

## *Chapter 15*

I awoke, and it was dark. I rolled over and bumped into Marc's warm, sleeping form. I was drenched in sweat, which told me my fever had broken, and when I moved I felt about a thousand percent better. But I was incredibly thirsty. I grabbed my cup, half full of warm, flat Seven-Up, and slid out of the bed. I felt tired and completely wrung out, but the whole body aches and pains of my flu were essentially gone. I shuffled off to the bathroom and got a drink. When I came back Marc was awake, too, and had sat up and turned on his bedside lamp. He squinted at me, frowning.

"Hey," I said, and planted a peck on top his pursed mouth.

He felt my forehead. I was soaked from head to toe, and my hair was damp and plastered to my head. Attractive, I'm sure.

"Your fever must have broken."

"I think so," I said, and came around to my—very damp—side of the bed. "Ugh!" I exclaimed when I felt the spot where I'd been laying, "This whole side of the bed is soaking wet. I'm afraid we're going to have to change it."

He felt around, too. Agreed. "Yeah," he sighed, but didn't evince much enthusiasm, "I wouldn't want to sleep in this wet bed, either."

I patted my damp body, growing chilly despite the warm room temperature. "I need to get rid of this soaked T-shirt and take a shower, too."

"Well, you go get in the shower while I change the bed." He sounded more like he just wanted to go back to sleep, than he did to get up and change the bed.

"I'll help you," I offered.

"That's OK, Kerry." He waved me off with a gesture, "Go take your shower."

When I returned he had finished changing the bed and was just getting comfortable again. I was fully awake, though, and didn't especially want to go back to sleep right away. It seemed, as well, that Marc was also awake, and while I trotted around to my side, swathed in my brand new ankle-length cotton flannel nightgown that was both super-warm and snuggly-comfy, I noticed him scrutinizing me most disturbingly. I say disturbingly because I sensed a tension in the air, and that tension could only be due to one thing. It was my walking out and running away. It was obvious we were going to have to talk about it, and the talking part worried me.

As I climbed in the bed next to my boy, I pretended not to notice how he was looking at me. I hadn't thought of it before, but it was also possible my hair being wrapped up in a towel caught his notice.

"I'll get rid of the towel in a few minutes," I promised.

"It's not the towel," he said. I got ominous vibes, but I didn't sense any anger.

I paused, staring at him just the way he stared at me. I felt *a lot* better, to the point I almost didn't mind facing the music. "I'm sorry, Marc," I began, without any prior explanation.

"I know. You said that, already."

"What do I got to do to make you believe it?"

"I don't know." He looked away, then back. "I'm not really mad, anymore. I'm more just glad to have you back. And I'm also glad you're feeling better."

"Me, too."

"You, too ... what? That you're glad I'm not mad; you're glad to be back; or you're glad to be feeling better?"

"Yes!" I grinned, hoping to lighten the mood.

"You didn't have to run away like that, you know."

I gulped. "I know. But it's so hard for me ..." I gestured in the air, searching for the right words "... I'm not used to having someone who accepts me for what I am. Sometimes I can't believe you could still love me when you know what I've done. If you really knew the truth ..."

"What *is* the truth, Kerry?"

"It's very ... complicated. There are a lot of things about me that I haven't told you. I don't even know if I *could*. It would be too painful. Too difficult."

"Too difficult and painful for whom?"

"*For me!*" My eyes bored into his. "I don't even want to remember my life. I sure as hell don't want to talk about it."

"You don't have to talk about it," he said. "All I'd like to know is why

you walked out on me. I deserve to know that much.”

“I know. You do.” But I didn’t offer any explanation right away.

It was a new thing for me—this talking thing. Since Grandma, I’d never had anyone who would listen to me, and who cared enough to let me say what I wanted, the way I wanted. Grandma was a pretty good listener, I guess, but after she died there was no one left to take her place. For a while I thought Danny listened to me, but I was really only fooling myself. Actually, I don’t know *what* I thought about my ‘relationship’ with Danny. One thing’s for sure, from the perspective of Marc and me, there had been *no* relationship there between Mr. Golden and myself. With Danny Golden I’d never felt more alone or isolated from others. And now with Marc, it was very hard to get used to having someone—having others there—who cared about me as a person and as a friend. I think too many times I pushed Marc away, thinking I needed to protect my feelings and myself. Wrongly, I always assumed he would act or react the way Danny Golden would, but he never did. Of course, no one’s perfect—most of all not *moi*—and though Marc has his temper and his faults, I know I’ve been more than frustrating and infuriating to deal with.

Marc forgives me. Marc has forgiven me so many things I can’t even begin to count them all. I don’t deserve all the love and the affection, the forgiveness and the understanding he’s given me. I can’t even begin to repay him. I don’t feel worthy or equal to the task of returning to Marc what he has given me so freely. And I so much want to love him back just as much and as deeply as he loves me. I haven’t managed it yet, but I keep trying it and keep working on it, so maybe some day I’ll get there. Meanwhile, I live under the shadow of my inadequacies at giving love.

Oh, I’m not talking about the physical part of love. I guess I don’t have any doubts about that. Before Marc, I made it my business to be an expert at physical ‘love’. I suppose it was a kind of defense mechanism against the loneliness and aloneness of my life. I wasn’t *cold* exactly, I just maintained a calm, controlled, professional air that always kept me in control. I tried not to see the faces of the men I knew. I tried to avoid knowing anyone I met. From time to time, and with certain men, I know I fantasized about their feelings for me, and wished and hoped they liked me enough to want to seek something more with me besides the physical, but none of my fantasies were ever realized. If I wished for something, it was a sure sign I wouldn’t get it.

So I don’t know, then, what I expected when I first met Marc. I know I didn’t look at him as if he were a business involvement—a trick, if you will. He didn’t look the type to me, as if there was anything like a certain

'type' who contracted for my kinds of 'services'. He was a cute guy who looked nice and intelligent, and something about him drew me. When I saw him I just had the sudden urge to meet him and introduce myself, though at the time I judged I had no more than a fifty-fifty chance he'd ever call me. When I saw him wandering around Rich's looking lost, a little person deep inside me told me to say something to him. It didn't say *what* to say, just that I should take the opportunity and say *something*.

I'm glad I did. I really didn't expect him to call me, but I wished he would. I didn't know what I was hoping for, but I hoped he would like me. I didn't know what I wanted, but I wanted someone like Marc as much as I wanted out of my life. I didn't think of things like, 'I hope this works out'. I was just a poor, ignorant, white-trash whore with a pretty face and a good body, and deep inside I knew a man like Danny Golden was all I deserved to have. Danny didn't love me—*no!* far from it—but I just knew that his brand of 'love' was what I deserved out of life. Marc Huffman was a handsome, *very* wealthy guy (by my standards, anyway) who would more likely have been interested only in someone from his own social class and standing, than he would me. I was being very impertinent to think I stood as much as a snowball's chance in hell of gaining and holding Marc Huffman's attention. And I think as much as anything else that first Christmas when I was sick in bed, the feeling most prevalent in my mind was *surprise*.

I'd walked out on Marc, and had made such a mess of our Christmas holiday, but at the end of it all he was still there, and he still said he loved me. And I was surprised. I was very, very glad, but he surprised the hell out of me.

I let some minutes pass while he waited for me to answer his question. It was too difficult for me to answer directly, though I really wanted him to understand. I just couldn't face up to it, and it made me very angry and disappointed in myself. Angry and disappointed to the point where, "I don't even know why you're still here," was what I told him, finally.

He looked at me with mock-seriousness, sensing a subtle change in the subject. "I don't know why I'm here, either." He looked very tired to me, as I'm sure he was. "I guess it's probably because I live here."

I only 'humphed' at his smartass line, but noticed he'd not answered my question. Why *was* he still there? I wasn't sure whether to press him on it, or not. I wasn't sure I would be able to accept his answer, regardless. "I still don't know why you put up with me, though," I completed the thought I'd put forth a moment ago.

He looked exasperated, frustrated, very briefly. "You don't know?" he asked, sounding as though he thought I was being stupid. "I'd have thought you would have figured it out by now."

"I *am* pretty stupid, you know." I looked away, feeling every bit as stupid as he'd just insinuated. I don't think he'd meant to put me down, but I had to admit I felt pretty dense. "I'm just a poor, ignorant, white-trash slut." I only modified 'whore' to 'slut' at the last moment, but otherwise it was how I felt.

"You shouldn't put yourself down so much," Marc said, though I was pretending not to hear him. "You're not stupid at all, and you know it, too. And I don't think you're a slut, either," he finished.

I turned back to face him. "I'm stupid when it comes to *you*, buddy." He seemed to want me to continue, since he said nothing. I could see the glinting reflections of the dim lighting in his eyes. He was listening, and paying close attention. I was almost afraid to destroy the moment by opening my mouth again, but there was no more delaying it. I sighed, "I don't understand what you see in me. I don't know why you didn't just kick me out a long time ago. All I do is just fuck things up all the time." I stopped.

"If you're waiting for me to disagree with you," he said, smiling with some ironic amusement, "you'll have to wait a long time."

"I'm trying to be serious, here, asshole!" I shot back. "I really don't understand this."

"What's there to understand?" Marc didn't seem to be offended by my calling him an asshole.

"**Everything!**" I almost wailed. He sat up at my outburst, started to say something, but stopped a moment, seeming to collect his thoughts. I let him.

"It's not just that I'm attracted to you," he began, "because I am—very much. You are by far the most beautiful woman I have ever met. I almost can't believe someone as stunningly beautiful as you is even willing to give me the time of day."

He embarrassed me, "Don't sell yourself short," I grinned. He gave me a stern look that said 'don't interrupt'. "I won't interrupt anymore," I assured him.

He continued, "You call yourself 'an ignorant white-trash slut' and I don't understand why you think that way. *I don't see you that way, at all.* I don't care where you're from. Your past doesn't mean anything to me." He paused, "Can't you see yourself? Can't you hear yourself? You don't look or sound ignorant, or 'white trash,' either. I know you came from a small town, and everyone there drove beat-up pickup trucks, lived in

mobile homes, and worked in the paper mill or the textile mill. *So what? Is that you?*" He stopped, apparently waiting for me to reply. After some seconds, I shook my head. It wasn't me, not anymore. "Who got you out of Alabama? Your Grandma?" I cleared my throat, and shook my head again. No, not Grandma. "You did," he said, and I shrugged agreement. So what? He surveyed me closely. I wondered what he was looking at. "Are you proud of what you did?" he asked.

That was a loaded question. To what was he referring? "What do you mean?" I asked. I had a moment of panic that he was somehow referring to my prostitution, which he shouldn't have known about. But I was just being foolish, how could he possibly know?

"Getting out of Alabama. Are you proud?"

"I guess so ..." I trailed off, momentarily, "It wasn't that big a deal."

"Doesn't matter. You did something about it—you got out. If you were still sitting in a house trailer somewhere in the middle of a red clay field in Bum-Fuck-East-Hell, Alabama, then I'd say you were just ignorant white trash." (And also a slut, too, I suppose.)

"I've never lived in a house trailer, but I had relatives who did." I lied, because I did live in one when I was little, but conveniently chose not to mention it. It didn't matter; it had been so long ago. Ancient history.

"Kerry," he sat up straight, leaned over, and looked me in the eye, "I don't care where you came from. I only care where you are, and *who* you are. Your family and being poor doesn't mean anything to me. I have a family and they have money and it doesn't even mean anything to me, so why should *your* lack of those things mean anything?" I didn't know. "I think you're smart, and you're *very* beautiful, and you seem to like me." He seemed embarrassed at his assumption that I liked him. "That's all I care about."

I sighed, "But I ruined your Christmas."

"You didn't. Christmas morning was very nice." He smiled. I agreed, nodding, it was. He went on, "Later on was a little rough, but we're over that, now."

"You sure?"

"I didn't mind taking care of you while you were sick. In fact," he almost smiled, "I sort of enjoyed it. It was nice to be needed, for a change."

"I *always* need you, buddy!" But I still wanted to know ... "You sure everything's OK, now?"

He just shrugged. I watched him a few minutes, silently thinking. I think he took my question seriously. Eventually, "Kerry, you scared me. When I came back and you were gone ... I couldn't imagine what I'd done or said to make you leave. I was afraid it was my fault, and that I'd lose

you forever and there'd be nothing I could do about it. God, Kerry, *don't ever do that again!* I know you're upset because you think you caused the fight between Tom and me. But—"

"—It was my fault," I said, half-hoping he'd disagree.

"You got that right!" Marc, who'd been sitting up in the bed, gave me a strange, enigmatic look, and laid back to look up at the ceiling.

I was taken aback by the quickness with which he had agreed with me. I guess I *was* to blame, then. And of course, I had no good comeback to it, either. It *was* all my fault. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"About what?"

"That night. You remember ..." I let my statement trail off.

