

Prologue

My name is Kerrilyn MacDonald. I am twenty years old, and I've just been given another chance at life.

For only being twenty, I think enough has happened to me to equal any *two* other people's lives. So many things have been done to me, so many other things I've done to others ... it would probably take a year to write them all down. But since I'm here, sitting on my bed looking out at the late summer trees and feeling both thoughtful and pensive, I thought I would just write down a couple things that are on my mind, right now. I think eventually with enough time and enough remembering, I might actually write everything down. If it takes a year—two years—then so be it. I've got lots of time. Now.

These days I've been spending time up here in the north Georgia woods as a full time resident of a place we call The Center. It's considered one of the best drug and alcohol treatment facilities in the whole South. I'm an alcoholic, you see, and I've almost destroyed both my life and my health because of it. But of course the keyword here is *almost*. I almost managed it, but was fortunate enough to be stopped just short of actually succeeding in killing myself. Perhaps I should add, *accidentally* killing myself. I don't know. Among the things I've been able to learn in recovery, I have learned about the real damage I've been doing (other than the merely physical) to the rest of my life. I never thought myself too damn smart, despite what my teachers and others told me, but when I finally came up against that huge brick wall called alcoholism—addiction to alcohol—I found I couldn't go forward anymore if I didn't do something about it. Thankfully, I proved how smart I really was and

broke the chain and the pattern of my disease. So now I'm actually doing something about my drinking, and that's why I'm here at The Center. In the process of recovery I've been forced to go back to my childhood—dredge both fearlessly and brutally through my past—and uncover as much about my life as I can. There are multiple good reasons for doing this; I can't go into all of them right now. The upshot of all this fearless, probing self-discovery is that I found I have a story to tell.

And this is it.

I feel pretty good about myself, now. Yeah, a lot of things are different, and every day (that I'm alive) keeps getting better and better. In talking to my therapist, and in listening and talking with the rest of the folks in my group, I'm learning more and more about myself and my disease, and some of the reasons why I might have become the way I am. From time to time I still get down on myself because of the stupid and foolish things I've done, and the myriads of destructive ways I've acted, but at the same time I get a lot of reassurance from everyone that I'm not the only one who's ever done these things, or said these kinds of things, or felt the way I feel about my life. In fact they all feel pretty much the way I do. We've all been pretty horrible, but yet we know we're not (completely) to blame. We know we have a disease, and the things we've done and how we've acted are just symptoms of this disease. It's that simple.

OK, OK! Before you remind me of the obvious, I know it's not that simple. Alcoholism is a complex, insidious crippler of the body, the mind, and the soul, and it hides itself behind hundreds of other guises, all the while looking to you as though *nothing at all is wrong*. I knew I drank a lot, sure, but so did a lot of other people I knew—including most of my friends. *Especially* some of my friends. I knew I got drunk all the time and was quite frequently sick because of my drinking, but then again, so were a lot of my friends. I can't necessarily speak for them and their lives, but speaking strictly for myself, it wasn't just the level of my consumption that characterized my alcohol use as a disease, or that ultimately convinced me I really *had* a disease. There were so many other things, that once I saw them it was made abundantly clear to me I was an alcoholic. Plain and simple. And something else, too, but I'm not going to talk about that other thing, right now. It will have to wait. I read a book, recently, called *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The main character, Valentine Smith, had a saying, and I paraphrase it loosely, 'In waiting, all things will come.' I

grok his philosophy. Of course, Ernest and Julio (or was it Paul Masson?) also had a saying, 'We will sell no wine before its time.' Basically, they both mean the same thing. But, I'm rambling.

I said up top that I'd been given another chance at life, but then didn't explain what I meant. Just a few weeks ago (actually, it's been about two months) I reached a point where I almost died from my alcoholism. Of course if I had I wouldn't be here right now writing this down, and you wouldn't be reading this, either, so obviously I didn't die. But I could have. Quite easily, in fact. I was drinking completely out of control, drinking more and more, literally drowning myself in the booze. I was trying to remove the pain and stresses of my life by the anesthetic effects of that good ole grain alcohol. And of course it wasn't working. In response to this failure to achieve the desired level of numbness, I drank more and more, and felt worse and worse, and my stomach began to hurt *very* badly. I don't remember most of what I did or what I was trying to do, but I do remember how badly my stomach hurt when I drank. But I didn't stop. I threw up blood, instead. My stomach burned and burned, and I vomited blood with almost every drink, but still didn't stop. If I ate anything, it wasn't much, and besides, my stomach hurt far too badly to make food very desirable, most of the time. But I didn't quit drinking—I *couldn't* quit drinking.

Well, we know I did finally stop. But that wasn't until they had to carry me off to the emergency room in an ambulance. And *that* was only after I had covered both my dress and myself with the bloody contents of my stomach and passed out in the process. There I was, trying to sing a gig at one of the premier clubs in town—a truly tremendous break for the band, me included—and I was in such poor shape physically I could barely stand up. Mentally and emotionally I may have been in just as bad a shape, maybe even worse, but ...

Well, I'm not drinking now. I feel pretty good and I feel pretty good about it, too, and I wanted to tell you all how I managed finally to get sober. But of course before I can, I have to tell how I managed to become a drunk, and why it took such a long, painful, life-threatening experience to make me realize just what the booze was doing to me. And, well, this may take a while, folks. I hope you're comfortable.

OK, this is me:

I am 5'3", more or less, and I have fairly long strawberry blond hair

that falls about halfway down my back. Not to toot my own horn too loudly, I think my hair is pretty, and not only that, I have large, bright green eyes. I never thought green eyes were so special—or unusual—since when I was growing up no one ever said too much about it, but since then others have commented on the ‘mysteriousness’ of my gaze, and told me how bright my eyes can be, especially when I’m happy or contented, as I am now. I’ve been told my eyes literally have sparks in them, though I’ve never seen them. Someday I’d like to see those sparks so I will know what they keep talking about. I’m a girl, in case the name Kerrilyn didn’t tip you off, and as I said before, I’m twenty years old. In a couple months I’ll turn twenty-one, but for me it’ll be no more (or less) special a birthday than the last one. Well maybe it will be special, since I’ve come to feel as though I’ve been given a reprieve from a death sentence. Maybe my next birthday will be the most special of all. I don’t know.

I used to weigh about 120 lbs, which for my short height might seem a little chubby, but considering my slightly less than petite frame (you might call me voluptuous, if you were so inclined) that would be about the right weight for me. I’m a little heavier than that, now, but it’s for a very good reason. I’m pregnant. But even with that, my butt and thighs tend to capture the pounds if I eat too much. My prominent posterior is fairly well balanced by my broad shoulders and nicely large-enough boobs. If you ignore the fact that I happen to be bulging in the middle right now, I’ve been told I have a pretty good body, so I guess I’m not being terribly immodest by saying so, now. I’ve also been told I’m very pretty, too, but that’s one thing I might agree with. I do think I’m pretty.

