

Chapter 4

Dr. Doug came by again, early the next morning. Surprisingly, I found an anticipation growing inside me to the point I was almost starting to expect him. I didn't mind it when he closed the curtain, and I actually heard Seattle turn the TV down as he was taking his seat next to the bed. He was quiet, and most obviously not his usual joking, smiling self. I wondered what was wrong.

"What's the matter, Dr. Doug?"

"Lost another patient."

That sounded bad. "Did they die?"

"No." He pulled his chair up and sat, but didn't elaborate right away.

"So?" I was curious, but strangely worried, too. "What happened?"

"My patient—he was a young man about your age. Similar problem." He shook his head. "Today, he decided he felt better, so he checked himself out and went home."

"Was he OK?"

"Physically, yes. I suppose so."

"What was wrong with him, then? Why did you say you 'lost another patient'?"

"Kerrilyn," he seemed in much distress, "he's a *drug addict*. He went home so he could get high. This was the third time." Dr. Doug was very upset. I don't know why I knew, but I knew. It seems he cared a lot for this guy and was taking it very personally that the guy was stupid, and

wouldn't quit doing drugs.

I had to think about what Dr. Doug was saying. Finally, "You said he had a similar problem to mine? But I'm not a drug addict." Why I didn't link my 'problem' to the problem with my pancreas—to the reason I was in the hospital—I don't know.

Dr. Doug just looked at me. I got a very sad feeling from him. He cared. He cared a great deal, and every loss hurt him inside. "Kerrilyn," he sighed, "you're an alcoholic. Alcohol's a drug, just like cocaine ... or heroin."

"I'm not an alcoholic." I was sure. But ... *was* I sure? "Am I?"

He nodded.

"But I'm not some old drunk wino you see wandering around on the streets, or sleeping in doorways."

"Kerrilyn," Dr. Doug said, "alcoholism is a *disease*. It doesn't mean you're a bad person. It's an illness."

"I've always drunk a lot. I enjoy it. But I've never had a problem with my drinking." At least I thought so. "Alcoholics are people who can't control their drinking. They get drunk when they're not supposed to. They have all kinds of other problems, too."

He frowned briefly, "You've never had any problems as a result of your drinking?"

"No." I was sure. "I've been fine."

"Fine? Then why are you in the hospital?"

"That's not because I was drinking. It's because Marc and I had a big fight, and I was pregnant, and the band wanted me to make up with him, and ... but not because ..." He was looking at me like *I* was the one who had, indeed, come from another planet. And I caught myself, eventually. "Jesus, I'm stupid," I said.

"How so?"

"You conned me into talking about my drinking. You made me admit I have a problem." I folded my arms, but stiffly, painfully. "Stupid. Just plain stupid."

"Do you not agree you have a drinking problem?"

But I was angry. "I'm not gonna talk any more about it. You might as well just leave."

“That’s OK, Kerrilyn dear. ‘Cause you ain’t alone.” And Dr. Doug got up and left.

The curtain was left closed. At first I thought he had just forgotten it, but then as I lay thinking and fuming in silence, it occurred to me that he may have done it on purpose. I suppose I could get up and open it. I *can* get out of bed; it’s not that big a deal. But I didn’t. Then I’d have to face Seattle. She’d be sure to have something to say. Hell, they may have even put her there just to irritate me. She’d launch on me about my ‘drinking problem’ and then make some stupid joke about it.

Sometimes she could almost talk to me like a normal person. But then she would suddenly flip 180° in the opposite direction and jump all over me. That she readily admitted she was an alcoholic, I found interesting. Furthermore, she made jokes about it. Jokes. The prospect of being an alcoholic scared me way too much to ever think it could be funny. I was way past the point where I didn’t care what happened to me—way, way past. Some things in life were too important. But that and the pressure of having to change—which was being forced upon me against my will—was almost too much to imagine. I wasn’t ready to admit it, but I knew I would have to change. And Seattle, I was sure, had no intention of changing. The only thing I really couldn’t quite figure out was why I even cared about her.

But she was, I knew, just like me.

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Why did I torture myself so much over Kerrilyn? Though I was angry, and had many and ample reasons for keeping away from that woman, why did I persist in still trying to hover around her, like a singed moth spiraling around a hot flame? I knew she was bad for me—loose, dangerous, and unpredictable—but still it seemed every time I turned around there I was again, thinking about her, trying to see her, paying for her and all her mistakes, worrying about her—worrying about *us*. I should just forget about her, keep away from her (as far as possible), and seriously attempt to get on with my life.

Oh, then I had to consider something else. As I sat alone on that quiet, boring Thursday night I began to consider the value of my new solitary, lonely bachelor’s existence. The band was on hiatus, if not gone. My best

friends, Sheree and Tom, were still reeling from all the upheaval Kerrilyn had caused. I could still talk to Tom, but Sheree 'hated' me, so it was better if I let him call me. I had no one and nothing to do when I wasn't sleeping or working. Without Kerrilyn, it seemed, I had no life. I had nothing to do, and no one to do it with.

I know I'd lived that way in the past. Prior to finding Kerrilyn it seemed as though all my life had been a solitary, monk's existence, but with the arrival of that wild, superheated Irish lass everything changed. No longer was I alone—or content to be alone. Before Kerrilyn I used to tell myself, and believe it, that I preferred to be aloof and detached from those around me. Not have anyone close to me. Certainly it seemed simpler, and it was. But what a desolate existence it had been! I knew, as I know now, that a frozen pizza alone in front of the TV is no kind of substitute for the pleasures and excitements of a warm woman wrapping her arms and legs around you while you only *try* to watch TV. A thing like TV matters so much less when you can trundle someone off to bed. Pizza isn't the only food in existence when you can dine on the blazing warmth of someone's love and attention. Love can't feed the body, but it nourishes the soul. Before Kerrilyn, I wrapped myself up inside myself, a fortress of bleak and silent despair sitting disconsolately alone at home, layered in the armor and defenses of the perpetually alone, girded for the long, cold, solitary haul. Before Kerrilyn, I believed myself destined to remain alone, and ultimately better off being alone. I hadn't had so very many experiences with love, certainly not enough to say I knew either that there was, or was no right love for me, but as for my limited experiences ... even those tended to tell me I just wasn't cut out for a relationship. For love—for loving.

I had dated a few girls before Joan, but only a very few since then. None had I ever loved, and none had loved me. I was in love Joan, or so I thought, but when the going got rough between us I stepped over the line, and she knocked the living shit out of me for it. She convinced me. Either I was some deviant, maladjusted sociopath, or she was just so manipulative and emasculating as to drive me to do horrible things that I couldn't otherwise imagine. I desperately feared the former, but suspected the latter.

I don't know if I deserved what Joan did to me. At the time I thought it was just what I had coming, but in retrospect she may have overreacted. After time passed the memory dimmed of how I'd treated her, what I'd

done to her, and maybe what I'd *tried* to do to her. In time it seemed that she was mistaken of my intentions; I hadn't done what she had accused me of. She hadn't needed to hit me the way she had. I hadn't hurt her, and wouldn't have hurt her, no matter what would've happened.

But was she? If she had been the evil one, why did I keep myself from seeking out other girls, other women? Why did I hide myself from the world and refuse to give anyone a chance, or take any chances myself? Did I know something I was afraid to admit? I didn't want to even think about it.

My experiences with Joan were followed by three years of almost nothing. I may have dated a few girls, but since I was always so uncertain and unsure, they never got the opportunity to know me. If they didn't pursue me (and it seems they *never* did) it was likely not to happen. I never pursued any of them, beyond all but the most halfhearted of attempts. Generally, if you don't put any effort into getting to know someone, they lose interest in a hurry. Maybe once in a while I'd call someone a second time, but rarely—if ever—did I make a third call. Tom (and others) kidded me about going gay, but I wasn't, and I'm not. I just couldn't see myself with *any* of the girls I met at school, or even at gigs where drunken chicks would sometimes come around during breaks or after, sniffing about for free drugs, or perhaps a chance to make it with a musician. What a joke! How could I possibly be interested in a drunk, staggering, awful-smelling girl with smeared makeup and straggly hair?

The women at Emory University (one would *not* call them girls) were typically from wealthy families and were always well kept, pampered, well groomed, and well fed. They were more likely to belong to expensive, *exclusive* sororities, and spend their time cruising the frat houses along Clifton Road for the future doctors, lawyers, and captains of industry. A few were nice to me. A very few others weren't sorority types at all, but were more likely to be psych or sociology majors with shoulder length straight, oily hair and horn rim glasses. Birkenstock sandals, blue oxford cloth shirts and pleated, plaid skirts down past their knees were the uniform of the day for those women. They were the political types, more concerned with the whales, the environment, or the MIAs still being held in Vietnam. I barely got a second look. I was just some long haired computer science major (just short of carrying a pocket protector) who in their opinion did too many drugs and 'prostituted' himself by playing pop music in a rock band.

In college I don't know what—or who—I was looking for, and much

later while I laid on my couch with a watered-down scotch and the stub of a joint, alone again—Kerrilyn in the hospital and out of my life—I found I still didn't know.

I felt like I had backdoored my way into Joan's life. I never really expected anything to happen with her, and was both surprised and a little lost when I succeeded in attracting her attention. At the time I felt uncharacteristically like I was pursuing her, and I probably was, considering how quiet and shy Joan was. But we were both pretty quiet and shy. I still am. But what was I looking for in a woman—in a relationship? Did I really want to be alone the rest of my life, and die a bachelor? No. I knew I didn't want to be forever only looking and hoping. What I wanted was a woman with a sharp, aware mind; nicely rounded shape and a pretty-enough face; who loved to be affectionate and would be absolutely loyal and devoted to me. But of course, I could have met that woman a hundred times in the past and simply put her off by not responding to her interest. What it would really take, then, was that one special persistent person to find me, get my attention, and never let go. Too much subtlety coupled with not enough perseverance would simply not do the trick.

None of my women have been very subtle. Joan was quiet, but hardly subtle once you got her alone. Kerrilyn is famously *unsubtle*, almost to a fault. Joan didn't need to be persistent, and I guess neither did Kerrilyn, but with dear Kerrilyn things were so different in the early going. The fact she came to live with me—and stayed—counts as a type of perverse dedication. So, with two of the three most influential women in my life (other than my dear old dead sister, Suzanne) not fitting the profile I've determined, why do I speak of persistence and perseverance? Because, for sheer determination in the face of resistance, I have Mel Howe.

I was a college senior at Emory. She had briefly attended Agnes Scott College not far away in Decatur. Two semesters, I think, and she had either run out of money or interest in the requisites of pursuing higher education. Some other school might have been more her style, perhaps, but maybe she had only gone initially under the coercion of her parents, and had only just managed to escape with her dignity intact.

I remembered her from our two brief prior meetings. She had struck me as a fairly pretty, tallish young woman with striking brown eyes and the type of long, shiny, full-bodied brunet hair that reminded me vaguely

of Joan. I thought she was too thin. I've always been mainly attracted to well-rounded women, girls with ample curves (like Kerrilyn, of course, and Joan before her) and though I thought Melinda Howe was pretty enough—in an angular, tomboyish way—she had never really caught my attention. At least not to the point where I would have ever called her.

So it was Mel Howe who called me. Fortunately for both of us she had gotten lucky that particular evening, and not only was I home but also happened not to be busy, so we talked awhile. Since we are close to the same age, and both musicians, we talked about the music biz, and about our bands and about other musicians we both knew. We talked about our equipment—or relative lack thereof—and dreamed out loud about what we wanted to do once our respective bands took off. We were both going to become famous, we were certain, and we were just itching to spend some of the megabucks that were sure to come our way, eventually. What irrational dreamers musicians can be! We both knew our spoken dreams and desires were hardly ever likely to be realized. But it was nice, just the same, to spend a little while just talking about all the stratospheric, glamorous heights we were 'destined' to ascend. How little well we understood the reality of fame, or of the 'fortunes' to be accrued ...

Still, it was nice to know someone who had some of the same aspirations as me. It was understood and completely unsaid that if I were to abandon my chosen career in computers for one in music she would not be disappointed in me. So many other women only seemed to subscribe to the expectation that I'd stop playing music once I graduated from college. My absolute denial of it, then, would inevitably put a damper on the conversation.

College women were only looking for a meal ticket, it seemed. Looking only for the 'good provider' for their babies and their hair appointments, and their BMWs, and their five bedroom 'mansions.' Why, even my major had been a cause for some concern. In my chosen profession, I'd probably never make the kind of salary their law or premed acquaintances would, unless I happened to form my own business and make a fortune by inventing some fantastic new program. At the time the personal computer was still in its infancy so the fortunes to be made from it were hardly more than dreams. But in almost every conversation with any of my female classmates, not only was my music interest *déclassé* to them, it qualified only as a hobby to be abandoned once I entered the 'real' workforce.

In contrast to that, Mel Howe was just as interested and excited as me by those naive dreamings of music. For her, as it was (and still is) for me, music—and the performance of it—were the most important things in our lives. In fact I think they're the *only* things in her life.

After discussing music and our (supposed) bright futures for some time, then, Mel asked me about something a little closer to reality. What was I doing later on that night?

"Nothing in particular," I told her. "Why? What are you doing?" I thought it an innocent question, asked by a friend. I had pictured us working together perhaps, but beyond that ...

"Well," she said, "I'd like to go out."

"Go out? You mean, like, on a date. With me?"

"Yeah, with you! Why not?" she asked. "What's the matter? Have you already decided I'm not worth going out with, even if it's just this one time?"

She was moving way too quickly for me. I had to progress from the idea that she even wanted to go out with me (which I had not previously considered at all) to the idea that she was only interested in going out with me that night. So, I had to ask, "What do you mean, 'just this one time'? What's the matter? Is your boyfriend out of town, leaving you bored with nothing else to do?"

Maybe I was a little too hard on her, but she seemed to take it in stride. I could feel her smile. "Oh, I'm not bored at all," she said smoothly. "I could have called anyone," she paused, dramatically, "but I didn't." She cleared her throat. "As far as having a boyfriend is concerned, and despite the fact that it's none of your business, I'm currently not dating anyone on a steady basis. I may have had 'nothing else to do' as you put it, but I really called you because I thought you were a nice guy. I also took the chance that you wouldn't be busy tonight—or dating anyone in particular—either. Was I wrong?"

Was she wrong? I was afraid to answer, but did anyway, "No, I'm not dating anyone right now." I couldn't help it; I was flattered. "I just guess I'm not used to being asked out—by a girl."

"That's OK," she chuckled, "'cause I'm not, either. By girls *or* guys."

"You're kidding." I didn't believe her, not for a moment.

"Unfortunately not. Mike Hummell." She coughed, "You remember

him?" I said I guessed I did. "We were together a long time. Since high school." She paused. "Well," she went on, "his idea of a fun date was to lay around the apartment with his two brothers and get drunk. I was only there to make sure he had a beer in his hand, and to be a convenient fuck afterward. But he never was good enough in bed for me to put up with that shit, forever."

I was embarrassed by her frankness. "I'm sorry," I said.

"No need to be. It's not *your* fault, certainly."

"I know. I'm just sorry he didn't pay more attention to you. He should have."

"Why, pray tell?"

"You seem like a pretty interesting person, to me." I had to admit it, she did.

"You silver-tongued devil! You don't have to flatter me, you know. I already think you're a cute guy."

"I wasn't trying to flatter you. I was just trying to tell you what I thought."

"Then, I thank you for the compliment."

"You're welcome." I thought a moment. "So, if we go out, tonight, where do you want to go?" 'If' seemed like the right word. I hoped she hadn't noticed my use of it.

She hadn't. "Oh, anyplace. Maybe no place."

I wondered at her riddles. "What do you mean, 'no place'? Like in, 'How can you be two places at once, when you know you're not anywhere at all?'"

She laughed at my slightly butchered quote from *Firesign Theatre*, which she appeared to get. "It ain't easy. How does 'no place' sound to you?"

I let silence reign for about three seconds. The only use I could think for 'no place' was in reference to being 'in,' i.e. at one or the other's place of residence. Surely—certainly—she *couldn't* be referring to the two of us getting together at either of our apartments. Surely not.

"Hello?" she called out, after the dead air became stifling. "You still there, Marc?"

Without thinking, I sighed. "Yeah, I'm still here."

"Hmmm," she intoned, embarrassed, "you're being a little too quiet, all of a sudden. Maybe we ought to just say 'I'll see you later' and say goodnight. Maybe this wasn't such a hot idea, after all." She sounded like she was talking to herself, almost.

"No!" I objected. "You don't understand. I didn't mean ..." I stumbled "... we don't have to say goodnight."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'm sorry." How could I recover? Did I even know how to recover? "I guess I need to find out what you mean by 'no place.'"

"I thought maybe you could come over to my apartment, for a while. We could just hang out, drink some beer, maybe watch some TV. Something." She couldn't quite say that she was feeling very lonely, and simply wanted to be with someone. She finished, "Is that OK?"

"Sure. I'm sorry if I sounded reluctant. I guess you surprised me, that's all."

"I don't know what you thought I meant, but I only thought that since it was getting kind of late ..."

"That's fine." I hoped I sounded enthusiastic enough to convince her I wasn't afraid to get together with her. Even if I didn't think she was quite my type, how bad could it be?

She seemed pleased. "Good. Your place or mine?"

I was confused, "I thought we had already agreed on your place."

"If you would feel more comfortable having me come over to your apartment, instead of entering into 'enemy territory,' as it were, that would be OK with me."

"I'm not uncomfortable," I said, and I wasn't—much.

"OK," she still seemed to not quite believe me. "Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure." I hoped I convinced her. "Where do you live?"

So in a few minutes I got in my car and drove up to Chamblee, where she lived.

When I arrived, she met me at the door and invited me in. It must have been a warm night because she was wearing some kind of skimpy but nondescript dark cotton knit top, a pair of very short shorts, and was

barefoot. Her hair was also pulled up behind her, so it was easy to see the long, smooth curve of her neckline. As I followed her into what must have been the living room, my eyes drifted down to the slim silhouette of her behind. She seemed to move fluidly, lithely with confidence and self-assured grace, and yet with great economy of movement. She seemed tremendously poised and very athletic as she slid onto her couch, spinning around to face me. I was hesitant to follow her example too quickly. So while I hung myself out in midair, brain and body in limbo, she turned pretty eyes on me and deftly folded her long, slender legs under her. Her tanned, bony knees stuck out to the side. She was a slim girl, but with an obviously nice shape that I hadn't really noticed before. Most of all I noticed her eyes.

"You gonna sit down, or are you gonna just stand there lookin' foolish?" She smiled, and disarmed me with the wrinkles around those eyes.

I fumbled with my hands a little bit, but decided not to fight the feeling. "I guess so," I said. I don't think I sounded very convincing. Then I smelled marijuana, and noticed for the first time that she was quite red-eyed. "You have any more dope?" I asked, sounding very nervous to my ears.

"I got plenty, and plenty of coke, too."

"Where'd you get the money for cocaine?"

"I fucked a guy for a gram," was the tart reply. "He'da given me two, but I accidentally bit him while I was sucking his dick." She shook her head, but still smiled with ironic humor. "Where do you think I got the money?"

"I'm sorry," I said. Jesus! I was some stupid idiot. "I didn't mean ..."

"I know what you meant. I'm not rich like you are, so you just assumed I must be robbing banks or turning tricks to be able to afford it."

"I said I was sorry, Mel. And that's not what I meant, at all." I paced. No way could I sit next to her, now. "And I'm *not* rich, either. I gotta work just like everyone else. Hell, I gotta work damned hard, and I know I can hardly afford any dope, let alone something like cocaine. I wasn't trying to put you down. I was just trying to make conversation." Just very badly, it seemed.

"Hmmm," she seemed to consider, apparently, the efficacy (or lack thereof) of my conversational methods. "OK, I guess." But she remained

smiling. "I was just testing you." She patted the spot next to her bony knees. Batted here eyes with a hint of faux seduction. "Here. Sit."

So I sat—nervously.

Mel brought out a freshly rolled joint and a small rectangular mirror covered with fine, white powder. The infamous extract of the coca plant. While she lit the joint she invited me to divvy up the coke into a couple of lines with a razor blade she supplied just for that purpose. And when it was suitably divided she traded me the dope for the mirror, and while I watched she snorted up the first line through a small, three inch long glass tube. She then leaned forward and took a stiff hit off the joint while I held it for her. The closeness of her face, her lips, her eyes made me aware of the power—the feminine sensuality—she carried, and so surely, so lightly. She smiled, eyes half-closed and very red now, and I caught a brief whiff of her perfume. I looked down at the valley between her breasts, almost as if driven, and noticed small beads of sweat glistening there. I noticed, also, that she was very tanned there, as well.