For a few moments, "Oh," was all he said. I waited for him to continue, but his eyes drifted closed and I thought that maybe he had decided not to talk anymore. I closed my eyes, too, and then I heard him speak. "Tom is my best friend. He and I have shared a lot of things over the years." He barked an ironic laugh, "Nothing quite like *this*, but you'd be surprised at some of the things we've done, and the places we've gone, together. That night after the gig was *strange*. Both of us noticed you seemed to be in a really unusual mood the whole evening, and the way you acted after we got up to the lake was certainly no exception. Do you remember what happened that night, there, in front of the fireplace?"

"Of course I do," I replied, thinking he thought I had somehow blacked out. Unfortunately, that hadn't been the case.

He didn't say anything for a few seconds. Then, "Can I ask why?"

"Why I did what I did?" I waited. He nodded. "I'm not sure I know." I half expected a challenge to that, but he was silent. "I was very horny, for one thing. I guess I felt like letting everything hang out, or something, and I didn't want Tom to feel left out. It doesn't make much sense, I know, but that's about the best I can do for an explanation. I *never, ever* wanted to hurt anyone, especially not Sheree. Especially not *you*. I know it was wrong, but I can't go back and change it now. If I could go back and undo what I did, you know I'd do it in a heartbeat. I really like Sheree, and I never wanted to do anything to hurt her. I never wanted to hurt her ..."

"Kerry," he stopped me, "I believe you."

I just wanted to cry. And I hated it. "Can I ask you a question, though?"

"You already have," was the smart-ass reply. I ignored it.

"Why did Tom let me suck his dick?" I didn't know any more elegant way to put it, period. I wished I had known one as soon as I said it, because it had such an awful, sleazy sound to it. Sleazy was what I was used to—before meeting Marc—and if I could have found a way to say it

any better, I would have. I watched Marc's face, trying to sense his reaction and hoping I hadn't done any serious damage to the tenor of our conversation.

"It's a rather long story," he said. He didn't sound offended or upset by my inelegant use of speech. "I'm not sure I know the whole reason, but I don't think it has anything to do with you, directly. Tom is, you should know, very happily married."

"I know that." I think.

"I don't think he thought he was hurting anyone, but I'm not sure he thought too much about it beforehand, either. I think he figured that if you were willing to do it, then he was willing to let you. He just 'conveniently' forgot he was married for a little while, and that was all it took. He could have stopped you anytime, you know."

"I wish he had."

"He wouldn't have let you do what you did if he hadn't wanted you to do it." Yes, that was right, and I hadn't come to realize it before he'd said it. Tom *had* wanted me to do it.

"I know," I said, but I sincerely regretted the incident. "I'm not trying to make any excuses for myself—I know better than that. But we were all three there, and *none* of us stopped me." I thought a moment. "I mean, why didn't *you* stop me?"

"That's simple, Kerry," he said. "I wanted to see what you would do. And I found out."

His words crushed me flat. In my mind I knew what his words meant, and they meant only the worst possible things to me. He found I would do *anything*. How he could know, and *still* love me, humbled but amazed me. My voice was tremulous, tiny, when I finally spoke, "Oh, Marc, I'm *so-oo* sorry!" And I began to cry.

It didn't last very long, though, since I abhor tears so much, but after a few minutes of useless blubbing I wiped my cheeks and cleared my throat. "Did you mean it when you said you loved me?"

"I've meant it every time I've said it."

"Do you *still* love me? Even after what I did?" I feared his answer, somewhat, but I just had to know.

"It's going to take more than this to change my mind." Marc sat up, then, and leaned over to kiss me on the forehead. "Yes, I do. I love you very much."

It bothers the hell out of me, even now, because though I asked him, and he said, I still don't understand why.



When you're a kid in your senior year of high school, just really starting to become an adult, you think you know a lot of things. *Some* things, maybe—maybe not so many—but compared to what you thought when you *really* were a kid, you begin to realize how much you've learned and how much you can do with what you know.

Your reasoning abilities have developed, and your control over yourself and your environment improve to the point where you think you can do almost anything, and you know you're immortal. You'll never die and you can achieve anything.

I thought that way. It's only natural, after all.

Joan Taliaferro was a hard, smooth, tough individual who, during the first six months we dated, I felt totally unable to control. At first, I accepted her leadership role and tolerated it mainly because of the growth and development of our physical—sexual—relationship. Not to be over-rationalizing too much, but that isn't too hard to understand. Sexual desires (and realization of those desires) can be overwhelming and all-consuming to a teenager. From time to time, though, I resented her control and her need to control me. Though, after she showed me how much she liked sex, and that she had a need for things physical and sexual ... As I said, I tolerated and accepted her leading role in the relationship. In the spring, though, I underwent some changes that began to rock the status quo.

I couldn't quite get a handle on what it was that was beginning to bother me. It was just a vague, restless, uneasy feeling that seemed to manifest itself whenever Joan would make a decision for us or whenever she would seem to be just 'ordering' me around. It wasn't her fault—I had permitted it since the fall when we'd begun dating—and in her mind there was no need and no reason for things to change. Truthfully, I wasn't sure, either, of the reasons for my need to have things change. Just that it was there.

We were *very* close. She was almost Jekyll and Hyde, though, with respect to how she acted in school and around others, and how she acted when we were alone. To others, she gave no indication she could have feelings or desires that ran so deep. Since we were always together at school, it was pretty plain we were an item, but she was so cool and aloof even as we walked down the hall together, I'm sure no one uninitiated would have suspected a thing.

What was there to suspect? I don't know. Lots, maybe. This was the mid-seventies, and the old game was still being played. The good girls didn't 'do it,' (even if they *did* 'do it') and the boys' job was to keep making the attempt. The prevailing group consensus of 'Ice Princess' Joan T was that she positively *didn't* 'do it,' and while people weren't sure if I was the type that did, they sort of assumed I would if I had the chance. And so people naturally wondered why I was always following Miss Joan Taliaferro around like a puppy. And by April, so was I.

When we were alone together, on the other hand, Joanie was indeed a warm woman. I believed her when she said she had been totally inexperienced when we began dating—a virgin—but in time she 'got over it'. She had a lot of inner strength and ability to make decisions, and it was her decision to explore and learn all she could about physical love. Fortunately for me, she chose to use me in her education. No, I didn't mind. I learned a lot at the same time, too.

I thought she was beautiful, and considerably more intelligent than me. I don't really know that she was, it just seemed that way. Joan arranged most of our dates, frequently decided where we would go (if anywhere), and when we would return. Most often we just watched TV or listened to the stereo up in her loft. She would pull out the blanket and the pillows, and without asking for my permission, she'd wrap herself around me and we'd get down to the business of pleasing each other.

I learned quickly what it took (essentially) to make a woman happy, but mostly by being compelled to, but she in turn learned what it took to make me happy. I don't think it took nearly as much effort to satisfy me as it did her. I tended to take whatever I got (which wasn't all that bad), but Joan had more stringent and definite ideas about how to be pleased in return. I just did my best, kept my mouth shut, and figured it could be a whole lot worse.

Until April, that is.

I do keep asking myself, even now, if I ever loved Joan. At times, and from time to time, I think yes. But what do I mean, at times? Isn't love something deeper and stronger, something that comes to us only with time and then abides? It's supposed to be that way, I know, but at the age of seventeen—almost eighteen—I think I did the best I could. I *loved* her love-making, and I enjoyed her quiet smile and occasional dry wit. To me she seemed incredibly beautiful, but in reality, not *so* very beautiful.

She was one of the prettier girls in school, but not the homecoming queen type. She might not have even made it had she been a popular

socialite. Which she wasn't. But did I love Joan? I wanted to love her—maybe needed to love her—and as I said, from time to time I *did* love her, but I've gone the long way around to say 'no'. Compared to how I feel now about Kerrilyn, the answer has to be no.

Why did I love Kerry, then? Why do I still love Kerrilyn, now? That's hard to say. She doesn't try to control me all the time, as Joan had. Joan was so strong and independent I often felt like an extra appendage. Kerrilyn needs me, and wants me, and because of her past, and all her pain and hurt, I still feel a very strong need to care for her and to protect her. Kerrilyn can still be a trying individual, to be sure, and not all our times have been good times, but it warms me so to see the sparkle in her eyes and feel the depth of her pleasure when we kiss. Joan only used me, and for her own reasons, but Kerrilyn at times seems to lose herself in me, and become no more than a reflection of me. It's scary to have such a responsibility, but I cherish that she can give it to me. Kerrilyn needs me, not to use me, but because there's something missing inside her that it seems I can supply. It's hard to identify the missing ingredient, but her need is much, much more than casual.

Ah, 'casual'. That's a good word for Joan's need.

I'm not trying to be unfair to Joan—not at all! I believe she really liked me. I believed her when she said I was a cute guy and all that stuff, and I believed her when she said she loved making love to me. Not *with* me—to me. Even so, it's still hard to view my physical relationship with Joan as anything less than satisfactory. We were both too young and inexperienced to know any better, to appreciate anything more adult or emotionally involved, and flying in the face of most of my friends, I was 'getting it' much more often than any of them. I was shallow, self-serving, brash, selfish and ignorant, and I was having one helluva good time. And not to be belaboring the point, until April.

April equals spring break. A whole week off just when the dogwoods and the azaleas are in bloom, and when the pine trees are spreading their powdery yellow pollen all over everything. I love north Georgia in April. Spring is definitely sprung by then. The days are getting warm, and lots and lots of trees and flowers are in bloom. And then to top it off, they let you out of school a whole week.

Some of my classmates and friends, Tom Germaine included, were planning to take the week and head down to Panama City Beach. The basic group consisted of Tom, his girlfriend Sandy Beauchamp (pronounced BEECH-um), Robbie Callander, the lead guitar player in Tom's (and my) band at the time, his girlfriend (Dixie, I think her name

was), Larry Frazier, another guitar player in the band, and Rick Fisher—just a friend. The last two tried, but could not get their girlfriends to go with them. Tom had arranged a three bedroom condo on the beach, and Joan and I were definitely invited. In fact, I had put about \$200 down as a deposit and had no great desire to miss out on my investment. But it seemed as far as Joan was concerned, we had a ‘small’ problem.

Joan didn’t like Sandy Beauchamp. Sandy *was* the homecoming queen type: a cheerleader; a member of the student council; class secretary; former chairperson of the prom committee; et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. You could puke out your guts with the things she did or with which she was involved. Tom Germaine had been the starting quarterback on our football team—and first team All-State, too—and so quite naturally, he and Sandy were ‘appropriate’ for each other. Despite Tom’s quasi-hero status as a heavy-duty jock, he *is* an intelligent guy and we’ve always been very good friends. (I had tried playing football, as a wide receiver—and I wasn’t too small for it—but I never developed a strong liking for getting clobbered every time I touched the ball. Instead, I just went to the games and sat in the stands. Mostly with Joan.) But Joan didn’t get along with Sandy. Sandy didn’t get along with Joan. They could be civil toward each other, if required, but Tom was always telling Sandy just to lay off Joan, and keep her opinions to herself. Sandy thought I was an OK guy, as far as non-jock ‘nerdophiles’ went, and quite possibly almost an acceptable individual because I played drums in *Tom’s* band. (*Italics hers.*) Sandy thought Tom walked on water, thought Joan walked on me, and rarely gave up an opportunity to trade catty barbs with the Ice Princess.

Sandy was the only person I know who *ever* called Joan that to her face. On occasion, I had let slip with Joan’s unflattering nickname, but mostly only when teasing her. She seemed to tolerate me, well enough, but absolutely detested Sandy’s condescending manner and hyper-attention to social status. In Sandy’s estimation, Joan came from a backwoods family (from South Carolina, no less!) and was only one step up from white trash. What might have raised Joan above being white trash was the way she dressed—nicely—and her very well enunciated aristocratic southern accent. Sandy’s opinion notwithstanding, Joan was *anything* but white trash.

Joan failed to see what Tom saw in Sandy. To her, Sandy was a worthless social ladder-climbing tramp—a frigid slut (an oxymoron?) who only cared for herself and her material possessions. Sandy was blond, about three inches taller than Joan, and very pretty (of course). Joan was, to me, no less beautiful, but Sandy certainly had nothing to be worried about. Sandy had much larger breasts than Joan, and though we had

never discussed it (are you kidding?), I think Joan privately envied Sandy's shape.

Joan felt intellectually superior to almost everyone. She never mentioned how I fit into the picture, but she decried Sandy's IQ on many, many occasions. Yeah, Sandy was 'that dumb, blond, frigid slut-bitch' Tom dated, and when I suggested that Joan and I join the whole group down in Panama City for the week, she and I had a 'discussion' about Sandy Beauchamp.

"Hmmm," she said, "Panama City, you say?"

I thought it was a perfect setup. My mother was elsewhere in Florida, and there was no one else at home. Joan's parents were home, but she'd made it clear she could go where she wanted and do what she wanted—with whom and at any time she wanted. If that happened to include spending the week in a condo in Panama City with me, then it was OK with them. Presumably, her parents knew about our physical relationship, but their opinions simply were not a factor. What was much more a 'factor' were the people with whom we were supposed to go. More likely the specific person. Namely Miss Cassandra Ellen Robillard Covington Beauchamp. (I swear to God, she really did have five names!)

