

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

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

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

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

Having paid close to thirty dollars for their meal and another fifty as a bribe to the bartender, Dixie asked Moons to give him half the stash she had hidden in her bra. After a bit of a struggle beneath her plunging neckline, which attracted the unwanted attentions of some of the patrons, she complied by extracting a Benjamin from her bulging bosom. However, she pointed out that if he would go back to the hotel with her now, she'd gladly give him the full contents of her overflowing bra. Chortling, Dixie shook his head. Then, following a bus boy, he escorted the happy but unsteady Moons down the long, dark, back hallway, past the kitchen entrance, toward the rear of the establishment. The bus boy ushered them to a back room door.

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

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

the door. A red and white exit sign hung over the portal. Just inside and to the right of the exit door was another captain's chair with its back against the wall and next to it near the corner, a shaded window. A similar arrangement existed with a chair just inside and to the left of the entry door. A door, to what appeared to be to a washroom, lay open across the room, in the opposite corner of the constricted chamber. Dixie could make out what appeared to be a narrow, shaded window in the far wall of that room. In the corner to his immediate left, opposite the washroom, a small mobile bar held a couple bottles of booze and two pyramids of glasses stacked upside-down. A huge ceiling lamp, containing several light bulbs, hung above the round table. Shaded on its top and sides, the hanging lamp was tethered to the ceiling by one of those stretch cords. Dixie watched as one of the men waiting in the room tested the range of the lamp's extension. He retracted the lamp by pushing it up to the ceiling and extended it by pulling it down within a yard of the tabletop. He left it there.

Half a dozen men, aged from their mid-twenties to sixty, mingled about the room. The familiar tone of their conversations indicated they knew each other. When Dixie had entered the room with Moons on his arm, they stopped to ogle the girl and stare at his beaten-up face. But no one spoke. They merely stared as if Moons had two heads, instead of two exquisitely, symmetrically round boobs beneath her plunging, sweetheart neckline. Dixie and Moons stepped inside and to their right to wait against the wall.

A minute later, a pudgy, distinguished looking gentleman with a fat, flattened nose entered. He was impeccably dressed, wearing an expensive, silver-grey suit and shirt and a silver over black-striped tie to match. A pearl stickpin held his suave tie in place. A folded, matching silver over black handkerchief protruded from his breast coat pocket. He carried a full head of slicked back, finely thatched silver-black, almost steel blue, hair. The man wore his hair straight back, like from a generation ago. He also sported two, matching, sparkling, diamond pinky rings on either hand.

He entered the room grandly, moving past Dixie and Moons without surprise. He glanced briefly at Moons before he sat down at the southern most chair of the round table, halfway across the room from either entrance. A smooth looking, olive-skinned, dark-haired teenage youth accompanied him. The boy's hairstyle emulated that of his older companion. Dixie heard the man's oak chair groan, as he sat down. Dressed from semi-casual to more formal coat and tie, the others waited respectfully until the dapper, older gentleman seated himself. Once he was situated comfortably, five other men took their seats around the table. With one exception, they all appeared to be of Italian descent.

Dixie escorted Moons to the right, behind and around the others to the captain's chair leaning against the wall next between the fire escape door and the window. Having gotten a good, long look at Moons, they now directed their

attentions to Dixie's badly beaten and bruised face, but again they said nothing. The youngest of the men whispered into the dapper dresser's ear, as Moons nestled down into the chair beside the fire exit. The dapper man spoke to Dixie.

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

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

"Yes sir, I understand, but she's not playing, she just wants to observe, kind o'."

"Obsoive?"

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

"Yous two don' have some kinda scam goin' on do yas? 'Cause if yous do, I can assuraw yous, da results could be most unpleasant faw da bod o' yas."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sightseein’?”

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

“Awl ride Sal, leaves da liddle goil her poise and cam’ra.”

Then he directed his attention towards Moons. “Bud no pictuaws in heraw, liddle lady, capiche? Or yous cousin will nevaw see dat cam’ra again!” Casually, he blew the cigar smoke towards Moons, who stumbled over herself with gratitude.

