

~ The Buzzbee Boys ~

“Hey, girls, ya made it back in time.”

Nick just finished taking off his uniform and sticking his baseball gear into his gym bag. Ignoring his teammates, he lifted the bag by its double handles and sauntered around the end of the bench to greet the girls.

“Thought I might have to catch a ride down to the clinic to get my baby back.”

“Now, we said we’d come and get you, didn’t we?” Terri, the blonde, welcomed him with a warm grin and Patti, the chestnut-hued brunette, was right on her heels and said.

“We only put a *small* dent in your *baby*, Nick.”

“What?” Nick got excited but calmed down when he saw both girls grinning.

“Told ya that would get a rise out of him didn’t I, Terri?” Terri giggled.

“Don’t worry. Your car is safe and sound and waiting for ya back in the parking lot. Sheesh! You act is if it were your *baby*.”

“It is.” Nick hugged them both in turn.

Patti: “Wow, hugs? What’s this Hollywood treatment? Ya make us out to be movie stars, Nick.” Nick lifted his hands, and his gym bag, out to his sides.

“Well hey! When you’re with a star, you get star treatment.” He chuckled.

“We were with ya two periods a day in school and homeroom, too, and we didn’t get any hugs then.” Terri faked a pout.

“Sounds like a practice we’ll have to change now don’t it, girls?” The girls beamed. Patti said, “Well, not if you don’t find some deodorant. You’re pretty ripe, Nick.”

“Whaddaya want? Been workin’ outside, down at the yard all day and playin’ ball after. Hosed myself off after work. Sheesh! Hold on a second.”

Nick dropped his gym bag to the ground, squatted down and fished some Right Guard out of the bag. He took off his long sleeve inner shirt, applied the deodorant put on a fresh, short-sleeved, inner shirt.

“See girls, your wish is my command.” He dumped the deodorant and dirty shirt back into the bag and zipped it up and stood with his arm out.

“Better, I hope?”

“We hope so too, don’t we Terr?” Terri frowned and shook her head in the negative. She looked a little embarrassed by Patti’s remarks. Nick started walking and they did, too, one on either side of him.

“Ya been here long?”

Patti said, “Long enough to see you strike out the side to end the game.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Here Nick, I’ll take your bag for ya.” Terri reached out and grasped his gym bag.

“Why, thank you Terri. You’re a doll, a living doll, Terri, you know that? That Gary is one lucky guy to have you for a girlfriend.” Terri took his bag, beaming. She said, “Well, it’s the least I can do with Patti busting your chops like that.” Nick nodded in agreement and escorted them toward the car.

“Hey Nick,” yelled Dave Morrison, still stowing away his gear back at the bench. “What you doin’ there, hittin’ into a double play?” Nick held onto the girls as they all craned their heads back towards the dingy green, bench along the third base line.

“Yeah, the only kind I make.”

Dave waved him off and joined their teammates, trekking from the country ball field toward their parked cars. Life was good, thought Nick. After another win on a sweet June evening, his big convertible waiting for him to take the wheel and a cute girl on each arm—yessir, life was damned good for Nick Sheeboom. Together they reminded him of that sister combo in “White Christmas,” the old Fifties flick with Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye. Patti wasn’t quite as slender as the skinny sister and Terry wasn’t as thick as Rosemary Clooney. No offense to Ms. Clooney. But they were a pair of cuties, too, two of the best lookin’ chicks in his class. He had a policy of not dating girls from his school, thinking it might be too tough to have to face them in class the day after the night before. Recent events had conspired to force him to trash that theory and he was trashing it in a big way with these two cuties. Besides, school was out for the summer, wasn’t it?

“So, ladies, you saw me close out the game with three K’s, hunh? Well, what can I say? I dazzled ‘em with my fastball, then fooled ‘em with my change-up. Had ‘em eatin’ right outta my hands.”

“Really?” says Patti. “Didn’t know them hitters could tell ‘em two pitches apart?” Nick stopped short but held onto each of them about the waist. He turned towards Patti.

“Now where’d ya get a fool idea like that?”

“Cary Geller.”

“Geller? He wasn’t catchin’ tonight. He ain’t even on this team. For cryin’ out loud.”

“So. He caught ya in the state championship, didn’t he? And we saw him in school everyday, didn’t we?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, he said they ain’t no difference between them two pitches of yours, ‘cept maybe in your head. They’re both slow as slop.”

Nick turned to Terri on his left for confirmation. She looked down and pawed the ground with her foot. Answer enough. Nick raised his hands above the girls’ shoulders and cried to the heavens.

“Can ya believe that Lord? I win the Class A State Baseball Championship practically single-handed, first one ever for our school, and this is the kind o’ thanks I get? Stabbed in the back my own battery mate? Oooh, how quickly they forget. Hell. It ain’t hardly been a couple weeks, has it?”

“Closer to four.” Terri said.

Nick smirked, shagged his head side to side in disbelief. His shaggy mane followed wherever he shook it. He lowered his arms back down to the girls’ shoulders.

“With a head that size,” said Patti, “don’t know if we can fit in the same car with ya.” Nicky grinned and arched an eyebrow for effect.

“I dunno. Think you girls’ll find my head size very ... uh, fittin’. ‘Sides I’m drivin’ with the top down.” Patti said, “You better.”

“What do you mean by that Nicky? Find your head size fitting?”

“Oh Terri, how can ya be so dense?” Patti shook her head. “That dirt-eatin’ grin on his face says it all, don’t it? You sure are a cocky little s.o.b., Nick.”

“Ain’t I though? May be my only fault. And I’m cute, too.” He paused to pose for them and chuckled.

“Yeah. Look at him Terri, grinning like the devil himself.”

“Well, I think he looks kind of cute in those tight, white shorts, Patti, almost like they weren’t even there, with his shirt tail hangin’ down like that, kind of girly. Saw some of the other players wearing them, too. Is that the fashion among ballplayers nowadays, Nick?”

“These? These are sliding shorts. Everybody wears ‘em. Keeps ya from gettin’ strawberries.”

“Well, you won’t have to worry about that now,” said Patti. “Strawberry season is all but over, seein’ as it’s the end of June.”

“No, no, not the strawberries you eat; it’s the kind you get on your thighs and butt when you slide into base. You know? Scrapes and bruises.”

Terri asked, “Do those shorts really work?”

“Usually. I got a doozy the other night though, must have hit a rock. You can check it out later if ya want, when we go dippin’.” Terri blushed.

“By the way, what’re you girls wearin’ underneath them clothes?” Terri said she wore her bikini. Nick frowned. “What about you, Patti?”

“Well, whaddaya think? Ya said we were goin’ skinny-dippin’, didn’t ya?”

“You bet.”

“Well, that’s what I’m wearin’, nothin’ but skin.”

“That’s my girl.” Pattie leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. She whispered. “Hope ya remember that later on, Nicky.”

The trio strolled through the weeds back to the cars parked on the dirt lot. They laughed and joked, as they walked in step with Nick, who squeezed the girls’ shoulders playfully. Nick claimed he was “a rose between two thorns” and the girls ate it up. Terri quoted scripture, warning him. **“That pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.”** Nick laughed her off, saying he wasn’t worried because he felt so good now that he had nowhere to go but down anyway. They had been going to school together for years, but this was their first official date. When his previous girlfriend transferred to Hawaii a month ago, Nick had decided to reconsider his policy of not dating girls from his high school. Patti was between boys, so she was fair game. With Terri’s boyfriend off to the navy now, Nick considered her semi-available, too. His timing was perfect.

Everything was falling into place. Patti smelled of Chanel No.5, while Terri's scent of Love's Fresh Lemon really got his blood up—real animal stuff. He couldn't explain it.

