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## Chapter 1 beta v2.0

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## I. Revelations

KIMBERLEE questioned her motives in going to yet another seminar about relationships. It certainly wasn't the chance to be with Melissa in this particular environment. Ironically, her best friend would complain about her own husband, while searching for a better one for Kimberlee.

It was hope that got her out of her condo, even after a long, stressful day at work. Hope that she'd learn something new; hope that she'd find the key to her dream; hope that somehow the partnership that eluded her would come within reach. Though she felt pessimistic, it was hope that made her try one more time.

It was also hope that had her marry Mathew. The hope that after their wedding, he'd resume being the affectionate and engaging companion he was during their courtship. When Mathew remained as distant as he had become during their engagement, despite the ring on his finger, she blamed it on her flaws. She set out to make Mathew love her more and want her more by perfecting herself. She lost weight, she learned to cook the same meals as his mother, she even climbed mountains in the dead of winter. But nothing worked.

After four years of trying, she concluded she lacked "the Grace Kelly gene." This was the only way Kimberlee could justify why her husband never pursued her with gifts. Especially the ones she craved most: gifts of words and time and touch.

Again, it was hope that had her leave Mathew. She'd rather risk being alone for the rest of her life to have a chance at the union she believed was possible. Yes, she wanted children and a family. But she needed support and attention, and laughter and passion. She wanted love and affection, and couldn't live without interest and respect.

It wasn't hope that led her to Brett. That was pure chemistry and charisma. And for a while, it worked. He was attentive, romantic and fascinated by her thoughts and ideas. For about three months. Then he, too, changed.

When it was over, she realized that all the men she was ever involved with were wonderful – in the beginning. *Why did this always happen?* It wasn't when she finally slept with them. She'd tested that theory. *They changed when I was caught and the pursuit was over. It was when I surrendered emotionally.* That's when they stopped putting their best foot forward and the disappointing behavior began.

This meant she needed a new strategy: Don't get caught; don't care more than they do. Or at the least, don't let them know she did. Protect her independence, no matter what. That seemed to be the only way to make men treat her well, for more than a few weeks or months.

She was smart enough to see the conflict. Even though her most enduring relationship with a male was with her tabby cat, Lancelot, in truth she wanted to be caught. She wanted to be adoring and adored, worshipped and devoted. Yes, even at thirty-one, the picture of a successful and liberated woman, she still hoped for happily ever after.

Kimberlee checked her appearance in the mirror, arranged her short dark hair, and added some pale pink lip gloss. Leaving Lancelot with a scratch behind his ears, she locked up and got in her BMW sedan. At a stoplight, she quickly checked her voicemail. A message from Melissa underscored her conflict: "Kimmee, I have the most adorable man for you to meet. I'll tell you about him tonight." In resignation, she asked herself, *But will he be adorable three months from now?*



KIMBERLEE tried to keep her attention on the speaker, a silver-haired man of about fifty. Sadly, nothing new or earth shattering was coming out of his mouth. Just more of the usual spiel about the importance of communication and trust.

She thought, *But what if men won't communicate? And they've already proven they can't be trusted?*

Suddenly Melissa raised her hand, energetically demanding the speaker's attention. Apparently, her petite and feisty sidekick had grown weary of the usual rhetoric as well. Melissa stood when the speaker called on her and, hand on her hip, shoulders thrown back, she challenged, "What I don't understand is why men are great in the beginning – you know, flowers, gifts, great dates and lots of attention – but after a while they turn into weekday workaholics. And on the weekend, they're nothing more than football-watching, pizza-eating, beer-belching couch slugs. Why is that?"

Kimberlee was used to Melissa's hostility towards her husband. It was born of too many lonely nights caring for their three children while Scott worked late in a career he loved. But her blunt description and raw anger sent a jolt through the room. Many women leaned forward, to better see Melissa and hear the speaker's response. Most of the men crossed their legs, presumably protecting their manhood from her friend's cutting remark. Kimberlee, with the best seat in the house, was surprised that the speaker seemed bemused by the comment.

