



Title: Only Love Can Hurt Like This

Author: Karen

Character: Hando “Romper Stomper”

Rating : R

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Part One

Karen wearily rubbed her eyes and looked at the clock on her mantle. Four, frigging, thirty. She had been on the computer for hours with her new acquaintances, chatting about the actor and the various roles he had played. The time had just flown. Since she had joined the list, she had been glued to this stupid box, not wanting to miss a minute of any chat, story or discussion. She could now see how people could get so addicted to the internet.

She stretched painfully as she felt a crick in her neck. "Shit", she had a meeting at 8 am which meant that she would only get about two hour's sleep. She yawned but didn't get up from her chair. She kept thinking about him, his strong, virile body... the way he walked...his eyes, the way they flashed blue and green highlights...his voice, deep and husky...his hands, large yet oh so light in his touch...

She groaned in response and let her fingers dip down lower and lower to touch the moist velvety folds. She made slow smooth strokes as her fingers pressed deeper inside. She thought about him kissing her, using his mouth as a weapon to bring her closer to surrender. She flushed and felt the heat within her rise. His hands were moving all over her, exploring every intimate inch. Her mouth parted and her tongue caught the saltiness of her sweat. She moaned louder as she felt her body start to tingle all over. She quickened the pace and thought of him and only him. The sweet, sweet climax drove her back further into the recliner. Once again, he had done this to her. Gradually, she let herself calm, her breathing softened and her eyes slowly opened.

She went through the rest of the week attending to the daily grind of her job. She was an underwriter for a large insurance company. She had been at this same position now for thirteen years. She could do it blindfolded. Eyeballing for her supervisor, she cranked up the music a little louder and sighed as it pulsed through her headphones.

I'm working overtime anyhow, she rationalized, for the umpteenth day in a row. I need a vacation.

She thought once more about the list and the promise of escape that it proposed. Could it be for real? She tried to be logical. Characters in movies

are usually fictitious. They don't suddenly spring to life at the drop of a hat, or in their cases, at the end of their movies. But why would all these women lie to her? Maybe they were all one brick short of a full load; the skeptical part of her raised its ugly head. Karen thought she was fairly intuitive though and could smell deception a mile away. She didn't suspect that these women were trying to con her or lead her astray. In fact, it was just the opposite; she felt encouraged to share her thoughts and daydreams. And even though she didn't feel threatened, she chose not to disclose too much. She kept it on a superficial level. Oh sure, she babbled on about how gorgeous RC was in his many incarnations; but she never told them who made her heart pound, her blood simmer and boil, and who it was that her very soul hungered for. That was her secret, and she fully intended to keep it to herself.

She relived again the recurring dream. Every time she had it, the details became more defined, the background more descriptive and the action more intense. Time and again, she couldn't wait to fall asleep and end up with his arms wrapped around her, taking her higher. What if it were true? What did she have to lose by going? They said that if you were meant to be there, you would find a way. No one would know if she tried and didn't succeed. She twisted her hair around her fingers, an old habit that she reverted to when she was nervous.

Tonight, she would speak with Michelle and frame it in a way that would be very nonchalant. If she wasn't busy, she would make it there, , if she didn't, then c'est la vie. Yes, she decided, that was the way to go.

Karen pulled over and looked at the vague set of instructions again. She hated driving and only did so when she absolutely had to, when there was no other possible way to get to her destination. For years, she had been phobic about learning until one of her exes asked what she would do if there was an emergency? Would she just sit around twiddling her thumbs waiting twenty minutes for a taxi or God forbid, an ambulance? She honestly had no sense of direction and had even got lost once in a restaurant while her friend had sat at their table laughing at her.

"Well, it should be right around the corner", she declared aloud.

But it wasn't, and she continued on for another fifteen minutes. The view through her windshield seemed fuzzy and then the road blurred. She saw the

outline in the distance of several buildings. One was definitely a hotel. Yep, she had arrived at last. She inhaled deeply.

"I can't believe I'm doing this." She quickly took a glance at herself in her rear view mirror. She sighed, "It'll have to do."

She parked in the main driveway at the furthest spot from the front doors of the hotel and pulled her tote bag out of the back seat, but then she just sat there, afraid to get out.

"Who am I kidding? I can't do this. With my luck, the first person I'll run into is Sid. He'll take one look at me and he'll never accuse Sheriff Biebe of being tubby again."

Karen studied her clothes. She always wore the biggest, baggiest outfits she could find, anything to try and disguise all the weight she had put on within the last four years. She had been relatively slim all her life and then she had undergone a crisis. Nothing had been the same since. She was really self-conscious about her looks. While all these thoughts were racing through her head, she didn't see him approach the car until she heard a tapping on her window. She jumped at the sudden sound and hit her head on the roof of the car.

"Shit!", she exclaimed. She rolled down her window.

"I'm sorry Miss; I didn't mean to startle you."

She looked at him; he definitely wasn't an RC character. He was tall, blond and thin.

"Are you Rick?", she asked tentatively.

"At your service, Ma'am. Though you have me at a disadvantage. I don't know who you are."

"Karen", she stuck her hand out and Rick shook it. "Though if you call me Ma'am again, it might as well be Jason, Freddy or Hannibal if you get my drift."

He laughed quietly and then said, "Are you going to come out or are you planning to camp out here in your car?"

"Oh, right", she answered rather stupidly and grabbed her purse. Before she could open the car door, Rick had already done so.

"Here, I'll take your bag."

She stepped out into the bright sunlight. "Oh, it's beautiful weather here. I didn't expect it to be so warm."

He took another glimpse at her. She had dark red hair that fell softly just beneath her shoulders. She was petite in stature and her clothes seemed to swallow her up. It was hard to see her eyes as she kept them riveted on the ground.

"You might want to change into shorts or something cooler. It can get quite hot in the afternoons", he suggested, glancing at the long sleeved green peasant blouse she was wearing with black leggings.

"Oh, I'll be fine", she replied somewhat tersely, suddenly looking up at him.

Wow, she had the most amazing dark blue eyes, he thought, even though she was wearing glasses, they seemed to just leap out at him, catching him unaware. She stared at him for a moment and then turned to look at the hotel entrance.

"Is Michelle here?"

"Yes, and she's got your room all ready for you", he held the door open for her.

Michelle looked up from the front desk. "Karen, is that you?", she greeted coming around to give her a hug. "Welcome to the Point. I'm glad to see you found us. See, your sense of direction can't be all that bad."

"Well, I made three U, turns and went the wrong way on a one, way street and almost backed into a five foot ditch, but I'm here", she finished waving her arms triumphantly.

"Here is your room key. Most of the boyz and guests are out and about right now so you can get settled in and have a nap if you want. I'll have one of them call on you at five and introduce you around. Seeing how it's Friday, you'll get to meet a lot of the ladies too."

"Thanks, Michelle. That sounds great."

Rick led her to her room and after saying he'd see her later left her to her own devices.

She walked around her room taking in all the decor. The spacious suite was painted in varying shades of dusty rose. That was odd; these were the exact colours she was planning to do her living room in back home. The bed was a four poster with no canopy, and the night tables were a mahogany hue. There were pictures and posters on the walls, most of them were of waterfalls. A gigantic painting at the far end of the room caught her eye. It couldn't be but it was. It was a painting of IguaÁu Falls in Brazil. She had a thing for waterfalls and had even intended to go on a trip and look at the world's most famous ones, Angel Falls in Venezuela, Victoria Falls in Africa, Yosemite Falls in California... She touched it in wonder; such surreal beauty and power together. She went into the bathroom. There was a large sunken tub, good for all those relaxing bubble baths she loved to take. There was even a bidet in the corner. This room was sponge painted in mauve.

Strolling out into the bedroom again, she spotted some equipment she had overlooked earlier. It looked like, yes it was, a mini Nautilus set.

"How did they know?", she pondered out loud.

She had wanted to ask Michelle if there was a gym in the complex but was too embarrassed to. She didn't want to work out in front of all the guys, watching their perfect bodies while all the while constantly aware of her own flawed one. But she couldn't help but smile at the vision that came to mind of seeing all those shirtless men, muscles flexing, sweat running down their broad shoulders and chests, their solid thighs jogging in unison. What a photograph that would make. She would love to be a fly on the wall.

She walked over to the TV console. There was a DVD player with a variety of movies, all of RC's, which was to be expected, but also a selection of old time classics, westerns, dramas and action movies. It was like someone had picked her brain and knew what she would like best. She yawned and realized she was pretty tired after driving for hours. She looked at her watch. She had time to take a siesta and then a quick shower.

She flopped on the bed and fantasized about how she might meet him, what words she would utter and what would follow, if anything. Would the

chemistry be there? More importantly, would he let her help him; would he let her inside? She curled her hair around her fingers and fretted to herself. She had three strikes going against her. Number one, she was at least ten years older than he was. Number two, the weight thing again; and Number three, she had never been good at starting and maintaining relationships.

She giggled and sang out, "High stress situations baby, never been a friend of mine".

Yes, RC and TOFOG knew what they were singing about. She yawned again and slid under the bed covers. She was asleep in five minutes.

She awoke to banging on her door. It took her a minute to remember where she was. The knocking came again.

"Just a minute", she called out. She took a few deep breaths trying to compose herself and then opened the door.

"G'day Mate. I'm Jeff. Pleased to meet you", Jeff bounced into the room.

"Jeff, from the 'Sum of Us', she whispered awestruck as she took in the mop of wavy hair, the striped shirt and the oh so fabulous footie shorts.

"The one and only Luv", he smiled and shook her hand. "Rick told me you were here so I thought I'd come by and have a gander."

"Please come in", she waved him into the room. "Were you just in a game?", she asked.

"No, actually, I missed my morning run so I thought I'd take it before I start my shift at the bar. So have you settled in then?"

"Pretty much, I just lost track of time and dozed off."

"Beaut of a room", Jeff observed looking around, "It always amazes me how you sheilas turn these rooms into something so distinctive and unique from each other."

Karen gave him a stunned look.

"What, Luv?"

Karen laughed, "That's the first time I've been called a sheila."

Jeff laughed as well, "Well you'd better get used to it. There are a lot of Aussies around here."

"About the room, I didn't do anything", Karen admitted, "It was like this when I got here."

"Ah but Luv, that's part of the magic of Crowe's Point", Jeff replied with a wink. He watched as her eyes continued to burn holes into his. It was slightly disconcerting.

"You're staring", Jeff said and then giggled, the high pitch sound that only RC delivered so well.

"Oh, I'm sorry, it's just that..."

"I know", Jeff interrupted, "it takes a while to get adjusted here. Everyone goes through this. No worries", he patted her on the shoulder. "Anyways, I have to start work but Chelle told me to tell you that Bud will be up to get you at five."

After he left, Karen jumped into the shower and examined the clothes she had with her. She decided on a long purple and grey blouse with flared sleeves; and the rest, well that was easy, it was a choice between royal blue, navy blue, beige, brown, green or black leggings. That's all she ever wore these days. She brushed out her hair and carefully reapplied her makeup though she didn't wear a lot. She then slipped on some pumps to try to heighten her 5'3" frame. She heard another knock at her door, this one slightly more forceful. Checking the clock, she opened it and said throatily:

"Well, Officer White, I wondered when you would come knocking on my door", looking up at him seductively through her bangs. "Sorry, I couldn't resist", she laughed and then noticed his somewhat wary expression. And then she realized to her horror what she had said.

She put her hand up to her mouth. "Oh, Bud, I didn't mean to make fun of you and Lynne. I know your movie is real life to you. I didn't think. Gees, remove foot from mouth", she finished awkwardly.

"It's okay, no harm done. I have a pretty thick skin. Really bad impersonation though. Don't take up acting as a day job." Seeing that she wasn't mocking him, his features relaxed and he shook her hand.

My gosh, he had a firm grip, she thought as she tried to shake out her numb hand without him noticing.

Bud took a moment to appraise this new guest. She wasn't very tall; she was probably a medium build though it was hard to judge through all her clothes. Nice hair and eyes and a beautiful smile.

"Well, since I see you already know who I am; I can pass on at least one introduction", he smiled then and her heart started to race. My goodness when these boyz smiled, they totally took your breath away.

"I'm here to escort you to the tavern and let you meet all my wild and crazy brothers with hopefully one exception."

"Sid", they both said together and then laughed. He stuck out his arm and Karen took it.

"So how long are you planning on staying?"

"I'm not sure. I have two weeks off but I need to do stuff around the house, visit the folks so they still remember who I am", and then she paused, "but I guess it depends...", she trailed off.

"Depends on", Bud arched his eyebrow, "whether you connect with that special Mister Right?"

"What did I say something wrong?", Bud asked as he saw a dark shadow cross her face.

"Bud, I just got here. To be honest, I don't believe in miracles or magic. I'm a little too long in the tooth to buy that a fairy godmother will swoop down and wave her wand, and me and my white knight will ride off into the sunset forever. I'm just here to kick back, have fun and link up with some good friends that I've made. By the way, they all just happen to be female", she added looking sideways at him.

"Okay, he said putting his arms up in mock surrender as he saw her grim expression. "I'll drop it however I think the lady doth protest too much."

Fuck, she got on the defensive pretty fast, he thought. He'd bet anything that this one had a temper to match her red hair. She certainly couldn't hide her emotions with those eyes of hers. They gave away all. Right now they were flashing out clear warning signals. In spite of this, he was intrigued.

They continued on their way to the Tavern discussing more harmonious topics such as the landmarks of Crowe's Point. He offered himself as a tour guide. They entered the Tavern and were waved over to a table by Michelle.

"Hi, you two. We saved a seat for you."

Tina, Lisa and Kath all gathered around Karen to welcome her warmly. She was surprised to see Tina and John as she thought they would be up at their own little nest. She turned back to the table to meet all of their men.

Part Two

She felt a little overwhelmed suddenly face to face with variations of the same face and body. Lachlan gave her a big grin and immediately asked if she liked to fly.

"Actually, I prefer to keep my feet on terra firma. That way, I won't hurl my cookies and muck up your plane during take off."

"Oh, but darlin', when you're with the right pilot, it's smooth sailin' all the way."

"He's right Karen; he's great with all of his passengers, especially those who might be a little nervous", Lisa chipped in throwing her arm around his shoulders.

"Yeah, he only saves the killer upside down, comet vomit, break the sound barrier rides for us", Colin grinned. Lachlan flipped him the bird.

"Do ya ride?", East asked. "Kath or I could show you around the trails."

"I know I'm going to sound really boring but the only two times I've been on a horse; it was a disaster. The first time, they could tell I was uneasy so they put me on the children's horse, even though I was twenty at the time. Then when we cantered, I had to hold on for dear life. I swear my whole life flashed before my eyes. The second time, we crossed through a river; and my horse just stopped and I couldn't get him going again. I called out to the other riders and then I realized, now how can I put this delicately, the horse needed to do his business." They laughed with her as she acted out the tale with grandiose gestures.

John then said encouragingly, "There are lots of other tamer things to do here. If you like to hike, swim, fish, skate or just lie around on the beach; feel free to do what you want. It's your holiday." John smiled at her, and again her heart throbbed in her chest.

She must admit she had a little crush on the handsome Alaskan sheriff. She had a thing for men with beards and "Mystery, Alaska" was one of her favourite RC movies. But he only had eyes for his beautiful wife, as he pulled Tina closer to him, placing a light kiss on her forehead. They were so much in love that it almost hurt her to see it.

"I think I need to get another drink", she announced as she got up quickly and made her way to the bar.

"Jeff, can I have a vodka martini?"

"Sure Luv, coming right up."

She sat down on a bar stool and briefly held her head in her hands. Jeff slid her drink in front of her.

"So have you made any plans for your stay?"

"I think I'm going to do some exploring tomorrow. I still can't believe a tropical paradise co-exists with the cold frigid Alaskan wilderness. It blows my mind."

"Wait till you see the sun rise and set in the same place."

"So I've heard." She seemed to hesitate about going back to her table.

"Do you jog? Maybe, we can take a run sometime together."

"I may just take you up on that offer. Well, I'd better get back", she sighed as she got off the stool. Jeff watched her head back just as Rick came up to pick up an order.

"So what do you think of the new sheila?"

"I don't know mate, she seems pretty quiet", Rick replied.

"She doesn't seem very happy", Jeff observed.

"Uh...I don't think her mood's going to improve anytime soon." Jeff turned to see where Rick was looking. Sid had just come into the room.

Sid scanned around to see which of his brothers he had to pick on tonight. He was bored. Tawny wasn't able to come tonight, and he needed something or someone to play with.

He directed his gaze towards the bar and saw the poofter with his lover, both of them returning his stare. No, they were too easy a target; he felt more like a challenge tonight. His eyes roamed to the back of the room and saw the usual crowd of lurkers. One looked boldly at him and ran her tongue suggestively over her lips. He was surprised to find that he didn't even feel tempted. There wasn't the usual stirring in his groin. What had his Tatiana done to him? He felt completely pussy whipped.

He heard laughter then and turned to find the source. Oh, yes, the usual suspects together: Sheriff Tubby and his exquisite wife, Colin and Michelle, Flyboy and Lisa, Mister Hothead and...what do we have here? His path of sight was arrested by a newcomer who had not yet had the privilege of meeting him. Another redhead. He made his way over, slinking up to their table.

"Ma Cherie, I don't think you've had the pleasure of being introduced to me", he took the stranger's hand and kissed it. "Have you been escorted around the gardens? They're really quite lovely at this time of year."

Sid liked what he saw from the waist up, the only view he was able to see from where she was sitting.

Bud scowled at Sid, "Leave her alone cyber freak. Get the fuck outta here!"

"No, it's okay Bud", Karen said standing up to greet Sid. "Hello Sid, I'm Karen. I've heard so much about you."

"All of it enthralling, I'm sure." His eyes dropped as he gave her the once over. His mouth fell open. My, my, for a little thing, she wasn't quite as svelte as he had imagined. She wasn't obese but she had just a little too much tummy for his taste. He tried to hide an expression of distaste.

Karen knew what he was thinking and called him on it. "Speechless, Sid. That's a little unusual for you, isn't it? You can say it. I'm not going to fall apart. I'm not fragile, just fat", she smiled up at him. "I mean that's what you were thinking, right? And let me guess, you suddenly aren't free anymore to accompany me around. But that's okay. Dig your suits by the way. Green and purple are my favourite colours."

He looked into her eyes. In spite of the smile she had plastered on her face, they were cold, daring him to say anything further.

"Alas, Ma Cherie, I suddenly recall a previous engagement I have, tout suite. I trust my brothers will take care of you." He gave a slight bow in her direction and quickly walked past their table.

Karen regarded the others. No one seemed to know what to say.

John finally spoke, "Ignore Sid; he always hits on the newcomers."

"John, let's be candid. Sid wasn't going to touch me with a ten foot microchip once he saw all of me."

Then everyone started talking at once.

"You can't expect Sid to be a gentleman. It's not programmed into him."

"Oh Karen, you're not that heavy, honest."

"Sid's a jerk!"

"He's so vain that he sees imperfection everywhere but in himself."

"Don't forget his pet name for me, Sheriff Tubby."

"Don't waste any time thinking about that fucking psycho."

Karen held her hand up to silence the comments. "It's okay guys. I've dealt with people like Sid before. Besides I'm not here to win a beauty contest, or pair up with anybody, so I'm not worried about offending anyone's aesthetics."

Tina and Michelle shared a glance. They certainly didn't want Karen to feel uncomfortable about herself. She was actually very pretty. Her hair and her eyes gleamed under the lights of the tavern. Women were always their own worst foe. Michelle also wondered after meeting Karen on-line whether she had a particular preference for any of the boyz. She had never said so in any of her messages. Yet she was here; she had found the place.

"I believe Bud there's more of your brothers here that I haven't yet been acquainted with", Karen said firmly changing the topic.

Bud moved her around the room. She met Andy and his enchanting young wife Jennifer, Johnny, Jack, Dominic, Zack and Buggy and Steve and Donna. She socialized with all of them, laughing when appropriate, putting all her best acting skills to use. She was just having a ripper of a time as Jeff would say, but those who looked closely could tell her eyes said something completely different.

Eventually, those who were part of a couple started wandering out. She said goodnight to her dinner companions and declined Bud's offer to accompany her to her room.

"Bud, it's safe. I'm quite sure I won't have to fight Sid off." Or anyone else for that matter, she muttered under her breath.

Alone at last in her room again, she threw her purse on the bed. She went to the stereo and turned the radio on. Roy Orbison was singing "Pretty Woman".

"I don't believe you're not the truth;
no one could look as good as you...Mercy."

"I can't win", she whispered weakly, and then turned the radio off.

She viewed herself in the dresser mirror. All she saw staring back at her was a short, laughable figure. She noted the too round face, the plump upper arms, the ever expanding waistline and the cottage cheese thighs. She wanted to break every mirror in the place. Instead, she calmly took some big fluffy towels from the bathroom and covered all of them. She got undressed and put on her workout clothes. She put TOFOG's Gaslight on the CD player and started her routine beginning with weights. After a while, the endorphins started to kick in and she felt better. Before turning in, she set her alarm for 8 am and took her medication.

She was driving down a dimly lit street. Cassie was excitedly pointing out the pub.

"There it is. I'll only be two tics." She watched as her friend opened the car door.

"Don't take too long. In case you haven't noticed, this is not exactly a good neighbourhood."

She tapped the steering wheel impatiently, looking at the tiny digital clock on the radio. thirty minutes had passed and Cassie still wasn't back.

"Come on Cassie, I have to work tomorrow." She beeped the horn. Nothing happened.

She should have known better than to take Cassie at her word. Since her friend had met her latest fling, she hadn't stopped raving about how incredible he was and that he could finally be THE ONE. She leaned on the horn.

"Fuck!", she threw open the car door, slammed it shut and strode towards the pub. She didn't bother to glance inside. She pushed past two or three men who were standing in the entrance.

She could see Cassie at the back, her arms around a tall, dark-haired man. He was leaning in close, ready to plant one on her.

"I'm not waiting any longer, Cassie. If you want a ride home, you'll have to leave now."

Cassie pulled away reluctantly from the man and pouted petulantly, "Chill Kar, we haven't seen each other in a week."

"Yeah, what's the rush", the man said thrusting his hand down Cassie's blouse and looking insolently at her. Karen, despite the alcoholic fumes he was breathing into her face, bent down so her face was near to his.

"The rush, Big Guy, is that I have to work for a living. I just moved here. I don't know anybody; I don't know this area and I want to leave now. And since I'm the driver, I hold the trump card."

Cassie was really pissed off.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Mate. Chuck a sickie tomorrow and then stay. You might meet someone. God knows you need a good root", Cassie's Australian accent always came out stronger when she was drinking.

Karen fought the impulse to throw Cassie's drink in her face.

"Well then...Mate, I guess you're on your own."

She turned to go and discovered that all eyes in the room were on her. She felt like she was moving in slow motion; for every step she took towards the door, it seemed like two back. She felt the first tickle of fear as she saw angry tattoos, big heavy boots, what did they call them, Doc Martens?, and shaved heads. She had read about these gangs in the Melbourne paper. They were called skinheads.

She gave herself a little shake mentally. She wasn't going to let herself be intimidated by these punks. She took a deep breath and waded through the crowd now gathered at the door.

"What do we have 'ere, a bushfire blonde."

"Hey Luv, where's the fire?"

"Let's have a Captain Cook at you darlin'."

"I think I'm going to crack a fat; she ain't no dog."

"Give a bloke a fair go. Don't get above oneself."

"C'mon give us a pash."

"How about a canoodle?"

All the Australian slang was flustering her even more. Someone slapped her behind and then she was pinched. Using all of her strength, she shoved at the man blocking the door. He was so pissed that he fell backward and landed heavily on the ground outside.

She told herself not to let them see the fear and she walked quickly to her car, the temptation to run almost winning out. She glanced behind. No one had followed her. She searched her pockets for the keys. They weren't there. She checked again and then rummaged through her purse. Then, she looked through the car window.

"Shit!", she yelled, seeing how they were in the ignition.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shadow move towards her until he was standing a few feet in front of the car.

"I can get them out for ya", he said quietly.

He was tall, dressed in a long dark coat and white jeans. He was also one of them, a skinhead. She thought frantically. What should she do? If she screamed, there was no one around to help her. He just stood there calmly, not making any threatening moves. She really didn't have any choice but to trust him.

