

Chapter 2

The pain I felt when Malmud was there asking me questions and telling me all the 'facts' of my condition gradually seemed to lesson as morning turned to afternoon. But as the anesthesia pain went away, so did the anesthesia. Ugh. Why I thought I would feel better ... well, I was very wrong. I felt much, much worse. Now, instead of just sore muscles, I could feel the place along my left side where they had opened me up to fix my pancreas. Now, I *really* didn't want to move. I couldn't turn over or it hurt massively; I couldn't sit up; I couldn't even *touch* my abdomen anywhere near the area. It was just too painful. It was awful.

And it didn't take long, either, that morning, before I had to pee. At first I wondered what I was supposed to do about it since there was no way I could get out of the bed. No fucking way! And I was just about to call the nurse's station when I discovered that they had put some kind of catheter in me. Oh. So, I guess I wouldn't have to get out of bed to pee. But the damn thing, one of many, still bothered me. The sooner I could get rid of it and everything else, the better.

Once the anesthesia wore off fully I became very sick to my stomach. That coupled with the very severe abdominal pain I was also feeling, it was all I could do to keep from throwing up. I knew if I barfed the muscle spasms would have torn me in two.

I called the nurse's station using the button clipped to my bedrail. Sometime later someone came in. I told them how sick I was, and in a little while they came back and injected something into the little rubber nipple attached to my IV line. Well, that did the trick because the nausea went away and I soon felt better enough to get some sleep. I didn't wake until

late the next morning, and then only very slowly. I felt very groggy and disoriented.

This was Monday, day two in the hospital. Malmud (I called him simply 'Malmud') made his rounds right after (everyone else had) breakfast, and made a rather thorough and quite uncomfortable check of his surgical handiwork. This 'check' required that my hospital 'gown' (I can't really call it a gown and be serious, since it's not much more than a knee-high smock with armholes) be pulled up around my armpits to inspect my sutures. Malmud was quite professional, though. I never got the impression he thought anything of me other than the side of beef I was. Why anything sexual would even occur to me as I lay there exposed to the good doctor, I don't know, but it doesn't matter. Malmud made his inspection, causing only a smattering of sharp pains as he probed, returned my gown and covers to their prior arrangements, and pronounced that I was, in his neat, Indian accent, 'in adequately good shape,' and left. Of course, I didn't feel like I was in a shape anywhere near 'adequate.' I was glad when he had gone.

Nurse Brenda (I call her that) came in some time after Malmud left. She dropped a metal clipboard on the end of my bed, briefly checked the state of my IV and oxygen, then extended the curtain around to give us some privacy.

"Good morning, kiddo," she said, smiling. She retrieved the clipboard and flipped through a couple of pages before continuing. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Tired," I said. The voice was not much more than yesterday's whisper, but it seemed one or two of my vocal chords were working again. Barely. "I hurt all over."

"All over?" she asked. I nodded. "Where does it hurt the worst?"

That was easy. "My stomach."

She nodded. "OK." She leaned forward and carefully pulled the blanket away from my chest. "Now, this might hurt, a little, but I want you to tell me if any of the places I touch feel particularly tender."

I wanted to ask: Do we have to? Didn't Malmud just do this? But instead I just laid there quietly while she gently pressed a spot on my abdomen. Yep. That hurt like fuck. "Ouch!" I said. Then another spot. "Oof!" I reported. Then a third spot. I had involuntarily sucked in breath in preparation for the pain, but that spot didn't hurt, too much. "That

one's OK," I told her.

Apparently Nurse Brenda was satisfied, and stopped poking and prodding me. "OK, then," she said, and gingerly restored my blanket to its original position. I was able to relax again. "We need to collect a little medical history on you. You feel like talking, this morning?"

The truth came out before I could stop it, "Not really." I suppressed a cough, which would have nearly ripped me in two. Actually, holding the cough back may have been almost as bad as coughing.

"Hmmm," she mused casually, not seeing my agonized grimace. "We were supposed to get this information from you, yesterday, but you were pretty ... out of it ..." she smiled, "and we were a bit short-staffed." Her smile broadened. "I promise this will be as short and as painless as I can make it. OK?"

"OK," and I added under my breath, "I guess."

"Good." Nurse Brenda then sat in the chair.

She asked several questions about me: my age; my birthday; my address, etc. I informed her that my name was no longer Kerry Lynn, but that I preferred to go by Kerrilyn, which she thought was a really neat way to put my names together. She said, "My real name is Brenda Sue, but I dropped the 'Sue' part once I got out of high school," she grinned, "a long, long time ago." I just looked at her without saying anything. She went on, "Anyway, *Kerrilyn*, I need to ask you some health-related questions."

"Like what?"

"Let's see ..." she perused the chart on the clipboard, "Dr. Malmud made some notes here for us to ask about your alcohol use." She paused, and looked rather sideways at me. "Are you gonna be OK if we talk about that?"

"What about it?" I was too tired to argue.

"Kerrilyn," she seemed concerned, "Dr. Malmud thinks you may be an alcoholic." But I got no hint of judgment in her voice.

"So?" It was all I could think to say.

"Acute pancreatitis and a bleeding ulcer in your esophagus. One of the major causes of pancreatitis, especially the acute variety, is excessive consumption of alcohol. The bleeding in your esophagus was probably brought on by excess stomach acid, which could also have been

aggravated by excess drinking." She just looked at me a moment. "If you haven't been drinking, then we need to know so we can begin looking for other causes. Though," she flipped a page, "you were intoxicated when we brought you in. Point two-three percent—"

"—I know!" I just wanted her to stop. "All right, I was drinking."

"How much? A bottle a day?"

"No!" I wished she would shut up.

But, she didn't. "How much, then?"

"*I don't know!*" I was irritated by her persistence, but I didn't have enough energy to keep fighting. "Maybe a bottle a day, maybe more. I don't know how much I was drinking." I looked up at her face where I expected to see judgment, or maybe critical appraisal, but she only looked after me, concerned. Regardless, it was difficult to say anything. "I don't fucking remember, OK?" I finished.

I thought I saw an eyebrow twitch, but she asked, "A bottle—or so—per day. For how long?"

"Two weeks."

"Two weeks?" She didn't seem to believe me. "Are you sure?"

"I'm not an alcoholic." I was certain.

Well, she decided not to keep pressing me about the booze, after that. She cleared her throat, flipped through some more pages in the chart. "It says here you're pregnant." She looked to see my expression. I didn't flinch, of course. Well, I tried not to. "Did you know you were pregnant?"

Were? Past tense? My voice seemed to crack, "Y-yes." I couldn't look at her, just then. I just knew she was going to tell some very bad news.

She seemed to get how I was feeling, flipped another page. Smiled. "Good news, though. It says here in the doctor's notes that the fetus is still intact." She waited for me to look at her, which I did. "We had to be careful with the anesthetics and the drugs we've given you so we won't hurt your baby. But Kerrilyn, if you've been drinking a lot, you really need to quit. Alcohol can be very, very harmful to your baby."

Later, I was dozing fitfully when Sheree called just before (everyone else had) lunch to report she had all my stuff *and* my car up at their house, and to ask if I needed anything. I almost didn't answer the phone, but

there's something about a ringing telephone ...

"Hello?" Well, my voice wasn't good, but after talking with Nurse Brenda, earlier, it seemed to have graduated from a painful whisper to a soft, hoarse croak.

"Kerrilyn?" she asked, as if it could be anyone else. "You don't sound very good."

"No shit," I said. I was almost too tired to hold the phone.

"Well," she said, "I called to let you know that I have your car, and your stuff. Everything is up here, safe and sound."

"That's good. Thanks."

"How are you feeling?"

I sighed, "About the same as yesterday. Worse, maybe." It *was* worse.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "Is there anything you need? I was going to come down, later. See how you're doing."

"Don't come all the way down here, just for me."

"Why? Don't you want me to visit?" She paused. "It's no problem."

Then I thought, it's Monday. Shouldn't she be at work? "Don't you have to work?" That was a pretty good reason for not coming to the hospital.

"No, I took the day off." She explained, "I needed to get your stuff, and I didn't know how long it would take, so I took today as a personal day. I'd like to come see you, later, if that's OK."

My voice, hardly functioning, grated in my ears, "Sheree," it was getting stronger with use, but it still hurt to speak, "I don't feel very good. I wouldn't be very much fun."

"That's OK, Kerrilyn. I know you're sick." She sniffed. Tears? "I just thought maybe you could use a little company, for a while."

Well, I didn't particularly feel like being around anyone, but of all the people I knew Sheree was probably at the top of my list. At the top of the list of those who *would* come to visit me, at least. So I said, "OK. Maybe later."

"Good. Is there anything I can get for you?"

"I really don't need anything. I mean, I can't move, or even get out of the damn bed."

“Can I get you a book, or something, to read?”

A book was the last thing on my mind. But I said, “They got books here, I think. I got my glasses.” I closed my eyes, wishing it was over. “I’ll be fine.” I just wanted to go back to sleep, and sleep forever.

But, she went on, “Can I bring you a nightgown and your robe?”

That might be nice. More privacy—stay warm. But ... “You don’t have to,” I said. Exhaustion was overtaking me, and I hadn’t even done anything.

But Sheree didn’t know how badly I was feeling. “*I know,*” she sounded exasperated, “but I want to.”

I had to rest a moment before replying. Then, “I appreciate all your help. Really, I do.” But, she said nothing in return. The silence on the line became deafening. I sensed something wrong, but at the same time I hurt so badly I just could not face dealing with her bullshit. Anyone’s bullshit. “OK, Sheree, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” was all she said. It seemed to me anything but nothing.

“Look, Sheree—”

“—If you don’t want to see me,” she snapped, pouting, “I guess I can understand it.”

Jesus! What *was* this shit? Didn’t I feel badly enough already? “Look.” Then I waited, making sure I had the floor, “You can come visit me, if you want. But I really feel like shit, and the *last* thing I need is you or anyone else laying some fucking huge guilt-trip on me. Come on down here, if that’s what you want, but don’t give me all this ‘*you don’t want to see me*’ bullshit. To tell you the truth, Sher’, I don’t really fucking want to see *anyone* right now.” I stopped talking.

At that point there was a long, long pause. A longer pause. Pretty much what I expected. Then I heard Sheree let out a long, deep, ragged breath. “I *will* come down.” But, I couldn’t tell whether she was angry, or not.

“OK. Can we stop fighting, now?”

“I’m not fighting with you, Vix.” She didn’t sound angry. “It’s just been a very difficult and frustrating couple of days. That’s all.”

“Sheree,” I had to catch my breath before continuing, “you can’t imagine how bad I hurt, right now. I feel *terrible*.” I had to stop, again. All

this effort was exhausting. "I do want to see you," previous comments notwithstanding, "I think this would be lots harder if I didn't have you here to help me."

She sounded very sincere, and very worried, too. "Oh, Vix, I'm sorry! You know I'll always be there to help you. It's just been ... very hard. You know?"

"I know, Sheree. I'm sorry." I paused, resting, then changed the subject. "I was wondering. Have you talked to—"

Slam! "—Marc?" She was sure quick to cut me off. "He won't come, Kerrilyn. He won't even talk to me." She started to go on, but hesitated. "I tried calling him twice this morning, at his work, but it just rolled over into voice mail. I left messages both times, but so far he hasn't called me back."

"OK, Sher', but I was *gonna* ask if you'd talked to anyone else in the band. I really let them down the other night."

"Oh." A *long* silence. Then, "Well ..." she cleared her throat "... things are not ... too good with the band, right now."

"Are they ready to kick me out?" I almost didn't care, at that moment. I hurt too badly to care about anything else. "I guess I wouldn't blame them if they did."

"I don't know." But I think she was lying.

"What does Tom say?"

"Let's not talk about it, right now, OK?" Something was going on, for sure.

"OK." I really didn't want to hear what she had to say.

"They aren't going to do *anything* until you get out of the hospital. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried." But then *I* was lying. I *knew* they were going to kick me out after what I'd done. And the logic was simple: Troy Dancer held no love for me, despite what he'd told me about respecting my talent. Tom, I thought, probably had a lot of reasons for wanting to see me gone. Marc, apparently, wouldn't talk to *anyone*. Was even Mel Howe on my side? I think not. Ergo, Kerrilyn is out of a job.

"Kerrilyn," Sheree interrupted my troubled train of thought, "you need to rest, relax, and get better. Everything will be all right, I promise."

"They're not gonna go and put the whole world on hold for me, you know."

"They're gonna put the *band* on hold, though."

I didn't believe it, but, "I hope you're right."

"Well," she said finally, "I gotta go. I'll come by later. OK?"

"OK. Bye."

Nurse Brenda came in the room around three o'clock. I was awake, but just barely. "I'm getting ready to go off shift," she said. "I remember you asked me about books, earlier. If you feel like reading, I can get you a book or two."

But I didn't feel like doing anything. "No, that's OK," I said. "My friend Sheree is coming down, later. She'll probably bring me something."

"You sure? Because I can get you a book now, before they close the patient library."

"They got a patient library?"

"Of course." She came around to check my IV, oxygen, and fill the water bottle. "We don't have *that* many books, but we do have a few good ones. Did you want something to read?"

"OK, maybe."

She smiled, "You want me to turn the TV on?"

"No, there's nothing much I want to see, right now." I fumbled for the remote control. "Besides, I got the remote right here."

"Fine." She straightened my covers, the chair, the curtain around the bed (which had been partly extended) retrieved the blood pressure machine (it's called a sphygmomanometer) and her stethoscope, and poked one of those electronic thermometers in my mouth. Very efficient. "Just relax, Kerrilyn," she admonished when she felt my arm tense. Nurse Brenda seemed to like me. But then, she barely knew me. Give her time.

The conversation lulled while she concentrated on measuring my vital signs, but the whole event was over in less than a minute. Only the thermometer took longer. Brenda scribbled my BP and pulse in the chart, and by the time she was done, so was the thermometer—it beeped. It was removed, read, and the result dutifully recorded.

“OK,” she chimed, seeming satisfied.

“So, I’m in the green?”

Her brow furrowed briefly, but apparently she felt comfortable enough giving me the word. “Your temp is up, slightly, but that’s expected.” She leaned against my bedside table and folded her arms. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Better than what?”

“OK ... Better than this morning?”

“A little. I still hurt like hell all over, though.”

She seemed to accept that. “Any chills, new or unusual abdominal pain, things like that?”

Her question seemed ludicrous—I had lots and lots of abdominal pain. Tons of it. I frowned, “How would I know if I had any *unusual* abdominal pain?”

She ignored my smartass remark. “Have you felt hungry, at all?”

The thought of food almost made me want to puke. “No.” *Ulp!* “Not at all.”

“Nausea?”

I gulped. “Yeah, plenty of that.”

“OK, we can give you something to help with that,” she said. She wrinkled her brow. It seemed characteristic of her. “But you haven’t been having any bad headaches, restlessness, anxiety, sweating, or chills?” She ticked the list off with her fingers.

“Should I be having chills?”

“Well, you’ve been pretty quiet, today,” she began. “Maybe you’ll be lucky, and not have any severe withdrawal symptoms.”

“Lucky?” I didn’t *feel* lucky, at all. “What kind of severe symptoms could I have?”

“Like I said: chills. Severe stomach pains. Disorientation—hallucinations.” She raised an eyebrow. “Sweating, insomnia, rapid heart rate, tremors—the DTs—even convulsions.”

“Convulsions? That sounds pretty serious.”

“They are. Withdrawal from alcohol can be *very* serious.”

But I wondered, “If I had any of those symptoms, like you said, would that make me an alcoholic?”

Hmm, well, Nurse Brenda had to think pretty hard for that one. I hadn’t really intended it as a leading question, but her depth of thought over the answer told me it was anything but a simple question. Her arms, which she had temporarily unfolded to put something in her uniform pocket, she folded again. “I don’t know, Kerrilyn. You’ve had a health problem that could have been life-threatening, had it not been caught in time.”

I understood. “I could have died, in other words.”

She nodded, once. “Only you can say whether you’ve been drinking too much, or not. I think your pancreatitis was brought on by drinking too much for too long a time. But, are you an alcoholic? I don’t know—you could be.”

