

~ Chapter 10: Missing Pieces ~

Back on the road in their respective seats, eyes shaded, Bill asked how things had gone with Mrs. Dixon. Knowing that Bill was a big football fan, a Rams fan, Ryz'n replied in a vernacular he understood well.

"Well, things got a little dicey in the second half Bill, but we smoothed everything over by the end of overtime." Bill patted her on the knee approvingly.

"Good, good. Glad to hear it, Ry. So, what's next?" Ryz'n took a deep breath.

"Well, I don't think there's anything left to do here." Then speaking more to herself than to Bill or Sheena, who sat on either side of her, Ryz'n began to check off items from her "to do" list.

"Let's see, I applied to the college. Of course, I have to write them an essay, but I can just copy one I already sent to UCLA or Stanford." She looked to Sheena for approval, but Sheena remained placidly superior behind her wraparound shades, so Ryz'n carried on. "There are no more leads to follow out here. We've got our bags packed in the trunk. And Nicholas is heading for home!" She beamed radiantly. "Don't see why we can't go to the closest airport and fly home ahead of him. Is that a problem, Bill?"

"Nope, no problem at all."

"Well, then—"

"Wait Ry. What about that record deal, Sis?"

"What record deal?"

"You know the one Mr. Stiehlmoir offered us? The sex angle?"

"Have you lost your ever lovin' mind? What were you drinking back there anyway? I'm sure Bryson would just love to see you touring all across the country pulling that act! You really surprise me sometimes, Sheena!"

"Well, I thought, we could make Bryce part of the act, you know like those male dancers down at the Hangar Club. That way, we'd attract both genders, make twice as much"

The two sisters stared speechlessly at one another from behind their dark glasses. "Millionaires for life, Ry! That's what your buddy Jerry said."

"MY BUDDY?!" Ryz'n was about to blow, but finally, Sheena could no longer keep a straight face. "Really had you goin', didn't I?"

"Yeah, Baby Sister, you sure did," said Ryz'n wagging her head in disbelief.

Bill opined that he thought the idea had merit, but he too was joking, wasn't he? Ryz'n wondered. With everyone hiding their eyes behind dark glasses, it was difficult to tell their true intentions. The good news about Nick had made them all a bit giddy.

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In the San Diego International Airport, the girls purchased first class tickets on an All-American Airlines flight to Dulles, departing at 1:35 p. m. PDT, arriving at Dulles at 9:55 p. m. EDT. Because they had nearly a couple hours to kill, Bill suggested they lunch in the airport lounge. They agreed and headed for the lounge. The girls lugged their bags and shoved them under a nondescript dining table in the fairly crowded lounge. After they were all seated, they waited, eyes shaded, for their lunch orders to arrive. Sheena began to relate Big Jim's tales of Nicky in Nam, which Ryz'n had missed during her talk with Donna.

"You should have heard him talking about Nicky, Ryz'n. Why, he spoke of Nicky like, like Nicky was some kind of, some kind of legend, didn't he Bill?"

"Yeah, sounded that way to me," agreed Bill matter-of-factly.

"You know, I must have missed out on something. How is it that Big Jim just showed up at home from out of the blue a week ago?" asked a curious Ryz'n.

"Coma," replied Sheena.

"Oh, that explains everything Sheena. Gee Whiz!" countered Ryz'n mildly exasperated.

"Well, that's about all he said, Ry. Big Jim was in a coma as a John Doe for a couple of years. He came out of it over in a VA hospital up in Washington State back in April. He had memory problems, too, at first. He just got squared away a couple weeks ago and they shipped him to Long Beach, where the V. A. helped him locate his family here."

"Gee, that seems kind of hard to believe, don't you think, Bill?"

"You mean harder to believe than finding Nicky out here under our noses?"

"Yeah, I see what you mean, but still ... Stranger than fiction, hunh?"

"I'll say it is, Sis, but then strange things always happened to you and Nicky. Look at that whole Buzzbee thing."

"That wasn't me, Sheena. I've told you that before. That was just Nicky, before me. But that accident we had that almost killed both of us on the Beltway, now that was me and Nick. Now look, I don't need a lecture on ancient history. I need to know about Nicky's more recent past. You were saying ..."

