

~ Chapter 14: Revelation ~

A cool liquid dripped upon Dixie's forehead. Giggles sounded behind him. The sun was up. Breaths of air tickled Dixie's face. He woke to feel and see bubbles breaking upon his nose. More giggles. A huge bubble, floating from over his head, was about to settle down upon his nose. Gently, he blew the bubble back in the direction from which it had spawned. The boys came around from behind him to face Dixie directly, blowing bubbles as they came. They laughed playfully.

"Mornin', Dix!"

"Mornin', Dixie!"

"Mohnin', fellas!" As the black of night had given way to the light of day for a span, Dixie's speech impediments, like Donna's lusty temptations, had deserted him temporarily. He found his speech problems often melted away when he was with these boys in a relaxed setting.

"You said you'd take us to school on the cycle." It was Little Jim.

"I did? Are you sure?" Dixie cocked his eyebrow quizzically and pretended as though he did not recall, a favorite ploy of his.

Dre spoke out, "Yes, you did Dixie. You shore did!" His round black eyes grew large.

"Gee, two witnesses, hunh? Guess, it must be true, then. Well, how soon you gotta be there?"

"You know what time Dixie, 8:30!"

"What time is it now? Anh, anh, not you, Little Jim. Wanna hear Dre tell me."

Dre looked at his brother's watch. He studied it carefully. It's eight-nine."

"No, Dre that's not right," declared Jim. Dre was perplexed by his older brother's comment. "It's seven-"

"Wait a minute now, Jim." Dixie raised a forefinger to halt Little Jim. "Dre? Why do you think it's eight-nine?"

"Because this little one is almost to the eight and the big one is on the nine."

Little Jim laughed at his brother who puffed up like a toad at his tormentor.

Dixie spoke deliberately, but he felt fine, loose. He loved these kids and felt comfortable alone with them, so he had no trouble speaking with them now.

"Well, now don't laugh, Jim. What he says makes sense, but, of course, we know it doesn't work that way. Now see here, Dre. You see these twelve numbers, one through twelve, right?" The boy shook his head in agreement. "Well, those numbers mean two different things. When the small hand is on them, the numbers tell the hours and when the big hand is on them, the numbers tell the minutes. Each number is five minutes apart from the other, because there are sixty minutes in an hour. So when you see the big hand on the nine,

remember to count the number of minute<sup>1</sup>s from the 12 by fives.” Dixie could see he had lost the boy, so he gave up.

“Never mind Dre, you’ll learn that in school. Eight-nine, it is! I’ll get ready.”

When it came time for them to leave, Dixie pulled his remaining gear off the bike to put the boys up on the cycle. He sandwiched himself between the smaller Dre in front of him and Little Jim behind him. Dixie wore his favorite navy blue, flared cords and grey T-shirt with a pocket over his left breast for his Luckys. He made each boy wear one of his batting helmets. Luckily, the boys did not see any police officers en route to school. After Dixie let them off, he returned to the Dixon residence.

He found Big Jim was up at the dining room table, drinking his morning coffee, probably looking as hung over as he felt. In other words, he looked pretty darned bad. Donna came in from the back yard to announce she had to run some errands. Monday had become her day off since Dixie had financed her home hair-dressing business. Monday was her run-around day, in which she had to take care of all her errands, all family business, for the week. Carrying her purse draped over her shoulder and dressed in blue jeans and a red and white checkered, sleeveless blouse that had a dainty, narrow round collar, Donna looked fresh and healthy this morning in her tight ponytail. “All mothers should look so good,” murmured Dixie to himself.

“You boys are on your own today. I’ll pick the kids up from school, Dixie. We’ll be eating dinner promptly at five, because the boys have baseball games this evening, OK?”

Big Jim said nothing.

Dixie said, “Sure, sure. How are they doin’ with it?” This was the first year for both of them playing organized ball and they did so largely because Dixie was a ballplayer. He had encouraged them in the athletic endeavor. He believed it would be a fun way to help keep them out of trouble.

Donna studied Big Jim, who seemed disinterested, lost in his thoughts. When he failed to acknowledge her, she frowned and turned toward Dixie.