That wasn’t quite what I wanted to hear. But I said, anyway, “I had a couple other attacks of really bad stomach pain in the past month, or so.” Earlier, I’d denied I’d had any prior warning that something might be wrong. I’d tried to tell myself they weren’t connected, and weren’t relevant. But they were.

She looked like she wanted to say something about my lying to her, but didn’t.

“I also threw up blood a couple times, too.” I looked away in shame. “They seemed to go together.”

“You didn’t see a doctor?”

I was becoming very ashamed. “No,” I whispered.

But Nurse Brenda touched me on the arm, lightly. “Don’t worry, Kerrilyn,” she said. “You’re here, now. You’re going to be all right. I promise.”

A couple of hours later, and after they had given me something in my IV, the nausea seemed to fade to a dull background roar. And with the departure of the nausea went my ability to stay awake. I don’t remember how long I’d slept when I was roused by the second shift nurse, who had come in to check my IV. I could barely open my eyes, but when I saw who it was I simply allowed them to drift closed, again. Then I heard a small sound from my immediate right. Someone had shifted in her chair and I

heard the sound of stiff paper being crinkled.

I drug my eyes open and swiveled them toward my right. That's when I saw Sheree's bright, hopeful little-girl smile. She was sitting in the chair next to the bed.

"Hey!" she piped, her grin all teeth.

It took me several moments (I couldn't be sure how long) to collect enough functioning brain cells to speak. "Hi," I croaked. My whole body seemed to be one large throbbing bag of pain, but at least I wasn't sick to my stomach.

What time was it? Where was I? Oh, that's right—I'm in the hospital. But, what day is it? What time is it? What is Sheree doing here? I was very disoriented, but the significance wasn't registering. I just looked dumbly at her.

"I brought you some things." She clutched a paper bag in her lap.

I tried to look at the bag, but I couldn't quite make out the details. Actually, I'm not even sure how I could be sure it was my girl Sheree sitting there, since my eyes were all blurry with sleep, and since I didn't have my glasses on.

"I fell asleep," I told her. I couldn't keep my eyes open, so I let them close.

She said something like, 'that's OK,' but I didn't quite catch it. "How are you feeling?" she asked, and I did hear that.

"Sleepy." I yawned, blinking, tried to clear my head enough to think. "They gave me something for nausea, again. It puts me to sleep." I tried to smile, "Sorry."

"How's your ... abdomen?"

"Sore, but I think I'll make it, maybe."

She just looked at me, a curious half-smile on her face.

"How long?"

She guessed, "Have you been asleep?" I only shook my head. She guessed again, "You mean, have I been here?" I nodded. "I dunno. Not too long." She crinkled the bag, again. "I didn't want to wake you up. You need your rest."

"I'm OK." I looked again toward the bag in her lap. "What's going on?"

“Nothing much,” she shrugged. “Tom is still mad at me.”

Still? I was coming around, a little. So I wondered, “Why is he mad at you?” Of course, I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear about it.

She coughed, “Well, I made quite a bit of trouble at the band meeting, yesterday.” She seemed sheepish about it. “I wasn’t gonna tell you, but since we talked about the band earlier, I thought you might as well know what’s going on, at least.”

It took me some time to comprehend what she’d said. I had to work hard to make my poor brain think. The band. What was going on with the band? Oh. There had been a gig Saturday night, and I had showed up too sick (and too drunk) to sing. Oh. “They kicked me out, didn’t they.” Not a question.

Two beats preceded her answer. “I told them to wait till you got out of the hospital, and got healthy enough to talk to them, first.”

“Troy Dancer ...” I started to say something, but lost the thought before I could get it out.

She informed me, “I’ll have you know I made a lot of waves defending you in front of that asshole.”

“I guess I appreciate that,” I said. But, I knew how little fun that would have been. Troy Dancer is a truly, completely, obnoxious asshole. He’d have eaten her alive. Or, at least tried.

She hung her head, “I’m sorry, Kerrilyn,” then looked up.

“That’s OK. I’m sorry, too.” I had to gulp. The whole band thing made me nervous, inexplicably stressed-out. There was no way I could even think about what must have gone on without being incredibly anxious because of it. Just no way. “It’s just that,” I explained, swallowing with some pain, “it’s probably all over for me with the band, and that kind of upsets me. You know?”

“It upsets me, too, babe. I think they’re wrong about you.”

“It’s OK, Sheree,” I said again. And once again, I was lying through my teeth. *It was not OK!* I was dying inside to think my music career was over. It was almost the worst thing I could imagine. Almost.

“No,” she contradicted me, “it’s *not* OK. I told them to wait.”

“You told them to wait.” I couldn’t see ... “What difference does it make?”

“What difference?” She leaned forward, determination set hard in her pixie features. *“It made enough difference to convince Troy Dancer that he had better not kick you out without at least talking to you, first.”*

I was finally starting to waken, more fully. *“It did?”* I felt hope creep upward, so slowly, but I dared not let it get a hold on me. I had to protect myself from the extreme disappointment sure to come, once they had a chance to have it out with me. But, I wondered, *“What did Marc say?”*

But once again Sheree didn't want to tell me the truth. She sighed. She cleared her throat, then sighed again. I wanted her to get on with it, and let me know the truth. The truth, I felt sure, was that Marc was through with me.

My voice was very small, and beginning to break despite my efforts to control it, when I repeated, *“What did Marc say?”*

Oh, Lord. Sheree began to cry.

Later, once I'd finished waking up, Sheree did get around to showing me what she'd brought. In the bag were two nice, ankle-length nightgowns and my thin, summer robe. The robe I recognized, since it *was* my robe, but the nightgowns were new.

I put my glasses on. *“Where'd you get those?”* I asked her when she held them up so I could see them better.

“Well,” she looked at me askance, *“I couldn't find anything resembling a nightgown in with your clothes. I guess I shouldn't be too surprised, since I know how you like to sleep,”* she made a mock scowl, *“but I still expected to find at least one usable nightgown or pair of pajamas. But you don't have a thing.”*

“Sweetheart,” I smiled, slyly, *“I don't think I've even owned a pair of pajamas in my entire life. The most I ever wear to bed is a T-shirt.”* I reached out and felt the fabric of the closest nightgown. It was cottony, soft. *“You could have rounded up a couple of my old baggy T-shirts to bring along, you know.”*

“They wouldn't be much better than what you have on, now.” She laid both nightgowns across the foot of my bed. *“I'd have thought you would want to be comfortable, and not half-naked all the time.”*

“It's OK. I don't mind being 'half-naked,' as you put it. I ain't got nothin' they haven't seen around here, and plenty of it. Boobs is boobs,” I

went on to explain, "and pubes is pubes. We're all created equal."

She laughed, shaking her head. "Do whatever you want. *I* wouldn't want to be cold."

"Sheree," I pushed my glasses up on my nose. "There's no way I could be cold in this place. It's summer, after all."

"Fine. So *don't* wear these nice things that I went to such effort to buy. I don't give a shit if you wear 'em, or not."

"Jesus, girl! Chill out. I'm gonna wear your nice, new nightgowns, I promise." I surveyed my entubed situation, and immediately came to a dilemma. "The only thing, now," I mused, "is how I'm gonna put these things on with this damn IV tube still hanging outta my arm. You got any ideas?"

"Hmmm, that could be a problem."

"You're damn right it could be a problem."

"Oh, well."

Sheree left a little while later, since she was at odds with Tom, and wanted to go home and make up. I didn't think she would have any trouble doing it, if she set her mind to it. Tom loved her, I was certain, and he would come around. After all, it was only *me* they were fighting over. How could *I* come between them? How, indeed.

It seemed I was everyone's biggest problem. Without even bringing Marc into the picture, I could think of several ways I could be deemed a big problem and an even bigger troublemaker for every one of my friends. Well, actually, that was mostly just the members of the band, plus a few others, but they (the others) hardly counted. I was mainly just a problem for *the band*.

Troy Dancer has always made it known that he thinks I'm a pain in the ass. I'm not sure why, exactly, but he has always seemed about an inch away from kicking me out. The band is (was?) named after the asshole. *Dancer*, we call it. And Dancer, the person, is the one who had suggested (insisted upon) the name in the first place. He thinks the band is his, and that he can do with it whatever he wants. I've always thought, though, that there is ample evidence to support the idea that the band belongs to all of us, and that Dancer is just the guitar player. If I were conceited, I suppose I might even think the band is *mine*, but that would be

presumptuous—and incorrect, besides. No, the band *Dancer* is a collaboration of the five members: Marc Huffman, Tom Germaine, Mel Howe, Troy Dancer, and me. I think we each hold up our part of the effort quite effectively, with no single one of us dominating. Troy Dancer is a true musical virtuoso, and can play rings around any *two* other guitar players, but in *our* band he's an equal. We're *that* good.

But, alas, it seems I am always aggravating Troy Dancer with my stage fright and my nervousness, and with all my screwing around (literally) with the other members of the band. I'm also a perfectionist at times (like *he* isn't) and I can be somewhat of a bitch in rehearsal if I'm having a bad day, or if I have a very specific idea how I want the band to sound on one of my songs. Which brings me to another point: I write songs, and the band plays them. Troy Dancer has a couple of tunes he wants us to play, but my songs define the band's personality. I don't know. It's just that way. So I'll say it again; the whole band is strong. None of us are weak. So it makes me wonder how he can be *so sure* I need to be out of this band when it's obvious I contribute significantly to the whole. But ... I suppose he can't be swayed.

Mel Howe and I have been pretty good friends. She's the 'mommy' of the group (since I guess someone has to do it) and is most often the one to call me down, and cool me off. She's *very* smart, and quite an intellectual despite her clearly aberrant affair with Mr. Dancer. Considering my past and my suspect decision making skills, I don't especially blame her for having made a mistake. It happens to the best of us, as well as to the rest of us. Anyway, she does an excellent job of picking up on my (sometimes) vague tune ideas and filling in the details of the accompaniment, almost as though she reads my mind. And of course she can really play, too. She has about four or five keyboards of various sundry types that she assembles around her, and (I swear) most of the time she sounds like an entire orchestra. We definitely *don't* sound like just five people.

I think Mel Howe would be ambivalent about kicking me out. She should be angry with me of course, but *that* angry? The only possible conflict between us would be her past association with *my* erstwhile lover, Marc. There are still some mysterious things about their relationship, and someday I'd like to tie them both down and finally beat it out of them. (Maybe tickle them until they give in.) My instincts aren't that far off, usually. There's still something there between them, and that 'something' may be the straw that breaks my camel's back.

Tom Germaine, Sheree's husband and the band's bass player, is also

the band's unofficial booking agent. Sure, we have a legitimate agent, but Maury Bozeman hardly counts. It's Tom who does all the footwork, all the running around and making phone calls. It's also Tom who provides the rehearsal space, at the studio where he works. It's Tom's van we use to haul our equipment around, and Tom's PA system we use to be heard, wherever we are. All in all, it may as well be Tom's band.

So, what does this boy have against me? (She asks, rhetorically.) First of all, he's Marc's best friend. Those two are stuck together tighter than two dogs in heat, and there ain't no woman alive who can come between 'em. I've probably come the closest, but even *I* failed to make a dent.

There's even this little matter of the night after our first gig where ... I got drunk (surprised?) and so naturally got very, very horny. We—Marc, Tom and *moi*—were up at Tom's house on Lake Lanier late that night, and in a moment of extreme stupidity and unmitigated wantonness I did a striptease in front of the two of them and ended it by sucking dear Tom's penis. It ended when he ejaculated in my mouth, if that's not being too graphic. Marc, of course, was there to hear—if not see—the whole thing. Boy, was I a stupid, ignorant cunt!

But wait, there's more!

Of course it wasn't long before Sheree found out. Fortunately it was Tom who told her, so she didn't hear about it through the grapevine. Needless to say (but I will say it, anyway) I thought Sheree would disown me completely after that. She should have, since I had probably committed the most unpardonable sin you can commit: I'd had an affair with the husband of my best friend, said husband also happening to be the best friend of my most excellent fella—namely my cohabiter, my lover, and of late the father of my child. Marc, of course. The *husband* in all of this is Tom. Anyway, after all that Sheree still managed (somehow) to forgive me and remain my friend.

Oh, but wait, there's *still* more!

This best friend of mine, one Sheree Germaine, all of five feet tall (maybe) and not even one-hundred pounds soaking wet and wife of Tom Germaine, eventually comes around to lay a really big one on me. She decides she's 'bi' and chooses *me* to be her first ... experiment? ... er, female lover. And I, stupid cunt that I am, do not refuse her. In fact I'm probably to blame for encouraging her, since I have no (read that: zero) compunction about whom I make love to. When Sheree (finally) made a pass at me, after months and month of gut-wrenching, soul-searching, and

extreme indecision, I did the exact one wrong thing: I accepted her advances, and reciprocated my feelings in kind. I have no excuse; it was what I wanted to do at the time. I didn't want to hurt her feelings or ruin our relationship in any way. I didn't want to ruin her marriage to Tom, either, nor did I want to ruin my relationship with Marc. I valued her feelings, as much as my own, and I welcomed her small, warm, naked body when she offered it to me.

And lastly, there's this little matter of what Tom and I have been doing since then ...

So, Tom Germaine should have ample reason for wanting to see me out of the picture. His marriage may have already been headed out the door, but that isn't (strictly speaking) entirely my fault. Sheree feels what Sheree feels, and if she likes girls, then I believe she should pursue her desires. Tom, I suppose, simply loses out. It's the breaks; it's what happens; it's too bad. But, it ain't my fault. And saying all that, I still know what lurks in Tom's heart. And it ain't all good, either.

And Marc. Marc knows all the above, except about that last little thing with Tom. There may be other things he doesn't know, as well, but ... he knows about Sheree, and he's seen me with Tom, too. Marc and I have known each other a little less than a year, and have lived together almost the entire time. I moved in on our first date, and stayed. Marc has seen me at my worst, most probably, and has held on through all my strange moods and (sometimes) tolerated my excessive drinking. He's adopted my smoking habit, somewhat, and together I thought we made a pretty good couple.

How he could stay with me after I sucked Tom off ... I don't know. I wouldn't have done it. But Marc loved me, and wanted me, and rationalized my erratic (*erratic?!?* there's an understatement!) behavior enough to press on. He even took my affair with Sheree—another *woman!*—with the kind of generosity and understanding I wouldn't have expected from anyone. Marc held steadfast to me, despite all the reasons to do the opposite. Nothing was going to shake him off, apparently. Nothing at all—not even Tom. Except that ...

I got pregnant. No, Marc wasn't angry about that—quite the contrary. Marc wanted to marry me and make me an honest woman even though I'd already decided not to tell him about my 'condition.' He'd had to hear about it from Tom, who'd heard through Sheree, who was the only person I told. Then he was angry. He was furious when it seemed I didn't love

him enough, or trust him enough to tell him. But the truth is that I didn't trust *myself* with the knowledge. Until I knew how *I* felt about being in the family way, I couldn't be expected to face how Marc might feel about it. I'd expected he'd want to marry me, and I was right. I'd expected he'd be happy, and again, I was right. I'd expected he'd want me to be happy, and sadly, I was right about that, too. But I wasn't happy about being pregnant. Being pregnant scared the hell out of me.

I was alternately elated and terrified. I didn't want to give up the baby, since I knew how much it meant to Marc (and secretly how much it meant to me) but I couldn't objectively face the prospect of bringing a child into the world. Especially not *this* world. I can't say it too many times: This world is horrible. It rapes and abuses small children for sport. No little child of mine would ever be subjected to the things I've lived through. No child, period.

I was so confused and scared I could think of no other solution but to move out of Marc's condo, and try to sort things out on my own. I thought I could get a job to pay the rent, and still make it to rehearsals and gigs, and I also thought Marc would ultimately understand. Well, he might have understood had I given him the chance. Moving out was without a doubt the last straw with my poor Marc. Anything else he could have taken, but not that. For Marc, as long as I came home to his house and his bed, he would forgive me and work through anything I did. But the moment I abandoned and denied his love and trust—that was the moment I broke his heart. I realize I was completely wrong to do that, but until I am able to see him again, and talk through all the painful and confusing things on my mind, we will be estranged. Hugely estranged.

