

## *Chapter 29*

I didn't call anyone to confirm the rehearsal—the one that everyone else knew was canceled. In some ways it's almost amazing that I was even coherent enough to have remembered that it was Tuesday, and to have gotten sober enough to get my ass out of my new apartment to attend it. I knew, as night follows the day, that showing up to rehearsal drunk was about the worst thing I could do. So on that first Tuesday (of the canceled rehearsal) I stopped drinking sometime in the afternoon, and was passably sober enough (I thought) to sing that evening. I was nursing a not inconsiderable upset stomach, but that was becoming so common I just sucked back the urge to barf and got in my car to go.

But, as I approached the studio and turned into the parking lot, I noticed the distinct lack of automobiles. There were a few lights from inside, visible through the windows into the offices, but where I expected to see Marc's Honda and at least Mel's or Troy Dancer's cars (I can't remember what kinds they were—sorry), instead all I saw was Tom's van. OK, well, Tom was there. It was still a couple minutes to seven, so maybe everyone else is just late.

I parked and went inside through the side door and down the hall to our usual room. Funny, the room was dark, so I flipped on the light. All right, our equipment was there, strewn all around the room still in its cases and crates and boxes and bags. Nothing was set up, yet, and here it was already time to start. What's going on, here?

Well, I couldn't do everything by myself, and besides, it really wasn't my job to set everything up. Feeling my abdominal discomfort growing at the thought of getting started late (and so ending late), I left the doorway and trudged back down the hallway toward the studio office. I guess Tom was down there. This very odd situation was stressing me out, and I was beginning to feel it in a major way. What was going on?

"Hello?" I called as I opened the door to the reception area. "Tom?"

Are you in here?"

He didn't immediately reply, but he was back in one of the offices, and heard my call on about the second or third try. "Back here," I heard him say, so I went off in search of the source of his voice. He was seated behind a desk as I rounded the corner. "Hey," he said, not even bothering to look up. I got the impression he knew it was me, and also that he was expecting me, too.

"Where is everyone?" I asked, standing stupidly in the doorway.

He still didn't look up at me. "Rehearsal is canceled, tonight." He was writing some notes in a notebook and inspecting some tapes he had piled in front of him. "I stuck around in case you showed up, after all."

"What do you mean, 'after all'? Why the fuck wouldn't I show up for rehearsal?"

"Well," he said, and glanced my way, briefly, "we kind of thought you might not want to come, because of Marc."

"I don't know, but I thought we had a rule." Now I was feeling sicker than ever, and it was quickly getting worse. "We *have to* show up for rehearsals. Period."

He went back to his notebook. His dismissal of me seemed pointed, but I couldn't see why he should be treating me so badly. Not after ....

"Why are you acting so funny?" I asked. "I thought we were becoming pretty good 'friends,' you and me." I walked around to the side of the desk and sat in the chair I just noticed was empty and available. "Especially after the other day."

He looked up, but didn't acknowledge the state of our 'friendship'. Instead he said, "Kerrilyn, rehearsal is scheduled for next Tuesday night. Same time as usual, and we have a live audition at '688' on the following Saturday night, and then if they like us ... Tuesday through Friday, as well." He leaned back in his chair. "And they *will* like us. You know that's the week of July fourth. I hope that's OK."

"Oh," I said. "That's great." But I don't think I sounded very excited. "That's really good news. I like '688'. They have a really nice stage." And of course I didn't mention the really cute bartender (if he was still there) who would make my drinks double Kerry-strength, either. I'd been there a few times in the past, and it would be good to get to see the place from up on stage, for a change.

"So, rehearsal next Tuesday?"

"Sure."

"And the gig? It's OK with you?"

"Of course." I tried to smile; he still seemed rather short with me. I felt like puking, though. "I got nothing else going on."

Then he smiled. "Good." He put his hands behind his head, "Now tell me, why the fuck did you move out of Marc's apartment?"

Sickness grew, and I gulped air to keep from throwing up on the desk. I sighed; *so* tired. How could I ever make him understand? No, not Tom—Marc.

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On Tuesday, Mel and I went to rehearsal together. She had come by my apartment, presumably to talk, arriving right as I got there, so we just rode over together in my car.

We were the first/only ones there. Mel had her key, so we went down to the room and started turning on lights. From time to time there might have been things going on at the studio in the evenings, such as some other local band making a demo tape or something, but on this night the place was deserted at ten minutes to seven when we walked in the door.

I stopped a moment, and stood in the middle of the room, looking at all our stuff sitting around where Tom had apparently unloaded it. I wished I'd helped him. Unloading the whole enchilada was certainly a horrendous job. All the packing cases, boxes, trunks, and vinyl covered amplifiers sat around the room, no rhyme or reason to their order. Most of my drum cases were in the corner to my right. Tom's amp and bass case were sitting next to one of my bass drum cases. Dancer's amp was just inside the door to my left. Mel's three keyboards were stacked on edge directly in front of me, her amp behind them. By itself on a chair, was Kerrilyn's microphone case. Mike stands, standing in lazy groups like miniature construction cranes, poked their headless necks above everything.

This was the stuff of a band. PA speakers, amps and guitars; all the things a band needs and collects; the working tools of the music profession. Stuff.

Musicians love their stuff. We spend hours and hours thinking about it. That new guitar we saw in the music store. An amplifier we think we'd like. A new PA system with more watts or more channels—or both. Maybe one in stereo. In my case, new cymbals; electronic drum pads; special fast-action bass drum pedals. Stuff.

I didn't want to give it up. I looked around the room at all our stuff, and I wanted to be a part of it. A part of the business and the love affair that is music. I wanted us to be successful, to be the best and to make

money, I suppose, but all I really wanted was to *play*. I just wanted the opportunity to play music and experience the simple joy again and again. And I wanted to hear Kerrilyn sing, again.

I thought of the uniqueness of her voice. Always on key, never flat or sharp on the note unless it was necessary to the proper rendition of the song. Very often she was hoarse, almost a trademark of her voice in my mind. Her voice was almost always raspy, gravelly. She overtaxed her vocal chords early and let them go, getting rougher and rougher as the night progressed. Some day she would lose her voice, and maybe she'd have to be more careful. But there were times and certain songs she always sang clearly. Crystal bright. She had a very high top range, higher than most people would suspect, mainly because of her naturally husky speaking voice. Maybe she spoke so deeply at times because of her constant smoking; perhaps because of all her alcohol consumption. She was destroying her body, and her voice, and seemed not to notice, nor to care. But I loved to hear her voice, and listen to her sing.

