

Chapter 17

We didn't get back to the apartment until well after one-thirty. We were both exhausted, but very satisfied.

"I had a good time tonight," Kerrilyn announced after I finished locking the door. She stood in the entryway, tired eyes, coat wrapped about her, and her hair in complete disarray.

"So did I," I agreed. I put my arms around her. She felt like a giant, fluffy, stuffed animal. "The movie was pretty good." I hoped she appreciated my joke.

She did, and laughed. "Very funny, old man!"

"I'm not *too* old for you, yet," I objected. "I think I kept up with you quite well, considering." But I don't think I had quite addressed the *real* subject at hand.

She allowed me to let the conversation lull, but came back to it after a few moments of cozy silence. "I'm talkin' 'bout our little 'trip,' tonight." She twinkled, "Did you enjoy it?"

I was almost surprised she was willing to take the risk of asking me how I felt about our little naked-under-her-coat adventure. "You know I did." I lightly stroked her smooth, soft, woolly back. "It was a bit different from what I'm used to, but then ..." I mused "... everything about you is a 'bit different'."

"It wasn't too wild for you?" Her tone of voice was plaintive, as if I were going to tell her we wouldn't ever do it again.

"No," I drawled. "Pretty wild, but not *too* wild." I had to smile, remembering the delicious tension I had felt as we hit the highway ...

The car's heater was a few minutes warming up, so during this time Kerrilyn kept herself bundled up against the chilly night. But it wasn't very long before the car was warm, with billows of hot air streaming from the vents, and she decided it was time to open her coat, just a little. In a

few minutes she pulled out of the arms, and relaxed while I drove awhile, wriggling around sensuously inside its satin-slick lining. The expressway was very crowded, almost packed, and though it was almost midnight (very dark), the chance always existed that she would be seen naked.

Kerrilyn seemed to become more aroused with the thoughts of her public nakedness and potential for discovery. She seemed to tease the other drivers and their passengers. 'Look at me!' she seemed to say, 'I'm not wearing anything!' She soon discarded the coat to the back seat, and with it her only safety net of clothed, protected propriety. And with the heater going full blast, casually talked to me while we drove.

"It's good to be back in the land of the living, again." She must have been referring to her recovery from the flu.

"It's good to have you back," I agreed.

She watched the cars, unabashed. "I thought rehearsal went pretty well."

"It was OK."

"Did you like the movie?"

"It was OK."

"Just OK? Is everything 'just OK' to you?"

"Yeah. For the most part, yes."

Her face was to the window, and several moments went by before she spoke again. "You still mad at me?" She was contrite.

"No! Why would you think that?" I tried to smile, but she wasn't looking at me. "It's been a rough week, though. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"I'm sorry I was sick. I know it was no fun having to take care of me. I wish it could have worked out differently."

"You wish *what* could have worked out differently?"

"I wish I hadn't been sick, for one thing."

"Me, too. I know it's no fun."

"And I wish some other things hadn't happened, as well." She was silent for a couple minutes, thinking. Then, "I ruined everything. I'm sorry."

"You didn't ruin anything."

"Well, I don't really want to talk about it right now, anyway."

"OK, Kerrilyn," I said. "But, you know, I got another week of vacation coming, so it isn't necessarily over, yet. There's plenty of time left."

"Good!" she looked at me and smiled, suddenly. "This, then, will be the new official start of our holiday, together."

"What ... will be?"

Kerrilyn turned her body toward me in the seat, but didn't answer. Her eyes burned into me, expression deep, smoky, and incredibly charged, sexually.

I could hardly concentrate on the road. The passing highway lights, and the lights of all the cars flashing against her smooth bare skin both distracted and bothered me. Distracted me with the thought of the raw, naked, unadulterated heat flowing just beneath the surface of her flushed skin, and bothered me that I had to drive the damn car, and couldn't avail myself of the burning, but silken soft caress of that skin against mine. And then she proceeded to make it even more difficult to keep between the lines. She leaned over, smirking all the while, and unbuckled my belt. No, not the seat belt—the belt that held my pants up. “What are you doing?” I foolishly asked, but she only told me to ‘drive, buddy’. The button on my jeans, and then the zipper were the next casualties. I had a sizable hard-on (and no wonder!) and without any hesitation, she gently pulled it free to feel the relative coolness of the night.

At first I thought she was going to take me in her mouth, but she only teased me with her deft, tickling fingers. She just talked to me awhile, about the band and the weather and the traffic—just stuff—and lightly stroked my aching cock with smooth, slippery, saliva-wetted fingertips. It was a *lot* of fun. And excruciating.

“What happens if we get stopped?” I croaked, excitement creeping, unbidden, into my voice.

“So, don't fuck up,” was all she said.

“What happens if someone sees us?”

“They probably won't believe what they're seeing, but even if they do ...” she let her voice trail off “... you won't mind, will you? I like the danger that we might be discovered any time. It's so naughty!” She leaned close to me, whispered, “It makes me so wet! I could come just by thinking about it!”

“Could you?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded, leaning toward me, staring into my eyes, wide-eyed and harboring the slightest of knowing smiles.

“Would you?”

“Would you like it?” she asked, no longer whispering, voice husky, *extremely* sexy.

I swallowed. This was almost too good for words. “I would love it.”

Kerrilyn had heard all she needed. She stretched out across the center console, not the most comfortable of positions, but adequate, and laid her head in my lap. All I could see were shining billows of hair, flashing eyes, and soft, wet, full, pouting lips. Her breasts lounged atop her chest, more

prominent with the arch of her back, and she put her feet up on the windowsill, knees parted. Her butt just barely touched the seat beneath her.

"Is this OK?" she asked once she was properly situated.

"It's fine. Great." I don't know how I managed to drive, so rapt was my attention upon her.

She drew in a large breath, exhaled, and stretched, arching her back and running her hands down her sides, across her pubis and along the inside of her thighs. She was *very* comfortable touching herself, and I could almost sense what she was feeling as she gently massaged and stroked her body, warming up. One knee leaned against the seat back, and the other bumped the dashboard. She closed her eyes and let her playful fingers begin their private journey.

I was going to have to stop so I wouldn't miss the show.

"I'm gonna pull off," I announced.

"No," she continued to massage herself, "don't pull off." She was almost panting—breathy, distracted—when she spoke. "Just keep driving." A pause. "Oh!" she exclaimed, then, "*Ahh!*" She was nearer, closing in on her orgasm. And she thought to ask me, "Do you like it? Is this exciting for you?"

"Yes," I breathed, and my breath came out slowly, raggedly. Her heat and arousal burned into me, making me quiver involuntarily. "Suck me," I ordered.

She laughed, but it was a little girl's laugh of delight, not one of derision. "Oh! buddy!" she giggled, "You don't have to *ask*, you know!" She stopped, a moment, concentrating on masturbating herself. Small sounds of excitement and pleasure came from her lips as she neared her goal. "Oh, buddy, I would *love* to suck you." And then she came, calling out, "*Oh-hh-hh!!*" her back arching and whole body spasming with its intensity.

Several minutes passed while she lay across my lap, panting. I tried to be patient, but it wasn't easy.

Kerrilyn finally spoke. "Don't you wish you were back in the apartment, watching Dick Clark bring in the New Year?" I think she was teasing.

"Don't you wish *you* were bent over the hood of my car, being *fucked* from behind while Dick Clark brings in the New Year?" I teased back.

"I do!" she promptly replied, face all grins.

OK, OK. I *had* to get off the highway, then.

Sunday 'morning,' twelve noon sharp, the alarm went off, right when

I'd planned. Since habit had taught Kerrilyn to ignore it, I had to resort to manual means to rouse *the girl*. So, before I got out of bed I spent a leisurely few minutes poking her in the ribs (and other, more intimate places) until she awoke. Once I saw that her eyes were open, I rolled out to make us some coffee. In a few minutes, she got up and followed me out to the kitchen.

"Good morning," she greeted me, smiling, her voice still a little hoarse from the strenuous rehearsal of the day before. "When you woke me, I thought it was still early. Then I saw what time it really was, and decided to go ahead and get up." Kerrilyn was wrapped up in my robe, which was long enough to cover all of her but her bright red toes. She padded over to where I was standing, and watched me watch the coffeemaker work. Her arms found my waist, and she snuggled close, the side of her face resting against my chest. Redolent in her hair were faint traces of the perfumes in her shampoo and in her hairspray. I basked in the radiating warmth of her body, enjoying the moment fully. She asked, sleepily, "What's on the agenda for today?" a slight yawn escaping at the last.

I inhaled deeply, thoughtfully. "Well, if it weren't New Year's, I would say we get you checked for glasses," I told her. "Maybe tomorrow, then." I half expected an argument, and I was right.

"I don't *want* glasses."

"But you need them."

"I don't care." So typical.

I countered, "I think you'd look cute in glasses."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about, is what I think," she said, then turned her face up to mine. "I can't afford them." Where she had gotten that idea, I didn't know.

"No one has asked you to pay for your glasses, Kerrilyn," I said. "Besides, who pays for everything else around here, anyway?"

With that, she shot away from me, instantly and most unexpectedly angry. "Listen, buddy!" she pointed. "I never fuckin' *asked* you to be my provider!" She glared at me, eyes large. "I don't need your fucking handouts, Marc Huffman, so you can shove that attitude right up your ass!"

What was her problem? One innocent comment and ...

I started, "Look, Kerry—"

"—It's *Kerrilyn*, now, in case you forgot," she reminded me, angrily.

"Sorry." I'd lost my train of thought momentarily, and had to take a few seconds to regroup. "I don't know why you're so angry. You've been living here for *months* without any job and no income, and I've been

paying for *everything*. Food, clothing, entertainment—*makeup*. Everything!" I'd started to say 'booze' but left it out at the last second. Then I thought better of it and said it anyway, "And all your alcohol, too." She seemed to ignore my reference to the booze, and stood there completely unmollified, if her expression was any indication. "Look," I took a step toward her, tried to get a hold on her—but no luck. "I don't know what your problem is, but *I* don't have any problem with you living here. I don't give a shit about the money you spend. When I mentioned it, I was only kidding. Besides," I finished, "it's the truth."

She continued to glare silently for a few moments, then decided what to say in response. She was angry when she spoke, "It seems like every time I turn around, you're throwing the fact that I don't have a job and that I don't have any money right back in my face." Her voice became louder, more impassioned, "If it's *that* fucking important to you, I'll just go get a fucking job and be done with it! That way I won't have to listen to you lecture me all the fucking time about how much fucking money you spend on me!" (How many 'fucking's' was that?)

"I *don't* lecture you," I told her, "and it's not all the *fucking* time even if I do." I tried to match both her vocabulary and her tone of voice. "Look, if you want to go out and get a fucking job—do it! I won't stop you, or—" I gasped with mock seriousness, "heaven *fucking* forbid!—try to fucking talk you out of it. I've told you before you can do any fucking thing you want. So get a fucking job! If it's what you want."

She had to grin. I'd successfully defused her anger. "But I've got a job, singing in the fucking band." She grinned wider.

