Even Better

A Work of Fiction By

Dixie Wells

EVEN BETTER
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Scripture quotations are taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

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For the late Kenley Davis, a true friend, who cared enough to review and critique my early efforts.

May you rest in peace with the Lord.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S:

My Dearest Spouse, thank you for so much of the cover art, indulgence of my time and your inimitable generosity of spirit. Thank you, Dear.

John Herold, thank you for your assistance regarding the law.

W A R N I N G:

This book contains adult situations and mature themes. It is ***not*** recommended for young readers.

CONTENTS

Foreword vi
Chapter 1: The Accident . . . 1
Chapter 2: The Set-Up 11
Chapter 3: The Meeting. . . . 19
Chapter 4: The Tale 24
Chapter 5: The Eyewitness . . . 53
Chapter 6: Fin & Claw 69
Chapter 7: The Indictment . . . 87
Chapter 8: Voir Dire et Rêver à Voir . 99
Chapter 9: Beach Call 123
Chapter 10: Jail 133
Chapter 11: Pep Talk 149
Chapter 12: The Arraignment . . . 159
Chapter 13: Tag Teamin' 168
Chapter 14: Love in the Air . . . 173
Chapter 15: Two Pair of Turtle Doves . 186
Chapter 16: The Defense Opens. . . 198
Chapter 17: The State Makes Its Case 203
Chapter 18: The State's Case, Day Two . 219
Chapter 19: Motive. 239
Chapter 20: Zonin' Out 250
Chapter 21: Character Assassination. . 263
Chapter 22: Land Mines for the Prosecution 282
Chapter 23: Mrs. K. 303
Chapter 24: The New Judge . . . 313
Chapter 25: Love Notches. . . . 335
Chapter 26: Absolution in Afterglow. . 356
Chapter 27: Weekend To Heal . . . 377
Chapter 28: In Chambers 381
Chapter 29: The Surprise Witness . . 388
Chapter 30: The Defense 399
Chapter 31: The Defense, Day Two . . 409
Chapter 32: Change of Heart . . . 431
Chapter 33: Insomnia 435
Chapter 34: Recantation 453
Chapter 35: Closing Arguments. . . 468
Chapter 36: End Game 485

… Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

—John 8:11b KJV

~ Chapter 1: The Accident ~

Terri scrunched behind the windshield to tie her blonde hair back with the red ribbon. She checked her look in the glass, making certain the ribbon was secure. She'd lost the ribbon during their tête-à-tête at the drive-in. Nick figured she'd just found it somewhere in the car. He eyed her as they approached the T.C. traffic light. Edging up on the passenger seat to lean forward, Terri scouted around in the black night. Straining to see, hands on her knees, Terri pressed her healthy front tandem up against the dashboard over the glove compartment. Dashboard lights reflecting off the glass revealed her deeply tanned chest. The girl showed well in a cute, scoop-necked, cotton, midriff top. Truly somethin' else.

"Say, you don't think those guys are laying for us up here, do you Nick?"

Terri voiced his silent fears but Nick said nothing. He didn't want to alarm her or Patti, the freckle-faced brunette, who sat between him and Terri on the vinyl, aqua cushion.

"You don't think they'd do that, d'ya Nick?" Patti's new, trendy, shag haircut compensated for her freckles, making her look older than her sixteen, nearly seventeen years. "I sure as hell hope not! Why would they? Wait for us, for what? Five hours in the middle of the flippin' night? What kind of creeps would do something like that?"

Like swivel-headed bookends, both he and Terri turned to look at Patti, as she if she had just fallen out of the sky. "Oh bull slop," said Patti. How could Patti forget how he'd made fools out of those boys earlier at Truley's?

"Those are bad boys Patti, muy malo."

Patti blanched at Terri. "They muy stupido, too?" He and Terri turned to eye Patti hard.

"All right, all right, I get it. I get it. I'll shut up." And she did.

In silence, Nick pulled his sleek, '67 aquamarine Pontiac Bonneville convertible up to stop at the T.C. traffic light. Truley's Bar and Grill was right there, just where it had always been. Yep, right where they had left it about five hours ago on this late June night. Only then, the Buzzbee boys were oil-smeared and rolling in the gutter, beat all to hell. Now, the night was blacker and bleaker than before. The thunderstorm Nick had sensed coming their way approached in the form of dark clouds, finally sprinkling its first large, scattered, cold drops. He pressed the button to raise the convertible top. The girls turned and bent over the seatback to roll up the rear windows, as Nick locked down the ragtop.

He was admiring their swaying, classy chassis humped over the seatback when–

"My gosh Nick. Is that who I think it is over there?" Terri's head turned to him.

She slid back down into the shotgun seat. Her countenance paled beneath her summer tan as she faced forward. The girl's ample chest heaved with fright. Nick peered around and past her wind-tangled, dense, blonde locks towards Truley's. His heart thumped harder, as it had during his earlier confrontation with those goons here at the road house.

Terri had fingered them all right. It was them—*the Buzzbees. Damn it!*

The brothers were parked near the telephone pole that held the lone lamp over the vacant, dirt and gravel parking lot. Looked like Arlo behind the wheel with his brother Alvin, riding shotgun. Nick could hardly believe it. They were waiting in the empty lot just inside the range of the street lamp. The Buzzbee boys sat in a souped up, black and yellow, hot rod, pickup truck that sported a giant, black bumble bee on the yellow hood with smaller images of the insect on the doors. Looked like one of those funny cars dudes ran on weekends over at Quasco speedway. Raising his convertible top must have caught their eyes. Southern Maryland's bad boys recognized Nick and his 1967 Pontiac. The brothers flipped Nick off, raining profanities out their windows and gunned their engine.

Their jalopy jolted forward taking an angle across the empty, dirt and gravel lot to cut Nick off. Nick didn't wait for the light to change. The storm-wet, dark road lay empty and all but dead in the early morning pitch black, both ahead and behind. Nick turned left from the right lane. The Pontiac hurtled through the intersection across four lanes of highway down Old Veer. His Bonneville curved right, past the girl's worksite on his left—the health clinic—vacant and dead now at two a.m. The rain came faster.

The Buzzbees followed, firing across the two north-bound lanes into the grassy median strip. Their jalopy fishtailed through the median, giving Nick a moment to put some distance between them. Good, he needed a break. Despite his Pontiac's three hundred and thirty-three horses, the Buzzbee's souped up, drag racin' hot rod would eat him up out on the highway. Nick knew Old Veer Avenue as one of those winding, country, up and down affairs, with high-pitched banks on its curves and not much in the way of shoulders. It was a dual yellow-lined, roller coaster deal where you always seemed to get stuck behind a farmer on a tractor, unable to pass. And then, when you get to that one straightaway with spaced lines, oncoming traffic held you in your lane.

Nick led the Buzzbees north over the dippy-curvy, roller coaster road. Checking for their lights in the rear view mirror, he could tell their reactions were slow, clumsy. They swerved all over the road behind him. The boys must have been drinking—or doping—another break for him and the girls. If those creeps weren't careful, they'd kill themselves. And wouldn't that be sweet? He only hoped they wouldn't kill him and the girls in the process. With his ragtop hugging the black-wet, asphalt ribbon, Nick curved sharply to his left. Behind him, the Buzzbees slid off the road. Turning on his windshield wipers, Nick slowed to take the first right angle in a long, square-shaped, U-bracket, double turn. A mile and a half of straightaway sandwiched between the pair of dead man curves. The double, sharp right-turn angles were notorious for producing fatal accidents.

The Buzzbee's foul-up at the right angle of the first turn caused Nick to lose sight of them for a minute. Spotting an up-hill, tree-lined rural drive, Nick screeched to his right to turn up a dirt, farm lane. He flipped off his lights, hoping the Buzzbees would fly by,

as the Spanish cavalry had when they had chased Zorro through the forest. That ruse had worked great for Tyrone Power up on the big screen. Nick hoped it did as much for him.

With the car lights off, Nick inched his Pontiac further up the hill toward a two-story, white frame farmhouse. Within ear-shot of the house, Nick cut his engine. He told the girls they could stay with him or trek up to the farmhouse for help. Both girls wanted to stick with him. Pale and frightened, their suddenly child-like faces warmed his heart. Just kids really, like him. But their shapely teen bodies were those of full-grown women. There was nothing child-like about their figures They were a pair to draw to for sure.

Behind them, they watched the Buzzbees careen around the right angle turn below. The hot-rod sped through the storm onto the straightaway. Shifting into high gear, the jalopy fish-tailed up the base of the U-bracket in search of the Pontiac. Nick watched until the Buzzbees turned right again at the far right angle turn, disappearing behind some trees bordering the road. He followed their headlights racing between gaps in the foliage.

"Thank God for big favors," said Patti. "Come on Baby, let's blow this place."

Nick followed her advice. He backed the big sedan down the dirt drive to trace backwards his path over Old Veer. As he drove, he prayed silently, askin' for help, for wisdom, for a way of escape. He knew those boys wouldn't let their earlier altercation at the road house slide. If they didn't catch him tonight, they'd come for him sooner or later.

The girls seemed to pray also. With heads bowed, their lips moved without sound. Terri crossed herself repeatedly over her solid chest. But this was no time to zone out on her luscious frame. Nick had to get his mind right if they were to get home unscathed.

He passed around the first leg of the long U-bracket turn back toward Truley's.

"Turn the lights on, Baby. Floor it and get the heck out of Dodge."

But, ignoring Patti, Nick stopped. He didn't know why. He thought he'd heard, felt, something. Coming down hard, the rain drummed the convertible rag top of the car.

– TURN AROUND, WAIT –

"What? Who said that?" Nick looked around. The girls stared at him, waiting.

"One of you say something?" Both of them shook their heads "no."

Against his reason, Nick began to turn the car around.

Patti asked what he was doing. She said they could escape if he kept on. Instead, he made a three-point turn in the narrow road. Then, after pausing for a minute, he inched the Pontiac slowly forward. He couldn't explain why he did it. Something inside his heart encouraged him. He *felt* it. Felt those three silent words. Where were those creeps anyway? The driving rain pelted the ragtop, hood and windshields, sounding like an endless-ammo, machine gun bursting over their heads and on the hood before them.

Calm and reserved, Terri asked, "What are you doing Nicholas?"

"I dunno, Terr. Gotta hunch, answer to prayer mebbe. I dunno. Just *feels* like the right thing ta do. If you know any good prayers, now's a good time to say 'em."

"What do you think I've been doing?" she replied. He grinned at Terri.

"Oh, just being your lovely, gorgeous self, I guess." As he smiled, she relaxed, as if he'd lifted a great weight from her shoulders. Sitting between them, Patti whined.

"What's all this slop?" Right next to him, Patti's heavy, direct glare unnerved him.

"Look Patti, why don't you jump in the back Sweetie, and put a belt on?"

Terri fastened her safety belt about her slim waist. Nick cinched his a little tighter.

"Like hell I will. Let Terri jump in back like she did before."

"Look Baby, ain't no time ta argue. Got no center belt up here. There's one in back."

"So, Terri can sit in back."

"She's already buckled in, see? It's nasty now. Could get rough, Baby. I can jes' feel it. Go ahead now and be a good girl. *Please?*"

Patti grumbled under her breath, but she scrambled over the seatback. Via the rear view mirror, Nick watched her buckle up in the middle seat behind him.

The rain was pelting the car very hard now. It was one of those summer thunderstorms so prevalent in Southern Maryland after a long hot, humid day. Though he noticed, there hadn't been much lightning or thunder in this one so far, just driving rain. He stopped to turn his windshield wipers on full. Patti leaned forward.

"What the hell ya still doin' with the lights off, *Nicholas*? I can't see a *damn thing*."

"*Relax* Patti. Just be cool and relax. Nick knows what he's doing, don't you Nicky?" Terri motioned Patti back.

"That's right, Terr. I can see in the dark but they can't." And besides, he hadn't sensed any heartfelt urges to turn the lights back on, only – *TURN AROUND, WAIT.*

"*Nobody* can see in the dark."

That Patti could be a real pain, but Terri was cool. She was really okay.

"Well, I can," said Nick. "Now just be cool Baby and we'll get through this all right."

"I don't believe you can see in the dark. Never heard of such a thing, have you Terri?"

"Saw some old war movie on TV once with Gary. Had some Indian marine scout in the Pacific, could see in the dark. Believe it was Clint Walker—what a great-looking guy. Thought it was just Hollywood stuff. You know? Made for a good story."

"Never heard of *anybody* who could see in the dark. That's for damn sure. And you *Nicky Sh'boom* are no exception." Nick checked her displeasure in the rear view mirror.

"Well Patti, now you do." She leaned forward to yell in his right ear: "Prove it."

"Well, ever seen anybody with two-tone peepers like mine?"

"No. So what?" Nick turned to Terri. "You, Terr?" Terri shook her head no.

"There ya go." He winked at Patti via the rear view mirror.

He thought talkin' was good for them, occupied their minds till the Buzzbee boys realized their mistake and headed back their way.

"Just because you've got the weirdest eyes we've ever seen Nicky, don't mean you can see twenty/twenty at night." He rolled his eyes and made a face in the mirror at Patti.

"Never said I see *twenty/twenty*. All's I'm sayin' is, I see better'n most people at night. That's all."

"Well, let's just hope you do," said Terri, who winked to show she was with him.

But it was true. He could always see well in the dark, not twenty/twenty o' course, but a lot better'n anyone else he knew. Always could. Piece o' cake.

"I don't believe it. You wear *glasses* in class half the time for cripesake."

"Them's my readin' glasses Patti. Oh ye of little faith. Use 'em to take tests."

Terri nodded. "Yes Patti, with faith as big as a mustard seed, you'll move mountains."

"All I care about *movin',* is this car—turnin' it around and *movin'* on home."

Nick quit listening to them. The rain had wet the road just enough to refresh old oil and fluid spills, but not enough to wash them off. The road was lifeless but treacherous, dangerously slick. He was waiting for further commands from his heart. The Pontiac was barely moving, inching along on a road void of life, enveloped in a wet pool of inky black. Absent the dashboard lights now, the black enveloped them inside, too. He could hear the girls breathing deeply, anxious but trying to stay cool. Terri was panting. Her heavy bust heaved with each breath**.** Nothing but that thin cotton top hid her bona fides. She'd lost the upper half of a two-piece swimsuit she'd worn under her cute midriff top back at the drive-in when things got heated, when Patti had left them for the rest room and concession stand. He wondered where the bra piece was now. After going missing in action during the heat of combat, so to speak. Even in the dark, Terri stood right out there. Both of 'em heaved in synch with anticipation, leaving little to his imagination, much less his short-term memory. He swore he saw a pair of firm, pink tips pokin' through that thin, white cotton top. *Ah, sweet seventeen.* Yeah. He saw good in the dark.

The girls prayed "The Lord's Prayer." Nick got his mind right enough to join them in a low whisper. They started up with "Holy Mary, Mother of ..." He didn't know that one.

Nick edged his big '67 Pontiac Bonneville closer to the first right angle of the U-bracket. Needing some fresh air, he rolled down his window halfway then cracked the vent window half open. Cold, refreshing pellets splattered against his left cheek and shoulder. All was quiet now, except for the pounding rain, the purr of his big engine and the girls' heavy-breathing. Tension was high. Off to his left, he heard a funny, low-pitched, buzzing sound, a kind of a hum that sounded like high-voltage electricity. Turning back over his left shoulder, Nick spotted an oversized, electric transformer, supported and housed by a scaffold of double wooden telephone poles with heavy cable wires running into it from all directions. Kind of a loud hum for electricity he thought. He turned on the dash lights. Terri was crossed herself. Her lovely lips moved in silence.

A line of shade trees bordered the right side of the road. Nick licked his lips. He was cool and calm. Just as he had been earlier at Truley's when he'd stuck it to those two turkeys. Seemed like a lifetime ago, instead of just a few hours. – *GO SLOW*.

Again, a silent but felt command from inside. Nick crept forward, peaking the speedometer at ten miles an hour. He turned right into the straightaway. A pair of headlights loomed between the trees, past the far bend in the U a couple miles away. He could see a vehicle racing beneath a rare streetlamp behind some sparsely planted, roadside, cedar trees. Couldn't make out a bumble bee on the door. Might be them, but he wasn't sure. Looked like some kind of a small truck mebbe.

Rolling distant headlights passed behind the trees the other side of the far bracket turn. The vehicle made the sharp left turn into the straightaway at the base of the bracket, fishtailing as it headed towards him. It had a tough time holding the road, turning ninety degrees left onto the straightaway. Yeah. Looked more like some kind of a small truck than a car. Jes' might be them. — *STAY SLOW* — The approaching vehicle was moving much faster than his Pontiac. Heading right for him now like a Wild West showdown. Had to be them. Surmounting the storm, Nick heard the deep but distant distinctive rumble of an on-rushing, four-barrel carb with dual exhaust. That menacing sound confirmed his suspicions. Had to be the Buzzbees souped up motor. Their hi-beams stared him in the face. Behind him, Patti cracked. She yelled to him to turn tail and run but he couldn't—too late now. Terri's wide eyes, pale face and heaving bust told him what they all knew. It was the Buzzbees, all right. And it was too late to turn back.

Them boys must have spotted the Pontiac even though his lights were off. Even if they hadn't, there was no time for Nick to make a three-point turn now. And he had just passed the farm lane he had ducked up earlier. He didn't know why he was driving so slow, when he wanted to go faster and challenge 'em—chicken 'em right off the road. But he drove as instructed, compelled by the mysterious, heartfelt, inner Voice to proceed cautiously. Even so, his speedometer crept up to twenty then twenty-five. The Buzzbees sped down the straightaway, running more than twice as fast as Nick. They had to be doing sixty. Nick thought he saw the bee on the hood, but how could he, with their hi-beams darn near blinding him? Must be his imagination.

The truck closed in on the halfway point of the straightaway. Flashing its high beams twice then leaving them on, the truck surged right ahead toward Nick. The hot rod crossed the center stripes, heading straight for his Pontiac. Yeah. Them boys knew he was here. They wanted to run him right off the road. Sure they did. Placing his left hand on the light switch, Nick pulled out the knob, flipping on his lights. This was it.

Behind him, Patti screamed.

"No! Don't play chicken with 'em Nick. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna—"

Th-wack! Terri had reached back over the seat to backhand Patti's thigh hard, shutting her up, earning even more of his respect. In the rear view mirror, Patti sulked but shut-up.

"Sorry Nick," said Terri.

Forget it. Their lives were hanging in the balance. Nick shook her off.

Pulling his shades off the sun visor while pushing the visor down, Nick jammed on his dark glasses, trying to shield his eyes from the blaring high beam lights ahead that were nearly blinding him. He stomped his left foot against the hi-beam switch on the floor board to block out their brites but it didn't help much. Terri shoved down her visor too, throwing up an arm to screen out the onrushing hi-beams. The Buzzbees came on faster.

"'S okay. Ya did fine, Terr—Patti?" He checked Patti out via the rear view mirror. "We're gonna be fine, Baby. Trust me. I gotta hunch."

Glaring at him in the mirror, Patti whimpered but nodded. Terri turned back to console her, but Patti said nothing. Then Terri faced front. She cracked her windows as Nick had. Then, seizing the vent window bar with both hands, she squished her twin torpedoes together between her elbows. She half-turned her head to Nick, managing a hopeful simper. Staring dead ahead, Nick nodded as they both focused on the road before them.

Seconds seemed like minutes. Rain fell in gusty torrents now. Windshield wipers beat a fast but steady rhythm though they could not match Nick's wild heartbeat or fully clear his line of vision. He flipped on the air conditioner with the fan on high to knock down condensation forming inside the windshield. Sweaty hands, dry mouth. Could feel the tension—Mann, what a ride. Rain fell in sheets. Lightning flashed and thunder cracked close behind it. The Buzzbees. Yeah. Had to be them.

Instants seemed like hours. Nick couldn't wet his lips. No spit. Palms, sweaty. Except for the dashboard lights, the car was dark inside. Outside, the slick, wet road was black and foreboding. Nick strained to peer through the inky black and driving rain. Oncoming bright lights stared him down. Just hundreds of yards away, the Buzzbees sped up. *Assholes*. Still no spit. Nick could smell the rain over the scent of the girl's combating perfumes. No further than a football field now. Blinding white light from their high beams shone dead on for him, looming larger. *Please help me, Jesus.*

Nick pumped his hi-beams twice. Their headlights grew, consuming him, coming, coming—eighty yards. Fifty! Twenty—*LEFT.*

Nick swerved left obeying the inner voice. The Buzzbees did the same. Patti screamed. They missed each other. *Un-bee-lieve-able!* But how? Both cars skidded toward opposite sides of the slick road, tires shrieking, just clearing each other's right rear fenders.

Nick tried to straighten the Pontiac out as he applied the brakes ever so slightly. The car skidded hard to the left, across the road. Turning quickly into the direction of the skid, Nick glimpsed in his rear view mirror. Behind him, the hot rod jerked violently to its left also. The faster moving pickup truck shot across the road, catching the opposite, shallow,

gravel shoulder with its driver's side tires. Braking, Nick thought he had the convertible under control when the Pontiac suddenly shifted, sliding right. He let up on the brakes, steering into the skid. Fishtailing sharply left, the wild skid carried him further than he expected. He steered into a second, correcting turn, breaking hard when he felt the front tires catching the narrow gravel shoulder.

The rear tires shrieked. The Pontiac slid sideways right, making that terrible, fatal, highway sound. Nick braked hard for fear of sliding over the road embankment down into the adjacent field. The car tipped, teetering for a second on its right tires. Patti screamed again. Nick leaned left against the door. His side of the Pontiac fell back to the ground, halting half across the gravel shoulder, back end perpendicular to the road with the back bumper, jutting out over the asphalt. The front end pointed downhill towards a planted field. Nick twisted quickly to his left to watch through his half-open window.

The Buzzbee's hot rod truck careened back across the road. Those boys either panicked or were too drunk or tired to react properly. Unable to stop, the truck steered sharply off the opposite, left shoulder then back to the right to regain the road. But the driver overcompensated. Trying to hug the asphalt, the hot rod turned sharply left again. Its ass-end slid right, across the road out of control into and through the right corner U-angle, far too fast to hold such a severe angle. Looked as if the driver had lost his nerve by braking too stiffly, too long. The hot rod's tires shrieked horribly. The truck slid up the sharp-banked asphalt right through the corner of the bracket. Too late, the truck turned in the direction of the long skid. The sound of loud-squealing tires gave Nick goose bumps.

The hot-rod truck vaulted up, out and over the steeply down-pitched bank of the curve, crashing sidelong into the double telephone poles holding the transformer he had heard humming minutes ago. Striking the poles nearly halfway up, the high velocity of the vaulting truck cracked the poles in two. They toppled like timber. The pickup's stinger end swayed to the right. The hot rod crashed to the ground on the driver's side at the base of the sloping embankment. The top half of the telephone poles, the scaffold and the huge, electrical transformer smashed down, squashing the passenger side of the truck. Starlight white electric sparks, from cable wires ripped asunder, showered into the wet, inky black over and around the crash site like so many holiday sparklers. Seemed to Nick as if the Fourth had come a few days early this year.

Within a matter of seconds, the electric sparks met what must have been gasoline fuel leaking from the hot rod. A fiery explosion erupted into a huge, black-yellow-orange and red mini mushroom cloud that vomited up into the black, stormy night. Stupefied and appalled, Nick removed his sunglasses to watch. The terrific explosion catapulted the truck's hood skyward, shooting it above and beyond the flames while shearing off the roof top. The roof landed and bounced, dancing end over end, away from them, across the field, as if it had a life of its own. The downed, wooden scaffold flamed yellow-white

atop the wreck. Streaks of fire shot high into the sky, licking at the inky, falling rain. The hood richocheted off the embankment into the field the other side of the sawed-off poles.

Seconds later, a secondary explosion insured the demise of the notorious Buzzbee boys. The missing cab roof exposed their heads and torsos to the view of Nick and the girls. Still inside the cab, the Buzzbees' bodies blazed along with remnants of the jalopy. The boys were still—limp. Nick figured those boys were unconscious, if not dead. With the truck on its side now and the cab roof gone, Nick watched in shock as white-hot flames consumed their heads and torsos while the boys lay atop each other on their sides in the wreck. If they weren't dead a minute ago, they sure as hell were now.

"Could have been us," Nick mumbled under his breath. "Shoot, it could have been us, if—" Terri squeezed the top of his shoulder from behind. Her hot breath panted against his neck. That inner Voice he had felt in his heart had saved their asses. If he had gone a little faster, as he'd wanted, the convertible might have flipped over down the slope. It dang near had anyway. If he had steered right as he'd wanted, they would have crashed head-on. He could have wound up like his Uncle Bill, pinned beneath the steering wheel and paralyzed for life, or worse—dead, like those boys fryin' in the flames.

In speechless terror, Nick and the girls watched this horrific, ghastly spectacle through the heavy downpour from the distant safety of the convertible. As flames engulfed the wreck, the Buzzbees fried. White electric sparks sputtered, sizzled and popped sporadically like effervescent sparklers. Live wires hopped off the ground, disconnected from the downed transformer, evidence the thing was down but not out. One sparking wire whipped out of control like an unmanned fire hose.

Through his open window, Nick could hear the staccato buzzing of the felled, grotesque electric monster, gasping, fighting for life. Sitting motionless, mouths agape, he witnessed a premature but unprecedented Fourth of July fireworks display, not to mention a gruesome, fiery, twin electrocution-execution. It was a sight Nick wished he never saw. The three of them sat in stunned awe and horror, but also in thankful reverence for being spared. Lightning flashed long, revealing the gruesome sight, as if it were broad daylight. Loud thunder followed.

"Did you see that?" Terri and Nick turned back to stare at Patti drying her tears, adding, "Yeah, guess you did."

Like Nick, Terri had removed her shades. Breathing heavily, she leaned in close to him to whisper. "Do you think they can survive, Nick?"

Her full, deep cleavage heaved above the drooping, scooped hem of her top revealing most all she had to offer. The voluptuous sight failed to excite him as it had earlier.

Behind him Patti replied, "You gotta be kiddin' Terri. Are you muy stupido, too? Can't you see their heads fryin'? Most gruesome thing I ever saw."

"How can you say that Patti!"

"Very easily, cuz I see 'em fryin' right there in front of me with my own two eyes. You want me to say it again so you can read my lips? Those were two bad boys—*muy malo.* You said so yourself, Terri. They deserved it."

Terri whispered, more to herself than Nick or Patti. "Never said they *deserved it.* We *all deserve* to die. We're all sinners. But *nobody* deserves to die *like that*—nobody."

She raised her tone. "That could have been us down there. If Nick had sped up or turned the other way, it could have been us, just like Nicky said. There's another transformer like that up there." Terri pointed to her right up toward the left side of the road near the far right angle of the square-U bracket by the lone street lamp. Terri turned back to face them— "Only not as big as that monster." She shuddered.

Funny thought Nick, the Pontiac didn't get so much as a scratch.

Terri nodded toward the wreck. "Thank the Lord that that's not us."

"Amen to that sweet prayer," said Nick. Patti concurred.

"You girls all right?" They nodded they were.

"Yes. Thanks for asking Nicky." Terri patted his shoulder, offering a thin smile.

"*Yes. Thanks for asking, Nicky.*"

Patti mimicked Terri, in a spoiled kid's, high-pitched sing-song. Then, in her deeper, normal voice: "Sounds like you two are scum-suckin' in love all of a sudden. What happened when I went to the restroom anyway?" Nick and Terri ignored her.

"Well, what happened?"

It came to Nick again, as he recalled those simple, silent but direct, internal commands.

TURN AROUND, WAIT – GO SLOW – LEFT

He had felt those silent commands inside his heart and obeyed. His obedience had saved them. But he kept this to himself. They watched the pickup burn for a couple minutes. Lightning flashed for an instant like daylight, revealing the gruesome scene. Thunder pealed again close by. The girls confessed the sight of the crash was making them ill. Terri thought she saw lights twinkling through the trees up on the hill above and behind them. Flashlights, mebbe. Probably from the farmhouse up there, the one with the dirt lane Nick had entered earlier. But the house itself was dark.

Nick heard faint voices floating above the storm down the hill through the rainy dark.

"Let's beat it Nicky." Patti leaned forward, peering over the seatback to make her point.

Terri faced straight ahead. Nick looked into the profile of her stunned, blank stare.

"Come on Nicky! Scram!" Patti poked the back of his shoulder. "Let's get the hell out o' here—*fast!* We can't do nothin' for them boys now." Patti was sure right about that.

"'Cept call the morgue mebbe," he said. "Shoot!" Terri looked down at her lap.

Nick took the wheel and shifted into Reverse. Turning the wheel to the left, he steered the Pontiac back onto the road. After stopping to shift gears, he lowered his window letting rain splash him. He headed for home, hoping the storm would wash away his sin.

Bzzzz.

Franco looked up from the transcript of the deposition in front of him to press the intercom buzzer. "Yes, Gladys."

"There's a Mister Vince Vizconni on line one. Would you like to take his call now?"

"Vinny? You bet. Put him on, please Gladys."

The phone rang. Franco picked up.

"Hey Vinny, how ya doin'? Long time, no hear."

"Frank-*eee!* Good to hear your voice."

"Yours, too. What's it been? Couple years since we went to that Senators game?"

"Yeah, but you came to my first midnight mass since then, Christmas before last, remember? We had coffee and brownies down in the rec. hall afterwards."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. You still at Holy Trinity? Your folks doin' okay?"

"Yep, sure am. They're doing fine, still living in the old neighborhood. And you. I see your name in the papers from time to time. Your law practice must be doing well."

"Can't complain. Could use that one big case maybe to put me over the top and I'd be all set. But I'm doing fine really, no complaints."

"Still single?"

"So far, so good." Franco tapped his wooden desk top.

"Seeing anybody special?"

"Ah, you know. Same old thing. Got an on-again, off-again with Carol. You know."

"Carol Davalone? That's been a few years now hasn't it? Gee, don't think I've seen her in … I dunno … two, three years, at least. Still recall her as a kid from the block."

"Yeah, she's still good, just not a kid anymore. None of us are, right Vin?"

"No, you've got that right Frank."

"So Vin. If you don't have an extra Nats ticket, what's up? Calling me before nine in the a.m., must be something important. Not about when I made my last confession, is it?"

"What? Making confession isn't important?"

"Vinny, Vin-*eee*! Hey."

"Okay, no homilies from me today Frank. Actually, I called on a legal matter for an acquaintance of mine."

"Oh? What's up?"

"Well this kid lives in my parish is in a bit of a scrape. He's not one of my parishioners but I know him. Know of him. I know some of his female conquests in the parish. The kid's like a one-man wrecking crew with the ladies. Anyway, he came to the rectory a little after four this morning seeking advice. Said he was involved in a car accident that

resulted in two fatalities. Seems he left the scene but called the police from a pay phone to report it then went back a short time later when the police and fire department were cleaning up the accident site. Tried to tell a police officer directing traffic what happened, but the guy wouldn't listen. Fire trucks were arriving and the officer just wanted to get him out of there to free up the road. Now, he wants to know what he should do, report to the police again or forget it. I told him this sounded more like a legal matter and recommended you to him. He said he'd like to speak with you, if you don't mind. I'm just sort of paving the way you might say."

"I see. How old is the kid?"

"Sixteen. Seventeen in September."

"He's got a driver's license, I take it? Was he hurt, any passengers, witnesses?"

"Yes, he's got a license. Two passengers, but they weren't hurt. His car wasn't even damaged. He says the other car tried to run him off the road in that bad storm we had last night and lost control. Couldn't make a turn and crashed into a utility pole supporting a power transformer. Both passengers died. You know that spot down there on Old Veer below Surrettesdale with those dead man turns? Know where I'm talking about?"

"Yes, sure. That's a bad spot. But why would another car try to run him off the road?"

"Well, it's kind of a long story. I think you should hear it from him. Maybe he could stop by and see you sometime? The sooner, the better. The kid's pretty shook up."

"Sure, sure. What's his name?"

"Sh'boom. Nick Sh'boom—S-H, double E-B, double O-M—lives up in Crest Hill Heights." Franco wrote down the name.

"Okay, hold on a second Vince so I can check my schedule. Say, I went to school with a guy by that name—a year or two behind me. Believe he played Legion ball against us? Pitcher, I believe—for Sweetland?"

"Yeah—Ray. Curve-baller. From Crest Hill. They're brothers."

"Right, blonde guy, sure. I remember him."

"That's right. But the brothers don't look anything alike."

"Really? Hunh. Well, hey. Let me check my schedule."

"Sure, go ahead." Franco pressed the intercom button again. "Gladys, do I have any openings next day or two?"

"Yes sir. The State dropped those charges against Mooney, so he cancelled his four o'clock. But he said the check was in the mail for the balance of your fee. He was your last for the day."

"Okay. Pencil in a Nick Sh'boom for that slot. That's S-H, double E-B, double O-M."

"Got it."

"Thanks Glad." He let up on the buzzer to speak into the phone.

"Okay Vince, I have an opening at four. The kid is welcome to it. Have him call me to confirm."

"Will do Franky."

"What's the kid like?"

"He's a likeable kid, real affable. But there's more to it than that. I can't put my finger on it. Something about him, something different—special, I don't know what."

"I see."

"Say Frank? I could stop by too. We could have drinks and go to dinner afterwards, catch up on things? Say five or so?"

"Sounds great. Any place special? How 'bout Clancy's?"

"The topless joint? Frank-*eee*! What are you trying to do to me? Make *me* have to go to confession?"

Franco chuckled. "Just kiddin' Vince. Seeing if you'd bite. You know you're my favorite Holy Joe."

"Yeah? Glad to hear it. Love to see you at mass sometime. But just for that, you can treat Frank."

"Okay, lookin' forward to it."

"And Franco, thanks for taking this kid on such short notice."

"Sure Vince, no problem. Take care Vinny."

* * *

Franco noticed late afternoon sunlight angling through the venetian blinds slanting across his desk. Strange, because it had rained on and off all day ever since that heavy storm last night. Now, alternating bars of sunlight highlighted parallel sections of papers resting atop a brown, legal folder, open on his desk before him. Dust particles floated on shafts of light in the air between the window and his desk. Franco always liked this time of day and the late afternoon sunlight. His watch read four-thirty-seven. The Sheeboom kid had called a quarter after three to ask him if they could push their meeting back to four-forty-five. The kid said his boss wouldn't let him go early enough to make the four o'clock. He had called Vinny to move their dinner date back an hour to six.

He reviewed the file before him of one Robert Willie Jackson, a.k.a. "Bobcat" Jackson, a.k.a. "Bobby Jack," a.k.a "Willie Jack," a.k.a. "Bo Willie." Born December 10, 1940, pushing thirty. Year and a half younger than he. At five-nine and a half, a hundred forty-five pounds, Jackson was a two-time loser doing a lengthy stretch for armed robbery and grand theft auto down at Lorton. Apprehended and convicted several years ago after robbing the Riggs National Bank downtown.

Seems Bo Willie and his partner had spent nearly twenty minutes inside the bank trying to work up the nerve to take it. The two of them came out to find their getaway car booted for excessive, unpaid parking violations. They hijacked a passing car without

noticing the U.S. government plates. Made it a federal offense. In the eighth year of his sentence, Jackson had been denied parole twice.

Charged now with having a shiv in his prison cell, Jackson claimed a guard had planted the shank during a routine shakedown. Franco took on the case originally as a favor to George Mooney, a big shot Maryland tobacco lobbyist and land speculator, who lived on a plantation over in Mitchellvale. Funny-strange how these things worked. After all, who'd connect the high profile Mooney with this two-time loser Jackson?

Mooney's wife had been eager to divorce him, but she was greedy. She wanted a huge settlement. Mooney didn't want to give her one. His wife believed she could get the blockbuster decree if she could catch her husband in an infidelity. So she hired private dics to catch him in the act, but Mooney always managed to outfox them. Franco chuckled. He thought the wife had chosen her investigators poorly. Had she hired Carol and Dom Davalone, as he did, she'd have been a single, rich woman some time ago.

Mooney knew what his wife was after but decided to stick it to her. He played the whole thing as if it were a big game. Enter the house cleaner. She arrived early to work one day to get a head start on her annual chore, polishing silver, while Mrs. Mooney was vacationing down in the Caribbean. When the maid heard loud noises upstairs, she went to investigate. She found Mooney with his precocious, fifteen year-old step-niece in the wife's room. The step-niece became irate at the interruption—not ashamed, but self-righteously indignant. Made a big scene.

The affair turned out to be an expensive lesson for Mr. Mooney. Because when Mrs. Mooney returned from her vacation to Martinique, the maid told her mistress of the incident. Mrs. Mooney filed for divorce on grounds of adultery. When the court learned the co-respondent was under the age of consent, the State of Maryland slapped Mooney with third degree sexual assault. Mooney hired Franco to defend him.

The State dropped its charges before trial when the house cleaner recanted her eyewitness testimony and the girl denied the incident took place. Evidently, the girl's parents had received an anonymous gift in the amount of ten thousand dollars, supposedly to be held in trust for her college education. Seemed to Franco that girl was educated enough already.

Mrs. Mooney fired the maid after nearly thirteen years of faithful service for her failure to corroborate her allegations. But Mr. Mooney took care of her. He found the maid another position at a higher salary and guaranteed Franco another five thousand above his normal fee to take the case of the maid's son. Yeah, one Robert Willie Jackson.

Jackson had heard from a fellow con that Franco had defended another inmate successfully on a similar shank beef about a year before. Willie had admitted to Franco that, although he was guilty of the shiv possession charge, Jackson figured Franco could get him off, too. And even if he couldn't, Jackson said it would be worth his while to get

out of jail for the trial. Have Franco help him gain some special privileges in the air-conditioned library, so Willie could assist in his own defense. Willie considered anything that got him out of work detail in Virginia's humid, summer heat as a victory.

Franco shook his head. In a case like this, all he had to do was select a juror or two who had seen one too many Perry Mason shows or had a prejudice against authority figures, like law enforcement officers, or a bias towards the downtrodden. That was how he had defended the case of Jackson's fellow inmate Leroy Jones a year ago. He hadn't won the case, but he hadn't lost either when the jury hung because of a lone holdout. Only the taxpayers had lost while Jones passed some of his jail time just a little bit more quickly due to the excitement of a trial. Funny part of it was, Franco had learned recently that Mrs. Mooney was filing for divorce anyway.

Franco thought he heard muffled voices the other side of the wall to his outer office. He glanced at his watch. Gladys buzzed him. It was exactly a quarter of five. She said the Sheeboom kid was waiting. The kid was prompt. Franco gave him that. He told Gladys he'd be out in a minute. Franco slipped the Jackson file into a side drawer.

Two ballpoint pens and a thick yellow legal pad were on his desk ready to go. He gave the "one-two-three test" on the portable Panasonic cassette tape recorder he had set up on the right side of his desk. Then Franco put on his Italian-made, silk suit coat, straightened his tie and brushed his unruly hair, ready to meet his next potential client.

* * *

Nick was having a heckuva time trying to make the meeting with this attorney dude that Father V knew. He wondered if he shouldn't just drop the whole deal, but Terri would be disappointed in him if he did. And things were going to good with her right now to have them spoiled. His half-brother Ramon, who just happened to be his summer boss too, was all bent out of shape for Nick leaving early again from his job as "yard boy" at the Outdoor Living Centre. Ramon had agreed to let Nick leave an hour early to play baseball for the Boys Club a couple nights a week, but now he claimed Nick was taking advantage of their family ties. Nick explained that he had to meet with an attorney because he was an eyewitness to a traffic accident.

True, as far as it went. Nick knew if he told his brother the whole truth, it'd get back to their folks. They'd take away his pride and joy, his low-mileage, '67 Bonneville ragtop that he had bought used from a widowed, neighbor lady with his own hard-earned cash. And his summer would be trashed. He had complained to Ramon, asking to leave early cuz there was nothin' for him to do anyway, since the day's steady, heavy rain had washed away their customers as well as his "yard boy" duties. But Ramon lectured him.

"Lawyer hunh? Dag-gone! You expect me to believe that Nicholas? More like another one of your hot dates I figure. The thing of it is, sixteen hasn't

receded so far from my rear view mirror as it has Mom and Dad's. You might get away with that stuff with them, but you can't snow me. See, the thing of it is, I been where you are now. Done what you're doin'." He smirked. "Time of your life, eh Nicholas? Ya see, the thing of it is …"

Blah-blah-blah. Yeah. *The thing of it was* that he had been on pins and needles all day. Worried about this meeting with Father Vizconni's lawyer friend. Two guys dead, fried to a crisp right before his eyes, had a funny-strange way of gettin' under his skin like that. Or maybe he was just funny that way. Sheesh. The *real* thing of it was, Ramon didn't have a dag-gone, frickin' clue. But when Ramon could see his lecture wasn't denting Nick's thick skull, he banished Nick to clean up the rest room. That meant he was really cleaning up Ramon's stuff again, because nobody but Ramon ever pinched a loaf in there. Nick slumped off singing "Summertime Blues," while big brother laughed at him as usual. Nick wasn't sure two bucks an hour was worth this.

After he finished with the bathroom, Ramon said Jock was bringing in a load of stones, concrete blocks, and Lincoln log tiebacks in the afternoon on the flatbed to restock their inventory. Nick was needed to off-load the stuff and re-stack pallets, rain or not.

While he waited on the delivery, Nick played with little Frank and Loretta Henson, Jock and Jill's little half-breed kids who lived with their folks in a stone house on the five-acre, teardrop tract of largely undeveloped land between the highways next to the county line. Like Ramon, Jock and his wife Jill, and now Nick in the summers, worked for B.E. Stio. Stio owned the place and the plant too, up in Jericho in the north end of the county. That's where Stio made the concrete patio blocks and Lincoln Log tiebacks. The Outdoor Centre here in the southeastern tip of the county was Stio's retail outlet. It was less than half a mile from Truley's Bar and Grill where all the stuff went down last night.

Stio also had started selling swimming pools here last year. Above-ground pools were a new sideline introduced to Stio by Ramon a year ago. The pool business did so well that, last winter, Ramon convinced Stio to branch out into selling and installing in-ground, steel wall, vinyl liner pools. Swimming pool sales were fast becoming a big seasonal revenue-maker for the small corporation. Stio didn't manufacture the pools himself. He bought the above-grounds from Bilnor and the in-grounds from Pal Pools up in Long Island through a connection of Ramon's. His installation crews, including Nick at times, installed pools under Ramon's tutelage. Jock was the company truck driver who, along with his full-blooded Cherokee wife and children, lived on the place that housed the retail business. They doubled as caretakers and off-hours security for the Centre there in the rural, sparsely populated southeastern tip of the county. Jill also helped with retail sales.

Nick waited for Jock and the flatbed to arrive, trying not to think about the accident and his meeting with the lawyer Vamia. When Jock didn't show until quarter after three, Nick

knew he couldn't make his meeting with the lawyer unless he went, stinking in his work clothes. He called Vamia, who had agreed to move their meeting back to four-forty-five.

After Nick helped Jock unload the truck, about twenty of four, he picked up Terri at the clinic, located about a mile or so north of the Centre, only to learn that Patti had to work late. She couldn't make the appointment. Vamia had said he wanted to interview both Terri and Patti, since they were the only eyewitnesses. But the clinic was state-funded, and today was the last day of the state's fiscal year. The clinic had to get their books in order for the state's budget review.

As part-time receptionist and assistant bookkeeper, Patti had been hired this summer expressly to help with the year-end budget. No way, the clinic administrator was going to let her off early today. Her boss claimed Patti would be burning the midnight oil on this one. That meant Nick's rain check swim date with Patti that evening would be washed out for the second night in a row. Terri, on the other hand, helped in the clinic as a sometime receptionist, orderly, phlebotomist and lab assistant— a jack of all trades, so to speak. There was nothing the doctors couldn't handle without her. She was expendable.

Nick drove Terri back to the Heights in his Pontiac convertible so they could clean up and change before their appointment with Vamia. Terri was unusually quiet on the ride. Something was bothering her. All she would do was pat his knee and smile weakly. There was no muscle behind her smile though. Nick suspected she might be bucking up for his sake. He dropped her at her place, promising to return for her in twenty-five minutes. Whatever was bothering her, he couldn't worry about it now.

He had plenty other stuff to worry him. Hadn't helped him feel any better to know that Patti had to work late at the clinic. He had looked forward to their swim date to help him forget his troubles. But shoot, might even be better this way. After what happened with Terri last night at the drive-in, he figured she could take Patti's place to pay off that huge rain check she owed him. After all, they never did go skinny-dipping last night as they had planned. Besides, last night's terrible storm had lingered in the area in the form of heavy, dark clouds scattering showers all day, keeping temps below eighty. It would be even cooler tonight. Maybe too cool for skinny-dipping. But couldn't they have fun keeping each other warm anyway? Yeah, buddy. Even better.

Nick showered, changed and returned to pick Terri up at her duplex. She looked sharp waiting on her front stoop in a powder blue skirt suit and a less than fashionable matching pillbox hat. Like a regular professional woman, a doctor or lawyer or somethin'. He welcomed her warm greeting when she slid over the bench seat next to him. Smiling, she asked him to put the top down.

"You look nice Nicky." She took a deep breath. "Smell better, too."

"You're lookin' pretty darn sharp yourse'f, Terr."

"Thanks. This outfit is a hand-me-down from Mom—didn't fit her anymore."

"Well, it sure fits *you* great!" Terri giggled. "Yeah? Gee, thanks."

She unlocked her side of the roof, while he undid his and lowered the top. Sunlight darted between patchy, dark clouds. He hoped the rain showers wouldn't kick up again.

Terri grinned as he pulled the Bonnie away from the curb. She slipped her left arm inside his right as he held onto the steering wheel. She pecked him on the cheek.

"Glad you're wearing your white denture instead of that gold one, Nicky."

A hot shower and a change of clothes had done wonders for her attitude.

"Why? Thought you liked my gold tooth?"

She pouted, as if she were mugging for a camera.

"I do Sweetie, but it wouldn't be appropriate for this meeting with an attorney."

Sweetie? Yeah buddy. Even better.

Nick smiled. "'*Appropriate?'* 'S what I like about you Terr, you got class."

When they stopped for a red light, Nick turned to kiss her. They exchanged mouth-washed spit, suckin' tongue, the whole bit, till a guy behind them honked, yelling something about "gettin' a room."

Whatever had been bothering Terri seemed to be gone now. Thank God. He had been nervous. He had reservations about this whole deal, but having lovely Terri's warm smile and warmer body by his side eased his mind. They found the place okay, right off Arrowhead Highway in the middle of the parking lot of the Oxen Mill Shopping Center. Just as Mr. Vamia had said, the only high-rise, professional building in sight.

The car clock read four-forty. They parked in the shopping centre lot. Terri helped him put up the top. He suggested she leave the pillbox cap in the car. A few minutes later, they stepped into Suite 303.

A slender brunette in thick, pointy-frame glasses, stood up at a big desk in the rear of a small reception-waiting area to Nick's left. She wore formal, business attire and low black pumps. Hair piled on top of her head in a giant bee-hive. The name plate on her desk read **`Gladys Tippett.`** She smiled. She buzzed an intercom then talked into it to announce their arrival. A male voice over the intercom acknowledged her.

But Nick was nervous again. He glanced around the office. He found leather, burgundy arm chairs upholstered with brass buttons sitting to the right of a small, dark coffee table. On the table lay a variety of magazines. They were stacked and overlaid so you could see the top halves of the cover pages. Three feet of dark-stained, wood paneling separated plush burgundy carpet from a burgundy dry wall that ran up to a fuchsia ceiling. A fuchsia chair rail ran around the room between the dry wall and wood paneling. Gladys Tippet's desk matched the dark wood paneling. Fuchsia curtains covered a window behind her desk. The curtains matched the fuchsia table lamp shades and ceiling light fixture covers. The place exuded rich warmth and luxury, calming Nick's nerves, giving him a sense of wealth, security and confidence. He felt better about this deal already.

Gladys greeted both him and Terri warmly. The secretary came around the desk to introduce herself and shake their hands. She suggested they take a seat. Gladys said she would see if "Franco" was ready for them. She walked to a door in the wall beside and in front of her desk. Knocking on the door, Gladys stuck her head inside to check. Then she closed the door, swishing back around her desk to her chair.

"Franco will be out in just a minute." *Franco?* Nick had to remember that.

Nick liked Gladys's informal, friendly manner. Liked that this attorney was coming *out* of his inner sanctum to meet him, rather than the other way around. He smiled at Terri. Squeezing his hand, she winked at him, as if to say: *See, I told you it'd be all right.* When the lawyer stepped through the inner door, Nick wasn't so sure.

Franco Vamia was not at all what Nick had pictured him to be—a swarthy, smooth-looking, olive-skinned, dark-haired, slick-looking Italian-American like Father Vizconni. No, instead Vamia reminded him more of Bozo the Clown or Jim O'Brien the Terps' star basketball swing-man. A tallish, narrow-shoulder red-head with a receding hairline, frizzy curls, freckles and a pasty complexion didn't impress Nick much. He figured this dude was in his early thirties, about the same age as Father Vizconni. But he had to admit the guy dressed sharp, in a blue silk suit, complementary gold tie and dark brown alligator shoes with tassels. He liked the tassels.

The attorney glanced at Nick as they shook hands. But the dude couldn't take his eyes off Terri, until Nick clamped down on his paw. Vamia winced, not offering to shake

Terri's hand when Nick let go of him. After they shared pleasantries, Vamia said he'd like to speak with them separately—Nick first. As he showed Nick to the inter-office door, Gladys offered her boss part of the afternoon paper *The Evening Star*. Same paper Nick's dad read—the chief competitor to the morning newspaper Nick delivered.

Gladys whispered that the accident was front-page news in the Local Section. She pointed to the news photo of the gruesome scene. Franco studied the page as he took it from her to usher Nick into his office. Nick heard Gladys behind him offering Terri a seat and the use of the magazines on the table. She asked if Terri wanted a cup of coffee. Franco closed the door behind them, pointing Nick to a plush chair near a tape recorder on the far, front edge of his desk. Absorbed in the news story, the attorney stopped beside his desk to nod then tossed the paper, face-up, onto the desktop.

"Just a minute." Vamia went back to open the door.

"Miss Schieffer, right?" Nick heard Terri say "Yes sir?"

"We could be anywhere from ten minutes to half an hour, or more. Some vending machines are upstairs with cold drinks and snacks. Gladys will show you if you like."

"Thank you."

"Gladys?"

"Yes sir."

Vamia stepped back inside, closing the door behind him to sit behind his desk. His desk was bigger than Ms. Tippett's, an executive's desk. Caddy-corner to the tape recorder, the desk held a big, fat black book, a yellow, lined legal pad and a couple of pens. All ship-shape and ready for business. Nick thought—*his business*. He started to wonder how much all this would cost him, just to play it safe. Nick looked around.

Half the size of the plush outer office, the inner chamber was cluttered with too much furniture for the size of the room. Venetian blinds drawn against the peek-a-boo afternoon sun shaded the lone window, rising behind Vamia's head, back of his executive desk chair. Same rich décor as in the outer office, but there were no fuchsia curtains in here, just the blinds. Just room enough for a big desk, a couple of armchairs and three walls of recessed shelves filled with what Nick presumed were law books. The chairs were burgundy leather, matching those in the waiting room. Only Vamia's chair was high-backed, on rollers and swiveled. Nick waited uncomfortably as the attorney read the news paper article, taking notes.

The walls seemed to hold armies of books, different colors for different sets: blue with gold lettering and piping, tan with red and black piping and lettering, or some reversed, red with tan and black. Books stood at attention, reminding him of uniformed toy soldiers in ranks on dress parade. The binders wore masks of letter abbreviations and numbers.

Sheepskins, hanging behind glass-enclosed frames, filled the other half of the third wall on either side of the door. When the lawyer finished the article, he leaned back in his

burgundy, leather executive chair to relax with his back to the only window, set in the wall, facing Nick. Nick perused the man's bona fides hanging on the wall to his right. A degree in Government and Politics from Maryland, a law degree from Catholic University, and licenses to practice law in Maryland, the District of Columbia and Virginia. All looked authentic to Nick.

"Mann, you must know a lot of sh-shtuff."

The lawyer grinned, sliding the newspaper in front of a big black book to his left.

"What's that one?" Nick pointed at the fat black book on the desktop.

The lawyer leaned forward, tapping the book with his left fist. "This? *Black's Law Dictionary*."

Nick smirked. "Mann, didn't know lawyer's had their own language, their own dictionary. Gee. French is plenty tough enough for me." Vamia grinned again.

* * *

Franco had greeted them in the outer office. A *good*-looking pair of kids. They made for an attractive teen couple, sort of ebony and ivory. Yes they did. The blonde was really sharp-looking, really tough in a snug-tailored, conservative, powder blue skirt-suit and white blouse. Her clean, neat features and obvious female attributes stunned him. She was Hollywood material, a Vera Miles type, but innocent. She was just that kind of girl. Beautifully symmetrical with, a *dyn*-o-mite figure and great gams. His trained eye and X-ray vision told him that beneath her cautious, schoolgirl manner and conservative dress, she could be quite voluptuous if she so chose. If she were above the age of consent, he wouldn't mind finding out what she was really like behind her formal demeanor and beneath the mummy-swathing that strapped her down. He found it hard not to stare at her until the kid's vise grip handshake brought him up short.

Dang kid's calloused hand was as rough as a board and as strong as a clamp. Franco managed to extract what was left of his hand. They kibitzed a bit before he escorted Nick into his inner sanctum, promising the attractive blonde he would get to her later. *You bet he would.* Save the best for last. He told her about the vending machines then digested the news article given him by Gladys. He was ready to hear the kid's story.

Vince was right. This Nick was a likeable kid. Real affable. But he didn't look anything like his blonde, older brother Ray. The kid was dark, swarthy, like he had Indian blood or something. Maybe a little over five and a half feet tall, hundred and thirty or forty, pounds maybe—dripping wet. But he had a presence that made him seem larger. Combed his coarse, dark waves, straight back—greaser style. Reminded Franco a little of Rick Nelson, another Rock'n'Roller. Except for the kid's weird, close-set, two-toned eyes: one coal black the other an electric blue. Franco had never seen anything like them, except maybe on a Siberian Husky. Yeah. Black hair like Elvis, worn well down over his shirt collar but mostly off his forehead, like an old style-greaser from back in Franco's day.

Except that the pompadour's dark, front wave was broken, curving slightly down touching his forehead, adding to his boyish air. Built like a cowboy: broad-shouldered and narrow in the hip, though he had muscular, up-turned haunches. Overall, the kid was lean-muscled but sturdy. Obviously, not yet quite full grown. A good-looking teenager.

When he'd pushed back their dinner date earlier, Vince had said the kid had introduced himself to him last September as "Shane." Said Nick had held an opened can of beer and they had staged a mock gunfight late one Friday night under a hoop in the Holy Trinity parking lot. Nick had used the beer can for a prop as a six-gun and when he drew, beer had flown out, spilling out onto Vince. Vince said he'd acted the part of Jack Wilson while Nick had played Shane. Franco thought he could see this kid as Shane, or maybe even Wilson, because of his strange-wild, two-toned eyes, no less his rough handshake. He guessed he'd learn whether the kid was a killer—like Shane? Or Wilson? Or not?

"So—Nick? That what they call you?"

"Yes sir." The kid's bass voice sounded like sandpaper rubbing over a piece of wood.

"You can call me Franco, or Frank if you want, but not if it seems awkward, okay? I want you to be comfortable with me." Franco smiled. The kid nodded.

"Good. So how long have you known Miss Schieffer?" The kid rolled his eyes.

"Oh, we been goin' to school together on and off since the fifth grade, I guess."

"I see, but you're classmates now?"

"Yes sir, at Pocomoke High. We're gonna be seniors this fall."

"Fine. And you see Miss Schieffer socially as well?"

"Well, I guess I do now, just a few times since the end of school though."

"But you're on good terms with her?"

"Oh, yes sir, very good. Gettin' better all the time."

The kid's girlish upper lip curled into a sneer. Franco made a mental note.

"Well, she certainly is a *very* lovely girl."

"Oh she *is* that all right. If it hadn't been for her, I might not be here now."

"Oh? How's that?"

"Well last night when I took her home after the accident, she convinced me to talk to someone about it or go to the police."

"You weren't sure yourself?"

"Well, I knew she was right but I was kind o' scared, ya know? I needed to talk to someone, an adult, and she recommended Father Vizconni."

"Yes of course. You spoke to Vince. He and I go way back you know. He, uh, told me your story was a bit complicated. He indicated you could tell it to me in person."

"Yes sir."

Franco pushed the newspaper across his desk so that the story faced the kid, permitting him to read without picking it up.

"If that's *your* accident, you made the front page of the Local Section."

Nick scooted to the edge of his chair to look at the large black and white picture of firefighters putting out the flames of what was left of the Buzzbee Boys hot rod funny car against the black night sky. Franco knew the caption below the picture read:

Firefighters extinguish flames from wreck as two more fatalities up death toll to seven in ten years on treacherous dead man's curve in southern Royal George County.

Nick rubbed his chin, shaking his head. "I knew it. Boy, I just knew it."

"Knew what, Nick?"

"Knew this'd be a big deal. Seems lately I can't do nothin' right. Feels like I'm goin' 'round with my head in a sling half the time. But those boys—" Nick tapped the picture with his fingers "—shoulda left me alone and they'd be alive today."

The teen's eyes watered as he squirmed in his seat.

"Look Nick, in order to give you the best legal advice, I need to know exactly what happened, all the details, including the events that led up to the accident. I'd like you to tell me everything from the beginning, in your own words. Okay? Leaving nothing out. As your attorney in this matter, anything you say to me is confidential, okay?"

"Like with Father V?"

"Are you Roman Catholic?"

"Uh, no. I'm kind of a, a hybrid Episcopalian-Methodist like my folks."

Franco nodded. "I see. Well, as a priest, Father Vizconni is required to maintain confidences, as are attorneys."

Franco didn't tell the kid that the privilege would not apply in his case since Vince wasn't the kid's priest and Nick didn't acknowledge the sacrament of confession according to the laws of the Church. Nick had not made confession. He was just asking advice. Such an admission on Franco's part now would be counter-productive. He needed the kid to be at ease to tell his story, as he had said—to leave nothing out. He told Nick he'd like to tape him, if that were all right. He reminded him that whatever he said was confidential. Nick agreed to tell him the same tale he had related to Vince, just as it happened. Franco clicked on the tape recorder as Nick began.

"Well, I guess the very beginning would be after my ball game when I went into Truley's to pick-up the cheeseburgers. I left Terri and Patti in my car in the parking lot and told 'em to save me a beer."

Franco: "By Truley's, you mean the road house, the bar and grill, down in T.C.?"

"Yeah, that's the place. I work jes' down the street—the highway—at the Outdoor Living Centre. We were gonna eat and then go swimmin' down at a place I know about, down near La Placa."

About what time was this?"

"Oh, about quarter to nine, ten of, I guess. The sun was just down. You know? But not near dark yet though."

"And you were drinking beer?"

"Yes sir. We split a six-pack of Miller's."

"So, how much did you drink?"

"Two. Two beers is all. We each had a couple. Was only fair, right?"

"Hmmm. And where did you get the beer?"

"Bought it at Truley's drive-thru windah."

"Didn't they ask you for I-D?"

"Yeah. Only cuz it was a new guy takin' orders. Guy name o' Duane. Floyd never useta ask me. Didn't need to."

"Oh, why not?" From his baby face with sparse, black wisps over his lip, looked to Vamia as though the kid wasn't even shaving regularly yet, except maybe his sideburns.

"Ya know Mister Vamia, if you could hold off on your questions till I'm done, it might work better." Franco said, "All right Nick. I'll try to do that. But if I raise my finger, hold up for a second while I catch up with my notes. Okay?"

Nick nodded. "Why that sounds fair to me Frank." Vamia chuckled.

"Great. The floor is all yours, Nick. Just talk to me as if you were telling me a story, without adding or withholding anything."

Nick nodded again. The teen's eyes came alive. He jumped in, talking easily toward the microphone built into the recorder. He seemed to relish the opportunity to tell his story …

> Well I stepped inside the joint. Air-conditioning gave me goose bumps, see? Took a couple seconds to adjust my eyes to the smoky, dark cool of the bar room and the stale smoke. Some o' the customers looked up, but most didn't. Dingy, green-grey, linoleum floor felt smooth and cool under my bare feet, ya know? A couple, hefty, good old boys were shootin' pool on the table in the middle of the

floor and Mister Truley was tendin' bar. Stocky fella, with salt and pepper hair. Ever been down to Truley's?"

Franco shook his head. This was more detail than he wanted, but he let the kid go, hoping to get a better read on him. The kid was really into it. Seemed to enjoy talking into the recorder. Seemed to be quite a ham.

Well, it's right out of the Thirties ya know? I dunno—Twenties, mebbe. Down at the T.C. intersection? T.C. stands for Thomas Crookfield. They got a marker there tells about this dude Crookfield there where this giant rock marks the southwest corner of his property from way back in the sixteen hundreds. I read the marker once. It's in the grass there, between the highways? [Franco frowns.]

Oh yeah. Truley's. Sorry. Two and a half stories? [Franco nods.] Well, Truley—the owner—lives right there over the bar. With his wife. 'Dya know that? [Franco shakes his head no.] Yeah well, he does. It's his wife, I think. Though ya never see her. Think mebbe she's an invalid or somethin'. What I heard, but I dunno. Anyway, I knew Truley from my go-for trips, picking up lunch orders for my brother and the rest of the Outdoor Living Centre crew just about a half mile down the road. Truley knows me. Likes me okay cuz I'd blow harp and sing for him on request. That was my end of the underage beer sale deal earlier at the drive-thru. Selling the beer was Truley's end. Singing for it was mine. Truley sez he not only likes my style, but my occasional ditties are good for business, see? On account o' his juke's always busted. [Franco nods.]

Anyway, I figured Truley wanted me to pay off the rest of my beer debt now with a tune. He sez ta me—

"Hey, Nicky, how ya' doin' kid? What'll ya have tonight?"

"Hello Mister 'T', jes' come in ta pickup a order o' cheeseburgers."

Truley yelled back through the server window to the kitchen, "Got that ordah o' cheeseburgers ready for Nick?" He turns back to me, shakin' his head.

"Be another five minutes kid. Whyn't ya give us a tune while ya wait?"

Franco was amazed that the kid was actually acting out the characters. His voice, tone and manner changed when he quoted Truley. He was imitating the barkeep—incredible.

"Hey! Had I figured Truley right, or what? Truley didn't have no juke box, see? Well, he had one but it was busted most o' the time like I said. I figured he hadn't fixed it yet, so I'd have to serve as the replacement again. So I sez, "Sure, jes' let me tell some friends outside, I'll be five more minutes. What'll it be tonight Mister T?"—Ha! Thought that was supposed to be the barkeep's line.

"Think I'd like to hear a little Patsy tonight Nick."

"'Crazy?'" He nodded. "Okay, just a second." One of Truley's favorites, see? Mine too.

So I popped out the front door. Called out to the girls that it'd be another five minutes. They waved. Then I stepped back inside ta pull my harp from the waistband of my sliding shorts—see I'd figured old Truley right all along. So I walked over, hoppin' up onta the bar, as if I owned it. Like I done before. I grin at Truley, who give me the go-ahead. I glanced around. It was Monday so the place wasn't crowded. Less than a dozen customers, some sittin' in the booths across the room and the rest at the bar turned their attention to me. A couple o' good old boys shootin' pool in the back, near the center of the room focused on their game, ignorin' me. That was fine. All in all, they were a mangy-looking bunch, but typical of Truley's, see? Didn't bother me none. With *GRT*—that's ma band. Ever heard of us?

Franco shakes his head. Nick grins.

"No? Well, don't matter, you will. Anyway, we've played all kinds o' crowds ya know? High school sock-hops, proms, NCO clubs, bar mitzvah's, church socials, private swimmin' pool clubs, country clubs, couple weddings, a grand openin', a fair, car lot promotion—all kinds o' crowds, see? Sure, I'd done this before. Ya know we even had a local hit off a car jingle I wrote for the Zipp Boys—the car dealership? Changed the lyrics ya know, but the same tune. Maybe you heard it?" Nick hummed a few bars. "Still plays on the radio once in a while. The commercial that is, not the other."

Franco said he thought he'd heard it. Thought it was a catchy tune.

"Yeah the Zipp Boys paid us five hundred for it. Wrote the thing on a napkin during a break when we were playing the Landrews Officer Club."

Franco said that was great but that they were digressing.

"Right, I was talkin' 'bout playin' a little Patsy Cline…

So I sat on the bar and played this slow, lilting, sad kick-off to this classic ballad on my mouth organ. The music got their attention. I used my free hand ta keep time by tapping the inside of his thumb against my thigh, like this... See, I always used my tongue'n'lips more'n ma fingers to play the instrument. Wanna demo? Always carry her in here.

[Nick pats his pants pocket but Franco says it's not necessary.]

Well okay. Now ya gotta understand Frank, I's only wearin' my slidin' shorts and a baseball inner shirt—short sleeves. See I'd just come from playing a ball game over in T'bacca Creek. So there I was sittin' up straight with my legs crossed and kind o' dangling over the side o' the bar. And then I projected my voice in falsetto across the barroom. I sang "Crazy," affectin' my patented, emotional Patsy Cline imitation, right down to that throbbing catch in her tremulous alto. Ya know the one I'm talkin' about? Ol Patsy, she was special. See, I knew why Truley had picked that particular Willie Nelson tune. He knew I imitated Patsy's voice well 'n' Truley was a big fan of Patsy's. Me too.

Nick emerged from story mode.

"Ya know, I really like that song Frank. And I'd imitated Patsy many times in the solitude of my home, too. Imitation's a peculiar talent of mine. Like I'm doin' now in this story. Most folks like it. Some don't. Gets on their nerves after a while. Especially now, my folks can't stand it. Useta break 'em up. But they don't like it when I do them. Know what I mean? 'S OK with you if I do it like this?"

"Sure, it's fine. Gives me a feel for what really happened. Just what I asked. More even. Go ahead. Don't be shy."

Nick grinned again, wider this time.

"Oh, I ain't shy Frank. No, nobody's ever 'cused me o' that. Yeah, ever since I's a kid I could mimic any sound, noise or voice I heard, much to my folk's amusement. Learned how to mimic the way other kids learned to talk. You know what the key to it is?"

Franco shook his head.

"People think it's in the reproduction of the sound, but it ain't, see? Least, not for me, anyway. It's in the hearing of it. Catchin' it jes' perfect. And I hear like a blind man, Mister Vamia. Like Ray Charles." The kid grinned as brightly as Ray Charles, too. "And like him, I got songs up here." [Taps his temple with his forefinger.] "One day, you'll be hearin' 'em for yourself on the radio, like that car jingle." He nodded, as if to reassure himself. "So I belted out this tender ballad. By Willie Nelson, d'ya know that?"

Franco shook his head again.

"Yeah, lotta people don't know that. Anyway, I belted it out in a plaintive falsetto, almost sobbing, reflectin' Patsy's style and tone, see? Here. Here's what I mean—

Cra—zy. I'm crazy for feelin' so lone-ly.
I'm cra— zy, crazy for feelin' so blue-u-u-u- ue.
I knew—ew, you'd love me as long as you wan--ted.
And then, someday, you'd leave me for somebody new--ew.

Wor—ry? Why do I let myself worry?
Won-derin' what in the world did I do-oo-ooo-ooooo?

Oooh cra-–zy, for thinkin' that my love could hold you-ou-ou.
I'm crazy for tryin' and crazy for cryin' and crazy for lo-o-vin' you.

Franco had wanted to cut the kid short, but couldn't. He sat too astonished at his rendering of the tender ballad. Darn, if the kid didn't sound just like the late crooner. Brought a tear to his eye. Remarkable.

"Course, I did it better that night cuz it wasn't all an act, see? Put real feelin' into it like a real torch song cuz I thought of the star-crossed love me and Ry's got for each other."

"Ry? Who's Ry?"

"Ryz'n, er Ryzanna Ryan—that's R-Y-Z-apostrophe-N—rhymes with horizon ya see." Nick grinned. She's the one got away ya might say, but that's another story. Let's just say our long hoped-for union ain't never come off—*yet*." Grinning like a mischievous leprechaun, he cut his eyes at Franco.

"Oh? What about Ms. Schieffer out there?"

"Oh! Well now, then, there. She ain't too shabby is she? [Grins.] Course, she's just a substitute for Ry, see? I's hopin' I could get from her and Patti, I mean uh, Terri and Patti together—Patti Slater? She's the other one with me last night? Yeah, Patti—what I could get from Ry alone."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Well, a great friend and a great romance all in one, o' course."

"I see. Well, we're straying a bit from the topic at hand, aren't we?"

"Yeah, guesso. Sorry. So anyway—"

When I finished, that barroom audience sat in reverent silence, starin' at me in disbelief. Jes' like you did, Mister Vamia, jes' now. But I figured they's jes' paying their respects to the memory of the late, great Patsy Cline, not me. But heck! Even the cook and dishwasher come out from the kitchen in their aprons and little white caps to listen. Guess I musta been that good. Touched me too, on account o' Ry, ya undastand? Next thing I know, spontaneous, scattered applause breaks out. So I pulled my hair back out o' my face, stuck it behind my ear and took a little bow as best I could, settin' up there on the bar.

Well, before I could hop down, them two hefty boys shootin' pool come up to me, carryin' their pool cues. Old fella on the bar stool near me mumbles under his breath—"Oh no! The Buzzbees. Bad hombres son—ex-cons. Watch yaself." That pair o' red-bearded, belly-busting Neanderthals headed my way, see? The closer of the two calls out.

"What's that you say old man? Hunh? Speak up." The ape stared hard, but the barfly shook his head, buryin' his beak back into his glass of rye. "That's what I thought," sez the ape.

[Nick's acting out all the roles in his tale in different voices—amazing.The kid had Franco enraptured, almost in awe.]

Now Mister Vamia, I mean Frank, you gotta undastand, these boys appeared more'n a bit unrefined. Bearded, half-loaded, work shirts unbuttoned, hangin' outta their jeans, hairy bellies hanging over rawhide cowboy belts and wearing ball caps backwards. They were a long way from what I had waitin'

for me outside in my convertible, ya undastand? Now they're approachin' me for an encore and I feared my artistry had over-stimulated these boys a bit. Back o' me, Truley said my order was ready. He set a grease-stained, brown bag of burgers on the bar next to my free hand. I sez "Okay, thanks." Then, in a hoarse whisper, but without looking at the apes, I sez to my new fans, "Maybe some other time fellas, my order's ready." The apes looked at each other and grunted. Well, guess I give 'em the wrong answer the wrong way, cuz the place went quiet as a church at midnight. The shorter of the two sez—

"Well Arlo, d'ya hear that? The boy says he cain't sing another. That don't sound too friendly, does it?"

[Franco notices the kid take on a different voice and manner now, and figures he was imitating the good old boys as he had done with the barkeep and the barfly. The kid amazed Franco by how he could slip in and out of narrative to character and back so easily. Could switch from teenage or rural slang to formal speech as articulate as a college professor, going back and forth among them as if there was no dichotomy.]

"—Yeah, yeah, I heard that Alvin, but you sure *it's* a boy?"

[Yeah. Nick was acting out the whole thing, evidently parroting back exactly what happened. Franco thought he'd asked for it. Now he was getting it.]

So this Neanderthal reaches out with his pool cue, liftin' my long locks with the cue tip, like this." [Mimics the act.]

"Looks too damn priddy for a boy, don't he, with that long wavy hair and 'em long, curly, eye-winkers? "n look at them peepers, will ya?"
"Mebbe, *it*'s a *she*?"
"Ha, yeah that's *it* all right. Sure sounds like one."

Now when I froze mute, my new fans, these apes, they wade right in.

"Yeah, sounds like what we got heah is failyah to commun'cate, don't it brother dear?"
"Sure do big brother, sure do. Well, you 'memba how we took care of 'em commun'cation problems in the joint, doncha?"
"Yes I do, baby brother, 'deed I do."

They bust out laughin' and I knew right then I was in deep sh-sh-shtuff—in trouble, ya know? I'd heard 'bout these g'rillas—the Buzzbee brothers. Heard they just got out o' jail a couple months back. Evidently, the State had freed 'em

once their sentence was up. The last few months they'd been tearin' around, terrorizin' the countryside, but always evadin' charges. Mos'ly cuz nobody had guts enough to rat 'em out.

The kid pulled out of story mode.

"Ya ever heard of 'em Frank?

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Not much. Just that they *are* bad news."

"Yeah well, they ain't no more. More like yestadiy's news now." Nick smiled sadly, pointing to the newspaper. "So ya can see, I's in a jam and nobody in the joint's gonna lift a finger to help. I could just feel it. Kind o' like High Noon, ya know?"

"Great flick."

"I always thought so."

"So you were just like Gary Cooper, hunh Nick?"

"Yeah—Will Kane. I hoped maybe Truley could sneak inta the kitchen and call the po-leece. These boys were half-loaded, mean, and lookin' for trouble. Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee in their late twenties, a coupla real losers—yeah. Kind o' good ol' boys who went bald before thirty but had hair growin' everywhere else, like out of their face, ears and noses and, from the looks of their open shirts here, on their beer bellies too. Sure, I'd heard of 'em. In Southern Maryland, who hadn't?"

Franco knew of them, mostly as criminals through his legal circles. They *were* notorious. Each had been through reform school, kicked out of the army, unable to hold a job, lost their wives and done time for wife-beating and attempted rape. They were a real pair of sweethearts, yes they were. People in the southern part of the county knew 'em and stayed clear. Separately, each was a handful, but together, Mann, he'd heard they were impossible. Nick shifted into story mode again—

"Lookee dat Arlo. She's starin' right through us, like we ain't even heah."

"Well now, Sweetie, that ain't vera friendly, is it Alvin? Cuz we shore arah heah."

Got ready ta hop down off the bar but Arlo stepped up to me, shovin' the palm of his hand into my chest, stoppin' me short. He answered his brother but spoke to me—

"No Bubba, that ain't atall friendly. But ain't she a priddy one though? With long, wavy hair and 'em big eyes, two-tone eyes like a Siber'n Husky 'n' look at them cherreh red lips!"

"Yeah, got nice lips. Umm, big 'n juicy, just the way I like 'em. Fresh, young girl lips. Bet they're soft, too. 'N how 'bout that gold front tooth? Classy, hunh? Oh, she's a special one all right."

"She got right nice, fresh young girl tits too," sez Arlo as he's feelin' me up—"Nice and full and firm."

Well my neck stiffens when Truley speaks up in my behalf in back of me—

"Come on boys, give the kid a break. How 'bout your next round's on me?"

Arlo sez, "Aw come on now Truley, all we want's another song. Right Alvin? But if you want to give us a round on the house, well hell, we won't stop ya." Then Arlo sez ta me, "Hey, priddy girl? How 'bout ya do one for us? Hunh?"

So I swallow my fear, lettin' my brain control the revulsion I got for these two a-holes. See self-discipline is critical to the teachings of aikido as well as boxing or any form of self-defense and I hadn't forgotten the lessons I learned up't the Crest Hill Boys Club. When I have ta, I can detach myself from the emotion of a moment, just as I did when I was on the mound with the bases loaded in the ninth in the state championship game. Folks say I got a killer instinct—"

[Franco held up his finger to make note of that, but Nick keeps talking.]

It helped that these creeps were half-loaded. But sittin' on top o' the bar like that, I's in no position to do anything effective. So I smile real friendly-like—playin' along see—and sez in my normal baritone, "What'd y'all like to hear?"

"Oh my! Hear that Arlo? She's got such a deep voice,' sez the one called Alvin, fluttering his eyelashes, mockin' me, see? "Sings like a woman but talks like a man. Oh yeah!'" He strokes my thigh and—

Nick shifted into his normal tone, "I tell you Mister Vamia, took everything I had to control myself. Well, those assholes picked up on my angry vibe—laughin' at me"…

"Ya know, this one 'minds me of that spirited, black-haired bitch we had in stir. Didn't want it at first but after we got her broke in all right. Sheeitt. She did just fine. Didn't she moan and groan for it though? What's her name?"

"Carlos? No—Carlotta, Ha! Memba? Yeah! We called her Carlotta."

"Yeah, we shuah give her a real eduamacation all right. Broke her in a little rough but after, she took all she could get. That beaner couldn't get enough!"

"Hell yeah, and we gave her all she could take." They broke out laughin'.

Well, I didn't budge. I's in a bad spot, ya know? Needed to be on my feet and balanced where I could use self-defense techniques and their aggression against 'em. No one else in the place was liftin' a finger to help. I wondered, were they afraid or just lookin' for more entertainment. So Alvin sez—

"The kid kin drink with us, Truley—on the house, too."

Truley brought the boys another round and one for me, while they thought about what they wanted me to perform. Alvin sez, "Yeah, the kid kin drink with us and we kin kind o' get acquainted, hunh, kid?"

"Why not?" I sez real friendly-like.

Truley brought the liquor, two double shots of bourbon for the brothers and a single for me. They didn't seem to notice or care about the difference in the size of the drinks—

"All right kid, let's see what ya made of. Here's ta a good time tanight."

I nod and raise my glass to theirs. They drank their liquor straight down. The barroom watched in silence. A new customer came through the front door, saw the two apes around me, me sittin' there on the bar between 'em, sensed the tension in the air, turned on his heels and left before he got five feet inside the door. I confess I coughed a little after slogging down the whiskey—

"That's pretty good kid. Whaddaya think Arlo?"
"Not bad, not bad atall."
"Yeah, she's got what they call PO! tential. Yes, she do!"

The liquor burned my throat since I'm more of a beer-drinker. But it served to relax me a little, which prob'ly was a good thing. Didn't want any more though or wouldn't be able to do what I needed to. I'd already drunk a beer out in the car with the girls waitin' for the burgers, see? When the brothers called for another round, I asked for their request—

"'The Stripper' and you can stand right up here and strip for us while you play it." Arlo pats the bar. "Tongue that mouth organ like it was a saxophone." Alvin sneered. "—Or my big honker," he sez.

They crack up. Big joke see? [Franco nods.]

"Gee, sorry fellas, but I don't know that one." I lied. Shoot, I'd played that number since I's in grade school. Alvin said, "How 'bout, uh, 'I'm Sorry,' ya know by Brenda Lee? Always been partial to that one. All my bitches 'pologize to me sooner or later." He laughs, slappin' his brother on the back.
"Sure, I can do that for ya.'"
The next round came but I ignore it. I ask them to move back a little, cuz I said I needed to stand down for this one.

"What for? Ya done fine with the last one, right up heah." Arlo patted the bar, again. "Got to see them pretty legs and that big bulge in them tighty-whitey shorts real good."
"Yeah, but I need to stand for this one."
"Why?"

I act indignant. “Well, have ya ever seen Brenda Lee sing it, sittin’ down?” The brothers looked at each other.

“Well, no. Have you, Alvin?”

“Cain’t say as I have.”

So I chime in. “See, there ya go. That’s cuz Brenda Lee’s short like me. It’s the type o’ song short folks gotta sing standin’ up for it to come off right.”

“She’s right Alvin. All right kid, stand right up here where we can get a good look at ya.” He slapped the top of the bar.

“Well, I don’t think Truley wants my dirty bare feet all over his bar.”

“Sure he do. Hell, Truley don’t mind, do ya Truley?” The boys glared at Truley looks down scared, shakin’ his head. ‘Nah, it’s okay,” he sez.

“There. Ya see nothin’ to worreh about. G’ahead kid, stand right up there and be Brenda Lee.” They laughed, slappin’ the bar top for emphasis.

So everybody’s watchin’ as I stand up on the bar. Alvin whacks me across the butt, givin’ me a little boost up, right? They wanted me to drink with ‘em again but I say, “After the song.” So I blow some blues harp to mimic the lilting violin intro in the original then imitated Brenda Lee’s throaty alto like I’d done many times before. When I finished, thought I’d pulled it off okay. Done better with Patsy but the Buzzbee boys seemed to like my Brenda Lee all right. So I thank ‘em, climb down off the bar, pick up my bag o’ burgers’n start to leave. Alvin’s sluggin’ down his whiskey—Truley kept ‘em comin’ for ‘em see—and grabs my arm, makin’ me wince and drop the bag back on the bar.

“Not so fast, Sugah. Where ya goin’? We ain’t done with ya yet, no not by a long shot, we ain’t. Right, Arlo?”

“So rightch’are baby brother.”

“Look,” I sez, “I gotta be goin’. My parents’ll be worried.”

“*Aww*, hear that? Her parents will be *worried*.” Alvin pouted, which cracked both of ‘em up again. Big joke, see? [Franco nods.]

So I glance around the room but no one’s lookin’ me in the eye. I’s in deep sh—uh—stuff unless Truley had called the police. Which he hadn’t cuz the Buzzbee boys hadn’t let him out o’ their sight either. No cavalry to the rescue. Nope. I’d have to deal with these boys alone. Will Kane, see? Each of the brothers had nearly half a foot and prob’ly seventy-five ta ninety pounds on me and they still had pool sticks in their hands. I didn’t think I could defend mase’f against both of ‘em at the same time and remain my same handsome self. And I couldn’t make a run for it and chance takin’ ‘em outside. If those apes caught one whiff o’ the girls out there, they’d both be doomed, too. But I did have an idea. Yeah. I had a *good* idea.

If I could somehow take ‘em one at a time, maybe, jes’ mebbe I’d have a chance. They looked ta be just loaded enough and just stupid enough to fall for that. These creeps had no way o’ knowin’ how capable I am of defendin’ mase’f

under the right circumstances—my ace in the hole, see? The last double shot looked like it put 'em over the edge and I sure hoped it had, so I laid the bait for 'em—A-holes!

[Franco jots a note, holding up a finger till he finishes ...]

"Look fellas, why should we make our private bizness, public? Whaddaya say we take care of our bizness in the can? Hunh? Whaddaya say?"

Arlo sez, "Well now kid, that's the best offer I had in a long time."

I believed that but didn't say nothin', jes' looked from one creep ta the other.

"Whaddaya think Alvin? Maybe we *can* take this kid where she's nevah been before? HARR! HARR!"

"Oh, I'm sure we *can*, brother, I'm sure we *can*. Git it? *Can?* Suppose we *head* back—git it again? Ha? Yeah, *head* back to the *can* like she said?"

"All right, *can* do. Harr! Okay kid, let's go."

They almost fell over themselves, loaded'n laughin', see? So I looked around, but still no one was willin' to help. See, just a few minutes ago they were applaudin' me. How fickle can ya be, right?

Anyway, I figure if I could get one of these Neanderthals alone in the men's room, I'm thinkin' maybe I'd stand a chance. The alternative was bleak, I tell ya Frank. So I smile and say "O-K, fellas." I set my harp on the bar next to the bag o' burgers and turn to walk back toward the men's room. The brothers dropped their cues on the pool table, while Arlo grabbed and pinched my left butt cheek, makin' me, kind o', scoot forward leadin' the way. Still got the bruise there.

"This one's a real beautte, Alvin, a real honey. Yes sir."

"Fresh, too. Walks like a panther. That's sexy as hell."

Nick looks at Franco. "Now I know what Terri and Alvin had in common." Nick laughed. Franco says, "Yeah? What's that?"

"They both think I got a sexy walk. Sheesh!"

Nick slapped Franco's desk so hard the tape recorder jumped. Franco smiled, but he didn't think it was that funny. He checked to make sure the recorder was still working.

"So go on, Nick I'm all ears." Franco smiled to encourage the kid.

Well, I quit foolin' around ta prepare my mind for battle. I lead 'em through the bar and to the right, down the hall outside the men's room. Figured they'd be overconfident (and why not? Shoot!) and I'd have surprise on my side. Trick was to sep'rate these jerks so I'd stand a chance see? So I humor 'em, speakin' their lingo—

"Look, they ain't 'nuff rum in theyah for all three o'us. S'ppose ya'all just come in one at a tahme?"

"D'ya heah that Arlo, he picked up on our talkin'. *'One atta tahme.'* okay with you big brothah?'"

"Yeah, I heard 'im all right an' ah'm fuhst. Wait heah, Alvin."

Arlo pushed Alvin aside then shoves me ahead of him through the men's room doorway. He shut the door behind us and orders me to sit on the toilet. So I sit down and suggest he lock the door for privacy. Arlo said that was a good idea. Sez, "We don't want no one 'nterupptin' us, now do we?"

While he's lockin' the door, I look around that filthy latrine. The roll-out, hand towel had busted off its holder to hang free down ta the floor. The towel, dingy grey with overuse, see? A sign over the urinal read: "DON'T EAT THE BIG WHITE MINT." Truley's idea of a joke. Sheesh. Dispensers on the wall shuckin' gnarly, jive condoms, featurin' fancy, arty pictures of fantastic female bodies, the kind ya only see in comic strips or *Playboy* centerfolds with the inducement: "Pleasure her all night." *Right!* More like she'd wind up pregnant a month later.

Anyway, Arlo sez, "Uh, we won't be needin' any of dem dings, Darlin'. Dat's one of da pluses for guys like us, ya know?"

I'm thinkin' 'Guys like *us*?' *Right.*

Outside, Alvin calls, "Don't ru'nt 'im for me now, Arlo."

I heard Alvin chuckle out in the hallway. And all the time, I'm hopin' Truley's callin' the cops about now. But knew I couldn't count on that.

Arlo tells me to drop my pants. Instead, I rise up off the stool, and smile real pleasant-like. Circle to my left, like a boxer—like Ali—switching places with Arlo. Go ta unbuckle his belt. He asks what I'm doin'. Sez he could undo his own pants. I say, "All right." So he drops his pants'n sez: "*You* done this before, aincha kid? *You sly dog*. I knew you's a keeper fuhst minute I seen ya."

So I fake a smile 'n' take a deep breath. But my head was throbbin' from the blood pumpin' so hard through my brain. I was scared sinless but didn't let on, see? Time for me to put up or shut up. So I send up a silent prayer.

God help me, help me, please. I know I don't deserve it, but I really need Ya now, if Ya ain't too busy. Give me strength. Give me courage. Give me wisdom. Give me somethin'. Please. Amen.

Immediately, I feel this surge of adrenaline-like flow through my veins while, at the same time, I get this kind o' contradictory but surprisin'ly, peaceful calm steal over me. Gives me a sort o' quiet confidence, ya know?

[Franco holds up a finger to make a note before he let Nick resume his story.]

Well, the filthy place had one urinal, one toilet and one grimy sink, opposite the toilet with most of a wall mirror still hanging over it. I'm standin' now with my back to the sink, facin' Arlo, who stood with his back ta the toilet. Arlo's jeans are around his ankles now. And he's workin' on his drawers, drops 'em to the floor, sneerin' at me, snarlin'n sayin' "Okay kid, do youah thing."

I lock eyes with the creep and pursed a faint smile. Then, I drop ta my right knee and—in a flash—spring off the floor and ram the base of the bony heel of my right palm up into the Buzzbee family jewels, clampin' a death grip on 'em. I gotta a pretty strong grip ya know?

[Franco nods, remembering their handshake.]

Yeah, comes from handlin' the business end of a shovel or weed-whacker or mattock all day and a baseball bat at night.

So Arlo screams in agony and stretches out for my neck. But I's too quick for the bastard. Like a boxer, I step up inside Arlo's reach. Still squeezing with my right hand, stood up'n seized his shirt collar with my left. Turned my shoulder and back quick into his chest. And when his forearm surges around towards my windpipe to strangle me from behind, I bury my chin into my chest to block him off. So then, I squat down, half under his center of gravity, like I learned in judo up at the Boy's Club, and, in one motion throw him over my hip. But he's got hold o' me, tryin' ta strangle me, see? So we kind o' lunge forward together and I sort o' steer him like—like—propel this ape headfirst into what was left of the mirror over the sink, crackin' his head against the wall and shatterin' the broken glass and plaster of Paris to the floor and into the sink. Arlo recoils off the wall'n I stagger backwards still half under the jerk, still squeezin' 'em tight, see? And give 'em a little twist.

Arlo's screamin'. So I slam the top of my head back up under his chin, turnin' inta him, shovin' him backwards, snappin' his head back against the wall above the toilet. Usin' the crown o' ma head like a football helmet, see, like a spear? Stumbled kind o' sideways against the stool when Arlo's knees buckled against it. So he's kind o' straddlin' the toilet there, slumpin' back against the tank'n I'm tryin' hard to maintain my balance off to the side still squeezin' 'em tight. He ain't cryin' so loud now, see? So I guess the old maxim is true: *When you got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow*. Not ta mention their bodies. For effect, I give 'em another twist and jerk. Arlo moans like a baby.

Look up and see this wood stud exposed and cracked now by the hole left from the busted plaster over the sink where I'd rammed his head. I didn't waste no time. Muster all the strength I got left, plantin' my feet ta one side o' the toilet, grab Arlo by the nape of his neck and collar in both fists. I trip him and pitch him forward again, headlong, smashin' him headfirst inta the front side of the sink basin, shakin' the wall'n fellin' more plaster into the sink.

Now I'm about spent. That Arlo ain't no lightweight, ya know? So I tug backwards on his collar and shoulder, kind o' twistin' him and he thuds down on his back between the toilet and the sink.

His grunts and shouts had turned to moans and whimpers at first and, by now, to jes' heavy breathin' cuz he's out like a light, see? So I lean on the sink, a real load off my back, see? He's lyin' there on the dirty linoleum on his backside, face up ta the condom machine hangin' there on the wall back of his head and he starts moanin' low, eyes closed. I clench my teeth and crack wise.

"You were right Arlo, 'We won't be needin' any of dem dings. *Dat's one of the pluses for guys like us'—Darlin'*!"

Now I've carried eighty ta hundred pound sacks o' marble chip and fine buildin' sand on my shoulder all day around the Outdoor Centre, but carryin' Arlo for just a few seconds had really sapped my strength. So I take a blow (no pun intended) restin', leanin' back against the sink. Then I look around the room and found just what the doctor ordered.

I swipe the top off the porcelain toilet tank. Take it by one end in both hands to ram the short edge downward with all my might into the jerk's face. Blood spurts out o' his nose like Old Faithful. I grab the top by each side at the end nearer to me, raisin' the thing twice more to bash the creep in the face. Arlo's dead quiet now. The rammin' end of the top had broken off against his forehead.

I spy his manhood exposed there and it pissed me off. Thinkin' what he had expected me to do with it, see? So I couldn't resist lettin' out the savage in me. Stomped on his balls for all I's worth my right heel. Then rammed the jagged, porcelain edge down into Arlo's limp privates. Blood splattered out over his still body. Still seethin', I flip the broken toilet top around. He moaned and his head lifts up at the neck, though he's still unconscious, kind of like a reflex, I guess. And with both hands, I lift what was left of the tank top over my head'n smash it down, broad side, flat against his face. He sank back quiet, breathin', ragged-like at my feet. I drop what was left of the thing onto the creep's privates, coverin' 'em up. Then I stood up ta lean back against the door, out o' breath.

[Franco raises a finger to take notes. Nick's out of breath now too, from reliving his ordeal. He waits until Franco signals him to continue.]

Well, out in the hall, Alvin's clamorin' for his turn, tryin' the knob and poundin' on the door, see? Feel the door joltin' against my back. So I tell 'im I'd be right out. But I take a sec to turn on the tap, to splash some cold water on my face and hands, makin' sure to wipe the a-hole's blood off my hands and forearms. I glance down at this pervert sprawled on the floor under me and hocked on the bastard's bloody face. Then I stepped over his splayed feet, unlocked and opened the door. And relocked it behind me on my way out real quick-like, so Alvin can't peek in. See?

So now I'm out in the hall, closin' the door quick behind me, screenin' Alvin's pryin' eyes from the inside of the bathroom. Funny. I recall dryin' my mouth with the back of my forearm … Things you remember, hunh? [Nick shakes his head.] Alvin sez he'd heard me groanin' inside and then it sounded, as if there was *"a whole lotta shakin' goin' on"* in there. He licks his lips, eyes me up and down. Sez he hoped I had somethin' left for him. I took a deep breath, assurin' him I did. Alvin tried to open the men's room door, but the door was locked, see?

I sez, "Give the man a couple o' minutes o' privacy. You know, ta recover hisself." I smiled sweetly at Alvin.

"I get ya. But what about my turn?"

I look across the hall and sez, "Well, is there anyone in this one?" Pointin' to the Ladies Room. Alvin sez, "No, it's empty."

"O-K then. Let's go in there and I'll help you get right, too." I grin, leadin' the way. He sez, "I 'spect you'll do as much for me as ya did for Arlo." I sez, "Oh, I'll sure do my best, you can bes' believe that." Alvin grins and I match him, sayin', "Right in here then," with my open hand pointin' the way.

Well, inside the Ladies Room with the door locked behind us, I pull a repeat performance for Alvin. Cold-cocked the bastard, bloodying him and knockin' him out same as I did his brother with the toilet tank top after I bounced him off the walls and sink a couple o' times, too. With a dress rehearsal behind me, so ta speak, and Alvin bein' a little lighter than his brother, the second time went easier. When I finished givin' Alvin his "turn," I washed my face and hands, locked the door, stepped out o' the room and shut the door tight behind me, jes' like I did with big brother Arlo.

Out in the hall, I slump back against the closed door. Drained and gaspin', takin' a couple seconds to pause and collect myself and pray under my breath. "Thank You, Lord, thank You. And please get us out o' here without no more problems. Amen." Water's drippin' from my face and my hands are shakin' but I scarcely notice. Look across the hall at the men's room door. Didn't know how long I got before these gorillas come to. Thinkin' I gotta get the heck out o' there pronto. So I calm my nerves before I push off the Ladies Room door. Then stride down the hall and back through the bar, jes' as cool as can be, though inside I's still scared. My insides still shakin' like a leaf on a tree.

I come back inta the bar, like before, brushin' the water drops from my face, when Truley calls out, "Ya O-K, kid?" Which really pissed me off, ya know? Like he really cares.

But now that I's out o' immediate danger, I still find myself shakin' like a leaf on the insides. Brushin' water from my face with my forearm, I sez. "No thanks to you, Mann. Did ya call the cops at least?" Truley shrugs. That's all. *Shrugs!!* Sheesh! Can you believe that? So I spit on the floor in disgust.

When I start to leave, Truley finds his voice again. "Hey, don't forget your order here. Your harmonica's in there, too." I say, "Gee, thanks." And step overt' the bar to pick up the bag o' cheeseburgers and peek inside to find the blues harp. I turned, raisin' my voice, though I didn't need ta, cuz all eyes and ears were on me, and sez.

"HEY! Anybody know what those boys are drivin'?"

One old coot raised his head up from a booth next to the front windah. He pulls back the blind ta look outside.

"Yeah, that old light blue Ford pickup out by the street, by the telephone pole."

"You sure? Absolutely, positively sure about that?"

The dude nods. Someone else at the back of the room said, "Yeah, I saw 'em step out o' the cab earlier. We come in together."

"Thanks." Thanks a lot *you pricks*, I'm thinkin' but I didn't say it, 'at's jes' what I'm thinkin', see?

[Franco nods, stupefied by the tale he's just heard.]

I turn to Truley, talkin' between my teeth.

"You never shoulda asked me ta sing when you knew them a-holes were in here." Truley looks down. Can't look me in the eye, see? I said, "Now you really owe me, Truley—big time. 'N' I won't forget it either."

Figurin' I'd get my beer in the future without havin' ta sing for it, see? Truley looks up but don't say nothin'. The old coot knew I's right. I sez, "Least you can do is slow 'em boys down some, when they come bustin' out o' there. They gonna be madder 'n hornets."

Again, Truley looks at me but don't say nothin'. Nobody makes a sound. A-holes, I thought. All of 'em. They're all pricks! I know they ain't gonna do a dang thing when them creeps come bustin' out o' there, jes' like they didn't do squat before. Will Kane, see? 'N' I know I gotta hustle. Haul my butt out o' there quick, see?

So I hurry out the front door with the burgers, knowin' I didn't have much time. It was almost completely dark by then. Like, time ta start the Fourth o' July fireworks, ya know? I'd left the keys with Terri, so I motion for her to drive the convertible around beside the blue pickup. I meet her at the Buzzbee's truck to hand her the bag of burgers.

"What took ya so long, Nicky? Patti's starving."

[Franco notes that now Nick is imitating Miss Schieffer in a falsetto, acting it out for him just as if he were there, probably sounding just like her. This kid was unbelievable. Under other circumstances his imitation might have been comical, but it was so real in context it was chilling. Had Franco riveted to his chair.]

"Not now. Got no time," I sez.

I hop over to the front of the Buzzbee's truck. Lift up the hood and motioned for the girls to pull the Bonneville up close to the pick-up, driver's side to driver's side. The two vehicles facin' in opposite directions, see? I reached in under the hood to rip off the truck's distributor cap and the wires attached to it. I slam the hood down, shuffle around the pickup to toss the cap and wires into the truck bed.

Terri asked, "Nicky, what on earth are you doing?" But I ignore her. Didn't have time for no pleasantries. Them Buzzbees could come flyin' outta there any minute, see?

Well, as I's walkin' back to the Pontiac, I glanced inside the truck cab ta spy about half a dozen cans o' Quaker State motor oil settin' there on the seat inside a topless corrugated, rectangular box. And I get another idea, another *real good*

idea. I open the cab door to reach in for the box. An oil can spout falls out of the box. Even better. I pull out a can and knock the rest to the floor. Climb up into the cab on my hands 'n' knees and crawl across the seat toward the passenger door. Punch three big holes into the top of the oil can with the pointed insert from the metal spout. Then I pour some oil on the passenger door handle. Scoot backwards across the seat, dumping oil all over the vinyl seat cushion and seat back like I'm smothering a pancake in maple syrup. When I run out, I open up another can and don't stop pourin' till I reach the driver's door. Standin' on the truck step, I poured out the rest o' the oil over the steering wheel, the inner door handle and the driver's seat.

Well, about thirty yards away, Truley's front door comes bustin' open. I jerk my head up to look out the cab's rear window. Arlo come stumblin' out the door, tryin' to buckle up his pants, screamin': *"Where's that scum-suckin' Sum'bitch? I'm gonna kill 'im."*

[Ha! Nick looks off into space, shaking his head and laughing.]

… So I set the can upside-down in the middle of the seat so it'd drain out and shut the door. Thankfully, the truck blocked the a-holes' view of the convertible. I hop in the back of the Pontiac and tell Terri to "Make tracks." She did. With no curb, the gravel and asphalt of the parking lot and Tyson Road sort o' meld together there. So Terri peels out to the right, spraying the truck and lot with gravel. She makes a violent U-Turn, stopping at the highway light about fifty yards away from the truck.

Sez Terri, "Which way, Nick?" Patti said, "South to Woldorn? I think I'll feel safe there."

I look back to the parking lot. By this time, Alvin had fallen out o' Truley's, too. Hangin' onto the door knob with one hand and buttonin' his pants with the other, he swings the open door back against the wall and falls down. He was madder 'n hell, too, but wouldn't let go of the knob, the same way I hadn't let go of his family heirloom in the rest room. Sheesh!

Nick cracks up.

"Ya had to be there Frank, really, to appreciate the comedy of it all. It was a sight to behold, lemme tell ya." He chuckled down before returning to his tale.

So Terri's peel-out had caught the apes' attention. And I hear Arlo yell, "Thair he is! Git in the truck! Let's git 'im, Alvin! Pull up your pants boy! Come on. Hurra up! He's gittin' away!"

Now, I was sittin' in the back of the Pontiac, top down ya know. So I turn around, lookin' out over the trunk 'n' rose up on my knees to watch the Buzzbees behind us, stumblin' across Truley's gravel parking lot, madder 'n hornets, just as I predicted they'd be. Patti yells, "Come on Terri, let's go."

"I can't! Gotta wait for the light."

"Screw the light! Just peel out, girl!"

I say, "No, no," quietly but loud enough for them to hear. "Just sit tight and watch this girls. It oughtta be sump'n ta see!"

Terri says, "But what about the light?"

"Just sit here and watch." There's no traffic comin', pushin' us, see?"

Terri sighed but put the car in Park, so she could turn around to watch with her foot off the brake, on accoun o' there's a slight backward incline there up to the main highway, while Patti's jes' shakin' her head. Both girls were scared, but they did what I said. They turned around to watch. We can see 'em from under the lit telephone pole lamp over the lot—dark now, see? Fortunately, like I said, on a Monday night, there's no other cars in sight.

I watch now as Arlo reached the pickup's driver's side door ahead of his brother, who was making for the passenger side. Arlo throws the door open with his right hand to cup-hold of the inner door jam. He grabs the vent bar separating the open driver's windows with his left and pushes up off the step, vaulting himself into the truck. I crack up watchin' as the a-hole slides clear across the oil-slicked, vinyl seat, reaching the opposite door just as Alvin opens it. Arlo slides right out, down onto the gravel, ahead o' the empty oil can I'd left on the seat, both the can and him fallin' on top o' Alvin.

[Nick cracks up, unable to control himself for a minute.]

Well, they fall, all tangled up to the ground, promptin' a fistfight between 'em. I laughed so hard I cried. I swear I had tears streamin' out my eyes Frank. See, I'd finally stopped shaking inside now. And for the first time, really, *for the first time*, I felt like I had the situation under control. It was like I had 'em by the balls again but from a safe distance, so's I didn't have to worry none. See?

[Astounded, Franco nods.]

Patti cries out, "Did you see that? That guy just slid all the way across the seat of that truck." Terri sez, "Yeah and that other guy was polite enough to open the door for him." She cracked up too. We all did. Really blew our minds, ya know?

I laughed some more while the jerks were beatin' the stuff'n out o' each other. When the brothers paused for round two, they all of a sudden remember me, see? And look my way. Cursin' and shaking their fists at me, they struggle up off the ground ta clamber back into their truck as best as they could. "Here it comes," I said to the girls. Arlo tried to start the truck, but he couldn't. The battery cranked but he couldn't get no spark to the engine, see? Smackin' the steerin' wheel, he cusses a blue streak that must have been heard down in St. Mary's County. Then he holds up his hands to look at the goo all over 'em. He shrieks like a maniac. The creep was so frustrated, I thought the bastard might cry. So the brothers, pissed off all ta hell now, get out to check under the hood. When they find the problem, Arlo—'s irate see—accidentally slams the hood down on his brother's hand. Alvin hollers out in agony, sheer agony, I tell ya.

I sez to myself, "Well, guess that makes up for open'n' the door on your older brother and lettin' 'im fall out o' the truck." I shake my head, laughin', sayin' "I

couldn't have planned this any better if I'da tried." Almost as if Arlo could hear me, he turns around, screamin' "I'M GONNA KILL YA, YA PISS-ANT SONUVABITCH! YOU HEAR ME? I'M GONNA KILL YA! I SWEAR IT!"

I tell Terri, "Get ready to fly south Baby, but wait for my signal." Rising up on my knees in the back seat, I bend my left arm across my chest, restin' my left wrist in the nook of my right elbow and shove my right fist skyward, giving 'em good ol' boys the universal symbol of contempt. Like this.

[Nick shows Franco what he means. Franco nods.]

And yell out, "UP YOURS, YOU SCUM-SUCKIN' BASTARDS!"

Afoot and steamin' now, them Buzzbees come racin', tearin' headlong for me, see?

"All right Terr, NOW! Lets' fly south, Baby."

"But the light's red."

"Anyone comin'?"

"No."

"Screw the light. Punch it."

"Which way?"

"Woldorn," said Patti.

"Go ahead, Terr. Hang a left, south," I said, trying to remain calm with the Buzzbees racin' towards us. Terri punched it but went nowhere. The motor revved, but she still had the car in Park, for cryin' out loud.

"Dammit Terri. Put it in gear. Now, hurry!"

"I'm sorry. I, I—"

"Just GO!"

Well, I guess 'racin'' was a poor choice o' words because those boys weren't exactly sprinters. They were all broke up and stumblin' all over the place, slippin' on the gravel, but they were only about twenty yards away now. Terri finds Drive and floors it. As she peels out through the red light turning left—no cars comin' down the highway—thank God—I rise above the top of the convertible boot well again to replay my gesture. I yelled out, "SUCK THIS, YOU ASSHOLES!"

After we pull out, the light changes behind us and the Buzzbees stopped in the middle o' the road, screamin' and shakin' their fists. Jes' in time to play chicken with a dump truck that come barrelin' through the green light travelin' up Tyson Road past Truley's outta nowhere behind 'em. The truch blast its horn and charges towards the intersection and across the highway, not even slowin' down a bit. The boys turned just in time ta spy the onrushin' truck. They parted before the honkin' dump truck like the Red Sea before Moses, each creep divin' to either side of the road. Up in the front seat, the girls were starin' back over the shoulders in disbelief at the spectacle, causin' Terri to weave back and forth from takin' her eyes off the highway. In back, I could scarcely hold my convulsions long enough to remind Terri to watch the road. Really blew my mind, ya know? We flew south around the curve, under the 301 overpass, past the Outdoor Living Centre towards Woldorn. While the Buzzbees rolled in the gutter, I rolled across

the back seat of the convertible laughin' my head off, till I managed to control myself enough to whisper a final prayer—

"Thank You Lord. Thank You so much. I'll never forget Your help."

Well, I didn't feel much like skinny-dippin' after that close call—what with the Lord helpin' me out'n all. So we went to the drive-in ta watch a Steve McQueen triple feature. You wanna know about the movies we watched and what happened at the drive in too?"

Wrapped up in the kid's story, Franco sat dumbfounded. He pulled out of it when Nick snapped his fingers.

"Excuse me, Nick. I, uh … well, that really was some story! But uh, maybe a little more than I bargained for. Why don't you tell me what happened with the accident but don't get quite so involved this time. Okay?"

"Sure. No problem. Mister Vamia."

"Well, like I said, I didn't feel much like agoin' skinny-dippin' after that. I mean with God helping me out of that tight spot, how would that look? So we went to the drive-in instead ta finish our burgers and left about quarter to two, just when the Blob was about to eat up the whole town. The girls were asleep. I'd seen the flick before and didn't appreciate the way Steve McQueen was bone-jackin' offa James Dean. *I* could do that."

"Was what? Bone-jackin'?"

"You know, copying James Dean style o' actin'."

Franco nods. "The accident, Nick?" Franco leaned forward, arching his brows.

"Oh yeah, right. So anyway, we come back up 5A ta get caught at the T.C. light, right there at Truley's. And danged if the Buzzbees ain't layin' for us in Truley's parking lot in this hot rod funny car, painted like a bumble bee. Musta been waitin' there almost five hours for us. Can you believe that? I still can't. [Shakes his head.] They see us and gun it and I tear out. They spun out crossin' the grassy median on account o' it'd started rainin' and the grass was slick, so I went through the red light, left onto Old Veer to get a jump on 'em. No other cars out there that time o' night, see? So when I passed that first sharp right angle turn I couldn't see 'em behind me. So I ducked up this dirt farm lane and cut my lights to hide out. They went whirrin' past. I seen 'em take that second right angle turn up the road a mile or so. Foxed 'em like Zorro did the soldiers on the silver screen, see? So I turned around, takin' a left back south the way I'd come. Now ya gotta understand it had started to rain and storm somethin' fierce. And that's when I felt it."

"Felt what?"

"I dunno, a hunch mebbe, but it was more like a voice inside me, like in my heart—" Nick tapped his chest—"I feel like: '*Turn around. Wait.*'"

"A voice? What kind of a voice?"

"It was like a real quiet voice, a whisper-like. But I felt it more than I heard it. Felt firm, ya know? I mean there was no mistakin' it. So I turned the car around and Patti went nuts. She said we should get the hell out o' there while the gettin' was good. But the Voice felt like "*Go slow*." So I did. Come back to make that first right angle turn again and here come the Buzzbees in their funny car, comin' back around that second turn up ahead about a mile and a half or so up the road. Of course, I wasn't sure it was them at that point. Didn't figure that out for sure till later, when it was too late. I seen these headlights comin' at me and I'm goin' about oh—twenty, twenty-five, somethin' like that. Then they see me and start coming hard, right for me. Told Patti to hop in the back, cuz I got no center safety belt up front. She griped, but she did it."

"How did you know it was them? How did you know they saw you?"

"As they got closer, I could tell the sound of that souped up engine of theirs. Gotta deep, distinctive low rumble to it, ya know? Four-barrel carb with a dual exhaust? Could hear it over the storm even, which was pretty bad by now. Yeah. Four-barrel carb with a dual exhaust, see? It was them all right. I knew it then. And it was too late to scram. And I'd already passed that farm lane I had ducked up before. The girls knew, too. Patti screamed at me not to play chicken with 'em. I could tell from the whites of Terri's eyes that she knew, too. Knew it was too late to bail. Besides, the Voice didn't feed me no vibes to bail anyway. They had their brights on, flicked 'em twice at us, like in recognition, and crossed the center line—their hi-beams, blarin' at us. Come right for us. Knew then for sure that they knew us, too. But I feel this Voice inside, keeps real calm and firm, instructin' me to go on slow-like. Well, I do. And then the Buzzbees are blindin' us with their hi-beams. So I turn on my lights, my hi-beams, too, hopin' they'll see me better and move back into their lane. And also to cancel out their brites so I can see better. I pump my brites to ward 'em off, but no dice. We're just about to collide when we both swerve left at the same time, crossin' over to opposite side of the road—"

"Why left? Wouldn't it have been more natural to go over onto the right shoulder?"

"I guesso, but the Voice was like "*Left*." Franco shook his head but made a note.

"Well, it was slick as Hell, Frank. Rain jes' pourin' down hard as all get out. Was all I could do to hold her on the road. I skidded and slid all over the place. Finally come to a stop half off the road with my car facin' this field below, kind o' perpendicular to the road. I look back to see the Buzzbee Boys weren't so lucky. Goin' too fast, see? And they were too close to that right angle turn I just came through. They couldn't hold that turn, skidded off the road. Crashed into this power pole below the road about half way up it. The thing cracked in two and the transformer come down on their heads and exploded BOOM! Looked like the finale of the Fourth of July!

"Fried 'em boys to a crisp. Roof blew off, see? Yeah. We could see their heads burnin'… Dang Mister Vamia, it was horrible, just horrible, not a dang thing I could do.

There were no other cars out there in the country, middle of a stormy night, no lights, no nothin' aside from the fireworks and the flames. That farm house up on the hill was quiet and dark. No lights anywhere. Guess, on account o' the transformer busted like that, power's probably out. We just sat there, watchin' 'em burn.

"Then Terri spotted somethin'. What looked like flashlights movin' up by that farmhouse. Then we heard shouts up there. Patti said to make tracks and I skedaddled. Figured there was nothin' I could do for them boys anyhow. But Terri said I should go back and I knew she's right. Well, we stopped off at the Seven-Eleven there. I called the operator from the pay phone outside the store to get me the police, cuz it was an emergency. She hooked me up to the new Oxen Mill station. I told the guy that answered what happened. Told him those boys were on fire and I thought the power was out, too. Said to get some fire trucks and the power company down there pronto and hung up."

Franco held up his finger. "Did you get the cop's name?" Nick winced. "Ah, think it was Durphy or Dunphy, somethin' like that?" Franco asked, did you give him your name?" Nick shook his head. "First name only. He asked me and I started to, but stopped cuz I didn't think it was important. Thought the Buzzbee boys fryin' was more important." Franco asked, "Did you tell him, they were *frying*, like that?" Nick nodded. "Yeah. Believe I used that exact word. Told him I thought they might already be dead, cuz they weren't movin', see?"

Franco scribbled. "And how long did it take you to get from the accident site before you made the call?"

"Oh just a couple minutes. The store's only a mile or so away. Up on the left there."

When Franco had finished his notes, he asked Nick to go on.

"Well, even after the call, Terri was still on me ta go back. I had turned onto Surrette's Road by then, headed for the main highway. Patti said I'd done enough with the phone call. She wanted to go home. But, after a few miles, I decided to go back by way of Veer Avenue, you know the highway? 5A? Where they just dual-laned it? Made a big circle, goin' back to T.C., followin' my original route back to the accident. That's when this cop directin' traffic stopped us. By then, fire engines and ambulances were comin' up behind us. We were kind o' blockin' them. So this traffic cop, out in the rain—"

"Excuse me, Nick. But how long did it take you to get back to the crash site?"

"Gee. I dunno. Ten, twelve minutes, tops." Franco made another note, saying, "That was from the time you left the scene or since you made the phone call to the police?"

"Oh, since the phone call."

"Go on. What happened with the cop?" Nick shook his head.

"He wouldn't let us through. Wasn't lettin' anybody through! Shoot! There was a car ahead of us and he had it turn around, make a three-point turn and made us do the same. I tried ta tell 'im I knew what happened. Tried to explain, but he wouldn't listen. He said

he had to clear the road for the fire trucks. Thought I was tryin' to show off for the girls, by showin' 'em a grisly accident. Shoot! If he only knew! Made me leave. Threatened to write me up if I didn't get out o' there quick—'*pronto'*—that's what he said, term he used. Ya gotta understand Mister Vamia, it was rainin' cats and dogs—lightnin', thunder the whole bit by then—and that cop was out in it. He was pissed. So I turned around and we left. Back the way we'd come, past the fire trucks and an ambulance—sirens blarin'."

The tape recorder ran out suddenly, clicking off. Franco held up a finger, ejected the tape then flipped it over to pop the cassette back into the recorder. Nick waited. Franco pressed down the "Play" and "Record" buttons simultaneously. He waited a few seconds.

"I see. Then what?" He cued Nick to resume.

"Nothin'. We left. I took the girls home."

"What time was this?"

"I dunno, 'bout twenty ta three I guess."

"All right, and then you took the girls home?"

"Right. Dropped Patti at her place just after three and then took Terri home."

"Then you drove to the rectory? Spoke with Vince a little after four. Is that right?"

"Yessir, that sounds about right. About ten after, cuz one of them other priests answered the door and he mentioned the time. Ha! He was mad, too. Guess I pissed everybody off last night."

"So I take it Patti and Terri live quite a ways from Holy Trinity, is that right?"

"Oh, no sir. We all live 'bout a mile of the church."

"Well, why did it take you from three to four to see Vince?"

"Oh, well, I took Terri home first—before I went to see Father V. We talked quite a while. Like I said, she's the one give me the idea to talk to Father Vince. Or mebbe I didn't tell ya that already?"

"You two talked about the accident then? For a whole hour?"

"Oh no, no. Talked about everything but. It was kind o' crazy. We went on a talkin' jag I guess ya might say. Tryin' not to think about it, I guess. I kept seein' that horrible sight in my head and I guess she was too. We talked about other stuff. Anything—to forget it I guess. Finally, she said that I knew I had to go back to the police. I knew she was right, but I wanted to talk to an adult first. And since I didn't, and still don't, want to drag my folks into it, she suggested Father Vizconni. And that's where I went."

"Why don't you want your parents to know? They'll probably have to know sooner or later. Who do you think will pay my fee?"

The boy bolted upright in the chair.

"Don't worry about that! I pay my own bills." The kid's jaw clenched. His eyes narrowed, miffed at Franco's question but Franco liked his sense of independence.

"If they find out, they'll take my driver's license and the car keys and I'll be stuck home all summer. That'd be a disaster! I gotta deliver my paper routes, get ta my job at the Outdoor Centre, get ta my ball games, take out the ladies. I got a lot goin' on, Mann. And we got a couple gigs down at O.C. this weekend over the Fourth, the band I mean. I need my car and my license Mister Vamia."

"I see. All right Nick. All right. Calm down. We'll leave your folks out of it for now.

"Well. That last was a clear, succinct statement. Anything else you'd care to tell me?"

Nick thought for a second but shook his head. He was still a little upset—glaring.

"You weren't under the influence of alcohol or drugs, were you—at the time of the accident?"

He shook his head.

"No sir. The couple beers and the shot I'd had earlier were long worn off at the drive-in." [Franco made a note.] "And I don't do drugs of any kind, 'cept the penicillin the doc's prescribed for my Rheumatic Fever. Been over three years since I had that though. Take the penicillin every day, only as a precaution now."

"Okay, now this is very important, Nick." Franco leaned forward a little to look Nick right in the eye. "Tell me again why you turned around when you could have escaped? Can you be more specific about this, this voice?"

Nick shrugged. Franco could sense the kid, trying to read him.

"I don't know exactly. How much more specific can I be? We were all scared. We were all prayin' like crazy." [Franco nods.] "I *felt* someone, somethin' inside me—

"*Felt*—not heard it, *'Turn around, wait, go slow,'* so I did."

"One of the girls, perhaps?"

"No Mister Vamia, I tole ya, it come from inside of me, sort of."

"So you heard a voice in your head tell you to 'turn *around*?'"

He was wondering about the kid's mental state. The kid seemed to sense his concerns.

"No, that's *not* what I said, Mister Vamia. You ain't listenin'. I didn't *hear* any voice in my head. What I said was I *felt* it. *I felt a voice*, like you might feel a whisper more'n hear it." Nick thumped his chest with his fist like a Roman soldier, saluting. "In here."

Franco was stumped. After a brief pause, he said "and you *felt* from inside, the advice to 'TURN AROUND, WAIT' and 'GO SLOW', is that correct?"

"Yes, yes that's it exactly."

Franco paused for a few seconds to make some more notes. The kid seemed a little perturbed with him but he had collected himself well.

"All right now, you proceeded in your lane on the right and these Buzzbees crossed over into your lane, coming head on into you, is that correct? With their high beams on?"

"Yes sir, that's exactly right."

You turned on your high-beams and swerved left. Why left, instead of right?"

He pouted. "I tole ya already. I turned on my high-beams to make sure they knew exactly where we were and because they were blinding me with their headlights. I figured my brites would cancel theirs out."

"Your brites 'would cancel theirs out?'" Nick bobbed his head.

"Guess you haven't taken Physics yet?"

"No sir, that's next year, uh in the Fall."

"I see. Okay. And why did you swerve to the left, into the oncoming lane, instead of going off to the right shoulder? Wouldn't that have been the natural reaction? Wouldn't that have made more sense?"

"'*LEFT*', same reason, *I felt* '*LEFT*' in here." Nick tapped his chest over his heart again. How many times I gotta say that?"

"Hmmm. And why didn't you have your lights turned on before that?"

Nick shrugged. "Well, I had 'em off when we were hidin' up the dirt lane and didn't turn 'em back on, when we were sneakin' out."

"Yes, but then you turned around in the road and never turned them back on. Why?"

"Well, I kind o' forget about 'em at first, though it *was* very dark. Guess, I was thinkin' about the Buzzbees more'n the road in front. If they were to come back, see? And then for the same reason, see? I never heard the Voice say nothin' bout turnin' any lights on. Actually, now that I think on it, I got in an argument with Patti about bein' able to see in the dark. She didn't believe me."

"You can see in the dark?"

"Yeah. Well—" He shrugged. "Not like I can see in the day o' course, but pretty good. Better'n anybody else I know anyway. Kind o' like in moon-brite. Only, when it's moon-brite, it's like daytime for me. See? Besides, I turned my brites on and pumped 'em to warn the Buzzbees to get back inta their lane."

The attorney leaned back in his dark wood and burgundy, leather-upholstered, executive chair with his right elbow on the arm of the chair, resting his chin in his right hand. Nick felt the lawyer studying him closely. Dude looked sort of like Bozo the Clown. He sensed the guy was sizing him up, trying to figure out if he was lying or not. They stared at one another for a minute. Vamia reclined back a little in his fancy chair.

"I'll be honest with you Nick. This business about feeling a voice from inside might not play in front of a grand jury, if it goes that far. That is, unless we tried to establish temporary insanity as a defense."

"Defense? A jury?! Whaddaya telling me here Mister Vamia? I, I might go ta jail?"

Vamia shook his head. He leaned forward.

"No, no, I doubt the matter will ever go to trial. It's just that we have to think in worst case scenarios. We have to be prepared in case the unlikely occurs, you understand?"

"Oh, I see. Expect the worst but hope for the best."

He smiled. "Yes, now you're catching on. You see, given the earlier incident with your assailants at the bar, a reasonable person could assume you had a sufficient motive to run the Buzzbees off the road intentionally. And the fact that you stopped, turned around and waited for them when you might have been home free—well, that's not good. You see where I'm headed with this Nick?"

"Yes sir, I do. I'm right with you every step but I can tell ya it wasn't like that with me. I was scared, sinless. And not just for me but for the girls too. They were in my car. I was responsible for 'em. I only did what I did because I felt like God was talkin' to me. We'd prayed. Figured if anybody could get us out of this jam, He could. See? After all, He helped me out earlier at Truley's."

"Hmmm. Well, you were quite right to the think of the girls' safety Nick, but following the advice of a silent voice is difficult to understand in those circumstances. I'm glad you mentioned the girls though. You knew you were endangering them when you turned back, didn't you? Why didn't you force them to get out at the farmhouse? For that matter, why didn't *all* of you go up to the farmhouse?"

"What? Wake up those folks in the middle of the night? Scare the heck out of 'em? For what? What would I tell 'em? No, I don't think so. As for the girls, I tried to get 'em to go. Figured they could make up their own minds. Ya see Mister Vamia, I like people to be free to do what they wanna do without pressure from anyone else.

"See, I live by a certain code that I learned growin' up a long time ago as the runt of the school. I don't like people tryin' to force me to do somethin' I don't wanna. So I don't like to force 'em to do somethin' they don't wanna do either. Kind of my golden rule, ya might say. I asked the girls to get out. They didn't wanna. So that was it. And besides, I don't know those people in the farmhouse from Adam. For all I know, they might've been another family of Buzzbees. Mainly, all I's thinkin' at the time Frank was to follow the Voice inside and try not to show how scared I was, for the girls' sake, understand?"

"Um-hmm. All right, just a couple more questions, Nick."

"Shoot."

"Do you remember the name of the police officer who turned you away?"

Nick edged forward in his seat, snapped his fingers and squinted.

"Uh, uh, I think, I think it was …" He banged his forehead with the heel of his fist. "'Dodge It', Somethin' like that anyway. Yeah, because he told me to call him '*Officer* Dodgett' and not '*Mister*,' like I had before."

"How do you spell that?"

"Uh, D-O-D-G-E double T, I think. I dunno." Vamia wrote that down.

"Okay. So you and Terri just *talked* for an hour, before you decided to visit Vince, is that right?"

Nick shifted in his chair, looking away and then back to Franco.

"Sure, that's right." But he couldn't hold Franco's stare.

The attorney laid down his pen to sit back in his executive chair.

"Miss Schieffer is a very lovely girl Nick. Very lovely, indeed. Has a very good, uh, shall we say, bone structure?"

"Oh yeah." The kid sneered. "That girl got one heckuva bone structure and her flesh structure ain't too shabby neither." Franco grinned, too.

"Yes. I see what you mean. So, under the circumstances, all the stress and fear and adrenaline of the situation, tryin' to forget, as you mentioned about that gruesome accident, your narrow escape from death, it might be natural for the two of you to, uh, have a uh … shall we say—a mutual need to console one another, to kind of validate life so to speak? To bond, to prove to yourselves that you had survived in the face of the gruesome finality of death? The indescribable horror, which you both had just witnessed? You see where I'm heading with this?"

The boy began to squirm in his seat, confirming Franco's suspicions, but he kept quiet.

"Loo-ook Nick. Miss Schieffer and Miss—what's this other girl—Patti's last name?"

"Slater."

"Yes, Miss Slater. They're the only two eyewitnesses to this incident as far as you know. Your relationship with them is crucial. Is there anything you'd like to tell me about either of them?"

He shrugged. "No sir. Jes' that we been classmates for several years and we only started to get friendly, in a matter of speakin', since the end o' school."

"Yes, believe you mentioned that already. But just *how friendly* is the question. And have you favored one over the other? The fact that Miss Schieffer is here and Miss Slater is not, is that any indication of the closeness of you relationships?"

"Look Mister Vamia, that's personal stuff. And I live by another rule when it comes to females. I don't say nothin' about 'em that's personal stuff, see? Not to nobody, not even confidential lawyers, understand? Le's jes' say, I'm a *good hour closer* to Terri right now than I am to Patti and maybe I need to remedy that. As for Patti not bein' here now, from what Terri told me, it was out of her control. Her boss said Patti had ta stay and work late tonight on account o' some fiscal year-end, budget deal for the State. That's all I know."

"All right Nick. That's fair enough. I'm not trying to pry into your personal life for any prurient reasons. I just need to know where we stand, in case the information may be needed in the future. *For right now*, what you've given me here is sufficient. All right?"

"O-K. That sounds fair to me Frank."

"O-K. Very good. Now last summer, you were involved in a couple of scrapes, high-profile scrapes that received national attention. You know what I'm referring to?"

"Yessir, but I was only a material witness both them times."

"Yes, but initially, you *were* a suspect in both cases, were you not?"

"Well, that's how the cops saw it but you can't blame me for their mistakes. Least ways, that's how I see it."

"All right, but the point is those *were* high profile cases and the public is fickle. If, on the off chance this matter should go to trial, people usually always recall the initial allegations, not necessarily the favorable, later dispensations of the cases in the news. If they make the news at all."

He thought for a moment.

"Don't figure there is anything I can do about that Mister Vamia."

"Well there is: Stay out of trouble, okay? You don't need any more bad publicity now."

"Yessir."

"Now, your father engaged a high-priced attorney to represent you in those cases last year in L.A. He did well for you, didn't he? Yet, you come to me instead of him. Why?"

Nick squirmed in his seat.

"Well, gee, I mean, he was a good guy and all. Knew his stuff, but I gotta do this on my own Frank. Can't drag my parents into this. They worry about every little thing. That's just the way they are. Seems like they ain't happy if they ain't worryin' 'bout sumpin' or other. And my dad is always concerned about his reputation in the neighborhood. And if they knew about this, they'd ground my ass for the summer, sure as shootin'. And like I said, I got big plans for the summer. I got everything workin' now, see? Except for this little bump in the road, no pun intended, I got the world by the balls right now, jes' like I did with them Buzzbee boys last night. And besides, I don't wanna cause my parents any more heartache than I hefta. Don't wanna get into it with the old man and hefta run off like my brother did—join the Air Force. And well …"

"And what Nick?"

"Well … Father Vince thinks—he thinks, you might be a little cheaper than the other guy?" Nick looked at him for confirmation. "He vouches for ya. So if he vouches for ya, ya must be okay." Franco sat back in his chair to study Nick some more.

"A little cheaper, hunh?" Franco chuckled. "All right, Nick. Fair enough. But you must understand, if this thing somehow escalates beyond my expectations, I'll have to notify your parents."

"Gee, I'd almost rather go to jail Frank."

The kid looked as if Franco was forcing him to drink a bottle of castor oil. Franco raised his eyebrows.

"Well, I'll do my best to prevent either one of those distasteful occurrences. Okay?"

He smiled. "You did well Nick." Nick nodded.

"That's all for now. You may send the young lady in now—won't you?"

"Sure, sure, I can do that. So, whaddaya think, Frank? Will I have to go to jail? Should I go to the police now or what?"

"No, don't do anything unless I tell you. I think you'll be all right but we have to cover all the bases. I need to hear from the two girls. Then I'll have a better idea what to do. I used to work in the prosecutor's office. Still have some contacts there I can touch base with. So. Hope for the best, but plan for the worst. Remember?"

"Yes sir. Gotta touch 'em all before we can score."

Franco broke into a grin again. "That's right Nick. You hit the nail right on the head."

He rose to shake hands with the kid.

"You're okay, Nick. You're a likeable kid just as Vince said. That Vince knows people. Yes, he does …"

He saw Nick to the door. "… a likeable kid." Franco nodded his head in approval.

Terri stepped into the attorney's inner office, not knowing what to expect. Her stomach was queasy. This was a big deal, a serious matter. She wanted to do the right thing. And the right thing was to tell the truth and protect Nicky. The attorney showed her to a fancy, burgundy leather chair in front of his executive desk. He stepped around his desk to sit down. Terri stood, gawking at the law books lining the shelves and the degrees and licenses hanging on the wall behind glass frames. She had never been in a lawyer's office before, not even when her mom had separated from her dad for a while and met with one.

Mr. Vamia smiled pleasantly. "Please sit down." He waved toward the visitor chair.

"I'd like to record you. If you don't mind—to insure accuracy." He pointed to a tape recorder on his desk. He spoke in a friendly, relaxed manner. But it was difficult to feel comfortable when his eyes kept straying to her bust. Nodding to the recorder, she said that she didn't mind. He ejected a cassette from the recorder, only to pop in another. He wrote something on the labels on both sides of the one he pulled out. When he pressed the record button, Terri heard the faint whir of the turning cassette wheels.

"Now Miss Schieffer—may I call you Terri?" She nodded.

"Good. You can call me Frank or Franco, whatever you like, whatever makes you most comfortable. Don't be afraid to speak up. We are on the same side here, are we not?"

"Yes sir. Is, is Mister Vamia all right?"

He waited for her to speak further. But she had nothing more to say.

"Certainly, if you prefer." She smiled. "Well, I'm glad you saw fit to come with Nick today. Makes things easier for me. Too bad Miss Slater could not make it."

"Yes sir."

"I understand from Nick that you two have been classmates for some time and only recently have started seeing each other socially, is that right?"

"Yes sir." He added, "And Miss Slater, as well?"

"Yes sir."

The attorney's smile melted. He leaned forward to turn off the recorder. "Look Terri. You're not on the witness stand *yet*." He grinned but that faded when she didn't respond.

"That was a joke Terri. I want you to feel free to elaborate on your answers so I can get a feel for both you and Nick, so I can understand what happened last night. All right?"

"Yes sir." He looked down, scratching his forehead.

Terri thought she'd feel much better if this attorney would look her in the eye rather than in the chest, but she didn't dare tell him that.

"Very well. Then can you tell me about last night? What happened with Nick and Miss Slater and the accident? Just anything that comes to mind as you recall it."

"Yes sir. Where should I start?"

"Anywhere you like. If you see me taking notes, don't stop unless I raise my finger. All right?" Picking up a pen, he leaned forward over a yellow legal pad.

"Yes sir."

"You may begin any time then." His smile returned.

"Yes sir."

The attorney re-started the tape machine and leaned back in his chair. Terri cleared her throat. She sat forward on the edge of her seat to speak at the machine rather than to the man, whose penetrating laser stare left her feeling naked and embarrassed.

"Well, Patti and I picked up Nick after the ball game. He had driven us to work—at the clinic yesterday morning—as he has been doing lately and we both had to work late last night. Well, I didn't *have* to work late. It was more Patti. I was going to stick around so she wouldn't feel so bad about it. But I also wanted to watch Nick's game. Nick suggested I drive him to the game, go back to the clinic and then for both of us to pick him up as soon as we could. See, the ball field was just a few miles down the road over at Tobacco Creek. So I did. Actually, I stayed to watch half his game. After Nicky tripled in the top of the fourth I drove his car back to the clinic to collect Patti. We got there in time to watch Nick strike out the side to end the game."

She looked at Mr. Vamia to see if she was doing all right. He nodded, saying, "And that's when Nick drove you to Truley's to get something to eat."

"Yes sir, that's right."

Mr. Vamia waited. When she didn't say anything, he made a rolling motion with the pen in his hand, for her to continue, "And …"

"Oh. And we ordered some burgers at Truley's Drive-Thru widow, but the boy said our order would take about twenty minutes. So we drove around the place to park out front to wait until our order was ready."

"Did you order anything besides burgers?"

"Like what?"

"Get something to drink perhaps?"

She had hoped he wouldn't ask that but now that he had, she had to answer truthfully.

"Beer. A six-pack of Miller's." She leaned forward a bit with her knees together, hands folded in her lap, her back straight. She sat as primly and properly as she could.

"Look Terri. You have to be forthcoming with me. For me to help Nick, I need to know everything I can—everything you know. Doesn't that make sense to you?"

"He's in bad trouble, isn't he?" Terri felt herself biting her lip. She stopped.

"Well, not necessarily. That's what we have to find out. And the only way I can help him, the only way *you* can help him, is to tell me all you know about what happened last night. You do want to help Nick, don't you Terri?"

"Oh, yes sir. I do very much. I, I—"

"You care for him, don't you?" She nodded. "Of course you do. So just be honest with me and tell me everything so you can help me, help him. All right?"

"Yes sir."

"Fine. Now, you were drinking beer in the front parking lot at Truley's while you waited for you order of burgers. Go on."

"Well, Nick went in to pick them up—"

"About what time was this?"

"Oh, a little before nine I think. I remember the sun had just set but it wasn't dark yet. Twilight, I guess you'd call it. And I was a little worried about being out in the parking lot with the top down when it was getting dark after what Nicky had said."

"Oh? What had he said?"

"Well, I offered to go inside to pick up the burgers because I could see Patti wanted to be alone with him. But Nick said I shouldn't because it was no place for me, dressed the way I was. I told him I had been in Truley's at lunch before and there was never a problem. But he said it was different at night. He would go instead. And he did."

"I see. How were you dressed?"

"I was wearing a cotton midriff top, scoop-necked, and a short skirt—A-line—over my two-piece bathing suit because we were supposed to go swimming later but we never did. Oh—and sandals. I had sandals on my feet and a red ribbon in my hair. Yes."

"All right. So Nick went inside and you waited with Patti in the car. For how long?"

"Gee. Must have been a good twenty minutes. I remember getting mad because Nick had stuck his head out the door right after he went in to say it would be another five minutes—for the burgers. Yes that was at five of. I remember now, because I checked the car clock. But gee, he didn't come out for another twenty minutes after that." The lawyer made a note, but didn't raise his finger.

"When he did come out, Nick acted kind of crazy. He motioned for me to bring the car around by this beat-up, blue pickup truck. It was just about dark, but I could see him by the lights at the place. I brought the car around and that's when he pulled the distributor wires out of the truck. Then he did something inside the cab. And that's when those Buzzbee boys came out, tearing after us. Nick jumped in the car. He had me peel out then wait at the light there. We watched those boys try to start the truck but they couldn't, of course. Nick had me wait there until they ran after us. Then I peeled out again. I drove us down to Woldorn. Nick said he didn't feel like swimming any more, so we decided to go to the drive-in. That's when we ate our burgers and finished the beer. Well, when I ate mine anyway. Patti and Nick ate theirs on the way down."

"And what time was this?"

"Well … the first feature had been playing a while … I'd say close to nine-thirty or so, right around then. Maybe a few minutes later. I'm not sure exactly."

"And how much beer did you all drink?"

"Two. We each had two. Nick said it was only fair."

"I see. And you watched the shows?"

"Yes, but Patti and I fell asleep during *The Blob*. Nick woke us up and we left."

"What time was that?"

"One: forty-eight. I remember checking the car clock to see how long I had slept."

"Anything of significance happen at the drive-in?"

"What do you mean? What could happen? The accident happened afterwards."

"What I mean is: a teenage boy and girl at the drive-in could lead you to entertain yourselves; especially, if the movie wasn't too hot. And as I recall *The Blob* wasn't exactly Academy Award material." Mr. Vamia grinned.

"Well, that's for sure. Like I said, put me and Paa—I mean, Miss Slater and I to sleep."

"But you and Patti didn't sleep *all* night, did you?"

"No sir." She looked down, hesitating. "Well?" said the lawyer, looking annoyed.

Terri lifted her chin admitting, "Well. We might have snuggled together a bit if that's what you mean?" The lawyer blinked. "Snuggled, hunh? The three of you? That's all?"

"Look, Mister Vamia. I don't see that this has anything to do with the accident. And I don't think it's any of your business. Did Nicky say anything about it?"

"No, and perhaps it isn't any of my business. But I can't say unless I know what I can discard. We'll let it pass for now. Let me just say that the relationship among the three of you, as the only eyewitnesses to the accident, will be crucial to any case against Nick."

"What case? Is Nicky—*is he really in trouble*? If he is, then it would be all my fault." Terri squeezed her hands together, glancing at the window behind the lawyer's head.

"Really? How is that?"

"Well, if I—if I hadn't made him go talk with Father Vizconni, we wouldn't be here now. And no one would know the difference. So it's all *my* fault!" Terri tried to mask her feelings but she couldn't keep from biting her lip and wringing her hands.

"Whoa now! Hold on. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here Terri. I'm merely trying to ascertain the facts so I can provide Nick with the best legal advice possible. All right?"

The attorney studied her. He seemed sincere. When Terri nodded, he said, "Good. Let's skip the drive-in for now. Tell me what happened after you left—on your way home. Please be as explicit as you can, because what you say is very important."

Terri nodded but sat quietly, ramrod stiff in her chair.

"Loo-ook Terri. You need to sit back. Relax. Would you like some water or a soda?"

"Yes, yes a glass of water would be fine. Thank you." She tried to smile.

"Good. That can be arranged."

Mr. Vamia buzzed his secretary. A minute later, the secretary set a pitcher and glass of water on the desk. Terri chugged down the water. Mr. Vamia asked her if she would like some more. She declined, thinking her eager guzzling uncouth. He urged her again to sit back in the chair and relax. This time, she complied. The secretary filled the empty glass with water, then bowed out, leaving the pitcher and glass on the desk.

"Now Terri, please tell me in detail, in your own words, what happened after you left the drive-in." He smiled pleasantly but eyed her bust.

Taking a deep breath, Terri directed her gaze to the tape recorder.

"Well, we put the top down because Nick had put it up while we watched the shows. But he turned the heater on because of the night chill. See, a storm was brewing and the temperature was dropping and because of the road winds, too. We left the drive-in while the Blob was still eating up the town. I was sitting next to Nicky now and Patti was riding shotgun. And on the way up Three-Oh-One, we kind of got into an argument…"

Patti took the soda cup out of my hand then threw both our cups out the window. Nick asked what she was doing.

Patti says, "You said we could spill 'em outside."

"The drinks, the drinks, not the cups, for cryin' out loud. That's littering."

"Oh slop! You expect me to think you worry about that?"

"Hey, I try to be a good citizen."

"Yeah, right. You really are corny, Nick."

"Yeah, but I make corny, cool, right? Ain't that what you said back at Truley's?"

"Yes, she did Nick. And you do." I smiled and reached around Nick's neck to peck him on the cheek.

Patti says all sassy-like. "What's wrong with this picture? What are you doin' sittin' in my spot anyway, Terri?"

Before I could answer, Patti, who was miffed climbed over me to wedge herself in between Nicky and me. As she turned to sit down, her behind struck Nick's elbow, causing him to swerve the car into the left lane. Fortunately, there weren't any cars near us. It was late. The road was pretty empty. Patti sat down almost in Nick's lap. She hooked her left arm inside his right as she had earlier. When Nicky smiled and winked at her, I complained at her rudeness. Patti told me to sit in back if I didn't like it. We stopped at the Spring Pond traffic light, where I crawled over the front seat into the back.

Nick says, "Aw, you didn't have to do that Terri."

I said, "It's all right. Might like the air better back here anyway." I was kind of mad at both of them. Patti turned on me.

"Just what's that supposed to mean?"

Nick checked me in the rear view mirror. I folded my arms across my chest, ignoring them. I couldn't find my hair ribbon, which I had lost earlier at the

drive-in, so my hair was blowing around even though we were stopped, because the storm was brewing. Patti caught Nick peeping in the mirror at me.

Patti said to me: "Say, what *did* happen when I went to the rest room and bought you that candy you never ate?" But I ignored her.

Nick shrugged, shaking his head. Patti put her head next to Nick's to look through the mirror to see what he saw behind her, which was me of course.

"Terri, I saw you scramblin' to fix yourself when I came back with the refreshments. I saw you all right. What were you two doin' anyway? Nicky?"

[Hesitating, Terri inhales deeply. She withholds Patti's complaint about Terri's missing swim suit top and the feeble attempt to explain its absence. Saying it was too hot and muggy to wear the thing. And that she didn't know where it was. And Patti saying that she didn't believe her.]

The light turned green so Nick pressed down on the gas. Patti says, "Nic-*kee*? I'm talkin' to you." Nick says, "Hmmm, I'll tell you if you tell me what happened to that cup of water you were supposed to bring me."

[That was the best he could offer, buying some time to come up with a reasonable answer. But again, Terri keeps that thought to herself.]

Patti says, "What? I set the water cup on the top of the car and forgot about it. When you pulled out, I guess it fell off. Or when you put the top down. Cuz it sure ain't there now, Baby. Sorry. Geesh! Didn't know it was such a big deal."

"It's okay."

"Good, now it's your turn Nicholas."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"I *mean*, what were you and Terri doin' while I was gone?"

"Ahem. Well, we were watchin' the show. Gettin' to know each other better. You know. Whaddaya think?"

"I don't know, but I sure can *guess, Baby*."

"Well go ahead and guess. Guess your pretty head off. We were talkin'. Gee."

"Talkin' hunh? 'Bout what?"

"…Gary—we were talkin' about Gary. Not exactly my idea of fun, ya know?"

Mr. Vamia stopped her. "Who is *Gary?*"

"Oh. He's been my steady all during high school. He took off right after graduation to join the navy. He's in basic training now down at that new navy facility in Orlando."

"I see. Sorry to interrupt. You're doing great Terri. Just what I want. Go on."

Sure, he wants to know all the gossip, too.

So, so Patti turns back to me and says. "Is that right, Terri?"

I said, "What? I can't hear a thing you're saying with all the road noise. Here, let me come up there with you." But I didn't not right away.

The light had changed by then, or did I say that already? Well anyway, I had heard her all right. I just needed time to think what to say.

Nicky yelled, "Be careful." Wasn't sure if he meant me to be careful about what to say or climbing over the front seat with the top down and car moving.

Anyway, when I started for the front seat, Patti reached up to kiss Nicky on the cheek. So I thought to heck with that. I slid over behind Nick, leaned over the seatback, hugged him from behind and kissed him on the opposite cheek, his outside cheek. Then I slid back across and climbed up over the seat back to ride shotgun again. When I got up front, I found the hair ribbon I'd lost on the floorboard under my feet. So I tried to comb my hair with my fingers, as best as I could in the windy conditions, tying my hair back with the ribbon. Once I settled down, I noted how cool and moist the empty vinyl back seat had felt against my bare thighs compared to the warm front seat. I mentioned that fact.

Nick said, "Just dew, Terri, nothin' else. Not to worry. We all used the rest room." Patti giggled. I said, "So what did you want to know?"

"What you and Nick were talkin' about when I was at the concession stand."

"*Gary*—I told ya Patti. We were talkin' about Gary, weren't we Terr?"

See, Nick wasn't sure if I heard him over the road noise. [Mr. Vamia nods.]

"Yes, that's correct." I took his cue and rolled with it. "We were talking about Gary," I said, "and how tough it was on me with him gone." Terri shrugged [thinking so what if Gary finds out about me and Little Nick last night? Just serve him right for running out on me. But she kept this to herself.]

Nicky says, "See, Patti? Satisfied?"

"Yeah, I see, but I'da liked to hear her answer for herself though."

I said, "I did Patti, I just did." Then, as we approached the T.C. light, I leaned forward—to scout around—towards Truley's. As I did, I felt my hair fall about my shoulders. The ribbon had fallen out again. But, looking around, I said.

"Say, you don't think those guys are laying for us, up here, do you Nick?" But Nicky didn't say anything. Probably didn't want to alarm us.

Patti says, "You don't think they'd do that, d'ya Nick? I sure as hell hope not. Why would they? Wait for us, for what? Five hours in the middle of the flippin' night?"

Both Nick and I turn to look at her, as she if she had just fallen out of the sky.

Patti says, "Oh bull slop," while I scrunched behind the windshield to tie back my hair back with the ribbon. When we stopped for the light, I checked Truley's dark parking lot, even though the place was all closed up.

Patti asked again, "You don't really think they'd do that, d'ya Nick?"

Terri faced the attorney.

"See, Patti's got this new, trendy, shag haircut to compensate for all her freckles. The cut makes her look older than she is. And she thinks she's real hot because of it. She figured I wouldn't be interested in Nick because of Gary. She didn't know I was kind of ticked off with Gary for leaving me. I begged him not to enlist, but he went ahead anyway. Everyone thinks we're engaged, well not officially—*yet*—though everybody

says we're made for each other. But that's not the case at all Mr. Vamia, not since he left me like that. See, Gary never liked school. He figured the navy would keep him from getting drafted, keep him from getting killed over in Viet Nam. He left because he's sure of me. Sure that I'll wait for him no matter what he might be doing down in Florida with all those bikini girls. But he figured wrong. I warned him not to go, not to count on me, but he wouldn't listen. That's how sure he is of me. He didn't figure on Little Nick or anyone else moving in on me. That's for sure. But then, neither was I."

"I see. There *was* something between you two at the drive-in? And how old is Patti?"

Terri nods. "She's almost seventeen, just behind me. Don't know if her birthday's next month or in August, but I know it's before school starts." Mr. Vamia made another note. "And you're seventeen?" She nodded. "Yes—just. Nicky's sixteen." He waved his pen.

> —So Patti says kind of indignant like, "I sure as hell hope not."
>
> How could she forget how Nick had made fools out of those boys earlier?
>
> I said, "These are bad boys, Patti, muy malo."
>
> She says, "Are they muy stupido, too?" Again, Nick and I look at her without saying a word. She says, "All right, all right. I get it. I get it. I'll shut up." Well, that was the best thing she'd said all night, as far as I was concerned.
>
> So we're stopped at the T.C. light. Truley's Bar and Grill was right there, where we had left it about five hours ago. It started to rain, to sprinkle, scattering large, cold drops. Nick raised the convertible top. We helped him lock it down on either side of the windshield and roll up the back windows.
>
> I was humped over the seatback, rolling up the back passenger window, when I spotted them—the Buzbees—in the shadows, just at the edge of the light from the telephone pole, street lamp in Truley's parking lot.
>
> "Oh my gosh," I said. "Is that who I think it is over there?"
>
> I slid back down into the shotgun seat. Patti said my face turned pale. I had noticed Nick admiring my form when I was rolling down the back window, but now he looked past me towards Truley's, frowning. My heart started pumping harder, as it had earlier when those goons had charged us there. I turned back to look again. It was *them* all right. The one Nick had called Arlo earlier sat behind the wheel with his brother—Alvin—riding shotgun …

From that point on, the girl's story matched the kid's almost verbatim. It was uncanny. Franco wondered if the two of them had conspired to come up with this tale. There were a few notable differences. After Nick had turned the car around and they were waiting in the stormy dark, Terri said, "I think Nick thought talkin' was good for us, kind of occupied our minds if the Buzzbee boys realized their mistake and came back our way."

Franco interrupted her, asking, "So you all definitely thought the Buzzbees would be coming back?" Terri blinked hard.

"I guess so. I mean, at least I figured it was a possibility. Believe Nick and Patti did, too. I mean, once those boys realized their mistake—that we had ditched them."

He shook his head, asking her to go on. In the telling, the girl revealed her strong feeling for Nick. And Franco noted a sense of discontentment growing in her with Patti over the boy. Strangely, there was no mention of an inner voice or any words spoken by that voice to Nick. She simply said Nick had told her that he had "played a hunch based off an inner urge." He made a note of that, thinking if these kids were lying they would have to be pretty darn clever for her not to mention the voice. *Too darn clever.*

Not unlike Nick, the girl impressed him with her ability to tell a story. Though her diction and sentences were more refined, more literary, in both detail and delivery, than Nick's. She was one sharp kid to go along with her amazing blonde, good looks. He stopped her description of the accident, so he could jot a few notes. He asked her to detail what occurred after they left, after the accident.

"Well, Nicky drove us slowly through the rain towards home. Then he stopped at the Seven-Eleven, which was close by, to call the police to notify them of the accident. Patti and I waited in the car. That took only a couple minutes. He got back in to drive us home. After a few miles, Nick stopped at the deserted Surrette Road intersection. We waited at the blinking yellow light though he didn't have to. His brow furrowed. He seemed to be thinking. The storm still raged and we were still the only car on the road. Nick rolled up his window but kept the vent window cracked. I followed his example.

I said, 'We have to turn back, Nick.'

"I could tell, or sense rather, he knew that I was right. He half-nodded but didn't speak. I was learning that we thought alike, which is another thing I love so much about him. The car idled but he said nothing ..."

"Nicky? We have to go back. You know that, don't you? I know you do."

"Like hell we do," Patti said. She leaned forward from the back to catch Nick's ear, "Let's get the hell out o' Dodge, Nick. Nobody saw us. Nobody knows. The Buzzbees sure won't be sayin' anything. I guarantee that. You did your bit—called the cops. Now let's vamoose."

I said, "What about those lights and those voices up on the hill? That farmer might have seen us. With the lightning and all."

Nick thought about it. They might have seen us but it was unlikely. Through the trees? With flashlights from that distance, in the dark and rain? No. Only recall lightning *before* I saw the flashlights. But if we heard their voices, they must have heard us drive off. I placed my hand gently on Nick's right forearm. Nick turned right onto Surrette Road, which would take us back out to the main highway that parallels Old Veer. He drove away slowly, still sort of in shock I think. We all were. I didn't know if Nick was going home or back to the crash.

I said. "You just can't leave the scene of an accident like that Nicky. You know that. It's against the law. We learned that in Driver's-Ed." From the back, Patti said, "Shut-up Terri, Nick knows what he's doin', don't ya Nicky?"

Nick drove on in silence. I turned around, asking Patti for support but, though she had been sobbing softly into her chest earlier, she was defiant now. Surprised me she didn't come up front now that we were out of danger. Found out why later. She had peed her pants a little back there. [Terri cannot keep from smiling.] Scared, you know. She was embarrassed. Probably was the main reason she wanted to get home as fast possible. When Nick reached the main road, he stopped, hesitated and then turned right, south, back down 5A.

"That's my boy Nick. You're doing the right thing. We'll back you up, won't we Patti? Those guys were drunk, had to be. Driving like that. They just messed up, that's all. Isn't that right, Patti?"

"Judas Priest. Is that our story? That's it?" Patti sniffled and wiped her nose with her forearm. Nick didn't speak. Patti slobbered. She said, "Nick turned around and laid for 'em back there like, like—like Crazy Horse and the Indians waited for Custer at the Little Big Horn."

[Terri pauses as Mr. Vamia notes her remark.]

I twisted around to face her: "It wasn't like that at all Patti and you know it. Nicky was protecting us, as best he knew how. He didn't make those boys try to run us off the road. He pumped his brite-lites in their faces to warn them but they came on anyway. They made their own choice and dug their own graves. But it was *their* choice, *not ours*. That's all there is to it, Patti." I turned back to face Nicky, "Isn't that right, Nick?"

[Mr. Vamia holds up his finger to take notes then nodded that he was done.]

Nick didn't say anything. But for sure, we didn't possess the overwhelming odds those Indians had. That was for certain. Nick turned right again at the intersection, there at T.C., by Truley's, retracing our earlier route over Old Veer back to the crash site.

Patti said, "Well okay, if that's the way you guys want it. Sure, had ta be I guess." Patti didn't sound convinced though. She said, "Don't let it be said Patti Slater ain't a team player." Nick drove slow, silently. I think he was too shook up by what had happened and was afraid to speak, afraid his voice might betray his true feelings. He was being strong for us, you see.

Well, it only took us a few more minutes of silent riding to reach the accident scene. As we got close, we became aware of sirens and lights flashing behind us. A police squad car blocked the road up ahead. An officer in rain gear with a flashlight was directing traffic to make three-point turns, to go back the way we had come, back toward the clinic and Truley's. The rain poured down on the poor guy. Up ahead, I could see the blaze of the wreck that lay beneath the road and live wires still sparking around on the ground.

