

“Hello? ... No. He’s not here. Sent him upt’ the bak’ry for do-nuts. Shoulda been back by now.”

Ry glanced up from her bowl of cream of wheat and toast. Nick’s grandmother was speaking on the kitchen’s black wall phone. Just inside the open kitchen door, dressed in blue, the short, woman’s chunky backside turned to her. Ry could see the light shining on the tiny bald spot, beneath the old woman’s frail, white-haired permanent on the back of her head.

“Yes. She’s here. Just who are you?” ... Nick’s squat, stubby grandmother turned around to face Ry. The phone cord uncurred, stretching taut against her age-spotted forearm. The old lady’s blue eyes magnified behind her bifocals so large that even her eyelids looked fat. Ry believed she could pass for Mrs. Kris Kringle.

“Never heard of ya ... Well, just so you know. This is my house and I don’t like the sound of ya ... Yes, I’ll put her on ... Well, you still sound like a troublemaker to me.” Ruth turned around away from the cord’s entanglement to hold out the phone. “Here, Ryz’n. It’s for you.” Pointing to herself, Ry swallowed a mouthful of toast. “For me? Who would know me, *here*?”

“Yes, for you. Long distance from Maryland. Here.” She held the receiver out for Ryz’n.

“Who is it?”

“Somebody calls hisself Faah-mea. Know a body with a name like that? Never heard it before.”
Nick’s attorney.

Ryz’n put down her spoon, wiped her mouth with the napkin and stepped around the oval oak kitchen table. She shuffled over the tan linoleum in her bare feet to take the phone, thanking “Grandma.” In passing, the old lady muttered: “A Franco Faaahmea. Don’t trust ‘em *I*-talians from back east and you shouldn’t either. Hmmpf!”

Favoring her bad ankle, Nick’s chunky “Grandma,” who Nick had told her came from sound Norwegian stock, waddled away like a duck. Kind of quacked like one, too. Ryz’n blinked. She was still getting used to Grandma Ruth’s gruff ways. Speaking into the mouthpiece, Ryz’n said, “Hello?”

“Ry? This is Franco. Who was that?”

“Oh, hello Mr. Vamia. Um, Nick’s grandma.”

“She’s a pistol. Look Ry, afraid I have bad news. Figured I’d give it to you in Nick’s absence.”

“What is it?”

“He got it.”

“Got it? Got what?”

“Grand jury felony indictment, on all charges, all counts, plus they added a few misdemeanors for good measure, a DWI, drinking underage and destruction of private property—the distributor cap and wires and disturbing the peace, you know. Felony Assault and battery, too. Haven’t actually seen it yet, but I have it on good authority from my contact in the State Attorney’s office. Summons to appear in court is going out today. Trial date’s set for September twenty-second.”

“Oh, that’s terrible, just terrible. Why, that’s Nick’s birthday.”

“Yeah. A Tuesday. Seventeen makes trying him as an adult more palatable. May not be so bad. Perkouri may be tipping his strategy with the DWI or may be using it as a smokescreen. Either way, I’ll nail him.”

“As an adult? Oh no! They wouldn’t really do that?” Conscience of the old lady hovering at the sink, Ry guarded her mouth with her hand, cupping the receiver to whisper. “I thought you said he’d be tried as a juvenile, if it went this far?”

“Now don’t go all weepy on me Ry. We’ll beat this thing. They don’t have a leg to stand on. I’m telling you now cause I know you know the score. And I don’t want to keep calling there and arouse suspicions with his folks, if I couldn’t get hold of Nick the first try. Has he told them yet?”

“No.”

“Well, he’ll have to now. The paperwork will be waiting in the mailbox for him when he gets home. You understand?” Biting her lip, Ry clamped her free hand under her armpit with her forearm over her boob. “Yes, I understand.”