"That's right," I agreed, nodding vigorously, suppressing my own grin. I waited for her to continue with her point, but no further expostulation, of the fucking variety or otherwise, was forthcoming. It hadn't been my argument to begin with, so I changed the subject. "Could we just take it easy today and not worry about how much fucking money your glasses cost?"

But by then Kerrilyn knew I was teasing her, and more than a little. "Sure," she grinned, and broadly, "but I'm *not getting* any fucking glasses." She did sound most definite nonetheless.

"Kerrilyn," I managed to get hold of her arm, and she permitted it, though reluctantly, "I love you. I care for you. And that's the only reason I even brought the subject up. If you *don't* want glasses, you don't have to get them. But I only want the best for you. Period." I pulled her back into my arms, and she came into them, too. "You deserve to see clearly."

Something about 'deserving' must have struck her. It was like she hadn't considered it, before, and now here I was talking of her deserving

something she had been forcing herself to do without. From the expression on her face, it was apparent to me she really did want to see better, after all, and the real conflict lay with some kind of need to punish herself. But for what?

“Can I think about it?” she asked.

“Think about it all you want,” I told her.

In a few seconds she decided. “OK, then, let’s do it.” And then she grinned, deviously, “But not right now. I’m horny!”

“Jesus!” I was, indeed, surprised. “I’d have thought last night would’ve taken care of *that* particular problem.”

“Humph!” she snorted. “I don’t think of it as a *problem* at all, buddy, and last night doesn’t count anymore!” She sounded perturbed, but ran her hand lightly along my thigh, allowing her thumb to barely brush the very sensitive skin of my scrotum. Even through the fabric of my pajama bottoms, her touch and attention were electric in their effect on me. It was enough—she’d convinced me.

Slowly, savoring every soft nuance of her body, I slid my hands down the length of her back, pressing deeply into the valley of her spinal column. In response, she arched backward and pressed her hips to mine, leaning back and letting her hair fall behind her. I held her to me, my hands cupping the round, softly firm mounds of her behind. Kerrilyn’s eyes drifted closed as she trustingly allowed me to support her, her chin poised upward, exposing her milky-pale neck. I wanted to lean down, to kiss and caress the softness at the hollow of her throat, but I held back, waiting. She ran her fingers through her hair, pulling it back from her face, and I watched her movements in rapt fascination. So beautiful! Such a beauty she was! I’ve never seen anyone with so much casual perfection of appearance. So perfect, she stunned and awed me to the point of complete disbelief. How could such a fabulously beautiful woman be in love with me? Even more amazing, how could such a lovely girl have been so beaten and abused as she had been?

I thought of the scars across her back, and I ached with each one remembered. I ached, and was angered by the thought that one could be so careless and cruel as to strike her. As she leaned back against my hands, her weight barely registering upon me, I felt her, someone, a very fragile thing, a very ephemeral being existing there in my arms. I wanted always to hold her, always to care for her and protect her ... but at her touch I got a distant, vague, disquieting sense of an evanescence of soul. I didn’t understand it at the time, and couldn’t, but ...

I forced the premonition from my mind, and focused on the warmth and softness of her body—the person I had cradled in my arms, supported

by my hands. As if on cue, she opened her eyes and looked straight at me. And I swear I got the immediate sense from her probing stare that she felt some of the same, sad shortness of existence, the same impermanence, calling out in the void. What was it? Was it the future—for us? Not understanding completely—either of us—we lingered over our loving and longing looks, and exchanged thoughts. And not all of them were platonic or chaste ones, either.

A slow, knowing smile began to spread across her face. Starting with her eyes and seeming to move down over the rest of her, coming to her lips, her mouth, her cheeks, the color at her throat, the set of her shoulders and the arch of her back, and then to rest in the warmth of her abdomen pressed against mine. I was totally engrossed, enraptured, and my body responded in tune with hers. Still keeping eye contact, she found the tie at the waist of her robe, and slowly, carelessly undid it. With a barely suppressed sense of urgency she pulled the robe open, uncovering her body to me.

I felt I could exist forever in the delicate, freckled valley between her breasts. Before my adoring eyes, those breasts hung free and gloriously unencumbered. As I found myself being drawn deeper and deeper into her spell, I had to work mightily to resist the temptation to count each auburn freckle sprinkled across her shoulder blades, so close was my scrutiny. Her breasts were most pleasingly large, full, and as I well knew, *so very* soft and inviting. Her areolas, set high, were typical of most fair-skinned redheads—relatively small and very pale pink—but today they seemed almost distinct—flushed and full, surrounding, framing, and glorifying her hugely erect nipples. Those nipples invited my lips and tongue to suckle and nibble, my teeth to scratch.

Kerrilyn saw me gazing at her breasts, and it pleased her. Slowly, and familiarly, she folded her arms under those breasts, a move she knew pushed them out and up, making them seem larger and even more prominent. I then indulged myself a second time in a long, lingering, and unabashed perusal of the twin orbs of pink flesh she presented to me. I knew I could die examining the depth and the contours of her naked body, but I was at the same time drawn by the near incandescent sparkle of her eyes, watching me just out of my line of vision. As I allowed my attention to drift to her eyes and her face—I found a toothy grin spread wide there. It said she knew I liked her body—her breasts—and she didn't mind it at all.

"You're beautiful," I whispered, almost too low even for me to hear. But Kerrilyn heard me, as if I'd shouted it at the top of my lungs.

"Tell me what you want to do to me," she murmured, her voice

almost a whisper, too. "I'm yours ... All of me belongs to you ... and only you ... I want to be ..." she closed her eyes, fantasizing and dreaming dangerous thoughts "... all yours!" At least *I* was fantasizing and dreaming those dangerous thoughts. "Oh, Marc!" she gasped, then louder, "**Oh, Marc!** Please, take me and own me ... lead me ... control me!" The robe was then pulled open more fully, and as its shawl collar reached the edges of her shoulders, it was allowed to fall from them. Only my hands supporting her bottom prevented it from hitting the floor. It was a distraction and a weight that was better discarded.

Slowly, and with the utmost in deliberation and precision of movement, I pulled her upright and into my arms. The robe, now, was left to lie in a heap on the floor. Kerrilyn was not naked, though, not entirely. She had on panties, (always) skimpy, but pink, cottony ones. I thought about her request—her 'plea' for my ownership and control—and began to consider whether I wanted her naked just yet, or not.

The idea was a new one, for me. Never in any previous relationship was I permitted to completely *control* the other person. Sure, there are many times you have to take the lead and make the first move—as men, we're expected to do this—but as far as having the right and privilege to command and direct the other person—it was a manifestly foreign concept for me. What did she mean? What type of dominance did she want and how far would she let me go? Even more to the point, could I do it? How far could I go? Did I even want to take control? That was perhaps the real question. It became apparent after a few moments of thought, though, that it was not so much a question of how far would she go, or what would she let me do, as it was how much was I capable of doing, safely. *Could* I comfortably accept the responsibility of taking her body and will into my hands? I asked myself the question, and tried searching her face—her eyes, those telltale eyes—for the answer.

Kerrilyn was looking calmly and soberly at me. Her grin had faded, and the expression that replaced it was serene and relaxed, though charged with patient expectation. Involuntarily I released her, and almost unconsciously I took a step back from her. With new interest I looked over her half-nude body and considered the situation. I asked her with my eyes if she understood and really wanted what she was asking, and she answered with her own, demurely lowering her lashes and her arms to her side. I started to ask her something, but something about her body language told me the question wasn't necessary.

For me, the question was what to do with this person, now that I seemed to have her, and now that she seemed to want to be had. To go out of my way to think up risky or dangerous things to make her do—just to

assure myself she would actually *do* those things—seemed boringly obvious and lacking of imagination. Neither of us deserved to be put through something so grueling or flatly demeaning, just for the exercise. Besides, the idea didn't seem erotic in the least. What I wanted, and what I'm also sure Kerrilyn wanted, was a little erotic fun—a sensuously naughty game. She would become passive and submit to my whim, and I would get the chance to really 'be on top' for a change. Standing there looking over my girl, and considering the import of her request, I got a sudden inspiration.

"Tell me," I spoke to her, in as commanding a tone as I could muster, though I still felt too unsure and hesitant to really pull the whole thing off, "do you love me?"

She started to smile, but I caught it and my one raised eyebrow promptly stifled it. Realizing her 'error,' she then curtly, but politely answered, "Yes, I do." She may have held back her smile, but I could see by the continued, maddening sparkle in her eyes that she appreciated my question.

"Good," I nodded. "Just so you know—I love you, too." She closed her eyes momentarily, then opened them. An acknowledgment, I think. I then asked, "And you would do anything I ask? You would perform any task for me?"

There was the slightest of hesitations before she answered, "Yes." She almost smirked, a most unsubmitive response, indeed. But I believed her, so what the hell ...

"Then, get down on your knees." I pointed to the floor in front of me, and almost to my amazement, she complied instantly.

I took a step toward her, and stood in front of her, the growing bulge at my groin mere inches from her nose.

She was a good girl, and did her best to obey me. I considered actually going ahead with what surely seemed like the obvious, but it wasn't exactly what I had in mind. And then I thought, I have no idea what I have in mind. None at all. I had her there, on her knees in front of me, and I had no earthly idea what I wanted her to do. Except perhaps fellate me. Though she probably wouldn't have minded it, and though I would have no doubt enjoyed it, it simply seemed like the all too obvious thing, and it failed to excite me. Damn it! Here I was, slave kneeling submissively at my feet, and at a total loss as how to take advantage of the situation. It was an exceedingly frustrating turn of events, and so I simply stood there, looking down at the top of her head.

But Kerrilyn saved me from my novitiate state. "May I speak?" she asked, and I was immediately thankful she had. I nodded, stupidly, but

realized she was looking straight ahead—right at my crotch—and could not see my nod.

So I said, “Yes,” out loud.

She sighed, “I need your guidance, master. I’ve been a bad and wayward girl and I need some discipline and direction. Only you, master, can give me the strong guidance I need.”

The way she said ‘master’ seemed to crawl into my loins and grow there, warming and enlivening me. Her submissive, but sultry voice brought goose bumps to my scalp, and little by little I began to catch the mood. If I got all my ill-conceived, preconceived notions out of my head, this ‘game’ could turn out to be a lot of fun.

“What would you have me do?” I inquired of her. I had no idea how she might answer me, but I was literally itching with anticipation to find out.

“Spank me, master. Bad girls must always be spanked before they learn. I want you to turn my bare bottom red. Spank me and make me cry for your mercy.”

“What if I choose not to spank you?” I wasn’t sure if I could handle touching her in any but the most gentle, loving ways. To consider otherwise—well, was a dangerous thing. Very dangerous.

But, of course, my Kerrilyn would hear none of my fears or trepidations. I think she viewed the risk as all hers, that if she were willing to accept the consequences of turning me loose upon her, then whatever happened would ultimately be her responsibility. She’d endured lashes across her back inflicted by—whom? I thought I knew, but I acknowledged that maybe I really didn’t know—and I experienced a momentary flash, a brutish, ugly vision of a picture straight out of hell—that her scars were the result of some kind of kinky sexual game. A brutal, but voluntary beating. But it just didn’t seem reasonable. I couldn’t see how that could have possibly been true. But ...