"Now you." She was referring, of course, to the coke. I felt self-conscious and highly inexperienced when she handed me the mirror and the glass tube, but Mel seemed to know how unsure I was and gently helped me 'do it right.' "Take up about half the line into each nostril. Rub whatever's left over on your gums." She waited while I followed her instructions. "And if you like that, I may have some more around her, somewhere." She took the mirror out of my hands. Winked. "You just never know." Her sultry tone and smile caused my heartbeat to elevate.

I thought the moment had become one *of truth*, as they say, but I was wrong. I thought she was going to lean toward me and pull me into her arms and kiss me, pushing her slick, wet tongue into my mouth and running her slim fingers down between my legs and over my half-erect penis. I thought she was going to pull my shaking, insecure hands up to cup and caress her smallish, but wonderfully soft breasts and invite me to pull down the neckline of her top and encompass her without the encumbrance of clothing. And in the span of ten seconds while I followed the movements of her hand with the white-flecked mirror and noticed again the heady musk of her perfume mingled with the swirling, leaves-burning smell of the dope, I fantasized all these things happening between Mel and me. I dreamed of the patient yielding of her wiry body against mine, the gentle, planned submission of her moist womanhood to my manhood. I saw myself removing her shorts to drive my fingers between her thighs, and into her soaked and waiting vagina. I heard her lilting,

dreamy sighs as she clenched her pubic muscles tightly around my hand. But none of that happened. Nothing happened. I watched her place the mirror on the plywood board that served as her coffee table, supported as it was by two concrete blocks, and watched her take again on the smoldering joint, and I saw her lean back against the back of the couch, and I saw her smile at me—severely stoned—and finally I heard me make a total ass of myself.

“You still seeing that guitar player? What’s his name—Mike Hummell?”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, but still continued to smile. Of course we’d already covered that ground, but in my extremely nervous state I’d forgotten it. “Him? You worried he’s gonna walk in on us, or something?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. I could hardly suppress a foolish grin.

“You worried *anyone’s* gonna walk in on us?”

“No,” I had to say, “I guess not.”

“You ‘guess not’?” She seemed to find something ironic or mildly humorous in my statement. “That’s good, ‘cause you got my undivided attention, right now.”

I wanted to say ‘good,’ too, and put my arms around her, but something prevented me from relaxing enough to do it. I thought I knew what to do—how to proceed—but there was doubt that I had the guts to do it. I felt frozen—stultified—to the point of complete inaction. Mel’s knees just barely touched the side of my leg, and I felt her shift slightly, poking me. She was a woman, and she was there—apparently just for me. The pokes of her knees seemed a signal. ‘I’m here!’ they said. ‘Notice me,’ she seemed to be saying. And I wanted to notice her. I *did* notice her, too, but everything was kept carefully hidden inside. I had been holding myself back for so long and so diligently that it was next to impossible just to relax and enjoy the moment, as she was trying to get me to do.

“I’m glad,” I finally said, but I know I sounded far too nervous and unsure to seem sincere.

Mel Howe just looked at me, still faintly smiling, but otherwise rather blankly, periodically blinking. Clearly she was waiting, but I couldn’t act. It felt too hopeless, then. I had to get up and get out of there, but I was afraid of making an even bigger ass of myself by disturbing the moment, however tense and insecure it felt, by getting up off the couch.

"I'm sorry," I said into the silence, cryptically.

"You're sorry?" She sniffed. The cocaine had made her nose run. "For what?"

"I don't know." Obviously, I did, since I felt responsible for the suspense of the moment.

"Relax," she whispered, and leaned her head into mine, eyes closed. A kiss. She wanted a kiss. So, nervously and tensely, I kissed her.

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Dr. Doug didn't come back to see me after walking out that morning. Instead someone else came by, and it was someone I wanted to see, very much. Sheree came in just as visiting hours began, about two o'clock.

She was very pretty. And wearing a dress! Something I hadn't seen her wear but very rarely; her hair and face were done up fantastically well. The dress was cut about mid-calf, a pale sea foam green, a slinky, form-fitting double-knit with white piping trim around the deep V neckline, and short, cute cap sleeves. It also looked like she'd also donned pantyhose and sported mid-height saddle tan peek-a-boo toe heels. Altogether very stylish. And she looked feminine—exquisitely feminine—adult, and responsible. I wondered if she had been on a job interview.

She bounced into the room with, "Hey, Vix!" Fortunately, grouchy, prickly Seattle, was out. I was glad the two of them weren't going to meet, just yet. But of course I didn't know which of the two I thought I was protecting.

"Sheree?" I queried. I almost didn't recognize her. I mean, it was Sheree, but it was a very different Sheree.

"It's me, sweetie!" She held her arms out, palms up, and twirled. She looked so smashingly pretty, a real knockout.

But I crushed the mood, whining, "Where have you been?"

"Been?" Sheree stopped her twirl suddenly, hand going to her mouth, eyes large and the set of her shoulders making her look like a little child. She was confused, almost horrified that I was unhappy or displeased. "What do you mean?"

"I haven't seen you at all, the whole week." I pouted, "I missed you."

And then almost magically her contrition evaporated. It made me wonder if I'd even seen it. "I missed you, too," she said. "I'm sorry, Vix." She floated lightly into Dr. Doug's usual chair, and moved up close to my shoulder. Her pretty blue eyes warmed me, but her expression was serious. "Dr. Pritkin told me I should wait."

"Dr. Pritkin? Who's he?" I did not immediately make the connection between my Dr. Doug, and her Dr. Pritkin.

"The psychiatrist." She made a puzzled look. "You know. That cute blond guy with the bushy mustache? He said you been talking to him."

"Oh," then I remembered, "Dr. Doug."

"You call him *Dr. Doug*?"

I shrugged, "He asked me to."

"Well, anyway," Sheree got back to it. "How are you feeling? You sound a whole lot better, and you look better, too."

"Thanks. I feel pretty good."

"How's your stomach?"

"Still sore. But better. They got me on a liquid diet, now."

"That's great!" But then her expression changed; she looked down. "I was pretty worried about you, you know. I was so afraid you were ..."

"Were what? Gonna die?"

"No." Then she changed her mind, "Yes. Maybe. I was really worried about you."

"You said that already. I'm not gonna die, Sheree."

She looked up, smiled sheepishly. "I see that. I'm glad."

"They told me I was lucky. Said if they hadn't caught it when they did, it might've been a whole lot worse." I suppose dying would have been worse. I trained my eyes on her face. "And I didn't lose the baby."

"Oh, Vix! That's great news!" She seemed quite happy to hear I was still with child. I guess I hadn't realized it was that important to her. Then she frowned, "Did they tell you if there was going to be any damage?"

"Damage?" I was confused. "To what? What do you mean?"

"Alcohol is very bad for your baby, Kerrilyn." Not Vix this time—Kerrilyn. "It's especially bad during the first three months. It leads to birth

defects and all kinds of other problems.”

I got angry and defensive. “Did they send you in here to lecture me on this?” I didn’t think it was fair to have everyone ganging up on me.

She almost whispered, “But I love you, Kerrilyn.” I saw it in her face. Almost automatically she reached over and smoothed over the hair on my forehead. I allowed it, but seethed underneath. “I love you. But ...”

“But *what?*” My tail was really twitching.

“But, you have to stop drinking. For you. And for your baby. You can’t go on like you were.” She was nervous and afraid. Afraid of me? Nervous in front of me? She finished, “You’ve got to do something.”

“Why are you all ganging up on me like this?”

She shook her head, “No one’s ganging up on you. We all love you. We want to see you get better.”

“Hah!” I shot back. “Who’s this *all*, hmm? I only see you sittin’ here.”

She knew what I meant. She swallowed. “Marc’s taking this very hard, I think, but he’s *far* from perfect.” Her emphasis on the word ‘far’ told me she was upset with Marc, for some reason. But she calmed herself quickly, and only continued to arrange hairs on my forehead. It was mildly irritating since it was being combined with all her motherly words. “I suppose he could be here, if he wanted.” (If he was a man, maybe.)

“Why *isn’t* he here?”

She shrugged, as if it weren’t important. “Because he’s a complete asshole, that’s why.”

“He’s an asshole, all right.”

She looked at me, closely. I could see something just below the surface, but she kept it hidden. “He won’t even talk to me, Kerrilyn, so why should he come talk to you?” Sheree’s attitude seemed very strange. In one moment, she was obviously upset with him, and then she became almost too detached—too aloof—over this falling-out between me and Marc. In the beginning she had been tremendously concerned that the two of us kiss and make up, but as she sat there still flipping the hair away from my face, she seemed to almost want me and Marc to break up.

I thought, what gives? “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” I was puzzled. “You seem different. Strange.”

"Everything's fine with me." Oh, yeah? "Last week was rough, what with everything that's been going on at work, and all, but I'm fine."

"How are you and Tom?"

She seemed ironically amused. "Well, with you temporarily out of the picture, *we're* doing great. We probably won't be so great when I bring you home from here," she shrugged, "but he'll get over it."

"Where were you? Why didn't you come to see me at all week? I had to lay here, all alone. Why didn't you come see me?" I was very into firing off questions, apparently. Sheree just sat listening to me, and not offering any explanation right away.

She shifted in her seat. "I told you." She sounded very determined, suddenly, "Dr. Pritkin said I should wait until he'd talked to you, some. He said it was important for me to wait till you were ready."

"Ready? For what?"

"He wanted to be sure you had 'hit bottom,' as he put it."

I chuckled, "If this ain't bottom, then I don't know what is." I thought of surgery, withdrawal, and Seattle, more or less in that order.

"So." She folded her arms. "Have you decided what you're gonna do?"

"About *what*?" But I was afraid I knew, already.

"About your drinking. About Marc. About your life."

"Oh," I felt relieved, but prematurely. "When I get out of here the first thing I'm gonna do is go make up with Marc, if that's what you're worried about."

"But Kerrilyn ...?"

"What?"

"What are you going to do about the baby? What are you going to do about *you*?"

"What do you mean?" Her question seemed out of place. "I'm keeping the baby, if that's what you're asking."

"That's great." She wasn't pleased. "But you can't go back to drinking, again."

"I'm not, Sheree. I'm gonna stop while I'm pregnant. Don't worry."

She was looking at me like I had just told her I was going to kill myself. Like I had just announced suicide, or something. My statement was as crushing to her as if I had died on the way to the hospital. Pure defeat. She hung her head and spoke hesitantly, with determination, “Vix, you need help. You won’t be able to stop drinking without a lot of help, and I’m afraid if you go back to the bottle, again ... then you’ll end up killing yourself.”

“I’m not gonna go back to the bottle. I promise.”

She latched onto my promise, and debunked it. “Don’t promise. That isn’t gonna work.”

“It *better* work, Sheree, ’cause it’s the best I can do. Either you believe me, or you don’t. I don’t give a shit one way or the other.”

She stiffened slightly, spoke with resolve, “Kerrilyn. I love you.” Her eyes glistened at the edges. “I will always love you. But if you don’t get help for your drinking problem, I can’t be a party to your self-destruction. If you don’t get help, I won’t be there to see you kill yourself.”

“I’m not gonna kill myself.”

Sheree still stared at me. She wasn’t buying it—not at all. “I’m warning you,” she said. “*I won’t be there.*” It was a warning, all right, and a promise.

“Fine!” I had had enough. “Don’t be there. Do what you like, I don’t give a shit. I don’t fuckin’ need you!”

She stood up, then, hugely disheartened by my apparent rejection. “I know. And I’m sorry.” And with tears clearly in her eyes, she left, and she took a huge piece of me with her, too.

“Sheree, come back!” I called after her. But, she didn’t stop. She took my heart away, and left me all alone, truly.

What was so important about my stopping drinking, and getting some help? I could stop drinking, if I wanted to. If they would just leave me alone, I knew I could do it. I was pretty tough; I was pretty strong; I could do it. If they would just give me a chance ...

Dr. Doug did visit me again, about an hour after Sheree left. He didn’t say anything right away, just came over and sat in the chair. He still seemed like a friend to me, but I wasn’t too sure I could trust him. But I liked him a lot, and after Sheree’s walkout I felt I needed someone to talk

to more than ever. But just as Sheree seemed determined not to let me off the hook, I knew Dr. Doug wouldn't let me go, either. He wouldn't believe—as Sheree wouldn't believe—that I could stop drinking on my own. I'd thought I could, but I was forgetting past attempts. Unsuccessful past attempts. I was thinking if I could just get out of the hospital, and if they would just leave me alone, I could stop my drinking and everything would be all right.

I hadn't cried when Sheree left. An hour later I didn't feel anything but anger and betrayal, and even that didn't seem to affect me very much. I was alone—and *so what*. I wasn't going to let them get me down. I was going to stay strong, and beat this thing, no matter what they said. No matter what they thought.

As I said, Dr. Doug was just sitting there, thinking and looking at me, while I lay there, thinking and looking at him. I was trying to be tough, but thank goodness I was really almost ready to give up.

Finally, I broke the silence. "My friend Sheree was here, earlier."

"I know," he said.

"You do? How?"

"I asked her to come by."

"Have you been talking to her?"

He shrugged. Yes, he had. "She was with you when you were brought in, you know. It's standard procedure to interview 'significant others' when alcohol or other drug problems are suspected. She's been a lot of help to us. I hope you know she's been a damn good friend to you."

I sighed, "I know. She's my very best friend."

"Your boyfriend, Marc, has been to see me, too."

"*He has?*" I was hugely surprised, considering what Sheree had told me about him. "When? I didn't see him."

"I called him yesterday. Asked him to come in. I talked to him about your problem—"

"—My problem?"

"Yes. Your drinking problem."

"Yeah, so?" I folded my arms. "What did he say?"

"He thinks you have a problem, as does your friend Sheree, too."

Kerrilyn, they all know. They all see it." Then, he delivered his *coup de grace*: "Why can't you?"

"Where *is* Marc, anyway?"

"Kerrilyn!" His blue eyes pinned me back into my pillow. "Don't change the subject. We're not talking about Marc. We're talking about you."

"What *about* me?" But, did I know? Did I really know I had a drinking problem? And was I trying my best not to admit it? Could my drinking be beyond control—controlling me—and not the other way around? Could it be true? "You know, I'm tired of all this fuckin' 'Kerrilyn's an alcoholic' bullshit. I may have a drinking problem, sure, but I'm not an alcoholic. No way."

"Kerrilyn, being an alcoholic doesn't make you a bad person. It's not a character flaw; it's a disease, nothing more."

"You told me that, before."

"Yes, and it's still true."

"So, I don't see why it's so important that I admit I'm an alcoholic. Whether I do, or not, doesn't change a thing."

He leaned toward me, "Ah, but you're wrong! It changes a lot of things."

"Bullshit. No it doesn't."

"Kerrilyn, I'm an alcoholic."

"Bullshit. You're a doctor."

He waved it off. "That doesn't have anything to do with it." He made close eye contact with me. "I told you before that I've been where you are, and I also told you life can be better if you get help."

"No, it can't. I can do this, myself."

"You can't. Every alcoholic ever born says what you just said, and every one of them is wrong. Dead wrong."

"How do you know? Have you tried it?"

He leaned back in his chair. "As a matter of fact, I have." He seemed saddened, somehow.

But I wondered, "And what happened?"

"I did all right for a while. I thought I could control my drinking, and lead a normal life, but it didn't work. I even held off a whole month, one time, until the day my oldest daughter got hit by a car. They had her taken to a hospital near my home, and I left here to go be with her. But you know I didn't make it there."

"What happened?"

"I couldn't handle the stress of her being injured. I felt I *had* to do something to calm myself down." He looked to me for concurrence. "I thought: I need a drink. Just one drink and I'll be OK." Then he stopped, maybe waiting for me to fill in the blanks. I just stared. "Do you want to know what I did?"

I was quick with, "No."

"Well, I'm going to tell you, anyway. I didn't have just *one* drink. I didn't even stop at three or four." He shook his head, obviously pained by what he was saying. "My wife had to come find me, almost four hours later. My six-year-old daughter had come through the emergency surgery just fine. But *I* was lost to the bottle. My little daughter Jamie had been tough, and brave, and held on, but her daddy just crumbled under the pressure. My little girl could have died, and I wasn't there for her."

I didn't know what to say. Had I ever done anything I really shouldn't have done, just because I was drinking? Had I?

The seconds stretched out. I could feel his hurt and shame, knowing how hard it must have been to let his loved ones down. And himself. So many times we do things just because we want to, without thinking of the consequences and without recognizing the seriousness of our actions. I knew how easy it was to do. All I had to do was take one drink, and whatever worries I had would vanish into nothingness. But could I remember any time in my past where I'd let someone down by my irresponsible actions—by drinking when I should have done something else? Was there such a time, past or present?

Well there was, and it wasn't so very long ago, either.

"You said life can be better if I get help," I finally said. "What did you mean?"

He sighed, then straightened, "Things don't look like they can ever be better. We've tried to stop, but we can't. It's not a question of being weak-willed, or morally bankrupt. It's a disease, nothing more. But it *can* be treated."

“It can?”

“Yes! I’m living proof. You think I was *born* a fucking psychiatrist?” He was still looking at me, intently. I wasn’t afraid. I wasn’t intimidated or put off. He was probing me, testing me, and I was allowing it. Subconsciously I think I wanted him to break me down, and I think he knew it was what I wanted, too. But, he changed the subject, just a little. “I told you about my father, and how he died.” I nodded. “Well, that was five years ago, right after I came on board.

“I was drinking still, but I was this hotshot psychiatric-type who thought he could save the whole, damn world. I thought I could cure anybody. I had breezed through college, and busted my way through med school at the top of my class. As a resident here, patients loved me, and I had several ‘miraculous cures’ under my belt.” He leaned back, now smiling to himself. “I thought I was damn near *invincible*.”

“Then, what happened?” He had me rapt, swallowed by the depth of his bluer-than-blue eyes.

“Then my father got sick. He was in a facility in my hometown, but I asked that he be transferred here. The head psych there was reluctant, and for good reason, since I was related to the patient, but as the patient’s son and closest living relative, he had little choice.

“We brought him here, and I proceeded to work my ‘miracle cure’ on him. I was so certain I could help him stop drinking, though *I* was drinking, myself. I didn’t even consider the possibility of failure. But, he refused to accept my treatment. I couldn’t talk to him; I couldn’t reason with him; I couldn’t reach him. Not at all.”

I thought I knew the story. “So, he walked out of the hospital and went down the street and got drunk.”

“That’s right, Kerrilyn, he did. To spite me, I thought, he walked right out of this place and went straight to a bar, and killed himself.”

But, I had an inspiration: “But it wasn’t meant to hurt you, was it?”

“No, it wasn’t.” He nodded, but sighed. “He was an alcoholic. Had been, for years. He drank all the while we grew up, my brothers and sisters, and me. My mom ran the house, sold real estate, and made enough money to put all of us through college, and even two of us through med school. She was incredibly smart, and tough, and loving, and I credit my success to her.

“But, we loved my dad, too. He was kind, and gentle, and even though he drank, he never hit us or hurt us. He was just never there for us.”

I spoke without even thinking, “My daddy drank, but he used to hit us.” Where that had come from, I didn’t know. Somehow, it had just come out.

Dr. Doug switched gears, suddenly, “Did your mother drink, too?”

“I don’t know. I was too young.”

“Where are they now?”

“Who? My parents?” I asked. He nodded. “Well,” I let out an ironic laugh, “my daddy’s in prison, I guess. My mama ...” I started to say it, but found I couldn’t.

Tears blew up suddenly, and very unexpectedly. I broke down. It was like all the pain and hurt held back for all these years suddenly washed out the dam and came crashing down on me. I had never cried for mama, and though I thought I had nothing to cry about, it came back in a sudden dark wave to tear me to pieces.

For the first time in years and years, I thought consciously of mama, and remembered she was dead. Really dead. It wasn’t that daddy had killed her, it was that mama wasn’t here to help me. In that moment in the hospital, more than anything else in the world I wanted my mama to help me. More than anything, I needed her to tell me what to do. Because I didn’t know what to do, and I knew I needed help. A lot of help.

So I cried, finally. Dr. Doug stayed there to give me Kleenexes, and to just be there. I know I called out for mama, and I know I asked her for help, but of course mama wasn’t there to help me. She wasn’t there, and I felt abandoned and betrayed so deeply I thought I wouldn’t survive it.