"You say it will be you, Tom, Robbie, Rick and Larry? Robbie's girlfriend Dixie, and *Sandy* Beauchamp?" She frowned when she mentioned the *slut's* name. "Eight of us, in a three bedroom condominium?" As if that were a problem.

"It's the biggest place we could find."

"I'm sure it is," she continued frowning. "What will the sleeping arrangements be? I presume you and I will get one bedroom, Robbie and Dixie another, and I suppose Tom and *Sandy* will have the third." (She always said 'Sandy' with a certain gagging disgust in her voice, as if she'd just swallowed a small moth.) I nodded, she continued, "Where will Rick and Larry sleep?"

"There'll probably be a couch and a love seat in the living room. And even if there isn't," I reasoned, "they can probably just sleep on the floor."

"I suppose they could." Joan was still frowning, and thinking. "How many bathrooms does this place have?"

"I don't know," I said. "Probably two, but maybe only one."

"That could be a problem."

"Why?" I asked.

"The three of us women will seriously get in each other's way. It's difficult enough to get ready in a strange place without having to share the bathroom with others."

"What's wrong with sharing?"

“With Sandy Beauchamp?” She seemed to think my question almost ludicrous, “Can you really imagine us rubbing shoulders to put on makeup?”

I thought I could see where this was leading. “Look,” I told her, “can’t you get along with her for just one week while we’re all down there together? Tom has talked to Sandy, and she’s agreed to suspend the ‘feud’ for the week.”

She gave me an ironic look, “Do you really believe we could be *friends* for a week? I don’t think that’s very likely, at all.”

“So what are you saying?”

She changed her tack. “Look Marc,” and put her hand on my arm, “I’d really enjoy taking this trip with you, and I don’t mind sharing living quarters with your other friends, but *Sandy* and I are like oil and water—we simply don’t mix. I’m afraid she won’t be able to hold her tongue, and in that event I would *not* be looking forward to having to hold mine. If we were to get into another argument as we did when we went to that Christmas party at Tom’s house, it would be very unpleasant for everyone.”

I was getting irritated. “So, I ask you again, what are you saying?”

Joan seemed to think she had already said what she was saying. But if so, it was just a touch too subtle for me. I thought she was saying ‘no,’ but she had not actually used the word, so it was hard to tell. When I repeated my question, she seemed to be a little exasperated—as was *I*—but she didn’t say anything right away. Instead, she just looked at me a minute. I waited.

Joan finally spoke: “I wish you had told me about this trip *before* you made the arrangements.”

“Why?” I asked her. “What difference would that have made?”

“It could have saved you the effort.”

“What effort? Maybe you mean the money. *I* put the \$200 down on the place.”

“Oh,” she seemed surprised, “I didn’t know you’d paid the deposit.”

“Get real,” I snorted, “no one else has that kind of money.”

“How were they expecting to pay for this trip, if none of them have any money?”

“The condo costs \$400 for the week.” I did some mental calculations: “Rick and Larry are paying \$25 apiece; Robbie is paying \$100; Tom is paying \$100. I’m paying the rest.”

“That’s awfully generous of you, I must say.”

“We planned this trip a long time ago, and I didn’t feel like telling either Rick or Larry to cough up another \$25. We originally thought the

place was going to run around \$250, and \$25 was all they could afford. Since they were willing to sleep on the floor, I thought it was only fair."

"But since this condominium is \$400, and not \$250, you end up picking up the difference." She shook her head, "It doesn't seem very equitable, to me."

"These guys are my friends."

"I know that, Marc," Joan said, "and I admire your loyalty." Her voice was tinged with more than a small touch of irony.

"So, are you telling me you don't want to go?" I pressed.

"It's not that I don't want to go," she seemed to be looking for a way to let me down easy. "It's that I don't think we would have a very pleasant time."

"How do you know that? Are you psychic or something?"

"I don't want to argue with you. If you had told me about it before now, we could have avoided all this discussion."

"*What* discussion, Joan?" I launched. "**What discussion is that?**" I was getting pretty fried—angry—and my voice raised with my blood pressure.

"**Don't get angry with me!**" She snatched her hand away from my arm, then she lowered her voice, "I'm not the one who put \$200 down on a condominium in Florida without asking my girlfriend."

I became quieter, too, though not less frustrated, "We talked about going away for spring break, so I don't see why I should have cleared this with you, beforehand."

"Well," she smiled, sardonically, "I thought we would go to Clemson for the week. I've been wanting to see my relatives, and you've never met the rest of my family."

"Why would I want to do *that*?" I was more than a little surprised.

"Clemson is a very boring place, especially during spring break when everyone with any brains is at the beach. The place will be empty."

"See?" she smiled, suddenly thinking it made her idea all the better, "We'll have it all to ourselves!"

"How boring, Joan."

She was taken aback by my attitude. I believe it had never occurred to her that I might have ideas or plans of my own. She had just assumed I'd be available and willing to go with her—to take her—to visit her relatives in Clemson, South Carolina. She was used to making all the decisions, and she naturally assumed this particular one was also hers to make, as well. Maybe it was a mistake on my part to pay all that money without asking her first, but I never would have thought she'd be against the idea. I couldn't imagine (and still can't) how anyone could choose a landlocked

little college town over the beach. The beach had sand, waves, beer, bodies, bands—everything a high school senior could want. Clemson might have beer, but the bands and the bodies would be in Myrtle Beach or Panama City. Boring!

Joan hadn't expected to argue with me. She disliked it, in general, and though she was used to getting her way, she didn't really want to upset me over the whole episode. Ironically, she wasn't even considering the feasibility of going to the beach with me (and all the others). She was perhaps less certain of going to Clemson for the week, but the beach was definitely out.

She frowned in several minutes of quiet consternation before she spoke. I just sat there with my arms folded and steamed. The longer she sat silent, the less likely I viewed our chances of going to the beach. And I distinctly hated it.

She broke the silence with, "Can you get your \$200 back?"

What? My fears were answered, and the answer wasn't good. "No," I said. "In fact, the deposit is nonrefundable. If I asked the guys to pay me back, they probably won't be able to rent the place at all. But that doesn't matter."

"Why not?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Because I plan to be there," I said, with determination. "And I want you to be there with me, too."

"I wish you'd asked me about it beforehand, Marc."

"Why, Joan?" I knew the answer. I just wanted to hear it. "What else are you doing that week that you can't go to Florida with me?"

"Nothing, since you've put the stops on going to Clemson."

"Well, come on then. Let's go to Florida for the week."

She said nothing right away. It may have been because she was considering whether to relent and agree to go with me, but it also may have been for some other reason. I couldn't tell what she was thinking, but I really wished I could. She sighed. "I'd like to go with you, I really would."

"But—"

"—But," she continued, "I'm afraid *Sandy* Beauchamp would make it very, *very* unpleasant for us."

"So what are you saying?"

"You've asked me that several times, now."

I rounded on her, loudly, "And you don't seem to be able to give me a fucking straight answer!"

"Don't yell at me!" she rounded on me, then, too, and just as loudly. "I'm not the one who made these plans. You can't make this my fault—I

won't accept it!"

"The fact is," I stood up, "You won't accept fucking anything!" Joan only looked up at me. I went on, "I've put up with you running everything long enough."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm going to Florida in two weeks, whether *you* go or not."

She only shrugged, apparently thinking it would be OK with her.

I continued my thought, "And if you don't go with me, then we're through."

"That sounds like an ultimatum, to me." She smiled, quite ironically. I don't know what she thought. That I lacked the fortitude to actually go through with something like that, or that she didn't believe I was serious.

"Well, Marc, this is quite a sticky situation in which you've placed me. I'm not sure how I should respond."

"Respond any fucking way you like—"

She cut me off. "—Oh! You can be sure I *will*." Joan stood up, then. She started to say something, but then changed her mind. She paced a moment, walking away from me, but then turned. "I love you, Marc Huffman." Though we'd told each other that many times before, this time I felt fairly sure she might have meant it. "I don't want us to break up over something like this."

"We don't have to ..." I started, but stopped.

"I *know*. But you have to understand how serious it is for you to be leveling an ultimatum at me. You leave me little choice in the matter." She turned away, paced a minute, turned back. "I could capitulate, but I don't think it would be the right thing to do."

"It wouldn't?"

"No, it wouldn't."

"Why not?" I felt I could pursue this line of questioning safely. After all, I was goddamned used to capitulating to Joan. I was pretty sure I could ask her to, just this one time.

"Well," she folded her arms, "you're *not* going to tell me what to do, for one thing."

"That's bullshit, Joan," I waved my hand at her, "I'm not trying to tell you what to do. I've only asked you to go somewhere with me."

"And if I choose not to go, you'll break up with me." She took a couple of steps toward me, "Is that it?"

I had to think before answering. "This is important to me."

She smiled, but it wasn't at all because she was happy. "It *better be*," she said, "Because I'm *not* going." She looked down, and her 'smile' faded abruptly, "So I guess this means we're breaking up."



I was very glad when my fever broke late Thursday night. It meant Friday would not be as terrible as the rest of the week had been. But it wasn't, as it turns out, much fun either. First of all, I spent the whole morning wanting a cigarette very badly, but Marc refused to let me have one. I begged and begged, and pleaded and pleaded—even whined hideously at times—but he was adamant. Not while I was convalescing, he said. I guess I had to agree, but even so, I spent most of the day tied up in a monstrous nicotine fit. And I really wanted a drink, too. The day was so ultra-boring while I sat there watching TV with my buddy, I found myself really wishing I could relax, kick back, and chill out with a nice scotch, or two. But no, he insisted, no cigarettes, and no booze. It was almost unbearable.

Mel Howe came by about five o'clock in the afternoon. I didn't know anyone even knew I was sick, but obviously I was mistaken. At first I was certain I didn't want to see her—see *anyone*—but initially she brought some pretty good (and then some very bad) news with her. In a few minutes I almost warmed to having a visitor. Almost.

Marc and I were quietly watching some stupid TV program when there was a knock at the door. He jumped up to see who it was; I just tried to wait patiently. I still felt pretty puny, as they say, so I stayed on the couch and tried to find something interesting in the program. In a few moments Marc returned, with Mel Howe right behind him.

"Look who's here," he said as they both came into the living room. I was comfortably ensconced there on the couch, my sweat-socked little feet propped up on the ottoman.

"Hey there," she smiled. "How're you doing?" She just came right in and flounced down on the couch next to me.

I stared dumbly back at her, thinking something along the lines of 'Go away. I don't know how you found me, but *go away*'. Mel, however, caught my dour look.

"What's the matter, Kerry? You don't seem very glad to see me." She had the clean, invigorating smell of the outside about her, and I watched silently, stoically, as she unzipped her coat. She pulled it open and leaned forward, hands gripping the knees of her tight black jeans. Her dark eyes seemed to sparkle as she smiled, but I was in no mood for smiles. "You look pretty miserable, girl." I think she was teasing. "How do you feel?"

I guess I was supposed to answer, but I just wanted her to go away. "Thanks for noticing how miserable I look, Mel, but I *feel* better. A lot

better, actually." I probably looked worse than I felt. Of course, I had taken a shower the night before, but I had no makeup on, and my hair was just brushed back and fastened into a simple ponytail. I was wearing my nice, new flannel nightgown, and Marc had lent me his cushy white terrycloth robe and a pair of heavy wool sweat socks. But even if I was quite comfortable, and technically presentable, I still didn't want anyone to see me.

Mel turned to Marc, since I seemed rather stony. "I saw your nephew the other day," she commented. "You know, the one who works in the bank."

"Rennie," Marc replied, nodding. Was he smiling?

"Right." *She* was smiling at him, though.

I reacted to it. What was that? Was that a twinge of something? Jealousy, maybe? Could it be possible? Mel's smile was too warm and radiant for my tastes. I liked the girl, and despite her faults—and my own, of course—we were a lot alike, and shared many of the same interests. And of course, one of those interests seemed to be one Marc Huffman, drummer extraordinaire and all around good guy.

Mel was saying something to Marc, and I hadn't caught all of it "... Said you never call him, anymore."

"I know," Marc said, and was *he* smiling! Whoof! I felt burned, and then I realized the reason I was flushed. It was from my extreme jealous reaction to Mel Howe's presence. Since I had grown so used to having Marc all to myself, I was having one humongously difficult time sharing him, now. Marc went on, "He and Frank came by Christmas Day, and they even brought over some presents. I hadn't even thought about getting them anything, so it was a little embarrassing."

Mel grinned, and her eyes twinkled in my direction. "What did they think of Kerry?" She then addressed me, "Did you meet Marc's ebullient nephew?"

Ebullient? I thought. What the hell does that mean? Damn it, I felt stupid, and it wasn't fair. I put my feet on the floor, and sat up straight. Mel Howe had made me angry, and I wasn't going to take it lying down (or even lying back). I didn't have to put up with her shit, so I just stared at her. Stony, like I said.