And I thought of the way she always danced around. So animated and expressive. She did more than sing, she moved with the music and the sound, and told a story with her movements. She was suggestive, she was demure, she could move you through the music with her hands or the movement of her head. She swayed in time to the beat of the song, eyes closed in total concentration. Her movements always felt so sensual, always felt so indicative of her personality. Always so Kerrilyn-like.

And the intensity of her performance. Always was she on the raw and bleeding edge of her emotions and feelings. She couldn't help it, I think. If the song was sad, or told a sad story, she often cried real tears. If the song spoke of love, or pain and hurt, she couldn't help but wail out in anger and frustration at the injustice of life and love. These were always her songs. Never specific, never too revealing, but always laden with an explosiveness just below the surface, ready to be unleashed by the orchestrations of her head; her hands; her body and her thorny, abused voice.

No, it wasn't Troy Dancer's band, despite the name. Once we began to play, and the audience heard our Kerrilyn's raw and intense vocals and saw her stunning visual performance, they knew whose band this was. She never led us explicitly, except to the extent that we tended to follow her movements like a metronome. If she slowed, so did we, and we speeded up if she decided it was necessary. Tom and I usually tried to direct the tempo and the tenor of the songs, though. He stood off to my right, as far to the edge as possible. That enabled him to come around to the side, and stand to my right, staring over my ride cymbal while we

played. But, to the audience, this was Kerrilyn's band.

I suppose most of them, those who might not have heard of Troy Dancer, would think our cute female vocalist was the one named 'Dancer'. And since that was what she did, most of the time, the appellation was apt. You'd think we planned it, or something. But no, sometimes things just come together and happen all by themselves, whether or not you plan them, and sometimes in spite of all your planning. Chemistry, of which I've spoken, can't be brought about by planning, no matter how careful. So much of this band I loved, so much of the girl I loved, so much of this musical family I belonged to, so much of my life ... so much of everything could not be attributed to planning. And you don't know what you've got, till it's gone. And that goddamned big yellow taxi was outside honking his horn, waiting to take this band and my life away from me.

I turned to look at who had come in the room. Mel, it seems, was outside. Probably waiting to intercept Kerrilyn. Tom stopped inside the door when he saw I'd turned. He didn't say anything, but I saw it in his face—uncertainty; regret; but toughness, too.

"Hey," I said. "What's going on?"

"I didn't set up any of the equipment the other day," he said, gesturing around the room. "I was too goddamned tired Sunday afternoon. I've been too busy, since then."

"I wouldn't have done it, either." I looked around. "I guess we'd better get started setting up, though, if we want to get any playing done before midnight."

"I guess so." He seemed to shrug. "But I'm in no real hurry."

"Look, Tom—"

"—What the fuck are we gonna do about this?" He cut me off, jumping right to the real question at hand. What were *we* going to do about the band—us; Kerrilyn and Sheree?

But I asked anyway, "About what?"

He grinned, "Well, since you're here, I guess you're not gonna quit the band. *This time.*" I almost had to smile, too. He had me, there. "Or did you come here just to blow me off in style?"

"Blow you off? No. I'm not gonna 'blow you off,' in style or otherwise, unless it's what you deserve."

"Do you think it's what I deserve?"

"I don't know, Tom," I said, because I didn't. "I may be more to blame in this situation than you are."

He looked away, and I wondered what was really on his mind. "Well, if you're worried about how I feel about you making love to Sheree—"

don't. I don't think of you as someone who would try to come between us, and I want you to know that I would never try to come between you and Kerrilyn, either."

"I didn't think you were trying to 'come between us'." I wasn't sure I could say it, though. But, "Did you have to do it the way you did?"

"Do what?" He seemed not to understand my point.

"That night after practice, up on your bed. Sheree had hoped that you would join us on the bed. She wanted you to make love to both of them, I think."

He just looked at me, expression clouded.

I went on, "I don't blame you for the fact that Kerrilyn seemed to get a lot of ..." it was hard to say "... satisfaction from you."

Then he spoke. Did he seem relieved? "I'm sorry, Marc," he said. "I was wrong, dead wrong, and despite the fact that Kerrilyn did it too, I did the wrong thing." He held out his hands. I didn't comment on Kerrilyn's participation. He went on, "It wasn't because I was horny, or feeling neglected, or because I lusted after Kerrilyn. And especially it wasn't because I wanted to piss you off. I mean, do you *really* think I would make love to her *just* to piss you off?" He shook his head, "Come on, get a grip!"

OK, I thought, "Then, what was it?"

"What was what?"

But I was well past wanting to continue the discussion. Let's get back to more fruitful endeavors. "Never mind. I'm tired of talking about all this ... shit, anymore."

He agreed. "Me, too."

I tried to change the subject, but realized too late that I was merely coming back around to the same, tired subject. "What are you and Sheree going to do, now?"

He was also aware that I had returned to the real subject at hand, and smiled, but not with any humor. "I still love her."

"I know you do." I loved her, too. She was a gem amongst dull glass.

"I don't want to lose her," then he sighed, "but it may be too late, already."

"Why do you say that? Has Sheree decided she doesn't want a man, anymore?"

Then he smiled for real. "Well, apparently she's decided she wants a baby, now."

"A baby? Really?"

"Yeah, who would have guessed."

"So she wants to stay with you, and have her baby with you?"

He only shrugged. Then decided to clarify it, a little, "She can't have a

baby with Kerrilyn. I suppose she could get a sperm donor, but with two of us doing it to her, I'm sure she'll get pregnant in no time."

"What 'two of us' are you talking about?"

"You and me, of course."

I didn't like the sound of that, since it seemed like such an ... improper thing to say. "Tom, I'm never going to do anything with Sheree, ever again." I had to pace. "That was then. It was a mistake, and it's never going to happen again." Then I thought, "I can't imagine why you would even say something like that. I never wanted her in the first place; that had been *her* idea."

"I know," he said. "To get back at me."

