



Title: Dark Clouds

Author: Karen

Character: John Nash “A Beautiful Mind”

Rating : PG

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Part One

He silently watched her as she began her weekend walk from the tavern. He stealthily followed as she passed the stables, hiked by Max's training grounds and headed through the forest trails.

She was singing some redneck country tune and looking straight ahead. She was not easily distracted by the scenic colours or animal sounds that accompanied her along her route.

No, he assessed, this one was always preoccupied with deep thoughts of her own. He ought to know. He had kept her under surveillance for a while now.

He felt his hatred for her grow with each pace she took.

At first, he hadn't given her a second glance. She was ordinary in her looks, intelligence, and whenever she opened her mouth, her affinity for loud, blatant and sometimes foul language proved her indeed quite common.

He hadn't been attracted to her at all. She hadn't been worthy of any effort on his part.

He studied her as she sat down in her usual spot, on the huge trunk of an oak tree that had been cut down in one of their summer rain storms.

Her waistline which had so offended his aesthetic sensibilities at the beginning had been reduced to average. Her legs were slim but short. Her long hair always looked messy and ungroomed. The only thing that captured his attention about her appearance was her eyes.

They were unique in their shade of blue. She wore her heart in her eyes for everyone to see. Whatever emotion she was feeling was revealed in them.

That, in fact, was what incensed him so. This one wasn't afraid of him at all. He could tell by the bored, irked looks she sent him so often when they encountered each other. The stupid bitch thought she was so above him. Her arrogance rivalled that of her equally half-witted boyfriend.

Why was she not scared? Perhaps it was because she read so much true-crime drivel. Perhaps it was because he had never really bothered with her, except for that one occasion when she had displayed herself so cheaply and vulgarly.

Oddly enough, it was the one and only time he had been aroused by her.

Why did anyone waste their time? There were prettier woman here and certainly ones that were more genteel in their manner. She was coarse, crude and chaotic. Yet, she had managed to ensnare two men. Of course, one had quickly seen the error of his ways and dispatched her promptly on the refuse heap. The other one really didn't count. He was a freak of nature--a mad academic. No other woman would have fallen for him. He naturally took what he could get.

He heard an audible sigh, as the woman wearily laid her her head in her hands. Oh yes; Wonder Boy was having one of his spells. He had to give her credit. She buried deep inside her the load she carried of his illness.

His moment of admiration for her strength faded fast. He wanted her gone. It was time to put in motion his plan.

Karen sighed again. John was sick and being reclusive. Even though the periods of remission were longer now and the delusional ones were shorter and less acute, it took everything in her to stand steadfastly by his side.

It was so hard when John pushed her away and kept his pain to himself. She knew it wasn't deliberate. The last thing John would ever want to do was hurt her. But he so often did without realizing it.

Karen could tell right off when he was cycling through the stages of schizophrenia. He would get quieter and disappear for long lengths of time. In the middle of a conversation, he would get up and walk out on her.

Then the paranoia would creep in. He'd hide his work from her. He'd start mumbling to himself. He'd cover their windows with newspaper to keep prying eyes out. He knew who she was, but he would act like a stranger.

She would reach for him in the night, and he would rebuff her advances. Karen would whisper that she loved him, and the silence would be deafening.

"John, I do love you, but sometimes I wonder is that enough?", she asked aloud.

"Loneliness has never been alien to you, has it?"

Karen jumped at the sudden intrusion of the voice. She turned quickly to find whoever had crept up on her.

"Sid! For fuck's sake, what is wrong with you?"

He winced at her choice of words.

"You don't sneak up on people like that! What are you doing here?"

"If I could get a word in edgewise, I would satisfy your curiosity."

She looked spitting mad. It did not enhance her appearance when she was all red in the face.

"I came because of Nash."

"John?"

She was suddenly all worried and contrite.

"Has something happened? Is he in trouble?"

Sid walked up to her with his hands stretched out in front trying to placate her. "No, Karen. I didn't mean to alarm you. As far as I know, he's fine."

She whirled on him then full force.

"Then why are you here? Did you follow me?", she accused in an angry, strident tone.

"As a matter of fact I did, but it was out of genuine concern for you, that I can assure you."

She then made a very unladylike sound.

"Oh save the bullshit for someone who doesn't know you Sid. It's wasted on me." Karen glared at him. Give the man an Oscar. He actually looked like his circuit board had been wounded.

"Karen, I know we've never been friends, but I would like to try and remedy that. Seeing you care for my brother, I've come to have a new respect for you."

She gave him a credulous look. "Have you been smoking some wacky tobacco Sid?"

He looked crestfallen. "I suppose I deserve that. Nash and I have never been close. We're too different."

"Well at least you've got that one right", Karen retorted. "Thank God for 'viva la difference'. You're not close to anyone Sid but yourself. Whatever you're trying to sell, I'm not buying." She tried to push past him, but he stopped her with his arm.

She gave him an evil look.

He withdrew it. "I saw you leave the tavern. You looked very upset. I really just wanted to make you sure you were all right. I know John is sick again."

She stared him right in the eye. "You can look sincere, and you sure do sound sincere, but you're anything but. You're working an angle here. I don't have time for this. I'm not Lady or Tawny so save your sweet talk for them." Karen marched off with her head held high.

Sid smiled widely.

Karen decided to go for a quick drink to ease off some tension before heading back up to their room. Jeff served her, and when she didn't greet him with a returning smile, he looked at her closely.

"You look completely knackered. What's up?"

She took a long sip of her vodka martini. "I just had a fascinating encounter with Sid."

When Jeff looked concerned, Karen waved a hand. "No, he didn't do anything. He just acted really weird."

"Care to elaborate on that Luv. Weird doesn't really surprise me when it's Sid we're talking about."

She beckoned to him, and they went to a booth in the back.

"I went for my usual walk, and he sort of ambushed me. When I called him on it, he said he was worried about me. He knew John was sick."

Jeff smirked. "Please tell me you're not buying his cock and bull."

Karen rolled her eyes. "Of course not. He obviously wants something. I just can't figure out what."

"Maybe he's just bored and trying to cause a rift between you and John."

She angled her head. "That's just it. I could understand if he tried something like that. Instead he does this song and dance about wanting to be friends because he can see that I care so much about John and must be stressed out."

Jeff shook his head. "Sid doesn't have the time of day for any of us, especially someone who he regards as deficient." He paused and turned red. "Sorry Karen, that didn't come out like I meant it too."

She patted his hand. "I know what you meant, and you're right. Sid doesn't give a damn about John. I just wonder what he's up to."

"Well if he gives you any more grief, just let one of us know, and we'll fix his caboose."

Karen smiled.

"How is John? Is he coming through as usual?"

Her smile dipped ever so slightly. "Nothing's different. He's just in his secluded phase. I give him another two weeks to fully be out of it."

Jeff frowned. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No, he'll be fine. Just you wait; he'll be ensconced in the library, and it will take all of my lovely home-cooked meals to get him out of there", Karen laughed self-deprecatingly. Everyone knew she couldn't cook for beans.

Jeff grasped her hand. "I didn't mean John. I meant for you."

"Me?", Karen laughed again. "I'm not the one who's ill. I've no worries mate."

Jeff's eyes narrowed as if he didn't believe her.

"Really, Jeff, I'm okay, but thanks for caring."

He patted her hand and stood up. "I better get back to the bar. But you, young lady, know where to find me if you need a shoulder."

She nodded and smiled. "Aye aye Sir."

When he was gone, she let down her guard. No one saw the tears that lightly splashed down on to her cocktail napkin.

Part Two ([back to top](#))

Karen pricked up her ears outside John's suite. No sound emanated from inside. She pushed open the door. It was pitch black.

She fumbled for the light switch and then went into the bedroom. It was empty. She threw her purse down and came back out to the living room. John was sitting there in his bathrobe in the big soft arm chair in the dark.

She walked over and turned on the table lamp by his side. "Hi Hon. Why are you sitting here in the dark?" She kissed him lightly on the cheek and noted he hadn't shaved for a while. Karen rubbed her face where the bristles had left their mark.

He looked up at her but didn't answer.

"I went to the library today, and Ainslee told me that special software you ordered for your computer came in. I guess either Buggy or Laura could install it for you." Karen continued into the kitchen and plugged in the kettle. "Did you eat all ready?"

Again, no answer.

She stuck her head out. "John, did you eat today?"

Her voice was firm, and he could tell she expected an immediate response.

"I wasn't hungry", he uttered softly. He listened as she began to take dishes out of the cupboard.

"You have to eat something. Do you want some soup?"

"If I desired something to eat, I would have fixed it myself. But it's as I told you, I have no appetite."

Karen came and stood in the doorway with her arms folded. He could tell she was counting to ten again, probably plotting his early demise by the looks of her fiery eyes.

Instead of giving him a blast like he anticipated, she sat down on the couch near his chair. "What did you do all day?"

Why did she bother asking the same tired questions? It was an immense effort on his part to even get out of bed let alone formulate words. He knew he shouldn't be annoyed with her, but his patience ran thin when she was in her caretaker role. That's not what he expected of her or wanted for her. Why couldn't she understand? He needed to be her equal, her full partner in their life together.

"If you're all ready aware of the reply, why do you ask? Keep in reserve your stamina for the real interrogation."

"What do you mean by that?", Karen snapped back.

John's eyes met hers in a flash of anger. "I do believe the next multitude of queries that will ensue include: When did you get up John?, Did you go out for some air John?, Did you speak with any of your brothers John?, Did you take your medication John?, And my personal favourite, Did you dream up any more apparitions or hear any alien voices John?"

Nash got up, and before stalking out of the room, leaned over her. "Did I miss any Darling? I would hate to be remiss."

Karen closed her eyes. No, she would not be drawn into a fight. She would let it go.

She stayed in the living room on the couch. Now she was the one who was sitting up in the dark thinking gloomy thoughts. The little cuckoo clock struck twelve midnight.

She heard the creak of the bed and saw light coming out from under his door. John came out, dressed, and sat down beside her. She shuffled over to give him more space, but he stopped her movement with his arm.

He bent over her and gave her a long stirring kiss. When his tongue traced the outline of her lips, she opened them to savour him. Karen reached up to pull him closer, but he resisted.

"Karen, we have to talk."

Those words had never failed to give her heartstrings a jolt of terror. How many times

had she heard those exact words from other lovers? She tried to remain calm. John was more than just her lover. He was her whole life.