Crazy how your mind works at a time like that. We waited for our turn to meet the traffic cop on our side—the south side—of the wreck. Looked like there was another cop on the other side, redirecting traffic too, coming from the

other way—toward us. We watched the car in front of us make a three-point turn and head back the way we had come. Nicky drifted the Pontiac up to the policeman and stopped. He rolled down his window. Rain splashed in on him.

The officer said, "You gotta turn around here son. The road is blocked ahead. Bad accident. Turn around and go back now. Follow that car there."

Nick said, "But Officer, I gotta get up there. I can help."

"Everything's bein' took care of, son. There's nothin' you can do for those boys now. So turn around and head on back. You can use 5A to get to where you wanna go."

"No, no, ya don' understand sir, I—"

"I understand ya better move your butt, boy! You're holdin' up the show. The fire trucks are coming. You're in the way." The officer's face changed from informational like to dictatorial. He was getting hot.

"But Mister, I know what happened."

"So do I. And the name is Dodgett, *Officer* Dodgett, not '*Mister*'. Now, if ya don't move your butt out pronto, I'm gonna give ya a citation. You aren't gonna impress these young ladies here by showin' em a couple o' fried corpses. So get out o' here—NOW. That means *pronto*. Or I'll write ya up."

He rapped his fist against Nick's door to show he meant what he said. He waved his flashlight with one hand, pointing Nick's way with the other. Nicky looked at me, held up his hands and shrugged. Then he turned the convertible around, rolled up his window and left that mess behind. As we turned, I saw and heard a hook and ladder fire truck and ambulance coming down the road at us. We passed them going back the other way toward T.C.

Patti said, "Well, at least ya tried Nick." Her tone indicated she was on board all of a sudden, but none too sorry to get off scot free. "Nobody can say ya didn't try. I'm sorry about the way I acted. Hope you guys don't count it too hard against me."

"No problem Patti. Forget all about it. Right, Terr?"

I sighed. "Forget all about it? Forget seeing those two men burn to death? Yes, of course, no need to mention it again." I was kind of sarcastic.

Nick turned to observe me. See, I didn't mean to say it like that, so snippy, like Patti. Nicky knew that. I know he did. I was just flustered, that's all. I'm sure he understood that. Then I'll never forget. Nick reached out with his right hand to place it over mine. My hands were balled up together shaking in my lap and I didn't even realize it. He studied my painted, long fingernails. He said I didn't look too happy, considering we had just escaped death. He was right, in a way. I was looking at the glass half empty. He was seeing it half full. I felt kind of sick though. Despite the downpour, I rolled down my window to stick my head out of it, like a panting dog, letting the cool rain calm me down. Patti slumped in the opposite corner of the back seat, frowning. I looked over at Nicky. This crazy, lost expression came over his face.

I think it dawned on him just then. *He had killed two men*, even if they were the low-life Buzzbee boys. He turned white. Looked as if he might puke. Following my example, Nick rolled down his window again for some fresh air.

He drove us home like that, like me, letting the rain wash over us, hoping perhaps, as I did that the cold rain would wash away that terrible sight replaying over and over in my brain. As we went through the light at Small Springs, I saw a couple PEPCO trucks, lights flashing, coming down the other way. Figured they were headed for the accident. Patti moved to the center in back, complaining about the rain splashing in on her. I thought … well—I thought as if it might, you know, be washing away our sin. That's all.

Mr. Vamia clicked off the recorder. Terri sat back in her chair, perspiring and exhausted. She sat forward to drink the glass of water the secretary had left on the desk. The secretary buzzed that the teaser for the local evening news showed film of the accident, promising it as their lead story. She also said that Father Vince Vizconni had arrived. Mr. Vamia asked her to tell Vince he would be out shortly. He asked her to buzz him at six for the news. The lawyer ejected the tape, flipped it over and plopped it back in. As the secretary buzzed off, Mr. Vamia cued the tape.

"Well Miss Schieffer. You are quite an articulate story-teller. Very colorful, very descriptive yet concise. You weave a tale well." He smiled, looking her in the eye.

"Gee. I'm sorry if I got carried away. I didn't mean to. It's just that I've thought a lot about what happened and I tend toward the literary. My English teacher thinks I could be a fine writer someday. But I don't know about that."

"Well, judging from the story you just told me, I'm inclined to agree with her." He smiled again. "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

"Just that Nicky is innocent, Mister Vamia. He wasn't trying to run those boys off the road. Honest, he wasn't. Just the opposite, they were trying to run *us* off the road."

"From what you said, Miss Slater didn't seem too sure about that?"

"Well, she's got a screw loose. She doesn't understand Nicky the way I do."

"Oh, how's that?"

"Well, let's just say that Nicky and I are more alike than she is. We think alike, as I said. We take more classes together—advanced classes." The lawyer's glare drilled her, as if he could see right through her. "Is that all there is to it? There isn't something more between the two of you? Something Patti doesn't share? Something *besides* your similar modes of thought and your classes? As you suggested earlier?"

His questions flummoxed her. Not knowing how to respond, she kept silent. Her hands hurt. Looking down, she noticed her hands clenched so tightly pressed against her lap that her fingers were turning white. She mumbled, "Well, what did Nicky say?"

The intercom buzzed. The secretary announced the news would air after the hourly commercials. Just in time. Mr. Vamia rose. He smiled faintly, saying, "He didn't."

"Oh."

"Uh, one more thing Miss Schieffer?"

"Yes sir?" The lawyer's smile faded. His direct gaze burned through her skull.

"Is there anything else you can tell me about why Nick turned around and waited?"

Terri lowered her head, mumbling, "Well, something, maybe."

Mr. Vamia leaned over the desk, saying, "Please, tell me." She hesitated.

"It could be very important." Terri looked up.

"Well, last night after he took me home, Nick said he had felt a voice inside him, like here—" She cupped a hand just under her left breast at a spot between her diaphragm and her heart. "The voice told him to turn around, to wait and go slow."

"Oh? He said he heard a voice, did he?"

"Oh, no sir. Not heard—*FELT.* He was very definite on that point." She nodded.

"He was, was he? Well, perhaps we can discuss this further another time, if it becomes necessary." The faint smile returned to his lips and his eyes dropped to her bosom.

"Shall we go watch the news Miss Schieffer? Or, should I say, Terri?"

"Yes sir, I think I already told you 'Terri' is fine." He escorted her to the door. "Yes, you did. I'm sorry. After you, *Terri*." Winking slyly, he held the door open for her. As she passed him, Terri sensed his eyes shift down to her backside. She tucked her tail.

* * *

After Nick stepped from Vamia's office, he sent Terri in to speak with the attorney. "Gladys" worked at her desk a few feet away. She wore a snug-fitting double breasted, skirt-suit, and thick, old-fashioned, pointy glasses. Her hair piled up on top of her head in a bee hive. Scooped curls, like sideburns, plastered the sides of her face. Reminded him of ski jumps. Come to think of it, she wore her hair like that big brunette with the booming laugh on *Laugh-In*. Only the secretary was petite and quiet. Her formal attire trapped her in a mid-Sixties fashion time warp. But her warm smile suited Nick fine. In the corner by the office door was a Sony Trinitron. Nick asked if he could watch something while he waited. She nodded, asking him to keep the volume low.

Vamia buzzed "Gladys" for a glass of water. The secretary poured water from a pitcher on her desk, got up and took both the glass and pitcher into "Franco's" office. Franco—that's what she called him—not Frank. Nick made a note of that.

He tuned into the end of an old black and white movie on *The Early Show*. It was a Forties crime melodrama he'd never seen before—*I Walk Alone*. Starred Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas and some blonde dame with a husky voice he didn't know. Her voice reminded him a little of Ry, but not her looks. She couldn't compare with Ry, or Terri, for that matter. From the hour, he knew he was catching the tail end of the feature.

Gladys came back through the door smiling warmly at Nick. She returned to studying the papers on her desk.

Apparently, Burt Lancaster had been double-crossed by Kirk Douglas and was paying him back now. Burt was in a lot of trouble, just as Nick was. Nick couldn't figure out how the title fit the story cuz that blonde went everywhere Burt went. Nick wondered if his blonde would stand by him the way the movie blonde stood by Burt. Based on their night together, he figured she would. Terri was special. She was a keeper. That Gary was an ass for leaving her. Even better for him. Nick smiled.

As he waited, watching the show, the outer office door swung open. Father Vizconni walked in. He identified himself to Gladys, who had risen to greet him, then the priest acknowledged Nick. Father Vince said he had a dinner engagement when Franco was through for the day. Gladys offered Father V a seat. She asked if he wanted her to let Franco know he was there, but the priest shook his head no. He said Franco expected him at closer to six. He was a little early. She explained Franco would be out shortly.

Smiling, Father V shook hands with Nick, taking a seat next to him.

Nick was glad to see him. They talked about sports, mostly. When the conversation lulled, Nick mentioned the flick on TV and the discrepancy between the title and the story. The padre shifted gears to talk about God. He reminded Nick that, "When you walk with God, you never walk alone." It was as if Nick had hit the guy's on-switch.

The padre began talking about how much God loves you and how we should love Him in return, reflecting His love by displaying virtue and temperance. And how the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, saying it was sinful to have sex outside of marriage. That remark got a momentary rise out of Gladys but she went back to filing. At least, she appeared to work. The priest leaned in close to whisper that a couple of the parish girls had spoken to him about Nick's "amorous proclivities." Father Vince said he had been a teenager once. "I the power of hormones pulsing through the adolescent body. But God calls us to temperance until we marry. See Nick, no temptation has taken us but what is common to man. God always provides a means of escape." The secretary bobbed her head again. "Draw near to God Nick. Resist the Devil and he will flee. You see Our Father in Heaven never permits us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. He—"

"Look!" Gladys pointed to the TV.

The Buzzbee boys fiery night wreck was on the small screen, blazing in living color. Nick recognized the scene right away. The newscaster voiced over the footage promising "… more to come on Eyewitness News at six." Nick wondered how the film got on TV. He hadn't seen any news trucks around there last night. As the movie climax aired, Nick told Father Vizconni that was the accident he had been in. The priest seemed shaken. His pallor turned white. Gladys buzzed the intercom to tell Franco about the news footage tease and Father V's arrival.

Father Vince smiled faintly saying, "We'll finish this conversation another time, Nick."

Geeze, Nick hoped not.

Father Vince sat quietly with him, watching the end of the movie, but Nick couldn't keep his mind on the show any more than the priest could continue his lecture on the need to preserve the holy sanctity of the body. Gladys buzzed Franco again, telling him the news was about to come on. A minute or so later, the door to the inner office opened. Mr. Vamia escorted Terri out just in time to watch the promised, ghastly news footage.

The ghoulish film took their collective breath away. When it was over, Nick noticed the concern on the lawyer's face.

"Well Nick, I'm going to do some checking around the next couple of days. As I said, I used to work in the prosecutor's office as an assistant state's attorney. I still have some connections there. I'll float some discreet inquiries and let you know how we should proceed. Suppose we meet next week, say a week from today? Same time okay for you?"

"Uh, what's that—Tuesday?"

"Yes, Tuesday."

"Well, I gotta game that night. Think it's the only Tuesday game we got all year."

"A game, what kind of game?"

"Baseball. Boy's Club—County ball."

"Ya hear that Vince? Vince and I used to play for Columbia Heights Boys Club and then later for Beverly—legion ball."

"Nick here is quite a ball player, Frank. Look at this." From his wallet, Father Vince produced a news clipping of the state championship game, surprising Nick.

"Ah. Royalty. I'm representing a state champion. Congratulations Nick."

"Thanks, I gotta little lucky that game. Somebody up there likes, I mean, *loves* me. Right, Father?" Father Vince winked. "That's right, Nick."

What Club are you playin' for Nick?"

"Crest Hill. But Father here's hopin' I move over into CYO ball, right Father?"

Vamia said, "Sure, that figures. Those county boys clubs were just starting up when we played, hunh Frank? Yep. We played both CYO and Boys Club ball."

The priest nodded. "Yes, might say we were switch hitters, in a manner of speaking."

"Columbia Heights was our old club. How they doin' these days, Nick?"

"Not so good, Mister Vamia. Some of their best players moved down to Clairton. Clairton's in third place, behind us and Small Springs. Most guys over in Columbia Heights now'd rather play basketball than baseball, if ya know what I mean."

"I see. Well, are you goin' to play legion ball next year? That's the best brand of ball you get, your side of college."

"I hope so. Mister Maverick up at Crest Hill said somethin' about sponsoring a new Legion club next year. Otherwise, I'd have to play for My Maryland or Oxen Mill. Not sure which." Franco blinked.

"Mister Maverick still around? A good man. A very good man. Knows his baseball. Used to bird-dog for the Dodgers, Brooklyn Dodgers that is, till they moved to L.A. Taught me how to throw a curve properly. That was my out pitch, hey Vince? Get 'em to beat it into the ground, start you off on turning two." Franco grinned.

"Sure Frank, we'd turn two, as long as you had me backin' ya at short."

They both laughed, slapping each other on the back. Nick got a kick out of watching the old friends kibitz. Eased him out of the somber mood left by the TV news.

"Well Nick, Vince and I have a dinner date for tonight. How about we meet here next week, say—Wednesday—five-thirty? Maybe six would be better? That way your boss should be satisfied. Afterwards maybe you, me, Vince and the gorgeous Miss Schieffer here, could go out to dinner together?" Nick hesitated.

"Well, how much is all this gonna cost me? I mean, I don't know if I can afford dinner, too?" The pair of old friends laughed.

"Well Nick, I charge forty dollars an hour, but the dinner will be on me. How's that?"

"Forty dollars an hour? Shoot! I only make two an hour and I just got a twenty cent raise." Vamia grinned.

"Well, we'll see if we can't work something out. After all, I give special discounts to all referrals from Vince here." The priest winked at his friend.

"See ya next Wednesday at six, okay, Nick? Look forward to seeing *both of you* for dinner, you too Terri. O-K?"

"Yes sir."

"Oh and please notify your other friend Miss, uh—" He snapped his fingers.

"—Slater," said Nick.

"Yes. Let Miss Slater know I'd like her to come in some time tomorrow. Here's my card, one for each of you and one for Miss Slater, too. Have her call me to set up the appointment. Okay? But don't speak to her or anyone about we discussed in my office."

"Sure Mister Vamia, I'll tell her. Oh, by the way, my band's playing down in Ocean City this weekend. Is it all right, I go down there?" Vamia paused.

"Sure, but remember Nick: Be careful. We can't afford any notoriety now, okay? And don't either of you mention what we discussed with anyone. And *stay out of trouble!*"

Nick liked that "we" stuff, knowing he wouldn't have to walk alone.

"I'll try, but trouble just seems to follow me around somehow."

"Well, keep an eye in your rearview mirror. Keep mum. And *keep out of trouble* at all costs." Nick winked, saying "Don't worry about a thing Mister Vamia."

Crack!

"Damn Carol! Almost shot my eye out. Second time tonight."

Frank blinked, dabbing yellow crab guts from his cheekbone with the side of his knuckle. She noticed it didn't keep him from stuffing his face with crabmeat though. Pinched between her finger and the paring knife, Carol's hard shell, blue crab meat disappeared into her mouth before he finished his sentence.

"Third time's the charm," she said, stuffing home another mouthful, careful not to cut her tongue on the knife.

"Hey Franky, it's every man for himself here."

"It's Franco, Dom. Fran-*KO* or Frank. How many times I have to remind you? What would you think if I went around calling you Dommy?"

"Think you were my mother. Better'n Dummy, which I heard a lot of over the years."

Her dad picked up his can of beer with his thumb and pinkie, trying to keep crab junk off the can while he held half a gutted crab in the other hand. Drank his beer as if he were from another planet where they didn't have four fingers, just pincers like a crab.

"'*Dummy.*' Bingo! Now you got it."

"Fran-kee. Fan-koh. What's the diff?"

"Couple o' vowels," Carol said. She slurped on her Bud. "And sometimes Y. Ah, but then we're back to Franky. And you don't like that either, Frank."

Frank ignored her, saying, "You have no problem with Frank or Franco, when you're pissed with me Dom, so why can't you get it right now?"

"Cuz I ain't mad at ya now and cuz you'll always be Franky to me, just like Concetta's 'Sister.' You still call her 'Sister' too, and so does Carol, who give her the name in the first place, when she was just a toddler."

"Okay, *Uncle Dom*. But everybody outside the family calls her 'Connie' or 'Cetta.'"

"Well, that's better'n Uncle *T*om. I don't mind. Just so long's you remember we ain't blood-related. I'm only your godfatha. "

"Not about that. I'm talkin about me being Franco or Frank. You just like to needle me. Why?"

Dom set his beer can down to pick meat out of his crab. He looked over to her.

"Listen to him. Hell Carol, *he* don't even know who he is. Can't make up his mind. I always knew. He's Franky."

Franco tossed his uncracked crab claw into the mountain of crab shells in front of him.

"Sheeitt!"

Focusing on her crab, Carol said, "Who's on first?" Dom said, "Franky."

Standing up, Frank kicked the wooden chair out from under him with the backs of his legs, as he wiped his hands with a brown paper towel.

"I'm going to take a leak. And ask the girl for an order of crab cakes for dessert. Okay? You both in, or you want some more hard shells?"

"Your treat, right Franky?" Dom grinned.

Frank nodded, clenching his teeth. Dom gave a thumbs-up. Carol nodded but ate as she spoke: "Sure. Crab cake sounds good to me too."

Frank threw the paper towel on the table. "Gee-zis!" He walked away holding his crab-stink hands away from his pressed slacks.

Being caught between Frank and her dad was like being caught between a rock and a hard place for Carol.

"Can't you be nice Dad? Frank's treating us to this expensive crab dinner at this fine restaurant. Here we are, out on the deck overlooking the Bay with the sun going down on the water, on this balmy Ides of August Saturday evening, and you have to act like that. Why can't you be nice to him for a change?"

"*Why?* Why the hell you think?

"Oh no. Don't start Dad. I don't want to hear it. Please."

"You don't wanna hear it, hunh? How long's it been, Carol? How long you been seein' him now?" Carol shook her head, frowning.

"Dad, please. What's between Frank and me is between *us*." Dom frowned.

"*Us?* Well, as your father, I think it's about time I dusted off my shotgun."

She placed her wrist over his.

"Dad, please don't embarrass me in front of Frank. Please don't." He pulled away.

"He's not good enough for you Carol." Dom nods to her. "Big shot attorney now. His mom was a scrub woman. Always trying to keep his hands clean now. Know why?" Her mouth was full of crab, so she shook her head silently.

"Cuz they're usually dirty." Carol swallowed.

"Come on Daddy. That's not fair. Just cuz he's successful doesn't make him a crook. He's worked hard to get where he is, like his mom did. Pulled up by his bootstraps."

"Yeah, but he's a *criminal* lawyer. How could he do that? Go over to the dark side? Why'd he quit bein' a prosecutor? He grew up in the neighborhood. I coached him baseball and basketball. I spent twenty-five years as a cop, catchin' bad guys and eight more on and off consultin' as an Eye for the State. For what? So wise guys with law degrees like Franky can get 'em off the hook?"

"Dad, we live in a free country. People are entitled to a good defense. You know that."

"Big shot—treatin' us tonight. Why? I'll tell ya why. He wants us to do a job for him. He knows I'm retired now. Not semi-retired no more, but retired, retired. He's gonna

write this dinner off as a business expense. You watch. Drinking white wine from a glass and eatin' hard shell crabs? Who the Hell does that? Big shot!" Carol shrugged.

"Different strokes for different folks, Dad. Besides he hasn't talked about business."

"Not yet. He's waitin' for the right moment. Beware the Ides of August Carol. Yeah—why he took off like that. Don't want to blow his top. He needs me for somethin'. Why else would he invite me here to this up-scale crab house in Annapolis with the two of you? He knows I want him out of your life. Fancy restaurant dinner with the both of ya? Fin and Claw no less. Be a third wheel? Choice table out here on the deck, overlookin' the Bay? Ever eaten here before?"

"Sure. Frank's brought me here before. Maybe he wants to ask you for my hand in marriage like in the old country?" She grinned.

"Bullcrap. In the old country, they never ask in front of the daughter. That's separate man-to-man stuff." Her dad picked at his crabmeat, shaking his head. "Besides, Franky's already married."

"Yeah? To whom?"

"His job. You're wasting your time with him, Honey. How long's it been now?"

"You asked me that before?"

"Yeah, and you didn't answer before." They stared at each other for several seconds before Carol said, "Almost three years—on and off. You know that."

"More off than on, until the last year. Hell, I know. Thinks he's gonna find somethone better. Thinks he's movin' up in the world. Someone better than *my Carol*? Dumb ass."

Her dad smirked, shaking his head.

"Who the hell else you know drinks wine with hard-shell crabs besides him?"

"Daddy, please. Frank and I have an understanding." She placed her wrist over his.

Again, he pulled away.

"Understandin', hunh? Yeah. Well, your mother, God rest her soul, and I had an understandin' too. 'N' her old man made sure the Church was in on it."

Carol sighed. "How do you know *I'm* not the one putting *him* off?"

Her dad stopped eating.

"Cuz I know *you,* Carol. You're just like your mother. God bless her."

* * *

In the men's room, Franco had to rinse off his hands good before he could pee. Get red pepper on his pecker and he'd be in a pickle for sure that even Peter Piper couldn't pick. Been there and done that. Damn that Dom! Dom could always push his buttons. Bad enough as it was without Dom being his potential father-in-law. But Franco needed Dom for the kid's case. The rainmaker that would pave his yellow brick road with gold. Make him famous. He needed Carol too. They were both of them darned good investigators. Knew their stuff. Franco finished peeing then washed his hands and face in the sink.

"Be cool. Just be cool. You need 'em for this one buddy."

Dom strolled in to take his turn.

"Just playin' with you Franco. Thanks for treatin'. D'ya order the crab cakes already?"

"My pleasure Dom. Yeah, I ordered them." Franco nodded then left for the table.

Carol was gone. The table was empty except for three mountains of empty crab shells. The busboy was cleaning them up now. Folding the brown paper, table cloth up over the shells then dumping the mess into a big deep, wooden tray and carrying them off. Franco stood against the rail on the veranda beside Carol's empty chair to view the boats anchored there in the marina, his own Chris Craft Constellation among them. Pulling a pack of Winstons from his pocket, he lit one then tossed the match over the rail into the water. Oops. Glad Carol wasn't around to bug him about polluting the Bay. He leaned on the rail, drawing deep on his nail, while the help reset the table with a clean, red and white-checkered cloth cover, rather than the brown butcher paper reserved for hard shells.

His thoughts wandered … If that kid screws up out there on vacation in Iowa, could ruin everything. Never should have let him go. How much trouble can he get into wearing a leg cast with his folks and Ryz'n there to keep an eye on him? Whoever took a vacation in Iowa anyway? Lake resort or not? Damn. That Ryz'n was something though. Just seventeen and a woman and a half already. Franco wondered whom he would draw as the trial judge. He'd settle for anyone, as long as it wasn't old man Higher.

Langham Hardern Higher, better known as Hang'em Harder and Higher. That old goat should have recused himself for good ten years ago. Odds were against him if he drew Higher. He knew that for a fact. He'd file a petition for a jury trial. Offer Dom his going rate, sixty per day and expenses and give Carol her standard forty-five. With only five weeks to prepare, he needed two good pairs of legs on this deal, one on each coast. He'd keep Carol's legs on this coast with him. He spied Dom and Carol coming back. Finishing his cigarette, he flicked the butt into the water below. He hoped Carol hadn't seen that or she'd be on him again for polluting.

They sat down. The waitress brought their drinks. Two beers for the Davalones and a glass of white wine for him. Their server said their crab cakes would be out shortly. He nodded. They drank quietly for a few minutes. Franco tried to figure the best way to say what he had in mind.

Dom said, "So *Frank*. What's the deal?"

Feigning surprise, Franco said, "What deal?"

Dom sneered. "You know. The reason you brought me out here. Must be something special if Carol can't handle it herself. She's a first rate dic if you pardon the oxymoron. I oughtta know cuz I taught her everything she knows."

"Well, now that you mention it…"

Dom glanced at Carol as if to say: *Told ya so*. Carol rolled her eyes.

Franco said, "Believe I've really got something for us this time."

"Something for *us*? Get that Carol? *For us*. Isn't that sweet? Yeah—Ides of August."

"Daddy, come on." Dom threw up his hands "O-K, O-K. Go ahead I'm listenin'."

He lifted his beer and guzzled. Franco looked to Carol. She said "Go ahead, Honey."

"All right. You recall that grisly accident down in Surrettsdale the end of June?"

"You mean the one where the local news showed the two corpses fryin' against the night sky?" Franco nodded. "Yeah Dom. That's the one."

"Who could forget it?"

"I musta missed it. What happened?"

"The Buzzbee brothers, Carol. About six weeks ago, two ex-cons, real bad boys, on a stormy night in a hot rod funny car didn't make that dead man's turn down there and crashed into a wooden power pole. Blew 'em all to hell. Fried to a crisp. Speculation, they'd been drinkin'. Terrible, except if it had to happen to anyone, they were the boys for the job."

"Dad, that's terrible but where's the case in that?"

"Beats me."

"Well it goes a little deeper than that Carol. So happens my client was involved. Sixteen-year old kid. Left the scene but came back a while later when the police were trying to clean up the mess and direct traffic. They wouldn't hear—ah, here they are."

The waitress delivered their crab cakes, three golden brown chunks of crabmeat, each looking like the top half of a golden softball, only piping hot and much more delectable.

"Hope there's no shells." Dom picked and prodded at his cake with a fork, turning up his nose, inspecting it, as if he smelled something bad. "Hate shells in a crab cake."

"Well Dad, if you don't eat like a pig and swallow too fast you'll be all right."

"Don't know about you Dom, but I plan to have my cake and eat it, too."

Franco dug into his cake. They joined him. Dom said, "So what about the kid?"

"Well, a cop on the scene wouldn't hear him out. [Chewing.] Told him to scram. The kid had already called it into that new station in Oxen Mill. Drove back to the scene at the urging of one of his passengers. The cop there, directing traffic, thought he was trying to sneak a peek at the accident to, you know, impress the girls with him." Franco swallows.

"Girls?"

"Yeah Carol, a pair of teen honeys, too. They're the only eyewitnesses we know of. Kid's got a new girl now and she makes those two beauties look like dogs."

"*Really?"* Carol arched her brow. "How old is *she*?"

"Seventeen."

"Well, at least I don't have to worry about *her*. Even you would have better sense than to get involved with a girl that young."

"I dunno. She's past the age of consent, right Franco? Criminal lawyer's gotta know that." Franco sighed.

"Look Dom, this could be a great case for us."

"What case? You haven't said anything yet that might interest the State's Attorney."

"But Frank's interested all right, Carol. Big time interested. Aren't ya, Fran-*kee*?"

Franco grimaced.

"Darby O'Halloran? He's got the judgeship locked up. What does he care?"

Franco shook his head. "No Carol, his assistant."

"Who?"

"Petros Perkouri."

Dom put down his fork, cracking, "Oh no, that weasel? Peter Pecker? Since when?"

"He was appointed interim S. A. a couple weeks ago when O'Halloran got that judgeship. Don't you read the papers Dom?"

"Not unless I have ta. TV's better. Bing-bam and ya got it."

"Think I just got it." Carol picked a piece of shell out of her mouth.

"Yeah, me too." Dom spit a shell onto his plate. Franco said, "Guess I'm the only one livin' right."

"Vinny's the only one livin' right."

"Funny you should mention Vince, Dom. He's the one got me into this."

"You've seen Vinny recently? How he's doing? Still over at Holy Trinity?"

"Yeah Carol, still there. This kid and the girl are in his parish, though the kid isn't Catholic. He's Protestant. Seems just the girls in his life are Catholic. [Chuckles.] Vince says the kid's a one-man, female-wreckin' crew over there. The kid thinks he's following the golden rule, you know? Doing unto others by loving his neighbor and such, instead of committing mortal sin. The boy never understood the meaning of fornication until Vince explained it to him. Thought it was some kind of a venereal disease, like celibacy."

Dom cracked up. "Damn, what I wouldn't give to come back as a Protestant."

"Come back? Back from where, Dad?"

"Back from the grave—reincarnated."

"We don't believe in that either Dad." Carol rolled her eyes. "Neither do Protestants."

Dom shook his head. "Always knew we got the short end of the stick. Sure as Hell, believe in mortal sin though, don't we? Ain't that right Franco, or do ya?"

Carol slapped her father on the arm. Franco ignored the slur.

"Anyway, Vinny's the one who sent the kid to me. One of the girls with the kid that night recommended him to Vince. Said Vince could help."

"Well that girl did right. Vince can always help."

"You still carry a torch for him, don't you Carol?" She blushed. "Always."

Dom added she always will. “Vinny’s a good kid, always has been And he don’t mind me callin’ him Vinny either, ‘stead of Vince or Vin or Vincent. I tell you that. You should have followed him into the priesthood Franco. You’d be a happier man today.”

“Dad. Please.”

“The hell you talking about? I *am* happy.”

“*Happy?* Gettin’ criminals off the hook? Or *happy with my Carol*? Or both?”

Carol slapped at her father’s wrist. “*Dad!*”

“All right. All right. I’m sorry. I got a little carried away. Let’s get back to business. Still, with you on the mound and Vinny backin’ ya up at short and Little Dom catchin’, we did all right. Didn’t we? Won that county championship what, twice? Ages fifteen and sixteen? CYO, too. Me the manager. Yeah, we did all right. Yes we did.

“Know the trouble with these crab cakes is they got too much bread filler, not like over in Baltimore at Obrycki’s. Now that’s where we should’ve gone for crabs, Franco. Don’t know how they make their crab cakes stick together over there without the filler, but they do. All back fin lump. Fantastic. Cook their hard shells in black pepper ‘stead of red. Makes a difference. And ya don’t smell as bad after eatin’ Obrycki’s crabs either, as you do everywhere else. Ever notice that?”

Carol nodded. “Think they use eggs to hold the meat together, Dad. So you think it’s the black pepper and not those wet sanitary napkins they give you to wash your hands afterwards that cuts down on the crab odor?”

“Maybe. Maybe both.”

“Hey! You don’t like it Dom? Don’t eat it.”

Carol reached out to rest a hand on each of their forearms.

“Come on now boys. Play nice ... What else about the case Frank? I still don’t see where there is one.” Franco sighed.

“That’s the point. There isn’t. Perkouri is blowing this thing up out of proportion. Wants to capitalize on that gruesome news footage and the upward trend of youth violence in the county. Use his discretion to try the kid as an adult. Like they did those two, sixteen year olds over in Baltimore. Royal George allows that too, you know. Only other jurisdiction in the state—damned rednecks. Perkouri figures to ride a victory in this case to a victory in the election in November as the new state’s attorney.”

“On what charge?”

“Two murder counts or lesser included offenses for felony manslaughter. Not to mention leaving the scene of an accident resulting in death, and misdemeanors for disturbing the peace, a DWI, underage drinking and destruction of private property. Guy’s using the shotgun approach. Haven’t seen the indictment yet but that’s the word I got through the grapevine.”

Dom: “The kid was drinkin’, too?”

"Two beers and a shot of whiskey, five hours earlier."

Carol said, "*Murder?* Shoo. That's crazy. Talk about giving an inch and taking a mile! He can forget about that. Seems more likely to charge him with homicide by a vehicle. And we know Maryland is pretty lenient when it comes to vehicular manslaughter, right Frank? But if he *was* legally intoxicated *and* they can prove that's what caused the accident, why not charge him with homicide while under the influence?"

Dom: "Perkouri wants to make a bigger splash. Greater maximum penalty for manslaughter. Ten years to three each count. So the kid's lookin' at twenty years max instead of six, if they run 'em consecutive. Plus what? Five for leavin' the scene of a fatality? But the liquor shoulda been out of his system by then. Two beers and a shot, five hours earlier? Come on. Had to be. Unless they got other evidence, no way they can say his driving was impaired."

Franco nodded. "That's right. But it might be worse."

"How could it be worse? If they can't prove his drunkenness caused the accident, absent gross negligence or recklessness on the kid's part, what case do they have? I mean that's the law, right? And why should homicide by vehicle be less than manslaughter?"

"Maybe it won't be in the future Carol. You forget about leaving the scene?"

Carol nodded. "Oh yeah. Forgot about that." She shrugged, guzzling her beer.

"What do you mean '*worse'?*"

Franco smirked. "Well Dom, my source tells me Perkouri thinks he can make a case for capital murder, saying the kid laid in wait for these turkeys on a deserted road late at night and, with evil intent, ran 'em off the road. Or, at the very least, drove recklessly, which would be cause for second degree."

Carol set her beer down hard. "Capital murder?" She shook her hand. "Talk about over-charging. That's incredible."

Franco shrugged. "Well. As I said, Perkouri really wants to win that election in November. Wants to make a big splash, like Dom said. Kill two birds with one stone—upsurge in teen violence and drunk driving. Could be bad for the kid."

Carol shook her head. "Nobody should want anything that bad."

Munching on crab cake, Dom shook his head.

"No. It ain't like a car is your typical murder weapon. Besides, we got the fastest growin' county in the country—what? Three—four of the last five years. O' course, teen crime *is* up. *All* crime is up. More people, whaddaya expect? Shoot."

"True Dom, but the word is Perkouri will go hard on motive, try to establish evil intent—malice aforethought—for first degree or, like I said, at the least, recklessness for second degree and settle for manslaughter." Dom balked.

"How's he gonna do that? Claim the kid pointed a loaded car at the victims and fired off, what? How many rounds before they died of lead poisoning?" Carol cracked up at

her dad's joke but Franco didn't think it was so funny, adding, "True, as you say. After all, a car isn't like a gun or a knife or something. But, even if the State could—"

"But first degree murder Frank? Come on. Where's the evil intent?"

"Oh? Didn't I mention that Carol? The kid had an altercation with the Buzzbees down at Truley's earlier that night. My source mentioned including second degree assault and battery, too." Dom smiled. "Ah, the plot thickens." Franco paused to wash some crab cake down with his Chablis.

"This sounds like quite a kid."

"Oh he is, Carol. He most definitely is. Never met anyone like him, kid or not."

"This kid got a name?"

"Yeah Dom, Sh'BOOM, William Nicholas. Spelled S-H, double E-B, double O-M."

"Hey Frank. Wasn't there a Sh'boom went to Sweetland High with us? Graduated in between us? Ron or Roy or something?"

"Yeah. Ray. Played legion ball for Sweetland. Pitched against Vince, Little Dom and me. Was a regular on *The Milt Grant Show."* Carol, nodded, swallowing some beer.

"That's right. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Cute guy but had an acne problem, as I recall. Good dancer. Liked to wear mohair sweaters."

Dom tried to snap his fingers, but could scarcely make any sound because his fingers were wet from holding the sweating beer can.

"Curve ball! Had a slow, tantalizing curve for his out pitch, like you. Guys used to break their backs trying to park it over the fence. Roll over on it." Franco nodded.

"Yeah. You guessed him. That's Nick's half brother Ramon. Runs the Outdoor Living Centre now. Down just past Truley's, on the right? Nick works for him. Summer help. Brothers—right. Shoot. Never know it to look at 'em though. Different as night and day. Nick's dark where the brother is fair, as you said Carol." Dom said, "Nick, hunh?"

"That's right Dom. Goes by his middle name and not William. So don't go calling him Billy or Willie or Nilly or whatever the hell you feel like and piss him off."

"Frank." Carol shook her head, pouting.

"Hey. Believe I read about this kid in the papers. 'Little Nick.' That's what they called him. Helped win the first ever state championship— Class A ball for Pocomoke—the friggin' hero of the game. Had the impression he's a cocky little dude."

"You guessed him. But he's really a likeable kid. Got a certain charm, a charisma to him, know what I mean? Thought you said you didn't read the papers Dom, just watched TV?" Dom blinked.

"Well sure, to keep up with local club and schoolboy sports. Don't get that on TV."

"A *je ne sais quoi?* Is that what the kid's got, Frank? As much as his new *girlfriend?*" Carol lifted one eyebrow towards him. Franco made a face.

"Say. Not the same Nick Sh'boom with *GRT*?" Franco nods. "Yup, Carol. The same."

Dom joked. "*GRT*? What the hell's that? Grit?"

"Local rock band Dad. *Good Rockin' Tonight—GRT.* Heard 'em over at the Brolling NCO Club."

Franco sneered. "You dating air men now Carol?"

"No. But I might if I thought it'd make you jealous."

Franco smiled, shaking his head.

"So what *were* you doin' over there?"

"I was on a case Dad. Suzie Farentello or Blackmoor now, at least for a little while longer I guess." Dom shook his head. "Little Suzie. You were a bridesmaid in her wedding—what? Couple o' years ago?" Carol nodded. "That's right Dad. Had me tailing her husband Bobby—Staff Sergeant. Suspected him of cheating on her."

"Was he?" Carol nods. "Yes. Afraid he was."

"What's to be afraid of? You caught him and delivered the goods to little Suzie? That's my girl. Just like her old man." Dom reached over to pat Carol's shoulder.

"Dad, please. Catching someone in adultery is no cause for rejoicing. After only two years of marriage? Come on. That's sad."

"Pays the bills though. So, this kid—how does an underage kid play an NCO Club?"

"I don't know Dad. His whole band looked underage but they were very good. Best local band I heard in years. Play any request thrown at them. Amazing. And sound just like the original, too. Kids with a history of music like that." Carol shakes her head.

Dom grunted. "Ha. No Sinatra I'll bet."

"Well you'd be wrong Dad. He sang a version of "That's Life," on request. Knocked me out. Thought it was Old Blue Eyes himself up there. The thing with this kid is, he not only can sing and dance, play different instruments, but he can imitate other artists—mannerisms, voice, tone, you name it—the whole bit. He *is* talented."

"Like Sammy Davis, Junior, hey?" Carol nodded. "But cute, Dad. Real cute."

"Yeah. Should have heard him telling me his tale. Acted it all out, imitated all of it."

"No kiddin'? I gotta see this kid. Sounds like a wonder man but if he's playing a club underage, probably has a fake I-D. Makes you wonder a little. Know what I mean?"

Carol sneered. "Lot of kids have fake I-Ds Dad. Doesn't make them all killers."

Something caught Dom's eye over Franco's shoulder. Dom nodded that direction.

"Got a sawbuck says I go home with them tonight."

"Who?" Carol looked over Franco's shoulder. "What about your car, Dad?"

"You can drive it home."

"But I was going home with Frank on the boat." Her shoulders slumped. She frowned.

"We'll see who's the *winner* after *dinner*. Me or Franky? Hey? Fran-*ko?*"

"What about me, Dad?"

"Hey. If I win, you win. Only Franky loses."

Franco ignored the slight to turn around, resting his left elbow over the back of his chair, jabbing a toothpick in and out between his teeth, mumbling: "Who do you mean?"

Dom raised his head.

"There. The table with the two women eatin' crabs. Three tables down on the right, up against the glass wall."

Franco smirked. "Yeah? You're dreaming. Which one you think'd go home with *you?*"

Dom jerked his head up. "Hey. Don't limit my options buddy, but I'm leaning toward the one with the frosted hair."

"Dad. She can't be much older than me." He shrugged.

"Her hair turns me on. Reminds me of your mother, God rest her soul."

"But Mom never frosted her hair."

"Sure, but those two premature gray streaks always got to me. Wasn't for those streaks of grey you, Cetta and Dom Junior might not be here now. Or either of Sister's kids for that matter." Carol shook her head.

"Don't pay any attention to him Frank. He always drinks too much beer when he eats crabs." Franco joked, "Yeah. Turns him into one."

"Hey, smart ass! We on or not?" Dom smirked.

"Sure, why not? But you can make your move after we finish our business. Looks like they have quite a pile to go there yet."

"Fair enough. So what's the deal with this Sh'boom kid? Doesn't sound like Peter Pecker's got much of a case to me."

"One of the two eyewitnesses, one of the girls, thinks Nick played chicken with the Buzzbee boys on purpose."

"Not the one that referred him to Vince?"

"Right Carol, not that one."

"Was the kid boppin' her and not the other one? The squealer, I mean?"

Franco chuckled. "I dunno, Dom. May be. Though probably not at that time anyway, as far as I can tell. Since then, I get the feeling he might have nailed both of them."

"To keep 'em quiet?"

"I dunno, maybe. He's not the kind to kiss and tell. But if he did, he blew it with them because he dumped both of 'em now for this new chick." Carol set down her fork.

"The seventeen-year old that shook you up, hunh Frank?" Franco looked away.

"So he's a ball player, band leader and a hot shot lover too? Ain't sixteen grand? When does he sleep?"

"Ha. That's what I asked him Dom, just like that. You know, as a joke. Said he doesn't only need but three to four hours a night. I'm tellin' you this kid is something else."

"Sure sounds like it. So what about this altercation the boy had with the two ex-cons?"

"Carol. It's the damndest thing. He took them both on down at Truley's, single-handed—but no witnesses. Kid's about the size Sinatra used to be, and he tears these two big boys up. Used the divide and conquer theory. Took them one at a time, each into a different rest room under the pretense of having sex. They had been molesting him and making threats. Buzzbee boys got a taste for their own kind in the slammer. Liked his long hair and, well, he is kind of a pretty boy, if you know what I mean?"

"Oh, you bet he is. Thought he kind of favored Ricky Nelson."

Ignoring Carol, Dom cracks up.

"Havin' sex in the can? Took 'em one at a time? How the hell he do that?"

"I dunno Dom. The kid's a corker. Says he learned self-defense up to the Crest Hill Boy's Club. And the Buzzbees had been drinking heavily. Anyway, he messed both of them up pretty good. Nobody saw any of it though. Left them on the rest room floor—men and women's, respectively. Then he went out in the parking lot and messed up their truck. Tore out the distributor wires—"

"That's where the destruction of private property comes in?"

Franco nods, swallowing some crab cake.

"Yeah Carol. Afraid the Buzzbees might come after him, see? When he came back by there later that night with the girls, they'd gone to the Range Drive-In, the Buzzbees were waiting for them in a hot rod jalopy in Truley's parking lot. They followed him up Old Veer Avenue and that's when it happened."

"How exactly?"

"Well, Nick and the two girls Terri and Patti, a blonde and a brunette—more chestnut actually—all said Nick foxed the brothers by hiding up a farm lane with his lights off. The Buzzbees flew past without seeing them. When the Buzzbees were out of sight, the kid pulled back on the road the opposite way."

The waitress asked if everything was okay, did they want anything else. Dom asked for another Rolling Rock and Franco asked for the check. Carol asked him to finish the story.

"Well, this is where it gets dicey. The kid's leaving, right? Gettin' out scot-free. And then he stops to make a three-point turn on that narrow country road, two a.m., in a driving rainstorm to turn back around."

Carol: "Why'd he do that?"

"Exactly! That's the sixty-four thousand dollar question, Carol. And that's what this whole case will hang on. Why—his motivation." They nodded, waiting on him to finish.

"Nick said he felt something inside tell him to turn around, go slow and wait. He did and he met the Buzzbee boys jalopy returning just on the straightaway between the two right angle turns. You know the place I mean?" They nodded. Carol said, "Yes, that's a nasty spot. Bobby Farino almost bought it there, remember Frank, my junior year?"

"Yeah, I remember and he's not the only one. That stretch *is* nasty. Something like seven people have been killed there now in the last ten years, including the Buzzbees."

"So Franky, whaddaya tellin' me, this kid hears voices?"

"No Dom, not heard. *Felt*. He *felt* the voice inside him here." Franco tapped over his heart with his fist, as if he were burping himself. "He was very adamant on that point. The thing is *both* Vince and the blonde told me that Nick had told each of them that very thing separately and, of course, that was within a couple hours after the accident. So I don't think that it's some cock and bull stuff he made up just for me. He believes it."

Dom: "So, did he run those bums off the road on purpose or not?"

"The one girl Terri, the blonde—she was in the front seat—says no. The brunette in the back—Patti—she's not so sure. What all three are certain of is that the weather was terrible. A torrential downpour. Nick was doing about thirty-five in a forty-five mile zone and he stayed on his side of the road. The Buzzbees swung over into his lane and came right for him. Hi-beams on."

"A real showdown hunh? Like *Hombre*. What about the kid? 'Have his brites on, too?"

Franco frowned.

"That's the curious thing Dom. He didn't have any lights on at all until the last few seconds. He had turned them off when he hid up the lane. Said he turned them back on to make sure the Buzzbees saw him and because he thought his hi-beams might cancel out theirs, so he wouldn't be so blinded."

Dom: "'Cancel out theirs?' Really?"

"Yup. He really believed that'd work. He wasn't fooling. He takes Physics *next* year."

"Driving without lights under those conditions? Then flashin' on his brites, blindin' 'em at the last second? Sounds pretty reckless to me. Negligent, at the least."

"Yeah Dom. But he said the voice from inside never said anything to him about turning the lights back on. If you can feature that. He also said the Buzzbees were speeding."

"Yeah? How's he know that? Got a radar gun?"

"He said he turned his car onto the straightaway before them, from opposite ends of the road. When they met, the Buzzbee's car was well onto his half of the straightaway. I went down and checked the tire marks and he's right. The police have an accident scene map of it. You'll see. You can go down there and check the marks yourself Dom, if you're interested. Pretty sure they're still there. It *was* a bad one."

Carol: "And no one in his car was hurt? What was the damage to his vehicle?"

"None. No damage. Not a scratch. Nobody hurt. Both cars veered off at the same instant, just missing each other. But the Buzzbees were going so fast they lost control, couldn't make that next right angle turn, or left angle in this case, and flew off the road into the wooden power pole snapping it in two. The car landed on the driver's side. The

transformer came down on their heads and blew them to smithereens. Fried 'em both. The kid skidded to a stop and saw the whole thing."

"Watched them burn and left?"

"Yeah Carol. That's what he did. Don't look so stunned. They're kids. They were shocked, scared, stunned. Nick said he didn't figure he could do any more to help the Buzzbees at that point anyway."

"Help them? Sheeitt. Could have called an undertaker I guess."

"He called the police Dom, anonymously, from a pay phone at a Seven-Eleven a mile up the road. If it weren't for that gory news footage, we wouldn't even be talking about this now. Couple twelve-year old twins staying with their grandparents at the farm house are film photography buffs. They heard the accident, saw the fire and filmed it. Didn't see Nick or his Pontiac though. He'd already split. Might have heard him leave though."

"So you wouldn't have treated me to this tasty crab dinner at the Fin and Claw, hunh Franky, if it weren't for those twins wantin' to be Alfred Hitchcock?" Dom grinned.

The waitress left Dom his Rolling Rock and the check. Franco figured a six-dollar tip. Dom nodded towards Franco's tip leavings saying, "And that's the way it should be."

"Think you can keep the news reel out of the trial Frank? That would be prejudicial as hell for the jury."

Franco shrugged. "Hope so Carol. We'll see. Depends on the judge."

"Better hope you don't get old man Higher. Leavin' the scene like that after incurrin' bodily injury—death no less? Two counts? Whoa. That alone's five years max right there and what? A five thousand dollar fine to boot, isn't it?"

"You got that right. Dom. Wouldn't be surprised if Perkouri includes assault and battery too. Falls into the category of lesser included offenses."

"You mean because of the altercation at Truley's? An undersized teenage kids beats up a couple of ex-cons who molested him? Even old man Higher wouldn't touch that one."

"Oh, right, Dad. Forget that. So Babe, why do you need both of us?"

"Because—" Franco failed to suppress a burp. "— Pardon me. Because, because we've got a short fuse on it. And this thing is going to come down to trying the kid's character for the motivation angle. Is he the type of kid to do something like this intentionally, or even unintentionally—recklessly? And I can't put the kid on the stand."

"Right, talking about voices from inside here," Dom taps his chest with his beer can. "Ain't gonna cut it with a jury, unless you wanna plead temporary insanity."

"And one of his girlfriends doesn't seem to be helping too much, does it Frank?"

"No Carol, it doesn't."

Dom: "Any priors?"

"No, none. As far as the law's concerned, the kid's butt's as clean as a baby's behind, but …" Carol said, "But what?"

Dom: “Sometimes a baby’s behind can be pretty shitty. Don’t need a record for that.”

“Exactly. Besides, he was involved in those murder cases out in California last summer as a material witness.” Carol snapped her fingers.

“That’s right. I remember now. Two different cases right? In L.A.? Wow. How’s that for coincidence? How can one kid be in the wrong place at the wrong time twice, back to back like that? Odds on that have gotta be astronomical. Perkouri’d have a field day with that if he can get the judge to let it in the record. What was the name? Uh—”

“Right, Carol. But this kid’s one in a billion. I’m telling ya. Make that a trillion. But you know Perkouri’s going to do his damndest to get it in too. That’s one of the things Dom could check into. Help us out.”

“You’re talkin’ about The Ransom Clan murders and that teenage runaway whose naked body they found charred and half-buried out in the desert? What was left of her, anyway. Those murders, gruesome as hell, one right after the other? Bang-bang.”

Carol: “Of course, Dad—the Clan murders out in L.A. Shoot. That’s one for the books. State of California sentenced them all to death, right? Trial finished before Christmas. Sentence came down right after the New Year. Talk about a bad way to start the year.”

Dom: “Not if you’re the D.A. Think those killers made any New Year’s resolutions Franky?”

“Sure. Get a better lawyer to handle their appeals maybe.”

Dom smirked. “Spoken like a true shyster Franco.”

“And they never did try anyone on the other case, did they?”

“No Carol, it’s still an open investigation. Close to being a cold case I think.”

“So Franky, you think I can dope out an ongoing police investigation just because I’m an ex-cop?” Franco nodded.

“Everything as far as Nick is concerned, yeah. As much as Perkouri anyway. That’s why I need the two of you. I need a pair of legs on each coast.” Dom glanced at Carol.

“No need askin’ which pair you want here.”

“Well Dom, are you in or out?”

“Sure. Like to meet this kid. Gotta admit he fascinates me. Find out how he nailed those Buzzbee boys in the can. What pitch he threw to induce the batter to hit into a triple play in the ninth in the state championship. But traveling to the Coast is expensive—”

Franco held up his hand. “I got you covered Dom just like I’ve got this covered.”

He slapped forty dollars on the table for their meal over the tip already lying there.

“And that runaway girl, the unsolved case, started out up in Vegas. So I could see where you might have to go up there for a day or two. Could spot you a hundred extra to, shall we say, sightsee out there?” Franco arched one eyebrow for effect. “I’ll defray all *reasonable* expenses—standard per diem—no high roller’s suites though, no Beverly Hills Hilton and such. But I *do* want you to use any connections you might have to find

out everything the cops had on Nick on both those deals. Work that fraternal order of police angle. Whatever it takes. Nick was initially a suspect in both cases but his alibis were rock solid both times. How he became a material witness. And bring back all the witnesses you need. We'll pay for them too." Carol said, "Who's we?"

"The kid's old man. Hear he's not hurting for cash. Trouble is he doesn't know anything about this yet." Carol looked at him dumbfounded.

"What? How can that be? That's crazy."

"The kid's own request. Said he'd get another lawyer if I told his folks before I had to. I kept telling him the thing would all blow over, see? I thought it would. No case to be made, ya know? Especially as liberal as Maryland law is for determining vehicular homicide because that's what I thought they'd go for. But this Perkouri is an asshole. Sees this case is his ticket to the big time." Carol looked at him sideways.

"Yours too, eh Frank?" He peered at her. "Carol. You know me better than that."

"Well. Just so long as you do all you can to keep it from going to trial. File all the necessary motions—no cause due to lack of evidence, etcetera—you know the routine. Push it to Juvie. Then I'll be satisfied."

"You can count on that. But Perkouri is going to make this thing happen. I'm telling ya. He's champing at the bit. Doing everything he can to fast-track it for circuit court."

"You sayin' the kid hasn't been arrested yet?"

"No Dom, I never said that. He was arrested a couple weeks ago. He's out on bail. Turned himself in voluntarily at my request. Cops didn't have a clue he was involved until I talked to my contact in the S.A.'s office. I feel bad about that. But for all his shenanigans, he's an honest kid. Wanted to do the right thing. I thought it would be all right, all for the best. But …"

"Best for whom, Franky? Best for you? Who bailed him out? How much?"

Franco frowned. "Five big ones. Kid used his own money for the premium and paid the bondsman his fee, too. I'll let that crack slide Dom. Co-signed for him with Max Terry."

"Terry's a good man. Worked with him out of the Bradensburg station back in the Forties, just after the War. The big one—WW Two. Not this chicken ass thing we got now in Viet Nam."

"And the summons?"

"Put out yesterday, Carol. At least that's what I heard. Haven't seen it yet."

"Gee, guess you'll have to tell his old man now?"

"Not yet. The kid's visiting his grandparents in Iowa with his folks and the girl. Some lake resort town his mom's from. We worked a deal with Perkouri and the county cops here and local police out there to keep tabs on him. Talked to him this morning. Said he'll tell his folks before he gets home to find the paperwork waiting for him."

Franco chuckled. “The S.A.’s office fouled up, see? Grand jury delivers their indictment yesterday, so the office has a couple plain-clothes men deliver the summons to the kid’s home. Only, nobody’s there. Right? Because they’re all out on vacation in Iowa, see? Some miscommunication. But they should have known that, since they set up the check-in deal with him out there. Perkouri doesn’t know what he’s doing. Idiots.”

“When’s he due back Frank and when’s the trial date?”

“Two weeks.”

“Two weeks to trial? That’s crazy.”

“No Carol. He’s due back in two weeks. Trial’s set for September twenty-second. His birthday no less. We’ve got five weeks to prepare. Not much time. See why I need you? Both of you? Perkouri’s really pushing this thing.”

“And you’re saying we can’t even talk to your client for two weeks?”

“That’s what I’m saying Dom. I might be able to get him to call you. But you can talk to almost everyone else. Got a list of people to interview on the boat, and where you might find them. Have a copy for each of you. It’s a long list, what with all the character witnesses. And I’ve got statements from the three kids you can review. Got ‘em on tape too, if you’d prefer them to the transcripts. About two hours-worth on tape. Actually, you ought to listen to them; especially, the kid’s. He’s a great mimic. Acted out the whole thing—all the characters. He’s something else.” Franco chuckled.

“Yes, I’d like to hear ‘em. See the transcripts, too.” Carol agreed with Dom.

“Great! Now, I’m going to need you to check with everyone who knew this kid. Start with what happened at Truley’s. Check with his teachers—you know the drill. Truley was there and his staff and several customers when it went bad with the Buzzbees. Also, talk with the two girls, the eyewitnesses. They’re key. Give me your intuition as well as the facts, how you think they’ll shake out on the stand. The twins, of course, and their folks. But stay away from the kid’s neighbors and relatives, who might be able to contact the old man, until the family gets back here. I put asterisks next to their names. Could use a good accident expert, too. If you got any recommendations, like to hear ‘em.”

Dom: “Sure. Know a couple o’ guys—solid guys. No bull. Know their stuff. Get you their numbers. Fella name o’ Barnes might be your best bet. An expert. Worked thirty years for the State investigatin’ accidents. Then, there’s another guy—retired insurance investigator—Juan. Last name escapes me right now.

“Seventeenth birthday, hunh? What a way to spend it. Sheeitt.”

Carol shook her head. “Also makes trying him as an adult not look as bad.”

“Yeah. You think Perkouri didn’t think of that? That pecker’s a real piece o’ work.”

“Dom. See if there’s anything you can do to help Carol. Then let me know as soon as you can get out to the coast. Might want to start by visiting Truley’s with her before you go. That Truley’s is a rough place.”

"What about the old man? Wouldn't he want the same shyster he hired last year to represent his son? There's none better."

"Bailey? Checked with him already, Dom. He's too busy. Said he doesn't feel any heat from this thing. Too local for his tastes. He doesn't mind throwing me a bone here."

"What if the old man insists? He's footin' the bill, right?"

"He will—yes. But the kid and I shook on it and I trust him."

"Trust him to sway the old man to hire you, 'stead of that ace Bailey?" Dom smirked.

"Yes I do. I trust him. And he trusts me."

"Didn't know that's how it worked with criminal lawyers Franky."

"Look Dom, this is gettin'—"

"Speaking of bills, standard rates?"

"Yeah Carol, standard rates, plus expenses. The usual deal. When we get the kid off, there could be a little extra in it. I expect the old man to be *very* grateful."

"Thought bonuses were illegal, Franky?" Before he could respond to Dom, Carol said, "Promises, promises Frank but that's not the promise I'm looking for."

"First things first. This works out, we could all be famous. Get rich."

"That's not what I meant." Franco ignored her.

Dom called the waitress over, saying. "You mean *you* could be famous, get rich, Franky." The waitress said, "Yessir?"

"The two ladies over there next to the glass. See the one with the frosted hair? Bring them a round of whatever they're drinking and add it to my friend's tab here, okay?" Dom nodded to Franco. The waitress smiled. "Yes sir." Dom added. "But tell 'em it's from me." He winked. Her smile broadened. "Will do."

"You're a piece of work Dom. Bet me a sawbuck and use my wallet to close the deal."

"Yeah buddy. Know my way around. That's why you want my legs on the west coast."

"And mine on the east, hunh Dad?" Dom smacked his lips in disgust.

"I didn't hear that."

They finished off their crab cakes in silence…

"Hey. Looky here."

Dom tilted his head towards the table behind Franco. They watched the girl deliver the drinks. The one with frosted hair leaned over to peer around her friend, raising her glass to Dom as the waitress pointed him out. Frosted hair motioned for Dom to come over.

Finishing off his beer, Dom got up.

"Excuse me *friends*. Thanks for the treat Franco. You can do this again anytime. Right now, the evening is young and my destiny awaits—like that ten-spot."

"Hello? … No. He's not here. Sent him upt' the bak'ry for do-nuts. Should've been back by now."

Ryz'n glanced up from her bowl of cream of wheat and toast. Nick's grandmother was speaking on the kitchen's black wall phone. Just inside the open kitchen door, dressed in blue, the short, woman's chunky backside turned to her. Ryz'n could see the light shining off the tiny bald spot, beneath the old woman's frail, white-haired permanent.

"Yes. She's here. Just who are you?" … Nick's squat, stubby grandmother turned around to face her. The phone cord uncurled, stretching taut against her beefy, age-spotted forearm. The old lady's blue eyes magnified behind her bifocals so large that even her eyelids looked fat. Ryz'n believed she could pass for Mrs. Kris Kringle.

"Never heard of ya … Well, just so you know. This is my house and I don't like the sound of ya … Yes, I'll put her on … Well, you still sound like a troublemaker to me."

Ruth turned around away from the cord's entanglement to hold out the phone.

"Here, Ryz'n. It's for you." Pointing to herself, Ryz'n swallowed a mouthful of toast.

"For me? Who would know me*, here*?"

"Yes, for you. Long distance from Maryland. Here." Ruth offered Ryz'n the receiver.

"Who is it?"

"Somebody calls hisself Faah-me-ah. Know a body with a name like that? Never heard it before."

Nick's attorney.

Ryz'n put down her spoon, wiped her mouth with the napkin and stepped around the oval oak kitchen table. She shuffled over the tan linoleum in her bare feet to take the phone, thanking "Grandma."

In passing, the old lady muttered: "A Fran-ko! Faaah-me-ah. Don't trust 'em *I*-talians from back east and you shouldn't either. Hmmmpf."

Favoring her bad ankle, Nick's chunky "Grandma," who Nick had told her came from sound Norwegian stock, waddled away like a duck. Kind of quacked like one, too. Ryz'n blinked. She was still getting used to Grandma Ruth's gruff ways.

Ryz'n spoke into the mouthpiece: "Hello?"

"Ry? This is Franco. Who was that?"

"Oh, hello Mister Vamia. Um, Nick's grandma."

"Wow. She's a pistol. Look Ry, afraid I have bad news."

"What is it?"

"He got it."

"Got it? Got what?"

"Grand jury felony indictment, on all charges, all counts, plus they added a few misdemeanors for good measure, a DWI, drinking underage and destruction of private property—the distributor cap and wires and disturbing the peace, you know. Felony assault and battery, too. Haven't actually seen it yet, but I have it on good authority from my contact in the State Attorney's office. Summons to appear in court is going out today. Trial date's set for September twenty-second."

"Oh, that's terrible, just terrible. Why, that's Nicky's birthday."

"Yes. A Tuesday. Seventeen makes trying him as an adult more palatable for a jury. May not be so bad. Perkouri may be tipping his strategy with the DWI or may be using it as a smokescreen. Either way, I'll nail him."

"As an *adult*? Oh no! They wouldn't really do that?" Conscience of the old lady hovering at the kitchen sink eavesdropping, Ryz'n cupped her mouth with her hand over the receiver to whisper. "You said he'd be tried as a juvenile, if it went this far."

"Now don't go all weepy on me Ry. We'll beat this thing. They don't have a leg to stand on. I'm telling you now because I know you know the score. And I don't want to keep calling there and arouse suspicions with his folks, if I couldn't get hold of Nick the first try. Has he told them yet?"

"No."

"Well, he'll have to now. The paperwork will be waiting for him when he gets home. You understand?"

Biting her lip, Ry clamped her free hand under her armpit with her forearm over her breast. "Yes, I understand."

Ryz'n began to sniffle. She felt Grandma's eyes on her and turned to confirm her suspicions. Ryz'n twisted around to hide from the old woman's gaze, looking through the doorway and parlor toward the wooden front screen door. Leaning her shoulder against the kitchen wall calendar, Ry brought the back of her free hand up to her nose.

"That gives us less than six weeks to prepare our case ... Ry? … Ry? Are you okay?"

She didn't like him calling her by the nickname she reserved for family and close friends, just as she didn't like him undressing her with his eyes every time he thought he could get away with it. Even if he had been a boyhood friend of Father Vizconni. Like Father Vince, Mr. Vamia was almost old enough to be her father, but she heard he was one heck of a criminal defense lawyer and that's exactly what Nicky needed now.

"Yes, it's nothing. Go on."

"Look, I'm on recess from jury selection in another case. I have to get back to it. I'll probably be tied up in court all day. Tell Nick he can call me at home. I gave him my home number before, but here it is again. It's a Tralatton number."

"Just a second."

Ryz'n noticed a pen hanging from a squiggly cord on the wall by the phone. She scribbled the number on the notepad next to it. She checked over what she had written.

"Yes, yes I have it." At his request, she read the number back, then tore off the note.

"Great. Now that's *my home phone* and it's *for you, too, Ry*. I expect to be out on my boat some this weekend, so keep trying it till you reach me."

"You mean Nick."

"Well, of course, but for you too. Thought you might need it sometime. Maybe you'd like to come out on my boat when this all shakes out. It's a real beauty, very much like you—say, they're calling us back in now. Gotta run. Don't forget. Call me. Bye."

He seemed confused about who should call whom. He couldn't possibly be serious that she should come out on his boat without Nicky. That knock-kneed, slew-footed, pasty-faced, red-headed Bozo the clown, being so sure of himself? Telling her about his new boat and his ritzy Tralatton address? Who did he think he was? If he wasn't such a hot shot attorney, she'd tell him where to stuff it, even if he *was* almost twice her age.

But Nicky needed him now and she needed Nick. Ryz'n hung up the phone, pondering the man's gall. She leaned her shoulder against the calendar hanging there on the wall. She glanced at the number she had written down on the note paper then stuffed it into her skirt front pocket. Lifting her shoulder off the wall calendar, she sighted today's date quite by accident—Friday, August 14. *Thank God, it wasn't Friday the Thirteenth.*

* * *

Franco Vamia hung up, thinking he had overplayed his hand. Ry was almost half his age, but, in all his life, he had known no one like her. If he had been too obvious just now, she'd tell Nick and he might lose both of them. Not only bad for his future love life, but also bad for business. He couldn't have that. Nick's case could catapult him to legal stardom as defense attorney of the year around here. Could even make the national papers once the D.C. writers got hold of it—played it up big. He could see the headlines now.

"Defense Attorney Saves Teen from Gross Injustice." Check that: "Brilliant Defense Attorney Gains Justice for Embattled Teen." Well, something like that.

The case had everything. Grisly news footage of a terrible wreck and the fried corpses of two ex-cons. And a troubled teen, who was a local legend for his high school performances on the ball diamond and on-stage with his rock band. Two voluptuous teen beauties as eyewitnesses and an overzealous prosecutor trying to railroad a kid for personal gain. Yeah—everything. The local papers would eat it up. Make him a rich star.

He'd play it low-key, humble. Take all the hits in public for the kid, as a good manager would for his slumping ball club, looking like a genius later when the team pulls out of their mid-summer swoon to win the pennant down the stretch. He'd let that overambitious prosecutor drive the publicity train right up to where Franco threw the switch, derailing the buffoon at the last minute with a not guilty verdict. Snatch victory

from the jaws of defeat. Nick's potential scandal could be his ticket to the big time. He could leave defending these small time hoods behind in the rearview mirror. There were enough corrupt politicians and big time murder cases in D.C. and Baltimore to feast off of for years. And Nick's case was definitely winnable, even if the State Attorney's office was stacking the deck against him. Tell F. Lee Bailey and Edward Bennett Williams to mover over. Make room for Franco Vamia—the new, big dog in court.

Though he had hung up, Franco stood by the wall pay phone watching dollar signs flash before his eyes, still holding onto the receiver. After he won the case, maybe Ry would be just a little bit grateful? Come out on his new boat to congratulate him?

And if, by some quirk of fate, Nick lost, Franco would still look a like hero in the girl's eyes, wouldn't he? After taking it on the chin for her guy like that? He'd appeal of course. Carry on the fight. Keep his name in the papers with Nick's old man footing the bill. And, with the kid in jail, she'd be lonely, upset, and old Franco would be there to pick up the pieces. After all, it wouldn't be the first time he'd worked that angle. She'd be young, gorgeous, innocent and grateful. And better built than a Playboy Bunny. More like a brunette Betty Brosmer. The girl had a bit of the exotic in her olive skin and dark Mediterranean good looks, maybe Indian or Persian, even if her last name was Ryan.

"Hey Mister Vamia! Judge finished early today." Grinning, a uniformed officer had stuck his head out past the opened courtroom door. "They want you back in court."

"What? Oh yeah, coming."

Across the hall, the officer held the door for him. Franco strode over to the door, but not too fast, slowing to straighten his tie, checking if it was okay in the shiny metal rectangle, marking where to push the door open. Stepping through the portal, he nodded to the man by way of thanks.

As soon as he returned, taking his seat at the defendant's table, the bailiff commanded all present to rise. Judge Tagnew strolled in from his chambers. Like God, looking over his court, the judge sat down, followed by everyone else. Seated next to Franco, Bo Willie Jackson whispered, "What took you so long, Mann?"

"Business Willie, just business." He patted Jones on the wrist. "Besides, Tagnew usually gets caught short this time of day. I overestimated a bit. That's all. Don't worry. I'm on top of this." He winked, patting Willie's forearm.

The judge banged his gavel to bring the court back to session.

"Where were we? Mister Vamia, I believe you were up? Prospective juror number …"

The judge reviewed documents before him.

Franco stood up. "Fourteen, Your Honor."

"Yes, fourteen. You may proceed Mister Vamia." Franco walked over to the jury box.

Franco: "Now, Missus Jefferson—"

"Mizz—*Mizz* Jeffahson." She grinned, flashing yellowing horse teeth around a center front gap in her dentures.

"Excuse me, *Mizz* Jefferson, now—" Smiling brightly, she said "'At's all right." She batted her lashes, smiling again. Franco smiled back.

"Now, '*Mizz* Jefferson,' have you any policemen among your family or friends?"

"*Poh*-leece? Family or friends? No, suh."

"Any other law enforcement officials, correction officials, members of the State Attorney's office, among your family or friends?" She seemed bewildered. "No suh."

"Do you have any biases in favor of, or prejudices against, preconceived or otherwise, towards the law enforcement community in general or any law officers in particular?"

"Suh?"

"What's your opinion of the law enforcement community Mizz Jefferson? How do you view the police, say in your neighborhood? How do you see them?"

"Well, I see 'em diffahent ways. You mean like when dey bustin' down my doah or eye-ballin' my backside when I'm crossin' da street?"

"Thank you for your cooperation Mizz Jefferson. Defense accepts this juror, Your Honor."

Judge: "Candidate number fourteen for the defense. Mister Paguarelli, for the State?"

* * *

Ryz'n sat on the rubber strap connecting two long parallel chains held up by the schoolyard swing's lofty iron rail. She lifted her sandals just off the dusty gravel, allowing an intermittent breeze to sway her. Glancing at her hot pink-painted toe nails, reminded her how much Nicky liked them. She had decided to wait here for him. He had to pass this way with the do-nuts to return to Grandma's place. She'd catch him here at the playground corner of the schoolyard to tell him Mr. Vamia's bad news in private.

Her mind wandered. Nick had left his grandparents' old house for the bakery well over an hour ago to pick up the do-nuts and long johns he was supposed to have bought an hour and a half before that. Nick had told her Clear Lake was a small, quaint town and he was right. She liked the way the folks out here retained their heritage with a humble pride. Time seemed almost to stand still here near the turn of the century. The Viet Nam war, race riots and all the protestors back home didn't seem to be a part of Iowa. That was somehow big city stuff, for back home in D.C., not suited here to small town USA. Staying with Nick's family at his grandmother's old house in the tiny mid-western, lake resort town at Clear Lake made her feel—well—safe. Nick had told her the lake was spring-fed but had been formed eons ago by a receding glacier.

He had told her too that much more recently some of his idols, Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper, had put this place on the national map, February 3, 1959, when their rented, small engine plane crashed in a snowy cornfield about a mile northeast

of here. Killed all three, pilot too. Nicky says that was the day the music died. The night before the crash, the legendary rockers had played the Surf Ballroom just a few blocks west, at the end of this very street right behind her, Seventh Avenue North.

Nick's ancestral home reminded her of the librarian's house in "The Music Man." It should. The mythical town of River City was based on the playwright's home town of Mason City, just ten miles due east, up Highway 18. A block up and two half blocks over from Grandma Ruth's place, this red brick, three-story, 1910 vintage schoolhouse sat here diagonally between her place and Clear Lake's Main Street. Nick's mom, brother and two sisters had attended public school here. Nick said the town had built a new high school east of the lake for the older kids. Now this school housed the little ones.

Ryz'n had lived in Germany, Georgia, Hawaii and Maryland. But she had never seen country quite like this. Black loam growing miles and miles of lush, green cornstalks and soybeans. Flat farm fields rolled gently as far as the eye could see. Small towns and walnut groves settled under clear blue skies dotting the flat, rural landscape. The breadbasket of the country. Smelled good too—dry air, sweet and fresh, not humid and musty like home. Everything fresh and fruitful, except for the occasional "honey wagons" hauling manure. Though Nick's pioneering, Norwegian ancestors settled the state over a hundred years back, this land seemed almost virginal, as she had been before Nick first settled her a few weeks ago. She sighed, glancing at her watch: ten minutes to eleven.

Grandma had warned Nick he should have left long ago to get the do-nuts fresh out of the oven. Ry bet the old lady wouldn't let him forget that when they got home. Bet Grandma Ruth's nagging wouldn't stop her from enjoying her share of the loot though.

She had left Grandma alone with a headache, feet up, sans bifocals, resting on the parlor sofa, her chunky forearm held across her forehead, reminding her to remind Nick of his error in judgment. Nick's dad had dropped the car by a local garage earlier to make sure it was in ship-shape for their trip home. One of Nick's mother's old girlfriends had taken Nick's mom and dad out to brunch. Grandpa and Uncle Bill were uptown at "the office"—the pool hall—playing pitch with "the boys," the other retired senior citizens.

Yesterday, the old gent had won thirty-eight cents. Been quite pleased with himself all afternoon. Walked around without stooping for the first time since Ryz'n had arrived. Usually Fred would lose and only grunt if you'd ask him how he'd made out. Nick defended him, saying the old man was an early riser, who didn't talk much after lunch. Ryz'n could see why. Grandma Ruth wouldn't let Grandpa Fred get a word in edgewise.

Without a ride, Nick had insisted on going to the bakery alone, on his crutches no less. He wouldn't dare ask to use his grandparent's car. Claimed he wanted "to enjoy the cool, fresh air just down from Canada." But she knew different. He was avoiding her.

They had been fighting again over the new bugaboo in their lives, the same one known to humankind since the Garden, probably. She had made confession *again,* a week ago,

just before she had made the two-day ride out here with Nick and his folks. And wouldn't you know? Father Vizconni had taken her confession. By way of being an old friend, in addition to being her priest the last few years, ever since her family had moved to Maryland from Georgia, Father V had asked her to come to his office to talk with him later that day. He had reminded her of all the things she had blocked out of her mind the last few weeks with Nicky—just loving him. Like her lessons from catechism about her body being the temple of the Holy Spirit and such. Presenting her body as a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God as was her reasonable service. But she'd made confession, promising to sin no more. She was clean now, in a state of grace. Ever since, she had resolved to refrain from Nick's amorous advances. That's when it hit the fan.

Ryz'n looked over at the worn asphalt blacktop, greying with age, a mixture of the tops of foundation pebbles showing through the surface, giving it a rougher texture than was originally intended. She had seen some kids brave it barefoot. Most didn't have feet tough enough to withstand the summer sun soaked up by the black surface. School was out for the summer but nobody was out here now. Too early in the day, too hot, or too close to lunch. Something. Nick thought most of the town's young folks wouldn't stick around here much once they graduated. Probably move off to the big cities for work and excitement. Ryz'n guessed maybe that's why the playground always seemed so empty.

Funny, school would be starting here what—next week? Seemed strange, sacrilegious almost, to start so early. Back home, school started day after Labor Day, which came as late as possible this year. Feeling alone, Ryz'n twisted in the hot breeze with the swing. She reflected on her situation with Nicky, but felt helpless to resolve it to the satisfaction of either of them. And now, this bad news from home. He'd have to tell his folks about it now, just as Mr. Vamia had predicted. He had no choice, not with a summons to appear in criminal court waiting for him when he got back in two weeks. Yes. Nicky sure didn't need her backsliding on him now.

But what could she do? Give in to him and turn from God again? Or maintain her renewed vow and freeze Nick out? She felt they must be the most star-crossed teen lovers since Romeo and Juliet. She wished she hadn't come now. She had known this would happen. Knew it as soon as she had left Father V's office. She should have stayed home and not let Nicky talk her into it. Maybe she could get Nicky's dad to drive her to the closest airport so she could fly home? She had suggested as much to Nick. She had enough money. She hadn't spent a dime on this trip. Nick and his folks wouldn't let her. His family was funny that way. She saw where Nick got it from—his generous spirit. But with his dad, it seemed more like a point of honor than generosity. Ryz'n appreciated Nick was different from his dad there.

Sure, she loved being with Nicky, overwhelmed by both lust and love. She loved everything about him so much, she could hardly stand it. She was addicted to his sweet

loving as she might be to a drug. That's what made all this so doubly difficult for her. Nick had observed that she loved, loving him too. Maybe even more than he did her. And he had admitted that he hadn't thought that was possible. But he was right. She adored him. And it pained her physically and grieved her emotionally to put him off like this. Because she longed for him so. But she also loved God, and therein lay her dilemma.

Reminded her of softball. She was in a pickle, caught in a rundown between third and home with little chance of escape no matter which way she went. Someone must tag her out. They had another year to go to finish high school before they could think about getting married, a subject Nick tap-danced around. And he wasn't Catholic. He didn't understand. He honestly thought they'd done the right thing—God's will. Loving one another as you love yourself, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. The term fornication must not exist in the Protestant bible. If it did, it must have a different meaning from the one Father Vince knew, because Nicky sure never heard of it.

What was that? She thought she heard Nick's sandpaper baritone singing. There– turning the corner of the schoolhouse to her left. Yep, there he was swinging his crutches out in front of him with his bag of do-nuts in hand, emerging from under the walnut trees on the far side of the school. Circling the bike stands, crossing the ball courts now, he hobbled under a basket hoop. Dark wavy hair down to his shoulders. Really moving now.

Hadn't cut his hair since the wrestling semi-finals last winter. He wore his baggy, khaki work slacks and her dad's oversized tropical Hawaiian shirt, which Nick had borrowed from her dad's closet at her bidding and had yet to return. Nick preferred the baggy slacks. They gave him enough room to slip his calf-high ankle cast through the leg without having to tear up the seam. How many days in a row had he worn them now? She chuckled. With his deep tan, coarse, dark hair and that shirt, he could pass for a native Hawaiian. She knew the muscular physical treasures his baggy clothes hid from the naked eye. Made her salivate over every inch of him. He hadn't spotted her yet, focusing instead on each long stride. He'd be getting that cast off next week. She'd keep quiet. Let him spot her and come over. Let him make the first move. He had to come right by her. What was he singin'? Chuck Berry's "School Days." That was Nicky all over.

As he swung closer, she began to change her mind. Right now, he needed her more than God did. She loved them both but … She sighed as she let herself out of the swing to walk slowly towards him. Carefully placing one foot in front of the other, head down, Ryz'n clasped her hands behind her back. She knew what she would do.

She worked up a smile for him, a bright, three-dimpled doozy, her specialty, the one he said he loved so much. She called softly, "Hey Baby." Nick slowed to look up.

It was Ry. She stood there with her hands behind her back in a short green denim skirt, A-line, her favorite style and a sleeveless, white cotton, midriff blouse. Jesus sandals on

her feet. Tanned and pretty as a picture. Toe-nails painted hot pink, the way he liked them. She cut a heckuva hourglass figure against the great oak and walnut trees towering behind her. Huge leafy trees provided shade for the moms from the afternoon sun, while they sat on a bench with acorns and walnuts under foot to watch their kids on the playground. Only the benches were empty. No moms, no kids. Just Ry.

Ry smiled. She must be feelin' better. But she wasn't wearin' the yellow ribbon in her hair, her symbol of their peace and love for each other. Must still be mad at him. But she was the best girl he'd ever had. Best friend, too.

"Hey yaself. Thought you were under the weather?" Ry shrugged. "Well yes, I was but, well, I'm better now. Feel fine." Nick smiled too. "Sure look fine." Her smile broadened, provoking the dimples in her double-cheeked, baby face. He swung himself toward her.

"You can really move on those things, when you wanna."

Nick stopped, clapping the stub ends of his crutches together out in front of him and barked, like a seal at the zoo. He managed to hold onto his big bag of do-nuts without dropping any on the playground.

"Yeah buddy, thought you'd flag me for a speedin' ticket, when I left out this mornin'."

"Uh, let's forget about that, shall we?" She moved closer, just out of crutch reach.

"Done. Kind o' figured you might be on that big bird flyin' out o' here—soon as you felt better, that is."

She looked down, shrugging again, balancing on one foot, sweeping the other out in front of her over the asphalt as an infielder might sweep his spikes across the infield dirt, waiting between pitches.

"Thought about it. Seemed kind of silly though, to run home to mama don't you think? Just because we had a spat?"

Ry tilted her head up at him with her chin still down, squinting her left eyelid against the late morning sunlight. Gosh she looked *fantastic!* No chick he knew had a better figure. And that was sayin' something. And her baby face cheeks with those dimples knocked him out. She said, "You know how I feel about you."

"Yeah, sure I do."

Nick shuffled sideways to his left to take the sun in his eyes. Ry pivoted on her heel, following him around. Her large, almond-shaped, hazel-green eyes opened fully now. She eyed him up and down as if he were an ice cream sundae, as he eyed her …

"What's in the bag? Goodies? Fill all the orders? Grandma's been waitin' for ya."

Nicky chuckled. "I'll bet she has. Waitin' for *me* or the pastry?"

Ry smiled. "Both, I think." Nick glanced at the big white bakery bag in his hand.

"Oh yeah. Wants to chomp on both of us but which one first? Me? Or the donuts? Ha!

"Well I filled 'em all, you bet. Got the long johns you like. Want one?"

He opened the bag. She shook her head. "Sure? I know how much you like 'em."

"Well, that's true. Better not just yet. My stomach's okay now. But I don't want to push my luck though. Maybe later. Ya know, there's uh, one special one you have I like more than any other." He frowned.

"Do tell. Thought your preferred maple-frosted?"

Grinning, she winked. "Not my favorite."

"Oh. Well shoot. Tell me what you want. I'll go back and get whatever you like."

He was serious. She shrugged.

"No need. You got my favorite long john with ya all the time Sweetie." Grinning and glancing down and then up, Ry winked again. She had a different kind of pastry in mind—his own special, sweet brand—that he reserved just for her now.

Sweetie again? Dang. Sure had changed her tune since last night. Why? If puking her guts out at dawn had made her see the light, he hoped she'd get sick every morning.

Ryz'n looked down and up again smiling like a leprechaun from under her long, dark, up-curved, natural lashes. Up-curved like that natural basketball butt of hers—a natural, perpetual bustle—not to mention her ample, twin, chest curves—better'n Betty Boop. Ry took after her mom in many ways. He matched her simper. Yeah, they were on again.

"What took you so long Baby? Couldn't have been that long of a line at the bakery?"

"Nah, had to stop by the police station."

"Police station? What for?"

"Anh, 's part o' the bail-bond deal Franco cooked up for me. No big deal. I'm supposed ta report inta the county cops back home once a week while we're out here. So they know I ain't skipped out on 'em. Franco worked it so I could report to the local police here. They call the authorities back home and have me check in over the phone while I'm standin' there. No big deal. As long as the locals don't say nothin' to my folks, it's cool."

"Did you ask them to keep quiet? After all Nick, this is a small town and all."

"Yeah. They said okay; 'specially, since I ain't even been indicted. Sheesh!"

Ry paused. Looking down, she swept the toe of her sandal over the worn blacktop.

"What? Did I say somethin' wrong? You're dimples just up and vanished like a fart in the wind."

His joke didn't fetch much of a rise out of her. She looked right, over towards the trees.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news, Sweetie." She tried to smile, but failed.

"Yeah, what?"

"Mister Vamia called to leave a message for you." Looking down at her foot again, she scraped the toe part of her sandal back and forth over the worn asphalt …

"Yeah? Well?"

"He said, he said, 'He got it.'" She looked up. "Those were his exact words."

"Got it? Got what?"

"That's what I said. The grand jury indictment. All charges, all counts."

"Oh."

Nick felt himself slump. His crutches rode high up into his armpits, above the calluses he'd made on the sides of his ribs the last month. He stared past her and the monkey bars.

"Mister Vamia said the State's Attorney added some other charges, too, misdemeanors though." He stared up at her.

"Hunh? Like what?"

"Underage drinking, destruction of private property and driving while intoxicated."

"D-W-I? That's *bullcrap!* Oh? Sorry, Ry."

"It's okay because the whole dang thing is *bull*, isn't it?"

"You got that darn right! Ya know, I never heard you talk like that before." She shrugged again. "Well, it is. And, for your sake, I don't mind sayin' so."

"Here." Nick closed the bag, shoving the do-nuts at her. He paced, hopping back and forth on his good foot, holding his crutches off the ground. "Sonuvabitch—witch!–I mean." He stopped to look up at her. Ry curled up the top of the bag in both fists, holding it under her big ones against her midriff, pushin 'em up as if in pain. "Anything else?"

"Well, a trial date's set for September twenty-second. In circuit court—adult court."

"Ha! My birthday. Can you believe that? Bastards have a sense of humor anyway."

He put his crutches together, holding them off to one side, resting on both feet. His ankle was healed. He was sure of it.

"Mister Vamia says seventeen sounds better for trying you as an adult." He slumped.

"An adult, hunh? Damn. Damn the bastards." He grimaced.

"I know it sounds bad Nicky but I've told you before, good things always seem to happen to me on the twenty-second of a month. And since you're a part of me now, good things will happen to you too, like our night at the beaver ponds. That was on the twenty-second. Remember?"

"The sumwitches. Franco was right. They're out to get me. That interim State's Attorney must want the full time job awful bad. Franco says my case is the asshole's ticket to win the election in November. I guess he wasn't foolin'."

Ry stepped in close to him. "Nicky?" He looked up, glaring. "What?"

"Mister Vamia says a court summons will be waiting for ya when you get home."

He faked sincerity. "Well sure, that figures. Geeze Ry." He rolled his eyes.

"But—what I mean is … you'll have to tell your parents now, before you get home."

He hadn't thought of that. But she was right, dammit.

"Mister Vamia said he'd be in court most of the day and out on his new boat most of the weekend. He gave me his home number and asked that you try to call him anyway. He doesn't want to call you and risk involving your folks until you're ready for it, just respecting your wishes, I guess."

She reached into the front pocket of her green, denim skirt to hand him a piece of paper with the lawyer's number scrawled across it in her neat left hand. He thanked her but told her to keep it because he already had his lawyer's home and office numbers. She slipped it back into her pocket.

"I'm so sorry Baby."

Ry looked so forlorn, he was afraid she might cry.

Ry stepped into him, reaching both hands around his waist still holding onto the do-nut bag, hugging him tight. She nestled her cheek into his chest with her chin between his pecs, against her dad's soft, baggy Hawaiian shirt. Nick lifted his chin to rest on the top of her head. He stroked the back of her hair. He always got a charge out of the feel of her long, dense, coarse waves against his fingertips.

"It'll be all raight, Ry. You'll see. I ain't' guilty." He forced a smile she couldn't see.

"I know Baby, I know. Maybe … maybe we should take Uncle Bill up on his idea?"

"What idea?" He pulled his head back, staring her in the eye, unsure what she was driving at. She looked up to him.

"You know? Visiting the Black Hills."

"What? You mean all three of us?"

"Yep, but oh—forgot you have to check in with the police."

I jes' did. Don't have to do that again till next Friday."

Her eyes lit up, green for go like a traffic light, smiling. Eager now, rising on the balls of her feet,she asked, "Do you think your folks would let us go by ourselves?"

"Hmmmpf! Fat chance. No, we'll need Bill. My dad might let us. Grandpa wouldn't care, I don't think, and Bill–shoot. He'd prob'ly get a kick out of it as his idea, fancyin' himself as Cupid. But my mom and grandmom, they're another story. Ya know Grandma believes your chastity is her primary, personal responsibility while we're out here."

He arched his brow for effect. She pulled back to look at him, grinning.

"Kind of had that impression. Just like your mom. What is it Grandma Ruth says?"

"No lollygaggin' while you're under my roof, Mister!'"

He imitated his grandmother to a T, pointing a forefinger right in her face, just as the old lady had done to him, when she had given him the lay of the land last Sunday afternoon when they first arrived. Ryz'n laughed.

"Yes, that's it—*lollygaggin'*. Never heard it called that before. Then, before you, I never heard of turtle-dovin' either."

Nick smirked. "Never did it either." A sheepish grin escaped her.

"Well, we don't want to disappoint Grandma Ruth now, do we Nicholas? We'll just have to take our *lollygaggin'* out on the road. Ebbe take Uncle Bill along a chaperone." Her eyes twinkled. "Won't we, Sweetie?"

Nick smiled. "Some chaperone. But hey! Amen to that sweet prayer. Even better."

~ Chapter 8: Voir Dire et Rêver à Voir ~

Nick sat at the defendant's table with his College Algebra book opened to the title page of *Chapter 1.3 Quadratic Equations in the Complex Number System*. He thumbed the page corners while his lawyer questioned another prospective juror. They were down to picking the alternates now. His attorney Franco Vamia and the interim State's Attorney Petros Perkouri had been *voir-diring* people since yesterday morning. *Voir dire*—that's what they called it. From his French class, Nick translated it as, "see, say." Yeah, he guessed that made sense. Just boiled down to askin' a bunch o' different people you never saw before a lot o' questions. Franco had insisted on getting as favorable a jury as he could. "Not a *fair* jury," he had insisted, "but a *favorable* one." There was a difference, or so Franco said.

Nick equated the difference to being like the one between taking a pitch and taking a strike. With Old Judge Langham Hardern Higher presiding, Franco had said they'd need all the help from the jury they could get. Franco said that dude Higher was bad news. Said folks didn't call him "Judge Hang 'em Harder 'n' Higher" for nothin'.

Nick had read the text's chapter title page no less than a dozen times. Unable to concentrate, he could think only of the mess his life had become in the last few weeks. Seemed to him as though God had picked him as His Job for the second half of 1970. He couldn't believe the stuff that had come down on him recently.

He had turned seventeen yesterday, the day his trial began. *Happy Birthday, William Nicholas.* In the dock of the nearly one-hundred year-old Royal George County Courthouse, he faced multiple felony counts for capital murder and lesser included offenses of manslaughter, leaving the scene of an accident, aggravated assault and battery, and misdemeanors for underage drinking, disturbing the peace, malicious destruction of private property and DWI. Franco said the prosecutor was serving up a smorgasbord of charges, hoping that, in the tasting, the jury would find a few they liked. Nick viewed it more as throwing a ton o' crap against him to see how much of it stuck.

So, how had he celebrated his birthday last night? Why, with his pregnant girlfriend over at St. Francis in the District pursuing the first of their eight bi-weekly, two-hour, Pre-Cana sessions over the next four weeks. After all, how else would a guy celebrate his seventeenth birthday? Considering Ry was two months along already, Father Vizconni, at the behest of Ry's folks, had chosen St. Francis for their marriage indoctrination rather than the local parish of Holy Trinity because time was of the essence. Not to mention, the secrecy afforded by the incognito status they enjoyed across the District line in a different parish. Ry's folks wanted to keep the whole affair *hush-hush* as long as possible.

The wedding date was set for a month out, on the evening of October 22nd at Holy Trinity, the week after they completed their Pre-Cana training. Gave 'em a week to make

up any classes they might miss. Aside from Father Vince, only immediate members of both families would attend the special, late evening, very private, *on the Q-T,* wedding mass. Yeah, very *hush-hush.* Since the twenty-second fell on a Thursday, both of them had to be in school the next day. There'd be no wedding night and no honeymoon, according to Mister Ryan. Her old man said he and Ry "already took care of that!"

Instead, they were supposed to return to live with their respective families as if the wedding never took place, until her condition became obvious. Ry, taking Home Ec. III instead of Gym this year, helped. Hopefully, she could last long enough to complete the first semester of school, or at least stay until the Christmas holiday. Then her folks planned on shipping her off, either north to her old man's folks on Long Island, or south to her mom's family down in Georgia, where she'd ride out the last trimester and bear the baby mid-April. She'd receive school assignments and take tests during the third quarter with the County's Education Department via mail. The details and reason for the proposed sudden disappearance of Pocomoke's Senior Class President and all-league softball catcher had yet to be worked out. Ry would turn the reigns of the senior class over to her V.P. Ace Klatz, who happened to be Nick's bass player, then return in time for the prom. The plan was for her to come back for the last quarter of school and graduate with their class. Maybe she could make most of the softball season? Of course, if he was found guilty—well. Nobody wanted to think about that. Even Ry's old man hoped he'd be acquitted. At least Nick thought he did. What a mess.

Nick had other ideas. He planned both a honeymoon weekend and living together alone. Either rent a flat at Walnut Hill or, even better, move into Mrs. K's place until Christmas when Kara came home for a visit. Instead of paying rent, they'd be *getting paid* to stay there from the fifty dollar monthly fee Kara sent him to maintain her place.

Nick ruffled the upper, right page corners of his opened math book between his right thumb and forefinger. He listened to his red-headed attorney and the prosecutor asking the same tired questions he had been posing to prospective jurors the last two days:

"Do you know or have you ever heard of the defendant William Nicholas Sheeboom? Have you seen any news footage of the accident? Do you know or ever heard of the accident victims Alvin Bernard or Arlo Barnabas Buzzbee? Have you ever been in a car accident? Were there any serious injuries, any fatalities? What did you do? Do you have any teenagers in your family? How do you get along with them? How do you view teenagers today? Have you ever had any memorable encounters with teenagers? Pleasant or unpleasant? If so, what were the circumstances? Do you fear teen violence? What are your views on premarital sex? For adults? For teens? What …"

* * *

Ryz'n glanced at the classroom clock. Twelve minutes past four. Two minutes past the time she had allotted for this special meeting of the senior prom advisory committee. Ace

Klatz her V.P. and R-J Rymfoukas were arguing over who should be checking into prospective off-campus venues for the prom, what venues to pursue and how much they should spend. As Senior Class President, Ryz'n figured it was about time to end this nonsense by asserting her duly elected authority. She stood up.

"I'll take care of it and report back to you in two weeks." She smacked the palm of her hand down flat against the desktop of the teacher's desk. "Meeting adjourned."

R-J: "You can't do that. As head of the Prom Committee, I say we have to vote on who's going to do what. And the meeting can't be closed until a motion has been made and seconded and a vote taken. Who do you think you are? Khrushchev or somebody?"

Ryz'n stared hard at the curvy, handsome brunette, who doubled as the school's unofficial talebearer. "Da. And I'm gone," she said.

The other members of the Prom Committee looked at Ryz'n with mouths agape. Ryz'n gathered her purse and schoolbooks to hold them in her arms against her chest. She started to leave when the deep bass of the mop-headed Ace Klatz stopped her short.

"Hey Ry, come on. R-J's right on this one. You can't do that, you can't leave now."

Ryz'n stopped. "Okay, you all take another hour to decide what you want to do. Meanwhile, I'll still check into some places for the prom. We can discuss them next time. Ace, I'm turning the meeting over to you. I can't stick around here diddling with you all. I've got more important matters to attend to."

"More important than the senior prom?"

"Yes!"

Ryz'n turned to head for the classroom door, only to hear the abrasive R-J cat-calling loudly behind her, "She's gotta go to court. Watch that whore of a boyfriend of hers get his come-uppance." Ryz'n stopped abruptly in the doorway, straight-backed. Her forest green pumps planted together firmly beneath her, but she did not turn around. Ryz'n could feel the committee's eyes upon the back of her kid sister's borrowed, sleeveless, forest green and white, princess dress. Then she heard R-J add: "*Yours, too*."

Ryz'n lifted her head, stalking off without a word. She was so mad she almost forgot to stop at the water fountain to take her Dramamine to control her pregnancy nausea. Upon reaching her Corvair Monza in the school parking lot, she threw her books into the car and herself in after. She headed for the courthouse in the county seat at Upper Winston. WRGC was playing "Julie, Julie, Julie, Do Your Love Me." Ryz'n punched the pre-set AM radio dial for WEEM. Got The Spinners – "It's a Shame." And it was a shame.

She simmered, still upset over R-J's brazen comments. To make matters worse, she promptly got stuck in an afternoon, home-bound, commuter traffic jam on the Sweetland Parkway between the Crest Hill Road entrance and the traffic light at Forestdale Road.

Edwin Starr's "War" aired.

God, please end that before Nicky gets drafted.

Unable to set aside her revulsion for R-J and her acrid testimony, Ryz'n let her thoughts drift downstream. As the ex-girlfriend of the school's returning senior All-County quarterback and Nick's good, childhood friend Johnny Allein, R-J Rymfoukas had turned her mouthy sights on Ryz'n and Nick. She claimed Nicky had gone behind R-J's back to introduce Johnny to the present love of his life, the equally curvy but blonde Trish Ryker. The whole thing had turned into such a mess. Just like her life.

With Nicky, nothing was easy but the love-making and, as she had gained experience in that department, she was learning easy-does-it*,* didn't always do it for her. Something he hadn't quite figured out yet. She was a little embarrassed to tell him that, once in a while, rougher suited her, as he liked to say, "even better." Because he thought of her as a delicate flower, she was reluctant to tell him. She was unsure how'd he take a revelation that, sometimes, she just wanted him to take her like, well—rape her—like, like a slut. Well. Didn't matter now, since Father V had made sex off limits until the wedding. Ryz'n figured she'd wait until their wedding night to shock Nick. Besides, maybe he'd even go for it, too? Might be "even better" for both of them—yes. That thought brought a smile.

"War" ended in time for a commercial. She punched back to RGC to catch "Green-Eyed Lady, mid-instrumental. She listened intently, fingering the steering wheel and dash as if they were keyboards. She was learning the organ piece of that super popular tune for the band. When it was over, the D.J. played "All Right Now." She had heard it a zillion times and probably played it a thousand with the band. But it still moved her.

Ryz'n tapped her forefinger on the steering wheel, inching the Monza along in the dual lane, bumper-to-bumper congestion she encountered on the Parkway. She hoped to get to court before the day's session ended. The Dramamine she took to prevent nausea caused by the pregnancy was starting to kick in, making her a little drowsy. She wondered if the lawyers had selected the jury yet and if the actual trial had started.

R-J had said that the prosecutor had "deposed" her as a potential witness for the State. But, if so, R-J hadn't been at the courthouse. That was a good sign. So probably, the real trial hadn't started yet. Probably, still just that jury-questioning stuff like yesterday. Ryz'n worried about what R-J had meant by that "*Yours, too*" comment. That snitch was up to something, just as she had been when she had tried to discredit Nicky and get Mrs. Severe—Miss Bucksalter now—fired. Ryz'n refused to believe R-J's sensational claims about Nick and the Junior Class English teacher, who, as the former Mrs. Severe, could pass for Julie Christie's double. Only, the handsome teacher possessed a fresher, more wholesome beauty than the actress. Despite the teacher's recent fall from grace, Ryz'n thought the teacher's nose more delicate and her mouth less sexy than the actress.

With nothing better to do than try to stay awake in a rush hour traffic jam and punch up the best song of the moment on her custom-installed AM-FM radio, Ryz'n thought about

the complicated, malicious spider web that R-J had woven around Nick and the slender, angelic-looking English teacher. And all because R-J wanted to exact revenge on Nicky.

R-J blamed Nick for losing Johnny to Trish, ignoring the simple truth that her own sassy ways had driven Johnny away. R-J blamed her too, because she had participated in the private, Ping-Pong party Nick had arranged in his basement where he had introduced Johnny to Trish on a blind date. R-J had blamed Ryz'n, even though she had known nothing about the set-up. In fact, she had arrived at the party in a jealous rage, believing Nick had wanted Trish for himself. When R-J's vindictive scheme to malign Nicky, by accusing him and the teacher of improper behavior to the principal had failed, the girl became even more infuriated. What was the old saying? *Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned?* Sounded right to Ryz'n in this case.

The whole messy affair proved just how matters involving Nicky always seemed to get out of hand—like this trial. Mr. Vamia said Nick's case would never come to court. So why was she stuck in commuter traffic trying to get to the courthouse? Since she and Nick had become a couple, her life had taken front seat on a roller-coaster. Rushing into so many highs and lows in such quick succession had made her dizzy. But she had to admit, life with Nicky was exciting, except for this Parkway traffic jam.

"Rubber Duckie" on RGC. She switched back to WEEM—"In the Summertime," Mongo Jerry. Yeah, that's more like it. She wished it were. Their summer together had been magical. She bobbed her head to the funky beat.

And because Mrs. Allein preferred R-J to Johnny's new girl Trish, Johnny's mom had believed R-J when R-J said her break-up with Johnny was all Nick's fault. Ryz'n's too. Then, from the window of the gynecologist's office, Johnny's mom had spied Nicky and her in a heated, tear-filled argument outside on the street by her Monza. Wouldn't you know it turned out that both Ryz'n's family and Mrs. Allein shared the same doctor? Bad luck all around. But then Ryz'n figured, if not for bad luck now, she'd have no luck at all.

After their argument, Ryz'n had left Nick stranded and stewing in the parking lot. On her way home from the doctor's office, Mrs. Allein had found Nicky hitch-hiking on Alabama Avenue—not a safe place for a white boy to be. In lieu of a fare, Johnny's mom thought she'd pick up some gossip. She asked Nick about his argument with Ryz'n by the street. When he declined to answer the woman's pointed questions, Mrs. Allein put two and two together to come up with four. She had concluded correctly, given Nick's heavily tainted reputation, that Ryz'n was pregnant. She informed R-J of her conclusion.

R-J spread the word around school like so much confetti. She loudly confronted her and Nicky with the allegation in home room the other day. When she and Nick ignored R-J's claims, neither confirming nor denying her assertions, the other kids believed R-J. Because, like it or not, no matter what you thought of R-J, her gossip usually bore at least a kernel of truth. Suddenly everyone distanced themselves from her and Nick. Well, her

anyway, they'd already ostracized Nicky due to the charges against him. It was all Ryz'n could do to keep from ripping R-J for what she'd said. The trouble was R-J was right, again. So Ryz'n could say nothing for fear of confirming her condition—or lying.

That R-J. Despite the principal's warning to her to curtail her tale-bearing ways, she was still trying to get even with them. That's why R-J's ominous "*Yours, too*" comment concerned her. Little over a week ago, R-J had provoked the confrontation among them in the principal's office that had backfired on her. Ryz'n recalled R-J was conspicuous by her absence from that conference with Mr. Marant. Yes, her rumors nearly cost Miss Bucksalter her position as the school's English III/American Lit. teacher. But Nicky had shot down the girl's lurid allegations about the teacher and him. Really ticked R-J off too, when she found out later. She despised Nick now and Ryz'n too, for that matter.

She hated Ryz'n not only for her association with Nicky due to the Ping-Pong party deal with Trish, but also because she claimed Ryz'n had failed R-J by lying to Mr. Marant in Nick's behalf. That wasn't true. Ryz'n had told what she knew, what she had witnessed between Nick and the teacher. It was R-J's own fault that Ryz'n hadn't spied all that R-J had seen in the classroom after school that day last June.

But R-J had not been in Mr. Marant's office with her, Nicky and Miss Bucksalter to see how ably Nick had defended himself and the teacher. She didn't hear Nicky employ a combination of logic and righteous indignation to shoot down R-J's specious allegations, crashing them in flames. Ryz'n believed that maybe Mr. Vamia should have been there to take notes. Afterwards, Mr. Marant had reprimanded R-J, threatening to dismiss her from her cherished position as student-assistant in the front office, if she could not curtail her tale-bearing. Of course, the front office is where R-J garnered most of the grist for her mill. Yes, since then, *both* she and Nick had topped R-J's blacklist. That's why R-J's ominous "*Yours, too*" comment concerned her.

Back on RGC, it was "Spill the Wine, Take that Girl." Now that was a strange tune but Nicky liked it. The song was as weirdly surreal as this whole bleepin' mess. Nick had incorporated the number into the band's repertoire, though the tune was fading out of the top forty now. As she stewed, stuck in traffic, Ryz'n recalled when the whole Mrs. Severe mess had started, after the next to last half day of school last June.

Ryz'n had grown tired of Donny, tired of putting off her former boyfriend when she knew she didn't want him. She and Nick knew each other well. Their occasionally tempestuous, strained relationship throughout their junior year had begun to thaw by year's end. After Nick had helped her win the election the last week of school, she returned the favor by helping him sell his creation, the inaugural spring supplement to the yearbook. They had begun warming to each other again. Though both of them had wanted to get together a year ago, Ryz'n had felt trapped in her relationship with Donny. Don and Nick had something between them they kept from her. She hadn't known what

then. But later, she had learned about the secret pact the two boys had made concerning her. She shuddered now at the thought of that insane, secret pact.

It wasn't until the Fourth of July weekend down at Rehoboth Beach, when she and Nick finally did get together. That was after Nick had told her why he had refused to bail Don out of jail. The police had busted Donny and some of their classmates for disturbing the peace and dope-smokin' at Li'l Mo' s folks beach resort home. In fact, seemed to Ryz'n at the time the cops had rousted half of Pocomoke's junior class in that bust. She later learned the police had responded to neighbors' complaints about a loud, excessive celebration in Mo's place—

But what prompted R-J's veiled threat about a "*come-uppance*?" Darn this traffic.

A U.S. Park police car barreled up the right shoulder past her, trailing dust, siren-blasting, red light-flashing, while angry horns honked in frustration around her. No telling how long this might take. She shook her head in frustration.

Ryz'n thought back to the end of school last June. She had gone out to check on Nick, who had been hawking the *Spring Book*, his yearbook supplement. From the front door, she'd seen Nick at the table he had set up in the breezeway under the school library next to the horseshoe-shaped, bus driveway. Coach Garth was with him. She had backed off to catch Nicky later. The busses had left. The drive-way was empty. School was out for the day. She walked back to the front office. R-J was there, working as an office assistant, as she did every day before and after school and during fourth period—the lunch period—as part of her Business curriculum. Ryz'n had stopped into the office to collect some phone numbers that she needed for the senior class officers who would be serving in her administration next year, and for kids she thought might help her lay the groundwork for next year's prom over summer vacation. A major plank in her campaign for Senior Class President was to create a great senior prom in a sophisticated venue—no more stinking, floor-boarded gym or the school's cafeteria-auditorium like last spring's Junior Prom.

Nick had lent his support to her campaign, promoting her presidency as well as the vice-presidency for his bassist in *Good Rockin' Tonight (GRT)* Wilhelm 'The Ace' Klatz. Though Ryz'n had always been popular, she never felt the other kids took her seriously. She never thought they thought she had the gumption to make things happen. Well, they were wrong. Nicky was the one person who seemed to sense her abilities. He had just helped the baseball team win the school's first state championship of any kind a few days before the election. He volunteered his rock band *GRT* to play an after-school sock-hop in the cafeteria-auditorium for free, featuring Ryz'n and Ace making campaign promises between sets. She was convinced Nicky's support on the eve of the election is what had swung the vote in her favor over her good friend and neighbor Vicky Vernier. After all, Vicky was cheerleader co-captain, National Honor Society member, National Merit Scholarship finalist and yet, possibly the humblest girl in school. No way, Ryz'n figured

she would have beaten out Vicky for the class presidency without the popular endorsement of their recent state championship baseball hero and his rock band.

Once she had won, Ryz'n helped Nick by hawking a Little Nick original creation, Pocomoke High's inaugural *Spring Book*. The book featured mostly color photographs of spring sports and other memorable activities like the prom and graduation, which had occurred too late in the year to be published in the annual yearbook. The *Spring Book* was Nick's idea. He made it work because of his good relationship with a few of the yearbook photographers, kids who had taken pictures even after the yearbook staff had closed up shop. He financed the project from his pocket, hoping sales would cover his costs. He probably couldn't have pulled it off without the help of his little Italian neighbor Mr. Sodello, who lived across the street from him. Mr. Sodello worked as foreman in the print shop out at the University of Maryland in College Park. He'd printed many publications for the university, including features like publicity photos for the Maryland athletic department. Nick's neighbor was the key to getting the supplement completed with professional quality in time before school ended.

Nicky had assured her that if she'd help him hawk the *Spring Book* during the last week of school, he'd make sure any profits went into their senior class coffers for the prom. She was happy to help. She liked the fact the book displayed photos of her and the softball team in action, not to mention a classy shot of her at the junior prom in that knock-out, strapless gown she had made especially for the occasion, the one that had featured her newly slimmed-down, hourglass figure. Sitting in traffic, Ryz'n reveled in her recollection—*zoning out*—what Nicky called it ...

> She picked up the phone numbers in the front office, believing Nick had remained at the makeshift bookstand he had made under the library breezeway. Exams were done. The last day of school tomorrow was just a B.S. half day, to turn in textbooks, sign yearbooks and say goodbyes. All the busses had departed. The kids were gone for the day. R-J was finishing up in the front office. R-J suggested it might be nice if they could get Mrs. Severe to sign their *Spring Books,* as she had their yearbooks. Working in the office since the closing bell, R-J noted the teacher hadn't left the building yet. Both she and R-J had admired Mrs. Severe, as did many of the junior class's female students.
>
> Though she was a classic, petite, blonde beauty, Mrs. Severe was articulate and youthful. She was an extremely sober, modern woman, who epitomized what all the junior girls wanted to become: an independent woman, capable of contributing to society in a meaningful way without resorting to in-your-face feminism or the second class status they associated with their mothers. Like most of the teacher's female pupils, Ryz'n had admired Mrs. Severe tremendously and aspired to be like her. Maybe the teacher would sign the supplement, too? And maybe they could keep in touch over summer vacation?

When she and R-J arrived at the teacher's second floor, corner classroom, both doors to the room were shut. That was unusual since class had long been out. The school was only three years old. The pale blue-painted cinderblock hall, lined with grey lockers and floored with scuffed grey and white Formica was empty. R-J peeped through the "eye-spy." That's what the kids called the wire, re-enforced, one-foot glass square in the upper half of the laminated wooden doors that roaming vice-principals used to spy on classes in session.

Ryz'n watched R-J's jaw drop at what she saw through the eye-spy. When she asked what was going on, R-J shushed her, whispering "I don't believe it. I just don't believe it."

"Believe what? Let me see."

But R-J wouldn't budge from the window. Maintaing her spy's stare, R-J whispered, "This one's mine. Use the other one."

Frustrated, Ryz'n walked past some lockers to look through the window in the other door. What she saw when she got there, froze her.

Mrs. Severe and Nick were embracing each other in the middle of the classroom in an aisle between some desk-chairs. The teacher was dabbing at her nose and eyes with a handkerchief. Nick seemed to be consoling her. They spoke in whispers too soft for Ryz'n to hear. Their heads bowed, foreheads touching, their arms circled about each other's waists. Yet when they parted, the teacher kissed Nick lightly on the lips. What Ryz'n saw, peeping through that eye-spy, nearly destroyed her. Her adult female role model and the boy she really cared for—*together*. It was too much. She hurried away in despair. R-J lingered, like a hungry vulture to see what would happen next. Minutes later, R-J ran down to the office, out of breath, catching up with her—

"Do you believe that!?" R-J was in seventh heaven. "Wait tillJohnny hears about this—and Missus Allein! Ha! Ha! Allena's gonna be so jealous. Bet she dumps Little Nick in a hot flash. After you left, Missus Severe gave him a huge hug. But think Little Nick saw me. I *know* he saw me. That's when I beat it. She'll get fired for sure. Yeah, they'll hafta fire her after this. Sure as—"

"No. No, they won't! Because *you* are going to keep your mouth shut R-J."

"Yeah, sez who?"

"Sez me!"

"You? Ha! Like to se ya try it, you little pip-squeak."

"Don't push me R-J, I don't fight fair. Besides, as Senior Class President now, I'm in a position to help you or hurt you, and I can go either way."

R-J bit her lower lip, looking away, considering her options. Finally, she said "Okay, Ryz'n. I'll keep quiet—for a while anyway."

"You better, because if I learn a word of this gets out, I'm blaming you."

"But that's not fair. Someone else could squeal."

"Yeah, who? Not me. That's for sure. And you know Missus Severe won't say anything. And neither will Nicky."

"Yeah? How do you know he won't? Little twerp'd probably love to brag he was frenchin' a teacher."

"No, Nicky's not like that. He wouldn't do that—I didn't see any *frenchin'* going on anyway."

"Yeah, well *I* sure did. Saw that right away when we first got there. And what makes you such an expert on Little Nick, anyway?"

"I … I just know him better than that. That's all."

"*Really?* Ever think he'd suck tongue with Missus Severe like that?"

Ryz'n felt trapped. She feared she might lose her stomach at the very suggestion. She felt defeated, ashamed for both her idol and her ideal.

"Well, I didn't see that." Then, recalling her lone date with Nicky last year at the Base pool, she added. "And I know he's not the type to kiss and tell. Never has that I know of. He kept Li'l Mo a secret until she moved away."

"Well, there's a first time for everything."

"Look, if it'll make ya feel any better R-J, if it gets leaked and I confirm it came from Nick, you're off the hook. But otherwise, I'm blamin' you."

Ryz'n stalked out the door, leaving R-J behind.

"Hey. Wait a minute Ry. That's not fair. Hey. You said you'd gimme a ride home."

R-J ran after her but Ryz'n had not wanted to be around anyone, least of all R-J. The secret double hurt she had experienced had been too much for her to bear. She decided then that Nicholas Sheeboom was out of her plans for good. The image of her idol and her ideal together had made her ill. She never wanted to see Mrs. Severe again either.

Ryz'n chuckled at that recollection now. She recalled she'd taken R-J home then retired to her room where she kept to herself. Stayed a recluse for ovr a week until Don finally persuaded her to stay with him, his folk's and some other kids from school at his folk's beach house in Rehoboth. Her folks agreed. They liked Don—trusted him. They didn't think as well of Nicky. At least, her dad didn't, not after Nick had dated her kid sister Sheena a couple weeks last winter.

At the end of the Fourth of July weekend, Don screwed up by getting busted. Nick divulged the ill-advised secret pact Don had made with him. Nick said that at the start of school a year ago, after her first and only date with Nicky, Don had convinced Nick that he was a pariah, a troublemaker. And any association Nick might have with Ryz'n would only bring her down. He told Nicky that if Nick had any true, real feeling for her, he'd back off before he brought her down to his level, ruining her reputation for life as he had Little Mo's. Like an idiot, Nick bought into the pact on condition that if Donny did something to mess her up, the pact was off. At Don's urging, Nick agreed to keep their pact secret from her. When Don nearly landed both her and Sheena in jail because of the beach bust, Nick figured Don had blown that pact to smithereens. When Nicky told her about it, the real reason he'd kept his distance from her all last year, she dumped Don in a heartbeat to take up with Nicky. The rest was history.

And they had been together ever since. Funny thing was Don had been right about Nicky after all. Because of Nick, Ryz'n was in the worst trouble of her life. But he wasn't solely responsible for her condition and she knew it. She had more than merely contributed to her present predicament. Really, she had only herself to blame. If she had stuck to her catechism, to the Roman Catholic values she always held to be true and proper, she wouldn't be pregnant now. But she had wanted him as much as he had wanted her. More probably, though he didn't know that. And their first time together in the night mist down on the levée bank between the beaver ponds was truly special—something she would never-ever forget, something like a glorious, love-lust, fog-filled, romantic dream, like something out of a corny, romance novel.

They had been drinking a little. Gusti, the restaurant-club owner and a personal friend of Nick's, had slipped her unfinished wine bottle into a paper sack when they had left the restaurant after dinner. Then they'd gone mini-golfing. Afterwards, they stopped by Truley's to purchase some illegal liquid libation. But they weren't drunk—tipsy, maybe, happy—feeling all right. But each of them had known exactly what they were doing on their first night of romance. She loved Nicky more than anything now, except perhaps, just *perhaps,* for his seed growing inside her. She felt bad about their recent quarreling. Their public fight this morning in Home Room had tumbled out of both of them, due to their mutual frustration rising from their abstinent state of grace.

Against their wills, her folks and the Church had conspired to force them apart. That is, to remain celibate until the wedding. Despite her pregnancy, and all the havoc it had wrought, she never regretted giving her virginity to Nicky that night in the mist on the levée bank between the beaver ponds. No. Her mistake had been in abandoning the pill. When her prescription expired after school ended, she didn't refill it. Thought she hadn't needed it anymore. She never consulted her doctor about her decsion. The medication had served its purpose. Her cycles had stabilized and become innocuous.

She had never considered using the pill as a prophylactic. For her, it was medicine, pure and simple. She had taken it to avoid suffering the terrible, physical effects caused by her periods. Those side effects had been so severe, so pernicious, they had forced her to miss so much school that she barely escaped having to repeat tenth grade.

After her tryst with Nick, she had no reason for concern. She was infertile, a fact confirmed by every doctor she had visited. So when Nicky came along a month after her prescription ran out, she never really considered the need for a prophylactic. Well, she didn't have to worry about her period now, just morning sickness and her new-found aversion to Nicky's scent. Before her pregnancy, his scent, used to turn her on. It reminded her of a mixture of Old Spice, pine needles, sunshine and a little clean sweat. She learned that Dramamine, before she went to bed or visited Nick, along with saltine

crackers and a couple sips of Pepsi, before she got out of bed in the morning, cured her nausea. Of course, her pregnancy remained but that was okay.

She just couldn't think about that now. But if Mrs. Allein and R-J could somehow prove their assertions about her pregnancy by Nick in court—no. She wouldn't think about that now either. She wouldn't. She needed to get to Nick's trial to support her man. She needed to apologize for their private argument last night and their public one this morning in Homeroom. She recalled the gleeful sneer on R-J's puss, as she had watched her and Nicky go at each other in Homeroom, eating up their discontent with a spoon—

"—Lola!" Nicky loved that tune! Made it their lead-in song to the Top 40 segment of their act. She turned it up.

"*… and it tastes jes' like Cherry Cola. C-O-L-A—cola-ah …*"

Yeah, she needed to talk to Nicky alone. They had quarreled badly last night when she dropped him off at home after their Pre-Cana class. And their spat had carried over to Homeroom this morning. She must make it right. It was her fault and she must apologize. R-J's sinister words, as she left the meeting earlier — "*Yours, too*" — yet rang in her ears. Ryz'n had to follow through on this thread about R-J. Something wasn't right—something in the brazen, knowing way R-J had said spoken those words, like a not so veiled threat. Why had R-J spoken that way? What did she know now that Ryz'n did not? R-J had said earlier that she'd been questioned as a potential witness at Nick's trial.

R-J had nothing to do with the accident, not a dang thing. Why would the State's Attorney want R-J to testify against Nicky? To get some dirt on him maybe? But R-J's allegations about Nicky and the teacher had proved false. The confrontation in the principal's office had proved that. Hadn't it? Had Miss Bucksalter changed her story? Whew! If so, she would be fired just as R-J had predicted. Could that be possible?

Traffic still wasn't moving. Ryz'n thought she might cut across the wide, grassy median to make a U-turn to backtrack off this darned Parkway. It wasn't as hot as it had been, but it was still warm and muggy. Feeling clammy, she reached up to unlatch the locks to the Monza's convertible roof, lowering the top. She felt a puff of a breeze, but not much. Still it was better with the top down. At least it was when the sun hid behind the patchy clouds. Indian summer was upon them. She sighed deeply, feeling as though she could breathe again. The driver of a fire engine red Mustang in the right lane beside her stared hard, smiling at her. Hmmmpf. More like leering at her.

—The news. She flipped back to WEEM—"Patches." When Nicky performed that song, he actually cried—had tears streamin' down his face. Ryz'n shook her head. Made the audience cry, too. He was a natural showman. But that R-J was something else.

She had slipped Ryz'n a piece of gossip down at the beach over the Fourth. R-J had said that after the last half day of school, she had enlisted Brandy Fuller and her VW Beetle to follow Mrs. Severe home. This was after R-J had spied Nick in the faculty

parking lot, loading boxes of books into the teacher's Dodge Swinger, not to mention tying his bike down in her trunk. She said that after Nick had stowed the bike, he climbed into her car. Brandy and R-J had followed Mrs. Severe and Nick all the way out to some new townhomes in Kargo, where Nicky carried the boxes inside for the teacher. R-J and Brandy had waited, and waited, but Nick never came out.

When Ryz'n had questioned Brandy to verify R-J's story, Brandy said they had waited forty-five minutes before Brandy had become fed up. School had been on a half-day schedule with no lunch period and Brandy hadn't eaten. Brandy told R-J that she was hungry and had places to go. Sitting in the summer heat in a Kargo parking lot with R-J and a growling stomach wasn't her idea of how to begin summer vacation. She said R-J had wanted her to stick around longer, but Brandy took R-J home. R-J had refused to tell Brandy what was going on. Told Brandy she "was sworn to secrecy." Brandy said she sort of had forgotten about the incident over the summer and, unlike R-J, didn't have the urge to pursue the matter further. At least that had been a break in Nick's favor.

A couple weeks later in mid-July just before Nicky screwed up his ankle playing ball, he had learned that R-J planned to spill the beans on Mrs. Severe. After her divorce at the close of school last spring, Mrs. Severe started going by her maiden name of Bucksalter. Upon learning of the teacher's divorce, R-J just couldn't keep her mouth shut any longer, just couldn't contain herself. She told Johnny she'd take her chances with Ryz'n's threat of reprisal. When Nicky learned of her plans through Johnny, he made Johnny a deal.

Johnny wanted Nick and his fleet feet and flypaper hands to catch touchdowns for him on the gridiron this fall. He said with Nick out there at flanker, running the new pro-style offense Coach Garth was installing, they could score forty points a game. Johnny claimed he'd be a shoe-in for a big time college scholarship.

Problem was: Nicky didn't want to play football. At five-seven, he only weighed about a hundred and forty pounds, if that. Shoot, Ry bet R-J weighed nearly as much. And Nick didn't want to wrestle anymore either. He had injured his thumb badly wrestling last winter, which had screwed him up for the start of baseball, almost costing him a spot on the team. And he didn't want to get all beat up playing football either. More importantly, Nick said he didn't want to take time away from her and the band. Oh, did she love him for that. Though she said she'd like to see him score a few touchdowns. But he said baseball and running a little track in the spring—the sprint relays in the districts and states, if he made it that far again—suited him just fine. But Johnny was insistent, as only he can be when he wants something badly enough. So Nicky made Johnny a deal. If Johnny would keep R-J quiet about the Mrs. Severe mess, Nick would play football.

Well, that had worked just fine until Johnny grew tired of R-J's mouth and sassy ways. Johnny thought he didn't need another sassy woman on his case. His mother was sufficient. When he complained to Nick about R-J at the start of school, Nick introduced

Johnny to the new transfer student Trish Ryker on a blind date at the private Ping-Pong party down in Nick's basement. Nick figured Trish could meet all of Johnny's needs without the sassy mouth and he was right. At least, Ryz'n heard she did—well—most of them anyway. She and Trish sat next to each other in Homeroom so Ryz'n knew the score between Trish and Johnny. R-J sat behind Trish who sat behind her because, in Homeroom, they sat in alphabetical order by last name—three names starting with *R-Y*. Talk about two chicks that despised one another. Each day without a catfight between R-J and Trish was a gift from heaven.

Nick never thought Trish and Johnny would fall in love. Never figured R-J would really implicate the teacher once the new year started. He was wrong. When Johnny dropped R-J like a hot rock, the floodgates to her wrath opened wide. Angry-jealous and free of any coercion from Johnny now, R-J had seen her chance to strike back at both her and Nicky by squealing to the principal Mr. Marant. But that went nowhere because Nicky had squelched R-J's lurid allegations with his able defense. So maybe Nicky should represent himself in court?

—Afro-Sheen commercial on WEEM. Back to RGC. "Close to You," The Carpenters. Oh, she'd heard it a zillion times but still adored the song. Reminded her of how she felt about Nicky. He had predicted the ballad would go to number one—did that all the time. She sang along with the chorus. When the song ended, she resumed her thoughts—

So the second week of school, RJ had informed Principal Marant of the goings-on between Nick and the teacher at the end of school last year. She named Brandy Fuller as an eyewitness to Miss Bucksalter's driving Nick to her townhome in Kargo and Ryz'n as an eyewitness to the smooching scene in the classroom. A week ago, Mr. Marant called that meeting with her, Nick and Miss Bucksalter in his office after the last bell. R-J and Brandy were conspicuously absent. Miss Bucksalter said nothing. It looked bleak for the teacher, until Nicky stepped forward like F. Lee Bailey and a knight in shining armor …

> Miss Bucksalter sat primly on the edge of a large armchair, like a marble statue, staring straight ahead out the lone window, located behind Mr. Marant's desk in his spacious office. Ry's former idol sat downcast, humbled, like a lamb before slaughter. Her slender, clear face, high cheek bones and bright blue eyes were expressionless, almost as if she were not present at all. She wore school colors: an old-gold blazer with a blue and tan-brown crest over her modest, left breast. Underneath the blazer, she wore a light blue blouse with a buttoned down collar and a navy blue, A-line skirt, hose and a pair of matching navy pumps. As usual, her hair was done up in a French twist, while her bangs swept down over the left side of her forehead, without a hair out of place. Her complexion was exquisite; her features, immaculate. She could have posed for a cosmetics commercial. She looked like Julie Christie as Lara in *Dr. Zhivago*.

Like a golden, marble goddess, the teacher sat ramrod straight on the edge of the armchair, with her knees together and her hands clasped in her lap. Her sleeved forearms rested on her thighs. Leaning slightly forward, she seemed calm, composed, accepting of her fate. The high collar of her blouse held a navy ribbon bow and rose above the collar of her blazer. Ryz'n's English teacher sat in sort of a trance-like state, staring vacantly out the window behind the principal's desk, disdaining any eye contact. But not Nicky.

Ryz'n was proud of the way Nick took charge of that awkward meeting, taking the teacher's side. Rising from his chair, he turned the tables on Mr. Marant, who sat behind his big desk. Nick confronted him about the cowardly way Mr. Marant would not let them face their accusers. Nick explained everything to the principal's satisfaction. About how, he and Mrs. Severe—Miss Bucksalter—had been at odds all year in the classroom, which Ryz'n, having been in the same class, could and did verify. How he and the teacher had made up at year's end with tearful apologies and a friendly embrace. Nick assumed the blame for their innocent kiss, promising the teacher was guiltless.

Ryz'n had been present to testify to what she had seen between Nick and the teacher. She confirmed that she had not seen any kind of sexual misconduct, no "wet-kissing on the mouth," as alleged, only a light peck.

Nick admitted that he had helped Miss Bucksalter cart her stuff to her car that last day, as he had helped a few other teachers before her, like Mrs. Mote and Mrs. Rondell. So, by way of thanks, Miss Bucksalter had fixed lunch for him at her place. While they ate, he said they had shared their mutual interests in literature, mostly American Literature, which was the subject she had taught them, and baseball. Nick said he had been surprised to learn that baseball was the teacher's favorite sport, as it was his. Then Miss Bucksalter drove him home. There had been no hanky-panky.

Nick told Mr. Marant he knew R-J was their accuser, surprising Miss Bucksalter, bringing her out of her zombie-like trance for an instant. Nick explained R-J's twisted personal motives for making the accusations—the whole deal about R-J blaming Nick and Ry for Johnny throwing R-J over for Trish. Nick even had the gall to warn Mr. Marant about R-J's blabby ways. He noted that R-J had been the source of other gossip, which had harmed others. Such as the prattle that had prompted a respected faculty member's transfer to another school. He also pointed out that R-J was the one who blabbed about the suicides of two students the last couple of years, creating unnecessary heartache for their siblings in school. Nick claimed R-J was the leak in the front office. He suggested the principal reprimand her and warn her to behave. Nicky even had the nerve to imply that he wouldn't be surprised if R-J started to spread some manure about him and Ryz'n now, just to get even.

Ryz'n loved the way Nick had set up R-J up for the fall on that one. Nicky was something else all right. Ryz'n smiled to herself now when she recalled the confident

way Nicky had thundered at the principal, in front of her and the teacher. How cleverly he had set R-J up for anything she might say in the future about them and her pregnancy. Nick had spoken forcefully, confidently, never missing a beat. She marveled now as well as then at how Mr. Marant had been taken aback, fumbling over himself, promising he would do just that. Yes, Nick had that pompous excuse for a principal backpedaling faster than a one-legged, circus dwarf on a unicycle, being chased by an elephant. Then, just like that, Mr. Marant said he would dismiss the matter concerning Miss Bucksalter. He said he understood that she was a highly capable and respected teacher. But he added, as a lovely young novice, enamored by the male teens she taught, she needed to learn to appreciate her position. He hoped this experience would make her less naïve. But he warned both Nick and the teacher that any further allegations would result in a more formal inquiry.

> Sitting frozen, like an iceberg, Miss Bucksalter endured the meeting. Must have been an ordeal for her. Like a golden Billy Budd before his hanging, the woman stared straight out the window, as if she weren't even there. Nylon stockings covered her knees, pressed together, lady-like, hands folded primly in her lap, without a peep, except for when Mr. Marant asked her a direct question. And when she had spoken, she avoided eye contact, speaking as if she were referencing someone else and not herself. Ryz'n had found her behavior curious. Unlike Nick, Miss Bucksalter displayed no righteous indignation or any hint of emotion, other than perhaps that of a whipped dog. She never spoke for herself. In the end, she merely bowed her head, replying softly, "Yes sir." Nick had done all the talking for both of them. Ryz'n left the principal's office with Nicky and the teacher through the side door that exited into the main hall, which was empty then since school was out for the day.
>
> After Nick closed the door behind them, the teacher did something that froze in Ryz'ns mind. The Lara—Julie Christie look-alike stopped Nick there in the hall, taking him by the hand. Squeezing his hand between both of hers, she looked up to him with moist eyes. Speaking in a hoarse whisper, almost too faint for Ryz'n to hear, she said "God bless you, Nicholas." Sullen then, head bowed, she turned on her heel to walk sadly away down the hall towards her classroom. In that moment her former idol seemed so small, so frail. Like Lara walking down an empty Moscow street into obscurity at the end of *Dr. Zhivago*, Miss Bucksalter walked down the empty school hallway.

Any budding jealousy Ryz'n had felt for the woman vanished in that moment. Her status as a role model faded into her past forever. She felt nothing at all for her now, pro or con. Ryz'n had thought no more about it. But now she wondered if there wasn't some truth in R-J's allegations. The way the teacher had reacted to the whole incident had been so very queer. Ryz'n consoled herself that all of the grist for R-J's charges had taken

place *before* she and Nick had come together as one. Even so, one of the most maddening qualities about R-J's gossip was that the girl *usually was right*. Ryz'n had to give her that. She was right on about her pregnancy. So, was it truly gossip, if the girl spoke the truth?

Ryz'n preferred not to think about that possibility. She contented herself with being grateful for the way Nick had set up R-J to Mr. Marant for any future allegations she might make against them. Yet, her wrath did not extend to chastising R-J, unless the girl's accusations proved too vehement. She hoped it wouldn't come to that. She might lose. Homeroom was enough of a battleground between R-J and Trish. Adding her voice to the holler in the front row would drive the class ballistic.

Still, the issue of the teacher's possible unconfessed guilt surfaced again to bother her. The woman never did defend herself. And maybe Nicky "doth protest too much." No matter how hard Ryz'n tried, she couldn't seem to let it out of her mind. She recalled asking Nicky about Mrs. Severe on a couple of occasions, during some of those intimate, private time-outs in between turtle-doving sessions. Last time was out at Clear Lake in the moonlight behind the third base dugout in front of the tree brake. She remembered Nick getting a far-off look in his eye, saying, "Bobbi's a good woman. I never should've been so mean to her in class all year. You recall how I was. I shoulda been a bigger man than that." Peering into her eyes, he said, "Only hope I can be a bigger man for you, Ry."

Now how silly was that? *Bigger?* He was plenty big enough for her. She recalled leering back at him. And though she didn't utter a word in response, in her mind, she thanked God for him. When she couldn't wait any longer, probably no more than a few seconds in real time though it seemed like minutes, she rolled over onto him, letting her actions speak for themselves. As she remembered, they put the matter to bed in raucous fashion. That was a good one. Thus had ended forever their discussion of Mrs. Severe.

"—Ain't no mountain high enough can keep me from you!" Diana Ross. That's right Baby, no mountain's gonna keep me from you, but this traffic is sure doing a heckuva good job of it—Pickles!" Ryz'n guessed Diana Ross didn't need the Supremes after all. Yet, she felt bad they'd been left behind.

Still, if she happened to see the teacher in the hallways, which was seldom, Ryz'n wondered. Knowing Nicky as she did, was that *really all* he and the teacher had done? *Just talk* about literature and baseball *all* afternoon? Did he ever go back for any further *discussions*? Nicky never said. His pat response was: "I make it a rule never to talk about my associations with the fairer sex." He'd added that she had "nothing to worry about regarding me and Bonnie." And he let it go at that. Not wanting to pry or make a nuisance of herself, she hadn't pushed him. Besides, she was glad of his rule, because it applied to her as well. Still, she wondered sometimes all right. And hoped, because of R-J, she wouldn't find out at the trial. She didn't want to think about that either.

Ryz'n turned into a slight breeze brushing the right side of her face. Diana Ross had climbed the mountain. RGC played "The Rapper." She hadn't heard that one for a while.

From the corner of her eye, behind her wrap-around shades, she spied a guy in the red Mustang convertible eyeballing her from the right lane. She heard what sounded like fire engine sirens up ahead nearer the intersection. The guy next to her was still staring. Ryz'n searched for her foot-long purse, finding the clutch half under the passenger seat. Must have fallen when she stopped suddenly back there entering the Parkway.

Unzipping the purse lengthwise, she searched for her green, mesh scarf. Found everything but: wallet, comb-brush, prescription bottle of Dramamine, lip gloss, compact, two ballpoint pens, unopened package of tissues, a pair of tampons, opened pack of chewing gum, a button she had been meaning to sew back on a blouse, her ever-present vial of honey and an elastic, green hair band. Everything a girl needs, but no scarf. She settled for the hair band, pulling it over her head and ears and below the hair above the nape of her neck. She opened a stick of gum, plopped it into her mouth, sticking the wrappers in the ashtray. Ryz'n wondered where she had put the scarf. From the wail of sirens ahead, this was no mere fender-bender. The clock was ticking.

Leaning across the red vinyl passenger seat, she opened the glove compartment to find the scarf. She heard a car door open and shut. Reaching for the scarf, a shadow fell across her arm shading her face. She looked up to find a man standing between her and the sun next to the passenger door. He had sandy hair, cut Beatles' mop head style, with a matching, trimmed mustache growing over his lip, like a still caterpillar. Looked to be around thirty, but it was hard to tell because, like her, he hid his eyes behind dark Hollywood glasses. Tan, about six feet she figured. His snug-fitting, unbuttoned, navy blue Ban-Lon shirt and tight grey slacks revealed a lean, muscular build with a strategic tuft of sandy chest hair rising above his open collar. He smiled easily at her, reminding her of the lounge lizards she'd seen at some of their club gigs.

"Help you find something?" He motioned towards the seat with his hand. "Been watchin' ya huntin' around there. Thought mebbe I could help ya, uh, find what you need." He grinned. On the radio, "*—Rap, rap, rap—you know what he's after.*"

"No help needed. Got it, thanks."

Ry didn't smile. Removing the hair band and sticking it in her clutch, she took the scarf from the compartment, shutting the drop-down door, then tied the scarf around her head beneath her chin in place of the hair band. Ignoring him, she stared straight ahead, where sirens wound down. Fire engines must have located the trouble.

"Could use a stick of that gum, you don't mind?" He grinned. She looked at him.

The guy just stood there with his weight shifted casually over his left hip. Ryz'n extracted a stick of gum from the pack in her opened purse. He reached for the door handle but stopped to catch the gum she flung at him. "Spearmint. Umm. My favorite,

too." He spoke as if they were old friends. Eyeing her, he unwrapped the gum, sucking it slowly into his mouth, licking his tongue over his thin lips. He tossed the wrappers over his shoulder and grinned.

"Looks like we're gonna be here a while. Mebbe pass quicker if we wait it out together, get to know each other a bit."

"—Rap, rap, rap, ya know what he's afta …"

Ryz'n pushed the gum pack into her purse, zipped it closed and shoved one end of the purse down in her lap, wedging it between her legs. The creep sneered. Staring straight ahead, she clenched her teeth, hiding beneath her scarf and her wrap-around, shades.

"Name's Ron Randall, with two L's. What's yours?" He reached for the door handle again. She had had enough of this traffic jam and quite enough of this jerk, too.

Ryz'n turned the steering wheel hard left and stepped on the gas as the creep fell back from the door up against his car in the other lane. She left him stumbling there as "The Rapper" gave way to Neil Diamond's "Solitary Man." Chuckling at the irony of the song and her situation, she just missed scraping the left rear bumper of the car in front of her.

Ryz'n drove down through the grassy swale, across the median and up the other side onto the westbound dual lanes of the Parkway. No traffic headed in that direction. Catching asphalt, she turned onto the road to drive west, past what Nick jokingly referred to as "the Sweetland Beach." The "beach" was a grassy embankment with a southern exposure longer than a football field that sloped upward maybe fifty yards above the highway. Empty today. But on summer weekends, sun worshippers lay in the grassy slope on blankets next to transistor radios and coolers, prompting the beach euphemism.

Ryz'n spied a dirt lane posing as a service road and turned off the Parkway. She followed the lane briefly back through a dead end at the rear of an apartment complex. Slowing through a maze of parking lots and asphalt lanes in the complex, she checked for kids darting between parked cars. She made it out to the light at Sweetland Road, trying to decide which way to turn at the T-intersection. If she went left, she'd probably get caught up with the Census Bureau workers leaving for home. To her right was her dad's air base and that homeward-bound crowd. She waited behind a couple cars for the light to change. A horn beeped behind her. She checked the rear view mirror to spot the creep in the red Mustang. He smiled, shaking his index finger at her as if she were a naughty girl.

What a jerk. Ryz'n shook her head then edged the Monza around the cars in front of her. She squeezed the Monza in between them and the curb on her right where she turned right on red. Traffic was clear in that direction.

With the Mustang right on her tail, she made a Ubie across the double yellow lines of the two-way, single lane road in time to sneak through the light. Sandwiching between oncoming cars just as the light changed from yellow to red, she left the Mustang behind.

Ryz'n changed channels when RGC went to a commercial. Via the rear view mirror, she observed the Mustang, unable to complete the Ubie. He nearly hit a black T-bird when the Thunderbird stopped for the red light in front of the creep. The Mustang was trapped between the T-Bird in front and other cars behind him by the red light. Trying to use the shoulder again, the Mustang's driver attempted to pull his car around the black T-Bird in front of him. But the big bird pulled over, blocking him off. As more cars filed to a stop behind the Mustang, Ryz'n watched via her mirror. The T-Bird's driver-side door opened. An enormous black man stepped out, leaving the door open into the street.

WEEM was playing "Express Yourself." She laughed as the black man lumbered back to speak with Ron Randall "with two L's." Ryz'n shook her head, mumbling, "Well Ron, looks like you're going to have that get-acquainted chat after all. Mebbe it'll pass the time more quickly? Hey. Express yourself!" She laughed, watching her admirer in the Mustang and his new friend recede from view, until they vanished from sight.

That brand of unwanted attention occurred with her kid sister all the time, ever since she'd reached puberty. Sheena was gorgeous, with a classic hourglass build and what the guys called "bedroom eyes." Problem was, Sheena knew it, too. Ryz'n had been chubby through her early teens, with limp hair and an acne condition. So she never had Sheena's problem until she had lost weight over the past school year. "Baby fat," Nick had called it. On the pill, her complexion cleared up, too. Since the summer, when she started dressing "sharp" for Nicky, she was getting more of the unwanted Ron Randall's in her life. Never when Nick was around though, except once out at the Clear Lake State Park beach. That had been her fault. Nick had said it was because she was too naïve.

A red light halted her, caddy-cornered across from the Sweetland water tower and the Census Bureau. A car ahead of her kept her from going right on red. Waiting for the light to change, Ryz'n zoned out again on the lake incident.

> Dipping up to her neck in the brown lake water, she was careful not to wet the hair she just piled on top of her head with burettes. She had found a cool spot, just inside the buoyed rope line of the state park's swim area. No breeze, no white-caps. Nick lay up on the sandy beach with his bum ankle in a leg cast. Four tow-headed boys, probably vacationing teens, like her and Nick, swam over to offer her a motor boat ride and a chance to water-ski. They pointed to the boat, anchored not too far outside the rope. Sounded like fun. She told them she'd have to ask Nick. The boys followed her out of the water back to Nicky, lying on his beach towel. She asked him if they could go for a boat ride. But when the boys said only Ryz'n was welcome, Nick declined for both of them.
>
> The largest of the boys kicked at Nick's cast. When the kid took hold of her shoulder, Nick placed his crutch's rubber, stub-end across the boy's forearm. The kid shoved it away, but Nick brought it back onto his arm hard. The kid erupted. He dived at Nick, lunging for Nicky's throat. But Nick was too quick

for him. He swung the crutch into the kid's path, impaling the boy's diaphragm on the stub-end. Knocked the wind clear out of the kid. The lifeguard appeared out of nowhere to shoo the blonde teens away. He said they were bad dudes—troublemakers. He had warned them off the beach before.

Yes, she had learned a valuable lesson about talking too friendly with strangers.

The light changed. She turned off Sweetland Road onto dual-laned Crest Hill road, joining homeward-bound Census Bureau commuters. She drove past Sweetland High on her left, where Nick's older half-brother had gone to school, and on down to triple-laned, Penn. Avenue extended. There, she turned right again. Ryz'n stopped the Monza at the red traffic light by Penn Glen Shopping Center on her left. Of course, another strange boy had approached her right after that deal and even stolen a kiss from her right in front of Nick—Little "Bwett." She reflected on what that little dickens might be doing now. She thought back again to that day at the Lake State Park Beach when she had met Bwett …

"You Really Gotta Hold on Me" played on her transistor radio, featured as a "golden oldie highlight." Nick turned it up. Sweating but happy for the diversion from the broiling heat, she said, "Remember the prom, Baby? When you got the guys to play this and sang it for me at midnight, just like I asked?"

"Yeah, you first heard it drivin' us to the base pool to teach me the twisty flips, start o' school last year."

"I remember. I remember. Our first date." She smiled and winked at Nicky.

She stood up in her red and yellow, hibiscus-flowered, two-piece suit to sing, cinching a towel, length-wise about her waist, swaying to the music, dancing slow on the nearly empty beach, putting on a show for her man. He said, "Are you something special or what? Why, you're, you're ..." Nick was speechless.

A small, sandy-haired boy with big brown, fawn eyes who had been playing nearby yelled out to Ryz'n in a loud, clear, high-pitched voice: "*Hey, bean-keen-ee girl! Dancing in the sand. Hey, bean-keen-ee girl! You're the best one in the land!"* Not much more than three, sporting a green bathing suit, drooping wet off his butt, the sway-backed little man stuck out his little, tanned pot belly at Ryz'n and grinned.

Astonished, Ryz'n stopped dancing to laugh out loud. Nick said, "The little tike took the words right out o' my mouth." Flashing white baby teeth, the boy half-skipped over to them, one foot in front of the other, scooting toe to heel, arms raised out to his sides for balance, walking like an Egyptian, leading with his small belly. His idea of dancing, she figured. Reminded her of Jackie Gleason, "—and away we go." Ryz'n bent over to the kid, kneeling down to his eye level to shake his hand. "Why thank you Mister, what's your name?"

"Bwett!"

Bwett stuck a finger in his mouth, batting his eyes in embarrassment. Nick adjusted her camera to snap a photo of her and her miniature admirer. She said, "Why thank you Master Bwett for a lovely compliment. So, how old are you?"

"Free!" He held up three, half-bent fingers in support of his claim.

"My, you're getting to be a big boy, aren't you?"

He nodded, grinning. The kid grew bold, 'Gibb me kiss?" Nick rolled his eyes and fell over laughing. Ryz'n laughed, too. She spoke seriously with the little fellow. "Well, I have to ask my boyfriend first? How 'bout it, Nick?" He nodded. "If I can get one, too," said Nick.

They noticed the rival Romeo's little twig poking out from beneath his droopy green swimsuit. Nick said, "Yeah buddy, she'll do that to you. Or mebbe he's just gotta go?" Nicky snapped a photo as she kissed the boy on the cheek. Throwing his hands up in a touchdown signal, Bwett cried, "Yipppeee!"

Then Ryz'n crawled over the blanket on her hands and knees, trying not to wrinkle it up again, to give Nicky a sexy kiss on the mouth. After they kissed, she noticed his stick rising inside his suit, too. She laughed at him. But Nick ignored her, saying "That was great Baby, but I meant from the kid."

Ryz'n faked a pout to scoot aside, while Nick, dragging his leg cast behind him, half-crawled, half rolled over to the edge of her side of the blanket next to the sandy-haired boy. "How 'bout it little guy? How 'bout a kiss for me on the cheek, too?" Nick touched his cheek, but the boy frowned, shaking his head no. This time Ryz'n took the camera to snap the picture. Instead of a kiss, Bwett offered Nick a handshake.

Nicky cried, "Alllriiiight!" He shook Bwett's small hand with a flourish, saying the little guy's folks didn't have to worry about this kid. The boy smiled. Ryz'n snapped another photo, as Bwett's mother strolled over.

"Come on now Brett, Honey, you've bothered these people long enough."

Bwett waved bye-bye and turned. Off he skipped to his mom, happy as a clam, arms flapping in the breeze like a bird's wings, singing his new composition. They watched him trip away, holding his mom's hand, not looking back, on to the next adventure.

"To be three again." Ryz'n mused aloud. "Love to have one like that someday Nicky." He didn't answer. The boy sang in a few simple words a tune that Nick, under a ton of wasted adjectives, had failed to compose for her all afternoon. She heard Bwett singing: " … *You're the best one in the land*."

Yes, she recalled thinking how she'd love to have a cute little fellow like Brett to care for someday and now—well—maybe now she would. She smiled. WEEM played a Motown golden oldie "Love Child." How appropriate was that? Yes, they had created a love child, despite all her doctor's former, wayward prognostications to the contrary.

And given the gynecologist's estimated timeline, conception had to have occurred their first time, that foggy night they had spent down at the beaver ponds. Knowing their

initial, misty romantic tryst as the source of the conception pleased Ryz'n very much, very much indeed. After Nick had submitted to fertility tests at her gynecologist's insistence, he was found to be infertile too. The doctors couldn't believe it. No one could. But it was true. Father V called hers the "miracle baby."

Yep. She was pregnant all right. Knocked up by Nicky Sheeboom. And to be honest, she was proud of it. It was difficult for her to keep the big family secret to herself. Her mom would just kill her if she revealed it. All her wise, learned physicians had told her she would never bear children. And she loved kids so much. Having sat for Sheena all those years while her mother worked part-time to help pay the bills, Ryz'n considered herself to be an expert with kids. There wasn't a child in the neighborhood for whom she had babysat who didn't claim her as their favorite sitter. Having a child now was a blessing she couldn't fathom, even if it had occurred sooner than she had wished.

Yes. She wanted to tell the world, but her mother, who had carried Ryz'n to term throughout her senior year of high school, wanted to shroud the pregnancy in secrecy. Having been through the ordeal herself, her mom said she knew what was best. Ryz'n usually tried to obey her mother. She liked to please, so she acquiesced. Despite the imposed shroud of secrecy, which tended to foster guilt, Ryz'n felt truly blessed. She would handle the stares of the scoffers later, after she began to show. Such temporary rejection would not overcome the joy that lived inside her. She had all she ever hoped for in Nicky and his seed growing in her. Maybe it was a bit sooner than she had hoped but, after all, who could turn down a "miracle baby?" Not she. Not Nick. That was certain.

—Commercial. Back to RGC, where Bread's "Make It With You" was ending. She sure wanted to make it with Nicky. Sure did—"Indiana Wants You" by R. Dean Taylor. She'd never heard of the guy before this song. But she couldn't take the lyrics. Couldn't help but think of Nicky and the law wanting him. More like "The State of Maryland wants you" to her. She switched back to WEEM—Diana Ross, "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" again. Must be on every station.

The long light changed. Ryz'n passed the shopping center, crossing over the intersection with Winston Pike under the Beltway overpass. The Sweetland Parkway light stopped her. Back to RGC, she caught the end of the golden oldie "Li'l Darlin'" by the Diamonds. She was glad she had told her mom she wouldn't be home to fix dinner.

With her mom working part time, Ryz'n did much of the cooking. Her dad and Sheena would be happy. Ryz'n would have fixed them another fish dish tonight. Maybe her mom would give them some red-meat instead. Her dad and sister were big meat and potato eaters. That Sheena could eat anything and not gain an ounce. Since Ryz'n had started eating right, about a year ago, she had come to enjoy fish and vegetables. Became a true mackerel-snapper, enjoying all kinds of fish—fresh water, salt water. It didn't matter. The fishier, the better. She'd cook fish for dinner seven days a week, if her family let her.

They used to serve fish only on Fridays. During lent, Tuesdays and Fridays. But with Ry cooking, she'd fix them fish three, four times a week. Her dad complained about fish odors. So her mom had a second, larger, more efficient exhaust fan installed. Sucked the fish smell out into the yard. Her mom had adopted Ry's "eat right" plan when she saw how Ryz'n had slimmed down. Her mother had lost twenty pounds herself since the Fourth. And like her, her mom enjoyed swimming. They often swam together in the recreation club pool at the Naval Research Laboratory, where her mom worked as a Budget Analyst a few days a week.

If Ryz'n had to eat meat, she preferred fowl to red meat. They served bread and butter, and potatoes and gravy for Sheena and her dad, while she and her mom enjoyed double portions of vegetables, raw or cooked. Her mom said she noticed they had acquired rosy complexions. Claimed the diet made her look and feel like a girl again. Whatever the reason, her mom did look younger, sprightlier. Her dad sure liked the results. That's why he sprung for the extra exhaust fan. Her dad said she and her mom could pass for sisters now, like on those TV commercials; twins, maybe. He noted that their countenances fairly glowed. Folks said Ryz'n looked radiant, even though lately, the occasional nausea cost her a bit of color she thought.

So fish had become a dinner staple. For dessert, she and her mom would eat fruit, fresh or canned, but Ryz'n preferred fresh. Even coconuts. She might have a bowl of ice cream or a milk shake once a week. And two donuts per week, one on the weekend and one on Wednesday. Yes sir, she was looking fit—slim and trim. And her mom was not far behind. And honey. Ryz'n carried a capped vial of honey in her purse. A couple honey drops a few times each day energized her, made her feel alive and sweetened her breath for Nicky. Her right-eating diet and strenuous swimming and exercise routine had given her a new lease on life. Sculpted her body into what Nick called "a heavenly form," pleasing them both—"Look What They've Done to My Song" now. Yes, look.

To her right, she noticed no cars backed up, waiting at the light coming off the Parkway. Must have been due to the accident at the previous intersection where she had been stuck. She had made a wise decision to get off it.

Tired of Top 40, Ryz'n punched up the oldies station. "Maybelline." Good driving song. Nick loved the oldies and, through him, she had learned to love them, too. With no more lights until she hit the Upper Winston exit, Ryz'n had clear sailing east down Route 4A in moderate traffic. Passing over familiar rural ground, she kicked back into cruise control to zone out once more.

Smooth sailing, a steady stream of golden oldies and thoughts of her man. What more could she want? Yes, Nick was her guy. There was no other. Could be no other. Didn't want any other. She had fallen for him first day of Homeroom their sophomore year, their first year of high school. Actually, the summer before that, when he first started to deliver her dad's newspaper. But he hadn't known she existed. Gee, seemed like so much longer than two years ago now. Seemed more like a lifetime. Her previous boyfriend Don had received little more than a goodnight kiss from her throughout their entire junior year of dating. But Nicky was different. It had taken over two years for her to get next to him. She wasn't about to let him go now, just because he was in a little hot water.

His loving embrace explained and gratified all those confusing urges and yearnings she had felt the last few years. He made her want to do things she never had allowed herself even to think about. Even though Mother Church had taught her not to entertain such thoughts, let alone actually practice them. Yes, Nicky was different. Before she had crossed that line with him in the night mist on the levée bank between the beaver ponds, she first had made up her mind he would be the only one for her—ever. Made him pledge as much to her, too—*forever*. Made him that promise, too. Her confident belief in their mutual pledge of love eternal had allowed her to be all she could be for him. Although her Catholic conscience sometimes reared its ugly head.

But just the sound of his scruffy baritone over the phone, or the pleasant sight of him, his casual, tiger-like gait, his easy manner, ready, flashing, white smile or his soft touch dissipated all doubts. And when he gave her that look with those fawn-like, inimitable close-set, two-toned peepers of his, he melted her right down inside like a candle. As one whose nature it was to please, she had refused him nothing. That lasted until she had to miss her next communion because she had not been to confession. And her mom had pried, asking why she had not received the host. So she had taken to attending a different mass from her family, usually on Saturday afternoon or very early Sunday morning.

Whenever she could persuade him, she'd cart Nicky along to mass too. He had no idea why she didn't take communion like everyone else. She knew he never gave it a second thought. He believed she was just being polite by staying in the pew with him since, as a Protestant, the Church discouraged him from taking the sacrament. But his sweet loving, and those time-outs and in-betweens that she lived for had overcome her strict Catholic conscience. Thankfully, the Dramamine had overcome her recent aversion to his scent, which she had adored before she had gotten pregnant.