And lastly, when I went to the last rehearsal, and where I had a chance to patch things up, I completely fucked up and told Marc to get the 'fuck out of my face.' I'm quite sure he was ready to make up and end all the controversy, but I shoved all his goodwill and forgiveness right down his throat, and squelched (but I hope not forever) the last shreds of his tolerance and generosity. I guess it's no wonder he wouldn't come see me in the hospital.

No wonder.

• • •

I am the Marc Huffman Kerrilyn has spoken of so often. I don't know

of any other way to introduce myself other than to say that I am the man who loved her, and cared for her, but who couldn't stand by her when she needed me the most.

She really hurt me. I didn't think anyone would be able to hurt me (again) the way Kerrilyn hurt me, but ... I was wrong about that. Not only was she able to rip my heart out, she did it gleefully. Her words and actions at the band rehearsal when she told me to 'get the fuck out of her face' still play over and over in my mind. What had I done to deserve that kind of treatment? I turned it in my mind until I was sick of it, but I just couldn't understand the reasoning. I felt I had endured so much with her. I felt *we* had gone through so much, together, that it qualified me for some special role—some special *permanent* position—in her scheme of things. If she had only stayed with me, I think I would have withstood *anything* she could have dished out. As long as she was there at home and was still willing to love me, I would have accepted and forgiven all the sins she committed, and would ever commit. She could have continued to drink and lost the baby; she could have gotten pregnant by Tom, or by *anybody*; she could have decided she wanted Sheree to move in with us. Anything, as long as she stayed with me and loved me. Well, I could be exaggerating here, but in my heart I know—not by much.

No one understands how I feel. How could they, really? Trust is the most important thing to me, and I measure that trust by a person's loyalty. Of course, even I have a spotty record on the loyalty label. If I feel I can trust someone, I will never abandon them. Ever. But, you know, trust is such a hard thing to gain. In fact I can't even tell you what it takes to make me trust someone, only what it takes to make me mistrustful. If I am mistrustful of another person, then I am most likely to be the first one to abandon the relationship. It just takes one time to make me decide which way to go. It's not fair, I know, but I can't help it. I demand complete loyalty in order to extend mine, but if I don't get it, I'll never extend it again. Of course having said all that, where does Kerrilyn sit on this scale of zero to everything?

From the beginning I wanted to trust her. Kerrilyn was unique in my mind. She wasn't like anyone I had ever known. She seemed to need my help (and trust) to such a degree that I felt surely she would see and understand how difficult it was for me. Why did I ever think that? I couldn't possibly say, now. If she had turned out to be a heartless, using, manipulative individual (like Joan had been) it would have killed me. But Kerrilyn found a hole in my armor, and fit into that niche so nicely it felt

as though she had always been there—belonged there. Being with her felt too *right*, too comfortable, too complete. Indeed, I thought she filled the void perfectly. And too, I thought she understood the delicate relationship between us. I thought she knew how fragile I was, and knew that to violate my trust would do us both irreparable harm. I thought she knew all these things. What I didn't count on was her ability to conveniently forget everything important whenever she felt like it, and go off and do whatever she wanted, to whomever she wanted, anytime she wanted. But still, as long as she came home to me afterward, I truly felt I could handle it. I believed that the level of her trust—and trustworthiness—was measured solely by her willingness to come home, hang her head, cry, and ask for forgiveness.

I think I was wrong. Not wrong about Kerrilyn's ultimate trustworthiness or faithfulness, just wrong about how they're measured—how they're determined. It is possible to love someone and be completely worthy of their trust and protective of their feelings, while not being controlled by that person. My requirement of always keeping Kerrilyn within arm's reach—requiring her to always stay a caged bird for me—that was where I was wrong. She could fly so high and so far and still could keep me deep inside her heart where I was ultimately safe. I was wrong about the true proof of trust, and how you show your belief—your *faith*—in the other person. And I was especially wrong when it came time to test the true strength of my faith in Kerrilyn. Today I believe she did all she was capable of doing, since I know now how abused, and hurt, and sick she was, but I was responsible for blowing my own first big chance to make up for something really important. I didn't do it. Kerrilyn really hurt me, and I was completely incapable of seeing beyond that hurt.

In the weeks between my twenty-seventh birthday and the time Kerrilyn went into the hospital, our lives—hers and mine—seemed to unravel completely. First, Kerrilyn had gotten pregnant. Maybe that sounds like I had no part in it, but she *was* the one who got pregnant regardless of whether she had full responsibility for it, or not. I take a full half of that responsibility, and willingly. It was Kerrilyn who wouldn't own up to the fact, and who wouldn't trust me enough to tell me. Instead, she just told Sheree. I only thank God Sheree told Tom about it. Of course, I knew Tom would tell me whatever he knew. Then Kerrilyn moved out. More than anything else, that act cut into me. It meant divorce; it meant rejection; it meant abandonment. It meant I couldn't trust her to stay when the chips were down. She would always leave; she would always run

away. She would never fully trust me to be the one person she could absolutely rely on. She would not believe I could know the very worst about her, and yet still love her to death. Hell, being pregnant wasn't even something *bad!* That was good news to me. Good news! Next to promising her love to me forever, it was the best thing she could have done.

The final straw was the aborted band rehearsal. Had Kerrilyn been sympathetic or even willing to talk to me, things might have worked out. Even then it still wasn't too late for us. I know it was a close thing, with much hanging in the balance, but still—we could have talked it over and worked it out. I just knew it could be worked out if she would talk to me. But Kerrilyn's inscrutable demeanor intervened, and she remained closed up and closed off from me. She pushed my buttons so very expertly, the ones she knew would put me over the edge, and all but ensured she would remain free of me. I couldn't quite believe she wanted it to be over between us, but there seemed no other conclusion possible. At least none I could understand at the time. Incorrectly I assumed that everything going on in her life revolved around me, and that any irrational or impassioned actions on her part indicated some problem with me. But, of course, that wasn't true. Not true at all. I know that, now.

I could not go with Kerrilyn to the hospital. I was too hurt, too angered, too heartbroken to break down and go be with her. This is something I still regret, but of course I can't do anything about it. It's past. She had destroyed my trust in her, and I was not about to risk having that vulnerability thrown back in my face again. And it wasn't so much that I expected her to tell me to get lost, again, either. It was that she had made herself sick, and though I had little true idea of just how sick she was, I was afraid she would die. I just could not face her dying. Not when there so much was left for us to do.

After the ruined gig where I decked Troy Dancer and after they carried Kerrilyn away on a stretcher, I went home in a complete daze and hid myself in my room. For the longest time I tried to sleep, but eventually I realized it would be impossible if I had to stay sober. There was a goodly amount of Kerrilyn's favorite scotch in the kitchen cabinet, being saved for—who knows what—so, to help myself forget everything and sleep I made a huge, strong drink. I drank that, and made a second, just as large. After the third such monster I believe I was sufficiently blasted to forget

things for a while. Actually I think I might have passed out on the couch sometime after two AM, with very little left in that bottle of good scotch. There's not much to say about how I felt concerning Kerrilyn being in the emergency room, since my mind simply refused to register any coherent thoughts. In fact, nothing became coherent again until the phone rang late the following morning. It woke me, and though I instantly regretted getting up off the couch because of the humongous hangover I had so abundantly earned, I answered the phone. It could have been Kerrilyn; it could have been Sheree; it could have been anyone. But I answered it anyway.

I think I mumbled 'hello' or something.

"Marc, is that you?" It was Mel Howe.

"Yeah," I staggered against the kitchen counter, gulping for air (and fishing for saliva) so I could talk. "What?"

"What happened to you last night?"

"What do you mean 'what happened'? I went home." I also remember thinking, what difference does it make?

"You didn't go to the hospital?"

"No." I didn't mean to sound quite so adamant or angry about it. But the truth does come out, eventually.

There was a pause. "Well, Kerrilyn's going to be OK."

"So?"

"I just thought you'd want to know." Mel sounded quite pissed off. I decided to let her think whatever she wanted to think, and remained silent on the line. She filled the vacuum with words. "They took her into surgery early this morning, and sealed up some huge fucking bleeding hole she had in her stomach, or something. I guess the baby is going to be OK, too, in case you wondered."

But, I was curious. "How did you find out?"

"Sheree stayed all night with her. I guess *she* must have talked to Kerrilyn's doctor, or something."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

There was a two beat silence, then. "*Nothing*, I guess. She's a sick girl, Marc. Maybe you're angry with her, and maybe you've got good reason to be, but she really needs your help. I think it's time to swallow your pride,

and get over being angry, and go tell that girl just how much you love her. 'Cause," she took a breath, "you *do* love her. And I know she loves you."

"What the fuck do you know about it?" I guess I felt like arguing.

"Is it right for Sheree to be the only one doing the right thing?"

"Mel," my head pounded, and I had to squeeze my eyes shut.

"Kerrilyn and Sheree are *lovers*."

She didn't buy the argument, "So? What does that have to do with how *you* feel about Kerrilyn?"

That's pretty ironic, I thought. "Plenty."

Mel then decided not to continue arguing. "Well, you knew about the two of them long before all *this* happened. But anyway, that isn't the real reason I called."

So, I decided to change the subject, too. I didn't want to talk about it anymore, anyway. Much longer and she would have had me getting in my car and going to the hospital. And I *really* didn't want to do that. I just wanted to continue wallowing in my anger and self-pity. "So, Mel," I finally said, "why the fuck *did* you call?"

"The rest of us need to get together, this afternoon. Can you come by the studio around two o'clock for a meeting?"

"A meeting? What for?" I couldn't imagine what was so important.

"There are a few things we need to discuss. Mainly—"

"—Mainly Kerrilyn. Right?"

"Her, too."

"You mean her—mostly." I did not want to spend the afternoon discussing the future of our vocalist, especially considering the uncertainty of her future with me. It felt too much like a self-fulfilling prophecy. I didn't want the band deciding the future of my life, since if they voted her out it meant either I was out, or Kerrilyn was gone to me, forever. I then realized that Mel had not answered my query. "Am I right?"

"Yes, we need to talk about Kerrilyn, but she isn't the only thing on the agenda."

I was feeling too badly to play guessing games. "What else do we have to talk about, Mel?"

“Well, I’m not supposed to tell you, but I will.” She paused. “You know, Marc, you and I have a lot of history.” I knew. “Sometimes I wonder why we’re even on friendly terms, and other times I could just melt in your arms. We’re not one hundred percent good for each other, you know. We’re not.” OK, I knew that, too. “But, despite our *history*, and despite the fact you seem to be hopelessly smitten with that sultry redhead, I still love you very much as a friend.”

Sarcastically, I said, “I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

She ignored the rude comment. “I just don’t want you to think I had anything to do with it. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Do with what? The decision to kick Kerrilyn out of the band?”

“No. The decision to kick *you* out.”

My heart began to race. This wasn’t what I had expected to hear. And pained though I was, my mind began to move, forming a defense. “Tell me,” I formed the words carefully, taking on a lawyerly tone, “just *who* made this decision? Was it you and Troy Dancer? Did you poll Kerrilyn from her hospital bed? Tell me. Who *decided* to kick me out?”

“At this stage,” she replied, calmly, “it’s only Troy.”

“Well, it certainly isn’t Tom,” I told her. I knew some things about Tom she couldn’t *possibly* know. “Are you siding with Dancer?”

“No, Marc. I think you were amply justified in taking matters into your own hands last night. I’d have knocked the shit out of him, too.”

“How could Dancer get me kicked out of the band?”

“Well,” she seemed uncertain, “it *is* his band.”

I had to laugh, at that. “Oh, don’t give me that old bullshit again! It hasn’t been his band for a long, long time. You know that as well as I do.”

“All right,” she returned fire, “tell me this: What are we gonna do if he walks?”

“I don’t know—I give up.” I thought the answer obvious. “Could it be ... find another guitar player?”

“It wouldn’t be the same.”

“How will it be the same if he succeeds in getting rid of me? Shit, if he’s really intent upon cleaning house, then he’s *surely* got it in his plans to axe Kerrilyn, as well. Then where will we be?”

“If the two of you are gone, it won’t be a ‘we’ anymore, white man.”

Ah, but what did she mean? “Does that mean you side with Dancer?”

“I told you already. I’m not *siding* with anyone, Marc. I don’t know what to do.” And strangely, I believed her, too. After all, she *was* talking to me.

“Have you talked to Tom?” I asked her.

“Well, Dancer’s been over here all morning, lobbying for my support. I haven’t had the chance to call Tom, yet.” Mel sounded exhausted from the effort. “But there’s no way in hell he’ll get Tom to support him, even if Tom wanted to get rid of you—which I’m pretty sure he doesn’t. But, I’m not so sure about Tom’s support for Kerrilyn.”

“Are you saying that if Tom votes to can Kerrilyn, she’s gone?”

“No, I’m not. But Marc, you don’t understand. There won’t *be* a band if Troy isn’t stopped. Even if you were to stay, if Kerrilyn’s not still singing with us the band will die. She’s the key to the whole thing.”

But, I’m not sure even *I* believed that. Kerrilyn the key? “Do you really think she’s *that* important?” I asked out loud.

She sighed loudly, “I don’t know. But personally and professionally, I’d be afraid to find out *after* it’s too late.” I saw her point, I guess. “Please, Marc? Will you come to the meeting at two?”

“I guess I have to.”

“Thanks.” I think she started to hang up, then said, “Oh, and Marc ... I’m with you.”

By the time I arrived at the studio for our little ‘band meeting,’ the lurching stomach and aching head I’d had earlier had been quelled, somewhat. The six glasses of water and four aspirin I took may have had something to do with it. There was still no way I could eat anything, but fortunately I wasn’t feeling too nauseated. Everyone else was there already. I was the last to arrive, even though I wasn’t late. I checked my watch, just to be sure. Sure enough, only one fifty-five.

The atmosphere in the room was unquestionably chilly. Chilly and tense. Tom sat on a chair against the wall, leaning back on two legs with his arms folded, and he looked *very* angry to me. When we made eye contact, though, his even expression and neutral eyes made it clear he

wasn't angry with me. That made it possible to relax, some. Then I checked Mel Howe. She actually smiled at me, but kept it surreptitiously hidden from the scowling one, Mr. Troy Dancer, who sat next to her, arms also folded, and radiating the frosty chill that was pervading the room. And Sheree was there, too, sitting next to Tom. She seemed angry with everyone, including me. Ahem. *Especially me*. When I looked in her direction she seemed to look right through me as if I wasn't there. Yep, she was frosted. And then, there was one other person in the room. I wasn't sure who it was, but I got a sick, unsure feeling about him. It wasn't how he looked at me, because he seemed almost as ill at ease as I was. It was more what he represented to the situation that worried me.

OK, where to start? "Who's this?" I addressed Mr. Dancer, pointing at the new guy.

"It's why I called this meeting, Huffman."

I thought we might as well cut to the chase: "*He's* our new female vocalist?" Damn, my joke was in bad taste. It made it seem I favored replacing Kerrilyn, which I didn't. But see, I knew the new guy could only be a *drummer*.

"I couldn't get *her* to come, today," was his only reply.

"So, you found someone already, have you?" I felt my face getting red.

"That's none of your concern, anymore." Dancer was actually smirking. He thought he had me staggering on the ropes, ready for the TKO. But not quite.

"Hold it, Troy," I said. "What makes you so sure it won't be *us* kicking *your* ass out, instead of the other way around?"

"It's *my* fucking band, Huffman." He stood up. "You do remember when this whole thing got started, don't you. You remember the conditions under which you—all of you—" he waved his hand around the room "joined the band. Tell me you forgot."

"I didn't forget." I started to circle the guy, keeping my eyes and my chest toward him. He stayed in one spot, but turned so he could keep his eye on me, as well. "But I think things have changed around here," I continued. "I don't think this is necessarily just your band, anymore. I think we all have earned a say in what happens. Don't you?" I swiveled my head around to indicate I wasn't talking only to Troy Dancer. I was hoping for some agreement, too. And I got it.

"That's right," Tom said. His voice seemed to radiate authority. Dancer wasn't about to mess with him.

Dancer was most disconcerted by Tom's statement —almost a challenge. I have no idea what he had expected to happen, but his face showed that what *was* happening wasn't what he had hoped would transpire. Did he expect *sympathy* from the rest of them because I'd decked him? Did he think he deserved special consideration because he had provoked me to physical violence? I don't know. He backpedaled, somewhat, but regrouped.