As the speaker slowly drew closer, he deliberately appraised Melissa's pretty face and athletic figure. Then he smiled and said, "Oh, I see. You're a Frog Farmer."

“A what?” Melissa demanded.

“A Frog Farmer!”

Narrowing her eyes suspiciously, Melissa demanded, “And what exactly is a Frog Farmer?”

“Well,” he replied with a lopsided grin, “some women turn *frogs* into *princes*. But that takes a queen, not a princess – or a shrew. Like most women, you, my dear, turn princes into frogs!”

Melissa’s gasp was echoed in the audience. Kimberlee’s friend sat down suddenly, glaring. The middle-aged man held out his hands, palms up, and shrugged his shoulders as if to say that it was a shame, but alas, nothing he could fix. As he walked back up the aisle, Melissa stuck out her tongue.

Grumbling echoed around the room from women equally dissatisfied with the response. But Kimberlee was completely intrigued. She envisioned herself standing on the porch of a large white farmhouse with a field of frogs spread out before her. Each frog had a little human head with a face she recognized from her past. Kevin and Mathew looked up at her from the front row.

*Wow! she thought, I’m a Frog Farmer!*

She realized every man she’d known began as some flavor of Prince Charming. And every man ended up the same: distant, defensive and uncommunicative. She’d assumed the prince was for show, and the frog was their true nature being revealed. *What if they actually were Princes? And something I did changed them?*

Far from needing to dodge blame, Kimberlee was relieved to think she might be the cause of how men treated her. If she was bringing out the worst in men, she could probably stop. She’d tried changing men; it *had* to be easier to change herself.

She puzzled, *But how am I bringing out the worst in men? And how does a woman bring out the best? What’s the secret? An image of a queen flooded her mind. Magnetic, confident, abundant – someone she imagined was in control of her castle and realm.* A thought caught her breath in her throat: *Could I become a queen? What kind of a woman is that, in the real world?*

Fascinated by her own thoughts, she didn’t hear anything else for the rest of the event. As they waited at the valet parking, Melissa ranted about the Frog Farmer remark. “Every woman in that room knew what I was talking about,” she insisted. “It was totally unfair of him to blame me for the self-centered and childish way men act.”

Not wanting to disturb the delicate, expectant state of her revelation, Kimberlee shrugged without comment. Fortunately, Melissa’s car arrived and they exchanged a quick hug.

Driving home, Kimberlee contemplated being a Frog Farmer. The more she considered the probability, the more certain it became that she was indeed a very successful Frog Farmer. And all her friends were too. Curled up with Lancelot, she fell asleep wondering if turning frogs into princes could be learned. *Or do you have to be born royalty?*



KIMBERLEE'S work on Tuesday was hectic, as usual. Managing a large department, with billions of insurance dollars at stake, kept her on the run. It wasn't until she stole away for lunch that she could think about the previous night. Flipping through *PEOPLE* magazine's pages of dramatic breakups, she recalled her vision of rows upon rows of frogs. *Heck*, she thought, *Frog Farming is the norm, even among the beautiful, rich and famous.*

So, where could she find one of the rare women who brought out the best in men?

Her grandmother's face appeared and she remembered dropping in on her grandparents' Pasadena home after an offsite meeting nearby. She'd found them sitting on a new bench in their backyard garden, holding hands. The scene was still vivid: the contented smile on her grandmother's face and the warmth in her granddad's eyes. Kimberlee had the feeling she had interrupted something intimate. If Burt looked at his wife with such obvious affection, after more than fifty years of marriage, she was willing to bet her grandmother was *not* a Frog Farmer. Did that make her a queen?

She recalled Thanksgiving dinner with her grandparents and their new forty-something friends, Karen and Mike. Kimberlee was curious about the way the couple behaved and assumed they were newlyweds. She was shocked to discover they'd been together for nearly twenty years. They were still conspicuously in love and she'd seen Mike looking at his wife tenderly. *Coincidence?* Maybe Karen wasn't a Frog Farmer either. Maybe that's why her grandmother had befriended her?

