

~ Chapter 8: Crooked Halo ~

Bill took Bunnie home. When he let her out, the sisters resumed their front seating arrangement next to Bill. Bunnie reminded them of their invitation to dinner on Sunday, but Ryz'n didn't want to commit. She really could not promise until she knew more about Nick. Bunnie left the invitation open anyway. They parted company with Bill ferrying the girls to the heart of downtown Hollywood.

Hollywood and Vine was where Halo Platters tall office building towered over all it surveyed. Bill offered to drive around the famed intersection looking for a place to park, while they went inside one of the more recognizable of Hollywood's landmarks. The thirteen-story, glass enclosed, silver and white cylindrical, high-rise office building, known as the "Stack of Platters," housed Halo Platters, one of the top record producers in the world.

Bill declined to go up to the Halo offices with the girls. He said he did not think the girls would come up with much. Besides, he recognized this as kind of a business visit between the girls and their former employer. He did not think it was his place to interfere. Finally he confessed, they did not even know if this was the record company "Dixie" said he would visit.

Ryz'n and Sheena left Bill in the Caddy to girl-watch, while they entered Hollywood's famed symbol of power and prestige. Whenever she entered "The Stack," Ryz'n smelled money. There was no other way to describe it.

They had no trouble with security. *GRT* had been under the Halo label ever since tiny Sable had sold out to the music giant almost two years ago. Ryz'n and Sheena made their way across the spaciously opulent lobby full of chrome, glass and a glossy, linoleum floor to the elevators, which serviced the penthouse executive suites on the top floor. For that was the office home of Jerry Stiehlmoor, Vice President (V.P.) overseeing all recording acts. He was the one they wished to interview. When they reached his outer office, Shirley, Mr. Stiehlmoor's personal secretary, intercepted them. Ryz'n removed her shades.

"Well, hello Ryzanna, Sheena. It's a pleasure to see you two again, truly it is." All smiles, Shirley, was resplendent in a pale blue princess dress with a matching blue waist belt, low blue pumps and an outdated bouffant hairdo. She came around the front of her large, highly varnished mahogany desk in good cheer to provide the obligatory, false Hollywood greeting. She gave a polite hug and a cheek-to-cheek caress for each of the girls. Shirley was OK. Yet Ryz'n also had learned, from personal experience, not to trust any of these Hollywood types.

"Great to see you again, too, Shirley. You're looking very fit, very fit indeed." Shirley posed briefly for them to show off her trim figure.

"Well, you know, Honey, I took you up on your suggestions. And I've lost eighteen pounds and kept them off, too, for nearly five months!" Shirley winked.

“That’s terrific, Shirley! I’m happy for you.”

As the smiles subsided, Shirley got down to business. “Well, Honey now what can we do for you, today?”

“Well, I know this is short notice Shirley, but I hoped I could see HIM for just a quick minute. Just needed to ask him one or two very quick questions and we’ll be out of here, I promise.” Ryz’n beamed her three-dimple smile, acting like Shirley Temple asking for a forbidden cookie. Shirley demurred.

“Well, he is in there alone right now. Let me buzz him for you.” She grinned..

“Thank you. We really appreciate it.” Shirley returned Ryz’n’s smile, as she stepped to the side of her desk, to buzz the executive on the office intercom.

A male voice blared from the speaker. “Yes, Shirley?”

“Sir, I have Ry Sheeboom here. She wants to speak with you a moment—”

“She would, hunh? I’ll bet she would. Better not be calling collect! Look, you tell that little witch for me that I’m tied up—busy. See? Tell her to call back next week. Oh, and Shirley? Did you get that tee time for me at the Riviera?”

“Yes sir, you’re all set for 7:50 Sunday morning, but—”

“Excellent. You’re one in a million, Shirley.”

“Why thank you, sir. But I don’t think you quite understand about Mrs. Sheeboom. She—” The voice from the speaker cut the earnest secretary off.

“I understand about her all right! Let me tell you about butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-her-mouth MRS. SHEEBOOM. That witch spends half the summer tour dopin’, drinkin’ and makin’ out with the lead guitar player. Then she has the gall to cry ‘rape’ when they get caught together alone after a post gig party. ‘Rape?’ By the guy, who, I might add, was married himself at the time to the band’s saxophonist! Then when the papers get wind of it, Sheeboom becomes Miss Purity herself, pining for her long, lost MIA of a husband.