“Oh, no sir. I mean, I mean yes sir, I won’t.”

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

Sal handed Moons back her purse and camera. Moons placed the camera inside the handbag.

“And leaf id dere,” The man glared at her and puffed on his cigar. Moons nodded profusely that she would. He motioned for Dixie to take a seat.

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

“So, what’s yous name, kid?”

“Dixie.”

“Dixie what?”

“Strickler.”

“And to what do we owes da pleasuaw of yous comp’ny here dis evenin,’ Mistaw Stricklaw, besides da U.S. Grant yous tipped Jake at da dooaw? Who dold yous about da game?”

“A fella down in Atlantic City.”

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

“Atlantic City? Whoa! See how famous we araw boys? Dey even knows ‘boutdus ovaw in Joisey.”

The others chuckled, too. He directed his attention back to Dixie.

“And what fellow was dat?”

“Umm, Paulie, I think. Yeah, his name was Paulie. That’s it.”

“Paulie? Whad about his las’ name? Lots o’ guys name o’ Paulie. Right, Paulie?” He smiled at the eager teen to his right, who nodded back.

“Uh.” Dixie squinted, trying to recall but he couldn’t remember. He snapped his fingers impatiently, but couldn’t recall the name.

“Uh gee, I dunno, I can’t remember.”

“Where was da game?”

“Place called the Fandango.”

The man smiled. He turned to the kid by the door.

“Paulie, go call yous godfadda in Joisey and check id oud.”

While they waited for Paulie to return, the gentleman offered them all a drink. Dixie declined, but Moons made eye contact with Dixie. She lifted her empty wine glass to him. The dapper gentleman caught their exchange. He instructed Little Tony to bring in a bottle of whatever wine the “liddle lady” was drinking. “Chianti,” offered Moons. She grinned goofily. Little Tony hesitated, but obeyed. He returned shortly, toting a freshly opened, straw-encased bottle of Chianti.

“Wid my compliments, seniorina,” the distinguished gentleman nodded politely to Moons. She smiled sweetly, thanking him, as she accepted the wine poured into her glass by a leering Little Tony. Little Tony set the round bottle of Chianti on the refreshments table when the youthful Paulie returned. He whispered into the distinguished man’s ear.

“Good, good. OK, Paulie, takes yous sead,” The boss man patted Paulie kindly on the shoulder, then waved his arm towards the chair next to the entry door.

The man then introduced Dixie to himself as well as the other players. He was “Big Tony,” while the larger, younger man, who had provided Moons the wine, was known as “Liddle Tony.” The other players were “Dom, Joey, Gus and Oiving.” Around the table, Irving sat immediately to Dixie’s right, next to Dom who sat next to Big Tony. Little Tony sat on Big Tony’s right and Joey sat in between Little Tony and Gus who sat on Dixie’s immediate left. Dixie sat directly opposite the two Tony’s. Big Tony, Gus and Irving appeared to be well over forty. The others were in their late twenties or early thirties. The hairstyles of the respective participants disclosed their respective generations. Those over forty wore their hair shorter and combed straight back. The younger set had longer locks, combed down across their foreheads, except for the teen Paulie, who copied his dapper mentor. The big, silent Sal had to be sixty, at least. His face was rugged, wrinkled and worn. He wore a silver crew cut. He sat behind Big Tony between the bathroom door and the booze cart. Big Tony indicated that neither Sal nor Paulie would be gambling. He grinned at Dixie and said that, like Moons, “they was merely obsoivaws.”

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

“Is dat pawt of youaw table stakes?”

Dixie smiled blandly. “Nope, just part of me.” Moons turned around to smile warmly at him. Meanwhile, next to Dixie, the bespectacled, bald-pated, banker-like, Irving ignored Moons' sexy shenanigans. Rather, he stacked his cash neatly by denomination, as if he were some kid playing Monopoly.

Dixie wondered how a guy named “Irving” came to play in this game of wops. Sal was the bodyguard, sitting behind Big Tony. The kid Paulie was the “go-for.” They played with cash, no chips, seven-card stud primarily, also some five-card draw. He figured Texas Hold ‘Em had not yet caught up to these Neanderthals of the Big Apple, which was to his liking anyway.