In that moment, Kimberlee wished she and Karen were friends. Asking the schoolteacher with the exotic looks and gentle nature about men would be far less intimidating than approaching her grandmother. Merely imagining talking to her grandmother about men and romance made Kimberlee feel queasy.

*And, oh dear, what if sex came up?* she thought, in the familiar panic that topic caused. If only she knew Karen better and could avoid her grandmother altogether. Discouraged, she decided to search for someone else who might show her how to bring out the best in men.



RAUL carefully rolled up a piece of gum and popped it into his mouth. He wanted a cigarette but settled for cinnamon flavoring. After two years, it was still a lousy substitute.

He prodded his friend, "So, Jack, how's it going with the ladies these days?"

They were sitting in Raul's office casually observing the bustle of activity amongst the dozen processors through the large glass window. Jack grunted. "If they're not bustin' my bank account, they're bustin' my balls," he replied with characteristic bluntness, in his deep, resonant voice.

"Ah, it can't be that bad," Raul chided.

"You have no idea, my friend. You're lucky you married young and well. Women these days expect too much from men."

"Such as?"

Jack looked at him from under bushy dark eyebrows. “They want me to initiate everything and provide everything, like a man. That’s fine. But they expect me to *just listen with sympathy and compassion*,” he mimicked in a falsetto. “And it’s not enough to be *willing* to go shopping with them, and bring the cash. I have to *want* to go shopping.”

Jack shook his shaggy head. “They can’t seem to make up their minds. Or else they don’t know it’s ridiculous to expect a man to be their boyfriend *and* their girlfriend.”

“Is it that awful?” Raul asked. “I mean, most women are more independent these days. That must have a benefit, right?” He added, “I love having my wife at home with our kids, but sometimes I wish she needed a little less from me.”

Shaking his head again, Jack grumbled, “You’re lucky Sally needs you. Career women don’t need a *man* for anything. And they make sure you *a/ways* know it. No matter what I do, they’re proving they can do it better. One woman even said to me, ‘I can out-man any man,’ as if that were a good thing!”

He chewed on his toothpick. “And have you tried to *impress* an accomplished woman lately? Besides having to guess at what they want, if you give them something they can give themselves, you get no credit. And with the money women are making now, even I could go broke trying to do something they think is special.”

“Why do you bother?” Raul asked.

Jack sighed. “You already know the answer. Success isn’t that satisfying without a partner to share it with.”

Raul nodded; he did already know.

A moment later, Kimberlee walked through the processors’ pit and Raul noticed Jack’s eyes following the voluptuous, suit-clad woman across the room. “What about Kimberlee?” Raul asked. “She’s incredibly smart. And pretty too. You’re always checking her out.”

“Pretty? Hell, she’s gorgeous. But,” he shuddered involuntarily, “way too edgy. And frostier than a shaken martini.”

His aversion didn’t prevent Jack from leaning forward to catch the last view of her. “It’s too bad though,” he added wistfully. “I could spend a lifetime admiring those curves.”



KIMBERLEE finally admitted on Friday night that she couldn’t think of a single woman who definitely wasn’t a Frog Farmer. Except her grandmother.

She thought about the elderly woman who had been such an important part of her childhood. She had been close to her mother’s mother, but that intimacy hadn’t survived adolescence. Their adult interactions consisted of sporadic, cheerful visits where Kimberlee avoided any topic of emotional significance. While she sometimes wanted to break through this barrier, she feared it would inevitably require her to reveal the most shameful part of her life. She wasn’t willing to expose herself in that way, even if it could help her regain a once-precious relationship.

Stroking Lancelot, she realized she also hesitated because she was in awe of her grandmother. She'd seen her standing in a pile of manure, grinning, with pitchfork in hand, while managing to appear adorably feminine, and command respect too. She reminded Kimberlee of an ancient queen, the mythical Earth Mother and a mischievous imp, all rolled into one. *How did any woman pull that off, let alone one almost eighty years old?*

The farmhouse vision would not recede, however. If anything, it grew more vivid and compelling. And how this earthy vision of her grandmother lived could coexist with the possibility of being a queen pestered her. Moment by moment, her curiosity grew. Finally, she called her grandmother and smoothly maneuvered an invitation to a late lunch on Sunday.



