

Chapter 5

The phone rang too early the next morning, Saturday, around ten o'clock. I know it was ten AM because it woke me, and with its continued, insistent ring I became highly irritated that someone should be disturbing me at such an hour, especially since Kerry and I hadn't gotten to sleep until about four-thirty in the morning. There was no way I'd had enough sleep by ten.

The phone woke Kerry, too, but I simply told her to go back to sleep as I picked it up. I said hello as she rolled over, already back to sleep. So quickly.

"Marc." It was Tom Germaine. "Hey. What's going on?"

"I was sleeping." My voice was rough, but my words pointed. "Why aren't you?"

"I just got a call." He waited for a response from me.

"So?" I said, and waited for him, then.

"So, I just got a call from Troy Dancer. You know—that hotshot guitar player I told you about?" I said I knew of whom he spoke. "Well, anyway," he went on, "he called, and said he wants to get together with us."

"Did you tell him we were interested?"

"All I said was that I thought you were a hell of a drummer, and that you were available if he needed one. Uh ... and of course I said I was available to play bass, too."

"Of course," I yawned, but smiled to myself. I would have been surprised if Tom *hadn't* told this guy Dancer about us. "So, you said he called you this morning?"

"No, actually, he called last night and left a message on the machine. Said he had talked about us to a keyboard player he knew. Apparently they knew about us, and told him to set something up. Just like that."

"Who's the keyboard player?"

"Don't know," Tom yawned. I yawned, again, too. "He didn't say." He paused, "Who do we know?"

"No idea. Could be twenty guys," I thought, "unless it's a girl. You know, we *do* know a chick who plays keyboards. You remember? Mel Howe."

"That's right! Pop-tart slut Melinda Howe. Could be ..." He seemed to consider the possibility. "If it's her, then we could be in trouble."

"What do you mean?" I was curious over his reasoning.

"She's very, very good, but I heard she broke up the last three bands she was in. Seems she always manages to get the hots for someone in the band, and when it doesn't work out between them—and it *never* does—off she goes, and the band with her. Makes sense, though. Dancer's just the type of guy who'd be fucking Melinda Howe." He concluded, "Those two are made for each other."

"We don't know it's her," I argued, "do we?" Tom wouldn't say if he had any information. That made me suspect it all the more. "So when does he want to get together?"

"Noon, today."

"**Noon?!?** *Jesus Christ!* Do you know when we got to bed?"

"Probably about the same time we did. So what? I could've called you last night when I got the message, but I figured you were probably ... busy." He seemed to grin into the phone. "Out of respect for you and your girl Kerry, I decided to wait until the late AM to call."

"You're such a wonderful friend, Tom," I said with heavy sarcasm, "and so considerate."

"I try." He waited about two beats. "So? Can you make it?"

"Where are we supposed to have this meeting?"

"At the studio, I guess." Tom sounded less than enthusiastic about the long drive that surely lay ahead of him. "It's convenient to everyone—*but me*—of course."

"Of course." I coughed. I was getting cold sitting up in bed, and my bladder was also starting to bark. Loudly. "OK," I agreed, "noon, then, at the studio. Should I bring the 'skins'," I asked, referring to my drums, "or is this just a social call?"

"Social call." He sounded definite. "If he's really serious we could always bring them over later."

"Fine." But I was getting cross-legged from my bladder pressure.

"Look, I gotta go."

"Hot date?" He chuckled.

"No, asshole, I gotta pee pretty bad."

"Nature calls." He said good-bye, I said good-bye, and I hung up the

phone and made a beeline for the bathroom.

Kerry was of course sound asleep when I returned to bed. I quickly set the alarm for eleven, and since I was very cold by then, I slid in and scooted over next to her warm, naked body. Her back was to me, and she was hugging a pillow, curled up in a semi-fetal position, face buried in the pillow beneath her head. I didn't want to disturb her, so I carefully put my arm around her waist, smooth, bare and deliciously warm under the covers, and snuggled my equally naked body up close to hers. It took me several minutes to warm up and relax, but I had little trouble falling back to sleep.

The next thing I remember was the alarm going off, and Kerry jumping up, startled, at the sound. Fully awake again, I reached behind me and hit the OFF button. She was sitting upright in the bed, blinking, rubbing her eyes and looking around, very groggy and confused. She looked at me, scowling, red-eyed and miserable, and seemed not to recognize me at all. But maybe I was wrong, since she promptly slid back down next to me and pulled the covers up around her neck. In a moment, her eyes closed.

I laid there quietly, blinking the sleep from my own eyes, and waited for her to finish waking up. But after a few moments, she looked like she was asleep again. Unfortunately, I couldn't do the same, so I reluctantly slid over and sat on the edge of the bed.

Kerry croaked, though, with eyes still closed, "What's going on?"

"Gotta get up." I was speaking strictly for myself, but apparently she thought I meant her, too.

"What for?" she pouted, voice grating, "I wanna sleep s'more."

"Go ahead." I put my feet on the floor. "You can go back to sleep, if you want."

"Thank you, I will." She rolled over onto her side, again, away from me. Then, with her back to me, "Why do *you* gotta get up?"

"I gotta meet Tom at the studio at noon," I explained. "That guitar player he told us about last night wants to get together with us. Today." No response from *the girl*.

I stood up, getting more reluctant all the time about getting out of bed and leaving Kerry's warmth. I *really* wanted to crawl back in the sack with that soft, sleepy, and very warm person. I stood there by the bed, and wondered if I could afford to grab another five or ten minutes of quality snuggle time. I almost caved in and did it, but duty won out and I trudged off to the kitchen to make some coffee. If I *had* to get up, I may as well get some coffee in me to get my blood flowing.

While the coffee brewed (and I was *definitely* going to wait for it!) Kerry appeared in the bedroom doorway.

She was naked except for that blue sapphire pendant around her neck, just as she had been at four-thirty when we had crawled into bed together, and she stood there and hugged herself against the cool air of the apartment. I was struck again—and not for the last time—by her beauty, made all the more striking by the helpless kitten-eyed look she turned on me. I must have smiled, and stupidly, because in that moment I also realized I was indeed naked, too, and she was there to see all of me. I tried to pass it off, since it seemed rather childish and immature to be embarrassed by my own nakedness, but I felt a slight warming around my ears, nonetheless.

Though I tried to look at her face, her eyes, I know my eyes were drawn down to the curves and bare skin of her magnificent body, because she followed them down, and looked critically at herself as if to ascertain what I found so appealing.

“Hi,” I said. “Why aren’t you in bed asleep?”

“I wanted to get up with you,” she looked down at the floor, her expression not especially happy, “but I didn’t know it was gonna be so damn early.”

“It isn’t *that* early, you know.”

“I don’t care,” she brought her eyes up to meet mine. “I wanted to have a nice, leisurely morning with you, and now it’s all ruined.”

“Sorry.” Now I wished I *had* stayed in bed with her.

“It’s OK,” but her down expression said it wasn’t. “Can I go with you to meet this guitar player?” she asked, as if she thought I might say no.

“Sure, if you’re certain you wouldn’t rather just go back to bed.” The coffee was almost ready, so I took a cup down from the cabinet.

She yawned. “I’m sure. And I want some coffee, too.” She came over and nestled her body next to mine. She radiated heat, and that inexplicable aura that I felt immediately and so deeply. Still unsure and nervous, I dared put my arms around her. Like we were meant to be together, she sighed and laid her head against my chest, eyes closing. And in that moment I was so happy I’d met her, and I wanted it to last forever.

We stayed like that, my arms around her and the sweet smell of her body filling my senses, for a long while. I let the coffee sit, and put the rest of the world on hold to enjoy the moment. Eventually, though, it had to end. I poured a cup of coffee for Kerry, and one for me, and we made our way to the bathroom. In a couple minutes the shower was steaming hot, and I stepped under its very hot spray. Time was flying, and I had to hurry so we wouldn’t be late. Kerry didn’t take a shower. Instead, she

washed off in the sink again, having also done so much earlier that morning as we were going to bed. When I got out of the shower, she had already brushed her teeth and was using a brush on her hair. Without much in the way of conversation, we got dressed and were out the door and into the car by a quarter to twelve.

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“A couple of months went by after that first episode in the club before I had to deal again with the back of Danny Golden’s hand. I think after the first time, even *he* was a little shocked and surprised at his own violence, because he returned to treating me with the same kindness and gentleness he had shown me during the first couple of months of our relationship. And during those two months of respite, he never asked me again to take anything off in public.

“I began to think the incident must have been a fluke—something unusual—so abrupt was the change afterward. And it was that type of thinking that lulled me into a very false sense of security—of safety. Though we had *never* talked about the night he slugged me and bloodied my nose—and it was thankfully *not* broken—he seemed so timid and nice that I eventually (and wrongly) concluded that he believed he’d made a mistake, and that I didn’t have to worry about it happening again.

“Well, it happened again. And the next time was even worse than the first.”

My therapist looked up from his scribbling. “What happened?”

“Well, we weren’t out, this time. I was at the apartment when Danny arrived at the door. I let him in, and he brought someone in with him. It was another man, handsome and very well dressed, and Danny introduced me to him.” I thought a moment. “I don’t remember his name, though.”

“That’s OK,” he said, “it doesn’t matter. Go on.”

“Danny was very excited, for some reason. He was jumpy, almost nervous—if you could say he was truly *ever* nervous—and it seemed awfully important to him that I like this guy. I didn’t know him from Adam, so I couldn’t see what was so important about it.

“Danny wanted me to sit on the couch with the guy. In all the time I’d known him, he’d *never* allowed me to show even the slightest bit of interest in other men. I mean, he was jealous to the point of insanity if I even so much as *looked* in the direction of another man. But when he asked

me to have a seat next to this man—well, I was supremely suspicious.

“The whole thing was making me very nervous and unsure, so I went into the kitchen to get a drink, and to get away from Danny, too. He followed me, though. ‘What’s wrong?’ he asked. So I asked him what the hell was going on. He said, ‘Bob’,” and as I told the story to my therapist, I suddenly remembered the man’s name, “‘wants to get to know you better.’ I was, of course, stupefied. Danny continued, ‘Why don’t you go sit with him awhile.’ ‘*Sit with him?!?*’ I exclaimed, not believing what I’d heard. ‘Danny, you never let me even *look* at another man without going crazy.’ He shrugged, and said, ‘That was before.’ ‘Before *what?*’ I snapped at him.

“And with that small insubordination, Danny was angry. He began to lecture me, quietly and furiously, on the proper way for *his* woman to act. *His* woman didn’t talk back to him; *his* woman didn’t disagree with him; his woman did what she was told ... and so on, and so forth. Even so, I still didn’t see exactly why he wanted me to sit with this guy. So, in my suspicion and reckless curiosity, I asked him.”

“And what did he say?” my therapist asked me.

I informed him, “That was when he hit me, again.” He had no immediate reply to that, so I went on. “It’s still so vivid in my mind,” and I was amazed that I was also still *very* angry over it. “It still hurts, too.”

“When you don’t deal with feelings—with things,” he commented, “they don’t resolve themselves. If you don’t deal with the hurt, it always comes back.”