"Okay", she said, her heart in her mouth.

"It'll cost you", he replied as he swaggered to the driver's side. He brought out a long thin instrument from his coat and within seconds had the door open.

She hastily brought out her wallet and began to count out bills.

"I don't want your dosh."

"I'm sorry. It's all that I have", her voice quivered, as she tried to give him the thirty dollars she had on her. He didn't take it and continued to look at her.

"I don't have anything else", she pleaded.

"Sure about that Luv?" His eyes raked down her body. She suddenly felt naked under his gaze. Her conservative dress now seemed sheer and barely able to cover her.

His eyes were piercing and blue-green in colour. She almost felt hypnotized by them. He was good looking and she was surprised to find herself almost attracted to him. He really wasn't her type at all. She stayed away from the bad boys. She dug her nails into her hands to break his hold over her. Her temper got the better of her. She reached the car and pulled out the keys.

"Here", she said angrily as she flung them at him. "Keep the fucking car; I'm not on the market." It was a rental anyways.

She walked past him seeing lights in the near distance of what looked like a train station.

"I wouldn't go there. It's not safe for a little girl like you."

She kept on walking, digging into her purse until she felt her Swiss army knife which she carried everywhere with her. She hid it in her hand.

Without looking back, she answered him, "I'll take my chances."

She refused to look back and she breathed a sigh of relief when she reached the station. Perspiration poured down her face and body and her hair and her dress clung to her. She wasn't sure where to go now. She was nearsighted and could barely see three feet in front of her. Yet oddly enough, she wasn't wearing her glasses.

Then they came out of nowhere, ambushing her. Skinheads again. She felt dizzy as she spun around trying to find an escape route. She started retreating as they pressed forward. She kept on until she backed up into a firm hard body. She felt arms grasp her shoulders tightly.

"She's with me", a deep familiar voice said.

"She's your bitch, Hando?", one of the approaching skinheads voiced in surprise.

"Yeah, mate."

The leader halted his gang. "She's not your typical bird. I guess I wasn't kept up to speed", he said roughly cuffing the head of the man who stood next to him. "Sorry, mate", he said before withdrawing.

Hando nodded and grabbed the girl's arm and dragged her through the tunnels until they were outside again and then released her. Karen felt sick to her stomach and bent over to retch. She felt the blood suddenly rush to her head. She had been petrified and yet this man had saved her. She slowly stood up and faced him.

"Thank you. I thought I was dead."

"In a few minutes, you would have wished you were", he replied.

"Where am I?"

"Footscray"

"If you could just tell me where I can find a cab", she gasped as he swung her around so her back was pinned up against him once more. One arm went around her throat.

"You don't listen too good. See this is my turf and everything that happens on it is my biz. If there had been blood shed tonight, that would have been a big problem for me. And anyone who is a problem gets taken care of personally by me."

His arm tightened around her throat. She froze and then jerked her hand holding the knife up, slashing at his other arm. It started to bleed but he ignored it. He wrenched her hand hard forcing her to drop the knife and cry out. He was going to kick it away and then stopped. He knelt with her still in his hold and picked it up.

"That was a mistake."

He dangled the knife in front of her face smiling darkly. He watched her eyes, paralysed with terror, as he touched the knife to her neck and gently pressed until she could feel the edge pricking her skin. A thin trickle of blood followed the knife as he traced it down to the collar of her dress.

He whispered in her ear, "Rebellion doesn't go unpunished."

Her mind was racing. Then she remembered a TV program where a woman was in the same position as her. The woman in the show had pretended to faint and catching her attacker by surprise, she had kneed him in the balls and got away. She tried to make her stiff body relax and fell back against him. He yanked her up by twisting his hand in her hair.

"Don't even think it or I'll have to hurt ya."

He then took the knife and began to slowly cut off the buttons on her dress, one by one, pausing between each. He could smell her fear and it intoxicated him. Her dress fell open. Her breasts were heaving from her exertion in trying to get away from him. They spilled out of the plain white bra she was wearing. He deftly undid the front clasp and freed them. She cried out again.

His fingers mixed with her blood and he smeared it around her right breast and then he lightly toyed with the nipple. He then roughly pinched it until she screamed.

"You have nice tits. It would be a bloody shame to have to mark them."

He slid the knife between them and continued down across her abdomen and stopped at the fringe of her white cotton panties. Her trembling increased. He then threw the knife away. He brought his hand up to her face so she could see the size of it. With these hands alone, he could tear her to pieces.

He lowered his hand, brushing it against her skin and she felt it move under the elastic band. His fingers touched the swirls of the curly short hairs. He descended further until he reached the very essence of her. He stroked it gently at first and then more roughly, all the while watching her face for her reaction. She had closed her eyes. He then inserted a finger pressing deeper. She was dry but not as much as he expected.

He moved his mouth down her cheek and his tongue licked its smooth creamy surface. He now had two fingers inside.

"Relax", his voice softened.

He could feel her defences dropping. She was breathing heavily and a tiny moan escaped her lips. Her eyes were dark with desire.

She was wet now. His fingers expertly continued their work. She tilted back her head until it rested against his chest.

She was close.

He suddenly stopped and withdrew.

Her eyes flew open and she spat at him, "You Bastard, if you're going to rape me, then do it quickly. Let this hell be over."

He laughed at her and it was the cruellest sound she had ever heard.

"It's only rape when one of ya doesn't want it."

He let go of her and pushed her away. He started walking. He threw something back at her and she caught her car keys.

Knowing she had been tricked, used and then discarded, she hung her head in shame and started to cry. She felt even more violated than if he had indeed taken her.

"Oh my God!", Karen sat straight up in bed. She was shaking. The dream had never ended like that before. Usually, it finished when they both gave in to their baser instincts to their mutual satisfaction. She reached for the glass of water on her nightstand and drained it in one gulp. She kept seeing his face, smirking at her, taunting her. She looked at the clock. 6 am. She knew his schedule. He would be up, getting ready to go to the training ground. If she crept downstairs and over to the Tavern, she could watch him as he left.

Part Three

She leapt out of bed, threw on a robe and carefully opened her door to peek out into the hall. It was quiet and empty. Keeping near to the wall, she tiptoed down the stairs and darted outside. She hadn't even stopped to put on her slippers. The damp cold ground made her shiver or was it due to something else? She heard a noise and dived for the nearest hedge in the gardens surrounding the hotel. She could hear the pounding of running

feet. She peered through the greenery. She saw a tanned, muscular figure with short dark hair running in the opposite direction.

Could it be? "Yes, I think that's the General."

Her heart skipped a beat. She hadn't yet met Maximus and she could only surmise that he was leaving Laura's room on his way to the same place as Hando. The Master and the Student. She stood up and made her way to the Tavern. She found another hiding spot and waited. It didn't take too long.

Before she even saw him, she sensed him. It was like an electric current zapped through her. She closed her eyes and envisioned him. He was running on the spot just outside the doors. His sweat pants were grey. He wore a red T-shirt and she visualized the bone shaped tattoo running up his arm to his neck. She put out her hand and touched it in her mind, her fingers exploring the pattern. His face was an unreadable mask though she tried her hardest to track with her mind what emotions he might be feeling. She could smell his scent and it enflamed her.

She then got an uneasy feeling that she was being watched, even though she had not made herself visible. He had stopped jogging and turned to face in her direction. She held her breath and her body muscles cramped as she had not moved in some time. He made a move towards her and stopped. He was smiling, only it wasn't an inviting one, and it didn't reach his hooded eyes that she knew so well.

She tugged her robe more firmly around her. She had on only a thin cotton nightshirt. She was trembling so hard that he must be able to hear her very skin break out into goose bumps. When she thought she couldn't take one more second of this game they were playing, he nodded at her and continued his run away from her. She stayed there in hiding far longer than necessary. He was long gone.

It was now well past lunchtime and Karen was thirsty after her morning's exploration of the Point's grounds. But unfortunately, after walking around aimlessly for the last hour, she was hopelessly lost and didn't have a clue as to how to get back to the hotel. She had started out on her journey by walking to the stables hoping that she would run into East and Kath. When she got there, no one was around and some of the horses' stalls were empty. She concluded that they were probably out on a ride.

She had kept on hiking at a brisk pace, not really caring where she was headed. She felt like she was in the country and felt carefree and happy in the brisk clean air, so different from city living. Then the landscape changed and she found herself in a forest grove. She had felt peaceful at first with the sun warmly shining down on her through the trees. She had been following a well worn trail but she was distracted by the many wildflowers she saw and without realizing it, had traipsed off in other directions.

The different kinds of trees fascinated her and she gave in to a childish impulse to climb one of them that had been knocked down probably by some storm. She pulled herself up on the big root and walked along it with her arms outstretched like she was on a balance beam. She giggled as she pranced up its length and stood boldly on one foot while she did a pirouette. Of course, not being a graceful ballerina and not being particularly coordinated, she slipped and landed hard on her backside.

"Ouch! That ought teach me. I guess my tomboy days are over", she whimpered aloud, rubbing her posterior.

She continued on deeper through the woods.

"Where's the path?", she wondered.

The forest floor was now covered in long grass and spindly weeds that tried to trip her up. Several times, she lost her footing. She stumbled on, sure that she would soon find a way out of the dense growth. A low hanging branch slapped against her cheek. She put her hand up and felt a sticky wetness.

"Okay, this isn't fun anymore. How do I get out of here?"

She found a big tree trunk and sat down on it trying to get her bearings. Her leg brushed against something stinging.

"Ow!", she cried out as the sensation went right up her leg. Her leg felt like it was on fire.

She rolled up her pant leg and saw an angry red rash quickly developing. She glanced at the foliage near her. She was surrounded by nettles. She jumped up trying to ignore the pain in her injured leg. Panic was starting to build in her.

"I need to retrace my steps and stay calm."

She wished she had told somebody back at the hotel where she was going or said yes to Bud's offer as a guide. If she couldn't find her way out, no one would know where to look for her. She felt a sharp bite on her arm. She scratched at the itch mechanically. Slowly, she started to backtrack looking for familiar landmarks.

"Where's a boy scout when you need one?"

Karen wandered around becoming more disoriented by the minute. She heard a rustling sound in the bush behind her. Whipping her head around, her heart seemed to stop as she listened to a low pitched growl. Her imagination took over and she thought of all kinds of animals that could be prowling around out here. The noise sounded again, starting off deep and rumbling and getting louder.

Terror took over and she started running blindly through the vegetation. She heard a crashing noise behind her. Her lungs were about to give out. Then gunshots echoed in her ear. She threw herself on the ground and rolled down an incline, knocking the breath out of her.

"Miss, Miss, are you all right?", an urgent voice rang in her ears. "Are you hurt?"

She tried to raise her head but dizziness overcame her and she collapsed back into the dirt. She felt herself being turned over and lying on her back, she stared into a pair of anxious blue green eyes. Her vision was blurry and her mouth felt like sandpaper. She made a grunting sound.

"Just relax Luv, you'll be right as rain in a minute. Here have some water." Her head was lifted and a canteen put to her lips. She drank hesitantly at first then gulped it.

She felt the man's hands moving along her arms and legs and then down to her ankles.

"What are you doing?", she managed to gasp out.

"Checking to see if anything is broken or sprained", came the response.

Her vision cleared and she tried to sit up. The man firmly pressed her back down.

"Easy, you took quite a tumble. Do you remember what happened?"

"Yeah, I was trying to get back to the hotel. Then something started to chase me and then I heard a gun go off. At least it sounded like gun shots."

"It was and you were lucky I was in the area doing some target practice. I found this on the ground a few clicks back." He handed her the bandanna that had slipped off her hair.

She took it and asked, "How did you know anyone was here?"

"I saw fresh footprints and tracked them. That cougar would have been on you in two ticks. Don't you know the worse thing you can do is run when you're cornered like that?"

All the tension and fear caught up to her and she snarled back at him. "Well, excuse me. I must have forgotten my Zoology 101. I didn't have time to brush up on my how to meet a cougar etiquette." She sat up again. "Why don't you have signs up warning people it's dangerous around here?"

"Why didn't you stay on the main trail? It would have led you right back out to the road."

"I thought I was on the main trail."

"Lady, you were nowhere near it. You were heading north into the back woods. It's all wasteland and wilderness where you were going."

"More like a jungle. How can you have a jungle out here? This isn't fucking Africa!" She was really wound up now.

"You obviously don't know a lot about the Point. We have all kinds of terrain out here; what you call jungle, frozen tundra, hell, we've probably even got a rain forest by now. The boundaries keep getting bigger and unless you're an experienced hiker, you shouldn't be out here alone without a guide or without water", he told her, noting she didn't have any on her. He found himself raising his own voice, his concern turning to irritation that she should be so careless.

Then he took another look at the situation. His anger dissipated as he realized she must feel pretty awful. She was probably dehydrated. Her face was smudged, scratched and bleeding from a cut on her cheek. Her hair was tumbling untidily out of her ponytail. She was scratching incessantly at her arm which was swelling up and favouring her right leg. He noticed that underneath all of the dust and grime, she was attractive. He must have a thing for redheads. The color of it reminded him of Kaz and how much he missed her when she wasn't here

"I'm sorry. I should be getting you back and having the doctor check you out."

"I'm fine", she replied as she tried to stand. She leaned on him for a moment. "I guess I should thank you for rescuing me. My name's Karen."

"Terry Thorne."

An image flashed through her brain of an intensely passionate kiss. "Proof of Life". She must have hit her head pretty hard not to have recognized him. Those amazing, powerful biceps were now wrapped around her, steadying her.

"Are you sure you can walk? I could carry you."

"No!", she raised her voice in sharp protest. "I'm all right and I don't need to see a doctor."

He was going to argue with her and then thought better of it. He didn't want to get her back up. It would only be wasted breath. She seemed quite determined to put this incident behind her as if it embarrassed her. She had a slight limp, but with his help she made it back to his car.

She'd felt foolish when they got back to the hotel. Michelle, Wendy and Laura had made a fuss over her and wanted her to get checked out by Anthony, the Point's doctor. She insisted she was okay and said that the only thing she had injured was her dignity. She had put cream on her leg and antiseptic on the bite.

She was now at the Tavern downing another screwdriver. She saw Bud come and waved him over.

"I heard you had quite an adventure this morning."

"Oh no, not you too. I do declare that the grapevine around here is the longest and the nosiest I have ever come across", she replied in a much exaggerated southern drawl. "But I won't worry about that now; I'll think about that tomorrow. After all, tomorrow is another day." She then said only slightly more seriously "I thought I'd make you reconsider my acting skills. Want to hear my John Wayne?"

Bud laughed and they started chatting about this and that as if they were old friends. Karen's normal self-consciousness was eased around him.

He was so easy to talk to, thought Karen. She couldn't understand why he would waste his time on her when he could have any girl in the joint? He was so handsome.

They discussed her favourite RC films.

"To tell you the truth, Bud, and don't let this go to your head, but I really liked LA Confidential. It's in the top three."

She saw him puff up in pride.

"It must have been because of that memorable guy who played Exley, what was his name? Oh yeah, Guy Pearce." She poked him in the arm seeing his face deflate. "I'm only kidding you nutbar. You were awesome."

"I can't believe Gladiator is not in your top five. Max draws all the women here", Bud acknowledged without the slightest trace of begrudgement.

"Not me. I mean I liked the movie, and Max does have his charms but it never really got to me."

"And what does get to you, Miss Summers?"

She considered a moment tilting her head. "Lots of things; a sunset at twilight, the sun reflecting on the water, the chirping of the birds at daybreak, the scent of eucalyptus...", she paused. "I'm babbling again. How you do let me run on."

"Why do I suspect that you're more of a romantic than you let on?"

"Because Bud White, you're a cop and suspicious by nature. However your instincts on this particular matter are incorrect. I'm as practical as they come."

They had talked and joked around some more and then Bud had excused himself to do an errand for Michelle. She had been invited to dinner by Zach and Buggy, but she begged off saying she wasn't hungry, and to herself, she thought she didn't want to be a third wheel. In actual fact, she was starving. She hadn't eaten anything but an apple all day. She was determined to remain in control and not let food conquer her. She wanted to join some of the girls sitting at one of the tables but they looked like they were having such a good time, she wasn't sure she should intrude. After all, she didn't know them that well. She didn't want to be a wet blanket.

She went back to her room and furiously worked out, pushing her tolerance level. She was now up to a hundred sit-ups. She bounded into the shower.

While blow drying her hair, her attention was drawn back to him. She hadn't seen him since their early morning encounter and then she still hadn't really seen him, just sensed him. She just knew that unless she sought him out, he would keep to himself and avoid newcomers. She empathized with how he must feel being torn away from his gang and his life on the streets. It would be harder for him than the others to adjust. He couldn't even go back to his movie for solace. Nothing was left for him there. He had lost everything; his squat, his fellow skinheads, his last girlfriend (no great loss in her opinion), his adopted little brother Bubs, his best mate and in the end, his own life.

She shuddered as she vividly recalled his final moments. What had gone through his mind in his last fleeting seconds, knowing he had been betrayed by the only person he had ever loved? The look of shock on his face as the knife (the very same one that he had bought for Davy) had penetrated the back of his neck, and then he had stumbled backwards taking in the sight of the two of them wrapped in each other's arms, Gabe and Davy. Karen wiped the tears from her eyes. Of course, she realized in her heart that Hando would have choked the life out of Gabe if Davy had not intervened. His hatred of her after she had revealed that it was she who had informed on them was white hot and wouldn't have been extinguished any other way. Still she couldn't help but feel sorry for the skinhead leader. Dying alone with no one to comfort him, no one to hold him and ease his fear, no one to love him and take away all the pain.

How could a person get over something like that? She was certain in her heart that Hando still suffered, still had nightmares and had still not recovered. That was a big part of the reason she was here. Of course, she desired him sexually, but she also wanted to help him get over the psychological scars he surely must have. She felt his pain as if it was her own. She hoped he would let her offer comfort and a shoulder to unladen himself to. From what she had heard from the girls on line, Hando kept to himself all the time. He must feel more than alone; he must feel lonely as well.

"I've got to stop thinking so much about him. He's probably going to be bad news, and I don't think I'm someone who could ever hold his interest."

Like his creator, he would have an affinity for skinny little blond girls. For a moment she despaired again and wondered why she had come here. Then a little voice inside of her urged, take a chance. For once in your life, risk a little. Love might be a mistake but it's one worth making.

She smiled. She didn't often heed the advice of that little voice. She often suppressed and buried it in favour of years of common sense, safety and self-protection. It was time, time to act. She left the hotel and walked towards the one place she had avoided all day...the beach. She knew that it was his special place, the one that he came to day after day in search of something...peace of mind?

She drew her sweater around her; the sun was just setting. The sky around her had exploded in color, a hundred shades of reds, tangerines and burgundy. She could hear the roar of the incoming surf striking the rocks. She took off her sandals and walked barefoot along the shore, digging her toes into the wet sand. She bent down every now and then to examine some seashells. She picked up a flat smooth stone, threw her arm back and laughed in delight as it sailed through the air and skipped over the water.

Hando glowered at her in silence from behind a grove of palm trees quite close to her. When he had first noticed her, he had been annoyed that she had disturbed him in his sanctuary. She was just another bloody guest that had invaded the Point, another silly twat who wanted to sink her claws into any bloke with a stiffy and suck him dry. The guests to him were nothing more than the lurkers who came weekend after weekend hoping to get some horizontal action. At least the lurkers were honest in what they were

after. They didn't think up elaborate lies and speak earnestly of romance, love and connections.

As he continued to follow her with his eyes, he noticed how her hair had caught the dying sun's last glints. It was a fiery red and the wind swept it over her shoulders in a tumbling disarray. She had taken her jumper off and her pale skin stood out in contrast to the dark colour of the deep blue water and the dark brown sand. She advanced through the waves slowly, spinning round now and then, loving the splash of them lapping against her legs. She had rolled her trousers up and he watched the turn of her impossibly tiny ankles, and his eyes moved up to the well-toned curves of her calves. The rest of her body was covered completely by a long flowing caftan. She was too far away to see her face up close and he was surprised to find himself wanting to see it.

What difference did it make what she looked like? She could be butt fucking ugly or even a looker; he would have nothing to do with her. Dirty little skanks, that's what they all were anyways. His face rolled into a sneer.

It was then that she became aware of him. Like before, she felt him first. He was watching her; actually he was checking her out. His eyes were narrowed as he studied her. She couldn't see them but felt cold under their gaze. His mouth had just twisted into a scowl. It was meant to intimidate. That was the wrong thing to try with Karen. The more someone tried to frighten her, the steelier her resolve became. She had just as much right as he did to be here. She held her head up high and called out an invitation.

"Why don't you come out of hiding? I don't believe we've been properly introduced."

A second later, he tore out of the trees.

"Fucking hiding? I don't think so. This is my place, and you're trespassin'"

"Funny, I don't recall seeing any signs. In fact, I distinctly would have remembered being told if this was private property."

A smart ass, this one, he thought. "Look Bitch, why don't you just sod off and wiggle that little arse of yours somewhere else. You're wasting your efforts here."

"Actually, my name isn't Bitch, and trust me Mate; I'm not here to impress you. I was simply enjoying a walk with no one's company but my own", the woman looked squarely into his eyes.

Her defiance angered him even more. He sidled up closer to her. She stood her ground and kept her eyes locked on his.

He noted that her breathing had become more rapid, she swallowed a few times in quick succession and the skin showing above the collar of her shirt had reddened.

"You're all the same. You come here practically drooling, willing to spread your legs for the first dick that cracks a fat. Well, I've got news for you darlin', that snatch of yours isn't made of gold and my good strong Aussie prick here isn't tempted to blow my wad. So why don't you just go back to the hotel and cream in your panties with no one's company but your own." He then walked on by her.

"Is this how you generally welcome people by insulting them and presuming to know why they are here? You're pretty full of yourself aren't you, Hando, are you always this way? If you are, it must get tiresome being a first class fucking asshole. It must get so old after a while."

So she knew who he was. He stormed back to her and his hand went to her throat. He squeezed and got the satisfaction at last of apprehension in those deep blue eyes of hers.

"You don't know jack about me Cunt, and no one calls me names and lives."

He squeezed harder and smiled as panic crossed her features. Her hands scratched at him trying to claw his hands away. He watched as her eyes went out of focus, her surroundings darkening as she was about to lose consciousness. He threw her away at the last possible second, and she collapsed, coughing hard into the sand.

He leaned down into her face, "I believe we've been properly introduced now. Ta Luv." He then spat on the ground in front of her and strode off.

Part Four

She didn't know how she made it back to the hotel but somehow she did. She was intending to just quietly slip back to her room, but Michelle and Colin met her at the hotel doors and wouldn't take no for an answer. She was on auto pilot and accompanied them to the Tavern and then took off for the washroom. She looked in the mirror and could see bruises already developing on the front of her throat. She dug through her purse for powder and tried to cover them. Her fingers were shaky and she fumbled with the compact and then dropped it. She burst into tears. She could still feel the pressure of his hands around her neck, squeezing. Her dreamy school girl illusions about him shattered. She had never expected him to physically assault her.

While he had been speaking to her, she had been shamelessly examining him. She had noted his strong straight nose, his bow-like mouth and the light growth of his beard. She had ached to touch it to see if it was as soft as she had imagined it would be.

She had been stung by his cruel words and his utter disdain and scorn. No one could have prepared her for this first brutal encounter. She had been so right about his anger growing; it hadn't stopped just because he came to the Point. What other emotions were swelling up inside him?

She trembled and stayed in the washroom until the tears stopped. She walked stiffly to the bar and asked Andy for a double zombie.

"Are you okay, Luv? You look a little off."

"Did I ask for your concern? You're a bartender; just pour the damn drink Andy", she snapped.

She knew she should instantly apologize but didn't. She took a big swallow of her drink and gasped as it burned down inside her. She shouldn't drink rum; it usually went right to her head.

When she got back to the table, she was encircled by a whole group of people, Wendy and Jeffrey, Kath and East, Laura and Max, and even Norma Jean and Mannie had managed to come down from the cabin. Karen was not at her best and merely nodded to Max and Mannie. The conversation and laughter went right over her head, and she wished she could just disappear.