"Two good lookin' chicks on my arm and another victory notch in my belt, it don't get any better than this." They looked at him with stars in their eyes and why not? After all, right now he was the star of Pocomoke High, wasn't he? All sixty-six inches and one hundred and thirty-five pounds of him. Damn straight he was.

The girls had left the top down on his '67 aquamarine, Pontiac Bonneville convertible. The car was his pride and joy. He had worked hard to pay for it. He had bought it a couple months ago, only slightly used, off the widow lady across the street. Nick dropped his gear bag into the back seat, while the girls piled into the front. "Should I check for dents?" He mocked them by eyeballing the driver's side car door and fenders. The girls rolled their eyes. Nick smiled. He took the wheel and seated himself next to Patti, while Terri rode shotgun. Behind them, he noticed the late June sunset slowly approaching. Stayed light late this time of year, thought Nick, though he noticed dark clouds forming on the skyline.

He sped them down the rural, shade-dappled, roller-coaster, country road until the red light at Route 5A stopped them. The light was a long one. The crossing four-lane highway took priority. While they waited, Nick sniffed the remnants of late season honeysuckle floating in the air. Then he spied the source of the sweet-smelling vine near the road, smothering a young locust tree. They had planned to grab some burgers after Nick's ball game and head down into Southern Maryland, to the beaver ponds, to go skinny-dippin' at an isolated place Nick knew about. Well, they hadn't quite reached a consensus on the skinny-dippin' part yet. Though Nick felt certain Patti would go for the idea. But Terri was another matter. Her boyfriend was away at basic training, but they hadn't broken up yet, officially, that is. Nick was intrigued by what she might do later and why. Gary was a nice enough guy, but Nick thought he was a fool for leaving a great chick like Terri behind. Moving in on her didn't bother Nick a bit. How did that verse go? **If He had not meant them to be shorn, He would not have made them sheep?** Somethin' like that. Anyway, Nick liked Terri better than Patti. Either way Terri went tonight, could make for an interesting evening. He considered it a win-win situation all around and licked his lips at the possibilities. He had never yet missed with a chick at the beaver ponds, but two of 'em at the same time? Sounded like beaver heaven to him.

While they waited for the light to change, Nick glanced across the highway at their first destination, the two-story, red brick and white-shingled roadhouse across the highway. The second-story housed the owner Truley and his old lady. Truley used only the first floor for business. The lone building at the hub of a triangle intersection, Nick knew Truley's had been a Southern Maryland institution since the bootlegger days of the Twenties. The joint still held a rep for nefarious activities, lending to its dark mystique. Stuff always seemed to happen around Truley's, just as it did around Nick. Yet, like old man Truley, Nick never got snagged for any of it. Nick didn't care about the tavern's shady rep any more than he did his own. Truley served damn good cheeseburgers and cold beer and that's all Nick cared about.

Nick reached over and punched the pre-set on the car radio to the oldies station WMOD. Bobby Darin was singing *Dream Lover* and Nick crooned along with him. Patti and Terri had never heard that tune before. "A classic," whispered Nick, "1958." He put more of himself into the song. Soon, they were joining in on the *yeah-yeah-yeah's*.

... I want—yeah-yeah-yeah, a girl—yeah-yeah-yeah, to call— yeah-yeah-yeah, my own— yeah-yeah-yeah. I want a dream lover so I don't have to dream alone.

The song was perfect for them, had that cha-cha rhythm popular from yesteryear. One of the tunes his older brother Ramon had introduced to him during the short time they had grown up together. The song faded out and WMOD went to a furniture commercial. Terri reached over and dialed down the volume.

"You're an anachronism Nick, you know that? With all those oldies you play in your concerts, you know with those 'Show Time' and 'History of Rock'n'Roll' segments. Nobody does that kind of stuff, except you, Nicky."

“If ya mean, nobody’s as korny as him, Terr, you’re right.” But Patti hooked Nick’s right arm in her left and squeezed. “Maybe that’s why we like ya so much Nick, cuz you make korny, kool.” She winked at him.

“Yeah Patti, that’s good. He does make korny, kool. He really does. Maybe that’s the true definition of anachronism. What do you think, Nicky?”

Anachronism? Mann, that Terri wasn’t just sharp-looking, she was smart, too. Maybe that’s why he liked her more than Patti. Anachronism? Sheesh. Nick threw his head back and chuckled. “Whoa! Anything over three syllables, you’ve lost me.”

The long light changed to green. Nick gunned the big convertible’s four hundred cubic-inch, V8 and three hundred and thirty-three horses raced across the intersection. Nick could hear and feel blue chip gravel of Truley’s parking lot crunching beneath the grind of the Pontiac’s tires. He screeched to halt in a cloud of dust next to the tavern’s side, drive-thru carry-out window, where they placed their orders.

The dude at the order window wore his long, dirty blonde hair back, greaser style, with a cigarette stuck between his ear and head. Nick mused that, despite this being 1970, greasers were still big in Southern Maryland. When they were done ordering, the guy did a double-take of Nick.

“Hey, you work down the street at the Patio Center, right? Ramon’s place?”

“Yeah, he’s my brother.”

“No kiddin’? Sure don’t look like ‘im.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s easy to remember me though; I’m the good lookin’ one.” Beside him, Patti squeezed his arm while Terri giggled.

“Wait a minute.” The guy snapped his fingers. “You’re Little Nick—guy who just won the state championship.”

“Nick’s sufficient.”

“Yeah.” He grinned. “I got you now, mann.” He pointed a forefinger at Nick and grinned.

“Great, got our order, too?”

“Sure. Got it right here.” He picked up the ticket off the sill.

“Gonna turn it into the cook anytime soon?”

The guy jerked. “Oh sure, sure.” He turned to the other side of the window and, with his back twisted toward Nick, clipped the order to the round turnstile on the inner window sill. He yelled inside. “Hey, Mister Truley, we got us a Little Nick Sheeboom out here.” Nick watched the kid strain his neck and bob his head to something said inside. Then he said, “OK, OK Boss. Will do.”

The greaser turned back to Nick and hunched forward to speak through the open carry-out window: “Truley says you should pick your order up inside, at the bar.”

“Yeah?”

The kid shrugged. “Yeah. Guess he wants to talk with you.”

“You haven’t been workin’ here too long, have ya?”

“A week.”

Nick sighed. “OK, how long’ll it be? For the order, I mean?”

“Oooh, ‘bout fifteen, twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?” Patti asked. “Are you kiddin’?”

The guy leaned outside the window sill. “Hey, our cook is an artist. Ya want fast, head on down ta the golden arches.” Patti took a deep breath, but held her tongue.

Nick said. “Well, how ‘bout a cold six pack of the High Life to go, hunh, while we’re waitin’? Or is your brewer an artist, too?”

“Hey, you’re quite a card, Nick, but one thing you ain’t mann, is legal. Sorreee.” He arched his brows as if to say there was nothing he could do about it.

“Yeah, but I just won the state championship, right? That oughtta count for somethin’. Besides, me and Truley got a little arrangement goin’. Just ask him about the beer.”

“OK.”

He turned back inside and asked. Next thing Nick knew the guy was handing him a cold six pack of Miller’s through the open, carry-out window. The girls’ jaws dropped open. Nick paid the dude with a five dollar bill (about three hours of Nick’s wages at the Patio Center) and told the kid to keep the change.

“Mann! That’s over a dollar tip,”

“Yeah. Now, you and me got a little somethin’ goin’, too, OK?”

“Hey. Whatever’s good for Truley is good for me too, I guess.”

“Kool. What’s your name, mann?”

“Duane.” Nick reached up and shook hands with Truley’s new employee.

“Kool Duane.”

“Truley said, don’t make a show of drinkin’ the beer around here though, OK?” Nick nodded.