Mel's smile faded slightly as she observed my unhappy stare. "What's the matter, Kerry?"

But Marc answered for me. "She doesn't like being sick." How nice of him to speak for me—like I'm an idiot or something. He amplified, "I don't think she's in a very good mood."

"You don't know *shit* about my mood, buddy!" I told him, with

perhaps more vehemence than intended. One thing about me, I can't hide my feelings when I talk. They all come out in the tone of my voice.

Marc had no comment, but Mel did. "I don't like being sick, either. In fact," she continued, still smiling, "I probably hate it as much as you do." I considered framing a sharp retort, but was a hair too slow. Mel chimed, "You'll feel better, maybe, when I tell you what's going on." She looked to Marc, then back to me. "I talked to Tom, this morning." So? I thought. "He said we got that gig at the Trackside Tavern, starting a week from Monday." (The Trackside Tavern was the place we'd just played before Christmas, where the owner was real happy with us. All right, this was good news.) "The owner hired us back for another two whole weeks, and said if we were good he'd ask us back again next month, too."

"That's great," Marc said. He sounded glad to get the news, but not *too* glad. But it was good news. "Anything else lined up, like in three weeks when this gig is over?"

"Tom didn't say." Mel leaned back, "I think we need to practice next week. A lot. Can y'all make it Tuesday and Thursday nights?" Marc looked in my direction, obviously considerate of my state of health. I merely shrugged. Marc then gave our assent by nodding to her. "OK, then." She looked at us both, "How about Saturday afternoon, then, too?"

"This Saturday?" Marc asked.

"If possible."

"It's New Year's Eve," he stated.

"I know," she shrugged. 'So what,' she was saying. "Did you have something planned?"

"No. Nothing special, but that's a lot of rehearsal time." Marc folded his arms. "Why are we doing this?" Yeah, I agreed, silently, why are we doing this?

"We barely have enough material to get through four sets, let alone five. Tom said, and I agree, that we need to learn another five or six songs by next Monday."

"How can we do that?" I spoke up finally. "There's no way I can learn that many songs in a week."

Mel assured me, "Don't worry, Kerry. You can do it."

Yeah, right. "How?" I asked her.

"We'll do the best we can," was her reply. It was a complete cop-out answer.

"But that doesn't help *me*," I groused.

Mel was not to be undone. She was in a good mood, and she wasn't going to let me ruin it for her. "Relax, Kerry! We need you to get better so you can be at rehearsal tomorrow afternoon. Don't worry about it. We're

gonna knock 'em out!" She grinned, hoping I'd warm up and get into a better mood. Wrong.

I pounced, "Why the fuck did you come by here, today, anyway?" I know I sounded like a sullen child.

"Tom told me you were sick." Her smile didn't fade.

I looked over at Marc, pointedly. "And how did Tom know I was sick?" Because only Marc could have told him.

And Marc answered, "I called him Monday and told him what was going on—that you were sick with the flu, so he wouldn't worry."

"So, what else did you tell him?" I was like a snapping turtle, biting people's heads off with each *snap!* of my mouth.

Marc put up his hands, "Look, Kerry, we're all your friends. You don't need to be embarrassed or upset about anything." Then he grinned, "We all know you, but we like you, anyway."

Mel grinned, too. "That's right. We don't care if you are a royal pain in the ass and the Bitch Princess of Atlanta. We still like you. Why, I don't know, but we do."

I almost had to smile, but I wanted to be over this! Marc excused himself, then, apparently to go to the bathroom. When he was out of the room, Mel leaned toward me.

She lowered her voice, as if anyone else was there to hear. "Don't blow a gasket," she said, "but Tom told me some other things, too."

At first I had no idea what she was referring to. At least, I didn't see how she could possibly know anything. Tom would not have said anything about *that*, would he? "I don't understand. *What* other things did Tom tell you?" I fairly scowled. Mel merely looked at me, rather wide-eyed. Other than the too-apparent whiteness of her eyes, her expression was hard to read. "What the fuck are you talking about?" I finished.

"Remember what I said to you about Tom?" She leaned back. "At the gig, a few weeks ago?"

"No," I lied. "Refresh my memory."

"Remember I told you that I didn't want things to get out of hand? Hmm? That maybe Tom wanted to get a little too ... friendly?" She held a strange expression, almost smiling, but not quite. A look of irony, perhaps. "Surely you remember."

I was disgusted. She knew. Why, or how (other than Tom Germaine telling her) I couldn't guess, but I *did* know what she was talking about. Of course I did. It had been the subject of many of Marc's and my conversations over the past several days. But I thought it was just between the three of us, Marc, Tom, and me. Now, quite obviously, it was not. And Melinda Louise Howe was probably the *last* person to whom I would

have said *anything*. Ever. If Tom told her about ‘that night,’ then I was sunk. They were going to kick me out of the band now, for sure. Finished. Kaput. Sayonara, sweet-cheeks. You are *outta here!*

Mel repeated, “You remember?” and she leaned toward me again, her face a little too close for comfort.

I felt ready to choke. I cleared my throat, feeling—of all things!—tears well up inside. And that made me very, very angry. It also made me want to deny everything. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” I sounded about as furious as I was. If I were prone to violence, I might have punched her in the face. But I’m not, so I didn’t. It wouldn’t have helped my case, anyway.

“Don’t worry, Kerry,” she was trying to calm me, to assuage my anger. I wasn’t buying any of it, though. “Nothing’s going to happen. Tom and I talked about y’all’s ‘little indiscretion’ and decided we can handle it ‘in the family’.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” I continued my absolute denial of the obvious.

Mel stood up, tried a different tack. “I wanted to keep from breaking up the band, you know. And we *are* a damn good band.” She paced. Marc, who might have saved me, was nowhere to be found. “It’s not your fault—what happened. I guess I was right about Tom, as it turns out, and it may just be that by my saying something to you beforehand, I actually *caused* the whole incident. I don’t know ...” she shrugged “... it doesn’t matter. Tom fucked up. Royally. He went and did a big no-no, and right now he’s paying the price for it.”

“*What?*” my voice cracked, not much more than a whisper.

She raised an eyebrow, looked knowingly at me. “He told Sheree about it this morning.”

Oh God! I thought. The worst possible thing has happened. Sheree is going to hate me forever. I’ll never be able to show my face around her, again. Goddamn it! I **did not** want this to happen. “Why?” I asked her, my voice wavering, and cracking more as I struggled to hold back tears.

“Why—what?” Mel came back to sit next to me, again. “Why did he do it, or why did he tell Sheree about it?”

I could only whisper, choking. “Why did he tell Sheree? And even more, why did he tell *you?*” That last was a wail.

“Well,” she said, very cool and calm, “He told Sheree because he had to, I suppose. His big argument with Marc on Christmas day was a little too conspicuous to keep quiet forever. He told me because I’m a girl, I suppose, and he needed me to talk to you.”

Girl, indeed! It didn’t quite compute with me. I cleared my throat. “I

don't buy it." Was there a conspiracy going on, here? Did Marc know about it? So I asked, "Does Marc know why you're here?"

Instead of answering, she said, "Kerry, babe, this is tough for us. We've all fucked up here, and now we're doing our best to keep things together. You see, this band is really, really good. I don't think you quite realize just how good we are."

"I *know* we're good." I hung my head, but she still didn't answer my question.

"Well, we don't want to lose you."

I looked up. "But, you haven't lost me." I pleaded with my eyes, but she looked at me as if she thought I was lying. I didn't *feel* like I was lying.

She played what she thought was a trump card. "So what was that stunt you pulled Sunday night—Christmas night—when you packed your things and ran away from home?"

"I didn't 'run away'," I objected, gaining strength, "I'm not some teenage kid who was trying to run away from mommy and daddy."

"Kerry, it was a childish stunt, anyway." She pointed her finger at me, "You act like a child—you get treated like a child."

I resented her tone of voice, and her finger. I straightened, "You're not my fucking mother, so you can just *can* all this parental bullshit! I don't have to listen to it."

"You're right, I'm not your mother, but I am one of your better *friends*." She stood up, again. "I know you don't believe it, but I care about you. *We all do*."

I felt betrayed. "So what's your point?"

"My *point* is that you've helped cause a truly monstrous problem in the band, and I'm trying my best to do some serious damage control before the whole fuckin' thing just falls apart like it was never there. Goddamn it, Kerry! It's bad enough we have to deal with egos the size of Danzinger's, and with all the alcohol, drugs, and other shit we do. The last thing we need is some sideline hanky-panky going on. If Tom doesn't learn to keep his dick in his pants—"

"—I thought you said Tom was expendable," I interrupted. "That we could replace him."

She only shrugged, "I changed my mind. I decided it wasn't worth the risk to find out if Marc would quit if we kicked Tom out."

"Who's this 'we'?" I had to ask. Mel waved my question off. I decided it was probably rhetorical, anyway. It's not like she had the power, or anything. I went on with my thought, "He would, you know. Marc would quit in a heartbeat." It seemed fairly certain to me.

"Yes, he would," she agreed. "And if Marc quit, so would you." She

turned toward me, "Even *I* would tell you to stay with Marc. You'd be a fool to give him up."

There were a few moments of silence as I digested her advice. Eventually, I said, "You like Marc, don't you?" I knew the answer to the question, I thought, but I just had to ask, anyway.

She shook her head, "It's not what you think."

"I don't know ... what *do* I think?"

"I don't know *what* you think," she said, "but Marc and I are such different people. We'd never be able to get along as lovers."

"Uh-huh," I replied, skeptical. Lovers, indeed!

But she was quick to change the subject. "That's not what I came here to talk about. I came to tell you to relax and hang in there, now that the cat's finally out of the bag. Sheree knows what happened."

"How can I *relax* about it?" I was hugely dismayed at the thought that Sheree was thinking the worst possible things of me. She'd hate me, and I wouldn't blame her. Hell, I hated myself, so how could I not think she would hate me? "Sheree probably hates me, now."

Mel barked a laugh, "I don't think she blames you for what happened, at least not entirely. She doesn't hate you. She's a pretty smart girl. And she also knows Tom, too."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She probably thinks it's *her* fault."

"That's bullshit! It's not her fault *at all*."

Mel just shrugged. And there was a silence of several moments. During that time I sat there looking at Mel, and she stood there looking at me. And I wondered where Marc was.

"Sheree wanted to come see you, today." Mel had taken out a cigarette, but hadn't lit it. She was just sitting there, tormenting me unwittingly, holding that unlit cigarette. "But I talked her out of it."

"You talked to her?"

"At Tom's request." She waved her cigarette around. I swear she was trying to tempt me, and it was working, too. "Sheree and I aren't the best of friends, for a variety of reasons, but I've become a sort of unofficial marriage counselor."

I snorted, "I'm surprised she talked to you. If I were her, I'd tell you to fuck off and mind your own business."

She raised her eyebrows, "Oh, my involvement is strictly by request. Otherwise, I'd be doing just as you said—minding my own fucking business. Of course, since I'm in this band, some of this *is* my business." She looked me over, pointedly. "I want you to believe I'm serious about this thing. This is the best band I've ever been in—*bar none*—and we're all

getting too old to keep starting over, and starting over, and starting over ... I'm telling you, it can be really, fucking frustrating, sometimes." She paused, apparently considering whether to go on, or not. "I don't know what you've heard about me, and I don't particularly care, either, but I have somewhat of a reputation." I knew. "I was almost famous for going after the guys I played with." She laughed and it sounded ironic, not as though she thought anything was funny. "I'm very emotional about my music, and it seems I always transfer those emotions to the guys I play with—play *music* with, that is. I know what I want, and I don't give up until I get it. Once or twice I even went after a married guy, and I can say—with no pride at all—that I've been responsible for at least one divorce."

"So you've been 'involved' with Tom, then." I thought I'd reached the correct conclusion.

"No," she sighed, surprised I'd think that, "Tom is *not* one of the lucky guys."

"Lucky?" I thought it a strange choice of words.

Mel only smiled, catlike and devious, "I thought I told you, I *like* guys."

I dismissed her braggadocio. "Was Marc one of the 'lucky' guys, then?"

She shook her head, slowly, but not to say no. "That was a long time ago, Kerry. We're both over it. You have nothing to worry about, with me. Trust me; I want you to have Marc."

"You just want Tom, is all."

She waved her hand, dismissing my assertion, "I don't want *anyone* in this band—not even Troy Danzinger." She thought a second, then shook her head, not smiling. "No. *Especially* not Troy Danzinger."

I thought it unusual she used his real name. "What's the matter," I pried, "are you not getting along with our guitar player?"

"He's OK," she replied, resentment not coloring her voice. "He's just *not* the kind of guy I would marry."

Marriage? "Who said anything about getting married?"

"No one." She seemed to want the subject dropped. So I did.

"What's going to happen to Sheree and Tom?" I asked, hoping her answer wouldn't confirm my fears. I felt I probably caused a breakup between them, and if so, I wasn't sure how I would live with myself after that.