Her first meeting with Hando was nothing like her dreams or imagination. He had acted exactly like he would have in his movie. Why was she so surprised? And yet, was he right in what he had said? She had come to the Point full of hope thinking she might have a chance with him. She looked at the far end of the room where the lurkers congregated. She saw how they were dressed, how they moved, how they all had bedroom eyes, and how triumphantly they looked at each other every time they made a conquest.

The tables were turned. It wasn't the women being ogled and pawed at. The brothers were a handsome brood, and there weren't enough of them to go around. Yes, a lot of them were attached now to regular partners and they seemed happy to be so. Did they feel sometimes like women did, that they were on display, just a piece of meat? Her eyes had certainly run down Hando's body on many occasions in her mind, eating him up like whipped cream.

She remembered again her main reason for being here. It was not to ravish him but help him mend his wounds and bring him back to the land of the living. How could she do that now when all his raw anger had been focused on her? He thought so little of her.

"Karen,...Yo Karen...Are you still with us?" She looked at Wendy.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"Girlfriend, where did you go to? You haven't heard anything tonight."

"I'm sorry. It's been a long day. I should get some rest."

At once, Michelle and Wendy were concerned, remembering that it had just been this morning that Karen had got lost and taken a tumble. She waved off the offers of being escorted to her room. But she didn't go directly back to the hotel. She sat down on one of the benches in Tina's rose garden. The alcohol on an empty stomach had made her tired, and she laid down along the bench using her sweater as a pillow. Within minutes, she was asleep.

Later, she felt her arm being lightly shaken. She didn't want to open her eyes. She then felt something light touch her face. She twitched her nose and tried to move away from it. It continued to tickle her until she let out a big sneeze.

"Whoa", Bud rebounded, the feather falling from his fingers. "Major cooties!"

Coming fully awake now, she slapped at him lightly but he had fulfilled his purpose.

"It's not safe to sleep here. That fucking hunk of nanogoo could come around or it could rain and you could catch a cold or worse."

"So, what are you Bud, my babysitter? I swear you and your brothers have to learn to be a little less protective. This macho raging testosterone thing you've all got going can be a little hard to deal with. We're not damsels in distress. This is the 21st century last time I looked", she stretched still lying on the bench, not knowing how provocative she looked in the moonlight.

Bud looking at her was trying to fight off a growing attraction. He and Trisha were still having problems, and it had been awhile since he had been with a woman.

Karen was oblivious to what was going on inside Bud and would have been truly amazed at what was going through his mind. She yawned, sat up and then let out a yelp. She began to rub her leg furiously.

"What's wrong? You got a cramp. Here, let me", he pushed her hands away and began to massage her leg. His strong fingers kneading the muscles soon released the knot.

She lay back and closed her eyes. She sighed heavily and Bud noticed the sheen of moisture on her upper lip. He had the strongest urge to kiss her but he fought it and instead he said, "C'mon Sleeping Beauty, time to go to bed."

Hando paced back and forth in his room like a caged lion. The nerve of that stupid slut crashing into his personal space and then acting all high and mighty. He bet he could take her down a peg or two. Teach the bitch a good lesson. Were he back in the streets of Melbourne, he would have quickly shown her who was boss.

He shook his head. She wasn't worth getting worked up about. Since he had begun training with Max he had been able to control the rage that was such an integral part of him. It was still simmering just underneath the surface, but he had been able to channel it and release some of the negative energy

through his daily exercises with Max and his own personal fitness regime. Sometimes he would be overwhelmed with the fury and the feelings of revenge that bubbled up inside him. On these occasions, he would just disappear for a while in the environs around the Point. Sometimes he would be gone for days. He would always tell Max when he went away so no one would be alarmed and send out a search party for him. Lately, he had begun to open up more with Max as he trusted him, and what's more, he respected him. Of all of his brothers, Max knew about hate and a thirst for vengeance and could understand some of his feelings.

Just thinking about some of his discussions with Max and the advice he had been given was starting to calm him down. She was so not worth it. Just another ditsy sheila with an obvious agenda. He grabbed onto his exercise bar and did his usual routine of chin ups and sit ups. But try as he might, he couldn't get her out of his mind. His memory flashed back to her hair ablaze in the sun and her eyes staring at him with such fierce intensity. She had called him by name, and at first, had not been afraid of him. The others would surely have warned her about him. He was pretty sure that it was standard protocol when guests first came to the Point to be alerted about Sid and himself.

He had seen first hand how many of the guests would go out of their way to avoid him, or they looked at him with either fear, revulsion or a bizarre kind of fascination as if he was a specimen to be examined, the Neo-Nazi! He often covered most of his tats, not because he was ashamed of them, but because he didn't like being on display for the latter group. They probably expected him to hollar "Heil Hitler" or whip out his copy of Mein Kampf. He rarely socialized with his brothers and did the bare minimum of work demanded of him before he once again was on his own, the lone wolf.

His thoughts again travelled back to the woman on the beach. She didn't tell him her name. He could tell she was older, in her mid to late 30's, maybe. She was short and small boned he realized, as he recalled how narrow her ankles and wrists were. Her clothes looked expensive but were so shapeless, it was hard to get a good fix on her figure. The bulk of her torso had been covered by that tent-like top.

Maybe she was a porker, he thought, and found it amazing that this didn't automatically dismiss her image from his brain. As a general rule, he wasn't attracted to fat women. He thought they were lazy, indulgent, negligent and

lacked self-discipline. Had he ever fucked any? Once or twice when he was shitfaced and there was no other pussy around.

He was tired of her barging into his head. He needed a pint. It was late so there probably wouldn't be too many people downstairs. He went to the bar and Andy immediately set him up with a VB. He looked around. Only Johnny, Jack, Alex and Bud were left. He decided to stay where he was on the bar stool. He and Bud didn't get on.

"So any new arrivals come?"

It took Andy a second to realize that Hando had spoken and was actually speaking to him.

"Not today mate. But yesterday, one did."

Hando cursed silently. In the old days, it had been so easy to get Andy to spill on any news or gossip, but ever since he had fucked up one time with his loose lips, he was now much more careful about what he said and to whom.

"She a friend of one of the regulars?"

"She seems to know all the ladies, but I tell you that one's got a short wick", Andy replied, remembering the way she had reamed him out and demanded her drink after he had just asked if she was okay.

"That so?"

"Yeah and with red hair to match."

"What's her name? I'm just askin' so I'll know who to steer clear from."

Andy thought that was kind of odd for Hando to say as he always steered clear from everybody but he shrugged and said, "Karen...I think her last name is Summers."

Hando wanted to ask if Andy knew how long she was staying but knew that would be showing way too much interest. He turned away and watched as Johnny and Jack left. Alex had joined Bud who was morosely looking into his glass of scotch. He couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, but it

sounded like Alex was trying to cheer him up. What a loser. He was probably moping around cause Trisha wasn't there. He would never let a dame get under his skin like that. He didn't trust any of them and only used them to do the nasty with when he was desperate.

He had tried to get Davy to see that. Women were trouble with a capital T. They were only good for one thing. But Davy hadn't listened to him and had got involved way over his head. As he made himself remember her, he clenched his fists. The stupid cow had come between them. There were few things that Hando regretted but one of them was bringing Gabe into their world. He had known at the time he met Gabe that Davy lusted after her. He had seen it every time they joked around and especially when Davy had risked his life to get Gabe's jacket from their squat while it was under siege by gooks. He had fully intended to pass her on to Davy when he was through with her. But she had pissed him off and after slapping her, he had ordered her to leave. Davy had followed, and that was when Hando realized he was in danger of losing his best friend for the first time.

He closed his eyes tightly and blocked out the rest of what happened. He came back to the present. Women were the same all over; treacherous, deceiving vultures. He repeated this to himself over and over like a mantra.

Karen slept in the next morning. Her stomach was growling, and she knew she had to eat something. She unwrapped the crackers and peeled the banana that she had stuffed in her purse. She had nicked them from a tray she had found in the hall. There were four crackers in the pack so she only allowed herself two. The other two she would hoard for later. She felt a little dizzy but attributed this to the rum she drank last night.

What should she do today, and for that matter, the rest of her time here? Hando didn't want to have anything to do with her. She doubted that would ever change, and to be honest, after what he did to her, it was probably for the best, though she honestly believed in her heart that he needed her as a friend.

Perhaps, she should hook up with the women, but then there would always come the awkward time when they would be whisked off by their men, leaving her alone and feeling like a wallflower. Maybe, she should just go home.

"With my tail between my legs", she murmured.

It wasn't fair. Nothing in her life had ever been easy. Her childhood had been marred by the bullying of other children, her teenage years were dateless and she had faded into the background of every classroom. Her only enjoyment had come from music and reading, and she would escape gladly at every opportunity into make believe. She would become the muse of every song and the heroine of every story. When she got her first job at sixteen, she then had money to spend on movies. Her world of pretend expanded and she would be cast as the leading lady facing off against the protagonist. In this world she was beautiful, glamorous, mysterious, clever, alluring and she had her pick of men.

Unfortunately, reality always bites you in the butt, and as she got older, her life became predictable and mundane. She went to college, began a career, moved out on her own, and the daily grind of being an adult, quite frankly, sucked. Slowly, very slowly, at an advanced age, men became interested. She had been initiated into the rites of flirting, the chase, and then the sexual dance. Her friends had married, had babies or travelled to exotic places. She was on a shoestring budget and could never get time off from work to join them on their voyages.

Then before she knew it, her twenties were over. She had felt deprived of the normal experiences of youth, going on picnics and BBQs at the beach, camping up north, watching firecracker displays on holidays and necking up a storm in someone's daddy's car. She had gone a little crazy when she turned thirty. She had to make up for lost time and she had and how!

Out of the blue, disaster struck and for four years, she merely existed. She dreaded each day and went to bed terrified each night. She couldn't read any more; she couldn't listen to music. She couldn't sleep; she couldn't work. She lost her friends one by one who didn't know how to relate to this stranger she had become. She had prayed to God then like she never had before. She didn't use the formal prayers she had been raised to say but just talked to Him. She begged Him to ease her suffering. In despair, she ranted and raged and said in the end whatever she did, it would be His fault. Then she had taken the pills. Karen was openly sobbing now at the memory.

It had worked though; some angel must have been sent to look after her. She had gradually recovered, and life took on new meaning. She had vowed never to take her life or happiness for granted again. She made new friends who were free, independent single women. She quickly grew impatient with them as they were always complaining, scheming, sniping and competing. She didn't want to become like them, but one day she had looked in the mirror and saw a bitter, stubborn, cynical and jaded woman staring back. That's where she was right now, and she wanted to change but didn't know how. She wanted to reach out and belong but, all too frequently, she put her foot in her mouth and unfailingly alienated yet again someone trying to help her. She wanted to fit in here at the Point, but she already had let her temper erupt on a few occasions. She didn't want to go home to an empty apartment and a phone that never rang.

Maybe she would go into town and do some shopping. Spending money that she didn't have always seemed like a pleasant diversion. She would just make sure she got specific directions so she wouldn't be stranded in Timbuktu. She laughed at herself. It felt good to be able to do that.

Karen wandered into the various shops and was pleased to note that quite a few of them sold antiques. She loved to browse and look at the jewellery, the fancy china and silver tea sets. She imagined a much simpler time back then and tried to picture how life must have been. At her age, her family would have given up hope of her ever marrying and having children. She would be considered an old spinster, the crazy lady with a million cats as her only companions. She giggled at the thought. But she would have adored the clothes, especially the corsets which would have cinched in her waist quite nicely, and the hats, right out of "Titanic". And as a bonus, she would finally have cleavage as those dresses certainly pushed everything up and out. In fact, that was the only good thing that had come with her gaining weight; she finally had grown a chest.

She saw a rack of parasols and opened one up, twirling around with it.

"Why thank you kind Sir, it will be my pleasure to be your escort to the ball", she mimed and smiled bewitchingly as she curtsied before an

imagined gentleman caller. "I'll be sure to save you a spot on my dance card, if there's any left", she giggled coquettishly.

Ah yes, she should have been born into another time. Then she thought seriously about it for a minute and shook her head.

"Nah."

Women back then didn't have the freedom and choice that she took for granted even though history did have some fine examples of those who broke the mould.

She went back to the jewellery case and bought a cameo broach and a Celtic cross necklace. Being of Irish descent and having travelled once to Ireland, she admired it as a symbol of her heritage. She continued down the street of shops and came to a sleepwear and lingerie store. She looked in the display window and winced at seeing the skimpy teddies and tiny thongs on the mannequins.

"Why would any sane woman want to wear one of those and have a permanent wedgie?", she wondered aloud. Because, she assured herself, they are so darn sexy and men didn't seem to have an aversion to women wearing them.

She entered the store and looked around. As usual, there were no plus sizes.

"Can I help you Miss", a saleslady smiled at her.

"I don't think there's anything here that's my size."

The woman gave her a perusing glance. "What size are you, a 12?"

Karen laughed and shook her head, "More like a 16."

"No, I don't think so; here let me measure you."

Before she could stop her, the saleslady went back to the counter and pulled out a measuring tape.

"Here Dear, pull up your blouse."

Karen hesitated and then did what the saleslady asked. She had her waist, bust and hips measured.

"You're definitely not a 16, and I think I have something in your size that you might like."

She followed the saleslady and said, "There must be some mistake; I've been a size 16 for the last four years."

The woman gave her a no-nonsense look. "My Dear, I've been in this business for thirty odd years, and I know how to measure and I know what fits my customers. Now here's what I want you to look at."

Karen looked at the delicate negligee set. It was gorgeous. It had a floral pattern on it of yellow and purple, was sheer, very sheer, at the top. It was also slit on both sides up to mid thigh and came with a matching robe.

"Do you want to try it on?"

Karen was about to say that it wouldn't fit but didn't want to get the old dear all riled up. It certainly was beautiful. She had never owned something quite like it. Maybe she should buy it as an incentive and then diet into it. It would help her motivation.

"Actually, I'll just buy it, thanks."

She hustled out of the store thinking how blind could that lady be. She couldn't have just lost two dress sizes; she had only been dieting and exercising for the last two months. She suddenly felt dizzy and had to sit down on the curb. She hoped she wasn't going to faint. She put her head between her knees until the feeling passed. Time to eat something. She unwrapped the two remaining crackers from her purse and crammed them into her mouth. Chewing slowly, she hungrily eyed a hot dog cart that was across the street. The temptation was strong but she fought it. Knowing she needed something more substantial in her stomach, she went into a fruit market and bought two apples, two oranges, some grapes, bananas and a case of bottled water. There, she was set for the rest of her stay.

She gnawed at one of the apples and, despite her misgivings, pictured herself in the negligee in front of Hando. His rough hands on the filmy soft material, were touching her through it and her nipples hardened in response. His

fingers were lightly caressing her breasts and moving up to her neck and then were replaced by his lips, tender and warm. She felt the dampness between her legs and then remembered his furious face from last night.

He deliberately tried to scare her by choking her even though she knew deep inside that he was testing her. What would his touch and kiss have been like last night? It would have been harsh, demanding and savage. If it was possible, she was now even more wet. Now that scared her. What kind of woman would want to be treated like that? She thought of her past boyfriends and her clandestine encounters with them. She had always been treated with respect, kindness and thoughtfulness.

Some lovers had been better than others and had been able to satisfy her. Some times she had faked her orgasms, not wanting to hurt their feelings. When they were gone, she would just reach for her vibrator. At other times, she would stare at the ceiling when they weren't looking and wonder why they were so excited, hot and sweaty while she stayed cool as a cucumber. She sometimes fantasized they were her favourite movie stars. When they rolled off her, she would wait an appropriate five minutes before excusing herself to the bathroom and wiping away all their traces.

She also wondered why she was so quiet in bed. She didn't scream, shriek or talk dirty. Every now and then, she would moan or gasp so she would still be considered an active participant.

When she had first seen Romper Stomper and the sex scene between Hando and Gabe at the party, she became highly aroused. She never had been taken that way and it excited her. She had kept rewinding the movie so she could watch it over and over. Hell, sometimes she would fast forward through the whole thing just to get to that scene. The pumping action, the expression on Gabe's face, Hando steadying himself with a hand on the wall as he came, all were recalled. There had been no doubt; Hando had been in control. Was that what she was hoping to find here with him, someone to sexually dominate her? No, that was just a little bit too kinky for her. She tried to push these deviant thoughts from her mind.

It was getting late. It was time to go. She drove back to the Point, feeling good that she didn't once have to stop to see where she was going. It was starting to rain and holding her parcels over her head, she ran into the hotel lobby.

She stopped to say hi to Colin who was manning the front desk.

"Did some shopping I see. Anything good?"

"Just some jewellery and some fruit."

"What about in that little bag there; you know the one that says 'Erotic Dreams' on it?"

She blushed furiously wishing she could disappear into the floor.

Colin patted her on the shoulder, "Just teasin' Luv. I'm sure you just bought a pair of flannels right?" He winked at her.

She ran up to her room and slid the offending bag under her bed wondering what possessed her to buy it.

Part Five

She took a cold shower and towel dried her hair before noticing an envelope that had been shoved under her door. Opening it, she saw it was a note from Bud asking her if she would like to have dinner with him. He left her his phone number. She was torn now. She wanted to have Bud's company but she didn't want to eat any more today. Maybe she could get away with having just an appetizer or a salad. She could then just work out twice as hard tonight. She dialled his number.

"Bud White."

"Do you always answer your phone so formally?", she said giggling.

There was a slight pause and then she heard a deep chuckle.

"Old habits die hard. Besides, not too many ladies call here anymore so they may have the wrong number."

"C'mon Bud, you're such a studly specimen, I can't believe that's true."

Another pause, this one longer then a change of subject.

"I presume you called about dinner tonight."

"Yeah I would love to have dinner with you."

Bud hadn't realized he had been holding his breath expecting to be rejected. "Great, I'll phone down and make a reservation for one of the dining rooms."

"Dining rooms?", Karen panicked to herself. That meant formality and lots of food.

"I figured we could have a late supper and then maybe do some dancing."

"Uh, Bud, I'm actually not that hungry. See, I ate a late lunch in town. How about if we just have a bite to eat in the restaurant?"

Bud felt disappointed but he didn't want her to know. "We could do that. But aren't you sick of the same place and seeing the same ugly mugs of all my brothers?"

She laughed again. She had a very loud and raucous laugh. It sounded good to his ears because it sounded genuine.

"Well then what would I be doing with you if I was sick of those same faces?"

"You got a point Sweetheart. How does 8 o'clock sound?"

"Perfect, I'll see you then."

She hung up and looked through her wardrobe again. She wished she had brought a skirt or dress, even a pantsuit would do. Every now and then, she liked to fancy up but she hadn't thought she would have an occasion to do so here.

"Silly me, I just thought I would be in bed all the time getting laid and wouldn't need any clothes." She banged her head on the closet in frustration.

She finally decided on a lacy white blouse and added an elastic belt that helped to narrow her waist. She pinned on her new broach and wore the necklace.

Bud was already at a table when she entered the restaurant. He rose and kissed her on the cheek and then pulled out her chair before seating himself.

"You look nice tonight", he said warmly.

"Why thank you."

"Is that new?", he pointed to her broach.

"I just got it today. I love old jewellery. There were some great stores in town."

Jeff came by to take their order, asking how her day went. They small talked for a while and then he put in their order. Bud had ordered a steak and another scotch.

"I forgot to ask you if you wanted some wine", he said mentally kicking himself for forgetting.

"No thanks, I'm still recovering from rum poisoning."

"You sure you don't want more than a salad?"

She assured him that she didn't. She noticed that Bud seemed a little nervous tonight, more wound up than normal.

"So anything exciting happen around here while I was gone?"

"Just Sid being more fucking obnoxious than usual. He always drives everyone nuts when he's expecting Tawny."

He then shared some stories with her about Sid's antics and how the boyz retaliated. She couldn't stop laughing. Bud certainly had a way of telling a story, especially with all the colourful swearing.

"So tell me about you", he finally said.

"What do you want to know?"

"I don't know; tell me about your home or your job."

"As you know, I'm Canadian, eh, and I live in Toronto, what is commonly known as Hogtown. I've lived there all of my life. In fact, I have never lived more than a five mile radius from my grade school, my high school, the family church, the hospital I was born in, the old age home where I first worked...etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Are you getting the picture of Dullsville? I guess I'm not too adventurous."

"No, it just sounds like you were content where you were living. Is your family close by?"

"No, when my dad retired, they moved out to Windsor. It's not that far away but far enough to be out of sight, out of mind."

"You don't get along with them?"

Karen puckered up her mouth, "That would be an understatement."

Just then the food arrived. They started to eat and Karen saw that Bud enjoyed his food, digging into it with gusto. He noticed that she took little bites and was pushing the lettuce all over her plate.

"So, we were talking about your family. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"One of each, older with the standard 1.5 kids each. I really love my nephews and nieces. They're at an age now where you can talk to them about anything. Of course, they think you're too old and not cool enough for them to waste their breath on because you don't know what Eminem's latest song is or who's playing against the Leafs."

"Leafs?"

"Hockey."

"Well don't tell John that. Isn't hockey supposed to be your national sport?"

"Uh huh but since my dad always hogged the TV during every game and I couldn't even skate because of weak ankles, I wasn't that interested. Treasonous, I know. But come to think of it, I played a mean game of road hockey when I was little."

Karen then asked about his life as a cop. He told her more amusing anecdotes about his work, avoiding any mention of his former partner, Stens or Lynne Bracken.

She told him that she really didn't like her job but it paid too well for her to just up and quit. "I've got good benefits, a good pension plan and five weeks of holidays."

"Yeah but if you're miserable, you should do something else."

"That's just it. I don't know what I want to be when I grow up."

"I think you're plenty grown up", Bud said quietly and Karen couldn't fail to notice the drop of his eyes to the low neckline of her blouse.

"Any men in your life back in Toronto?"

She swallowed hard and then wiped her mouth with her napkin. "Not at present, been a few in my past and who knows what the future holds." Their eyes met and Karen broke the stare. "What about you Bud? Don't tell me some woman hasn't hitched herself to your wagon."

He thought again of Trisha, his pretty English rose. That was the problem though; he felt like she wasn't his anymore, that he had lost her. Karen seeing the inner turmoil reflected on his face reached for his hand. No words were necessary. He squeezed it and smiled that he was okay.

Just then, Michelle and Colin approached their table.

"So Bud, did you tell Karen about the beach BBQ we're having?", Michelle

asked lightly.

"Must have slipped my mind", Bud said looking down at his plate.

Michelle gave him and Karen a curious glance wondering if she had interrupted a private moment and then decided to continue.

"Next weekend, we're having a party on the beach. We're going to play volleyball or badminton then have a sunset BBQ. Oh and they'll be swimming. Did you bring a bathing suit?"

Karen, dejected by her encounter with Hando and not wanting to risk any more rebuffs replied, "I'm not sure if I'll be staying that long. I was thinking I'd leave by mid week."

"You just got here, and believe me you haven't been to a real barbie until you've been to an Aussie one", Colin added. "See we convince Annabella to take a break and then we take over. Bud, can't you sweet talk her into coming?"

"The parties here are pretty good. You should stay."

"Karen, I speak for the ladies. We haven't had much chance to talk and get better acquainted. On the Friday night, we were thinking about a girl's night out."

"Oh Oh, another Hen's Night, here's trouble", Bud said and Colin raised and crossed his fingers in front of him as a hex to ward off danger. Karen and Michelle laughed.

"Okay, consider my arm twisted. I'll stay til next weekend."

After Colin and Michelle had left, they ordered coffees and drank them comfortably in silence. He walked her to her room hoping that she might invite him in.

She thanked him for dinner and on an impulse, lightly kissed his lips before saying goodnight and closing her door. Leaning on it, she wondered why she had done so. He was just a good buddy for heaven's sake. Don't complicate

matters she told herself.

Karen sat on her bed thinking about her day. From a dismal beginning, it actually had turned out pretty good. She had started it by giving in to self-pity and feeling sorry for herself.

"No more. My life is my own and I have to make it what I want."

She looked at the waterfall painting on the wall seeing again beauty and power in the thundering cascade and she was comforted.

The next few days passed quickly for Karen. She did some more sightseeing, doing everything but dropping bread crumbs to follow, to ensure she would not get lost again. She saw Lachlan's hangar and watched him take some passengers up for a flight. He tried his best to coax her into his biplane, but she just laughed him off. She watched John playing hockey on his ice rink with some people she didn't know. She roared out her approval when he scored. He gave her a thumbs up. East and Cort galloped by her and she followed them with her eyes full of awe at their skill and grace. Her nights were spent at the Tavern either with a handful of people or just Bud.

