

Chapter 13

It was *very* tough rolling out of bed at noon on Christmas Day. I know I saw the clock pass six AM while we laid there trying to get to sleep. I am always perpetually wound up after a gig—especially a good one—and with the work of packing up all the equipment, it was pretty tough falling asleep right away.

Kerry wanted to have sex; tired or not; dawn or not. Well, so did I, I think, but my body couldn't decide whether to be keyed-up or tired. She tried to get me going, and succeeded, more or less, but my full energies weren't there to do my bidding, and I came rather too quickly for my preferences. Kerry wasn't able to come, then, without doing a little manual stimulation on her own. She seemed to take it all in stride, but I felt badly about being too tired to hold up very long. Though it did make it easier to get to sleep.

Kerry woke me up. When I opened my eyes, all I saw was a pair of bright, emerald green ones looking down at me, and sparkling to beat the band. Those eyes were also accompanied by the biggest, brightest smile I'd seen in quite awhile. Blearily, I looked over at the clock radio. On purpose I had not set the thing so we'd at least get some sleep. Well,

we'd gotten *some* sleep, but as far as I was concerned, not enough. The clock said a few minutes after twelve. Basically noon. Acting disgusted (but teasing) I rolled over and covered my head with a pillow. It was Sunday, and though it was Christmas, I wanted to sleep in. Hah.

The girl poked me in the ribs and tore the pillow off my head. "Up, boy!" she demanded, and romped on top of me, scissoring me with her legs. It was more than I could stand, so I reached around and grabbed for the sides of her rib cage, tickling her with all my might. She flew off me, squirming and giggling, and calling, "No fair! No fair!" But she retaliated instantly anyway, trying her best to tickle me back. I'm pretty ticklish, too, but she isn't that strong, and I'm *much* bigger. After a few minutes of wrestling, I won out.

Well, maybe. I had wanted to sleep some more, but now I was fully awake, and adrenaline was pumping into me at ninety miles per hour. There was no going back to sleep, now, and that was just as she had wanted. The tickling match now settled, we sat on opposite sides of the bed, caught our breath, and warily regarded each other, grinning like devious Cheshire cats.

"All right!" I told her. "I'm awake, now."

"I can see that," she said with an evil leer, eyes twinkling madly. I love those eyes, truly. "You were so cute just sleeping there with your *widdle* eyes closed!" She teased me with her perfectly disgusting baby talk. Then she became an adult, again, "But I want to open presents, buddy, and I need you there to do it."

"Why do you need me?" I asked. "Can't you open them all by yourself?"

"I could, I guess," she considered, in mock-seriousness, "but I always thought it would

be so much more fun if we did it together.”

I snorted, “I’m sorry, but you’ve been misinformed.” I smiled, though.

“That figures.” Kerry slumped, and exhaled strongly. She looked a little tired, too. She gathered as much of her hair as she could between her hands, and pulled it back out of her face. It looked stiff—and probably was—from all the hair spray she’d used on it the night before. She held her hair back in a ponytail with one hand while she materialized an elastic band out of ... somewhere ... and wrapped her hair up.

I could see her face in the light from the bedroom window, very clearly. She was very young, by any and all standards, but in the brightness of the midday sun she looked much older. Her eyes had a dark puffiness around them, especially underneath, and I noticed slight wrinkles fanning out across her high cheekbones. I guess I’d never seen her face that clearly before. And she noticed my noticing, too.

“Quit lookin’ at my face.”

“Why?” I objected, “I like your face.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m not wearing any makeup, and my eyes are all puffy, and I’m sure my complexion is just too horrible for words.” She shook her head, smiled wanly, “Unless those words are *‘Night of the Living Dead,’* of course.”

“I don’t care,” I said, “I *still* like your face.”

She just ‘hmped,’ and said, “Are you gonna come out and help me open presents, or not?” She scooted over to my side of the bed, and leaned over, her face coming closely up to mine. She made her eyes very large and stared most balefully into mine. We stared at each other for some moments, then both backed down, grinning.

"If you'll make the coffee," I offered, and *bang!* she instantly jumped up and slid off the bed.

"Deal!" she called as I watched her scoot through the bedroom door, clad only in a T-shirt. It had been only a few short hours since we'd made love, but the sight of her bare and extremely well rounded rear end made a familiar urge begin to grow within me. The only question was whether I'd grab her before or after I got a cup of coffee.

As I got out of bed to follow her to the kitchen, I was thinking, both.

I quietly made my way out to the kitchen. Kerry was there at the sink filling the glass coffee pot with water. I crept silently toward her as I watched her pour the water into the reservoir, and placing the pot under the basket containing the coffee, switch on the maker. I had gotten within about five feet when she spoke, back still to me.

"I know you're there, buddy. You can't sneak up on me *that* easily."

"What makes you think I was sneaking up on you?" I continued to approach until I could place my hands on her hips, fingertips just touching her bare skin. She held still, and I reveled in the electricity and warmth of her touch. So smooth, so inviting, so alive! I wound my arms around her, sliding my hands underneath her T-shirt and upward until each hand cupped a warm, soft breast. In a tight embrace from behind, I hugged her to me. As she leaned back into me, I kissed her lightly on the side of the neck. The very slight whiff of perfume I received caused me to linger there, my lips just barely touching her. She smelled so nice! She was so warm, so soft, so willing! My libido was fully awake, now.

I kissed the base of her neck again, nuzzling beneath her ear and nipping at her ear lobe. She turned her head toward me as far as she could, her mouth finding mine. My eyes were

open, since I had wanted to see what I was doing, so as she leaned her head back, eyes closed and inviting mouth open to accept and enjoy mine, I had an opportunity to observe her close-up. Kerry focused totally and completely on kissing me. For the moments we explored each other with our tongues, her whole universe and existence was no larger than the space of our two snug bodies. The world outside my arms had simply ceased to exist—it did not matter in the slightest.

I could hear the coffee maker gurgling, but I decided it could wait. I turned her toward me, and as she turned to meet me, I pulled the T-shirt up over her head, leaving my Kerry naked in my arms. Not being one to hesitate, she then pushed my pajama bottoms down to my knees. I allowed them to fall to the floor. I stepped out of them, and pushed Kerry against the counter.

“Mmmm ... mmmm!” she purred, her eyes still closed, and she smiled and purred again. I was excited—to be sure!—and I was poking her stiffly in the belly. I suppose it was uncomfortable, because she used her hand to move me into a more satisfactory position. Now more suitably situated, our kissing resumed, and in scant minutes intensified wonderfully.

I pulled back from Kerry slightly, almost reluctantly. “Merry Christmas, love,” I told her.

“Oh, Marc!” she cried, and she hugged me and hugged me, rocking back and forth. “I do love you! Very, very much!” She kissed me, briefly. “Merry Christmas, my love ...” another kiss “... I love you! I love you! I love you!” She punctuated each ‘I love you!’ with another small smack on the lips. I guess she loved me. Or, if not ...

We separated, and she was unhappy about it. Not wanting to leave an unhappy woman alone, I put my left arm behind her shoulders, reached down under her behind with my right, and swung *the girl* up into my arms. I think it was the first time I'd ever done that with her, and as I'd expected and hoped, her unhappiness evaporated when she wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Damn, buddy!" I think she may have said. She was smiling so hugely I could literally see every one of her teeth. Not all of them were perfectly straight, but they were all exceptionally white and very pretty. When I took in her unabashed smile, and saw the sparkle in her impossibly green—emerald ocean green!—eyes, counted the auburn freckles on her fair, white, winter-sun skin, I fell ever more deeply into the mystery, the enigma, the wonderment and the hope that was my Kerry MacDonald.

She was light to carry. She seemed like nothing at all. I felt I could have held her for hours, so insignificant did the weight of her body seem to me. She hugged me around the neck, and kissed me on the chin, the nose, and on the neck. I kissed her back, fishing with my mouth for hers. Kerry held our heads together with an urgency and a desire that surprised and elated me, and we kissed. This time I closed my eyes, too, and experienced firsthand the implosion of the universe.

Nothing existed beyond the touch of my hands on her bare skin. Nothing mattered outside of the touch of my tongue to hers. Nothing counted except her love for me, and my love for her. Holding her in my arms with that warm, bright Christmas sunlight filling the apartment, I felt time stop and all debts become paid. Whatever differences or hurt we may have held between us were gone, vanished. I erased the past clean, and opened a bright new

future. I so wanted Kerry to forget the pain and unhappiness of her past, and revel in the joy of our present. I so wished nothing would cloud the perfection of our love, ever. I so hoped to see her smiling forever, as she was smiling just then ...

Slowly and unhurriedly, I carried Kerry to the couch. I wanted to lie with her in the softest place I could find, and the couch was going to be it. Carefully, so as not to risk dropping her, I bent over and laid her warm, naked body on the couch.

“Can you turn on the Christmas tree lights for me?” she asked. I could not possibly have refused.

Without a word of reply, I went over to the tree, found the light cord and the plug as quickly as I could, and the tree was lighted. I took a few seconds to admire the cheery brightness of the reds, the blues, the greens and the golds of the lights, but I remembered I had a woman waiting for me, so I turned my back on the tree.

“I think it’s the most wonderful Christmas tree I’ve ever seen,” she murmured as I lowered my body next to hers.

“It’s very nice,” I commented as we kissed, lightly and gently, getting reacquainted. “What made you decide to go to all the effort to get one?” Not only that, she’d bought all the trimmings as well—lights, ornaments, tinsel, strings of colored glass beads, etc.

She sighed, lightly. “I don’t know, it just wouldn’t have seemed like Christmas without a tree.” Then she snorted. “I know *you’re* nothing but an old Scrooge when it comes to Christmas, but *I* on the other hand, dearly love Christmas. It’s truly a shame, you know.”

“I like Christmas,” I told her. “It’s just the *family* part I can’t handle. I mean, it’s stressful enough without them adding to it.” Her face showed she seemed to understand. “Christmas

is fine if it doesn't involve me with my family."

"So, what do you usually *do* for Christmas? Spend it cooped up here all alone? How depressing!"

"Hardly." I shook my head, "Tom and Sheree and I have a tradition of getting together on Christmas day. They spend Christmas morning with her parents, usually, and then a bunch of us get together up at the lake in the afternoon for presents and some early dinner. This year is so screwed up—with the gig and all—so we haven't made any specific plans, but I expect we'll get a call later on when they finally decide what they're doing."

"What about Tom's parents?" she asked.

"Ah, they divorced when Tom was two, and his mother has since died."

"Died?" Her eyes were suddenly very large, "How?"

"Cancer," I said, as if that explained it.

"Is that how he got the house?"

"That's it."

"Well, what about his daddy? Where's he?" She was quite curious.

"I don't know, Kerry. I don't think Tom's seen him since he divorced Tom's mother." I thought a moment, "I guess it means he probably doesn't remember his father, at all."

"His mama never remarried?"

"No, never did."

"He have any brothers or sisters?"

"Yes, an older sister who's married with three kids, who you'll probably meet later today if they're up there."

“That’s good,” she commented. There was a pause during which she seemed to think, and very seriously. I just waited for the wheels to finish turning. “I’m glad,” she continued, “he has a sister he can visit.” She paused again, still thinking. “But I know what it feels like not to have a family. It’s terrible to be alone all the time.”

“I don’t think Tom’s *ever* lonely,” I pointed out.

“That’s not my point.” Kerry wrinkled her nose at me. “Here you are, all your family is around you and you won’t even see them. You hole yourself up in this apartment and you never do anything.” Where she got her information, I couldn’t say. The accuracy of it, however, was (I had to admit) amazing. Well, at least it had been accurate before I met her. She didn’t stop talking, and I didn’t interrupt. “If I had a family I’d be visiting them all the time. Your family is all you got. The world out there is a horrible place, and if you don’t have any place to go to get away from it, it will drive you crazy. I wish you’d see your family more often. I think I might like to meet them some time, if I could ever convince you.”

“Well,” I decided, “maybe sometime you will.” But I wanted to change the subject. “What happened to your family?” We hadn’t discussed it. And her face was like a door slamming closed.

“They’re all dead.” She said it in such a way as to stifle any further conversation on the subject. I got the point. She didn’t want to talk about it.

“I’m sorry,” was all I could say.

“Me, too,” she agreed. She frowned, then, but turned it around and brightened, smiling, “I don’t want to talk about depressing things on our first Christmas together. This should be a happy time, not a sad and depressing one. We should be happy. We got each other, and the

sun is out, and we got a *whole bunch* of presents to open!”

I homed in on what she'd said, “Our *first* Christmas, you said?” I smiled, too. “That implies more than one, you know.”

“I know,” she grinned, and her eyes twinkled. “Face it, buddy, you got me now.”

We came together for our most loving, passionate and heartfelt kiss yet. Yes, I really loved *the girl*—I couldn't (and wouldn't want to) escape it—and *the girl* was telling me she loved me back. Until you hear it and see it, and feel it and know it, love defies definition. When it touches you all things become possible, and not only that, all things become *easy*. As easy as it was to kiss my darling little red-haired girl lying naked in my arms on the couch.

Though my arousal had faded somewhat while we talked, her touch and her caresses brought me back quickly, and almost just as quickly we found ourselves sliding together, joining and sharing ourselves. I started out on top, and the sight of my loving girl—eyes half closed, cheeks and neck blushing—warmed me immensely. Touching her, and feeling her wet warmth around me, squeezing me and pushing against me, I felt my mind going out and becoming one with her. I gave up part of my control over myself, and allowed her to lead us. She used her hands on the small of my back to guide me, to pace me with her growing and flowing rhythms. Her skin was hot, flushed with excitement, and when I touched her breasts she felt moist, the sweat pouring out of every pore.

I don't know where my body was. My energy seemed to grow, pulling from—somewhere—I didn't know. I held myself back, but this time it was easy. Nothing seemed easier than to work with Kerry, and move with Kerry, and wait with Kerry for the inevitable. It was amazing, and I was amazed to be still participating without losing control or going

over the edge. I so wanted to be there and be ready when she reached that point, that crucial point. I felt she was nearing, and as she did her pace quickened, became more insistent and urgent. Hold it, now! I panted, the muscles in the backs of my legs complaining, but I held on. We were so close! Hold it, hold it ...

And Kerry seemed to explode. "*Oh! Oh, Marc!*" she cried, "*Oh, Marc! Oh ... oh ...*" and as she exploded, so did I. So perfect; so powerful. So much; so soon. Her arms pulled me tightly to her body, and we buried ourselves in a long, deep kiss.

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I remember my first Christmas with Grandma and Grandpa. He was still alive (obviously, since I remember him), and I think it was the most wonderful Christmas I ever had as a child.

It was **cold** that Christmas! I know that part of Alabama can get pretty cold in the winter, at times, but when I was five (I think) the cold weather broke all the records. The air was freezing, the wind blew like icy knives through our coats, and the ground was covered all over with a white, hoary frost.

I never thought much about it, but Grandma and Grandpa were pretty poor. It must have been difficult to make ends meet most of the year, but I'll bet it was especially hard at Christmastime. Even so, we *always* had a Christmas. By that I mean we always had presents, even if only a few; we always had a nice Christmas dinner; we *always* had a Christmas tree. And more importantly, we always had each other for Christmas. Until Grandpa died, of

course, then it was just Grandma and me. Still, Grandma kept Christmas where it belonged—in her heart.

Our first Christmas, Grandma cooked all day Christmas Eve. In the morning Grandpa took me out to the woods to find a tree. It was *so* cold, I had to bundle up with layers and layers of heavy clothing. Grandpa put on his big, lined rubber boots and his heaviest work coat and took me out to the barn to get the axe.

I remember the cold, frosty morning air that made my breath visible, billowing up in swirling white clouds around my head, to be carried away by the gusty wind. As we walked, our boots crunched loudly on the frozen ground.

Grandpa huffed and puffed, and grumbled under his breath. What oaths or curses he made, I couldn't tell, but though his hand was gentle on my shoulder, he always represented a strong, dark, unknowable force to me. I can't say I was afraid of Grandpa—Grandma always said he loved me so dearly—but I was so young and still very unsure of things. It had not been that long since I'd gone to live with them, and I think I still expected to be put out at any moment. What a horrible feeling!

