

Chapter 27

I woke to a tapping noise. Startled, I opened my eyes and looked around. Where the hell was I? Nothing seemed familiar. I heard the tapping again, and it came from my immediate left. I looked in that direction, and saw a policeman bent over looking in my driver's side window at me. He'd tapped with his nightstick.

What was I doing in the car? Where was I? Quickly, I ran back the replay of the last few things I remembered before apparently falling asleep. I had gotten in my car to go home, feeling totally stunned, and so tired I wasn't sure I could keep my eyes open. I remembered deciding to close my eyes a few minutes, to relax and try to clear my head, and then

...

So I rolled the window down.

His eyes made a rapid survey of the interior of the car. Satisfied, he leaned a little closer. "Sir," he said, "are you all right?"

My head was clearing. I nodded. "Yes." My voice was hoarse, cracking.

"What were you doing asleep in your car? Did you have car trouble?"

"No," I smiled, sheepishly, "I just fell asleep. I'm in the band that played here last night, and I guess I was pretty tired."

"Uh-huh." His tone didn't specifically indicate disbelief, or understanding, either. But I noticed he did see my drums in the back.

"Would you mind getting out of the car, please? And I need to see your driver's license, proof of insurance, and vehicle registration." He took a couple of steps back, and I noticed he had not put away the nightstick. No matter, I wasn't going to give him any reason to use it.

I opened the door and got out. I retrieved my wallet and took out my driver's license and handed it to him. He studied the picture, briefly, and turned back toward his cruiser, "I need your vehicle registration and proof of insurance, too, please."

Said cruiser was sitting behind my car, blocking it, and washed the surroundings in sweeps of bright blue light. The light bar on the roof had about eight revolving lights, and all were working in synchronization, moving from the inner pair outward in expanding cobalt waves. I wasn't really worried, but blue lights *are* blue lights.

I called after him, "The registration is in my glove box." I'm not sure why I felt the need to tell him that, but it seemed the prudent thing to do. He said nothing, but got in the cruiser while I searched the glove compartment frantically for my MV-1 form. Where had I put it? I had thought it was in an envelope, but I couldn't find any envelopes right away, but ... ah, there it was, near the bottom of the pile. With a surge of panic, too, I hastily made sure the bag of dope I had stashed in there was kept carefully covered up. If he found that, I was in *real* trouble.

Relieved, I walked back to the cruiser and went around to the driver's side. Without a word, I handed the registration to him as he sat, microphone in hand, listening to the radio. I overheard the report:

"Seven-two-oh Charley. Vehicle Alpha-Delta-Alpha three-niner-niner is a 1981 Honda Accord, registered to one Marcus Anthony Huffman. H-U-F-F-M-A-N. 30 Lindbergh Drive, Atlanta. No wants or warrants." The dispatcher ended her report.

"Seven-two-oh, roger," the cop answered, keying the mike. I noticed my driver's license was fastened to the top of an aluminum clipboard that lay in his lap. "Do you have proof of insurance, sir?"

"Oh!" I had forgotten. Nervously, I fished in my wallet for the card that said I had auto insurance. Stupid law. I handed it to him.

He studied the registration and my insurance card, very briefly, and unclipping my driver's license from the clipboard, handed all three out the window to me. He regarded me evenly as I stood there in the very early morning light, looking pretty bedraggled and weary, I'm sure. He almost smiled. "Mr. Huffman," he began, "you haven't broken any laws. I was just concerned when I saw you in your car, there." Then he did smile. "It's not the safest thing to do—sleeping in your car like that—especially in this neighborhood. You can go on home now, but I'd be more careful in the future. If you're too tired to drive, get a motel room. OK?"

"OK, but I'm fine, now." I smiled too, and felt pretty foolish, but lucky. I turned, and walked back to my car.

"Be careful driving home," he called to me. "And have a nice day."

Do they *still* say that? I got in the car, and though relieved, I was still nervous as I fumbled in my pocket for my keys. I'd not even taken them out last night. I snatched the key, snicked it home in the ignition, and twisted. And of course my trusty Honda cranked right up. The blue lights

behind me went out, and the cruiser backed up. I thanked the cop with a wave, backed my car out into the middle of the parking lot, and shifting carefully into first gear, drove slowly to the exit. There was no traffic since it was, by my dashboard clock, about six-fifteen AM, but I pulled out into the street very carefully anyway, and began to make my way cautiously down the street. As I pulled up to the traffic light down the block, I saw the police cruiser pull out of the parking lot and go the other way. Only then did I relax completely.

Once I was alone and moving down the street toward the expressway, the final events of the previous night started coming back to me in a fell rush. Kerrilyn had told me she was moving out. Had moved out, already. And then I was then overcome, again, with a blackness and a despair that nearly overwhelmed me. She was gone! *She'd left me!* Again!

What was I going to do?

As I drove, my mind reeled, desperate thoughts circling insanely as I tried to comprehend what had happened. There was no understanding it, for me. No matter how hard I tried to fit all her words and deeds together into a coherent, logical pattern, they simply would not fit. Nothing made any sense. She'd gotten pregnant; had been afraid to tell me. I'd confronted her; we'd argued. She'd gotten angry; I'd gotten angry. She'd left the apartment in a huff.

I understood that she could be angry with me. I understood how I could be angry with her. I even found it possible to understand her ambivalence toward becoming pregnant in the first place, though all along I just *knew* she would eventually come around. She just didn't want me pressuring her into having the baby. *Our baby*. Well, I thought I understood that, and I didn't want to be pressuring her, either, but when I finally realized what had happened, something about it struck me deep inside, and I found I could not ignore it or turn back from it. Kerrilyn's becoming pregnant with my baby felt very much like a dream coming true for me. And it was a dream too strong and too dear just to let go without a fight.

When I first met Kerrilyn, I just *knew* she would never consider settling down, but even that knowledge didn't stop me from hoping, and wanting, just the same. Marriage and children weren't in her plans. But what her plans were—that seemed to be the mystery. She seemed to careen from day to day; idea to idea; man to *woman*—to man; never stopping to think or decide anything anywhere along the way. For the most part, life was just something that *happened* to Kerrilyn while she was out making other plans. While she was out getting drunk every day. She never seemed in control of the things that should have been most

important to her. And I felt I should have been one of those most very important things.

I wanted Kerrilyn to love me the way I loved her. I think everyone wants that, but it's really nothing but a sadly misguided idea, one that gets us into all kinds of trouble. We think the other should (and does) feel about us *exactly* as we feel about them, and in so believing we just naturally assume everything is fine, when in fact everything isn't. I had thought everything was fine between Kerrilyn and me, even with that most complicating and unique distraction called Sheree, but obviously I was wrong. I still believed she loved me, but apparently just not the way I loved her.

When Kerrilyn decided not to tell me she was pregnant, and I had had to find out from Tom, I was shocked and bewildered. It hurt me immensely, because I had previously ascribed to Kerrilyn the same level of honesty and trust that I felt toward her. But she'd only told Sheree—not me. Sheree, who should have been 'just a friend' but wasn't, was clearly trusted more than I was. She was perceived less threatening. She was felt to be more understanding. More accommodating.

When I confronted Kerrilyn, mainly angry over being excluded from her trust, she only blasted back at me, just as angry. She informed me she had decided not to keep the baby, then stormed out of the apartment. Where she'd gone or what she'd done, I had no knowledge. But when she made it to the job that night, I thought everything would still work out, ultimately. We talked during the breaks, but she gave no indication of the plans she had made, or was in the process of carrying out. She acted as though nothing out of the ordinary was going on (though well aware of our differences on the pregnancy question) and waited until almost four o'clock in the morning to tell me she was moving out—was in fact *leaving me*. Again.

She was leaving me, and had left, and as I pulled onto the expressway ramp, my mind was nothing but a seething mass of roiling, black, *despairing* thoughts—poisonous and poisoning. I don't remember where I was going, or where I went, just that I finally pulled into Sheree and Tom's driveway about nine-thirty. I could not possibly face going home to an empty, cold, abandoned bed, and to the holes in my closet where Kerrilyn's pretty clothes used to hang.

I started to knock on the front door, but didn't need to. Sheree was there, and opened it as I raised my hand. I lowered it as the door swung open, and we simply stood and stared blankly at each other a few moments. She was barefoot and dressed in a large, loose, bright pink tee

shirt with some kind of graphic across the front, and her short, tight, navy blue shorts. Usual home attire. Without a word she turned, and motioning for me to come in, walked away. Like a zombie, I followed, closing the door behind me.

She went past the end of the stairway, turned right, and went straight for the kitchen. I followed. On the kitchen table was a plastic milk jug, an open box of cereal, and a bowl. She slid into her place at the table and picked up the cereal box.

She wouldn't look at me, but asked, "You want some breakfast?" Her voice was flat, unanimated, apparently not very happy to see me. But she no doubt had expected to see me, so was perhaps resigned to the idea.

"I'm not very hungry," was all I said. She shrugged, and poured cereal in the bowl. I half expected her to have more to say, but she was silent while she poured milk on her cereal. I sighed, "I'm sorry I'm bothering you." It sounded ridiculous to say out loud, but I could think of nothing better. "But Kerrilyn—"

"—I know." She cut me off. "She moved out. You don't have to tell me, because she told me herself last night. She finally called me about eight-thirty. Told me what she was going to do." Then she began to stir her cereal with a spoon, still not looking at me. Her motions were very lackluster, aimless, and I got the impression she wasn't really very hungry. And not only was she not hungry, she was definitely not happy, either.

I had to ask, "What's the matter? Are you angry with me, or something?" If she was, I needed to find out why. I didn't think I'd done anything to warrant her anger, but I wondered.

She shook her head, slowly. "No, Marc," and she sighed, her voice almost a whisper.

I asked, again, "What's wrong, then?"

"I don't know." She stirred her cereal some more, then took a spoonful and guided it slowly, almost automatically to her mouth. She slurped it in and chewed, crunching quietly. She followed it with another spoonful. I sensed she was building up the energy—or the courage—to speak, so I waited. "I'm worried about Kerrilyn," she finally said.

"Worried?" Was there something going that I didn't know about? "Why are you worried about Kerrilyn?" I didn't see why *she* should be so worried—just me.

"I'm worried about the baby, Marc. I'm worried about her *health*."

"I'm worried about her, too."

"You know she's going to keep the baby, don't you." She looked up at me.

"She is?" That seemed like good news, but was it? "When did she tell you this?"

"She didn't exactly tell me. *I know*. She really wants this baby. I can tell. She wants it almost more than she wants *anything*, but she's really afraid. She's positively terrified that she won't take good care of it. She doesn't think she would be a very good mother, and she doesn't want her baby to end up like her." Spoon went back to bowl, and scooped more cereal. "And I think she's also beginning to realize that maybe she has a rather large drinking problem, and *that* prospect terrifies her most of all. She doesn't think she will be able to stop drinking. Because she knows if she doesn't, it will certainly harm the baby. She knows she could kill her baby if she doesn't stop drinking." She dropped her spoon into the bowl, splashing out milk. Then her tired blue eyes turned toward me. "Marc, she told me she will kill herself if she hurts the baby." Those eyes beseeched me. "Marc, I'm really worried!" She whispered, "We *have* to help her."

"You said she called you at eight-thirty? Only fifteen minutes after I left the apartment?"

She pushed back from the table, no longer hungry. Regarded me. "If you say so. It *was* eight-thirty."

"She told you all this, then? Why the fuck didn't you try to stop her?"

Her eyes went wide with surprise. "Wait a goddamn minute, there! When she called at eight-thirty, she was already late for the gig—already packed—her clothes, and everything. All she told me then was that she was moving out of the apartment. She seemed OK, otherwise."

"OK?!? How the fuck could that be 'OK'? You didn't try to stop her?"

"*Stop her?* What was I supposed to do? Tie her to the fucking bed? Marc, I was over an hour away from your apartment. No way I could have gotten to her in time."