It had been over two weeks since they had made love. Father Vizconni insisted they should remain pure now until he married them next month. Ticked Nicky off something

fierce. Her too, actually. But she didn't take on over it as much as Nicky did. Until last night when she had argued with him over nothing then blamed him for everything. She was wrong. She had to tell him today. Had to apologize now that she realized the real reason for her anger was fallout from their abstinence. Brenda Lee's "I'm Sorry" aired. The D.J. must be reading her mind. She felt alone and frightened, really hungry for Nick's tender, experienced touch, his cooing, sweet loving, turtle-doving to comfort and reassure her that everything would be all right.

But would it really? The truth was they all were worried-scared. Not just her mom but also her dad, Nick's folk's, Father Vizconni, even Sheena. Even Mr. Vamia did not sound as confident about Nicky's acquittal as he had at the outset. Not with that Judge Higher running things. Ryz'n worried too. Nick had never told her what happened the night of the accident. He said Mr. Vamia had advised him not to talk about it with anyone, not his folks, not her, not anyone. Nick did what he was told. It bothered her that he didn't trust her enough to tell her. She said they shouldn't start out keeping secrets from one another. He told her not to worry. He said it wasn't that he didn't trust her, because he did. But Mr. Vamia had warned him that this Perkouri was a tricky guy. Tricky, ruthless and ambitious were bad character traits for anyone, let alone an aspiring State's Attorney. Mr. Vamia said Perkouri would do whatever he deemed necessary to assure a guilty verdict. That included grilling Ryz'n on the witness stand in open court if he thought she might know anything. Nick promised that he trusted *her* all right, but not Perkouri.

Funny-strange, as Nicky might say. The only one who seemed confident in his innocence was Nick himself. When she had asked him why, Nick indicated he felt a peaceful calm about the situation that he really couldn't fathom. He had said that, though Mr. Vamia forbade him to speak in specifics, Nick felt that God was with him. God would see him through this matter. He said God had saved him that night. This, from the kid who didn't know the meaning of the word fornication? Who thought making love outside of marriage was simply fulfilling the golden rule?

Ryz'n had to agree that God is a God of love, not death. He wants people to live and love Him but according to *His* rules, not kill or cause the death of others no matter how sinful they might be. Or mess around outside of marriage, either. Nick had thought hard about that for several seconds before he'd said, "Well, we all die Ry. God let's that happen for all of us, doesn't He? It's just a question of when, where and how. Guess it was just the Buzzbees time. Besides, *He loves me*. You said so yourself. Remember? You told me that after I walked ya home from the Vernier's back-to-school party last year?" That was the night before their pool date and Nick made that silly pact with Don. Nick added, "Father V said the same thing. So ya see Ry, there's really nothin' to worry about. Is there?" Then he had smiled and kissed her. And, for that moment, her worries had vanished, only to resurface once he left her sight. He never did comment on the sex issue.

She recalled when this nightmare had started for her, the last Wednesday in July, her dad's birthday, down on their second story, front porch at their beach house in Kill Devil Hills with that first telephone call. Came on a sultry late July evening …

She, Nick, her mom, her sister Sheena and Sheena's latest boyfriend Bryson Mather sat on the front porch after supper, appreciating the ocean waves rolling onto Carolina's Outer Banks, the far side of the old beach road. They were mending fences over the fiasco that had occurred during the "touch" football game on the beach that afternoon, all except her dad that is. He had taken an Elmore Leonard western and a bottle of good Irish whiskey, retreating upstairs to his bedroom. Since it was his birthday, her mother hadn't scolded him for being rude. Her mom had gone inside to answer the phone. She swung open the screened, front porch door for Nicky.

"Nick you have a phone call, a Mister Franco Vamia. I told him it might take you a minute because of your cast, so there's no need to rush."

Beneath her bouffant hairdo, her mom smiled like Jackie Kennedy Onassis. Nick looked puzzled. Ryz'n helped him push up off the porch swing then handed him his crutch. The empty swing creaked as it moved up and back when they hopped off. Ryz'n stood back to let Nick hobble ahead of her on his calf-high ankle cast, across the plank floor of the screened-in porch to the door.

Curious, Ryz'n followed him inside. Nick hobbled on one crutch into the living room. She wanted to eavesdrop on his half of the conversation. She steadied him so he didn't trip and fall again, trying to go too fast as he had before. He looked good despite the cast. Barefoot, his heavy tan contrasted sharply against the snug, white T-shirt that clung to his muscular torso over powder blue, boxer swim trunks. The trunks, featuring a white racing stripe down each side and over the bottom hem, failed to conceal his firm, upturned rump. His legs were like inverted oaks. His tight T-shirt sharply defined his V-shaped torso, tapered waist, broad shoulders, and bulging biceps and triceps that strained against his crutches. A vein stood out down his arm like a mighty, long smooth bolt of lightning. His athletic frame and slim, girlish waist, like the rest of him, belonged solely to her now forever. He was hers, as he had pledged the other night at the beaver ponds.

Ryz'n stepped inside the airy, three and a half-story, wood frame house. Her mom touched her shoulder, whispering, "Your sister's right." She pointed to Nick's upturned backside, as he hobbled away from them. "He does have a cute behind, a very athletic build, just like a colored boy." Ryz'n looked at her mother as if she had blasphemed. "Your father used to look like that, but when you age, you tend to sag." Ryz'n gasped, "Mother, please." Her mom replied, "Well, it happens. Look at me." Her mom placed her fingertips beneath her enormous bosom, as if to lift it. She sighed. "This is what you have to look forward to."

Ryz'n shook her head, thinking her mother was only thirty-five. Her mom had a bad habit of projecting her fears to no one else but her, begging compliments by way of a flat contradiction. That was so typical of her. Ry refused to play that

game. She followed Nicky without comment into the spacious living room. Southerly evening breezes puffed out transparent white, gossamer curtains from open, screened windows in a lazy, evening dance ballet, cooling off a torrid summer's day. Nick set his crutch aside to lean against the back of the couch for support. Keeping his weight off his ankle cast, he picked up the receiver.

"Hello Mister Vamia, how're you doin'? Did that cash I paid ya bounce?"

Nick grinned, winking then half-turned away from her.

"What? What bad news?"

Nick had hair like hers: dense, dark and wavy, only his was darker, nearly black and combed back, greaser style behind large ears that lay flat next to his head. Long, wavy locks, uncut since the wrestling semi-finals, curved almost to his shoulders. Nick said it was better for business if he kept his hair long. Better for his band gigs, he meant. She understood.

"Re-file, why? I thought you said it was all over?"

She stared at his profile: straight, roman nose, similar to hers, firm chin, dark, broad, long arched eyebrows and lashes curling seemingly without end. His striking, clean, even features reminded her a lot of that striking young actor in a famous, old John Wayne, Technicolor western. Lean and hard-muscled, he might not be tall yet, but, at sixteen, Nicky had a great foundation and was still growing. And he did have an athletic frame. Her mom and Sheena were right about that. Nick carried himself like an athlete, because he was one. Ryz'n was proud of his feats on the baseball diamond. He had done more than his share to help their school to its first state championship of any kind. She noticed again the thick vein standing out from his bicep down his forearm. Deeply tanned and sexy as all get out. He was the one for her, but she would have to tame him. No more of that stuff, that—that flirtin' stuff with Sheena on the beach today.

"*Prosecutorial discretion*? But I don't, I don't get it. What the hell is that?"

Nick's naturally arched brow furrowed.

"Grand jury hearing? Shoot! For what? …"

"*Manslaughter*? *Judas priest!"*

Now he was upset, throwing his free arm in the air. Pivoting on his good foot, Nick noticed her listening. He waved her off, turning his back to her, hopping away on his good foot, steadying himself against the backside of the couch, the telephone receiver pressed to his ear.

"Tomorrow? What time?"

"Three's better…"

"Bond? How much you think?"

"Ten per cent, just a premium huh? All right, I'll stop by the bank on the way."

"No, I don't blame *you*, Mister Vamia…"

Biting her lower lip, Ryz'n wrung her hands as she was prone to do when she was nervous.

"All right, Bye." Ryz'n touched his forearm.

"What? What is it Baby?" But he hadn't hung up yet—

"I understand. Yes sir, I'll be there. Courthouse steps, three o'clock, right…

"Yeah, that's O-K Franco, thanks for letting me know … Sure … Yeah, bye."

Nick hung up then leaned back, half-sitting on top of the couch-back, stroking his chin, his back to her.

"What is it Baby? What's wrong?"

Nick rubbed his hands over his face and up over his forehead. He pressed he heels of his palms into his eyes, fingers apart, stretched upward. She walked around the couch that sat out in the open, perpendicular across the living room, to stand in front of him. A warm evening breeze wafted over them, chasing the gossamer curtains away from matching, long, open windows in the south wall.

"What's wrong Baby?" She reached out to stroke his forearm. "You can tell *me*." Nick lowered his hands to rest them by his sides on top of the couch-back to look at her. She reiterated. "You can trust me, Sweetie." He looked around, over his shoulder. But everyone else was out on the porch or upstairs. He faced her.

He whispered, "Can you take me home early tomorrow morning?"

"Sure I can, but we've only been here a few days."

"You said you'd take me home whenever I wanted to go, didn't ya?"

"Well sure Nicky, but —well, it would help if you'd tell me what this is all about, don't you think?"

He leaned in to confide in her as if they were a couple of secret agents wearing overcoats and pulled-down fedoras in a dank, fog-shrouded alley.

"Recall that terrible accident a month ago? Down in Surrettesdale?"

"The one where those two guys burned to death?" Nick nodded.

"Yeah." He dropped his chin to his chest. "Well." He sighed. "I was in it."

He leaned back for her reaction, as if that explained everything. Her mouth fell open. She covered it with her hand. "*No!*" He frowned, nodding his head.

"Yeah, I reported it to the police and everything through my attorney. That was him on the phone, Mister Vamia."

"The guy we had that victory dinner with at Gusti's the other night?"

"Yeah, if you can believe that now. Some victory celebration, hunh?"

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"Well, see, the State's Attorney had dropped the case against me and that was supposed to be the end of it. *Supposed to be* anyway. Never even got arrested or nothin'." Ryz'n shrugged. "So why did Mister Vamia call now?"

"Seems there's somethin' called prosecutorial discretion, which means the State's Attorney can change his mind, because, all of a sudden now, he thinks there's enough evidence to make a case against me."

"For what?"

"For leaving the scene of an accident and manslaughter, manslaughter by vehicle."

"*Manslaughter*?"

"Yeah. Two counts."

"What's that mean?"

"Means if they find me guilty, they can sentence me twice, once for each guy, ten years a piece, plus one to five more for leaving the scene."

"But you're not guilty, right? *Tell me you aren't guilty, Baby*."

Her hands stretched out before her as if she were groping in the dark. He looked long at her before saying, "No, I'm not guilty."

Sagging, she placed her hand over her heart. His pause alarmed her.

"So why do you have to go to the courthouse now?"

"How'd you know that?"

She motioned to the phone. "I just heard you."

"Oh, yeah. Well, Mister Vamia says it's all politics. Something about the State's Attorney for R. G. County resigned to become a judge, so his old job's available. And one of his assistants is hot to take his place. Guy wants to look tough on crime, 'specially youth crime. You know, to get elected this fall."

"But so what? You're no criminal."

"Yeah, I know. But Franco says violent crime is up in the County, 'specially among juveniles. Looks like they want to make an example of me, since the accident was so gruesome and on TV and all. And since I got a bit of a name. You know? Mebbe try me as an adult."

Nick threw up his hands only to let them drop at his sides. Ryz'n stepped into him, hugging him, burying her head into his chest.

"Try you as an adult? But that, that's ridiculous. You're only sixteen."

"Yeah. Well, Mister Vamia used to be an A-S-A and he's got a buddy—"

"What's that? A-S-A?"

"An Assistant State's Attorney. Think he said they went to law school together. He was the one who said I had nothing to worry about, why we had the celebration dinner. Anyway, he told Franco that the S-A's office wants to 'fast track' my case now ta make sure they finish it by the end of October in time for them to flaunt it for the election. Help 'em win, see?

"Sweet Lord. Sounds like they've decided the case against you already. What are we going to do, Sweetie?"

"Be at the courthouse by three tomorrow afternoon. Stop off at my bank first to draw out some bail money. Case I need it. You'll take me now, won't ya?"

She looked up. "Sure, of course I will. But what will tell my folks?"

"Tell 'em, uh, I'm a material witness for a traffic accident and the cops need ta talk with me. Like I was last year out in L.A."

"Okay. That should work. What time do you want to leave?"

"Up at six, and out by six-thirty? Can't be late. Gotta be at the jail by three."

"Anything you say."

"Then you're not mad at me anymore?"

Ry almost smiled. "No, I guess not."

"Good."

"Ya know I don't want to lose you, Nicky."

He caressed her face with both hands to kiss her. He whispered low. "Don't say anything to your folks, okay? Shoot, I haven't even told my own folks."

"But Nicky, that's not right. You're going to have to tell them sooner or later."

He shrugged.

"Maybe. But I want to make it as 'later' as possible. Think I got enough money to cover bail. And hopefully, maybe, enough collateral to cover the bond, based on what Mister Vamia guessed it would be. I mean, between my car and all my instruments and stuff."

"How much will that be?"

"Up to ten thousand dollars probably, for a first time offender with good standing in the community." Ry whistled low.

"Gee. That's a lot of money. You can't have ten thousand dollars though."

He shook his head. "No, but I don't have to. All I gotta do is pay the premium on the bail bond—ten per cent—and have collateral to cover the rest."

"Oh." Ryz'n paused to think. "Well, do you have enough collateral?"

"I dunno. Got my car. It's got less than ten thousand miles on it, and my instruments. Got almost three thousand between my savings and checking accounts and another nine hundred in a passbook savings account for college. And ya know I gotta lot o' high quality instruments. Think I might could scare up a few grand if I had ta hock 'em."

She reached up to caress his cheek.

"You can have whatever I've got, Baby—everything. It's not much, my baby-sitting and sewing and gift money, and my allowances, maybe twelve hundred?"

Nick took her in his arms, peering hard into her eyes.

"This is all I want of you Sweetie, right here."

He slid his hands down her back from her shoulders, over her waist and broad hips to double clutch on the double cheeks of what he liked to call her "double-bubble, basketball butt—the perpetual bustle." She peered back into his eyes. They kissed as if it was their last.

"You keep that money Ry. Maybe use a little of it to buy some sharp-looking clothes, okay? Makes me feel good to see you dressin' sharp, tough—sexy—ya know? Keep up my morale."

She smiled. "Okay, Sweetie." She reached up to embrace him again.

"Even better."

"—Oh crap! Looks like they've made up again." It was Sheena's voice.

Nick and Ryz'n turned their heads to see Sheena and her latest flame Bryson Mather, walking across the room towards the TV set through the front porch, screened doorway. "Liked it better when you two's fightin'." Nick started to reply but Ryz'n placed a hand on either side of his face, covering his mouth with hers before he could speak. Sheena moaned.

Ryz'n whispered, "Even better. So much better'n fightin'." He grinned.

* * *

Next morning in the Monza on the way home, they had gotten into a bit of a tiff. A hail and thunderstorm had hit them coming off Pitch Kettle Road onto the highway there, west of Suffolk. Afraid the hail might rip up the Monza's ragtop, she'd pulled onto the shoulder under an overpass there at the edge of the swamp to wait out the storm.

Ryz'n glanced warmly now at the empty passenger seat where Nicky had sat in his cast that stormy morning. He had looked so vulnerable, so delectable. Tan, muscular. Dark wavy hair down to his shoulders. His close-set, two-toned eyes like a wild animal's. Turned her right out. Full, soft, kissable lips—like a girl's. She recalled how she induced him to untie the spaghetti straps on her sundress. He sure liked that dress. Liked taking it off her, too. They had shoved the seat back to make out.

She caught herself blushing in the rearview mirror now at the recollection. Nicky had been worried that, despite the storm, someone passing by might see them. But they had steamed up the windows too much for anyone to see. Their tryst during that storm had been unbelievable. Ryz'n giggled, embarrassed even now by the recollection. Wasn't really romantic. Not at all like their first time at the fog-filled beaver ponds, not as she preferred, or maybe, not what she had told him she preferred. Though she was beginning to wonder now, what exactly she did prefer. Their front seat escapade had been so earthy, so bawdily spontaneous and rough-hewn, with an element of danger in being discovered. She had been oblivious to any passing cars. Oblivious to anything really, except—all of him. Until he delivered the final knockout punch, when they wilted into each other's arms. When she thought about how boldly she had behaved, she did love it so—and him—she meant him, too. Of course she did—*all* of him. She was both surprised and embarrassed by how much it—he—turned her on. Like the words in one of Nick's favorite oldies—*love is* indeed *strange*. And *once you have it, you never want to quit.* And *after you've had it, you're in awful fix.*

Yes. She *was* in an awful fix. And she didn't think she ever wanted to be put right or escape love's magical clutches again. Never had she felt such sensations, from the top of her tingling scalp to her curled toes. Even her hair seemed to have tingled. No, not misty, romantic love like their first time a week before at the beaver ponds, but she would take their front seat, car-loving anytime. She'd thought she might pass out when at last he finally let loose, after making her wait so long, building up to it. *Mann!* No amusement park ride could top the snaking roller-coaster he had steamed through her. They had basked in the afterglow while the dark storm raged outside. As her internal fireworks had winked out and the waves subsided, Ryz'n recalled feeling drained. She remembered telling Nicky she loved him so much that she just couldn't stand it. Then, unashamedly, she'd asked him to go again.

Her juices riled now just to think of it. They didn't talk much for some time after that. Just grunted mostly because she had gone hog wild for round two. Even better than the first. And she hadn't thought that possible. Better, because it required more effort to garner the same effect. Thankfully that had been a whopper of a storm, long and steamy, both in and outside the car. Traffic had been light. No one had stopped to see if they were in a state of distress—more like a state of undress. She giggled. Knowing her addictive

personality, she had feared her new-found amatory nature might turn to dissipation; a fact, she confirmed the following weekend when they stayed in Mrs. K's cathouse.

But even after stopping at his bank for the bail money later, they had reached the courthouse in time to meet Mr. Vamia at three. Then the police had interrogated Nicky and arrested him. Ryz'n recalled how distraught she had been, when the officers booked him then lead him away to jail in handcuffs.

After Nick's arrest, she had eaten a little supper at Riordan's with Mr. Vamia. Tried to eat anyway. The attorney had told her that probably Nick would be arraigned the next day. He could post Nick's bail bond then, but Nick would have to spend the night in jail. Tears filled her eyes to hear that. Mr. Vamia had tried to console her. A little too much, she thought. He had followed her home in his big Lincoln and offered to come into her house to talk and console her further, but she had declined. She'd tolerated his excessive concern over her well-being only for Nicky's sake, enough for one evening certainly.

With her folks still vacationing down on the Banks, Ryz'n spent a few tears at home alone crying into her pillow over Nick. It wasn't the first time. And it certainly hadn't been the last either. She never realized love could be so difficult, so taxing on her nerves. Not like in fairy tales. Nothing seemed to come easy with Nicky, except the romancing, the "turtle-doving," as he liked to call it. And that came rushing hot—electric and, in pulsating waves of pure joy.

So she had tried to console herself. After all, she had given him as fine a send-off as she could muster under the overpass, when they rode out the storm in each other's arms. Who was she kidding? At the time, she hadn't even known he *would* be going to jail. She had pogoed his lap through the storm because that's what *she* had wanted. Had she ever known such sheer pleasure? Her only regret was that she couldn't be riding him now.

Ryz'n snapped out of her reverie when she heard the Monza's tires passing over the grated, metal bridge across the river that separated Royal George from Lord Calvert County. She'd missed her turn. Now she had to go a couple miles out of her way down to the exit at Wayman's Corner before she could turn around. So much for her manual cruise control.

Glancing down, she spotted a half-revealed garter snap attached to her right nylon stocking. She hadn't realized that the hem of her dress had ridden up so far. Must have happened when she had shoved the purse into her lap earlier. No wonder that leering creep had wanted to get to know her better.

Hank Ballard's "Annie Had a Baby" played on the oldies station. "Double Pickles!" Nick loved that tune. He would. The song had a real raunchy R&B beat and lyrics.

… Annie had a bay-bee! Can't work no more.
No-no-no-no-no-noh-no-ohh!

Annie had a bay-beh! Can't work no more.
Every time we start to wor—king,
She has to stop and walk the baby 'cross the floor-oor-orr-orr.
…
She has to walk with the bay-beh!
Instead of me-ee-e
Talk to the bay-beh!
Instead of me-ee-e
Sing to the bay-beh!
Instead of me-ee-e
Cling to the bay-beh!
Instead of me-ee-e

Now I know, and it's—understood!
That's what happens when the gettin' gets good—Whew!

Nick listened to Franco interviewing prospective alternate jurors, but the attorney's voice faded. He recalled his first meeting with Franco in his office in the Oxen Mill professional building. Franco had said he was pretty sure Nick's case would never go to trial. But they had to be prepared if it did. "Hope for the best, but plan for the worst." That's what Franco told him. Nick understood. They had "to cover all the bases." At their second meeting, a week later at dinner, Franco said Nick was off the hook. He had spoken to his contact in the State Attorney's office, who had told him to forget it. There was "no need to worry." The State chose not to pursue the case. *Famous last words!*

Franco had treated him, Ry and Father Vizconni to dinner down at Gusti's that night. Surprised Franco that he had brought Ryz'n in place of Terri, whom Franco had invited, personally. Mr. Gusti had come over to their table to ask Nick to take the stage: "Give the folks a number on the piano." He did, performing "There Goes My Baby" at Franco's request, singing for his dinner so to speak, as he had sung for his beer for old man Truley. And "Since I Met You Baby" for Ry, a golden oldie but a tune new to her.

Then he'd coaxed Ry on stage to join him. He discovered quite by chance that she had a fine voice, kind of throaty not unlike Patsy Cline or Brenda Lee, but deeper, more a contralto than an alto. Had a rich timbre that sounded black, like him, yeah, very rich. First time she sang in public. Ry'd been drinking a little wine with her meal and he had sweet-talked her into it. She got a big round of applause. The headline band came on right after. He danced with her while Franco and Father Vince looked on. After that, he'd invited Ry into the band. The guys welcomed her with open arms. They didn't mind splitting their take with her because they were certain her voice and sex appeal would attract more, higher paying gigs. And they were right.

Nick smiled when he thought of Ry's singing. But his smile melted when he recalled getting a call from Franco about three weeks later. He had been vacationing with Ry, her family and Bryson Mather, Sheena's boyfriend, down at the Ryan's beach resort home on the Outer Banks. He was in his cast, recovering from ankle surgery. But that call, and not his ankle injury, was the start of all his troubles. Ryz'n had driven him home the next day in her Corvair Monza convertible. They had gotten caught in a hail and thunderstorm on the western edge of the Great Dismal Swamp. And were lucky enough to find shelter under probably the only overpass for miles. Then Ry had come onto him right there in the front seat of the Monza beside the road wearing that low-cut, spaghetti-strap sundress he liked so much.

She said she loved God but loved him too. And God wasn't about to maybe be arrested. Said she figured he needed her right then more than God did. She was

something else in that storm, a real tigress. They had that old Monza rockin' and rollin'. Their stormy liaison that morning had taken the sharp edge off of going to the police station that afternoon…

"—Next!"

The desk sergeant was in no mood to fiddle. They had been waiting for about half an hour. Nick felt like he should have taken a number, as if he were ordering donuts at the bakery or something. Franco looked sharp as usual, dressed in a dark brown, light summer suit and gold tie. Franco stood up, prompting him and Ryz'n to do the same. Leaning on both crutches, Nick hobbled up to the desk counter with Franco and Ry. They left the other poor miscreants behind, seated against the wall on hard-backed, wooden slatted benches to await their fates. With Vamia on his right, Ryz'n hung back a half-step to his left.

"Whaddaya need?"

In his cop uniform, the guy was in no mood to fool all right. Name tag on his chest claimed he was "Tompkins." About forty with a ruddy, pock-marked complexion, signs of a long-passed, teen acne problem. Close-cropped but wispy hairs edged across his high, ruddy, shiny forehead. He looked down his oversized nose at Franco, who nudged him. Time to say his piece, as rehearsed.

"My name is William Nicholas Sh'boom. I'm sixteen. I live at Fifty-Eleven, Twenty-Fifth Street in Crest Hill, Heights, Maryland. Here to turn myself in."

The sergeant lifted one eyebrow. "Turn yourself in, hunh? For what?" Nick looked to Vamia, who nodded. "I heard the State's Attorney wants me to talk to me for leavin' the scene of an accident."

The guy rubbed his chin, then appeared to write something down. Nick couldn't see over the high, wooden desk counter to know for sure. The sergeant said, "Just a minute." Taking a piece of paper with him, he stepped away from the counter, back through an office door. He closed the door behind him. The top half of the door was made of opaque glass with the word PRIVATE written across it in bold black letters. Nick could see the cop's form through the opaque glass like a distorted shadow. His head bobbed, as other grotesque shadows approached him. Then more heads bobbed and hands waved, as if they were talking back and forth. A minute later, the sergeant came out of the office, followed by a larger man in an ill-fitting grey suit. Grey suit carried a legal-sized, manila folder in his hand. His dark eyes were ominous. They stepped up behind the counter. Grey suit ambled around the high desk counter to meet them.

Looking from Franco to Nick to Ryz'n, he said, "I'm Lieutenant Detective Ferguson. You're late. You were supposed to be here twenty-five minutes ago."

Square-jawed, sporting a salt and pepper crew-cut, the lieutenant's worn grey suit did not hide a barrel-chest and beer gut. His bushy eyebrows were fearful.

"We were," replied Franco. "Been sitting here, waiting for over half an hour." Ferguson looked back to Tompkins, who made a face as if to say, *it's possible*.

The detective asked Vamia. "Who are you, the father?"

"No sir. I'm the boy's attorney." The detective rolled his eyes.

"Oh, it's gonna be one of those deals, hunh?" Franco said he didn't know what the lieutenant meant. The detective ignored him. "All right, bring him back here to an interview room for questioning. You want your lawyer with you kid?" Nick glanced at Franco, who nodded. "Yes sir."

"All right. Come with me." Waving the manila folder back to his right, he motioned them around the corner at the end of the wooden desk counter. Then, as he began to turn, he stopped.

"Who's this? A sister?" He pointed the folder at Ryz'n.

"No sir, she's my friend."

"Friend, hunh? Got anything to do with the accident?"

"No sir, she's clean."

"All right, you can take a seat Miss." He pointed to the wooden benches against the wall.

"Why don't you go home Ry? This is no place for you. Franco can take me home after."

"No, I wanna stay. Like I said in the car, I'm here for you, Nicky." She smiled.

Loyal Ryz'n, trying to be brave. Naive Ry, who had never been near a jail a day in her life, who had never done anything wrong, except maybe to slug her kid sister a little too hard to keep her in line. Guilt-ridden Ry, who felt she had to confess to a stranger in a dark cubicle because they had made love a couple times. He loved her dimples, even if the smile was forced now.

"Could be quite a while, Miss. The kid's right. This is no place for you." Ryz'n looked down but didn't speak. "All right, suit yourself. There's a Pepsi machine around the corner. " To the desk clerk, he said, "Tommy, keep an eye on her. This could take a while." To Franco and Nick—"This way." He pointed around the corner with the folder again.

"The boy's a juvenile," said Franco.

"Not in this county. The State in this jurisdiction has discretion to charge kids his age for felonies as adults. You should know that Counselor."

But the Lieutenant stopped, half-turned and snapped his fingers at the desk clerk. "Tommy, have somebody from J-D meet us down there, too. Room A. I think Ray Fammick's on duty today." Tommy replied, "Right Lieutenant."

"Follow me."

"Am I arrested?" Ferguson shot Nick a look. "Not yet."

"Well, what am I?"

"Got an answer for that but I'll skip it. You're a material witness for now."

Nick swung his cast leg forward, pushing off on his crutches with Franco alongside. They followed the Lieutenant down the hall. Nick couldn't figure out why this cop was giving him attitude. The corridor, made of concrete blocks painted over in a pale, institutional yellow, smelled of mold. Bright lights hung from corrugated acoustic tiles overhead and a scuffed, worn brown linoleum floor lay under their feet. The cop was in no hurry. Nick looked to Vamia for moral support. Franco winked his encouragement.

Near the end of the hall, they entered what looked like a small conference room that featured a horizontal, oblong mirror in one of the walls. No other windows. One of them one-way mirror deals Nick figured, like the ones he'd seen on all them TV cop shows. Metal-slatted chairs with round-topped backs and plastic green seat coverings surrounded an oblong metal table that seated six. The furniture filled the room. Ferguson motioned with the manila, legal folder for them to take a chair. They sat down together, opposite the mirror and waited. It smelled as funky moldy in here as it had in the hallway.

A minute later, the door opened and a swarthy, dark-haired man, built sturdy, low to the ground like a basset hound, walked in wearing a baggy tan suit and tie to match. He had a dead stogie hanging out the corner of his mouth and a head full of sloppily combed dark, wavy brown hair over a creased but tan forehead. The Lieutenant said, "This is Detective Sergeant Peter Colombo. He will be assisting me on this case." Nick looked at the guy. Nice tan, but there was something funny about his right eye, as if he had a cast. Just like the cop on TV. He ignored Nick's stare. Nick thought it odd that *he* was staring at someone else's funky eyes the way other people usually stared at his two-toned peepers. A bit of comic relief, considering his dire circumstances.

"What's up Lieutenant?" Had a nasally baritone too. *Mebbe he was on TV?*

Ferguson stood up, pushing in his chair. "This is the one I was tellin' ya about Pete." Colombo's face hardened. He glared at Nick. "Oh?"

"Why are a Lieutenant and Sergeant of Detectives involved in this matter?" asked Franco. Ferguson replied, 'Cuz that's how the SA wants it, Counselor."

"And why is that?" Ferguson shrugged. "You'll have to ask him."

Mr. Vamia sat back. He had told Nick earlier he could talk to the police until Franco stopped him or they read him his rights. Then he should clam up. Franco had said he hoped that an informal interrogation, if there was such a thing, might clear up the matter. Maybe they'd release him after?

Colombo stood behind and between Nick and Franco, reviving his stogie, blowing smoke their way. Franco sighed. He mimicked Ferguson's comment. "'Oh, it's gonna be one of those deals, hunh?'" Ferguson sneered, patting the manila folder against the side of his right hip, waiting. Nick fidgeted, while Colombo blew smoke rings over their heads. Shortly, the door opened. A fresh-faced, younger man entered, coatless with light brown hair wearing a pale yellow, buttoned-down shirt, squared off, blue tie and slacks, and what looked like black coach's shoes. He carried a lined, yellow legal pad.

Ferguson grunted. "Finally." The young guy shrugged, "You know how it is."

"Right. O-K our late arrival here is Ray Fammick, J-D division."

Nick figured the initials stood for juvenile delinquent. Fammick walked past the mirror to take a seat the end of the table, opposite the two detectives. Ferguson pointed his closed folder at Nick. "This is William Nicholas Sh'boom, sixteen, from Crest Hill and this is … uh, Franco Vamia, the hot shot defense attorney. *Thought* I recognized you at the desk."

"Franco Vamia, attorney, yes, but I think I'm innocent of the other charge."

Colombo said, "*Va-mee-a*. Yeah, he's 'the hot shot defense attorney' all right. Got that creep off that rape case, when he crossed the *victim* and *tried her* in front of the jury. 'Bout a year ago. You remember? That near-sighted secretary with the stringy hair? And the jury fell for it. Poor bitch cried her eyes out in front of the whole courtroom, stripped her of any shred of dignity she had left. You bastard." Colombo glared daggers at Vamia, who winked at Nick.

Clenching his teeth, Ferguson set the folder down on the table to lean forward on his fists. "Yeah. *I remember*." Nick widened his eyes, looking at Franco. Dang. Nick thought maybe Franco was the right guy to defend him after all.

Taking a pencil from his shirt pocket, Fammick set his legal pad on the table. The two detectives stood, with Colombo puffing incessantly on his stogie. At this rate, he'd smoke it out soon. And wouldn't that be a blessing? Ferguson opened his mouth, but Franco cut him off.

"Before we get going, I just want it noted that my client came in here of his own free will, as soon as he knew the State's Attorney had asked for him."

Colombo griped, "Yeah-yeah. We got that Vamia."

Ferguson started in on him, but no one read him his rights. So Nick told his tale. Franco had instructed him to gloss over his motivation for turning his convertible back around to confront the Buzzbees on the stormy road that fateful night. "And don't say anything about the Voice." The one that had urged Nick to fly in the face of all logic and common sense by not skedaddling when he had the chance. Nick followed Franco's instructions. The J-D guy took notes while the two detectives took turns grilling Nick. They found two bits of his story unbelievable: First that he could beat the stuff'n out of the two ex-cons, the Buzzbee boys, albeit separately, and live to tell the tale. Second that he turned around after he'd lost the Buzzbee boys later that night out on the stormy highway, when he could have escaped without incident.

On the first matter, Nick explained how the Buzzbee boys were a little drunk and way overconfident. Nick said he had learned self-defense up at the Crest Hill Boys Club, boxing, judo and aikido. By separating the Buzzbees into the men's and women's restrooms at Truley's, he was able to surprise them one at a time. He told the detectives that he learned then that the old adage was true.

Colombo cracked. "Yeah? What adage is that?" Nick grinned.

"One sez: When you got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds'll follow."

They grinned. They liked that answer. Nick knew he had scored some points with these dudes. But when they pressed him on the second issue, Franco nudged Nick's knee under the table. Nick said he couldn't talk any more.

Ferguson: "You spilled your guts so far and now you're taking the Fifth, William?" Nick shrugged. "Call me Nick, please. Everyone else does."

"Well, are ya, *Nick*?"

"Are you going to make him? He's told you his story. Surely, there's nothing here worthy of a crime." Franco nodded at Nick.

"That's up to the prosecutor. Hell, he fled the scene, didn't he? Resulted in two deaths? That in itself is a felony. And drivin' at night with his lights off in a bad storm sounds like gross negligence to me. You know that Counselor."

"He didn't hit anybody and he called it in. Went right back. Not his fault the cop at the scene wouldn't listen."

"So he says. Are ya gonna play ball here kid, or do you wanna spend the night in the slammer?" Nick looked to Franco, who pursed his lips and shook his head slightly. Colombo said, "Don't look at him kid, he ain't the one about to spend the night in a locked cage with a bunch of perverts."

Fammick: "He's a juvie. He won't—"

Colombo slammed his hand down on the table. "Not this guy. He's got the prosecutor's special attention, ain't that right Lieutenant?" Ferguson looked toward Fammick and nodded.

"But he can't do that. This is a boy for cripesake."

Ferguson replied, "How long have you been here, Fammick? The S-A. can do whatever he wants. He's got prosecutorial discretion. You know that."

Fammick dropped his gaze. Ferguson turned back to Nick. Nick thought there was that dirty term again.

"What's it gonna be kid, conversation or the cage?" Again, Nick looked to Franco, only to get the same silent response. He kept quiet.

"O-K Pete. Read him his rights and book him."

Fammick: "What about his parents?"

Colombo looked to Ferguson, who said: "Well, what about 'em?"

"Shouldn't they be notified their son's going to jail?"

"Why don't you take care of that Ray? Be useful for a change."

Fammick blinked. "And you'll put him in juvie? Right, Lieutenant?"

Ferguson shrugged. "That's up to the prosecutor. I'm going to see him now. Okay? Anything else?"

"What about his bail?"

"He can take care of that at the arraignment, Counselor."

"When's that?"

"Dunno. He's in the system now." Nobody spoke. Just stared at each other.

Ferguson said, "O-K then. I'm done here." He frowned, slapped the legal-sized manila folder against his palm and stalked out. Franco called after him.

"It better be first thing tomorrow morning. Dammit!"

After Ferguson left, Fammick asked Nick for his home phone number. Colombo said he was arresting him and read Nick his rights. When he was done, Colombo asked if Nick understood his rights as read to him. Nick ignored Colombo to beg Fammick not to call his parents. When he asked why, Nick said this was his mess and he didn't want to upset them since they worried about "every little thing." Fammick noted this was "no little thing." Nick understood that but said he had a good lawyer. He thought he and Mr. Vamia could handle it. Fammick scratched his head. Franco asked Fammick to honor his client's request for the time being, anyway, saying he was acting as Nick's legal guardian.

Colombo piped up. “If we don’t call your parents, will ya talk?”

Nick hesitated but Franco shook his head again. “I guess not.”

“Call ‘em Ray.”

Nick looked to the younger man but Fammick asked: “What about bail?”

Franco said that unless it was unreasonable, Nick could cover it right now.

Colombo sneered. “Bail ain’t even been set yet. A spoiled, rich kid, hunh? ”

When Nick ignored him again, Colombo pulled Nick out of his chair and around the table, tossing him against the wall mirror.

“Do you understand your rights as they were read to you punk?” His forearm pressed Nick’s face up against the mirror. Too much weight on his casted foot made Nick grimace. Pain shot from just above his left ankle and down over it.

“Yeah. Do my rights include getting shoved around by you?” Colombo raised his open hand, when Fammick shouted, “Pete! Get it together, Mann.” Colombo lowered his hand.

“Smart-assed kid. That’s what he needs though. Just another punk. I dealt with ‘em all my life. Only he’s got money. But they’re all punks.”

Franco told Fammick to make a note that in a heat of passion, Colombo had assaulted Nick and recognized him as a “kid.” Colombo spun Nick around, pulled a pair of handcuffs from under his coat to cuff Nick behind his back.

Franco: “That’s totally unnecessary Detective. At least, cuff him in front. He can’t use a crutch if you cuff him like that.”

Colombo: “Procedure.”

Fammick: “Bull. That’s harassment Pete.”

Colombo: “Sue me.”

Franco: “I might just do that Colombo.”

Colombo: “Who knows what he might do with that crutch? This guy beat the tar out of two ex-cons and then fried ‘em to a crisp. Sat right there in that chair and said so himself. I’m taking all necessary precautions.”

“What? To walk him down the hall of a police station with a cast on his leg? Besides, nothing he said can be used against him. You never read him his rights.”

“Out o’ my way. I gotta book ‘im.”

“Fammick!” Franco cried.

“The lawyer’s right Pete. At least cuff him in the front. Give him his crutch.”

Colombo shoved Nick at Fammick, saying, “Here! You do it.”

Fammick spun Nick around. He took a key from Colombo to unlock the cuffs. He started to cuff Nick in front when Colombo told him to cuff Nick through a crutch. Fammick seized one of his crutches and cuffed him as Colombo ordered. Then he returned the key to Colombo.

Fammick: “What’s he gonna do in the lock-up Pete? He can’t take his crutch.”

“That’s his problem.”

Colombo led them down the hall to the booking station with Fammick supporting Nick’s right arm and Franco his left.

As Detective Colombo had Nick booked, Franco said he’d bail him out as soon as the bond was set at the arraignment and not to worry. Franco asked Colombo

when the arraignment would be. “When we get around to it.” Franco repeated that had better be first thing tomorrow morning or he would make life miserable for them. “Don’t make me file a writ!” Colombo blew him off. But Franco persisted, saying “Believe me the State’s Attorney doesn’t want to get into a pissing contest over this one. Makes for bad politics and that makes for bad copy. Get my meaning? You guys are already notorious for police brutality.” He stared at Colombo to make sure his remark had sunk in. Then he told Nick good-bye, assuring him again he would bail him out soon.

… Fammick un-cuffed him. Nick emptied his pockets. He gave his belt to the booking officer. The desk cops took Nick’s possessions, including his harmonica and wallet to inventory everything. They took his fingerprints and mug shots, just like on “Dragnet.” Nick tried to pose his devilish look, the one the girls said melted their insides and started their juices flowing. He didn’t know if he pulled it off, because the photographer had a quick trigger finger. Just like a cop, Nick thought. The clerk said Nick was the first suspect he had photographed with one blue eye and the other black, though it wouldn’t matter since the pictures were black and white. Nick took his remark as a compliment. When the officers had finished with all the official business, another officer escorted Nick upstairs into a holding tank with a bunch of other suspects. All adults. No juvies here that he could spot, just him. Fammick escorted them. Nick figured Fammick didn’t have too much pull around here, if he couldn’t get him into juvenile detention.

The guard escort took Nick’s crutch, suggesting he hold onto the bars that comprised the two long sides of the rectangular cell, the short sides, being concrete walls. Nick noticed catwalks outside of the two long, opposing cage-bar walls and barred windows in the walls on the far sides of the catwalks. A guard sat at the end of the walk Nick had used. The guard didn’t carry a weapon, except for a baton hooked to his belt. The tank door slip open. Nick hopped inside.

By Nick’s count, must have been thirty-seven prisoners in the tank besides him. Only a few young guys. Most sat on the floor up against the walls or bars. Some milled about the cage. Conversations were scarce. Nick overheard a couple of Latinos in the corner pinning the blame for their fates on each other. There were several colored guys, a couple of young ones too, not much older than he. But the population was overwhelmingly white. Without speaking or making eye contact with anyone, Nick found a vacant spot in a corner to his right. He sat down with his back against the bars. Lowering his eyelids, he appeared to doze, but beneath his closed lids, he was wide alert, ready for anything.

Over an hour later, a guard yelled, “Chow down! Chow down!” Prisoners queued up beside the same bars that supported Nick’s backside. Then another guard started shoving dinner trays and spoons through a waist-high, rectangular slit in the bars. Nick pressed off the floor with his good foot, inching his back up against the wall until he could stand.

Watching his back, he made his way to pick up his meal as best as he could, hopping along the wall on his good foot, while grasping at the bars for balance. He accepted his tray—metal—the kind with built-in depressions for four small

corner dishes. Beef stew, corn, baked beans and apple sauce. He found a spot against some bars to eat standing up, resting on one foot. Tasted like cafeteria food at school. Not good but not terrible either. He was halfway finished, when his good foot got jerked out from under him. His tray went airborne. He landed on his backside. Half of his dinner flew all over the place. The tray and spoon clattered to the floor.

A crew-cut, good old boy with a pock-marked face, kind of beefy, complained that Nick had spilled food all over him. He said Nick had to clean his plate in there. Spilling his supper wasn't the way to do it. He told Nick to eat the spill off the floor. A crowd gathered in a circle around them. The asshole towered over Nick, leering down over him. Reminded Nick of a photo of Richard Speck.

Nick slid over to sit with his back against the concrete wall now as he had earlier against the bars. He rested his left, cast leg up over his slightly bent right knee with his right foot flat to the floor, trying to appear casual. Real polite-like, he said, "I'm afraid I no longer have an appetite."

A prisoner laughed: "Ain't he the cool one?" The jerk said, "Let's see."

He leaned in to seize Nick by the neck but Nick clasped both hands into a big fist, got his forearms inside the jerk's elbows and thrust his interlocking hands and elbows up and outward against the mans wrists, surprising the jerk with the force of the dual blow, knocking free of the man's grip so that the dude lost his balance. As he fell toward him, Nick flicked his cast leg up at the jerk, catching him with the heel of his cast right on the point of the creep's dropping chin.

Pain zinged down over the incision on his ankle again, but the jerk's head spun like a top then swung back like a pendulum. The guy dropped like a stone, striking the linoleum floor nose first. Blood splattered out from under his face. He didn't move. The sharp pain over Nick's ankle, forced him to suck air deeply between clenched teeth in a reverse hiss. It had only been ten days since his ankle surgery. He picked up his tray, pushing off the floor with his hand and wrist. Placing his good, right foot to the floor under his butt, and pressing his back against the wall, he edged his way up to a standing position as he had earlier. He rested his aching, casted foot ahead of him, as if nothing had happened. Sensing the other jailbirds expected a few words, he obliged them.

"For sure now, I've lost what little appetite I might have had left."

Around him, the shocked circle of prisoners said nothing. Standing mum, they looked at his attacker face down in a growing puddle of his own blood— still but for shallow breathing—and then back to Nick. Shorter guys peeped over the shoulders of bigger dudes in front of them. It had happened too fast for them to comprehend. A guard came down outside the opposite wall of bars.

"Hey! What's goin' on there? Break it up, break it up. If I hefta come in—"

Prisoners separated, making a path for his view.

"—What's wrong with that man? Hey Bill! Get Greg and come down here now. Tommy, open the door dammit."

A minute later, the tank door slid open and three guards entered the tank. The talking guard walked in to kneel down next to the fallen prisoner, while the other

two guards watched his back, batons in their hand. The kneeling guard felt for the pulse of the felled man's neck. "What the hell happened to this man?" Nobody spoke. "Well? There's blood and food all over the place." Still, no one spoke. The guard looked around to spy blood splashed on Nick's cast.

"What do you know about this kid?" Nick shrugged.

"Dunno. Looks like mebbe the food didn't agree with him."

His cell mates laughed. The kneeling guard didn't.

"There's blood on the floor and blood on your cast."

Nick nodded. "Yes sir. There is."

"Well?"

"Well, guess I'll have to clean my cast. Hope it don't mess up any of my autographs none."

The jerk on the floor hadn't moved. The talking guard made a face, saying, "Let's get 'im out o' here." The other two guards picked the downed creep up under either armpit to drag him out. His feet trailed behind him. Blood dripped from his nose and mouth. They hauled the jerk away. The door slid shut. Nobody bothered Nick after that.

Later, guards ushered the prisoners from the holding tank into cells, four beds per cell, double bunks on either wall, like berths on a naval ship, with a toilet at the end of the bunks opposite the sliding cell door and a sink on the concrete wall opposite the toilet. Two blacks and a redhead joined Nick to fill up these lovely accommodations. The colored guys took the bunks to the left. Turns out, they were brothers Bobby and Donny something. Dressed alike, in double-knit slacks and long-sleeved shirts with long, pointed collars. Their shirts bore funky little green-stemmed, purple, red and yellow flowers all over them. Nick had a shirt like that, wore it to his gigs sometimes. Despite his handicap, Nick took the top bunk on the right. The set-up here was similar to that in the tank, 'cept for the plumbin'. A concrete wall supported each double berth with bars for walls at the front and back. Catwalks bordered the bars. A solid wall bordered the other side of the catwalk he came down. Wire mesh windows rested in the outer wall back of the cell. Encased, spaced bright, rectangular lamps hung over the walkways.

Nick hoisted himself up to his bunk to sit on his bed, making sure his back was to the wall again. He wasn't letting anybody behind him tonight. The two colored dudes lay in the opposite bunk beds, leaving the bunk beneath him for the red head. He was a kid too, maybe a couple years older than Nick with a silver front tooth. The red head stood up facing Nick. Nick thought he had the kid beat with his gold-capped front tooth, but he had worn his white denture today, and glad of it. He saved the gold one for his band gigs and other special occasions. He didn't figure jail was one of them.

Red head wore cuffed, green Mac work pants, a muscle mesh T-shirt and a green denim jacket, like Mr. Green Jeans on Captain Kangaroo. About five-eight, maybe a hundred and fifty pounds, with a florid complexion, green eyes and a pug nose, the dude sported dark red hair, standing straight up in a long brush cut, with duck tails behind. His top hair looked like maybe he'd stuck his finger in an

electric socket. Seemed as if he wanted to speak but was having trouble getting around to it. He stalked back and forth for a while. The colored boys lay back, saying nothing. Finally, the red-headed pacer stopped to address Nick.

"You're the guy fried the Buzzbee boys, right?"

"Who told you that?"

"Word gets around … So?" He motioned with his head for Nick to speak.

"My lawyer advised me not to discuss it."

Sitting across the cell, the black guys looked up from their bunks. The red head threw up his hands as if he were under arrest.

"That's cool, dude. Jis' wanna shake your hand Mann. That's all. Cuz if anybody deserved to get it like that, it was them two. They messed me up once Mann. See what I'm saying? Jis' like to shake your hand, is all."

Leery of this ploy, Nick said, "Well I appreciate that, I truly do, but if I were to shake your hand, it might be interpreted in a court of law that I killed those boys on purpose. You understand? Don't mean any offense by it."

Again, red head threw up his hands, humble as pie. "Oh no, I understand, no offense taken. No need to worry about me." Smirking, he twisted around to the black boys, "or these dudes either." He faced Nick again.

"Just call me Red and you're?"

"Nick." The guy smiled.

"Okay, Nick. No problem. I'm proud ta be your bunkmate Mann." Nick nodded.

Red paced the cell, beginning to talk low, just above a whisper, enough to be heard, a habit he said he'd picked up in reform school. He was a little bigger than Nick. The black boys, who looked to be around twenty, had settled back onto their beds across the way without speaking. Judging from the amount of the beds they took up, Nick figured them to be about six feet each. They seemed content to listen. Red's harmless, low murmuring seemed to calm them. They rested now with their hands clasped behind their heads, staring up. One featured an afro. The other didn't. Nick noticed they wore popular, alternating grey and black-striped, double-knit, flared slacks. Red stopped pacing to hang on the edge of Nick's bed, whispering between cupped hands that the blacks were true blood brothers, who had tried to rob a 7-11 with a Luger squirt gun. One of them got too excited and pulled the trigger accidentally, spraying the store clerk with water. Red giggled.

"Cop in a squad car pulled up just then on a Slurpee break. Caught 'em. If not for bad luck, those boys'd have no luck atall." He giggled some more. The black dudes turned to stare, but kept quiet. Red chuckled low but long. When he calmed down, Nick changed the subject, asking what Red was "in for."

In a normal tone Red said, "Third Degree Sexual Offense and Solicitation of a Minor." Nick blinked.

"Damn! Sounds bad. What's third degree mean?"

"Statutory rape."

Red threw his hands out to his sides and resumed his low murmuring. "How'd I know she was only *fourteen*? With all that make-up? Sportin' a red and white

polka-dot, halter dress? She looked more like forty than fourteen! Really blew my mind, Mann." He stared at Nick, incredulous.

When Nick didn't reply, Red kept talking low.

"Yeah, that's right. She was hookin' outside o' Clancy's, see what I'm sayin'? Over in Langham—the topless place? For twenty bucks, all I had on me. Takes me 'round the corner to a motel for a tumble in one of 'em budget deals. See what I'm sayin'? Number thirteen! Shoulda known right then it was my unlucky number—*my unlucky night! Thirteen!* I shoulda known. Hell, she already had the key to the room. See what I'm sayin'?

"But no, all I see is her bouncing before my peepers in this bulging, red halter top. 'Bout falling out of it all over, see what I'm sayin'? And that long black, gypsy hair and her dark eyes, made up like Cleopatra. So, we get in there—see what I'm sayin'?" The colored boys had turned their heads to watch him now. Like Nick, they saw what Red was sayin' but remained silent with their hands clasped behind their heads, showing no emotion. Red bounced up and down on his heels, getting more excited as he relived the event.

"Yeah, I see your point," said Nick, playing along, sober as a judge, "both of 'em." Red grinned.

"Yeah, now you're getting' the picture." He smacked the side of Nick's bunk with his hand. "Well, she steps back'n wiggles plum out o' that halter dress, kind o' slow-like, ta show herself off—*fourteen?* But right proud of what nature done for her, see what I'm sayin'? Geeze-Louise! Standin' there in front o' me! A/C's raisin' goose bumps on her. Yeah. See what I'm sayin'? Really blew my mind all right. Startin' to lose it already. Geeze-Louise! Who you kiddin' Mann? Fourteen?" He laughed.

"Normally I'm an ass man and I don't mind sayin' so. I go for 'em big round butts—yeah. But this girl didn't have hardly no ass atall, more like a twelve-year old boy's, see what I'm sayin'? But she's got these big ones and jis' wild for it. So I said screw it. I'm jumpin' this chick anyway.

"After all, I consider myself open-minded, right? Jis' cuz she's got big hooters 'stead of a big butt, don't mean I should turn my nose up at her. I mean, she's gotta earn a livin' too, right?" He paused for Nick's nod and got it.

"Well, she's all over me, a real eager beaver. See what I'm sayin'? Yeah Mann, helpin' me undress. So we move over ta the bed. She couldn't even wait till I pulled down the damn sheets—*fourteen?* All hot ta trot. Geeze! So we're just about to get it on, see what I'm sayin'?" Red paused again.

Nick said, "Yeah, I'm still right with ya pardner." The colored boys across the way had their mouths open as wide as their eyes now. Though silent, they were right with Red too. They were all sort of silent partners in Red's crime.

"So what happened?"

"What happened? *Whamm!*" Red clapped his hands together hard. "That's what happened. The door slams open and lickety-split just like that there are more cops in there than fleas on a hound dog. Yeah! Just like that!" He snapped

his fingers. “Blew my mind. And I’m caught red-handed or red-assed, however you wanna look at it. More like Woody the Red-pecker, get it?”

Nick chuckled silently. He appreciated a guy who could poke fun at himself when he was in a tough spot. Red tossed his head to one side, dropping his hands onto his hips, akimbo.

“And you know the stink of it is, I ain’t been able to sleep a wink since. It’s been three nights. Look at these circles.” He pointed to the dark half-rings, holding bags under his eyes. “Every time I try to sleep I see her big hooters standing out there, ya know? They just keep extending out further and further, like twin torpedoes with big-old, brown bull’s-eyes on their noses and I get so excited, you wouldn’t believe.” He shook his head in despair. “I tell ya Mann, I’m a mess. I’m too young for this.”

“Think of her butt.” Red frowned.

“Whaddaya mean? Didn’t ya hear what I jis’ said? She didn’t have no butt.”

“Yeah. That’s what I mean. You’re an ass man, right?” Red blanched. “So?”

“So quit thinking about her boobs and visualize her skinny rear end. If that don’t do it then imagine her from behind, sittin’ on that puny butt taking a dump. If that don’t help you sleep—shoot! I don’t know what will.”

“Are you serious?” Nick replied, “As a heartbeat. Go ahea—”

Overhead out in the hallway lights blinked. Red nodded.

“Ten minutes to lights out. If ya need to take care o’ business, now’s the time.”

Soon, toilets flushed up and down the catwalk, as well as on the floor below them. Red went over to the toilet to do his thing, followed by the black guy in the upper bunk. The other dude didn’t budge. Nick was okay. He’d wait until they were all asleep. He was taking no chances tonight.

Nick said to Red, “Go ahead and lay down and try it. Whaddaya got to lose?”

Red grunted then disappeared beneath Nick onto his bunk. “O-K, I’ll try it.”

From the sound of Red’s voice, his head was at the opposite end of the bed from the toilet, out o’ sight. The red head with the long, brush cut popped up by Nick’s bunk side, facing him to say, “My name’s Ripley, Roy Robert Ripley. Folks call me Red. Some call me Rip. This is Bobby and Donny Sims.”

Nick nodded to the colored guys, who just stared back from their bunks. Leaning on his elbow, Nick said, “Ripley, hunh? Like in ‘believe it or not?’”

“Yeah, like I never heard that before.”

Nick winked. “Well Red, I believe ya. Ya gotta good lawyer?”

“Public Defender, but I don’t trust ‘im. Looks like a fat weasel.” Across the cell, one of the colored boys chuckled.

“‘No penetration,’” says Red. “That’s what he says—this defender guy. Says ‘worst they can do to you is attempted rape.’ I said, ‘Hey Mann, she’s the one ‘tempted ta rape me!’ See what I’m sayin’? Dude says, ‘You’re nineteen and she’s fourteen. Law don’t work that way son.’ What really gets me is the whore is all pissed at me. *At me!* Sez I set her up. *I* set *her* up! Can you believe that?”

“Nineteen? Why ain’t you in J-D?”

Red sneered. “Over seventeen. Why ain’t you?”

"My lawyer says, it's politics. Thought it's twenty-one?"

"I wish it was. Nope, eighteen. Politics, hunh?"

"Yeah. You ever think maybe she set *you* up?"

"You mean, she's a fourteen-year old, undercover hooker? Riiiight."

"Maybe she *is* forty after all, 'n mebbe your lawyer don't know what he's talkin' about?" Red scrunched up his face. "I don't see what you're sayin'?"

"Well, attempted statutory rape? Seems like an oxymoron to me."

"What the hell is that? Oxen moron?"

"Oxymoron? O-X-Y-moron. Means the exact opposite of what it says."

"Yeah? So how's that work here? Oxymoron, I mean?"

"Well, if there's no penetration then nothin' happened, right? I mean what have they really got? If what you did, or didn't do, is attempted rape, seems to me every teenage guy on a hot date with a gleam in his eye'd be in jail."

"Hey! Good point, Mann. Yeah! Gonna talk to my lawyer about that."

"Seems to me, if they got the twenty bucks you gave her, worst they could do is cite ya for a misdemeanor, mebbe. Probably jes' fine ya. But seems to me too, if *she asked you* for the twenty, which I think she did right?" Red nods.

"Well, seems to me she was the one doin' the solicitin'. I mean I dunno." Nick shrugged, shaking his head. "I ain't no lawyer. But I got a good attorney. Maybe you should talk to him. He got a guilty guy off a rape charge once."

"Yeah? How'd ya know he was guilty then?"

"Cops said he was."

"Shee-iitt! That don't mean squat. They say everybody's guilty."

The colored guy on the bottom bunk said, "You got that damn right."

Nick looked over expecting more, but the dude didn't speak further.

Nick: "No, you weren't there. It was *the way* the cops said it. They were seething. And my lawyer winked at me. The cops said my lawyer tried the victim on the stand when he cross-examined her. Broke her right down. Made *her* look guilty, instead of his client. Wouldn't you like to have him cross-examine your fourteen-year old hooker?"

"Damn straight, I would. What's your guy's name, F. Lee Bailey, Clarence Darrow maybe?"

"No. Vamia, Franco Vamia. Sounds to me like your cops busted in too soon."

"Sure, they did. Think mebbe I heard o' him—Vamia." Red ducked back down to his cot … "Oh Mann! Here they come right at me again. Real torpedoes. You never knew such a chick. *Fourteen!* Goin' on *forty!* Mann. *Shoot!*"

Nick nodded. "Oh, believe me I do. Only my chick's seventeen and well—you gotta see her to believe her. Could be a centerfold. Trust me."

The lights flicked out. One of the colored guys whispered, "*Centerfold!* Yeah, right." He shook his head.

"Don't like ta brag but she's got plenty o' what it takes to make a growin' boy smile. That's for sure. Believe it or not. You'd like her Red. Plump, full curves in all the right places. But just a wisp of a waist. Real hourglass. Kind you only see in men's mags. Yeah. I'm a lucky dog all right."

Beneath him Red said, “Bull. In your dreams maybe. Only Hugh Hefner and rock stars, movie stars get chicks look like that.” Nick shot back loud.

“Well, I must be dreamin’, cuz I’m up there on the silver screen with her.”

“Hey! Knock it off down there.” A guard yelled down the catwalk. “Else I have to come down there and thump some haids.” They shut up.

There were other unique parts to Ry’s anatomy that Nick wouldn’t dare share with anyone but, lying on his back in the top bunk, they came to mind now in the darkened jail cell. Though short, her curves were large and well-rounded, soft or firm, where they should be. Soft and squishy in her ample breasts; firm in her belly and her broad basketball butt—a superior posterior. But small and narrow or tight where she should be too, like in her waist and—well she had some truly unique anatomical features.

And a very colorful girl, too. From her hazel green eyes that could turn to jade or emerald when she became emotional. To the broad, burgundy bull’s-eye tips of her twin torpedoes. Even seen some orange tints around the edges, too. Yeah, a very colorful girl. And when he turned her out, them square end tips morphed into long, rich burgundy licorice whips with pores. Never seen nothin’ like ‘em. *Mann.* And her complexion—

Her complexion was just as unique—radiant, almost glowing, and smooth. All her acne from tenth grade had vanished. Normally olive in tone, more Greek than Italian, her smooth skin would brown up, copper up, immediately upon exposure to direct sunlight, like an instant tan. Amazing, truly bizarre. She said it was due to all the Near and Middle Eastern blood she had inherited from her desert ancestors. Like her Lebanese gypsy grandmother on her father’s side and the Asian Indian and Arab blood from her mom’s folks. A real colorful girl. Yeah.

Ry was one of a kind all right. Yet, she would tell him Irish tales of Saint Patrick banishing all the snakes from Ireland and of fairie rings and the wee ones, the mischievous little people like Darby O’Gill. Her last name was Ryan, after all. Sure didn’t resemble no Irish chick he’d known. Except when her large, doe eyes turned from hazel-green to emerald, anytime she got emotional.

Though sometimes, he wondered if her kid sister Sheena possessed the same characteristics. Certainly, not in Sheena’s eyes, which were dark brown, and not in her skin tone either that he could recall. Naw. Sheena had freckles on her chest and back. Ry didn’t have no freckles. Couple o’ beauty marks mebbe, in special places, but no freckles. And he oughtta know. Cuz he hadn’t missed a square inch of her. Now that he thought about it, he recalled Sheena’s tan line across her boobs when she had filled her bikini top up with saltwater and dumped it on him down at the beach. Her skin color seemed like anybody else he knew. Nothin’ special. Not like Ry. No, nobody was like her. Ry was unique.

Of course, no chick he knew had a sexy-hot mouth like Ry’s—phat and full lips with a delicate philtrum—soft pink lips, even without lip gloss. Matched her painted hot pink nails—both toes and fingers she painted, jes’ for him. Yeah, very kissable lips like Julia’s—that colored nurse on TV. Teeth flashed just as

white, too. Sexy, well-shaped, pink lips like her body, not over-puffed. Like Goldilocks, just right. And hidden behind them luscious lips, her acrobatic, honey tongue was the longest he'd met. Very entertaining, too. Tasted, literally, of honey that she dabbed, well, everywhere seemed like. And elsewhere—

The girl had a combination of anatomical features and sexual abilities that were truly unique. Not at all timid in celebrating her passion either. Get so excited? Like each time was a completely new, delightfully wild surprise. Timed him like no other. He'd try to hold off. But her caressing rosebud had a mind, a will, of its own. Made him feel like some stud stallion. Force him off against his will. And just then—she'd fire off. Go bonkers. Gratified him so much for her to go off like that. Yeah. Like they were two volcanos erupting simultaneously into each other, each firing off geysersof red hot love. No one else could do him like that, with such impeccable timing. And game for anything? Ry had gears others never dreamed of. Just when he thought she'd topped out, exhausted, and could take no more, she'd shove him into overdrive. She was a natural, a keeper. That's for sure. In all his amorous affairs, and he'd had many the last three years, there was no one like her. *No one.* Inimitable—that's what she was—one of a kind. Not only did she have all the right equipment, the girl knew how to use what the Good Lord gave her. In Ryzanna Ryan, God had created the perfect female, turtle-dovin' machine.

He had to quit thinking like this, lest he become an insomniac like Red. Problem was, he couldn't take his own advice on that score. Cuz no matter how he thought of Ry, even picturin' her on the can takin' a dump, she still looked good to him. While his cellmates snored, Nick climbed out of his bunk to take a leak. Back in bed, he pictured Red's chick on the can—from the back. Tucking his hands safely behind his head as the colored boys did, Nick felt drowsy. He started to drift. Even better. Next thing he knew, he heard himself snorin', too.

Ryz'n headed back for the bridge. She resolved not to miss her exit this time. Still, she couldn't keep from recalling Nick's arrest, how bad she had felt for him. She had worried then, too, not knowing what might happen to him in jail if he were arrested. She recalled waiting on that hard bench during Nick's police interrogation. Mr. Vamia and Nick had been gone with Lieutenant Ferguson over half an hour. Nervous, she had downed a Dew and a Pepsi and been to the ladies' room twice …

All the carbonated sugar had made her antsy. That hardwood bench had lost its romantic appeal some time ago, if it ever had any … Is this how it would always be with Nicky? She didn't know if she could take it. But then she thought of them in the car during the storm this morning under the overpass. Recalling their stormy tryst, Ry zoned out, crossing her legs, settling back—

"Ry … Miss Ryan?"
"Yes? Oh Mister Vamia? You surprised me."
"I did? I apologize. You looked like you were in another world."
"I did? I guess I was. Where is Nicky?" She stood up.
"I'm afraid he's going to have to spend the night in jail."
"Oh no? But, but will he—will he … be all right?"
"I hope so. From what I know of Nick, he can handle himself pretty well."
"But—" Mister Vamia held out his hand to take her gently by the elbow.
"Let's go outside and talk. Did you park in the pay lot by the race track?" Ryz'n nodded. "Good, I'll walk you, okay?"
"Okay, and you can tell me what's going on."
Mr. Vamia escorted her outside. Free of the A/C, the humid, late July heat hit Ryz'n hard-like, like the back of a shovel to her face. On the broiling sidewalk, Mr. Vamia let go of her elbow. They walked and perspired down the street around the corner of the courthouse toward the big outdoor, pay parking lot. As they walked down a slight incline, Mr. Vamia explained the process.
The police were putting Nick through the system, arrest, booking, etc. But why were they doing that? The Lieutenant had said he was taking Nick to the interview room, Room A, to talk. She didn't understand. Mr. Vamia explained that he had advised Nick not to speak regarding part of his story. Why had he done that? Because, Mr. Vamia said, it was complicated and anything Nick said could be twisted around to be used against him.
"So you advised Nicky to take the Fifth, like they do on TV?" He nodded.
"But what *is* his story? Nick wouldn't tell me."
"That's my fault. I told him not to discuss the matter with anyone."

"But Mister Vamia, I, I …" They crossed the street toward the pay lot, where she stopped walking. He said, "Yes?"

"I should know because you see, well, I … I—love him."

There. She had said it. It was out in the open and she was not ashamed. In fact, she was proud. Funny thing, aside from Nicky, this attorney-stranger was the first person she had told. The lawyer smiled. He took her gently by the elbow again, leading her down the sidewalk along the parking lot.

"I understand. And because you love him, you'll want what's best for him."

"Of course."

"Then it's best for him that you don't know, now."

"But—"

"You'll find out, in due time I'm sure. Where did you park?"

They stood on the sidewalk by the toll gate at the entrance to the parking lot. She felt sweat beads dripping under her arms. She pointed. "Over there, I think."

"Okay. Look, why don't I follow you home and we can talk about it some more over an early dinner, maybe? Do you have a place you prefer?"

With Nicky in jail, and with the heat and the sweat, her head was spinning. He had asked her a question. What did he want? He leaned down a little closer.

"Dinner, Miss Ryan? Where would you like to eat? Somewhere?"

"Oh, I dunno—Riordan's?"

"In Harlow Heights?"

"Yes, do you know it?" He smiled. "Sure, I have eaten there a few times, long ago though, with Vince. They used to have great Irish beer."

"Vince?"

"Father Vizconni to you."

"Oh yes, Father V. He's been my priest ever since we moved here from Georgia." He smiled. "Yes, I know. Vince told me. Come on. Ry, isn't it? Isn't that what Nick calls you?" Only to people I know well, she thought.

"Well, I prefer Ryz'n."

"Oh, I see. Ryz'n Ryan, hunh?" He grinned.

"It's short for Ryzanna—Ryzanna Christine Ryan. My saint's name is Brigid."

"I see. Has a ring to it. Well, Miss Ryzanna Christine Brigid Ryan, shall we go? Get out of this heat?" He had made her simper.

"Okay. Sounds like a winner."

Ryz'n tried to smile her three-dimple smile, but she didn't think she pulled it off. This attorney creeped her out a bit. And not just because of his roving eyes. He reminded her of a guy name of Jim O'Brien, a swing-man on the Maryland Terps basketball team, a pale-skinned, freckle-faced, frizzy-haired redhead, kind of a live wire type. She wasn't sure she could trust this lawyer. And if *she* couldn't, how could Nicky? And besides, when they all had eaten at Gusti's a couple weeks ago, he had eyed her up and down as if she were the main dish, instead of his veal parmesan and fettuccine alfredo.

* * *

Ryz'n knew Riordan's mostly from when she was a kid. Her dad liked to take the family out to eat there. The pub had a cool, dark forest green interior that always made her feel comfortably cozy. Seemed to swallow them up completely, when they strolled in. The owner was Irish. He hired those like him, who spoke with a brogue. Her dad said the place was like a bit of Ireland. Once a patron stepped through the door into the foyer, the eyes had to adjust to the pub's cool darkness. Only then, could you notice a long mahogany bar running almost the length of the right side of the building. A five-foot high, black baseboard wall, topped by a planter, bisected the room. A brief aisle at either end of the planter permitted traffic to flow between the bar and the dining tables. Booths lined the wall planter, as well as the other walls on the eatery side. The plants had to be plastic though. They might attract pests, if they weren't. The planters weren't very old country though. A row of small square tables that could seat four people apiece stood between the booths. Behind them, looking from inside out, a large, front plate glass window read RIORDAN'S, painted backwards in a green semi-circle over a shamrock. Partly closed Venetian blinds shut out unwanted sunlight, not a problem now after noon. Her family rarely frequented the pub anymore. They didn't go out to eat much since her folks had bought their beach resort place down on the Banks.

Mr. Vamia sat down with her in the row of four-seat tables between the booths lining the wall and the planter. "Shirley," by her name tag, greeted them. She was middle-aged, wore glasses and a page boy haircut, a bit on the chunky side. Shirley smiled pleasantly, leaving them a pair of menus. Despite, or perhaps because of, the events of the day, Ryz'n was hungry. After studying the menu, she decided on the grilled tuna, broccoli and an omelet on the side. But she asked for "the broccoli raw—washed, not cooked." And "a glass of iced tea with a lime, not a lemon, please." Mr. Vamia opted for a corned beef on rye with cabbage, some fries and a Guinness Stout.

He was studying her figure again. She ignored him. Occasionally, she had caught him staring at her as if he were measuring her carcass for a wall trophy, not just now but earlier in the day, too. She discovered this mostly male phenomenon had been occurring more and more over the last few months. Especially, since the warm weather had arrived and she dressed lighter, airier. The sensation of males undressing her with their eyes had been foreign to her until her junior year transformation. What her mom and her lady friends called "Ry's belated blossoming." Of course, now that she thought about it, since summer started, she had caught a couple of women eyeing her, too. Now that had really ticked her off, once she realized what they were doing.

Her gorgeous kid sister Sheena experienced men staring at her all the time. When she had asked how she handled it, Sheena just laughed saying, "Look all you want, but don't touch. That's my motto. That is unless I *want* them to touch." Then she had laughed some more. But Ryz'n didn't like it. Guys her own age weren't as bad older ones like this lawyer. But when Nick looked at her like that, her insides melted. Made her want to jump his bones. But nobody else affected

her that way. What she had under her clothes belonged to her, and now, to Nick alone. No one else. Yes, she and Nick in the car this morn—

"Earth to Ryz'n." Mr. Vamia passed his flat hand in front of her face.

"What?"

"You were off in another world again."

"Oh, I'm so sorry Mister Vamia."

"Please, call me Franco or Frank."

"Oh no, I couldn't do that. It wouldn't be fittin'. I mean—proper. Sometimes my old Georgia ways of speaking crop back up on me."

"No need to apologize. Funny you don't look *Eye*-rish to me."

"Well, you don't look *Eye*-talian to me, either."

He chuckled. "Well, guess I deserved that. But really, aside from your name, I don't see much Irish in your heritage, except perhaps for those green eyes."

"Well, I get that a lot. Guess I'm really more a mutt than any one thing."

He frowned. "No, no. You're no mutt. I've known some dogs in my day. And you could never be mistaken for one. Trust me." His mouth curled.

"You're the one who looks Irish. Something tells me, you have a bit of the leprechaun in you. But make no mistake Mister Vamia, Nicky's my guy, always will be." She arched her eyebrows to underscore her sincerity.

"Why certainly, Ryz'n. I didn't mean to imply differently. It's just that, well, you look more, uh, Middle Eastern, more erotic to me than Irish."

"Erotic?"

"'*Erotic?'* Is that what I said? Oh pardon me." He smiled through a blush. His pasty, freckled face turned a kind of orangey-pink. "I meant *exotic*."

"Oh, well I should hope so."

"Please, I meant no offense, honestly Ryz'n. What I want to say is that, with your dark, even features, green eyes and olive complexion, you make for quite a striking young woman. Nick is very fortunate to have a friend like you."

"Well thank you Mister Vamia. I think Nicky knows that. At least, I hope he does. I'll be sure to pass your compliment onto him—If uh, I appear to be *exotic* though, it's only because of my mixed heritage. I'm only about an eighth Irish, in name only mostly. See, I've got a lot of different races in my blood."

"Oh really? I didn't know that."

"Well yes, I'm at least a quarter Indian. That is, I'm an eighth Cherokee and an eighth real Indian, like from India. Besides Irish and Indian, I'm an eighth Spanish, Ukrainian, and Lebanese, and a sixteenth Greek, Icelandic and Polish with a smidgen of Arabic and, like you, I even have some Italian blood in me, too." She smiled pleasantly. "Of course, that's going way back a few generations. And since my Dad's mom was a gypsy, we're kind of guessing at her heritage. She met my grandfather Ryan when she was dancing in Ceuta. Do you know where that is Mister Vamia?" He shook his head. "It's an autonomous city of Spain, located in an enclave of North Africa. Surrounded by Morocco?

"Yes, my grand pop was a career officer in the Royal Marines stationed at Gibraltar when they met. So there's really no telling what all else I could be."

She forced a smile, which quickly melted.

"Icelandic, Arabic and Indian, both kinds of Indian? Whoa! Yes, that *is* quite a heritage. One to be proud of. Makes you one hundred per cent American, I'd say. Yes, I think so, and it all comes together so nicely in you." He grinned.

She forced another smile. Adding once more, she'd be sure to pass his compliment onto Nick. But the smile faded when she thought of Nicky in jail.

And here she sat in a nice restaurant about to dine with an attorney, calmly discussing genealogy. She wondered what Nick was eating tonight, who his dining partners were. Her mind wandered. She frowned.

"Are you okay Ry?"

She thought she might be if he'd stop undressing her and calling her Ry instead of Ryz'n.

"Sure, as well as can be expected I guess."

When Shirley brought their drinks, she excused herself to wash her hands. Mr. Vamia followed her lead. When they returned, Ryz'n squeezed a wedge of lime juice into her drink. She sipped on her iced tea while the lawyer slurped his ale.

"I'm sure it's disconcerting, having Nick in jail, but I'm confident he'll be out tomorrow. We'll get him arraigned. Post bond. He'll be back in your arms."

"Really? Are you sure?" Swallowing his Stout, he said. "Umm, pretty sure."

"What happens exactly when you get arraigned?"

"Well, a magistrate calls your case before him and asks you to enter a plea: guilty, not guilty or nolo contendre." She perked up.

"What's that mean? I've heard it on TV, but was never sure what it meant."

"That you don't plead one way or the other, innocent or guilty, but you won't contest whatever the judge rules. Essentially, it's like a guilty plea."

"You rely on the judge's best judgment in other words."

"Yes, in other words."

"What's Nicky going to plead?"

"Not guilty, of course."

"And the charge is manslaughter?"

"Unh-hunh. Manslaughter by a vehicle and leaving the scene of an accident that resulted in death."

"Don't suppose you could tell me all about it?"

The attorney shook his head. "Wouldn't be prudent at this point."

He spoke no more. They sipped their drinks until Shirley brought their food orders. Ryz'n crossed herself whispering grace. After hesitating, Mr. Vamia did the same. They ate in silence, each to their own thoughts. Halfway through her meal, she got Shirley's attention for another iced tea with lime.

"How can I help Mr. Vamia? I'm Nick's girl now. I want to do everything I can to help him."

"Well, don't pester him to tell you things he shouldn't. Just, you know, be available, I guess." He waved a French fry in the air, "You know, for moral support." She perked up again.

"You mean like a cheerleader with lots of TLC?"

He grinned. “Now you’re talking. You know Nick is very lucky to have a girlfriend like you. You truly are a lovely, young woman.”

“Well, thank you very much Mister Vamia. And like I said, before, I’ll pass your compliment onto Nicky, so he can appreciate it, too.”

“Franco or Frank is sufficient.”

She shook her head, waiting to speak until she swallowed some tuna.

“Sorry Mister Vamia, somehow it just doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Well, have it your way. But I’d be happy if you change your mind.”

She smiled. “That’s a deal.”

Shirley brought her iced tea refill.

They talked about her and Nick’s strange, belated courtship and some of Mr. Vamia’s courtroom successes. Ryz’n assumed he wanted to assure her that he knew what he was doing. They finished their meals with him picking up the tab. He walked her out to the parking lot then followed her home in his car. Pulling up behind her in the long driveway, he stepped out of his car when she got out of hers, offering to walk her to the door. She declined politely. Standing beside his opened car door, Mr. Vamia said goodbye. Ryz’n felt his eyes crawling over her as she strolled up the walk to the front door. Creeped her out, feeling his sex-ray vision, piercing the light cloth armor of only her sundress covering her backside.

She recalled how Nick had admired her natural gait that night before they went mini-golfing, before the beaver ponds. Right here—he had made her walk back to the front door accidentally on purpose with some phony excuse. She wore Sheena’s snug, black cotton-knit mini-skirt and a pair of her mom’s dark nylons. Nick had said he did that, “Just so I could watch your naturally sexy strut.”

Trying hard not to strut now, Ryz’n tucked her tail as she approached the front door to minimize any thrills Mr. Vamia might be getting from her rear view.

Until Nick had said that, she had never considered she had a “sexy strut.”

Afterwards though, she seemed to recall that others had made comments about her “easy, rolling hips”, her gait, even when she was chubby. Their comments had flown over her head. To her, she walked how she walked. Nothing special.

After unlocking the door, she turned and waved good-bye to Mr. Vamia from the front porch. She called out to thank him again for his generosity and all his efforts in Nick’s behalf. She shut the door, glad to be shed of his sex-ray vision.

Inside, the house was empty and quiet. With her family and their pet Skye terrier Scruffy away, down at the beach, the house felt odd, funny sort of. “Funny-strange” as Nick might say, “not funny-ha-ha,” or “funny-funny.” She couldn’t concentrate on the TV. She could only worry about how Nicky was making out in jail. Talking with Mr. Vamia had kept away negative thoughts.

She popped the top of one her dad’s beers from the refrigerator. Slurping her brew, Ryz’n plopped down in his recliner to watch TV. The beer tasted good. As Nicky said, “The first few sips were the best; especially, when you were two-fisted-wrapped-around-the-tonsils-squeezin-em-dry-kinda-thirsty.” Nicky always had an interesting but genuine way of putting things. He said he had heard

Wolfman Jack deliver that line over the radio, advertising Olympia Beer, when he had been in L.A. for that trial last year. She'd never heard of that brand before.

Nick said that first sip or two of a good brew, when you were really thirsty, was like the best it'd get. Until you got a buzz on and didn't care. Kind of the opposite of good loving. And now, after this morning in the Monza, she knew what he meant. "Sweet lovin'," is how he described it—even wrote a song by that name, also known as "Turtle Dovin'." Then, Nicky was always right when it came to stuff like that. She couldn't get around him on that subject. But then she didn't want to, either. On second thought, she really liked getting around him. She giggled then polished off the beer before she reclined fully in her dad's chair. The beer had lightened her mood, tempering the strain of her day. She dozed…

The phone rang, waking her. Ryz'n answered to hear her mom on the other end. Just checking in. Ryz'n told her everything was fine, when of course it wasn't. She heeded Nick's request to keep his troubles from her folks.

Her mom said they visited Jockey Ridge again. Sheena had run too fast, lost her balance and fallen down one of the dunes headfirst. Bit her lower lip. Bryson claimed he liked the taste of her blood. Said her swollen lip gave him something to gnaw on. Her dad had caught some grouper. He grilled his catch "outdoors to cut down on the smell." The fish were delicious. He was a happy camper, or angler in this case. She added that they all missed her but were glad she and Nick had gotten home safely. Then she said good-bye and hung up.

She had not asked if Nick were there alone with her. That surprised her. The question was almost conspicuous by its absence. Probably, her mom was trying to overcome the mistrust and anger generated during the disaster of the Sheeboom-Ryan "get-acquainted *family* picnic" a couple weeks ago. When Nick had cold-cocked her dad, after her dad had slapped her in front of everyone during a heated argument over Nick's bad rep—the bad rep that a jealous Sheena had made a point of detailing to their father in front of both families. Ryz'n had gone on a hunger strike after that fiasco. But she had learned her lesson on that score. Never again.

Ryz'n undressed for bed, wondering what she could wear to the arraignment to lift Nick's spirits. He had convinced her that sleeping in the buff was the only way to go. He had taught her—made her—feel things she never dreamed could exist. What it felt like to be a woman. She trusted him. He'd said, "Sleepin' in the raw'll help your skin breathe and make ya feel great." Claimed it would help her sleep better, too. And darned, if he wasn't right. Then he was always right about stuff like that. He'd told her God had intended for people to be naked. Nicky liked to say: "That's how He first invented us." Then he'd grin like the devil.

That Nick was a fountain of knowledge when it came to stuff like that. Sure knew how to make her feel good, too. Though she didn't like to think how he had acquired such knowledge. How he came by all those scars and marks on his manhood. Doctors messed up when they circumcised him, so he said. She thought if that were true, his folks should have sued the doctors.

On reflection, she knew he had been right though, about sleeping in the raw. But she didn't think she'd keep it up when the weather turned cold. More important to keep her skin warm then she figured, even if her pores didn't breathe quite as well. Yes. Seemed Nicky always was right about stuff like that. But she had confessed to him that she couldn't kneel and pray by her bed without wearing something at least.

So she slipped into her light cotton bathrobe to pray. Come to think of it though, Nick had shot that argument down too. He said that God knew what she looked like beneath her shimmy and loved her regardless. Saying that after all, "Hadn't He created Eve naked from Adam's rib? And created her naked from her mom's womb?" He'd said "You can't hide nothin' from God," or from Nick either, it seemed. Then, she didn't care to. Still, she was not brazen enough to pray nude, not yet anyway. So she kneeled by her bed to say her prayers now, wearing her light, cotton robe, asking forgiveness for lying to her mother on the phone and for her trespasses with Nick in the Monza. She prayed for his safety. Then she sighed, knowing she would have to make confession again.

Slipping out of the robe, she crawled between fresh-cleaned sheets. Lying on her back, Ryz'n reveled in the soft texture of those fresh, clean sheets against her skin. Extremely tactile and visual by nature, she had found much satisfaction in Nick's peculiar sweet, loving touch. Reinforced her sensual proclivities. But sleeping in the buff didn't just reward her tactile senses. It also reminded her of him, how they had lain in each other's arms on the old wool, army surplus blanket beneath the unzipped sleeping bag in the mist on the levée bank. Yes, sleeping like this brought him closer to her. She needed him now. Longed for some of his sugar in her bowl. Resting her head on the pillow, Ryz'n blocked the day's sins from her mind to pore over other events.

Being with Nicky was an incredible, never-ending adventure. Every day was different. She never knew what to expect of him from one minute to the next. She liked that sense of excitement. But she was worried about him in jail. She had dreamed for nearly two years of what it might be like to be with him. And now that she was with him, the whole experience exceeded her wildest expectations, both good and bad. Yet they were good together, as she always had suspected they would be.

Their adventure in the Monza this morning returned to her in all its glory, embarrassing her at first. But then, she delved deeper into her reverie, letting those lurid, deep-seated feelings steal over her again. Her left hand strayed down over stomach—she stopped it halfway home. Flopping over onto her belly, Ryz'n shoved her hands up to tuck them safely under her pillow. Resting on her right side, she tried to console herself that Nick probably had nothing against that. Probably would have said it was "natural" under such difficult and lonely circumstances. But Ryz'n scolded herself for even entertaining the temptation. Still, she couldn't help recalling how warmly and so completely he had filled her during the storm. Pushed all the right buttons at just the right times. She'd never experienced such violent, lusty passion. She'd never known anyone like him.

Never wanted to know anyone else either. They were united together forever now in love. Just as they had pledged each other that first time, eight days ago, in the mist on the levée bank between the ponds.

Though she had not renewed her "pill" prescription, she consoled herself with her doctors' repeated assertions that she was "clinically infertile and highly unlikely to conceive." What would Nicky think of that? She would have to tell him before they got married. It wouldn't be fitting of her not to. What would he say? No need to worry about that now. They had to finish high school first.

She always figured she would have children. She'd taken that fact for granted, despite all the negative medical opinions to the contrary. Some doctors said her tubes were blocked, maybe twisted from birth. Or maybe they had been scarred during the high fever and infection she had suffered after her emergency appendectomy when she was eleven. Other doctors suggested she had cysts on her ovaries, something they called "endometriosis." Did it really matter? All she knew was that she used to have severe migraines and abdominal pain to the point of nausea from cramping duirng irregular periods. She had missed so much school her sophomore year because of her condition, she almost got held back.

It had been six weeks since she'd run out of pills. Normal for her since she got regulated on the pill. Made the other girls jealous. Especially, when they learned hers lasted only a few days instead of a week. She was due but not worried. She was in love. It felt great. Besides, she was infertile, right? If not sterile?

All the doctors said so. Yet, she wouldn't accept their diagnoses, because she adored kids. She was good with them. By all accounts, Ryz'n was widely considered the favorite babysitter among the neighborhood teens. Parents and children alike proclaimed her as their first choice. Quite a feat, considering there was an inordinate number of attractive teenage girls on her street. So many that Nick, who knew her neighborhood well from his paper route, had dubbed it "Double G Street" for all the "*G*reat (looking) *G*irls" who lived there.

Growing up, she had enjoyed taking care of her kid sister when their mom was at work. Sheena said she was too bossy, but Ryz'n always took her baby-sitting chores seriously. When her folks were away, she became the mom. She had a unique ability (mainly due to her penchant for pain, like her mom) to make her kid sister tow the line by outlasting Sheena in any physical confrontation between them. Ryz'n thought, if the doctors were right, she and Nick could adopt if he wanted to. Oh! She was thinking crazy. But she couldn't sleep.

She got up, put on her robe and drifted into the living room to watch TV. She thought about going downstairs to the freezer to candle and eat some raw herring. It was her personally peculiar way of beating the "hornies" and inducing insomnia. But it was eerie being all alone in the house like this, without even Scruffy to keep her company. She knew it was childish, but she was afraid to go down to the basement all alone now. Visions of the end of *Psycho* played in her head. Anyway, the late news had just ended.

She found an old black and white flick on *The Late Show*, called *The Conspirators.* The show had a look and feel similar to *Casablanca* with many of

the same actors. Only this story was set in Portugal during World War II. The plot moved quickly, keeping her attention. On commercials, she took a couple of shots of her dad's Irish whiskey as a sedative. Burned her throat on the way down but the liquor made her drowsy. She fell asleep in her dad's recliner with the whiskey bottle on the stand beside her.

When she woke, a test pattern buzzed on the tube. The show was over. She wondered how the movie had ended—if Paul Henried and Heddy Lamar ever got together. Dragging herself to her room to sleep, Ryz'n removed her robe to lie down between the sheets. Clutching her Kodiak teddy bear securely between her arms and unfettered bosom, she lowered her head to assume a fetal position lying on her right side. This was her favored sleep position. The one endorsed by her mom, who claimed it as the one least likely to mar the shape of a full-bosomed woman. If anyone knew about that, it would be her mom.

With the surrogate Nick clutched to her bosom, face-up, kissing her lips, Ryz'n placed her hands together as if she were a child in prayer, inserting them downward between her thighs, the way she preferred. She sighed deeply, thinking of Nicky—what he would like to see her wear at the arraignment. An idea came to her she thought he might appreciate, something—sharp, sexy—tough. Like most other nights the past two years, she fell asleep dreaming of him.

~ Chapter 12: The Arraignment ~

Petros Perkouri was questioning a woman for the last alternate juror slot. Nick hoped after the jury was selected, the judge would call it a day. Let them all go home. Franco nudged him with his elbow, propping him up. On cue, Nick turned toward the prospective juror under question to smile briefly though friendly-like, as Franco had instructed. The woman looked as if she were in her mid-thirties. Her eyelids widened a bit when her eyes met his. Yeah, the female jurors seemed to like him all right—so far anyway—the younger ones. Nick glanced to his left at the clock high up the wall. Five after five. Shoot. Franco's left arm was resting on the table in front of them. He reached forward to peel back Franco's French cuff over his wristwatch to verify the time.

Where was she? Was she still mad at him from their fight in Homeroom? He turned around again, scouring the near empty courtroom for Ry, but she still wasn't there. His dad, who sat behind him, caught his eye and sternly motioned for him to turn around. When he returned to face the bench, Franco leaned in to ask what was wrong.

Nick whispered. "Ry. She ain't here yet."

"Don't worry. She will be. Didn't you say she had some meeting after school today?"

"Yeah, but I figured she'd be here by *now*. Maybe she's still sore at me from before?"

Franco patted the back of Nick's forearm, resting on the table now too.

"Don't worry, she'll be here. You'll see. That girl's a keeper." He smiled.

"Hope so. I'm countin' on her." Franco replied, "Me. Too."

Perkouri was asking the same, tired questions. Nick looked around the courtroom, the same one used for his arraignment. Bored by the endless voir dire, his mind drifted …

> Awaiting his arraignment with the other handcuffed jailbirds, Nick stood in a holding pen, walled with benches at the end of an iron bar-gated hallway adjacent to a courtroom. He peeped through the privacy window in a tall door. The window was embedded with crisscrossed wire mesh like the classroom doors at school. On the other side of the door, he could see half of the courtroom. To his left he saw an empty jury box and a table where a couple of suits sat. A high desk-like structure blocked his view to the right. He could spy half the gallery.
>
> Fammick had escorted him from the holding tank after breakfast. Then took him down to another interview room to ask if he was all right. He'd pressed him to call his folks. But Nick declined. Fammick was okay. He made sure Nick got on the list for the morning arraignment. He had contacted Franco for him, too.
>
> Nick wondered if Ry'd be there. He peered through the window, trying to spot her in the courtroom. No dice. Behind the table where the suits sat, he saw people scattered throughout the gallery in various styles of dress, sitting behind a short, wood-slatted fence rail that ran across the room. As far as he could see anyway.

The Sims boys were before the judge now. He could see 'em, standing there slouch-shouldered with scowls on their faces. High above the door a wall speaker box squawked the court proceedings. Red leaned over his shoulder to watch.

Folks in the courtroom looked left, past a high desk to Nick's right—

"How do your clients plead, Counselor?"

"I'm not sure that a plea is needed, Your Honor. I understand the storeowner has dropped the charges?" This came from some white guy, dressed in a dark suit and wearing prescription glasses, standing next to the Sims boys.

Someone spoke, apparently from behind the high desk, out of sight also to Nick's right. Nick figured it must be the judge.

"Mister Jacoby, is that right?"

One of the black guys turned to his left. Nick heard another man's voice, somewhere the other side of the colored guy, out of Nick's sight.

"Yes, Your Honor. Seems it was just a prank gone wrong. Nothing in their record to indicate otherwise." The would-be judge guy asked, "Where is the arresting officer?" The unseen, far voice said, "He's not here, Your Honor. The State does not wish to press charges."

"Does the State have a motion for nolle prosequi ready?"

"We do Your Honor …"

"Ahem. Very well …"

The suit next to the black kids said, "Your Honor, may defense move for Expungement now, while the matter is fresh in the eyes of the Court?"

"Counselor, having not seen you previously, I take it you are new to this Court. You may be unaware of our procedures here. [The attorney nods.] Well, you may obtain the forms for the Petition for Expungement of Records and General Waiver from the Clerk." The lawyer replied, ""I have them right here, already filled out for the Court's review, Your Honor." The guy offered some papers up toward the desk but Nick couldn't see what was going on.

"Very well. Hand the documents to the bailiff, please."

The suit handed the papers over to someone Nick couldn't see.

"Your Honor, I thought we could take care of this matter right away. I—"

"Oh, you did, did you? Thought you could just leapfrog over all the other Expungement motions waiting to be processed. Is that right?"

"Well, if it please the Court Your—"

"Well, it doesn't! There is no fast-tracking of Expungements—no exceptions. Consider this a lesson learned, Counselor. On second thought. Bailiff return the paperwork to the Counselor here. He can file them in the Clerk's office. Now, case dismissed." *Slamm!*

That dude swings a mean gavel. Nick watched the suit accept the forms back.

The black boys were all smiles. They shook hands with the white dude in the suit then strutted to the side of the courtroom in Nick's view. They had a bounce to their step Nick hadn't seen before. Their suit led them to a desk on the near side of the courtroom beside the empty jury box. An officer un-cuffed them. Then each of them signed a paper. The officer handed them their personal

belongings. A chunky, greying, elderly black woman, dressed in her Sunday finest Nick figured, scurried through the gallery to meet them. She hugged them. Then the boys bounced out of the courtroom, slapping hands.

Nick heard someone on the other side of the magistrate's bench call out—"William Nicholas *Shee*boom."

The door to the holding pen swung open. A guard said, "You're up kid."

Red nudged him through the door. Cuffed and on one crutch, Nick pushed the door open with his shoulder. A court officer the other side of the door escorted him across the courtroom to stand before the judge. Franco stood up in plain view in the front row of the gallery, catching Nick's eye. Seated next to him, Ry stood as well. Franco motioned her to sit.

Mann! She looked sharp, wearing the black cotton, knit mini-skirt, dark fish-net hose and black, open-toe, stiletto heels, she had worn down at the beaver ponds. And some out o' sight top he'd never seen. Looked like something one of Captain Nemo's crew might have worn in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea.* Only it had a deep, V-neck. Looked to be light cotton-knit with alternating horizontal, broad green and narrow black stripes and short, cap sleeves. Her hair swept across her forehead curving down below one brow. And though it didn't go with her outfit, she wore Youngblood's yellow ribbon tied in her hair, instead of a burette. Kept her tresses from falling into her eyes. Looked like a Christmas present wrapped in green and black-striped tissue paper under that yellow bow.

Dang. She was something else all right.

Nick smiled at her. She winked back, sexy as sin. Yeah buddy, she was his Christmas present, right here in July. Never knew her to dress or act that way—sharp, sexy—before they started goin' together. He was a good influence on her. His guard escort led him by the wrist closer to the bench.

Franco held a well-worn, fat, brown leather briefcase by the handle. He stepped up to stand by Nick's left shoulder. Two other suits, an older, baldy dude, wearing glasses and a younger man—blonde, medium build—carrying a briefcase and a clipboard full of papers, walked up beside Franco. The guy in a black robe, seated behind the big desk, had a puffy, blotchy kind of face. He wore glasses with round lenses and gold, wire frames. His dark hair seemed funny, sort of out o' kilter. A wig, maybe. Looked to be in his fifties. The magistrate peered through his specs at a paper in his hand.

"What have we here now?"

He glanced over the papers before him then looked over his spectacles at Nick.

"Mister *Shee*boom: The State of Maryland has issued a formal complaint against you on two counts of first degree murder and two counts each of lesser included offenses of second degree murder and manslaughter and one count of leaving the scene of an accident that resulted in death. He ruffled the papers.

"So. How do you plead?"

"*Murder?*" Nick looked to Franco, who nudged him.

"How do you plead son?"

"I thought it was manslaughter by a vehicle. I never murdered anybody."

"That's not how the complaint reads. So you're pleading not guilty, to all charges I take it?" Franco nudged him again and nodded.

"Uh, yeah—right. Not guilty—to everything. Tha—that's right. You bet!"

"Your Honor," said the older, bald guy next to Franco, "the State is keen to expedite this matter to insure a speedy trial. We have sworn, notarized affidavits from two eyewitness who attest to the allegations in the complaint before you."

The baldy guy turned to his blonde assistant, who removed documents from the clipboard to hand to the blotchy-faced guy in the black robe behind the high desk. The bald guy paused to let the judge-guy review the documents. Nick looked to Franco, who, nodding smiled faintly, as if to say everything's cool. The judge-dude looked up. The balding suit on the other side of Franco said.

"As you can see from those affidavits Your Honor, the State believes sufficient probable cause exists to move this matter forward. Since the purposes of a preliminary hearing are to show probable cause and to notify the accused of defendant's right to counsel and to advise him to obtain counsel, which is a moot point here because the accused is already represented, and because probable cause is shown by these sworn affidavits, the State requests that this matter be turned over to a grand jury as expeditiously as possible."

The magistrate looked up from the papers to peer over his glasses at Franco.

"Has the State provided notarized copies of these two affidavits to defense counsel?"

The bald guy checked with the blonde assistant to his left, who nodded. The bald dude said they had. The guy in the black robe turned to Franco.

"Is that true, Counselor?"

Franco nodded, saying yes he had received the documents that morning.

The magistrate asked if Franco had a chance to review them to his satisfaction.

Franco said he had.

"Does defense counsel object to the State's desire to expedite this matter? If the accused waives his right to a preliminary hearing, you understand he will be waiving his right to cross-examine the witnesses whose testimony is contained in these affidavits?" He tapped the papers in his hand.

Franco shrugged. "I understand. We have no objections. The sooner this farce can be placed before a grand jury, the sooner this boy will be acquitted."

Nick half-turned to Franco, wondering what was going on.

"In that case, the State requests bail set at a quarter million dollars," said baldy.

Franco stepped forward. "Your Honor, this boy is only sixteen. He's never been in trouble with the law, never been arrested or charged, not even with a traffic violation, I believe." Franco looked at Nick who blinked.

(Nick figured that speeding ticket he'd gotten last month in the District on South Dakota Avenue didn't count for much here in R. G. County. How was he supposed to know all streets in the District were twenty-five miles per hour, unless otherwise posted? South Dakota was a four lane street—two each way.)

Franco returned to face the judge.

"This boy is not a threat to the safety of the community. Indeed, he has strong ties to the community. He has lived here all his life, comes from a reputable family and is an honor student, well respected in his high school. He presented himself to the police yesterday voluntarily, within hours of learning of the State's desires to question him. He traveled here from out of state where he was vacationing to do so. He is not a risk to flee the county, I assure you."

"Umm, you mean like the scene of this accident?" The judge smirked.

"Your Honor, this boy will appear when and wherever the Court wishes."

"You guarantee that do you, Mister Vamia?" Franco nodded. "Yes sir, I do, I—"

"He was involved in the infamous Ransom Clan murder case in Los Angles last year, Commissioner," said baldy. "You probably read about it in the papers."

"—As a material witness for the State! He helped put the Clan on death row. He volunteered, and at his own expense. He turned the State onto Ransom."

Franco shot the bald due a laser stare before settling back on the commissioner, whose eyes behind his glasses darted back and forth from baldy to Franco, coming to rest on Nick, as if his vision could penetrate Nick's heart and mind.

"He's charged with two counts of capital murder, Counselor. What are you suggesting, he be released on his own recognizance?"

Capital murder? The term turned Nick's stomach queasy.

"And without his parents? Or are they here? [Looking around.] The note here from J. D. says he has refused to contact them."

"No sir, his parents are not here. I'm representing the boy in this matter."

"With his parent's consent, I presume?"

"Well Your Honor, I feel confident his parents will consent to my representation as soon as I can inform them. These charges were unexpected."

The judge frowned. "Well, I expect you to make that your primary order of business Counselor!" Franco nodded again. "Yes, Commissioner."

"R-O-R is out of the question. But, given your arguments, bail will be set at twenty-five thousand dollars."

He picked up his gavel, as baldy stepped forward. Ray Fammick appeared out of nowhere.

"—Sir, the boy should be in juvenile detention, not the general population."

"If bail is not posted today." He lowered his gavel—*Bang!* "Next case."

Fammick threw his hands up, only to let them drop at his sides. Yeah. That Fammick was okay. Nick had learned Fammick was responsible for getting him locked up with the three other youngest inmates in the jail last night.

"Thanks, Ray," he said. Fammick tried, but couldn't quite pull off a smile.

While Nick was trying to figure out what just happened, a court officer ushered him back towards the holding pen door. Franco walked beside him. Halfway there, he said, he'd bail him out shortly. "Not to worry."

Nick peeked around the guard to see Ry standing, gesticulating with her hands. Hovering above the thigh-high, wood-slatted fence railing, her heavy bosom bounced in tandem, as she stepped awkwardly sideways along the rail with her

hands falling to grab at the rail for balance. She maneuvered gingerly around people's feet and knees on them stiletto heels to meet Franco at the gate. Seemed as if every head in the courtroom turned to ogle her. Nick strained, but couldn't hear her speaking. Then she stood on her toes to peep at him over Franco's shoulder. She mouthed the words, *I love you Baby*. Nick nodded.

A man in uniform on the other side of the magistrate's high bench called out, "Roy Robert Ripley."

Red stepped through the portal. Like Nick earlier, he picked up an officer escort. Also cuffed in front, Red passed Nick, saying "Is that your chick?" He raised his cuffed hands, pointing to the gallery. Nick craned his neck around to spy Ry speaking with Franco. Red waved, pointing at her.

"Yup, that's her."

Red puckered his lips to kiss the air. He flipped two thumbs up above his cuffs, gushing, "Oooohh Mann! Yeah buddy, I see what you're sayin'."

As Franco ushered Ry towards the far door, a pudgy, sweaty man in a baggy tan suit stepped around the short wooden fence that divided the room. He met Red before the bench. Guy looked like a fat weasel all right. Red twisted around, mouthing something to Nick, but Nick couldn't make out what he said. Red tapped his cuffs against his fly and mimed clearly: *That's what I'm sayin'*.

Nick grinned, raising his chin in acknowledgment. Red broke into a wide grin then made a pronounced wink. The court officer jerked him back around by the elbow. Nick sniggered, while the weasel in the baggy suit joined Red at the bar. Nick wanted to hear the disposition of Red's case but his guard escort was in no mood to dawdle. He assisted Nick through the exit. The bar door at the far side of the pen slid open. A guard loomed in the aperture. He pointed at Nick. Nick crossed the pen past the other waiting prisoners to return to the holding tank.

* * *

Balancing himself on one crutch, with his hands free, Nick counted the fifty in cash he had left in his wallet. He had given Franco the rest yesterday for his bail. Nick wanted to make sure the cops hadn't short-changed him. It had taken Franco little over a couple hours to post his bail-bond premium. Nick collected his personal effects from the cop at the booking desk. He tried his blues harp to make sure it worked okay. Then he stuffed all his junk into his pockets. The clerk returned his other crutch. Nick stuck it under his free armpit. He swung himself down the corridor around to the waiting area by the jail's front desk.

Ryz'n was there waiting for him, where he had left her yesterday. Darn if she didn't look like *dyn-o-mite*, bouncing all over like Jell-O on springs in her snug-fitting outfit. She hustled over to greet him in short choppy steps. All she could manage due to her tight skirt. She gave him a heartfelt hug and a sloppy big, wet kiss. The kind she had warned *him* against making in public.

Franco dressed in a lightweight, blue silk suit, loud red tie and an old-fashioned pair of black and white wing-tips. Like the kind Nick pulled from the back of his dad's closet to wear to school or gigs. Nick preferred to dress in baggy Fifties style with a dark, dress shirt and light tie when he performed. Made him feel like

early Elvis. He'd been too preoccupied during the arraignment to note his attorney's resplendent attire. The A/C was running full blast here at the front desk. The cool air drew Ry out through her Captain Nemo top. Her licorice whip tips were forming beneath the snug fabric. Nick dived onto her lips again.

Franco patted Nick on the back to break his embrace with Ry. He suggested they go across the street to a diner for lunch to discuss their case. He pointed to Ry's lower leg bent back at the knee parallel to the ground.

"Thought they only did that in old movies." Ry blushed but Nick said, "Well, I thought you would have known by now, Ry here is royalty, just like any of them Hollywood movie queens. Franco sighed, saying, "Yes, she certainly is that."

* * *

The diner across the street from the courthouse was a genuine greasy spoon. But after jail food, their fare tasted heavenly to Nick. As they ate, Franco talked to him across the booth about his situation—bail and stuff. He said Nick needn't worry about the murder charges. Franco explained it wasn't easy to prove vehicular homicide in Maryland. So, once the prosecutor learned the booze would have been out of Nick's system by the time of the accident, he went for the murder charges, knowing he'd be lucky to settle for manslaughter. And he had "a damn slim chance with that." No way the grand jury could consider Nick's Pontiac as a murder weapon, especially when there was no collision.

Nick felt much better after hearing Franco's explanation. Then he had a hard time looking his attorney in the eye. Beside him, Ry looked and smelled good enough to eat. Her Love's Fresh Lemon scent charged his motor. How had she glued on that top to make it fit so tight? No bra straps he could see. Pokin' through like that, showin' her natural torpedo shape. Maybe *he* drew *her* out? He'd find out later how she managed that second skin look. Seated side by side, Nick felt the heat from her thigh. One thing was on his mind. It sure wasn't bail.

What Nick got out of Franco's discourse was that Franco had used the money Nick gave him yesterday to defray the premium on the bail bond and pay a fee to some bail bond agency—AAA Bail Bonds—run by an acquaintance of Franco's name of Max Terry. Franco had paid the balance of the bondsman's fee out of his own pocket. He said he didn't do that as a rule as it was a conflict of interest.

Patting Nick's forearm, Ry said with a smile. "See, that's because you're so special, Baby." Nick picked up her hand to kiss the back of it, squeezing tightly. Franco tolerated their byplay. Then he steered them back to business.

Nick promised he wouldn't skip out on his bail. Told Franco he needn't worry because he'd worked too hard for that bundle to blow it now by being stupid.

Nick asked Franco what the judge-guy had meant by waiving his right to a preliminary hearing and the chance to cross-examine witnesses. Franco said, "You mean *the commissioner*." Nick said, "Sure—yeah. That's what I meant."

Franco explained that the State's prosecutor "Petros Perkouri"—the bald guy whom Nick had seen in court—was hot to pursue this matter. He wanted to present the allegations before a grand jury, which would hear the case to determine if the State had sufficient evidence to proceed to trial. Franco said a

preliminary hearing wouldn't help Nick's case any. Franco said he'd interviewed the witnesses already. He claimed cross-examining them would only reveal his strategy to the prosecutor, should the case go to trial.

"But you said there wouldn't be a trial."

"I know. I know. And I don't think there is a sufficient case for one but the grand jury will determine that. We have to be ready, no matter what. Cover all the bases, remember?" Franco glanced at Ryz'n, who looked anxious.

"Well, lemme look at those statements then. Wanna know who's accusin' me."

"We can go over them in my office Monday. Stop by any time after two. I'll check my calendar to give you a time when I'm free."

"Why can't I see 'em now? I gotta right to know who my accusers are, don't I. It says that in the Constitution."

Again, Franco glanced toward Ry then smiled.

"Yes you are correct Nick. The Bill of Rights guarantees you that. But here and now is neither the time nor the place to discuss the matter. Wouldn't be prudent. We'll get down to it in detail. You can review their statements until your heart's content in the privacy of my office Monday. There'll be more papers to sign."

"Why can't we go to your office now? Shoot, let's do it!"

"I'm sorry, Nick. I can't. I'm supposed to be in court shortly for another client. But I'll definitely make time for you Monday. I promise."

Noticing his concern, Franco smiled.

"Relax, Nick. The grand jury won't convene for a couple weeks. That jerk prosecutor wants to move quickly I know, but he can't move that fast."

Franco chuckled. Nick didn't join him.

"Yeah, you told me we had nothing to worry about, too. Remember? We even had a party to celebrate that I helped pay for."

Franco's smile evaporated. He shook his head.

"I know. I know. They told me it was over. You saw the young blonde guy in there with all the paperwork?" Nick nodded. "Well, that was Sid Sitch, a former co-worker. We went to law school together. He told me the former prosecutor—O'Halloran— wanted nothing to do with the case. That's why we had that little dinner party. But O'Halloran received a judgeship and this character—the bald guy in there—Perkouri?" Nick nodded again. "Well, he's been appointed the interim State's Attorney and he wants the job full time. He thinks a guilty verdict against you will help him win the election in November. Asshole! Oh, pardon me Ryz'n." Ry shook her head, saying it was okay.

Nick looked to her and she, back at him. She looked as worried as he felt.

Franco sighed. "Look, kids. I've been here and done this many times. I also worked with Perkouri and Sitch for the State a couple years. I *know* what I'm doing. *Know* how this works. Trust me. It's what I do. And I'm good at it."

He glanced from one of them to the other then leaned forward, eager-like.

"Tell ya what. You kids have a nice weekend together and try to forget about this now. Monday, show up fresh to my office and we'll work it all out, okay?"

Nick and Ry looked at each other, unsure.

"*Hey Nick!* You're free on bond. Innocent until proven guilty. That is, if the grand jury decides to push this thing forward. And that's a big *if*. Ya gotta a lovely gorgeous, girl on your arm. Go. Have fun. Enjoy yourselves. Enjoy the weekend. But stay close by and, above all, stay out of trouble."

Nick and Ry sighed almost at the same time. Smiling, Nick nodded.

"O-K, Franco. Sounds good."

He stared at Ry looking forward to following his attorney's advice soon, real soon. Ry squeezed his bicep, producing the three-dimple simper that he adored.

"Ahem." Franco leaned forward, as he cleared his throat. "But there is, uh, one little matter, we should settle now before I got to court for another client."

"Yeah, What's that?"

"Well, I'll need more cash to start, if you still want me to represent you."

Nick turned from making goo-goo eyes with Ry long enough to assure Franco he still wanted him in his corner, asking how much more.

"Seventeen hundred. Gotta recoup my share of the bond fee, pay Gladys—investigators. File some motions. My time is worth something, you know."

"I gave you twenty-eight hundred already. I only got about eight hundred left."

"That money's gone already for your bail and I have bills to pay, too, Nick."

Nick rubbed his fingers over his mouth. "That's my college money."

Ry hooked her arm inside his. "*We* can cover it. You'll have it Monday, Mr. Vamia." Nick's mouth fell open as he stared at Ry. She smiled. "It's okay Baby."

"Okay, okay Ry." He faced Franco. "Boy, you sure put the Jesse James to me."

Franco didn't seem to appreciate Nick's dry sense of humor. He looked miffed until Ryz'n giggled, patting the back of Nick's hand. Franco said, "Don't worry, I expect to earn it." Nick said he expected him to earn it, too.

"You know, I sort of feel responsible for your predicament Nick. Maybe if you hadn't come to me, you wouldn't be in such sad shape—why I paid off that fee."

"May be, but with that news footage out there, somebody might have fingered me eventually anyway. And besides, my conscience is clear, ya know? I feel like I did the right thing. It's all gonna work out for good. I really believe that. Just keep my folks out of it until I say it's okay. I don't care what that judge said."

Franco sighed, but nodded. Ryz'n leaned in to kiss him—sloppy-wet, as if they were alone—

Ry. Where was she? Nick fidgeted in his chair, looking over his shoulder past his old man. He spotted Ry, slipping into a back pew. He lifted his chin to her. But she missed his signal. Franco poked him in the side with his elbow. Nick turned forward.

The voir dire was over. The judge was swearing in the jurors selected by the attorneys. When the judge finished, he asked Perkouri to make the State's opening statement.

Dang judge wasn't gonna let 'em go after all. After sittin' around for two days, his trial was about to start—just like that. He could hardly believe it. This was it.

"And here's a special oldies treat for you. The rare but original version by *The Crickets*, sans Buddy Holly, recorded about three and a half months after Buddy perished in that fateful plane crash. Written by *Cricket* Sonny Curtis, first released in 1960, six years before the Bobby Fuller Four made it famous—'I Fought the Law and the Law Won.'"

Ryz'n parked in the pay lot by the back fence, not too far from the racetrack's home turn in the county seat of Upper Winston. She listened to the tune for a minute before she shut off the engine. She never knew *The Crickets* made that song. Didn't know they existed after Buddy Holly died. She wondered if Nicky knew that. She'd have to ask him. She hustled up to the courthouse with that tune playing in her head. *Darn bad song to be thinking of on the way to a courthouse.* She entered the courtroom at ten after five.

It had been about an hour since she had left school. That traffic jam and her long-way-round escape had cost her half an hour. She slipped quietly into a seat at the back of the near empty gallery. She arrived to hear the judge thanking the attorneys for both sides for finishing jury selection in time to hear opening arguments before the end of the day. She had hoped she could get Nick's attention to let him know she was there. But, without making a scene, that was impossible. His folks were in the first pew behind him, back of the wooden bar rail. Ry settled into her seat in the back of the room.

The judge swore in the jury. Mr. Vamia rose to ask the judge if it wouldn't be better to recess to hear opening arguments in the morning, when everyone was fresh. He pointed out it was late in the day. The judge declined the suggestion. Mr. Vamia sat down.

The prosecutor rose to address the jury. A silence fell over the courtroom so still that Ryz'n heard the parsed click of each slow turn of the old-fashioned ceiling fans tethered high overhead. They were working now. Yesterday, the air conditioning had gone on the blink. She guessed it was still broken. Side windows opened to a balmy but close Indian summer day, typical of the first day of fall. The room was a little stuffy but not stifling.

The State's prosecutor Petros Perkouri, whom she had heard about for some time but first had seen at the arraignment without knowing who he was until afterwards, was a short, spare, baldy man around forty with a paunch and a prominent nose. He wore silver, wire-rimmed glasses and a three-piece, charcoal grey suit. The prosecutor stood, looking over some papers lying on the desk before him. After checking a pocket watch, he stepped forward to address the jury. She had learned Perkouri had been a long term A.S.A., assigned now as the interim State's Attorney for R. G. County pending the November election. Mr. Vamia had said Perkouri intended to take O'Halloran's place as the district's chief prosecutor. He said the man wanted to look tough on mushrooming teen crime, by riding a guilty verdict against Nicky to victory in the November election.

Approaching the jury, the prosecutor placed a solemn hand on the front rail of the jury box. He began speaking in a low, nasal voice using a deliberate, sober tone.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the State of Maryland brings this case before you to prove that the defendant William Nicholas *Shee*boom is guilty of causing the deaths of two County residents on the thirtieth of June this year past on Old Veer Avenue just outside the town of Surrettesdale in the south of our county.

The State charges the defendant with two felony counts of murder in the first and second degree, or two lesser included counts of felony manslaughter, voluntary or involuntary, which you will determine based on the facts the State presents and the law as explained to you by Judge Higher. The State also charges the defendant with two felony counts of second degree assault and battery against the deceased victims before the accident, as well as a felony count of fleeing the scene of an accident that resulted in the victims' death and four misdemeanor counts. One for underage drinking, a second for driving while intoxicated, a third for malicious destruction of private property and a fourth for disturbing the peace in a public place.

The State will show through eyewitness testimony *that*: At the time and place mentioned, the defendant made a conscious choice to lie in wait in the dead of night in his motor vehicle with his car headlights turned off on a treacherous stretch of county road during a driving rainstorm. And then, with gross negligence, he recklessly ran off the road the two male victims approaching him in their vehicle, causing their untimely, gruesome deaths. An eyewitness will also testify that, after watching the victims burn, the defendant fled the scene of the accident in a callous and cowardly manner. The State will provide news footage of the aftermath of that accident so you may see for yourselves, the ghastly demise of the two victims.

The State will also prove that the defendant illegally imbibed alcoholic beverages before the accident when he physically assaulted and battered the victims, in this case two brothers, in a violent, physical confrontation at a public road house earlier that evening. Eyewitnesses will also testify that after making the dual assaults, the defendant vandalized the victims' truck, rendering it inoperable by purposely ripping the distributor cap and wires from said truck, and pouring oil over the interior of the truck cab.

The State will show beyond a reasonable doubt these events took place using eyewitness testimony, the testimony of an expert accident investigator and public news footage of the accident scene. The State will also produce character witnesses to testify to the defendant's habitual violent temperament, indicative of his state of mind at the time of the fatal accident and, to his general, amoral conduct and lifestyle that he disguises beneath a cleverly devised but cold-blooded Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde persona.

His dual personality renders him capable of the aforesaid gross negligence that resulted in these brutalities, as well as the cleverly devised cover-up of his

heinous, cowardly actions. Thus, the State is trying him as an adult. Not as the beguiling juvenile that he appears to be, but as the hedonistic narcissist he truly is, a young man who cares for naught but pleasing his own whims.

Character witnesses for the State will also testify as to the defendant's intelligence and cunning so that you may see, he is no mere child or disadvantaged youth who should be tried in our juvenile court system. The State will show beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant assumes adult privileges in his lifestyle, has an adult body and an intelligent but fiendishly clever adult mind, which he used to cause the callous, gruesome and untimely deaths of two life-long county residents, whom he cut down in their prime, after savagely beating them physically and destroying their personal property. It is time for this young man, who lives like an adult, to answer for his adult, criminal acts in Circuit Court rather than letting him escape to the juvenile court system.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, when this trial ends you will be certain of four things: One, the victims are dead because the defendant wanted them dead; Two, he murdered them by driving them off the road into a power transformer during foul foul weather amid hazardous driving conditions ; Three, that he had beaten them savagely and vandalized their property before they died. And four, the defendant William Nicholas *Shee*boom is a maliciously vindictive, narcissistic hedonist who will stop at nothing to fulfill his whims or assuage his gross egoism and is—guilty, as charged.

Ryz'n's eyes watered. A lump rose in her throat she couldn't ignore. The prosecutor solemnly retraced his steps to sit at the prosecution table about a dozen feet from the jury box. The somber quiet of the high-ceilinged, old courtroom echoed his footsteps loud enough for all to hear. This is why she had fought traffic and rushed down the road?

Buttoning his suit coat while patting Nick on the shoulder, Mr. Vamia rose to speak for the defense. But before he could utter a word, the judge intervened, stating "It's late and the dinner hour is nigh. The Court will not set a precedent at the outset of the trial by delaying suppers longer than necessary. Court is adjourned until tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, at which time we will continue with opening statements." The judge dropped his gavel against his desk, rose and retreated towards a door behind the bench.

Ryz'n was perplexed. She became angry when she heard Mr. Vamia argue that it would not only be unjust but unprecedented not to hear the defense's opening statement at this time. The judge replied over his shoulder that, "It could keep until tomorrow morning." When Mr. Vamia persisted, the judge turned back to the bench.

Leaning over his desk, the judge suggested that it would be better for the defense if the court were to hear the defense's opening statement on "a well rested, fresh and full stomach in the morning rather than trying to listen to it over distracting hunger growls now. Court is adjourned until nine o'clock tomorrow morning." *Bang!* The judge brought down his gavel. The bailiff asked all to rise for the judge's departure.

"But Your Honor, this, this—"

Mr. Vamia could not finish because the judge exited the courtroom. The old coot, thought Ryz'n. The geezer looked to be ninety, even if he did have a full head of densely cropped, white hair. Reminded her of black-robed Spencer Tracy in *Judgment at Nuremberg*. He should be retired, instead of making her and Nicky's lives miserable.

She noticed the prosecutor grinning as he gathered up the papers on the table before him. When Mr. Vamia turned to him, Ryz'n could have sworn she saw the prosecutor wink. The jury filed out. The courtroom emptied. Nick's folks stood right behind the bar rail and the defendant's table. Nick's dad leaned over the railing to seize Mr. Vamia by the arm. When Nick turned to listen, Ryz'n caught his eye with a wave of her hand. He nodded, smiling then frowned sharply when his dad pointed an angry finger at him.

While Mr. Vamia addressed Nick and his parents, Ryz'n slipped out of the back pew, up the center aisle. She slid around behind Nick's folks, talking with Mr. Vamia over the bar, to take Nick in her arms and squeeze him tightly.

"I'm so sorry about last night, Baby. And Homeroom—it was all my fault."

Nick leaned back to look her in the eye. Brushing her cheek with the backs of his fingers, saying, "Forget it, Sweetie. I'm just glad you're here."

The prosecutor approached Mr. Vamia from behind to deliver a paper. Ryz'n heard Mr. Vamia excuse himself from Nick's parents to speak with the prosecutor, who said something to him that she couldn't make out. She heard Mr. Vamia say, "This is inappropriate and totally irrelevant." The prosecutor smiled, closed his briefcase and sauntered away, shaking his head. Evidently, he was much pleased with himself.

"The State is adding Ryz'n to its list of prospective jurors," said Nick's attorney.

He nodded to her, noting she could expect to hear from the prosecutor's office to arrange a meeting for a deposition. Nick got hot.

"Why is he doing this? I told you I don't want Ry to testify. She has absolutely nothing to do with this. It's totally unnecessary. She knows nothing about the accident. I never said a word to her, just like you asked. I thought you told him to leave her out of it?"

"I did. But his naturally suspicious nature makes him think she may have something to hide, something the State can use against you."

Nick pointed his finger at Mr. Vamia saying, "That's bull. I won't allow it. I won't. She doesn't have a darn thing to do with this case!"

"Unfortunately Nick, I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about it. He has the right to question her, at least. Whether he puts her on the stand or not, will depend on what she says." Nick clenched his teeth. His face turned red, looking as if he might explode. "But she's got nothing to do with the accident, not one blessed thing!"

"Nicholas! Keep your voice down," said Nick's dad. "Let me handle this Son."

He asked Franco why the prosecutor might want to interview Ryz'n.

"Well, from his opening statement and his list of prospective jurors, I think he's going to go for the jugular to assassinate Nick's character. He wants to prove Nick is capable of killing two people, watching them fry and not caring enough about it to remain at the scene. From what Nick has told me about the witnesses on the list, it includes everyone who has ever had a beef with him." Ryz'n decided to speak up.

"But I don't have a beef with Nicky. I love him."

Nick's folks sighed as Ryz'n tried to calm Nick down. Mr. Vamia smiled, saying he understood that but the prosecutor must have learned something that makes him suspicious. Or maybe he was fishing, hoping Nick had confided in her.

Without fully realizing it, she blurted out, "R-J!" Nick said, "You don't think she—"

"Yes, she would. Before I left our meeting today, she said that Nick was going to get his 'come-uppance' and then she said *I* would, too."

Mr. Vamia asked who she meant by "'R-J' and what's going on?" Ryz'n looked at Nick and his folks. No one spoke. Mr. Vamia said he needed to know what was going on. Ryz'n and Nick looked down at their feet. Finally, Nick's dad whispered, "Ryz'n's pregnant. And Nick is the father."

Ryz'n said, "R-J's a witness for the State, who might have guessed my condition."

She explained about running into Mrs. Allein at the gynecologist's office, the woman's close connection with R-J via Johnny and the argument she had with Nicky outside the doctor's office, which Mrs. Allein had witnessed. Mr. Vamia's pasty face turned paler than usual. But he recovered, saying that information, "although technically irrelevant, could still hurt them if Perkouri questioned her on the stand about it. Because even if the judge sustains my objection and refuses to let Ryz'n answer the question, the allegation would be out there, making Nick look bad." He got a little hot, reiterating that Nick couldn't keep things like this from him, if he wanted the best defense possible.

Nick argued once more that Ryz'n's testimony would be totally irrelevant. His dad intervened. He promised to meet with her parents to discuss a strategy to back the State off of her. When Mr. Vamia asked him what he had in mind, Nick's dad said he would handle it. He'd get back in touch with Mr. Vamia before he took any action.

"Not to worry," said Mr. Vamia. "I'm confident our strategy will win out. We're ready for anything the State can throw at us."

Before parting, he reminded Mr. Sheeboom to consult with him before acting. They walked out of the courthouse doors together. Mr. Vamia patted Nick on the back.

"Don't worry Nick. You'll be back at school, playing football by next week."

Before they separated on the courthouse steps, Ryz'n asked Nick's parents if she and Nick could dine out together, alone, saying they had some private matters to discuss. The Sheebooms consented. They walked to the parking lot together.

~ Chapter 14: Love in the Air ~

The Dino restaurant in Sweetland had come to be one of their favorite haunts. They ordered a couple of garden salads, egg plant parmesan and a small pepperoni and bacon pizza with mushrooms. While they waited for their orders Ryz'n sat across the booth from Nick, fingering her Pepsi glass, turning it slowly, watching the ice cubes jiggle and float in the tan fizz of the soft drink.

Dino's was a special place for them. Had the best pizza. Even better than the 51 Club, she thought, and as good as Ledo's even. They sat in a back booth against the wall with the giant grey, mural print of Venetian canal scenes outlined in green diorama above their heads, near the rear foyer that led to the pay phone and rest rooms. It was a quiet, family restaurant with low-lighted ambience, very romantic. Nicky leaned forward, reaching across the table taking her hand from the glass to hold in his. He peered into her eyes. As always his two-toned peepers, strong yet vulnerable like him, melted her right down.

"Look Baby, it's gonna work out. Don't know what my Dad's got in mind, but he usually wins when it's something he wants bad enough. You'll see."

Ryz'n forced a smile. "I know. It's just that, well, all of this is such a strain. The worst of it is, we can never be alone together anymore. Ever since we got back from Iowa and your dad lassoed you with that curfew."

"Hey. I can always sneak out on the curfew. It was Father Vince's deal that put the kibosh on our turtle-dovin'."

Ryz'n sighed. "But he wouldn't have agreed to petition the bishop for a dispensation if we hadn't promised to stop fooling around. At least, we can get married in the Church now." Nick smirked. "Yeah, great, hunh? Hope you're happy."

Placing her hands flat on the table either side of her soft drink, Ryz'n cocked her head.

"Please Nicky, *please* don't say it like that. I don't like being separated any more than you do. Truth is, it's killing me. Pickles!"

"You and me both." He hung his head, as did she.

Yes, pickles. She had to think of something to break this spell of gloom and doom.

"A funny thing happened to me today on the way to court."

Raising his head, Nick arched a brow. "Yeah? What's that?" She squirmed in her seat.

"Well, I got stuck in this traffic jam on the Parkway. Evidently, there had been a traffic accident at the Forestdale Road intersection. Aall the commuters were backed up there."

"Yeah. You said that's why you were late."

She nodded. "Right. But I didn't tell you what happened then."

Nick motioned for her to go ahead.

"Well, I'm sitting there, stuck in the left lane, and I notice this blonde fellow in a red Mustang next to me. He's staring at me. Least, I thought he was. He was wearing dark glasses so I couldn't be sure. So I ignored him but the next thing I know, he's standing next to the passenger door making conversation. Said he figured we could pass the time quicker by getting to know each other better, you know, to wait out the accident."

Nick placed his elbows on the table on either side of his glass of root beer, folded his hands together above the glass to rest his chin on top of the backs of his interlocking fingers. He didn't speak. Just waited for her. He had that bored-I-told-you-so look she'd seen often on her dad's face.

"Well, I hear sirens and cops passing us by, tearing up the right shoulder. Then I hear more sirens, like fire engines and ambulances up ahead. This guy asks me for a stick of gum—he saw me taking some from my purse. So I gave him a stick. Then he starts reaching for the door handle. I couldn't believe how forward he was."

A tired look came over Nick's face. "How old was he?"

Ryz'n shrugged. "Gee, I dunno. Around thirty, I guess. Mister Vamia's age."

"Did you let him in the car?"

"Shoot no! I peeled out of there across the median. Headed down the Parkway in the other direction. Past the 'Sweetland Beach.' You know?" Nick nodded, smiling. "And I turned off at that dead end. That service road that's there? Followed it back through the apartment complex."

Nick parted his hands to suck on his root beer straw. Letting go of the straw from his lips, he said, "And you went left up Sweetland Road, turned right at the water tower by the Census Bureau, drove down to Penn. extended and came down 4A, right? Why you were late. No big deal."

"Yes I did, but that's not the point."

Nick shrugged. "So what *is* the point?" He sucked on his root beer.

Ryz'n took a sip of her Pepsi, squirming again on the cushioned, bench seat. She had been eying him as she talked, but now she looked down at the ice cubes, stirring them. She watched them jiggling in her Pepsi glass.

"Well, you didn't let me finish. See, the guy in the Mustang?" Nick shrugged. "Well?"

"Well, he followed me." Ryz'n looked up.

Nick dropped his straw into the glass, as his mouth dropped open.

"From the Parkway, through the apartments and all?" She nodded.

"Yes. He followed me out to the light at Sweetland Road. Pulled up behind me while I waited for the light to change. He wagged his finger at me—big grin on his puss, too. Like it was some kind of a game. Like I was the fox and he was the hound."

Nick stirred his straw. "Sounds like a real dog to me all right." Ryz'n gurgled.

"So I went right on red and made a quick U-bie there. Sped through a yellow light up Sweetland with him right on my tail." She giggled. "He didn't make it. Got trapped between a couple cars when the light turned red. Tried to go round to the right—squeeze in between the curb when a big T-Bird pulled over in front of him."

"Yeah?" She swished her straw in her glass and giggled some more, shaking her head.

"Yeah. The T-Bird blocked him off."

Laughing, she shook her head some more. Nick giggled, too.

"Then I see the driver door of the T-Bird open out into the street and the biggest, blackest man I've ever laid eyes on got out to have a word with my admirer."

"Let me guess—to get to know him better?"

They both cracked up, laughing so loudly that other patrons turned around to stare. Ryz'n stirred the ice cubes around her Pepsi. When their laughter subsided and their shoulders stopped convulsing, Nicky slurped his root beer. He pushed back from the table, folding his hands in his lap. His head tilted down and his girlish full, red lips parted. She dragged long on the straw, savoring the syrupy-sweet drink as much as she savored her story. He looked up at her from under his sweeping, dark brows. *Oh no!* His tired, cross look coming after such laughter couldn't be good. Before he could speak—

"You mean to be severe upon me Nicky. I know that look."

His mouth stopped half-open. He shrugged ever so slightly. Leaning forward, Nick slid his fists across the table past either side of his glass.

He said very softly, "You had the top down?" She nodded, knowing what was coming.

"Baby, I don't like to say I told you so but—" Ryz'n held up her hand, palm out.

"I know. I know. You've told me before. I shouldn't ride by myself with the top down. But it was muggy and I guess I, I guess I didn't think. I forgot."

Nick opened his hands, palms angled outward, elbows hidden below the table, as if he were a saint blessing a sinner. He half-smiled.

"Ryzanna, you just don't understand what a knock-out you are now. The effect you have on guys is undeniable. It's a cross you'll have to bear but please, *please* be more cautious in the future. You were lucky today, Babe. Somebody up there likes you."

His soft tone tore at her heart. A tear brimmed out of her left eye, sliding down her cheek, falling to her chest. His gentle berating hurt. He was right and his tender tone cut her like a knife. He had assumed a patronizing adult tone and pattern of speech. He did that when he was upset with her. Made her feel like a guilty, little kid. When the mood struck him, he could sound as intelligent as any teacher.

Nicky peered into her eyes, making it difficult to hold his stare. It was a weary but kind stare just the same. Then he relaxed back against the booth, letting his hands drop below the table, folded onto his lap as before. Sniffling, Ryz'n took a napkin from the dispenser by the mural wall to dab her cheeks. They said nothing for a minute or so. But she could

tell he was no longer upset with her. The former leprechaun glimmer had returned to his eyes. Thank God, he wasn't going to make a big deal of her confession. As she blew her nose into the napkin, she decided to change the subject.

"Gee Nicky, this really is kind of nice. First time we've been alone together in almost three weeks—since we got back from Iowa. I don't count the Pre-Cana classes."

Nick came to life as if nothing had happened. Saying, "Me neither. But hey. Here we are at The Dino Restaurant. [Grinning.] Trés romantique, n'est ce pas?"

Turning her head and tilting her chin down to look up at him from under her eyelashes, Ryz'n giggled, affecting a snobbish air. "But of course."

"Mais bien sur, en Français, ma chère mademoiselle."

Smiling, she said "but I take Spanish, Sweetie."

Nick paused, "Si, si, uh lemme think—uh, oh yeah. Señiorita, mas bonita. Besse me mucho." He closed his mouth, smiling like Stan Laurel. "It's all I know."

Ryz'n pushed her Pepsi glass across the tabletop. She sauntered around to sit beside him. Ignoring the other customers, Ryz'n leaned into him, frenching him long, slow and deep, making the kind of public spectacle, she abhorred as a rule. It had been a while, much more than a while. When he put his arms around her, sinking his tongue into her open mouth, she thought she'd faint. After surfacing for air, she couldn't keep quiet.

"I'm so—so hungry for ya, Baby. Been three weeks and I feel like I'm starving inside."

"Think you're telling me somethin' I don't know? Closer to two, but feels like years."

She sighed. "Love is indeed strange, Nicky. Like the song says, "*Once you get it, you never want to quit. And after you have it, you're in an awful fix!"*

Nick stroked her bangs, pushing them up, off her forehead. He peered into her eyes, whispering slow, soft and sexy in his raspy baritone, as only he could.

"Ya know Ry, I believe ya." He smiled.

She lowered her head onto his shoulder, nestling into his neck. Nick slipped his arm about her, hug-holding her close. Ryz'n sighed deeply, snuggling closer. Beneath the table, her hand found him locked and loaded, taking her breath away. Her juices flowed.

* * *

In the close quarters of the tiny galley, Carlotta Davalone heard footsteps clomping down the dock—*Frank*. She checked the fettuccine alfredo sizzling in the pan on the range of the seven-year old, customized thirty-six-foot Chris Craft Constellation. Turning down the burner, Carol bent over, rapping her rear against the back of the dinette bench seat in the close quarters. She wouldn't mind right now if the boat had been a thirty-eight footer with the two extra feet in the galley. She checked the mahi-mahi broiling in the oven. And sprinkled some garlic over the fish. Ummm. Smelled good. Dinner was working out great—his favorite. Maybe an odd entrée combo, but he liked it. And that was all that mattered. WMOD played The Dixie Cups' "Iko, Iko" over the stereo system.

"… Talkin' 'bout—Hey now! Hey now! Iko, Iko, unday
Jockamo feeno ai nané, Jockamo fee nané.
My flag boy and your flag boy, sittin' by the fire
My flag by said to your flag boy,
"I'm gonna set your flag on fire … Talkin' 'bout …"

Carol rocked to the vibes as she turned down the burner some more. The lyrics made her hope she wouldn't set the fettuccine sauce on fire.

Two knocks on the stern: "Hey honey, I'm home."

Carol grabbed the rum and coke that she had chilling for Frank in the small fridge. She left the miniature galley to walk back aft, his cocktail in hand with a smile on her face. The boat listed slightly as he stepped aboard.

Frank bore a weary smile on his pale, freckled visage. He greeted her with a kiss on the lips first, *before* he reached for the cocktail. That was a good sign, she thought. A very good sign. But he was distraught, looked kind o' down. Might need her sympathetic ear. Either way, she'd work it to her favor.

"Dinner's almost ready. How'd it go Babe?"

"Umm, smells good too. What is it?"

"Your favorite—fettuccine alfredo and mahi-mahi with a garden salad."

Frank shook his head. "You're a wonder, Honey. A real marvel."

Accepting the drink—"Oooh, that's cold." He sipped the cocktail, savoring the libation all the way down. Frank nodded, remarking, "not too much Coke either—how I like it. You really know how to take care of me Carol. Yes Babe, you surely do."

She smiled. "Well, I'm ready for a full-time gig, if you are. Wednesdays and weekends are nice but leaves me unfulfilled somehow."

"Aw Baby, after this case, after this case, we'll talk about it seriously. Okay? Besides, I always thought 'Wednesdays and weekends' had a sort of a nice ring to it. Could be a song title." He smiled. She didn't.

"You've been saying that every case for the last ten months Frank. Am I supposed to think you really mean it this time?"

Frank stepped around her, setting his bulging briefcase just inside the cabin, stowing it under a bench seat. He took off his coat and tie to hang them in the tiny closet. Then he turned around to hug and kiss her stronger, longer than before, saying "Sure, why not?"

She shrugged. No use in making a scene. She could tell he'd had a rough day by the way his eye was twitching. Always did when he was worried. Carol softened her tone.

"What's wrong, Honey? Didn't it go well in court today?" He sat down on the bench.

"Hmmpf. *Well?* Suppose it could have been worse, but I don't know how."

Sitting beside him, Carol pecked at his shoulder, waiting for him to speak.

"That darn Higher. Between him and Perkouri, they're gonna railroad this kid right into the Klink, if they can." She stopped soft-pecking him through his shirt long enough to look up, saying "But you're not going to let that happen, are you Frank?"

"Not if I can help it." He sipped his drink. She rubbed his bicep, waiting.

"Ya know what they did today?" She shrugged. "Who?"

"Higher and Perkouri, like they were a tag team in a wrestling match on TV. And you know how staged those things are."

She shrugged again, frowning. Frank sipped long on his drink, cutting it in half.

"We finish jury selection, I dunno, some after five and I figure, he'll close for the day, right? Hear opening statements tomorrow? I even suggested as much." Carol nods.

"Guess what that old fart did?" She shrugged. "Gee Frank, I dunno. What?"

Leaning forward, drink in hand, he shifted on the bench seat cushion to face her.

"Higher has Perkouri open with his statement, right? And then, when he finishes, after he's thrown out all this B.S. trashin' the kid's character in support of his theory for motive, and the old goat let him get away with it, Higher adjourns for the day.

"Yeah, the 'Pecker' is driving to pin a murder rap on the kid, figuring the harder he goes for the murder conviction, the more likely he'll be to at least get manslaughter. Yeah, he'd settle for manslaughter, the cold-hearted, self-serving sonuvabitch!"

"Well Frank, they're all like that, aren't they? You ought to know. You practiced for the State once upon a time. Like you say, you'd 'rather get a guilty person off than put an innocent one in jail.' Prosecutors are just the opposite."

Hearing the sauce start to pop and crackle, Carol patted his knee. "Just a sec Frank. Gotta get this." She jumped up to take care of business.

Carol hustled to the small stove in the galley. She turned off the range then poured the steaming hot fettuccine onto two dishes she had waiting there on the bit of a counter. Pulling on an oven mitten, she opened the stove door. The fish looked good to go too. She bent over to pull the pan out. Frank got up to lean against the portal. The dinette table was already set. Tossed salads were in their bowls.

"Gee Baby, you got great legs. Walk sexy as hell. Did I ever tell you that? Nice, round caboose, too. You could be in a chorus line."

Carol stood to dish the three fish onto their plates: two for him, one for her. She thought about it—two for him, one for her. Always, in everything. Yes, the salads were good to go. Carol watched him salivating over her legs, beneath the mini-skirt she had worn especially to give him the eye candy he enjoyed. A little appetizer so to speak.

"*Really?* Better than the Ryan girl or the other one—your chief witness—Terri?"

"Who? You mean Terri Schieffer?"

"You know who." Frank sighed. "Ah, they're both just kids, Baby."

"Hmmm. They don't look like kids, least their bodies don't. Or dress like it either from what I've seen."

Frank winced. "Come on Carol. Jealousy doesn't become you. Especially, when there's nothing to be jealous *of*. You know that. Besides, the Schieffer girl is very conservative."

"May be. Can't say same the same for that Ryzanna Ryan though."

"Aw, she just dresses like that for Nick."

"Oh really? How do you know that?"

"Because she told me." Carol arched a brow. "But you get to reap the benefit too, hunh Frank? Never can keep your eyes to yourself."

Frank shook his head. "You believe that Higher? Let's Perkouri open and adjourns. Never seen that happen before. Never. Leaving those damn jurors to ponder Perkouri's opening all night. While we get no chance to have our say. And the press, too. What was left of 'em. Two days of jury selection bored 'em, I guess. *Voir dire* scared 'em off."

"No. I don't believe it. I mean, about not allowing you to open." She shook her head. "That's terrible. Wanna pour the salad dressing, Honey? Thousand Island. You can use it on the fish—how you like it.

"Though, I believe that about the press. You'll get decent coverage from the county papers. But you can kiss the D.C. papers good-bye."

Frank downed the rest of his drink.

"Would ya mind Baby? I need to take a leak and wash up."

He handed her his empty glass for a refill. Then stepped down into the head to do his thing, not bothering to close the door.

Carol sighed, thinking they might as well be married. They already acted as if they were. He was reaping all the benefits, while she still didn't have a ring on her finger. But this was no time to start in on that. She had to pick her spot. She'd wait until after the trial. Shouldn't be more than a week and then she'd give him the ultimatum.

They'd been seeing each other on and off going on three years now, the last ten months steady—Wednesday nights and weekends. But it was time she made her case. Carol heard his long stream taper off then the flush. She loved him but she wanted a home, kids, a dog, two TV's—the whole bit. And her biological clock was ticking. She was pushing thirty, in eighteen months anyway. She couldn't afford to wait around any longer for Frank to make up his mind. Yes, she'd wait until the trial was over. The kid needed Frank's full attention now. She wasn't about to jump on him now and derail them both.

Carol heard the tap water run then shut off. She mixed him another rum and coke, another double, then set it on the table. She poured herself a third glass of Chablis. Carol had acquired his taste for white wine her last ten months with him. Frank came out of the can, drying his hands on a towel. He reached back to hang the towel up inside the john, before he stepped into the galley. The dinette table was all set, ready to go.

"Gee Carol. That really smells good. Looks good, too—like you, Baby." Smiling, Carol pulled the wine glass from her lips, saying "It's the seasoning and the garlic. Here."

She handed him a fresh drink. He sat down at the dinette on the bench seat across the table counter top, his back to the stern. She slipped in across from him, her back to the oven. She poured his wine and lit the pair of candles between them, even though it wasn't quite dusk yet. She crossed herself with Frank, saying, "Gee Baby, do you—"

"Bless us O Lord and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty through Christ Our Lord. Amen." She looked up, crossing herself again. "Sorry. You were saying …"

"Gee Carol. You always have to do that? I mean we're practically living together. You believe—"

"Yes Frank, I do. And I wish you would, too, more than you do."

She picked up her knife and fork to cut the fish. Then she reached for the Thousand Island bottle, pouring some onto her dish of garden salad and a little onto the plate beside her fish. Cutting and forking a piece of fish, she dipped it into the dressing on the side.

"Umm, not too bad, if I do say so myself."

Frank stared but said nothing. Starting to eat, he stopped with his fork halfway home.

"Nice top too. Poor Boy, isn't that what they call it? Becomes your slender figure and broad shoulders, Baby. Which, by the way, matches your broad behind."

Carol smirked, shoveling some of the fettuccine into her mouth. She swallowed, saying, "You know it is, Frank. You gave it to me. Suppose I don't fill it out to suit you though. Not like those two teenagers, anyway."

"Aw Baby, how can you say that? You know what I always say—"

"Yes. 'More than a handful's a waste.' That's what your tongue says. But your eyes speak louder. I see how you look at those two busty teens. You should be ashamed of yourself. You make them uncomfortable. I noticed your young client doesn't seem to appreciate the way you eyeball his girl either." He shrugged.

"Okay, I admit it. My eyes tend to wander. But it's always look-don't touch with me. You know that Honey."

"It better be, if you want my handfuls." She looked up at him, chewing rapidly on her fish. Frank laughed. "Good thing I don't have big hands." She didn't think it was so funny, but said nothing. Frank doused the cheek with his cocktail.

"So, you were talking about the case? Higher and Perkouri? Ganging up on you?"

He nodded, swallowing some fish, trying to get it down so he could talk.

"Yeah, that's right. I objected to him adjourning before I could make my opening statement. Know what he says?"

With her mouth full, she merely shook her head no.

"Some B.S. about how his belly was growlin' and he didn't want to set a bad precedent for the jury, eating supper late. Sayin' they would be more receptive to my statement tomorrow *after* a *full* breakfast. You believe that junk? Hell, in five minutes I'm done."

Carol shoved some food aside with her tongue, against her cheek, so she could talk.

"Damn Frank. They *are* out to get this boy. I never heard of such a thing."

Stuffing his face, he looked up with a mouthful, saying "And that ain't all."

"What?" She waited for him to swallow again.

"Damn Carol, this *really is* good. You certainly outdid yourself this time Honey."

Carol smiled, setting down her fork to reach for her wine goblet.

"Could be getting this every night if you wanted it, Frank. And me too, no extra charge, sort of dessert after the dessert. Every night, Baby. Not just Wednesdays and weekends."

Carol sipped on her wine without taking her eyes off him, finishing it off. She poured her fourth glass. But who was counting? Frank replied with a silent, kind of down-in-the-mouth blank stare. So what else was new? Carol was starting to feel loose. The wine was relaxing her, as usual. She'd have to watch her tongue though. If she pushed too hard, she'd tick him off. Then, neither one of them would get the dessert after the dessert, they were expecting on Wednesday night. Next week, after the trial, she'd deliver her ultimatum. Stick to the case now. Obviously, it was troubling him. And she didn't like to see him like that. She preferred his usual piss and vinegar machismo.

"You filed all the necessary motions and pre-trial stuff to head this thing off, right?"

"Of course, I did. I told you. But Higher is denying every petition I make. You know they're arguing that appeal of *Long versus Robinson* in the Fourth Circuit right now. Case opened last Thursday."

"No, I didn't know. What case is that?"

The one where those two kids, sixteen at the time, were facing prosecution as adults in Baltimore—for armed robbery, I believe. Baltimore's the only other jurisdiction in the state besides R.G. Count that sets such a low age bar for adult crimes. U.S. district court found the law unconstitutional under the Fourteenth amendment, claiming the kids' due process and equal protection rights were violated because the rest of the state, other than Royal George, says you have to be eighteen to be tried as an adult. Yeah, so Higher denies my motion for an injunction against trying Nick as a juvenile on the grounds that case is being appealed and *he thinks* it will be overturned. You believe that stuff?

"Yeah. I submitted a motion to try him as a juvenile—denied. Motions to dismiss for judgment on the pleadings due to insufficient evidence—denied. And another after discovery—denied. Submitted a written petition to suppress that prejudicial news footage and accident scene pictures—denied. And a written petition to sever the murder charges from the lesser included offenses to limit the felony allegations to manslaughter and assault and battery. But Higher's denied everything I've put before him. The old bastard!

I doubt he even looked at them. And after Perkouri presents his case, I'll make a motion for judgment of acquittal to dismiss as a matter of law for failure to allege sufficient facts to establish a case. Though I know it's useless. And will probably piss Higher off even more than he already is, but hell, he's pissed *me* off! And after I put on the defense, I'll petition for acquittal again, with particularity as to the murder charges. But Hell. We all know there's no way this ain't goin' to the jury. Not with Higher steering the engine and Perkouri stoking the flames. They're gonna highball this kid right into the calaboose."

Carol set down her wine glass to look him in the eye.

"Frank. That boy's life is in your hands."

"Dammit Carol. Think I don't know that? And all because I checked in with the State Attorney's office in the first place. *Just to be safe!* What a crock."

He set his fork down rudely. Then took a long nip on his rum and Coke, finishing it off. Frank held the glass out to her.

"Would you mind, Baby?" His brows arched in a pitiful, hangdog expression.

"Why don't you stick with the Chablis, Hon? You shouldn't drink too much tonight."

"Dammit Carol. See? See, this is why we aren't married yet. I don't like to be nagged."

Carol took a deep breath then accepted the glass from him. She mixed him another drink but went lighter on the rum and heavier on the coke this time. She handed the glass back to him, stroking her hand through his thick, shaggy, unkempt red curls.

"I'm sorry Baby. Just want you ready for tomorrow. After all, the jury will be won't they? After that *full* breakfast?" She grinned.

His face broke into a smile. He took her hand in his to kiss her palm.

Sometimes, he really was worth it all. And she knew he'd be a good provider. She was a good detective, but she'd had enough of that life. Her Dad didn't need her help. He was ready to stay out to pasture. And after all, her biological clock was ticking.

"You're right Honey. Maybe, you should mix this one a little lighter."

Kissing him on the forehead she said, "I did." And sat back down. Frank smirked.

"Anticipating me hunh, just like a good wife?" Carol grinned. "You said it, not me."

She took up her fork to finish her meal. But she smiled. Frank did, too. They ate in silence for a while. Carol thought the fish had nothing on the fettuccine. They were both damn good. And to his credit, Frank said so, too ….

She was about to serve dessert when consecutive rings made her jump.

"What's that?"

Frank headed for the helm, when she heard two more consecutive rings.

"Got a phone hooked up the other day," he called down to her. "Thought I might like to stay aboard till it gets too cold. Don't want to be out of touch; especially, not now."

Frank answered the phone after the fourth set of rings. Putting his hand over the mouthpiece, he leaned down over the cabin to the galley. "Surprised you didn't see it."

"Guess I should get the number."

"Hello? …Yes Ray, I remember …."

Carol cleared the table. She set out some apple wedges and home-baked chocolate chip cookies, she had brought from her place. His favorite.

"Tomorrow morning at eight? Outside Perkouri's office? Okay, but do you mind telling me what you have in mind?"

Carol listened as she washed off the dishes. *Ray?* Must be Nick's dad.

"Well, we all know this thing is motivated by his political ambitions. Sure. But do you think this will work? He could mention it to the judge and Higher might not like the implication? … Yes, you're right there … And the Ryan's feel the same way, hunh? … Unh-hunh. I see. Well, okay. We can try it … Yes, I'll be there—eight o'clock … Right, bye." He hung up and trundled back down to the galley, sitting down to finish his wine.

"What was that all about?"

"Hmmm? Oh. Ray Sh'boom. Forgot to tell ya. After court adjourned, I'm talking with Nick and his folks at the bar there. Nick's old man's upset with Higher adjourning like that before I made my statement. And rightly so. The guy's no dummy. So Perkouri comes over to me, looking like the cat that swallowed the proverbial canary. He says he's going to put the Ryan girl on the witness list. Wants to depose her."

"Which one?" Frank looked baffled. "*Ryz'n,* Nick's girl. Which one do you think?"

She nodded. "Oh. Thought it might have been the sister."

"The sister? Why do you say that?"

"Oh, no reason I guess. Just that when I interviewed her, the younger one—Sheena. She seemed to have something against Nick. Jealous, maybe."

"Oh, why?"

"Well, ha! You'll love this, Frank. Evidently, Nick dated her a few weeks last winter, before he started going with the older sister, and he never made a pass at her—the younger one, I mean. Really pissed her off. She told me she had thought he was queer."

"Gee. I find that hard to believe. She's a sweet-lookin' kid. Maybe better lookin' than her big sister, if that's possible. Not as well put together though. It's those bedroom eyes. And she's got a tight figure, too, though she's not a patch to the older one. Though Heffner would love to get a hold of either of 'em for his centerfold. You bet he would."

"No doubt you would, too. Frank. They're teenagers, for cyrin' out loud. Just kids!"

Carol drilled him with both peepers, but he ignored her glare without skipping a beat.

"Not as sweet a girl though—impressed me as kind of a spoiled brat—the kid sister, I mean. Still, I'd never think Nick would let one like her get away. I mean, her figure is nothing to sneeze at." Carol shook her head at his reasoning.

"Evidently, your boy has some scruples after all. You won't believe this Frank. She—Sheena—said that Nick said he never made a pass at her because he held the older sister

Ryz'n in such high esteem. Couldn't bring himself to—how did she put it? 'To violate' her. Said he pulled the same trick with a neighbor girl, whose older sister, he also holds in high regard. Least, that's what she said. Frankly, I think she's jealous of big sister."

"No kiddin'? That boy never ceases to surprise me, both good and bad."

"So, what did his father want?"

"Oh. Well, both families are upset that Perkouri wants Ry to testify against Nick—"

"*Ry*, hunh?" Carol smirked at him calling her by the family's nickname. "Why?"

"You won't believe this Carol." Frank shook his head but said nothing.

"Well?"

Frank smirked. "Ryz'n's pregnant. Nick knocked her up."

Carol's hand shot over her gaping mouth. "No! You can't mean it. How far along is she? Did they just find out?"

"Yeah. I mean, I wish I didn't mean it. They say she's a couple months gone. Found out a couple weeks ago but didn't tell me about it. That pissed me off. This case is tough enough as it is, with everybody out to get us, tag-teaming us. I was mad. Told Nick, told all of them, I couldn't give him the best defense possible if they held things like this out on me." Carol blinked.

"Yeah? What'd they say to that?"

"Well, they all got right sheepish. Then Nick became irate, saying Ryz'n knows nothing of the accident. Said he said nothing to her about it just as I had asked him. Said any testimony she had, would be totally irrelevant." Frank paused to sip his Chablis.

"So?"

Frank set the glass down on the table.