“They’re doin’ good Dix, both of ‘em. Andre is the more aggressive one, but the coaches tell me they both have some ability. And they’re enjoying it, which is the main thing.” She looked accusingly at her sullen husband, then back to Dixie, before she added. “Thanks for asking, DIXIE!” She spit out Dixie’s name, clearly angry with her husband’s lack of interest, and not with her fiancé. The handsome blonde patted Dixie softly on the shoulder as she moved past him to the garage. Evidently, she held nothing against him from the previous night’s abstention. She stopped at the door, placing her hand on the doorframe, and turned to ask softly but sweetly.

“Umm, you are gonna be here for dinner tonight, aren’t ya Dix?” Dixie hesitated, before he answered.

“Don’t know. Sure would like to see the boys play some ball, but ...” He shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t know. Can’t make no promises.” The corners of Donna’s mouth turned down a little.

Slowly however, Big Jim looked up from his daydream, to break his sullen silence.

“He’ll be here. Go ahead, Donna. Don’t worry. He’ll be here when you get back.” His voice was distant, empty. Donna tapped the doorframe lightly twice with the flat of her open, right hand. She raised her eyebrows and nodded her approval, before she stepped into the garage. Dixie heard the garage door open and then the car door open and shut. Then he heard the car start and roll out of the garage as Donna left on her weekly rounds.

The two men sat silently, opposite one another at the dining table. Big Jim sipped on his coffee, staring straight ahead. No doubt, he was feeling his hangover. The dining room air was pregnant with tension. Dixie could feel it, but he could not place a finger on the reason for it. Had Jim seen Donna return to their bedroom in her altogether last night? Was he putting two and two together? Or had one of the boys said something to him? The quiet from the boys’ absence resounded against the walls of the bandbox to heighten the pressurized atmosphere. Dixie rose to enter the kitchen and pour himself some orange juice. One commodity they had in abundance in Southern California was orange juice, which he really enjoyed.

Wearing a dark blue terrycloth bathrobe over a light blue T-shirt and a pair of under shorts, Big Jim’s sat in his wheelchair with his back to Dixie while Dixie poured his drink. Staring sullenly straight ahead and down at the oaken, dining room table, Big Jim spoke from out of nowhere in a flat monotone.

“Somebody’s been poppin’ my wife.”

Dixie’s ears perked up. He almost dropped his juice glass. Swallowing hard, he came around the kitchen counter into the dining room to retake his seat at the opposite side of the table from Big Jim.

“Wh-Why do you say ... that, J-J-Jim?” The tension in the air and Big Jim’s allegation had resurrected Dixie’s stuttering.

Jim pulled Donna’s checkbook out of his lap. Dixie wondered if Donna could complete her errands without her checkbook. Maybe she took some checks with her or maybe she’d be back for it, soon.

“There’s a cash deposit in here back in December for ten thousand dollars, marked as a ‘gift.’” He raised the bankbook aloft. “And another one in January for three G’s—another GIFT!” He growled. She’s had the work done on the garage and patio, the electrical work, the plumbing, the new door. She bought all them fancy patio furnitures and them hair-dressin’ accessories so she can work at home. That Chevelle station wagon is new, too, probably a trade-in on the Nova, but still ... No way could she cut enough hair to buy all that herself. I don’t blame her, but I’d kinda like to know who it is. If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was you Nicky, boy.” He stared at Nick. Dixie choked hard on his juice.

“But then, there’s no way a kid like you could lay his hands on that kind of green, not given your condition and all. There’s no way you could afford this!”

The big man set his coffee cup down to pull something out of his blue tee-shirt pocket, which he tossed onto the table like he might toss a pair of dice in a crap game. The object of his toss was an ostentatious, gold diamond engagement ring.

“Go ahead, pick it up” he urged Dixie. “Take a look for yourself.”

Dix did as Big Jim ordered. He inspected the ring. Truly, it was a thing of beauty. Dix ought to know, he had picked it out. He had thought that ring in that setting had been more beautiful than some of the more expensive engagement rings he had considered. And there hadn’t been many, more expensive than this.

Big Jim observed, “That’s gotta be a five, maybe, probably, a ten thousand dollar ring. What do you think Nicky? How much is it worth?”

Dix returned the ring to Big Jim, stating matter of factly: “Split the di-d-di-diff’rence.”

Big Jim nodded. “That sounds about right.”

“How d-d-did you ... c- come by it?” The paraplegic motioned his thumb casually backwards over his shoulder. He scooped the ring back up off the table.