The barn door creaked as Grandpa opened it and we went inside. The smells of the animals were very strong—the cows and the pigs, especially—and I can still identify them completely from memory. Grandpa coughed, and grumbled to himself again. I asked him what he was grumbling about.

And he chuckled, "Nothing, Kerry Lynn, honey. Barn needs cleaning, s'all."

With the big, heavy axe balanced on his stooped shoulder, we walked down the path behind the barn toward the woods, Grandpa in front, me trailing after. The frozen gravel

crunched there, too, and I took much delight in seeing how much crunching noise I could make.

“Quit yer noise makin’,” Grandpa growled, but he wasn’t mad. “You’ll ‘sterb the rabbits inner holes.” I wondered what would happen if I did. “Let’m stay inner holes fer the winter, chile,” he chided me, “they want a nice Christmas, too.” But even years later, I still wonder what kind of Christmas the rabbits had.

We found a nice, small evergreen tree to cut and take back to the house. I wanted to help cut it down, but Grandpa never let me use the axe, and I was forced to just stand by and watch while he took a few healthy swings at the base of the tree. That was all it took. Once felled, I was allowed to help him drag the tree back to the house, where we sawed it off level on the bottom. Grandpa rummaged in the barn for a couple of boards and some nails to make a base for the tree, and in no time we had a tree sitting prettily in the corner of our living room. Naked—unadorned—but so pretty and green and smelling very sweetly of pine.

It was now time to trim the tree, and this was my favorite part.

Grandma gave us each steaming mugs of hot chocolate, replete with marshmallows, and the three of us began to very carefully place ornaments on the tree. All our Christmas ornaments were old, and each had a story behind it. As we trimmed the tree, Grandma and Grandpa told stories about the ornaments. I don’t know (or care) if the stories were true—any of them—but starting with that first Christmas I’ve always loved to hear them tell the stories.

I remember mama’s ornament! Grandma had the first ornament they bought when my

mama was a baby. It was a small, brightly painted wooden rocking horse, and oddly, it had Grandpa's name painted on the side. I had forgotten. Grandma used to tell the story about it:

Once upon a time there was a family. They was a poor family and they didn't have no money to buy their little girl any presents for Christmas. They loved their little girl and did everything they could so they could buy her presents. Her daddy worked real hard all year, and when it was time for Christmas, he had just enough money to get the little girl a few really nice presents.

Along with her presents, her daddy also bought a whole box of fancy painted Christmas ornaments to trim the tree with. All this was packed away, hidden, in the attic of their house. All the little girl's Christmas things were there, except for one small ornament. Her daddy kept it out so he could paint the little girl's name on the side.

But, two days before Christmas something very bad happened. Their house caught fire and burned to the ground, burning up all the little girl's presents—the ones her daddy had worked so hard for. They was fortunate no one was hurt when their house burned down, but their Christmas was ruined. They had no presents, and no money to buy any more. All they had was that one small ornament, which the little girl's daddy had put in his pocket as they was escaping out of the burning house.

The little girl knew all her nice presents was gone. The little girl

also knew there was no money to buy more, and she was very sad. But her daddy took his axe out in the woods and chopped down a small, pretty pine tree and he set it up for the little girl. They all worked real hard and made their own homemade ornaments—strings of popcorn and apples with cloves stuck in them—and decorated the little tree real nice. The little girl was still sad, even though their tree looked so pretty.

Her daddy was also real sad, 'cause the little girl was so sad. On Christmas Eve he stayed up late, sitting next to the little tree and holding the ornament in his hand and thinking about all the presents the little girl wasn't going to get. He was so sad he cried, and when he cried, he prayed. He prayed that he wanted the little girl to have some nice presents for Christmas. He knew they was real poor, but he loved the little girl so much he just couldn't bear to see her sad. He prayed that he didn't want anything in his life but to see his little girl happy at Christmas.

In his prayer, though, he was answered. He was told by a voice that if he put the ornament on the top of the tree, when he got up in the morning there would be a big surprise. He didn't know whether to believe the voice in his prayer, or not, but he knew he didn't have no other choice. So in tears he hung the little girl's ornament at the top of the tree and went to bed.

In the morning he was wakened up by the little girl's laughter, and he went out to see what it was she was laughing about. When he got out to where the tree was he saw it was surrounded on all sides by boxes and boxes of presents, and all their homemade ornaments had been turned into gold and silver. The one ornament he'd saved and hung on the tree, though, was still the same as it had been, but where he'd painted the little girl's name on the side before, in its place was now her daddy's own name.

He had gotten his wish that the little girl would be happy at Christmas. He had bought the ornament for the little girl, but as it turns out ... it was for him, all along.

I know the story's not true, but it doesn't matter. Grandma had a hundred of these stories, and I was perpetually fascinated when she told them. I think they were all supposed to teach a lesson, or something, and I suppose they do ... but I just liked hearing Grandma talk.

You know, I think there's a lesson here. The little girl's daddy had worked so hard all year long to buy presents for his little girl. To see her happy on Christmas was, for him, the greatest gift he could ever ask for. But he never asked for *anything* for himself, just for his little girl to be happy. And, as you all know, he got what he wished for—what he had prayed for. He didn't ask for anything for himself, but he got his greatest reward, anyway.

Well, Grandma believed in prayer. She used to tell me to pray when I was sad, or when I was unhappy, and when I was a little girl myself, I used to do it, too. Of course, that was a

long time ago (for me) and I haven't prayed—for anything—in a long time. I don't know if I still even know how, either. But maybe it isn't that hard to pray. Maybe all you need to do is find the time to look inside yourself and ask for the help and the guidance to make it through your troubles. Maybe, even if God (or someone) doesn't talk to you, He listens. Having someone just *listen* to you sometimes makes all the difference.

This is my favorite prayer, these days:

“God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.”

I had a glass star, covered with gold glitter, and that was my own special Christmas tree ornament. I remember it distinctly, now, but I have no earthy idea what happened to it. I guess it may have been packed away with Grandma's things in the attic of the house in Alabama. But I haven't been back there, since, so I can't say for sure. When I left, I couldn't wait to be rid of the old house and everything about it, but now I wish I'd taken some things with me. Like mama's and my Christmas tree ornaments. All the stuff I left there has probably been thrown out by now, and the thought of something so dear to me being trashed and forgotten makes me sad. It's what I deserve, I guess, but it still makes me sad.

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While we lay on the couch relaxing and recuperating, I thought Kerry looked better

than ever. The past few months had been easy for her, comparatively, and despite our recent shift toward a night owl schedule, to me Kerry looked happy, contented, and rested. My story may have been somewhat different, since I still had to hold down a daytime job, but even with my dual shift schedule, and relative lack of sleep, I still felt pretty good. And I, likewise, felt happy, contented, and (mostly) rested.

All evidence of her prior injuries was completely gone, completely healed. And I thought it interesting that as Kerry's bruises faded, so also apparently did her memory of the incident that had precipitated them. I hadn't forgotten, but I hadn't brought the subject up, either. I think I was afraid to ask her about it. Initially her reaction was so pronounced—violent? maybe—it made me very hesitant to pursue it any further. The depths of her pain and unhappiness intimidated me, and though I was still intensely curious and concerned for her safety, I could not bring myself to ask her about that guy 'Danny'. I hated him—I could have killed him for what he'd done to her, but still the subject remained strictly taboo.

We lounged on the couch for quite some time before Kerry finally decided we'd lounged quite long enough. "Hey buddy, are we gonna open our Christmas presents sometime today, maybe?"

"I don't know," I mused. "Do we even have any Christmas presents to open?"

"After that crack, I'm not sure *you* have any," she admonished, "but I can hear several of mine calling to me."

"That so? What are they saying?"

"They're saying, 'Kerry! Kerry! Come *open* us, Kerry!'" She imitated small, falsetto present voices calling. I paused, hand to ear, and tried to hear (if only in my mind) the

sounds of gifts beckoning to their intended. Funny as it seemed, I knew the gifts I'd wrapped for her, and I could visualize their loneliness and consternation at having to sit and endure the anticipation of being received. It's not too tough to imagine a gift's need to be given.

"Well," I relented, "if you must, you must."

"I must," she nodded, grinning.

I sighed, "OK, then." I levered myself up from the couch, and as soon as I had my feet on the floor, I pulled Kerry up with me. She ran her hands over her long, lovely ponytail and gingerly tiptoed over to the tree. I guess she thought she might surprise the presents, or something. She turned to me.

"Shhh!" She put her finger in front of her mouth, whispered, "Be *vevwy* quwiet! We're hunting wabbits!"

"Oh, just get on with it!" I teased. Kerry scrunched her face into a scowl and smacked me on the arm, which was the closest body part she could reach. I wonder what she would have smacked had she been able. "Oww!" I complained, but she silently went back to her present stalking. She found first a couple of small packages, one labeled 'Kerry' and one labeled 'Marc'. (Imagine that!) The 'Marc' one she handed to me, and for the 'Kerry' one she collapsed into an indian-style sit.

My present to her was a book. In fact, one of several I'd bought for her. I don't know exactly what possessed me to buy such gifts, but I'd noticed (though she'd gone to some lengths to keep it well hidden) that she had been methodically going through all my books one-by-one during the day while I was away at work. I couldn't be certain, but I was pretty sure she'd read about twenty since early fall. She never said a thing about it; never cracked a

book when I was around; never expressed any interest in anything I might have been reading—just snuck them out and read them when I wasn't around. My reading patterns varied from time to time, and in those few months I'd been zipping through about two good-sized novels a week, spending a couple of hours every night reading in bed before going to sleep. It's a bad habit, but it does teach you a few things. Since Kerry was the ultimate night person, she usually watched TV while I read. Why she never read anything while I read was a complete mystery to me. Why I never asked about her reading habits was, I'm sure, a complete mystery to her. Or maybe not ...

When Kerry discovered what I'd bought her, she held it open and read a couple of pages, having not said a word. Something struck me as unusual about the way she held the book, though. She held it rather close to her face, probably no more than eight inches away. It seemed a pretty close reading distance, even considering that the type-size wasn't very large.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Do you need glasses, or something?" She ignored me. I went on, "I've noticed that you're reading my books. I thought you might like some of your own, so I decided to get you a few." She didn't respond, then, either, so I continued, "I wasn't sure what genres you liked, so I had to guess—"

"—What's a 'genre'?" she interrupted me, turning away from her book.

"A type of book. Like a category. You know—mysteries; science fiction; romance novels. That sort of thing."

"Oh." She seemed satisfied with my answer, and went back to reading, the page mere inches from her nose.

"You look like you could use glasses," I pressed.

Then she shot back, "So what if I do?" and continued to read.

I was nonplused—I wasn't sure how I had expected her to respond—or how I would continue my inquiry into the quality of her eyesight. I had nothing left to say, so I said nothing.

She had been thinking about it, though, and finally stopped reading long enough to look up at me, where I sat on the edge of the couch. My present from her was lying in my lap, untouched. On her face was a look of dread, I think, and I couldn't fathom why she would feel that way. Her expression was one of her patented varieties, such a dour look of complete unhappiness that my heart ached to see her. I could start crying every time she would look that way. I never did, but I always hurt mightily for her.

"It's not that big a deal, Kerry." I tried to be reassuring, at least a little. "Lots of people need glasses—so it's no big deal." Unexplainably, her eyes were moist.

"I used to wear glasses," she sniffed, barely. "They used to make fun of me, so I stopped wearing them." I had no idea why that should make her so sad.

"I wouldn't make fun of you, Kerry," I said. "I think you're very pretty, and glasses would only make you all the more unique to me." I smiled when she seemed to brighten, fractionally. "Let's go get you checked out tomorrow—and don't worry about it." She almost smiled, then.

• • •

I was eight years old when they found out I was nearsighted. I had had a difficult time seeing things more than a few feet away, and this was a problem for me in school, especially. My teacher, Mrs. Kuykendall, talked to Grandma about getting glasses for me, but we were very poor, then, since Grandpa had died that year, and Grandma didn't know if we could afford them. As far as Mrs. Kuykendall was concerned, my having glasses was very important, so she bought the first pair of glasses for me.

Man! It was like night and day, the difference. Suddenly, things I'd been missing seemed to pop up out of nowhere. Well, I could finally see the blackboard, for one thing. I mean, I honestly don't know how I'd managed up to that point. I'd always been able to read, but with some difficulty, I guess. Once I had my glasses I found I could read *very, very* easily.

But we was poor (as Grandma would say it), and my glasses were those industrial-type little kid glasses (you know—thick lenses and strong, heavy plastic frames) that are always *so* ugly. Mrs. Kuykendall made sure they would last a long time, and wouldn't break or anything, but they did make me look so homely. I really appreciated the chance to see, but I hated they way they made me look. So mousy; so frumpy; so *unattractive*. I mean, I always dressed so poorly (since we was poor, you know) and my hair, then, was always cut very short. I didn't grow my hair out until I was ten, and I've never allowed it to be short, since. I wore my glasses when I had to—at school and when I did my homework at home—but I did my best to avoid them, otherwise.

When I was in the fourth grade there was a boy who must have liked me, or something, because he always used to tease me, mercilessly and endlessly, about my stupid 'pop bottle'

glasses. I used to tell him to get lost, and even hit him now and again, but nothing I ever said or did to him worked. He continued to taunt and tease me about my glasses, and I hated him for it. As a consequence, I began to hate my glasses (even more), too. I cried to Grandma that they were too ugly and too horrible, but she had a deaf ear when it came to the important things for me. ‘Kerry Lynn, honey,’ she told me, time and time again, ‘You need them glasses, chile. You have to wear ‘em so you can see.’ And she was right, but at ten years old, I wasn’t ready to listen.

Well, I endured the teasing and the humiliation until I got to junior high school. I listened to Grandma until I met some *real* boys—the juniors and seniors in the high school—whose opinions of me I tended to value (but now, I don’t know why!) more than I valued clear eyesight. So what did I do? Contact lenses were out of the question. You could get them, of course, but they were much too expensive for us. Grandma wouldn’t hear of it, period. What did I do? Answer: I chucked my glasses and always sat at the front of the classroom. Maybe I wore them at home when I studied, but after awhile I know I just stopped wearing them altogether. It took Marc to convince me I could wear glasses and not be considered homely or ugly, and I’m really glad he did, too. It makes things so much clearer for me. It’s uncanny!

• • •

“Thanks for the books,” Kerry said after I kissed her to make her feel better about her need for glasses. “I used to read all the time, but in the past couple years I sorta ... got out of

the habit.”

“Why were you hiding your reading from me?” I was curious.

“I don’t know,” she shook her head. “I guess I was afraid you wouldn’t want me reading your books, or something.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Kerry! You can read whatever you want. Don’t lose my place in the book I’m currently reading, maybe, but you can do what you want with everything else.” I was pretty incredulous at her fearful attitude, but I wasn’t being very sensitive to her real reasons for being so unsure. I hurt her feelings as a result. And her face fell, once again.

“You gonna open your present?” she said, and closed the book in her lap. Well, yes, I was going to open my present. I tore at the wrapping paper, feeling uneasy and unsure, myself.

Kerry changed moods very often. Too abruptly and too often, in my opinion. It was difficult to deal with her when she was this way, and even though we’d just made love—truly wonderful lovemaking!—her emotional rollercoaster ride was tough to overcome. I had hoped this first really big holiday would be a pleasant one, and not overly charged with negative emotions, but I was beginning to realize that she probably had just as much problem with Christmas as I did. Well, so be it. All we could try to do was get away from the bad feelings, and head toward the good ones. If I could convince her to throw away anything unpleasant she might have experienced in Christmases past, and concentrate only on the wonderful Christmas of present, then we might be OK. I was willing to toss my bad experiences out the window and forge ahead, if only Kerry would go with me. If only Kerry was going with me.

Kerry's present to me was a bottle of cologne. Not one of my brands, but a good one, and apparently one of her favorites. I opened the bottle and applied some, and she accordioned up from her cross-legged position to come smell me. She took in a large lungful, and smiled.