"Do you think I initiated sex with her when we were in your bed the other day?" Since Mel had her facts wrong, it seemed reasonable that Tom had gotten them wrong, first. I waited for his reply. When none came immediately, I went on to explain, "Making love to Sheree had been Kerrilyn's idea. She was the one who put Sheree between us. She was the one who wouldn't let Sheree get away."

He seemed quite angry. "Was she the one who put her dick inside my wife?"

And his sudden anger shocked me. I guess he wasn't as open and rational about what I'd done, after all. "You apologized for what you did, and I am apologizing for what I did. Can we forget this mess and get on with things?"

He backed down, a little, then. "I guess we both have the right to be mad, here, but I've had just about more than I can take of this whole weird bullshit situation. Sometimes," he shook his head slowly, "I swear if I hear one more thing about Kerrilyn and her stupid, crazy sexual adventures, I'll be about ready to can her ass, myself. She's been more trouble than she's worth. Especially to me."

"Can her, fuck-wad—and I'm gone, too." His comment really frosted my ass.

"Don't blow a gasket, all right? I was just venting. But, do you really think what she's been doing is normal?"

"As normal as Sheree?"

He saw the truth of that half-question, "But Kerrilyn ..." he began, then stopped, because it was then that Dancer, Mel, and Kerrilyn walked in.

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I had decided I'd go to rehearsal on that second Tuesday night, even though I sincerely didn't want to see Marc, or have to talk to him, and despite the fact that physically I was in terrible shape and getting worse by the minute. With all the time between the job ten days before and that night, I had managed to build up the whole scenario in my mind to the point where I fully expected to be yelled at by Marc, and kicked out of the band by everyone else. I expected Marc to tell me that if I didn't come back to live with him again, then we were breaking up for good. That I had to come back, or he'd go find someone else.

And I really didn't want to lose him, completely. But I couldn't just give in to him, either. That was perhaps the most important thing. I needed to know what I was thinking; what I was feeling about Marc and the baby; what I was feeling about myself. And I couldn't go back, either, not after what I'd done. I couldn't even look at him for more than two seconds and keep from having to look away in shame.

During those ten days I saw no one. I called no one. I just had a couple of good, stiff drinks before I left my place for rehearsal. I'd also bought an ounce of dope with what I had left of my money, and I smoked the last joint in the car on the way over. All in all, I was feeling no pain, and no anxiety.

Mel Howe was standing outside in the parking lot when I pulled in. She was smoking a cigarette, and smiled and waved when I got out of the car. I felt a little better, knowing it was only Mel who was there to greet me, and that she smiled too, so I fished in my pocket for a cigarette of my own (since I practically *never* carry a purse, yuck!) and lit it as I walked up to her.

"I'm glad you made it," she said.

"Why wouldn't I?" I noticed her eyes were clear—no red. I knew mine were bloodshot as all hell. I was pretty stoned from my good dope. Oh, and a little drunk, too. As we stood there a moment and looked at each other, I noticed she noticed my red eyes and stoned look. But she didn't say anything about it, right away.

She took a puff of her cigarette, exhaled. "I heard you moved out of Marc's apartment."

"Mel, I *had* to—"

She stopped me, "That's OK. I moved out on Dancer, too."

But, "I don't think it's quite the same thing." Where I'd gotten *that*, I couldn't say. She wasn't lecturing me, and here I was, lecturing her.

But she only said, "I don't know if it is, or not." Then, she looked more closely at me. "I understand that you have your reasons for moving out, and they're probably none of my business. But Marc was quite ready

to quit the band, until I managed to talk him out of it." She looked me up and down. "I assume you still want to be in this band, since you're here."

I nodded, "I do, Mel. Very much."

"Good. We need Marc, too. Tell yourself: 'We want Marc to play in the band'."

"I want Marc to play in the band," I dutifully repeated. "I haven't changed my mind about that."

She nodded, once. "We want you to sing in the band, too. Can you say: 'I want to sing in the band,' too?"

"I already said it, Mel." She was making me smile, which, despite the stresses of my life, wasn't all that difficult. The dope made it particularly challenging to treat *anything* seriously. But I still said, "I want to sing in the band. Too."

Then she only puffed her cigarette, apparently thinking.

So I said, "I really do hope Marc decides to stay with the band. I'm not mad at him, anymore. If he isn't too mad at me, I know we'll get along fine."

She smiled, but it seemed like a half-hearted effort, veiled in something. "Good. He is *quite* upset with you, still, but I think we can keep things together, if you help me."

Help her? I wondered what that might mean, and in thinking about it I felt my anxiety and stress grow. Marc was still very upset. He was no doubt going to cross-examine me about moving out, about being pregnant—again. Of course he was going to want an explanation—and a logical explanation, too—but unconsciously I knew the reasons were mostly irrational and emotional. I had some other perhaps less emotional reasons, but there was no way I could tell him about them. No way.

I think she saw my doubtful, anxious expression, and responded, "What's the matter? Don't you think you can be nice to Marc, even if it's just when the band is together?"

I shook my head, "No, that's not it. I *can* be nice to him. He's a very sweet guy, but ..." I found I couldn't quite say where my worries came from.

"What's the problem?" It was obvious she didn't quite understand. "Just don't make the situation any worse, OK?"

"I won't make it *worse*, Mel. OK?"

"So, I suppose you *don't* plan to tell him about Tom, right?" She pointed with her cigarette to punctuate the remark.

"What about Tom?"

"What you been doing with him. Hmmm?"

I lied, "I ain't been doing nothing."

She sighed. It was obvious she knew the truth, and she seemed rather ... disgusted that I should still insist on lying to her about it. But it still seemed better not to admit it.

So, instead of coming clean and having to get into something with her that had *no chance* of working out to my benefit, I decided simply to deflect it. I sighed, too, but tried to make it sound like I was more exasperated with her questions than I was worried about the implications of my actions. "I don't want to get into it right now. We have a rehearsal to get to. OK?"

"You know, you're pretty fucking unbelievable, sometimes." She shook her head slowly, then poked me on the arm—hard. "Just what the fuck did you think you were doing?"

I had no answer to her condemnation except to harden my resolve, just a little. There was nothing to defend in my actions, but I didn't want to hear about them, either. Not then. If I had done anything with Tom, it was only what I thought I *had* to do. And I'm sure my hard, 'steely' stare told her what she needed to know. She may know the truth, but I was determined not to get into it with her.