MELISSA balanced Sarah on her hip, stepped over a toy tractor, and managed to answer the phone before it went to voicemail. "Hello?" she said.

"Pretending all's well again, huh?" Kimberlee teased.

"Well, Kimmee," she replied with a chuckle, "even if I can't fool you, hopefully Scott will never know how much chaos I reel in around here. You've seen how freaked he gets at any sign that things are out of control."

"My hat's off to you, Mel. As much as I complain about my processors, they're not nearly the challenge of three kids."

Melissa felt gratified by the admiration of her career-oriented friend. She set Sarah in her playpen, balanced the phone between shoulder and ear, and pulled her auburn hair back in a ponytail. "When you pump out a few rug rats of your own, I'll be happy to give you some tips on raising three small children and one large one."

Referring to her husband as a child usually got a laugh out of Kimberlee. This time it didn't and Melissa couldn't imagine why. After an awkward moment, Kimberlee asked, "Speaking of men: who is this Mr. Adorable you forgot to tell me about?"

With the exception of the pause, this was their usual routine. Classmates in junior high, they were each other's oldest and best friend. At twelve they shared fantasies of marrying boys named Gregory and Harlan and each having two perfect children. At fifteen, they added successful and glamorous careers to their lists, as well as changing the world.

They sometimes joked that between them they had the life they'd envisioned: Melissa had the husband and ideal children and Kimberlee was successful in the not-so-glamorous insurance business. They weren't sure yet who was going to change the world, or how. But they could still dream together and counted the other's friendship as key to the foundation of their lives.

Melissa considered it her duty to find Kimberlee a new husband and often fixed her up with Scott's colleagues. "Mr. Adorable is a new guy in Scott's office. He came over for dinner last week and I pre-screened him. He's cute and single, on the way up the accounting ladder, and he wants to meet you. I told him I'd invite you to the company picnic on Sunday. What do you say? Will you come?"

When Kimberlee said she was busy, Melissa's curiosity was piqued. Finally, Kimberlee admitted she was having lunch with her grandmother, in hopes of finding out how *not* to Frog Farm.

"Are you sure 'Frog Farming' applies to you?" Melissa asked. "Isn't that taking on your self what's really the fault of men? No matter what that jerk said, men do change – and not for the better. We both know that too well. Remember how cold Mathew became only months after you married him? Come on! I wanted to kill him."

When Kimberlee didn't respond again, she added, "And you have to do this on Sunday? Wouldn't you rather meet Mr. Adorable?"

Kimberlee started picking at her cuticle and explained her impatience. "I've already set up our lunch and don't want to disappoint her. Besides, my grandmother is the only woman I know who definitely doesn't Frog Farm; I've got to see if she knows something about being a queen that the rest of us don't. She's not getting any younger, and frankly, I don't want to waste another week of my life living in the dark."

That stung. *What does she think I do that's so blind? My husband's not home enough to be cultivated into anything, frog or prince.*

Feeling hurt and defensive, she wished Kimberlee good luck and used Sarah's whining to quickly get off the phone. As she straightened up the family room, Melissa thought about Frog Farming. *Could that actually happen – inadvertently turning a good man into a frog?*

Unbidden, memories of her and Scott's early years brought tears to her eyes. Though both were poverty-stricken college students, they'd been very much in love. Scott was quietly romantic even though he couldn't afford anything as extravagant as flowers or dinner out. She still kept a box full of poems he'd written to her, and a collection of 99¢ stuffed animals that he'd occasionally tucked into her purse, hidden in a drawer, or left on her pillow.

They married two weeks after graduation. Expecting a period of newlywed bliss, Melissa was disappointed by how little time they actually had together. With Scott's eighty-hour workweek as a junior auditor in a big public accounting firm, there weren't many meals they shared. Still, they created romantic moments, like picnics in the backyard at midnight. They'd counted the stars and made love under them.