"And you couldn't have come to the club, or called me or something, to let me know what was going on?"

"No. She said she would tell you when the gig was over." She shrugged, very slightly. "I had work to do. So did y'all. I figured you could probably handle the situation, yourself." An eyebrow went up. "Was I wrong?" Her tone of voice suggested she thought I had maybe not handled things very well.

"What would you have said to her that I wouldn't? What could you have done to keep her from leaving?"

"Maybe more than you did."

"That's not fair!" Her words hurt. I didn't need more hurt piled on top of the crushing, numbing pain I was already feeling. "Maybe you

could have convinced her to stay, maybe not. But if you thought you had such a great idea about how to get her back, why the fuck didn't you get off your fat ass and go talk to her?"

She realized her words had been unfair, and apologized, "I'm sorry, Marc. You're right." She fidgeted in her chair, momentarily. "I was a little ... shocked, I guess ... when she told me she was moving out of your apartment. I didn't know *what* to do. Truthfully, it didn't even occur to me that *anything* I could say to her would make even the slightest difference."

I couldn't really think of anything to say, to that, but I was a little confused over the sequence of events. "When did she tell you all this stuff about her being afraid of not quitting drinking, and hurting the baby, and all that?"

"She called here, again, about five this morning. Absolutely dead, stinking, drunk. She kept me on the phone for over an hour, and spent most of that time crying." She shook her head, looked down. "Marc, she's in terrible shape, right now."

"What did she say?" I felt like I was clinging to very tenuous threads.

"She cried a lot, like I said. She was very mad at Troy Dancer, for something he evidently said to her last night."

"They went out for coffee after the gig," I explained.

Sheree continued without losing a beat, "She was mad at you; she was mad at Tom—mad at *me*." A half-shrug. "She said a lot of things I know she didn't mean. She said she was 'quittin' this fuckin' band' and that she 'never wanted to see any of us, again.' Especially not you." We shared a look. The hurt was sinking into me, fully by then, and Sheree saw it. "Marc, she didn't mean it. I know she doesn't mean it. The only reason I'm telling you this, *at all*, is that you really need to know how upset she is. She's really bad off, right now."

"Why is she angry with you?" As if I couldn't guess.

"She's angry because we're ..." She didn't complete the thought, just shrugged. "She doesn't believe she deserves to be loved. She only called me, I think, because she couldn't call you." Then, an idea came to her. "Were you home this morning when she would have called, maybe?"

"No, I wasn't." I really wished I had been there to take her call. If she even *had* called, that is. "I fell asleep in the car, still in the fucking parking lot."

She almost smiled at that, but it was extremely short-lived. "Have you even been home at all?" I said no. "She didn't say she'd tried to call you, so I don't know." Then she saw my 'it's all my fault' expression, and responded to it. "Look, it's not your fault, Marc."

"I tried to talk her out of it, you know," I explained. "I tried my best,

but—”

“—I know. I tried to get her to tell me where she was, so I could go get her. Damn it, Marc! She really needs our help, and badly.”

“I should never have let her go.”

She almost laughed. She knew Kerrilyn. “That’s easy for you to say. What would you have done? Physically restrained her? Taken her damn car keys away?”

“*I don’t know*, Sheree! Maybe. You didn’t do *anything*, so I don’t think you have much room to talk. Do you?”

“Oh, I’m not saying you did anything wrong, or anything less that you could.”

“I’m *so* glad you approve,” I said, sarcastically. “Considering she called you first, and *you* never even tried to talk her out of it.”

Anger flashed in her eyes, but also a lot of hurt. “But, you *know* I did! I tried *my best*! But she can be very stubborn. Very resolved. No one was going to change her mind.” Then she considered, “Did *you* do it?”

“If I had changed her mind, do you think we would be here, having this nice conversation?” It sounded like something Kerrilyn might say.

“So, if the two people she loved best couldn’t keep her from leaving, then ...” She left the thought unfinished. I got the point. Both of them.

“I can’t compete with you, you know,” I said, finally.

It may have caught her by surprise, but she recovered quickly. “Don’t compete with me. You don’t have to.”

But ... “What did you expect to happen?”

“What? When?” She was confused.

“When you and her ...”

The sides of Sheree’s neck reddened noticeably, and her eyes dropped to study the remaining few Cheerios floating around in her cereal bowl. She cleared her throat, but had difficulty voicing the words when she spoke. “I don’t know what I expected. But you really shouldn’t feel like you’re competing with me.” She looked up. “Kerrilyn loves you, Marc. Just you.”

But I disagreed. “I was there in the bed, Sheree. I saw what you all were doing.” This was very hard for me. “I *felt it* when she made you come.” It was a terrible moment. “How could you do this to me?”

Sheree was quick, eyes piercing me. “*Do what?!?* This whole discussion ain’t about you, or her and me—or *you* and me, either.” At that, I felt the fading love bite on my neck begin to tingle, reminding me of things so recently consummated. She continued, “This is about her, and the fact that she’s pregnant. It’s about the fact you bullied her into talking

to you about it, and now that she's told you, she's discovered that she just can't handle it. *That's* what this is about."

"**This is not my fucking fault!**" I blasted. But I didn't know if I believed it. That Kerrilyn would want to leave me, again, just had to be my fault.

She was calm in response, though. "This is not my fault, either. But she's gone, and we have to do something to try to get her back."

I took several moments to cool down, because like it or not—and I did not like it *at all*—Sheree was probably right. "OK, so what can we do?"

"Unfortunately," she said, "at the moment there's nothing we can do. Nothing until we see her, again."

There was a short pause while we both thought about things, but there was still something I wanted to know. "Who made the first move?"

"What are you talking about? What 'first move'?"

"Was it you, or was it Kerrilyn?" I knew what Kerrilyn had said.

"I don't think there was any 'move' made, at all. Women don't work that way."

"Then how did you all know what you were thinking? Did you just suddenly stumble across it, one day?"

"I think she figured out how I felt on Memorial Day, after your birthday party."

I remembered it clearly. "So on Monday while Tom and me played golf, you all worked on 'cementing' your relationship?"

She faced me openly, seemingly unafraid. "I really didn't know what would happen."

"But you were willing to take the chance."

"I *had* to take the chance." She was frustrated and angry, "I know y'all don't understand it, but something's been going on in my mind for a very long time, and it's something I simply can't ignore. Not anymore."

"Sheree, I think your timing stinks."

She agreed readily, "Oh, so do I. *Believe me!* I admit I've made a mistake. It was very obviously a hugely wrong thing to do, and if I'd known how much trouble I was going cause, I think I would still be keeping all this stuff strictly to myself. Just like I been doing since we met."

"You felt this way about her since then?"

"Pretty much."

Oh, God. "What did you think would happen to us?"

"What 'us' do you mean?" she asked. "You and Kerrilyn, or me and Tom?"

"Yes," I nodded. "All of us." I took a step closer. "You and me, too."

"Only you and Tom are the inseparable pair, hmmm? You two are more married than we are." I started to counter, but she stopped me with a motion of her hand. She still had the floor. "Maybe we were living in dreamland—smoking too much dope, or something—but we sorta thought the four of us could maybe become like an extended family. A foursome, maybe."

And then I was forced to remember her love bite, once again. But, it was a fading feeling. "That's a nice fantasy, maybe. But the naked reality of it is a completely different matter. No pun intended."

"I think you're right. The 'naked reality' *is* quite different." *She* made the pun. Did she see the mark on my neck?

"I can't believe you're willing to break up your marriage this way."

"Whoa boy! *That hurts*. I *did not* do this to break up my marriage. I love Tom. He's my lover and he's like my brother. I still want him. But ..."

I didn't let her finish, "What about how *I* feel?"

"How you feel about *what?* Kerrilyn and me?" But she didn't wait for an answer. Instead: "I never thought Kerrilyn would leave you for me. No, not a chance. But did I think you would have a problem sharing Kerrilyn with someone other than yourself?" She chuckled, mirthlessly, "Well, I knew you'd have a problem, maybe, but it certainly was one you were used to."

"OK, *woman*," I admonished, "you get a 'touché' for that. But why try to hurt me for something Kerrilyn did? I certainly never *suggested* she do anything with Tom, if that's what you're insinuating."

"No," she sighed, "after the night of the party, I wasn't trying to get back at anyone. Not anymore. Not you, certainly, *or* Tom either. I know it looks that way at the moment, but I've only been following my feelings. I have only been doing what my instincts tell me is the right thing. The only thing." She hung her head, both embarrassed and ashamed. But she continued, "I am intensely attracted to Kerrilyn. I can't explain it, nor can I justify it. I still like boys, I think—I always have—but when I'm around Kerrilyn she makes me feel ... weak. She warms me like no other human being ever has." She looked away, then said very quietly, almost to herself, "And I really can't believe I'm telling you this."

But, even on top of everything else, I was almost glad she'd finally come clean. No more guessing. Facts. "You have to tell me, Sheree. Because it sounds like we're in love with the same person."

She turned back, looked up. I saw tears glistening in her eyes. I almost wanted to be sympathetic, but found one big obstacle in the way of that: Kerrilyn. It was Kerrilyn she was in love with. *My* Kerrilyn.

But, "OK. I don't want to fight anymore about this," I said. "It's not

worth it. Kerrilyn isn't here, and I need your help to get her back. I really want to think we can still be friends."

She smiled, and touched the side of her neck. It couldn't be my imagination; she was pointing out her love bite to me. "I *am* your friend, still," she said. "I love you, too, in a way." She rubbed the spot, briefly, then dropped her hand. "I wouldn't worry about losing me as a friend. A *really good* friend." And she smiled, again.

I touched the spot on my own neck, acknowledging my understanding. "I haven't forgotten what you gave me, the other night."

Did she blush?

I asked, "Why do you love me, Sheree?"

"Because you are, in your heart, one of the very nicest, kindest, and gentlest individuals I've ever met. You've always treated me as if I was made of gold, or something, and believe me, that's very important. Any woman would consider herself both lucky and honored to count you among her friends. An even luckier woman would be honored to be your companion, as Kerrilyn already is. She's incredibly lucky, and I envy her a great deal."

"I don't feel so kind and gentle. I don't feel like women are so very *honored* to be my friends. Women certainly don't count themselves lucky to be my companion. Is Kerrilyn 'lucky'? Do you think luck has had anything to do with it?"

"Yes. God has given you a great chance. It's just now up to you to do something with it."

"And what about the chance He's given you?"

She shrugged. Looked away. "I think I've probably already blown that one. You think, maybe?" I didn't know to what she was referring. Her chance with Tom, or with Kerrilyn? Poor, sick—*drunk*—Kerrilyn.

"Do you want to stay married to Tom?" I had to ask, because I had to know.

She sounded rueful, sensing some irony, "Since I've probably lost Kerrilyn, don't you think I should?"

"What would you say if you still had Kerrilyn? Would that change your answer?"

But instead of answering, she asked, "How would you feel if you had *two* women in your bed?"

"You can't be serious! Sheree, you don't want to leave Tom for me—or Kerrilyn, for that matter."

"No?" She leaned back in her chair, and seemed to consider the idea with more than a passing interest. Then changed her mind. "No. You're right. It wouldn't work."

"Damned right it wouldn't work."

"Tom would want to be part of the crowd."

"What are you saying? That you don't want Tom, anymore?"

She stood up, hands on the table pushing herself up. Instead of answering, she asked, "Do you really want Tom fucking Kerrilyn anytime he wants? Anytime *she* wants?"

It felt like a slap; a hard one. But she was right. No, I didn't. "Where is Tom?" I asked.

"Upstairs, asleep," she pointed toward the ceiling. The bedrooms were over top the kitchen.

"And you're not worried that he might overhear us?"

She only sniffed. I couldn't tell if she had thought about it, or not.