Ryz’n began to sniffle. She felt Grandma’s eyes on her and turned to confirm her suspicions. She twisted around to hide from the old woman’s gaze, looking through the doorway and parlor toward the front screen door. Leaning her shoulder against the kitchen wall calendar, Ry brought the back of her free hand up to her nose.

“That gives us less than six weeks to prepare our case ... Ry? ... Ry? Are you OK?”

She didn’t like him calling her by the nickname she reserved for family and close friends, just as she didn’t like him undressing her with his eyes every time he thought he could get away with it. Even if he had been a boyhood friend of Father Vizconni. Like Father V, Mr. Vamia was almost old enough to be her father, but she heard he was one heck of a criminal defense lawyer and that’s exactly what Nick needed now. She said, “Yes, it’s nothing. Go on.”

“Look, I’m on recess from jury selection in another case. I have to get back to it; probably be tied up in court all day. Tell Nick he can call me at home. I gave him my home number before, but here it is again. I’m giving *you my home* number now. It’s a Tralaton number.”

“Just a second.” Ry noticed a pen hanging from a squiggly cord on the wall by the phone. She scribbled the number down on the notepad taped next to it. She checked over what she had written. “Yes, yes I have it.” He asked her to read it back. She did, then tore the number from the wall notepad, to hold it in her hand. He said, “Great. Now that’s *my home phone* and it’s *for you, too, Ry*. I expect to be out on my boat some this weekend, so keep trying it til you reach me.”

“You mean Nick.”

“Well, of course, but for you too. Thought you might need it sometime. Maybe you’d like to come out on my boat when this all shakes out. It’s a real beauty, very much like you—say, they’re calling us back in now. Gotta run. Don’t forget. Call me. Bye.”

He seemed confused about who should call whom. He couldn’t possibly be serious that she should come out on his boat without Nicky. That knock-kneed, slew-footed, pasty-faced, red-headed Bozo the clown, being so sure of himself; telling her about his new boat and his ritzy Tralaton address? Who did he think he was? If he wasn’t such a hot shot attorney, she’d tell him where to stuff it, even if he *was* almost twice her age.

But Nick needed him now and she needed Nick. Ry hung up the phone, pondering the man’s gall. She leaned her shoulder against the calendar hanging there on the wall. Ry glanced at the number she had written down on the note paper, then stuffed it into her skirt front pocket. Lifting her shoulder off the wall calendar, she sighted today’s date quite by accident—Friday, August 14. *Thank God, it wasn’t Friday the Thirteenth!*

* * *

Franco Vamia hung up thinking he had overplayed his hand. Ry was almost half his age, but, in all his life, he had known no one like her. If he had been too obvious just now, she’d tell Nick and he might lose both of them. Not only bad for his future love life, but also bad for business. He couldn’t have that. Nick’s case could catapult him to legal stardom as defense attorney of the year

around here. Could even make the national papers once the D.C. writers got hold of it. Played it up big. He could see the headlines now.

“Defense Attorney Saves Teen from Gross Injustice.” Check that: “Brilliant Defense Attorney Gains Justice for Embattled Teen.” Well, something like that.

The case had everything. Grisly news footage of a terrible wreck and the fried corpses of two ex-cons. And a troubled teen, who was a local legend for his high school performances on the ball diamond and on-stage with his rock band. Two voluptuous teen beauties as eyewitnesses and an overzealous prosecutor trying to railroad a kid for personal gain. Yes, the case had everything. The local papers would eat it up. Make him both rich and famous.

Franco would play it low-key, humble. Take all the hits in public for Nick, as a good manager would for his slumping ball club, looking like a genius later when the team pulls out of their mid-summer swoon to win the pennant down the stretch. He'd let that overambitious prosecutor drive the publicity train right up to where Franco threw the switch, derailing the buffoon at the last minute with a not guilty verdict. Snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Nick's potential scandal could be his ticket to the big time. He could leave defending these small time hoods behind in the rearview mirror. There were enough corrupt politicians and big time murder cases in D.C. and Baltimore to feast off of for years. And Nick's case was definitely winnable, even if the State Attorney's office was stacking the deck against him. Tell F. Lee Bailey to mover over. Make room for the new, big dog in court.

