

~ Chapter 7: Top Kick ~

She and Nick arrived at the Navy Yard in about twenty minutes without further incident, although a little bit of good luck had not hurt them. Her mother-in-law had been right about the speed trap on the Parkway. En route, Ryz'n would have been toast had the Smokey on duty not been citing another offending motorist when Ryz'n sped past. She counted herself fortunate indeed. Ten minutes later, she and Nick arrived at 8th and I streets southeast, in the District, home of the oldest U. S. Marine Corps barracks in the country.

The Marine Corps portion of the Yard was comprised of two- and three-story red brick structures. Red, Spanish tile roofs covered the buildings, which presently housed the Marine Barracks. In her efforts to locate Nick, Ryz'n had visited here many times. She knew the layout well and identified various outfits housed in the Navy Yard for Nick's information:

"Now what we have here is the USMC Band, Battle Color Detachment, Color Guard, Drum & Bugle Corps, Body Bearers, Silent Drill Platoon, as well as the offices and private residences of the Corps' Commandant, Sergeant Major and, of course, the prisoners in the brig."

Ryz'n parked the Starfire and combed her wind-blown hair. She grabbed the notebook that she had brought from home and the pair went up the outside stairs to the Commandant's offices. Ry suggested they direct their attentions towards the Sergeant Major, whom she knew well. She told Nicky that the Sergeant Major was well aware of Nick's case. She squeezed her spouse's arm and smiled reassuringly as they mounted the veranda stairs. However, an over officious Staff Sergeant in the Sergeant Major's outer officer intercepted them. He insisted upon handling the matter himself. He asked Nick for identification, which, of course, did not match the identity of Nick Sheeboom, whom he purported to be. Steeled for just such a situation, Ryz'n showed him her notebook, the one she had gone back home to get and brought with her now for just this purpose. She knew the critical officious and judgmental ways these pogeys thought.

The notebook was a large three-ring binder with every stick of official paper she had about Nick's official existence, including every stick of official paper she had obtained from the U. S. Marine Corps and Navy over the past three and a half years. Ryz'n had placed the papers inside plastic sheets to protect them from damage. She had created three of these huge notebooks: one contained original documents, the other two contained copies. She was ready for these over officious jerks.

Ryz'n had been most meticulous in maintaining these books. She had learned the hard way that when one dealt with the U. S. government, especially the military, official documents seemed to be the only evidence they accepted. These books, along with his letters and the shoebox filled with awards, had also helped keep Nick alive for her. The girl extended her recordkeeping to unofficial matters, too, creating large scrapbooks of their exploits, both when they were apart as well as when they had been together. She had planned on going over them with her husband, but she had not yet

had the chance. These notebooks and some scant movie film of their days together had been her private sources of pleasure and hope these last few, dark years.

Now this over officious idiot Staff Sergeant was rebuffing Nick and her documented living memorial to him as well. Well, he didn't know with whom he was dealing. The strain and lack of sleep over the last few days had left her mightily fatigued. She was in no mood to put up with any official Marine Corps crap! She had dealt with this sergeant's type in the past. Ryz'n waved the notebook before his face, pointing out a couple of items, such as some of Nick's unique identifying characteristics, as well as some of the wounds his medical records described. However, the young non-commissioned officer refused to budge.

Across the room, Ryz'n noticed that the door to the Sergeant Major's office was open. Hoping to rouse the Sergeant Major, she intentionally raised her voice, expressing her indignation at their treatment by the "overzealous, undereducated *Private*." Surreptitiously, Nick tried to calm her. Obviously, he did not want a scene. He whispered to her that he knew how these "pogeys" could make a guy's life miserable, if they wanted to.

However, Ryz'n would have none of the young NCO's well-intended entreaties. She railed more loudly. When the Staff Sergeant indicated he was not a private, but a Staff Sergeant, Ryz'n exclaimed loudly: "That's a temporary condition I will have rectified PDQ." By now, her emotional level had met the decibel level of her voice. If she had been acting to start, she wasn't now.

A long ominous shadow fell across the anteroom from the doorway of the Sergeant Major's office. Their eyes followed that shadow to the door, where a large, granite-like, square-jawed Marine faced them as he finished buttoning his tunic.