It was now Thursday and Karen sighed thinking she would soon be leaving. She hadn't managed to meet her objective, but she had had a good time, and that was the most important thing. She was walking through the hotel's main corridor when she heard a sweet tenor's voice singing a hymn. She quietly pushed open the door where the music was coming from.

Arthur had his back to her and was singing the words of a song she recognized from childhood. She found herself at first humming softly and then singing in full harmony with him. Arthur stopped and went three shades of red discovering her but she motioned to him silently to keep singing. He did so, and they finished the whole song, all five verses of it together. They clapped at the end for each other.

"Arthur, that was wonderful. What a beautiful voice you have."

He blushed again at the praise. "Thank you and you did well with the harmony."

She was fascinated by his strong Welsh accent.

"Well, I'm afraid that's all you ever get to sing when you're an alto and not a soprano in the church choir."

His face then lit up. "You should come and sing at Sunday's service. Do you know a lot of hymns or the Psalms?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea Arthur. I'm not exactly a churchgoer."

"If you don't mind me saying so, Cort's services are different from more formal rituals. It's non-denominational and there's lots of music and singing. Cort always keeps the sermon short."

"I'm sure the services are great, but I haven't sung in public in a long time, unless you count drunken karaoke parties."

"I wouldn't know anything about them, but perhaps you might just like to sing a few verses with some of the other members or a solo if that's what you want."

She almost felt herself persuaded. She did love to sing and had many fond memories of singing in choirs growing up.

"I'll think about it Arthur and let you know."

It was mid-morning and already she was feeling the heat as she walked outside. It was going to be a scorcher today. She looked down at her outfit. It just wouldn't do for a day like today. She had bought a sleeveless blouse with her but not any shorts and certainly not a swimsuit. She went back to her room and changed into the blouse and then she remembered she had brought a pair of silk pyjamas where the bottoms were actually shorts. She changed again into the pyjamas. Where she was going, no one would see here anyway. She grabbed a blanket, towel, sunglasses, a hat, sunscreen and a book and she was off again to catch some rays.

She headed towards the bluffs that she had seen the other night from the beach. First it was a climb up an embankment in which you had to pull yourself up on the rocks. She laid out her blanket along the flat hard

surface. It wouldn't be as comfortable as the sand to lie out on but at least she wouldn't have to worry about running into His Lordship. She put on some sunscreen, as she was very fair and prone to sunburn. She leaned back against another rock and opened her book. Soon she was avidly devouring its contents.

The sun rose high in the sky. Her eyelids kept drooping lower and lower. The book fell from her hands. She gave in to the land of Nod and spread out on the blanket.

Dark eyes were silently watching her closely as she slept fitfully, as if she was trying to drive certain thoughts from her mind. She mumbled something and then gave out a little cry. Her head rolled from side to side. Her hands moved in front of her as if pushing something away. She moaned and turned on her side. Her eyelids blinked furiously as if the dream taking place was in fast motion and she was trying to take it all in. She sighed and exhaled another little scream..."No...oh No!" It rose in pitch and then suddenly it stopped. She woke with a start.

"Bloody hell, you're a noisy tosser aren't ya? What were you dreaming about my big thick cock inside ya? Naughty girl."

She sat up abruptly and hit her head on jutting rock. She groaned as the pain alerted her to her whereabouts. Hando was leaning over her. She wriggled backwards trying to get away from him and found herself pressed up against another rock wall.

"What's your problem? You weren't afraid of me the other night or so you kept telling yourself. How's the throat by the way?", he said pointing casually to his own. Hando's voice almost sounded pleasant as if he were just asking what time it was.

Her hand still rubbing the bump on her head, she looked up at him. His eyes were cool; his smile mocking her. "What are you doing here?", she finally found the words to say.

"I live here...remember. You're the outsider."

Silence.

"What cat got your tongue? No smart assed comeback? You disappoint me Luv."

Karen was still trying to get her bearings. She glanced at her watch. It was three o'clock. Why was she feeling so stiff? She looked down and saw that her arms and legs were reddened.

"Yeah, you've got a bit of sun. I was trying to wake you so you wouldn't fry anymore."

She looked at him in disbelief. "How stupid do you think I am? You...a good Samaritan, please! Forgive me if I don't laugh; I'm in a little much too pain."

His eyes darkened. "That smart yap of yours is gonna get you in heaps of trouble one day."

She ignored him as she piled on more sunscreen. She was unnerved and was unable to match his stare for stare.

"Little late for that. Like closing the gate after the horse has bolted."

He picked up the book she had been reading. It was on Jack the Ripper. He cocked an eyebrow.

"What? So I like reading true crime. Something wrong with that?", she yanked the book out of his grasp.

Why don't you just talk to Sid? Then you'll get a first hand account of what it was like killing all those prosties. I'm sure old Jackie boy has a big place in his heart."

She shivered at the harrowing images that came to mind. "That's not why I read it."

"Do you read them to find out their motivation; what makes them tick? Do you want to know what goes through a killer's mind? I could tell you", Hando's voice softened but his face remained impassive and his mouth cold.

Her temper flared again. "Give it a rest will you. Stop trying to scare me. You're doing a piss poor job of it."
He laughed. She was feisty, he liked that.

"Why are you staring at me?", Karen asked thinking it was because she must look dreadful.

He took a step back. "You were the one", he said in surprise, his face now showing puzzlement.

"What are you talking about?"

"You were the one watching me the other day when I was starting my run. You were hiding."

She blushed but since her face was burned red already, it probably didn't show.

"Why were you there?", he asked harshly. "Having a perve were you?"

"Don't flatter yourself. Why would I waste my time checking you out when there's guys like Max and Terry around? Real men."

He moved fast and straddled her, grabbing her wrists and holding them above her with one hand. "I'm more of a man than you could ever handle darlin'. Feel this", he pulled one of her hands down to his dick.

She gasped and drew it away like she had touched fire but not before noticing that it was big and hard. He grabbed hold of her hand again. He wasn't through. He kissed her then. His tongue forced his way in, his lips raped hers. She tried to fight it but she couldn't. She opened herself to him and her tongue wrapped around his and swept across his lips, sucking and tasting. He freed her arms and she reached for him to pull him nearer.

He resisted and got off her. For one moment, she could see arousal and desire in his face, and then it was gone, replaced by disgust and loathing.

She couldn't bear it and began to gather her things. He hadn't moved. She started to leave but he stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Why were you really there that day?" There was no sarcasm or venom in his voice.

She looked directly into his eyes. "Because I came here for you. Not to make fun of you, not to play silly games and not to sleep with you. I came here because you need someone. You need to start to heal. You need a friend."

She hurried away, not seeing bewilderment cross his features. Trying to descend the rocks as fast as possible, she kept going. In her distraction, she didn't quite make the leap from one rock to the next. She felt her ankle twist, and she stumbled and fell, but luckily for her, she was now on the grassy hill. She rolled to a stop. Her leg was bleeding and the bump on her forehead was also oozing. She started to shout out Hando's name, but he was already there.

He grabbed her towel and ripped it. He wrapped a strip around her legs.

"Here keep your hand on it."

She did what he said.

"Do you have any water?"

She shook her head. He cursed under his breath but she could still hear him say "stupid git". He spat on part of the towel and began to wipe the blood and dirt from the cut on her forehead. She cried out as his hands were far from gentle.

"Shut up. You're not carking it."

"Whatever that means. You're forgetting the sunburn", she brushed his hands away angrily.

"Do you want my help or not? It's no skin off my nose to just leave you here."

Hando felt like giving this one a good gobful. He was about to when he noticed that the top of her blouse had torn, and he could see the milky tips of her tits. From what he could see, they were firm and ripe. "Fuck", he swore.

"What now?"

He took a good look at her. She looked bloody awful. She was red as a lobster. Her hair was a bird's nest, and she had black shit smudged under her eyes. Yet he already had a hard on for her.

"Why did you bail back there?"

"Do you mean why did I leave? I wasn't in the mood to be laughed at or told again that you wanted no part of me, that I was just being a stupid little slut that you wouldn't look twice at."

"Did you mean what you said before?"

"Every word, but don't worry I won't force myself on you. I'm leaving at the end of this week, and you can go to hell for all I care", she shouted, hot tears streaming down her face.

She pushed him away and tried to stand. Her ankle gave out on her, and she fell back but he caught her.

"Let go of me!", she screamed at him, slapping away at his arms.

She kicked him hard in the shin. He reacted instinctively with a firm backhand. She fell again to the ground, holding her cheek, but before she got any wild ideas about going for the crown jewels, he grabbed her by the back of her hair and jerked her up.

His face nose to nose with hers, his voice full of menace, he said, "Now we can continue this row if you want but I guarantee you I'll win. So I'm giving you fair warning; shut the fuck up, stay down and do as I tell ya or you'll be one sorry little Yank."

"I'm a Canuck", she managed to spit out before seeing his glare and wisely deciding to stay quiet.

Her cheek still stung from his slap. She had never been struck in her life. She should be very afraid of this man. She had already seen the violence in him flare up. She knew from his movie what he could do with his fists and a

weapon, but she wasn't frightened, and that terrified her more than anything.

For the second time in a week, she felt her body being touched and probed for damage. Terry had been a lot more tender. Karen knew that Hando was probably very experienced in looking after the resulting cuts, bruises and scrapes that his gang would endure after a fight. That's what made him a leader; he was almost paternal in his care. He ripped more of her towel and cleaned and wrapped her other small wounds.

"There, that should do it. You should be able to put weight on that ankle once the swelling has gone down. If we get you back, you can put ice on it. You have a choice now; I can go and get one of the blokes to carry you back or I can do it."

"I'm sure I'll be able to get there on my own volition, thank you very much", she said somewhat haughtily.

He gave her an exasperated look. "Fine, be bloody stubborn. I'm outta here."

He walked briskly away from her, not once looking back. She waited until he was out of sight and then tried to get up. She could hop a little, but it would take a long time. She felt like she was burning up and she had a nagging headache. She stopped to rest every few feet. She could hear thunder rumbling in the distance. Little droplets of rain began to fall around her. She would have to wait out the rain as it would quickly turn everything around her to mud. She looked around for shelter. There was a bench under a group of trees. Maybe that would provide some coverage. She hobbled over to it already slipping on the wet ground. She pulled the blanket around her.

The rain continued to splatter down. She felt dizzy again. Along with her water, she had forgotten to bring her fruit. She was really sick now. The rain started teeming leaking right through the trees. Her clothes were soaked through and plastered to her skin. She shivered. She hadn't meant to come across as a pain in the ass when she refused Hando's offer. Why did guys always want to carry women? Fuck, did they think they were that helpless?

Truth was, she was mortified about her weight. She remembered only too well when one boyfriend had tried to sweep her to her bedroom and he had fallen. Another wasn't even able to lift her. She knew down inside that the boyz were very strong and could probably carry her, but she didn't want to

be compared to the unbearable lightness of other women.

She changed the subject in her mind back to Hando's kiss. She had wanted more but he had pulled away. Was he just toying with her? Did it mean anything to him? Was he just paying her back for what she had said? Her head was spinning. She had to sit down. The sky had darkened and soon it would be nightfall. She sat on the bench but the water quickly seeped through the blanket.

Part Six

Hando was back at the Tavern downing a pint. Fuck, she made him mad. No, she hadn't wanted him to touch her, even though he had no intention of doing anything but dropping her on her fat ass as soon as he got her back to the hotel. She was probably ashamed to be seen with him. Well the little tart could just totter back on her own. All that garbage she had been spouting about her being there for him was just that, fucking bullshit! She was all piss and wind. What did she mean he needed to heal? Was she trying to be his shrink? Dumb cow. He should have slapped her silly.

He thought of the kiss. He had done it as a power trip; to prove to her that he wasn't a man to mess around with; that he could always take what he wanted. It wasn't supposed to have meant anything other than that. But when he felt her lips pressed against his, desire had crept in unexpectedly. She had responded with ardent fervour and that had jolted him back to senses.

His attention was once again drawn back to the weather. He could hear the rain pounding down on the roof. She must be drenched. It'd serve her right if she caught pneumonia. He finished his beer and was going back to his room but something made him look outside. The wind was picking up now. Maybe she got back all right; maybe someone else had come across her. He turned away, but something again stopped him. He knew she wasn't back.

"Bloody hell!", he bellowed before pushing open the door and stepping outside.

"What's up with him?", Steve sitting at the bar asked Andy. Andy just

shrugged. You never could tell what was going on with Hando.

Hando was soaked in a matter of minutes. He went to where he had left her. She was gone but she had dropped her book, what was left of it anyways. He picked it up and kept searching for her. He looked across the shoreline. She must have found her way back. He started to head home until he heard what sounded like a groan. He looked in the direction it came from, and there Karen was, huddled under the trees, holding on to her head.

"Are you daft, or are you expecting to just float home?" He grabbed her roughly around the waist and hauled her up, hoisting her over his shoulder in one smooth motion. She started shouting out expletives at him so he swatted her hard on her bottom and she shut up. When they were approaching the hotel, she begged him to stop.

"Please Hando. I don't want anyone seeing me like this. All they'll do is fuss. Is there a way I can get to my room without being seen?"

He looked through the window. Arthur was at the front desk. He carefully put her down.

"Stay here. I'll get rid of him."

In a few moments he was back. He slung her over his shoulder again and hurried up the stairs.

"Which one?"

"206"

He set her down. She leaned against the door and fished out her key. He opened it and let her lean on him. He walked her over to the bathroom.

"You need to get out of those togs and in the tub. Do you want me to get Chelle or one of the other girls to help?"

"No, I'll be able to manage." She could hardly stand to look at him.

He grabbed the nearest towel which for some reason was covering the mirror and threw it at her. He went to go but her voice stopped him.

"Thank you. I'm sorry for being a brat before. I know you only meant to help."

He grunted something unintelligible and left.

Hando went back to his room. He took off his own wet clothes and had a shower. He could still see her shivering as he had lifted her to her feet. Her sopping blouse had stuck to her skin. He could see her nipples erect and he almost had touched them, wanting to pinch them and cup her full breast in his hand. Her shorts had clung to her ass which was well-rounded in shape. She wasn't exactly fat, but she definitely wasn't all that thin. She was curvy and he usually didn't go for that type. After all, you only needed a mouthful.

He knew she hadn't looked her best today but there was something about her that drew him in. Her eyes widened and changed colour to a vivid sapphire blue when she was angry. Her lower lip was full, and he figured she would be a pretty good pouter or sulker. Even though he knew she was older than him, she had seemed almost childlike in some respects. She might be a handful for him to tame. Hando always thought in these terms with women. He needed to be in control. He would never allow himself to be led around by his dick. Did he want to bed her? Surprisingly, yes he did. Did he want more from her than a quick fuck? He didn't know.

Karen took about four Advils and limped over to the bed. When she had got out of the bath, she had found that Hando had left a bucket of ice outside the door. She leaned back against the headboard after wrapping an ice pack on her ankle. She was slathering herself in Noxema. The shrill ring of the telephone on the nightstand startled her. After wiping off the grease on her hands, she picked it up.

"Hello"

"Where the fuck have you been?"

It took a minute for her tired brain to register that it was Bud.

"Excuse me?"

"Where...Have...You...Been?", Bud enunciated every word.

"I've been sleeping. You just woke me up. Is something wrong?"

"Does cocktails tonight ring a bell or do you make a habit of standing men up?"

Damn; memory of their date tonight had been erased. "Oh Bud, I'm sorry. I forgot about it completely. I was just so tired today that I overslept when I got home."

"You certainly are a sound sleeper. This is the fifth time I've called. I also knocked on your door twice."

Shit; she didn't need this aggravation. He sounded really pissed. "How about if I make it up to you tomorrow?", she said cheerily trying to diffuse his anger.

"Don't you have a ladies night out tomorrow?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that."

"What are you doing right now?"

"Now's not a good time Bud. I got a little too much sun today and I have a really nasty headache." At least that was the truth.

"Maybe, you just need a little TLC. Why don't I come up and pamper you a little bit."

"That sounds lovely Bud but I think I'm going to have to pass. I need to sleep off this headache."

The silence was deafening.

"Bud, are you still there?"

"Yeah but why do I get the feeling you're trying to blow me off."

He was starting to push her buttons.

"We're friends. It's not as if we had a lover's tryst planned."

"You would find that a real hardship wouldn't you; if we were more than just friends?"

She started to count to ten but was close to losing it. She adored Bud but lately he had been getting possessive and she didn't know how to handle it. She was flattered with his attentions but her heart was elsewhere, especially after today. Bud was funny and sexy as all hell but she was a one man woman and that man was Hando. Besides she really believed that Bud's interest in her was just a poor attempt to erase Trisha from his mind.

"Bud, I don't want to do this. I'll talk to you tomorrow." She hung up.

She turned off her night lamp and lay in the darkness. The stereo was playing one of her Shania Twain's CDs. She advanced the songs to her personal fave. She had dubbed it "The Hando Song". It said exactly what she felt about him.

*Deep in Denialville
Tryin' to fight the way I feel
I go jello when you smile
I start blushin'...my head rushin'*

*If you stand too close to me
I might melt down from the heat
If ya look my way one more time
I'm gonna go out of my mind*

Whatever you do...

Chorus:
*Don't even think about it!
Don't go and get me started!
Don't you dare drive me crazy!
Don't do that to me baby!*

You stop me in my tracks

*My heart pumping to the max
I'm such a sucker for your eyes
They permanently paralyse*

Chorus

*You got my heart under attack
You give me shivers down my back
D'ya have to walk the way you do?
I get weak just watchin' you*

Chorus

Way to go Shania! She couldn't have said it better herself.

In spite of the discomfort from her sunburn and her ankle, she couldn't help but beam. She was thrilled that he had come back for her. No one on earth could have made him do that if he hadn't wanted to. She was still amazed that he had first found her on the bluffs. His intentions must have been good though she had seriously doubted them at the time. How long she wondered did he watch her sleep? She was a little bit worried about what she might have said or done. She was a restless sleeper at best and she often talked and even yelled in her sleep. Once she had been fighting in a dream and she had actually kicked out and almost knocked her lamp off the night table. She had woken up fast with a smarting foot. Past boyfriends had noticed too that she frequently masturbated in her sleep. Of course, they would watch and not wake her, like the secret voyeurs they all were.

Time to plan a strategy. She only had two days left and she wanted to leave quite an impression on the Marquis de Sade Junior. She didn't want to go the girlie girl party tomorrow night. She felt out of place with them. They all knew each other so well, and she felt like she was as entertaining as a lamp post most of the time. Beside it would just use up precious time. How was she going to get out of it without looking anti-social and very unfriendly? She could play the sick card, but that would mean she would have to keep out of sight all day, then there was Bud to keep at bay. Too bad she couldn't just suddenly become a lurker, then she could just be as obvious as sin. What if she said she had an emergency at work? She had her laptop with her. But then everyone would wonder why she didn't just go home earlier. Developing sudden amnesia? No that was another one of those ideas

that only worked in soap opera land, and she was sure she would be reminded about it tomorrow.

What if she used Bud as her excuse? She could say to the ladies that Bud really needed someone to talk to. That wasn't unfeasible. Everybody knew that Bud wasn't himself. She could play the consoling good buddy and then after doing her part, vanish mysteriously.

In spite of her eagerness to be with Hando, she felt a small twinge at stooping to such mind games to be with him. She decided to abandon her conscience temporarily. It was time to look after Number One; All's fair in love and war; The end justifies the means. All those old clichés sounded real good to her ears right now as she justified. She said to herself, "Don't go there", when she thought about Bud and how she had the power to hurt him. Her mind was made up.

The next day she was up early. She could walk easier on her ankle now. She had to put tons of makeup on her face to cover the ugly redness. It was cooler today so she could get away with wearing long sleeves and leggings. She reminded herself to eat though she still felt a nagging emptiness in her stomach. She typed up a note on her computer and marched, well whatever resembled a march, to the restaurant. Seeing Rick, she asked him if he could deliver a note to Bud's room. Then seeing some of the girls at a table, she invited herself to sit with them.

She tried to be as vivacious as possible, and more than once said how she was looking forward to the party tonight. She giggled at the jokes, made meaningful small talk (if there was such a thing) and dropped a hint now and then that she was concerned about Bud. The others knowing she had spent a lot of time with him bought into it and shared their feelings as well. Everyone adored Bud and nobody liked seeing him in pain. He always paid the utmost respect to women, and he was their primary champion. Karen shoved down that little moral voice of hers that was acting up and buried it under about five cups of coffee. Feeling slightly nauseated, she left when they did, and once more promised to jump on the bandwagon bright-eyed and bushytailed.

"I deserve an Oscar for that performance", she mumbled.

She walked outside and sat down on the same bench as before in Tina's rose

garden. She soon heard footsteps and braced herself for an ugly confrontation but none was forthcoming. She turned to face him and the sight almost broke her resolve. It was a much more subdued Bud that was now staring at her.

"Hi", she said softly, "I'm glad you came."

"I almost didn't", he answered just as softly.

He looked away and then back at her. "I'm sorry about last night. I was out of line. You were right. Friends shouldn't act that way."

She felt another twinge. "I could have been nicer. I'm never my best when I first wake up." He was still standing. "Please sit down."

He sat and put his hand up to rub his face, a nervous gesture. "It's just that I thought we were getting closer. I know you said you weren't here to get involved, but I kind of hoped I could change your mind."

She took his hand. "Bud, if anyone could, it would be you. But I've had some bad experiences, and I'm not just ready to trust myself again, not you, but me." This was in fact true about the men in her past.

"You never talk about those other men, what they did to you. Maybe it would help. I don't mean you have to talk to me but maybe someone else here. I don't know maybe Cort or John. They understand things better than me and they know what words to say."

That was pure Bud, already thinking about her and not himself.

She turned his face towards hers. "Now you listen here Bud White, don't go selling yourself short. You were the first friend I made here and you still are my best one. If I need to talk to someone, it will be you. Understand?"

He reluctantly nodded.

"Now as I remember, my invitation stated that I wanted to spend the day with you. That is, if you want to spend time with me."

He smiled at her, got up and stuck his arm out, just like at the beginning. She

linked arms and they went to the kitchen. She put aside for the moment her aversion to so much food as Bud ordered a picnic basket for them from Annabella.

They had spent a delightful day together. The more time she spent with this man, the more she realized what a big heart he had. Even though you had to get through the rough exterior he wore most of the time, there were so many layers underneath that showed a complexity and depth that most men didn't have. He was a brooder and Karen could always relate to such men, as she herself was very intense, and on the surface people were to her just shallow and empty. Why, oh why, couldn't she have fallen for him? She was closer in age to him, and she wouldn't have had to constantly deal with hostility and contempt. But Karen felt with her heart and not her head, so now she was a permanent rider on this emotional rollercoaster called Hando.

"I should let you go and get ready for your party."

"I don't want to go Bud. I'd rather stay with you." It wasn't a lie but neither was it the whole truth. "Do you want to come up to my room? We could watch a movie or keep talking or just hang out", she was rambling.

He looked into her eyes. What was she trying to say? Something in them almost stopped him. A doubt flickered in the back of his mind. She took his hand and let him in. While she went into the bathroom, he walked around jamming his hands in his pant pockets. He tried to focus on the paintings on the wall, her collection of CDs, but he was drawn back to the bed, the huge elephant in the room. He sat down on a chair and undid the first couple of buttons on his shirt. She came out.

"Did you want to watch a movie?"

"I guess", he said noncommittally. "What kind of movie do you like? Let me guess, adventure, mystery, cops and robbers? You could shoot holes through all the plots."

"It doesn't matter, you pick."

She came to him and kneeled down. "What's on your mind Bud?"

"Are you playing me Karen? One minute, I'm walking on eggshells around you and the next you invite me up here, and I'm not sure what my next line's supposed to be."

"What do you want it to be?"

"You know", he drew her onto his lap.

Oh God. This was not how it was supposed to go, she thought frantically.

Before she could think straight, he tilted her face to his and then kissed her. It was soft, gentle and left a question mark. She didn't resist but she didn't pursue either. He traced his finger down her cheek to her lips. Her eyes told him all that he needed. He lifted her off.