She pressed me, though, seething, "Did you think no one was going to find out!?" She wouldn't let up.

But, instead of playing it safe and denying it again, and before I could stop myself, I snorted, "I suppose you told Marc all about it, didn't you?"

She almost spat. "I haven't told Marc anything." She glanced briefly toward the building, then back to me. "And no one else has, either."

I said nothing.

"Kerrilyn, I'm not going to tell Marc your dirty little secret." She sniffed—distaste most evident.

I cleared my throat, which had begun to constrict, suddenly. "What about Tom?"

Her expression said I had all but admitted what had been going on. "Him, either."

"Good," was all I said.

She turned away, acting as though she was going to go inside, and to my back said, "You know, I don't know how you can live with yourself, sometimes."

"I don't have to fuckin' listen to this!" I turned then, and without looking to see if she turned to follow, started back toward my car. But Mel Howe had a trump card to play on me.

To my back she said, "Leave, now, and it's all over between you and the band."

I whirled to face her. "And I don't have to listen to your fucking

threats, either. So just get the fuck off my back!" I then turned back and made the last three steps to my car, unlocked the door and opened it.

From about fifteen feet away, she laughed. "Oh, you're right, girl. This isn't my band, anymore than it's your band." I turned to look at her. "This isn't Tom's band, this isn't Marc's band, and it sure isn't Troy Dancer's band, regardless of what he thinks. It's *our* band, and right now everyone but you is together. I'm tellin' you right now. If you walk out of this rehearsal, everyone here will kick your *sweet ass out*." She thumbed the air, then folded her arms. "Count on it."

"This band won't be the same without me."

"You're right. It won't."

"Y'all need me to sing."

"We need you. But you're all alone, now. If you quit, Marc will stay. You can't hold that over our heads anymore."

"I never *did* try to hold that over your heads. I want to stay in this band. But you can't threaten me." I was sure I was right.

"It's not a threat, Kerrilyn. It's a promise. I know Marc and Tom are still going to be friends when this is over; Marc will stay in the band." She coughed. Unconsciously, I inched away from my door, listening. "And I'm staying with them. Troy Dancer's not going to quit the band to go with *you*. So, I'd say it's pretty simple, actually."

The goddamned bitch was right, I guess. But I really hadn't intended to quit. I don't know, now, what I had intended to do, but it wasn't quitting. I kept that promise, at least. No matter what, I was not going to quit. I didn't want my way, I didn't think I needed to get my way, so I guess I needed to turn around. And stay.

"What's going to happen if I go in there?" I asked. I greatly feared what Marc would do if (when?) he found out, maybe because deep inside I knew I deserved it. And more. But I wasn't admitting it, that night. I had to stay strong, and stand firm, and I didn't know any other way to do it. I couldn't give in to one thing and remain steadfast on another. If I allowed myself to be undone over Tom, then I was undone over everything.

But, Mel replied, "That all depends on you." Of course, I knew that. "Marc doesn't know you've been *cheating* on him, so Marc's reaction to you depends solely on how you deal with his present state of mind. If you go in there with a chip on your shoulder, like you've shown me, then we've probably got big trouble. If you go in there and apologize for moving out, or for ... whatever ... then I'm sure he'll listen to you. But," she paused, sizing me up, "I don't think you're gonna do anything like that. Do you?"

"Mel," I started, losing a little of my steam, "I really can't tell him

about Tom, right now. And I can't just move back in with him, either." As if they were the only alternatives. When Marc found out about me and Tom, I didn't think he would want me back, at all.

Mel didn't seem to care whether I confessed, or not, though. "That's fine. But, can you *at least* patch things up enough for us to get through the gig next weekend? That's all I'm asking."

"I'll try," I lied, closing my car door and locking it again, too. "But I don't know how I can do one without doing the other."

"You don't?" she seemed surprised. I said no. "Well," she walked up to me and put her arm around my shoulder, starting to drag me toward the door, "then I guess we might be in for some really 'interesting' fireworks." She chuckled, but mirthlessly, spoke rather sarcastically, "I hope you brought your asbestos underwear, Kerrilyn dear. You're gonna need 'em."

Troy Dancer had just arrived, and the three of us walked in together.

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I don't know what I expected to happen when I saw Kerrilyn. One side of me was still unbelievably angry and hurt, and needed to have it out with her, but another side was tired of all the bullshit and just wanted to make up. And I didn't necessarily need her to move back in, either. I just wanted to know everything was all right; that there was still a chance for us. My long talks with Mel had renewed hope in the situation. All that was left was for Kerrilyn to reinforce it.

She didn't say a word. To me, or anyone. Since we were messing around with the equipment, she took it as a cue to do the same. She started grabbing mike stands and pulling crates out of the way, and tried her best to avoid eye contact with me. I was afraid to say anything—at least to be the first one—and though I tried to communicate my willingness to her, she seemed closed and unwilling—or unable—to meet me in the middle.

I didn't understand it.

Dancer, as usual, seemed oblivious to everything going on around him, and opened the evening with: "The equipment is not set up."

"No shit," Tom said, and threw Dancer a mike cord. He caught it deftly with one hand, and began to unwrap it.

As Dancer untangled the cord, he commented, idly, "I heard we have a gig next week."

"You heard right," Tom, the 'organizer,' said. "It's a 'live audition' on Saturday night, nine o'clock, at a little place in midtown called '688'."

"Really?" Dancer seemed interested, as well he should be. "How many other bands?" He knew the usual program was three or four bands playing an hour and a half set apiece. Tom had been trying to get us in there for six months.

"We're opening for two other bands. It isn't the greatest slot to be performing in, I know, but it's the best we can do right now." I didn't see why Tom should be apologizing. "But," Tom continued, "if they like us—and they will," he looked around the room, "we get to play Tuesday through Friday, the week of July fourth."

Dancer only said, "It's about fucking time."

"So, what time do we have to be there?" I asked.

"Why?" Tom smirked, "Have a hot date?"

I thought his teasing was uncalled-for, and my look expressed my sentiment fairly adequately. "No, asshole, I don't."

"Eight-thirty should be plenty of time." He answered my question, anyway.