It was after John was born, followed by Bradley two years later, that the quality of their relationship changed significantly. She'd often thought they must be extremely fertile to have conceived Sarah while rarely having sex. She'd lost track of how many weeks passed without it. Even working out to keep her petite body trim and firm hadn't made a difference in their sex life. Sadly, now she always thought of it as having sex, never as making love.

Melissa told herself it was what happened to mature couples. But as she thought about Kimberlee's Frog Farming notion, she wondered if she had anything to do with Scott's lack of romantic initiative. *Heck, initiative period*, she thought, *except where his job is concerned*. She couldn't get him to do anything at home; whether it was in the kitchen or in the bedroom didn't seem to matter. She'd tried nudging, nagging, criticizing, pleading, even tears. Nothing got through to him and she was always left hurt and even more angry and hopeless.



If she told the truth, she regretted how things had become between them. Scott was her children's father and the family breadwinner, but for a while now that was all he was. Beneath her bitter resentment, she grudgingly acknowledged that she missed the man she'd married.

He had definitely changed. That much was certain.

*I didn't change him, did I?* She suddenly doubted and her heart skipped a beat. *But if I have changed him ... maybe I could change him back!*

Impulsively, Melissa picked up the phone and speed-dialed Kimberlee's number. As the call went to voicemail, she composed herself once again. Knowing she wouldn't fool her friend, she still attempted to sound casual, "Kimmee, let me know what happens with your grandmother. Okay, Sweetie? I'll be home with the kids Monday night. I'm sure Scott'll be working late. Call me or come over. Okay?"

Though she thought it, she couldn't bring herself to add, "*Please ....*"



KIMBERLEE rehearsed the conversation with her grandmother as she drove from Santa Monica to the San Gabriel foothills. It seemed impossible to ask a seventy-seven-year-old woman for her advice about men – and appear cool and confident while doing it. She finally resigned herself to telling her about being a Frog Farmer and seeing how it went from there.

Pulling up to the familiar white-trimmed blue-gray house, with its stone columns and wide porch, she felt nervous and excited. *I hope whatever makes Grandmother different can be learned!*



CLAUDIA could tell by her fidgeting and how Kimberlee picked at her lunch that she wanted to talk about something important. This was uncharted territory for them. Claudia kept her tone soothing and detached, belying the painful ache of her own hopes and fears.

After eating with Burt in the dining room, the two of them moved their tea and coffee to the carved mahogany table in the garden. Kimberlee didn't seem to notice her favorite flowers were in bloom, that Burt had clumsily excused himself to his workshop, or the elaborately carved chair that had been added to the beautiful outdoor set.

Claudia waited patiently and was soon rewarded. She kept her expression open while Kimberlee slowly relayed the story of her recent realization. Suppressing a smile, she silently willed the younger woman to continue. With each word, Claudia's heart beat stronger as a long-dreamt-of future opened up before her.

Concluding her narrative, Kimberlee said cautiously, "The man said that women who turn frogs into princes are queens ... and, while I'm certain that I am a Frog Farmer, I'm also pretty certain that you're not."

After a pause, Claudia said simply, “Your grandfather has said I am his queen. It is a beautiful compliment. It is also accurate, in that I follow the Queen’s Code. And I avoid Frog Farming – a charming term that I’ve never heard before, but which is absolutely accurate, and a terrible trap.”

Lowering her voice to conceal the emotion that nearly overwhelmed her, she added, “I am glad you noticed.”

Kimberlee leaned forward eagerly, her eyes lit up. “What’s the Queen’s Code? And how do you not Frog Farm?”

Claudia chose her words with care. “I avoid Frog Farming by understanding and inspiring men. For example, I understand how they think and I am fluent in the language they speak. I also have a different point of view about men that prevents me from being hurt or frustrated by them. All of these things were taught to me by my mother and grandmother.”

Kimberlee was even more excited. “But how did they know all that?”

She studied Kimberlee’s beloved face for a long moment – the worry lines in her young forehead, the sharp edge of her jaw line, the thinness of her lips. The evidence of disappointment, resentment and hard-driven self-sufficiency contrasted with the new hope in her intense blue eyes.