“She left it on her side of the bed headboard cupboard.” He sighed as he returned the ring to his shirt pocket. “I asked her about it, but she dummied. When I tried to talk to her, she just gave me a dirty look and left.” Dixie nodded in an understanding manner, as he sipped his O. J. “You know, Nick. I kinda wished you was the one.”

Dixie was surprised. He placed his juice glass on the table top.

“But Wha-Why, J-Jim?”

“Because, if I had to pick one guy to take my place with my wife and my kids, there’s nobody who I’d trust more, nobody who would provide for them better than you, kid. I remember how you useta take care of us out on patrol, even though you was the youngest guy in the outfit. You was a natural leader. I see how you are with my boys here, just like that. And I see how much they respect you, how much they admire you, just as we all did in the Nam. They would never admire me like that, not now. But then, Hell! You got your own family, kid.”

Dixie had started to raise his glass for another drink when that remark took him completely by surprise. He dropped the glass back to the table, causing what was left of the orange juice to slosh like a tidal wave inside his glass.

“Wh-what ... fam-famly?” Jim’s blank expression disclosed that he was again lost, deep in thought. Dixie repeated his question.

Continuing to stare blankly into space, Jim asked seriously, “You haven’t been poppin’ my wife, have ya kid?”

“Wh-wh-what?” Big Jim seemed to be incoherent, leaping from one thought to another. He broke out of his trance to smile at Dixie.

“Nah, of course not. You’ve got your own beautiful wife, now don’t ya kid? You’ll be goin’ back to her now that you’re done playin’ ball and school’s out for the summer.”

“Wha—hell ... What wife?” Dixie sat up in his chair ramrod straight, his eyes searing through Jim.

“That’s right, Mann! That’s right. You don’t know, do you? I clean forgot. How could I? Ha! The rock star, Nicky, that’s your wife.” Big Jim winked at Dixie.

Dixie opened his wallet, pulling out a ragged, bent, six-inch by two-inch piece of cardboard. He unfolded it before Big Jim, pointing to the girl in the group picture of band members. “Her?”

Big Jim picked up the picture to inspect it closely.

“Yeah, yeah. She’s the one. She’s your wife, all right. See, there you are and there’s your name and there’s her’s.”

“No, no ... My name, STRICK ... LER. S-See?” Dixie tapped the name Strickler, next to his picture.

“Nah, Mann! That’s a screw up. You’re this guy. You’re Nick Sheeboom.” He tapped Nick’s image and name simultaneously for emphasis. I’m surprised Donna didn’t tell you that, before now.” Nick could tell Jim’s surprise was as genuine as his own.

“Donna? Why a ... D-Donna?”

He grunted. “Are you kiddin’? Come here.” The big man pushed away from the table and pivoted. For some reason, he opted to leave his motor off and laboriously rolled himself with his lone good arm until Dixie pushed him from behind. They went into the far corner of the living room to the record cabinet, housed inside the wooden framed combination television/Hi-Fi set. Big Jim pulled out all four *GRT* records from amongst the cabinet full of albums.

“She had hid ‘em in the back. Wrapped ‘em in cheesecloth. Ever seen ‘em?”

Dixie shook his head. “Na-never went in there. Th-that’s her st-t-tuff.”

“Hmmpf!” replied Jim disdainfully

Then Jim showed Dixie the fourth one, *Lest We Forget*. On the front cover, Dixie saw all three *GRT* band members in separate photos. The photos were enhanced, elongated pictures. Each band member was playing his or her respective instrument. Dixie recognized the drummer and one of the two girls, the one Jim identified as “Nick’s wife,” from the picture he carried in his wallet. The second girl, Dixie did not know, but she was a looker, too. Big Jim opened up the album to show the three band members, posing seductively.