"Please understand. This is confusing." She didn't know what else to say.

"Baby, you need to be sure. I need to know that it's me you want. Until I can read that loud and clear in your eyes, we're nowhere." He then had left.

She had felt like dying right then and there. She felt cheap and dirty. She had deliberately arranged for the day together to act as a smokescreen to avoid the party and her true aims to vanquish Hando. She rushed into the shower and scraped her skin raw, trying to punish herself. She had let herself be caught unaware. She had let Bud in thinking she was clever enough to shut herself down, but she had been oddly moved by that kiss. This was dangerous, and Karen didn't like the path she was on. She had to cut him loose, that was the only way she could live with herself.

Someone knocked on her door she didn't know how many hours later. It was Rick.

"The girls sent me up to see if you were okay. They were worried when you didn't show. Are you all right?" She looked as if she had been crying.

"I'll be fine. Can you tell them I'm sorry; that something came up?"

"Sure. Is there anything I can do?"

Her eyes became steely and determined. "Can you keep a secret?"

"It depends on what it is. I don't keep Jeff in the dark about anything."

"I need to talk to Hando. Can you please give me his room number? It's important."

He hesitated.

"Please Rick. If you don't give it to me, I'll swear I'll knock on every door until I find it."

He gave it to her. "Can I give you a friendly warning?"

She nodded.

"Be careful what you wish for. Fantasy and reality often turn out to be two very different things."

"I don't know what you mean by that. I just need to talk to him."

Rick's last words to her, "If you're planning to bluff in poker, better remember to wear sunglasses."

Part Seven

Karen, outside the Tavern, could tell by the lack of voices that the party was over. It was clean up time. She entered and ignored the looks of Andy and whoever else was helping him clean up. She ran up the stairs and down the hall. She did not feel nervous at all. She hammered on his door.

"Hold your fuckin' horses", his voice rang in her ears.

The door was whipped open. Hando was standing there just clad in his jeans. The vivid tattoo on his chest was revealed in its full ugly sentiment. The well toned muscles of his chest and arms were not missed by her eager eyes. She moved up to his throat to more hate where what he was, was etched permanently. She finally reached his eyes. They were intently looking into her own. They continued to stare at each other without a breath passing between them for one minute, maybe it was two.

Then he grasped her backside in his hands and pulled her body against his lifting her off her feet. She wrapped her legs around his waist. Their mouths crushed together. He backed into the room and kicked the door shut. It was dark inside except for the reflection of the moon through the window. They continued to plunder each other's lips and tongues. His mouth was everywhere on her skin, invading and burning. She sucked greedily along the nape of his neck, reaching up to his ear lobe and circling her tongue inside it. Her nails scratched down his back. He forced her head back by grasping her hair. He walked to the bed and threw her down on it.

Leaning over her, he tore open her blouse and the buttons flew off everywhere. She wasn't wearing anything underneath. His hands attacked her breasts, tugging and tweaking. His mouth and tongue followed, teasing her nipples. His teeth grazed them and she gasped as he bit down hard. Her fingers moved roughly along the shaved scalp, the only part of him that they could reach. She tried to pull his head up but he was too strong and denied her. He was raining kisses down her torso, each one more bruising than the last. She was frustrated as she could not demand the same attention to parts of him. He saw her struggling to reach him and he quickly yanked her blouse down her shoulders and back, effectively cutting off the use of her arms and hands and trapping her beneath him. He fell on her with his full weight and smiled wickedly at the outrage in her eyes. He touched a finger to her lips as if daring her to complain. He ground his body hard against hers.

He brought his hand to her face and scrunched her lips painfully together. Then he ravished her mouth again and again with his own. His tongue full and heavy danced everywhere inside. Hers melted with his. She was finding it hard to breathe. His full body on hers pinned her down and his mouth was relentless. She could taste her own blood from the split lip where he had nibbled on it. She pushed against him feebly. The heat of him was suffocating her. Then she knew what he expected of her. She gave in and stopped struggling.

He felt her submission and looked into her eyes. He could still see resistance there. She hadn't quite learned the lesson but he didn't want to break her spirit at this early stage. He eased off her and allowed her to untangle herself. She laid back down waiting for him to take the lead again. His eyes never left hers as he lifted her hips and tugged hard at her leggings, stripping them and her panties off in one smooth gesture. She was dying to undress him and waited for the invitation that never came. He unbuckled his jeans,

yanked them off and threw them in the corner. Standing at the foot of the bed in his briefs, he watched her.

Nervously wetting her lips, his erection exposed to her, she sat up and inched herself forward to the end of the bed. She looked up at him for permission and slowly bared all of him. The sheer size of him extracted a moan from her. He moved away from the bed back against the wall. She knelt down and took him in her mouth. He let her use her hands this time around. She ran her tongue down the hot throbbing vein and cradled his balls. She tasted the first glistening drops of his arousal. She could feel him pulsing and hear his ragged breathing. He stopped her and backed her onto the bed.

With expertise, he quickly parted her thighs with his hand and probed her wetness. She was panting now and spread her legs wider to give him deeper access. Lying above her, his fingers manipulated her and without warning, he plunged into her. She was so tight and had to adjust to accommodate him. He pounded in and out of her. She felt her legs weaken. Her body convulsed with each of his strokes. She gasped and cried out as her body shuddered in the spasms of her orgasm. He continued to pulsate within her and her legs ached keeping up with him. He thrust one last time and exploded in her, softly cursing. He collapsed over her sweaty and spent.

He was now sitting by the window smoking a cigarette. She felt suddenly embarrassed at how quickly everything had happened.

"I thought you didn't want to sleep with me", his voice echoed in the silence.

"It's not the main reason why I'm here", she answered defensively.

"Don't lie. You're not very good at it", he said taking a long draw and blowing it out.

She stayed back in the dark on his bed. "You haven't once said my name since you met me. Do you even know what it is?"

He smirked at her. "Is that a first for you, fucking somebody without knowing names?"

"If you mean do I make a habit of having one night stands, no I don't"

"Names aren't all that important in the end are they? A faceless, nameless body is all that's needed."

"Maybe for you. When I'm intimate with somebody, I want to share with them, give them respect and I would hope that it would be returned."

He laughed, a deep-throated chuckle. "You're with the wrong bloke then Luv. Look, you knew all about me, and I've given you no surprises. You knew exactly what you were in for when you came here tonight, and yet you're still here. Why is that?"

"Do you want me to go Hando? After all, you're the one in charge, right? You call all the shots?"

He crushed out his cigarette and walked over to her. "Maybe that's what you like. All those dags back home didn't satisfy ya, did they?", he stroked her hair now. "Bet they treated you like a princess, all concerned about making it good for ya, asking you what you want, how they can make it better for ya. Yet you soon got bored with them, didn't ya? They didn't excite you. I reckon you were as dry as a nun's nasty with them, weren't ya?"

She tried to slap him but he caught her arm and twisted it. She grimaced but refused to cry out.

"That's not the way it's going to be with me....Karen", he emphasized her name. "You don't get choices. You get orders, commands, and directions to follow to the letter or else...", he tapered off with a scowl. He grasped the back of her neck and forced his mouth on hers and then flung her away. "You can fuck off now."

He lit up another cigarette. Karen stayed where she was. He was right in everything he had said. He had read her like an open book.

"I don't want to go and neither do you want me to."

"Don't presume to tell me what I think and want, you stupid cunt", he yelled at her.

"Fine", she yelled back, "call me ugly names if it makes you feel more of a

man. But know this, every time you look at me, I can feel your eyes starting a fire all over me. I want you like I've never wanted anything before. Every time you kiss me, I feel like dying because you leave me wanting more. You want to fuck me into submission, go ahead. You want me to be your little fuck toy, use me. Actions speak louder than words Mate, so stop jerking me around and get on with it. Show me what that loaded gun is for."

Karen had never felt so incensed. How dare he just try to dismiss her and expect that she meekly walk out his door and never come back.

"Don't say you weren't warned Luv", Hando said with a sly grin. With that statement, they went into Round two.

Unlike the first time, it wasn't silent. He called her more names and cursed. She cried out his name when she came, clinging to him. They left marks on each other. It was animalistic and they both were caught up in the wild frenzy. After, they fell into a deep recovery sleep.

He woke first at dawn and looked over at her. She was on her side softly snoring. Even though she was pushing forty, she looked like a little girl as she slept. Ringlets of her hair were curled around her fingers. Her face had few wrinkles and her little high pitched sighs were almost endearing. He thought about waking her and telling her to go back to her room so the secret would be kept but he didn't. He dressed in his sweats and headed off to training.

When Karen woke up and found him gone, she felt an odd sense of emptiness and disbelief. She would have thought she dreamed up last night until she realized she was not in her own room. She was going to leave but decided to survey his bedchamber instead. It was sparse, not much in the way of furnishings. He was quite a reader though. There were hundreds of books on his bookshelves. He seemed to be a history and war buff. His taste in music was much harder than hers, a combination of hard rock, punk and heavy metal. He also had a lot of war DVDs. There was nothing in his room that reflected his philosophyóno flags, swastikas, uniforms, posters or pictures. She wondered if being here, away from his gang, had influenced a change in his ideology.

She took a shower and in the mirror saw the aftermath of their lovemaking, if you could call it that. She had bruises along her neck right down to her

breasts. Even her lips were darkened, almost a purplish hue. She was sore all over, especially between her legs. But she nevertheless felt ecstatic as if she was floating on air. She decided to go back to her room. She borrowed one of his T-shirts as her blouse was beyond repair. She heard clamouring in the Tavern as people were eating breakfast.

"There's another way to get by without being seen."

She jumped at the sound of Jeff's voice. She turned to face him. He took one look at her and grabbed her hand.

"Here, I'll show you." He took her back up the stairs and down a hallway to a rear fire exit.

"Thanks Jeff."

"Are you sure you're okay? You look a bit frazzled."

"I'm actually better than I've been in a long time." Jeff saw the glow in her eyes and the undertone of exhilaration. She was a woman who definitely had been fulfilled.

She suddenly ducked behind him. He looked to see who she was hiding from. Bud had just stepped out of his room and headed down the stairs. Jeff helped her to her feet. He had assumed that she had been with Bud. One look at her red, panicked face told him otherwise.

"Okay, I don't think I really wanna know what's going on here. So, I'm just gonna go back downstairs and forget that I saw anything."

She squeezed his hand in thanks and took off out the door.

It was now late Saturday afternoon and the beach BBQ was about to begin. Bud had called earlier and she had put him off, telling him she would meet him there. Since she had already missed the ladies party last night, it would be extremely rude not to show to the BBQ, especially since this was her last night. She didn't know what to wear. She felt too uncomfortable to ask one of the girls if she could borrow something.

"It probably wouldn't fit anyways", she told herself.

She had already started packing up her things. She wanted to leave first thing in the morning. A knock on the door interrupted her. She looked through the peephole hoping to God it wasn't Bud. It was Hando. She opened the door and he sauntered in.

"Those are funny looking bathers", he said pointing to what she was wearing.

"What? Oh you mean for the BBQ. I don't know what to wear. I don't have a swim suit." She noticed he was wearing his usual tight T-shirt and jeans.

"Are you going dressed like that?"

"I'm not going at all. I never go to these lame parties."

Karen felt awkward. After the phenomenal sex and the night they had shared, it was really difficult to come down to earth and talk to him normally as if nothing had happened. He was walking around her room like he was casing it.

In fact, that was exactly what Hando was doing. It was part of his nature to be always observant and on guard. He made note of the paintings, the books and magazines she had brought, the 4-poster.

"What, no frilly curtains? I thought a toffee-nosed princess like you would surely have them. You know in case she meets her knight in shining armour and wants to shag him good and proper", he laughed again, ridiculing the very notion of it.

He moved to her CDs which she hadn't yet packed. "What's all this retro shit? Gees this stuff is fuckin' elevator music."

The return of his snarky personality dismayed her but she retorted. "The 70's and 80's were prime decades for soft rock. Oh, I'm sorry I mentioned the 70's, were you even born then?", she said nastily.

"Bitch", he growled at her.

"Why are you here Hando, just to harrass me or do you have a purpose for

this unexpected visit?"

"Unexpected?", he quirked an eyebrow at her, which by the way she found incredibly sexy.

"Yeah, you must have known I would be going to the BBQ."

"It's your last night here so you told me. Do you really want to spend it with those wankers?"

"That's what you think of your brothers, wankers?"

"I guess some of them are all right, some are arse holes and the rest are dickheads."

"Whose in which category?", she asked, curious.

"Max, Terry, Colin, Johnny, Andy, Jack, Alex and Steve are okay. Shit, I guess even Biebe's all right for a cop, except when he tries to take over and run everything. Wigand's a pompous old windbag. Mitchell's a fudgepacker. Curry, Driscoll and Mannie are all froth and bubble. Well, let's see, that leaves the Welsh virgin and the preacheróthey're in their own special reject category. The restóKim, Zack and Bud are definitely certified pricks." He noticed she flinched when he mentioned Bud's name.

"You forgot Sid."

"Ah, Sidney boy has his own uses on occasion."

"He's a bloody psychopath."

"And you're attracted to the dark sides of men aren't ya? Why else would you come to me last night?"

"Maybe last night was a mistake."

"No, you know it wasn't", he was circling around her now like a fox after his prey. His voice was hardly a whisper. "I make you cum like a fountain. I took ya where no one's taken you before. Tell me that all the dirtbags you fucked back home did that", he murmured in her ear, nibbling the end of it.

"Hmm, can you tell me that?"

He was doing it to her again. Just with his voice, she was soaking. He nuzzled down her neck.

"I have to go. They'll be expecting me."

"Are you trying to convince yourself Luv? Stop thinking about everything and just live, let go."

She turned to look up at him. "Kiss me, I'm dying."

He smiled that smile that drove her wild. She pressed her lips against his but he pulled back. "Are you sure you want it Luv?"

"Yes...oh yes!", she hungrily reached for him again.

"You're gonna have to work a little harder than that", he thrust her away. He saw confusion in her eyes. "You want me, then earn it. Show me how badly you want it."

Her eyes darkened as realization crept in. He wanted to humiliate her and make her beg for it.

"On your knees."

She did as she was told and crawled to him. She undid his jeans and slid them down his legs. He wasn't wearing underwear. She touched his big, throbbing cock. He grabbed her hair and yanked her face up.

"No hands."

She suckled what she could but her mouth was small and his dick was enormous. He took the matter out of her hands and thrust it inside, fucking her mouth in long hard strokes. She felt like her head was going to explode, that she was going to gag, and she was trying so hard not to scrape him with her teeth.

"I haven't heard any words yet", he said as he drew out of her. She tried to think what he wanted her to say but she was already weak with desire.

"C'mon Bitch, tell me how you want it and where."

She hesitated as she had never asked any man before to do this. "I want you to cum all over my face and hair. I want you to treat me like I'm a whore, your whore." She felt her face grow hot and she couldn't look at him. Had those words really come out of her mouth?

Hando wasn't shocked. He took his prick in hand and whacked off. He pushed her down on the carpet. He groaned and spoke in a sultry undertone, "Are you ready for it?"

Too exhausted for words, she nodded. It was spurting all over her like it would never stop. Some went in her mouth and she eagerly lapped it up and swallowed the salty juice. She didn't feel degraded like she thought she might, she felt liberated.

He had taken off the rest of his clothes and stalked towards the bathroom. She heard the shower being turned on. She rapidly undressed and washed herself clean while he watched. She spent extra time washing her breasts, her backside and her pussy, and his eyes never once left hers alone.

"Play with yourself", he commanded.

She did so, and because his eyes were on her, she was wet again in a matter of seconds. He grew hard again. She towelled herself dry and walked to the bed.

"Is there something else you want to say?"

"Yes", she answered shyly, "I want you to take me from behind." He smiled again but it was a predatory one and his eyes gleamed with some emotion she couldn't fathom.

She knelt on the bed and leaned down on her arms only to have him slap her ass. "Move it higher." She obeyed with some trepidation. Since she had never had sex in the "doggy style" position, she wasn't sure what to expect. She felt so exposed. Without seeing if she was ready, he slammed into her, burying his dick in her to the hilt. She shrieked at the sudden intrusion. With one ramming motion after another, he slapped against her gyrating her forward, faster and faster.

When it was over, she was dripping with sweat and his seed was running down her leg. She never felt more alive or more like a woman. He was lying down and she wanted to cuddle against him but knew he wouldn't go that route. So in the end, she had just laid down beside him not knowing what to say or do next. Eventually he got up and started to get dressed.

"You don't have to go Hando. Why don't you stay the night?" It almost looked like he was going to say yes but then he shook his head. "Got things to do." He headed for the door. She could feel the walls go back up.

"I'm leaving early in the morning. Do you want me to come again? In a few weeks, I could come back for a weekend." Karen tried to keep her voice casual, while studying his face for any signs of hope or encouragement.

"Don't come on my account."

She was crestfallen by his indifferent response. "But I want to. I told you, you're why I'm here." He got a little testy at that remark. "Look, I don't believe in this connection bullshit that everyone spouts around here. If you're here and if I'm still interested, I can give ya a good ride but that's all it's gonna be."

She tried to hide the hurt. "If that's all you can give me then I'll just take that. No strings." He nodded at her then left without saying goodbye.

She wanted to cry but couldn't. Later on, she went to Bud's room. After knocking a few times and getting no answer, she finally slipped a note under his door. She couldn't sleep the whole night. She decided to leave at 6 am. She left her key and a note for Michelle at the front desk. She kept hoping she would get a glance of him jogging as she walked towards the parking lot, but she saw no one. As she loaded her bag into her car, she didn't sense the two pairs of eyes that were watching her.

Hando with a grim expression had followed her. He kept on watching her until she backed up and took off down the road and then he started his run. Bud once again read her goodbye note, and he too followed her with his eyes as she left. He had wondered why she didn't go to the BBQ but didn't want to pressure her by asking. The note didn't say if she would be coming back and he felt heaviness in his heart at the thought of maybe never seeing her again.

Part Eight

Karen, back at her old desk, at her crappy job, thought back to her last week of vacation. She had driven up to see her folks; and as usual, she had argued with her mother and had been ignored by her father. She couldn't do anything right in her mom's eyes. She had the wrong haircut, the wrong clothes, the wrong friends, not that she had too many of those left, she didn't go to church, she swore too much, she didn't eat enough...Yep, she was headed for hell in a hand basket. Seeing her brother and sister--she called them each the wonder child--and their families didn't help improve her position in life any. They were oh so busy wrapped up in their kids' lives and their important careers. They were upwardly mobile while she, the black sheep, was stuck in a downward tailspin. And God knows, she wasn't getting any younger, as her mother always threw in her face.

Her phone rang again, and again she thanked silently the inventor of voice mail. She was so distracted since she came back and so very discontented with everything. She snapped at her colleagues and was brusque on the phone with clients. She used to pride herself on the fact that she was always a professional at work: industrious, meticulous and ethical. Now, she was taking coffee breaks every hour, long liquid lunches and holding her breath trying not to tell her boss to "shove it". She looked at the classifieds every day in search of a better job. But she was a prisoner in her field; she'd either have to get retraining or take a pay cut and she wasn't about to do the latter.

When she got home at night, after her workout and her measly meal of a tuna sandwich, hold the mayo, with 0% fat peach yogurt, she still went on line with the gals but it wasn't the same. She didn't feel like she was a part of them anymore. They were too cliquey. At times, she was irritated with the lot of them but she played nice in case she went back there. Her time at Crowe's Point seemed eons ago. It was now four weeks since she came back and she hadn't dreamed of him once. It was like once she had experienced the real thing, her dreams would never recapture her innocence or his shades of grey.

She wondered if Hando thought of her at all, and if so, in what capacity. Maybe by now, he had forgotten her. After all, what about her was rememberable? He, on the other hand, was etched permanently in her brain. However, It was not just the sex. He was so

different from the other brothers. He appeared to not need them. Appeared though was the operative word. He tended to shun them but she had seen in his face, in his eyes, loneliness. Why did he not reach out to them after all this time? Did he really dislike them that much? She thought not. She wished she could shake some sense into him. But the only way she could do that was by going there again.

She looked back down at her monitor. A long weekend was coming up and the girls were telling each other when they would arrive. She looked at her calendar. It was empty of any social engagements. "Gee, how novel." Impulsively, she typed away and invited herself. This time it would be different. She wouldn't let anything or anyone stand in her way of what she desired. No wasted time and no feelings of guilt. She was a woman with a mission.

She made better time this visit. She swung into the parking lot and leaped out of the car. She strode confidently into the hotel lobby and greeted Arthur dismissively.

"Hi Arthur. I trust my room's ready. I did email Michelle with the details of my arrival."

Cutting him off mid-sentence, she went to her room. It looked different, and she couldn't think why. Everything seemed darker even with the curtains wide open. The paintings of the waterfalls were still there; everything was still in place as she had left it but something was not right. She couldn't pinpoint what it was but she felt uneasy. She unpacked and went down to the Tavern. It was early but some couples had already gathered. She saw Cort and Roberta, Terry and a tall redhead which could only be Kaz, Mannie and Norma Jean, Steve and Donna and Alex and Anabella. At other tables were Jack, Dominic, Dr. Wigand and Johnny was manning the bar. She gave the queenly wave to everyone and went right up to Johnny.

"Give me a beer and none of that Aussie crud. Make it a Molson's Canadian."

"Boy, that's a first. I've never seen you order a beer before", Johnny replied giving her the bottle and a glass.

Just taking the bottle, she winked at him, "Life should be full of firsts, Johnny, remember that and reach out and take them."

She sat down at the back of the bar where she could see all the players. She got a few questioning looks from the main table who were probably wondering why she didn't join them. She drank her beer, choking it down. She really wasn't a beer drinker, and two or three was her quota before she starting dancing on tables. She lowered her eyes as Bud and Zack walked in. They went to the bar and then over to the main table. Bud sat with his back towards her. Then somebody must have said something as he turned to look over his shoulder. He saw her and smiled. Then he waved her over.

She pretended not to notice. Man, she was being a bitch, she told herself but she hardened her resolve.

Bud nursing a scotch found himself getting angry, figuring she was playing games. Had he imagined all the good times they had shared when she was here last? He knew he hadn't dreamed up the few times they had kissed, especially the last one. He walked over to her.

"Hi. I didn't know you were coming."

"It was a sudden decision", she simply said.

"I'm glad you're here. After I got your note, I wasn't sure if you'd be back."

"Well, here I am."

Something was wrong. Short and sweet sentences were not her style. His frustration diminished, he reached for her hand "Honey, what's wrong?"

She drew it back, "Don't call me that. You know I'm not here for you."

He sat back and gave her the famous Bud White once over. "I thought we were over this stranger shit and we agreed to be friends. Have I done something to change that?"

"No, it's not you. I've made some changes in my life and one of them is being totally honest with myself and others."

"I always assumed we were upfront with each other."

"Well, you know what they say about people who assume...", she let the sentence hang.

"This is not like you. Did something happen at work or with your family? Something's not right, and I want to know what it is so I can help you."

"That's the trouble with you Bud. You always want to fix everything. Some things just can't be handled and even if they can, it's not up to you to do it. If you'll excuse me", she downed the last of her beer and walked away from him.

Bud was left alone wondering where in that cold, distant woman was the Karen Summers he had known.

Karen went out the back way and up to Hando's room and knocked.

No answer.

She tried the door.

Of course, it was locked.

Fortunately, she had a cousin who was a locksmith and who had provided her with some picks. At least, they hadn't gone totally modern with those stupid card keys. She heard a rewarding click and she eased the door open.

Hando walked up the stairs and as soon as he came to his door, he knew something was wrong. Without getting his key, he opened it. The lights were still off. He stood in the door and listened. Music was playing that wasn't part of his collection. He entered and closed the door. He walked over to his stereo. A Jann Arden CD was playing. Number 1 track was "I've Got This Thing For You". He walked over to the bed. It was too dark to see the occupant.

"Who the fuck let you in and why are you here?"

She switched on the lamp. "I let myself in and I'm here to screw you into next week."

He really hadn't expected to find Karen here in his bed after all these weeks looking all coy and sensual. For once, he was speechless. He had thought about her daily since she had gone in spite of his resolve to get the fucking broad out of his head.