Ah, vanity—that’s a curious thing. I’m a pretty girl, maybe, but I never thought it made me better than anyone else. I have ample evidence proving that I’m *not* better, but in some respects, being considered an attractive lass has been a good thing. But it’s also been quite a large pain in the ass. No pun intended. Men seem to notice me more than they notice other girls. I see you guys out there! Tell me it’s not true. I can just *feel it* when I walk by. The eyes; the turn of the head; the carefully hidden leer. Of course, most of the time I don’t particularly mind that men think I’m pretty. I mean, it has had its advantages. But then again, these so-called advantages have their downside. Nothing is given but what you have to both pay a price and shoulder a responsibility. But I guess I’m not really complaining. Too much.

I graduated from high school two years ahead of the other kids my age. My teachers always told me I was intelligent, and in schoolwork, I

suppose I was. Most subjects were easy for me (to the extent that they were able to teach me anything in that decrepit old brick building they called a high school). Mrs. Kuykendall, who was my elementary school teacher (yeah, for all of it) and who also taught me freshman English, thought I was someone (and something) special, and was the one who helped me skip the two grades. That was how I graduated early. And it was just as well, I suppose.

What else about me? Oh! I sing lead vocals in a band, and again, this seems to be another area where others have commented on my rather 'unusual talents.' Where some singers have a hard time staying on key and singing the correct pitches, apparently I have the ability to hear the notes in my head and sing them without needing any help (appreciably) from the others. I like good stage monitors so I can hear everything, but even when I can't, it doesn't matter very much. I stay on key. Other vocalists hate me for this. I can't help it, since it's another trait I was born with, and another that I can't do a damned thing about. But I love my music, as much as—or more than—I love anything else in my life. I do get terrible stage fright when I first get up on stage, but despite the frequent urge to throw up before performing, I wouldn't trade music and the opportunity to perform for anything. These are all the good and nice things about me, and they've made for a few pretty good-sized paragraphs. Now, for the rest, I guess.

I was born in Alabama, miles from nowhere. Daddy used to beat me when I was a little girl. He used to beat my younger brother Kerwin, and he used to beat mama, too. Mama wouldn't tolerate that kind of treatment, so daddy tended to be gone a lot. But mama's dead now and daddy's in prison, where he damn well belongs. After that I was taken to live with Grandpa and Grandma, mama's parents, and Kerwin went to live with Uncle Craig and Aunt Susie, up in Roanoke, North Carolina. Grandpa died a few years later, so Grandma and I lived alone together until I was seventeen. That was when she died.

At age ten I was brutally raped by two neighbor men. It was my fault, of course, and I was so ashamed of what I'd done and how it happened that I never told anyone about it. No one. I had bruises from where they'd beaten me, and I was sore and bleeding from where they'd violated me, but I concealed my injuries and my pain, and endured the shame and guilt in complete silence. Grandma never knew what happened, and I never did anything about it.

After Grandma died, I took the car and drove from Bum-Fuck Alabama to Atlanta, to 'seek my fortune,' so to speak. Since I wasn't expecting to go to college (ever) I figured at least I could get a good job in the big city. Well, that didn't exactly happen. In my youth and naïveté I got tangled up with a man named Danny Golden who owned one of those topless-bottomless nudie bar places. No, I didn't wait tables *or* dance naked. Instead, I became Danny's 'girlfriend' for a time, and when he decided I was ready, he sold me into prostitution. Of course, I was strictly top-shelf stuff (hah—the irony!) but nevertheless I regularly collected money in exchange for sex. In time I was collecting fairly large sums of money for my 'sexually explicit' behavior, and though I hated Danny and everything he stood for, I am still ashamed to admit I liked being a call-girl. Yeah, I called myself a 'call-girl,' but really I was nothing but a high-priced hooker. I never considered myself a *whore*, but for some I suppose that's the most appropriate term for a girl like me. Danny wasn't often a violent man, as some can be, but he did beat me near death one time with his belt. That beating has left me with scars covering my back that are only now beginning to lose their itchy redness. Thankfully most of them aren't too deep or disfiguring, but I still wouldn't willingly wear a backless bathing suit in public. Probably the only thing that kept me alive during the two years I worked for Danny Golden was the booze. My friend, alcohol. I rarely touched other drugs. Not before, not then, and not now. Marijuana, sure, but not cocaine or other, harder drugs. Danny, despite *his* regular use of cocaine, wouldn't permit me to touch it. I did try it, however, and his subsequent 'reprimand' was an experience don't I particularly wish to repeat. But despite the opportunity, I had no real interest in doing other drugs. And it's heroin I'm talking about, in particular. The one time I drank part of a bottle of codeine-based cough syrup, it made me so sick that I forever after abandoned the opium avenue in favor of the alcohol autobahn. Considering the prostitution and everything else, it wasn't hard to understand why I might have become an alcoholic, and in some respects, I may have even been one by the time I left Alabama.

And that just about covers my whole sorry-ass life in a nutshell. I'm in treatment, now, and it's a damned good thing. My old life ended when I was carried away on that stretcher, and my new life began when I woke up the next day, and I ...

Chapter 1

... Opened my eyes. Everything was blurred-out, hopelessly fuzzy. I had to blink several times to get things into focus. Even a little. (I'm nearsighted and I have to wear glasses, so without them things are a little fuzzy anyway, but this was near complete blindness. Only shades of light and dark.) For a moment I entertained a foolish thought about rubbing my eyes, but when I ordered my arm to move, my body became suddenly wracked with excruciating pain. This pain was nothing small at all, or restricted only to my arm, or anything simple like that. This was a monstrously huge, whole-body hurt that brought tears to my poor, blurry eyes.

Slowly, my mind focused. Where was I?

Yeah, good question. I started to search my memory, but nothing immediately came forward. Still, this was no real surprise. Of late, most of my life had been kept hidden from me, lost inside a fog of alcohol, so ...

That must be it, then. I must have blacked out, or something, and this was the aftermath. Well, knowing that didn't make me feel any better. This pain was *huge*. And I still had no earthly idea where I was or how I'd come to be feeling so very, very badly. Oh God, I thought, what have I done now? What have I done to myself? Where am I? Dead, in hell (where I deserved to be), or in bed with some total stranger?

Then, I saw her. Sheree. My very best friend Sheree Germaine. As my vision gradually cleared, I could just barely make out the shape of her face and her piercing blue eyes. Sheree was there, meaning I wasn't alone in a strange place, and also meaning I wasn't dead, either. I swiveled my eyes

unsteadily in her direction, and tried to turn my head to see her better. It wasn't easy, excruciating pain accompanied even the slightest of movements. But Sheree saw that I saw her and leaned forward. Her face was almost in focus, then.