For a second, then, everyone seemed to be looking at Kerrilyn, who had said nothing. She usually had a million questions, being the neophyte of the band, but tonight she was silent, pretending she was not the center of attention. But she was. I looked at Mel, Mel looked at me, and the two of us looked at Tom. Dancer didn't seem to care about what was going on. He only fumbled with his amp. Was it my imagination, or was the tension in the room growing? I didn't feel it from either Mel or Tom, and Dancer seemed totally out of it, mood-wise, so it had to be coming from Kerrilyn. Strange.

She had her hair back in a ponytail, and she wore her favorite pair of faded, raggedly cutoff jeans under a huge, loose, white football jersey that said 'Falcons'. I'd bought her the jersey, I remembered. She liked skirts or tight pants, and roomy, loose tee shirts, sweaters or sweatshirts. I guess, to minimize the size of her bust. She was wearing her old, worn tennis shoes—no socks—and as she moved around, ignoring all us most unconvincingly, I caught in the way her breasts swayed and jiggled under the jersey, that she wasn't wearing a bra. Despite everything else, the mere thought of her naked breasts almost warmed me, and I followed her movements more carefully after that. I hated it, but I wanted her body.

In the middle of my reverie, I heard Mel ask: "Kerrilyn, do you know where '688' is?"

Kerrilyn looked up, then, with a look that I interpreted as anger, but even knowing her it was hard to tell, and said, voice quiet, "Yeah. I been

there, before.”

“Eight-thirty Friday OK?”

“Of course.” Kerrilyn returned to the task at hand.

I thought it was time for someone to ask her what her problem was, but it seemed that unless *I* did, it wasn’t going to get asked. I’d not spoken with Mel since she’d come in with Kerrilyn, so I didn’t know what—or if—she’d said anything to her. Furthermore, I wasn’t sure if Mel should be running interference for me, anyway. Tom, I felt certain, was going to stay as far away from the fray as possible.

Well, I figured if I didn’t talk to her, things were probably going to go downhill, and faster. The mood since she walked in so conspicuously silent was anything but conducive to a good rehearsal. So, if anything was going to happen in a positive manner for this ready-to-abort rehearsal, I supposed I was going to have to make it happen.

I was nervous, *so very nervous*. Kerrilyn affected me so profoundly, and the sense of her overt avoidance of me shook me, almost to the point where I would be unable to open my mouth and say: “Kerrilyn, can I talk to you?” But, I’d said it. So much hopefulness hung in the next word out of her mouth.

She looked at me for the first time that night. True to form, I could not read her expression. It was as closed and as stony a look as she’d ever laid on me. Again, I thought she was hugely angry with me. It was the only thing I could conclude from the narrowed eyes, the impassive, tightlipped mouth, and the icy-cold atmosphere in the room. She was so pretty to me, almost a perfect face, and so acutely feminine and desirable, but her expression clamped down on my admiration with iron claws, cutting into me, and totally squeezing the charity out of me.

“I don’t think so,” she said with the most contempt she could muster. I thought she was going to turn away, and indeed she may have thought of it, but she continued to look at me.

I was tempted to abandon my request, but decided I might as well know *why* she thought talking to me was so contemptible. “Why not?”

“I wanna get out of here sometime tonight, you know. I don’t think we got time to talk about anything. We need to start rehearsing.”

“Look, babe,” I went up to her, and she stared up at me, impassive as ever, “I don’t think there’s going to be a rehearsal, tonight, if we *don’t* talk.” Then I saw how stoned she was.

She waited a long, tense beat. Snorted. “I can go, then?” Contempt. More bloody contempt. And I smelled booze, too.

“No!” I bellowed. “Jesus! What *is it* with you, tonight?”

“I didn’t come here to talk. I came here to *sing*.” She looked at the

others, who just stood around, watching. "If y'all don't want to practice, tonight, then I got other things to do."

"We want to practice," Mel said.

"Good," she said, "'cause that's why I'm here." She looked back at me. "So, why don't you just get the fuck out of my face. Hmmm?"

Rehearsal *was* over for me, then. I just turned around and walked out. It was either that, or smack the living shit out of Kerrilyn. And, I couldn't do that.

Not very long after I got back to the apartment I heard a knock at the door. It was Mel Howe. Though I was way beyond wanting *any* company, I let her in, anyway.

"How'd you get here?" I asked. I was feeling a little chagrined that I'd left her at the studio, while her car was still parked here, at the apartment.

"Dancer dropped me off." She smiled, though. "No problem."

"No rehearsal?"

I thought she would laugh. "What do *you* think? Kerrilyn split right after you—without even saying good-bye. The rest of us just sorta had nothing to do after that ..."

"Sorry about that."

"I'm sorry about it, too, Marc," she said.

"Why?" I asked. "It's not your fault."

"Well, maybe not, but ..." she followed me toward the couch "... I tried real hard to keep things from getting out of hand. It just didn't work out that way."

"She's one fucked-up bitch, all right." I sat back down, and took a sip from my beer. "I don't know how we ever managed to stay together as long as we did." Mel, seeing me with a beer, went directly to the refrigerator and helped herself to one. I didn't mind. To her back, I said, "I'm really tired of talking about this thing. I need a break."

She turned, popping open her can. "OK. What do you want to talk about? Is there anything you'd like to do, instead?"

"Not tonight. I can't deal with anything right now." I gulped down about half my beer. "Especially not *that bitch*." There was no argument offered to that.

Mel came over and sat down next to me. Tom and Sheree used to be my best friends, my closest companions, but they were so enmeshed in the whole weird affair I felt I had lost them, and their support. Always in the past, they had been there to talk to and to help, but *they* were part of the cause, and I couldn't expect them to offer a logical, rational response to my problems. All that left for me was Mel Howe. And our history.

Good old Melinda Howe. Talented; footloose; pretty. But I couldn't summon any interest in her, despite her deep brown eyes and soft, full lips. Despite her slender, athletic shape and crooked smile. I don't know that she was looking for any interest from me, but I thought it odd, anyway, to have her sitting on my couch again, herself on the rebound from an aborted love affair, just as I was on the rebound from the same thing. Again.

