

Back Room at Jake's Place
(Excerpt from the Novel *Home Safe*)

Just then, Dixie received the nod from the bartender that he had been anticipating. He left a tip for their meal, while he told Moons he'd have to put her in a cab now.

"It's time for business, Baby. Time for you to go."

Moons became indignant. The wine had loosened her inhibitions. She threatened to make a scene, which she was in fact doing. As he ushered her through the restaurant lobby, Dixie purchased a souvenir, silver handkerchief bordered in blue and embroidered with a big red apple and the staggered words in blue *New York, New York*. She was thrilled with the gift, but when she saw that he intended to buy her off with it, she railed again. To quiet her, Dixie stared hard into her strikingly beautiful, electric blue eyes, which contrasted smartly with her raven brows and hair, and told her she could go with him on one condition: she had to sit in the background and not say a word, "not one solitary word." Could she do it? Moons stated emphatically that she could. She gulped down the last of her third glass of Chianti, but held on to her empty wine glass as a baby might clutch its pacifier.

Having paid close to fifty dollars for their meal and another fifty as a bribe to the bartender, Dixie asked Moons to give him half the stash she had hidden in her bra. After a bit of a struggle beneath her plunging neckline that attracted the unwanted attentions of some of the patrons, she complied by extracting a Benjamin from her bulging bosom. However, she pointed out that if he would go back to the hotel with her now, she'd gladly give him the full contents of her overflowing bra, at no further charge. Dixie shook his head and laughed. Then, following a bus boy, he escorted the happy but unsteady Moons down the long, dark, back hallway, past the kitchen entrance, toward the rear of the establishment. The teen ushered them through a back room door to the game.

Dixie hoped he was doing the right thing. He wondered if he could play his usual aggressive, ballsy style of poker with Moons hovering about in potential jeopardy every minute. After all, it hadn't been forty-eight hours since the subway denizens had beaten him to a pulp on the train after his last poker night. He was having second thoughts now, as they were about to enter the poker room, when an inexplicably quiet, peaceful calm came over him. That was a good enough omen for him. He relaxed, letting Moons stay to watch his play.

The card room was what he might have expected it to be: dingy, dimly lit, and rectangular, about twenty or maybe twenty-five feet by fifteen. A round table, resting on oak legs with a smooth, darkly varnished, wide-grained, oaken surface dominated the middle of the room. Seven wooden captain's chairs surrounded the wooden table. On the opposite side of the room, directly across

from the entry door, was a heavy, metal, fire exit door with a metal bar you pushed to open the it. A red and white exit sign hung over the portal. Just inside and to the right of the exit door was another captain's chair with its back against the wall and next to the chair, a shaded window. A similar arrangement existed with a chair just inside and to the left of the entry door. A door, to what appeared to be to a washroom, lay open across the room, in the opposite corner of the constricted chamber. Dixie could make out what appeared to be a narrow, shaded window in the far wall of that room.

In the corner to his immediate left, opposite the washroom, a small mobile bar held a couple bottles of booze and two pyramids of upside-down-stacked glasses. A huge ceiling lamp, containing several light bulbs, hung above the round table. Shaded on its top and sides, the hanging lamp was tethered to the ceiling by what looked to be one of those extendable, stretch cords. Dixie watched as one of the men waiting in the room tested the range of the lamp's extension. He retracted the lamp by pushing it up to the ceiling and extended it by pulling it down within a yard or so of the tabletop. He left it there.

Half a dozen men, aged twenty-five to fifty-five, mingled around inside the room. The familiar tone of their conversations indicated they knew each other. When Dixie had entered the room with Moons on his arm, they had stopped to ogle her and stare at his beaten-up face, but no one spoke. They merely stared as if Moons had two heads, instead of two exquisitely, symmetrically round boobs beneath her plunging, sweetheart neckline. Dixie and Moons stepped inside and to their right and waited against the wall. Her ultra short dress scarcely covered kept her decent. But she had sharp, sexy looking legs, which were easy on the eyes.

A minute later, a pudgy, distinguished looking gentleman with a fat, flat nose entered. He was impeccably dressed, wearing an expensive, silver-grey suit and shirt and a silver over black-striped tie to match. A pearl stickpin held his suave tie in place. A folded, matching two-toned silver and black handkerchief protruded from his breast coat pocket. He carried a full head of slicked back, finely thatched silver-black, almost steel blue, hair. The man wore his hair straight back, in a style popular a generation ago. He also sported two, matching, sparkling, diamond pinky rings on either hand. He entered the room grandly, moving past Dixie and Moons without surprise.

He glanced briefly at Moons before he sat down at the southern most seat of the round table, halfway across the room from either entrance. A smooth looking, olive-skinned, dark-haired teenage youth accompanied him. The boy's hairstyle emulated that of his older companion. Dixie heard the man's oak chair groan, as he sat down. Dressed from semi-casual to more formal coat and tie, the others waited respectfully until the dapper, older gentleman had seated himself. Once he was comfortable, the five other men took their seats around the table. With one exception, they all appeared to be of Italian descent.

Dixie escorted Moons to the right, behind and around the others to the captain's chair leaning against the wall next to the fire escape door. Having gotten a good, long look at Moons, they now directed their attentions to Dixie's badly beaten and bruised face, but again they said nothing. The youngest of the men whispered into the dapper dresser's ear, as Moons nestled down into the captain's chair beside the fire exit. The gentleman spoke to Dixie.

"Liddle Tony here has just reminded me dat, as a rule, we don't allows dames to pawticipate in da spawtin' proceedin's."

The guy ignored Dixie's bruises and Moons' fantastic hourglass figure so skillfully that Dixie admired the guy's calm self-discipline, causing Dixie to note that this guy could prove to be one tough poker player.

"Yes sir, I understand. She's not playing, she just wants to observe, kinda."

"Obsoive?"

"Yes sir, she won't say a word. You have my word on it." Dixie looked at Moons sternly.

"Yous two don't have some kinda scam goin' on do yas? 'Cause if yous do, I can assuraw yous, da results could be most unpleasant faw da bod o' yas."

"No sir, nothing like that. I don't think she even knows how to play poker."

The man stared at the half-high Moons, who smiled sweetly up at him from beneath long, half-lowered eyelashes. He saw Moons held an empty wine glass in her hand and nodded. Then, flashing his bookend diamond rings, he pulled a cigar from his inside shirt pocket and motioned to the silent, larger, fiftyish, short-haired man behind him:

"Awl ride. Sallie. Foisd ..." He nodded towards Dixie. "... den da dish."

Sallie approached Dixie and patted him down. Fortunately, the man did a poor job of frisking him and missed the sheathed stiletto inside Dixie's right boot, which, in all fairness, was easy to do. He had patted Dixie down right over the concealed knife. Both the knife handle and blade were thin and flat and he had stashed it inside his sock such that it contoured to the muscles of his lower calf. The guy did find Dixie's bottle of codeine and flourished it before the dapper gentleman giving the orders.

"What's dis?" The dapper gentleman asked and pointed towards the bottle held by the large man.

"Oh, well that's my medicine. I gotta bit of a cough, ya see?"

"Cough?" Well, don' go coughin' all over da cawds and spreadin' joims around here. Maybe yous twos should take a powdaw?"

"Oh, no sir! That's what the medicine is for, keeps me from coughing, ya see?"

"Unh-hunh." He nodded and Dixie relaxed.

The large, muscle-man motioned for Moons to rise from her seat. He patted her down as well, but very quickly. There were no patty fingers, but when he found the camera in her purse and confiscated it.

Moons blurted out, "But, but that's my cousin's camera. She let me borrow it. I, I promised her I'd take care of it. I use it for sightseeing."

Sallie held the purse in one hand and the camera in the other and looked towards the guy giving the orders. With his bookend, diamond pinky rings flashing, the dapper man calmly trimmed his cigar and lit up.

"Sightseein'?"

He chuckled and glanced around the room at the others. They responded to his chuckle with one of their own. Then he nodded towards the big guy holding Moons' handbag.

"Awl ride Sal, leave da liddle goil her poise and cam'ra."

Then he directed his attention towards Moons. "Bud no pictuaws in here, liddle lady, capiche? Or yous cousin will nevaw see dat cam'ra again!" Casually, he blew the cigar smoke towards Moons, who stumbled over herself again to thank him.

"Oh, no sir. I mean, I mean yes sir, I won't."

Dixie could see these guys had her spooked. He bet she wanted to leave now, but it was too late. They were in this one together now, for better or worse, like a marriage. Dixie grimaced.

Sal handed Moons back her purse and camera and Moons placed the camera inside the handbag. "And leaf id dere," The man glared at her and puffed on his cigar. Moons nodded profusely that she would. He motioned for Dixie to sit.

Dixie sat down opposite the spruce boss man, while the others filled in the chairs around him. Little Tony sat to the right of dapper dan. Moons followed Dixie's lead and cautiously retook her seat by the fire exit. The big man called "Sal", who had patted them down, sat in the lone chair against the wall, back between the washroom and the small booze cart, about two yards directly behind the dapper boss man. The baby-faced, teenage kid sat behind Little Tony, right of the boss man, in the chair between the entrance door and the table laden with booze and ice. Again, Little Tony whispered into the ear of the dapper man next to him. In a voice more gruff than Dixie's own, the distinguished gent spoke to Dixie in between puffs on his cigar:

"So, what's your name, kid?"

"Dixie."

"Dixie what?"

"Strickler."

"And to what do we owe da pleasuaw of your comp'ny here dis evenin,' Mistaw Stricklaw, besides da U.S. Grant yous tipped Jake at da dooaw? Who dold yous abowda game?"

"A fella down in Atlantic City."

The boss looked around the room with a dirt-eating grin on his face.

"Atlantic City? Whoa! See how famous we araw boys? Dey even knows 'bowdus ovaw in Joisey."