I came to that cliff, again. That place where if you look over the edge, you go insane. You come to feel you’re just one step away from losing all your sanity and your rationality, and if that doesn’t scare you ... then nothing will. I was terrified, more of losing my mind than anything else. I just couldn’t let that happen. No matter what, I was determined to hold onto my sanity.

A long time went by. I think maybe Seattle came back, but she left

again, probably at the request of Dr. Doug. He got up a couple of times, talked to the nurse, and after the room was empty again, he shut the door. As he came back to the bed, he put his hand on my arm.

"Come on, Kerrilyn," he said.

"God! I'm so afraid!" I whispered between sobs.

"I know," he took a Kleenex and dabbed lightly at my face, "I know."

"I can't do it," I whispered, again.

"Yes you can. I can help you."

"I can't!" I cried, and broke down into uncontrolled sobbing again, not listening to anything he was saying. "What can I do? I don't know how to stop drinking. If I don't stop, it'll kill my baby. I'll *die* if I hurt my baby!" I whispered, "Oh, please!"

"You can stop. I promise, if you really want to, *you can stop*. I promise."

"How can I!?" I wailed. "I don't know how!"

"We can teach you."

"But I don't know how!"

"Shhh," he soothed, "Relax, now. Just relax, dear Kerry Lynn, just be calm, don't worry about anything."

And his words helped. I listened, and calmed, and relaxed, and in time my sobbing gradually subsided. And all the while he kept calling me Kerry Lynn. Kerry Lynn. My name from childhood, and it took me back to being a child. It took me back to where things were different, and things were easier, and where you had big, strong, adults to help you get out of whatever trouble you got into. They were unpredictable, and they often punished you for reasons you didn't understand, but they were *so strong*. They could hurt you, and they sometimes left you, but they were still the only thing strong enough to kill the monsters.

Because the monsters were coming to get me, and I needed someone to help me kill them. I was a child, a helpless, cringing child, and I desperately needed someone big and strong to help me kill the monsters.

He stayed with me until I felt able to open my eyes and look around at my surroundings. It was later, but exactly how much later I couldn't tell. I didn't have a clock on my bedside table, and with the TV off and no regular traffic, I was completely unable to judge the time.

“What time is it?” was my first question.

“I dunno.” He seemed not to care, particularly. “About five, I think.”

“Where’s Seattle?”

“I asked the nurse if she could take her down to watch TV in the waiting room awhile. I suppose about now she’s probably getting pretty bored.”

“She can come back, if she wants.”

“I think she can wait. Let life be boring for her a while longer. You know?” He dismissed my concern with a wave of his hand. “I’m more worried about Kerrilyn at the moment.”

“I’m better,” I lied.

“You’re not crying, that’s true.”

My heart was in my throat, suddenly. “What do you want from me?” I whispered, choking. But, I knew.

“I want you to get better.”

That threw me, for a minute. “But, how?” I gulped.

“Step one: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”

“What?”

“It’s the first step. Trust me.”

It took no effort to say, “OK. I do.”

“The first step is admitting we have a problem. One we can’t control. We are powerless over alcohol. It’s destroying our lives, ruining our health and our careers, hurting our loved ones, and preventing us from becoming the beautiful, wonderful people we were meant to be.

“But, denial is very strong. We don’t want to see that we have a problem. The alcohol makes us think we can control it, but it’s controlling *us*. We want to think we can drink, socially, and not let it get out of hand, but it always does. We always go too far. *I know.*” And I saw how tired his eyes were. I knew then. He knew what it was like. I could see it in his eyes, in his face. He knew, and I knew I could really trust him. If nothing else, I could trust Dr. Doug to help me.

God! I was *so-oo* close! Just inches away from breaking down the last barrier to recovery, if only I could admit I wasn’t strong enough, or tough

enough to beat the alcohol, alone. So much of me hung in the balance. Deep inside I knew I was losing the fight against the booze, and that the booze was killing me and preventing me from achieving all the things I wanted. But I was determined not to admit that it was. For so long I thought I had been this tough, strong person who ran her own life and made her own decisions (despite the fact I had *never* done that), to break down the last barrier and admit I was beaten was almost too much. I was so close, and yet ... it was so hard to do.

"Can I really stop drinking?"

"If you want to. If you *really* want to."

"I want to."

"Good." But, it seemed, the test wasn't over. "Do you think you have a problem?"

"I guess so."

"You guess so." He parroted my words, sounding very disappointed.

I was horrified to think I was letting down Dr. Doug. I couldn't disappoint him. I couldn't! I felt tears well up, again.

"Don't cry." He was stern, demanding. I stopped. "Just say it. You'll feel better, I promise."

"Say what?"

"Say: Dr. Doug, I have a drinking problem—I'm an alcoholic. I want to stop drinking and put my life back together."

It was so easy, but yet so hard. It seems so foolish, now, to think I had such a problem with admitting my disease, since that's all it is. All I had to do was simply admit to myself that I had a problem, and that I wanted help, and help would begin immediately. All I had to do was stop denying the reality of my life, the shambles I'd made of it (with the alcohol's help) and turn my problem over.

Step two: [We] came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Yes, sanity.

Come on, Kerrilyn! You can do it. Just let go all your fears and your holding on to the booze. Just break down the denial and turn yourself over for recovery. Just let go, and let God.

"All right. I know I have a drinking problem." I said, most soberly. (No pun, not now.) "I'm a ... an alcoholic ... and I need help to quit." I

looked up to him, but couldn't hold his gaze. It was shame, pure and simple. All I could do was look down at my feet, toes hidden under hospital blankets. "Dr. Doug, please help me."

And I felt as if the weight of the world was suddenly lifted from my shoulders. Because no matter what Dr. Doug thought of my declaration, I had come around to finally believing I had a drinking problem. I still didn't know what was going to happen—how I was going to beat the monsters—but I had become willing to trust someone enough to let them help me. And Dr. Douglas R. Pritkin was that someone.

Dr. Doug allowed me a few moments for my statement to sink in, then asked, "Have you thought about what's going to happen once you get out of the hospital? What do you think you'll do once we let you out of here?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought too much about it, I guess."

"You're still pretty sick, but you're quickly becoming well enough that in a few days, or so, we *could* send you home ... or at least you'd be able to leave the hospital."

"I don't know. I suppose," I quickly did a mental inventory of the one friend I had remaining, "I suppose I could stay with Sheree. Have you talked to her? I know she said she talked to you, before."

"I've talked with her, some." I wondered what they had talked about, and whether he had talked to her before or after she came to see me, but he declined to elaborate further. Instead, he redirected my thinking. "But, what are you going to do? Are you going to go back to your old life again, as if nothing has happened?"

"Probably not. The band is probably broken up, so I guess I'll have to find a new one."

"That's not what I'm talking about." He leaned back, and I got nervous all over again. I just knew what he was going to say. "Kerrilyn, I'm talking about getting sober; about getting better. I'm talking about starting down the path to recovery."

I was right. Recovery. Just the very word scared me. It made me wonder what would be expected of me; how was I going to do it? Because I had no earthly idea.

Dr. Doug went on when he saw I wasn't going to answer him. "A little while ago, you asked for help. You admitted that you're an

alcoholic." He did smile, though, "That's a very important first step, you know."

"It is?"

"Yes, finally believing you have a problem *is* the first step."

I remembered: 'We admitted we were powerless over alcohol.' "I have to stop drinking, don't I?"

"I think you do." He paused. "What do you think?"

"I don't know. I think it's going to be pretty hard to do." And in that moment I realized I was wishing I had a drink, because the prospect of getting sober was giving me stress. And I realized that wanting a drink even while in the hospital meant I was going to be in a lot of trouble when I got out. If I didn't have a plan. Maybe even if I did. I gulped, "I think it's going to be damn near fucking impossible."

"Tell me about it."

I rounded on him, then, icy irony abounding in my voice. "I might just *do* that." He only smiled. *I* was nervous. "Why am I so fucking nervous?" I asked myself.

"Maybe you're afraid." He answered the question for me.

"Terrified," I quickly agreed.

He put his hand on my shoulder. I looked at it. "It's OK to be scared," he said. "We're *all* scared. We're afraid we won't be able to change. We know we're not strong enough to stop drinking, on our own. But there's a Power greater than ourselves that can help us. All you have to do is accept *your* powerlessness over the alcohol, and give yourself over to that Higher Power, and you *will* be able to beat it."

"I wish I could believe you ..." but I wasn't sure.

He seemed sure, though. "There's an AA meeting here in the hospital, tonight. Come with me."

"Do you mean 'Alcoholics Anonymous'?"

"Uh-huh. That's the one."

"Am I well enough to go?"

He smiled. "*I* think you're almost well enough to go home." I got a lot of hope from that. "I think you'll be safe with me. We can't remove the IV just yet, but if that doesn't bother you too much, I think you'd get a lot out

of the meeting.”

“They aren’t gonna make me get up and say anything, are they?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” He seemed amused. “We’re just going to listen, and learn, maybe. Why did you think they were going to ask you to talk?”

“I dunno.” I gave him a worried, nervous smile. “Just something I heard, I guess.” I’d heard of AA, and I heard they made people talk.

“No.” He shook his head, smiled too. “Not at your first meeting. Just relax. No one’s going to make you talk. Unless, of course, you want to.”

“I wouldn’t count on it. I get stage fright pretty bad. The idea of getting up in front of a whole room full of strangers flat *terrifies* me! If I thought I was going to have to talk at this meeting, there’d be *no way* you could get me to go. No way!”

“Then you will come?”

Had I said that? I didn’t think I’d agreed, but ... “I suppose.” I shrugged. “But no talking! OK?”

“Fine. Whatever.”

“Can I get cleaned up before then?”

“Sure. I was going to suggest it, anyway ...”

“Will there be any other patients there?”

“You mean, other people like you, dragging IV’s around?” he asked. I nodded. “Probably not, though it’s not that uncommon.” He stood up. “Trust me, Kerrilyn. They won’t mind you, at all. In fact, I think you’ll be surprised at the people you’ll see there. It’s generally a pretty young group, though it’s open to anyone.”

“Do you run these meetings?”

“Run them? No.” He studied me rather seriously. “*I go to them*. You’ll have an advantage over me that no one else does. You see,” he wandered around the end of the bed, thinking as he talked, “they only know me as Doug. They don’t even know I’m a doctor, though from time to time former patients of mine do show up. That’s the ‘anonymous’ part. No one has to know who you are, except your first name. Just give them your first name, and you’ll be fine.”

“They aren’t going to lecture me?”

“No one in AA will ever single you out—or ‘lecture’ you. Kerrilyn, we’re just like you. We’re all alcoholics and we all need help, just like you do.” He wandered back around to his chair. “You might, however, want to keep your ears open and listen to what the others have to say. We won’t lecture you, but you might just learn something if you’re willing to listen.”

“You’re sure I’ll be all right?”

“Positive.” Dr. Doug’s hand went to my shoulder, again. He made me feel small and weak, but protected, and I wanted to trust him completely. And I almost could, too. Just one little bit more, and ...

“OK,” I said. “I’ll come with you, tonight.”

“Great! I’ll have the nurse get you cleaned, showered, and all spiffed up in your best nightgown and IV bottle. If you have a robe and slippers, you’ll probably want to wear them, too, but the meeting is at seven. I promise you’ll be back here by eight thirty, or so.”

“Of course,” I observed dryly, “it’s not like I have anything else to do, is it?”

At the door, he smiled. “That was an extremely brave thing you did, today. I’m proud of you.”

“Sure. It wasn’t that brave.”

“You can think what you want, but *I* say you’re brave, and I think that bravery deserves some mention. Take it easy on yourself, Kerrilyn, the real work is just beginning.”

And on that note, he went out the door.

Dr. Doug came by again, early the next morning. Surprisingly, I found an anticipation growing inside me to the point I was almost starting to expect him. I didn’t mind it when he closed the curtain, and I actually heard Seattle turn the TV down as he was taking his seat next to the bed. He was quiet, and most obviously not his usual joking, smiling self. I wondered what was wrong.

“What’s the matter, Dr. Doug?”

“Lost another patient.”

That sounded bad. “Did they die?”

“No.” He pulled his chair up and sat, but didn’t elaborate right away.

“So?” I was curious, but strangely worried, too. “What happened?”

“My patient—he was a young man about your age. Similar problem.” He shook his head. “Today, he decided he felt better, so he checked himself out and went home.”

“Was he OK?”

“Physically, yes. I suppose so.”

“What was wrong with him, then? Why did you say you ‘lost another patient’?”

“Kerrilyn,” he seemed in much distress, “he’s a *drug addict*. He went home so he could get high. This was the third time.” Dr. Doug was very upset. I don’t know why I knew, but I knew. It seems he cared a lot for this guy and was taking it very personally that the guy was stupid, and wouldn’t quit doing drugs.

I had to think about what Dr. Doug was saying. Finally, “You said he had a similar problem to mine? But I’m not a drug addict.” Why I didn’t link my ‘problem’ to the problem with my pancreas—to the reason I was in the hospital—I don’t know.

Dr. Doug just looked at me. I got a very sad feeling from him. He cared. He cared a great deal, and every loss hurt him inside. “Kerrilyn,” he sighed, “you’re an alcoholic. Alcohol’s a drug, just like cocaine ... or heroin.”

“I’m not an alcoholic.” I was sure. But ... *was* I sure? “Am I?”

He nodded.

“But I’m not some old drunk wino you see wandering around on the streets, or sleeping in doorways.”

“Kerrilyn,” Dr. Doug said, “alcoholism is a *disease*. It doesn’t mean you’re a bad person. It’s an illness.”

“I’ve always drunk a lot. I enjoy it. But I’ve never had a problem with my drinking.” At least I thought so. “Alcoholics are people who can’t control their drinking. They get drunk when they’re not supposed to. They have all kinds of other problems, too.”

He frowned briefly, “You’ve never had any problems as a result of your drinking?”

“No.” I was sure. “I’ve been fine.”

“Fine? Then why are you in the hospital?”

“That’s not because I was drinking. It’s because Marc and I had a big

fight, and I was pregnant, and the band wanted me to make up with him, and ... but not because ...” He was looking at me like *I* was the one who had, indeed, come from another planet. And I caught myself, eventually. “Jesus, I’m stupid,” I said.

“How so?”

“You conned me into talking about my drinking. You made me admit I have a problem.” I folded my arms, but stiffly, painfully. “Stupid. Just plain stupid.”

“Do you not agree you have a drinking problem?”

But I was angry. “I’m not gonna talk any more about it. You might as well just leave.”

“That’s OK, Kerrilyn dear. ‘Cause you ain’t alone.” And Dr. Doug got up and left.

The curtain was left closed. At first I thought he had just forgotten it, but then as I lay thinking and fuming in silence, it occurred to me that he may have done it on purpose. I suppose I could get up and open it. I *can* get out of bed; it’s not that big a deal. But I didn’t. Then I’d have to face Seattle. She’d be sure to have something to say. Hell, they may have even put her there just to irritate me. She’d launch on me about my ‘drinking problem’ and then make some stupid joke about it.

Sometimes she could almost talk to me like a normal person. But then she would suddenly flip 180° in the opposite direction and jump all over me. That she readily admitted she was an alcoholic, I found interesting. Furthermore, she made jokes about it. Jokes. The prospect of being an alcoholic scared me way too much to ever think it could be funny. I was way past the point where I didn’t care what happened to me—way, way past. Some things in life were too important. But that and the pressure of having to change—which was being forced upon me against my will—was almost too much to imagine. I wasn’t ready to admit it, but I knew I would have to change. And Seattle, I was sure, had no intention of changing. The only thing I really couldn’t quite figure out was why I even cared about her.

But she was, I knew, just like me.

• • •

Why did I torture myself so much over Kerrilyn? Though I was angry, and had many and ample reasons for keeping away from that woman, why did I persist in still trying to hover around her, like a singed moth spiraling around a hot flame? I knew she was bad for me—loose, dangerous, and unpredictable—but still it seemed every time I turned around there I was again, thinking about her, trying to see her, paying for her and all her mistakes, worrying about her—worrying about *us*. I should just forget about her, keep away from her (as far as possible), and seriously attempt to get on with my life.

Oh, then I had to consider something else. As I sat alone on that quiet, boring Thursday night I began to consider the value of my new solitary, lonely bachelor's existence. The band was on hiatus, if not gone. My best friends, Sheree and Tom, were still reeling from all the upheaval Kerrilyn had caused. I could still talk to Tom, but Sheree 'hated' me, so it was better if I let him call me. I had no one and nothing to do when I wasn't sleeping or working. Without Kerrilyn, it seemed, I had no life. I had nothing to do, and no one to do it with.

I know I'd lived that way in the past. Prior to finding Kerrilyn it seemed as though all my life had been a solitary, monk's existence, but with the arrival of that wild, superheated Irish lass everything changed. No longer was I alone—or content to be alone. Before Kerrilyn I used to tell myself, and believe it, that I preferred to be aloof and detached from those around me. Not have anyone close to me. Certainly it seemed simpler, and it was. But what a desolate existence it had been! I knew, as I know now, that a frozen pizza alone in front of the TV is no kind of substitute for the pleasures and excitements of a warm woman wrapping her arms and legs around you while you only *try* to watch TV. A thing like TV matters so much less when you can trundle someone off to bed. Pizza isn't the only food in existence when you can dine on the blazing warmth of someone's love and attention. Love can't feed the body, but it nourishes the soul. Before Kerrilyn, I wrapped myself up inside myself, a fortress of bleak and silent despair sitting disconsolately alone at home, layered in the armor and defenses of the perpetually alone, girded for the long, cold, solitary haul. Before Kerrilyn, I believed myself destined to remain alone, and ultimately better off being alone. I hadn't had so very many experiences with love, certainly not enough to say I knew either that there was, or was no right love for me, but as for my limited experiences ... even those tended to tell me I just wasn't cut out for a relationship. For love—for loving.

I had dated a few girls before Joan, but only a very few since then. None had I ever loved, and none had loved me. I was in love Joan, or so I thought, but when the going got rough between us I stepped over the line, and she knocked the living shit out of me for it. She convinced me. Either I was some deviant, maladjusted sociopath, or she was just so manipulative and emasculating as to drive me to do horrible things that I couldn't otherwise imagine. I desperately feared the former, but suspected the latter.

I don't know if I deserved what Joan did to me. At the time I thought it was just what I had coming, but in retrospect she may have overreacted. After time passed the memory dimmed of how I'd treated her, what I'd done to her, and maybe what I'd *tried* to do to her. In time it seemed that she was mistaken of my intentions; I hadn't done what she had accused me of. She hadn't needed to hit me the way she had. I hadn't hurt her, and wouldn't have hurt her, no matter what would've happened.

But was she? If she had been the evil one, why did I keep myself from seeking out other girls, other women? Why did I hide myself from the world and refuse to give anyone a chance, or take any chances myself? Did I know something I was afraid to admit? I didn't want to even think about it.

My experiences with Joan were followed by three years of almost nothing. I may have dated a few girls, but since I was always so uncertain and unsure, they never got the opportunity to know me. If they didn't pursue me (and it seems they *never* did) it was likely not to happen. I never pursued any of them, beyond all but the most halfhearted of attempts. Generally, if you don't put any effort into getting to know someone, they lose interest in a hurry. Maybe once in a while I'd call someone a second time, but rarely—if ever—did I make a third call. Tom (and others) kidded me about going gay, but I wasn't, and I'm not. I just couldn't see myself with *any* of the girls I met at school, or even at gigs where drunken chicks would sometimes come around during breaks or after, sniffing about for free drugs, or perhaps a chance to make it with a musician. What a joke! How could I possibly be interested in a drunk, staggering, awful-smelling girl with smeared makeup and straggly hair?

The women at Emory University (one would *not* call them girls) were typically from wealthy families and were always well kept, pampered, well groomed, and well fed. They were more likely to belong to

expensive, *exclusive* sororities, and spend their time cruising the frat houses along Clifton Road for the future doctors, lawyers, and captains of industry. A few were nice to me. A very few others weren't sorority types at all, but were more likely to be psych or sociology majors with shoulder length straight, oily hair and horn rim glasses. Birkenstock sandals, blue oxford cloth shirts and pleated, plaid skirts down past their knees were the uniform of the day for those women. They were the political types, more concerned with the whales, the environment, or the MIAs still being held in Vietnam. I barely got a second look. I was just some long haired computer science major (just short of carrying a pocket protector) who in their opinion did too many drugs and 'prostituted' himself by playing pop music in a rock band.

In college I don't know what—or who—I was looking for, and much later while I laid on my couch with a watered-down scotch and the stub of a joint, alone again—Kerrilyn in the hospital and out of my life—I found I still didn't know.