"Hey," she said, not smiling, "how are you feeling?" Her face showed a deep concern. But when I tried to assess her question, I came up just short of understanding her. But I can say that seeing her worried and eminently concerned face only helped me become a bit more worried and even more concerned. Yeah, seeing her frowning, unhappy expression flat scared me *shitless*.

"Where am I?" I tried to say, but my voice refused to work. The words came out only as painful, cracked whispers. She seemed to hear me well enough, though.

"Sweetheart, don't you remember?" She leaned closer. "You're in the hospital. Don't you remember?"

Being called sweetheart confused me. That's Sheree, why would she call me that? But in my state I little choice but to accept the term of endearment at face value. I tried to think: What was going on? But while I recognized Sheree, my mind seemed a completely blank slate, otherwise. It almost hurt to think, but the pain I think was all but too familiar. *That much* I could remember. It felt like hangover pain. I must have been drunk and somehow (though I could not remember it) done something that had landed me in the hospital. But what the fuck had I done?

Sheree leaned closer, and her hand gently brushed the hair from my eyes. I couldn't have looked too good since her distressed frown was so pronounced. Man, she was *worried!* Oh God. What the hell was wrong with me?

"What ..." I whispered, but it was almost too much effort to continue. I tried to swallow, but I couldn't. "... Happened?" I hoped she would understand me.

She licked her lips. Cleared her throat. Uh-oh. "Don't you remember getting sick in the club last night?"

All I could manage was the slightest shake of the head. "Club?" I croaked.

Evidently she decided it could wait. "It's OK, Kerr'," she soothed, stroking my head, "just rest now."

Boy, that seemed like a really good idea, so I simply closed my eyes and drifted off.

I awoke sometime later when the nurse came in to check my vital signs. I couldn't really see her very plainly without my glasses, but when I turned my head I saw Sheree still sitting by the bedside, still looking worried.

Where was Marc? I wondered. He should be here—where was he? Yes, Marc. I was hurt, obviously very badly. My pain, when I didn't try to move, had become not much more than a dull ache in the background, but even so I quickly came to the realization that I needed him here with me. In the worst way.

"Is ..." I tried to dredge up some moisture, and failed, "Marc here?"

"What?" she hadn't understood.

"Marc?" I mouthed again.

"Babe, I'm sorry," Sheree answered after a few seconds, "he's not here."

A whisper, "Where?"

"I don't know." She seemed strangely patronizing. "Home, I guess."

"Home?" And then ... and then ... *oh, no!* It all came back to me, suddenly, in a literal flood, as if I'd suddenly turned on a monstrous black faucet inside my brain.

The baby. Marc. *Sheree*. The band. Oh God, what had I done? What in holy hell had I done? Then the tears came. I almost couldn't bear up under the terrible truth of my life.

Marc Huffman and I had been living together for the past nine or ten months. We had met originally under circumstances that were, at the time, not at all satisfactory for me. But that first night when he should have just turned around and walked straight out my apartment door, he didn't. He stayed, and helped me get away from Danny. In a way he *took* me away from Danny Golden. And so with suitcases stuffed full of clothes I moved into Marc's very nice one bedroom condo/apartment, hid from the world for a time, and tried to get my life in order.

It wasn't long at all before he introduced me to his favorite avocation, music. The performance of music. I've always enjoyed singing, and even

in high school when I sang in the choir (probably the only extracurricular activity I ever participated in) I was recognized for being pretty talented at carrying a tune. Of course I liked to sing, but until Marc introduced me to his musician friends, Tom Germaine and Mel Howe, and we started a band with that egotistical maniac and distinctly unfriendly son-of-a-bitch Troy Dancer, I never realized just how much potential music could hold for me.

It quickly became the most important thing in my life. Actually, it's continually bounced between number one and number two, the other thing being Marc Huffman. But any way you look at it (and I have looked at it from many different perspectives) I love my music. Nothing else has ever made me feel as competent or as powerful as when I belt out a song on stage in front of an audience. Nothing before or since has ever made me feel as complete or as fulfilled as when performing my songs. Nothing.

So while the band rehearsed regularly (with me as its vocalist), my life improved. I relaxed a bunch, and because I had music and songs to think about, I rarely thought about all the unpleasant (and painful) things from my prior life. Specifically: Danny Golden; physical and mental abuse; and prostitution. He (Danny) began to scare me less and less, and memories of my former life and lifestyle faded more and more. There was something to look forward to every day, and despite the apparent 'unevenness' of my emotional state from time to time, life was pretty good.

Christmastime had its share of unpleasantness, but that was because of me. Finally sober now and looking back at it, I can hardly imagine how I could have been so reckless, foolish, and just plain stupid as to think I could perform a sex act—fellatio, to be exact—on Marc's best friend Tom Germaine (in front of Marc, no less) and have no price to pay for it. Christmas Day I ran away from home in shame for the way I'd fucked (well, sucked) Tom Germaine. Tom Germaine is married, and to Sheree Germaine, the girl sitting next to my hospital bed and giving me all these worried looks. And though she found out what I'd done to Tom that night in their living room, she forgave me and took me back as her friend. I didn't understand it then—I barely understand it now—but I do have my theories. Well, maybe they're more than theories.

Despite my having fucked up—*royally*—Marc forgave me, too, and took me back. No, I don't know why. However, after I repented my sin life got even better. We bought a little electric piano/keyboard thing so I could work on my songs, and in a flood of creative juices I wrote many,

many songs and learned to play the piano (somewhat). I don't think I'll ever be any good, at least not good enough to play professionally, but I can play well enough to pound out the chords and the melodies to my songs. In the band, I'm just the singer.

With Marc's birthday in May (the Sunday before Memorial Day), things again became complicated. I think my habitual 'complicatedness' is both my burden and my bane, but for Marc's birthday I was suckered into something I should have known to steer clear of. Sheree wanted to get revenge on Tom for what he (and I) had done in December, by having sex with Marc while I kept Tom 'occupied.' Yeah, she wanted to fuck Marc while Tom was 'forced' to watch. Oddly enough (or not oddly at all, depending on your viewpoint) Tom seemed not to mind what they were doing. Indeed, at the time I thought he was essentially *unaware* that Sheree was riding Marc's cock in their hot-tub while he lounged there, his own cock being manually massaged by a wet and naked Kerrilyn—me. It worried me some to think he would take for granted that I would be so willing to 'do him' so nicely—and so easily. But it was just a job, and it was just what I had been asked to do.