As he pulled the car away from the window around the building, Patti twisted in her seat to yell back over her shoulder. “Hey? Tell that chef of yours we don’t need to wait for no masterpieces.” Then she turned back around and grumbled loud enough for Nick to hear. “It’s more ‘n two hours past my dinner time and my stomach ain’t forgot it yet.” Nick pulled the convertible around the road house, past Truley’s private driveway, over to the far corner of the parking lot nearest to the highway. The lights on Truley’s sign had come on above them. There were little more than a half dozen vehicles in the lot. Whaddaya expect for a Monday night, thought Nick. Terri reached for her purse and pulled a dollar and two quarters from her wallet. She offered the money to Nick. “For my share,” she said. Nick thought, now there’s another reason to like this chick.

“Anh, forget it—my treat.”

“Gee Nick, you always pay for us, even when we aren’t out on a date. Guess we’re not special though, because I hear you treat everybody.”

Patti cut in. “Nicky’s rich Terri. Don’t you know that? Him and *GRT* got gigs at all them NCO clubs around here. You knew that. How you think he paid for this car?”

“Well, I never knew playing in a teenage band could be so lucrative, Patti.”

Lucrative? Ya hear that? Terri had done it again. Mann, that Terri was really all right, really somethin’ special.

“Nick? Is she right? Are you really rich?”

“Rich? You gotta be kiddin’. But, you know what? Sittin’ here like this with you two girls I feel like ... like mann, I’m the richest dude on earth.” Nick grinned at them for effect.

“Layin’ it on a little thick, ain’t ya Nicky? We ain’t born yesterday.”

“Can you blame me, Patti?” She eased up and smiled. “I guess not.” Terri said. “Well, maybe you aren’t rich, but you are a blessing to us, Nick.”

Blessing? Is that what she said? He was a blessing? Oh, this Terri was a find. Where had she been all his life? With Gary, of course, the jerk. Wide-eyed, Terri asked why did he treat everybody all the time?

“Well Terri, it’s very simple. I like makin’ people happy, that’s all, especially you.” Patti coughed. “And you too, Patti.” Patti said, “That’s better.” Terri said, “All right then.” She stuffed her money back into her purse. “But gee Nick, I’ve never seen a kid could buy beer like that, not even Gary and he looks old for his age.”

Nick asked Terri to fish his bottle cap/can opener out of the glove compartment and then he did the honors for each of them. “Well, I’m not just *any* teenager, Terri.” Patti agreed, “You got that right, Baby. You’re the king of Pocomoke.” She winked at him. Terri furrowed her lovely dark brows. With those green eyes, cute, turned up nose and that true Aryan blonde hair, she was quite a knockout.

“Nick, we’re not supposed to drink it here. You heard that guy.”

“Anh. Don’t worry about it, Terri. That’s only in case the cops show up and they never do, ‘less Truley calls ‘em.” Patti bottomed up her bottle and drew long on her brew. “Umm good stuff, Nick, tastes real good.”

“Yeah, don’t it? ‘Specially that first sip.” After, they slaked their thirst, Nick said, “If the cops come, just hide the bottles under the seat.” Terri said, “Won’t that mess up your car?”

“That’s all right Terri, Patti will clean it up later.”

Patti choked on her beer and slugged him in the arm with her elbow. “Like hell I will.” She frowned at him. “Hey, I’m just playing with ya, mann.”

Terri said, “That’s OK, I’ll take care of it Nick.” Damn, there she was again. What a girl! “There ya go Patti, problem’s solved.”

Nick reached around Patti and rubbed Terri's shoulder gently, "Now that's my girl. Terri here is a real angel, a true living doll. Yes she is." Terri took hold of his hand and, just as gently, kissed the back of it. This was a different Terri from the retiring girl he had known, but he liked her. He liked her a lot. Patti lifted Nick's hand off Terri's shoulder and back over Patti's head, sticking his hand down between her legs, under the hem of her A-line skirt. She clamped down, not so gently, on his hand with her powerful thighs and turned her doe eyes to peer into his.

"Didn't think angels is what you was after tonight Nicky. Or was I mistaken?"

Before he could answer, Patti leaned over and frenched him on the mouth, hard but wet. Nick replied with the straining fingers of his trapped hand, sending her his message. Her tongue slithered deep over his. She tasted like beer. She tasted good. Patti sneaked her left arm around his neck and pulled him closer to her. At the same time, she grabbed his trapped hand about the wrist and push-pulled his fingers up into her, rubbing his knuckles up and down against herself beneath her skirt. She hadn't lied earlier when she had said she was wearin' 'nothin'" but skin' under her clothes. Terri opened her door and got out of the car, saying she'd go inside to pick up their order and leave them alone. Nick jerked away from Patti's embrace.

"No, no you don't wanna go in there, Terri."

"Maybe I should say the same about you." Nick squirmed.

"What're ya talkin' about?" She nodded towards Patti's lap and he understood. "No, no, I'm sorry. I'll get it."

"Yes, I can see that." She frowned. "That's why I'm leaving."

Nick tried to pull his hand from Patti's crotch but the girl had a thigh death grip on him, he couldn't believe. Nick said, "Hey now, Terri. We got a long night ahead of us. Let's, let's just be cool, OK?"

In a huff, Terri said, "I'm goin' in."

Nick jerked his hand free from Patti's crotch and picked his beer bottle from between his legs, while Patti threw her head back and cackled. A few sips and she's loaded already? Nick scooted up to sit on the top of the seatback, above Patti's shenanigans.

"No, Terr, don't"

"Why not? I've been in there before to pick up lunch orders."

"Yeah, I know but that was in the daytime. Nights are different. Please don't."

"How different?"

Nick connected with her stare and smiled. "It's no place for an angel like you, Baby. That's for sure." She almost smiled. He had her now. Terri relented and turned back to the car. Nick hoisted his bottle and toasted:

"Here's to Terri, a true earth angel and here's to Patti, who may be the devil in disguise."

He felt his allusion to a couple old Rock'n'Roll hits was lost on these children of the flower culture. Placated, Terri sauntered back to the car and pushed her bikini straps down, out from under her cotton top, over her shoulders. The straps fell down over her sleeveless arms to her elbows. Resting her forearms on top of the car door, she leaned down over her arms, pressing her breasts up out of her scoop-necked, midriff top, permitting Nick to catch a healthy glimpse of her ample cleavage. Was that on purpose? Wasn't she a good Catholic girl? They touched bottles and drank, with Terri's loosed boobs revealing more of her than he had ever seen before. Nick felt Patti's body stiffen beside him and watched her jaw tighten. The tempting sight of Terri's milky-white, full breasts nearly paralyzed Nick. That Gary sure was a fool. They were both cute girls, but Terri knew where her advantage lay. When they had swallowed their beer, Terri opened the door and plopped back down into her seat. She turned to both of them.

"You know Nicky, you shouldn't misjudge me. Just because I try to be nice doesn't mean I can't put out if I want to, angel or not." She stared at him. Yeah, that cleavage shot had been on purpose, no question. She talked like an angel, but she acted like his old girlfriend. Yeah, this Terri was sure different from the one he had known in class, all right. Nick sat up straight.

"Hey Terri, I'm, I'm sure that's true. I didn't mean anything by it. Honest, I was just kiddin' around, you know. That's all."

"Oh, I know what you meant all right."

For the first time all night, her brow darkened toward him. He looked away from her scolding stare, fumbled with the radio dial and turned up the volume. Wouldn't you know it? *Earth Angel* was playing. Terri looked across Patti at Nick and they broke up, all except Patti.

*... Earth angel, earth angel, will you be mine?
My darling dear, love you all the time—*

Patti shot her hand forward, punched another setting and got WPGC –

*—Momma told me not to come. Momma told me not to come.
That ain't the way to have fun son. They ain't the way to have fun...*

“Yeah, now that’s more like it.” Patti bobbed her head in groove with the beat of a recent top ten hit. “No more o’ that ancient, doo-wop slop.”