“For more than five hundred years,” Claudia said, “the women in our family have studied men. Each generation has validated and added to the entire body of knowledge and passed it on from mother to daughter. Over time, the various elements of the Queen’s Code were developed.”

As Claudia expected, Kimberlee was shocked. “But if that’s true, how come Myra never taught me all those things about men?”

Claudia could not conceal her sadness. “Because your mother does not know. Because your mother did not want to know.”

“But how could Myra not want to know? Half the planet is male,” Kimberlee responded.

“As you know, she doesn’t have much use for any of them – not your father, her father or her brother,” Claudia said, shaking her head.

Kimberlee nodded her understanding and Claudia continued, “Your mother was deeply in love with your father. When Stewart was not ready to be responsible for a child, she was distraught and felt abandoned and betrayed. Hurt, unhealed, can turn to rage. And all this happened when women her age were already angry at men.”

As Kimberlee frowned, Claudia continued. “Men were blamed, as they are today, for almost everything women no longer accepted. Men were considered the enemy. It was unfashionable to want to understand them. Men were *wrong*. And some women set themselves to proving they did not need men at all. Your mother was, and is, one of them. Given how devastated she was, I understand. But I still wish she would have let me help her heal.”

Claudia waited, seeing the comprehension as Kimberlee connected this information with the way the young woman’s mother had behaved all her life. Although it pained her, she continued, closely watching Kimberlee’s face.

“No matter what I said, your mother was threatened by the way I think about and relate to men. She did not want to support men in opening up, by listening to them the way they need to be heard. She did not want to give men the energy to provide

and the inspiration to act, by using the words that resonate for them. She could not imagine that it is possible for men and women to be powerful at the same time. She always thought it had to be one or the other and that she would lose whenever men succeeded.”

Claudia concluded sadly, “Myra didn’t want to be a queen. She prefers being a king.”

Kimberlee chewed on this last statement. Claudia could tell that she didn’t quite understand it. But her granddaughter was on a mission and didn’t have time right now to pursue these subtleties. *If all goes well*, she reminded herself, *there will plenty of time for everything*.

Tilting her head, Kimberlee asked, “How come you didn’t teach Myra anyway?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “It does not work that way. You cannot force this kind of knowledge on anyone. Not even for her own good. At the very least, the student has to be open to a new point of view about men. And committed to a deeper understanding of both men and women. Ideally, they want it badly enough that they would do anything for it.”

Claudia smiled and felt her face brighten with the deep affection she felt. She added mischievously, “Such as risking the terrible awkwardness of talking about romance with an old woman.”

She chuckled as Kimberlee’s mouth dropped.



BURT watched his wife and granddaughter from the window of his workshop. He was tickled by the strong resemblance between these two lovely women with the same bright blue eyes, high cheekbones and deep dimples. From long familiarity with Claudia’s expressions, he could tell the conversation was going well.

When she received Kimberlee’s strange phone call, Claudia hoped that their only granddaughter was finally coming to inquire about men. She had been aching for years – sometimes with tearful self-restraint, lately with more hopeful patience – to pass on to Kimberlee her family’s extraordinary legacy.

Claudia’s exploratory lessons with Karen, the teacher she met in her yoga class, had given Burt his first formal exposure to her esoteric knowledge. As Claudia taught Karen about what she called the “Stages of Development,” the information had been eye-opening, even for him. He completely resonated with her description of how men evolve in a predictable and unavoidable pattern. It illuminated his life and the source of his experience of being loved, appreciated, and truly understood by his wife.

For more than fifty years, he’d been inspired to do everything he could to give Claudia what she needed, and to make her happy. While his buddies sometimes complained that they couldn’t win with their wives, he’d been successful ninety-nine percent of the time. He suspected it was the way Claudia communicated with him. What was important to her was always clear and simple to act upon. He felt privileged to be married to her and was still more deeply in love than he’d thought possible.

Burt decided now would be a good time to get the supplies he needed for the project being conceived as he watched Claudia and Kimberlee. He rubbed his hands together at the prospect of working with the long-familiar wood and surprising Claudia yet again. On his way, he stopped by their spot in the garden. "Sweetheart, I'm making a trip to the lumberyard. Do you lovely ladies need anything before I go?"