Later, once the four of us made it upstairs to Sheree's and Tom's bed, things became even a bit more 'interesting.' Sheree and I were wrestling on the bed (*we were* naked, you know) and shortly a vicious tickling match broke out between us. It was a lot of fun, but I became so aroused I thought I was going to lose my mind. I remember lying in the middle of the bed, then, literally begging someone—*anyone!*—to make love to me. Tom seemed quite ready to remedy that situation. That is until Sheree intervened and took over those duties herself. Under different circumstances I might have been surprised, but considering the state I was in, I was able to get into the feeling quite nicely and easily. Really.

Marc and I had had a very regular sex life. It's no secret; I enjoy sex greatly—and frequently—and (thankfully) so does Marc. From the time we met until the time I moved out, we probably had sex at least once *every day*. Really, it was just our style. It was just my style, I suppose. When I'd worked as a prostitute I probably saw on average three to five clients a day. That meant I was having sex at least three times a day, and perversely, I was enjoying even that. That Marc had the capacity and the desire to mate with me so often probably explains why I stayed with him. It didn't have anything to do with why I went with him originally, but it *definitely* had an impact on why I'd been so happy to stay. But don't misunderstand me on this point. I *do* love Marc. I want him and need him,

and can't seriously imagine life with anyone *but* Marc. But that isn't my point, exactly. Marc and I had sex quite often, for months and months, and no birth control of any kind had ever been used. None whatsoever. And yet I didn't get pregnant until sometime in May. Go figure. No one's been able to explain it and very probably it hardly matters, but it took a couple hundred good fucks with Marc to get me pregnant. I don't know which time was 'the one,' but I do know with absolute certainty that no other *man* had been with me in months at the time when it had to have happened.

The morning after Marc's birthday party was a surprise for *some of us*. From the very beginning I don't know what I had thought (if anything) about the slightly unusual way Sheree Germaine always seemed to act when she was around me. I never connected her affections and attentions to anything other than an apparent (and disconcerting) need for my close friendship. I suppose I should have been wondering why she even wanted to *be* my friend, but I never really got very deep into analyzing that particular shadow puppy. Shadow puppy, you ask? A shadow puppy is something you think may be soft, warm, and cuddly, but since you really can't see it, you really can't be sure. That wet tongue may be *tasting* you. That wagging tail could be a tentacle. You don't really know. Anyway, I didn't objectively figure out her need for me—why she needed me. Not until she finally did something about it.

On the morning of Memorial Day, after Marc's most interesting birthday party, I woke alone in Sheree and Tom's bed, just as naked as I had been the night before when Marc and I had scampered from the hot-tub up to their bedroom. Soon though, Sheree joined me on the bed. We talked a long time, about a wide range of subjects, but eventually the conversation turned to sex. I don't think I've ever been particularly confused about sexual matters—my own sexual feelings. Not since becoming an adult, at least. I don't think I have any sexual inhibitions so I don't think I have the kinds of 'should I or shouldn't I' moral or ethical debates most people seem to have. I know when it comes to giving sexual pleasure, I don't much care to whom I give it. And even sometimes when it comes to receiving sexual pleasure, I can be pretty flexible about it, as well. It's all a matter of relaxing, and taking control, and doing to the other person what you know would make your own motor run.

However, in their bed that morning, Sheree was very unsure of herself and didn't even seem to know where to begin or how to proceed. But I was willing to show her. I simply took charge, as I said before, and

put all my efforts into making her feel pleasure at my touch. I worked on my most nervous girl so diligently and determinedly, and I made her have an orgasm as good as any she'd probably ever experienced. Such are my skills. Encouraged and emboldened by the success of my deft fingers and skillful tongue, Sheree then took over the lead. Initially she needed some help, but she had also learned from me, so she licked and tickled and massaged and caressed and eventually took me over the edge. Afterwards, we talked about our feelings—she, mostly—and I assured her I understood how she felt. She asked me, 'but what about Marc?' to which I replied, 'Sheree, I love him, so I can't promise you anything,' and she cried. I had to kiss her tears away, and hug and stroke her, but in the end she seemed to accept that I would not become her only lover, nor would she become my only lover.

No one knew what we decided that morning. Sheree said she wouldn't leave Tom, at least not right away. I told her I wouldn't leave Marc, not for her or for any other person, but I didn't know about the fertilized egg inside me that was even then dividing and growing to become ... someone. A little someone.

We had to agree we couldn't just go back to being platonic friends, but ... Sheree was afraid to ask because she was afraid I would refuse, but it was plain she wanted me. How then could we work things out? I asked her, 'What about Tom? Does he know you have feelings for me?' She said he suspected she might have certain feelings, and that night after Marc's birthday party had obviously been rather blatant, but still ... neither Tom nor Marc knew what was going on.

We really didn't know what to do. Since we had made love and in fact had become lovers, it was impossible not to have had our two men become embroiled in our illicit relationship. Inevitably they would figure out what we were doing, and though we thought we could hide it, we weren't very successful. I take responsibility for that. Ultimately, we knew they would have to face us and each other with the truth of the situation. How could we be lovers without destroying everything around us? Well, her plan (though it didn't quite work out) was to bring the two men in with us, and get them to share their women with each other. I thought I could bring Marc around to accepting Sheree, and Sheree had given me permission to 'bring Tom around.' Perhaps I did a little too good a job with that.

Within a few weeks it became apparent I was pregnant. My period was late, though previously it had been one of the very few reliable things

in my life. And then to confirm my suspicions, I failed (or *passed*—whatever) the pregnancy test. No doubts, then. And it was almost the scariest thing that had ever happened to me. I could not face telling anyone but Sheree. I couldn't even imagine telling Marc, despite the fact he was the father, and despite our essentially close relationship. All I had was a feeling—a sense—that if I told him about the life I carried, he would close in around me and smother me. His love, so warm and so close, would become a trap and a snare to hem me in and corral me into a life and a lifestyle I truly didn't want. He'd want to marry me, certainly, and make me into an 'honest woman.' He'd want to buy a big house in the suburbs, and probably buy me a Volvo station wagon, or something, and I'd be trapped forever, prevented from ever pursuing my music, again. Shut away from my freedom—my independence. We'd never discussed it, but regardless I still had a sick, certain feeling about it. And then came the day when he finally found out, and confronted me with the awful truth.

I had been too tired to think, since it was quite late on a Friday night and we'd just come home from the gig we'd been playing. But Marc was too wound up to let it go until morning. He was angry, as I suppose I would have been were the roles reversed, and he was determined to know the truth. What was I going to do about being pregnant? But with all his pointed questions my fears only seemed to be coming true, and if anything it felt worse than even I had imagined. To be honest, I brought the worst down upon myself by intentionally withholding the news from the one other person who *should* have known—and known first. And that was Marc. It was grossly unfair and inconsiderate to make him find out from Tom that the woman he was living with was pregnant with his child. I had been ignorant and quite foolish to think Sheree wouldn't tell her own husband. I couldn't blame Tom for looking out for his best friend. It was my fault. I was the stupid one.