Though he had hung up, Franco stood by the wall pay phone watching dollar signs flash before his eyes, still holding onto the receiver. After he won the case, maybe she'd be just a little bit grateful? Come out on his new boat to congratulate him?

And if, by some quirk of fate, Nick lost, Franco'd still look a like hero in the girl's eyes, wouldn't he? After taking it on the chin for her guy like that? He'd appeal of course. Carry on the fight. Keep his name in the papers with Nick's old man footing the bill. And, with the kid in jail, she'd be lonely, upset and old Franco would be there to pick up the pieces. After all, it wouldn't be the first time he'd worked that angle. She'd be young, gorgeous, innocent and grateful. And better built than a Playboy Bunny. The girl had a bit of the exotic in her olive skin and dark Mediterranean good looks, maybe a bit of Indian or Persian, even if her last name was Ryan.

“Hey Mr. Vamia! Judge finished early today.” Grinning, a uniformed officer had stuck his head out past the opened courtroom door. Franco knew what he meant. “They want you back in court.”

“What? Oh yeah, coming.”

Across the hall, the officer held the door for him. Franco strode over to the door, but not too fast, slowing to straighten his tie, checking if it was OK in the shiny metal rectangle, marking where to push the door open. Stepping through the portal, he nodded to the man by way of thanks. It was Franco's turn to voir-dire the next prospective juror.

As soon as he got back to the defendant's table to take his seat, the bailiff commanded all present to rise. Judge Tagnew strolled in from his chambers. Like God, looking over his court, he sat down, followed by everyone else. Seated next to Franco, his client Willie Jackson whispered, “What took you so long, Mann?”

Franco said, “Business Willie, just business.” He patted Jones on the wrist. “Besides, Tagnew usually gets caught short this time of day. I overestimated a bit. That's all. Don't worry. I'm on top of this.” He winked, patting Willie's forearm.

The judge banged his gavel to bring the court back to session. “Where were we? Mr. Vamia, I believe you were up? Number ...” The judge reviewed documents before him.

Franco stood up. “Fourteen, Your Honor.”

“Yes, fourteen. You may proceed Mr. Vamia.” Franco walked over to the jury box.

Franco: “Now, Mrs. Jefferson—”

“Ms.—*Ms.* Jeffahson.” She grinned, flashing yellowing horse teeth around a center front gap. “Excuse me, *Ms.* Jefferson, now—” She seemed puzzled but said “‘At’s all right.” Batting her lashes, she smiled again. Franco smiled back. “Now, ‘*Ms.* Jefferson,’ do you have any policemen in your family or have any friends who are policemen?”

“*Poh-leece?* Family or friends? No, suh.”

“Any other law enforcement officials, correction officials, et cetera, among your family or friends?” She seemed bewildered but answered, “No suh.”

“Do you have any biases in favor of, or prejudices against, preconceived or otherwise, towards the law enforcement community in general or any law officers in particular?”

“Suh?”

“What’s your opinion of the law enforcement community Ms. Jefferson? How do you view the police, say in your neighborhood? How do you see them?”

“Well, I see ‘em diffahent ways. You mean like when dey bustin’ down my doah or eye-ballin’ my backside when I’m crossin’ da street?”

“Thank you for your cooperation Ms. Jefferson. Defense accepts this juror, Your Honor.”

“Candidate number fourteen for the defense. Mr. Paguarelli, for the State?”

* * *

Ry sat on the rubber strap connecting two long parallel chains held up by the schoolyard swing’s lofty rail. She lifted her sandals just off the blacktop, allowing a puff of intermittent breeze to sway her. Glancing at her hot pink-painted toe nails, reminded her how much Nick liked them. She had decided to wait here for him. He had to pass this way with the do-nuts. Around one side of the school or the other, to return to Grandma’s place. She’d catch him here at the corner to tell him Mr. Vamia’s bad news in private.