Nick got ticked, but held his tongue. He controlled the radio play in his car; no one else, but he didn’t want to start an argument now. Too much was at stake. If a guy had fooled with his radio, he would have slugged him and let him know the next time he pulled a stunt like that he’d be hoofin’ it. Instead, Nick slid down off the seatback, slouched down in the seat, turned with his back to the door, drained his brew and said nothing. He was beginning to think this double dating stuff was going to be a lot harder than he figured. Lost in their respective thoughts, the girls kept silent and sucked on their brews, too. The feel-good aura they had shared just a few moments ago had vaporized. They slurped their beers in silence, each one staring straight ahead, listening to Three Dog Night do their thing on the radio. Nick wondered if the girls’ mothers had told them not to come.

The sun was setting. Hues of pink, purple, blue and yellow lingered on the horizon. At least ten minutes had passed, since he had placed their orders. Rock music played softly through the rear speakers. Nick didn’t want to leave them alone in the parking lot and he couldn’t take them inside either. Despite the girly name, Truley’s was a rough place. Nick didn’t want this pair of sharp-looking, high school girls sitting at the bar in their skimpy outfits, showing off their legs and cleavage (which he knew they had revealed solely for his benefit) to all those horny old farts inside. Besides, he didn’t want them to see him have to pay his debt to Truley for the beer. He preferred they think he was something special. They drank quietly and listened to the radio.

Terri was the first to have the stones to speak, a fact Nick noted. She talked about Nick’s ball game. His summer team was undefeated and they had just won an easy victory. Nick confessed, it had been kind of embarrassing to have won so easily. He admitted the competition had been weak. But he had the world on a string. He said the only problem was to figure out how they could get the most mileage out of their evening together. The girls had softened and both of them agreed to help him. Maybe this wasn’t going to be so hard, after all. That Terri was looking better to him all the time.

Nearly nine, it had been over fifteen minutes since he had placed their orders. The sun was just about to set. But those ominous, dark clouds kept on the skyline kept rolling slowly towards them. How might they affect his skinny-dippin’ plans for later? Nick handed Patti his empty bottle. He jumped out of the car, fished inside in his gym bag on the back seat and fumbled around until he located his harmonica. He cupped the end of the mouth organ in the palm of his left hand and hid the rest of the instrument up against the inside of his wrist and forearm. Then he excused himself. Trying not to let the gravel bother his bare feet, Nick strolled gingerly behind the car, over the lot, toward the seedy-looking roadhouse to pick up their food order. The girls turned in their seats to cheer him on, mocking him as he picked his way across the lot. Terri whistled, while Patti teased.

“You look delicious in them white shorts Nicky. Believe I could eat you right up. Why don’t you forget about them burgers and come on back here, so we can have some Nickyburger tonight.” Nick called back. “You all had your chance.”

“Patti’s right Nick. You got the build, the muscles, but that tight, little, round rump turned up under those shorts, makes you a real cutie.”

“The farther away you get though Nick, the more you look like a girl,” said Patti, “with those long, wavy, black curls. And that baseball shirt looks more like a mini-skirt from here. You watch yourself in there Nicky and bring back that meat, all of it.” She laughed.

“Don’t let her kid you Nick. You look sharp. You move like a panther—sexy.”

Nick turned back to see Terri flash him the thumbs-up sign. Pointing at them, Nick laughed falsely, but loud enough for them to hear. "That's cuz I'm barefoot on these stones." Then he raised his voice. "Just leave me one of them beers, ladies or I'll be very put out with you." He turned his back to them, lifted his shirt, stuck the harmonica inside the waistband of his cotton sliding shorts and walked into the tavern. As he entered Truley's barefoot, Nick thought this might work out after all. Patti and Terri might just be ready for anything tonight. He only hoped he was, too.

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As he stepped inside the joint, the chilly air-conditioning hit him hard, giving Nick goose bumps. He took a couple seconds to adjust his eyes to the smoky, dark cool of the bar room. Some of the customers turned to look at him. Most did not. Stale, smoky air filled his nostrils. The dingy, green-grey, linoleum floor felt smooth and cool beneath his feet. A couple, hefty, good old boys were shooting pool on the table in the middle of the floor. Nick recognized Truley right away behind the bar. Stocky, with salt and pepper, grey hair, Nick knew Truley from his many go-for trips, picking up lunch orders for his brother and the rest of the Patio Center crew. Nick understood that Truley knew him as a fun-loving kid who'd perform on the harmonica and sing, upon request. That was Nick's end of the underage beer sale deal earlier at the drive-thru. Selling Nick the beer was Truley's end, singing for it was Nick's. Truley had said he not only liked Nick's style, but that his occasional ditties were also good for business. Nick figured Truley wanted him to pay off the rest of his debt now with a tune.

"Hey, Nicky, how ya' doin' kid? What'll ya have tonight?"

"Hello Mr. 'T', I just come in ta pickup a order o' cheeseburgers."

Truley yelled back through the server window to the kitchen, "Got that ordah o' cheeseburgers ready for Nick?" Truley turned back to Nick and shook his head.

"Be another five minutes kid. Whyn't ya give us a tune while ya wait?"

Had he figured Truley right, or what? Truley's didn't have a juke box. Well, it had one, but it was busted most of the time. He guessed Truley hadn't fixed it yet, so Nick'd have to serve as the replacement again.

"Sure, just let me tell some friends outside, it'll be five more minutes. What'll it be tonight?" (Nick had thought that was supposed to be the barkeep's line.)

"Think I'd like to hear a little of Patsy tonight, Nick."

"*Crazy*?" He nodded. "OK, just a second." It was one of Truley's favorites, Nick's too.

Nick opened the front door and stepped over the threshold. Holding the door open, he called out to the girls, it would be another five minutes. Then he stepped back inside of the stuffy place. He pulled out his harmonica, walked over to the bar and hopped up onto it, as if he owned it. He had done this before. Nick grinned at Truley, who gave him the go ahead. Nick glanced around. It was Monday, so the place wasn't crowded. Less than a dozen customers, some sitting in the booths across the room and the rest at the bar turned their attention to him. A couple of good old boys shooting pool in the back focused on their game, ignoring Nick. That was fine. They were a mangy-looking bunch, but typical of Truley's. They didn't bother him. With his band *GRT*, Nick had played all kinds of crowds. He had done this before.

Nick sat on the bar top and played the slow, lilting, sad piano intro to the classic ballad on his mouth organ. The music got their attention. Nick placed the edge of his free hand on his thigh and kept time by tapping the inside of his thumb against his thigh. He had always used his tongue more than his fingers to play the instrument. He sat erect with his legs crossed and dangling over the side. He blew the intro and then Nick projected his voice in falsetto across the country barroom. He sang the haunting ballad of a woman trapped in a deep love for a man who had used her and left her behind. He affected his emotional Patsy Cline imitation, right down to that throbbing catch in her tremulous alto. Nick understood that's why Truley had picked that particular Willie Nelson tune. He knew Nick imitated Patsy's voice well and Truley was a big fan of the late crooner. Nick loved this song, too. He had practiced his imitation many times in the solitude of his home. Imitation was a peculiar talent of his. Since childhood, Nick could mimic any sound, noise or voice he heard, much to his family's amusement. He had honed his talent the way other kids learned to talk. Now he belted out the ballad tenderly, in a plaintive falsetto, almost sobbing, reflecting the famed performer's style and tone. The

feeling he put into the ballad was real, for he thought of his star-crossed love for Ry, the one girl he had let slip away. Their long, hoped for union had never come off and apparently never would.