“Well, Danny’s hitting me was always so sudden and unexpected,” I continued, “I don’t think I *ever* expected it any of the times he hit me. But this time, that one hard slap across the cheek made *me* mad, too. And for the first time—and the last time—I showed some guts.”

“What did you do?”

“I slapped Danny back.”

Then I had to stop there, a moment. Remembering what had happened—how it had felt—made me so unbelievably angry and brought the old hurt, the bad, *bad* feelings, back again. I think I might have started to cry, a little. I hate to cry. I feel so small, so out of control that I start to get scared. I don’t know why it happens, but the scared feeling is a *very* old feeling, one I don’t ever want to feel again. It has something to do with when I was a very small child, and I was living with my mother and father. I can’t remember why I have this feeling, but I really wish I could. My therapist waited for me to get control of myself again. It didn’t take long, and when I felt ready enough, I continued with my story.

“Danny’s next move was to double me over with a fist in the

midsection. *Goddamn it!* I never saw it coming! The bastard just hauled off and slugged me in the stomach!"

It took me several minutes to calm down enough to continue. The more I thought about it, the madder I got, and the madder I got the more I wanted to cry. I *tried* to keep the tears from coming back, but ...

"Go ahead and cry." He touched my hand, I looked up at him, and he gave me a sad smile, an understanding smile. "It's OK to cry."

"No it's not," I blubbered, but I cried, anyway.

It was several more minutes before I went on. "I hit the floor after he slugged me, and I curled up and retched my guts out because he had knocked the wind out of me. While I writhed in pain on the kitchen floor, my upturned glass sitting in a pool of booze next to my face, Danny left me to smooth the way for the guy sitting on the sofa. I stayed in the kitchen, though. No goddamn way I was going back out there after having just gotten the shit kicked out of me.

"But Danny came back. He was still mad, and red-faced. 'If you don't go out to the living room and do what I tell you,' he yelled, raising his fist at me so I could clearly see it, 'you gonna regret it, *sugar*.' I knew he was serious.

"I still lay on the kitchen floor, *still* clutching my stomach from his punch, *still* trying to keep from puking, and merely looked up at his fist. I started to cry, then. I felt trapped, outnumbered, and so *alone*. I was afraid to even guess what he wanted me to do; it was so completely beyond my imagination.

"Well, between my sobs I asked him what he wanted me to do. And he told me.

"'Bob,' he said, was a 'special business associate' from out of town. He had a lot of money, money he was going to lend Danny to fix up the club and stuff, and Danny had promised 'Bob' he could find him a 'date' for the evening. He wanted me to be 'real nice' to 'Bob,' and he wanted me to do whatever 'Bob' asked me to. I was completely crushed and humiliated, then, to finally realize what he wanted me to do.

"Danny wanted me to turn a trick for him."

"I don't know what I thought at the time. I know I thought I was better than just some cheap hooker. I thought I was pretty, and smart, maybe, and I really thought Danny was in love with me."

"Was he?" my therapist asked me, a question more rhetorical than anything else.

"I don't know," (I'm not at all sure, even now), "maybe. But I thought I was in love with Danny, though. I had been ready to forgive him for hitting me, before, but when I realized he had sold me to another man—I

just fell apart—all the good feelings I had about myself just crumbled into dust.”

“How do you feel about it, now?” He stopped scribbling, a moment.

“I can’t be all bad,” I said. “I’m talking about it, and I’m not falling completely apart, yet.”

“Yes, but how do you *feel* about it?” he pressed.

“**I feel like I was raped!**” I screamed. He accepted my outburst without comment. My eyes started to tear up again. “I felt like I was back to being a poor, dirty, white-trash slut again, one who had once let two filthy men do horrible things to her; one who didn’t have the intelligence or the guts to run away. I was so crushed I just completely gave up. I couldn’t run, I couldn’t get away; I couldn’t stand up to Danny and risk what he might do to me if I refused to ‘go on a date’ with ‘Bob’. I never even thought about my own safety. I just said, ‘OK,’ and that was it.”

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Everyone was already there when Kerry and I got to the studio. We weren’t especially late, so I wasn’t particularly concerned that we were the last to arrive. Being Saturday, and with nothing else going on, the place was quiet and almost deserted as we walked down the corridor to the far studio, where we were apparently meeting. I guessed it must be the right place, since all the other doors were closed, and the door to this studio was open and the lights were on. I could hear faint voices, too.

Tom was there, along with legend-in-his-own-mind Troy Dancer. It was just those two, and after looking around the place and determining there was no one else lurking in the corners, I asked where the rest of the band was.

Dancer yawned, “She’s in the john.” My eyebrows went up, and I shared a look with Tom. Dancer went on, “She’ll be out in a minute.” He came forward, held out his hand. “Hi. Troy Dancer, but everyone just calls me ‘Dancer’.” We shook hands, and I said I’d heard of him. “Yeah,” he grinned in mock humility, “I’ve been around, a little. You must be Marc Huffman, the drummer.” I nodded. He looked around, “So, where’s your stuff?” But he already knew there were no drums in the studio. Just Tom’s bass and amplifier, and a guitar case and small amp that must have been his.

“I didn’t bring them with me,” I explained. “Tom said we probably wouldn’t need them, today.” I looked at Tom, he gave me an ‘I didn’t

know what he was going to do, ' type of look.

"Well," Dancer folded his arms, "we can't have an audition without our instruments, now, can we?" This guy was an asshole. No question about it. If I had had any doubts before, he instantly and completely laid them to rest. Completely.

I was ready to turn around and walk out. "Look," I said to Dancer, "I don't give a shit who you think you are, but I don't have to take this kind of condescending bullshit from anyone." I turned, and saw Tom standing there, his arms folded and his faced scrunched up in the expression that said he was pissed off, too. To hell with this guy Dancer. Fuck him. I was hung over, and very tired from not having had enough sleep, and also hungry. And I was certainly not in the mood to be force-fed an asshole sandwich, either.

Dancer wasn't fazed by my outburst. Not in the least. The guy smiled, and seemed to accept what I had said. "Well, now that we have *that* all straightened out, we can get down to business." He took a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, fished one out of the pack, and lit it with a match. After a couple of drags, he smiled again, and refolded his arms across his chest. "How soon can you get your drums here?"

I was nonplused, almost beyond recovery. But, "Twenty minutes," I said. Then sarcastically, "Is that OK?"

"Great!" He shrugged and took a drag, "That'll give Mel time to get her ass off the toilet."

So it *was* Mel Howe, after all. I should have known. I think I *did* know, actually, since the logic of it was so perfect. Good old Melinda Howe. Of course, I felt there was nothing good—or old—about her. The best thing I could say, except that I thought she was a damn good musician, is that we once had a relationship, and it didn't work out, and it wasn't all her fault.

I had little else to do at that point but get my drums.

Without looking to see if Kerry followed me or not, I left the studio without another word and walked quickly down the hall to the front door. I was pretty jerked off at the attitude of that asshole Troy Dancer, but I wanted to play in a band again, and even if his band wasn't going to be the one, I still couldn't just walk away from the chance to play. Kerry, who'd not said anything since we entered the building, was right behind me, and hustling to keep up. I pushed open the door and stepped out into the bright sunlight. She scuttled out the door behind me.

"Slow down, buddy!" she complained as I slammed myself into the driver's seat. I looked, I'm sure, as if I were planning to drive away without her, so she raised her voice, "**Goddamn it, Marc!** Wait for me!"

"I am," I said, more calmly than I really felt, "but hurry up."

She slid into the seat next to me; shut the door. She seemed to understand my mood—that my anger wasn't directed at her. "Jesus! Is this guy an asshole, or what?"

"Oh, he's an asshole, all right," I agreed. "A world-class, grade-A, number-one, king-size asshole with an ego the size of New Jersey—and half of New York." She giggled. I started the car. "And the fun, dear Kerry, is just beginning."

When we got back to the studio, Tom was waiting outside to help us carry in my drums. Fortunately, all my equipment fits in a half dozen carrying cases, and it didn't take more than two trips for the three of us, Kerry, Tom, and me, to deliver the stuff to the audition. On my first trip I set the two cases I was carrying just inside the door, and hastened back for another load. I noticed Mel Howe crawling around on the floor, trying to get her own stuff set up, but she didn't see me. I really wanted to avoid her, if possible, but I also knew it *wasn't* going to be possible. When I returned on my second, and final trip, she was set up, and plugged in, and warming up. When I picked up the bass drum case and carried it to the raised platform in the back, immediately behind her rack of keyboards, she saw me and stopped playing. I set the case down and went back for another. As I returned I noticed she coolly followed my progress. And when I finally looked at her, and we made eye contact, she smiled.

"Hello there, Marc Huffman," she said.

Mel Howe and I know each other. In fact, we go way back together, almost to high school.

I met her the first time at a club where she was playing electric piano behind a *very* bad trio of brothers. The band was called *The Hummell Brothers Band*, or something like that, and the three brothers Hummell were truly quite *awful*. On their second break, I approached her while she was getting a Coke, and asked her how she happened to have gotten hooked up with that particular trio. I told her I thought she was a good piano player, a much better musician than were the three brothers, combined. She just looked at me. I then explained that I played in a band, a pretty good one, and asked her if she was interested in playing piano with us. Just like that. She smiled and shook her head. In a couple minutes, I saw why, though. The guitar player, a Hummell brother, and easily the best musician of the three (still not saying very much) came over. Mel kissed him sweetly. They were apparently an item, so I guess that explained it.

The next time I saw her was about six months later, and this time I

was playing a gig and she was in the audience. I was still in the same band, but by then we had a keyboard player, and the offer I'd made before wasn't open anymore. She listened to us for about a set and a half, and came back stage to talk to me on our third break. She said 'hi,' smiled, and asked if I remembered her. I said I did, and asked her how she was doing. I didn't know her name, though. I only knew that she was the piano player I'd seen in that *really bad* band. She said it looked like we didn't need a piano player anymore, and asked me if I knew of any bands that needed one. I didn't, but I told her I'd check around. I asked for her name and phone number, and she gave me her business card.

Melinda L. Howe

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I was impressed that someone as young as she (well, actually, she's only about two years younger than me) was prepared enough to have had business cards printed, and I told her that. 'Oh,' she said, 'Mike had me do it—Mike Hummell—you remember him?' I didn't know any Mike Hummell, but she explained he was the guitar player in that *really bad* band I'd heard six months earlier. I understood a little better, then. 'Well, Melinda,' I said, and she immediately corrected me—she said she preferred 'Mel' to Melinda, and I obliged—'Well, Mel,' I said, 'it's been really nice talking to you, but I gotta go. See you around.' And I walked away. I didn't see her again for another six months. And, I didn't call her, either. She called me.

Back at the audition, several years later, we only said 'hi' to each other, again, and I more or less silently went to work setting up my drums. Kerry wanted to help me, and she did, but for the most part I have to have everything *just so*, and she only became frustrated and perturbed when it seemed she was doing everything wrong. I tried to tell her it was OK—I didn't expect her to know how to set things up—but she must have sensed something between me and the slender, comely, dark-haired and talented Melinda L. Howe, because Kerry went off to the corner and sat there, silent and pouting, and intently smoking a cigarette while I finished setting up.