Then Big Jim tapped the facing side of the inner sleeve cover. There, in a background picture that covered the whole inside sleeve was a close-up of Dixie in his dress blues. Inserted in the corner was a wedding picture of him with this gorgeous bride, the same girl that was on the cardboard in his wallet. Song lyrics were printed all over the inside cover, superimposed over the big picture of him. Dixie didn’t buy records. He didn’t own a record player, though he did own a cassette tape recorder. If he listened to music radio at all, it was usually Country and Western. That’s what his buddies in the Corps had liked to hear. He did get a charge out of the late night Rock-N-Roll “Oldies” shows hosted by The Wolf

Man. In shock, Dixie slowly removed the album from Big Jim's hand. The young vet sunk slowly down, coming to a rest with his butt on the small but sturdy, rectangular wooden, glass-covered, coffee table behind him. "BRING THE BOYS HOME" was superimposed diagonally over the pictures of the band members on the facing cover. Dixie pointed at the marine in the dress blues.

"Th-that looks la-like m-m-me!" exclaimed Dixie utterly shocked. Jim turned his chair to face Dixie squarely.

"Damn right, it's you! That's what I'm trying to tell you, Mann!"

"But how— Why di-di-didn't you tell me ye-yesterday?"

"Didn't think of it yesterday, Mann. Too much beer, I guess. I knew you used to be a big time rocker, but forgot you didn't know it. Guess we got caught up in talking about the Nam and then I got loaded before I could tell ya. Didn't think of it again 'til a couple of hours ago."

"Ya know, whenever I get loaded like that, I can't sleep, but for a few hours. Guess you don't remember that, either, hunh? Anyway, I got up early, before dawn, started hunting around for something to do. Then, I remembered your old record albums. Figured if I got them out for you, maybe they'd jog your memory. I didn't know about these latest two, but I found them hid with the others. This one ... " Big Jim tapped the third album (*Still More Good Rockin' Tonight*) "is pretty good, like the first two, but not as good, 'cause your voice ain't on some of the tunes.

But this one here (*Lest We Forget*) is different, more slow songs, kind of sad, soft rock, they call it, and a religious song, too. Only half are up-tempo tunes, but they're more kind of like bubble gum melodies, you know. You ain't on but a couple of them tunes. They must have had you prerecorded or somethin'. It ain't a bad album. It's just ain't as up-tempo, as soulful rockin' as the others. Guess that's 'cause a lotta of them songs was writ by your wife about missin' you and not by you, like on them other albums."

"ME? S-songs?"

"YEAH! YOU!" the big man held up the first three albums. You wrote practically all of the songs on these other three albums!"

This was too much information, too fast for Dixie. He took a seat on the couch, trying to take everything in, clutching the *Lest We Forget* album in his hands. Dixie thought about those strange, unfamiliar tunes that popped into his head randomly. He almost always ignored them like he would a bad thought. Occasionally, he would blow them out on his bugle mouthpiece. A couple times, when he had been alone, he even had written down some words and blown out a simple tune on his mouthpiece. But hit songs? No, no way!

Big Jim could see Dixie's wheels spinning. Jim watched him curiously.

"Lemme help ya out kid. You was on the verge of being a Big Time Rock'N'Roller! You didn't know that? I mean BIG TIME, before ya joined the Corps. You and your band *GRT* won awards, been on national TV and everything. Hell! We all knew that over in the Nam, even. We used to kid ya

about it all the time. Kidded ya about your wife, too. I mean about her awesome looking picture, here on this album, here.” He pointed to the inside cover of *GRT*’s second album *More Good Rockin’ Tonight*, which depicted Ryz’n in profiled in a snug, canary yellow, terrycloth, tube top, black leather mini-skirt, fish net hose and three-inch black, spiked, high heels, topped off with a yellow ribbon in her long, wavy hair. One leg was stiff, while the other was bent seductively at the knee. Her shapely hips were thrown to the side of her stiff leg. Big Jim set the record albums down on the coffee table, so that picture of Nick’s wife lay on top.

“‘Aw, nobody could have a wife looked like that,’ we’d say. Then you’d come over to the unbeliever who had made that remark and introduce ya’self as ‘Nobody’ and wink. Ha! You always got a kick out of that! I’m surprised nobody recognized you by now.”

“They d-d-did once. ‘s how . . . got ... p-pic-ture ... showed you, b-but ah though’ b-big red-head g-g-guy here,” Dixie pointed to an individual standing next to Ryz’n, “was N-Nick ... Shee-b-boom an’ I—”

“Well, you thought wrong, Mann. That album cover is kinda screwy, the way they did it. Why didn’t you go to the record comp’ny and follow up on it?”