*... Cra - zy. I'm crazy for feelin' so lone-ly.
I'm cra - zy, crazy for feelin' so blue-u-u-u- ue.
I knew-ew, you'd love me as long as you wan - ted.
And then, someday, you'd leave me for somebody new-ew.*

(Bridge)

*Wor- -ry? Why do I let myself worry?
Wond - erin' what in the world did I do-o-ooo-ooooo?*

(Bridge)

*Oooh cra - zy, for thinkin' that my love could hold you-ou-ou.
I'm crazy for tryin' and crazy for cryin' and crazy for lo-o-vin' you.
I'm cra- -zy for thinkin' my love could hold you-ou-ou-u.
I'm crazy for tryin' and crazy for cryin' and crazy for lo-o-v'ng you."*

Nick blew his mouth organ for another verse and then belted out a last refrain in the same somber, subdued sobbing tone, once made famous by the late singer. When he had concluded, the rough and ready barroom audience sat in reverent silence, staring at him in disbelief. Nick figured they were paying their respects to the memory of the late, great Patsy Cline. But hell! Even the cook and the dishwasher had come out from the kitchen in their aprons and little white caps to listen. He guessed he must have been that good. That didn't surprise him, either. Nick was silently reverent also, not because of his performance, but because of his plaintive yearning for Ry, the one girl he most cared for, the one he could not have. After a few awkward seconds, spontaneous, scattered applause broke out from a few patrons. Nick shook his head, then pulled back the long hair covering his face, stuck it behind his ear and bowed to the crowd from his perch atop the bar.

Before Nick could hop down from the bar, the two hefty boys shooting pool approached him. The man on the bar stool nearest Nick mumbled under his breath—"Oh shit! The Buzzbees. Bad hombres, son, ex-cons. Watch yourself." Dixie glanced from him to a pair of red-bearded, belly-busting Neanderthals headed his way. The closer of the two called out. "What's that you say old man? Hunh? Speak up." The ape stared hard, but the barfly shook his head and buried his beak back into his glass of rye. "That's what I thought."

These boys appeared more than a bit unrefined. Bearded, half loaded, work shirts unbuttoned and out of their jeans, hairy bellies hanging over their rawhide cowboy belts and wearing ball caps backwards, they were a long way from what Nick had waiting for him outside in his convertible. They approached him for an encore. Nick feared his artistry had over stimulated these boys. Behind him, Truley told Nick his order was ready and set the grease-stained brown bag of burgers on the bar next to Nick's free hand. Nick said "OK, thanks." In a hoarse whisper, but without looking at them, Nick said to his new fans, "Maybe some other time fellas, my order is ready." The apes looked at each other and grunted. Wrong answer, wrong delivery thought Nick. The place went quiet as a church on Monday night. The shorter of the two spoke.

"Well Arlo, did you hear that? The boy says he can't sing another. That don't sound too friendly, does it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I heard that Alvin, but you sure it's a boy?" He reached out with his pool cue and lifted Nick's long locks with the cue tip. "Looks too priddy for a boy, don't he?"

"Maybe it's not, maybe it's a *she*."

"Ha, yeah that's it all right. Sure sounds like one." When Nick froze mute, his new fans waded right in.

"Yeah, sounds like what we got heah is failyah to commun'cate, don't it brother dear?"

"Sure do big brother, sure do. Well, you 'membah how we took care of 'em commun'cation problems in the joint, don't ya."

"Yes I do, baby brother, 'deed I do." They both burst out laughing.

Nick was in trouble. He had heard about these gorillas—the Buzzbee brothers. Having recently completed their prison sentences, the state had set them free. The last few months they had been tearing around, terrorizing the countryside, but always evading charges, largely because nobody had the guts to rat them out.

Nick was in a jam and nobody in the joint was going to lift a finger to help him. He could just feel it. He hoped maybe Truley could sneak into the kitchen and call the police. These boys were half loaded, mean, and looking for trouble. Arlo and Alvin Buzzbee, brothers and ex-cons in their late twenties, they were a pair of real losers. They were the kind of good ol' boys who went bald before thirty but had hair growing everywhere else, like out of their face, ears and noses and, from the looks of their open shirts here, on their beer bellies, too. Sure, Nick had heard of them. In Southern Maryland, who hadn't? Each had been through reform school, been kicked out of the army, unable to hold a job, lost a couple of wives and done time for wife beating and attempted rape. They were a real pair of sweethearts, yes, they were, and everyone in the southern part of the county knew them and stayed clear. Separately, each was a handful, but together, they were impossible.

"Lookee dat Arlo. She's starin' right through us, like we ain't even heah."

"Well now, sweetie, that ain't vera friendly, is it Alvin? Cuz we shore arah heah."

Nick put his hands to either side of him on the bar. Arlo stepped towards Nick and shoved the palm of his hand into Nick's chest, preventing him from hopping down. He answered his brother, but spoke to Nick.

"No Bubba, that ain't at all friendly. But ain't she a pretty one with that long, wavy hair and them big eyes and, look at them cherry red lips! 'N how 'bout that gold tooth? Classy, hunh? Oh, she's a special one all right." Alvin agreed.

"Yeah, she got nice lips. Umm, big and juicy, just the way I like 'em. Young girl lips."

"She's got right nice, young girl tits, too," said Arlo as he felt Nick's chest, "nice and full and firm."

As Nick's neck stiffened, Truley spoke up in Nick's behalf. "Come on boys, give the kid a break. Tell ya what, your next round is on me." Arlo said "Aw come on now Truley, all we want is another song. Right Alvin? But if you want to give us another round, well hell, we won't stop ya." Then to Nick, Arlo said, "Hey, priddy girl? How 'bout ya do one for us? Hunh"

Nick was calm, cool. He submerged his fear. He allowed his brain to control the revulsion he felt for these two a-holes. Self-discipline was critical to the teachings of aikido as well as boxing or any form of self-defense and he hadn't forgotten the lessons he had learned up at the Crest Hill Boys Club. When he had to, Nick could detach himself from the emotion of a moment, as he had done with the bases loaded in the ninth to secure the state championship for Pocomoke. Everyone said he had a killer instinct. The fact that these guys were half-loaded was in his favor. Seated atop the bar, he was in no position to do anything effective. He decided to comply with their request. He smiled and replied, not in his falsetto imitation of Patsy Cline, but in his normal baritone.

"What would you like to hear?"

"Oh my, hear that Arlo? She's got such a deep voice," said Alvin, fluttering his eyelashes, mocking Nick. "Sings like a woman but talks like a man. Oh yeah!" He stroked Nick's thigh. Nick clenched his teeth, trying hard to control his contempt. The assholes picked up on his angry vibe and laughed.

"Ya know, this one reminds me of that spirited, black-haired bitch we had in stir. Didn't want it at first, but after we got her broke in all right. Sheeitt. She did just fine. Didn't she moan and groan though? What was her name? Carlos?"

"No Carlotta, Ha! Memba? Yeah! We called her Carlotta."

"Yeah, we gave her a real eduamacation all right. Broke her in a little rough, but after she took all she could get, why, that beaner couldn't get enough."

"Hell yeah, and we gave her all she could take." They broke out laughing again.

Nick did not budge. He was in a bad spot here. He needed to be on his feet and balanced where he could use his self-defense techniques and their aggression, against them. No one else in the place was lifting a finger to help him. Were they afraid to help or just looking for more entertainment?

"The kid can drink with us, Truley—on the house, too." Truley brought the boys another round and one for Nick as well, while they decided what they wanted Nick to perform. Alvin said, "Yeah, the kid kin drink with us and we kin kind o' get acquainted, hunh, kid?"

"Why not?" Nick said real friendly-like.