"I love this stuff!" she cooed, and since I had a naked breast hanging (literally) in my face, I pulled her to me and we tumbled back onto the couch. I wasn't especially horny (well, maybe not horny at all) but I love to touch my amber-blond beauty. Our mouths found each other and we kissed, and for a few moments the world seemed to be a much nicer place to be stuck in.

"I love you," I told her, and then the phone rang.

• • •

My therapist asked me to talk about some of my experiences during the holidays. Since I told him they sometimes make me sad, he suggested I write down some things. It's no fun—not at all!—and I don't want to do it, but I guess I have to agree with him.

A lot of other things have been very hard to write, and some have been damn near *impossible*, but since I survived them, and since I have them written down, I'm almost able to *forget* them. I figure if I ever want to remember (why? I don't know) I can just pull out the pages and read them. They're there, and if I don't want to remember them, I don't have to. It's like a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. You can't imagine what it feels like to *not* have to remember things if you don't want to. For the first time in my life I have some

freedom, some release, and the effect is that I almost look forward to some of the things I used to dread. Surviving isn't as difficult, anymore, since I don't have to carry around all this excess baggage, these remnants of my suck-ass life. And my life *has* sucked, too. All right, so ...

My mama and daddy were arguing again. They were very loud, and I remember Kerwin and me were sitting on the sofa in our little mobile home living room. We were worried, and more than a little scared. It was Christmas, or near there, since we had a little tree set up in the corner, and it was all decorated with lights, ornaments, and stuff. There was nothing under it, though. And that was why mama and daddy were fighting.

They fought all the time, it seemed. He'd yell at her; she'd cry; he'd say he was sorry; they'd kiss and make up; she'd say something to make him mad again; he'd yell at her again. We never knew where we stood with daddy. He could be so nice one minute, and yelling at you and sending you to your room the next. Mama always defended us, though, and risked his wrath and possible injury to protect us.

Daddy had hit me, that day. I don't remember when or why, but I know I'd begun to cry. He'd told me to shut my mouth or I'd 'get something to really cry about,' and when he raised his hand again, mama attacked him. She grabbed his arm and pulled him away from me. He wasn't about to be told what to do by a woman, so he hauled off and hit her across the face. She slapped him back, just as hard, and then they were wrestling with each other.

Mama never stood a chance. Daddy was so much larger and stronger, but she was very angry, and I think daddy was surprised how strong she could be when she was really determined. He hit her across the face, enough times to bloody her lip, but she grabbed

something off the kitchen table—a vase, something, I don't know—and went after him with it. I don't know, she may have hit him with it, but whatever she did do he backed down and stopped threatening us. It was so *odd*. He could be so nice to us one minute and hit us the next. He was so strong he could have killed us all, but he didn't. (He only killed mama.) Maybe in a small way he respected her, or feared her, I don't know. I don't have any idea.

I guess I could ask him, but I don't ever want to see the son-of-a-bitch again. I don't hate him, I keep telling myself that, but he hurt us. **He hurt me!**

No presents for Christmas. That was the reason for the fight. Daddy had spent all the Christmas money on something he wasn't supposed to buy, and that left us with nothing under the tree. How we'd gotten a tree, I don't remember, but it was there, and there was nothing under it. Nothing at all. We were all crying, but mainly because mama and daddy were fighting. I don't think I understood why everyone was so upset. I would gladly have foregone all my Christmas presents for the rest of my life, if they would simply not fight and hurt each other so much.

This all seems too cold, too detached. I can't get to the heart of what it really felt like, and it's making me very frustrated with myself. The whole incident is horrible in my memory, but when I read what I've written, it seems so remote and unhooked from everything else. I can't seem to get at what the really bad things are. There's something else about this Christmas that I can't remember. The fighting, I do remember. It happened all the time, so it's not that hard to talk about. I never liked it, I mean I *hated* it, but it doesn't seem to be the real reason why this memory sticks out in my mind. While I'm here and writing I want to write it all down, but I guess I can't write it if I can't remember it ...

My therapist told me not to worry too much if I can't remember something. If it was important, he said, you would remember it when you needed to. Well, I don't fucking *need* to remember anything! Don't do me any favors! If you think any of this is *fun*, then you're very sadly mistaken. Of course, I know he doesn't think this is fun for me, so I'm not being fair to him. He understands, he really does, and I've tried so hard to get it out—to remember it—and he knows that, too. But all this stuff from my childhood still haunts me, and it's getting damned *old*. I'm really tired of the bad dreams—the nightmares—the up-and-down, up-and-down. It makes me want to drink, and I can't. *I can't*. I've never wanted a drink more badly in my entire life than I do right now. But I *will not drink*. Right now, at this very moment, I will not drink.

They tell you to take this one step at a time. You can only control the present—the right now—so they tell you not to worry about the future. Don't think of what will happen tomorrow, or the next day. Just don't drink anything today. I may be weak, ultimately, but I don't have to drink *today*. Tell yourself you simply won't drink anything today. *Right now*. You may have slipped yesterday (I didn't), and you probably will have to face the fact that you will drink sometime in the future, but you can definitely promise yourself you won't take a drink today. I won't drink today. Someone is relying on me—I'm all she has—and for her *I will not drink*.

• • •

Reluctantly, I disengaged myself from Kerry's arms and aura, and stumped off to

answer the phone. It was Rennie.

“Greetings, dear uncle.” He was his usual sardonic self. I said hi. “Frank and I were in the neighborhood today, so to speak,” he said laconically, “and we were wondering if you would like some company on this fine holiday.”

“Where are you?” I asked him.

“We’re in some gas station down the street from you,” he replied. “I can almost see the window of your condo from here.”

“Wonderful,” I said, though I didn’t know why. Rennie always makes me say things so much differently. It’s like I can’t be serious with him, or something.

“Well,” he pressed, “are we invited, or not?”

“It’s just you and Frank?”

I could almost feel his eyebrows rise in the pause that followed. “Yes,” he sounded tentative, wary.

“What’s the matter, Rennie?”

“Marc,” he explained, “you’ll have to get over this aversion to all things family, eventually.”

“Why?” I asked him. “Is anyone else with you?”

“No, but this attitude of yours is getting a bit dated.”

I didn’t want to be lectured. “Look,” I told him, “I have my reasons. If you don’t like being quizzed about it, then I’m sorry. But I don’t want to deal with anyone else in the family, right now.” I coughed, feeling anger well up, uninvited and unwanted. I was a lot more upset about the family than I realized. It shocked even me. “I don’t know if I’ll ever

want to deal with the family, again.”

Rennie didn't pursue his argument further. Instead, “We'd like to see you,” he sounded very gentle, “and your ‘friend,’ too, if she's there.”

“Sure,” I said. “We'd love having you. Come on up. But give us a few minutes to get dressed, OK?”

“No problem.” He said something to someone just out of earshot, then returned. “Ten minutes, then?”

“Great.” We said good-bye, and I hung up the phone.

“Who was that on the phone?” Kerry asked as I returned to the living room.

“My nephew, Rennie. He and his roommate, Frank, want to come visit us today.”

“OK,” she sat up on the couch. “When?”

“In about five minutes.” I offered my hand to her. She took it and stood up. “Let's get dressed.”

“OK, I guess so,” Kerry said, sounding reluctant to put on clothes. “I look pretty horrible,” she lamented. “I need to put on some makeup before they get here.”

“Don't bother,” I said. “I think you look fine without it.”

“That's easy for you to say,” she countered, “but since you don't wear makeup, you couldn't possibly understand. Just get out of my way and let me get dressed.”

“Jeez! So touchy!”

But I had to admire the sight of her ample bare butt as she led the way to the bathroom. It was some nice piece of ass, and I told her as much. “You have a really nice ass.”

“Fat chance you'll have at getting any, buddy.”

"That's not fair," I protested. "I'm being nice to you."

And she laughed, turning to me briefly. "I'm *only* kidding you, silly." She corralled me in her arms, abundant breasts rubbing against my chest. So nice! "I appreciate your compliment. I know sometimes I have a hard time accepting your praise, but I'm trying to get used to it. Give me more time. It's really difficult to switch gears ..." she stopped, apparently needing to be more certain of what she was about to say "... I'm just not used to being treated so well ..." she broke away and made a hasty retreat to the bathroom. I was dumbfounded, not understanding.

"I'm sorry, Kerry." I followed her to the bathroom. She only shook her head forcefully, her back to me, and said nothing. So many changes, so quickly. One instant she was laughing, happy, and the next she seemed angry or close to tears. It couldn't be fun for her, and it sure wasn't a party for me. "Well, I'd like to stay and discuss it with you, but we have company coming." That was, at least, the truth.

"I know," she said, turning to face me. "I'll be all right." She sighed, exhaling fully. "But, I need a drink." That figures. However, at that moment I agreed.

"Fine," I said. "What do you want? Your usual?" (Which was scotch, rocks optional.) She smiled, realizing I was not going to argue with her about the booze, and relaxed noticeably.

"That would be great!" She was truly thankful. "Thanks buddy."

By the time I returned with our drinks Kerry had put on a pair of jeans and a pretty pink cotton sweater. I handed the scotch to her and as she lifted it to take a sip, I put my arms around her. She had nothing on underneath the sweater, and I momentarily

experienced again the sweet, hidden softness of her magnificent breasts. It was almost more exciting to feel her naked under her sweater and think of her soft, hidden charms, than it was to see them and touch them, displayed openly as she was so fond of doing. We kissed, very briefly, and I made a beeline to the closet for some clothes of my own.

I had just managed to get my pants on when there was a knock at the door.

“Could you get that?” I asked her, and she bobbed her head yes.

I continued to struggle into my clothes while I watched her pad off barefoot to get the door. I heard her open the door, say, ‘Hey, come on in!’ Then other voices, male, recognized as Rennie, and then Frank. Kerry laughed, and said ‘Thanks’. Rennie said something I didn’t quite catch, and Kerry laughed again. ‘Can I get you something to drink?’ she asked. The reply was indistinct. ‘Scotch OK?’ Kerry again. Her voice seemed to carry quite clearly back to me, but the others were harder to pick out. I heard other noises, probably coats, etc., being removed, then crackling paper-like noises, most likely wrapped packages. Oh damn, they brought presents. I hadn’t gotten Rennie and Frank anything. Oh, well.

I was still buttoning my shirt as I went out to greet our guests. Both of them jumped up from their seats when I made my appearance. Rennie ran to hug me, and to wish me Merry Christmas. Frank, four inches taller and forty pounds heavier than Rennie, merely shook my hand, smiling.

“It’s been a while, Marc,” he said. His voice was deep and resonant, his handshake firm. I rather liked him.

“Yes, it has,” I agreed. I noticed Kerry in the kitchen, apparently getting drinks. I looked toward her, smiled. “You met Kerry, didn’t you.”

“How could we have *missed her?*” Rennie practically gushed. “She answered the door.” He took me by the arm; spoke quietly in my ear, “She’s a knockout! Melinda Howe understated your vocalist’s appearance, considerably.”

“Thanks, but did you tell Kerry that?” I asked, loud enough for *the girl* to catch her name being mentioned.

“Tell me what?” She came up just then, handed Rennie a glass. She seemed very pleased, almost smirking, and I noticed the twinkle in her eyes. The very best of signs. Rennie winked in my direction. I have no idea why. “What?” Kerry insisted, coming to roost under my arm. I wrapped her up and felt her strong, forceful warmth against my chest. What a presence she could exert upon me! I think my knees even got weak, but she helped hold me up. When she was contented, as she was just then—mentally purring like a cat—she burned into me with a heat and a fire more powerful than I could contain. More powerful than I could comprehend.

“I’ve already complimented Kerry, Master Marc,” Rennie bowed to me. He’s some kind of character, all right. He then bowed to Kerry. “It’s so good to meet you in the flesh, milady. I’m so pleased to find that my favorite uncle has finally found a good woman to warm his heart—and his bed!”

“*Renfield!*” I warned. He merely raised his eyebrows at me, smirking. Kerry seemed not to mind any of it. She looked up at me, smiling more inwardly than out.

“Pardon *me*, milady,” such faux gallantry from such a cad, “if I have offended you. But your sire, here, *did* inform me of the living arrangements.” All this Renaissance speech crap was getting old, though. He finished with, “Are we not all adults, here?”

“Cut the crap.” I tended to find his theatrics boring and excessive, as I was just then.

“Fine,” he pulled Kerry out from under my arm and led her away toward the couch.

Frank, meanwhile, was left standing there with no one to talk to but *moi*.

“So, Marc,” he said, sipping from his scotch and smiling, faintly, “I hear you’ve started a new band.”

Rennie and Frank stayed awhile. The conversation was, for the most part, light, polite, and generally very entertaining. Renfield Huffman is the type of individual who gets in the center of things and stays there. He draws everyone else around him, and proceeds to hold court with his acerbic wit and scintillating repartee. In his element and in his preferred arena he is the consummate raconteur, and if it weren’t for the fact that he’s gay, he could easily have any girl in the place on her back, with her knees in the air. Maybe not Kerry, but ... charming isn’t quite the word, but it’s close. I like to think he learned something from me, but I’m only flattering myself. I can’t come close, and usually don’t even try.

Needless to say, Kerry loved Rennie. Well, maybe it isn’t needless to say, but she loved him anyway. He paid extremely close attention to her, telling jokes and trading verbal bullets with the rest of us. I think Rennie liked Kerry, too, but I was beginning to understand that she had that effect on most people. Me included. Me, especially.

While the four of us chatted, I realized that Kerry and I had yet to open any of our presents. There were several things under the tree for her, from me, and I was looking forward to seeing her open them. Only one or two could be considered ‘private’ in any way, but I didn’t want to be rude to our guests by interrupting the festivities. Especially since I

had not thought to buy either Rennie or Frank anything. Better to wait until they've gone.

We talked about the gig. Rennie was unhappy he'd missed it, but since I hadn't told him we were playing anywhere, there was little chance he could have been there to hear us. I let Kerry talk about our performances. She was quite excited about being a professional musician, and regaled us with all her experiences and observations. She had a viewpoint I found refreshing, if not a bit naïve. I suppose I may have sounded that way, too, when I first started playing. Sometimes I think it would be nice to go back and experience the whole 'coming of age' thing again, but at the same time there were a lot of shitty things that happened, too. Kerry had only seen a very few of the less savory aspects of working in a band, and though I was tempted to mention a few things, I wisely held my tongue and only smiled as she talked. Rennie and Frank listened, so attentively, as Kerry synopsisized the events of the past three nights. She's a sharp girl, and it was apparent they caught on to that aspect fairly quickly.

Rennie had brought a couple of small gifts, one for Kerry, whom he had not met previously, and one for me. Kerry's gift was appropriately neutral and generic enough to please most any female of Kerry's age—a small and very nice cloisonné pin of the famous bust of Cleopatra. Leave it to Rennie to think of something to get for someone he didn't even know. My gift was a bit larger, but probably not more expensive. Rennie has good taste in clothes, and he'd given me a burgundy—mostly—and multicolor patterned sweater. After opening the box and seeing what he had gotten me, I wished I'd thought of someone else long enough to have gotten something for him. I have a real problem with the rest of the family, but not with Rennie. He and I could have been friends even if we weren't related.

Why that gets in the way so much, I don't know.

"Your mother asked after you at breakfast this morning," Rennie informed me while we opened our gifts. I nodded, but did not comment. "She hasn't seen you since last summer, she said, and she was wondering how you were getting along."

"What did you tell her?" I asked.

"Not much." He sipped his drink. "*Your* relationship with my grandmother is strictly your business, so I begged off—lied, actually—and told her I hadn't talked to you."

"Thanks," I said, but nothing more.

"Don't mention it." His tone of voice told me he was being ironic. He resumed, "Almost everyone was there. Uncle Bill; Aunt Melody; the twins—Terri and Trish, and *Theodore*."

Terri, Trish and Theodore were Bill's three youngest. "My two siblings," Rennie's younger brother and sister, Kendall and Samantha, "mom and dad, and Grandmother, of course."

"Thad wasn't there?" Thad was Bill's oldest son, about a year older than Rennie.

He barked, laughing, "Wouldn't you know it! He couldn't get a flight out of Honolulu, yesterday, so he's stuck there." Thad is a pilot in the Navy, stationed in Hawaii. Poor soul had to spend Christmas on a tropical island. What a shame.