The ante/bet was ten and twenty. The limit was table stakes with a three bet limit, jacks or better to open. Dixie had a thousand dollars in his wallet, four hundred in his boots and nearly a hundred stuck in Moons' brassiere, just in case. He could see the others had anywhere between two to four thousand on the table, which meant they could bluff him out of the game very easily. Big Tony had closer to four grand. Dixie asked to use the washroom, back beside Sallie. Big Tony assented. In the washroom, Dixie added two hundred of his boot money to his thousand. He tried to fold the bills so it looked like he had more cash than he did, then wrapped four C-notes around the others. He washed his hands before he returned to the table.

“Everyding awl ride?” asked Big Tony.

“Oh, yes sir, just fine.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“DI-VOISION? Ha! And we're it, hunh?”

“It would appear so, sir.”

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

The others chuckled in homage to the boss man.

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

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

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

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

On the fifth hand, Dixie bet and won the pot. He recouped his losses for the evening. He felt like a batter getting his first hit, in what would prove to be a long, extra-inning ballgame. He was getting comfortable in these surroundings. Finding a comfort zone, whether at the plate, on the mound or at that poker table, was an important ingredient in his ability to win. Here, he picked out different things about his environment that appealed to him. Then focused on them, rather than on the things he did not like.

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

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

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

The play continued as the hours passed. The room swam in cigar smoke. If he had known these cats better, he would have asked to open a door or a window. Dixie felt like he was getting green around the gills from all the second-hand cigar smoke. He considered dropping some money on the floor so he could get down on his knees beneath the smoke to pick it up, taking a few breaths of fresher air. The smoke did not seem to bother the besotted Moons. She would lift her glass and Little Paulie would lick his lips, jumping to hurry around the table to pour the Chianti she craved. When Moons smiled at him by way of thanks, the kid would turn as red as the wine he carried, then retreat sheepishly to his seat. Moons drank, and drank some more. Then, through the heavy smoke and boredom, she leaned back in her captain's chair with her head of dense, raven-hued hair supported against the dingy, grey wall to nod off. Once, she got up quietly to use the restroom, but she returned to her place afterwards without incident. She drank another glass of wine, only to doze off again. Dixie admired her for battling through all of this, true to her promise, without uttering a word of complaint or regret.

As their play progressed, Dix played only a dozen hands out all night. He folded the rest. However, when he chose to bet, he made sure he had some cards. He won every hand he bet but one. He hadn't bluffed, not once. They had played for about three hours. He was nearly nine hundred ahead when he caught a break in a game of seven card stud, with a pair of kings as his hole cards, followed by a seven, a black lady, a ten of diamonds and a king face-up. Little Tony had a pair of Queens showing along with a seven of spades face up. Little Tony had drunk a couple vodka tonics and, money-wise, he was about even. His body language showed he was dying to win a big pot.

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

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

Tony saw and raised Dixie. Dixie answered and re-raised. He was going to repeat his prior raise, when Big Tony reminded him there was a three-raise limit. Funny, he had said nothing a minute ago when Little Tony had raised him far above the maximum bet.

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

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

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

"Le's see."

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

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

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

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

“Is dat so? When you makes an excusation like dat, Tony, you betta be able to back it up.”

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

“I suggest you takes a walk Little Tony. Sid owd da nexd coupla hands.”

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

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

“Oh. Does anyone mind?”

“Yeah,” growled a surly Gus, standing up abruptly on Dixie’s left. “I mind.”

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

“HEY! AUGUSTO! Tenere la bocca chiusa e sedersi! Che diavolo! Cos’hai combinato?”

“But Big Tony—”

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

Gus sat down abruptly to stew in his anger, as he scowled at the table. Though he did not know Italian, Dixie knew enough Spanish to get the gist of Big Tony’s surly reprimand of Gus. Then Big Tony turned a suddenly, honey-sweet disposition towards Moons and, by extension, to Dixie.