But the fear I held inside was real. The *real* fear. The world is a nasty place. I've had a hard and painful life, and there is no way I could doom a child to suffer as I've suffered. I didn't believe myself capable or prepared to bring a child into the world and raise it to know love, and kindness, and gentleness, and most of all—right from wrong. From the moment I first considered it, the very thought of caring for a small baby who was so totally dependent on *me* was the most frightening—the most chilling prospect I could imagine. How could I care for someone else when I knew full well that I was all but incapable of caring for myself? How could I possibly care for another? The protection of Marc's apartment and the

safety of our family and circle of friends had kept me out of the most serious kinds of trouble, but even with all that protection and support I managed to find ways to fuck up. Evidence the blowjob I had given Tom; my running away to cover up my shame; making love to Sheree; doing Tom, too. *Getting pregnant*. And then, when I finally reached the end of that path of desperation I had been heading down, I went off and turned another trick. Yes, prostitution. This was no high class out-call—it had been just a pickup in a bar.

I felt the irrevocability of the decision (to turn another trick) the very moment I made it. And it had occurred even before I'd left Marc's apartment that day, too. Without putting it into so many words, I knew what I was going to do, and why, and whom I intended to hurt by doing it. Quite simply, I wanted to hurt myself. I knew if I went back on my promise and fucked another guy for money, I would have to take steps to remove myself from Marc's influence. If I let him down in that particular manner, then I could no longer deserve his kindness *or* his love. If I found the one way to hurt him the most, then I had to pay for my crime. I wanted to hurt both my baby and myself, and forever ensure my loneliness and isolation from all things warm and wonderful. If I managed to lose the baby, then I could be sure Marc would never want to see me, again. And though it was what I feared the most, it was what I set out to do. Even if it meant I died in the process, I had to destroy my relationship with my best buddy—Marc. Because of the one other thing that I knew for sure, I knew I had to break my bond with him. Because I knew to have my baby I had to stop drinking, and because I feared *that* most of all, I chose instead the path of total personal destruction. If there was no middle ground—and there *was* no middle ground there at all—then I chose (what seemed like) the easier of the two paths. If I couldn't stop drinking, and I was sure I couldn't, then I just had to make sure that neither of us (the baby or me) made it. Death would finally get me off the hook.

I'm even now afraid to think that I thought those things, since they run so completely counter to what I really believe, but I cannot deny they existed, and influenced my actions. They were *me*, and I must live now with what I was, and what I've done.

My therapist has told me forgiveness is the first step. If that's so, then I am yet to move my fucking foot.

I think Sheree had been sitting beside my bed for hours. I could do

nothing except drift in and out of fitful, dazed sleep. I couldn't think—about anything. I could only try to sleep and blank my mind against the impossibility of the situation.

“Sheree?” I tried to lick my lips for moisture, just to work my mouth. There wasn't any moisture to be had. “What happened?” I could only produce a faint, airless whisper. My vocal chords seemed gone, or completely gummed up. Something. They didn't want to work. Swallowing hurt so much I soon decided to save up my spit—what little there was—and only swallow when it was impossible not to, anymore.

There was a lengthy pause during which I wondered if she had heard me at all, then she answered. “Don't you remember?” Her voice, though soft, seemed loud and incongruous against the hushed quiet of the room.

“No,” I shook my head, fractionally. It hurt. A sharp, stabbing headache suddenly swelled up behind my eyes. But I guess I did remember some things after all. “Yes,” I corrected myself. “Maybe ... I don't know.”

“Do you remember going to the club last night?”

I wasn't sure at first, but I guess I *did* remember. Barely, I nodded. From time to time, even whispering was too much effort.

“You really scared the hell out of us, you know.”

“What ...” I had to swallow, then. *Ugh!* My throat felt as though something very large and very hard had been crammed down it. As if some long and uncomfortable device had been shoved right past my vocal chords and down through my esophagus. From instinct, my hand came up to touch my face while I strained to swallow. I felt something plastic. Tubes. There were some plastic tubes hanging in front of my face. A small plastic clip held an opening in front of my nose. I took a deep breath, and noticed the fresh coolness of the air. Oxygen?

Sheree saw me discover the oxygen supply hoses, and helped fill in some of the blanks in my memory. “They put you on oxygen.” She must have thought I was going to remove the hoses, because, “Don't mess with that, Kerrilyn,” she said.

But, I wasn't going to ‘mess’ with the oxygen hoses. I was almost too weak to even fucking move. What seemed more important, was, “What ... what ... happened?”

As she considered what (or whether) to tell me, I thought her eyes

grew larger, momentarily, but she said nothing right away. What could it be that was so scary, so horrible that she felt she couldn't tell me? Still again, why couldn't *I* remember?

Then Sheree decided. It could wait. "Rest now, babe." She stroked my forehead with her soft, cool fingers. "We'll talk about it later. Rest now." More strokes. "I'll be right here when you wake up, and we can talk about it, then." Well, that answer wasn't entirely satisfactory, but ...

"Where's ... Marc?" And even as I said it, my anxiety shot straight through the roof. Something—temporarily blocked from my mind—was wrong with me and Marc. Part of my mind knew it—it was obvious—but didn't want the rest of me to know it. At least not yet.

She fairly spat the words, "*He's not here, Kerrilyn.*" Then she sat back, expression closing up and eyes narrowing to slits. She was furious, no doubt, and specifically with Marc, it seemed. *Furious.* "He wouldn't come."

"That's OK," I lied, because it wasn't OK. Damn it, I *needed* him here. But, just maybe when I remembered what it was that had happened—what I had done—I might discover the reasons for his absence. Then I might not blame him so much. Just maybe. It was hard to think.

"It's *not* OK." She hissed, refuting my statement but actually agreeing with me, shaking her head. "He should be here with you. I don't care what happened, he should *be here.*"

"But, what ... happened?" I repeated, my 'voice' almost too soft for me to hear.

"Kerry—" then she stopped herself. Kerry was my old name—the *hooker's name.*

I closed my eyes. Poor Sheree must have interpreted it as anger, or recall of some painful memory, or something. It was none of those things. It was only pain. And sadness. And regret.

"I'm sorry, Kerrilyn ..." she began again, but stopped again.

I only nodded, it was OK, but Sheree had begun to cry. I shook my head—please don't cry. I couldn't help it, *I* was crying then, too. I mouthed the words, "Don't cry."