“Yeah! And I let her peddle that soft rock crap LP last summer, instead of the raw R&B that *GRT* is famous for. And they don’t even make half the dough they should have made. Now, she has the temerity to turn me down on a new album that plays up the sex angle a little bit? Why? Because, and I quote ‘**THAT IS BENEATH [HER] DIGNITY?**’ Well, BULL CRAP! Now, probably, she’s run out of cash and has come to her senses. Let her wait. She needs us. We don’t need her. Tell that piece of work to call back next week. Maybe I’ll be available.”

While Shirley tried once more to explain that Ryz’n and Sheena were right there listening to every word, Ryz’n’s rising anger boiled over. She felt her face flush hot as she stormed into the vice president’s office. She threw open the six-foot wide double office doors with vigor, crashing them back onto the dark mahogany, inner office walls, with Sheena hot on her elder sister’s footsteps. The crash of the swinging doors caused the vice-president to wheel abruptly around in his large over stuffed leather, executive office chair. He wheeled away from the floor-to-ceiling, high window through which he had been staring and which served as a wall halfway around his office. From behind his polished mahogany executive desk, he turned in the direction of the sound that had startled him.

A typical visitor might have been overwhelmed by the floor-to-ceiling glass walls and rich mahogany furniture and plush carpet. Brilliant rays of afternoon sunlight streamed in between partially closed strip curtains. However, the Ryan sisters were not typical visitors.

The sight of Ryz'n before him, arms akimbo, coiled and ready to strike with her legs spread as far apart as her snug, navy blue, silk mini-skirt would allow, startled the record executive. The surprise registered plainly on his countenance. Stumbling to his feet, he abruptly released the "On" switch to the intercom. Straightening his tie with his right hand and buttoning his custom tailored, double vented brown Hong Kong-tailored suit coat with his left, the forty-five year old, sandy haired record executive rose to greet his unexpected guests.

Ryz'n was so hot, she couldn't speak. The mutton-chopped Stiehmohr took advantage of her momentary verbal lapse to seize the initiative, by trying to make amends. He threw his arms wide out away from his sides to greet her with the traditional, perfunctory Hollywood hug and a wide grin, as Shirley had just done.

"Ry, Baby. How the hell are ya? You're looking just FANTASTIC, as always!" Ryz'n pointed her left forefinger at him, wagging it menacingly.

"Stay away from me you, you snake in the grass! Watch out for this guy, Sheena. He'd just as soon shoot you down as look at you. That is after he steals all he can get from you. But, what he'd really like to do is make you." Ryz'n glanced towards her disbelieving sister for just a second. "Yeah, that's right. He tried it with me and got nothing but a knee to the groin and a surprise dip in his private swimming pool! I haven't had any problem with him since, so I warn you." She turned her wagging finger towards Sheena, who yet wore her shades..

Stiehmohr dropped all pretenses and his false smile dissolved as quickly as it had appeared. The grey-eyed, heavily mustachioed exec with sandy, mutton chop side-burns narrowed his wide-set eyes shooting a laser gaze into Ryz'n.

"Same little bitch you always were, I see. Well, if you've come to agree to terms on the sex LP, too bad. Got someone else, who can fill the bill better than you." He eyed her up and down arrogantly before proceeding with old bad news. "We dropped your option. *GRT*'s history around here. You've lost your 'Halo,' so to speak. HA! So you can just get out of here, both of ya. I've got work to do."

"Oh really? We heard about your 'tee time', among other things, Mister Steal More! All I want from you is the answer to a couple of very simple questions, so simple even you can answer them without having to quiz your lackey—that, that 'Varmint' guy. And believe me, it sickens my stomach even to have to ask you."

"That's Marmint! Leonard Marmint! And if you feel so sick, why don't you make both of us feel better by leaving, NOW, before I call Security on you"

"I'm leaving. Believe me, I don't want to stay in here any longer than is absolutely necessary. Just tell me one thing: Did you see this guy come around here recently to talk with you? Maybe in the last few days?"

Angrily, Ryz'n shoved a recent baseball photo of Dixie into the record executive's face. Coach Trahorn had just given her the photo about an hour before. Stiehmohr hesitated, glanced at the picture and returned it with a smirk.

"Still playing the aggrieved wife, are we? Think it'll get you another audience with the President in the Oval Office? I guess, after that flop of an album, you need some positive publicity, hunh?"

Vibrantly indignant, Sheena spoke for the first time. "I wouldn't call an album that has sold almost three hundred and fifty thousand copies, a flop!"

"Yeah? It could have gone triple gold, if you had listened to me and recorded more of Sheeboom's tunes, showed a little more skin and put out a lot more bounce to the ounce on stage. And cried a lot less of that MIA crap!"