She slinked out of his bed sheets wearing only a smile and wrapped herself around him, daring him to stop her. The battle was on and he was losing. She invaded him completely and he caved. Mouths, tongues, hands, fingers were everywhere in every crevice and nook. It was rough and it was wild, and she rode him like a fine prize stallion, until they were both exhausted and overcome by the passion.

Hando was trying to recover and regain some sense of control. Damn, how could he let her do this? How could he let her think she had won? She reached over and put a hand on his chest, gently circling the light amount of hair. He grabbed it and swung over to straddle her.

"I don't know what game you're playin' at but I'm not about to let some bitch in heat, out to bust my balls, bugger up my life." She laughed at him; the bitch actually laughed at him. He raised his hand but the icy look on her face made him freeze.

"I play for real Sweetie and I'm actually quite fond of your balls, and you've already messed up your life on your own. Remember, you're really dead!" When he was going to erupt, she held up her hand, "I'm not finished. You don't get to make all the rules Hando. I've got a few as well and you'd better listen if you want what we have to continue", she looked at his groin, "and I think from your reaction, you do." He was about to protest again but she shut him up with a savage kiss.

"There's only two so it won't be hard to remember them. Number One, outside of the bedroom, we act like two equals and you show me dignity and respect in front of everyone. But in here, behind closed doors", she gently caressed his face, "you have the power, and you can do with me what you want for the most part. I will relinquish all control. You are the dominant one and I'll be your submissive slave. You can demand obedience and I'll

comply. I finally admitted to myself that's one of the things that turns me on about you." She looked up at him.

"I know this time, I took over but it was just to prove a point. Power and control are gifts that can be offered to someone but they should be taken in the spirit that they're given. They're not to be taken for granted and they never should be abused. Which brings me to my second rule. If you ever fucking hit me again like you did at the bluffs or like you almost did right here, I'm gone for good. I'm not anyone's punching bag. What's more, I'll whisper a little word in Bud White's ear and let him take care of you. Now can you deal with these stipulations or do I walk?"

He was still leery about her and hated ultimatums unless he was the one making them. Part of him wanted to tell her to go fuck herself but the other part of him, the part that was strictly a sexual being, wanted her, conditions and all. So he made his decision.

"You're a bossy bitch and you yabber on way too much. I can think of much better ways to use your mouth so get down there and give me head." She smiled a cruel smile and did as she was told.

After, they were both famished and instead of ordering up, they decided to venture out in public and face the music so to speak. The Tavern was still full and as they walked in together, several pairs of eyes, some astonished, and some not, watched them. They took a table right in the middle and placed their order. Poor Johnny didn't know where to look. Karen was wearing a low cut tank top that didn't hide the love bites and marks. Hando was staring back boldly at anyone who looked over.

When Johnny was gone, he said to her, "Do ya like sticking it to everyone or is there somebody in particular you want to bury the knife in?"

"We're not doing anything wrong. We're just having ourselves a drink. What's wrong with that?", she replied, "Unless you're afraid to be seen with me."

"I've never been afraid in my life."

"Not even of men who can easily take you out?" She watched him closely and he bristled. She continued. "I mean I can think of three right here: Max, Terry and Bud." She was enjoying goading him.

"Max and Thorne are soldiers. They only fight if there's a reason to. You think they're going to exert themselves over a tart like you? White's a loose cannon who acts before he thinks. By the time he gets a clue, the spoils have already gone to the victor."

She didn't like this comment and he saw it, picking up on it real fast. "What's this thing you're got going with White anyways?"

She spilled her drink halfway up to her mouth. "What makes you think there's anything going on?"

"I told you before. You're a shitty liar. I've got eyes and ears. Last time you were here, you spent a lot of time with him. Are you trying to use me to piss him off?"

"Do you have a short term memory problem? Read my lips. I came here both times with no other mission than to be with you. Bud was nice to me but he doesn't mean anything. In fact, I think he's finally got the message to leave me alone."

"Famous last words. Don't look now but Wendell's heading over here." It was Hando's turn to observe her and he gave her a smug look when she appeared rattled. This should be good, he said to himself.

Karen inwardly trembled as she knew a conflict long overdue was about to go off.

"Karen, can I have a word with you?", Bud asked all the while staring straight into Hando's eyes. Hando was smirking.

"Actually Bud, I'm busy right now, maybe some other time."

White grabbed her arm and hauled her out of her seat. "Make time."

Karen looked at Hando for some support. The damn bastard kept silent and looked amused.

Bud firmly walked her out of the tavern.

"There's going to be trouble down the road", John said to the members around him.

"What's she doing with Hando anyways?"

"How come she's avoiding us?"

"She hasn't spoken to any of us since she got here."

"I thought her and Bud were friends."

Karen, once outside, wrangled her arm out from his. "Don't strong arm me Bud. What's your problem? You've got something against me enjoying a drink?"

"No, just your company. What are you doing with a lowlife scum like him?"

"That's how you talk about your brother? He's not Sid."

"He's a racist degenerate. He's twisted and violent. He's just using you; he'll take advantage of you. You shouldn't give him the time of day."

"Oh, thank you for the vote of confidence. Nobody uses me. Why do you have a bug up your ass about him anyways? Max doesn't have any problems with him. He sees something worthwhile in him and so do I. Judge a book by its cover and you'll never know the whole story."

"You're being naive. I know his type. He preys on women and treats them like garbage. Do you know how many lurkers he's been with?"

"I don't care Bud. There's another side to him that you are blind to. Haven't you noticed he's changed since he's been here? Are your cop instincts so rusty that you haven't seen the signs everyone else has. You're just not willing to give him a chance. You're willing to condemn him without even taking the time to get to know him. And for your information, he can't take advantage of something I've already freely given him."

Bud's face turned to stone. He then took a good look at her, at all the signs of recent coupling he had missed. Karen wished suddenly she had worn a sweater. She felt naked under his gaze.

Then Bud sneered, "So you've fucked him already. That didn't take long. You've been here what, all of three hours?"

She stood up close to him. "I've got a newsflash for you Bud. I fucked him, as you so eloquently put it, all weekend the last time I was here. The night of the BBQ...I was with him."

She could see the wheels turning in his head. "But you were with me the night before." She couldn't bear the dawning realization that came into his eyes. "You left me for him." It was a statement not a question.

"Actually if you remember it correctly, you left me. I didn't lie to you Bud. I told you I wasn't ready for a relationship with you. I never led you on."

"You weren't ready because you never intended to give us a chance. You said we were friends. I told you things that I haven't told anybody; and all along, you couldn't wait to boink the resident fascist. You've been lying from day one. You said you weren't here for anybody. You came here for him. Him... Jesus! What are you, a masochist?"

"I don't have to listen to this. You'll never understand. And Bud, you should talk about being racist and violent. I know how people thought about certain ethnic groups in the 50's. It was barbaric. As for violence, well, we both know how far you'd go to get a conviction or what you call justice." The spiteful words just poured out of her mouth. Immediately, she wished she could take them back.

His look of utter contempt made her want to beg for his forgiveness. "When he hurts you, and he will, don't come to me." He walked away abruptly. "I'm sorry", she called out to him softly, not knowing whether he heard her or not.

She slid down the wall she was leaning against, her head in her hands, and that's where Hando found her fifteen minutes later.

"Did he hurt you?", she was asked urgently.

"No, but I hurt him."

"He'll get over it", he paused and then a moment later he said, "It seems we've created quite a lot of natter inside. They're probably laying bets on how long it will last."

"How long do you want it to last?", she asked him.

"Until it's not fun anymore. I told ya before; if you're lookin' for long term or romance or flowers and candy, find someone like Biebe."

"Don't worry Hando, you've drilled it into my head what you don't want. I'm just not sure of what you do want. Is it just going to be sex? Can we actually have a normal conversation without me being bitchy or you being sarcastic and snide? See, that's what I would like; to be able to talk, to really talk about anything. I know you're intelligent and well-read, and I think we could click on a number of different levels if you give us a chance." He gave her another wary glance.

"See", she told him, "I know what that look means. It means you don't trust me, and I know with your history, that's a reasonable concern."

"What do you know of my life? You've seen two hours of it, and you think you're an expert? My life is not a movie; it's not entertainment." Hando's voice seemed to break in mid-sentence. He gave her a bitter look and then turned away, trying to hide the indignation and hurt that swelled up in him.

She grabbed his arm, "I know it's not. Don't misconstrue what I say. I want you to be able to tell me about it and not think that I'm going to turn away and run because it's not pretty or simple. I want to hear you Hando. I want to be there for you. Please don't disregard me and dump me in the same category as all the other women in your life." She held out her hand to him and he pulled her up from the ground.

They went walking, and it wasn't easy by a long shot but they were able to let their guards down for a little while and just talk. They came back to the restaurant and Hando ordered some food. Karen just ordered a drink.

"Don't tell me. You're of those chicks that don't admit that they have to eat."

You're probably on bread and water rations, right?"

She flushed, "I ate earlier before I came here, and I have a small appetite."

"You've lost weight since you were here."

She simply shrugged and changed the subject. "So how is your training with Max going?"

This was a subject that Hando eagerly launched into. He was full of nothing but enthusiasm and admiration for the General who had befriended him. It was good to see him hyped and smiling. While they talked, Karen noted that some eyes were still focused on them. It was mainly the younger unattached men who seemed fascinated that they were having a civil and pleasant conversation and not getting down and dirty in public or having a barroom brawl.

"Do ya want to go upstairs now?", he asked with a lewd look.

She gave him her key. "Why don't you wait for me in my room? I haven't really spoken to anyone since I came back...Unless you want to join me at the main table?", she said hopefully.

He just shook his head, "Not with that lot."

She walked over to the table. "Hi, do you mind if I join you?" Some faces looked down or away but there were still a few friendly ones.

"Sure, come sit by me", Tina invited her with a warm smile.

She tried to participate in the dialogue but it was difficult. No one mentioned Bud or Hando, or the ladies' night or BBQ that she had missed. In fact, no one mentioned anything with regards to her at all. Why would they want to talk with someone they didn't like? Karen knew she had blown it again. She had estranged herself from this group just like she did with all groups. What was it about her that made her perpetually dig her own grave socially? Why did she care so much? She had got what she came for. Yes, she had made a mess of things with Bud, and he was their good friend and they probably resented her for that. She stayed long enough for one drink and then said her goodnights.

Hando was watching TV laid out on her couch. As always, her heart gave a little jump whenever she looked at him. He was really a beautiful man though she knew he would cringe at that particular description. She would kill for his long dark eyelashes and the extraordinary shade of his eyes. She loved the touch of his soft beard on her face, no matter how roughly it sometimes scraped her skin.

"Are you finished perving?", he asked without turning his head.

"For the moment", she replied, coming around to face him.

He turned off the telly with the remote and pulled her down on his lap. She turned until both of her legs encased his. He reached up and took off her glasses.

"Do you have those contact thingies?"

"You mean lenses. Yeah but they bother..."

"Good", he interrupted and dropped the glasses on the rug and crushed them underneath his boot, "Wear them."

She gave a little cry of protest, "I can't believe you just did that."

He ignored her. "I like this top you're wearing", he said fingering it. You're finally showing the goods. Lose all those tent outfits and the baggy pants. They do nothin' for ya. And your hair, let it grow. I like long hair."

Karen felt irked at these edicts but didn't show it. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, do you have any racy knickers?"

"What's wrong with my underwear?"

"It's fine if you're a sweet little virgin and the cherry's about to pop, but as we both know that's not the case. Don't you have any of those edible undies or crotchless ones? I also like garters, stockings and those mile high "fuck me" boots.

"You want me to dress the role I'm playing?", she asked softly, "so I won't forget that it's just that, a role and not anything more."

He was exasperated. "Do ya have to analyze everything? Man, you are so anal, so different from an Aussie sheila. You see they know how to have fun and they just go with it. They don't ask questions and they don't need explanations."

She wanted to say, "Like Gabe?", but held back the angry retort as she knew it would hurt him. "I don't want to argue Hando. We only have the weekend so let's make the most of it."

And they did. When they were not having smokin' sizzling sex, they filled their time by getting to know each other. Karen was amazed at the historic facts that Hando could just rattle off; like dates of World War II battles, and the strategic planning behind each. He learned that Karen liked to laugh and had a very dry, somewhat cynical sense of humor. When she smiled, she was radiant. The weekend for the most part was spent alone together. Karen had kicked to the curb all others. Of course, there were times when they reverted back to form and fought like cats and dogs. Trust was still a very strong issue. When she left, they both knew she would be coming back at the end of the work week.

Their weekends quickly developed into a pattern. She would come on the Friday evening, and they would lock themselves away in her room to renew passionate encounters. Karen discovered that there was so much she had missed out on with other lovers. Though Hando was always dominant in their sexual realm, by mutual consent, he taught her to let go and how her gift of acquiescence allowed her to free herself. He never demanded anything she didn't want to give or tell her to do something that she didn't want to do. It was one exhilarating adventure after another.

Sometimes, after he had fallen asleep, she would replay in her mind every move, every action with wonder. She never thought she could be so uninhibited. She remembered one boyfriend who had said she was frigid. When she repeated this to Hando, he had laughed and said it was the bloke's fault for not knowing how to use his equipment right, though he'd said it slightly more graphically. Then he'd made another joke about how boring, sensitive guys didn't know how to handle stuffy, snot-nosed princesses.

Watching him while he slept, it was hard to believe that he was still so filled with anger, bitterness and still loneliness. When he slept, the dark suspicious look in his eyes was shuttered. The hardness that was often displayed at the corners of his lips evened out. The taut tense muscles always ready for attack relaxed. It was then that she fell hard for him. Just once she wished that his arms would embrace her in tenderness or comfort but with Hando, everything was raw, impersonal and devoid of sentiment. He saw softness as a weakness. He wouldn't let her touch him with kindness or generosity.

One time, in the privacy of her room, she had asked him to slow dance with her. He looked at her like she had grown two heads and refused saying that he was not to be confused with the poncey dipsticks she had known, as if! She had really been hurt but of course, Hando subscribed to the double standard and asked her - no told her - to do a strip tease for him. She had felt foolish and insecure but she had done it to the best of her ability.

She had also succumbed to his tastes in lingerie and fetish wear - what she called "costumes". She could now actually walk in 3 inch stilettos, and the dreaded thong wasn't really that bad. Sometimes he would make her go downstairs and wait for him in the Tavern wearing nothing underneath a short skirt, and he would then proceed to torture her by playing footsie underneath the tablecloth. He would then smile this impish grin at whoever served them. She was now also used to wearing contacts and had to admit that she never looked better in her life. She had lost a lot of weight but it still wasn't enough for her. She had to be careful about that with Hando. When he ate, he expected her to as well, saying he couldn't stand whinging harpies who were constantly starving themselves. The girls had noticed her weight loss too, but instead of congratulating her, they had been concerned that she would go too far.

"You know at the Point, it doesn't matter how much or what you eat, you won't gain anything", Michelle had said. More magic nonsense that she had promptly disregarded.

She would now catch admiring glances from some of the boyz, even the attached ones. She was flattered and proud, but not too much as she knew Hando would cut her down to size if she ever got big-headed. The odd time, she would even find Bud looking but he would quickly drop his gaze when her eyes met his. Hando noticed and often chose that moment to showcase his dominance and brand his ownership label on her. He could really be a

prick at times to Bud.

The times she cherished the most with Hando were when he simply talked to her as an interesting and worthwhile companion. They could talk about almost anything. He would just as often listen to her comments and agree with her that she made some valid points as he would tell her she was full of shit and didn't know her ass from a hole in the ground, that she was so dense, she couldn't catch a cold. But she could only press him about personal issues so far then he would shut down. She had never met such a moody person. At the drop of a hat, the mask would fall. Sometimes she would be talking and he would just take off, leaving her wondering what she had said to offend him.

It was always difficult after a weekend with him to go back to her dreary and decaying little world. Work hadn't improved any. She was starting to make mistakes and miss deadlines. Half the time, she would lock herself in the washroom and quietly pleasure herself to relieve the tension of being away from him. When he hadn't been looking, she had taken pictures of him. Some were used in her stimulating fantasies and she had enlarged others to put up in her apartment. Her favorite was the one where he was smiling naturally, just a big old-fashioned shit-eating grin from ear to ear. Thank God for a zoom lens.

She would try to rush the work week and fill it with self-imposed busyness. She had turned into a cleaning fanatic, something she never would have thought possible. Soon, every part of her life was starting to revolve around him. She started buying CDs of his music and would sing along to previously negligible and incomprehensible lyrics. Profanity had become everyday language. Mind you, she had never been a saint in that area before but now her vocabulary had tripled and she could make tough teenagers, nasty little fuckers, blush with envy. He was never far from her mind, and on Fridays, the whole day was a write-off spent in rabid clock watching and anticipation

Part Nine

It had been a few months now since they got together. Karen had just arrived and was having a drink in the Tavern. She had been troubled of late

whenever she came back by certain people's reactions to her. She thought they would have gotten over it by now. For the most part, she evaded and ignored it, but there was one person whose opinion she couldn't just throw off. It bothered her deeply.

Hando joined her and after trying to draw her out said frankly, "What the fuck's wrong with you?"

She didn't seem to hear him as she stared off into space. He waited and then finally she spoke, "You know there's only one man here who intimidates me."

He made a joke, "Sid?"

"Hardly", she replied.

He could tell then by her straightforward expression that she was serious.

"Who?"

"Your mentor", she said simply.

"Max? Are you having a delayed reaction? He has a certain effect on all women and you're just feeling it now?"

"It's not what you think. I just don't believe the General thinks that highly of me."

"Why would you say that?"

"It's just a feeling that I have, and every now and then, I catch him looking at me as if he's evaluating me in some way and finding me lacking."

Hando scoffed, "You're being paranoid."

"Am I? He has such an influence over you right now. You value his opinion. What if he told you I was no good for you?"

Hando just gave her an exasperated look.

"I'm serious Hando. What if he said to you that I was bad news or bad karma or that the gods were against me and that you shouldn't see me anymore?"

"First off, Max wouldn't say those things. He's not one to dish dirt on anyone. Second, you know no one tells me what to do. I decide my own destiny."

"Gees, you're even sounding like him now. Next thing you know you'll be spouting out platitudes like 'Strength and Honor' and 'What we do in life echoes in eternity'."

"Don't be a bloody nong. Max is more than just pithy epithets. I respect the soldier in him but what's more, I respect the man. You don't even know him. Have you ever had a convo with him?"

"Oh do you mean do I pay homage to him? Do I chat him up like you do with everyone else here?", she threw at him. "You don't even deign to speak with your brothers. No, they're too far beneath you."

"Are you on the rag or what? If you're just here to ear bash, do it with someone who gives a flying shit", he got up to leave.

"No wait", she stopped him with her hand on his arm, "I'm sorry. I'm just on edge today." He sat back down.

"I got written up at work."

"You copped a blast?"

"Yeah, I lost it with a client. He started yelling at me that his billing statements were all wrong and that he got them late. You know I tried to be polite but firm but then he started swearing at me and telling me I was incompetent. So I told him what he could do with his bloody billings. He complained to my boss and I was officially reprimanded."

"You hate your job anyways. Why don't you just quit?"

"And live on what? Take the easy way out and go on the dole, become a slacker?" Ooh, low blow even for her. This time he did get up and leave. When would she ever learn to keep her big trap shut?

"Hey, looks like you could use a friend." She looked up into Jeff's smiling face.

"I sure could." He sat down across from her.

"Did you and Hando have a blue?"

"No, I was just being my charming self", she then shrugged. "Women can be so catty. You're lucky you play for the other team."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, why not", she replied.

"Why don't you ever hang out with the other girls? From what I understand, that's what girl talk is all about you know, getting things off your chest and getting support."

"I can't. I cut them off a while ago. I don't know how to make it up."

"They don't hold grudges Mate. It may take a big of effort but I'm sure you can find your way back in."

"Jeff, I know you're being sweet and you mean well, but I just can't right now. I'm afraid I'm on my own."

"As the good padre would say, it's never too late to make amends", he patted her hand and left.

She went for a long walk to clear her head. When she got back, she knocked at Hando's door. When he opened it, she hung her head, and with a rather playful but petulant expression said, "It seems I've been a bad girl again. I think I need to be punished."

He gave her a sidelong grin and the door closed behind them.

The more time Karen spent with Hando, the more she noticed his mood swings. Often when she came, she would find him on the beach brooding. It took more and more effort on her part to bring him out of his funk. Something was eating away at him and Karen thought she knew what it was.

One afternoon, as they sat on the beach, she decided to bring things to a head and quietly asked, "Why do you do it to yourself? Why do you come here of all places? Doesn't it remind you?"

A savage look crossed his face and to her surprise, he was remarkably candid. "I want to be reminded. Betrayal makes you hard and toughens you. It teaches you to never forget and make the same mistakes."

"It also teaches you not to trust and give of yourself if you focus on just the bad times. Just because some people hurt you doesn't mean everyone is dangerous and a threat."

His eyes were blazing fiercely now thinking back to Davy and how their friendship had been torn apart. "I told him I'd get him through it. If only he had listened to me. She didn't love him. She was using him. It was just us. It had always been just us since we were little nippers. I took care of him. I took care of all of them."

She said his next line for him, "We've got to stick together now. Past is past. That's what you said to him."

"That's right. We were like blood. Then he let a piece of arse distract him. Not just ordinary tail but a spastic one at that."

"She had epilepsy Hando. It's a medical condition, not a character flaw."

"Whatever, she was one crazy bitch. She ratted us all out and got Bubs killed.", he was almost in tears remembering. "Bubs was fourteen, just an ankle biter, and his life was snuffed out in all of five seconds. You know he used to follow me around all the time, and it really annoyed me. He'd ask me all these stupid questions, and he wanted in on every scrap. I had to cuff him good once or twice just to keep him in line and out of trouble. He always thought he was big enough to take on the gangs. He was a great little scout. I'd do anything just to hear him ask one more dumb thing."

Karen wrapped her arms tight around him. Amazingly enough, he didn't push her away. "I know you would. It must be so hard to come to this place and not have any of your friends here, something from your old life to relate to. You're still in so much pain. It's going to continue to grow unless you just let it go."

"How can I?", he broke away from her. "It's my fault. I'm the one who brought her in. I knew Davy liked her. I egged him on. She meant nothing to me, just another lousy lay, but I could see he was jealous."

"Hando, this goes way beyond you and Gabe. Why are you really torturing yourself? What is it that's haunting you? Is it what Davy did in the end?"

His face utterly whitened. He got up and started walking fast. "I don't want to talk about this. You'll never understand. You weren't there."

She ran to him and swung him around. "Make me understand. Take me there. Please let me help you." Karen was crying now, wanting so badly to hold and comfort him.

He dragged her down to the water's edge. "Here, my best mate killed me, stabbed me in the back; how do you live with that? It happened because I couldn't get control. I couldn't control the fire inside, my rage. All my life, I've taken care of myself. I learned ya had to keep it in, whatever you were feeling. Don't show it to anybody. If some one beats ya, don't cry. Don't give them that power. They'll use it against ya. That's why I was the best leader. I could hide behind a blank face, and no one knew what I was thinking; no one could know me or own me. I lost sight of that. That's why I don't trust anyone or believe in anybody but me. When I first came here, I didn't get along. Max was the one person who could understand." His legs were buckling now and he was short of breath as though the memory had drained all of his vitality, his lifeforce.

Karen let him lean on her and helped him to sit down. "But don't you see? All your hurt and anger is still there. How are you dealing with it by trying to hide it? Don't you need to work through it?"

He looked at her suddenly, "Why are you really here with me Karen? Do ya like the person ya see? Cause if you can't accept me as I am; if you're trying to change me or save me, it ain't gonna happen. I only know how to be me."

She held on to his hand tight. She searched his face. She wanted to get the words right; it was too imperative not to. "What are you asking me? Do you mean if I can accept the neo-Nazi skinhead who killed, beat people senseless, told people that this is not their country, whose hatred once ran so deep that it emanated from every pore of his skin? No, I don't accept that man."