"We both know this state of affairs can't persist. We should both be jubilant right now. We're in the prime of our lives. You're young and beautiful, and you ought to be with someone who makes your heart sing with joy and laughter not frown and weep."

She tried to interrupt him to say that he was the only one who always did that for her and so much more, but he hushed her with one finger on her lips.

"Instead you're here commiserating with me and this hellish madness that I can't prevent from returning and returning. I want so much more for you. So I'm going to give you an escape clause."

"John", she blurted out. "I'm not looking for an out. I love you."

He took her hands, unfolded and raised them to his mouth and kissed her fingertips. "Sometimes love just isn't enough. If we stay together, this animosity between us is only going to grow and fester."

"John, I'm sorry for what I said tonight and all the other times. You have to forgive me", Karen pleaded.

He caressed her cheek tenderly. "My precious angel, there's nothing to forgive. I won't permit you to throw your life away nursing me constantly back to health. We have to accept that our relationship has insurmountable obstacles."

Karen's sobs had no effect. He continued on breaking her heart and twisting her soul to pieces.

"I want you to leave tomorrow. If it makes easier, lay the blame all on me because that is truly where it lies. Let the others speculate all they want. They cannot fathom all that we have endured."

He stopped to wipe her tears away. "Darling don't cry. We tried our best. I will always think highly of you."

Karen couldn't believe this was happening. Oh My God, did he really say he thought HIGHLY of her? She searched his face, his eyes for any trace of the passion, intimacy and adoration she knew he had felt for her. There was nothing there but kindness, affection and sympathy.

She started to scream. "You love me John. I know you do. Remember you said those words first to me. You told me I was your best friend and that you would never let me go. Why are you doing this to me, to us?"

John sadly shook his head. "I did love you Karen but like everything else in my life, it was unstable and unhealthy. You have to go. I know you'll find somebody else."

"I don't want anybody else. John, you're not thinking clearly."

He cupped her chin in his hand. "Goodbye my dear." He got up to leave.

"No John!" Karen threw herself at his feet. "You can't make me go. Do you hear me? I'll never leave."

He disentangled himself from her arms. "Please leave us some dignity Karen".

As he left the suite, Karen fell to the floor in a state of utter collapse. "Don't go John. Please don't go."

Karen abruptly sat up on the couch. Her face was streaked with tears. The lamp was still on as well as the kitchen light. Gingerly, she stood and walked to the bedroom.

Pushing open the door, she saw John was asleep in bed. His clothes were draped over the back of a chair.

Oh My God, it was a dream! It was just a dream.

She crawled in beside and hugged him from behind.

He let out a brusque snore.

Karen never let go of him all night.

Things were better between them the next morning. John was more responsive and attentive.

Karen finally convinced herself that the nightmare she had had was just that, a nightmare, and had no basis in reality. Still the dream unsettled her.

It had been a long time since she had felt insecure about a relationship. She didn't want to go back and re-visit her demons from the past, but she found herself doing just that. Boyfriends from days gone by flitted through her mind. The painful break-ups that had left her devastated and the attacks on her self-esteem that had been pushed to the back of her subconscious now came tumbling forward.

Karen was very aware of the dangers on focusing too much on her faults and liabilities

without looking at the asset side of her personal balance sheet.

She had never doubted John's love for her, but last night's vivid dream made her wonder about the future for them.

"I don't want to do this", she told herself sternly. "Don't go there", she warned.

The nagging thoughts warred back and forth in her brain. Is John happy, and if he isn't, is it because of me?

Jeffrey picked John up to drive him to Anthony's clinic for a check-up. Karen dashed out to Kelly's cottage.

"What's wrong?" were Kelly's first words after seeing her face.

"I'm having a real tough time with my inferiority complex today."

Kelly made some tea and they got down to business. Karen told her about the dream.

"So now you think John is going to all of a sudden dump you?", Kelly asked point blank.

"Damn you're good", Karen replied. "Please tell me I'm being stupid, pre-menstrual and reading far too much into this."

They went out to sit on the front porch chair swing.

"Has John ever once said to you that he's not happy here being with you?"

"No."

"Has he ever said that you'd be better off without him?"

"No again."

"Has he ever asked you to leave or not to come back after a weekend?"

"No but that doesn't mean he doesn't think it, right?"

Kelly stopped the motion of the swing and looked at Karen. "Other than the times he's sick, John seems perfectly besotted with you."

Karen sat up straight. "That's my point. When he's not well, he treats me differently. What if that sick half of him is trying to influence his well half? What if that half is the predominant half of him?"

Kelly gave her that 'what the fuck look'. "Okay, you're losing me here."

"Kelly, John will never be truly healed. He will always have bad days. What if he just doesn't want me around when he's sick? That's a lot of time if you add it up in weeks, months and years. What good am I to him if I can't comfort or support him because I'm irritating the shit out of him? Maybe he resents me being here."

Kelly got up and squatted down in front of her friend. "First of all, get a grip! You've been here with John now for well over a year. You've seen him go through all the stages. You know he'll snap out of this solitary phase. He always does. Yes, he may push you away, but it's part of the illness and not you. It's got nothing to do with you. It's not personal. He went through this with Alicia too."

Just the mention of John's former wife's name gave her solace. Karen always thought Alicia was just too perfect to be real and to be reminded that John even ignored her too, well that must mean the problem was on his end.

"I know he did but that didn't stop him from loving her."

"Exactly", Kelly patted Karen on her knees and stood back up. "You're making too much of this."

Karen followed her back inside. "I hate feeling this way. Men like confident, self-assured women. Cosmo says it's so it must be true."

Kelly laughed at the joke.

Karen wasn't kidding.

"Why don't you just talk to John about this when he's better? I'm sure he'll set your mind at ease."

Karen gave her a big hug. "What would I do without you?"

Kelly walked her to the door. "I don't know but your shrink would have it made for life."

On the way back to the hotel, Karen spied Hando walking hand in hand with Stef along the beach.

Ouch! Could this day get any worse?

It should be no biggie that Hando was back with an old flame, except that it was much

more than that. He loved Stef. He was ecstatically happy with her. She was happy with John, but it still stuck in her craw that she hadn't been the one to melt Hando's heart.

She waited until they were way ahead of her to continue on her path. She was slightly caught off guard again when she saw Sid approaching her.

"Okay before you even open your mouth, I'm not interested in anything you have to say. You care sweet diddly for me and John. So I'm putting you on notice. Don't make any waves for us."

Sid took out from his pocket and waved in her direction a white handkerchief. "I surrender. A truce please. Cease all hostilities."

Karen warily watched as he carefully re-folded and pocketed the hankie.

"Karen take a pill and get over yourself. I'm just taking a walk."

"Oh." She felt deflated and then embarrassed that she overreacted. "Sorry, I've been jumping to conclusions a lot lately."

Sid smiled. "No one's perfect so they tell me endlessly it seems." He preened and brushed a non-existent stray hair back into place.

It actually made her snigger. Yes, Sid would always be a megalomaniac but that didn't mean he always had to have ulterior motives when making civil conversation.

"Have a good one Sid", she passed on before striding away.

"You too Karen", he bowed his head slightly and carried on with his walk.

It was too bad that Karen missed the malevolent grin that spread all over his face.

Part Three [*\(back to top\)*](#)

Saturday rolled around, and Karen hadn't planned on a night out, but John had pushed for it. Actually, he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"The ambiance around this little apartment is dismal at best. I'm afraid it's contagious. So, for your own welfare, I must insist that you go out and have a good time with your friends."

She had tried her best to get him to come along. When he refused, she said that she'd rather stay with him.

"Darling don't be contrary. I'm quite capable of entertaining, nourishing and ministering to myself." He then had kissed her, firmly turned her towards the door and sent her on the way with a fatherly swat on the rear.

So, Karen again was at the tavern. Glancing around as she entered, she saw Beej, Rachel, Jack Aubrey, Kaz and Terry, Jennifer and Andy and Trisha and Daniel. There were a lot of people here tonight that she didn't know.

Jeffrey waved to her from a corner booth, and she joined him and Wendy.

"John wouldn't come?", Wendy asked sympathetically.

"Nope but he's on the way back up. I can tell", she answered briefly.

Talk had then turned to Jeffrey's upcoming golf tournament. Nearly all of the Point residents had signed up including Karen.

After a few drinks, they excused themselves. Jeffrey had wanted to steer her towards another table so she wouldn't be alone when they left. Everyone, however, seemed to be in twosomes, and Karen hated being a third wheel. After saying goodbye, she drifted to the bar.

Rick was on duty and after exchanging smiles and small talk, he left her in peace. Gazing out into the horde of people and seeing many of them laughing and dancing, she began to feel sorry for herself. John had banished her here, and now she was bored and lonely.

Since she was sitting at the bar, a few guys thought she was available. She pretended not to see their long, languid stares. A tall skinny youth with acne scars on his face stood in front of her.

He leered and then rasped out, "Is it true what they say about redheads?"

Karen cast a haughty look at her intruder and said in an equally throaty whisper, "Who is they and why should I be interested?"

He pressed his groin up against her legs which were wrapped around the bar stool. "I've heard that reds are really hot and are up to just about anything. They're very adventurous," he slurred. "They can do things to a man's body that rock his world. Youse are insatiable...and Honey, I just want you to know that whatever you dish out, I can send it right back at ya." He pointed his index fingers at her throat.

Karen grinned and ogled the young man boldly. "I bet it took you years to fine-tune that line."

He gave her a crooked sheepish smile and weaved towards her. "Then are you up for it?"

She tilted her head as if she was seriously considering his offer. "Tempting as you make it sound, I think I'll pass. It's true that us 'reds' are insatiable, but we also like to think of ourselves as individuals. That means, for me", Karen paused and pointed her two thumbs at her chest, "it's all about me. Honey", she leaned in close to him, "I don't think you have a frigging clue as how to please and satisfy a woman past legal age. So why don't you try that smarmy smile and sophomoric tripe on that sweet little thing over there." Karen gestured to a young teen. "Or did you crash and burn with her too Cowboy."

He gave her a nasty look and snaked back into the crowd.

She cursed John for doing this to her. "Damn you Nash. I'm not having fun yet."

She slid off the stool and was pushing her way towards the door when she was halted by a booming voice.