"Sure, sure, I know. After all, you were the one who asked about Big Jim. Well, anyway, before I was interrupted," Sheena slid her dark glasses down her nose and, looking over her shades and cut her dark brown eyes in her sister's direction, "I was relaying Big Jim's stories about Nicky over in Nam." She lowered the glasses to the table. "Big Jim explained that when Nicky first arrived over there, he was green as anything, a real 'cherry' is the term he had used, right Bill?" Bill smiled and Sheena continued. "So they were in the same squad. Big Jim took a liking to him and he took Nicky under his wing, teaching him how to survive. Within two months, Nicky was teaching Jim. He said Nicky 'went Gook.'" Sheena replaced her glasses on her face.

"Went Gook? What does that mean, exactly?"

"He said Nicky was far out, Mann, even though he didn't do any dope, like the rest of 'em. Nicky was farther out than anyone in the outfit. He told how Nicky

ate what the VC ate, some stinking fish dish called ‘nuoc mam,’ dressed like they dressed, thought like they thought, and most important, fought like they fought, only better. Nicky stopped wearing boots. He wore Ho Chi Minh sandals.”

“What on earth are they?”

Ryz’n was familiar with a lot of the slang Sheena was repeating verbatim from big Jim’s stories. What Ryz’n had not picked up from Nicky’s letters, she had learned when she had performed her own long range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP or lurp). She had traveled in a privately owned, motorized skiff up tributaries of the Xe Khong (or Me Kong) River over her last winter’s semester break, searching for her husband.

Ryz’n, Nicky’s former company commander, her father-in-law Mr. Sheeboom and a handful of hand picked marines and soldiers, who had served with Nick, had volunteered to go back “in country” for their lost comrade. Despite the fact that the American military had withdrawn from that war torn country two years previously, the civil war still raged among the Vietnamese people.

Sheena noted, “Well, Big Jim said the Ho Chi Minh sandal was a kind of homemade footwear, like flip-flops with tire tread for soles. He said Nicky’s feet became like boards. Nicky dressed light: no steel pot, no extra garbage, just his M-16 rifle, which, because of its reliability, he preferred the M-14. He also carried a USMC service .45 caliber pistol, a ruck of grenades and ammo clips, a canteen and some salt tablets and light poncho. He also bore a converted, scoped Winchester hunting rifle for sniping. That’s it. The bugs didn’t bother Nicky as much as the other guys. Maybe it was his diet, because he ate like the natives or maybe he just ignored the insects better. Big Jim couldn’t say, but he did say that in almost eight months over there, they were constantly behind enemy lines.”

“Yeah, Sheena I know that. I learned about ‘The Outfit’ last winter on that search and rescue mission. It was an inter-service, “special ops” unit. They pulled out over 250 Americans. Nick and Jim’s platoon alone performed 115 extractions in eight months, including some 28 Vietnamese POWs and 87 Americans. That was a big deal, because, in the South, unlike the North with its ‘Hanoi Hilton’. The Viet Cong (VC) didn’t keep their prisoners very long, just long enough to torture and kill them. The Dac Cong (DC) were especially cruel.”

“Yeah, Jim mentioned that. He said the DC tortured their prisoners brutally and killed ’em pretty quickly. Didn’t waste no resources on keeping them alive very long. Those 87 American POWs, most of whom were soldiers, you know, were captured during and after the Easter offensive. They probably wouldn’t have been around to be freed like the hundreds of other boys in northern prisons, who were released in February, right after the peace accord was signed. Of course, the NVA had their own prisoners whom they would transport north, sometimes through Cambodia and Laos. Now, Big Jim said when Jim and Nick’s unit received reliable intelligence, they’d penetrate the border if necessary to effect their extractions. You know? Their rescue operations. Isn’t that where you were last winter, Ry, in Laos?”

Ryz'n's eyes misted over.

"Yes. That's why Nicky went you know, why he volunteered, to bring the boys home. He saw it all in a vision. You know that Sheena. Looks like that's what he did. He didn't want to hurt or kill anybody, just help."

"One out of three ain't bad for a battin' average, I guess." Sheena replied dryly.