Her mind wandered. Nick had left his grandparents’ old house for the bakery well over an hour ago to pick up the do-nuts and long johns, he was supposed to have bought an hour and a half before that. Nick had told her Clear Lake was a small, quaint town and he was right. She liked the way the folks out here retained their heritage with a humble pride. Time seemed almost to stand still here near the turn of the century. The Viet Nam war, race riots and all the protestors back home didn’t seem to be a part of Iowa. Somehow, that was big city stuff, for back home in D.C., not suited here to small town USA. Staying with Nick’s family at his grandmother’s old house in a tiny mid-western, lake resort town at Clear Lake made her feel ... well safe. Nick had told her the lake was spring-fed but had been formed eons ago by a receding glacier.

He had told her too that much more recently some of his idols, Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper, had put this place on the national map, February 3, 1959, when their rented, small engine plane crashed in a snowy cornfield about a mile north of here. Killed all three, pilot too. Younger folks around here say that was the day the music died. The night before the crash, the legendary rockers had played the Surf Ballroom just a few blocks west, up this very street right behind her, Seventh Avenue North.

Nick's ancestral home reminded Ry of the librarian's house in "The Music Man." It should. The mythical town of River City was based on the playwright's home town of Mason City, just ten miles due east, up Highway 18. A block up and two half blocks over from Grandma Ruth's place, this red brick, three-story, 1910 vintage schoolhouse sat here diagonally between her place and Clear Lake's Main Street. Nick's mom, brother and two sisters attended public school here. Nick said since then, the town had built a new high school east of the lake to house the older kids. This building was for the little ones now.

Ry had lived in Germany, Georgia, Hawaii and Maryland. But she had never seen country quite like this. Black loam growing miles and miles of lush, green cornstalks and soybeans. Farm fields rolled gently as far as the eye could see. Small towns and walnut groves settled under clear blue skies dotting the flat, rural landscape. The breadbasket of the country. Smelled good too—dry air, sweet and fresh, not humid and musty like home. Everything fresh and fruitful, except for the occasional "honey wagons" hauling manure. Though Nick's pioneering ancestors had settled the state over a hundred years ago, this land seemed almost virginal, as she had been before Nick first settled her a few weeks ago. She sighed, glancing at her watch: ten minutes to eleven now.

Grandma had warned Nick he should have left long ago to get the do-nuts fresh out of the oven. Ry bet the old lady wouldn't let him forget that either when they got home. Ry also bet her nagging wouldn't stop Grandma from enjoying her share of the loot though.

She had left Nick's grandmother alone, feet up, sans glasses, resting on the parlor sofa, her chunky forearm held across her forehead, reminding Ry to remind Nick of his error in judgment. Nick's dad had dropped the car by a local garage earlier to make sure it was in ship-shape for their trip home. One of Nick's mother's old girlfriends had taken Nick's mom and dad out to brunch. Grandpa and Uncle Bill were uptown at "the office," the pool hall, playing pitch or pinochle with "the boys," the other retired senior citizens.

Yesterday, the old gent had won thirty-eight cents. Been quite pleased with himself all afternoon. Walked around without stooping for the first time since Ryz'n had arrived. Usually Fred would lose and only grunt if you'd ask him how he'd made out. Nick defended him, saying the old man was an early riser, who didn't talk much after lunch. Ry could see why. Grandma Ruth wouldn't let Fred get a word in edgewise.

Without a ride, Nick had insisted on going to the bakery alone, on his crutches no less. He wouldn't dare ask to use his grandparent's car. Claimed he wanted to enjoy the cool, fresh air just down from Canada." But she knew different. He was avoiding her.

