

~ Chapter 19: Reunion ~

The late afternoon of Tuesday, the 17th of June, 1975 was balmy, not stifling hot or humid, but close to 80 degrees. The sky was mostly pale blue, almost cloudless. A couple of scattered puddles on the streets and sidewalks served notice that a storm had passed through town recently. But the storm was long gone now. It was the kind of day where the birds sang merrily, the air was sweet and a body felt glad to be alive. You couldn't breathe without taking in the freshly sweet scent of clover, honeysuckle, honey locusts and magnolia blossoms, which blended together to form a soft, invigorating, nectar-filled inhalant. Dixie hoped that sweet scent was leading him to his sweet pea, as he drove slowly down the residential streets lined by a variety of differently colored, brick rambler homes.

There were not as many shade trees in this neighborhood as there were adorning the brick duplexes he had passed nearer the shopping center. However, the June flowers were out in full force. It seemed like every house he passed featured at least one window box or flower bed. There were peonies, impatiens, pansies, roses, rhododendrons, and day lilies. Beautiful, just beautiful. But Dixie focused his concentration on finding the person who might be the girl of his dreams. He had never seen so much red brick in his life!

The one and a half-story homes looked to be about ten years old, based on their style and the height of the shade trees and shrubs in the yards. Grey, white or tan, shingled roofs sloped precipitously towards the front yards, covering half the height of the homes. Everything was so green, more like the islands than Southern California. When Dixie had crossed east of the Sabine and later the Red Rivers, he had noticed the large quantity and variety of green shade trees. The trees of Crest Hill Heights exceeded that greenery. In fact, the greenery amazed him, as did the preponderance of red brick. He liked it. That greenery gave the place a fresh, lively feeling, unlike the dull year-round, barren, brown of the Southern California hills.

Dixie passed over two or three cross streets before he hit the twenty-two hundred block. The odd numbered houses were on his left. He counted them down 2229, 2227, 2225. His heart grew larger in his chest with each home he passed. Out of habit, he kick-shifted down into neutral, cut his engine, and drifted the bike up behind a parked car on the right side of the street. Dixie had learned to "cut and glide" in residential neighborhoods after people on Donna's court had complained about the noise from his bike's four-in-one exhaust. He always had thought the bike ran pretty quietly, but he had not wanted to cause trouble for Donna, so he had cut the engine and glided. That precaution had become habit with him in neighborhoods like this one. He kicked down the block stand and

rocked the bike back on it. He didn't want to take a chance some kids might come along, playing around when he wasn't there and knock it over. Righting the bike after a fall could be a real back breaker. Once, out a Donna's, the boys had tipped the bike over. Dixie had thought he'd rupture himself trying to right it.

Dixie dismounted, feeling a little light headed from the booze and the ride. He had parked beside a blossoming magnolia. He removed the rubber bands from around his pant legs with little difficulty, placing them in his pocket and then he turned to survey the houses across the street. He combed his long, dark, wind-blown mane straight back, as was his custom. He patted the hair on top and behind his head, feeling the waves that formed naturally. Donna had said his hair reminded her of Errol Flynn's in one of the first color film's ever made, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Dixie studied the scene before him, hoping to recognize something, anything. Across the street, the sun was high yet directly in his line of view. His cheap dark glasses helped immensely.

These brick ramblers were about fifty feet in length, on lots maybe seventy-five feet wide. The homes had gray shingle roofs with front stoops about six steps high. Slate or concrete sidewalks led either directly from the street, at right angles or in a serpentine manner from the driveways to the front steps. Each house had a long, concrete driveway off to the side of the home, but there would always be two driveways side by side, one for each adjacent house. Thus, each rambler had one side with just lawn and no driveway between its neighbors.

Dixie had parked against the concrete curb, across the asphalt street just past the driveways for 2225 and 2223. The sweet, pungent scent of the magnolia's white blossoms whetted his palette. Scattered oak and maple trees stood in the yards of the homes on Dixie's side, the north side of the street. However, the homes directly across from him, including the Ryan's sandy-hued brick home, had green grass yards devoid of any shade trees.

Funny. For a "rich bitch", this neighborhood is pretty modest. Maybe she don't have the bills everybody thinks she's got.