“Scusa, mi scusi. My apologies liddle lady. Of course, yous may have da boddle, wid my compliments, mia bellissima signorina.” He smiled serenely,

nodding to Moons, who returned a pleasant grin. Then she half fell, half plopped down into her seat and burped loudly.

"I beg your pardon," Moons demurred.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yous can always leaf anydime yous wants Joey, if yous can't take da heat," replied Big Tony in a saccharine tone.

Frowning, Joey shook his head but he stayed. Big Tony lowered his chin and arched his brows. "Allride den. Led us proceed with da proceedin's."

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

"Yous look and folds quite a bid, kid. Maybe toos much, hunh?" Dixie smiled pleasantly.

"Well, it seems to work out OK."

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

“Suppose we raised de ante/bet to twenty and fifty? Any problems wid dat?” Everyone shook their heads. Nobody dared go against Big Tony. Joey did murmur something, but buried his mouth in his hand, rendering his remarks unintelligible.

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

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

“Dat’s good Joey. Yous knows why?”

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

“No, dem ain’t da reasons, Joey. It’s on account o’ I likes to take yous money.” Big Tony snickered.

Except for Irving and Sal, the others laughed at Joey’s expense.

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

The next hand, Dixie received junk, face down and a pair of jacks, face up, but nothing else. Big Tony showed a pair of seven’s, Irving a possible king-high straight. Dixie bet his jacks. The three of them went at each other slowly, cautiously, like three sharks circling one another, each looking for an edge, while the other players hung in with the game, swelling the pot. Little Tony re-entered the room from the alley door, noticeably calmer. However, he didn’t sit down right away, opting for a glass of water from the refreshment cart instead. He let Paulie perch in his chair, while he waited for the hand to play out. Irving was the first of the big three to fold. He folded when Dixie, without batting an eye, raised him three times in a row. Probably, Irving didn’t have the straight. He must have figured he couldn’t bluff the other two out. But his play had succeeded in raising the pot over twelve hundred dollars.

Big Tony hung with Dixie, seeing and raising Dixie’s every bet. Dixie wondered if he was doing the right thing by bluffing Big Tony for such a large pot. If Dixie lost the pot, he’d be in the hole and have to bow out of the game with his tail between his legs. On the other hand, if he won, he could lose everything including Moons’ safety. That is, if Big Tony proved not to be the “spawtin’ gent” he pretended to be. With so many good omens, Dixie felt compelled to gamble along with the dapper boss man.

Again, jacks bet, so Dixie raised the bet. Tony saw him and raised him back. Dixie never flinched, never changed expression. He confidently saw Big Tony and re-raised him again. Suckering Little Tony was one thing, but suckering his namesake in front of all his boys was quite something else. However, Dixie was too deep into this pot to fold. He played on. He played it straight, calm and cool, as he had all night.

Big Tony surveyed the table. Dixie had the pair of jacks showing. Dixie didn’t have to stuff them up the guy’s nose. Dixie figured that Big Tony knew

the kid hadn't bluffed all night. That was Dixie's advantage in being the stranger to the group. They didn't know his play. The pot was something approaching fifteen hundred. Calmly, Dixie watched Big Tony mentally convincing himself that Dixie had a third jack, just as he had held the third king earlier. Besides, there was no other jack showing on the table. The jacks would top Big Tony's trio of seven's. Dixie was gambling Tony did not hold a full house or a pair of jacks himself in the hole. As with Tony's nephew earlier, Dixie had the fourth seven face down. Tony puffed hard on his cigar. He studied Dixie, searching for a hint that would tell him what to do. Big Tony had contributed about thirty percent or more of the pot. Dixie smiled pleasantly, abruptly.

Little Tony had been watching the proceedings from behind his uncle. Now he roused Paulie, who had been sitting at the table in his chair, sitting down in his seat next to Big Tony.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gee Big Tony, that's a little steep for me."

"Yous can blows whenever yous wants, Joey."

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

"Okay, tanks Big Tony."

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

Big Tony called after the young man as he exited. "Tell yous lovely Mama I said 'hello,' hunh Joey?"