She and Nick had been fighting again over the new bugaboo in their lives, the same one known to humankind since the Garden, probably. She had made confession *again*, Friday a week ago, a day before she had made the two-day ride out here with Nick and his folks. And wouldn't you know? Father Vizconni had taken her confession. By way of being an old friend, in addition to being her pastor the last few years, ever since her family had moved to Maryland from Georgia, Father V had asked her to come to his office to talk with him later that day. He had reminded her of all the things she had blocked out of her mind the last few weeks with Nicky—just loving him. Like her lessons from catechism about her body being the temple of the Holy Spirit and such. Presenting her body as a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God as was her reasonable service. But she had confessed; promising to sin no more. She was clean now, in a state of grace. Ever since, she had resolved to refrain from Nick's amorous advances. That's when it hit the fan.

Ryz'n looked down at the worn asphalt blacktop, greying with age, a mixture of the tops of foundation pebbles showing through the surface, giving it a rougher texture than was originally intended. She had seen some kids brave it barefoot. Most didn't have feet tough enough to withstand the summer heat soaked up by the black surface. School was out for the summer but nobody was out here now. Too early in the day, too hot, or too close to lunch. Something. Nick thought most of the town's young folks wouldn't stick around here much once they graduated. Probably move off to the big cities for work and excitement. Ry guessed maybe that's why the playground always seemed so empty.

Funny, school would be starting here what, next week? Seemed strange, sacrilegious almost, to start so early. Back home, it started day after Labor Day. Feeling alone, Ryz'n twisted in the breeze with the swing. She reflected on her situation with Nicky, but felt helpless to resolve it to the satisfaction of either of them. And now this bad news from home. He'd have to tell his folks about it now, just as Mr. Vamia had predicted. He had no choice, not with a summons to appear in criminal court waiting in his mailbox for him when he got home in two weeks. But Nicky sure didn't need her backsliding on him now.

She knew that, but what could she do? Give in to him and turn from God again? Or maintain her renewed vow and freeze Nick out? She felt they must be the most star-crossed teen lovers since Romeo and Juliet. She wished she hadn't come now. She had known this would happen. Knew it as soon as she had left Father V's office. She should have stayed home and not let Nick talk her into it. Maybe she could get Nicky's dad to drive her to the closest airport so she could fly home? She had suggested as much to Nick. Ry thought she had enough money. She hadn't spent a dime on this trip. Nick and his folks wouldn't let her. His family was funny that way. She saw where Nick got it from—his generous spirit. But with his dad, it seemed more like a point of honor than generosity. Ry appreciated Nick was different from his dad there.

Sure, she loved being with Nicky, overwhelmed by both lust and love. She loved everything about him so much she could hardly stand it. She was addicted to his sweet loving as she might be to a drug. That's what made all this so doubly difficult for her. Nick had observed that she loved, loving him too. Maybe even more than he did her. And he had admitted that he hadn't thought that was possible. But she knew he was right. She adored him. And it pained her physically and grieved her emotionally to put him off like this. Because she longed for him so. But she also loved God and therein lay her dilemma.

She was in a pickle, caught in a rundown between third and home with little chance of escape no matter which way she went. Someone must tag her out. They had another year to go to finish high school before they could think about getting married, a subject Nick tap-danced around. Nicky wasn't Catholic. He didn't understand. He honestly thought they were doing the right thing—God's will. Loving one another as you love yourself, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. The term fornication must not exist in the Protestant bible. If it did, it must have a different meaning from the one Father Vince knew, because Nicky sure never heard of it.

What was that? She thought she heard Nick's sandpaper baritone singing. There, turning the corner of the schoolhouse to her left. Yep, there he was swinging his crutches out in front of him with his bag of do-nuts in hand, emerging from under the walnut trees on the far side of the school. Circling the bike stands, crossing the ball courts now, he hobbled under a basket hoop. Dark wavy hair down to his shoulders. Really moving now.