"I assume everyone is fine," I asked, not really expecting a straight answer. Of course, I didn't get one, either.

"They're all alive, if that's what you're asking. But that sword cuts both ways, Marc. If you want to know what everyone is doing and how they all are, you'll have to ask them yourself. I make them do that about you, dear reticent and reclusive uncle of mine."

"That's only fair, Renfield." I shrugged, and turned toward Frank. "How's your family,

Frank?"

He bobbed his head, sipping his drink. "They're fine." He smiled, "Fucked up, still, but fine." Frank had experienced quite an uphill battle to convince his parents to accept his homosexuality.

Here in the south, below the bible belt, folks tend to take a dim view of other folks who may be just outside the narrow boundaries of what they consider 'proper'. Gays, of course, are easily 'just outside' the boundaries. No self-respecting Baptist could possibly condone homosexuality, though ten percent of them are gay, anyway. My family isn't Baptist, per se, but Frank's is. Of course it isn't only the Baptists that are against gays, but they *are* the majority, and the majority rules. Despite their claim to be Christians, and the bible's admonition to love your neighbor as you love yourself, they do an awful lot of 'polite hating'. God wanted us to *tolerate* our neighbors, hence the 'love thy neighbors as thyself' thing, but if you ask a Baptist, they'll tell you the bible also contains a prohibition against men lying with men, and the like. God has proscribed homosexuality—and it's in black and white, and black and white to them. My take is that while God may have said 'no-no' to 'boys with boys' it's still not man's place to judge. You see the bible also says something about not judging lest you also be judged. You don't, of course, have to *like* gays, but you *do* have to let them face their maker on their own terms. I think that's what God intended, and we all know we have plenty to be called to task for. Let he who is without sin ...

All right. Enough preaching.

Rennie and Frank didn't stay very long. They had other stops to make, most notably at Frank's parents', and about an hour and a half after arriving, they said their good-byes and

we shut the door behind them. It was about three o'clock.

"I really like your nephew, Rennie," Kerry commented, getting another scotch after the door had been rebolted. I went into the kitchen to get another drink, myself.

"I'm not surprised," I said. "He's quite a popular fellow. It's no wonder he's going to inherit the house when my mother dies."

"Your parents' house?" she asked as she poured scotch into my glass.

"My mother's, now, but yes."

"How come you're not going to get it? Aren't you first in line? I mean, you're her son."

"So?"

She looked at me sideways. "Are you *sure* you're not inheriting your mom's house?"

"*No one* calls her 'mom,' Kerry. But," I shrugged, "I'm not completely sure of anything. She likes Rennie much better than she *ever* liked me. I don't know who's getting the house, but it wouldn't surprise me if it were Rennie, and not me."

Kerry only shook her head. "If I had family around, I wouldn't be so mad at them all the time."

"You don't know *anything* about me, *or* my family!" I rounded on her, angrier than I should have been. "If you had *my* family, I don't think you'd want them." She had been walking back toward the living room, but stopped about halfway, eyes momentarily large.

"You're right, of course." She sounded almost angry, herself. "I *don't* know anything about you, *or* your fucking family. But at least you have one. That's a whole lot more than I can say—'cause my entire fucking family's dead—so don't blame me if I think you're being stupid for not seeing them." She drank her scotch down in one gulp. "Your family is all you

got. Or didn't you know that?" She paused a few seconds, building steam. "No, I guess you don't." But I said nothing. "Look," she continued, "I'm not trying to tell you how to live your life, but sometime you're gonna have to break down and go see those people. Whether you like it or not. And I say the sooner the better, too."

I disagreed. "You're wrong, Kerry. *They're* the reason I don't have a sister anymore." I'd never mentioned Suzanne before. Or what had happened to her.

"You have a sister?" She returned to the kitchen for another drink.

"Had."

"What? She dead, or something?"

"You got it. Worm food." I slammed my glass down for Kerry to pour me another, too.

"How? Why?" She poured. "Is it their fault, or something?"

I considered telling her the story, but ... "I don't want to get into it right now," so the conversation came to a standstill, then. She sipped her drink, I sipped mine, and we stared each other down.

Several minutes passed as we stood there in the kitchen, each within arm's length of the half-empty bottle of scotch. I think we had another full bottle, somewhere. No question, I was upset and considering going one-for-one with her in the alcohol department. I wasn't sure I could do it, but I was almost willing to try. She seemed less upset than me, but since she was silent and unblinking, returning my stares with even stonier stares of her own, I was unable to get a read on her. I wondered what she was thinking, but I didn't especially care if she was angry with me, or not. I was a little angry with her, myself, and if she jumped on me again I was prepared to do something about it. What, I hadn't decided, but something.

Without really breaking eye contact, I poured more scotch in my glass. She set her glass next to mine, expression fixed, unreadable and closed, and patiently waited while I poured more golden stuff over her melting ice cubes. We resumed our stare-fest, but she soon broke the impasse.

“Thanks,” she said. I shrugged, indicating it was nothing. Then she turned away. I don’t think I won, or anything, I just think she decided not to play anymore. But her eyes returned to mine, and I noticed the slightest softening as she put her hand on my arm, briefly. “I don’t want to fight with you anymore, today. OK?”

“Well, go *easy* on me, then,” I lectured, pointing my finger at her. She looked down at it, expression guarded, eyes cloudy.

Her eyes returned to mine, “I *am* easy on you, buddy. But sometimes you hafta lighten up, a little.” She coughed, sipped from her drink.

“Don’t hassle me about my family, Kerry. It’s all I ever hear.” I wasn’t especially irritated with her, but I needed to vent my frustrations on someone. I parroted the words of the others, for her, “‘Marc, you should see your mother ...’ ‘Marc, you should visit your family ...’ Marc this, Marc that. I get really sick and tired of all this guilt-trip bullshit. I wish they would just leave me alone!”

“Christ Almighty, buddy!” She seemed to react defensively to my outburst. “I only asked you a couple of innocent fucking questions, and you jump off the deep end. I’m sorry!” But it didn’t sound very much like she was. “You’d think you were beaten and abused as a child, for all your bitching and carrying on.”

“So, what do *you* know about child abuse?” I asked, without thinking. In response, her

eyes got very wide and her jaw dropped open. Fully. It was plain she'd assumed I knew something about her childhood. I couldn't, of course, since she hadn't told me anything, but I think she thought I did.

Kerry was furious, then. She wanted to hit me, I think. She wanted to run and hide, I think. She wanted to cry, I think. For a few moments she seemed so angry she couldn't speak, but still I could see the fury building behind her eyes.

"Plenty, you asshole," was all she said, seething through clenched teeth.

"Sounds like we have more in common than we might have thought," I commented, keeping my voice even, non-threatening.

"I don't think you know *shit* about it," she snorted. "You, with all those fucking silver spoons shoved up your ass. *You've* never been poor; *you've* never been alone; *you've* never been neglected; *you've* never been hit for just fucking **being there!** You don't know a *fucking thing* about child abuse!"

"You're wrong," I told her. "You think that just because my family has some money, I was pampered, and loved, and cared-for all my fucking life? Money doesn't have anything to do with it. Money doesn't have **shit** to do with it. People can be just as cruel, just as uncaring, just as abusive—maybe even more—when they have money." I snorted, then, too. "You think you got the market cornered in this 'poor me, I'm so-oo neglected!' business you can't even stand for someone else to have problems. Then, if everyone doesn't come to your pity party you get *so* upset! Get a grip." I poked her between the boobs, solidly connecting with her sternum. It was the wrong thing to do—I shouldn't have touched her. But too late to take back, now. I finished, "You should shut the fuck up sometimes."

She went ballistic. “**DON’T YOU FUCKING TELL ME WHAT TO DO!!!**” She was almost hyperventilating, she was so angry. Her glass slammed down on the counter, sloshing scotch and scattering ice cubes all over the place, and she stormed off to the bedroom.

“**Hey!**” I called after her, “Come back here!” No success. “**Kerry!**” I yelled, “Kerry! Come back here!”

“**Fuck off, asshole!**” was the prompt, curt reply.

In a few moments I followed her to the bedroom. I found her there, curled up on the bed, facing away from the door—and me.

“Look,” I said to her back, “I’m *not* trying to tell you what to do. I don’t want to fight with you, today, either.” She ignored me. “Kerry,” I coaxed. “Come on, Kerry, look at me.” Still no response. I waited. A minute went by. I waited. “Kerry, look at me,” I said again.

Then, finally, quietly, “Don’t tell me what to do.” Furious, though.

“I’m *not*,” I said.

“You are.”

“I’m not going to argue with you. You have to fight fair.” I marshaled my thoughts, “I have feelings, too, you know. I’m sorry if I jumped on you. And I’m *not* trying to tell you what to do. I’m just telling you how I feel.”

“**Don’t you ever hit me!**” She was pissed! Really angry. “Next time, I’ll break that fucking finger off and shove it up your ass!” Boy, was she pissed!

“I’m sorry I hit you, OK?” I tried to apologize, but the tone of my voice must have seemed more sarcastic or less sincere than I felt. It merely fueled the fire.

"You don't sound too f-fuckin' sorry, dick-face."

"Don't call me that." I tried to be calm, reasonable.

"I'll call you anything I want." She turned her head toward me, face red with anger.

"Dick-faced asshole m-mother-ff-fucker!" She looked me over, derision and contempt plain in her eyes. "I thought you w-was different. I thought you w-was a nice guy." She was actually stuttering, a little.

"I am."

"You don't f-fuckin' know the meaning of the word!"

"Why are you so mad?"

"**YOU HIT ME!!**" She screamed, as if I couldn't hear her well enough.

"I didn't mean to hit you." I had to apologize—I had to keep trying. The whole incident felt very weird, not exactly familiar, not exactly unknown. It gave me a sick feeling. It smacked of something in the way I'd been treated as a child, but I couldn't quite place it, exactly.

"**Goddamn it!** D-don't you **ever** hit me again!" She whipped her head back around, and laid there, facing away from me.

"I'm sorry," I repeated.

She seethed, though, "*Fuck* your f-fuckin' apologies! I'm tired of hearin' 'em!" She paused, thinking, waiting. I had nothing better to say than 'I'm sorry,' so I was silent. "Why don't you take my advice," she said after waiting long enough, "and just f-fuck off."

That's it! I thought. I've had it! "Why don't *you* just fuck off, then." And I turned and left the bedroom.

I went straight for the booze, and poured myself another. As I sipped on it, I inspected the damage left when Kerry threw her glass down on the kitchen counter. It was broken, cracked down the side, and the contents—what little that remained in the glass—were slowly seeping through the crack and out onto the counter. Half her ice cubes were strewn across half the kitchen floor, along with a good bit of the good stuff. I wished she hadn't broken the glass, since it was part of a set and had been fairly expensive. But, it wasn't like I cared all that much about it—or the money, either.

Not really knowing what else to do, I scrounged around on the floor on my hands and knees and one by one tossed all the wayward ice cubes in the sink. I grabbed a handful of paper towels and wiped up as much liquid as I could. The floor was still likely to be sticky, anyway, and I figured I'd have to mop the floor down with detergent before much longer. The glass went into the trash. No sense messing with it—it's not like you can glue it back together. I got another good handful of paper towels to wipe down the counter, and once it was mostly clean, I took my drink and went into the living room to chill out.

I sat on the couch and ruminated while I stared at the Christmas tree. All our presents were still there, *unwrapped*, and it was beginning to look more and more doubtful that we'd ever get around to opening them. Why was that such a problem? I hadn't seen so much hostility in her since we first met—maybe not even then—and coupled with the abrupt changes of mood she had been exhibiting, I was as much dumbfounded and confused as I was angry.

And I *was* angry. Kerry had been very unfair and cruel to me. I had never intended to fight with her, and I truly wished she hadn't reacted so violently. We'd had a chance—an

excellent chance—to spend Christmas day together, to relax, exchange gifts. And except for making most wonderful and satisfying love on the couch, the day had been a complete disaster. I was angry; she was positively furious. I was sitting alone in the living room; she was alone in the bedroom. I wanted to call her out to me, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. That would expose me to risks far beyond what I was prepared to face—I'm not such a glutton for punishment that I'd open myself for more abuse, whatever the potential for reward. So I sat.

After awhile I turned on the TV. There really wasn't anything worth watching, but I was getting spooked by the silence and the tension in the place, and needed something to distract me. I found a Christmas movie classic, one I'd seen several times in the past, and buried myself in the sappy message it was trying to deliver. I resisted its appeal for the first four or five commercial breaks, but sometime in the second hour I found I was beginning to soften under its saccharine celluloid onslaught. Damn it, I wanted to make up with Kerry. Maybe more than I feared her hostility.

I quietly got up from the couch and went into the bedroom. Kerry was where I had last seen her, on the bed with her back to the door. Cautiously, I went around to the side so I could see her face, and where she could see mine. But *the girl* was asleep.

I stood watching her for several minutes. It was as much to see if she was actually asleep, as it was to watch her sleep. All right, I had decided not to be angry anymore, but it was still difficult to awaken the sleeping cobra. If I didn't have my mongoose slippers on I might not be quick enough to evade her fangs should she awaken and decide to strike without warning. But after several more minutes of waiting, I decided to take the chance,

anyway.

“Kerry,” I spoke quietly, gently. I waited. “Kerry,” I said again, louder. She opened her eyes. Her head never moved, but she looked up at me, expression unchanged. Her eyes registered no feelings, no emotion, nothing. “Can I say I’m sorry, again?” I ventured. But it still was a long minute before she answered.

“You can say it.” She looked away then, her voice flat, toneless. I was not encouraged.

“Please, Kerry?” I persisted. “Let’s not fight, today.”

Her eyes returned. “I never wanted to fight to begin with.” She looked at the wall, briefly, then back. “Don’t point your finger at me, and don’t *ever* hit me again. Ever.” Her voice was still unconvincingly bleak. She wasn’t ready to end this thing, yet. Maybe she was softening, but it was hard to tell. She seemed to still be very hurt. I’d said I was sorry. I couldn’t face saying more. There was nothing I could do to change things, save apologize and try to go on.

“I’m sorry, Kerry,” I said, again. As I said, there was nothing else I could say. Nothing.

“I’m tired of fighting, buddy.” She said it plaintively, almost pleadingly. I believed her. I was tired, too. “I guess you didn’t mean to hurt me—hit me—like you did. It scared me a lot, you know. It felt too much like the ‘old times’. You are so good to me, so gentle and so kind. It scared me to think you’d hit me like Da—*he* did.” She sniffed. “God, it scares the hell out of me. Do you understand what I’m saying? Do you *know* where I’m coming from?”

“I do.”

“*Do you?*” she returned vehemently, and sniffed, again. Her sniffing didn’t seem to be caused by tears, past or impending, either. “Maybe *you* don’t think it’s important for you to

understand me, I don't know, but it's *very* important to me."

"I *understand*, Kerry." I was irritated, and I know I sounded that way.

She went on undeterred. "If you get mad at me, it only tells me you *don't* understand." She sighed, and sat up, crossing her legs in front of her, indian-style, elbows on knees. It was a very sad face she presented. "Can I tell you something?" she asked. I nodded. She took a deep breath. "I thought I was in love, once, with Da—that other guy." She corrected herself again. "I thought it was the real thing, you know—the 'forever' kind?" I nodded, again, saying nothing. "At first it was so wonderful; so neat; so exciting. He treated me better than anyone ever had, before. He swept me clean off my feet, and I was totally taken by his loving, his strength, and his charm." She smiled, ruefully, "Sort of like you." I started to protest at the comparison, but she stopped me. "Don't go telling me how *un*-charming you are. Face it, buddy, you're a peach of a guy." That embarrassed me, but I only tried to suppress my sheepish look. "I think I know some things now, though, that I didn't know then. I think I know when someone is sincere and when they're not." She saw my uncertain expression. "Don't worry, Marc, I know you're sincere. Shit, you practically *ooze* sincerity out of every fucking pore." She smiled, then, and shook her head. "It's disgusting. But what I mean is, when you hit me there between the boobs, I suddenly saw a man I hadn't seen before, and it was a scary sight. Very scary! Don't ever, *ever* do that to me, again." It wasn't a threat, it was a heartfelt plea.