I always worry about the wrong things. I was worrying about having to fight off an advance from Mel, in total absence of any evidence, and feeling perfect rage toward Kerrilyn, whom I really should have been worried about. She needed my understanding and my pity, and all I wanted to do was punch her in the face.

And I did feel that way. I was horrified how close I was to using my physical strength to combat her. I had always tried to tell myself it was *never* necessary to use physical force against women. They would never do the same to you. A real man—a strong man—didn't need to force a woman to submit to him. She stands on her own. She has earned and deserves the same rights and privileges as any man. Size has nothing to do with it, nothing at all. I believed force was the last refuge of the incompetent, the juvenile, the poor of mind and spirit. Was *I* that devoid of self-respect that I could rob Kerrilyn, no matter how obstinate and aggravating she was, of her basic dignity? Rob us both of our dignity?

Because I had *thought* of hitting Kerrilyn, I was guilty. I didn't need to touch her to be at fault. I was horrified, and ashamed, and though it didn't make any difference how I felt about her, I knew I'd stepped over the line, and it wasn't her fault.

It was mine.

I was eight or nine, I guess. Suzanne was upstairs, listening to her stereo and doing her homework, I think. Her stereo was loud, but I didn't think it was all *that* loud. I was downstairs watching TV, when I heard father's voice boom out over the blare of Suzanne's stereo:

**"Turn that fucking thing down!"** he yelled. The sound of his voice was unmistakable—is unmistakable still. Moments later, Suzanne's music got softer. I heard her say something like: 'Sorry, dad,' and I expected that to be the end of it. Mother was nowhere around. I don't know where she was.

"Why do you always have to play that *fucking* thing so *fucking* loud all the time!?" He continued to yell, though it was hardly necessary. I couldn't see him, despite the balcony and the open hallway above. "Can't you *for once* have some fucking consideration for others in this household?"

And keep that *fucking* thing turned down?!?"

I didn't hear Suzanne's reply. But, I heard father's.

**"What did you say to me?!? Shut your goddamned mouth, you fucking ugly cunt-whore-bitch!!"** I heard the sound of a hand being thrown across someone's face. Then a thump! as apparently Suzanne hit the floor.

The language wasn't uncommon, at all. Frequently we were all subjected to his screaming tirades, and when it happened, mostly, I was just glad if it was happening to someone else. That's a terrible thing to say, but when you're eight years old, you tend to think in terms of self-preservation. Let the others take care of themselves. They were bigger.

But it was Suzanne. I heard her yell, **"Get off me, you drunken bastard!!"** And then I heard another slap, and the muffled cry just after. Suzanne tried to cry out, again, but her words were all but entirely obscured by something unknown. I was scared.

Training had taught me to mind my own business, and not get in the way. If I did, then I could be the recipient of a little fatherly discipline, myself. 'Did I want that?' he often warned me. 'Are you asking for some whacks for yourself? Open your fucking mouth one more time and I'll show you what happens to smart-mouthed little sons-of-bitches!' But, he would hit me, anyway. If I got within range, it didn't matter. If he was really angry, and it took nothing (it seemed) to get him there, nothing you could do or say would make any difference.

Though I had ample reason for not going upstairs, I did anyway. I was scared and worried for Suzanne, and all I wanted to do was satisfy myself that she was all right. I didn't want to oppose father; I didn't want to stop him (I couldn't); I only wanted to be sure Suzanne was OK.

When I stepped inside the open doorway to her room, I saw father on his knees in the middle of the floor, his face beet-red, and Suzanne pinned face-down under him. He had his old, bony knees on the backs of her arms, and was holding her head, nose-down, to the carpet. She couldn't cry out because he held her mouth smashed flat into the thick carpeting. I thought for an instant he was trying to kill her, but when he saw me he suddenly got up, releasing her.

He stood, towering over me, all six-foot three inches of him, and looked at me. I fully expected him to knock me to the floor for coming in on him, but instead he seemed to be sizing up the situation. Thinking, I suppose, of how he could make what I'd seen look like something entirely different, so if (or when) I told mother about it he could easily refute me, and make me look like a spiteful, lying, hateful child. But that wasn't exactly how he handled the 'situation'.

Suzanne, crying and bleeding from her mouth and nose, ran from the room and down the hall. Father only stood there, presiding over the silent scene like some ancient, grizzled, ugly, fattened cobra. Sated, but still aware of the power of his fangs, should you make any sudden moves or come too close.

The cock-sucker chuckled. He knew he had beaten me, and he didn't even have to open his mouth. He could see it in my eyes—the deer-caught-in-the-headlights look I surely must have been giving him. He dismissed me, then, and as he went by my shoulder, bumping me, I first smelled alcohol, then he spoke, a quiet, hateful growl, "Get out of here, you sniveling little cunt-licker. Go back down and watch your faggot TV program." This was my *father* speaking to me. I'm not sure I understood his words, then, but I remember them, and I understand them, now.

Thinking of that Thanksgiving, and Suzanne's profane (to father) announcement, I have no doubt now he had raped her. Not necessarily that day when I was eight, but many, many times before that. Before now, I was afraid to admit it, but I know it has to be true. All I have to do is count all the times I heard her crying in her room when I was little, late at night when I was supposed to be asleep. And sometimes I would go in to her, and lay down with her, comfort her as she sobbed. But she would never tell me what happened, directly.

Knowing this about your own father gives you enough anger and shame to make you want to change your name, move away, and never see any of your former family again. I didn't move away, and though I always regretted it, occasionally I did see members of my family. I don't know if any of them know the truth about father. I figure mother has to know, and her continued blind refusal to acknowledge that there was *ever* anything wrong with our family has caused me to lose all respect for her. The bastard's dead, mom! He ain't coming back! **Suzanne is dead, too, mom!** What can keeping this thing quiet possibly do for you, now?!? Keep the family name clean and spotless? And toward what goal?

Thanksgiving was only the climax of that long and tiring battle between my favorite sister and the man who thoughtlessly trod over our 'happy home' with sharp, hobnailed jackboots. I always thought Suzanne tougher than she was, apparently, but I didn't count on her own ability at wreaking revenge.

Her death humiliated mother. As well it should, since to mother, these things simply *did not happen* to nice families. No. Father, of course, put all the blame on Suzanne. I wouldn't have expected less. I can't say I really know how Bill and Paul feel, but at the time of Suzanne's suicide

they seemed to side with father.