Hadn't cut his hair since the wrestling finals last winter. Wearing his baggy, khaki work slacks and her dad's oversized tropical Hawaiian shirt, which Nick had borrowed from her dad's closet at her bidding and had yet to return. He preferred the baggy slacks, because they gave him enough room to slip his calf-high ankle cast through the leg without having to tear up the seam. How many days in a row had he worn them now? She chuckled. With his deep tan, coarse, dark hair and that shirt, he could pass for a native Hawaiian. She knew the physical treasures his baggy clothes hid from the naked eye. Made her salivate over every inch of every rock-hard muscle. He hadn't spotted her yet, focusing instead on each long stride. He'd be getting that cast off next week. She'd keep quiet, let him spot her and come over. Let him make the first move. He had to come right by her. What was he singin'? Chuck Berry's "School Days." That was Nicky all over.

As he swung closer, she began to change her mind. Right now, he needed her more than God did. She loved them both but ... She sighed as she let herself out of the swing to walk slowly towards him. Carefully placing one foot in front of the other, head down, thinking, Ry clasped her hands behind her back. Trying to work up a smile for him, a bright, three-dimpled doozy, her specialty, the one he said he loved so much. She knew what she would do now. But he didn't—not yet.

In spite of herself, she said, "Hey Baby." Nick slowed to look up.

It was Ry. She stood there with her hands behind her back in a short green denim skirt, A-line, her favorite style and a sleeveless white cotton blouse. Jesus sandals on her feet. Lookin' pretty as a picture. Toe-nails painted hot pink, the way he liked them. She cut a heckuva figure against the great oak and walnut trees towering behind her. Huge leafy trees provided shade for the moms from the afternoon sun, while they sat on a bench, acorns and walnuts under foot, to watch their kids on the playground. The benches were curiously empty now.

Ry, smiled. She must be feelin' better. But she wasn't wearin' the yellow ribbon in her hair, her symbol of their peace and love for each other. Must still be mad at him. But she was the best girl he'd ever had. Best friend, too.

"Hey yaself. Thought you were under the weather?" Ry shrugged. "Well yeah, I was but, well, I'm better now. Feel fine." Nick smiled too. "Sure look fine." Her smile broadened, provoking the dimples in her double-cheeked, baby face. He swung himself toward her. She said, "You can really move on those things, when you wanna."

Nick stopped, clapping the stub ends of his crutches together out in front of him and barked, like a seal at the zoo. He managed to hold onto his big bag of do-nuts without dropping any on the playground. "Yeah buddy, thought you'd flag me for a speedin' ticket, when I left out this mornin'."

She said, "Uh, let's forget about that, shall we?" She moved closer to him, just out of crutch reach. "Done. Kind o' figured you might be on that big bird flyin' out o' here, soon as you felt better, that is." She looked down, shrugging again, balancing on one foot, sweeping the other out in front of her over the asphalt as an infielder might sweep his spikes across the infield dirt, waiting between pitches.

"Thought about it. Seemed kind of silly though, to run home to mama don't you think, just because we had a spat?" Ry tilted her head up at him with her chin still down, squinting her left eyelid against the late morning sunlight. Gosh she looked *fantastic!* No chick he knew had a better figure. And that was sayin' something. And her baby face cheeks and those dimples knocked him out. She said, "You know how I feel about you."

“Yeah, I do.” Nick shuffled sideways to his left to take the sun’s rays upon himself. Ry pivoted on her heel, following him around. Her large, almond-shaped, hazel-green eyes opened fully now. Neither spoke for a minute. Then she said, “What’s in the bag? Goodies? Fill all the orders? Grandma’s been waitin’ for ya.” Nicky chuckled. “I’ll bet she has. Waitin’ for *me* or the pastry?”

Ry smiled. “For both I think.” Nick glanced at the big white bakery bag in his hand. “Oh yeah. Wants to chomp on both of us but which one first? Me or the donuts? Ha! Well I filled ‘em all, you bet. Got the long johns you like. Want one?” He opened the bag. She shook her head.