"OK," I told her, "I won't. I promise. But will you take it easy on me and my problems with the family?"

"I suppose," she shrugged.

“You suppose?”

“All right, I will,” she said, and nodded. I wanted us to get closer, but I wasn’t sure how to accomplish it. I wanted to lay down with her, but I felt too unsure and hesitant to ask. I thought she would accept me, but it was still too hard a question to pose. But then she sighed, “I’m sorry, too, Marc.” She looked like she wanted to cry, but she didn’t. Instead, she asked, “Will you lay down here with me, please?”

I didn’t have to answer, I just slid onto the bed next to her, and she rolled onto her side to face me. I moved next to her, fairly close, but I didn’t touch her, yet. Kerry put out her hand, almost touching my shoulder, but she stopped short, hesitating for some reason. I almost understood her unwillingness, but I really needed to get close to her, to touch her. It hurt me to see us remain at such a distance when it was obvious we needed each other so desperately. I wanted us to be together, to get past our differences and our disagreements and just *love* each other. I had to bring us together; we had to touch. If she wasn’t willing, then ...? Slowly, tentatively, I put my hand on the small valley of her waist. She seemed to tremble, cold maybe, so I brought her against me. She came to me with slight resistance, but once we touched bodies, she smothered me in a strong, *passionate*, but saddened embrace. I don’t know, it just seemed very sad, that’s all. However, after a few seconds, she broke away.

She said, “I love you, you know.”

“I know. I love you, too.”

“I’m so scared, sometimes.” Tears seemed to well up in her eyes, and she fought them back. I had only the smallest of inklings why she should be so frightened. What I’d done didn’t seem that scary—that frightening. We’d had a fight, that was all. It was ludicrous to

think we would never fight. People living together are bound to fight with each other from time to time, it's as inevitable as growing old. The stress from the sheer proximity will do it, if nothing else.

"Don't be scared." I tried to sound reassuring.

"I'll try," she sniffed, stifling her tears with all she could muster, "but it's hard. You really are very wonderful to me. All the time. It's not fair for me ..." she sniffed again, losing ground to her tears, little by little "... to be so hard to get along with. I just can't help it sometimes." Her eyes then suddenly filled with huge, wet tears—breaking my heart again—but valiantly she fought against them. "Oo-oo!" she bawled, almost breaking, "I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be," I said. Then Kerry did cry, and I just held her.

Later, we went out and opened the rest of our presents. The mood was subdued, somber almost, but she smiled and I smiled, and we did enjoy what was left of the afternoon.

My 'big' gift for Kerry was a pair of diamond-stud earrings. Her ears were pierced, as were the ears of almost every woman I knew, so it was a pretty safe bet she'd like the earrings. Well, she loved them. I thought she had pretty ears, and I knew if I picked the right earrings she might show them off more. She always tended to cover her ears with her hair—pretty as it was, too—but I wanted to see more of her face, her ears, her neck and shoulders. Maybe if she wore her diamond earrings, and if I asked her to wear her hair up in a ponytail, she might do it. Seemed worthwhile.

Kerry's 'big' gift to me was a leather jacket. And it was a nice one, too. All I could imagine was how much thought and planning must have gone into the selection, and I was

humbled and pleased. It was black of course, a fairly simple unlined bomber-style with a plain leather collar, and it was exactly my size. What capped it was the embroidered inscription sewn into the flannel lining on the inside, over the heart: 'To Marc with love, Kerry'. How had she managed that? I don't think anyone had ever been so considerate and thoughtful on my behalf in my entire life. Well, except Suzanne, that is. I couldn't say enough how much I loved and appreciated my gift. It struck me inside—down deep, very deep—and as we sat together on the couch and watched TV some more, I was more content and in love than I'd ever been in my life. All our problems, and Kerry's strange moods, and everything else, were just the thinnest and most insubstantial of spectres compared to the solidness, the soft earthy smell and feel of the jacket with Kerry's proclamation of love sewn inside.

I couldn't say enough how much I loved the jacket. Not nearly enough.

About six I started to wonder why Tom hadn't called. I remembered he'd said something about getting together in the late afternoon, today, Christmas day, but here it was, turning to evening, and he was yet to call. About six-thirty I decided to take matters into my own hands and call the boy myself. And it was Tom who answered the phone on the third ring.

"Hey," I said, "it's me, Marc."

"Hey," he said back.

"What's going on?" I asked him. He sounded distracted, or something.

"Nothing. We're all just sitting around watching TV."

"We talked about getting together this evening. I was sort of waiting for your call." I wondered why he hadn't. It was somewhat unlike him.

"Sorry," he said. He paused, and I heard sounds like a door shutting. Then he came back, and was less distracted. "OK," he said. I waited. OK, what? "I'm glad you called." He paused again, and I got a small, nervous twinge that said not everything was all right, maybe. "Uh, I don't think it'd be a good idea for us to get together, tonight."

"Why not?"

"I think you know 'why not'." He didn't elaborate.

"This is bullshit, Tom," I said, not understanding, "I have no idea what you're talking about. Suppose you tell me and end all the suspense."

"OK, you remember two weeks ago? After our first gig?"

"Yes ... You don't mean—?" I started.

"—I *do* mean. You remember what happened up here that night."

"Yes, Tom," I said, coldness seeping into the pit of my stomach, "I remember."

"I've thought a lot about it, and I think for the time being we should cool it. We should take it easy and not get too involved right now. It could be dangerous."

"What's this '*we*' thing? And dangerous for *whom*?" I had to ask.

"All right, asshole, dangerous for me!" He sounded pretty stressed out. There was a lot of that going around, these days. "Dangerous for you, too, if I have to quit the band, or if *Kerry* has to quit the band."

"You haven't told Sheree about this, have you?"

"No," he sounded as though he thought I was stupid. "And I'm not taking any chances,

either. Give it another couple weeks, or something, and this whole thing will probably blow over. Right now—I don't think it's worth the risk. I need to adjust my feelings toward Kerry a great deal, and seeing her right now just wouldn't be the best thing to do."

"What 'adjustment of feelings' are you talking about?" I wondered what he meant. "You've *seen* Kerry at least ten times since then. I haven't noticed any problem. I guess I don't understand why the sudden change."

He didn't seem to want to explain. "I don't know, Marc, it's just a problem."

"Look, Tom," I started, angry, "this is *your* fault, you know."

"Yeah," he shot back, "*partly*, maybe. But it was Kerry who did all the cock-sucking." I felt the blood rush to my face, embarrassed supremely. It made me much angrier. In fact, since it felt like a slam against me, I was furious!

"**You fucking, hypocritical son-of-a-bitch!**" I struggled to keep my voice from getting too loud, but it was loud anyway, and Kerry was hearing everything I said. "You sat there and watched her undress, and when she called you up, *you went to her!* I can't *believe* you're telling me that you blame her for everything! **You hypocritical motherfucker!**"

"Cool it, Marc," he warned me.

"**No, motherfucker!** *You* cool it!" My face was beet-red, I was shaking, and I felt ready to climb down the phone. He sounded like he was slamming Kerry, but he was really slamming me. It was something I just couldn't put up with, not without a fight, that is. "You should have been in control of the situation, and you let her suck your dick anyway. If you were so fucking against it, why did you let it fucking happen in the first place?!?"

"If *I* should have been in control, Marc, where the fuck were you?"

"I'm not married, Tom." I think I had an excellent point. "Besides, she's *my* girlfriend."

"Yeah," he sneered, "she's *your* girlfriend."

"What's that supposed to mean?" It sounded like a challenge. Fightin' words.

"I don't know, Marc. Where did you find her? In the gutter somewhere?" *My God*, I thought. The double *fucking* standard some people have. He put all the blame on Kerry and me. Kerry, for doing it in the first place, and me for hooking up with her and bringing her around, I suppose. Tom could have declined her invitation and everything would have been cool—but *no!*—he didn't do it. And to top it off, he blamed **me** for it!

When I heard Tom say what he was really thinking, I had no immediate comeback. There was nothing I could say to counter or counteract his true attitude. In the space of a few seconds, I ran the whole gamut in my mind and came up completely empty. It hurt as much as any cruel or inconsiderate thing I'd ever been told—more, in fact—since Tom was my very best friend. I thought he liked Kerry. I thought he loved me like a brother. I thought we could find a way to rise above the incident and get over it—to go on. If we were to remain as a band, and as friends, it was essential. When I heard Tom say what he was really thinking, I had no choice.

"Fine, Tom," I said, calmly and evenly, "I quit the fucking band, then." It was all I could do. I started to hang up, but I waited just a second or two.

"Don't quit, Marc," he told me, "just think about it." And he hung up the phone.

Kerry, of course, had eyes as big as dinner plates. She cringed, looking as though I would hit her at any moment, but didn't run or move away from me. I was furious—angry beyond all belief—but it wasn't immediately directed toward Kerry.

Her voice was small, but I think she felt she had to ask, “What was that all about?” So timid; so fearful.

“That was Tom.”

“I know.” She really thought I was going to hit her without warning. It was unmistakable in the manner she hunched her shoulders, the way she flinched when I moved.

“He doesn’t want us to come up there, tonight,” I said.

She knew what the argument had been about, and her face fell. “I heard why.” Her voice was barely audible, so huge and immediate was her shame. She lowered her eyes, whispered even more quietly, “I’m sorry, Marc.”

“Well, you *should* be.” I let my breath out, fully. “But, so am I.” I definitely didn’t want to get into it with Kerry, so I just turned and walked off toward the bedroom. I could think of nowhere else to go. I just had to get away. From everyone, Kerry included. Kerry especially. “Why was I so stupid?” I mumbled to no one in particular. “Why did any of this happen?” Hah! It was obvious to me, just then. *It was Kerry’s fault.*

But she followed me into the bedroom. I think she wanted to be hit, is what I think. Well, I wasn’t going to oblige her—no way! not now—but I did *not* want to see her.

“Go away,” I told her, sounding much more calm and reasonable than I felt. “Leave me alone.” I just couldn’t face her. I was feeling very, very badly toward her just then, and I feared if she got in my face too much I’d say something I would really regret. I did love her, I wanted to love her—*so much!*—but if I didn’t get away from her soon, something was going to happen. Something bad.

“Marc!” she choked on her tears, but did not leave. “*Don’t* quit the band!”

"I'm not gonna quit the band." I paced around, feeling like a caged lion about to bite someone. I probably could have bitten Kerry, but I would really rather she just left me alone. If she left, we might be OK. If she stayed, well ... "Kerry, just go *away*."

Well, it worked that time. She turned and left the room.

I sat on the bed about a half hour, thinking. All my thoughts were bad, and many of my bad thoughts were directed toward me. Some others (almost as many) were directed toward Kerry, and the rest were directed toward Tom. Perhaps in all this I blamed Tom the least, though he should have kept his goddamned pants *on!* That part, at least, he could control. The rest? The rest was split more or less equally between my horny little slut, and me.

I couldn't get away from the truth. It didn't matter how much I tried to tell myself it was nobody's fault—it was my fault, and it was Tom's fault. *It was Kerry's fault.* I thought Tom was right, and I hated him for pointing out the truth to me. The right kind of girl just didn't do those kinds of things. Especially not with you sitting right there to watch. If your girlfriend were to fuck your best friend, it meant you would lose your girlfriend—and probably your best friend, too. How Tom could blame her for doing what she did was pretty easy to understand, once I looked at it in the right way.

Goddamn it! Mother fucker! Why did he have to burst my bubble that way? I loved *the girl*. I needed *the girl*. How could she ruin everything? Why did Tom have to force me to see the truth? Why?

In time, it occurred to me the evening was ruined. (No shit!) I was in no mood to talk to or even see Kerry, or anyone else for that matter, and the confines of the bedroom were becoming too—confining. The only solution I could see was to get in the car and drive. No

specific destination, only get out and get away. Kerry could do whatever Kerry wanted to do; I was going to get the hell out of the apartment. I only hoped that in time I could come back and sit down with her to sort the thing out. I didn't know what I would decide, or decide against, but I needed the time away.

I went out into the hallway and grabbed a coat off the hook by the door. Kerry, who had been sitting on the couch watching TV, stood up.

"Where are you going?" she asked, sounding very worried. I imagined the waiting while I hid in the bedroom had been difficult, but apparently not too difficult, since she'd managed to turn on the fucking TV.

"Out." That was all I could say.

"When will you be back?"

"Don't wait up." I went out the door, closed it, and locked it behind me.

Chapter 14

I have so many regrets in my life. I want to believe I'm a good person, but I know it's not true. Marc is the one person I'll always love, and I've hurt him so badly. So badly.

I think we were only pretending that everything was OK. I know *I* was pretending that the whole thing with Tom had never happened, but it doesn't really matter how much you pretend, it *did* happen. And I did it. Yeah, you can ignore things all you want, but sooner or later they come back to haunt you. They always come back, and you *always* live to regret them.

Always.

There's not much I can say besides 'I'm sorry'. If I knew why I'd done what I did, exactly, I could say it; I could write it down—**but I don't know!** I've searched in my mind, over and over again, but every time I come up completely blank. I mean, I can count off the reasons why I shouldn't have done what I did.

1. I dearly love Marc, and I would never do anything to hurt him (despite the fact that I *did* hurt him, I never intended it).

2. Tom is my friend—my *platonic* friend.

3. Sheree, Tom's wife, is also my friend, and I respect her right to have and keep her husband only to herself. Hell, I would have wanted to keep my husband only to *myself*, too.

4. I am in this band, and I *really* want to be in this band. That's a big one—a huge, huge one.

5. My actions are a drawback—a vestige of my prior life—and I never, ever want it to intrude in my new life, again. I never wanted it to intrude, *at all*.

I broke all five of my very good reasons. I'm sorry, but sorry isn't going to cut it, this time. (I know I've heard that, before, but I can't remember where.) I deserved punishment, and I'm nothing if not good at doling out punishment to myself. Usually I just get really, *really* stinking drunk and spend the next couple days throwing up and being horribly hung over, but on that Christmas day, as Marc slammed the door behind him, I felt I deserved much worse.

I turned the TV off and wandered aimlessly about the apartment awhile. Marc had cut me loose, apparently, and I felt fatalistically empty and devoid of any hope. Being alone is probably the most horrible feeling you can have. It feels like complete and utter abandonment. I can deal with simple rejection, especially from someone I don't know, but from Marc it was too much to bear. Grandma's dying had left me feeling alone like I felt that Christmas. I'd done the drunk-thing with Grandma's death, then, and 'worked it out' of my system (so to speak). But Grandma wasn't coming back, and I knew I wouldn't have to face her, later. Marc would be coming back, of that I was sure, so getting drunk there in the apartment didn't exactly seem the brightest of 'solutions' to my feeling bad about myself. If I

stayed, and just got smashed, it would certainly be worse when Marc returned. And there was *no way* I was going to stay there sober. No way.

My heart pounded in my chest. It was everything. Fear, anxiety, pain—hurt—and more. I felt trapped and alone, and I just knew that if I didn't do something about my fear I was more than a little likely to do something really drastic. What that was, I was afraid to even think. Writing now, I can say it, and it doesn't scare me as much. If I couldn't have gotten away, I feel certain I would have killed myself. Somehow, I would have found a way to do it. It's what I deserve, maybe, anyway. But I've never had the guts to slice my wrists or jump out an eight-story window. To drink myself to death has always had a type of morbid appeal to me, being who I am, after all (an alcoholic), but I've always passed out before I could get drunk enough. Maybe if I chugged the whole bottle at once, but ... (sigh) I don't know.

Well, it didn't take very long to come to a decision. Marc was ready to throw me out, I could feel it, and I *did not* want to be there when he returned to tell me. It mattered too much to me, to have to face him. If he was going to get rid of me—break up, whatever—then I was going to head him off and leave before he had a chance to do it. It was the best thing to do, and I made tracks to do it. I grabbed one of my suitcases—the larger one—and went through all the stuff in my dresser and the closet. I packed the suitcase as full as I could, but of course I couldn't take even a quarter of my stuff. As it was, I could barely carry the thing.