"What do you mean by that?" Ryz'n asked indignantly, ready to strike.

"Well, he helped people all right, like the POW's they rescued, for sure. But Big Jim swore Nicky killed, more than two dozen of the enemy, seventeen confirmed kills, just snipin', alone, by Jim's count. He doesn't know how many exactly, not with their firefights, too. And that wasn't counting their escape from that supply dump that served also as a temporary detention center for prisoners. A lot of enemy soldiers got wasted there, maybe a couple platoons' worth and Nicky was the primary zapper!"

"That's hard for me to believe Sheena, even though I've got all his medals at home. It doesn't seem possible that he wasn't over there long enough for all that! Was he, Bill? Was eight months long enough to do all that?"

"I don't know Ryz'n," shrugged Bill. "Because Nicky's was the only special operations outfit over there performing that clandestine rescue mission, sounds like they were constantly out in the field reconnoitering behind the lines. They operated all over the country from the northern most part of Quang Tri down to the Delta, even west into Cambodia and Laos. Our air cavalry ferried them all over. I suppose it's possible, given Nicky's unique skills and mission."

"Unique skills? He's no killer, not my Nicky. I don't believe it."

"What he means, Ry, is that Nicky's great vision, his ability to see well at night, his sense of smell—"

"Sense of smell? What sense of smell? All I remember about his sense of smell was how much he loved that 'Love's Fresh Lemon' cologne I wear. It really used to turn him on." She grinned at her two lunch mates.

"All right, calm down girl. You got six days yet to go." Sheena giggled. "But it's true. Big Jim did say Nick 'could smell out the enemy.' Don't look at me like that, Ry! That's what he said. Big Jim also claimed Nicky had a sixth sense when it came to booby traps. He said if Nick stopped, because he feared a booby trap, they usually found one most times. At first, guys ignored him, 'cause he was a cherry, and went on ahead, only to pay the price. Soon, the others came to listen to whatever Nicky said. They learned to respect, despite his youth. Jim related the VC learned to fear Nicky, even though they didn't know who he was. They just knew there was a sniper out there who had killed a lot of them ... usually by a single bullet through the brain." Out of the corner of her left eye, Ryz'n glanced skeptically at Sheena.

"Sheena, either you're really embellishing this story or Big Jim did."

"No, I'm not!" Though indignant, Sheena backtracked. "Well I dunno. I mean, maybe *he* did. I'm just passin' on what he told us. Right Bill?" Bill nodded.

“So hear this now, Ry.” Ryz’n playfully sat at attention, primly obedient, but the sober Sheena would not be deterred by her sister’s light comedy. “Big Jim gave us an example of the way Nicky, ‘the recon sniper,’ operated. He said one time they were out tracking this team of four NVA regulars, who were transporting six American prisoners across the foothills.” Sheena’s enthusiasm drew Ryz’n in, as Sheena looked over her glasses and her eyes narrowed into small hot black coals. Sheena was in the jungle now with Nicky and Big Jim and she was drawing Ryz’n in right along with them.

“... So Nicky and his squad had tracked them all day and into the night. Nicky, who was a Corporal at the time, halts the squad and motions everyone to spread out.”

Sheena slides her shades back up to the bridge of her nose and pantomimes what she believed Nick was doing as she persisted with her tale.

“He assembles a silencer on his Winchester rifle, then climbs up this tree about two stories in the starry dark of night. Big Jim and the others in the squad see Nicky aim his rifle and heard ‘shhoo’, ‘shhoo’, ‘shhoo’, real quick like.” As she lowered her sights and jerked her head, her dark glasses slid down her nose again. Sheena’s eyes blinked unconsciously with each pull of the trigger. She removed her glasses to avoid further distraction. “Only it was silent, whisper-like, rapid fire. Nicky holds his hand outstretched, then makes a fist with his thumb sticking out, turning it down three times in a row, signaling, three fell.” Sheena imitates the motion. “He climbs down before the squad and they fan out to approach the NVA camp cautiously— cautiously, because they couldn’t account for the fourth Gook, ya see?”