"What's amiss Karen? You look sorely distressed."

Captain Jack beckoned her over to his table.

Karen felt like she would be disobeying a direct order if she demurred. Jack had such a presence of quiet authority. She meekly did as she was told which was quite unlike her.

"Where did Beej and Rachel go?", she enquired taking a seat.

"The ladies went to their quarters. They have an early morning departure."

Karen smiled and inwardly chuckled. You can take the man out of the sea, but you can't take the sea out of the man.

"How is John faring?"

She would be a rich woman indeed if she collected a dollar for every time that question was asked.

"He's doing better. He's more alert and receptive", she simply said.

Jack didn't all together understand John's disease. In England, in his time, Nash would be a mere lunatic and either stuck in an asylum for life, or maybe he would have been pressed into service with the other undesirables.

Karen changed the subject, and they conversed on how he was adapting to Point life. It had taken Jack quite a long time to adjust. Unlike his other brothers, it appeared that Jack had arrived with no advance visions of this place or who everyone was. He had been greatly disoriented when he couldn't find any trace of his crew. He couldn't even sail the Surprise away to look for them with no hands on board.

She was sensitive to the vast emptiness he continued to feel over the loss of Stephen Maturin, his one true confidant and best friend. Even though Jack had a sanguine and optimistic nature and tried to hide when he was troubled, Karen could still tell by the sorrow in his eyes when his heart was heavy. They could all tell when he played his beloved violin, and he would often angle his head as if listening to the melodic accompaniment of a solitary cello.

Listening to him speak and laugh, she was reminded again of what an honourable and brave man he was. She felt a strange sensation when he accidentally touched her hand while reaching for his glass of wine.

Yes, the Captain was very handsome and virile, and Karen was only too well aware of her attraction to him. She felt threatened by it so she bid him goodnight.

As he rose and kissed her hand ever so gallantly, she felt a warm flush rise to her face. She practically ran out of the tavern.

Chiding herself for being silly, she headed out for the meadow. She made sure not to once look back in the direction of the frigate.

"I need to be close to you John." Saying the words out loud made her feel better. It would be so easy to go back to his room, but she couldn't bear the thought that he might reject her.

She went to the one place where she could meld with him. The gazebo gleamed brightly in the moonlight. The memory of their lovemaking here when he had told her he loved her for the first time brought tears to her eyes.

Curling up on the bench inside, she cherished the moment once more.

Sudden intense rapping on his door pierced Terry's sleep. His military training made him at once wide-awake and on his feet in seconds. He checked to see that the noise hadn't disturbed Kaz before closing their bedroom door.

Throwing on a robe, he quickly walked through the living room to answer the persistent knock. Thrusting the door open, he saw his neighbour Nash standing there greatly agitated.

"John, what's the matter mate?"

Nash was still in his pyjamas. "Karen didn't come home last night."

Terry invited him in and went back to hurriedly put on a pair of pants and shirt. He knew John was in no condition to organize a search if one was necessary.

"Have you checked around to see if she stayed over with anyone...Kelly maybe?"

"I spoke with Cort. They went to bed early last night and haven't heard from her."

Terry asked outright, "Did you two have a tiff? Maybe she went somewhere to cool off."

John was shaking his head. "No, she headed to the tavern around eight o'clock. That's the last I've heard from her."

"Well let's head down there and check with Andy. He's on this morning. Someone probably saw her leave." At the distraught look on his brother's face, Terry clapped him on the shoulder. "John, I'm sure there's a good explanation so keep your shirt on. We'll find her."

They talked to Andy who recalled seeing Karen come in last night. "Last I saw, she was at the bar. Do you want me to call around and see if anyone else remembers anything?"

Terry nodded.

John was getting more and more rattled.

"Okay John, I'm going to do a drive around. You stay here in case she comes back."

Nash agreed and Terry hopped into one of Colin's old trucks. He was gone for about an hour and found no trace of her.

He kept in touch with Andy by cell. "You said Jack was the last one to see her?"

"He saw her leave. It was about 11:30."

"Did she say where she was headed?"

"He just assumed she was going home."

"Okay mate, I'm going to head over to the waterfall. It's the one place I haven't looked."

There was a click at the other end of the line.

"Andy, did you heard me?" There was a pause like he'd been put on hold and another click.

Then Andy came back on. "Uh Terry, don't bother. She's here. But you might want to foot it back."

"Why, is she hurt?"

"No but Sid's the one who brought her in."

"I'll be there in two tics."

Part Four [*\(back to top\)*](#)

Karen was dead on her feet. "How many times do I have to say this? I fell asleep at the gazebo. I'm sorry I worried you. Can I go to bed now?"

She had barely managed to keep the men from jumping all over Sid. He hadn't helped matters by snidely reminding John that if he was any kind of man at all, he would have stayed up until Karen came in to make sure she arrived safely.

Nash had clenched his fists but said nothing. He wanted to take her to their room, but Terry held them back.

"How did Sid just happen to come across you? The gazebo's rather a long way to walk which doesn't happen to be his favourite pastime."

When Sid tried to interrupt, Terry shoved him with one arm against a wall. "Let the lady speak for herself."

Karen groaned. "Why are you acting like a pit bull with this Terry? All Sid did was act like a gentleman and escort me home. There's no story here."

Terry gave her a probing look.

Sid straightened his shirt collar, gave Terry and John wilting looks and climbed the stairs to his room.

"John take her upstairs. Make sure she has a warm bath. It was pretty cold last night."

Nash nodded and led her away.

Terry followed them with his eyes.

"You think something happened out there?", Andy asked.

"I'm sure of it. Karen is way too smart to get suckered in by Sid, and Sid's way too selfish to do a good deed."

Karen had a quick shower to pacify John. She pretended to be asleep while he hovered around her. Finally he left her alone.

She thought back to last night. She remembered lying her head down on the bench. She had just closed her eyes when she heard footsteps. The smell of his cologne tuned her in to who her visitor was.

"What do you want?", she had questioned, bitter that her solitude had been disturbed.

"Would you believe I was out on another walk?"

"Not a chance."

"In that case, I'll be frank. Do you mind?", Sid gestured to the bench.

She sat up and scrunched over.

He sat down wiping the seat first and being careful not to crease his pants.

"You try anything Sid and so help me, I'll have Bud pulverize you, and what they did to you after Laura will seem like a slap on the wrist."

Sid held up his hands. "Please, threats are so old. Can't anyone be more novel? Don't worry Karen, your virtue is quite safe. I just want to talk to you."

"Why would I want to listen?"

He contemplated her. "Because you love Nash and want what's best for him."

Karen flipped him a suspicious scowl. "Hello? Sid, is the word gullible stamped on my forehead? Am I supposed to just believe on blind faith that you've suddenly changed your stripes overnight?"

Sid looked down at his feet. "You mentioned Lady and Tawny the other day. Meeting both of them changed my life. They accepted me for the man that I was. Their trust and conviction finally made me realize that I'm responsible for my own actions and not just some mindless android who was programmed to kill and wreak mayhem. But see no one here chooses to give me the benefit of the doubt. I'm always pre-judged and pre-sentenced."

Karen faced him. "Is there a point here somewhere or am I just gonna die of old age waiting for it?"

"I know how John feels. Everyone's always waiting for the shoe to drop, aren't they Karen? They treat him with kid gloves. They're always waiting for him to mess up and go off his rocker. No matter what he says or does, he'll never be the one everyone turns to for leadership, for advice or for a friendly ear, will they?"

She looked away, eerily amazed by his insight.

"As hard as it may seem, I can empathize with John. No one would come to me either."

Her words were barely above a whisper but he caught them. "It's not fair. John is not just a great man but a man of greatness. I wish they could see what I see in him."

Sid studied her face...her eyes. "Perhaps they could if you weren't in his way."

Karen reeled swiftly on him ready to cut him down but he carried on. "Don't take that the wrong way. I simply meant that if you had a different type of temperament, it might make things easier for John."

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes showed just how anxious his words made her.

"Permit me to be candid. You're a very high-maintenance woman. Not that there's anything wrong with that. It just tends to distract people from taking you seriously and by the same token John as well."

She now looked pensive and distrustful.

"You tend to dramatize situations. I've done that myself so I can understand why. You like attention because it's something you never attained when you were younger."

She looked at him directly. "How....?"

"How do I know that?", Sid finished for her. "You're not that hard to read once someone has taken the time and care to do so."

He waited patiently for his words to sink in.

"Are you saying that no one can respect John because they can't get past me as his girlfriend?"

He had to be careful here. "No, that's not quite what I intended you to think. I just meant that you as a person sometimes overwhelm people. You have such a strong personality that you dominate John which I'm sure is not your aim. It's just that people will always notice you first Karen. They'll see you leading John by the hand and just take it in stride that he needs to always be guided and minded."

Karen stood up and leaned on the lattice work. "Like I'm his keeper", she mouthed.

Sid dipped his head in assent.

She swivelled to face him. "Why are you telling me all this?"

He stood. "I don't mean to upset you. You've done wonders with John. I'm sure he adores you. But that's the rub now, isn't it? It's very easy to become enthralled by someone like you when you're an introvert like Nash is. You outshine him and he can just sit back and stay the way he is knowing you're there to act as a shield to keep people from looking at the man inside."

"I don't want to hear anymore." Karen covered her ears, confused by all of his words.

Sid stopped at once. "I really didn't say this to distress you. Just as I have to earn people's respect so does John. That's all I meant."

He had left her then.

She stayed awake all night sensing truth and wisdom in what she had been told. She never felt the cold wind or the dampness of the dawn. When she finally felt the stiffness seep into her body, she became conscious that it was morning.

Sid was standing by her with his hand outstretched. "Let me lead the way back for you Karen."

She had taken it.

Part Five [*\(back to top\)*](#)

John, at first, was bothered that Karen stayed in bed all day. She simply didn't do that. She was always so bouncy and full of energy.

"I think I'm catching a cold. I guess I am a little run down. I don't want you to get it too."

He obliged her request that he not ask her any more about last night.

He tried to be solicitous, but it was clear that she didn't want him around.

"I just need to sleep John."

He left her alone. How could he do anything but? He, of all people, knew there were times when one had to be by oneself. He thought no more of it.

Each time he came in to check on her, she had the covers wrapped around her like a cocoon and her eyes were closed. It was their last day together before she had to go back to work. When she finally woke up and had a cup of tea and a piece of toast, he asked her to stay and phone in sick.