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

"Joey always was a pussy!"

The others chuckled, while to Dixie's right, overcome by Chianti, Moons dozed oblivious to Joey's hasty departure.

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

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

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

Before the seventh card had been dealt, Dix had been assured of two pair, aces high. In the hole, Dixie held an eight of spades, and a jack of hearts. Dixie

never picked up his river card, when it was dealt. He didn't have to. He saw it plainly, when it was dealt to him. Before the card had flattened out on the table, it had hung lengthwise on its back edge for a split second at about a forty-five degree angle, freezing its image into Dixie's brain. The others, certainly Gus to Dix's left or Irving to his right, must have glimpsed the face of the card as well. Dixie glanced furtively at each of his neighbors.

Gus folded, cursing his bad luck. Irving was eagerly spying his last hole card. From the faint trace of a smug expression on Irving's face, Dixie knew the flush had come to the man who played coldly like an accountant. Maybe they hadn't seen his seventh card? It was worth a gamble. Opposite him, however, Big Tony was eyeballing Dixie like a hawk. Dixie hoped he had not told his hand. Big Tony sat back, puffing on his cigar, observing the play. Beside him, Little Tony's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. Dixie refrained from licking his lips.

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

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

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

Rather, he leaned back in his chair, resting his chin in his right hand as his elbow supported him by resting on the broad arm of his captain's chair. His

thumb hugged the underside of his chin, while his fore and middle fingers supported the right side of his face, hooking over the bridge of his recently broken nose. He surveyed the cash and card-cluttered table before him, contemplating the hard faces of the two Tony's across the table.

Little Tony panted expectantly. He was eager to clean Dixie's clock. Big Tony was relaxed but sober, cunning. He breathed evenly, puffing calmly on his stogie. Yet, underneath their superficial expressions, Dixie knew they were both mad as hell. Pretending to be bored, Dixie met their silent glares. He exhaled slowly, as though he were forced by the pain of boredom to do so. They all knew a loss would drive Dixie out of the game.

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

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

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

"I know. I watched him, too, Big Tony," swore Dom. "He nevaw touched it. I swearaw!" Gus concurred, which notified Dixie that Gus hadn't seen Dixie's last card, after all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dixie sat back, deliberately pulling out a Lucky Strike. He fired it up, then dragged deeply. His opponents simmered as he stalled.

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

Little Tony seethed. He lurched over the table towards, Dixie but, from behind Big Tony, Sal reached forward to pull Little Tony back.

Little Tony cried. “Yous cheatin’ scum. Just show youaw cawd. Yous been cawllid.”

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

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

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

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

Dixie never flinched as he watched their faces fall. The pot held over twelve large, including Dixie’s thirty-eight hundred. With the two hundred stashed in reserve in his boot and another c-note stashed between Molly’s gorgeous,

round, two moons, he had nearly thirteen grand. Now the trick was to figure how he and Molly Two Moons could get out of there in one piece, with even half of it, because these cats were seething hot.

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

“Well kid, you araw one helluva a cawd playaw, yes yous araw. I oughtta know, cuz I’m one helluva cawd playaw.”

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

“Suppose we all dakes a ten minute break to refresh ouawselves? Emotions seem ta be geddin’ da beddaw o’ some peoples,” offered Big Tony, as he sneered at the alley door exited by his namesake. “Den we’ll play some *real pokaw*, hunh, kid?” He smirked at Dixie.

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

“What’s going on, Baby? They seem to be a little upset with you.”

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

Dixie whispered into her ear, “Yeah, well that’s what happens when you take their money. Look Sweetie, we’re in a bind. I’ve done too good, see? So I’m gonna try and lose back some of this loot, so we can get outta here in one piece. OK?”

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

“Yeah, whatever you say Dix—what are you doing there?”

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

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

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

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

“Well, that’s no lie.”

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

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

“No, no don’t even think that, Dix.”

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

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

“Yeah, I hears yous,” he kidded, impersonating Big Tony, in a sorry attempt to alleviate her anxiety. “Dell yous what Baby, yous pray we gid oudda here OK, OK?” His whispered imitation of Big Tony provoked a weak smile from her.