"*Ooohh!*" she bawled, fairly blubbering, "You had me *so-oo* worried! I thought you were going to die! **Die!** I thought we were going to lose you."

"I'm not dead." It was the barest of whispers. I didn't think she could

hear me, but she did. Her eyes turned to mine, and I repeated with as much energy as I possessed, "I'm not dead." Still a dry, wretched whisper.

"No," she said, almost whispering, tears on her cheeks, "you're not." She sighed, and there was a silence for some moments. Then, "What are you gonna do?"

I tried to answer—to say I didn't know—but all I could manage was a weak shake of my head. Even that hurt.

Sheree knew I was in no shape to talk about it, or even think about it. "I know Kerrilyn, I'm sorry." She sniffed back tears, drying up. "Everything can wait till you get better." Again a sigh. "While you were laying there all morning, asleep, I guess I was letting my worries get the better of me. I guess I was wondering how things could get so fucking screwed up, and how I could have let them get out of hand."

I barely managed, "It's not your fault."

"I feel like I'm partly to blame." She gave me a rueful look. "I mean, I've very likely destroyed my marriage. Why shouldn't I be to blame for fucking up your life, as well?"

I tried to turn my head, tried to lift my hand. No luck. I wanted to tell her that it really wasn't her fault ... but I was too exhausted to form the words, even a whisper. My eyes closed.

"I'm sorry Kerrilyn," I heard her whisper as I drifted off, "I'm so-oo sorry ..."

I awoke sometime later, alone. Considering how badly I had hurt previously, I was somewhat amazed I'd even been able to sleep, but I suppose it simply indicates just *how badly* I'd really hurt myself. My own body was doing what was best for me—numbing the pain enough to let me sleep.

My mind probably shouldn't be left to wander on its own. There are too many things swirling around inside it—dangerous, scary things—to allow my unbridled thoughts to run rampant for very long. The more I think, the more unhinged I become. I simply cannot allow my mind to wander. This was what I thought as I lay alone in my hospital bed, desperately trying to stifle the rising tide of distress and despair brought on by thoughts of my wayward, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable mind. Under other circumstances I could have told myself not to think about the

things that scared me the most. I would have suppressed and ignored them, pretended they didn't exist and didn't matter if they did. But weakened and in very serious, very real *physical* pain, I was manifestly not up to the task. My fears and anguished thoughts got the better of me.

I was nothing but a stupid, silly bitch! How could I have been *so fucking stupid?!?* How? **How?!?** What had I done? What had I done to myself, to my baby, to Marc? Alone and scared in the dim quiet of that hospital room, I was manifestly unable to assess my condition. I couldn't see (though I could certainly *feel*) what kind of shape I was in. I hurt *so* badly. I thought, it must mean the worst. I was dying. Shit, for all that it mattered, I was dead already. I'd betrayed Marc; I'd betrayed the band; I'd betrayed *myself*. And what kind of betrayal had I levied on my innocent, unborn child? Oh Lord, what have I done? This last was definitely *not* a question. I could certainly feel the brunt of *what I'd done*, all the way from tips of my toes to the follicles of my drab, straggly red hair. What a fucking stupid, ignorant, white trash cunt I was! A cunt. A whore. Worthless, no good. 'Yer a fuckin' little cunt,' the man had said to me. 'Nothin' but a cock suckin' little whore, and that's all you'll *ever be*.' And I certainly believed it. The only thing I couldn't remember was who had told me that. It wasn't Marc, and I didn't think it could have been Danny (though he may have said some things like that). It seemed *older*, somehow, from somewhere further back in half-remembered my past. So old it must be the truth.

I couldn't help crying. So much I wanted to be loved, and worth loving! No one knows how badly I've *always* wanted to be loved! So why can't I do the right thing? Why? **Why? Why?!? WHY???** I had so many questions of myself, but nowhere did I have any answers. The old prophecy, the old prediction, dredged up from somewhere in my deep, dark past, seemed to reverberate hollowly in my ears as if sentence were passed on my life, and I was found guilty. Guilty.

It was all my fault. Everything. I didn't want to admit it, but everything that had ever happened to me was my fault, and furthermore, I *deserved* everything that had ever been done to me. Deserved to be vilified and beaten, raped and sodomized, eventually drunk and abandoned. It was better that I die, and get it the fuck over with. Better that I die.

Better that I die.

Can you look at what those four words mean? And then tell me that

you've never felt as I felt about myself that day, cinched up and stranded in that hospital bed? Why do we all have to be so abused and neglected as small children so we feel—even as adults—that the world would be better off if we were dead? I can't begin to understand it. It's so unfair, so utterly unjust—unwarranted and completely undeserved. So very undeserved, ultimately. I can't imagine what crimes a three year old could commit that she would deserve to be called a cunt—a *whore*. Just what could you have possibly imagined, let alone done, to deserve being shut in a closet for days with no food or water? To deserve being *raped*? Or to deserve being beaten with a belt until you passed out, bleeding from a hundred or more lacerations?

Oh, daddy, I thought you wanted me to do it! Why can't you just love me for who I am?

I couldn't comprehend the full depth of my self-loathing and despair. Part of me (still) doesn't want to uncover and explore the true sources of my self-hatred—my complete lack of self-esteem. Not even today. But, ladies and gentlemen, it's there. See it? Out there on the periphery, hovering just out of reach of the conscious mind. It won't come closer because you can't permit it. You can't face the truths that it will reveal should you push it out in the open. No way.

You cunt! That's what you are. Nothing but a stupid, lousy, fucking cunt. Can you fathom the essence of what that *means*? Can you really come to understand what being a fucking cunt—a *whore*—must mean? I can. I did.

Yeah, I cried for myself, but I didn't understand why I was crying. I mean, I deserved what was happening to me, so what room did I have for self-pity? I should just pull out the tubes and let my wrist bleed out onto the floor. It wouldn't take long to die. Not long at all. It wouldn't even hurt. But I was crying.

I couldn't move; I couldn't even remove the IV tube. Perhaps if I'd been more determined, or something, I could have succeeded in killing myself, but I lacked the decisiveness—the drive. I was, indeed, nothing but a worthless, no-good cunt. I couldn't do *anything* right, not even if my life depended on it. And I did feel that my life depended on my ability to end it.

Maybe I didn't want to kill myself. I thought I wanted to, but maybe I didn't. Maybe I wanted to believe I had something to give, something to contribute. But then again, there was so much evidence pointing in the

other direction. I felt I was patently unreliable—about *everything*—with no moral standards (like normal people have) to guide me in the proper ways to act. I wanted Marc to love me, but I couldn't be true to him. I knew all he was asking was for Kerrilyn to love him and be faithful and honest with him, and I couldn't fucking *do it*. I knew I'd betrayed him, time and time again, but so far had not come around to fully understanding the extent of the damage I was doing. When I was around other people, especially the people I liked and felt affection for, I could not be trusted to keep my clothes on, or my hands off. It seemed I just naturally went for sexual stimulation with *everyone*.