"I haven't talked to Tom much, lately," I said. "It's been pretty busy, and I haven't had time for anything except work, sleep, eat, and play drums." I glanced toward the ceiling. "What does he think of your affair with Kerrilyn?"

"He isn't too happy about it."

"Knowing Tom, that's probably a pretty big understatement."

She dismissed the idea with, "You asked." She seemed to think I should know her husband almost as well as she did. While I wasn't sure she was right since there *were* some things he and I had never shared, I also knew he would be very angry and upset to learn that his favorite wife had decided she would rather love women, not men.

"What are you all going to do?" I asked, as if they would have worked things out, already.

"Things are a mess, right now. He doesn't know what to do." She pointed to herself, then. "I don't know what to do. I still love him." She walked around the corner of the table toward me. "Being married takes a lot of effort, you know. You have to put a lot into it, and you have to get a lot from it, too, or it won't work. I've been putting into my marriage since the very beginning, and we both still seem to be getting something out of it, even now. I love Tom, and I do respect him and his feelings. I never meant this to hurt him, and it never really affected him, either, until I took that first step a few weeks ago. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I don't want to see you two get divorced." The thought of it made me incredibly sad. The prospect of my two best friends breaking up, with one going his way and the other going hers, made me wonder which one I would be left with. Tom was my oldest, very best friend. I couldn't see knowingly deciding to lose him; I simply was not going to make that choice. But if Kerrilyn and Sheree were to continue as ... *lovers* ... would I even have the choice? I did not want to lose Kerrilyn, and not just because

she was carrying my child, but how could I share her .. with another *woman*? Even if that woman was Sheree?

I couldn't take seriously Sheree's offer to come into our bed. To try to remain friends with Tom while fucking his (sure to be) ex-wife was just too ludicrous an idea to consider. Besides, did I even want someone else—man *or* woman—to be competing with me for Kerrilyn's attention? I could picture it in my mind, coming home in the evening to the sounds of lovemaking coming from my bedroom, and Kerrilyn's impassioned screams when she came. I would want to be doing that to her, and would *not* want to think that someone might just be a little bit better at it than me.

So it really *was* worse than I thought. Everything was crumbling right before us, and there was nothing any of us could do to keep it from going that way, despite our efforts. I was exhausted, and totally consumed with self-doubt and self-loathing over my inability to keep and protect my girl, but I was also disappointed and dismayed at the role Sheree had played in it. Sheree hadn't gotten Kerrilyn pregnant, certainly, but I was sure she had added significantly to Kerrilyn's stress.

To be loving another woman while living with a man, and then finding out you were pregnant by that man—it had to be difficult. If you weren't confused about your own feelings and desires before, you sure were going to be, after. Compound that with your serious drinking problem and a very substantial ambivalence toward babies and motherhood, in general, then you certainly would have the makings for a true world-class meltdown. A meltdown that was apparently happening.

Then of course, I come along and add my own set of problems to the mix. I have a problem with my girlfriend and lover being in bed with another woman. Not too terribly hard to understand, I think. But I'm also not very relaxed and cool when it comes to being excluded from the knowledge of my lover's pregnancy, and I (also understandably) am a little 'concerned' over the whole matter. Had I forced her to move out? No. I had only been angry and insistent. She was the one who decided she couldn't take it anymore, and just had to get out. She was the one who couldn't seem to do anything but to extremes, and had concluded that since I was angry with her, she had no choice but to leave me.

But I—I had to believe that any woman would eventually leave me. It was a horrible certainty to have, made even more terrifying by the fact that it had actually *happened*. But no matter how hard I tried to escape it, I just couldn't shake the awful feeling that this was all nothing more than exactly what I deserved to have happen.

Sheree and I looked at each other, silently, a long time. And in that long time I felt the blackness creeping in, again. I hadn't known it before

that night for a long, long time, but it was starting to become a habit. A bad, bad habit. It was the bleak nothingness of despair, of isolation and abandonment that wounded me to the very core of my being. It was the worst pain I could imagine, and it was Kerrilyn who was responsible for it. I loved her more than I could ever express, but the hurt she had laid upon me had damaged me. A part of me that I thought had been healed and forgotten was again torn open and laid bleeding, and I feared that the process of healing yet one more time would leave me so scarred, so weak, and so frightened that I would not dare take the risk again. I loved her, but I worried I might not be able to take her back inside my heart, again.

Then my mind wandered on to other thoughts. *The baby*. Now there was a baby involved, unless Kerrilyn decided to have it aborted, or did something to herself to do irreparable harm to the child. Through the growing ambivalence and fear of my relationship with Kerrilyn, was also the quickly developing presence of another person. A baby. Our baby. *My* baby. I couldn't ignore it; I couldn't run away from it. I would not abandon this most precious thing that needed me, but just couldn't know it yet ...

"Kerrilyn and I never really discussed birth control," I said, out of the blue. The comment made sense to me, but I'm sure it played as a complete *non sequitur* to Sheree.

"What?" She had been lost in her own thoughts, and frowned, "What are you talking about?"

"Kerrilyn's being pregnant. I thought she had an IUD. She told me she had an IUD, and I simply forgot all about it. If I had known ..."

She shook her head. "She was just being stupid. Are you trying to tell me that her being pregnant is your fault?"

"No! I'm trying to tell you things would have been different had I known that she could get pregnant at any time."

"Really? And what would you have done?" She seemed overly irritated, as if she thought I *was* somehow at fault.

"I don't know, Sheree. Worn a fucking condom, maybe?" I was too tired to argue very eloquently. "Maybe if she didn't drink so much all the time, it wouldn't matter—so much."

"It's not your fault. I'm sorry." She held out her arms as if she wanted to hug me. I was way too tired to fight it—or her—so I took her in my arms and we held each other very loosely. She was small, but soft, and I almost lost myself and all the loneliness and hurt while she hugged me about the chest. She looked up into my eyes, and by the way she held her head and let her eyes drift closed, I got the distinct impression she wanted

me to kiss her. But I didn't think I could do that. Not under the circumstances. Maybe not ever, again. When I didn't make a move, she opened her eyes and looked away, "Oh, Marc, what are we going to do?"

"Well, if you're asking about Kerrilyn, I guess, until she tells us where she is, nothing."

"I'm so afraid for her."

"Me, too." I sighed, and rested my chin on the top of her head.

I must have been heavy on her, because she squirmed out from under me, looked up. "Are you tired?"

"Exhausted."

"Well, you know where the bed is. You're welcome to it." We parted, and she immediately turned toward the kitchen.

To her back, I said, "I'm not sleeping in your bed."

"I was talking about the second bedroom." She looked over her shoulder at me, and I saw a sad, twisted, ironic smile. Maybe some humor would pick things up, she was thinking. "I wouldn't mind it so much, maybe, but let's give Tom some rest."

Don't come on to me, Sheree, I thought, not now. Not even if you're joking. I shook my head, not smiling, and turned toward the foot of the stairs.

"I'm sorry, Marc," she apologized, seeing my bleak expression, "I was only kidding."

I stopped when I reached the third rung. "I know." Then I lied, "That's all right. I appreciate the compliment, but I think I'd really rather have Kerrilyn."

And as I reached the top of the stairs, I heard, very quietly, and probably not meant for me to hear, "So would I." But that wasn't going to help, any. Not at all.

When I first laid down, after removing my shoes and pulling the thin blanket down, I thought I would have a difficult time falling asleep. From time to time I heard noises downstairs in the kitchen—obviously Sheree preparing something in the way of food—and the distraction of the occasional random pot-or-pan noise had been just enough to keep my mind halfway alert. But I didn't want to be alert and thinking. I wanted to be comatose and sleeping. Anything to keep from turning the events of the previous night over (and over) in my mind.

Part of me wouldn't (or couldn't) yet believe that what had happened—had really happened. A major portion of my psyche simply refused to accept or even acknowledge the possibility of Kerrilyn moving out of the apartment. It wasn't logical or necessary, and it hadn't been

preceded by problems between us that in any way pointed me toward an eventual breakup. The situation with Sheree hadn't entered into it, at all. Wouldn't have, in my mind. Kerrilyn was pregnant, and that was the problem. We disagreed on the issue—and vehemently—but in my mind there still remained substantial room for compromise. Though I felt very strongly about marrying Kerrilyn and having the baby, I was sincerely prepared to listen to her viewpoint if she felt otherwise. I really believed I could listen to what she had to say, if only she would stick around long enough to say it. Who knows? It might have even been possible to convince me that my perspective was wrong, but toward that end she hadn't made even the most rudimentary attempt. Things had gotten tough, and in response to that opposition she'd bugged out—completely.

It was frustrating—and it baffled me, utterly.

I hadn't even realized I'd fallen asleep when I woke suddenly, feeling someone's hand on my shoulder. Then I heard Tom's voice, "Hey man, wake up."

I shrugged him off, and tried to roll away from him. "Leave me alone," I groused.

"I'd like to, Marc, but Sheree says come down for lunch." He shook my shoulder again, with more force. "Come on, get up. I know you haven't had much sleep, but then neither have I." I heard his voice from somewhat farther away, then, "I got coffee ready, so drag your ass downstairs."

"Maybe later." I refused to promise anything.

"Come on, Marc. Let's get something to eat. You'll feel better."

"Hi, guy!" Sheree piped most effervescently as I rounded the corner into the kitchen. Her mood seemed to have changed considerably since morning. She smiled brightly, and came over to plant a small, sweet peck on my cheek. I just shuffled over to the coffeemaker, and to the steaming mug they'd already set out for me. She hovered at my back, "You're just in time for lunch."

"That's what Tom said," I mumbled, and put the cup to my lips to venture a hesitant sip. Good. It wasn't too hot to drink. I took a large gulp to begin the process of clearing out the cobwebs.

"Sit down," she pushed insistently against me to herd me toward the kitchen table, where plates and bowls had been set. "Let's eat!" She was altogether much too bright and cheerful for my tastes or present disposition, but her mood was becoming almost infectious, and even though I existed without hope—maybe there were small reasons *to* hope.

Maybe things *weren't* quite as bad as I thought.

As I sat down, and Tom sat next to me, Sheree quickly came around and ladled out soup for the two of us. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like bean soup. I was hesitant to ask, and seem either too picky or ungrateful for being fed lunch, but she adroitly picked up my tired, but curious, inquisitive look, and supplied the answer to the unspoken question.

"Homemade bean soup. One of my all-time favorites." She scooted around the table and filled her own bowl, then sat opposite Tom. "I had this in the freezer from some time ago, and it seemed like a good idea. Today seems like a bean soup sorta day, if you know what I mean."

I nodded, and tried to smile. But it wasn't easy.

She elaborated further as she slid into her chair. "This always reminds me of when I was a little girl, at my grandma's house. We'd have to wait almost the whole day, since she cooked hers real slow, but man! ... the smell!" She inhaled hugely, "And was it ever good!" She bounced her glance from Tom to me, to Tom again, eyes twinkling, smiling.

I checked out Tom's expression, and smiled too, but with infinitely less feeling. "Yeah." Then I thought, "My grandparents were all dead by the time I was born, but I know what you mean."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No need to be. I never knew them, so I don't miss them at all." And to myself I continued the thought, I don't even miss my parents, either, and my mother is still alive. I think.

"Everybody needs a family, you know." It was like she read my mind. The implication of her statement was that I didn't (or wouldn't) have a family. I understood what she was saying.

"Well," I gestured to the two of them, "I got you two." Most of the time, I didn't add.

She smiled at that. "Yeah," she agreed, "but we're a *really* strange family."

I studied Tom's face, looking for some sort of acknowledgment or reaction to her words. He just ladled spoonfuls of soup into his mouth, and seemed not to be paying very much attention to the dialogue at the table. Then I began to wonder just where Sheree was planning to take the conversation, given her odd, left-handed remark.

I decided to diffuse or redirect things, a bit. "I know I'm a little strange. So is Kerrilyn, too, I guess."