Moons mumbled, “But, you know Dix, I don’t believe in prayin.”

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

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

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

"Let's get back to pokaw, hey kid? You can poke heraw ... lataw." The gambler laughed at his own joke with the others joining him. Then he added ominously, "Maybe ... if yous up to id, dat is."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What happened to youraw fingaws dere kid? Gid 'em cawd in youraw goil's pussy?"

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

"And how'd yous get dat face, kid? Looks like someones woiked yous over priddy good. Or 'd ya get youraw face cawd up in heraw, too?" There was another round of chuckles.

Gus added, "She must be really somedin' else, hey kid?"

These guys should be stand-up comics.

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

“Umpf. Gee, dat’s tough. New Yawk’s a rough town, kid. Hope it don’t happens to yous again—tonight.”

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

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

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

“Sallie, check her poise again.”

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

“Nothin’ here, Boss ‘cept da cam’ra.”

“OK, take a seat Sal.” He did.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When she went to sit down, Moons caught Dixie’s eye and she winked. In acknowledgement, Dixie raised his chin at her. It was enough. She smiled. She loved him. Dixie knew she did and he didn’t know what he should do about it. Moons had trusted him and what had he gotten her into? Big Tony must have caught their exchange, because, he rudely interrupted Dixie’s “loveboid” thoughts.

“Sallie, check da wash room.”

“What for, Boss?”

“Aneydin’ s’ spicious. Look in de derled dop, everywheraw.”

“All right, Boss.”

Sal moved searched the bathroom. When he exited, he turned off the light. He proclaimed loudly, “It’s clean, Boss, clean as usuoil. The dame didn’t mess it up none.”

Little Tony returned from the alley.

Big Tony balked. “Frisk her again, Sal and check her poise again.”

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

“No. I said ‘Sal.’ Sid down, Tony.” Big Tony chomped angrily on his perpetually lit cigar.

“OK, OK. I jis’ dawd—I, I’m ride here is all.”

“Yeah, I knows where yous araw Tony and I knows what yous jis’ dawd and dinkin’ ain’ ‘xackly yous strong suit Tony, so ‘sid down,’ I said.”

Little Tony slid across the room behind his uncle and sat down. “Gee Tony, I jis’ dawd—”

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

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

“She’s clean boss,” remarked Sal drily.

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

“OK Sal, sit down.” Sal resumed his seat behind Big Tony.

The men played a couple hands with Dixie folding one and betting one and losing. Then Dixie promptly lost another pot. He was down nearly sixteen hundred since the break. Big Tony was the winner each time. Dom’s stack was almost gone. Tony had increased his stack to about five grand by now. He was ahead about fifteen hundred for the night. Plus he had Little Tony’s marker for one and a half large. Relatively speaking, Big Tony had had a good night. Would he be satisfied? Dixie doubted it, not after Dixie had embarrassed him and his buddies. While Dixie only had about twenty-five hundred on the table, he carried nearly four grand elsewhere on his person. Moons had the rest. He wondered where she had hidden it that they couldn’t find it.

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

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

“Well, yous besd pud id on da table, ‘cause yous gonna be needin’ id. Looks like yous luck has changed—HOD SHOD.”

“Yeah, looks like.”

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

“Hey Paulie!”

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

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

A light went on in the kid’s eyes, as a smile crept over his face.

“Suraw Big Tony, I knows the ones.”

Paulie lit out of the room to return in a New York minute with the “fresh deck” of cards.

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

“Hey kid, I been doin’ priddy good da last few hands, maybe too good, yous dink? So we’ll led Liddle Tony sid in here ta deal, if dat’s OK wichu.”

“Why do you wanna do that? I’ve got no problems with your deal, Big Tony.”

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

“I played it once or twice.”