I felt like I had backdoored my way into Joan's life. I never really expected anything to happen with her, and was both surprised and a little lost when I succeeded in attracting her attention. At the time I felt uncharacteristically like I was pursuing her, and I probably was, considering how quiet and shy Joan was. But we were both pretty quiet and shy. I still am. But what was I looking for in a woman—in a relationship? Did I really want to be alone the rest of my life, and die a bachelor? No. I knew I didn't want to be forever only looking and hoping. What I wanted was a woman with a sharp, aware mind; nicely rounded shape and a pretty-enough face; who loved to be affectionate and would be absolutely loyal and devoted to me. But of course, I could have met that woman a hundred times in the past and simply put her off by not responding to her interest. What it would really take, then, was that one special persistent person to find me, get my attention, and never let go. Too much subtlety coupled with not enough perseverance would simply not do the trick.

None of my women have been very subtle. Joan was quiet, but hardly subtle once you got her alone. Kerrilyn is famously *unsubtle*, almost to a fault. Joan didn't need to be persistent, and I guess neither did Kerrilyn, but with dear Kerrilyn things were so different in the early going. The fact she came to live with me—and stayed—counts as a type of perverse dedication. So, with two of the three most influential women in my life (other than my dear old dead sister, Suzanne) not fitting the profile I've

determined, why do I speak of persistence and perseverance? Because, for sheer determination in the face of resistance, I have Mel Howe.

I was a college senior at Emory. She had briefly attended Agnes Scott College not far away in Decatur. Two semesters, I think, and she had either run out of money or interest in the requisites of pursuing higher education. Some other school might have been more her style, perhaps, but maybe she had only gone initially under the coercion of her parents, and had only just managed to escape with her dignity intact.

I remembered her from our two brief prior meetings. She had struck me as a fairly pretty, tallish young woman with striking brown eyes and the type of long, shiny, full-bodied brunet hair that reminded me vaguely of Joan. I thought she was too thin. I've always been mainly attracted to well-rounded women, girls with ample curves (like Kerrilyn, of course, and Joan before her) and though I thought Melinda Howe was pretty enough—in an angular, tomboyish way—she had never really caught my attention. At least not to the point where I would have ever called her.

So it was Mel Howe who called me. Fortunately for both of us she had gotten lucky that particular evening, and not only was I home but also happened not to be busy, so we talked awhile. Since we are close to the same age, and both musicians, we talked about the music biz, and about our bands and about other musicians we both knew. We talked about our equipment—or relative lack thereof—and dreamed out loud about what we wanted to do once our respective bands took off. We were both going to become famous, we were certain, and we were just itching to spend some of the megabucks that were sure to come our way, eventually. What irrational dreamers musicians can be! We both knew our spoken dreams and desires were hardly ever likely to be realized. But it was nice, just the same, to spend a little while just talking about all the stratospheric, glamorous heights we were 'destined' to ascend. How little well we understood the reality of fame, or of the 'fortunes' to be accrued ...

Still, it was nice to know someone who had some of the same aspirations as me. It was understood and completely unsaid that if I were to abandon my chosen career in computers for one in music she would not be disappointed in me. So many other women only seemed to subscribe to the expectation that I'd stop playing music once I graduated from college. My absolute denial of it, then, would inevitably put a damper on the

conversation.

College women were only looking for a meal ticket, it seemed. Looking only for the 'good provider' for their babies and their hair appointments, and their BMWs, and their five bedroom 'mansions.' Why, even my major had been a cause for some concern. In my chosen profession, I'd probably never make the kind of salary their law or premed acquaintances would, unless I happened to form my own business and make a fortune by inventing some fantastic new program. At the time the personal computer was still in its infancy so the fortunes to be made from it were hardly more than dreams. But in almost every conversation with any of my female classmates, not only was my music interest *déclassé* to them, it qualified only as a hobby to be abandoned once I entered the 'real' workforce.

In contrast to that, Mel Howe was just as interested and excited as me by those naive dreamings of music. For her, as it was (and still is) for me, music—and the performance of it—were the most important things in our lives. In fact I think they're the *only* things in her life.

After discussing music and our (supposed) bright futures for some time, then, Mel asked me about something a little closer to reality. What was I doing later on that night?

"Nothing in particular," I told her. "Why? What are you doing?" I thought it an innocent question, asked by a friend. I had pictured us working together perhaps, but beyond that ...

"Well," she said, "I'd like to go out."

"Go out? You mean, like, on a date. With me?"

"Yeah, with you! Why not?" she asked. "What's the matter? Have you already decided I'm not worth going out with, even if it's just this one time?"

She was moving way too quickly for me. I had to progress from the idea that she even wanted to go out with me (which I had not previously considered at all) to the idea that she was only interested in going out with me that night. So, I had to ask, "What do you mean, 'just this one time'? What's the matter? Is your boyfriend out of town, leaving you bored with nothing else to do?"

Maybe I was a little too hard on her, but she seemed to take it in stride. I could feel her smile. "Oh, I'm not bored at all," she said smoothly. "I could have called anyone," she paused, dramatically, "but I didn't." She

cleared her throat. "As far as having a boyfriend is concerned, and despite the fact that it's none of your business, I'm currently not dating anyone on a steady basis. I may have had 'nothing else to do' as you put it, but I really called you because I thought you were a nice guy. I also took the chance that you wouldn't be busy tonight—or dating anyone in particular—either. Was I wrong?"

Was she wrong? I was afraid to answer, but did anyway, "No, I'm not dating anyone right now." I couldn't help it; I was flattered. "I just guess I'm not used to being asked out—by a girl."

"That's OK," she chuckled, "'cause I'm not, either. By girls *or* guys."

"You're kidding." I didn't believe her, not for a moment.

"Unfortunately not. Mike Hummell." She coughed, "You remember him?" I said I guessed I did. "We were together a long time. Since high school." She paused. "Well," she went on, "his idea of a fun date was to lay around the apartment with his two brothers and get drunk. I was only there to make sure he had a beer in his hand, and to be a convenient fuck afterward. But he never was good enough in bed for me to put up with that shit, forever."

I was embarrassed by her frankness. "I'm sorry," I said.

"No need to be. It's not *your* fault, certainly."

"I know. I'm just sorry he didn't pay more attention to you. He should have."

"Why, pray tell?"

"You seem like a pretty interesting person, to me." I had to admit it, she did.

"You silver-tongued devil! You don't have to flatter me, you know. I already think you're a cute guy."

"I wasn't trying to flatter you. I was just trying to tell you what I thought."

"Then, I thank you for the compliment."

"You're welcome." I thought a moment. "So, if we go out, tonight, where do you want to go?" 'If' seemed like the right word. I hoped she hadn't noticed my use of it.

She hadn't. "Oh, anyplace. Maybe no place."

I wondered at her riddles. "What do you mean, 'no place'? Like in,

'How can you be two places at once, when you know you're not anywhere at all?'"

She laughed at my slightly butchered quote from *Firesign Theatre*, which she appeared to get. "It ain't easy. How does 'no place' sound to you?"

I let silence reign for about three seconds. The only use I could think for 'no place' was in reference to being 'in,' i.e. at one or the other's place of residence. Surely—certainly—she *couldn't* be referring to the two of us getting together at either of our apartments. Surely not.

"Hello?" she called out, after the dead air became stifling. "You still there, Marc?"

Without thinking, I sighed. "Yeah, I'm still here."

"Hmmm," she intoned, embarrassed, "you're being a little too quiet, all of a sudden. Maybe we ought to just say 'I'll see you later' and say goodnight. Maybe this wasn't such a hot idea, after all." She sounded like she was talking to herself, almost.

"No!" I objected. "You don't understand. I didn't mean ..." I stumbled "... we don't have to say goodnight."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'm sorry." How could I recover? Did I even know how to recover? "I guess I need to find out what you mean by 'no place.'"

"I thought maybe you could come over to my apartment, for a while. We could just hang out, drink some beer, maybe watch some TV. Something." She couldn't quite say that she was feeling very lonely, and simply wanted to be with someone. She finished, "Is that OK?"

"Sure. I'm sorry if I sounded reluctant. I guess you surprised me, that's all."

"I don't know what you thought I meant, but I only thought that since it was getting kind of late ..."

"That's fine." I hoped I sounded enthusiastic enough to convince her I wasn't afraid to get together with her. Even if I didn't think she was quite my type, how bad could it be?

She seemed pleased. "Good. Your place or mine?"

I was confused, "I thought we had already agreed on your place."

"If you would feel more comfortable having me come over to your

apartment, instead of entering into 'enemy territory,' as it were, that would be OK with me."

"I'm not uncomfortable," I said, and I wasn't—much.

"OK," she still seemed to not quite believe me. "Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure." I hoped I convinced her. "Where do you live?"

So in a few minutes I got in my car and drove up to Chamblee, where she lived.

When I arrived, she met me at the door and invited me in. It must have been a warm night because she was wearing some kind of skimpy but nondescript dark cotton knit top, a pair of very short shorts, and was barefoot. Her hair was also pulled up behind her, so it was easy to see the long, smooth curve of her neckline. As I followed her into what must have been the living room, my eyes drifted down to the slim silhouette of her behind. She seemed to move fluidly, lithely with confidence and self-assured grace, and yet with great economy of movement. She seemed tremendously poised and very athletic as she slid onto her couch, spinning around to face me. I was hesitant to follow her example too quickly. So while I hung myself out in midair, brain and body in limbo, she turned pretty eyes on me and deftly folded her long, slender legs under her. Her tanned, bony knees stuck out to the side. She was a slim girl, but with an obviously nice shape that I hadn't really noticed before. Most of all I noticed her eyes.

"You gonna sit down, or are you gonna just stand there lookin' foolish?" She smiled, and disarmed me with the wrinkles around those eyes.

I fumbled with my hands a little bit, but decided not to fight the feeling. "I guess so," I said. I don't think I sounded very convincing. Then I smelled marijuana, and noticed for the first time that she was quite red-eyed. "You have any more dope?" I asked, sounding very nervous to my ears.

"I got plenty, and plenty of coke, too."

"Where'd you get the money for cocaine?"

"I fucked a guy for a gram," was the tart reply. "He'da given me two, but I accidentally bit him while I was sucking his dick." She shook her head, but still smiled with ironic humor. "Where do you think I got the

money?"

"I'm sorry," I said. Jesus! I was some stupid idiot. "I didn't mean ..."

"I know what you meant. I'm not rich like you are, so you just assumed I must be robbing banks or turning tricks to be able to afford it."

"I said I was sorry, Mel. And that's not what I meant, at all." I paced. No way could I sit next to her, now. "And I'm *not* rich, either. I gotta work just like everyone else. Hell, I gotta work damned hard, and I know I can hardly afford any dope, let alone something like cocaine. I wasn't trying to put you down. I was just trying to make conversation." Just very badly, it seemed.

"Hmmm," she seemed to consider, apparently, the efficacy (or lack thereof) of my conversational methods. "OK, I guess." But she remained smiling. "I was just testing you." She patted the spot next to her bony knees. Batted here eyes with a hint of faux seduction. "Here. Sit."

So I sat—nervously.

Mel brought out a freshly rolled joint and a small rectangular mirror covered with fine, white powder. The infamous extract of the coca plant. While she lit the joint she invited me to divvy up the coke into a couple of lines with a razor blade she supplied just for that purpose. And when it was suitably divided she traded me the dope for the mirror, and while I watched she snorted up the first line through a small, three inch long glass tube. She then leaned forward and took a stiff hit off the joint while I held it for her. The closeness of her face, her lips, her eyes made me aware of the power—the feminine sensuality—she carried, and so surely, so lightly. She smiled, eyes half-closed and very red now, and I caught a brief whiff of her perfume. I looked down at the valley between her breasts, almost as if driven, and noticed small beads of sweat glistening there. I noticed, also, that she was very tanned there, as well.

"Now you." She was referring, of course, to the coke. I felt self-conscious and highly inexperienced when she handed me the mirror and the glass tube, but Mel seemed to know how unsure I was and gently helped me 'do it right.' "Take up about half the line into each nostril. Rub whatever's left over on your gums." She waited while I followed her instructions. "And if you like that, I may have some more around her, somewhere." She took the mirror out of my hands. Winked. "You just never know." Her sultry tone and smile caused my heartbeat to elevate.

I thought the moment had become one *of truth*, as they say, but I was

wrong. I thought she was going to lean toward me and pull me into her arms and kiss me, pushing her slick, wet tongue into my mouth and running her slim fingers down between my legs and over my half-erect penis. I thought she was going to pull my shaking, insecure hands up to cup and caress her smallish, but wonderfully soft breasts and invite me to pull down the neckline of her top and encompass her without the encumbrance of clothing. And in the span of ten seconds while I followed the movements of her hand with the white-flecked mirror and noticed again the heady musk of her perfume mingled with the swirling, leaves-burning smell of the dope, I fantasized all these things happening between Mel and me. I dreamed of the patient yielding of her wiry body against mine, the gentle, planned submission of her moist womanhood to my manhood. I saw myself removing her shorts to drive my fingers between her thighs, and into her soaked and waiting vagina. I heard her lilting, dreamy sighs as she clenched her pubic muscles tightly around my hand. But none of that happened. Nothing happened. I watched her place the mirror on the plywood board that served as her coffee table, supported as it was by two concrete blocks, and watched her take a hit on the smoldering joint, and I saw her lean back against the back of the couch, and I saw her smile at me—severely stoned—and finally I heard me make a total ass of myself.

“You still seeing that guitar player? What’s his name—Mike Hummell?”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, but still continued to smile. Of course we’d already covered that ground, but in my extremely nervous state I’d forgotten it. “Him? You worried he’s gonna walk in on us, or something?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. I could hardly suppress a foolish grin.

“You worried *anyone’s* gonna walk in on us?”

“No,” I had to say, “I guess not.”

“You ‘guess not’?” She seemed to find something ironic or mildly humorous in my statement. “That’s good, ‘cause you got my undivided attention, right now.”

I wanted to say ‘good,’ too, and put my arms around her, but something prevented me from relaxing enough to do it. I thought I knew what to do—how to proceed—but there was doubt that I had the guts to do it. I felt frozen—stultified—to the point of complete inaction. Mel’s knees just barely touched the side of my leg, and I felt her shift slightly,

poking me. She was a woman, and she was there—apparently just for me. The pokes of her knees seemed a signal. ‘I’m here!’ they said. ‘Notice me,’ she seemed to be saying. And I wanted to notice her. I *did* notice her, too, but everything was kept carefully hidden inside. I had been holding myself back for so long and so diligently that it was next to impossible just to relax and enjoy the moment, as she was trying to get me to do.

“I’m glad,” I finally said, but I know I sounded far too nervous and unsure to seem sincere.

Mel Howe just looked at me, still faintly smiling, but otherwise rather blankly, periodically blinking. Clearly she was waiting, but I couldn’t act. It felt too hopeless, then. I had to get up and get out of there, but I was afraid of making an even bigger ass of myself by disturbing the moment, however tense and insecure it felt, by getting up off the couch.

“I’m sorry,” I said into the silence, cryptically.

“You’re sorry?” She sniffed. The cocaine had made her nose run. “For what?”

“I don’t know.” Obviously, I did, since I felt responsible for the suspense of the moment.

“Relax,” she whispered, and leaned her head into mine, eyes closed. A kiss. She wanted a kiss. So, nervously and tensely, I kissed her.

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Dr. Doug didn’t come back to see me after walking out that morning. Instead someone else came by, and it was someone I wanted to see, very much. Sheree came in just as visiting hours began, about two o’clock.

She was very pretty. And wearing a dress! Something I hadn’t seen her wear but very rarely; her hair and face were done up fantastically well. The dress was cut about mid-calf, a pale sea foam green, a slinky, form-fitting double-knit with white piping trim around the deep V neckline, and short, cute cap sleeves. It also looked like she’d also donned pantyhose and sported mid-height saddle tan peek-a-boo toe heels. Altogether very stylish. And she looked feminine—exquisitely feminine—adult, and responsible. I wondered if she had been on a job interview.

She bounced into the room with, “Hey, Vix!” Fortunately, grouchy, prickly Seattle, was out. I was glad the two of them weren’t going to meet, just yet. But of course I didn’t know which of the two I thought I was

protecting.

“Sheree?” I queried. I almost didn’t recognize her. I mean, it was Sheree, but it was a very different Sheree.

“It’s me, sweetie!” She held her arms out, palms up, and twirled. She looked so smashingly pretty, a real knockout.

But I crushed the mood, whining, “Where have you been?”

“Been?” Sheree stopped her twirl suddenly, hand going to her mouth, eyes large and the set of her shoulders making her look like a little child. She was confused, almost horrified that I was unhappy or displeased. “What do you mean?”

“I haven’t seen you at all, the whole week.” I pouted, “I missed you.”

And then almost magically her contrition evaporated. It made me wonder if I’d even seen it. “I missed you, too,” she said. “I’m sorry, Vix.” She floated lightly into Dr. Doug’s usual chair, and moved up close to my shoulder. Her pretty blue eyes warmed me, but her expression was serious. “Dr. Pritkin told me I should wait.”

“Dr. Pritkin? Who’s he?” I did not immediately make the connection between my Dr. Doug, and her Dr. Pritkin.

“The psychiatrist.” She made a puzzled look. “You know. That cute blond guy with the bushy mustache? He said you been talking to him.”

“Oh,” then I remembered, “Dr. Doug.”

“You call him *Dr. Doug*?”

I shrugged, “He asked me to.”

“Well, anyway,” Sheree got back to it. “How are you feeling? You sound a whole lot better, and you look better, too.”

“Thanks. I feel pretty good.”

“How’s your stomach?”

“Still sore. But better. They got me on a liquid diet, now.”

“That’s great!” But then her expression changed; she looked down. “I was pretty worried about you, you know. I was so afraid you were ...”

“Were what? Gonna die?”

“No.” Then she changed her mind, “Yes. Maybe. I was really worried about you.”

"You said that already. I'm not gonna die, Sheree."

She looked up, smiled sheepishly. "I see that. I'm glad."

"They told me I was lucky. Said if they hadn't caught it when they did, it might've been a whole lot worse." I suppose dying would have been worse. I trained my eyes on her face. "And I didn't lose the baby."

"Oh, Vix! That's great news!" She seemed quite happy to hear I was still with child. I guess I hadn't realized it was that important to her. Then she frowned, "Did they tell you if there was going to be any damage?"

"Damage?" I was confused. "To what? What do you mean?"

"Alcohol is very bad for your baby, Kerrilyn." Not Vix this time—Kerrilyn. "It's especially bad during the first three months. It leads to birth defects and all kinds of other problems."

I got angry and defensive. "Did they send you in here to lecture me on this?" I didn't think it was fair to have everyone ganging up on me.

She almost whispered, "But I love you, Kerrilyn." I saw it in her face. Almost automatically she reached over and smoothed over the hair on my forehead. I allowed it, but seethed underneath. "I love you. But ..."

"But *what?*" My tail was really twitching.

"But, you have to stop drinking. For you. And for your baby. You can't go on like you were." She was nervous and afraid. Afraid of me? Nervous in front of me? She finished, "You've got to do something."

"Why are you all ganging up on me like this?"

She shook her head, "No one's ganging up on you. We all love you. We want to see you get better."

"Hah!" I shot back. "Who's this *all*, hmm? I only see you sittin' here."

She knew what I meant. She swallowed. "Marc's taking this very hard, I think, but he's *far* from perfect." Her emphasis on the word 'far' told me she was upset with Marc, for some reason. But she calmed herself quickly, and only continued to arrange hairs on my forehead. It was mildly irritating since it was being combined with all her motherly words. "I suppose he could be here, if he wanted." (If he was a man, maybe.)

"Why *isn't* he here?"

She shrugged, as if it weren't important. "Because he's a complete asshole, that's why."

“He’s an asshole, all right.”

She looked at me, closely. I could see something just below the surface, but she kept it hidden. “He won’t even talk to me, Kerrilyn, so why should he come talk to you?” Sheree’s attitude seemed very strange. In one moment, she was obviously upset with him, and then she became almost too detached—too aloof—over this falling-out between me and Marc. In the beginning she had been tremendously concerned that the two of us kiss and make up, but as she sat there still flipping the hair away from my face, she seemed to almost want me and Marc to break up.

I thought, what gives? “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” I was puzzled. “You seem different. Strange.”

“Everything’s fine with me.” Oh, yeah? “Last week was rough, what with everything that’s been going on at work, and all, but I’m fine.”

“How are you and Tom?”