Her voice interrupted my train of thought, “But master! You must!” She obviously hadn’t sensed my dilemma.

What I hoped couldn’t possibly be true, but I felt I had to ask. “You must tell me only the truth,” I ordered.

She hesitated, perhaps suspicious, but responded, “I will.”

“How did you get those scars on your back?” It was out almost before I realized what I was asking. This time her hesitation was much longer, and I thought she might balk at the question and tell me it was none of my business. I wasn’t too sure she would be right if she refused to answer, but that wasn’t what she said.

“I was living with a man before I met you.” Her tone was very

matter-of-fact, almost too reasonable, too clinical. “He made me do something for him that I didn’t want to do.” She exhaled sharply, steeling herself, “He made me *fuck* another man for money. I didn’t want to do it! I didn’t want to do something like that for nothing more than **fucking money!** But I did it, and he beat me with his belt because of it.”

I was completely and utterly shocked by this revelation. I had nothing in my experience to compare it to, and though I thought I knew how she’d gotten her scars, the forthrightness with which she informed me scared the living hell out of me. It was as if instantly I was transported to another planet, and found myself standing in front of a complete stranger. It was the story of someone I didn’t know. What kind of monster had I unleashed to prey upon our happy little game of dominance and submission?

I could think of nothing else to say but, “Kerrilyn, I’m sorry.” And with that, she was suddenly crying, and hugely.

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My therapist has asked me to think of someone I love. Marc Huffman, my ever-lovin’ man, comes to mind immediately, and I suggested I could write about him, but my therapist only said he wanted me to look outside my ‘heterosexual love relationship’ for other relationships I could classify as love.

Then, of course, Sheree Germaine comes to mind.

At first, I was suspicious of the quickness with which she accepted me. *No one* in my past had ever taken the ‘one look’ at me that she had, and then promptly decided I was worth knowing, and knowing *well*. Marc is such a dedicated, loyal soul, and I love him so painfully much, but even he took a relatively long time to come around to me. I don’t know if I know why he did, either, but regardless, I’m glad he did. Sheree, on the other hand, didn’t need any time at all to decide she wanted to be my friend. Sheree Germaine wanted to have a best friend who looked, talked, and acted *just like me*. And she wanted a good deal more than that, too. But after all this time and everything that’s happened, I still don’t know why.

It’s been awhile, now, but I remember the party Marc and I went to—I guess about a week after we met. Right after we arrived, I was introduced to Marc’s friends, and they were Tom and Sheree Germaine,

he said. Marc and Tom had some 'band business' to talk over, they said, and on that cue Sheree grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away.

"Come on, let's get away from those two idiots," she said, referring, of course, to our two men. She grinned, her small, pixie face all aglow with the first of the good party dope. "Hi there! I'm Sheree Germaine, wife and lover of Tom Germaine, Marc Huffman's best friend. How long have you and Marc known each other?"

"Not very long, I'm afraid."

"Doesn't matter, hon'." She continued to drag me by the arm, until we were well away from the boys. "Marc Huffman is one helluva sweet guy. A little socially backward, for sure, but he's just about the kindest, gentlest, and nicest representative of that particular species you're ever likely to meet."

"Well, I've only known him about a week," I confessed, "but he does seem like a pretty nice guy."

Sheree only smiled.

She stands just about five feet tall, and probably not even ninety pounds. She keeps her medium brown hair cut very short, and that and its natural curliness cause it to curl very cutely around her ears and across her forehead. Couple that with her bright blue eyes, triangular face, high, angular cheekbones and rosy-hued complexion, the description 'pixie' fits her perfectly. Beyond her elfin face, though, she's not built like the proverbial boy you'd normally associate with such pixie-ish types. She's slender, of course, but she's been given an all-round nice shape—hips not too narrow and boobs not too small. But that night at the party, and in the dress she was wearing, she still looked more than a few years younger than the twenty-five she was actually aged.

Sheree took a moment to look me over. I was dressed fairly nicely, myself, and I'd done my level best to cover up my swollen lip and bruised face, but as I scrutinized her scrutinizing me I got the distinct impression she saw right through my makeup job and embarrassed, hopeful smile. It was disconcerting, but I never felt ill at ease or threatened by her frank appraisal. It was an odd feeling, and I've never experienced anything like it, before or since, or anyone quite like her—before or since.

"How're you doing?" she asked, giving me a seriously concerned look. "It's Kerry, right?" Both questions came out before I could answer.

"Yes," I said, "Kerry MacDonald." I answered the second question first, since it was far simpler, and much less ambiguous—or committal. However, I saw by her studied expression that she sensed I'd avoided the first question, and also that she would ultimately not permit me to. "I'm fine," I said. I hoped it would suffice. But, alas no ...

"Uh-huh," she said, not buying my glibly framed answer, but she smiled anyway. It was not a pressure game she was playing. Not at all. She merely wanted to make sure I canned any ideas I might have had of bullshitting her. Well, after I saw her smile, and the piercing way she *looked* at me, I knew something, at least. I needed to elaborate, some.

"I'm much better." I hoped it was the right kind of answer. Of course, I wasn't too sure why it should *matter* so much.

"Good," she said. The pause that followed indicated she wanted me to go on. I wasn't sure I could.

"Sheree," I began to plead, though I'd only just met her, "I really can't talk about it right now."

And she shrugged, "OK. I understand how you feel." She gave my black eye a very close look, "He hit you pretty goddamn *hard*, didn't he?"

I panicked instantly, "Oh, no! Not Marc!" worrying she might be thinking that.

The frown and adamant shake of her head confirmed it wasn't Marc she was thinking of. "That *other* guy. He really beat the *shit* out of you, didn't he?" It wasn't quite a question.

And I wondered how she could be so sure of 'that other guy' since I hadn't said a word. For all she knew I might have bumped myself against an open door, or something. Then her apparent impertinence caused a flush of anger to come to my face. I could feel it, and it embarrassed me to think someone had hit upon the truth and gotten beneath my façade so easily. I had no choice but to refuse to answer her.

Sheree caught my angry look and stiff, sternly hunched shoulders. "Kerry!" she soothed, putting her hand on my arm, "Don't worry about it." She stopped, and looked around conspiratorially, as if she were going to tell me a super tiptop secret. "I know what you've been through. Believe me, *I know*."

I snorted, not believing her 'assurance'. "Has anyone ever smacked the living shit out of you?"

Her lips came together, forming a thin line, but then she relaxed them and spoke quietly, "Yes, as a matter of fact, someone *has*."

"Tom?" Well, it seemed like a reasonable question, considering the one she'd just asked me.

"No, thank God." She took no offense. "Tom's a teddy bear. He's my biggest, best big brother when it comes to things like that. He's never laid a hand on me, and I know he never would."

"That's wonderful." It came out as sarcasm, or maybe irony (and I know the difference, too). I was feeling better, but not so well I couldn't remember the slugs and the backhanded slaps I'd been so recently given.

"OK," she seemed to think I'd challenged her. "I'll tell you my story, but only if you promise to tell me yours."

"I'm not sure I can." My head shook, "Not right now, anyway."

"Fair enough, Kerry. But we have to have a deal, regardless."

I thought about it a few moments. I could promise anything, and it didn't necessarily mean I had to deliver. Then I thought, why do I even care about her story? *So what* she's had an experience with being slapped around. Big damn hairy deal! For me, it had been commonplace, so why should I care if this Sheree person has had the same thing happen? Why should *I* care? But those blue eyes were piercing right through me. I wanted to tell her I didn't care about her fucking story, but instead I said, "OK, it's a deal." I sighed, "*Someday*, I'll tell you."

So Sheree told her story:

"Right after I got out of high school I left home to go live with this guy I'd just started dating. He was in college at UGA, and living in Athens at the time. I met him at a concert early in the spring of my senior year of high school. He was a college junior, a real 'older' man, and since I'd been such a wallflower—a complete social dropout all through high school—when he asked me to move in with him, I couldn't refuse."

"I know *that* feeling," I interjected. She only shrugged.

"Hell, I hadn't even had sex with him yet when I packed up all my clothes and took the Pinto to his apartment on Lumpkin Street right near downtown Athens, not two blocks from the campus. I wasn't quite a virgin, but I might just have well been, for all the good my one little experience had done me.

"I'll bet you know how the story goes." She pointed her finger at me, "He was older, and wiser, and much more experienced than me, and for the first several months I was totally overwhelmed with the excitement and newness of the whole thing. Dave, was his name. Dave Mansfield. And wherever he is, I hope his dick is rotting off!" She sniffed.

"Anyway," she went on, "it didn't take very long for me to become 'experienced' with all the things college students like to do. We smoked dope—hell, we still do—and we drank tons of beer. And I also got introduced to Dave's idea of 'normal' sex."

"What was that?" I asked. I had to admit, her story sounded all but too familiar.

"You know, he could hardly get it up if he didn't first tie me to the bed face down and smack my ass raw with his hand. Can you believe it?"

I think she expected me to be incredulous, or shocked, or something. Unfortunately, I wasn't. "Well, actually," I ventured, "I can."

"And what's even more unbelievable is that I tolerated all his weird

sexual hang-ups. I let him smack my butt red and raw two or three times a week, and I thought I was getting *love* from this man. Shit, Kerry, I couldn't sit down half the time, and the rest of the time I was afraid to stay in one place long enough for him to get his hands on me. But of course, smacking me on the ass was just the beginning.

"Good ole Dave Mansfield probably began to get tired of me when it became obvious I didn't care too much for his spanking fetish. So he would abuse me in lots of other ways. He'd put me down in front of his friends, or slap me if I was sarcastic, or smart-mouthed back to him. He even hit me one time in public, right in front of a bunch of his friends! Bloodied my lip then, too." She touched her face briefly. "I see *you* know what that's like. Dave Mansfield was the first man I'd ever known intimately for any extended period of time, and though he hit me and slapped me, and though he liked to *tie me up and spank me*, I didn't have sense enough to get the hell away from him. For a whole year I stayed with the man, and as each day; each week; as each month went by his abuse got more and more wild, more and more dangerous. I knew it wasn't right, but at the same time I was so unsure of myself I couldn't distinguish between what was normal and what wasn't.

"I never went home to see my parents. I avoided them like the plague. I guess I was just too ashamed of how I looked and of what I'd become. You know, I've never been a very big girl, and I certainly wasn't *fat* then, but I *lost weight* while I lived in Athens, and I stopped dressing up and going places on my own. I did nothing but sit around the apartment all day and watch TV, and hide all my bumps and bruises from the rest of the world. Girl, I tell you I was completely isolated from everything sane and normal. I was a mess, and I was going downhill fast."