Eventually, I was ready, and took my seat. Dancer had been warming up, regaling us all with furious, lightening licks on his Washburn guitar, and Tom had just finished tuning up to Mel's piano.

“Whatta y’all know?” Dancer asked, looking for something we might all know to start with. There were mumbles all around, which I sat quietly through, since I was prepared to fake it, anyway, regardless of what was selected. Drummers have that privilege. But Tom and I knew a bunch of songs, and of course, Dancer knew *everything*, so it was really just a matter of finding something that Mel knew. That was not likely to be a problem, either, since she’d played in almost as many bands as Tom and me, even if not necessarily the same ones.

We settled, finally, on something old and simple, and with that decided, Dancer suddenly launched into his own personal rendition of *Jumpin’ Jack Flash*. I was barely able to keep up with the changes he wanted to play, and poor Tom was almost completely lost most of the time. I felt sorry for him. He’s not *that* bad a bass player, though he sounded as though he hadn’t played in ten years. What saved us, though, was that Mel couldn’t keep up with Dancer, either. She was the one who stopped us about halfway through the song, when it was apparent Dancer was trying either to show off—almost certainly—or to humiliate us, or both. Probably both.

“Hold it,” she held her hands up. “**Stop!**” she had to yell when Dancer kept playing. He stopped, finally, but he seemed irritated that she should interrupt him.

“What’d you stop for?” he asked, and he looked like a cat with his tail wagging.

“Look, babe, you’re *losing* us, here.” Mel put her hand on his. “Can’t we play this more like the *Stones* did it? I don’t know your arrangement, and neither does anyone else.” Dancer sulked, like a five year old, but Mel pecked him on the cheek. “We can do it any way you like, later, but let’s get through this audition, first. OK?”

I’m sorry, but I was impressed with Mel Howe. She never seemed to me to be a likely leader, but right away she was taking charge, and seemed capable of controlling this guy Dancer to a certain degree. I would have always pegged him for the leader, what with his giant ego and condescending manner, but I saw that whatever else happened, it was likely going to be Mel Howe who led the band in rehearsal. And at that moment, that was fine with me.

Dancer wasn’t especially nice to her. He made some comments to the effect that his arrangement was easy; that we should have heard it before; that we should have picked it up; which meant that we were slow; which meant that he wasn’t sure we were what he wanted. Mel, bless her heart, told him to his face that he was a complete asshole. He only smiled, and immediately switched gears. He said, ‘OK, then. Let’s play it the old

fashioned way.' And we did.

If it hadn't been for Mel Howe stepping in when she did, I think it would have all ended right there.

After that first rocky start, the rest of the 'audition' seemed to go much better. Tom warmed up, I warmed up, and Mel warmed up. After that, we seemed to get into the music pretty good, and by two o'clock when it was getting time to call it a day, I was feeling pretty good about the chemistry. Once Dancer got going, he seemed to put his asshole personality on hold and simply play. And he could *really* play.

Troy Dancer sang, played about two guitars'-worth, and all at the same time. Mel also sang, and showed clearly that she had been practicing, and the two of them together sounded like four or five performers. I could see, easily, why Dancer had hooked up with her. Tom, too, once warmed up and into the session, was *very* good, and the whole coming-together made me play much better and more solidly than I'd done in a long time. I don't think I embarrassed anyone, and the looks that passed between us as we played said a decision had been made, and the decision was that there was definitely going to be another rehearsal. For sure.

Only Kerry seemed to be left out of the fun. But she did seem to calm down a little as we played, and by halfway through she was sitting at the soundboard playing 'sound man,' making small adjustments, experimenting with the equipment. And as I said, by two o'clock we were ready to stop for the day.

Dancer put his guitar down, carefully, and produced a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket. He was a very strange bird, all right. He stood about two inches shorter than me, about five-foot eight, and had very long, straight, dishwater blond hair that hung down well below his shoulder blades. He was very thin, very tanned, and had a large-carat diamond stud earring in his left ear. He wore a plain, white, single pocket T-shirt under a black denim vest, and a pair of skintight black jeans. He looked like a rock star, and I'm sure he thought of himself that way, too. For all the other things that could be said about him, in the words of David Bowie: "... But boy, could he play guitar." This guy *was* Ziggy Stardust, incarnate.

Kerry came over then, and sat on a stool next to me. I asked for a cigarette. She lit one and handed it to me.

"When did you start smoking?" Tom asked me.

"I don't know," I grinned. "This was almost as good as sex. It seemed only natural." Kerry grinned, Mel smiled, but Dancer gave no indication he'd even heard me.

"It's good, all right," Tom agreed, and looked to Mel for validation. She shrugged, and nodded. She looked down at her piano, and seemed modestly humble. Her niceness struck me, and I found myself staring at her.

Kerry, not wanting to let me forget she was there, spoke up, "You all are *really* good! I am very impressed." No one questioned her evaluation. We *were* very good.

Dancer noticed *her*, though. "OK," he nodded, "you passed the audition." He moved over to nuzzle Mel on the neck, asserting his possession of her. She threw her head back, and leaned up to kiss him warmly and fully, their mouths open to each other.

I broke in, "Can I ask a question?"

They stopped kissing. Dancer turned toward me. "Sure."

"What's your real last name?" It was something that had been bugging me since walking in and being introduced.

"Danzinger," he said, "but don't tell anyone. To you," he pointed at me, "and you," at Tom, "the name's Troy Dancer." What an asshole!

"Fine," I said. "So we passed?"

"Yeah." He walked around. "You're better than I thought you'd be. Mel said you all were pretty good, but I don't take anyone's word for it without hearing for myself." He crossed his arms. "So let me tell you the deal.

"One, we've got to get something together in the next three months. My manager, Maury Bozeman, has gigs lined up that start just after Christmas. I told him I could get a band together by then, and I *don't* want to miss this opportunity.

"Two," he held his fingers up for us to see, "if these gigs go well, and they *will*, the next step will be to go on the road for about six months. Bozeman has assured me that if the band is good he can keep us busy every week for six months, at least. Are you all prepared to go on the road? I assume you all have daytime jobs. If you want to play with me, you'll have to quit your jobs. That's three.

"Four, I'm tired of being in someone else's band. This is *my* band; my gigs; my rules," he finished, "*my deal*. Any problems with that?" He looked around, but got no reaction or response from the rest of us.

"Five, and the last one, I want to call this band *Dancer*." He paused. "If everything is OK then, we have a deal. If not, you better say it now, or I'll really be pissed off later. You *don't* want me pissed off."

Well, Tom said nothing. I guessed he'd already heard this whole spiel, and if he was going along with it, I supposed I could, too. Quitting my job and going on the road wasn't a big problem for me, and if the rest

of Dancer's conditions weren't a problem for Tom, then they weren't going to be a problem for me, either.

We looked around at each other a few minutes, but no one apparently had anything to add, so Dancer took Mel by the hand and made to depart. At the door, he turned to Tom.

"It's OK if we leave the equipment here, isn't it? I kind of thought we'd make this our rehearsal hall. Bozeman may even pay something for us to rent it, but you'll have to arm wrestle him to get it." Tom said it was fine, and Troy Dancer and Melinda Howe were gone.

So it was just Kerry, Tom, and me, and the three of us just stood there and looked at each other.

Tom was the first to speak. "Well, what do you think?"

"I was going to ask *you* that," I told him.

"Well," he explained, "going on the road is no problem. If the money's there, then it's almost a no-brainer. Troy Dancer, though, is a complete asshole."

"So I noticed," I said. "But he does make us look good."

"I agree," he nodded. "Well, I don't care for him personally," he made a sharp, horizontal cutting motion with his hand across his neck, "at all! But we could do a whole lot worse on the music end of it with someone else." Tom paused, considering what else to say. "So, what about Mel Howe?"

"What about her?" I asked him, wondering what difference her presence could possibly make.

"Didn't the two of you used to be involved, or something? I don't want any friction between you to get in the way of anything."

I was irritated that he perceived her as a potential problem for me. "That was a long time ago," I told him, and I was also embarrassed that Kerry was hearing all this. "We were friends, first, and we can be friends again. I don't see any problem with her."

"Fine." He nodded, and the subject was closed, but he didn't sound very satisfied.

In the car, though, Kerry wanted to know more about Mel Howe and me. When she asked, I found myself wishing Tom hadn't even brought it up.

"Mel Howe and I dated each other, several years ago. It was fine for a while, but in the end it didn't work out between us."

"That so?" Kerry was cat-curious.

I looked at her as carefully as I could, since I was driving at the time. "Are you jealous of her, or something?" It seemed amusing that she could be.

"No," she said, agitated nonetheless. She thought about my question a few minutes in silence, and decided she needed another cigarette to help her think. I waited. She thought. Finally, "All right, maybe I *am* jealous." I smiled, started to say something, but she cut me off, and had to suppress a grin herself. "Don't you look so fucking amused! I can't help it. I want to play in a band, too, and I'm jealous that *she* gets to do it. That's all."

"What do you play—?"

"—All right! *Sing* in the band. You know what I mean."

"Why didn't you say something while we were all there at rehearsal? Why did you wait until *now* to say something about wanting to sing? You could have auditioned, too, you know."

"Hah!" she snorted. "There's *no way* I would've had the guts to say *anything* in front of that Troy Dancer guy." She thought a moment. "He intimidates the hell out of me."

"He's like that," I countered. "But you know, if you plan to get up and sing in front of large crowds of people, you'll have to get over being shy about your singing."

She eyed me, but shrugged. "I suppose you're right."

"Trust me," I said, trustingly. "If you can't get up the nerve to sing in front of Troy Dancer, then you'll *really* have trouble auditioning in front of the owner of the White Dot." The White Dot was a local nightclub that specialized in showcasing local talent. I'd played there a few times.

Kerry considered what I'd told her, and we finished the rest of the trip home in silent, solemn contemplation, her cigarette acting as her talisman of concentration.

Not long after we got back to the apartment, Tom called. "What's going on?" I asked. I wasn't mad at him about Dancer.

"Are you doing anything later this afternoon?" he asked.

I looked up at the clock as he spoke; it was almost three. "Like, what did you have in mind?" Kerry got us beers out of the refrigerator. I didn't think we had any more, but obviously I was wrong. She hovered around both me and the phone, seemingly intent on listening in on our conversation.

Tom went on. "I just talked to Sheree on the phone, and she wants to know if y'all want to come up to the house this afternoon."

"Hmmm," I thought aloud, "I don't know. Let me ask." I turned to Kerry, who was all ears. I can only guess she knew who was on the phone, and what was being asked. But I had to ask, anyway. "Hey, Tom is on the phone. Sheree wants to know if we want to come up to their house this afternoon." I could tell by her face she fully favored the idea, but she

nodded and said 'sure,' anyway. I relayed the verdict to Tom.

"Great!" He sounded quite pleased. There was a short pause. "Well, I got some more stuff to do here awhile."

"You're still at the studio?"

"Yeah. Anyway, it'll take me a good two hours to get everything done and get home. Shall we say six-ish, then?"