"Honey, it's just a cold. If everyone played hooky when they had one, the world would be in a pretty sad state of affairs."

He was disappointed. It was a long week between weekends, and she didn't always come out on every one.

"I miss you when you go. I wish you would reconsider finding an occupation in town."

Karen sighed. "I miss you too, but I'm happy with my job. Besides I believe firmly that couples need their own personal space with their own friends and interests."

John looked glumly at her. "Yes, you've voiced that opinion only several hundred times. I can quote the lecture verbatim."

She smiled and pinched him lightly on the arm. "Don't be such a grump."

He pulled her into his arms. "I don't care if you're transmitting an infectious disease. I want you." He gave her a long, slow appreciative stare.

The gentle touch of his lips turned to a heated, crushing demand.

She quivered with expectation as his teeth grazed her neck.

As he helped raise her nightgown over her head, he was consuming her with his eyes.

She traced his ear with her fingertips and then leaned up to nibble on his lobe.

He dragged her back against him, digging his hips into hers.

Karen could feel the heat of him and the proof of his arousal against her thigh. She tugged on his hair forcing his head up so she could greedily recapture his mouth. It was sweet just to be held and pure bliss to be kissed as it had been weeks since they had made love.

He tasted her everywhere, behind her ears, inside her elbows, the hollow of her breasts, seeking almost wildly for each sensitive spot.

John loved it when her smile became sultry and she arched her back in response. She was so incredibly sexy.

Karen inched her hand down his body and fondled him. He leaned into her touch and

groaned.

She was writhing beneath him and begging him to enter before he finally began to push himself into her.

The mere feel of her wetness and warmth led him home. He sank slowly into her. Stroking the tresses of her tangled hair, he murmured, "I love you Karen Summers. Don't ever forget that."

They both took their time. John slowly brought her to climax loving her with his hands and mouth.

He fell asleep in her arms, and to Karen, everything was perfect.

Back at home, she relived his every touch and felt once more secure of their happiness. She shouldn't doubt herself so much or John. It was a bad habit that she had to break.

She went to work humming on the train in and came home eagerly awaiting the next time they could fall together.

Karen booted up her computer and scanned for any messages from John. There weren't any which didn't faze her. They didn't correspond daily especially when he was sick or involved in his research.

She looked for any new juicy stories from the girls to read. Sadly, there were none of these either.

A message flashed across her screen as she was surfing Ebay. She had mail. Flipping back to her inbox, she didn't recognize the addy but it was from Crowe's Point. She clicked to open it and then immediately regretted it seeing it was from Sid. She almost deleted it outright, but she couldn't resist seeing what he had to say.

"Karen, no doubt, you are wondering why I'm emailing you. I was disturbed by how we left things at the gazebo. I don't want you to have the impression that I think you're unsuitable for Nash. Perhaps I was more plainspoken than wise.

Though I can empathize with John about being considered a millstone around my brothers' necks, that doesn't mean I think you do him a disservice by overshadowing and trying to exercise control of the perception he leaves with the others."

Karen stopped reading at this point. What the heck was he saying? She never tried to influence what everyone thought about John...well at least not all the time. She did attempt to present him in the best light to people as they could not possibly know him as

well as she did. Was that wrong?

Remembering Sid saying she was dominant over John worried her. She didn't like the connotation of that word. To her, it meant overbearing and high-handed. Sure, she gave John a little shove from time to time, but that was because he needed to be motivated in getting through every day activities.

It had been her who had got him to pull his weight by doing household and ground chores like everyone else did. John was his own man, and she didn't like the vibe she was getting that she was the mastermind behind his actions, his puppeteer. If Sid thought this, did the rest of them think that as well? No wonder people didn't take him seriously consistently.

Karen rubbed her temples as she continued to read his message.

"John is looking well, and I believe he is over the final hurdle with his illness. I'm sure his long talks with Ainslee have contributed immensely to his fast recovery. Just the other day I found the two of them in the library. Their heads were so close together, that if I didn't know she was a psychiatrist, I would think they were plotting something. They looked as thick as thieves."

She stopped again. John hadn't mentioned being counselled by Ainslee. It would make sense though. Ainslee had an office in the library as she was their resident archiver. John liked Ainslee. He had told Karen that she was easy to talk to and very intelligent.

She went on reading.

"Ainslee reminds me so much of you Karen that it's no wonder that John would be engaged by her. You're both of similar height and fair skinned, though, of course, she's somewhat younger I believe. No matter, John is fortunate to have two outstanding women to steer him along the proper path.

Well I must sign off now, as I hear White bellowing my name. Honestly, the man is such a primordial barbarian. Yours, Sid"

Karen tapped her fingers nervously on her desk. She tried to get a clear picture of Ainslee in her mind. She was indeed her height, and she had curly brown hair with red highlights. What colour were her eyes? Green? She was fair but she had lots of freckles.

One thing she didn't have to recollect; Ainslee was curvy. Karen stuck out her own chest and peered down at it. Nope, she couldn't compete in that area. When she had lost her weight, she had also lost her boobs.

She then slapped her forehead. What was she doing? She was letting her imagination run wild. Ainslee was engaged to Bud, and she was also an acquaintance of hers. She had no reason to feel threatened by her.

"You're being a dickhead", she lambasted herself.

She turned off the computer and went to bed.

The rest of the week passed quickly for Karen as she had a presentation to prepare for one of her senior groups on alcohol and drug addiction. She had taken a course in substance misuse and abuse and could now act as an addiction therapist.

Doing her research, she was astonished at the number of older persons who were hooked on prescription drugs such as sleeping pills and pain medication. The statistics were truly frightening.

Friday couldn't come soon enough, as she wearily packed up her brochures and hand-outs. She had already had her bag in the car, and by ten after five, she was on the road to John.

Karen drove straight through not stopping for food. She was in the mood for a romantic candle-lit dinner with lots of red wine. In fact, if she had her way, she and John would see neither hide nor hair of anyone else this weekend.

She parked haphazardly in the lot and jumped out of her car. Waving to Roberta who was at the front desk, she checked in and then hurried over to John's room. The apartment was dark and apparently empty as she briefly looked in each room.

He probably was still at the library. She would just hotfoot it over there and drag him back. Walking briskly, she smiled as she saw the lights blazing through the windows. Yes, John had forgotten to check the clock again. He was so single minded when working.

She threw the door open in her hurry and yelped as it slammed loudly back against the brick wall. Running up the stairs to his office, she was about to bust open the closed door when for no reason, she peered through the tiny window.

Karen was halted in her tracks by the sight that greeted her. John was sitting at his desk, and Ainslee was leaning over his shoulder pointing to something in a book in front of them. John was smiling, and then he turned to her and said something which made her burst out laughing.

Ainslee wore a blouse that otherwise wouldn't have been too revealing if she hadn't been almost chest first on the desk with her deep cleavage. Her derriere was also at a very prominent exposed angle in a black tailored skirt.

Karen gulped in a bit too much air and started coughing.

John looked up at the sound and grinned as he caught a glimpse of her. He sped to the door and opened it. "Are you a sight for sore eyes. I'm so glad you're finally here."

He lightly brushed her lips and embraced her in a big, warm hug.

Over the back of his shoulder, Karen watched while Ainslee straightened and adjusted her clothes. Was it her imagination or did she seem flustered?

John released her.

Ainslee swept the book off his desk and greeted Karen with a big smile. "Karen, it's great to see you. I missed you last week. Bud and I were so busy with details of the wedding that we hibernated and neglected everyone I'm afraid."

Karen stared into her eyes steadfastly with a blank expression just a minute too long. She didn't reply.

Ainslee at last uncomfortable looked away. "I'm sure you and John have catching up to do, so I'll get out of your hair." She was almost to the door when she turned and addressed John. "We'll take up where we left off on Monday. Have a great weekend you two."

After Ainslee had left, John hustled around the office cleaning up. "I'll be with you in just a minute Darling."

Nonchalantly walking over to his desk, Karen was curious to see what was so fascinating that kept two people working overtime on a Friday evening when they both had significant others.

"What were you and Ainslee working on?", she asked casually.

"What?" John's head popped up from locking his desk drawers. "Oh that. She was just showing me a paper in the American Journal of Mathematics."

Karen tugged at her ear and perched on the corner of the desk. "A paper? What was it on?"

He gave her a quizzical look. "Since when have you developed an appeal for scholarly pursuits?"

She threw him a hurt look. "John, I've always taken interest in your studies. Just because I don't understand them doesn't mean I cannot be engrossed with what you do."

He shook his head as if to say, 'Are you feeling well?'. He put some papers in his briefcase, snapped it shut and took her arm. "I can think of a myriad of things better to be

engrossed about, so why don't we make haste and get home so I can show you what's peaking my attention right now."

On the stairs, she drew back. "John, I really would like to know. What paper was she showing you?"

Nash who desperately wanted to forget everything but making love to his beautiful delicious lady had to think twice. "The article? It was on the analyticity of solutions of implicit function problems with analytic data."

At the empty gaze he got back, he laughed. "Sorry you asked?" He took her arm again but she still delayed.

"How would Ainslee know anything about that? Is she also a budding mathematician as well as a shrink?" Her tone was bordering on acrid.

John could never safely predict how Karen would react to anything. But obviously, she was digging her heels in on this. He would never get her home at this rate until she was satisfied.

"She was doing some investigation for me on the topic. I was explaining some of the concepts, and she did admit that it was a bit too cerebral for her."

"Oh but she certainly seemed impressed and eager to learn more about it. She even made that comment about Monday."

John gave her a long searching look. "Karen is there something on your mind?"

She continued down the stairs. "No, I just wondered how Ainslee who's so busy with her writing could take the time to have you tutor her."

"It's hardly that."

She pushed open the outer door and stepped out into the night.

He turned her to face him and lifted her chin to kiss her deeply. "I've been dying to do that since you walked in."

Karen smiled absent-mindedly. "Let's go home then."

It had been a disaster. While John avidly undressed her and began raining kisses on her torso, she couldn't get the image of John and Ainslee out of her head.

John was too lost in his efforts to notice how distracted she was. Yes, he had been able to excite her as always. But she had not been able to orgasm. In the end, she faked it for the first time with him and hoped it would be her last.

He hadn't been aware.