The Marines at 8th and I were wearing their green and khaki "Class A" service uniforms, just as she figured. The man in the doorway was no exception. Fortyish, broad shouldered, narrow at the hip with a square jaw, straight nose, and light blue eyes: he could have posed for a Corps recruiting poster. A clump of closely cropped, sandy brown hair, cut in typically brief Corps style, sat stiffly on his crown like a wire brush, running over his scalp. His features, though ruggedly chiseled, were nonetheless handsome. One look at him commanded immediate respect. The placid, confident Marine exuded leadership and one look at him inspired obedience.

As soon as the Command Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps saw Ryzanna in full battle mode beside the Staff Sergeant's desk, his stern countenance disappeared without a trace, replaced immediately by a broad grin, the kind old Davey Crockett had probably used to "[c]ill a bar," thought Ry. Ryz'n smiled winningly at him. Two could place this game.

"Why, Mrs. Sheeboom, what a pleasure it is to see you again, Ma'am."

The Sergeant Major greeted Ryz'n in a manner that recalled familiarity. The Marine strode confidently and efficiently across the anteroom to greet her. The man took her small dainty right hand between his two, large, sandy-haired ham hocks. His deliberate tone dripped warmth and sincerity, as he pronounced the King's English perfectly and with a dramatic flair as well.

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“You look just as lovely as ever, Mrs. Sheeboom, if I may say so. Ma’am?” His grin broadened.

Surprising herself, Ryz’n felt her face warm. In her brief time with the Sergeant Major, she usually took his heavy compliments lightly, but still, there was something about this man, even if he were merely BS-ing her. The Sergeant Major ignored Nick altogether. He appeared to be absorbed totally by Ryz’n’s presence.

“Well, thank you so much Sergeant Major Lattimore. You are as gracious as ever. I can only hope that characteristic will rub off on some of *your* Marines.” Ryz’n’s eyes darted quickly and darkly to the uncooperative Staff Sergeant, standing stiffly behind his receptionist’s desk. Then her winning stare reverted to Lattimore.

“Oh?” the Sergeant Major seemed surprised. “Is there some problem of which I am unaware, Ma’am? Perhaps something I may be able to assist you with? I’m only too glad to help ... Ma’am.” The Top’s grin broadened even further and he squeezed a little tighter her hand between his. His teeth flashed white like those of a wild animal. The young Staff Sergeant rolled his eyes. Ryz’n sensed the Top’s eager-to-please attitude toward her would bear unwanted ill consequences for his hapless assistant in the not too distant future. And that is exactly what she wanted. She caught the faintest of smiles cross her husband’s lips. He must have guessed that, too.

“Why, yes, yes I believe you can Sergeant Major. Sergeant Major Lattimore, it gives me great pleasure to present to you my long, lost husband, Nicholas Sheeboom, formerly Staff Sergeant of the United States Marine Corps.”

As if she were an attractive hostess on a game show, Ryz’n turned with a slight nod of the head and waved her outstretched hand grandly towards her husband.

The Sergeant Major dropped her hand lightly and, for the first time, with the grin still plastered across his face, turned his attention to Nick. However, the Sergeant Major’s grin had narrowed and his eyes no longer reflected his mouth’s bright smile. It was the first time the Top had even acknowledged Nick’s presence. Lattimore shook hands stiffly with Nick, sizing her husband up as he did so with a quick but studied once-over.

“So, *you* are our famous war hero Nick Sheeboom, come home to us after all this time? Well, I must say you are looking rather well for a corpse or for someone who has been held captive in a prisoner of war camp for over two years.” His grin narrowed.

“Sergeant Major, begging your pardon Sergeant Major,” the Staff Sergeant interrupted his superior, who turned to his subordinate.

“You have some information regarding this matter, Sergeant Smith?”

“Yes Sergeant Major. According to his current driver’s license, this man’s name is Strickler, not Sheeboom. And from his records, compared to the physical measurements on his license, he is clearly larger than Sheeboom. In fact, we have no evidence at all to corroborate that he is who he says he is.”

Incensed, Ryz’n burst out indignantly. “What am I? Chopped liver? I can corroborate that he is Nick Sheeboom and this whole file I brought with me will, too.” She picked the three-ringed binder up off the Staff Sergeant’s desk and promptly dropped it back down on top of the desk with a loud thud. “This will corroborate his identity as well, if

you'd only take the time to look at it." From the corner of her eye, she sensed Nick's admiration of her grow, despite her increased exasperation or perhaps because of it.