"I don't think they're going to get a divorce, if that's what you're worried about," her eyes questioned me. I nodded, slowly. "But these are going to be some pretty rough times for them."

"I'm sorry, Mel," I said.

"It's all right," she looked at me rather humorously, "We'll just blame Tom for everything."

"Except that it's not all his fault—"

"—Close enough," she cut me off. "Tom has made it sound as though *he* seduced *you*. All you were supposed to have done is let him. I'd say you're pretty much blameless at this point." But her eyes told me she knew better than that. "Next time, though, *don't let him*."

"That wasn't the way it happened."

"*I know what happened*, Kerry. Next time, if you have to fuck somebody, fuck a stranger." She paused, "But *don't* get caught."

"I didn't *fuck* Tom."

"The way I hear it, you sucked him off—*but good*." Anger edged her voice. "It was a sex act, no matter how you slice it. But it doesn't matter, now. Just *don't do it again*."

I did the best I could to defend myself. "I'll be a good girl from now on." It sounded stupid and lame—very childish. It reminded me of what she'd said about acting like a child and in return being treated like a child. I thought I was being treated like a child, and here I was, sounding just like a fucking ten year old. But Mel caught the strange sound of my supplication.

She laughed, "Oh, I don't give a shit if you're a 'good girl' or not, Kerry. Just do us all a favor and don't fuck the band. Except Marc, that is. Fuck him all you want, 'cause he really needs it!" She laughed again, at her joke. I found it funny (sort of), but I wasn't sure whether to laugh or get angry. She went on, "Chill out. It's not a disaster. It's not the end of the world. Hell, it's not even the end of the goddamn band. You've been absolved, more or less, so now we all can get back to business." She concluded, "Is that OK with you?"

"Yes," I said, frowning.

"Good. Well, I gotta go." And with that she jumped up and headed for the door.

And I was ready for her to go, too. As she went by the short hall to the bedroom on her way to the door, Marc reappeared. Evidently he wanted to talk to her, in private (something I definitely did not care for), and he motioned her toward the bedroom, out of my sight. Marc and I would probably have words over this, once Mel was gone.

• • •

I was standing just inside the bedroom doorway when Mel Howe walked past. I'd stood there as quietly as possible, hoping I'd catch her before she left. I hadn't known Mel was coming by the apartment that day, but when I saw her, I wasn't surprised. I knew Tom had told Sheree, and I knew what he had told her, too. Despite the realities of the matter, Tom had made himself out to be the bad guy. How he had explained his motives, I didn't know, but I think he figured if he was to be guilty of adultery, then he might just as well be the instigator. But with Kerry? Even *I* thought that sounded a little odd. Was Sheree going to buy his explanation? I didn't think so.

The fallout from the incident was just now starting to settle around us.

Mel saw me, stopped briefly. "Practice tomorrow afternoon at two. OK?"

I nodded, "That's fine," and quickly motioned for her to follow me into the bedroom. She did. We looked at each other, and for just a moment I remembered another time, another place, and those deep, dark, brown eyes of hers. There was almost a fondness back there in my memory, but all too evident was also a hurt—a pain. She smelled good, and she was very pretty in her low cut V-neck sweater and black jeans, almost a trademark. I tried not to notice the swell of her breasts, barely concealed by the V of her sweater. They were very nice, but ... I moved my eyes back to her face.

She smiled momentarily, but it wasn't a happy smile. The smile faded. "This is a bitch, Marc." I noticed fine wrinkles around her eyes, her mouth. All this, and only twenty-five. She laughed quietly, subdued, an ironic laugh, "And for the first time in my life it isn't *my* doing, either." I knew to what she referred—her past 'reputation' for being a band-breaker and a sexual loose cannon.

"Kerry told me you were supposed to have warned her about this." I asked, "Is that true?"

"Well, I was just guessing at the time—but yes." She looked down at the floor, shook her head, "I probably should have kept my fucking mouth shut. The mistake *I* made was to put the idea in her head in the first place. I would never have imagined she'd treat it as a *challenge*." She looked up at me, and saw my uncomfortable expression. "I'm sorry, Marc. I think Kerry really is a nice girl, deep down. Don't lose faith in her. I don't know exactly what's going on with her, but it could be worse."

Worse? How much worse? Was Mel lying to me, or was it possible she saw something in Kerry I didn't? But, I supposed it could be worse. "Yeah, she *could* be fucking a stranger." I parroted her own words, and

she immediately knew it.

"I don't think she thought she was being unfaithful to you." She put her hand on my arm, "I think she thought she was sharing herself with you and Tom. It was a mistake, that's all." Yeah, that was a good rationalization. Maybe even true.

"You're right." I remembered the events of the evening, and my reaction and feelings, as well. "It *was* a mistake, but I think that's exactly what she thought she was doing." I hoped so, anyway. I thought a moment, "It was pretty weird."

She must have thought I was going to tell her about it, because she said, "I think I've heard about as much of the gory details as I care to hear, thank you very much."

"That's fine," I corrected her. "I wasn't going to get into it. But it *was* strange."

Mel sighed, probably remembering her past, and her own strange behavior. It was hard to tell. "Well," she said, "I really gotta go. Danzinger awaits me." She said his name in such a way that made me glad she didn't feel this badly about me. I would have hated to think that anyone would have found me so loathsome and distasteful, as her tone of voice indicated.

It made me ask, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, but didn't sound too convincing. "It's just Danzinger, Christmas, and my fucked-up family ... More or less in that order."

"What about your family? Did you see them over the holidays?"

She nodded, "Yeah, but I had to go by myself. Danzinger wouldn't go."

"I'd have thought that was a good thing," I joked.

"I suppose it was ..." but obviously there was something else there. She turned to go.

"Melinda," I called her back, not wanting her to go away sad. There was enough of that going around. She turned, and I put my hand on her shoulder. Very gently. "Look," I told her, something hitting me suddenly, "I don't want you to misinterpret what I'm about to say, but ... you know I still do love you, don't you?"

She brightened a lot, and I don't think she misunderstood me, either. She smiled, bright white teeth showing, and gave me a short, sweet kiss on the mouth. I was tempted to pull her to me and kiss her with a lot more feeling, but I decided I would be out of bounds if I did. Maybe there were no conflicting feelings in my heart between Mel and Kerry, but I couldn't be as sure about the state of Mel's heart. If she were feeling neglected and

ignored, I didn't want to make my life any more complicated by appearing to be interested in her. Especially not with Kerry so close by. She just might decide to investigate, and I felt sure she *wouldn't* understand.

Mel didn't say anything, just smiled, winked at me, and walked off. I heard the front door close, and then went back to the living room. And Kerry.

## Chapter 16

After the incident of Danny beating me bloody with his belt, it was several weeks before I let him back into the apartment. Yeah, I know, why did I let him in again, at all? But that's simple—because he owned me. I had healed fairly well by then, and though the memory hadn't faded at all, the physical pain had, somewhat. He was so nice to me. He came in with a smile and just dripping of sweet words, and he brought me flowers, and a present.

And he said how much he loved me.

That was the most ironic thing about it. He said he *loved me*, and I was stupid enough to actually try to convince myself that he meant it. I went over all kinds of crazy rationalizations as to why he'd beaten me so badly—that it was a mistake, plain and simple. He'd not meant to do it—that was why. It's almost incredible how willing I was to absolve him of the blame, that today—that today!—*I know* is all his. I thought *I* was a bad girl. That it was all my fault. Something along the lines of: I deserved it because I ... well, you fill in the rest. I thought it; I believed it; I was sure I deserved it.

His being so nice to me, then, confused me even more. He never said a word about my bruises, never called attention to them or seemed to notice the healing cuts on my back. Not even when we made love again ...

I am so completely shamed and appalled I ever let Danny Golden touch me again. It only tells me just how little self-esteem I possessed, that day when I took off my jeans and lay back on the bed for him.

I cried later when the realization of the whole incident (of his making love to me, again) hit home. At the time I had no idea why I was crying. I think I thought I was sorry for what I'd done (to deserve getting beaten with his belt) but now I know what it was.

I'd spent two months cooped up in that apartment, not seeing anyone. Kristie had come by a couple of times, but otherwise, by the time

he showed up I was simply so starved for companionship that I would have invited Jack the Ripper into the apartment. I needed someone to talk to, and I was also horny. I know it's hard to understand, seeing what I'd done to get myself into that mess, after all. But I've always been basically interested in the opposite sex, and the need for someone between my thighs was all too apparent to me when I let Danny Golden in the door.

"Hey, sugar," he grinned, "how you doin'?" Not, 'how do you feel?' Or, 'how are your cuts and bruises?' Or even, 'I'm sorry I beat the living shit out of you.' Just, 'how you doin'?'

Stupidly, ignorantly (and I still can't completely forgive myself), I answered, "Fine." God! I was *anything* but 'fine'.

"Great!" he said, sounding like nothing out of the ordinary or unusual had ever occurred between us. He pushed his way inside the door. Of course, I let him in. (Stupid bitch!) In one hand he had a big bunch of flowers, and in the other he had a small, gift-wrapped box. He presented the flowers to me, saying, "When I saw these in the shop they was so pretty, they reminded me of you, sugar!" I hate being called 'sugar'.

At the time, though, I bought it, and blushed, smiled, and accepted them. Then I went to put my precious pink and red flowers in some water. Women always do that. Dumb bitches. You give them flowers, and right away they go off to find a vase so they can put them in water. What a fucking waste!

He followed me into the kitchen. "Business been real good at the club the last couple weeks." He typically left out a lot of words. I know, it may be strange for me to notice, (being who I am and where I'm from) but speaking well has always been very important to me.

I only replied, "Oh."

"Got some extra money. Thought you'd like it." What was this, a bribe? (Yes, it was, but I didn't see it that way at the time.) He went into his pocket and pulled out a *huge* wad of bills. I swear, he always carried around more cash than anyone I'd ever seen. He then proceeded to peel off over \$2,000 in fifties and hundreds. It was a tremendous sum of money. Which he handed to me as I stood there stunned, temporarily forgetting my flowers' need for water.

"What's this for?" I asked Danny. (Was I stupid, or what?)

He seemed embarrassed, or something. I couldn't tell. He smiled, and put his arm around me. It was the first time he'd touched me since ... and I noticed once again how strong he was. He gripped my shoulders under his arm, and firmly drew me to him. I didn't resist him, exactly, but I

didn't precisely come willingly, either. I felt a dull twinge of pain, almost an itching, where his arm touched the healing flesh of my back. And I was then sharply reminded of how hard he had hit me with his belt.

Danny sensed something going on within me, and gently loosened his steel-like embrace, allowing me to extricate myself and get away from his touch. I did think quickly enough, though, to distract him away from my real intentions, and went immediately to the sink. I fumbled around in the cabinet above, and found a glass vase that would suffice for the flowers. While he watched—and I felt his eyes poring over my back and the rounded curves of my ass—I filled the vase with water about halfway and shoved the flowers into it. I wasn't sure whether to be afraid or excited by his presence, but I think it was more excitement that elevated my heartbeat as I turned back toward him.

"They real pretty, sugar," he said, smiling. He sounded very relaxed, and I was glad. I wanted him relaxed, because that meant violence was just *that much* farther away.

"Thanks for the flowers," I said, and goddamn it! I smiled, too. (What a stupid, stupid bitch!)

"Here," he put his hand forward, the one with the small gift in it.

"What's this?" I was feeling incomprehensibly warmed by his smile and his gifts, and his damnable charm.

"Just a little present. I ain't seen you in awhile an' I thought you needed somethin' nice. Somethin' real nice." No mention, of course, as to why he hadn't seen me, or why I might need 'somethin' real nice'.

"What is it?" I accepted the present. In one hand I had \$2,100, and in the other I had something else. So I put the cash absently on the kitchen counter, and carefully opened the package. It was about the size that a watch comes in. Well, it was a watch. A ladies' Rolex, to be exact. "You shouldn't have done it," was what I think I said. I shouldn't have accepted it, was what I should have done.

"Oh, it don't matter," he shrugged it off. "You been real good to me, so it's only fair I be good to you back." How ironic!

"I don't know what you mean."

"Sure you do! You helped me out a bunch."

I still didn't realize what he was referring to. "But I haven't done nothing ..." and then it dawned on me—'Bob'. The guy he'd had me fuck. I know my blood pressure dropped precipitously in the span of a few seconds. My puzzled look gave way to an expression of complete, absolute, crushing shame and humiliation. All I could do was stand there dumbly and stare at this man with my mouth (probably) gaping open. There was no delicate way out of this situation. I understood; he

understood. I *had* helped him, all right. I'd fucked and sucked my way into a new line of work. And I was too stunned to say anything.