Truley brought the liquor, two double shots of bourbon for the brothers and a single for Nick. They didn't seem to notice or care about the difference in the volume of the drinks.

“All right kid, let’s see what ya made of. Here’s ta a good time tonight.”

Nick nodded and raised his glass to theirs. They drank their liquor straight down. The barroom watched in silence. A new customer came through the front door, sensed the tension in the air, saw the two men around Nick sitting on the bar, turned on his heels and left before he got five feet inside the door.

Nick coughed a little after slogging down his whiskey.

“That’s pretty good, kid. Whaddaya think Arlo?”

“Not bad, not bad at all.”

“Yeah, she’s got what they call PO – tential. Yes, she do!”

The liquor burned his gullet, but served to relax Nick a little, which was probably a good thing. He didn’t want any more though or he wouldn’t be able to function as he knew must. The brothers called for another round. Again, Nick asked for their request.

“*The Stripper* and you can stand right up here and strip for us while you play it.” Arlo patted the bar.

“Tongue that mouth organ like it was a saxophone.” Alvin sneered. “Or my big honker.” They cracked up.

“Gee, sorry fellas, but I don’t know that one.” Nick lied. Hell, he had played the number since he was in grade school. Alvin said, “How ‘bout, uh, *I’m Sorry*, ya know by Brenda Lee? Always been partial to that one. All my bitches apologize to me sooner or later.” He laughed and slapped his brother on the back.

“Sure, I can do that for ya.”

The next round came but Nick ignored his glass and asked them to move back a little, because he needed to stand down for this one. “What for? Ya did fine with the last one, right up heah?” Arlo patted the bar, again. “Got to see them pretty legs and that big bulge in them tight shorts real good.”

“Yeah, but I need to stand for this one.”

“Why?”

Nick feigned indignity. “Well, have ya ever seen Brenda Lee sing it, sittin’ down?” The brothers looked at each other.

“Well, no. Have you, Alvin?”

“Cain’t say I have.”

Nick chimed in. “See, there ya go. That’s cuz Brenda Lee is too short like me and it’s a type o’ song a short person’s gotta sing standin’ up for it to come off right.”

“She’s right, Alvin. All right kid, stand right up here, where we can get a good look at ya.” He slapped the top of the bar.

“Well, I don’t think Truley wants my dirty feet all over his bar.”

“Sure he does. Hell, Truley don’t mind, do ya Truly?” The boys glared at the barkeep. Scared, Truley looked down and shook his head. “Nah, it’s OK.”

“There ya see, nothin’ to worry about. G’ahead kid, stand right up there and be Brenda Lee.” They laughed and slapped the bar top for emphasis.

With Truley’s endorsement and all eyes upon him, Nick stood up on the bar. Alvin whacked Nick across his butt, giving him a little boost up. They wanted him to drink with them again, but he declined until the song was finished. Nick sang the song, using his harmonica to mimic the lilting violins in the original. Now, he imitated Brenda Lee’s throaty alto as he had many times before. When he finished, he thought he had pulled it off OK. He had done better with Patsy, but the Buzzbee boys seemed to like his Brenda Lee all right. Nick thanked them, climbed down off the bar, picked up his bag of burgers and started to leave. Alvin seized his arm, causing Nick to wince and drop the bag back on the bar.

“Not so fast, Baby. Where ya goin’, sugah? We ain’t done with ya yet, not by a long shot. Right, Arlo?”

“So right, y’are, baby brother.”

“Look,” said Nick, “I gotta be goin’, my parents will be worried.”

“Aw, isn’t that a pity? Her parents will be worried.” They laughed again.

Nick glanced around the room but no one looked him in the eye. He was alone. He was in deep crap, unless Truley had called the police, which he hadn’t because the Buzzbee boys hadn’t let him. Nick could not expect the cavalry to come to his rescue. He would have to deal with the Buzzbees alone. Each of the brothers had

nearly half a foot and seventy pounds on him and they still held pool sticks in their hands. Nick didn't think he could defend himself against both of them at the same time and remain his handsome self. And he couldn't make a run for it and chance taking them outside. If these apes caught one whiff of those girls outside, they would all be doomed. But he had an idea. He had a good idea. If he could somehow take 'em one at a time, he might have a chance. They looked to be just loaded enough and just stupid enough to fall for that. The creeps had no way of knowing how capable he was of defending himself under the right circumstances. That was his ace in the hole. The last double shot looked like it was putting them over the edge. Nick hoped it would.

"Look fellas, why should we make our private business public? Whaddaya say we take care of this in the can? Hunh? Whaddaya say?"

Arlo said, "Well now kid, that's the best offer I had in a long time." Nick could believe that, but he kept silent, looking from one creep to the other.

"Whaddaya think Alvin? Maybe we *can* take this kid where she's nevah been before? HA! HA!"

"Oh, I'm sure we *can*, brother, I'm sure we *can*. Get it? *Can*? Suppose we go back to the *can* like she said?"

"All right, *can* do. Ha! Kid, let's go." They almost fell over themselves, laughing.

Nick looked around but still found no one willing to help. Hell, just a few minutes ago they were applauding him. How fickle can ya be?

If he could get one of these Neanderthals alone in the men's room, Nick thought he might stand a chance. The alternative was bleak. Nick smiled and said "OK, fellas." He set his harmonica on the bar next to the burgers and turned to walk back toward the men's room. The brothers dropped their cues on the pool table, while Arlo grabbed and pinched Nick's right cheek, causing Nick to scoot forward, leading the way.

"This one's a real beautte, Alvin, a real honey. Yes sir."

"Fresh too. Walks like a panther. That's sexy as hell."

Now Nick knew what Terri and Alvin had in common, they both thought he had a sexy walk. Sheesh! Nick had to quit fooling around and prepare his mind for battle. He led them through the bar and down the hallway outside the men's room. He figured they'd be overconfident (and why not) and he'd have surprise on his side. He had to separate these jerks to have a chance. To humor them, he spoke in their lingo.

"Look, they ain't 'nuff rum in theyah for all three ovus. S'ppose ya'all just come in one at a time?"

"D'ya heah that Arlo, he picked up on our talkin'. One atta time, OK with you big brother?"

"Yeah, I heard 'im all right an' I'm first. Wait heah, Alvin."

Arlo pushed Alvin aside and shoved Nick ahead of him through the men's room doorway. He ordered Nick to sit on the toilet, as he shut the door behind them. Nick suggested he lock the door for privacy. Arlo said that was a good idea. He locked the door. Nick looked around the filthy latrine. The roll-out, hand towel had busted off its holder and hung free down to the floor. The once white hand towel had become dingy grey with over use. A sign over the urinal read: "DON'T EAT THE BIG WHITE MINT." Truley's idea of a joke. Dispensers on the wall shucked condoms by featuring fancy, arty pictures of fantastic female bodies, the kind seen in comic strips. One showed a particular gnarly condom with the inducement "Pleasure her all night."

"Uh, we won't be needin' any of them things, Baby. That's one of the pluses for guys like us, ya know?"

Guys like us? Right, thought Nick. From outside, Alvin called, "Don't ru'n him for me now, Arlo."

Nick heard Alvin chuckle out in the hallway. He wondered if Truley was calling the police now. He hoped so, but he couldn't count on that. Arlo told him to drop his pants. Instead, Nick rose off the stool, fondled Arlo's privates and smiled pleasantly. He circled to his left, like a boxer, switching places with the bigger man. He unbuttoned Arlo's jeans. Arlo asked Nick what he was doing. Arlo said he could undo his own pants. Nick said he was going to "get him ready." Nick licked his lips in a manner that convinced Arlo to drop his pants. "You done this before, kid?" Arlo searched Nick's face. Nick breathed deeply. His head throbbed from the blood pumping through his brain. He was scared. He was real scared. It was time for him to put up or shut up.