Part Six ([back to top](#))

Sid was quite cocksure his tactics were being successful. Karen was a mass of insecurities, which made her wide open to attack and defenceless.

He checked off the completed bullets on his list:

1. Make her see she's doing more harm than good for John.
2. Hint of a mutual enchantment between Nash and Ainslee.

Sid giggled with glee. There were only a few items left to achieve, and then Karen Summers would be history.

Having lunch with Tina, Kath, Buggy and Lisa, Karen tried to put the complications quickly arising in her life aside. Joking with the girls and kicking back was definitely what the doctor ordered. She caught up on all the rumours, and it was only when the chatter turned to Bud and Ainslee's antics with their wedding planner did her good mood start to fade. She tuned out and picked at the rest of her western sandwich.

No matter how many times she told herself she was being unreasonable, foolish and yes green-eyed with jealousy, it didn't change the facts.

John and Ainslee worked closely together in the same building. Ainslee was a lovely looking younger woman, with YOUNGER being the operative word. Karen had now reached a milestone birthday and would just as soon forget its arrival.

No doubt, Ainslee was also less dramatic, impatient, impulsive and impertinent than Karen was. Ainslee was better educated and could carry clever conversation without frequently mispronouncing words or smattering it with off-colour slang.

John came from an upper-class background. It was likely that Ainslee did too. She didn't know much about her.

Karen's musings stopped the instant she saw Sid enter the restaurant. She cringed. He was a constant reminder of her failings. It was a case of wanting to shoot the messenger. He came towards their table directly.

"Ladies, I do hope you're enjoying your splendid repast."

Snickers and scowls were his welcome.

"We were Sid until you barged in uninvited as usual", Buggy scoffed.

"Yeah Sid, don't you have to press your suits, polish your shoes, gel your hair or something equally earth-shattering?", Lisa added.

Sid echoed the others' disparaging laughs. "Charming as always. I just came over to tell Tina that her husband is looking for her."

Tina jumped up. "He and the boyz must be back from town. They were going to get all the supplies and food for Jeffrey's golf tournament. C'mon girls, let's give them a hand."

The others got up while Karen stayed seated.

"Karen, you coming?", Kath asked grabbing up her purse.

"You go ahead. I'll catch up with you."

As the women disappeared out the front, Sid sat down across from her.

"I'm not in the mood for intense dialogue Sid. So why don't you take your angst and your good intentions, and tell it to Oprah."

Sid frowned. "I only wanted to say that you're looking exceptionally fetching today. Have you done something with your hair?"

Karen couldn't believe how oily and glib he still managed to be. "Yeah Sid, I combed it."

He actually reddened at her retort. "Maybe it's your clothes then. Is that a new outfit?"

She didn't bother to waste her breath.

"Well it makes you incredibly rubenesque. It's nice to see some ladies fill out their apparel. That whole Twiggy scene from the sixties never depicted women as they should be--plump and buxom. I can see that you don't want to communicate, but please accept my compliments. You look bewitching."

He departed, and Karen started to panic.

She rummaged furiously through John's bathroom cupboards.

"Oh man! I can't believe he doesn't have one. I'll just have to go and get mine."

Karen unlocked her old room, the one she had first stayed in while she was with Hando. She hadn't been back in here since her affair with him had ended.

She didn't look twice at all the paintings of waterfalls as she dashed to her mauve sponge-painted washroom. She reached for the scale and moved it to the best spot for an accurate reading. Crossing her fingers, she stepped on it and then hopped off to kick off her shoes.

Remounting, she gazed down, and her mouth fell open. It read 120 pounds. Last time, she had weighed herself, she had only been 109. She had gained eleven pounds!

Even before Sid's words had sent her reeling, she knew that her sweater suit was tighter-fitting than usual. She had been in denial.

Karen quickly disrobed and examined closely her naked body in the full-length mirror on the door. Her waistline had thickened, and her stomach was protruding. She never in her life had had a flat washboard belly, but in profile now, she looked pregnant.

How had this happened? She used to be so careful about what she ate. Sure at one point, she had been losing too much too fast yet she had levelled out. She had to lose these excess pounds. She stared at the mirror. There was no sign of a double-chin coming back to haunt her.

"Okay", she tried to calm herself down. "Eleven pounds is not a big deal. You caught it early."

She would just watch what she ate, and she would go to the gym every night instead of only three times a week.

Coming back to John's room, she hid the scale on the upper shelf of their closet. She re-dressed herself in a loose-fitting top and a pair of shorts with an elastic waist. Crumpling her suit into a ball, Karen tossed it in a garbage bag.

Bud tiptoed up behind Ainslee and covered her eyes.

She giggled and sang out, "How many guesses do I get?"

He tried to disguise his voice. "Three", he rumbled deeply.

"Tom Cruise?"

He snorted in disgust.

"Okay, Brad Pitt all rippling with muscles as Achilles?"

He smacked her bottom this time.

She giggled again. "Well, I guess I'll have to settle for my handsome, studly fiance."

He twirled her around. "I'll make you forget all those fucking wimps and pretty boys, Doll."

Their lips locked together.

Bud had caught up to her as she was headed to their room. He opened the door for her and stood back while she entered.

"So anything new with the wedding, or should I even ask?"

Ainslee went to the kitchen and poured him a scotch and fixed herself a wine spritzer. "No, thankfully, I haven't heard from Franck all day. So we can just relax and enjoy the reprieve from pandemonium."

"I like the sound of that", he whispered as he nibbled on the nape of her neck.

They sat down on the couch, and Bud slowly took off her shoes and began to massage her feet.

She leaned back and moaned with pleasure. "That feels wonderful. I'll have to get you to do a full body rub tonight. I've got this wicked kink in my neck."

"You work too hard. It's the weekend Babe. Give your eyes a rest from the computer."

Ainslee had closed her eyes. Her thoughts drifted to her book and also the research she was helping John Nash with. Thinking about John made her recall Karen and the weird look she had given her yesterday.

"What's the matter?" Bud's question interrupted her reflections. Man, he didn't miss a trick.

"Nothing really. I was just thinking about a paper I found for John to help him write his hypothesis."

He grimaced. "I'm rubbing your feet, and you're thinking of Nash and his hotshot theories which nobody but him can figure out? What's wrong with this picture?"

She smiled. "Actually, it was his girlfriend that came to mind."

Bud had moved up to her calves. "Karen? What's up with her?"

Ainslee looked slightly embarrassed. "Maybe I'm reading too much into this but yesterday when she came to see John, she gave me a real funny look."

He took a sip of his drink. "Could be she was having a bad day."

"No, I don't think that was it. John was giving her a hug, and she just stared at me with a complete deadpan expression for the longest time. When I said hello to her, she didn't even answer."

He shrugged. "Karen's a really moody bird. She probably didn't even realize she was doing it. Half the time, she's in another world."

She reached down and clutched his hands to pull him up. "I suppose you're right. Now how about that body rub Mister?"

Bud grinned and swept her up in his arms.

John gave up trying to initiate conversation with Karen. She kept giving one word replies.

"Do you want to go out tonight?", he asked.

She raised her shoulders.

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No, no John. I'm just not up to the usual crowd. I'm sorry. I'm not being very sociable.

He went to the kitchen and brought back a blueberry muffin and a glass of orange juice. "Here, it's the only comfort food we have on hand."

She took the glass and ignored the muffin. "You have it. I'm still full from supper."

"What supper? You had carrot sticks and melba toast which barely constitutes as a snack."

"It was all I fancied." She rubbed her temples again, a gesture becoming all too familiar.

"Do you have another migraine?"

She didn't but nodded.

He turned out the lamp shining above her. "Why don't you rest your eyes?" Putting a cushion underneath her head, he kissed her lightly. "I won't trouble you. I'll be in the den if you need me."

She smiled weakly, and as soon as he left she continued fretting about the state of their relationship.

Another week passed, and Karen at home had only lost three pounds. She didn't understand it. She was barely subsisting on anything. What's more, she was constipated.

Opening the medicine cabinet, she found some Ex-Lax and swallowed two tablets without even reading the label.

It didn't make her any happier to discover the new addition of Chatelaine on her coffee table which heralded in bold type on the cover all the new methods to cope with menopause. Okay, she wasn't quite as old as that, but just the menace of it looming in her near future depressed her.

That's probably why she wasn't losing the weight as quickly as she expected. The older you got, the harder it was to take off.

She suddenly recalled RC's song "High Horse Honey". She had laughed when she first heard the lyrics to it, especially "'Cause the good lord above who parted the waters will soon start spreading your ass all over the couch". Now it wasn't quite so amusing.

The laxative bottle loomed in front of her. They helped you lose water and stopped bloating. She shook out two more pills and dry swallowed them.

Part Seven

Karen had been working major overtime at her job, and her Supervisor insisted that she take some time off. She emailed John who was in very high spirits at the good news. She, herself, wasn't sure how she felt. Yes, she wanted to be with him, but at the same time she was hesitant to be around a swarm of people.

She was withdrawing which she knew was unhealthy. How many times had she warned John about the perils of retreating into oneself? Karen tried to break out of the funk she was in, but her self-worth had taken another nose dive. She mustn't let John see it. He had enough on his plate without a clingy girlfriend. She would be as strong as possible.

Good intentions notwithstanding, her first day of holidays rolled round and she was

feeling ill. Very bad cramps had started. The laxatives she was beginning to rely on to help her lose weight were doing their thing. Her system was finding it hard to adjust. The name of the game though was losing weight, so she could put up with a little discomfort.

At the Point, she was reluctant to immediately meet up with John. She decided to pay a visit to Kelly who was out putting around in her garden. Karen was straight forth put to work.

"How can I tell again if it's a weed?", she enquired.

Kelly just laughed at her. "You will never have a green thumb. Here, stop before you hurt yourself. Why don't you water the flowers? Then you can help me cut some of this rhubarb. It will make a great pie."

She did as she was told, conscious all the while of sharp pains in her stomach. When they were both sitting cross-legged snipping the rhubarb, Kelly asked, "So was John over the moon to have you to himself for two glorious weeks?"

"He wrote that he was."

Kelly stopped her cutting. "Well what did he say today? Have you got big plans made?"

Karen kept her eyes on her work. "I haven't seen John yet."

"Why not? Is he busy at the library?"