“I tr-ried, only that,” Dixie pointed to the first two albums, “Sable rec-comp’ outta bi-business, dis-a-p-pear ... ”

“Maybe, but that one your holdin’ there is made by Halo Platters. I know they ain’t gone outta business.” Dixie began to inspect the Halo label and read their address at North Hollywood and Vine. *That’s not too far from the Mount!*

“Ya know Nicky boy. Ya saved my life again up in sick bay up in Spokane.”

“How’s that-t-t?”

“Yeah, I was amnesic at the time like you are now and just a little while ago, too. Had been in a coma for coupla years and jes’ come out of it. Anyways, I’m layin’ there in the hospital bed, feelin’ sorry for myself and you come on the radio. I mean your voice was on the air in a pre-recorded interview, ya see? I’ll never forget it. It was a Saturday night and the oldies station had this special program called, uh, lemme see ... called ... uh ‘The Late Great Eight from Noon to Eight!’ Yeah! That was it. They repeated the show the next day, too. You know they said your band set some kind of a mark for a new group. Your first two albums sold more copies faster than the first two albums of any other new artist. Did you know that? Least I think that’s what they said.” Dixie shook his head in the negative and said nothing.

*Was he serious? How could I know that?*

“Yeah, well anyway, the station had about an hour devoted to eight, late great Rock’N’Roll personalities and you was the last one. Yeah, they gave you close to an hour and a half, Mann!” Big Jim halted to think.

“Lemme see, the others was, uh, Buddy Holly and them other two dudes that crashed and burned with him. And there was Sam Cooke and Alan Freed—the

guy who coined the term ‘Rock and Roll’. Ha! Ya know that’s the brother’s old slang for gettin’ it on. You knew that, right Nick?”

“No I, I, I dunno. I—” Dixie was thinking about Jim’s wild tale, but in Jim’s enthusiasm, he had cut off Dixie’s response.

“Aw Mann! Sure it was. You knew that! Anyway the other cats was Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin and you, of course, Nicky boy. Not bad company, ‘cept they’re all dead. HA! HA!”

“B-but, J-Jim—”

“Lemme finish Nick! Come on, Mann!”

Jim flashed impatience, so Dixie kept quiet, as he had all yesterday.

“Anyways, them announcers said you and *GRT* was the best pop/soul group since Sly and the Family Stone. ‘ME-TE-ORIC’ that’s how they described your star. ‘The ME-TE-ORIC rise and fall of Nick Sheeboom and GRT ...’ That’s what they said. Yeah, T-R-U, Mann!

“And they had Gary Bordy on there, on the air, saying you was a musical genius and how he wished he would have had you under his Motor City label. Dan Demetorice of *Soul Track* said you and your band volunteered to stay an hour after the show to perform for the kids, both times he had you on his program. The other guy, runs the white dance show on Saturdays? Uh, Ricky Dark. He said you all revived the art of hand dancin’ that had been missin’ since before ‘The Twist.’ And them composers, Lollar and Stieber said they had quit the business, even quit listenin’ to the radio, until your sound made ‘em turn the radio on and listen again.”

“Loller and who?”

“Oh, Mann. You know them—the dudes who wrote all those big Toasters hits in the Fifties? Them fun tunes I used ta listen to as a kid.”

“Oh yeah, sure.” However, Dixie was anything but sure.

“But the best dude was this Achmed cat. Owns the Ocean record label?” Dixie shrugged.

“Trust me. He does. He said you—now get this—” Jim looked up to the ceiling and recited as if by rote. “He said ‘Sheeboom combined honest R&B sounds of the Fifties with the “Soul” and style of the Sixties along with a new southern kind of rock to create a whole different genre for the Seventies.’ Yeah! How ya like them apples? And he oughtta know. His label has been pumpin’ out big hits since R&B became big back in the late Forties. And they even interviewed Elvis!”

“No way! Elvis? About m-me?” Dixie was flabbergasted.

“Damn straight, they did.”

“What d-did Elvis s-say?” croaked Dixie reverently.

“He said you were ‘cool,’ Mann. ‘Damn tragedy, what happened,’ he said. ‘No tellin’ what you might have done, if you had lived.’ He said you was ‘a true American hero.’”

“Aw, you’re pu-pullin’ ma-my leg? El-vis?”