"Six is good for us," I said, and in agreement, I got nods and smiles from Kerry.

Tom and I said our see-you-laters and our good-byes and hung up the phone.

But, "I'm hungry," she immediately complained.

"Well," I leaned back against the kitchen counter, "we could feed you, but I'm positive Sheree is planning dinner for us when we get there. If they invite us up to their house, you can be sure she won't send us away without feeding us steak, or lobster, or something totally incredible, like that."

"You're kidding! Lobster?" Kerry seemed very excited.

"She has a reputation for going completely overboard. Tom knows that I know, and he didn't even bother to mention it. I can guarantee you'll love whatever she fixes." I remembered the frozen pizzas from the night before. "She cooks *much more* than just frozen pizzas." I held out my arms to Kerry and she came to me, bright eyes gleaming in the hazy, lazy afternoon light. "We can feed you, but I really had something else in mind."

"Hmmm ..." she smiled "... and what's that?" she asked as she wrapped herself in my arms. I noticed she smelled very, very good, fleeting wisps of perfume touching my nose, teasing it, and floating off again. Her face turned up to mine, inches away. I was so hoping to get a kiss, and she seemed to want one as much as I did. As I bent down to touch my lips to hers, she closed her eyes and seemed to melt into me.

• • •

It's very difficult to talk about Marc. Not that the thought of him is painful—quite the opposite—it's that I've always felt some kind of jinx working against me. It's irrational, I know, to think if I put down on paper how we feel about each other and the experiences we've had, that we'll be somehow affected—negatively—but that's how I feel.

All the other parts of my life have been bad. Some of them don't seem that bad, I know, but when I think about it, all the memories of my life, apart from thoughts of my Marc, make me sad. I have been afraid to talk about him for fear that if I do, it might make my memories of him turn bad as well. But, if this is about me, about my life, then it can't be complete if I don't include the most important person in it. And that would be Marc.

The circumstances he walked into when he came over to pick me up that night, I wouldn't have wished that on anyone. But he stayed with me, he hung in there (I still don't know why), and he helped me get out of by far the worst situation I'd ever been in, in my life.

I am so ashamed of the person I was, then. And I still can't completely forgive myself for becoming who I was—who I am—really. I hope some day that I can reach some kind of agreement, some kind of uneasy truce with myself over why I allowed myself to get so far away. So far away from being the person I want to be.

Though we've had our problems (some of them serious), and though not everything has been so sweet between us, I feel Marc has been the one other person I've always been able to count on. He didn't abandon me that first night when I was scared, beaten, and bleeding, and though I've not always been easy to get along with, and not very coherent or reliable at times, he has always come back when I needed him the most. Through all the things he's learned about me, and all the things that have happened since we met, he has never left me. I still don't know why, but I'm very, very glad.

I like to think about the first time Marc and I made love. It was so late at night, and we were both so drunk and stoned, I'm surprised I can remember it at all. But I guess it wasn't really making love. He was so nervous and tense, and I was so *horny*—why, I'm not sure—it seemed it was over almost before it started. He came with practically no effort on my part. I was tickled to be the one to finally break his 'long dry spell,' but when he went off so quickly, I felt forced to take my orgasm into 'my own hands,' so to speak.

Many times in the past I have resorted to masturbating myself to orgasm. It's the one thing that a person can always count on—their own hands just do it best. Maybe, I might have to say Marc does it better, but when I am alone or lonely, the touch, the pressure of my own fingers provides the warmth and the release I need. I would have really liked for Marc to bring me to climax the first time, but he was the prisoner of his own pent-up desires, so if I was to get off along with him, the only way was if I put my hands between my legs and did it, myself.

Later that night, after I had come down off my cloud, we went into the bathroom and washed each other off. I was a mess, since he'd come all over me, and I had made the best use of it by rubbing it all over myself. By the time we made it to the sink, everything was starting to dry and was a real bitch to get off. We managed, however, to clean ourselves off fairly well, and then rolled off into bed together for the very first time. It was so late, and we were both so wasted, we just went to sleep. I had had an idea I would wake him up the next morning in a most loving and intimate way, but unfortunately he had other plans, so mine had to wait. The band rehearsal took precedence over my pleasure, and it irked me to no end.

The band rehearsal was excruciating for me. The guitar player, Troy Dancer, whom we all know (but do not love) was, and is still, a complete, unadulterated asshole. Don't misunderstand, he's probably one of the five best guitar players in the city—no bullshit—but as a human being he's at least two quarts low.

The piano player, Mel Howe, made me jealous. Among all the other emotions I love to hate, jealousy is one of the worst. It makes me feel inferior, second-string, left out and forgotten. So you see why I hated having someone like Melinda Howe there. I also wanted to sing. I just couldn't get up the nerve to tell them that, so I just sat there dumbly and played around with the soundboard instead.

When Marc and I got back to the apartment, Tom Germaine called and invited us up to their house, and I remember how excited I was to get to go up to the house on the lake for the first time. The house on the lake. A lot of memories are living there, and I'm glad I have them to call upon when I feel low or lonely. By the time Marc hung up the phone I was ready for us to *really* get to know each other.

Marc wasn't the most experienced of lovers. Well, it wasn't too hard to understand, since he'd been so long out of practice, but at the time it hardly mattered. I'm not sure if it has ever mattered as far as Marc is concerned, but certainly up to that point I mistakenly thought having talent in bed was important. I know I've worked long and hard to polish my own skills, but until I experienced Marc's tenderness, his patience, his care, and his wide-eyed, puppy-dog awe of me, I don't think I ever really knew what love was. I probably don't really know now, either, but I'm *trying*. What Marc may have lacked in manual skills (at making love) initially he *more* than made up in sincerity and effort. It *floored* me then, and amazes me still, that he holds me in such awe—such high esteem. It was a completely new experience for me, and so I suppose on the balance we're even. He was unsure and tentative, and I wasn't used to being loved. Really *loved*.

Finally off the phone, we kissed a long, long time, standing there in the kitchen. I was very glad that he seemed more relaxed and confident than he'd been the night before, but even so, I soon felt I was going to have to take charge, so to speak—to lead the effort if we were ever to get back into bed with each other.

After kissing so closely and wonderfully, I was getting very steamy and weak behind the knees. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt that way, but if our kissing continued I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to stand up at all, anymore. So, slowly and carefully I took Marc by the hand and led him toward the bedroom. He was like a lamb in my hands, and the mere thought of his excitement, the anticipation that showed so plainly on his face, made me all the more weak-kneed and wobbly.

The stereo was on, and an old favorite Karla Bonoff love song was playing. It's one I've sung a hundred times. "... Those restless nights; so warm and bright; his touch was ice; your love was fire." And I *was* on fire.

The bed was still unmade from that morning. I kicked my shoes off, and turned toward my new lover, my favorite guy of all time.

His eyes were aglow. I love those deep, complex hazel eyes and the gentleness and concern that always shows in them. I think he was getting nervous, again, and I had to suppress some mild amusement over it. If he'd only known how I felt about him, I don't see how he could possibly have been nervous. If he had pushed me down on the bed right then and there, I would have come the moment I touched it. I could no more have resisted him, his affections, his loving, than I could have resisted the urge to *breathe*.

Weakly, and tingling from anticipation, I pulled him to me. I snuggled my body as close to him as I could, and put my arms around his lean, muscular chest. He's about six or seven inches taller than I am, and at the time he probably weighed about a hundred and seventy-five, about sixty pounds more than me. (All right, maybe fifty!) His hair was just a little more than casually long, curling down over his ears, and sandy brown in color. And his hazel eyes! Oh! I can just cream myself thinking of the luscious complexity of those wonderful, longing, loving eyes, and the smiling crinkle of skin around them. He was clean-shaven, though when I reached up to kiss him I noticed the day-old growth of beard against my cheek. I reveled in the feel of his muscular body against mine. It was also apparent he was aroused, excited by our kissing and the touch of our bodies together. I felt his erection plainly against my stomach, and couldn't resist the temptation to rub my belly against it. He growled deep in his throat, a strong, satisfying sound that immediately tweaked my state of arousal up about two full notches. I couldn't stand it anymore. I

pulled him with me as I fell back onto the bed. Once lying down, our kissing resumed. I was certainly ready to come with the next piece of my clothing that came off, but he didn't offer to remove *anything*. It was frustrating—the waiting—but I tried mightily to resist the urge to just strip off all my clothes for him. But damn it, I *needed* to be naked for him!

He found the cleft between my boobs, where I'd put some perfume that morning, and slowly, almost tentatively, nuzzled me. I could tell he really liked the way I smelled, and I arched my back to afford him the best vantage to absorb all that I had to offer. His tongue came out, and licked timidly between my breasts. The wet-rough feel made me purr inside, and I began to feel he was finally taking charge of the situation—taking charge of me. The buttons on my blouse were no match for the strength of his chin, and they popped open one-by-one as he moved down between my boobs and onto my stomach. The touch of his tongue and rough chin made me shudder involuntarily, and wish that he would simply keep moving downward. But he was too unsure, too tentative, and he stopped when his lips reached my belly button. He kissed me there, briefly, and reluctantly (for me, at least) returned his mouth to mine.

My hands went to work on the buttons of his shirt. In no time I had them undone, and I pressed us together tightly, belly to belly. My breasts begged for my bra to be removed, so alive and sensitive were my nipples against its flimsy nylon fabric, but I wanted him to be comfortable—to move at his own pace—and not be put-off or intimidated by my moving too quickly. I ached for him to strip my clothes off, to just rip open my jeans and take me. But I *had* to wait; I had to be patient. This moment was far too important for me to louse it up by being in a hurry.

When his hand finally found its way to my breast, I think I did come. It was a small one, a nice, quiet, *tingly* one that he probably didn't even notice, but I floated off in a wave of orgasmic pleasure anyway, not knowing or caring where I was, what I was doing, or what was being done to me. Gingerly, he ran his hand inside the lace of my bra. He pulled my breast from its secure embrace, and slowly and wonderfully brought his hungry mouth down to taste the soft, tender nipple that sprang up to greet him. He kissed my nipple, reverently and sweetly. Carefully and cautiously he licked it, then licked the whole surface of my boob. I was purring, I was moaning, "Suck it, please! *Oh, please!*" I was close to coming again, so light and painful were his touches, and I begged him to continue what he was doing. So gently, so carefully, he began to suck at my breast, and the feeling of it shot through me like nothing else, ever. I *did* come again, then, and hugely.

So many others have touched me, so many others have sucked on my

breasts—gently, roughly, hungrily or otherwise, but *no* others have ever affected me the way Marc does. So many others have had nothing but their own pleasures on their minds, and by touching me, by fondling me, by sucking me, they were only working to loosen me up so they could achieve their own satisfaction a little bit sooner—a little bit easier. Marc, though, has never anything but my satisfaction on his mind. He doesn't think of himself, isn't working to 'loosen me up,' isn't thinking ahead to his eventual plunge between my legs—Marc is always, ever, thinking only of me, and of doing whatever he can to please me.