“Big Jim described the American prisoners as lying there, tied up, and scared to death with Gook blood and brains all over them. Well, it turns out there had been four NVA regular soldiers killed after all, not three. Nick, without realizing it, had killed two with one bullet as they had been standing side by side and fell dead one on top of the other. The American prisoners said it was the most incredible thing they had ever witnessed. No noise, no nothing and all of sudden, ‘Sploosh! Sploosh!’ These Gook heads start exploding all around them. They said Nick had shot all four of them, before the first two even hit the ground. The enemy never knew what hit them.” Sheena nodded vigorously her concurrence, as if she herself had been an eyewitness to the amazing rescue. Ryz’n grimaced, covering her opened mouth with her left hand.

“Big Jim related that Nick wouldn’t enter the camp to inspect his marksmanship. He said Nicky didn’t take any pride in killing, like some guys did. ‘One bullet, one kill’, was the Marine Corps sniper motto and Nick lived up to it, but he didn’t take pride in it. Big Jim implied jokingly that Nick wanted to give the taxpayer maximum bang for his buck, but Jim said Nick never laughed or joked about that. Nick may have enjoyed the stalking part, outwitting the enemy, that part, but he didn’t derive any pleasure from actually killing them. Jim said each time Nick knew he had sniped one of the enemy, he thought it had

killed Nick, too, a little, inside, ya know?" Sheena paused to look down at the table sadly. Ryz'n waited, then her sister raised her face.

"You know, Big Jim added that as a super sniper, Nick had the opportunity to make those silent kills, but in a firefight, he didn't. It was every man for himself then. Kill or be killed, with no time to think or remonstrate. Jim said 'Nick did his job well, but he definitely didn't enjoy it.' He said Nick did enjoy very much, the looks of gratitude on the faces of those he helped to rescue, as they all did."

Ryz'n nodded solemnly, but Sheena began to giggle. When Ryz'n asked what was so funny, her sister relayed an imitation of Big Jim's deep, rolling laughter, when he had recalled Nick's peculiar fear. "Evidently, it was not the VC, or DC or the regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) that Nick feared. No, it was snakes. To be more precise, it was the Burmese Python. Nick had trouble sleeping in the bush for fear that a python would slither out of a tree and coil itself about him while he slept, squeeze the life out of him and then swallow him whole. Evidently, that had happened to one of the prisoners they had rescued.

"Big Jim had chuckled, because with all the other more likely dangers and hazards, pythons were what really had scared Little Nick." Sheena added that Big Jim had said, 'so Nicky used to pacify himself to sleep by unsheathing his bayonet, folding his arms and holding the bayonet along his sternum, with the blade perpendicular to his body.' Nicky's reasoning was 'the tighter, the bastard squeezed, the deeper the snake'd cut himself.'" Sheena eyes opened wide again when she recounted, "Big Jim explained, once Nick became comfortable with that idea he slept like a baby. But the squad would tease him, chiding him that eventually, Nick would roll over in his sleep and stab himself to death!" Bill and Sheena laughed lustily, but Ryz'n did not think it was so darned funny.

Ryz'n again observed that Sheena, in the retelling of Big Jim's stories about Little Nick, may have displayed a common but likeable tendency towards exaggeration. However, neither Bill nor Ryz'n called her on it again, not after Ryz'n's earlier questioning of Sheena's veracity had tended to upset her.

The waitress brought their orders. After gracing their lunches, they ate in silence. Ryz'n contemplated quietly the horrors of war, as well as what Nick must have experienced. She thought of the vision Nick had experienced after they shared their last Thanksgiving together, the vision of him helping to rescue American POW's. Ryz'n thought of how only 646 kids his age had been drafted in Nick's draft year, just before the draft ended, and how none of them had been sent to Viet Nam. Nick had been wrong about drawing "Lucky 7", drawing 268 instead, but he had been right about the vision of rescuing helpless prisoners of war. More often than not, he was uncanny that way, usually, irresistibly so.

Ryz'n choked up. She blamed it upon eating her salad too fast, but it was really the thought of Nicky and all the grief she had given him about enlisting. Had he not enlisted when he did, he never would have matriculated through the Corps' training fast enough to help those boys before America's participation in the War had ended. As it was, the Corps had expedited his training to get him over there

in time. And to think, because of his impatience, Nick personally had helped save one hundred and fifteen human beings. It took Ryz'n's maximum resolve to maintain her composure and calmly eat her salad.