Tom then looked straight at me. I couldn't read his expression. Slowly, calmly, he turned toward his wife. "Yeah. And things are gettin' stranger by the minute."

"Let's just eat our lunch." Sheree picked up her spoon. "OK?"

"I dunno. Maybe it's time we talked about a couple things," Tom said.

"Kerrilyn's not here," Sheree said. Apparently she knew what the 'couple things' were. "She needs to be here for this discussion."

"I know," he agreed, "but she isn't."

But, I thought I probably knew what the 'discussion' was about. "I don't want to talk about this, at all," I said, almost pleading. I looked around the table, first to Sheree, then to Tom. I wanted to make sure they understood I was in no mood to be pinned between them on the 'Kerrilyn situation'.

Sheree turned to me. "This is not Kerrilyn's fault, Marc."

"It's not," Tom said, eyeing his wife with a hard, closed expression. "The fault lies right here at the table," and he turned to me, eyes softening, "and it's not with you, old buddy."

Sheree had no immediate reaction to his words. I guessed she'd heard all this, before. Probably many, many times. She sighed, and to her husband, said, "Are we going to go through this, again?"

"No," he replied. Then to me: "Do you know what's been going on?"

I wasn't sure whether to just come right out and say it, or not. But, he had to remember that I had been in the bed with the two women when he had come upstairs to 'join' us. When he fucked Kerrilyn. When he took her and ... "Not everything, I think," I said.

"Tell him," Tom ordered.

"Tom, he knows." She looked away, ashamed.

He turned toward me. "Turns out we were right. Apparently the women have a real thing going." He paused, gauging my reaction. Then he wondered, "When did you find out what they been doing?"

I didn't remember, exactly, when it finally occurred to me that there was a lesbian—well, certainly a bisexual—affair going on between Kerrilyn and Sheree. "I don't know. I don't know when I figured it out." Then I had to look away. "Awhile ago, I guess."

"I've known for sure for a couple weeks," he said, looking at Sheree. "Have you known that long?"

"Yes. At least that long."

"Well," he said, "I'm not sure what to do about this." He sounded almost resigned, but I sensed some resistance. "Kerrilyn is pregnant, and Sheree tells me she packed up all her clothes and moved out of your apartment last night. Hell of a situation, now, isn't it?"

I had to swallow before speaking. "What are you going to do, Tom? You're not going to leave Sheree, are you? She still wants you. I still want Kerrilyn ..."

He glanced toward me, then returned his stare to his wife. Spoke to me, "That all depends on what happens, now." Meaning, apparently, that he was willing to take Sheree back if she dropped her infatuation with Kerrilyn. I didn't think that likely to happen. Women didn't work like that, or so she said. Regardless, Sheree had waited so long to make a move. It didn't seem like something that was just going to go away all by itself. Not without a lot of help.

"I don't want to share Kerrilyn with *anyone*," I said to both of them.

Tom turned to me. Something passed over his face, then was gone. "I don't want you to, either. She's good for you, old buddy. I think you should go off, buy a house somewhere in the suburbs, and have lots and lots of kids."

"What's going to happen to you two? What's going to happen to *us*?"

"Me and you?" he asked. I nodded. "Nothing. I'll always be your friend, if you'll have me."

"But Sheree?"

Tom then turned back to his wife, almost grinning. "Let's ask her."

Sheree waited a long time before answering. "OK," she began, "I guess this is Marc's business, too."

Tom nodded. "Yes," he said, "it is."

"Where to start?" Then she decided. "I've always had feelings for women," she said. Tom's expression never changed. "I never understood what those feelings meant, but I know I've always had something inside me that just couldn't be explained or satisfied by a man's touch. By a man's attention."

She addressed Tom, "That you don't understand it, still, I have no doubt. Fortunately for you, you've been blessed with complete and utter heterosexuality, and for you, men are only buddies and pals you play music and sports with. That you have no interest in other men doesn't surprise me, at all. I'm glad that you know so well what you want. But not all of us can say that, necessarily.

"If you sliced me open and took a look at what you found, you'd see that I, too, am basically bolted up right—I like men and really can be happy in a lasting relationship with one. I've been happy in my relationship with you, and still want to be, if it's possible. But inside me there is also this other feeling. I never wanted it to be there and I can't explain why it hasn't gone away, but along with my relationship with you, I also have ... desires ... for a woman.

"Kerrilyn was a bad choice. I love her—we all love her—but to believe that I could make her *my* lover? That was a pretty stupid idea." She laughed, rather ironically, "It ranks right up there with Dave

Mansfield, and you know how big a mistake that was.”

Tom nodded. “Why didn’t you tell me a long time ago that you had these ‘desires’? Don’t you think I had a right to know how you were feeling, especially if you were having all these feelings towards other women?”

She knew he already knew the answer to the question, and spoke for my benefit, “Really, I tried my best to ignore them, most of the time.”

Tom went on, still directing the conversation to educate and enlighten me. “What changed all that? Why did you decide, after five-plus years of marriage, that it was time to stop ignoring your feelings, and do something about them?”

Sheree looked to me when she answered, “It wasn’t exactly a conscious decision on my part. It just sorta happened. You know?” She shrugged, but I thought it was the wrong thing to do. It communicated the wrong message—the message that she didn’t care, or that it didn’t matter. That it wasn’t her doing, or something.

Then Tom asked her, not surprised or repulsed, at all, “And after you did it, and realized what it meant, what did you think about it, then?”

She continued to look at me, making sure I understood. “By then I didn’t really want to stop. By then I started thinking that somehow I—we—could figure out how we could all be lovers, and not make me have to stop loving her.”

Tom looked at me. “Pretty fucked up situation, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know what to think, Tom,” I said, not sure whether I should defend Sheree, defend Kerrilyn, or defend myself.

“Did you know they were thinking about making us a foursome?”

Did I? “No.”

“Whadda ya think about that? Are you OK with that?” I think he knew perfectly well that I wouldn’t be.

“I don’t want to share Kerrilyn with *anyone*,” I said again, but I was feeling terrible. And I really wished she was there to speak for herself. Because I just wasn’t going to be up to it. I was too tired, too weak, too hurt, and too, too ... “Why did you do it?”

Sheree at first thought I was asking her, but saw that I wasn’t looking at her, or at Tom, either. “Who, me?” she said.

“I want everyone to answer that question.”

“What did I do?” Tom asked, going instantly on the defensive.

“You fucked her,” I said.

There was a beat pause. “Oh.”

He sat there some seconds without answering. He was looking at me very intently, trying to ascertain some things, apparently. Then he seemed

to reach a decision, but it was impossible to see which one he reached. "You're right. I shouldn't have done that. I thought ..." and then he faltered.

Sheree chimed right in, obviously knowing *exactly* what he had thought. "Marc." I turned to her. "Tom knew that we had just made love." She referred to her and me. "Was it really such a bad thing, given the situation?"

I just stared at her, eyes wide, unable to speak. Was she defending Tom?

She continued, impassioned, "I was in your arms. I could feel your ... sperm ... leaking out of me." It was graphic, maybe, but she had made her point. "Was it really such a horribly bad thing?"

So I answered her, "Sheree, what you and I did was not a bad thing, but it was Kerrilyn's doing, not mine. She was the one who wanted me to make love to you."

She was gentle, but incisive, "I know. And *you just went along*, didn't you?"

"I guess," I wasn't sure whether I was digging a deeper hole, or filling it in. "I don't know. I guess."

"I'm still sorry, old buddy," Tom said. He looked away, then back. "It won't happen again."

"That's OK," I said, reflexively, but it didn't mean I thought it was OK for him and Kerrilyn to continue ... having sex. It had been a fuck, pure and simple, but I just didn't want to think of her that way. "I never wanted to get between you and Sheree," I said to him.

"You didn't," he said. He seemed certain.

Sheree seemed to sense a resolution of some kind. "There now," she said, smiling, "all better?"

Tom rounded on her, angry. "Just a goddamn minute, here! I may not have had any problem when you and Marc fucked, but that doesn't have shit to do with this fucked-up situation with Kerrilyn."

"Why not?" She still smiled. "*You* fucked her. In fact, you've been wanting to fuck her since day one! I don't see what the big problem is, here. I'm attracted to her, too, just like y'all." The sweep of her hand took in the whole table.

"OK, *that's it!*" I was ready to die. "I can't listen to you all talk about her this way. I can't handle the thought that it's because of *me* that she's here." I was ready to cry. Then I was crying, because shame and humiliation were rushing in on me, and carrying me off. "I brought her here, and now you all," I lifted my hands to them, the two of them who were there in front of me, "are sitting here and talking about her like she

was some piece of meat. Just some fucking piece of *meat!* **Jesus H. Fucking Christ!** *Everyone* wants to fuck Kerrilyn, and all you're fighting over is who fucking gets to do it, first!

"I love you all way too much," I was so choked up I could barely speak. "I love *her* way too much, to ..." I was reduced to a whimper, "You all—Kerrilyn too—are the only family I have ..." In a flood of despair I stood up, mind reeling. "I ... can't ... take this ... anymore," and rushed away from the table, and them, and out the front door.

I don't remember what happened after that.

Chapter 28

I didn't know who to be angrier with—me, or Kerrilyn. First I was angry with myself, obviously, because I had been stupid enough to have become involved with her in the first place, and had *stayed* involved. Then it was Kerrilyn because ... well, because it *was* Kerrilyn.

I must have driven home, because that's where I found myself, later. I was humiliated and ashamed for both of us—both Kerrilyn and me. I was ashamed for myself that I had not seen the truth about her long ago, and had not wakened up and realized just exactly what type of person she was, and cut loose of her. I should have seen back in December what kind of trouble she would be, and been smart enough to cut my losses, but I hadn't. In fact it was tough, just then, to even remember what my logic had been, then, or even if there had been any logic to it, at all! It certainly didn't seem to make sense. Why couldn't I have seen what she was? Why couldn't I have envisioned what would happen, how things would become so royally screwed up if she remained 'in the group'?

Kerrilyn really fucked things up back in December. Sitting at home in front of the window, watching the cars go by on the street below, it was all but too easy to see—too crystal clear. If I'd even been halfway intelligent I would have known that a girlfriend simply *does not* give blowjobs to her boyfriend's friends. Sweet, tender kisses, maybe, but I should have definitely drawn the line at oral sex. And now, of course, she's fucked both Tom *and* Sheree ...

I didn't care whose fault it was—it happened. Kerrilyn was there; Kerrilyn was always horny; Kerrilyn simply could not say no. Christ!

I couldn't decide if I should blame Sheree for discovering her attraction to Kerrilyn, or Kerrilyn for being there and allowing Sheree to act on it. Any other woman would have kept the relationship status quo and remembered that she was taken already—and by a man. Any other

woman would not have encouraged Sheree as I was sure Kerrilyn had encouraged her. Sure, they had used that 'lonely' Memorial Day Monday to get acquainted, and for all I knew, nearly every day since. Given their fireworks of late, there was no doubt in my mind that they had been seeing each other—and often. And quite ruefully, as well, it seemed that Kerrilyn hadn't been any more successful with a woman than she had been with a man.

Whose idea had it been to get us all in bed, again: Kerrilyn's, or Sheree's? Could really have been either, but I put my money on Sheree. And I for one didn't really doubt her motives, at all. I'd been an idiot for not seeing it at the time, but it should have been obvious that if I agreed to get naked with her (and Tom) again, then I'd have considerably less ammunition to throw at her, later. Especially if she allowed me to make love to her, again. The more times I fucked Sheree, the less I would have to say about it, the more times she fucked Kerrilyn.

Oh, no doubt too, that she'd need Tom to finally get a taste of that forbidden fruit, and fuck Kerrilyn. Regardless of how little she might have truly wanted him to touch her, she would definitely see to it that he *did* touch her, so that later he too would have so much less to say about it when it came time to question her. What chutzpah! What evil planning and manipulation! What brilliance!