"This is our new drummer, Huffman. You're out." Maybe he thought if he presented it as a *fait accompli*, he could somehow fool us into accepting it.

But, Mel spoke up, "I think we should vote on it, Troy." (Yes! The bloodless *coup d'état* had failed! There would be blood spilled today.)

Dancer spun on her, shouting, "If y'all think this is some kind of fucking democracy," then he turned toward Tom, "then I got something you can all vote right up your fuckin' asses: **I'm gone.**" He started for the door. "Without me, y'all got *nothing!*"

Damn, but Mel just *had* to grab him back, didn't she? "Wait, Troy." And wouldn't you know it; he *would* stop, wouldn't he? But he said nothing. Only glared. So Mel, bless her poor ole misplaced heart, tried to soothe him. "Let's just see if we can work this thing out, before you go storming off. How about it?" Would he agree? I hoped not. "Troy, babe, we don't want to break up this band. We want ole hothead Marc, here, and we want ole belligerent Tom, there, and we also want ole 'I'm the greatest' Troy Dancer, too. After all," she smiled, "we *did* name the band after him."

"I named the band," he said, but his thunder was all gone.

"That's right, you did." She smiled more sweetly, talking to Dancer like he was a petulant three year old. I just hoped he wouldn't take too much offense at her more than slightly condescending tone of voice. So far, he wasn't. "Now. About Kerrilyn MacDonald." Mel turned toward me. "What do we do with her?" Was she expecting me to answer? No way. Still looking at me, but speaking to Troy Dancer, she continued, "Troy. What do you think we should do about Kerrilyn? She broke one of our cardinal rules. She showed up to the gig too messed up to play."

"What do you mean, messed up?" That was me. "She was *sick.*"

“She was sick because she was so fucking messed up, all the time.” That was Dancer.

“You’re both right,” Mel said, stopping the confrontation between Dancer and me. The one that was just about to escalate into something really unpleasant. She asked, “So, what do we do?”

“I say get rid of her.” Of course, that was Mr. Dancer, again. But his tone of voice and body language told me he wasn’t simply laying down the law, as he had been earlier. He was just putting in his opinion, as we all were expected to do.

I should have spoken up in Kerrilyn’s defense, just then, but I kept silent. I should not have allowed Kerrilyn to be thrown on the mercy of the rest of the band, but instead fought tooth-and-nail for her, but I was too angry and hurt to do it. I sensed that the battle over whether I was in or out was over almost before it began, and the new guy had lost, whoever he was. For Kerrilyn, though, that battle had yet to be fought. But I hadn’t counted on Sheree. Sheree was there to defend Kerrilyn.

“Kerrilyn *is* sick,” she announced, standing up. I saw Tom give her a perturbed look, but she cowed him instantly with a glance. He wasn’t about to do battle with her. Not *this* particular afternoon. Sheree had been up, obviously all night, and was both very tired and pissed off beyond all comprehension. She carried enough righteous anger in her to fry the entire room, let alone poor Tom’s balls. I looked at Sheree to indicate my noncombatant status in this fight, but she let me know instantly that I was anywhere but out of the fray.

She may have been the most angry with me.

“Kerrilyn is an alcoholic.” Sheree stepped to the center of the room, facing us all. “Alcoholism is a disease—a sickness. It’s not something she has any control over.” I heard Troy say ‘bullshit,’ or something like that. “**No!**” she rounded on him then, fuming. “*She can’t control her drinking!* She’s just lucky she didn’t kill herself.”

“But she broke the rules.” Dancer, again.

“**Oh!**” I thought she would pop a vein. “***Jesus H. Fucking Christ!*** You and your *stupid fucking rules!*” She balled her hands into fists, like she was going to hit the man. Dancer, ever the survivor (and having already been decked, by me) backed away. “Would you kick Mel out of the band if she got the fucking measles? Would you kick Tom out if he fell down the stairs and broke his leg? Would you kick Marc out if he lost his brain and

couldn't find it?"

"Huffman doesn't have a brain," Dancer quipped, grinning.

"**You ain't got one *between you!***" Sheree screamed. She waited, then. Two seconds became five, and then ten more went by. "Well?" she panted.

"Well—what? This is different," Dancer told her, calmly.

Sheree didn't explode again, as I expected. She spoke calmly, "It's not different, Troy. It's exactly the same thing. If you could only see that it is, you'd understand that she's not in control of her drinking. She's got a disease, and she can't quit."

"So, what are *we* supposed to do about it?" That was Dancer. "If she can't quit drinking, how are we all supposed to work together as a band?"

"She *can* quit, but she can't do it alone."

"You don't expect *me* to help her stop drinking, do you?" Still Dancer.

"No." Sheree almost smiled. "I expect all of you to help. And the first step is to *not* do anything rash while Kerrilyn is in the hospital. This band is very important to her, and I think it will help her a lot to know we're all waiting for her to recover. If she knows she's got something to come back to, she'll *be back* just that much sooner."

"I don't think I care if she ever comes back, or not." And yet, still Dancer. So far, this seemed to be a discussion just between Sheree and Troy, because so far no one else had said a thing.

"That's fine, Troy," said Sheree. She started to say something else, but was cut off.

"—Some of us," said Tom, "don't fucking care if *you* come back." He looked straight at Dancer, but didn't unfold his arms, or lean his chair forward. "I'm tired of all this fucking discussion about 'rules' and stuff. It's all bullshit. I think we should vote on this, now." Then, he did lean his chair forward.

"You all can vote on it, if you want," said Dancer, "but what I say still goes."

"If we vote to keep Kerrilyn," challenged Tom, "there won't be a damn thing you can do about it."

"I can quit."

"Yes, you can." Tom was very calm, his voice quiet and even. "But, as

hard as this is for me to say, I think the band still wants you in it. So," and he took a deep breath, "I'm asking you to stay." They—Tom and Dancer—spent some time staring each other down. I couldn't quite see either of their faces, so I don't know exactly what was being communicated. But Dancer finally spoke, slowly and evenly.

Dancer capitulated. "OK. I'll think about it." Tom had won.

"Fine." Tom stood up. "Then, can we all go home, now?"

"Y'all didn't vote," Dancer said.

"I think we did," said Tom.

"Troy?" said the new guy, "I can work the sound board and the lights, you know."

"Shut up, Jerry," said Troy.

Oh! So *this* was the infamous Jerry Jones. He didn't look so formidable to me. I doubted he could even keep a steady beat, most of the time. I grinned to myself, thinking of good ole Jerry's plea for a job, and feeling that the meeting was suitably adjourned, started for the door, hoping to get back home so I could nurse my hangover in peace. But Sheree had other plans. I felt someone grab the back of my shirt and fairly yank me back into the room. I whirled, expecting it to be Dancer.

"Boy, I ain't through with you, yet," Sheree said, pointing up at me. I felt caught by the teacher, in grade school again. "You ain't goin' nowhere till I've had a chance to talk to you."

I was tired, too. "What about?" Maybe I sounded bored, because ...

She drew her hand back and slapped me across the face. *Hard*. And I don't have to tell you how quickly that will get your attention, either. For a split second I thought about being angry with her, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Tom's face, and though he was appearing to be neutral, I decided it was better if I simply took her slap like a man. And that made me angry with Tom.

"You only did that 'cause you got your husband standing right there behind you," I told her, rubbing the side of my face, which stung.

She laughed, an ironic bark. "I ain't afraid of you, boy!"

"Hey, I'm outta here," said Tom. He eyed me, though, as he moved around us. I let him go without further comment.

Sheree wasn't through, though. "You're nothing but a spineless pile

of bird shit, Marc Huffman. You wouldn't *dare* touch me, Tom or not." Whoa! She went right for the throat—or the balls. "I know right where your balls are," she put her hand out crooked into a claw. I flinched, backing away. "And you know I wouldn't hesitate to shove 'em right up your ass."

I felt cornered—by only one small person, no less. I wasn't used to dealing with such anger coming from Sheree, so I unwittingly gave her the advantage she was seeking. I kept my mouth shut and stood there, taking it.

"What have you got to say for yourself, hmmm?" she folded her arms.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"I'm *talking* about Kerrilyn."

I played dumb. "What about her?"

Then bam! She slapped me again, even harder and quicker than I thought possible. The left side of my face, which had stung mightily with the first blow, hurt a dozen times worse after the second.

But I stayed calm. "I think I'm gonna leave now."

"**Don't you dare leave!**" she screamed to my back once I'd turned.

I spun to confront her, "If you touch me *one more fucking time*, I'm gonna knock the shit out of you!" I was so angry I almost couldn't see. "I don't care if Tom *kills* me, you won't get away with it again!"

"**I can't believe you could abandon Kerrilyn like this!**" More screaming, this time into my face.

"You don't know anything about it."

She lowered her voice, somewhat. "I know everything I need to know! She almost bled to death last night! Doesn't that mean *anything* to you?!?" She was about to break into tears, I could see. And if she did, I would, too. I *did not* want to cry.

"I've got to get out of here," I said, choking in my throat, and turned again for the door.

"Why?" she followed, not crying yet, but close to it.

But I couldn't tell Sheree why I couldn't face her. I was embarrassed by being so weak and close to tears myself, and in the male book of face maintenance, holding back the tears—those unmasculine, femininely

weak tears—was paramount. Sheree, though, could only interpret my exit as heartlessness. Cruelty. The worst of ice-cold human nature.

By the time I got to the outside door, she gave up following me. She just stood at the door as I made for my car, and screamed after me as I opened the door: “I hate you, Marc Huffman! *I hate you!!* **I FUCKING HATE YOU!!**”

Chapter 3

Hearing Sheree scream that she hated me was the ultimate low point of my hung over Sunday. I know she had misinterpreted my reaction to her impassioned pleas—the apparent coldness and heartlessness I displayed was completely for my own protection—but I could neither stop nor turn back once I had turned my back to her. I was furious almost beyond any rational understanding, but only with Kerrilyn, not Sheree. I was ashamed of the way I'd treated Sheree. She was only trying to help and protect her best friend (and don't forget, lover) and to her I seemed impossibly stony and immovable—heartless and unfeeling.

I should have gone with Kerrilyn when she fell sick at the club the night before. It was my job to do. I should have been able to rise above my anger enough to see that she needed to be cared for. That she needed me. But Sheree had done it for me. I should have thanked her and sympathized with her in her time of anguish, but when it came time to do it, I simply couldn't stop and face her as a man. I couldn't tell her I was through with Kerrilyn.

Only two weeks before, on the morning after Kerrilyn moved out, I remembered that my mindless wanderings had taken me eventually to Sheree and Tom's house, and I remembered that it was Sheree who had cared about me and comforted me, and who had helped pull me from the depths of my self-pitying blackness. Sheree was a true and loyal friend to me, but I remembered, too, that she had admitted her love for Kerrilyn ...

It was for that and all the others that made me determined not to rationalize my anger and give in to Sheree. Or Kerrilyn, either.

Kerrilyn's hospital tracked me down easily enough, no doubt with some of Sheree's help. They did wait until the Monday morning following Kerrilyn's admission to call me—at work, no less—but they weren't running a charity, so they were naturally looking for someone to pay for her stay. And naturally, Kerrilyn had no health insurance of any kind, and since we weren't married (if we had been, she'd have been covered under my company's policy) she had no means of support *other* than the band and my good graces. Sheree, of course, wasn't in a position to pay the somewhat significant expense of Kerrilyn's surgery *and* her eventual ten-day stay in a semiprivate room at one of the better hospitals in Atlanta, either.

The business office manager was polite. She certainly should have been, since I was under no legal obligation to pay them anything. She politely explained that they knew the living arrangements and relationship between Kerrilyn and me, and intimated that didn't I, of course, care very deeply toward Kerrilyn, and want to see her receive the very best of care? I resented the implication that if I refused to pay they would throw her out on the street, or something equally as dire. But I didn't argue the point with the polite hospital lady. My problems with Kerrilyn were none of her concern. After all her call was only business.

Only business, indeed.

I am not a poor person. I still have to work, and I want to have a job, too, but my 'family' has provided for me quite adequately despite my reluctance and, at times, my downright nastiness toward them. And what they stand for. Only my nephew Rennie ever gets my phone call, or the time of day when he calls. Mother has given me a lot of money over the years, including paying for my college education, so just when it seemed as though I was going to have to sell some stocks to finance Kerrilyn's recovery, mother sent me another check. It was just like the others—completely out of the blue—and it was accompanied by a short note:

Dear Son, [Not: Dear Marc.]

How are things these days? How is your job, and how are you getting along as a single man? [Gad! Is she concerned that I might not marry?] You know I think of you often, and though you feel you still need to exert your independence, I'm always here to listen,

and help if I can. [She never listened to me when I was there, so why should I talk to her now?]

Because I want only the very best for you, and because I worry about you, I've enclosed a little money for you to add to your 'retirement.' [Quotes mine. She'd already funded my 'retirement' to the tune of over \$500,000 at the time, and I was only twenty-seven.] As always, if you ever need any help, please don't hesitate to call me.

Love,

Mother

PS. Everyone is getting together at William's beach house for Labor Day. You're welcome to come, as always. Let us know. [Fat chance I'd ever join them, as she well knew.]

The check she sent was an exorbitant amount of money, \$25,000, to be exact. I figured I would clear about \$15,000 after taxes, and that would probably be enough to pay everything the hospital was asking for Kerrilyn's little 'sickness.' I suppose could have refused the hospital, and asked them to simply bill Kerrilyn, but I knew she'd never be able to pay them anything. I had the cash in hand, and it was found money, no less—not as a result of my labors, at all—so I agreed to pay for everything. If she (the hospital lady) had been polite before, she was positively drooling over me after that. They simply *love* a paying customer. No insurance claims to file, no waiting for reimbursement from a red-tape-strangled government, no argument or debate over the veracity of the treatment. Nothing. Nada. Nichts. Just, 'thank you very much for your prompt payment.' When I thought about it later, my private payment arrangements were very probably the reason why Kerrilyn's hospital stay had been as long as it had.

When Kerrilyn was finally discharged they simply sent me the bill, and with only the smallest bit of reluctance or hesitation, I paid it.

It didn't make me feel any better, emotionally, helping Kerrilyn as I did. But, in defense of my actions, it didn't make me feel any worse, either. It was the right thing to do, and when you do the right thing it never comes back to haunt you, or bite you, either. If Kerrilyn and I never got back together, or if Kerrilyn never sought treatment for her alcoholism, or even if she subsequently died from her drinking, I knew I

had a clear conscience. I had helped her, and in helping her I was no longer part of the problem. *Her* problem. I still had plenty of my own problems to solve, and I thought I would be taking the time—a time out, finally—to work on them.



Tuesday morning I woke up early, nauseated and dizzy, and very depressed. The Monday evening after Sheree left had been quiet but I was still restless and agitated. I was tired of the hospital bed; I just wished I was home, cuddling with Marc on the couch in front of the TV. Sometimes such small things can mean so much.

About the only good thing that happened Monday night was that they removed the oxygen line and the catheter that had enabled me to pee without getting out of bed. Apparently they thought I would be able to breathe well enough on my own, and go to the bathroom on my own, as well. Well, I soon found out that they expected me to pee into some kind of funky bedpan so they could measure my 'output.' Yuck. At least with the catheter I didn't have to look at my damn pee all day and night. With the bedpan always beside my bed, and getting fuller and fuller, I couldn't help but wonder if they weren't expecting me to set some kind of record, or something.

I still *hurt*, too. My throat was sore; my stomach was too sore to even touch; I couldn't eat or drink anything but water. And as if that wasn't enough, not long into the depressing loneliness of that day I began to experience chills, just as Nurse Brenda had predicted. At first they weren't too bad, but they very quickly worsened. I might have steeled myself and gutted them out, but for the fact that someone had told me about them beforehand. That knowledge—that certainty—scared me. Why should I be having chills? Why should I be relatively calm one minute, and be shivering and shaking uncontrollably the next? I called for a nurse, and Nurse Brenda (thank goodness) came in.

"What is it, Kerrilyn?"

I had to clench my jaw to keep my teeth from rattling. I was *freezing*. "I'm-m-m h-having ch-ch-chills ..." I was stuttering. I remembered stuttering as a little girl. I only ever did it when I was very frightened. "... L-like you s-s-s-said ..." I almost cried, so badly was I stammering, "... I w-would."