"What happened? How did you get out?" I was getting some awfully strong, bad vibes from her story, since so much of it seemed so familiar to me. I'd never talked to anyone who'd ever experienced anything like what I had, and though I heard what she said, at the time I didn't think there was anywhere I could go or anyone I could talk to about my experiences. I could have talked to Sheree—I *should* have talked to Sheree that night, right then—but it was all too fresh and confusing. But I'd asked her a question.

She answered, "I met my boy Tom." She raised her eyebrows, but I didn't see the point she was trying to make. So she elaborated, "If you're not out yet, Kerry, get out *now*. Get out. I can help you if you need someone."

Several seconds went by before I realized that last statement had been directed toward me. "But," I said, "I'm out, Sheree. Trust me, I'm out."

And she smiled, and most brightly, too. "That's great!" She paused while she accepted a joint from another partygoer who saw us and thought well enough of us to help us get high. She toked, then passed the joint to me. Gratefully, I accepted it. As I toked and held it, my glass of scotch, cradled almost forgotten in my hand, finally made its way to my lips. I exhaled and downed the scotch in almost one single gulp.

"I drank a lot, too, then," she commiserated, noticing the empty glass. "It's probably the only sane reaction to such a fucked-up situation. I used to get so totally plastered I couldn't feel *anything* by the time Dave would get around to tying me up." She sighed, "Kerry, girl, don't *ever* let someone do that to you. Don't *ever* let them hit you." She gave my arm a shake, to emphasize her point. "On this, you got my promise. If anyone ever touches you again, you give me a call and we'll take care of the situation. Call me, and me and my boy Tom will take care of any son-of-a-bitching, scum-sucking toad that thinks he can hit a woman and get away with it." She barked a laugh. "He *won't* get away with it!"

"It's not going to happen to me. Ever again." I realized I had all but admitted a connection between her experiences and mine. But it was no matter; she knew it already. It was plain on my face. Too plain.

"Jesus!" she shook her head, "I've completely bared my innermost soul to you, and all you've done is smoke my dope! Let's get off this morbid subject and have a little fun. What do you say?"

"I say that's the best idea I've heard tonight." I glanced over my shoulder at 'the boys,' who seemed lost in serious conversation. "What about them?" I referred to our two men.

"We'll rescue them from themselves in a few minutes. But first, I want you to meet a few of my friends." And with that, the party began.

Much later I told Sheree some of the details of where I'd been and how I'd gotten out, and she seemed very glad to know I was living with Marc, and was definitely not going back to wherever, or whatever I'd been doing before.

As the weeks went by we talked on the phone a lot. Sometimes she'd call me during the day while I sat around Marc's apartment, and we would talk about things. Nothing serious, usually—just things. Girl things. But she never, though, pressed me to tell her everything about Danny Golden, and I noticed it, and was grateful for it.

My story with Danny was much, much too painful. Too new, and too painful. But with Sheree, I found I could cut the pain just by knowing someone else had survived something like what I'd been through. Maybe she hadn't done the prostitution thing, or anything, but that didn't matter.

No trick had ever hit me or demeaned me the way Danny had. There's no honor in being a whore, and most of the time they won't even kiss you, but there's so much less 'honor' in being a total doormat.

For Sheree to forgive me for giving her husband something he shouldn't have accepted, is the true measure of how much love she held in her heart for me. That she also forgave Tom for the same thing—well, either she's some kind of saint, or she's just plain stupid. Did I think she was stupid for forgiving me? I sincerely hope not. But that's too indefinite an answer, though. I *don't* think she was stupid to forgive me. I deserved to be forgiven.

OK, I've said it. I deserve to be forgiven.

People keep telling me you have to love yourself before you can truly love others, but I still don't know what they mean. I love Marc, I love Sheree, I love Tom. I even love Mel Howe. I don't know ... do I love myself? Have I forgiven myself? I don't know, but God knows, I'm trying.

• • •

Joan's decision to break me wasn't entirely unexpected, though it was still a shock when I finally realized we were no longer a couple. Just like that, it was over. When we fought about going on vacation, I don't know if I had really wanted her to go to the beach with me, or if I was somehow secretly wishing she'd just give me the big kiss-off. I was stuck on the girl, supremely hung up on the smoky, dark, mysterious beauty she held for me. She was, when we were alone, as close to uninhibited as I could imagine, and though I tried to downplay the importance of the very regular sex I'd been getting, the feeling didn't last.

We (the boys: Tom, Robbie, Larry, Rick and me, and the two girls: Sandy and Dixie) went to Panama City and spent the week in the condo near the beach. I ended up sleeping in the third bedroom alone. Sandy and Tom took the 'master' bedroom, and Robbie and Dixie took the second bedroom. I guess the fact I paid all that money qualified me for a bed of my own, while Larry and Rick commandeered the couch and love seat in the living room. Everyone was quite comfortable, though I seriously resented the noises I heard coming from the next room over as I lay there, cold, lonely, and alone in my bed. That Sandy person was noisy. Obscenely noisy.

Dixie LaFollette, Robbie's plain-looking, skinny little girlfriend, was very shy. I could no more have imagined her panting and calling out

'pump me harder, stud! harder! harder!' than I could have imagined her sunbathing nude at the beach. I know they, Robbie and Dixie, heard Sandy's impassioned moans and cries at night. How could they have *not* heard? The girl was obviously trying to set a record for the most and loudest noises made during sex. She apparently had no shame—and no modesty, either. That, or she just didn't give a shit who heard her, or what those unintentional listeners heard. In retrospect, I think it was some of both.

Sandy Beauchamp was a pretty girl. Yes, maybe even more than simply pretty, but at the least, she was easy to look at. She had long, shining blond hair, large, very bright blue eyes and a dazzling, pearly white smile. She was a master of makeup and of dressing stylishly and femininely, and her affectation of style didn't stop when she went to the beach.

Her bathing suits, of which she took *six*, were varied and expensive, and all but one were as small and skimpy as the law and typical Floridian decency would allow. She was just a little more than 'well endowed,' and when she 'strolled,' she carried her ass with all the authority and abandon of the true 'frigid slut' of Joan's estimation. Nineteen-seventy-five was a particularly good year for bikinis, and Sandy's were among the best. I am ashamed of it, but I found myself fantasizing about her more than once.

Poor Dixie. Next to Sandy, you just couldn't see her. She simply melted into the background, which was where she probably felt most comfortable, anyway. I'm sure she noticed Ms. Beauchamp and all her almost-there bikinis, and I'm also quite sure she heard all the hollerin' (pig callin', Kerrilyn calls it) going on next door while the rest of us tried to sleep.

I asked Tom about turning down his girlfriend's volume level. He only grinned, the asshole! He wouldn't consider saying or doing anything to quiet Sandy, and that definitely increased *my* resentment of the whole iniquitous arrangement. I wanted someone to fuck, and I just as soon would have Joan back as anyone.

There's more to tell of Panama City, but some other time, as it was Joan who held my attention when we returned to Atlanta at the end of the week.

I called her as soon as I got home. She answered the phone, since she was the only one home there, too. "Hi," I said, and I tried to sound as though nothing had happened.

"Oh, it's you, Marc," she replied. She sounded OK. A bit cool, perhaps, but apparently willing to talk to me. "How was your little

vacation in Panama City? Did you have a good time at the beach?"

"It was fine."

She wasn't convinced. "'Fine'? Just 'fine'?"

"I missed you. I really wish you could have gone with us." That was the truth, in sum. "You would've had a good time, you know."

She ignored my belated plea, though, "I'm sorry you missed me." That was all she said.

I forged ahead. I was hoping we could get back together, even if only for the night. I was horny, and I thought Joan might be feeling similarly inclined. I asked, "Can I come over?"

"Why do you want to come over? We're no longer dating, and I'm not sure it would be advisable under the circumstances."

"What does that mean?" It sounded like bullshit to me.

"I'll tell you." She sounded too calm, too even, too rational. I suspected something. "I was serious when I said I didn't want you telling me what to do. I have to have my own rights, and make my own decisions. You made an ultimatum, and I had little choice but to decide what's best for me."

"And what's best for you, Joan?"

She sighed, "I think maybe we were deluding ourselves into thinking our relationship was working out. While you were gone I did a lot of thinking." She paused, then continued, "We have precious little in common. Outside of sex, of course, there are so few things we both like, and are both interested in. I think you would prefer a girl with a little less 'independent mindedness,' and I believe I would prefer a gentleman with a proper understanding of what's best for me."

"Joan, you're just looking for some spineless idiot who'd never disagree with you. No one would put up with that."

She laughed, but it was an icy, ironic sound. "Oh! You're wrong, Marc Huffman! I can tell you with certainty you're *not* the only boy in the world. There are *men* out there who would appreciate a woman of my intelligence and common sense."

I was offended. "I'm not a boy, Joan. If you can call yourself a woman, then I don't think you can call me just a 'boy'." Then I thought about her comment about 'men out there'. "Are you trying to tell me you've already found someone else—in just the past week?"

"Don't be absurd, Marc," she snorted. "I'm much more selective than you're suggesting. I would not be so hasty as to begin a new relationship so closely on the rebound from such an unsuccessful one."

"Unsuccessful? You think we were *unsuccessful*?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Just because you couldn't be bothered to go somewhere I wanted to go, you think the whole thing was for shit." I was angry at her coolness, her damned inscrutability over the whole matter of our 'relationship'. "Goddamn it! I love you. I can't believe you could just throw me away like I didn't even matter."

"I never meant to imply you didn't matter." She seemed to draw back from her condemnation, if only a little. "You matter; you do. Some day you will probably make some girl a good husband. In the meantime ..." she trailed off, not finishing her thought, at least not verbally.

"In the meantime—what? Are you still saying we're broken up, and that there's no hope of us ever getting back together?"

"Yes. I truly don't see it happening."

She had sounded final, but, "I still want to see you," I pressed.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"**Fuck** what you think!" I was incensed at being turned away.

"That's my point, exactly. You want someone to do just as you want, and you say 'fuck it' to all ideas to the contrary." For Joan to say something like 'fuck' meant she was pretty hot, herself. But all the time, she kept that same, even, maddeningly calm tone of voice.

"You're making me mad, Joan."

"So I can tell." She seemed almost amused.

"I don't want to be mad. I want to—"

"—Get back together with me?" She leapt upon my *faux pas*.

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't." I tried to think. "We need to talk about it. I don't think it's a good idea for us to just split up with no more discussion. If you'll let me come over, we can talk about it."

"But we're talking, now," she drawled.

"*Come on*, Joan." I was getting desperate, "You can't just shut me out like this. You have to let me come over, so we can talk." I waited, but nothing came over the phone back to me. "Please?"

I think, and I'm still not sure why, but that 'please' did it.

There was a pause in the conversation, then, and we both just listened to telephone line noises for a few minutes. I hoped she would let me come over, even if it still meant we had broken up for good. I was very, very horny, and I was irrationally driven to do something about it. All I needed was permission to come over. The rest, I was sure, would follow. I was very, very sure.