"So I agreed. I mean the kid's absolutely spot-on. But what can I do? I told them that if Perkouri gets her on the stand and asks about the pregnancy, even if Higher upholds my objection to it for being irrelevant and immaterial, which you know he won't—the old bastard. But even if he did, it would be hanging out there in the jury's minds. And that would be enough to prejudice them even further against the kid."

Nodding, Carol peeled the plastic wrapper off of the fruit dish. She picked up an apple wedge from the dish for herself. She had cored and sliced a couple of them earlier, before dinner, sipping Chablis. Golden Delicious.

"Yes, that would be very prejudicial." Before placing the apple into her mouth, she paused to ask: "So what'd the father have to say just now?"

Frank picked up a slice of apple too. "Oh. Well, he got together with the Ryans. Evidently, they' devised a strategy to keep Ryz'n off the stand." Frank ate the apple.

"Yeah, what might that be?"

He swallowed, slipping another slice into his mouth while she waited for him to chew.

"Well, Mister Sh'boom is quite civic-minded. He's coached local Boys Club teams for nine years. Presided over the club's fund-raising support organization, called appropriately enough the Dads Club. Been president of the PTA at both the junior and senior high levels. He's very well thought of in the community, well-connected, county-wide. And Mister Ryan runs, or has run, the Welfare and Recreation offices at both the local air force bases, Brolling and Landrews. That includes the Officer and NCO clubs. So he's well connected, too."

Swallowing another wedge of apple, Carol asked, "So what?"

"Well, they plan to approach Perkouri tomorrow morning in his office, before court at eight-fifteen. I'm to meet them at eight to go over what they want to say."

Carol blinked. "And what might that be exactly?"

"Well, they know this whole thing is politically motivated. Perkouri's trying to make a big splash just before the election. They're not blind or stupid. They want to inform our illustrious *interim* State's Attorney of their connections, their influence in the county, particularly the south county to keep the girl off the stand." Carol rubbed her chin.

"Hmmm. Think it'll work? Could backfire? Judge Higher might not appreciate that type of interference. Might view it as coercion or even as obstruction of justice."

"Yes. That's what I told Ray but he correctly pointed out—he's a savvy guy, really street-smart, ya know? Calls it 'common sense' but it's more than that—anyway, he sees how this thing is going. And he figures it can't hurt. Says they already have us cornered, our backs against the wall. Might as well come out swinging. If you'd heard Perkouri's opening today, you'd know he was right."

"So you're okay with it then?"

Frank shrugged. "Not a hundred per cent. Normally, I wouldn't want to chance it. But in this case, I think the kid's old man is spot on. We'll see." Carol nodded and rose.

Fingering a cookie, Frank says, "Umm chocolate chip; chewy and heavy on the chips, just the way I like 'em. You sure are pulling out all the stops tonight Baby."

Standing up to dry off the dishes, she said, "And that's just the first course of dessert. The best is yet to come." She curled the corner of her mouth then winked.

Stuffing another cookie down his throat, Frank stood up to walk over to her. He took the dish towel from her hand and tossed it into the sink. Then he kissed her hard, cupping a hand over her left breast through her Poor Boy top, massaging the tip, as she liked.

"A handful of you is just right for me, Baby."

She kissed him hard then led him down into the cabin, shutting the door behind them.

Couple hours later, the phone rang, interrupting their extended bedroom loving. Frank tugged on his undershorts. Carol asked him to quench the candles on the way up to the helm. But Frank just grinned, then winked. She pulled the sheet up over her bare chest. Glancing at the radio alarm clock, she noted it was almost ten. She reclined to listen.

"Hello? … Who? … Yes, I'll accept the charges."

"Dom! [Her dad was checking in from the Coast.] Hey, how's it going Dom? … "Yeah? … Um-hmmm. Got 'em all, hunh? …. Well the State is putting on its case tomorrow. The subpoenas are good for another couple weeks, but I'd say by next Monday, probably, but I should know better this weekend. Let 'em know that, okay? Need 'em ready to go now? That bastard Higher won't cut us any slack. That's certain ...

"Good. So, you okay? …. Getting ready to eat, hunh? Sounds like it. Late dinner? … Yeah I hear voices in the background … Calling from the dining table? Aren't you the classy dic? … 'Mora's flying out for the weekend—going up to Vegas together,' eh?"

[Frank was repeating the other side of the conversation for her benefit.]

"Well, I didn't say anything about paying for your female escorts now Dom. That's on you … 'Gambling?' Yeah, I hear ya … I said I'd front ya a hundred…. No, not two. One! All right, one-fifty. What's my cut of the winnings? …. 'Ten per cent!' You cheap bastard … 'Carol?' Yeah, you wanna talk to her? … No? O-K. I will ... Yeah, bye."

Frank hung up. He lumbered back down, stripped off his shorts then crawled back in bed beside her.

"That phone is coming in handy. Glad I had it put in. May need to take it off the wall and get a long outlet cord. Move it as I need it. This up and down stuff's for the birds."

Carol turned on her side, rising up on her forearm and elbow.

"What do you do when you take the boat out?" He smirked, "Unhook it, of course."

She was perplexed. "But what happens to the cord?" Frank made a face as if he were bored all of a sudden. "Works the same way as the electric hook-up. What do you care?"

"Gee, I was only curious. That's all. Hope it's not too expensive. So what did he say?"

"Well. He's got all the witnesses out there lined up, ready to go. Told him we might need 'em as early as Monday but I'd know more this weekend. Said I'd get back to him."

"You think it'll take Perkouri two days to put on his case?" Frank did a double-take.

"With that witness list he's got? At least two days. Might take a week by looking at the length of his list. You've seen it. Hell, you've interviewed most of 'em yourself. That bastard's going to dredge up every creep he can find that ever had a beef with Nick, or thought they had, to prove the kid's a hedonistic narcissist who would stop at nothing to fulfill his whims. Least that's the gist of what he said in his opening statement."

Carol jerked her face up. “Hedonistic narcissist? You’re kidding?”

“Damn Carol. You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.” She blinked, swallowing hard.

“Maybe I have—Nick’s.” Shaking his head, Frank smacked his lips. “Yes. It’s a damned bad business. O Lord! Save us from men with political ambition. If I ever get too ambitious Baby, give me a swift kick in the ass. And remind me of Perkouri, the Pecker.”

“Well, I would, but it seems like you’ve got almost everything you ever wanted. A Lincoln town car, practically new, with a phone and a stereo. A late model Porsche Spyder and this boat—both also stereophonic. Your swanky Tralatton address and me, too—Wednesdays and weekends—cheap! Only when you want me, of course, and your freedom, too. Maybe my handfuls aren’t enough for you?”

“Oh Baby, don’t say it like that. Don’t. Thought I told ya how I acquired this stuff? You know I got a big mortgage. This boat is seven years old—the only object of contention in the Merriwell divorce. Since they wanted an amicable settlement and since I represented both parties, when I offered to take the boat off their hands in place of my fee, they jumped at the chance. Might have been a steep price to pay, considering what my fee would have been. But money was never a problem for them. They thought it was a great compromise. And they’re still cordial today.

“The Town car, I got cheap at a police auction.”

“Yeah, after you spread the word the trunk had been shot up from a Mafia hit that left a corpse bleeding inside it.”

He shrugged. “Hey. Nobody else wanted to bid on it. So I picked it up cheap for a grand. Shoot. It *was used* after all. Probably could have got it for half that amount. Can I help it that I’m a good businessman? After all, I had to get that stinking trunk fumigated and that bloody carpet replaced. Get the body shop to patch up those bullet holes in the bottom and replace the spare tire that was all shot up.”

Carol arched her brow. “And the Porsche?”

He rolled his eyes. “Come on Baby, thought I told ya?

“Drug dealer got side-swiped in a cop chase. He swapped it in lieu of my fee, most of it anyway. Worked a lotta hours on that one. A former client in a body shop fixed it up.”

“Got the body work and paint job for free too, as I recall.”

“Carol. The guy owed me a favor. I got his kid off of some serious marijuana charges with an illegal search and seizure. Second time he’d been nabbed for pushing. The kid was nineteen. Would have done adult time and he’s not a bad kid—a college student. Hey, I earned it. Best part is, you can’t even tell. Darn car looks as good as new now.”

Frank beamed, patting himself on the back.

“And my handfuls?”

Frank reached to embrace her but Carol balked. “So he’s got all of them, hunh?”

Frank sneered, stopping in mid reach. “Who? What?”

Carol frowned. “Dad. Isn’t that who you were talking to on the phone? Got all the witnesses lined up?” Backing off her, Frank nodded.

“Oh. Yeah, that’s what he said.”

“The ADA, the Lieutenant Detective *and* the Sheriff?”

“Yep. He said Nick had nothing to worry about. They all like the kid out there. They appreciate what he did for them last year in that Ransom Clan case.”

“And the girl that turned State’s evidence against the Clan? She’ll back Nick, too?”

“Yep. All the bases are covered, Baby. It’s going to work out. You’ll see. But we might not need her. The cop and A-D-A should be enough. Now. Think it’s time to uncover all your bases, Honey. Oh—your dad said to ‘say hi and be good.’ Gives you his love. So be good to me and give me some of that love—by candlelight no less. Romantic, huh?”

Frank grinned like a devil. He peeled back the sheet to revel in her natural charms. She let him. For the second time tonight, Carol would give him what he wanted, how he wanted it, where and when. But next week after the trial, she’d give him the ultimatum he wouldn’t want to hear if it came to that.Whether he won the case or not.

He was a damned good defense attorney, a natural. His apprenticeship in the S.A.’s office taught him how to beat the State. Still, it was time she took a stand. She hoped that push wouldn’t come to shove. She’d invested too much in Frank to lose him now. Truth was, her Catholic conscience was starting to weigh on her. It’d been weeks since she’d taken communion. She had become weary of confessing the same tired old sins. Living outside a state of grace didn’t seem to bother Frank any. If it did, he didn’t show it.

And she did love Frank, didn’t she? Aside from Vince, she had loved no other. And she couldn’t exactly marry a priest, now could she? But, if Vince hadn’t felt the call, she would have done anything for him—anything—and gladly. Vince was the finest person she had ever known. That included her saintly mother, God rest her soul.

She and Vinny had a good thing going in school before the bike accident took his kid brother’s life just after Christmas her freshman year at Maryland. Vinny took it hard. He changed after that. They saw each other weekends then because he went to college at the Mount. Vince sunk into a shell until Easter when he had a spiritual revelation. He said the Lord had called him to the priesthood. She dropped out of Maryland.

That year, after his graduation and all through seminary, Carol had believed, hoped anyway, Vinny would change his mind. But he never did. Made her angry and jealous, jealous of God and that had made her feel guilty. She had only seen Vinny three times since he had been ordained. In what? Seven years now? Every time she saw him reminded her of their brief but torrid teen romance. Gave her pause to think each time. She thought it must be Halloween with Vinny wearing a priest costume with that turned around collar and black tunic. She couldn’t sleep for a week after those meetings. She

hadn't seen him in a couple years. After a few disappointing adult relationships, Carol figured moving onto Frank, Vin's best friend growing up, was just Karma.

Frank was no movie star leading man, not dark, scholarly handsome like Vinny. She accepted that. But Frank was fastidious, sharp, successful and confident. Maybe, too confident. But she liked that. He was not only a good attorney, he was a shrewd businessman. He'd be a good provider for their kids. And he had a keen sense of humor. She knew Frank like the back of her hand from growing up together in the old neighborhood. Like Vinny, Frank was three years her senior. Maybe she only thought so highly of Vinny because he was her first love. No, that was sour grapes.

But what she did now for Frank, out of wedlock, she didn't perform gladly. Of course, she didn't let Frank know that. No. She acted as if he was dessert. He claimed she was "*prima* at it." Sure. She had learned to be "prima." He often complimented her sexual prowess, same as he did her cooking. Only a letter difference between "cooking" and this. Maybe that's why he said she was so good at it. He claimed she was a natural. If she *was,* it was because she persevered. She'd learned her avocation well. Self-control—that was the key. Kept at him, diligently plodding. She could do it because she had grown to accept it, roll with it. Because he enjoyed her that way. After ten months at playing the lover, Wednesdays and weekends only, Carol had learned her lessons very well indeed. She did it for him—for love. Except for that Wednesday after the Fourth when he went to dinner with Vinny and the kid. She just couldn't take seeing Vin again. Not with Frank.

No. This wasn't her choice, her preference, as she let him believe. Of course, if she could ever bring herself to let them use a prophylactic—but her Catholic conscience wouldn't allow that. What a hypocrite she was! The compromises she made. The rationalities, the lies, she told herself. And she was still a virgin—technically.

Say? Hadn't she heard him mention Mora's name on the phone? Mora Lisa Frémount! Now there was a fitting moniker—Mora Lessa Frémount, the one her dad had picked up that night at the Fin & Claw after dinner with her and Frank. Yes, Dom had taken Frank's money on that wager, too. Seemed like her old man was always taking Frank's money, one way or another. She wondered if her dad ever thought about that, how it looked.

She was getting too adept at this though. Still, she was glad Frank had installed the spacious double bed in the cabin. So it didn't sleep six now. So what? There was only the two of them anyway. Actually, she kind of liked the idea of "the love boat."

Frank was begging now. Ironic how she could perform without missing a beat. Frank, never knowing, how or where her mind wandered. Then she'd always been adept at multi-tasking. Like an old slipper or a favored, well-worn, cozy housecoat, she had come to wear Frank well. And despite this, she was comfortable with him.

They both hailed from the old neighborhood, before it had turned dark. He was a couple years older, but they had learned and suffered under the tutelage of the same nuns

in grade school. Learned the same catechism and later gone to public school at Sweetland High. Though her dad had put Sister through Our Lady of Lourdes High and then Mount Saint Agnes College of Maryland. And yet, Cetta was already married with a pair of adorably cute kids, while she was here with Frank like this—Wednesdays and weekends.

Unlike Vinny's folks, Frank's mom couldn't afford to send him to a private high school. Frank's dad had died in the Battle of Leyte Gulf and his mom never remarried. Veteran's life insurance had bought their little place in Columbia Heights. His mom had raised Frank alone by scrubbing other people's floors and cleaning their toilets. A plain woman with a large nose, ears and freckles like Frank, his mom had worked hard. In some ways, her dad had become a father figure to Frank, coaching him over the years in the Boy's Club and CYO leagues. Frank had always been around, hanging out with her older brother Dom Junior, and Vinny. She admired Frank because he was a hustler.

As a kid, Frank always helped out his mom. Delivered newspapers, cut grass, shoveled snow, he even set pins at the bowling alley. Sometimes he sat for neighborhood kids. In high school, he got a part-time job at a filling station. Worked his way through college, washing dishes and bussing tables before he graduated to short order cook. His mom passed during his first year of law school. Found her slumped over some steps she was scrubbing in the Sanitary Commission building over in Shyattsville when they opened the building the next morning. Probably been lying there like that for ten hours. Poor woman. Heart attack at forty-three. Spring of Sixty-two. Funeral was held in a downpour.

Mrs. Vamia had been proud of her boy. She'd watched him receive diplomas from high school and college. And Frank had stayed out of trouble with the law. No easy feat in their old neighborhood without a dad. She had no doubt his mom was in heaven now. The woman had suffered too much during her short life to remain in Purgatory for long.

Then Frank got a job as a night watchman for the Federal Protective Service. He monitored government office buildings downtown. Said the job was perfect for a law student because he had few official duties and got paid, basically, for studying. And most of the buildings had law libraries, which he said he hadn't hesitated to use. The summer before his last year of law school, Frank clerked for a judge in the District. Yes, Frank was self-made, smart, ambitious and successful. He wasn't Vinny, but he'd do. He had to. She was running out of time and options—

Frank's firm caress against the back of her head primed Carol like a pump handle. She didn't care for that and he knew it. But she got the message. She had slacked off, spacing out on his history. Carol redoubled her efforts. The sheet fell off her head down her back. Frank bolted. His hand relaxed from her head then slipped lazily down her back. He groaned loud and long. Sounded more as if he were crashing and burning, dying in pain. She knew better. He was flying. Stroking his thighs slowly but repeatedly, she brought him in for a smooth landing just how he liked it. Self-control—that was the key.

"Ahhh Car-oll—oh-oh-ummm Baby … You're th-the best … Prima Baby, just prima."

She'd remind him of that remark after the trial, when she'd claim her ring.

He was panting now but managed to hiss, "Hey? Like I taught ya now?"

Carol responded as usual, faking a smile for him as best as she could She made him with her eyes. Yes. Accustomed now, as she had learned to grow accustom to Brussels sprouts, fish stew or clam chowder. Well, maybe that was a stretch, a bit of a rationalization. But one gives for love, right? That's what love means. At least, that's what she told herself. And really, it wasn't *that* bad, was it? Accustomed. And, after all, it was only on Wednesdays and weekends, wasn't it? Yeah. Prima. How he liked it.

Satisfied, Frank let escape a low sigh of approval.

Yes. He liked that all right. Funny, she didn't even mind anymore. Well, not much anyway, not like at first. Wasn't so bad, really. Was it*?* Healthy for her actually—nutritious? Of course, it was. Had to be.

Taming her reflexes had been key. Like cleaning a toilet for her now. Sure it was. She had learned how to please him efficiently and well. Admiring her handiwork, Carol could pull back to revel in his delighted purrs and starry, blissful countenance. Gratified her about as much as the fresh scent and sparkle of a well-cleaned toilet bowl. Sure. She could take some little satisfaction after she had finished a job well done. Yes, she could. That was something at least. She did it for love. For the family they'd have. You betcha.

Carol smiled—coy, flirtatious—as seductive as she could make it—how he liked her.

"Ahh Carol, Baby, you really outdid yourself this time Honey. Babe, you really did."

Frank had stopped panting. She'd put him in La-La-Land, in the afterglow for a second time. Carol grinned the mandatory leer for him. She inched forward on hands and knees, straddling his torso. Rising up on her knees to her full height again, Carol hovered over him, inhaling, maximizing her slender curves and her handfuls for his viewing pleasure alone. Slowly she ran her tongue over her lips. As he preferred. Hoping, maybe he'd sense her need tonight, to reciprocate her a second time for a change. Two-for-two instead of two-for-one. Saying as huskily as she could, "Glad you enjoyed it, Hon."

Made her feel like a genuine vamp, towering over him like this with Frank lying there starry-eyed. Yes. Superior to those two curvy teenagers he'd gone ga-ga over, who lacked her experienced "prima" technique. If he'd liked it so much, maybe he *would* give her a second go tonight. She might even ask. She was in the mood—ready.

Carol had learned to accept this deal, his two to her one, only because she resented his inevitable excuse. Him saying: "If you weren't so intent on staying a virgin for your wedding night, we wouldn't have to resort to this tongue-in-cheek nonsense. Come off together like normal folks." She'd volley back, "That's cuz marriage is normal, Frank. *This ain't*." He didn't like her sass but he'd let her have the last word, knowing she'd give him the last deed. Two-for-one, see? Wasn't so much that she felt the need to remain

a virgin for her wedding night as he thought. Real reason was that when she did go to confession every other month, she hoped to mitigate her sins by telling the priest she was still saving herself for her husband-to-be. Promising that marriage was just around the corner. They had made love aftr a fashion. And technically, by any medical or physical examination, she was yet a virgin. Shopping around to different confessionals didn't hurt any either. But it had been a while since her last confession.

It had been two months since she'd received the host. And it was starting to wear on her. Parishioners noticed when she cut out of mass early, right after the homily. Or worse—if she stayed to rise up and down, up and down, from the kneeler, forcing communicants to step around her to and from the alter wondering why she stayed put.

So, who was the true master of the master bedroom? The one who received twice or the one who gave twice? Controlled the other twice? Serving up two helpings of her special brand of dessert as it were?

"Come here Baby. Lean down to me."

She complied, as always. Leaning down, placing her hands on the bed, astride his head—purring like a tigress for him—how he liked her. Nose to nose, Eskimo kissing. Moving forward, dangling her peaches in his face, she let Frank nurse her like a baby, let his hands stroke over her waist and hips, exciting her. She didn't mind this at all.

He better enjoy it now because next week after the trial, she'd tell him: Piss or get off the pot. Looking up, he paused, saying, "Always wondered if you might be adopted?"

Whoa—where did that come from?

"Oh? Why is that, Baby?"

Frank grinned from ear to ear, following her slightest move.

"Cuz Baby, you're the only one in your family with natural, honey blonde hair."

He touched her. Then, stroked his fingertips to trace over her eyebrows.

"But here. These naturally dark brows give you a striking appearance that really sets you apart Babe. Really does." She grinned, reveling in his compliment.

Yes, next week she'd lower the boom if he forced her hand. Demand a ring. She hoped it wouldn't come to that. Frank was going to be the father of her children, wasn't he? Sure, he was. And she did love him, didn't she? Sure she did. Of course she did. Though not like the priest, whom she could never have. No, not at all like Vince. There was no one like him—

Tugging her haunches toward him, Frank scooted beneath her thrusting her forward. Carol seized the headstand to keep her balance hovering above his head. She felt his breath—whaddaya know? A two-for-two Wednesday—yessss.

* * *

Ryz'n pulled the Monza to a stop next to the curb in front of Nick's sidewalk. He leaned over to kiss her tenderly on the lips, soft and tantalizing, like a puff of warm,

moist air. He knew that drove her wild. And he was going to leave her, like that? All juiced up and nothing to do about it? Well, she'd fox him. As he backed out of the passenger door into the street, Ryz'n snatched the vial of honey from her purse. She added a long drop under and over her tongue, as she had in the rest room before they had left the restaurant. Nick opened the door as she licked the stopper and capped the vial, slipping the bottle back into her clutch. Then she climbed out of the car to meet him.

"What are ya doing, Ry?"

"Thought I'd walk you to the door, the way you do me."

Smiling, he brushed her double cheek with the backs of his fingers, raising her dimples.

"You don't have to do that." She frowned. "It's what *you* do."

"Yeah, but I'm the *guy*, see? I'm supposed to make sure you get in okay, is all."

She frowned again. "That's all, hunh? Well, me too."

Nick paused with the backs of his fingers against her cheek. "You're a guy, hunh? Sure fooled the heck out o' me." Though he laughed silently, his shoulders shook.

She shot him a darting scowl. "You know what I mean."

"All right, but you know, I'm just gonna walk you right back."

Placing their arms about each other's waists, they walked slowly to his front stoop.

His folks' car was in the drive, so she knew they were home. The front porch light was on, waiting for them. After climbing the three cement risers, they reached the front door.

They embraced on the brief, cement porch. He tasted of pizza, spumoni, root beer and nicotine. And why not? It's what he'd eaten. And, though she did not approve, he had smoked a post meal Salem. But she liked both of those foods. And she could even stand the nicotine on his breath. As a former asthmatic having grown up in a home filled with tobacco smoke, she didn't care for second-hand smoke. But tasting the mild Salem on him excited her for some inexplicable reason. She hoped the taste of honey covered the garlic she had sprinkled on her egg plant parmesan and the onion in her garden salad.

Arching her back, Ryz'n surged into him. She felt badly for both of them that he couldn't release his pent-up pressure into her, nor could she receive it. She noticed that his status had remained unchanged from the booth at the restaurant. Had he been like that all night? Poor baby.

Flexing one knee and then the other, Ryz'n slowly shifted her weight back and forth into him hoping to get over, making her catch her breath. For a short guy who was still growing, Nick sure could satisfy her. Having nothing to compare him to, she didn't know how he rated. Frankly, she didn't give a darn. He filled her bowl. That's what mattered. Nicky always knew just what to do—how, where and when to squeeze and please her.

"Ohhh Baby." She spoke with her tongue still entwined with his, sounding as if she had marbles in her mouth. He pressed all the right buttons, except the one she most craved.

On the cement porch, under the roof overhang, Ryz'n closed her eyes, letting her head drift back, arching her spine to straddle his right thigh as best as she could through her skirt, sliding the hem high up on her. Nick flexed his right knee to help her. She felt his athletic thigh, large as her waist, ride up into her. She widened her stance—*there!*

"Ohhhh!" She damn near swooned. He moved his hand up to the small of her back to steady her. Ryz'n started to lose herself, to go for it. The wahine-shaking hula lessons she had taken in Hawaii as a kid came in handy now. Ohhh, yes they were-ere-ere-ere.

"Darn Ryzanna."

She pulled up short. Afraid, she'd hurt him somehow.

"What?" She stared at him. The wall, porch lamp shone over her head onto his face.

"This ain't doin' either of us any good." He stared back, somewhat miffed.

She began to say, speak for yourself, but didn't.

"All right, Hon. If you think we shouldn't."

Nick let go of her to lean back against the brick wall on the closed side of the stoop landing. Thrusting his hands deep into his pants pockets and scowling, he bent his right leg at the knee, jamming the sole of his right foot against the wall behind him. He bounced repeatedly off the wall in nervous jerks.

"Ain't what I think—or want. And you know it! I don't get Father Vince. He says you make love only with that one special person you want to be with for life. You get married and have kids. All right. We want to be together for life. We're having a kid. We're getting married. And we still can't do it until we do. Just doesn't make sense to me."

Ryz'n understood. She wanted him now, too. The invigorating, early fall, night chill had her blood up. She thought how strange and desperate love could be when you were so darned needy that you couldn't stand it any longer. As if you had knives sticking into you all over and the only thing that could relieve the torture was him—where, when and how she wanted him—all of him. She vibrated with yearning. Was it love or lust, or both? Whatever you called the thing, it had become for her what heroin must be to a hard-core addict strung out after a long drought. She never had felt like this before, so painfully, yearningly desperate for him. No, never—not even before their first time on the levée bank in the mist between the beaver ponds, when she didn't know any better. Yes, like a heroin addict so terribly in need of a fix—his particular, inimitable brand of fix. And it was obvious she wasn't alone in her flaming desires. She was behaving like a bitch in heat. Wanted him bad enough to—yes—right here on his folk's front porch.

Nick relaxed. "Ya OK, Baby? I'm sorry. Didn't mean to flame on ya. Not your fault."

All hoarse, and as sexily as she could muster, she panted that she was "Okay." He grunted twice in agreement, sighed and began to giggle.

"What's so funny?"

He shrugged, hands still buried in his pockets. “I dunno. Guess it’s two grunts and a giggle for yes and what? One grunt and a frown for no?” He chuckled some more.

She sighed deeply, leaning forward to hug him, too far gone to laugh at his lame joke, reaching her arms behind him, clasping her palms tightly against his back. His right leg, still bent at the knee, pushed gently, rocking off the wall with his foot. He arched his back to keep the rough masonry wall from squishing her hands. Her hips stilled, no longer gyrating like a wahine. Ry squeezed his raised thigh between hers to show she cared.

“Dang Ry. You’re like a boa constrictor. I can’t hardly breathe.”

She loosened her hold around his waist but still pressed hard into his leg, trying, hoping to regain some measure of relief. She began to rock gently back and forth without gyrating this time. Just easy does it. They remained like this for a couple of minutes, silent, just floating, drifting, before Nick looked in her eyes.

“Is it okay, now Baby? Can I walk ya back to the car?”

Heck no! It wasn’t okay but what could they do? She had come part way, but now she felt incomplete and frustrated. They had promised Father V to be good until the wedding. She nodded for yes, burying her face again into his chest and shoulder.

He didn’t move. This was pure torture, to be so close with her arms about him, feeling his hard-muscled, lean slab of a body and rock-hard thigh pressing into her. Her mind drifted to their previous trysts, so unrestrained and utterly fulfilling, when they first titillated then satiated each other so completely. But what could they do about it now?

She had read in some women’s mag that it was her duty to set the tone when her man was depressed. They had enjoyed a rare evening alone together. And it had been great. She didn’t want to end it on a sour note like this. An idea came to her.

Ryz’n grunted twice and giggled. Nick seized her face in his hands, pulling her head back to see if she was really back. He smiled.

“Your eyes are still glazed but your pupils aren’t as big. Guess that was a ‘Yes’ in code then?” Ry grinned. “You guessed me, Sweetie.”

She reached up, kissing him long and full. When she was satisfied, she broke off. They turned. Ryz’n hooked her arm inside his. Leaning on his shoulder, they retraced their steps down the risers and sidewalk to her car. They stopped at the curb to rest against the driver’s door where the Monza was parked illegally beside the curb against traffic flow, if there had been any traffic. So, who’d notice at this hour? When he reached to open the door for her, Ryz’n pressed in to kiss him. She found him still locked and loaded for her.

“Oh Baby. Is it bad? Does it hurt?” He shrugged behind a faint smile.

“Don’t worry about it. I be okay, I promise.”

“No, it’s not okay. What do you think I am? Some sort of narcissistic hedonist, who cares only about pleasing her own whims and not giving a hang about anybody else?”

He laughed. “You picked up on that bull too, hunh?”

She half-smiled. “You bet. That creep! Well, *I* am not like that at all. Come here.”

Ryz’n reached for his belt. She tugged him close. Nick stopped her, seizing her wrists. Ryz’n pushed him off balance. They fell to the zoysia grass beside her Monza.

In the dead of night on a dead street, Ryz’n longed to quicken him, to appease his frustration. Groaning low, his eyes closed tight. He appeared to be in pain. She rose to her knees to straddle him. Nicky rolled her onto her side next to him.

“Damn Ry. It’s no use. Please don’t try no more. It’s only making it worse. I be okay. Hones’, don’t worry. I be fine. Father V said we ‘gotta be good. Rememba?’”

“You sure? I could help ya, if you don’t mind the mess.” He shook his head.

“Sure I’m sure. Been in this shape many times. But after we’re married, never again, right Sweetie? Best now I keep this pistol holstered, pard. Keep my powder dry.”

His broadening grin made her smile. She grunted twice, forcing a giggle. They embraced on the grass, tasting each other’s Italian dinners again. Sharing a bit of her honey with him, so to speak. A neighbor’s porch light flicked off. Finally she whispered she had to be going cuz her folks would be worried.

They stood up. The Monza’s interior lit up as Nick held the door for her. Ryz’n slid behind the steering wheel. He shut the door. When she started the engine, Nicky leaned down to kiss her through the opened window, saying good night. Once more, he kissed her lips lightly, like a puff of air. Against the September night cool, echoes of faint, warm waves rolled over her, glimmers of what might have been, might have reverberated through her and almost did. They were just faint echoes of the thunder and lightning bolts she had come to expect from his well-versed, firm but sweet, turtle-doving.

Unable to leave just yet, Ryz’n reached out with her left hand to pull his head inside the car. She kissed him wet and hard with every fiber she could muster. Gasping for breath, they backed off each other. She cupped her left hand around the nape of his neck.

“I love ya so much Sweetie, I just can’t stand it. But I gotta go Baby or I’ll end up camping out here with you on your front lawn. And what would the neighbors say when they woke up to find us like that?” He chuckled.

“They wouldn’t say nothin’. Just eat their hearts out, prob’ly.” His eyes beamed.

“Say, bet I know something about old Rock’n’Roll you don’t.” He replied, “What?”

“Well, did you know that *The Crickets* wrote and released “I Fought the Law and the Law Won” in nineteen-sixty? Six years before Bobby Fuller made it a hit?” He blinked.

“No, I didn’t know that. Buddy Holly was dead then.”

She smiled. “Heard it on the radio today. One of the *Crickets* wrote it. Guy name of Sonny Curtis.” She reached out with her left forefinger to touch his nose. “So the student is teaching the teacher. How do you like that?”

“I like it fine. Only there’s some other things I’d like to teach you right now.”

She sighed. “I know and I’d love to be learning them from you too, Baby.” She sang, “*You know I hate to leave you, I really must say. But goodnight Sweetheart, goodnight.*”

Nicky smiled but it was a sad smile just the same.

“I like your version better than the Spaniels.”

“Sorry Baby. I really do have to scoot. See you in court tomorrow. Bye-bye.”

Putting the car in gear with one hand, she cupped the other to blow him a kiss, waving good-bye like Miss America. The Monza chugged off down the street, headed towards the par-five, eighth fairway of the golf course at the bottom of the hill.

Nick watched from the curb until she turned left on Ashton, disappearing from view.

“What a woman! This wedding can’t come too soon for me. Mann. How lucky can a guy be? Yes sir, I’m one lucky dog.”

Inhaling deeply of her Love’s Fresh Lemon scent, which clung to him like a heavenly fragrance, he strolled up the brief concrete sidewalk, up the porch risers again and into his house without feeling the ground under his feet. Dialing down, he breathed deeply, chanting softly to himself, “I’m a lucky dog. I’m a lucky dog …”

~ Chapter 16: The Defense Opens ~

Nick sat next to Franco at the defendant's table, waiting on the judge and jury. Behind them, the gallery was noisy with commotion. Word had leaked that the trial was about to heat up. An *Eyewitness News* camera team had followed him up the courthouse steps. Journalists, pads and pens in hand, had asked him what he thought of his case, the prosecutor, the judge. Nick followed Franco's advice. He made no comment.

Franco pulled out papers from his over-stuffed briefcase onto the table then set his case under the table next to the leg. He leaned in: "Your dad is a very persuasive man Nick." Nick asked him what he meant. "He got Perkouri to drop Ryz'n from the witness list. Quoted him statistics about the rising youth population in the county, all the newly built high schools, his connections with the County Boys Club and the local PTA, Mister Ryan's affiliation with the Officers and NCO's clubs at Brolling and Landrews. Backed that peckerwood right down. Gave me some stuff I can use, too." Nick nodded.

"Yeah, my old man can be a force to reckon with when he wants to be." Franco winked. "Good thing too, I'd say." Pointing to some index cards in front of him, he said, "Wanna go over these a minute before we get started. Okay?" Nick left him to it.

A side door opened. Nick watched the jury file in: eight men and six women. There were four older white males; a younger white guy who looked to be in his twenties; two black men, one in his thirties and the other, maybe ten years older and an Asian man whose hair was graying. Of the six women: one was white and middle aged; one, black, probably about Franco's age, and the other four were in their twenties. A couple looked like they could be co-eds. Two were white; one black and one Hispanic. An elderly white man and a young, good-lookin' white chick were the alternates.

Franco had picked a rainbow jury, "a favorable one," or so he said. Nick looked in the eyes of each juror who dared look at him. The women mostly, the men, not so much. He felt only kindness in his heart toward them. Without a kind heart, he couldn't eye them without doing himself harm. He didn't fear his jurors as potential jailers. Instead, he embraced them as potential liberators, fellow human beings free of bias, who wanted to be fair, to be just. At least that's what he hoped, what he told himself. He refused to take offense, to make their presence as adversarial. He could afford to do no less.

And he could tell the women seemed to reciprocate his affable sense of humanity. Nick had a warm notion about them. Over the last few years, since he'd recovered from Rheumatic Fever, Nick had developed a feeling for folks—women, especially. Became like a sixth sense to him. Like his batting ability to gauge the rise on a fast ball or the drop of a curve. Or his musical ability to feel as if almost any instrument he picked up somehow became an extension of him. So that melodies or rhythms he heard in his brain,

felt in his soul, would just flow out of him naturally. Simple as taking a leak. Or the ease with which he could mimic sounds and gestures to the delight or dread of his audience.

Thanks to the young Widdah Donna Ready and the posse of lovers who followed her, Nick felt he understood women, as well as any guy could, if understanding the fairer sex were possible at all. He was comfortable in their presence regardless of the situation, even this formal one in court. Since Donna first had saved his butt from a peeping Tom debacle, when she'd pulled him in through her second-story bedroom window on top of her, Nick had learned, for the most part, to embrace people as they came. If he gave folks space and a little patience, they usually returned his open affability. For those who didn't, he tried not to take offense. Though sometimes, a jerk was a jerk. But through the Widdah, he had learned females viewed him as being easy on the eyes. He came to understand that his two-toned peepers could mesmerize others, especially women, and he played that to his advantage. Donna had taught him the most important lesson he'd ever learned about the female species. To wit: if you did it right, they liked it as much as you did, maybe more. He was thankful, grateful, she had gotten hold of him at such a young, impressionable age—her, too. Told him as much every time they'd made it. Yes, she had.

Yet he need only to consult the State's witness list to find about every malcontent and jerk who had ever run afoul of him. He believed Franco, who claimed to have obtained "a favorable jury—favorable—as opposed to fair. Favorable's better than fair. As favorable as possible anyway, considering R.G. County was pretty much full of red-necks."

The gallery sure was filling up. High, old ceilings echoed courtroom noises, bouncing and multiplying off the rafters back down to the people below. With the voir dire over, they were looking for some meat—his. Due to previous TV news footage, his case had made the local county papers with Perkouri playing it up big. The D.C. papers—the Post, the Star and the Daily News—not so much. Not yet, anyway. Nick was thankful for that.

The bailiff asked the court to rise for "The Honorable Judge Langham Hardern Higher, presiding." The old coot entered in his flowing, black robe to sit on the bench, above them. Sure had an air about him, as if he was God Hisself. As far as this trial was concerned, Nick figured he was. Old Hang 'em Harder'n'Higher. Higher and Perkouri had his balls on the chopping block, right out there for everyone to see. Nothing much he could do about it. 'Cept not screw up somehow. He was countin' on Franco. Yes, he was.

Sensing a commotion behind him, Nick glanced over his shoulder in time to spy Ry turning heads in the gallery. She sauntered down the center aisle, naturally sexy and sweet, dimples galore. Her natural swish and sway beguiled the courtroom, including him. She didn't try to walk that way. Just couldn't help herself. Just her natural gait. Ry was dumbfounded when he'd tried to explain the effect her natural swish and sway had on guys. Just bewildered her. Said she walked how she walked, nothing special about it. She couldn't fathom how much it moved him. The fact that she was naively oblivious to

the power of her natural stroll over the opposite sex endeared her to him all the more. He'd written a song about it—"Her Swish and Her Sway." Played it at gigs sometimes.

Ry strolled up to his parents sittin' in the first pew behind the bar rail. A demure gold crucifix dangled from a gold chain, bouncing off her chest. She smiled encouragement to him. Looked sexy in her newly made, mock turtle neck, Ban-Lon shift with alternating horizontal, spring and forest green bands. The snug, curve-clinging garment had long, similarly banded sleeves, pushed back to three-quarters length, halfway up her forearm. The shift clung to her contours like a second skin. Sexy as sin without even trying. Showed off her curvy contours. Whatever *"it"* was, the girl had *it* in spades. Dang small wonder he'd written so many songs about her. Never had a better muse—never.

His folks made room for her as she slid in beside his dad. Ry had made four shifts alike, except for the color of the alternating, horizontal bands or stripes and the material used. Modeled them for him. Two other cotton-knit shifts featured black stripes alternating with either broad bands of forest green or grey. A fourth, identical to the Ban-Lon, was made of wool, or so she said. Tapered them to her exact measurements so he could get all the curves he wanted. She intended to wear them for him Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays—until her condition became too obvious. The wool, she was saving for colder weather. Said she was knitting a few long sweaters and some baggier outfits for later, too. Loose sweaters—cardigans. She was one amazing chick. Could sing, cook, sew and love like *dyn*-o-mite! Play softball great, too. Yeah. Lucky dog.

The judge called the session to order. Then he asked Franco to present his opening statement. Franco glanced over the typewritten sheet of paper on the table before him. He nudged Nick to take his eyes off Ryz'n, as she nestled her bouncing curves down behind him beside his dad. Winking and clapping Nick on the shoulder, Franco stood.

"Yes, Your Honor. Defense is happy to address the court members—finally."

Franco stepped around the defendant's table to walk toward the jury box.

"My name is Franco Vamia. I am the defense attorney representing this youth. I trust you all had a sound night's sleep and a full breakfast so you can hear, at last, the other side in this case. I hope you didn't have too many wild visions running around in your heads all night, imagining the worst about this [turning with hand outstretched toward Nick] 'hedonistic narcissist,' or was that a 'narcissistic hedonist?' [He chuckles.] This boy in any event, on trial before you, facing some very, very serious adult charges."

Nick noticed that Perkouri shifted in his seat but made no objection.

"Yes, take a good look at this boy who sits in the dock. And he is that, you know? Just a boy. Turned seventeen the day before yesterday. Yes, sixteen at the time of the alleged crimes. And I emphasize the word "*alleged*," because that is all the State has done thus far. As we all know, mere allegations do not a conviction make. That requires evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. And I can assure you there is none. There is, in fact, another

side to this story. And I only wish you could have heard it yesterday afternoon, so the balance of justice could have weighed evenly in your minds overnight."

Bang! The gavel rang out. The judge looked over his spectacles coldly at Franco.

"Counselor, stick to the facts you hope to prove. Get off this tangent. [A faint smile crosses Perkouri's face.] Reserve your sarcasm for your social life."

"Yes, Your Honor. I will." Franco returned his attention to the jurors.

"As I said, my name is Franco Vamia, or Frank, if you will. And I represent this youth in his defense against the charges so eloquently laid out for you yesterday for the State by Mister Perkouri. By the way, in case you didn't know it, Mister Perkouri is the acting, interim State's Attorney, pending the outcome of the election in six weeks. So you may want to consider his handling of this case closely. It may help you cast your ballot—

"Your Honor—" The judge raised his hand to Perkouri, who had risen from his chair.

"I'm putting a stop to this right now." He turned to Franco.

"Mister Vamia. I instructed you to make your argument on the facts. Stick to them. The Court will brook no more of this *poh*-litical nonsense, lest you be cited for contempt."

"Forgive me Your Honor, I was mistaken. I thought the jurors, given their sound night's rests and full stomachs, could bear to hear what this trial is really all about."

Bang! Bang! "Another such comment sir, and you *will* be cited for contempt. Is that clear?" Franco nodded. "Yes, Your Honor." And pivoting towards Nick, with his back to the judge and jury, Franco flashed a quick wink with his left eye, as if to say: *We got our two cents in. Now it's time to go to work.* Nick smiled with his eyes, not his mouth.

Franco faced the jury.

> Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: The defense concedes that the victims in this case, Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee, two ex-convicts as you will learn, molested and threatened my client on the evening before the accident, the twenty-ninth of June last. The defense will show that my client acted in self-defense, to protect himself from the aggression of those two ruffians by removing the distributor cap and wires from their vehicle. He did not take these items but, instead, placed the wires safely in the bed of their truck; solely, to prevent them from pursuing him and harming him and his passengers as the ex-cons had threatened. The defense will also concede that a tragic accident occurred later that night, in the wee hours of June thirtieth last on that nasty, dastardly, stormy stretch of road, in which the two victims—brothers, Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee, met their fatal ends. And that the accused teen William Nicholas Sheeboom was present when that accident occurred. But the defense will also show that the accused did not cause the accident. No. That's right. My client did not cause that fatal tragedy. In fact, he made no negligence, let alone gross negligence but drove his automobile safely, harmlessly—not recklessly—and possessed no malicioiu intent to harm anyone.

On the contrary, you will learn the reckless negligence, malicious intent, excessive speeding and drunk driving, which cost the victims their lives in that gruesome crash, came solely at the Buzzbees' own hands and not my client's. The defense not only has eyewitness testimony to support this argument but also will produce an experienced accident expert, who examined the site of the accident thoroughly. He will testify in my client's behalf as to the nature of the reckless negligence on the part of the victims, which led to their tragic demise.

You will also hear testimony from the police desk sergeant who took my client's call to report the accident within minutes after it occurred. You will hear from the police officer on the scene of the accident, who will tell you he rebuffed the accused when my client tried to explain how the accident occurred and ordered him to leave the scene, under pain of receiving a traffic citation. Unable to discuss the matter with the authorities, you will learn that, just two hours later, the boy sought the advice of a priest, a personal friend of mine. You will learn that said priest referred the boy to me. I reported the matter to the State's Attorney's office the next day and was told there did not appear to be sufficient evidence to pursue the matter in court. That's right ladies and gentlemen, the State's Attorney's office told me there was insufficient evidence to charge this boy with any felony crime. And we will produce a witness to support this fact.

You will also learn that later, after the former State's attorney was appointed to a judgeship in this Circuit Court and Mr. Perkouri assumed the interim position he holds today as the Maryland State Attorney for Royal George County, the State Attorney's office contacted me, asking that my client come in for questioning. You will learn that although he was out of state, vacationing with friends and recovering from an ankle injury unrelated to this accident, my client responded immediately to my long distance call to produce himself voluntarily to the county sheriff at the station next door the following day.

Furthermore, for every negative character witness the State can produce—that is for every malcontent, who has ever had a beef or holds a grudge against my client—the defense can produce as many, twice as many witnesses if need be, if the Court will allow us, to testify to the solid character of my client. And, while the burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt rests with the State to convict the defendant on these scurrilous charges and not with the defense to disprove them, we, the defense, will show categorically that these charges not only cannot be proved beyond a reasonable doubt, but that they are, in fact, false when compared with the facts and eyewitness and expert testimonies you will hear.

Mark my words ladies and gentlemen: when the defense rests its case, you will ask yourselves why did this matter ever come to trial? [Franco pauses to look from juror to juror, letting them ponder his statement.] And by the end of the trial, after *all* the facts are revealed and the law, as applied to those facts, is made clear to you by the Court, I believe you will have the common sense to see this matter for what it truly is. Under a warning of contempt, I'll close now.

[He pats the rail in front of the jury box and returns to the defendant's table.]

~ Chapter 17: The State Makes Its Case ~

Ryz'n hustled through the courtroom double doors down the center aisle. She hesitated. The gallery looked kind of crowded. All the local publicity had brought the curious out for this nine a.m. hearing. She thought she saw room in the first row behind Nick, next to his parents. Anxious, and glancing about the gallery, she did not spy her dad. He said he had to meet with the State's Attorney and Nick's dad early that morning before court. He hadn't planned on staying for the trial. The President was flying into Landrews on Air Force One today from Key Biscayne. And he had to make contingencies for a reception in the Officer's Club, just in case the President chose to linger, as he seldom did. Thank God for the President and Air Force One. If her Dad found her here, when she was supposed to be in school, she'd really catch it.

The judge entered the chamber. All rose. Ryz'n froze in her tracks in the aisle. When the courtroom sat down after the judge, she hurried down the center aisle to slip in next to her future in-laws. They slid over, making room for her. Men gawked, ogling her in her newly made Ban-Lon shift. Nick smiled widely when their eyes met. She could ignore the lustful stares, if showcasing her curves made him happy. He needed her best now.

Nicky turned around. She offered her three-dimple simper, whispering all had gone well at the Doctor's office. She winked, saying "The baby's fine, too." Nick's smile faded a tad. Mr. Vamia nudged him. Nick turned back around to listen.

As Mr. Vamia rose and spoke, Ryz'n felt her chest swell with pride and hope. He told it like it was, despite the Judge's threat to hold him in contempt. She had not thought well of Mr. Vamia, of his roving, lust-filled eyes and his invitation to join him on his boat after this was all over. But she sure liked the way he was sticking up for Nicky now. The man's suave arrogance was not misplaced here in the courtroom in defense of her man. Nicky's attorney looked sharp in his fancy, double-breasted, three-piece, blue serge, pin-striped suit with a rich, burgundy tie and his black, tasseled loafers. As did Nicky, in his. They had dressed similarly, as if they were twins. When Mr. Vamia finished, her dark forebodings melted away. She was certain the truth would set Nicky free.

Ryz'n glanced at the jurors. They looked to be a good cross section of the County. Three blacks, an older and a younger man and a woman about her mom's age, who wore large glasses. There were four other young women, one of whom was Latino. Another white woman was her mom's age, too. There was a young white man, probably in his late twenties. And three other middle-aged men, one of whom was Asian, and two old gents, one with spectacles. Fourteen in all. Nicky had said the two in the back row nearest the gallery were alternates. She noticed the young women eyeballing Nick as Mr. Vamia

addressed them. Her neck stiffened with jealousy. But, if they like Nicky, maybe they'll vote for him. "Even better," she whispered to herself, imitating him.

The State's prosecutor Mr. Perkouri started first with a pimple-faced guy, named Duane something, who had manned the drive-thru, pick-up window at Truley's road house in T.C. the night of the accident. She and Nicky had picked up carry-out at that window a couple of times. But she didn't recall this guy—Duane—per se.

Duane identified Nick for the court. He testified that just before dark on the night of the accident he had sold some cheeseburgers and a six-pack of Miller's to Nick and a couple of girls, who were with him in his convertible. He said the three of them had driven off to wait until their order of burgers was ready. But first, Duane had accepted cash from Nick for a six-pack of Miller's High Life he had handed through the window.

When the prosecutor asked why he had sold Nicky the beer when Nick obviously was under age, Duane said Mr. Truley, the owner, had said it was "All right." He didn't know why Mr. Truley would say that, because he usually forbade the sale of alcohol to minors.

After the prosecutor sat down, Mr. Vamia asked Duane if he had known Nick before that meeting. Duane said he had only known *of* him, never actually had met him. Franco asked how Duane knew *of* him. Duane said that he had recognized Nick from the local sports pages as the kid who had helped Pocomoke High win the Class 'A' baseball state title a few weeks before. Then Mr. Vamia let the guy go.

The State called Mr. Truley next. He was a borad-faced, big-boned, rotund man of average height with salt and pepper hair, combed straight back like a greaser from the Fifties. Ryz'n figured he must have been in his fifties, too. He stated his age as fifty-three and he owned and managed the road house there in T.C. He had worked there all his life, having inherited the place from his uncle. In answer to the prosecutor's questions, Mr. Truley said that he had known Nick for a couple years, since Nick had started working summers for his brother Ramon at the Outdoor Living Centre about a half-mile south.

When asked, Mr. Truley said he wasn't in the habit of selling alcohol to minors but that he had made a special exception in Nick's case. Though he was reluctant to speak further, at the prosecutor's prodding, Mr. Truley answered that Nick was very talented. He said that Nicky sometimes performed a song or two on his harmonica. "To liven up the place a little 'em times the juke was busted. In exchange, I'd sell him a six-pack now and then."

Ryz'n glanced at the jury, many of whom, the older guys mostly, seemed to shift uncomfortably in their seats at this admission.

The State's Attorney asked Mr. Truley to tell, in his own words, what happened when Nick came into the bar "on the night the Buzzbee borthers, two lifelong residents of the County, were gruesomely and heinously driven off the road to their deaths."

Mr. Vamia dropped a pen he had been doodling with to look up.

"Objection, Your Honor. Move the Court strike the last comment or ask the State to rephrase the question for lack of proper foundation, leading the witness. Neither the nature of the fatalities nor the character of the victims' residency has been established."

"Overruled. The witness has been asked to tell the matter in his own words and he shall do so. Proceed, Mister Truley."

"But Your Honor, such a leading question is prejudicial to the jury."

Mr. Vamia leaned over to whisper something to Nick. But Ryz'n couldn't make out what he said. The jury watched them as well.

Judge: "Counselor, if you wish to make an exception to the Court's ruling, do so in the proper format." The judge paused, but Mr. Vamia shook his head without speaking.

The judge turned to the witness. "Mister Truly, please proceed with your testimony."

Ryz'n tried to figure out what had just happened with all that lawyer talk. The prosecutor stood aside so the jury and the gallery could view the witness.

Mr. Truley: "Well, it was a typical Monday night. Only a few customers. Nick—"

"The defendant," corrected the prosecutor. Shifting in his seat, Mr. Truley looked to his right at the prosecutor.

"Right, the defendant. The defendant came in to pick up an order o' cheeseburgers, which wasn't ready yet. So I asked him if he wouldn't mind givin' us a little tune, seein' as how the juke was busted again. He said sure, as soon as he let some people waitin' out in his car know, he'd be a few more minutes. So he went out and came back in, sat on the bar and gave us a tune—'Crazy'—imitatin' Patsy Cline. When he was done, his order was ready, so I give it to him. Then the Buzzbee boys came over to the bar—"

Mr. Perkouri: "By the Buzzbee boys, you mean Alvin and Arlo Buzzbee, whose deaths later that night are the reason we're having this trial—the victims?"

Mr. Truley looked to his right at the prosecutor. "Yes sir. That's who I mean."

Mr. Perkouri: "Please continue."

"Well, the Buzzbee boys said they liked the tune fine and asked for another. Nick—" Mr. Perkouri started to speak but before he could say anything, Mr. Truley said, "I mean the defendant—said he had to be going cuz his folks'd be worried if he didn't get home soon. But the Buzzbees wouldn't take no for an answer. They persuaded Ni—the defendant—to sing another and got him to stand on top of the bar while he sang. Sang, uh, Brenda Lee's 'I'm Sorry.' He got down when he was finished but the Buzzbees didn't want him to leave just yet. They kind of talked to him a bit and the defendant said, maybe they should discuss the matter in private, like in the Men's Room. So, they walked around the corner down the hall to the rest rooms—"

Mr. Perkouri: "So, it was the defendant who suggested they talk in the rest rooms?"

"Yes sir. That's right." The prosecutor said, "Very well, go on."

"Well, me and the rest of the folks in there sort of went back to mindin' our own business. Then we heard a ruckus-like back there and then we heard somebody come out of the bathroom. Then I heard the defendant tell one of the boys, he could take care of *him* in the Ladies Room. Then, the same thing. Another ruckus and the defendant come out into the bar, kind o' shaky with something dripping from his face and arm—water, I think. It looked like his shirt and shorts was kind o' wet but they weren't stained."

The witness took a deep breath and the prosecutor nodded.

"So I give him his cheeseburgers and he asked if anyone knew what the Buzzbee boys was drivin'. One of the customers told him it was an old, light blue Ford pick-up, parked out by the telephone pole. The defendant went outside. I followed him to the door and watched as he got a blonde-haired girl to drive his convertible over near the Buzzbee's pick-up. Then he opened the hood and ripped out the distributor wires and threw 'em in the back of the truck. On the way to his convertible, he stopped ta open the driver side door to the pick-up and climbed inside. He did somethin', but I couldn't see what. Later, I learned he'd found some unused oil cans in the cab and dumped oil all over inside."

"Objection, hearsay."

"Overruled," said the judge. "Go on with your story Mister Truley." Mr. Vamia sighed.

So, about this time, Arlo comes bustin' out o' the john, face, bloody, madder 'n heck and cussin' up a storm. Askin' where the defendant is 'n' swearin' a blue streak that he's gonna kill 'im. He sees me at the door, which I's holdin' open, and he come over and pushed me out o' the way.

Blood's pourin' down his face and he's cut on his nose and forehead. His nose is all smashed up, bleedin' out of his mouth, too. And he's got a gash and nasty knot's formin' on his forehead. Tryin' to hitch up his pants as he stumbled down the front step to the parking lot. Sees the defendant and starts hollerin' some more how he's gonna kill 'im. And shakes his fist. Well, about this time, Alvin comes from outta the back in the same shape and just as ornery.

He follows his big brother outside. They take after the defendant, both of 'em madder'n hornets that had their nest knocked down. Meanwhile, Nick—the defendant—jumped in his car and this blonde's pulled it out o' the lot, stoppin' at the light—the traffic light, that is—there at the highway. The defendant sat up in the back seat—the convertible was open, ya see—and taunted the Buzzbee boys.

Well, them boys ran to their truck. Actually, Arlo ran first and got in the driver's side, climbed in and slid across the front seat. When Alvin opened the passenger door, Arlo slid out head-first to the ground, on account o' the oil spill, see. Them boys started fighting each other until the defendant, who was still in his convertible, waitin' at the light even though it was green now, called over and flipped 'em off. The Buzzbee boys—" [Pauses to chuckle.] "Them Buzzbee boys looked like the Keystone cops fumblin' over each other, gittin' inta the truck,

slidin' on account o' the oil, see? Finally, they get in the cab 'n' go ta fire her up, but she won't catch. I mean, she'd spark but wouldn't turn over.

Meanwhile, the defendant and the two girls with him stayed at the light, which had changed to green 'n' back to red now. And the Buzzbees slid out o' the truck and took off runnin' across the parkin' lot for 'em. The blonde drivin' lets those boys get within about fifty feet then takes off thru the red light. They weren't no other cars comin' the other way, see?

And, as the Buzzbees git out inta the street, the light changes ta green again. Then this here truck come up Tyson road behind 'em—like a dump truck. And this here truck's beepin' its horn at them boys in the middle o' the road now with their backs to it, still fumin' and cussin' and shakin' their fists at the defendant.

When they realize the truck is about to run 'em over, cuz the light was back to green now see, they dived each one to a side o' the road and the truck barrels through 'crosst the highway headin' for T'bacca Creek. By that time, the blonde drivin' Nick's convertible was peelin' out, swervin' all over da road, headin' down towards Woldorn. And that's when the defendant raises up in the back seat and gives 'em boys one of these here—

Mr. Truley stood up to shoot his right fist in the air with his left wrist stopping his right arm at the crook of his right elbow. "You know? The big bird."

Ryz'n noticed some of the jurors, the younger ones, smiling and chuckling. Made her and some of the gallery laugh, as well. The judge slammed down his gavel, calling for order. He said he wouldn't "tolerate inappropriate behavior in his courtroom. The bailiff will escort anyone who disturbs the civility of these proceedings further from the room."

That drained the smile from her face, as well as those around her.

Judge: "I shouldn't have to remind you people, these men at whom you are laughing, found themselves dead hours later. And the defendant is on trial for their murder. This is no laughing matter."

Well, the judge sure put a damper on that courtroom in a hurry.

The prosecutor asked what happened next. Mr. Truley said, "The Buzzbee boys come back to the bar, asking if anyone knew who Ni—the defendant was and where he lived."

"Somebody said he lived up north, near town cuz he went to Pocomoke. So Arlo had his brother Alvin stand out in the parking lot by the corner to watch in case the defendant come back that-a-way. Meanwhile Arlo got one of the other customers to take him home.

"'Bout half hour later, Arlo come back in his funny car, hot rod, pickup truck. The one them boys raced over at Quasco, Friday nights? Yeah. He parked the truck in the middle of the parkin' lot, facin' the highway. They sat there, waitin' all night. I closed up at one and went to bed. And they were still settin' out there. Only car left in the lot."

Ryz'n noticed Mr. Vamia taking notes. He had been doing this from time to time throughout the witness's testimony and nudging Nick, who'd whisper to him.

Mr. Perkouri: “And what happened after you went to bed?”

The witness shrugged. “Well, I went to sleep.”

Mr. Perkouri: “With the Buzzbee brothers still sitting in their truck in the parking lot?”

Mr. Truley: “Yes sir.” The State’s Attorney said, “And then what?”

“Well, about an hour later I was woke up when I heard a bunch o’ shoutin’ out in the lot. Heard like two vehicles peel out, one after the other. I got up and went over ta the bedroom windah ‘n’ opened ‘er up—it’s on the second floor facin’ the highway—and saw the defendant’s convertible, top up, taking off ‘crosst the highway, up Old Veer towards Surrettesdale. The Buzzbees’ hot rod tearin’ after ‘em, fish-tailin’ ‘crosst the median. A storm had just started up, a big un. It was dark but I knew who they were all right. Last I seen of ‘em, they was tearin’ up Old Veer. Watched till their tail lights vanished around the bend behind the trees ‘n’ went back to bed.”

Mr. Perkouri: “So that was the last you saw of Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee—alive that is?”

Mr. Truley: “Yes sir, it was.” The prosecutor asked, “And what time was this?”

Mr. Truley: Two o’clock. Give or take a couple o’ minutes.”

Mr. Perkouri: “Thank you, Mister Truley. No more questions.”

Mr. Truley stood up to leave the witness box.

Mr. Vamia looked up. “Uh, Mister Truley, if you don’t mind, the defense would like to ask you a few questions. That be all right?” Truley shrugged. Said he didn’t mind and sat back down. Sitting next to her, Nick’s dad chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief.

Mr. Vamia rose from behind the table. He asked to approach the witness. The judge granted him permission. Mr. Vamia walked up to stand left of the witness box as the prosecutor had earlier, so he didn’t block the witness from the view of the judge or jury.

Mr. Vamia: “Now Mister Truley. That was quite a colorful tale. Quite colorful indeed, but are you sure you told the whole story, just as you saw it?”

Mr. Truley: “Sure. I told the truth.”

Mr. Vamia: “Oh, I have no doubt sir. Certainly, but perhaps you could fill us in on a few details that might have, well, shall we say, slipped your mind?”

Mr. Truley: “Like what?”

Mr. Vamia: “Well, you said the defendant had performed for your customers before?”

Mr. Truley: “Sure, when the juke was busted—he had.”

Mr. Vamia: “I see. Do you think Nick thought you would give him his cheeseburgers if he had refused to perform?”

Mr. Perkouri: “Objection Your Honor. Calls for speculation on the part of the witness.”

Judge: “Sustained.”

Mr. Vamia: “Very well. Let me restate the question. Would you have given Nick the cheeseburgers if he hadn’t sung for them?”

Mr. Truley: “Sure. His singing was more for the beer than the burgers. Nick knew that. He’s a good kid. He knew the score.”

Mr. Vamia: ‘Oh, ‘he’s *a good kid*?’ Yes, I see. And this *‘juke’* that was ‘*busted*?’ You indicated it had been ‘busted’ before. So I guess you had it repaired and it had become ‘*busted*’ again? Is that right?”

Mr. Truley: “Yeah, that’s right.”

Mr. Vamia: “Well, how did it come to be busted so often?”

Mr. Perkouri: “Objection, Your Honor, irrelevant and immaterial.”

Mr. Vamia: “Your Honor, the Court has allowed the witness to tell this story. It is only fair that we get to hear all of it. We can’t have an effect without a cause. And the witness’s response will bear directly on the victims’ involvement in this matter.”

Judge: “Overruled. The witness will answer the question.” The judge nodded to the witness who looked at the prosecutor, as if he were confused.

Mr. Vamia: “Come now Mister Truley, you can answer without any help from the prosecutor, can’t you?” [Brief titters rose in the courtroom.]

Mr. Truley: “Course I can.”

Mr. Vamia: “So please then sir, do tell us how the juke came to be busted repeatedly.”

Shrugging, Mr. Truley said, “Well, sometimes the customers’d get a little restless, a little rowdy, ya know?”

Mr. Vamia: “No, I don’t know. Which customers and how rowdy would they get?”

The witness looked to Mr. Perkouri, who remained quiet and motionless as far as Ryz’n could tell. And she had a good view of him, not a dozen feet away.

“Come now, Mister Truley, please tell us. Don’t leave us on tenterhooks.”

Mr. Truley: “Well, it was the Buzzbee Boys done it a couple times, when they got drunk. Somebody’d play a song they didn’t like and they’d smash it up with their hands or a pool cue or pool ball or somethin’.”

Mr. Vamia: “I see. I see. And how many times did this occur?”

Mr. Truley: “Four.”

Mr. Vamia: “*Four times?* Hmm.” He pursed his lips and nodded. “Why four times? Why didn’t you call the police and have those boys arrested for disturbing the peace and destruction of private property after the first time, as the defendant has been?”

He snickered. “Are you kiddin’ me? Why, those boys’d trashed the whole place and tor me a new one.”

[Laughter is cut short by the harsh sound of the judge’s gavel smacking his desk.]

Mr. Vamia: “I see. So you had reason to fear those boys, is that right?”

Mr. Truley: “Sure, me and everybody else in the county. Those boys—

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection, Your Honor. The victims are not on trial here. They're dead. And there's no way, the witness can speculate as to what everyone else in the county thought of them."

Judge: "Sustained."

Mr. Vamia: "But *you* were afraid of these boys, were you not Mr. Truley? Afraid for your person as well as for your property?"

Mr. Truley: "I guesso. And my employees were too, cuz they told me so."

Mr. Vamia: "And why were you so afraid, sir?"

Mr. Truley: "Well, those boys were ex-cons. It's a matter o' public record they'd been in prison for assault and batt'ry and 'ttempted rape. I watched 'em grow up here in the county. Knew they had been out of prison a few months. They warned me they'd trash the place if I called the cops on 'em."

Mr. Vamia: "I see. So you did nothing?"

Mr. Truley: "That's right."

Mr. Vamia: "Wouldn't that serve to encourage them to threaten you in the future?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection, Your Honor—calls for a conclusion."

Judge: "Sustained."

Mr. Vamia: "On the night of the incident that you have related so eloquently to us, did you not offer Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee, as well as the defendant, whiskey on the house when they asked the accused to perform a second number for them?"

Mr. Truley: "Well, I might've."

Mr. Vamia: "Yes, in fact, you served them two free rounds and my client one with a promise of a second round when he finished his second number, did you not?"

Mr. Truley: "Uh, I, I don't remember."

Mr. Vamia: "You don't remember? Yet your memory seemed very clear on so many details a few minutes ago. Can you be a little more forthcoming in your testimony here? Can you tell us the nature of the atmosphere in your bar at the time the Buzzbees approached the accused for another song?"

Mr. Truley: "I don't think I quite follah your drift."

Mr. Vamia: "Are you going to make me draw it out of you bit by bit or will you volunteer pertinent details, as they occurred?"

Mr. Truley: "What do you mean? I tole ya everything already."

Mr. Vamia: "I mean sir, isn't it true that a hush fell over the bar room when these two men, these ex-con Buzzbee brothers, pool cues in hand, approached this sixteen year old boy, the accused, sitting on top of your bar?"

Mr. Truley: "Well, yeah I guess so."

Mr. Vamia: "And isn't it true that the Buzzbees threatened a customer seated at the bar near the accused, one Byron Johnson, who warned Nick to be wary of the Buzzbees?"

Shrugging, Mr. Truley said, "Sure. I guesso."

Mr. Vamia turned to Nick, asking him to stand. When Nick rose, Mr. Vamia asked the witness, "Tell me sir, what do you say my client's height and weight might be?"

Prosecutor: "Objection." — Judge: "Overruled."

"Mister Truley?"

"Oh, I dunno. Guess he's about five-seven or eight, a hundred forty pounds or so, mebbe less."

Mr. Vamia: "I'd say that was a pretty fair estimate. And the Buzzbee boys—how big were they?" The witness shrugged. "I dunno—six-foot, two-ten, two-twenty a piece."

Mr. Vamia: "And when these Buzzbee boys approached Nick, knowing their destructive tendencies, you stepped up to intervene in my client's behalf, did you not?"

Mr. Truley: "Yes sir, I did. I asked 'em to leave 'im alone. I asked 'em a couple o' times. Offered 'em liquor on the house to leave 'im alone."

Mr. Vamia: "Did they—leave him alone?"

Mr. Truley: "Well … no."

Mr. Vamia: "But you gave them the liquor anyway?"

Mr. Truley: "Well, they's already half-loaded. I figured maybe another drink or two'd put 'em over the edge and they'd leave the kid be."

Mr. Vamia: "Did they?" The witness shook his head. "Please speak up Mister Truley."

Mr. Truley: "No sir."

Mr. Vamia: "Well, did anyone else, say one of your employees or any of the other customers, intervene to help the boy?"

Again, the witness shook his head. Mr. Vamia asked him to speak up.

"No sir."

Mr. Vamia: "So no one lifted a finger at any time to help this sixteen-year old boy?"

Mr. Truley: "No sir. Nobody helped him."

Mr. Vamia: "So this boy, the accused, sat alone on the bar, all five feet seven inches and one hundred and forty pounds, of him in a barroom against the two, much larger, ex-convict Buzzbee brothers?" Mr. Truley nodded agreement. "Yes sir. That's right."

Mr. Vamia: "What did the Buzzbees have in their hands at this time?"

Mr. Truley: "Besides their drinks?" Mr. Vamia nodded.

Mr. Truley: "Pool sticks?"

Mr. Vamia: "Yes. Pool sticks, which they used before to smash your juke box. Right?"

Mr. Truley: "Yeah, I guesso."

Mr. Vamia: "Oh, come now Mister Truley. You can do better than guess, can't you?"

Mr. Truley shrugged. "Yeah, they'd used pool sticks to wreck it—both of 'em."

Mr. Vamia: "Did the Buzzbees threaten the defendant? Make insinuating, snide, double-entendre remarks questioning his sexuality, feeling his long hair, and groping his legs and chest, calling him repeatedly by the pronouns, "She" and "It?"

Mr. Truley hung his head, nodding. "Please speak up Mister Truley."

"Yes, they did."

Mr. Vamia: "And what was Nick wearing at the time?"

"Wearin'? Well, not much. He'd come from playin' a ball game and it was pretty hot. He was barefoot, wearin' one of them baseball t-shirts and a pair of tight, white shorts."

Mr. Vamia: "And then the Buzzbees had him stand on top of your bar to perform?"

"Yes sir, they did."

Mr. Vamia: "So then, how do you think the defendant felt at this time?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection, speculative. The defendant is here in court. He may take the stand to state himself how he felt." The judge said, "Sustained."

Mr. Vamia: "Well, let me put it another way. When my client offered to discuss the Buzzbees' sexual advances toward him, and they were sexual advances, were they not?"

Mr. Truley: "Well, it kind of seemed that way to me."

Mr. Vamia: "Yes, it did. And when the defendant offered to go with the men to the rest room to discuss the matter 'in private,' I believe is how you put it or words to that effect, how did *you* feel then?" Mr. Truley looked at Nick and then looked down.

"Well, guess I's relieved we wouldn't have no trouble out in the bar room, at least."

Mr. Vamia: "I see. No further property damage? And when the three of them vanished from view around the corner down the hall to the rest rooms, did you call the police?"

Mr. Truley: "No sir, I didn't." Mr. Vamia shrugged toward the jury. "Why not?"

The witness shrugged again—"I don't know why …well, maybe because I thought Nick'd take care of the matter without makin' no trouble."

Mr. Vamia: "'*Without making no trouble?'* Two ex-cons, whom you, by your own admission, feared, whom you said had served prison time for violent felonies—sex offenses—who towered over the accused, a sixteen-year old boy, who had made sexually suggestive remarks to the boy and who were walking him to the rest room, when no one in the place would lift a finger to help him? And *you didn't think that was trouble enough?* Wasn't sufficient reason to notify the authorities?"

Ryz'n found herself clenching her fists before her, as tears welled in her eyes. Next to her, Mr. Sheeboom seemed to suppress similar emotions. The jury, too, seemed moved.

Mr. Truley: "Well, I, I …"

Mr. Vamia: "And when you heard "a ruckus" I believe is how you put it, on two separate occasions, coming from the rest rooms, did you call the police then? I mean, obviously, there was trouble then, wasn't there?"

Mr. Truley: "Well, I, I …dunno. I …" Mr. Truly cast his eyes down, looking forlorn.

Mr. Vamia: "This was a kid—'*a good kid*'—your words not mine, who 'knew the score,' as you said. One might think that he was a friend of yours who helped you out, helped entertain your customers for you when the juke box was busted. Isn't that so?"

Mr. Truley stammered, "Well, I guess I should have, shoulda called the cops but …"

Mr. Vamia: "But? *But?* But *what?*"

Mr. Truley: "I was scared. We all were. Those Buzzbee boys were bad enough sober, but after they'd had a few snorts, they could be monsters."

"Objection." — "Overruled."

Mr. Vamia: "So you let these two '*monsters*', now after having '*a few snorts,*' take this kid, a supposed friend of yours, into the rest rooms to molest him. Is that correct?"

Mr. Truley: "Well, I dunno. I mean. How could I have stopped 'em? I tried."

Mr. Vamia: "All right, Mister Truley. Now after the ruckuses, when the defendant emerged alone into the barroom, 'shaky,' as you put it, did you speak to each other?"

Mr. Truley: "Yeah, I asked him if he was okay and gave him his cheeseburgers."

Mr. Vamia: "Well, did he reply? What did he say?"

Mr. Truley sighed and said in a low voice, which Ryz'n could barely hear. "He said, 'No thanks to you, Mann and asked if I'd called the cops."

Mr. Vamia: "Louder please, Mister Truley so everyone can hear."

"He spoke up saying, 'No thanks to you, Mann. Did ya call the cops at least?'"

Mr. Vamia: "And you said what, Mr. Truley?"

Mr. Truley: "I said, 'Here your cheeseburgers,' and that I put his harmonica in the bag with the burgers."

Mr. Vamia: "And what did my client do?" Bowing his head, Mr. Truley looked away.

Mr. Vamia leaned in toward him to repeat louder, "He did *what,* Mister Truley?"

Mr. Truley: "He looked at me, spit on the floor and said, 'Gee, thanks.' He, he said I, I shouldn't've asked him to sing, knowin' the Buzzbees was in the place."

Mr. Vamia: "Did the defendant then, or at any time since, ever tell you what happened in the rest rooms?" He shook his head, saying "No sir, he didn't."

Mr. Vamia: "Did you ever ask him?" Again, Mr. Truley said he did not.

"Did either of the Buzzbee boys ever tell you directly what transpired in the rest room with the accused?" Mr. Truley said, "No sir, they didn't."

"Did anyone else tell you?" Mr. Truley shook his head. Then said, "No sir."

Mr. Vamia: "So, you don't know exactly what happened in the rest rooms between my client and the Buzzbee brothers, do you?" Mr. Truley agreed, saying he didn't.

Mr. Vamia: "So, far all you know, they could have slipped and hurt themselves?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection, calls for a conclusion." — Judge: "Sustained."

Mr. Vamia: "All right, all right. Now you said the defendant came out with water on his face, arms and hands and his shirt and shorts appeared wet. Do you think the Buzzbees, one or both of them, could have shoved him into the toilet face first?"

"Objection—"

"Overruled. The question regards possibility not certitude. The witness will answer."

Mr. Truley: "Well, I suppose so. Never really thought about it like that. Could've happened, I guess."

Mr. Vamia shrugged again, asking "So, did you call the police then?"

Mr. Truley: "No. I told ya. I watched Nick go out ta the parkin' lot."

Mr. Vamia: "And why didn't you call the police then?"

Mr. Truley: "I thought it was over."

Mr. Vamia: "But it wasn't over because you testified the Buzzbee boys came out of the bath rooms, "*madder'n hornets.*" I believe those were you exact words—came out swearing and vowing vengeance against the boy, right? So did you call the police then?"

Mr. Truley looked away, ashamed. He said no, he didn't.

"And after my client and his two female companions escaped in the Pontiac convertible as one of the Buzzbees, or both, later sat in your parking lot waiting all night, *did you call the police then?*"

Mr. Truley: "No sir. No need. It was all over."

Mr. Vamia: "Ah, but it wasn't over, was it? As you have testified. The Buzzbees waited in your parking lot all night for my client to return. Did you call the police then?"

Mr. Truley shook his head. "No sir, I didn't."

And when you were awakened at two o'clock in the morning to shouts of cursing and cars peeling out, outside your window, *did you call the police then?*"

Mr. Truley, looking truly defeated and so worn down that Ryz'n almost felt sorry for the man, said, "No sir. I did not."

"And after the two cars had disappeared from sight up the road and you were no longer in any danger, *did you call the police then, sir?"*

Mr. Truley hung his head again, shaking it slowly side to side, saying. "No."

"So what *did* you *do*, Mister Truley?"

Mr. Truley shrugged. "I closed the window and went back to bed."

The courtroom stirred.

Mr. Vamia: "Now, during the time that the accused had left the first time and the Buzzbee boys waited for his return in the parking lot, did you have occasion to supply the Buzzbees with alcoholic beverages?"

Mr. Truley: "Yes sir, I did."

"And what did you give them?"

Mr. Truley: “Sold Alvin a pint o’ Jack Daniels, when he asked for it, while he waited outside by himself. And later, when Arlo came back in the funny car, he asked for a fifth and I give it to him.”

Mr. Vamia: “And you said earlier, they already had appeared somewhat inebriated. As a bar owner and a bartender, who has worked in the road house your entire adult life, you have had occasion to see people become inebriated quite often, have you not?”

Mr. Truley: “Yes sir, I have.”

Mr. Vamia: “So in your expert opinion, would you say those boys were drunk when the defendant returned later that night?”

“Objection.” Mr. Perkouri stood up. “Calls for speculation on the part of the witness. Unless the witness administered a sobiety or Breathalyzer test or had seen and spoken with them at that time, he could not say if the victims were legally inebriated or not.”

“Sustained.”

Mr. Vamia: “I see. If the Court does not choose to consider a bartender of some thirty plus years as a qualified expert on drunkenness, I suppose I must waive the question.”

Judge Higher: “Careful, Counselor. You are treading dangerously close to contempt.”

“I apologize to the Court, Your Honor.” The judge nodded.

Mr. Vamia: “Tell me Mister Truley, how do you feel about the fact that the Buzzbee brothers aren’t around anymore?

Mr. Truley: “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Mr. Vamia: “I mean, how do you feel about their demise—happy? Sad? Indifferent?”

Mr. Perkouri: “Objection Your Honor, speculative, immaterial.”

Judge Higher: “Counselor, can you rephrase your question?”

Mr. Vamia: “All right, let me try it like this. Mister Truley, you said you were afraid to call the police to help the defendant, afraid of what the Buzzbee brothers, Arlo and Alvin, might do to you and your establishment. Are you afraid of them now?”

Mr. Truley: “Well … no.” He seemed bewildered.

“Why not?”

“Well, they’re dead.”

Mr. Vamia: “You said they broke your juke box four times. Is it still broken?”

Mr. Truley: “No sir, I got it replaced.”

Mr. Vamia: “How many times have you replaced it or fixed it since they’ve passed?”

Mr. Perkouri: “Objection, irrelevant and immaterial.”

Judge Higher: “Overruled. The witness will answer the question.”

Mr. Truley: “Well, I haven’t had to. It’s never been broken since. It works fine.”

Mr. Vamia: “So, I take it you don’t have much reason to mourn their passing?”

Judge Higher: “Now you may object, Counselor.”

Mr. Perkouri: “Objection, argumentative.” — “Sustained.”

"So, Mister Truley, do you believe those boys would be alive today to destroy your juke box if you *had* called the police?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Guess I never will."

Mr. Vamia: "Well now Mister Truley, I have just one more question for you then. Have you been fined or prosecuted in any way for selling alcoholic beverages to a minor?"

Mr. Truley sat forward quickly, "Well, I—"

"—Objection, Your Honor." Mr. Perkouri said, "Irrelevant and immaterial."

"Overruled. The witness will answer the question."

Mr. Truley: "Well, yes. Got fined and my license'll be suspended if it happens again."

Mr. Vamia: "But you have remained in operation, unencumbered by the State?"

Mr. Truley: "Yeah, so what? I been fined. I'm on probation."

Mr. Vamia: "No further questions at this time." Mr. Vamia returned to his seat.

The judge asked the prosecutor if "the State wished to re-direct?"

Mr. Perkouri asked Mr. Truley if the State had promised him any favors in return for his testimony. Mr. Truley said no. The prosecutor had no more questions "at this time." The judge ordered Mr. Truly to hold himself available to the Court, but he could go now.

Mr. Truley stood awkwardly. Ryz'n could see he was one shaken bartender. He stepped down and trudged past the attorneys without looking at Nick, down the aisle, out of the room. The judge called for a ten minute recess then exited through the door behind him.

Nick patted Mr. Vamia's forearm. He tousled Nick's hair. Nick's folks reached across the bar rail to congratulate Mr. Vamia on his cross-examination. Ryz'n heard Nick's dad say that he hadn't been sure he had wanted the lawyer to represent Nick but now he was glad the attorney was in Nicky's corner and he had the family's "fullest confidence."

A classy, slender blonde, who Nick had said was one of Mr. Vamia's investigators, came forward to hand Mr. Vamia a note. He read it then thanked her. Ryz'n watched her give the attorney a quick hug. The look in the woman's eye told Ryz'n she was more than just his investigator. It was a look of both pride and love. He winked to the classy blonde who strolled back down the aisle. And he had asked her to come on his boat with him! Right. But Ryz'n was glad. Now he wouldn't bother her anymore about that. She hoped.

Ryz'n leaned forward to pat Nick on the back. She heard him ask Mr. Vamia why the judge had taken a recess so early. Mr. Vamia explained the judge had stage two, nephrogenic diabetes insipidus, damaging his kidneys. The condition forced him to drink a lot of cold water and, in turn, to pee a lot. Now that he mentioned it, Ryz'n had noticed the judge repeatedly sipping on a glass of what she presumed was water.

When the judge returned, the trial resumed.

The State called a couple of witnesses from the road house that night to back up the owner's story. The State called the short-order cook at Truley's and a couple of men who had been customers in the bar at the time of Nick's altercation with the Buzzbees. They

corroborated the owner's testimony. On cross-examination, Mr. Vamia induced them to verify the facts he'd brought out in his interrogation of Mr. Truley. She thought Mr. Vamia made them look as silly and cowardly as he had the bar owner.

All their testimony did was show that Nicky knew how to handle himself in a pinch, even though no one had seen a fight. Ryz'n didn't think the State had gained any ground with those witnesses, but who knew what the jury was thinking? Though she knew what those younger female jurors were thinking, because their eyes kept coming back to Nick repeatedly. And every once in a while, Nicky would spy them eyeing him and curl his lip for them. And they'd smile back. She'd have to speak with him about that.

Mr. Perkouri interviewed a pair of twelve-year old twins. They had filmed the burning wreck outside their grandparent's farmhouse on Old Veer Avenue. They testified to what they'd seen and filmed. The prosecutor made a point of the time the kids were awakened by the sound of the explosion, when the Buzzbee's hot rod funny car blew up catching fire beneath the fallen power transformer, killing them as well as the electricity in the grandparents' farmhouse. Neither they nor their grandparents saw or heard any other vehicle than the wrecked one. They said the clock was stopped at two: twenty-seven.

The prosecutor asked to show the boys' film and have it introduced as evidence for the State. Mr. Vamia objected, arguing that the defense had not refuted the facts concerning the cause of the accident. Thus, he said the film's "probative value was nil," and that showing the film would be "unnecessarily inflammatory and prejudicial to the jury."

The prosecutor argued that the film had been shown repeatedly on a local news station. Therefore, the footage was already "in the public domain" and should be allowed.

Mr. Vamia countered that, while it may have been in the public domain, the jurors in this case had sworn during *voir dire* that they had not seen the film footage and that was one of the reasons the defense had selected them as jurors. Mr. Vamia offered a written motion to back his claim and handed it to Judge Higher. The judge said he had already denied one such pre-trial petition. He added: "The Court is sorely grieved that defense counsel sees fit to raise this issue again." The judge noted lunch was approaching. He recessed until two but called the attorneys to his chambers.

* * *

Ryz'n ate lunch at the nearby diner with Nick, his folks and Mr. Vamia's attractive, slender blonde investigator. Same diner they had visited after Nick's release from jail.

Nick introduced the blonde as Carol Davalone. Ms. Davalone told them her father was also investigating the case for "Frank." Her dad was on the West Coast securing witnesses in Nick's behalf concerning the two murder cases involving Nicki as a material witness last year in Los Angeles. She said that the State had individuals on their witness list from out L.A. that were not favorable to Nick. Ms. Davalone's dad had interviewed them, too. Her dad had passed his observations onto "Frank" for his review. She assured

them Frank was an excellent defense attorney, as they had seen by his "skilled cross" of the road house owner. Ms. Davalone felt certain they would win the case. Her upbeat confidence in Mr. Vamia's defense skills lifted Ryz'n's spirits.

Ryz'n's hopes were dashed later that afternoon. The attorneys from both sides had met with Judge Higher in his chambers. Ryz'n could tell from Mr. Vamia's face that the judge's ruling had not gone their way. The judge allowed the prosecution to introduce the twins' film into evidence as State Exhibit A, based on the public domain argument, overruling Mr. Vamia's objection. Mr. Vamia stood up, claiming "Exception" very loudly, whatever that meant. And the judge replied, "Noted." No more was said about the matter. Then the State showed the gruesome film.

Ryz'n had to turn away to keep from getting sick right there in the courtroom. With the truck roof sheared off, the sight of the Buzzbees on their sides, heads ablaze inside their flaming hot rod led the young, white female juror to excuse herself. But she lost her lunch before she made it through the side door to the jury room. The judge recessed court until ten the next morning because arraignments were due to be held at eight.

Mr. Vamia was mad as heck, demanding a mistrial. After the judge and jury exited the courtroom, he lambasted the prosecutor for such cheap sensationalism. Perkouri blithely retorted that all was "fair in love and war." Standing nearby, listening, Nick's dad lurched at the prosecutor. Mr. Vamia held him back just in time. Mr. Sheeboom claimed long and loudly that this wasn't about 'love or war' but "about a boy's life." Ryz'n watched the blood drain from the prosecutor's face. He narrowly escaped a close call. By the time a court officer could arrive, Mr. Sheeboom had calmed down. He was smoothing back strands of his wavy, dark hair that had come loose during his lunge.

Ryz'n noted reporters lingering near the court entrance, scribbling furiously on notepads while a janitor cleaned up the juror's vomit. Nerves were frayed. This thing was really heating up. She could scarcely believe what she was seeing—adults acting like children, while a kid was being tried as an adult. The drama was more like a TV movie.

Nick put his arm around his dad as did Nick's mom, to calm him down. Mr. Vamia assured them that the film and the juror's nauseous reaction could work in their favor on appeal, if it came to that. But he was confident they would win the case right here in circuit court. He added the juror's negative reaction might well backfire on the State, too. He said he had a good feeling about this jury. He felt certain the most of them were favorable to Nick, saying, it only took one juror voting not guilty to hang a jury.

"That young woman might be so incensed by what she saw, by the prosecution's inflammatory tactics, she might vote to acquit on general principles alone."

Nick's dad apologized for losing his cool. He promised it wouldn't happen again. Ryz'n asked to drive Nicky home. His Dad said, "Sure Doll. Drive safely."

~ Chapter 18: The State's Case, Day Two ~

The next morning Ryz'n was seated in the courtroom by a quarter past ten. She sat behind Nicky with his folks again. She had had a busy morning already. She had helped Nick deliver his newspapers then driven Sheena to school. She'd ducked into Homeroom to count herself as present and ducked out after to run some errands. She refilled her Dramamine prescription and her gas tank. The Monza had needed water, oil and a new windshield wiper. But after getting caught in a bit of traffic, she'd flown down the highway against rush hour commuters. Long-running morning arraignments had forced the trial to open fifteen minutes late. She just made the opening gavel.

Mr. Vamia cross-examined the twins. He got the boys to admit their grandparents kept their clocks set ten minutes ahead of the true time, implying the real time the power would have been cut off was at two: seventeen, rather than two: twenty-seven. Ryz'n didn't know why those ten minutes were so important. She figured Mr. Vamia had his reasons for what he did. After the way he had cross-examined Mr. Truley, she didn't figure she should question any device of his.

The rest of the morning, Mr. Perkouri called witnesses from the county's sheriff and fire departments who had responded to the scene of the accident. The State first called an Officer Joseph Kopmann to the stand.

The officer said he was a private first class in the R.G. County police force. He was working out of the Clairton sub-station when a dispatcher from the Oxen Mill station radioed to report a car on fire down at "dead man's curve" just off Old Veer Avenue. The accident occurred about a mile from the sub-station just south of Pistataway Creek. Responding to the call, he testified that he and Officer Dodgett were first on the scene. They arrived several minutes ahead of the Aachen Voluntary Fire Department.

Officer Kopmann testified he could see bodies burning in the front seat of the truck, which was turned on its side next to and under a downed power transformer beneath an embankment. Because the fire was out of control, he and Officer Dodgett could do nothing to save the victims. In fact, the victims appeared to be dead already. On fire, they made no sound or movement. Downed power lines whipped about, sparking dangerously. Officer Kopmann called into the station on the car radio, asking the dispatcher to notify PEPCO to turn off the power in the area. He also asked for a police photographer.

The prosecutor introduced the still, black and white photographs of the accident as State Exhibits B through K. Mr. Vamia objected, claiming that after viewing the news footage, the photos were "redundant and prejudicial." But the judge overruled him again.

Officer Kopmann said he and Dodgett were able to identify Arlo Buzzbee from documents found in his melted wallet after the fire was put out. The victims' heads, upper bodies, right sides and feet were badly burned. Arlo's left side, leg and buttock were not burned so much, where he rested against the seat and driver's door next to the ground. That's why Arlo's driver's license, retrieved from the wallet in his left, back pocket, though somewhat melted into a plastic cover, was legible enough to identify him.

On cross-examination, Mr. Vamia established that Kopmann and fellow officer Dodgett initially reported a one-car, not a two-car, accident. And that they had claimed excessive speed on a wet road as the cause of the wreck. The officer also admitted that he had found fragments of a charred Jack Daniels whiskey bottle among the wreckage.

Ryz'n wondered why Mr. Vamia hadn't produced the initial accident report as evidence, since the State had not. The prosecutor had introduced the photos but not the report. But she figured Mr. Vamia knew what he was doing.

The Aachen volunteer fire crew chief and two of his crew described the accident scene. They verified the film footage and the twins' testimony. They said when the fire crew arrived, two police officers were on the scene directing traffic. The smoldering victims were deceased. Due to the live wires sparking around the wreckage and the fact that the victims were already dead, the crew had waited until PEPCO turned off the power before they doused the wreckage below the embankment with their water hoses, quenching the flames. The fire was not in danger of spreading. They confirmed the Buzzbees were dead when crew members pulled their corpses from the wreck. They removed their bodies via an ambulance. Mr. Vamia objected only when Mr. Perkouri persisted in asking each member of the responding fire crew, if any of them had "ever witnessed a more gruesome wreck" than that of the Buzzbee boys. The judge overruled all of Mr. Vamia's objections.

An accident expert from the County, a Mr. Black, testified. He surveyed the scene about a month after the accident. Mr. Black said, "Due to the wet road at the time of the incident, the numerous skid marks on the road at that location, some more recent than others, and the fact that the final resting point of the defendant's car was unmarked, it would be impossible to identify pertinent tire marks."

Mr. Vamia asked if the expert knew there were two eyewitnesses to the accident, other than the defendant, and if either one of them had "walked or ridden the accident scene" with him to help in recreating the accident or in identifying tire marks. Mr. Black replied he knew of only one eyewitness besides the defendant. He testified her memory as to exact locations of the cars on the road that stormy night "were nebulous at best." He said she had told him this was due to the fact that she had sat in the back seat. Mr. Black confirmed that Patricia Ann Slater was that eyewitness.

Mr. Perkouri also called the Buzzbee's mother to the stand to identify the distributor cap and wires Nick had ripped from the truck. She said those were the wires she had

found in the bed of her son's messed up pick-up truck. The prosecutor introduced the cap and wires as State's evidence. Ryz'n thought that was kind of unnecessary. And besides—like that old lady knew one set of distributor wires from another? Sure, right.

Mr. Vamia had no questions for her but he did offer his "sincere condolences on the loss of your sons." Mr. Vamia did seem quite sincere but the old lady merely nodded in return before she trundled sadly away. He assisted her through the railing gate.

Ryz'n thought Mr. Vamia could have asked her about her sons' troubled past to show what kind of low-lifes they truly were, but he didn't question the mother at all. The body language of some of the older members of the jury seemed to indicate their empathy for the old woman. Ryz'n did not view that as a good sign. Maybe, why she had been called.

A little before noon, Mr. Perkouri called Patricia Ann Slater to the stand.

Ryz'n had learned from the grapevine at school (and not from Nick, who wouldn't speak about the case) that Patti and Terri Schieffer had been with Nicky in the car that night. Besides him, they were the only two eyewitnesses. The young twin photographers had filmed only the aftermath. She felt the fact that the State, rather than Mr. Vamia, called Patti to testify did not bode well for Nicky.

Ryz'n had known Patti since they had been sophomores at Pocomoke. She and Patti had been on friendly terms until the start of the school year, when Patti had become distant and formal with her. They took Spanish and Home Ec. together. They also shared Homeroom, what with her being the last of the "R's" and Patti being in the middle of the "S's" like Nick. They also ate the last lunch period. But Patti never sat at her table, as she had in past years. In fact, Patti seemed to do her best to avoid Ryz'n whenever she could. Neither Patti nor Terri talked about the case, having been warned not to.

Mr. Vamia suggested they adjourn for lunch but the judge said he thought they could hear the witness, "before our tummies start to rumble."

After the bailiff swore her in, Mr. Perkouri interviewed Patti asking her, as he did all the witnesses, to state her name, age, address, occupation, and to identify Nick and tell how she knew him. Patti was sporting that trendy, shag hair-style she had adopted over the summer. Ryz'n thought the cut looked cute on her. She noted Nicky had asked her not to cut her hair. He liked it long—to her shoulders. And she liked that he liked it that way.

Patti said she was seventeen and a student at Pocomoke. She'd gone to school with Nicky since seventh grade at Studdard Junior High. They had attended a few classes together during those years though not many. They had been in the same Homeroom all three years in high school, explaining high school in the county included grades ten through twelve while junior high was seven through nine. Aside from Homeroom, the only class Patti had with Nicky this year was Physics. Although Patti indicated Nicky had a special arrangement where he took tests in her Problems of Democracy (P.O.D.) class

fourth period, but didn't attend class. Patti said Nick took another class fourth period with "all the smart kids—a math class."

Then Mr. Perkouri started to get personal, asking if Patti had known Nick at all outside of the classroom. She said she had watched him help Pocomoke win the baseball, state championship game. She also knew him from his band *Good Rockin' Tonight (GRT),* because they had performed at a few of Pocomoke's school dances, including last year's junior prom. Then the prosecutor asked her if she had "gotten to know the defendant in a more close and personal way?" Ryz'n leaned forward. She wanted to hear this.

"Yes. At the end of school last year, we started seeing each other socially."

Mr. Perkouri asked Patti if she were with Nick on the night of June 29th and at the time of the accident in the wee hours of June 30th. When Patti said she was, he asked her to relate, in her own words, what happened that night starting with when she had first seen Nicky that evening. Ryz'n moved up on the edge of her seat. The jury perked up, too.

"Well, as I said, I had started to, sort of, date the defendant. I was working as summertime help as an assistant bookkeeper at the county health clinic in T.C. The defendant worked just around the corner about a mile down the road for his brother at the Outdoor Living Centre. So he used to take me to and from work sometimes. That day, the twenty-ninth, was a Monday I believe. He took me to work and stopped by afterwards to pick us up, so Terri—"

Mr. Perkouri: "Excuse me, Miss Slater. But who is Terri?"

"Oh yes—Terri Schieffer. She's a classmate of mine at Pocomoke. She also worked at the clinic as sort of a nurse's aid, phlebotomist and receptionist. She was with us."

"Very good, Miss Schieffer then. [He nods to her.] Please go on with your testimony."

Sure. Well, Miss Schieffer took him, the defendant that is, to a ball game he was playing for his summer league team that evening over in Tobacco Creek. I had to work late since the annual budget was due the next day. Well, not the next day but the day after that— the First. The ball field was several miles west of T.C. from where we worked at the clinic. Miss Schieffer dropped him, the defendant, off at the ball park. Then came back ta pick me up a little before eight, around seven-thirty, to go watch the end of Nick—the defendant's—game. We saw him strike out the side in the last inning. Then we all went back to T.C.—to Truley's—to get some cheeseburgers. Good thing too, cuz I was famished. Hadn't eaten since lunch and it was past eight-thirty.

The boy at the Drive-Thru took our orders and sold Nick—I mean the defendant—a six-pack of Miller's, which we drank in the front parking lot while we waited for the cheeseburgers. We drank beer and listened to music on the car radio for a while, fifteen minutes or so. And then the defendant went in to pick up the burgers. He came out about a minute later to tell us they—uh see, that the burgers, I mean—weren't ready yet. Needed another few minutes. Which kind o'

made me mad cuz I was starving. Hadn't had anything except a candy bar since lunch. And I was used to eating at six.

Mr. Perkouri: "What time was it when the defendant went inside to get the burgers?"

"Oh, before nine. The sun had just gone down, so it was like twilight, almost dark, getting close to nine o'clock, I guess. I don't know exactly. Only know I was starving."

Mr. Perkouri told Patti to go on.

Well, we waited and waited and he didn't come out. My stomach was growling. Finally, he did come out. About a quarter after nine, I guess. Came out all flustered-like. He motioned for Ter—Miss Schieffer—to pull the car around to a blue pickup truck. Dropped the burgers with us and then tore some wires out from under the hood of the truck and tossed 'em in the back—the truck bed, that is. Then he went inside the cab and did something, couldn't tell what exactly. It was just dark now and the door—the driver's door to the pick-up was open, blocking my view. Then, Ni—the defendant, that is, hopped into the back seat. Well, we peeled out when a couple guys looked like good old boys came out o' the place, yellin' and cussin' and shaking their fists at us.

We stopped at the light, watchin' 'em try to get into their truck. But one guy fell out onto the other guy and they started fighting. We started laughing. They looked like Laurel and Hardy or the Three Stooges. Make that the Two Stooges.

Anyway, they got back in the truck when the defendant yelled at them. But, of course, it wouldn't start cuz Nicky had torn out those wires.

They got real mad then and took out after us on foot. When they got close, we peeled out through the red light towards Woldorn. And the two guys came running behind us and almost got run over by a dump truck coming through the intersection behind them. They dove to either side of the road to keep from getting hit while we kept going on down to Woldorn.

Nick—I mean, the defendant—said he didn't feel like going swimming then, cuz that's what we were supposed to do after we ate—go swimmin' at a place he knew about near La Placa. So we decided to go to the Range Drive-In to watch a Steve McQueen triple feature they had playin' there. We finished off the burgers and beer there. After a while though, me and Terri fell asleep and then Nick—I mean—the defendant woke us up to go home—

Mr. Perkouri: "And what time was this?"

Patti: "A little before two. Maybe quarter of—about that."

Mr. Perkouri: "So, after the show, you left the drive-in and—"

"Objection, leading."

Judge Higher: "How is the question leading, Mister Vamia?"

"The prosecutor said, 'So after the show,' indicating the show was over but the witness did not state that the show was, in fact over."

Judge Higher: "And the relevance of this is?"

"It plays into the timeline Your Honor. The third feature that night was "The Blob" and defense can produce a witness from the Drive-In, the projectionist, to testify that the movie ended about two-oh-two. And the credits ran a couple minutes after that. Perhaps the State could ask the witness if the show was over when she left the drive-in."

Judge Higher: "Overruled. If you think it that important, you can establish the ending time of the movie on cross. The witness may continue." He nodded for Patti to resume.

Well, Ni—the defendant drove us up the road towards home. We had to stop at the red light at T.C. there by Truley's. That's when we saw this hot rod, pickup truck, kind of a souped-up deal in the front lot there where we had been earlier.

Two guys in the car started yelling and cussing at us and revved their motor. We took off across the intersection, headin' up Old Veer Avenue with them on our tail. We shook 'em off when the—the defendant—dodged up this old farm lane and turned off his lights.

They went flyin' past us up the road. We waited until we saw their lights disappear up around the far bend. And then the defendant turned around and drove us back the other way, the way we had come. But after we turned the other corner back towards T.C., back the way we'd come, he stopped to turn the car around again and wait. Was stormin' real bad by this time. And I asked him what he was doing, when we could get away. He said he was following a hunch. We waited for a few minutes when we started up and turned that bend for the third time, the second time headed back up Old Veer. We spotted this car comin' around the far bend back towards us, about a mile and half off I guess.

The defendant started driving that way, when the other car flashed its lights and came at us. We sped up a little but they came right for us. At the last instant, Nick turned on his lights and pumped them twice. Both cars swerved to the left.

We skidded back and forth, ending up half off the road, pointed down towards this field. Think it was a corn field but I'm not certain on that. Then we watched back to our left, as this other car that had come at us, lost control and skidded off the highway into this power pole. The pole snapped and the transformer fell on the car. Well, a small truck actually, which had landed on its side—driver's side that is, on the ground below the road there.

There's kind of a steep bank there down off the road at that corner, see?

Well, the sparks from the broken transformer must have ignited some leaking gas or something because the whole thing exploded in a matter of seconds. We sat, watching the car and them boys in there burn for a couple minutes until we skee-daddled. I thought we were going home, but Terri—Miss Schieffer—convinced, uh—the defendant to turn around and go down Veer—the highway, 5A that is—back to T.C. Back around to the accident. Traffic cops stopped us there. Made us turn around. So we did. And the defendant brought me home.

Mr. Perkouri: "And what time was this? What time did you arrive home?"

Patti: "Well, about three because we, that is the defendant and I, talked on my front porch for a minute or two. When I got inside, I remember the clock said four minutes after three. I remember because I was supposed to have been home by twelve-thirty, one o'clock at the latest. And I knew I'd be in trouble the next day for bein' so late."

Mr. Perkouri: "Very good Miss Slater. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions to sort of fill in some blanks, if you don't mind?"

"No sir, I don't mind."

Mr. Perkouri: "Now you can positively identify the men who ran after you earlier that evening at the road house as the same two who pursued you in a different car later that night and were then killed when the transformer exploded on top of their car. Correct?"

"Yes sir. They were the same ones. Big old boys—burly, with shaggy, red hair and beards, wearin' ball caps. Kind of hard to forget. Kind of scary, ya know?"

Mr. Perkouri: "All right. Now when you ducked up the farm lane to hide from them, were the lights to the defendant's car on at that time?"

"They were until we got up the hill a ways closer to the farm house. Ni—the defendant—turned them off then to hide us and ta not disturb the folks livin' there."

Mr. Perkouri: "And when did he turn the lights back on?"

Patti looked at Nick, swallowing hard. Seemed to Ryz'n as if Patti was afraid, almost like a mouse caught in a trap.

"Well, just before we swerved outta the way of the car comin' at us."

Mr. Perkouri: "Did you say anything to the defendant about the lights before that?"

"Yes, I told him he should turn 'em back on so we could see but he said he could see in the dark. Then we got inta an argument about whether he could see in the dark or not."

Mr. Perkouri: "All right. And did you say anything else to him at this time?"

"Yes sir. When he turned back around to wait for them, I told him we should get the heck outta there before they came back and spotted us."

Mr. Perkouri: "So, you all thought they were coming back and the defendant was waiting for them?"

Mr. Vamia: "Objection, calls for speculation, Your Honor. The witness can only speak for herself and not the other two persons in the car."

"Sustained."

Mr. Perkouri: "Very well. Now Miss Slater, *you* thought the defendant had turned around to wait for the other car to return, did you not?"

"Yes. I said we should 'blow this place' and when he didn't, we got into an argument."

Mr. Perkouri: "So what happened then?"

"Well, we waited in the dark and we started prayin'."

Mr. Perkouri: "So you sat there in the dark, lights off, in this terrible storm, waiting and praying?" The prosecutor glanced toward the jury and back.

"Yes sir, that's what we did."

The prosecutor paused to look at the jury again before returning to Patti.

"Now when you spotted the other vehicle coming towards you and you were moving toward them, towards their headlights, did you say or do anything?"

"Yes sir, I did."

Mr. Perkouri: "And what was that?"

"Well, I had climbed inta the back to put a seat belt on. The defendant had asked me to, on account o' the front seat didn't have a center belt. So I did."

Mr. Perkouri: "Did the defendant say anything else to you about why you needed to climb in the back and wear a seat belt?"

"Well, he said Miss Schieffer was already buckled in up front and he said, he said: 'It's nasty now. Could get rough, Baby. I can just feel it.' That's exactly what he said."

Mr. Perkouri: "He said, it *could get rough Baby* and he could *just feel it*? Is that right?"

"Yes sir. Those were his words."

The prosecutor paused to look at the jury again.

Mr. Perkouri: "So the defendant knew something bad was about to happen?"

"Ye—"

Mr. Vamia: "Objection, calls for a conclusion." Judge Higher: "Sustained."

Mr. Perkouri: "Well, Miss Slater, did *you* feel something bad was about to happen?"

"Object—." Judge: "Overruled.

Patti looked from the judge back to the prosecutor. "Well, sure I was scared. I started prayin'. I told 'em all I cared about was turnin' that car around and gettin' on home."

Mr. Perkouri: "Did the defendant heed your advice?"

Patti glanced at Nicky. She appeared anxious—antsy. "Well, no sir."

Mr. Perkouri: "The defendant sat, waiting in the stormy dark of night with his lights off. And you felt something bad would happen? So much so that you began to pray?"

Patti all frightened like a mouse again, looked at Nicky and gulped. "Yes sir."

"And then what *did* happen? What did the defendant do and what did you do?"

"Well, he started inchin' the car forward around the bend. Then we saw the headlights of the other car roundin' the far bend and headin' for us. I was scared, so I screamed. I yelled: '*No, don't play chicken with 'em, Nick. I don't wanna die*.' Then Terr—Miss Schieffer turned around from the front and slapped me hard on the thigh."

Mr. Perkouri: "And what did you do then?"

"I shut up and started cryin' sort of quiet-like and prayed some more."

Mr. Perkouri: "So you feared for your life at that point because you thought the defendant was going to, how did you put it? '*Play chicken with them*?'"

Patti nodded. "Yes sir, I did."

"And you cried, praying for your life at that time, sitting by yourself in the back seat?"

"Yes sir."

Mr. Perkouri: "Did the defendant, in fact, '*play chicken' with the oncoming car*?"

Patti: "Well, they came right for us and we kept straight at them. Then the defendant turned on his lights. We both chickened at the same time, turning left at the last instant and I screamed and hid my head."

Mr. Perkouri: "Did you do anything else?" Patti got red. She looked down, "Well, I—I peed my pants some but I didn't say anything about that."

"Well, that's an understandable reaction under the circumstances. You thought you were going to die or the persons driving toward you might die, isn't that right?"

Patti nodded. "Yes sir." Again, the prosecutor paused to glance at the jury.

Returning to Patti, he said: "Now later on, just after the accident, you had some discussions with the defendant about what had just happened and what to do next?"

Patti agreed. The prosecutor asked if she could be more specific about what she said.

"Well, I watched them boys' heads fryin' and said it was the most gruesome sight I'd ever seen and that maybe we should go, cuz there's nothing we could do for 'em now."

Mr. Perkouri: "Was that all?"

"Well, I thought we were going home then. That's how we were headed. But Miss Schieffer talked him into going back to the accident. When Nicky—I mean when the defendant—got out to Veer—5A—he turned back towards T.C., Miss Schieffer asked me if I didn't think we were doin' the right thing ta go back and I said …" Patti sniffled.

Mr. Perkouri: "And you said what, Miss Slater?"

Sniffling, Patti looked at Nicky. She asked for a minute to collect herself. After a minute, she seemed to calm down. The prosecutor repeated his question.

"Well, I asked if that was our story, because, because I said—I said, the defendant 'had turned around and laid for 'em back there like, like …" She started sobbing again.

The prosecutor asked if he could approach the witness. Judge Higher said he could. Perkouri pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to hand to Patti. She blew her nose and dried her eyes with it. Then he said, "Please Miss Slater, I know this is difficult for you, but your testimony on this point is crucial. Just be honest. Tell us what you said then."

"I know. I know. But I don't want to hurt Nicky. I don't."

Patti began to bawl into the handkerchief. Mr. Perkouri threw up his hands to the judge. Judge Higher said he would give Patti another minute to compose herself. They waited while Patti blew her nose and whimpered some more.

Nick stood up, blocking Ryz'n's view of Patti saying, "It's okay, Patti. Go ahead and tell 'em. Jes' tell the truth. It'll be okay. I don't mind. G'ahead. It be all right. I promise." His tone was kind and pleading.

The judge banged his gavel: "The defendant will sit and be quiet."

Mr. Vamia seized Nick by his suit cuff, pulling him down into his chair. Ryz'n glanced at the jury, who seemed baffled by Nick's actions. But Patti seemed to take heart from them. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes once more saying, "Okay, Nicky."

Turning to Mr. Perkouri, she said, "I said that I thought he 'had waited for 'em back there like Crazy Horse and the Indians had waited for Custer at the Little Big Horn.'"

The jury gasped almost as one. Ryz'n shook her head—*incredible, just incredible.*

Mr. Perkouri said that he had no further questions. He thanked Patti for her "forthright, courageous and illuminating testimony." He let Patti keep his kerchief.

Judge Higher said that since it was almost twenty minutes past noon, they would break for lunch. The defense could cross-examine the witness after lunch at one-thirty.

Mr. Vamia objected that he should be allowed to cross-examine the witness now while her testimony was fresh in everyone's mind, especially the witness's. But the judge overruled him, citing the same excuse he used after the State had given their opening argument, saying that everyone "would have clearer heads, be less distracted and more attentive after a full meal." The judge said the court reporter could read back any portion of Patti's statement the defense thought pertinent to refresh their minds.

Mr. Vamia replied it was for that very reason that he had suggested that the Court hear Patti's eyewitness testimony after lunch. He objected to the judge's decision as being prejudicial against the defense regarding, "this key eyewitness testimony." He voiced another "Exception," which, again, the judge "Noted." Then court recessed for lunch.

After the judge exited, the prosecutor said something that angered Mr. Vamia.

* * *

Ryz'n ate at the diner again across the street with Nick, his folks, Mr. Vamia and Carol Davalone. The State's prosecution team ate there as well, at a table not quite twenty feet away. Mr. Vamia whispered his negative opinions of the judge's handling of the case but Nick's dad voiced his thoughts loud enough for the prosecutor to hear. Mr. Vamia also whispered that after court adjourned, the State's Attorney told him he had added her mom's name to the State's witness list. He said Mr. Perkouri would call her mom, since he had agreed not to use her. Probably, he would have her mom testify that Ryz'n was pregnant by Nick. He said the prosecutor was "a worse weasel" than he had figured. Mr. Vamia added that between Mr. Perkouri and the judge, they were doing a real number on Nick. He reiterated their actions would provide solid grounds for an appeal if one were needed, but he thought—hoped "the jury would see right through their shameless tactics."

Then Nick said something that struck Ryz'n as strange. He asked Mr. Vamia not to be too hard on Patti, not only because he thought it wouldn't play well with the jury for him to beat up on her, but also because he didn't want her to suffer any more than she had to.

They all looked at Nick as if he were crazy. Mr. Vamia said Nick could count on him to do what was in his best interests. Nick did suggest that Mr.Vamia should get Patti to admit that he had called the police from the 7-11. Mr. Vamia said he could count on that.

As they were leaving, Mr. Vamia pulled Nick and her aside.

"Ryz'n, I think Nick would like to speak with you alone for a minute before we go back to court." Nick sighed.

Mr. Vamia, Ms. Davalone and Nick's folks walked across the street and up towards the courthouse. Nick escorted her from the diner, stopping out on the sidewalk.

"Look Baby, Mister Vamia's gotta ask Patti some personal questions."

Nick looked into her eyes, kind of searching-like, darting back and forth with his own.

"So?"

Nick grimaced. "Well, see, me and Patti sort o'—well—made it there last summer."

She blinked. "When?"

"Just before I went up to O.C. for the Fourth."

She sighed. "So that was *before* we got together then?"

"Oh sure, absolutely, '*before*,' you bet." She turned her head to look sideways at him. "And you haven't fooled with her since?" Nick seemed almost to beg. "No Baby, honest. Haven't laid a finger on her since." He simpered. She shrugged, saying "All right, you better hadn't. If I find out, you been foolin' around on me, I'll, I'll …"

"What?"

She paused. "I dunno. But I'll think of something. And you won't like it."

Nick said okay. But as they walked back to the courthouse, arm in arm, she could not think of what she could do to Nicky if he had betrayed her. She couldn't dump him, even if she wanted to, being pregnant with his baby. And she couldn't threaten to cut him off from turtle-doving because they already had cut themselves off when Father Vizconni said they must. That is, if they wanted to get married in the Church.

She thought at worst she could give him the silent treatment until the wedding. But that would be like abandoning him in his time of need. She hoped Nicky had been faithful so she wouldn't have to come up with something. She loved him so much that she might forego a wounded pride to cling to him anyway. But if he had broken the pledge they'd made to each other at the beaver ponds that night, she'd have to rethink everything. She feared she could never trust him again. That's no way to start a marriage.

* * *

When Court reconvened, Mr. Vamia rose from his chair, and walked around in front of the defendant's table to cross-examine Patti. He said he hoped she was feeling better after her "emotional ordeal." He asked if he may call her "Patti" instead of Miss Slater, noting to Judge Higher that Patti, like Nicky, was under eighteen, as if that meant something.

Ryz'n thought Mr. Vamia was being pretty friendly considering Patti had just about sunk Nicky with her testimony. The judge nodded.

"So Patti, tell us what the weather was like before and during the accident."

"Oh well, it was terrible. Just pouring down rain in buckets. Some thunder, too."

"I see. So when the accused asked you to climb into the back of his car to put on a seat belt, saying, '*it's nasty now*', you knew that he was referring to the nasty weather and the treacherous road conditions brought about by that weather, did you not?"

Patti nodded. "Yes sir. I did."

"So then, it was prudent of him to ask you to 'buckle up—for safety'—as we say?"

"Yes sir. It was."

"Good. Now Patti, just before the accident, you were buckled up and seated in the back of the Pontiac, were you not?"

"Yes sir."

"And from your position there in back, you could see the speedometer, couldn't you?"

"Well, not at first, not until he, the defendant that is, not until he turned the dashboard lights back on."

"Of course. And when he did turn the lights back on, tell us how fast he was driving."

"When I saw it, it was between thirty-five and forty. In the middle there, somewhere."

"So he would have been driving at a speed of say, thirty-seven, thirty-eight miles per hour, just prior to swerving out of the way of the Buzzbee's oncoming vehicle, right?"

"Yes sir."

"And the speed limit there is what? Do you know?"

Patti thought for a second. "I think it's forty-five."

"So he was driving seven to eight miles per hour under the speed limit. Correct?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"And how was my client driving?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, was he swerving from side to side? Was he stopping and starting? Doing anything irregular?"

"No—well—he pumped his hi-beams after he turned his lights on."

"I see. But would you say he drove recklessly in anyway or was he driving safely?"

"Well, he was in control of the car if that's what you mean. So I guess you could say he was driving safely, under the speed limit and all, considering the storm—sure. But those Buzzbee boys were coming right for us."

"So. The accused *was* driving safely?"

"Now that I think about it, I mean when you put it like that, yes sir, he was."

Mr. Vamia paused to look at the jury for a couple seconds, before he returned his attention to Patti.

"Good. Now you say, '*Those Buzzbee boys were coming right for us.'* Correct?"

"Yes sir. That's right."

"What lane were they in?"

"Well, at first they were in their lane, but then they crossed over right for us."

Mr. Vamia eyed the jury: "Crossed over into your lane, to come straight for you?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection. Asked and answered." Jude Higher: "Sustained."

"Okay. Now Patti, after the accident, did you suggest anything to the accused?"

Patti: "I dunno. I might have. What do you mean?"

"I mean, when you watched the burning wreckage, didn't you tell my client to leave the scene?" Patti hesitated. "Well, I-I guess so. We were all scared."

"Of course you were. That was a natural reaction, was it not? Because you were scared? To leave the scene, I mean?" Patti nodded. "Yes sir, it was."

"Now Patti, in your testimony, you failed to mention something. Something my client did after you told him to leave the scene of the accident but before you all returned to it. Can you tell us about that?"

"You mean when he stopped to call the police?"

"Yes, that's what I mean. So you knew about that. Why didn't you mention it before?"

"Well, he told me not to."

Mr. Vamia: "*He?* He, who?"

"Him." Patti pointed to the prosecution table, seating the prosecutor and his assistant.

Mr. Vamia: "Which '*him*'?

"Why—Mister Perkouri. He said to let you bring it up, if you wanted to."

Mr. Vamia grinned. "Oh, *he* did, did he?"

Patti nodded. "Yes sir." Perkouri sat unfazed.

Pursing his mouth and arching his brows, Mr. Vamia asked, "So Patti, tell us what the *interim* State's Attorney didn't want you to tell us under oath. If you please."

"Sure. Well, the accused stopped at this Seven-Eleven store there a mile or so from the accident, just the other side of the creek to use the pay phone to call the cops."

"Why did he do that?"

"Well, he wanted to tell them about the accident. Where it was, you know, and that the Buzzbees were in the wreck, burning. Probably dead already."

Mr. Vamia: "I see. And did he tell them that?"

"Well, I only heard his side of the conversation but it sounded to me as if he did. Yes."

"And what was his attitude when he hung up the phone to return to the car?"

"Well, he was mad, mad at the person he had spoken with."

"And why was that?"

"Well, he said the cop had asked him what the pole number was. You know? Of the power pole that snapped in two when that car ran off the road into it? He was mad the

guy would ask him that because he didn't know the pole number. I remember him saying, 'Who would know something like that anyway?' He said that he told the officer where the accident was as best as he could. Just south of the creek, there on Old Veer."

Mr. Vamia: "I see. And after he hung up and returned to the car, did you or Terri say anything to him?" Patti shrugged. "Like what?"

"Well, didn't Miss Schieffer suggest that my client return to the accident scene, but you said that he had done his bit by calling the police and he should take you home?"

Patti blinked. "Well, yes. I think I did say something like that. But Nicky didn't listen to me. He listened to her, and drove us back to the accident—the long way."

Mr. Vamia: "And the officer directing traffic there told my client, what?

"To turn around and leave or he'd give Nicky a ticket."

"Even though my client tried to tell him that he was involved in the accident. Right?"

Patti nodded. "Yes sir. That's right."

"Now Patti. You mentioned the accused bought a six-pack—of Miller's I believe you said—at the road house. And you drank beer from when? Eight-thirty or so to when?"

"About nine-thirty or so, when we finished them off at the drive-in."

"Nine-thirty? That would have been almost five hours before the accident, is that right?" Patti pondered a minute before she concurred saying, "I believe so."

Mr. Vamia: "And how many beers did you have?"

"Two."

"And how many did the accused have?"

"Two. We all had two a piece. See Nick—I mean the accused—said it was only fair that we should share them evenly."

"You each drank two in an hour? Of course. So you thought of my client as fair?"

"Why sure. He was more than fair. It's understood when you go on a date with the—the defendant—he won't let you pay for anything and he shares fair and square."

Mr. Vamia: "Now, you mentioned another person was in the car with you. That would be Miss Terri Schieffer, another classmate of yours, also not yet eighteen?"

"Yes sir, that's ritght."

"What was your understanding of her part in all this?"

"Well, I'm not sure what you mean?"

"Well, you told us that you and my client were 'sort of dating' at this time. Was she 'sort of dating' him as well? Were you both *sharing him fair and square*, too?"

Patti frowned. "No sir, of course not. Not then, anyway."

"I see, so how did you view her part—Terri's part—in all this? Were you good friends with her? Was the accused? How did she come to be on the date with both of you?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection Your Honor, irrelevant and immaterial."

Mr. Vamia: "Your Honor, the State is intent on proving my client's motive for his actions that night. The motive for this witness's testimony in behalf of the State needs to be fully explored in order to thoroughly understand my client's motives."

"Overruled. You may proceed, Counselor. The witness will answer. Go ahead, Miss."

Patti: "Well, at the end of school, the last day, Nicky talked to us—me and Terri, that is— in Homeroom about maybe getting together over the summer. You see, he had just lost two girlfriends in as many weeks and he said he was looking to have a fun summer and not get too bogged down with any one girl. So, Terri and me volunteered to help him out. Just kind of as a fun thing, you know? Nothing serious. I'd broken up with my boyfriend after the prom, so I was free and hopin' to find a friend for the summer, too." Vamia nodded. "And what about Terri, was she free too?"

"Well, I didn't think so. She had a boyfriend named Gary who had just graduated and joined the Navy. He was in basic training at the time. They had been going together all through high school."

Mr. Vamia: "I see. How was it that she came along on your date with the defendant?"

"Well, like I said. We all knew each other from school. Homeroom mostly, since we were in different programs. And we ended up working together at the clinic, Terri and me, that is. Just kind of coincidence, I guess. And Ni—the defendant—just worked a mile or so away. But she and the defendant had more classes together than he and I did."

Mr. Vamia: "So, were you and Terri good friends?"

"Not exactly. More like good acquaintances. We didn't have many classes together."

Mr. Perkouri: "Your Honor, I'm afraid the State must object for relevance."

The judge asked, "Mister Vamia, where are you going with this?"

"Your Honor, the relationship among the three people in the car that night is crucial to our defense. Other than my client, the two young women in the car with him are the only eyewitnesses to the accident. I'm trying to establish how this witness saw things at that time and since, so the Court members may get a better overall picture of the dynamics at play in the car at the time of the accident."

The judge overruled the objection, bidding Mr. Vamia to proceed.

Mr. Perkouri: "Exception." Judge: — "Noted."

Mr. Vamia: "Now Patti, how did you view Terri's presence on your date with my client? Were you happy she was along?"

Patti squirmed a little. "Well, not really. I knew she and the defendant had talked some before. They were in a lot of classes together with all the smart kids."

Mr. Vamia: "By smart kids, you mean students who are in the college preparatory program at Pocomoke while you are in the business curriculum. Is that right?"

"Yes sir, that's exactly what I mean. I figured they knew each other better. And maybe it would be a good idea to have Terri along, to sort of make things easier, smooth the way, ya might say. But she *was* kind of a third wheel, too."

Mr. Vamia: "I see. So you didn't think she was in competition with you for my client's affections because she had a long-term, steady boyfriend?"

"Yes sir, not then. We'd gotten along pretty well together since school let out, with him taking us back and forth to work and all. We had lunch together sometimes, too. All three of us, I mean. That is, when he wasn't out with a crew installin' swimmin' pools."

Mr. Vamia: "But this was the first true date at night you all had together?"

"You mean, just the three of us?" Mr. Vamia nodded. "Yes. Yes sir. It was."

Mr. Vamia: "Now you stated that you were to eat carry-out from the road house and then go swimming down somewhere near La Placa, is that right? And you were to be home by twelve-thirty? One at the latest, right?"

"Yes sir." Mr. Vamia: "Was that all there was to it?"

Patti blinked, furrowing her brow. "I'm not sure what you mean. We were going to eat and go swimming afterwards. Sure."

Mr. Vamia: "Yes, I know. Had you brought a towel and swimming suit with you?"

"Well no, Nick—the defendant—said he had some towels and a blanket in the trunk."

"Did he have a swimsuit for you too, or perhaps you were wearing it under your clothes?" Patti hesitated. "Well, uh, no I wasn't." Patti looked aside.

"Patti, wasn't it understood that you were to go skinny-dipping at some isolated ponds the defendant knew of near La Placa?" Patti dropped her head. "Yes sir."

Ryz'n thought—that devil! So the beaver ponds aren't our special place, after all? She edged forward in her seat.

Mr. Vamia: "Did the other girl Terri have a swimsuit?" Patti nodded. "Yes sir. She was wearing it under her clothes." Mr. Vamia: "But you were not, were you?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection. Asked and answered."

"Sustained."

Taking a deep breath, Mr. Vamia stepped backwards to half-sit, half-lean against the defendant's table with his hands at his sides, resting on the table's edge, supporting him.

Mr. Vamia: "Patti. Isn't it true that over the course of the evening, the accused and Terri seemed to form an attachment that made you jealous?"

Patti looked at Nick but didn't respond.

"Were you disappointed not to go skinny-dipping with the defendant?" Patti shrugged.

"Well, I kind of … was and I kind of wasn't."

"How's that?"

"Well, I didn't know if I could go through with it. Especially, if Terri wasn't going to. That's probably the main reason I wanted her to come along. See, I guess, I'd do

whatever she did. Either way, I figured I wouldn't need a suit. Actually, I didn't know what I was going to do. If she wore a suit then I'd just swim in my underwear. I guess I was disappointed in one way, but glad in another. Kind of relieved, you might say."

Mr. Vamia: "Now, at the drive-in, didn't you go to the rest room and the concession stand leaving Terri alone with my client in his car?" Patti replied, "Yes sir."

Mr. Vamia: "And you were gone quite a while due to the long lines even though it was a Monday, this being the first night of the Steve McQueen triple feature?"

"Yes sir. They only had one attendant at the stand. Guess they didn't figure on such a crowd, seein' how it was a Monday."

"I see. And how long were you gone?"

"Oh, about half an hour I guess, maybe a little more. The lines were long."

"Were you concerned about leaving my client and Terri alone together that long?"

"Well, I kind of was, but Terri had asked me to pick up some candy for her at the concession stand and, like I said, the lines *were* long, so yes—that bothered me."

Mr. Vamia: "Later, after the accident, didn't the accused ask if you two girls were all right? And when Terri said she was and thanked him for asking her, she patted him on the shoulder and you got angry?"

"What? *After the accident?* I thought we were talking about the drive-in?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I'm referring to after the accident now. Do you recall what you said?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Didn't you mimic Terri, saying *'Thanks for asking'* and then you said, "'Sounds like you two are scum-sucking in love all of a sudden. What happened while I was at the restroom anyway?' "'*Scum-sucking in love.*' Believe that was the phrase. Hard phrase to forget, isn't it?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection. Irrelevant and immaterial."

Judge: "Overruled. The witness will answer the question."

Patti seemed flustered. She kind of fumbled over her words, reluctantly admitting she might have said something like that. Mr. Vamia asked if, after Nicky brought her home that night after the accident and was talking with her alone on her porch, if he hadn't asked her to go skinny-dipping with him the next night and hadn't Patti said she'd go if Terri wouldn't be coming. Patti agreed that was true.

Mr. Vamia: "And did you go skinny-dipping the next night with the accused?"

"Well—no, I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I had to work late again, to finish the budget. Besides, it rained hard that night, too."

Mr. Vamia: "After that hard rain, the next day at work with Terri, didn't you find out that she had spent the previous night with the accused in his car?"

Ryz'n perked up. Nick had never said anything about this.

"Well, Terri said they had gotten stuck in the mud that night and when Ni—the, the accused—tried to get out to see what he could do to free the car, he slipped on the wet grass and fell and hurt his head. He knocked himself out on the pavement. Terri said she helped him back into the car but then they fell asleep. Didn't wake up till morning."

Mr. Vamia: "Did you contact the accused the day after Terri told you of this incident?"

"Yes, I did. At lunch, the next day."

"And what happened as a result of that contact?"

"We went swimming in the pool that night at the Outdoor Living Centre."

"The Outdoor Living Centre is where my client works for his brother. Is that right?"

"Yes sir."

"So you and my client went swimming there?"

Patti nodded. "Yes sir. That's right. In the above ground display pool."

"Did you tell Nick you were upset with him being alone with Terri the previous night?"

"Yes sir."

"And did you ask him to prove to you that you, and not Terri, was going to be his girl for the summer?" Patti—sheepish, hanging her head, mumbled "Yes. I did."

Mr. Vamia: "Did you two go skinny-dipping there at that time?"

Still hanging her head, Patti paused then replied, "Yes sir."

"And did he prove his affection to you at that time?" Patti hesitated then looked up.

"Well—well …Yes sir, he … he did." Mr. Vamia: "How did he prove it?"

Patti looked up straight at Nick. She swallowed. "Well …We—we were intimate."

A collective gasp escaped the courtroom, followed by a loud hush. Ryz'n sat back, shaking and lowering her head. Even though Nick had forewarned her of this revelation, hearing it from Patti on the stand in public like this still struck her hard.

Mr. Vamia: "Now Patti, the next day, my client left to go to the beach for the Fourth of July holiday weekend but you did not go with him. Why not?" (Ryz'n looked up.)

"My family had other plans."

Mr. Vamia: "Did you see him when he came back?"

"No, I called him but he wasn't home. I left messages but he didn't call me back all that week. He didn't drive me to work."

Mr. Vamia: "Did that make you angry?" Patti flushed, nearly yelling, "You bet it did!"

"Did you see the accused after that?"

"I tried to. But he'd stopped driving me to work. I went to his work place but his brother said he was out with a crew installing swimming pools. I tried to see him all that week in the evening but he was never home. He was out playin' ball or 'with friends,' his mom said. I finally caught up to him that Saturday when he was eatin' dinner with his folks. They were kind enough to invite me in to have dessert with them. Afterwards, he took me for a ride. He told me he was with Ryzanna Ryan now. Said they had liked each

other all last year and when she broke up with her ex the week before down at the beach, they had started seeing each other—him and Ryz'n—I mean. They still are. He said he was sorry things turned out bad for me, but said he really cared for her—Ryz'n—a lot.

Mr. Vamia: "How did that make you feel?"

Patti started to sniffle again. "I was hurt. I thought we could have been together a while, like a real couple, ya know? I thought—after we did it ya know—that we'd be together at least for the summer." Patti raised her chin defiantly, looking up at Nicky.

"We would have been good together, too. Had a lotta fun." Her lips formed into a pout.

Mr. Vamia: "So you were angry with him?"

"Yes. I was." Mr. Vamia pushed off the table to stand. He raised his voice.

"And do you think you've evened the score now?" Mr. Vamia's tone had turned bitter.

Patti blinked. "What?" She seemed confused.

Mr. Perkouri objected: "Argumentative." Judge: — "Sustained."

Mr. Vamia: "No more questions at this time, Your Honor." He sat down.

The judge asked if the State wanted to redirect. Mr. Perkouri said he did.

The prosecutor asked Patti if she knew if Nicky had identified himself to police, either when he had phoned the police or returned to the scene to talk with the traffic cop. Patti said she thought he had given the policeman on the phone his first name. But she never heard him give his full name to either policeman, either on the phone or at the scene.

Mr. Perkouri: "So throughout, he remained an anonymous tipster, you might say?"

"Well, I guess you could say that. I never really thought about it much."

Mr. Perkouri: "And while you said that the defendant drove safely before the accident, do you think it was safe of him to turn around and head back in the direction the Buzzbees had gone when he could have escaped without any further trouble?"

Patti looked right at Nick. "Well, uh … no. I wish he hadn't turned back around. Wish none of this would've ever happened."

Mr. Perkouri: "Of course. I'm sure we all do, especially Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee."

Patti nodded. The prosecutor glanced toward the jury before he re-addressed Patti.

"Now Miss Slater, you have told the truth, have you not, even at the expense of embarrassing yourself with intimate details of your personnel life?" Patti said she had.

"Have you done this out of spite or jealousy or because you have sought to do your duty as a responsible citizen?" Patti hesitated, biting her tongue.

"Well, at first, last summer, when you talked to me about testifying I thought it might serve him right. But now, I wish you hadn't asked me. I don't want Nicky to be hurt."

"So in spite of everything, you still hold tender feelings for the defendant, despite the way he used you, and you have testified anyway because it was your duty and you have told the truth, have you not?"

"Yes sir, that's true. I have." The prosecutor nodded and smiled.

"Very well. Thank you Miss Slater for having the courage to step forward to do the right thing. I have no further questions." The judge said she could go.

Patti was still shaking and sniffling a bit. She tried to stand but fell back into the witness chair before she could rise. She seemed to be pretty shook up.

Mr. Vamia stood. "If it pleases the Court, Your Honor, the defense may wish to recall Miss Slater, so we'd appreciate it if she would hold herself available to the Court."

Judge Higher: "The witness will hold herself so available. You may step down."

Patti stumbled down off the witness stand. She paused in front of Nick at the defense table to whisper just loud enough for Ryz'n to hear that she was "sorry."

Nick told her, "It's okay, Patti. Don't worry about a thing." Ryz'n felt like reaching over the bar and bopping him a good one. Patti tucked her chin before she hurried away.

Ryz'n understood now why Patti had been so distant with her since school had started. Watching the jury's reaction, she didn't know what to make of them. They seemed bewildered but taken aback at the same time by Nick's behavior—standing up—encouraging Patti like that. Appeared to her, the younger women looked at Nicky a bit harshly now. She was worried, unsure if Mr. Vamia's cross-examination had succeeded.

The prosecutor called Detective Sergeant Peter Colombo.

Her eyes followed the detective as he shuffled down the aisle to the witness stand. The guy reminded her of the famous TV detective. After he took the oath, he said Nick was "a smart-aleck punk, spoiled rich kid who tried to play the system by coming in of his own free will." He said Nick wouldn't cooperate. "Never mentioned he'd been drinking alcoholic beverages. Clammed up when we asked why he turned around on the road when he could have fled. Said he didn't want us to notify his folks."

On cross-examination, Mr. Vamia brought out that Colombo had roughed Nick up in the interrogation room and would have smacked him, had another officer not stepped between them. Though it was obvious he did not want to, Colombo also admitted that Nick had cooperated by answering all but two of the detectives' questions, before he was read his rights. When he left the stand, Ryz'n thought the detective might have looked like the TV Colombo but he sure didn't act like him. The prosecutor did not redirect.

Instead, he stood up to announce that he had no more witnesses to call regarding the accident itself or the altercation at the road house but, "if it pleased the Court," he would like to call some witnesses "who could testify as to the defendant's character. They will provide insight into the defendant's mindset and substantiate his motive for inexplicably turning the car around and waiting for the victims as 'the Indians had waited for Custer.'"

Mr. Vamia objected but, to no surprise for her, Judge Higher overruled him. After the usual noted exception deal, he warned Mr. Vamia against objecting to this ruling for every character witness the State produced to establish motive, lest he be cited with contempt of court. Shaking his head, Mr. Vamia tossed his pencil down but said nothing.

Mr. Perkouri called a witness who had been a Deputy Sheriff in Topanga, California at the time of the Ransom Clan murders a year ago last August. He testified Nick had been part of the Ransom Clan. That was ridiculous. Ryz'n knew, and of course everyone in school knew, Nick had been a material witness at that big trial in L. A. last year. It was in all the papers, on the nightly news, too. He had been a big man on campus for a while. So big, he had to get away to London over the holidays. But she listened with interest at what this character on the stand had to say about Nicky.

He testified Nick was suspected of partaking in the nationally infamous, heinous plot to kill a half dozen innocent people in their sleep in the hills northwest of Hollywood. He said the District Attorney for Los Angles County had turned Nick into a State's witness—"You know—to keep from having a tangled case, so the State could zero in on the other suspects who got convicted of murder." The judge overruled Mr. Vamia's objection for speculation, due to "the witness's personal and professional knowledge of the case."

To convince this guy to testify truthfully on cross-examination, Mr. Vamia threatened to call the man's current and former county supervisors. Mr. Vamia coerced the man into disclosing that he no longer worked for the local sheriff. He'd left that job a year ago, just after the Ransom Clan murders. He'd transferred to work for the county as a dog-catcher.

When Mr. Vamia asked if the man hadn't lost his job as deputy due to his failure to heed Nick's warnings about the Clan before the gruesome murders, the guy shot back that he had changed jobs voluntarily because "I found I prefer animals to people."

Under Mr. Vamia's prodding, the witness admitted receiving paid "administrative leave" from L. A. County for his absence to testify against Nick. While, at the same time, he was receiving financial compensation for meals, lodging and travel expenses from the State of Maryland. He dismounted the stand angry and shaken. She guessed the creep probably figured Mr. Vamia hadn't known about him. The guy never knew that Carol Davalone's father had dug up the dirt on him during his West Coast investigation.

Same thing happened with a couple of hippie girls, formerly of the Ransom Clan. They had the gall to testify that Nick was actually *in* on the Clan murders, even though the trial in L.A. proved he wasn't. They even claimed Nicky planned the entire heinous atrocities in exchange for obtaining sexual favors from them.

On cross-examination, Mr. Vamia asked if they knew the penalty for perjury in Maryland. They said they didn't know and didn't care. They admitted their devotion and adoration for Harley Ransom, the leader of the Clan. They were salivating to expound the virtues of their noble, false prophet. They said they wanted to take his place in jail.

Ryz'n knew Ransom as the self-appointed, apocalyptic leader of the Clan, whose bizarre visions had led him to mastermind the notorious and heinous multiple murders over a year ago in West Lost Angeles. The two girls freely admitted that they were proud of their association with Ransom. Mr. Vamia pointed out to them the record of that trial indicated Nicky was not a suspect, but instead, had been a material witness in the case.

They asserted strongly that the court record was a lie. That Nick, and not Ransom, had been the true mastermind behind the gruesome murders. And that Nicky had turned State's evidence to save his own skin. To Ryz'n, those girls clearly were deranged. She hoped the jury could see that. Mr. Vamia could do nothing further with them. Each of them left the witness stand, chanting, "Free Harley. Free Harley. He's no State's Ransom." Officers escorted each of them from court after their testimony. Ryz'n couldn't believe the jury could take them seriously. Those girls made the State look foolish, though they did tie Nicky in with the Clan just before those gruesome murders occurred.

Later, after having set the table with R-J's and Brandi's testimony, the prosecutor had Pocomoke's principal Mr. Marant testify that he had placed Miss Bucksalter on probation over R-J's accusations. Then Mr. Perkouri called Miss Bucksalter to testify.

Ryz'n was anxious for Nick as well as for herself. She had been worried that day after they had left the principal's office together. The way Miss Bucksalter acted had been so very queer. So sadly kind to Nick, yet so guilty like a martyr herself, walking away silently with her head bowed. And it bothered her the way Miss Bucksalter avoided eye contact with her if they happened to pass in the halls. Same as Patti had done.

Ryz'n turned around to face the closed double doors to the courtroom. Where was she? What would she say? Why was it taking Miss Bucksalter so long? Maybe she skipped?

The large, double doors behind Ryz'n opened to reveal the young teacher, all prim and proper in her typical French bun. She wore a navy blazer with the college crest over the heart and a matching, pleated skirt, pressed and hemmed above the knees and an ice blue blouse. A purse, clasped in her hands before her, covered her loins. Could there be some symbolism in that? Some kind of foreshadowing, as the teacher had taught her and her classmates in American Lit.? Her golden head was bowed just as Ryz'n recalled her that day outside the principal's office, like a lamb before the slaughter.

Miss Bucksalter approached the divider rail, cool, young and lovely. She lifted her head to look at—at Nicky! At no one but Nicky. The handsome teacher strolled stiffly through the gate to the witness stand. Her eyes left Nick only to focus on the bailiff. Placing her hand on the Bible, she swore to tell the whole truth and nothing but.

She took the stand, all prim and proper but icy cold. Ryz'n believed she could feel the woman's chill from the witness stand fifteen feet away. The teacher possessed the perfect posture that Ryz'n recalled from class. She stared straight ahead, hands folded primly with the same icy reserve and cold formality with which she had taught class all last year.

The prosecutor rose to repeat all the familiar initial questions. Miss Bucksalter identified herself, gave her address in Kargo and occupation as a junior grade English teacher and class sponsor at Pocomoke. She said she was twenty-six, which surprised Ryz'n, being a couple years older than Ryz'n thought. The teacher replied that yes she was a recent divorcée. She identified Nick for the court. Said she knew him as a student in her third period American Literature class last year.

Mr. Perkouri asked if she knew Nicky socially. The judge overruled Mr. Vamia's objection, receiving another admonishment for his trouble.

Miss Bucksalter said she had invited Nicky to her home after the last day of school to thank him for toting her belongings down to her car after the last bell.

When the prosecutor asked why she would do that, she said she wanted to make it up to Nick for the mean way she had treated him in class during the school year.

Mr. Perkouri got her to admit she had embraced Nick the day before, after school in her classroom. But she denied french-kissing him as R-J had testified. Ryz'n was glad now that she and Nick's folks had persuaded the prosecutor to leave her out of this. She worried for her mom though, whom Perkouri had added to the State's witness list.

Then the prosecutor got down to it.

"Miss Bucksalter: Two of your former students testified in this courtroom just minutes ago that you took the defendant and his bicycle, which he loaded into the trunk of your car, to your home where you two spent at least at an hour together. And your principal Mr. Marant said he had placed you on probation for your actions. And, when the two students left, neither you nor the defendant had emerged from your townhome. Were you, in fact, alone in your home with the defendant then?"

Miss Bucksalter, maintaining her icy reserve, stared straight ahead, looking at no one. It appeared to Ryz'n, she looked over the prosecutor's head to the back of the room. The teacher said, "Yes sir, I was." He asked, "What were you two doing all that time?"

"I fixed him lunch. We ate and talked. Of American Literature and baseball, mostly."

Mr. Perkouri: "For how long?"

"Oh, I don't know. Most of the afternoon I guess. I had him home by five."

"So you spent all afternoon alone with the defendant, your student, in your home?"

"Yes sir, I did."

Mr. Perkouri: "You saw nothing inappropriate or improper in your behavior? You, a young female teacher, a recent divorcée, alone with a male student in the privacy of your home all that time?"

"I was more concerned with the inappropriate behavior I had displayed to him in class all year. We had had a running feud, engaged in a battle of wills you might say, all year during class. I was ashamed for my part in it. I should have known better. I was more to

blame actually, because I was the adult. I should have known better. I was happy to have the opportunity to make amends, to get to know him better and he, me."

"Very well. And was this the only occasion in which you saw him socially, alone?"

The teacher turned to look the prosecutor in the eye replying, "Yes sir, it was." Then she looked over his head again. He seemed to be taken aback. He asked her to repeat her answer, which she did, ignoring him as before. Mr. Perkouri became angry.

"Your Honor, the witness flatly contradicts her deposition. Permission to approach."

"You may approach." The prosecutor moved up to stand before the witness box.

"Miss Bucksalter, do you know the penalty for perjury in this state carries a maximum sentence of ten years imprisonment?"

Miss Bucksalter looked him in the eye. "No sir. I did not know it was that severe."

"Well, you may be certain that it is severe. It *must be severe*. Perjured testimony strikes at the foundation, the very heart, of our legal system of trial by jury. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir, I do."

"Now I put it to you again. Did you have other social contact with the defendant?"

Mr. Vamia objected: "Asked and answered—twice," but the judge overruled him.

Again, looking coldly at the prosecutor, she said, "No, not in the way you suggest."

"You mean to sit here now and tell me you never had improper sexual relations with the defendant when you told me during our interview two weeks ago that you—"

"Objection, asked and answered," said Mr. Vamia. "Sustained," replied Judge Higher

Perkouri threw his hands in the air. "But Your Honor, this is preposterous! This witness told me of her—her repeated illicit, inappropriate, I dare say—*scandalous*—liaisons with the defendant, a former student, in her own home! This—"

Mr. Vamia leaped up, shouting: "Your Honor, the defense objects and requests the prosecutor's statement and redundant questions be stricken from the record."

Judge: "Overruled." Mr. Vamia: "Exception."

Judge: — "Noted. And you, Counselor, take your seat." Mr. Vamia sat down.

Mr. Perkouri: "Your Honor the State asks to treat Miss Bucksalter as a hostile witness."

Judge: "Permission granted."

Mr. Perkouri got into Miss Bucksalter's face.

"How can you say this now madam, after what you told me? How can you? Perhaps you believe the defendant will not testify in his own behalf, leaving no other witness to your philandering indiscretions? But I assure you the State can charge you with perjury and subpoena him to testify against you. Are you aware of that Miss Bucksalter?"

Her lips parted. She stared at Perkouri before her. Her icy reserve cracked for a second. Ryz'n could tell the prosecutor had startled her with his threat. If it was clear to her, it must be clear to everyone else. The jury members also appeared to be shocked. Miss Bucksalter closed her mouth, looking towards Mr. Vamia, who stood up once more.

"Objection Your Honor. If Counsel for the State is going to threaten his own witness, he should at least get the law right. He knows my client cannot be compelled to testify against himself."

"Defense has a valid point there, Counselor," Judge Higher replied.

Perkouri seemed to regain his calm. He said, "I can see that you were not aware of that penalty Miss Bucksalter. I ask you again to tell us about your affair with the defendant."

The courtroom was so quiet that Ryz'n could hear people breathing around her. Miss Bucksalter dropped her head and, it seemed to Ryz'n, her pride. The teacher was going to spill what Ryz'n had suspected all along, what she had feared but had not wanted to admit to herself. Then Miss Bucksalter looked straight at Nick.

She paused. "I never had an affair with the defendant, the way you put it—'improper, inappropriate, philandering indiscretions, *illicit—scandalous*, sexual liaisons with the defendant in my home.' Not in the way you think."

"Not in the way I think? *Not in the way I think?* No. But in the way, you told me. Explain yourself. For you were very clear to me previously. Dare I say, you were very explicit even, in detailing your illicit behavior with him in the privacy of your home?"

Miss Bucksalter turned her attention from Perkouri to Nick, focusing solely on him.

"He is a good boy, a fine student and someone I feel I can call a friend, despite the difference in our ages and our student-teacher relationship."

Fully recovered, Miss Bucksalter held her chin high now. Ryz'n felt the ice again. Believed she saw icicles dripping from the teacher's words frozen in mid air. The courtroom didn't need an air conditioner today. Not with Miss Bucksalter on the stand.

"He befriended me after my divorce was final, when I was at as low a point as I have ever been in my life. I did see him a couple times after that. We went to dinner once, as I recall, at a restaurant not far from my home. But there was nothing—improper in it. I—"

"But you told me—"

"Let me finish Mister Prosecutor. You asked me to explain, so let me finish." Mr. Perkouri backed down, while Miss Bucksalter returned her focus to Nick.

"This boy Nicholas reminded me a great deal of the boy I once had fallen in love with—my ex-husband. What I told you during our interview was—were—my, my wishes—my imaginings if you will, of dreams lost but resurrected though unrequited—hoped for possibly—to be fulfilled in this boy, of happier times when I had first fallen in love with my husband in college. My confession to you was just that a confession, an unburdening of my soul over the guilt I felt for what I had thought—projected, onto this boy—of all the illicit, improper, inappropriate thoughts I had of Nicholas—the things I confessed to you. I freely admit to this. And if such thoughts are enough to cost me my job, so be it. I can tell you I even went so far as to invite Nicholas to come and visit me up on the Cape at my summer rental home. But, to his great credit, he never came."

She smiled at Nick, tilting her head.

"He never did and it was for the best—for both of us." She sighed. "My wounds have healed now. I am whole again. I am strong again. This boy helped me."

The teacher refocused on the prosecutor.

"And if you wish to try me for perjury and subpoena this boy to testify against me, that is your prerogative. But you would be wasting the taxpayer's money and the Court's time. For he knows what we did and what we did not do, whether it was improper or illicit, scandalous or not. And he will tell you no different, can tell you no different.

"When I spoke with you before, in my mind, I wore my imaginary scarlet *A* upon my chest as shamefully as Hester Prynne did initially. But, like her, I have come to wear it proudly now. In my mind, Nicholas and I did nothing improper or illicit except to befriend one another when school was out. And we could forget for a brief while how ugly we had behaved toward one another when he had been my student and I, his teacher." She turned back to Perkouri. "So Mister Prosecutor, you may do your worst."

Mr. Perkouri was flabbergasted. Tongue-tied, he muttered that he wished she'd made all this clear to him previously, to avoid wasting the Court's time. She apologized.

When Mr. Vamia declined to question her, the judge dismissed her saying she was free to go. Miss Bucksalter stood, ramrod straight, stepped down and strode out of the courtroom, pausing only briefly to smile at Nicky. Once more, she reminded Ryz'n of Julie Christie walking away at the end of *Dr. Zhivago*, after she'd been unable to locate her missing daughter. Had Miss Bucksalter told the truth, or given a performance worthy of an academy award? One, which her film double might envy?

Judge Higher called for a fifteen minute recess. Ryz'n figured he had to pee again. She charged through the milling crowd, out of the building, hoping to catch up to her former teacher. She reached the teacher just as she was pulling out of a metered parking spot on a side street. Miss Bucksalter stopped to roll down her window and greet her with a friendly smile.

"Why Ryz'n. How are you? Were you in the courtroom? I don't believe I saw you."

She nodded. "Yes ma'am, I was sitting right behind Nicky with his parents."

"Oh, I guess I missed you then."

Standing by the teacher's green Dodge Swinger half out of its parking spot, Ryz'n fumbled with her fingers.

"So. I guess you heard my testimony?"

"Yes ma'am, I did." Ryz'n looked down at the pavement.

"Well, I hope it puts your mind at ease. I've had the sense that you might have been worried about Nicholas and me—our past relationship, I mean. You know, after seeing us together in the classroom that time?"

Ryz'n looked up. "Well, to be honest, I was." Miss Bucksalter pursed a weary smile.

"Well, you have nothing to worry about from me, I assure you. Nicholas is all yours."

Her smile broadened, as she extended her hand through the opened window. "Friends?"

Ryz'n nodded, shaking her hand to echo, "Friends."

Winking, the teacher bobbed her head, as a car came down the lane looking to park in the spot she was vacating. The on-coming driver tooted his horn.

"Better scoot. Bye Ryz'n." Ryz'n stepped back, waving good-bye.

She watched as her former ideal, female role model pulled into the street, driving away, not sure what to think. She did feel better about her though. Maybe the teacher wasn't her ideal anymore but maybe "friends," as she had said, was good enough. The impatient driver behind them tooted his horn again, making her jump. Ryz'n walked back to the courthouse, noting for the first time the beauty of the balmy, Indian summer day.

* * *

The rest of the day was spent hearing testimony against Nicky from their classmates. Seemed to her every guy who had ever picked a fight with Nick testified how mean and vicious Nicky was. Mr. Vamia had each of them state their heights and weights at the time of the fights and asked them to estimate Nick's, as he had with Mr. Truley. Mr. Vamia made each witness look like a bully, which, in her opinion, they were. They all claimed Nicky knew martial arts, which gave him an edge. And that he was ruthless.

R.C. Cantwell told about his fistfight with Nicky in ninth grade during Gym class, when he was several inches taller and maybe twenty to thirty pounds heavier than Nick. On cross, R.C. admitted their fight started after he had thrown a softball into Nick's face from ten feet away. R.C. alleged that Nick provoked him by ordering him to quit stalling and pitch the ball. Mr. Vamia induced R.C. to explain that the bell was about to ring, with Nick due to lead-off after the side was retired. Nick merely wanted to get his ups before class ended. Cantwell confessed this took place when Nicky had just come off eleven months of restricted physical activity due to suffering from Rheumatic Fever. R.C. also admitted he'd gotten into a fistfight with almost every "friend," he had at one time or other. She thought, at least R.C. had been honest.

Stan Steinmetz, who stood over six feet and weighed two hundred pounds, had fought Nick behind the school in tenth grade after baseball practice. Stan said he had just been "foolin' around" when he had taken Nick's ball cap and thrown it onto the school roof. Claimed Nick took it all wrong. Mr. Vamia made Stan admit that Nick had beaten Stan out for center-field on the jayvee baseball team before they had fought. Then Steinmetz testified to his brief bout with Nick on the Ocean City fishing pier on the Fourth of July.

Ryz'n had witnessed that fight. She had been with Don at the time, and what seemed like half of Pocomoke's junior class, which had been enjoying the holiday weekend at the Maryland beach resort. Stan swore Nick had started the fight when he had kissed Allena—Matt Yike's girlfriend and Ryz'n's neighbor and ex-best friend— there on the

pier. But that wasn't what happened. She had seen the whole thing. It was Lena who had kissed Nicky, not the other way around.

Nicky had been with Li'l Mo then. Mo was vacationing at her folk's rental place several miles north in Rehobeth, Delaware. Matt sucker-punched Nick after Allena had kissed him. Nick used his knowledge of judo to turn Matt's aggression against him to get Matt off balance and toss him off the pier as if Matt were a sack of potatoes. Then Stan clobbered Nicky from behind. Nick gave Stan the same heave-ho treatment he'd given Matt. Stan's sucker blow, so soon after Matt's, had knocked Nick kind of goofy.

Though wobbly on his feet, Nicky managed to stay upright, joking with bystanders that the trouble with those boys—as they floated in the ocean below—was that "they were all wet." Everyone had laughed but she could see Nicky was hurt. She wanted to go to him but Don had stopped her. As she recalled, Nicky had leaned on Li'l Mo, who helped him around the corner. She and Don and several others had watched them each buy a pair of wrap-around shades so Nick could hide his wounds. Somehow, Nicky managed to perform later that night with his band down at that Irish pub on the Boardwalk.

When Stan balked on the stand, Mr. Vamia wrestled the truth out of him just as Ryz'n recalled it. Of course, he first had to threaten to call a horde of other witnesses, their classmates mostly, to say what really happened. Stan left the prosecutor shaking and scratching his head. Seemed to her as if every witness the State called against Nick turned into an unexpected land mine. Seemed as if the State's strategy of trying to slander Nicky was backfiring. From the jurors' faces, she figured they thought so, too.