The others chuckled, too. He directed his attention back to Dixie.
“And what fellow was dat?”
“Umm, Paulie, I think. Yeah, his name was Paulie. That’s it.”
“Paulie? Whad about his las’ name? Lots o’ guys name o’ Paulie. Right, Paulie?” He smiled at the eager teen to his right, who nodded back.
“Uh.” Dixie squinted his eyes, trying to recall, but he couldn’t. He snapped his fingers impatiently, but couldn’t recall the name.
“Uh, I dunno, I can’t remember.”
“Where was da game?”
“Place called the Fandango.”
The man smiled. He turned to the kid by the door.
“Paulie, go call yous godfadda in Joisey and check id oud.”
While they waited for Paulie to return, the gentleman offered them all a drink. Dixie declined, but Moons made eye contact with Dixie and lifted her empty wine glass to him. The dapper gentleman caught their exchange. He instructed Little Tony to bring in a bottle of whatever wine the “liddle lady” was drinking. “Chianti,” offered Moons. She grinned goofily. Little Tony hesitated, but obeyed. He returned shortly, toting a freshly opened, straw-encased bottle of Chianti.
“Wid my compliments, seniorina,” the distinguished gentleman nodded politely to Moons. She smiled sweetly, thanking him, as she accepted the wine poured into her glass by a leering Little Tony. Little Tony set the round bottle of Chianti on the refreshments table as the youthful Paulie returned. The kid whispered into the distinguished man’s ear.
“Good, good. OK, Paulie, take yous sead,” The boss man patted Paulie kindly on the shoulder and motioned with his arm towards the chair next to the entry door.

The man then introduced Dixie to himself as well as the other players. He was “Big Tony,” and he confirmed the larger, younger man, who had provided Moons the wine, was known as “Liddle Tony.” The other players were “Dom, Joey, Gus and Oiving.” Around the table, Irving sat immediately to Dixie’s right, next to Dom who sat next to Big Tony. Little Tony sat on Big Tony’s right and Joey sat in between Little Tony and Gus who sat on Dixie’s immediate left. Dixie sat directly opposite the two Tony’s between Gus and Dom. Big Tony, Gus and Irving appeared to be well over forty. The others were in their late twenties or early thirties. The hairstyles of the respective participants disclosed the respective generations from which they hailed. Those over forty wore their hair shorter and combed straight back. The younger set had longer locks, combed down across their foreheads, except for the teen Paulie, who copied his mentor. The big, silent Sal had to be sixty, at least. His face was rugged and worn. A silver crew cut topped his head. Sallie sat behind Big Tony between the bathroom door and the booze cart. Big Tony indicated

that neither Sal nor Paulie would be gambling. He grinned at Dixie and said that, like Moons, “they was merely obsoivaws.”

All the other card players followed Big Tony’s example and lit up some foul-smelling stogies. Dixie placed his pack of Lucky Strikes on the table and lit up, as well. He offered Moons a nail, and she sashayed up to the table to take one from him. When she bent over from the waist, Dixie lit her up and noticed Little Tony and Paulie gave Moons’ pumped up rear end the twice over. To his left, Gus stared right down her bulging pair of overexposed, round moon namesakes, which swelled over her décolleté neckline. Dixie gave her the pack, keeping a few cigarettes on the table for himself. With her cigarette lit, Moons retreated cat-like to her seat by the door, employing the same tough, sexy walk she had used earlier in the pub. Little Tony grinned, licked his lips and spoke to Dixie, though he nodded toward Moons:

“Is dat pawt of youaw table stakes?”

Dixie smiled blandly. “Nope, just part of me.” Moons turned around and smiled warmly at him. Meanwhile, next to Dixie, the bespectacled, bald-pated, banker-like, Irving took no notice of such sexy shenanigans. Rather, he stacked his cash neatly by denomination, as if he were some kid playing Monopoly.

Dixie wondered how a guy named “Irving” came to play in this game of wops. Sal was the bodyguard, sitting behind Big Tony at the back of the room in the dark between the washroom and the booze cart. The kid Paulie was the “go-for.” They played with cash, no chips, seven-card stud primarily, also some five-card draw. He figured Texas Hold ‘Em had not yet caught up to these Neanderthals of the Big Apple, which was to his liking anyway. The ante/bet was ten and twenty. The limit was table stakes with a three bet limit, jacks or better to open. Dixie had a thousand dollars in his wallet, four hundred in his boots and nearly a hundred stuck in Moons’ brassiere, just in case. He could see the others had anywhere between two to four thousand on the table, which meant they could bluff him out of the game very easily. Looked to Dix, as if Big Tony had closer to four grand. Dixie asked to use the washroom, back next to Sallie. Big Tony agreed. In the washroom, he added two hundred of his boot money to his thousand. He tried to fold the bills so it looked like he had more cash than he did and wrapped four C-notes around the others. He washed his hands and returned to the table.

“Everyding awl ride?” asked Big Tony.

“Oh, yes sir, just fine.”

“Looks like yous movin’ kind o’ stiff dere, kid. Ain’t dat ride, Big Sal?”

“Right, Boss.” Big Sal growled in a voice that was scarcely human.

“Say, what happened to yous face dere, kid?”

“Yes sir, well, I had a little accident the other day, but I can still play poker.”

“Ax’dent, hunh? Looks more like yous should be at home in bed, takin’ caraw of yous self, ‘stead o’ playin’ cawds wid strangaws.”

“Yes sir, I was, but, after a while, I thought I could use a little diversion.”

“DI-VOISION? Ha! And we’re it, hunh?”

“It would appear so, sir.”

“Well, we’ll see about dat, Ha. I like dis kid, Tony. He’s very polide, not like dese udda long-haired, young punks dese days, whose got no respect for dere eldaws. Yeah, OK kid, pull up to da table dere and we’ll see if we can’t DI-VOIT yous from some of dat cash yous carrying. Hunh? Aha, ha, ha, ha!”

The others chuckled in homage to the boss man.

“Well, that sounds fair to me, gents. Yessir, it sure does.” Dixie grinned faintly and pulled himself up to the table as ordered.

Big Tony explained the table rules. He said this might not be poker according to Hoyle, but it was poker according to Jake’s back room. He looked right at Dixie and said “Any guy who don’ like da house rules can leave now.” But nobody moved. “OK, Paulie, gid a fresh deck and Liddle Tony, you deal da cawds.”

They started their play. Dixie opened cautiously, opting to fold the first four hands, mostly because he didn’t receive much in the way of cards, partly because he wanted to get a feel for how the others played. Dixie always thought he could learn more about the other players, if he watched them play a little. He often employed the same tactic when he faced an unfamiliar baseball pitcher, taking as many pitches as he could before he had to swing. When it came Dixie’s turn to deal, he called five-card draw, even though he preferred their game or any variation of seven-card stud. With his card counting abilities, he liked to see as many cards face up as possible and the stud deal did that with two down, four up and one down. With seven players, seven-card stud brought out almost every card. That was good, because he could use his card-counting acumen to its fullest. However, that also could be bad. With all but three cards of the deck dealt out, more unusual, long shot, low probability combinations were possible.

When it was his turn, Dixie dealt the draw hand to be different and to indicate maybe he preferred it; thereby, hoping to encourage the others to stick with the stud game. Between hands, he glanced at Moons, who was enjoying her wine and his cigarettes. She was content to lean her head back between the corner of the door jam and the wall behind her head and space out on a river of Chianti, under a stream of Lucky Strike smoke. From across the table, Little Tony was eyeballing her every chance he got. Dixie smiled. Glancing at the lovely Moons between hands was the only thing that changed Dixie’s expression. Big Tony took note.

On the fifth hand, Dixie bet and won the pot, recouping his losses for the evening. He felt like a batter getting his first hit, in what would prove to be a long, extra-inning ballgame. He was getting comfortable in these surroundings. Finding a comfort zone, whether at the plate, on the mound or at that poker

table, was an important ingredient in his ability to win. Here, he picked out different things about his environment that appealed to him and focused on them, rather than focus on the things, he did not like.

For example, he liked Moons sitting next to the fire exit door, knowing her position enabled them to make a quick getaway, if one were needed. And she sure looked awesome. He wondered if she knew just how awesome, how tough she really looked with her long-flowing, black hair. She was sexy as hell, all hair, legs, boobs and butt and very little waist. Overhead, he also liked the lamp, which was the only light on in the room. When he needed it to, he could look into the blackness above that light, which helped him to block out other distractions, even the sexy Moons.

He even came to appreciate and respect his opponents. He liked Big Tony, who acted like a real mob boss and Dixie liked the semi-gruff, semi-kind way Big Tony treated young Paulie. Dixie came to respect Irving as a shrewd poker player. Dixie understood now why Irving was the lone non-Italian among the group. Big Tony needed at least one challenge amongst this flock of patsies.

Aside from Big Tony and Irving, the other players were mediocre, except Little Tony who proved to be too emotional to be even a mediocre card player. Dixie signaled him out as the chump he could take. Little Tony had brought three thousand dollars to the table. Dixie planned to leave with it—all of it.

The play continued as the hours passed. The room swam in cigar smoke. If he had known these cats better, he would have asked them to open a door or a window. Dixie felt like he was getting green around the gills from all the second-hand, cigar smoke. He considered dropping some money on the floor so he could get down on his knees beneath the smoke to pick it up and take a few breaths of fresher air.

The smoke did not seem to bother the besotted Moons. She merely would lift her glass and Little Paulie would lick his lips and jump to hurry to her and pour her the Chianti she craved. When Moons smiled at him by way of thanks, the kid would turn as red as the wine he carried and retreat sheepishly to his seat. Moons drank, drank some more. Then she slept through the heavy smoke and the boredom, leaning back in her captain's chair with her head of dense, raven-hued hair supported against the dingy, grey wall. Once, she got up quietly to use the restroom, but she returned to her place afterwards without incident. She drank another glass of wine and dozed off again. Dixie admired her for battling through all of this, true to her promise, without a word of complaint or regret.