It took a long time for her to answer. "I don't know what he's doing. I just wanted to have a quiet spell first before I joined him. He's not expecting me until later anyways."

Kelly searched her friend's face. Karen seemed drained, and she kept trying to suppress little belches.

"Are you okay? You don't look so hot."

"Pardon me", Karen excused herself again as another burp escaped her. "I've got real bad gas. I know too much information. I think it's something I ate. It's not digesting well."

"Are you avoiding John?"

At the sudden switch in topic, Karen put her knife down and gave Kelly a dirty look. "Where did that come from? Just because I'm not on his doorstep with my little tail wagging does not mean we're about to stage Armageddon. I just need some peace and no questions asked." Her voice had risen.

Kelly left it alone. If Karen didn't want to talk about it, she wouldn't pressure her.

They spoke about Cort until Karen abruptly leapt up and raced for the cottage.

She must really be sick Kelly surmised. It was about fifteen minutes before she came out again.

"I feel much better now. Sorry I snapped at you before. I don't know what gets into me sometimes."

Kelly shrugged off the apology.

"I think I'll head back now and surprise my wonderful gentleman. I might see you and Cort later tonight."

Kelly knew there was a problem somewhere but hoped to heaven it wouldn't affect the love John and Karen shared.

Karen took her time strolling back. It was a beautiful sunny day, and Mother Nature always had a way of soothing her soul. As she approached the hotel, she saw Terry painting the fence that surrounded the rose bushes.

"My, my, it does seem that every where I look, people are being so industrious." She greeted him with a hug.

"That's just because you're a lazy little bugger", he teased her back.

"Damn straight on a day like this."

"I was just about to take a breather, care to join me or are you off with John?"

She accepted his invitation, and they walked off to recline under Max's poplar tree.

After several minutes of muteness, he asked, "Are you away with the pixies?"

Karen stupidly regarded him.

"Daydreaming?", he clarified.

She chuckled. "No, my brain is just going nowhere in neutral. I can't get it to kick into high gear."

Terry declared, "That's what vacations are for. Don't think. Just go with the flow." He paused. "So why aren't you and Johnny boy having some afternoon delight?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

She poked him in the leg with a stick. "There are other things in life that are just as enjoyable."

As Terry's brow arched once more in mock disbelief, she giggled again and then turned serious. "I just have a lot on my mind right now. I've got projects piling up at the Centre, and it's a really bad time for me to be away." She hoped he would buy the lie.

He stuck a piece of straw in his mouth. "You'll only add fuel to the fire if you don't allow yourself some down time. You don't want to burn out like you did at your last job."

"John never seems to." Oops that had slipped out, she thought, wishing she could take it back.

"Are you in competition with him? Lovers make poor rivals my friend."

Karen rubbed her temples. "I don't even know why I said that. If he's happy then so am I."

Terry slowly sat back up, stood and then helped her to her feet. "He was in fine feather earlier. Where is he?"

"He just had to do an errand with Jeffrey. I'm going to wait in the tavern for him. See ya." As she ambled off, she realized it would be hard to keep up with her lies soon. All she needed was for Kelly or Terry to see John first and let him know she was here. She decided to chance the tavern. He didn't come there on a regular basis unless he was on kitchen/bar duty.

As soon as she had sat down with a diet coke, Jeff came over to chat. The cramps were returning with a vengeance. She pasted on a smile, but at this point, she didn't feel like faking it anymore. He sensed that and soon went back to sit with Lach and Lisa.

Karen gritted her teeth. It was time to go upstairs. She didn't want to bring John down. If it killed her, she would do her damndest to be a happy camper and just mellow out.

When she entered their suite, he wasn't there. She unpacked, took a shower and had some strong coffee. While she was having a second cup, John arrived and did a double take seeing her.

"Hi. If I'd known you were here, I would have begged for clemency from Michelle."

After they kissed hello, she asked him to explain.

"She had me assisting Arthur in the storeroom. That young man doesn't know that slaves were emancipated centuries ago. Someone should advance his education."

What luck! Half her lie was true. She laughed with him about Arthur and his truly deplorable work ethic.

"Are you tired? Do you want to take a nap? I thought we'd go out for dinner."

That was the last thing she wanted to do, but she said she was fine. They had a glass of wine together with Karen automatically calculating in her head the number of calories in it.

John looked wonderful. He even had a tan on his face and hands. You would think he was a completely different person than the one from just a month ago. She may be biased but she still privately thought he had one of the better physiques of the brothers. No, he did not stand out like Max, Terry or Bud, but she alone knew what was underneath that blue shirt. He had the beefy arms she loved and that gorgeous chest with just the right amount of hair for her to nest on.

Holy Fuck! She was surprised to find she was aroused. Talk about a 180!

In the middle of his next sentence, she straddled him. She then left him totally speechless with a kiss that made his head spin.

Clothes went flying, and they ended up on the carpet. After, when they were regretting their haste because of the rug burns, they snuggled.

Why couldn't it always be like this?, she wondered.

When he went to shower and change, Karen's frame of mind flipped flopped again. She was going to ask if they could eat in when Rick knocked at the door.

"Tell John the private dining room has been set up. Hope you guys have a fabulous evening."

"Marvellous", she mumbled under her breath.

She got dolled up, but it was like she was in slow motion. John seated her at the fancy table and presented her with a red rose. Any other time and she would be out of her gourd, thrilled beyond belief at such romantic gestures. John seldom went all out, but when he did, he excelled.

She chose the lesser of two evils in picking grilled chicken as a main course. He had filet mignon.

"I can see that you're not particularly loquacious tonight."

It took her a moment to call up her mental dictionary. Right, that means I'm not being extremely talkative. Try and fit that one in a bodice ripper story, she reflected.

"I'm just enjoying the company and the delicious food", she reassured him.

"You've hardly touched it. Is it cooked to your taste?"

Karen bobbed her head.

"You look pale Darling. Maybe you should have slept when you arrived."

"Perhaps", she admitted and then changed topics. "How is your research going?"

She half-listened with one ear while he expounded in great detail on his current theory. When he finished, she offhandedly asked, "Is Ainslee still helping you on that?"

"When she has time. Her first priority is her book. She's very good at compiling data and deciphering the main components. She's remarkably tenacious about comprehending it also. We collaborate well as a team."

"I'm sure you do", she said just a bit too acidly.

"Something wrong with your champagne? You just pursed your mouth."

She didn't reply, but her eyes turned dark and cold.

After dinner, she begged off dancing. "You were right. I should have taken that nap."

He tucked her in bed, and though she was exhausted, she never slept all night.

Part Eight

John woke up early and glanced over at Karen. Her chest was rising lightly. She finally must have fallen asleep. She had kicked the covers off, and for a moment, he just enjoyed the view. Her nightgown had ridden up, and her shapely legs up to her curvaceous cheeks were displayed.

She let out a tiny snort and rolled further away from him. Her hair was an adorable mess, and it took all the resolve that he had not to turn her over and despoil her.

He would let her sleep. She had tossed and turned rousing him several times throughout the night. He quietly did his morning routine, made sure there was plenty of coffee for her and went out to fetch the morning paper.

A throbbing headache finally stirred Karen. Her mouth felt like sandpaper. She deduced John must be out. She went to the washroom for aspirin, and as she leaned over the sink,

another cramp seized her.

The pain nearly doubled her over. She lurched to the toilet and barely had time to kick the door shut before John came back in. He called out good morning but she could barely squeak out an answer. She stayed in there a long time.

When she emerged, John only had to look at her ashen face to know something was amiss. He helped her hobble over to the couch.

"What is it? Shall I call somebody?", he asked urgently.

Karen restrained him from running out. "It's not an emergency. It's just female problems." She hoped that would shut him up.

"You look dreadful. I think we should call Anthony."

She had to do some fancy footwork to convince him, but eventually she got him to back down.

He never left her side until late morning, when fed up, she told him to politely leave her alone. He refused to go until she called Wendy to come over and babysit. As soon as he was gone, she phoned Wendy back and cancelled the visit. Her normal tone of voice assured her friend that everything was all right.

Karen was intending to cut back on her laxative use, but as she stepped on the scale, it read 111 pounds. Her progress was going gangbusters. Why should she end it? She had enough sense to figure out she was getting dehydrated so she drank a large bottle of water. She vowed to be more careful.

If John insisted she go see Anthony, she was afraid the doctor would find out she was dieting again and then the whole anorexia business would rear its ugly head again. John didn't know she had suffered from the disorder, and she was determined he would never find out.

The rest of the afternoon was spent soundlessly reading and doing a bit of writing. Before she knew it, it was going on 5:30. She needed to stretch her legs and decided to rendezvous with John at the library.

Heading out, she stopped to chat with Chelle and Colin and waved hello to Max and Laura. She was steady on her feet, but her face was still very pale.

Climbing the library's outer steps, she pinched her cheeks to add some colour. Looking down, she didn't see Ainslee walking out and collided with her. Naturally, an apology was on her lips and then she noticed who she had banged into.

"Karen, John was so worried about you. He said you were really sick. How are you

feeling now?"

Ainslee's concern for her well being could have been genuine, but Karen wanted no part of it. "I'm well enough not to take advantage of."

When Ainslee gave her a queer look, she leaned back against the stair railing.

"I don't know what you mean by that Karen."

"I mean that I'm not John. He can be easily swayed by a friendly smile, a pretty face and sweet offers of support. But you see, that's my job, to support, guide and look out for him. He doesn't need an outsider to practise analysis on him, hold his hand or pretend to be interested in his implicit function problems."

Ainslee had heard enough and put a hand up to halt Karen's tirade. "Apparently, you're working under a big false misapprehension. There is nothing going on between John and I. You're letting your imagination run wild."

Karen straightened up. "You may have a ring on your finger and an M.D. behind your name, but don't think you can pull the wool over my eyes Sweetie."

She stalked off through the doors leaving Ainslee standing there incredulous by her unwarranted attack.

They had intended to join the video party downstairs, but at the last minute, Karen backed out.

"You know I hate popcorn anyways. You go on your own, and I'll just have a nice bubble bath and have an early night."

John didn't want to go without her. She took the decision out of his hands by dialling up Jeffrey. Tit for tat, she rationalized. If he could force her to go to the tavern alone, she could sic Wiegand on him.

"Wake me up when you come in", she purred as he left.

John didn't though because she was fast asleep, and he could plainly see dark circles underneath her eyes.