No, see, I won't back down from anyone, Baby, especially not where you are concerned!

The Staff Sergeant pointed to her notebook and began to retaliate with "I'm afraid this is unoffi—" but the Sergeant Major silenced him with a hard, sideways glance.

Ryz'n knew Sergeant Major Lattimore was extremely familiar with Nick's case for she had seen to it that he was. Upon becoming familiar with her husband's file, Nick's legendary military feats had served only to underscore Lattimore's interest. Later, Ryz'n came to understand that this poster marine had also taken a special interest in the matter because he had taken a special though guarded special interest in her, too.

From the counsel of others, Ryz'n had learned that, since the untimely loss of Lattimore's wife, few people had gotten to this granite Marine. Yet, somehow Ryz'n had cracked through his rough, officious exterior, although she had never sought Lattimore's interest, except officially in Nick's behalf, of course. The behind-the-back whisperers had stated that it was due to her youthful beauty and charm that his icy demeanor had started to thaw again and that was the cause for his interest in Nick's case. However, Ry had felt it was mostly because of her persistence, her resourcefulness and her sincere fidelity to her missing husband, which had prompted Lattimore to take a personal interest in the matter of M.I.A. Nick Sheeboom. Uncharacteristically, Lattimore once had let slip to Ry that those qualities in her had reminded him of his own late bride.

Yes, it had been Jake Lattimore, who had helped her by overstepping regulations to locate Nick's former company commander and some of the other surviving members in Nick's special joint operations unit. Lattimore had convinced them to risk everything in a return to the jungles and mountains of Nam and Laos, to try to find their missing fellow warrior. And they had come close, as close as was humanly possible.

An experienced top Marine, Ryz'n understood that Lattimore knew Nick's file, almost by heart. Yes, she had seen to that. She realized that Nick was now quite a bit different from the Nick in the USMC files. Certainly, the young man standing before the Top Sergeant now was physically larger than the one in their files. The kid sergeant had been right about that. Now a suddenly serious light in Lattimore's eye told Ryz'n that the Sergeant Major intended to discern whether this young civilian with her was, in fact, who he claimed to be or if he were some deranged imposter. Implicitly, she understood Lattimore would do so to protect her. He would take nothing for granted and, strangely, she admired him for his discretion as well as his dedication.

Ryz'n's curiosity, as well as her anxiety, rose. While she trusted Lattimore's motives, she feared his methods and Nick's possible reactions to them. Behind that leering smile, Lattimore had the reputation for being one tough Marine. She hoped he would not exit her husband a stuttering, stumbling jelly fish whose confidence she would have to restore again. If so, she might night not ever get Nick to bed her.

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Subconsciously, in her anxiety for Nick, Ryz'n unconsciously bit her lower lip and twirled her engagement ring between her two wedding bands, about her ring finger with her thumb, as was her custom. Thus far, Ryz'n had learned that Nick did not react well to verbal pressure.

Actually, I don't give a darn, if the Marines want to acknowledge if Nick had returned or not. If they didn't, they were only hurting themselves. Shoot! Nick was the best thing to happen to the Corps since Audie Murphy. No, wait a minute—that's not right. Murphy was a soldier, not a Marine. Well, what difference does it make? Still, that Staff Sergeant had been a real pain—

All these thoughts flashed through her weary but agile mind before Lattimore reassured her with a booming compliment.

"You needn't fear Mrs. Sheeboom. You most certainly are not 'chopped liver.'"

Ryz'n smiled beatifically. Lattimore's wolfish, white-toothed grin broadened again. "I'll be most happy to look into this claim, personally. I'd like to help, Ma'am." The Sergeant Major turned graciously towards Nick.

Sergeant? Could I have been a Sergeant? Is that what Ryz'n had said?