I put on a pair of heavy wool sweat socks, my good, strong leather boots, a stupid toboggan hat and the heaviest coat I owned. I was out the door and had it locked before I completely realized what I was doing. I was out on the street and down the block before I remembered I still had the key to the apartment. I don't know, maybe I hoped I'd get back

there someday—I didn't know—but I stuffed the key in my coat pocket and kept on walking. I didn't know where I was going, or what I'd do once I got there, I was just walking away from the problem as fast as I could. Because sometimes, you know, it's all you can do.

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I made a loop of the perimeter (the interstate highway around the city) while I thought things over. It's about fifty-six miles, not including the five miles each way to and from the nearest interchange, so by the time I got back around to my exit again, I had cooled down, and calmed down considerably. In my mindless, boring sojourn on the freeway I had little else to do but think, and come to understand, and decide. By the time I returned to the parking garage at my building I was mostly ready to go upstairs and make up with Kerry. I didn't know exactly what I was going to do about Tom, but at the very least, I could patch things up with *the girl* and have a little quality time left in the evening. I had figured out what to say, and was up-beat and almost excited when I opened the door.

It was quiet. But that didn't mean anything, I thought. I looked around, first to see if she was somewhere in the living room or kitchen, then to see if she was asleep, or in the bathroom. No Kerry around. OK, then, she just went out for something. Unusual, maybe, but there was a 24-hour carryout nearby. Maybe she needed cigarettes, or something. Cigarettes seemed likely. I decided to wait for her.

I'd waited a half hour when I began to wonder where she could be. There was no place I could think of where she would go on a Christmas night that would take more than a half

hour. And that's considering that she would have left the apartment just before I got home. To be sure, longer than that—well—something wasn't right.

After an hour of waiting, there was definitely something wrong, and I began to get an awful feeling about her absence. To check her clothes and things was something I would never have thought to do, but I had to answer that one terrible question before I could even hope to relax at all. Even though I was very concerned that she had been gone so long, I had to be sure she hadn't gone and done something particularly stupid. What to check? I went to her dresser, and opened the top drawer, where she kept her underwear. Half empty. Bad sign, but not conclusive. I checked the next three drawers, which also seemed rather sparse, but still not good enough evidence. Maybe she had a lot of clothes in the wash. I went into the closet. A dozen hangers littered the floor, and my feeling of dread grew with each one I picked up. On the top shelf, in the corner—there, it had been *right there*—one of her suitcases was missing.

I couldn't believe it. I've hardly been so scared in my entire life. Kerry had packed her clothes and left the apartment. Left me. No note, no warning. *No Kerry*. Gone.

In my mind I replayed all the events of the day—the evening. We had started out so very nicely, making love and then starting to open presents. Rennie and Frank had come over, visited awhile. Kerry and I fought; then made up; then I called Tom. Tom and I had a bad argument, traded some pretty strong words, upsetting me such that afterward I secluded myself in the bedroom, telling Kerry to go away. After awhile, then, I decided I had to get out—get away from everything—so I left Kerry at home and hit the road in order to think and sort things out. She was left scared and worried, perhaps, but I didn't think I'd

said anything that could be interpreted as a demand that she leave. Or had I? I was angry with her—with *everyone*—but I had always expected to have her here when I finally came to my senses and cooled off. I never expected her to leave—*ever*.

When I told her to go away, I meant I wanted to be alone to think. Could she have interpreted it the wrong way? I thought very carefully, but I didn't see how. Was this just another example of Kerry's sudden mood swings and hair-trigger temper? How could I know what she was thinking? Did I tell her to go away, or just to leave me alone? I'd said 'go away,' but I'd definitely meant 'leave me alone'. Why did she have to take things so seriously, so literally? I could not understand why she had done what she had apparently done, but there was no denying it—she was gone.

What could I do about it?

I paced, trying desperately to think where she could have gone. Where *would* she go? If I could get to her quickly enough, maybe she wouldn't get very far. Maybe she was just down the street, maybe down the block. No. I'd been home over an hour. In an hour's time she could be miles away. Even at a slow pace she could be nearly anywhere within a five mile radius, by now. That would be more than seventy-five square miles to cover, making the search impossible, especially at night. Especially if she didn't want to be found. But—did she want to be found? I didn't know, and couldn't guess. So that left me no choice but to try to think of all the places where she was likely to go, and then check each and every one. Seemed simple enough, until I realized just how little I really knew about her.

For purposes of tracking her down, I knew nothing at all about her. I didn't know who she knew; where they lived; where she had worked—essentially nothing. I knew of the

apartment where she had lived before I'd brought her to live with me, and I supposed it was possible she might return there, but that seemed very unlikely. She had talked so little of her prior life. She had always seemed so glad to be away from it, so happy to be able to forget about it, it almost didn't make sense that she would try to return to it. Her previous 'boyfriend' had beaten her up, so she'd said, and if he lived in that apartment, I seriously doubted she'd go there. I couldn't imagine it. If he hadn't lived there, then in all likelihood someone else was, by now. I might have to check it out, anyway, but it seemed the very least likely place to find her. In net, I had exactly one place to look, and that place, in my mind, was almost out of the question. But I *had* to find her. I had to have her back—simply had to.

In semi-desperation, I picked up the phone to call Rennie. He answered.

"Hello again, uncle," he greeted me.

"Is Kerry there?" I asked immediately, without explaining myself.

"Marc," he reminded me, surprised, "how could she be here? She doesn't know where I live." That's right. I was being completely irrational. "Why did you think she would be here?" he asked.

"She's gone."

"Oh?" he queried me. "How can you tell?" He must have thought I was stupid, or something.

"Her stuff is gone."

"Hmmm." He thought a moment, "You're sure of that?"

"Yes," I said, "I looked in the closet, and one of her suitcases is missing."

"Is there any other reason you can think of why she might be *really* gone, and not—

say—down in the basement cleaning her suitcase, or something?”

“I’m not stupid, Renfield.” I hate it when people condescend.

“No one ever said you were, Marc,” he responded, calmly and evenly. “You just sound very upset, and I want to be sure we have all the facts straight before we get the police involved, or anything.” I’d not thought of calling the police. I doubted they could be much help, but they were one resource we could call upon, if we had to.

But, “I don’t think the police would be much help,” I said.

“Yes, well,” he cleared his throat, “I know you don’t want to hear this, but ... if she’s lying dead in a ditch somewhere, they’ll almost surely find her before we do.” He waited only a beat, “Tell me, if you can, why she left.”

“We had an argument.” He made agreeing noises. I continued, “I was pretty angry; she was apparently pretty upset about it ...”

“I see,” he said. I didn’t know if he ‘saw,’ or not. “And so she just decided to pack her things, and leave you.”

“Yes, that’s about the size of it.”

“You didn’t do anything to *encourage* her to leave, did you?”

“What do you mean?” I was vaguely suspicious of his question.

“I’m just asking, Marc. These are all the kinds of questions the police might ask. You have to be prepared for this type of thing, if you call the police.”

“Right now, I’m not planning to. Call the police, that is.”

“That’s fine.” He didn’t press the matter. “Did she have any identification?”

I had to think, then. Did she have a driver’s license? Yes, she did, I’d seen it. “She had a

driver's license."

"Did she take it with her?"

"Hold on," I said, and laid the phone down to go to the bedroom to check. I thought she usually left it on top of her dresser, and though there were several things strewn across the top, there was no money, and no driver's license, either. I went back to the phone. "It looks like she took it, but unless I search the entire apartment I can't be sure."

"Doesn't matter that much," Rennie passed it off. "It just might make things a little easier. Do you have any idea where she might go?"

"No. *That's* the problem." Then it occurred to me that I'd called Rennie, my nephew, who was perhaps the least likely person to help me find Kerry. "I don't know why I called you, it's just that I needed to call someone—and I thought of you, I guess."

"What about your friend, Tom Germaine?"

"Well," I coughed, "he's part of the reason she left." Rennie didn't say anything right away, so I fell into the hole left by his silence. "Tom and I had an argument over Kerry, tonight. I got mad at Tom—I'm still pissed as hell—and I think Kerry thought it was her fault." I expected him to ask me if it *was* her fault, but he didn't. "It's not Kerry's fault, completely, but I think she thinks it is. I had to get out of the house for a while, so I went and made a lap of the perimeter so I could think. When I got back ... Kerry was gone."

"No note?"

"No note. Nothing, except one of her suitcases and some of her clothes are missing."

"I'm sorry, Marc." Rennie sounded sympathetic, but about to turn me down, "I wish I could help you—"

“—But you can’t.” I sighed, “I know. Thanks, anyway.” I must have sounded angry.

“Hey! Don’t get angry with me.” But he didn’t sound angry or offended. “Call the police tomorrow if she doesn’t show up. They probably won’t even think of doing anything until she’s gone at least forty-eight hours. Lots of people disappear for periods of time, only to reappear a few days later. If the cops tried to track every one of them down, they’d get little else done.”

“Thanks for your help.”

He was undaunted, “Don’t lose it over this girl, yet, Marc. I mean, how long have you known her, anyway?” Not long enough, I thought, but didn’t say. He continued, “Take it easy—sleep on it. If you don’t see her by Tuesday, then maybe you should call the police.”

He waited for me to respond, and when I didn’t, said, “OK?”

“OK,” I agreed, but reluctantly.

“Take it easy,” he closed.

“I will. Bye.” We hung up.

Rennie was a voice of moderation, albeit an unhelpful one, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that if I didn’t do something quickly to try to locate Kerry, the two of us—Kerry and me—would suffer much more than the seriousness of the ‘crime’ should warrant. I was emotionally beat to death, and I was sure Kerry was feeling just about as beat up. Despite the idyllic beginnings of the day, it was all too apparent the Christmas holiday caused Kerry (and me, I suppose) huge amounts of stress. Her hair-trigger anger and hostility; her elation and sudden tears, her inability to cope even in the smallest degree with *my* stress. All pointed to the same thing—Kerry had had some bad experiences connected with Christmas

(like me), and she wasn't over them, yet. (Again, like me.)

I thought long and hard about it—where would she go? Where *could* she go? How would I find her? It became very obvious to me after a while that if Kerry didn't want me to find her, then I wasn't going to find her. I had thought I knew her pretty well. How ironic! I didn't know her *at all!* Now that she was out of the apartment (except for the remainder of her clothes), it was as if she hadn't been there at all. Poof. Gone. I was angry, and I was scared. I didn't think I'd given her any reason to leave, and I resented deeply the hurt she'd put on me. And I felt pretty sure she was trying to hurt me. It just never occurred to me that she might be trying to protect herself. It never occurred to me she might be hurt by the things I'd said or the things I'd done. It never occurred to me she might not have acted out of spite, but rather out of fear and uncertainty—some deep-seated insecurity. And I don't think it would have mattered if I had. I was simply at a loss. I still loved her, I think. I still wanted her to stay with me, I thought. I wished she would just knock on the door and ask to come in. I wished she'd just vent all her anger at me, yell at me—even hit me, if she wanted—but come back and stay.

I was still very angry with Tom. He was my best friend, maybe, but right then I didn't want to deal with him. I figured I would need his help to find Kerry, but I sincerely did not want to talk to him. That he would help ultimately, I really didn't doubt. He would be reluctant under the circumstances, but if I talked to him, he would do whatever he could. You see, there was this little matter of a debt he owed me. If I could get over my anger enough to pick up the phone, there might be a chance we could find Kerry before the night was over. It was hard, and it took over an hour, but eventually I caved in and called Tom.

Sheree answered the phone. I said hello, and asked to speak to Tom. She asked me if I was sure I wanted to talk to him. Obviously, she knew we'd fought earlier. She said Tom was still very upset about it.

But I told her why I'd called. "Kerry has packed her things and left." It seemed a pretty succinct way of putting it. She was silent for several seconds.

"Why?" She cut right to it. No beating around the bush.

"I don't really know," I replied. I knew instantly we were treading into dangerous territory, and any explanation of the true events would certainly get down to the heart of the matter. But no matter what, I was not about to get into any discussion with Sheree. Damn it! She was my friend. One of my most favorite people. She'd done nothing to deserve what had happened, and it felt very cheap and deceitful trying to keep the whole thing quiet. I was ashamed of what we'd done, how we'd acted, and I was even more ashamed that now I felt forced to withhold it from her. But I couldn't tell her about it. It wasn't up to me. It was up to Tom, and Tom had chosen to keep Sheree from finding out. Tom was lying to his most loving and trusting wife, and I knew it. How could we *do this*? What kind of terrible people were we that we could keep such an awful secret hidden?

I knew eventually it would get out, and the thought of Sheree finding out what had happened made me ill. She would be incredibly hurt, of that I was positive, and she absolutely didn't deserve it. Tom may have been angry with Kerry, angry with me, but ultimately he had only himself to blame. Ultimately only he would suffer if Sheree found out. Kerry might lose a friend—and deservedly so—and Sheree might not want to talk to me, ever again, but Tom would be the one to really pay for his moment of 'indiscretion'. If Sheree

left or if she threw Tom out (I wasn't sure which was more likely), it was Tom who would end up paying for it.

Sheree didn't appear to buy my 'I don't know' explanation. She didn't exactly voice disbelief, but when she replied, I sensed mild distrust and skepticism. "Uh-huh," she said, and that said it all. But she didn't press me. "All right, Marc," she finished, "I'll tell him you're on the phone." It was some moments before Tom picked up.

"Hello," he said. He sounded angry, reticent, bothered, but he *was* talking to me.

"This is starting to become a real mess," I said with no preamble.

"It's *already* a real mess." He let out a long breath. I waited. He seemed to have more to say. "I'm sorry, Marc."

"Me, too." There, we said it. Now we could get down to business.

He started with, "It's really all my fault, and I guess I'm going to just have to face it." He didn't sound at all happy. I wasn't surprised, especially. "It's pretty late," he went on, "but you all can come up here tonight, if you want. I think we can work things out." He paused, and I waited until he was finished before telling him what was going on. "Kerry will *not* be the one at fault in this 'situation'. I will." That was good to hear, but hardly helpful under the circumstances.

"Tom," I said, "she packed her things and left."

"What?" He seemed stunned. "Why?" he asked. Jesus! Everyone wanted to know the answer to that one. I wonder why? (He asked, rhetorically.)

"She overheard our conversation, earlier, and knows why you didn't want us to come up there, tonight. I was pretty mad—"

“—*Pretty mad?*” he interrupted, “Christ, Marc! You were more angry than I’ve ever seen you!” His tone of voice seemed to indicate he thought it was humorous, somehow.

“It’s not funny, Tom.” I was perturbed he found anything amusing about our current situation, however warranted or unwarranted it might have been.

“I’m not trying to be funny,” he said. When I said nothing in response, he went on, “Maybe I just see the irony of the whole thing, or something. I don’t know.” I still had no reply, though. He passed the conversation back to me, anyway. “So go on.”

I worked very hard to restrain my anger from growing. I needed Tom’s help, so I felt I had little real choice ... “Kerry was upset that I was so angry with you, and then I was angry with her as a result. I left the apartment to get out awhile—to try to cool off—but when I got back here, she was gone.”

“Just like that? She left? Packed her stuff and moved out?”

“Split.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, Marc.”

“Yeah?” I intoned, seeing the irony, as well. “So am I, but it’s a little too late for that.” I figured he’d ask what I wanted him to do. I wanted his help, but if he asked for a specific plan I knew I’d have to punt. I had no clue how to approach the problem. It was even hard to think about it logically.

“You don’t know where she went, right?” He seemed to have a good handle on things. I *didn’t* know where she went, and said as much. “We’ll never find her, then.” He dropped the other shoe. The one I was afraid he would drop. I knew it, but I was afraid to admit it to myself.

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"I'd come help you look, but unless she's standing on the street corner outside your apartment in plain sight, we have exactly zero chance of finding her. She could be miles away." He thought a second. "Unless she just left. She didn't just leave in the past few minutes, did she?"

"No," I felt very stupid that I'd just sat around waiting on her when I first returned. I might have caught up with her if I'd acted more quickly. "I waited an hour for her before I figured out she was really gone. I thought she'd gone out for cigarettes, or something. I had no way of knowing she left."

"How long has she been gone?"

"At least two hours," I said. "If she left right after I did, then it could be as long as three and a half."