Joan finally sighed, and I just knew it meant she was reconsidering. And I was right, at least partly. "All right, Marc," she said. "I'm tired of arguing with you. I'm not very busy tonight, anyway, and I'm also not so

angry with you that I wouldn't like you to come visit with me." What was this? Was the Ice Princess thawing? I only dared hope. She resumed, "But I'm very serious that I don't want you getting the idea we're going to go back together. You can't change my mind on that point."

But I didn't believe her. I just knew if she let me see her we would be dating again; screwing again. Joan may say she was determined and definite, but when we would get 'close' later, she would surely melt. In my mind, despite all the angry words, and despite her apparent determination to end our relationship, nothing had happened between us that couldn't be fixed.

Joan let me in, and we went upstairs to her bedroom. She was casually dressed, wearing an ugly blue and brown plaid flannel shirt belonging to her brother, and a pair of old, faded, loose-fitting jeans. As I followed her up the stairs, I couldn't help but admire the roundness and lithe, catlike movements of her rear end. I had the sudden urge to pat her behind as we ascended, but I was reminded of our estrangement, and I was then embarrassed at my thoughts. My affectionate touching had been a habit, and I suddenly realized it may be ending. The thought of my loss made me incredibly sad, and I didn't know why.

Her mood was hard to read. She flopped on the bed and rolled over onto her back to look up at me. It seemed almost intimately friendly—her body language suggested it strongly—but something inside was telling me I should know better. Should I know better?

She patted the bed next to her. I was confused, and I think she was trying to confuse me, as well. I just folded my arms and stared at her.

"What's the matter, Marc?" she seemed to be smirking, but maybe it was only my imagination. It seemed she'd gone from 'I don't want to see you' to 'I want to make love to you'. No wonder I was confused. She was manipulating me again, and it was one of the things I hated most about her.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'what am I doing?'" Joan shook her head to flip the hair out of her eyes, "I told you on the telephone I didn't mind visiting with you. What were you expecting?"

"Not this."

She sat up. "You know, Marc—"

"—I know what?"

"You know, don't you, what you are giving up?"

"What do you mean? What am I giving up? Is this your attempt at making me suffer? I thought we were doing fine. All you had to do was

get off your high-horse and go with me to the beach." I paced, back and forth. "Was that such a lot to ask?"

She was unruffled. "You could have told me of your plans ahead of time. As hard as that is for you to understand, it might have made a difference. I don't think it was appropriate for plans to be made that I wasn't a party to."

"I don't see what the big deal was."

"The 'big deal,' as you put it, was that you gave me an ultimatum. You surely didn't expect me to cave in because of it, did you?"

"Damn it, Joan, I was mad." I continued to pace, "I didn't mean it as an ultimatum. Do you have to do this just to make me suffer?"

She looked away. "Your suffering is all in your mind."

"Where else would it be, smart-ass?"

She shrugged, her imperiousness damnable. "I let you come over, Marc, because, quite honestly, I wanted to see you." She smiled, "I didn't really want to have a *conversation*, if you know what I mean." I knew what she meant. For Joan, wanting to 'see me' was her euphemism for wanting sex. Her wanting to 'visit with me' meant nothing special, but now the thing with the bed made more sense. She patted it again.

As I had hung up the phone earlier, I remembered thinking that if I could just get her in the clinch, my 'manly charms' would change her mind about breaking up. She had needs, most definitely, and I knew I was pretty good at fulfilling them. Why she would want anyone else, I couldn't imagine. Now Joan was sitting on her bed and inviting me to lay down with her for the express purpose of *fucking*, and though it had ostensibly been my goal all along, now I didn't want it. I didn't want it because Joan was controlling it. She'd turned the tables on me, neatly switched tactics so as to remove any advantage I might have thought I held over her. If she asked me outright to screw her, then I couldn't use it as a weapon against her. The manipulative bitch!

I hadn't planned to hurt her by being devious about my intentions, I merely wanted to enforce the value placed upon giving up both me, and my love-making. I had reasoned that if she found anything desirable about our loving, then she should rationally reconsider her stand on ending our relationship. I think I was beginning to hate her for the way she treated me, but I loved her too much to want out. I guess she called my bluff, and I caved in.

I remained rooted to the spot. No way was I going to get on the bed with her. Not under the conditions she imposed. Inside I was seething at being outmaneuvered, and despite my urge, and urgent need to fuck this woman, I couldn't break my pride down enough to do it. Sex is no fun if

you can't feel like both of you are equal participants. In the past, I never minded it when she would want sex, because it was something I also wanted. Well, this time, too, I *did* want it, but not on her terms, only. I wanted it on my terms. This time it had to be *my terms*, or no terms at all.

I watched, scowling, as Joan began to unbutton her shirt. This most unusual person, who barely spoke to others in public; who kept her eyes down and demeanor totally closed to nearly everyone; who had the nickname of the *Ice Princess*, no less; this person was undressing in front of me.

All the buttons were slowly undone, and she pulled the shirt from her shoulders. Underneath she had no bra on. Why was I not surprised? What was next? Was she going to slip out of her jeans and be completely naked? Was this whole thing planned, or what? At the time, I didn't understand it, and I'm not sure I understand it, now.

Yes, next she did undo her jeans and scoot them off her hips. Well, she did have on underpants, so my *premeditation* theory was losing some of its steam. Maybe she had been braless earlier, and my shock at seeing her bare breasts was only due to some misconceived idea about her willingness to see me. The jeans were removed, and I expected her to slip out of her panties, next. Well, no.

She folded her legs under her, indian-style, and placed her hands, palms down, under her thighs. Her expression was difficult to read, but mostly I saw only vague amusement, and maybe contempt. Certainly not love, or respect, or admiration. None of those things; those things I might have wanted to see.

Then I saw it was really over between us.

"Are you going to come join me, here, or not?" she drawled, but each word was so carefully enunciated, far beyond any other mortals' capabilities. I said nothing. "Come on, *sweetheart*," she crooned, and was the inflection on the term of endearment imagined, or was it real? "I'd really like to see you."

I had to have control back. I felt emasculated, humiliated, and taken to the point of murderous rage at the cheapness and tawdriness she implied in our relationship. It seemed as though all she had ever wanted from me was the length of my *dick*, or the slipperiness of my tongue between her thighs. Mother-fucking bitch! I loved her—she'd made me love her! I thought I'd wanted her, and needed her—that she filled an emotional need within me. That she wasn't 'fun' on a date, hadn't mattered. I felt I had been ready for a mature, loving, understanding relationship with a woman. My teenage 'lecherousness' in September had evaporated, to be replaced by a 'gee whiz' admiration and infatuation

with the darkly elegant Joan Taliaferro. I'd thought I loved her, and I needed her, and we would always be together. But it was over, and I felt betrayed. I was a man, I thought, and the man was supposed to control the relationship. Lord knows, my *father* controlled everything and everyone he'd ever come into contact with. He controlled the fucking life out of Suzanne, and I guess he had pretty well controlled me. I was over being controlled—being manipulated—by anyone, male *or* female. And if Joan wouldn't give me control, then I had to take it from her.

I jumped on the bed and knocked her over, pinning her arms under me. It was a violent move, and she was shocked by it. She didn't struggle, much, but her contempt and condescension were completely gone. Good, I thought. I positioned myself over her, placing most of my weight on my arms, my hands gripped on her arms just below the shoulder. She could have kicked me in the balls, if she had been so inclined, since my knees were on either side of her hips. Her legs were unimpeded, but she did nothing at all to get me off her. There was only a silent few moments while she lay there, weakly resisting the weight upon her arms, which must have hurt, and during which I made an attempt to catch my breath.

Joan's hair was in her eyes, and since she couldn't pull it back with her hands, she tried to blow it out of the way with her lips. She was only partly successful, but it made it seem to me she wasn't intimidated enough. What was it going to take to get her attention? I moved my knees and laid my shins across her thighs, placing more weight there, and trying to pin her legs down. I think I outweighed Joan by fifty or so pounds, and I know I was twice as strong and I know I was hurting her, but she only put up the very weakest of struggles.

Oh, God! Then I remembered she held a black belt. What then, was she doing? She should have been easily able to throw me off and do incredible bodily damage to me without giving it a second thought. I'd seen a demonstration, and I sincerely believed she could do it. But, she didn't.

Instead, she most calmly said, "Will you please get off me?"

"No," I panted. I don't know if it was from the exertion, or from my fear of her reprisal, when or if it would come.

"Come on, Marc," she made a half-attempt to smile, "this has been 'fun,' but I'm ready to quit, now."

"This is *not* fucking fun, Joan."

"Then, what is it?" She had developed an edge to her voice, a dangerous sound, a threatening timbre I'd never heard before. Not, at least, directed toward me.

"For once," I continued to pant, real fear building, "you're going to

do something *I* want you to do. I swear, you aren't going to get away with it, this time."

Joan started to laugh, but I ground my fingers mercilessly into her biceps, and dug my shins more viciously into her thighs. She was hurt, finally, and cried out: "**Ouch! Shit!** That hurts!" Then Joan wrenched herself very quickly, and I found my grip suddenly loosened. Her arm came up across my chest, and in a split second I was on my side, and she was up, kneeling over me. But she made no further moves against me. "I think the fun is over," she said, calmly enough, but still she seemed to be shaking. "I don't want to hurt you, but you were hurting *me!* I will not fight you, but I *will* defend myself. Don't," she paused, panting, and gulped, "*don't* try something like that, again." She was finally agitated—scared—it seemed. She, scared? Joan scared of me?

But, I was shaking, too. What had I been trying to do? I'd never touched anyone—*no one*, ever—before, and the thought of it—the horror of it—sobered me and brought me back to reality. Slowly, I came to my knees. We looked at each other, and I tried to read her thoughts. What must she be thinking of me? If she hated me before, after hitting her and climbing on top of her, what would she be thinking of me, now? With her level glare on me, I could do nothing but kneel there breathing heavily, furiously angry—and not just at Joan, but at everyone—and hope she didn't decide to let loose and kill me.

"What were you trying to do to me?" she asked, but her tone of voice told me the question was mainly rhetorical. I think she thought she knew.

"I don't know," was all I said.

Her eyes narrowed, anger still building. "Let *me* tell you." She rubbed her arms, and grimaced with pain. She shook it off. "If I had let you continue," she narrowed her eyes even more, fury clouding them, "you would have tried to rape me."

"No!" I objected. "I just wanted you to stop with all your—" I fished for the right words—"condescending attitude and your ... bloody ... fucking ... contempt." I had to gulp, too. "I want you to take me seriously."

She allowed her eyes to open, marginally. "I take you seriously. When you jumped on me, just then, I took you *very* seriously. Rape is serious, indeed."

"I was not trying to rape you! ..." I nearly choked "... I love you!" I tried to make her believe me. In truth, I don't know what I was trying to do, just that all the anger and frustration had both come together in me at the same time, and I had come dangerously close to losing control. "I didn't want to hurt you. Please believe me, I would never hurt you."

"It's too late for that." She started to slide toward the edge of the bed. "Because you did hurt me." She came to her feet, still facing me, head shaking. "I think the fun is over. I think you should get the hell out."