Dixie had played only a dozen hands out all night, folding the rest. However, when he chose to bet, he made sure he had some cards and he won every hand he bet but one. He had not bluffed, not once. They had played for about three hours. He was nearly nine hundred ahead when he caught a break in a game of seven card stud, with a pair of kings as his hole cards, followed by a seven, a black lady, a ten of diamonds and a king face-up. Little Tony had a pair of

Queens showing along with a seven of spades face up. Little Tony had drunk a couple vodka tonics and money-wise he was about even. His body language showed he was dying to win a big pot.

With each successive deal, the players had bet and raised the maximum. By the seventh card, the river card, it became obvious to all that the pot would fall between Little Tony and Dixie. The others dropped out one by one. Earlier, when Dixie had been dealt the king, face up; he didn't flinch a bit. He had studied the others, searching for their tells, especially Little Tony's, whose face Dixie read like an open book.

Dixie was sure Tony had three ladies, but no full house. He was sure Tony did not hold a full house, because the show cards of some of the other players around the table matched the seven and ten Little Tony had face up. For the same reason, Dixie knew Little Tony wasn't holding four ladies, because Dixie held the fourth queen, himself. He had picked up the queen on the river deal. Dixie also held the seven of clubs. Dixie showed absolutely nothing. Sitting on the button, he had played his bets cautiously, seeing Little Tony's raises on his queens, until the river card. On the river play, Tony raised Dixie three times the maximum bet, Dixie checked for Big Tony's approval of that maneuver. Big Tony gave his approval by puffing on his cigar and flashing his ring, ignoring Dixie's questioning glance. Dixie rubbed his chin, peeked at the corners of his three down cards and, reluctantly, met Tony's bet. Then he raised him, surprising all of them. Tony saw and raised Dixie. Dixie answered and re-raised. He was going to repeat his prior raise, when Big Tony reminded him there was a three-raise limit. Funny, he had said nothing a minute ago when Little Tony had raised him far above the maximum bet.

Little Tony complained that he would not mind making an exception for this hand. Big Tony overruled him, claiming they could do that for the rest of the night, if the others agreed, but they had to play out this hand under the existing rules. Yeah, those same rules, which the two Tony's had already violated. The pot was over seven hundred dollars. Tony turned over his hole cards revealing the third queen. Dixie did not budge. Little Tony laughed and reached for the pot, but Big Tony restrained his eager nephew by placing his right hand on Little Tony's left forearm.

"Led's see what da kid has got foisd."

"He's got junk, Big Tony. He ain't got nuttin' showin.' He's bluffin.'"

"Le's see."

Dixie flipped over a queen and then the two men to go with the third king already face-up. Little Tony's face lost its color.

"DAMN IT! DAMN IT!" cried Little Tony. He stood up, knocking his chair over backwards behind him, while Paulie rushed to right the chair.

"That bastard is cheadin' Big Tony. He's cheadin' like Hell!"

Big Tony calmly struck a match on the side of the arm of his wooden captain's chair and lit up another one of his Havana cigars. He puffed stoically on the stogie a couple times, then said,

"Is dat so? When yous makes an axcusation like dat, Tony, yous bettaw be able to back it up."

Frustrated, Little Tony slammed both hands down on the table causing the cards and cash to jump an inch in the air.

"I suggesd yous takes a walk Liddle Tony, sid owd da nexd coupla hands."

The younger Tony stared hard at his namesake. Then he stalked off, violently thrusting open the fire exit door, before he disappeared into the alley, which Dixie could see ran behind the restaurant. This confirmed what Dixie had learned earlier from the waitress in Jake's, which he considered to be another good omen. The door slammed shut heavily behind the irate Little Tony.

The racket of the door slamming shut next to her head roused Moons from her boozing slumber. Dixie followed her every move. She looked around, wondering where she was and wiped some drool from her chin. Then, more importantly, she remembered where her wine bottle was and staggered up to the refreshment cart to pour herself another glass of the grape. She waved the bottle haphazardly, carrying it back with her by its straw neck, loop handle, then made her unsteady but guilelessly sexy way, back to her seat. She smiled over at Dixie, who returned her pleasantry. About to sit down, the torrid Moons pivoted about with eyebrows raised holding the round, straw-covered bottle of Chianti aloft with her forefinger by the loop in its braided, straw neck handle. She turned towards the card table, wavered in her stance and asked no one in particular.

"Oh. Does anyone mind?"

"Yeah", growled a surly Gus, looking up abruptly on Dixie's left. "I mind."

Moons pouted. With a full glass in her left hand, she offered the bottle to Gus, but he waved her off angrily. Dixie figured Gus was unhappy with how Dixie had just cut off Little Tony's poker balls. An unwitting but cavalier Moons looked at Gus sideways and then proceeded to take a swig from the bottle herself, as if to demonstrate it was OK to drink from the bottle if he chose to do so. Her cavalier manner ticked Gus off further and his brow furrowed in anger as he rose from his chair. About to rise, Dixie put his hands on the arms of his chair, when—

"HEY! AUGUSTO! Tenere la bocca chiusa e sedersi! Che diavolo! Cos'hai combinato?"

"But Big Tony—"

"Silencio! Ca! Sono il capo, capiche? Dico sidersi. Sidersi!"

Gus sat down abruptly and stewed in his anger, as he scowled at the table. Though he did not know Italian, Dixie knew enough Spanish to get the gist of

Big Tony's surly reprimand of Gus. Then Big Tony turned a suddenly, honey-sweet disposition towards Moons and, by extension, Dixie.

"Scusa, mi scusi. My apologies liddle lady. Of course, yous may have da boddle, wid my compliments, mia bellissima signorina." He smiled serenely and nodded to Moons, who returned a pleasant grin. Then she half fell, half plopped down into her seat and burped loudly.

"I beg your pardon." Moons arched her brows and simpered.

Big Tony nodded and graciously purred "don' mention id, signorina." Then he turned sternly to the other card players.

"Tempaws seem to be flarin' a bid high. S'ppose we awl takes five? And collects ourawselves? Paulie, yous watch da table. Make suraw everadin' stays pud, capciche?" Proudly, Paulie nodded and jumped towards the table to assume Little Tony's vacated chair.

The other players, including Gus, belatedly nodded their agreement, stood up and stretched. A couple took turns in the wash room, but most of them gathered around the refreshment cart, helping themselves and calming their frayed nerves with a brief libation. They ignored Dixie, while he raked in the last pot deliberately, allowing time to perform a mental count of his winnings without giving the appearance of counting. There were seven hundred and sixty dollars in that pot, about two hundred and fifty of which he had contributed. Nevertheless, Dixie was the big winner thus far. He had a little over twenty-seven hundred dollars total now. He was ahead fourteen hundred. Little Tony was down close to two grand. Big Tony and Irving were each a few hundred ahead, while the others were losing. The next deal fell to Dixie.

Before the others returned to the table, Dixie allowed himself a wink and a smile to Moons and received a blown, warm and woozy kiss from her in return. Dixie grinned warmly at her. Then he felt someone watching. From across the room, Big Tony was drinking, what appeared to be a glass of water. He had spied the exchange between the young lovers. He smiled falsely for an instant and then he frowned. Then he announced:

"Lets us awls ree-toin to da table and play some real pokaw." After they were seated, he added, "Table stakes and no bed limid, no limid on da beds, all ride wid yous gents?"

"Well gee, I dunno Big Tony," whined Joey.

"If yous can't take da heat, yous can always leaf any dime yous wants Joey, replied Big Tony in a saccharine tone. Frowning, Joey shook his head but he stayed. Big Tony lowered his chin and arched his brows. "Allride den. Led us proceed with da procedin's."

Dixie stuck with the seven-card stud game they had been playing. He dealt himself nothing, so he folded before he dealt the river card. Big Tony puffed hard on his stogie, as he leaned back in his chair.

“Yous look and folds quite a bid, kid, maybe toos much, hunh?” Dixie smiled pleasantly.

“Well, it seems to work out OK.”

“Unh-hunh. A guy wid real balls wouldn’t do dat.” Big Tony frowned, but he won that hand and the deal passed on to Gus.

“Suppose we raised de ante/bet to twenty and fifty? Any problems wid dat?”

Everyone shook their heads. Nobody dared go against Big Tony. Joey did murmur something, but buried his mouth in his hand, rendering his remarks unintelligible.

“What was dat, Joey? Yous got an objection?” Big Tony pulled his stogie from his mouth to stare at his nephew.

“No, uh no, Uncle Tony, no objections.”

“Dat’s good Joey. Yous knows why?”

“Uh, cuz I’m your nephew and yous like me.”

“No, dem ain’t da reasons, Joey. It’s on account o’ I likes to take yous money.” Big Tony snickered. Except for Irving and Sal, the others laughed at Joey’s expense.

Dixie had them set up, thinking that he never bluffed. With a little capital to work with now, Dixie figured he’d bluff the next good chance he got; especially now, since Big Tony had removed the three-bet limit.

The next hand, Dixie received junk, face down and a pair of jacks, face up, but nothing else. Big Tony showed a pair of seven’s, Irving a possible king-high straight. Dixie’s jacks bet. The three of them went at each other slowly, cautiously, like three sharks circling one another, each looking for an edge, while the other players hung in with the game, swelling the pot. Little Tony re-entered the room from the alley door, noticeably calmer. However, he didn’t sit down right away, opting for a glass of water from the refreshment cart, instead. He let Paulie perch in his chair, while he waited for the hand to play out. Irving was the first of the big three to fold.

He folded when Dixie, without batting an eye, had raised him three times in a row. Probably Irving didn’t have the straight and must have figured he couldn’t bluff the other two out, but his play had succeeded in raising the pot over twelve hundred dollars. Big Tony hung with Dixie, seeing and raising Dixie’s every bet. Dixie wondered if he was doing the right thing by bluffing Big Tony for such a large pot. If Dixie lost the pot, he’d be in the hole and have to bow out of the game with his tail between his legs. On the other hand, if he won, he could lose everything including Moons’ safety. That is, if Big Tony proved not to be the “spawtin’ gent” he pretended to be. With so many good omens, Dixie felt compelled to gamble along.