Onlookers had stopped most of Nick's fights before they had gotten too one-sided. But not his fight with Matt Yikes behind the school after an away baseball game last spring. She had heard no one intervened that time. Nick had beaten the much larger Matt to a pulp. Matt testified that he went to the hospital with bruised ribs and a broken nose. Not to mention facial cuts requiring stitches. Matt was six-two, two-ten at the time. Like Steinmetz before him, Matt testified similarly to the fistfight they had with Nick over the Fourth of July weekend on the Ocean City pier.

The judge adjourned for the day in the middle of Matt's testimony. Mr. Perkouri said he had more questions. But since it was after five, the judge claimed the State's questions could wait until Monday. He admonished the prosecutor that he might want to reconsider questioning Matt further, as the State's "character witnesses" thus far hadn't been helping the State's case much.

On their walk to the parking lot, Mr. Vamia told her, Nick and his folks that he couldn't believe the judge had made that statement in open court like that. He said, usually such a comment would have been reserved for the judge's chambers. From the way Mr. Perkouri had argued with one of his assistants on their way out the door, she believed Mr. Vamia was right. Ryz'n was feeling confident about Nick's chances again.

* * *

The weekend was to be a pleasant relief from the drama of the courtroom for both her and Nicky. The only fly in the ointment was Sheena.

Sheena was supposed to collect school assignments for her and keep mum about her absences from class. But, when they were clearing the table after dinner, Sheena let slip that Ryz'n would have to call Steve Gasch or somebody to get her P.O.D. assignment because Sheena hadn't gotten around to it. Ryz'n thought Steve Gasch? He wouldn't know himself. Steve was cute and a great guy but he wasn't exactly a fountain of thirst for book knowledge. Sheena had spoken loud enough for their Dad to hear when he sat in his chair to smoke his after-dinner pipe and read the newspaper. He wanted to know why she had failed to get her own assignment. Sheena shot her a coy grin before she ducked into the kitchen with some dirty dishes, hiding behind the shut-swinging kitchen door.

"Dad? Can we talk about this tomorrow? I really need to get cleaned up. I promised Nick's dad I'd get Nicky to our gig and back. He's counting on me to make sure Nicky stays out of trouble tonight."

"*Nick's* dad?!" Her dad lowered the paper to his lap. "What am I? *Chopped liver?* Why am I the last one to know what's going on around here? Am I just some dumb schmuck who pays the bills? Is that it?"

"No Dad, I thought mom told you. We're playing Pax-Nav tonight. It's a big break for us. It's a pub down there at the Rec. Center. Supposed to be a really cool place, right there where the river and the Bay come together. Very romantic."

"*Romantic?* Hell's bells! You've had enough *ro-mantic* by the water. Now what's this about Sheena not getting your assignment? Why can't you get your own assignment?"

Sheena traipsed through the dining room into the living room past them, stopping at the linen closet in the bedroom hallway.

"Stay out of that bathroom Sheena. I need to take a shower." Ryz'n shot her sister an evil eye. Sheena replied, "Me, too. Bryson's coming by and we're goin' to a show."

"Sheena, now you hold on," said their dad.

Sheena stopped at the entrance to the bedroom hallway, turning to face her and her dad.

"Why are you supposed to get your sister's assignments for her? Why can't she get her own assignments?"

"Why don't you ask her? She's standin' right next to ya."

Her dad leaned forward in his chair, resting his forearm over the chair's arm with his lit pipe in his hand, shaking the pipe at her in a menacing fashion.

"Don't you get smart with me young lady or you won't be going anywhere tonight."

"Oh, come on Daddy, don't be mean." He glared. "Tell me."

Sheena looked at her as if to say, *Sorry, but I've got no choice now*.

"I was pickin' up Ry's homework assignments because she wasn't in school today."

Their dad sat up like a gopher, poking his head out of its burrow.

"'Wasn't in school?' Why the hell not? Where were you Ryzanna?"

Ryz'n shot her sister an icy stare, cold enough to freeze Niagara Falls and turned to her Dad. "Well Father, I-I—"

"*Father?* Oh this must gonna be good—father?"

Ryz'n stood with her hands extended, alternately flexing her knees in and out.

"I was at the trial, Dad. They tried to make Nicky look bad but it backfired on them. I think he's going to win. The jury likes him. I can tell. At least, most of them anyway."

She faked a wide smile for effect, hoping to get over.

"*At the trial?* Thought we told you to stay away from that thing? After all the trouble I went to, to get you off the hook? And you're skipping school to go anyway? *Jesus, Mary and Joseph*!" He rose. (Taking the Lord's name in vain was never a good sign.)

Her mother rushed out of the kitchen, pushing the swinging door wide open, wiping dishwater from her hands on a towel.

"Roy! *What* is going on? You know I don't like that kind of language in my house."

Her mom walked around Ryz'n to the middle of the living room, facing both her and dad while Sheena, the instigator, lurked at the far side of the piano, off to their left.

Dad held out his hand to mom. "Did you know *your* daughter was skipping school? Going to that damned trial?"

Her mom looked at her then swiveled her head to Sheena still standing at the entrance to the bedroom hallway and back to her. "No, I didn't. Which one?"

"*Which one?!?! Which one?!?! Your precious first-born!* Which one'd ya think? Which one's been knocked up by the kid on trial for cripesake?"

Bewildered and staring hard at her mother, her dad shook his head in disgust. Ryz'n hung her head in shame. She glanced at Sheena who mouthed "Sor-reee," looking like a wounded puppy—faking it. Clenching her teeth, Ryz'n shook her head at her kid sister. Her mom anxiously dried her hands on the towel stuck into the waistband of her apron.

"Why, no," she said. "I didn't. Is this true Ryzanna? Look at me Baby."

Ryz'n nodded, but failed to face her mom. "Yes ma'am."

"But Ryzanna, I thought we discussed this subject thoroughly. You were to stay away from there. Bad enough they want me to testify now, but you promised. You swore—"

"I know but how could I Mother? My husband-to-be, the father of my baby is on trial for murder, for manslaughter. Now how can I sit in class and keep my mind on my studies? How could I? Could you? Put yourself in my place Mother. Could you really go to class and not worry what might happen to Dad, if he were in Nicky's place? Really?"

Trying to hold herself together, she stared hard at her mother. Ryz'n felt her lower lip trembling as she looked into her mom's eyes. Her mom balled the dishrag in her fist.

"Oh, my baby, my poor baby." Her mom opened her arms and they stepped into each other's embrace, both of them sobbing. Her mom blubbered, "Of course not Ryzanna, of course I couldn't. We were wrong to make you swear to stay away. I'm sorry my baby."

They hugged each other tightly with her mom patting her back, consoling her. Shaking his head in disbelief, her dad tossed the Sport Section in the air letting it flop to the floor. His hands fell, slapping helplessly against his thighs. Then he shoved his pipe back into his mouth and clamped down, clenching his teeth.

From the hall, Sheena said, "And she gets off scot-free—again. Amazing. Maybe I oughtta let Bryson knock me up so I'd get a little more sympathy around here."

Her dad took the pipe from his mouth, pointing it at Sheena.

"You go wash your mouth out with soap young lady. I never want to hear you talk dirty like that again. Do you hear me?"

"But cripes Dad! You just said the same thing yourself." He stepped around the two women, hugging in the middle of the room to glower at Sheena. "Don't. *Don't you ever—By God—git!* Git outta my sight and wash that mouth out before *I lose my temper*!"

"Fine. Just going to get cleaned up anyway. Might as well wash my mouth out, too."

Sobbing, Ryz'n said, "Mother, I need that bathroom. I need to shower and pick up Nick for our gig tonight." Her mom said, "Yes, of course, Dear." She turned to the hallway.

"Sheena. Use our bathroom and leave the shower free for Ryzanna Christine now."

Sheena pulled up short of the bathroom door. "But what about Bryson? I got a date too. I gotta right to live too, ya know? I gotta take a bird bath in your bathroom?"

"Well, Bryson can wait a couple minutes if he has to. Your sister's priority is higher than yours. It won't hurt you to miss a couple of previews, if you're late. But the boys in the band are counting on Ryzanna. Now. Do as I say, or you'll stay home. You and Bryson can stay here and watch television with your father and me."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe it." Sheena turned to leave, yelling, "Ever since she got pregnant you treat her like she's a royal princess or something!"

Ryz'n watched as Sheena pulled a towel out of the linen closet to stalk off into their folk's bedroom to use their half bath. Her mom wiped Ryz'n's face with the hand towel from her waistband, saying, "Now hurry along dear. The show must go on." Her mom smiled. Ryz'n kissed her mom's cheek before she headed for the bathroom.

Behind her, Ryz'n heard her dad.

"Now what the hell was that all about Rose? What am I around here? A nobody?"

"Now Roy, we can discuss this later. We have the house to ourselves tonight Dear, so let's not fuss. Think of the possibilities."

Nick passed the weekend pleasantly without incident. He spent most of it with Ry. She drove him to their gigs. They played the naval air station Friday then a homecoming dance at a neighboring high school Saturday. Mornings, they delivered papers together. Saturday afternoon, he skipped his Boy's Club bowling league, affording a substitute a chance to bowl, to go with Ry to watch Pocomoke lose, evening their record at one apiece. Sunday morning, they went to a morning mass and out to breakfast. They spent the rest of the day studying together at his place. After dinner, they went over to school to practice long-throwing and hit some soft tosses against the backstop. They worked on Ry's fast-pitch delivery, too. With Leigh Ann graduated, the girls'd need another hurler.

Nick's trial resumed at one Monday afternoon. Mr. Vamia said the county held arraignments there in the morning to accommodate weekend arrests. So Nick went to school until the fourth period bell. Near twelve-thirty, he strolled through the courthouse doors with his folks. Though they were a half hour early, Franco had beaten them there.

They found his lawyer standing in the main lobby waiting, with his well worn, overstuffed briefcase at his feet. Franco, lookin' sharp in a grey silk suit, with dual rear vents, and a burgundy and silver tie with alternating diagonal stripes. Sparkling ruby cuff links set off French cuffs. Grey loafers. Shark-skin maybe? You had to hand it to that Franco—boy. He sure knew how to dress. Nick thought there oughtta be a picture of him in Webster's Dictionary next to "sartorial splendor."

After they shook hands, his dad talked strategy with Franco. That was the reason for their early arrival. His mom excused herself to the Ladies Room. As the two men talked turkey, Nick drifted away. He opened one of the double doors to the courtroom. His dad asked if he didn't want to join the discussion.

"What for?" He didn't think he could add anything. After all, he couldn't testify. He said he trusted Franco. He'd wait inside if it were all right. His dad suggested he do some homework while he waited.

Strolling down the center aisle of the courtroom, he toted his French and math textbooks and a Cliff-noted copy of *The Canterbury Tales*. The empty room was eerily quiet and still. He was alone, like the title of that flick he'd watched in Franco's office.

Assuming his place at the defendant's table, he set his books down. How long before court started? He glanced at the clock on the wall. Hmmm. Twenty-eight minutes to kill.

He gazed down at his books. Going to class today had felt strange. Everyone had stared at him, as if he were a leper or something. Kids and teachers, both. They all knew about his case, what was happening. R-J wasn't the only gossip in school. Cracking his math book, he looked around the still, empty room, which seemed so cavernous now that no

one was in it. Nah, he couldn't get into math now. He closed his book. He sat back in his chair, looking around.

Had arraignments here this morning, hunh? Couldn't prove it by him. Everything—clean, neat, orderly. Blinds drawn. Lights off. Made him wonder at the many human stories that had played out there earlier. Shoot. Even the ceiling fans were off. Old-timey ones, popular like mebbe a hundred years ago or so. A/C must be working again.

A steady pitter-pat tatted against the long rectangular windows. They had beaten the rain here. His mom had been worried about that. Worried for nothin'. Like always. Nick recalled his arraignment was held in the morning too. Right here in this very court-room on a Friday. He recalled the Friday because Ry had driven him from the courthouse to her place and then to Mrs. K's afterwards, kicking off that fantastic week they spent in Mrs. K's vacated purple bedroom with all the mirrors. Ry called it "the cathouse." She enjoyed it though—him, too. She wouldn't admit it but she liked those mirrors. Yes, she did.

Her folks were still vacationing on the Outer Banks then. His parents had thought he was with the Ryans. Ry had driven him from the Banks to turn himself in the day before. His ankle was still in a cast. They'd stopped on the way back under an overpass when that hail and thunderstorm surprised them. Ry had gone to confession when they first got down to her folk's beach place. Been stiffin' him all week since. Changed her mind in the Monza under that overpass. Steamed up them windahs somethin' fierce!

Made it with him in spite of her convictions for his sake—not hers. Oh no, perish the thought. Shoot. She was funny that way. Be both sincere and passionate about her convictions in two different directions—bang-bang—one right after the other. And never be a hypocrite about it. No, not for an instant. Bang-bang? No pun intended.

The Harvell brothers had delivered his newspapers while he was away—and back—with Ry at Mrs. K's. No one had expected him until the following week. Ry was more than compliant that marvelous, rapturous week they spent alone together after he'd passed the night in jail. Much more. Yes, she was. He rcealled thinking this must be what a honeymoon is like. If not, it oughtta be. Great times. Great fun. Ry ate it up with a spoon. They had the purple palace to themselves with Mrs. K living in New York and goin' on that world cruise, leaving him as caretaker. Ry tried anything, no holdin' back. Trusted him implicitly. Still did. And generous? Heck—yeah! Made him wonder if she could get enough, claiming he needed her more than God did. No regrets, not like now.

He loved Ry. She was different from all the others. Most of the time she was a helper girl who wanted only to please him. Innocent and naïve. But she could be more passionate, more exciting than any of 'em as long her mind was right. That is, when she wasn't worried about her body—that gorgeous one-of-a-kind, Miss Universe, perfectly-proportioned female form of hers—bein' the temple of the Holy Spirit. It wasn't that she was a hypocrite. In fact, she was just the opposite. Ry was so sincere, it was scary. She

could be holy and pious, sincerely afraid of committing mortal sin one minute, as she was now. Or she could be the best lay he ever had the next. And that was sayin' somethin'.

She didn't mind losin' it either. No, didn't embarrass her at all. Just the opposite. Girl had no limit. Made him feel on top of the world. Not a one of 'em lost it with more gusto than Ry did. Yes, the Widdah had taught him well, but Ry was different—special. They could talk and joke together before, during or after. Or just moan, groan and grunt—no words needed. Didn't matter. They could tell each other anything. And laugh? They could always laugh about something, even right in the thick of it.

No, wasn't in her to be a hypocrite. Against her nature, actually. The girl was nothin', if not sincere. But she could change on a dime. Not capriciously either. No, she always had a reason—a good reason. Either out of the obligation she felt toward God or him. Or if she just got plain jealous. "Righteous jealousy," she called it. The girl put him in rare company with the Lord. He didn't take it lightly either. Yeah, Ry was special all right.

She could be jealous as sin though. Mann! Could she turn on a dime if she thought another girl caught his eye or vice-versa. He recalled the first time he got a taste of her righteous jealousy. He'd drivin' her home after the weekend of the Fourth with four other kids. Ry was in the center back seat of his open convertible. They'd made love with their eyes via the rear view mirror the whole way home. Just kissed for the first time the night before. Then she broke up with Don that next day. After they got back to the Heights, he let Lena out, and walked her to her door, totin' her bag o' junk for her. Lena kissed him good-bye on her front porch. When he got back to the car parked at the curb, Ry was standin' next to it, waitin' for him like a spider, in what he'd come to call "The Stance."

Her natural, double chin tilted down. Her eyes hid behind wrap-around shades. Arms folded beneath her buxom bust, liftin' her up, smashing her ample cleavage together above her scoop-necked blouse. Her weight shifted back over a rigid, left leg with her right leg, flexed forward a bit—toe tappin'. He called it "The Stance."Her sexy mouth was drawn taut. No dimples. Defiant as all get out. She let him have it ...

"NICHOLAS SH'BOOM!"

She removed her sunglasses. Told him to remove his so she could look him directly in the eye. Her eyes—emerald—wild with fury, glowered up at him from under long, dark, Bambi-like lashes, and broad, pointed-arched jet black brows—Ava Gardner brows—contrasted with her brown hair. What he called "The Look." Gorgeous mighty mite of a woman, arms akimbo, ample bosom heaving.

"That's the last of that! You hear?" She raised her left hand, holding her shades, shaking them at him purposefully. "If you want ME, you got ME! And NOBODY ELSE! That means NO-BODY ELSE! Understand?"

He pleaded, "But Baby, I's just bein' courteous."

Irate, she stamped her foot, cutting him off:

"BULL TWINKIES! You heard me! And DARN IT, I MEAN IT! Don't gimme any of that "BABY" junk, either! Not after you pull a stunt like that!"

He'd never seen her angry like that, never really seen her angry at all. Never heard her talk like that either. That's because, as a rule, she didn't. She was a good Catholic girl. Nick figured she wanted to make an impression on him in a language that he understood. If so, she was accomplishin' her purpose.

"I got the message, Sweetie. Hones'."

Then, like a chameleon, she turned soft and warm as freshly melted candle wax. She sauntered over to him to kiss him on the cheek.

"I didn't mean to hurt ya, Baby, but that's one subject I want you to know that I feel very strongly about. You need to know that right from the start, if you want to make this work. Okay, Nicky?" Her now-tender, jade eyes mirrored her changed tone. He knew right then she was honest and pure.

"O-K Ry. I'm yours, honest. Scout's honor."

He held up the three-fingered scout salute with his right hand. "Nicky," she said. "I accept your pledge, but don't think for one, single minute that I believe *you* are a Boy Scout." They both laughed.

She was okay. They were gonna be good together. He knew it, as he'd known that fastball was coming in grooved on that three-one count in the bottom of the ninth of the state championship game, same as on three and oh.

And they had been great together. Of course, he had made it with Terri that night anyway, after his summer league ball game had rained out in the fifth. Ry's little tirade didn't prevent that. Nu-oo. No way. Him and Terri spent the night alone together down in his private pool club. Sneaked in the back through a slit in the chain-link fence he knew about. But him and Ry hadn't bonded yet—physically, that is. That came a couple weeks later. Until they did, he'd figured he was still free as a bird. But he knew then, after Lena's kiss and that deal by the car, Ry was a girl who meant what she said. The girl didn't play no head games. Like down at the beaver ponds on the levée bank, first time she gave herself to him. Yeah, he remembered that hot, summer night all right …

He lay flat on his back, naked in seasonably warm moon-bright on the grassy levée bank. His body angled toward the edge of the pond. His left ankle, encased in a calf-high cast, featured all the kids' autographs. A nearly full moon reflected opaque light through the mist rising down along the edge of the pond and up over the grassy levée. Ry emerged from skinny-dippin' in the pond, dripping wet. Refracted by mist, silver moonlight cascaded over the point of Ry's slick left shoulder, silhouetting the girl's wondrous profile for him against the misty dark. The sight of her unparalleled beauty stunned him. Despite the mist, her full-curved, goddess-like profile stood stark against the dull moonlight.

In a husky contralto, Ry whispered "What's wrong, Honey? I scare you?"

As she parted the mist, moonlight bathed her left side. Her body glistened silver-wet with pond water. Her tangled, mass of long, dense, wet brown hair, hued like hot chocolate around a marshmallow, began to kink up naturally, dripping silver beads of pond water down to the grassy levée bank. He could barely make out her hazel-green eyes. Mebbe he jes' filled 'em in from memory. Ry posed for him like a Hollywood starlet—a nymph—dripping silver liquid beads of pond water. He rose up toward her on one elbow.

"You're all silver, Ry. You—*You* are ab-so-lutely ***the*** *single most beautiful sight* I ever beheld. Ever. No angel could be more lovely."

Without drying off, she lowered her arm to her side, studying him. The totally open, innocent look on her face showed she knew his candor was sincere. And he knew that she knew that he believed totally in what he'd just said. It was no line. Dropping her arm to her side, Ry stepped a little closer, asking sweetly.

"Better than all the rest?"

"What rest?" He leaned up on his right elbow, towards her.

"Don't B.S. me Nicky Sh'boom. Because if we go through with this, it's only going to be me and you from now on. No more Li'l Mo's, or that whore who lived next door to the Salvaranos—"

"Don't say that, Baby, please. The Widdah don't deserve th—"

"Or Mickey Saxon's sister, or that colored Amazon—that-that hip-shakin', fly-girl party doll, or Lena, or Missus—Koala Bear whatever her name is—no Patti or Terri either—especially no Terri! And only God knows how many roadies you had out west and any others I don't know about or ever want to."

She stepped over his right thigh with her foot between his legs so the moonlight bathed her more fully. He fell back on the blanket. Back-lit ground mist rose behind her, silhouetting her captivating figure. Hugh Hefner had never seen the likes of this beauteous nymph, dripping silver, beads of pond water that tickled Nick with each cool droplet that struck his skin. Mist rose off the pond, creeping up the bank on "little cat's feet" as the poet had written. It swallowed her up from behind in an opaque grey blurring her outline in refracted moonlight.

Burning incense sticks from Spencer's stuck into the sod around the blanket kept pesky insects at bay, filling the air with a pungently sweet aroma. Smoky pyres trailed upward from the flaming sticks augmenting patchy ground fog, fashioning her murky silhouette all fuzzy and warm in the humid summer night. Light refracting off the fog framed her Eve-like form in an halo of silver mist. She was an angelic being, silver yet sumptuous. He sat in awe on his blanket studying her unabashed, glistening pose in the misty moonlight. Unashamed to show him her natural beauty. That Hefner dude could just eat his heart out.

Must be the part of her cycle when her breasts swelled to the max, because she jutted out as never before. Beads of silver liquid dripped from them. Broad hips matching the breadth of her shoulders sandwiched a long funnel, hair's breadth of a waist. She was humbly content to show him. Wholesomely, unashamed. He tried to snap a picture of her profile with her camera, but she put him off. He settled for a mental snaphot that seared into his psyche.

Quivering above him, the girl bent down slowly. She thrust her right knee out over his left with her right thigh grazing him. Coyly straddling him on her knees, Nick rejoiced with each drip of cool silver pond water that fell upon him.

Before he could speak, Ry plopped down on her palms just above his shoulders, pressing her knees up against his flanks. Her arms locked straight and rigid. His mouth became an inadvertent hangar for any homing insects who might buzz near. She lowered her narrow, flat belly, touching him.

Neither flinched. Her eyes were a glassy jade, boring into his. In a dead calm, Ry whispered slowly but clearly.

"I've longed to say this to you, Baby."

She inched forward, stopped then turned her locked elbows into the outsides of her ample, nautral breasts, nearly touching the twins together. Gravity stretched their heavy fullness out so that the up-turned tips hovered, yearing at his chin.

"I'm no angel, Nicky. I'm real; human, just like you. I'm just a girl. But I'm yours, *all* yours, if you really want me. And your mine—*all* mine—from now on, from this moment on. I claim you forever. No one else, just *me and you.*"

Her quivering had ceased. She spoke with a soft-toned innocence, an unembroidered sincerity that penetrated his soul, anchoring him still to the sod. Her eyes widened, staking lances deep into his soul, penetrating his gaze.

His two-toned peepers focused in on hers. He felt something new inside—virginal to him—a deep penetration of both soul and psyche, a simultaneous, mutual connection between their innermost beings. It was as if something had taken root deep within him and become inextricably bound with her, something anchored deeply within her, too. As if an invisible, mystical, umbilical cord bound them together in a sacred pledge at the very core of their beings. He had never sensed anything like it. Not with anybody. They shared a stare and tone that were spontaneous, joyously mutual yet solemn, enduring and everlasting. He had always considered himself a true romantic, but this, this whole deal was too much. Yet it was so real, so *present*, he accepted it without questioning.

"You know something Ry? I … I believe ya."

His standard line but they both knew this time it was no line.

"This might pinch, or sting, a bit at first Ry, but after—if ya don't fight it, just ride with it—you'll be flyin'. I'll make it last, make it good for ya. I promise."

"I trust you Baby." Her naturally husky contralto had lowered an octave. "Lookin' forward to all of it—*all of you*." She pressed him between her thighs. "Been lookin' forward to all of you for quite some time."

Her emerald eyes twinkled. She pursed a faint smile. There was nothing between them but the simple, tiny gold crucifix that hung down from her neck. She lowered herself down upon him at her own pace. Her eyes widened. Ry melded them into one. She gasped. Her eyes shut with a grimace, staking her claim on him forever.

Alone in the courtroom, Nick hummed the tune he'd composed to commemorate that occasion. More of a poem really than a song. Softly, under his breath, in reflection, he crooned the lyrics he had penned—

Silver pools on a sultry, summer night
Reflect silver love in our hearts so bright.
Watchin' you thru silv'ry, misty, half moonlight,
Makes everything seem silver in my sight.
Yes, it is silver—silver right.

You went dippin', silver, skinny dippin'
And you swam laughin', while I laid
On the bank in a cast,
Watchin' you as you played.

Gazin' upon you—a nymph in water,
Tryin' to forget you're your Daddy's daughter—
Splashin', divin' and cuttin' like a knife
Through silver'ry waters, larger than life.

We were all alone
(till that otter scared ya out)
And you—more beautiful than Venus—
A goddess, without doubt.

Your stride from the pond to me
Was sensual and sweet.
You hovered right above me,
Like a sumptuous, silver treat—(So sweet).

Silver drops of liquid
Fell upon my thighs.
As you stood over me,
Starin' in my eyes.

Never seen such beauty
As you displayed that night.
No Eve was ever better
Not even in God's pure—holy sight.

When He created you
It "was very good" indeed.
You shine like silver wine

Above me, sowin' silver seeds.

You told me that you loved me.
You said I was the one.
You said there was no other,
And you hoped to bear our son.

Silver drops of water dripped from
Your breasts and tangled, long, wet hair
On to me, as I agreed,
Your pledge of troth; our love to share.

A halo formed about your angelic frame
From moonlight refracting opaque mist
A vision of an angel from Heaven come
To earth, and then—we kissed

The moon shone silver upon your skin,
Profiled in wondrous silhouette,
Silver shades of beauty,
Which I never will forget.

How you tumbled down upon me
In the silvery half moonlight
To give ourselves each other
And stay throughout the night.

Silver pools on a sultry summer's night
Shone silver love from our hearts so light.
Watchin' you thru silv'ry opaque moon-bright,
Made everything seem silver in my sight.
And silver, still it is—silver right.

He called it "Silver Right." O' course, he hadn't actually said he loved her. Not in so many words. He could write that sappy song but couldn't come right out and say it to her face. Nah, he couldn't do that. Just couldn't. Why—that'd be like Samson tellin' Delilah he got his strength from his long, uncut hair. To be fair though, Ry was no Delilah. She wasn't out to hurt him or betray him. She loved him body and soul with every fiber of her being. No doubt about that. The others said they loved him but they didn't mean it for keeps the way she did. He could tell by the look in their eyes, how they'd compared to hers that night. Most of 'em just loved how he loved 'em, the way he could put 'em on top o' the world. What he had experienced with Ry that night was unlike anything else.

She was the one. No gettin' around it. Knew she'd been special a year ago when she's still chubby and sat on him at the base pool ta rub aloe vera on him, after he back-flopped off the high dive. Tryin' to do the twisty flips the way she did 'em. He'd made his pact with Don to leave her alone cuz he thought he'd be bad for her. Get her inta trouble. That was after his summer of debacles with all them other bimibos. Made do with Mrs. K and occasionally took one for the team or, in that case, the band with Mick's sister till Baby come along.

He'd taught Ry to lose weight as he had, recoverin' from Rheumatic Fever. And her complexion cleared up. 'Cept for joggin' round the school track with her and Leigh Ann, he stayed away from Ry nearly a year. After the Fourth, he saved her and Sheena from the cop raid down at Mo's beach place. And then, they kissed. She dropped Don. And they were on. Darned if he hadn't gotten her in trouble anyway. He still couldn't believe that. Just as Don had predicted.

Ry gettin' pregnant with his kid had spooked him. Had she done that on purpose? Stopped takin' the pill? Naw, she wasn't like that. She confessed to him that she'd stopped when her prescription ran out after school let out for summer. She hadn't takin' it to keep from gettin' pregnant. Not like all them other chicks did. No. Wasn't prescribed for that reason. After she got the Church's okay, the pill did its job for her. Regulated her, she said. She had missed a lot o' school in tenth grade on account o' her "female problems." Said she'd been "miserable." Almost got held back for missin' so much class time. She said her folks went to bat for her on that one. After a year on the pill though, she—not her doctor—thought she was good ta go without it.

Some time after they'd romanced down at the beaver ponds, she told him and said not to worry. The doctors all said she's infertile anyway. He had always placed great trust in doctors. His dentist was excellent. Filled that gap left from his accident during a sleepover with a gold tooth. Gave him a white one, too. Whichever he felt like wearin'. And his general practitioner was first rate. The guy had had a tough time diagnosing his Rheumatic Fever at first cuz he never had strep throat. But the doc erred on the side of precaution. Hospitalized him for three weeks until blood tests determined the disease. Kept him in bed two months. Restricted his activities for eleven. Was ten months before the doc even let so much as bowl duckpins. The doc's prudent actions precluded any heart disease, which he claimed was a miracle. No valve damage whatsoever. None modern medicine could detect anyway. He had lost his sedentary fat and went on to be as active as ever without any repercussions. Yeah, Doc Duzzi-Duzzi had saved his butt.

But Ry's doctors had tainted the purity of the medical pool for him forever. They'd predicted she was sterile. Yeah. Right. Then her doc's husband—the urologist—had tested him both for venereal disease, at Mr. Ryan's insistence, and for fertility, due to the dude's disbelief in Ry's pregnancy. The doctor's tests concluded amazingly that though

he was clean, *he* was infertile, too. Incredible. Their first time at bat, Ry'n'him had hit one outta the ballpark. Go figure. Then that screwy husband and wife medical team subjected Ry to another Spanish inquisition to insure he was the father. That pissed off everyone in both families. His respect for physicians nose-dived after that.

Ry's family accepted Father Vizconni's pronouncement that theirs was "a miracle baby, a true gift from God." Made Ry feel special too with her pregnancy being of biblical proportions. As if it was the special will of God, an actual blessing from above. For that, he was truly grateful because the idea of a special blessing gave Ry such great joy. She actually looked forward to becoming a mother at seventeen. "The mother of our 'miracle' baby," as she liked to put it. Still, he couldn't picture himself as a father.

He was grateful his doc had the foresight to keep him on a daily dose o' penicillin to preclude a relapse of Rheumatic Fever. He was convinced the antibiotic had kept him from contractin' V.D. from sowing all his wild oats. He didn't blame Mr. Ryan for making the urologist check him out, as his folks had. He was glad to know he had a clean bill of health. He was worried about money, though. Didn't want Ry and him to live off their folks after the wedding.

The band was doin' well. Booked almost solid for the next six weekends, 'cept for the weekend after the wedding when he and Ry'd be honeymoonin' at the beach. *GRT* was makin' a name for itself. Ry had helped. He discovered she had innate musical abilities. She added class—female sex appeal to their group. Versatile, too. Helped out on all them funky percussion sounds. Filled in on rhythm guitar for Jimmy Allein on Friday gigs, when he's under curfew for Saturday football games. And Ry helped Todd on keyboards.

Todd was teaching her the intricacies of his new Combo Duo organ and one of those new-fangled Model D Mini-Moogs. Which Todd was still learning himself. His old man had bought the revolutionary synthesizer for Todd after they'd heard an earlier prototype the year before in August at a special performance by Dr. Moog himself at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Todd's dad worked as a scientist of some kind for the Government. Had a Ph. D. and everything. Wore an I-D badge around his neck when he went to work. Dude was kind of absent-minded though. Forget to take it off, when he left the office sometimes. Todd and his dad were true audiophiles, really into cuttin' edge, musical electronics. Todd's synthesizer was the slickest musical instrument they ever saw or heard. When Ry played the thing, Todd managed and modulated their overall sound set-up—amps, boards, etc, which seemed to give him a kick. Thought of himself as some kind of electronic maestro-guru. And Ry was just gettin' used to playin', standin' up.

She looked a heckuva lot better than Todd did behind them keyboards, too. That's for dang sure. Played better too, the more she got the hang of it. Though Todd would never hear that from him. And Ry's vocals were great—truly special. She had the gift.

Her husky, rich contralto was a match for his husky baritone. People said, if they closed their eyes, they'd think *GRT* was black. Played funky soul music, too, among a lot of new as well as old R&B and Blues standards. Like "Juke," "Big Boss Man," "Baby, Please Don't Go," "Shake Your Hips," or "Baby, Scratch My Back." People liked to dance to that stuff. He liked makin' 'em want to get up and move their feet. So did Ry.

Heck—the whole band got a kick out of it. All they needed was a break, some air time for some of his original tunes. He'd written a hundred compositions—ballads, foot stompers, R&B—you name it. Good stuff—toe-tappers. Just a matter of time, that's all.

Until their big break came, they could get by on his newly expanded paper route. With Ry helpin' him now, usin' the car and his bike to maximum efficiency, they served the equivalent of three *Post* routes every day before school. The fifty dollars a month he got from Mrs. K for maintainin' her place in her absence didn't hurt either. The few bucks he earned from cuttin' lawns would dry up with the onset of winter. O' course, there might be some snow-shovelin' money but he couldn't count on that. Ry said she could take in sewing if she had ta. The girl sure knew her way around a needle and thread and a Singer sewin' machine. Yes, she did.

Hey. Maybe Mrs. K would let 'em stay at her place and still give him what? Fifty bucks a month? He'd keep takin' care of the place for Kara as he had been. Be a good deal for both of 'em, until he went to college next fall. He hoped Kara wasn't dependin' on his lovin' in exchange for her cash. No way could he do that now. Well, mebbe he could. But Ry'd never go for it. No. That was outta the question now that he'd be a married man. Definitely and absotively, posilutely out of the question. He and Ry had promised to remain faithful to each other down at the beaver ponds. He was keeping his promise. At least they could stay at Kara's till Kara came back from her world cruise for the holidays. Kara's dough would pay the grocery bills till then. And she'd be paying the utility bills, like always. Even better. Ry and him'd be livin' for free. Save their cash for the baby. If Kara kept livin' in New York after the holidays, maybe she'd let 'em stay at her place for old times sake? Kara was rich. She could afford it, else they'd rent a flat. He and Ry could go to community college, while his mom took care of the baby.

Ry didn't know that he and Terri had made it a couple times after the Fourth of July weekend. She believed that once they returned from the beach after the Fourth, they were goin' together as a couple. But he never saw it like that. At the time, him and Terri had unfinished business. They'd owed each other "rain-checks." And after the big row at the Sheeboom-Ryan, get-acquainted, family picnic, after he'd knocked her old man on his ass and Ry had gone inside crying, goin' on a hunger strike for the rest of the week—a hunger strike that ended up hospitalizing her—he couldn't be sure they'd be able to last together. He thought her old man would break 'em up. Same as Mo's and Audy Lou's

dads had. So he went back to Terri briefly. But after his night with Ry at the beaver ponds, after their pledge, he'd remained true to her. Yes, he had. And it was easy.

He didn't count spendin' the night with them square-head sisters out at Clear Lake, cuz they hadn't actually fooled around. Just partied and made out a little. But that was Ry's own fault for cuttin' him off. She'd been to confession again after their glorious week in Kara's purple bedroom, just before they'd driven out with his folks to visit his grandparents in Iowa for a few weeks. She had promised to abstain from turtle-dovin'. Laid up in his cast, nothin' ta do and around her, twenty-four-seven, unable to do anything about it all of a sudden—her cuttin' him off like that—was pure torture for him. He got pissed. Took off in a huff, uptown on his crutches. Met 'em four blondies—sisters fifteen to twenty-one—up at the A&W gettin' ice cream. Summer vacationers, like him.

They felt bad for him, on his crutches, hobblin' around like that. Bought him some ice cream, after one of 'em accidentally knocked his cone to the ground. They got to talkin'. Next thing he knew they were drivin' him back to their lake cottage. Well—Shoot! What was he supposed to do? Just stiff 'em after they'd been so nice to him? Turns out yeah, that's exactly what Ry had expected him to do. Said, "Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Next day the chicks brought him back to his grandparent's place in their baby blue Mustang convertible. The seventeen year-old, one with the biggest boobs naturally, was settin' on his lap in the shot gun seat. Two other sisters in back. The oldest one, drivin'. All four of 'em, good lookin' chicks, like most of 'em blondie, Nordic types out there in I-o-way—real Inger Stevens-Jean Seberg types. He hadn't called home or nothin' all night. His mom and grandmom were waitn' on the concrete front porch like a couple o' vultures waitin' on him to drop dead of thirst in the desert. Ry lurked behind 'em, back o' the screen door. He'd brought a bag o' donuts, fresh from the bakery as a peace offering.

But his folks jumped him. Ry was incensed. She threatened to leave. Fly home. They fought all day. But, the next day, she was sick as a dog that mornin'. Pregnant but didn't know it. Later, when he's uptown at the bakery, she got the call from Franco about the indictment. Changed her tune then. Again, figurin' he needed her now more'n God did.

Uncle Bill suggested the three of 'em take off on a road trip to the Black Hills in his Bonneville convertible. They went. Ryz'n did a one-eighty. Gave herself completely to him. And just like that! They were on again. "Scum-suckin' in love," as Patti might say. It was as if they'd never had an argument, just laughin', livin' and lovin'. They even found a chick for Bill. Woman name of Candy, who Bill said was "dandy." Had a great time. Like a double honeymoon. Bill and Candy stayed in a separate room, o' course.

By the time they were drivin' back home to the Heights with his folks, Ry was gettin' sick mornin's, regular as clockwork. The next week, she found out she's pregnant. Told him and her folks. Went through a batt'ry o' tests and the inquisition cuz of her doctor's

disbelief. Told Father V. He advised marriage, a Church dispensation and the Pre-Cana classes. Both families agreed and then boom—just like that! She cut him off again.

He argued: "Who needed her more now, with the trial and all—him or God?" But it was no good this time. She said, "Abstinence was necessary because of the dispensation Father V was getting so we can marry in the Church. After all, God has a right to me for a few more weeks since I'll be with you afterwards until death do us part." You kiddin'?

All on account o' her body being the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit or some such nonsense. Shoot! And it wasn't as if he had any choice in the matter after all. Didn't seem fair somehow. 'Specially, when he pointed out her body was also the dwelling place of his kid too. Told her he felt that give him kind o' like "squatter's rights, after all." But she said the Lord had a prior claim. She said, "It was God's miracle baby and I can't jeopardize that." Like she was the Virgin Mother or somethin'. And that was that.

Sheesh—Catholics. You kiddin' me?

— Doors opened. Lights flicked on. The bailiff and court reporter walked in. Others drifted into the courtroom. He looked up. Six ta one. He shut out everything to zone—

Yeah. And they'd been under the ever present noses of his or her folks ever since. Not to mention the omnipresent heavy burden of Church dogma, weighing on him like an anvil on his chest. It was killing him, this temple of the Holy Spirit stuff. He didn't see it like that at all. He figured this was the time they should be bangin' heck out of each other. Before she got too big. Before the baby came, while they still had time alone.

The girl was lookin' better'n ever. Lost a couple more pounds in her waist, if that were possible. But her boobs were swellin' up bigger all the time. He couldn't believe it. Them melons were downright, outright-upright. Always more 'n ample before, substantially much more 'n a handful, each of 'em. But now, either one of 'em could smother him. The girl's bras couldn't contain her no more. Those melons was ripe for pluckin' and she was ripe for — And, all he could do was stand by helpless and salivate. Take cold showers.

This Catholic bull was just killin' him. Gee. He'd agreed to raise the kid Catholic. Get married in the Church. But this abstinence bull was too much. He was right before. Celibacy was a disease—worse. It was pure torture. He resented the Church. Not Father Vizconni but the Church itself—the institution. He knew some history, 'bout indulgences, the Inquisition. All them popes back in the day with bastards runnin' all over Europe.

So, okay. Those dudes had had their time. Had their cake and ate it, too. Why couldn't he? Now was *their time*—his and Ry's. The Dramamine had overcome her new-found aversion to his scent that she used to rave over—cuz of the baby. So that was no longer an obstacle. They should be makin' the most of lovin' each other now. She wanted him, too. He could tell. Left him with little consolation that she also felt forced to tow the line. He was like Red now, unable to sleep at night. Ry, too, so she said. He hoped—

"—All rise for the Honorable Judge Langham Higher."

That a-hole! All rose. Franco was standin' next to him. Nick hadn't even known he was there. That's how deep his zonin' had been. He couldn't believe all this stuff he was goin' through. But he and Ry had spent a decent weekend together. Not great, not as good as it could have been; celibate, as it was. All things considered, it was okay. He hoped this trial would end soon. The judge sat down. So did everyone else. And after they won, maybe Ry would be so happy they could sneak away to Mrs. K's mebbe and—

"Mister Perkouri. I believe when we last adjourned you were interviewing a witness, uh, let me see here, uh"—the judge shuffled through some papers in front of him.

"Matthew Yikes, Your Honor."

"Ahem, yes, yes, of course. Mister Yikes. How could I forget?" Beside him, Franco shook his head before Perkouri said: "If it pleases the Court Your Honor, the State would like to recall Mister Yikes at a later time to question a witness from Texas now."

"The Court has no objection. Does the defense have any objection, Mister Vamia?"

"No objection Your Honor, provided the defense gets to cross-examine Mister Yikes."

"Ah, excellent," said Higher. "We seem to be less contentious today. I trust the extended weekend has served to calm frayed nerves. Very well, please call your witness."

"The State calls Miss Maureen Kilpatrick."

Nick turned around to watch Li'l Mo saunter through the double doors at the back of the courtroom as if she owned the place. Her round hips swayed. Her shoulders slouched as always, hovering over her long, narrow waist. Mo looked tough in a suede, burgundy mini-skirt, high leather boots and an orangey-gold, short-sleeved Poor Boy top, scooped low enough to feature a little cleavage. Made for a snug fit over Mo's pair of twin peaches, which looked a little riper now than he recalled. The Indian head band was new. Nice touch. But Mo was wearin' her hair long again. With her pug nose, freckles and chipmunk cheeks, Mo was one chick Nick thought looked better with shorter hair. Kind o' bobbed at the chin. Mo and Patti were the only ones though. He never wanted to see Ry cut her shoulder-length, dense tresses and he'd told her so.

Li'l Mo. There was a chick he coulda stood a long time if it hadn't been for her trippin'. He had written more'n one tune about her. Not as buxom as Ry, but similar elsewhere. Heckuva lover—Mo. Came close to Ry. Yeah, *close*, but no cigar. Nah, Mo didn't smoke no *cee*-gars, just weed. And he had come to despise her for it. Couldn't stand the smell o' the stuff. If he wanted to get high, he had his music, ball playin'—and Ry, o' course. A little booze was good enough for him now and then. And it was legal,

too—well, almost. Legal, too? Sheesh. 'N' here he's on trial for murder and drinkin' underage among other things.

Li'l Mo testified to their love, to how great they'd been together. All that bull. Franco objected, saying her testimony was irrelevant and immaterial. But the judge got mad and overruled him, after Perkouri noted the judge had ruled the State could call "character" witnesses to show the potential for motive in this case. Higher agreed and warned Franco he could be held in contempt if he peristed in objecting to each "character" witness the State called. Franco asked for an "Exception," which the judge "Noted."

Mo even asked Perkouri to stand aside, so she could see better. He thought Mo musta been trippin' out at lunch. Wouldn't have surprised him. But after Perkouri moved aside, Nick noticed Mo was lookin' over his head at somebody behind him. Then it hit him. Mo was lookin' right at Ry. Mo's relishin' this opportunity to pass on intimate details, which Franco tried to prevent but which old man Higher allowed over his objections. Mo got downright graphic about their trysts. The old coot was smilin', hangin' on Mo's every saucy morsel. Gettin' his jollies up there in that flowing, black robe. That old lecher. He wouldn't be surprised if the creep called a recess to hit the can after Mo's lurid testimony.

Nick didn't dare turn around to see how Ry was takin' it. Mo up there, smiling all through it, like the cat that swallowed the canary. Shoot. Now Perkouri was askin' Mo if she hadn't aborted Nick's baby. Mo stiffened. Stuck her up-turned nose further in the air. Wasn't so funny now, hunh Maureen?

"Well, I don't think that's any of your business," she said.

Gee that Mo was a pip. Dissin' the prosecutor like that, right there in open court.

Mr. Vamia objected, agreein' with Mo. Higher overruled him of course. The bastard.

Perkouri: "You have sworn to tell the whole truth Miss Kilpatrick. You can be held you in contempt if you stop now. Tell the Court, did you or did you not have an abortion after you left the defendant and moved to Texas?" Mo looked to Higher.

"Is that right Judge? Do I have to answer that in front of all these people?"

"Yes Miss, I'm afraid you do."

"Well, that don't seem right; 'specially, if it don't have nothin' ta do with Nicky."

Higher asked, "Are you saying that you were never made pregnant by the defendant?" Mo looked around at Nick and then over his head then back to Nick again.

"Yeah, that's what I'm sayin'. Though I wouldn't o' minded so much. Not by Nicky."

Perkouri: "Are you sure about that? I understood from your folks that—"

"Well, who got pregnant?" *Me, or my folks?* I oughtta know who got me pregnant for cripe sake. I don't need them, or you, or anybody else to tell me that!"

Mo was ticked. When roused, Mo could be a real fireball if she wasn't stoned out of her gourd. Cuz reefer mellowed her right out. Made her lazy-happy—and horny.

Perkouri stuttered, “But, but—” Franco stood up saying, “I think the witness has answered the question, Your Honor. No need to beat it into the ground.”

Higher said, “If you’re raising an objection Counselor, please use proper procedure.”

Franco stood wearily: “Objection, asked and answered.” Higher said, “Sustained.”

Franco sat down mumbling under his breath, “Guess the good feeling from the weekend is a moot point now.”

“What was that Counselor?” asked the judge. “Have you something to add?”

Franco half rose from his seat to reply, “No, Your Honor. I concur in the Court’s ruling.” He sat down.

“Well, the Court is glad to hear it, Counselor.”

Nick could tell Higher was miffed, too. Franco whispered to Nick, “See what I mean?”

Higher: “Does the State have any further questions for this witness?”

Perkouri: “No, Your Honor.”

Higher: “Does the defense wish to cross-examine?”

Standing, Franco nodded, “Yes, Your Honor.”

Franco pivoted around to lean over the railing to Ry. She leaned forward, half-rising out of her seat. Nick barely heard Franco ask her, “Was she looking at you?” Ry nodded, tears brimming in her eyes. Mo’s darts had struck home. Damn that Mo. She always had a knack for stickin’ it to a body. Had an unfortunate, in-your-face way, o’ puttin’ things.

Franco wheeled in an about-face, bumping into Perkouri who was returning to take his seat. Their heads bobbed back, pausing to stare at each other. The jury tittered. Both attorneys excused themselves. Franco asked permission to approach the witness and got it. Smiling, he walked up to the left of Mo, giving Nick and Ry a clear view of her. Just as Perkouri had stood aside at Mo’s request, Franco faced both Mo and the jury.

“Miss Kilpatrick.” Franco’s smile broadened then melted almost as quickly. “You have told us of your—how did you put it? Of your ‘*great affection and love for the defendant*?’ You said you dated the accused for four months a year ago, before your family moved away. And you vacationed with him over the holiday weekend of the Fourth, this past July. Were things always perfectly rosy between the two of you? Did you never argue?”

“Well sure, sometimes. Lover’s quarrels, you know.”

“Over what, exactly?” Mo shrugged. “Little things, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. It’s no secret you have an affinity for cannabis, do you not, Miss Kilpatrick? You like to relax with a little marijuana now and again, isn’t that right?”

Mo turned up her nose a bit. “Yeah, I don’t mind tokin’ once in a while. Ain’t nothing wrong with it that ain’t wrong with booze.”

Higher: “Miss Kilpatrick. The Court is compelled to warn you, smoking cannabis is illegal in this country. Please refrain from this illegall activity for your own good.”

Mo let out a bored sigh. Franco pursed a very brief smile before resuming.

"Did the accused share your proclivity in that regard? Did he join you in your toking sessions?"

Mo chuckled. "Nicky? Are you kiddin'? He wouldn't touch the stuff."

"Though you tried in every way you could think of to get him to join you, didn't you?"

"Yeah, you could say that. But he wouldn't bite. The boy can be damn stubborn when he wants to."

"And why didn't he surrender to your overt, friendly persuasions to join you?"

Mo smirked. "Cuz when it come to a little harmless tokin', Nicky can be a real square. Sez it's against the law. Wouldn't do it no mattered what I tried. Wouldn't allow any of his band to do it, either. Kicked Ricky Schmelling out when he caught him."

"'Against the law?'" Franco paused, staring at the jury. "Wouldn't smoke grass with you, his lover, because it was *against the law*? Or let any of his bandmates smoke it either. Kicked out a band member for that reason. Ahem. I see." He looked to Mo.

"You like this boy a great deal, don't you Miss Kilpatrick? Yet, you appear here today from Texas to testify for the State against him. I'm sure we would all like to know why."

Mo shrugged, slouching down. "Cuz he wanted me to."

"By *he*, you mean Mister Perkouri, the prosecutor for the State?"

"Well sure, who'd you think I meant?"

Franco flashed a forced grin. "Well, I just wanted to make sure for the record that you didn't mean my client?"

Mo shook her head. "Oh, course not. I'd never do anything to hurt Nicky."

"I see. So you're here to testify against him but against your will too, is that right? Just fulfilling your civic obligations?"

"Well sure. I wouldn't be here if I didn't have ta be. I don't wanna hurt Nicky none."

"Yes, I believe you've said that a couple of times. But, perhaps, there *is* someone in this courtroom you do wish to hurt with your testimony? Is that possible?" Mo frowned.

"Well, I don't think I know what you mean." Mo seemed insulted by the question.

Smiling, Franco placed both hands on top of the witness box. "Come now, Miss Kilpatrick. Is there no one here you hope to hurt by your salacious testimony?"

Nick glanced at the jury. They didn't have a clue what Franco was getting at.

Perkouri: "Objection, Your Honor. Irrelevant and immaterial."

Franco: "Goes to credibility, Your Honor—the witness's motive for testifying."

Higher: "Overruled. The Court wishes to hear this witness. She will answer."

Franco turned to the jury. "I don't know if the members of the jury could tell from where they sit, but it was quite obvious to me during your testimony; especially, during some of the more prurient aspects of your testimony that you were looking over the head of the accused. Over my head too, isn't that true?" Franco turned back to face Mo.

"Well, I might've. So what?"

"Perhaps you were looking at someone behind us? In the gallery, perhaps? Were you?"

"Well, nobody special I don't think." Franco nodded, pursing his lips.

"Tell me Miss Kilpatrick. You said the accused was your first lover. He taught you what it felt like to be a woman. I believe you said that because of him that—what were your words? You came to—'understand why I have periods and it makes me thankful for them?' Is that right?" Mo nodded. "Yeah, I said that and it's as true now as it was then."

"I'm sure it is, Miss Kilpatrick. So you still have deep feelings for my client do you not? I mean if it were in your power to move back here, it's not too much of a stretch to think you would like to renew your former relationship with him. Isn't that true?"

"Well, yes I would. I care very much for Nicky. In fact, I never stopped caring."

"Of course. That was obvious from your testimony. But, even if you could move back here and your folks agreed to you seeing the accused again, there still would be an impediment to a renewal of your former relationship with him, would there not?"

Mo shifted uncomfortably in her seat but remained silent.

"Miss Kilpatrick?"

"Well, I don't know about that. After all, like I said, we tore it up pretty good when I come back to visit him last Fourth o' July." (Younger members of the jury chuckled.)

"Yes. But that was almost three months ago. Things have changed since then, haven't they?" Mo looked away.

"Don't know what you mean. Me and Nicky's still separated by fifteen hundred miles."

Franco: "Please, look at me, Miss Kilpatrick." Mo drilled him with her fawn-like eyes.

"Now. Who were you looking at in the gallery during your testimony for the State?"

"Objection, asked and answered," said Prick-kouri.

"Sustained."

Franco sighed. He folded his arms across his chest, bunching his silk suit coat over his sliver and burgundy tie. "Miss Kilpatrick, do you know a Miss Ryzanna Ryan?"

"Yeah? What of it?" Mo tossed her head high, looking down her nose at Franco.

"Is she here in this courtroom?" Mo smirked. "Yeah."

"Would you identify her for the Court, please?"

Sighing, Mo pointed toward Ry, saying, "She's the tart in that skin-tight affair. Forest green with black stripes. And the mock turtle neck. That's her."

Franco walked back to the railing, pointing over it to Ryz'n. "You mean this young woman here? Sitting directly behind the accused with his parents?"

Sticking out her chin, Mo crossed her legs and folded her arms under her chest. "Yeah, that's the one." Looked to Nick as if venom dripped from Mo's lips.

Franco: "Miss Ryan would you mind rising so the Court could get a good look at you?"

Nodding, Ry stood up straight, like a soldier on parade. Chin and chest out. Hands behind her. Nothing to conceal her perfectly symmetrical, proportions. Those luscious

curves, snug against that tight shift, pregnancy breasts jutting out, bouncing like full, ripe clusters blowing on the vine. Umm-um. Her milk chocolate locks rested in dense waves down over her shoulders. Clear features, striking hazel-green eyes, olive complexion. Was she somethin' else or what? Ry chose not to dab at a tear streaming down her cheek, standing still and proud. Franco extended his hand toward her but said to Mo.

"You mean, this lovely young lady here?"

"Well, that's *your* opinion. Ain't so lovely to me. Like her better when she's chubby."

Nick's head swiveled, glancing from Mo to Ry, to Franco, to the jury and the judge. The judge—boy! His eyes were eatin' Ry up with a spoon as if she were a hot fudge sundae with whipped cream and a cherry on top—that dirty, old bastard.

Ry, in all her glorious beauty, stood, almost at attention, humbly proud, trying not to cry. The jury's collective jaw dropped. They probably had been wondering who she was. Mebbe thought she was his sister, sittin' there with his parents throughout the trial, seein' as they were both swarthy and short. The jury knew his folks. Now they knew Ry. He hoped Franco's ploy wouldn't embolden Perkouri to call her as a witness.

Franco: "Miss Ryan, would you face to the jury please?"

Ry turned her head, leaving her perfectly proportioned torso, in all its pulchritudinous profile, for the pleasurably petty purview of him, Franco and the judge. She forced a weak, one-dimple simper, holdin' back tears. He was never prouder of her. Not only did she look so tough—outta sight like dyn-o-mite—she didn't sulk a bit. Stood right up there. Not too proud, but honest and true. Her person was enhanced by the snug shift clinging to her curves accentuating her hair's breadth of a waist, among other features. He wanted to reach over to smother her in an embrace. Who was he kiddin'? He could—

"Miss Kilpatrick." Franco turned back to Mo. "Do you know of any relationship between Miss Ryan and the accused? If so, perhaps you'd care to tell us about it?"

With her arms still folded and legs still crossed, Mo said, "Yeah, I know that goody-two shoes. She's his main squeeze now. But she wouldn't be if I come back here."

Franco turned to Ry. "Thank you for indulging me Miss Ryan. You may sit down now. Thank you very much."

Ry sat down, affecting the same hard pose as Mo. The two of 'em locked laser stares onto each other over his head. His head was swiveling back and forth. Mann, you could just feel the electricity in the air, the tension between them two girls. He couldn't help but grin. Yeah, lightning bolted back and forth over his head. He waited on the thunder.

Franco: "So Miss Kilpatrick, you're planning to move back into the area then?"

"Objection, irrelevant and immaterial," said Perkouri.

Higher: "Overruled, Mister Perkouri. You opened this door, Counselor."

Perkouri sighed and sat back. Franco prompted Mo to answer.

"Yeah. I'm workin' on it. I might swing it."

"And if you could *swing it*, would you renew your former relationship with my client?"

"Damn straight I would. Push that goody-two-shoes right off the map. That is, if he ain't knocked her up already. That's the rumor goin' 'round. If he did, it'd be too late. Nicky'd stick by her then for sure."

Perkouri leaned back with a broad grin on his face, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Request that last remark be stricken from the record Your Honor. The witness was asked a yes or no question but gave an unsolicited, hearsay response."

Before Perkouri could speak, the judge said, "You have only yourself to blame Mister Vamia. You got a little too smart for your own good. Defense has gone to great lengths in this case with so many noted exceptions to build a strong record for reversal on appeal, should the jury find against your client. The cat is out of the bag now, Counselor."

Franco stepped angrily towards the bench.

"Your Honor! The least the Court could do is instruct the jury to disregard."

"Very well." Higher addressed the jury. "The jury will disregard the last statement by the witness as unsolicited hearsay testimony." And to Franco, "Satisfied, Counselor?"

Nick wondered how they could disregard what they just heard? He couldn't.

Frowning, Franco nodded. "Thank you, Your Honor."

"You're welcome. Now, do you have any more questions for this witness?"

Franco seemed disoriented. Mo waited, as did they all.

"What?" asked Franco. "—Uh, no—no more questions. She can go."

He watched Mo pass by him smiling, but shooting daggers at Ry as she exited.

Mr. Perkouri: "The State calls Mister Rodgers Rodgers."

A chuckle rippled through the courtroom. Through Nick, too. Who could this cat be—Rogers Rogers? So nice, they named him twice? You kiddin'?

When the double doors opened, Nick's heart sunk in his chest. Franco turned to him, asking if he recognized Rodgers. Nick said he was Audy Lou's dad, the Methodist minister. He'd always thought his first name was Guy—what everybody called him. Franco said he didn't recall seeing his name on the list. Franco said he'd deposed an Audra Lou Rodgers, but not this guy. The girl had backed up Nick's story during Franco's deposition of her last summer.

Franco stood. "The defense objects to the Court hearing this witness at this time, Your Honor. This witness was not on the list. The defense has not had an opportunity to depose him. We request the Court waive the witness until defense has had that opportunity."

"Your Honor," said Prick-kouri. "This witness will testify in behalf of his daughter who is out of the country at present. She was on the list and has been deposed by the defense. The father has first-hand, eyewitness knowledge of the testimony she would give if she were here." Higher looked over his spectacles. "Any objections, Mister Vamia?"

"Well yes, Your Honor. As I said, the defense hasn't deposed this witness."

Mr. Rodgers, in his minister's black frock, tunic, turned around white collar and black slacks, had stopped at the railing gate. Waiting for the judge, he sneered down at Nick.

"Mister Vamia," said Higher. "The State has said that the witness will testify as his daughter would, if she were here. Mister Perkouri claims you deposed the daughter?"

"Well yes, Your Honor but that was over a month ago. When we learned she would be out of the country, we did not prepare for her testimony."

"If you deposed her, and this witness can testify firsthand as to her deposition, being eyewitness to the facts of the matter, as the State has indicated, I see no reason why the Court should not expedite this proceeding by hearing this witness now. The defense's failure to prepare for such a contingency should not be used to inhibit the prosecution of this matter. Just because the State is prepared, and you are not Counselor, the Court does not view that as sufficient justification to postpone hearing the witness now."

"Exception, Your Honor," replied Franco. "He wasn't on the list."

Judge: "Your exception is noted. Now, Counselor. The Court will hear the witness."

Franco sat down, disgusted. After the bailiff swore in Mr. Rodgers, the pecker head asked the usual initial questions before he got down to the crux of the matter.

The Reverend Rodgers said he first had known Nick as a fine, upstanding young man who had befriended his daughter Audra Lou, summer a year ago. He told how they had met at a private swimming club in Oxen Mill, frequented by both families.

"… The two youngsters seemed to hit it off very well together. The defendant escorted Audra Lou to church and participated with her in all of the youth group, church activities that summer. My wife and I thought they were an excellent match. The defendant is handsome and appeared to be a very charming, polite young man, respectful of his elders. We were very pleased with him. We even trusted him and our daughter to baby sit our younger son. The young man was a talented musician and singer as well. When I asked if he would care to perform with our church choir in the fall, he happily agreed."

Perkouri: "So you were taken with the defendant as much as your daughter was. She was very happy in the defendant's company, I presume?"

"Oh yes. My wife and I remarked upon her adoration for the young man. This was the first time she had taken a keen interest in a member of the opposite sex. Our daughter glowed when she was around him, or at the mere mention of his name. She was very enamored of the defendant, as were my wife and I, and our young son, by the way."

"The defendant was your daughter's first crush, so to speak? How old was she then?"

"Yes, her fist. She was fifteen." Smiling, Perkouri said, "A very impressionable age?"

"Yes sir. It is a very tender and delicate time in a young girl's life."

Perkouri: "I would agree with you sir. So, as this youthful summer romance developed, did you have any qualms about your daughter's relationship with the defendant? With her new-found devotion to him?"

"No sir. Quite the contrary. We were delighted with him and his courteous attentions. Not only to our daughter but also to the entire family. He reminded me of Andy Hardy."

Perkouri chuckled. "The defendant reminded you of Andy Hardy? Does he still remind you of Andy Hardy?" Reverend Rodgers face grew hard. "No sir, he does not."

"Why not?"

"Because I've come to learn he's the devil in disguise. As cunning as the serpent himself. A Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde if there ever was."

"Objection, Your Honor," said Franco. "Argumentative and lack of foundation."

"Overruled," said Higher, "as long as the State intends to build that foundation now." Perkouri nodded. "It does, Your Honor."

"Reverend Rodgers, why this sudden hundred and eighty degree turn-around on your part? How can you make such a contentious statement against the defendant? Especially, after lauding his praises?"

"Because sir, my wife and I found the conniving cad out. We came home one evening early from attending a benefit dance because my wife had taken ill suddenly. Our son was spending the night at a backyard sleepover with other members of his scout den. The defendant and our daughter were alone together in our home. They did not hear us come in but we heard them loud and clear. Hearing screams and blood-curdling groans, we feared the worst for our daughter's safety. When we, that is, my wife and I, reached our daughter's bedroom, we caught the defendant nude, in the act of debauching our daughter in a lewd, perverted and egregious manner, foreign even to married couples."

"Objection, Your Honor, speculative. How can he speak for all married couples?"

"Your objection is sustained, Counselor."

Perkouri: "Reverend Rodgers, could you be more specific?"

"I'd rather not but if I must, for the good of all the other unsuspecting parents with teen daughters in our county who might be subjected to this, this debaucher of young girls—"

"Objection, Your Honor, Argumentative and speculative."

"Overruled. If the defense will permit the witness to answer the question, it appears his observations may well prove his point."

Franco: "Exception." Judge: "And noted."

Turning to the witness, Higher said, "The witness will finish his response."

Reverend Rogers shrugged. "Well, as to specifics, it was dark. The only light came from the downstairs via the staircase. My wife and I stopped in the hall outside the open door to our daughter's room where we found the defendant nude in the half light with his back to us kneeling beside our child's bed. She sat with her legs over the edge of the bed, leaning back on her forearms. I'd like to leave it at that, if that's possible."

Perkouri: "Very well. Enough said. Now sir, what action, if any, did you take upon discovering this shocking act of debauchery?"

"Well, at first we were shocked, as you say—*paralyzed*. Both my wife and I froze, watching—well, I—as I stated, my wife had been feeling ill. At the sight of finding our young daughter with that pervert, my wife became nauseous. I started to attend to her. My wife, that is. But I became so incensed by what I had seen I went in and separated the young people. I tried to apprehend the defendant. But my hesitation over my concern for both my wife and daughter cost me a few split seconds. The cad was too quick. He slipped past me out of the room down the stairs gathering up his clothes as he went—eluding me. He fled on his scooter that he had stashed outside."

Separated us? More like ripped us apart by our hair, thought Nick. Audy Lou's braces took a divot out o' him just before her old man bounced her off the wall. He still bore the scar. Shoot. He could offer it as evidence, if he had to. Her dad wasn't telling all of it. He wrote Franco a note. Franco read it and nodded.

Prick-kouri: "And did you allow your daughter to see the defendant in the future?"

"I should say not, sir. We forbade her. We restricted her social movements severely."

"So your daughter had no further contact with the defendant after this incident?"

"No sir, not to my knowledge. Not physically anyway. Though I believe, they may have spoken on the phone once. But I assure you I put a stop to that also. We changed to an unlisted number, which was quite an imposition for us and my congregation."

"Very good. So, based on your first-hand, eyewitness experience with the defendant, you perceive him as a deceptive person, as you said "*a Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde*," who used his charm and good looks to despoil your daughter in your home after gaining your complete trust and confidence while you, your family were absent?"

"Yes sir, I do, absolutely."

Perkouri: "And based on your full knowledge of the defendant, you view him as a sinister person with a dark heart who harbors evil intentions?"

"A snake in the grass, sir. As our Lord said, 'For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies—' Matthew Chapter Fifteen, Verse nineteen. And I hope my testimony here will serve to warn others of this wicked conniver. This cunning debaucher of young girls."

Perkouri: "Thank you Reverend Rodgers for having the courage to step forward and be heard. Thank you very much. No more questions, Your Honor."

Higher: "I imagine the defense wishes to cross?" Franco stood saying, "Yes Your Honor, it does. But would it be possible for the Court to have a five minute recess first?"

"To what purpose, Counselor?"

"Well, as I stated Your Honor, the defense did not have an opportunity to depose this witness. I should like to consult with my client and another person here in the gallery."

"Very well. Under the circumstances, I see no harm in it. Let's make it a ten minute recess, shall we? Any objections Mister Perkouri?" The judge raised his gavel.

Prick-kouri: “Well, it seems a bit irregular to break before a cross-examination—”

Franco: “On the contrary, Your Honor’s already set a precedent for this very thing. As Your Honor says, we can come back with our minds clear and refreshed, right Judge?”

“Excellent point, Counselor. Any objections?” Perkouri shook his head. “Good.” The judge rapped his gavel, adjourning court. “Make it ten minutes then.” The judge exited.

Franco turned to the gallery, searching, lifting up on his toes and bobbing his head, looking over the onlookers as they rose, stretching and milling about, some heading for the double doors in back. Franco smiled broadly. He waved his hands, motioning for someone to come forward. Nick stood, turning around in time to see Father Vizconni emerge from the throng to approach the bar at the outer aisle. As Franco stepped around the front of the defendant’s table toward the windows, Nick followed him from his side of the table. Grinning widely, Franco took the priest’s hand.

He listened as Franco asked if Father Vizconni would mind helping out with some biblical quotations, if needed, on cross-examination. The priest said he’d be happy to help anyway he could. Franco suggested that perhaps the padre could sit right behind him close enough to offer advice. Again, Father V agreed. They huddled together above the low railing. Nick heard them conspiring in whispers, discussing the bible and the condition of the human heart. Franco handed the padre a notepad and a pencil. The priest scribbled some notes. He handed them to Franco. Franco accepted the handwritten notes, letting Father V hang onto the pad and pencil..

Ry came over to hug him. She smelled terrific. That Loves’ Fresh Lemon really got his blood up. He told her he was sorry she had to go through all this, sorry about Mo’s testimony in particular. She said it would all be worth the trouble and heartache if he was found not guilty. She smiled, nothing but tender love in her eyes, offering him a honey sweet kiss. Was she a bit of terrific or what? He told her so. They returned to their places.

Father Vince squeezed in next to Ry in the first pew of the gallery right behind Franco. Franco scooted his chair back by the railing in front of the priest. They were ready.

As Judge Higher reconvened the session, Franco sat back with the back of his chair against the rail to cross-examine the Reverend Rodgers. He was less than a foot from Father V, who leaned forward to the rail from the edge of the first pew with his right hand cupped to his forehead and around the side of his face, as if in prayer.

Franco: “Mister Rodgers, it’s regrettable your daughter isn’t here to testify for herself.”

Mr. Rodgers: “I do not view it so, sir. On the contrary, I am happy she is not here.”

“Certainly, I meant from the point of view of the accused, it is regrettable. Nevertheless, I am compelled to do the best I can in her absence, for—how did you call him—my client—this ‘*young* man?’”

Mr. Rodgers: “Yes. Among other things.” Franco let that remark slide.

"Mister Rodgers. You stated that your daughter and my client spent a great deal of time together during the summer a year ago. Did you have no inkling that they may have been involved in a physical relationship?"

"No sir, I was taken in completely. The cad's act deserved an academy award."

"I see. Perhaps the accused was as taken in by your daughter, as she was by him?"

"My daughter succumbed to a moment of weakness, learned her lesson and repented."

"Yes, of course. And that is why you packed her off to a private, Methodist, female boarding school in Edinburgh, Scotland. To insure her repentance?"

Perkouri: "Objection, irrelevant."

"Sustained."

Franco: "Your Honor. You forget I have seen the precocious Miss Rodgers. She is quite stunning—beautifully striking with long, wavy auburn hair, blue-green eyes, with an equally striking, healthy female figure and a decidedly, winning, independent spirit."

Prick-kouri stood up. "Is there a question here Your Honor or are we to crown this young woman as a beauty queen?"

The courtroom tittered. Nick glanced at the jury. They seemed to appreciate the joke.

Smiling, Franco said, "Well, as this young beauty is not here in person, I'm afraid we cannot do that. We can only attempt to garner a glimpse of her beauty, as well as her independent spirit through the words of her father, as he is under oath to tell us the truth."

Judge Higher: "Mister Vamia. Please cease your lamentations over the girl's absence."

"Yes, Your Honor. Hopefully however, because she *is* absent you will grant me some latitude in questioning her father." Higher leaned forward. "*Some* latitude, yes. Proceed."

Franco turned back to the preacher.

"Mister Rodgers, she is a gorgeous young woman, your daughter. Is she not?"

The minister smiled. "Well, I don't like to brag but my wife and I are humbled by her beauty of face, figure and spirit. With her braces removed now, she truly is gorgeous."

"Yes. From having spoken with her in person, I quite agree. And you might agree that the accused may have been as taken with her as was I, or as she was with him. You said she was quite enamored of him?"

"Yes. We all were. Both—all taken with him—and taken in by him, as I have stated."

"And you believe this 'cad,' as you called the accused, led your daughter down the primrose path so to speak?" The minister nodded. "I do sir, because he did."

"I'm surprised you didn't bring my client up on charges for his behavior with her?"

"We considered it, but decided not to pursue the matter legally."

"You enrolled her in a Scottish boarding school instead?"

Mr. Rodgers nodded. "Yes sir. That's correct."

"Now sir, how old is your daughter?" Mr. Rodgers replied, "Seventeen."

"But she was fifteen at the time of the incident you related here?"

Audy Lou's dad shifted in his seat and nodded. "Yes, that's right. Almost sixteen."

"Hmmm, same age as my client. I understood from speaking with your daughter that both she and the accused were born on the same day. September twenty-second, nineteen hundred fifty-three. Is that correct? I believe it is because I recall your daughter telling me that was one of the reasons, among others, that she believed the defendant to be her—as she called him—her 'soul mate?' Isn't that true?"

"Yes. I believe that's correct. She has used the term 'soul mate' with me too."

Franco: "In fact, your daughter may actually be older than the accused by an hour?"

"That I wouldn't know, but it seems to be immaterial."

Franco: "It is material, because when you learned of the Romeo and Juliet laws in this state, which permit sexual intercourse among minors of similar age, you chose not to charge the defendant with third degree sexual assault. Isn't that right?"

Mr. Rodgers folded his arms across his chest. "I suppose so."

Franco: "But then maybe you did not find your daughter and the accused in an *egregious* act of perversion after all?"

Mr. Rodgers unfolded his arms to lean forward. "What are you implying?"

"I'll come back to that. You stated that you came home early from a dance because your wife was ill and, upon entering the house, you heard what you believed to be, in your own words, 'screams and blood-curdling groans', which caused you 'to fear for your daughter's safety.' And upon investigating the matter, you found what? Was your daughter's safety, in point of fact, in jeopardy?"

Rodgers: "Her spiritual safety was. Yes, sir. And her reputation most certainly was."

"But what about her physical safety? Was her blood in fact being curdled? Was she in fear of her life? Did you see my client threaten your daughter, perhaps with a weapon?"

"No, I did not. She was not being threatened. She appeared unhurt. But I wasn't sure."

"So, your conclusions based on the sound of her screams and groans were incorrect?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

Franco leaned forward towards the desk. "So what egregious act do you think caused her screams?"

"Well … I, I don't really know that I should say. After—I, I entered, and turned on the light, they parted."

"*They* parted? Or you parted them? In truth, did you not stand there in the bedroom doorway with your wife for some time in shock, as you said, unbeknownst to the young lovers. Watched them exchange roles, as it were. And, as your daughter engaged my client, you rushed over, grabbed her by her long auburn tresses and threw her up against the wall, leaving you with a fistful of her hair. And then your daughter did cry out in pain. Isn't that the first pain you saw or heard her feel?"

Grimacing, the preacher flushed red. "I, I may have overreacted. You would have too, if you had found your daughter in such a position."

Franco sighed, glancing toward the ceiling. "Yes 'position.' That's a very apt word in this context. You mentioned that my client was unclothed, below your daughter. Was your daughter clothed when you found them?"

The preacher shifted uncomfortably, looking away.

"Mister Rodgers, was she clothed? Or not, the same as the accused?"

"—No. She was not clothed." Audy Lou's dad kept staring away from Franco.

Still seated, Franco lifted his hands outward, as if he were a priest invoking a benediction. "Oh. So neither of these young lovers were clothed then?"

The minister shifted in his seat, looking at the side wall.

"I see. And how did you find your daughter's well-being?"

"Objection" said Perkouri. "Details of this unsavory incident can profit no one. May we move on Your Honor?"

Franco: "I'm not so sure about that Your Honor. The witness stated that evil resides in my client's heart. In this case, I submit the devil is in the details and not the accused."

Judge: "Objection sustained. Move on, Counselor."

Franco: "Exception." — Judge: "Noted."

Franco: "Well, is it too much of a stretch to suggest Mister Rodgers that your daughter may have been flushed, perhaps perspiring even? Could it be that once you learned your daughter's screams and groans, as blood-curdling as they may have sounded to you initially, were not at all screams and groans of pain but instead emanated from a deep-seated source of pleasurable delight? Perhaps her countenance, even radiant?"

Perkouri: "Objection." — "Overruled. The witness will answer."

The minister's face flushed beet red as it had that night he'd found them together, as if he might explode. Nick was waitin' for the guy's head to pop wide open like a zit.

Clenching his fists, the minister growled, "Arrrrrgghhh."

Turning his head slightly, Franco cupped a hand to his ear. "Um, I don't believe I quite caught that Revered Rodgers. Could you repeat your answer so the Court may hear?"

The minister balled up his fists in front of him. "*May-be.* It, it was dark."

"Oh, come now Brother Rodgers. There's no 'may-be' about it. Your daughter told me that's exactly why she was screaming and how she felt. And, in fact, my client had been making her scream and radiate with similar delight for most of the summer, had he not? I have her taped deposition to attest to that fact, which I can produce if you like."

Franco leand forward to tap his briefcase resting beneath the table. Perkouri objected again, asking that the question be withdrawn, claiming Franco's assertion was hearsay and the taped deposition was inadmissible as evidence. When the judge agreed, Franco threatened to petition the Court for a writ of habeus corpus to subpoena Audy Lou to

answer his questions if the defendant refused to respond. Franco argued, "Since we live in the jet age, the girl could appear in court to testify within twenty-four hours if need be." He offered to pay her fare. The judge said he would prefer to settle the matter now. He asked Franco to rephrase his question.

Franco: "Reverend Rodgers. I'd like a yes or no answer now. Let me rephrase by way of a summary of your testimony thus far. The fact is sir, your daughter and the accused were young lovers, who had been romancing each other under your nose all summer. You came home, heard your daughter squealing with delight, groaning with pleasure and caught them naked together in the act. You watched in the dark until the lovers switched roles, then you acted. You pulled your daughter off of my client by tossing her against the wall while he fled. You forbade them to see each other. Then you shipped her off to a private, female boarding school in Scotland to insure they remained apart. Now isn't that the gist of the entire matter in a nutshell?"

Audy Lou's dad fumed a little less than before, though he was still pretty hot. He calmed himself to answer, "That's, that's—probably about the size of it I, I guess."

"Reverend Rodgers. You quoted scripture verses about the evil that lurks in the heart of man. I take it your faith leads you to believe that mankind is inherently wicked. Isn't there scripture, which states "that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?"

Audy Lou's dad perked up. "Yes. '—*fall* short of the glory of God' I believe is the exact quote. From Romans Chapter three, verse twenty-three. *King James Version*. And a few verses earlier, in verse ten, the scripture says, "There is none righteous no, not one."

Quoting scripture seemed to calm the man down. Franco leaned back by Father V.

"Thank you. Now we have established that you believe we are all sinners—"

"All save one—Jesus Christ, Our Lord."

"But we're talking about all the rest of us now, other than the Lord. You, me, your daughter, my client, the judge and jury and everyone in this courtroom now. We all make mistakes, including youthful transgressions, I'm sure." Franco looked down at the note Father Vince had scribbled for him. "Yes…" Then, looking up again—

"I believe somewhere in the Book of John, the bible records that when Jesus caught a woman in the act of adultery, the mob took up stones to pummel her to death, according to the law and custom of her people. And isn't it interesting that the mob took up stones to hurl against only the female of the two adulterers, the male party in sin being absent? Similar to what we have here today; but reversed, with the male party being here and the female being absent? Isn't that so, Reverend Rodgers?"

"Well, I-I-I … I guess I—never looked at it that way."

"No sir, I can see that you haven't. And when they saw Jesus, this mob seeking justice, asked Him if they shouldn't stone the woman. But Jesus stopped them. How?"

The minister looked somewhat stunned. He looked over Nick's head, where his eyes lost their focus.

"That would be in John, Chapter Eight. I quote, 'But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He heard them not. So when they continued asking him, He straightened up, saying to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone."' John Chapter eight, verses six and seven." His voice trailed off.

"Did anyone cast a stone?"

Sill looking afar off, in a lighter tone, scarcely louder than a whisper, he said "No."

Franco: "Why not?"

"Because they all had sinned."

"And what happened next?"

"Her accusers left Jesus and the woman alone. And 'when Jesus had raised himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her "Woman where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."'"

Audy Lou's dad looked strangely at Franco and then turned to gaze upon Nick, as if he were seeing him for the first time.

Franco: "Now Reverend Rodgers, you have come to testify in a trial regarding an alleged murder-manslaughter, about which you know nothing at all. Unable to testify regarding those charges, you have attempted to assassinate this boy's character because you caught your daughter enjoying him in sin. You have cast your words here in your testimony, as the mob in the gospel was prepared to cast their stones at the adulteress. So I put it to you, shouldn't you drop your testimony now, like a stone to the ground, and go home and sin no more yourself?"

The courtroom shushed, amplifying the whirring of the overhead fans. Nick could hear people breathing. The pecker-head didn't even bother to object. Several seconds passed in silence. Then Judge Higher spoke.

"Reverend Rogers? … *Reverend Rodgers!*"

"Hunh?" As if he were in a trance, Audy Lou's dad turned to Higher.

"Reverend Rogers, would you like to have the question repeated?"

Rev. Rodgers shook his head absently. "No…sir. The answer…is—yes. And—I will."

Audy Lou's dad rose to go. The judge asked if Franco had any more questions to which Franco replied that he didn't and pulled his chair forward to the table. Audy Lou's dad stooped, ready to step down. Higher asked if the State cared to redirect but Perkouri also declined. The room was so quiet, Nick thought he could hear his hair growing.

"You are free to go Reverend. Rodgers," said Higher.

Seeming a bit uncertain, Audy Lou's dad stepped down. Perhaps, a changed man. The courtroom remained as silent as a church at midnight. Halting at the rail gate, the minister turned to Nick saying, "I forgive you son. Hope, I—you can forgive me."

Nick glanced at Ry, who nodded. Looking the minister in the eye, Nick curled his lip in a smile. "Sure, don't worry about a thing Mister Rodgers. Say hello to Audy Lou for me."

The man half-smiled. He pushed open the gate and ambled away, as if in a trance. As Nick swung back around to face the bench, he caught the jurors looking at him, sort of queer-like. Felt strange. He didn't know quite what to make of their stares. He flashed a brief smile for them. The younger women returned it.

Perkouri: "The State calls Sergeant Sarah Smithson."

Baby? An attractive, shapely Negress sashayed down the center aisle in her Class "A" blue Air Force uniform to take her oath. Baby's sexy strut rated up there with Ry's. Nick noticed Baby wore an extra stripe in the chevron on her sleeve. He was happy for her. Had her promotion been part of the trade-off for her premature transfer to Hawaii?

Baby's testimony turned out to be a toned-down version of Li'l Mo's. Thankfully, Baby was not nearly as graphic. And she possessed no predisposed bias against Ry. She described herself as "a party girl" and Nick, as "the ultimate party boy." Baby testified they'd gone together for nearly five months before she transferred to Hawaii. Prick-kouri got her to confess that both she and Nick had been ashamed and embarrassed by "a couple of drunken orgies." However, she said she was "unable to recall the details." Prick-kouri said "—Unable or unwilling?" Baby replied, "Well, I distinctly recall the hangovers." She added that if there were anything she could go back and do over with "Nicky," she'd like a second chance to avoid those two drunken encounters. Nick had told her he felt the same way. She said she dated only him during their time together and believed he had reciprocated her fidelity. (He had never mentioned Mrs. K to her.)

"…Nick was the closest I ever come to givin' my heart to anyone completely. If fate should throw us together again, I'd love to party with him." She winked, flashing him a wide, white-toothed grin, brilliant against her chocolate skin.

On cross-examination, Franco congratulated Baby on her recent promotion, noted her good conduct medal and had her read her recent outstanding fitness report. He got her to reiterate her "deep, sincere feelings for the tender boy," conceding she had "never been fonder of anyone." Absent a redirect, Baby was free to go. Nick didn't turn around to meet Ry's gaze. He could only imagine her disgust. But Ry had known of Baby before.

The State next called a Mrs. Wilhelm Ehrlich. Another name Nick didn't recognize. But he did recognize the youthful frosted blonde as she came forward. Turned out to be Donna—the Widdah. Must have remarried. Donna walked down the aisle in a maternity smock and skirt, all skittish and as big as an overblown beach ball. Said she was twenty-five and was a homemaker living in Mitchellvale. She was anxious on the stand under

Perkouri's interrogation, strangling the large hoop handles of her pocket book in her lap with both hands. She got flustered when the Pecker asked how she and Nick first met—what was the nature of their "unique relationship." Donna said Nick was her paper boy.

Looked as if Donna might pop right there in court. Then—she did. Her mouth flew open and she shrieked. Sounded as if she was takin' a dump with an anal fissure. She half rose out of her seat gasping, "My water—my—my water broke." Looking down over the witness box Perkouri exclaimed, "Oh my Lord! She's right Your Honor.

"I'll only be a few minutes Your Honor, I'll be brief."

Franco jumped up but before he could object, the Widdah took the words right out o' his mouth, screamin', "ARE YOU CRAZY?! I need to get to the hospital *NOW!* The second one comes faster than the first."

For once, the judge agreed. He dismissed her, subject to recall. Nick thought he'd dodged a bullet there. The Widdah had enough dirty stories to tell on him to testify for a week at least. He whispered that fact to Franco, who smirked and nodded.

Higher called a fifteen minute recess to clean up the mess.

Upon returning from the men's room, Nick and Franco went over the State's witness list. Speaking in whispers. The list included Mrs. Allein, Allena Larrabee, Mike Amoré, Mrs. Kovakloczech, Ry's mom, the recall of Matt Yikes and some woman called Murray, whom the Sate had added recently. Franco said he had not deposed her.

Franco asked if Nick knew her. But he didn't recognize the name until he saw the address— across the court from Mrs. K—Kara Kovakloczech. He said yeah, he knew her—the neighborhood busybody. Franco asked if he delivered newspapers to her. He said no—Mrs. Murray took the *Evening Star*.

"Have you ever shagged her?"

Nick frowned. "Are you kiddin' me? That old bag?"

Franco shrugged. "Just askin', that's all." He pulled back, looking at Franco askance.

Franco whispered. "So why would Perkouri want her to testify against you? This Murray lady, I mean." Nick shrugged. "Well, like I said—"

Franco glared at him, nodding back over his shoulder towards the prosecution's table. He whispered, "Keep your voice down." Nick winced and whispered.

"Oh, right. Well, she's the neighborhood snoop. Lives acros from Kara. Likes to brag she's always watchin' out for the neighbors and all. But all she' really doin' is spyin' on 'em. I 'member the night Kara's old man kicked off. Kara told me later Missus Murray told the cops that my bike had been outside Kara's front porch there for over an hour."

Franco blinked. "Who's Kara?"

Nick did a double take. "Kara Kovakloczech—*Missus K* Thought I tole ya about her. Franco shook his head no. "So, *was* it there over an hour?"

Nick grinned. “Yeah. Thought I tole ya that already. You don’t rememba? Maybe it was Carol I told. Anyway, Kara hustled me outta there pronto. Told me to say I hadn’t been there? Thought I tole ya. Toted my bike through the house. Kara didn’t want the cops to know me and her’d been up in that king-sized purple bed o’ hers upstairs. In her room? With all ‘em mirrors all over the place? You don’t remember? [Franco shakes his head.] Yeah. Kara covered ta the cops for me. They didn’t listen to the old bag cuz she’d already cried wolf one time too many the last couple o’ years. Thought I tole ya that?”

Franco shook his head.

“Yeah—well she did. Cops don’t trust her now.”

“That information could be very useful.” Looking away, Franco rubbed his chin.

Franco stood up. He turned around to find someone in the gallery. He motioned them to come forward. It was Carol. Franco wrote down Mrs. Murray’s name and address. He told Carol to check with the county police for anything they had on the woman, like reporting neighborhood complaints and such. “If they need a reason, say she’s being a nuisance again. Need this ASAP, Baby.” Carol split, paper in hand.

“I’ll visit your Widdah-friend in the hospital tonight, Nick. Carol said she was headed to Royal George Hospital over in Beverly. I’ll tell Donna, you aren’t testifying. Hope she hasn’t provided the State any notarized or taped depositions. Could handle her the same way as Bucksalter. Your Widdah-friend could be tried for statutory rape and various other degrees of sexual assault for debauching a minor if she tells what she knows.”

“They wouldn’t do that, would they? She’s a mom.”

“I wouldn’t put anything past Perkouri the way he’s been going for the jugular the whole trial.”

“Never seen Donna so nervous, strangling her handbag like that.”

“I’ll call the hospital tonight. If she’s delivered the baby, I’ll go over there right away. Play up to her, ask to see the baby and such.

“Has anyone ever witnessed you two in the act?”

“No, a couple of her ex-boyfriends might’ve suspected but they never eye-witnessed nothin’.” He winked.

“Well, if she didn’t say anything to them, they won’t have any proof.” How about her, think she might have spilled the beans herself?”

Nick shook his head. “Naah. The Widdah always made a big deal o’ keepin’ our affair real hush-hush—on the Q-T. You seen how scared she was up there, stranglin’ her purse that way. Don’t believe she’d ever tell about us.”

“Well, I’ll find out when I visit her tonight. That was a lucky break, her losing her water like that. Maybe somebody upstairs is looking out for you, kid.”

“Yeah. Even better.”

When Judge Higher reconvened the session, the State recalled Matt Yikes to complete his testimony. Yikes got into the infamous "potato incident"—what all the kids at school had come to call it. Grinning, Nick ribbed Franco with his elbow. "This oughtta be good."

Franco leaned into him, whispering, "On trial for murder and manslaughter and you act like your watching your favorite show at the theater. How can you do that?" He smirked.

"Cuz it's the best show in town. 'N it's all about me." Franco shook his head. "'Sides," Nick grinned. "I got no worries, Mann—I got *you!*"

Franco smiled. "Yeah. Even better, hunh Nick." Nick winked.

Yikes told about how Nick had stolen Lena from him at the cook-out—the ball team's championship victory party—at the Coach's house down in Clairton Estates. Afterwards, Yikes and his buddy, a relief pitcher on the team name of Mike Amoré, had waited in Yikes' car outside the Coach's house for him and Allena to leave. When Yikes said, "Nick and Lena went over to his scooter," Franco noted on the legal pad in front of him, "Scooter?" Nick wrote, "Dad took my car keys but forgot the scooter." Franco nodded.

Yikes said he and Nick exchanged words. When Nick left with Lena behind him on the scooter, Yikes and Amoré followed them in Matt's car. He said Nick led them behind the Coach's development, which was isolated out in the boonies. Nick listened to Yikes …

> The road dead-ends there, so me and Mike got outta the car ta chase after 'em uphill on foot. Up a dirt bike trail, underneath some gigantic power lines. You know, the kind that look like giant stick men built out o' a erector set. We could hear 'em power lines hummin' with 'lectricity. That bastard Nick led us up the trail, stayin' just outta reach on that Vespa of his, laughin' and tauntin' us all the way. If we slowed down, he did, too, till we got close. Then he'd take off again. That chump! Ya know that scooter of his can do fifty? We chased him uphill. I dunno how far. Until we dropped down, out o' breath. Then he turned the scooter around, like he was Rooster Cogburn chargin' them outlaws in *True Grit*. Come flyin' right back at us. I thought he's gonna run us over. We had ta pick ourselves up off the ground and dive outta the way into them tall weeds there by the trail. He's a real bastard that Nick Sh'boom, lemme tell ya.
>
> [The judge overrules Franco's objection. So what else was new?]
>
> We rolled over and laid there in the high weeds, thankin' our lucky stars he hadn't clipped us. All out o' breath, from all that uphill runnin' we done. We watched him and Lena disappear down, around the corner back towards the dead end where we left my car. After catchin' our breath, we jogged back down the hill. Must have ran three, mebbe four, football fields. Got in the car and backed up. Tried to turn around but she choked out on me. Died right there."

Nick elbowed Franco in the ribs again, placin' his hand over his mouth to hide his grin.

> —We couldn't get the darn thing started. Too dark at that dead end to look under the hood. So we pushed her back around the corner under a street lamp in front of Coach Shaunny's house. Checked the carburetor, distributor cap, alternator. Looked okay. She'd spark fine but acted like she was flooded. Smelled of carbon monoxide. Wouldn't turn over no more. Then we hear Nick—the defendant—tauntin' us again. [Yikes pauses, turning red in the face, staring at Nick, who was trying to keep from cracking up.] See, him and Lena were up the street near the top of the hill under a street lamp. Nick flipped us off. We knocked on the coach's door and he came out to take a look at the car with his flashlight. But Coach couldn't see nothin' wrong either. Though he thought, mebbe somethin' was wrong with the exhaust, on account o' the strong smell o' carbon-monoxide. But we couldn't find nothin' wrong. We went into the coach's house ta call an all-night towing service. Cost me fifty bucks! [Nick shakes, laughing silently.] Towed us back to his garage. But they couldn't do no more until the mechanic come to work Monday mornin'.

Yikes shook his head, staring poisoned laser darts at Nick.

Prick-kouri asked Yikes what was wrong with the car. But Yikes was in a trance—starin', hatin' on him. Nick sat with his elbows resting together on the table top. His hands were folded into a double fist in front of his mouth, starin' back at Yikes. Nick bit his fist, tryin' hard to keep a straight face, hidin' his grin behind his double fist.

The prosecutor had to raise his voice and snap his fingers to snap Yikes to attention.

Yikes said, "Hunh?" The pecker-head says, "So what did the mechanic determine was wrong with your car?" Yikes relaxed. "Oh—a potato."

Nick couldn't help himself. He threw his palms down flat against the table, trying to swallow a laugh. But he couldn't hold it and busted out chuckling. Higher rapped his gavel twice then twice more. Nick covered his mouth with his left hand, trying to contain himself by grabbing across his chest to his left side with his right and slidin' down in his seat. Higher's face was turnin' red with anger but he couldn't match Matt's beet red face.

Matt seized the top of the witness box in front of him, lookin' like he might explode. The harder Nick tried to stop laughing, the more he cracked up. He smothered his laughs as best as he could. Higher threatened to cite him for contempt.

Franco clasped his left had around the nape of his neck, squeezing hard. Matt went berserk. He vaulted out of the witness box, charging him. Before the bailiff could react, Nick shoved the table hard into Matt's thighs. The extended table edge halted Yikes in his tracks, just as Matt started to reach across the table for him. Matt groaned in agony, as the bailiff took him into custody. Judge Higher stood up banging his gavel repeatedly,

demanding order. He fell back, slumping in his chair, managing to grunt loud enough to recess court for thirty minutes. One of the court officers helped him to his chambers.

Franco, Nick and his dad walked out onto the side portico to get some fresh air and calm Nick down. Franco said if Higher couldn't continue, any other judge'd be a huge break in their favor. Then he got on Nick for his lack of self control in the courtroom. His dad joined Franco. They all hoped the judge wouldn't throw a contempt charge at him. Franco told him what to say to the judge when they returned to court.

When court reconvened, Judge Higher seemed okay. But something was different about him, something odd. Yet he was ornery enough to admonish everyone; most specifically, Nick and Yikes. Warned that he'd cite both of 'em for contempt for the least little disturbance or if either of them were anything less than cooperative. Looked to Nick as if he'd escaped the contempt charge. Franco had coached him during the time-out. Franco nudged him to rise to speak his piece. Nick stood.

"Terribly sorry, Your Honor. I beg the Court's forgiveness. Won't happen again, sir."

"It better not or I'll add to the list of charges against you. I'm very tempted to do so anyway." Nick nodded, as humbly as he could, saying, "Yes, Your Honor."

Higher turned his attention to Yikes, who likewise stood before the bench, mumbling an apology. The judge repeated for Yikes the same threat he'd made to Nick. But the judge exhibited no mean spirit to either of them. Acted a bit goofy, actually—strange.

Nick glanced at the jury. Like the rest of those in the capacity-filled courtroom, they'd settled down after the recess. Nick noticed the younger female jurors smiling at him. The two younger men seemed to eye him with a healthier respect. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on his part. The older men appeared as stoic as ever. Those were the dudes he had to worry about.

Yikes retook the stand, only to have Perkouri say he had no more questions. He turned the witness over to Franco for cross-examination. Franco asked Yikes if he had calmed down enough to answer some questions. Yikes said he had. So Franco started in on him.

"Mister Yikes, I understand you are attending college on a basketball scholarship, is that correct?" Matt said yes. "And for each of the three years you attended Pocomoke Senior High, you earned nine varsity letters, one each year in football, basketball and baseball, respectively, is that right?" Yikes agreed.

"Now, as I understand it, at the start of your senior year, you were the starting quarterback on the football team, isn't that also right?" Again, Matt agreed.

"But you lost the starting quarterback job to a junior before the year was out?"

Matt looked at Franco sideways but agreed once again.

"And, after a successful basketball season in which you led the team in scoring with twenty points a game, you lost your starting catching position on the varsity baseball team to another underclassman. Isn't that also true?"

Perkouri stood. “Your Honor, the State objects. This line of question is totally irrelevant and immaterial.”

Franco: “You Honor, this line of questiong is necessary, as it was previously with Ms Kilpatrick. Defense is establishing a foundation that goes to the witness’s credibility.”

Higher: “Very well. The objection is overruled. Proceed, Counselor.”

Franco: “Mister Yikes, you lost your starting position as catcher, did you not?”

Yikes: “Yeah, what of it? Coach moved me to the outfield.”

“Yes, and you started there until, halfway into the season when you were replaced by my client, were you not? For a lack of hitting, I believe.” Yikes took a deep breath, looked at Nick, and said “Yeah, but I got back in the line-up later.”

Franco nodded. “I believe that’s correct. You batted, what—eighth after that? Just ahead of the pitcher?” Matt said, “So what? I’s slumpin’ a little. Happens ta everybody.”

“I’m sure. But not to my client. He became the lead-off hitter and lead the team in hitting, did he not?” Yikes shrugged. “How should I know? Didn’t keep no stats.”

“No. But your girlfriend at the time, Allena Allenbee did, did she not?”

“So what?” asked Yikes, steely-eyed.

“Now, when the coach, after practice one day after a bitter loss midway into the season, announced that he was going to make some line-up changes, he prefaced his remarks by stating that he had gotten a call from a player’s mother complaining that her son wasn’t getting enough playing time, isn’t that right?”

Perkouri: “Objection, Your Honor. Hasn’t this gone on long enough? The State fails to see the relevance in these innocuous details. The defense should constrain itself to the facts established on direct examination and not go off on a fishing expedition.”

Higher: “Mister Vamia, you *are* going somewhere with this line of questioning?”

“Yes, Your Honor. I’m merely rebutting the prosecution’s theory as to motive.”

Higher: “Well, see to it that you make the connection *sooner* rather than later.” Franco nodded. “Yes Your Honor, I will. The judge said, “Objection, overruled.”

Perkouri: “Exception, Your Honor. The State views this line of questioning as irrelevant and immaterial.”

Higher re-addressed Franco: “So where *are* you going with this Counselor?”

“If it pleases the Court, Your Honor, this witness has no knowledge of the charges at the bar. He is here supposedly to speak to motive by virtue of his encounters with my client. The defense concurs there is motive involved here, but it can only be revealed in fullest truth by also ascertaining the motive of the witness in testifying. Once again, the defense wishes to show the cause that preceded the effect.”

“Very well. Mister Perkouri, your objection is noted. Carry on, Counselor.”

Franco turned back to Yikes. “Now. Mister Yikes. After the remark about the player’s mother, the coach stated that there was someone on the bench who had worked hard, who

he felt deserved a chance to start. That's when the coach announced that my client would start the next game in your place. Isn't' that right? And you, incorrectly as it turned out, believed his mother, that is my client's mother, had called the coach?"

Yikes shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Yeah? So what?"

"So, after this announcement and your benching in favor of the accused, you angrily confronted him after practice on multiple occasions. Threatening him. Bullying him. Complaining that he was—what was the phrase you used? 'A candy ass?' For having his mother call the coach to get him into the line-up?"

Seemed as if Matt's collar suddenly had grown too tight for his neck. He tugged at it as he admitted that he might have used that phrase.

"And, as my client played well, and continued to play well in your place, you sat on the bench stewing, becoming more and more jealous of his playing time, isn't that also true?"

"I tole ya already, I got back inta the line-up."

"Yes, after a couple weeks, batting eighth while my client starred as the leadoff hitter and led the team to the state championship. Isn't that right?"

"He got hot at the right time. Lucky creep!"

"Calm yourself Mister Yikes. No need to raise your voice and risk a contempt citation." Yikes sat back a bit, looking away.

"Now, at the same time this was ongoing, you were having difficulties in the classroom, were you not? Even concerned that you might not graduate with your class? Might lose your college basketball scholarship?"

Matt faced Franco. "But I didn't. I graduated okay."

"Yes, you managed to squeak by with a cumulative grade point average of what?"

Yikes shrugged. "I dunno. Who pays attention to them things anyway? If ya graduate, that's all that matters."

"One point six, I believe was your GPA, according to school records, wasn't it?"

"I dunno, if you say so."

Franco: "And you had to take some remedial, summer courses to maintain your athletic scholarship is that right?" Yikes nodded, "Yeah, but I made out okay."

"And also, as the school year wound down, besides your worries over upcoming final exams, you had trouble with your girlfriend of long-standing, the baseball statistician Allena Larrabee. Believe you two broke up after the prom?"

Matt shrugged. "We had a tough time, sure. Happens to a lot of couples but we're back together now. Doin' all right."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, but during that tough time you mentioned, your girlfriend started seeing the defendant, did she not?"

Yikes frowned and nodded. Franco asked him to speak up. "Yes." Matt growled.

"So now we come to the uh, for lack of a better descriptor, *the potato incident*." Matt's frown deepened. "You confronted the accused. Telling him you intended to follow him and your ex-girlfriend home. When he told you following a scooter like that could be dangerous, you said you would leave him alone if Miss Larrabee would leave with you, instead of leaving with him and riding on the back of his scooter. Is that right?"

"Yeah, I guesso."

"But the girl chose to stay with my client. When they left, you followed them. As you mentioned, the scooter could do fifty miles per hour but that was only over flat ground or downhill. You knew there was no way the scooter could outrun your car on the highway, didn't you?" Matt said, "Sure. I knew that."

"So you thought you could follow them home but my client rode past the dead end, up a dirt bike trail your car couldn't handle. That's when the cat and mouse game took place up and down the bike trial, isn't that right?" Matt replied, "Yeah, so what?"

"Now later that summer you retaliated against the defendant by stuffing a potato in the exhaust pipe of his car, did you not?" Matt said he was "takin' the Fifth on that."

Franco smiled, admitting that probably was a wise decision on his part. He offered to represent Matt if he needed a lawyer. The courtroom tittered. Higher banged his gavel.

"Well, I don't think the defense needs to question you any further Mister Yikes. The Court has both heard and *seen* what type of man you are. No more questions."

As Franco took his seat, Nick patted his lawyer on the back. On redirect, Yikes reiterated Nick turned back on them, running them down like John Wayne in *True Grit*.

Perkouri then called Mike Amoré, Matt's friend and co-conspirator. He backed up Matt's story but remained calm and composed. Mike displayed no animosity toward Nick, as Yikes had. On his cross-exam, Franco induced Amoré to corroborate Matt's testimony regarding Yikes' hatred of Nick. He also got Amoré to admit that it was, in fact, *his* mother who had called the coach to get *him* more playing time and not Nick's mother calling in Nick's behalf. And, that Amoré had let Yikes think it was Nick's mom until it was too late to stem Yikes's bent of hatred toward Nick. Amoré concurred.

After Amoré testified, the State called Amos Karawaki. Mr. Karawaki said he lived in Crest Hill. He worked downtown as a chef and is forty-five. He knew Nick from the Crest Hill Boy's Club where he coached boxing, judo and other martial arts. He said he had not seen Nick in a while. He said he had taught many Boy's Club members the art of self-defense, which he had learned as a boy growing up in Hawaii. Mr. Karawaki estimated Nick was between the ages of ten and sixteen when he had instructed him.

Mr. Perkouri relayed testimony of prior witnesses who had described their physical run-ins with Nick. He described the Buzzbee brothers and their wounds received at Truley's. Perkouri asked if Nick were capable of beating such larger individuals to a

pulp. Mr. Karawaki said, in his opinion, he believed it to be possible. He said Nick was an excellent student, naturally athletic and had learned to defend himself well.

Nick slipped Franco a note to ask the witness if he would attack someone first. On his cross, Franco did just that. Mr. Karawaki said he'd taught Nick, as he'd taught all his students, to avoid physical confrontation at all costs, if possible. He said Nick was no bully. He understood that knowledge of martial arts was a sacred trust, not to be abused.

On redirect, the pecker had him reiterate Nick's "violent capabilities."

Next on the hot seat was Allena Larrabee—cute as ever. Always blinking her long lashes due to discomfort from her hard contact lenses. Lena aid she was seventeen, a student at Pocomoke and knew Nick from school. The pecker-head had her corroborate the testimony of both Amoré and Yikes. He limited her to yes or no answers. He didn't ask her to expound upon her responses until he asked about her physical relationship with Nick. Then he asked her to explain, in her own words, how that relationship developed, how long it lasted, and so on. Franco objected, but guess what? Higher overruled him.

Lena said that after the team victory cook-out, she and Nick had gone to Clairton Regional Park to spend the night there together in a vale near some woods between two ball fields. Perkouri joked: "Splendor in the grass, hey?" Lena didn't make the connection with the book or movie, though Nick did.

Perkouri had her tell how, the night before the Coach's cook-out, he had taken her and four other female classmates on a championship celebration, sneaking them into a nightclub in Georgetown. Then they'd ridden up the G. W. Parkway to stop and make out at a scenic overlook. After Park police chased them off, they'd stopped to romance in his car by the Tidal Basin. And how, finally, all six of them had ended the evening playing strip poker in an airport budget motel on Route One over in Crystal City.

Lena explained how she and Nick started going together after their night of romancing in the regional park. That was right after the potato incident, the night after their nightclub and strip poker session. Afterwards, Lena admitted their folks had kept them on a strict curfew because of those back-to-back dates when they hadn't come home all night. She testified their affair lasted only a couple of weeks, because Matt made up with her. After the Fourth, Lena's folks shipped her off to upstate New York, near Rochester, to spend the summer on her mom's family farm with her grandparents. Then Perkouri asked Lena to tell her version of the potato incident.

Again, Franco objected, but Higher said he wanted to hear Lena's version. Nick whispered that he couldn't believe the judge had said that. Franco concurred with him.

Allena stated that Matt had threatened "Nicky" earlier during the cook-out in the coach's backyard but that another player, the team captain whom they called "Stumper," had intervened in Nick's behalf. She said that before they left the coach's house in the dark later that night, Nick had asked the coach's wife for a banana. This was after she and

"Nicky" had stepped outside to spy Matt and Mike Amoré waiting outside in Matt's car. When the coach's wife said she was out of bananas, Nick asked her for a potato, so she let him have his pick. He picked a long, skinny one, cut it in half, lengthwise, and stuffed the two halves into his jacket pockets.

"As we went out the door, I recall asking Nicky what he intended to do with the potato. He said—" Lena's retelling of the story brought the incident back to Nick like déjà vu…

"Uh, somethin' I read about in *Popular Science*, waitin' to get a haircut one day. Hopefully, we won't need it."

Out in the street, Nick turned left to approach Matt in the driver's seat of his car. The car's windows were down. He said, "Hello Matt, run out o' gas?"

"No, just waitin' for you. Hope we haven't kept you too long? We got all night." He looked inside Matt's car. Only Amoré was with Matt.

"Whadidya do with Leigh Ann, stuff her in the trunk?"

"She left with Stump."

"Oh, I see. Shrewd move to dispatch the Stumper." Matt said, "I thought so."

Nick pulled out his pack of Chesterfields, offering a cigarette to everyone. Only Matt accepted. He lighted Matt's nail with a match and then lit his own. They both took a long drag. He exhaled. He leaned in over the car door, grinned and said, "Well Matt, you and Mike here make a fine lookin' couple."

Matt exhaled smoke into his face, making him cough. Matt smiled. Nick quit kidding around.

"Okay, Matt. What's up?"

"Gotta short memory haven't ya, Suupah Stah? I tole ya me and Mike's gonna follow ya home. And that's what we're gonna do."

"While Lena and I appreciate your concern, it really ain't necessary."

"Oh, I'll be the judge of that."

Nick leaned down over the door again, speaking softly,.

"Loooook, Maaaattt. Tailin' somebody driving a scooter like mine is dangerous. Come up on 'em closer'n ya think and BAM. It's all over. Scooters ain't got protection of cars."

"Tell ya what, Suupah Stah, if Lena comes with us, we'll leave ya alone an' ya can do whatever ya want." Matt exhaled fumes into his face again.

Nick was gettin' pissed. He'd tried to reason with Matt but it wasn't happening. Matt called over to Lena, "Well, Lena? What's it gonna be?"

"I'm with Nicky now. We're together. And ya know what that means."

That irked Matt somethin' fierce, so he started to get out of the car. But Nick slammed the door on him even as he opened it. He smiled at Matt.

"Okay, you win. Follow us. Just *don't ride my ass*. Ya could hurt someone."

Evidently, Coach Shaunny's wife had been watching from his opened front door. Because she called out, "Everything okay, Nick?"

"Yes ma'am. We're just leavin'."

Matt and Mike stayed put. He led Lena to the scooter, sayin' it was like ridin' a bike only you go faster. He explained how to get on and how ta ride, leanin' with him on the curves. Sayin' "Just hold on tight, Baby, and we be all right." Lena said she's "lookin' forward to it." He told her, "If ya got an emergency an' need me to stop, squeeze me twice quick, okay? Here we go."

Matt had driven up the street a bit to turn around in a driveway and come up behind the scooter. Nick went down to the corner and turned right, opposite of the way he should have gone to exit the development, toward a dead end.

The Coach's neighborhood was out in the sticks by itself, bordered by woods and undeveloped land on three sides and the dual lane highway 5A on the fourth. Behind the last row of houses, parallel to the highway, mebbe a mile away from the road, was a set of power lines. Beneath the lines, the ground was cleared. The power lines went up the same long, steep—sloping hill as the development. There was a wooden scaffold, painted with white and black diagonals that stretched across the dead end of the road at the back of the development. He weaved the cycle around the scaffold, over the grass and weeds to the clearing under the power lines, where he knew there was a path.

Matt and Mike got out of Matt's car. He heard Matt curse because the car couldn't follow 'em up the path. He told Lena there was another less travelled entrance to the development at the top of the hill. Nobody used it much cuz it was an old, poorly maintained farm road, full of ruts and bumps and curves.

They waited. He told her if Matt was smart enough to drive parallel to 'em on one of the residential streets, he could catch 'em up there at the top of the hill. But Nick didn't wanna chance it. Plus, he owed Matt for his rude behavior just now. Matt and Mike were catchin' up. Sittin' on the scooter with Lena, motor running, he yelled: "Hey, Yikes. Thought you were gonna follow us?"

Matt yelled, "You little bastard. You chicken sonuvabitch!" Nick laughed.

"Lena?" he said, loud enough for Matt and Mike to hear. "Baby, if you don't mind, I could sure use one of them passionate, wet kisses, you do so well. That is if you can do it in front of him."

Lena pulled his head back to give him what he asked for, a long, slow, wet kiss that nearly drowned him. He broke off the kiss when he saw Matt scrambling up the hill about twenty-five yards away with Amoré another five yards behind him. Lena said, "Bettah hurry, Baby." But he wasn't ready yet.

Matt was nearly on them, when he reached out for Lena. Nick squeezed the accelerator to leave Matt grasping at air with Amoré right behind. Nick took off up the hill but not too fast, baiting Matt and Mike to follow.

"Kind o' like throwin' 'em my change-up," he told Lena.

He did about twenty to twenty-five miles per hour, staying just out of their reach, as the boys stumbled up the hill. He kept lurin' 'em on, up the long, steep hill, slowing down whenever the boys fell more than ten yards behind. A couple times, Lena said Matt actually grazed her back. Nick let 'em chase for about—oh, almost four football fields. Until he noticed, the boys had had it.

He rode about twenty-five yards on ahead then turned the scooter around to face Matt and Mike. They were lying on the ground exhausted, side by side, there on the path, pantin', tryin' not to puke their guts out.

"Well now, then, there," Nick said. "You know, Lena? I do believe these boys were serious about followin' us." He pulled out a nail. Offered it to her. Lena declined saying, "Be careful Nicky." But he ignored her. "Yassah, ah do believe they werah." He lit himself up, blew out the match and tossed it away. "Well, it's been fun boys, and sang *I hate to leave you, I really must say, but Goodnight, Sweethearts, Goodnight.*"

He told Lena to hug him tight. She asked him not to hurt 'em any. He said he "Jes' wanted to teach 'em a lesson and have a little fun." He accelerated right down through 'em like a bowling ball, splittin' a pair of pins in two.

They shot down the hill, taking the bumps and dips like pros with Lena hanging on literally for dear life. At the base of the hill at the dead end, Nick drove up along the rear, passenger side of Matt's car. He climbed off while Lena held his jacket. She'd stopped asking questions by now. Learned to jes' set back and watch him in action with appreciation and amazement.

He pulled the two long halves of the potato out of his jacket pockets. Then he crawled under the rear of the car to stuff a potato half up the exhaust. He slid back out, got up and chucked the other half of potato into the weeds. He brushed off his hands and took his jacket from Lena to hold it for her to put on.

"Think I hear 'em comin'," she said. He listened …

"Aw, they're a good fifty yards away." But he got back on the bike anyway.

They took off, turnin' left up onto the Coach's street, climbin' to the top of the hill. He turned the bike across the quiet street to look over the lower housetops towards Matt's car. Nothin' to block their view except for the dark of night. Which he confessed, didn't affect him much.

He chuckled as he pulled out another Chesterfield, lit it and drew on it. Lena took the cigarette from him, inhaled then handed it back. As she exhaled, she asked, "What's so funny? What were you doing with that potato back there?"

He picked a flake of tobacco out from his front teeth. Lena straddled the bike behind him, wearin' his jacket. He didn't answer her—too distracted. He motioned with the cigarette down towards Matt's car. He said, "See 'em?"

"No I can't. It's dark. Can *you* see them?" He laughed louder.

"Yeah," he said, pointing with the cigarette. "Use your peripheral vision."

She turned her head. "It doesn't help any. What is it?"

"They got in the car, see, down at the dead end, and backed up to start a three-point turn when it choked out on 'em." He mimicked with his body and head how the car lurched and choked and died. He cracked up.

"You can see that? How can you see that? I can't see that. Nothin' but dark."

"The Lord—He give me good eyes." He winked.

"What about those glasses you wear in class to take tests?"

"Aw, them's jes' ma readin' glasses. Don' wanna take no chances. Messed up once without 'em, see?" He started cracking up again.

"What? Tell me."

"They're lookin' under the hood now, tryin' to figure it out.' He laughed like a hyena. "This really is *too much*! Uh-oh. They think they got it. Matt's climbin' back inside to drive. Uh-oh, there it goes again—cut'n out."

He did his St. Vitas dance imitation, mimicking the car. Cracked her up, too.

Lena calmed down long enough to ask him: "Nicky, now tell me. What'd you do under that car?" He said, "You don't know?"

"No, would I ask if I did? What'd you do?"

"Well, I shoved that potato up the exhaust pipe. Used one half ta push the other up as far as it would go. Funnier'n shovin' 'it up his ass, ya think?"

"You did what?" Lena said. Nick laughed and said, "Whaddaya deef?"

"No, I heard ya, but why'd ya do that?"

"Why? So I can enjoy this—[Nick spreads his hands out grandly]—this delightful entertainment. Uh-oh. Amoré's pushin' 'im. Goin' towards Coach's house. There! There they are. See em'? Down under the street lamp now?"

Lena turned her head more to the left to follow his fingers, lookin' down to the end o' the street. She said she saw them, just as he'd pointed out.

"They're gonna ask the Coach for help. Whewweee! That's gotta hurt." He stood up off the bike, cupping his hands to his mouth, loftin' his voice down the hill. "AAAAAA-HOOOOOOLLLLE!" They could seem 'em under the coach's porch lamp. Matt flipped him the big bird with his arms.

As the Coach came out his front door, Matt yelled, "YOU SONUVABITCH!" Nick cracked up again, dragging on his cigarette.

"You really are a sonuvabitch," said Lena, but she was grinning when she said it. Actually, Lena seemed kind o' proud of him. She took a long drag on his cigarette saying, "An' I just luv ya to death for it!"

Lena kissed him again as she had under the power lines. He climbed back on the scooter. This time he faced backwards toward her. They went on a kissing spree without any worries of Matt and Mike to bother them.

"Sweetie, anything you want tonight, if it's within my power, I'll give it to ya. Now, what would you like? Hunh?"

Lena placed her hand on him sayin', "Just you, Sweetie, all of you."

"Okay, you got that! An' ya know it. But I mean—anything else?"

Nick waved his hands upward and outward toward the heavens. Lena followed his hands towards the sky.

"How about . . . ummmm, let's see. How 'bout a swim? It's awful muggy."

Down the street, the Coach was checking Matt's car. He hadn't put two and two together either. He went back into his house followed by Matt and Mike.

"Well, big fellah, how about that swim? I could, uh, pay off my gamblin' debt from last night?" He knew she meant from setting him up at strip poker.

He didn't need no more incentive. He said all the club pools he knew of were closed. The beaver ponds down at La Placa would be ideal, but they were too far for the scooter, over too much highway. But the above-ground display pool down where he worked wasn't five minutes away. He could take the same back

roads he had covered earlier this evening. The only obstacle was Jock Henson who lived there with his family, guardin' the place. He said you never knew what Jock might do, adding he'd just have to sweet talk Jock—

"Ahh-chuu!" Franco sneezed next to him, bringing Nick out of his trance. Allena was saying "—We stopped off at Truley's to pick up some beer to bribe Jock and his wife. Then we swam in the pool. Afterwards, we spent the night together in the park."

Under cross-examination, Lena said she'd broke up with Matt after the senior prom because he was being a jerk. "His basketball scholarship and the prospect of co-eds had gone to his head. Matt became irately jealous when I took up with Nicky."

Franco asked Lena if she regretted her romance with Nick. Lena said she did and she didn't. She said she had "never known anyone more exciting, more romantic. More passionate either." But she regretted that her brief romance with Nicky had cost her Ry, as her best friend. She said, "Ryz'n won't hardly give me the time of day anymore."

Franco asked if Lena thought Nick had tried to hurt Matt and Mike during the potato incident. Perkouri objected, but Higher overruled him, giving Nick a break for once. Lena reiterated that "Nicky didn't want to hurt them, just teach them a lesson and have a little fun doing it." Franco asked if she really believed that. She said she did—"absolutely!"

Franco asked her to give an example of Nick's compassion.

Prick-kouri objected but the Judge overruled him again. Nick could hardly believe it.

By way of illustration, Lena told of the night in July she and he had spent on the beach, right after the cops had raided Little Mo's summer rental for disturbing the peace. Lena said Nick had written a song about their midnight beach experience. She'd brought a copy with her and asked if she could read it. Judge Higher granted her permission.

Perkouri objected, claiming the song would be irrelevant and immaterial. Franco argued that the song reflected Nick's inner thoughts, which is what Perkouri had been trying to unearth to prove the State's motive angle, so he thought the song should be heard. Judge Higher concurred. He said he'd like to hear the song, which surprised Nick.

The judge seemed a little different, a little off, since he'd experienced that spell and recessed court after Yikes had gone berserk. His ever-present, stern scowl had been replaced by this quizzical, half-simper. And he wasn't as sharp as he had been. The old fart started to kind of remind Nick of Jimmy Stewart as Dowd, Elwood P., in *Harvey*, and less like his "Hang 'em Harder'n'Higher" moniker. The judge noted the pecker head's exception. Then Lena pulled a paper from her purse and unfolded it.

She sat up proudly saying, "It's called, 'The Power of Prayer.' I won't try to sing it, just quote the lyrics. Okay?" Franco nodded. She said, "Okay, here goes."

Lena wiggled her butt to sit up straight. Lena—with her honey-blonde hair, curving in at her shoulders, bangs sweeping down from left to right across her forehead, turned up

nose, fake lashes. All made up to perfection. She had sexy lips like all of his chicks come to think of it. And pleasant-happy eyes—always smiling. She was a pert cutie, a picture-perfect chick, who blinked a lot cuz of her contacts. And curves, o' course, all his girls had the prerequisite curves. She looked sharp in the popular, snug green shift, like Ry's. Lena read "The Power of Prayer" —

Kneeling down on the sand,
Side by side, hand in hand.
We prayed on the beach late that night,
Both of us, pray'd by pale starlight.

That paved a golden street
Across the ocean to our feet,
Where we asked God to help us two.
Asked Him to help both me and you.

You know the power of prayer
Is that there's Someone up there
And, you know, I believe
He's Someone Who cares.

We asked Him to help you get straight
With your man, before too late,
And to give to me the lovely Ryz'n,
While we worshipped a new horizon.

Then, later that night, after the rescue,
Again, on the beach, it was just we two.
We sat, smoked, talked and played,
Beginning to forget what we had prayed.

I decided to swim, so I stripped.
Needed to cool off and take a dip.
Went in a-swimmin' and so left you,
But you stripped to come in—a-swimmin', too.

You know the power of prayer
Is that there's Someone up there
And, you know I believe,
He's Someone Who cares.

As we swam together and played
We began to forget what we had prayed.

Began to forget those vows we'd made.
Thoughts of our true loves began to fade.

Then, just as we decided to make,
What would have been a huge mistake,
A great wave drove us into the sand,
Smashing us into the land.

Sputtering, we tried to recover,
And were smashed again by yet another.
Washed up onto the beach, side by side.
Battered and bruised, I cursed—you cried.

You know the power of prayer
Is that there's Someone up there
And, you know I believe,
He's Someone Who cares.

Thus ended our brief beach romance.
The waves giving us a second chance
To straighten out our circumstances
And restore us to our true romances.

Now you're with him. And that's okay,
Because I'm with her, come what may.
As I think back, you know we did right,
To pray as one on the beach that night.

The Lord helped what we couldn't do
Showed us the straight way and the true
To resist wrong and commit right,
Beneath the golden, pale starlight.

You know the power of prayer
Is that there's Someone up there
And, you know I believe,
He's Someone Who cares.

Lena read his lyrics with true emotion and honest feeling, pausing a couple times when the words touched her. She said it was "the most beautiful thing anyone had ever written or said about me and I will cherish it always." Franco admitted, "It was very touching and indicative of the defendant's soul." Surprisingly, Higher agreed. Franco looked from judge to jury and to Perkouri. Nick followed his gaze, noting that all the female jury

members seemed touched also. The younger ones reached into their purses for Kleenex or a kerchief to dab their eyes. Even looked as if old Hang 'Em Harder'n'Higher was blinking back tears. Nick was sure as sin glad he'd written that sappy song. Yes, he was. Perkouri looked as if the air'd been let out of his balloon. Nick couldn't repress a grin.

Franco asked if Lena could share one more example of Nick's compassion. Perkouri objected but the judge overruled him again, saying the Court would like to hear it. Perkouri took exception and sat down, shaking his head. Old Higher-Dowd was different now, after his spell or whatever it was. Lena said she'd be "happy to share."

Blinking, Lena testified that she and Nick dated only for a couple weeks. They saw each other seldom because of the curfew both sets of parents had laid on them. Lena recalled the last time they met. She told Nick she was going back to Matt. Nick couldn't believe it. Lena reminisced aloud over the prosecutor's noted exception. Listening intently, the judge seemed curious. He bid Lena go on without interruption.

"Well. There was something between Matt and me that I couldn't tell Nicky then. This was in June—before our night on the beach that he wrote about. But someday I said I would explain. We were under the big oak, in the woods. Nick was outraged by my lack of an explanation. He protested—

> "That's it? What the heck kind of an answer is that? Yesterday you were in love with me. And now you can't see me, because you're with *him* again? I swear, a few black clouds appear on your horizon and you crumble!" He was referring to our curfews and punishments for being out overnight, you see.
>
> Well, I got mad. I said, "What do you know about black clouds? Nothin'. Absolutely, nothin'. Everything goes your way." I yelled, "You win the big game. You win the big race. You drive a big convertible. You're rock star, Honor student. All the girls want ya." I broke down, crying. He didn't understand. He tried to calm me but I was inconsolable.
>
> I slumped to the ground on the moss. Nicky slumped down beside me. He held me and rocked me gently. He gave me his handkerchief to dry my eyes and wipe my nose. Eventually, I calmed down.
>
> He said, "Lena." His tone was soft and gentle. "Is that what you really think? It's true the Good Lord gave me musical and imitatin' ability and foot speed. Good eyesight, too. And I'm grateful for all those gifts. They come easy to me, always have. But the rest, I had to earn, and it wasn't easy. Whether it was studyin', or workin' out, or baseball or wrestlin' or whatever. And the girls? Why, nothin' could be further from the truth."
>
> I stopped sniffling to stare at him in disbelief. I said, "Come off it."
>
> Nicky said, "No. I'll break 'em down for you." Counting on his fingers, see?
>
> He said. "One: Maureen's folks moved her to Texas. Two: Audy Lou's parents took her away from me. Same as (Three) Valerie Bonet's did, sent her to that art conservatory in Boston. Four: you saw what they did to Baby?

Transferred her butt right outta here. And Val Vernier (Five) and Sheena Ryan (Six), both of 'em dropped me flat. How embarrassing was that? Two sophomores dumped me. Why? Cuz they wanted me ta, ta—well, you know."

Between sobs, I asked him, "Why didn't ya give 'em what they wanted, ifyou had the chance?."

Mad, Nick said, "What kind of a person do ya think I am anyway? Them's jes' kids!" I said, "HA! Kids? Whaddaya think you are, anyway?"

He said, "Well, I'm experienced for my age and—well, they …." Nick pawed the ground, lookin' away from me. Then he admitted, "Well, I jes' couldn't, ya know? Got too much respect for their sisters. Never coulda looked either Vicky or Ryz'n in the eye, if I'da messed with their kid sisters—never."

I smiled and stroked his wavy hair. He had calmed me. I said, "That's why I'm so fond of you, Nicky. Cuz of thinkin' like that."

He said, "So ya love me so much that you just decided to dump me flat too, is that it? Just kick my guts all over the ground here cuz ya love me so much? Damn, sure hate to get on your bad side. Can't imagine what you'd do then."

I said, "Oh, Nicky. I don't wanna. Really, I don't. I've got no choice. Ya jes gotta believe that. Ya gotta!"

"Well I don't. You got a choice. You're just not tellin' me about it. Everybody's got a choice. You jes' don't even think enough of me to tell me what the real reason is."

Well, I got mad again. I yelled: "That's just not true! It's not!" I took a deep breath. Stood up, pacin' back and forth, holding the hanky and poundin' my fists into my thighs. Said "You're right, Nicky. I do have a choice. I'm keeping it from you to protect myself but that's selfish. Ya think ya love me hunh?"

He backed off a little, sayin' "Well gee Lena, I ... I mean I ain't sure. I, I never loved anybody before I guess. Least ways not more'n mase'f anyways."

"What about Ryz'n?" I said. He said, "How can you say that? I never even get to see the girl. For cryin' out loud." That was before they started dating.

I yelled. "Really, hunh? Who do ya see in your dreams at night? Her or me?"

He was stunned. And I knew I'd struck home with that dagger. He stood up to look me in the eye. And kind of whispered. "I useta see her always but, but I knew I had to giver her up. Gotta forget her. I'm bad for her, see? She's too good for me. So … lately … lately I kind o' been seein'… you, I, I guess."

I said, "*Really,* Nicky? For real?" He crossed my heart and raised three fingers like a boy scout, sayin', "Yeah, for real."

Made me feel like a queen I tell ya to hear him say that.

I said, "All right Nick, I'll tell you why then. But this is strictly 'tween you and me. If I ever find out you leaked this, I'll take it real bad of ya and never speak to you again. O-K?" He swallowed hard and nodded. [The judge nods.]

"Okay, the thing is ya see, there's a good chance I'm, well … pregnant."

Nick fell back to the ground down on the moss. He said, "But you told me it was under control." He kept talking nervous-like. He wouldn't stop and I couldn't stop him.

"Look, we can work it out," he said. "Them plans for Walnut Hill I's tellin' ya about? Me movin' out on my own? Well, heck, we'll just do it together. *You* can be my roommate. Do the right thing. Get married." [Higher-Dowd nods.]

Then Nicky stopped suddenly. Like he couldn't believe those words had just come out of his mouth. Like maybe someone else had said 'em, instead of him.

I said, "Nicky! Nicky! Shut up a minute. Shoot. Ya never let me finish, Baby. So, ya wanna marry me, hunh? Get married, have a baby and live happily ever after, like in the movies? Is that it?"

He stammered. "Wuh-well, we-we could if ya really wanna I—I guess?"

Pretty lame offer I thought. Like he wasn't too sure of it himself. Like he was hopin' maybe I wouldn't hold him to it, ya know? So I said, "If that's what *I* really want, hunh? Gee, Nicky sometimes, for a smart boy, you're so dense, it's unbelievable. So ya wanna marry me and be father to my baby, hunh? Is that what ya want, Nick?" He backed down, kind of unsure like.

He mumbled "Ah dunno. Mebbe. If-if that's what you want, I guess."

I asked him. "How long we'd been together, Nick? What? Ten days? Since that victory celebration with the girls? An' what did I do after breakfast the next day, hunh? Puked up didn't I? And the next mornin', when we were eatin' at IHOP? I had to run to the rest room and do it again? Before we got together Saturday night, hunh?"

He was kind o' stunned. He said, "Gee? How could that be?"

I said, "Oh Nicky, do I have ta draw ya a picture? And you're the one got thirteen-fifty on his S.A.T's? For crying out loud. It was *Matt*, *not* you."

Nick was dumbfounded. Like how could he've been so blind?

"Still wanna marry me now, Nicky? Be father to Matt's red-headed kid?"

I dropped down next to him and started sobbin' again. Wore out his handkerchief. He consoled me. Steeled himself, took a deep breath, placed his right arm around my shoulders and his left hand gently under my chin. Raised my chin up so I was eyeball to eyeball with him. I remember my mouth was quivering, snot running from my nose and tears streaming down my cheeks. And I'll never forget, though it sounded as if someone else's voice spoke through Nick's mouth, when he said, "Yes … I, I will."

Well, I started ballin' even more. I hugged him and my snot was running all over his shoulder and down the back of his shirt—

Nick heard a commotion behind him. Lena stopped talking. He turned to see Ry hustlin' down the center aisle for the double doors. Hand to her face, head bowed, she took short choppy steps, on account o' her shift was so tight, like Marilyn Monroe when she sashayed fast next to the train in *Some Like It Hot*. All eyes turned to watch her exit. Franco stuttered then asked Lena to continue.

Lena stood up, raising her voice to yell, 'I'm sorry Ryz'n. I'm—" But Ry was out the door. Very gently, the judge asked Lena to sit down.

Lena stuttered, saying, "Well, I-I just messed it up for ya Nicky. I didn't mean to. Thought I was helpin'." Lena sniffled. The judge told her to take her time, to compose herself saying he wanted to hear "the outcome"—Higher-Dowd again.

Instead of Franco, Lena spoke to the judge now, as if they were new best buddies.

—Well, we were sittin' there sort of side-saddle on the moss under that huge oak, when Nicky started mumbling about the amount of money he had in the bank and puttin' a month's deposit down on the apartment. Said he hoped Walnut Hill had one available. By then I'd collected myself. Rolled over there on the moss to kiss him sweetly on his forehead. I said, "Nicky, you truly are someone special. You're gonna make Ry one happy, lucky girl one day."

He says, "Whaddaya talkin'?" You know the way he does, when he's indignant? [The old fart Higher is nodding to her as if he knows.] Nick said, "It's you and me right down the line now Lena. I'd never be good for Ry. Been lyin' here, figurin' it all out. Jes' hope Walnut Hill's got a vacancy. That's all."

I said, "I hope so, too because me and Matt could sure use one."

He said, "*You and Matt?* But you—" I cut him off.

"I know what I said, but that wasn't what I meant. You might find this hard to believe because of all the trouble you've had with Matt. But I loved Matt before I did you. He was my first love and still is, I guess. I've been with him almost two years. I've been with you almost two weeks. That's a big difference, Nick. And he's really not at all as bad as he's been to you."

He said, "But I thought you and him '*weren't related anymore*?' Those were you're exact words."

I said. "That was when he wanted me to ditch the baby and didn't want me around until I did. But that's all changed. Matt's willing to do the right thing now. It's best for everyone. Our parents say so. Father Vizconni says so. Even Matt says so now. He really loves me, Nicky. Really. He just got his head so far up his rear after he got that scholarship that he was a jerk, but no more."

"Yes, I agree [Higher interrupts.] That's probably the best way to handle it." Nodding like he was her grandfather or something. Franco looks back to Perkouri, who is staring back in disbelief, as if both of 'em are thinkin', you gotta be kiddin' me. Lena says—

Yes, Judge. I said, "Nick, think about it. Would you really want to have a little red-headed Matt to take care of, runnin' around, have to send to college some day and everything?" [Higher-Dowd shakes his head no.] Well, Nicky sighed. I had rocked his world so many times in the last half hour he didn't know what to think. "Besides," I said, "there's still an outside chance I'm not pregnant. Should know pretty soon. I hope."

He yells. "Whaddaya mean? *Not* pregnant? What the heck ya talkin' about?"

"A false pregnancy," I replied, matter of fact-like. He jumped up.

"You mean, you told me all this bull, put me though all this stuff, and you aren't even *pregnant!?*"

[Higher's shaking his head, saying "Hmmm."]

I said, "Well Nicky, it's just that we don't know for sure. Probably, I am, but there's a possibility I'm not."

He said, kind of bewildered-like, "But the doctor said you were pregnant?"

"No, I never said that. Haven't been to the doctor yet. Too scared to find out. I'm waitin', bidin' my time. It's just that I'm pretty late and, well, I'm worried. Usually you can set a calendar by me." Nick shook his head and said, "I can't deal with this anymore. Come on, I'll walk ya home."

So we walked home in silence until Nick finally said, "Suppose you aren't pregnant, Lena? Then who are ya gonna go with—me or him?"

Now he had put *me* on the spot. I said, "Gee. I don't know, Nicky. Really, I don't. My parents want to send me up to the family farm for the rest of the summer. Stay with my grandparents, up near Rochester in upstate New York. They want me to stay away from all boys and just think about, well, things." I felt kind of pitiful-like. I said, "You know, I'm afraid they may be right this time. I'm so messed up right now. I don't know what to think. I can't believe some of the things I've done lately. I'm so ashamed, so ashamed."

I started sobbin' again. Nick placed his arm around me and walked me home.

Higher-Dowd interrupts as if he's father-knows-best, nodding his head in sympathy, saying, "Well, we've all made mistakes. But your parents' advice was sound. Go on."

"Well, when we reached my door, I stroked his cheek. Said, "Nicky, you're so sweet. I'll never forget what you said back there. Never. No matter what."

I kissed him gently on the mouth and went inside. But I called to him as he was going down the front porch steps. I opened the screen door to stick my head out offering him back his handkerchief. "Almost forgot, this is yours." He considered it but said, "Forget it. You keep it. You earned it."

I said, "Nicky? It'd be just fine if it was yours though." He said, "No, you can keep it." I said, "No, not this"—shakin' the handkerchief. "I mean, a baby." He half-smiled, saying, "Oh." Then he left. I went to New York after the Fourth. When I got back, he was with Ry. And Matt was waitin' for me.

Smiling, the judge asked, "So, you never were pregnant?" Nick couldn't believe his ears. Neither could Franco from the look on his face.

"No sir, I never was. Thank God. Guess I just threw up those two mornings in a row, cuz of stayin' up all night and livin' high on the hog." Lena sighed and rolled her eyes.

Higher concurred with a fatherly nod and a knowing smile. Franco said he had no more questions if the judge didn't, but Peter Pecker wanted to redirect. After receiving the Court's permission, he walked up to the stand shaking his head, hands out to his sides.

"Well, that was quite a touching story Miss Larrabee. Yes, quite touching indeed. But let's get back to the salient point of your testimony, shall we?" Lena said, "What's that?"

"On the dirt bike trail! The defendant had a chance to escape your pursuers, didn't he?"

"Yes? And, what did he *choose* to do instead?"

Lena blinked her fake lashes rapidly. Nick figured her contacts must be botherin' her, dryin' out her eyes. She said, "What? Stuck the potato in the exhaust pipe?"

Perkouri slapped his sides, pivoting back and forth on his heels.

"No! The defendant turned around and tried to run those two boys down, didn't he?"

"Gee, I don't think he really did. I mean, he could have hit one of them if he had wanted to. See, Nicky was worried that Matt might know about the other way out of the place. But mostly, I think he just wanted to go back to stick the potato in the exhaust pipe to choke out Matt's car. Because it *was* funny. He wanted to see if they could figure it out. Watch the car sputter and die. Least, that's how it seemed to me. Nicky said he wouldn't hurt them. Just wanted to have a little fun is all."

"'Have a little fun? No, Miss Larrabee, he said he wanted to "*teach them a lesson*." Those were your words, quoting him. And then to do just that, the defendant turned on them when he could have escaped in the other direction. Is that not correct?"

"Objection, Your Honor, asked and answered. I know the Counselor would like to answer the question himself and, in fact, has, *twice*. That's enough." Judger Higher said, "Sustained." Shaking his head, the pecker wood pivoted towards his seat. Higher asked if the State had any more questions for the witness. Perkouri turned about to say he did. He asked the judge permission to treat Lena as a hostile witness. The judge agreed.

Perkouri badgered Lena by reviewing all the women Nick had prior to her. When Lena asked if she had to answer, Franco objected. But Higher allowed it since Lena had mentioned the other girls under cross-examination.

Perkouri said Lena needs to know what kind of man Nick truly is so he she "may render a valid testimony." He added, "It might be beneficial to your health, as well. For prudence sake, you may wish to visit a physician to be examined for venereal disease."

Franco jumped up in Perkouri's face. He objected vehemently. The lawyers squared off in front of the bench. Allena stood, trembling, frightened. The judge banged his gavel calling for order. The bailiff stepped in between the two attorneys. Higher clutched at his left side, above his heart, in a Roman soldier's salute. His face turned ashen. And, once more, he slumped back into his chair. But again, he managed to adjourn court. The bailiff and another court officer helped him to his chambers. The courtroom fell into disarray. A glance at the jury told Nick that they were as shocked as he was.

On their way out of court, Franco whispered to him that the fiasco they just witnessed might turn to their benefit. "If Higher can't finish, anybody they get to replace him will be better for us. They may have to replace him anyway. He's been way out of line."

Franco apologized to him for letting Lena get so detailed and so emotional, upsetting Ryz'n. He said he had to try to make the jury see things from Lena's point of view to overcome her testimony about Nick running down Yikes and Amoré on the dirt bike trail.

"You see how similar that was to the way you turned back on the Buzzbees? I had to do it. Better to have Ryz'n mad at you for a while than take a chance on going to the slammer. Don't you think?"

Nick agreed. He'd make it up to her. All the same, he worried. Felt low for her hearin' all that stuff from her ex-best friend in open court like that. Yeah. Real low.

* * *

That night Franco visited briefly with Mrs. Ehrlich in the hospital. She had delivered a healthy baby girl but the delivery had been complicated. She had been hemorrhaging. The doctors were discussing their options. She was upset. The last thing the woman needed was to worry about her involvement in the case against the kid. Franco took only a few minutes of her time. He wanted to reassure her that Nick would not testify in his own defense. Like Miss Bucksalter, he knew the State had not questioned Mrs. Ehrlich in front of a grand jury. He also learned from her that, like the English teacher, the State had deposed her without taping her interview. If she were certain that no one else had proof of her involvement with Nick, she need not testify to any wrongdoing with him; thereby, implicating herself. She said she had told no one. Franco emphasized he was not asking her to lie under oath. He merely wanted her to understand her options. Without her voluntary testimony, the State could not prove any allegations against her regarding Nick. She thanked him. He left after congratulating her a second time on her daughter's birth.

When he got home, he spoke with Carol on the phone. Carol said she had found out about the Murray woman. Evidently, Nick was right. The woman had made herself something of a pariah among the local police. The only witnesses left on the State's list were Mrs. Allein, Mrs. Murray, Ry's mom and the new witness Kara Kovakloczech, whom Perkouri had added that day. Franco asked Carol what she knew about the woman.

She said Nick had mentioned her at one time as being one of his paramours but she was supposed to be out of the country, on a world cruise or something. Carol said she had some information for her but it was sketchy. Franco asked her to dig up anything she could. He said he needed it A-sap. If possible, he also wanted to speak to Kovaloczech before she could testify. He asked Carol to have the woman call him. Later, Franco telephoned Nick to ask him to be at his office at eight the next morning. He told the kid he wanted to drive him to court because he had a few things to discuss with him.

~ Chapter 23: Mrs. K ~

Dressed in a grey, London Fog raincoat with a closed umbrella in his hand, Franco waited out of the sprinkles in front of the glass lobby doors of the professional building's recessed, outdoor alcove in Oxen Mill. Nick's dad dropped off the kid there at five minutes to eight. Nick wore his blue suit with the rear double jacket vents. No raincoat or umbrella, hair long and untucked. In parting, through a lowered window, his old man reminded Nick to tuck his hair before court. Dodging raindrops, they hopped into Franco's Lincoln Town car. Driving to court, Franco described his visit with Mrs. Ehrlich in the hospital. He asked Nick to fill him in on the details surrounding Kovakloczech.

The kid admitted, "She's a good friend of mine." Franco knew what that meant. Nick related that "Kara" was the widow of a foreign diplomat and international businessman. The kid told him the guy had come home unexpectedly one evening late last spring to find him and Kara in their skivvies eating snacks in the kitchen. Then the husband dropped dead in the foyer of his home from a heart attack. He was supposed to have been out of town, conducting some affairs concerning his sideline import-export business.

He suggested Nick fill him in on the details but the kid wanted to talk about Ryz'n. She had refused to speak with him on the phone last night. Claimed she had a headache.

Franco sneered. "Hell. They all say that, kid." His remark didn't allay Nick's worry.

"Sure she's upset after hearing from a series of witnesses in open court you're the modern day Don Juan. I truly am sorry for the cross on the Larrabee girl. But it was in your best interests." But Nick was still up tight. "Look kid, I'll apologize to her, okay? Tell her how much we need her. You'll see. Now tell me about Kovakloczech."

"Hey Franco. You know I don't kiss and tell."

"Maybe you should make an exception to your code of chivalry this time, kid. Who knows what Perkouri digs up? Talking could help you stay out of prison."

He had driven up Arrowhead Highway to the Beltway, heading north to the exit for Route 4A. Not the most direct route, but there were no lights on the Beltway and traffic should be light. He could focus on the kid's story without worrying about traffic.

"Thought I told you about Kara? No? … Maybe I told Carol? I dunno, mebbe I forgot.

"Well, I's playin' Boy's Club football last fall in the Hundred and Forty Pound League. We practiced every day after school at four. So I collected for my newspaper deliveries either early before school or late after dinner. Don't like to waste my weekends with collections, see? The Kovakloczechs started their delivery about a year and a half ago. Mrs. K took a shine to me. When I collected from her for September a year ago, she invited me in for a Coke. She was wearin' this fuchsia Japanese kimono. Asked me to call her 'Kara,' confessin' she'd missed my deliveries in August. Thought I gave up the

route, see? [Franco nods.] Claimed I's the best paperboy she ever had. Blah-blah-blah, always punctual with front door service, always kept the papers dry. You know.

"'I vouldt haedt to loose vine nuuse boyee liahke yuu,' she said in that Count Dracula accent of hers. Told her I's out of town on vacation for a few weeks in August. And had some neighbor kids —the Harvell brothers— pinch-hit for me." Nick grinned.

"She was a foreigner, from Czechoslovakia, and I had ta explain the meanin' o' pinch-hittin'" to her." Nick shook his head. "Classy chick but older—foreign—kind o' mysterious, see? Had a chic European suave. Taught me stuff even the Widdah hadn't."

Franco nodded. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Oh—like chokin'. Canin'."

Franco spun his head to the kid: "What—canin'? What the hell is that?"

"Canin'—whippin' like with a long, thin rod? Yeah—after we'd made it a few times."

The kid shook his head raising his hands as if under arrest then dropped them.

"Hey, I didn't care for it Franco. And I told her so. But Kara really got off on it. She said she wouldn't cane me no more, but I had to cane her. In fact, she demanded it. Well, I wanted to please her, so I did. Then we go down to the kitchen for a snack ta wait.

"See, canin' stings, sure. But it's later, after twenty minutes or so, when it pays off. Said she '*throbbedt vor eet*.' I'm munchin' on goodies and she's eyein' me'n, salivatin', like I was her favorite *dee*-ssert, till she'd say she couldn't stand it no more'n 'ttack me like a bitch in heat. Didn't even make it upstairs sometimes. Yeah, she *really* liked that. Went nuts over it." He shook his head. "Weird, hunh?"

This kid was educating him. Watching the road ahead, Franco said, "So much for chic European suave." The kid chuckled.

"Mentioned that very thing to her. Know what she said? Franco shook his head.

"'Der ist time und playzz vor efrayding, Dahlink.'"

"So tell me Nick, just how did it all start between you and this older woman?"

Well, she invited in me this time I's collectin' for the papers—the September collection? Started flirtin' with me across the bar-like counter in her kitchen. Loosened her kimono revealing this sheer, dark purple negligee, which left little to the imagination. And she ain't bad-lookin', ya know? Told me how cute she thought I was —"wher-wee vell buildt vorrr kidt myee age and "mit eyz ohnlike any I saw." Thought I was: "Zexee ahbah in cude vay." Talked like Dracula, see?

Same junk I get all the time. I suggested that if she'd pay her bill, I'd be on my way. So she slinks over to the back counter, has me follow and pulls a ten-spot out o' a jar and hands it to me. I'm makin' change—she sez, "Vorrrr-gedd-eedt. Keep ass teep vor yourrr goodt zayrfizz." She's both a daily and a Sunday customer, see? Even so, she'd tipped me almost four bucks. Hey. I never get tips that big 'cept at Christmas, ya know? Mebbe half that. [Franco nods.]

So I thank her. But before I could split, she drops her kimono all together. Right there in front of me on the dang kitchen floor. Well, shoot. I could see right through that danged negligee. Deep purple, it was. Nuttin' under it. Tied at the waist with a kind o' purple sash ribbon? She was petite. In her mid to late thirties but curvy in all the right places with frosted hair and made-up heavy. What you might call alluring, see?" [Knowing the type, Franco grins.]

Yeah. So all of a sudden, though the lighting was bad, like always in her place, this older chick starts lookin' pretty good ta me. She exuded a kind o' class—I dunno—a certain East European chic like I said. A polished suave, see? Very deliberate but sure of herself. She intrigued me. Talked cool, too. Had this accent like I been doin', like Dracula, see? Ha! But her face and figure called ta mind a frosted-hair Barbara Eden, from *I Dream o' Jeannie?*" Though I felt more like Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*. Know what I mean? [Franco nods.]

Only Kara might've been a little skinnier in her legs mainly, not anywhere else. I mean—she's cool—suave, not bubbly or bumbling like Jeannie. Real sure of herself. So she kisses me real slow and sensual-like. And, all of a sudden, this older broad's startin' ta get to me, see? [Franco nods.]

When she slips me the tongue, I back off ta ask about her husband. She says they were no longer related. She rarely saw him. Said that, in addition to his diplomatic duties, he was a senior partner in some import-export business. Which interested him more now than she did now, after fifteen years of marriage. His duties kept him out o' town most of the time. She was lonely. Poutin', see? Give me this sad look and—I dunno—jes' knocked me out I guess. And she knew it, too. Takes my hand and sez: *Komm Leapschen, Dahlink*—like that, real deep throated and enticing-like. Then she leads me upstairs to the master bedroom.

That bedroom—Mann! You never seen nothin' like it Franco. Took up most o' the second story. Mirrors, everywhere. Ceiling, walls, doors—everywhere. And where there wasn't a mirror, everything was purple—deep, dark purple. Paint, bedding, rug, drapes, lamps, shades—all of it—like the negligée, see? Dark and sexy. Even had a purple drawing room at one end.

Guess I's too smitten with her charms. Or mebbe just too much of a whore to turn her down. I dunno. Only thing about her physically was she had a very slight paunch, like from havin' kids. Hid it at first with that sash belt. Like Donna though, so I didn't let it bother me none. Melted away when she laid on her back. And in the heat of combat, so ta speak, I never really noticed. 'Sides, usually she'd let the negligée slip down around her waist. Keep that sash tied, see? She knew. Only thing was, don't think Kara ever had no kids like Donna did, which's always Donn's excuse. Kara never mentioned any. Gotta admit Kara was smooth though, in her technique I mean. Knew all the tricks. Really got into it too—passionate. Get kind o' bossy sometimes. Likes it her way, ya know? But hey. Kara's okay. And she'd gush that I *plissedt herrr faree muuch*. [He chuckles.]

So we got a regular thing goin', a regular monthly rendezvous when I'd come by to collect for her newspaper late in the evening. [Grins.] Always saved her for last and usually stayed late. Tell my folks, I had to work hard for those

collections. Ha! Yeah, buddy. And her husband's never around. Never saw the dude. "Dee-worce-edt," like she said. Stay over sometimes. Missus K's a late sleeper, see? Wore these dark purple, satin night shades like a mask? Ta sleep?

But at least once a week, she'd be up waitin' for me ta deliver the mornin' paper. Usher me inside and upt' that purple room for "a kvicky," as she'd say. Then kick me out o' bed afterwards and slip on those sleep shades so she could get some rest. But she always offered me the run of her kitchen on my way out.

Yeah, ol' Kara—Mann. She really kept me guessin', ya know? Made gettin' up mornin's ta deliver papers kind o' excitin'. Cuz I never knew when she'd be settin' there, waitin' for me like a spider, ta drag me upstairs into her purple web.

"So, this purple spider, is she still banging your head off?" Nick grimaced.

"Aw, come on Franco. You know me better'n that. I'm with Ry now. Shoot. How can you say somethin' like that? Sides Kara's off on a world cruise. Ain't even here."

Keeping a hand on the steering wheel, he said. "Oh, really? Pardon me for asking. So how'd you end it? Cut yourself off from all this hot European chic?" He sneered.

"I didn't. They did."

"Whaddaya mean, '*They* did?" Franco exited the Beltway to head down 4A. Turned on the fan, set the defogger and windshield wipers on high as it was raining steady now—

Her old man and her. See, Kara and me carried on jes' inta June, when her hubby comes home unexpectedly one evening, 'bout dusk. First time I seen him. Totin' a suitcase. Caught us snackin' in the kitchen in our skivvies, after canin', see? Me, in a bath towel, and her in that see-through negligee, takin' a munchy break. Like I said. Well, the dude stares at us for a minute. Then—*Bang!* Drops on the spot. Yeah. Bang—heart attack. Right there in the foyer.

We watched him, horrified, gaspin' for breath, clutchin' at his heart and collar ta undo his tie, crumplin' up there on the floor—that cold flagstone floor. [Shakes his head.] Mann. The poor guy swallows a loud groan, keels over and craps out. Right there at our feet. [Shrugs.] I felt bad for him, ya know? I really did. So did Kara. I could tell. But only for a minute. We tried to revive him with CPR 'n' all, Kara givin' him mouth-ta-mouth'n me pumpin' on his chest, but he's gone—pupils dilated—dead. Those cold fish eyes, ya know? Flat-lined, see?

Thought I's a goner too, but that Kara's quick on her feet, Mann. Yessir. Surprised me the way she kept her wits and took charge like that without hardly battin' an eye. Kind o' cold, Mann. Made me shiver. I tell ya that.

Tells me ta get dressed and get out o' there pronto. Make sure no one sees me.

She says, "I tell dem eff-wray ding hoppened yuust as it didtt, abah uu veren'dt heerrah." Sez to haul out the back through the woods so no one spots me. Make sure I had a solid alibi for that hour. Don't know why she wanted ta shield me. I mean after all, wasn't like we killed the guy. So I dressed, got my bike and split."

"Wasn't like you killed him, hunh?" Franco took his eye off the road to stare Nick hard and cold in the eye. The kid looked away scratchin' his sideburn.

"Well, now that you mention it…I mean, maybe—mebbe we did. In a way. Poor bastard." Nick shook his head then jerked up. "But if I'da known things woulda turned out like that, I'd never o' started with her Franco. Hones', ya gotta believe me."

Franco watched the road but said, "'S okay kid. I believe ya. And even if I didn't, I'm your lawyer. So it really makes no difference, does it?" Franco turned to face him.

"Well, sure it does. Makes a helluva lot of difference *ta me!"* Franco watched the road.

"Okay, okay, Nick. Forget it. Just tell me what happened next."

Franco took his eyes off the highway to check Nick, who glanced at him sideways without speaking, looking ticked.

"Looook Nick, I apologize, O-K? Come on. I *believe* ya. Now tell me how it all ends."

The kid looked forward out the winshield at the stormy road ahead.

Well, Kara tells me ta do as she says and she'd be in contact. But I never forgot that frozen look of pain and horror on the poor guy's face. Him lyin' there dead on the floor like that. Eyes, open starin' off, all cold and vacant-like. Pupils dilated—black fish eyes. Anyway, like I said, Missus K scoots me out o' there pronto. Hauled my bike from the front porch through the house. Leave out the back inta the woods. Kara covers for me jes' like she promised. Tells the cops she'd been alone with her husband. Some neighbors gossiped there'd been foul play since it's well known in the neighborhood he's rich'n estranged from her'n all. Nothin' was proved against her though. And it was like I's never there.

Well, Mister K's *dee*-mise was front-page, obituary news with him being a respected diplomat and international business executive and all. Only made one more collection from her though—jes' for the paper I mean—nuttin' else.