Kerrilyn, as I finally realized to my penultimate dismay, was obviously incapable of saying no to anyone. Clearly incapable. She would gladly do whatever to whomever—all you had to do was ask. Yeah, even without having tried it, I knew if I asked her to jump in the sack with Tom, again, she would gladly do it without another thought. If I told her it was OK to do Sheree, too, she would happily oblige without batting an eyelash. If I wanted her to get on her knees and submit while *both* Tom and I did her, together, that would very likely be quite OK, too. Notwithstanding the base degeneracy I would have to display to even suggest something like that, she would have no problem with it as long as it was OK with me. Kerrilyn had no morals, and no conscience. What irony, then, that she seemed to have such a definite opinion concerning being pregnant.

How could she look at the prospect of bringing a child into the world and see the consequences and the dangers, but yet not see *any* of the consequences or repercussions of being promiscuous, as well? Since she certainly didn't or couldn't see the dangers or the possible aftereffects of her drinking, why would she single out this one small thing (though it was *anything* but small) to have moral qualms over? And *what about* her drinking? If she was drunk and knew she was pregnant, then she was

unquestionably doing harm to the baby. And in my mind there couldn't possibly be any other explanation than that she was *intending* to harm the baby. Where were the moral objections to that? Were they all mine, and were they all to fall uselessly onto completely deaf ears—or onto no one's ears at all? And that was perhaps the source of my greatest dismay with Kerrilyn.

I couldn't abide knowing the risk she was taking with our baby. It made all other considerations quite secondary, but I knew if she didn't want me to know where she was or what she was doing, then I absolutely would not know.

I was angry for being so blatantly reminded what she and Sheree had been doing. Maybe I knew—maybe I'd known what they'd been doing since that Sunday night up on their bed, but for some reason ... somehow I hadn't quite put all the pieces together. I'd seen them engaged in sexual 'play', but was sex even all that important in this situation, anyway? Did it really matter more what they were doing, as opposed to how they felt? Shouldn't we be more concerned with how they feel about each other, rather than simply what they were doing together?

A male mistake. We think sex is the most important thing. We believe sex defines us and our relationships. We can think anything we want about someone else, but it doesn't really matter if we aren't doing the dirty deed. Women, too, sometimes fall prey to this idea. Maybe it's because we know we can't control what goes on in others' minds, but if we can prevent and prohibit them doing anything to *realize* those thoughts, then we at least have the *veneer* of respectability and control. Because certainly the feelings Sheree had toward Kerrilyn were just as dangerous and damaging as any physical acts they might choose to commit. And if Kerrilyn had reciprocated Sheree's feelings in some way, either verbally or physically, then it wasn't only Tom who had the big problem. I would have one, as well. Hmm, Kerrilyn had told me she was going along with Sheree to protect her feelings, but if she had any feelings of her own—feelings she had essentially denied—then I might be in considerably more trouble than I thought. But then, I also thought: Kerrilyn had moved out. She'd left me. Did I really care, any longer, what she felt or how she felt? She was gone; I was rid of her. What difference did it make if she was in love with Sheree?

Well, it made a lot of difference, because like it or not Kerrilyn was pregnant, and no matter what else happened we were going to have to deal with that, eventually. And if Kerrilyn was really in love with Sheree, then I was going to have some even more serious decisions to make. I wasn't prepared to simply forget I had a child, and let Kerrilyn go off and

raise (or not choose to raise) this child without both my input and support. Maybe things would be simpler if I were to make such a decision, but in my heart I knew that in the final analysis, that wasn't going to happen.

• • •

Moving out of the apartment was one of the hardest things I think I've ever had to do. Probably not *the* hardest thing, strictly speaking, if you listen to my therapist, but at the time I sure thought it was a *difficult* thing to do.

In the first place, I couldn't think about what I was doing. I had to concentrate only on the tasks at hand, and not let my mind drift off into thinking about all the reasons why it could be a bad decision, or all the possible repercussions of the decision: what it meant to me and my (our) future. I could guess how Marc would feel, and though I was absolutely determined to go through with it, I still felt for him. I can't say enough times how very, very sorry I am for what I am and what I've done, but I hope when I see him again, he will forgive me.

I haven't seen Marc in awhile. I've been in this place (the Center) almost six weeks, now, and I think I'm just about ready to be out of here. It's strange. My heart is so fond of my buddy Marc, and every day and every night I put myself to sleep thinking of his handsome face and cute body. I think of his smile, his gentleness, and his desert-dry sense of humor, and it makes me smile. But when we parted it was definitely not under the most cordial of circumstances. He probably hates me now, and I'll be in for a real rude awakening when I see him next. But still, I'm hopeful. I'm even optimistic. I know I can handle it now. Before, I worried incessantly whether everyone would like me, whether I was good enough for the band—whether I was good enough for Marc. I don't know, of course, how Marc will feel about me, but I know if he gives me another chance, I think we can make it.

Man! That's a really neat thing to say. Just the very thought of having a home, and a lover, and a family, and *making it* elates me thoroughly! We can't go back to the past, and we shouldn't spend all our time (and energy) beating ourselves up in trying to make up for things we can't possibly make up for. I don't want to spend the rest of my life living under the spell of the black cloud, always trying to be so good and perfect

all the time, when I know pretty damn well who I am. Meaning, I'm somewhat of a loose cannon and a maverick, and I can only change just so much. Now, sober and (hopefully) thinking rationally, I don't really want to change too much or too many things, because I know I can be a neat person, sometimes.

And we can't, despite what we want, do everything that's necessary to pay back those we've irreparably harmed by our alcoholism. For me, this is a most sober (please pardon the pun) subject. Some things I've done I know will be told to me, because I don't remember everything I did while blacked-out drunk. Some things I do remember, and have and will write about, because it's the *only* thing I can do. I hope, and I pray to God I'll be forgiven. For most things, I'm starting to forgive myself, and every day I try to write down *one more thing* I did bad, or wrong, and when I've cried over it, and prayed enough for guidance and forgiveness, I feel a little better and I let loose a little of that load. Every day, one more piece of the load falls away. And I can't wait to get out of here and go home.

I'm almost starting to show, now, with our baby, and I know Marc will like the size of my boobs, a lot!

Well, I started out to write about moving out of Marc's apartment, then got sidetracked into writing about getting better. I really need to talk about the last few weeks before I got into this place, so here goes ...

I didn't try to put all my stuff in the back of the car. It's a hatchback, true, but I had enough clothes to fill the trunk area, the whole back seat, floor to ceiling, and the passenger's side seat, as well. Since I wanted to get all my clothes, I left my piano and amplifier in the apartment. I don't know, maybe I left them there to remind Marc I'm coming back. Maybe I just didn't have enough room. I don't know.

When I walked in the door, waiting a few minutes after I made sure Marc had left, I saw the note next to the phone. 'Call Sheree' it said in Marc's hurried-but-neat handwriting. I had no time to waste, but I figured I should probably call my girl before I left, just to keep all the bases covered.

I ran to the bedroom and flung open my dresser drawers. As quickly as I could, I grabbed up all my underwear and other stuff, and then made for the closet to get my suitcases and get packing.

The suitcases were stuffed full in no time, and staggering and grunting, I lugged them both out to the car. Then I made about a dozen trips from the closet to the car, carrying as much as I could. It was no fun, considering I wasn't quite drunk anymore. But until I was fully packed up and out of there, I had no time to restore my buzz, either. Of course, my

head throbbed with each labored step from the elevator to the car. Then multiply that throb by fifteen trips (or did I say a dozen?) and you have the extent of my misery. I'm not asking for sympathy, so don't worry. I'm just stating the facts as best I remember them.

Then, other than my piano and amplifier, which I had no room for, as I said, I was packed. And it was only a little after eight-thirty. I limped back upstairs to call Sheree. She answered almost immediately.

"Hey!" I said, much more cheerfully than I felt. To keep functioning, I had to remain detached from what I was doing, and actually pretend nothing unusual was happening. I almost can't believe I was able to do it, but I was. I must be a better actor than I thought. "What's going on?" I asked when she said 'hey' back. We'd long since passed the point where we needed to identify ourselves to each other.

"Nothing much, here," she said. I noticed a strange tone to her voice. It meant she knew I had stormed out on Marc that morning. "What's going on with you?"

"Just got back to the apartment." It was the truth, you know. I didn't say any more, right then.

"You're going to be late for the performance."

"I know. I was just ready to jump in the shower when I thought I ought to give you a call. Especially since Marc left a note here."

"Don't worry about me, lady. I think you need to hurry up and get your sweet ass to the club. If you're late, there'll be some kind of hell to pay."

"Sher', I can't possibly make it on time, now. I'm going to be late. That's all there is to it."

"What were you doing, may I ask, that made you so late?"

"I had to wait till Marc left."

"Uh-huh. Do you mind telling me why?" It sounded suspiciously as though she knew what was going on.

"Sure." I started to clear my throat, but suddenly it constricted, and my 'ahem!' came out like a retching, gagging sound.

"What's the matter?" came the worried inquiry over the line.

"Nothing," I tried to say, but it came out as a strangled, strained sound. I forged ahead, anyway. "Sheree, I'm moving out of the apartment."

Silence.

More silence.

And still more silence.

Gad! I thought. She's died on the line. "Sheree?" I ventured.

"You've moved out." A whispered statement, not a question.

"Yeah. I need to, right now." My words rushed ahead to explain, lest I falter and fail in my resolve. "I need to get away and think about this pregnancy thing. And about Marc. About you. About *everything*. You know, Marc wants to marry me. Sheree, I don't want to get married. I can't get married!"

"Do you love him?"

"You know I love him something awful, but right now I just don't know if I can handle it. Not with everything else. Sher', this is way too much, too soon. The band is just gettin' goin', and we're talkin' about playing the beach in the fall. It'll be the season down there, and I don't want to miss it. I didn't expect to get pregnant, babe, and now that I am, I don't know what to do about it."

"You don't have to go through with it, you know."

"I know, and I'm thinking about that all the time. But I need to get away where I can think better, without everybody always telling me what to do."

"Am I always telling you what to do?"

I had to be honest, "Sometimes, but not always. I can handle you, I think. You're different. It's Marc I can't handle. When he talks about the baby, and getting married, something in me just freezes up and I can hardly move. He scares me." I paused, hoping she'd say something. But, no. "Sher', I really need to do this. Do you understand?"

"I think so." She paused, herself. "Would I be able to talk you out of it, if I didn't?"

I had to think, a moment. "Yes. But please, Sher', don't! Don't talk me out of this. Not now. I feel too trapped. If I don't get away for a while, I don't know what I'll do!"

She warned, "Don't do anything you'll regret, sugar."

Ice water ran down my spine. *Danny*. "Sheree," I felt the urge to be insistent, "don't ever, *ever* call me 'sugar,' again."

"Why not?" she started to ask, but I think my sudden arctic tone made her think better of it. "All right," she said, "I won't. But please, be careful. And take care of yourself."

"I will." I looked at the time. Whoa, gotta hurry! "I promise."

"If you really think you need to move out—*really* think so—then it's the right thing no matter what Marc may think about it. No matter what I think, either." She sounded supportive and positive, but I wasn't so sure. She concluded, "Do you have a place to stay?"

"I think so, yes."

"You sure you're going to be all right?"

"Yeah." But ... "I think so. I hope so." I wasn't any more sure than

she was, and she wasn't sure, at all.

"I worry about you, babe." She coughed, "I love you, you know."

"I know. I love you, too, Sher'." I was glad of that.

"You're still going to the club, tonight?" She said it as if she thought there was any doubt.

"Of course! I wouldn't miss the gig for anything. I hate the fact I'm going to be late, but there's nothing I can do about it, now. Anyway, I need to get in the shower."

"Marc is going to be pretty upset when you tell him."

That's an understatement! I thought. "I know, Sheree, I know." I was getting impatient, because the clock wasn't waiting on anyone. "I'm going to wait until after the job tonight before I tell him."