Again, jacks bet, so Dixie raised the maximum. Tony saw him and raised him back. Dixie never flinched, never changed expression and confidently saw Big Tony and re-raised him again. Suckering Little Tony was one thing, but

duping his namesake in front of all his boys was quite something else. However, Dixie was too deep into this pot to fold, so he played on. He played it straight, calm and cool, as he had all night.

Big Tony surveyed the table. Dixie had the pair of jacks showing. Dixie didn't have to stuff them up the guy's nose. Dixie figured that Big Tony knew the kid hadn't bluffed all night. That was Dixie's advantage in being the stranger to the group. They did not know his play. The pot was something approaching fifteen hundred. Calmly, Dixie watched Big Tony mentally convincing himself that Dixie had a third jack, just as he had held the third king earlier. Besides, there was no other jack showing on the table. The jacks would top Big Tony's trio of seven's. Dixie was gambling Tony did not hold a full house or a pair of jacks himself in the hole. As with Tony's nephew earlier, Dixie had the fourth seven face down. Tony puffed hard on his cigar. He studied Dixie, searching for a hint that would tell him what to do. Big Tony had contributed about thirty percent or more of the pot. Dixie smiled pleasantly, abruptly. Little Tony had been watching the proceedings from behind his uncle. Now he roused Paulie, who had been sitting at the table, from his chair and sat down now in his seat next to Big Tony.

"He's bluffin' Uncle Tony. He's bluffin'. Yous got him by da balls!"

"Quied, Liddle Tony! Or I'll have Sallie here escords yous home."

Thinking about the beating he had taken on the subway, Dixie's faint smile vanished and he stared the dapper man down. Big Tony scutinized the kid across from him some more. Big Tony brightened, as he drum-rolled the table with the fingers of his left hand. Pouring over Dixie's face, he stated dryly.

"Looks like yous tooks a helluva beadin' dere kid. Hope id wasn'd for cheadin' too bad?"

"Nope, for winnin' too good," replied Dixie. Big Tony grinned. Then, inexplicably, the dapper man folded.

Dixie's expression did not change. He continued to stare at Tony, as if nothing had transpired.

"The pot's your, kid. G'head, take it."

Dixie casually reached for the pot and again raked it in slowly, mentally figuring what he had just won, trying to conceal his count. The pot was about fifteen hundred and forty dollars, about four hundred and fifty of which was his. Dixie had over thirty-eight hundred now. He was ready to pack up and go home, but the others were not. It was two a.m. As the big winner on their turf, Dixie could not leave now. He would have to stay and play and maybe lose back a little so they would let him and Moons leave in one piece. Dixie scooped his cards up, placing them all face down and threw them into the center of the table on top of the others.

Little Tony broke the rules again by seizing the cards and flipping them over, revealing nothing but everything.

“Damn it! Yous see dat Uncle Tony. I told yous, the sonovabitch was playin’ ya for a suckaw all along!”

Big Tony looked at Dixie’s nothing hand and stared hard at Dixie, who remained expressionless. The veins bulged in his foe’s once olive, now florid forehead.

“So dat’s how yous wants it, hunh kid?” He inspected Dixie coldly and his countenance turned from a distant admiration to a vengeful scowl, before he smiled gamely. “OK, OK kid. We got all nighd, ride? *Now* led’s us play some caawds, Mr. Dixie Sticklaw. The ante is a buck and the bet is a pair. OK?” He glanced around the table. Joey swallowed hard.

“Gee Big Tony, that’s a little steep for me.”

“Yous can blows whenever yous wants, Joey.”

Joey had lost over twelve hundred dollars. With the grand or so he had left and the inflated betting, he could lose the rest of it real fast.

“OK, tanks Big Tony.”

Relieved with this reprieve, Joey gathered his remaining cash and left the table quickly.

Big Tony called after the young man as he exited. “Tell yous lovely Mama I said ‘hello,’ hunh Joey?”

Joey nodded before he hurried from the room out towards the bar. After the door shut behind Joey, Big Tony muttered loud enough for all to hear.

“Joey always was a pussy!”

The others chuckled, while, overcome by Chianti, Moons dozed oblivious to Joey’s demise.

The game picked up again. They played a few hands with everyone but Dixie winning at least one hand. Dixie folded each time, losing little more than the ante, prompting Little Tony to call Dixie “gutless.” Dixie had about thirty-four hundred on the table, before he finally got something worthy of playing.

Despite his loss on Dixie’s bluff, Big Tony, aside from Dixie, had been the big winner thus far. Dixie figured Big Tony had to be well over a grand ahead. Even so, Dixie wasn’t taking any chances. After the way he had embarrassed the pair of Tony’s, Dixie figured these guys were out for the kill now.

Six cards into the next stud hand deal, Dixie’s face-up cards showed a pair of Aces, and a five and eight of clubs. Little Tony showed a possible straight flush with the nine-ten-queen and Ace of hearts. Big Tony had a pair of fives and an ace high, while Irving showed a possible diamond flush. The other players showed squat, but Gus had an eight of spades Dixie sure could use. The betting escalated, but Big Tony dropped out on the river card deal. Evidently, the fives were all he had. Gus and Dom followed right behind him. Both Irving and Little Tony had about fifteen hundred dollars apiece left on the table. Dixie had about thirty-one [?] twenty-seven hundred left, with nearly another seven hundred in the pot.

Before the last card had been dealt, Dix had been assured of two pair, aces high. In the hole, Dixie held an eight of spades, and a jack of hearts. Dixie never picked up his last card. He didn't have to. He saw it plainly, when it was dealt to him. Before the card had flattened out on the table, it had hung lengthwise on its back edge for a split second at about a forty-five degree angle, freezing its image into Dixie's brain. The others, certainly Gus to Dix's left or perhaps Irving to his right, must have glimpsed the face of the card as well. After the card fell to the table, Dixie had glanced furtively at each of his neighbors. Gus had folded and was cursing his bad luck. Irving was eagerly spying his last hole card. From the faint trace of a smug expression on Irving's face, Dixie knew the flush had come to the man who played coldly like an accountant. Maybe they hadn't seen his seventh card? It was worth a gamble. Opposite him, however, Big Tony was eyeballing Dixie like a hawk. Dixie hoped he had not told his hand. Big Tony sat back, puffed on his cigar and observed the proceedings, while, beside him, Little Tony's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. Dixie refrained from licking his lips.

To his right, Irving must have had the flush. Otherwise, he would not have stayed in. Irving was not the sort to bluff. With the no-limit stakes now, he could drive them both out of the game. That's exactly what he did. He ran up the bet until neither of them could match him and then he bet it all. Dixie showed no mercy. It was fifteen hundred to Dix for both of them. Irving dropped his bald head in his hands, shaking his head back and forth in defeat. Little Tony whined like a baby. Then he jumped up angrily.

"Big Tony! Yous gonna led him get away wid dat? Da bum! He's chicken. We let him in the game with a lousy grand. He folds all da time and now's he's runnin' us out. He's bluffin' just like he did yous, Big Tony! If I only had anudda grand and a half, I'd see him and cawl his sorry ass!"

Tension in the room ran high. Except for the two c-notes beneath his sole and the lucky Benjamin caressing Moon's fine round orbs, all Dixie had rode on this one hand, but Dixie remained placid, confident. Roused by Little Tony's outburst, Big Sal had left his perch for closer observation, hovering now between the two Tony's obscuring Paulie's view of the table. Irving was disgusted. He must have had the diamond flush. Then he showed them his cards to prove it, which he shouldn't have done until after the hand had played out. He was ticked because he had lost all his money, over three grand. Dixie couldn't blame the unlucky bastard. He had held the cards but not the dough to match Dixie's raises. Dom, who had also lost big and had been forced out of the hand late, stared daggers at Dixie. They all did. Moons had waked again. Evidently, she sensed her man was in trouble and tried to force her besotted self to focus, sitting ramrod straight in her chair between the window and the exit, as if she were a school kid waiting in the outer office to see the principal. Dixie chose not to notice her. He couldn't afford to.

Rather, he leaned back in his chair, resting his chin in his right hand as his elbow supported him by resting on the broad arm of his chair. His thumb hugged the underside of his chin, while his fore and middle fingers supported the right side of his face and hooked over the bridge of his broken nose. He surveyed the cash and card-cluttered table before him, contemplating the hard faces of the two Tony's across the table from him. Little Tony panted expectantly. He was eager to clean Dixie's clock. Big Tony was relaxed but sober, cunning. He breathed evenly, puffing calmly on his stogie. Yet, underneath their superficial expressions, Dixie knew they were both mad as hell. Pretending to be bored, Dixie met their silent glares. He exhaled slowly, as though he were forced by the pain of boredom to do so. They all knew a loss would drive Dixie out of the game.

Slouching to his right, he lowered his right hand, letting his fingers drum aimlessly on the table, as Big Tony had done earlier. Dixie could not resist throwing it back in their faces.

"OK. All right." Dixie spoke slowly. "If Big Tony wants to take your marker for fifteen hundred to call, well that, that sounds fair to me." Dixie turned his attentions fully onto Big Tony, as did the eyes of the others. Big Tony puffed hard on his cigar, as he had done all night whenever he had had to make a tough call.

"Come on Uncle Tony, don't let dis bastard bluff yous again. Hell! He ain't even looked at that last cawd. I know. I watched him. We can send his ass home in a sling, right now!"

"I know. I watched him, too, Big Tony." swore Dom. "He nevaw touched it. I swearaw!" Gus concurred, which notified Dixie that Gus hadn't seen Dixie's last card, after all. He couldn't have been watching Dixie and the card both at once.

"Lemme see your hole cawds, Tony," ordered Big Tony.