She was sympathetic, though, and immediately got me another blanket. She helped wrap it around me, and while I cowered, shaking under it, she took my temperature. I could barely hold the thermometer in my mouth. We waited patiently for the thing to beep.

"Your temperature is up, significantly." She felt my forehead. Her touch, I noticed, made me feel better. It was like someone actually cared about me.

"Is th-that b-bad?"

"Your body is craving alcohol. This is nothing but withdrawal." She sounded so matter-of-fact about it.

I only looked up at her, blankly. What could I say?

"I'm sorry you have to go through this, but it's the only way."

"H-how l-long will it l-l-last?"

"The chills? The shakes? Depends."

"Dep-pends on what?"

"How addicted your body has become to alcohol." Nurse Brenda pulled the curtain around my bed, closing me off to the rest of the room. I wasn't sure why that was necessary since there was no one else in the room—the other bed was empty—but I wasn't in any condition to argue. Her voice was soft. "I have other patients that I must attend to, kiddo. I want to stay here with you, but I can't."

"Th-That's OK." I'm always saying that when I don't mean it.

"Do you have a friend I can call? What about that young woman (Nurse Brenda was probably in her late thirties) who was here with you, Saturday and Sunday?" Nurse Brenda had not been there when Sheree visited Monday evening. "Would she come if I called her?"

"N-No."

"She wouldn't come? You seemed like pretty close friends, to me."

"No!" I countered, angry. "She'd c-come." I had to stop speaking and force my teeth to stop rattling. "I d-don't w-want her here."

"Don't be ashamed, Kerrilyn." Her voice was quiet, soothing, despite my anguish. "It's just a disease."

"No!" I was adamant. "I d-don't ... d-don't w-want her here!"

"OK." She felt my forehead once more. "I'll stay here for a little while

longer, but then I have to get back to my other patients.”

“I d-don’t need you here,” I complained. “You can j-just l-leave me the f-fuck alone.”

She looked down at me. I expected anger, but her face only showed concern. “I’m not going to abandon you, Kerrilyn. You don’t have to worry. I’ll be right here.”

“J-j-just g-go a-w-way.”

But Nurse Brenda didn’t go away.

The remainder of Tuesday was horrible. I guess the only thing I didn’t do was hallucinate—see pink elephants or something—but my fears and trepidations were so vivid and pronounced I might just as well have seen them. It wouldn’t have surprised me at all.

For a while things were pretty bad. I don’t particularly like to talk about it, because not only does my withdrawal that day represent fairly incontrovertible proof that I am an alcoholic, it also represents a very difficult time for me. Though I’m not going to pretend it never happened or that it was no big deal, all the same ... I’m not going to expend a lot of ink writing about it.

But back to Tuesday morning. My chills and uncontrolled shaking eventually subsided. Naively, I hoped they were over, but actually I was only on the bottom side of the first ‘wave’ of many such episodes I would suffer. For a while my teeth stopped chattering and I was no longer cold. When I opened my eyes, Nurse Brenda was sitting in the chair next to me. I looked at her, her face blurry.

“That was pretty bad,” I told her, not stuttering anymore. She felt my forehead, but said nothing. “I feel better now, but these blankets are too warm.”

“Keep them on,” she told me, then.

Well, I quickly became much, much too warm, and had to be restrained from throwing off my covers and thrashing about in the bed, trying desperately to cool off and get comfortable. “Lay still,” she told me, and replaced the blankets around me.

“I can’t!” I panted. “I gotta get out of the bed.” Off came the blankets, again.

"Try to stay still," she insisted. The blankets came back.

"*I can't!*" I wailed. The bed was painfully hard, and my butt had become sore from all the frantic inactivity of lying on it 24 hours a day. My skin seemed to swelter and itch like a thousand mosquito bites. I truly felt if I stayed there one minute longer I would both incinerate and go crazy. I couldn't decide which would be worse. "I gotta get out of the bed, now!"

I bolted upright and swung my fiery, wobbly legs over the side of the bed. Surprisingly Nurse Brenda didn't try to hold me down, she just rolled the IV stand out of the way. I barely knew it was there. I pushed off the bed and to my feet. I wanted to walk, but all I could do was sway dizzily, grabbing hold of anything and everything to obtain and hold my balance. I think it was Nurse Brenda I clutched. My hospital gown had to go, or so I thought, so I began to pull it away from my body, completely ignoring the IV line and that little line of sutures along my left side.

"Come on, Kerrilyn," she spoke, crossly. "Let's get back into bed."

"No," I mumbled.

"*Now!*" she insisted. I wouldn't have obeyed except the shakes returned in a 'chilling' flash.

Now I couldn't get warm enough, quickly enough. Where just a few seconds before I was headed away from the bed, now I turned and headed back toward it. I was freezing again, and my knees seemed like they were made of rubber bands. I didn't know if I could make it to the edge of the bed before I collapsed in a shivering heap on the cold, hard, hospital floor.

"H-Help me," I pleaded, and Brenda put her arm around my shoulders to guide me to my warm, safe haven. She pulled the blankets up around my chin, and I shut my eyes against the return of my own particular case of the DTs.

The rest of the day went pretty much the same way. It really sucked. I've thought about writing more about withdrawal, but at the moment nothing seems particularly memorable, except Nurse Brenda. Overall, alcohol addiction (and the subsequent withdrawal) is not something you should be proud of, but of course I've written about a great many other things I'm not proud to have done, either.

While she was there, Nurse Brenda stayed by my side almost all the

time. She did have to leave me occasionally, but it seemed never for more than a few minutes. She even stayed well past the end of her shift, which should have ended at three. She had promised me—and I believed her—that until I felt better, she was going to stay and help me survive.

I cried a lot. I don't remember why, especially, but it probably had something to do with all the guilt and shame surrounding my apparent addiction to alcohol. I'd ruined *everything*. Nothing was right anymore, and it was all my fault. And then I understood why Nurse Brenda had wanted to stay with me. Due to my anguish, my shame and humiliation, and in the midst of being wracked with horrible chills and uncontrollable shaking, I really believe that if I could have killed myself, I would have. Brenda's quiet presence, though, prohibited any rash acts on my part. She forced me to endure the pain, and the shame, and stay living through it all until the chills and the shaking went away. And they did. Brenda Cowin, my companion in withdrawal, and who had stayed by me through the whole excruciating experience, was finally able to leave my side.

I must have fallen asleep because I awoke sometime later. For several long minutes I suffered through another episode of intense disorientation, which made me begin to worry that I might be losing my mind, but in time I was able to piece together enough memory fragments to make my bed-ridden and stitched-up state almost make sense. Of course the problem was that it *didn't* make sense. Here I was, but ...

I surveyed the space around my bed. The curtain was pulled around, blocking me from everything else in the room. Nurse Brenda was gone. No Sheree either, but then I hadn't seen her since Monday evening. What day was it? What time was it? I listened, and the TV seemed to be on, but why was it on? Who had turned on my TV? I listened more closely, but there weren't enough noises to help me understand my surroundings. Fortunately, a few minutes later, the night nurse, Michelle, came inside the curtain to check on me.

"Oh, you're awake." She smiled. Nurse Michelle was a black woman, younger than Brenda, and quite pretty. I liked her. "How're you feeling?" She felt my forehead.

I frowned. "I don't know." It was the truth. "I'm not having any chills, at the moment."

"Good." She pulled the curtain back from around the bed, allowing me to see the TV and the rest of the room. I was in the bed nearest the

door, and the bed next to the window had been empty, earlier. Now, it contained someone, who was awake and looked at me. "Kerrilyn MacDonald," Michelle addressed me, "this is Cynthia Montgomery, your new roommate."

"Seattle," the new roommate corrected, crossly.

"Oh, that's right." Our nurse smiled. "I forgot. Kerrilyn, meet Seattle Montgomery."

Who the hell is this? I didn't know what else to say, except, "Hi."

Seattle mumbled something in return. I didn't hear it, but I gathered from the way she twisted her head away that she didn't want to talk to me. Or anyone, it seemed.

"Well," Nurse Michelle said, "I'll leave you two alone, now." Then turned to me, again, "Kerrilyn, if you need anything, just give me a buzz on your call button. You did really well, today."

Today? What? Then I remembered: *withdrawal*. I didn't think I'd done so hot. I shook my head, perhaps more vigorously than was wise. The room began to spin around me. I closed my eyes.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I wanted to say no, but instead, "I'm fine," I said, waving her off weakly, eyes still closed. She left.

The silence in the room that followed Nurse Michelle's departure was strained and uncomfortable. Though I still wasn't quite sure what was going on, and I sincerely didn't feel well at all, I wasn't especially upset by or put off by the person in the bed next to me. On the other hand she seemed expressly angered by my simply being there. Over the course of the evening, and as my disoriented feelings gradually subsided, I tried several times to start a conversation. She wouldn't have any part of that, refusing to speak or even look my way. All I got from that side of the room were furtive, resentful, angry faces. If I looked at her too long or too directly, she gave me the back of her head.

Seattle was very young. I estimated her age no more than fifteen or sixteen; she looked just like one of those street urchins you sometimes see. Her eyes were dark and smoky, and her hair was mousy brown, cut somewhat short in a Liza Minnelli shag. It looked about as uncombed and unkempt as I'm sure mine did. She looked too thin by a couple of degrees, and had a pale, sickly, sallow complexion noticeable even in the soft light

of the room. The TV, too low for me to hear, flickered colors off her pale, shiny forehead. But still, Seattle was almost pretty. Thin, straggly and undernourished, but still with the potential to be an attractive girl.

Something about her made me want to get to know her better. Maybe it was that I could almost see myself in those smoldering, dark, hateful eyes. They haunted me. But Seattle was adamant about not wanting to communicate, so for that evening I decided to give up trying. I turned toward the TV.

“Can I turn up the sound?” I asked. I expected no answer.

“I don’t care,” though, came the tart, sharply edged reply.

I turned up the volume with the remote, and made an effort to get into the program she’d been watching. Seattle then seemed satisfied I would be leaving her alone, so we both watched the TV without speaking for the remainder of the evening. I must have fallen asleep again sometime after nine-thirty, and slept all the way through until morning.

Wednesday was the Fourth of July. It’s not so much that I had ever paid attention to the fireworks before, but on that particular holiday I remembered Sheree had mentioned a couple times that the fireworks display down at the southern end of the lake were especially impressive. We’d even talked about seeing them when the time came, but of course no concrete plans had been made. And now it seemed, I was missing everything, completely.

On Wednesday I got a visit from different doctor. A new doctor. It was late morning when he came in. By then we (Seattle and me) were awake and watching TV again. I wasn’t able to eat or drink anything yet, unlike Seattle, who seemed to be wolfing down nearly everything put in front of her. And though the shakes and the chills were gone and my throat pain had almost completely subsided, I still couldn’t move, much. Two things conspired to prevent this: The small line of sutures across the left side of my abdomen that hurt *tremendously* if I tried to move my body, and the huge IV that was stuck in the top of my right hand. My IV hand didn’t especially hurt to move (much) but I had to keep it lower than the IV bag to prevent blood from backing up into the clear plastic tube. I *hated* that. I *did not* want to see my own blood. Not at all.

Seattle was sullen and withdrawn and no fun to be around, and I hadn’t even seen Sheree (or anyone else from the outside) since Monday

evening. Because of that and the conspicuous absence of that one other significant person in my life, I was not in a decidedly good mood, at all. I really wished I could just go back to being alone in the room.

The guy—I presumed he was a doctor—came to the foot of the bed and just stood there, looking at me. Just like a doctor. I knew he was there, but I wasn't interested in starting any conversations. After a few minutes, though, I think he'd had enough waiting.

"Hi there." He waited until I looked up at him to smile. I was in no mood for smiles. He finished with, "How are you feeling?"

Everyone in the hospital asked me that, every time they came around. It was just standard procedure for them, and since I usually didn't answer and they usually never pressed me, I didn't bother to answer this guy, either. I didn't look away; I just waited to find out why he was there. Again, the others always told me why they were coming around. Why should he be any different?

But, this guy wasn't going to let me off the hook, so easily.

He grinned, "I know. You hate being in the hospital; you feel pretty lousy; you wish I would go away. Is that about it?"

I still didn't answer.

"I'm Doug Pritkin." He smiled, warmly and sincerely. "I thought you might be feeling a little bit better by today, maybe, and I also figured you'd probably be getting pretty depressed and lonely, too, so I thought I'd come by."

Yeah, that so? I thought. His white lab coat over a white shirt and dark tie tended to identify him as a doctor, though I couldn't quite read his name badge. It piqued my curiosity so I asked him, "You're a doctor, right?" For the most part my voice had come back. Maybe it was still a little raspy.

"Uh-huh." He smiled again, more warmly, "I'm sort of the staff psychiatrist around here. I thought you might like someone to talk to."

I didn't want to talk to anyone, *especially* not a psychiatrist. But I asked, "'Sort of' the staff psychiatrist? But not *really* the staff psychiatrist."

He laughed, "That's pretty funny." Conversation suitably started, he came around to the right side of the bed, and pulled the chair up so he could sit next to me. He had a folder in his hand that he studied momentarily, then he leaned forward, elbows on knees. "Kerry Lynn

MacDonald, right?"

I looked away.

"Come on," he coaxed, "don't be so mean to me." He sounded genuinely hurt by my apparent rejection. "We all got jobs to do, here. Your job is to be the patient, and my job is to be the guy asking questions."

When I didn't turn toward him, then, he carefully reached over and pulled my face around toward him with his finger. Was I surprised! They *never* touch you without your permission. I wasn't offended or scared, just surprised. I could have turned away again, but I didn't. I just leveled my stare *at* him instead of away from him. In the background I could see Seattle surreptitiously watching us. It was impossible to judge her reaction to this man.

He continued, "I came by because I thought you might like someone to talk to, but the way you're looking at me tells me you just want to be left alone. Am I right?" When I didn't answer, he repeated, "Am I right?"

"Yes," I said, small and quiet. I sounded almost more pitiful than I felt.

"Well," his smile faded, "I can respect your desire to have me get out of your face, but I really need to verify some information on you, first. So, if you'll cooperate with me just a little, I promise I'll be as quick as I can, and then you can go back to your *fascinating* soap opera."

"It isn't that fascinating," I informed him. I used to watch them a lot at home, but not *being* at home took most of the fun out of it. He waited, though. "OK," I relented, "ask your fu—" whoops, almost said it "your questions."

He leaned forward, cupped his hand to his mouth, and keeping his voice down, said, "I hate these fuckin' questions, too." He smiled, and winked.

And I couldn't repress my smile in response. He was almost all right.

He saw I smiled. "That's better! You *are* alive, after all."

I snorted, "Of course I'm alive." I just didn't quite feel that way, that was all.

"Yeah," he leaned back. "They teach us in med school that one of the best signs of life in a patient is a smile when presented with the proper stimulus." He shook his head. "Doesn't always work, though."

“Why not?” I was getting curious at this ‘doctor’ who said ‘fuck’ to his patients, and definitely didn’t seem to take things so fucking *seriously* all the time, either.

He shook his head, sagely. “Broken funny bone. Can’t be fixed.” He shrugged.

“Mine ain’t broken.”

“Good!” And he consulted his folder, again. “So, you’re Kerry Lynn MacDonald, right?”

OK. He’d won. I’d warmed up. “Close. I usually go by Kerrilyn.”

“OK.” Oddly he seemed rather pleased. I watched while he scribbled something on the top sheet contained in his folder. “Kerrilyn MacDonald. I’m guessing you spell it K-E-R-R-I-L-Y-N, right?” I just nodded. “Great.” He looked, again, at his notes. “Let’s see. You’re twenty years old, and ...” quick glance and a checkmark “you live at ...” he named Marc’s apartment address (another checkmark) “... and you were brought in last Saturday night by ambulance. Your diagnosis was ...” he had to flip some pages (didn’t they *always* do that?) “... lessee, they found a lesion in your esophagus, which they repaired in the ER ...” more page flips “... hmmm, three units of blood given ... and when blood tests came back later we found pancreatic enzymes in your blood stream, indicating that you’d had some kind of trouble with your pancreas. Pancreatitis. Acute, it seems.” He paused. “In fact ...” flip, flip “... hmmm ... CAT scan revealed a small bleeding lesion on your pancreas, too,” he nodded to himself, “that the good Dr. Malmud had to open you up for, to stop the bleeding.” He slapped the folder against his palm. “Bleeding organs all fixed up, I guess. Have any idea why you were having so much trouble?”