“Ya sure? I know how much you like ‘em.”

“Well, that’s true. Better not just yet. My stomach’s okay now. Don’t want to push my luck though. Maybe later. Ya know, there’s uh, one special one you have I like more than any other.” He frowned. “Do tell. Thought your preferred maple-frosted?” Grinning, she winked. “Not my favorite.”

“Oh. Well, tell me what you want. I’ll go back and get whatever you like.” He was serious. She shrugged. “No need. You got my favorite long john with ya all the time Sweetie.” Grinning, Ry winked again as she glanced down below his belt, then up again. Her actions told him she meant a different kind of pastry, his own special, sweet brand that he reserved just for her now.

Sweetie again? Damn. Sure had changed her tune since last night. Why? If puking her guts out before dawn had made her see the light, he hoped she’d get sick every morning. Ryz’n looked down and up again smiling like a leprechaun from under her long, dark, up-curved, natural lashes. Up-curved like that natural basketball butt of hers—a natural, perpetual bustle—not to mention her large, phat, nubile breasts—better’n Betty Boop. Took after her mom in many ways. He matched her simper. Yeah, they were on again.

“What took you so long Baby? Couldn’t have been that big a line at the bakery?”

He could see she was alarmed. That was the last thing he wanted now. “Nah, had to stop by the police station.” She asked, “Police station? What for?” He downplayed it, not wanting to stir her up again. “Anh, ‘s part o’ the bail-bond deal Franco cooked up for me. I’m supposed ta report into the county cops back home once a week while we’re out here. So they know I ain’t skipped out on ‘em. Franco worked it so I could report to the local police here. They call the authorities back home and have me check in over the phone while I’m standin’ there. No big deal. As long as the locals don’t say nothin’ to my folks, it’s cool.”

“Did you ask them to keep quiet? After all Nick, this is a small town and all.”

“Yeah. They said okay; ‘specially, since I ain’t even been indicted. Sheesh!”

Ry paused. Looking down again at her foot, she swept the toe of her sandal over the blacktop. He said, “What? Did I say somethin’ wrong? You’re dimples just up and vanished like a fart in the wind.” His joke didn’t fetch much of a rise out of her. She looked right, over towards the trees.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news, Sweetie.” She tried to smile, but failed.

“Yeah, what?”

“Mr. Vamia called to leave a message for you.” Looking down at her foot again, she scraped the toe part of her sandal back and forth over the asphalt ... “Yeah? Well?”

“He said, he said, ‘He got it.’” She looked up. “Those were his exact words.”

“Got it? Got what?”

“That’s what I said. The grand jury indictment. All charges, all counts.”

“Oh.” Nick felt himself slump, his crutches riding high up into his armpits, above the calluses he had made over the sides of his ribs the last month. He stared past her, past the monkey bars.

“Mr. Vamia said the State’s Attorney added some other charges, too, misdemeanors though.” He stared up at her. “Hunh? Like what?”

“Underage drinking, destruction of private property and driving while intoxicated.”

“DWI? That’s *bullshit!* Oh? Sorry Ry.”

“It’s okay cause the whole dang thing is *bullshit*, isn’t it?”

“You got that damn right! Ya know, I never heard you cuss like that before.” She shrugged again. “Well, it is. And, for your sake, I don’t mind sayin’ so.”

“Here.” Nick closed the bag, shoving the do-nuts at her. He paced, hopping back and forth on his good foot, holding his crutches off the ground. “Sonovabitch—witch! I mean.” He stopped to look up at her. Ry curled up the top of the bag in both fists, holding it under her big ones against her midriff, as if in pain. “Anything else?” She spoke low. “Well, a trial date’s set for September twenty-second. In circuit court—adult court.”

“Ha! My birthday! Can you believe that? Bastards have a sense of humor anyway.” He put his crutches together, holding them off to one side, resting on both feet. His ankle was healed. He was sure of it.