"So, you've already packed up your things?"

"I thought I already told you I did."

"If you did, I forgot. Are you sure you're going to be all right?"

"I'm sure. I gotta go."

"OK. Call me later."

"I will. Bye." She said 'bye' too, and I hung up. I zipped off to the shower, my last one in the apartment (so far), and hoped everything would eventually turn out OK. Then, I had no idea, and even now I'm not completely sure, but now I know how we can make it work, and I feel *so much better*.

I hurried taking a shower and getting dressed. (I had left out my outfit for the performance so I wouldn't have to walk to the car naked, don't you know.) By nine-fifteen I was out of the house (apartment?) and on the road. But just in case, I grabbed what was left of my good scotch and snuggled it between my legs as I made for the expressway.

Once safely on the highway, I smoked a cigarette, the first one since getting back to the apartment, and swigged on my scotch. In a few minutes, I felt better, my headache pain adequately anesthetized by the alcohol. The knot and boil in my stomach, though, was just getting ready to kick into high gear. I had half hoped the booze would make the pain in my stomach go away, too, but I really knew it wouldn't.

• • •

I got a phone call from an old friend the Monday morning after Kerrilyn moved out. I had been devastated on Sunday (as well as being

exhausted from lack of sleep) but by Monday I was rested, and merely only severely depressed. I had work to do, so I went back to it and threw myself into it, hoping to be able forget about Kerrilyn, the whole messy affair with Sheree—and everything, for a while. And as I said, on Monday about mid-morning I got a phone call, and the old friend was, of course, Mel Howe.

“Christ, Marc,” she immediately launched, “things are a fucking mess!” That was the fucking understatement of the fucking century, as far as I was concerned.

“It’s worse than that,” I said, leaning back in my chair, “it’s a fucking disaster.”

“You sure you got the facts right?” She was asking *me* if I had the facts right?

“What ‘facts’ are you talking about?” I hadn’t told her anything. She’d just started the conversation with that declaration, above.

She enumerated. “Fact one: Kerrilyn moved out of your apartment Saturday night, after the gig.”

“Right.”

“Fact two: She’s pregnant, but doesn’t want to be, and that’s why she moved out.”

I wasn’t so sure of that, necessarily, but ... “I guess.”

“And fact three: Sheree Germaine has been having an affair with her.”

That was number three, all right, but I almost choked on my reply. “Uh, yes.”

“Is that it?” she asked. “Anything else?”

“*Anything else?!?* Isn’t that fuckin’ enough?” One more thing and I was ready to get an automatic rifle and find a bell tower somewhere. (*Not funny*, Marc Huffman. You can’t *do* that.) “Know any college campuses, maybe, that need strafing?”

She seemed to catch the drift of my comment instantly. “I went to school briefly at Agnes Scott. But they don’t need strafing, just maybe a good stiff dick, now and then.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I have much interest in women, right now. For some strange reason, I seem to have developed an aversion to vertical smiles, at the moment. Call it an allergic reaction to being fucked over.”

She laughed, not offended, “Then it’s safe to come over?” She had always seemed to appreciate my black, parched sense of humor.

“Well, I’m at work right now, but sure ... it’s safe, I guess. You won’t get any seductions from me, anyway.”

She feigned mock disappointment. “What a shame.”

And I wondered what she meant. Surely, she couldn't be interested in me, at all. What about Troy Dancer? So I asked, "What do you mean, 'what a shame'? Mel, I'm way too beat up to even think about trying to get in your pants. I can't believe you're even *suggesting* such a thing. Not after what we've been through, together, and certainly not while you're shacking up with our guitar player."

"But I'm not, anymore."

"What do you mean? Did he move out?" I mentally recalled the original arrangements.

"I moved out. Left him with the apartment. I just hope he keeps the rent up, 'cause my name is on the lease."

"I'd say I was sorry to hear that, but I think it's about the best thing you've done in a long while."

"Gee, thanks, Marc." She obviously didn't appreciate my very left-handed compliment. "How would you feel if I told you Kerrilyn's moving out was a good thing?"

"It *is* a good thing, as it turns out."

There was a barely perceptible pause. "I don't necessarily agree." Hmm, interesting.

I tried to decide whether to get angry, or just let it go. I let it go. "Well, it doesn't matter, because she's probably going to be kicked out of the band, now, and that'll just be the end of that."

"I think you got it backwards. She's *not* kicked out of the band. I talked to Troy, and I can tell you he's not planning any such thing. She's been forgiven for being late to the job the other night. When I talked to him, he didn't even know she'd moved out on you, and besides, that doesn't have anything to do with the band."

"Just with me, maybe."

"Certainly—with you."

"Well, what if I decided to quit? I'm not sure I want to be in a band with her."

"Don't quit. I can understand why you're upset with her, but come on. Don't quit the band." She sniffed, "We can work this thing out, I think, and get back to business again."

"I don't know. Having an ex-girlfriend in the band might prove to be pretty difficult. Especially one who's screwing my best friend's—and the bass player's—wife. She's also pregnant. I think we might be headed for some pretty difficult times, you know?"

"I agree. Fucking where you work is almost always a problem, but since you were living with her before she became our vocalist, I guess there isn't much we can do about that. Believe me, I know just how

difficult it can be.”

But, that wasn’t particularly encouraging. Actually, it wasn’t encouraging at all. “But you still think we can work this out, and not end up breaking up?”

“This band is very good, you know.”

“I know.”

“Other bands survive these kinds of breakups between members.”

“So, you think we’ve broken up, then—Kerrilyn and me?”

She cut right to it. “Do you want to be ‘broken up’ with her?”

“I didn’t have any choice in the matter, Mel. *She’s* the one who moved out.”

“So, when she comes to rehearsal next Tuesday, are you gonna have a problem with it if she doesn’t just agree to move back in?”

“Next Tuesday? Aren’t we practicing tomorrow night?”

“Not anymore.” She went on, “Both Tom and Dancer think we should take a break and let things cool down. Rehearsal is canceled for tomorrow night. Next Saturday, too. Dancer can’t make it.”

“A break? Cool down?” It sounded suspicious, like they were doing this just for my benefit. “Mel, I don’t need a break. I don’t want a break; I want to play.”

“Well, I think you need to take a break from Kerrilyn, regardless.”

“I need to take a break.” It was a question phrased as a statement.

“Whatever.” She didn’t seem to want to argue about it. That was fine with me. “Rehearsal is canceled until next Tuesday. We have to get together at least once next week because we got that ‘live audition’ at ‘688’ coming up a week from Saturday. You know, don’t you, that if they like us we’re playing there all during the week of July fourth.”

“I knew Tom was trying to get us in there, but I didn’t know we’d gotten it.”

“We got it. We start around nine PM Saturday night, and if we’re lucky, we get to play Tuesday through Friday night.”

It seemed like good news, but I wondered, “Does Kerrilyn know rehearsal is canceled tomorrow night?”

She seemed to shrug into the phone, “I don’t know. No one has talked to her that I know of. But, I’m more worried about the job. Did you tell her that we might have a job coming up?”

“I don’t remember. Maybe.” Then I realized, “But Mel, she was probably way too drunk to remember it.” No matter. “Do you think she might show up at the studio tomorrow night?” I admit that I was thinking. Not really plotting, just wondering if I could use the canceled rehearsal as an opportunity to talk to Kerrilyn.

"Marc, don't try to talk to her, right now."

Then I thought: Did I want to talk to her, under the circumstances? Was I even in any shape to talk to her? I didn't like it, but I had to agree. "No, you're right. I *don't* want to talk to her."

She seemed to disagree, somewhat. "Give her a break. Give yourself a break. Relax, cool down, and when you're ready ..."

"What cooling down? I'm cool, completely." But no, I was anything but cool. I was *furious*. "She's gone. I don't want her back. Not now. Maybe not ever. You know?"

"You sure about that?" She seemed to think I shouldn't be—so sure.

"All I can say—again—is that I wasn't the one who moved out. *She was*. She's gone. And as far as I'm concerned, it may be a good thing, after all. Good riddance to bad rubbish. That's what they say, isn't it?"

"Something like that. But don't—"

"—Look." I decided to change tack. "What would you think if your boyfriend suddenly turned out to be gay? I realize he couldn't get pregnant, but wouldn't you find his interest in the same sex a little hard to swallow?" Jeez, a pun. "And what if that person he was 'interested in' turned out to be a very, very good friend of yours? What if they turned out to be married to your very, very best friend?" I paused, but mainly to catch my breath. "What would you think?" But she didn't take the bait. "I know what I would be thinking, and it would be just about what I'm thinking, right now."

"Mel, she's out of control. I'm not sure she was ever in control, but she's gone way over the line, now. I mean—can you even imagine what it must take to risk throwing away *everything* just so you can get your jollies with someone new? Let's not forget, either, that this also means you're definitely breaching the barrier between *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality*. And not just a little. That little romp after my birthday party was one thing. Hell, I think we almost expected the two women to do something with each other. We *were* all in the same bed together, after all. But, now ..." I suddenly lost the desire to go on. The realization of it was falling all about me, and it made me ill.

"Are you sure everything is Kerrilyn's fault?" She sounded as though she knew something.

"No. Only half. The rest is Sheree's fault."

"OK, but hold that thought," she said.

"Why? Do you have somewhere to go?"

"No. It's just that we're starting to stray off into some very personal stuff. I think it would be better, probably, if we had this talk in person." She paused. "How does that sound?" Of course, she was right, and I had

to agree. She went on, "So, is it all right for me to come over, tonight, so we can talk about this more 'privately'?"

"You're not tired of hearing me bitch and complain, yet?"

She laughed, lightly. "Oh, I think I can take you venting your anger a little bit longer, maybe." Then she promised, "We'll sort things out tonight, OK? You can bitch; I will listen. What do you say?"

"OK. Come on over." It was eleven o'clock in the morning. "I get home about six, usually. I'll even make dinner."

"Deal," she said, and that was the end of our phone conversation.

• • •

After moving out of Marc's apartment, I rented a kind of motel room to stay in while I thought about things. It was one of those furnished, apartment-like places you can rent by the night, the week, or by the month. I had earlier that day put a month's rent down, almost \$400, and when I got there about four-thirty in the morning, more than exhausted—comatose—I unpacked the car. Then I got my bottle of scotch and a glass of ice (I was hot, so I opted for ice) and sat down in front of the TV to do some serious drinking.

Sheree told me I called her later, while I must have been out of my mind, but I don't remember it. If I really want to know what I said, I can ask, but no one seems to think it was important.

I finally woke up Sunday afternoon late, well after four o'clock, and tried to assuage my pounding head with a handful of aspirin. Then I got sick on the aspirin, and again coughed up some blood in the process of getting rid of the offending substance. It worried me a little, since I really hadn't seen any blood since vomiting in Marc's kitchen. But, after seeing what came up when I was there all alone, it made me feel all the more ill, and then I vomited up a whole lot more. Blood too. And too much to be ignored. *Now* I was scared. *Now* I was terrified. But still, I didn't do anything about it, such as go to the doctor or call anyone. I just sat in pain in front of the TV and sweated icy bullets, hoping I wasn't dying.

There's a psychology at work, here. I'm not much for analyzing people's motivations and stuff like that, but I understand, now, why someone (like me) would sit all alone in their apartment all day worrying themselves sick over barfing up some blood. Especially why they wouldn't do anything about it.

I know, now, that it was just a little matter of ‘acute hemorrhagic gastritis’ (that, from the doctor) that all my drinking, barfing, and subsequent copious consumption of aspirin had caused, (all better now, thank you) but at the time I was sure I was bleeding to death, internally. I couldn’t imagine why—just that it was happening. I was shaky, I was sweating (literally), and my whole abdomen *burned* like seventeen hells. Seventeen hells is about as bad as it gets.