The single lane driveway for 2221 was on the right, the opposite, side of the house, from where Dixie stood, facing it. A black, iron light pole, about seven feet high, stood on the house side of the right-angled slate sidewalk, halfway between the stoop and the driveway. Dixie could not count them, but there must have been a hundred yellow ribbons tied around that light pole. He recalled Tony Orlando's song and reflected upon Donna's prediction.

A quaint, cobalt blue, slate walkway wound through the green front lawn stepping from the concrete driveway to the front stoop. The stoop top and the four-foot high brick and mortar veranda jumped out at the casual observer. Recessed under the overhanging roof and shielded by a brick wall on the left, the porch featured a black, wrought iron rail fence. The fancy looking rail guarded both sides of the stoop and the two sides of the veranda's perimeter not buttressed by the brick house. Consisting of about a half dozen steps of finished cement, the green-painted stoop was about six feet wide and little under five feet

high. The top of the stoop and the veranda were covered in some type of green outdoor carpet. Three evenly spaced, three-foot high azalea bushes conceal the brick wall supporting the veranda to the right of the stoop. The home's roof extended over the porch. Two forest green Adirondack rocking chairs lounged on the veranda along either side of a low, round, black metal table. A black, corner, iron brocade brace extended from the driveway side corner of the roof down to the corner of the iron veranda railing. A similar brace ran down along the driveway side of the brick wall next to a forest green downspout. Dixie couldn't help but notice some kind of yellow ribbon entwined around the top of the veranda's black, iron railing.

Damn! Hope I don't disappoint them. Hope I'm the guy they're expecting.

A tall, extra wide, picture window ran the length of the veranda. A set of Venetian blinds was drawn fully down at either end of the window, leaving the center portion of the window open to what lay behind it. Dixie could not make out much through the center glass. He thought he saw a floor lamp to the right.

Azaleas also fronted the sand colored, brick wall, on the opposite, left side of the front stoop. What must have been two large bedroom windows sat about seven feet off the ground on the left side of the house. Their blinds and shades were pulled down about two thirds of the way. The windows were braced by a pair of decorative, louvered, wood shutters. Like the downspouts and eaves, these fake, wooden shutters were painted forest green, but they were trimmed with an off white color that matched the roof shingles. A shallow cape cod roof peaked above the open brick between the two windows. A small, octagonal window was set in the brick, a few feet below the peak of the cape cod roof. A giant metal TV antenna sprouted from the top of the chimney on the right side of the roof.

Dixie recognized nothing. But the yellow ribbons certified this must be the right place. He just hoped he was the right guy. From prior disappointments, he knew it could be darned embarrassing if he weren't. His hands began shaking again. Dixie fished out his new pack of Lucky's from his suit coat pocket and unwrapped the top, as he resumed his inspection of this foreign place. For all his hard riding during the last few nights, strangely, he was in no hurry now.

A rich bitch who lives with her parent's in a working class neighborhood—now that's FAR OUT! He chuckled nervously, as he drew a Lucky from the pack.

There were three cars in the driveway. Two other cars, including a baby blue, open convertible Starfire and a Ford station wagon, were parked along the curb in front of the house just this side of the driveway entrance. Parked at the head of the driveway, along the right side of the house, he detected the back of a beat up, old, black Chevy Monza rag top. Parked in the driveway behind the Monza, was a late model, vermilion Cadillac Seville. Behind the Caddy, closest to the street, was an older, well maintained, navy blue Pontiac Bonneville convertible. The Bonneville's trunk was wide open. The two sleek convertibles caught his eye.

The front door of the house flung open, emitting a large, muscular, curly haired, young man. He carried a number of travel bags. Dixie stopped fooling

with his pack of Luckys to watch. The porter's long, curly hair style matched that of the rocker John Oates. He appeared to have been pushed out of the house, banging open the screen door loudly, as he went. He was about Dixie's age.

So, that's the comforter? Not bad.

Following behind him was a short girl with long, straight black hair, parted in the middle, which reached down as far as the small of her back. An orange head band around her forehead held her long, dark hair in place. In fact, she was clad all in orange: orange flip-flops, hot pants and a stylish kind of broad strapped, orange halter top that featured large, pointed collars. The collars covered her otherwise bare, front shoulders. Her back was completely bare except for the halter's lower back strap. Dixie did a double take, thinking for a minute, she was Moons, who, by some miracle, had arrived here ahead of him. Yet, when he heard the girl's voice, he knew she wasn't Moons. Then, Moons was taller, too.

