

## Chapter 25

I wasn't sure I bought what Kerrilyn was saying about Sheree. The 'affair' wasn't something going on between the three of us—it was something going on between Kerrilyn and Sheree. I had just happened to be there 'in the middle,' so to speak. Close enough to get in the way; close enough to have been on the receiving end of Sheree's love bite; close enough to have fucked her. That was all.

It hadn't even been Sheree's intention to make love to me. That was all Kerrilyn's doing. She was the one who'd put Sheree between us, and who'd as much as forced her to submit to me. I hadn't attributed Sheree's sucking on my neck as anything but lust and excitement—a dangerous desire that had come over her in the heat of the moment. She probably had intended it only for *the girl*, since she'd gotten one first. At least I thought she'd gotten sucked on by Sheree before she'd thought to do it to me. There was nothing between Sheree and me, certainly nothing emotionally charged or suggesting strong feelings.

Strong feelings. Those had been Kerrilyn's words. 'Sheree has very strong feelings for me,' she'd said. And I believed it, too. It was incredible, unbelievable, impossible, but based on what I'd seen and felt—I had to believe what Kerrilyn said. There was only one problem I could see. What was I going to do about it?

Well, Kerrilyn was right about one thing. I couldn't talk to Tom about it. If he had seen what the women were doing with each other, and concluded what I had apparently missed (unbelievably, I had passed over all the 'physical' evidence and simply chosen to believe their 'love' was casual, childlike, free of any emotional attachments), then Tom would be going through a very rough time. I know how I would feel if it were happening to me.

Indeed. So, why *wasn't it* happening to me? How could I accept Kerrilyn's feelings toward Sheree, and her obvious bisexual proclivities,

and not then conclude that it meant I could be losing her? What was different about how Sheree felt, from how Kerrilyn was feeling? Did I really know how Sheree felt? Or even Kerrilyn, for that matter?

Kerrilyn had not said she was in love with Sheree. All she'd said was that Sheree had strong feelings toward her, and that out of respect for Sheree's feelings she had not gone into the relationship casually. Hmmm. What did that mean, exactly? I know on the phone at the time I was only worried about whether Kerrilyn still loved me—and she still insisted that she did—but I had really missed an opportunity to delve into a most basic question about their relationship.

I felt sure that Kerrilyn's statement of 'she has strong feelings toward me' translated to 'she's in love with me'. That could be the only reasonable, logical conclusion. How? Why?—I couldn't guess, but I had to accept that that was the case. Kerrilyn wasn't being 'casual,' apparently, but did she have the same strong feelings? I could believe only that she did not. Whatever she *was* feeling toward her friend, I simply could not believe that she would—that she *could*—be in love with Sheree.

It did not leave me feeling very settled or secure. Nowhere close, in fact. And, as I sat at my desk those last few minutes before lunch, I suddenly could see the whole thing from Tom's eyes. And his strange, quiet mood also suddenly made complete sense.

No, he wasn't angry with Kerrilyn. He would know Kerrilyn hadn't 'seduced' Sheree. Why? Because of things Sheree had already said. She'd dropped several very large hints about how she might be feeling—what might be on her mind. But he would still be very unsettled around Kerrilyn. She was a very attractive woman and she was his friend, but she was also an admitted bisexual. Interested in women. Apparently interested in his wife, at least enough (and boldly enough), as well, for him to have seen the two of them together.

So, why had he still felt compelled to fuck Kerrilyn, as he had? And why didn't I feel more strongly about that, as well? I should have at least been feeling *some* insecurity (my own natural state), but other than certain disquieting aspects of it (that I don't want to get into, again) ... I really felt almost numb. He'd simply taken her, and she'd simply allowed it. There were no feelings there. There was no danger. Right?

Tom had watched Kerrilyn and Sheree making love, and had seen the dark love bites that Sheree had given to both of us. He had been lusting after Kerrilyn since probably the very beginning, and like it or not and no matter what else happened, he was determined to get into her pants. Once and for all. He didn't mean it as anything against me, and though he had said over and over that he was only interested in being her friend, when it

came down to it, and once he saw me doing his woman, he had to get back some small measure of respect by doing the very same thing to mine.

As a consequence and an inevitability, there were too many things going around in his head whenever he thought of Kerrilyn, and most of them were bad. I understood how he felt, but I still wondered what would be worse. Being married to the woman who was perhaps experimenting seriously with her first same-sex relationship, or being involved with the alcoholic, over-sexed, loose, cute, sexy, and talented temptation? Well, whichever one it was, I knew I was going home to the temptation.



After I had gotten off the phone with Marc, realizing that *no one* was going to come over and keep poor ole Kerrilyn company, I decided I was getting hungry, so got up to make myself a sandwich. And, I had just washed my hands and was taking the smoked turkey out of the fridge when the doorbell rang. Well, I wasn't expecting anyone, so who could it be?

I quickly scooted off to the door and looked through the peephole to see who was outside. It was not anyone I expected to come calling at my door in the middle of the day, certainly.

It was Tom.

Of course I let him in. It didn't matter I was wearing only a T-shirt. He'd just recently seen me in a whole lot less, so ... being only very 'casually dressed' didn't seem like much of a problem.

"Hi," he said as I closed the door behind him.

"Hey. What's going on?" I asked. I hoped it wasn't something bad, with the band or something. At first glance, that was the only thing I could think of that could bring him here unannounced, in the middle of the day. "When I looked through the peephole just now I certainly didn't expect to see you standing there. What's happening?"

"Oh, nothing," he said. And that should have been my first clue.

I glanced down at myself, and the state of my undress. Did the T-shirt cover my pubes? I suddenly hoped so, because his expression and his smile made me slightly uncomfortable. But it wasn't enough of an uncomfortable feeling to act upon.

"Do you want something to eat?" I asked as I scampered back to the kitchen to finish making my sandwich. "We don't got much, but there's enough to make you a sandwich."

"No thanks. I'll get something later, probably."

OK ... I rattled the plastic surrounding the bread. "So, Tom ole buddy, tell me what's going on."

He came into the kitchen and leaned on the counter a few feet away from me. "I talked to Sheree a little while ago. She told me you were feeling much better."

I just nodded while I spread mayonnaise on the bread.

"I'm glad it's nothing serious." He looked around, nervously. I figured he was probably about to say what it was he had come to say.

"I'm sorry for how I acted, last night."

"Hey," I said, and I made sure my smile was good and bright, "it's no big deal. I understand." But, did I?

He stood. "Things are a little ... confused, right now."

What could I say to that, except, "They are?" Good. Better to play dumb.

"Kerrilyn," he frowned, "I think you know what I'm talking about."

"I do?" Still acting the dummy.

"Yes. I saw you and Sheree in the bed, Sunday night."

"I thought it was Marc who was in bed with me."

"I saw *him* there, too." He looked at the clock, then back. "But, I'm talking about what you and her were doing to each other when I came in the room."

I finished slapping my two slices of turkey between the pieces of bread, and then placed the sandwich on the plate I had waiting. "I don't know when you came in the room, exactly, and I have no idea what you thought you saw, but I think you probably just saw Marc making love to Sheree." I looked at him, then. "So, you don't have a problem with that?"

"She didn't want to fuck Marc," was all he said.

OK, so ... what? I changed the subject, slightly. "I think you did your share of fucking, too, if I remember correctly."

"And you didn't enjoy it? It certainly looked and sounded as though you were enjoying it a lot."

I rounded on him, "All right! So what if I did?" I turned away, dismissing him. "I like sex. I like it a lot, and I think you already know that. You just caught me at a vulnerable time, maybe. I really didn't care who was doing me. I just wanted to be fucked." I wanted him to understand that the level of my enjoyment had nothing to do with him—or his performance. He wasn't important. It was just ...

He said to my back, "You can be a pretty cold-blooded bitch, sometimes, you know?"

I remained with my back to him. "You mean 'whore,' don't you?"

"I never thought that way about you, before, and I don't think that way about you, now."

I slowly turned around to face him. "So, tell me: Just what *are* you doing here?"

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I got home late, unfortunately, knowing that it left little time to talk before having to get ready for that night's performance. As it turns out, though, being late didn't matter much because I found Kerrilyn curled up on the couch, TV on, still not dressed. It seemed as though she hadn't bothered to put on more than a T-shirt or even had a shower. And she wasn't communicating, either. Just glanced my way briefly as I walked by the couch toward the kitchen. She never moved or said a word while I made a sandwich, ate it, and went to the bedroom to take a shower and change clothes. About fifteen minutes later I was redressed and ready, but Kerrilyn was yet to move from the couch.

I came to the foot of the sofa and looked down at her. "What's the matter with you?" I asked. "Are you sick, or something?"

No reply, yet. In fact, she wouldn't even meet my gaze.

"Come on now, Kerrilyn. We have a gig tonight. You have to get ready." When she didn't stir, I added, "Now."

OK, that got a small reaction. She looked back over her hunched-forward shoulder toward me. Slowly, she blinked.

"Are you drunk?" I asked. If she was, then there was going to be trouble when the band found out. It was a serious offense to get drunk *before* the gig even started, not that getting drunk during the gig was any better.

"I'm not drunk," she said, "but so what if I was? What are you going to do about it?" Then she just turned back to the TV. I felt like turning it off, but decided it really wasn't the issue.

"Are you sick?" I asked again.

She did reply, now. "No." Then she sighed, "But I *really* don't want to play, tonight."

I almost laughed in spite of myself. "I feel that way too, sometimes." I walked around to the front of the couch and stood between her and her TV. "You know what I do?"

She sniffed, "Obviously you don't kill yourself."

"Why? Is that how you feel?"

She tried to look away. "Sometimes."

"C'mon, babe. What's wrong?" I tried a slightly different tack, hoping a sympathetic tone and willingness to help would. Help, that is.

"You know," she said, "life can really suck, sometimes."

Uh-oh. I almost didn't want to ask why she was feeling that way. Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to. But, I had to know. "Are you upset with me?" It didn't seem as though she was, since she was talking. But of course, then that would likely mean it had something to do with Sheree. And that was undoubtedly one of the answers I didn't want to hear.

She returned her sad eyes back toward me. Almost met my gaze. "No. I guess not." Then she stirred and pushed herself up to a sitting position. Red nail polish toes hit the carpet. "I'm OK, I guess." She looked at the floor at my feet. "Life sucks, sometimes."

"You said that, already," I said. Dare I ask the obvious question? Nope. Instead: "Are you going to play, tonight?"

She looked up. Frowned as if I had just said something stupid or inane. "Of course. *I have to*. I just needed to vegetate for a while." She stood up and stretched. Then smiled, sort of. "I'm better, now, buddy. OK?"

I didn't know what, if anything, I could say. She just put her arms around my neck and went up on tiptoes to give me a short, wet kiss on the lips. It caught me somewhat off-guard, so she was off and headed for the shower before I even thought to react and kiss her back. Well, I'll just make up for it, later, I thought.

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After Tom finally left, I wanted to call Sheree to tell her what had happened, but something held me back. Guilt, for one thing. Shame, for another. Fear, for a third. It was wrong—nothing else could be said about it—and it was my fault.

When am I ever going to learn? When am I ever going to control myself, and make the right decisions?

No, I couldn't call Sheree, because to do so would end everything. Certainly end their marriage and her relationship with me. Probably end my relationship with Marc. The band, once all of the above occurred, was gone, too. No, it was too much to risk; too much could be destroyed with just a simple phone call. So I accepted that what I'd done couldn't be

undone, and kept my mouth shut.  
Life really sucks, sometimes.