But when I realized this was all only for me, I think I tensed, somewhat. His touch, his tongue, his kisses were so deliciously nice, almost sinfully enjoyable for me—but I began to have difficulty accepting that I could be allowed to simply lie back and let him please me. It all felt so nice, so tender, so considerate; I was becoming angry that I was not allowing myself to enjoy it fully. I was holding back and punishing myself because I didn't feel I deserved the love he was giving me. And he sensed my tension—my self-anger.

"What's wrong?" he asked, and he was genuinely, sincerely worried that it was because of something he had done, or was doing. It was, but for reasons exactly opposite of what he was thinking.

"Nothing," I said, but we both knew I was lying. Anger at myself almost brought me to tears, so unfair and uncalled-for it was. I was afraid to tell him how I felt, what was going through my mind. He was so innocent and wide-eyed with concern it broke my heart to have destroyed the mood so completely.

"Kerry, *please*," he begged, his voice echoing his own fear, his uncertainty, "what did I do?"

I was close to tears. I couldn't speak, I couldn't tell him how badly I felt toward myself, and the pain of hurting him when he had been so very sweet and gentle with his love-making made my eyes well up with tears. My throat was choked with emotion, and I found it next to impossible to speak. "You ain't done nothin' wrong," and I slipped in my English, which is always so important to me. "Really, it ain't your fault."

"*What's* not my fault?" He moved away, now that he knew something was definitely wrong.

I sniffed and wiped at my eyes, trying to hold the tears in. I hate to cry. "This is too wonderful, too much! I can't ..." tears ran down the sides of my face, and I couldn't continue.

"Can't what?" he seemed suspicious, worried.

"Nothing," was all I could say before I began to cry in earnest. I wanted to reassure him, to tell him that he was being wonderful to me

and that this was all my problem, but I had to cry, first, and get it out of the way. I hoped I hadn't ruined the whole thing, but I began to get the sick feeling—the certainty—that I had.

But somehow, though, Marc was patient with me. He stayed there on the bed, although at arm's length, and quietly waited while I cried my eyes out. I was so ashamed at having spoiled the mood—ruined our lovemaking—that I turned my face away from his, and cried all the more. From behind me he put his hand on my shoulder, and tried to turn me to face him. I resisted, wallowing in my anger, my hurt and shame, but I eventually allowed myself to be pulled toward him. He gently put his arms around me, and held me while I cried. And I cried.

And I cried.

After awhile, it became apparent that I wasn't crying just over my guilt and shame at being attended to so unselfishly. There was a lot of old hurt and anger making its way out, and my warmth and relaxation with Marc had unwittingly let it out. I knew I had to tell him, then, what was really bothering me, and that was going to be very difficult. So I told him about Danny Golden. Not everything—*not nearly*—but I had to tell him why I was so ashamed, and why I was so painfully unable to accept his loving gestures.

I started calmly enough. I wiped my eyes and steeled myself to the baring of a little of my soul. I hated myself. I was so ashamed and embarrassed to admit I had been living in such an abusive and unhealthy relationship for so long that all I could do was condemn myself for my stupid ignorance and lack of determination. I told Marc I had been living with a man named Danny Golden, and that he had beaten me up when I told him I was going out on a date. While I wasn't really living with Danny, to have said just what the real arrangements were would have been much too painful to relate.

I told Marc I really liked him—I couldn't say *'love'* yet, to anyone—that his gentleness and his tenderness were the best things I had ever experienced. I told him I felt warm and safe with him, and that I loved his lovemaking, most of all. It was his unselfish loving, then, that had made me cry. I had to tell him something, even if it wasn't the whole truth.

Marc listened quietly. His troubled look of worry and concern grew, but still he laid there and listened until I had said my peace. I was terrified he would get up and leave. I had risked so much in opening up to him, if even only a little, so that any one thing more would have completely destroyed me. The end.

After I finished, he remained silent and contemplative. My fear and trepidation grew, but I breathed deeply and evenly, and tried desperately

to keep from breaking down, again. His brow furrowed, he frowned deeply a moment, but then he thankfully reached a conclusion.

"I had *no* idea," he said, his voice choking as he seemed to be holding his own tears back. "No idea at all. What an **idiot** I was! I don't know *what* I thought when I brought you here with your face all beaten up and swollen—your eye black and bruised. I guess I figured if it was something important, you would tell me about it. **What an idiot!!**" He was plainly angry with himself, too. "I should have *known* something was wrong. *Very, very wrong*. It's not *normal* for someone to get beaten up like you were. It's not right that you should have to endure such *abuse*. **Not right!**" He fairly jumped up off the bed. I tried to pull him back, but he was too quick, too strong. "I'm so *fucking angry!*" He was very upset.

"It's not your fault, Marc," I lamely offered, "it's mine."

"**God no!**" he bellowed, but he wasn't angry with me. "**It can't be your fault!** That guy should have his balls cut off for hurting you. There isn't any punishment too brutal for guys like that." He paced around. "I'm gonna get him," he finished.

"**NO!!**" I screamed. I was terrified that Marc would tangle with the likes of Danny Golden. Danny Golden was a very bad dude, and Marc needed to know that he was asking for trouble—big trouble!—if he went after Danny. "You *can't* go after him," I explained, hurriedly. "You don't *know* what kind of man he is. He knows people, really *bad* people. If you try to mess with him, he can have you killed!"

Marc was not impressed. "Aren't you worried about yourself?"

I had to think. Well, I hadn't really thought about it, much. "Yes," I said, "as a matter of fact I *am* worried about myself—and you, too! If he finds me, it'll be very bad for both of us. It will be *horrible!*"

"But he's not *going* to find you. That I can promise you."

"You can promise," I was skeptical, "but if he wants to find me, he will. And when he does it will be bad for both of us."

"But he *won't* find you." He was definite, strong. "If you don't want him to find you, then he won't find you."

I wanted to believe him, so very much, but it was incredibly hard just to forget I ever knew Danny Golden, and harder still to believe that if we planned it, Marc could make it so Danny wouldn't find me. I didn't think even if I left town would I be able to hide if Danny decided to come after me. I felt truly, completely, trapped by Danny Golden.

I didn't fear so much for my own safety. I felt I had already experienced the worst of what Danny Golden could do to me. If he killed me, (and he was capable of it) it *still* couldn't be worse than the pain, the humiliation and degradation to which he had submitted me over the past

two years. But I did fear for Marc. Marc was innocent—he was blameless—unlike me. If Marc caught the full brunt of Danny Golden’s anger I felt very sure I wouldn’t be able to live with myself afterward. I didn’t *want* to live if Danny hurt Marc. If that happened, I decided then and there I would kill Danny, then kill myself. And when I finally reached that conclusion, it was easier for me. I wanted to believe Marc—I needed to believe *someone*—and I was so very desperate to escape the horror and the nightmare that I’d been living. So I put my fears and uncertainty aside and decided to trust Marc and his offer of protection.

“OK, if you can keep Danny Golden from finding me,” I hoped and prayed, “then I want you to do it.”

“It’s done,” Marc told me, but I didn’t know how.

I asked Marc to come lie down on the bed with me. We were both, now, completely cooled off, but I still wanted him, still needed him. And he came to me, too, but even more cautiously and hesitantly than before. I think he felt I was so fragile I would break if he touched me. I did feel breakable, but I pulled him into my arms and welcomed him there with a kiss, anyway. He returned my kiss, and the energy that had been there earlier began to return again, and in full. This time I was ready to take the initiative if I felt like it. And I did. We kissed warmly and gently a few minutes, and then I decided I wanted to be naked. Completely.

Without breaking the contact between our mouths, I reached behind and unhooked my bra. The elastic unstretched with delightful authority, and my aching breasts came happily free of their bonds. I pulled the blouse and bra from my shoulders, and then laid back to undo my jeans. Marc seemed not to mind me undressing myself, and helped pull my jeans off. The panties I wore were quickly slipped off, next, and I was naked in Marc’s arms, the coarse material of his jeans rubbing roughly between my thighs and against the full, extended folds of my soaking wet vagina.

I felt content, comfortable that way. He was strong, but completely gentle with me, and I relaxed into his strength, letting the muscles in his leg knead and massage my clitoris. I was a wild, uncontrollable mess. He had already made me come twice, while not even touching me there, and it certainly didn’t take very long this time for me to come again. But, after exploding the third time, I was ready to feel Marc inside me. I felt it essential that he be inside me, that he be moving inside me, and in time, that he be coming inside me.

“Please, *please* make love to me,” I begged. “I need you.”

“With pleasure,” he replied.

Marc's jeans came off, but not as easily as had my own. His erection got in the way, as I expected, and he needed my help to manipulate his jeans down over it. When they were bunched near his knees, I pushed them down further with my feet. My knees were in the air, touching either side of his chest, and without either of us seeming to plan it, he slid into me. He was comfortable, solid, and warm, and I relished the feel of his gentle rocking as we made love for the first time. Real love. It didn't take him very long to come—and come he did!—and as he strained and bucked and called out, I came again, too. I never felt so loved and needed as I did, just then.

We lay there together, joined as lovers, a long while. He tried not to put his full weight on me, though I wouldn't have minded it at all. We compromised, though, and he laid his head on a pillow next to mine, and we spent time kissing each other, and smoothing each other's hair, and in general, feeling so good that we were together with each other. We talked a little, about things that had nothing to do with us. I purred even then with the contentment and gentle calmness that has since always marked our lovemaking. And in that time of quiet conversation, of gentle affection that we shared, I fell in love with Marc Huffman. Maybe I haven't always shown it, maybe I haven't always acted as though I loved him, but I have *always* loved Marc Huffman from that moment on.

Later, we had to hurry to get dressed again. I needed a shower since I fairly reeked with the pungent odors of Marc's come and my own peculiar sexual odor. I was first in the shower, and as I luxuriated in the steaming hot stream, I invited Marc to join me.

"With pleasure," he said, again, and we took turns washing each other.

When I washed his penis, it started to become hard, again, and I couldn't resist the urge to stroke him, a little. He responded most favorably to my gentle rubbing, and in a few minutes he was raging, again, as well. I was kneeling there in the shower, 'washing' his rock-hard penis with my hand. He was leaning back, water streaming down his chest when I felt the sudden urge to take him into my mouth. Making sure all the soap was gone, I lightly touched the tip to my slightly parted lips. He moaned in pleasure, in return. I opened my mouth wide, wide enough to admit him completely, and with the practiced skill that I've acquired, I pushed him deep into my throat.

I enjoyed loving him that way, and he enjoyed my loving of him, too. I took it slow, more gently than I ever had before, and in a little while the boy couldn't hold it back any longer. Having him come, again, and the salty, tingly taste of his semen in my mouth made me come, again, too.

Five times in the space of an hour was a record for me, and I wondered at the strength of my reaction to being loved by Marc. Without trying, I was beginning to understand he had something that simply made me relax and loosen up inside. And when I relaxed, my libido always took over, and the next thing I would be aware of was that I was having an orgasm. Many have been small, and have been large, but he has *always* made me come, and the boy doesn't even have to try.

Chapter 6

The drive up to Sheree's and Tom's lake house was a long one. It took at least an hour, maybe more, and I was antsy and anxious the whole way. No, I *don't* know why. But I was very much looking forward to seeing Sheree again, and seeing their house on the lake, and the trip by car took far, far too much time. But we did finally get there, eventually.