After the trio had finished their meals, Sheena relayed Big Jim's opinion, that maybe Nick was better off as an amnesic, because the less horror and pain he could recall, the better off he would be. Ryz'n agreed in part, but she sure would like him to remember her, how much they had loved one another. Bill suggested that maybe Nick would remember. He thought that maybe Ry would remind him of everything that happened before the war, but nothing that happened during it. Ryz'n asked again if Big Jim had reminded Nick of anything. Sheena said it had not, not even when Big Jim had told Nick about their miraculous escape.

Ryz'n lit up as she asked about the escape—that did interest her. The waitress came by to take desert orders. They each ordered a beer. They still had three-quarters of an hour to kill, before the sisters needed to board their plane home. Sheena looked to Bill, who told her “Go ahead. You're doing fine. You tell her.”

“Well, it was just after the peace agreement had been signed in Pairs, within hours, actually. We, the Americans I mean, were supposed to have ceased all offensive maneuvers, some two weeks earlier. However, Nick's search and rescue unit was still operating in secret behind enemy lines, near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were trying to effect even just one more ‘extraction,’ as Jim called it. Nick and Big Jim's squad were scouting to the northwest along a tributary of the Xe Khong River in the Annam mountains across the border in Laos trying to locate an enemy camp. Vietnamese intelligence claimed that camp was detaining American prisoners. After about fifteen minutes, Jim and Nick heard rifle fire coming from their rear, to the southeast. They ran down through the heavy mountain jungle to find their platoon outnumbered and flanked.

“Nick and Big Jim's squad hit the right flank of the North Vietnamese unit that appeared to be at company strength. Surprised, the enemy's flanking arm crumpled momentarily and retired. The Americans then retreated down either side of this jungle path, not worrying about avoiding potential mines and trip wires, because the enemy was right on their tails. The mountain jungle terrain was rough, hilly. The ground was uncertain beneath their feet. Nick and Big Jim formed the rear guard one on either side of the path, to cover the withdrawal. Nick climbed a tree for better firing vantage, using the tree as a shield.

“Together, they held off the North Vietnamese, long enough for their platoon to retreat with their wounded, but an RPG, that is a rocket propelled grenade, exploded near them. Big Jim caught shrapnel in his left arm, while the explosion, knocked Nick out of his perch. Big Jim said Nick should never have gone up there. That was okay for a long range sniping, but not a close quarters firefight. Too dangerous! Nick knew better, he said.”

Sheena's expression saddened. “Big Jim said it was the one time not wearing a helmet cost Nick too, because he landed partly on his head, and got knocked out cold. When Nick came to, he and Jim were in enemy hands.

“The enemy forced marched them for a couple days to this base on a tributary of the Xe Khong, on the other, the east side of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, in Laos. The enemy had a fuel and ammo dump there, not too far upriver from that village where the Red Cross found Nicky.”

“Dong Pal, yes, I know exactly where it is, on the opposite side of the river and just north of Muang Zai. We were there. Go on, Sheena.”

“Well, it was well after dark, when the Gooks threw them into this short holding pen made of bamboo rails, both walls and ceiling. There were almost twenty allies, mostly American advisors: Marines and Army Rangers from their outfit, in a five foot high bamboo pen the size of the Dixon’s living room. Jim said you couldn’t imagine the stench and unsanitary conditions. Big Jim described the conditions as ‘brutally horrible.’ His words, not mine.”

Sheena glanced at Ryz’n for recognition of her last remark, before she carried on with her tale. Ryz’n understood her sister did not want to be accused falsely of “embellishing” again, so she signaled for Sheena to continue, as Ryz’n sipped expectantly on her brew.

“OK, then. Well, the prisoners didn’t remain in the pen for long though. The guards would take them out by one’s and two’s over to a hooch, where the prisoners were tortured and killed. The VC and NVA had no intention of turning them over to the Americans now that the peace agreement had been signed.