"DID YOU SEE HIM OR NOT?" interrupted Ryz'n, but he ignored her.

"You know your style and type of music went out with The Pony Tails and The Shirelles, with Leslie Gore and Brenda Lee. This is the Seventies, Baby. Today Disco is what's hot—and sex.. Well, sex has always sold. A little onstage "Rock'N'Roll Hoochie-coo" sure never hurt business any. Not a bit. That's what sells now, Baby. "I'm Sorry" and "Soldier Boy," sung with longing gazes, just don't cut it anymore." Ryz'n lowered her chin and placed her hands on her hips as she widened her stance a bit the only way she could, by pointing her toes outward at an angle of forty-five degrees.

"And don't go gettin' up on your high horse, Girlie. You two haven't forgotten Baton Rouge and Kansas City? I'm sure. Or Oregon? Yeah! You know, ticket and record sales shot through the roof after those exhibitions! So don't tell me, you can't do it. You can do it all right. Hell, you caused near riots in Louisiana, in K.C. and Oregon, too. So don't play the pious act with me, either of you."

Sheena remained impassive behind her Foster-Grants, but Ryz'n shifted uncomfortably. This executive rat had found the chink in her armor.

"We--I made a few mistakes. We apologized for it each time," replied Ryz'n in staccato fashion. Seeing her on the defensive, Stiehmohr pursued his advantage.

"Yeah, and what happened each time?" Stiehmohr raised his hand and made it dive down like a jet fighter. "Sales hit the floor. BAM!" He clapped his hands together for effect. "Why don't you listen to me? You, both of you, got it in you naturally to be the greatest Rock'N'Roll/Burlesque act ever. It's in your curves and it's in your blood. You proved that. Don't fight it. It's your nature, girls. Go with it. Rock with it. Roll with it!"

"Nature is something we were meant to rise above Mr. Stiehmohr," claimed Ryz'n haughtily.

"Oh, really! So! It takes a little wine to lose your inhibitions. Hey? So what? OK, OK, maybe a little white ice, too? Hunh? Yeah! That's all right. You think I don't hear things?" He sneered at the girls. Sheena remained motionless. Ryz'n fidgeted uncomfortably, twirling her engagement ring.

That slime ball Tommy Tremain! I wish I had never laid eyes on that bastard!

“We didn’t come in here for any history lesson, or any econ. lesson either, for that matter, Jerry. All we want to know is—”

“You little pious, self-righteous, psalm-singing hypocrite! You want to let go. You love that high you get onstage! Don’t bother to deny it. I know better. But you’d rather play the martyr for a dead kid, who got what he deserved!”

Ryz’n was seething now and she blurted out.

“You sonova--! I SAID: ‘DID YOU SEE HIM OR NOT?’”

“NO! NOW SHAKE YOUR FAT ASSES OUT OF MY OFFICE!” Stiehlmoehr threw the back of his hand out towards the wide office doorway.

Unfazed and not yet ready to exit, Ryz’n assumed “the stance,” as Nick had dubbed it. She stood with her weight shifted over her right hip. Her right leg locked straight beneath her, while her left was also locked at the knee straight out in front of her with her left foot angled towards her adversary. Her arms crossed beneath, and uplifted, her heaving bosom. Her hands clenched tightly around her opposite elbows, as she clutched Nicky’s picture, which protruded from between her clenched knuckles. Her chin was thrust defiantly in the air before her. The whole tone of her stance was one of defiant contempt. She fired back.

“You don’t realize it, but you’re just shooting yourself in both feet with this arrogant, hostile attitude MISTER Stiehlmoehr. We’re close now, real close to finding him. You know Nicky’s a heckuva talent! But believe me, he won’t be plying his talents for you, or for Halo either. No way! You just screwed yourself, BIG SHOT. How does it feel?” Stiehlmoehr chuckled derisively and replied casually.

“He’s dead. You’ll never find him. NEVER! And without him, *GRT* is nothin’. NOTHIN’! Nothin’ at all. You’ve proven that.” He glared at Ryz’n. “You’re a three-piece Rock band without a guitar player. HA! You’re nothing at all.” He spit the last words out contemptuously.

“What are you saying? Sheena’s our bassist and I can strum some in a pinch.”

“Precisely my point. No guitar players at all!” The sisters frowned indignantly, but Stiehlmoehr persisted unimpeded. “You know I’ve shopped your anemic act around and nobody’s buyin’, Honey!” Stiehlmoehr sneered grandly at Ryz’n.