Dixie leaned back against his bike as he subconsciously fished for the lighter in his suit coat pocket. He was in no rush to make his presence known. He packed down the tobacco of his cancer stick against the top of the package. Dix retrieved his lighter from his pants pocket and casually lit up. Inhaling deeply, he began to relax again. The fresh taste of the Lucky resurrected the effect of the booze. All the while, Dixie watched the scene playing out before him little more than a hundred feet away, across the street in the front yard of 2221. He wanted to enjoy this moment, sensing somehow his life might be about to change forever.

Dix made himself a mental note that he was smoking a lot lately, but he focused on the people across the street. He thought, like Moons, the girl in the yard bore a strong resemblance to the silhouette girl, too. But she was too small in stature to be the object of his dream. Besides, how many silhouette girls could there possibly be? They seemed to be everywhere. Dixie always had believed the silhouette girl was unique and was made especially for him. Now, he wondered.

The curly haired fellow was huge, very muscular. He looked like he could be a football player especially with that number 80 football jersey he wore on his back. Only his hair was too long for a football player. His curly "doo" made him look like one of the Three Musketeers. However, the spitfire of a brunette sure seemed to have him wrapped around her finger. The young man wore brown sandals and cutoff khakis. Trimmed in navy blue and old gold with a navy blue number '80,' the jersey hung loosely over his cutoffs. The guy was following the orange-clad girl's instructions to the letter. She was working him like a dog. After he had laid the luggage in the trunk of the Bonneville, she ordered him back into the house for more stuff.

Dixie smiled to himself. *If THAT is the silhouette girl, (he jabbed the cigarette, held between his left hand fingers, in the girl's direction) that guy can keep her.* Dixie croaked quietly, "I sure ain't fightin that big cat for HER. No way, Mann!" Must be the liquor that promoted his sudden, atypical penchant for soliloquy.

He dragged slowly on the nail. The perfect combination of booze, no food and cigarettes had really relaxed him. From head to toe, he felt good, real good, warm

yet smooth and light. Dixie wrapped his right arm around his ribs, inadvertently closing and bunching up his suit coat. He rested his left elbow over the back of his right wrist, smoking the nail with his left hand. He was no longer anxious. The orange, boss girl stood in the yard, halfway between the car and the front steps. The top of the parked station wagon blocked her lower half from his view.

Imploring something, she retreated towards the porch, again bringing herself into Dixie's full view. The girl had a cute shape and tantalizing, long, dark hair. Dixie had to give her that much, but her bossiness rubbed him the wrong way. He could not hear what she was saying now, as she spoke away from him towards the front door. Again, the door opened and the young Adonis burst forth, loaded down as before, this time with beach paraphernalia. He hurried to the car with the orange terrier of a girl nipping at his heels. Then the girl-terrier turned back to the house yelling loud enough for the whole block to hear.

"RYZANNA!"

Dixie's ears perked up. The young man loading the car had dropped something on the ground. Dixie could not see what, as the two cars parked against the curb in front of the house again obscured his view of the yard there. The girl in the yard was reprimanding the curly haired muscleman for his sloppy work, when an attractive older woman stepped out from behind the front screen door. Probably in her late thirties, the woman was wearing a sleeveless brown shift covered with a tan, half-apron tied about her waist. This woman was heftier than the boss girl. Yet her apron failed to conceal her own shapeliness, even if her curves were a bit more rounded with age than those of the girl in orange.

"Hmm," observed Dixie. "Must be the mother. You can see where the daughter gets her figure," he observed talking to himself again. The older woman on the steps called to the girl in the yard.

"Sheena? Think you might need these, Honey." She tossed the girl in orange some keys. "Sheena" caught the keys, looked at them and dropped her head. Then she raised both her head and hands high, before she let both hands and chin drop abruptly. She slapped the sides of her hot pants which barely covered her protruding buttocks. Dixie noticed that in addition to a gleaming diamond ring, the girl wore a large, fire opal ring on her outstretched, left hand.