"She could be ten miles away by now, you know," he reminded me.

"I *know*, Tom."

"We'll never find her."

So much for Tom. "Thanks for your help, buddy," I said, sarcastically, borrowing Kerry's favorite appellation.

"I never said I wouldn't help you," he shot back, a little defensively, "I'm just telling you the facts."

But of course, the facts were abundantly obvious to me. "I *know* the facts, Tom," I sounded pretty disgusted. I *was* pretty disgusted, too, but mostly at myself. Also at Kerry, but for the wrong reasons, I guess.

“Take it easy, Marc,” he said, “you know I’ll help you, whatever it takes.”

“I know,” I nodded, though he couldn’t see it. “Thanks.”

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I walked north up Peachtree Street, and uphill a long, long way. And lugging that very heavy suitcase made the trek even that much more strenuous. I managed, though. The sidewalk wasn’t very well lit, and the occasional car that sped by whipped up the cold, winter wind, terribly. I wasn’t cold, though, except perhaps for my hands, since I didn’t have any gloves, but the unkind fridity of the night air did make me much more acutely aware of the momentous decision I’d made. I’d left the bright, warm security of Marc’s apartment on Christmas night, for the chill and loneliness of the street. I easily saw the foolishness of the action, and I knew my reasons for having taken it. But as each step took me further away from security and warmth, though, it became more and more difficult to understand why I had really needed to leave. It didn’t change my mind, it just blurred and confused the already blurred and confused situation.

I didn’t start out angry with Marc. I was afraid of Marc, I think, and I was worried he was going to kick me out of his apartment because of what I’d done to Tom. He’d said ‘go away,’ and I somehow had construed it to mean ‘get out’. He hadn’t told me to leave, but I was very sure he would’ve said it when he saw me again. Therefore the only choice I saw after Marc left and I was left cowering there in the apartment, was to spare myself the anguish—protect myself—and get the hell out before he had a chance to throw me out. As I

said, I didn't start out angry with Marc. I started out really angry with myself, but the icy-cold night air soon made me realize some things.

First of all, I began to resent like hell that Marc threw me out. I know now, mind you, that he *didn't* throw me out (and I guess I knew even then he hadn't done it), but as I struggled with my heavy suitcase on that long, long hill up Peachtree toward downtown Buckhead, I became more and more angry with the supposed shitty way he'd dealt with me. How dare he kick me out! I thought. What had I done to deserve being treated this way? And so on. My hands were cold, my nose was cold, I was sweating under my coat from the exertion of dragging that heavy suitcase, and more than *anything else* I wanted to be back in Marc's cozy, warm living room, snuggled up and watching TV. I could have done without Marc at the time, I think, but I desperately wanted to be back on the couch, lounging comfortably. That was being denied to me, and I blamed Marc for it.

The more I strained, the more I sweated, the more my anger toward Marc grew. He was so unfair! He wouldn't listen to me. What had I done that was so bad that I had to leave him? Why couldn't we work this thing out? These thoughts went through my mind. I had the whole conversation entirely in my mind, too, answering my questions to Marc for myself, and arguing my 'woe is me, I'm so pitiful' story back. Almost schizoid, what do you think? I was afraid to face Marc and his anger, and I had to justify my fear some way. I couldn't have unreasonable or unjustifiable fears, could I? If they were unfounded, how could I claim their legitimacy?

When I reached the small, triangularly shaped park where Roswell Road intersected Peachtree Street, I had to stop awhile, and I was steaming (literally) at Marc. By that time I

never wanted to go back, never wanted to see him again, never wanted anything to do with him anymore, ever again. I sat down on one of the park benches, setting the (by then) super-heavy suitcase next to me. I fished in my pocket for a cigarette, the first since walking out almost two hours earlier, put it in my mouth, and lit it.

It felt pretty good to relax a few minutes. My cigarette gave me the nicotine lift I wanted, and I had a chance to put my free hand in my coat pocket to get warm. Otherwise, I was adequately clothed, and I contemplated the situation as I watched my smoky-steamy breath stream away from me in the swirling, wintry breeze.

There was no crying. I felt cold inside, angry, unsympathetic and uncompromising. I was sure I was wronged, and my anger towards Marc, Tom—toward everyone—sustained me as I smoked. I'm gonna show them, I told myself. They can't do this and get away with it. Yeah, I was tough all right. Real tough.

But what was I going to do? I was sitting out in the cold on a park bench in downtown Buckhead, where the cops were quite likely to come cruising by at any moment. Out here they don't just drive by, ignoring you. Out here, where the Mercedeses and the BMWs outnumber the Chevys and the Fords two-to-one, the cops take the time to check you out. They have the time, first of all, and they earn their salaries the easy way—they hassle poor little white girls sitting under streetlights in the cold. Thank God I wasn't black. That would have *really* gotten me into trouble. But of course I was just speculating all these things, since I'd barely seen a car in the past five minutes while I smoked my cigarette. Even if someone did come by, I could simply say I was waiting on a bus. At least I *thought* the buses were running. It was Christmas, after all. Surely a bus would come by soon ...

I'd avoided it. The question, that is. What was I going to do? I lit another cigarette while I thought some more about it. I didn't really want to spend the night out there in the cold. I could do that, I suppose—it wasn't *that* cold, after all—but it seemed such a far cry away (very, very far!) from where I'd been only a couple of hours earlier. I really didn't give camping out much serious consideration. If I knew anyone, and if they were home, there was a very good chance I'd get a warm bed to sleep in that night. Whom did I know?

Well, I used to know two guys who lived right around there, out in the wilds of Buckhead. Yes, they were former clients, but they were nice guys, as far as clients went. Whether either of them would be home, and whether either of them would take me in like this ... well, those were both pretty large 'whethers'. It seemed rather unlikely. Besides, I would probably have to sleep with whoever took me in. Not *so* bad a thought, all things considered, but I had absolutely no interest in sex, with anyone. Anyone, besides Marc, that is.

All right! I'd admitted it! I was hopelessly and completely in love with Marc. So sue me! I belonged to Marc, and it was going to be only to Marc's bed I would go. Goddamn it then! I could not just go look up either of my former clients. It just wouldn't work, if I did. Why did things have to be so complicated? Why couldn't I face Marc? Why? Et cetera, et cetera, so on, so on ... I came full circle in my reasoning. I didn't start out to hurt Marc, only to protect myself, but I made myself mad at him, all the same. I hadn't wanted to face his anger, his—whatever he was going to do—when he got back. I was already pretty ashamed of myself, and I didn't need him to point out my shame for me. I seriously didn't need that to happen.

And to top it all off, I was sober. Doesn't that beat all! All this pain and anguish; all this

packing up and ‘getting out of Dodge’; all this upheaval; and I didn’t even think to take any fucking booze with me! What a wholly sorry state of affairs. I was out in the cold and I couldn’t even get a good buzz on. I was going to have to face the night—*this night!*—sober. Well, that almost broke the whole thing open right then and there. If I couldn’t get drunk, then I wasn’t just lonely, I was also damned afraid.

God, this fear is a terrible thing. It’s difficult to explain, but it’s real. You don’t realize how much you’ve been relying on the booze to make things go smoothly, until you find yourself in a situation. Stress. A situation of extreme stress. And in such a situation, two things happen. First, I get a drink, then I smoke a cigarette. If I don’t have cigarettes, then the booze will do. But no way do cigarettes ever make up for the lack of alcohol. I wanted my drink. I needed my drink. And after I’d smoked my fifth or sixth cigarette, *I really needed my drink*. I was afraid of the pain, of the loneliness, of the stress, and when I found myself mentally casting about for a place to get some alcohol—any kind would do—and I realized no place would be selling booze on a Sunday, let alone Christmas, I became more stressed out. Of course, that’s putting it mildly. I was ready to get up and go back, just so I could get drunk. At least we had plenty of good booze at the apartment. I’d seen to that. It was my booze, and I deserved it.

But I couldn’t go back, could I? No, definitely not. What, then? I thought about—what was his name? Mike?—one of my nearby clients, again. Why did a good-looking guy like Mike need a hooker? I’d never asked him about it and I’d never cared, either. He could have had dates with women who wouldn’t demand cash money, but instead he’d chosen me. And we didn’t always end the night with sex, either. I mean, we had real dates, almost. I guess I

never thought too much about it. Every few weeks he'd call and we'd go out. We'd see movies, get dinner out, maybe, and most of the time he'd take me back to his apartment for a little horizontal hustle. I, being a lady of the evening, didn't care what we did since he always paid me most adequately, but while I sat on that cold park bench I wondered why he'd ever called me, at all.

Could he have really liked me, and just never made it around to tell me? I don't know. Hell, I don't even know if I would have dated him for real, if he had. That was such a different life, a different time. I hadn't met Marc, and things hadn't been changed irrevocably—forever. But Mike was an interesting case. Here was a normal, handsome man in his early thirties who regularly engaged the services of a professional call girl instead of asking out women he knew. For all I knew, he *did* date other women. And again, to be truthful, I never asked and he never said. He had no sexual hang-ups, as far as I was concerned. We never (well, rarely) did anything kinky or unusual, so I didn't understand (this was later, Christmas night while I got colder and colder by the minute) why he had *ever* called me. I couldn't figure it out, but I was almost ready to walk the fifty feet to the nearest pay phone and call the guy. I was almost ready, and if I did I felt pretty sure I was going to ask him why he always paid, and only paid, when he could have gotten it for free. Maybe not from me, but from someone.

But wait, he wasn't the only person I knew besides Marc. Mel Howe lived not too far away, and I knew if she was home I just might have some place to stay. Then I thought: What if Marc called her? He knew her, and he knew I knew her, too. It only made sense. But what was I trying to do? If I was trying to get away from Marc and make it so he couldn't

find me, then going to Mel Howe's apartment, where Troy Dancer also lived, wasn't the brightest of ideas. But that was stupid. If Marc was throwing me out, then why would he try to find me?

OK, I realized what was going on in my mind. I didn't really think Marc was kicking me out. I was just pulling some kind of insane stunt to get his attention. And when it occurred to me, finally, it made a lot of sense. But, then again, I felt pretty put-upon and neglected. (Sigh.) A mind is a terrible thing ... OK then, I wanted Marc to find me. I hoped Marc would find me and help make it all better. I desperately prayed that Marc would find me. Should I just sit there and wait for him to drive by? Would he drive by?

Time was running out for me, and if he didn't come soon I was going to have to call him. Calling Mike was maybe a nice idea—maybe—but I really wanted Marc. It was cold, and I was over it. Marc could be as mad as he wanted, I didn't care (I knew how to make him forget his anger, I thought), I wanted to come home and snuggle into bed. OK, then. I stood up, picked up my suitcase, and trudged over to the telephone booth.

It took a few seconds to locate a quarter, but luckily I had one and listened intently while it clinked into the phone. My hands were a little stiff, and I was (surprisingly) more than a little nervous when I dialed the number. I expected Marc to be there, but if not, I was going to leave a message. Regardless, I wasn't going to budge from this spot until I saw his little red Honda pull up.

The phone rang five times, and then he answered. And I don't think I ever felt more relieved in my entire life than when I heard him say hello.

"Hi, it's me," I said, and felt very foolish all of a sudden. It wasn't an especially pleasant

feeling, since I felt about five years old and incompetent as all hell, but I *know* I would rather have felt stupid, than lonely. Or cold. Or sober.

“Kerry!” he sounded very glad to hear my voice, and I was even *more* glad he was glad, too. “Where the hell *are you?*” he asked, which I expected.

“You know where that little park is?”

“What little park?”

“The one in downtown Buckhead?”

He had to think. “You mean where Roswell Road comes out on Peachtree?”

Relief! “That’s the one.”

“Is that where you are?” Then *he* sounded foolish.

“No, silly,” I was *so* glad he wasn’t mad. “I’m down in the lobby.” I paused for sarcastic effect. “*Of course*, that’s where I am.”

“There’s no ‘of course’ to it, girl.” He was maybe a little angry, probably from my flippant sarcasm, but I was still glad to have him on the phone. “You had me worried shitless.” He paused, and I let him think. Finally, “Why did you walk out on me?”

There was only one answer to that. “I thought you were going to throw me out.”

“That’s stupid. Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t know why I’d said that, since I knew pretty well why I’d packed up and left. It was because ... because ... “I was afraid.” That seemed to cover it.

“Don’t *ever* do that, again,” he demanded, and he sounded like he meant it. “That’s the worst, most helpless feeling I’ve ever had. I had no idea where you were, or how to find you. I called Rennie, and then I called Tom, and I was about to call the police, when you called. I

can't take it, Kerry. It's not fair!"

"I'm sorry, Marc," I tried to make him understand I *really was sorry*. It's not that I never apologized sincerely before, but while I stood there in the cold, I really wanted him to understand just how penitent his wayward girl was. "I won't do it again, ever. I promise."

"I believe you," he was quick to close the book. "Can I come pick you up?"

"Oh, please!" I was very glad to hear him say that. "Please hurry!"

"Be there in a few," he said, and hung up.

It was still cold, but I felt so much warmer.

It took Marc barely five minutes to find me. I was standing at the curb along Peachtree Street, with my two-ton suitcase by my side when he drove by, going north. On his first pass he missed the left turn onto Roswell Road, which meant he had to circle the block, and as he turned left onto the little street that separated the park from a now-closed Wendy's, I ran, as fast as my overburdened and tired little legs would carry me, over to the Roswell Road side of the park. He pulled up—facing the *wrong* way on the street—and jumped out of the car. When I got within a few feet of him, I dumped the suitcase and jumped up into his arms. He crushed me tightly to his chest, and I never felt anything more wonderful in my entire life.

"I love you, Kerry. Oh, I love you!" he rumbled in my ear. "Please, Kerry, please! Don't ever do that again!"

He said he loved me! Of course he'd said it before, but it had never hit home for me so profoundly, as it did then. **He loved me!** I choked on my reply, emotions bringing my heart to my throat, "It's hard ... sometimes ... sweetheart ... so hard! *So hard!*" And you can bet I

wanted a sweetheart. Up to then, I *know* I never considered the idea, at all. But, as the words fell out of my mouth I knew it was what my heart wanted. It was what my heart and soul needed. And I needed it more than anything.

I wrapped my legs around Marc's waist, to stay near face level, and he hugged me very, *very* tightly, squeezing the breath out of me until I thought my ribs would crack. I didn't mind—the secure feel of his strong arms around me was incredible! I felt he wanted to bring me inside him, and I wanted to be there, too. Safe and sound, hidden and protected from the world. Struggling, I twisted around to find his face with mine. I needed his kiss, deeply and desperately, and nothing was going to stand in my way. As our mouths came near, I pulled his head down to press our lips very tightly together. Forcefully and wonderfully, his tongue pushed into my mouth, and I accepted it completely, willingly. We kissed, and I realized how much he loved me; how much he needed me; how much I needed him. How much, just how much, I loved *him*.

Reluctantly, it seemed, he let me down so my feet touched the sidewalk. He held my hands in his, and we looked at each other, silently and thoughtfully for some moments. His hands were warm—much warmer than mine—and I was pretty damn glad he was there to warm them, too. I know I must have looked genuinely pitiful in my heavy coat and frumpy toboggan hat, but I don't think he noticed, or minded. In my eyes he was the most wonderful, the most magnificent sight I had ever seen. Never had I been happier to see anyone, and never before in my entire life had I ever been sorrier for anything I'd ever done.

Then when I thought about it, and realized exactly what I'd done, I was suddenly overtaken by a crushing, numbing, annihilating shame that threatened to take me to my

knees. I couldn't face Marc, then, and I staggered back, my knees wobbly and weak. I was almost surprised at the strength of my reaction, but the truth of it was undeniable. *I* had caused Marc and Tom to argue so terribly. *I* had been the bad girl who'd done the unthinkable and the unforgivable. *I* was no good. It was *me*. And worse, I had foolishly walked out on Marc, not because he had said or done anything, but because I was so spineless and irresponsible, totally unable or unwilling to face the things—or the *thing*—I'd done.