“No Mann! It’s all true! I got it memorized, ‘cause everything just came together for me right then. He said your loss was a ‘real tragedy.’ Dixie shook his head from side to side and laughed. He couldn’t believe this. The whole thing was absurd—ridiculous.

“So hey, Nick? Listen up, Mann! I got sidetracked. I was gonna tell ya how I come out of my amnesia.”

“Yeah, g-go ahead, J-Jim. Maybe it’ll work for m-me,” Dixie joked.

“Anh, I don’t think so, cause you already heard your voice and that’s what done it for me. Now see, I’m like just layin’ there and I hear that scratchy croak of yours on the radio in some pre-recorded interview and presto!” Jim snapped his fingers. “I know that’s the same voice I’d been hearin’ in my head the last couple years, in my coma—your voice, tellin’ me to ‘hang on, Big Jim, you just hang on.’ And that’s when I remembered, who I was. So ya see, ya really saved my butt twice, Nick! Now whaddaya got to say about that, hunh Nicky boy?”

Dixie merely stared at Jim in disbelief. Jim took that as a signal to carry on. “Well, I’ll tell you what the radio guys said. They said you was a ‘teen’—wait, wait a minute, now. They said you was a ‘teen—?’ Oh mann!” Big Jim rolled his eyes and then suddenly snapped his web scarred fingers again. “‘PRODIGY!’ Yeah that’s it. That’s what they said. They said you was a damned ‘teenage prodigy.’ That’s what they said all right. You went from bein’ ‘a great teenage prodigy to a late, teenage tragedy.’ Yep. They did. And now they’ll hail you as the prodigal son returned home. HA! HA!” The big man slapped his hand down on the arm of his chair. So whaddaya got to say about that one now, hunh? ‘Teenage prodigy?’”

Big Jim was all smiles, but Dixie was on another track, not *Soul Track* either. He was thinking about his own amnesia and the Rock’N’Roll girl on the album covers, his alleged wife.

“Da-Damn! Ya know. Th-this Halo—” Dixie moved quickly from the couch back onto the coffee table. He tapped firmly on the *Lest We Forget* album cover next to him. “They cl-clo-ose ta P-Pep-pep-, ta ‘cool!” Excited, Dixie checked the album for a date. Big Jim’s smile melted away as he read Nick’s mind.

“May, 1974. That’s when the album was published,” observed Jim wryly, suddenly looking like he remembered his hangover. Dixie looked up to Jim. Their eyes met. The big man voiced what they both thought. “Yeah, that’s right, Mann. She may have had the album a year. She never said anything, did she? Just like she never said anything to me about that damned ring I found this morning while she was sleepin’. Now, why would she keep silent, hunh? That ring ... ”

Dixie saw the wheels spinning in the black man’s head.

Sadly, Dixie shook his head, looking down to the ground, unable to look the big man in the eye. He slid down, off the coffee table onto the floor on his knees. Big Jim leaned forward in his chair, facing Dixie. His voice dropped almost to a whisper, but he was calmly serious.

“It was you, wasn’t it kid?” From his knees on the blue, shag-carpeted living room floor, Dixie looked up to Uriah with a confused, pained expression.

“What?”

“You’re the one, Donna’s been bangin, ain’t ya?” She knew who you was all along, but she wouldn’t tell ya. She was afraid she’d lose ya. She promised to marry ya. Hell, Mann! my legs may be paralyzed, but my mind ain’t! At least not anymore. What a chump—umm! You love her. Hell, I can see that! Wait a minute. It’s all coming together now.” Jim looked past Dixie and slammed his lone hand down on top of the arm on his chair. SMACK!

“Yeah, she told me how you two met. You all thought I was dead. It makes sense. Hell! Even the kids love ya! She figured she had it made with a new young husband, a WHITE husband too, a father who the kids respected. So she hid this from ya and kept her mouth shut.” He held the album cover aloft. “Then I showed up black and back—from the dead, so to speak, but only half alive ... if that.” Jim spit out the last two words in anger and in shame. Then, he stopped, evidently to contemplate what he had just admitted to himself.

“Sure. It all figures ... ”

Dixie hung his head in shame a second time, remembering David, Bathsheba and Uriah.

“Thing I can’t figure out, kid, is the money angle. Where in Hell did you get the cash to start her up in business and buy that expensive diamond ring, if you didn’t know who you was?”

“G-Gam-blin’,” responded Dixie softly.