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Tuesday night was a strange night. In the car on the way to the club Kerrilyn still seemed very withdrawn and closed in. I had thought we would talk, perhaps, but she made it clear, if mostly without words, that she was not interested in talking. Then, she managed to get irritated with both Troy Dancer and Mel Howe before we even started playing. I wasn't privy to their exact conversation, but I heard a heated 'where's my goddamn microphone,' and 'just leave me the fuck alone!' that sent both of them literally scattering from the stage. 'What the fuck is up with MacDonald?' Dancer was heard to exclaim as they headed toward the bar. Both of them, Troy and Mel, gave me dirty looks as if I were somehow to blame for her foul mood. In my own defense, I could only shrug. Then, to make matters worse, Sheree showed up to hear us play.

From the way Kerrilyn seemed to go out of her way to ignore Sheree, it appeared Kerrilyn's silence and her mood were due to something that had transpired between them. Oh, joy. Just what we needed—yet another lover's quarrel between the two *women*. If before, the band hadn't been convinced, completely and utterly, that something was going on between Kerrilyn and Sheree, then after the way Kerrilyn proceeded to ignore her friend with a sullen, almost frosty air, only a complete idiot would miss the obvious.

As for her performance, in general, Kerrilyn was pretty good that night. She had a lot of pent-up energy, it seemed, and she allowed it to seep out in the velvet-steel power behind her vocals and the alacrity of her dance movements on stage. Anger, I guess, would be the most operative word to describe the voltage that charged her performance.

She didn't drink anything alcoholic, that I could see. After the first set she simply walked off the stage and found a spot at the band's table near the stage. Sheree was sitting a few tables away, but Kerrilyn acted as if she hadn't seen her and didn't know her best friend was waiting for her to come over and sit down. I sat down with Kerrilyn, not sure if I should say anything to her, or not, but before I could make such a decision she looked at me.

"Will you get me a Coke, please?" She asked me, and leaned back and took out a cigarette.

"Just a Coke?" I wanted to be sure I had heard her correctly.

She waited to answer while she lit the cigarette and took a large, apparently satisfying drag. As the smoke streamed out to join the rest of the general stink and choke of the club's atmosphere, she said, "Well, maybe some ice would be nice." And went back to enjoying her cigarette some more.

So I got her a Coke. And some ice, too.

No one dared join her at the table, even after I set the Coke down in front of her and sat, deciding to stay. She wasn't chewing on me, it seemed, so I felt somewhat safe. For the moment. And other than thanking me, she said nothing else the entire twenty minute break.

I think Sheree left sometime during the second set, and speaking just for me, I was relieved. Not that it meant there wasn't going to be any fallout or repercussions, just that it meant there weren't going to be any fireworks later that night, once we were through playing. I couldn't say I noticed any difference in Kerrilyn's performance or mood once Sheree left. It was as if she hadn't been there at all. Except for the fact that Sheree had been patently ignored during the time she had been there, I was beginning to wonder if Kerrilyn's prickly, bitchy mood couldn't be due to some other external stimulus. But of course, until the night was over, I wasn't going to ask her about it. And neither was anyone else, either. In fact, I waited until we got home at around two-thirty to say anything at all of relevance. Like:

"Are you OK?"

She reached around behind her back and pulled down the zipper to her dress. Then she pulled it off her shoulders and laid it out neatly and smoothly over the back of the bedroom chair. OK, she was braless, but that was hardly going to affect me, or the situation.

I felt compelled to repeat my question, but before I could get much past the 'are you ...?' part, she stopped me. "I don't know," she said. Then she began to work on her pantyhose. No bra, but a pair of tight (almost too tight, I noticed absently), industrial-strength pantyhose to hold in her soft, warm tummy and give her legs that shapely shape that we all (well, me, at least) liked so much. In a few moments she worked them down and with expert movements, removed them. She made it look easy, but I sincerely doubted that it was.

I felt I had watched her long enough, and turned to begin removing my own clothes. And it was then that she hit me in the back of the head with her panties.

"What was that all about?" I asked her, and picked up the panty-wad. I held it in my hand, debating whether to throw it back or just hold it. She

just stood there smiling, and quite naked.

"Got your attention, didn't I?" she smirked.

"You feeling better, then?"

"I'm not sick, if that's what you're asking."

"That's not what I'm asking." I threw the wad at her, trying to hit her either in the face or right between the boobs. And my moment of indecision just before I released the wad to its target caused me to miss both, horribly. The panties unwadded themselves and sailed lightly over her shoulder to cling to the side of the bed. "You've been acting pretty bitchy and abrupt with everyone, all night long. I was just wondering if it was something you wanted to talk about, or not."

"Not." She snatched up the panties and headed off to the bathroom.

I just had to follow. "If you don't mind my asking—"

"—Oh, but I do," she said, and began to run water in the sink. She surveyed her face momentarily, then checked her teeth before grabbing a washcloth and wetting it in preparation for washing her face (and probably the rest of her, as well).

I was taken aback, and perhaps a little frustrated, but otherwise undeterred. "Did you know Sheree was there, tonight?"

"I saw her." Spoken as if I'd said the mailman had been in the audience. Soap was rubbed into washcloth and then washcloth was rubbed onto face.

"And you chose to completely ignore her."

"I'm sorry. But it was my choice."

"And meanwhile, the rest of the band is wondering yet again what has happened between the two of you." I had to shake my head; it seemed so foolish of her. "I can only assume you meant for the whole band and the rest of the world to know what's been going on."

"And I suppose you've been telling them?"

"You know better than that. I almost can't believe it myself. There's no way I'm going to embarrass Tom and cause both you and Sheree all that humiliation."

She redirected the subject back to Sheree's presence at the club. "I knew she was there, tonight. I couldn't talk to her."

"You had to ignore her altogether?"

"Yes. I imagine this is difficult for her. Right now, things are a real bitch for me, I can tell you that."

"Is this another fight?"

"Fight?" Pause. Then scrub. "No." She seemed to scrutinize her forehead in the mirror. Then scrub, scrub. "This is not a 'fight'. I don't really know *what's* going on." Scrub, scrub. "I ...." she began, but stopped.

"You—what?" I asked, but she continued to scrub her face, then moved on to her neck and shoulders. Finally, a rather definite head shake was her reply. She wasn't going to talk about it.

"Well, you seem OK with me." I tried to smile, hoping to lighten the mood if I could.

She smiled to herself, "For now," then finished by swabbing down her boobs with the soapy washcloth. She began to rinse out the washcloth. "But don't press your luck." Then she looked at me in the mirror, and gave me a crooked, half-grin.

OK, I decided I was too tired to keep playing this guessing game with her. There was just one more question I needed to ask, and then we could go to bed. Finally. "Are you going to keep ignoring her, and treating her like shit, like you are?"

She let out a very large sigh, but answered honestly. "I don't know. Somehow," she eyeballed me in the mirror, again, "I don't think she'll be showing up tomorrow night."

"OK, but what about when the two of you do finally meet again?"

She didn't answer right away, but made me wait while she rinsed off all the soap she had just applied to her body. It took a couple minutes, but eventually she wiped herself clean. Now finished in the sink, she spun around and came to where I stood in the bathroom doorway. "I'll deal with Sheree when and if I see her, again. Sound reasonable?" She stood there in front of me, naked as the day she was born, and hand poised on the bathroom light switch.

"Not very," was all I could say in response, and she clicked out the light.

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A part of me knew I was probably pregnant when my period was late. It should have started the day or two after Marc's birthday party, and when it didn't, that sober, logical part of me said it could only mean one thing.

For the past few years of my life my period had been regular. More than regular—it had come around every twenty-nine days, just like clockwork, for as long as I could remember. I never thought too much about it, or kept careful track of the days between, or anything like that, but it seemed that anytime I did the math, the result always came out the same.

So when we got halfway into that two-week gig in June, I was sickly certain I was 'with child'. All that was left was to buy a home pregnancy test and verify my conclusions. Yeah, and wouldn't you know it—I was right.

Oh, joy. What to do, now? I couldn't even think coherently until I called Sheree. Recent events and my odd, distant behavior notwithstanding, she was the only one I could tell. She was the only safe friend I had. So I called her at work.

"Hi," I said when she answered.

"Oh, hi," she replied. She knew who it was, of course, and yes, she sounded surprised and perhaps a bit cool. Like she really hadn't expected me to call, and now that I had, she almost dreaded what I would say.

Well, I didn't know how else to put it. "I'm pregnant," was all I said.

"Really?" she said, then there was a pause. "That's great, Kerrilyn." But she didn't sound any more excited than I felt. I wasn't excited at all—I was scared. When I didn't respond to her 'that's great' statement, she went on with, "Does Marc know?"

"No, Sher', I haven't told him." Then I thought to add, "Yet."

She seemed to take some moments to digest things. I let her. Then, "When did you find out?"

"Just now. I bought one of those home pregnancy tests, and took it."

"And?"

"And what?—the stick is definitely blue."

"You're sure it's not a mistake?"

"No, it's not a mistake," I drawled. "I'm pretty sure it's legit. I even called the pharmacy where I bought the thing, and asked the lady if these kinds of tests were ever wrong."

"And what did she say?"

"She said 'false positives'—that's what they call them—were very rare. Then she asked me how blue the test stick was."

"So, how blue is it?"

"It's so blue ..." I sighed "... it's bluer than your eyes. That's how blue it is." I had to clear my throat. "Very blue."

She considered that, then continued, "You don't sound too happy about it." And then again, neither did she.

"That's a fucking understatement! I wasn't really expecting anything like this to happen."

She seemed struck with sudden disbelief, "You *have* been using birth control, haven't you?"

"No." I couldn't lie. "Sheree, I was stupid. I stopped taking the pill when I moved in with Marc. It's just taken till now for anything to

happen, that's all."

"Jesus, Kerrilyn! You *are* stupid, especially if you didn't want to get pregnant." She waited a couple beats for me to answer, but I remained silent. It didn't feel very good to be called 'stupid'. She didn't seem to notice. "I'm guessing you didn't want to, did you?"

"Are you kidding? But ... I don't know *what* I want," I explained. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?" she asked.

"Everything. I've never thought about becoming a mother."

"You don't have to be a mother, Vix, if you don't want to be."

"I know, Sher'," I sighed, "I could have an abortion. Just scrape the sucker right out and be done with it."

She ignored my crude comment, though. "You don't sound like that's what you want to do. Am I right?"

"I don't know *what* I want to do." And I didn't.

"So," she seemed to be recapping things, "Marc doesn't know about this."

"No, sweetie pie. You're the first. Just you."

"Are you going to tell him? He deserves to know, you know."

"I don't know what I want to do, yet, Sheree. If I decide not to have this baby, I'm not sure I even want him to know about it."

"It *is* his baby, isn't it?"

That surprised me. "Of course, it's his baby! I mean, who else could it be?"

But she didn't answer the question. Too difficult to admit, I guess. Instead, she said, "As long as you're sure."

Then I was a little miffed, "I know you think there's some doubt about the father's identity, maybe, but it *can't* be anyone except Marc. Trust me."

But her voice was mostly apologetic when she answered, "I'm sorry, Kerrilyn. I didn't mean to imply that I thought you were sleeping with other guys, or anything." Other guys, indeed! How ironic! But she knew my past, so just exactly how far off could she be?

"I gave that up when I came to live with Marc," I explained, with no pride whatsoever. "I'm not a prostitute, anymore, Sheree. I know you think—"

"—I *do not* think!" She sounded angry, but I couldn't be sure she wasn't more perturbed with herself, than with me. She went on, "I was just asking, to be sure. I know that isn't a very nice thing to say." She paused, and changed the subject, "But you're making me very jealous, you know."

That was odd. "Jealous?"

"Yeah. I've been wanting to get pregnant, and now you beat me to it."