Reluctantly, Little Tony revealed his cards to his namesake. Big Tony puffed harder on his stogie. Even though the air conditioning worked sporadically, drops of sweat dripped down the side of Big Tony's face, plopping onto his silk suit coat. He checked the four naked aces spread over the table. All eyes were on him. Though this time, Dixie did not stare at him. Rather he stared vacantly into the huge pot in the center of the table, thinking once again about how savagely the gang of toughs had beaten him up the other night on the subway. If his face gave anything away; it would be his reflection of that beating. It was the same dour face he had used to bluff Big Tony, but without any abrupt, pleasant smile this time. Maybe the fact that he didn't meet Big Tony's stare, as he had done earlier when he had bluffed him, tipped Big Tony's reasoning, as Dixie hoped it might. Whatever the case, Dixie felt this guy wasn't about to let Dixie bluff him again; especially, with all those aces showing.

“All ride,” replied Big Tony flatly. “Here’s a G and a half to CAWLL!” Big Tony counted out fifteen bills from his stack and tossed them into the pot. “But Tony? Yous owes me, capiche?”

“Suraw, suraw, Big Tony. But don’ worry, yous gonna ged id ride back. Ha! See look ad dis.”

Before Dixie could respond to Tony’s call, an over eager Tony broke poker etiquette again by turning over a King-high straight—but no straight flush. Irving groaned in despair for his flush would have beaten Tony’s straight, had he had enough cash to stay in the pot.

“Well kid, we’re all waitin’,” stated Big Tony calmly, confident in the outcome. “Yous godda bead a straight. Dat pair yous got showin’ won’ do it.” He smiling smugly.

Dixie turned over his first two hole cards slowly, one at a time, leaving him nothing more than two pair showing. He left the last card dealt untouched, face down.

“Even two pair won’ bead a straight, kid. Le’s see. What else yous got in da hole?”

Dixie sat back and deliberately pulled out a Lucky Strike, fired it up and dragged deeply on it. His opponents simmered as he stalled.

“Yous know,” Dixie admitted in their slang, “Liddle Tony played oudda ordaw dere, toinin’ his cawds ovaw foist. Wouldn’t I be widin my righds to take da pod?”

Little Tony seethed and lurched over the table towards, Dixie. But, from behind Tony. Big Sal reached forward and pulled Little Tony back.

“Yous cheatin’ scum. Just show youaw cawd. Yous been cawlded.”

Dixie grinned and held up both hands, palms outward, as he puffed on his nail. “OK, OK, just askin’. That’s all.”

Then Dixie hesitated with his hand over the river card. He paused and graciously said, “You know, Little Tony, all these guys are right. I never touched that card, not once. But since you’re so anxious to see it, why don’t you do the honors. Go ahead.” Dixie drew his hand back from the card, permitting Little Tony to pick it up.

Little Tony glowered at Dixie, reached across the table, snatched up the card and thrust it disdainfully face up on the table. It was an eight of hearts for a full house, eights over aces. The eight of hearts was the card Dixie had seen dealt, but they had not. Holding a full house and the jack and eight of hearts, Dixie had had no worries that Little Tony held a straight flush and no fear that a straight or Irving’s flush alone could beat him. It was like taking candy from a baby. It took all of Dixie’s self-discipline to suppress a grin.

“Aces and eights,” said Gus, “—a dead man’s hand.” He stared daggers at Dixie.

Dixie never flinched as he watched their faces fall around the table. The pot held over twelve large, including Dixie's thirty-four hundred. With the two hundred stashed in reserve in his boot and another c-note stashed between Molly's gorgeous, round, two moons, he was approaching thirteen grand. Now the trick was to figure how he and Moons could get out of there in one piece, with even half of it, because these cats were seething hot.

Busted out, Irving excused himself. The cold accountant gamely congratulated Dixie on his play, before he slipped past the now wide-awake Moons and out the alley door. Little Tony went off again, prompting Big Tony to order Sal to throw him out in the alley to calm down. As he stormed out, Big Tony reminded his shaken nephew about the grand and a half Little Tony now owed him. Dixie observed that Big Tony had appeared shaken for an instant, too, but he regained his composure quickly. He leaned back in his chair puffing on his foul-smelling stogie.

"Well kid, you araw one helluva a cawd playaw, yes yous araw. I oughtta know, cuz I'm one helluva cawd playaw."

Dixie checked the stash of each player. Joey, Little Tony and Irving were all history. Of those three, only Joey had left of his own volition with some cash in his pocket. Gus appeared to have twelve hundred and Dom, somewhat less than a thousand. Big Tony was maybe a little less than even at around thirty-five hundred. They were all pissed with Dixie.

"Suppose we all takes a den minute break and refresh ouawselves? Emotions seem ta be geddin' da beddaw o' some peoples," offered Big Tony, sneering at the alley door exited by his namesake. "Den we'll play some real pokaw, hunh, kid?" He smirked at Dixie.

Dixie considered his options. He would love to have declined gracefully, but there was no way these guys were going to let him walk now. *Real pokaw?* Dixie shuddered to think what that might be. He merely paused as he stacked his cash, nodded and smiled deferentially without speaking. The others rose from the table and filtered back to the little bar or the washroom to take care of business. Dixie finished stacking his bills. When no one was watching him, he took about two thirds of the stack, split that money in half and stuck each of those two halves in either front pocket of his suit coat. He left the rest on the table, got up and walked over to Moons. With his back to his chair, he squatted down before her. Clearly anxious, Moons whispered in his ear.

"What's going on, Baby? They seem to be a little upset with you."

It was true. All the others had given him the cold shoulder, either by stepping out in the alley to cool off or by turning their backs on him to drink at the refreshment cart.

Dixie whispered into her ear, "Yeah, well that's what happens when you take their money. Look Sweetie, we're in a bind. I've done too good, see? So I'm

gonna try and lose back some of this loot, so we can get outta here in one piece. OK?”

As he spoke urgently to her, Dixie glanced around at the others who were ignoring him. He reached into his suit coat pocket with his right hand and took hold of Moons’ left hand in his left.

“Yeah, whatever you say Dix. What are you doing there?”

Glancing across the room over his left shoulder, he opened her fist with his left hand and pressed the wad of bills inside her palm, closing her fist back up quickly. “Squeeze it tight, Baby.” He felt her hand tighten around the wad. They whispered now directly into each other’s ear, while the listener tried to keep a wary eye on their adversaries across the room. If any of them did look their way, it would appear as if the two love birds were making out.

“Look Baby,” Dixie whispered, “go to the bathroom and hide this money on your person, somewhere they won’t find it, all right? Uh, no, better yet, first ask if it’s OK to use the can and then come right back out and sit down here, quiet as a church mouse. It might be the only cash we take out o’ here. Ya dig?”

“OK Dix, but suppose they won’t let me go?”

“Cross your legs and tell ‘em, it’s an emergency—too much wine.”

“Well, that’s no lie.”

Moons skyed her eyes and arched her brows, shooting him a smug smirk. He glanced across the room to find the gamblers still ignoring the two of them, so Dixie pulled her head next to his mouth, whispering into her ear once again.

“All right! Now look Sweetie, we may have to beat it outta here quick. Outside that fire door is an alley, see? Watch me close. If I give ya a signal, you know wink your way or squeeze your hand once, once, like you know, ‘once for go?’ You scam out that door and don’t wait for me. Otherwise, wait for my move, see? Don’t leave your spot here by the door, whatever you do. It’s our ace in the hole, OK? I’ll be right behind that beautiful phat ass of yours. Here, take this bottle of codeine and put it in your purse. Don’t wanna break it in my pants pocket, if things get rough.”

“No, no don’t even think that, Dix.”

He took a slug of the pain-killer before handing it over to her. Moons took the bottle from him and stuffed it in her purse, even as she clenched her fistful of dollars. He whispered: “But don’t you dare budge outta that chair Molly, ‘til I give ya the signal. And take those clogs off. You can’t run in them things. OK?”

“OK, but I’m worried about you Dix—don’t wanna see you get all beat up again. Geeze, ya still look like Hell from the last time.”

“Yeah, I hear yous,” he kidded, impersonating Big Tony, in a sorry attempt to alleviate her anxiety. “Dell yous what Baby, yous pray we gid oudda here

OK, OK?" His whispered imitation of Big Tony provoked a weak smile from her.

Moons mumbled, "But you know Dix, I don't believe in prayin'."

Dixie answered with a hushed voice. "Well, start believin', cuz we're gonna need all the help we can get. And don't budge 'til I signal." He winked at her.

The girl nodded respectfully. Then she kissed him long and hard, making his stitched lower lip smart.

"Now ain't dat touchin,' fellas? See dere's a reg'law paiaw loveboids over dere, real toitedoves." Big Tony laughed sarcastically and the others grimly followed his lead.

"Let's get back to pokaw, hey kid? You can poke heraw ... lataw." He laughed at his own joke and the others joined him. Then he added ominously, "If yous up to id, dat is."

"Sure, why not?" Dixie smiled, but he did not like the ominous sound of Tony's "maybe."

Moons squeezed Dixie's deformed hand before she let go of him. Dixie responded by patting Moons reassuringly on her knee and returned to his seat, as Big Tony informed Dixie of some new house rules. Big Tony had decided they were going to play five-card draw with a limit of one thousand dollars a hand. Big Tony explained that since Dixie had all their money, table stakes were kind of out of the question. Dixie agreed. Moons interrupted, reluctantly raising her forefinger in the air.

"Uh, excuse me Mister Big Tony, but, could I, uh, use the can, please, sir?"

"What foraw? Yous been sittin' dere all night and now yous wanna use da can all o' sudden? After yous was talkin' wid *him*?" He cast a suspicious, sideways glance at the girl. Moons grimaced and crossed her legs as Dixie had suggested she do.

"I know Mr. Big Tony, but all that wine has kind o' hit me now that I'm awake." Big Tony eyed her once up and down, as he puffed on his stogie.

"HA! Yeah well, id will do dat. All ride, but keep da dooraw open and yous beddaw be oudda dere in tree minutes, see? And leafs de poise here!"