As his eyes dropped and his body drooped, she tilted his chin up forcing him to meet her gaze. "But I do accept the one who loved his best mate so much that he couldn't hide his affection for him, who put him to bed when he passed out and listened to him when it went against his every grain but it kept him and his from certain slaughter. I can accept the man who taught survival skills and street smarts and provided guidance to a bunch of unschooled hoods, the man who looked after a little boy who hero worshipped him and kept him safe. That's a man I can accept. I choose to see the good in that man because I know he must have gone through a world of pain, no agony, to lead him to that period of desperation and vengeance in his life. You say you can't be changed but you already have. Max sees it in you and so do the others, or they would keep you on a short leash, like they do with Sid. I see it in you. You came back for me when I twisted my ankle in the storm. You could have left me there or told somebody else to come get me but you didn't. When we do things together, you always show me in so many little ways that you're thinking of me. There is good in you. Please", she put her arms around his neck, "Cut yourself some slack. Don't be your own worst enemy."

He pulled away from her; there was a hardness in his voice. "I have to go. I need to think things through", he backed away.

"Hando, give us a chance. I swear I won't hurt you. I won't let you down." It was too late though, he had already started running.

That night, she slept alone, hoping he would come to her but he didn't. Maybe by trying to get closer to him, she had pushed him even further away. She was still reeling from it all. He had seemed so lost, like a little boy. She wanted to wrap him up in a cocoon of her love to protect him. She couldn't bear the thought of him continuously dealing with all that tragedy on his

own. She called in sick to work in case he needed her.

When she couldn't stand one more minute, she broke in to his room again and refused to leave. When he tried to push past her, she put her back against the door. "If you want to go, you'll have to go through me first. Just listen to me and then if you still want me to go, I will." He backed down.

"Let me show you that tomorrow doesn't have to be like yesterday. The past can be just that, the past."

He had asked, "And what if tomorrow never comes?"

"Then, I'll just hold on and love you tonight. Please don't send me away. I need you. I need to feel you inside me. You need to feel safe."

She held out her hand to him and just as she was about to turn away, he took it and clasped her to him so tightly as if afraid she would vanish.

They were locked together for what seemed like an eternity, and then they had made love for the first time. He gently undressed her, his eyes treasuring all she had to offer him, which was everything. He gave her soft lingering kisses while she stroked his face. They took their time, exploring each other as if it indeed was the first time. When his tongue lapped and bathed her down below, she felt the first of many little deaths. He eased himself into her and they melded as one, slowly and lovingly reaching rapture at the same time. He then had laid his head on her chest. No words were necessary but Karen had to say what she had kept in for so long.

She whispered it, "I love you. It's probably not what you want to hear but I want you to know it. I've only said those words once before to one other man but I must have been lying because what I feel for you is so much stronger and deeper. I don't expect you to say it back. I just wanted you to hear the words and remember and know in your heart that you are worthy of love and a second chance."

He hadn't said anything but she knew he had taken it in and that was enough.

For a while it lasted; for a while it was heaven. They spent time making

glorious memories. They walked hand in hand everywhere, speaking to each other without words. They grew quite close but something in Hando's eyes continued to haunt her.

Hando, in reality, was in torment. His thoughts and dreams gave him no rest. Everything he had believed in for so long was falling by the wayside. He unconsciously fought to hold on to those beliefs. He began to have deep misgivings, not only about himself but about Karen, who was becoming of major importance. He was lost in doubt and felt he was losing his edge, what made him authentic.

A few weeks later, Karen's world fell apart. She had thought the tide had turned that night, that the earth had moved. If indeed they had, the tide quickly receded and the earth revolved no more. At first, it was little things. Hando seemed aloof and withdrawn. He was distracted and their lovemaking was hurried. He would go for walks late at night alone, and even though she told him to wake her when he came back, he never did. Sometimes, she would wake up to find him on her couch instead of in her bed where it was warm and loving.

Soon, he became sullen and more abrupt with her. He seldom laughed or smiled. In deliberate steps, he began to distance himself from her. Karen thought she knew why. He had opened the door to her and had let her see a part of him that was long closed off, his true self. He felt vulnerable now and didn't know how to act so the old Hando had reappeared to shield himself. She tried to be patient and understanding but he made it difficult when he snapped at her to leave him alone. Weekends were being wasted as he would go off on his own for hours on end.

He spent more and more time with Max. She would see them together on the grounds or in the Tavern and she didn't dare to intrude. She was jealous that Max was the one he was confiding in. She pleaded with him to tell her what was on his mind but to no avail. Their intimacy shattered and he would just use her body to escape. She let him because she loved him. Instead, the walls grew higher.

Gradually, Karen began to take it personally, and the more he ignored her or lashed out, the angrier she became. She didn't take it out on Hando, but everyone else around her. She acted shrewish and began to spit venom. Andy, always seemed to be her main target. After all she spent a lot of time

in the Tavern, and he was always there. She regarded him as simply a barkeep and a mere boy. Even Jeff, who was the closest thing she had to a friend, felt the sharp edge of her tongue when he tried to help and told her she should play it cool with Hando for a while and let him come to his senses.

"Who are you to give advice on relationships? The longest one you've had is with Rick and how many years did you say it's been?", she said sarcastically. "Do me a favor and stick to giving advice on what you do know, like sticking it up the old Hershey Highway. Keep it to yourself Mate; I don't need to hear it." It was hard to brown off Jeff but that remark managed it.

She also wasn't feeling physically well. One day, she had fainted in the restaurant; and it just so happened that good old Doctor Anthony was present. He had insisted on examining her. He took her blood pressure and tested her blood sugar in spite of her protests.

"When's the last time you ate?"

"Doc, you just saw me in the restaurant; take a wild guess."

"What did you have?"

"A salad. This is ridiculous. I'm just tired; that's all. I haven't been sleeping very well."

He looked intently at her. "People have been noticing that you have lost a great deal of weight; and they are concerned."

"Which people? Do they have names?"

"A lot of your friends I assume."

"I don't have any friends here. You can tell your 'people' that they are just being too bloody nosy. Tell them to get a life and stay out of mine."

Despite her abrasiveness, he pushed on. "Have you been losing a lot of weight?"

"A little. Not enough to get excited about."

"I want you to do something for me."

"And if I don't?"

"It's your choice but I would think you would want to take better care of your health."

"All right. I'll humor you Doc. What do you want me to do?"

"You can either see your own physician or if you're here, I would like you to make an appointment with me. I'd like to run some more tests and blood work including measuring your thyroid levels. Also, I want you to keep a list of how often you eat, what you eat and the approximate portion sizes. If you exercise, keep track of how often and for how long."

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Let's just wait to see what the test results show. Will you make the appointment?" Karen agreed knowing full well she would lie about her eating habits. She really believed she was just mega stressed about Hando.

She couldn't bear to give up on him. She would daily say things to him like, "I'm not going anywhere Hando so deal with it. How can I get through to you? Do you want me to cry, get down on my knees and beg? I'm not too proud to do that. I'll do whatever it takes to convince you of my loyalty, trust and sincerity. What have I done wrong anyways? All I did was listen and love you. I didn't betray you. I am not Gabe. Don't shut me out. Everybody needs someone."

He would typically answer, "Not me. I've made it this far alone. Look Doll, I told ya at the beginning. This was never meant to be a permanent arrangement. I need space. I feel like you're breathing down my neck. The walls are closing in."

"I can give you space. I just don't want you to give up on me. If you want me to go home, I will. Just don't tell me not to come back."

He was tired of the bickering and he didn't want to hurt her so he just said, "Do what you want."

Then he had gone away, told Max one day he was leaving and disappeared. Karen used up all of her remaining vacation time to stay just in case. She tried writing him a letter but the words always came out wrong. She stayed in his room, slept in his bed, and he was everything she dreamt and everything she felt.

"Don't do this to me", she would cry to herself, her heart slowly breaking in two.

Meanwhile, Michelle was really worried. After all, she was the owner of the Point, and even though Karen was often troublesome to deal with, she still felt compassion for her and a responsibility for her welfare.

"We have to do something. She's been locked up in Hando's room for days. We don't even know if she has food in there, but I think it's fair enough to say she probably doesn't. She could be sick."

Just when the girls had agreed to go en masse to try and reason with her, they saw her come down into the Tavern. She looked pale and drawn. Michelle went to her and asked if she was all right. She nodded but didn't say anything else. She sat down at one of the tables.

"Hon, you've got to eat something. Let me get you some soup." To Michelle's surprise, she agreed and actually ate the whole thing.

Some of the girls might have sat with her and offered consolation but she was still acting standoffish. In fact, the last thing Karen wanted was anyone's pity which she thought everyone would be feeling for her. She imagined them all gossiping about her and saying how pathetic she was.

The more she thought like this, the madder she got. How dare they intrude and presume to know what she and Hando were feeling? The madder she became, the more determined she was to remain here and fight to the finish. If it meant that she would have to fight them all in return, then so be it. The first person she would take on was just leaving now with Tina, John and Laura.

She stood up and called out formally, "General, may I have a word with you?"

Max turned but didn't seem particularly surprised as to who was making the request. He said a few words to the others and they continued on without him.

"Of course", he answered pointing to a table. They both sat.

"I'll cut right to the chase. You disapprove of me and Hando or maybe it's just me. Why?"

Max was very good at assessing people. He had to be when he had had hundreds of lives depending on him when he was in command of the Felix Legions. Looking in front of him now, he saw a woman still in the last blush of her youth who was very unhappy and heart stricken to the point of despondence. He also saw anger, volatility and pride. He knew instinctively that she was afraid of him or maybe just a little bit in awe of him. He was thinking a talk between them was long overdue. He had been aware whenever he talked to Hando, she felt envy and almost a pathological wrath towards him.

He made direct eye contact. "I think you're entertaining a false perception. I don't hold anything against you Karen. I try not to judge others."

"You talk with Hando all the time. Are you telling me my name doesn't come up?"

"Sometimes, but that's between Hando and myself. However, if it's any reassurance to you, what we discuss is not the least bit derogatory towards you."

She looked forlorn then and confused as if she wasn't sure what to say next. He decided to allay some of her distress and tell her what she wanted to know.

"When Hando first came here, from what I understand, he was a very angry, lost and disturbed young man. He'd been ripped from a world where all he knew was violence and chaos. Indeed, he perpetuated a lot of that himself. When I met him, he seemed to need order, stability and a purpose in his life. He came to me of his own accord to train as a soldier. There's more to the training than just the physical aspect. There's a whole mindset that comes

with the maturity of a military man. Hando is in the process of learning and internalizing certain core values. To date, he'd been making progress."

"You mean until I came along", she interrupted him, "until I corrupted him".

"Your words, my dear, not mine", he said refusing to be baited. "After a while, he wasn't isolating himself as much. He kept his rage under control and his biases hidden. He was no longer as divided among his brothers. He could be counted on if a crisis arose. He has been distracted as of late. It's a continuous struggle for him. Sometimes he fights against himself. He finds it hard to believe that there is any inherent goodness in him because of his past. He seeks peace of mind and forgiveness."

She jumped on that. "But I've told him that Max. I've said it until I'm blue in the face. We became so close and then he just cut me off. I don't understand."

He felt for her. He could truly see that she cared for him deeply. "Hando has to come around to this belief by himself. You can't force it upon him." What he didn't say was that she might be the catalyst for him wanting to change but might not be the person who is the actual momentum.

"What am I to do then? Should I just let him go?" Her mood had shifted from anger. She sounded like a young wounded child.

"I will tell you this without breaking a confidence but just from observation. Hando feels a great affection for you, but he feels he gives away too much of himself, what he still holds onto from his past, and that you will never be happy with what he can give you now. In his eyes, he will never measure up to the man you want him to be. It is his pride that pushes you away." He didn't want to leave her so disheartened so he left her with this thought, "Maybe someday he will be at peace with himself and then he will be able to give you what you need."

"Thank you Max for your honesty." He nodded and left.

She went back to living in her own room. One evening she came back from her daily walk to find him in the tavern. He was sitting with Steve and Alex.

He saw her and then looked away. She went to her room and sat on the edge of her bed. Her feet kicked out at something lying half-under it. She looked down and saw a plastic bag. Opening it, she saw the negligee that she had bought months ago. She had forgotten all about it. On a whim, she decided to try it on. It was big on her but she still thought it was beautiful as she stared at herself in the mirror.

She heard a pounding at her door. Opening it, she saw Hando leaning against the back wall, leering at her. She could smell the booze on him a mile away. It wasn't like Hando to drink anything except beer, but this was whiskey she smelt.

"Take a picture Luv, it'll last longer", he giggled. "Aren't ya going to invite me in?" She opened the door wider and he staggered in.

"So darlin', did ya miss me?"

"You know I did."

"Show me, don't tell me."

She kissed him even though it was like kissing a distillery. He grabbed her and roughly pressed against her, moving his hands all over her body.

"Well isn't this flash", he said fingering the negligee. "It's lovely but you'd look even better starkers. So why don't we just get it off."

She couldn't believe his gaul. "Hando, you're drunk. You probably won't be able to even get it up", she said scathingly.

"Well, you let me worry about that." He was impatient and didn't want to wait while she took her gown off carefully so he grabbed hold of one of the shoulder straps and tore it.

She looked down at the remnants of it and yelled, "You idiot. This was brand new and the most elegant thing I've ever owned, and now you've wrecked it. How could you be such a fucking jerk?"

He wasn't used to the fury in her voice. "Who do ya think you're talkin' to? Have I been gone that long? Seems someone's got a bit too cheeky for her

own good. Do ya need a lesson in manners, little girl?"

She tried to evade him but he was fast and managed to pounce on her and throw her to the ground. He pinned her down and savagely attacked with his mouth and hands. The gown was torn to shreds. He had managed to push what was left of it up to her waist. She pushed futilely against him.

"Get off me!"

He was too busy undoing his pants to pay much attention. She didn't want it like this. Just as he was about to force himself on her, she sank her teeth hard into his shoulder.

"Aaaah!", he cried out and rolled just enough for her to get free.

She picked up the nearest object which was her shoe and lobbed it at his head, dazing him.

The dream suddenly came back to her. She said in a deadly tone, "Guess what Hando? You were right. It is rape when one of you doesn't want it. Be gone when I get back." She put on her robe, grabbed her purse and darted out into the hall and bumped right into Zack.

He had heard the shouting and saw how flustered she was. He helped her regain her balance.

"What's wrong? Do you need help in there?", he said pointing to her room. "Is it Hando?"

"Mind your own fucking business", she snarled at him and shoved him out of her way.

She raced down the stairs and once outside, she ran without stopping to the parking lot. By the time she got there, her feet were scraped and bleeding from the rough cobblestones. She didn't care. She was running on pure adrenalin now. She got in her car and turned the key to start it. She wanted out of here. The engine wouldn't turn over.

"C'mon damn it", she beat her hands on the dashboard. She tried and tried again. Nothing.

"No, this cannot be happening to me." She ran her hands through her hair.
"I've got to get out of here."

She was in a panic close to hysteria. "Okay someone needs to fix it. I can ask Colin."

She was going to run out and look for him but then a little semblance of mind came back to her. She was wearing only a robe, it was pitch black out and probably too late for him to do anything. It would have to wait until tomorrow. She wrapped the robe around her tightly and shivered. She wanted to make sure he was gone so she stayed in the car for about an hour.

She crept back in. She cautiously kicked her partly open door. Her room was empty. She went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. She was still trembling.

"Get it together", she sternly told herself.

After a few minutes, she had calmed down sufficiently to get her bearings. She grabbed her suitcase and started tossing things in. Once she was packed, she curled up in a ball on the couch. Sleep of course now eluded her. She went over and over it in her mind. She should never have let him in. She had seen him drunk plenty of times but he had never been mean spirited. In fact, he was usually silly and quite fun to be around when he was blotto.

"Get him out of your mind", she screamed outloud. But she couldn't. She kept seeing his eyes but they were different; the warmth of them had gone. Nothing in them seemed to hold her.

She threw the cushions off the couch in a mad rage. She was so damn jealous of Davy. "He's the only one you've ever loved. But look what he did to you. I offered you everything."

She took extra medication that night and soon she was drained enough to fall into a restless slumber.

Part Ten

Shortly after dawn, she was up and calling Michelle but there was no answer. She went down to the front desk and waited. Soon Arthur came along.

"Arthur, do you know where Michelle is or Colin?"

"You probably just missed them. They were going into town."

"Do you know when they'll be back?"

"They were going to get some supplies and I think Colin needed some auto parts."

"Great, just great. I need to get home and my car won't start."

"Well, Johnny just went down to the kitchen. He might be able to help you."

"Johnny, that's right. I didn't think of him. Oh, thank you Arthur", she leapt up and kissed him, leaving him standing there rather stunned.

Once she found him and told him her situation, Johnny said he would look at her car this morning and get back to her. Feeling wide awake now and not knowing what to do with her time, she decided to go to the library and read some magazines. Her head felt fuzzy. If she didn't know better, she would say she was buzzed. She put it down to the sleeping pill she took last night. As she walked towards the library, she felt a strange tingling that went right up her spine. She had to sit down and catch her breath.

All of a sudden it hit her. The library looked different. She looked again. She blinked rapidly, not believing her eyes. It was bigger. There was a whole extension added on that hadn't been there last week when she walked this way.

"How could that be?", she wondered out loud. "Maybe, I'm going crazy."

No, it was very plainly in front of her. She walked towards the new part and peeked in the windows. There were comfy chairs and long wooden tables, nothing out of the ordinary. Stacks of books were piled on one of the tables.

Some were opened and others seemingly undisturbed. There was a blackboard there and there were scrawls and symbols on it in chalk that she couldn't decipher. Obviously, people had already been in this new section. She tried the door but it was locked. That was odd. She went back to the main entrance and found the doors here open as usual. She went in and tried to get to the new part from the inside but the same walls and partitions were there from before from the old foundation. From the inside, it was like the new addition didn't exist.

Her head was now spinning. She sat down and tried to make sense of things but the tingling sensation now ran through her whole body. Since it had grown worse since she stepped inside, she went back out. The strange feelings started to diminish the further she walked away from the library. Looking at her watch, she saw she still had time to kill before Johnny would be through so she kept walking and found herself eventually on the path leading to the beach. She had avoided this place from some time now. Today, she would say goodbye to it and all of its memories, good and bad.

Wading through the water, she let her mind drift back to the very beginning. She retraced all of their moments together and felt again all of the emotions: happiness, fear, anger, bliss, disappointment, awe, despair, ecstasy, disillusionment. She could not hate him. Even after last night, she still loved him and wanted him in the worst way. She had already forgiven him in her heart.

By noon, she was back at the hotel. She found Johnny but the news wasn't what she wanted to hear. A new part had to be ordered for her car and it could take a day or two. As if her day couldn't get worse, Dr. Anthony had knocked on her door having other business at the hotel.

"I got your test results back", he looked rather sober.

"It can't be that bad Doc. What, are you going to tell me I got some strange new disease and have only six months to live?", she asked flippantly. "At this point, that would be good news."

"No, but it is serious", he answered her. "Your thyroid levels are normal but your blood work does show that you are anaemic and your electrolytes are out of whack, meaning you're mildly dehydrated."

"So, I just pop a pill, right?"

"That's not what concerns me. I was looking for test results that would show a physical cause for your weight loss." He looked at her but a blank look back told him she really didn't get it.

"I believe you could be developing an eating disorder."

"An eating disorder", she repeated, "doesn't that usually happen to teenagers who don't want their bodies to grow up?"

"It can develop at any age, and there's usually strong psychological factors involved."

"Well Doc, I don't binge and puke. In fact, I never throw up."

"So we rule out Bulimia and Anorexia Nervosa but that still leaves plain Anorexia which is a disinclination to eat often accompanied by long periods of strenuous exercise." She said nothing. He noticed a suitcase by her door.

"Are you leaving soon?"

"As soon as possible."

"Karen, please see your family doctor when you get home about this. There are clinics that can help you. Right now, your prognosis is good because for your height, your weight is only slightly below the average. You can beat this thing." When there was still no response, he wrote out a prescription for iron tablets, told her to drink lots of fluids and left her some pamphlets to read.

Karen looked over the brochures and even opened up her lap top and went online. The graphic pictures she saw of women suffering from such disorders sickened her. She was horrified that the good doctor might be right, that she had taken her dieting one step too far. All she had wanted to do was to look and feel attractive. But in spite of everything, in spite of the weight loss, in spite of the new clothes, in spite of men's admiring glances, she still felt ugly inside. She felt like a fraud.

"I need a drink." Too much soul searching today was bringing her down.

In the restaurant, she had a glass of wine. One glass led to another and soon she was feeling light-headed and giddy. She had brought a book to read and as always was soon engrossed in it. She was able to shut out the background noise. That's probably why she didn't hear anyone approach her table. But something made her look up into a pair of apprehensive blue-green eyes where she didn't know the owner.

"Excuse me Miss for bothering you. I just had the strangest feeling come over me when I saw you just now." He seemed to falter in going any further. He put his hands in his suit pockets and then pulled them out again as if he didn't know what to do with them.

She tried to place who he was. Obviously, he was a brother. "Can I help you?"

"I was actually hoping that you could be of some assistance to me." He stopped and looked nervously around him.

"Are you new here?", she said trying to draw him out.

"So I've been told but I don't know whether I choose to believe that. I don't quite understand, that is, I have not yet grasped the logistics or grown accustomed to these surroundings I find myself in."

His accent and his patterns of speech reminded her of someone. "Who are you?", she said finally.

He said in a whisper, "My name is John Nash. I think I'm a captive here, and I must endeavor to find a way out of this present predicament."

Karen was in shock. Of course, now she could see it. He must just recently have arrived here. "Have you met Michelle, the owner or any of the others?", she asked tentatively.

"I have been introduced to a number of different people in a number of disguises, some who even closely resemble myself."

Was he still delusional? She didn't know how to handle this.

"Miss, if you don't mind me asking, do I know you? I feel like we've met somewhere before."

"No, Doctor Nash, we've never met. My name is Karen." He reached out his hand stiffly to shake and she took it. He didn't seem puzzled that she knew he had a doctorate.

Feeling helpless, she simply asked, "Do you want me to bring you back to your room?"

At this, a change seemed to come over him. Panic set into his features, and she could see the fear and distrust in his eyes. She made a motion with her hand trying to calm him but he backed away. He started walking very quickly till he got to the door and then he vanished leaving her feeling quite unsettled.

Several hours later, Karen was well on her way to getting blitzed. After her strange encounter with John Nash, she had been sufficiently perturbed to follow her wine with a few vodka martinis. She felt a strong empathy for the man. To be caught in the cruel web of mental illness, well let's just say she could relate. She hoped that he would get the care he needed.

She was feeling rather melancholy, and her thoughts drifted back to Hando. She knew in her soul that he was sorry for his near assault on her, but it would probably keep him away from her, just one more proof to him that he couldn't control the beast within. While she was thinking this, she noticed one of the lurkers, her name was Sally, that she had become acquainted with sitting at the back of the Tavern. She wasn't a bad sort actually, and they had exchanged small talk and man talk. Sally liked Steve even though she knew he was attached. She kept trying to change his mind. She also liked Bud which touched a little nerve in Karen. She walked over to her and they started talking. Sally was wearing a stunning leather outfit that was quite daring and risqué, and it suited her dark colouring to a tee. Sally told her she had ordered a few of these outfits online.

Karen said, "Wow, you look fabulous. I wish I had the guts to wear something like that."

Sally then turned to her, "Well why don't you? I've got two more similar to this in my car. We're about the same size."

"No, I couldn't", she laughed aloud at the very idea.

"C'mon, I bet if you did your hair up and put on a little more makeup, you'd look gorgeous. It would give you a lift too", Sally urged.

She was about to refuse again when she saw Hando come in with a strange girl beside him.

"Do you know who's that?", Karen asked, slightly slurring her words.

"With your honey? Yeah, I think her name is Loretta. She's been here a few times."

Karen gave her a competitive once over. She was tall, read leggy, blond, read bitch, young, read super bitch, and was giving Hando these come hither looks that she couldn't possibly have ever mastered.

"What's her story?"

"You mean who's she hit on? Well, I think she's scored with Johnny. She tried putting the moves on East when Kath wasn't around for all the good it did her. But she sure seems to be eating up your man."

Karen didn't know that Hando had seen her. Once he had, he played up to the girl, letting her think he was available and looking for action. Meanwhile, Karen was looking daggers at the intruder.

"Sure you don't want to even out the odds a little by putting on one of those leather outfits? Here, I'll give you some liquid courage", Sally passed her a shooter. She downed it, reached across Sally and drank another.