"Really?" That was interesting. "You never said anything. I guess I just assumed you didn't want to have children. Yet. Or maybe never."

"Don't ever say 'never'." Hmm, my line. At least I think that's where she heard it. "Forever's a fucking long time. But you *do* make me jealous."

"So get pregnant, yourself," I joked. "And we'll have our babies together."

"So you're planning to have this kid, then."

"I was *joking*, Sheree," I informed her. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"OK." She could buy that. "So when *will* you?"

"I don't know. I need some time to think about it—a while, maybe."

"Fine," she coughed. "Take all the time you want, but don't wait too damn long. In a month or so you're going to start to show, and Marc will definitely be suspicious."

"I'm not gonna wait that long."

"Good."

"Look," I said, "I gotta go, now. I'll call you later, maybe," I closed.

"OK?"

"Sure. Call me later. I think we still need to talk." Then we hung up.

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Like most men, I think, I never paid much attention to Kerrilyn's monthly cycle. All I knew was that every so often she had her period, and in general sex was somewhat more limited during those times. I never put the dates on my calendar, or made mental note of them, or anything. And so as a result, I never noticed it at all when she missed her period at the end of May.

Because of everything else going on: the band just getting going, the bizarre changes in Sheree's behavior toward Kerrilyn, the even more bizarre changes in all our relationships, et cetera ... the small matter of a missed period was easily the *last* thing on my mind. I mean, even in the midst of some of Kerrilyn's strangest mood-swings—and strange, sudden illnesses, too—I never even gave a thought to the idea that she could be pregnant. Pregnant, of all things! Funny, but it suddenly seemed to explain a lot.

She had told me she had an IUD. OK, so I just assumed that that meant she would not get pregnant. I'd not even checked into the effectiveness of those things, and besides, since she really didn't have one, I guess it really didn't matter. The only surprise when I finally found out was how long it had taken for her to conceive.

Tom was the one who told me. It was immediately after we finished on Friday night, the night before finishing up the gig, and all the packing up and heading home. The night before she ...

Well, Kerrilyn was off somewhere.

"There's something I need to tell you, Marc ole buddy," he started.

"What's that?"

"Kerrilyn, I guess, is pregnant." Gee, no beating around the bush, there.

Well, I was stunned a few precious seconds, then asked, "How is it *you* know?"

"You forget," he reminded me, dryly, "my wife is her 'best friend'."

Oh. "When did you find out?"

"I've known a couple of days."

"And you didn't think to tell me?"

He only shrugged, "I'm telling you, now. It's just taken me till now to decide it might be my business, after all. Sheree told me to keep it to myself."

"Why did she tell you?"

"I dunno. Because she's my wife, maybe? We *still* talk."

I thought a moment. "How long?"

"Has she been pregnant? I don't have the slightest idea. You'll have to ask her that yourself." He finished putting away his bass guitar before continuing, "Why do you suppose she hasn't told you, yet?"

I was lost in thought, and had to stop to think what he was asking. "I don't know, Tom. I don't know."

Kerrilyn was *pregnant*? We were going to have a baby? Was that it? She'd told Sheree, who'd told Tom, who'd told me, but she hadn't had the guts or the consideration to tell me—the *father*—about it? Then, for an awful second I wondered if I was, indeed, the father of her baby. "Do you suppose someone else could be the father?" I asked him. I wasn't immediately suspecting him.

"No," he promptly replied. "Sheree said she—Kerrilyn—was sure you were the lucky papa." He wrapped a mike cord. "I don't know who else it could be, if not you." He looked at me. "It's not me, I can tell you that."

I wasn't so sure. It almost made me sick to think about it. "Why couldn't it be you? I saw what happened—"

"—Because," he cut me off, "that was the first time, and because there wouldn't have been enough time." He seemed rather certain.

Not enough time? "But Tom," I wasn't convinced, yet, "that was over a week and a half ago. How much fucking time does it take?"

"Till a pregnancy test can return positive?" He grabbed another mike cord. "Think about it. She'd have to miss her period by at least two weeks before the damn test would even work. Then, even if she found out some time last week, that still means at least a month would have to have gone by since *conception*. I don't know, old buddy, but she probably got pregnant sometime the week or two *before* your birthday party." He finished with the cord and tossed it in the pile. "And that would have to make you the culprit." He eyed me, wryly, "Y'all have sex any time during that week?"

I didn't bother to answer. Four or five times, probably. All right, he was right. And besides, I seemed to remember she did have a period sometime very early in May. "OK, I believe you. I'm the father."

"Like I said." He smiled, and went on, "What I can't quite figure out, though, is why she still hasn't told you about it. Maybe," he mused, "she's not sure she wants the baby. That could be the case. I mean, have you talked to her about this kind of thing? Babies; sex; the birds and the bees and stuff?"

"She *knows* where babies come from, Tom," I said. "But, no, we've never talked about it. Hell, we've never even talked about getting married, either."

He was wry, and seemed to be commenting on Kerrilyn's suitability as a mate, "Seems a little early for that kind of discussion, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think." I finished wrapping the mike cord I had been messing with. We had to get everything up and out of the way for the next day. "And besides, if what you say is true, we're gonna have to start talking about it—now."

"Not necessarily."

"What do you mean?" I was concerned. I didn't see how we could avoid it.

"It's nothing against you, but Kerrilyn might not want to get married, and she might not want to keep this baby, either. I mean, she doesn't have to go through with it, you know."

"What? You mean have an abortion?"

He nodded, once. "Women do it all the time."

I guess they do. But for some reason, I hadn't considered it a possibility. I'd just assumed since Kerrilyn loved me, and I loved her, that if and when she got pregnant (and it didn't really matter to me if we were married, or not) she'd be happy about it, and when she told me, I'd be happy about it, too. If she had told me, I'd have been *ecstatic*. And here I was—angry, feeling as though I'd been cheated out of the one thing in my life that would have made everything just a little more worthwhile. A little Kerrilyn-clone.

When we got home from the club that night, around three AM, Kerrilyn wanted to go straight to bed, claiming she was very tired. I had been still sorting things out and hadn't said anything in the car, so by then I was quite ready to talk about the news I'd received. She shook off her shoes and made for the bedroom door, but I held her back.

"Don't go to bed, just yet."

"I'm really beat, Marc," she said, not looking at me.

"I don't care," I started. "There's something we need to talk about, first."

"*What?*" she complained, turning toward me and yawning, sounding tired, and very bothered, too.

"When were you going to tell me you were pregnant?"

She stopped then, at that statement. I waited, and for the longest, most uncomfortable moment, she simply stood there in the doorway to the bedroom, and looked at me. The girl did look tired. She looked exhausted, in fact, and I wondered if being pregnant had anything to do with it. It was possible. Finally she spoke, and with a voice completely devoid of animation or emotion.

"No. Not tonight. I'm going to bed. We can talk in the morning."

"No, Kerrilyn!" I went toward her, angry and insistent. "We need to talk about this. *Now.*"

"Not now, buddy," she didn't react negatively to my anger, "please, in the morning?"

Well, I was suddenly far too angry, it seemed, to wait. "The morning will be too late."

"Too late? What do you mean? Too late for *what?*"

"I need to know—*now*—what you're planning to do about being pregnant."

She sighed against the doorjamb, then straightened, "I was gonna tell you, you know."

"You were?" I thought it ironic. "When?"

"Sometime ... soon. I don't know."

"You told Sheree ..." It was an indictment.

Of course. "I had to tell *someone*."

"But not me."

She shrugged. "Sometimes you're too close. Like right now. I had to have room to think. I didn't want to decide that I wanted this baby, if you didn't. I didn't want to decide that I *didn't* want this baby, if you did." She yawned, but she wasn't bored. She shook her head to clear it. "It was too hard a choice to make."

"Kerrilyn," I went to her, and tried to put my arms around her. She resisted, pushing me away. I went on anyway, "I love you. If you had told me about this, I would have been OK with whatever you decided. I want you to trust me."

She snorted, looking away, "Trust you?!? You don't trust me!"

"What are you talking about? I do too trust you!"

"Don't gimme that. You don't even trust me to wash the darks separate from the fuckin' whites. Don't gimme that shit about *trust!*" She sighed, "No one trusts me to do anything."

Well, most of the time they had good reason. But now certainly wasn't the time to discuss *that*. Despite her occasional flakiness, despite her alcohol use (and abuse), despite her sexual *and* bisexual ... proclivities ... despite everything, I still felt Kerrilyn was a very lovable girl. One that shouldn't be saddled so all alone with such a momentous decision such as this.

"I need you to want to talk to me about this. I do trust you, regardless of what you think. I'm not like the others," I wanted her to know. Some of those others, band members, were notorious for generally not letting Kerrilyn do anything—except sing. Well, maybe it was only Troy Dancer, and occasionally Tom, maybe, but they were without a doubt most vocal about their condescending, mistrusting attitude. And it wasn't that Dancer did all that many things in the band, either, it just seemed as though most of the time he thought she was stupid or incompetent, and I knew it irritated her tremendously. Taken on the whole, she was anything but stupid. She maybe lacked good judgment sometimes, but dumb she wasn't.

And she knew who and what others I was talking about. "And it's a damn good thing, too!" She almost laughed, "'Cause you and me wouldn't be here havin' this nice conversation if you was."

"I *do* trust you."

She deflated, somewhat. "I know you trust me, most of the time." Then she looked up at me, dark circles under her eyes, "I just wanted to wait till I knew better how I feel about *this*," she patted her stomach,

"before I told you. That's all." She turned, "And now I need to go to bed, before I fall asleep standing here."

But I was unsatisfied. To her back, I said, "I just can't believe you weren't going to tell me about this."

She whirled about, and was instantly, hugely, almost insanely angry, shouting, "**You aren't gonna fuckin' let this go, are you?!?**"

It was more of a reaction than I expected—much more extreme—but in retrospect I think the pregnancy may have been working on her. "When were you going to tell me?" I asked again, calmly. More calmly than I felt.

"You're not gonna let this go, are you?" she asked again, shaking her head in disbelief, her voice quieter, but mood no less angry. "We can talk about this whole thing in the morning. I promise. I'm too tired right now to even stand up, let alone *think*, and you're standing there asking me some *very hard* questions! Gimme a fuckin' break now and then! Huh?"

"How about giving me a break? How do you think I feel being left out in the cold? You tell Sheree; she tells Tom; he *finally* decides to tell me! So tell me, how many others know this secret of yours? The whole fucking band?"

"I only told Sheree. She must have told Tom."

"Did you think she wouldn't?"

She blinked, trying to think, apparently. "I told her not to."

"When were you going to tell *me?!?*" I growled.

She growled back, "**I don't know!** All right?!?"

"No, Kerrilyn, it's *not* all right."

In frustration, she rubbed her eyes with her hands, and sagged against the doorframe momentarily, but she didn't say anything more. Then, with her head back and eyes closed, she reached behind and unzipped her dress. I watched as it came away from her slender shoulders. Ordinarily I would have found the act mildly enticing, but instead I resented her for it. So much! I wanted to be close to her, and hold her, and love her for being pregnant with *my* child. But she was angry and recalcitrant almost to an extreme, and though I loved her and needed her—as she undressed and remained silent—it hurt me.

I was hurt by being shut out of the one thing in which I should have been included. But to see her body there before me and imagine the small life just starting to grow within her ... it angered and hurt me. I turned from her, then.

"All right, go to bed," I told her, and promptly went over and sat down on the couch. She must have taken my advice, because in a moment when I looked over at the bedroom doorway, it was empty. After about five minutes I found I was pretty dog-tired, too, so I turned out the light,

stretched out, and went to sleep.