Claudia smiled up at him, her beautiful eyes shining and the delicate skin around them crinkling in that way he adored. "No, thank you, my love. We have everything we need." Her eyes were dancing. "Kimberlee has come over to inquire about her inheritance."

Burt was delighted for both of them. "Good for you!" he said, with an affectionate squeeze on his granddaughter's shoulder. He walked away, a fresh bounce in his step, whistling *I'm Popeye the Sailor Man*.



KIMBERLEE sat speechless, slowly shaking her head. Her grandparents' behavior shocked and amazed her. She was overwhelmed by the sense that they had been waiting for this moment. *For how long?*

She'd stumbled upon a treasure whose value she could only guess. The hope that flared anew when she realized she was a Frog Farmer expanded even further. At the same time she felt fear – the deep-in-the-gut kind of fear a person experiences when they know the next step would change their life forever.

Clasping her hands more tightly, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She studied her grandmother, in awe. After a moment, she asked, "Where do we begin?"



CLAUDIA attempted to contain her reaction. "The first thing would be to schedule some time with you and Karen."

"Karen? Your friend I met at Thanksgiving?"

Claudia nodded, "Yes, that Karen. I began teaching her many months ago and she is eager to continue."

Claudia's heart ached at the hurt that immediately appeared in Kimberlee's eyes. "Would you let me explain?"

Kimberlee nodded but the old reserve was back. Claudia calmed herself with a deep breath and began slowly, "I have been longing to give you this information since you were a teen. But I was forbidden by my family's Covenant to pass it on to any child I had not personally raised."

As Kimberlee started to interrupt, Claudia shook her head. "That is a long story for another time. For now, please understand that it has pained me to watch you suffer, especially through your divorce. As I confronted my advancing years, your grandfather saw how much I was tormented by the thought of dying with all this knowledge inside me. He was the one that suggested I look for a student that was open enough and motivated enough to try an experiment."

She sighed and smiled. “Karen appeared, torn up by the conflicts in her marriage and desperately afraid she and Mike were not going to make it. She was highly motivated and surprisingly courageous.”

Claudia paused and Kimberlee’s curiosity got the better of her. She said, “After watching them at Thanksgiving, it’s hard to believe they had conflicts. They’re so in love. And what do you mean by courageous?”

“It takes courage to let go of old beliefs,” Claudia replied. “It takes courage to question your own perceptions. Especially when they are validated every day by our culture.”

Claudia wasn’t surprised when Kimberlee didn’t pursue that thought. *It’s a heady topic for anyone.*

“So you’d be teaching Karen and me together?” Kimberlee asked, a little less reserved.

She nodded. “I taught Karen what she needed to know to turn her marriage around. But I noticed that she was beginning to suffer as I did, from being the only one with a dramatically different understanding of men. I was not willing to continue without a partner for her. And I had someone special in mind ....”

“So you have been waiting for me!” Kimberlee said, jumping in her chair.

Claudia’s chest filled to bursting. “Yes, my dearest. And I am so happy right now I could cry.”



KAREN recognized the number on her caller ID and picked up the phone with trepidation. “Hi Claudia, what’s up? Are you cancelling Wednesday night?”

“Not exactly. More of an alteration.”

Karen smiled at the unexpected energy she heard in the older woman’s voice. “Karen, something momentous has happened.”

Karen’s pulse raced, *Could it be?*

Every morsel of information Claudia had taught her had made a difference in Karen’s life. As an elementary school teacher, it had made her more effective with her male students and staff. With her husband, it had cured the resentment she had felt, and healed the pain from all those years of Mike’s long hours and long weeks. Most important of all, Karen finally understood why Mike had been stalling about having children.

But there were other problems in their relationship that Karen wanted Claudia’s help with. Some were old, like her frustration with Mike not helping enough around the house. The newest challenge was fallout from their attempts to get pregnant: Their sex life was a wreck.