This chick really likes orange!

Semi-humbled, the young woman cried and beat her chest with both fists in an overly dramatic, mocking fashion.

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Thanks, Mom."

"Well, that's what mothers are for, Dear." The handsome mother smiled quaintly at her contrite offspring.

Sheena? What a name! Sheena? Yeah! Sure, she's the other girl in the band with her picture on the latest album cover—the sister. Sure. Dixie recognized her now.

As this byplay had occurred, Dixie drew on his Lucky, still undetected. He wondered how long it would be before they noticed him spying on them.

Suddenly, Dixie became aware of another short female. Evidently, she had slipped out of the house onto the porch quietly, during the mea culpa episode. Initially unnoticed by Dixie, she emerged now from behind the mother. He saw her. She must be the “Ryzanna” who had just been paged.

This girl’s hair was several shades lighter than either of the other two women, but her face was strikingly similar to the mother’s, at least from this distance. The girl carried a pair of what looked to be heavy wool blankets, folded in quarters, and pressed firmly against her right side under her arm. Turned towards the driveway, she held the blankets in a way that obscured her body from Dixie. But he could see her bare, tanned legs—“Gorgeous” slipped from his mouth without coercion, as did his cigarette when he pulled it down to gawk.

She’d make any chorus line in Vegas with them stems, if she was a little taller.

Dixie sucked hard on his nail. He needed that butt right now. He was only a hundred feet or so from them. Yet, they were all so absorbed in their own affairs, none of them had noticed him, standing diagonally across the street. He leaned back against his bike, inhaling the pungent fragrance of the magnolia, above his tobacco smoke. Again, he wondered how long his advantage would last.

Now Dixie riveted his eyes on the short, lighter hued brunette on the porch. The girl chuckled at this “Sheena’s” forgetfulness. Dixie zeroed in on the porch girl, the one, he believed was Ryzanna. His keen eye took in everything about the attractive girl, as Sheena chastised her sister’s lack of initiative.

“For cryin’ out loud, Ryz’n. That’s all you brought out?”

“I brought what you told me to bring, Sheena. I swear, if anyone doesn’t do exactly as you say, you get ticked off. Now, it seems like, you get ticked even if they do. Do you want the blankets or not?” Ryz’n held the blankets out before her. Sheena placed her hands akimbo.

“My! Aren’t we touchy? Hope that husband of yours gets here quick, so you’ll snap out of it. Of course, I want the blankets. Put ‘em in the trunk, PLE-EASE?”

‘Husband of yours?’ How could they know he was coming right now? Could Sheena be referring to someone else? Had that helpful record company secretary called ahead to warn them?

However, Dixie could not dwell upon such thoughts now. He was much too much mesmerized by the lovely vision on the front stoop across the street. From Dixie’s viewpoint, that girl seemed to be spraying sunshine out all around her.

Ryz’n shifted the blankets to her left arm, using her right hand to grasp the stoop’s iron handrail. When she turned to descend the stoop, the girl was wide open to his view. The sight of her figure about knocked Dixie back over his bike. “Be damned,” whispered Dixie to himself in awe. “She’s got the face of a cheerleader and the body of a—Wow! What a fox! A bodacious fox at that!” He had never seen an hourglass so sharply defined on any woman or girl before, ever! Not even in Vegas! He called Big Jim’s words to mind. “Nobody’s got a wife that looks like that.” *And I’m Nobody? Be damned.* “Be double damned!”

Ryz'n hesitated, halting on the third stoop step. She looked perplexed as though she had just heard a strange noise. The girl was wearing high-waisted, forest green short shorts (not "hot pants") with broad cuffs, a sleeveless, yellow, scooped neck, midriff, summer top and there was a necklace or something dangling from her neck. The midriff seam of the top, almost but did not quite reach the high waist band of her shorts. Nevertheless, her navel was covered, a fact that Dixie appreciated. However, she could have been wearing a burlap sack thought Dixie and still her womanly virtues could not have been hidden from him, not the way she looked.