The next morning, early, she came out to the living room. I woke when I heard the coffeemaker gurgling. And when I opened my eyes, Kerrilyn was standing over me in her robe, sans glasses, staring closely. She looked almost as tired as she had the night before, and seeing me on the couch wasn't helping to make her feel any less tired, either.

"Why didn't you come to bed with me, last night?" she asked, her voice plaintive, tiny, sounding just like a little girl.

"I don't know." I sat up.

She stood up straight. "You know, I was having a hard enough time thinking things through, but now you're making it a whole lot more difficult." She folded her arms, "Now, I'm not so sure I should be having this baby."

"What? Why?"

"Your reaction, for one thing."

"Kerrilyn, I love you. And I want you to be happy. If we had this baby, we could be very happy." I thought about that prospect, a minute. "We could get married, I could buy a house, and everything."

"We'd just be a couple of happy fucking suburbanites? Is that right?"

"I don't care where we live." Her statement confused me. "We could move downtown, for all that it matters."

"That's not my point." Somehow, I knew it wasn't.

My voice was quiet when I asked, "So, what *is* your point?"

"You may find this hard to believe, but I may not *ever* want to get married, settle down, and raise a family. It doesn't have anything to do with you, it's just not something I want to do." She paced. I followed her movement, like watching the ball at a tennis match. She talked as she paced, "I wasn't trying to get pregnant. I was just being stupid, since I obviously wasn't using any birth control."

"What about your IUD?"

"Don't have one, buddy. I lied about it. Sorry." She shrugged, changing the subject away from birth control. "I've never been very happy with my life, and I sure have never gotten to do the things I wanted to do. Just for once I'd like to be able to do what *I* want, and not what someone else wants. Just for once."

"Kerrilyn," I admonished, "we'd all like that. Unfortunately, life doesn't always work out that way."

"Don't fuckin' lecture me on *life*." She stuck her finger out at me, gesturing angrily, "You haven't seen *half* the shit I've seen, or been through one-tenth the hell I've lived through. So don't go telling me how

unfair life is. You want 'unfair'? *I'll fuckin' show you unfair!*" She pulled the robe off her shoulders, then turned her back to me. "**Look at this!!**" She showed me her bare back, crisscrossed with small, white lines, seething, "**Do you see these fuckin' scars?!!** This is what 'unfair' is all about."

"I'm sorry, Kerrilyn," and I was, indeed, very sorry. "I wasn't trying to lecture you. I *know* things have been pretty tough for you. You can't imagine how angry it makes me whenever I see how you've been mistreated. I love you! I would die before I could *ever* hurt you ..."

She laughed, a short, sardonic sound. "That's good to know." She pulled the robe back on, and resumed her pacing around the living room. "I don't think I want to bring a kid into a world where scars like mine are possible. And where people who'll make them are runnin' around loose on the street. People who *like* to make them, especially."

"You don't know this child will experience anything like what you've been through."

"You're right," she nodded, "I *don't* know. But all the same, I don't know if I want to take the chance, either."

But I disagreed, "I think it's worth the risk."

"Tough shit." She put her hands on her hips. "I *don't*."

"I'm sorry." I was saying that a lot. "I'm sorry you don't want to have my baby. I would really love it if you wanted to go through with this pregnancy, and perhaps even marry me in the process." I stood up to get some coffee. "I know Sheree wants you to have your baby. I'll bet she might even want one of her own." Though how she could expect to become pregnant with her pregnant bisexual lover, I didn't exactly know. "Just think: you and her could raise the little ones together." I admit I was trying to make the whole thing sound very inviting and safe. Friendly and comforting. I didn't know Sheree had made a similar argument. I just needed her to want to have my baby. Our baby. Then I sighed, "I love you. And I would love nothing more than to always have a part of you around to love me back. A part of us. I would love that child like no other. Goddamn it, Kerrilyn! Say you love me and that you'll have my baby."

Her reply took some moments. "I may love you," she said, "but I don't want to have this baby."

I thought it was all over after that. Our conversation hadn't lasted very long, at all, and it seemed she'd already jumped to the one big conclusion. She said she didn't want the baby. And when I heard that, I exploded.

"This is not just *your* decision to make, you know!" I yelled, and I was pointing then, too.

"Yes, it is." She was just as adamant, just as defiant. But quiet.

I lowered my voice. "This *is* my baby, isn't it?" I already knew it was. Regardless, I *had* to think it was.

"Whose would it be?" And her expression added, 'asshole'.

"I don't know. *Tom* says it can't be his."

"And it isn't." She was certain.

"OK, so is there someone else I should know about?" Wrong thing to say, there, because instead of answering she shot forward and slapped me, hard, across the face. It was so totally unexpected I couldn't think how to react. So I didn't. I just stood there, and gaped at her in complete, stunned surprise. When I didn't do or say anything, she hit me again, harder.

"**FUCK YOU!! And everyone else!**" She was both enraged and ready to cry all at the same time. "I've tried to be as faithful to you as I know how. And *still* you think I'm out fucking other guys?!?" Tears welled up, huge. "**You bastard!** You scum-sucking mother-*fucking* son-of-a-bitch! I can't believe you still think I'm a whore after all this time!"

But I never, ever, thought she was a whore. It had not occurred to me. I didn't know about the prostitution, but even if I had, I don't think I ever really doubted her truthfulness or her faithfulness. Even with the most recent events with Sheree and Tom (which I hardly even counted). It was just a cruel, hurtful thing to say, and I'd said it.

I apologized. "I don't think you're a whore. I never said you were a whore."

"Yeah? Well, I *am*." She stomped away from me, then turned. "I'm nothing but a two-bit, lowlife, cock-sucking **whore**. I'm surprised I haven't given you any really killer STDs by now. Truly surprised."

"STDs?"

"Yes, you asshole. Sexually transmitted diseases. I've fucked just about every guy in this town, you know." She stormed back, got in my face. "I'm surprised your fucking *dick* hasn't rotted off, or something."

"You're being very unfair to yourself. Don't say those kinds of things if they're not true. And they're *not* true."

"They are," she informed me, "but don't take my word for it. Call *Danny*. He'll tell you."

"I don't believe you."

"*Don't fuckin' believe me,*" she laughed, "I don't care! You're the one who fucking wanted to know why I didn't want this baby. **So, don't fuckin' believe me!**" she shouted. "I could care less."

"Why are you so upset?" It seemed the reasonable question to ask.

Tears began to stream down her cheeks, but she wasn't breaking down. She blasted up into my face, and raged at me through her tears, "I

can't fucking deal with my life! I've had it! I'm over it, buddy! *You got that?!? YOU FUCKING GOT THAT?!?!*"

I took her rage. Absorbed it all. "Yes, I got it."

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I was furious when Marc confronted me about being pregnant. I hadn't told him about it, and I wasn't sure when I would, either, but when he asked me 'when were you going to tell me you were pregnant' it was just about the last thing I wanted to hear.

I don't know why I was so angry. I shouldn't have been, but I couldn't help it. Suddenly I felt trapped. More trapped than I'd ever felt, even when I was serving Danny's clients. The baby would weigh me down and hold me back, and I'd never, *ever* be free to be what I wanted, or do what I wanted. Marc was on the side of those who wanted me to have the baby. Well, I can't say there were any others telling me what to do, but Marc was surely one who wanted me to go through with the pregnancy. Up to the time he expressed his opinion, I know I was undecided, but after that ... he forced me to make a decision. A bad decision.

I decided, then, that I didn't want to keep the baby.

That upset me even more. I had wanted to make my own decision about it, but despite that, I felt coerced into making the *wrong* decision. I wanted my baby, but at the same time, I didn't know if I could go through with it. But even so, I really did want to know that there was a little part of me floating around in the world, in case there ever was a lack of love that my child could supply. And I didn't mind it so much, either, that this baby was the result of Marc's and my loving, since I so adored his hazel eyes and cute, shy smile. A little bit of us in the world would not be such a bad thing ...

But I couldn't go through with it—the pregnancy. The idea that my child could be forced to have sex against her will—beaten, abused, and mistreated—was too much for me to bear. However irrational my feelings might have been, they were where I was; they were how I felt. I was caught between the two extremes. Fear of the unknown, and fear of the known. I just knew that if I went through with my pregnancy, I would live to regret it. And I just knew that if I didn't, I would almost certainly regret it just as much. Most women decide on the side of hope and optimism. But my hope had been so continually smashed to bits since I was a baby,

myself, and my optimism hadn't yet had the chance to develop. So ...

Marc and I got home late from the job. It was Friday night. I was completely exhausted from the performance, much more tired than I thought I should have been, considering I hadn't gotten up until well after noon. All I wanted to do was go to bed—and sleep. Once in the door, though, Marc went off on me about being pregnant.

He wanted to know when I planned to tell him, and he repeated the question several times. I was in no mood and no shape to discuss it with him, so I excused myself, got undressed, and flopped down on the bed. I must have fallen asleep before my head hit the pillow.

I woke the next morning about ten to find he wasn't in bed with me. I would have normally rolled over and gone back to sleep, but I remembered that I'd promised to talk to him about being pregnant. Maybe I did owe him *that* much, anyway.

But it wasn't a very nice conversation. We weren't going to see eye-to-eye on this thing—not at all! The more we talked, the madder we both got, and before long he stormed off to the bedroom. Pretty damn typical.

With Marc hiding himself in the bedroom, I had little I could do but get dressed and leave. There was no way I could stay in the apartment with him as angry as he was. It was an awful feeling, this distance and anger we had between us. Much worse than any other feeling I'd ever felt. It was horrible! *We* hung in the balance. He would go on; I would go on; but *we* were surely finished.

I spent a long time in the bathroom, taking a shower and then drying my hair. I wanted Marc to come in, tell me he was sorry (to which I would have said how sorry I was—and I *was* sorry!) so we could kiss and make up, but he didn't. I couldn't face going in the bedroom and apologizing on my own. I should have apologized—*someone should have apologized!*—but the atmosphere of bad feelings intimidated me too much. I was afraid. I knew I'd hurt Marc very, very much, but I couldn't bear the responsibility. Not on top of everything else. It was too much. Much, too much. It totally overwhelmed me.

Once I was fully dressed, I had to walk from the bathroom through the bedroom to get to the door. And I had to stand in the bathroom doorway and to my breathing and steady my heartbeat before I could make that trip of all but twelve feet that would take me by Marc. What he would say, what he would do—I didn't know—but it scared me almost to the point of frozen inaction. I *had* to leave, but I almost didn't have the courage to do it.

With a final deep breath, then, I began that long walk through the

bedroom. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled as I felt his eyes on me. Stop, Kerrilyn! my conscience screamed. Stop! Stop! Turn around and say you're sorry. You're walking out (again) on the best thing that's ever happened to you, and it's wrong. Completely wrong. Stop! Stop! He will forgive you, he will accept you and every insecurity and indecision you possess. Trust him.

But I didn't listen to my conscience. I didn't stop.

Since I had the car I knew I wouldn't be hindered as I had been at Christmas. And since I had some money, too, I knew I wouldn't have to face the day sober, either. I didn't really know where I was going, or what I'd do once I got there, but I drove down by the expressway anyway, and found a bar I used to frequent.

Baby cakes, old habits die very hard.

The bartender knew me. He hadn't seen me in a while, it was true, but he remembered me immediately, and was glad as ever to pour me a scotch. He almost didn't want any money when I offered to pay him, but I smiled and told him he should take my money, since it was probably the last he was likely to get. He asked me what I meant, but I wasn't even sure I understood it, myself. Instead, I told him to 'start settin' 'em up,' and he obliged.

Over the next couple hours, I managed to get steadily drunker and drunker, but for some reason I didn't black out. I almost wish I had, because it would have made this a whole lot easier to write, since I wouldn't remember anything, now, to write about. Because you can't tell what you don't know. But alas, somehow I kept my brain alive.