“Mr. Vamia says seventeen is one year closer to eighteen. Sounds better for trying you as an adult.” He slumped again. “An adult, hunh? Damn. Damn the bastards!” He grimaced.

“I know it sounds bad Nicky but I’ve told you before, good things always seem to happen to me on the twenty-second of a month. And since you’re a part of me now, good things will happen to you too, like our night at the beaver ponds. That was on the twenty-second. Remember?”

Nick shook off her optimism. “The sumwitches. Franco was right. They’re out to get me. That interim State’s Attorney must want the full time job awful bad. Franco says my case is the asshole’s ticket to win the election in November. I guess he wasn’t foolin’.” Ry stepped in close to him. “Nicky?” He looked up, glaring. “What?”

“Mr. Vamia says a court summons will be waiting in your mailbox for ya when you get home.” He faked sincerity. “Well sure, that figures. Geeze Ry.” He rolled his eyes.

“But ... what I mean is ... you’ll have to tell your parents now, before you get home.”

He hadn’t thought of that. But she was right, dammit.

“Mr. Vamia said he’d be in court most of the day and out on his new boat most of the weekend. He gave me his home number and asked that you try to call him anyway. He doesn’t want to call you and risk involving your folks until you’re ready for it, respecting your wishes I guess.”

She reached into the front pocket of her green, denim skirt to hand him a piece of paper with the number scrawled across it in her neat left hand. He thanked her but told her to keep it because he already had his lawyer’s home and office numbers. She slipped it into her pocket, “I’m so sorry Baby.” He was afraid she might cry.

Ry stepped into him, reaching both hands around his waist still holding onto the do-nut bag, hugging him tight. She nestled her cheek into his hard chest; her chin between his firm pecs, against her dad’s soft, baggy Hawaiian shirt. Nick rested his chin on the top of her head. He stroked the back of her hair. He always got a charge out of the feel of her long, dense waves against his fingertips.

“It’ll be all raight, Ry. You’ll see. I ain’t’ guilty.” He forced a smile she couldn’t see.

“I know Baby, I know. Maybe ... maybe we should take Uncle Bill up on his idea?”

“What idea?” He pulled his head back, staring her in the eye, unsure what she was driving at. She looked up to him. “You know? Visiting the Black Hills.” He balked. “What? You mean all three of us?” Ry said, “Yep, but oh—forgot you have to check in with the police.” He replied, “I jes’ did. Don’t have to do that again til next Friday.” Her eyes lit up, green for go like a traffic light, smiling. Eager now, she asked, “Do you think your folks would let us go by ourselves?”

“Hmmpf! Fat chance. No, we’ll need Bill. My dad might let us. Grandpa wouldn’t care, I don’t think, and Bill, hell! He’d pro’bly get a kick out of it, fancyin’ himself as Cupid. But my mom and grandmom, they’re another story. Ya know Grandma believes your chastity is her primary, personal responsibility while we’re out here?” He arched his brow for effect. Ryz’n pulled back to look at him, grinning. “Kind of had that impression. Just like your mom back home. What is it Grandma Ruth says?”

“No lollygaggin’ while you’re under my roof, Mister!” Nick imitated his grandmother to a T, pointing a forefinger right in her face, just as the old lady had done to him, when she had given him the lay of the land last Sunday afternoon when they first arrived. Ryz’n laughed. “Yeah, that’s it—*lollygaggin’*. Never heard it called that before. Then, before you, I never heard of turtle-dovin’ either.” Nick smirked. “Never did it either.” A sheepish grin escaped her.

“Well, we don’t want to disappoint Grandma Ruth now, do we Nicholas? We’ll just have to take our *lollygaggin’* out on the road.” Her eyes twinkled. “Won’t we, Sweetie?” Nick smiled. “Amen to that sweet prayer. Even better.”