I couldn't keep my sexual urges from coming out, wherever and whenever. I'd let loose with Tom Germaine. I'd let loose with *Sheree* Germaine. And finally, I'd let loose with some guy in a bar whose name I didn't even know. Why couldn't I have told myself not to do those things just because they were there, just because they were what I wanted to do? Other people have the same urges; they don't lose track of them. We're all tempted, all the time, but we don't just fuck everyone we're attracted to, just because we're attracted to them. Do we? Something inside my mind said, surely we don't. Because if we did, we would destroy all the love and the trust we've worked so hard to build. Because we want to be trusted; we crave being trusted; trust makes us whole. There's no finer feeling than to know we can be secure in our surroundings, that we're welcome and accepted, that we're *loved*. Surely, no finer.

But dear Sheree, my love, some of us can't be trusted, can we? And I'm quite sure Marc would agree with us, as well. Some of us can't be trusted, and that makes some of us undeserving. *I can't be trusted; therefore I am undeserving*. Did I make sure Marc understood what kind of person I was? Was I honest and forthcoming about my life and my past? Did I warn him of my penchant for wanton fucking? (And rhetorically speaking, would it have mattered if I had?) Did I make sure Marc understood my motives *before* I jumped into bed with Sheree? Before I let Tom between my legs? I don't think so.

It must mean I don't trust Marc. That's the only thing that can explain my reprehensible behavior. I felt I simply *could not* tell Marc all the horrible, painful things from my fucked-up life and still expect him to love me. Hell, *I* knew these things and I didn't love myself, so why would I expect him to love me if he knew, as well? It didn't make sense that he would understand me and love me if he knew all the bad things about me. How could it make sense?

Like I said, it's dangerous when my mind wanders. And these are just a few of the things I have remembered long enough to write down.

I worried and fretted for an interminable time. The room was quiet—no one around—no Sheree, no roommate, no nurses, and no doctors. It seemed odd—very unusual—but all the same I was apparently in no imminent danger of dying, so I suppose they were justified in ignoring me. I wondered where Sheree had gone, but I couldn't decide if I wanted to see her, or not. I loved her, as much as a friend as any other way, but her presence made me anxious. Sheree's presence shouldn't be raising my anxiety level, but even she placed pressure on me.

Well, I might have thought I was being ignored, but my solitude didn't last very long. Within five minutes of noticing how quiet it was, and how it seemed as though everyone was avoiding me, the hordes began to descend. First, Sheree returned. She saw I was awake and came over to kiss me on the forehead and sadly smile. Then the nurse came in to take my temperature, blood pressure (I think), and pulse. I didn't remember seeing her before, but she talked to me as if she knew me, and helped me get a drink of water. This was accomplished by her holding a squeeze bottle (with straw attached) to my lips while I weakly sucked. The nurse, named Brenda G. Cowin, RN (from her nametag) then showed Sheree how to feed me water (rather perfunctorily) and left the two of us alone. But we weren't alone long.

The doctor came in. He strode right to the foot of the bed with my chart in his hands, and proudly announced his presence:

"Hello, young lady," said the doctor, "I'm Dr. Malmud." The guy was obviously from India, or somewhere, because he had short, curly black hair and a very swarthy complexion, but he spoke reasonably good English. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty bad," I whispered. I hoped he heard me.

He did. "Ah," Malmud nodded, "do your muscles ache?" Was he fucking kidding, or something? I was in agony. I nodded the best I could. It was all I could manage. He nodded back. "Yes. Sometimes the anesthetic will produce general muscle pain for a few hours after surgery." (Surgery?) "Are you feeling any other pain? Nausea? Shortness of breath?"

As if I could tell. I was breathing OK on the oxygen, but otherwise I

felt mostly numb. What wasn't numb was sore as hell. I tried to shrug, but wasn't successful. Malmud didn't seem to wait very long for an answer, though. He consulted my chart, flipping through several pages. "So ... Kerry Lynn ..." he began, "there are a few things we really need to ask you. Do you feel up to helping us with some of the answers?"

No, I didn't. I closed my eyes, hoping everyone would just go away, but in a few moments when I opened them, he was still there.

And went right on with his questions, whether I liked it or not. "I'm sorry, but this is very important. We need to know how much alcohol you had been drinking." I didn't quite see the glance he and Sheree shared, but it looked as though they may have consulted her prior to my waking up. "Last night when you were brought in, you tested with a blood alcohol level of point two-three percent."

I shook my head weakly. "I ... I don't know," and that was barely a whisper. Then I had to swallow again. I know he could see how painful it felt. "A ... a lot ... I guess." I couldn't even think about it.

He didn't immediately comment on that. Instead, "Do you know why you were brought in to the hospital, last night?"

Again I shook my head. I couldn't remember *anything*.

"Well," he said, flipping more pages, "when you were brought in by ambulance, you were in a state of shock, and bleeding rather significantly from a small lesion we found on the end of your esophagus." He pointed to his own chest, about mid-sternum. "That lesion was repaired in the ER by Dr. Russell. We had to give you ..." he consulted, again "... three units of whole blood to replace what you'd lost. You had become rather severely anemic from the blood loss."

OK, I thought, so what? I sort of remembered feeling really shitty and sick to my stomach the previous night when I got to the club. So, that was the reason for all the blood. It didn't seem to matter, very much.

He went on. "We initially thought that the esophageal lesion might be the extent of damage, but blood tests showed pancreatic enzymes in your blood stream. So, very early this morning we performed a CAT scan of your abdomen and found a small, bleeding tear in your pancreas." He stopped, apparently thinking I would have something to say about that. I had no idea what a pancreas was, let alone why I should care about it. "You were suffering from acute pancreatitis, in addition to the bleeding gastritis. We had to take you into surgery, then, to repair that tear." He

paused, frowning. "If we hadn't caught the damage to your pancreas when we did, you could have died." He paused again, then, "Both of those conditions can be the result of long-term, excessive consumption of alcohol.

"We need to know if that was the case."

I could only look away. I hurt way too badly to face him, or anyone.

I heard Malmud speak even though I wasn't looking at him. "Well, we believe you are out of danger, for the moment. Fortunately you are young, and unless there are other complications, long term damage should be minimal." He turned as if to go. "You *are* a very lucky young lady."

"So I didn't die." I don't know whom I meant that for.

He stopped, and I thought he smiled. "No, you didn't die. You are very much alive. We caught the bleeding in time to prevent more serious damage from occurring. But you were *very* lucky."