“No.”

“No? You don’t?”

“That’s what I said, wasn’t it?”

“How are you feeling, now?”

“Pretty shitty.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “How do *you* feel?”

He smiled, unfazed, “Fine. I understand you had some fun in withdrawal, yesterday.”

Fun?!? “Who told you that? Did Nurse Brenda tell you that?”

“Nurse Brenda?” Then he saw whose initials were next to all those

notes in the chart he held. "No, it's here in your chart." I expected more comment on my 'withdrawal,' but instead he changed the subject. "So! Is all this name and address stuff correct?"

I sighed. It was too much effort to fight him. "They're correct, I suppose."

"Please let me know if I have *anything* incorrect. It's important we have everything accurate in your record." He looked up at me, while keeping his head tilted downward. If he'd been wearing glasses, he'd have looked over them. It was a fatherly look. But I suspected he might be putting me on.

"OK," I looked up at the ceiling, "I will." I felt too poorly to smile. He said nothing. Then, I thought, "You said your name was *Doug* Pritkin? How come you're not Dr. Pritkin?"

"Oh, I am Dr. Pritkin. Douglas R. Pritkin, MD. But only the nurses call me Dr. Pritkin," he grinned, "because I make 'em. You can call me Doug, Kerrilyn." He used my name as if he'd known me all my life.

"Fine. So, what's the 'R' stand for?"

"My middle name."

"Very funny, *Doug*." I had to smile, then. And I had to try his name out, too.

He smiled, too. "I try." Dr. Doug put the folder on the floor, and folded his arms, leaning back in his chair.

He looked like a young man to me, as doctors go. He was probably not much over thirty, and had very light, almost white blond hair and bright, cornflower blue eyes. He sported a mustache, which was reddish and several shades darker than the hair on his head, and had a very fair, pink complexion that said he probably got sunburned very easily. I understood the getting sunburned thing. He was about Marc's height, and probably carried twenty or so more pounds of weight. He was a handsome man, and funny, too, and I was beginning to like him. He didn't take things too seriously, and he could say 'fuck' to me without blushing.

We looked at each other a few minutes, neither saying anything, both studying the other. I knew what I thought about him, and wondered what he thought about me. Or was I just another fucked-up patient?

"Are you waiting for me to say something?" I asked.

His head shook, fractionally. “No. Not particularly. Did you *want* to say something?”

“Not particularly.”

“No problem.” He stood up, suddenly. “It’s a holiday; I can come back tomorrow. We can talk then, if you like.”

“You’re not gonna talk to me, today?” Damn it, he had me hooked.

He bent over, and picked up his folder. “Only if you want to.” He straightened. “But I think tomorrow would be better, Kerrilyn. Think about what you might want to talk about between now and then, so I won’t have to waste time dragging it out of you.” He seemed serious, but he *had* to be kidding. Wasn’t he?

“You’re kidding, right?”

He smiled, winked, and put his hand on my arm. “Yeah.” He turned, “But I’m pretty good, and I *can* drag it out of you if I want. So think about it, OK?” He put his folder under his arm and started toward the door, but stopped there when I didn’t answer him. “OK?”

“OK.” I shrugged. I could almost picture talking to this guy. It might not be too bad.

While he had been in the room with me, Dr. Doug had not acknowledged Seattle’s presence at all. It seemed odd, somehow, but maybe it made sense, too. I thought for a second, looking straight ahead into empty space, then turned toward my silent, brooding roommate. I expected her to turn away, but instead she spoke.

“So, you’re an alkie too, huh?”

“What do you mean, ‘alkie’?”

She rolled her eyes, like I was stupid or something. “An alcoholic. A boozer. A lush. A fuckin’ piss ass drunk.”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s me,” she continued, as if I’d not spoken. “I’m the original runaway teenage alcoholic slut.”

Her words sounded too much like my own. Hurt and self-pity practically oozed from them, and I discovered how distasteful they sounded in someone else’s ears. She was angry, too, and I wondered at my own anger. Was *I* that angry at the world? How unattractive it was to

be perpetually seething at everything and everybody. Who could have hurt someone so much as to make them *that* angry? Oh, but I knew who.

"I'm sorry," I said. I could think of nothing else.

"Don't be fucking *sorry* for me, *Kerry Lynn*." She said my name with contempt, and incorrectly.

"It's Kerrilyn." Seattle intimidated me, and I felt it, plainly.

"Whatever." She shrugged. "So, how many times is it for you?"

"How many times for *what*?"

"Rehab. How many times?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Jesus Christ, you *are* stupid! Don't you know where you are?" But, she didn't wait for an answer. It would have been wrong, anyway. "This is the drunk tank. The alkie ward." She seemed almost gleeful, "Don't tell me you didn't know that!" But, I didn't. When my stare remained blank, she shook her head, fully contemptuous of me, sneering at my relative ignorance. "Shit. You don't have a clue what's going on, do you?"

I wanted to say something, to rebut her in some manner, but I couldn't get past the size of her *anger*—her complete and utter disrespect for me and everything about me. Why would this girl hate me so much? Why was she so angry, and why was she taking it all out on me? Nothing of her life was my fault, so I couldn't understand why she should despise me so much. Well, her anger may have caught me by surprise, but it helped raise a little of my own. And that made it possible to speak up.

"How old are you?" I needed to know.

"Fourteen."

"You're kidding."

"I ain't got time to fuck around with you, lady."

Being called 'lady' made me smile. I never thought of myself as being old enough—or refined enough—to be a 'lady.' But I don't think she meant it as a compliment. "You're awfully young to be an alcoholic."

"Hah!" she snorted. "Show's what you know. This is my third time here." She seemed proud of the fact. Proud? How could anyone be *proud* of being an alcoholic, as she freely admitted to being. Unless, of course, she was putting me on.

"Don't bullshit me." I tried to convey my skepticism, but gently.

"You know," she smiled herself, then, "I don't give a rat's ass if you believe me, or not. *Don't fuckin' believe me. I don't care.*"

God, how much like me she sounded, just then. Just like me. "I believe you, Seattle." It *was* Seattle, wasn't it?

"Only my *friends* can call me 'Seattle,'" she said. "We ain't hardly had time to be *enemies*, let alone friends. Shit, we probably won't even *be* friends, either."

"If you wanna be friends with me," I told her, "you can start by chillin' out, a little."

She looked away. "Jesus, what an asshole," she said to herself.

I was too tired to fight her, anymore. I had been semi-sitting up in bed, so I slowly slid down till I was lying more or less with my head on the pillow. I tried to go back to the TV.

Thirty or more minutes went by while neither Seattle nor I said anything. I thought the subject of Kerrilyn and Seattle closed, and I fully expected she would think that as well, but she surprised me when she spoke up out of the droning din of a TV commercial.

"Hey, Kerrilyn." She didn't seem angry.

"What?"

"How old're you?"

"Twenty. Almost twenty-one."

"Only twenty? Really? You look older'n that."

"What do you mean? How old do I look?" I turned my head toward her. She was lying on her back, as well, and had turned her head toward me. Her expression and the tone of her voice seemed almost friendly.

"I'd say at least twenty-nine or thirty."

"God," I sighed, "I must look *horrible!*"

Seattle giggled, incongruously. "Yeah. Pretty bad."

"Do you want me to tell you how bad *you* look?" I could take the teasing, so I teased back, "You're only fourteen, and you look like somebody's sick idea of a twenty-five year-old *ghost*." And the effects of

my words were as if I had slapped her. The reaction was so palpable—so sudden—I was sorry for what I said the moment I'd said it. But I couldn't just apologize. The moment was too fragile—I was too fragile. I couldn't risk it.

She turned away, angry again. "Goddamn it," she said to the air, "You try to be nice, and make friends, and what does she do? She fuckin' has to go and put me down." She watched the TV for a minute. Then, "Fuck her." She turned back toward me. "*Fuck you,*" she said to me.

Oh, boy. I could see this was going to be a lot of fun. The only question was could I stand it?

Malmud came around early the following morning, Thursday, on his regular rounds. He briefly checked the status of his surgical handiwork, then asked, "How are you feeling? You seem to be healing quite well." He smiled, showing very white teeth. He seemed to note my IV, still keeping me alive. I hadn't eaten or had anything to drink (except water) since Saturday. He nodded to himself. "If your nausea has gone away, we may be able to start you on a diet of clear liquid. How is the nausea?"

Well, it wasn't gone, completely. Could I stand to eat anything? "It's not too bad. I might be able to—eat, that is."

He shook his head, "No, we wouldn't be giving you any solid food. Not yet. Not until you are able to handle the liquid diet without problems."

I shrugged, "OK."

"If you feel like you can drink some broth or eat some jello, then I will order a liquid diet for you."

Jello? But that made me think, "If I did, could we get rid of this ... IV thing?"

He shook his head, just like a moment before. "Not yet. Once you are eating, then we will remove the IV. OK?"

That wasn't the best news. "I guess."

He seemed to notice my downcast eyes and slightly depressed mood, then. "Cheer up, Miss Kerry Lynn. You are doing very, very well."

'Miss Kerry Lynn,' hmmm? I couldn't help smiling. So Malmud smiled, too.

He checked his watch. "I believe we may have missed breakfast for you, but ..." he scribbled something in the clipboard he carried "... we'll get you something for lunch." He stopped writing. "How does that sound, to you?"

Well, it sounded pretty good, and I told him as much. But nausea had been a constant companion of mine for the past few days. There were times it was bad enough that I had to gulp and swallow just to hold back the dry heaves. I hated those times, because retching hurt so badly. Sure, they could give me something to make that awful queasy feeling go away, but then *that* stuff only made me sleep. Maybe I would feel better if I had something to eat, even if it was only broth and jello. Because I knew if I could tolerate it, stomach-wise—and I was *determined* to 'tolerate' it—I would soon progress toward solid food. And solid food meant I was just that much closer to going home. Wherever that was. Regardless, I would be out of the hospital, and that had to be a good thing.

Anyway, Malmud had asked me if I thought I could handle a liquid diet. So I naturally went on to the next most important question (at least in my mind): "Does that mean I will be able go home, soon?"

"When you are able to eat a regular diet, solid food, and if there are no other extenuating circumstances," (whatever those *other* circumstances might be—he never elaborated) "there is no reason you could not be discharged soon."

Soon, huh? What are we waiting for? Well, it turns out we had only treated the first and most acute problem—the one that had landed me in the hospital in the first place. The second problem and arguably the most serious by far, was yet to be addressed.

Lunch was a tray of the liquid stuff. Initially, I found it barely edible. The broth (which was chicken, I think) was very bland, needing salt and maybe other stuff, but I very quickly found I was absolutely *famished*, so I hungrily consumed the contents of my lunch tray with much 'relish.' Hah! Even the milk!

So it was with only a little tummy upset that I sucked down the liquid diet, quite literally. And no problems, either. My first solid meal, Sunday's lunch, was somewhat more 'challenging,' since I hadn't eaten any real food in over a week, but with Nurse Brenda's help and encouragement, I took my time and slowly worked on my meal of sliced turkey with dressing, and even managed to finish it. As it turns out swallowing solid

food had been the main difficulty, but it wasn't all that painful, really, and I eventually learned a way to chew my food and get it down without much discomfort at all. Brenda assured me that the pain I felt was mainly sensitive scar tissue, and I wasn't going to tear myself open if I ate, despite how it felt. At dinner I ate with much more confidence and authority, and quickly devoured it in minutes. It still hurt, but I was damned if a little pain was going to stop me from returning to a regular food agenda. Because I also knew if I could eat regular food, then the IV would go. And sure enough, it did.

Let me just tell you a little about IVs: First, they stick you on the top of your hand with this huge (*huge!*) fat needle that's surrounded by a long, white nylon-like tube. Once it's in, the needle is pulled from the center and they position the tube. It's about two inches long, and 'sits' in one of your veins. (Yuck!) They tape it down and you go on your way. But wait! If you move too quickly or bend your wrist back too far, the tube can really hurt, so you find yourself (at least for a couple days) holding your hand real still and trying not to move it. Unfortunately you get used to the discomfort, so by the time you've had it a week or so you almost forget it's there. I still hate the way blood can back up into the tube coming from (leading to?) the IV 'bottle' (really a clear plastic bag that flattens as it empties) if you raise your hand too high, but you even get used to something as sickening as that, after while. Regardless, you can see why I was so happy that they finally agreed to remove my IV tube. (Actually, I just untaped it and pulled it out.) The hole it left tried to bleed, but I put my finger on it and in a couple minutes it stopped. Nurse Michelle came by a little while later, ostensibly to remove my IV, but when she found I'd already done it for her she frowned severely, but she still got a bandage for the hole in the back of my hand. And that's the end of my IV story.

Dr. Doug came by after they took the lunch tray away. His admonition to 'think about what I wanted to talk about' had rattled around in my brain, and though there were a lot of things I didn't want to think about, let alone talk about, I was beginning to feel that I probably ought to talk about some things. I had a lot on my mind—no doubt—and with nothing to do *but* think, I was wondering a lot, and I had a lot of questions.

Like, since I was still pregnant, had my drinking done anything bad to my baby? And maybe, what was going to happen to *me* when I got out of the hospital? Was I going to drink, again, and what would happen if I did? What kind of trouble was I in? What kind of trouble was my baby in?

Those kinds of questions. You know, simple stuff ...

"Hello, Kerrilyn!" he chimed as he swept into the room.

Seattle was there, of course, so Dr. Doug nonchalantly pulled the curtain around my bed, blocking her off. It also blocked off the TV, as well. I think I would almost have preferred keeping the curtain closed, were it not for the fact that the TV was almost my only source of entertainment. I suppose I could have read the book Nurse Brenda had given me, but with Seattle *always* watching TV (just like the Kerrilyn of old) it was very hard to concentrate on it. And furthermore, being fed by IV meant I had to piss a lot. I had detested the stupid bedpan so much that I wasn't using it any longer. But then that meant I had to get out of the damn bed to pee, and I couldn't hardly do that without help. Of course, that made peeing a major hassle. A *major* hassle. Oh, well. As Dr. Doug pulled up his chair, I suddenly got the call from Mother Nature, again. I had to pee.

"Uh," I stammered, embarrassed, "I hate to bring this up, but I have to go to the bathroom."

"Where's your bedpan?" he asked, looking around.

"I hate that damn thing," I said. "It stinks. Nurse Brenda told me I was doing so good that I didn't have to use it, anymore."

"OK," he seemed puzzled, "so?"

"I need help to get out of bed." I wasn't very proud of it, either.

"OK," he said, "I can help you, if you want. Unless you'd really prefer to have the nurse help you." He stood up. "Should I get her?"

"You ain't gonna look at my bare butt, are you?" I teased. I hadn't made the effort to put on either of my nightgowns. I didn't really care one way or the other if someone saw my naked body, but I did wish I'd put something on.

"Probably," he considered, "but I won't enjoy it." He smiled, and it made me smile, too. He was pretty funny.

"OK," I said, pulling my covers down, carefully, avoiding any undue disturbance of my IV line. "You'll have to help me up." If I jostled the needle stuck in the top of my hand, it gave me an awful, icky feeling. The trick, of course, is never to jostle the needle.

Dr. Doug knew what he was doing, though, and together we managed to get me out of bed with no mishaps or undue discomfort. I

could walk, somewhat, hanging on to the IV stand, if I was careful to avoid raising my IV hand too high, and if I avoided moving my left arm, at all. If I tried to hold myself up with my left arm, it pulled at the stitches in my stomach, and hurt. Very much.

He pulled the curtain aside, and I shuffled slowly toward the bathroom, too concerned for my aching bladder and sore abdomen to worry what kind of view he or anyone else got, and he pulled the door open for me. I shuffled inside, and slowly and carefully worked my way around to sit on the toilet.

“Are you going to be all right if I close the door? The rules say someone is supposed to watch you, but it’s probably less fun for me than it is for you.”

“I don’t care, Dr. Doug. I’m not gonna take that long.”