After that, she flew back to the old country to bury him. But she didn't stay. Moved ta Manhattan in July, all hush-hush and incognito-like, ta escape the local scandal. Just as well then, cuz of me'n Ry, see? But Kara kept the house furnished and unrented. Said she liked me so much I could use it, since she's filthy rich now, after inheritin' her husband's estate and sellin' his half in his import-export deal, see? Owns the place—that house I mean—outright now.

Yeah, Kara left me the key to the house. But before she says goodbye, she slips me a U.S. Grant and a knowing wink. She says she'll be back for the holidays and that she's '*luu-kingk vorfardt to zee uue den*.' She set me up with a fifty dollar a month gig, lookin' after the place in her absence. All's I gotta do is cut the grass once a month and forward her mail to New York."

[Nick smirks.] "Believe that? Fifty bucks a month for nothin'? Basically."

Sitting next to the kid in his Lincoln, Franco stared at Nick in disbelief.

"This is big, kid. How could you not tell me? Nick shrugged.

"Gee, I'm sorry Franco. I didn't do it on purpose. Guess Kara was just a case o' out o' sight, out o' mind. Had other things to think about, ya know? Besides, thought I'd told Carol about her."

"You still receiving the fifty per?" Hush money, thought Franco.

"Yeah. Like clockwork. She sends me a money order first of each month to her house out of a Manhattan bank. Expect a check in a couple days. Countin' on it, actually. After all Mann, you ain't cheap."

Franco sneered, shaking his head.

"So where is she now?"

The kid shrugged, shaking his head.

"Last time I spoke with her was long distance from her place in Manhattan the night after my arraignment. Said she'd booked a long world cruise startin' the following week. Planned to be out of the country until the holidays. Looking forward to seein' me then. Did receive a postcard from her the first of last month postmarked Marrakesh, along with my monthly fee. Found 'em waitin' in her mailbox when I got back from vacation."

"Know what cruise line she took? Where she might be now?" Nick shook his head no.

"Well. Old man Higher could suspend the trial until Perkouri can bring her back. Or realized he couldn't bring her back, which normally would be out of the question. But with the way this thing is going, I wouldn't put it past them. The pair of 'em are tag-teaming us right into a railroad job. All my overruled objections should make for a good case on appeal, if things go bad with the jury."

"What the heck are you saying, Franco?"

"Anh, don't worry kid, my defense will rip the State's case to shreds." He chuckled.

"Kid, you're the greatest gigolo since Casanova. Does Ryz'n knew about Kara?"

"Yeah. We used her place a couple o' times to be alone."

"What'll you do when Kovakloczech returns for *her Christmas present?*"

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Be married by then. That should dissuade her. Probably lose them U.S. Grants every month though, but we'll manage without 'em."

"Does Ryz'n know Kovakloczech expects to find you waiting for her?"

"Naah. She don't know about Mister K's death either. No one does, 'cept you'n Kara."

"I'm surprised Ryz'n went along with rendezvousing at the Kovakloczech place."

"Well, she does say the place is a regular cathouse with all them mirrors in that purple bedroom. But she knows it's cheap, comfortable and, unlike a motel—anonymous.

"'Sides, think Ry kind o' got off on them mirrors all over the place. Though she'd never admit it, o' course." Nick winked. "Yeah. '*Discrete*' is what Ry called it. Also on account o' we sneak in the back from the woods, usually after dark. Keeps the bugs from eatin' us alive, too. And we don't gotta worry about no cops sneaking up behind us

either. And, with Ry pregnant now, it don't matter much anyway cuz we gotta practice celibacy until Father V can marry us in the Church. But after—yeah—it's an option."

Nick shrugged. "You believe, I used ta think celibacy's some kind o' disease?"

Franco chuckled. "Yeah, must be quite a hardship on you."

"Damn straight, it is. Big Time. Ya know, maybe it *is* a disease after all. I mean, sure ain't a condition I wanna have for long. Don't seem right—natural—somehow. Ya know? Know what's even better?" Franco shook his head.

"Believe Ry feels the same way." Nick winked again.

But that brought the kid back to voicing his concern over Ryz'n's showy disappearance during the Larrabee testimony. Franco said he would speak with her if Nick thought it would help. Nick thanked him, conceding that he could use a good word.

"Nick. You're the most precocious kid I ever met."

"Thanks for the compliment Franco. I guess I owe it to Donna—the Widdah Ready—er Missus Ehrlich now. She taught me somethin', uh—*a most very important secret* early on. And got me hooked on turtle-dovin'.

"See, Donn was married right outta high school to a guy in the merchant marine, who later become a travelin' salesman. Before he got drunk and crashed his car inta the Ohio River, he passed on his world of knowledge—uh —of romance, ya might say—to her and she passed it onto me. Useta babysit for her little boy Billy and Donn would come home from a date—usually frustrated with some creep who didn't appreciate her, jes' wanted to jump her cuz she's a pretty, young widdah—and started payin' me off in lessons of love, 'stead o' cash. Said she took great pride in teaching me about a woman's emotional as well as her physical needs, see?"

"How old were you then?"

"Almost fourteen. We carried on for a year and a half, till his life insurance run out. And she had ta get engaged. Yeah, if it hadn't o' been for Donn, wouldn't be the man I am today—the whore—see?"

"Yeah? So what's the secret she taught you?" The kid grinned from ear to ear.

"Chicks like it just as much as we do, mebbe more. I mean—if you do it right. An' once they get a taste for it, they're hooked, see? And they ain't ascared to advertise. You know a day don't go by I don't get the urge—er—ur-*ges*—multiple!" Franco chuckled.

"See Frank, the only female role models in my home were my mom and grandmom. And neither one of 'em allowed their husbands to get frisky when I was around. Just the opposite. Don't mind boppin' 'em to keep 'em in line." Franco laughed again.

"Yeah, sometimes, I can't figure out how I got here. Think mebbe *I'm* the miracle baby." They both laughed.

"Yeah, guess my family is the reason for how I think, for why I do what I do."

"Oh, how's that Nick?" Nick shrugged.

"Well, my brother's almost twelve years older'n me —your age. An' even though I's just a little tike, I seen how he was pretty popular with the ladies as a teen. I think he was precocious, too. Even if he was born in December, young for his grade, ya undastand?

"Course, I don't know what he did with all them girls, but I can sure guess Buster."

Nick chuckled. "Ya know his first date he took the girl up the street ta the movies? An' when he went up ta the window to buy their tickets, he asked for one adult and one child, cuz she was twelve and he was eleven." Franco cracked up. Nick, too.

"I seen how my folks treated him. They were pretty rough on him, I think. Pretty strict, ya know? He had been an only child. Lived with his grandparents some after his mom and our dad divorced. Got a little spoiled, mebbe. Everybody makin' over him and all, ta make up for the situation, see? Kind o' funny. For a while I heard that our dad lived with my brother at my dad's in-laws after his ex took a powder. He slept on the couch. That was before my dad met my mom, that is. Ain't that a corker?" Franco said it was.

"So, when I come along, Ramon come to live with us full-time, 'stead o' jes' weekends. My folks laid down some ground rules I guess he wasn't useta. See. My dad worked days and went to school nights for eight years to get his B.S. degree when my brother was growin' up. Him and my dad never saw eye-to-eye on things—two different philosophies o' life ya might say. More like diametrically opposed. My dad's real big on self-discipline. Sacrifice now to have it easier later. Likes to be in control all the time. He's a Marine, ya know? In the Big One?" Franco said he didn't know that.

"Yeah. And my brother's just the opposite. Live and let live kind o' guy. Epicurean, see? *Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you may die*? Yeah, that's his philosophy. Things gotta get really bad to worry him. Mom and Dad? Mann, they worry about every little thing. Why I didn't want you to mention this deal to 'em. One reason, anyway.

"So anyway, my brother quit college his first semester out at Maryland. [Nick shakes his head and clucks.] Yeah. Rather dance on *The Milt Grant Show* on TV 'stead of go ta class. After my dad went ta school eight years at night while workin' full time for the Government, see? Different philosophies, see what I mean? So Dad wasn't around as much for him, as he's been for me, coachin' me in baseball and stuff. He ran off and joined the Air Force—my brother, that is. Think my folks don't want me to pull the same stunt. 'Specially with this war goin' on. Don't want me to wind up dead over there like my two cousins. Want me to go to college real bad. So mebbe—I dunno—mebbe they're a little easier on me, see? Look the other way when mebbe they shouldn't."

"Sure. Happens with a lot of families. The older kid gets the brunt of the discipline. The parents mature and relax a little with the kids that come along after. So what's your philosophy of life, Nick? Epicurean, I take it, like your brother?"

He shrugged. "Guesso. Only I wouldn't say eatin' and drinkin' is big for me. I'm more inta sex and ballplayin' and Rock'N'Roll." Nick grinned. "Know what I mean?"

Franco nodded. “Oh yeah, I’m right with you. Only, you figure God is going to welcome you into heaven with that kind of philosophy?”

“Sure. Why not? He loves me. Heck, even Father V sez so. And I ain’t even Catholic. And ya seen in court how much I try to love my neighbor.”

He shot Franco a coy grin. “Yeah—and his wife,” replied Franco.

“Hey. Kara was as good as divorced. She told me so. And since I never seen the guy home, I believed her. Never messed around with any other wives—jes’ widdahs or divorcées. Father V. says that’s real bad. Sez its adultery. Worse’n fornicatin’, even.

“‘Sides, I’m on the straight and narrow now. Stickin’ to one woman. Gettin’ married. Even bein’ celibate like Father V wants. He sez God’ll forgive me if I’m sincere in repentin’. And I am. I’m doin’ good. Got twenty-four days and twenty-three nights ta go. And you can bes’ believe I’m gonna do my damndest to make up for lost time. Yessiree!”

“Well, I envy you kid. I really do.”

“Shoot! You envy me Ry. That’s what you envy. All the guys do now that they see how she turned out—like a beautiful swan from a chubby duckling. But if you’re smart Franco, you’ll put a ring on that Carol’s finger but quick. She’s all riiiight.”

“Think so, hey? Passing out free marriage advice now that you’ve seen the light, being engaged? Well I tell you what, Nick. You think she’s so great, I’ll trade you, straight up.”

“Better not let Carol hear that.” Nick shook his head. Franco said, “Just joking kid.”

“Half-jokin’ you mean. But you was half-serious too—kiddin’ on the square. I seen how you been eyeballin’ Ry. I can tell you for a fact she don’t appreciate it much either.”

Franco shrugged. “And you?” Nick shrugged back.

“Well, I don’t care for it. But I *understand it*. Pardon my sayin’ so Franco but you ain’t exactly what I call movie star handsome, ya know? No offense meant.” Franco chuckled.

“None taken. But I am superstar smart! And pretty soon I’m gonna be movie star rich.”

Franco chuckled again. Nick joined him.

“Yeah, I oughtta know. Off my dough too.” They laughed together.

“But now that you mention it, I guess I am an Epicurean. When I think of what happened with my cousins, I oughtta be.”

Franco shrugged, taking the Upper Winston exit off 4A. “Why? What happened?”

“Thought I tole ya. Both of ‘em were killed in Nam in the last eighteen months. Nineteen and twenty. Bang! Bang—dead! One was in the airborne, a medic, ambushed, shot through the head. Died right away. Other dude was a Marine. Stepped on a land mine. Lasted a while before he bought it. They weren’t no forturnate sons that’s for sure. And that can be me. Shoot. Even wrote a song about it. Called it ‘Two Cousins Down.’”

“Aw, Nixon will have us out of there before you get drafted. You’ll see.”

"You really think so? Tricky Dicky? He said he would. But he's been in office nearly two years now and he ain't done jack! 'Cept escalate the bombin' and kill them co-eds out at Kent State." Nick sang, "*Four dead in Oh-HI-O*."

"See, I don't even have ta go half-way 'round the world to get croaked, Franco. I can jes' stay here and go ta college and get shot. Sheesh. You kiddin' me? Nick sang,"*'Step outta line and the man come and take you away.'* And ya see? He did!

"And that dude Agnew? He ain't no better. No Spiro ain't know hero. He's a slickster if ever there was one. You oughtta know that. You used to work for him, didn't ya? Wouldn't surprise me if him and that pecker head Perkouri weren't related some how, from back in the old country. Pair o' Greek pricks if I ever knew any."

"See Nick. That's what I mean—precocious. That's what you are. What would a kid your age, out playin' ball and buzzin' beaver, ever know about politics, or even care?"

"Lemme tell ya. When your ass is on the line, you better care. Affects the way I live and think. Sure do. Live life to the fullest? You betcha. Yeah. Epicurean, I guess so.

"See. As a *Post* delivery boy, you can't help but get yase'f a little bit edumacated. *Herblock*, right? All ya need to know right there. And that *Post*—boy! They're hell on Republicans, lemme tell ya. My dad reads the *Star*, cuz he don't have time ta read the paper in the mornin'. Wants to get the latest news in the evenin'. Sez he likes to read the *Star* on account o' it leans Republican, not like the *Post*. Shows him how them other dudes are thinkin'. What he claims, anyway. Sez that's important to know for his job. He's a big shot in the "Food for Peace" program downtown with the USDA. But he remains apolitical. Sees the administrations come and go. But he's always there to run things, see? He's pretty shrewd. You seen how he played Perkouri on Ryz'n, didn't ya?"

"Yes, I did. And I was impressed. He seems to know people—human nature—well."

"Yeah, me too. 'Common sense,' he calls it. That's where I get it from, I guess."

As they pulled up the pay lot, Nick asked to be dropped off at the License Bureau.

"Wanna pick up the forms for the marriage license. Have everything lined up and ready ta go. Besides, showin' Ry the license might help smooth out her ruffled feathers a bit."

Franco nodded. "Okay, Nick. Least I can do after Larrabee's cross is drop you off."

Franco let Nick out at the License Bureau, reminding the kid to tuck in his hair.

Driving back to the pay parking lot, Franco realized he'd never had a client like this kid. The kid was right on about Carol. He wondered how he could win the case with Perkouri and Higher ganging up on him. He worried Nick might have to go to jail until he could get the verdict overturned. No, he couldn't allow that. This kid was too special. He had to keep Nick from prison, no matter what. Franco climbed out of his Lincoln Town car, hoisted his umbrella against the rain and trudged uptown lugging his briefcase, planning his defense.

~ Chapter 24: The New Judge ~

Court reconvened Tuesday a.m. with Judge Higher seemingly no worse for wear. Nick thought if it weren't for bad luck, he'd have no luck at all. He noted that Ry was back in court but still wasn't speaking to him. Though he had called her several times last night, she wouldn't take his calls. The last time he called about nine-thirty, her mother told him Ry had gone to bed with a headache. She said he could see her in court the next day. Nick indicated he was concerned Ry might pull another hunger strike, as she had last summer, after the fiasco of the get-acquainted, family picnic. Mrs. Ryan assured him that wasn't the case. She said Ryz'n had eaten a balanced dinner to prevent that. And promised she would be in court. Ry was there all right, but she hadn't dressed sharp for him or worn the yellow ribbon in her hair either. Still ticked, Nick figured.

Evidently, Higher was all right—the old coot. Though he did appear strange. Kind o' goofy-like still. Not quite so lordly. Allena didn't retake the stand. Perkouri must have changed his mind, after the way she'd blown up in his face. Higher muttered that he "liked that girl and that 'Power of Prayer' song, too." Franco smirked, whispering to him that he couldn't believe Higher had said that.

"The old guy's really losing it. That last attack must have shaken his marbles. May have to move for a mistrial. If Higher keeps siding with us, Perkouri might ask for one."

Then Perkouri asked for a continuance for a few days. He noted the judge might not be feeling well. He added that two of his key remaining character witnesses were absent. He added the State was trying to locate one who was out of the country. He also wanted to allow Donna time to recover from a tough delivery last night. When the judge asked if the State had any other witnesses ready, Perkouri said he had three more. Judge Higher said the Court would hear them now. He reminded Nick of Elwood P. Dowd again.

As the double entrance doors to the courtroom swung open, Ryz'n's eyes turned toward Mrs. Allein. She strode purposefully through the portal down the center aisle. Her blue, light raincoat flew open in her wake. Her barrel chest led the way revealing a navy blue, knee-length skirt and a buttoned, yellow top. She came blowing in lugging her pocketbook as if she were the wind parting the waters of the Red Sea. Given so much salacious testimony against Nicky, Ryz'n could guess why Johnny and Jimmy's mom was here to testify for the State. The thought made her shiver. She recalled their meeting at the gynecologist's. As the popular, outspoken mother of two of the school's top football stars, she and most of the Pocomoke student body knew, Mrs. Allein was a force to be reckoned with.

Johnny's mom took the stand quickly. She swore "I do," almost before the bailiff had finished his piece. She took off her raincoat, folding it in her lap. When she sat down, she didn't look happy. Mr. Perkouri asked her to state her name, address, age and occupation.

"Dorcas Allein" (pronounced 'uh-line'). I live at "2727 Ashton Street, Crest Hill Heights. I'm thirty-seven, a full-time wife and mother and a part-time bookkeeper at Duffy's Marine World in Oxen Mill and I'm a certified notary republic." It surprised Ryz'n that Mrs. Allein was only two years older than her mom. Not that Mrs. Allein looked much older, now that she thought about it. The woman just seemed older, more worldly, self-assured. Maybe her, large tortoise shell, frame glasses gave that impression. Ryz'n hadn't realized Johnny's mom kept books either, same as her mom.

Mrs. Allein was a handsome woman, though her glasses tended to mask her eyes. But she had clean, clear features, excellent complexion with a beauty mark above and to the side of her mouth. Her dark eyebrows, spread like eagle wings above her glass frames, contrasting attractively with her lighter, golden red hair. Ryz'n believed her mouth to be well-formed but maybe a little cold. She had a beauty mark on her cheek. Mr. Perkouri asked her to identify Nicky. She did. Then the prosecutor asked how she knew Nick.

"I've known that boy going on ten years. He's a good friend of my older boys John and Jimmy. Goes to school with them. Plays ball with them. Shared meals with us—sleepovers—the whole bit. He's a good kid and it's rotten what you're doing to him."

Mr. Perkouri: "If it pleases Your Honor, the State would like that last sentence stricken from the record. The State did not ask the witness her opinion of these proceedings. And I would also ask the Court's permission to treat her as a hostile witness."

Judge Higher: "The Court agrees to the striking of the last sentence of the witness's response from the record and instructs the jury to disregard that remark. However, at this time, the Court refrains from according her the status of a hostile witness, pending further testimony. Since *you* called her to testify for the State, Counselor, and since she is new to these proceedings, the Court wishes to give the witness further opportunity before ruling that she is hostile."

Turning to her, Judge Higher said: "Missus Allein, you will refrain from giving unsolicited opinions by restricting your responses within the boundaries of the questions posed to you. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Allein: "Thought you wanted me to be honest? Tell the truth, the whole truth, so help me God?" Judge Higher smiled, saying, "And you are right in that Missus Allein, but the whole truth within the bounds of the questions posed to you. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Allein: "Your Honor I understand that the words "honesty" and "hostility" have several letters in common. Five by my count. And if a person is asked to be completely honest and swears to be completely honest in a court of law like this, and then is prevented from doing so, they might tend to become a little bit hostile."

Judge Higher smiled again. Ryz'n thought the old goat might actually have a sense of humor. He seemed different today. Or maybe he was merely playing up to Johnny's mom, as he had to Lena. Johnny's mom was not, by any means, unattractive.

"So true, ma'am. Sometimes the legal process requires a delicate balance in order to be fair to both sides, to balance the scales of justice evenly. That is why we have rules of procedure to handle such matters, which is why the Court, as the State's impartial judge in this case, must make decisions to insure that balance so that the integrity of the legal system is maintained for all. Justice requires that the Court be blind to prejudice of any kind. You understand, Missus Allein?"

Ryz'n couldn't believe her ears. *Impartial*? But the old guy was actually acting as if he were a real judge for a change. He was acting very strange, very different from before.

Mrs. Allein: "I believe I do. As long as justice isn't deaf, too."

Judge Higher: "Quite true. But let me make it clear. If your demeanor proves hostile to the State, I will allow Mister Perkouri to treat you as a hostile witness, which means the Court will allow him more liberties in putting his questions to you. Do you understand?"

"I believe I do. But no matter how he asks me, I'll be honest in my answers."

The judge nodded. "Very well." He turned to the prosecutor. "Please proceed with your examination Mister Perkouri."

"Missus Allein. Would you please tell the Court where you were on Tuesday, September eighth about four-forty-five in the afternoon?"

"I was waiting for a doctor's appointment that I had at five."

"What type of doctor were you visiting? Was he a specialist?"

"Yes. *She* is a gynecologist. I was there for my annual exam."

"Did you meet anyone there you knew besides the doctor and his—er—her staff?"

"Yes. I met Nick and the Ryan girls, Ryzanna and Sheena."

"Please refer to the defendant as *the defendant*."

"Yes, I'll try to remember that. See? I'm cooperating." Mr. Perkouri cleared his throat.

Mr. Perkouri: "Did you speak with them? If so, what did you discuss?"

"Yes, I spoke with the defendant to say hello and make a little small talk while we waited. Me for my appointment, and him, waiting for the Ryan girls to come out of the examining room. When the girls came out, they all left together."

Mr. Perkouri: "Did you happen to see them after that?"

"I saw them from the waiting room window a minute later down in the street, where they had parked."

"Did you notice anything peculiar when you were observing them?"

"They seemed to be arguing next to the Ryan girls' car—the Monza."

"How could you tell that from a window? Could you hear what they were saying?"

"No, but their body language indicated they were arguing—hand gestures, angry stances— facial expressions, heads bobbing, pointing fingers. That sort of thing."

"Did you see any of them later in the day to discuss this so-called argument?"

"Yes. I picked the defendant up on Alabama Avenue. I gave him a lift home."

"Tell us about your conversation with the defendant during the ride. Did you learn anything about the argument he had with the Ryan sisters in the doctor's parking lot?"

"Not much. Mostly just that Ryz'n was so mad at him that she had left him afoot. He was reluctant to talk about it. I did learn that he had also visited the doctor. They have a husband and wife practice over there in Congress Heights—the Yarneckis. He's a urologist and she's the gynecologist. Nick, I mean the defendant, had visited the urologist while Ryz'n had visited his wife. The defendant said he had to give some specimens to have some lab work done. Have his blood taken, that sort of thing."

Mr. Perkouri: "Did you talk about anything else?"

"I told him we were all disappointed he was thinking about not playing football for the high school. That my oldest son Johnny had told me that the defendant had promised him earlier in the summer that he would play. The defendant said he might play but he was still recuperating from an ankle injury he had suffered playing baseball last summer. The doctors were holding him out from any contact for another week or so to be safe."

"And that's all? He didn't say anything more about his argument or the doctor visit?"

"Well, I did tell him I really hoped he'd play football. I said he and Johnny would make a good team. With his speed and my Johnny tossing him touchdowns, the team could have a very good year again. I told him we needed all our talent because we were moving up in class to Double A this year."

"You didn't learn anything else about his and his girlfriend's doctor appointment?"

Mr. Vamia: "Objection. Asked an answered." Judge Higher: "Sustained."

Mr. Perkouri asked the judge again if he couldn't treat Johnny's mom as a hostile witness. He claimed she had been more forthcoming during her deposition. Judge Higher asked Mrs. Allein if that were true.

"Sure. I said more during the deposition. But those were my *o-pinions* I was telling him. And you said I should stick to the facts as they applied within the bounds of the questions I was asked. So that's what I'm doing. If you want me to tell my *o-pinions*, the ones I told him last week when we talked then I should be allowed to tell my opinions of what I think of this ridiculous trial, shouldn't I? I mean that would insure the scales of justice would be balanced and *impartial* as you said. Wouldn't it?"

"You see what I mean, Your Honor?" said Mr. Perkouri.

Judge Higher screwed up his face. The old guy sat back, folding his robed arms across his chest. He said, "Frankly Counselor, I don't. The witness has a point. If the Court lets

the State open Pandora's Box regarding her opinions on one side of the fence then the Court would be bound to do no less for the defense. Is that what you want?"

"I just want justice to be done Your Honor."

"Very well. The Court does not grant your request to treat the witness as hostile."

"Objection." — "Overruled."

"Exception." — "Noted."

Ryz'n made herself a mental note again to find out what all those "exceptions" and "noteds" meant. She'd have to be sure to ask Mr. Vamia about that.

Judge Higher: "Does the State have any further questions for the witness?"

Mr. Perkouri: "No, Your Honor." The prosecutor seemed exasperated.

Judge Higher: "Does the defense wish to cross?"

Mr.Vamia: "No, Your Honor."

Judge Higher: "Then the witness is excused."

Mrs. Allein stepped down, asking: "Does this mean I'm free to go or do I have to spend another day and a half waiting around outside there? I've got five kids, a dog, a hungry husband and an impatient boss depending on me and I don't have time to waste."

She set her purse on the table in front of Nick while she put on her raincoat. Judge Higher asked if either attorney thought they might need to recall the witness. When they both said no, he said she could leave. Mrs. Allein bent over the table in front of Nick to look him sharply in the eye from behind her tortoise shell glasses. She pointed an index finger at him while holding her pocketbook by its strap in the crook of her other arm.

Loud enough for all to hear, she said. "You stay strong Nicky. You'll get out of this all right. Keep the faith, Baby." Ryz'n saw Nick's head bob.

Judge Higher instructed the bailiff to escort Mrs. Allein from the building.

Passing through the bar rail gate and past her, Mrs. Allein called over her shoulder to Nick's folks sitting beside her.

"Ray, Wauneta: Hang in there. If you need anything from Rob or me, you let us know."

The bailiff hurried after her as Johnny's mom strode purposefully down the aisle. The gate smacked into the bailiff's legs on the backward swing. Mrs. Allein stalked purposefully to the double doors at the back of the room. Her raincoat flew open as before with her chest leading the way. The bailiff hurried but was unable to catch her.

Judge Higher called, "Bailiff! Never mind. Resume your post —Officer?" The judge motioned for the cute, young court officer at the door to block her exit. When Mrs. Allein reached the door, the officer stood at ease barring her way. "Escort the witness out of the building please," ordered the judge. "Make sure she has left before you return."

The officer took hold of Mrs. Allein's elbow as she pushed open the door. As they left, Ryz'n heard her say, "Why thank you, young man. You've just made my day. Let's go."

Bang!

Ryz'n —and the rest of the courtroom turned about to hear the judge say, "Court is adjourned for fifteen minutes. Both attorneys—in my chambers —at once!"

* * *

When the judge and the attorneys returned, the State called Mrs. Murray to the stand. Ryz'n knew her as a neighbor who lived in the court down the street. She couldn't fathom what good this notorious neighborhood busybody could have to say about Nicky.

After she took the oath, Mrs. Murray identified Nick as the neighborhood delivery boy for *The Washington Post*. She testified that she lived across the court from the Kovakloczech residence. She suspected Nick and Mrs. Kovakloczech of having an illicit relationship. Over Mr. Vamia's overruled objections, the woman reported that often during the last year she had seen Nick enter the Kovakloczech residence late in the evening when the husband was not at home. "Usually, when he made his collections." On occasion, she had witnessed Mrs. K invite Nick inside the house after some of his early morning, paper deliveries. She testified that Nick would exit about twenty minutes later, "often huffing and puffing, usually with a smile on his face."

She also alleged the couple had conspired in foul play in the death of Mrs. K's late husband last spring. On the evening of the late Mr. K's "unfortunate death," Mrs. Murray had noticed Nick's bike parked for quite a while outside the colonial style Kovakloczech house, against a pillar on the front landing before supper. But, when the ambulance arrived later, after supper, to remove the husband's corpse, the bike was gone.

The old busybody said that Mrs. K had moved to New York City in July, leaving Nicky a house key so that he could maintain the home in her absence.

Mrs. Murray testified that she believed "the defendant uses the house as a brothel to dally with his many female acquaintances." Fortunately for Ryz'n, the woman was unable to identify any of the alleged "female acquaintances" by name. This was "due to the fact" that the old biddy suspected that "the defendant and his paramours approached the house by the rear entrance at night, using the cover of the woods behind the house to gain access surreptitiously." Mrs. Murray assumed this because she occasionally saw lights on in the house some nights that differed from the pre-set timer lights that usually came on. Mr. Perkouri turned Mrs. Murray over to Mr. Vamia for cross-examination.

"Missus Murray. Do you recall what was the county coroner's determination of the cause of death for the late Mister Kovakloczech?"

"Why yes. I believe they said the poor man died of a heart attack."

"Yet you have some suspicions regarding this determination?"

"Yes, I most certainly do."

"And you suspect that the accused and the late Mister Kovakloczech's widow, who is unable to be here to testify in her own behalf, had committed some subterfuge that resulted in the poor man's death?"

Mrs. Murray perked up, apparently interested that the defense attorney was seeing things her way. "Yes, quite so." She nodded. "I definitely have my suspicions."

"Tell me Missus Murray. Do you have a medical degree in pathology or histology? Ever examined a corpse to determine cause of death? Even see the body of the late Mister Kovakloczech before the ambulance removed it?" Mrs. Murray stammered, "Why no—"

"So you really have no idea what you're talking about when it comes to contradicting a licensed, board-certified, professional coroner's expert diagnosis regarding Mister Kovakloczech's cause of death, am I right?"

"Well, I'm not a professional in that sense. No, but I—"

"And of course, you were not in the house when the death of the late Mister Kovakloczech occurred, were you?"

"Well, of course not. I never said I was."

"And in your expert, professional opinion as neighborhood busybody, you did not even see my client in or around the house at the time Miste Kovakloczech expired, did you?"

"Sir, I resent your implications. I saw his bike. I—"

"Just answer the question please, Missus Murray."

"Well… no, I did not actually see him there at that time. Just his bike."

"But you did report your suspicions to the police, did you not?"

"Yes, I did."

"And what did the police conclude about the matter?" Mrs. Murray shrugged.

"Well. They said that Missus Kovakloczech had said that she was home alone when her husband came in and dropped dead on the floor of a heart attack."

"So the authorities could not substantiate your allegations?"

"Well, no, but I think if they would have pressed her a little more. And perhaps questioned *him*—the defendant, they—"

Mr. Vamia cut her off again, saying "Yes ma'am. I'm quite sure if *you* had been in charge of the investigation, the matter would have been handled quite differently."

The courtroom broke into spontaneous chuckling. Ryz'n couldn't help but giggle a little herself. She thought Mr. Vamia would let the poor woman go then, but he didn't.

"Now Missus Murray, was that the first time you had notified the police of activities you found to be suspicious in your neighborhood?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection Your Honor, irrelevant and immaterial.

Judge Higher: "Mister Vamia, what has this to do with the case?"

"Your Honor, this woman has been brought here to testify against my client, allegedly because somehow her testimony in this matter will mysteriously speak to his motivation on the night of the accident. Although I disagree with that logic, she *has* testified for the State. It is only just that the court understand how other allegations she has made have come to be viewed by the local authorities. Goes to credibility, Your Honor."

"Very well. Objection overruled. The witness will answer."

The woman seemed flustered. She said, "Well no. I try to help my neighbors, if I can."

Mr. Vamia: "I'm quite certain you do. Now Missus Murray, I'd like you to answer my next questions with a simple 'yes' or 'no' response.

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection Your Honor."

Judge: "On what grounds, Mister Perkouri?"

Mr. Perkouri: "On the grounds of irrelevancy and immateriality and lack of foundation."

Judge: "But Mister Perkouri, we have not even heard the questions yet."

Mr. Perkouri: "Well, defense has indicated it will ask her about other reports to the police, which I'm sure have nothing to do with the defendant in this case."

Judge: "Mister Perkouri. That may very well be. But you have called this witness. She has made some very specific and serious allegations against the defendant. Certainly, the defendant and this Court have the right to hear what she knows. Whether her other dealings with the police have anything specifically to do with the defendant or not, the defense has the right to call into question the credibility of the witness, within certain boundaries of course that the Court will determine. And defense has latitude on cross in laying foundation. Your objection is overruled, Counselor. Mister Vamia, please proceed with your interview." Ryz'n was pleasantly shocked with the judge's fair ruling.

The prosecutor sat down. She saw Mr. Vamia half-turn to make a face at Nick. Seemed as if he was shocked by the judge's ruling too, as if he wondered where the judge had acquired his new-found, legal reasoning abilities.

Mr. Vamia: "Thank you very much Your Honor for that lucid ruling. Now, Missus Murray. Isn't it true that on August second last, you called the police to report that you heard a baby crying in your next door neighbor's backyard in the dead of night? And you suspected the parents of abusing their infant by leaving it alone in the yard?"

"Well, I—"

"Just a simple yes or nor will do Missus Murray. Please." She looked down. "Yes."

"And isn't it also true that when the police responded to your call, they discovered a stray cat in the neighbor's backyard while the infant you believed you heard was asleep in its crib?" The woman nodded. "Please, Missus Murray, speak up so we can hear you."

"Well …Yes—"

"And isn't it also true Missus Murray that over a year ago, ten months prior to that incident, you reported that this same next door neighbor was being raped by a—what was it?" Mr. Vamia pulled some notes from his shirt pocket inside his coat. "—Oh yes, quote, 'a naked, masked invader, in her living room?' End quote."

Mrs. Murray: "Well yes, but that—"

"Unh-unh, *Missus Murrrrr-eeeee?* A simple 'yes' or 'no' will do now. And isn't it true that after your call, the police arrived upon the scene to learn that your neighbors were celebrating their fourth wedding anniversary with some sexual role-playing at midnight in the supposed privacy of their own home?" The woman sighed but didn't respond.

"Missus *Murrr-eeeee?"* Her face turned beet red. "Well … Yes, but—"

"Yes. And isn't it also true that on March twenty-fifth last, you notified the police once again of a break-in at a house across the street next to the Kovakloczech place one rainy, cold evening? Only to learn later that the nanny had gone for a walk when her employing family was out to dinner, got caught by the storm, and having forgotten her key, was, in fact, searching for an unlocked window to re-enter the home to get in out of the rain?"

Mrs. Murray: "Well, she looked very suspicious to me."

"Yes ma'am. I'm sure she did. [More chuckles.] No more questions, Your Honor."

The judge asked if the State wished to redirect but the prosecutor said no. Instead, he buried his head in his hands with his elbows resting on the table. As Mrs. Murray stepped down, Ryz'n looked anxiously about at the court members and the gallery. She was heartened by the humorous looks on their faces, relieved to learn that the gossip's testimony did not seem to garner much credibility. And she and Nick were not under suspicion of sneaking in the back to use the cathouse as a love nest. If they only knew.

Judge Higher: "Does the State wish to call another witness?"

Mr. Perkouri: "Yes, Your Honor. We have one more witness today but two more we'd like the Court to hear after a continuance, if the Court would be disposed to grant one."

Judge Higher: "Continuance? Hmmm. Call your witness, Mister Perkouri."

"Very well. The State calls Missus Rosalie Maasila Matondkhar Ryan." *Her mom!*

Before Ryz'n could work up a good fright, Mr. Vamia stood to object to the State calling her as a witness. When the judge asked why? Mr. Vamia said "On the grounds that her testimony would be both irrelevant and immaterial. This woman had nothing to do with the accident and neither was she present at Truley's road house that night."

The judge asked Mr. Perkouri if this was correct. The prosecutor said that, while Mr. Vamia's assertions were accurate, the next witness knew the defendant well enough to supply some "significant, fact-based insight into his character, which would support the State's theory of motive in the case." Since the Court had allowed this type of testimony thus far, he saw no reason why the witness should not be allowed to testify. The prosecutor reminded Judge Higher that the judge had warned the defense about objecting to the State's character witnesses against the defendant in the past. The judge concurred.

Her mom came forward to be sworn in. Ryz'n made eye contact with her mom just before she sat down. Her mom's feeble effort at an encouraging smile melted quickly. Ryz'n was so nervous, she thought she must go to the bathroom. She couldn't leave now, so she crossed her legs. Too bad the judge didn't have to go too, so they could recess.

Mr. Perkouri: "Missus Ryan. Please state your name, address, age and occupation."

Her mom sat up straight and, for the first time in a long while, Ryz'n noticed how young and lovely her mother truly was. To her, she had always been just "Mom" or, more recently, "Mother." She took for granted how close in age and appearance they truly were to one another. Though her mom's hair was darker, she wore her hair with sparse bangs curled down over her forehead. The rest of her black hair swept up and back over her head, curling around her ears down to her neck, reminding her of ram's horns. The "do" enhanced her youthful appearance. She thought her mom to be almost breathtaking in a quaint sort of way. She wore her new, spring green Princess dress that favorably showed her still shapely form. Her mom had followed her example by losing more than twenty pounds over the summer. Though her mom was still thicker everywhere, and more matronly endowed, she possessed a bright countenance and chubby, baby-faced cheeks that produced her own set of dimples and double chin when she smiled. To her surprise, aside from their similar appearance, Ryz'n found she admired her mom very much. It kind of shocked her to learn here in the courtroom that her mom was still quite a dish.

As her mother sat primly on the stand, Ryz'n believed she might be looking at herself in the mirror eighteen years from now. The bangs definitely shaved off a couple years. She thought her mother could easily pass for thirty. She looked younger than Mr. Vamia. It amazed Ryz'n to see her mother in this sober but refreshing light. Ryz'n was proud of her. Her mom was staring at her. Perhaps her mother realized what Ryz'n was seeing in her for the first time, what had been there all along. Her mom smiled.

Mr. Perkouri: "Uh, Missus Ryan?" Her mom snapped out of her trance. Ryz'n, too.

"Yes sir?"

"Please state your name, address age, and occupation for the Court." Her mom smiled.

"Oh yes, of course. My name is Rosalie Ryan. I live at Twenty-two Twenty-One, Twenty-first Avenue in Crest Hill Heights, Maryland. I'm a homemaker and work part time as a Budget Analyst at the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington D.C. And I'm thirty-five years of age." She beamed proudly.

"Thank you Missus Ryan. I would have thought you weren't a day over thirty."

The weasel smiled at her. Her mom smiled back.

Watch out for this guy, Mom. He's not on our side.

Mr. Perkouri: "So you're married and have a family?"

"Yes sir. I am happily married. My husband is a few years older than I. He works at Landrews Air Force Base. He is in charge of the Welfare and Recreation offices for both Landrews and Brolling." She beamed proudly again.

Mr. Perkouri: "Of course, and you've been married how long now?"

"Almost eighteen years, I'm proud to say." She smiled at Ryz'n, who mentally repeated her silent admonition for her mother.

"Well congratulations Missus Ryan. Seventeen years? Remarkable. With your youthful appearance, I'd never have guessed. Any children?"

"Yes sir, we have two lovely daughters: Ryzanna Christine and Sheena Ann."

"Yes I've seen both of them. They *are* 'lovely.' Take after their mother, I believe."

"Why thank you. I believe my husband will appreciate your compliment as well." The courtroom tittered briefly.

"Well, by all means. Of course. And how old are your daughters Missus Ryan?"

Mr. Vamia: "Objection. Irrelevant and immaterial. Your Honor is there any point in this questioning?"

"Overruled. But Mister Perkouri, please make your connection, sooner than later."

"Very well Your Honor. Just a couple more questions and all should be made clear."

Mr. Vamia: "Exception." Judge Higher: "Noted."

Like her mother, Ryz'n watched this legal sparring not fully understanding what was going on, but she had learned to trust Mr. Vamia's instincts in the courtroom. Suddenly, she felt frightened for her mother, though she couldn't articulate the reasons for her apprehension. She feared the shark was circling.

Mr. Perkouri: "So, Missus Ryan, you were going to tell us your daughters' ages …"

Mr. Vamia tossed his pen onto the desk before him. He turned to Nick. Ryz'n could see the attorney shaking his head in disgust. Her mom watched this byplay also.

The prosecutor repeated: "Missus Ryan?"

"Yes sir?"

Mr. Perkouri: "How old are your daughters?"

"Ah yes. Our baby Sheena Ann just turned sixteen two weeks ago. And our oldest, Ryzanna Christine is seventeen."

Mr. Perkouri: "Ah, two teen-agers in the house so close in age must make for some exciting times. And when was Ryzanna's birthday?"

"Yes sir, it certainly does. Her birthday is June twenty-second."

"Now Missus Ryan, do you know the defendant in this case, William Nicholas *Shee*boom?" She smiled saying, "Yes sir, I do."

The prosecutor seemed to take pleasure in mispronouncing Nick's name.

Mr. Perkouri: "If he is in the courtroom, would you please point him out to us."

Ryz'n's mom pointed to Nick. "That is Nick sitting at the table there."

"Very well. Let the record show the witness identified the defendant. And how do you know him Missus Ryan?"

"He's been our paper boy well over two years now. He delivers the *Post* in the mornings. We are daily and Sunday subscribers. He's an excellent paper boy, always prompt and sticks the paper inside the storm door to keep it dry during inclimate weather." She smiled at Nick.

Mr. Perkouri: "Yes, I see. But is there any other way in which you know him?"

"Well, how do you mean?"

"Well, I mean do you have any relationship with him other than him being your paper boy?" Her mom rocked in her seat and sat up a little straighter. "Well, yes I do. Nick—"

"—The defendant."

"Oh, yes sir, *the defendant* is a very good friend of our older daughter."

Mr. Perkouri: "I see. And how long have they known each other?"

"Well as I said the—the defendant, that is, has been our paper boy for nearly three years, so she has known him, as have we all, the family I mean, for that length of time."

Mr. Perkouri: "Of course. But how long has he been *a very good friend* of your daughter's? I believe that's the term you used."

"Yes sir, it was. Um, I'd say they started dating right around, oh just after the Fourth of July weekend, I'd say."

Mr. Perkouri: "I see. And were you and your husband pleased with your daughter dating the defendant then?"

"You mean when they first started going together?"

"Yes, that is precisely what I mean." Her mom sighed.

"Well, we were a little apprehensive about it; my husband, more so than I."

"And why was that?"

"Well, there was talk, you know, about him."

Mr. Vamia: "Objection. Hearsay."

Judge Higher: "Sustained."

Mr. Perkouri: "Well, would it be safe to say that you had reservations about your older daughter dating the defendant initially but you have overcome those reservations now?"

"Yes sir. I suppose you could say that."

"Even despite the fact that the defendant is on trial for murder?"

Her mom shifted uncomfortably in her seat, looking down into her lap. Swallowing hard, she looked up again at Ryz'n.

"Well, it *is* a very difficult thing. But we all feel that he—the defendant—is not guilty and this trial will prove that." She forced a smile to look at Nick and the jury. "We have great confidence that his innocence will be proven beyond a doubt and we welcome him into our family."

Mr. Perkouri: "'*Welcome him into our family*?' That's a curious turn of phrase to use for your daughter's boyfriend. Why do you say that?"

She cleared her throat. "Well … well, our daughter has grown very close to the defendant the last few months. He makes her happy. So if he makes her happy then we are happy to welcome him into our family, I guess you could say."

Mr. Perkouri: "And so you have said. Yes. And your husband feels the same way?"

Mr. Vamia: “Objection. Calls for her to speculate as to her husband’s opinion.”

Judge Higher: “I believe she can relay her husband’s feelings on the matter if he has confided them to her. Missus Ryan, has your husband told you of his feelings regarding the defendant dating your daughter?”

“Well, yes sir he has. He does not feel as strongly in favor of the boy as I do. That’s true. But he’s starting to come around. Nick—the defendant that is—sort of grows on you, the more you get to know him. He’s a good boy.”

Mr. Perkouri: “Oh? And your husband agrees with you, despite this trial?”

“Well, as I said, he’s coming around more and more to that way of thinking every day.”

Mr. Perkouri: “Even despite this trial? I would think that might tend to distance your husband from the defendant?”

“Well, things happen and he’s getting to know the defendant better now.”

“What things for instance, Missus Ryan?”

Mr. Vamia: “Objection. Leading, irrelevant.”

Judge Higher: “Mr. Vamia. I can hardly see that he is the leading the witness. And I must overrule for irrelevance as well. It seems we are finally starting to get somewhere in regard to character as it relates to motive. Mister Perkouri, please continue.”

Mr. Perkouri: “You’ve had time to think of an answer now haven’t you Missus Ryan?”

“Yes, I have. My husband got to spend time with the defendant on our vacation and they seemed to bond. As I said, the defendant grows on you. He and my husband are getting to know each other better all the time. After all, they both love our daughter. That is a very strong bond.”

Mr. Perkouri: “Indeed, it is. And *that is* a very clever response Missus Ryan.”

Judge Higher: “Need I remind you Counselor, you called this witness. There is no need for sarcasm.” Mr. Perkouri replied, “Sorry, Your Honor.” He turned back to her mom.

“Missus Ryan, you said your elder daughter’s date of birth is June twenty-second. And the year would be?”

“Nineteen-fifty-three. As I said, she is seventeen.”

“Yes, you did. And you were born when?”

“June fifteenth, Nineteen-thirty-five.”

“So you had been eighteen a week before you bore the older child, is that correct? And you said earlier that you had been married almost eighteen years. Uh, when is your wedding anniversary, ma’am?”

Ryz’n’s mom stiffened. She sat up straight in her chair. Her face turned to stone. She looked right at Ryz’n. “Yes, that is correct. We married a few days before Christmas.”

“And what year would that have been, Missus Ryan?”

Her mom replied coldly, “Nineteen fifty-two.” The courtroom let out a collective sigh.

Mr. Perkouri: "Now isn't it true that 'telle mere, telle fille,' like mother like daughter, you both have been pregnant out of wedlock? And the reason for the sudden change in your disposition to *welcome* the defendant *into your family*, as you so aptly put it, is because the defendant knocked up your daughter?"

"—Objection Your Honor: Prejudicial and irrelevant."

The judge banged down his gavel as the courtroom erupted with emotion. Ryz'n held her mom's cold, stone-faced stare, miming as graphically as she could, "I love you, Mom." Her mom smiled faintly, pulling a hanky from her purse to dab her eyes and nose.

"Objection—objection—"

Judge Higher's eyes lost focus. It seemed as though the man spaced out. He stared toward the back of the courtroom for several seconds, as if he were locked in a trance. The prosecutor tried to rouse him to no avail. As the bailiff moved towards the bench, the judge blinked. With his right arm limp at his side, he looked down at his desk to shuffle some papers—

"Ah yes … yes—continuance." Apparently recovered, he smiled. Slurring his words, he said, "Yes. The Court will continue the case next week. The State has until then to produce its missing witnesses." Ryz'n could scarcely understand his slurred speech.

"But Your Honor," replied Mr. Perkouri, "we have not finished with this witness."

"What witness," asked the judge.

The prosecutor pointed to Ryz'n's mom, sitting dumbfounded in the witness chair and said, "Missus Ryan."

"Wuh-wuh-well, the Court has heard enough for today. I-I believe I need to lie down. Court is adjourned until next —" He slumped to one side then banged his gavel, partly rose and teetered toward the rear door behind his desk. The bailiff hurried to assist him. The judge left both attorneys open-mouthed, staring at each other, while the jury and rest of the courtroom stared at them.

Ryz'n asked Nick's dad, who was seated next to her, what had occurred.

"I'm not sure, except that Court is adjourned. Apparently, the judge had one of those mini-strokes, similar to what my mother used to get before she had the big one. She'd lose track of the moment and be unable to recall what had just occurred. Her speech slurred like that, too. Not certain, but I believe that's just what happened with our judge."

Mr. Vamia suggested the prosecutor should look into the judge's health before trial resumed. Ryz'n heard him tell Nick that "this could be a big break for us kid, if Higher can't go anymore. A big break." He grinned like Davey Crockett grinning down a b'ar.

* * *

That night Ry wouldn't take his calls. And his dad wouldn't let him out of the house, except to cart him to Pre-Cana class over at St. Francis. His old man was still being a hard-ass cuz of the curfew. Going on a month now since they'd come back from Iowa.

Ry didn't show for Pre-Cana training. He didn't see her in school the next day either. She was "absent due to illness." He stopped Sheena in the hall between classes to ask her what was wrong. Sheena whispered Ry was very upset after hearing "all that testimony about your affairs and watching mom get torpedoed like that in front of everybody, all because of you. Ry's too ashamed to come to school, so she's faking sick. Can't believe my folks bought her act. She gets away with murder, since you know what!"

Later a voice over the intercom called Nick out of his third period French class down to the front office. When he got there, the secretary told him his lawyer wanted him to call right away. He asked if he could use the office phone but she said he had to use the pay phone in the alcove down by the gym. She gave him a hall pass. When he reached Franco on the phone, Nick learned they were to report to court by two that afternoon. When he asked what was going on, Franco said he didn't know for sure. But rumors were flying around that something serious had happened to Judge Higher. Franco told him to meet him at the courthouse at quarter of two. Nick phoned his mom to pick him up at one.

They met with Perkouri in the Clerk's office at two to learn that Judge Higher had suffered a paralyzing stroke the previous night. The damage was serious—permanent paralysis over the right side of his body. The judge was unable to speak intelligibly. Perkouri was shocked. Severely downcast, he was clearly disappointed at the news.

Franco though seized Nick by the forearm, squeezing him hard enough to paralyze him. Franco could scarcely contain his glee.

Rather than move for a mistrial, Perkouri asked who would replace Higher. The Clerk said that was to be determined. Given the State's urgent need to prosecute, and because the trial was half completed, the Clerk said they hoped to avoid a mistrial by getting another judge up to speed on the case as quickly as possible. Hopefully, trial would resume by next Monday. Meanwhile a gag order has been placed on all parties. He added that the jury may be sequestered until trial resumes.

On the street outside the courthouse, Franco erupted with glee. He told Nick and his folks they had the break he had been hoping for. He said there was no tougher defendant's judge on the circuit than Higher. Any replacement had to be better for them.

But Franco also cautioned that sequestering the jury for five days and nights could really tick them off. They would have all that time to stew, to think about the prosecution's case without having heard anything from the defense except a few telling cross-exmainations and a lot of overruled objections. Franco was confident there were at least a couple of jurors on Nick's side. He said he'd been watching their body language closely during the trial. He thought the younger jurors especially favored him along with another middle-aged woman, whom Franco believed was partial to him as well. He reminded the Sheebooms that it took all twelve to render a guilty verdict. Franco left them in high spirits, promising to be in touch if he learned anything new.

* * *

Nick stopped by Ry's place that afternoon to relay the good news. He wanted to pass on the marriage license, application papers, as a kind of present. But her mom told him Ry was confined to bed. She couldn't, or wouldn't, see him. Mrs. Ryan said she'd pass on the news about the new judge. Mrs. Ryan had been rather curt. Made him think better of giving her the license forms to sign. He called for Ry later that night but was rebuffed again. This time, by her old man. When Ry failed to show to help him with his route the next morning and was absent from Homeroom later, he became worried she *was* sick.

He caught up to Sheena in the halls between first and second periods. Sheena said Ry was coming in after lunch to pick up her assignments, but she didn't want to talk to him.

"Ry's still very upset over all the dirt that came out about your love life. You best leave her alone until she comes out of her funk. We're all pissed at you cuz of Mom."

He asked her if Ry was eating okay. He was worried that she might pull another hunger strike deal, becoming hospitalized as she had last summer. Sheena said her sister was forcing herself to eat something for that very reason.

"But she doesn't have much of an appetite. She's very depressed Nicholas. She can't reconcile that you screwed all them chicks and never told her about it. She had to find out in a public courtroom. She's embarrassed and hurt. Especially about Lena. They used to be best friends until you came along. How could you be such a lecherous ass? You've shamed all of us. Just cuz *you can't keep it in your pants!*"

Sheena stalked off in a huff. He bit his tongue. That was some comment coming from her, considering she had told the world all last winter that he was queer. Just because he wouldn't make out with her.

After school, he skipped football practice to visit Ry. Even though the principal had suspended him from the team pending the trial, the coach wanted him there as much as possible. Even if just in street clothes sitting on the bench, so he could watch and listen to what Coach was trying to do with the team. Instead, he rode his Schwinn three-speed to Ry's house. Since his dad had confiscated his car as well as his Vespa, he had to rely on his bike to deliver his newspapers and get to and from school now, unless Ry drove him.

Aside from school, papers, and Pre-Cana training, his dad had tied Nick to the house when he wasn't in court. Each week he had to work out a deal with his old man to allow him to get to *GRT*'s weekend gigs and band practice. His dad had let Ry drive him to and from because he trusted her. But without Ry now, he wasn't sure his dad would be so lenient. Nick had been the driving force behind the band's popularity. He was afraid that, without him, they'd start losing dates. And he sure couldn't afford that now. He and Ry needed all the cash they could get for the baby.

He found Ry home alone. He had the license application papers in his pocket. Her folks hadn't come home from work yet. And Sheena had to stay after school for varsity

cheerleader practice. Ry wouldn't open the door for him. Nor would she speak to him. But he knew she was inside because he saw the light in her front room flick off when he first rang the bell and called her name. He banged so hard on the front door she finally answered from her window—

"Leave me alone. I don't want to talk with you. Go away."

He said he had something to tell her that was very important. He couldn't say it through the door. He told her he hadn't forgotten their vows to each other down at the beaver ponds. He hoped she hadn't either. He promised he'd been true to them. When she didn't respond negatively, he thought he was making progress. But her mom pulled in the driveway just then, costing him his chance to speak with Ry alone. He whispered loudly towards her closed front bedroom window next to the porch that he wanted to meet her that night. He'd relay the time and place to her later during Pre-Cana training. He assured her he had something to show her that would make her very happy.

"We'll see."

She had whispered through the closed front door. So she had come out of her room to the front door? That was a hopeful sign. He peered through the door's glass privacy panes. He just caught sight of her backside scurrying out of sight of the parlor.

Then her mom climbed the front steps. She let out a pained sigh when she saw him.

After a friendly greeting, he begged his future mother-on-law to intercede for him. The piano boomed inside. Glancing through the privacy panes, he saw Ry with her back to him. She was banging away at the upright piano standing against the far living room wall.

"Oh Dear," said Mrs. Ryan. "Wagner is never a good sign. That or Beethoven. I'm afraid she really *is* upset. You better run along Nick. Let her pound it out of her system."

"Sounds like "Ride of the Valkyries?" Mrs. Ryan nodded.

"Yes, she really *is* upset." He smiled.

"Well, it's better than a hunger strike, hunh Missus R?" He was referring to breaking into Ry's room to take her to the hospital last July.

His future mother-in-law gave up a smile as she reached out, caressing his cheek.

"You're so right dear boy. You are *so* right. We saved her from that one, didn't *we*? You and I?"

"Yes ma'am. We sure did." Mrs. Ryan sighed.

"It will be rough on you two at first, when the baby comes. Make no mistake. But I believe you'll do fine. Ryzanna is lucky to have a responsible boy like you. Now you better run along. The sooner you leave, the sooner she'll calm down. I hope. And the sooner our home will return to peace and quiet." She rolled her eyes. "Bye Nicholas."

He said bye and hopped down the steps onto his bike to finish his monthly paper collections. Ry's volcanic rendition of the Ride of the Valkyries banged in his head.

* * *

Her mom came inside. She asked Ryz'n what was going on with Nick.

"Nothing. I told him I didn't want to see him." Her mother sighed.

"Well Ryzanna, you're going to have to see him sooner or later. It's not right that you're missing school and your marriage counseling over this. You have a Pre-Cana class tonight, don't you? Did you pick up your lessons from school today? You've missed too much lately." Ryz'n rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mother."

"You know, you'll have to make up the session you missed the other night, don't you?"

Ryz'n plopped down on the couch. Scruffy jumped into her lap, settling down when she stroked the terrier's head and back. She whispered. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Her mom glared at her, astonished at her ambivalence. "Well I'm afraid Father Vizconni will insist upon it. You know you must complete the training before the wedding. It's only three weeks away now. You can't afford to miss any more Ryzanna."

Her mother stared hard down at her but Ryz'n looked away.

Her voice trailed off as she said, "Well, maybe there won't … be any wedding."

"What are you talking about? Of course, there'll be a wedding. You *have* to get married Ryzanna. You have no choice now. You gave up that right when you got pregnant."

"But Mother. You weren't there. You waited in the foyer. You didn't hear all those girls up there admitting under oath to all the, the sick, wicked things they did with Nick. And that minister! Their testimonies—about his depraved, Lotharion ways left me empty inside. I have nothing left to give him now. The whole ordeal was—was so appalling and embarrassing. I don't know why that judge let them say all those things that have nothing to do with the accident. Did you know he offered to marry Lena?" Her mom blanched.

"Well …I had heard something from Missus Larrabee. I didn't want to upset you with it because Nick only offered out of a misguided sense of youthful chivalry. I'm sure he's more appalled and embarrassed now than you are to have his most secret and sinful deeds come out in open court. *Sick,* you say? *Wicked?* We warned you about him Daughter. Both your father and I—about the urges you inherited from our mothers passed down from one generation to the next. I expect those other girls didn't do anything with Nick that was any more sick or wicked than anything you've done with him."

Pushing Scruffy from her lap to the floor, Ryz'n jumped off the couch into her mom's face. Through clenched teeth and with fists clenched at her sides, she shouted:.

"The difference is *we love each other*. And that makes *all* the difference in the world!"

She rudely shoved her mother aside to stalk back into her room, slamming the door behind her in her mom's face. Her mother shouted, "Ryzanna Christine! Open this door."

As her mother fumbled for the knob, Ryz'n locked the door from her side. She heard and felt her mom seize the knob from the other side to try to turn it. When her mom couldn't budge the knob, she banged on the door.

"Ryzanna! Open this door now."

"I won't. Go away. I need to be alone." Ryz'n leaned back against the door.

"Look my baby," her mom's tone had softened, as she pleaded through the door. "I know what you're going through Ryzanna. You know, I know. I've been through it. Please don't do anything rash now. You have your child and your reputation—our reputation—to think of. We know Nick's a bit wild. But Father Vince has assured us that the boy is sincere. And he truly *wants* to marry you. Nicholas *does love you*. Father's had some long talks with the boy and he's certain Nick loves you. And Nick wants to do the right thing and he's prepared to, well … to make an honest woman of you—"

"*Honest woman!*" Ryz'n turned to face the door. "Please Mother! Just leave me alone. I don't want to discuss it!"

"All right. But you must understand Ryzanna. We all have your best interests at heart, yours and our grandchild's. You have to think of your baby now Ryzanna. You must put the baby *before yourself* now, as I did for you. And things will work out as they worked out for your father and me, and you and Sheena. You'll see. This will all work out for good. But you *must* get married now. It's the only way. I know you love Nick. You'll see. You'll get over this hurdle. And after you're married and you're lying in his arms, holding the baby in your arms, you'll see this will all have been worth it and you'll be happy. As I was, with you and your father. You'll see, my baby. You'll never be as happy again as at that moment. I promise you. After all, I know. And all the shame and anger and jealousy will melt away, like a bad dream."

Ryz'n began to sob. Turning to lie down on her bed, she heard her mother's voice, more tender now, through the closed door.

"You have a good cry now Dear and rest. I'll call you when dinner is ready. I'm fixing your favorite tonight. Crab cakes and salmon. We'll have a little Chablis too. I know how much you like it. Just rest now Dear. It will be all right. Yes, everything. You'll see."

Her mother was right. In her embarrassment and anger over Nick's shenanigans, Ryz'n had forgotten about their baby. How could she have forgotten when her body would not let her forget? When her folks and Sheena and Father Vizconni would not let her forget? Yes. She *had to* marry Nick to have their baby. But she would make it clear to him that she wouldn't stand for any infidelity on his part. If she ever found out he were to be unfaithful, she'd leave him flat and take the baby and come home to her folks. Yes, she would. She'd tell him tonight. He wanted to meet with her. All right. She'd meet with him and lay down the law. There could be no compromising on his fidelity to her. What she had to say on that subject was the law. He would just have to accept her authority on that matter, absolutely and without discussion. Yes, she'd tell him tonight.

Sighing, she relaxed. Now that she had made up her mind, she felt better. She yawned and dozed fitfully beneath the canopy of her mint green and yellow four-poster. She lay, paralyzed between sleep and waking …

She saw all those girls, women on the stand, parading about the courtroom, dressed like hookers, boobs out to there in low-cut dresses, short skirts scarcely covering their butts, faces made up like whores, sneering, laughing, pointing at her in the gallery. Everyone in the courtroom stared at her. And there was Nick smirking and exposing himself. His gnarly, scarred monster, likewise laughing, grew and rose and grew until it filled the entire courtroom with all those tarts salivating, grabbing and leaping, lurching and latching onto it anyway they could, and the whole courtroom laughing at her. As he grew larger, she grew fatter and uglier. Her hair grew limp and pimples sprouted on her face, growing ever larger, as he did. She ran out of the courtroom in horror. Mocking laughter followed her all the way to the parking lot—

Ryz'n woke in a cold sweat to the aroma of broiling salmon and frying crab cakes permeating the house. She shook herself awake, wiping drool off on her lace pillowcase as she rose. It was nearly dark outside. She always had known Nick had a mountain load of experience to complement his natural load of endowment, but she never realized the extent of either until she had heard and seen for herself. The many scars, lumps and gouges on his member had taken on a new, tortured meaning for her.

Now when he needed her support the most, she wanted nothing to do with him. She couldn't bring herself to see or speak with him. She wondered how many others there were, whom he hadn't mentioned, whom the State's Attorney didn't know about. Nick was at his lowest point and she was deserting him. Could things get any worse? To settle her stomach she ate a couple of saltines, stashed on the nightstand.

Her mother knocked on her door calling her to dinner. Ryz'n replied that she'd be there after she washed up. That had been a simply terrible dream. She took a Dramamine, before rising. When she came out to the dinner table, Sheena said that Mr. Sheeboom had phoned. He wanted to know if she was driving Nick to class tonight or if he should do it. She asked Sheena to call him back because she was too embarrased to speak with her future in-laws. Tell him she'd meet Nick over at the church. She'd bring him home.

As she was about to leave for Pre-Cana after dinner, the phone rang. Sheena answered. Mr. Vamia wished to speak with her. She took the call in the kitchen. Mr. Vamia noted Nick's depression in court the other day after she had run out. He told her that now is when Nick needed her support the most. He said he couldn't have Nick looking like a zombie in court. "Now is when we need that 'cheerleader' with all that 'TLC' we talked about, remember?" She said she remembered. She understood. She told the attorney that she was going to see Nick tonight at their marriage counseling session. She didn't say that she only planned to speak with him to give the boy a piece of her mind.

* * *

Ryz'n was waiting on the front steps of St. Francis over on Pennsylvania Avenue with her homework in hand when Nick's dad delivered him to the church doorstep. He called from his car window, asking if she could bring Nick home. She promised she would. Nick smiled as she let him kiss her on the cheek. But then she walked into the church without speaking another word. She didn't speak to him during class either. She felt her classmates and the facilitators knew something was amiss but she was glad they cut them some slack with their silent deference. Father Paul said she didn't have to repeat the class she missed since she had provided him with the homework papers he required. He did remind her of the importance of future attendance.

When they left after class, she still wasn't speaking to Nick. He had remained quiet too, until she pulled the Monza up in front of his house. He told her he had to see her later to set things straight. She was curt with him when she ordered him to tell her now. He complained the setting wasn't right. He needed a little more time to demonstrate his love for her. She warned him that she wouldn't tolerate any funny business before the wedding and neither would Father Vizconni. Then she laid down the law in explicit even harsh terms, as she had promised herself in her bedroom earlier. Nick dropped his head. He said he understood. He promised to be faithful—had been faithful, saying "you won't have to worry on that score." Nick pleaded that he had been true all along, ever since their pledge to each other down at the beaver ponds their first time. She said she expected no less—that never even need be a topic for discussion. She told him that he didn't have to say or do anything more, adding that they didn't need to meet later.

But Nick was adamant they meet. He told her he needed to give her something, show her something. Needed to prove something to her as well as to himself. Afterwards, she would be as sure of him as he would be of himself. He suggested they meet at the Kovakloczech house. But she refused to go into "that cathouse" with him now. "Especially, after what the Murray lady said." So he told her to meet him at midnight behind Mrs. K's place, in the "secret room" in the woods at the big oak that he liked to call the "Stamm Oak," after the farmer folks who lived there. The tree was huge with great low, spreading branches, not unlike the state tree the "Wye Oak." She agreed to meet him. But she warned him once more that she would not cotton to any "turtle-doving" before the wedding. He concurred. He said after he showed her what he had in mind, he wouldn't want to anyway. He asked her to bring a half dozen ice cubes, making her wonder what he meant by that odd request.

* * *

As Nick entered his house, the phone rang. His dad answered. Franco wanted to talk to him. He found his attorney brimming with good news. A new circuit court judge had been assigned to their case, one Laurene Myoshi Ballante. Trial would resume next week. Franco had tried cases before her in the past. He said she was tough but fair. "She might

lean a little towards the State but she's a raving liberal compared to Old Man Higher." Franco had worked with her when she had been the first female State's Attorney for R.G. County. Knew her pretty well, actually. She'd draw a line she thought fair but wouldn't cross over it. "This is a big break for us, Nick. Trust me." Nick said he did.

Franco asked how things had gone with Ry. He replied, "Well, at least, she's speaking to me now." Franco thought that was great; reminding him, he'd said she'd get over it.

Franco added, "The worm is turning in our favor now Nicholas. You'll see. I'm gonna shove all that B.S. right back down Perkouri's throat. Take a load off Nick. Get some rest. We'll show up ready for bear next week. Perkouri won't know what hit him."

He asked if Franco had heard if Perkouri had located Kara Kovakloczech yet. Franco said he hadn't and doubted he would. He said even if he did, it probably wouldn't matter. When he asked why, Franco said he'd learned that, among other things, Kara wasn't an American citizen. She wasn't a potential criminal or even a material witness for that matter. The State didn't have any authority to extradite her back here from a foreign country. She could stay out of the country indefinitely.

"No way Judge Ballante will hold up the trial for her. I've got a good feeling about this buddy boy. You'll see."

Then Franco added a bit of gossip. Rumor was that Judge Higher's paralyzing stroke had come upon him by way of his young wife trying to appease him during a tryst the night after he had recessed the case. Franco gushed.

"That old coot. What great fortune. And how ironic. With him letting Perkouri pour all that dirt on you, over my objections!"

Franco gossiped that the seventy-seven year old judge, a former widower of some years, had met his future bride a little over a year ago when the State had brought her up before him on solicitation charges during a bench trial. Word was, the young blonde bombshell had struck the old coot's fancy. So he took her back to his chambers for a meeting of the minds. Twenty minutes later, they emerged with sheepish grins. The judge dismissed her case and that Saturday a justice of the peace married them. Franco joked the old man had rendered her a life sentence with him. Looked to Franco as if the judge was paying for his sins at last, while giving his young bride time off for good behavior.

Franco laughed, saying, "See Nicholas, there *is* justice in the world after all." He had assured him Old Man Higher had been determined to see Nick in jail, saying "This is a big break for us. Ballante's okay. You'll see. Probably lean over backwards for us, once she reads the transcript and sees how the old coot was railroading us. Shoot. She may even throw the case out, since it never should have come to trial in the first place."

Nick felt better after he hung up. He passed the good news onto his folks. Franco's enthusiasm was contagious. Now all Nick had to do was prove himself to Ry.

~ Chapter 25: Love Notches ~

Nick's folks were in bed. His mom was asleep. His dad was lying next to her watching *The Dean Martin Comedy Hour.* In the middle bedroom, Ramon's old room, Pappy was smoking his cee-gar in bed again. Nick could smell the stogie even though the old man's door was closed. He wondered if he should knock on the door to warn his grandfather. If his mom woke to get a whiff of that cee-gar smoke, she'd rip the old guy a new one. With his mother being an early bird, he thought better of it. She was down for the night.

He and the old man had an understanding, kind of a live-and-let-live policy. Neither one ratted out the other. Cuz there was plenty they could have ratted. Under his dad's curfew, he often sneaked out at night. Pappy must have heard him on occasion, though the old gent professed that he was hard of hearing. Sure seemed to hear okay when he wanted to. Yeah, Pappy could hear like Ray Charles when he wanted to.

Having finished all his homework, Nick took a shower, dressed and collected the assorted materials he would need for his meet with Ry. He rolled his double sleeping bag onto his bed to fill it with supplies—clean rags like worn terry-cloth wash towels, a candle and a saucer, a fifth of his dad's Jim Beam, aspirins, Neosporin, a roll of gauze bandage, scissors, box of band-aids, an unopened package of green, tennis shoe laces, and a flashlight. He checked to make sure the flashlight worked. Sticking a pack of matches in his pants pocket along with his lighter, he wrapped two new, unused razor blades in a Kleenex before he slipped them into his pocket. He filled his quart-sized, army surplus canteen with cold water. Grabbed a couple giant-sized Johnson & Johnson bandages and laid them with the other supplies in the canvas bag. Anything else? Band-aids? Got 'em.

After he rolled all the junk up in his double sleeping bag, he cinched his bindle up tight with two belts, which he double-wrapped around each third of the bag. When he was ready, he'd tie the bindle around the Schwinn's handle bars with his heavy duty cable, combination lock. He dropped the bindle into his closet and shut the door. Then he folded the license application form in thirds to stick it into his back pocket. He turned off the light then lied down on his back in bed. Hands clasped behind his head, he waited for his dad to retire for the night. Nick glanced at the clock on his desk—about twenty after ten.

He lay on top of his bed pondering his situation. He had returned to class but the kids, not to mention the faculty too, had ostracized him. The way everyone kept their distance, he thought he might as well walk the school halls like a leper in the bible, crying out before him "Unclean, unclean." Though he hadn't stuck around for practice today, he had watched practice yesterday. Coach Garth had him memorize the play books—all of 'em—offense, defense and special teams. Garth didn't know yet exactly how he'd fit in.

Noting he was innocent until proven guilty, Coach had talked Mr. Marant into lifting his suspension so he could practice and play with the team if there was a break in the trial. Nick's orthopedist, the same guy the Redskins used, had cleared him to play the day before the trial had started, two months after the surgery that repaired torn ligaments in his ankle and removed bone chips. His injury had healed completely. He was fast again.

He was fast all right, but he didn't want to play football. Didn't look forward to gettin' pounded. He wished Coach Garth hadn't convinced Mr. Marant to let him play. But his playing would pacify Johnny Allein and his mom, who had stuck up for him in court. Even on the practice field though, the guys had kept their distance. Many sided with Steinmetz and Cantwell against him. But Johnny and Jimmy Allein were happy to have him out there. So was Coach Shaunny, who coached defensive line as well as baseball.

Unsure how to use him yet, Garth was trying him out everywhere. Said he wanted to make use of his speed and athleticism. Try him both in the secondary and at flanker in their new pro-set offense. And after Coach had seen him handle a few punts, he said he definitely wanted him for that. Coach said he wanted to save his top running backs from being abused on punt returns. Nick thought that's just great—wants to use me for tackle fodder. Steinmetz and Cantwell were even more pissed because both were DB's and alleged punt returners. They saw him as a threat to their playing time.

He didn't mind everyone shunning him. He kind of wore his "scarlet *A*" proudly, as Hester Prynne had come to bear her shame. Same as Bobbi had said in court. He was a changed man, heeding Father V's proclamation: "One man, one woman married by God for life." But his martyred defiance did not extend to Ry's pain and wrath. That was too much for him to bear. That's why he had arranged to meet with her at the big oak, near her house at midnight, to prove his devotion to her. He hoped she'd bring that ice.

As he steeled himself for the ordeal he was about to undertake, he reflected on his assortment of unusual scars. "Combat wounds" and "love notches," he called 'em. He'd acquired the combat wounds in the heat of action from love accidents. The notches, he'd marked on himself with a razor blade out of—well—superstition, really. He'd experienced so much emotional pain and distress with the loss of so many chicks, he thought to ward off future pain by notching himself for every chick he'd had and lost. Started the practice after Audy Lou. And it seemed to work okay for most of his junior year, when he'd dated Baby on the Q-T for nearly five months. That was sweet.

But Mann, how those topside notches knocked Ry out. And every other chick, too. Bein' pure, Ry never knew no better. But she *was* curious as heck about 'em. He kept her in the dark, knowin' the truth would give her heartache. But after the last few days in court, he had nothin' to lose. At seventeen, he must have the most messed-up pistol goin'. Now he'd mess it up worse, just for her. He hoped the pain would be worth Ry's favor.

Ry had first spotted the ridge-like markings at the base of his root during their romantic "honeymoon" week at Mrs. K's place, after his arraignment the close of July. First time they had enough leisure to loll around in between turtle-dovin', without havin' to worry about cops, or parents findin' 'em out, or bugs chewin' on their asses. They spent almost a whole week together. Most of it in Mrs. K's purple room. "The cathouse," Ry called it. Gave 'em a lot o' private time to get to know each other better and experiment. Lay around during what Ry called "time-outs and in-betweens," flirtin', talkin' and inspectin' each other's bona fides, so ta speak. Like a honeymoon. Their week of romance brought it all together for him, crystallizing and confirming his love for her. It wasn't puppy love or mere lust or even the romantic lure of moon-bright on a misty levée bank, it was the real deal—what he'd searched for but never found with all the others—that rare, unique umbilical sense of being one whole together. And they both knew it.

Besides the notches, Ry had noticed "combat wounds" left by nightmare mishaps with dumb Debbie Dove and Audy Lou's braces, when her old man jerked her by the hair and threw her against the wall. Not to mention, a couple o' overzealous, buck-toothed, eager beavers who didn't know a Popsicle from a hot dog. But them foul-ups on him had one big advantage. Gave him a variety of "deliveries" so ta speak—what Donna called 'em. No matter how he came at them, his scarred pistol gave his lovers a little extra thrill.

He never explained the markings to Ry. Or about his awkward attempts to heal the wounds himself. Him, too embarrassed to see a doctor. But he was still smooth as a baby's butt where it counted. And she noticed that too. That Ry didn't miss a trick. Tried to keep her curiosity to herself. But every once in a while she couldn't help but ask if all guys were like him there. And when he had said no, she asked why he was different. He lied that the doc had messed up when he'd circumcised him at birth. What a whopper that was. Bein' a girl and havin' no brothers, naïve Ry didn't know no better.

"Love Notches," he called 'em. Or jes' "notches" to her. Sure got her curiosity up—to "unbearable proportions" she claimed—wondering if he was "defective?" Him saying, "*Defective?* What the heck? Must work pretty danged good the way you take on so." She'd blush and grin, slappin' him on his bare chest or butt. Only he knew how lucky she was to have him all scarred up like that with the strategical logistics of satisfaction his scars provided her. Ry, without a clue to her good fortune, naïve novice that she was. Tonight he'd slice right through all of 'em jes' for her. Prove she alone was for him.

Of course, the girl could pour her own palpitating, peculiar physiognomy of pleasure upon him such as he'd never had with any other. Her inimitable, grasping rosebud could engage him in a tug o' war that served only to prolong the inevitable. Took all the control he could muster to hold back for her. Like waitin' on a slow curve. Holdin' back, lettin' the ball get deep over her plate until the last instant—bamm! He'd come through. Connect to that sweet spot on his bat—hers, too—it's going, going—gone! Let her

shower celebration begin. Bobbi Bucksalter might not approve of him mixing his metaphors like that but he approved of her mixin' the truth in her testimony.

Though he prided himself on his disciplined timing, Ry often overcame his best efforts to control the situation. Fortunately, she always responded in utter, steamy spasmodic relief. As if she was timing him and not the other way around, as he did with the others. But with Ry, it was an uncanny routine—and awesome. Mentally, it disturbed him, cuz he wasn't always in control as Donna had taught him to be. Could be a bit unsettling, if he let it. Thankfully, Ry's equally gratified, timely responses of release had to be genuine, cuz she's too danged much of a novice to fake it. Good problem to have though. Jes' further proof they were made for each other. Yeah, she's the one.

Ry was special. He refused to associate her with all the others both good and bad by notchin' her up out of superstition. Believed he could take the best features—bits, pieces, parts, whatever you wanted to call 'em—from all of 'em, put 'em all together and the sum total could never equal the whole of Ryzanna Christine. Hey. He liked that. Made a mental note to use that line on her tonight. Because Ry was, well—even better—the best.

Staring up into the dark of the bedroom ceiling with time to waste, he began to entertain himself, recalling how he'd come by his "love notches" and assorted other scars. For a kid recovered from Rheumatic Fever, he'd enjoyed many affairs of the heart the last few years. Thank God for penicillin. Amen? He smiled, harking back to when his love lessons began in August of '67. Hippies in 'Frisco called it the "Summer of Love." They had nothin' on him and his mentor the Widdah—Donna—that August. He'd stack her up against them hippies any time. Donn gave him an eduamacation all right. Jes' twenty-two herself then but very knowledgeable after years married to her late sailor, travellin' salesman husband. Donn very much enjoyed passin' on what she'd learned. Sure. Mebbe more'n he did receiving her instruction, if that was possible. He'd be baby-sittin' little Billy when she'd come home, usually early from a date. With little Billy fast asleep, she'd pay him off with a buck and a lesson in love. He recalled that first night…

* * *

Nick heard a toilet flush. The door to his folk's room jerked open—applause—followed by Dean Martin's theme song "Everybody Loves Somebody, Sometime." A click cut Dino off in mid verse. The hall floor creaked as his old man padded into the living room making his nightly rounds, checking that the house was secure. A minute later, he heard his dad walk back down the hall and turn toward his room—a knock at his door. The door cracked open just a hair, for speakin', not for lookin' through.

"You asleep yet, Nicholas?" His dad whispered.

In the pitch dark he knew his dad couldn't see that he lay on the bed, dressed, ready ta scoot. "No, not yet."

"Got all your homework done?" Nick replied, "Unh-hunh."

"Well, try to sleep. You need your rest Son. Can't afford to have you take sick now. No trial, so you can go to school again tomorrow. Play on Saturday. Lucky, Marant said you could. He's trying to help. You say Garth's going to have you return punts?"

"Yeah. Said he might put me in at flanker if we get behind late."

"Okay. Well, that was good news from Franco tonight, hunh Babe?"

"Yeah. Good news."

"All right Doll. Sleep well. See ya in the morning."

"Okay, Dad. 'Night."

"Want this open or shut?"

"Shut." His dad said a little louder, "Okay, good night Babe."

He closed the door. Nick heard him walk into his room. A few minutes later the bed creaked as his pop climbed into it. The pause between his walkin' and climbin' into the sack told him his dad had kneeled to pray at his bedside. As was his custom. Made him feel good, kind o' secure like, to know his Dad prayed-on his knees no less. He hoped his old man put in a good word for his younger son. He sure could use it.

Nick's bed rested against the front wall of the house under a large sash window. He turned onto his side, beneath the window, his back to the wall. He pored over all the crazy events of the last few months that had led him into this mess. But when he sorted everything out only two things mattered to him. First, that he wouldn't go to prison and second, that Ry would stick by him. And if he had to choose between the two, he'd choose Ry every time. He could stand prison if he knew she was waitin' for him. With time yet to kill before their date, he finished reviewing his love résumé. Going over how he'd come to notch the top of his gun barrel so many times. Like watching his personal, private stag films. He checked the clock on his desk—11:36. Time to scoot.

Turning to the window, he pulled on the cord to open the blinds up to the top of the lower sash. He opened the window as quietly as possible. Retrieving his bindle from the closet, he insured that the belts cinched tight. He climbed onto the bed on his knees next to the bag to unlatch the inside hooks on either side of the screen. Holding onto the hooks, he pushed his head into the screen. The top of the screen toppled outward about a foot and a half, held up there by the large bush that blocked his window. The base of the screen rested on the sill. He dropped the screen upright on the ground left of the window behind the tall privacy bushes against the front wall. He made the bed with pillows under the cover, placing an old baseball cap under the covers atop the pillow at the head of the bed, just in case. At a glance in the dark, it'd look as if he was sleeping with his back to the door. He had used this ruse with much success the last few years.

Lifting the bindle through the open window, Nick tossed it down to his right into the narrow space between the bushes and the front brick wall. Then he slipped through the spacious aperture, careful to place his left foot on the water faucet, balancing there while

he reached inside to tug on the cord to lower the blinds. He pulled down on the window to about a half inch from shutting, leaving just enough room for his fingertips. Still perched on the faucet, he rested his hands flat on the brick sill then eased himself to the ground. He made sure to avoid getting jabbed in the back by the big bush. Piece o' cake. He had done this so many times he could do it in his sleep. Believed he may have, too.

Nick picked up his bag to slip between the tall shrubs and the brick rambler's front wall. Pausing at the front stoop, he peeked around the end bush to check out the neighbor's homes. The street was rolled up for the night, all dark and quiet late on a week night. He stepped across the front stoop and patio to his three-speed, locked to the brown downspout on the patio beneath the roof overhang and the living room picture window.

He and Ramon had built the patio for their folks last spring out of rose-colored patio blocks from The Centre—a combination Mother's/Father's Day gift. Three rows of two-foot square blocks, six blocks per row, were fronted by a semi-ovular pink and white marble chip "garden," bordered by scalloped, red concrete edging. Ramon's idea, but built with Nick's muscle and sweat. Laying the block, chip and scalloped stone border had been the easy part. Rootin' out them old sticker bushes filled with wasp nests had been the kicker. After he had dug around the root base, he and Ramon had tied a chain around the bushes and a pick-up, trailer hitch to tow out the shrubs. Pissed 'em wasps off, somethin' fierce. Scared him to death cuz he had a slight allergy to bee stings. No big deal, he just swelled up some, more'n most folks. But when they'd finished the job, the patio looked great. And his mom liked to set a couple lawn chairs on it, relaxing in the evening after she had finished her chores for the day. Neighbors would stop by to gab, with the three-riser stoop at one end of the patio providing extra seating if needed.

Fog crept in on tiny cat's paws, as a poet once wrote. Somethin' like that anyway. No breeze on a cloudy, sticky, early autumn night. Coolin' off fast, sproutin' patchy fog.

He removed the protective tarp to unlock his bike from the downspout. Used the cable wire-combination lock to tie the bindle around the handlebars. He carried the bike across the front yard down the front sidewalk to the street, where he set it down out of earshot —he hoped. Nick flicked on his headlamp, which ran off a generator that got its energy from the rotation of the front tire. Then he took off down the street with the generator humming low. After a block and a half he turned onto Ashton, crossed over the boulevard and up Dickson, gettin' up speed past the Salvarano's and the Widdah Ready's old place. He crossed Chadwith without stoppin', slammin' up the steep hill as far as he could before he petered out. He walked the bike the rest of the way, passing the brick and siding duplexes on either side of him, the Presbyterian Church near the dead-end close to the top of the hill and Valerie Bonét's house to the right of the wooden dead-end scaffold.

That Valerie Bonét was a strange one. Great lookin' chick and very artistic but never said a blessed word—quiet as a graveyard. Real spooky girl. But he knew still waters ran

deep. Despite her quiet manner, Val had been hot for him that night in the front seat of his old Fifty-Nine Oldsmobile, the one he had to chuck on account o' it leaked oil so bad. Took a can o' oil every time he bought gas. Yeah, him and Val were about to get it on right back there at the dead end in his Olds in front of her house. She didn't say nothin', jes' moaned and grunted like sin. Sure. She went for him all right. Val wasn't so quiet then, till that cop opened the door to pull him out onto the street. He'd been too enraptured with some of Val's finer points to notice the jerk slipping up on 'em. Asshole pulled him out o' the car by his long hair. Right after that, Val's folks shipped her off to some special art conservatory up around Boston somewheres. Good for her. She *was* talented. Even better for him cuz he's with Ry now. And they didn't make 'em no better.

On the dirt path now past the dead end, he skirted the woods and dump. He turned right up the hill till he reached Dunstan. At the summit, he hopped on his bike to ride again. Yeah, if he had to give up bachelorhood, Ry was the one to bite the dust for. Yes she was.

Beneath fog-shrouded street lamps, Nick tooled through the Holy Trinity Church complex, past the old church hall, rectory—and Father V— and the newly opened sanctuary-in-the-round. Crossing residential Double G Street, he glanced to his left, half-hoping to spot Ry. But the street was empty. He was a bit early. He rode through the Cathcart Junior High parking lot, veering right to stop at the curb next to the woods. He climbed off the Schwinn to walk the bike up the well-worn, winding, wooded path until he reached the great "Stamm Oak" on his left, just before the top of the trail.

He had discovered this place by accident a couple months after he'd acquired the paper route on his way to deliver the Stamm farm the other side o' the woods. He always saved the Stamm's for last. If he had time, they'd invite him in for a glass o' juice and a bit of breakfast, eager to gab and learn the latest about his family. Funny, cuz all the kids around there took the elderly couple for ornery, old critters. He knew different. The old lady had a bad rep cuz she had no qualms about firin' a round o' buck shot—rock salt—from her twelve gauge at trespassers. The Stamms had trouble with kids, particularly colored kids, sneakin' across the District line to steal their produce, watermelons and such. They were oldsters who knew Pappy from back in the day. They were also the farthest of any of his deliveries. They lived alone in an anachronistic rural section next to the D.C. line, his last delivery on his way to school. The Stamms liked him fine.

He had discovered the big oak just south of the trail from Cathcart to the Stamm farm near the rise in the woods. He had measured around the base of the trunk once with a tape measure. As near as he could figure, the trunk was about twenty-four and a third feet around. Not quite as big as the real Wye Oak mebbe, but pretty darn big! He figured the tree must have been there long before the surrounding woods because it was so big by comparison. He'd mentioned the tree to old Farmer Stamm and his wife, who said the oak marked the northeast corner of their farm. They were as proud of it as he was. When

he told them he'd named the oak after the Maryland state tree, they suggested he name it after them. The "secret room" he'd thought was his by right of discovery, really belonged to the Stamms. So he kept the place clean, free of any trash, no cigarettes butts and such.

Yeah, he found the cozy glen off the trail here when, thinking he was alone, he'd stopped to take a leak beside the trail. Had his thing in his hand all set to let it rip, when he heard someone coming down the trail from above. He quick-jumped into the bushes, falling through onto his back into this soft, mossy-grassy glen. He figured the place was probably a hundred-fifty-foot in area, shaped like a kidney bending around the north, west and south sides of the big "Stamm Oak." The spot became a safe haven where he might stop on his way to or from school, maybe to study, zone out or just to think, kind o' like his private, personal sanctuary. Later it became his boudoir as well, for Li'l Mo, Audy Lou, Baby, Allena and now Ry. Cheaper'n a motel room and more convenient, too. Never brought Dumb Debbie Dove or Mick's sister here. The place was too sacred.

Wedging his backside through the heavy undergrowth, he backed up through the bushes, stooping over the bike's front tire, tugging on the handlebars, while shielding the bike from clutching branches. A backward-snapping branch caught him high on his right cheekbone, just missing his eye—lucky. "Dang, that smarts." He whispered here out of habit. Once he broke free of the bushes, into the cozy, grassy-moss and fern-filled clearing, he rested his bike against the south side of the oak's broad trunk. Touching his cheek wound, he noted a light streak of blood on his finger. Wouldn't be the only blood he'd spill tonight. He wiped the scratch with his shoulder sleeve.

Nick turned on the flashlight. Then he unpacked the bindle on the soft mossy-grass and low fern rug next to the tree. He laid the double sleeping bag out over the moss and ferns at the northwest base of the tree trunk. He set everything up the way he wanted. Like an operating room, ready for surgery so to speak. Satisfied with his preparations, he took a deep breath to relax for a minute. He didn't wear a watch but he figured it was close ta midnight. He turned off the flashlight and put it in his pocket then picked his way back through the bushes onto the trail, retreating down as he had come. He halted just inside the tree line next to the parking lot to wait and watch for Ry.

* * *

Six minutes to midnight. Ryz'n left her canopy bed to slip into her "hippy" dress she had worn earlier to Pre-Cana class. It was her sole, ankle-length dress. The long dress was beige, covered by a red, yellow and green print of violet sprig bouquets. The flowing dress featured a deep-scooped sweetheart neckline, short, mutton-chop shoulder sleeves and, what she called "barrel-buttons," wooden toggle buttons, fastened in thick-corded loops down the front, hem to hem. The dress showed off her trim, maidenly figure in a modest way 'cept for the deep neckline. She was no longer a maiden or even very modest now, she guessed. She believed the hippy dress to be too informal to wear to school.

She didn't bother donning other garments. This meeting would be brief. No one would see her except Nick. She didn't dip honey under her tongue, as usual. This was no social visit as far as she was concerned. This was business. Besides, she had brushed her teeth and gargled earlier when she had prepared for bed and taken her Dramamine. All the while, waiting and worrying, wondering if she should keep her date with Nicky. She didn't want to have anything to do with him right now. But she had promised.

Slipping into her Jesus sandals, she picked her pale yellow Peter's jacket off the back of her desk chair to wear over her dress. Her folks and Sheena had retired an hour ago. Ryz'n opened her door to peek into the hallway. No lights. No sounds. She slipped down the hall through the living and dining rooms to the kitchen. Scruffy, their Skye terrier, jumped off the couch, panting at her feet. The pooch's tail and tongue wagged happily. "Shhhhh." She bowed to the pet, placing a forefinger over pursed lips to repeat her shush. The dog settled down to follow her around the corner to the kitchen.

She opened the refrigerator door wide, lighting over half the kitchen. She opened the overhead freezer door to pull the ice tray out of the freezer. Propping the refrigerator door open with her foot, she ran some tap water over the tray. Then tipped it over to drip dry. She knelt down to bump the tray bottom against the kitchen floor, loosening the ice as gently as she could so as not to wake anyone. Why he wanted ice cubes, she hadn't a clue, but she'd bring them. Ryz'n pushed Scruffy away to keep the pooch from licking the ice. Whispering, "No. No. Bad girl." She reached into a cabinet under the counter to pull out a thermos. Ryz'n unlocked the lid to slide the ice cubes into the container then screwed on the cap. *Ice cubes*—the things she did for him!

After filling the tray with water, Ryz'n replaced it in the freezer. She cupped the thermos in her jacket pocket with her forearm and elbow so it wouldn't fall out. She slipped back into the living room, out to the front door with Scruffy at her heels. Bending down to the pet, she whispered to the dog to stay put. Scruffy sat down with a perplexed look, cocking her curly, grey head to one side. The pet seemed to understand but, as soon as Ryz'n opened the front and screen doors, the dog slipped out.

"Pickles!" Exasperated, Ryz'n picked up the leash hanging over the door knob of the coat closet to her right. She followed Scruffy out onto the front porch. Then she unlocked the door, shutting it quietly behind her. She figured her folks would be safe from the bogeyman for half an hour at least. She wouldn't be absent longer than that.

It was foggy. Scruffy had moved on ahead to the street sidewalk, sniffing the grass along the curb. Ryz'n followed, hurrying across the porch down the stoop over the slate-step sidewalk and down the driveway, catching up to the pet. The terrier came when called. Ryz'n latched the leash onto the dog's collar. Taking note of the unusually dense fog, she hustled up the street towards Cathcart Junior High. Scruffy trotted at her feet. As they approached the school grounds, she noticed headlights through the fog to her right,

coming up Callahan Street from the church. She ducked left, down a side yard behind a bordering, privacy screen of tall bushes to watch. Scruffy christened the lawn.

As the vehicle entered the circular drive in front of the school, she could see it was a police squad car. The car turned right into the parking lot, disappearing around the far side of the school. Ryz'n waited in the cool mist, hoping the cop wouldn't spot Nicky if he were around. That boy was in enough trouble with the law. He sure didn't need any more now. With no exit behind the school, the squad car had nowhere to go. She waited until the car returned, turning right onto the circular drive, following the drive around the grassy median housing the flag pole, past her and then on out retracing its path back towards the church. She watched until the red tail lights turned right down a side street.

"Come Scruffy. Come on girl." Ryz'n clucked her tongue beckoning the dog.

She jerked the collar of the recalcitrant pet, which had become enamored with a scent in the bushes undetected by her. Back on the sidewalk, Ryz'n hurried on making sure to press the thermos to her side. Scruffy trotted next to her. They hustled across the circular drive, over the grassy median, past the flag pole and across the parking lot. Reaching the far side of the lot, she stepped over the curb onto the grass.

Nick appeared out of the mist from the tree line, blocking the dirt path. She pulled up short, almost running into him, her free hand shooting to her heart. She gasped.

"Pickles, Nicky. Ya scared me half to death."

"Sorry. I's afraid the cops might spot ya. Did ya see 'em?"

"Unh-hunh. Waited behind Missus Seymour's bushes until they left." He nodded.

On her hind feet, the dog's forepaws scratched at Nick's pant leg, tail wagging, tongue out. Nick knelt down to ruffle the pet's dense, curly mane, cooing, "Hey Scruffy, good girl, good dog. Ain't it a little past your bedtime girl?"

Evidently, the pet didn't think so. She jumped with her front paws against Nick's leg, licking at his hand. Ryz'n smiled. She knew Nick was no dog-lover. His folks never let him have a dog of his own and he'd been bitten more than once on his paper route. He complained that the Salvarano's cocker spaniel had nipped him a couple times, too. She appreciated the effort he was making, so she dialed down her attitude a notch or two.

"The little dickens slipped out when I opened the door." She knelt down to cuddle her pet. "Didn't you, Baby? Yes you did." Grinning, Ryz'n kissed the bitch on the nose with Scruffy, lapping up the attention. Nick stood.

"Hey?" he said. Ryz'n looked up. He nodded toward the woods.

"Okay, but this better not take long. I left the front door unlocked."

She wanted that out there, so he wouldn't try anything to extend their visit.

"I hear ya."

Ryz'n took the flashlight he offered and turned it on. Nick snickered as they started up the path, whispering, "Be terrible if anything happened to 'em." She stopped.

"What could happen to them?" Nick turned to her, sighing.

"It's a joke Ry. Come on. Sheesh!" She frowned but followed him up the path.

When they reached the great spreading "Stamm Oak," he backed ahead of her into the bushes, parting them with his backside so she could pass through unfettered. Scruffy scooted behind her underneath the brush. Ryz'n pushed through, shielding her face with her left arm as Nick backed up, holding back the branches on her right. Suddenly, she stepped into their "secret room." Though she'd learned in court, it really wasn't "their secret." He had used the friendly glen as a rendezvous for trysts with others before her, including her neighbor and ex-best friend Lena Larrabee. When Allena had known full well how she had felt about Nicky, even if she and Nick weren't going together then.

Still, she liked this cozy place, a bit larger than her folks' bedroom, with moss, ferns and sparse grass for a carpet. Great leafy, oak branches spread overhead serving as a canopy. Stars often peeked through branches. But there were no stars tonight, only fog.

She scanned their room with the flashlight. Evergreens, Canadian hemlocks, long-needle pines and cedars stood guard about them, like fresh-scented, green walls. Interlacing, thick underbrush connected the trees, affording them a safe haven for their turtle-doving. You could be on the path a few feet the other side of the brush and never know their "secret room" existed. The glen got her juices flowing every time she stepped in here. Made her salivate like Pavlov's dog. And Nicky knew it. She turned on him to whisper: "I'm warning you Nicholas. No funny stuff. Keep your hands to yourself."

Nick bent over to pet Scruffy, who was only too happy to receive the attention. "Get more love from your dang dog than you. Sheesh! Least, somebody still loves me."

"Look Nicky," she whispered. "We all still love you. It's just that we're all really ticked at you right now." He whispered, "Who's 'we'?" She replied, "Everybody. My folks, your folks—everybody." He blanched. "You too—still?"

Speaking in whispers as was their custom in this woodsy boudoir, she replied, "Sure, me too. Hearing all that poison about you come out in open court. Whaddaya expect?"

"So do ya love me now more'n you're pissed off or vice-versa?"

Frowning, she furrowed her arched brow while swinging her hips left, locking her left leg rigidly beneath her, tapping her right foot before her at a forty-five degree angle. Her arms crossed beneath her large, heaving chest, acting upon her like a corset pushing her flowing pregnancy bosom up, above her sweetheart neckline, giving him what he called "The Look and The Stance." He threw up his hands, palms out, surrendering in peace.

"Okay Baby, I get it." Shaking her head, she sad, "No, you aren't—not tonight, you aren't. Now get to it Nicholas. What's this all about?"

"Gee. Ya don't gotta be so frosty about it. Dang! Come on. I've got things all set up."

She balked when he placed his arm about her to point her toward the double sleeping bag unfolded next to the broad west base of the oak. She directed the light. The bag she knew well but not all the stuff around it, like unlit candles, first aid supplies and towels.

"What's all this? For crying out loud, I told you Nicholas. No foolin' around until our wedding night, like we promised Father Vizconni."

He raised his hands, patting down the air before him, motioning for her to calm down.

"Take it easy Ry, take it easy. I won't lay a finger on ya I promise. 'Less you want me to, that is." She smirked. "Well, you can forget about that Buster. Might as well get that straight right now." He shook his head. "Okay, okay. Whatever you want—or don't."

"You betcha!" She frowned, bobbing her head. Nick whispered.

"Just provin' myself to ya Baby, so you won't ever question me or my fidelity to you ever again. I've had enough of the treatment from you. Feel like you're sticking it inta me and breaking it off worse'n Company G did to Prewitt. But please douse that light."

Switching off the flashlight, she spread her feet as wide as her shoulders, placing her arms akimbo and clenching her fists. "What the heck are you talking about?"

Nick arched his brows. "*From Here to Eternity*. Never heard of it? Book or movie?"

"No." She dropped her chin, thinking. "At least, I, I don't think so. I don't know."

"Ah well, you should. Won the National Book Award in Nineteen-fifty-two. James Jones, not Michener or Joyce, but Jones—year, we were conceived." He grinned.

Nick lit the candle to drip melted wax into a saucer. When he thought he'd dripped enough, Nick set the burning candle down into the melted wax to stand erect, reminding her of something else that she did not want to think about right now.

"You owe it to yourself to check it out Ry," he whispered.

He began undressing. She cocked her head, much as Scruffy had done to her earlier. Probably had the same bewildered look on her face, too.

"What're you doing? What do you mean? Owe it to myself?"

He shrugged. "*From Here to Eternity* whaddaya think I'm talkin' about? Nominated for thirteen academy awards in fifty-three. Good year. Won eight. It's a special story. Shoulda got another one. Monty Clift was robbed. Two separate tears drippin' down either side of his face? One after the other? Standin' at attention when he played them "Taps"" For Frank Sinatra? Come on, Mann! I mean, William Holden was great in *Stalag Seventeen* but the Academy really jobbed Clift that year. He was—he was—" Nick raised his hands out to his sides even with his shoulders, letting them flop down against his thighs. "—Even better. Performance of a lifetime. Was like a make-up a call in a game though, see? Academy had prob'ly jobbed Holden a couple years before for *Sunset Boulevard*. Like the Duke bein' passed over all them years then winnin' for Rooster Cogburn, beatin' out Dustin Hoffman and Jon Voight in *Midnight Cowboy?* You kiddin' me? Course, them two probably split the vote between 'em, let the Duke sneak in there."

When she turned back to him after checking Scruffy, she watched, astonished as he had stripped naked. "Nicky, what the heck are you doing? I just told you, I—"

"Well, you'll understand once you hear my story. Gonna tell it to ya right now, too." When she frowned, he said, "Okay. Suit yourself. "But I'm gonna give it to you straight, the bare facts so ta speak." Grinning, he waved his hand down the length of his naked body, head to toes. "—And skip the details, which, believe me, ya don' wanna know."

Standing near the edge of the sleeping blanket, Ryz'n watched in disbelief as Nick poured from the fifth of Jim Bean over top of his fast-shrinking "gun barrel," or "pistol," as he called it— his "sex-shooter." The night chill was having its effect on him.

"So you heard about all them chicks, hunh? Most of 'em anyway. Well, I don't deny it. You fell in love with a whore Ry, what can I say? A *former* whore, that is. Not no more. And all on account o' you, Sweetie." He arranged some towels on the moss outside the sleeping bag, throwing his hands out to his side, as if to say so what?

"Well, I wouldn't be so proud of it, if it was me. I can tell you that much."

"Is that so?" She bobbed her head keeping her arms akimbo, shooting him The Look.

Nick paused for her response. But unable to believe any of this, she remained mute.

Nick, naked in the mist before her as if he were at home in bed. He had to be freezing. Darn. Sure looked good though, V-shape, still all tan and hard-muscled. Reminded her of their previous romancin'. Started to rile her fancy. Only he wasn't his usual self in the night chill. Even without the light, she could see that.

Michelangelo's "David" had nothing on Nicky, tempting her enough to forget her vow. She could eat him up with a spoon. He had the body of a Greek god and the lips, soft and red and full—and doe eyes—like a girl's, though uniquely two-toned. Turned her on. Dense, wavy hair, curled out at his shoulders—like one of the Musketeers—not greased back like in court. Despite herself, she became aroused—prickly, throbbing. Darn him.

When he had shoved that table into Matt Yikes the other day, Nick's hair had popped out causing his dad to have a fit. Quick like a bunny, she had hopped forward in all the commotion, pulling a ponytail holder from her purse to tie it around his loose hair before she stuffed it back beneath his collar. He scarcely noticed. Why did she think that now?

"Ryzanna, all you gotta do is watch and listen. And keep your hands to yourself or I might have to report ya to Father V." Nick snickered but he had her pegged all right.

"Ha! Fat chance of that." But she was trying to convince herself, not him.

With Scruffy chafing at the leash, straining to be free, Ryz'n hooked the loop end around a low-hanging pine branch. She pulled the leash through the loop, cinching it tight. Knowing she was hooked, Scruffy lay down in the low ferns.

"Judas priest, Nicholas, what the heck are you doing?"

"Provin' my love to you once and for all. So I don't have to put up with your assinine attitude and cold shoulder no more. So we can get on with our lives happily ever after."

"'Assinine attitude?' You must be joking. I wonder what kind of attitude you'd have if the situation were reversed? If you had to sit in court listenin' to all of my slut-filled, amorous affairs in front of your family and friends?"

"Please. Keep your voice down, Ry. Hopefully, you'd know what's past is past. You're my present and future, no one else." She frowned.

"Easy for you to say. Historians might say, 'Past is prologue.' Gee Nicky, you gotta be freezing. Must be close to fifty degrees."

"I'm okay. Besides, freezin' is thirty-two. Figure I got near twenty degrees ta spare 'fore I turn inta an icicle." He grinned.

Nick wasn't wearing either of his dentures, gold or white. The gap left by his missing upper front tooth stood out like a sore thumb. He sure knew how to use that gap on her. Of course, he had enough space between his upper front teeth without missing a denture. He looked good even though his violet was shrinking fast.

Nick dropped to his knees, rubbing his hands together. The simper slid from his face. She stood speechless as she held the flashlight on him. What was he up to?

"Guess after all 'em years, the Duke deserved a break. On the Oscars—" She hissed.

"Nick-EEE!" Scruffy yelped. Ry clenched her hands and teeth. Her blood boiled.

"Please! Not so loud," he whispered. "But you're right, Ry. When you're right, you're right. Simple as that. We ain't got time to discuss the flaws in the Academy Award selection process right now. Got my own story ta tell. But keep your voice down, will ya? Guess I'm stallin', puttin' off the inevitable."

"You are nuts and I'm leaving."

As she turned to reach for the leash, Nick snagged her by the wrist to spin her about. She shone the flashlight on him. Her eye caught his. His two-tones drilled her, nailing her in place. His strong grip strangled her wrist, cutting off the flow of blood to her hand.

"Nick, you're—you're hurting me."

She tried to wriggle—to twist her wrist free, but it was no good. He drew his grip even tighter, tugging her down to her knees with a steady pull she couldn't resist no matter how much she turned and twisted against him. Surprised and shocked—scary—to think how powerful he was. How much physical force he could exert over her, if he so chose. It was the first time he had ever used force on her. No, that wasn't true. In the purple room and between the dugout and the tree brake, that was force. But force from passion, not anger, and she'd liked it—a lot. Though this was from anger, it hurt but she liked it—too much. She sunk under his withering gaze no less his grip, melting down to the ground, much as the Wicked Witch of the West had melted down dying in the *Wizard of Oz*. Ryz'n understood now Nicky hadn't made the wrestling semis last year because he was a wimp before DQ'ing for failing to make weight. Knew why he was one of only five guys in school to hold an iron cross for ten seconds, only one to walk on his hands to first base.

"Here." He offered her the bourbon. "No, thank you. Have you gone completely nuts?"

"Yep. Over you, Sweetie," he whispered. "Over you."

Stretching himself out, he pointed to his long rectangular scar.

"You been dying to know about this. All right. I'll tell ya since most of it come out in court already anyway." He looked up to make sure he had her attention.

"All these marks?"

"Yeah. Notches, I call 'em. Superstition—from losin' all 'em chicks, see?"

"Why'd you have them in the first place?"

"Why? Why'd you think? On account o' you!"

"*ME?* That's—that's ridiculous! Why, that's the lamest excuse I ever heard."

"Yeah, *YOU!* All because I was tryin' to replace the absence of you. Don't ya see Ry? You were the one for me ever since that day at the pool when you rubbed the aloe vera on me. Even though you didn't look near as good as ya do now. But I made that stupid pact with Don. Every time one of 'em left me. It hurt. Felt like I's gettin' cut every time, see? So I figured God had sumpin' against me. Maybe I wasn't livin' right? Or mebbe, He required a sacrifice, like in the Old Testament. So I figured, if I cut myself, inflicted the pain on myself for every chick that hurt me then the next time, mebbe I wouldn't get hurt so bad, if at all. See? I cut myself once for each one. Made these notches but this is what's important. Wanna prove to you now none of 'em—not a single, blessed one—mean a damn thing to me, Ry. Just you Baby and nobody else."

"Notches? I don't think I want to hear any more. I'm getting sick to my stomach."

Leaning over, she felt for her belly. Nick reached to hold her head but she thrust his hand aside, glaring at him.

"Please Ryzanna, please. Not one of 'em means a damn thing to me. Honest. Only one matters is you. And I never made a notch for you—"

"Ha! That's supposed to mean something?" She stared at him. "You notched one for every whore you've had. Is that what you're saying? But none for me, hunh? What am I dog meat?" She scowled. "Hmmmpf. Figured it was some crazy, perverted deal like this. No mark for me though, hunh? Why not? Not good enough for ya?"

Nick stiffened. "No. Too good. 'Sides you knew I's experienced ta begin with."

"Sure. And you knew I wasn't." She felt her face flush as she scowled at him.

"Your sarcasm don't do you justice Ry. It's misplaced here."

She sneered again. "Really? How's that?"

He sighed. "Cuz you're *too good* for me Baby. Always have been. Always will be. Like that blues number I wrote about ya. Why I made the pact with Don to leave ya alone all last year. Mebbe I's selfish ta go with ya, but it's too late now. We're in it together, for better or worse, like a marriage."

She smirked. "'Like a marriage'—ha! Got that right, at least."

"Look. You asked for the truth and you deserve it, so here it is. I'm only doin' this cuz of how I feel about ya, like no one else Sweetie. You gotta believe that. What's underneath—" He revealed the ugly truth that branded his underside base with lumpy scars. She held the flashlight riveted on him there.

"Call 'em combat wounds, Ry. Purple heart wounds from accidents. Well, it don't matter really what from. The details ain't important. Point is I started notchin' mase'f out o' superstition see? I always seemed to have such bad luck with chicks, always losin' 'em for one reason or another. And each time was more painful than the last. I thought God was against me cuz I could never find that one girl—the right girl—ya know, ta stand by me. The one Father V says you gotta have for keeps. But it was you all along Sweetie."

"Knew that circumcision excuse was a lie."

"I'll break 'em down for ya. One: Maureen left me when—"

"Hold it right there Buster! I heard it all in court. Once was too much. Asked and answered as those lawyers say, so just stuff it. Least you didn't do Sheena. Guess that's somethin' to be grateful for. Darn it Nicholas, you—"

"—Well like Lena said in court …." Nick pawed the ground, looking down away from her. "I, I jes' couldn't Ry. Got too much respect for ya. Never coulda looked ya in the eye, if I'd messed with her—never!" He let go of her but she was still mad.

On her knees, Ryz'n resumed The Stance as best as she could.

"My-my! Scruples! I'm supposed to believe you have a shred of decency in you. You, kneeling here without a stitch, freezing your butt off, all scarred up from mutilating yourself over your whores!"

Nick opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off, stretching out her hands, palms toward him as if she could fend off his ugliness with her hands. Nick—on his knees naked in the mist, exposing himself, and in more ways than one. Bad enough to hear it all in court from others but to see him confess like this—

"I don't want to hear any more Nicholas. I don't want to and I won't."

"Too bad, you're gonna hear it cuz I'm gonna prove myself to ya now by these wounds and notches, 'n one more I'm gonna make. Just for you and the baby—*all three of us!* By this wound, we'll all be healed—put right. You don't know how lucky you are to have me all scarred up like this."

She had no idea what he meant and could care less. She started to tell him what she thought. But, as she rose, Nick seized her again by her still sore wrist.

He peered into her eyes so boldly, as though he were undressing her very soul, so rivetingly that she was unable to speak. The words caught in her throat. Too shocked to speak or move, as if he had cast a spell paralyzing her beyond his firm grip.

"Ry! We pledged ourselves, our bodies and spirits, our love to each other down at the beaver ponds. You can't walk away from that now and break our pledge."

Nicky stared hard into her eyes. Those two-tone peepers burned right through her, melting her right down as always, like a used candle. When she relented, he loosened his grip on her forearm. Yes. They had promised themselves to each other. She had made him swear before they crossed the line that night in the mist on the levée bank. She had sworn, too. She had promised. She remembered. She could never forget.

"Yes, and you promised to marry Allena too. Never a second thought, just promised her." She snapped her fingers. "Just like that! To give your life away—and mine with it."

He shrugged. "What was I supposed to do? Thought she was gonna have my kid."

"So is that why you're marrying me Nicholas? Out of obligation?"

"Oh, hell no! It ain't like that between us. You know that Sweetie." Ryz'n scowled.

"Oh, how is it? You never once said you loved me. Not one darn time!"

"Well after this you, won't need me to say it. Actions speak louder'n words. Watch."

Nick reached into some Kleenex lying at his knees. He pulled out a razor blade then poured more Jim Beam on it and himself.

"Hold that light steady now. This is for you Ryzanna, for all three of us, the baby too."

He took the corner of the blade in his right hand. The blade gleamed in the flashlight.

"No! Don't!"

Ryz'n lurched forward to stop him, striking her knee on a knobby surface root that snaked through the moss. Sudden pain pierced her kneecap making her jump. She lost her balance. With hands outstretched, she tumbled into him. The flashlight knocked into his hand holding the razor blade. Nick yelped. Ryz'n fell across and on top of him. Nick pushed her away, swallowing a painful groan in a loud hiss. She rolled off him onto her side, ignoring her sore kneecap, trying to fix the light on the source of his pain.

"What is it Baby? Are you okay?" She couldn't help but notice the heartfelt concern she'd voiced in her tone toward him for the first time tonight.

"Ahh! Sliced myself good I think. Look at that!" He pointed to his thigh, where she swiveled the flashlight. He laughed through a pained grimace.

The razor blade was sticking in his leg. Forgetting her horror, she rose to her knees, centering the light. The corner of the blade had wedged into the flesh of his right thigh with the blade sticking out at an acute angle. But there was blood elsewhere, too. Ryz'n moved the flashlight to her right a few inches to spy the source—the sac.

"Oh, no," she said.

It was bleeding badly. He winced.

"Damn Ry. Missed the darned notches. What'd ya do that for? Hunh?"

"Pickles! That darn tree root. Hit it with my knee and—shoot! I'm so sorry Baby."

"Anh. 'S okay. Not as symbolic as I'd planned, but it'll do. Guess ya left your special brand on me after all. And I can safely say, it was your doin', too. Ha!" He grimaced.

"Does smart though. Dang!"

Ryz'n shoved him down on his back.

"Here. Take the light. Let me see … Ohhh, yes … It's a bad one. I'll fix it."

"You don't hefta. I can do it." Nick rose back to his elbows. She shoved him harder.

"No. Damn it! You lay back there. I'll do it." Her tone was so firm, it chilled her. But he lay back as she went to work. "Hold that light steady," she whispered, "so I can see what I'm doing." She shook her head as the light stilled. "I swear Nicholas sometimes—"

"Gee Ry, you cussed." Seizing the bottle of bourbon, she said, "Well, pickles Nicky. You drive me to I, I swear." He laughed. "Yeah, what I jes' said."

She yanked the razor blade from his thigh then poured the corn liquor on top of his wounds. Nick hissed, sucking in the pain.

"Stings, does it?" Trying to smile through the pain, he whispered, "Sure do."

"Good." Ryz'n poured some more, making him wince. She smiled. "Serves you right." Between clenched teeth, he hissed: "Sac's spurtin' like an oil well. Ain't it, Ry?"

Ryz'n seized one of the many wash rags he had laid out there on the moss. She thrust the cloth over the wound before he could do so himself. After wrapping him, she used both hands to press hard against each of his wounds to stanch the flow of blood.

Sensing blood in the air, Scruffy whined behind her. The pet backed up on her belly under the nearby shrubs. Nick took the bottle from her. Then he took a swig.

Ryz'n focused on his wounds. "Hold that light steady Sweetie."

"*Sweetie*, hunh? Gee Ry, that makes it all worth it. Sure do." He grinned, revealing the gap in his upper, front teeth as she worked to stop the bleeding.

"How so?" He grinned wider, hissing out: "Cuz ya love me again."

Shaking her head, she sighed. "I always loved ya, Baby, just was mad at ya is all. This is bad Nicky. You tore the sack into two flaps. Think it needs stitches."

Nick shook his head. "Nah—no doctors. Just do what ya can."

She cleaned and bandaged his wounds as best as she could, applying Neosporin.

"Maybe I can use some melted candle wax to seal ya up? Temporarily that is. Until I can stitch ya up good and proper. Your thigh's not too bad."

"*You?* Stitch *me*? Ahhhh-dammn. Stings like a bitch though."

Nick propped up on his elbow again. She felt his free hand stroking her hair, rubbing her head, soothing her. He cooed to her, while she tried to concentrate on binding his wound. Lying back, he grimaced, muttering between clenched teeth.

"My little nurse, my bride-to-be. How lucky can a guy get?"

Keeping mum, she applied steady pressure to his sac wound, afraid to let loose of him for fear of it gushing again. Without looking up, she muttered.

"That was a darn fool thing to do Nicholas." She reached for another cloth. "You might get infected. What if we can't stop the bleeding? Have to go to the emergency room to

get you sewed up. Pickles." She handed him a wash cloth to wipe the blood dripping off his hand, but he didn't use it. "Here. Hand me that candle, please?"

"Try the ice first, Ry."

She iced him down. He said it was cold. She iced his wounds until he said he couldn't feel them. When the bleeding stanched, he reached to his side, to set the saucer holding the candle onto his belly. Carefully, slowly, he inched it down to her. She dried the melted ice water from his wounds with a hand towel. She broke the candle free of the waxed saucer then, lowering it, brought the flaming candle down, dripping wax, first on the sac then his thigh, forcing him to hiss with pain. She righted the candle so the brim would fill, only to repeat her efforts until the wounds were completely sealed, making him jump with each hot drip. She placed the candle on the saucer down to her left.

Nick bolted down another shot of bourbon then stilled. Setting the bottle down, he leaned forward. His hand reached forward to caress her left cheek and slid under her chin, turning her face up to him. She looked up to notice a faint smile cross his lips.

"For you, Sweetie, cuz you're the one now, always have been. The only one. Not Lena. Not any of the rest of 'em. Jes' you Ry, just you."

The wax dried, sealing his wounds. "Looks pretty good. Hope it holds," she said.

His thumb was at the corner of her mouth, teasing, drawing a reluctant curl from her lips, searching over her face, feeling dimples in her cheeks, formed by a smile he created. Tears welled in her eyes. All was forgiven. How could she be angry with him now?

Nick leaned in to kiss her, his full pink-red, girl lips, so soft like a puff of warm, moist air against hers. Gently squeezing him, Ryz'n kissed him, open-mouthed, wet and hard. Her tongue found his, poking into the gap in his denture-free teeth. His mouth widened for her. She crawled over his legs, careful to avoid his wounds. Her left arm shot round his neck pulling him down, bending him over her as she fell backwards onto the moss and low ferns. Panting hard, she wanted to give herself to him. Yet she felt frustrated and lacking, knowing he was unable to complete her now.

She'd done a full one-eighty in temperament as well as position, now on her right side facing Nick on his left. His left knee bent forward resting flat against the sleeping bag leaving his wounds free to the night air. She wanted him desperately, like the first time. He knew. He had to know. As if by order, his right hand slid down over her neck, shoulder and arm, sliding up under the Peters jacket around behind her, down along the small of her back and over her rump. His hand pressed into her loose dress. He rubbed over the deep swale of her waist, pressing the limp dress against her back and ribs. Radar drew his fingers around to her loose bosom and back down the curve of her waist. Up and down, up and down, from bodice to bust quickly, repeatedly. Ryz'n tugged off her jacket.

Friction from his firm petting spread warmth through her body, negating the cold. Waves pulsated within her. She became aware of her belly shallowing, only to refill

quickly. She forgot about the smart on here kneecap where she'd fallen against the root. Sucking in the night chill, Ryz'n's panting escalated, becoming more rapid with each breath. She kissed him, drawing hard on his tongue, returning his petting. Despite his pain, Nick fumbled at the toggle-buttons held in place by the thick-corded loops that ran down the length of her dress from the deep-cleaved nadir of the sweetheart collar to the bottom hem. Her sweet, desperate craving—a throbbing deep within her—was nigh unbearable. Like a frightened rabbit, she noticed her body quivering with anticipation.

Placing her left hand over his right, Ryz'n slid his hand down the barrel buttons to those covering her loins. Withh both hands, she tore at the loops fastened over her torso. She couldn't loosen them fast enough. Swollen pregnancy breasts spilled out over her bodice. Nick did his bit. Her dress parted down the middle. She shoved the opened hems to her sides, exposing her quivering body to the night chill. Goose bumps crawled over her skin. Nick played a familiar tune upon her as only he could. Her stomach shallowed deeper with each panting breath. Ryz'n sunk her fingers into his dense lockes. She seized Nick's head, tightening her grip as if his head were a basketball. She shook with want.

"Father, forgive my weakness," she whispered then pressed him home.

… Nick moaned low. His body sagged, wilting heavy upon her. His left hand held firm about her neck. His right hand below fluttered to a spastic halt, slipping away. Ryz'n clung to him, squeezing, hoping to hold him in place. But his hand fell limp, vacating the volcanic throb inside her, ending her fantasy. Turning aside, she bit hard into his left thumb that had formed one pincer of the vise grip that strangled the carotid artery beneath her ear. The stranglehold from his left hand loosened. He sighed.

Breath—oh! Finally—sweet breath of life! Ryz'n gasped, sucking deeply, desperately of the fresh, cool night fog. How great was this? To breathe deep of the dense night chill? When she thought for sure he had strangled her to death. To feel the cold against her skin, yet still own the hot-glowing, fast fading fireworks inside, too? Her chest heaved, filling her lungs with cool night mist. She relaxed. The animal taste of Nicky's blood roused her while cool mist bathed her limp body.

Yes, the night chill upon her everywhere—all over. Only the cap-sleeved shoulders of her dress clung to her, tugging at her, riding up under her armpits. The parted skirt splayed out behind and above her head, covering the moss. She felt sweat, drying fast on her bare body, cooling beneath the clammy night fog. Yet inside, she was hot, aglow, pulsating, and breathfully alive—yes. *Alive!*

Ryz'n squirmed, wriggling her backside deep into the fern carpet beneath her, extending the pain-tainted, pleasurable scintillation she felt inside. She had sunk past the moss into the ferns, fully and utterly contented. Ferns tickled her behind, legs and toes. Smiling with satisfaction, Ryz'n stretched out her limbs reaching, reaching…then balled

her hands into fists. She twisted her hips, screwing her behind into the tickling ferns; revelling without, pulsing wild delights within. How strange, so surreally strange—

Scruffy barked, straining at her leash, jumping wildly. How did she get so close?

Nicky moaned. "—Damn dog gonn…do—do…us—in."

Still gasping, Ryz'n turned her head left to hiss: "SCRUFFY! SHUSH-SHUSH!!"

Her hissing tone was so harsh the pet obeyed immediately, shying back down among the low ferns. Nick had done what he could under the circumstances. He knew exactly what to do and how to please her even though his wounds made him incapable of pleasing himself. She had taken advantage of him knowing he would do anything to please her. To escape her doghouse. And it had worked out better for her than she ever could have hoped. She loved him all the more for playing hurt.

Ryz'n seized his head again, squeezing his limp hand between her thighs as she sat up. She pulled his head to her and covered his slobber mouth with hers, kissing him deeply, tasting of them both. Then she lay back to luxuriate in the leafy ferns caressing her body tickling her skin. Her chest heaved. She slurped deeply of the chill night mist.

Lifting his head, Nick loomed toward her.

"Ry—" His choking whisper was hoarse.

Nick's eyes rolled back. His head flopped down, listless and heavy upon the masses of her exposed bosom. His drenched, lower arm jerked once, stilling against her thigh.

She could hardly believe any of it. She wanted to cry. From joy. From shame. Both satiated and embarrassed by so much carnal pleasure earned at his expense. She felt guilty for wanting him so badly. Guilty for using him when he was hurting. Guilty for taking advantage of his need to escape her doghouse. But guilty mostly, because he had understood her so well, making her feel so darned good despite his pain. Though hobbled, he had used a choke-hold and skills gained from blowing blues harp and plucking guitar to play a rapturous melody upon her. Filling her so completely, so utterly and—my gosh—repeatedly, satisfying her carnal lusts, he had exceeded wildly beyond the usual passions of their lusty call and response duets. He had played upon her breath-taking notes, both so sonorous and raunchy that dimming echoes yet resonated pink waves of undulating warmth deep inside her. He'd known exactly what he was doing—the choke hold—all of it. How could she ever doubt him?

He'd done it for love. Done it for her.

Ryz'n wept.

Nick woke to a persistent, stinging, smart. Looking about, he licked his lips and blinked. Encompassed by thick ground fog, he spied the burning candle first through the murky mist to his right. Through the grey murkiness to his left, not fifteen feet away, he could make out the dog. The pet raised its head, hiding halfway under the heavy, intertwined brush and tree wall that surrounded them in the tiny glen. Faint aroma of Love's Fresh Lemon prickled his nostrils. A nudge against his chest, made him look down. He spied Ry's hot cocoa-hued, dense tresses resting in the nook of his chilled, partly uncovered chest and shoulder. He admired her low brow and thick, coarse hair.

Still slumbering beneath closed eyelids, Ry's lips pursed slightly, curling at the corners as she snuggled into him. Her angelic satisfaction prompted him to smile. They lay side by side, snug in the double sleeping bag. Ry rested on her right side, nestled into his left. Nick lifted his head to look around. His bike leaned against the broad base of the great oak behind and beside them. Heavy yet leafy branches draped over then like a canopy, scarcely visible in the dense fog. Makeshift, first-aid stuff lay strewn about them on the moss in the mist. They rested together in the double sleeping bag, snug and warm against the night chill. What had happened?

He'd proven his love for her trying to notch himself one last time—for her and the baby. And when she nursed him, they got frisky. All went black. He couldn't recall a dang thing after that. He kissed her forehead beneath her dense bangs. He rested his head back, trying to remember what occurred. But it was no use. He must've passed out. Had they made it first? Could he have managed it? Her slumbering smile produced a dimple.

His left arm and hand had fallen asleep beneath her. She must have washed the blood off of them, because he felt and saw no blood — dry or wet. Nick slid his arm out from behind her neck as gently as he could. He rubbed his arm to revive it. Ry stirred.

He watched her eyes struggle to life batting her long, black lashes, the kind of curling, long lashes most girls had to buy at the drug store. The kind that contrasted so sharply with her hazel-green eyes and hair that reminded him of hot cocoa surrounding a marshmallow. Sleepy-eyed but coming to life, Ry looked up to him all warm and dewy. Wet with waking, her eyes shone like emeralds. The sight of her roused him and the rousing brought upon him a sharp, rippling twang that stung like a bitch.

Ry must have noticed his grimace because she brought her left hand from under the sleeping bag to caress his right cheek.

"You okay, Baby?" she whispered.

He blinked hard, staring at her innocent beauty.

"Well, I been better." Peeking out of the corner of his eye at her, he watched her grin.

"You know something Sweetie?" she asked,dimples flaring.

"No, what?"

Her grin widened. "I believe ya."

She had used one of his favorite lines on him. They giggled until he winced. Her dimples faded with her giggle. Concern spread over her double-cheeked, baby face.

Lord how he loved that face with those healthy baby-faced cheeks—like a Sunday picnic. And when Ry smiled, her dimples and double chin knocked him out. Her innocent features contrasted with her enticing, dark-sweeping, arched brows and sexy, full, pink lips with the natural, pronounced philtrum; the kind of eyes and mouth movie stars had to paint on themselves. Her comely visage resembled the best features of Annette Funicello in all her beach blanket glory. No, not Annette but—and Ry's olive skin added to her mysterious allure—that chick in *Ben Hur* opposite Charlton Heston—the Jewess. They could pass for sisters. 'Cept Ry's gorgeous hazel-green eyes shone emerald now with the dew of waking. And her nose was cuter. Wait—*June Palmer*—same size. They could be twins. June Palmer, the pin-up model he'd learned of in a London club over the holidays. Only Ry's contours bested the pin-up model's. Like Betty Brosmer, Ry's waist was slimmer, longer, and her posterior—superior—rounded like an upside-down valentine heart pumped up over a bustle of muscle. Was that possible? Dang straight it was.

Ry popped up beside him, jolting him from his musings.

"Better check ya out, Sweetie. Make sure everything's okay."

Sweetie? Now, that's a good sign. That's a *very* good sign. Meant she wasn't mad any more. Thank God for that. Made the pain he felt worth it.

"No Ry, please don't. Just tell me what happened. Can't remember much after we got a bit frisky."

She pulled her head back to eye him.

"'A bit frisky?' Ha! That's an understatement if I ever heard one. You were something else Baby, even though you stayed holstered. But gee, I never thought it could be so great with you—well, you know—like that." She stared off, shaking her head. "Incredible. Guess that's what happens when you get so hor—uh, hungry-needy that—you know. But I'm okay—the baby, too. Thank God, Mother Mary and all the saints. No need to worry."

"Gee. Wish I remembered more. Remember you, spurtin'." He guessed amnesia was the Lord's way of escape for him on this deal. "Say, whaddaya mean, 'the baby?'"

"Never mind. Don't *worry about a thing*," she said, mimicking him, reaching up to peck him on the cheek. "Guess there's more than one way to skin a cat. That's for sure."

"Or tickle the pussy?"

He had difficulty keeping a straight face. She shoved him.

"Why Nicky Sh'boom, you're being filthy." But she grinned just the same.

"But I did all right for you though, didn't I Baby? I did, didn't I?"

"You betcha. Played hurt well. You got the magic touch, Baby."

"Yeah. Sometimes I get, uh, an itchy trigger finger, you might say."

"Worked out fine, matched my itchy trigger." Ry arched her brow.

"Why Ryzanna Christine. Now who's bein' filthy?"

She laughed out loud. "Sorry Sweetie. Couldn't resist that one."

Nick massaged his arm. "Went to sleep on me."

She frowned. "Oh. Sorry, Baby."

"'S okay Baby. You love me again, makes it all worth it. Ya cleaned me up nice too."

"Nicky, I always loved you. Never stopped. Just that you can get me so darn mad sometimes, like nobody I've ever known. Worse even than Sheena. And that's saying something, let me tell you." Ry shook her head in wonder and gazed off. "Because kid sisters really know how to punch your buttons, believe me."

"Yeah? Glad to hear it." Scrunching her face, she turned to him and chirped.

"What? Glad to hear you can make me as mad as Sheena does?"

"No, glad to hear you always loved me and still do. Had me worried there for a bit."

"Oh Baby, let's not go into that. I'm feelin' too good, a little sore but good, still warm and glowy inside all because of you. But I'm worried about your wounds. Hurt much?"

"Kinda. Could use some aspirins. Think I brought some. Say? Mebbe wash 'em down with another swig of that bourbon?"

"If there's any left. Lemme see."

Ry turned over to her left to find what he needed. Reaching out, her hand fumbled through the mist over the moss. After locating the bottle, she gauged its contents.

"Yes, we're good to go here. Where's the aspirin?"

She handed him the Jim Beam while he pointed through the mist to her left toward a folded hand towel. "Check in there." She did, coming up with the aspirin bottle. Ry poured a couple pills into her hand. Turning, she stopped.

"Sure you should take these? Aspirin's a blood thinner and you were bleeding like a stuck pig Baby."

"I'll take my chances."

Nick plopped the pills in his mouth and washed them down with a swig from the bourbon bottle. The hot bite of liquor down his gullet felt good. He offered her the bottle.

"Want some?" She screwed up her face.

"Better not. Had enough already. Not good for the baby, ya know?"

"Nonsense. Help him sleep better. Here." She took the bottle from him to raise it to her lips, but stopped. "How do you know it's a boy?" He shrugged.

"Figure it's gotta be. Dad had two boys and I don't expect no less—this one bein' '*a miracle baby'* and all." He winked before adding, "Go ahead Sweetie. It'll help both of ya sleep better—honest."

Ry slurped on the bottle, coughing as she handed it back to him. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

"Whew! That's hard stuff. Burns.Had some earlier when I fixed ya up. Needed it to steady me at the sight of all that blood. Don't know I could ever get used to it—the liquor, I mean. The blood doesn't bother me now though. Makes me feel kind o' light and goofy. Know what I mean? Uh—the bourbon, that is—not the blood."

Nodding, he grinned. "Yeah. I know." He took the bottle to guzzle some more. Then sucked air. "Whew!" He held the bottle out to study it. "Don't know how to explain this to Dad. He keeps close watch on his liquor. Ta make sure Pappy ain't gettin' inta it."

"That's the least of your worries, Sweetie. What about your wounds? Probably, we should go to the emergency room. Get you sewed up. It didn't look good Baby. Was all I could do to stop the bleeding after we, well—used the ice you had me bring, the liquor too—and the Neosporin. And more melted wax. I tied the gauze around you as best I could. Good idea, bringing all this stuff—Neosporin, especially."

"With the shoe laces?"

"Just one at the base, to cut off the flow of blood. I cut the gauze in strips with the scissors and tied the strips around ya tight. Triple-wrapped ya tight as I could. You must have opened a blood vessel the way you were bleeding—like a stuck pig."

"But you stopped it, right?" She nodded.

"Unh-hunh. Least, it *was* stopped after I bandaged ya up. Nothing seeped through too bad—let me check."

Before he could respond, Ry had the flashlight in her hand. Turning it on, she dived down into the double sleeping bag. He felt her inspectin' him, her hot breath upon him.

"There's a little blood," her muffled voice floated back to him, "but it's not bad—pretty dry. And the thigh's okay."

Her breath upon his manhood aroused him, making him wince.

Ry pulled her head out of the bag up next to his face.

"That's a good sign Baby, a very good sign. U, O-K. I, O-K. All A-O-K. Tied ya up tight as a drum. Hurt much?"

"Not too—"

She kissed him hard and long on the mouth.

"You taste like Jim Beam, Sweetie, but I kind o' like it. Wonder what time it is?"

Nick shook his head. "No way o' tellin' in this fog."

She grinned. "Well, no bugs at least, too cold for 'em, I guess. Below fifty now, probably. Seems like we do our best turtle-dovin' in the fog, doesn't it Baby?"

He knew what she meant, their first time down at the beaver ponds and them times at Clear Lake between the third base dugout and the tree brake next to the cornfield.

"Yeah, guess so. Ya know, had an idea we could go back to the beaver ponds on a foggy night like this and snap some pictures of ya in the fog, you know, in the raw? Mann. Wouldn't that be somethin'? Gorgeous nymph like you—in the mist and all?"

She grinned through a blush, shoving him in the ribs. "Leave it to you to think of something like that." Clucking, she shook her head. "Too darn cold now though."

"Even better, Baby. Make yours stand right up. Mebbe even get some licorice whips goin'n see some goose bumps. Make for a great pic." It was his turn to grin.

"And freeze my butt off while you're all clothed I suppose? Maybe I should take some nudies of you, freezin' your behind off? Inspect your goose pimples!"

"Hey that's okay by me. But we couldn't make any money off pictures of me like that. We could off you though. And we'll be needin' money to take care of the baby, right? 'Specially, after I pay off Franco. Don't wanna hock my instruments, I don't hefta."

She backed off him.

"Sell nudie pictures of me? Like to *Playboy* or something? To save your stuff? You must have drunk too much of that liquor Nicholas. You aren't thinking straight. I would never do a thing like that. I don't care if it sets us up for the rest of our lives."

Nodding hard, the girl shot daggers at him.

"No—*not Playboy*. But like to them arty photography mags that give ya cash prizes for best pictures. Like in *Photo-Op* or *Pix Mix* or *Photo Art*, one o' them kind. Shoot. Mebbe all of 'em. Like Mister Bereb showed us in photography class. You wouldn't be showin' everything, see? You'd be in the fog, sort o' stickin' out here and there with those tree-mendous coives of yois pokin' through. Call 'em, 'Curves in Mist' or 'The Nymph'. Yeah, I like that. Your face'd be kind of obscured by the fog, see? Features, blurred? Yeah—Oww!"

"What's wrong?"

"Got a little excited picturin' ya like that and it stung me good."

He winced as he shifted his weight. She chuckled.

"Well good. Serves ya right for thinking such nonsense."

He reached for the Jim Beam to chug more of his painkiller. The hot burning sensation slid down his gullet again. He felt smoother and happier with every sip.

"Still …" Ry looked off into the fog. "If we did it right … I mean, made it kind of arty, kind of masked my face, like you say. And the fog was thick enough to blur my features, just see my hair or mouth and chin maybe—the outline. After all, who would know it was me? And we sure could use the money. That's a fact. There's lots of things I want to get for the baby. And those magazines give good prizes. If you win for the month, you automatically qualify for picture of the year. And we could develop them ourselves in the school lab, after hours. Nobody'd know. I'm sure Mister Bereb wouldn't mind—we don't mention the subject matter. Just, you know, ask him about taking pictures in night fog."

He sighed. "Yeah, ta get the shutter speed just right. Ah, Ryzanna. That's my girl. Sure, we could. You bet we could. And no one would ever know it was you. See? Now you're talkin'. We can pick one o' these foggy, Indian summer nights when it's nice and warm, just after the sun goes down, before it gets too cool. Jest enough to draw ya out."

Scrunching up her shoulders and eyes, Ry simpered.

"Yeah. Be kind of like our secret, something private—yet public. But just between us. Kind of like that idea, Sweetie."

Her simper broadened to create the dimples he loved. She nestled into his side again.

He nodded. "Yeah, even better."

Ry turned to him, kissing him on the mouth, soft but deep, very romantic, to whisper.

"To think a year ago I was a chunky tuna. I've lost nearly nine inches off my waist since then, Nicky. And all cuz of you …"

She stared at him, all thankful and dreamy.

"Me? Whaddaya talkin'? It was *you*, Sweetie. All you. I mighta pushed ya in the right direction but it was *you* that done it. Not me. And kept it off, too. That's important. You kept it off, not me. All that fish you eat and two helpings of vegetables, one cooked and one raw. Stayin' away from fried foods. No sweets. Just a shake or a bowl o' ice cream or what—two do-nuts a week? Shoot. Yeah, you got a wisp of a waist—a heckuva waist."

Blushing, she simpered, showing her dimples.

"But know what really gets me off about your figure Ry?"

From the corners of her eyes, she glanced up at him from beneath them dark, curlin' lashes that seemed never-endin'.

"Yes, I do." She said it, kind of miffed, looking down at her left breast still exposed out over her dress but under cover of the sleeping bag. He shifted a little toward her.

"Naw, ain't jes' them tantalizin' twin torpedoes of yours, Baby—P-H-phat though they are. Or that great P-H-phat *bee*-hind of yours either, as broad across the beam as ya are in your shoulders. Cuz I dig that. I really do. Looks like you're wearin' a perpetual bustle back there. From *bee*-hind, your butt looks like a rounded, upside-down Valentine, funneling into your waist. With another valentine—your torso—on top of it, right side up. Kind o' end-ta-end-like. Don't take it wrong. You got—symmetry—perfect symmetry."

"Really? My waist isn't too thin? Too grotesque? Doesn't make me look like a freak?"

"Whaddaya talkin'? That's crazy. Where'd ya come up with that?"

"Sheena, she said—"

"Sheena? What the heck does she know? She said I was a fag for cryin'out loud.

"Look Baby. You got the best hourglass, I ever seen. Your waist sets off your whole figure. Kind o' like the centerpiece. The crown jewel in a beautiful, uh, a beautiful diamond tiara or somethin'. You gotta be the most voluptuous chick in history."

She nestled into his side, beaming up at him, lapping up his praises as she might a butterscotch sundae. That was good because he knew how touchy she was about her waistline. Flyin' off in an instant, if she took him wrong. She'd done it before. And it was a terrible sight to behold. But he hadn't quite got it all out yet, what he really meant.

"Now don't take this wrong Baby. But you got this lovely, kind o' healthy, double-cheek, kind o' baby face that, when you smile, creates these great dimples of yours, your trademark so to speak, and a sort o' natural double chin. Knocks me right out.

"I mean you got the classic high cheek bones and all, but your face is healthy—glowing. And your body is like that, too. And that turns me on. Kind o' like Shirley Temple's, if ya know what I mean? Kind o' pudgy-healthy—" She stiffened beside him.

"'*Pudgy-healthy?'* Like *'Shirley Temple's?*'" Her brow furrowed.

"Uh, when she got older—you know? Uh, what I really mean is—maybe. Mebbe I shoulda said Kim Novak. Cuz your body's like perfect thickness cuz ya ain't hard and bony like a lot o' them skinny chicks, see? You got real meat on your bones Sweetie. I mean ya ain't wimpy. You got muscles without being muscular. Uh, like—toned, ya know—from all your swimmin'n the pull-up bar I give ya. I mean, ya got nice soft but *firm, round* curves, very invitin', see? You're thick, er plump mebbe, in all the right places, but not in your waist where it counts and—"

"As in pleasingly plump, is that what you mean?"

"Yeah, that's exactly it. You hit the nail right on the head—*pleasingly plump*—yeah, everywhere—'cept—except in the waist o' course, with the emphasis on the *pleasingly* part. And that slim, vanishin' waistline o' yours, why, jes' makes it—you—sets ya all off, like a beautiful goddess or nymph or somethin'. Wholesomely voluptuous, see?"

"Hey bean-keen-ee girl, you're the best one in the land," she sang.

They cracked up.

"Will our boy be as cute as that Bwett someday, ya think Nicky?"

He shook his head, "Nah—cuter, cuz he'll have you in him."

She laughed.

"Say, whadidya tell me that night at the Kovakloczech place? You know, 'bout your measurements? Give or take a half inch here or there?"

The girl's face shone. She counted on her fingers.

"I said: on my sixteenth birthday my measurements were thirty-three—twenty-six and a half—thirty-nine. Fat ass. Couldn't fill an A-cup." She frowned. "But by my seventeenth birthday, I grew an inch, lost six inches off my waist and a couple off my hips. My torso and shoulders expanded two inches—from swimming, push-ups and pull-ups on the bar you gave me. No more A-cup. I grew and shrunk in all the right places."

She blushed through a smile.

"Yeah, ya sure did. Said your boobs more'n quadrupled. Remember that part all right."

"You would." They chuckled. "Yes. Mom says I'm a 'late bloomer' like she was. '*Blossomed*,' is what she likes to say, as she did when she was sixteen."

"Shoot. She sure as heck got that right. You're a triple-double, see—a triple-D."

"'*Triple D*?' Oh no, Sweetie. You give me too much credit. I'm not that big. Mom's an *H* now after being my size when she was seventeen. She says after a couple kids, I have that to look forward to—you, too—happens to women in her family—the Matondkhars. There and the rear. But bein' pregnant has pumped me up. Had to get new bras. Up to an *E*, er Double *D* now from a *D,* and seem to be getting bigger. Pregnancy seems to gives us a second-wind growth spurt somehow." Ry grinned while he leered, shaking his head.

"No. That ain't what I mean, though bein' pregnant sure does agree wicha. I mean you got the *D*ouble-*D*igit-*D*ifferential—triple *D*, see? *Between* your measurements."

She beamed more but then her brow furrowed.

"Wonder what your measurements are, Sweetie," she asked.

"Me? Gee. Dunno. Wear a forty-regular suit and twenty-eight-slim slacks."

"What about your butt, Baby?" She giggled and reached down to tap his hip.

"Aww. I dunno. But it sure as shootin' ain't dang near as big as yours." She chuckled.

"Of course not. Sure like the look of it though—super cute way it turns up. But you know? It's funny. Measured for my wedding dress the other day–size zero–and since, well since I've been pregnant even though my breasts have swelled, I've lost almost five pounds and another inch and a half off my waist. Fancy that. Funny-strange. You'd think I'd gain. Morning sickness, I guess. But I have to take in a size zero."

He grinned. "I believe ya. But you're so much bigger up here–*udderly* fantastic. All boobs–purely awesome. And not just your pecs from that pull-up bar I gave ya last year."

He nodded towards her chest. She sighed.

"Leave it to you to say something like that Nicky. But you're right. What do you think? Milk, maybe? Gettin' ready for the baby, I guess."

"Yeah, some o' that vitamin *E*, er, double-*D* milk." Nick grinned.

She giggled. "Yes. And you know? I don't even break a hundred now—a pound shy."

"Almost thirty pounds gone all together. Pretty danged impressive, Sweetie."

"*Who told you that?*" Her eyes scolded. "Sheena? That little witch?" He shook his head no. "Mom?" He shook his head again. "Well, who then?"

"Can't reveal my sources. Le's jes' say, a little birdie tol' me. But you should be happy, not mad. I'm proud as a peacock over ya, really am."

"*Really?* Well, I never want to hear you mention the words *thirty pounds gone* and *me* in the same breath again. *Understand?*"

"Gee, sure Ry. Only meant to compliment ya's all. That's a heckuva feat Baby."

"Well, you know, it *is* kind of funny. Being pregnant, I mean."

Her tone softened as she looked past him.

"Think I'd gain weight. And I'm sure I will, but instead, I've lost. Don't crack a hundred now. And ya know what?" She faced him again.

"When I measured for my wedding dress the other day? My waist was under nineteen. Would you have believed that possible a year ago?" She smiled. "Boy, I don't. And it's all cuz of you Baby. Your game plan, your diet, your exercise routine. You ran those laps around the track with me and Leigh Ann. Only times—"

"Whoa. Hold on now. I might've pointed ya in the right direction. But you did all the work Baby. You're the flower. I just planted the seed, watered ya a little, stood back and watched you grow is all—and shrink. Ha. And you sure blossomed into one *bee-u-tee-full* flower. That's for sure. Gee. *Playboy*'d love to put you in a centerfold, believe me. You're one of a kind, Ry. With them pregnancy breasts added onto what's natural—"

She looked at him funny, stopping him short. He could see her thinking. When her brow furrowed, he thought he'd blown it again for sure. Figured she'd erupt on him like Mount Vesuvius. Instead, she was calm and pensive.

"Yes. But we must do it pretty soon though before I start to show and spoil the curves." Her brow wrinkled. "But how can we? Your dad is never going to let you go to the beaver ponds at night Nicky, not with this curfew deal."

"To do what?"

Grinning, she shoved him. "Why, take those pictures, silly, like you said. Maybe even some movies. Use your dad's Kodak Brownie or maybe Todd's sixteen millimeter?"

He nodded. "Yeah. After the trial—we'll do it after the trial. Next weekend."

Ry frowned.

"Suppose they find you guilty? Oh, I don't even want to think about that!"

She turned her face from him. He slapped his thigh through the sleeping bag.

"Oh gee. Guess I forgot to tell ya. You been so mad, not speakin' ta me and all. Guess all I had on my mind was gettin' ya here for this. But I've got good news."

Her frown faded as she faced him. "Oh? What?"

"Franco called me tonight after you dropped me off. Said we've got a new judge. Higher had that stroke and can't even talk now. Got the only female judge on the circuit. Franco used to work under her when she was State's Attorney. Supposed to be tough but fair. He figures when she reads the transcript—how old man Higher shafted us'n all—she might bend over backwards for us, might even throw the case out? Even better, see?"

"Oh, Nicky. That's wonderful. Just wonderful." She threw her arms around his neck to kiss him hard but stopped when he grimaced beneath her embrace.

"Oh Baby. Sorry. Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry. How can we get you home like this?"

Sighing deeply, he leaned back, shifting his weight again, laying his head back on the moss next to the oak trunk. "I dunno. Guess I's so intent on provin' my love ta ya, didn't think much about that. But it's okay I missed? Didn't cross out them other notches?"

"Hey. Whaddaya talkin'?" she said, imitating him. "But there's no way you're going to be able to ride your bike home Baby. Slicing yourself up like that just to prove a point. You cut yourself badly. On the corner kind of, in two pieces flapping there. How can you play football Saturday like that? And Coach Garth went to all that trouble to get Mister Marant to let you play? What a bummer. Gee, I was counting on seeing you out there."

She sat up, rising out of the sleeping bag, shaking her head. He noticed her bare left shoulder and overstuffed, torpedo-like left breast, stretching—stretching its phat torpedo length out, over her undone dress—just going on seemingly forever. Great girth to it, too. Really awesome. Hugh Hefner could just eat his heart out. The cool night air had drawn out her inimitable, licorice whip tip. Was he a lucky dog or what?

"Damn Ry, you *are gorgeous.* Really somethin' else. Blows my mind. A true nymph. Put all 'em Greek goddesses we learned about in sophomore English class to shame."

Glancing down at herself, she realized what he meant. She quick-slipped herself back into her dress, coverin' her breast, but not bothering to button up the bodice.

"Just forget about that Nicholas. Can't get you all shook up again, hurtin' you worse. Besides, what happened earlier was just—well…just one of them—one of *those* things. Pickles. You even have me talking like you."

Ry stuck her nose in the air. She settled back, buttoning only one toggle.

"We couldn't help ourselves then, could we? Just sort of happened? Yes. One of those things, I guess." She sighed. "Bad enough as is. Have to go to confession."

"Why? You said yourself, we didn't actually do it."

"Oh. We did worse. Believe me. Got me going so." She sighed. "Sprayed you more than once. You don't remember? Pickles—and I had impure thoughts. Let you breach the holy temple. That's for sure. That's more than enough!"

"Impure thoughts? *Holy Temple?* Judas priest. Whaddaya talkin' about? We're gettin' married for cripesake. Three weeks from today—er, yesterday now. Or did you forget?"

"*Gettiin'* married, ain't *bein'* married, to put it in your vernacular, Nicky. So, until we *are* married, *according to the Church*, those are impure thoughts and actions. Well I'll just make sure I don't get Father Vince. That's all. We'll be all right. You'll see."

He shook his head. "Never understand that as long as I live—confession. Never."

"Well, I don't expect you to. After all, you're not Catholic. You know we're lucky, Nicky. Ten years ago we wouldn't have been able to get married in the Church."

She paused to think a minute, staring into the mist.

"Well, in the Church maybe, but not at the altar anyway. They changed the rules on that you know, letting us marry out of the faith like this—at the altar I mean—in a nuptial mass. But I'm not sure exactly.

"Let's see … When we were stationed in Hawaii, a good buddy of my dad's married a local wahine. That was a mixed marriage but I can't recall which one was Roman Catholic and which wasn't … Well, it doesn't matter. The point is, as I recall, they did get married in the Church, but not at the altar, right? Oh, I'm not sure. Can't keep it all straight. No? Yes, that's right. Because I remember now, asking my mother why they were in the center aisle between the first couple of pews instead of at the altar."

He tapped her shoulder.

"The point is, it shouldn't matter. A justice of the peace married Ramon and Jolynne."

"So?"

"Well she's Catholic and he ain't. Didn't get married in the Church. If I recall right."

"When was that?" He shrugged.

"Gee. Dunno. Their oldest is seven. So it had ta been over seven years ago."

"Well, I think the Pope changed the rules on that since then but I'm not sure. Vatican Two was a big deal ya know. Finished just five years ago? But we're definitely getting married in the Church, and *at the altar, too*. Have a mass and everything. Soon as we get our Pre-Cana certificate." Ry nodded hard.

"Vatican Two? Shoot, I never even heard o' Vatican *One*." She ignored him, saying, "Maybe they just didn't get a dispensation from the bishop like we are?"

"Dunno nothin' 'bout that. But with all them rules and regalations changin' 'round, wonder what God thinks of all that?"

Ry shook her head. "Gee, I dunno Baby. I only know that if you belong to an organization, you should abide by its rules—no matter what the organization is."

"Yeah, like the Mafia, hunh?"

She smacked him playfully. "Nick-*eee*! How can you compare the two?"

"Well they're both Catholic, ain't they? Both got their rules and rituals."

She shoved her elbow into his ribs. "Gee Ry, I'm hurtin' bad enough.

"But mebbe that presupposes you want to stay in the organization to begin with? I mean, if the rules don't make sense and change all the time, why stay? Shoot, I know the Methodist Church'll marry us, Episcopalian, too—*at the altar*—no problem."

"Whoa. Hold on. Are you suggesting that I leave the Church? My faith? You must be out of your mind? I could NEVER do that! Father Vince is going to marry us *in* the Church. *AT* the altar. And we'll have a wedding mass and everything." She nodded.

"O-K, okay. You don' gotta get all bent outta shape over it. Sheesh Ry. I ain't makin' ya, am I? I'm goin' along, ain't I? Agreed to raise the kid Catholic and all, didn't I? Doin' all this Pre-Cana bull? Shoot. What more do ya want? For cryin' out loud."

She smiled: "Just our baby and—*YOU, SWEETIE*"

Casting her arms about him again, Ry's tongue went deep-divin' into his mouth, as if she was huntin' for buried treasure or somethin', as if she was Lloyd Bridges on *Sea Hunt*. He started to get into it but then pulled her off.

"Oh, almost forgot."

He reached for his cords, lying on the ground next to the sleeping bag to retrieve the marriage license application buried in the pocket.

"Now gotta sign it same as my folks did, so we can get the license, see? My folks already sigthis is very important Ry. Make sure your folks sign it. It's the application form for our marriage license. They signed here. Look."

Ryz'n shined the flashlight to scrutinize the application. "Says here not only do they have to sign, but at least one of them has to be present when you submit the application."

He snatched the paper from her hands.

"Where's it say that? Franco didn't say nothin' 'bout that."

She held the flashlight, pointing to the verbiage she had found.

He held the paper at arm's length cuz he hadn't thought to bring his readin' glasses. She held the flashlight steady. He read the paper carefully, which he hadn't done before.

Reading along, Ry said, "Looks like we have to show our birth certificates too. Hmm."

"Gee, you're right. Why didn't Franco tell me that? Some lawyer. What a bummer."

"Gee, I don't know. He's doing good for us in court though."

"But looky here Ry." He leaned back further, pointing to some fine print. "Says right here: 'A minor who is pregnant does not need parental consent as long as the pregnancy is verified in a written statement by a licensed physician.' So we don't need 'em to sign after all. Only need ta get a note from the doctor, just like for bein' absent from school."

She leaned in to pore over the document.

"But gee Nicky. I don't want that in our record. Like we *had* to get married."

"Well we do, don't we? I mean since you're pregnant, right?"

"Well I guess we'd have to wait until we graduated, uh—both eighteen, a year from now. Then, according to this, we wouldn't even need our parents to sign *or* a doctor, either. Sure. We could get married a year from now on our own see, just us." She smiled.