Hold ‘em or Texas Hold ‘em prevented what Dixie had been doing all night, which was, look and fold, look and fold. It forced the action by making the dealer and the player to the dealer’s left pay the blind to see their hole cards. Dom and Gus dropped out, leaving a two-man game between Big Tony and Dixie. Big Tony set the blind at two bucks and the half blind at one. Dixie did not like the game much, because he thought it involved too much luck with too many cards being left in the deck; especially, when two players went head to head like this. Each player received two cards face down while they shared a “community” of five face-up cards. Those five cards were dealt in a “flop” of three, which were bet as one, while the last two cards, the turn and the river, were dealt but bet one at a time, as in a game of stud.

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

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

“Sure, why not?” replied Dixie.

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

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

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

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

“It’s all I got, honest.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, you’re not strippin’ her.”

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

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

“Why not me, Uncle Tony?”

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

“Bud—“

“I said, sid down, TONY. SID DOWN! Sidere.”

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

“G’ahed, Sallie.”

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

“All of it?”

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

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

“What’s so funny, Dom,” asked Gus.

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

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

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

Dixie’s jaw clenched. His fingers quivered with anticipation.

Sal said, “Boss?”

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

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

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

“OK, Boss.”

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

“She’s clean, Boss.”

“What about her poise?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What is it, Molly?” Dixie asked.

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

“What, what is it? Spit it out.”

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

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

“You what?” Dixie cried with alarm.

“Well, I’m afraid, I ...”

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

“I, I flushed it down the toilet.” Moons hung her head in shame. Silence invaded the room.

“You what?” Dixie was incredulous.

“I’m so sorry, Baby. I just, I just couldn’t pull it out of the pee water. It was—ooh Yuk! I had peed a long one. Thought I’d never stop. Too much wine, I guess.” She made an ugly face. Then Dixie started to laugh. He laughed so hard he doubled over, wincing from the pain of his beat-up face. But the Italian boys weren’t so happy.

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

“You’re not mad, Baby?” Moons cried.

“No, No. It’s OK.”

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

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

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

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

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

“But—”

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

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

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

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

“And da clothes Uncle Tony?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dixie asked to cut the deck. Both Tony’s ignored him. But Little Tony made a show of burning the top card, something no one had done all night. Big Tony

threw in his hundred-dollar blind. The game was between just the two of them. "Let's play pokaw, kid." He grinned from behind his smoking stogie. Reluctantly, Dixie followed with his. This game was rigged. He felt certain of that.

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

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

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

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

"Whadsa madda kid? Got no balls?"

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

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

The others cried, "Bawk, bawk, bawk!"

Little Tony was the loudest chicken impersonator. The others laughed. Dixie glanced up, taking notice of the overhead lamp. An idea came to him. It was a good idea. It was the only idea. Big Tony swiped the ruined cigar aside, onto the floor. Flashing his bookend, diamond, pinky rings, he casually fired up a fresh stogie. He was in no hurry. He was enjoying, watching Dixie twist slowly in the wind. Dixie figured Big Tony had a pair of aces in the hole. Everyone waited on Big Tony's play. After he drew deeply on the cigar, he was ready. Before Little Tony dealt the turn—

"OK kid, no moaw foolin' around." Big Tony added, "I'm all in."

Big Tony pushed his stack of cash into the center of the table. "Dat's forty-four C-notes to yous kid. Now whaddayous say ta dat?"

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

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

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

“Well, now . . . then . . . there.”

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

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

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

Dropping his lecherous grim, Little Tony slammed his hands atop the table, glaring at Dixie with pure hatred.

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

“Shaad up, Tony!”

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

If Dixie hadn’t known what to do before that outburst, he did now. Their specious attempt at fair play had fallen flat in the face of Little Tony’s impatience. That sucker had tipped his hand again. Little Tony and the rest, less Big Tony probably, were going to clobber Dixie and take his dough no matter what. And when Moons would rush to his rescue, as he knew she would, they’d smack her around, too, if not rape her. The way their minds worked, they probably figured gang-raping Moons would serve as some kind of partial compensation for Moons’ claim of losing their cash down the toilet. So Dixie could play along, lose his money on this rigged hand and maybe another one just like it, and then get clobbered anyway. Or, he could fold, make his move and take his chances. He didn’t dare so much as glance to his right towards the door and Moons. Yet, that fire exit to the alley, which Little Tony had used twice already and Irving once, was in working order right next to

Moons' chair. And that door was scarcely ten feet from him. The door was their ticket out of here. Only Dom sat between him and Moons and the door.