“NEVER find him, hunh? Well, this picture here is current, taken within the last three months, HONEY!” The incensed Ryz’n gave him back the sarcasm he had dished out as she held the picture in one hand and tapped the front of it with the other. Her caustic tone was unmistakable. “Nicky’s been going to school and playin’ baseball right out here under your very nose, over at Peppermount. He’s alive and I’m gonna find him.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know. I know.”

“Well, even so, his butt is under contract to me. I’ll just pick up that option. It doesn’t matter either way. If he still has what it takes, he’ll make records for me.”

“No, you don’t seem to get it, Jerry! He never signed anything with you. Sheena and Mickey and I signed for one album, one tour and an option for

another one, which you dropped. Nick has signed nothing. His original deal, which you bought from Sable, expired two months ago.”

“He’s with *GRT* and Halo owns the rights to *GRT*, period!”

“*GRT*? What’s that? Nick can form a new group or just go solo or maybe he’ll just compose? Who knows? But he won’t be doing anything for Halo, not as long as you and your Varmint friend work here. I can guarantee you that!” Stiehlmoir lost his patience and began to shoo them out of his executive suite.

“Well, you just try it Honey. And you’ll be in the biggest law suit of your life! Believe me, you don’t want to tangle with the Big Halo in court. It’ll be your worst nightmare. So, you see Baby, no matter what you do, you’re always gonna smell like fish!” Inhaling deeply through his nostrils, Stiehlmoir dismissed her disdainfully, as he might a foul odor and laughed. Ryz’n knew her ritualistic penchant for raw herring was common knowledge at Halo. In fact, it was the butt of some great jokes. Ryz’n seethed, too angry to speak.

“NOW GET OUT! Both of you! And I don’t wanna see you wiggling your broad butts around here again, not until you’re ready to dance and prance for me! You and the queen of the jungle there. We’ll see what happens when the dough runs out. Hell, you’ll be in here begging me, just begging me to abuse you. I know, I’ve seen too many of ‘em come and go. You know, you really should be more polite to me. I might just drop the dime on you and that guitar player.”

Stiehlmoir flashed daggers from his grey, cold shark eyes, while the pair of short sisters retreated. In their common anger, they stalked out of the plush executive suite, through the ceiling high, still wide open, double doorway. They strode away, in step, as quickly as their snug mini-skirts would allow, unconscious of the impression they were leaving behind. Ryz’n, however, could not resist facing about in the portal to fire a parting shot at her former boss.

“You know, I’ve never seen a person more aptly named than you: Mr. STEAL—MORE! If you want to really drop something, just DROP DEAD!” The girls passed though the outer offices on their way to the elevators. Shirley trotted after them, catching the irate sisters before they could board the elevator.

“Mrs. Sheeboom, Mrs. Sheeboom. Please wait!” Ryz’n held up. “Mrs. Sheeboom, I’m, I’m, well, I don’t know what to say. That was terrible, what he did back there. I, I’m terribly sorry. I heard everything.” The shame in Shirley’s face told Ryz’n this was no act.

“Well, it’s not your fault, Shirley. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“But I do. You see ...” Chagrined, Shirley cast her eyes downward.

“Yes?”

“He was here, yesterday, maybe the day before. I can’t remember which.”

“Who was here?”

“Your husband!”

“WHAT?” Shirley looked up to meet Ryz’n’s disbelieving glare.

“Yes, he was. I didn’t say anything at first, because I thought Mr. Stiehlmoir might want to tell you, himself.”

“You mean he saw Nicky and he just lied to me?”

“Not exactly. You see, Nicky, or this nice lookin’ young fella who looked like him, came in the other day, asking questions. He was kind of pathetic, actually. He pulled a cut-out piece of your first album cover from his wallet. It was pretty beat-up and had the band’s picture on it. He never saw Mr. Stiehmohr, although I told Mr. Stiehmohr there was this guy here who looked like he could be Nick Sheeboom, who’d like to see him. Mr. Stiehmohr said he didn’t want to see him. He told me to send him away. You see, we’ve had a lot of imposters come around since your *Lest We Forget Tour* last summer. They all proved to be false.

“Anyway, Mr. Stiehmohr was busy at the time with the company president, et cetera. I tried to explain that this guy not only looked, but also sounded, like the real Nick Sheeboom. Mr. Stiehmohr wouldn’t listen, just like he didn’t listen a few minutes ago, when he thought you were on the phone and I tried to tell him you were here in person.” She nodded towards Ryz’n.