Being sick is, by itself, pretty bad. But the aloneness I felt while I laid there on that old, raggedy couch watching that old, raggedy TV was truly the worst experience of my life. I don’t think I’ve ever been as lonely as I was that Sunday. Grandma’s death had nearly wiped me out, and it’s right up there in the top five, but I think I came very close to ending everything that day.

You’ve heard the term ‘Black Friday? Well, that Sunday was my ‘Black Sunday’. I laid there, abdomen burning up, bleeding in my stomach from all the booze I was consuming, **and I knew at the time I was bleeding because of the alcohol**, and I still drank a half-bottle of scotch so I wouldn’t have to feel the pain, so much. If I ever had a better reason for *not drinking*, I surely didn’t know what it was. And I was totally forgetting about the *baby*.

I was losing everything. I had left Marc, and I was determined not to go back to him, no matter what the cost. Though I was pregnant with his baby, I was so afraid to lose *myself* if I called him. For so many years, I seemed to exist only as a reflection of someone else. While I knew him, I only existed *for* Danny, not for, or as myself. I was property—I didn’t matter. But I thought I had begun a move to discover and become myself, and between Marc and me, rightly or wrongly, I needed to firmly establish who I was. I had to exist as he existed, separate and away from any other person. But, I was really just afraid. Afraid of having a baby. Afraid of having Marc be my husband. Afraid of being a bad mother. Afraid of admitting I had gone back to my old, bad ways and turned a trick. And afraid of facing the fact I knew I had to stop drinking. And I knew I couldn’t.

• • •

Five o’clock rolled around, and with the crowded, anonymous wave of coworker departures, I took the opportunity to scoot out alongside them, even knowing I’d come in more than a little late. Mel Howe was

coming over, and I wanted to get home a little before six so I could straighten up the living room. As it was, I just barely made it home in time to beat her to my door, and had only just whisked my pillow and blanket off the couch and deposited them in the bedroom when she rang. I had been sleeping on the couch, since the bed smelled too much like Kerrilyn, and I was too depressed to change it.

Mel was smiling brightly when I swung open the door. Sad to say and true to form, I found it somewhat too difficult to smile as I ushered her into my entryway. I closed the door behind her, apologizing. "I just got home two minutes ago. Sorry the place is a mess." She slowly followed me as I wandered toward the living room. "I wasn't expecting anyone to come over." I looked over my shoulder to see her expression. She still smiled.

She unslung her purse from her shoulder. "Don't worry about it. You should see *my* place." Then she stopped herself. "Wait! I don't have a place anymore." She grinned, "It's Troy's place, now." She snickered, "You should see it! By comparison, you're a fucking prince."

I motioned her to take a seat on the couch. Seemed like the best place, to me. "I don't feel like a prince. I feel like I've been fucking pounded in the ground." I discovered I still had my tie on, so I loosened it. Then, once I restored blood flow to my brain, I realized that I was thirsty. Maybe a beer would taste good. "You want a beer, or something?"

"Sure," she said as she slipped off her sandals, actually just a pair of rather aged, foam rubber thongs, "a beer would be good."

I thought she noticed me noticing (and admiring) her, and pulled her long, tanned, shapely legs up to one side and tucked her darkly painted toes up under her equally shapely rear end. It had been a very warm day, and her jeans shorts were cut very short; her V-neck, sleeveless, snug-fitting top wasn't quite long enough to cover her belly button as she lounged on my couch. The small, pert swell of her breasts brought back sad-sweet memories. Yeah, she was still a little thin for my tastes, but she was no doubt an attractive woman. Even more so than before. Troy Dancer was an idiot to leave this one unattended, and thus losing her. I knew Mel Howe, and she wouldn't be one to hang around forever if you weren't giving her the stiff one on a regular basis.

So, once again my timing with women seemed all wrong. Only the barest of sighs escaped my lungs as I trudged off to the kitchen for the first of what I hoped would be many beers.

She waited to talk until I returned. "Here." Smiling, she pointed to the spot on the couch next to her. "Sit; relax; drink beer."

"Yes, ma'am," I obediently replied. She gave me a couple minutes to

finally stop moving, relax, and ingest a few swallows of the icy cold stuff.

"You've probably forgotten where we left off our conversation, this morning," she began. I nodded, and took another sip while I followed her big brown eyes. She continued, "I thought so." She cleared her throat and took a swig from her bottle. "If I remember correctly, you had just made the statement that you thought everything was Kerrilyn's fault." I started to object, but she waved me off. "OK, not her fault. You blame Sheree for deciding she wants to 'experiment' with another woman, and for choosing Kerrilyn."

I agreed, "Sheree is at least half to blame for this fucked-up situation, for ... just what you said. But Kerrilyn—"

"—Right," she interrupted, and smiled. "The two women have been messing around doing things they ought not be doing."

"Not if they expect everything to remain as it is—as it was."

"So," she seemed to be gauging me carefully, "you haven't done anything ... inappropriate ... with anyone ...?"

That caught me by surprise, somewhat. Maybe I expected that she knew what I had been doing with Sheree, but somehow I didn't equate my behavior with Kerrilyn's. Somehow it was different. But, I felt compelled to defend myself, anyway. I waved my hand dismissively, "Mel, what I did was maybe a little irresponsible—reckless, maybe—but at least I chose a *woman* to be my partner."

"Noted." But I detected a hint of ironic amusement in her voice. Her eyes verified it. "You're fucking Sheree," she made it sound so *sordid*, "but yet everything is Kerrilyn's fault?"

I shook my head. No, that's not what I had said. "I'm pissed with Kerrilyn because she wouldn't tell me she was pregnant, and because she decided she couldn't take living with me, anymore, and moved out."

"But you don't blame her for what she's been doing with Sheree?"

"Of course I do! I think Kerrilyn should have left things where they were. One time; one fling; nothing more. That she could—that she *would* go further—I don't think there's any excuse for that. Sheree may feel for another woman, but Kerrilyn should know that it simply cannot be her. Mel, what kind of person—"

She held back the remainder of my question with a hand on my arm. "Marc, Kerrilyn is sick."

"No shit."

She sniffed, went on, "But I want to get back to *your* behavior over the past few weeks."

I guess her nose was runny, or something. Maybe it was from the cocaine she had sometimes done. I know in my earlier experiences with

her it had been a factor. A very negative factor. "Are you doing coke again? I just thought I'd ask. No harm in making a friendly inquiry." Of course, I had deflected her question in the process.

She took her hand away. "No, I'm not." And amazingly, she wasn't offended by my asking, either.

I noticed the cessation of her touch, and regretted it. "I'm sorry I brought it up."

"It's OK. You have the right to be upset if I was snorting coke again. I gave the stuff up three years ago, and I've been pretty good at keeping away from it since then."

"Good for you. I didn't know you'd quit."

"It's no big deal. I just don't do cocaine anymore." Then, she changed the subject. "But, about what you've been doing with Tom's wife ...?"

There was no avoiding it, apparently. I scowled, "What about it?"

"So, you don't see anything wrong with what you've been doing?"

Her question was pointed. Very sharp and pointed.

"OK, Mel. What I did was wrong. I shouldn't have let Sheree fuck me in their hot-tub. I shouldn't have fucked Sheree up in their bed, either. Either time."

Her eyes went wide. "You did it *twice*?" She seemed more than a bit surprised.

I answered, very slowly and carefully, "Yes." And I could hear how that might sound to someone outside the situation. "It's not what you think."

She drank from her beer, letting the bottle go with a sucking *smack* from her lips. "Really? Hmm." And another suck from the bottle. "What, exactly, *should* I think?" Then there was a pause of several seconds. She held her beer inches from her pursed lips. I remained silent, watching her. No sense making things worse. But she asked, glancing sideways at the side of my face, "Who gave Kerrilyn that big sucker bite she had on her neck? I originally thought it was probably you, but now I remember that you also had one, as well." Thankfully, the dark patch on my neck had nearly faded out. "Could have been Kerrilyn, I suppose," she sniffed, "but I think you both probably got them from the same person."

That was the truth, of course. So I decided to quit before I got further behind the eight ball—I said nothing. Just looked at her and tried not to give anything away with my expression.

She got the point—that was enough. So she decided to drop her questions about my behavior, and get back to the *real* issue at hand. "Well, I'm serious about what I said earlier. I don't want you to quit the band. We need you. *I* want you—" then she corrected herself, eyes fluttering

downward “—in the band.”

I heard her *faux pas* and replied, looking away momentarily, “Yeah, I wouldn’t want me, otherwise, either.”

She tapped me on the arm with her knuckles. “You know I didn’t mean that. And besides, you said you weren’t interested in me, anyway.”

I turned back to look into Mel’s dark, pretty eyes. She was peering at me most intently. I had to say, “Oh, I like *you*. It’s just women I can’t stand.”

She laughed. I like it when she laughs at my jokes. “Relax, Marc. I’m going to have a talk with Kerrilyn.” I made a rather disgusted sound, indicating my skepticism of the likelihood of her success. She ignored my rude interjection. “We’re going to work this thing out, somehow.”

“I don’t see how.”

“*Somehow*. Promise me this: Wait till rehearsal next Tuesday, OK? If Kerrilyn shows up, or if she calls me before then, I’ll talk to her. If she doesn’t,” she shrugged, “then you win, and we can all go find a new lead vocalist. Or maybe Troy can take over that responsibility. I don’t know.”

“You can talk all you want, but I don’t think you’re going to change anything. She moved out; she’s gone. Unfortunately, I don’t think there’s anything left to talk about.”

“Don’t give up so easily. I think there’s still hope.”

“I don’t.”

But, I was sure she was getting damned frustrated hearing the same old tired line from me. I couldn’t blame her, since she was trying so hard to turn me around, but she had to eventually come around to the understanding that *I wasn’t going to get over it*. As far as I was concerned, it was all over.

And that made me very sad.

“Well,” Mel said, apparently noticing my downcast, discouraged look, “I know you’re upset. Maybe what you need is a little ... diversion from things. A little break from the same-old, same-old.”

I thought she must be referring, somehow, to herself. “I’m not going to find out you’ve been fucking Kerrilyn, too, am I?”

“Me? *No*.” She seemed to take some offense from that, “And neither has Troy, either.”

“I’m sorry, Mel, but how would you know that, exactly?”

She finished her beer, leaned over, and set the bottle carefully on the carpet in front of her. She was very fluid and limber. She straightened. “Well, me and Danzinger haven’t even had sex for the last three months, or so. I don’t think it’s in him.” She shrugged.

I finished my own beer. “Really?” That sounded almost incredible,

given how attractive I thought Mel was. "Maybe he's just so *satisfied* with Kerrilyn that he doesn't want anyone else." Oops! "No offense, Mel. I think you're very attractive." I had started to get up to get us more beers, but hesitated when I goofed.

She seemed to look past my terrible blunder, and used her hands to smooth down her top. I was drawn to follow her movements. "Thank you for saying so. But, I think you're unfairly trashing Kerrilyn's reputation." I started to disagree, but she continued, "Now, I'm not saying what she did was right, nor am I absolving *anyone* of anything," it was a pointed accusation, in my direction, it seemed, "I just think you've gone completely overboard in thinking that she's been doing it with everyone. Or anyone, in particular."

I was on my feet, moving toward the kitchen. I called over my shoulder as I opened the refrigerator. "Wouldn't you?" Because, I knew some things she didn't know. Some things that involved Tom.

"No."

I closed the door, started back. "And why not?"

She leveled a finger at me as I approached, "Because Kerrilyn loves you."

I stopped next to the couch, caught up short by her use of that L-word. *So fucking what?* I thought, and my pained look allowed silence to reign awhile. I broke it, full beer bottle being offered to the woman curled up on my couch there. "If she loves me, Mel, then why did she *lie* to me about it?" I returned to my place next to her.