“Gamblin’?” Jim couldn’t suppress a chuckle. “Shee-ittt! You that good?”

Nick nodded. “Li’l l-luck, too.”

“I’d say so. We should go to Vegas,” joked the big man sarcastically.

“O-K. Ta-teach ya ma sy-system. La-Least I can d-do. Rent car and ... . ga-go up there ca-couple days ... Then ch-check out ... Hay-Halo Rex-uh, Pl-Platters. See ‘bout ... wa-wife of m-m-mine.”

“Hope nobody’s bangin’ her, hey kid?” Big Jim cocked his head to eye Dixie suspiciously.

Utterly defeated, Dixie studied the injured vet. Dixie threw up his hands in surrender as he kneeled before Jim’s wheelchair. He placed his hands on the arms of the big man’s chair.

“Wha’ ca-can, I say, Ja-Jim? Yes, I la-love D-donn.’ Ya-Yes, I wan-TED ta ma-maarr’ her. Hell, ‘posed to been maarr’d week ag-go la-las Sa-Satur ... day, ba-but team ... made it tada Ser-ies. Yes, I ... la-love you ka-kids. But’s all o-o-o DAMN!”

Dixie was angry at himself. He slapped his thigh, rose up and paced away from Jim the few feet allowed him by the constricted space of the tiny, dark room. Then he turned around to face the paraplegic. He was going to get this word out, no matter what. Big Jim watched carefully as Dixie tried to compose himself.

“O-O-VER! Damn it! Told her th-that yester ... Ta-told her on phone Sa-Satur ... nigh.’ ‘s ov’, ‘cause ya-you r’ah her husban’ ... , you are fa-fatha her-her ... k-kids.”

The big man studied his young houseguest earnestly, looking him directly in the eye. Big Jim measured his words as he leaned forward in his wheelchair to speak solemnly.

“All right, Nicky. I believe ya. You always was a straight-up guy. That’s one of the things caused me to take ya under my wing over in the Nam. You was always straight-up, no matter that you was a big celebrity. You didn’t have to come to the Nam and risk your butt, but you did. You helped rescue a lotta people and you saved my butt, to boot! More than once! What’s left of it, anyway. Hell, I was jes’ kiddin’ ‘bout Vegas, kid. You don’t have to take me to Vegas. I was just raggin’ on ya ‘bout that. You gotta find your own wife now.”

The big man stretched out his one, good hand to Dixie, who took it. Big Jim squeezed hard, as hard as he could, but Nick met his grip with equal pressure, drawing the wheelchair toward him. as they shook. Neither man would back off. They stared hard at one another. Finally, Big Jim said through clenched teeth, “Don’t think we’re gonna make Vegas like this, Nicky boy.”

When Dixie smiled, they both relaxed their grips and let go of each other’s hand. A modicum of good will had been re-established between them.

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When Donna Dixon arrived home later that afternoon looking for someone to help her unload the groceries, she found no one, contrary to what her husband had promised her earlier. Instead, on the dining room table, she found her engagement ring on top of a note and the opened *Lest We Forget* record album.

*“Gone to Vegas for a few days.”*

There was no signature, no reason why, but Mrs. Dixon recognized Dixie’s immaculate handwriting and she needed no explanation. She bet it had taken him a good ten minutes to write that brief note. She could just picture him now, bending over the table with his tongue hanging out, putting a hundred per cent effort into forming those neat letters. She sat down, buried her head in her forearms on the table and cried. The ice cream melted.

\* \* \*

In Vegas, Dixie taught Big Jim, Dixie’s system. Actually, it was Ed Rabinowitz’s system, his late comrade from Subic Bay. Dixie made sure that Jim understood that he couldn’t take credit for inventing the system, but he sure could play it. They gambled for three nights, winning about eleven and a half thousand dollars. The two vets split the loot evenly between them. Big Jim was impressed favorably with Ed’s system. The pair had spread their play out over nine different establishments, careful not to draw attention to themselves as big winners. Dixie simply told Jim that “they got a little lucky.”

Naturally, a long-haired, young white man, with gold-capped teeth, who always kept his right hand in his pocket accompanying a one-armed, paralyzed, black man in a wheel chair drew people's attention. However, Dixie made certain neither of them left a casino with more than a thousand dollars apiece. Dixie planned to return to Vegas many times in the future. He didn't want to wear out his welcome teaching an old buddy how to gamble. Dixie felt comfortable with their efforts. Big Jim was ecstatic.