The house was beautiful. It wasn't very large, only two bedrooms, one and a half baths, and the basic living/dining/kitchen arrangement. The living room, though, was more of a great room. It was in the back of the house, facing the lake, and the ceiling was vaulted high up over our heads. The entire back wall was glass, and afforded a truly spectacular view of the water. I felt at home almost immediately. The second floor was open and overlooked the living room, and when I walked out into the open expanse I heard Sheree call to me from somewhere above and behind me.

"Hey there!" she piped, leaning over the second-floor railing so far I thought she might fall. "'Bout time y'all got here!" She dashed to the stairs and was down them in a flash. She is only about four-eleven, maybe five feet even, and probably not quite ninety pounds, but she has more energy and happy drive than any *three* other people. Her brown hair was short almost like a man's, and very curly. It made her look like a pixie. And what a pixie!

She hugged me, and kissed me warmly on the cheek. I was happy to be there, and happy to see Sheree again, but Sheree seemed positively ecstatic by my mere presence. Marc, seeing all this lavish attention being paid to me, sulked nearby, but when I looked in his direction Sheree had a big hug and kiss for him, too. Now, only Tom, who was behind us after having closed the door, was left out of the hugs and kisses. Sheree, not to be out done or to forget anyone, jumped up into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. They shared a long, warm, and clearly sexual

kiss. After a few moments, though, she squirmed to get down and was instantly off to check on dinner.

The place smelled even more wonderful than it looked. But I couldn't quite place the aroma at first, so I followed Sheree into the kitchen to find out what was cooking.

"It's my specialty," she whispered to me, winking, "and Tom's favorite—'Filet à la Sheree'." She opened the oven to show me. "It's not ready yet, though. I just put it in, and it has about a half hour more to cook."

"It smells *delicious*," I said, closing my eyes and taking in all the wonderful aroma of the dish. My stomach then growled its gastric agreement, since I hadn't eaten all day. "What's in it?"

"It's basically just filet mignon in a burgundy wine sauce, but the exact ingredients are a tiptop secret." She closed the oven. "Maybe someday, if you want to learn how to cook it, I'll give you the recipe."

"I don't think I could ever cook something this good."

"You won't know till you try," she stood up. Her blue pixie eyes fairly twinkled and she seemed to look right through me. It was most disconcerting. She went on, "How do you like your steak cooked? Medium? Rare? In between?"

"I like my steaks almost bloody rare, when I can get 'em that way."

"No problem, babe!" Sheree held up a thumb, her energy and excitement bubbly, irrepressible. But she paused in her effervescence just long enough to look my face over. Again. Carefully. And she reached a verdict. "You look good, tonight. Better."

"I feel pretty good," I said, but embarrassed still to be noticed. "Thanks." I had to look away.

"Even your black eye is looking better." She spoke so matter-of-factly about it that I felt my face flushing even more, and continued to avert my eyes. But Sheree saw my discomfort, and moved immediately to lessen it. "Hey, babe," she spoke quietly, putting a finger under my chin and pulling my face around until I had to look at her, "don't worry about it. It's OK. Just take it easy, all right?" I nodded, briefly, and just as suddenly as she had brought the subject up—it was dropped again. She took my arm, smiling reassuringly, said 'come on,' and we rejoined our men out in the living room. Tom was pouring glasses of red wine, and Marc was on the couch fumbling around with a rolling paper full of that most exquisite of illicit drugs, the herb superb—marijuana.

We all got glasses of wine and found seats in the living room. Marc and I sat together on the couch, and I snuggled up with him while the first joint was passed around. Sheree took a long time getting settled in her

chair, seeming always to find something she was forgetting in the kitchen, at the table, anywhere, so by the time she finally got settled, we had already made a couple of rounds with the marijuana. It felt really good to kick back and let the warm, fuzzy high come on.

I was anxious to talk about the band rehearsal, though neither Marc nor Tom seemed to want to bring it up. Fortunately, Sheree asked how it had gone, and I took it as my cue to fill her in.

"They were great!" I exclaimed. "That guitar player, Troy Dancer, is a real asshole, but he can *really* play the guitar. He also sings pretty good, too."

"Yeah," Tom interjected, with apparent disinterest, "he's a strange dude, all right."

"What did he do?" Sheree asked.

"Well," Tom went on, in a somewhat bored tone, "for one thing, he brought Melinda Howe with him."

"I remember you telling me he had a keyboard player," Sheree raised her eyebrows, inquisitively, "but you never told me it was Mel Howe."

"I didn't know," said Tom, shrugging. "The first I knew about it was when they showed up." The corners of his mouth curled up in a rather crooked smile, remembering something. "But Marc handled it pretty well, considering."

"Considering *what*?" That was Marc.

"Considering you've got a thing for the girl, is what."

"*Had*, is more like it. But that's old news, son," Marc said. He was a little red around the ears, and I could tell he was uncomfortable talking about her with me right there.

"I'm not worried about her," I assured him, "unless I *should* be ...?" Marc looked at me, then. I couldn't quite read his expression, so I just smiled, sweetly. "I guess there's nothing I should be concerned about. After all, we haven't known each other all that long, have we?"

"That's right," Sheree cut in. "Marc, you haven't said how you and Kerry met."

"There's really nothing to tell," Marc passed the joint to me.

"That so?" I accepted the reefer with a polite smile.

I saw Marc was uncomfortable, probably with being the center of the discussion. But he did answer, "Kerry and I met in Rich's a couple of weeks ago, *very* briefly. We talked, and she gave me her number and said to call her, sometime. So, I called her up the other night. We went out a couple times, and then last night you saw us at the party." He abridged the circumstances, considerably, and I was thankful that he did.

"Kerry, do you live near Marc?" Sheree asked.

"I have an apartment near Piedmont Park," (or was it *had*?) "but I think I'm going to find a better place," I explained, giving them a little white lie. "I don't like it there, very much. Since meeting Marc, I really think I'd like to live nearer to him." It was closer to the truth than anyone but Marc could have guessed.

"What do you do for a living?" Sheree, again. I think it was my turn to get the 'twenty questions'.

"Well, actually," I offered, "I'm unemployed at the moment." That *was* the truth.

"So, what *did* you do?" That was Marc suddenly entering the interrogation. What an ass! He must know something, or suspect something. But I backtracked a moment, getting control of my near runaway panic. No, I had definitely *not* said anything about it. Not even a hint. So why was he asking me? Now, in front of strangers?

I don't know why, but I couldn't help it—I was angry! If anyone else had asked me I could have simply made something up—lied, I suppose—but when Marc jumped in and tried to nail me with it ... It made me furious! I wanted to get away from him, and fast. I didn't see any reason for him to try to hurt me like that, and the last place I wanted to be just then was sitting in Marc's lap, as I had been. As I said, *had* been.

I pulled my legs off his lap, debating only a fraction of a second whether to completely get up from the couch, or just move away from him. Since he sat at one end, I basically had my choice, so I scooted quickly away to the other. I was really angry, and so I just sat there and refused to speak to anyone. I saw Sheree and Tom pass puzzled looks between them, but it wasn't their fault. And I guess I *was* acting pretty unusually, especially considering the apparently harmless question I'd just been asked. I knew well enough that a question like that hardly merits the type of response I'd given, but I'd reacted to it before I had really thought about it. So, there it was.

But I got a flash of an idea, just then. "Sorry," I explained, calming down, "but it's a touchy subject with me. It's really no big deal, but I was fired from my job last week, and Marc *knows* it."

"Don't tease the girl, Marc," Sheree chided. "You don't like it when we tease you."

"All right." He turned toward me and gestured for me to come back down to his end, again. "I'm *sorry*, Kerry." But I didn't like the emphasis on the word 'sorry'.

That one little word hurt me even more, but I went back to my place next to him, anyway. Giving in to him so easily, and without any argument, reminded me too much of the way I'd been with Danny, and it

scared me and angered me, a lot more than I realized at the time. I took my place next to Marc, and I put my legs in his lap as I had done before, and smiled, and was friendly to everyone, including Marc. But I was still seething under the surface.

More wine was passed around, and I made sure my glass was filled to the top. I felt I really needed a good buzz to get the whole thing out of my mind. And I also knew it would likely take more than one or two glasses to do it.

We talked some more about the band. This time, though, I didn't wait for permission to speak, and I guess it was me that did most of the talking. I wanted, so badly, to get a chance to sing, and I made sure that both Marc and Tom knew it. Marc only said that if I wanted to sing, I was going to have to ask Troy Dancer for an audition. He said Dancer was the leader, and it was *his* band. I thought Marc was being chicken-shit about saying anything to the guy, and I told him that, too, but Tom spoke up and sided with Marc. Men, they always stick together, the fuckers! But I agreed, then, to bring up the subject of my audition at the next rehearsal. Once I'd committed to it, the whole idea made me nervous, and more than a little bit scared. But both Marc and Tom thought it was a good idea, and they asked me what I wanted to sing.

"I don't have any idea," I told them.

"What do you know?" Tom asked me.

"I haven't sung anything for a long time." I was clueless. "What do you think I should sing?"

"Well, something you *know* would be nice," Marc, the smart-ass, chimed in.

"Do you know any Crissy Hynde—*Pretenders*, Linda Ronstadt, Pat Benatar, or something like that?" Tom asked me.

"How about Karla Bonoff?" I offered. "She's one of my favorites. I know lots of her songs. If I wrote down the words I probably could sing one of her songs."

"Fine," Tom said, then to Marc, "Don't we know *Trouble Again*?"

Marc nodded. "That's a good one. If you think you can learn it by the next rehearsal," Marc said to me, "then I'd say do it."

After that, it was only a few minutes until dinner.

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There were several glasses of wine poured while we waited on dinner

to be ready. Kerry and I sat together on the couch, and true to form, she felt compelled to sit so close as to be almost sitting in my lap. On this fine, cool evening, Kerry had dressed in a loose, salmon-pink cable-knit cotton sweater and a fashionably short khaki skirt. I thought she had pretty legs, and since I had told her that (repeatedly), she seemed to be gravitating almost exclusively toward dresses and skirts—and it seemed the shorter the better. I didn't mind it, at all, unless she put her legs up over my lap and sat with her knees in the air. In that position her skirt was even shorter, and once again I found myself noticing how much leg she exposed, and wondering what kind of view she was giving the others. And I suppressed the urge to say anything about it, yet once again.

I had about two glasses of the good red cabernet that Tom served, about one more than my usual limit, and in that span of about forty minutes while we waited on dinner, Kerry almost out-drunk all of us, combined. She had at least four glasses, and by the time dinner was served, she was pretty drunk. She seemed mostly OK, despite the little tantrum over my asking her what her 'profession' was, so I had nothing much to say about the wine.

During dinner, the subject of the band came up, again, and this time a heated debate ensued. I don't know exactly who started it, but I think it was Sheree. Once the subject was on the floor again, there was immediate disagreement over the conditions Dancer had laid down.

"I'm not too jazzed about you going on the road after the first of the year," Sheree said to Tom.