Were Suzanne and me the only ones to be abused? Or am I the only one, other than Suzanne, to admit it?

I never got to read the note she left. They wouldn't let me see it. I know there was a note, since that was how the police determined it was suicide, and not something else. Despite father's despicable treatment of us both, I'm fairly sure Suzanne *did* kill herself. I'm only holding on, now, because I have something to look forward to. At this stage, I wouldn't give the dead bastard the satisfaction of beating me in that strange, abusive game he played, as he beat Suzanne. As he defeated her.

It isn't over between father and me. He's dead, but I never got in the last shot. At the time, I may have been too spineless to do anything, but he never gave me the chance. He simply had a heart attack sitting in the barber's chair one day, and he was dead before the paramedics arrived. Such an inglorious way for the bastard slave driver owner of Huffman Plastics, Inc. to die. To just suddenly croak one day while getting a trim. He should have died while fucking his secretary. Then, people might have believed the real truth about him. Maybe, he *should have* died while fucking the stock boy in the warehouse. *That would really* have frosted mother's cake! I don't know if he ever did anything like that, but it makes me smile to think he might have. All I've ever wanted to do since becoming an adult is find ways to burst my mother's fragile bubble of the family. She always thought appearances were so goddamned important; she always voiced her disappointment over the way both Suzanne and I turned out; she always managed to see father in a rosy light that was always so patently false. She even made me go to the funeral. (I'm talking about father's funeral, not Suzanne's. I *wanted* to go to Suzanne's funeral.)

I had almost hit Kerrilyn like father had hit me. I don't know what stopped me, but *for that*, at least, I'm grateful. At the last possible instant, something caught hold of my arm and forced me to keep it by my side. It did leave me with a mountain of guilt over the thought ever crossing my mind, but I suppose I'm trying to break a pattern, here, and though I wanted to, I did not hit Kerrilyn MacDonald.

I *never* deserved to be hit, and ultimately, Kerrilyn didn't either.

Back with Mel Howe, that night after our ruined rehearsal, I sat on my couch, and drank my beer, and tried to tell myself I wasn't to blame for what had almost happened. If I could blame Kerrilyn, I would, but it wasn't going to be *my* fault.

Mel tried to talk to me, about anything at all, but she soon got the idea I was in no mood for company. But, she didn't go away, though.

It wasn't really necessary for her to leave. If she could tolerate my silence and my extremely bad humor, then she was welcome to stay. For all I knew, she liked it. (I'm not being serious about that. *No one* likes me when I'm really thinking down.) I consumed many beers, and she seemed to be keeping pace with me. And it wasn't long before we both were very drunk, both very frustrated and angry, and both most vociferously trashing the rest of the entire human race. I don't know what we said, and I'm not sure it's relevant, but the two of us had a strong chord of resonance between us—a common outlook—and we had a roaring good time each entertaining the other.

She passed out on the couch, eventually, and I only just managed to stagger off to bed. And there was some hell to pay the next morning for both of us.

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I had been going downhill since becoming pregnant, but after the rehearsal at the end of June, I began to pick up speed. I simply don't remember anything from Tuesday night through Saturday morning. On Saturday I woke up sick again, and though there seemed to be less blood than before, the toilet was splattered red with globs of drying blood laced with hunks of unrecognizable, food-like stuff.

My whole body shook. I could hardly stand up, and when I tried to use the telephone, I found my voice wouldn't work. Yeah, I knew we had a performance that night, and a big one at that, but at that moment, at eleven-fifteen AM, I couldn't speak, let alone sing. How could I get my voice back by evening?

I looked in the mirror, and was horrified at what I saw. My face was deathly pale, anemic-looking, and my eyes were sunken, bloodshot, dull gray-green in color. My hair looked like dirty, muddy straw—a witch's mop. My lips were pale, too, split and cracked from dehydration. I needed to retch, again, but of course there was nothing left inside me to come out. Just a few spatters of deep red blood. My chest ached to take a deep breath. If I coughed, I was wracked with pain.

The living room was a mess. Everywhere was strewn empty bottles of all types of booze, some scotch, some bourbon, some vodka, even some rum. Was only tequila missing? The remnants of three pizzas and their boxes littered the coffee table. And a man's sock was found under a half-eaten piece of pepperoni. Where had I gone? What had I done? Where did

all the booze bottles come from?

I checked myself for recent sexual contact. I didn't feel sore, but I never expected to, either. My vagina didn't seem to contain any extra liquid, but then, that was hardly unusual. It could have leaked out, or been absorbed, or something. Of course, I was wearing only my neat Falcons jersey, and nothing else. I had worn it Tuesday, I remembered. And I *still* had it on? What happened to the rest of my clothes? I looked, but didn't seem to see them anywhere amidst the rubble and detritus of my living room.

The front door wasn't locked, so I locked it. Thirty-seven dollars, in fives and ones, was found stuffed between two couch cushions. I didn't remember putting it there, or where it had come from. The TV had been on, so I turned it off. I couldn't stand all the bottles lying around, but I was much too sick to pick them up. All I could manage was to clear off the couch, put on a pair of underwear, and bury myself under the covers. Of course, I had been sleeping entirely on the couch, since it was near the TV. I didn't even go in to look at the bed. I didn't want to know what I'd find, if I did.

This was bottom for me. It took a little while longer to get some help, but I was at the very bottom of my piss-poor existence.

I awoke, again, after six-thirty. I did not feel better, either. I was again shaky and nauseous, but thankfully I did not retch up any blood. I took a shower, spending almost forty-five minutes standing underneath the hot, soothing spray. I tried to wash myself off and wash my hair, but though I used up a lot of shampoo and soap, I *still* felt clammy and wretched, soaked through with a scratchy, poisonously toxic substance that wouldn't go away no matter how many times I scrubbed. My boobs were throbbing. I wondered why, (but of course I'd forgotten I was pregnant—I wasn't thinking of that) but put on a too-tight bra, anyway. Mistake. I had to take off the bra and find one a bit larger, softer, gentler. I drug on pantyhose without bothering with panties, and shrugged on my only clean 'band dress' over my head. Then I took a look at my face, again, in the mirror.