She seemed ironically amused. “Well, with you temporarily out of the picture, *we’re* doing great. We probably won’t be so great when I bring you home from here,” she shrugged, “but he’ll get over it.”

“Where were you? Why didn’t you come to see me at all week? I had to lay here, all alone. Why didn’t you come see me?” I was very into firing off questions, apparently. Sheree just sat listening to me, and not offering any explanation right away.

She shifted in her seat. “I told you.” She sounded very determined, suddenly, “Dr. Pritkin said I should wait until he’d talked to you, some. He said it was important for me to wait till you were ready.”

“Ready? For what?”

“He wanted to be sure you had ‘hit bottom,’ as he put it.”

I chuckled, “If this ain’t bottom, then I don’t know what is.” I thought of surgery, withdrawal, and Seattle, more or less in that order.

“So.” She folded her arms. “Have you decided what you’re gonna do?”

“About *what*?” But I was afraid I knew, already.

“About your drinking. About Marc. About your life.”

“Oh,” I felt relieved, but prematurely. “When I get out of here the first

thing I'm gonna do is go make up with Marc, if that's what you're worried about."

"But Kerrilyn ...?"

"What?"

"What are you going to do about the baby? What are you going to do about *you*?"

"What do you mean?" Her question seemed out of place. "I'm keeping the baby, if that's what you're asking."

"That's great." She wasn't pleased. "But you can't go back to drinking, again."

"I'm not, Sheree. I'm gonna stop while I'm pregnant. Don't worry."

She was looking at me like I had just told her I was going to kill myself. Like I had just announced suicide, or something. My statement was as crushing to her as if I had died on the way to the hospital. Pure defeat. She hung her head and spoke hesitantly, with determination, "Vix, you need help. You won't be able to stop drinking without a lot of help, and I'm afraid if you go back to the bottle, again ... then you'll end up killing yourself."

"I'm not gonna go back to the bottle. I promise."

She latched onto my promise, and debunked it. "Don't promise. That isn't gonna work."

"*It better* work, Sheree, 'cause it's the best I can do. Either you believe me, or you don't. I don't give a shit one way or the other."

She stiffened slightly, spoke with resolve, "Kerrilyn. I love you." Her eyes glistened at the edges. "I will always love you. But if you don't get help for your drinking problem, I can't be a party to your self-destruction. If you don't get help, I won't be there to see you kill yourself."

"I'm not gonna kill myself."

Sheree still stared at me. She wasn't buying it—not at all. "I'm warning you," she said. "*I won't be there.*" It was a warning, all right, and a promise.

"Fine!" I had had enough. "Don't be there. Do what you like, I don't give a shit. I don't fuckin' need you!"

She stood up, then, hugely disheartened by my apparent rejection. "I know. And I'm sorry." And with tears clearly in her eyes, she left, and she

took a huge piece of me with her, too.

“Sheree, come back!” I called after her. But, she didn’t stop. She took my heart away, and left me all alone, truly.

What was so important about my stopping drinking, and getting some help? I could stop drinking, if I wanted to. If they would just leave me alone, I knew I could do it. I was pretty tough; I was pretty strong; I could do it. If they would just give me a chance ...

Dr. Doug did visit me again, about an hour after Sheree left. He didn’t say anything right away, just came over and sat in the chair. He still seemed like a friend to me, but I wasn’t too sure I could trust him. But I liked him a lot, and after Sheree’s walkout I felt I needed someone to talk to more than ever. But just as Sheree seemed determined not to let me off the hook, I knew Dr. Doug wouldn’t let me go, either. He wouldn’t believe—as Sheree wouldn’t believe—that I could stop drinking on my own. I’d thought I could, but I was forgetting past attempts. Unsuccessful past attempts. I was thinking if I could just get out of the hospital, and if they would just leave me alone, I could stop my drinking and everything would be all right.

I hadn’t cried when Sheree left. An hour later I didn’t feel anything but anger and betrayal, and even that didn’t seem to affect me very much. I was alone—and *so what*. I wasn’t going to let them get me down. I was going to stay strong, and beat this thing, no matter what they said. No matter what they thought.

As I said, Dr. Doug was just sitting there, thinking and looking at me, while I lay there, thinking and looking at him. I was trying to be tough, but thank goodness I was really almost ready to give up.

Finally, I broke the silence. “My friend Sheree was here, earlier.”

“I know,” he said.

“You do? How?”

“I asked her to come by.”

“Have you been talking to her?”

He shrugged. Yes, he had. “She was with you when you were brought in, you know. It’s standard procedure to interview ‘significant others’ when alcohol or other drug problems are suspected. She’s been a lot of help to us. I hope you know she’s been a damn good friend to you.”

I sighed, "I know. She's my very best friend."

"Your boyfriend, Marc, has been to see me, too."

"*He has?*" I was hugely surprised, considering what Sheree had told me about him. "When? I didn't see him."

"I called him yesterday. Asked him to come in. I talked to him about your problem—"

"—My problem?"

"Yes. Your drinking problem."

"Yeah, so?" I folded my arms. "What did he say?"

"He thinks you have a problem, as does your friend Sheree, too. Kerrilyn, they all know. They all see it." Then, he delivered his *coup de grace*: "Why can't you?"

"Where *is* Marc, anyway?"

"Kerrilyn!" His blue eyes pinned me back into my pillow. "Don't change the subject. We're not talking about Marc. We're talking about you."

"What *about* me?" But, did I know? Did I really know I had a drinking problem? And was I trying my best not to admit it? Could my drinking be beyond control—controlling me—and not the other way around? Could it be true? "You know, I'm tired of all this fuckin' 'Kerrilyn's an alcoholic' bullshit. I may have a drinking problem, sure, but I'm not an alcoholic. No way."

"Kerrilyn, being an alcoholic doesn't make you a bad person. It's not a character flaw; it's a disease, nothing more."

"You told me that, before."

"Yes, and it's still true."

"So, I don't see why it's so important that I admit I'm an alcoholic. Whether I do, or not, doesn't change a thing."

He leaned toward me, "Ah, but you're wrong! It changes a lot of things."

"Bullshit. No it doesn't."

"Kerrilyn, I'm an alcoholic."

"Bullshit. You're a doctor."

He waved it off. "That doesn't have anything to do with it." He made close eye contact with me. "I told you before that I've been where you are, and I also told you life can be better if you get help."

"No, it can't. I can do this, myself."

"You can't. Every alcoholic ever born says what you just said, and every one of them is wrong. Dead wrong."

"How do you know? Have you tried it?"

He leaned back in his chair. "As a matter of fact, I have." He seemed saddened, somehow.

But I wondered, "And what happened?"

"I did all right for a while. I thought I could control my drinking, and lead a normal life, but it didn't work. I even held off a whole month, one time, until the day my oldest daughter got hit by a car. They had her taken to a hospital near my home, and I left here to go be with her. But you know I didn't make it there."

"What happened?"

"I couldn't handle the stress of her being injured. I felt I *had* to do something to calm myself down." He looked to me for concurrence. "I thought: I need a drink. Just one drink and I'll be OK." Then he stopped, maybe waiting for me to fill in the blanks. I just stared. "Do you want to know what I did?"

I was quick with, "No."

"Well, I'm going to tell you, anyway. I didn't have just *one* drink. I didn't even stop at three or four." He shook his head, obviously pained by what he was saying. "My wife had to come find me, almost four hours later. My six-year-old daughter had come through the emergency surgery just fine. But *I* was lost to the bottle. My little daughter Jamie had been tough, and brave, and held on, but her daddy just crumbled under the pressure. My little girl could have died, and I wasn't there for her."

I didn't know what to say. Had I ever done anything I really shouldn't have done, just because I was drinking? Had I?

The seconds stretched out. I could feel his hurt and shame, knowing how hard it must have been to let his loved ones down. And himself. So many times we do things just because we want to, without thinking of the consequences and without recognizing the seriousness of our actions. I knew how easy it was to do. All I had to do was take one drink, and

whatever worries I had would vanish into nothingness. But could I remember any time in my past where I'd let someone down by my irresponsible actions—by drinking when I should have done something else? Was there such a time, past or present?

Well there was, and it wasn't so very long ago, either.

"You said life can be better if I get help," I finally said. "What did you mean?"

He sighed, then straightened, "Things don't look like they can ever be better. We've tried to stop, but we can't. It's not a question of being weak-willed, or morally bankrupt. It's a disease, nothing more. But it *can* be treated."

"It can?"

"Yes! I'm living proof. You think I was *born* a fucking psychiatrist?" He was still looking at me, intently. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't intimidated or put off. He was probing me, testing me, and I was allowing it. Subconsciously I think I wanted him to break me down, and I think he knew it was what I wanted, too. But, he changed the subject, just a little. "I told you about my father, and how he died." I nodded. "Well, that was five years ago, right after I came on board.

"I was drinking still, but I was this hotshot psychiatric-type who thought he could save the whole, damn world. I thought I could cure anybody. I had breezed through college, and busted my way through med school at the top of my class. As a resident here, patients loved me, and I had several 'miraculous cures' under my belt." He leaned back, now smiling to himself. "I thought I was damn near *invincible*."

"Then, what happened?" He had me rapt, swallowed by the depth of his bluer-than-blue eyes.

"Then my father got sick. He was in a facility in my hometown, but I asked that he be transferred here. The head psych there was reluctant, and for good reason, since I was related to the patient, but as the patient's son and closest living relative, he had little choice.

"We brought him here, and I proceeded to work my 'miracle cure' on him. I was so certain I could help him stop drinking, though *I* was drinking, myself. I didn't even consider the possibility of failure. But, he refused to accept my treatment. I couldn't talk to him; I couldn't reason with him; I couldn't reach him. Not at all."

I thought I knew the story. “So, he walked out of the hospital and went down the street and got drunk.”

“That’s right, Kerrilyn, he did. To spite me, I thought, he walked right out of this place and went straight to a bar, and killed himself.”

But, I had an inspiration: “But it wasn’t meant to hurt you, was it?”

“No, it wasn’t.” He nodded, but sighed. “He was an alcoholic. Had been, for years. He drank all the while we grew up, my brothers and sisters, and me. My mom ran the house, sold real estate, and made enough money to put all of us through college, and even two of us through med school. She was incredibly smart, and tough, and loving, and I credit my success to her.

“But, we loved my dad, too. He was kind, and gentle, and even though he drank, he never hit us or hurt us. He was just never there for us.”

I spoke without even thinking, “My daddy drank, but he used to hit us.” Where that had come from, I didn’t know. Somehow, it had just come out.

Dr. Doug switched gears, suddenly, “Did your mother drink, too?”

“I don’t know. I was too young.”

“Where are they now?”

“Who? My parents?” I asked. He nodded. “Well,” I let out an ironic laugh, “my daddy’s in prison, I guess. My mama ...” I started to say it, but found I couldn’t.

Tears blew up suddenly, and very unexpectedly. I broke down. It was like all the pain and hurt held back for all these years suddenly washed out the dam and came crashing down on me. I had never cried for mama, and though I thought I had nothing to cry about, it came back in a sudden dark wave to tear me to pieces.

For the first time in years and years, I thought consciously of mama, and remembered she was dead. Really dead. It wasn’t that daddy had killed her, it was that mama wasn’t here to help me. In that moment in the hospital, more than anything else in the world I wanted my mama to help me. More than anything, I needed her to tell me what to do. Because I didn’t know what to do, and I knew I needed help. A lot of help.

So I cried, finally. Dr. Doug stayed there to give me Kleenexes, and to just be there. I know I called out for mama, and I know I asked her for help, but of course mama wasn't there to help me. She wasn't there, and I felt abandoned and betrayed so deeply I thought I wouldn't survive it.

I came to that cliff, again. That place where if you look over the edge, you go insane. You come to feel you're just one step away from losing all your sanity and your rationality, and if that doesn't scare you ... then nothing will. I was terrified, more of losing my mind than anything else. I just couldn't let that happen. No matter what, I was determined to hold onto my sanity.

A long time went by. I think maybe Seattle came back, but she left again, probably at the request of Dr. Doug. He got up a couple of times, talked to the nurse, and after the room was empty again, he shut the door. As he came back to the bed, he put his hand on my arm.

"Come on, Kerrilyn," he said.

"God! I'm so afraid!" I whispered between sobs.

"I know," he took a Kleenex and dabbed lightly at my face, "I know."

"I can't do it," I whispered, again.

"Yes you can. I can help you."

"I can't!" I cried, and broke down into uncontrolled sobbing again, not listening to anything he was saying. "What can I do? I don't know how to stop drinking. If I don't stop, it'll kill my baby. I'll *die* if I hurt my baby!" I whispered, "Oh, please!"

"You can stop. I promise, if you really want to, *you can stop*. I promise."

"How can I!?" I wailed. "I don't know how!"

"We can teach you."

"But I don't know how!"

"Shhh," he soothed, "Relax, now. Just relax, dear Kerry Lynn, just be calm, don't worry about anything."

And his words helped. I listened, and calmed, and relaxed, and in time my sobbing gradually subsided. And all the while he kept calling me Kerry Lynn. Kerry Lynn. My name from childhood, and it took me back to being a child. It took me back to where things were different, and things

were easier, and where you had big, strong, adults to help you get out of whatever trouble you got into. They were unpredictable, and they often punished you for reasons you didn't understand, but they were *so strong*. They could hurt you, and they sometimes left you, but they were still the only thing strong enough to kill the monsters.

Because the monsters were coming to get me, and I needed someone to help me kill them. I was a child, a helpless, cringing child, and I desperately needed someone big and strong to help me kill the monsters.

He stayed with me until I felt able to open my eyes and look around at my surroundings. It was later, but exactly how much later I couldn't tell. I didn't have a clock on my bedside table, and with the TV off and no regular traffic, I was completely unable to judge the time.

"What time is it?" was my first question.

"I dunno." He seemed not to care, particularly. "About five, I think."

"Where's Seattle?"

"I asked the nurse if she could take her down to watch TV in the waiting room awhile. I suppose about now she's probably getting pretty bored."

"She can come back, if she wants."

"I think she can wait. Let life be boring for her a while longer. You know?" He dismissed my concern with a wave of his hand. "I'm more worried about Kerrilyn at the moment."

"I'm better," I lied.

"You're not crying, that's true."

My heart was in my throat, suddenly. "What do you want from me?" I whispered, choking. But, I knew.

"I want you to get better."

That threw me, for a minute. "But, how?" I gulped.

"Step one: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable."

"What?"

"It's the first step. Trust me."

It took no effort to say, "OK. I do."

“The first step is admitting we have a problem. One we can’t control. We are powerless over alcohol. It’s destroying our lives, ruining our health and our careers, hurting our loved ones, and preventing us from becoming the beautiful, wonderful people we were meant to be.

“But, denial is very strong. We don’t want to see that we have a problem. The alcohol makes us think we can control it, but it’s controlling *us*. We want to think we can drink, socially, and not let it get out of hand, but it always does. We always go too far. *I know.*” And I saw how tired his eyes were. I knew then. He knew what it was like. I could see it in his eyes, in his face. He knew, and I knew I could really trust him. If nothing else, I could trust Dr. Doug to help me.

God! I was *so-oo* close! Just inches away from breaking down the last barrier to recovery, if only I could admit I wasn’t strong enough, or tough enough to beat the alcohol, alone. So much of me hung in the balance. Deep inside I knew I was losing the fight against the booze, and that the booze was killing me and preventing me from achieving all the things I wanted. But I was determined not to admit that it was. For so long I thought I had been this tough, strong person who ran her own life and made her own decisions (despite the fact I had *never* done that), to break down the last barrier and admit I was beaten was almost too much. I was so close, and yet ... it was so hard to do.

“Can I really stop drinking?”

“If you want to. If you *really* want to.”

“I want to.”

“Good.” But, it seemed, the test wasn’t over. “Do you think you have a problem?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so.” He parroted my words, sounding very disappointed.

I was horrified to think I was letting down Dr. Doug. I couldn’t disappoint him. I couldn’t! I felt tears well up, again.

“Don’t cry.” He was stern, demanding. I stopped. “Just say it. You’ll feel better, I promise.”

“Say what?”

“Say: Dr. Doug, I have a drinking problem—I’m an alcoholic. I want to stop drinking and put my life back together.”

It was so easy, but yet so hard. It seems so foolish, now, to think I had such a problem with admitting my disease, since that's all it is. All I had to do was simply admit to myself that I had a problem, and that I wanted help, and help would begin immediately. All I had to do was stop denying the reality of my life, the shambles I'd made of it (with the alcohol's help) and turn my problem over.

Step two: [We] came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Yes, sanity.

Come on, Kerrilyn! You can do it. Just let go all your fears and your holding on to the booze. Just break down the denial and turn yourself over for recovery. Just let go, and let God.

"All right. I know I have a drinking problem." I said, most soberly. (No pun, not now.) "I'm a ... an alcoholic ... and I need help to quit." I looked up to him, but couldn't hold his gaze. It was shame, pure and simple. All I could do was look down at my feet, toes hidden under hospital blankets. "Dr. Doug, please help me."

And I felt as if the weight of the world was suddenly lifted from my shoulders. Because no matter what Dr. Doug thought of my declaration, I had come around to finally believing I had a drinking problem. I still didn't know what was going to happen—how I was going to beat the monsters—but I had become willing to trust someone enough to let them help me. And Dr. Douglas R. Pritkin was that someone.

Dr. Doug allowed me a few moments for my statement to sink in, then asked, "Have you thought about what's going to happen once you get out of the hospital? What do you think you'll do once we let you out of here?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought too much about it, I guess."

"You're still pretty sick, but you're quickly becoming well enough that in a few days, or so, we *could* send you home ... or at least you'd be able to leave the hospital."

"I don't know. I suppose," I quickly did a mental inventory of the one friend I had remaining, "I suppose I could stay with Sheree. Have you talked to her? I know she said she talked to you, before."

"I've talked with her, some." I wondered what they had talked about, and whether he had talked to her before or after she came to see me, but he declined to elaborate further. Instead, he redirected my thinking. "But, what are you going to do? Are you going to go back to your old life again,

as if nothing has happened?"

"Probably not. The band is probably broken up, so I guess I'll have to find a new one."

"That's not what I'm talking about." He leaned back, and I got nervous all over again. I just knew what he was going to say. "Kerrilyn, I'm talking about getting sober; about getting better. I'm talking about starting down the path to recovery."

I was right. Recovery. Just the very word scared me. It made me wonder what would be expected of me; how was I going to do it? Because I had no earthly idea.

Dr. Doug went on when he saw I wasn't going to answer him. "A little while ago, you asked for help. You admitted that you're an alcoholic." He did smile, though, "That's a very important first step, you know."

"It is?"

"Yes, finally believing you have a problem *is* the first step."

I remembered: 'We admitted we were powerless over alcohol.' "I have to stop drinking, don't I?"

"I think you do." He paused. "What do you think?"

"I don't know. I think it's going to be pretty hard to do." And in that moment I realized I was wishing I had a drink, because the prospect of getting sober was giving me stress. And I realized that wanting a drink even while in the hospital meant I was going to be in a lot of trouble when I got out. If I didn't have a plan. Maybe even if I did. I gulped, "I think it's going to be damn near fucking impossible."

"Tell me about it."

I rounded on him, then, icy irony abounding in my voice. "I might just *do* that." He only smiled. *I* was nervous. "Why am I so fucking nervous?" I asked myself.

"Maybe you're afraid." He answered the question for me.

"Terrified," I quickly agreed.

He put his hand on my shoulder. I looked at it. "It's OK to be scared," he said. "We're *all* scared. We're afraid we won't be able to change. We know we're not strong enough to stop drinking, on our own. But there's a Power greater than ourselves that can help us. All you have to do is accept

your powerlessness over the alcohol, and give yourself over to that Higher Power, and you *will* be able to beat it.”

“I wish I could believe you ...” but I wasn’t sure.

He seemed sure, though. “There’s an AA meeting here in the hospital, tonight. Come with me.”

“Do you mean ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’?”

“Uh-huh. That’s the one.”

“Am I well enough to go?”

He smiled. “I think you’re almost well enough to go home.” I got a lot of hope from that. “I think you’ll be safe with me. We can’t remove the IV just yet, but if that doesn’t bother you too much, I think you’d get a lot out of the meeting.”

“They aren’t gonna make me get up and say anything, are they?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” He seemed amused. “We’re just going to listen, and learn, maybe. Why did you think they were going to ask you to talk?”

“I dunno.” I gave him a worried, nervous smile. “Just something I heard, I guess.” I’d heard of AA, and I heard they made people talk.