This was news to Dixie. He had been a Lance Corporal before the Company Commander had busted him down to Trumpeter for mixing it up with his platoon guide. Then Dixie recalled his conversation with his in-laws over dinner last night. Ryz'n had mentioned that he had earned battlefield promotions to the rank of sergeant. If true, this would mean more dough for his entitlements. Last night at dinner, Ry had also mentioned rather proudly that his superiors had recommended him for officer candidate school. The very thought of that disagreeable prospect sent a nauseating, chill through his body now, just as it had last night at dinner. *An officer!?!?*

"May I see your driver's license?" asked the top courteously.

The Staff Sergeant brought Dixie's license over to Lattimore. Something fell off the back of the plastic that enclosed the card. Dixie watched that something fall beneath the Staff Sergeant's desk, but no one else noticed, nor did the Staff Sergeant bother to pick it up. If it was what Dixie thought it was, it could prove most embarrassing right now. He would leave it lay and retrieve it later, on his way out, if circumstances permitted.

After studying the license for a minute, Lattimore asked the Staff Sergeant to obtain the "Sheeboom" file. Lattimore returned Dixie's driver's license to him and stepped past Ryz'n to pick up her notebook.

"Mrs. Sheeboom, would you kindly explain this record, please?"

Dixie observed Ryz'n smile sweetly and step between him and Lattimore.

"My husband has amnesia Sergeant Major Lattimore and can't remember anything past a couple years ago when he came to after brain surgery over at Subic Bay Naval Hospital. He doesn't know what's in that file, but I believe the file will speak for itself."

The Sergeant Major smiled demurely at Ryz'n once more, acknowledging her response, in a sweetly polite manner. Then, despite her defensive explanation and, as

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though he flipped off one switch only to turn on another, the Marines first sergeant returned a hard stare to Dixie.

“Suppose we step in to my office, Sergeant Sheeboom? Where we can discuss this matter in more detail?” He eyes squinted at Dixie in a false grin; however, Dixie’s experiences as a Marine warned him this discussion might not be so pleasant. Nevertheless, Dix replied as though it would.

“All right. That would be fine Sergeant Major,” but, unlike the Top, Dixie did not return the smile.

As the two of them stepped toward the door, Ryz’n followed close behind, until the Top Kick stepped in between her and his office door, blocking her entrance. Dixie watched as the guy turned to her with a wide, dirt-eating grin and asked her most pleasantly to wait in the outer office. Dixie noted that Lattimore’s charm won her over. She agreed to remain in the outer office, after acknowledging that she knew Lattimore had her best interests at heart. Ry admitted that his past actions had proven that, so she complied with his request, by producing a winning, be-dimpled smile of her own.

Dixie noticed a curious smirk steal over the Staff Sergeant’s face, as the pogy waited beside his desk through all this byplay. Yet, the kid sergeant’s face quickly turned into a frightened frown, when the Sergeant Major boomed towards the opened doors at the rear offices beyond the foyer and demanded again: “The Sheeboom file and be quick about it!” The pogy scurried off, disappearing back around the back corner of the outer office in a hurry, while Ryz’n grabbed her notebook from the pogy’s desk and offered it to Lattimore. His demeanor changed in an instant. He accepted it graciously with his white teeth flashing personably. Then, Dixie watched Ryz’n, with a resigned but hopeful look on her face; take a seat back against the wall of the outer office to await the outcome of Dixie’s meeting with Lattimore.

* * *

Behind his closed office door, Sergeant Major Lattimore moved with an air of confident authority. He thoughtlessly dropped Ryz’n’s notebook on the desk. Dixie felt the guy was not much inclined to reference the record. He noted the Sergeant Major’s desk was devoid of clutter. There were an IN and an OUT box, one box at each of the two far corners of the bureau. A nearly full, yellow legal pad rested on top of a blotter in the center of the desk. The Top Marine sat ramrod straight in the chair behind his huge mahogany bureau. Dixie began to collapse into one of the stark 1930’s vintage, wooden-slatted visitor’s chairs opposite the desk. However, Sergeant Major Lattimore stopped him abruptly in mid squat.

“I didn’t ask you to sit down—Sergeant.”

Mid-bow, Dixie halted, eyeing the granite sergeant, and stood up. *A ball breaker, this guy is going to be a real ball breaker.* Dixie had had his share of them during his brief eight months in the Corps, the eight months he could recall, anyway.

“Ten ‘Hun!’” ordered Lattimore. Dixie snapped to, as he was conditioned to do.