She pulled her legs out from under her and stretched them out. Happy toes wiggled. "What did she lie to you about? Sheree" I shrugged, yes. She went on, more toe-wiggling, "Did you, like, ask her pointblank if she was having an affair with Sheree, and did she, like, say 'no, I'm not?'"

"No, not exactly. I just asked her if ..." what *had* I asked her, exactly? "... I'm not sure what I asked her. Doesn't matter, because she lied to me about it. I mean, she *knew* what I was asking. There was absolutely no chance she had misunderstood, because she was quite angry and indignant that I would even *suggest* such a thing to her.

"She knew what I was asking—and she denied it."

Mel absorbed what I'd said, then went forward with, "Let me ask you this, if I can."

"I'm ready." I guess.

"Has Kerrilyn done anything with Tom, lately, that you know of?" Of course she knew about that now-famous 'incident' back in December.

But, I had to lie. I don't know why, but I just couldn't tell her the truth of what I knew—of what I'd seen. I shook my head. Was it too emphatic?

"No. Not that I know of."

Her eyes said she saw something in my blank, forced expression, "Are you sure?"

"Yes." The less said here, the better. But a thought suddenly flitted across my mind: Who was I protecting by lying? Tom? Kerrilyn? Me?

She asked, "Do you think Tom would do anything like that, again?"

"Like what?" I had to keep up the charade.

"Like, do anything with Kerrilyn." Her tone and intent look seemed to suggest that given all the other shit she was finding out, there was still one more dirty shoe to be dropped.

"Uh, no."

Still, Mel persisted, "And you're sure?"

"Yes." But, all this persistence sparked my curiosity. So, I just had to ask, "Why do you ask?"

She sounded as though she really didn't want to say it, "I dunno, Marc. Something someone told me, maybe."

"Who? What did they say?"

"Nothing, really." Her eyes gave little away, or too much. I was lost. "If you're sure Kerrilyn and Tom have been good little boys and girls with each other, then it's nothing."

But I wasn't going to press the subject. I wasn't happy about the truth—that they *had* done something—but I was also well aware of what I had done with his wife, all the same. And besides, since they had done it right in front of both Sheree and me, no one was hiding anything from anyone.

Except maybe from Mel and the rest of the band, that is. It was a sick situation.

She broke my silent, ashamed reverie, suddenly. "Tom told me you accused him of being the father of Kerrilyn's baby."

I wasn't sure how to respond, because I had believed him when he told me that he had not been with Kerrilyn. At least not before ...

"Is that true?"

"Yeah, I was concerned at first, maybe. But Kerrilyn got pregnant by me at least two weeks before my birthday party, by our calculations. At least I'm sure of *that*."

"Why did you suspect Tom, anyway?"

Uh-oh, I get it now. Trapped in a lie. Dead to rights. "All right, Mel. I lied."

She sounded as though she was glad I was coming clean, but I still didn't quite understand it when she said, "I understand how you feel,

though.”

“Feel about what?”

“Since you knew that Tom and Kerrilyn had been together, you naturally wondered if they had been ‘doing it’ all along.” She seemed very self-satisfied, her expression smug. “But they weren’t, so you’re the father.”

But, I was angry that she’d let me lie, at all. “If you knew I was lying, then why didn’t you call me on it?”

Her eyebrows went up, “What were you lying about, Marc old friend?”

“I thought you knew.”

She coughed, shrugged, “I hear a lot of things. Some of them are pretty unbelievable, so I don’t necessarily believe everything I hear.”

“So, you figured out that I accused Tom because I knew he’d fucked Kerrilyn.”

“Or suspected it.” There as a short pause. “*Did he?*”

It was very hard to answer her.

She went on, though. “Can I ask you a personal question? You don’t have to answer, of course.”

Her questions had seemed personal enough, already, but what did I have to lose? “Sure. Why not?”

“I’ve been wondering something,” she began, frowning slightly. I couldn’t read her exact tone of voice. “How many times a week did the two of you make love, on average? Two? Ten? Fifty?”

“You mean Kerrilyn and me, right?”

“Of course, unless you’ve been regularly fucking someone else.” She evidently thought she was quite clever with her bunny-quick comeback.

But the comment didn’t deserve an answer. I did some mental calculations, “I’d have so say almost every night was pretty common. Sometimes more than once a day.”

Mel was apparently impressed, and almost seemed to be talking to herself when she said, “Gee, I’m surprised you had the time—or the energy.” Then she addressed me, “I’ve heard of people like you, but I’ve never known anyone who had a sex-life like that.”

It didn’t seem all *that* unusual. But, “It can be pretty exhausting, sometimes.”

She nodded, “*No doubt.*” I couldn’t tell if she was jealous, or disbelieving, or merely being ironic. No matter. She coughed, and shook her head briefly before continuing. “Who usually initiated all this sexual behavior? You? Kerrilyn?”

I should have been uncomfortable discussing my sex-life, but for

some reason Mel didn't affect me that way. She wasn't just casually interested, which would have made me much more hesitant, and she wasn't too clinically interested, which would have had the same effect. It was the interest of a former lover who still loved me enough to care about me. So I replied, "Mostly Kerrilyn."

"Does that seem normal to you?"

"I don't know," I said, "I really never thought that much about it." So, I thought. "No, I guess not. But, I sort of got used to it, so it didn't seem that unusual." And I thought some more. "I mean, as many times as we had sex, it's a wonder to me she never got pregnant way back in September of last year. Talk about saturation bombing! With no birth control, it should have been a snap."

"I'm not talking about the physiology of her pregnancy, or her capability—or lack of capability—to conceive. I'm talking about the frequency of your sexual activity."

OK. "So, what's your point?"

"Well, *if* she'd been having sex with Tom prior to ..." she left it unsaid "... do you think it was to make up for some lack of sex with you?" I couldn't comprehend otherwise, so I said no. "Do you think she was unhappy or dissatisfied with you or your sexual performance?" Again, male pride said I had to say no. "Then, do you think Tom had any reason to want to screw Kerrilyn?" I didn't want to say, because when I thought about it, I *could* see what kind of reason he might have had. And that only made me feel worse. Mel pressed, "Why are Kerrilyn and Sheree lovers?" Because Sheree is bisexual, I guessed. "And do you believe that?" I supposed so. "Well, do you think Kerrilyn is bisexual?" Well, yes, I said. She seemed not to have expected that particular answer. Said, "OK, no matter."

"No matter—what? Mel," I said, finally, "I don't see your point."

She laughed. "I guess I don't either, now."

But then, it occurred to me. The frequency of sex; the *variety* of sex (which I hadn't told Mel about, but she probably might have guessed); the affair with Sheree; her unremitting horniness; her *aura*. And finally, sex with my best friend Tom. "You think she's got a problem with sex, don't you?"

"Well, she certainly seems a bit oversexed, if you know what I mean, but then ... so do you."

I wasn't so sure. "Because I made love with Sheree, that makes me oversexed?"

"Did you have any damn good reason for seeking her out?"

"No, but I didn't *seek her out*. The first time, she sought me out. The

second time was when she was eating out Kerrilyn. The third time was Kerrilyn's doing."

"Really? Kerrilyn's doing?" She seemed doubtful of the veracity of my statement.

"Yes. I was making love to Kerrilyn—perfectly normal, perfectly acceptable sex up in Sheree and Tom's bedroom—when Sheree came in, naked, and laid down with us."

"OK," she said, watching and listening intently.

"Sheree was mainly intent upon making love to Kerrilyn, while I watched, but Kerrilyn put her between us, and held her there while we ... I made love to her."

Mel digested what I'd said, then said, "Marc. What does that make Kerrilyn?"

I thought I knew the answer. "She's an alcoholic, of course."

"Right." Two beats. "And what else?"

"What do you mean?"

"What else is she?"

Then I caught on. "A sex-aholic?"

"Sexually addicted. Bingo."

"I've never heard of it."

"Doesn't matter. But it's *obviously* true in this case." I was amazed, but I said nothing. She went on, "And it may, in fact, be worse than the alcohol."

That was curious. "How so?"

"It's like a food addiction. You can always quit the booze, but you can't just quit having sex."

Ah, but, "Monks do it."

"It's not the same thing—monks fantasize. Sex is not, per se, physically addicting. It's purely a mental—emotional—addiction. I don't think abstention would work in a case like this."

"So, dear Melinda," I asked, gesturing with the beer bottle, held largely ignored, "what does all this have to do with me?"

She made a similar gesture with her bottle, "Kerrilyn may not be entirely to blame."

"Only half. The rest lies with Sheree. And maybe some with Tom."

"No. If Kerrilyn has a problem with sex—something like an addiction—then she may not be entirely in control of herself."

That was an understatement. "Of course she's not in control. I'd have thought that was obvious."

She frowned, "You know what I mean. I don't think she can control herself sexually any better than she controls her drinking." Then she

deadpanned, "And she doesn't control her drinking very well, at all."

"Well," I said after some time had passed, "you sound like you're saying I should overlook Kerrilyn's overactive libido, but I'm not sure I can do that, very easily. How are we supposed to stay together if she's always going to be doing—stuff—with everyone?"

"I'm not saying that, at all. I wouldn't suggest you overlook her sexual improprieties any more than I would suggest you overlook her excessive drinking."

"But it doesn't do any good to complain about her drinking. That usually just makes her drink more."

"Marc, Kerrilyn needs help."

"So? She needs help, so I should just forgive her, just like that?"

"No. I'm not asking you to forgive her, just yet, just understand her, a little."

I wasn't sure there was any way to understand Kerrilyn, not completely. "Mel, this is all very confusing. I think I need time to think about this."

She nodded agreement, and smiled, "That's what I tried to tell you, before, if you remember. Don't try to see her, right now. Take it easy. Relax. Think."

But I wondered, "Do you think she'll show up at rehearsal?"

She took a long, deep drink from her beer before answering, then shrugged, "I dunno." Then another long swallow. "We'll just have to see."

I had to admire Mel. She didn't try to tell me I shouldn't be upset, but she did try to tell me I ought to examine all the facts and talk to Kerrilyn before I made any decisions that might affect anyone's future. So I agreed, and decided to wait and bide my time until rehearsal, the following Tuesday.

I didn't know if I'd see Kerrilyn again, despite her assurances that I would. I didn't know how she could stand coming to rehearsals and playing gigs, if she had some very important reason for moving out on me—for breaking up with me. I certainly could not have separated the two well enough to function. If I were emotionally involved with a person I was working with, and our involvement ended, I wouldn't be working there anymore. And a band is especially vulnerable to the effects of the members' interpersonal dysfunctions. Put in other terms—when it's over, it's over. Time to move on.

No one had yet heard from Kerrilyn since her drunken call to Sheree. Not too surprising, but I still held out a private hope that she would come to her senses and come around to realizing what she was giving up. Me.

She was giving me up, and I wanted to believe—I was desperate to believe—that I was someone and something worth having, and keeping.

If Kerrilyn showed up for the canceled rehearsal, I expected her to immediately pick up the phone and call someone in the band. It seemed unlikely she would call me, but I felt quite sure she would contact someone. Once she did, then she would find out about the rehearsal next Tuesday and then the job on the following Saturday. Neither Mel nor I could say whether or not Kerrilyn would try to come to the canceled rehearsal, but though we could have fretted and stewed, we decided all we could do was wait and see. If she came or called, then that was good, no matter how she felt about me. If she didn't, or didn't call, then she wouldn't find out about next week's rehearsal or, more importantly, the gig lined up for the following week. And if she didn't make the upcoming performance, then she was out of the band. As simple as that. I didn't want her out—I wanted to see her happy and successful, and to succeed with the music if that's what she wanted. I didn't know about my continued involvement with either Kerrilyn or the band, but I didn't want Kerrilyn to do as I would have done. And quit.

Well, my worries were only partly founded. Kerrilyn showed up at rehearsal, and the gig on Saturday, but it would have been infinitely better had she stayed away. She should have called in sick, since she really *was* sick. She could have done *anything*—except what she did.