After a few days and no word from her buddy, Kelly told Cort at breakfast that it was time to set Karen straight.

"I know something's eating at her. If I have to drag it out of her kicking and screaming, I will."

Cort admired his lady's grit, but at the same time, he readily recalled Karen's temper. "Are you sure that's wise? She can be a handful. I don't want her taking her frustration out on you."

Kelly winked at him. "I'll tell you a secret. Karen turns into a pussy cat when you fight back. She respects that because so few people stand up to her. Why do you think Hando can always talk sense to her? He doesn't put up with any guff, and neither do I."

Kelly foraged around the grounds and found Karen in the gym. She was jogging around the track.

Karen finished her lap and plumped down beside Kelly on a bench. "Fucking A. You've given me an excuse to stop."

As she caught her breath, Kelly observed her. Her face looked thinner. It looked like she was losing weight.

"So how the hell are you?", Karen hollered clapping Kelly on the thigh.

"That's supposed to be my line. Where have you been hiding?"

She grinned at the question. "Ask John unless you blush easily."

Kelly returned the grin. "No, I don't think I need pictures drawn for me. That's great. Then your absence is justifiable."

Karen stood up and began to do stretches. "Yep, this vacation is what I needed."

Kelly then asked, "What about those gas pains you were having before? Have they gone away?"

Karen switched to the other leg. "I keep forgetting you have a mind like a steel trap. It was just something I ate. Maybe I had food poisoning."

While Karen started lunges, Kelly stepped on the treadmill. They exercised together for about half an hour.

Kelly then sprung it on her. "Are you dieting?"

Karen momentarily paused on the Stairmaster. "Why would you think that?"

"The obvious comes to mind. You look thinner."

Karen resumed her stair climbing. "I don't think so. I haven't weighed myself in months."

Kelly hadn't been at the Point when Karen had first begun depriving herself of food and when it became a serious issue, but she had told her about it when they became friends. She now wished she hadn't confided in her. Kelly was sharp, and she didn't know if she could fool her. Kelly though dropped the topic.

They went to the restaurant to have a coffee. The more Karen raved about John and how much closer they were, the more Kelly thought she was being led down the garden path. She held her tongue though preferring to give Karen the benefit of the doubt.

If it was true, she couldn't be happier. If it wasn't, things would soon reach a breaking point.

Ainslee wasn't going to tell Bud about the confrontation between her and Karen. She wanted to handle it on her own. The psychiatrist in her discerned that she was dealing with either a very paranoid person or a very insecure one. She deemed it was the latter in Karen's case.

She told Bud in the end to simply get his opinion. "You know her better than I do. What do you think?"

He was fuming that Ainslee had been so ill-treated. "What that woman need is a serious kick in the ass. You don't have to take that crap from her. She's going back to her old ways. I thought she had changed."

"John loves her, so she can't be all that bad."

Bud smirked. "You're in shrink mode again, aren't you? You always see the best in people. Well for what it's worth, I think she puts on a tough act but underneath, she's scared. She doesn't want to get hurt."

Ainslee went behind Bud and wrapped her arms around his waist. "A very astute assessment Dr. White. I concur."

"Are you sure you don't want me to say something to her? It's not right that she's giving you attitude."

"I'm a big girl Bud. I can fight my own battles."

Part Nine

The interminable saga of Dr. Demented and Miss Turbulence was taking far too long to combust. Sid wanted to win the game, pass Go and collect his big payoff. He didn't like the two players, so why should he keep up the pretense of being civil. If being unsporting and vicious quickened the pace and led to checkmate, then let the pawns beware.

If he hit Karen hard with a few fast truths, there was a risk she would stay just to spite him. However, she was at her most vulnerable, and they could very well expose to her all her old open wounds that hadn't yet been healed. It would be like ripping her skin off layer by layer. What a visual image that was. It excited him.

He gave no credence to the ideathat Nash himself would be a threat to his plans. The man was docile and spineless. Karen would leave, and he would resign himself that he was ill-fated in love and ultimately in life. Sid could guarantee with 99% assurance that there would be no other lady-love in Nash's future. Once temptation was out of reach, John would retreat into his private asylum of anguish, and there he would forever languish.

Sid would be rid of two self-important, snobbish and disdainful creatures. He could then turn his time to better use and aim for his next target, the corpulent Captain.

Where would Miss Summers be at this particular hour? She could be in her vomitorium or she could be pouncing on Ainslee. She might even be rolling in the hay with Nash.

"Watch out for his pitchfork Ma Cherie. It might suddenly become blunt or rust off." He giggled at his own wittiness. He set off to find her.

There was a knock at the door and answering it, John found Kelly on the other side.

"Kelly, Karen's not here at the moment. She went into town to do some shopping. I will let her know you came by."

Kelly stepped in and closed the door. "I know. I saw her leave. It's you I want to speak with."

He was caught off-guard by her comment but welcomed her to take a seat. He sat down as well.

"What can I do for you?", he formally enquired.

"John, you may not be aware of this, but I think Karen's in trouble."

He leaned forward perturbed by where their conversation may lead. "In trouble? Do you mean she's in some kind of danger?"

Kelly had wavered all the way over here as to how much to tell John. She didn't want to betray confidences, but she felt he had a right to know if tidal waves were surfacing.

"She's not in any physical danger. I just have a feeling that she's going through something and needs us to bolster her up. Have you noticed any changes in her recently?"

John didn't have to reflect long. "She's been very quiet, almost distant. She hasn't been sleeping well, and she prefers to stay in rather than socialize, which isn't like her. I've been wanting her to take time off work. I assumed if she came here, she could recoup."

Kelly tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. "I don't think her problems are work-related. She's shutting down, and I'm worried that she's making herself sick."

John stood and walked over to the balcony window. "Do you mean the stomach cramps she's been getting?"

"She's had more? She told me they were finished. She said it was food poisoning or gas pains."

He looked outside the window and visualized Karen on the ice rink chasing him around and throwing snow at him. Her face was aglow. Her eyes were bright with mischief.

He said to himself mostly. "The light has left her face." He turned back to Kelly. "She had one bad attack. She didn't want Anthony to be called. She spends a great deal of time in the washroom. She keeps saying she's fine. What do you suppose she's hiding from us?"

Kelly rose and walked over to him. She had her own suspicions about Karen's stomach aches but didn't want to voice them until she had more proof. "Can you get her to open up to you? I've tried but she's stonewalling."

John didn't say anything for a minute. "I know why Karen won't say anything. She's trying to be strong for my sake. She's so used to protecting me that she sacrifices herself to be my sanctuary."

He closed his eyes. "Leave this with me Kelly. I'll see to her."

Kelly startled him by giving him a warm hug. Instead of being put off, he was strangely touched. He even reciprocated by lightly patting her back.

"She does love you John. That's one thing I'd stake my life on."

He accompanied her to the door. "You've been a good friend to her. Thank you. I'm glad she had someone to depend on when I wasn't there for her."

She reproached him. "You're here now. That's what matters. That's all that matters."

Karen had gone on a whirlwind shopping spree in town to get away from the Point and all its claustrophobia. She bought jewellery, cosmetics, a handbag, two pairs of shoes and more books she could bury herself in. Shopping in the past had always rejuvenated her and helped her escape when life became too disheartening.

She wished she didn't feel so empty. How much longer could she expect to keep it from John? She couldn't pinpoint even when life had become such a bitch or why.

She empathized with John now more than ever. Look at the sadness and despair he had gone through for years.

"No one can understand unless they have suffered as well", she said softly while driving back.

The only thing she was certain of was her love. It would kill her to have to leave John or if he left her. She had found that once in a lifetime bond. But John deserved the best, and was she the one to offer it? How many times could she go on and on asking herself that?

Was she being selfish and proud to think only she could make him happy? Had John convinced himself that Karen was his last hope for re-discovering intimacy and devotion. He had met his perfect mate once already in Alicia. Was he settling for her as a poor substitute?

Karen found no joy in putting herself down, but she was quite self-aware to know that some of her character traits clashed with John's personality while others undermined it.

Sure she could make him laugh spontaneously, and the physical chemistry they shared could spark an inferno. Life was more than gaiety and love-making.

Everything was super when they both were up. When John was sick and she was erratic, would their union stand the true test of time? It wouldn't if they shut each other out like they had done so in the past.

Karen had always been afraid to say how hurt she felt when he ignored her. John, undoubtedly, wished she were more forbearing. They tiptoed around and then eventually one or the other would snap out a cruel remark. They would instantly regret it but could never find the right words to express their frustration and then their remorse.

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. The more she longed to unburden to John, the more inadequate she felt to articulate her emotions. Her dreams, her fantasies and her hopes she could easily communicate. The darkness in her soul, her nightmares and her tears she simply could not impart.

What were they to do? Perhaps the more critical question was had they already done what they had in them to do?

He saw her pull in. He spied on her as she trudged through the parking lot laden with parcels. No one else appeared to be in their vicinity.

Sid approached her. "Here, let me help you."

Without a word, she relinquished her bags to him. In silence they hiked the short distance to the hotel.

"Have you made your decision yet?", he asked without the slightest trace of concern in his voice.

Karen diverted their course and strode ahead towards the park. Sid followed waiting for a reply.

She didn't speak until reaching the fountain just inside the interior. "About John?"

He slowly inched his head up and down.

"No, I haven't. It's not a decision to be made lightly or quickly. Despite what you think, what we've shared together in such a short period is a life time of memories, both good and bad. You can't just suddenly paint the canvas black and over-ride the work of art that was there before."

As she trailed off, he struck a thoughtful pose. "I am aware that you and John have experienced countless episodes of so-called bliss and triumph. However, you also have endured your ordeals and travesties. When will you realize the former doesn't compensate for the latter?" Sid's voice deepened to a husky rasp. "When will you let him go Karen and let him be the man he was meant to be?"

Karen sat down by the water. "What kind of man is that Sid?"

"You can't save him. He is what he is, what he's always been. John is a man of science. He lives by reason and logic. He's a simple man with simple tastes. He's not a visionary. When you came into his life Karen, you were a novelty to him. You were a breath of fresh air with your wilful and spirited ways. What was so new and exciting at the beginning though has now become tired and trite.

John needs all his strength to fight his sickness not to expend on the whims of his partner. He needs someone steady who's not all over the map at a moment's notice. Karen, I don't say these things to wound you. I'm just echoing what's been in your mind for weeks

now."