"Is that what you want? Wait a year and have the kid out o' wedlock?"

"No, of course not. I was just saying, *if* I wasn't pregnant, is all."

"Well *if* you weren't pregnant, we wouldn't need to get married at all, now would we?"

She pulled up short, snatching away the form.

"What do you mean by that Nicholas?"

He shrugged. "Nothin'. Jes' that we wouldn't *have to* is all. We could wait."

"*Wait? Wait until when?!?!"*

Her hazel eyes were turning emerald. Red was showing through her olive complexion. Nick knew he'd screwed up. He had to backpedal fast. He whispered.

"Well gee, Ry … I dunno. But don't talk so loud. Maybe we should wait till we git out o' college? Like Lonnie Sintmoyen and Lettie are doin'. You always looked up to them. 'Member they were voted the first, *First Couple of Pocomoke* two years ago?"

Her brow furrowed.

"Did Lonnie put you up to this? When were you talking to him?"

"No. He's at college, up in Pennsylvania. Lettie, too—at Maryland. I'm just sayin'—"

"*You're* just saying? Or is that your dad talking?"

"Well, sure. My folks'd like us to wait till I finish college. Don't do ta get married in a fever like it says in that Johnny Cash-June Carter song." (What Bobbi'd told him.)

"In a fever? More like in a pickle. I know you can't mean this. You can't, possibly."

Taking his chin in her hand, Ry turned his face to her, pausing for several seconds. Her face and jade eyes, hard as rocks, stared daggers through his peepers. Ticked, for sure. Then, as if she just thought of something wise, she said, "Know somethin' Nicky?"

"No, what?" Her icy glare was harsh.

"… I don't believe ya." Then she cracked up.

"—Got ya that time, didn't I Sweetie?" Nick let out a deep sigh.

"Yeah. You sure did." He let her enjoy her little joke for a minute…

"Look Ry, my folks signed off already. Why don't you get yours to sign and we'll get a signed statement from your doctor, too? Just in case."

"In case of what?"

"Gee, I dunno. But I like to cover all the bases. I mean, suppose—well suppose your dad gets pissed and changes his mind? He ain't too keen on this deal as it is."

She looked away, thinking for a minute.

"All right, Nicky. If you think it's best, that's what we'll do. I have a doctor's appointment early tomorrow—today. I'll get her to sign then. But if my folks agree and show up at the license bureau, I'm tearing the doctor's statement up. Don't want our child ever to see it. Might grow up to find it. Think maybe we didn't want to get married—didn't love each other. As if he wasn't wanted or something. As I've felt at times."

She pouted. He knew what she meant, "love child," like in the song. Sure, he understood. She'd told him her folks had to get married when her mom was a senior in high school. Ry came along a week after her mom turned eighteen in June. It was a sensitive subject. Her dad transferred out to Germany right after her birth, leaving Ry and her mom with her mom's folks in Georgia. It was hard on her mom. Sure, he understood.

He shoved his open hand in front of her face to snap her out of it. He whispered.

"Okay Ry. But don't go tearin' up the form till I get the license. I don't trust your dad."

She wavered.

"Here, shake on it." She shook his hand, adding "I'll do better than that."

Ry took off deep-diving on him—Lloyd Bridges as Mike Nelson—again. When she came up for air, she said. "Too bad you're all messed up Sweetie. That bourbon I drank's got me floatin' good enough to forget the holy temple for a while." She smiled.

"Me, too. But I don't wanna bleed all over ya."

"Well it's not as if I never bled there before. But I don't want to make confession worse than it is already. Hope I can get away with saying we just made out heavy." She sighed, nestling her head back into his chest. "That's reasonable, isn't it—considering."

He leaned back with his right hand behind his head and his left around her shoulder again. She was right—no way could he ride his bike home like this. What about his newspapers? What about school? He jiggled her a little.

"Hey Baby? Think you could do me a favor or two?"

Speaking into his chest without looking up, she answered.

"Sure. What do you need?"

"Was thinkin', mebbe you could drive the Harvell brothers around on my route today. Go pretty fast with you drivin' and each one of 'em takin' one side of the street."

"Sure Baby. I can do that for ya."

"Hefta go early though. Danny goes to Studdard—gotta be at school by seven-thirty."

"I could drop him off after. No problem. Tell them to be ready by a quarter after six."

"Yeah, that'll work. Even if you gotta drop him at school before ya finish, his brother can finish with ya. And mebbe pick up my assignments for me, too, if I can't make it."

"You think you won't be able to go to school?" She rose up, looking at him all serious. "When's the last time you missed? Never seen you miss. Except to be in court, I mean."

"Gee. Dunno, Ry. Been a while. Mebbe since my Rheumatic Fever in eighth grade. No. I missed last year when I testified in that murder case out in L.A. But that was for court too, wasn't it? No, never missed for bein' sick. You're right. Guess that daily dose of penicillin's doin' good for me, hunh? Keeps me healthy, like you said."

"Keeps you from getting V-D, you mean." She looked up at him, furrowing her brow. "That's been over three years though. That's incredible."

"What? That I been takin' penicillin that whole time?" She shook her head.

"No, that you haven't missed a day of school since then for being sick."

"Oh, yeah. Guess that's so. Never thought about it like that—but I missed the whole fourth quarter that year in eighth grade. So mebbe I jes' been makin' up for it."

She nodded, saying she had hardly missed since she went on the pill, before she got pregnant, except for "coming in late on account of morning sickness a couple o' times."

"Whaddaya talkin'? Ya just missed yesterday."

Ry rose up on her elbow.

"Yes, but I wasn't sick. Just too ashamed to go is all, hearing all your love-lust adventures in court like that. That's different."

He didn't want to get her started on his aberrant love life again.

"Yeah, I see your point. Speakin' o' mornin' sickness? You jes' woke up okay."

"See! Now you just don't listen to me Baby. I told ya before. I take Dramamine before I go to bed and it keeps me okay through the night. Then, in the morning, I've got saltine crackers and some flat soda right by my bed so I can reach over and take them before I even lift my head off the pillow. So I won't get dizzy-sick. After a few minutes, I can get up. No problem. Take Dramamine and eat breakfast and I'm good until after school."

He shrugged. "Oh yeah, I remember now. Good deal."

"Should be a 'good deal.' Allows me to stand the smell of ya after all."

She shook her head. He recalled her saying his scent had come to bother her since the morning sickness. Before that, she raved over his scent. Go figure.

"You know if you miss school the day before a game, you can't play on Saturday."

"You think I can play football with this? Take me a few days, at least, to heal up."

Ry nodded. "A few days? Probably a week at least—longer without stitches. Sure would like to see you running with that ball though. With your speed, I bet you could score a touchdown someday."

"Mebbe someday." He sighed. "Just for you, eh Sweetie?" Smiling, she squeezed him.

They became quiet. From her deep, slow, rhythmic breathing, he knew she had dozed off. Cuz of the bourbon, he figured. He lay awake wondering, how he'd get home. How could he sneak in the window without bustin' hisself wide open? Maybe he should go to the hospital ta get stitched up? When he'd sliced his love notches before, he'd been careful to zigzag around the blood vessels. This bad bleedin' stuff was new.

He dozed but woke later to her snoring. Made him smile. Covering her mouth, he pinched her nose between his fingers. Ry snorted awake—"Whaah-what?"

She was groggy, groping, as she rose, eyes still shut.

"Hey! Why'd ya do that?"

"Ha! Cuz you were snorin', Baby." She opened her eyelids.

"Oh gee. The fog hasn't lifted yet? Still thick as pea soup. Think it's even worse than before. What time is it, Sweetie.?" Ry smacked her lips, eyes only half open.

"Dunno. No way o' tellin' in this '*pea souper,*' but we better be makin' a move."

Yawning, Ry rose up on her elbow, mumbling "Okay."

"Looks like your Dramamine's holdin' up?" She yawned again and stretched.

"Yes. Usually lasts six hours so it can't be five yet cuz I took it a little after eleven when I thought I wasn't gonna come." He jerked his head back.

"Not come? Why?"

"Aw, I was still mad at ya Sweetie."

"But you promised."

"Sure, and that's why I came. And I'm sure glad I did. We're all made up now."

She reached up to embrace him.

"Me, too." He grinned. "Gee, don't know how I'm gonna do this. Still hurts like hell."

Ry sat up, raising Scruffy too from under the bush to their left.

"Look Sweetie, don't worry about a thing, as you say. I'll take care of it. Clean up this stuff and take Scruffy home. I'll drop her, get the Monza, drive back and load you and your bike and the stuff into it. Take ya home. All you have to do is get your pants on." She turned her head to glance sideways at him. "Of course, I'd be glad to help ya with that too if ya think ya need me." She grinned but he didn't.

"What's wrong, Sweetie?"

He grabbed his head. "Mah head's startin' to throb again."

"Oh, which one?" She giggled but he was serious.

"Both of 'em. Time for some aspirin and bourbon."

Her brow arched. "You sure?" He nodded.

She handed him both bottles. He served himself. The corn liquor made him almost goofy. Ry gathered up all the stuff. When she was done, she said.

"You know I can stitch ya up, if you want—if you don't want a doctor, I mean. I'm an excellent seamstress."

"Whaddaya talkin'?"

"I mean I've done it before, to myself, a few times." She winked.

He jerked his head, smirking as if he smelled somethin' rotten. Ry turned on the flashlight then thrust out her left wrist with her palm up, the light shining on her wrist.

"Look close. See that scar across my wrist there?" He looked close.

"Yeah?"

"I stitched myself up with some heavy-duty thread after I cut my wrist on a broken bottle when I was thirteen. Sewed it with my right hand, too—one-handed. Wasn't easy. Sheena and I were horsing around in the kitchen one day when Mom was at work. Made Sheena promise not to tell. And it worked out fine. Wore long sleeves. Mom never found out, not for a long time anyway."

"You're pullin' my leg, right?"

"No, I'm not. I'm a darned good seamstress."

"I know *that*. I seen that prom dress ya made and some o' them other things but I mean how could you needle yase'f like that? Didn't it hurt?"

She smiled. "Nah. [Shrugs.] Well, a little. But—like I told ya once before—I guess you weren't listening *again*—" Sighing, she threw her head back. "I guess you should know now. Since we're baring all. Ya see, I kind of like a certain amount of pain. I know I told

you that over at the cathouse once. It's why Sheena can never get the better of me. Pain turns me on—sometimes —if I let it. If I concentrate on it. Weird, hunh?

"Mom's the same way. She caught me burning a cigarette stub on my skin one time when I thought she was outside. Got it out of my dad's ashtray. Here, up on my thigh. Burned it high up here between my legs—the stub, that is. Re-lit it. Remember, you asked me about those little round, pink and white marks up there over at the cathouse?

"See Baby, you're not the only one who can make notches. Mom got real angry with me. Said I should never do anything like that again because it could be addictive. Said she knew first-hand. Only time that ever came in handy for her—enjoying pain like that—was when she was in labor with me for nine hours. Midwife down in Georgia delivered me—no anesthetic. Mom said her '*penchant for pain*'—what she calls it anyway —came in real handy then. And I'm like her. She was under with Sheena."

"Shoot. You're jokin'. I don't believe ya."

"Does it look like I'm laughing? I tell you a secret—a deep, dark secret at that—and you blow me off? Well, suit yourself Mister *Shee*-boom. All you need to know is I can stitch ya up if ya need it. That is, if you think you're *man enough* to handle a little pain."

She shot him a hard look.

The dog was up wagging its tail, tied to the tree, expecting to go with her mistress.

He said he thought he could take it, still wondering at her claims.

Ry pulled on her jacket—"Yukkk!"

"What?"

"This jacket sleeve's a mess, probably ruined. Full of dried blood—*yours!* It's all crusty hard now. *Yukkko!*"

"I'll buy ya a new one. Okay?" She shook her head.

Ry took his jacket and unhooked the dog from the tree. Scruffy jumped, wagging her tail, all excited. Holding the leash with her right hand, Ry stooped down to the bitch to caress the dog with her free hand, whispering to the pet.

"Shhhh. Be a good girl, Scruff."

Ry placed her forefinger over her lips then patted the dog's head, calming her pet.

"Scruffy, you're all wet. Must be the mist."

"Or your long-range squirts, mmore likely.You must've nailed her good."

She had started to walk with the dog to the hidden entrance, but stopped.

"Thought you couldn't remember?"

"Well, not all. But it's hard to foget them Olympic record-setters."

She shot him The Look.

"Hey? You really stitched yourself a few times? When?"

She stopped to twist her torso around to him.

"Why should I tell you? You don't believe me anyway." She started to leave.

"Well, I'm changin' my mind, okay? So when? Tell me," She stopped, turning his way.

"You really wanna know?" He nodded. "Sure, wouldn't ask if I didn't."

Through the mist, her eyes lit up. Her irises flashed emerald. She seemed eager to reveal her dark secrets. Ry stepped closer to the sleeping bag, careful to hold the bike up, balancing it against her firm, round hip. The dog extended the lease to nestle beside him.

"Well, the day after our first time down at—uh—never mind. It'll keep until our wedding night. Make for a good story during one of those time-outs and in-betweens, we like so much. And you can check it out for yourself then. It's getting late. Tell you then."

Smiling, she turned into the bushes. She parted the dense shrub wall, backing out using her broad butt as a shield, pulling Scruffy along. He watched the undergrowth swallow them up. Unseen from the path, he heard her whisper she'd be back in a few. He heard her steps recede down the path. Shaking his head he whispered: "What a woman."

Nick threw off the sleeping bag to tug on his pants. She was right. There was blood on the bandage but not too much. And what there was wasn't too fresh. Seemed like she had triple-wrapped him up good. He admired the way she'd cinched him up so neatly, cutting the gauze into strips and tying the ends together. The girl would make a good nurse. Moving as little as possible, he rolled up all his stuff in the sleeping bag, belting it up into a bindle as before. Then he waited. With her gone now, and as gingerly as a possible, he pissed into the bushes. And thanked God that he could, without to much pain.

Ry came back not ten minutes later, huffing. She said it was close to five. She handed him the bindle then took hold of the bike handlebars to push through the underbrush , using the bike as a wedge. He followed gingerly. He got a kick out of watching her swish and sway next to his bike through the fog down the path on ahead of him. When they reached her Monza at the edge of the parking lot, he noticed the top was down. He helped her load the bike into the back seat. The bike was too big. It stuck half-way out over the side. Reminded him of her hanging out of her dress earlier. The bike would stay put if she drove slowly, didn't hit any big bumps. He smiled, thinking, yeah she would, too.

Ry held the passenger door open for him. He dropped his bindle onto the floorboard in front of the seat. Placing his left foot on the door jam, he paused to look at her. In a low, serious tone he said.

"Ry. I want you ta know somethin'." She blinked—"What?"

"Well I was thinkin' earlier, before comin' over here tanight. You know, lyin' on my bed in the dark? She blinked again—"Yeah?"

"Well, I's thinkin' that all them other girls—women, whatever—don't mean nothin' to me since I been with you. I mean you could take the best part—features or bits and pieces of all of 'em—faces, figures, minds, souls, spirits, hearts—whatever. And put 'em all together to get like the one perfect girl, see? But the sum of all their parts would never, could never, equal the whole of you."

Her hand fell from the top of the door. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She strained hard looking at him, trying not to blink. But she did blink and two large crocodile tears streamed down her cheeks, one from either eye like Prewitt, playin' them "Taps." Her lower lip trembled as she fell into his arms. Throwing her hands about his neck, she kissed him passionately, wedging the tip of her pointed tongue through his gap and the whole bit. Then she drew her head back to look up at him, shaking her dense, wavy locks.

"Darn you Nicholas. I came here tonight despising you, even enjoying despising you. Trying to figure how I could get even with you for all the Lenas and Little Mos. How I could make you pay. But now, when you say something like that—makes my heart go pitter-pat. And all I want to do is jump your bones right here in the parking lot."

She threw her arms under his, around his back, to bury her head into his chest and neck. Sobbing into his shoulder, she squeezed him until he could scarcely breathe.

He gasped, grunting, "Sounds fair to me Ry. Better'n squeezin' me ta death like a danged boa constrictor." But she didn't take the hint.

"Dang, I'm gonna have to take that pull-up bar away from you Sweetie. You got too danged powerful for your own good, not to mention mine."

Finally, she let go. Gasping, she stepped back. He realized she'd been holding her breath all the time she'd hugged him.

"Nicky, what am I going to do with you?"

"Well, for starters, you can take me home. Then help me through this trial. Finish our Pre-Cana. Get married. 'Shake it till we break it' like Hank Ballard sung it. Have our baby. Graduate and jump each others bones when the baby's asleep. Sound like a plan?"

She brushed the tears from her eyes and face.

"Sounds like a wonderful plan. Glad you thought of it."

He smiled. "Can't take all the credit. You inspired me." She shook her head.

"You know Nicholas? At night, before I go to bed I get down on my knees. And pray to the Lord and the Virgin Mother and Saint Brigid, the patron saint of Ireland along with Saint Patrick. You know Saint Brigid is recognized in the Irish Catholic Church as one of the most potent symbols of Christian womanhood and fertility for all times. I took her name at confirmation because I wanted to be fertile and bear children, even though after my appendectomy and that fever, they said I couldn't. And now I am, ya see? And it's a miracle because the Lord and St. Brigid and Mother Mary made it so. And they picked you to make it happen with me, because *you* are supposed to be infertile, too. The Lord does move in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform, just as the hymn says. It's her name—Brigid—I took for my saint's name, my church name. Did you know that?"

He shook his head. "No, I didn't. Tell me Ry, when you pray, do you pray for me?"

"Sure I do. You bet I do—and for what I should do for you." Her dimples sprouted.

"And what does the Lord say *you* should do *for me*?" Looking up, her eyes widened.

"He tells me: 'Just love him.' That's what He says every time. 'Just love him.'

He grinned. "Well ya know Sweetie? That sounds fair to me. Yep, real fair."

He kissed her on the forehead. Then she kissed him on the mouth again as before, pressing into him, moaning when she felt him rise against her loins. When he winced, she broke off, jumping back.

"We better get going before I really do jump your bones Sweetie. Or I might hurt ya because I don't think you're in any shape for it. Besides, I need to get you home so I can get me home and we can both get our beauty sleep."

"Baby, you don't need any."

Tiptoeing, she reached up to kiss him on the cheek.

"Come now My Love. Get in the car, Sweetie. It's time to go."

She pushed him inside, shutting the door after him.

Ry drove him home. The fog was still dense. The streets were deserted, misty and dark. His street was like a ghost town. She parked by the curb wrong way, against traffic. They pulled his bike out of the back seat. She stored it for him on the patio under the roof overhang. Ry locked the front wheel to the brown downspout with his cable combination lock. She covered the bike with the storage tarp he had left on the patio. Ry followed him through the mist, across the front lawn and around between the shrubs in front of his bedroom window. He was all set to climb through the window, when a light came on inside the Sodello's house across the street.

"Mister Sodello's an early riser. He be gone in a minute." Staring at him, she nodded.

They stood like a pair of deer caught in headlights behind the bushes next to the house, waiting. Ry held her breath. A door opened across the street—footsteps on the stoop and sidewalk—then quiet. He breathed shallow. A car door opened and closed. An engine fired up. A car slipped into gear, backed up, down the drive out onto the macadam pavement, stopped and moved forward past them down the street. They relaxed.

Facing him, Ry let out her breath and pursed her lips. She sighed in a low whistle, placing her palms flat against his pecs, massaging him. Her hands spread upward, caressing his shoulders, down over his arms and forearms and back up, coming to rest with her fingers cupped around his triceps and her thumbs, rubbing—feeling, his biceps.

Sighing deeply, she looked up to him.

"My man. You're the one built like a Greek god, Baby." She slid her hands up over his shoulders, down his back, rubbing hard up and down over his lower back and up, over his shoulder blades and shoulders. "Like that oak back there, Sweetie." Sliding her hands down and behind him, she stopped over his buttocks. Ry took a chunk of his protruding haunches in either hand. With another deep breath, she squeezed hard. "Like a prize bull. Nothing but solid muscle everywhere. I could just eat you up with a spoon, Nicholas."

She leaned back, swaying her loins into him. He contorted with pain.

"Oh, Baby. I'm so, so sorry."

"It's okay. Forget it."

Apologizing again, she took his hand in hers. Ry caressed his hand by rubbing her cheek against his open palm, kissing him tenderly. She whispered.

"The man with the magic hand. Sure was tonight. Ooh Babe, can't wait for our wedding night—just can't wait."

They kissed. He said he had to go before they messed up and woke his folks.

He boosted her up onto his shoulders to open the window and pull up the blinds. Then he lowered her to the ground. Ry kissed him hard and wet on the mouth again. She helped him step up onto the water faucet. She supported him as he climbed through the window. His foot slipped a little on the faucet, turning the water on at her feet. Ry stepped back. But he was inside. She turned off the faucet. He asked her to wait a sec.

Inside, he fumbled on his desk in the dark for his wallet. After pulling out a fiver, he stuck his head back out the window, leaning over as far as he could to hand her the bill. He whispered she was to pay the Harvell brothers for helping her deliver the papers. Said he'd call them in an hour to let them know what was up and call her to confirm. Kneeling on the bed, he leaned down over the sill out of the window as far as he could, asking her to hand him the screen. She did, rising up on her toes, reaching up to embrace him after he took the screen.

She whispered "Goodnight, Sweetie."

Then she slipped away between the bushes. He waited until he heard her drive off. He inserted the screen, pulled down the window, then collapsed back onto the bed.

* * *

Ry was as good as her word, driving the Harvell boys around. About ten, she called from the doctor's office to confirm "everything is fine—the baby and I are both doing well." He thought he heard her smile over the phone. She added that she'd gotten the doctor' signature and picked up some things—"gifts to help him heal." She wouldn't elaborate, but said she'd show him tomorrow. She wished him well and hoped he'd feel better soon. Then she said she had to get to school and would see him after.

He didn't go to school because he bled like a pig if he moved much. He stayed in his room complaining he "felt bad sick." Which, he did, in a way. His dad nagged that he should have gone to sleep earlier—"Wouldn't be sick now if you had listened to me."

That night, Ry drove him to their gig at a high school. The guys pushed her out front in his place to sing lead and strum rhythm. He played in the background, content to take a back seat to her vocals. She performed great. Her cover of Smith's cover of the Shirelles "Baby, It's You" drew a wildly tremendous response from the audience. Brought the house down. She was overcome. The combination of her sex appeal and rich contralto overwhelmed everyone, including him. She'd hit one outta the park. He was proud of her.

~ Chapter 27: Weekend to Heal ~

With his wound still healing Saturday morning, Ry and the Harvell boys delivered his newspapers for him again. That afternoon, while their folks had gone to watch Pocomoke's game, Ry brought him over to her place where they could be alone. He wanted her to patch him up with the catgut she had obtained from her doctor's office.

To get away from Pappy she performed the surgery on him in her house rather than his. After she tied her dense waves back into a long ponytail and sterilized her hands, she got to work. She performed the operation right there on her bed, using the catgut and a special needle obtained from her doctor, some tweezers and small needle-nosed pliers. She poured her dad's good Irish whiskey as a disinfectant over everything. Nick smirked knowing how much her dad would appreciate his whiskey being used like that.

He observed her surgery, wearing his glasses. Though her tongue hung out of her mouth, Ry's calm hands were rock-steady. Observing her so intense got to him. Thought to say he loved her as no other but he didn't want to interrupt her concentration.

Besides it hurt like a bitch. But shoot, if she could stitch herself, he could take it. Made himself take it. She told him to try to enjoy the pain, to absorb it and revel in it, as she did. But he didn't care for it so much. He settled for some of her dad's whiskey as a pain-killer. Ry kissed him on his forehead, saying she though he looked cute wearing glasses. She stitched him over the slice in a blood vessel. It was a bloody mess though. Bothered him to view it more than it did her. She was a trooper.

"It's darn, delicate work." She paused, astonished. "Your skin is so funny there, so changeable. Never saw anything like it. Hard to work with."

"Blow on it, like you's coolin' off soup." She did, sayin' "That's neat—wait a sec."

She hopped up to return with a dish of ice. She touched ice to his sac to make it shrivel.

Hard part for him was holdin' steady so she could do her work. Hard part for her was all the blood made him "slippery and hard to see and the skin there being so strange."

Stung like a bitch. She used her old man's whiskey liberally as an antiseptic. He feared the catgut may be strangling him so tight he'd never recover. Teased her in a falsetto that he hoped he could pee, claiming he—"might wither and die on the vine."

She laughed. But she was dang serious about her work—very careful, very exact. Watching her concentrate aroused him. She sewed a couple stitches into the deep jab in his thigh. "Just for good measure." Took her nearly forty minutes for the whole deal.

She said she liked the catgut. Her Grandpa Ryan had been a Royal Marine, who had had sutured up bullet and shrapnel wounds in his day. As part of the retelling of his war stories, he had showed her and Sheena how to do it. Had them practice on a banana peel, though he never knew she later practiced what he'd shown her on herself. She said her

grandpop had used whiskey in his day as an antiseptic too. And she looked forward to trying the catgut out on her sometime instead of that heavy gage thread. She snipped the catgut tied around the base, restoring blood flow. Was she kiddin' or what? He said:

"Watch yourself with them scissors down there will ya? You could mess me up good."

Kidding around, she snipped the scissors rapidly through the air, grinning like a fiend.

She paused to inspect her work.

"No leaks? That's a good sign. How's it feel threaded through your skin? *Smooth*, isn't it? Not coarse like thread."

Shoot. That girl's somethin' else. Yes, she is.

She promised to remove the stitches next weekend. Told him to keep the wounds clean.

"So it's okay I didn't cut through them other notches for you?" She looked up.

"Gee, I don't know, Sweetie. Good intentions? You expect me to buy that?

"— Well, maybe it's 'even better,' as you say Nicky. But if you had sliced your man-root off, guess I'd have to find me another." She could hardly keep a straight face.

He raised his fist, mimicking her, "You do. I'll bop *you* a good one." They laughed.

He had always thought mebbe he might be too much for her. Like mebbe in him and his bad boy rep, all gnarly and combat-tested, Ry was bitin' off more'n she could chew. But now he wasn't so sure. As he thought back on it, she was always up for more turtle-dovin'. Seemed as if she could never get enough. And she controlled him in the sack as much as he did her. That is, when her conscience wasn't plaguing her with Catholic guilt or when he wasn't tryin' out somethin' new to her. He had thought she was half-jokin' about that "penchant for pain" deal but now, he wasn't so dang sure about that either.

He had always tried to treat her like a delicate flower but wondered if he was really pleasing her enough—bein' so easy on her? Though they did get into it pretty good in the Monza that time and a few times behind the dugout—and at Kara's. As he thought back, she did get off on that throw-down stuff. Never knew anyone like her. Never wanted to know another. Never shy really, she'd taken to him and his turtle-doving ways like a fish to water. Same as she had taken to the stage. He wondered what married life would be like when she could cut loose her fear of "violating the holy temple," which had been gnawing at her conscience, holding her back just a bit. He couldn't wait for their wedding night. Made both his heads spin just to think of it. But oooh—that smarted. Sure did.

* * *

Later, Ryz'n's folks told them Pocomoke had lost again. Sheena said Coach was pissed Nick hadn't played. He might have made a difference. Apparently, Steinmetz fumbled a punt to cost them the game. That news didn't help Nicky feel any better. Ryz'n felt bad for him. Sheena didn't have to say that, not all nasty like that.

That night Nick's folks went to dinner at his aunt and uncle's house over in Langham. They took his grandfather and all his stuff with them. Actually, it was the changing of the

guard. Nick said Pappy was going to stay with Nick's aunt for a while. Pappy's kids rotated him among them about every four months—the ones that cared for the old guy.

The band had another gig that night at a local high school homecoming. Although she performed fine out front again in Nicky's place, some kids in the audience complained because Nick wasn't out front. He had acquired a local following over the last year. Nick told her that he had to admit. "It's nice to be wanted." Made him feel better—her, too.

Sunday morning she helped him deliver papers. They finished in time to clean up for eighty-thirty mass. After mass, they brunched at IHOP. Sunday afternoon, she attended a cook-out with Nicky and his folks on Mr. Vamia's boat at the marina. Carol Davalone was there. The couple had set up a grill on the dock next to the thirty-six foot Chris Craft Constellation. The women cooked dogs and burgers and gabbed, while the men gathered around a twelve-inch Trinitron in the cabin to watch the 'Skins-Eagles game. Nick said it always was a big game since the clubs were in the same division and played twice a year, and they'd traded starting quarterbacks half a dozen years ago—Stormin' Norman Snead for Sonny Jurgensen. Nick told her, "Jurgy loves to make 'em Eagles pay for that deal."

It was a perfect Indian summer day, low seventies and sunny. She had dressed sharp for Nicky in a beige mini-skirt and burgundy cotton-knit, scoop-necked pull-over, adorned with widely spaced, thin, horizontal gold stripes. "Redskins colors."

"Ya look some kind o' tough Ry, standing out there. Downright-upright, ya know?"

Made her blush.

Mr. Vamia and Carol were upbeat. Judge Ballante's replacement of Higher buoyed their spirits. Their new-found optimism proved contagious. When Jurgy and the Skins beat the Eagles by a score of 33 to 21, the festive mood mushroomed.

After the game and dinner, Mr. Vamia told what he knew about the change in judges. He reiterated Higher's stroke had canned him. Said it was unlikely that he would ever sit the bench again. He added that was a blessing for all defense attorneys in the county. He said the new judge Laurene Myoshi Ballante had been enjoying the last week of a three-week vacation in Hawaii when the Circuit Court had contacted her to replace Higher.

Mr. Vamia explained that the rise in crime in the county, which had been one of the fastest growing in the country the last few years, left the State short of judges in the district. Evidently, the only other available judge was O'Halloran. He recused himself due to his knowledge of Nick's case from last summer when he was the State's Attorney.

Mr. Vamia said he had worked under Judge Ballante when he first came to the State Attorney's office out of law school. Before she became a judge, she had been the only female to serve as State's Attorney in the circuit court for R.G. County. He said she was "tough but fair. She'll be like a breath of fresh air compared to Old Man Higher."

Mr. Vamia noted Judge Ballante was born in Hawaii in the '20s of mixed Japanese-Hawaiian descent. The Government interred her and her family along with other

Japanese-Americans in one of the camps out West during the Second World War. Franco said the interment experience gave her a taste of what it was like to be on the wrong side of the law and that was good for them. The judge had earned an academic scholarship just after the war to Maryland of all places, where she obtained her degrees.

After graduating, she married an Air Force attorney and worked in Maryland's law school. Her husband died of a massive heart attack in his late thirties. They had no children, but she kept her married name. After his death, she worked for the State's Attorney here in R. G. County. She served eleven years as an ASA before the county elected her as the first female State's Attorney. She received her seat on the bench a couple years ago. In her mid-forties now, she had never remarried.

"She can be a stickler for procedure. Leans toward the State. But her war interment renders her sympathetic to defendants. Makes her a fair jurist in other words.

"Lives alone with her pets now—bookish but fit. Enjoys water and winter sports. Though short, she's not unattractive by any means. Tends to hide her Eurasian peepers behind large round frame glasses when she sits the bench. Makes her appear almost bug-eyed. Usually wears her hair in a thick ponytail in court. I've seen her occasionally in the company of renowned gentlemen at some of the finer restaurants in town with her glasses off. Not at all hard to look at. But she keeps mostly to herself."

He chuckled. "Don't figure she's too happy about having her vacation cut short. All in all, this will be a great break for us. You'll see a decided shift in the way this trial is handled from here on out. I'm to meet with her and Perkouri in her chambers tomorrow at two. Lookin' forward to it. We'll see how that weasel Perkouri takes it."

Before they left, Ryz'n thanked Carol and Mr. Vamia for their hospitality. She hung back to confide in Carol that she was glad to have visited the boat in her company. When Carol asked why, Ryz'n said, "Because I had been a little worried when Mr. Vamia had invited me here before. He said he'd like to show me his new boat after the trial some time. I had the impression, mistaken I can see now, that he had wanted to be alone with me. I'm glad to see that you two are so happy together."

Over a thin smile, Carol assured her that Franco was spoken for and that Ryz'n wouldn't have to worry about him. Carol said, "Frank has a bit of a roving eye but he always keeps his hands to himself." She frowned, adding, "He better, if he knows what's good for him." Then she winked. Ryz'n giggled. She liked Carol a lot.

She rode home with the Sheebooms in the back seat with Nicky. She and Nick spent the rest of the afternoon and evening studying together. Trying to keep their minds on their books and their hands off each other was no easy task for either of them.

~ Chapter 28: In Chambers ~

Monday, Judge Ballante's chambers. Franco checked his diamond-studded Rolex. Five minutes to two. He would wait a couple minutes before he knocked on her door. Sounded quiet inside her office. He assumed Perkouri hadn't arrived yet. He thought about what he might say. He could complain about the trial, the way the State and Judge Higher had handled it. But that would be obvious from the transcript, what with all his overruled objections and Higher's noted exceptions. She'd have read it. Probably why she had called the meeting. It was her meeting. He'd let her talk. Play it by ear.

1:59. He knocked on the door. The judge called him to come in. He entered.

Judge Ballante rose from behind her executive desk to greet him. The desk appeared to be made of some dark, heavy rich-looking wood. Looked to be mahogany, like his. She removed her large frame glasses, permitting them to dangle against her chest from a silver chain about her neck. The judge smiled as they shook hands. She seemed happy to see him. She wore a grey silk, suit skirt and an off-white blouse that featured a broad tie. The tie looped through a round bow that appeared to be part of the collar, as the founding forefathers might have worn two centuries ago. A matching grey silk suit coat hung over the back of a high-backed swivel chair. Papers and manila folders lay strewn over a green blotter across her desktop. Sunlight filtered through opened venetian blinds that covered double sash windows nearly floor to ceiling. Long, high, old time windows. Alternating bands of sunlight, punctuated by shadows from the blinds, crossed the green, pile carpet, reminded him of his office in the afternoon. The crossing pattern of early autumn light and shadow extended halfway into the office, as far as the visitor's chair closest to the door. The judge stepped around her desk to shake his hand.

"Frank. Good to see you again. How have you been?"

"Fine, Judge. Very well, actually. Sorry to hear you had to cut your vacation short."

She sighed. "Well, it couldn't be helped. That's what happens when you're short of judges. Got most of it in. Got to see my family. Do some hiking and surfing. It was very relaxing, very enjoyable while it lasted."

A knock at the door found Petros Perkouri lurking in the opened doorway. The judge greeted him in similar manner. She asked them both to sit down in the matching pair of brown, leather-upholstered, arm chairs located opposite the front corners of her desk. She sipped a cup of tea as she sat down, offering each of them a cup. They declined.

Franco glanced about the room to notice her bona fides hanging inside glass picture frames on the wall: sheepskins, certificates, licenses, standard documentation of a judge's achievements. She kept two pictures at the sides of her desk, turned so that both she and

her visitors could view them. One was a portrait of her late husband. The other was a family group photo with palm trees, ocean and beach in background.

A potted palm plant sat in the corner by the twin floor-to-ceiling sash windows. One of the antiquated, wooden-frame sashes rested open about six inches. The crisp, musty scent of early fall air permeated the office. Overhead, a ceiling fan was off but the lamp in its hub was lit. A copy of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights were stationed beneath the Maryland State flag plastered to the wall above her head. In the wall on either side of those legal adornments were two doors. The door near the windows half-opened to a bathroom. The other, nearer the outside hall, was closed but he knew it to be the coat closet that housed the judge's stately black robe. The wall, facing her desk behind him and Perkouri, held a copy of the Declaration of Rights that prefaced the Maryland Constitution. Two large, glass-framed action photos of the judge flanked that document.

One depicted her surfing a steep, deep blue wave. The other showed her skiing, in mid-air over a snow-powdered mogul, plenty of blue sky behind her and between her skis and the snow. As he sat down, his eyes had lingered on the surfing photo of the petite judge's curves, trim and fit, in a red, one-piece suit. Not bad, not bad at all. Easy on the eyes. And from the looks of her now, she was still fit. The intervening years hadn't hurt her form any. No, not bad at all. If she weren't a judge, he wouldn't mind surfing her a little.

Nodding towards the pair of wall pictures, he said, "Nice form, Judge." She looked up.

"Oh, yes. My late husband was an amateur photographer. He loved to take action shots. Notice the two, small water droplets at the upper left of the surfing picture? Really disturbed him to have them there. He offered to air brush them out. I wouldn't have it. Told him I liked them because they reminded me that he had taken the picture. I think he did an excellent job of catching me leaning into the wave."

"Yes, he did. Very well done. You look, uh, very athletic in that pose."

Perkouri concurred. Sighing, the judge sat down.

"Well—gentlemen." She placed her teacup in its saucer and waved at papers on her desk. "I've spent the last several days reviewing the transcript and the evidentiary exhibits, as well as interviewing the bailiff and the court reporter to fill me in on the in-betweens, so to speak, to get a feel for the tenor of the trial. I believe I have a solid grasp of the case. And I can't say I'm pleased with what I've found. Frankly, had I been the State's Attorney, and I was once for four years, I would not have brought these charges. Especially, in light of the federal court's recent decision in *Long versus Robinson*. If anything, I would have preferred some of the misdemeanor charges in our juvenile court system. And let the relatives of the deceased pursue a wrongful death suit. If they thought it prudent. Be that as it may, we are in the thick of it now and must finish."

"*Must* we, Judge? If I resubmitted my motion for an injunction based on *Long,* you could quash this whole thing."

"The idea is tempting Frank. I admit it. But the State has invested a great deal in this trial and, while I may not agree with my predecessor in denying your motion for the injunction, I won't cut the legs out from a crippled old man at this juncture. As a recent member of the jurist fraternity, I just can't do that. If your client is found guilty and *Long* is upheld by the Fourth Circuit, you would likely win a similar appeal in federal court anyway. Given that Judge Higher denied your motion initially, a reversal on appeal for unconstitutionality would not disturb me. That would be on him. Besides, you may win on the merits, which would be better vindication for your client than winning an injunction to halt the proceedings on *Long*, particularly at this stage.

"Of course, either of you could file for a mistrial. There's ample evidence in the record that Judge Higher was—well, shall we say—not his usual self? Since the Yikes testimony and that regrettable altercation before the bench."

She glanced at Franco then to Perkouri and back to him. "Your call, Frank."

"Well Judge, I'd prefer the State drop the matter altogether."

"No way, Counselor," said Perkouri. "As Laurene just said, we have too much invested in these proceedings to stop now."

"Well then, the defense will play the cards the State has dealt."

"Very well Frank. We'll play this one out. Now, if the Fourth Circuit upholds as unconstitutional the law before our trial concludes, I'd be happy to entertain a new motion from you."

The judge sipped her tea, waiting for his response. When Franco nodded, she set her cup down on the saucer.

"So Pete, what witnesses do you have left to testify?"

"Well. I have to finish with the Ryan woman, and there are at least two others."

"These 'two others,' will they testify as to the accident or the altercation at the bar?"

"No Judge, they're character witnesses."

"I see. Well I believe the Court has heard enough of *those* witnesses. I won't allow them. In three years, I've never had a case overturned on appeal. And I don't intend to start now. There will be no more *character* witnesses from the State against the defendant."

"But Your Honor—"

"Save it, Pete. The State has been granted far too much leniency in this regard. The matter has become less a court trial and more a soap opera that could rival *Peyton Place*. And I will not let that continue. Not on my watch. Actually, the way your character witnesses have been blowing up in your face Petros, you should thank me for doing you a favor. However, I do intend to balance this thing out. I'll allow a defense character witness for every one called against the defendant by the State, should the defense so choose. By my count, that's been *fifteen*. Of course, I hope that won't be necessary. I

intend for this trial to come to a speedy conclusion. It has taken up far too much of an over-crowded docket already. Yes. Although the pool may have been polluted thus far, I do intend to permit the defense to balance out the P-H level, so to speak, if it so chooses."

Perkouri sat back, shaking his head.

"Does the State have any other witnesses or any other evidence to present that can speak to the altercation at the road house or the accident?"

"No."

"So the State will rest?" The prosecutor nodded.

"Now Frank. Will your client testify in his own behalf?"

"Well Judge … I don't know, I—

"Come, come. Let's cut through the dross Frank. It's obvious, even to a third year law student that shouldn't be necessary if you have any other means at your disposal to discredit the Slater girl. I only ask because I want to have an idea where this is headed. I don't want any surprises that could prolong this matter unnecessarily."

"Well, no ma'am. I have no plans for my client to testify at this time. However, if it becomes necessary, I might put him on. Right now, I don't see that happening."

She shrugged. "All right."

"Now Pete, I think it would be prudent for the State to drop the murder charges in favor of manslaughter. I'll be happy to accept the State's motion to amend the pleadings."

"But Your Honor, in good conscience I don't believe—"

"Hold it right there Petros. You have no murder weapon. And no way in Hades, I'll let you use the car as such."

"But Your Honor, I couldn't—"

"Very well. I won't force you. I'll be happy to accept a motion from defense counsel for a judgment of acquittal on the murder charges for lack of prima facie."

"But Laurene, you'd be taking the case from the jury. They have a right to decide guilt or innocence based on the facts and the law. I beg you not to remove any charges from their hands. Should the defendant be found not guilty, I may be forced to appeal."

"You always have that right Pete. I suppose I could wait to acquit on the greater murder charges until after the defense puts on its case and petitions the Court to that end. Avoid confusing, and possibly prejudicing, the jury. But I believe it would be to your advantage to eschew an effect you may not have considered."

"What's that?"

"The jury might see the folly of the murder charges, as I do, and conclude the whole thing is a farce. Then make it easy on themselves by lumping all the felonies together. Decide not guilty for murder means not guilty for all. So they can get back to their lives."

"I'll take my chances on that."

"Okay. Suit yourself."

"Now Frank, I'll expect your petition. I expect you to address each allegation by count and degree of offense arguing for each separately and specifically with particularity for all reasons as to why the motion should be granted. I also recommend your client plead to the misdemeanor charges of destruction of private property and under age drinking. The facts seem uncontroverted as to those allegations. Unless, of course, you believe you can disprove the State's case in that regard. If your arguments for dismissal are what I think they should be, and since I've already indicated how I feel about the greater murder charges, that shouldn't be difficult. Of course, it's your right to make a similar petition for judgment of acquittal after you put on your case.

"But both of you: Make no mistake. There's a new judge in court. I mean to expedite the trial and simplify matters for the jury. If that means acquitting charges, so be it."

Perkouri blanched but before he could speak, the judge was all over him.

"I am well aware of what I am proposing Pete. The State should consider it fortunate that the Court doesn't dismiss *all* the felony charges, except for leaving the scene. Now I grant the State has shown circumstantial evidence for the two counts of aggravated A and B. Though it would take Helen Keller not to admit the boy acted in self-defense.

"I intend to see justice done in this matter. And if you recall your lawyer's code of ethics, you'll remember a prosecutor is expected to do no less. Remember, I was a prosecutor once myself. And as I recall, the code clearly states that *the primary duty of a lawyer engaged in public prosecution is not to convict but to see that justice is done*. Don't forget that Petros. *Justice.* This court owes it to the jury, to the defendant and to the State to expedite this matter fairly and impartially. I intend to clear away the obfuscations here by letting the jury focus on the heart of this case—the felony manslaughter charges, leaving the scene and aggravated A and B. The state's evidentiary bar for those felonies may be low, but it is not invisible. And we have gone too far to stop now. So as you have suggested Pete, I am reluctant at this point to take those decisions out of the jury's hands.

"Frank: Make your petition. And you may be assured I will scrutinize each argument carefully. That is, provided your client pleads to the two misdemeanor charges. After all, as I've said, the victims' family has the right to pursue wrongful death if they so desire. And, in any event—Pete—the State retains the right to appeal if the jury's decision goes against it. But, as I said, no appellate court has overturned a decision of mine thus far. And I do not intend to give them sufficient grounds for this case to be the first. Well gentlemen, I think that about covers it. Good luck."

Franco left the judge, walking on air. He couldn't wait to get to his office to draft his motion. And he wanted to talk to Nick about the Kovakloczech woman.

Carol had unearthed some unsettling information on Kovakloczech. Carol said she had to call in a favor with a government contact to get the woman's record. And Kovakloczech had quite a record. The kid was in for a surprise.

* * *

Next morning, with Nick seated beside him in his roomy Lincoln Town car, Franco sprung his surprise.

"You were right Nick. You did talk to Carol about Kara Kovakloczech. Carol did some further checking on your lady friend. Dug up quite a dossier on her. Got quite a record, actually. Yes, she has. You said she's how old? Been married how long?"

The kid pondered. "Ohh … thirty-six—eight mebbe. Though she said thirty-five. Took it for granted she was older. Older'n you that's for sure. Married fifteen years."

"Hmmpf! Do tell."

Nick nodded. "I said she's old."

He chuckled. "Old, hunh? She's forty-eight, not thirty-eight. She'll be forty-nine on Halloween."

Nick bolted upright, turning pale as a ghost.

"*Forty-eight!?!?* I don't believe it. My folks are fifty!"

He laughed. "Yeah! How 'bout that? She was married thirty-one years, not fifteen. You never suspected? After all that time with her?" Stunned, the kid shook his head.

"No. Kara never let me see her real good in the light. All her lamps had dark shades, even in the bathroom and kitchen. Come to think of it, never really saw her in daylight. The curtains were always drawn. She lived in shadows. Her hair was frosted. She did have them wrinkle things at the corners of her mouth and eyes—whaddaya call 'em?"

"Crow's feet?"

The kid nodded. "Yeah. Crow's feet. Just a slight paunch, like I said."

"Any scars? On her back, maybe?"

'Yeah, on her backside and lower belly. How'd you know that?"

"From the war, the big one."

"No. Kara said she got 'em in a car accident."

"She did—car accident caused by German bombshells in Stalingrad. Killed one of her kids, a twin boy. The girl survived—living in Essaouria near Marrakesh now—married to a Moslem. Some big shot, commercial fish wholesaler. Got a little import-export business also. Couple o' kids. Yeah. Your lady-love's a grandma. "

Franco grinned. The kid looked shocked, listening with a mix of awe and horror.

"Yeah, she was a Sudeten-German—Sudetendeutche, if you will. Sudetsti-Nemsci in Czech. More German though, even if her maiden name was Kovak. His was Loczech—her husband, I mean. Guess they combined 'em. Met at Prague University in thirty-eight. Married the next year. Both linguists. She speaks nine languages. He spoke six. Both of them spied for the Nazi's—at her urging. Helped Hitler invade the Czechs. After the accident, they turned Commie—double agents for the Ruuskies."

He eyed Nick's stunned reaction.

"Yeah. She got out of the spy business after the war, to take care of her kids I suppose. He kept on, see? Not a diplomat really. Lived many places since then. Been in the States almost fifteen years now. Started out in New York City where she worked as an interpreter at the U.N. for ten years. He used the import-export business as a cover. Let him travel all over the country—spying. The business is in New York, too. Oh, he was a partner all right. Did drum up some business, establish contacts, that sort of thing. He was quite a bit older than his wife, about ten years.

"But he really knew nothing about the import trade. His partner does all that. The partner was legit all right. And prosperous, too. She sold out her husband's share to the partner for a nice chunk of change. Almost half o' mil. And they had a swanky flat in Manhattan. Upper East Side where he stayed—very luxurious. She's subletting it through her late husband's business partner—since she lost her visa. That's why she's not here now. On a world cruise? Right. Russians might be looking for her, too. She does own the home in Crest Hill, of course, as you said. Cash deal. They bought the place brand new back in sixty-five. Tell me something. The bills come to the house, right? Electric, telephone, water, et cetera? How does she pay them if she's not here?"

Nick shrugged, too stunned to speak. He stared vacantly, mumbling, "Dunno. She … doesn't. I told ya I forward her mail to her place on Fulton Street in New York."

He shook his head. "Naw. That's the address of the business. Suspect the partner is handling it for her. Maybe as part of her deal with him to close out the partnership. Financially-speaking, your lady-love is doing all right—set for life. Politically though, not so well. She's a woman without a country right now. Trying for a green card."

"You sure? How do you know all this?"

"Sure, I'm sure. After our conversation the other day, I had Carol do some digging. She's a good dic, Nick. Carol, I mean. Don't sell her short kid just because she's a woman. She and her dad have contacts all over this town. Places you'd never imagine. Did you know Kara's old man was a biathlete?" Nick shook his head, unable to speak.

"Yep. Represented Czechoslovakia in the Thirty-two winter games. What's the matter boy? Look like you've seen a ghost."

"I dunno. Jes' can't believe she's *that old*. She didn't look it. Actually, she looked pretty dang good—in the dark. Sheesh. A yeah and half younger than mom. *Damn*!"

"Well, you said she's experienced. Knows all the tricks. Ha! Guess she did all right. You too, now. And got yourself a sugar mama to boot. For fifty bucks a month."

As he chuckled, the Nick turned his head away in shame. The kid peered out the passenger window in silence. It was a long, quiet ride to the courthouse.

~ Chapter 29: The Surprise Witness ~

Eight-thirty, Tuesday morning, the sixth. Ryz'n thought this new woman judge started early. She didn't even give her a chance to duck into Homeroom to count herself present for the day before she skipped out.

Ryz'n assumed her usual perch with Nick's folks in the front row of the gallery behind Nick and Mr. Vamia. Carol Davalone and her dad—also a private eye for Mr. Vamia—sat behind her. She hadn't dressed for Nicky today. She dressed conservatively in her normal schoolgirl attire: a plain A-line, brown cotton skirt, a conservative button-up, short-sleeved green blouse with a petite, round collar, her low, brown pumps and a button-up, brown suede vest. She didn't want to be mistaken for one of his bimbo-whores. She did tie the yellow ribbon in her hair to show her support. It was the same yellow ribbon she had worn for him the night they'd dined at Gusti's, and went mini-golfing, before their memorable beaver pond excursion.

Nick had asked her to wear the ribbon that night because he said she "looked so tough, like in 'Young Blood,' one of the Coasters' big hits, as in "… Young Blood! I can't get you out of my mind … You're the one. You're the one. You're the one. Uh, you're the one." Nick had mimicked the different voices for her, ranging from tenor to bass. Made her smile now to think of his imitation, unable to get him out of her mind then or since.

Her mom retook the stand. The prosecutor picked up where he left off last week before Judge Higher's stroke. That weasel Mr. Perkouri was following up on making her mom look bad about her shotgun wedding, linking her mom's shame to her's and Nick's.

Mr. Vamia objected.

Judge Ballante, trailing a ponytail, paused to look through thick-lensed glasses at her mom, the prosecutor, Mr. Vamia and then Nick. Ryz'n believed she saw the wheels turning behind the judge's large, round frame glasses, which did make her eyes look kind of bug-eyed, as Mr. Vamia had said the other day.

Mr. Perkouri: "Similar lines of questioning concerning the defendant's character, leading to motive in this case, were allowed by your predecessor Your Honor."

"Yes, I am well aware of that Counselor. Otherwise, I would not have let you continue with the witness."

Judge Ballante drummed her fingers on the desk in front of her.

"This well is already poisoned. Although the Court is disinclined to pollute it further, the Court will allow it. *BUT* note: The defense has yet to put on its case. The Court will grant the defense equal latitude to cleanse the well. Defense is overruled. Proceed."

Mr. Vamia: "Exception."

Judge Ballante: "Noted. The witness will answer the question."

"Yes. My husband and I married a little before we were ready due to my pregnancy. As far as our daughter is concerned, I have nothing to add."

He nodded. "In that case, I have no further questions at this time Your Honor."

Ryz'n couldn't believe it. The creep was letting her mom off the hook? Her mom dabbed at the corner of her eye with a kerchief. Maybe the earlier warning from her dad and Nick's had scared the prosecutor? Or maybe he didn't want to get tripped up regarding her pregnancy, as he had with Lena and Little Mo. He retreated to his seat.

"Does the defense intend to cross?"

"Yes, Your Honor, if the witness is ready. The defense would not object to a recess if the witness so wishes."

"Missus Ryan … Missus Ryan?" asked the judge.

Her mom was still wiping away a tear. In that moment, Ryz'n glimpsed once more some of the former shame and disapproval her mother must have suffered eighteen years ago. And it brought home the reality for her that she, too, would experience similar embarrassment. She thought of Hester Prynne and the scarlet 𝒜 borne upon her chest. Saw it on her mom's chest now glowing red hot over her bright green princess dress. Felt it burning a brand into her bosom as well. Here was a taste of what her mother repeatedly had warned her about, tried to protect her from her whole life. And she had let her down.

"Missus Ryan," asked the judge. "Do you wish a recess or do you care to continue?"

Her mom lifted her head proudly to Mr. Vamia: "I can continue now. I have continued under similar cross-examination going on eighteen years. I do not find it necessary to retreat now." Ryz'n was proud of her.

"Very well. Counselor, proceed."

"Missus Ryan, I regret that you have been subjected to this, this, well what must be for you—", thrusting his hand out to his sides and letting them flop— "an ordeal. As I understand it, the State brought you here to testify as to my client's character to help prove the prosecution's theory that he is a bad apple. 'A vengeful, vindictive narcissistic hedonist,' as the prosecutor has put it, who would intentionally lie in wait to run two unsuspecting citizens off the road on a dark, stormy night. Based on your knowledge of my client, do you agree with the State's assertion?"

Mr. Perkouri: 'Objection, Your Honor. Calls for a conclusion. The witness is not a qualified psychiatrist who is giving an expert opinion after examining the defendant."

Judge Ballante: "Mister Perkouri, were this not *your* witness, whom *you* called to testify in this matter as regards the character of the defendant, the Court might sustain your objection. But she is *your* witness. *You did call her* to testify as to the defendant's character. Therefore, the defense may cleanse the well. Objection, overruled."

Mr. Perkouri: "But Your Honor, I brought her here to testify as to facts. The defense is asking her to state an opinion."

Judge Ballante: "As I recall, you asked this witness why she, uh—what were your words? Would 'welcome the defendant into [her] family?' I may be paraphrasing but I can ask the court stenographer to read back the State's question, if you'd like. Her response may clarify matters. After all, *justice* is what we're after here I believe."

Mr. Perkouri dropped his head. Ryz'n thought things were going differently for the prosecutor now with Judge Ballante in charge. Mr. Perkouri shook his head, saying that reading back his question wasn't necessary. "But, the State still objects."

Judge Ballante: "And the Court still overrules your objection."

Mr. Perkouri: "Exception." Judge Ballante: "Noted."

The judge turned to her mom. "Missus Ryan, you may answer the question." Her mom asked for the question to be repeated. The stenographer read the question back for her.

"The defendant is a fine, young man. He has done nothing to prove otherwise to me. I don't believe for an instant that he could ever, would ever, try to run a car off the road. I am very proud of both him, and my daughter for choosing him. They have my blessing."

Her mother smiled at her. Mr. Vamia thanked her mom. When the prosecutor declined to redirect, the judge dismissed her. Her mom stepped down to leave the room.

Ryz'n was glad the State had not been smart enough to find out about the "get-acquainted" family picnic between her and Nick's family last July. Glad her folks and Sheena had kept mum about that fiasco when the prosecutor interviewed them. If the State had learned Nick cold-cocked her dad in a fit of anger after her dad had smacked her in front of both families that fact wouldn't look so good on Nick's résumé right now.

Judge Ballante: "And this concludes the State's witness list? Does the State rest?"

"Uh, no, Your Honor, we have one last witness. The State calls one George Izaak Toombes to the stand."

The judge asked the prosecutor if the witness had any knowledge of the accident or the altercation at Truley's bar. Mr. Perkouri said yes to both.

Mr. Vamia objected. "This witness was not on the list Your Honor."

Mr. Perkouri said he had informed Mr. Vamia before today's session the State would call this witness, whom he "just realized only late last night had pertinent testimony." Due to the witness's alleged direct testimony, the judge relented, over an objection and noted exception.

The witness entered the court from the back door, the same door Ryz'n recalled from where Nick had entered for his arraignment. The witness wore grey denim pants with a pair of blue side stripes down each leg, a grey shirt, open at the collar, revealing a white T-shirt underneath, and an ill-fitting, blue denim jacket, the kind a farmer might wear. Chunky, with a pock-marked face and a reddish-brown crew-cut, the man sent a shiver through Ryz'n, reminding her of news photos of Richard Speck.

As the man took the oath, Mr. Vamia bent over Nick. She heard him ask if Nick knew this guy. She couldn't hear Nick's soft reply. When Mr. Perkouri asked the witness the usual opening questions, the man said he's thirty-two, lives in Jessup, Maryland and he's an out-of-work bartender and commercial painter. Franco turned around, whispering past Ryz'n to ask Carol Davalone to come to the bar rail. Ms. Davalone came forward as the witness testified he knew Nick because Nick had assaulted him once. He said Nick kicked him in the face with his cast, breaking his jaw and knocking out a tooth. He touched his chin and grimaced to reveal a gap where a lower front tooth should be.

Nick nudged Franco. They whispered together with Franco taking notes, scribbling furiously on a legal pad. Franco tore a paper from the pad. He handed the note to Carol Davalone, who, after reading it, disappeared down the aisle out of the courtroom.

When the prosecutor asked why Nick had kicked him, the witness said, "He got upset when I called him on his bragging about beatin' up the Buzzbee brothers in a bathroom. Said he fixed 'em for good later when he run 'em off the road one night durin' a storm."

Mr. Perkouri had no more questions. Ryz'n looked at the jurors. The man's testimony seemed to have impressed them. She was worried.

"The Court sees the witness has surprised the defense, and the Court as well." The judge said as she glanced toward the prosecutor. "Would defense counsel like a recess to depose the witness?" Mr. Vamia rose.

"No, Your Honor. Defense is willing to proceed now but may wish to recall later."

"Very well. You may proceed, Counselor."

Mr. Vamia asked permission to approach the witness. Judge Ballante concurred.

"Mister Toombes. You said you reside in Jessup. Where exactly in Jessup is that?"

Mr. Toombes: "At the Cut."

Mr. Vamia: "By 'the Cut,' you mean the State's maximum security, correctional facility for men in Jessup, Maryland, is that right?"

"Yeah, you got it."

"Why are you in prison Mister Toombes? What were you offenses against the State?"

"Writin' a bad check."

"I see. And what sentence did you receive? And how long have you served?"

"I been in a few weeks. I'm eligible for parole in fourteen months."

"That must make your sentence around five years. Is that right?"

"Yeah, you guessed it."

"Five years for writing a bad check? That's a pretty stiff sentence for the crime."

"Yeah. I thought so, too. Mebbe you could help me get it reduced, Counselor?"

Titters broke out, but Mr. Vamia did not share in the humor.

"Well, you must have done more than that. Maybe had a record before that?"

The witness shrugged. “Anh, you know how it is when you have a little cash flow problem. Could happen to anybody.”

“Not for that sentence. The State wouldn’t give you five years at a maximum security prison for writing one bad check. Do you have a record of prior convictions?”

“I guesso. Got railroaded, ya know. If I’da had a good, expensive lawyer like you, I probably wouldn’ta been railroaded like that.” The courtroom tittered again.

“Well, I haven’t had an opportunity to check into your record yet, but you may be certain that I will. And we’ll discuss it. But first, I’d like to know if the State has made any deal with you in return for your testimony here today?”

Mr. Toombes scrunched his face, acting indignant. “Nah. I didn’t make no deals.”

“So you’re just here today out of your keen sense of civic obligation, is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Just doin’ my civic duty, is all.” He smirked. The room tittered again.

“Of course, you wouldn’t think testifying now might help you secure a parole when you’re first eligible?” Toombes shrugged. “Well, who knows? Prob’ly wouldn’t hurt.”

“Of course not. However, if you’re not telling the truth, it could hurt you a great deal. Perjury is a felony offense. You could have a significant sentence tacked onto the one you already have.” Toombes shot back. “That’s why I’m tellin’ the truth.”

“So tell us then, *truthfully* Mister Toombes, how did the defendant’s ankle cast come in contact with your face?”

“Like I said. He kicked me with a cast when we was eatin’, after I called him out.”

“When you were eating? I see. And *where* were you eating?”

“In the holdin’ tank.”

“That would be in the holding tank of the county jail, next door here, after the defendant was arrested?” Toombes shrugged again. “Yeah, that’s right, Counselor.”

“How tall are you Mister Toombes?”

“Me? Six-foot.”

“So the defendant, wearing an ankle cast that extended over halfway up his calf was able to lift his heavily casted foot up, high enough to strike you in the face? That would have been over five feet then? Quite an achievement, don’t you think?”

“Naw. It didn’t go down like that. He pushed me to the floor first and then he kicked me. While I was down, see?”

“*He* pushed *you* to the floor. Then *kicked you* while you were down in the cell?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Pretty strong for a kid in a cast. So there must have been several other prisoners in the holding tank, many witnesses to this event?” Toombes frowned. “Yeah, sure, I guesso.”

“So you should be able to name these witnesses. And we could have them testify to corroborate your story. Tell us who they are so we can clear up this matter.”

"Hey! I don't recall no names. The kid kicked me and knocked me out. I heard they—the guards—dragged me outta there with my blood spillin' all over the place."

"So guards witnessed this alleged assault? Maybe you know who *they* were?"

"Naw. I heard they come in after it was all over. They wasn't watchin' when it happened. He wouldn'ta attacked me, if he'd knowed the guards was watchin'. I was out cold when they come in."

"And how many men were in this holding tank with you at the time?"

"Gee, it was supper time. There was a lot o' guys in there, ya know? Couldn't say how many—not if I wanted to be truthful." He grinned.

"Of course, and you *do* want to be truthful, do you not Mister Toombes?"

"Oh, sure. Don' wanna lie. Like you said, could be in prison a lot longer if I lied."

He smiled. Ryz'n shook her head. This guy was lying through his teeth—had to be.

Mr. Vamia: "So of all the other prisoners and guards, there is no one else who can corroborate your story?" Toombes shrugged again.

"Well, you could ask your boy there. He knows what went down. Course I wouldn't expect him to say what really happened. Seein' as he's on the hot seat now."

Mr. Vamia turned to look at the prosecutor. Mr. Perkouri sat back in his chair, arms folded across his chest and a dirt-eating grin on his face. Ryz'n got it. The State wanted to force Mr. Vamia to put Nicky on the stand. That had to be it.

Mr. Vamia: "Perhaps my client will testify in his own behalf. Perhaps, not. But when I discover that you've perjured yourself up here, you won't have to worry about the State charging you with perjury. I may swear out a complaint against you myself."

Mr. Perkouri: "Objection, Your Honor. Argumentative and prejudicial."

"Sustained."

Mr. Vamia: "No more questions at this time Your Honor. But I would appreciate the Court holding this witness available for recall."

"Very well. Mister Perkouri, does the State wish to redirect?"

"Yes, Your Honor." The prosecutor rose. "Has the State promised you any leniency in return for your testimony here, Mister Toombes?"

"No sir. It hasn't."

"No further questions."

Judge Ballante: "The witness may step down but shall hold himself available for further testimony."

Mr. Perkouri: "Your Honor, the State rests."

Mr. Vamia stood, nudging Nick to stand too.

"At this time Your Honor, to expedite this matter, the defense would like to change its plea regarding the misdemeanor charges alleging destruction of private property and illegal drinking under the age of majority. The defense elects not to contest those

allegations, pleading *nolo contendre*. In addition, we would like to petition for the Court's consideration of a motion for judgment of acquittal for failure of the State to establish sufficient evidence to support the remaining charges. May Counsel approach the Bench, Your Honor?"

Judge Ballante nodded and motioned for both attorneys to come forward.

Mr. Vamia handed a document to the judge and the prosecutor. Judge Ballante flipped through, page by page, deliberately reviewing the sheets of paper through her thick glass lenses while the attorneys waited in front of the bench. As Mr. Vamia whispered certain points, the judge noted some of the pages with a pen. She finished then looked up to Mr. Vamia and nodded. When Mr. Perkouri whispered something to the judge, she nodded again and spoke to the prosecutor. The lawyers returned to their seats.

Judge Ballante: "The Court will recess until one-thirty to consider the defense motion. In the interests of expediency, the Court will make available a copy of the Court's annotated motion to both counsels." Her gavel banged down. Then she exited.

Ryz'n watched as Mr. Vamia snagged Perkouri by the elbow. She heard Mr. Vamia say: "I want to see the record on Toombes."

Mr. Perkouri turned to his assistant, said something she couldn't make out and snapped his fingers. The assistant handed over a type of cardboard record of some sort. Mr. Vamia glanced over it, smirked and slapped the thing with the back of his free hand.

"I want a copy of this immediately."

Grinning, Mr. Perkouri, said "You can keep that one." Then he asked if there would be anything else. When Mr. Vamia said no, the prosecutor left with his assistant.

Mr. Sheeboom leaned over the bar rail to ask what was going on. Mr. Vamia said he would explain everything across the street at the diner. He said Carol was to meet him there if court recessed early. Ryz'n walked with Nick, his folks and Mr. Vamia to the diner. As they placed their orders, Mr. Vamia laid out what had occurred.

He said Judge Ballante was trying to help them out. She had refused to hear the other character witnesses the State had lined up against Nick. Mr. Vamia had Nick change his plea to no contest for two of the misdemeanor charges because they had no defense for them and, because Judge Ballante had asked him to. He added the judge had indicated in chambers that, if Nick would plead to the misdemeanors, she seriously would consider dropping some of the felony allegations. Mr. Vamia told them the judge wanted to clear away the State's bull to expedite the trial and simplify matters for the jury. He said this was good for Nick. But Perkouri's last minute, lying jailhouse snitch derailed her plans.

Mr. Vamia explained he had submitted a motion for the judge to dismiss the remaining charges for lack of evidence. He said he thought he had a good shot at dismissing all charges except for aggravated assault and battery and leaving the scene until Mr. Perkouri produced "Toombes—that sorry excuse for a human being." He said the prosecutor had

just given him Toombes' arrest record. The convict had a history of both arrests and a couple convictions for petty crimes. He said the State stooped to use this guy at the last minute when he realized the judge might acquit some of the felony charges for lack of evidence. With Toombes' testimony, the State now had a witness with knowledge of the murder and assault and battery charges, from Nick's own mouth.

Nick got mad. "That creep was lying through his teeth."

Mr. Vamia said he knew that but the judge would have to consider his testimony when she reviewed the motion. Mr. Vamia had prepared the motion without the benefit of Toombes' testimony, so he'd asked her if he could amend the document there at the bench to insert the word "credible" between the words "no" and "witness" under his arguments to drop the felony murder charges for lack of evidence.

"Ballante wants to expedite this matter. She doesn't want to stand on formality and force a delay by having it retyped. She's okay—wants to help us. Only …"

Ryz'n leaned forward asking, "Only what?"

Mr. Vamia shook his head. "Only, as incredible as that creep may be, she'll have to consider his testimony as evidence against Nick. I'd be surprised if she drops the greater felony charges now. It will be up to us to prove he's lying. Perkouri wants to force Nick to take the stand so he can rip him up on everything—all the stuff that's come out against his character. Not to mention, make him look silly with that inner Voice deal."

"But that's true Franco, I thought you believed me?"

"Like I said Nick, it doesn't matter whether I believe you or not. As I've told you before, it's what we can make the jury believe." Nick rolled his eyes.

"Where does that leave us," asked Mr. Sheeboom. "Why would he perjure himself?"

"Well Ray, with Toombes' record in hand, I can recall him and discredit him in front of the jury. But Perkouri has prosecutorial discretion, don't forget, to charge him or not. Also—Nick. Remember Roy Ripley, who bunked with you in the lock-up that night before you were both arraigned?"

"Yeah?"

"Can he contradict Toombes'? Was he in the holding tank when you two got into it?"

"Yeah, and so were the two black guys in our cell. They had to see it, too."

"They were arraigned right before you, weren't they?"

"Oh I remember them," said Ryz'n. "Their grandmother was sitting behind me. She was so happy when the judge dismissed their charges."

"Right. We should be able to get contact information for them from the Clerk. With three witnesses against Toombes, Nick won't have to take the stand. But we've got to find them first. That's where Carol comes in." Mr. Vamia looked up.

"Speak of the devil. Carol? Over here." He waved her to come over to them.

Breathing heavily, Carol Davalone sat down in a chair Nick's dad pulled over from an empty table. She nodded her greeting to everyone.

"Well, you were right Frank. That Toombes character's a real creep. Got a record as long as my arm. Petty stuff though mostly. Never did much time until his last sentence."

Mr. Vamia nodded. "That weasel Perkouri gave me a copy of his record after the judge recessed to study my motion." Carol arched her brows.

"Oh? So you don't need this?"

"Sure. I'll compare your notes with what Perkouri gave me. Thanks Carol. Got something better for you." She perked up.

"Need you to dig up some witnesses for us."

"Okay. Who?"

"Remember Roy Robert Ripley? The kid I defended for statutory rape?"

"Sure."

"He and a couple black kids shared Nick's cell. They were arraigned with Nick."

"What day was that?"

Ryz'n blurted out: "That would have been Friday, July thirty-first." Nick said, "Gee Ry, how'd you know that so fast?" She said, "I gotta a way of remembering dates that are important to me and that one was very important." She felt her face warm, recalling that was the first night they spent in the purple cathouse with all those mirrors.

Carol Davalone hopped up, saying she'd "get on it right away." Mr. Vamia reminded her to call Phyllis for Ripley's contact information. "Right," she said and excused herself.

"You've got a good gal there Franco," offered Nick's mom.

Glancing around the table, he nodded. "We all do."

They discussed the case over lunch. By one-thirty, they were back in court.

* * *

Carol Davalone tracked down Roy Robert Ripley—"Red." Found him pumping gas at an Esso station over in Bradensburg. Red told her he'd be happy to testify in Nick's behalf, if she could fix it with his boss there at the station. Red said he'd seen the whole incident with Toombes. He confirmed Nick's version of the story that Toombes had attacked Nick, spilling Nick's food from his tray all over the floor. Then, with Nick on the floor, Toombes had dived for Nick's throat. Nick stuck his cast-foot into Toombes' face, knocking him out. Red told her their colored cell mates had seen the altercation too. There names were Bobby and Donny Sims. He told her they live in Bunbury Heights with their grandmother and work at a car wash near Crest Hill. Red said Nick never said anything to Toombes about his case. Carol asked how Red could be sure of that.

"Cuz everybody saw Nick come into the tank, what with his cast and all. Just a kid. Only guy younger'n me. Sure, we all noticed him. Watched him pick out a spot against the bars and sit down there." Red grinned. "Pretty obvious he didn't wanna talk with

nobody or let 'em git behind him. See what I'm sayin'? [Carol nods.] Stayed like that until they started pushin' food trays through the slot. Wasn't too long as I recall. Nick didn't talk to nobody. Sims boys can tell ya the same thing. Besides …"

"Besides what?"

"That night when the four of us were in the cell together, I tried to get Nick to talk about his case. But he wouldn't peep. Said his lawyer, you know—Franco? Told him to keep quiet. He did. I tried to find out cuz the Buzzbees had roughed me up once. I wanted to hear the details on how Nick took 'em down. But that boy's as cool as they come. Never said a word. Got me ta talkin' about my case instead. Referred me to Franco. Slick. See what I'm sayin'? Yeah. He's one cool dude that Nick Sheeboom.

"Did ya know Toombes knew the Buzzbee boys? Word is they were tight at one time when Toombes was tendin' bar over at Clancy's."

Carol said that was good information to have. She thanked Red then cleared it with the service station owner for Red to take off to testify. Carol followed up Red's lead to find the Sims brothers working at Sam's Car Wash off Veer Avenue near Fleischer's Village.

The Sims' said their boss didn't like them fraternizing on the job, if she wasn't a paying customer. Carol offered to put her '66, fire engine red, Mustang convertible through the car wash. Said they could talk as the car went through the wash and the boys towel-dried the cars coming off the line. Both kids backed up Red and Nick's story to the hilt. They said they'd be glad to testify for Nick. Like Red, they thought Nick was a stand-up guy. They said they knew what it was like to be accused falsely. Carol spoke to the car wash manager so the brothers could appear in court. She took their phone number, saying Franco would be calling them. As she had with Red, Carol suggested they wear a coat and tie to court, if they had them. The boys promised that wouldn't be a problem.

* * *

Franco had a plan in mind for the kid's defense. He wanted to start with the accident scene. Interview Officer Dodgett, who had spurned Nick's confession. Talk to Dunphy, the desk sergeant Nick had phoned. Move onto the accident expert he had hired to testify as to what exactly had occurred that night that led to the death of the Buzzbee boys. He planned to interview the county coroner who had autopsied Arlo Buzzbee regarding Arlo's blood alcohol level at the time of his death. He wanted to have Ray Fammick of the County's Juvenile Division testify as well. Ray could tell how Nick surrendered of his own free will and spoke freely when the police interrogated him. If the judge would allow it, he hoped to have Fammick offer his opinion that Juvie Court routinely handled cases involving kids Nick's age. Fammick could also testify that the rise in the county's juvenile crime rate mirrored the rapid growth in population. He might call Lieutenant Ferguson too, to offset Colombo's biased testimony. He didn't want to, but he would call his friend and former fellow law student and co-worker in the State Attorney's office

Sidney Sitch. Sid could testify to the time-line of the initial and final dispositions of the case by the State prosecutor. Sid could show that the former State's Attorney had declined to prosecute the matter for lack of evidence initially. And that after the former prosecutor had been appointed a circuit court judgeship, he had recused himself from presiding over the trial for the same reason. If Perkouri gave Sid a hard time, Sid could work for him. If he won this case, he would have more clients than he could handle alone. Publicity for this trial was running high. He'd need a partner. He could do a lot worse. Sid Sitch was a darn fine attorney, sharp, personable and thorough.

Franco had a host of character witnesses available in Nick's behalf. Most of them were teachers and neighbors and others who had known Nick all his life, like his barber and physician. If Carol could track down Red and the colored boys, he would call them and then recall Toombes. Castrate that bastard in front of everyone. Maybe even ask Ballante to have the State prefer a felony complaint against Toombes for perjury. He planned to conclude with Terri Schieffer. She was his ace in the hole, his star eyewitness. He'd save her for last. He had to be flexible enough to accommodate the witnesses from Los Angeles County he had flying in from the West Coast. He planned to fill in around them with character witnesses to make that work. He wanted to get the L. A. witnesses in and out in a day, if possible, so they wouldn't have to spend a night here in town.

The previous night he had called long distance to speak with Homicide Detective Lieutenant Miles Thursby and Assistant District Attorney Floyd Archer, both of whom worked for Los Angeles County in California. Dom had met with them out in L. A. to discuss Nick's case. Both men said they could make themselves available to testify regarding Nick's involvement with the murder cases out there a year ago. He had assured them that he would incorporate their testimony into his case as soon as he possibly could, so they would spend a minimum of time away from their jobs. When he had checked in with Phyllis during the recess, she told him both men had caught the first flight for BWI out of LAX that morning. They'd be in court late that afternoon. Dom would pick them up at the airport, drive them to the courthouse and back to the airport for the return flight.

He also had promised Nick's doctor to take him early in one of the next two days, so the physician could make his hospital rounds yet still receive patients during his normal office hours. The other character witnesses, Nick's teachers, neighbors and lifelong friends, would have to wait out in the lobby until he could work them in. He would try to call the teachers later in the afternoon, except for a couple football coaches who had said they didn't mind missing classes but not football practice.

With all the continuances and recesses, the State's case had been long and laborious. Felt almost tedious to him. He believed the jury might share his sentiment. He decided to change the tempo with his defense. Hit quick. Hard. And repeatedly. Shake and wake the jury. Ballante wanted to move this thing along, as well. She'd help him.

When Laurene reconvened court, Franco was ready. Anxious actually, to finally put on the kid's case. He called Corporal Dodgett as his first witness, introducing the accident report, signed by Dodgett, as Defense Exhibit A. Dodgett testified to what he had written and drawn on the report, confirming what the other police officer—Kopmann—had admitted earlier. The initial report showed the accident involved a single car (the Buzzbees'), probably traveling at excessive speeds on a stormy, wet road. And that an alcoholic beverage may have been a factor in the cause of the accident, as evidenced by the scorched, liquor bottle fragments found amid the rubble. Dodgett said he first reported a one-car accident because they found only the Buzzbees' car and no witnesses, including the twins and their grandparents, saw or heard any other vehicles.

Since he had interviewed the traffic cop several weeks ago, Franco had learned that the county police department had recently promoted Dodgett to corporal and transferred him out of the traffic division to a special operations unit. On the stand now, Dodgett's memory was a little bit fuzzy concerning his confrontation with Nick at the accident scene that night. He recalled the accident but couldn't be sure Nick was the kid he had turned away in the downpour. He said it might have been Nick. He just wasn't positive.

Over the State's objection, Franco showed the sheriff's department did not grant Dodgett his time-in-grade when eligible. Yet, as soon as he was eligible, the department promoted him to Corporal in August on his hiring anniversary date. Dodgett said the delay in receiving his time-in-grade rank was due to an administrative error. Dodgett said he passed his corporal's exam and was eligible for promotion. Franco noted when he'd interviewed Dodgett a week before his promotion, Dodgett seemed to recall Nick all right. Franco said he had taped their conversation. He had the tape and a playback machine in his briefcase. He offered to play the tape back for Dodgett, if it would aid his memory. Dodgett said that wouldn't be necessary. His memory cleared, as if by miracle.

"Yes, I remember him. Drove a sort o' aquamarine Pontiac convertible. Had a blonde in front and a brunette in the back. It was a nasty night. Bad storm. The defendant did drive up to me. Said something about the accident but I don't recall what. Guess I didn't listen much to what he said. It was my job to redirect traffic so the fire department could do their job, putting out the blaze and cleaning up the mess. I told him to move on, same as I told the other motorists. I might have put it to him a little roughly. You know how that is, Counselor. But it was a nasty night. And I wasn't much in the mood to tolerate thrill-seekers, guys out to impress their girlfriends with grisly accident scenes."

On cross, Perkouri asked if Dodgett was promised a promotion in return for his testimony. Corporal Dodgett said no. Franco next called Sergeant Dunphy.

Dunphy testified he was the desk sergeant at the Oxen Mill Police Station who logged in Nick's call at precisely two-twenty-five a.m. He logged the call out three minutes later. Franco suggested Nick made the call eight minutes after the power went out according to the testimony of the twins about their alarm clock. Dunphy testified that someone named "William Nick" had phoned to report the accident involving the Buzzbees. He couldn't identify Nick as the caller. "The caller said his name wasn't important. Just the accident, the location of the accident was important." Dunphy also testified that the caller had suggested he notify the fire department because the "car was on fire and there were live wires down, sparking on the ground, a very dangerous situation."

When Perkouri declined to cross, Franco called his accident expert—one Elias Barnes.

Barnes said he had retired after thirty years working for the State of Maryland as a safety expert, often inspecting highway accident scenes. In his retirement, he worked occasionally as a free lance safety expert, examining accident sites. He acknowledged that he didn't know the defendant or his family. From his inspection of the tire marks, Barnes testified Nick's Pontiac had been traveling in the proper lane at about half the speed of the Buzzbees' vehicle when the incident occurred.

Barnes had mocked up a three by five-foot, scaled diagram of the accident scene. Laurene accepted the diagram as Defense Exhibit B, which Franco set on an easel facing the jury just right of the witness box. He handed Barnes a pointer to step through his recreation of the accident for court members without having to step down from the stand.

The diagram showed the stretch of road where the accident had occurred, as well as the relative positions of the approaching cars. Using the pointer to explain how the accident transpired, the witness traced the skids of the respective cars showing where Nick's Pontiac had stopped and how and where the Buzzbees crashed into the transformer pole. Then Franco intervened to introduce black and white photographs of the various skid marks. Sitting at the prosecution table, Perkouri scrutinized the labeled photos while he made notes on a legal pad. When he finished, Perkouri concurred with Laurene in accepting the photos as evidence. Barnes corroborated the pictures as the ones he had taken and labeled. He differentiated between tire marks made by Nick versus those made by the Buzzbees. Franco offered the photographs as Defense Exhibits C through H.

He passed the pictures among the jury members before he allowed Barnes to continue. Upon collecting the photos, he asked Barnes to renew his testimony.

Barnes testified that he could describe how the accident had unfolded by recreating it from the respective skid marks. While he couldn't be sure exactly how fast Nick had been traveling, he was certain the tire marks showed Nick had not exceeded forty miles per hour. Barnes also said the relative length and severity of the skid marks showed the Buzzbee's vehicle to be traveling nearly twice as fast in the wrong lane when the cars passed each other. Based on his professional review, no blame could be attached to Nick.

On cross, Perkouri asked when Barnes had made his examination. Barnes said he had made two examinations: one, the night of August 28 and the other, the morning of the following day. Perkouri noted that was two months after the accident occurred. Perkouri took one of the photos to hold in front of Barnes.

Perkouri: "This photo has a wider angle. Where were you when you took this picture?"

Barnes: "Standing on a crate in the bed of my pickup truck."

Perkouri: "How many sets of tire marks do you see?"

Barnes counted them, using his finger as a pointer on the photo. "Seven."

Perkouri tapped the edge of the photo against his open palm.

"Seven? And you've labeled two on the right side as "AB" representing marks from the Buzzbee's vehicle and two on the left side as "NS" identifying them as tire marks left by the defendant. Yet three other sets of marks in between them are not annotated. Why?"

Barnes: "They had nothing to do with the accident in question."

Perkouri: "You can view seven sets of tire marks on asphalt as late as two months after the fact and determine which cars made them? I find that hard to believe. The State's accident expert testified that he had examined the scene a month after the accident. He could not draw any conclusions regarding the accident because there were too many skid marks from a variety of incidents. How can you be sure which skid marks were made by which vehicle, if either of them?"

Barnes: "I rode and walked the accident scene with an eyewitness, one of the girls who rode in the car at the time of the accident. We rode over the scene at night where the accident occurred to label the road where she said the cars started braking and where they stopped. And we walked the scene once the following day so I could verify labels from the night before. That's how I was able to determine the applicable tire marks."

Perkouri asked how this other witness could be sure those were the right tire marks. Barnes suggested he ask her. Barnes added that by knowing those were the skid marks of the two cars and the direction each was headed, he could make a determination as to the relative speeds of the two cars at the time and place they nearly collided.

Perkouri: "You counted seven sets of tire marks in this photograph. If your assisting witness was mistaken in her opinion regarding the location of the tire marks, how might that affect your testimony? Couldn't you be mistaken?"

Barnes: "Yes. In that case, my opinion would be mistaken, too."

Perkouri asked Barnes if the defense was paying him to provide this testimony.

"Yes. *The worker is worthy of his wage.* The same as you are worthy of your wage for being here Counselor."

Franco smiled. He liked that biblical paraphrase. Barnes said just what he'd told him to say if the prosecutor asked if Barnes were getting paid for his expert opinion. Franco used that response routinely with his paid experts. It always went over well.

On redirect, Franco had Barnes reiterate that, based on the tire marks he was shown, Barnes was certain, in his expert professional opinion comprising over thirty years of experience in the field, that his testimony was accurate.

Franco called Byron Johnson, the old bar fly in Truley's, to testify that he had warned Nick the Buzzbees were bad boys. Johnson also testified that Nick was all alone. No one in the bar had bothered to lift a finger to help him. He said neither Nick nor the Buzzbees had mentioned what had occurred in the rest rooms. He said he hadn't spoken with anyone who did know, or admitted to knowing. On redirect, when Perkouri asked Johnson what he thought had happened in the rest rooms, Franco did not object.

Johnson answered, "I dunno. Mebbe they slipped and fell. Yeah, slipped on a bar of soap—or passed out drunk, mebbe?"

Franco swallowed a smile as Perkouri returned to his seat. Johnson had said exactly what he'd coached him to say. Made Perkouri look like the ass he was. Then Franco called Ed Kiefer, the man who had given Arlo Buzzbee a ride home to get his hot rod.

Kiefer confessed his fear of Arlo and Alvin. When Kiefer had asked Arlo what had happened in Truley's bathroom: "Arlo told me 'to mind [my] own business.'" As he had with Byron Johnson, Franco asked if Kiefer knew of anyone whom the Buzzbees might have told about what happened in the rest rooms. Kiefer said he didn't and doubted there was anyone "cuz Arlo was so intent about keepin' mum." Perkouri declined to cross.

* * *

Laurene recessed court for lunch. During the break, Franco checked in with Phyllis at the office. She assured him all his witnesses were available, including those in route from the Coast. He told the Sheebooms and Ryz'n things were working out. With any luck, he hoped to wrap up Nick's defense late the next afternoon, if not the following morning. They seemed to be encouraged with his defense of the kid thus far.

After lunch, he called Ray Fammick, who testified Nick voluntary surrendered to authorities. Fammick admitted that, while the State's Attorney had discretion to prosecute Nick as an adult, cases involving kids Nick's age usually were handled by Juvenile Court.

On Perkouri's cross, Fammick admitted juvenile crime in the county had sky-rocketed this last five years. But on redirect, Fammick admitted that according to census documents available to the police department in the last decade, Royal George County had been the fastest growing in the State and one of the fastest growing in the nation. Fammick named off the six new high schools built and opened by the County in as many as years. He named two more that were scheduled to open the following year to accommodate the burgeoning growth in the county's juvenile population.

Lieutenant Ferguson corroborated Fammick's testimony. He also gave the height and weight for the Buzzbee brothers from the police records at the time of their arrests and when they were discharged from prison last April. Upon discharge, Alvin was five feet

eleven inches tall and weighed two hundred and four pounds, while Arlo was six-foot one and weighed two-twenty-three. When Franco asked him why both a Chief Homicide Lieutenant and a Sergeant of Detectives were needed to interrogate a sixteen year old kid about an auto accident, Ferguson mumbled his response. Franco asked him to speak up.

"That's how the State's Attorney wanted it."

"Do you mean Judge O'Halloran?" Ferguson shook his head no. "Mister Perkouri."

On cross, Ferguson corroborated Colombo's testimony that Nick had clammed up during his interrogation regarding his motivation for turning around and waiting on the Buzzbees and that Nick had hidden the fact that he had been drinking alcoholic beverages. On redirect, Ferguson testified Nick had appeared voluntarily for questioning.

Next, Franco called his friend Sidney Sitch to the stand. Sid stated he was thirty and has worked as an assistant state's attorney in the State's Attorney Office for a little over five years. He asked Sid when he first heard of the matter presently before the court.

"I believe I received a call from you about the matter on Wednesday, July first, but we played phone tag for a day before we actually discussed the particulars."

"So my client's involvement in the matter was brought voluntarily to the attention of the State's Attorney Office the day after the accident, is that correct?" Sid agreed.

He asked what Sid did with the information he had given him. Sid said he referred it to the State's Attorney. "To Mister Perkouri there?" Franco pointed to Perkouri at the table.

Sid: "No, to his predecessor Darby O'Halloran."

"The new Circuit Judge?" Sid replied, "Yes, that's correct."

"So what did Judge O'Halloran have to say about the matter?"

"He said he would consider it over the weekend of the Fourth—the holiday weekend—and get back to me on it the following week." Franco asked, "And did he?"

"Yes. The following Tuesday. Judge O'Halloran said he didn't see much there to interest the State. He said, 'Tell Franco, we won't prosecute. And tell the kid to watch it in future. Next time, he might not be so lucky.'"

"And so you relayed the message to me and the matter was dropped?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And that would have been when?"

"Ummm, that would have been that day. I got back to you that very day."

"So that would have been Tuesday the seventh, correct?"

"I believe so—yes."

"But you contacted me again regarding the matter. Do you recall the date?"

"Yes, I do. It was three weeks later on a Wednesday—the twenty-ninth, I believe."

"And what did you tell me then?"

"I said we had reconsidered the matter and wanted the police to speak to your client."

"And what else did you tell me?"

"I asked you to present your client at the Upper Winston police station for questioning that day. You said he was out of town in North Carolina on vacation. I suggested you call him back to town. Bring him by the police station no later than the next afternoon."

"Did he in fact report to the police station as you requested the next afternoon?"

"Yes, I believe he did."

"Came back of his own free will right away, though he was out of state at the time?"

"Well, I wasn't present at the station of course. But the file indicates he did."

"When did former State's Attorney O'Halloran became Judge O'Halloran?"

"I believe his first day in office as judge was a Monday, the twenty-seventh of July."

"That would have been two days before you contacted me about having my client report to the station—when Mister Perkouri was in charge, is that right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Thank you, Mister Sitch. The defense appreciates your cooperation in this matter. No further questions at this time, Your Honor."

Laurene asked if the State wished to redirect. Perkouri stood up.

"Mr. Sitch. Between the times that the State decided not to pursue the defendant and you contacted defense counsel telling him to present the defendant for questioning; did the State become aware of additional evidence in this case?"

Sid: "Yes sir, we did. We learned the defendant had engaged in the purchase and imbibing of alcoholic beverages, illegal for him because he was a minor."

Perkouri: "And the defendant failed to volunteer this under initial questioning?"

Sid nodded. "Yes sir, he did not proffer that information under police questioning."

"Please explain the circumstances by which the State learned of this new information."

"Well, our office had been under pressure from various local citizens groups in the County to crack down on drunk driving, particularly among teenagers. As you know, there is a movement, both national and local, to lower the legal blood alcohol content for drunk driving from point-oh-one-five to point-oh-one per cent. Our office reviewed various establishments with state liquor licenses to determine if any were selling liquor to minors. When we looked into Truley's Bar and Grill, we learned of this incident."

"And when was that?"

"That was in mid to late July. I'm not certain of the exact date off the top of my head. I can look it up in the file, if you'd like."

"No that won't be necessary, as long as you can swear that the State acquired the newly learned information regarding the defendant's illegal drinking and altercation at Truley's, before you called defense counsel to have him present the defendant at the police station but *after* the State's Attorney first declined to prosecute."

"Yes sir, that's correct. The new information was the basis for that call."

On redirect, Franco asked Sid if Truley had lost his liquor license because of the State's investigation. Sid said no but Truley had received a fine and was placed on probation by the State liquor bureau. And that another proven incident of Truley selling liquor to minors could result in a suspension, if not a revocation, of his license.

"So, Mister Truley was, and still is, in the liquor business, uninterrupted as it were?"

"Yes.".

"Did Judge O'Halloran recuse himself from sitting on this case?

"Yes."

"Why did the judge recuse himself?"

"He didn't tell me."

"But you know why, don't you? How did you find out?"

"Yes. It was because he had prior knowledge of the case."

"He told you that?"

"No. Mister Perkouri told me."

Franco didn't want to put his friend on the spot, but the kid's life was at stake.

"What did he tell you exactly?" Sid glared at him.

"I suppose you should ask the judge."

Perkouri: "The witness is correct, Your Honor. Objection. Hearsay."

Laurene: "Sustained."

"If the State wishes Your Honor, defense could call Mister Perkouri to have him testify directly to what he told the witness."

She looked at the pecker. Slumping in defeat, Perkouri withdrew his objection.

Laurene turned to Sid. "Very well, so ordered. Please answer, Mister Sitch."

Sid hemmed. "He said—" Franco: "Who said?"

Sid frowned. "Well, Mister Perkouri said. He told me that, that he—Judge O'Halloran—didn't believe the State should pursue the matter at trial."

"Did Mister Perkouri say why Judge O'Halloran had told him this?"

Sid sighed. "He said—" Franco: "Who said?"

Sid: "The State's Attorney—Mister Perkouri—said that the judge told him he didn't think the State should clog the docket with this trial." When Franco asked why, Sid glanced at Perkouri then back to him, saying, "Because, becasue he thought there were far more serious matters with more evidence that were easier to prove." Sid grimaced.

He thanked Sid, adding "I regret having to put you in this position Mister Sitch, pitting you against your boss like this. I have only done so in the sole interest of gaining justice for my client. I hope you understand that and won't suffer any repercussions from your testimony here today. I hope you will bear me no ill will. I appreciate very much your candor. I have no further questions Your Honor."

When Perkouri declined further questions, Laurene said the witness could step down. Franco felt bad for Sid, but he had to play this card. The jury had to see that Judge O'Halloran saw the kid's case as an unlikely one for the State to win.

He accompanied Sid as they returned to their seats. Leaning in towards Sid, he whispered: "If he tries to shaft you, you can lawyer with me."

Sid hesitated, glancing at him, bewildered. Franco whispered: "I mean. Come work for me." Sid blinked. He watched Sid turn halfway round to give him a quizzical look.

Franco next called county coroner Dr. Clive Carver. Dr. Carver testified that he had served in his official capacity as coroner for six years. He performed the autopsy on Arlo Buzzbee. He said Arlo's corpse contained "a blood alcohol level of point zero-two-two-three per cent." When Franco asked him what was the legal limit for drunk driving, he replied "Point zero-one-five per cent."

"And from this discovery and your six years of experience as County Coroner Doctor Carver, you can deduce what?"

"That the victim was legally drunk at the time of the accident."

"I see. Now Doctor Carver, previous testimony has determined that the accused weighed about a hundred and thirty-five pounds at the time of the accident and that he had consumed two, twelve-ounce cans of beer and a shot of whisky between around eight-thirty and nine-forty in the evening before the accident. And that the fatal accident occurred somewhere around two-fifteen the next morning. Given those facts, can you make a determination as to whether or not the accused was legally drunk at that time?"

"Well, I doubt that he was."

"Why is that?"

"Well, the alcohol should have passed from his system by then. If I had my Blood Alcohol Content Calculation Chart, I could tell you exactly."

"Ah well, we're in luck then. It just so happens I have such a chart."

Franco pivoted to retreat and retrieve a piece of cardboard about nine or ten inches square from the defendant's table. He asked and received permission from Laurene to approach the witness. He proffered the chart to Carver.

"You may recall Doctor Carver, you provided me with this chart at the time of your deposition?"

Carver accepted the cardboard document.

"Yes. This appears to be the chart."

Laurene asked if he'd like to introduce the document into evidence.

"In a minute, Your Honor." She nodded.

"Now Doctor Carver, from this chart could you estimate what the blood alcohol content level of the accused would have been at the time of the accident?"

"I believe so. You say he weighed about a hundred and thirty-five pounds? And how long had it been since he had stopped drinking?"

"About four and a half hours, closer to five."

Dr. Carver: "Four and a half hours? Hmmm. Do you have a pen or pencil?"

"Yes sir, I do." Franco reached inside his suit coat to pull out a ballpoint pen, clipped inside his shirt pocket. "Here you are."

Carver took the pen to note some calculations in the margin.

"One thirty-five, hey? And four and a half hours … hmmm." Grunting, he looked up.

"Yes. The alcohol would have been entirely out of his system by then."

"So it would have been impossible for him to have been legally drunk at that time?"

Dr. Carver: "Based on those figures you gave me? Yes sir."

"Would you mind initializing and dating your calculations there, sir?"

"Not at all." The coroner scribbled beneath his calculations, as requested.

"Now Your Honor, defense would like to offer this chart into evidence as Exhibit I."

Laurene asked if the State had any objections. Perkouri asked to inspect the chart. Franco handed it to him. After glancing over the record, Perkouri shook his head.

"Very well. The Court will accept the blood alcohol level content chart into evidence as Defense Exhibit I. The court reporter will please mark the exhibit accordingly."

On cross, Perkouri asked Carver if the defendant had drunk alcoholic beverages later in the evening, might he not have had alcohol in his blood at the time of the accident?"

Dr. Carver said it would depend on how much and when he had drunk.

Perkouri then induced the coroner to describe the condition of the bodies and the cause of death. Carver said the cause of death for both victims was asphyxiation due to the presence of carbon monoxide in their lungs. There also was evidence of serious blood loss from both victims. Alvin had suffered first degree burns over ninety per cent of his body; Arlo, about eighty per cent. The remainder of their bodies had incurred second degree burns. Pieces of their lower extremities, back and backsides were missing, "evidence of an explosion of some kind." Perkouri asked if there was evidence of any beating about the head or face. The coroner admitted there was evidence of brain trauma but their faces were too burned to tell. Perkouri asked if the brain trauma could have been caused by a physical attack from another person. Dr. Carver said it was possible.

On redirect, Dr. Carver said the head and facial injuries could have been caused during the wreck and subsequent explosions. After he finished, Laurene dismissed the witness.

When Franco began to call character witnesses in Nick's behalf to rebut the State's character witnesses, Perkouri objected. Laurene overruled him, noting his exception.

Franco began with Nick's high school wrestling and baseball coaches, who also coached the football team. They testified to Nick's athletic leadership and motivational abilities. Franco dismissed them in time to conduct football practice. A couple of Nick's

lifelong neighbors, pillars in the community, echoed the coaches' high opinions of Nick. None of them could see Nick trying to run anyone off the road. Perkouri objected. But Laurene said "fairness and justice demanded" that the defense character witnesses be heard as the court had heard similar, negative character witnesses testify for the State.

The Assistant District Attorney (ADA) for Los Angeles County and a lieutenant from L.A.P.D.'s homicide division closed out the days' testimony. Dom had driven them to court before the session ended. They said Nick had been a material witness in the Ransom Clan multiple murder investigation a year ago. And he had served in a similar capacity in an unsolved murder investigation of a runaway teenage girl from Wisconsin. The girl's corpse had been found in the High Desert northeast of L.A. That case was yet open. They added Nick's testimony had helped him secure guilty verdicts against Harley Ransom and his co-defendants, who were awaiting execution by the State of California.

They volunteered that Nick had offered to fly back and forth across the country at his own expense during the investigations and subsequent Clan trial. And, by staying with relatives in the greater metropolitan Los Angeles area, Nick had saved the county from reimbursing Nick's expenses. They also testified that the former deputy sheriff turned dog-catcher, who testified earlier for the State, had reason to slander Nick because the guy's refusal to heed Nick's warning about the Ransom clan had cost him his job as a deputy. The Clan had murdered one of their own a couple days before Nick met them. Nick learned of the crime and reported it to the deputy, who dismissed him as "a dirty hippy." The L.A. witnesses also nixed the testimony of the two clan bimbos, who had implicated Nick as the "mastermind" of the murders, testifying that Nick had gotten off scot-free by striking a deal with State prosecutors who railroaded Harley Ransom. Both the ADA and the police lieutenant insisted those testimonies were complete fabrications.

On cross, both men admitted Nick initially had been a suspect in the Ransom Clan murders and the unsolved murder of the teenage run-away. On redirect, they testified that Nick's "rock-solid alibis" in both cases had removed the kid from "any and all possible suspicion." The testimonies of the Los Angles officials concluded the hearing for the day.

Afterwards, by way of thanks, Franco treated the two westerners and the Davalones to dinner before Dom drove them to BWI to catch the last flight to LAX. He would pass on their expenses to Nick's dad as part of his final bill. After dinner later that evening, he met in his office with Red and the Sims' brothers to prepare them for their next day's testimony. All three were happy to help Nick. Franco was set for day two of his defense.

~ Chapter 31: The Defense, Day Two ~

Franco began the second day with Dr. Duzzi-Duzzi, Nick's lifelong physician. Like the other character witnesses in the kid's behalf, the doctor testified to the kid's moral fiber. As a physician, the doctore said he often had witnessed people deal with adversity. Nick had been a vibrant, active, athletic kid, when Rheumatic Fever had struck him down at the age of thirteen for nearly a year. The doctor said "Yet, despite the setback, Nick handled being bedridden, bouncing back, emotionally stronger than before."

On cross, Perkouri asked if the doctor's prescribed, daily dose of penicillin for Nick might prevent venereal disease as well as a relapse of Rheumatic Fever. The doctor said that it should. Franco objected but Perkouri asked, "So the defendant could assume that the medication might give him immunity against such disease?" When Lorraine sustained his objection for irrelevancy, Perkouri withdrew the quesiton.

Nick's Portuguese barber Mario said Nick was the only client for whom he made house calls to cut hair. He said when Nick was laid up in bed recovering from Rheumatic Fever; he would cut Nick's hair on his day off in Nick's home because he said, "That Neeque a good boy." Under cross, Mario admitted he was not a witness to the accident.

Two other neighbor ladies, who tutored Nick in Algebra and French during his convalescence from Rheumatic Fever, testified to Nick's perseverance in pursuing his studies at the time. All refused to believe Nick could ever be capable of running anyone off the road intentionally. Again, on cross-examination, the witnesses testified they had no personal knowledge of the accident or the incidents with the victims at Truley's Bar.

Red and the Sims' brothers refuted Toombes' testimony against Nick by stating that Toombes, not Nick, had initiated the brawl in the holding tank. They said Toombes had ambushed Nick without provocation. They testified that Toombes merely got what he deserved when Nick had retaliated to protect himself. Red added that Toombes had told him and fellow inmates in the holding cell that Toombes had been "friendly with the Buzzbees from his bar-keepin' days." And that he "owed the kid [Nick] for their deaths." Perkouri was unable to shake their testimonies on cross-examination. Franco then called Toombes back to the stand to confront him with the testimony of Red and the Sims' boys.

Toombes said they had lied. When Toombes refused to recant his earlier testimony, Franco provided him a copy of his police record. He made Toombes read his record aloud to the Court. Perkouri objected but Laurene overruled him. Then Franco asked Toombes if he hadn't known the Buzzbee brothers personally. Toombes lost his cool. He stuttered, looking over to Perkouri for help. When Toombes denied his question, Franco suggested he had witnesses who could prove Toombes had a friendly association with the Buzzbees. Franco only had Red's hearsay testimony, but Toombes didn't know that. Toombes broke

down. Toombes admitted he had been friendly with the Buzzbees. But he refused to admit that he had attacked Nick to avenge them.

After lunch, Franco called more character witnesses in Nick's behalf: neighbors, life-long friends and teachers. Paramount among them was Nick's principal Mr. Marant, who had testified earlier for the State. The principal swore that Nick was "sometimes playfully mischievous but never malicious or mean-spirited." He noted Nick's academic record, his status in the top five per cent of his class, his membership in the National Honor Society (NHS). He said Nick's athletic and musical efforts helped garner state and regional recognition for the high school. He dismissed allegations regarding improper sexual relations between Nick and Miss Bucksalter as "a teen vendetta against the accused."

Other teachers came forward to testify in Nick's behalf, including Mrs. Mote, who had taught him French for three years and, as Faculty sponsor of the Pocomoke chapter of the NHS, recommended him into the prestigious academic organization. Mr. McElroy, Pocomoke's music teacher and orchestra and band leader, testified to drafting Nick into playing in the school band and orchestra against the boy's desires. He said during Nick's junior year, he had enlisted Nick to play tuba when no else would. And despite his unfamiliarity with the instrument, Nick played the tuba well, helping the band and orchestra win state and regional honors. None of these character witnesses believed Nick capable of running a car off the road. Perkouri objected to their assertions Nick was incapable of running someone off the road. He made them admit they knew nothing of the accident or the incidents at the bar involving Nick and the Buzzbees. Late in the afternoon, Franco called his last witness—Terri Schieffer.

Franco had met with Terri three times since his initial interview with her in his office the day of the accident. Her testimony was crucial to his defense. Her eyewitness testimony would negate Patti's. Hopefully, Terri would create reasonable doubt in the jury's mind regarding Nick's intentions that fateful night. The second time he met with her, Franco broke her down. He explained Patti had told him about Terri's swim top-gone-missing at the drive-in. Terri confessed she and Nick had an affair last summer, but that was over. Her sailor boyfriend had finished his basic training in Orlando. They had reconciled. Her boyfriend was down in Florida now receiving advanced training.

Franco had told Terri she should try to avoid referencing her affair with Nick under cross-examination. He would help her as best he could. But, no matter the circumstances, she was to answer truthfully—but concisely. He warned Terri that anything less than the truth would backfire on her and, thus on Nick, too. Terri said she always told the truth. She reminded him that she had talked Nick into returning to the scene of the accident.

He had seen Terri once more since then—last Saturday afternoon. Carol had been out on a case. He had invited Terri to his boat for lunch. He had told Terri he wanted to prep her again for her testimony. In fact, he had wanted to impress her with the Chris-Craft,

hoping maybe after the trial she might want to get together with him on the boat. But Terri had arrived with her sailor boyfriend, who was on a brief liberty from the Naval Training Center in Orlando where he was learning to be a signalman. Then, late last night, after he had prepped the Sims' brothers, Franco called Terri to pump her up for her testimony the next day. She assured him she was "ready and eager to help Nicky."

In court now, Terri wore the same powder blue suit she had worn to his office the day after the accident. The girl looked the part of a handsome, bright co-ed. He hoped the jury would perceive her both as winning and earnest. After she swore her oath and identified herself, Terri repeated her version of the events on the night of the accident.

She confirmed Barnes' expert accident testimony regarding her part in identifying the tire marks. Franco asked her if Nick had drunk any alcoholic beverages after he finished his beer at the drive-in around nine-thirty. Terri said he had not. And she had been with him the entire evening, except when he'd excused himself for a few minutes to go to the restroom. And the drive-in didn't sell liquor.

Franco: "So, Miss Schieffer—Terri. You do not believe it was the intention of the accused to harm the Buzzbee brothers in any way, when he turned around on the road that tragic evening by teaching them a lesson, as you said. Is that true?"

"No sir, I do not. The Buzzbees tried to run *us* off the road. All Nick did was stay in our lane and drive slowly through the rainstorm." Franco paused to look at the jury.

"So why do you think my client turned the car around that fateful night in the storm?"

Perkouri: "Objection, Your Honor, calls for a conclusion on the part of the witness."

"May I rephrase Your Honor?"

"Please do, Counselor."

"Terri, did the accused tell you why he turned around instead of leaving?"

"Yes, he did."

"And why was that?" Terri looked to Nick.

"He said he didn't really know. He said, I'll never forget—he said he had '*a hunch, an answer to prayer maybe*. He said he wasn't sure, just that it '*feels like the right thing to do'*. Those were his exact words: '*feels like the right thing to do— an answer to prayer.*'" She straightened up, looking at the jury. "I'll never forget those words."

Terri had avoided mentioning the Voice, as he had instructed. The jury members seemed satisfied with her testimony. Franco thanked her and returned to his seat.

Laurene: "Mister Perkouri, I presume the State wishes to cross?"

"Yes, Your Honor, it does."

Perkouri walked halfway towards the witness stand. Franco could not help but gaze upon Terri's pristine beauty and calm poise, a true Aryan. With clean, even, wholesome features, button nose and shining blond locks parted off-center, curving down around either side of her face to the base of her neck to rest on her shoulders, she reminded him

of a healthy, radiant May blossom in full bloom. He hoped Perkouri couldn't reach up to pluck her from the vine now and crush that lovely blossom in his fist.

Perkouri: "That was very touching Miss Schieffer, very touching And didn't the defendant mention something else regarding prayer right after he made that remark?"

"I don't know, sir. Like what?"

"Well, didn't he say, 'if you know any good prayers, now's the time to say them?'"

Terri shifted in her chair.

"Well yes sir. I believe he might have said something like that." Terri looked to Franco.

Perkouri: "Miss Schieffer, I understand you are quite a bright student. You rank in the top ten per cent of your class, take advanced academic courses and have been nominated for membership in the most prestigious academic club at Pocomoke—the National Honor Society. Isn't that true?"

Terri sat up straight, bright, young, radiant. She cleared her throat.

"I believe that's correct, except for the part about the Honor Society. I'm not aware of any nomination."

"Perhaps not. If I let the cat out of the bag, I apologize. But the point is, you are among the academic elite at your high school, both bright and accomplished. Both your peers and the faculty alike think highly of you, wouldn't you agree?"

"I would hope that they would. I always strive to do my best."

Terri was doing great, even better than Franco had hoped.

Perkouri: "Your humility and honesty do you great credit Miss Schieffer. You were honest with the defendant just after the accident and wise enough to know he should return to the scene. You persuaded him to do so, did you not?"

Terri hesitated. "Well, I'm not sure. I may have helped influence him, but I believe he would have gone back even without my advice."

"Yes, but you cannot be sure of that and we can never know that now, can we?"

"Well, perhaps not, but I feel confident Nick would have gone back anyway. He's got a good heart. He knows right from wrong."

"I see. But a person of your intelligence would concede, would you not, that even people with good hearts, who know right from wrong, sometimes make mistakes, sometimes do wrong, even willfully? Otherwise, the State would not need jails or courts of law such as this. And the Church would not need confessionals, isn't that right?"

"Well, yes sir, I, I suppose so. I see your point."

"Of course, it stands to reason."

The rat Perkouri smiled, trying to get over with her.

"Now Miss Schieffer, we have heard testimony in this case from two accident experts regarding what happened the night of the accident. The expert for the defense, one Mister Elias Barnes—you are familiar with him, are you not?" Terri said that she was.

Perkouri asked if she knew Mr. Barnes had said that, without Terri's help, he could not have determined which tire marks corresponded with the defendant's or which for the Buzzbee's cars. Terri acknowledged that assertion. Perkouri said the State's expert had inspected the site only a month after the accident and could not distinguish the tire marks.

"Yet, you and Mister Barnes were able to distinguish the marks two months after the accident. When did you and Mister Barnes search for those marks?"

"Yes sir, that's correct. I believe it was the last Friday in August. Yes. It was the weekend before the Labor Day weekend. I'm certain of that."

"So, *two months after the accident*, you could do what an experienced expert, the State's professionally certified accident expert, could not do a month earlier—identify the appropriate tire marks at a place on a dangerous road filled with tire marks? Is that so?"

"I did not identify any tire marks sir; only the locations where the cars slammed on the brakes and skidded. Mister Barnes identified the tire marks."

"Ah, I see. So you, an eyewitness, a participant in the accident, could not identify any tire marks, is that right?"

"Yes sir, that's right."

Perkouri glanced around towards the jury. "Well, that is extremely enlightening. Yes."

"Now in this case you may or may not know that the Court heard previously from a witness, I believe she is a classmate of yours—a Miss Patricia Ann Slater?"

"Yes sir. I know her. She is a classmate of mine."

"Yes. And Miss Slater, who was in the defendant's car with you that night, gave the Court a slightly different version of the events leading up to the accident. Are you familiar with her testimony?"

"No sir. I wasn't permitted to be in the courtroom when she testified."

Franco loved that response.

Perkouri: "But you were in the car with her when she urged the defendant to flee the scene and not turn around to face the victims, were you not?"

"Yes sir, I was."

"Now. Isn't it true that, shortly after the defendant turned the car about to face in the direction the victims had driven, that he told Miss Slater to climb into the back seat where she could put on a seat belt?"

"Yes sir."

"And do you recall why he said she should do that?"

"Well I had just buckled up in the shotgun seat and there was no safety belt in the middle of the front seat. So he told Patti to get in back and use one of those belts."

"Yes. But Miss Slater balked, did she not, at going to sit in the back? I believe she suggested that you go instead, while she remained up front with the defendant, as you had been sitting previously? Isn't that right?"

"Yes sir. She did say that."

"But the defendant persuaded her to go instead of you. Isn't that also true?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you recall what he said to persuade her to do so?"

"You mean other than the fact that I was already buckled in?"

"Yes."

Terri furrowed her brow, seemingly perplexed.

"Well, I do recall him saying it was nasty out. The weather, you know, was bad. So it could be slippery and he wanted to make sure she was safe."

"*Make sure she was safe?*" Perkouri glanced toward the jury then back to Terri. "Yes. And didn't the defendant say it was also because, I believe his words were, '*it could get rough*.' He could '*just feel it*'"?

Terri pondered. "I believe … yes, he might have said something like that. Yes sir."

Again, Perkouri glanced toward the jury box. "And you heard Miss Slater beg the defendant not to, what were her words? '*Don't Play chicken'* with the Buzzbee boys?"

"Yes sir. She did say that."

"And did you not slap her at that time to keep her quiet?"

"On the leg. Yes sir, I did. I thought she was distracting Nicky. The road was wet and very dangerous. The storm was ferocious. He needed to keep his mind on his driving."

"Why do you think the defendant turned around to head back in the direction the Buzzbee brothers had driven, when he could have escaped?"

"Objection, Your Honor. The witness answered this question on direct examination."

Perkouri: "Your Honor, having laid a more detailed foundation, the witness may now recall facts of which she was not aware. The State begs the Court to let her respond."

"Very well. Objection overruled. The witness will answer."

Terri frowned. She seemed perplexed.

"I'm not sure why he did it. He said he had a hunch, an answer to prayer maybe. He felt something inside him urge him to do it. We were scared. And I was praying at the time. We all were. We prayed the Our Father together. Then Patti and I prayed the Rosary. Maybe, maybe it was God urging him to turn around? That's what I was thinking. And still do."

Perkouri: "Maybe. Or perhaps, it was someone else—Satan, perhaps?"

Terri blinked. "Gee I, I never thought of that. Would Satan answer a prayer to God?"

"Well, he is a tricky devil and the father of all lies, is he not?"

"Yes. So the sisters taught me in catechism. But I never thought of it that way before."

"Perhaps you should. To be honest in this matter, you must be open to all possible explanations, should you not?"

"Yes sir. I suppose so."

"Yes. Of course. It stands to reason. The truth is, you don't really know why the defendant turned about and headed for the victims. Isn't that correct?"

"Maybe not—but I don't think he intended to harm them. It's not in him to do that."

Perkouri arched his brows. "Really? Are you aware of the altercation the defendant had earlier that evening in Truley's bar with the Buzzbee brothers?"

"Well, I know they were mad at him. They came out of the bar, in the dark, chasing after him—us."

"They were angry with the defendant and threatened to kill him, did they not?"

"Well, yes sir, they did."

Mr. Perkouri looked down at his feet then up.

"Very well. Miss Schieffer, are you aware the defendant has been involved in physical altercations with several of your classmates? Altercations that have been identified here by witnesses under oath who sat in the very seat you occupy now? Altercations, which have not been contradicted but rather have been corroborated by yet other eyewitnesses?"

Terri hesitated. "I have heard things—yes. But *I* have never witnessed them."

"So it doesn't surprise you that the defendant could, and has, violently beaten others?"

Terri sighed. "If he did, I'm sure it was in self-defense. I can't see him picking fights, especially at his size."

"But size did not figure into the equation at the time of the accident did it? The defendant drove a big, eight-cylinder sedan which had better than three hundred horses under its hood, did he not?"

"Yes sir. I suppose so."

"And he pointed that big car at the victims and drove straight at them, did he not?"

"He drove in his lane, much slower than they were driving toward us."

"After the defendant left the scene and you persuaded him to go back, didn't Miss Slater say that the defendant had waited for the Buzzbees as '*Crazy Horse had waited for Custer at the Little Big Horn*'"?

Terri flushed red.

"Yes sir. She did say that. That was *her* opinion. But I didn't believe it then and I don't believe it now."

"Perhaps you had good reason for not believing her? After all, that evening you and she spent with the defendant was somewhat unusual from the outset, was it not?"

Terri wrinkled her button nose and sweeping brow.

"I'm not sure what you mean, sir."

"Well, it was understood that Patti was actually the defendant's date. You were just along for the ride, a third wheel so to speak. Isn't that correct?"

"Yes sir."

"You had a boyfriend at the time, who was away in Naval Basic Training, correct?"

"Yes sir. That is correct."

"Miss Slater sat in between the two of you and next to the defendant at the outset of the date, while you sat next to her in the passenger seat next to the door?"

"Yes sir."

"And after you ate carry-out, you all intended to go to some ponds near La Placa to go skinny-dipping, isn't that right?"

Franco objected. "Irrelevant, Your Honor."

Perkouri: "Your Honor, the relationship among these three people that evening is crucial to revealing their mindsets and the defendant's motive leading up to the accident. As defense has often argued. Given that the testimony of this eyewitness seems to contradict that of the earlier and only other eyewitness, it is important to get at what was really happening that night in the defendant's Pontiac among these three individuals. The Court allowed such testimony to be heard when defense counsel argued similarly in crossing the State's eyewitness. It's only fair now that this witness be heard."

"Objection overruled. The witness will answer the question."

Perkouri turned from Laurene to Terri. "Miss Schieffer?"

"Well, the topic had come up—"

Perkouri: "We're talking about skinny-dipping? Is that right?"

"Yes sir but—"

"What in your mind did that entail exactly?"

Terri looked down to her lap, fumbling with her purse. She hedged.

"Well, I, I suppose it meant to me what it commonly means to most people."

"Which is what, exactly?"

Terri cleared her throat. She sat up straighter but she stared down into her lap.

"Well, that we would go swimming—in the buff, I guess."

"All of three of you, together? Swimming nude?"

"Well, I wasn't too sure about that, sir. See, I wore my swim suit under my clothes. And, as it turned out of course, it never came down to that—skinny-dipping—I mean."

"No, it didn't. But you were considering it at the time, were you not, Miss Schieffer? Remember you are under oath."

Terri bit her lip and screwed up her face. She looked up at Nick.

"Well, I thought if the others did, I might, but I wasn't sure I could go through with it."

"Now a couple weeks before this, didn't you go out with the defendant and four other female classmates to celebrate Pocomoke's victory in the state baseball championship?"

"Yes sir, I did. There was Nick and five of us girls."

"And didn't that night end with you and the defendant engaged in a game of strip poker at a motel on Route One over in Arlington?"

"Well yes it did, but nothing—"

"Miss Schieffer, just answer the question please. And the defendant wound up stark naked and you, I understand, were at least half-naked from the waist up?"

The jury shifted in their seats. Terri looked up at Nick, somewhat frantic.

"But-but nothing happened. We all went to bed—all us girls. Nicky slept on the floor."

"So I take it your response is: "Yes?" Terri dropped her head and nodded.

"You'll have to speak up Miss Schieffer. I couldn't hear your response. And if I couldn't hear you, I'm sure no one else in the room could hear you either."

Terri looked at Perkouri. She replied clearly, "Yes sir."

"Very good. So you had seen the defendant naked and he had seen you half-naked?"

Franco: "Objection asked and answered." Laurene Sustained his objection.

Perkouri: "So how long had you been dating your absent boyfriend at this time?"

Terri: "Well over a year and a half."

"He was your steady boyfriend? Had you ever dated anyone else?"

"No sir, I hadn't and yes sir, he was my steady."

"So you were very close to this young man, I take it? He was your first and only love?"

"Yes sir."

"And perhaps, promises had been exchanged between the two of you regarding fidelity and such during his absence?"

"Well, we had a sort of a pact you might say. An understanding, I guess you'd call it."

"I see. And after he graduated, as soon as he left you to join the navy, you were engaging in drunken, strip-poker parties and proposed, skinny-dipping sorties with the defendant. Were those affairs part of your pact with your steady boyfriend? Was he aware of your shenanigans?"

"Well, no sir, not, not exactly—but I had begged him not to leave me. I told him if he did, he shouldn't count on my fidelity."

"But you knew he trusted you to be faithful to him when he was away. Isn't that right?"

Terri nodded. "Yes sir."

"Yet, the night of the accident, you were in fact *going out on him*. Were you not?"

"Well, Patti was there."

"Yes. I'm glad you mention that. Miss Slater *was* present. In fact, she began the evening sitting between you and the defendant, correct?"

"Yes, sir. I already said that."

"But by the time of the accident, she was seated in back and you were alone with the defendant in the front seat?"

"Yes sir."

"Now between the start of your date and the accident, the three of you attended a triple feature at the Range Drive-In in Woldorn. Isn't that what you testified earlier?"

"Yes sir, we did."

"And from the time you entered the drive-in until the time of the accident, the dynamics of the relationship among the three of you changed, did it not?"

Terri hesitated. " … I, I don't believe I know what you mean."

"Oh, I think you know very well what I mean Miss Schieffer. After the accident, didn't Miss Slater indicate she was aware of this new dynamic? Didn't she accuse you and the defendant, in her words, of being and I quote, '*scum-sucking in love all of a sudden?*'"

"Well, she did—"

"She asked you what happened between you and the defendant when she went to the rest room and concession stand. Did she not?"

Flustered, Terri replied, "Well yes, but—"

"Did you not notice the lines were long at the concession stand because there was only one server for a large crowd?"

"Yes sir."

"Did you ask Miss Slater to get you some candy when she went to the rest room later?"

"Yes sir, I did."

"How long did it take her to go to the rest room, buy candy for you and return?"

Terri balked. "Gee, sir … I don't know exactly."

Perkouri: "Approximate."

Terri looked away. Shrugging, she said, "A half hour, maybe, a little longer."

"And you were alone with the defendant in his car all that time, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"I understand the defendant's Pontiac has a unique feature regarding the interior, does it not? You know to which feature I am referring?"

Again, Terri sighed. She looked down into her lap. "Yes sir, I think so."

Describe it for the Court, please. Terri looked up.

"The backs of the front seat can be pulled out of their sockets and pushed back and down to form a bed with the back seat."

"Was this *bed* in place when Miss Slater left for the restroom? I mean the interior of the car, was it made into a bed?"

"Yes sir."

Terri looked anxious. She was no longer making eye contact with Perkouri. When Franco got her attention, he scowled at her, pointing to his eyes, indicating she should look Perkouri in the eye and sit up straight. She responded to his cues.

Perkouri: "And you and the defendant were lying in this bed, side by side, for a half hour or more while Miss Slater was absent?"

"Yes sir."

"What happened then?"

"We watched the movie and talked a little."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

The courtroom tittered. A single blow from Laurene's gavel silenced the room.

Perkouri: "Your Honor, the witness is fencing with me."

Laurene to Terri: "The witness will answer the question without evasion."

Terri looked at him but Perkouri stepped in front of her, blocking his view of her.

Perkouri: "Counsel for the defense cannot help you now Miss Schieffer. I'm sure he has told you to tell the truth, as you are under oath to do so. So please, tell us truthfully, what transpired between you and the defendant as you lay side by side, alone, on this bed at the drive-in, after having played strip poker together and viewed each other naked?"

Again, Terri bit her lip. "Well sir, we talked and I guess, I guess we made out a little."

"May I approach the witness, Your Honor?" Laurene nodded.

Perkouri stepped to his left a bit, to Terri's right, very close to the witness box. Facing the jury, Perkouri placed his hand on the witness box and turned to address Terri.

"You and the defendant 'talked and made out a little?' Yes. Define the term 'made out a little' for us if you would be so kind." He leaned on the rail of the witness box with his left forearm and elbow, clasping his hands before him, smiling for the jury—the weasel.

Terri looked over Franco's head. She must be looking at Ryz'n. Then she stared hard at Perkouri. She replied, "We uh … we—necked."

"For half an hour?"

"Yes sir, about that."

"Perhaps more?"

"Perhaps—maybe, a little more."

"Must have gotten pretty steamy on that bed in there."

The courtroom tittered.

Terri sat up straight. She looked the pecker solemnly right in the eye.

"Yes sir, it did."

The courtroom laughed out loud. Laurene rapped her gavel, quieting the room.

Perkouri [grinning]: "And when Miss Slater finally returned, were you still wearing your bra?"

Terri replied confidently, "I was never wearing a bra."

Perkouri hit his forehead with the heel of his hand.

"Oh, that's right. That's right. You testified that you had worn your swim suit under your clothes. Correct?"

"Yes sir."

"Was your full swim suit on when Miss Slater returned to the car?"

"No sir."

"What was missing?"

"The top."

"Just the top and not the bottoms also?"

"No sir!" Terri flushed angry.

"Were your clothes on then, or were you stripped to the waist as at the poker party?"

"Yes." Terri's face flushed redder. "But my skirt was on!"

"But you were putting on your blouse when Miss Slater returned, were you not?"

"Possibly. Patti told you all this, didn't she?"

"Miss Schieffer, please." Terri glared at the pecker.

"Yes sir, I had—stripped to the waist—like at the poker party." Her nostrils flared.

"Was your absent boyfriend, your only boyfriend ever, the one you had dated solely over a year and a half, aware that you were topless and necking, making out with the defendant in the bed of his car at the drive-in for over half an hour?"

"No sir, he wasn't." Terri spoke through clenched teeth.

"Was this the only amorous adventure you had had with the defendant? I mean other than the strip poker you had played with him previously?"

"Yes."

"Really?" Rising, supporting his elbow with his other hand crossed before him, the weasel tapped his nose with the forefinger of his free hand. He leaned into Terri. "Ever?"

"What do you mean?"

Perkouri leaned both hands on the top of the witness stand.

"I mean Miss Schieffer, have you ever had any other amorous trysts with the defendant at any time?"

Terri looked at Franco then Nick and finally over his head. Franco could just imagine Ryz'n sitting on the edge of her seat, worried, biting her nails, trying to hold back her tears. He focused on Terri and nodded.

"Miss Schie*ffer*?" The creep raised his voice in a mocking, lilting fashion, intoning the last syllable, as he had done with the Murray busybody.

"Yes sir, I—I have."

Terri looked down, anxiously fumbling with her purse in her lap.

"I see. Tell us about these trysts: where, when and what did you do exactly?"

Franco stood up. "Objection, Your Honor."

"On what grounds, Counselor?"

"On the grounds that further testimony along these lines is repetitive, salacious and prejudicial. There is no need to badger the witness further over prurient details."

Laurene appeared to annotate something before her on her desk. She sat back, looking up to the ceiling, as if she were in thought.

Perkouri: "Your Honor. The answer to the question will show the depth of the defendant's relationship with the witness and the timing of that relationship, which could

have influenced her testimony here today. Goes to credibility, Your Honor. The Court has a right to understand why this eyewitness is testifying for the defense when the only other eyewitness to the accident has already testified *against* the defense, for the State."

"Very well, Mister Perkouri. Objection, overruled."

"Exception." — "Noted." Franco sat down.

Perkouri: "Now Miss Schieffer, please answer the question."

Franco had warned Terri about getting too specific with details in replying to such a question. He had told her to state dates and places but limit her answers to saying, she and Nick were "intimate" and to let it go at that.

Terri looked over his head again. She swallowed hard. "I—I don't think I should answer because it—it might incriminate me." She looked like a mouse caught in a trap.

Franco rolled his eyes. Perkouri laughed out loud.

"The State has not asked if you have committed a crime Miss Schieffer and has no intention of implicating you in one. You have no reason to fear criminal prosecution of any kind—as long as you reply truthfully." Perkouri smirked.

Terri looked past the prosecutor to him. Franco frowned, nodding for her to go ahead.

"Well …" She looked at Nick then over his head once more. Biting her lip, and with her tongue sticking out the corner of her mouth, she said, "We had a long talk when he took me back to my house after the accident. After a while, we [Terri looks down], we became intimate but we did not—he did not anyway—consummate, uh any—I mean—well, you know what I mean… Honestly, he didn't." Terri swallowed hard.

"Very well, Miss Schieffer. He didn't, but *you* did, is that it? Were there any other occasions when you were *intimate* with the defendant, as you put it?"

Terri swallowed hard again, looking like a frightened bird. Her forehead wrinkled.

"I know Patti told you this, didn't she?"

Perkouri looked bored. "Miss Schieffer, just answer the question please."

"Yes—yes sir. Two other times." Terri glanced down then up to eye Perkouri.

Perkouri: "Did you both consummate your relationship *on those multiple occasions*?"

Terri stared down into her lap, seemingly distracted by something there.

"Miss Schieffer?" Perkouri waited then turned to Laurene. "Your Honor—"

Terri: "—Yes." Terri looked anxiously over Franco's head and down again. "Yes sir, we most certainly did." Terri looked defeated.

Perkouri: "When?"

"Uh, let me see … Uh … One night maybe … one night each of the next two weeks."

"Those would have been the two weeks after the Fourth of July weekend, correct?"

Again, Terri looked over his head and down at her hands, fumbling in her lap.

"Yes sir. That's correct." Her lower lip trembled.

Franco thought his star witness was about to lose it. *Come on Terri, hang in there.* Franco heard a loud, hissing gasp behind him. Must be Ryz'n.

Perkouri: "I see and none—not even once—since that time?"

Terri seized the top, front rail of the witness box with both hands. He could see her fingers squeezing hard, turning white. She lunged forward toward Perkouri.

"*No sir. I swear it. That was all.* I'm back with Gary now. *I swear it!*" Her lip quivered.

Perkouri: "Well, Miss Schieffer. You must have cared a great deal for the defendant to betray your long-standing boyfriend in that manner. The boy who voluntarily left you to serve his country in time of war, who trusted you so implicitly?"

"Yes sir, I-I do."

"You *do* or you *did*? You mean you still have deep feelings for the defendant?"

"I'm back with Gary now. I just told you."

"Yes, but you did not answer my question. Do you still feel deeply for the defendant?"

Looking directly at Nick, Terri paused then nodded.

"Yes sir, I-I do. I … I am very fond of him." Perkouri leaned into her.

"Fond enough to testify in his defense I take it?"

Terri stared at Perkouri. "Yes, of course. But everything I've said is true."

Terri looked at the jury, who seemed to be judging her. She scooted to the edge of her seat, imploring them with one hand squeezing the rail of the witness box in front of her.

"Please, you must believe me. I *am* telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God." The urgent anxiety in her face pled her case more than her words.

Perkouri: "I'm certain in your own mind Miss Schieffer, you are telling the truth but your mind may be clouded by your fondness for, and because of your intimacy with, the defendant. So that *your* truth, through no fault of your own, may not be the real truth."

Franco rose again: "Objection Your Honor. Prosecution is drawing conclusions and putting words in the witness's mouth. If he has a question, let him ask it. The witness has emphasized for the Court that she is telling the whole truth, as she has sworn to the Court to do so. Otherwise, I request the prosecutor's last statement be stricken from the record."

"Sustained. Strike the prosecution's last statement from the record. Do you have a question, Mister Perkouri?"

"No, Your Honor."

Franco sat down. Terri slumped back in her seat as Perkouri walked away, only to halt abruptly. He pivoted about on his heel, pre-empting Laurene.

"Yes! I do." Perkouri faced the witness as Terri braced and bristled.

"Miss Schieffer? Do you believe the defendant was intimate with you to secure your testimony in his behalf?"

Terri railed at him.

"No sir! Absolutely not. Of course not. He was very fond of me, too. It was obvious."

"I see. As Miss Salter has testified as well. Miss Schieffer. Did your fondness for the defendant extend to love?"

Avoiding eye contact with everyone in the courtroom, Terri pulled a hanky from her purse to dab at her eye, asking "What?"

Perkouri: "I say, did you, or do you, *love* the defendant?"

Again, Terri bit her lip and furrowed her brow. Her tongue protruded from the corner of her mouth again. She wavered.

"Come, come Miss Schieffer. Don't dally. You can say it. I think we all know by now."

Terri looked at Nick. Her eyes darted behind his head and back.

"Yes—yes sir. I did."

"And do you *still* love him? Remember, you are under oath, Miss Schieffer."

Terri licked her lips. Beads of sweat broke out over her lovely forehead beneath her shoulder-length, side-parted blonde locks. Her face was bound in torture. Terri sat up straight, looked over Frnco's head and then back to stare squarely at Nick. She raised her head. Speaking clearly, almost defiantly, she said.

"Yes—I do."

A collective gasp, escaped throughout the courtroom. Judge Ballante banged her gavel, silencing the room. Behind him Franco heard a cry cut off in mid utterance.

"—But, but he loves someone else." Terri gazed over Franco's head. "I understand that and accept it. If she weren't such a fine person and someone I consider a good, personal friend, I would—" Her lip quivered. "But, as I said before, my boyfriend and I are back together now. We are hap-happy to-together. We are content."

Terri lifted her head. "I guess that's all I have to say."

Perkouri: "Back with your boyfriend. Does he know of your affair with the defendant?"

Terri nodded. "Yes sir, he does."

"And he still took you back? He's very understanding, and most forgiving, is he not?"

Terri nodded again. "Yes sir, he is. Very forgiving. He realizes we both made mistakes—him for leaving me and me for, for …"

"Betraying him in his absence, while he was serving our country in its time of need?"

"Well … yes sir. I suppose that's one way to look at it. But he shouldn't have left me."

"So you understand now how good people, with good intentions, can make mistakes?"

Terri nodded: "Yes sir, I do."

"And you would not want to repeat your mistake by betraying those you love, correct?"

"Sir?

Perkouri: "Earlier you stated that the defendant was not the type of person to intentionally run someone off the road. You said he would never try to kill anyone—"

"Yes sir I did. And I still believe that."

"But I haven't finished my question Miss Schieffer."

"Oh, sorry."

"So tell me now Miss Schieffer, before you became involved intimately with the defendant, did you believe you were the type of person to commit adultery and betray your steady boyfriend in the manner that you have?" The room hushed.

Terri stopped fidgeting to look up, stunned, with a bizarre blank expression on her face.

"Miss Schieffer?"

"I, I—I don't know. I guess, sometimes we—we don't really know … that is—know what we're capable of. But I've confessed my sins and told Gary and—and, well—we're back together now. We are, we are—" Terri's lips trembled.

Franco thought she might crack. But she didn't.

Perkouri: "***We*** *don't really know what we're capable of*? Yes, of course. No more questions, Your Honor."

Perkouri glared at Nick then stared toward the jury, before he retreated to take his seat. Terri stared vacantly into space.

Franco stroked down either side of his mouth with his left index finger and thumb. Then down over his chin repeatedly. He had not counted on Terri turning the witness box into a confessional. Expected even less that she would admit that people, her and Nick specifically, were capable of, well—anything.

"Do you wish to redirect Mister Vamia?".

He rose. "Yes Your Honor, I do. May I approach the witness?" Laurene concurred.

Franco stepped around the table to address Terri. His hands pressed flat together in front of, but perpendicular to, his face as if in prayer. He balanced his forefingers against the tip of his nose while pressing his paired thumbs against his lips as he approached her. Terri sat proudly now, daring anyone to speak to her. He assumed a gentle, solemn tone.

"Now Terri. You've sworn an oath to tell the truth before God. Indeed, you have done so even at great distress to yourself, as is plainly evident to all here. You're an honest person, are you not? Even though it must pain you to speak as truthfully, as you have?"

"Yes sir. I am. I always strive to be honest." She lifted her chin slightly.

"And you have told the truth here today, adding and withholding nothing?"

Terri raised her head higher, lifting her chin. "Yes sir, I have."

"Now, Terri. I want you to think carefully for a moment. Laying aside your feelings for my client if you will, would you—could you—testify any differently than you have?"

She paused to think. "Well … No sir, I couldn't. Nicky never intended to run those bad boys off the road. I swear it. Quite the opposite, they tired to run *us* off the road. Nick pumped his hi-beams at them but they just kept on coming—sped up even—right for us. *They* tried to kill *us*. Not the other way around. And they almost did. But the Lord was with us. He protected us. Gave Nicky a hunch in answer to our prayers. Frankly, I believe Nicky's actions saved us. Even Patti said as much. And I believe this even were I to

despise him completely. Nick is innocent. There is no doubt in my mind. No one who says otherwise was there in the front seat with him, staring those onrushing headlights in the face. *I* was—the only one. No other."

Terri turned from him to the jury. She looked at them coldly.

"And if you find this innocent boy guilty, may your consciences haunt you the rest of your lives." She glared.

"No more questions Your Honor. Thank you, Miss Schieffer for your utter honesty."

He could not have been prouder of her. As his ace in the hole, Miss Terri Schieffer had proven well worthy of his draw. God bless that girl. Franco resumed his seat.

Laurene: "The witness may step down, unless the State wishes to re-cross."

Perkouri declined. Terri stepped out of the box, wiping her cute, button nose with her hanky. As she passed by him at the defendant's table, Franco nodded, smiling at her. Terri looked at Nick and hesitated, smiling faintly before she pushed open the gate at the bar to step through, pausing to eye Ryz'n, who, amazingly, also smiled faintly and nodded. He watched, along with the entire courtroom, as Terri then strode briskly away.

Franco stood. "The defense calls Father Vincent Vizconni."

Perkouri objected on the ground that Vince's testimony could be tainted, because Franco had added Vince to the defense witness list after the Reverend Rodgers had testified. Franco acknowledged that Vince had been in the gallery to hear the State deliver most of its case. He noted that Vince had recused himself to wait with the other witnesses in adherence to the exclusion rule once he realized he wanted to call Vince, after Rodgers testified for the State. He advised the court that Vince had not been present for any part of the defense's case and had missed much of the prosecution's case as well.

Laurene applied the same litmus test she had applied to the State for Toombes. She asked if the witness could testify regarding the altercation at Truley's or the accident. Franco said he could and, if possible, would like to restrict his testimony to those areas only. Laurene overruled Perkouri's objection, noting his exception. Vince came forward, wearing his black tunic and turned-around collar. He made for an impressive witness.

After taking the oath, Vince identified himself as a priest, thirty-one years of age who had lived and worked at Holy Trinity in Crest Hill Heights for the last five years. Franco asked how Vince knew the accused. Vince said he had met Nick one evening on the outdoor basketball court in the church parking lot a little over a year ago. Though Nick was not Roman Catholic, Vince said he'd seen Nick attend mass with friends several times over the last year. He and Nick shared an acquaintance type of relationship until the fateful night of the tragic accident with the Buzzbee brothers, when their relationship became personal. Vince said Nick came to visit him less than two hours after the accident to tell him what had happened that night. Vince confirmed Nick told him about "a Voice.

"He said he felt an inner voice speak, telling him to '*Go slow and wait*. And to *turn around*.' And later, when he was about to crash headlong, the Voice had said '*Left*.'

"So Nick had swerved left instead of right, which might have been a more natural reaction? Of course, had he turned right, Nick might have turned into the oncoming vehicle and crashed, too, which had turned, against common sense, to its left. Correct?"

"Yes, that is what the boy told me."

Franco asked Vince if that was possible, for someone to *feel* an internal Voice of God speaking to him or her.

Perkouri objected. "Speculative, calls for a conclusion."

"Your Honor, I submit Father Vizconni is an expert in the God field."

Laurene asked him to rephrase the question. Franco paused …

"Father Vizconni, how did you reply to my client when he told you about the Voice?"

Vince: "I told him about a passage in the Book of First Kings, Chapter 19 and quoted some verse for him."

"Could you quote the passage for us?"

Perkouri: "Objection, irrelevant and immaterial."

Laurene overruled the pecker head again. She instructed Vince to answer.

Vince explained that the passage he quoted concerned the prophet Elijah, who was hiding out alone in a cave, on the run from Ahab and Jezebel who were trying to kill him.

"And the word of the Lord came to Elijah there. I'll quote starting at the ninth verse in the King James Version if you don't mind—"

> And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said unto him, "What doest thou here, Elijah?"
>
> And he said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and they seek my life, to take it away".
>
> And He said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD."
>
> And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake:
>
> And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice —

"Or, in our Roman Catholic bible, it is referred to as 'a whistling of a gentle air.' —

"'And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, 'What doest thou here, Elijah?'"

Franco: "And this still, small voice was what exactly, Father?"

Vince: "The voice of the Lord."

"The same voice Nick heard?"

"I don't know."

"So you don't believe the defendant heard or, I should say, *felt* the voice of God telling him to 'Turn around? Go slow? Wait? Left?'"

"I didn't say that."

"What are you saying, Father?" Franco glanced at the jury who leaned forward as one.

"I'm saying it doesn't matter what *I* believe. It matters only what Nick believes. But I know from my own experience that God chooses to reveal Himself in ways that are very personal and very well-suited to those who receive his message humbly and with an open heart. I believe Nick did so. And *he* believes the Lord spoke to him. And, from what the boy said, the Buzzbee brothers were out to kill him. They'd sworn to him they would."

"And it has been established here in court that the accident occurred sometime around quarter after two, give or take a couple minutes. And my client told you this when?"

"A little after four a.m. Maybe ten to a quarter after."

"So that would be about two hours after the accident. Had he told anyone else?"

"He said that he had told Terri Schieffer the same thing, just before he came to see me. In fact, Terri recommended him to me."

"No more questions, Your Honor."

He thanked Vince and returned to sit down.

Perkouri jumped out of his seat, asking to approach the witness, to which Laurene agreed. With both hands on the front of the witness box, Perkouri leaned toward Vince.

"Father Vizconni, is the defendant a member of your parish? Is he even a member of the Roman Catholic faith?"

Vince shook his head calmly. "No sir, he is neither. I said that."

"So. Why you—Father? Why should he come to you—out of the blue like that?"

"Well, as I stated, Miss Schieffer recommended him to me."

"Someone comes to you at four a.m., someone who isn't of your faith, whom you know only as an acquaintance and tells you this wild story, claiming the voice of God told him to run two county residents off the road and you believe him?"

"Objection, Your Honor: Leading."

"Overruled. The question is appropriate for cross. The witness will answer."

Vince: "I believe he—the boy—believed."

Perkouri: "Miss Schieffer's recommendation aside Father—why you?"

"Well, as I said, I knew Nick. We had met over a year ago. And I had seen him at mass a few times and spoken with him. We have several mutual acquaintances."

"Female acquaintances, Father?"

"Some, yes. And some male as well. Mostly kids his age who live in our parish."

"So you must have made an impression on the young man that he would come to you, and not his parents, on a matter as serious as this. Or did he go to his parents first?"

"He said he had not." Perkouri: "Why is that, I wonder?"

"He said he didn't want to worry them. He said he was afraid they might not understand. Might overreact. Take his car away, and he needed his car to get to work."

"But why *you* Father—and not the authorities?"

"He told me that he had phoned the police and tried to tell an officer directing traffic at the scene of the accident but the officer wouldn't listen to him."

"So, why not go to the authorities himself the next day?"

"As I said, he was following Miss Schieffer's recommendation to see me. Miss Schieffer is one of my flock. She knows me well and the boy trusts her."

"The defendant trusted *you* and Miss Schieffer, but not his parents or the police?"

"Objection, calls for conclusion on the part of the witness to determine whom the witness might trust. The State is badgering the witness."

Perkouri: "Your Honor. We may speculate on whether the defendant heard the voice of the Almighty, but not on whom he might trust to share a confidence?"

Laurene: "Father Vizconni, did the defendant tell you whom he trusted?"

"He said he trusted Miss Schieffer, who recommended me and he came to see me."

"The objection is overruled. Proceed Counselor, but do not badger the witness."

Perkouri: "Come now, Father Vizconni. Isn't it true that you knew the boy quite well? That you were, in fact, quite taken with him? That you followed his athletic and entertainment exploits in the papers? That you often asked after him of members of your congregation? Isn't it true that you knew much about him from his sexual exploits with several of your young female parishioners, former virgins deflowered by the defendant, who came crying to you over their lost virginity, stolen from them by this, this Lothario?"

Franco shot up. "Objection, Your Honor. The State is leading the witness with run-on, prurient questions, drawing conclusions for him by inference and badgering. And, may I remind the Court, these questions have no bearing on the accident or the altercation at the bar, which the Court has stated was the litmus test for allowing testimony on motive."

"Objection sustained. Counselor, please rephrase your question such that you receive an answer before proceeding. And restrict your questions to the litmus test the Court has defined for this matter. The reporter will strike the State's previous questions."

"But Your Honor, this line of questioning has been deemed relevant as to motive and the defendant's state of mind throughout this trial. It is crucial to the State's case."

"Counselor: My predecessor in this trial allowed that line of questioning. And once allowed for the State, in the interests of fairness and justice, the defense must be allowed to rebut such allegations and evidence in a similar fashion. However, to expand this line

of questioning with *this* witness by the State, at *this* time, serves no interest that the Court can see, except to service the prurient, as suggested by defense counsel. Now, unless the State has questions related to the accident or the witness's involvement in learning of the accident or the altercation at the road house or his advice to the defendant concerning the reporting of said accident, the Court orders the State to desist from this line of question."

Perkouri held out his hands as if she were crucifying him.

"But Your Honor, *this* is a cross-examination. It is *crucial* to the State's prosecution in determining motive."

"Mister Perkouri! The Court does not see how the witness's knowledge; however much it may have been gained from hearsay, or from information that should be, and quite probably is protected by the priest/confessor relationship, have anything to do with the accident *or* the earlier altercation. The court has sustained defense's objection. You may note an exception, if you wish. *Is that clear?*"

Franco sat down, hiding a smirk beneath his hand.

Defeated, Perkouri let his hands fall to his sides and muttered "Exception."

"Noted. Now. Any more questions for the State, Counselor?" Perkouri looked up.

"Yes, Your Honor." He turned to address Vince again.

"Father Vizconni. You just quoted a passage from the bible in which the prophet Elijah, a holy man of God, said he *heard* the Voice of God as if it were a—what did you say? '*A whistling of a gentle air*?' But the defendant, according to you, claims not to have *heard* such a whistle or even a voice for that matter. But you testify that the defendant, who as we have heard—you have heard, being present for much of the State's case—is anything but holy, claims he *felt*—not heard—the Voice of God. Given the disparate circumstances as well as the characters of the defendant and the biblical prophet, how do you expect us to consider your comparison as valid?"

"As I said earlier, I cannot confirm or deny the defendant's claim that he felt the Voice of God or even that he heard it for that matter. It is sufficient for him to believe he did."

Perkouri: "So! Only he knows that?"

"Yes. He and Our Lord."

"Perhaps the defendant should take the stand and speak for himself. But you cannot verify that he did in fact *feel* the Voice of God?"

"No, I cannot, as I have stated. But neither can I confirm that he didn't. And whether or not he takes the stand is up to him and his counsel."

"Might I point out Father that in the passage you quoted, you said Elijah was running away from evil pursuers who would kill him? But in the case of the defendant, he turned about—made a one hundred eighty degree turn on a stormy, dark night with his lights off—*to drive into* his pursuers, whom you noted had threatened to kill him. Perhaps the voice he felt was not God's, but one of his own choosing or perhaps, even of Satan?"

"Perhaps, but in either event, the defendant's evil pursuers ended up meeting the same fate as did Jezebel and Ahab."

Perkouri sneered. "So what are you trying to say Father? What conclusion should we draw from your *expert* observations?"

Vince shrugged. "None whatsoever. I offer no conclusion. Rather, I would prefer that the Court and the jury draw their own conclusions."

Perkouri shook his head and waved Vince off. "No more questions."

"Redirect?"

"No, Your Honor." Laurene turned to Vince.

"The witness may step down. You are dismissed Father." To Franco, she said, "Call your next witness, Counselor."

Franco stood, buttoning his suit coat, as Vince walked past him.

"Your Honor, the defense rests and petitions the Court again with a motion for a directed verdict on the remaining charges. Given Miss Schieffer's eyewitness testimony, the testimony of Father Vizconni and the rebuttal of the inmate Toombes, defense feels the case lacks sufficient evidence for a jury's consideration. I have here an updated motion for the Court's review."

He took two copies of his motion from the table to hold in his hand.

"May I approach the bench, Your Honor?"

"Please."

As he approached, Perkouri stood up.

"Your Honor, the State objects to a directed verdict on any of the charges."

Franco handed the judge his petition. She told him to make sure Perkouri got a copy. Then she said loud enough for the courtroom to hear:

"The hour is late. I will consider the motion overnight and render my verdict in the morning. In the meantime, should the motion be denied, the Court expects both counsels to be prepared to give closing statements tomorrow. Court is adjourned until ten a.m."

Laurene rapped her gavel, rose and exited.

The courtroom stood as one to watch her leave. Franco handed the other copy of his petition to Perkouri, who snarled as he snatched the document from his hand.

~ Chapter 32: Change of Heart ~

Carol strolled into the cabin, wearing only a full, black satin slip, feeling beat. Frank sat back against the headboard of the bed with his legal pad, a pen in hand and handwritten notes strewn about him. The bed sheet was pulled up to his hairy chest. She flipped off the overhead light, leaving the lamp on the nightstand next to Frank as the sole source of light. She crawled into bed and said, "What's it gonna be tonight Baby?"

Frank growled. "Anh. I dunno. I'm stuck trying to figure out my closing argument."

"What seems to be the problem? I thought you had it all worked out. Sounds like an open and shut case to me."

"Yeah? Wish you were on the jury. Or better yet, maybe you should deliver the closing tomorrow?" She smiled. "Maybe you won't need it, if Ballante rules for acquittal."

"Can't count on that. Though I'm pretty sure she'll drop the murder charges. She's been itching to do that since we first met with her. But the rest of it, I dunno. Unlikely she'll take it from the jury's hands. There's enough for them at least to consider manslaughter and leaving the scene. Circumstantial evidence for A andb. Besides, she doesn't want to give the State good grounds for an appeal. She's never been overturned."

"Yeah. Well, what seems to be the problem Hon?" She reached over to stroke his arm.

Frank stuck the ballpoint pen in his mouth, sucking on the ink end.

"Most of the facts Perkouri put out there are uncontested. It's just that they don't add up to what he's alleging."

"So? Just tell them that. They'll see it. Besides …"

"'Besides?' Besides, what?"

She rolled onto her elbow, looking up to face him.

"Well, you used to be a prosecutor. You know a prosecutor is supposed to be seeking justice, not just try to win his case at any cost. Point out how the facts don't add up to his conclusion and show 'em that prick is way off base—and pick him off." Frank smiled.

"Hey, that's not bad Carol, not bad at all. Maybe I should hire you as a partner instead of Sid Sitch."

"Hire me—as *partner?* You should have me as your partner all right—*partner for life!* Shoot!" A pained expression came over his face.

"Carol. Don't start with that tonight, Baby. Not tonight. Please."

Frank was right. This wasn't the time. But the trial would probably be over tomorrow. Then she would hit him with it—this weekend. Frank started scribbling away on his legal pad like a mad man. Sure, she'd make him a nice surf and turf Friday night right here on the boat. Ply him with his favorite booze. Get him into bed and then, just before she got him off, she'd hit him with the ultimatum. She didn't feel like doing anything but

crashing right now. But it *was* Wednesday night after all and he would expect it—two-for-one. Maybe she'd just do him once and tell him she was too tired for more. He'd be happy. He'd be ahead—a head? Get it? She chuckled at her pun. Frank didn't notice. He was too busy, writing. She'd make it special. Really draw it—him out. So he'd remember. And Friday, if he didn't agree to marry her, she'd leave him hanging with that great memory to rue his choice. She set the alarm clock by her side of the bed for seven.

She touched his arm. "Whaddaya say, Honey? It is Wednesday, after all?" Frank scarcely glanced at her. "In a little while," he mumbled. "You inspired me Baby. Gotta get this down now while I'm thinking about it."

She smiled because his tongue was hanging out of his mouth as he scribbled furiously.

"Well, if ya want me to *in-spire* you in another way, wake me. I'm bushed. No pun intended." She pecked him on the cheek then turned on her side with her back to him and the light. Frank said, "Unh-hunh." She dozed …

* * *

The phone rang on the nightstand next to the bed, waking her. Frank reached over to pick up the receiver. She glanced at the alarm clock. Twelve-thirteen. He had gotten that long extension cord and had left the phone by the bed for the night, just in case.

"Hello?" … "Yes. This is Franco Vamia … Who?"

She rolled over to face him. Frank rose to turn on the lamp. He rubbed his eyes awake.

"—you want to change your testimony? But I closed the defense today. We're giving closing arguments first thing in the morning … Well, yeah, probably is too late."

She tugged on his shoulder. He twisted to her, placing his hand over the mouth piece to whisper: "—Patti Slater. Wants to change her testimony."

Carol frowned as Frank turned back to speak into the mouthpiece.

"Well, I can ask. Tell you what. Can you be at my office at quarter to eight tomorrow? Good. We'll go over what you should say. You can ride to court with me … No problem. Miss Davalone will be glad to take you to school afterwards." He glanced at her.

To Patti: "Yeah, okay. So why'd you change your mind? …."

"Is that so? How about that! Well, we won't say anything about that in court … Right—tomorrow, quarter to eight in my office ... Yes. Right. See you then. Bye."

Frank hung up the phone then slid back under the sheet.

"How do you like that?" Carol yawned, asking. "What?"

"Patti Slater said she's been thinking it over and she thinks she was wrong about the kid's motive for turning around. She wants to testify in his behalf."