God help me, help me, please. I know I don't deserve it, but I really need You now, if You ain't too busy. Give me strength. Give me courage. Give me somethin'. Please. Amen.

Immediately, Nick felt a surge of adrenaline flow through his arteries, while, at the same time, a contradictory but surprising, peaceful calm stole over him, giving him a quiet confidence.

The filthy place had one urinal, one toilet and one sink, opposite the lone toilet, with most of a wall mirror still hanging above it. Nick stood now with his back to the sink, facing Arlo, who stood with his back to the toilet. Arlo had released his monster. The red-haired beast sneered. "OK, kid do youah thing."

Nick saw what he needed to see, locked eyes with the creep and pursed a faint smile. Then, he dropped to his right knee and, in a flash, rammed the base of his bony right palm up into the Buzzbee family jewels. He clamped a death grip around Arlo's stones. Arlo screamed in agony and stretched in vain for Nick. But Nick was too quick for the larger man. Like a boxer, Nick stepped up inside Arlo's reach. Still squeezing Arlo with his right hand, Nick stood and, with his left hand, seized onto Arlo's shirt collar. Nick turned his shoulder and body quickly into the bigger man's chest. And when Arlo's forearm surged towards Nick's windpipe, Nick buried his chin into his chest and blocked the ape's attempted stranglehold. Nick squatted and hefted the creep off his feet onto Nick's back. Then, in one motion, Nick propelled the ape headfirst into the mirror over the sink, cracking it against the wall and shattering the broken glass and plaster paris to the floor. Recoiling off the wall, Nick staggered backwards under the jerk with the Buzzbee family jewels yet firmly clamped in his twisted grasp. He pushed back violently with the top of his head up under Arlo's chin, shoving Arlo backwards and snapping his head back against the wall above the toilet. Straddling the stool and pressing backwards, Nick pinned Arlo against the wall for a second to catch his breath. The bigger man's cries grew softer. The old maxim was true: *When you had 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow*, not to mention their bodies. For effect, Nick twisted and jerked the man's balls. Arlo moaned. Opposite him, Nick saw a stud now revealed in the broken wall. Wasting no time, again, Nick summoned the strength of Hercules, planted his feet on either side of the toilet, adjusted his load and rose upward. Riding Arlo on his back, Nick pitched himself forward again and violently smashed Arlo headfirst into the wall stud, this time cracking the stud and felling more plaster into the sink. Exhausted, Nick dropped to his knees with his chin resting on the edge of the sink and Arlo draped on top off him.

Arlo's initial shouts of protest had turned from grunts to moans, to whimpers and now, to heavy breathing. Nick pulled himself up by the sink, stood, twisted around and dropped the creep onto the floor, a real load off his back. Arlo thudded down against the dirty linoleum on his backside, between the toilet and the sink. He faced up at the condom machine hanging from the wall. Arlo moaned low. Nick smirked around clenched teeth and cracked wise. "You were right Arlo, 'We won't be needin' any of them things, Baby. That's one of the pluses for guys like us.'" Nick sneered.

He had carried one-hundred pound bags of marble chip and fine building sand on his back all day around the Patio Center, but carrying Arlo in a dead man's lift for just a few seconds had really sapped Nick's strength. He panted as he rested, leaning back against the sink to catch his breath. Then he looked around the room and found just what he was looking for. He stole the top off the toilet tank. Taking the porcelain top by one end in both hands, Nick drove the short edge or the top downward with all his might into the jerk's face. Blood spurt out of his nose as if it were Old Faithful. Nick raised the toilet top twice more and repeatedly bashed the creep in the face. Arlo was quiet now. The ramming end of the toilet top had broken off against the ape's forehead. Nick spied Arlo's exposed manhood beneath him. Unable to resist, Nick let out the savage in him and rammed the jagged, porcelain edge down into Arlo's limp genitals. Once more, blood splattered out over the broken man's stilled body. Still seething, Nick flipped the broken toilet top around. With both hands, he wielded what was left of the makeshift weapon over his head and smashed it down, broad side, flat against the man's face. Arlo was quiet, but he was breathing raggedly at Nick's feet. Nick dropped the weapon onto the creep's genitals, covering them. Panting, he stood back against the wall.

Out in the hall, Alvin clamored for his turn, trying the knob and pounding on the door. Nick assured him he'd be right there. Nick turned on the tap and splashed some cold water on his face and hands, making sure to wipe the a-hole's blood off his forearms. He glanced down with disdain at the pervert sprawled on the floor beneath him. Nick spit on the bastard's face and then stepped over his splayed feet. He unlocked and opened the door and then relocked the door on his way out.

He stepped into the hall and closed the door quickly behind him, screening Alvin's prying eyes from the interior of the bathroom. Nick dried his mouth with the back of his forearm. Alvin said he had heard Nick groaning inside and then it sounded, as if there was "*a whole lotta shakin' goin' on*" in there. He licked his lips, eyed Nick with lust and said he hoped Nick had something left for him. Nick took a deep breath and assured him he did. Alvin tried to open the men's room door, but the door remained locked.

"Give the man a coupla minutes o' privacy. You know, to recover hisself." Nick smiled sweetly at Alvin.

"OK. I get ya. But what about my turn?"

Nick looked across the hall. "Well, is there anyone in this one?" Nick pointed to the Ladies Room across the hall.

Alvin said, "No, it's empty."

"OK, then let's go in there and I'll help you get right, too." Nick grinned and led the way again.

"I 'spect you'll do as much for me as ya did for Arlo."

"Oh, I'll sure do my best, you can believe that." Alvin grinned and Nick matched him.

"Right in here, then."

Inside the Ladies Room, with the door locked behind them, Nick repeated his Men's Room performance for Alvin. He cold-cocked the a-hole, bloodying him and knocking him out, just as he had his brother. With a dress rehearsal behind him, Nick's second performance was quicker and more polished. When he had finished giving Alvin his "turn," Nick washed his face and hands, locked the door, stepped out of the room and shut the door tightly behind him. He slumped back against the door. Drained and gasping, he took a couple seconds to pause and collect himself. He prayed under his breath. "Thank You, Lord, thank You. And please get us out of here without any more problems. Amen." Water dripped from Nick's face but he scarcely noticed. He looked across the hall at the closed men's room door. He didn't know how long he had before these gorillas would come to. Feeling a sense of urgency, Nick pushed off the door and, as before, brushed water drops from his face with his forearm. He strode down the hall and back through the bar.

Truley called out, "Ya OK, kid?"

Now that he was out of immediate danger, Nick found he was shaking like a leaf. He nodded. "No thanks to you, mann. Did ya call the cops at least?"

Truley shrugged. Nick spit on the floor in disgust. He started to leave, when Truley found his voice again.

"Hey, don't forget your order. Here, I put your harmonica in the bag."

"Gee, thanks." Nick stepped over to the bar to pick up the bag of cheeseburgers and peeked inside to find his harmonica. He turned and raised his voice, though it wasn't necessary, because all eyes and ears were on him.

"HEY! Anybody know what those boy's are drivin'?"

One coot raised his head up from a booth next to the front wall and pulled back the blind from the window to look outside.

"Yeah, that old, light blue Ford pickup, out by the street, near the telephone pole."

"Ya sure? Absolutley, positively sure about that?" The customer nodded and someone else at the back of the room said, "Yeah, I saw 'em step out o' the cab earlier. We came in together."

"Thanks." Thanks a lot, you pricks, thought Nick.

He turned to Truley and said between clenched teeth. "You never shoulda asked me in, when you knew them a-holes were here." Truley lowered his eyes. Nick said, "Now you really owe me, Truley, and I won't forget it either." Truley met Nick's gaze but said nothing. The old coot knew Nick was right. "Least you can do is slow them boys down some, when they come bustin' out o' there. They're gonna be madder 'n hornets." Again, Truley looked at Nick but said nothing. Nobody made a sound. A-holes thought Nick. They're all pricks. They won't do a damned thing. He had to hustle.