Danny stood there looking at me, and he was still smiling. He thought his expensive gift and all that cash money would somehow make up for what he'd put me through. And I'm not too sure I wouldn't have agreed with him, either. I was pushed out into territory I'd never have thought I'd *ever* have gotten into. Before meeting Danny Golden, the word 'prostitute' hadn't even been in my vocabulary. I had been poor, true, but I *never* would have thought of becoming a hooker to combat my poverty. Previously, with Danny around, I'd never given money that first thought. It seemed to me all those gifts and attention and cash were merely in exchange for loving attention given freely. I thought he liked girls, and he wanted his 'girl' to be dressed up and made-up to suit his image. I thought he liked frilly, slinky things on his girl, and so for that reason he bought them for me, and 'encouraged' me to wear them. After all, he *did* own a nude dance club. That he had the habit of asking me—in public—to remove pieces of my clothing, I just shrugged off as idiosyncrasy. Perhaps true, but I should have realized where it all was leading. I finally understood.

I felt—and *was*—set up.

I was more confused than angry. Well, I wasn't angry. I don't know what I was feeling. I was just—confused. Parts of this deal were just too good to be true. The super-expensive Rolex watch; the \$2,100 in cash. The flowers weren't quite in the same category, but I liked them just the same. Seeing him smile—seeing *anyone* smile—and seeing and receiving all those gifts completely muddled my thinking. And it was just as he had intended.

He took control. "Here, sugar," he said, his words fairly dripping honey (and not to be coining a pun on his use of the word 'sugar,' either). "C'mon, let's sit an' relax awhile."

I allowed him to guide me out of the kitchen and into the living room. He was gentle, but insistent, so I perceived that as long as I went along, everything would be fine. I could feel something inside me, though, something waking up, some *feeling* totally outside my volition. Christ! I was *excited* by this man. He made me wet—fucking *horny!*—and there appeared to be nothing I could do about it. As he led me to the couch my knees started to weaken, and as I took each step closer I felt my conscious will and resolve simply dissolve into nothing. Incredibly, he started to unbutton my blouse. It felt so much like habit—like something familiar—I almost welcomed it with a sense of relief. My Danny was back, and he loved me. He was going to make love to me, and everything was going to

be all right. As he pulled me down on the couch next to him, and drew my mouth to his, I closed my eyes and dreamed of the feeling of his rock-hard cock inside me.

By the time we made it to the bedroom, I was lost. Completely.

My therapist and I have spoken at length about my experiences with Danny Golden. He thinks I've made a lot of progress toward overcoming my extreme hurt and anger and almost total lack self-esteem, but both of us realize I have a lot further to go, too. I've said I can't and won't forgive Danny Golden, even though he won't ever bother me again, but the real act of forgiveness is from me to myself. I have to forgive myself. Others, I can forgive more easily. But me? It's not so easy.

My therapist tells me, "Don't beat yourself up so much. Give yourself a break once in a while." I would, except it's really all my fault. I could have stopped it from happening. I *should* have stopped it all from happening. At least that's how I feel about it. He disagrees. "You were *not* to blame." How's that? How is it that I am not responsible for my own actions? "It's called the 'battered woman syndrome'," he tells me. Oh, just because they can give it a fancy name and call it a 'syndrome' and all, does that make it someone else's fault? All he said was, "You have permission to forgive yourself. Let yourself off the hook."

I keep trying, but it isn't easy.

I've heard people—ignorant people—say battered women stay in abusive relationships because they like getting beat up. I can tell you that that is total bullshit. I've also heard them say that it's because they (the women) think it's what they deserve. Sadly, that's closer to the truth. And too, it's because they don't think they have anywhere else to go. They don't think they have anyone else they can turn to.

The first thing an abusing man does is isolate the abused woman from those around her who might see the truth of what's happening and who might do something (or say something) about it. With no reality check to tell her the injustice and inhumanity of what's being done to her, she loses sight of what being normal is all about. What happens to her is so unreal—so far out in left field—that she no longer sees what *is* real; what *is* the truth. She no longer knows right from wrong, or fantasy from reality. And it's scary. That I *can* tell you.

She's convinced she deserves what is happening to her. A battered woman thinks she deserves being hit. OK, maybe not all battered women do, but *I* did.

Everything she does is wrong, at one time or another. Even if he tells her to do something, in the next second it will have been the *exact wrong*

*thing*. 'Put this dress on.' So she does. 'You look like a slut—take it off!' 'Fix me some dinner.' You do. He says, 'I wanted (blank, you fill it in) to eat, not (whatever you fixed). You stupid, ignorant cunt!' And so on, and so on. And in my case, 'Take off your panties. Give 'em to me.' 'What? Where?' I ask, 'We're in public and there's no place to take them off.' Whereupon he bends me over, hikes my dress way up above my waist, and rips down my panties, tearing them off my legs as they hang down around my knees. Several people see this, of course, but incredibly no one does anything about it. Not one fucking thing. The next time I don't give it a second thought when he requests my panties, so I quite daintily pull them off in front of a dozen strangers. **In a fucking theater lobby!** Then he slaps me across the face and calls me a 'fuckin' whore'. I suppose that's just what I was.

Danny built me up and tore me down so many times, I learned to dismiss the build up just to hear the tear down. He confirmed my own worst fears—that I was a worthless, lowlife slut. That all I was good for was turning tricks for his profit and his entertainment. He defeated me most ably.

There were times so nice and magical I thought things couldn't get any better. Well, I was right, they couldn't. Danny's abuse followed a predictable pattern, though he never beat me bloody with his belt, again. His abuse became much more subtle, less overtly violent, but abusive just the same. The simple slap across the face, the punch in the stomach, or even the mere threat of violence, was violence enough. Eventually, when he would ask me to take something off, I had gotten so used to it—I had become so inured to it—I simply pretended no one could see me. I didn't care if I was nearly naked under my coat, it was all an illusion—not real at all. I was the invisible woman, seen only while I was alone and when no one was there to scrutinize me. He would put his hand behind my head in a darkened, crowded theater, and I would get down on my knees right then and there and fellate him. The worst humiliations were commonplace. Just the strength of his grip convinced me it was useless to resist. I had no need of resistance—I was completely his property and chattel to do with what he wished. If I balked, he could be gone for days, leaving me alone in the apartment, going nowhere, talking to no one. That was all it took. Eventually, he could just ignore me and I would cave in to his desires. When he would come back, I would willingly crawl naked on my knees through broken glass just to get a touch—either slap or caress—from his hand.

And yes, at times too, even a slap is better than nothing.

Other men started to encroach on the scene. At first they were

'special' friends of Danny's. These men were wealthy and handsome, and most of them were nice to me. They were always from 'out of town,' and according to Danny, all 'investors' in the club. Just like dear old 'Bob'. (Whom I saw fairly regularly for almost a year, after that.) I was stupid not to see what kind of racket he was running. Of course they were all from out of town! Danny ran a brothel, a whorehouse, an out-call service, and with businessmen in town on 'business,' they would come by the club looking for some 'action'. And Danny was more than willing to oblige. That they were 'friends' of Danny Golden, I never doubted.

He would make friends with all these men in their expensive suits and unusual tastes. I'll bet he gave them free drinks and provided girls for quickie blowjobs 'on the house'. No doubt he ultimately charged a hefty fee for his services. I know how much he gave to me for my part of the 'bargain,' and it wasn't small change. Hell, my on-the-side tips were more than \$2,000 a month. ('Bob' was an especially good tipper.) Danny boasted of having only the best, and I believe he went a long way to deliver. Because I was part of his 'best,' you know.

I am a pretty girl. This much I know. I've been blessed with a cute face and shapely body, and like it or not I have the intelligence to know how to look my best, and to be my best when it matters. That I allowed myself to be dragged down into prostitution and the ever-tightening downward spiral of loss-of-self that was called Danny Golden, there is no excuse, but in a perverse way I was also proud of what I was. When prostitution is all you can see, then you do your best to be the best at what you do. It's where I was.

To Danny's credit (though I am *not* at all proud of this), he brought around only the best of the best who were looking for a 'good time'. I never dealt with lower-class guys—the \$50 or \$100 tricks. Why Danny thought I was worth all the trouble, I never knew, but there it was. All my tricks were well-heeled businessmen with fat expense accounts, and for what I provided he made them pay. I mean, all I usually did was have sex—simple sex—with these guys, and they'd pay hundreds of dollars. I didn't have to swing from a trapeze in the bedroom, or perform double-jointed cunnilingus on myself while simultaneously giving the guy a hand job just to earn my living. Of course, I'm joking and exaggerating. But it was rarely anything but good, clean, wholesome 'missionary-style sex'. Boy on top, girl on bottom. Well, of course I did do a lot of other things, too, but that's not important. My point is that despite the violence, abuse, and crushing humiliation I was dealt time and time again, I felt I was better than the rest. I only got the best, and I only deserved the best. I *was*

the best.

But then again, being the best whore in town isn't something of which you should be terribly proud.

I thought a lot about Sheree between the time I saw Mel Friday evening and when we arrived at rehearsal on Saturday afternoon. Tom wasn't there yet, but both Marc and Mel had keys, so it was no problem getting in. It was a bit unusual not to see Tom there, yet, since he was almost always the first one to arrive, but no one seemed to have any idea of his whereabouts. Mel only said he told her he'd probably be late, so we set up without him.

He showed up about ten minutes later, with Sheree in tow.

I didn't know what to say to her. I was afraid to say 'hi' or anything, for fear I'd find out just how upset she was, so I just smiled and went about my business. It was a bit unusual for her even to be there. I could count on one hand the number of times she'd come to rehearsal. But still, she had come around before, and other than the incredibly uncomfortable circumstances, I didn't think too much of it.

Sheree sat on a stool over by the door and just silently watched us. *That* was unusual. The Sheree I knew should have been bouncing around talking to everyone, making jokes and conspiratorially regaling me with the latest confidences about her friends. She did none of these things, acting instead like she was at a funeral, or something just as depressing.

Tom smiled and joked with us, and seemed OK, but I couldn't help but think he was just trying to ignore the obvious—that Sheree was in the room, and that she was a very unhappy little person. Well, I couldn't blame her. If it had happened to me I would have been just as unhappy, maybe even more dejected-looking, so I didn't think she was unduly morose, considering everything. Shit, I'd have been stark raving insane with anger—with blind, unadulterated rage!

We warmed up with a few of our oldest and best songs, to get the blood flowing, so to speak. I was unavoidably preoccupied with the small, sad person sitting over by the door, so I missed a couple cues and cracked a couple notes. That got me noticed by Mel, who asked if I was feeling all right. Physically I was fine. I just couldn't get my mind off imagining what Sheree Germaine must be thinking of me. What kind of tortures she was inventing to wreak revenge upon me for fellating her fella. (OK, I couldn't resist it, but it's not a funny subject, so I'll cut it out.) It wasn't funny, and I wasn't concentrating on my work. We only played about a half hour, then took a break. My throat was dry, like cotton had been growing in my cheeks, and I desperately needed a cigarette. I could also have used a

drink, but the beers we had in the refrigerator were strictly for after rehearsal. I had to do my smoking outside, so I had to pass by Sheree on my way out. She looked at me.

I stopped. "Hey," I said. A weak, timid greeting.

"Hey," she said back. "How're you feeling?"

"Good." I felt like I was in front of the principal in school—most uncomfortable. I thought I might invite her to go outside with me, "I'm going outside for a smoke ..." and I let the thought end there.

"Fine. Can I go with you?" she inquired. She didn't sound angry, but even so it was hard to gauge her true feelings by the tone of her voice.

"Sure," I motioned for her to follow. As we walked down the corridor, me in front and her behind, I was acutely aware of her eyes on my back. I didn't know what was about to happen, but I figured I knew what we were going to talk about. And it scared the living shit out of me.

Outside, I lit up and was surprised when she asked for one, because I didn't think she smoked. I shook one out of the half-filled pack, and lit it with my lighter as she held it in her mouth. For a few seconds, then, we both puffed deeply. Silently.

"How was Christmas?" I asked after some time had passed. I couldn't stand the vacuum created by the smoldering, puffing silence.

"Pretty good," she replied, puffing. "How was yours?"

"Parts of it were great." I felt the need to be completely honest. Lies and half-truths weren't going to cut it with this girl, in the long run.

"You feeling better, now?"

"Pretty good."

"Flu all gone?"

"I think so. I haven't had any fever since Thursday night."

"Good." She nodded, looked as if lost in thought. And a pregnant pause ensued.

"Sheree, I'm—" I started, and she cut me off.

"—**Don't say it!**" She rounded on me, fists bunched and eyes flashing with sudden righteous anger. "If you don't mean it, don't bother expending breath, 'cause I *sure* don't want to hear it!" Well, she had a right to be angry.

"I'm sorry, anyway." I had to look away. I couldn't bear up under her close, angry scrutiny. I didn't hide; I didn't run away; I simply looked away.

She took a deep breath. "You know, I may be wasting my time, but I want to ask you, anyway." She threw her cigarette on the pavement, and snuffed it out with the sole of her tennis shoe. She had small feet, and cute little white tennis shoes. I waited for her to continue, but she was waiting

on me ...

"OK," I said, hoping (and not hoping) she'd ask me.