“No.” He shook his head, smiled too. “Not at your first meeting. Just relax. No one’s going to make you talk. Unless, of course, you want to.”

“I wouldn’t count on it. I get stage fright pretty bad. The idea of getting up in front of a whole room full of strangers flat *terrifies* me! If I thought I was going to have to talk at this meeting, there’d be *no way* you could get me to go. No way!”

“Then you will come?”

Had I said that? I didn’t think I’d agreed, but ... “I suppose.” I shrugged. “But no talking! OK?”

“Fine. Whatever.”

“Can I get cleaned up before then?”

“Sure. I was going to suggest it, anyway ...”

“Will there be any other patients there?”

“You mean, other people like you, dragging IV’s around?” he asked. I nodded. “Probably not, though it’s not that uncommon.” He stood up.

“Trust me, Kerrilyn. They won’t mind you, at all. In fact, I think you’ll be surprised at the people you’ll see there. It’s generally a pretty young group, though it’s open to anyone.”

“Do you run these meetings?”

“Run them? No.” He studied me rather seriously. “*I go to them.* You’ll have an advantage over me that no one else does. You see,” he wandered around the end of the bed, thinking as he talked, “they only know me as Doug. They don’t even know I’m a doctor, though from time to time former patients of mine do show up. That’s the ‘anonymous’ part. No one has to know who you are, except your first name. Just give them your first name, and you’ll be fine.”

“They aren’t going to lecture me?”

“No one in AA will ever single you out—or ‘lecture’ you. Kerrilyn, we’re just like you. We’re all alcoholics and we all need help, just like you do.” He wandered back around to his chair. “You might, however, want to keep your ears open and listen to what the others have to say. We won’t lecture you, but you might just learn something if you’re willing to listen.”

“You’re sure I’ll be all right?”

“Positive.” Dr. Doug’s hand went to my shoulder, again. He made me feel small and weak, but protected, and I wanted to trust him completely. And I almost could, too. Just one little bit more, and ...

“OK,” I said. “I’ll come with you, tonight.”

“Great! I’ll have the nurse get you cleaned, showered, and all spiffed up in your best nightgown and IV bottle. If you have a robe and slippers, you’ll probably want to wear them, too, but the meeting is at seven. I promise you’ll be back here by eight thirty, or so.”

“Of course,” I observed dryly, “it’s not like I have anything else to do, is it?”

At the door, he smiled. “That was an extremely brave thing you did, today. I’m proud of you.”

“Sure. It wasn’t that brave.”

“You can think what you want, but *I* say you’re brave, and I think that bravery deserves some mention. Take it easy on yourself, Kerrilyn, the real work is just beginning.”

And on that note, he went out the door.

Chapter 5

The nurse brought Seattle back a short time later. She walked in, though a tad unsteadily, and was helped to get in the bed and tucked in. Seeing Seattle sitting in bed you would not have thought her unhealthy, at all, since her abrasive personality was always so evident, but seeing her out of bed, and walking, showed me a little more of the truth about her.

Seattle was a very sick young girl.

At various points during our brief cohabitation I had tried to find out what was wrong with her—why she was in the hospital—but she was adamant and unyielding; she absolutely refused to discuss her situation. It was frustrating only to be able to talk to her when *she* wanted, and about things *she* deemed acceptable, but I had little choice otherwise.

I felt completely beat up by my earlier revelation (or maybe ‘epiphany’ is a better word) but at the same time the news was too good to keep quiet. I waited only until the nurse was out of the room.

“Seattle,” I looked over at her.

She turned toward me, fractionally. “What?” Good. Not too belligerent.

“Sorry you had to stay away so long.”

She shrugged, “No problem.” Did she sound depressed? “Some friends of mine came by to see me, so it was probably better you didn’t meet them.”

“My best friend Sheree was here, earlier. You should meet her sometime.”

"Yeah?" She sounded bored. I knew it was a front.

"Yeah. She's real nice."

"How *so* fucking wonderful for you." Flat. "I'm so excited I could piss myself."

"What's the matter?" There was something there, all right. "You're not mad at me, are you? I said I was sorry." All I got was a sigh. Then there was silence for some moments.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" I asked. I was simply fishing for something—anything—to talk about. I really wanted to talk to someone about what had just happened to me, and I was even willing to risk it with thorny ole Seattle Montgomery. She laughed, and I was taken aback. "What's so funny?"

She continued to snicker, "I thought I told you."

"Told me what?"

"That I was a runaway. That I hustle on the street."

"So?" (How quickly you forget, though.)

"*Get real.*" She shook her head, disbelief and irony flowing over her face, "You are *so* fucking naive." She twisted in her bed, facing me fully. "*Kerry Lynn*, I suck dicks on street corners for guys I don't even know." She paused, for effect. "Does that shock you?"

No, it didn't. I knew someone who used to do that kind of thing, and knew her pretty well. In fact, it wasn't all that long ago for her, either ... "Nope," I said. "Not a bit." I grinned, snidely. "How much do you make? \$200, \$300 an hour?" I had sometimes gotten that much.

"*No one* makes that kind of money, hustling. I'm lucky if I can get \$50 a trick."

"I used to get \$500," I said. OK, I was exaggerating, a little, but I wanted to make a point.

"You ain't no street hooker, lady. And besides, you can't get that kind of money *anywhere* in Atlanta. There just ain't that kind of money floating around."

"Did I say I worked the streets?"

"Ah," she turned away, then back. "You're just bullshitting me. You look like some fucking suburbanite housewife. And an overfed one, at that."

"You think so?" I looked down at myself. "Hmmm, I guess I have been eating pretty good lately." I shook my head, but slowly, for effect. "But I ain't *no* fuckin' housewife. You ever hear of the band *Dancer*?"

"No."

"Well, I'm their lead singer."

"So what?" She shrugged. "You sing in a band and you say you used to turn tricks. So fucking what?" She thought, a moment. "If you made so much fuckin' money givin' blow jobs and stuff, why'd you quit? You can't make that kind of money singin' in a band. Not around here."

"I quit hooking 'cause it ain't no way to live. And 'cause I met a guy, too."

"How *so* very nice for you." Same emphasis on the word 'so,' same mocking facetiousness, all the way. "And yet you ended up here, anyway."

"Yeah," I sighed, "I still ended up here, anyway."

A couple of minutes went by, and neither of us said anything. But I knew, somehow, that Seattle wouldn't let things sit. I wasn't going to let things sit, either, but I was going to wait for Seattle to make the next move.

"That's a pretty good fairy tale you told me," she announced, "but I don't think I believe a single word of it."

"What makes you think it's a fairy tale? Why would I lie to you?"

"I'm sure *I* don't know." She folded her arms. "But, lady, you've never turned a trick in your whole fucking life. You don't know a fuckin' thing about it. No way."

"I'm gettin' real tired of you callin' me 'lady,' all the time. The name's Kerrilyn."

"Well, *Kerry Lynn*," she sneered, "you don't fuckin' know a goddamn thing about my life, so I think you should just shut the fuck up. I'm tired of all your bullshit attempts to show how much fuckin' sympathy you got for me. You're totally bogus."

How could I prove what I was saying? And why did it matter, anyway? Normally, I might have told her I didn't care whether she believed me, or not, and let it go at that, but something about poor, abrasive Seattle drew me to her. I didn't know if there was anything I

could do or say that would make her believe what I was saying—that I had experienced the same kind of horrible, sleazy existence that she had—but I felt I had to try. What could I say? How could I prove it to her? What evidence did I have that proved I knew?

Ah, hah. I suddenly got an idea. “Can you come over here?” I asked.

“What? You mean, get out of the bed?”

“Yes.”

“Why can’t you come over here?”

“All right, I will.” I pulled back the bed covers and swung my feet over the edge. I had to hold onto the IV stand for dear life to keep my balance, but I managed it. The nightgown I wore wasn’t too long, hitting me about mid-calf, so I didn’t think I’d have too much trouble with it. I wasn’t wearing anything underneath, but I doubted Seattle would mind. She’d already seen what there was to see, of me.

“What are you doing?” she asked as I approached, pulling my nightgown up.

“I want to show you something.” With each step I gained confidence. With each foot I moved toward her I became more convinced she would ultimately believe me. I stopped at the edge of her bed. “Here,” I pushed the IV stand at her, “hold this for me.” She reluctantly complied, but she didn’t say anything. That was good. With effort, I managed to work my nightgown up to my hips. “This is gonna be tricky,” I said, mostly to myself, “’cause I don’t wanna get my IV hand above the bag.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“’Cause blood backs up into the tube, and it makes me sick.”

“Oh.” I guess she bought my explanation. She was all eyes and ears. “What are you doing, anyway?”

“I’m tryin’ to get my fuckin’ nightgown up around my armpits, is what I’m doin’.”

“Why?”

“I wanna show you something.” I grunted, and I struggled, and I even let blood back up into the IV tube so I could get my nightgown high enough. When it cleared my boobs I turned my back to her. “Can you see my back?”

“A little.” I detected no traces of hostility or resistance. “What am I

lookin' for?"

"Scars," I said. "Seattle—sweetheart—lots and lots of scars."

"Where did you get all those scars?" She asked, a tinge of concern almost evident in her voice. I had let down my nightgown and retrieved my IV stand. I wasn't too tired to stand, but all the exertion had made me dizzy.

"Can I sit on the edge of the bed?" I asked her. I half expected her to tell me no.

"Sure," she said. "What's the matter?" I think she saw me wobbling, and she reached for my arm as I staggered back against the bed.

"I'm a little dizzy, that's all," I said. "I must be gettin' too used to lying around in the bed, all day. I guess I forgot how to walk." We weren't either of us very strong, but we worked my sorry ass up onto the bed, anyway. Once my big butt was squarely in place my spinning head slowed its lazy revolutions, and I was able to relax. Almost.

"Where'd you get all those scars?" she repeated.

"All right." I took a deep breath. Seattle, I saw, was giving me her undivided attention. "Before I waste my breath tellin' you my fuckin' life story, I wanna get one fuckin' thing straight." I got a clue that maybe the best way to talk to Seattle was at her level, the way she would talk to me. So I decided to try it. "You think I've been bullshitting you—for some ridiculous reason, I don't know—but, *sweetheart*, I ain't got any more time to fuckin' bullshit you, than you got to bullshit me." I eyed her. She met my stare. "I believe what you been tellin' me about your sorry-ass life. The least you can do is fuckin' believe me when I tell you about mine."

"All right, Kerrilyn," she grinned, "tell me your fuckin' life story."

• • •

Mel Howe wanted us to become closer, but although the dope was starting to work on me and should have been calming and loosening me to her presence and her touch, I still found it hard to relax and let things take their course. On the first count I wasn't terribly attracted to her. I guess she was pretty enough, not that it was *that* important. I know she smelled good enough, but something inside me just wouldn't connect with the gentle urgings of her lips and tongue. I kissed her but remained essentially impassive and uninvolved. I noticed my own lack of physical

'excitement' and I'd have also noticed were it happening *to me*, as well. Mel did notice what wasn't 'happening,' and pulled back. She looked at me with a mixture of quizzical hopefulness and frowning concern.

"What's wrong?" She licked her lips, wet from my own.

"Nothing," I said.

"Oh ho! That's complete bullshit." She pushed away from me to an arm's length, but didn't get up. "You ain't with me, here, and I'd like to know how come."

"Nothing," I repeated, but followed with, "I don't know."

"I might buy that," Mel said, apparently understanding the difference between 'I don't know,' and 'nothing,' "but I still wish you could've had the courage to tell me you weren't interested in me before you came all the way up here." She puffed out her cheeks and exhaled—a sigh. "I *can* take no for an answer, you know."

"I'm sorry, Mel." I hung my head. "I wanted to come here. I didn't want to say no to you ..."

"But, you just did." Then she stood up. Like the fool I was, I remained sitting and said nothing. Of course she caught that, too, and quickly became angry. "Oh, why don't you just get the fuck outta here!"

All I could say was, "I'm sorry, Mel." But I didn't get up to leave as she had just requested.

"What's wrong with me?" she asked, using her hands to gesture at her own body. Contempt was curiously absent from her voice. I'd struck a nerve. "What's the matter?"

"Mel, It's not you."

"*Not me?* Who the hell else could it be? There's no one here *but me.*"

"I don't know." I felt really foolish. "It's hard to relax. I don't know ..."

Mel sat back down next to me, and placed her hand on my arm. She looked at me gently, hopefully, and risked reaching out for me, something surprising and making me even more embarrassed for myself. I tried to look her in the eye but it was next to impossible. There I was, apparently unattracted to this woman, or so long frozen in apathy by the scarcity of suitable, friendly female bodies that I couldn't even recognize one when it wrapped itself around me. What could be so wrong with the present

situation and the present person that I couldn't kiss her as she wanted to be kissed? That I couldn't touch her as she wanted to be touched?

Her fingers were cool on my arm, so I looked down at her hand. She had long, slender fingers—a born keyboardist—and short, bare, but immaculately groomed fingernails. She had very pretty, but utilitarian hands.

“Marc,” she almost whispered, “what’s wrong? What’s wrong with me?”

Why did she have to think it had anything to do with her? It was nothing she had done; nothing she could do; nothing she could fix. “There’s nothing wrong with you,” I croaked, choking on the words and causing her to completely misinterpret them, and turn them around to mean just the opposite of how I had intended.

“Am I not pretty enough?” Her words drew my eyes up. She seemed to smile, crookedly, as if everything in life were a halfhearted joke. “Are my tits not big enough? My ass too big—or too small—maybe? What’s wrong with me?”

I repeated, louder, “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“What is it, then? Are you gay, or something?”

“No!” I objected, with more vehemence than necessary. She flinched back, removing her hand. I quieted my voice, hoping to restore some of her trust. “I’m sorry. It’s just not working out, tonight.”

There was a lengthy silence, before she said, “So,” and cleared her throat, “what do we do now? It sounds like this’s been a big mistake for both of us. I want to understand what’s bothering you, but if you won’t tell me—or if you really don’t know—then I’m at a loss.” She clasped her hands together and held them between her knees. Her slim, bony knees. She seemed to study them, looking down so she didn’t have to look at me. Then she shrugged, “I guess I was a little lonely, tonight. I remembered you, and remembered I had your number ... I don’t know ... I guess I thought you were a cute guy ... so I took a chance you might not be busy tonight. I thought it was worth a shot.” She shrugged and looked up. “But I told you all this already, didn’t I?” When I didn’t reply right away, she said, “Man, this is embarrassing!” She looked away, grinning reflexively.

I had to look away, too. “I don’t know what to do.”

She snapped back to face me. “*Say something!* Kiss me! Hold me!

Make love to me!" She leaned in toward my face, glowering wide-eyed at me in near-spitting consternation and frustration. "Anything!"

"I want to," I offered feebly, feeling especially lame in the attempt.

"Then fuckin' *do it!*"

"I can't!"

"Why not?" She pressed herself to me, wrapping me up in her arms. I tried not to back away from her touch, but I didn't think I was convincing. "Put your arms around me, boy, and kiss me." But I tried to relax anyway, and complied on both counts, though slowly. "*Touch me,*" she breathed, whispering in my ear as my hands hesitantly felt the bony contours of her back. "Oh please, touch me."

"Oh, Mel," I cried, whispering too, "I don't know if I can."

"Sure you can." She kissed me, again.

"I can't!" I shook my head, and closed my eyes, not wanting to look at her and reveal my helpless shame. Then I added, almost not knowing what I was saying, or why I was saying it, "Please help me."

"Just take it easy, babe, and relax. No one's gonna hurt you, I promise."

How she could know, I couldn't guess. But the essence of it all was just that: I was afraid of being hurt again like I had been hurt before. Like I had been hurt with Joan. "I believe you," I whispered, still, "I really want to believe you."

"And you can, you can." She pushed me gently down on the couch.

But we didn't get very far, and it didn't take very long. After only a few minutes in which I began to relax, and began to feel some of the old interest, the old desire for a woman, and for a woman's company, I stopped us. "I'd like to stay," I told her, "but I think I better go."

"Why?" she panted. Her hair had come undone, and was in disarray all over her face, spilling into her eyes and tickling my nose. "What's wrong, now?"

"I'm really sorry, but I have to get up early."

"Jesus!" She pulled the hair back out of her eyes. "Shit. You sure are difficult to get to know. It isn't even ..." she twisted to look at the clock on top the TV "... eleven o'clock yet." It was just past ten-thirty.

"I know," I said, "but I have to get up *very* early."

“How fucking early?!?”

“I’m sorry, Mel.” I extricated myself out from under her slender body, sitting up and trying to catch my breath, too. “But, I gotta go.”

She was completely blown away by my sudden change, and clearly inexplicable intent to depart, but said to my back anyway, “Yes, I suppose you do.”

• • •

I was afraid of what would happen at the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. I’d heard of the organization and some of what they were about, but I had little idea what to expect when I actually went to a meeting for the first time. Really, I shouldn’t have worried.

Dr. Doug showed up about five minutes before seven pushing a wheelchair. I wasn’t expecting to be ‘delivered’ to the AA meeting, but he insisted I needed to ride—not walk. I realized later how tired I’d become from the meeting, so it was a pretty good thing I got to ride. As we returned to my room his gentle, caring presence made me feel special and important. It was such a new, very odd feeling.

As it turned out I was the only ‘TV toting’ patient in the meeting, but I wasn’t the only patient. There were a couple other folks in bathrobes and pajamas, and seeing them take seats made me feel a lot less self-conscious. Dr. Doug wheeled me to the back and found a seat next to me, against the wall where the wheelchair and my IV stand wouldn’t be in the way. Despite there being a couple others dressed—or undressed—as I was (in a nightgown and fluffy cotton robe) I still felt somewhat conspicuous with my fat butt parked in that damn wheelchair. A few faces may have glanced toward me, casually observing I was a semi-invalid-looking patient of the hospital, but they only looked momentarily, then turned away, moving on to other business.

A woman came over and introduced herself, as the meeting was starting. She was wearing a blue pinstripe suit, nicely tailored, and looked about Mel’s or Sheree’s age, twenty-five or so. She smiled. “Hi. I’m Danielle. Welcome to the meeting.”

I quickly looked around, but no one else seemed to be paying attention to us. “Hi,” I said, feeling very embarrassed and uncomfortable. “My name is Kerrilyn.” I thought about standing up to meet her face-to-

face, but she didn't seem to expect it, so I stayed sitting.

"Good to meet you, Kerrilyn." She extended her slender, well-manicured hand, and we shook. I offered my right, even hampered as it was with the IV line. As we shook hands the huge IV needle in the top of my hand—so obvious and prominent—reminded me too clearly of the reasons why I was in the hospital, and I suddenly felt a wave of shame come over me. She must have noticed my sheepish, ashamed look, because she asked, "This your first meeting, isn't it?" I only nodded, looked down. "Well," she glanced momentarily at Dr. Doug, then back, "it's good to have you here." She smiled at me, again, and passing a quick eye again to Dr. Doug, went back to her seat.

"Is she the official greeter, or something?" I asked him quietly once she was gone.

"Not at all. She's just a regular visitor, like me." He folded his arms, and yawned. When he had come to get me, I saw he had removed his white lab coat, and white shirt and tie, and had put on a dark blue, knitted, short sleeve golf shirt. Perhaps a little incongruous with his dress slacks, but the effect was that he didn't especially look like a doctor. "Danielle is one of those former patients I told you about. She often comes around to say 'hi' when I show up with new folks."

"You bring girls here often?" I teased.

"Girls; guys; people's grandparents." He yawned again, grinned lazily. "Anyone will do."

At the meeting I found out about the Twelve Steps. I recognized the first two from things Dr. Doug had said to me, and heard about the other ten. They sounded pretty formidable and scary, but Dr. Doug assured me there was nothing magical or mystical about the fact that they *work*. He assured me the Twelve Steps work—if—I was willing to work them.

Stupidly, I asked when would you be all through with it—the 'working the Twelve Steps' thing. He replied:

"Never. We keep working the Steps for the rest of our lives. The price we have to pay for our sobriety is eternal vigilance to the Twelve Steps."

I asked him, then, "So, you believe in these Steps, then?"

"Kerrilyn," he said, "for us," and he swept the room with his hand, "nothing else has worked. God, AA, and other recovering alcoholics are

the only things we've found that can keep us sober. That's why we keep coming, and why we keep after our work in the program."

"I don't know how you can do it," I wondered aloud.

"One day at a time."

"What?"

"Kerrilyn, we take it one day at a time. I don't ever think of not drinking for the rest of my life. That's just too damn long! If I were looking at the height of *that* building, there'd be no way I could jump over it. No way in hell.