"Please, Joan," I begged, holding out my hands. Then she hit me.

Joan used all her strength, all her training, and all her skills at the art of hand-to-hand combat to spin suddenly and lash out with the edge of her foot, catching me full and hard on the side of the head. I wouldn't have thought she could reach me there, or kick that high, but I was wrong. Very, very wrong.

I don't think she knocked me out, quite. But she did knock me off the bed, and I hit the floor flat on my back, barely keeping my wits about me enough to keep the back of my head from smashing against the hardwood of her bedroom floor. It took some time to clear my vision, to see what truck had hit me, but eventually I struggled weakly to get up.

"Stay there," she ordered. "Don't even *move*. If you do, I swear I may kill you." And I believed she would, too.

"Please Joan," I moaned, "I'm sorry." I allowed myself to lie back, still dazed, still reeling from the blow that had nearly broken my jaw. "I'm sorry," I panted.

She circled me, fists balled, wary, but hopefully losing steam. "Don't make me hit you again, you piece of scum." She reached onto the bed and retrieved her shirt. I stayed where I was, and dizzily watched while she pulled it on and buttoned it. Was she shaking? Was she really going to hit me again, if I moved?

"Joan, please," I pleaded. "Don't hit me again. I won't hurt you. Don't hit me again. I won't hurt you. Please," I shook my head, trying to clear the spinning, the buzzing in my ears, "I won't hurt you."

"What did you think you were trying to do?"

I thought she had asked that question, already. And I thought I had already given her the best answer I could, so I had nothing to add. I just lay there on the floor and tried to regain full consciousness.

Joan finished buttoning her shirt, and pulled on her jeans. Then she came over and leaned down to look very closely at me. I flinched. She smiled. The bitch! "Oh," she grinned, "I'm not going to hurt you any further, but if I ever see you again," she stood up, still smiling, "I swear to God I'll kill you." Then, Joan left.

As she disappeared through the door, I heard her say, "Get out." I heard her feet on the stairs, then from the bottom she screamed, "**Get out! Get out! GET OUT!!!**"

Chapter 18

The night I told Sheree I had decided to change my name from Kerry to Kerrilyn, she greeted the announcement with little more than raised eyebrows and a comment on my new glasses. She had come to our regular Tuesday night rehearsal, and since Marc and I happened to have gotten there late, we had no time to talk before the band got started.

For me, rehearsal seemed to drag on and on, and I was simply counting the minutes until we could be out of there. After an hour of hard playing, we took a break, and though it departed from my usual habit, I didn't go outside for a smoke. Mel and Dancer were outside having a cigarette, Tom was off embroiled in something or other, and Marc was in the control room, drinking a Coke. Apparently not having anything else to do, particularly, Sheree came over to talk to me.

"What's wrong, Kerry?" she asked me as I sat on my stool, hand on microphone, head down, lost in thought.

I looked up, startled to be interrupted from my deep concentration, and pushed my glasses further up on my nose. I hated the way they always slid down, but it was a familiar irritation, though experienced so long ago I'd almost forgotten it. "Hey," I tried to smile. I couldn't place the reason I felt so pensive and withdrawn. "Nothing's wrong," I said, "I was just thinking."

She dropped her inquiry, with, "I like your glasses."

"They're OK, but I'd just as soon do without them."

"I think they make you look *much* cuter," she said, grinning, "and more intelligent, too."

"Raise my IQ twenty points—just like that? Hmmm?"

"Something like that."

Nothing was said for some moments, while we both looked at each other. I really liked Sheree, and whenever we were together I felt relaxed and capable of just being myself. But I'd hurt her tremendously, and I was

very aware of the wounds she carried, and all so recently healing. That she could look at me *at all* without hating me was almost the most amazing act of love and forgiveness I'd ever experienced.

"Kerry—" she started to say, but I cut her off.

"—Oh!" I stopped her, "I forgot to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Well, I decided to change my name. It's Kerrilyn, now."

"Really?" She raised her eyebrows. "That's fine with me, but ... why change your name? I thought Kerry was a very pretty name. Simple, and very easy to say."

"My whole name is really Kerry Lynn. I just decided to put them together." I shrugged, uncertain of my logic, or if there was even any logic to it. "It's *not* Carolyn, with a 'C,' or anything. Just Kerrilyn. With a 'K'."

"Fine. No problem—Kerrilyn." She punched me in the shoulder, something I was beginning to learn was how she dealt with emotions she couldn't put into words. I'd always thought it was a 'guy' thing, but with this *girl*, it was a show of close affection. "Is this change significant, or are you just on a whim? Does this mean you'll be changing your name a lot, or can I have stationary printed?"

"Print your fucking stationary, Sheree!" I laughed, "I won't trouble you to learn any new names. For a while."

"Great!" she punched me again, then lowered her voice to a whisper, "How shall it read? Kerrilyn Huffman? Or are you still MacDonald?"

"Hmmm ..." I looked over my shoulder at the guy just mentioned, albeit indirectly. I whispered back, "I don't know, girl. What do you think?" I could hardly believe my ears! What was I saying? Was I discussing marriage? What had *possessed* her even to mention it, indirectly or otherwise? Furthermore, did I hear myself actually considering it as a real possibility? Questions, questions, questions ... I found I was excited, and it had come on as the subject of marriage had come up. Lord knows, I loved Marc Huffman more than anyone, but was it the kind of love that could ultimately lead to a long, and lasting relationship? So, I asked Sheree Germaine, qualified as a wife and long-term lover, "How do you think Marc feels about it?"

"He'd love it."

I retorted, sarcastically, "No shit."

"Well," she pulled over a vacant stool next to mine, and hoisted herself up onto it. Her legs were so short they barely reached the rungs. "You're the first girl he's been involved with in a very long time, so all this planning and scheming is probably premature, but ... I'd say he thinks of little else but one redheaded little slut-vixen called Kerry—oops!"

Kerrilyn—MacDonald.”

I took no offense that she called me a slut. In the way she said it, she was only teasing me, and stating the facts as we both knew them. I appreciated that she could lay it on the line. I almost liked being the slut-vixen. The vixen, especially. The slut? Well, that part is the huge wart on my ass. You don't like it, but there it is anyway. I guess if you decide to take the rest of the package, you gotta take the warts, too.

“So you think Marc Huffman is in love with me?” I *knew* he was, but I wanted some independent confirmation, anyway.

“Most definitely, Vix’.”

“Vicks?” I frowned, “What the hell is that? Some kind of smelly old cold medicine?”

“No, dummy,” Sheree punched me again. I think we must be falling in love with each other, or something. “Vix’. Short for Vixen.”

“Is Kerrilyn too many syllables for you to handle?”

“Yeah, smartass. 'Bout two.”

“Fine.” I threw up my hands, and unintentionally caught the attention of a wandering Marc. He had returned to the studio, and at my wild, expressive gesture, idly asked what was going on. I told him to go mind his own fucking business. He took it in the gentle, sincere, and loving manner it was intended. Then Sheree and I were left alone, again. God, her presence felt so *odd*, suddenly, but though I'd been friends with other girls from time to time, and though some of them had been bi or lesbian, and perhaps attracted to me, I didn't get that same sense from Sheree. Maybe we were sisters under the skin, I don't know. The way she looked at me seemed to call out for us to get closer, somehow, but I had a difficult time understanding what that might mean.

No, it didn't seem like a sexual thing. I have, and am capable of loving another woman that way, but it isn't a natural inclination for me. I'm not gay. I don't have any hang-ups about it; I'm just *not*. As we sat there, staring at each other like two love-starved puppies, I considered the outside possibility that she might be coming on to me, but it was only the very most of outside possibilities. I figured her for plain, straightforward heterosexual, just like me, and though she was making such *eyes* at me, I had to conclude it wasn't because of any sexual attraction or inclination, specifically.

I wasn't embarrassed, but I wasn't far from it, either. The silence between us had become fairly lengthy, and if one of us didn't break the eye-contact stalemate, then I *would* be red-faced.

“What's going on here?” I croaked, my voice cracking. I hoped she'd know what I was asking. She did, I think, but didn't answer my question.

Instead, she said, "We need to talk some more."

I thought she wanted to discuss 'the indiscretion,' as it was euphemistically being referred to by those who knew. I was afraid that that was it.

"Sheree," I started, "I'm very, very sorry that it ever happened. Believe me—"

"—*Not that.*" Her distaste of the idea was evident. She shook her head emphatically, frowning.

"Then what are you talking about?"

"I think you know what. We just need to talk about some things." And that was all she would say about it.

Rehearsal started up again in a few minutes, and for the rest of the evening I was kept pretty busy. As rehearsal concluded, Sheree invited us—Marc and me—up to the lake, and though Marc seemed apprehensive about it, I got him to agree. Tom, it seems, held the same reluctance Marc did. But once I put two-and-two together, though, their reticence made some sense. They'd had a big fight—a *huge* fight—and Sheree wanted to get them back on buddy-buddy terms. They needed to clear the air between them, and on principle I was all for it.

Well, we needn't have worried. Once we'd all gotten to the house, the boys became boys again after they'd had a couple of beers, and Sheree and I found ourselves essentially ignored while Marc and Tom regaled each other with extremely off-color (make that downright obscene!) jokes. Of course here I am, the slut-queen of Atlanta ('Vix' to my best friends) passing judgment on someone else's dirty jokes. Shit, I'm my own worst dirty joke.

Sheree and I took a bottle of wine, and though it was very late and pretty chilly, we went out back and sat on the edge of the deck, facing the lake. The middle railing was just high enough for us to poke our arms through as our feet dangled down into the dark, fifteen feet below. I pulled the collar of my jacket up around my ears to keep them from freezing, and gratefully accepted the open bottle she proffered. I'm a pro, so it took no particular effort (or talent) to upend the bottle and take a long, peremptory pull on the wonderful, sweet, red nectar contained therein. Satisfied for the moment, I handed the wine back to Sheree. So far, neither of us had spoken, much.

Well, I wanted to get it over with. I exhaled, tiredly, "You said you wanted to talk?" I wasn't really sure I wanted to broach any sensitive subjects, especially in light of all the long, puppy dog looks she'd been giving me. Fear. That's the operative word, here. Fear of intimacy.

"I did. And I do," she nodded, between sips from the wine bottle, "but I want to get some of this wine, first."

I agreed, "My sentiments, exactly, Ms. Germaine."

Then, there was a long pause. "Kerrilyn," she started, "I liked you the moment I first laid eyes on you, but since then you've proved to be a very difficult person to be friends with. And it isn't just what you did to my husband, either." She barked a laugh, but not because she thought anything was funny. "Though, that's not insignificant." She took a drink, a large one.

I wasn't sure what to say, but I accepted the bottle when she handed it to me. I took a drink, and said to no one in particular, "That was without a doubt the stupidest thing I've ever done. I remember it—I mean, I did it—but it almost seems like someone else was there ..."

She thought a few moments about what I'd said. "I know. Who was that person?" She was mostly a voice in the dark, only her outline showing.

