

It Is Always Darkest Before the Dawn
By Krista Fink

Standing on the porch, hands on hips, I scanned the back yard disgustedly, taking in each vehicle stranded in the mud. In November my husband and I had moved into a home that we were planning to buy to use not only as our home, but also as the new sight for Ken's business: a wrecker service. I'm sure our neighbors loved us.

Ken decided in January to close his already dying business, but not before it had brought us into the depths of debt and emotional despair. Every day was a struggle for me as I answered the calls of bill collectors, tax agents, unhappy customers, and sundry other distasteful things that go along with closing a business in the red. Ken, of course, didn't want to deal with it and felt it was my duty to answer the phone and free him of the pain of being reminded of his failure.

When he decided to close the business, there was no way we could go through with the purchase of the home. It was just one of those crazy dreams he had that I went along with hoping for the best, for I knew to oppose him was to be accused of bringing him down.

So, the gentleman who was so happy to have us move in with the bank's word that financing was underway, lost his gentlemanly nature when he discovered the current state of affairs. He came to our home one evening demanding to know what was going on.

"You are a coward," he stated simply to Ken. "Why can't you talk to me about this like a man instead of always having your wife answer the phone and do your dirty work?"

I was secretly happy that someone was attempting to put Ken in his place, but still afraid as I knew I was the only one around at whom he could aim his retaliating wrath when the world was against him.

We were to be out of the house by the end of February, along with the twenty or so cars stuck in the mud and snow out back. It was February 11, and we still had no idea where we were going to go. We had found a home that I could actually afford, but as it was an estate sell, the buying process was held up.

When I walked through the door around nine that Friday night, Ken was furious. “Where the hell have you been?”

I reminded him, again, that I was taking a class. He claimed that it was a common courtesy for me to leave a note telling him where I was. I suppose I could have, but I just didn’t since I was in a hurry and had already discussed it with him several times before. He was angry, but unusually calm for the anger I knew he felt, and that scared me.

Within minutes I heard a car pull up and Ken walked out the door without so much as a “goodbye.” I ran out to see him getting in a truck with our friend Jim.

“Where are you going?” I called.

“Out,” came the terse reply.

I called his cell phone and demanded to know where he was going and why he was acting this way.

“Since you don’t have to let me know where you are, I don’t have to let me know where I’m going,” he responded. “We’re just going out for a drink.”

The last time he and Jim went out for a drink, I didn’t hear from him again until three in the morning when he called asking me to come get him from Jim’s house because he

was too drunk to drive. I hadn't seen him until the next day because I refused to go pick up his drunk ass and told him to sleep it off on Jim's couch. A month later I had gotten my credit card statement with a charge on it for \$250 at Southern Exposure from that night.

Anyway, here I was again, fuming. I very maturely told him that if he could go out then I could too, and I proceeded to drive out to the four-lane, turn around, and come back home to watch TV.

Ken came home just an hour or two later. I was still mad that he had acted so irrationally about my class and had gone out wasting more money on beer. He was mad that he hadn't known where I was. But more importantly, he despised me for being mad at him.

I zoned out in front of the TV, too tired to deal with my own anger, too annoyed to deal with his. He wasn't willing to let it go that easily; I came out of my funk as I felt beer streaming down the sides of my face as he emptied a can over my head.

I was infuriated, but said nothing. I simply took a deep breath, stood up, and walked to the bathroom. Bending my head over the sink trying to rinse the sticky, stinky, mess from my hair, I heard him saying something to me, but I didn't care.

When I didn't answer, the intensity of the voice increased. The volume rose. I heard the quick, angry footsteps coming down the hall, and my heart began to pound in the way it always did when I knew the storm was about to hit.

He came around the corner booming "ANSWER ME BITCH!" as he grabbed the back of my shirt, ripping it, and threw me into the hallway against the wall. His hand quickly found its way to my throat and he lifted me easily to just above eye level so that

he could see the panic in my eyes as I watched the hatred grow in his. The veins pulsed in the all-too-familiar red face as his eyes flashed darts at me and spit sprayed from his mouth.

“ANSWER ME YOU STUPID BITCH!” he continued to scream.

I tried to say something, that I was sorry, anything, but the force of his hand around my throat cut off my air supply and thus my ability to speak. I could feel the blood pulse in my head and I began to feel light headed. I panicked and wondered if I had taken my last breath--perhaps hoping I had.

Somehow, I managed to finally squeak out “you’re hurting me,” to which he quickly replied, “Damn straight, bitch, that’s the point.” Then he released me and let me drop to the ground.

There would remain on that wall sticky beer trails running down from where my head had been driven into the wall, and perhaps where I had slid down as he released me. I would not remove them. They would remain for someone else to clean up. Not me. Not this time.

The next day, I would begin planning my escape from that prison. But I must do it ever so carefully, and be such a good little prisoner so as not to raise the suspicion of the iron fisted warden. I had learned from my years with him how to be sneaky and conniving. I would cover each detail and do whatever I had to do to come out of this alive. I meant business. And that was exactly how I treated this plan, as a business deal that must be handled seriously and precisely. I would draw from my acting skills and patience. Whatever it took, I would be his prisoner no longer.