"What *were* you trying to prove? Did you think I wouldn't find out about it? Did you think it was 'OK' to do just whatever you wanted?" She fired her questions at me, too many and too quickly for me to answer. I had little choice but to wait on her to finish. "*Just what in the fuck did you think you were doing?*"

"It's all my fault ..." I started.

"**Christ Almighty!** That's all I've heard!" She threw up her hands. "Everyone wants to be at fault, here, but *nobody* wants to be responsible for their actions. I've heard at least three different accounts of this fiasco, and I don't know which of them to believe. If I let you go on, you'll tell me how you were the one to blame, and how you seduced Tom and all that happy horseshit. And I suppose you'll also be telling me how Marc is innocent of all wrongdoing. Jesus H. *Fucking* Christ!"

I couldn't say anything.

"Tell me, Kerry," she started, again. "Did you think you would get away with it? Did you think you *could* get away with it?"

"No!" I shook my head violently, "That has nothing to do with anything."

"You *wanted* to get caught?!?"

It was a rhetorical question, so I didn't answer it. Instead, I said, "I was drunk. I wasn't thinking of the consequences. I was horny."

She hauled off and hit me on the arm as hard as she could. It hurt, but I was obliged to stand there and take it without flinching. She held her hand, which apparently hurt from the blow, and panted, "**Jesus, Kerry!** You were **fucking HORNY?!?**" Then she hit me again, and harder, if you can believe it. "What was wrong with Marc Huffman? Or did you have some sick fantasy about banging the two of them together at the same time?"

"No!"

In disgust, "Gimme another fucking cigarette," she demanded. So I did. And again lit it for her. She puffed, agitated. "I *knew* something like this was going to happen. I saw it coming. I did my best to avoid it, but it was inevitable."

"What do you mean?" This was curious, indeed.

"You and that Melinda Howe, sniffing around like a couple of bitch dogs in heat." Ouch! Her characterization hurt, but I guess it was accurate. It felt accurate, anyway.

But I wondered: how did Tom figure in all this? "What about Tom?" I asked, and felt the question important enough to risk her wrath should

she decide he was worth defending.

"What *about* Tom?" She poked her cigarette at me. "I love him, still," she said, "but he's a real asshole, sometimes." So, she didn't defend him against me. She went on, "Maybe he *can't* keep his dick in his pants. I guess I have to live with that, but **you!** ..."

It was as I expected. Something like this *had* happened between her and Tom, before. It doesn't make it any easier, I'm sure, but at least she's dealing with a known quantity. A brain-damaged known quantity, to be sure, but still ...

"You're making it very hard to be friends with you, you know." That seemed like a most unusual utterance, considering she'd just called me a bitch. "It's tough to be chums with somebody who's fucking your husband, if you know what I mean."

"It only happened that one—"

"—**Oh! Thank heavens for small fucking favors!**" She threw up her hands again, almost beside herself with the irony of the situation—of my words. As she shook her head over it, then, she puffed madly on her cigarette. "What was wrong with him? Why only once? His dick too small?" Now, where did she ever get that idea? Oh, I get it—she's baiting me.

"I don't think I ought to answer that question."

"And I would agree," she nodded and smiled, but she was only coming in for the final kill. The scent of fresh meat made her grin, that was all. "So, what're you gonna do for an encore? I can't imagine what's left for you to conquer."

"Nothing, Sheree." I managed to look her in the eye, "Nothing."

"Good. Thanks." She paced around. "The real bitch, now, is that I used to think you were my friend, and now I don't know if I can trust you anymore. You've sort of shot right to the top, in a manner of speaking. You've gone and done the *one thing* that will forever set you apart in my mind, and I don't think there's any going back."

"I'm sorry," I told her.

"God, Kerry," she shook her head, "so am I." Then she shook her head again. "How can we be friends, now? How can I trust you? Tell me."

"I don't know." I didn't.

"Well, you *better* know. 'Cause if you're gonna be in this band with *my* husband, and go on the road with *my* husband, and spend all those late nights out with *my* husband, you better get some ideas real quick about how I can truly trust you. Because if not, then I don't see much of a future for us."

"Marc and I talked about it, and we agree it was a tremendously

wrong and stupid thing to do. I don't have any good excuses for my actions, so I won't even try one, but Marc was there. He watched the whole thing happen."

"So?"

"So ... I don't know what." I'd lost my train of thought.

"You're not saying I can trust you with Marc around?" She sounded skeptical, dubious.

"Yes, I suppose ... something like that."

"After he just sat there and watched you, you think I can trust *him*?"

"I know it sounds pretty lame," I had to agree.

"*Pretty lame*? What happens if Marc isn't around? What then, oh illustrious over-sexed little red-haired-slut lead singer?" Her sarcasm wasn't lost on me. I had it coming, and I took it with as much grace as I possessed. But was it enough?

"Marc doesn't matter."

"You're goddamned right he don't matter! *You* matter. It's *you* I have to trust!"

Poor Sheree, she was in a state. For some unknown and unknowable reason, she still wanted to be my friend. The effort she was expending on my behalf to vilify and denigrate me wasn't just an excuse to beat up on me. Rather, she was venting her anger and extreme disappointment with the express goal of working it out—getting past it. It seemed incredible to me that someone—*anyone*—would care *that much* about me to go to all this trouble just to preserve a friendship. I couldn't quite comprehend it; it was too confusing. And it made me even more ashamed of what I'd done. Apparently, this was one friend I couldn't just blow off. She wasn't going to let me do it. Man, she should have hated me forever, but instead she was trying to find a way to love me anyway. I just couldn't understand why she wanted so badly to love me.

I said, "You can trust me."

She shook her head. No, she was saying.

I didn't know what else I could say. I didn't know what she wanted of me. I didn't know if I'd ever get to see again the sunrise from the couch in their living room, and didn't realize how important it was to me until I stared the prospect of losing her right squarely in the face. I saw, then, that if I wanted Marc (and I did), then I had to take all three of them, lock, stock, and barrel. And I wondered if Sheree was seeing it that way, too.

"Have you forgiven Tom?" It was an extremely personal question, and had I thought about it beforehand, I'm sure I wouldn't have opened my mouth with it.

Sheree started to answer, but held up, thinking. Her sigh became my

answer, then.

“What about Marc?”

“Well, of course,” she thought my question foolish, “he’s not your keeper.” OK, that made sense. Marc was not responsible for me. “Has he forgiven you?” she asked. Ah, that was more to the point.

But I didn’t know. “I don’t know.” I thought about it, and she waited. “I think so. I hope so. But, I don’t know.”

“OK,” she continued to counter me. “Do you think I should forgive you?”

All right, that was a good sixty-four dollar question. The question was would I forgive me were I in her position? Knowing what I know about myself, (which is way too goddamned much), would I be able to forgive myself for what I’d done? That was, all things considered, the toughest question I’d ever been asked. But it was easy, really. If I say no, then she asks me why I don’t deserve to be forgiven. No one wants to have to answer that one. If I say yes, she may ask me why I *did* deserve to be forgiven. And I couldn’t answer that question, either. I just didn’t understand the idea that I might deserve something good.

Instead, I held my tongue and stared at her. I felt two years old.

She answered for me. “Well, girl, I *will* forgive you. Hell, I may have, already. But I’m also very, **very** hurt at the moment.” She saw my lower lip start to tremble, and in sympathetic response, tears started to well up in her eyes. As she tried to hold them back, she sputtered, “I just ... can’t ... believe ... you would do this to me!” Then she started to cry.

And so did I. And I said something then, as I reflexively clutched at her, that I hoped she hadn’t heard, but that I knew she had. As we cried in each other’s arms, I called her ‘mama’.

• • •

When Kerry and Sheree came back to the rehearsal together, it was quite apparent they had both been crying. During the break the others had wondered where they were; why had they been gone so long? Mel had offered to retrieve Kerry from the ‘smoking room,’ (the parking lot) but Tom told her to leave them alone. Apparently he knew what was going on. They were outside working out their problems; they’d come back when they were through. Dancer, of course, grouched interminably. I didn’t think he would ever come around to liking Kerry, and for the most part I really didn’t care, either. Mel, though, once brought back to reality,

understood her near *faux pas* and joined with Tom and me to help calm Troy Dancer. In Kerry's absence, we decided to play a song that he (Dancer) normally sang, and he agreed readily enough. And we were just getting ready to start when our two red-eyed girls came back into the room.

"Where the hell have you been?" Dancer quizzed Kerry as she scuttled in to take her place at the microphone.

"Out having a smoke," she replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Of course, for our rehearsals, it was.

"Fuckin' supposed to be a *five* minute break, Kerry."

I was almost shocked. He'd used her name! I don't think he had ever called her that to her face in the three months we'd been together. I didn't know, but it seemed like something really unusual was either about to happen, or had just happened. Or maybe not.

Kerry only said, "Sorry, Troy."

He might have taken exception at her use of his first name, but she said it so guilelessly and sincerely that even he had to permit it to pass unchallenged. Of course, Troy Dancer always insisted we call him 'Dancer'. Most of the time, though, we lengthened it, somewhat. 'That fuckin' Dancer' was much more common.

Rehearsal went very smoothly after that. Kerry seemed to be right on with every little detail, and exhibited an excitement and an energy that charged the rest of us quite fully. We screamed as a band when Kerry screamed her siren best.

She had quite a talent for gutsy, lusty vocals. More than once I found the level of my arousal becoming noticeable as I listened to her sing. But of course, I had all that visual and tactile memory working for me. In rehearsals, she tended to simply stand up there in front and sing into her microphone. No dancing, no gyrating, no motions or acrobatics of any kind. And not that rehearsals call for that sort of thing, either. But, get *the girl* up on stage and she became another person altogether. After she got over her stage fright, and that was *no* mean trick, she warmed up and opened up, and put much more than her silken, smooth, raspy, rough (all those) voice into her work. She understates it to say she was a 'pretty good vocalist'. As a singer, she held a tune nearly perfectly, remembered her cues as well as anyone, accompanied others of us quite well when we had the opportunity to sing lead, and she lost herself in the music so completely it was scary.

The blues had to be her best song style. In retrospect, it's not at all hard to understand. She evoked Janis Joplin's intensity, though her voice wasn't quite as gravelly, even when stretched beyond the limit. She had

good strength as a vocalist, but it was a hidden strength, left largely untapped most of the time. Get her in the right mood, and she lifted the band straight up, brought us together and pulled from us every ounce of energy we possessed. She could make ‘that fuckin’ Dancer’ work his ass off to keep up with her. And I loved it.

All good bands have good chemistry. Excellent bands have stupendously excellent chemistry. Sometimes this chemistry is the result of long years of hard work. Simply by playing all that time with the same people you develop that osmosis of musical expression that enables you to pick up a song, and the five or the six of you simply play it together the first time—without rehearsal. Then sometimes, but very, very rarely, you just get lucky. Along comes a group of people who, like karma, seem to be meant to play together. You each one just seem to *know* what the others will do, and not from experience, either. Well, of course similar experiences will yield similar reactions, but the chemistry I’m talking about doesn’t just come from growing up on the same music. Hell, we *all* grew up on the same music, and most of us can’t even agree on what the best band is. There is no absolute.

When you experience that quintessential *chemistry* at work, your first inclination is to look around and see if anyone else has noticed it. You’re afraid to be the first/only one to call attention to it, because it might only be the dope you just smoked. But you remember you’re *straight*, so you eliminate the cannabis factor. It feels pretty good. That’s the first clue. You relax into the song, and you seem to be going off into an *ad-lib* all by yourself, but when you do it, you’re amazed to notice that everyone else is out there with you. And you think, how can this be? If you lose your concentration, which is easy at this point, and decide to *really* get bizarre, then you will lose the rest of the band. There’s a reason why this happens. The thread of greatness; of togetherness; of getting down and jammin’ your pants off is a tenuous and ethereal thing. It’s the thin, transparent skin of an allegorical soap bubble that you dare not push too hard against. If you get careless, then *pop!* it breaks, making hardly a sound or ripple in the cosmic continuum, but as a band, you all are sunk!

So you’re all playing there, and it seems too together and too smooth, and you begin to suspect that the all-important nirvana of *chemistry* is beginning to work for you. But you put it from your mind, and you go with the flow. (Ye gads! You let the ‘force’ be with you!) Soon, someone else will look at you, and you will know—you can tell from their expression that they know. They know. You might get a nod, or a small smile, but you will feel the bond with this person. Yep.

Excitement builds. Someone else is looking around, and the two of

you to first make contact see them looking at you, and then the three of you know it. After that, the rest of the band can't help but catch on to the strong vibes being generated, and then armed with the strength of *all of you* concentrating together, you *really* get cooking.

Audiences have no trouble sensing chemistry. I don't know, there's just something about a crowd that helps focus and direct the energy. If you're up there, and you're *not* getting it, believe me, the crowd will know it and will inexorably drag you down. But if the crowd is in the right mood, or if the band's karma is strong enough, the vibes form a positive feedback loop, and just like feedback from an amplifier, the chemistry becomes self-sustaining. Once you reach that essential threshold, there's no place to go. But up.