“Dr. Doug, hmmm? Can’t get past calling me ‘doctor,’ can you?” He stayed in the doorway, but pulled the door in close to his shoulder.

I couldn’t wait any longer, and I let loose with a powerful stream of urine. “Sorry,” I apologized, knowing it was such an indelicate noise. He said nothing, only waited for me to finish.

I needed to wipe myself off, but it was harder than it looked. Again, I had an IV in one arm, and sore stitches hampering the other. I had no choice but to *very carefully* use my left hand to slowly and carefully take a small wad of toilet paper, and holding onto the IV stand, reach down between my legs and pat myself dry. If I were prone to be embarrassed from exposing myself so blatantly, I would have been totally aghast, but it seemed so far away from reality, for me. I was still pretty sick, and I was in the hospital. Dr. Doug would just have to get over it. I was.

He circumspectly stood there in the doorway, said nothing, and tried not to watch me wipe myself. When I finished, I staggered to my feet, and he helped me get back into the bed. Once I was tucked in, all comfy and cozy, he resumed his seat next to me.

“Have you thought about what you want to talk about?”

I knew he’d ask that question. “You told me to, didn’t you?”

“That I did.” He paused, waiting. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“I *know* you have questions for me.”

"How would you know that? Why would I have any questions for you?"

"Did you know you were pregnant when they brought you in?"

Of course I knew, but I felt slam-dunked, anyway. Yes. I *did* have a couple of questions. I guess ... "Yes, I knew." My voice was baby small. And then I was *very, very* afraid.

"Well, Kerrilyn, the good news is: You still are."

"I know. They told me I didn't lose the baby." Yet, I thought.

He waited a beat, "I'm guessing that's good news, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." I wasn't convincing anyone. Not even me.

"Do you want to talk about it? Is there anything you'd like to know?"

"About what?"

"About being pregnant. I *am* a doctor, and I can fill you in on a lot of things you've probably been wondering about."

"How do you know I haven't been to a doctor already?"

"I don't." He seemed nonplused. "I was just guessing. I'm sorry if I was wrong."

"Well, you're right, though. I haven't been to the doctor, yet."

"You should, you know." I knew. "Especially if things inside," he pointed toward my belly, "aren't one hundred percent all right."

"Why wouldn't they be all right?" But, I think I knew why.

"Lots of reasons."

"Didn't they check me out, here?"

"They did," he seemed very concerned, "but they were much more concerned with your bleeding pancreas than your pregnancy. Every effort was made to save *both* you *and* the fetus, but if it had come down to a choice ... well, you were lucky you didn't lose it."

"I'm sorry." I don't know why I said that.

He ignored my misplaced apology. "You're not married?" I shook my head. "Are you in a relationship with the baby's father?"

"I was."

"You're not, anymore?"

"He *ain't* here, is he?" Vehemence sprang to my voice, completely unanticipated.

But Dr. Doug took it in stride. "I don't know, Kerrilyn. Do you know where he is?"

"Probably at home."

"Where's 'home'?"

"I was livin' with him. The address you have is *his* address."

"Oh. Is it something you'd like to talk about?"

"You ask me that fuckin' question a lot."

He only nodded and smiled. He was patient. "It's my job, Kerrilyn. And besides, I asked you to think of what you'd like to talk about. I also warned you, too, that I could get it out of you if you didn't cooperate willingly."

But, I was depressed, again, and getting angry with his lightly funny bedside manner. "If I decide not to talk to you, there ain't a fuckin' thing you can do about it! Don't give me any fucking threats, *Doctor Doug*. I can just decide I don't want any visitors—and that includes *you!*"

"I won't threaten you, I promise." He seemed unaffected by my anger. "I'm here to help you, like everyone else. My kind of help is the 'talking help,' but you have to *want* to talk, or it doesn't work, at all."

"I don't want to talk."

"OK." He accepted what I told him at face value.

I couldn't believe it. He was letting me off the hook, and so easily. I was suspicious of his motives, but at the same time I liked the guy, and I think I really wanted to trust him. I really needed to trust *someone*, because I was practically dying inside from all the guilt and shame of leaving Marc, and being so unsuccessful on my own as to end up in the hospital with a 'life-threatening' illness. I'd really fucked things up. Again.

But, Dr. Doug continued to sit in his chair, and quietly, calmly, waiting for me to talk. I'm so very grateful he was patient with me.

"You must think I'm horrible." I'd let things cool for a good five minutes, and had come to the reluctant conclusion that I really needed to talk, after all.

"I don't think anything about you, at all. Kerrilyn, I'm here to listen, and to talk, but I'm not here to judge you or lecture you."

"But," I swallowed, suddenly unsure, "I think I know why I'm here."

"You do? Why?"

I couldn't believe he didn't know. Ah, he was just trying to get me to say it, wasn't he? And I definitely did not want to *say it*. I'd lost all courage. "I don't know, I guess," I said, and I had to look away. I couldn't face it, or admit it. I wished Marc were there so he could take me away from the mess I was in. He would help me; he would protect me. But he wasn't there. "This is too hard," I finally said, almost choking on the words.

"I know," he agreed. "It's very hard to come around, finally."

"What are you talking about?" I snapped around to confront him. "Come around to *what*?"

"Things," he replied cryptically. "Reality."

"Oh," I jumped at that statement, "I got *plenty* of reality! Just look at all this!" I waved my IV hand around, indicating my surroundings—my *stitches*—and momentarily forgetting the 'ick' factor. And then regretting it. "This is all reality, and as usual it sucks out loud!"

"I'm sorry, Kerrilyn."

"Sorry about *what*?!?! What have you got to be sorry about?"

"I'm sorry your reality sucks so badly, because it doesn't have to."

I snorted, "I don't know what planet you're from, but the one I come from is a horrible, nasty place."

He was quick. "I've been to that planet."

"You have? Bullshit."

"No bullshit." He leaned forward, suddenly very serious. "*I've been where you are.*"

"I don't believe you. Prove it."

"I will, sometime." He leaned back.

"What's wrong with now?" I snorted, "I got lots of time, here. I mean, I ain't goin' nowhere, right now."

"Well," he stood up, "I don't have the time today, and you're not

ready to hear what I have to say, anyway. But regardless, I know where you're coming from, and I'll listen to you anytime you want to talk."

I groused, "Except, apparently, right now."

Dr. Doug sat back down. "Oh, if you want to talk, I'm here to listen. It's just my own, personal story I'm avoiding." He looked at me, bright eyes piercing, but warm and friendly, too. "That can wait. It's your own, personal story I really want to hear. What makes Kerrilyn tick? Why is she here?"

I thought a long time. I wanted to talk to this doctor, since he seemed so sincere and genuinely friendly. I didn't know what I wanted to say, or where I could start, but there were a lot of things on my mind, swirling around, poking me roughly. So much confusion and uncertainty, so much anger and rage, so much love and hope buried underneath everything else.

How *had* I gotten myself in trouble, this time? Why was I all alone in the hospital, with no one around to talk to (except angry, belligerent Seattle), no one to laugh with, or to love? Where was Marc? Was he so hurt from my desperate actions that he couldn't come around even to see if I was alive? I mean, I still loved him. I will always love him. I just couldn't show it in the right way—the way that mattered. Where was Marc now that I needed him? Only Sheree was still with me. Only she still cared about me, and worried what would happen to me. Only Sheree had visited me. Other than my cute little pixie, no others had come by.

Moving out had been the stupidest thing, especially in light of the poor way I'd handled it, and I knew that by then, too. I knew I couldn't control myself when I was away from home, all alone. I could admit that. At home I could be a good girl, and I would stop drinking. I would simply stop drinking—and smoking, too—if I could just go back home, again.

And, at first I believed I could do it, too. I just conveniently forgot that none of my other attempts to stop, or even slow down, had ever been successful. I mean, why did I want to stop in the first place? I wasn't hurting anyone, so why did I have to stop? Ah, but there in the hospital, I knew I had a reason to stop, and I tried to tell myself I could do it, too. But while I lay there on that hard hospital bed, still stitched up from my own last, and horribly failed attempt to 'control' myself, I found I really wanted a drink. And badly.

"I really need a drink," I said, almost not realizing it. Of course I'd said those words, or words to that effect, so many, many times, and in so many situations ... they just seemed the natural prelude to a tall, stiff one.

"I do, too," Dr. Doug said. "But I can't, and you shouldn't, either."

"I know," I agreed, sighing, "but I'd still like one."

"Tell me," he began. "If I told you that you could have something to drink, right now, would you do it?"

I had to think. Would I? I knew I was pregnant, and it was bad for the baby, and I knew I was in the hospital recuperating from surgery on my pancreas, which was damaged from my drinking, but ... would I take a drink if it were offered?

I guess my pause had been too long. "Would you?" he repeated more insistently.

"Wait a minute!" I protested, "I'm thinking about it. You want an honest answer, don't you?"

"I do want honesty, yes. But let me just say this: One more drink might kill your baby, and it would probably kill you, too. So, would you still take a drink if I gave you one?"

"You would give me something to drink?"

He shrugged, "You said you wanted one. Why wouldn't I?"

"But you just said it might kill my baby—and me—if I did. You would give me a drink knowing it could kill me?"

He pronounced sentence, "*You* would take one knowing it would kill you. Wouldn't you?"

"No!" I turned away. Then back. Well ... "I don't know. There ain't nothing here," I meant no booze, "so I can't say for sure."

"Kerrilyn, if the answer to that question isn't a quick and certain no, then we've got a problem, here."

"*You* may have a problem, but I don't."

"Look, I'm telling you, from all my training in med school, and in all I've seen since, one more drink right now *will definitely kill you*. I'm not joking; I'm not kidding; I'm not bullshitting you. Your system simply will not handle *any* alcohol, right now."

"All right, then," I shrugged, "I don't want anything to drink."

“Just think,” he didn’t let up, “you could unplug that IV, get dressed, check yourself out of here, and go right outside and down the block to a bar. You could go inside, and without even so much as batting an eyelash, you could order a bourbon, a vodka—whatever you drink—and you could have all you want. It would be easy, wouldn’t it?”

“Why are we talking about this?”

“You said you needed a drink a few minutes ago. I was just telling you how you could get one.”

“You know damn well I can’t just walk out of this hospital. I can barely stand, as it is.”

He shrugged, “So what? I’ve seen others do it.”

“You mean to tell me you’ve seen people get up and walk out in the condition I’m in, and go down to that bar you just mentioned, and get drunk?”

“Yep. I had a guy, once, whose liver was so badly scarred by cirrhosis it was a wonder he was alive, get up out of his bed and walk out. He needed a smoke, and he needed a drink, and nothing I could do or say could stop him.” Dr. Doug shook his head, obviously upset about this hypothetical (I thought) guy. “He left here, got drunk, and inside of a week, he was dead.”

“He deserved it.”

Anger flashed momentarily in his eyes, then was suppressed. “I see. The way you deserve it?”

“I don’t deserve to die, asshole! I’m not trying to kill myself. I’m in a band; I sing lead vocals; I have a lot to live for. I have a man who loves me ...” and it ended right there. I was right. I *was* in a band, and I had a man who loved me. So, why was I in the hospital, all alone?

Dr. Doug was very quiet and gentle when he replied, “Well, *this* guy didn’t deserve to die. He had a family, he had friends, and he had a career—everything. He had just as much to look forward to as you do, but he was very, very sick. He knew, just as you know, that one more drink could kill him, but yet he drank, anyway. He knew, but yet he did it.” He hung his head, shaking it slowly from side to side. Apparently, he had some feelings for this man, and his death had meant something to him.

“Who was this guy?” I asked.

“That man, Kerrilyn, was my father.” Then he got up and left the

room.

• • •

Doug Pritkin called me at home on Thursday, after Kerrilyn had been in the hospital almost a week. He called during the day while I was away at work, and left a short, nondescript message on my answering machine: 'This is Doug Pritkin ... my number is 355-4272 ... please call me as soon as you get this message. Thanks.'

I had no idea who he was or why he was calling, so I innocently called him back when I got home. I hadn't really expected anyone to be there, still.

"Hello? Doug Pritkin, can I help you?" he answered.

"Mr. Pritkin, this is Marc Huffman. You called and left me a message, earlier."

"Oh! Hi, Marc." He was very pleasant, relaxed and conversational. "I'm glad you called me back."

"What can I do for you?" I had no clue.

"Do you know a young lady named Kerrilyn MacDonald?"

I hesitated before answering. "Yes." I know I sounded ashamed, or maybe angry to have to admit it. But I suddenly got a sick feeling that he must be from the hospital, and must be calling me to tell me Kerrilyn was ... "Is she all right?" I thought I hated her, but I didn't want to hear it if it was bad news.

"She's fine." He seemed to be smiling. "Can I ask you a question or two about her?"

"Who are you?" There would be no answers until he told me why he was asking.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm a psychiatrist over here at Northside Hospital." The hospital, then. He seemed unoffended, though, and continued, "Kerrilyn's a pretty sick young lady, and I was just looking for some ... information ... from those closest to her ... to help her with her problem. Are you a friend of hers?"

Stupid question, I thought. Of course he knew who I was. I could sense it in his voice. Stupid question. I snapped, "I used to be a friend of

hers.”

He didn’t react. “OK.” I heard rattling of papers in the background. “Are the two of you ...?”

Come on, I thought, get out with it. “We were living together, if that’s what you’re asking.” I figured I might as well make it plain.

“You’re not married?”

I almost laughed. “To her?” Then I did laugh. “No. But we had a relationship at one time, I guess.”

“Had?”

“Yeah. She moved out on me about three weeks ago, so it’s pretty well over between us, now.” I tried to sound bored instead of angry. Just let her go.

“How long had you been together?” More rattling.

“I don’t know,” I had to think. “Awhile. Almost a year, I think.”

“How would you describe your relationship?”

Dead, I thought. But instead I said, “She was my girlfriend, Dr. Pritkin.”

“Call me Doug.” He moved right on with, “You said ‘was’ ...?”

“She moved out on me, Doug.” I coughed. “It’s over between us, now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“That’s the way it goes, sometimes.” Man, I sounded both bored and relieved. Was I convincing him?

“Are you happy that she’s gone?” Apparently I wasn’t very convincing.

What was this? Telephone psychoanalysis? “Look, Dr. Pritkin,” I said, anger renewed that he was prying into my life, into areas that were better left alone, “I don’t really want to waste my time talking to you about this. If she’s all right, then ... that’s all I really want to know.”

He was undeterred. “Then you’re glad she’s all right?”

I shrugged, but I felt foolish doing it, since only I knew it. “Sure, why not?” He made me a little nervous, though. Not angry anymore—nervous. “I don’t hate her. I don’t really want to see anything bad happen to her,” (I

was still talking to him on the phone, though) “if that’s what you’re asking.”

“That’s good.” He paused, and seemed to lean back in his chair, or something. It squeaked. “Marc, I need your help with some things.”

“What things?” But, I knew.

“Marc.” Another pause. “Would you consider coming over to the hospital?”

“What for?” Not bloody likely, I was thinking.

“I dunno,” he seemed to squeak forward in his chair. “Talk to me, maybe, about Kerrilyn. I need some help to find out what’s going on with her.” A beat pause. “You could help me a lot if you would come talk to me.” He seemed to wait for me to respond, but I held silent. No matter, he went on, “Kerrilyn’s friend Sheree told me you were very important to her.”

“To whom? Kerrilyn?”

“Yes. She said you two were very close.”

“I suppose we were.” Once.

“Then,” he finished, “will you talk to me?”

“No.” I hoped I sounded final. Of course, since I was only hoping, he would know I wasn’t as resolved as I needed to be.

“Why not?” He wouldn’t give up. “From every indication it seems you two felt a great deal of affection toward each other—”

“—We were in love, once, *all right?*”

“OK, you were in love with each other. But for Kerrilyn’s complete recovery, I need *every one* of her ‘significant others’ to participate. You were,” his voice bored into me, “her most significant other.”

“Kerrilyn’s recovery?” How could my involvement aid in her recovery? But then I was only thinking of her physical recovery.

“Recovery from what?”

“Marc. You did know Kerrilyn is an alcoholic ... right?”

Of course I did. But ... “No.”

“No?” He seemed very surprised. “You never saw her drink? Her drinking habits never seemed ... unusual ... to you?”