"Yes sir, yes sir. Thank you so much Mr. Big Tony."

Moons rose and pinched her knees together. She scurried knock-kneed into the wash room, while little Paulie chuckled. Dixie watched them as they watched her walk, rather than her clenched fistful of cash, which she kept by her right hip with her body between them and the cash. Big Tony returned his attentions to Dixie, pointing at his maimed hand.

"What happened to youraw fingaws dere kid? Gid 'em cawd in youraw goil's pussy? I hear dem IUD's can do real damage." He smirked.

They all broke up and Dix worried for Moons' safety.

“And how’d you get dat face, kid? Looks like someones woiked yous over priddy good. Or ‘d ya get youraw face cawd up in dere, too?” Another crack-up session ensued.

Gus added, “She must be really somedin’ else, hey kid?”

These guys should be stand-up comics.

“Got mugged on the subway,” replied Dixie calmly without bothering to answer for his missing fingers.

“Umpf. Gee, dat’s tough. New Yawk’s a rough town, kid. Hope it don’ happens to yous again, tonight.”

He stared coldly into Dixie’s one good eye. Dixie’s injured right eye remained half closed, unless he exerted a major effort to open it.

“Be a shame, if da liddle lady ended up wid a mug like yoiws, hey kid?”

He had hit upon Dixie’s big fear, his Achilles’ heel. Big Tony’s ominous remark had curled the hair on the back of Dixie’s neck, just as his hair had curled before those thugs had creamed him in the subway car the other night.

“Sallie, check her poise again.”

Big Sal lumbered over to Moons’ chair and inspected her purse.

“Nuttin’ here, Boss ‘cept da cam’ra.”

“OK, take a seat Sal.” He did.

Moons had sat down on the toilet just to the left and inside of the washroom doorway. Leaving the door open as instructed, Moons did not turn on the bathroom light as she he had the last time. From where he sat, Dixie couldn’t see her, but they could all hear the tinkling of her strong pee stream into the bowl. Moons let out a loud sigh and Gus snickered. Next to Dixie’s right, Dom was straining to glimpse more of her. From his body language, it appeared he was having mixed success.

They played a quick hand, which Dixie lost. The toilet flushed and for a few brief seconds the door shut, but did not catch in the jam. Big Tony turned around.

“Sallie, see what the goil’s doin’ in dere in da dark.”

Dixie’s heart went to his throat, but he steeled himself to meditate on his cards for a new hand. Sal turned to his left, got up, swung the bathroom door open wide and turned on the overhead, electric bulb, hanging naked from the ceiling. Water ran in the sink. Moons was standing there washing her hands. Dixie could see her. She took a towel and dried her hands.

“It’s OK, Boss,” growled Sal. “Da liddle ladie’s comin’ out now.”

Dixie folded. As that hand concluded, an unsteady Moons returned to her seat

“Thank you Mr. Big Tony,” Moons quipped politely. “I needed that.”

When she went to sit down, Moons caught Dixie’s eye and she winked. In acknowledgement, Dixie raised his chin at her. It was enough. She smiled. She loved him. Dixie knew she did and he didn’t know what he should do about it.

Moons had trusted him and what had he gotten her into? Big Tony must have caught their exchange, because, he rudely interrupted Dixie's "lovebooid" thoughts.

"Sallie, check da wash room."

"What for, Boss?"

"Aneydin' s' spicious. Look in de derled dop, everehwhere."

"All right, Boss."

Sal moved off his chair and searched the bathroom. When he exited, he turned off the light and proclaimed loudly.

"It's clean, Boss, clean as usuoil. The dame didn't mess it up none."

Little Tony returned from the alley.

Big Tony balked. "Frisk her again Sal, good this time, and check her poise again."

Standing just inside the door between Sal and Moons, Little Tony eagerly offered to search Moons.

"No. I said 'Sal.' Sid down, Tony." Big Tony chomped angrily on his perpetually lit cigar.

"OK, OK. I jis' dawd, I, I'm ride here is all."

"Yeah, I knows where yous araw Tony and I knows what yous jis' dawd and dinkin' ain' 'xackly yous strong suit Tony, so 'sid down,' I said."

Little Tony slid across the room behind his uncle and sat down. "Gee Tony, I jis' dawd—"

"Shad-up! Yous only gots one ding to dink about Andony and dat's how yous gonna pay me back dem fifteen c-notes yous owes me. G' ahead Sal."

They all watched as the big, rugged Sal roughly frisked Molly Two Moons with his large, board-like hands, as if she were a man. Dixie held his breath and glanced quickly about the table as they all lived vicariously through the big man's paws.

"She's clean boss," remarked Sal drily.

Dixie relaxed--just another frisk in a long line for that old hood. He wondered what Moons had done with the handful of cash bills. Had she hidden them in the restroom? He had told her to hide them on her person. Maybe it was a good idea that she hadn't. Big Sal had given her quite a frisking, but she stood it fine.

"OK, Sal, sid down." Sal resumed his seat behind Big Tony.

The men played a couple hands with Dixie folding one and betting one and losing. Then Dixie promptly lost another pot. Dixie was down nearly about sixteen hundred since the break. Big Tony was the winner each time. Dom's stack was almost gone. Tony had increased his stack to about five grand by now. He was ahead about fifteen hundred for the night, plus he had Little Tony's marker for one and a half large. Relatively speaking, Big Tony had had a good night. Would he be satisfied? Dixie doubted it, not after Dixie had

embarrassed him and his buddies. While Dixie only had about twenty-five hundred on the table, he carried nearly four grand elsewhere on his person. Moons had the rest. He wondered where she had hidden it that they couldn't find it.

"Hey! Where's da resd of yous dough, kid?"

"Hunh? Oh! I got it right here." Dixie patted his suit coat pocket.

"Well, yous besd pud id on da table, 'cause yous gonna be needin' id. Looks like yous luck has changed HOD SHOD."

"Yeah, looks like."

It was a little past three. The tension in the room had dissipated. Dom and Gus could barely keep awake. Their stacks were low, real low. Even big Sal was nodding out back in the dark behind Big Tony. A slumping Paulie slept next to Big Tony, until Big Tony woke him.

"Hey Paulie!"

The dozing kid snapped to attention. "Yeah, Big Tony?"

"Go ged us a fresh deck o' cawds, da ones in da blue box under da bar cash registaw. Yous knows da ones."

A light went on in the kid's eyes and a smile crept over his face.

"Suraw Big Tony, I knows."

Paulie lit out of the room and returned in a New York minute with the "fresh deck" of cards.

Something was up. Dixie could just feel it. When Paulie returned with the fresh deck, Big Tony made an elaborate ritual of breaking it in. It was Big Tony's deal. Both Dom and Gus had perked up. A beaten, disgruntled Little Tony had returned once more from his banishment to the side alley. He sat down in a funk against the wall now across the room from Moons, staring at her with a hard on. It was Big Tony's deal.

"Hey kid, I been doin' priddy good da last few hands, maybe doo good, yous dink? So we'll let Liddle Tony sid in here and deal, if dat's OK wichu."

"Why do you wanna do that? I've got no problems with your deal, Big Tony."

"Suraw, suraw. But now cuz I feel my luck has changed, I feels like I'm gonna moiders yous now and I don't wanna hear no crap about id aftawawds. So we'll jes' led Liddle Tony here deal. And since id's my deal, we'll play a new game called 'Hold 'em. Yous know dat game, kid?"

"I played it once or twice."

Hold 'em or Texas Hold 'em prevented what Dixie had been doing all night, which was, look and fold, look and fold. It forced the action by making the dealer and the player to the dealer's left pay the blind to see their hole cards. Dom and Gus dropped out, leaving a two-man game between Big Tony and Dixie. Big Tony set the blind at two bucks and the half blind at one. Dixie did

not like the game much, because he thought it involved too much luck with too many cards being left in the deck; especially, when two players went head to head like this. Each player received two cards face down while they shared a “community” of five face-up cards. Those five cards were dealt in a “flop” of three, which were bet as one, while the last two cards, the turn and the river, were dealt but bet one at a time, as in a game of stud.

The others all stared at Dixie who felt as if he were a mouse in a laboratory experiment. Only something told him these turkeys had performed this experiment several times before, with the only variable being the pigeon in his seat. Since Dixie wanted to get Moons out of there safely, he was in no position to contradict Big Tony, so he smiled and nodded affably.

“And we’ll play true Hold ‘em wid table stakes limid, all in ad anytime, OK?”

“Sure, why not?” replied Dixie.

He was glad he had dumped a few grand on Moons, though he wasn’t sure she still held it. For all he knew, that cash might be floating down the Hudson River right now. They were going to try to stick it to him this hand. They wanted to take his money, nail him, and bang Moons. Across the table, Big Tony grinned and puffed on his stogie. Alert now, the others sat up in their chairs. In his eagerness to deal, Little Tony didn’t even offer Dixie a cut of the cards.

“Hey! Where’s da resd o’ yous dough, kid?”

“Whaddaya mean? This is it. It’s all I got.”

“I don’ b’lieve id. You godda won at least ten grand by now. You hardly god seven dere on da table. Where’s da rest of id?”

“It’s all I got, honest.”

“Honest? Soich ‘im Sal.” Dixie threw up his hands.

“All right. I got another two bucks inside my stinkin’ boot. Here, I’ll pull it out if you want it that bad.” Dixie pushed back from the table and started to remove his boot.

“Sal, gid on ‘im!” Sal strode around the table with a speedy agility that belied his age. He snatched the boot away from Dixie and pulled out the lousy two c-notes.

“Trow ‘em on da table. And check his udda boot.” The big guy followed orders and pulled Dixie’s other boot off but found nothing. Dixie’s knife remained concealed safe inside his sock. The old hood had missed it again. “Check his clothes.” Sal found Dixie’s wallet. Dixie held his arms out wide and nodded to Big Tony, “OK?”