“However, the other day, I thought, this really could be the guy. So I broke company policy, by giving him your home address, not the phone number, just the address, which I know is unlisted. But I thought if he is the real McCoy, he could write or even visit you. If he isn’t, then maybe he wouldn’t bother you. He asked if the address were current.”

“What did you say?”

“Well, I told him I didn’t know for sure, but I explained the Crest Hill address was your parents’ home. I said even if your weren’t there, they could find you.”

“Oh Shirley, you’re an angel, an absolute angel!” Ryz’n tightly hugged the surprised but grateful Shirley.

“I can’t thank you enough, Shirley. But look! If he comes back soon, here’s the number I can be reached at, in Buena Park. After that, I’ll go home to my folks. And Shirley, this time I authorize you to give him the phone number, as well, or anything else he wants.” Ryz’n took a pen and notepad from her purse to provide the Buena Park number. “And I authorize you to release all my home phone numbers, to this guy, and this guy only, that is, if he comes back, OK?”

“Sure, sure. Look Mrs. Sheeboom? I’m really sorry about that scene with Mr. Stiehmohr.” The pained expression on her face confirmed her sincerity..

“Stiehmohr? Who’s he? Nevah , hoid uv ‘em.” Ryz’n laughed. “Shirley, I feel so good, so high, right now, not even a genuine S.O.B. like that can bring me down. Thank you so much, Honey. I’ll never forget you for this, never! Is there anything, anything at all, I can do for you?”

Ever the quintessential company employee, Shirley replied, “Just don’t forget Halo Platters, in the future, Mrs. Sheeboom.”

“OK, I won’t.” Ryz’n beamed her dimpled smile after hugging Shirley. The Ryan sisters turned and walked to the elevator door with Ryz’n muttering to herself, “You can be sure I won’t ever forget Halo Platters!”

The elevator came back up to open for the third time since Shirley had stopped the sisters from boarding it, before they started talking. The Ryan girls stepped

onto the elevator. When they reached the street, they searched for Bill. They found him double-parked on the boulevard, girl-watching.

After the sisters hopped into the seat next to him, Sheena, heatedly talked across Ryz'n to Bill, letting fly with all that had occurred, leaving out no detail.

"But Bill you should have seen my big sister going toe-to-toe with that Hollywood record mogul. Why! I would have paid good money to see that. Her face got red and her eyes got green. She looked like a busted traffic light. Ha! I tell you true: 'Ali-Frazier' had nothin' on this bout, either one of them. You were just awesome, Sis! You put that guy right in his place. Did he really try to force himself on you? You never told me that."

"Yeah, well it's not something I care to recall, either time. He was going after you until I told him about Bryson. He backed off then. He didn't cherish the thought of getting mashed into the ground by Bryce."

"No kiddin'? I never knew it. Glad I didn't. And you kept mum about J.J., even when he baited you with that no-guitar, three-piece bull!"

Bill interjected. "Well, that's all very interesting girls, but it's dinner time. Since I never quite finished my lunch, my stomach has been rumbling. How 'bout we get something to eat? There's a classic Fifties style drive-in around the corner. Waitresses on roller skates—everything. Over on La Brea, OK?"

"Sure, Bill whatever you want," replied Ryz'n. Actually, I'm kind of hungry, too, now that I think of it. And Sis, you keep mum about Double J, too. He's GRT's future, right now."

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When the trio had finished filling their bellies at the drive-in, they sat back in the front seat of Bill's Caddy to ponder their next move. Ryz'n observed that they had only one. That was the San Diego connection. She itched to confront that Dixon lady, again. La Jolla was a little over a hundred miles from Bill's house. Presently they were clear up in North Hollywood. It was six o'clock on a Friday evening, which meant it was nine p.m. as far as the girls were concerned. Bill suggested they start out for La Jolla fresh in the morning, especially since the Friday rush hour traffic had yet to clear out. Ryz'n hesitated but finally agreed. After all, Bill had been right earlier about Coach Trahorn being out for lunch.

For Sheena's benefit, she asked Bill to drive them over to nearby Griffith Observatory to view the setting of James Dean's famous *Rebel Without a Cause*. Ryz'n explained the James Dean thing to her sister: how Nicky had gone over the setting with her, quoting lines from the film, imitating the various voices perfectly, as only he could. That was before Sheena had joined *GRT* in the Fall of 1971 when the band had come out to L.A. for a long weekend to make some personal TV appearances. Ryz'n's recollections helped keep her mind off Nick and the Dixon woman. While she was nearly ecstatic over the good news she had received about Nick today, she stewed over the lying adultery of Donna Dixon.