“So Strickler, *you* are the famous returning war hero Sheeboom, hunh, *Strickler?*” He nodded slightly and grinned. “Amnesia! Ha! Danged convenient, ain’t it? Well, we’ll just see about that. *Strickler*, hunh? That your real name? Answer me, son.”

Top Kick

Lattimore spoke with a concentrated effectiveness, as he clearly but harshly enunciated each syllable. The grey irises of his eyes narrowed and spewed venom. He pressed both fists down, at arm's length, upon his desk blotter.

"No, Sergeant Major. My real name is Sheeboom, William N." (*Oh, did that sound strange to say!*) "Sergeant Major!"

"Well, we'll just see about that. Yeah! Darned convenient, ain't it, *this amnesia?* Here you come home to a beautiful, young wife and a million dollar fortune." He threw his right hand toward the outer office. "Hell boy, I could have *amnesia* for far less than that, a lot less! Ha!"

Before Dixie could reply, the office intercom buzzer rang. Lattimore pressed the buzzer. "Yes?"

"Sergeant Major, I can't locate any file under that name, Sir." (Dixie recognized the tenor of the smug young Staff Sergeant on the intercom.)

"Did you look in the top-secret files?"

"No Sergeant Major, I don't have access to those files."

"Well, find someone who does, dammit! And get me that file. Pronto!"

"Yes, Sergeant Major." The intercom clicked off. Lattimore raised his forefinger off the speaker button and turned back to Dixie. Then, he selected an eighteen-inch ruler from his top desk drawer.

"Remove your coat son. Hang it on the coat rack over there." He motioned with the ruler towards a one-tree rack." Dixie, standing in a relaxed manner, obeyed.

"Ten 'Hun! I didn't give you permission to rest."

Again, Dixie snapped to attention. The Top ordered Dixie to extend his hands for inspection. Dixie's missing digits from his right hand were obvious. Lattimore rose, then he walked like a tiger slowly circling its prey, around his desk to come even with Dixie. With one end of the ruler, Lattimore pried Dixie's hair back from his left ear, revealing the prosthetic rubber ear. Dixie dared not eyeball the Sergeant Major, but his peripheral vision allowed him to follow Lattimore's actions. Lattimore inspected the ear carefully, as well as the scars beneath Dixie's long hair, as he lifted the longish locks down off Dixie's neck. The blue, sleeveless mock crew neck T-shirt plainly showed Dixie's Marine Corps emblem tattoo, high up on his left shoulder. Lattimore stepped slowly around his subject, where Dixie could not follow the Sergeant Major's activities, but suddenly Dixie felt the ruler pressing against the inside of his right rear pants leg. The ruler's edge ran against his slacks, up along the inside of his right buttock and forward into his lone ball. Pissed now, Dixie tightened his stance. Lattimore must have sensed Dixie was beginning to lose his temper, because the Marine backed off and completed his circle around Dixie and then around his desk. He took his seat behind the desk. The Top inhaled deeply, apparently satisfied with his inspection. He spoke.

"All right, at ease, son." Lattimore's tone was relaxed now. "Grab your coat and take a seat." Again, Dixie followed orders, slipped into his silk suit coat and sat down.

There was a sharp rap at the door.

"Yes, come in," barked Lattimore.

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Another Staff Sergeant, one “Ryker” according to the nameplate on his coat, entered with a large folder and placed it on the Top’s desk.

“Oh Ryker, thank you.” The sergeant began to leave. “Hold it Ryker. Stick around a minute, will you? We can use your dictation skills. Here. Here’s a notepad and a pencil. And shut the door.”

Lattimore pulled a pencil from his desk drawer and shoved the note-taking items across the desktop towards Staff Sergeant Ryker. Ryker shut the office door and picked up the pencil, pad and paper. Lattimore nodded towards a chair against the wall near the door. He told Ryker to make use of it. Then Lattimore pored intently over the Sheeboom file which Ryker had delivered to him. Lattimore rubbed his chin repeatedly between his left thumb and forefinger, as he studied over the file. He zeroed in on two pages in succession and flipped back and forth between them repeatedly.