Waiting for another student to show up – to share the burden as Claudia put it – had not been easy. Though Claudia listened with extraordinary compassion, when pressed, she always said, “Be patient. In due time, you’ll have everything you need.” There was nothing Karen could do but honor her mentor’s requirement for continuing her education. She had consoled herself with the fact that Claudia had waited half a century to pass on her esoteric knowledge.

Trying not to sound desperate, Karen ventured, “Yes?”

“It has finally happened. What we have been waiting for ... and hoping for ....” Claudia choked up.

Even in her anxiety, she was reminded of the formal way Claudia spoke. She rarely used contractions. It was one of the speech mannerisms Karen had come to love.

Not wanting to inflame a wound, Karen played it safe. “Who is it? Do I know her?”

As usual, Claudia sensed the intention behind her words. Another trait that endeared her to Karen, even though it made concealment nearly impossible. “Thank you for being considerate, Karen. But there is no need. Kimberlee is asking for the knowledge. Kimberlee has opened her mind ... and her heart.”

Karen heard the emotion in Claudia’s voice and her own heart went out to her teacher. “That’s great, Claudia. Beyond great. I’m happy for all of us, but I’m especially happy for you.”

“Thank you, dear. Thank you for knowing how much this means to me. Kimberlee is waiting in the garden for the answer to ‘Where do we begin?’ Given what there is to accomplish, I do not think once a week is enough time. I am calling to see if we could use both Wednesday nights and Saturday afternoons.”

Karen couldn’t help but smile, in relief and anticipation. “You know Mike’s Saturday routine. But even if he wasn’t occupied, this means enough to him that he’d make it work. How many weeks should I plan on?”

She heard the resolve in Claudia’s voice as she answered, “It could easily take a decade to give all my knowledge to you. I will teach you as long as you want. Or, as long as I have.”

Karen gulped. The elderly woman’s mortality was a subject Karen avoided. But it had everything to do with Claudia’s urgency and generosity. She felt Claudia wait patiently for her to digest the import of those words. She always honored the way that Karen never committed to anything thoughtlessly.

Karen squared her shoulders and replied, “With the exception of an occasional vacation, I’m all yours, Claudia.”



MIKE read the text message with dread: “Call asap xoxo” seemed innocuous enough. But for the last few months, it had usually meant a demand to perform. He shook his head at his predicament. He’d never thought his scrumptious wife wanting sex would be a problem. *Except*, he reminded himself, *it isn’t sex she’s after. It’s sperm.*

But Karen had been ovulating last week, which meant she must be calling for another reason. He pressed CALL.

“Hi Honey!”

At her tone of voice, he immediately perked up. “What’s up?”

“My sessions with Claudia are starting again!”

*Shit howdy*, he thought. “Really? What’s behind that?”

“It’s exactly as you said it would be; Kimberlee has opened her heart.”

Mike grinned. Now he understood the feeling in Karen’s voice; few things meant more to her than her lessons with Claudia. This was the same enthusiasm that had

uplifted his life last year. *Maybe she can help with this pregnancy obsession and get her off my back. If anyone can make a difference, it's Claudia.*

"That's great, Darlin'. I'm excited for you. And for us."



KIMBERLEE traced the pattern in the dark wood while waiting anxiously for her grandmother. *Granddad is a fine carver*, she thought, admiring the roses that bordered the handmade table. Suddenly she noticed the detail in the mahogany under her finger. It wasn't a rose at all. It was a face.

She looked more closely and it immediately registered: *Grandmother smiling*. And next to it: Grandmother laughing. In a flash, she realized that what she'd always assumed to be flowers were at least twenty different images of the same beloved face. And not only on the table. The arms of the chairs across from and next to her were carved with pictures of her grandmother, young and old.

*There were only two matching chairs*, she thought, *I don't remember a third*. Curious, she was about to examine her own chair when the French doors opened. Kimberlee couldn't be sure, but she thought there was a new bounce in the elderly woman's step.

Gingerly perched on one of the extraordinary chairs, this enigma Kimberlee had known – and not known – all her life, announced, "We are all set. We embark next Saturday afternoon."

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