Well, so much for the fucking bright side. I whispered, "So ... what ... does this ... mean?"

"The compounded affects of alcohol over a period of time lead to physical dependence, draining your body of nutrients and weakening the system. The significant presence of alcohol in the bloodstream, as we found in yours, can make anesthesia extremely difficult to administer, as a result surgery is very risky until it is lowered. There was some danger you would lose an excessive amount of blood before we could operate safely, and with bleeding in your intestinal tract, infection can be a very serious complication." I know I wasn't understanding everything he was telling me. My head swam. There were just too many words. He went on, "But, we were able to stop the bleeding, and repair the damage." He took a deep breath. But I heard what he said next. "I think part of what you are feeling, too, this afternoon, is alcohol detoxification."

Detoxification? Bullshit. A hangover, maybe. I didn't think I had drunk *all* that much. A lot, but *that much*? Well, did I know exactly how much I had been drinking? I thought a second, and concluded there was no possible way for me to know. I didn't even *remember* the last few days, let alone how much I drank. I must have drunk a lot, then.

Apparently there was more. "Did you know you were pregnant?" Malmud asked. I only nodded weakly—yes. He merely nodded to himself over that, and made no further comment. I wanted to ask him if I was still

pregnant, but didn't. I hurt too much, and besides, I was mightily afraid of what he might say. But he did continue, "Dr. Russell was on call last night and performed the surgery on your esophagus. He has gone home for some rest and will be back later to check on your progress." Then Malmud smiled, "You are out of danger now, so relax, rest, and drink plenty of water. It will keep the throat moist and help reduce irritation. It won't harm you to drink water. Unfortunately, until your digestive tract returns to normal function, no other foods or liquids may be taken by mouth for the next few days, at least. I think, though, you have an excellent chance for a complete recovery."

With that, he excused himself and left. That left Sheree sitting there looking at me like I had tried to commit suicide, or something. Most prevalent in her face were disappointment, concern, and oh yes, anger. I tried not to feel five years old again, but couldn't help it. And I hated it.

"Don't look at me ... that way," I told her. Then I was forced to swallow. I'm sure my painful grimace wasn't helping my case. "I'm not dead."

"I know. But you could be."

"But I'm *not*."

She leaned forward, and put her hand on my arm. "But you *could* be."

This was getting old in a hot fucking hurry. I didn't need this kind of judgmental bullshit, especially as badly as I felt. And I didn't *only* feel bad physically. I felt more than my share of guilt and shame for what I'd done to myself, so she may as well just stop it right now ...

I closed my eyes. Make it all go away.

There was a silence for some minutes. I hadn't answered or rebutted Sheree's admonition, but she hadn't continued her chastisement, either. Maybe she understood I couldn't fight her, maybe she didn't. In any event she was silent, and I was quietly thankful.

Finally, I broke the silence. "Thirsty," I said. "Water." I kept my eyes closed.

"Here," she said, and I felt the plastic straw touch my dry, chapped lips. I latched onto it and sucked up a couple mouthfuls of the room temperature water. It would have been better had it been colder, but anything was better than nothing.

As I let go of the straw, I decided only to smile in thanks. It was a pitiful smile, at that.

She saw my sad attempt to appear grateful, and replied, "I'm sorry, Kerrilyn." And I thought she might cry again.

I didn't need more crying. I needed someone to cheer me up. But how could I make Sheree understand what I needed, if she was nearly as emotionally distraught as me? Who would hold us up? Who would tell us what we needed to hear? I wanted to say 'Sheree, please, lighten up!' but I felt much too bad—all my energy taken up just trying to stay awake—to make the effort. For a moment, then, death seemed like a reasonable solution ...

"Kerrilyn?" She sounded worried, but what was new about that? She repeated, "Kerrilyn?"

Good God! What *was it* with this chick? Couldn't she leave me alone for even a little while? (This I was thinking as I lay there with my eyes closed, trying to rest.) It seemed *so* much effort just to open my eyes. I was *so, so* tired. Much better to just relax, and let the minutes flow by.

"Kerrilyn? Are you all right?"

OK. I guess I better let her know I'm still alive. "Yes," I replied, still nothing but a hoarse whisper. I still kept my eyes closed. "But," I swallowed—*agony!*—"if you don't ... lighten up ... give me a break ..." I swallowed again, less agony, somehow "... you're going to drive me crazy."

"I'm sorry. I know." She sounded *very* relieved. "But for a minute there, you had me worried." (Oh? How so?) "We were talking, and then you just seemed to fade out."

Head shake, weakly. "I've been right here." (Still, with eyes closed.)

"Well, you *haven't*, but I know you're very tired and sore from the operation. I just worry about you, is all."

I had to frame the words carefully, "I'm all right." But I *was* tired, no fucking doubt.

"Uh ..."

"What?" I was ready to stop talking, anytime she wanted.

"I was thinking about your stuff. You know—your clothes and things."

I didn't want to think about it. But, "What about 'em?"

"Well, if you'll tell me where you were staying, I'll go by and get your things. We can store them up at the house until you get out of the hospital."

It seemed like a reasonable idea. I *was* in danger of losing my possessions if someone didn't watch over them. I nodded, "Get my stuff." I gave her the address, and it took some minutes before she got it right.

"Do you have a key?" she asked, finally.

I nodded, "I had one. I don't know ... where it is."

"That's OK, I'll look for it. It's gotta be around here, somewhere."

Then I thought, "What about ... my car?"

"What?" She hadn't quite heard me.

I strained, "My car?"

"Oh. Don't worry babe, I'll get that, too." She got up, and started a search for my clothes, which weren't hard to find at all. They were in a plastic bag hanging in the little closet. She commented, "I would have gotten your car first thing this morning if I'd had the key, then."

I only shook my head. Maybe someone should just steal it, and save her the trouble.

"Don't worry about it, Kerrilyn. I'll take care of everything."

I tried to smile, mouthed, "Thanks."

But Sheree must have misunderstood me, or something, because she repeated, "*Don't worry*, Kerrilyn. I'm gonna take good care of you."

"I know," I mouthed, again, but I was completely exhausted.

"You need to rest."

I only nodded. No shit.

Sheree came round to the side of the bed, and stood there, keys in hand. She showed them to me. "I have your car key, and I hope this is your apartment key."

I nodded. Yes, that was the key.

"OK, then." She looked pensive, "I need to go."

That was fine with me. I needed to sleep. I weakly waved my hand, but it was almost too subtle a movement.

She understood it, though. "You'll be all right?"

I tried to smile for her. Yep. I'm all right. I'm alive, at least.

She smiled back, sadly, and touched my arm, "I gotta go, girl."

"I know." I closed my eyes again. "Go."

Sheree said 'bye' and I heard her scoot out the door, leaving me alone again.