“Nicky was in pretty good condition, except for the lump on his noggin and some welts and bumps where the guards had smacked him around a bit.”

“Don’t forget about his teeth,” added Bill.

“Oh yeah, thanks Bill. I forgot about that. Well, it seems the Gooks had pulled out his upper front two teeth as well, so his mouth was kind of a bloody mess. The Gooks wanted to get that gold cap off his tooth and I guess they did.” Ryz’n set her beer down and unconsciously covered her lips with her left. She winced as she felt her husband’s pain. Sheena hardly skipped a beat. “Jim said he had warned Nick that would happen if they ever got captured, but Nick had always blown Jim off. But Nick wasn’t too bad off compared to most of the prisoners. Thankfully, Nick had some penicillin with him, which he popped like Pez.

“Jim explained how he had used to kid Nicky about his ‘stash.’ But Jim was not laughing when Nick produced it in that pen and extracted a four-inch shiv.”

“What do you mean by ‘his stash’?”

“That’s what we asked, didn’t we Bill?” Bill nodded. “Evidently, Nicky had this narrow six-inch long, smooth, stainless steel tube. Inside it, he kept a short shiv, penicillin, a couple salt tablets, and a cyanide tablet. You see, Nick’s outfit had been instructed not to be captured alive. They were operating in direct violation of the peace agreement and the government didn’t want any more ‘bargaining chips’ for Hanoi. Right Bill? Isn’t that what Jim said?”

“In direct non-compliance ...”

“Yeah, that’s right ‘in direct non-compliance.’ Thanks.” Sheena sat corrected.

“But didn’t the VC search him? Wouldn’t they have found that stuff then?” asked Ryz’n, bewildered.

“Not where he stashed it.”

“Where was that?”

“Up his butt! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh Mann!” Sheena’s outburst caused some neighboring diners to glance Ryz’n’s way. For a minute, Ryz’n thought one of them had recognized her despite the dark glasses she was wearing and did wear routinely in all public places whether outdoors or inside. But the woman merely sneered without comment, as she turned back around to her friends.

Ryz’n whispered, “Oh please, Sheena, not so loud. Everyone will be over here asking for autographs! Besides we just got through eating! To hear something like that, why that’s terrible and not funny at all.”

“Who’s laughing?”

“Well, you for one!”

“I don’t care. It’s T-R-U! Ain’t it Bill?”

“I’m afraid so, Ry. I know it’s terrible to consider, but think of it this way. That stash saved Nick’s life, Big Jim’s too! Not too mention many other prisoners.”

Ryz’n shook her head in disgust, muttering more to herself, than Bill and Sheena, “Nicky would never have done anything like that before he joined the Corps, never.”

“Anyway Ry, do you wanna hear the rest of this story or not?”

“Sure. You know I do!”

Sheena resumed with relish, “OK then. Well, like Bill just said, Nicky’s stash saved their lives. Nicky cut his bonds with the shiv, as well as those of several of the others. Then he worked his way around the other prisoners to get near the door of the cage, where the Gooks would grab him next.

“The leader of the two guards took Nick’s dog tags. He placed them around his neck like trophies with a host of other dog tags, which he had confiscated from the poor devils who had gone before Nick. The guards grabbed Nick from the cage to march him across the compound to the torture hooch. The other prisoners in the cage and Jim watched, as Nicky killed those two guards so quickly, so silently, textbook style, from behind, you know? Nick deftly side stepped and slipped behind the rear escort, nailing him first. Then he jumped the leader, the one with the dog tags, before he could turn. Anyway, Nick killed them so quickly and quietly that the prisoners in the pen couldn’t believe the guards were dead.

“Well, Jim said Nicky gathered up his victims’ weapons, giving one to Jim, whose left arm was worthless and kept one rifle for himself. He also passed onto the other prisoners, the shiv and knife he picked off one of the guards. Then he went over to a rifle stack, gathered up the weapons and handed them out, quietly, quickly. AK-47’s, I think is what Jim said the rifles were.” Sheena’s expression briefly became quizzical. Listening in rapt silence, Ryz’n urged her sister on..