"But, I *can* think of not drinking *today*. I can say to myself '*I will not drink today.*' And I can live with that." He put his arm around my shoulders, gently, briefly, then let go. I missed the touch immediately, and deeply. "Sometimes," he went on, "when even today seems like an eternity, I tell myself I just won't drink *right now*. It can be minute by minute, but if you can make it through the *right now* without drinking, you can stay sober. Only worry about not taking that first drink, that next drink. If you can do that, then everything else will follow."

"I never thought of it that way." I had to think awhile, then. (A pun. Sorry.) Then I changed the subject. "You mentioned 'God.'" It was a question.

"Yes. *God*, as we define Him, is very important."

"You aren't gonna make me get religion, or anything, are you?"

"Did you hear what the Third Step said? 'We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*'?" He raised his eyebrows. "We all look for a 'Higher Power' to help us stay sober. It can be anything. God; Allah; the floor. *The group* if you have trouble believing in something else."

"But, why believe in a Higher Power?"

"Because of Steps One and Two. These you've already heard from me. 'We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.' And, 'We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.' As individuals we don't have the power to stop drinking. Kerrilyn, we've tried and tried, but we can't do it."

"So you look to God to help you?"

“As I said: God; three guys named Moe; the group. Whatever.”

“And it works?” Oh, God, could it be *true*?

“Yes,” he said, bright eyes so happy and smiling, “thank God, it does.”

I wanted to tell Seattle about the AA meeting as soon as I got back to the room, but she was asleep. I have to admit I was pretty charged by what I'd heard, and I was really 'itching' to share everything I'd learned with my 'scratchy' old roommate. Why I thought she'd want to hear what I had to say, I don't know, but I wanted to tell her, anyway. Dr. Doug stayed just long enough to tuck me into bed, then said good night though it wasn't much past eight-thirty. So I turned on the TV to chill awhile. I thought I was keeping it turned down low enough so I wouldn't wake her, but evidently she was a very light sleeper. She awoke.

“Where were you?” she asked, sleepily, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“Dr. Doug took me to the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting here, tonight.”

“Oh.” But, no further comment.

“Have you heard of AA?”

“Sure,” she said, bobbing her head. “It's where a bunch of strawberry-nosed old winos go to drink coffee and tell each other how bad they been drinking. Then they leave and all go get drunk, together.” She sniffed, “I heard of it.”

“But, it's not like that, at all.” I guess I shouldn't be too surprised at her cynical viewpoint. After all, this was Seattle who was talking. “The meeting tonight had a bunch of people there who're just like us. They were not all 'red-nosed winos' like you said. And we didn't all go out and get drunk after the meeting, either.”

She seemed unconvinced. “I bet some of them did, though.”

“So?” I was getting a bit irritated by her attitude. I should have known better, but I just couldn't keep it all to myself. “Have you ever been to an AA meeting?”

“A couple times.”

“And?”

“And—*what?*”

“What did you think?”

“I thought it was fucking silly—a waste of time. That’s what I thought.” She shook her head, obviously with no patience for me. “Every time I end up here they put me with some fucking, bleeding-heart, do-gooder type. I gotta admit you ain’t quite the standard type, but you’re close enough. Anyway, every fucking time they send this goody-two-shoes to an AA meeting, and then they come back all teary-eyed and jammed up with all the ‘God’s gonna save me from the booze’ mumbo-jumbo bullshit, and then they try to shove that bullshit down my throat.” She looked at me, scowling, in the flickering darkness. “I was thinkin’ you’d be different, but *Kerry Lynn*, sweetheart, I’ve heard it all before, and I’m gettin’ fucking tired of hearin’ it, too. So, why don’t you just shut the fuck up, and leave me the fuck alone?”

“I’m sorry.”

She sighed. I didn’t perceive she was especially angry with me, just with things in general. “Save your breath, Kerrilyn. I don’t want to be saved.”

But, “Why not?” It seemed like a reasonable question.

“Because I don’t deserve it,” came the prompt, biting answer.

“But we all deserve it.” Don’t we?

“You really drive me crazy, sometimes,” she replied, shaking her head, but smiling.

“Goddamn it, Seattle!” I fumed, but I didn’t continue with my thought. I wanted to tell her that not *everybody* hated her, and that not *everybody* was out to hurt her, or exploit her, or use her—that *I* wasn’t out to do any of those things to her. Seattle was me. Different age, different circumstances, but otherwise identical. In her eyes I saw my soul, and all my hurt and pain made evident and reflected back at me.

I suppose I got very lucky, finding Marc and getting out of prostitution. But I know I had been hiding my true self while I lived in that nighttime, nightmarish existence, and only allowed myself to come out once it was safe; once I was away from Danny Golden, and the bleak, black, numbing life of the professional sex object. But, even for me things still lingered. All the degenerate and degrading things that had been done to me had wreaked a permanent change. Many times I didn’t want to

believe, as Seattle didn't want to believe, that there were could be those in the world who were not put there to hurt you. Because I believed that to trust and open yourself up for the most good, means you have to be open, willing, and vulnerable to the most bad. Well, I was with Seattle on that score. I was damned good and tired of being the butt of everyone else's 'most bad.'

It was important—crucially important—that I convince Seattle I was her friend. And not only that but that I could be trusted with something very fragile, and very dear to her—her heart. Inexplicably, I wanted it, for no one else could possibly know just how much like me she was. If I could have Seattle's heart for safekeeping, then there might be a chance for us. For in keeping her safe, meant that I could be kept safe, as well.

"Damn it, Seattle," I said, finally, almost whispering, "you deserve to have good things happen to you. *I* deserve good things to happen, and you're no different."

"Maybe I don't want them," she seemed convinced I had to be wrong.

But, I had to laugh. "Oh-ho! You're not foolin' me."

Yeah, she had no immediate answer to that.

• • •

I called Mel when I got back to my apartment that night, about twenty minutes later. On the way home I'd thought of what I had given up, leaving her like that, and also thought about what she could possibly mean to me if I didn't blow it. Hell, I was horny even, and I'd gotten up and left that woman!?! What an idiot! I mean, what difference could it possibly make if I lost a little sleep once in a while, *like tonight, maybe*, and tried to resurrect something with that slim and subtly pretty piano player. However unlikely it might be to happen again, I felt I just had to give it one good try.

While we'd talked on the phone, earlier, Mel had given me her number, and I found the scrap of paper where I'd written it lying amid the clutter next to the phone. I knew she'd be there, since it was getting late, but I wondered if she would just immediately hang up on me. I had to take the risk, anyway.

"Hello?" she said into the phone after about two rings.

"Mel, this is Marc Huffman."

Just the barest of pauses. “Yes?” Then, nothing more.

“I’m sorry about tonight. Really, I am.”

She sighed.

“I really do have to get up early.” It was true, but it hardly mattered.

Her reply sounded very much like she doubted my reasoning, or my reasons. “Oh, I believe you.” I couldn’t tell if she was going to laugh, or cry. “But it’s really just a little hard to take, you know?” And the sudden hitch in her voice did sound as though she could cry at any moment. And I felt for her. “You shouldn’t have come over if you didn’t like me. I could have done without you walking out on me, so suddenly.” She laughed, then, but I think mainly to keep from breaking down further. “The ole ego feels a little bruised right now. But, I’ll get over it, I suppose.” She sighed, again.

“Mel,” I pleaded, “it’s got nothing to do with you. I really do like you. It’s just ... it’s just ...” I had a hard time talking, for some reason. “... I’m a little scared. That’s all.”

“Well, *I’m* completely baffled. Unless you care to explain what scares you so much, I’m gonna have a pretty hard time getting past what happened tonight.” Now she sounded angry. “Hmmm? How ‘bout it, Markie ole boy? You wanna explain?”

“Can I come back over?”

“Not a fuckin’ chance.”

“Look, I’m sorry!”

“So what!?! You hurt my feelings. I *do* have them, you know.”

Yes she did. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, and I’d like to make it up to you. Can I come over?” I really hadn’t planned how I could ‘make it up to her,’ but on the spur of the moment it was all I could think of to keep her on the line and talking to me.

She snorted. “Why should I let you? I only need to be turned down once, or maybe twice, to learn my lesson. I don’t know if you realize it, or not—and I really don’t fucking care if you do, either—but you could have had me, tonight, if you’d wanted.”

“What do you mean?”

“I would have gone to bed with you. *That’s* what I mean.” She snorted, again. “What do you think of that?”

"I don't know."

"*You don't know?*" She seemed to find my response somewhat 'questionable.' "You don't *know* if you want to go to bed with me? Wow." She was amazed at the irony.

"What I meant was that I don't know if I can tell you why I had to leave," I said, as if I had a valid reason I could honestly relate, "but if you can forgive me, a little, I think I'd like the chance to start over."

"Well, *I* think I need some time to think about it," she shot back. I said OK. She paused, presumably so she could think about it. Then she said, "What if I came over to your place, instead? You gonna freak out on me again if I invade your territory?"

"I'm not gonna freak out. I may even kiss you again, if you'll let me," I joked.

She laughed, and seemed to lighten up, some. "Don't get too cocky on me, boy. I'm no longer so certain I should let you near me."

"But I'm basically harmless."

"Oh," she said, cryptically, snorting, "you're hardly harmless."

"What do you mean?" I was suddenly sweating coldly. Her glib statement cut into me like an icy, razor-sharp knife. Fear. Fear of discovery clouded my mind, but why should I feel that way?

But Mel only laughed in the face of my fear. "Here I am, turned down twice already, and I don't even have the fucking sense to say no when I really should." She seemed to grin. "Oh, boy. I think you're gonna be very dangerous for me." She cleared her throat, "I'll see you in a few," then hung up.

It took Mel no more time to find my apartment than it had taken me to find hers. By the time she got there it was well past eleven, but I was no longer worried about the time. I had a small apartment just off North Decatur Road, about a mile from the Emory Campus. It was a single bedroom affair since I lived alone and had no need for more space. Though it was ostensibly student housing, it was a fairly nice place in the basement of a three-story building situated on a quiet, tree-lined street about a block south of the main road. You had to walk around the side of the building to the back to find my 'front' door. Then down four steps to a sunken landing that provided entrance to two apartments, mine and one

other. I remember the number still, apartment 2, on the corner.

She knocked on the door, and I opened it to find her standing there in the yellow ochre of the porch light. She still wore the same shorts and top, but had put on a pair of pale pink running shoes. They looked almost orange in the light. I let her in quickly before the bugs invaded the place and all the cool air was let out. I had all the lights off except the television, so as I led her to the couch, the only place we could sit, I turned on a lamp beside the postage stamp that served as a kitchen table.

"I was pretty surprised when you called me," she said. She stood there, hands nervously stuffed into small, too-tight pockets, elbows akimbo. "After you left so suddenly, I decided to jump in the shower for a minute, just to cool off, and then I was just going to go to bed. When you called I was already in bed."

"Did I wake you?"

She snorted, smiling crookedly, "Hardly."

"It didn't take you long to get dressed and get over here. In fact, you got here a lot sooner than I expected."

"I just threw on this top and my shorts and jumped in the car."

"I'm glad you decided to give me another chance."

Mel chuckled, "We'll see. Our night is still kinda young, here." Then she thought to add, grinning wryly, "Or are you still worried about the time?"

I decided to let the comment pass, and instead motioned to the couch. "Do you want to sit down? How about a beer?" I went to the refrigerator.

"Sure." She found a spot on the couch, and seemed to make herself comfortably at home. In a moment I returned with two beers, handed her one. She quickly drank a couple of large swallows and watched me carefully, most studiously as I sat on the couch next to her. Not too close, but close enough. Her eyes seemed to be smiling at me, but her overall expression was rather carefully guarded. "OK," she said, "you asked me to give you another chance. And they say third time's the charm, so ... you also said you'd make it up to me. Well?"

"What made you decide to call me, earlier?" I took a long drink from my beer. "You barely knew me at all. Why me?"

"Why you?" she repeated. I nodded. She drank more beer. "Why, indeed. Well, that's a pretty personal question. I think most guys would

just consider themselves lucky to get a call, at all, and let it go at that. I never expected to have to justify myself to you, or really, to anyone.”

“I’m not asking you to justify yourself. I was just curious.”

“Well, if you have to know,” she smiled from the eyes up, only, “it’s like I told you before. I think you’re cute. I’ve thought you were cute from the moment I first met you. Mike and me broke up about a month ago, and to tell the truth ...” as if she wasn’t, already “... I was feeling pretty damn lonely tonight.”

“I’m sorry I made it so rough on you.”

“If you really want to make it up to me, now, you can kiss me.”

I leaned toward her. “I’d like that,” I said.

She closed her eyes and came into my arms, and we kissed. And despite all my fears and inexplicable hesitations of earlier, with Mel in my arms I finally felt relaxed and ready, and there was never another moment of indecision or doubt that night.

• • •

By Saturday I had been in the hospital for more than a week. I was recovering nicely from the surgery and fully conscious by then, and certainly able to pick up the telephone. I mean, I had one right there next to the bed. I could have called someone. Anyone. I could have called Marc, for example. But yet I hadn’t. Sheree had called me, and had been by to see me a couple times, and I *could have* called Marc, but I didn’t. I was just lying there in my hospital bed waiting for him to come to me. I thought he should be coming to me.

I didn’t really know why he hadn’t come by, or even called. I thought maybe he had forgotten about me, abandoning me to the past, but even then I was telling myself I should be glad to be finally left alone. Like I had wanted. I thought I had wanted to be left alone to sort things out myself without a lot of unwanted interference, and though I was angry about it he was doing what I wanted. I thought.

But another part of me was very hurt. I fought to keep it hidden—totally suppressed—denying its very existence, but it was there. You think you’re so tough. You think you can get by on your own. I thought I had been getting by on my own since Grandma died, but I was blind to the real truth. I was hurting, and denying my most basic needs. But why was I

doing it? What was so important about breaking away and showing everyone my independence? I couldn't figure it out. I kept telling myself I needed to think. I needed to sort out all my feelings about Marc and the baby. Yeah. That was it. Marc was too close, I told myself. But, wrong.

I don't know all the terms for the psychology of where I was, but none of the above was true. I was afraid. I feared he would learn the truth about me, and keep me from doing what I wanted most. I know Marc would have given me all the space I needed to sort out my problems, if only I could have faced those problems myself. I thought it was baby, marriage, and Marc's 'commitment,' but it was only the alcohol talking. Becoming pregnant had placed me in a completely untenable situation. How could I hope to carry the baby to term, and have it be normal—everything all right and all that—if I continued to drink, and continued to live with Marc? I'd not given him the chance to confront me about my drinking and for good reason: I didn't want to stop. It was the alcohol making the decisions. Deep inside I loved the booze. It was my best and only true friend and nothing was going to come between my best friend and me.

Make no mistake! *I wanted my baby!* Until I thought about what it might mean to bring a new life into the world I couldn't have articulated my true (sober) feelings about what was happening to me. I wanted her—my baby, my child—but to have her and hold her and love her and cherish her ...

It meant leaving one thing behind. The drinking. It was simple; I had to stop drinking. Because she would die if I didn't.

But OK, my friend (the booze) said. You're gonna have to choose between us. Do you remember how I got you through Danny Golden? Do you remember how I helped you cope with all those nasty tricks you turned? Do you remember how I saved you after Grandma died? Everyone else left you, then—no one else really cares about you. No one but me. Just think what I mean to you. No pain; no hurt; no regrets. I'm always there, and I'll never let you down. Just one drink, my friend the booze tells me, and you can escape all the painful things in your life. Whatever's dogging you and won't let go, I can get rid of it for you. Just one drink, he says, and I will make it all go away.

Sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? But it's true. My friend *can* make it all go away. And he did. But of course he has a price. There's always a price associated with that friend of mine. But hey, he says, don't

worry about the cost. Stick with me and you'll never have to pay it. Don't worry about it. *Relax*. Have a drink. I promise you'll feel better.

Alcohol is a very powerful, convincing voice in your mind. Of course you want to believe it—the sultry, seductive voice of the alcohol—and for a long time you *do* believe it, since you can soak in it's warm, inviting ocean, apparently with no cost or repercussions. The hangovers you suffer are bad, maybe, but they're nothing compared to the real suffering, the *real* pain that you've been suffering. Now you're being mercifully spared. Nothing compares to the abandonment and betrayal to which you've been subjected. Nothing. You just go back, and swim again in that bright, warm, golden sea of forgetfulness.

You keep swimming and escaping, and swimming and escaping, and though your life is disintegrating around you, you just don't fucking care. Not only do you not care you don't even *see* that it's happening. It becomes *their* fault: The others who are telling you to stop drinking. They don't understand your friendship, the love affair you've had for so long. You think they must be jealous. Though you may start to realize your life is a lie, you can't then escape it. You can't escape the lie. And by the time you realize the voice of the alcohol is nothing but a lie, it's too late.

Dr. Doug's father, dying of alcoholism, couldn't escape the lie. He had lain so long with the breath of the cobra that he couldn't breathe without it anymore. He simply suffocated on the shore of recovery. But I don't think he lacked the will *or* the desire to stop drinking. Of that I'm sure. It was simply more powerful than he was. Despite all Dr. Doug's attempts to help, his father just couldn't see his escape from dependence on the cobra. I don't know if he wanted to die, or if he wanted to live. The choice just wasn't up to him.

But where did that leave me? I had lied to myself for more than five years, telling myself that I was in control and that I called the shots in my life, when all the time it really wasn't me, at all. I had fallen in love with the cobra—alcohol—almost immediately, and until I heard in graphic detail the events in the life of my Dr. Doug, I had never managed to take a true, objective look back at myself.

There can be no doubt I was totally, completely out of control. No doubt. And Dr. Doug was right that if I didn't stop drinking, I was dead. I would die. Alcoholism is a terminal disease—*100% fatal*—if left untreated. If left to run its course, you *will* die from it. But before you die, it will take everything down around you, too. It doesn't just destroy you,

it destroys everything you've ever touched. Everything you've ever loved; everything you've ever cared for.

I can't say this enough. In my life, my alcoholism was destroying all the things I loved and cherished. My career; my love; and my baby, yet unborn. And I'm so glad the destruction was halted.

While in the hospital that last, long, lonely Saturday, I asked for a pen and some writing paper. I don't know why, exactly, I just had some thoughts I really wanted to put down on paper. A few days on my back (and finally sober) got my brain working—a thousand things swirling around and poking me roughly—and I thought if maybe I wrote those things down I might feel a little better. Just maybe.

Dr. Doug wasn't around, and since I was left alone with nothing to do other than talk to prickly Seattle, I wrote the first fifty pages of my life.

I don't know what I intended, or for whom it's written, just that I wanted to get some things down on paper, before ... well, before it isn't possible anymore. I don't know. I have a feeling, very thin and always quickly gone, that says 'Kerrilyn, you should write this down.' So, I did. And I am.

• • •

Mel Howe did not leave my apartment that night. But even though we were occupied most of the night, I did manage to make it into work the next morning. It felt far too early, too, considering we didn't finally get to sleep until sometime after three.

We continued to kiss, locked in a tight embrace and sitting on my couch. The TV droned on—some stupid movie that neither of us paid any attention to. She smelled good. That was the thing I noticed most about her, but she was also a thin, wiry young woman with a lean, athletic build. Only about two inches shorter than me, sitting we basically looked eye-to-eye, and seemed to be having the same thoughts as we held each other in the dim, diffused light of the kitchen. I thought she would be too boyish—too much like a guy—but that image proved entirely wrong. Under that sinewy exterior, Mel was *all* woman. And a good deal more, too.

We got very warm holding each other. I know I started to sweat, even though I wore a thin cotton polo shirt and a pair of jeans. Mel was dressed

even less conservatively, and the two of us got quite moist and slippery while we necked. My defenses had dropped, and as my demeanor relaxed further, another part of me seemed to wake up and become very excited. But still I refrained from touching Mel in any sensual or intimate manner. I only held her waist or hugged her about the shoulders. Our mouths did touch, though, and we kissed, licked, and touched and explored each other—mouths, faces, necks, and earlobes. She bit me on the neck once and I almost thought I would come, but thankfully held back. We kissed, and though we seemed very aroused, the level of our perspiration increasing, she would not offer to touch me anywhere that I did not touch her first. I'd half hoped she would, but the longer we remained sitting on the couch, still fully clothed and becoming more and more heated, the more it became obvious she was content to wait me out. Eventually I had to break it off. Though the moment I let go of her I regretted the loss of contact, but I had to get up and cool off a minute. Apparently so did Mel, too, since she got up from the couch.