Dixie grinned widely for the first time all night.

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

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

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

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

Big Tony sat back in his chair, clasping his hands together over his belly.

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

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

Dixie suckered the mobsters to him, just as he had suckered them all night into losing. Surprisingly, Dixie felt as calm and peaceful, as he had when he had stood on the penthouse balcony, looking out over the ocean into the black night, with Moons behind me, slumbering inside, in bed.

When Sal reached Big Tony, Dixie, who was still standing over the table, quickly reached up toward the overhanging lamp. He tugged violently with his left hand on the lamp's extendable cord, ripping the cord right out of the ceiling. He crashed the lamp down onto the oak table, smashing it to bits just to the left of the pot containing Big Tony's five grand. Bits of broken glass and electric sparks splattered everywhere. The crash extinguished all light, pitching the room into total darkness. Dixie dropped to his knees. He reached out over the table with both hands, raking in the camera and all the cash that he could muster. Falling to the floor, he pulled the loot down over the table's edge to his bosom. Dixie spun halfway around, scooting backwards on his butt underneath the card table, cradling the camera and the cash in his lap. With both hands, he greedily stuffed Big Tony's cash into his coat pockets.

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

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

Dixie reached his left boot forward and kicked sideways to his right into somebody’s shin. He heard Gus curse. Then Gus, Little Tony and Dom converged upon Dixie’s empty chair in the dark. Dixie failed to impede the frenzied trio. Instead, he scooted back further under the table, drawing his knees up to his chest, careful to cradle the camera in his lap. Blind in the dark, the three men tore viciously into one another, each mistakenly thinking they were clobbering him.

Dixie shoved the remaining loose cash into his pockets. Then he reached up and forward to seize the round edge of the oak table. With both hands, using all his strength, he shoved the table backwards over his head, ramming Big Tony hard in the chest with the edge of the table. Big Tony cried out in pain, but Dixie strained, pulling and shoving the table backwards until Big Tony lost his balance and tumbled over backwards to the floor, still in his chair. Sal and Paulie rushed to his rescue.

Now was their chance!

Big Tony cried, “Gid anoddaw lighd Paulie, anoddaw lighd.”

“Are yous OK, Boss? Are yous OK?” cried Sal. The others cursed, fighting each other, while Paulie scurried off in search of another light.

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

Crouched over at the waist and with bent knees, Dixie led her two short steps to the exit door. He placed his free hand over the iron bar that crossed the door. While Big Tony yelled for somebody to turn on a light, Dom, Gus and Little Tony cursed and scuffled, beating the crap out of one another. Meanwhile, with his keen night vision, Dixie glanced over his shoulder to observe Sal falling over himself to help right Big Tony, still stuck in his chair on the floor. Big Tony reminded Dixie of a sprayed, dying cockroach from a Raid commercial, squirming on its back.

An odor of burnt cloth penetrated Dixie’s senses. Big Tony had dropped his lit cigar, which had rolled down his shirtfront into his lap, singeing his silk suit and burning his thigh. The embers reflecting off his diamond pinky ring, stood out like a hot, red tail lights over a rural road at midnight. Vainly, he tried to wipe them away. Dixie chuckled silently to himself. Big Tony cursed the burning stogie. The accident distracted his thought process for a few seconds, just long enough. It was all Dixie could do to keep from cracking up.

Dix silently pushed open the door, just a crack, shoving the slim Moons past him. She slipped neatly by him, out the fire exit door and into the black, hot, muggy alley behind Jake's saloon. Dixie slipped out noiselessly right behind her, letting the door close gently behind him.

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

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

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

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

"Faw-ged me, Sal. Faw-ged me. GED DA GOIL, SAL, DA GOIL!"

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

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

Dixie looked upon Moons with admiration.

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

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

"What do you mean *fat*?"

"P-H, Molly Two Moons, P-H—phat!"

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

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

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

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