I sighed, "It was me. An *old* me. Someone who didn't have any control over herself, and who didn't know the difference between what she wants and what she can't have."

"I hate that person," she said, extending a hand to take the wine bottle.

"But Sheree, that was *me!*"

I think she shrugged, but I wasn't sure. Then she sighed, too, "Yeah, it was you, I guess."

I couldn't think of anything to say, to that. She took a drink of wine, then handed it back to me. I followed suit with a long, long draught. But then, I did think of something. "Why are we here?"

She snickered, oddly, the wine obviously taking effect. "Did you mean that metaphysically, or what?"

"Metaphysically?" I wasn't sure what the word meant.

"Yeah, metaphysically. Like in, 'what's the meaning of our existence'."

"No! I meant, why are Marc and me up here with y'all, tonight?"

"Oh, you mean, like why don't I hate your guts and want to see you die a horrible, agonizing death for sucking my husband's dick while I was out of town? Is *that* what you want to know?"

I felt pretty small, but her tone of voice wasn't terribly angry. "Yeah. That's about it."

"That's a goddamned good question," I think she nodded, "But I'll tell you the answer, anyway." However, there was no answer immediately forthcoming. Instead, she asked, "Where's the fucking

bottle?" I handed it to her; she drank. Then answered my question. "It's because I prefer to believe it never happened."

"What do you mean? We both admitted it!" Voice then small, "I mean, Tom and me."

"I know."

"But Sheree, that doesn't make any sense."

"And nor does the reality, either. So we're even. I can hardly conceive of Tom doing something to ruin our relationship, like that. And I can't conceive at all that you would maliciously try to take him away from me—I just don't believe it. Therefore, it was a total fluke. Not meant to happen at all. So, as a consequence, I just look at it as if it *hadn't* happened at all."

I took the bottle, again. "I'm confused."

"Good," she said, "'cause so am I."

"What are you going to do if Tom ever does do something like that, again?"

"With you?"

I handed the bottle back, shaking my head. "No. That won't happen. Can't happen. I mean, with someone else."

"Well, for the time bein', I'm not lettin' the boy outta my sight. But, of course, that can't last forever. Sooner or later I'm gonna have to trust him." She thought a moment, then continued, "If he can't be trusted, well ... then, I guess I'm outta here."

"Sheree, you've got my promise I'll never do anything like that again."

"**You better not!** You're my best friend."

"That's what I don't understand, Sheree. Why?"

"Everyone needs someone, and I need you." She executed a dramatic pause, for effect—a caesura. "But tell me, who do you need?"

And I thought, "I used to think I didn't need anyone. But it turns out I was wrong. Then, I used to think no one needed me. But I guess ... I guess I was wrong about that, too. Now, I don't know what to think—is what I think. I'm completely confused." And I sat there in my confusion for some moments, still thinking. Then finally, "But why do you need me?"

"I don't know. I just *do*. We're a lot alike, more than you think."

"But you don't know anything about me."

She snorted, "Well, it's not for lack of trying! There's so much going on inside you; so many conflicts; so much anger and hurt. It gets in the way every time I try to be friends with you. I sometimes feel that if I'm a good enough friend, you'll open up to me. Sometimes I wish you could tell me all the things from your past that haunt you so much." She

stopped, and I looked at her, but she lowered her head in the gloomy dark. She wouldn't look at me. "I want to help you, you know. I've been where you've been, and if I'd have had anyone I could've talked to, I know it would've helped me a lot. A lot." Then she looked at me.

"Kerrilyn, you *need* someone to talk to. Trust me, on this. If you don't get it out, it'll drive you completely crazy. Maybe Marc can't help you, but I can."

Then I spoke, "Sheree, you've been a good friend to me—the best—but you have no idea what my life has been like."

"You're wrong! I know a *lot* more than you're giving me credit for."

I didn't want to debate the subject with her. Did she lose her family and then her dignity and honor by becoming a prostitute? I did. Did she get whipped till she was bloody for simply doing what she was ordered to do? I did. Did she spend her life trying to get back her sanity when all the world around her was so fucking *insane*? No, I don't think so. She'd had a very suburban, white-bread existence, punctuated only by a year of living with a freak who had a spanking fetish. I used to *charge* those kinds of guys extra! Abuse? She didn't know *shit* about abuse. But I did.

If I spoke, I would be giving her one hell of an education, but I just wasn't up to it. Sheree was the nicest person—my best friend—maybe, but I just wasn't up to loading her down with all the shit from my life. Certainly not then, and maybe not ever.

I was gentle, though, in letting her down. "Sheree, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but you really *don't* know anything about me. I wish you could help me, really I do, but if I talked to you it would only make things more complicated and difficult than they already are. No one knows what I've been through, and neither you nor anyone can help me get past it."

"Kerrilyn," she shook her head emphatically, "you're wrong. *Dead wrong.*"

"Maybe I am," I said, eventually, "but I'm still not ready."

"Someday you'll have to be."

"Maybe."

"*Not maybe,*" she disagreed. "Someday you'll have to deal with your feelings, and I think that day is coming up, real soon."

I only sighed. But yes, Sheree, you're right. Real soon.

• • •

Time started to fly, again. Mel upgraded one of her keyboards late in January, and at rehearsal Kerrilyn casually inquired as to the whereabouts of the old one. Since Mel had not disposed of it, yet, she sold it to her for about \$300. That price did not include an amplifier, so Kerrilyn and I went shopping and bought a small one so she could hear herself play. She didn't actually play the piano, but she had a good ear for sound, rhythm and harmony—and an innate understanding of chord structure, progressions and transitions—and though I guess I shouldn't have been surprised, she began to write songs. She's a pretty good composer, too. Her tastes run to sad, soulful tunes much of the time, almost bluesy, but since her moods dictate the songs she writes, her song styles vary considerably.

But at the time, the most difficult thing for Kerrilyn was to find the courage to ask Troy Dancer to listen to some of the songs she had written. Dancer had just begun to call her by her (old) first name, and then she went and changed it on him. He refused to call her Kerrilyn, but he didn't call her Kerry, either. She was very shy about auditioning her songs for him, and needed a lot of encouragement to even open her mouth about them. Of course I'd heard them all, many times, since she'd been practicing them in the evenings, before, during, and after dinner, too. I liked several, in particular, but was a little hesitant to critique her efforts. Let the rest of the band and time decide which songs were good, and which were just also-rans.

Because Troy Dancer was such an accomplished musician, Kerrilyn was afraid to play her songs in front of him. She felt overwhelmed by the facility with which he played the guitar, and though she was more than passable at pecking out her tunes on her little electric piano, in rehearsal she was hopelessly intimidated by his imperious glaring stare. Mel tried to tell Kerrilyn to ignore Mr. Danzinger, as she called him, and play her songs anyway. But Kerrilyn just kept putting it off, and putting it off, until I thought she would forever be stuck in the void between writing songs and getting those songs played (and ultimately listened to).

By the first week of March, however, after Kerrilyn had written well over a dozen tunes, she finally got up the guts to play one of them for Mel Howe. Mel liked it immediately, of course, and picked up the melody and the chord progressions very quickly. Kerrilyn was amazed Mel could learn her song so fast, but Mel reminded her that it was 'her business' to learn new songs. When Kerrilyn heard Mel Howe play this new song on her brand-new Yamaha electric grand piano, Kerrilyn couldn't resist the urge to sing it, and for the first time I heard what I'm sure Kerrilyn had been hearing in her head all along.

It was personal and spoke intimately of Kerrilyn's feelings, and it gave me goose bumps to hear it. I don't think the others were similarly afflicted, but when my girl finished the last verse and went into the chorus the final time, both she and I had tears in our eyes. When Mel wrapped it up with her usual practiced flourish, we all sat there looking at each other, amazed and dumbstruck with awe. It was a *very* good song, and had been performed with an incredible, simple eloquence.

Mel insisted we introduce the song at the very next rehearsal. I was in favor of the plan, as well, but at the last moment, Kerrilyn went into one of her patented bouts of extreme stage fright. Though Mel was there to accompany Kerrilyn on the piano, and all she had to do was *sing the song*, she had to first retreat to the rest room to barf up her dinner. Of course, she felt much better after having done so, and with only the most minor of nervous quivers in her voice, she sang while Mel played:

How can we love when our love's so demanding?
 How can we try, if the trying's all wrong?
 You say you want me, and want me completely,
 Will our lives come together—together tonight?

Nighttime falls, but the birds are still singing,
 Daylight comes, with the sun on the lake,
 Without losing ourselves to the call of our
 heartstrings,
 Will you love me tonight—together tonight ...?

You say it's wrong, that we can't go onward,
 I say it's right, and my tears fall around,
 You say 'I love you,' but you don't understand me,
 Will our lives come together—together tonight?
 Nighttime falls ...

Questions of love, and questions of loving,
 Make each of us feel the things we can't say,
 Do you love me tonight, and love me forever?
 Will you hold me and touch me—together tonight ...
 Nighttime falls ...

Dancer didn't have much in the way of comment for or against the song. At first, I thought he was going to say something hideously inappropriate, and send Kerrilyn out into the parking lot in hysterics, but

he just stood there with his arms folded, mouth pursed, and seemed to still be listening to the song well after it was over. Mel just sat back at her piano and smirked, knowing in her mind, at least, that this was a good song regardless of what Dancer thought. Then, he seemed to finish the song, mentally, and he turned to Kerrilyn, and—most amazingly!—asked her what kind of guitar part she thought the song ought to have.

I thought Kerrilyn would faint. To say her ego was positively stroked by his question would be a rather significant understatement. But she hadn't even considered what the song might sound like with the entire band behind her, so she told him she was clueless—open to his suggestions. He seemed to like being treated with (what he thought was) respect concerning the arrangement of the song, and he spent the entire rest of the rehearsal working with Kerrilyn and Mel to assemble a suitable and adequate backup for Kerrilyn's little love song.

To Kerrilyn's immeasurable credit, to have involved Troy Dancer as she did cemented a working relationship between them that despite their personal differences and occasional clashes, helped the band survive. Unquestionably, as time went on, their mutual respect of each other's talents settled most artistic disputes with amicable compromises. Kerrilyn's songs were transformed by Troy Dancer's unique and sometimes unusual interpretations, and Dancer's stranglehold on the control and direction of the band was lessened by the emergence of that other most significant musical talent, Kerrilyn MacDonald.

We didn't get around to performing Kerrilyn's song until mid April, and for an 'original,' it was fairly well received by the audience at the time. On average, we performed about three nights a week, working many clubs around town. However, Dancer's plan of going on the road after the first of the year didn't happen. Maury Bozeman, Dancer's 'manager,' turned out to be next to worthless when it came to booking the band regularly and reliably, so by the first part of May we found ourselves asking Dancer how he could get out of his personal services contract with Bozeman. We didn't want to lose our guitar player, as much as we may have generally disliked his personality (or lack thereof), but we just couldn't see paying thirty percent to a hopeless do-nothing such as our guitar player's manager.