"You want another beer?" I asked, and noticed how husky my voice had gotten. My face felt very flushed, my breathing deep and heavy, and the size and strength of my erection made a prominent tent in the front of my jeans. She seemed not to notice, so I too pretended it wasn't there.

"Sure," she replied, voice also deep and breathy. "Is it hot in here, or is it just me?"

"It's not hot, and it's *not* just you."

"Oh," she smiled. "I took a cool shower, earlier, but I feel like I need another."

I handed her a new, ice-cold beer. "I know what you mean."

"So, how about it, then?" She put her arms around me, and when I put mine around her, I felt how wet the back of her top was. She was soaked.

"You're soaking wet," I commented.

"And so are you," she said. "Don't think I'm in any hurry, or trying to pressure you just because I said I wanted to take a shower with you, but ..." Evidently she sensed something about me, and wanted to be sure I was comfortable with the pace of things.

"But what?"

Then she grinned, slightly embarrassed, thinking of what to say or

maybe how to say it, but changed her mind at the last moment. “But ... well ... I guess I’m willing to take as much time as you need.”

But then I was embarrassed, too. In some ways I almost felt capable of handling a relationship with a woman—Mel, perhaps—but as she had suspected, in other ways I felt totally inadequate for the task. My experiences with Joan—even taken in total—had not prepared me for all the variety and wonders possible in the opposite sex. I wasn’t afraid of Mel, but I *was* afraid of myself. I hoped it wasn’t too late for me—too late to learn some good and healthy things about my sensuality, about my sexuality. And I hoped Mel Howe was willing to teach me. She was demonstrating patience and understanding, but at the same time I knew she had needs and expectations I would have to fulfill were I to be successful with her. And then it crossed my mind that I wouldn’t exactly mind having a little ‘success’ with her, either.

“This is fine,” I said. I kissed her lightly on the lips, and she responded by softening, suddenly, and opening her lips and her tongue to me. It felt wonderful to finally experience a woman who had something more than her own agenda at heart. Sweet, patient Mel was willing to let me lead, however slow or inadequate I felt. And that willingness gave me some courage.

I slid my hands slowly, carefully down her back, stopping at the waistband of her shorts. Her top was short enough to leave about an inch of midriff exposed, so for the moment I was satisfied touching only the slippery bare skin in the small of her back. I knew she wanted me to go further—to touch her and explore her—and I knew it was what I wanted, too. But still, and frustratingly, something held me back.

Mel was alive in my arms. Go for it! she pleaded with her mouth, her lips, and her hands. She massaged my back, kneading my sweating, knotted muscles with painful urgency. But still, when I would not touch her intimately, she refused to touch me that way, either. And even though I was frustrated by my own hesitancy, she appeared to harbor no such anxiety or consternation. She was patient and willing to wait until I could overcome the uncertainty that the situation held for me.

I fanned my fingers out across the top of her hips. Her waist was narrow, and muscular, but her hips spread nicely to accentuate the firm roundness of her behind. I held her to me, and pressed my aching erection into the gulf between her legs. She accommodated me, and seemed to smile in acknowledgment that I could be so turned on.

"Let me get the light," she whispered, and we leaned over together so she could turn it off. Then, we were alone in the dark, with only the dim blue glow of the TV for illumination. "That's better."

"I'm glad you decided to give me another chance," I told her, feeling very comfortable and relaxed in her presence.

"So am I." There was a pause, then she sighed, a shiver coursing down her body, "I needed someone to hold me, tonight." Then she giggled, incongruously, "I've had the hots for you for quite some time, you know."

"You only met me two times, and you were already fantasizing about me?" It was almost easier to believe she was kidding me.

"Yeah." She kissed me, eyes closed and breath coming in quick, deep gasps.

"Well, was I worth it?" I just had to ask, you know.

"So far," she seemed to smile, "not too bad. But, you know, you ain't done nothing yet, either."

I sighed. "I know. Sorry." I suppressed a shrug, "I'm doing the best I can."

She sensed my unease, rescued me with, "You're doing fine, babe. Just take your time, and relax. I know everything will be just fine." She kissed me, again. "Everything will be just fine."

"Do you want to go back to the couch?"

"If you want. Anywhere is fine. Mm-mmm," she hummed, pressing her pelvis against me, and reveling in the strength and severity of my erection, "standing is OK, too."

I looked down at the tent in my jeans. "Sorry about that."

"Look, babe, if you *wasn't* bulging at the seams by now, I'd be gettin' worried about you. You know?" She cleared her throat, "And if I wasn't soaking wet by now, either," she looked down, eyelashes fluttering momentarily, "you should be worried about me."

I knew what she meant. And she wasn't talking about the near-dripping state of her clothing, either. "I was never worried about you," I said.

"But you haven't checked me out, yet, either." She thought it ironic.

I let go of her, laughing at my own consternation. "And *you* haven't

made it any easier!" I glared at her in mock anger. She only smiled, demurely, and held her hands crossed over her breasts—a Madonna-like pose.

"Do I *have* to make the first move?" Her hands went to the hem of her top, tugged it slightly. "Can you take control of things, or do I have to guide you like some pimply-faced young virgin freshman." Then she whipped her top off in one swift motion. "Are you a virgin? Marc?" Bare breasts were revealed in the dimness. I wished the kitchen light had still been on, so I could have seen her better.

"No, lady. You *know* I'm not a virgin."

"Really?" She walked toward the couch, looking back over her shoulder as she went. "And how would I know that? I mean it's true; you got me powerfully turned on," she bent over to untie her tennis shoes, "but that could be just blind luck." She wiggled her butt, then straightened and kicked her shoes off. "And man, you got me turned on so very, *very* much, right now. I think you *better* do something about it, or ..."

"Or—what?" I followed her to the couch, where I watched as she laid down lengthwise, opening her arms to me as I stood over her. "What, pray tell, would you like me to do about it?"

"Hmmm. Let's start by having you fuck me. Then we'll work our way up to something more interesting, later."

Finally then, I did make love to Mel Howe.

I left Mel asleep in my bed early the next morning. I still had to work regardless how much I may have wanted to stay in the bed with her, so I left her a short note and a key to the apartment, and rushed out the door about a minute past six-thirty. I had some distance to drive, and I was almost late getting there.

The computer operator's job I had was one of those where you run around all day mounting tapes and disk packs, pulling large piles of computer paper off three high-speed printers, and mounting fresh boxes of paper to replace the stacks of printed-up stuff continuously being regurgitated. Occasionally someone would call on the phone to ask if such-and-so job had run, or if such-and-so report had printed, but otherwise practically no one ever came around to check on me. Regardless, I was always busy, never having the opportunity to sit around

and get bored or sleepy, but with no one paying much attention to me, I had plenty of time to daydream about the night just ended, and the night I expected would be yet to come. I did have two classes later, but the seven PM 'Theory of Data Base Design' (yawn) was probably one I could afford to skip. At least this one time. I had it Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and on most Fridays the professor usually let us go early. He was young, only thirty or so, and no doubt he wanted to go out and have fun as much as we did. I was pulling an easy A, so ... when my four o'clock 'Principles of Digital Circuit Design' class (I was a computer science major, you know) was over I immediately headed back to the apartment. I sort of half expected to find Mel still there, but if not I knew I still had her phone number. I also expected that if she didn't have any previous plans she and I would be going out, or getting together some way or other. Thursday night's frolics and frivolities had reestablished some of my confidence, and some of my desire to be with someone. And that someone was Mel Howe.

But Mel was gone when I got home around ten after five. I suppose I could have called there anytime during the day, especially during the long, boring, eight hours I spent on the job in the computer center, but I'd never thought of it. I was more content to dream about Mel Howe, and all her bedroom antics. Tonight would be soon enough to hear from her, and if everything was again right—to be with her.

I picked up the phone and dialed her apartment. Luck was with me, because she picked up on the third ring. She sounded slightly out of breath, and in a hurry.

"Hi, Mel. It's Marc."

There was a two-second pause on the line during which I began to worry if I had dialed the right number, when she spoke, "Oh." Another two-second silence. "Hi."

"What's the matter? I catch you at a bad time?"

"Uh ..." Over the phone I heard something heavy bang to the floor, and heard her level a juicy obscenity at whatever it was that had fallen. Then she said, "Well, actually, yes. I'm a little busy at the moment."

"Oh." I felt the bubble of excitement that I had been building all day burst suddenly.

But she said, "Hang on a second." Apparently she set the phone down, because I heard a *bump!* and then various sundry noises and

strange voices in the background. Male voices, too. I couldn't tell if there was more than one man there, or indeed, more women than just Mel, so I had to wait until she returned, to find out.

Eventually she came back. "Sorry," she said, sounding even more out of breath than when she had first answered.

"What's going on over there?" I asked.

"We've got a gig, tonight."

"Oh. I didn't know you were playing anywhere."

"No reason you should." She coughed. "It's really no big deal. It's just a job. Something Mike and his brothers lined up months ago. I'd tell them no, but I hate to walk out on anyone when I've made a commitment. You understand?"

"Mike? Mike, who?"

She laughed, but was gentle when she answered, "Oh, Marc! You don't have to worry about a thing. I had a *really* good time last night, and if I didn't have this damned job to play, I'd be having a good time again tonight, too."

It sounded like I was just being let down easy, but I still had to digest what I'd just heard. "You sure?"

"Of course!" She sounded quite sincere, but I was still suspicious. She cooed, "That was a very sweet note you left me this morning."

"Thanks, I guess."

"I have the key to your apartment, too. I hope you don't mind."

"No," I said, "I don't mind." I'd given it to her, after all.

"And if you want, I'll come by tonight after we finish. Is that OK?"

"I suppose so."

But, she was calling my bluff. "Look, if you want to be angry with me because I have to play this stupid fucking gig, then I guess there's nothing I can do about it. But you gotta believe me when I tell you I had a very, very nice time last night." She paused, "So, do you believe me?"

Well, what choice did I have, really? "OK. No problem."

"Is it all right if I come over later?"

"Sure. I'll be here."

She lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "Mike's promised me a whole gram of the good stuff to play this job for him. I decided it was better than the cash, since high-grade coke is pretty hard to come by, sometimes. You and I can have a party!"

"You *are* talking about Mike Hummell, aren't you?"

"Yes-ss," she drawled, suspicious. "Who else would it be?"

"Just checking."

"It's over between us, Marc. You don't need to worry about him."

"But you still play together."

She became significantly exasperated with me, just then. "*I told you!* This gig was arranged *months* ago. We had an agreement. They need me to play keyboards, and besides, I could use the dope." She seemed to be shaking her head, but I could only imagine her frustration with me. "Are you gonna trust me, or are we gonna have a problem over this?"

"I trust you," I said. I hoped I believed my words, too.

"Good." She coughed, again. "Look, I gotta go get my stuff packed. *I'll see you later*. OK?"

"All right," I agreed, "see you later."

• • •

Both Malmud and Dr. Doug were away all weekend, but both of them came to see me on Monday morning. I thought I was recovering nicely (physically, anyway) and though I'd asked Malmud more than once, neither he nor anyone else would tell me when I could go home. All he ever said was, 'We'll see ... a couple of days, maybe,' and I was then left to wait impatiently for those couple of days to pass.

I had seen Sheree on Friday, but before that it had been almost an entire week and no sweet girl. I hadn't seen anyone else in my life, at all, since entering the hospital. What was going on? Why were *they*—Marc, Tom, Mel, Sheree, too—doing this to me? I needed her and I needed the rest of them, too. But the vacuum left by their absence forced me to reach out for something else. Finally realizing I was drowning, I couldn't but hold out my arms for something—someone—and as if he had planned it, that someone was my Dr. Doug.

He stood at the foot of my bed in his usual white lab coat, all blue eyes, tall, pink faced and very blond. "I'm very sorry, Kerrilyn, that I couldn't be here for you over the weekend," he said. I wondered why it should be so important to be with me, so I asked him. He replied, "We had just started something that's very important—critically important to you—and for me to leave you here to stew in your own juices was a serious error."

"No big deal, boss," I waved off his apology, "It was the weekend. You deserve time off, once in a while, too. Besides, I had Seattle to talk to."

"But, it *is* a big deal." He sat down in the chair by my bed, his usual spot. His bright blue eyes darkened with concern. I was suddenly nervous. "I care for you. It's important to me to see you start down the path of recovery. But I have other patients, too, and sometimes their needs come into play. Sometimes it's unavoidable." He didn't comment on Seattle, which I thought odd.

"Really," I tried to reassure him, "It's OK. No big deal, like I said."

"How do you feel?" he asked. It seemed like a *non sequitur*.

"Me?" I frowned. "Why?"

"Why—what? Why do I ask how you're feeling?"

"Sure."

"I dunno."

But, I answered his question, anyway. "I feel pretty good." I held up the small pile of pages I had clutched in my lap. "I didn't have anything better to do, so I wrote down some things." I don't know why I was even interested in telling him about the pages—my story—or why once I'd done it my heartbeat elevated so significantly. He asked, "What things?" And so I started to tell him about my life. Just like that. No preamble, no shyness or hesitation.

It was like another person's life I was telling. That's how it felt. It was, be assured, all true and all about me, but somehow it seems now like everything I wrote about had happened to some other poor, unfortunate girl, who being very much like me had some of the same dreams and feelings. Some of the same regrets, too. But the pain and the abuse, *they* were all hers, alone. I didn't have to experience, first hand, the horribleness of the things this girl had had to endure.

Am I crazy? I asked Dr. Doug this question, once I'd finished reading what I'd written.

"You're not crazy, Kerrilyn," he replied.

"Then, what?"

"You remember what they said in AA about the fourth step?"

I had to think. "No, not really."

"That part about 'we made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves'?"

"OK, so?" I didn't see the connection. I held the pages up, "This is hardly a moral inventory, fearless or otherwise." Then I let them drop in my lap. Flump.

"Who knows what forms our recovery should take?" He was becoming quite cryptic; I was lost.

"Is that some sort of trick question?" The term 'rhetorical question' wasn't yet well enough ingrained in my brain to roll off my tongue, but that's what I meant. He just shrugged and shook his head. I felt stupid, and it quickly angered me. "Don't play word games with me! I don't like it when people make me feel stupid."

He was unfazed. "I'm not playing word games with you, kiddo. I apologize if it sounds that way, but all I was saying was that it isn't up to me to decide what form your fourth step should take. I think what you've written is excellent." He smiled, very big. "You are remarkable. You are so quick to come to the realization of things that some of us take years to understand."

"That's just bullshit to make me feel better." I looked away. "I don't have one single, fucking clue about what I'm doing, or what I'm going to do, either."

"You can go to AA. Ninety meetings in ninety days."

"That many?" It did seem like a lot.

"Kerrilyn, if you're serious about staying sober ..."

All right, I *was* serious! But, "How often do you go?"

"Three or four times a week."

"Still? Here at the hospital?"

He shrugged, "Sometimes. There are meetings all over the place, not

just here.”

“I think I might be staying with Sheree for a while. They live near Gainesville. Do they have meetings up there?”

“I’m sure they do.” He took out a pen and his pocket notebook. Started writing. “I’ll check into it for you. That is,” he stopped writing, “if you think you will go.” I only frowned. “Kerrilyn, if you want to go, then I think that’s the best thing you could possibly do. But ...” he stopped.

“But, what?”

“I just thought of something.” He started scribbling some notes in his notebook. I thought he was going to go on and tell me what he had thought of, but he just kept writing in that damn notebook.

“*What did you think of?*” I was perturbed that he was ignoring me.

He stopped. “Oh. It just occurred to me that I know the director of a really good facility up in the North Georgia hills. Should be pretty convenient for you. I think we could get you in there, if you’d rather do something like that, instead.”

“What? A hospital?”

“Sort of. An inpatient drug treatment facility. You’ll be up there with all kinds of folks, some of whom will be very much like you, and some who will be very, very different. I think you might find the Center easier, in the early going. Later you can continue with AA, if you want.”

“I dunno. Do you think I should go to this ‘Center’ place?”

Dr. Doug didn’t answer right away. His delay made me nervous all over again, because it essentially highlighted the basis of all my fears. I may have ‘conquered’ (so to speak) getting sober, though I really hadn’t had any conscious participation in the matter, but the prospect of *staying sober* scared the living hell out of me. Even more so because the more I thought about not drinking, the more my gut told me that I wasn’t going to be able to do it. Not if I had to do it alone, and probably not even with help. A *lot* of help. I remembered a guy from the AA meeting Friday night. How many times had he tried to get sober? And how many times had he failed? How much had he cried and literally fallen on his knees to ask God to help him remove that curse he carried? Many. Too many. I couldn’t afford to fail that many times. Too much depended on my succeeding.

I was only me, and I was hardly even strong enough to ask God to help me, let alone recognize His help when it finally came.

Dr. Doug said, "Dr. Fraser is a good friend of mine, and I know he would love to have you. I think you will get a lot from it, and as I said, I think you might find it easier than simply going to AA meetings all by yourself. Being out in the world, and finally sober, can be a very scary experience. Especially if we haven't faced the world without a drink in our hand for a very long time."

"It's been more than five years, for me." The admission, while true, immediately depressed me. Five years. Six years. Longer? And I wasn't even twenty-one, yet. You see? I had never been sober in my entire adult life. What was life going to be like for me once I discovered who I *really* was? Was there even a sober person inside me? One who wasn't already hopelessly insane?

I sighed. "I think I probably need some place like the Center. Are you sure you can get me in there?"

He nodded, and smiled. "I'm sure I can, Kerrilyn. Don't worry." It was as if he read my mind. "I wouldn't even worry about the cost. I think we can even get the state to pay for it."

"Oh! Shit!" I exclaimed, since up to that very moment no one had mentioned if any of this nice hospital stay or recovery process had any cost, at all. And I was damn sure it did. Considering how nice this place was, I was fucking certain it was definitely *not* free. And this realization led to another very sobering realization: "I don't have any money."

He didn't seem surprised. Or concerned. "I thought as much."

I went on without acknowledging him, "I spent the last of what I had on that ... apartment ... I rented right before they brought me in here." I shook my head, "I can't go back there. No way!"

"That's OK, Kerrilyn," he said, trying to soothe me, "you don't have to."

"But Dr. Doug, I'm broke!"

"I know. Don't worry about it."

"How am I gonna pay for being in the hospital?" The more I thought about it the more worried I became. I had mental images of being chained to the dishwashing machine down in the cafeteria, washing up cups and plates and knives and forks until I'm old and wrinkled just to pay for having stayed in the hospital.

He shook his head, "Kerrilyn, don't worry about your hospital bill."

It's been taken care of."

So then I wondered, just who would take care of my hospital stay? Sheree? She couldn't possibly afford it, there was no way. Marc? Well ... no way he would do it, either. And, depressing as it was, I couldn't fault him for that. I didn't even want to ask Dr. Doug who had 'taken care' of my hospital stay.

But he asked, anyway, "Don't you want to know who's paying for this?"

I countered, "Do I?"

But he only looked at me for several long seconds. Trying to decide if I wanted to know, maybe? Then he said, "Kerrilyn, I don't know what it means, exactly, but your friend Marc has agreed to pay your hospital bill."

"I can't believe he would do that. Not without ..." I had to think how to put the words together "... wanting something from me."

"So, you think there are strings attached?"

I wasn't sure, but, "There has to be." It seemed logical and Marc was nothing if not fucking logical. "I don't want to owe Marc Huffman anything."

"You think he's going to want something from you?"

But I still couldn't fathom why he would pay what I was sure was a *lot* of money, just for me. Not after what I'd done. Not after I'd tried to kill myself.

Not after I'd tried to kill our baby. Not then—ever.

But Dr. Doug changed his mind. "I shouldn't have told you he was paying for this. You seem upset about it, and the last thing I want to do is upset you." He put his hand on my arm. "Kerrilyn, don't think too much about this. Try not to worry about it. There may in fact not be any 'strings' attached to his helping you. Maybe he just wants you to get better."

Did he? Then, before I could stop it from escaping, I asked, "Do you think he still loves me?" And the mere thought brought me instantly to the verge of tears. Because it was something so far beyond hope that I dared not even utter the words out loud.

But Dr. Doug only asked, "Do you still love him?"

I felt tears hit the front of my nightgown as I whispered, "Yes. I love him very, very much."

He took his hand away, then stood up, suddenly. "So get better. Get sober. Stay sober. Then talk to him when you feel you are strong enough." He turned to go. "So. You wanna come with me to the AA meeting, tonight?"

"There's a meeting tonight?" But, that was a silly question, because he'd just told me that.

He only smiled and said, "I'll pick you up at five till seven. OK?"

When I nodded, he was out the door at a trot.