"But you're closing tomorrow. You rested the defense."

"I know. But maybe Ballante will give us a break. After all, she let that creep Toombes testify after Perkouri said he had no more witnesses? And after she got me to tip my hand

to the pecker in chambers that I wasn't going to let Nick take the stand. *After* she said she didn't want any surprises."

"That's true. So why'd the girl change her mind?"

"Ryz'n," replied Frank. "*Ryz'n?"* she echoed.

"Yeah. Seems she's been talking to Patti and tugging on her conscience."

"Better not let the pecker hear that."

"Yeah, that's for sure. I'll coach her up tomorrow, early."

"I heard. Okay, I'll drive her home." Carol settled her head back down to the pillow.

Frank said, "Maybe you could coach me up a little now, Baby?" He winked.

"Ya know. I was sleepin' good, Frank."

"You reneging on your offer? Like you said before, it is Wednesday night, after all?"

She rose up on her elbow. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Feeling pretty cocky after that call. She's the only witness I never really impeached. How about it Carol?"

She sneered. "Cocky, hunh?" He grinned.

"Yeah." The sheet rose over his lap like a tent with the prospect of what she could do.

Carol was drowsy but figured what the heck. It was Wednesday, after all. Though, technically, it was Thursday. But no sense in being technical on him now. She sat up.

"Yeah, Patti's the only witness I didn't impeach."

"You impugned her pretty good though."

"Patti can nail this thing down for us. Ray'll have to pay me that balloon—"

"What balloon? You mean that *bonus* if you win."

"Carol, that would be ethically and legally improper. Call it a final—balloon payment."

"So, do Dad and I get to share in this balloon payment?" She shot him a smirk.

Frank chuckled. "You're gonna get your bonus right now Baby."

"Shoot! Like hell you say. More like the other way around. Just how much are you making off this kid anyway? Mister Sh'boom's payin' you out weekly, right? Didn't you say he wanted to pay as he went to avoid a big lump sum surprise all at once?"

"Yeah, that's right." Frank thought a moment. "Well, if we win tomorrow, I figure I'll make about eighteen grand for three months work. That's including the bone—balloon payment. That's nothin' to sneeze at. Could pay off almost half my mortgage, if I want. And with all the publicity, should bring me some expensive, A-schedule clients. Maybe a book deal? How 'bout that? Think Ray's using funds they saved for the kid's education."

"Gee, that's too bad. Maybe he can get a scholarship or something, some grant-in-aid?"

"He's working on it. Nick said he's got a couple things going. Some things his guidance counselor suggested—both for academics and baseball. If they don't work out and we can keep him out of jail, he says he'll go to R.G.C.C. for a year a two. Did you know, he and Ryz'n pull in over four hundred a month between 'em?"

"No! You're kiddin'! That's almost half what I make in a good month. That's not bad, not bad at all. How do they do it and go to school, too?"

"Nick says they deliver three paper routes; play six to eight band dates a month and he picks up fifty from the Kovakloczech lady. I told ya about that, right?" [She nods.] "And then, Ryz'n picks up ten bucks a week in allowance. With her mom working part time, I understand she's the chief cook and bottle washer. Does laundry and cleans house, too."

She chuckled. "Darn! Like to have someone do all that for me for ten bucks a week."

"Who wouldn't? Say, maybe I should raise my rates?"

"Yeah? To what?"

"Well, Cool Hand Luke said, 'Fifty is a nice round number'. Think I'll go with fifty."

"Fifty an hour? Fifty *is* a nice round number. Maybe I'll up my rates too—fifty a day. What do you think?" Frank shrugged.

"Fine by me, as long as the client defrays your bill, Dom's too, as Nick and Ryz'n did."

"What are you saying? Those kids paid for us? And not his old man?"

"Yeah. And Barnes. Their band mates helped. You know—*GRT*? Donated their end from recent gigs to the kid's—get this—'*defense fund.'* What they call it anyway."

"Sure," she replied. "They know who draws the crowds. Those guys aren't dumb." But Carol sat, shaking her head in awe. "That's gotta be four grand to those kids. And paid his bail premium and fee? Bought that convertible of his too—before. Where do kids their age come up with that kind of scratch?"

"From that four hundred plus a month, I guess. And they used all his own college savings—Ryz'n's, too—what he said anyway. Swears he'll pay her and his old man back every dime Ray pays me. Whether he strikes it big in the record business or not."

Shaking her head, Carol clucked her tongue.

"Take him four years at $400 a month. He's some kid, isn't he? A hustler—just like you Frank. I know he's pulled some shenanigans, but I do admire him."

"Yeah—a hustler like me. Now why don't you hustle me a little right now yourself, Baby? The night ain't getting' any younger." Frank grinned like a devil.

Sighing, Carol turned to him and rose up on her knees.

"Okay, but I'm goin' back to sleep after. You don't owe me—not tonight, anyway."

Frank chuckled. He lifted his head and then the sheet. She ducked under. Lying back, Frank placed his hands behind his head to cackle, "Like the kid says—even better."

Come tomorrow night, he'd remember all right. She'd remind him. Then she'd walk out if he gave her anything less than a yes. Leave Frank to himself, if he was that stupid. But it wasn't Friday—yet. The trial wasn't over—yet.

She worked over him, deliberately, thoroughly, building to it slowly, as he preferred. For him. For love. He salivated, purring, begging her to finish, moaning "even better."

Yeah—for him—but after the trial, it was gonna be even better—*for her.* Or else.

~ Chapter 33: Insomnia ~

Ryz'n looked at the clock: seventeen minutes after one. She hadn't even dozed for five minutes. She was no nearer true sleep than she had been two and a half hours ago. Tonight, even the Dramamine, which tended to sedate her, had failed to dent her insomnia. Because of the baby, she was reluctant to take another so soon. Nude under the covers, she tossed and turned and worried. Mr. Vamia said Nick's case would go to the jury tomorrow. They would decide Nicky's fate, her fate—their baby's fate—tomorrow. As much as she wanted to believe Mr. Vamia's reassurances, she had learned from the court reporter, whom she had befriended recently that "no one ever knew what a jury might do." Those words beat in her head. She was too hepped up to sleep.

She had tried everything she could think of. Prayer. Counting sheep, forwards and backwards. Warm milk and crackers. Reading. But the thought of Nick going to jail for as much as twenty to thirty years kept her from relaxing. What would she do if that happened? Would she still marry him? She thought she would. She had to. They had committed mortal sin. They had to make it right. And the baby would need a father. But how would it be for their child to grow up with its father a jailbird? Too keyed up to rest, she kept thinking what Nick had told her earlier. Drowsiness, let alone sleep, escaped her. Freshly alert, she couldn't—wouldn't— believe, what Nick had told her tonight.

She had eaten dinner with him and his folks at their house. Well—*eaten* was an understatement. The meal had felt like the Last Supper to her. She picked at it, pushing the food around her plate, too anxious to eat, worried about the verdict. When Nick's mom asked if she could fix her something else, she said, "No, it was just the baby."

> …Wednesday night was band practice. After dinner, she and Nicky drove up to Todd's house even though it was only a couple blocks away, because they had to tote all their instruments. They practiced with the rest of the band in Todd's garage. The guys alternated hosting Wednesday night practices. Nick, Ace and Tony had no siblings. Todd had a younger sister and Mickey Saxon an older one. Each of the boys took one Wednesday night each month to host practice sessions. Since Mick lived clear down in Waldorn, the band only practiced there on any fifth Wednesday in a month.
>
> Jimmy Allein and Ry were the only band members who didn't host practices. Jimmy had two brothers and two sisters. Seven people lived in his small place that held two bedrooms upstairs and two in the basement. There was no room to practice. She had yet to host a practice, even though she was eager to do so. Given the situation with Nick and her dad's bias against him, she and Nick had decided it would be best not to bother her pop with the inconvenience. Besides, the current set-up worked out well for everyone. There were no complaints.

The guys' folks usually went out for the evening to escape the noise. Like dinner and a movie, or a movie and dessert. A monthly family night out proved to be an evening their folks had come to look forward to enjoying; especially, the moms and Todd's and Mick's sisters, who escaped kitchen duty.

The band consisted of Mickey Saxon on drums: Jimmy Allein, rhythm guitar, Todd, keyboards and general all-around audio engineer, Ace Klatz on bass guitar, Tony Sacarelli on reeds—tenor, alto and baritone sax, clarinet and oboe, Nick on lead and slide guitar, harmonica, vocals and any other instrumentation they needed. And with Todd's new Minimoog, his Combo Duo and a host of percussion instruments, they could reproduce just about any famous Rock'n'Roll song ever invented. And recreating that original sound as exactly as possible was a must for Nicky. She helped on vocals, a variety of funky percussion sounds and keyboards, when Todd preferred to play manager or sound technician. She also filled in for Jimmy by strumming rhythm guitar on Friday night gigs before Pocomoke's Saturday afternoon football games.

Besides Top Forty, the band was working on some fresh, cute duets featuring Nick and her for the "History of Rock and Roll" and "Show Time" segments of their act. They were adding Mickey and Sylvia's "Love Is Strange," replete with cow bell, and Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe," featuring Tony on the oboe. And new, duet renditions of the Drifter's "Honey Love," Little Willie John's "Need Your Love So Bad," Smith's, evocative cover last year of The Shirelles "Baby, It's You," not to mention, Sam and Dave's pumpin' "And I Thank You!" And Huey "Piano" Smith's "Don't Ya Just Know It."

The guys wanted her to dance a hoochie-coochie number to a cover of the Coasters' "Little Egypt" but she wasn't ready for that—yet. And Nicky was real good about it. He didn't force her. He never forced her to do anything she didn't want to do. But if he had told her to do it, she would have tried at least. They did a lot of Coasters hits as skits though, during "Show Time." Audiences loved it. And they loved doing those comical skits as much as the audience.

Nick was a stickler for details. He wanted their sound to mimic as exactly as possible the original tunes played on the radio and records. That's why they carted all those instruments around. Even toted a glockenspiel just so he could reproduce "Everyday." Nick said "Radio air play was the sound people knew and liked." He wanted to be true to the original artists for the sake of the audience. And he could make it happen. He said the band had plenty original material they could squeeze in now and then to strut their R&B style.

Band practice helped take her mind off her troubles until Nick mocked his situation by ad-libbing a rendition of the Robin's, Lieber-Stoller classic "*Framed*." The guys filled in behind him as Nick sang and picked his electric Gibson Les Paul. She stood and watched in amusement at first. Nicky sang—

I was walkin' down the street mindin' my own affairs,
When two policemen grabbed me, uh, unawares.
They said, "Is your name Nicky?" I said, "Uh, why sure."

They say, "You're the boy we've been lookin' for."

Framed. I was framed.
I never do nothin' wrong. But I always get blamed—framed.

They put me in the line-up and let the bright lights shine.
There were ten poor souls like me standin' in that line.
I knew I was the victim of someone's evil plan
When a stool pigeon walked in and said, "Uh, that's' the man."

Framed. I was framed.
I never do nothin' wrong. But I always get blamed—framed.

The prosecutin' attorney started prosecutin' me.
Mann, that cat gave me the third degree.
He says, "Where were you the night of June Twenty-Nine?"
I said, "I was home in bed. He said, "Judge, this man is lyin'."

Framed. I was framed.
I never do nothin' wrong. But I always get blamed—framed.

I deny the charges of slaughterin' those two boys.
Deny the charges of makin' public disturbance noise.
Deny the charges of leavin' the scene, too,
But when the judge came down, poured whiskey on my head,
Turned around to the jury and said, "Convict this man he is drunk."
What could I do?

Framed. I was framed.
I never do nothin' wrong. But I always get blamed—framed.

(He was framed.) I was framed.
(He was framed.) I was framed.
(He was framed.) I was framed.

Nick parodied the lead in his natural baritone and the guys chimed in on the chorus. Even Jimmy, who neve sang. When they finished, everyone cracked up, her, too. Big joke. She'd never heard that tune. Butwthen she thought about it, suddenly, Nicky wasn't so funny any more. It was too much, too close to the truth. She broke down, ran upstairs and out of the house into the street.

Nick caught up to her a block away, down on the boulevard. He had left their instruments behind to run after her carrying the new yellow Peter's jacket he had bought for her. He found her sobbing and shivering in the early October night chill. She was wearing Sheena's skimpy shift, which her mom had given

her because she said Sheena had outgrown it. Her mom, saying, "The thing didn't cover enough of Sheena's behind anymore." For the same reason, Mom was reluctant to let her wear it. But her mom had caved, when she pleaded she wore it to please Nicky, reminding her mom she was an inch shorter than Sheena and soon, she wouldn't be so pleasing to look at. Her mom understood.

Ryz'n liked the calico shift because she knew Nick would like its snug, revealing hemlines; particularly, the deep-cloven sweetheart neckline. She favored the fabric and the geometric floral dog designs of purple, green and violet. Especially, she liked the short-sleeved, puffed shoulders. Reminded her of late nineteenth century styles she'd always admired, even if the short, thigh-high hem was decidedly not Victorian. And the garment showed off her figure well. Better than Sheena's even. Her kid sister had a cute figure and the "bedroom eyes" the guys craved, but Sheena couldn't match her shape.

Nick placed the pale yellow Peter's jacket she had left at Todd's around her shoulders. He had bought the jacket for her last Saturday up at Hecht's after she had sewed him up at her place before their gig. The jacket replaced the one he had ruined the other night when he had bled all over it. Nick seized her.

He apologized for his "obtuse behavior back there." Saying he had wanted to make her laugh, not cry. When he hugged her tenderly, she cried more. He apologized for the trial being such a hassle. *Hassle?* She thought of it more as a nightmare. A big, bad, never-ending one. Nick suggested they take a walk.

They crossed over the curbed, grassy median separating the dual lanes of the boulevard to walk on the mown grass between the woods and the curb. They ambled over some early fallen, gold and burgundy leaves, down to the dead end of the closest cross street—Catoctin. Turning up through the brief dead end, they strolled on a path up through the woods, coming out onto the softball fields behind Green Vale Elementary School, Nick's former grade school.

They didn't speak—just walked, strolling over the grass alongside the chain-link fence that bordered the school grounds, overlooking the boulevard and the steep, grassy bank that ran down to the concrete creek, some fifty feet below.

Nick said the County had replaced the original creek with the concrete spillway, cutting down the trees a few years before she had moved into the area from Georgia. Woods used to border the creek but not anymore. She said she hadn't known that. Only two, lone locust trees were left standing together, halfway up the steep, grassy bank, overlooking the spillway and boulevard. The trees seemed forlorn and naked, much as she felt. Like the two of them.

She had overcome her freak-out at Nick's rendition of "Framed." But she couldn't block out what Terri had said on the witness stand about her and Nicky. She had been holding back all evening, trying to keep her thoughts under control but now she let them out, half-whispering.

"That was some testimony by Terri today, hunh?" Nick remained quiet.

"Nick, didn't you hear me?"

"Uh, maybe not? What?"

"Maybe not?! What kind of an answer is that?"

"Do we have to discuss this now, Ry? I just wanna relax a little. Got enough of a load on my mind right now." Nick winced as if he were in pain.

"Really? Me too. More'n you I think. Can't I share my extra load with you?"

"Oh that's hea-*vee*!" Nick stopped by the chain link fence to lean over it.

"Not funny, Nicky. Not funny at all."

"All right. G'ahead. Get it off your chest. If it'll make ya feel better."

"Well gee you make it sound like I'm the one who's wrong. I wasn't doing anybody." Nick balked. "What was I supposed to do? It was right after the accident. We were both scared and—I dunno."

"But Terri said you didn't consummate anything *then*."

"That's right. We didn't. Least I didn't. Why are we even talking about this? It's ancient history. Now's you'n me. We're gettin' married for cripe's sake."

"You told me you didn't make it with anyone since we started going together. And now I found you made it with both Patti and Terri since then. How can I trust you? How can I believe you?"

Nick shook his head. "No, no. Patti don't count. She was the week before the Fourth. And you misunderstood. Cuz I said I hadn't made it with anybody *since we made it* down at the beaver ponds. And that's true. I haven't."

"No, no that's not the way I remember it."

"Well, you remember it wrong then."

"How could you Nicholas! After the way we were when we drove home from the beach like that together? Eyeing each other through the rear mirror? How could you even think to be with another girl? And she *still* loves you!"

Nick sighed. "Shoot Ry! I owed 'em."

"*Owed 'em?* Owed 'em for what?"

"For not going skinny dippin' with them, and stuff. I mean, ya know, it was implied we'd—you know?" He shrugged, throwing up his arms.

"Down at *our* beaver ponds? *Our spot?*"

"We gave each other rain checks, Ryzanna. Besides, I never even went down there with 'em, either of 'em. Come on. I had ta keep my word."

"Rain checks? *Rain checks?* After I dropped Don and we were together? So I thought—"

"Come on Ry, what was I supposed to do? I didn't know it'd work between us, like this. We'd been sniffin' around each other all year and got no where."

"Yes. And whose fault was that? You and that stupid pact with Donny!"

"Loo-ook Ry, I owed 'em, both of em. I was jes' keepin' my word is all."

"So, you just had to do Terri *twice*? A second time, the second week we were going together? Double your pleasure, double your fun? That it? *Come off it!*"

"Look Ryz'n! If you recall, we had that picnic from hell at your place, when I popped your dad. You ran inside and wouldn't speak to me. Went on a hunger strike. Your old man threatened to kill me if I came around any more. I figured we were washed up before we got started. Just like with Mo and Audy Lou, see? Terri was lonely without Gary. And I was lonely too. So, what the heck?"

"And she didn't cure your loneliness. You just had to do Patti too, hunh?"

Nick hung his head over the fence, shaking it.

"Nah, I tole ya already, I's with her *before* the Fourth. Besides, guess I can tell ya now. See. I thought I had to please her to keep her quiet. In case, somethin' happened—you know— with my case. And, it did. See, I was right."

"Sure. But you didn't even know you had a case then."

"Right. But I was plannin' ahead, see? Hopin' for the best but expectin' the worst. Like I always do. And now ya see, I was right." He shook his finger.

"Yes, but she screwed you over anyway."

"Well, what can I say? I did her. But I didn't enjoy it. Well—not that much, anyway. I was worried Jock'd come outta his shack any minute ta join us."

"But you enjoyed Terri, didn't ya—*every time*?" Nick jumped at her.

"Not like you Baby. There's nobody—not a single one of 'em—like you. Not a one! You got somethin' special. *You gotta believe that Ryzanna!* You gotta."

"I do? Why?"

"Cuz you got it all. Enthusiasm. A super figure. Great sense o' humor. And the way you can stretch out them licorice whips when ya get excited—nobody else has that. 'N your sexy mouth—perfect lips, 'em dimples of yours, all your own. Never knew anything like 'em. And the way ya gush and latch onto me with that rosebud of yours'n draw it right outta me—against my will even—like rapid-fire thunderbolts. Makes me feel like a stud stallion. And I can talk to you about anything. And you're always up for anything, up for more—I dunno—jes' feels so natural bein' whichya, ya know? And …"

"And what?"

"Ah, I don't wanna say."

"Why not?"

"Might embarrass ya."

"Why? What is it?"

"Nah. Mebbe after we're married, I'll tell ya. It's nothin' bad. It's great really. You're just special, Baby. Never met a chick like you. You're a great, innocent, natural lover—the best, Ry. We're just great together. Don't know how else ta explain it. You're the one. Even better'n all of 'em put together."

"And not … Terri?"

"*Whaddaya talkin'?* You heard her in court. She told the truth. That prick screwed her over for tellin' the truth. You're the one for me. Even she said it. Told it like it is."

She leaned over the fence to reach, to turn his mouth to hers.

"*I better be!"* She kissed him, wet and sloppy. "Besides I like her too really."

Nicky kissed her back, taking her in his arms and really put himself into it.

"It's even better when you help," she said.

Nick kissed her again. He helped a lot. She believed him. She let the matter drop—for now because this is how it's supposed to be. They headed down along the fence, arm-in-arm.

"And what about Patti? You like her too? Seen ya talkin' with her."

She shrugged. “She’s okay cuz I know she doesn’t mean anything to you. I’ve been talking to her, trying to get her to change her story, see things from your point of view. I thought she was bending but I guess it’s too late now.”

“Yeah, guesso.” He looked kind of sad, kind of beat. She felt bad.

Nick stopped when they reached the “sluice,” what he called it anyway. It didn’t have a gate, just a beveled concrete gutter that carried run-off water about twenty-five yards from the school grounds down the steep slope to the concrete spillway. Nick knelt down by the top of the sluice to scoot under the opening left by the chain-link fence that crossed above it. He motioned her to follow him. She did. Then Nick slid over onto the dense, grassy sod to the left of the sluice, sitting with his knees pulled up to his chest. She sat beside him likewise. They faced Nick’s housing development, with the brick or siding homes lined up, terraced neatly in rows above rows, dug into the opposing hill, retreating above the spillway and boulevard below them. Nick placed his right arm around her shoulders and his left hand over his knee. She drew up her knees in similar fashion to sit hunched forward with her hands folded in her lap. She leaned against him. Nick kissed her softly on the cheek, telling her not to worry. He said this spot reminded him of adventures with the Salvaranos.

Nick said once they had found an old, abandoned car tire behind the school. They rolled the tire over here to the sluice. They had to lift the tire over the fence because the tire was too wide to slide through the aperture underneath the chain-links. They dropped the tire, rolling it down the shallow-scooped, cement sluice. The steep pitch of the embankment, about seventy degrees, let the tire speed downward, picking up enough velocity to carry it across the concrete creek, up the opposite, ten-foot high embankment of concrete and grass, up over the curb and across the boulevard. Even had enough steam to carry the curbed grassy median down the center of the boulevard to cross the far lane. The boulevard formed a T-intersection there with Bristow Place, a short street, only three houses long. Bristow Place ran up into Twenty-Fourth (Todd’s street) almost directly behind Nick’s house, a block up the hill, on Twenty-fifth. The tire kicked up off the curb into Bristow, halting there on the hill opposite the creek, where the tire would wobble and fall in the gutter. An accidental find had netted the boys a cool summer discovery. They found that if they gave the tire enough of a push, but not too much to make it wobble down the sluice, it might even carry the curb on the other side of the boulevard.

Nick said they rolled the tire down the hill all day, careful to avoid passing cars. He said back then the boulevard, like the spillway, was new. Traffic was sparse. Not many people knew about it—that the new road cut through from the District line clear up through the Heights—connecting the District with both the Crest Hill and Harlow Heights Shopping Centers and 5A-South.

Nick said Paul Salvarano had stayed at the top of the sluice, where she and Nicky were sitting now, to initiate the tire roll. His brother Phil had positioned himself down the steep bank near the creek, while Nick stood out by the near curb of the boulevard. Nick said he’d retrieve the tire from the road to roll it

back down the short embankment over the spillway, where Phil would pick it up—wet—to push it halfway up the hill to Paul. He'd haul it the rest of the way to the top of the embankment. Then Paul would roll the tire down again. After a few rolls, Nick spotted "something real cool, an *amazing discovery*."

From where Nick had stood on the boulevard, the tire rolling down the sluice would disappear down into the spillway below the short bank beside the road.

"Below road level, see? Only to pop up after a few seconds, emerging like out of nowhere, rollin' like crazy, across the street."

So they decided to roll the tire down the steep bank as a car passed, so it'd pop out of the spillway behind a motorist. Just to see what the driver would do when he saw the tire in the rearview mirror, crossing the street behind him.

But the drivers didn't do anything. Evidently, no one looked in the rear view mirror. So the boys decided to let the tire pop up out of the spillway, well ahead of an unsuspecting car. That's when they started getting some action. Some driver's would slam on their brakes and skid. Some just kept driving, because it happened too fast for them to react.

"Imagine driving along down there on the street and a tire comes rolling up fast out of the creek bed right across your bow." Nick cracked up.

They had a blast. Nick, being down on the street, was the only one in real danger of being caught. He took to lying flat on the ground, across the boulevard from the spillway. From there, he could see everything and get the full effect. If anyone stopped, he could light out, scramble across the boulevard and concrete creek and scoot up over the slippery sod slope.

One guy did stop, got out of his car there in the street, shaking his fist and yelling that he would report them to the police. After several more tire runs, Paul suggested they stop because the police might come. By that time, the Hudspeth kid, who was two years behind Nick and lived on the corner across from the school, had come by with a few of his buddies to get in on the fun.

The younger kids were only too happy to take over when he, Paul and Phil left. The next day, Nick learned the cops had caught the Hudspeth kid and his cronies. Evidently, the cop confiscated the tire to show the Hudspeth kid's folks what he was doing. Hudspeth said his old man whaled his hide. Nick's laughter at the memory made her chuckle. So he told her another tale.

During the big, back-to-back blizzards when they were in seventh grade, her first year here, Nick and the Salvaranos had used this very spot on the other side of the fence behind them atop the hill by the sluice as a vantage point to rain snowballs down on unsuspecting motorists driving along the boulevard. From this spot at the crest of the bank, the boys were well protected.

If any motorists stopped to get out of their cars to come after them, which a few did, he, Phil and Paul just stood there and laughed. No way the drivers could climb that steep slope in the snow. The bank was so steep it was dang hard to climb when the grassy sod was dry. (Nick noted they always climbed up the concrete sluice, rather than over the sod, to get better traction.) He said they just stood there behind the fence on top of the embankment laughing,

pelting ticked-off drivers-cum-creek-jumpers and would-be mountain-climbers with snowballs. Guys coming after them would be cussing and fuming, sliding back down the hill into the frozen spill water, breaking through the ice and getting their feet all wet. They'd leave shaking their fists and cursing.

What the boys had to watch out for was anybody smart enough to turn around and drive a few blocks back towards the District line, take a left onto Ashton and swing around behind them up by the school. Keeping an eye in that direction was sufficient. Anyone who came after them there would have to run over about seventy yards of school ground, three feet deep in snow. They could slide down the slope in a jiffy and break for Nick's house. If they were attacked from both directions, they could run along the fence line behind them into the woods and double back to the Salvarano's place. They had it all figured out.

After a while, pelting cars became too easy. So they took to lobbing rainbow shots, high-arcing parabola, pop flies that, due to the height of the lob, would land with a wallop. This tack afforded them greater sport because, gauging the speed of the car with the height of the throw, took a certain amount of skill. And, if they missed, the snowball would explode in a giant splat in the plowed, slushy, bare-spotted pavement with a great plopping sound that was almost as much fun to watch and hear as hitting an unsuspecting car. As the snow melted in the sun, only to refreeze in the windy cold, their snowballs became more like ice-balls late in the day.

Then Nick and Paul nailed the same car in quick succession, one on the hood and one on the roof—*bamm-bamm!* Nick said the ice-balls landed, exploding on the car with loud pops, more like cannon balls. The driver threw on his brakes, screeching and sliding to a halt sideways in the road. He jumped out of his car and charged across the creek up the bank, slipping and sliding on all fours, while the boys laughed. But they could see this guy was determined. When he got halfway up the bank, they unloaded their store of ammunition on him. Stymied for an instant, the irate driver took their best shots but kept comin', though he slipped often—

"A young guy, really pissed, ya know? We took off running all the way to the Salvarano's house about three blocks away. Of course, he never caught us."

"So you got off scot free again? Seems like you're always getting into dangerous situations and coming out of them smelling like a rose."

"Sure. And I will this time, too." Then his smile melted away.

"Only there is a moral to the story. You gotta follow my motto Ry. Ya gotta hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. The way we did then, having all our escape routes mapped out ahead o' time, in case things went bad."

"What do you mean?"

I mean, if things go bad in court tammorah, ya gotta be prepared, is all."

"Why? What's the worst that could happen to you?"

"Well, the absolute worst is they find me guilty of everything and the judge sends me to jail for life and throws away the keys." Nick smirked.

She didn't find his reply amusing. She heard herself whisper, "Sweet Mother of God, have mercy on us sinners. Lord have mercy."

Nick frowned. "Hey Ry, don't worry. You heard Franco. The judge is gonna drop the murder charges. She would have done so before but Perkouri pulled Toombes out o' his rear at the last minute. But now, with the testimony of Red and the Sims' boys, we won't have to worry about that."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Franco says the absolute worst I could get—the maximum if I's found guilty of everything besides murder—would be forty-five years. And the judge runs everything consecutively, prob'ly be eligible for parole in thirteen or so, if I behave myself. But, bein' as this is my first offense and all, he don't think the judge'd be that hard on me. Mebbe run the sentences for the multiple counts on assault and battery and manslaughter concurrently. I'd be eligible for parole in five or six years—maybe less. Gee! Franco said she might even suspend the sentence all together and I wouldn't hafta go to jail at all."

"What are you saying Nicholas? Mister Vamia thinks they'll find you guilty?"

Nick shook his head. "No, he never said that. I asked him is all, 'what's the worst possible thing could happen to me?' Like you jes' asked me. Jes' glad I won't have to worry about life imprisonment—if he's right, that is."

"If he's right? Sure. You mean like when he was right when he had that premature celebration party? Or about not being tried in adult court? Or when he said the judge would drop the murder charges after the prosecution's case?"

Nick looked away, ignoring her. Neither spoke. Then he said, "Would you … would ya still wanna marry me, if I have to go to jail for six years?"

Fear shone upon his face. She'd never seen him afraid. Made her afraid, too. She tugged his head to her.

"Of course I would. You're my baby's daddy. What do you think I'd do?"

Nick smiled. "Well, I hoped you'd say that Ry. But just so you know, if that happens and you want to back out, I'll understand."

"What do you mean? You want to go to jail so you don't have to marry me?"

He frowned. "Course not. Where'd ya come up with a crazy idea like that? Sheesh! I wanna marry ya. Sure as hell don't wanna go ta prison. Shoot!"

"So why are you even bringing it up?"

"Because—*because,* we have to *be prepared*—for the worst, see? The worst might not be so bad though. I figure, six years in jail, I could get a college degree, maybe even a law degree, too, like my dad wants. What else would I have ta do? Who knows? Maybe they'll allow conjugal visits?"

She shook her head, doubting a convict could be a lawyer.

"I don't believe I'm hearing this. You want to be separated from me and the baby six years?"

"Heck no! I tole ya already I don't want that. I wanna be with you and the baby. You think I'd wanna be in jail with a bunch o' convicts? Watchin' my backside if I drop the soap in the shower? You gotta be crazy to think that."

"Well what am I supposed to do all that time without you?"

"Gee. I'm glad you asked Ry, cuz I been thinkin' about that, too. See, I figure you could keep the band together. With you out front? Heck, they'd do great. You're a naturally gifted performer. And good lookin', too. You add sex appeal and got that great, raspy contralto. Yeah, with you out front, the band could really take off. And sooner or later, some record producer's gonna get wise and sign us up. You know my songs are good. Everybody says so. It's just a matter o' time before *GRT* hits it big and lands a recording contract.

"In the meantime, I think you oughtta look into playin' more weddin's. Lot o' guys we know who graduated ahead of us are startin' to get married now. And you can drive the Harvell kids on the paper routes and split the proceeds with 'em—half for you though—no three-way split. Understand?

"Sure. The way I figure it—between the band and the route—you'll make enough to take care of the baby. And ya know darned well, you're gonna have two sets of dotin' grandparents vyin' with each other to help you watch the kid. I figure you're worst problem will be tryin' to keep the peace between the families, dividin' up their time with the kid evenly, so nobody gets pissed."

"You don't want to be a father, do you? Do you?"

"Naw. It's not that exactly. It's just that I can't see me like that, is all. My body ain't like yours. Remindin' me all the time of what's comin'. I'm worried about providin' for him, and you. It's kind o' intimidatin', know what I mean?"

"You're scared. Me, too. But you *are* happy to have him—me—be married?"

"I'm happy because you're happy, Ryzanna. I see how secretly you are really happy over becomin' a mom. And I'm happy for you Ry and …"

"And what?" Nick shrugged. "Anh. You wouldn't believe me." She took his hand in hers. "Sure I will Nicky. You know I will. Go ahead." Nick blinked.

"Well … with you bein' pregnant and us gettin' married'n all, I know …"

She squeezed his hand. "What? You can tell me, Baby. You can always tell *me*." She simpered, radiating love and warmth, flourishing her dimples.

"Well, your folks won't take you away from me now, like them others did. And you won't leave me, not like all them others, either. I know you'll stick by me now—cuz of the baby, I mean."

She put her arms around his neck, peering into his eyes.

"I'd never leave you Nicky. Never! With or without a baby."

She kissed him hard. He responded then broke their embrace, picking up where he left off, as if he'd never stopped.

"And you can go to R.G., like Paul. You know—the junior college that just opened over in Kargo? Start working toward that business degree you've been talkin' about. Hear it's pretty cheap. Thirty bucks a credit? Only thing is, you're gonna need somebody to play lead guitar and back ya up on vocals.

"Got a couple guys in mind. One guy I met over in London last year. That is, if he'd wanna move over here. You know—when I went over to visit that blues band? Driftwood-Flack? Over Christmas break ta get away after the Clan trial? And there's another guy, just a kid really, a black kid, couple years younger

than us up in Baltimore. You remember? We heard him down on the Boardwalk at O.C. this summer. Baritone, like me. Plays lead. Blows a blues harp, too. He'd be perfect, though he is young. He was with that skinny black chick singer, stylin' the Afro?"

"I can't believe what I'm hearing." She shook her head.

"Whaddaya mean? Sure, you remember. They were down on the boardwalk outside the Shamrock, remember? I was with Mo, right after my fight on the pier with Steinmetz and Yikes. You musta seen 'em playin' there."

"That's not what I mean. Sure, I remember them. But I'm talking about you, saying all this stuff. How can you think like this? You're not convicted yet. You talk as if it were a done deal. And all this time you've been telling me we're gonna win. Have you been lying to me?" Nick shook his head.

"No Ry, that's not what I mean at all. I'm just plannin' things out, just in case—to be prepared—is all." She got mad.

"The jury has to be unanimous to find you guilty, right?" Nick said, "Sure."

"Well, the way those young chicks have been eyeballing you, they would never vote against you. I saw that Latina chick smiling at you and you winked at her. You didn't think I saw that, did ya? I did. I let it go because I know you were playing her. Knew it was good for our case. You think she'd vote against you? No. Of course not. She likes you. All of those young ones like you."

"Well, they may like me all right, but that don't mean they'll vote for me."

"Sure they will. Why wouldn't they?"

"Well, Franco says people on juries do funny things. 'Specially, if they got eleven other people breathin' down their necks to vote a different way. See, when you get locked up in a room like that and can't come out till everyone is votin' the same way, people do strange things." She cast down her eyes.

"Yes. I know, I've heard that, too. Must be true, I guess."

"Yeah. That's why Franco says, ya jes' never know what a jury might do. He said if they do find me guilty, we got a real good shot to overturn it on appeal, on account o' how old man Higher was so biased against us and all. He said there's some case bein' decided in Federal court right now, some appeal, that sez it's unconstitutional for Maryland to try guys our age as adults. Franco said if they uphold the appeal, I'd be off the hook—as an adult anyway. But shoot. Goin' to prison or reform school might be a good thing for us in the long run. Might serve to calm me down. Help me get my head on straight, ya know?"

"That's nonsense Nicholas. I don't want to hear another word of negative thinking like that come out of your mouth. The jury is going to find you *not guilty* tomorrow and we are going *to win this case.* And Father Vizconni *will marry us* up at Holy Trinity, *at the altar,* just as we planned. We'll get a flat up at Walnut Hill and jump each other's bone until the baby comes—*every night!*" Frowning, she nodded and crossed her arms over her heaving bosom.

"Sounds like a great plan to me, Ry. Maybe live at Kara's place? Let her pay us fifty bucks a month to live there? *Hot damn! Ha!* At least till she comes back for Christmas. Now wouldn't that be sweet? You like them mirrors. Don't

deny it, I know you do. [She rolls her eyes.] But I don't see why we have to wait though. Shoot. We could get it on right here, right now. This sod is thick. It'd be soft on your backside. Nobody looks up here. And if they do find me guilty, this'd be our last chance. Unless they have conjugal visits in jail.

"And you look some kind o' tough in that skimpy dress Baby. That's one of them dresses Sheena wore when we went out last winter. Even though it's a summer dress. And let me tell you, she never looked so good in it as you do Ry. You're just bustin' out all over. Pun intended. Me, too."

A look at his lap proved he was right. She scowled at him.

"William Nicholas Sh'boom!"

"Well, okay, on *my backside* then. You get on top. I don't mind. Shoot—even bettervat your pace. Shower me. Okay?" She stood up.

"That tears it Nicholas! I'm going home. That why you brought me up here? You know we gotta be good like we promised Father Vince. Besides, foolin' around now could jinx the whole she-bang—no pun intended. It's mortal sin."

"Shoot. Just thought I'd make a last request."

She stepped down away from him over to the concrete sluice, scooting down carefully, her right foot in front of her left, goofy-footed, as if she were surfing. Nick followed behind her. When she reached the bottom, she hopped over the spillway water to scramble on all fours up the opposite, short bank.

Nick caught up to her as she waited at the curb for a car to pass. He took her by the arms, spun her about, kissing her for all he was worth. She joined him, giving as well as she got until her juices started flowing. She pushed back, saying she had to go home. Said she needed to get some rest because tomorrow was a big day for both of them, all three of them. Although reluctant, Nick agreed. He walked her back to her car parked out in front of Todd's house.

She dropped him off and drove home, forgetting to pick up Sheena's acoustic guitar, which she left in Todd's garage. She was too tired and upset to care.

It had been four hours since she told Nick that she must leave to get some rest. Here it was a quarter to two with her still wide awake. *Pickles!* She had tried sleeping in every position imaginable but she couldn't stop thinking about Nick spending six years in jail. Even her tried and true fetal position had failed—the one with her teddy bear in her arms and her hands together as if in prayer between her legs. She needed something, something to calm her, to make her relax. The thought of a shot or two of her Dad's Canadian Club whiskey appealed to her, until she considered the baby and the fact that she already had Dramamine in her system. She thought of Nicky, the way he had looked tonight—muscular in his tight, navy blue T-shirt and grey cords, bulging out of his pants in all the right places, lightning veins bolting the length of his deep-tanned arm. How his hot kisses and rock-hard, lean muscles had excited her there on the curb next to the boulevard. Made her juices flow. Go all warm and soft and gooey inside, and prickly-itchy out. And here she was again, moistening suddenly. Except for that fluke—his magic hand act—the

other night under the big oak, it had been exactly a month for her between drinks—Nicky cocktails—so to speak. There had been some blood in his sleeping bag that night that was hers, not his. But the baby was all right. Thank God for that. And, as she'd done before with coarse thread, she'd fixed herself with the catgut she'd procured from her doctor.

Deep down, she understood she had an addictive personality, which she kept in check with great self-discipline. She had been addicted to all the wrong foods, then to diet pills which the doctors quit prescribing for that reason. Now she was addicted to fish and vegetables and that worked well. Sewing was a healthy addiction. She had an unhealthy penchant for pain that could be addictive, but her mom had nipped that in the bud. Mostly she had a penchant—an addiction—to *be* loved, to be needed and *to* love. The kids she sat for had helped emotionally but only Nick met her deep physical needs. And, quite by accident the other night, she had discovered the audience, which went wild over her out-front performance, had given her a tremendous high, similar to what she attained through her marathon swim and exercise sessions or from taking too many diet pills. But now she was really hooked on Nicky and their lust/love-filled turtle-doving. She was going out of her mind after four weeks. She couldn't take it. How could she take six years if he went to jail? The song was right, "once you've had it, you're in an awful fix." She was hooked, and it scared her. Because this was one addiction, she feared she couldn't control—didn't want to. It was in her blood—lust-filled urges—handed down from both grandmothers.

Seemingly, with a mind of its own, her thumb started creeping up along her thigh. Felt like baby's breath, brushing against the back of her thumb, soft but coarse, wild, exciting.

"No! I won't." She'd promised Father V and God and the Holy Mother—all the saints.

She stopped, knowing that was something she wouldn't even have considered before she started going with Nicky. She wanted to scream in frustration.

"Love Is Strange" played in her mind. Then she recalled Father V's homily on H.A.L.T. He had said the acronym stood for hungry, angry, lonely and tired. When people find themselves in one or more of those four states he said, "We are at our weakest, most vulnerable point. That's when Satan tempts us the most." She prayed for delivery from temptation, believing the "H" stood for a different kind of hungry.

Praying proved difficult because she was angry with God for telling Nicky to "turn around, wait and go slow." Nick had confessed to her about the Voice after it had come out in court and she had begged and pleaded with him to know why he had turned around that night of the accident. When she discussed Nick's revelation with Father V, he had assured her that "if God had spoken to Nick, all would work out for good." Father said that "even having Nick's sins washed like dirty laundry in open court might serve God's purpose in bringing Nicky to repentance." She had found that statement reassuring. But what had the priest meant by "*if* God had spoken to Nick, all would work out for good?" Who else could it have been? *Satan?* As Perkouri had suggested? Oh no. A cold shiver

passed through her. She couldn't think about that now. Her stomach growled. Having ignored her dinner she was hungry too, consumed by H.A.L.T. It hit her—the herring!

Since she had become pregnant and taking Dramamine, she hadn't used the fish to help her relax, to get her mind off her hungry craving for Nick's sweet loving. But now, she thought a raw herring might be just what the doctor ordered. Might relax her enough.

She hadn't consummated this ritual for a couple months, not since she had been dating Nicky. Well, more like since she had been doing Nicky to be more precise. Dating him for nearly three weeks before their initial tryst at the beaver ponds, she had been downstairs candling and eating raw fish a couple times a week. Her mother had discovered her dark secret last spring. Once she had explained how and why she had come upon this curious custom to help her sleep, help her control her desires, her mom had agreed to keep the matter between the two of them.

The seeds to her bizarre ritual were sown last winter over Christmas break. Don had taken her and Sheena uptown one dreary, cold, rainy afternoon. They had gone to the *Biograph*, one of those arty movie theatres uptown, to watch a matinee double feature of foreign films. She had found the subtitles distracting. One of the movies had been the political thriller *Z*. The critics had raved over it but she hadn't found it to be so hot. But the other movie, whose title she couldn't recall, had left an indelible impression upon her. Even though the heroine was blonde, Ryz'n had identified herself with the attractive female lead, whom Don had admired because of her shapely figure.

The film was set in a European port on the Baltic Sea. She couldn't recall if the film had been shot in Germany or Lithuania or whatever, but it had subtitles. She recalled the movie was about a love triangle, among a sexy young, blonde woman and two men. One of the men was dark, swarthy, good-looking, charismatic and extremely passionate, but coarse. He was a commercial fisherman. The other guy was fair, a university student both polite and intellectual but not as cute as the first guy. The heroine enjoyed the latter as a friend but preferred the former as a lover. She developed a passionate, physical bond with the fisherman, much to the chagrin of her student friend who brooded and pined for her.

The film showed some nudity and lovemaking, which didn't shock her because the shots were done tastefully. She knew the film's mature, sexual theme had been the reason Don had brought her. He had hoped the love-making scenes might spur her into similar romantic action with him. But that would and never did happen. She thought of sandy-haired Don as the film's heroine perceived the fair-haired student, while she pictured Nick as the fisherman. She had been a little embarrased for Sheena, seeing that stuff in cinematic living color in front of Don. Until she realized her kid sister was eating it up with a spoon. Didn't embarrass Sheena one iota. She should have known.

Besides making love, the fisherman had taught the girl how to enjoy life to its fullest, as Nicky had done for her. Among other things, the fisherman taught the blonde to enjoy

eating herring—raw. Eating raw herring and slurping beer became a symbol, a metaphor or analogy, for that full enjoyment of the lusty side of life. After her lover went to sea one final time, never to return, the girl became lonely and despondent. Her student friend tried, but failed to console her. The girl grew more and more depressed. She took to visiting the haunts she and her absent lover had frequented. She'd sit in their favorite pub, think of him, eat raw herring and guzzle beer. She ignored the amorous intentions of many other would-be suitors to sit in this pub to gobble raw herring. The film ended in a montage of overlapping scenes, depicting her at a booth in a pub, eating plates and then trays, full of raw herring. She became gluttonous, eating the raw fish with her fingers, holding them by the tails; lowering them headfirst down her throat, teasing herself, ignoring skeptical gazes from other patrons. Was as if the herring had become her lost lover and she couldn't get enough of him through the fish. No one could reach her.

The movie ended with her teasing, slurping and gorging herself on herring in a dark, dismal booth in the pub. Her student friend failed at one last attempt to persuade her to quit the fish for him. But she ignored him for the herring as if he didn't exist. He walked out of the pub into a foggy night, ending the movie. Weird.

The film didn't move her to be more passionate with Donny. All it did was give her the idea of consuming raw fish in place of the passions she was missing from her life. She had taken to eating raw herring out of her basement freezer alone, while she mooned over Nicky, who, at that time, would have nothing to do with her. She'd never understood why, since she wasn't aware of his pact with Donny then. Yet she knew something magical, chemical, connected her to Nick. She had learned that on their lone date a year ago at the base pool after he had back-flopped off the high dive.

Her attraction-reaction to Nick had come in an epiphany when she had sat on him to massage his hurting, muscular body with aloe vera. When they accidentally touched each other's private parts through their wet suits, it was electric—white hot. Reminded her of that scene near the beginning of *Dr. Zhivago* when the two main characters brushed past each other on the tram and the electric wires sparked overhead. She had never understood that scene until that time she sat on Nick by the pool, rubbing aloe vera into his slab-muscled body. Then it had come to her in a flash, a white hot, electric flash unlike any other. Nick knew it too because she had felt him rise up inside his bathing suit before turning over on his belly, embarrassed. It was only later, almost a year later on the Fourth of July weekend at the beach, when she learned of that stupid, ridiculous pact Don had made with Nick to keep her for himself, away from Nicky.

The thought of traipsing downstairs at this late hour to candle fish suddenly lost its appeal. Instead, she took half a Dramamine. Yet unable to sleep, she decided to finish hemming her new creation: an emerald green, lamé tunic top with a Nehru collar. She had planned to finish it in the morning and wear it to the trial to surprise Nick.

She had gotten the idea from and old black and white movie about spies in Portugal during the Second World War that she had seen on *The Late Show* the night Nick was in jail. Playing the heroine, Heddy Lamar had worn the garment that had caught her eye. Being an old, black and white flick, Ryz'n could only guess at the green color. She tailored the tunic perfectly to her unique contours. The clingy lamé hugged her curves like white on rice. She had worked hard to achieve that clingy-snug-but-chic effect for Nicky. Lamar's tunic had padded shoulders but she didn't need such artificial contrivances. Though short, her shoulders were naturally broad, as broad as her hips, and Nicky really liked that. Yes, he liked that a lot.

Scruffy heard her and pawed at her bedroom door, whining. Ryz'n let her pet in, telling the bitch to be quiet if she wanted to stay. She shut the bedroom door behind the dog. Curiously bewildered, the pet quietly observed her handiwork. She sewed in the nude, unafraid anyone would disturb her, finishing her hems in minutes.

Trying on the garment, she studied herself in the full-length mirror on the inside of her closet door beside an admiring Scruffy. Ryz'n stood up straight and breathed deeply, only to decide the tunic was too short, too showy, not quite covering her butt, to wear alone in open court. She might lower the hem. Or she might wear it just for Nick sometime like that or, if he thought it all right, on stage. She decided to wear the tunic over the snug, pale yellow, cotton-knit mini skirt she had bought at Dollar Days out in Clear Lake. To add a few inches to her stature, she had bought a matching pair of heels and a clutch from Nick's aunt at the Labor Day, summer's end sale up at Carol Ann's in Harlow Heights.

Nick's aunt was a widow. The poor woman had lost a leg due to hardening of the arteries. She supported herself on a prosthetic leg, working long hours at the chain store haberdashery. The woman had been very helpful in finding accessories to match the skirt.

Studying herself in the mirror, Ryz'n liked her look—sharp but sexy. The way Nicky liked her. The way she had grown to like herself. Yes. She'd wear the tunic over the mini-skirt. She smiled at her chic reflection: sharp—sexy. Yes. How he liked her. Maybe she'd paint her nails green to match the tunic and wear the open-toed yellow heels.

The extra Dramamine was having its effect. She removed the clothes and hung them in her closet. Before she shut the door, she caught a glimpse of herself in the door-length mirror. She marvelled at the toned body she had sculpted that Nick adored. The sight of her reflection flushed her, reminding her of their week at the cathouse with all those mirrors. He was right. She did get a charge out of watching them together in those mirrors. But what about the baby? Pregnancy will ruin her shape. What would he think of her then? Well, it's "a temporary condition," as Nicky might say. And once she had the baby, she'd work extra hard to get herself back into shape for him. Yes, she would.

Ryz'n studied herself in the mirror. It was simply incredible. A year ago, she had been a flat-chested butter ball with limp hair and acne. And here she was svelte, cut with clear

complexion, full bouncy hair and more, bigger curves than the road up Grapevine Hill. Nicky was right. She *had* become centerfold material. If she did sell herself for a photoshoot to a men's magazine, how much could she get? Enough to pay off their legal expenses? College? A downpayment on a home? Nick might not mind, if the price was right. But what about her folks? Father Vince? Could she do that? For him? For the baby? No. *Could she?* How much? In hard cash, *really*?

Maybe she might be Little Egypt—dance that hoochie-coo on stage—for him and the band. If he really believed it would help the band land some better-paying gigs. Better do it quick before she started to show though. She might even like it, if she got the applause she did the other night when she was out front in Nick's place. And before—that lengthy standing ovation from the Pax-Nav audience gave her a thrill that was second only to making love with Nicky. She giggled with embarrassment. What a high. Those were grown men going nuts over her that night, after she had shed her guitar to sing and roam the stage in her Ban-Lon shift and heels, playing to the audience like Nicky did. That reception had an erotic, rousing effect on her. Turned her out. Got her to vibrating the way only Nicky could. Could be addictive though. And the doctors said she had an addictive personality. What did they know? They said she wouldn't conceive either. Being out front sure was a thrill. The adulation was overwhelming.

But she could never hoochie-coo and keep a straight face. Who was she kidding? Still, the audience had gone crazy when she had strutted on stage in heels in her snug Ban-Lon shift and rocked her hips to the beat. Especially the men. But vamp around the stage like she was some sort of exotic dancer, the way the guys in the band had suggested? And with a baby inside her? No, she just wasn't the type. Was she? *Was* she? Of course, she never had thought she was the type to be pregnant at seventeen either. Never thought she'd become addicted to sex—um, Nicky—she meant Nicky. Didn't she? Of course, she did. Sure she did. A warming fatigue grew over her, stretching out soothing fingers of warmth and peace, massaging her into drowsiness. She felt very tired, but peaceful.

Warm, and too groggy to care anymore about anything, Ryz'n flipped off the light switch. She lay down upon her canopy bed without bothering to slip beneath the sheet. Scruffy jumped up beside her. Ryz'n latched onto her favored, Kodiak teddy bear. A warm, heavy drowsiness descended over her. She was content knowing their miracle baby slept inside her. She was so exhausted, she didn't even bother to shove Scruffy to the floor. The bitch snuggled into her backside. Ryz'n clutched the stuffed bear into her bulging bosom. She rested in her favorite fetal position, fetal like the baby inside her. She slid prayerful hands down between her thighs. She drifted, ignoring Scruffy's snoring, dreaming of Nicky, misty beaver ponds and raw herring.

~ Chapter 34: Recantation ~

The gallery was packed today. Franco thought there hadn't been this much interest since the first continuance a week ago. He recognized some reporters in the gallery, spotting at least two sketch artists with pads and pencils in hand. Unloading the contents of his briefcase onto the defendant's table, he looked up to spy shiny bright, emerald green toenails leading a pair of pale yellow suede, open-toed, high-heels held in place by a single, broad, yellow strap across high arches. They came down the center aisle right for him. His gaze rose to take in the shapely legs. He knew who it was without looking higher. Someone with a longish waist like hers, you'd think might have skinny legs. But no, not her. Those legs could be in a chorus line. She came on with a matching yellow velour clutch in hand and an old gold, knit sweater slouched over her forearm.

Frank took his time following his gaze upward over the broad, round curve of the hips that nearly vanished, funneling into a long-waisted, V-shaped torso. Ryz'n bounced up the aisle—perfectly proportioned—uncannily symmetrical, fetching curves everywhere. She wore a bright emerald green lamé Nehru tunic over a pale yellow mini-skirt that matched her accessories. The tunic covered her like sparkling, green skin, showing full well her curves, bursting through the lamé top. Sexy but classy. She ignored his leer.

A yellow-gold ribbon held back wavy, cocoa brown hair that swept across her forehead, angling over one eye, cascading down to her shoulders. Ryz'n was going all out for Nick today. Just as she had promised she would. What did the kid say? *Like Jell-O on springs?* That lucky S.O.B. kid. If he were found guilty, Franco would do his utmost to console a disconsolate Ry. He figured he couldn't lose no matter how the jury decided.

Mrs. Ryan followed in her daughter's footsteps, taking a seat beside Ryz'n. Dressed more sedately, her features belied her thirty-five years. The woman could have passed for Ryz'n's older sister. Same face and height, similar proportions, but the mother was more rounded and thicker everywhere than her elder daughter. Yes, she could have passed as her daughter's older sister if not her twin: a pair of Betty Boops—senior and junior. The mother was yet strikingly fetching. Nick had said as much. Said Mrs. Ryan had lost well over twenty pounds the last few months following her daughter's diet: large quantities of fish, vegetables and juice or tea cut heavily with water. They were a darn good-looking tandem of females. And here came the younger one—Sheena—sitting at the end of the pew next to her mom. What a plethora of feminine pulchritude. He wouldn't mind tapping a little mother-daughter action. No, he wouldn't. The old man was nowhere to be found, but then he had been absent throughout the trial. The kid stepped back, leaning over the bar to kiss Ryz'n. Her dimples primed Nick with all the cute teen, cheerleader support the boy could ever want. From just a couple feet away, her kiss primed him too.

He and Nick dressed like the Bobbsey twins again today. Both wore their Brooks Brothers, three-piece, pin-striped suits, dark blue with faint gold pin-stripes, burgundy ties and black-tasseled loafers. They hadn't planned it. It just happened. The only difference was in the color of their dress shirts, light yellow for him, pale blue for Nick. And of course, he wore French cuffs featuring gold cuff links. For his part, the kid wore his hair as usual in a '50s-like pompadour, ducktail tied behind, hiding its length out of sight beneath his shirt collar. He checked to make sure it was hidden. Yes, it was. Good. Franco sighed. Nick's old man would have a conniption fit if it weren't.

A tap on his shoulder turned his head.

"Judge Ballante would like to see you in her chambers," said the bailiff. "Mister Perkouri is waiting with her." Franco nodded.

"Sure, I'll be right there." He glanced at the gold Rolex on his wrist—a few minutes before ten. He turned back to face Nick and his supporting cast behind him.

"Judge wants to see me in her office. Back in a few." He winked.

Nick's dad asked what was up. Franco pulled his copy of the motion from his briefcase on the table. "Not sure. The bailiff didn't say but it might be about this—my motion to acquit. Keep your fingers crossed." He flourished the document, turned and left.

* * *

Franco arrived in the judge's chambers to find Perkouri and his young assistant already there. Perkouri sat in his former chair, dressed in his drab grey, three-piece, off-the-shelf suit with a red tie, while his assistant wore a lightweight, brown silk suit with an old gold tie. The younger man stood beside him. His sartorial splendor made his boss look bad. Neither of them looked too happy. Laurene stood behind her desk with a saucer in one hand, sipping from a cup held close to her mouth. She wore a green-grey skirt. A matching suit jacket draped over the back of her executive swivel chair that was pushed back from her desk. A billowy, long-sleeved, French-cuffed, cream-hued chiffon blouse, buttoned about her neck, added to her ensemble. Protruding from under her brief, rounded collar was a green ribbon tie that brought to mind a Rorschach blot of a butterfly with spread wings. Franco thought she would have been elegantly stunning, were it not for the thick-lensed, glasses resting on her beak, magnifying her large, dark, Eurasian eyes. Laurene smiled as she set her cup on her saucer to greet him. That was a good sign.

"Come in Franco. You know Will Braunoeser here I take it?" He nodded towards Perkouri's assistant, whom he had not met but had seen throughout the trial.

"No Laurene, I don't believe I've had the pleasure." Perkouri rose out of formality.

Franco stepped toward the young man, whose dark features belied his Germanic surname. They shook hands. Laurene bid them sit. He and Perkouri resumed their respective chairs from their last meeting. Laurene apologized to Braunoeser for having to stand. Without a chair, he stood beside Perkouri nearest the door.

Laurene offered Franco some tea, noting that the prosecution team didn't seem to care for her choice of beverage. That remark motivated Franco to accept her offer. Pleased with his acceptance, she poured him a cup then leaned forward to hand it to him along with a saucer across her desk. Franco placed his copy of the motion face down on his lap, sitting back to sip his tea and resting his saucer on top of the document.

"Umm. This tea is very good, Laurene." He smiled at her while winking at Perkouri.

Assuming her seat with cup and saucer in hand, she said, "Yes, much better than the batch I had the last time you were here. I just made it fresh."

Smiling, she pointed toward the document in his lap.

"Your motion to acquit?" He nodded between sips.

"Well, we'll get to that in a minute. First, I'd like to discuss a matter Mister Perkouri has just brought to my attention. He said you woke him early this morning with a phone call to the effect that you wish to recall Patti Slater as a rebuttal witness for the defense.

"Is that correct?" She sipped her tea calmly.

Lowering his cup to his saucer while swallowing, he nodded again.

"Yes ma'am. That's correct." He glanced toward Perkouri. "Hope you didn't lose too much beauty rest Petros."

Perkouri sneered. Did a faint smile trace over Barunoeser's lips?

"Rather you had disturbed my slumber too, Frank. We could have hashed this matter out earlier. Begun court on time. Suppose we can be a few minutes late for justice sake."

"Pardon my saying so Laurene, but you're beauty, unlike the respected Counselor here, would have been quite undiminished in any case." He grinned.

Laurene forced a weak smile. "For your sake Frank, I'll ignore that remark."

She leaned forward to set cup and saucer down on her desktop next to a document, which he presumed was her copy of his motion to acquit.

"The State has pointed out, correctly I might add, that you rested the defense and calling another witness now would be, uh, shall we say, irregular? To say the least."

"Well Laurene, recalling Miss Slater becomes a moot point, if you've reached a decision to acquit on all charges." He smiled. She did not.

"I decided to acquit only the murder charges. The other charges remain."

Perkouri jumped in.

"Laurene, I must object. Considering the prior incident at the road house, the threats made and the defendant driving toward the victim with his lights off, the State has put forth sufficient evidence to—" Holding up her hand, Laurene cut him off.

"Grounds for negligence maybe criminal negligence, but murder? No, Pete."

"But what about the other evidence?"

"What evidence? The testimony of a jailhouse snitch friendly with the Buzzbees, who perjured himself in the hope of getting time reduced from his sentence? Are you telling

me you believe his story over the three witnesses the defense produced to discredit him? And do you think your claim that an automobile driven soberly, even prudently, under the speed limit constitutes a murder weapon? No Petros. I can't allow that and I won't. The State has not presented any evidence of murder under the law. While I have great faith in this jury to determine guilt or innocence here, there's no way I'm going to let this boy stand for potential capital or life imprisonment felonies before any jury. The evidence under the law simply does not warrant it."

"I'll object."

"Fine. You do that. But I suggest you do it mildly and pro forma, lest I become displeased and cite my reasons for acquittal in open court. That wouldn't look too good for your manslaughter charges." She pursed a quick smile.

"How's that?"

"Well, a juror might reasonably conclude the same logic could apply to manslaughter."

"If you explain Maryland law regarding manslaughter, there should be no problems."

Laurene set down her sauce and cup on her desk. "You can rely on that."

She glared at Perkouri. Franco said, "But what about manslaughter Laurene, and the other charges? Don't they beg acquittal as well?"

"Frankly Frank, I believe the State has made a prima facie case for them."

"'Prima facie?' Sure. That's why the Grand jury indicted but, certainly, there's no substance, not enough to go forward before a petit jury."

"I disagree. There is circumstantial evidence to indicate aggravated assault and battery, as amazing as it is that one could believe your client could have beaten those burly ruffians to a pulp. Even though anyone with half a brain could justify both batteries by reason of self-defense. And, your client did leave the scene of the accident, even though there was no collision. He may have fulfilled the intent of the law by phoning the police immediately afterwards and returning to the scene later. But those are issues for a jury to decide. After all, you requested a jury trial, Frank. And you've got one."

"Well, if I had known you'd be the judge Laurene, I wouldn't have petitioned for a jury." She returned his smile. "Thanks. I take that as a compliment. But be that as it may, it is what it is. I want to wrap this thing up today."

"But what about the manslaughter charges? Shouldn't they be dropped as well?"

Replying to Franco, Laurene swiveled to look at Perkouri. "No, I don't believe so."

She turned back to him. "The State has made a case for involuntary manslaughter. The boy was driving with his lights off. Both girls testified to that. And a jury should decide whether your client's act of turning around to wait for his adversaries was reckless in itself, regardless of how calm and collected he was in so doing or how unusual were the reasons for his actions. And, that he should have known, if in fact he did not guess, that

his actions could have resulted in harm to the victims. I suggest you too, Frank, tread lightly, lest you force me to cite those specifics before the jury."

"But suppose Miss Slater's testimony can allay those suspicions? Don't you think we should hear her to see?" Laurene drummed her fingers on the desktop beside her cup and saucer. "Miss Slater? Yes …" A wave of her hand silenced Perkouri before he spoke.

"How did the Slater girl come to call you—at when? Twelve-thirty this morning?"

"A little closer to twelve than twelve thirty, I'd say."

"Fine. It makes no difference. What prompted her call?"

"The girl said she had pangs of conscience. She called me out of the blue. I swear neither my client, nor his folks; I, nor anyone on my team had anything to do with it. The girl said she couldn't sleep lately from thinking about what she had said on the stand. She claimed she was beginning to look and feel poorly as a result."

"Losing her beauty sleep, eh?" A glint appeared in Laurene's eye behind her glasses.

He chuckled. "Yes, exactly."

Laurene sipped on her tea then set the cup in the saucer held in her hand.

"Well, we can't have a young co-ed doing that, can we?"

He grinned. "No ma'am, we can't."

"The State objects, Laurene."

"Oh, I'm certain it does Petros. And on what grounds?" Perkouri shrugged.

"As you've said already, the defense has rested. To reopen now would not only be most irregular, as you mentioned, but also would delay the trial. Who knows where Slater's testimony could lead us and how long it might take to get there? Without her, we end this right now. After all, you've said repeatedly how much you want to expedite, how much you want to avoid surprises—last minute ones, no less. And the State agrees."

Laurene set down her cup to lean forward. Her face became stern.

"'The State agrees,' hey? That's funny coming from you, Pete. You mean, as in the way the State claimed it had no more witnesses then produced its star witness Toombes at the last minute, after I got Franco here, in chambers, to reveal that he would not put his client on the stand? Is that what you mean by preventing a last minute surprise?"

Perkouri stammered, fumbling for words. Laurene turned to Perkouri's assistant.

"What about you Will? Don't you deem it only fair that the Court allows Miss Slater to be called?" Braunoeser smiled faintly. "Well Your Honor, I suppose it's the prudent thing to do. Certainly may help in the event of any appeal." Perkouri glared up at his protégé.

"Precisely. You have a sharp assistant there Pete. I wouldn't be too severe upon him for speaking candidly. At least one member of the prosecution team understands it is a *prosecutor's duty to seek justice first rather than to convict!*"

She shot Perkouri a hard look before she turned back to Franco.

"Frank. I take it this Slater girl wishes to recant her testimony pertaining to your client's state of mind before he turned around just before the accident." He nodded.

"Yes ma'am. She can speak to motive, an area in which the Court has granted the prosecution much leeway. And the witness *is* subject to recall. I specifically requested that. I beg the Court's indulgence in this matter that it may not stand on a technicality when justice can be served right now, expeditiously."

She leaned back in her chair. Looking down, Laurene fingered the handle of her teacup, while resting the saucer in her lap below the desktop. She whispered: "*Justice* …

"Yes. But you should have notified me *before* I reviewed your motion to acquit."

"Well, perhaps I would have done Laurene but the Slater girl didn't call me until after midnight and your ruling hasn't been made official yet."

"No, it hasn't. But no thanks to you, Frank. You could have notified me about Slater this morning. But you figured if I denied your motion in open court, you'd get another crack to move for acquittal if I should let Miss Slater testify, is that it?"

"Well … it has all worked out to good, hasn't it Laurene—for justice sake?"

She sipped her tea. Then, though eying Franco, she spoke to Perkouri. "Enough said.

"Pete. Have you had an opportunity to speak to Slater regarding this matter?"

"Yes Your Honor, I have."

"And you still wish to object?"

"Yes Laurene, I do. The defense rested yesterday. Miss Slater's subjection to recall expired then." Laurene lowered her cup to the saucer.

"And you said you had no more witnesses. Then pulled Toombes out of jail—out of a hat more like it ..." She tapped the teacup with her forefinger. "The girl will testify."

Perkouri raised his hand, "But—"

"Fine. You go ahead and object but she's going to re-take the stand. Now. Is there anything else? Anything *else* I should know *before* we go in there? Any more *surprises*?"

She glanced from Franco to Perkouri and Braunoeser and back again.

"Good! Then I suggest we get at it. I want the jury to consider this matter today."

"What about the motion to acquit on manslaughter?"

"Well Frank, I suppose that depends on Miss Slater's testimony, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "All right. That sounds fair to me." She nodded, sipping her tea.

"If your rulings lead to a not guilty verdict Laurene, you may expect the State to appeal." Perkouri stared hard at her.

Laurene returned his stare over her raised cup, before lowering it towards the saucer.

"You always have that right Pete. As does the defense. But I'm secure in knowing that my decisions are right and just under Maryland law. And what's more—they are fair."

Silence prevailed for an awkward minute while the two held each other's stare.

"Good. That's settled then. We all know where we stand. I'll take my time finishing this cup of tea." Laurene raised her teacup half way from the saucer. "Give you a few minutes Frank, to inform your client of what has transpired here.

"Gentlemen? See you in court. I warn you both: It would be wise not to provoke me in there. I'm in no mood for public argument on these issues."

She sipped from her cup in the prevailing silence. Franco finished his tea then placed the cup and saucer on the judge's desk. He thanked her for the refreshment.

Perkouri had already risen from his chair, stalking toward the officer door with Braunoeser at his heels. Franco was not far behind. He knew Perkouri was ticked. As Perkouri reached the door, he falsely wished the prosecutor luck. Perkouri turned to hiss, "Go chase yourself, Franco." The pecker pivoted and strode through the doorway. Braunoeser grinned briefly at him before following his boss out the door.

Franco could not help but shoot a backwards smirk toward Laurene. Her eyes seemed to smile as she sipped her tea. Reaching the door, he paused with his hand on the knob to face her. "Surely Laurene, you know that boy doesn't deserve to go to jail."

"For your client's sake Frank, you better hope the jury knows."

"But Laurene—"

"Enough said. You can trust me to be fair. Now go. Go!" She shooed him out with her free hand, holding the saucer and cup in the other. He shut the door behind him.

* * *

Back in court, he explained to Nick, Ryz'n and their folks what had occurred. Carol and Dom leaned in from behind them to listen as well. He held out hope that, after Patti's testimony, Laurene would acquit Nick on all charges. Ryz'n's countenance shone so brightly, he felt she might jump up to kiss him right there on the spot. He suggested they keep praying all would work to good. Ryz'n said she would. Nick added an "Amen."

From the corner of his eye, Franco caught the jury filing into their box. Seconds later, the bailiff asked the court to rise for "The Honorable Laurene Myoshi Ballante." His Rolex read nineteen after the hour. Nineteen minutes for justice? Seems a fair sacrifice.

Laurene entered regally, without delay. She struck her gavel once to start the session.

"Good morning. The first order of business today concerns a request from defense counsel to recall a witness to the stand for rebuttal. Is that right, Mister Vamia?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And this witness can testify to the events involved in this case, to wit: the altercation at the road house and/or the accident?"

She was playing it out for the jury's benefit.

"Yes Your Honor. The witness is Patricia Ann Slater. She wishes to revise her testimony regarding the events leading up to the accident. She will speak to motive."

"Very well. Though it is highly irregular since the defense has rested, but the Court will hear Miss Slater in the interests of justice and fairness."

Perkouri stood. "The State objects to calling this witness at this time Your Honor. The defense has rested its case. The State suggests, in the interests of custom and expedition, the Court hear closing arguments now. The State respectfully requests the witness not be heard. Other witnesses sit in the gallery today expecting to hear closing arguments rather than waiting out in the alcove to be called. We all are primed for closing arguments now as promised. Reopening the defense not only delays the trial but sets a bad precedent."

"I understand your points Counselor, but your objection is overruled. Both sides are here. The jury is here and has heard all the evidence put forth thus far. In fact, the Court, you might say, is 'primed' to hear further testimony, testimony that if it were not heard here and now could present sufficient grounds for a costly appeal. That will not happen in my Court. The State has leveled serious charges against the young man in the dock. He is due all the fairness under the law to acquit himself. As for setting dubious precedents, that is the Court's, and not your concern, Counselor. The Court will hear this witness."

"Exception."

"Noted."

Laurene faced the jury.

"Counsel for the defense has asked to recall a witness to rebut prior testimony. Though defense has rested its case, the Court deems it fair and just to hear this witness, even as it allowed Mister Toombes to testify in behalf of the State after the prosecution had indicated in chambers that it had no more witnesses. However, since the defense has yet to finish putting on its case, the Court will suspend judgment of the defense motion to acquit until the defense rests."

Perkouri stood. "Your Honor, should not other witnesses present absent themselves during this testimony?"

Laurene sighed. She appeared to be exasperated. She scanned the gallery.

"The Court know of no witnesses present subject to recall, Counselor."

She nodded to the bailiff. "Call Patricia Ann Slater to come forward."

A court officer opened the double doors at the back of the room. Patti came forward, shooed in low, brown pumps, robed primly in a russet shift over a yellow, long-sleeved, cotton blouse with her chestnut brown hair coiffed in a fashionable shag cut. She was a cute, slim co-ed but, instead of olive skin like Ry's, she sported freckles and chestnut hair. Her cute, trim hourglass figure was no match for any of the Ryan clan.

Patti hurried down the aisle through the bar's swinging gate to the stand. Laurene reminded her she was still under oath. He could not resist another glance toward Ryz'n.

She was swimming in the heavy cardigan sweater. The old gold sweater smothered her figure. She looked cozy and very much an earth angel. The overlong sleeves gobbled up

her hands. Her dark, wavy tresses poured down over her emerald, Nehru collar and sweatered shoulders. Must be Nick's letterman's sweater; too large probably even for him, featuring a predominant, three-dimensional navy blue **P**, blocked in old gold with a trio of gold pins stuck on the letter. Looked like pins for wrestling, track and baseball. Seated, the over-sized, buttoned-up cardigan draped down to her knees, concealing her sex completely. Only her manicured, pointed, emerald green fingernails peeked out from under the sweater cuffs. He wondered if she had put on the sweater before the jury could glimpse her sleek, busty largesse and bare, sexy thighs. There was no hiding her baby face and those lovely dimples. Her dimples warmed Franco's soul. He smiled in spite of himself. Franco doubted they did any less for Nick. Yes, the kid was one lucky S.O.B.

After Patti acknowledged her pending oath, she took the stand with all eyes upon her. Franco glanced toward the jury. They appeared alert, even hungry—the younger ones—for her testimony. He stepped around the defendant's table to look Patti in the eye.

"Now Patti. Last night you phoned me a little after midnight, asking to amend your prior testimony, did you not?"

"Yes sir."

"Did I or the defendant or anyone from the defense team, his family or any witness, such as Miss Schieffer, prompt you to come forward?"

"No sir."

"So why did you decide to contact me at that late hour about re-testifying?"

Patti looked at Nick then back to him, replying, "I couldn't sleep at night."

"I beg your pardon. You say, you '*couldn't sleep at night*?' Is that what you said?"

He glanced toward the jury and back. "Pray, tell us, why not?"

"Yes sir. Because what I said before wasn't exactly right and could be hurting Nicky."

He looked toward the jury. They were hooked. He turned back to Patti.

"Please, in your own words Patti, tell us exactly what has been bothering you."

"Well, the way I said what I said before just wasn't quite right. Like when I said that Nicky said he had a hunch that made him turn around and wait and head back up the road. Well that was right as far as it went. But he also said it was something inside him that made him do it. He couldn't explain it. And he wasn't mean or angry about it or defiant or anything."

"What do you mean by that, Patti? Please explain if you will."

"I mean he was very calm. He wasn't like angry with those boys—the Buzzbees. He seemed to be at peace with his decision to turn around. And the more at peace he was, the more nervous I got. But his peace seemed to calm Terri. And when Terri took on like him, sort of following his example—confident but calm-like—becoming very calm too, you see? Well that made me angry." She looked down. "I guess, maybe … maybe I was a little jealous. Kind o' like what you indicated before when you questioned me the first

time. I thought about what you said and about what happened with the accident. And how I testified before. It was like they were together on this thing—Terri and him—sittin' up there in front like that. And I was in the back, left out." She looked up again.

"Ya see, I could see them kind of like, bonding over this thing, and it made me angry. I felt like I was losing him. Guess I was kind o' jealous of the way Terri had horned in on my date with Nicky, like putting herself in between the two of us. It had been going on all night and it just kept getting bigger between them. I could just feel it. I thought I was gonna lose him. And I had big plans for me and him—for the summer, you see?"

"I do see. But you did testify earlier that you had asked the accused not to 'play chicken with', I believe those were your words, not to '*play chicken with*' the Buzzbee brothers, did you not?"

"Yes. I did. Because *I* thought that's what he would do. But I can't say that's what *he* thought he was going to do. Just what *I* thought. And then, he didn't really do that, after all. I mean, when I think back on it. He just drove slow through the storm in our lane, under the speed limit like I said before. And he turned his lights on in plenty of time for them to see us. Even pumped his brites at them to warn them out of our lane.

"See. I made it sound before like it was just at the last second, but that wasn't so. They—the Buzzbees—had plenty of time to see us and move over into their lane but they just sped up right for us. When they'd flashed their lights at us earlier and first came across the spaced lines, I'm certain they knew it was us. I don't think they would have done that if they'd thought we were some other car. *They* were the ones who came after us, who ran us off the road. Not the other way round."

"So you may have erred before when you said the accused was waiting there for them as '*Crazy Horse and the Indians had waited for Custer at the Little Big Horn*?'"

Patti nodded, starting to sniffle.

"Yes, I, I did. I never should have said that. I was hurt and jealous. I, I—" Sobbing, she looked at Nick, "I'm so sorry Nicky. I was wrong. Please don't think bad of me. Please."

Her lower lip trembled so violently Franco actually felt sorry for her.

Nick nodded saying, "Sure Patti. Don't worry about a thing. It's okay."

Patti half-laughed and half-sobbed, probably as much from relief as joy. Franco asked to approach the witness. Laurene nodded while reminding the kid to be silent. He pulled a clean, pressed handkerchief from his pocket, handing it to Patti. As she blew into the hanky, he discerned a smothered, "Thank you" come from behind the kerchief. Was she thanking him, or Nick, or both?

"I have no more questions Your Honor."

As he turned to sit down, the girl offered to return his kerchief but he let her keep it.

Perkouri was on his feet in an instant, asking permission to approach the witness and, after receiving it, charging the witness box.

"Who got to you? Who asked you to change your testimony? Miss Schieffer? Did she discuss her testimony with you?" Perkouri was hot. His face was flushed; eyes, bulging.

Startled, Patti blew her nose and wiped her eyes with the kerchief. She blinked.

"Why, nobody—nobody asked me to change my testimony. Terri didn't say a thing."

Perkouri: "So—all of a sudden at the eleventh hour, or the *thirteenth* hour in this case, you decided to come forth with this new information? You expect us to believe that?"

Patti sniffled. "I know. I was scared I was too late. I'm glad the judge let me testify." She turned to smile at Laurene.

Franco saw the weasel's bald pate and face redden, and the arteries bulge in his neck.

"So! Are you admitting you lied before—that you perjured yourself right here in open court? The punishment for such an offense is very grave Miss Slater. I assure you. So tell us, once and for all. Which is the truth and which—the *lie*?"

Patti wiped her nose, lowered the used kerchief to her lap then sat up as if to recite.

"I have told the truth both times. It's just that I didn't realize until I couldn't sleep since my last testimony that what I said before wasn't really exactly right, not the whole of it. I realize that anger and jealousy had clouded my judgment, my recollection. I haven't lied at all. But my testimony before wasn't exactly complete. So I've set the record straight."

Patti was not quite defiant but she was firm. Franco smiled. He had coached her on that answer earlier this morning when they had met in his office to go over her testimony. She had responded perfectly.

"And this *late, remorseful pang of conscience* came on you *suddenly*, did it? Why?"

"Like I said, I haven't been sleeping much. My parents were worried about me. Some of my classmates noticed I was looking poorly. When I mentioned why to one of them that person suggested I go to confession. I did. And I told the priest what I have told you here today. He told me I needed to satisfy my conscience. He told me that our conscience is God's inbred way of telling us when we have done wrong. He suggested I might want to consider righting that wrong. And that's what I have done." She raised her head. "And he was right. I feel much better already. My conscience is clear now. I'm glad I've done it. Glad the judge let me." Patti glanced at Laurene then stared hard at Perkouri.

Perkouri asked her if Vince was the priest who had taken her confession. She said no.

Franco was delighted. This couldn't have come off better if he had planned it, which he had a little by coaching her up. But the girl *had* come forward on her own. Well, maybe not entirely on her own. Patti had said Ryz'n was the classmate who had mentioned she was "looking poorly" and maybe Patti should go to confession. He had suggested that Patti keep Ryz'n's name out of it, coaching Patti to maintain Ryz'n's privacy. The girl had done so beautifully.

Perkouri: "Are you saying now that you were *not* frightened for your life, as you testified earlier, that you didn't cry and lose your water before the cars swerved?"

Patti sat up and blinked, wide-eyed.

"Why—no. I *was* scared and that did happen. But Nicky was right all along. And I guess I was wrong, because we survived without a scratch."

Perkouri smirked. "Yes. You survived but the Buzzbee brothers did not. Did they?"

Patti stared at him. "No sir, they didn't."

"Miss Slater. You testified previously that you and the defendant went skinny-dipping and '*were intimate*' in a swimming pool at the Outdoor Living Centre, did you not?"

Patti gulped. "Yes sir."

"And that the defendant then threw you over for someone else. Isn't that right?"

"Well … I suppose so. Yes sir."

"Have you been intimate with the defendant since you last testified?"

"*No sir, I have not*." Pattii sat up straighter.

Franco swallowed a grin.

"Well did it ever occur to you that maybe the defendant was intimate with you to keep you quiet in his behalf?"

Patti did a double-take—"What?"

"Is it possible that, knowing how you felt about *playing chicken* while waiting for the Buzzbees as "*the Indians had waited for Custer at the Little Big Horn*" as you testified, isn't it possible the defendant satisfied you that night in the pool, solely to keep you from saying anything about your feelings on the accident? Keep you from incriminating him?"

Like Terri before her, Patti sat dumb-founded by the same question, unable to respond. She stared at Perkouri. Then at Nicky. Beside him, Nick barely shook his head.

"No. He wouldn't. Not for that reason. He may have done it because he was feeling guilty about neglecting me for Terri. Like I said before, he's fair and square. But I don't believe he'd do anything like that just to keep me quiet."

Beside him, Nick nodded ever so slightly. Franco smacked his leg under the table.

Patti added, "Gee! He didn't even know then that a case would be made against him. He had no idea. So no—the answer to your question is no—Sir."

Still angry, Perkouri leaned into Patti.

"Let's get some things straight Miss Slater once and for all." Patti blinked but held her tongue. "I'll summarize for you and you may interrupt me if I'm wrong, all right?"

"Objection, Your Honor. Let the prosecutor ask if he has a question."

"Overruled, for the present. If the Court believes the State is putting words in the mouth of the witness, your objection will be sustained. Proceed, Mister Perkouri."

Perkouri looked from judge to jury then back to Patti. He stood closer to Patti, placing his hands, at arm's length, on the witness box. When he spoke, Patti sat back away from him. Apprehension stole over her face.

"Fine. Miss Slater: You've testified you saw the defendant rip the distributor cap and wires from the victims' truck. You both heard and saw the Buzzbees threaten the defendant immediately thereafter and heard and saw the defendant's defiant responses to those threats. You identified the victims later as the same men who chased after you and the defendant in his car. The defendant evaded the victims by ducking up a farm lane with his car lights off. Once the Buzzbees passed by, you and the defendant were free to go. The defendant started to leave but stopped and, with his lights still off, turned around to face back in the direction the Buzzbees had gone, to wait in the dark of a driving rainstorm on a deserted, treacherous country road. When the Buzzbees returned, the defendant started towards them slowly. You screamed, 'Don't play chicken with them' and were slapped in the thigh for your efforts. The defendant drove towards the Buzzbees who swerved into your lane. With his lights still off, the defendant increased his speed. As the two cars approached a head-on collision in the storm, the defendant threw on his lights and pumped his high beams. You were so frightened that you lost your water. At the last instant possible, the two cars swerved left, narrowly avoiding each other. After stopping and watching the Buzzbee brothers wreck and burn to death, you said the defendant 'waited for them back there like Crazy Horse waited for Custer.'

"Now Miss Slater, is my summary of these facts, as you have testified, true or not?"

Sniffling, Patti looked toward Franco.

"Miss Slater, defense counsel cannot help you answer. Now. Are these facts, as you have stated them, here, under oath, *true or not?*"

Patti's lower lip quavered, "Yes but—"

"That is enough. Your 'yes' is more than sufficient. Now, Miss Slater. If the defendant had fled—not turned around—would we be here today? Would those boys still be alive?"

Patti inhaled. Franco watched her modest chest heave. Patti looked at him and back to Perkouri. She mumbled. "I suppose there'd be no need to be here. Whether they'd be alive or not now I don't know." Lifting her head to speak clearly, she said. "They were bad boys—'muy malo,' as Terri said. They might have gotten theirs anyway by now."

Perkouri: "But we will never know that *now*. Will we Miss Slater?"

"No, I guess not."

Silence hung over the courtroom for several seconds as Perkouri stared at the jury. More to the jurors than to Patti, he said, "No, we'll never know that now. Perkouri paused for effect. The jury waited. They seemed unsure but concerned—apprehensive.

"Now, you just apologized to the defendant, did you not Miss Slater? Pleading that he not 'think bad' of you, I believe is how you put it?"

Patti nodded. "Yes, I just said that."

"Yes, so it means a great deal to you that the defendant not think bad of you, more so than it does to regret the loss of the victims—the scorched Buzzbee brothers?"

"Objection, Your Honor, argumentative, prejudicial."

"Overruled. The witness will answer."

Patti looked at the judge then Franco then Nick, and Ryz'n and finally, back to Perkouri. She sat up straight.

"What happened to those boys was terrible. It was the most gruesome think I ever saw. I wish they were alive. But Nicky is innocent."

The judge asked if the State had any more questions. Perkouri said he didn't. The beet red color had drained from his pallor. He was calm, but returned solemnly to his chair. Franco was confident. He couldn't resist winking and nudging Nick with his elbow.

"Mister Vamia? Is the defense ready to close or do you wish to redirect?"

"Yes Your Honor, I have some questions for the witness."

"Proceed."

He asked permission again to approach Patti. The judge granted his request. Buttoning his suit coat, Franco walked toward Patti stopping just before her at the witness box rail.

"Tell me Patti. Would the Buzzbee brothers be alive and would we be here now, if they had *not* chased you and Nick?"

Perkouri: "Objection, calls for a conclusion."

"The State was just granted a similar question. Overruled. The witness will answer."

Patti furrowed her brow. "Well. Sure, I guess so."

"Would they be alive if they had stayed in their own lane, and not driven straight for the defendant in his, with their hi-beams shining in the defendant's face, blinding him?"

"You mean if they had stayed in their own lane and just gone on past us?"

"Yes, that's precisely what I mean."

"Well, sure. I mean they wouldn't have wrecked and died." Smiling, he tapped the top of the witness box twice. "Thank you Patti. I have no more questions, Your Honor."

Patti looked toward Laurene, who looked to Perkouri. When the pecker shook his head then ignored her, Laurene nodded that Patti may step down.

Franco followed her to his seat. When Patti pushed through the bar gate, Ryz'n beamed at her and slid over forcing the Sheebooms to scoot aside. Ryz'n pointed to the empty space she'd made between her and her mom. Patti sat down between them. Still beaming, Ryz'n tapped Patti's thigh.

Laurene asked if the defense was ready to rest. Franco stood.

"Uh, yes. If it please the Court, Your Honor, the defense begs the Court's ruling on defense's petition to acquit my client on all charges not already pled."

"Very well. The Court has reviewed the defense motion thoroughly and consents to acquit as to the greater charges of first and second degree murder. The allegations as to the lesser offenses stand, as charged by the State. "

"The State objects Your Honor," said Perkouri, rising behind his table. "The State has made a case for murder. The jury should be permitted to consider those allegations."

Laurene glared at Perkouri. Franco would not want to be in the pecker-head's shoes standing under her withering gaze.

"In the eyes of the Court, the State has failed to make a case for murder under Maryland law. The defendant is thus acquitted of those charges. Your objection is overruled Counselor."

"Exception!" — "Noted!"

Even behind her thick glasses, Franco could see Laurene's lovely Eurasian peepers boring into Perkouri. Recalling Laurene's admonition not to test her in this matter, Franco considered whether he should object to her refusal to acquit on manslaughter. If he failed to object, the jury, as well as a potential appellate court, might conclude the defense didn't believe strongly in the acquittal motion. On the other hand, if he did object and was overruled, the jury might conclude Laurene believed the kid to be guilty. And then, he sure didn't want to tick off Laurene further. If Nick *were* found guilty, Franco was counting on her to give the kid, as a first-time offender, a light sentence. Maybe even suspend it all together. When Laurene glanced his way, he kept mute.

Turning to the jury, Laurene said: "Members of the jury. The Court's acquittal of the murder charges means, you will *not* be allowed to consider those charges in your verdict. This ruling implies neither guilt nor innocence on the remaining allegations. Those issues you will decide when you retire to consider your verdict. Do you understand how the Court's ruling affects your duty?" They nodded, as one, some murmuring, "Yes." Laurene asked if anyone did not understand. They shook their heads in silence. "Very well. Let the record shows the jury members understand the Court's instructions."

It looked to Franco as if many of the jurors were relieved by the judge's ruling. Good. It confirmed his decision to make no objection, lest he provoke Laurene.

"We'll proceed to closing arguments. Mister Perkouri, you may close now."

Nick whispered, "I thought you said she'd drop all charges after Patti testified?"

He blinked. "Well, I hoped she might. But trust me Nick, this is good for us. She's on our side. I could tell from our meeting in chambers. Besides, this is a good jury for us. I can just sense it." Smiling, he winked at Nick.

Franco thought some of the apprehension melted from the kid's face. He reached under the table to pull his notes for the closing argument from his briefcase. He noticed Perkouri going over his notes—the asshole!

~ Chapter 35: Closing Arguments ~

Laurene told the officer at the back of the courtroom to let any witnesses waiting outside enter, if they wished. Franco watched his adversary rise slowly from his seat, buttoning his grey flannel suit coat over his red and silver diagonally-striped tie and starched white dress shirt. He noticed Mr. Truley and the Widdah, who had been waiting to be re-called, enter court. Perkouri had calmed. He removed his glasses deliberately, placing them inside his coat in his shirt pocket, revealing his beady eyes. He walked slowly toward the jury box, head down, stroking his chin between his thumb and forefingers and shaking his head. When he got within a yard of the jury box, he halted to eyeball the jury.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: Facts, motive and the defendant's character. These are the salient factors you must consider in determining your verdict in the matter before you. We shall review each of them now. As to the facts—

It is a fact the defendant does not contest he illegally purchased alcoholic beverages for himself and his underage friends and partook with them of those illegal drinks—illegal for all of them.

It is a fact there was bad blood between the defendant and the victims—Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee. Eyewitnesses observed the victims enter the latrine alone with the defendant and emerge badly beaten.

It is an uncontested fact that the defendant vandalized the victims' vehicle.

It is a fact that eyewitnesses both saw and heard the victims threaten to kill the defendant.

It is a fact that eyewitnesses testified the defendant turned his powerful Pontiac around to wait for the victims—the Buzzbee brothers—and proceeded toward them with his headlights off in a driving rainstorm on a treacherous road.

It is a fact that eyewitnesses testified that just a few weeks prior, the defendant had pulled a similar stunt on his scooter under some power lines with two other victims, members of his baseball team.

It is a fact that eyewitnesses testified the defendant fled the scene after the accident without waiting for the authorities to arrive.

It is a fact that the defendant consulted a criminal lawyer and fled the state.

It is a fact that the State's expert witness, who reviewed the accident scene within a month of the accident, could not identify the tire marks involved in the accident. But an expert accident investigator *paid* by the defense could identify such markings to recreate the accident some *two months* after the accident.

It is also a fact, as our county police officers have testified, that felony crime in our county has risen to new heights five of the last seven years and that a major contributor to this wave of lawlessness stems from teens on the cusp of manhood.

These facts are uncontested ladies and gentlemen—yes—*uncontested.*

Now, as to motive, as I said, the State has shown, and the defense has not disputed, there was bad blood between the defendant and the victims. Certainly, enough for the defendant to wish to harm or, at least inadvertently, cause harm to the victims—the Buzzbee brothers.

And, there is the issue of the defendant's character—his history, so to speak.

That history speaks for itself. Several young women testified to having had illicit sexual relations with the defendant. And the father of one, formerly innocent, neophyte to the rogue's underage advances, described the defendant's perverse and duplicitous nature in no uncertain terms. The Reverend Rogers stated the defendant had duped both him and his wife completely. Other sworn testimony has disclosed the defendant was involved in some of the most infamous, heinous slaughters this country has ever witnessed. Three young men—the defendant's classmates— testified to being assaulted and battered by him. One was hospitalized after being savagely beaten by the defendant.

Can we doubt the defendant is the hedonistic narcissist this trial has shown him to be? Can we doubt he ran the victim's off the road causing their gruesome deaths? I beg you, ladies and gentlemen, find the defendant guilty, as charged.

Perkouri hung onto the rail of the jury box beside Juror Number One, scanning and holding his stare upon all the jurors for several seconds. The jury stared back. The prosecutor turned to the judge and nodded. Laurene thanked him. The courtroom was silent as the prosecutor returned to his seat. Beside him, Franco felt the kid's eyes upon him. He turned to Nick and winked. Nick looked a like a lamb before the slaughter. He patted Nick's arm. "Don't worry kid, it's our turn now," he whispered.

"Mister Vamia," said Laurene. "The defense may close now."

"Yes Your Honor. If it pleases the Court Your Honor, defense would appreciate a minute to consult its notes."

"Take your time Counselor. The Court can wait a minute or two."

He nodded. "Thank you, Your Honor."

Franco bent over his hen scratches from the previous night, flipping from page to page, commending different points to memory, circling a point here and asterisking one there. About finished, he noticed Nick seated beside him with a dour look on his face. He interrupted his review to lean over to the kid, whispering to ask what was wrong. Nick shook his head, saying only that he was counting on him. He acknowledged the boy with another reassuring wink for good luck.

When Franco finished reviewing his notes, he noticed Perkouri was reviewing a legal pad as well, annotating pages with quick markings flipping through the pages on his desk. Franco laid down his notes and stood to face Laurene. Winking at Nick again, he patted the boy on the shoulder. Then he nodded to the kid's parents and Ryz'n sitting behind him. Nick's dad returned his nod. Franco pivoted toward the bench. He was ready.

"Your Honor, the defense is ready to close now."

"Very well. Please proceed then, Counselor."

Franco stepped around the table, halfway between it and the jury box, where he stopped.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: The State has presented a multitude of facts, largely uncontested by the defense, it's true—some, which under scrutiny, have little or no bearing whatsoever on this case. I mean [chuckling] I'm surprised the *interim* State's Attorney did not throw in a few others—such as the world is round or the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. [Traces of faint smiles cross some of the juror's faces, increasing his confidence.]

So, let us shed some light on these undisputed facts. Let us review them in their proper context. So that we might reason clearly on the serious matter before us, one that will determine the guilt or innocence of this seventeen year-old boy, who is facing a potentially lengthy prison sentence, should you be mistaken in your judgment of him. [He pauses to make sure they are with him—they are.]

First, the State has uncontroverted eyewitness testimony that this boy illegally consumed alcoholic beverages on the night of the accident. My client does not contest the allegation. But, as the county coroner testified, the amount of alcohol he drank, some four and a half hours before the accident, was no longer present in his system at the time of the accident, negating criminal negligence on his part.

Second, the State alleges that the accused engaged in brutal altercations with the accident victims in Truley's Bar and Grill earlier that evening. And that these altercations resulted in, not only disturbing the peace, but also constituted felony assault and battery upon the Buzzbee brothers by my client. Yet, no proof has been given of these charges, other than the Buzzbees' appearance after they left the rest rooms. Eyewitnesses at the bar that night said no such assault or battery was ever witnessed. No peace was disturbed or noted subsequently by any of those involved. If anything, by leading the Buzzbees to the restrooms, the defendant went out of his way to avoid disturbing the peace of the bar room. Mister Truley admitted as much. And, as Mister Johnson stated, for all he knew, the Buzzbees could have slipped and fallen in the restrooms, inflicting their injuries upon themselves. After all, witnesses said the brothers were drunk or close to it. And, although assaults have been alleged but not proven against my client, given the size and background of the Buzzbees, their violent criminal records vis-à-vis my client, is there anyone with a bit of common sense who could say, *if* my client *were* in fact involved in a physical altercation with those brothers, that the accused, all five feet six inches and one hundred and thirty-five pounds of him, had a right to defend himself against a pair of ex-convicts, who each towered over him and outweighed him by seventy pounds or more?

Third, the State alleges that Nick maliciously destroyed private property, to wit: ripping out the distributor cap and wires of the Buzzbees' pickup truck and pouring oil over the front seat of the cab. Of course, he did so to protect himself and his two female passengers from being pursued by the notorious ex-convicts.

And those fears were later proven justified, as the evidence has shown. Yet again, my client does not contest this allegation, having so pled before this Court. So you need not consider the misdemeanor charges of under age drinking or destruction of private property in your deliberations. Judge Ballante, in her wisdom, will decide what sentence the Court shall pass on my client for those petty grievances against the State. So let us move on.

Fourth: As to the felony charge of leaving the scene of an accident that resulted in death, I ask you *what* accident was that? In his mind, my client had just *avoided* an accident. He didn't cause one. His car never so much as grazed the Buzzbees' vehicle. He was driving under control in treacherous conditions. Unlike Arlo Buzzbee, enough so to stop and avoid killing himself and his passengers. That fact is substantiated by the testimony of the only other two eyewitnesses, who both testified that my client was sober, driving under the speed limit and in his lane with his lights on in time to avoid an accident. He was quick-witted and sober enough to avoid a collision. The defense accident expert agreed, finding Arlo Buzzbee, not my client, as the offending speeder. And the county coroner determined that Arlo Buzzbee, and not my client, was legally drunk at the wheel. These are also facts, you should consider for your verdict.

Realizing there was nothing he could do for the Buzzbees after the crash and, at the insistent urging of Miss Slater, the boy *momentarily* left the scene of the *Buzzbee's* accident—*their accident—not* my client's. Yet, even though the lad did not cause the wreck, he fulfilled the *intent* of the law to remain at the scene. Because within eight minutes of the accident he phoned the police to report the Buzzbees' wreck, its location and the dangerous situation left by the wreck. But, as if that weren't enough, the boy, like Miss Slater here today under an attack of conscience, dutifully returned to inform police on the scene by that time of what had transpired. Yet, as you heard, the officer directing traffic refused to hear the boy out, even threatened him with a citation if he did not leave immediately. So, my client obeyed the officer's instructions. Now, at this point, no one had seen or heard my client's car. He could have gotten away free.

Totally free! Think of that ladies and gentlemen. Yes. And we would not be here today or, for that matter, for more than the last two weeks. See, no one, other than those in his car at the time, even knew my client was there.

But the boy had the good conscience to report the situation first to a priest and then to me at the recommendation of that priest. I reported the matter to the State's Attorney, who declined to pursue it, *until* the *interim* State's Attorney here, [he half-turns, extending an open hand towards his adversary] Mister Perkouri, decided to re-open the matter and here we are today. When called, my client dutifully and voluntarily returned to the county seat to meet with authorities.

[Shakes his head.]

My client's repeated persistent efforts to notify the authorities of the accident more than fulfilled the intent of the law to remain at the scene. Even though *he* did not cause the accident. Arlo Buzzbee did. As both eyewitnesses testified.

Fifth—and this is the key to this whole matter. [He holds up an outstretched hand to indicate the number five.] The State alleges that Nick's actions on the night of the accident, as well as previous incidents in his life, were sufficient to indicate the inner workings of his mind at the time of the incident. The State deduces erroneously that the boy willfully, intentionally, operated his motor vehicle in a recklessly negligent matter to run the Buzzbee boys off the road, directly or indirectly resulting in their tragic fates.

[Stepping toward the jury,] 'The inner workings of his mind' [and points to Nick] … '*The inner workings of his mind*.' Think of that for a minute.

The State is saying that it knows exactly what was going on in my client's mind just before, during and after the accident. Yet, the *only* eyewitnesses to the event, other than my client, have testified that Nick was calm and tranquil in the moments leading up to the accident. They have both, one rather late I grant, testified that he did not try to run those ex-cons off the road. He drove safely under terrible conditions. They *both* said so. It was Arlo Buzzbee who was legally drunk and grossly negligent, not this boy. Rather *they*—the Buzzbee brothers—tried to, and did, run my client off the road. Yes. *Both eyewitnesses testified to this fact.* And it was only by the grace of God and my client's quick reflexes that no one in the boy's car was harmed. And why did Miss Slater change her mind?

[He extends a hand toward Patti, seated behind Nick next to Ryz'n.]

Because, she had an attack of conscience. Patti Slater did the right thing. It took great courage and honesty for her to come forward to admit her mistake in open court, baring herself to the recriminations of the State. Yet, both she and Miss Schieffer, the only eyewitnesses other than my client mind you, have testified that Nick operated his car in a responsible manner that night, sticking to his lane and driving under the speed limit on a treacherous, stormy road, turning his lights back on in time to prevent an accident, even pumping his brite-lites in the Buzzbees' faces to warn the ex-convicts out of his lane. In fact, both eyewitnesses testified it was the Buzzbees' vehicle, which tried and did run them and my client off the road. They both said that. My client never told them what he was thinking, except to say he felt an inner urge to do what he did. Later, within two hours after the accident, he confessed to both Miss Schieffer and Father Vizconni that he had *felt* an inner voice urging him to act thusly.

Now. You might ask: Why hasn't the boy taken the stand in his own defense?

[Turning with hands outstretched towards Nick, Franco pivots back toward the jury, stepping slowly backwards in front of the jury box, peering into the face of each juror, his left hand sliding back along the front jury box railing.]

… Why didn't the boy speak up here in court to defend himself? … *Why*?

[Stopping beside the foreman, but eyeing all the members, Franco leans forward with his left hand on the rail.]

Well, quite simply ladies and gentlemen, because I advised him not to. [Backing off.] Yes. That's right. *I* advised him not to. So you might ask, why would you do that, Counselor? Well, I'll tell you why. You have seen why, right

before your eyes, played out in this very courtroom. You have seen the State dredge up every malcontent, every person who's ever borne my client a grudge, every lover he has ever had—and, oh yes, he has had many [smiling]—to undermine the boy's character in your eyes. How much more would the State have sought to torpedo this lad on matters that have nothing to do with the accident, if the interim State's Attorney had that chance at him on the stand?

The Reverend Rogers testified that this boy is a cad, a conniving Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde who duped and despoiled his unsuspecting daughter. Because of his position as a man of the cloth, you may be persuaded to accept his *opinion*. Of course, his biased testimony had absolutely nothing to do with the charges at bar in this case. And you may, as I did, notice that the good minister left the witness stand an enlightened man, who had come to grips with his own complicity in his daughter's fall from grace. To wit: had he a closer relationship with her, been more in tune with her thoughts and needs, she may well still be unspoiled today; never mind, however happy she may be in her current state.

But the boy in the dock is not on trial here for his moral lapses in the sexual realm. No. His obvious weakness when it comes to restraining himself with the opposite sex is not the issue here. The State has not charged this boy with any manner of sexual offense. None whatsoever. Though, had you heard their case without the benefit of knowing the charges, you might well wonder what those charges were exactly. The State has turned this trial into a regular Peyton Place. The boy's personal history is not at issue here, *except* as it relates to the events of the night and early morning hours of June twenty-ninth and thirtieth of this year.

Remember the charges the State has levied and remain against this boy: felony manslaughter, assault and battery, leaving the scene of an accident, and a misdemeanor for disturbing the peace. *Those* are the matters for your consideration at the bar, not what you may think of him personally regarding his sexual largesse. [Franco stares at the young women grouped in the two rows to his right.] Even though, as you have heard, those encounters were by mutual consent, and from all we have heard, were mutually gratifying to all parties involved. [He holds the gaze of the young female jurors before turning his attention back to the rest of the jury, letting the young women gaze upon Nick.]

The fact that this boy is sufficiently audacious and successful at fulfilling fantasies other boys his age only dream of, must not be held against him because they have *absolutely nothing to do with this case.* [He smacks the top of the box rail with both hands, while glaring at the older jurors.] But, as much as the prosecution would like to focus your attention in that area, my client's amorous proclivity towards the fairer sex is *not* what is at issue here. And *must not* be considered in your deliberations. [He smacks the jury box rail with his open palm.] You *must* lay those thoughts aside. To consider the true matters at the bar honestly, you must place such thoughts in a box and lock them away. If you cannot divorce the boy's sexual môrés from the State's allegations, you should consider recusing yourself from this jury. [He pauses for his remarks to sink in.]

Now, both the State and the defense have presented many *character* witnesses in support of their case. For relevance sake, I suggest you consider only three of them. Three character witnesses who testified *both* for the State *and* for the defense, though two did so perhaps unknowingly. The first is the boy's principal Mister Marant. Here is a professional educator, whose job it is to understand, teach and relate to adolescents everyday. What did he say of Nick? That he was a Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde, as did the obviously biased Mister Rodgers? *No.* The principal said Nick is a top student, and a gifted athlete and musician who helped garner state recognition for his school and that he is a *playfully mischievous* lad. Yet, being playfully mischievous is a far cry from being Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde.

And there is Miss Kilpatrick, who granted, had mixed motives for testifying. But during her testimony, she pointed out a salient fact, which I hope did not escape your attention. Despite all her attempts at persuasion, all her cute seductions, her charms if you will, she could never convince the boy to smoke marijuana with her. And further, that he prohibits members of his band from smoking the forbidden weed as well. Why? Because she said that he knew it was against the law. *Against the law*, ladies and gentleman. The boy knows smoking marijuana is against the law, so he doesn't do it and prevents others from breaking the law in this regard, as well. This is the kind of conscientious boy, who stands before you in the dock. Not a Doctorr Jekyll and Mister Hyde.

And then there is Allena Larrabee. If you really want to understand the heart and mind of my client, all you need do is listen to her testimony, when she spoke so movingly of Nick's compassion and youthful chivalry. He was willing to give his life to her, to cover for her mistake with another, just to help her. That's the kind of selfless, loving individual this boy is. How much farther from Mister Hyde could he be? [Franco pauses for his remarks to settle upon the jury.]

Now. The youth has not denied the only truly factual matters among the allegations. To wit: those misdemeanors with which he was charged and to which he has pled. So, to get back to the question I posed earlier. Why did I advise my client against taking the stand in his own defense?

You have seen why. The prosecutor calls it character history. *History?* More like character assassination. You have seen how the prosecution has attempted to assassinate this boy's character and those with whom he associates. What do you think the State would have done, had this boy taken the stand? How much further would the State have gone to obfuscate the real issues here at bar to assassinate not only his character but those of his lovers, perhaps even others who have not testified here, who were spared potential embarrassment by his silence?

And *if* the youth *had* taken the stand—to be truthful, to obey the *law—my* client would have had to respond honestly to all the State's questions, no matter how far-ranging. Because, to knowingly testify falsely, would be what? —*Yes! Against the law*—something this conscientious boy refuses to do.

The State, in its eager obsession to prove its case, has embarrassed publicly a promising school teacher, a recently remarried widow and mother of two, a

decorated airman and several, blossoming teen coeds. Isn't that enough carnage for one erroneous trial? Must the boy also testify further about his private liaisons, which have no business being made public in the first place? Would any of you care to have *your* private lives scrutinized publicly in such an open display? *Think about that*, if you will ladies and gentlemen.

[He drills the jury. Then, nodding, he steps back from the rail.]

And, [pausing for effect] it *could* happen to you, you know? Yes. It could happen to any of us. Why? How? Just as you have heard in this case—because of *prosecutorial discretion*. Just as the *interim* State's attorney has used that discretion to prosecute a juvenile in adult court, when his predecessor would not. And for what purpose? [Franco spreads his arms out wide from his sides.]

To what purpose? Have you asked yourselves that? [Lets his arms drop.]

To seek justice for the State in the tragic, gruesome deaths—self-inflicted mind you, according to eyewitness testimony—of two violent ex-convicts? Who, according to witnesses for the State had terrorized not only them but also their neighbors in the county since their release from prison last spring? Is that what this trial is really about? I ask you.

[Looking at the jurors' faces, he knows he's getting to them. He nods.]

Or is this trial more about who will be the next full time State's Attorney in Maryland's Circuit Court for R.G. County? [Pivoting toward the reporters in the back of the gallery.]

Perkouri jumped to his feet, almost screaming: "Objection, Your Honor." The State resents the implication that this trial is being used for any other reason than to seek justice in this matter by removing a violent, young criminal offender from our streets."

Laurene banged her gavel, calling for order. "Mister Perkouri, sit down sir. But the Court sustains your objection. And you Mister Vamia are dangerously close to breaching contempt in the eyes of this court. You will stick to the facts of the case and the allegations as charged and retreat from this line of argument or suffer the consequences."

"I apologize for any offense I may have given the Court in my zeal to defend this embattled youth, Your Honor."

"Very well, but don't let it happen again Counselor." Franco felt her stern glare.

"Yes, Your Honor."

He nodded, half-bowing first towards her and then to the jury but pointedly skipping Perkouri. He returned his attention to the jury when Laurene bid him to proceed.

Now. There is yet another fact, more of an allusion I would say by the State during the trial, pertaining to the upward rise in juvenile delinquency in the county. The State has implied this trial may set a precedent for deterring juvenile violence in the future with a guilty verdict against this boy now. What the prosecutor doesn't tell you, but has been indicated by the testimony of defense

witnesses, is that, over the last several years, we have been living in one of the fastest growing counties in the nation. Not just in this state, mind you, but in the entire country!

Of course, juvenile crime is on the increase. *All* crime is on the increase. There are more people living here than ever before. The county is growing at an alarming rate and the State is hard-pressed to deal with all the ramifications from that growth, not just with crime but also with schools, hospitals and services of all kinds. You have learned the county has opened six, brand new high schools in as many years to keep up with this youth population explosion. And yet, we don't have enough schools to accommodate our teenagers. Two more high schools will open next year. That's better than one new high school a year in the last seven years. So don't be fooled by the State's implications regarding the increase in juvenile offenses. But that rise in crime doesn't mean we should *make this boy a scapegoat* for the county's rapid growth and all the attending repercussions.

Now ladies and gentlemen, where the defense has not challenged the facts presented in this matter, it is because those facts *are irrelevant* to the case.

Where the defense has challenged facts in contention, or the sworn testimony of prosecution witnesses, it has impugned or impeached them in every instance, by revealing the true nature of those facts or the ulterior motives of the hostile witnesses towards my client. One witness, one key eyewitness under a crisis of conscience, had the courage to come forward at great personal chagrin to amend her testimony so you may have the full and unadulterated truth.

And I would hope that those other witnesses for the State, who had their own personal reasons or grudges for testifying against the accused, would not lead you astray. And, as for the testimony of *Mister* Toombes—the jailhouse snitch. [He waves his hand disdainfully toward the prosecutor's table.] Or the dog-catcher who lost his deputy position because he failed to heed my client's warning and the two Ransom Clan hippies? You need only consider Toombes' contradicted testimony, his criminal record and his motivation for testifying, as well as that of the dog-catcher and the two Clan girls. Clearly, the Los Angeles Deputy District Attorney and the Detective Lieutenant of the Los Angeles Police Department's Homicide Division are more credible than they. Enough said.

There is one last fact that the State has presented magnificently and, because its presentation was so magnificent in its horror and gory detail, the defense feels compelled to address it now. That fact is the gruesome, horrific news footage of the violent deaths of Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee.

To be sure, they died violently, tragically, gruesomely. Who that has viewed that footage and the corresponding still photographs of the ghastly crash scene could ever forget them? I know I can't. [He stares at the juror who threw up after viewing the film.] Nor can my young client, as he has related to me. But, ladies and gentlemen — [he leans both hands on the rail again] — I beg you. Do not let the grisly, tragic manner of their deaths, which again, according to eyewitness testimony, the Buzzbees inflicted upon themselves, prejudice you against this youth. *This boy did not cause that accident. The Buzzbees caused their own*

deaths, and no one else. Both eyewitnesses testified to that fact. And, as the coroner stated, he found an alcohol level in Arlo's body at the time of the accident, which far exceeded that of the legal driving limit. It was *Arlo Buzzbee*, who was *intoxicated*, who was *negligent,* and who brought about his and his brother's terrible demise. *Not this boy in the dock!* [He extends a hand to Nick.]

In closing, and before I release you to the prosecutor—as you know in our system of justice the State gets to take both the first and last shots at the accused—I ask that you study this boy in the dock. After you impartially consider the facts, those that apply, and disregard those that don't, can you *honestly* say that the State has proved its case against Nick Sheeboom beyond a reasonable doubt? I am not referring to the boy's questionable sexual môrés, which are not and *must not* be on trial here mind you, but rather to the allegations the State has made against this youth. When you consider the charges, I can't and don't believe you will find this boy guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

In fact, I doubt you will find him guilty at all … In fact, you may be posing in your minds now the very question I mentioned to you in my opening statement. That is: how did this case, so lacking in evidence and yet so prejudicial to this youth, ever come to trial in adult court in the first place? Please. Do your duty. Find this boy *not* guilty, noting the *interim* state prosecutor's discretion could extend to any of us.

Franco lingered over the jury box rail, making eye contact with each juror in turn, hoping each one would feel the full, personal effect of his last remark. "Thank you," he said quietly. Then he pivoted to stroll back to his chair. Winking at Nick, he nodded to Nick's dad in the first row of the gallery. Mr. Sheeboom, with his chin high and his arms folded across his chest, nodded in return. The kid pulled out the chair for him. Sitting down, Franco patted Nick confidently on the back. The kid winked and grinned.

"Does the State wish to rebut?"

Perkouri rose buttoning his suit coat and flattening his tie inside it.

"Yes, Your Honor, it does." She nodded. "Please proceed then Counselor."

As Perkouri rose and approached the jury, Nick tugged at his suit sleeve whispering, "What's goin' on Franco? He already had his ups."

"The State always has the option of rebutting the defense. That's the way it works."

"Don't seem fair."

"Think of it like baseball Nick. If the visiting team has the lead, the home team gets to bat in the bottom half of the last inning."

"So, you think we're winning, hunh?"

"Well, I sure hope so. Don't you think I did well for you?"

"Well sure, but that Prick's gettin' his ups—first and last. I don'—"

Ladies and gentlemen, law-abiding citizens like you have no reason to fear the State. No reason whatsoever. Now: Facts. Motive. History. Let's revisit them, shall we?

One [Perkouri raises his right fist to the jury and holds up his pinky, while holding his thumb over his other three fingers against his palm, permitting the jury to see only the back of his hand and the lone raised pinky.]: The defendant had been drinking alcoholic beverages, illegally for him as well as for the two female eyewitnesses he provided them to, before the accident. And defense counsel said the defendant wouldn't break the law. You've both seen and heard him plead in open court before you that he doesn't deny breaking the law for underage drinking and destruction of private property. So much for that!

Two [raising his right ring finger]: The defendant engaged in brutal altercations with the victims earlier in the evening before the accident. There were eyewitnesses to the circumstantial evidence which was irrefutable that the victims—the Buzzbee brothers—went into the latrine in fine shape and came out rather mauled. Slipping on a bar of soap notwithstanding, I mean come on, really. [A smug smile creeps over Perkouri's face.] Two bars of soap felled those two men in different bathrooms and inflicted the severity of wounds described in this case? [Perkouri shakes his head.] No. I won't insult your intelligence with that. [His smile vanishes, replaced by an annoyed frown.] But defense council has. Hasn't he? It should be obvious to all of us that the defendant, who, as we have learned from undisputed testimony, is well-versed in martial arts and techniques of self-defense, played a hand in those maulings. Who else went into the rest rooms with those boys? No one. The State has produced several witnesses who have testified to the defendant's violent personality. How, time after time, he has employed his knowledge and skill of martial arts to pummel into submission anyone he chooses.

Three [adding his middle finger on high]: And after those altercations at the road house, eyewitnesses testified the defendant not only maliciously destroyed the victim's private property but he also watched with glee, taunting them over his achievements, which prompted them to threaten loudly to kill him.

Four [raising his right index finger, leaving only his thumb against his palm]: So, with those death threats undoubtedly ringing in his ears, later, in an act of passive aggression, and with a wanton disregard for the potential of taking human life, the defendant calmly but *recklessly*, turned around and waited for his victims to come back to him, at perhaps the most dangerous spot on the most deadly road in the county, in the dark of night during a driving rainstorm with his headlights off. Then knowing, *knowing ladies and gentlemen, knowing* that things were about *to get rough,* because he could *just feel it*—his own words ladies and gentlemen, as both eyewitnesses have testified—the defendant had Miss Slater get in the back seat to buckle up for safety. And, just before the defendant headed the car forward towards the victims with his lights off, he told Miss Schieffer, if she knew any prayers; then, was a good time to say them. Again, *his* words as sworn to by Miss Schieffer, the star witness for the defense.

Five [adding his thumb, so that his entire right hand opened flat out, palm towards him]: That, in reckless, criminal negligence, the defendant directed his unlit, Pontiac convertible sedan, with the power of three hundred and thirty-three horses under its hood, head-on at the victims as if it were a battering ram.

Six: [He raises the back of his left fist and pinky to the jury, even with his still open right hand.] That the defendant turned his lights on late, pumping his brite-lites, *blinding* the Buzzbees and causing them to skid out of control off the road smack into a power pole holding a transformer that fell and exploded upon them, torturing and burning them to death in a most gruesome fashion.

And that seven [adding his left ring finger to the rest]: The defendant had set a precedent for these very actions just weeks earlier under the power lines on his scooter, when he could have escaped also but, instead, turned around to run down two pursuers who were on foot. As the eyewitness of that incident, quoting the defendant's own words, said—and I quote, "*to teach them a lesson.*" End quote.

Eight [adding his left middle finger]: The defendant voluntarily left the scene of the accident under scrutiny here, contrary to the laws of this state. The dual eyewitness testimony, which counsel for the defense showcases with every other breath, proved that fact. It is *un-dis-puted*—ladies and gentlemen— *un-dis-puted*.

And nine [raising his left index finger to the others]: Realizing his complicity in these actions, rather than turning himself into the police, the defendant consulted a criminal lawyer to see what he should do, and then fled the state.

And then, ten: [adding his left thumb so that both hands rise before him for all to see, palms open flat out towards him]: There are the mysterious tire marks, unseen and undiscovered by the State's expert accident witness *one month* after the accident. Unseen and undiscovered by any eyewitnesses. Yet, allegedly uncovered *two months after* the accident by a witness *paid* by the defense to discover them. And there is more, though I don't intend to remove my shoes and socks to count on my toes—

"We all thank you for that Counselor," cracked Franco, drawing a smirk even from Perkouri. As the courtroom snickered, Laurene banged her gavel to quiet them. She admonished him and asked Perkouri to proceed. Perkouri faced the jury.

These are *un-dis-puted facts* ladies and gentlemen. [Perkouri turns his hands around to press them forward, palms outward, toward the jurors.]

Not one—or two—or five—but *TEN! Count them,* ten *facts*! [Perkouri repeatedly balls his hands into fists and opens them, flashing the jury as if his hands and fingers were a neon sign.] That prove beyond a reasonable doubt that this young man not only by his reckless negligence committed the crimes the State has alleged, but also that he is a menace to our county and deserves to be removed from its streets before he kills someone else, maybe one of us.

[Perkouri lowers his hands then raises a single forefinger.]

And though this has nothing to do with the accident per se, but does reflect adversely on the defendant's moral character and his amoral lifestyle in general, the defendant has wantonly consorted with older women and deflowered several teenage girls. Once again, *un-dis-puted* facts.

[The older, male jurors shift uncomfortably in their seats.]

The only issue in dispute here concerns whether or not the defendant's actions were voluntary or involuntary. Remember, the boy could have escaped without harming anyone; but instead, intentionally and recklessly turned his powerful automobile around with its lights off and a V-eight engine with its three-hundred and thirty-three horses under the hood, and launched said vehicle at the victims' car. And to what purpose?

[Perkouri also spreads his arms wide to his sides before dropping them.]

Again, using the defendant's own words as Miss Larrabee—one of his myriad of lovers—quoted him, describing his intentions: "*To teach them a lesson*."

Instead, the defense has relied on a shameless tactic, normally reserved for a not guilty plea by reason of insanity, though the defense has not invoked that plea here, so you may not consider it. And that is that the defendant heard or *felt* a voice inside of him, instructing him to act in such an irrational manner. A contrived an alibi, as weak as they come, and untenable for defense in this case.

To comprehend the mindset of the defendant before the accident, to gain an understanding of how he thinks and why, the State has brought forth many witnesses to testify to the defendant's suspect character. And I quote now the testimony of the Reverend Rodgers, a man in the business of knowing good from evil, who noted the defendant's character, and I quote: "*His Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde personality.*" I quote the Reverend because he did say that, did he not? I mean you heard him as did I, despite defense counsel's attempt to persuade you to ignore the good Reverend's testimony. And I never heard the minister retract his opinion, did you? [Pauses.] No. I didn't think so. Neither did I.

On the one hand, the defendant appears to be an angelic student/athlete. In reality, this trial has shown, as you may recall, as I mentioned in my opening argument, that the defendant William Nicholas *Shee*boom is an aggressive, vindictive, manipulative, narcissistic hedonist who has little regard for anyone other than himself. The State's witnesses have shown the defendant cares naught for those who might stand in the way of satisfying his lustful desires or vindictive ends. The State has produced several witnesses to testify not only as to the defendant's violent personality—how, as I stated, he has repeatedly used his knowledge and skill of martial arts to pummel into submission anyone he chooses—but also as to the many females he has despoiled.

Opposing counsel has asked you to ignore the defendant's actions beyond the narrow context of the charges at bar, to disregard actions that reveal his true nature. And look upon his client here, as if his choir boy demeanor and handsome features could dictate his guilt or innocence. I say, all right, look closely upon him, at his eyes. [Perkouri pauses to study the jurors staring Nick in the eye.] One

is an angelic blue and the other a demonic black. I put it to you ladies and gentlemen that those eyes are windows to his Jekyll-Hyde bi-polar soul.

Except for his violent flash attack on Mister Yikes right here in this very courtroom, the defendant has revealed only his courteous Doctor Jekyll persona to you here in court. Yet, if you meet him out on the street, on a dangerous dead man's curve, on a black stormy night, you may very well experience his dastardly Mister Hyde, as the Buzzbee brothers did. And not the gentlemanly forbearance he has displayed here in court. And that is why the State has brought this case to your attention. Not merely to gain justice for two county residents killed at the hands of the defendant. But also, to protect *you* from *him* in the coming years while hopefully, in his confinement, he will have pause to reconsider his actions and his lifestyle so that he might repent of his sins and rehabilitate himself to where he no longer is a danger to *us*.

Now, the State is compelled to address the alleged recantation of a witness. That would be Miss Patricia Ann Slater. Because her testimony is key for both sides in this case. I might say it is crucial. Defense counsel has presented Miss Slater as a noble young woman, who, by the courage of her convictions, came forward of her own accord to right, what in her youthful mind and adolescent body raging with driving hormones, confused by love and jealousy, was a grievous wrong. To wit: her statements regarding the defendant's state of mind leading up to that tragic, gruesome accident that killed two of our neighbors.

Miss Slater claims that her feelings for the defendant and his wandering attentions toward the other eyewitness—Miss Schieffer—clouded her original judgment when she first testified for the State against her former lover, the defendant. She further claims not to have been approached by the defendant, his family, his counsel, or any member of the defense team to amend her testimony. She says that she came forward on her own, strictly as a matter of conscience.

Really? A matter of conscience? Hmmm … Let's think about that, shall we?

Let's consider the circumstances of this young high school co-ed during the time in which she changed her mind. She was, and is, attending classes with the defendant and his friends. The defendant is a sports hero in her school. He is a dynamic Rock'n'Roll performer. His celebrity is school-wide. He is, we might surmise, what is known commonly as "a big man on campus." She has lost him, first to Miss Schieffer, and then to another. Her peers may be ostracizing her for her testimony. So naturally, she is having difficulty sleeping. Now, perhaps the defendant smiles at her one day in Homeroom, in class, or in passing. Perhaps, she apologizes and he, as he did here in court, says he doesn't blame her and smiles back—Doctor Jekyll again, you see? Though *he* did not approach *her*. And now she thinks about it, and to relieve her conscience, to be accepted again by her peers, she changes her story. In fact, you heard her apologize to the defendant, almost begging him to not, as she put it, "think bad" of her. So, if he doesn't think badly of her then maybe her classmates won't either. You see?

So, ladies and gentleman, which of Miss Slater's testimonies are we to believe? The first time when she was closer to the incident, to her initial deposition and

grand jury testimony was fresher in her mind, before she was subjected to the displeasure of her peers? And later, here in court, as you saw and heard? Or the second, after her testimony is known and she returns to school to suffer that displeasure and rejection and yearns, as all of us do, particularly during the vulnerable teen years, to be accepted? Possibly, even to win back the lover she had lost? Which do you think? [Perkouri pauses to arch his brow.]

Truly, the testimony of both eyewitnesses may be suspect to any reasonably discerning person. Why? Because both girls confessed their warm feelings for the defendant. Both admitted to a strong emotional, physical and romantic attachment to him. In fact, both admitted to engaging gladly in sexual intercourse with him. The young man *is* a handsome rogue. And if this trial has proved anything, it has proven that he has not only a penchant but also a facility, obviously, for fornicating with young women. 'A conniving cad,' as the Reverend Rogers testified.

And, given the defendant's sexual proclivities, his wanton, immoral sexual excesses, as has been described by those who know him, who knows what other perverted, lascivious acts beyond intercourse, in which they may have indulged? Such as that implied by the albeit, reluctant testimony of Reverend Rodgers.

To avoid catering to the prurient, and in deference to the members of the Court and those present in the gallery, the State refused to delve deeper into the wanton wickedness of the defendant. Yet, given these tame confessions, it is not unreasonable to assume the confused, adolescent feelings of the eyewitnesses—the two teens carry for the defendant—may have clouded their recollection of his actions leading up to the accident. Their admitted emotional and physical desires for him, which, combined with the hormones raging through their adolescent bodies, biased their testimonies in his favor. Consider that argument carefully, ladies and gentleman. Because, *if* that is true beyond a reasonable doubt, the defense has no case whatsoever. That's right—*no case at all*!

Since the defendant refused to take the stand in his own defense, the entire defense as to motive hinges on the testimony of these two, self-professed, be-smitten, young girls. The defendant is hiding behind their skirts and hopes that what he has done *beneath* those skirts will be sufficient to sway them to shield him from punishment. *BUT!* If you believe their testimony is questionable, you must consider the defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. There is no other option because the defense has no case. Nothing. As the able defense counselor admitted, the pertinent, salient facts of the case are: *Un-dis-puted!*

And there is yet another fact, which the State has disclosed, though I hesitate to mention it now, because it does, on its face, appear to be somewhat coincidental. Yet, it endures. And that is this. The State produced evidence tying the defendant to some of the most notorious, cold-blooded and heinous murders in our nation's history. Malevolent violence seems to follow this young man everywhere he goes, even twenty-eight hundred miles away across the continent. Why is that? [Perkouri pauses for effect.] Did you ever stop to think about the multitude of disparate but similar acts of violence, which trail in the defendant's wake? Is that

mere random chance? Coincidence? [Perkouri pauses again.] Put yourself in the defendant's place, that black stormy night. Would you have turned your car around on that on that treacherous road with your headlights off, to face two men who had sworn to kill you hours earlier? Would you consider such behavior on your part to be reckless, to be criminally negligent? Think well on that.

And if you let the defendant off now, who will be next? *You?* Your loved ones, your friends, coworkers? Who? The defendant stands on the threshold of manhood. That is why the State is trying him as an adult and not for any other ulterior motive, but for *your* future protection and *his* rehabilitation. The young man is a menace to society. He needs to be put behind bars for our good, your good, the community's good—for *his own* good.

The State has also shown all of these facts, other than those regarding motive as I have said, are uncontroverted by the defense. You have sat here for the better part of two weeks, listening to the State make its case based on these facts and the defense has not really refuted even one of them. Although this crafty, skilled defense lawyer has done an excellent job of misdirecting us *from* these facts. Yes, he is correct when he states so obtusely: "The world is round and the sun sets in the East and rises in the West." [Smiling, Perkouri shakes his head.] I really must hand it to the eloquence of defense counsel in this case. [Waving toward him, Perkouri's smile broadens to a smirk.] I really do.

Mister Franco Vamia can weave a tale and turn logic on its head better than anyone I know. [Franco pushes back his chair to cross both his arms and legs, tilting his head to Perkouri.] By what is known in common parlance, as "kidding on the square." By telling you the very thing as it appears, he makes it seem as if it is, in fact, not so at all. His defense is a tribute to the immortal Hans Brinker Anderson and his classic tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes." Only, opposing counsel has revised the story by making the facts, and not the clothes, invisible. And his defense is truly a story—a fairy tale—if I ever I heard one.

In the famous tale as you may recall, a shyster conned a vain emperor into believing he was a master tailor, who made the finest, most exquisite apparel from the finest, rarest fabrics. Only the most intelligent, sophisticated individuals, those possessed of rare, impeccable taste and discernment, such as the emperor himself, could comprehend and appreciate such unmatched tailoring. The story ends with the emperor parading around without any clothes, until a young child cries out: "But he isn't wearing anything at all."

[Perkouri pauses for effect, studying the jury.]

In this scenario, Mister Vamia has clothed the defendant as that emperor. The State is the young child. And the defense here, like the emperor's clothes, is invisible to those with the good sense to see through defense's transparent logic to the truth. Defense counsel is betting that by acknowledging the defendant's immoral behavior and the gruesome results of his vindictive intentions as having no connection with the defendant's true character and his actions that tragic, fateful night, you will join defense counsel, as did the emperor with the shyster

tailor, and fail to see William Nicholas *Shee*boom for what he truly is. Which is, my friends: naked, without defense and guilty, as charged.

Ladies and gentlemen: We live in what is fast becoming a lawless age, an age where youthful violence and irreverent flaunting of our laws, of the very essence of what a free, democratic society stands for, has reached epidemic proportions in our country, and especially, right here in our county. Trying youthful offenders for violent felony crimes such as the ones before you in this case in the juvenile system has failed to put a dent in this violent, criminal tidal wave of the county's youth. Yes, the county has been growing at an alarming rate. But that is even more reason to make a statement now, to deter this wave of youthful, excessive, senselessly violent offenders. The defense speaks of building new schools. Did you know increased juvenile violence forced the county to cease holding high school football games at night? Since schoolboy football games are played only during daylight hours, violent incidents at those games have dropped to nil.

For this same reason, the State is trying this case in our adult Circuit Court. Two county residents, our neighbors, are dead at the hands of this young man. [Points to Nick.] It is time we put a stop to this youthful violence. It is time we say "No more!" [Perkouri smacks down on the jury box rail with his open palm.] Stem the tide of homicides in our county. It is time for us to make an example that says we have had it up to here [raises both hand to neck level] and we're not going to put up with it anymore. So that the next time a young man, because he is not quite yet eighteen years of age, thinks to take the law into his own hands, believing he can get away with vindictive actions that steal lives, "to teach [someone] a lesson," he may stop before he acts.

Consider now, how your guilty verdict in this case may preserve and protect the life of *your* neighbor, *your* friend, *your* family members or *your own* life, not only from the wrath of this defendant but also from other juveniles who may be deterred from acting rashly by *your* guilty verdict here, today.

Based on the uncontroverted facts of the case, finding the defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt is the right thing to do. Consider carefully all of the facts the State has presented to you and not just those the defense would wish you to consider. Consider the vulnerability and the bias of the eyewitnesses toward the defendant. Consider how, in similar circumstances the defendant, by his own admission, sought to teach his adversaries a lesson. And consider how, even the now-biased Miss Slater, indicated the Buzzbees would be alive today had the defendant simply driven home when he had the chance to do so.

His decision to turn about and drive with his lights off under those conditions constitutes a reckless decision and criminal negligence on his part. It is not a decision you or I or any prudent person would have made. And consider how the law, which Judge Ballante will explain in the Court's instructions for your deliberation, applies to those facts. I beseech you to take a stand now. Set a precedent that we will no longer allow violent, youthful offenders to run rampant in our community. And find the defendant William Nicholas *Shee*boom *guilty*.

As Perkouri turned from the jury to stride purposefully to his seat, Nick's stomach turned queasy. He felt as if he *were* truly guilty; as if, he were the lowest slime-ball on the face of the earth. And if he thought that of himself, he could imagine what the jury was thinking. And that sure couldn't bode well for the defense.

"Methinks he doth protest too much," whispered Franco, smiling.

But Nick was in a daze as Judge Ballante instructed the jury on the law. Franco nudged him with his elbow to buck up. He heard Ry's muffled sobbing behind him but he dared not turn around, thinking it best to follow Satchel Paige's advice on that one.

The judge explained to the jury for the second time that Nick was not contending the misdemeanor charges of underage drinking and destruction of private property. She said those charges were not for the jury's consideration. She said she would sentence him regarding those misdemeanors at the conclusion of the trial. She added once more that neither were the homicide charges for the jury's deliberation. The judge reiterated that she had dismissed them for a lack of evidence under the law. She explained the remaining charges were for their consideration. The judge emphasized that the Court's refusal to dismiss the remaining charges had no bearing on Nick's guilt or innocence concerning them. She said that, unlike the murder charges, the State had met its minimum obligation of setting forth sufficient evidence under the law for the jury to, at least, consider them. It was up to the jury to deliberate and decide whether or not the State had met its burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt—

"Reasonable doubt is your litmus test for determining guilt or innocence."

While Judge Ballante explained the legal meaning of leaving the scene of an accident and aggravated assault and battery and the concept of self-defense under the law, Nick zoned out, feeling sorry for himself. The judge moved onto the difference between voluntary and involuntary manslaughter. He didn't know what the heck she was talking about. It all sounded bad to him, like some kind of legalistic gobblety-gook; specifically, designed to throw him in the slammer for the next thirty or forty years.

Judge Ballante said voluntary manslaughter is an intentional killing that occurs in the heat of the moment, resulting, usually from a moment of passion. Something had to occur to cause the perpetrator to become emotionally or mentally disturbed to act spontaneously. Involuntary manslaughter, though also unintended, results from reckless behavior or criminal negligence. She said, "Involuntary manslaughter occurs when a person negligently commits some act, lawful in itself, or by negligently failing to perform a legal duty. The negligence must be gross or criminal, such as manifests in a wanton or reckless disregard of human life that results indirectly in a fatality."

Nick figured that'd probably the feller they'd nail him for. Then the judge added something he heard, but did not quite comprehend.

"The State of Maryland has a specific, peculiar article in its constitution which I will read to you now. Article Twenty-three reads, and I quote, 'In the trial of all criminal cases, the Jury shall be the Judges of Law, as well as of fact, except that the Court may pass upon the sufficiency of the evidence to sustain a conviction.' This means that you, the jury, enjoy the privilege and, moreover, *have the obligation* to determine what constitutes justice in this case. *Justice.* Do you understand? Together, you will determine what is just and fair—for the State as well as the defendant—based on the evidence presented during this trial, under the Law, which the Court has just explained to you."

The judge paused to stare up and down each of the two rows of seated jurors, studying their faces. She repeated: "*Justice*, based on the Law and the facts. In short, it is your duty to consider all the evidence you have seen and heard, as well as the arguments of opposing counsel, to determine whether or not that evidence proves beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant is guilty of the crimes with which he has been charged. The Court is here, of course, available to advise you if you have questions or require legal interpretations of the law as it applies to the evidence. If you require the Court's advice, or if you wish to review any of the evidentiary exhibits, you need only contact the officer of the Court stationed outside the door to the deliberation room and that officer will notify me of your needs. Is that clear? Remember: you need a unanimous decision to determine guilt for any one allegation. Do you understand your duty?"

The jurors nodded and Juror Number One said they did. Judge Ballante smiled.

"The Court has prepared these instructions for you in writing and they will be available to you in the jury room along with a verdict sheet that reflects the charges made by the State against the defendant. When you have concluded your deliberations, you will mark next to each charge the appropriate box, either Guilty or Not Guilty. Now do you have any questions before you retire?" The jurors conferred. Then the first juror stood to speak for all of them that the jury understood their duty and had no questions at this time.

The judge smiled again, reminding Nick of Glinda, Good Witch of the South in *The Wizard of Oz* smiling to Dorothy and Toto, pointing them to the Yellow Brick Road.

"Very well. Please retire to deliberate your verdicts." The judge even spoke in the same saccharine tone as Glinda and with the same syrupy smile.

Perkouri jumped up: "You Honor—before the jury retires, the State requests permission to approach the bench."

Nick smirked. Perkouri had landed like the Wicked Witch of the West, acting as she did when she viewed the feet of her dead sister, sticking out from under Dorothy's fallen, tornado-blown house. Judge Ballante turned her head toward the prosecutor. Peering over her round spectacles, resting at the end of her nose, she replied, "You may approach."

Franco rose, asking to approach as well. She granted him permission. The two attorneys reached the bench together. Nick watched as the judge leaned forward to hear what Perkouri had to say. He studied her eyes, as they appeared above her glasses. He had never really looked at them before. They *were* beautiful, as Franco had said, almond-shaped, dark, attractive, even sexy—*Eurasian*—not too unlike Ry's except for the color of the irises. A judge with gorgeous eyes. After that old coot Higher, who would've thunk it? For a couple minutes, the legal trio conferred in heated whispers inaudible to him. There were shakings of heads, nods and what appeared to be a difference of opinion between Perkouri and the judge over something. Franco listened but said nothing. Then Perkouri, still shaking his head, turned away. The attorneys retook their seats.

Judge Ballante redirected her attention to the jury.

"Very well. The jury may retire to deliberate its verdict."

She smiled toward them again—like Glinda. And, using her hand instead of a magic wand, motioned them to exit. "You may go." As they left, she turned soberly to the court.

"This trial is recessed until the jury reaches its verdict."

The judge banged her gavel, stood up and departed through the door behind her chair.

Yeah. Bang! That was it.

The packed courtroom buzzed alive with the sounds of voices and the rustling of folks stirring to leave the gallery. He asked Franco what that last conference was about. Behind them, his folks, Ry and her mom, even Sheena and Patti leaned over the rail to listen.

"It was just lawyer stuff. Perkouri disagreed with some of the instructions the judge gave the jury. The weasel's worried. When she refused to amend her instructions, he threatened to appeal if the State loses. She told him that was his privilege and let it go at that. That Laurene boy—she really is bending over backwards to right the scales of justice that old man Higher tipped so badly against us. She's all right."

Franco grinned broadly, slapping Nick on the back. Buoyed by the judge's actions and Franco's confidence, Nick's stomach settled down. Hope surfaced anew within him. Even better. Mebbe—*maybe* he might get out of this mess—Lord, and the jury, willing.

* * *

As the jurors filed back into the courtroom, Nick glanced behind him. His folks and Ramon, Ry and her folks, including her dad and Sheena, were in the gallery. In fact, seemed like half the school was there—*GRT*, his friends, the Allein and Salvarano brothers and their moms. All the local witnesses, including Terri and Patti, Miss Bucksalter, Coach Shaunny, even some of his teachers and coaches who didn't testify. He wondered how Coach and the Allein brothers got there so quickly after football practice. Half of Pocomoke—not to mention the reporters and journalists he'd come to recognize.

The place was packed—standing room only. The curious spilled across the back of the room and up the side aisles near the railing. He spotted "the Widdah" slipping in the

back, wedging into stand against the back wall. Glad to see she'd recovered from her difficult delivery. He always had a special place in his heart for his love mentor. And damned if that wasn't Audy Lou back there, too. Come all the way from Scotland—*for this? You kiddin' me?* Ray Fammick and Red. The Sims brothers. Allena, Yikes and Mike Amoré. Mr. Marant. All of 'em here—at dinner time? Baby! And Little Mo. Shoot. The Vernier sisters, Steinmetz and R.C.—the jerks. Half the baseball team. Sketch artists eyed him and scribbled furiously at their pads. Mrs. Mote stood next to Mrs. Allein.

All rose for the judge. The jury had been out over six hours, including lunch. He didn't know if that was good or bad. As they sat down, he noticed Ry was praying. His dad nudged her. Looking up, she flashed him her special, three-dimple simper. Nick responded as best as he could, though he didn't imagine his smile could compare. Ry nodded for reassurance. The judge asked if the jury had reached a verdict. Franco elbowed him to turn around. The foreman stood to say they had. He handed a slip of paper to the bailiff, who carried the verdict to the judge. Just like on TV.

The foreman stood as the judge silently read the jury's verdict. Her face betrayed no emotion. Franco patted the back of Nick's right wrist, resting outstretched on the table in front of him. The judge handed the paper back to the bailiff who handed it to the standing Clerk. She instructed Nick to rise. Franco squeezed his wrist, rising to stand with him.

Judge: "The Court will hear the verdict. The courtroom will remain silent until all five verdicts have been read. Mister Foreman, please rise to answer the Clerk."

Clerk: "What say you Mister Foreman? Has the State proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant is guilty of the felony of voluntary manslaughter, or not guilty?"

Foreman: "No, it has not. Not guilty."

Clerk: "What say you Mister Foreman, has the State proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant is guilty of the felony of involuntary manslaughter, or not guilty?"

Foreman: "No, it has not. Not guilty."

The courtroom erupted with approval. Franco hugged Nick. Judge Ballante banged her gavel loudly demanding order. Behind him, Ry halted in mid squeal. Quiet descended upon the crowded room like a drawn blade. The judge looked ticked.

"Silence will prevail until all verdicts have been read or I will clear the gallery." Judge Ballante scanned the room, peering over her glasses. Nick heard only his own breath.

"The Court will hear the findings on the remaining charges." She nodded to the Clerk.

Clerk: "What say you Mister Foreman, has the State proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant is guilty of the felony of aggravated assault and battery, or not guilty?"

Foreman: "No, it has not. Not guilty."

Clerk: "What say you Mister Foreman, has the State proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant is guilty of the felony of leaving the scene of an accident that resulted in fatality, or not guilty?"

Foreman: “No—not guilty.”

Clerk: “What say you Mister Foreman, has the State proven beyond a reasonable doubt the defendant is guilty of the misdemeanor of disturbing the public peace, or not guilty?

Foreman: “No—not guilty—the defendant is *not guilty on all charges*.” Nick grinned.

An ovation broke out. The gallery’s approval swelled over the courtroom like a sudden, rising tide. Franco was hugging him. Nick could scarcely believe what he just heard. He wanted to be cool, to show no emotion. But an effortless, warm glow fired up inside him, emanating from his diaphragm—his heart—creeping up through his throat, forcing its way up and out of his mouth, which broadened out into a huge smile, despite his attempts to hold back. Felt as if a flower were growing out of his core and blossoming upward and out of him into a huge rainbow of a dirt-eating grin that he could not suppress.

The judge allowed the commotion for a minute before she banged her gavel loud, hard and repeatedly, demanding “Order! Order in the Court!” The din withered then faded under the judge’s persistent attack until the place went silent as a tomb, permitting the judge to speak. She stared at the jury, asking, “So say you one, so say you all?”

The jurors nodded, some saying yes. “Yes, Your Honor,” replied the foreman.

“Very well. Please be seated. The Court will render its sentences on the uncontested misdemeanor charges against the defendant.”

The room hushed. Judge Ballante turned her attention to him, standing beside Franco.

“William Nicholas Sheeboom: As to the misdemeanor charge of underage drinking, the Court understands that for the last six weeks, your parents have revoked your license, suspending your driving privileges and imposed a strict curfew upon you. Considering this is your first offense, the Court deems this punishment sufficient and warns you to avoid alcoholic beverages until you are of age at twenty-one.” He sighed.

“As to the misdemeanor charge of destruction of private property, the Court sentences you to pay a fine of one hundred dollars to the County Clerk. And to replace, have replaced or, if already replaced, reimburse the estate of Arlo Barnabas Buzzbee for damages you inflicted on the decedent’s Ford pickup truck to include the truck’s cab interior, distributor cap, wires and spark plugs, if damaged. In addition, you will meet with the Buzzbees’ mother Leticia Lucy Buzzbee and express condolences. You will make this restitution in the presence of Raymond Fammick of the County Juvenile Division. Do you understand this sentence?”

He nodded. “Yes, Your Honor.” The words sounded as if they had come from someone else, some stranger, and not from his mouth.

“The Court intends to follow up to see that you do. You will report to me no later than two weeks from today in my chambers at my convenience. Your attorney can provide you with my office number. At that time, you will present me with a receipt of the payment of your fine and reimbursement for the vehicular damages, as well as an

affidavit signed by you and Mister Fammick, attesting to the fact that you have carried out the rest of your sentence. Is that clear?"

"Yes Your Honor, very clear."

"Your Honor," said Franco. "Considering the youth of my client, may defense petition the Court to seal and clear the boy's record?"

"The statute requires three years before Expungement of Record may be considered, Counselor. You should know that."

"Except in this instance Your Honor, surely my client meets the good cause standard. His juvenile standing and the hardship of this trial may meet that exception?"

"Once the defendant has made the restitution required by the Court, the Court may entertain defense's petition. The matter may be reviewed then."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

The judge nodded then looked over their heads.

"Now: The Court wishes to address the young man in the dock."

Some in the gallery stirred to leave. Judge Ballante lifted her head and her voice.

"The Court wishes all to remain stationary and silent." She waited for them to comply. Then the judge eyed him. "William Nicholas Sheeboom, please approach the bench."

He looked to Franco, who nodded. They stepped together from behind the defendant's table toward the bench, until the judge raised her hand. "No. Not you Counselor, just your client." Franco looked at Nick then stepped aside to let him pass. Franco sat down.

Nick walked up to stand before the judge. Tilting his head to the right, trying to get over, he smiled at her. She did not return his smile. Resting at ease with his hands clasped behind his back, he felt his inward, glowing smile recede. His heart pounded. One look at the judge's stern face turned his stomach queasy again. He had returned to earth. The lighter-than-air, aura of good feeling and that internal, blossoming flower wilted as quickly as they had sprouted, as did his involuntary, glowing smile. Came and vanished—nothing he could do about it. His insides seemed to shrink. He righted his head. The courtroom stirred again but the judge banged her gavel twice, restoring order.

"Court is not yet adjourned! — William Nicholas Sheeboom?"

"Yes, Your Honor?" He replied, as respectfullly as he could muster.

Judge Ballante removed her glasses, lowering them to the desk before her. Closing her eyelids and sighing wearily, she placed her hands together as if she were about to pray. She leaned forward to exhale, rubbing either side of her nose between the fingertips of her right hand. Bowing her head, as if in deep thought, she folded her hands down over the long sleeves of her black-robed forearms then raised her gaze to drill him in the eye.

She did have lovely eyes. Just as Franco said. Another time, another place, he thought he could get lost in them, as he did Ry's. But this was neither the time nor the place.

"First, for the record, this was a trial, in error. Your case should *never* have come to the bar. Certainly, not this bar. If anything, perhaps—*perhaps*— a juvenile court should have heard the matter as to the misdemeanors. As a former State's attorney, I feel I am qualified to make that judgment without passion or prejudice. *Pol-i-tics*…" She spit out each syllable as if she were trying to remove a bitter taste from her mouth. "Politics was played with your life young man and that is *IN-EXCUSABLE!"* She paused to shoot daggers at Perkouri. She sighed, shaking her head, before returning her attention to him.

"But this trial may not have been a waste of the taxpayer's money, if you take to heart what I am about to say to you young man. So let me redirect to the subject that is paramount here. That subject is *you* Nicholas. I believe that all may, and I mean *may*, work to good if you are wise enough to let it. Do you understand what I am saying, son?"

Up close, without her glasses, he found her Eurasian eyes enchantingly sexy— almond-shaped like Ry's—drawing him in. A handsome face—no gettin' around it. With a double chin and baby-faced cheeks—even at her age—like Ry's. Made him wonder what she looked like beneath her long-flowing, black robe. He stirred himself to respond.

"I-I think so."

"Well. Let me make it perfectly clear, so there can be no mistake. I will articulate your dilemma for you.

"Young man, I hope you realize that you have dodged a dangerous bullet here today—"

"Yes ma'am, I—"

Shaking her head, the judge raised her glasses holding them at the corner base of a single opened, ear frame in her left hand, cutting him off. "No. I did not instruct you to speak. Now is the time for you *to listen* young man. And I hope you listen well."

He nodded, keeping quiet with his eyes raised toward hers looming over the bench.

Shaking her glasses at him as she spoke, one ear frame flopped down across the lenses. Peering down, the judge held her glasses there as if she were pointing a gun at his head.

"You are headed down a steep and slippery slope young man. This verdict affords you a chance to catch yourself, to stop and think—to take stock of what has transpired—to realize how fortunate you have been to escape a lengthy and, what would have been for you, an arduous and horribly tragic prison sentence. Let it be a wake-up call to turn your life onto the right and true path.

"Events in life tend to snowball for good or evil. But here and now, you have the opportunity to choose in which direction you wish your life to flow. I hope it will be for good. But—it is *your* choice, Nicholas. No one can make it for you. You have been gifted with tremendous abilities. And I am not referring to your amorous, romantic prowess, which has been demonstrated all too clearly during this trial."

Her lengthy pause and drilling stare made him squirm inside his suit. Maybe it'd be better if she kept that robe on, after all.

"—but rather I refer to your intelligence, athleticism and musical gifts. *Don't throw them and your life away son!* Do you understand my meaning?"

The glasses shook as both her voice and hand vibrated with emotion. She waited for his response. He nodded. "Yes ma'am."

"Now I realize this trial has been unnecessarily embarrassing and difficult, not only for you, but for your loved ones, family and friends alike. No one enjoys such strict public scrutiny of his or her most personal, private affairs. But I believe it may also serve a noble purpose if you let it. I repeat—*if you let it!"*

She punched her glasses towards him.

"You are at a crossroads in your life son. I only hope this experience, as distasteful and unnecessary as it may seem to you now, will help steer you down the proper path."

She paused again, for effect, setting her glasses down.

"Nick," her tone softened. "Are you familiar with the Hebrew word *timshel?*"

No—he'd never heard of it. "No ma'am."

The judge rested her left elbow on her desk and, free of the glasses now, held her left hand aloft. As if she were about to snap her fingers, she shook her half-fist at him slightly to emphasize her point.

"A great American writer by the name of John Steinbeck once wrote that the Hebrew word *timshel*, as translated into English '—"Thou mayest"— that gives a choice.' Mister Steinbeck wrote that, 'It might be the most important word in the world.'"

She paused for effect before adding, "'The Hebrew word, the word *timshel*,' … wrote Steinbeck: 'That says the way is *open*. That throws it right back on a man. For if "*Thou mayest"*—it is also true that "*Thou mayest not*."'

"You see what Mister Steinbeck is getting at here, Nick?"

"Yes ma'am. I, I believe I do."

"He is talking about the choice we have been given, a choice, which sets us apart from the animal kingdom, which makes us, in fact, human." She stared hard at him, her large black Eurasian orbs piercing right through the pair of two-toned windows to his soul.

"You see Nick, that's where we, as humans, differ from animals. We have a moral conscience and the *privilege* of the ability to reason whether we should follow that conscience or not. And because we have that ability, that capacity to reason, that God-given privilege, we have been granted dominion over ourselves as well as the animals—the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the creatures of the sea. To rule over them and ourselves as humans, or to sink to their dumb natures and be as they are.

"And because we have this special, unique privilege, we all—each and every one of us—must be held accountable for our actions. That is why we have courts of law such as this one to deliver justice and hold us responsible, so that civilization is preserved. So we don't sink to living like animals and destroy the very fabric of our society. It is up to each

individual to choose for him or herself what he or she will be. We—you—have that freedom. It's up to you Nick—

'Thou mayest' or—***OR*** 'Thou mayest not.' Do you understand, Nicholas?"

An answer came to mind. It was James Dean's line from *East of Eden*, as Nick had recited in the poem he had composed about the late actor.

"Yes ma'am, I do. I guess what you mean is 'that man has a choice, and that, that choice—is what makes him a man.'"

The pilot light inside him reignited, radiating up and out from his heart. Shafts of the setting sun angled through the top of the tall west window to his right bathing him and the bench in light. Judge Ballante blinked.

"Yes. That's exactly what I mean." She smiled. "Very well. Now get out of here and I hope never to see you in the dock again."

Putting on her glasses, she stared over his head and stood up.

"Now," she said loudly, "Court is dismissed." Then she whispered, "See you in my office in no more than two weeks."

Bang! The gavel came down hard, sealing the case closed with a pronounced finality. Yet the judge looked down, holding her stare upon him as the sound of the gavel's clap reverberated throughout the still silent, thronged courtroom. Bouncing off the ceiling and walls, the gavel's clap faded into silence as the room buzzed alive once more.

Ry was upon him immediately. Sans letter-sweater and purse, with her figure bursting from beneath her new, tight, bright-colored outfit looking like a pair of phat green and yellow valentines balanced end-to-end atop one another, she bounced into his arms like Jello-O on springs. So excited, Ry exploded upon him appearing to flounce plum through her clothes. She flung her arms about his neck, kissing him long and strong, offering him her taste of honey, smothering him beneath the rousing scent of her Love's Fresh Lemon. His folks and Franco held back, giving him and Ry a moment alone.

Coming up for air, she snapped her fingers next to his ears then raised up on her toes, leaning in close to whisper, rasping-singing Hank Ballard into his right ear.

"*Hey now! Hey now! It's finger-pop-poppin' time, Baby*. Thank God and praise the Lord, Mother Mary, Saint Brigid and all the saints." He smiled, adding "Amen to that sweet prayer," then whispered more of Hank Ballard's lyrics into her ear, singing "*I feel so good—and that's a real good sign*." She reprised with him, whispering, "*Hey Baby, come along with me. We gonna shake it' till it break. Just wait and see.*"

Well-wishers descended upon them. Ry pulled her head back to stare him in the eye. She winked, saying, "Even better Sweetie, even better."

He believed her.

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