"Okay, let's do it."

Sally had helped her do her hair. It was fairly long now but tended to lay flat. A little teasing took care of that. Sally also let her borrow some really cool chandelier earrings. Then it was on to the makeup. Usually, Karen just wore the bare minimum foundation and a little mascara. Not tonight. Sally proved to be a whiz at applying face paint. She nearly bawked at the lipstick.

"What shade is that, whorehouse red?" Then she had tugged and pored herself into skintight red leather with matching boots.

She looked in the mirror. She didn't recognize herself. Sure, she had torted herself up before for Hando's private amusement but not like this.

"You look hot girl! You'll knock them dead. Are you coming?"

"Just give me a few minutes Sal. I'll see you down there."

"Okay, here you need this more than me", Sally passed her a flask.

"What's in here?"

"Rum."

It was now nine o'clock on this particular Saturday night, and the tavern was pretty full. Nearly all the brothers were there. Tina and John were sitting with Bud, Michelle and Colin, East and Kath, Zack and Buggy and Norma Jean and Mannie. It was mid-summer and the night air was sizzling, and the music was rocking. This was the atmosphere that Karen teetered in on. She made her way across the floor; her sights were on Hando and she failed to notice that soon she was stirring up quite a bit of excitement.

"Who is that?"

"Whoa, check out the sheila in red?"

"Shit, I think I've died and gone to heaven."

"She is a walking heart attack."

"No, she's a walking wet dream."

Then came a dawning recognition, and people were dumbfounded.

"Oh my God, that's Karen."

"Wow, does she ever clean up good."

"What does she think she's doing dressed like that?"

Bud's jaw clenched as he saw her. Mannie looked away embarrassed.

All Karen could see was Hando all over the little bimbo. "If you stick your tongue any further down her throat, you'll take her tonsils out."

Hando did a double take. He looked her up and down and was not pleased.

Karen didn't care. "Excuse me Loretta, is it? Do you mind taking your hands off my guy before I break them? We need some privacy too so could you shove off?" Loretta simpered but slithered away. "Close your mouth Hando; you're catching flies."

He looked livid. "Have you gone bonkers? What the fuck do you think you're doing here dressed like a..."

"A what?"

"A flaming trollop."

"Oh nice, Hando. Thank you for the compliment."

"I'll give you 10 seconds to foot it on out of here."

"Or what?"

"Don't frig around with me. Move your arse."

"I don't feel like being your little lap dog tonight Hando. I've got questions of my own. Are you trying to erase me from your memory before I'm even gone with a little slap and tickle with Miss Barbie Doll? Really, I thought you had more taste."

Hando was thinking only one thing. He had to get her out of here before she disgraced them both. "You've gone fucking mental. You've got everyone here giving you eye service", he grabbed her arm roughly and pulled her close, "You are not going to make me look like a bloody fool."

"Why, am I an embarrassment to you?", she asked reeling in closer.

It was then that he realized that she was hammered. "Man, you're three sheets to the wind."

"Maybe I am. Just like you were last night." At least he had the decency to look ashamed for a second.

"So what are you planning? Are you going to stage some big scene? Do you want big old bad Bud to come to the rescue? Well, guess what, I'm not following your script. Look like a fucking slag; see if I care."

"If you don't want me Hando; I'm sure I can find someone who does."

He had to hurt her now and get it over with. "I think we should both move on." He turned away, found Loretta, grabbed her hand, "I like this song. Let's dance." They started to slow dance. Her arms went around his neck and he crushed her to him, but his eyes were empty. Karen seeing him dance with a stranger when he never would with her couldn't stand it. She rushed for the washroom with Sally following close behind. As soon as she was gone, Hando broke away from...whatever her name was.

"Hando, Sweetie, what's the matter?"

"Sod off", he muttered, walked outside and kept on going, not once looking back.

Sally tried to comfort her but Karen was having none of it. "You know what? I'm sick and tired of these head games, and I'm sick and tired of crying over something that never was. It's my turn to shine tonight, and I don't care who I go home with."

She held her head up high and strutted out. A fast hippy song was playing. A few people were up dancing. She made a space for herself and started doing her thing. Once she got the rhythm, the spotlight was on her. Karen was a very good dancer and soon began to bump and grind with the beat.

John looked around his table, "I hope this doesn't get ugly. I have the feeling she's not going to stop until she's the star of the show."

"I think someone should cover her up. She looks like a two bit hooker", Bud looked as if he was about to jump up to volunteer.

John clamped down on him, "Don't do it Bud. She's not your problem. She's been looking for a fight for some time now. Don't give her any more ammunition."

"She won't thank you for it Bud", Zack added, "Don't get involved. She's carrying major baggage." Karen, oblivious to other's comments, kept on dancing even when the dance floor emptied.

Steve sitting with Sally and his ever present camera whispered to her, "I've got to get a few pics of this. I think I'll caption them "The Goddess in Action". Steve was definitely one of those who were enjoying the view. He discreetly snapped a few shots.

The music changed tempo and a slow dance began. More couples joined on the floor. Steve asked Sally to dance and she winked at Karen. Karen was too far gone to notice. She began to swing her hips sensuously and her eyes closed. Her arms moved suggestively down the front of her body as if a lover was stroking her. Bud was simmering. He hated to see any women being degraded but doing it to herself was unforgivable. Where was the woman he had known and quickly had become attracted to? He hadn't seen her in a long time.

Jeffrey Wigand chose an unfortunate moment to come back from the men's room, crossing right beside Karen.

She latched on to him, "Jeffrey, you're just the man I'm looking for. Dance with me."

He blushed bright red and stammered, "I don't think that would be appropriate at this time".

"And why is that? Don't you think you're man enough for me? I think you are Dr. Wigand", she purred, tracing her hand down his cheek to his lips and outlining them. "You're the only man here who is mature enough", she spat out, "to deal with a real woman, a genuine one with feelings that matter, who truly cares for you and would do anything for you. I know you wouldn't

ignore and pretend I don't exist like some people who can't handle love and tenderness."

"Young lady, it's evident that you've had far too much to drink. I strongly suggest that you find a friend to take you back to your room."

"Young lady", she laughed boisterously, "young lady. You flatter me Jeffrey. I haven't been called that since I was 17 and daddy caught me smoking a joint." Jeffrey disentangled himself from her.

Still laughing, she sashayed up to Dominic who was acting as DJ. "This tune bites. Mind if I change it?"

Dominic looked horrified. "Actually, that's not a good idea".

"Oh c'mon Dom, lighten up. You act like I'm gonna eat your firstborn. All I want to do is put on some retro stuff. Then you'll get more people up and boogying. Let's see what you got."

She looked through his CDs. Her perfume was heady, and her breasts were pushed up right in front of his face. He didn't know where to look.

"How about I just put this one little song on okay. Just one. Okie dokie?" Not waiting to see if he agreed, she plopped it on the stereo.

She went to the middle of the floor. The Knack's "My Sharona" belted out from the speakers. Sinuously moving, rotating and lifting her pelvis, she was in harmony with every beat. That's when the proverbial shit hit the fan as Sid walked in, took in the scenery, took one look at the lady in red and made a beeline for her. Karen turned and saw him and beckoned with her finger. Sid couldn't believe that this was the same woman who just a few months ago was dumpy and ordinary.

"Cherie, you've been hiding yourself I see." He brazenly looked down her top. She put her arms around him, and he put his hands on her rear end which was barely covered. They started to dirty dance.

Bud nearly broke his chair as he leapt up and dived for Sid. John and Colin were two steps behind him. Bud flattened Sid with one punch, but Sid was strong and got a choke hold on him. John and Colin struggled with Sid while

Zack and East wrestled Bud. At last they were separated.

"Leave her alone. Don't you dare touch her again you fucking scumbag", Bud hissed.

Sid straightening his rumpled suit glared and sneered, "Are you feeling frustrated White? Not getting any action lately? Just because that pecker of yours is withering away is no reason to go postal on me. Not my fault, the lady prefers my attentions."

Bud lunged for him again. John held him back shouting, "Shut up Sid or we'll take your module out and crush it into tiny pieces."

While the boyz were hashing things out, Karen had disappeared. She had stepped out the fire exit at the back for some air.

Loretta was smoking a cigarette. "Do you know where Hando is? He said he was just coming down for a coldie. Boy, I got to tell you honey, he is really something in the sack. No wonder you can't let go of him. He's prime A1 sausage", she said licking her fingertips.

Karen would have decked the bitch but she was seeing double at the moment. "Isn't it past your bedtime?"

But Loretta didn't know when to quit and went on and on about what Hando did to her and what she did to him. Of course she was lying through her teeth but Karen didn't know that and felt provoked nevertheless. She threw open the door and strode behind the bar.

Andy saw her though and made to head her off. "No way are you having another drop from here. You are so cut off."

Karen saw that he wouldn't budge. She also was vaguely aware that she was being surrounded. Just then a fire alarm went off loudly. Michelle knew by the tone that it was coming from the hotel. She took off with Colin, Tina and Zack and some of the others. It caused just enough of a diversion for Karen. She nipped behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of wine. Andy just missed her.

Loretta had followed her in. "What's the matter? You really shouldn't drink so much. Maybe that's why Hando said you had problems. He said something about you being an uptight born again virgin and that having sex with you was like screwing an ice pick. I believe those were his exact words."

Karen fed up, smashed the bottle on the bar and it broke. She held up the jagged edge in front of her, "Look Bitch, get out of my face or I'll rearrange yours."

Bud tackled her from behind, and his momentum drove them both to the floor. She still held part of the broken bottle.

He yanked her up, "Drop it. I said Drop It!" He brought his knee up and smashed her wrist down over it.

She let go of it but she had cut herself and was bleeding. She was too smashed to feel any pain. Bud kicked the bottle out of the way, and Karen threw herself at Loretta. Bud, this time, bodily picked her up with his arms around her waist and swung her around.

"Let me go. I can take her", she yelled.

"It's not you I'm worried about. Get out of here", he yelled at Loretta. She took one look at Bud's face and scampered off.

"Bud, let of go of me now", Karen demanded. "Don't go all caveman on me."

"Not a chance, sweetheart." Bud was fed up.

Karen started cursing a blue streak. Bud covered her mouth with his hand. She bit him hard. That was the last straw. Bud hated violence of any kind towards women but one more wrong move on her part and he swore he would put this hellcat over his knee and spank the living daylights out of her. His iron grip around her middle made her short of breath.

"Ow Bud. I thought you didn't hurt women."

"I don't see one, just a spoiled little brat."

Now it was John's turn, "The show is over. You can either walk out of here or get carried out. Are you going to behave?"

"She's got cuts all over her John. She needs to have them taken care of."

"Well Norma Jean's here. Let's move her to another room. Are you going to come quietly?"

"Right John. You're going to trust her?", Bud said sarcastically, swooping down, picking her up and carrying her out.

She went limp in his arms.

Part Eleven

Michelle had come back from the hotel after finding the fire alarm was a false one and had been filled in on the excitement.

Karen made no complaint or protest as Norma Jean cleaned her up. She did have to run to the washroom twice to vomit. She was too weak and stuporous to be a threat to anyone now. When she was finished, Buggy helped her to her room. John told Bud he'd better get a tetanus shot for his hand knowing how serious human bites could be.

Karen passed out on the bed still in her clothes. At noon, when she woke up, it was to a throbbing headache and the mother of all hangovers. Her outfit was clinging to her like a second skin. She peeled it off and stomped on it in disgust. She could smell the rank odor of herself. She made herself some coffee and after two cups and a breakfast of Advils, she managed to hobble to the shower. It was in the shower that she became slowly aware of last night and what she had done. Sliding to the tub floor, she let the water rain down on her as she reproached herself. She cringed as she remembered not only her sins of last night but also those since she had first come to the Point.

How would she be able to face all these people she had mistreated in some way? She made a list in her head: Dominic, Jeffrey, Zack, Andy, most if not

all the girls, Jeff and Bud, most of all Bud. As RC once said in some interview, "It's hard keeping up with all the apologies." She was so ashamed. She could only pray that the part for her car would come in today so she could leave here and never show her face again. She thought about taking the coward's way out and writing letters to everyone and doing a runner. But maybe it was long past due to face the music. At least she owed them that much. Before she left her room, she discovered a note under her door from Johnny saying that her car had been fixed. She took one final look around her and left for the last time.

She went downstairs not sure where she would find people. Then she remembered that this was Sunday and after Cort's service, many went to the restaurant to have brunch. She hesitated before going in, trying to psych herself for the dreaded final encounter. She took one last heavy breath and walked in. Like she thought, a lot of the residents were here. She walked up to the big full table. The sound of laughter and chit chat dwindled as one by one she was noticed. She stared at all the faces. There were no smiles and no signs of encouragement. They waited and for a moment Karen was terrified she'd start crying.

"This won't take but a minute. Excuse the interruption. I'm here to take my medicine so anyone feel free to take their best shot. I just want to say how truly sorry I am for my behavior last night. I was really really drunk, confused and angry. But I'm not here to make any excuses because there are none. Michelle, I'll pay for whatever damages there were", she paused, waiting for somebody to say something. She was met by total silence. "I'll leave now before you gather a posse to escort me off the premises."

She hoped to exit with some modicum of dignity but what was left of her heart broke when she passed Bud at the end of the table.

She knelt down beside him and took his hand. It had a bandage on it from where she had bitten him. She massaged it slowly. "I'm sorry for everything Bud. You were a true friend, and I was so wrong to abuse that friendship." She had tears in her eyes. Bud gave her a searching look and then got up and left, leaving her there certain that she was completely and unequivocally alone.

She ran out. She didn't see John throw down his napkin and follow her out. He caught up to her and twirled her around. "No, you don't get to do what

you just did back there and walk away." He firmly led her over to a place out of earshot and sat her down.

Karen was startled by his grim expression and stern voice. "You think you've eased your conscience and that everything is okay? You left all those people in there; people who have tried to be your friend for months now without any explanation, without any reason."

"John, what are you talking about? I said I was sorry for last night. I was out of line. What more do you want me to say?"

John was one of the most patient people men at the Point but his patience was running very thin at this moment.

"You don't get it do you? What happened last night will soon be forgotten. You think you're the only one who's gotten drunk and acted out? You are not that special. You're at the end of a long line, honey." She still looked blankly at him, not understanding.

"Damn it woman, your troubles here started a long time ago, and we would all like to know what your fucking problem is." John seldom swore in front of the ladies but he was really wrought up. "Ever since you first came, you started treating people like dirt, like their feelings didn't matter. Having a bad day once in while or being in a bad mood happens to all of us, but you have taken your condescension and disdain for us to a whole new level. You've got a chip on your shoulders the size of Texas. You need a major attitude overhaul.

Without a breath, he continued. "You've disrespected Andy I don't know how many times. He is the manager of the Tavern you know. He does have authority to toss anyone out, and it's just because of his good nature that you've been given so many chances. Zack tried to help you out the other night because he thought you were having a fight with Hando and might be hurt. What did you do? You insulted him. And you know it's very hard to piss off Jeff. He's one of the most cheerful guys here but you managed it. Michelle and Tina have tried to befriend you and kept giving you the benefit of the doubt time and time again, but you ignored them like they didn't exist. And whatever happened between you and Bud is your own business, but I can tell you he was your chief defender here. Even when you got involved with Hando, he took your side.

So what I want to know is why you pushed us all away. Was it for your own amusement or do you really think so little of us? Because if that's the case, you're not welcome back here."

He stopped because Karen's worst nightmare came true. Not prepared for this verbal thrashing, she burst into tears—not quiet little sobs but good old fashioned bawling. She was trying to say something but all she could do was gasp for breath trying to choke out words. Now John even though angry was usually easy going and compassionate. A woman's tears got to him the same as most men. Maybe he had been too hard on her.

Finally, she managed to say between sobs, "I never meant to be so awful. I wanted people to like me but the harder I tried, the more I felt that they wouldn't, that they would hate me."

John was gentler now, "You didn't try hard. You didn't try at all. Nobody here hates you, and do you know why? 'Cause no one knows you that well. You're like a porcupine, all bristles, no one can get near you. You don't let anyone in."

"That's funny. That's what I've been telling Hando."

"Maybe you should take some of your own advice then."

Karen felt the need to unburden herself. "When I came here, all I could think about was Hando and how much I wanted him. He was my primary objective. I never have fit in with groups of people, so when I met the girls online and they greeted me with open arms, I thought 'great'. I can make friends here, and I did so want to make friends. But when I met them in person, I became afraid again that I'd screw it up somehow and they would reject me. It's been my pattern. I feel like I don't fit in; that I'm boring and an introvert. So I just decided that I would hurt others before they did it to me, and then that way, I'd still have some pride, some self-respect. When someone was nice to me, I would think they felt sorry for me or had an ulterior motive. At one point, Jeff told me I could still change and make it up to the girls, but I just thought I had made my bed and would have to lie in it.

With Bud, I could not believe that someone who was so much of a gentleman and so handsome would see anything worthwhile in me because

for so long, I felt ugly inside. When I found out he did really like me for just being me, I was torn. You see I had already set my goal for Hando, and I was determined that nothing would stop me. He was my every fantasy. So I used Bud because he made me feel pretty and desirable, but then he became an obstacle. So I had to trash him because I couldn't tell him the truth. But don't think it didn't hurt because it did. Bud is an exceptional man. You know the rest. I got caught up in Hando's world, and for a time, everything was wonderful. When things fell apart, I was miserable and wanted everyone around me to feel the same. I wasn't aware of how hateful I had become."

She was still sniffing. "So that's it John. That's as truthful as I know how to be. I didn't mean to be cruel and insensitive. Do you think you can explain it to the others for me?"

Seeing how she was being totally sincere, he nodded, "I'll tell them what they need to know and the rest is between us."

"Do you think they'll ever forgive me, or am I permanently on everyone's shit list?"

"Well right now, you sure aren't going to win any popularity contests, but yeah, I think they'll be able to once they know your intentions weren't malicious."

She laughed hollowly, "Well, I'd better get going."

John looked at the dark clouds gathering over the horizon. "I hate to tell you this but there's a big storm coming. Heard it on the radio earlier today, and by the look of those clouds, it's about to start soon."

"No, I can't stay here. I'll be all right. I'll probably beat it home."

"Can't let you do that."

"John, please", Karen begged.

"Karen, everyone here knows you're a lousy driver. You've admitted it yourself. And you get lost walking from here to the ice pond for fuck's sake. How are you going to be on the dark lonely highways if you can't read the signs because of the weather?"

"I only got lost that one time", she protested. "Fine", she threw her hands up in defeat. "But as soon as it's clear, I'm outta here."

The storm did hit. Torrential rain slashed down followed by golf ball size hail stones. Thunder roared and lightening lit up the sky in mighty flashes.

Karen waited it out downstairs. Throughout the afternoon, she had undergone a major catharsis. After being raked over the coals by John, she surprisingly had been able to let go of her anger, her jealousy, her hurt and most of her sadness. For the first time in weeks, she didn't feel that her life was over.

People had straggled in and out of the tavern all day but now she saw Max walk up to John and Bud. Hando was missing and he hadn't come home last night. He had missed his training session without leaving word and his room had been empty and undisturbed. It was not like Hando to just up and leave without letting someone know. As the storm continued to rage on through the late afternoon and early evening, people started to become more concerned. Max was sure that he wasn't away on one of his long jaunts. John was thinking maybe a search party should be sent out.

"There's no one here that knows better than me where he might be", Karen piped up. "I know where he goes when he wants to be alone and think. But I want to go by myself."

"No way" and "No" were her answers from John and Bud. Even Max had a doubtful look on his face or was that introspection?

"I need to talk to him one last time. I need to say goodbye."

"Haven't you and Hando already done this dance to death", Bud grunted.

John added, "Besides, Hando knows the terrain and can take of himself. You would become a liability if we had to look for you too."

"John, it's just rain and thunder right now. I believe it would be best that

Hando not suspect we are all fretting over him. It would embarrass him needlessly. I'm sure if Karen can find him in a reasonable amount of time, she could persuade him to return and she could say her piece at the same time", Max said quietly.

Karen turned eagerly to John as it seemed he had the final say in the matter. John shook his head as if he disagreed but said, "Fine. You have one hour. If you're not back by then, we head out. Don't make me regret this."

She nodded to him and mouthed 'thank you' to Max. Putting on a raincoat, she rushed out into the downpour. She did a process of elimination in her head and headed towards the places where he most likely would be and that offered some sort of shelter. The rain was almost blinding, and she was soon soaked to her skin. She did a brief dash down to the beach and on to the bluffs. She went to a few more solitary locations that they had visited. She tried to visualize in her mind as she had been able to do when they first met.

Suddenly an image came to mind. The waterfall. Hando knowing she loved waterfalls had brought her there once. Since she had only been there once, she wracked her brain trying to remember how they had got there. She remembered passing the stables and heading east or was it west to a ridge of mountains?

"Think, you idiot, think. For once in your life, manage to find some place", she scolded herself.

She went with her first instinct and headed east. The rain was chilling her to the bone. She hoped Hando had sense enough to stay out of the elements. She hurried along, once slipping in the mud. Ahead, she could see a haze of white. Then she heard the roar of the cascading cataract. Hand over hand, she climbed up the rocks. She smelt smoke and soon saw a fine wisp of it hanging in the air. She knew where he was now. There was a cave built into the rocks behind the waterfall. She could now see the light of what must be a campfire.

She approached him slowly. Here he was, her lover and her true love. He was looking into the fire with a steady gaze. It looked as though he had had a rough night. Even though she knew he had to hear her footsteps, he didn't turn.

"I didn't think I'd find you here of all places", she began.

"Why not?", he asked simply, still looking into the flames.

"Because the day you brought me here was one of the happiest of my life. I felt so precious that you would bring me to such a splendid and wondrous place. Don't you remember how you blindfolded me and carefully led me up here? I mean I could hear the water but what made it so magical was you describing everything to me, whispering in my ear. And you kept bringing me different wildflowers to smell; I still have the heather pressed in my book. I remember the sweet red berries you fed me. It was like you brought the Garden of Eden to me."

"Yeah but didn't that particular garden have a serpent in it?"

"I guess everything worthwhile has its price. Don't people always say that nothing good is going to last forever?", she answered sitting down beside him.

"What's the point then? If everything just turns to dust, why all the bother to try and make things happen?"

She thought about that for a moment. "If we didn't dream and wish on stars and hope for the best, then we'd miss those little moments that do come our way. We wouldn't reach out and grab them and hold on for dear life just in case this is one of those rare times, 'the once in a blue moon', where everything is perfect and where everything will last." She stopped and started again.

"We had our moment Hando, and for a time, it was right but there wasn't a blue moon in the cards for us. I wish with all my heart that there had been. I once heard a song long ago, and one of the verses stayed with me. I didn't feel what it meant then but now I do."

"What was it?"

"It went 'few are the choices we are given; the sands of time pass quickly by'."

"What does it mean to you?"

"In our lives, we come to forks in the road where we have to choose a path. It could be a new job or a new place to live or it could be a person we turn to. If we don't choose at that exact moment in time or make the wrong decision, the option is gone and may never come back again."

She reached for his hand, and he didn't pull away. "What I'm trying to say is that you had a choice for a life with me. You could either have embraced it, or do what you did and let the opportunity go by meaning you weren't ready, or I wasn't the right person, or maybe even a combination of the two. It hurt desperately to realize that.

But you know what, I never thought I'd say this, but that's okay because another fork in the road could be just around the bend for both of us or maybe if we're really lucky, a blue moon."

Hando felt a loss at her words but also an odd sense of relief. She was letting him off the hook, and he had been blaming himself for some time for not being able to return the trust and honesty she had so easily given to him. He looked at her and brought his hand up to wipe away an errant curl from her face. He didn't know what words to say.

Karen continued. "I'll never regret what we shared because I found out that even though love can hurt like hell, it's a wound worth suffering, and I'll gladly endure it again and again. But, a word of warning, as the poem goes, we don't know how many options will present themselves. I really hope Hando that one day you'll be able to let somebody love you."

She listened to the noises outside and stood up. "Anyways, the storm seems to be ebbing, and I have to hit the road. They're worried about you back home. Promise me you'll leave soon."

He nodded and walked over to her, "I owe you a slow dance".

She smiled brightly at him and blew him a kiss, "Save it for the next lady you bring to the Garden".