After several minutes, he emerged from the dossier, realizing he had neglected common courtesy. “Oh excuse me, Sergeant Ryker meet Nick Sheeboom. Mr. Sheeboom here is probably going to wind up the most decorated Marine in the history of the Corps, if everything pans out as I expect it will. Either that or this man before us is an imposter who will do a lengthy stint in the Brig for impersonating a Marine.” Lattimore chuckled heartily. The Staff Sergeant respectfully shook Dixie’s hand, while Lattimore motioned for the kid to retake his seat against the wall near the door. The young marine sat down in a chair near the Top’s desk, ready to take dictation. Lattimore sat up in his chair, nodded curtly to the stenographer and turned to Dixie.

“All right now son, tell me everything you remember from when you first came out of surgery in Subic Bay until how you got to my office today.”

His tone was semi-patronizing, but much softer than it had been and that suited Dixie fine. Dixie had nothing to hide, so he told them his story in his sometime stuttering manner, with Ryker recording everything. Dixie related second-hand some of Jim Dixon’s stories of his service in Nam and about their escape, of which Dixie confessed he knew nothing other than what Dixon had related to him. When he concluded, Lattimore asked Ryker if he had gotten everything, the stenographer assured him that he had and offered to read it back to them.

“No, that won’t be necessary Ryker. Just type that up for me in triplicate. You’re dismissed, Sergeant!”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.”

Ryker rose, made an about face, exited the office and closed the door behind him like a true marine. “That Ryker is one efficient Marine,” offered Lattimore admiringly.

A faint smile melted from his face as Lattimore rubbed his chin some more and relaxed back in his office chair. His face took on a pensive shade and he swiveled slowly to his left. Then he stood up cautiously and deliberately strode the length of the office to the window. He pulled down on the cords to the Venetian blinds, raising them above his head. The strong afternoon sunlight poured through the sash window panes. The Corps’ top noncommissioned officer looked out into the sun, through the long, high, rectangular office window onto the parade ground below. For a few long minutes, he did not speak. He merely looked out the window, lost in thought, as if he

had forgotten the young man he had just interviewed. Without warning, still staring out over the parade grounds below, he spoke with his typical dramatic punctuation.

“You know son, we lost that damn war because we didn’t try to win it!” He turned suddenly around to Dixie to emphasize his point. “Patton was right. Americans, real Americans, love winners! They love heroes.” With one arm behind his back, and the other before him, Lattimore made a fist and punched it into the air for emphasis. “That damned War produced little of either. The political climate ain’t right, just now, for heroes, not from that damned War anyway. After all, all combat Marines were supposed to have been pulled out of there in April of Seventy-One. How the hell are we going to explain what you were doing there, behind enemy lines in January of Seventy-three? Hunh? Tell me.” He strode towards Dixie angrily, answering his own question with a question. “Executing clandestine extractions? BULL! Who would believe that now, after Watergate?”

He marched around his desk and resumed his seat, swiveling his chair back to face Dixie. The Sergeant Major composed himself and the red drained from his face as mercurially as it had risen. He leaned forward, resting his forearms along the edge of the desk for support, his hands clasped together before him.

“Son, *you are a hero* by any stretch of the word and you should be highly decorated, but the truth of the matter is, most of the country don’t give *a damn* about any of it and they sure as hell don’t want to be reminded of it now by your heroics. They just want to forget the whole rotten mess.” He slammed his palms face down on the desktop in exasperation.

Again he rose, looking at Dixie for some confirmation. Sensing their meeting had concluded, Dixie rose to his feet as well.

“I guess you right, Top. It don’t mean anything to me either, since I can’t remember it anyway.”

For the first time since they had entered his officer, Lattimore’s countenance brightened.

“Well, that may be just as well son. One thing is for sure.”

Lattimore leaned over onto his desk, once more resting himself lightly on his two fists against his desktop. Then he pointed a forefinger toward the closed door.

“You have got one fine woman out there waiting for you, son. She has been battling all of us, the bureaucracy, all of us, in your behalf for years. I admire everything about her. She’s one in a million. Make that, ten million!” He thrust a forefinger in Dixie’s direction with exceptional dramatic flair. Then he placed his hands behind his back and stood at ease. “Why, if I were younger ... well, hell, I could be her father, you know? Even so, she is one truly exceptional woman and you’re lucky as hell to have her. I’d give my retirement for a woman like that. Why, with a girl like her in your present and future son, you don’t need the past.” Again, the dirt-eating grin spread widely across his tanned visage. “You follow?”