The girl was barefoot, but she wore a yellow ribbon in her wavy, shoulder length hair, which was parted high on the right side of her head. Her hair appeared to be a smoky grey-brown, the color of hot coffee, no, make that hot cocoa surrounding a marshmallow, taken with a couple spoonfuls of cream. Like him, she parted her hair very high. She had pulled her long bangs apart so that they framed either side of her face and then curled them up so the tips of the curls brushed her prominent cheekbones. However, unlike Dixie, this girl's hair reached down to her broad shoulders and a little beyond. Her prolific hair growth was unmistakable. Like the orange, head band on Sheena, the yellow ribbon held this girl's hair in place, keeping it from falling in her eyes.

Dixie's keen eyes were burning a hole through his custom-made Foster Grants as he observed the girl, who was about twenty-five yards from him. He studied her meticulously from the yellow ribbon about her head to her hot pink-painted toenails which he could barely make out, even with his superior vision. From the light pole, which was halfway to the driveway, the boss girl again began to prod this other girl, whom she had called "Ryz'n", from her perch on the porch steps. However, Ryz'n ignored her.

Dixie felt the brunette with the glorious shape and the yellow ribbon in her hair sensed she was being watched. He was right, for she lifted her head now, looking for something. Slowly, as if she had radar, the curvaceous cutie in the green shorts turned her head his way. When she found him, her eyes locked onto his face. His excellent vision had proved him well. She was indeed gorgeous! Truly something else. But Dixie hid behind his wraparound shades.

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Ryz'n had walked down a few steps of the stoop, when she stopped dead in her tracks! She felt uneasy, as if someone were staring at her. She looked up across the street. Then, turning her head to her right about forty-five degrees, she found the individual whose gaze she felt penetrating her like a laser.

There, caddy-cornered across the street from Ryz'n, stood a young man with long, dark, wavy, almost shoulder-length hair. Long black sideburns and a matching, trim, dark moustache, leaning up against a parked motorcycle. Wraparound, dark sunglasses, similar to those she owned, masked him like Zorro. He dressed in a stylish unbuttoned light grey suit coat with matching, flared, grey slacks, a powder blue shirt, and matching light grey loafers. From

what she could make out, his feet appeared to be sockless. He was smoking a cigarette with his left hand, while he had shoved his right hand out of sight down into his suit pants pocket.

The stranger stood, immobile, on his left foot only, relaxing back against his bike with his right foot crossed over his left. He appeared calm, peaceful, as if he were at home here, but he was a stranger to her, to this neighborhood. He was looking straight at her. She gasped.

Could it be Nicky?

But it wasn't possible. Big Jim said Nicky couldn't get here until tomorrow at the earliest. Yet the stranger's motorbike was parked behind him! Ryz'n's heart rose in her throat and her chest began to heave. The more she studied the stranger, the more she knew.

It's him. It just has to be him!

"Roy! Roy! Come here QUICK! COME QUICK!" Her mom's urgent voice sounded from the stoop above her, shattering the moment's supreme stillness.

Suddenly, everything began happening in a slow motion vacuum for Ryz'n. Behind her, she heard her mother speaking urgently in a backwards direction through the front screen door to her father, who, Ryz'n knew, was planted in his easy chair reading the evening newspaper. Prompted by the urgency in her mother's voice, Ryz'n heard her dad appear momentarily behind her, pushing open the screen door. Sheena, who had just caught the keys from her mother had been urging Ryz'n to hurry up with the blankets, when the director of operations caught herself in mid sentence. She, too, followed her sister's line of sight to the man leaning against the motor cycle. Bryson, when he pulled his head from the trunk of the Bonneville, also stopped, as if entranced, to look at the mysterious motorcycle man. Behind her Ryz'n heard the screen door creak open, while from the left corner of her eye, she saw her sister and Bryson freeze in their tracks as though she were dreaming them.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" gasped her dad loudly behind her.

"Oh, Roy!" exclaimed Mrs. Ryan.

Ryz'n heard her parents above and behind her, but she did not heed them. Slowly, she moved the blankets to her left hand, before she let go of them altogether, dropping them down the last couple of porch steps. Ryz'n raised her left hand unconsciously to her mouth, in an expression, common both to her and her mother. Then, without taking her eyes off the biker across the street, Ryz'n took one long, light stride over the last steps to the grass. She began to walk, haltingly at first, towards the mysterious visitor.