"Why?" he asked her, looking at me, first, then her.

"Don't look at Marc for support, boy," she seemed to be already pissed off, "this is between you and me, here."

"I wasn't looking at Marc for support." He was trying to keep her from losing her cool. "It's just that he's in the same boat."

"Not quite," she disagreed. "He ain't married to me, and you *are*. If he wants to quit his job and spend six months living out of a suitcase and staying in cheap motels, then that's *his* business." She pointed her finger at Tom, "You, on the other hand, are part of a team, here," then down at the table, "and I think we need to talk this over before you go off and agree to something, you maybe shouldn't be agreeing to."

"I didn't exactly agree to anything."

"That's not what Kerry said." She looked at Kerry for backup, then at Tom, again. "I distinctly heard her say that when Dancer laid down his 'conditions,' no one had anything to say about it."

"What did you want me to say?" I think he felt pushed into a corner, a little.

"I wanted you to tell him you had to talk to *me*, first."

"Uh-uh. No way."

"*Why not?*" she growled.

"Look," Tom explained, patiently, "I couldn't just tell this guy I had to ask my wife for *permission* before I could join the band. This is *my* thing. It's what I want to do. *I* have to make this decision."

"And what I think doesn't count, huh?" Her tail was twitching, but good.

"You count. I value what you think a great deal. You *know* that." Tom was plaintive, trying his best to ward off her anger.

"But you were just going to do this anyway, without regard to what I thought." She glared, "Weren't you?"

Tom didn't answer right away. I think Sheree took it as a 'yes,' and decided that she'd had enough. Most uncharacteristic of the Sheree I know, she threw down her fork, got up from the table, and made a beeline for the bedroom. We all watched in uncomfortable silence as she stomped up the stairs.

Kerry had her face in her plate, timidly picking at the remainder of her meal. Tom and I shared a brief look, which for him consisted of one part exasperation, one part wide-eyed pleading, and about one part anger. "I'll be back," he sighed, and got up from the table to go talk to his wife.

I looked toward Kerry, sitting there next to me. Her head was down, and she forlornly used her fork to spear single lima bean and put it in her mouth. Even if Sheree's going upstairs in a huff was a little unusual for her, I wasn't too worried about the whole thing. Kerry, on the other hand, was quite visibly upset. She seemed to withdraw into herself, in the fresh, yawning silence of the dinner table.

I tried to be reassuring. "Don't worry about it, Kerry. I've seen them fight before." I had, many times in the five years Sheree and Tom had been together. "They'll make up and be back down in a few minutes." I took a small sip of my wine.

Kerry kept her head down, the edges of her mouth turned down into a desolate frown, "I need another glass of wine."

"OK, fine," I said as I got up from the table to retrieve the bottle from the kitchen counter. And just as I finished pouring her another glassful, she picked it up and downed it. I was a little surprised she drank it straight down, and even more surprised when she immediately asked for another.

"Fill it up, again, please."

"I'm not so sure you need another glass, so soon."

"Fine," she sulked, and slammed the glass down, hard. "Don't, then. I

don't give a shit."

"What are *you* upset about?" I asked her.

"Nothing," was all she said.

"Look, if you want another glass—OK." I set the bottle in front of her plate. "Go ahead, but I don't want you just getting drunk and passing out on me, again."

She looked up, accusing, "When have I ever passed out on you, before?"

"The other night."

"*I don't think so,*" she glared up at me, green eyes dark and smoldering. "And besides," she stabbed at me with her fork, "who the *fuck* are you to tell me what to do, anyway?"

"I am not trying to tell you what to do, it's just that it's no fun when you're falling-down drunk."

"*Fuck off.*" She picked up the bottle and drained it into her glass. Then she picked up the glass and downed it, again, all the while continuing to glare at me in obstinate, childish defiance.

I had had enough. I deemed the discussion over and left the table, going into the living room to find a place as far away from her as possible. Satisfied, I pulled a chair around to face the window, and sat down. I wanted to be away from her awhile, so both of us could cool off. Behind me, I heard her open another bottle and pour another glass. I didn't know exactly what to think, but the very idea she seemed to be intent upon getting completely smashed really pissed me off.

In a couple of minutes, I heard someone open the front door and go outside. I figured it was probably Kerry.

I sat there in the living room, alone, and tried to think. Kerry was outside, apparently, and Sheree and Tom were being pretty quiet, somewhere upstairs. I knew they were probably in the master bedroom, talking, and though the bedroom is semi-open to the living room below, I couldn't really hear what they were saying. Occasionally I would hear a stray word or two, in a low, hushed voice—sometimes Tom, sometimes Sheree—but from the general tenor of what I did hear it seemed as though they were working out their differences. It was fully what I expected, and I relaxed, and waited patiently for them to come down.

It was several minutes—maybe as much as fifteen—when I heard footsteps on the stairs. I turned around, and sure enough, it was Sheree and Tom coming back down to be with their guests. Tom had his arm on Sheree's shoulder, and I knew immediately that they were OK, again.

Tom went into the kitchen to get something, and Sheree came over to where I was sitting. She came up behind me, put her arms around my

neck and leaned over my shoulder. She gave me a hug, fully Sheree again, and kissed me lightly behind the ear.

"Sorry about that," she apologized. "It was rude of me to go off and leave you two down here, alone."

"It's OK," I told her, "it's *your* house."

"Even so," she chided herself, "it's still rude when you have guests. We shouldn't argue like that in front of friends. It makes everyone uncomfortable, and spoils the party." She stood up. "You have my most humble apologies."

"It's OK," I said.

Tom called from the kitchen, "Where's Kerry?"

I got up from my chair. "I think she went outside." I walked into the kitchen where Tom had poured both he and Sheree another glass of wine, and where he was also rolling a joint. "I think she's pretty upset over your argument," I explained. "She whipped down a bunch more wine, and when I said something to her about it, she told me to get lost."

"I heard her," Tom smiled, but not happily, "and that wasn't quite how she put it."

"Sorry," I sighed.

He shook his head. He didn't want my apology. "It's OK, Marc. Let me go talk to her," he offered.

"No," I shook my head, "I'd better do it." I started for the door, "Just relax, a minute. I'll talk to her."

I went outside and closed the door behind me. It was cool, dark, quiet, and very peaceful. A low stone wall ran along side the walk, holding the steeply sloping front yard back from the house, and about halfway to the driveway I saw the dim, red glowing tip of a cigarette. I could just make out Kerry's outline in the faint glow from the porch light, a lone figure sitting on the wall in the dark.

"There you are," I said, more cheerfully than I felt. I walked up the steep, curving walk toward her, listening to the sounds of my own feet on the dusty, gravelly walk as I approached. I stopped a few feet away, and studied her a moment before continuing. "I'm sorry," I said to her stiff, stoic back, since she sat facing away from the house. "I didn't mean to get on your case back there." But she was silent in response. "Come on, Kerry, let's go inside. Tom and Sheree have kissed and made up, and they want you to come back and join the party."

She spoke slowly, "I hate it when people argue like that." Her words were noticeably slurred. She lifted something toward her mouth, and I saw it was a wine bottle. She took a drink, then lowered the bottle, again.

"How much have you had to drink?" I asked, but I expected her to be

combative in response.

She only sighed, "Not enough," and took another drink from the bottle.

"Can I have some?" I asked her, and came around until I faced her. I held out my hand.

But she didn't offer the bottle to me, just took another drink, instead. "Go get your own." She wouldn't look at me, either.

"You're going to be sick if you drink that whole thing," I lectured, but only mildly, "so why don't we just go back inside. I don't really care if you want to get drunk, just don't sit out here all alone and make our hosts feel so bad that you're upset."

"I ain't upset." She sounded very drunk, indeed. "Just a couple more swigs, an' I won't feel nothin' at all."

I ignored her comment. "Come *on*, Kerry. Let's go inside."

"What if I don' wanna go inside? What if I jus' wanna sit out here awhile?"

"I guess," I told her, "if that's what you want to do, then there's nothing I can do about it."

"Fuckin' A-right!" She took another drink.

"Come inside." I pleaded, "Please?" She made no response, but I judged she was considering it. So I waited.

She was a long time in responding. "I'm pretty f-fuckin' drunk, ya know." I thought she almost stuttered. "You ain't worried I'll embarrass you if I come back inside?"

I sighed, "No. They're my best friends. They *know* me, and they know how upset you are. I think we can risk it this time."

There was a long pause. "OK," she finally agreed, and handed me the empty bottle of wine.

• • •

Once Danny Golden had secured my obedience to his plan, he left me there in the apartment alone with 'Bob'. But I stayed in the kitchen still, a long while, too scared and too sick feeling to go out and meet my 'date' for the evening. I was humiliated beyond all comprehension when I finally, fully realized that Danny had *sold* me to this man. Maybe not sold directly, but I was unquestionably being given up to this man for money. In my book that meant only one thing, and that thing was the oldest profession. I had become a prostitute for Danny Golden.

Suddenly, all his time and attention seemed to make a kind of perverse sense. After all, I reasoned, he *couldn't* have been after me all this time only for his own pleasure. No. He had only been prepping me for my new role. He had been preparing me to accept whatever any man I would be sold to wanted.

I was sick when I thought of the prospect of turning tricks for Danny. I felt trapped, and alone, and scared, and ashamed. And most of all, I felt I had no choice. If I didn't go through with Danny's demands, I'd be dead meat. Danny would beat me good next time—or worse. I hadn't yet experienced what 'worse' could be, but as I stood alone in the kitchen and tried to calm myself with a good belt of my favorite scotch, I realized I had seen Danny with others of 'his girls,' and I had seen some of those girls afterward. Some others, I suddenly remembered, I *never* saw again. They seemed to just disappear from the scene. Gone. No one ever saw them again. I wondered and worried what had happened to them, and I wondered and worried if I might end up just like them. Gone, too.

But even so, I did eventually have to face the man in the living room. If I wanted to stay healthy, and maybe alive, too, I had to go through with my promise to Danny. I *was* trapped, then. Trapped by my own words—by my own blatant lack of intelligence. I obviously had not seen the signs when they first appeared, and now there was nothing I could do about it. I had to face the man in the living room, and I had to face myself. I had become a prostitute—a goddamn whore. And I deserved it.

Eventually I got up the nerve to leave the kitchen. 'Bob' was still on the sofa, and he smiled when he saw me. I was more nervous than ever, and as I fumbled for a cigarette, I dropped the whole pack, spilling several out onto the carpet. 'Bob' laughed, and spoke to me for the first time.

"You look nervous, girl. There's no need." He casually put his arm on the back of the couch. "You can call me 'Bob'." Gee, I figured as much. He went on, "Danny has told me so much about you. He said you were his favorite girl, and that he'd had to do handstands to get you free the whole night for me. I can see why. You're very pretty, you know. I'll bet you're also very popular, too."

I was speechless. I couldn't believe it! He thought I was just being coy, or modest, or something. Incredible!

"Why don't you come over here, girl, so we can talk." Well, I thought he *was* talking. "I think you'll like me. I'm a nice guy, and if you're real good to me, I'll give you a fat tip you won't have to tell Danny about."