Anyone who has ever been a musician and has felt true musical/emotional chemistry while on stage will tell you they will remember it for the rest of their lives. Better than sex; better than winning the lottery; better than anything. The greatest rush of all time, and the single, sole reason why so many people try to make it in the music biz. To catch the vibes and really cook it for an audience.

The band *Dancer* found their chemistry, quite fortunately, on stage. *The girl* says it well when she says we were 'electrifying'. That's exactly how it feels. Everyone feels the charge, the total adrenaline rush, and (as I don't have to tell you) it makes people do some very strange things. The night of our first gig was both the most fortunate of occurrences, and perhaps the most unfortunate of occurrences. All of us felt the extreme, feedback-like zoom that was our true chemistry, and for some of us, it was sort of our undoing.

It wasn't fatal, not quite. It *was*, however, dangerous. We learned something from our experiences, and afterward worked hard to keep our libidos in check when it was necessary. Kerry may have been the instigator, and Tom the witting accomplice, but chemistry was the real villain. I'm not making excuses, since it's all in the past, but for the record, that's what did it.

Rehearsal, as I said, went very well after Kerry and Sheree had their mutual cry together out in the parking lot. Sheree seemed to cheer up, becoming much more her usual effervescent self, and that seemed to charge Tom. It would have charged me, and I'm not even married to the girl. Kerry, so rarely in control of things, was undoubtedly on top of her game. *Dancer* had to run to keep up, but she never let him catch her. He answered the challenge, though, as he had demonstrated many times previously, and the two of them took off.

As I said, Kerry rarely danced around at rehearsal. Usually, it's not

worth the effort, since it's far more important to get the song right than it is to do a little aerobic exercise. That afternoon, though, she couldn't keep from dancing. It was fine, since none of us were able to find any fault with her performance, technically or otherwise. It was humorous for a while, seeing this pretty, bouncy, red-haired girl in the tight white jeans and huge, loose, gray sweatshirt bounce and sway, and spin and gesture, and all with no perceptible audience other than Sheree Germaine to see her. I guess a load was lifted, and she unleashed all her pent-up energy with a vengeance. Whoof! I was enjoying the performance immensely, and that, my friends, is a true double *entendre*. You see, Kerry and I hadn't been together intimately since Sunday night. It was all of a week, I know, but it had been a pretty stressful week. Kerry had been pretty sick, still, even on Friday, and then there was that rehearsal we had to attend, where the atmosphere started out so very chilly and tense ...

When the alliteration twins had it out between them, finally, the rest of the day screamed. It was a highly successful rehearsal that led to a highly interesting, and successful evening.

Rehearsal broke up around five. I was starved, as was Kerry, and though Kerry and Sheree were back to being buddy-buddy, the same couldn't be said for Tom and myself. Despite their (the women's) suggestion and urging, neither of us (the men) were at all interested in pursuing activities outside the rehearsal. They were disappointed, but they got over it.

Kerry and I went out, even knowing it was New Year's Eve, and tried to get something to eat. I've always had a rule, no partying (out) on New Year's, and so was surprised to learn Kerry espoused the same philosophy. Seems she preferred to party 'in' on that particular occasion, as I did, so we restricted our restaurant search to those not catering to the rowdy, party-down crowd. It wasn't easy.

All we wanted to do was munch down a couple burgers, drink a couple beers, and go home. And we did, but it still took almost three hours to get out of the place. It won't be named. As we walked to the car about eight, with Kerry's white-hot heat snuggled up under my arm, I suddenly saw a theater marquee sporting a movie I wanted to see, and posed the suggestion, "How about a movie?"

"Sure," she smiled, *so* prettily. And it was done, then. So, it was almost eleven o'clock when we finally closed the apartment door and locked it behind us. Kerry, who'd slept until noon anyway, wasn't the slightest bit tired, and made a beeline for the refrigerator and another cold beer.

"Do you want one, too?" she asked, and I said sure.

There was a very relaxed, comfortable atmosphere circulating around us. I felt quietly, gently, very close to her as we sauntered over to the couch and flopped down. She thumbed the remote control and brought the TV to life. The TV. Of course, it *was* New Year's Eve, as if that mattered. On some other night I might have kvetched about having yet another distraction, but on this night I was in no hurry, felt no pressure or timetable to keep. I was pretty tired, though. Some from the upheaval and stress of the past week, and the rest from the highly successful rehearsal we'd had that afternoon. I was tired, but when we wound ourselves together on the couch, and Kerry undid the laces of my tennis shoes so I could put my legs up, the tension just seemed to flow out of me and off into nothing.

I stretched out lengthwise, finally getting a chance to relax, but Kerry suspected I was headed for a snooze and would have none of it. She scooted over in front of my face, back to me, blocking the TV, and did her best to ensure I wouldn't get too comfortable.

"Can you move, please?" I inquired, and poked *the girl* in the ribs. She jumped, but did not move out of the way.

"Not if you're gonna go to sleep on me, buddy. Nope. Not a chance."

I complained, "I'm not going to fall asleep, but I do want to see the TV."

She persisted, the cheerful, good mood evident in every sound, every movement, every nuance of her being. "I'm not buying it!" she informed me, teasing in a light, but slightly hoarse voice. "You're famous for falling asleep on the couch right when I get in the mood." She leaned back, and almost smothered me with the voluminous folds of her sweatshirt. I struggled, but weakly and without any true purpose. She smelled very nice. The perfume was her favorite brand, the one I will always associate with her, and with the fondest of memories. The very fondest.

I had to tell her, though exceptionally muffled, "You smell good."

I think she smiled. Well, I hoped she smiled, anyway. She seemed to consider whether to stay in her leaned-back position or let me breathe, but in a few moments relented and removed her body from directly over my face.

"Thanks for the air," I informed her. "I don't know if you know this, or not, but I *like* to breathe now and again."

She took a large lungful of air, and let it out slowly, like a full-body sigh. "So do I." Kerry sounded almost wistful. It was a rare mood.

We sat and watched TV a minute or two. Well, *Kerry* watched the TV. All I could see was her back, and that didn't have much in the way of

action or plot. It had touch and smell, both very nice in their own way, but not what I was expecting. She twisted around so she could see me.

"You're not gonna fall asleep on me, are you?" she asked.

"Not a chance, Kerrilyn," I answered.

She scooted around then, more or less facing me. I noticed the expression on her face, and it was a curious one. I'd just called her a different name. It was her name, I suppose, but it was all the same, *different*. I don't know what possessed me, or why I decided to call her by that name—it just seemed to fall out of my mouth unbidden, and when it did, it seemed appropriate. Right. Somehow, it fit her.

Kerrilyn, who forever after would be known only by that name, said to me, "That's *so* weird!"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I was just thinking about changing my name, too, and then you just said it." She seemed amazed. "That's just too weird for words!"

"If it's true, then it *is* weird," I said. "But I think you just made it up on the spur of the moment."

"All right, buddy, *don't* believe me." She dealt me a non sequitur.

"How would you spell it, anyway?"

"I don't know, K-E-R-R, I suppose—"

"—*That's* obvious!" she interrupted.

But I had to think a second. "I, and then L-Y-N. Is that right?"

"That's exactly how I'm gonna spell it."

"Good."

She wouldn't let go of the amazement. "I still can't believe you came up with that name exactly at the same time I did."

"Just lucky, I guess." If I had been sitting, I would have shrugged. As it was, it was difficult.

"But that doesn't change the fact."

"I suppose not," I mused, "but will you move the hell out of the way, please?"

She stood up and stretched. *So-oo* big. Like a cat getting up from her nap. I saw a band of pink skin revealed about her waist as her sweatshirt rode up with the stretch. Her waist was so slim, so supple, so pale and so soft, I couldn't resist the urge to put my hands on it, feeling the warmth of her bare skin, and with practically no effort at all, I drew her down onto the couch with me. My God! The woman was amazing. The electric force as she nestled in next to me definitely threatened to zap me into next week. That inexplicable aura was back, it was hungry, and it was looking for me!

In my entire life, before or since, I've never known anyone who felt so

alive, so energized, so sensual, so unrestrained, so acutely *feminine* as Kerrilyn. She charged me and electrified me like no other, and that night, as we kissed—and kissed properly for the first time in several days—I felt our souls combine.

It was easy. My hands found their way up inside her sweatshirt and I caressed her breasts, bridled though they were in her bra. Kerrilyn snuggled close, purring, and as I fumbled for the catch in the back of the bra, I saw that briefest of sparks flash in her radiant, emerald eyes. It was the miracle happening all over again, and the one I'd nearly forgotten. I managed to unfasten the thing that existed only to daunt me, and she gratefully wriggled free of the elastic monster.

"That feels so much better!" She delighted in the feeling of freedom. As my hands found the soft mounds of her breasts, they continued the thought and the motion, and her sweatshirt was pulled up and over her head. Almost getting tangled in the arms, she pulled her hands free and instantly wound them around my neck. I'd wanted to kiss and caress her most wonderful, full breasts with my lips and tongue, but she enveloped me instead with her searching, hungry mouth. As we kissed, I felt her heaving chest crushed tightly against me.

I slid my hands down the valley of her back, dragging my nails lightly as they moved. I felt her quiver with goose bumps as I lightly placed my fingertips over her shoulder blades. Her skin, so delicate and soft, was almost hot to the touch. It was the heat of passion; the heat of excitement, and it was the heat of desire that bathed me and saturated me completely.

In seconds I found my hands squeezing the cheeks of her behind, but I didn't remember placing them there. She'd ordered it, and my mind without my conscious knowledge or participation, obeyed. The coarse material of her jeans was in the way. Almost as I thought about it, then, she wormed her hand down and unsnapped the fly of her jeans. And almost as easily, she worked the heavy zipper down. The waistband of her jeans now suitably open, I eagerly pushed them down over her hips, taking her skimpy, lacy panties with them. And without my help, those magical jeans seemed to slide all the way down past her knees. A few deft kicks, and Kerrilyn was naked, once again, in my arms.

She planted a warm, wet kiss on my lips. "I've been looking forward to making love to you *all day!* I've been almost hopelessly horny since yesterday, and I was almost ready to go crazy waiting for us to get home." She pulled back from my face, a moment, and I saw the brightest of smiles, the happiest of expressions come to her freckled, pale, peach-pink

face. "I love you so much, Marc Huffman! Please make love to me! Please, sweetheart, make glorious love to me!"

I don't see how I could have resisted. Honestly. Ah, but ... "Not so fast, oh interminably horny one!" I warned her. Her face fell, consternation flowing over it like a cloud. I reminded her, "There are better places than the couch."

She smirked, recovering from her pout. "Do tell? Where shall we go?" Her tone of voice and accent evoked Scarlett O'Hara, and were it not for the red hair, I'd have taken the comparison quite easily. Maybe Scarlett O'Hara *should* have been a fiery redhead. Lord knows, she had everything else. "Pray tell me, my master, where *do* you desire to cleave these eager and tumescent folds?"

"Tumescent?"

She broke character. "Yeah. I learned that word today. It means something like 'turgid,' which means swollen or distended. But it sounds much nicer!"

"Turgid's OK," I mused.

"Nah," she informed me. "The G-sound is too unfeminine. Don't forget, we're talking about a girl, here."

"Is that so?"

She grinned, "You better believe it, O buddy O mine!" She snuggled in close to my face, spoke in a quiet, casually intimate tone, "So, where do you wanna make love to me? It's your call, lover—anywhere."

"I dunno, the bed sounded good."

But, no good. "Boring."

"So what did you have in mind?"

"How about out in the back of the parking lot next door, standing up against a tree?"

"You gotta be kidding!"

Her eyes told me she wasn't. "I want to do it someplace exciting—someplace *dangerous!*"

"The bed can be dangerous. You know," I misquoted, "'half of all household accidents happen in the—'

"—In the *tub!* Not the bed. *No one* thinks the bed is dangerous. Except you, maybe!"

"OK, but not the parking lot. I may be open to suggestion, but name someplace else."

"I thought this was gonna be *your* choice. Hmmm?" she reminded me.

I noticed my erection fading, as well as the incredible mood. "Well," I warned, "if *someone* doesn't make up their mind pretty soon, you're gonna

have to give me oral resuscitation.”

“You mean,” she twinkled, playing the straight man for me, “mouth-to-mouth?”

“Not a chance. I mean mouth-to-dick.”

“OK, hold that thought!” And she bounded up off the couch, hair flying and naked breasts bouncing. I watched, incredulous, as she scampered over to the coat rack and rummaged there for—something—I couldn’t guess. But I found out soon enough as she hastily wrapped herself in her heavy winter coat. It was a mid-thigh length winter-white wool coat she usually only wore when we went out all dressed up. She buttoned it about her, and ran her fingers through her hair, arranging it about her woolly, white, thickly padded shoulders. I saw the effect of her golden-red hair against the whiteness of the coat, and it was very nice. Kerrilyn stood there in the hall next to the door, bare legs and bare, red toes sticking out, and beckoning for me to come to her.

She beamed, “Let’s go for a ride!”