“Anyway, the prisoners cut their bonds as well as the tongs that tied the bamboo pen door shut. It was pretty late, very dark, no moon and there was no

activity in the compound. Nick directed them down to a couple skiffs, one of which was motorized and tied to the end of a short dock. Everything was going along fine. Almost all the guys were in the skiffs, when one of the VC came out of the torture hut, yelling, wanting to know where their next victims were.

“Well, that dude saw what was going on and called for help. Shots broke out. Nick killed that Gook as well as the next three to exit the hooch. But then, Gooks from all over the compound came running out of their hooches. They caught the escaping prisoners in the open, like sitting ducks, half of them in the skiffs and the others on the dock. The prisoners didn’t have a chance. It was then Nicky stopped shooting the enemy and started shooting the gas barrels in the supply depot. They caught fire! Then—BOOM! BOOM-BOOM!” And Sheena’s voice rose with the sound of each explosion.” Ryz’n glanced around furtively fearing they’d be discovered. Softly, she mouthed “Shhh” and motioned with her hands over the table, her palms outward towards Sheena, motioning for her sister to tone it down. But upon reaching the ammo dump, Sheena’s explosions grew..

“Remember Bill, when Big Jim told this part?” She glanced to Bill for confirmation and he provided it.

Sheena added, “Mann, Big Jim’s eyes got huge. He raised his hand in the air (as did Sheena) making these huge, deep bass BOOM-BOO-BOO-BOOMS!

“Sheena! Take it easy,” whispered Ryz’n.

“OK, OK. Sheese, Ryz’n! Don’t be such a drag. Mann.” Ryz’n’s shoulders slumped with exasperation. Sheena resumed her tale.

“So, Big Jim said night turned into day, as the whole place went up in flames and explosions. Gook body parts were flying all over the place. That’s when Nick and the other survivors took off, floating down the Me Kong. There wasn’t enough room for all of them in the skiffs, so those who were not badly injured, like Nick, swam along side the skiffs, holding on as best they as they could.”

“That confirms what we learned when we went back over there last Christmas to search for Nicky. Go on, Sheena. This is dead on, right down to the dog tag thing. What else did Jim say?” Ryz’n could scarcely contain her own excitement.

“Well, Big Jim related how the escaped prisoners hid out along the river bank among the jungle bushes and trees, during the day, while they floated south during the night.”

“From what I learned over there last winter, the supply depot was completely demolished. I guess there were no able-bodied enemy soldiers left to chase after the prisoners. Guess that’s how they got away.”

“Guess so, Ry. Anyway, the second night out, something happened. Jim did not know what, because he had lost consciousness from the shrapnel wound in his arm going untreated. They had run into white water and Nick was having a tough time hanging alongside Jim’s skiff. There were a couple of explosions near them that roused Jim. Jim, who was barely conscious, remembers Nicky reaching up over the edge of the skiff to grab Jim by the shirt to encourage Jim, to ‘hang on,’ if they were to get separated. Nick grabbed Jim’s dog tag accidentally at the

same time. Then there was another explosion more violent than the others were, because it was closer. The prisoners were in some rough water, now. Though it was not the rainy season, some recent storms had raised the river higher than normal. The current was swift. The violent explosion rocked the skiff and separated Nick from Jim. Nick fell away from the skiff below the surface of the river, taking Jim's dog tags along with him.

"Next thing Big Jim remembers is regaining consciousness in the V. A. hospital up in Washington State a couple months ago, as I said before. He woke up paralyzed, with only one arm, and a messed up memory. He had been in a coma for two years. It was only recently that he recovered sufficiently to where the V. A. could pull everything together for him, enough to return him home."

"That explains how Nick wound up with Big Jim's dog tags and why Nick didn't have his own tags," mused Ryz'n. "But why couldn't the V. A. have taken Big Jim's fingerprints and found out who he was from the military's files?"

"Yeah, we asked that too, Ry. Evidently, the clandestine nature of their outfit prevented that. See, their records were hidden in some 'Top Secret' file that nobody knew about and didn't want to know about. I mean Watergate was bad enough, but suppose it had come out during the final peace negotiations that Nicky and his guys were fighting behind enemy lines after the U. S. had agreed to withdraw completely. Shoot! All Marines were supposed to have been evacuated from the country over a couple years before."