* * *

Nick hurried out the front door with the burgers. He didn't have much time. He had left the keys with Terri. Nick motioned for her to drive the convertible around towards the blue pickup. He met her at the Buzzbee's pickup truck and handed them the bag of food.

"What took ya so long, Nicky? Patti's starving."

"Later," he said, dismissing her.

Nick hopped over to the front of the truck. He lifted the hood and motioned for the girls to pull the Bonneville up close to the truck, driver's side to driver's side, facing the two vehicles in opposite directions. Nick reached in under the hood and ripped off the truck's distributor cap and the wires attached to it. He slammed the hood down, shuffled around the pickup and tossed the distributor cap and flailing wires into the truck bed.

Terri asked, "Nicky, what on earth are you doing?" But he ignored her. He didn't have time for no pleasantries. Them Buzzbees could come flying out here any minute.

As he walked back to the Pontiac, Nick glanced inside the truck cab and noticed about half a dozen cans of Quaker State motor oil sitting on the seat in a topless corrugated, rectangular box. He had an idea. He had another good idea. He stopped, opened the cab door and reached in for the box. An oil can spout fell out of the box. Even better, thought Nick. He pulled out a can and knocked the rest to the floor. He climbed up into the cab on his hands and knees and crawled across the seat toward the passenger door. He punched three big holes into the top of the oil can with the pointed insert from the metal spout. Then he poured some oil on the passenger door handle. He scooted backwards across the seat, dumping oil all over the vinyl seat cushion as if he was smothering a pancake in maple syrup and he didn't stop until he reached the driver's door. Standing on the truck step, he poured oil over the steering wheel, the inner door handle and the driver's seat.

About thirty yards away, Truley's front door smashed open. Nick jerked his head up to look out the rear cab window. Arlo came stumbling through the door, trying to buckle up his pants and screaming: "Where is that scum suckin' SOB? I'm gonna kill 'im."

Nick placed the can upside-down in the middle of the seat so that it would drain out and shut the door. The truck blocked the a-holes' view of the convertible. He hopped in the back of the Pontiac and told Terri to "Make tracks." She did. With no curb, the gravel and asphalt of the parking lot and Tyson Road melded together. Terri peeled out to the right, spraying the truck and the Buzzbees with gravel. She made a violent U-Turn, stopping at the highway light about forty yards away from the truck.

"Which way, Nick?" Patti said, "South to Woldorn? I think I'll feel safe there."

Nick looked back to the parking lot. By this time, Alvin likewise had fallen out of Truley's. Hanging onto the door knob with one hand and buttoning his pants with the other, he swung the opened door back against the wall and fell down. He was madder than hell but wouldn't let go of the knob, the same way Nick had not let go of his family heirloom. Terri's peel out had caught the apes' attention.

"There he is! Git in the truck! Let's git 'im. Alvin! Pull up your pants boy! Come on. Hurra up! He's gettin' away!"

Nick, who had been seated in the back of the Pontiac, turned around and rose up on his knees to watch the Buzzbees behind him, stumbling across Truley's parking lot, madder 'n hornets, just as he predicted. Patti yelled,

"Come on Terri, let's go."

"I can't! I gotta wait for the light."

"Screw the light! Just peel out, girl!"

"No, no," Nick said quietly but loud enough for them to hear.

"Just sit tight and watch this girls. It oughtta be somethin' to see!"

"But what about the light?"

"Just sit here and watch."

Terri sighed and put the car in Park, while Patti shook her head. Both girls were scared, but they followed Nick's instructions and turned around to watch. Fortunately, there were no other cars in sight.

Nick watched as Arlo reached the pickup's driver's side door ahead of his brother, who was making for the passenger side. Arlo threw the door open and with his right hand cupped hold of the inner door jam and with his left, he grabbed the vent bar separating the open driver's windows. He pushed up off the step and vaulted himself into the truck. Nick watched with glee as the big a-hole slid right across the oil-slicked vinyl seat, reaching the opposite door just as Alvin opened it. Arlo slid right out, falling on top of his brother. They fell, entangled, to the ground, prompting a fistfight between them. Nick laughed so hard he thought he would cry. He had finally stopped shaking. For the first time, Nick felt like he had the situation under control.

Terri cried, “Did you see that? That guy just slid all the way across the seat of that truck.” Patti concurred, “Yeah and that other guy was polite enough to open the door and let him out.” She cracked up.

Nick laughed some more, while the jerks were beating the crap out of each other. When the brothers paused for round two, they remembered Nick and turned towards him. Cursing and shaking their fists at him, they struggled up off the ground and clambered back into their truck as best as they could. “Here it comes,” said Nick. Arlo tried to start the truck, but he couldn’t. Smacking the steering wheel, he cursed a blue steak that must have been heard down in St. Mary’s County. Then he held up his hands to look at the goo all over them. He cried out in anguish. The creep was so frustrated, Nick thought the bastard would cry. The brothers got out to check under the hood. When they found the problem, Arlo, irate as Hell, accidentally slammed the hood down on his brother’s hand. Alvin hollered out in agony.

Nick said to himself, “Well, guess that makes up for open’n’ the door on your older brother.” Nick shook his head. “I couldn’t have planned this any better if I had tried.” Almost as if Arlo could hear him, Arlo turned around to Nick and screamed “I’M GONNA KILL YA, YA SONOVABITCH! YOU HEAR ME? I’M GONNA KILL YA!” Nick said to Terri, “Get ready to fly, Baby, but wait for my signal.” Rising up on his knees in the back seat, Nick bent his left arm across his chest, resting his left wrist in the nook of his right elbow and shoved his right fist skyward, giving the Buzzbees the universal symbol of contempt.

“UP YOURS, YOU SCUM-SUCKIN’ BASTARDS!”

Afoot and steaming now, the Buzzbees tore headlong for him.

“All right Terri, NOW, lets’ fly south, Baby.”

“But the light is red.”

“Anyone coming?”

“No.”

“Screw the light. Punch it.”

“Which way?”

“Woldorn,” said Patti.

“Go ahead, Terr. Hang a left, south,” Nick said, trying to remain calm, as the Buzzbees raced towards them. She punched it, but went nowhere. She still had the car in Park, for cryin’ out loud.

“Dammit Terri. Put it in gear. Now, hurry!”

“I’m sorry. I, I—”

“Just GO!”

Not exactly sprinters, the stumbling, broken Buzzbee boys were only twenty yards away now. Terri found Drive and floored it. As she peeled out through the red light turning left, Nick rose above the top of the convertible boot well once more, and replayed his gesture. He yelled, “SUCK THIS, YOU ASSHOLES!”

The light changed behind them. The Buzzbees stopped in the middle of the road, screaming and shaking their fists, just in time to play chicken with a pickup truck barreling through the green light traveling up Tyson Road behind them. The truck honked its horn and charged through the Buzzbees towards the intersection across the highway. The Buzzbee boys turned just in time to spy the onrushing vehicle. They parted before the honking truck like the Red Sea before Moses, each creep diving to either side of the road. Up in the front seat, the girls were staring over the shoulders in disbelief at the spectacle. In back, Nick scarcely could stop his convulsions long enough to remind Terri to watch the road. They flew south around the curve and under the 301 overpass, past the Pool and Patio Center towards Woldorn. While the Buzzbees rolled in the gutter, Nick rolled with laughter across the back seat of the convertible, until he managed to control himself enough to whisper a final prayer.

“Thank You Lord. Thank You so much. I’ll never forget Your help.”

The Buzzbee Boys
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