I *did* get drunk, though. Very, very drunk. It was just as I'd intended, as it always is. Once I'd blotted out every memory of my piss-poor existence, I was ready for a little fun. I've got to say it here, because I have no choice anymore—this is the place *and* the time—but what I did was really bad.

There was a guy also sitting at the bar while I sat there sucking down scotches. He was drinking something of his own, and after I'd downed several—five or six, I wasn't counting—he scooted over the three stools to sit next to me. I recognized him, or his type, as soon as we made eye contact. I merely smiled.

He said something to me, like 'What cha doin' here, pretty lady?' He may have been more (or less as) drunk as me, so I'm translating.

'Drinkin',' was probably all I said in return.

'Can I buy ya one?' he probably asked me. Again, I'm not sure, but it seems to fit with how things developed. From now on, we'll just assume I

was more or less sober, and cognizant of things, and that what I say transpired was indeed, what transpired. I'm only certain of the aftermath, and not specifically what led up to it, so we'll just have to assume a few things.

So I said, 'Sure,' and smiled again.

We talked awhile, as drunken bar-mates often will. He told me his name—first name only—and I told him mine. I'm certain I said my name was Kerry.

"Well, Kerry," he said, and smiled, too, "you look pretty lonely."

"I'm not lonely," I assured him, smiling, "I got you to talk to." That flattered him immensely, as I knew it would.

We talked some more, but after some time I know he got around to the Question: "Ya wanna go some place where we can have a little fun?"

And the Answer was out of my mouth before I even knew what I was saying. "Sure, but I don't know if you can afford me."

He laughed, undaunted, understanding me and accepting my terms implicitly, "How much, then?"

"Ya ain't a cop, are ya?"

He laughed again, "No way, sexy lady! So, how much?"

I acknowledged his compliment with a smile. "\$200 and I'm all yours." Cheap.

He looked me over, carefully. Probably trying to decide if I was worth the bucks, or not. But, it didn't take him long to decide, though. "All right, you got a deal." He took me by the arm and we left the bar.

It was *that* easy.

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Sheree called later that afternoon, asking for Kerrilyn. I had to tell her she wasn't home. She asked where Kerrilyn was, and I told her the truth. We'd had a fight about her being pregnant; she'd left in an angry huff; I had no idea where she was or when she'd be back. All things considered, I was somewhat surprised she hadn't gone up there to be with Sheree. Sheree thanked me, though for what, I wasn't sure, and asked if Kerrilyn would call her when she got home. I said I'd tell her, but some nagging suspicion told me I might not see her right away. I left a note for Kerrilyn next to the phone, anyway.

We still had to play that night, being the last night of the gig, and though at first I had few doubts, by seven PM I was beginning to worry

about her. We would have to be leaving the apartment by eight if we expected to make it to the club on time, and knowing how long Kerrilyn usually took to get ready, she was probably late already. I called Tom, then.

"Kerrilyn's not home, yet," I told him when he said hello. I expected him to know what was going on.

He did. "She's not?"

"No. I haven't seen her since about eleven-thirty this morning. If she doesn't get here pretty soon, we'll be late for the gig."

"Don't wait on her. You can't afford to be late, son."

"I *know*, Tom," I said. "But I'm worried about Kerrilyn."

"So am I. But, what can we do? She's an adult—presumably—and we have no choice but to rely on her to make it to the job on time." He coughed. "Did she have any money?"

"I don't know." I thought, a moment, "Probably. I gave her an advance on her salary."

"You're not serious?" He sounded almost amused.

"No one's keeping track," I countered, "if that's what you mean. She needed money, so I gave her some. What does money have to do with anything?"

"Marc," he reminded me, "if she has money, then she's probably drunk out of her mind by now. You *know* Kerrilyn." All right, I did. "Y'all's fight was a big one, wasn't it?"

I considered whether to answer, what to say if I did. Well, may as well be honest. "Yes. I was pretty upset that she didn't want to tell me about being pregnant. You would be, too, I think, if it happened to you."

"I'm not saying it's your fault, Marc. Relax."

"How can I 'relax'?"

"If Kerrilyn doesn't show up, it's not your fault."

But I was certain. "She'll show up, Tom. She wants to be in this band as badly as I do. As badly as *you* do. You know that."

"No one's going to kick her out for this one thing."

"Who said anything about kicking her out?"

"*No one.*" Yet. He cleared his throat again. "But you know the rules." Yeah, I knew the fucking rules. He and I had agreed long ago not to tolerate band members missing rehearsals and/or gigs. If you do it, you could be replaced. Of course, it *sounds* good when you first say it, but in practice it isn't that cut and dried. Essential members of the band—and *everyone's* essential—can't be replaced easily. Not easily at all. Especially not lead vocalists. That she was also my live-in girlfriend and I the band's drummer made the decision just that much more difficult.

"She'll be there." I tried to sound definite, but I convinced no one. Least of all not me.

"I hope you're right." Tom echoed my sentiments, but he wouldn't have convinced anyone, either.

To play the gig without our lead vocalist was, well, a stressful and painful thing to consider. So much depended on Kerrilyn. How many songs could we do without her? Ten? Fifteen, maybe? Could Dancer sing some of the songs she normally did? Probably, but since we'd not rehearsed any of them that way—well, I would not want to be placed in that position. Dancer, though, was very professional, and provided he wasn't too messed up, himself, he would do the best he could.

He'd have something to say about it, for sure. Maybe it was just the excuse he needed to get rid of Kerrilyn. But I assumed he was only waiting for something like this to take back control of the band. Personally, I doubted he could do it. For my part, if Kerrilyn was put out—I was gone, too. It just didn't make sense to be playing in this band without her. Right or wrong, good or bad, I was with Kerrilyn.

The silence on the line had grown long, both Tom and I thinking, so I broke it with, "She'll be there, Tom."

He sighed, "I'm gonna stick with you, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't worry about it if Kerrilyn doesn't show up, tonight. Whatever happens, I'm going to stick with you. You know what I'm talking about?"

"I think we're both worrying about nothing."

"Maybe we are," he agreed, "but the band is *not* going to break up over this."

"Nothing's happened," but did I believe that nothing would? "Yet."

"Go get ready," he said. "I've got to leave the house right now in order to make it to the club on time." He tried to sound reassuring, "Don't worry about it."

"She'll be there," I insisted. But he had to go. So we hung up the phone and I went to take a shower.

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I've debated long and hard with myself over writing about what I did when I met that guy in the bar. Nothing that I can remember now has ever made me more ashamed, more regretful, or angrier (with myself) than breaking that one promise I'd made.

I've read about people who have no concept of others. They act totally amorally and without consideration for their impact on others. They lie, they cheat, they steal, and they hurt and kill others without even raising their heart rate. No one outside their own mind matters.

But that's not me.

I'm human. I care about others, and their feelings. There's a voice in the back of my mind telling me about it every time I do something wrong. I have a conscience and I have morals, as warped and twisted as they may be. The problem is that I just cannot control myself. Now, I know why (it's the alcohol) and I'm working on it, but when I got in that guy's car at about two o'clock on that hot Saturday afternoon, I was drunk, loose, and completely out of control. I thought I was having a good time, and in some ways I probably believed it, but I was really crossing over into territory I promised myself I'd *never* go back into, and though I was betraying Marc and his love, I was actually betraying myself, more.

One thing about it, when you betray yourself, you know it immediately. The only choice you have then is to medicate yourself into utter oblivion. Of course, I would never have done what I did had I been sober (at least I hope so) but ultimately it isn't only the alcohol that's to blame.

I want you to know I'm not just blaming everything on the alcohol.

I don't know where we went, exactly. It doesn't even matter, maybe, but I think we ended up in some cheap, local motel. He'd asked if we could go to my place, but I pretended not to have heard him—I simply left it out of the question. If he wanted me he had to figure out where to go. I was, indeed, very drunk. Too bad I could still think, and that I can remember even now what I said (more or less) and what we did.

The motel room smelled funny. Familiar, but strange. Old. Musty, maybe—a dank, musky smell like old semen seemed to permeate the sheets. It was heady, then, but thinking about it now turns my stomach.

I kicked off my sandals, pulled down the covers, and demurely sat on the edge of the bed. The guy sat down next to me; put his hand on my leg. I remember I was wearing a short, yellow cotton skirt, one that barely came to mid-thigh even while standing. Sitting, it left a lot of leg showing. Sickly amused, I watched both him and his hand while he started to make his move. He was the customer, so why not let him do it his way. Ah, but no money had yet exchanged hands.

"I hate bringin' this up," I said, "seein' how much fun you're havin', but I need some money for this." I'm sure my words were slurred, but maybe not too badly. Nonetheless, he understood me.

"After, sweetheart."

I promptly and adroitly removed his hand from my leg. Then I laughed and shook my head, causing my hair to fly. I have very pretty hair, I think, and I wanted him to know what kind of woman he wasn't going to get if he didn't come across with some green. And soon. "No fuckin' way!" I chuckled and grinned, assuring him I wasn't angry, just definite and determined.

"Wait a minute," he grinned, too. "How do I know you're worth \$200?"

"I'm worth a helluva lot more'n that, bucko," I stood up, but still smiling. "I'm givin' ya a break on the price 'cause you're so cute!" I turned my back to him and stretched, pushing my behind out toward him, just a little, and ran my hands down my sides and over the twin rounded mounds of my ass. I gently allowed my fingertips to curl under the hem of the skirt, and slowly lifted it up in back, just enough to show the edge of my tight, black, scanty panties. I know my ass is nice, too, and wanted to be sure that he knew it, too.

"Cute," he said, still sitting and smiling, "but I don't pay for nothin' in advance."

"That's OK," I told him, then. "Been real nice." I let the skirt back down. "Jus' take me back to my car, and we'll call it a day. No hard feelings."

"Hold on a minute," he said. "How do I know ya won't walk out the door once I hand ya the money? An' even more," he continued, "how do I know *you're* not a cop? Once ya get money from me, you could arrest me."

"If I was a cop," I smoothed the skirt down over my behind, and noticed how his eyes followed the movements of my hands, "you'd be up shit-creek already, for askin' me for sex back in the bar."

He laughed, "I just asked if ya wanted to have some fun, sweet-cheeks."

"Yeah, an' I asked *you* for \$200." I stopped my posing and went into the bathroom, probably to check my face. I didn't have to pee, yet, but I also knew it wouldn't be long, either. I looked at my face in the small, filthy mirror, and called over my shoulder, "My terms are cash in advance. Period. You're a cute guy, an' I like ya, but this is my rule. No bucks—no fucks." Without waiting for an answer, I went back out to the bedroom. I couldn't even be sure he had heard me while I had had my back to him. "Did ya hear me?" I asked, stopping in front of him, just out of arm's reach. "No bucks, no fucks."

He wasn't deterred. "You're a pretty cocky chick, ya know."

I smiled, nodded. I was going to win; I knew it without any doubt. It

was an issue of supply and demand, and as I stood there looking at his face, studying his expression, in my mind I knew, and without any doubt at all—pretty soon he was going to get out his wallet and give me money. After that, I had already made my mind up he was definitely going to get his money's worth.

"This better be worth it." He reached behind him, and as I had predicted, took out a wallet. Old and shabby, but fat.

"You can count on it." I held out my hand as he counted out the requisite ten twenties. "You ain't gonna regret nothing. I promise I'm worth every penny ya got."

"Ya ain't gonna get all my money, honey." He briefly checked the status of his remaining cash. "I don't care *how* goddamn good you think you are. No woman is worth what I'm payin' ya, already."

I offered him his money back. "Suit yourself, bucko. Go find someone else, then." When he failed to take the money from my hand, I tossed it on the bed next to him.