Bill leaned forward over the table and added, "It was like they were already dead and forgotten about as far as the Government was concerned, Ry. Actually, it was more like they never existed."

Ryz'n recalled what Donna had said about the 'Top Secret' file in the Pentagon and the failure of the DOD's computer system to locate the boys' records. "Yes, Donna said something about that. And now I believe that's why it took the Navy so long to notify me that Nicky was missing ... "

"Gee, Ry, look at the time." Sheena was right.

Bill urged, "Yep. You two better get a move on." Ryz'n echoed Bill's wink and accidentally knocked her half-empty beer onto her chest and down her right arm.

"Oh, PICKLES!" exclaimed Ryz'n. "I can't board the plane smelling like a brewery. I'll just have to change my blouse in the Ladies' Room first."

"Well, you better get a move on Ry, because you don't have a lot of time."

"Yes, Bill I know. Don't wait for me. You two go straight to the boarding area and stall a minute or two if you have to. I'll be right there. Uh wait a sec. Bill, would you mind taking my bag?"

"No, no problem Ry. Here, give it to me." Ryz'n handed him her suitcase which he rested across his lap.

"One more second, Bill. I need to get a replacement top .."

"You haven't got much time, Ry."

Ryz'n bit her lower lip, popped the latches on her suitcase, reached in and grabbed the first thing she saw. Then she slammed the case shut and latched it.

“OK, thanks so much Bill. I’m off.” She grinned quickly. The trio split up and headed their separate ways but ultimately to the same destination.

* * *

Ryz’n arrived momentarily carrying the beer-wet blouse, wrapped around her equally beer-wet bra and wearing a fresh, horizontally striped, mint green and white body suit top. (Ryz’n learned later that Bill had escorted Sheena to the All-American Airlines flight boarding area, where he had asked the boarding agent to hold up a couple minutes for Ryzanna Sheeboom. The agent had noted the celebrity’s name on the manifest. Grinning with saccharine sweetness, she had offered that would “not be a problem for THE Mrs. Sheeboom.”) Bill handed Ryz’n her bag and asked if she knew when Nick’s family, were coming home from their trip. Ryz’n replied the fifteenth, which was the next day. Bill said he might fly back to D. C. later in the week. He would like to see Nicky, himself.

The boarding agent hustled the sisters down the runway to enplane. All the other passengers had boarded. Bill wheeled rapidly after them, overtaking Ryz’n before the sisters boarded. For the second time in just a couple hours, Bill took Ryz’n forcefully by the arm. His bright blue eyes bore into hers, as his fingers clenched tightly around her wispy-haired forearm.

“Don’t worry Ryzanna. Just love him. When he gets a look at you, he’ll just fall out. Hell, I’m fallin’ out now, you look so sharp! You two are going to have a great future together. Don’t worry about a thing! You’re almost there, kid, almost there!” Bill’s eyes lit up with sincere, enthusiastic encouragement. Ryz’n had been concerned by Bill’s actions at first. Now she understood. He wanted her to be at ease over her upcoming reunion with Nick.

“Thanks, Uncle Bill.”

She knew Bill was referring implicitly to the buxom Dixon woman as Ryz’n’s source of concern and he was correct, so his compliment on her top warmed her.

“I’m counting on that, Bill. Thanks for all your help Willie, and your patience, and for putting up with all our talk.” She kissed Bill on the cheek, motioning for Sheena to do the same, and Sheena complied. The flight attendant stepped through the plane’s passenger doorway, acting like a traffic cop to wave them in.

“Come aboard, please.” The sisters left Bill to board the flight.

“If you see Ray and Wauneta, tell them I’d like to come back for a visit soon, maybe next week. I wanna see that boy, too!”

“Will do, Bill. Bye and thanks again, for everything.”

“Ryzanna?”

“Yes?”

“This time, it’s gonna happen!” Bill winked again. As Sheena stepped through the portal ahead of her, Ryz’n beamed the seldom seen multi-dimpled grin and pulled a Nicky. “You know something, Bill? I believe ya.” She waved and boarded the plane behind her sister.