Her heart, like her mind, raced a mile a minute, while everything else around her seemed to slow down. Her gait quickened. Her stomach felt queasy, then hollow. Her mouth became dry and her palms began to perspire. She felt herself flush from head to toe. Could this really be happening? This was not one of the many dreams she had imagined about this moment, was it? *It can't be.* He wasn't

supposed to be here for another two days yet! Wouldn't that be just like Nicky? Early or late, but he was rarely on time, except when they were ...

The breathless, barefoot girl picked up speed as she crossed the yard diagonally toward the stranger. The green zoysia grass tickled the soles of her feet, but she scarcely noticed. She wanted to pinch herself, but her trance-like state would not permit such a simple feat.

She never took her eyes from him. Neither did he redirect his vision away from her. As she began to jog across the yard towards him, the biker moved for the first time. He casually flicked his cigarette away with his left hand, while his right remained buried in his pocket. The man began to cross the narrow, residential street. When a car honked to his left, he held up coolly to let the car pass. Then, most deliberately, he angled right, across the street towards her.

Ryz'n remembered she had promised herself she would not throw herself at him. She didn't want to embarrass him or herself. She remembered the psychiatrist's cautions. She paused just past the concrete pedestrian sidewalk that bordered the avenue, at the edge of the grass next to the concrete curb. Ryz'n waited dutifully as she had been for these three years past. She became conscious she was barefoot but, for some, strange reason, she noticed her recently painted toenails shone a glossy pink. With her right hand over her mouth and her left down by her side, she realized her fingernails were also glossed in pink. *Who CARES about nails? What thoughts at a time like this!* Ryz'n nervously spun her diamond engagement ring about her ring finger.

The stranger came close but he halted in the macadam street, a couple feet from the curb, squarely facing her. His right hand remained buried in his pocket. His dark glasses still masked his face. He gave no sign that he recognized her. *Could he remember her?* Ryz'n's heart thundered. *Is it him?* He seemed too big for her Nicky. She tried, but could not swallow.

Ryz'n could not see his eyes for his large, dark glasses obscured them. Devoid of any facial expression, his nose and mouth, or what was not obscured by the moustache, looked like they belonged to her Nicky. That trim, coal black moustache had not been present in the recent baseball photos given her by the Peppermount coach, but Ryz'n needed to see those eyes!

She had experienced her share of imposters over the last year, more than one a gig when she had been touring with the band. She searched his cool, expressionless face, but those darned glasses ... Now, overcome with emotion, unable to speak, Ryz'n made a subconscious, halfhearted motion with her left hand toward her eyes and over her head, in effect, asking him to remove his sunglasses. He did so haltingly, placing them in his left pants' pocket, leaving his left hand in his pocket with the glasses and his right out of sight in his suit coat pocket. Then he raised his head and simply stared directly into her eyes.

"OH, MY GOSH!" cried Ryz'n. "There they are!" she gushed. Unforgettable and larger than life! With the left eye just as black as coal and the right, an bright

electric blue! Now her left hand shot upward to join her right in covering her suddenly gaping mouth. She exclaimed in a smoky, hoarse, choked whisper:

“NICKY!” *Nobody has eyes like you, Nicky! Nobody!* Without thinking about all her precautions and warnings, Ryz’n leaped from the curb into his arms. He had no choice but to catch her. She wrapped both arms around his neck and both legs around his waist. Overcome with emotion, she turned her head to the left and buried the right side of her face into his rock solid upper chest and left shoulder.

Despite her prior plans to remain dignified, to hold back for fear of scaring her timid husband off, Ryz’n had attacked him like that Spider Lady from Saigon might have. Ryz’n had behaved just as coarsely as she imagined that prostitute described by Big Jim might have acted. Nevertheless, Ryz’n wrapped both her arms and her legs around her husband, the stranger, back from the grave. She hugged him so tightly, she suspected he might mistake her for the boa constrictor he had feared in his sleep in Nam. His body felt just as hard and lean to her as ever, only he was larger everywhere. Her arms did not reach around him as far as they once had. She could no longer clasp her hands around his shoulders and behind his back. He was a man now. It was true. She buried her face in the side of his neck for a few seconds before she pulled back.