Early Thursday, the two men drove to L. A. in their rented 1974 black Cadillac Seville, where Dixie visited the Halo Platter offices in downtown Hollywood. The Halo executives stiffed him, but one of their secretaries was very helpful. She gave him the home address of Ryzanna Sheeboom, the Rock'N'Roll star, who was purported to be his wife. The secretary had observed that, if Mrs. Sheeboom weren't there, her parents could tell him where she was.

"Mrs. Sheeboom?" he had asked. Was she still "Mrs. Sheeboom?" The secretary had said as far as she knew, Ryzanna was still "Mrs. Sheeboom" and very anxious to meet "Mr. Sheeboom." Then she had grinned widely. Dixie asked the secretary for Mrs. Sheeboom's phone number, but the helpful woman kindly refused to provide it. The administrative assistant explained that she had just broken company policy by giving out that unlisted home address. She wasn't going to compound the problem by adding an unlisted, private residence phone number. The secretary explained Halo Platters, as well as Mrs. Sheeboom, had both dealt with many impostors since Halo had released the *Lest We Forget* album. While the Halo secretary thought Dixie looked and sounded very much like the real Nick Sheeboom, she could not be sure since she had never met him. She had reckoned, if he truly were Nick that he would not mind taking the trouble to write a letter or head east to find out.

Dixie did not mind. In fact, he was looking forward to the adventure. Suddenly, Dixie had something, something to look forward to, something that might be able to thaw and absorb the frozen, vacant hole left in his soul. That hole had been dug even deeper now due to the loss of the desirable Donna Dixon and her loveable kids. Suddenly, Dixie had hope.

He then took Big Jim over to Peppermount to show him around. Big Jim, like everyone else, was extremely impressed with the scenic, immaculate school's oceanside campus grounds and its grand view of the Pacific. Coach Trahorn was not available, so Dixie left him a note under his locked office door, explaining that he was heading east to take care of some personal business, where he hoped to play summer baseball, as well. Big Jim mentioned that he would like to bring the kids up next year to watch some of Dixie's games.

The two war buddies returned to La Jolla in the rented, late model, black Caddy. Strange as it may seem, neither man had mentioned Donna the entire trip. In fact, they had gone out of their way to avoid mentioning her. They both knew that she was the main reason they had left La Jolla in the first place. Upon their return, Dixie was fired up to leave for the East Coast that very night. However,

the boys prevailed upon him to stay one more night to watch their little league and tee ball games on Friday. They reminded Dixie that he had skipped out on them the other night. So, Dixie obliged the youngsters by staying over one more day to watch their Friday night games.

After Dixie had put the boys to bed Thursday night, the three adults retreated to the back yard patio for a painful confrontation. The larger measure of hurtful, ill will fell between the Dixon's, while Dixie mostly just listened in anguish. He did not confront Donna about her withholding evidence of his past from him. What good would it have done? As the troubled, married couple carried their battle royal back inside, into the master bedroom, Dixie retired to his bedroll under the lemon tree. Listening to the pair fight through their open bedroom window, hurt him tremendously, for he knew they were arguing over him. He wished he had never promised the boys that he would stay over.

The overriding factor that brought joy to Dixie's heart this night was the hope of finding himself, of finding HIS wife, HIS family. Since Big Jim had shown him the record album covers, Dixie had studied, even memorized, the album pictures of Ryzanna Sheeboom. She was an absolute knockout. From the record albums, he also found her smoky, sultry voice with the catch in it to be tremendously fetching. One picture, in particular, intrigued him, the one Big Jim had singled out. It was a profile shot of her facing right, standing up as she played the keyboard. She was singing in her tight fitting outfit, with her long coca-smoky brown hair hanging far down her back and a tremendously joyous grin across her face. The picture reminded him very much of mirror image of the silhouette girl. He wondered if this Ryzanna Sheeboom could be his silhouette girl, if she could be the one to fill that void in his soul. He wondered this as he fell asleep under the lemon tree, inhaling the omnipresent lemon scent while the battle of the Dixon's raged on inside the little, stucco house. He slept right through the two a.m. freight.