"She drank a lot, sure." No use denying that. "But I wouldn't say she's an alcoholic." Though in my heart and mind I knew it to be true.

"You wouldn't?"

"No." I was getting very upset, for some reason. "Look, what's this all about?" But of course, he'd told me already.

"Marc," he sounded very gentle, conciliatory, "Kerrilyn is an alcoholic. The fact she's in this hospital is due to her continued ingestion of grain alcohol in—I would say—fairly large quantities." He seemed smug, almost. "I'd have to say she very probably tried to drink herself to death."

"You think she tried to kill herself?" It was plausible.

"Possibly."

"Maybe she did." I shrugged. *But I don't give a shit*, I was thinking.

"You don't care about that?"

"I care," pause, "I guess. I wouldn't want to see anyone hurt." Not even Kerrilyn. Well, maybe *especially* not Kerrilyn.

"Of course you don't." He agreed. Squeaked back in his chair. "But Kerrilyn is an alcoholic, and if she's ever to recover from it, she's going to need all of our help."

"How does that involve me?" Jesus, what a stupid question. But he held back his frustration very well.

"Come on, Marc," patiently, very patiently. "You know as well as I do that Kerrilyn needs help to combat her drinking problem. A lot of help. Marc, she needs your help, I think."

"So?" I tried to continue my bored-sounding tone. "She didn't need my help to move out of my apartment."

"Come on, Marc." Completely patient.

"No! You can forget it."

Then, he suddenly changed tactics. "OK, I understand. I think things may have been pretty rough between you two," (*pretty rough?!?*) "so for me to ask you now to come in and talk about Kerrilyn isn't at all your idea of a 'fun time.' I was just hoping you could help me shed some light on a few things ..."

But I was still curious. "What things?"

He must have smiled. "Come talk to me, and find out."

I really didn't want to talk about Kerrilyn, but for some strange reason, I did want to talk to the man, Doug Pritkin. He intrigued me, for some vague, indistinct reason. So I went.

A little later that evening I visited Dr. Doug Pritkin at the hospital. He was younger than I thought he'd be, and when I knocked on the open door to his office, he immediately got up from his desk to greet me at the door.

"Hi there," he took my hand in his, though I'd not said a word, or identified myself in any way. "You must be Kerrilyn's boyfriend, Marc."

How did he know? How could he be so sure? I shook his hand, though. "How did you know I was Marc Huffman?"

"I dunno." He grinned, and he showed bright white teeth in the middle of his flushed-pink face. "I wasn't expecting anyone else, this evening." I had come over not long after talking to him on the phone. It was then seven-fifteen or so.

I simply stood there after we finished shaking hands.

"Come in," he motioned me to the chair next to his desk. It wasn't in front of the desk; it was beside it. He came around to squeak into his chair. He leaned back, folding his hands behind his head. The chair squeaked again as I suspected it would. "Well," he began, but didn't continue.

I simply looked at him, blankly. He simply looked back, smiling pinkly. I noticed he had very bright blue eyes, quite a contrast to his white-blond hair and pink complexion. And he was just young enough not to put me off.

"Well," he started, again.

"Well, what?" I finally spoke.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven." I frowned. "What difference does—"

"—No difference," he quickly waved his question off. "What's going on with you, right now?"

That was a much more pointed question. Too pointed. I just looked at this Dr. Doug Pritkin, kind of bug-eyed, and said nothing.

"Too direct," he agreed. "Here," he leaned forward to shuffle some papers on his desk. "Let's start over. I'm Doug Pritkin, Kerrilyn MacDonald's psychiatrist here at the hospital. You are Marc Huffman, Kerrilyn's significant other." I nodded, slowly. He smiled, obviously thinking 'so far, so good.' "Kerrilyn was admitted last Saturday night with acute pancreatitis and a bleeding ulcer in her esophagus, and had to undergo emergency surgery to repair bleeding in both her esophagus and her pancreas. She came through the surgery well, as you know, and is now recovering from that surgery. Her surgeons and I have recognized and diagnosed alcoholism as the primary cause of her bleeding, and the pancreatitis, as well." He stopped, and looked down his nose at me, slightly. Apparently he expected me to comment. When I didn't, he went on, "She's in the drug and alcohol rehab ward right now. She's been detoxed, but she had some fairly pronounced alcohol withdrawal symptoms earlier. She's in fair shape right now—physically anyway—but emotionally I'd say she's pretty well hit bottom. We want her to get better, and I'm trying to help her." He leaned toward me. "And you can help me help her, too."

"She doesn't want my help." I shook my head.

"But *I* do."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Pritkin, but I'm not sure I would be such good help."

"Call me Doug, Marc ... but why do you say that?"

"When she moved out ..." I cast about in my mind, trying to corral my thoughts enough to make some sense "... she rejected me, completely. I had just found out she was pregnant, but she hadn't told me ..."

"So, you knew she was pregnant," he asked, more a statement. I nodded, more a shrug. "Are you the father?" A real question, now.

"She says so." I sighed. "I think so, too. Actually, I'm pretty sure it's my baby she's carrying."

"How do you feel about that?" A typical psychiatrist question.

"I was *happy* about the baby. It's only her leaving me that's got me upset." I shook my head, and spoke quietly, mostly to myself, "More than upset."

"How do you feel about that?" Again, the same fucking question.

"It pisses me off," I said, very calmly.

"You don't sound pissed off."

“Doug, it ain’t worth it. She’s gone, now.” I shrugged, slightly. “I was mad at first, but I’ve decided now the bitch just isn’t worth the effort. I’m just gonna forget about her and move on. Start over.”

“I believe what you’re saying, Marc,” he began, “but I can’t help hearing another message in there, too. Kerrilyn’s friend Sheree said you two were very close.” He turned toward me, very slightly. “In love. You know, serious and all that. Was she right, or did she not know the full story?”

I hesitated some moments before answering. In essence, Sheree did know the ‘full story,’ as he had put it, but as I sat and talked to Doug Pritkin I debated silently whether to keep my problems to myself and lie about our relationship, or come clean and tell him the real story. Doug Pritkin wanted to know the answer, though.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” He wasn’t pressing, just asking. “I’ve got time, and if you think it would help you, I’d like to hear your side of the story.”

“How much is this gonna cost me?”

He laughed, maybe thinking I’d made a joke. Well, it may be funny, but I hadn’t exactly intended it that way. “Marc ole buddy,” he grinned, “I’ll tell you what. If I can help you—at all—then you pay me whatever you think my help is worth. Otherwise, you can just tear up the bill when you get it.”

“Right,” I had to smile. “Sure.” I didn’t believe that for a moment.

“No! I’m serious. I think everyone ought to get something if they’re going to pay for it. Conversely, if you receive value from something, then you *should* pay for it. Sound fair?”

“It’s fair, I guess.” But, I didn’t feel any better, yet.

“Now,” he slapped the top of his desk with both hands. I was startled, momentarily. “Let’s forget Kerrilyn MacDonald awhile. You seem pretty upset with her, despite your careful attempts to keep it hidden, and I would like to know why you’re so angry.” He leaned back, getting comfortable. “For now, I don’t give a shit about Kerrilyn. Tell me about *you*.”

It took me some time to relax. Doug Pritkin was a very patient man though, and eventually convinced me he had put *the girl* on hold, and was

really only interested in finding out what was on my mind. On the other hand, he was very curious about everything related to my experiences with the redhead, but even then he only wanted to know *my* perspective—to see what it felt like to be me, with no regard for how she might have felt.

At first I expected him to judge me, and chide me for some things I hadn't handled very well, but he didn't. He didn't seem to care how Kerrilyn might have felt about any of the events I related over the course of the hour and a half we talked. I wanted to tell him as much as I could, but I know I didn't have time to tell him everything. I had to abridge considerably, and stick with the most prevalent and emotionally charged aspects of my derailed love affair.

I told events backward. I started with the most recent and most angering ones, and gradually worked my way back toward the early things that didn't make me so angry anymore. I started out furious, literally spitting on Kerrilyn at every turn, but in time I ended thinking things weren't quite as bad as I'd thought. He corrected me, though.

"Don't rationalize your anger away, Marc."

"What do you mean?"

"You're constantly trying to talk yourself out of being angry with Kerrilyn. You started out very angry, but then I just heard you say things could be worse." He shook his head. "Just how do you think things could be *worse*?"

"She could be dead."

"Yes," nodding, "I suppose that would be worse, but then," he said, "all your problems would be solved. You wouldn't even be paying her hospital bills." I'd told him of my conversation with the nice billing department lady. He'd commented on how 'noble' I was for offering to pay her bills. I didn't necessarily think it particularly noble. Just chicken-shit, maybe. "Believe me," he continued, "you have some very valid reasons for being angry with Kerrilyn."

"But," I countered, "you said she's sick."

"Yes, I said that. *So what?* So, she's sick." He dismissed the assertion. "That has nothing to do with whether you're justified, or not, in feeling the anger you feel." He pointed to the desk top. "Right now. She hurt you deeply, and treated you very unfairly. She has disregarded both you and the relationship you both shared." He shook his head. "I'd be pretty

damned angry if it happened to me, I can tell you that.”

“But we were only living together. We weren’t married, or anything.”

“Does not being married have anything to do with how you feel about her? Does that have anything to do with how she feels about you?”

“No. But—”

“—But nothing.” He stood up. “Give yourself a break. You’re *very* angry with Kerrilyn, and you have good reason to be.”

“So?” Like: What’s your point?

“So ... maybe you don’t want to hear this, but Kerrilyn needs to hear your anger. *You* need to tell her. Maybe the relationship is over, maybe it isn’t, but both of you could benefit a lot from you venting your anger, and telling her just how you feel. If you don’t confront her with everything she’s been doing that infuriates you, and has been destroying your relationship, she won’t see—truly—how her drinking has destroyed her life.” He wandered toward the door. I thought the ‘session’ was over, then, but he continued, “You’re very important to her, as well as to the baby she’s still carrying. She’s afraid of losing it, and I think she’s also very afraid of losing you. But until you confront her, and tell her exactly what she’s done to hurt you so much, and make her understand how much she’s wronged you, you won’t get better, fully. She won’t get better, either. She may get sober, but she won’t ever fully recover.” The session was over, apparently.

I got up, and started to follow him. “So all of this was for Kerrilyn’s benefit, wasn’t it?”

“No, Marc, it wasn’t.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “Your anger is justified. Just remember that. Feeling anger—feeling anything—is neither right nor wrong. It just is. It’s how you feel, and you have to deal with it. Don’t talk yourself out of being angry with Kerrilyn.”

“But I can’t stay angry forever.” We stopped at the door.

“I know,” he said. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll still be plenty angry when it comes time to confront Kerrilyn over everything she’s done to you.”

The only question was, when would that be? “But, you don’t want me to see her, here, while she’s in the hospital?” He’d told me not to, earlier.

“No, unless you think you can completely swallow everything you’ve just told me. She’s not well enough, physically or emotionally, to take you

full strength. See her if you must, but give her time to recover before you unload both barrels on her.”

I felt very weakened for some reason. “I would like to see her, I guess, just to know she’s all right.”

“She’s all right, don’t worry.”

But why did he not want me to talk to Kerrilyn? I’d have thought he would want me to reassure her, or something. I guess not. “You don’t want me yelling at her if I were to go see her, is that what you’re saying?”

“It wouldn’t do either of you much good, in the hospital setting. The nurses would ask you to leave, and Kerrilyn’s recovery might be set back. You’d not get any satisfaction, and she would be worse off than she is.” Doug finished by shaking my hand. “I can’t tell you not to see her, but if you do, just take it easy. OK?” I nodded. “And don’t forget what I said.”

But, what had he said? Oh, I remembered. ‘You have the right to be angry.’ For once, I was right about something. “OK.” I let go of his hand, and stepped out into the corridor. “Thanks for talking to me, this evening. I do feel better.”

“Good.” He put his hand on the door, and started to close it. “Take it easy, Marc. Call me anytime if you want to talk. Otherwise,” he looked at his watch, briefly, “we’ll be in touch.”

“OK,” I said, and walked off down the corridor toward ... guess where ... Kerrilyn’s room.

I found the rehab wing with very little trouble, but had to ask the nurse at the desk where Kerrilyn’s room was. She eyed me, closely and suspiciously, and asked tersely if I was a relative of Kerrilyn’s. I debated several seconds before answering, considering whether to become her ‘brother,’ or something, but decided to tell the truth. ‘I’m her boyfriend,’ I told the nurse. ‘I didn’t know she had a boyfriend,’ the nurse said, very oddly, and then (almost reluctantly) gave me Kerrilyn’s room number. I thanked her, turned left, and walked down the corridor in the direction she had indicated.

The door was partway open, but I stopped outside it. I did not go in. Instead, I stood just outside and listened for evidence of who might be in the room. I knew it was Kerrilyn’s room, because her name was printed on a card stuck in a slot next to the door. I also noticed there was another

name stuck in the slot below hers. So, she had a roommate. That of course meant she wasn't alone, and I wondered what, if any, difference that might make if I decided to visit her.

What would I say? What could I say? I have to admit I hadn't thought it through very carefully. Did I even want to say anything to her, considering how I felt, and considering what had happened? Doug Pritkin had already made it very clear he didn't want me visiting her at all, if I didn't think I could hold my temper and be civil toward her. Could I? What if she was just as angry toward me? What then? If she was angry, I thought it highly improbable things would go smoothly. The only acceptable way she could act toward me would be if she were penitent and contrite, and as I stood there in the corridor rocking from foot to foot and silently, anxiously thinking ... it seemed very unlikely that she would simply apologize and prostrate herself in front of me. Very unlikely.

But! Marc Huffman! What are you so worried about? Can't you take a little opposition? Why do you always have to have the other person talking and acting just the way you want them to? *So what* she doesn't apologize. *So what* she lays into you for not being with her and coming to see her. *So what* when she blames everything on you. What are you gonna do, then? Are you gonna keep your cool, and tell her, 'But Kerrilyn, sweetheart, love-of-my-life, *soul-mate*, all-knowing, all-seeing arbiter and adjudicator of our relationship ... I love you! I love you, and can't live without you, and even though you blame me for everything, including all that booze you drank, and the physical and emotional abuse you received so you had no choice but to move out, and failing to see your point of view (even though you wouldn't give it to me) and even though I was *so* intolerant of your bizarre sexual escapades, and all your strange moods, and even though I wouldn't *ever* give you love—or sex ... I still love you. I love you, I love you, I love you! Love love love love love ...' Yeah. It would be a fucking piece of cake, keeping calm and talking nice to her. No problem. I can accept it all, and willingly. No problem. Everything *was* my fault. You were right; I was wrong. It's pretty fucking simple, now that I think about it.

No, it was abundantly plain I couldn't expect to keep my cool if I went inside and tried to talk to her. But, even so, it was a shame. All it would have taken was just the smallest amount of trust that my feelings would be respected, not disregarded and ignored. Maybe at one point in the past I could have trusted her, and risked talking to her regardless of what had happened between us ... but three things I remembered about

Kerrilyn prevented this: One, she left because she was pregnant and couldn't deal with it. Two, she'd told me to get out of her face, and three, she had tried to kill herself (and my baby) with alcohol.

I gave up, and turned to go, but ...

I heard a voice inside the room. It wasn't Kerrilyn, so it must have been her roommate. Then I heard someone answer. That voice, though hoarse and very rough, *was* Kerrilyn's. She said something like, 'I liked him better before he cut off all his hair.' Of course they must be talking about something on the TV. I could hear it droning in the background.

The sound of her voice brought it all into sharp, clear focus for me. Where before I was only considering my feelings intellectually, and not internalizing the hurt, the sound of her rough voice made my heart start to pound, and my hands begin to shake, palms sweating. I was still far too furious to approach Kerrilyn, and remain even remotely sane. I knew, then, without any doubt at all I couldn't see her there, in her hospital room, without the two of us getting into something with each other. Without getting into it with her. I was extremely—extraordinarily—upset with her, and if she was even the slightest bit angry or lacking in sympathy toward me, then I knew there'd be trouble. Huge trouble. It just wasn't worth it to aggravate an already untenable situation by attempting to talk rationally and reasonably to a person who had precious little of either those things. Maybe later, in much different surroundings, but certainly not here, in the hospital. And certainly not now.

Heart still pounding, then, I trudged off to find the exit.