“Put yous shoes back on,” ordered Big Tony “and sid down.” However, before Dixie could sit down to pull on his pair of Dingos, Big Tony issued Sal another order.

“Now, check da goil again, Sal. Strip her if you haf da.” Dixie railed and stood up.

“No, you’re not strippin’ her.”

“I’ll do id,” cried Little Tony eagerly.

“No, not you dummy—Sal.” He motioned to Sal.

“Why not me, Uncle Tony?”

“Cuz this is business, nod pleasuaw. Dat comes ladaw. Sid down, Tony.”

“Bud—“

“I said, sid down, TONY. SID DOWN!”

Tony fell back into his chair, looking like a little kid who had just had his ice cream cone taken from him.

“G’ahed, Sallie.”

“Hold it, hold it,” cried Dixie, with a boot in one hand and his free hand held high. “Moons, Baby? give im’ the money you stuffed in your bra, Baby. Go ahead, please?”

“All of it?”

“Yes, please. Yeah, whatever you got in there, Baby.”

Moons reached beneath her steeply dipping, sweetheart neckline into her bra, dug deep and, to Dixie’s surprise, came up with not one but two hundred dollar bills and handed them over to Sal. Moons sat there, looking like a little girl who had just had her ice cream cone stolen, too. Closest to the action, Dom turned around in his chair and chuckled.

“What’s so funny, Dom?” asked Gus.

“I was jis’ dinkin’: two boobs is word da same as one bood. Ha!” Gus laughed, too.

Big Tony did not. “Trow da money on da table dere Sal, and strip her.” Dixie dropped his Dingo and stepped toward Sal.

“Don’t do it, Mann. Frisk her all right, but don’t take her clothes off.”

Dixie’s jaw clenched and his fingers began to quiver with anticipation.

“Boss?”

“Big Tony, you said this was about business, business first, right? But if you let him strip her here . . .”

Dixie glanced back and forth from Big Tony to his big lackey and around at the leering others. Moons sat on the edge of her seat, breathing heavily, her chest heaving, swelling up through that plunging, sweetheart, empress neckline. He bet she wished she hadn’t come now; especially, not in such a revealing dress.

“All ride Sallie, leaf da dame’s clodes on, but do id right dis time!”

“OK, Boss.”

Sal motioned for Moons to stand up and then he proceeded to put his huge paws all over Moons, patting her down and feeling her up thoroughly, until he finally gave up, coming up empty.

“She’s clean, Boss.”

“What about her poise?”

“I’ll check Boss.” Sal opened her purse and searched it. “Jes’ da cam’ra and da med’cine and da udda dame stuff, likes befoaw.”

“Like befoaw? She didn’t have no med’cine befoaw. *He* had it. Gimme dat boddle, Sallie.”

Sal handed the medicine over to Big Tony, who studied the label.

“Codeine? Thought you said you had a cough.”

“I do, if I don’t take the medicine.” Tony opened the bottle, smelled it and peered inside.

“Unh-hunh. How come you give id ta her?” He nodded towards Moons and screwed the cap back on.

“I just wanted her to hold it for me. It felt awkward on my leg.”

“Wanted her ta hold id foaw ya, cuz id feld akwawd on yaw leg. Unh-hunh. Suraw. Take da kid oudside and bead da dough oudda him.”

“My pleasure,” cried Little Tony. “Not *you*, Andony—Sal, Gus and Dom.” Big Tony pointed towards the fire exit. As Gus grabbed Dixie from behind, Moons blurted out.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. It’s my fault, I—it was an accident, I, I didn’t mean ta—

“What is it, Molly?”

“Oh, I’m sorry Baby. I didn’t wanna upset ya, take your mind off the game and all, but I, I—”

“What, what is it? Spit it out.”

“Better speak up liddle goil, if yous don’t want yous boyfriend, here to get hurawt.”

“Well, you see I, I messed up in the bathroom. I, I was so nervous I dropped the cash in the toilet by accident when I was cleanin’ up and—ueueuue, well yuk, I didn’t want it after that so I—”

“You what?” Dixie cried with alarm.

“Well, I’m afraid, I . . .”

“Sal, let her have it,” ordered Big Tony. Sal raised a backhand against her, but before he could deliver a blow she spoke.

“I, I flushed it down the toilet.” Moons hung her head in shame. I’m reall sorry about it. Honest.” Silence invaded the room.

“You what?” Dixie was incredulous.

“I’m sorry, Baby. I just, I just couldn’t pull it out. It was—oooh Yuk! I had peed a long one, thought I would never stop.” She made an ugly face. Then Dixie started to laugh. He laughed so hard he doubled over and hurt his beat-up face, and his head began to throb but the Italian boys were not so happy.

“Well, we’ll see who has da lasd laugh, here Mr. Stricklaw. Sid down and play cawds.”

“You’re not mad, Baby?” Moons cried.

“No, No. It’s OK.”

She jumped into his arms, hugging and kissing him profusely. Then she pulled his head and ear down close to her mouth and whispered quickly, “I still got it!” She hugged him tight, backed off, winked and kissed him hard on his lips. Now Dixie truly was incredulous. To reassure him again, she winked her left eye, the eye opposite from Big Tony. Then Moons sat down.

“Come on, kid. Dis is BIS-EH-NESS befoaw pleasuaw and trow dat fancy cam’ra inta da pod.”

While Dixie pulled on his boots, Moons sat up alarmed. “But Mr. Big Tony, this is my cousin’s camera like I told ya before. Besides it’s never been on the table.”

“She’s right Tony, we’re playin’ table stakes, ain’t we? And the camera ain’t part of that.”

“Maybe, but she dropped a lod more of da table stakes down da derled and if she don’t wanna fish the cash oud, den she puds the cam’ra up now.” For emphasis, Big Tony rapped his knuckles on the table.

“But—”

“No buts! Dat camera don’t covaw da wad she dropped down da terled. But if yous complain, maybe dat dress and da fancy lace slip she’s wearin’ should goes in da pot, too?”

“Yeah, Uncle Tony, and whatevaw else she’s wearin.’”

The others turned towards Big Tony, with approval gleaming in their eyes.

“See dere, kid. If we took a vode I dink yous would lose. Hunh? Now ante up da cam’ra, sid down and play cawds.

“And da clothes Uncle Tony?”

“I said da cam’ra! Now yous too, Tony, sid down and Shaaad-UP!”

Moons looked forlornly at Dixie, but she pulled the camera out of her purse and set it down on the table.

Shoot, Baby! If we get out of this with enough cash, we can buy your cousin another danged camera. But first, we gotta get out.

Dixie sat down to square off against Big Tony. He couldn’t imagine where Moons had hidden the wad of cash. Little Tony started to deal. Dixie had to get his mind back on the game.

“Wait a minute. Ain’t you supposed to shuffle the deck, even if it *is* new?”

Little Tony looked at his namesake, who nodded curtly. Moons asked politely if she could have the medicine bottle back. Big Tony handed it over to her via Sal. Dixie noted that she received the bottle and stuffed it into her purse without any sign of jitters. *What a gamer!* He only hoped he could prove worthy of her trust. He didn’t like to bother the Lord with personal requests, but he did send up a quick but heartfelt prayer that the Lord could show him the way out of this mess and that he would be wise enough to take it.

The dealer shuffled the deck, or appeared to do so, but Dixie didn't see the top dozen or so cards getting shuffled much. Then, right before he dealt, Little Tony dropped his hands below the table for a couple split seconds. Dixie had heard about things like this and once, in Honolulu, he had sat in on a rigged hand, but he had not been the patsy. This time, he was.

Dixie asked to cut the deck. Both Tony's ignored him, but Little Tony made a show of burning the top card, something no one had done all night. Big Tony threw in his hundred-dollar blind. The game was between just the two of them. Grinned from behind his smoking stogie, he said "Let's play pokaw, kid." Reluctantly, Dixie followed with his fifty. This game was rigged. He felt certain of that.

What would happen after that? What would they do to Moons? If Big Tony let those dogs loose on her ... And suppose they searched Moons again and found the money on her? Just where had she hidden it, anyway? Was it still in the bathroom or floating down the river, as she said? That Big Tony held all the cards. Their fate was in his chubby, diamond-bedecked hands.

Little Tony dealt each player his two hole cards. Dixie peeked at his cards—Kings. *Kings?* Out of the entire deck, the first two cards dealt to him were a pair of kings? The odds of drawing that pair to open the hand had to be astronomical. Dixie played his hand cautiously, as if he held zip, and bet two bucks. Big Tony matched Dixie's two hundred dollars and raised him three hundred. Dixie saw the three hundred.

This is all just some B.S. window dressing, like a kid playing with a bug before he killed it; only he was the bug.

Little Tony dealt the flop: another king, a six of clubs and the ace of hearts. *Mann, they're so damned obvious that it's pathetic.* Dixie checked. Big Tony chomped down on the end of his cigar, his eyes black as coals. Dixie felt certain that Big Tony knew that Dixie knew the game was rigged.

"Whadsa madda kid? Got no balls?"

"I got one, but I'm savin' it."

"Ha! Ha! Yous hear dat?" He laughed as he looked around the table at his boys. "He says, he gots one, bud he's savin' it. Dis kid is somedin else. Well, maybe yous ain't got da one, maybe yous jis'chicken!"

"Bawk, bawk, bawk!"

Little Tony was the chicken impersonator. Had they known he'd lost the other in the War, they probably would have rolled on the floor with laughter. The others laughed. Dixie looked up to avoid their shirking stares and took notice of the overhead lamp. An idea came to him. It was a good idea. It was the only idea. Big Tony swiped the ruined cigar aside, onto the floor and, flashing his bookend, diamond, pinky rings, casually fired up a fresh stogie. He was in no hurry. He was enjoying, watching Dixie twist slowly in the wind. Dixie figured Big Tony had two Aces in the hole. Everyone waited on Big

Tony's play. When he drew deeply on the cigar, he was ready. Before Little Tony dealt the turn—

“OK kid, no moaw foolin' around. I'm all in.”