"Look, babe," he scooped up the \$200, took my hand, and pressed the money into my palm, "I was only kiddin'." He shook his head, a rueful smile coming to his lips. "Man, for a hooker, you sure are one tough customer. All I wanted was a little fun in the afternoon, and you're givin' me *such* a hassle over it." The guy stood up, and I allowed him to put his arms around me. The money in my hand? I stuffed it in the small front pocket of my skirt. Lucky for me I had a pocket, I guess.

He was taller than me by some inches. He leaned down and tried to kiss me. I refused, and twisted my head to the side. "I don't kiss." He accepted my terms, but not happily. I pushed away from him, and smiled, crookedly and swaying slightly, feeling very drunk and woozy suddenly. "Should I take my clothes off?" I asked, pulling out the front of my tight T-shirt.

He sat on the bed, again. "That'd be nice. Yes." His sense of irony was lost on me, though.

"Too bad we don't got any music," I commented as I pulled the T-shirt over my head and smoothed down my ruffled hair. He asked why I wanted music. "I could dance for ya while I undressed."

"It's all right," he was concentrating on the curves of my body, mainly my barely concealed breasts, apparently not concerned with whether I danced, or not.

I folded the T-shirt, an old habit. It was something I'd always done, even from the first few times, and it struck me as very unusual, suddenly. With Marc, I never bothered with my clothes. I just threw them off wherever I was, without a single concern. On the job, I think I

subconsciously felt the lack of safety and protection, and true to habit, I was finding myself folding my clothes neatly as I was preparing to fuck a stranger.

I followed with the skirt. I unzipped the small zipper in back, and carefully stepped out of the garment. Making sure my money was safe, still, in the pocket, I folded the skirt and placed it carefully on top of my folded T-shirt. My bra was next, and I quickly undid the catch in back and placed it neatly with the rest of my clothes. The guy was watching me undress, and I judged he approved of what he saw, even if he did comment on the way I folded my clothes.

“You’re real neat, foldin’ your clothes like that.”

“It’s a habit,” I told him, and it was the truth. It just felt more comfortable following tried-and-true procedures. I would keep in control, and get through it and go home again without taking any undue chances.

Without any further hesitation, I whipped my panties down, stepped out of them, and placed them on the very top of my small pile of clothes. I came around to the far side of the bed, and scooted onto it, coming to lie on my side facing him.

“Ya gonna join me?” I asked.

“In a hurry?”

“No.” I smiled, and slowly closed my eyes, then slower still, opened them. He smiled, then, too, and seemed satisfied with things.

He took his time. First he went in the bathroom and peed. I know, because I heard water splashing in the toilet. Then he washed his face and hands, and then undressed there in that teeny-tiny bathroom. It was slightly on the odd side, but lots of guys had done that in the past, so I patiently waited for him to come to me. In a few minutes, he appeared in the bathroom doorway, naked, and he quickly came over to the bed and got in with me. I allowed him to kiss me, then, noticing he was already very hard and ready, and in a few minutes rolled onto my back and he slipped effortlessly into me. Absently, I noticed he wasn’t a very large fellow—much smaller than Marc. Oh, well.

I was incredibly stupid, since I didn’t even make him wear a damn condom. It had occurred to me, maybe, but it just didn’t seem very important at the time. Under the circumstances, there was nothing for me to fear with respect to getting pregnant, since apparently I already was, but at the same time I figured I’d have to go get checked out later. It’s just one of the hazards of the profession. What a stupid, fucking cunt I was.

## *Chapter 26*

I called Sheree when I was ready to leave the apartment. I knew Tom had left almost an hour earlier, but I still wanted to know if Sheree had heard from Kerrilyn. Why I thought she would have heard from her and not called me, I don't know, but ...

"She isn't here, Marc," she told me. "She hasn't called, and I haven't seen her. Are you worried about her?"

"I'm not so much worried about her as I am worried she'll be late for the gig. She'll be in really deep shit if she's late."

"I understand." She sounded sympathetic, "Is there anything I can do? I mean, if I hear from her I'll put her butt in gear, but if she doesn't call me, or anything, I can't help, much. I'm in the dark as much as you are. Has she ever been late, before?"

"Never. But, in fairness she's always been with me, and I'm never late. She took off out of here early today, and I haven't seen her since."

"Tom said y'all had a big fight."

"Whatever would give you that idea?" Sarcasm fairly dripped from my voice. "Just because she was pregnant with my baby and didn't want to tell me, there's no reason for us to have had a fight."

"I didn't say you were wrong, Marc." She sounded somewhat defensive.

But I was accusatory, "You knew about it, and yet you didn't tell me." She countered, "I didn't think it was my business to tell you."

I was about to disagree, but changed my mind. "I know," I said instead, "sorry." My next thoughts were faltering, "But ..."

"But, still the same, you wish I'd told you as soon as I found out."

"I don't know, Sheree. You know I love the girl. Desperately. What's it going to take to bring her around to realize just how much ... just how much ...?" I had to stop a minute, since—almost incredibly—tears were beginning to creep into my eyes, emotions threatening to encroach upon

my voice. I particularly didn't want Sheree to know I was crying. I cleared my throat. "What's it going to take to convince her she doesn't have to be afraid?"

"I don't think either you or I can convince her. She's an alcoholic, Marc, and until she realizes the extent of her problem, there's nothing *anyone* can do for her."

"You think she's an alcoholic?"

I think she thought me dense, or something, "Are you trying to tell me you haven't noticed that she has a drinking problem?"

"I've noticed, but do you think it's that serious? I mean *really*?"  
Where was my brain, just then? Where was all my supposed intelligence and powers of observation? Was Kerrilyn's drinking problem serious? Could a bottle a day be considered serious?

Sheree asked, "Do you think she's drunk right now?"

I sighed, "I'm sure of it."

"Nuff said." And there was a very lengthy pause.

Eventually I recovered enough to speak. "Christ, Sheree!" I had come to an awful realization. "What am I going to do?"

"About what?"

"Kerrilyn."

"Well," she cleared her throat, "there's only one thing you *can* do, I think. Let her go."

I couldn't hear the truth, yet. "I'm going to lose her. They'll kick her out of the band, for sure. The band will break up. That'll be it."

"Do you *really* love her?"

I didn't reply immediately, and considered not answering at all, but I understood the point she was making. If I loved her—really loved her—I had to let her go to find her own way through this crisis. Any help I could have been to her was past being effective once I brought my own emotional needs into the picture. I didn't think it was wrong to have emotional needs, but there wasn't much doubt at all that they complicated Kerrilyn's pregnancy dilemma, considerably.

Sheree repeated, "Do you really love her, Marc?" Then I sensed the emotion in her voice. At first I wondered why it was there, then realized another thing. Sheree might feel she was losing Kerrilyn, too.

But, Sheree's love aside, "You know I do," I finally said. "I just wish she didn't have to suffer so much. She's really not as strong or as tough as she thinks she is. She's not taking this very well, and by the time she realizes what she's got, she might lose everything."

"Everything?"

"You mean," I asked, "do I think she'll lose me?"

Instead of answering my question, she said, "Well, for my part, she's *not* going to lose me." She paused, "I care a great deal for her, you know, and I've already decided I'm going to stand beside her all the way." She finished, "You should, too."

I wanted take exception to Sheree's 'love' for Kerrilyn, but had to remember the mark that Sheree had planted on my neck, and the love that Kerrilyn had shown to us. *Both of us.* "I want to, Sheree."

"Think about it. If you want Kerrilyn—and the baby—you're going to have to be pretty strong for her. Don't let her get away with killing herself with booze, and don't *ever* let her think you'll abandon her." She stopped, and it sounded like she began to snifle. I started to speak but she went on, tears evident in her voice. "I know she loves you. Much more than she loves anyone else. More than she'll *ever* love anyone else. You've got to hang in there for her. She needs you. Needs all of us—"

And I listened while Sheree cried, then. Too. It hurt to hear, but at least I understood.

We had to start the gig without Kerrilyn. Sheree had cried on the phone a few minutes, then let me go so I wouldn't be late. When I arrived at the club, which was far out east of town, Tom was already there. He didn't have much to say when he saw that Kerrilyn wasn't with me, other than 'Dancer will have to sing lead vocals, tonight.'

When Mel and Dancer got there a few minutes later, and when I told them Kerrilyn wasn't there and I didn't know where she was, Dancer, understandably, was very angry. He did his usual ranting and raving act, growling about how stupid and untrustworthy she was, and also how he was going to kick her sorry ass out of the band for not showing up. Tom was about the only one to come to her defense, though, since I was too sick at heart to take her side. He simply told Dancer nothing was going to happen until we talked to Kerrilyn. Dancer may have had dreams that he *was* the band and we were only just backing him up, but in reality he was just another member of a very good and very tight group, and to excise Kerrilyn would be to seriously damage the *chemistry* we all knew we had. In spades. Meanwhile, though, we had to figure out what just what the hell we were going to play, now that it looked like our lead vocalist wasn't going to be there.

What to tell the club owner was the easy part. Tom just told the guy Kerrilyn was sick, and wouldn't be there. What could the guy do? Fire us? Musicians get sick just like normal human beings, and missing a gig now and then is just something that happens. The owner did ask what we were planning to do about all the songs she usually sang, and we told him we

had plenty of stuff in our repertoire that she didn't sing. It was only partly true. Dancer knew a lot of songs, but few of them were in the band's play list. I sincerely hoped Mel and Tom could fake songs as well as I could. There are times when being the drummer has its advantages, and this was one of them.

Fortunately, we only had to cram together the first set sans vocalist. Kerrilyn came through the door at ten o'clock just as we were starting our first break. Dressed, but drunk.

I was all set to launch on her again, but I remembered what Sheree said, and decided to leave our fight for some other time—and some other place. It wasn't easy, talking to Kerrilyn while wanting to strangle her—and *not* strangling her—but I managed it. Barely.

"Where *were* you?" I hissed as we found a table near the stage to sit while we were on break.

"None of your fuckin' business," she tartly replied.

I had to bite back anger, and hugely. I swallowed. Exhaled. "OK, I guess I deserve that."

"Damn right you do!" This girl was going to be a trial, I could sense it. "You're lucky I'm here *at all*."

I couldn't suppress an ironic, condescending smile. "Uh, Kerrilyn," I informed her, "*you're* the lucky one, I think, for showing up."

"What do you mean?" She took out a cigarette and lit it. I wanted one, too, but I resisted the urge to ask her for it.

"They could kick you out of the band for not showing up tonight."

"But, I'm here." She puffed, and I tried to see her eyes behind a curtain of smoke.

Indeed. "So you are."

"I don't know why everyone is so worried that I wasn't gonna show up. You know damn well how important this is to me."

"How did you know we were worried about you?"

"I got your note." She seemed to resent being though stupid. "I called Sheree, dummy. She chewed my fucking ear off a good ten minutes when I got back to the apartment. I'd have been here sooner if she hadn't kept me on the phone so long."

"Well, we *were* worried. You left the apartment without telling me where you were going or when you'd be back." I had to stop because the waitress came by to take our drink order. I ordered my usual, a light bourbon and Seven-Up, and Kerrilyn ordered her usual, a double scotch, ice only. I considered mentioning it to her, but didn't. When the waitress went away, I resumed, "I didn't know what to think."

"I'm still *very* mad at you." She reached forward and poked me in the chest with her finger. The nail gouged me squarely, and it hurt. "Think on *that*."

I rubbed the spot where she had gored me, and changed the subject. "Are you sober enough to sing?"