Her husband’s discomfort registered with Ryz’n, as evidenced by him holding his hands out helplessly in the air above her shoulders. She was holding him, not the other way around. Obviously, not knowing what he should do, he inadvertently but clearly displayed his missing fingers to her, as well as to the others. The family stood stock still, in place behind her, like deer caught in headlights. The sight of his maimed hand opened the flood gates for Ryz’n and she rained tears of joy mixed with grief on his shoulder and collarbone. Dixie looked past Ryz’n to the Ryan’s, for what? Help? Direction?

Dixie knew Donna was a big, strong woman, but neither she, nor Miss Riordan, nor anyone else, ever held him as tightly as this little mighty mite did. *Jeeze! She is strong! Like a danged Boa Constrictor!* He could feel the firmness of her well toned muscles in both her legs and her arms. However, her substantial bust like her double, facial cheeks were soft, as was her heavy, luxuriantly thick hair. Her eyes! He had never seen eyes quite like them before, with that combination of a large, soft round irises and their pronounced almond-shaped setting. Their emerald hue contrasted sharply with the pitch black brows and long lashes. Aside from her pictures on *GRT*’s album covers, he did not recognize her. He wished he did. Still, in her presence like this, a shiver shot down his spine and sliced through his soul, fracturing that cold void within. Nevertheless, she sure as hell recognized him. *That’s for damned sure.*

Ryz’n heard her mother weeping uncontrollably behind her. Her dad had stepped out onto the porch to comfort his wife. In an excited voice, the patriarch consoled his wife in a tone loud enough for all to hear.

“It’s him, Rose. By God, it IS him! I’ll be damned! I never ... thought, never ... thought we’d see him again. He left us a boy and now ... now, why now, he has come home a man.”

“A boy, a man! Who cares?” Mrs. Ryan sniffled, “He’s alive! And he’s come home to our Baby. That’s what’s important!” Dixie noticed Sheena and her manservant standing on the other side of the yard, several feet apart. Disbelief laced with wonder lined their open-mouthed, slack-jawed faces as well.

Dixie had been holding his hands out above Ryz’n’s shoulders, as if he were under arrest. However, the more she cried, the more she squeezed. And the tighter she clung to him, the more this beautiful stranger moved him to compassion for her. Her scent of lemons engulfed him, reminding him of the tree in Donna’s backyard. *Must be her perfume ‘cause they sure ain’t no lemon trees around here.* Despite all this heavy emotion, Dixie remained amazingly calm.

Out of compassion for her present state now, rather than from any memory of her, Dixie held Ryz’n close. He gently rubbed her back slowly with his left hand. Dixie felt her powerful, broad shoulders were like those of an athlete. With his deformed right hand, he tenderly stroked the back of her head, through her dense, wavy hair. Ryz’n responded by burying her tear-stained face into his left shoulder. Her hair was not only long, but wavy and luxuriantly thick. He could not recall anyone with hair quite so dense as this girl’s light, hot chocolate colored, brown-grey locks. He marveled that her hair actually had its own weight to it like one of those guys he had read about in the Old Testament. As if climbing out of a deep well, Dixie consciously raised himself from his admiring stupor for her beauty. He felt he should say something.

But what could he say to soothe this distraught woman, sobbing softly upon his shoulder? He remembered what Big Jim had told him when they had first met. It seemed appropriate, so he paraphrased Jim’s words now to her. Softly, he whispered soothingly into her right ear, so only they two could hear.

“O ... K ... OK it’s ... O ... Kay ... We ma-de it. Yes, we ... di-did it ... Sh-Shhhhh, Shhhhh, n-now.” He cooed very slowly, deliberately, as experience had taught him to do in stressful situations. The shooters and his deliberate manner helped cloak his typical speech impediment. “There ... now. There ... now ... Sh-Shhhhh, Shhhhh. We ... ma-de it.” He spoke in that croaky, froglike voice that Ryz’n knew belonged uniquely to her husband.

As soon as she heard his inimitable croak, she hugged him even more tightly, if that were possible. He responded to her ever tighter clutch, repeating even more gently. “There ... now There ... now ... Shhhhh! Shhhhh! We ... ma-de it. Yes, we, we di-did it. Sh-Shhhhh!”