Big Tony pushed his stack of cash into the center of the table. “Dat's forty-four C-notes to yous kid. Now whaddayous say to dat?” Another had like this and Dix and Moons would be hitch-hiking out of Gotham.

Dixie studied their faces, then his cards. He licked his lip pensively, tasting some dried blood still there from his previous beating. All eyes were on him.

“Dis is a big decision for yous kid. I sure hope, for da liddle lady's sake anyways, dat yous makes da righd one. Hade to see her wid a face like yous tomorraw. Know whad I mean, kid?”

Dixie had not forgotten about the swelling in his face and the cuts on his lip and over his left eye. The codeine had helped, but it had only mitigated the pain. The constant throbbing and ever-present taste of dried blood would not allow him to forget. Big Tony was right. Dixie couldn't let anything happen to Moons. What assurance did he have that if he played their game and lost his cash, that they wouldn't nail him and Moons anyway? Especially after the way Dixie had beaten them, make that embarrassed them, all night. The tension ran so high, Dixie swore he could hear himself sweat, but he played it cool, as he had all evening, making his one ball stand up.

“Well, now . . . then . . . there.”

Dixie counted out his cash on the table, but he picked up his entire stack in his left hand, the hand with all his fingers, as he held his cards in his maimed right hand. He lifted both hands a foot or so from the table, as if he was weighing the contents of each one, balancing them on the scales of justice.

“Whad should I do, whad should I do? Whaddayous dink I should do Liddle Tony?”

Dixie's mocking accent and skeptical smile towards the leering sycophant dripped sarcasm, as if he were playing the big loser for a big sucker again, which he was.

Glaring at Dixie with pure hatred, Little Tony dropped his lecherous grim and slammed his hands atop the table once more lifting everything off the table top for an instant.

“It don't matta what yous do, cuz weaw gonna—“

“Shaad up, Tony!”

Big Tony's scolding back hand to Little Tony's forearm had its intended effect, though Little Tony still grilled Dixie with venomous eyes. Big Tony ground his teeth, chomping right through his cigar, which dropped to the table.

If Dixie hadn't known what to do before that outburst, he did now. Their specious attempt at fair play had fallen flat in the face of Little Tony's impatience. That sucker had tipped his hand again. The jerk just couldn't help himself. Little Tony and the rest, less Big Tony probably, were going to

clobber Dixie and take his dough no matter what. And when Moons would rush to his rescue, as he knew she would, they'd smack her around, too, if not rape her. The way their minds worked, they probably figured gang-raping Moons would serve as some kind of partial compensation for Moons' claim of losing their cash down the toilet. So Dixie could play along, lose his money on this rigged hand and maybe another one just like it, and then get clobbered anyway. Or, he could fold, make his move and take his chances. He didn't dare so much as even glance to his right towards the door and Moons. Yet, that fire exit to the alley, which Little Tony had used twice already and Irving once, was in working order right next to Moons' chair. And that door was scarcely ten feet from him. It was their ticket out of here. Only Dom sat between him and Moons and the door.

Dixie grinned widely, for the first time all night.

"Well, I think ... I think I'm gonna—" Dixie stood up, raising his cards over the table as if to call "—FOLD!" He threw in his hand, slamming it face down, as he stuffed the cash from his left hand in his left suit coat pocket. Big Tony sat back, puffing calmly on his stogie, while the others prepared to jump Dixie.

"FOLD? Whad da Hell? How can yous fold with a hand like dat?" asked the incredulous Little Tony, whom Dixie had played for a sucker all night.

"What kind o' hand would that be, Little Tony?"

"Da Kings—" Little Tony shut himself up, but too late again.

Big Tony sat back in his chair and clasped his hands together over his belly.

"Well, kid. I tried to warn yous but yous jis' wouldn't listen. Sal!" Big Tony snapped his fingers. "Wake up, Sallie!"

Big Tony leaned back in his chair to look over his head at Sal. Little Tony was grinning from ear to ear as he left his seat, followed around the table by Gus, while Dom turned and stepped towards Dixie from the right. Big Tony remained seated. Still hovering over the table, Dixie glanced at Moons, who sat on the edge of her seat, utterly terrified. He would never forget the sight of her horrified face at that instant. The severity of the situation before her must have overcome the inebriating vino coursing through her veins, because she looked a sickly white.

Dixie had suckered these mobsters to him, just as he had suckered them all night into losing. Surprisingly, Dixie felt as calm and peaceful, as he had when he had stood on the penthouse balcony looking out over the ocean into the black night down at Ocean City. When Sal reached Big Tony, Dixie, who was still standing over the table, quickly reached up and tugged violently with his left hand on the extendable cord that attached the overhead lamp, ripping the cords right out of the ceiling. He crashed the lamp down onto the middle of the oak table, smashing it to bits just to the left of the pot containing Big Tony's five grand. Bits of broken glass and electric sparks splattered everywhere. The crash extinguished all light, pitching the room into total darkness. Dixie

dropped to his knees while he reached out over the table with both hands, raking in the camera and all the cash that he could muster. Falling to the floor, he pulled the loot down over the table's edge. He spun halfway around and scooted backwards on his butt beneath the card table, cradling the camera and the cash in his lap. With both hands, he greedily stuffed Big Tony's cash into his coat pockets.

Pitch black had swallowed the room. For an instant, the place froze, silent as a tomb, with only the whir of the A/C unit breaking that silence. Dixie reached out with his left foot and nudged the leg of his chair backward. The sound of the chair scratching across the floor broke the silent stalemate.

"Dixie! Baby!" Moons shrieked out from the blackness. Little Tony growled, "You bastard! I gotcha now."

Dixie reached his left boot forward and kicked sideways to his right into somebody's shin. He heard Gus curse. Then Gus, Little Tony and Dom converged upon Dixie's empty chair in the dark with Dixie failing to impede the frenzied trio. Instead, he scooted further back under the table, drawing his knees up to his chest, careful to cradle the camera in his lap. Unlike Dixie, the terrible trio was unable to see in the dark. Consequently, the three men tore viciously into one another, each mistakenly thinking they were clobbering him. Dixie shoved all the loose cash into his pockets. Then he reached up and forward to seize the round edge of the wooden table with both hands. With all his strength, he shoved the table backwards over his head, ramming Big Tony hard in the chest with the edge of the table. Big Tony cried out in pain, but Dixie arched his back, leaning into his efforts and kept shoving the table backwards until Big Tony lost his balance and tumbled over backwards to the floor, still in his chair. Sal and Paulie rushed to his rescue.

Now was their chance!

Big Tony cried, "Gid anoddaw light Paulie, anoddaw light."

"Are yous OK, Boss? Are yous OK?" cried Sal. The others cursed and fought themselves, while Paulie scurried off in search of another light.

Indifferent to the loud commotion all around him, Dixie slid out from under the table and along the floor towards Moons. He crawled around Dom's chair to the screaming Moons, who, as instructed, had remained frozen in her seat by the door. Dixie rose up halfway, seizing Moons by the hand that held the corked, half-filled bottle of wine as a ready defense. He calmly whispered into her ear, cutting her off in mid-scream, "Let's go, Sweetie."

Crouched over at the waist and with knees bent, Dixie led her two short steps to the exit door and placed his free hand over the iron bar that crossed the metal exit door. While Big Tony yelled for somebody to find some light, Dom, Gus and Little Tony cursed and scuffled, beating the crap out of one another. Meanwhile, with his keen night vision, Dixie glanced over his shoulder to observe Sal falling over himself to help right Big Tony, who yet lay on his

backside upon the floor, still in the chair. Big Tony reminded Dixie of a sprayed, dying cockroach from a Raid commercial, squirming on its back.

An odor of burnt cloth penetrated Dixie's senses. Big Tony had dropped his lit cigar, which had rolled down his shirtfront into his lap, singeing his silk suit and burning his thigh. The embers reflecting off his diamond pinky ring, stood out like a hot, red tail lights over a rural road at midnight. Vainly, he tried to wipe them away. Dixie chuckled silently to himself. Big Tony cursed the burning stogie, which evidently had distracted his thought process for a few seconds, just long enough. It was all Dixie could do to keep from cracking up. That's when he silently pushed open the door, just a crack, and urged the slim Moons to slip past him. She slipped neatly by him, out the fire exit door and into the black, hot, muggy alley behind Jake's saloon. Dixie slinked out noiselessly right behind her, letting the door close gently behind him.

Through the shaded window, Dixie and Moons saw the glare of a couple flashlights spring up. Then the bathroom light fired up. Holding Moons by her elbow, Dixie watched inside and whispered towards the flashing lights, mocking Big Tony's gruff manner.

"Yous one helluva pokaw playaw, yes yous araw, yous araw."

Clutching the camera, Dixie felt a rush that was nearly orgasmic! Turning to the stunningly gorgeous, long-haired hippie by his side, who yet clasped her clogs in one hand, her half empty wine bottle in the other and her handbag slung over her shoulder, Dixie grinned.

He heard the boss inside realize his mistake too late, shouting:

"Fawged me, Sal. Fawged me. GED DA GOIL, SAL, DA GOIL!"

Seconds later, Sal yelled, "She's gone, Boss! Da liddle ladys took a powdaw."

"SHEEIIITTT! DA ALLEY DOORAW! Sallie, check da alley. DAMN IT!"

Dixie looked upon Moons with admiration.

"Baby, now's the time to haul that big, beautiful, phat ass of yours out of here."

However, when he smacked her sharply on her beautiful round rump, Moons balked.

"What do you mean *fat*? That's the second time tonight you've said that!"

"P-H, Moons, P-H phat!"

"Oh, yeah, yeah I get it." She spanked him sharply in return.

"Yeah, yous got id, all ride. Now come on, let's move it, Baby."

He whipped her flank again and they took off down the alley like a pair of thoroughbreds bolting out of the starting gate.

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