She nodded, smiled, puffed on her cigarette. "I been lot's drunker'n this, before. I can handle it, fine." The waitress came by with our drinks. I handed the girl a ten, and she set the change on the table. Kerrilyn took a moment to sip from her scotch before continuing. "I got just enough of a buzz on to take the edge off. Just enough to kill my butterflies. Should be pretty fine in a few." And punctuated the remark by downing the scotch in a gulp. The thought of it made me sick. And the night's trouble was really only just beginning.

Mel, who was sitting a couple tables over watching us talk, decided it was time to come around. She found a chair and scooted in opposite me, a cigarette also dangling from her hand. "What's going on?" she asked no one in particular.

Kerrilyn answered, though, "Not too much. What's going on, with you?"

"We just had to play an entire set without you, is what." She leaned forward on her elbows, "*Where the hell were you?*" Her tone was deadly serious, words pointed.

Kerrilyn chose not to give Mel a flip answer, though. She made herself pause, and looked Mel straight in the eye when she spoke. "I'm sorry I was late. Time got away from me." She took a large drag on her cigarette, and coughed, fist in front of her mouth. "It won't happen again."

Mel Howe only stared at Kerrilyn, levelly and coolly. Considering what to say, if anything, I suppose. "OK." She smiled, but humorlessly. "You ready to sing, now?"

"Yep," Kerrilyn nodded.

"Good." Then Mel stood up and went back to the table where Troy Dancer still sat. She was obviously angry, but she was also smart enough to keep it to herself. Until, I figured, the gig was over. Then she'd have something to say. At least I hoped so.

"Mel's mad, isn't she?" Kerrilyn asked me once we were alone again.

"*Everyone's* angry, woman."

She looked at me, eyes growing larger momentarily, and though I felt purely a million miles away from her, I saw some of the old, sweet Kerrilyn come through, for an instant, and I was melted. Just a little. I honestly didn't know if we'd be together in the morning, but for a few

moments, I understood the reasons why I might have fallen in love with her. She sighed, and leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes briefly, then opening them. "I really didn't mean to be late, you know."

"OK," I decided to accept that at face value, for the moment. "Where were you that you forgot we had a job, tonight? Surely you didn't forget, or were you just too drunk to remember?"

"*I remembered!*" She shot forward to confront me across the corner of the table. "But if you care so goddamn much about me, why didn't you fuckin' say something to stop me, or something, this morning?"

"*Me? Stop you?*" I shook my head, since the whole idea seemed ridiculous. "Would you have stopped if I *had* said something?" She started to reply, but I cut her off with a motion of my hand. "No, Kerr', I know better than that. There was nothing I could have said or done that would have made any difference, at all."

She scowled, "You're wrong, buddy. You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. And you do, too."

She apparently decided either I was right, or it wasn't worth arguing about, anymore. "I didn't mean to be late."

"You said that, already, and I believe you. But that's not what we're talking about, is it? We're talking about you walking out this morning, and deciding not to have the baby. You didn't forget that, did you?"

She said nothing to that. Only glared at me for the rest of the break.

On stage, Dancer merely blinked at Kerrilyn, and briefly asked here where the hell she'd been. She apologized to him for being late, and when he told her what the first song was, she nodded and we began.

The rest of the gig went passably well. Kerrilyn's voice was rougher than usual, but the added raspiness only served to make her vocals more soulful and sultry. Though it was obvious to me she'd had quite a lot to drink, it didn't seem to be affecting her singing, noticeably. By rights she should have been a complete fuck-up, but somehow she kept her shit together and managed not to make too many mistakes.

From my perch behind all the action, I tried to discern what kind of mood she was in. Once or twice I became so immersed in my thought processes and my study of Kerrilyn's movements and inflections that I almost missed a cue, but I managed to catch myself before I made any serious errors. Mel started spending a lot of time watching me, then, so in response I had to suppress an embarrassed grin at my lack of proper concentration.

We, as a band, were only just 'OK'. There would be no superheated performances, this night. And that was OK, too, considering how the

night had begun, and furthermore, we certainly couldn't be expected to be 'up' every night. I was glad when the night was over.

Packing up took a long time, mainly because of the strange, strained mood we were all in. And even stranger than the mood, both Mel and Dancer stuck around to help tear down the equipment. I couldn't tell, but it seemed as though Dancer wanted to talk to our vocalist, and he was determined to get his opportunity. No way was I going to do anything to prevent it, or mitigate it in any way, since I felt pretty strongly that Kerrilyn should feel the brunt of the others' anger.

Their disappointment, though, would ultimately be only a small fraction of mine.

• • •

Troy Dancer didn't leave after the gig was over. I think it was the first time he'd ever stayed once the playing was over, and I wondered and worried if he was sticking around just so he could talk to me.

Well, I was right, he was.

I busied myself untaping cords and wrapping them up while Dancer and Tom wrestled with the PA speakers. Tom had not come around all night, or even spoken a word to me the whole evening. It was probably what I had expected of Marc, but Marc had spent quite a lot of time talking to me—and he did not seem especially angry when he did, either. Tom's complete silence and avoidance of me made his point quite well, though. I was wrong for being late, and he was pissed with me. But I just wished he would yell at me and get it over with. It was easier, that way.

When most of the equipment was torn down, wrapped up or put away, I heard Dancer say something to Tom to the effect of 'I want to talk to MacDonald about something. Rehearsal, Tuesday night. Right?' I think Tom may have nodded, and then I watched as Troy Dancer walked toward me. I don't know why, but I felt like the school principal had just seen me do something wrong. It made me feel like a child.

"MacDonald." He had taken to calling me by my last name. I suppose he thought it was easier to remember than my semi-fluid first name. "You busy right now?"

No, I wasn't. I shook my head, wondering if it was going to be bad. The asshole still intimidated me.

"Let's go for a ride. I could use a cup of coffee." He smiled, seeming pretty relaxed, and put his hand on my shoulder—the one closest to

him—*not* around my shoulders. “You?”

“Sure,” I said, very acutely aware of his hand on me. I don’t think he’d ever even touched me, before. At least not in any semi-intimate way. And his hand on my shoulder *did* feel mildly intimate. Maybe he just wanted me to relax, I don’t know, but I was anything but relaxed. But he dropped his hand, then, and we walked together to the club’s front door. He opened it for me, and we went outside in the still steaming, humid night air. I’d forgotten how muggy the day had been, but I remembered it the instant the door swung closed behind us.

“We’ll take my car,” he called as he made off across the parking lot at a trot. “Come on.”

“What about my car?” I asked.

“*I’ll bring you back*, MacDonald.” He seemed very amused. I didn’t bother to answer, just got in the passenger’s side.

He didn’t talk much while we left the bar, nor while we drove around looking for an all-night place where we could get a cup of coffee, but what he did say failed to raise any red flags. It seemed he simply wanted to talk to me, not tear me to pieces. In a few minutes we found a Waffle House out by the expressway, and slid into a vacant booth in the back. There was no one around us, and few others at all, except the grill cook and two waitresses.

“So, Troy,” I opened immediately, “you wanted to talk to me?” I thought it better to take the offensive, rather than leave myself open for his first strike.

“You call yourself Kerrilyn. Or have you changed it again?”

I shook my head. “No. Kerrilyn is right.”

“Fine.” He took a minute to peruse the menu. “You hungry?”

I shrugged, “I suppose.”

“You got money? Or am I gonna have to pay?”

“I got money.”

“Good. Then, you can eat whatever you can afford.” He grinned, thinking his joke pretty funny.

“Is this your comedy act?” I shot back, “Cause if it is, I wouldn’t quit your day job.” I almost expected him to get angry, then, but he only smiled. The waitress came by, and he ordered breakfast and coffee. I looked the menu over, but couldn’t quite decide what sounded good, so I got some of their raisin toast (one of my favorites) and a cup of coffee, too. The waitress went away.

“You OK—Kerrilyn?”

I thought it an extremely odd question, coming from Troy Dancer,

famously inconsiderate person that he is. And then I didn't know whether to answer him honestly, flippantly, or just tell him to go to hell. Which one? Mentally, I tried a coin toss, and settled for something part way between honesty and go-to-hell. "What are you talking about?"

"You were late, tonight."

"I know. I already said I was sorry."

He went on without further preamble, "I've been hearing a lot of stories about you, lately. Actually," he continued, "I've *always* heard a lot of stories about you, it's just that now they've gotten really weird. In fact, there's *so much* shit going around about you I just had to finally sit down with you and find out if any of it is actually *true*."

Oh? "What 'shit' have you heard?"

"You mean, you don't know?" He seemed very amused.

Of course I knew. I got angry, then. "People might say lots of things. That don't make 'em true. Anyway, I could tell you a few things about yourself, *dip-shit*." I placed special emphasis on that last bit.

"Yeah, but I haven't done *one-tenth* the shit you have."

"So, what of it?" What did that prove?

"All right, *Kerrilyn*," he nodded, placing his hands on the table, palms down. "Let me lay a few things out for you. One," he put up his right index finger, "this band is killer. Two," and another finger, "you and I make a great team. I almost hate to admit it, but you're pretty damn good. In time, you could probably even be better than me." I raised my eyebrows at his highly complimentary statement. I had suspected it, maybe, but I really had had no idea how he felt about me. I wasn't too sure, even then. He went on, "Three. You cause so much fucking trouble and stress in the band it's almost not worth it to keep you."

Well, that smashed me flat.

What could I say, after that? The blood drained from my face, and instead of getting angry, which I wanted to do, I regressed back to being a bad little girl. And distinctly *hated* it.

"Of course," he smiled—*what an asshole!*—and sat back in his seat, "having said all that, I still want to know if what I've been hearing about you is true."

"What?" I croaked, barely able to make my voice work. I was already very hoarse from singing, but still ... I coughed, and cleared my throat.

"What do you want to know about?"

He got right to it. "Sheree Germaine."

"What about her?"

"Don't say that!" He looked at me, frowning. "Either answer me honestly, or quit the band and get the fuck *out*." It seemed like an

ultimatum.

God, I hated him, then. Anyone else I could have taken on, and held my own with, but Troy Dancer had the knack of making me feel *so inferior*, and it infuriated me as he literally held me down and pounded on my head. I wanted to kill him! But I could only hang my head. "What about her?" I repeated, meekly, weakly.

"Tell me," he pressed.

"**Look!**" I yelled at him, angry enough, now, to fight back, "**I don't have to tell you nothing!** You ain't my fucking daddy." Tears were very near the surface, and with renewed anger I bit them back. *He was not going to see me cry!* No fucking way!

"Tell me," he repeated, but much quieter, and with much less a demanding tone.

"**All right!** What do you want to know? That she and I are lovers? *Is that it?*" I could feel my ears redden. I hoped he didn't notice.

"Is it true?"

I took a large lungful of air, and let it out slowly, trying to control my rising rage at this poor excuse for a human being. "Yes, it's true." How had he gotten me to admit it, so easily? I'd resisted everyone else, but not Troy Dancer.

But apparently he had no comment to make about Sheree, and moved right to the next thing on his list. "Tom Germaine. After our first gig."

How did he know about that? Mel? "What?" I asked, sarcastically. "That I sucked his dick and asked him for more?"

He seemed amused by that remark. "I didn't know you went back for more." He smirked, and I wanted to smash his face in.

"You fucking asshole! It was just that one time."

"Except for Marc Huffman's birthday party."

I started to say something about Marc and Sheree, to deflect some of the negative attention away from me, but I bit my tongue—but good! If he didn't know anything, and was only guessing, I wasn't going to tell him. Whatever he knew, I could corroborate (maybe), but beyond that ... it was none of his fucking business. "You haven't heard nothin' about Marc's birthday party."

"Oh, no?"

"**No!**" I glared at him. His look told me what I suspected. He knew nothing, and I was then sure of it.