“Yes, Sergeant Major. She surprises me more every minute I’m around her. And I’ve only known her for about twenty-four hours. The more I see, the more I want to see.”

Dixie was proud that his stutters had deserted him temporarily. The Marine had shocked them out of him.

“Yes. In your position, I would, too.” Lattimore nodded as he came around the table to shake Dixie’s hand with his right hand and place a reassuring paw on Dixie’s back.

“Say, one more thing, son. If you could provide us with some of your dental x-rays, maybe with an affidavit signed by the dentist confirming they *are* your x-rays, I’d appreciate it. Drop them by as soon as possible. Then I’ll be able to get to work to get your records restored. It’s not to convince me, you understand, but the bureaucracy, you see? It’s just a matter of formality.” He nodded twice grinning all the time. “And I’m *personally* going to handle this matter. I guarantee it. I’ll get the VA straightened out for you as well, OK?”

“Yes Sergeant Major, but please don’t lose me my entitlements. I kind of count on that money while I am going to school.”

“Sure kid.” The Top chuckled as he opened the door to the outer office. “Sure. I’ll see to it that you won’t get cheated out of your entitlements—as a Staff Sergeant, no less—even though you won’t need them with all the loot you’ve got.”

Staff Sergeant? Dang, I go from an E3 to an E6 just like that! Must have done something to get those battlefield promotions. Shoot! I’m set for life.

The Top broke into Dixie’s financial reverie. “By the way, did you give me the phone number of that Dixon fellow?”

He ushered Dixie through the doorway, into the outer office where Ryz’n was sitting patiently, waiting for her husband.

“Yes, I did. I’m certain Staff Sergeant Ryker wrote it down along with the address, because I repeated it when he asked me to.”

“Yes, of course. Very well then. I’m certain he got it as well. That Ryker is one damned efficient Marine.” He shot a glance at a cowering Staff Sergeant Smith, seated behind his desk. Dixie noticed a faint smile crossed Ryz’n’s lips.

He and Lattimore crossed the office to Ryz’n who rose to meet them. For an instant, Dixie thought she was upset and he didn’t know why, but when she turned on the charm for the Sergeant Major, he thought better.

“Well, gentleman,” proclaimed Ryz’n, grinning happily. “Are we all ‘squared away’? I believe that’s Marine slang, is it not, Sergeant Major?”

“All squared away, Ma’am,” Lattimore assured her as he bowed deferentially to her and the dirt-eating grin split his face yet again. “Your husband is going to present us with his dental records as further verification of his identity, though it’s a mere formality, really.”

“You mean you don’t believe us yet?” Ryz’n asked incredulously.

“No ma’am, not me. I believe you, of course. It’s just a minor detail required in a case of this nature. You understand, Ma’am?”

“Well, no I don’t, but if it’s required and ... where’s my notebook, by the way?”

“Oh yes, just a minute, Ma’am.”

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The Sergeant Major turned on his heels and strode with dispatch back into his office, returning with the requested notebook, which Dixie noted he had ignored during the entire interview.

“Here you are Ma’am. Thank you for the use of it. It was vey thoughtful of you, Ma’am,” he remarked politely. Lattimore turned again to Dixie.

“Yes sir, Mr. Sheeboom, you are one mighty lucky man, mighty lucky, indeed.” Once again, the Top was grinning like a hyena.

The couple bid their good-byes and Lattimore reminded them of the performances of the U.S. Marine Corps Band, Color Guard and Silent Drill Platoon Fridays at 1930 hours during the summer. Lattimore said he would make sure the Sheebooms had a standing pass to sit in the Commandant’s box. As they were leaving, Dixie checked under Staff Sergeant Smith’s typewriter credenza, for the item that he had seen fall from the back of his license earlier. However, Dixie found nothing.

“What’s the matter, Baby? Did you lose something?” Ryz’n asked mockingly. Disconcerted, Dixie took his license from his pocket and checked the back of it. He shook his head and then replaced the license in its typical spot in his wallet. “Uh, no, no. I must have been seeing things. Let’s go, I guess.”

“Yes, lets. Let’s make a move.” Ryz’n smiled—“as you used to say, Sweetie.”