"He's got options to renew every year for the next twenty years," Dancer informed us at rehearsal one night. "I could talk to him about not renewing in July, when the current contract expires, but I wouldn't count on it. I owe him too much money." That last part was a surprise.

"What do you mean?" Tom asked. "Just *how much* money do you owe

the son-of-a-bitch?"

"Probably close to \$5,000."

"You *got* to be shitting me!" Tom whistled, and shook his head. "How did this happen?" Dancer started to explain, but Tom stopped him. "Don't tell me, I don't think I want to know."

Dancer folded his arms, and spread his legs apart in a lock-kneed, defiant stance. He *did not* like Tom Germaine, at all, and Tom's apparent role as the band's 'daddy' didn't make him feel any better about him, either. "Look, Germaine," he said, finally, "I've paid back almost half what I owe him."

"Almost *half*?" Tom was incredulous, "You owed him almost ten grand?"

"Almost," Dancer replied.

"Jesus Christ, Troy!"

"All right, Germaine," Dancer waved his hand, "don't lecture me. Mel does that enough already." I couldn't resist looking her way. She suppressed a grin, and merely shrugged.

Tom turned down the volume on his bass and pulled the neck back out of the way. "So, what are we gonna do? We need the work. Some of us still have daytime jobs, and if we're ever going to be able to quit them, we've got to have more regular gigs."

Dancer echoed Tom's frustration, "I know." He turned away from Tom, and pulled a cigarette out of a pack he had stashed in his shirt pocket. Smoking in the studio was usually discouraged, but Dancer lit the cigarette anyway. "I've talked to the asshole about getting us on the road, but so far he hasn't come through with anything." Dancer gestured, pointing, "You talked to him last, didn't you?" Tom nodded. "Well, what did he tell you?"

"He said he was 'working on' a whole string of good gigs all up and down the Florida Gulf coast. But I've heard that type of thing before. I won't believe the slime-ball until we get contracts in hand."

"He *can* book us for the beach trade, you know," Dancer went on to explain, "He knows practically every club owner from Mobile to Tampa. They're all Jewish, you know, and they jerk each other off all the time. You know—one hand washing the other—and all that shit."

"That sounds just *great*, Troy," Tom said, sarcastically, "except for one thing."

"I know," Dancer agreed. "He hasn't gotten us any of these 'great gigs,' yet, has he?"

The rest of us just stood or sat around and listened to the whole exchange. Kerrilyn sat quietly on her stool, occasionally pushing her

glasses up on her nose, and alternating between looking at me, and looking at Mel. Sheree, who had lately become a rehearsal regular—a groupie, if you will—sat on her customary stool over by the soundboard, and idly twisted knobs and such. Mel Howe was standing, and constantly shifting from foot to foot, mildly agitated but ultimately bored. Maybe not bored, but certainly as frustrated as the rest of us. I sat behind my drums, and wished we were playing something.

“Let’s get back to the music. OK?” I ventured, plaintively.

Kerrilyn had to look to Mel for confirmation, but then spoke up, herself, “Yeah,” she concurred. Then more loudly, “**Everybody?**” She looked around, waiting for our attention. When she got it. “All right,” she began, “if we’re stuck in this thing, then we’re stuck in this thing. Short of getting rid of Mr. Dancer, here, there’s nothing we can do about it. But if you,” she looked pointedly at Dancer, “can get out of this stupid contract, and we can pay this guy back, then I think we ought to do it.” Wow! Kerrilyn *never* gave advice to anyone. I thought it extremely unusual. Dancer, almost completely out of his usual asshole character, merely nodded agreement at her suggestion. But, where did she think we would get the money?

“What about the \$5,000, Kerrilyn?” Tom asked. “Where are we going to get that kind of money?”

“I don’t know yet, Tom,” Kerrilyn shrugged, standing up, all five-foot three inches of her. “But what choice do we have? I mean, is this guy sandbagging us, or what?”

“I doubt it,” Tom shook his head, “he’s just fucking incompetent.”

“Well, then, shouldn’t we be finding another agent?”

I had to admit, Kerrilyn had a point. But, one of the real problems was that I don’t think Tom trusted Troy Dancer, very much. Of course, there was no particular reason why he should. Furthermore, I don’t think any of the rest of us especially trusted Troy Dancer, either. Everyone, except maybe Kerrilyn.

“Marc,” she addressed me, “can I have some money?”

“Sure,” I said, not realizing at first what she was asking. “How much?”

“Oh, about \$5,000.” Her tone was so matter-of-fact and serious, I took her seriously.

I thought about it for all of two seconds, then said, “OK, babe.” It was Kerrilyn who was asking. For her, it was no problem. I didn’t necessarily trust her judgment of Troy Dancer *so* completely, but I certainly trusted Kerrilyn.

“Problem solved,” she announced. “Let’s go. I want to play some

music!"

I expected Tom to object, and argue, or something, but he only grumbled underneath his breath and turned up the volume on his bass. Someone asked what we were going to play, and out of the corner of my eye I caught Sheree grinning at Kerrilyn. Had she put her up to it, or encouraged her? It seemed likely, to me.

My birthday is near the end of May. May 27, to be precise. That year it came on Sunday, and to celebrate Kerrilyn and Sheree cooked up a big party for me up at the lake. I was almost certain Tom was in on their plans, and though I pressed him most persistently, he refused to divulge any details of the festivities.

Two weeks prior, though, a semi-momentous event occurred. Kerrilyn and I went out and bought her a car. We didn't buy anything new, or even especially expensive, but we had finally reached the point where it made eminent sense to turn her loose on the highway. She couldn't just be sitting around the apartment all day, every day, waiting on me to get home. I had to have my car, since I very frequently made trips to client offices around the city, and I couldn't always predict those trips ahead of time. The only thing that made total sense, then, was for Kerrilyn to have her own transportation.

The money wasn't that much of a problem. We simply borrowed it, making sure it was in *her* name, with me as cosigner. I had to lend her most of the \$500 down payment, since she'd only saved about \$300, but it was worth it to see the happy, simple satisfaction in her eyes when the salesman handed her the keys to the three year old blue Toyota Celica. Of course she drove it home, and like a bat out of hell, too. I knew that about her already, but it still warranted a fatherly caution about not getting any speeding tickets. The insurance costs were very nontrivial, and I wanted to keep them within shouting distance. Kerrilyn only smiled, and charmed me with that damnable twinkle in her huge, emerald green eyes. She was just too cute to deny. *Sigh.*

Of course, once Kerrilyn got her very own automobile, she was no longer bound to the TV in the living room, and she was suddenly also no longer at home in the evenings when I got there, either.

Most of the time she left notes, like, 'At the lake. B back by 8'. 'Shopping with Sheree. C U later!' 'Met a super guy; moved to Memphis; please forward my mail'. Of course, that last was a joke, though I didn't think it at all funny when I first read it. It took checking to see if she'd taken any of her clothes (which she hadn't), to convince me she was only kidding. Probably.

Saturday, the twenty-sixth, Kerrilyn was up at eight AM, about two hours earlier than usual, quickly dressed and kissing me good-bye before I could inquire as to her plans for the day. As she headed out the door, she said, "Got lots of stuff to do today, buddy. I'll try to be back by dark."

"By dark?" I exclaimed, in a panicky state.

"Yeah, buddy," she turned back to me, her long hair shining like dark, rusty gold. "It's your birthday tomorrow, old man, and I got a lot of things I need to get ready. If you *really* need me, I'll be up at the lake."

"Can I go with you?"

"Are you kidding?" She snorted and shook her head, "No way!" She raised her hand and wiggled her fingers. "Be good!" she chimed, and the door slammed shut behind her. I was a little depressed to be spending Saturday all alone, but at the same time it was a nice break.

Sunday morning greeted us with a heavy downpour. It hadn't rained in about three weeks, and we were beginning to get spoiled by the dry (though hot) weather. As a consequence, the deluge coming down outside the balcony window was quite a surprise. Kerrilyn was all depressed and worried the rain would ruin my birthday party, planned for that night.

"If it rains, it rains," I told her, trying to be philosophical and accepting of the inevitable. "We can just take the party indoors."

"I know," she agreed, unhappily. "But still, it'd be *so* nice to be outside, tonight. Especially, tonight."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and don't you get too curious, either."

"What's there to be curious about?"

"You'll just have to wait, old man."

"Humph!" I scowled, "You've called me that several times, now, and I'm not sure I like it. I am not an 'old man'."

"I think you'll just have to get over it." She rolled toward me, as we sat on the couch, half-watching some stupid, old, black and white movie. "You may be old," she smiled, toothy, freckle-faced, and eyes sparkling, "but *I* still love you." And she kissed me. I responded by grabbing her up most forcefully.

We ended up making love right there on the couch.

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I remember what Marc did for my twentieth birthday. I'll *never* forget

the microphone, or the neat Mickey Mouse watch he gave me. Sheree told me later how much he had treasured that watch, and though it was just a cheap little thing, worth no more than \$25, it was worth more to me than anything. He gave me the watch out of love, and every time I feel lonely, or tired, or afraid, I simply hold onto Mickey. And Mickey makes me feel better.

It's lonely up here at *The Center*. Every day we get up early—at six-thirty—get dressed, and go to the cafeteria for breakfast. After breakfast we have a morning group session, which isn't too bad, and then by the time it's over, it's time for lunch. After lunch we usually have the afternoons to do what we like, such as play basketball or volleyball in the gym, play tennis or even golf outside, or watch TV, or just sit up in our rooms and read. (I write a lot, like I'm doing right now.) Dinner is at six, and then after that it's time for the evening group session.

This session is much harder for me, since they try to get you to focus on your feelings. I tried sitting it out the first couple weeks—going to the group but not saying anything—but it wasn't very long before the others started refusing to let me off the hook—to get out of participating. Once I did start talking, I just cried, mostly. That's OK with them, since your tears are caused by your emotions—your feelings. And I have plenty.

I've been crying my way through about a month of these daily sessions, and it's getting old. No doubt, it's getting better, but I still feel so lonely all the time. My roommate, Teresa, is a recovering coke addict, and is having a somewhat rougher time than I am (believe it or not), but it's still no church picnic. The fried chicken likes to bite you back, and the ants are as large (and mean) as tarantulas. She's all through the physical withdrawal part, as I am as well, but she's still such an emotional mess it almost isn't worth talking to her, sometimes. Fortunately for me, my therapist is the one bright spot in this whole depressing scene.

He lets me be myself, and talk or not talk depending on how I feel. But though he doesn't ever *make* me talk, I find myself wanting to talk to him, anyway. He knows I like to write, and he's practically required me to write about my feelings, my life, and my experiences. That's been the most help. In the writing comes the remembering, and in the remembering then comes the forgetting. If I've written it down, I can let it go. And boy! is that a relief.

My therapist knows everything about me. *Everything*. And still he loves me. He tells me this, over and over, and never do I think he means it in a sexual or inappropriate way. Confusing love with sex has been one of my bigger problems, too. He just wants me to know someone loves me,

and that someone will always be on my side and by my side, no matter what I've done or what I do, or what happens. And man, that really helps.