What a fucking great enticement! I thought. How ironic! What *had* Danny said about me, anyway? Here I was, not quite seventeen and a half, and already I had been billed to this guy as Danny's 'favorite girl'. His

best hooker. What a cheap shot he'd given me! What a brainless, spineless slut I was to have fallen for it! I was so humiliated and degraded. **How could he do this to me?!?** I had loved him! And ruefully, regretfully, it was 'love' I was now going to give to this man, this *stranger*.

'Bob' smiled again. Well, I thought, gulping, he does look like a nice man. He had dark, but graying hair—maybe he was about forty-five or so—and he was handsome and very expensively dressed in an Italian designer suit and a one-of-a-kind hand-printed silk tie. I, on the other hand, only felt cheap and slutty. But 'Bob' was asking me to come over to him, and if 'Bob' wanted it, I guess I was going to do it. As I walked across the floor to him, finally, I only hoped he wouldn't hurt me.

Grandma once told me something about men. She said, "Kerry Lynn, honey, pray you don't get involved with some man who's just like your daddy."

So I asked her, "Why, Grandma?"

She said, "I never told you what your daddy did to your mama." She was obviously emotionally upset, and fought to keep from crying. I asked her what he'd done to her. "He used to beat your mama," she said. "Beat her bad. She used to have cuts and bruises all over her face and arms. Maybe it wasn't my place to say anything, but I tried so hard to tell that child to leave him.

"That was after you was born, you know. Your mama was already pregnant with your brother Kerwin, and just starting to show. I begged Carole Anne to leave your daddy—just go!—but she said she loved him and that he didn't mean it when he hit her. I was so worried that she would lose the baby, I worried myself sick about it.

"Your mama and daddy had just gotten married. Despite my objections, they had gone and had the judge marry them one night. Carole Anne was so smart and so pretty, just like you, and I always wanted nothing but the best for her."

"Where was Grandpa?" I asked her.

"Your Grandpa didn't know, or pretended not to. He didn't like your daddy—not at all!—and since your mama went away to live with your daddy after they was married, she wasn't there so he could see how bad she was hurting. It would have made your Grandpa crazy to see his little girl beat up like that."

"Why didn't you *say something?*" I was baffled, incredulous.

"I did, child, I did. But your Grandpa was mad at your mama for getting pregnant, again, and he refused to listen to me. He didn't like it much at all when your mama got pregnant with you, but after you was

born and he saw you was such a lovely baby girl, your Grandpa forgave your mama. But he was dead-set against your mama having another child by that man—" she swallowed distastefully "—your daddy."

"I don't understand," I said. "Why didn't you stop him from beating mama? Wasn't there something you could do?" I saw tears in Grandma's eyes.

"I tried, honey, I tried." She cried, "I tried, but they just wouldn't listen to me. I'm so sorry, Kerry Lynn, please forgive me, *I'm so sorry!*"

I did forgive Grandma for not stopping something that she couldn't control, but I never understood how someone could get hit by a man and not leave him. How they could keep coming back. Until now. And there was nothing *at all* voluntary about it.

The next day Danny came around to see how it had gone. I tried to keep the door bolted against him, but he was very strong and forced it open despite my best efforts. He knew I'd entertained 'Bob,' since 'Bob' had already been by the club and talked to Danny about me. Danny said that 'Bob' was very pleased with me, and had complimented him at great length on his excellent choice of companion for the night. 'Bob' had also—apparently—gone into some detail about my subsequent nighttime activities. I couldn't tell if Danny was mad or glad that I had fulfilled my role so sufficiently—so effectively. He was certainly agitated, but I couldn't tell if he was going to hug me, or slug me. I flinched every time he moved.

"You were very good last night." He put his arm around my shoulders. He seemed pleased. "'Bob' talked real nice about you this morning when he came by the club. He's so pleased, in fact, that he plans to give me the money, after all." I hadn't known there was any doubt. "I always knew you had the talent, sugar, always. All it took was a little training, a little softening up. I knew that you would come through when I needed you." I was dumbfounded. Training? *Talent?!?* Softening up?!? What did he mean? "Sugar," he went on, pleased as he could be, "you and me can have a very long and profitable relationship ahead of us, but only if you do what I say. If you slip up, and I know you know what I mean, you'll be in big trouble with ole Danny. But you won't slip up, will you?"

I couldn't think of a single thing to say. I was still stuck on the events of the night before, how I'd been set up, how I'd been beaten, and threatened, and how I'd been forced to have sex with a man I'd just met. And all for some stupid, lousy money. Money I didn't even get to keep.

Danny had his arm around me, holding me firmly and not entirely with my cooperation. His arrival had wakened me suddenly, and I had

only pulled on my robe. After 'Bob' left the night before I hadn't even bothered to get out of bed, so (of course) under the robe I was naked. In Danny's grasp, I felt oddly vulnerable and exposed, having only a flimsy, insubstantial garment separating me from him. Where before I may have been excited and enlivened by his touch, on this morning all I could feel was a sense of revulsion and disgust. And fear.

Without preamble and without my permission, Danny pulled open the knot binding the robe around my waist. Roughly, he jerked the robe off my shoulders, and forced me to stand there in front of him naked and exposed. I wanted to hide, to cover myself, but he held me tightly by the arms and forced me to stand without moving.

"I think you needa lose a little weight, sugar," he appraised me coldly. I felt like a side of beef, a piece of property. I think they call it '*chattel*'. He poked me in the ribs, rudely. "Most men'll want you a little thinner, I think. And I don't want to see those thighs of yours ballooning up any more than they have, already." He put his hand on the inner part of my left thigh and squeezed me mercilessly hard. I winced, and had to struggle to keep still. If I moved, he might hurt me. I wanted to run, but the strength and anger flowing just beneath his hard surface, and the implied threat if I resisted him or made any move to get away from him, held me where I stood, and made me submit to his scrutiny.

He ran his hand up between my legs, and pushed his thumb painfully against the now dry folds of skin that protected my vagina. "You ain't wet," he commented, and chuckled to himself. "We gonna have to teach you to be wet when I touch you. You always used to be wet, I know—real wet." His hand pushed into my crotch, his rough thumb forcing its way between the sore, parched lips of my labia and into me with a start. I still didn't move, but it hurt so badly tears were forced to my eyes. "Were you wet for 'Bob,' last night, sugar? Did you put your wet little pussy in his face—" his face came right up to mine, inches away, his breath smelling of cheap, stale whiskey, "—and make him eat you like you always want me to do?" He sneered, his nose an inch from mine. His eyes were all I could see, and they terrified me. He backed off, momentarily. "Did you like it? Did he make you *come*, sugar?" And when he said the word '*come*,' he pushed upward very hard and his thumb buried itself deeply within my aching, abused cunt. I couldn't help flinching and crying out, and as I stood there, impaled painfully on his thumb, I did feel like nothing more than a stupid, cheap cunt.

"Did you suck his dick? Did you swallow it whole, like I taught you? Did he *fuck* you in the *ass*?!" He grabbed the cheek of my ass then with his free hand, and I cringed back in horror when I thought he might

violate me there. I couldn't help it. Danny came in close, again. Very close. He seemed to suck all the air away, and I felt completely stifled, hemmed in, trapped. "Tell me, sugar," he whispered, menace overwhelming the softness of his tone, "did you let him fuck you in the ass?" Then louder, "*Did he? Did he? TELL ME!*" he screamed.

I thought I would pass out. I was so afraid of him, and he was hurting me so much with the brutal pressure of his thumb, I didn't think I could bear it another moment. I knew I couldn't bear it if the pain continued. "**Please! Danny please!**" I wailed, and my hands flew up to cover my face.

But he was cold and completely unmoved by my plea. He stood there, malevolent, silent and steely, his eyes narrowed to slits as he mulled semi-drunkenly over my pitiful appeal for mercy. "No, slut," he said, no trace of emotion left in his voice. "I think you have to pay." And with that, he released me to fall to the floor in a sobbing, ragged heap.

I cringed there on the carpet, trying to cover my head and protect my vulnerable, soft body parts from the attack I was certain was coming. I heard the sound of his belt being undone, and I began then to steel myself for a sexual assault. The thought of submitting to his stiff, hard cock was, however repulsive, infinitely preferable to getting beaten again. But it wasn't sex, or even rape that he had in mind.

I heard the belt slide out of the loops. It made a zip! thwack! sound as I heard him snap it taught. "You were pretty good, bitch." He circled me, snapping the belt and threatening. "*Too good. You shouldn't have done it that good, bitch. I was saving you, and you gave it away! You fuckin' gave it away!*"

From a distance, I heard hard leather strike something. It sounded like leather striking cloth, but I couldn't quite place it. I was waiting for him to hit me, and I wondered and worried when it would happen. I heard the sound again, and again, and still I waited and wondered when his attack would come.

Oddly, I felt no pain. I was not attached to my body. My mind was buried so deep within me I was totally shut off from the pain. Dimly, almost absently, I became aware that the sound I was hearing was Danny's belt striking me across my own back. I could feel, then, the force behind his blows, but for whatever reason, I *could not* feel the pain.

When I didn't cry out or beg him to stop, he became more enraged, screaming and flailing at my back with the belt. The sound was loud and sharp in my ears. The timbre changed, and the belt seemed to be striking bare flesh, and I knew, even if there was no pain, it was *my* bare skin it was striking. I kept my breasts and thighs protected as best I could. He rained blows onto my ass, my back, and the back of my neck. I then

locked my hands behind my neck to protect myself, and I felt the force of the belt on the backs of my hands and fingers. Still, surprisingly, I felt none of the pain. He was a brutal, enraged animal, screaming and panting and dancing around me, and I was just covering up; just trying to survive.

I don't remember if or when he eventually stopped. I had lost all touch with the present. When I finally came back into myself, it was quiet, and I listened carefully for any sound. I stayed in my covered, protective position and strained to listen for any sound or sign that would tell me he was still there. But there were no sounds. Nothing. Slowly, and carefully, I allowed myself to unfold. As I moved, the skin on my back seemed stiff, and crackled as I came to my knees. Only then did the pain start to come through. I was alive, but I knew I was very badly hurt. I don't remember anything else, but I *do* know I began to cry, then.



When Kerry and I were washing each other in the shower, before going up to Tom's and Sheree's lake house, I noticed fine white scars crisscrossing her back. None of them were very pronounced, but several had faint red lines down their centers, as if long, deep cuts had been laced into her at some point in the not-too-distant past. I asked her about them.

"They're nothing," she said. "They're not important, anymore. Forget it." I tried to get her to talk, but she adamantly refused to discuss the subject. She wanted to pretend they didn't exist—that they didn't matter—and nothing I could say or do could open her up to talk to me about it.

I had heard that victims of violence often blame themselves. Why, I still don't understand, but Kerry obviously had been beaten, and very, very badly, and she held all the tremendous hurt and pain bottled up inside her. There was no way I could help her get it out, and it hurt me so much to see her that all I could do was hold her, and hug her, and promise her it was never going to happen again. She was withdrawn—completely closed to me—and as I held her there in the shower, the warm water pelting us, I felt a little of the horrible, terrible *aloneness* she must have felt.