I couldn't speak, nor could I raise my head to look Marc in the face. It just wasn't possible. I wanted to sink into the pavement; dissolve into the concrete like the melting Wicked Witch of the West. I wanted to become so small as to completely evade Marc's notice. But though I thought about running—about just getting away!—my legs felt like monstrous bags of wet sand: My feet were nailed to the spot. I couldn't move, I could only cower in shame. It hurt, it really hurt! Like razor-sharp knives were being slipped between my ribs, through my heart. An awful few seconds crawled by while my heart lurched like I was having a heart attack, and I worried I might not be able to stand. I closed my eyes, and breathed deeply and carefully until the beating rhythm resumed. With my eyes closed, my head swam, dizziness threatening to overtake me, and I was forced to open them to the pavement at my feet. Fortunately, I recovered my equilibrium quickly, so I don't think I wobbled too much. I couldn't face Marc—face anything—and though I forced myself to look at my feet, and breathe slowly and deeply, I didn't feel *at all* well.

I don't know what Marc was thinking, since he never said a word or moved while I went through all these rapid emotional and physical changes. I wondered about him, briefly,

but mainly I had other concerns that were more important. Like holding back the tears that were quickly coming on, like a freight train.

I didn't think I could dare move, even to wipe tears from my cheeks with my hand, so I held still and allowed the huge, hot, stinging drops to fall from my cheeks to the front of my coat. I hoped Marc would not see I was crying. But, I think he did.

Quietly, he spoke, but he sounded kind, gentle, unaccountably good. "Don't cry, Kerry." He moved to touch me, but I jerked away—completely by reflex and without conscious thought. My body would not permit him to touch me, to assuage me, to reassure or caress me in any way. "Please," he pleaded, "you don't have to cry." He seemed to understand, though I still don't know why. "What's done is done. We can't either of us take back the past, so I wouldn't even try."

His hand approached my arm, slowly, cautiously. And just as cautiously I allowed him to touch me. His fingers closed around my elbow and he held onto me, firmly, but not to hurt me. "Everyone can share in the blame. Everyone *is* to blame, not just you. It's part my fault; it's part Tom's fault. Maybe most of all it's Tom's fault. But ... but it's also partly your fault, too." He cleared his throat. "But, I think there may be something else at fault here, as well." I waited, but he didn't elaborate. I wasn't sure if I could ask him to, either. "Do you know what I'm talking about?" No answer from me on that one. "Do you know what I'm talking about? I think you do, if you could just admit it."

All right, maybe I *did* know. And he was right; I was not willing to admit it. I didn't want to admit it, and even now (much later) I still don't *like* having to admit it. It just wasn't in me to open up and say what he was asking me to say. I had been fooling myself for such a

long time, and the fooling wasn't over, just yet. I didn't want to stop kidding myself, and by God! I wasn't going to do it.

I kept my mouth shut. Time crawled.

Marc sighed. "OK, it doesn't matter. Time will tell, and all things change." He squeezed my elbow, lightly, "We all have our problems, and *no one's* perfect." He chuckled. "Not by a long way! So, since that's the case, I say we should just put the whole thing behind us and get back to what's important." What that was, I didn't know, but he informed me. "Kerry, I love you, girl. I haven't felt this way about anyone for a long, long time. Maybe not *ever*. And despite all our faults and all our problems, I know we can make it if we want to. I want us to make it, and I hope you want the same thing. Tonight doesn't have to hurt us if we don't want it to, so if you're willing to forgive me, I'm willing to do the same. OK?"

I wasn't sure, but I didn't think I could refuse his offer. "OK," I croaked, and I had to clear my throat before continuing, "I don't want to fight, anymore."

"I don't, either."

"I want to come home."

"I want you to come home. I love you."

I looked up at his face for the first time in several minutes, and I could see his hopeful smile in the dim, yellow glow of the streetlights. I tried to smile, too, but I didn't feel as successful. "I'm so sorry."

"Me, too."

I sniffed back a plugged nose, "Can you forgive me?"

"I already have," he said, and pulled me back into his arms, where I always belonged,

anyway.

Once more, and with slow, gentle patience, we kissed. I resisted, though I couldn't decide why. But Marc persisted, and eventually persevered. We continued to hold each other and explore each other with our lips, our tongues, and I wished the warm, dozy feeling of relief and cozy well-being would last forever. After what seemed like a very long time, but which might have been only a minute, we separated, and Marc leaned down to pick up my suitcase.

Then I started to feel faint, almost like I would pass out. At first I thought it was probably because of the feelings of relief that had been washing over me, but then I wasn't so sure about it ...

Marc grabbed for me, keeping me from falling, I think. I don't remember much about the next few moments, except I think Marc must have picked me up. Everything was swimming and swirling around me, and I oscillated between needing more oxygen, and having too much cold, frosty air in my lungs. I felt my hands tingling, and everything was buzzing, growing more distant. I think I heard Marc's voice, but it seemed so far away and indistinct, it was completely inconsequential and unimportant. If I fell, I didn't realize it, but I don't think I did. I was almost totally numb—the humming and the buzzing growing louder and louder by the moment. And then there was noth

When I woke up, I didn't know where I was. It was dark, but there were lights passing by my eyes—distant lights—whites and ambers, the occasional red or green. I was dizzy, and everything was out of focus, but my head was clearing, little by little, and in a few

minutes I was able to see things with some clarity.

Apparently, I was in the back of Marc's car, and he was driving. "Where are we?" I asked, my head clearing more and more, my strength returning.

He looked over his shoulder at me, very quickly, and said, "I'm taking you to the emergency room."

"No way, buddy," I shook my head, and sat up behind him, groggy, but not dizzy.

"You passed out back there," he commented, as if that said it all. It didn't, in my estimation.

"I'm better, now." I tried to sound reassuring, and hoped I was. I *hate* hospitals with a true-blue passion that practically knows no end. I'd only been in one once, and that was when I was a child, and the only way you'd ever get me back into one would be if I were dying—or dead already.

"I still think we ought to get you checked out."

"Please, Marc," I touched him on the shoulder. "Let's just go home. I really just want to go home. Please?" Under my hand, I felt the resolve gradually melt from his body, and he seemed almost to slump in his seat. I knew all this was very hard for him—as it was very hard for me, too—and I didn't want to cause any more trouble than I had, already. If we went to the emergency room, it would be nothing more than more trouble.

"Are you sure, Kerry?"

I did indeed feel much better, and when it seemed as though we *would* go home, and not to the hospital, I felt damn near *perfect*. I smiled at the back of his head, but I knew he couldn't see me. "I'm sure, buddy." My voice lowered to a husky drawl, "Let's go home." I

stroked the back of his neck lightly, hoping he got the message.

He did.

When we got inside the door of the apartment, I couldn't wait to get my hands on him. I can't remember a time when I ever felt more horny or alive than when I ripped at his coat.

I kicked my shoes off, and tore at my own coat. The process was taking *way* too much time and I feared we would lose the anticipation of the moment—the overwhelming, blinding desire I had to feel his huge, burning hard cock inside me. Nothing more, nor anything less would satisfy me, and as I dreamed and yearned for his body, the process of removing our clothes was still taking way too fucking long!

I ripped my shirt open, popped buttons flying all over. I urged the shirt from his shoulders, and pressed my aching, sweating breasts against his chest. My nipples' contact with the cool, dry skin of his chest brought them to excited tingling, and with a guttural growl of pleasure I brought his hands up to envelop the wanton and wanting flesh of my breasts. He squeezed me, hard, and tweaked the swollen buds of my nipples, eliciting a twinge of pain.

"Oh! Yes!" I panted, encouraging him to pinch me harder. *"Yes! Oh, yes!"* I urged.

If he kept it up for just a few more seconds I was going to come, and then ... he leaned down and bit my right nipple, sucking it into his mouth with tremendous, urgent force. And I came! Boy, did I come! I felt I would collapse in his grasp. My knees turned to loose water, and my head lolled back, my eyes closing and my mind drifting off to that place ...

"Fuck me," I whispered, my juices threatening to leak clean through my panties and into my jeans. *"Fuck me,"* I repeated, *"Oh, please!"*

Marc grabbed at the front of my jeans, and scrabbled at the top button. He tore it open, and pulled the flaps apart, making the zipper give under his strength with a popping sound like ripping cloth. The thought and the image of my clothes being ripped away excited me even more, and as he pushed the jeans off my hips I continued the motion and rolled back onto my back. My bare butt hit the tile there in the entryway, and with a shrug, I kicked my jeans free. In seconds, it seemed, I felt Marc's very hard cock slide into me, no resistance offered at all due to the volume of my wetness, and as I wrapped my knees around his waist, he pumped into me with all the strength and masculine force he possessed.

It didn't take very long, at all, for Marc's excitement to peak, and he came, too, filling me with his warm, loving sperm. On his final thrusts, and as the strength flowed out of him, my vagina clenched around him, and I came again, riding out our contractions in tandem.

For a long time, we panted together there on the cold, hard floor, and eventually, when we both had regained the strength in our legs, he got up, pulled me wobbling to my feet, and we staggered off to bed. I was already naked, ready for bed, and it only took Marc seconds to remove his shoes and socks, untangle his jeans from around his ankles, and crawl in next to me. I laid my head against his chest, and in seconds was fast asleep.

It was so good to be home!

The next day I woke up sick. We had both slept very late, and around noon Marc rolled out to make his morning coffee. I woke then, too, but when I started to move to get up, something told me I probably shouldn't be trying it.

Oh, man, I felt terrible! My whole body ached like I had been used as a sledgehammer,

or had *been* sledge-hammered, and when I touched my forehead with my hand, it was obvious I was burning up with fever. I just closed my eyes, then, and moaned.

Marc came back after while, and when he noticed I hadn't gotten up, came round to my side of the bed. I opened my eyes and looked up at him, the heat behind my eyes making them feel like they would dry up inside my head—or pop, I didn't know which.

"What's the matter? You not feel good?"

I nodded, barely, aching too much to move more than that. "Yes," I croaked, "I feel like I'm burnin' up, and I ache all over." A cracking whisper was all I could manage.

He reached down and felt my forehead. "Jesus!" he exclaimed, "You're hot, all right. Let me get the thermometer."

"Aspirin," I added, and he walked off, nodding. He returned with something he put in my mouth—the thermometer, I guess—and while it cooked, he handed me a couple of small, white pills. "Mmm-mm!" I objected, with my mouth closed tightly around the thermometer, "Mmm." ('No, Marc! More.')

Somehow, though, he translated my M-talk. "You want more than two?"

I nodded weakly, and he went to get more little white pills.

In a few moments, while I gulped down my four aspirin with a glass of water, he read my temperature, "102.6°," he announced. "That's *very* high, Kerry." I merely closed my eyes, aspirin now ingested, and nodded weakly. "You need to stay in bed."

"No shit," I croaked, opening my eyes, "I ain't goin' nowhere."

He regarded me, as I regarded him. "Last night did it." He made it sound like a sagely proclamation.

I chided him, whispering hoarsely, “What was your first clue?” It seemed pretty obvious to me.

“You rest, now,” he ordered, frowning, and left the bedroom. Normally, I enjoyed his company, but then, feeling as badly as I did, I wanted nothing more of life than to go back to sleep. And sleep.

• • •

After I got Kerry her aspirin, and satisfied myself she would likely live, I went out to the kitchen finally to get a cup of coffee. I was worried for her, but more than that I felt a great deal of relief. She was sick—obviously—and I was going to have to take good care of her, but she was *home*. At home.

I sipped my coffee and thought what to do next. Tom would want to know what was going on. I’d been in a complete state of panic the night before, and though we were still on very shaky ground with each other, he deserved to know that everything had come out all right. Rennie, too, but first I needed to call Tom.

“Hey,” I said, when he answered. “It’s me, Marc.”

“Yeah,” he said, indicating he knew who it was. But that was all.

“Kerry’s back.”

“That so?” He sounded like he didn’t want to talk to me, but I ignored it.

“Yeah. She called me not too long after I talked to you last night, and I went and picked her up.”

"Where was she?"

"You know that little park that's right in downtown Buckhead?"

"Not really, but it doesn't matter." He definitely sounded irritated. So what.

"Well, anyway," I was losing interest, and quickly, "she's back, but she's pretty sick this morning."

"Hangover?" he asked, and I could have slugged him.

"No." I sighed, mentally. "The flu, probably. She has a temperature of 102.6, and says she aches all over."

"It's the flu." He coughed. "It's been going around, lately. One of the guys at the studio had it last week."

"How long was he sick?"

"If it's the same stuff Tim had, it lasts about three days, I think."

"Well," I had lost any desire to continue the conversation, "I just wanted to let you know she was home."

"OK." He paused. "No rehearsal, then, this week. OK?"

"Fine," I said, and hung up without waiting for his response.

Kerry's illness must have been the 'flu' Tom said was going around, since she remained quite sick right through Thursday. In fact, Thursday was by far the worst day, as far as her fever went.

I did my best to take care of her. Mostly, though, all I did was feed her aspirin and Seven-Up, and try to get some food into her at least once a day. She wasn't ever very hungry,

and most of what I set out for her went uneaten. Chicken noodle soup seemed to be the thing she tolerated best. So I fed her *lots* of chicken noodle soup. I expected her to sprout feathers any time, but since she was at least eating *something* I was a little encouraged and relieved.

She stayed in bed the whole time. When she got out of bed at all, to go to the bathroom or something, I had to help her, and I really sympathized with how badly she must have felt. She had a continual high fever, despite the aspirin. At times it went past 103 degrees, and on Thursday evening it topped 103.8. I was determined if it went past 104 she was headed for the hospital. Perhaps I should have taken her, anyway, but it never got that high. Thankfully.

I spent a lot of time during the day mopping her forehead with a cold, wet washcloth. Most of the time she barely knew me, and though I tried to talk to her, occasionally, she was too sick to follow the conversation. I really worried about her. It was the first time she'd ever been sick since I'd known her. Occasionally, I'd felt punk for a couple of days, and missed work while Kerry played nursemaid to me, but she'd never had so much as a snuffle. Just one of those lucky people who are *never* sick, it seems. Well, almost never.

Though I sympathized with her, my sympathy only went so far. I believed she had brought her illness upon herself, and for the most part deserved it, but even so, it's hard to look at someone who must feel as though death can't be far away, and who is probably wishing it would just get there and be over with. For the entire four days, she remained in bed, huddled shivering under the covers, and burned with a scary, high fever.

The one good thing about Kerry being sick was that she didn't smoke or drink anything. I would not have allowed it, anyway. She drank too much. She smoked too much. She did *everything* too much. There was no such thing as a low gear when it came to *the girl*. She was

either going ninety miles an hour, or stopped dead up to her axles in the mud. And after the trauma of Christmas and all the anguish and recriminations, it was good for both of us to get away from the world for a while.

I originally had vacation time planned for the week between Christmas and New Year's, so I was able to be home for Kerry, but of course it didn't go exactly as I planned. No matter. Sitting around the apartment all day, watching TV and checking on my sick puppy now and again, gave me a chance to think about things. And it wasn't entirely as though I *wanted* the opportunity to dwell on the stressful and confusing state of my existence. Things had, it seemed, moved very quickly. For me, I had just gotten used to having someone around, again (after so long), and in the process had also become quite attached to them, and had found quite abruptly how tenuous and temporary such an arrangement might be.

It was far too easy to pull the thing down. Kerry had some problems, and despite feeling (and hoping) I could still trust her, I was shaken by her involvement with my best friend Tom Germaine. I had plenty of self-doubts, far too many to let them get out in the open. I thought about her; us; everything, but I was afraid to think too deeply, lest I talk myself out of something.

I was so attracted to her, so taken with her beauty, her surprising musical talent, her sharp wit—and not the least—her nearly insatiable sexual urges and desires. But her ever-present poor self-image and nonstop drinking made her into an arguably beneficial pill almost too bitter to swallow. I wanted her, for many reasons too tangled and twisted to examine, and I rationalized heavily that she was quite possibly the one for me. When I would look in on her, give her aspirin and another Seven-Up; when I would see her sleeping

soundly and comfortably; when I would feel the heat of her fever on her forehead and cool her with a folded washcloth, I renewed love and understanding for her, and promised both of us I'd stick with her.

Then, Thursday night late, after one AM, her fever broke.