To put makeup on over the death's mask that was my face required more skill, patience, and steadiness of hand than I possessed. I worked on myself, shaking and feeling hollow inside, for most of the hour I had before I knew I'd have to leave for the club. Believe me, I *did not* feel like singing—didn't know if I could, even—but for some insane reasons not even known to myself I was determined to be there for our performance. I was determined to do my best, no matter how badly I felt.

At eight-twenty, it was time to go. I thought I could get to the club, not very far away in midtown, in about ten or fifteen minutes, so I grabbed my car keys, and the thirty-seven dollars, and my shoes (which I carried, since my feet were too swollen to put them on) and I shut and locked the door behind me. I also took two very large gulps of vodka, all that was left. It burned unbearably, but it helped steady me for the drive over.

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We all could tell how sick Kerrilyn was just by looking at her. She calls her face a death's mask, and that's pretty accurate. Even with makeup, she looked far worse to me than even when I met her originally at her apartment, for our first date.

She could barely stand up straight. She could only stoop, crouched over, holding her abdomen. She winced with every movement, and when Sheree, who had accompanied Tom to the performance, asked her how she was feeling (knowing she must feel terrible) the croak that emanated from her shocked us.

She had destroyed herself. Her mind just hadn't realized it, yet. She didn't talk after that, she didn't smile, she didn't look any of us in the eye. She just stood by, shaking, while we prepared to set up.

Dancer was the first to recognize the obvious. "She can't perform." He was helping Tom with amplifiers, and pulled him aside with me. "She's too sick to sing. We'll have to do something else." He looked around. "Shit!" He was angry. "Why does she have to fuck this performance up, tonight? Why couldn't she have kept herself straight enough to make this gig?" He turned away.

Neither Tom nor I said anything.

Dancer, apparently more concerned for the job than the singer, turned back toward us. "What are we going to do?"

I cleared my throat. "Play without her." It seemed obvious.

"That's it!" He thumped me in the chest with his finger. "She's out!"

Well, I went one finger past control, and hit Troy Dancer on his left cheek with my right fist. I am much larger than he is, and he hit the deck like someone dropped a load of bricks on him. Tom watched it all happen, and waited about three beats before he turned to me.

"Good one, ole buddy." He didn't smile; he didn't joke; he didn't help Troy Dancer get up. "Thanks." He put his arm around my shoulders. He

was my best friend, and he knew I'd need all the help I could get, since I was beginning to shake so hard I would have fallen to my knees.

I'd really tagged Troy Danzinger. It felt good, but he really wasn't the cause of my anger. He had just been there in the way when I got that 'one straw too many'. He, Danzinger, didn't get up right away. I thought I'd knocked him out, but no, he propped himself up on his elbows, and stared stupidly up at Tom and me. Maybe he was afraid to get up, fearing he'd get another little tap to the jaw, or maybe he just felt more secure on the floor, flat on his back. Who knows? I didn't give a shit.

"I need to get out of here," I told Tom, quietly.

"No problem." He turned me toward the back of the stage area, where there was an open overhead door, and we walked (he walked, I stumbled) outside.

Sheree came around in a few moments. She had that worried, rabbitly look about her. "I think y'all better come inside," she almost whispered, "Quick!" Her words scared me.

"Why?" Tom asked, "What's going on?"

"Kerrilyn's passed out. And she just threw up a *whole bunch* of blood."

I thought Kerrilyn was going to die. I felt so helpless, so horrendously miscast for the role chosen for me. I could only stand on the periphery, bound up in nearly overwhelming, but toothless, impotent rage at everyone and everything. I was scared shitless and worried, too, while the paramedics arrived and took charge of the situation. Though I felt she needed me to be with her, I never went up to her, or tried to see her at all as they lifted the stretcher into the back of the ambulance. I don't think she would have known me had I been there, but I just stood by in anguish and watched them carry her off, and I seriously thought she was going to die. I didn't know if I wanted her to die, or if I wanted *me* to die for her, instead, but I couldn't break out of my anger long enough to come to her aid. She needed me, perhaps more than she ever did before, and I could do absolutely nothing.

**Anger! Blinding rage! Kerrilyn, how could you do this to me!?!?**

What have *I* done to deserve this?

You see, I felt I was much to blame for her condition. It's not a rational viewpoint, but it was my perspective at the time. Deep inside, I was her big brother—her shield against the world. I had taken on the responsibility of keeping her protected and safe. And I had completely let her down.

I've cried over it, and hated myself and my weakness, for failing her

when I needed to be strongest. She needed me, and I knew it, but I just couldn't bring myself to forgive her for trying to kill herself. This was what I thought. She was trying to hurt me—abandon and reject me—and for reasons I could not fathom.

Something in me wanted to push her away and reject her before she could do it to me. My first reaction to any crisis was, and still is (sometimes) to forget all the things relationships mean, and to give up fighting for what I want, and remove myself and my presence from the situation. Do it to them before they can do it to me. Protect *myself* and my hurt feelings from the crushing pain of *rejection*. I just didn't trust myself or others enough to risk losing, and to fight for the thing I wanted. Too quickly—much too quickly—I have always been ready to give away everything I've worked for, just to avoid the risk of having it all taken away by the callous, self-serving, selfish desires of the others in my life.

When Kerrilyn told me to get out of her face, it seemed to confirm all the negative feelings I had toward myself and my relationship with her, and it fulfilled a very old prophesy, too. But, don't give up on her, they all said. Hang in there, they all encouraged. But, you know, I just couldn't do it. It just wasn't in my make-up to look past the terrible realization of my inadequacies, and believe that I could be worthy, too. I felt I was just not worthy to have such a love as hers, drunk and damaged and dysfunctional though it was. I was simply and succinctly a lesser human being. Not strong enough at heart to hold safe the love between us, in Kerrilyn's most critical time of need.

I've had to forgive myself for being weak, and I know Kerrilyn certainly has forgiven me, but there is no failure harder to overcome than when you fail yourself. She knows that, too. If I ever said I wanted her; needed her; *loved her*—and meant it—it was all lost to me then. No, there was nothing Sheree could have said, nothing Mel could have said that would have pulled me from my deep, despairing depression, and made me forget myself and my pain and get in the car and go be with Kerrilyn.

Robin L. Ashwood, June 3, 1993, and January 13, 2004