"Pregnancy, then."

Apparently that cat was out of the bag, too. I snorted derisively. "What of it? I'm a girl; Marc's a guy. These things happen."

"So it *is* Marc's baby, then?"

And then I smacked the living shit out of Troy Dancer. It felt good, and afterward he was completely convinced I was pregnant by Marc. Whatever else, he knew *that* to be true.

"OK, Kerrilyn," he rubbed the side of his face, almost contrite, but not angry. "I guess I ought to be sorry for that. That's the one thing you've done that could even be considered halfway normal."

"Don't fuckin' lecture me on '*normal*,' Mr. Asshole-Universe— Universe-Asshole." I almost stammered, but luckily I kept my voice from hitching too badly. The waitress came by with our coffees, so I waited before going on. She left. I resumed, "Did you bring me here just to kick me out of the band?" I had to ask, but I wasn't especially worried anymore.

"No." He tried to sip his scalding coffee, but set it down, instead. "Being late for the gig is bad, but it *is* only your first offense. I've almost been late a couple of times, myself." Damn right, I thought, he had. "It just seemed like things were starting to get out of hand, and whether you believe me or not, I don't want anything to break up this band."

"OK," I agreed, "I don't want anything to break the band up, either."

"So," he pounced, then, "get your fucking shit together!"

I didn't flinch at all, "I will, but you can't tell me what to do with my life, away from the band."

He shook his head, "I'm not trying to tell you that." Smiled sickeningly, "But so far, everything you've done has been *with* someone in the band, or related to someone in the band, and you're fucking things up. *But royally.*" He exhaled, fully. "Look. I don't get along with Tom Germaine especially well, but it's because we just don't like each other. Professionally, I think he's one of the best, and he manages our business dealings quite well. I like your man Marc Huffman, but I doubt he would believe it. Marc's only an OK drummer, but since he's best friends with Germaine, I guess we could do a whole lot worse. Mel and I aren't getting along very well, at all. In fact, she moved out last week." I hadn't known. "But, we're managing to keep *our* shit together, musically, so that shouldn't be a problem. You, on the other hand, are another thing altogether." He hazarded another attempt at the coffee. "You come on the scene with your pretty face, and your tight little ass and those huge tits, and all your fucking *perfect pitch* ... and not only that, you write some pretty good songs, too. But you cause all kinds of trouble, and your stage fright is so bad you almost can't get up on the stage to begin with ... and then you drink like a fucking fish ..." And then he stopped, apparently having run out of things with which to damn me.

"You think I drink too much?"

He nodded, curtly, "*Way* too much."

"So, what do you think I ought to do about it?"

He snorted. "Since you're pregnant, I'd say *stop*."

"Stop drinking?"

"Stop drinking."

"I don't think I'm going to stay pregnant." Whoops, I probably shouldn't have said that. If there were rumors before, I surely added to them, now.

He seemed unconcerned about the pregnancy. "Do whatever you want with the baby, MacDonald, I don't give a shit, but I'd still tell you to stop drinking."

"You know," I thought something was pretty ironic about his advice, "you're one to talk. I've seen you lots of times completely stoned out of your gourd on sopors or 'ludes, and you drink and smoke a ton of dope all the time. And here you sit and tell me I ought to quit drinking? That's total bullshit!"

Our conversation was interrupted by a message from our waitress: she set our food on the table in front of us. Dancer took the break in the conversation as an opportunity to tear into his food, and as he munched merely looked at me through the strands of his long hair, which had fallen in his eyes, and which he pointedly neglected to remove.

He swallowed his breakfast, and said, "I quit doing drugs."

"When?" It seemed pretty unlikely, to me.

"When Mel hit the road, I did some thinking." He munched a bit of his eggs. "I realized what I had been doing, and I decided to just stop."

"Just stop?" I took a bite of my raisin toast. It crunched. "Just like that? Cold turkey?"

"As far as I can see, it's the only way. Unless you know of some other."

"Why quit?"

"Hah!" he pushed back in his seat, shaking his head vigorously from side to side, and smiling all the while. "I can't tell you the answer to that question, MacDonald. It's just something you'll have to figure out for yourself."

There was more, but I had just gotten the gist of it.

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Kerrilyn and Dancer were gone a long time, almost an hour. Mel took

off not long after they left, so Tom and I spent the next forty-five minutes getting the van loaded with all the equipment—that would fit. Both of us were dead tired, and I for one wanted to go home and get some sleep, but I also wanted to wait for Kerrilyn. I didn't know what it was about, specifically, but I definitely wanted to talk to her before we got back to the apartment. Call it intuition. Call it an act of self-preservation.

Tom really couldn't wait any longer. I told him there was no sense in him hanging around, so after he waited with me about ten more minutes, he said good-bye and started on his long trek back up to the lake. The bar had closed long ago—even the owner had left—so I sat in my car alone in the darkened parking lot, waiting for *the girl*.

It wasn't long before I saw Dancer's car pull up.

He pulled in along side Kerrilyn's Toyota and stopped. I saw the passenger's side door open and Kerrilyn get out. She leaned inside the car and said something to him, then straightened. She closed the door, his car began to move away, and she turned toward her own car. My car was about ten parking spaces away, and I got out as she put the key in the lock. Apparently she hadn't seen me there, and had assumed she was alone. She heard my footsteps, though, and looked up, startled, as I walked up.

"Hi," I said.

She did a double take. "Oh! You scared me." She seemed strangely cool, almost emotionless, and I wondered if she was at all glad to see me. She didn't seem to be. I only stood there dumbly while she unlocked the car and opened the door. It seemed incredible to me, but it looked like she was going to just get in and drive away. And leave me standing there.

"In a hurry?" I laughed, nervously.

"I'm very tired, Marc," she replied, and the atmosphere between us suddenly felt very cold. Icy.

"I'm tired, too," I smiled, but she wasn't looking at me to see it. "Let's just go home and go to bed."

She paused in her motion to get in the car, then turned to look at me. "I didn't think you'd be here."

That was strange. "I decided to wait." I was getting an awful—a terrible—feeling about this conversation. "I was almost ready to give up, but then I saw you all drive up. Was Dancer angry?"

"No." She didn't seem to want to elaborate, but she did. "We had a nice, long talk. About things. Band things, mostly."

"Really?"

She nodded, and looked down at the pavement at my feet.

"Kerrilyn, what's wrong?" And there *was* something wrong, here. I only hoped it had nothing to do with me. But I was mistaken.

"I would have told you earlier," she began.

"Told me what?" Innocently, I tried to keep my voice calm.

Conversational.

"Marc," she wouldn't look me in the eye, but cut right to it. "I moved out."

Then I saw the suitcases—and all her clothes—in the back of the car. Of course, I didn't believe it.

"No-oo," I drawled, smiling and shaking my head, "you don't have to do that." I tried to put my arm around her, but she twisted out from under me. "Come on, let's go home," I said. "We can talk about it when we get there."

"I can't," she continued to twist and squirm, to evade my arm. "Marc, *I've got to go!*"

Tears filled my eyes, suddenly, and without any warning at all. Panicking, I blinked them back. I have never been so scared in all my life. Her rejection felt so old and so terrifyingly familiar. It was the worst nightmare I could possibly imagine. All my life I have lived in fear that some day, one day, some way, the one I loved the most would suddenly tell me they don't love me anymore, and leave me. The mere thought of it is so painful—so unbearable ... I can hardly even put it into words. The idea of having to face the world—*alone*—completely alone and unloved, uncared-for, is so bleak, so black, so horrible, that writing about it now makes my heart race. I've got so many words inside me, but for this I can't even think of *one*. **Not one, fucking, goddamned word!**

But, with Kerrilyn standing there, looking down at my feet, I did think of one. "Why?"

"It's not you," she said. A lie. A patent, bald-faced lie.

"Please?" My tears became heavier, and I felt drops hit my cheeks. I was lightheaded, dizzy, and I had to grab hold of the side of the car to keep from falling over. "Kerrilyn, don't say this. I love you."

"I hate this, too."

**"You don't know the fucking meaning of the word!"** I screamed, and my reaction surprised even me. Kerrilyn flinched backward in sudden fear toward the open car doorway and tripped over the sill. Losing her balance and falling into the car, she hit the back of her head hard against the edge of the roof. I heard the loud *thud*, clearly painful—the impact truly solid.

**"Oww!!"** she wailed, and crumpled over, covering the back of her head with her hands.

"Oh, Jesus!" I gasped, and tried to take her in my arms, to hold her and comfort her.

Kerrilyn was crying. I was crying. And we held onto each other a long, long time, crying like babies in each other's arms.

I remember stroking her hair, soothing the hurt away, and listening to her sobs leaking mainly onto my chest. I remember saying over and over 'oh Kerrilyn, oh Kerrilyn' as if by chanting her name I could somehow erase the present and bring back the past. Desperately, I wanted the words I'd heard to be wrong. Surely she had not meant to move out. Surely I had heard her wrong, and it was all a huge misunderstanding. Surely.

"Oo-oooh! Marc!" she bawled, and the sound of her helpless crying was reassuring to me. It meant she loved me, and that she was just very upset, and when we went home we would talk about it and everything would be all right. She bawled like a baby, and I stroked and smoothed her hair, hoping against all hope that I was right.

But in time, she pulled back from my arms. Luckily, no cut on the back of the head, but a nasty bump, to be sure. She tried to walk around, and managed it, almost, gingerly touching the back of her head as she paced, wiping the tears from her eyes and cheeks.

"That hurt like *fuck!*" she exclaimed, and I gained even more hope, because I thought I saw her smile, embarrassed. And my soul clutched at that smile with every strand of my being.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I was, indeed, sincere.

"Not your fault," she shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs out. "I was the stupid one for tripping over my own stupid fucking car."

"You sure you're OK?"

"I think so," she said, but she may have felt dizzy, since I saw her wobble, a little.

"You ought to sit down," I said. "Here," I pointed, "sit on the curb."

She did, and immediately put her head between her knees. Not good enough, so she stretched her legs out straight in front of her and leaned over as far as she could. But after no more than ten seconds, she sat up again. "I was pretty dizzy there, for a second."

"Stay sitting," I ordered. "Let me bring the car over."

She shot bolt upright. "No!"

"Why not?"

"I told you. I moved out."

"Kerrilyn," I voiced complete disbelief, "that's total bullshit. You don't have to move out."

"I do." She started to stand up. "And I have."

"Where are you going? Where are you gonna live?" I circled her, helping to hold her up as she wobbled. "What are you gonna to do for money?"

"I got a job. I found a place where I can live for a while."

"A job? What? *Why?*"

Kerrilyn looked up into my eyes, and I swear I saw the spark. Goddamn it! I swear I saw the goddamned spark! Do you know what that fucking spark means? It means she loves me. It means she responds to me. It means we're meant to be together. Can all the other bullshit—it means neither of us will ever want or need another for the rest of our lives!

"I can't tell you why," she said. "Believe me, *it's not you*, but I have to move out for a while."

"Awhile? How long?"

"I don't know," she sniffed, "awhile."

I was beginning to cry, again. It's not fair! "Kerrilyn," I pleaded, "don't."

"I have to." She turned, and started to get in her car.

"Don't you love me anymore?"

She stopped. Turned. And started to tear up, again, too. Then she whispered, "I love you more than I've ever loved anyone." Louder, stronger, "This is not good-bye, buddy. I promise. I'm not quitting the band, so you'll see me—sometime. But I *hafta* do this." She got in the car. Closed the door. Opened the window, started the engine. "Trust me, OK?" She looked out at me, wiped the tears from her face, and put on her glasses. Whispered, "I love you, buddy."

And I stood there, dumbfounded and heart-stricken, as she drove away.