She studied Sid's face for sincerity but could only find a vast sea of coldness in his eyes. "Don't think I'm not aware of what you're up to Sid. You want me gone because I see through you to the core of your black heart."

She stared into his eyes. "You expect me to cower and cringe at the sight of you, and it galls you to no end that I will NEVER do that. You want me gone so John will remain passive and therefore no threat to you like the others are. Do you think I've listened to you because I'm naive and desperate for your advice? You're the last person I would turn to for anything." Karen sneered and spit on the ground by his feet.

Sid hissed back at her. "You still listened though, didn't you? You know what I've said makes perfect sense. You will not be John's saviour. You'll just be what you've always been to everyone here, an amusement. They laugh at you behind your back Karen. Did you know that? When you walk out of a room, they roll their eyes and thank their lucky stars that they're not the unfortunate ones who have to deal with you daily, let alone sleep with you."

Karen swung her arm back to strike, but Sid caught it easily and held on. He took pleasure in seeing the tears seep out of her eyes at his barbs.

"Hit a nerve did I?" His lips curled up into a ugly snide leer. "Hando didn't keep you, did he? No, he didn't want you. He just used you for some wild and rough action. What kind of woman debases herself for a man's soulless entertainment? How could anyone respect you who has so little respect for herself?"

She flung off his arm forcefully, lost her balance and tumbled backwards to the ground sobbing.

Sid lowered himself to her level. "You're not special enough for any man here, even a half-wit. You're just another redhead in a plethora that we have here. Go home Karen. You still got a couple of good years left. Maybe you'll get lucky and snare some old man who'll put up with you in exchange for your body. But don't wait too long. Middle age is the kiss of death for most women, and you're already prone to portliness."

He cast her a look so full of disgust and loathing that she had to look away. She bowed her head until she heard the last of his footsteps.

Part Ten

After Kelly had left, John considered what had to be done. He would have to take care of Karen like she had for him. He would finally have his chance to be able to reciprocate and give back to her all those months she spent fixing his meals, reading to him, singing

her songs, making him laugh, trying to make sense of his work, nursing him, holding on to him when he couldn't touch her, encouraging him and brightening his day.

He would make her see that she didn't have to be brave or strong all the time. She could lean on him. If something was physically wrong, he would ensure that she got proper medical aid immediately.

John relished this situation as an opportunity, a new start for them whereby they looked out for each other equivalently.

Heg glanced at his watch. Karen would be home soon. He went into the kitchen to cook her favourite meal. They would have a long talk tonight, and all the cards would be laid out on the table. He was looking forward to it.

She sneaked in while the pasta was boiling. Classical music was playing loudly and covered the sound of her entrance.

After leaving the park, she toted all her shopping items back to her car and stuffed them in the trunk. They gave her no joy now, so she didn't need to see them. Karen quietly went to their room and laid on the bed on her stomach.

Sid's words haunted her. "You'll just be what you always are to everyone here, an amusement." "They laugh at you." "You're a novelty to John." Over and over, the chorus resounded in her ears.

She put her hands up to cover them. "How could anyone respect you who has so little respect for herself?" "You're not special enough."

Karen screamed an ear-splitting Nooooo inside her mind. It reverberated so loud that she buried her face in her pillow lest it escaped to the outside world. A low moan seeped out.

The light in the room clicked on. John was arching over her.

"I didn't know you were home. Why didn't you tell me?"

When she didn't move, he sat on the bed beside her and gently rubbed her back. "Karen, it's time you let me know what's plaguing you. Please don't be evasive and say everything is splendid, because I'm fully aware it's the reverse."

She lifted her face and turned her head. Her eyes were leaking wetness.

He took out his handkerchief and lightly dabbed at them. "Your tears say more than words can explain. You're carrying a deep sorrow within you. Let it out."

Karen slowly rolled herself up until she too was sitting. She took his hand. Before Sid had waylaid her, she had intended to confess her heavy heart to John this night. Now, she felt differently. He didn't deserve to have all of her negativity and lack of confidence foisted upon him. She should be able to deal on her own. She was an adult, and she hated to be dependent on anyone.

Sid was right in one aspect. How could anyone respect or love her if she despised herself?

John's face was creased with worry lines. This dear, sweet man who had spent so much of his life already precariously perched on the thin line between genius and insanity didn't warrant a woman like her.

Karen carefully chose her words. "Hon, yes, I know I've not been myself. I'm dealing with something, but it's not a problem that's urgent or even particularly significant. I have to work through it on my own. Please understand."

John had not been prepared for her to lock him out yet again. His jaw clenched in indignation. To his chagrin, the kid gloves were back on her hands. His look of disillusionment was lost on her. She was already getting up and walking out of the room.

He stayed put, and their dinner ended up cold as neither one of them felt much like eating.

In the morning, he relayed that Kelly had come over.

"What did she want?" Karen asked.

"She was worried about you. She wanted to know if I had noticed anything different about your conduct", John admitted.

Karen looked annoyed. "Is that why you were so concerned last night? What did she tell you?"

John was peeved that she would think him so blind as not to figure out something was wrong on his own. "I didn't need your friend to divulge any secrets, and in fact, she didn't."

Karen was incensed. "She had no right to fly over here and ask any questions at all. It's my own business as to how I am or how I act. She shouldn't have interfered."

John was about to lose his temper. Gritting his teeth, he chastened her, "Kelly is your dearest friend here. I would think you might be grateful that she's acting like one. She's

looking out for your well being. You're very fortunate. Not everyone has such allies."

Karen did not appreciate being lectured to. If Kelly hadn't stuck her nose in, she could have kept John from badgering her. "John, I'm not a child, so don't patronize me. If Kelly was a real friend, she would respect my wishes for privacy."

She stormed out of their apartment in a big huff.

For the first time, the words "little brat" surfaced in his mind about the lady he was sharing his life with.

Karen remained angry, and when she was sure Cort would be out riding or working at the stables, she went to clear the air with Kelly. She found her going through swatches of wallpaper.

"Hi", Kelly greeted her. "You're just in time to help me pick out what would look best in the kitchen."

Karen paced in front of her. "I don't really give a flying fuck how your kitchen looks. Why did you go to John yesterday and upset him?"

Kelly closed her sample book. So this was show time.

"If you want to go on living in this fantasy world you've created where everything is just perfect, that's your prerogative. Just don't expect the rest of us to buy into it. It will explode in your face. I care too much to see that happen. The man you claim to love so much cares too much, and all you do is keep him at arm's length.

I didn't have to tell John a thing that he didn't already know. He knows you're down, and he knows that you're drawing away from everybody. He even knows about your stomach cramps which you told me were finished." Kelly's voice remained even but her face reddened.

Karen's hands balled into fists, and she dug her fingernails into them to try and stay cool. "You had no right. I told you things were great with John. We are closer than ever and...."

Kelly interrupted. "Who are you trying to deceive, me or yourself? They're not great." Her voice rose. "I don't know what's been going down with you. You used to be so honest, and that's one of the things I've always admired about you.

Look at yourself! Have you looked in a mirror recently? You look terrible. You've got bags under your eyes like a raccoon. You're ghostly white and losing weight. If I see these things, how can you possibly think John wouldn't?"

Karen clenched the back of a chair. "I don't need your sympathy or your two cents worth of advice. I don't want or need anything from you or anybody else. You just stay away from John and stay away from me."

She turned to go and then suddenly bent over racked with pain.

Kelly though furious helped her to the washroom.

When Karen came out ten minutes later, Kelly stared her down. "You're not fooling me either with those cramps. You're abusing laxatives aren't you to help you lose more weight?"

At Kelly's words, Karen was shocked into silence.

"I see that you're not denying it", Kelly observed. "You're jeopardizing your ties to John by not being upfront with him. You're putting your health at risk every time you shove those pills down your throat. You can be mad at me all you want. I don't intend to watch you destroy yourself."

"What are you going to do?", Karen stammered out the question.

"Either you go see Anthony and seek professional help, or I'll tell John about the anorexia and that it's resurfacing."

Kelly wasn't bluffing. Karen was backed into a corner. She inwardly seethed at the ultimatum but managed to announce, "I'll make an appointment with the doctor today."

Kelly grimly nodded.

Karen waved a finger in her face. "But you and me are done."

"So be it", Kelly replied.

Karen was planning on making an appointment, but Anthony, Stephanie and Molly had left the Point to attend a medical conference. She probably had bought herself a little time.

Her rage at Kelly had simmered down. It took too much energy to stay sore.

She couldn't believe what a mess things were. John and her were teetering on the edge of a cliff. She felt shitty most of the time, and now she had just lost her best friend.

Should she follow Sid's edict and just go home? What was she waiting for, a miracle?

At this immediate moment, she needed smiling faces who knew nothing that was going on so she could get her shit together. She searched the hotel and tavern for Terry or Jeff. She saw Kaz in the restaurant so that left out Terry. She discovered that Jeff was in town with Chelle and some of the girls.

She ordered a coffee to go and walked down to the beach. Kicking off her sandals, she waded into the surf. The water was warm and inviting.

Everything Kelly said was true. But if she admitted it out loud, Karen would be forced to realize that she was lost and had no clue how to find her way back to John. She was so terrified of losing him and terrified to stay not knowing her place or role in his life. If she was not John's guardian angel, then who was she? Her identity was tied so deeply to being his stability when he was adrift. Now, she was the one at sea. Who would be her anchor?

She stayed outside all day, got a wicked sunburn and fell asleep on the bench in Tina's rose garden. She awoke to find it was twilight and stiffly made her way to the tavern for a medicinal drink.

John was on bar duty. He was displeased with her behaviour and left her alone.

Karen joined a table with Zack and Buggy and Johnny and Chriztine. They were quick to pick up on negative vibes between her and John but made no mention of it. She joined in on the conversation as if she had no cares in the world. The juke box kicked in and couples started to dance. She accepted every invitation to take a whirl on the floor.

When she was taking her turn with East, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Mind if I cut in?"

East acquiesced immediately, and she found herself with John. They didn't say a word until the tempo changed to a slow dance. John put an arm around her waist and drew her tight.

Karen tried to put some distance between them, but he firmly pulled her against him.

After several minutes of trying to break loose from his grasp, he finally spoke. "You're leading again."

She adjusted her footing. "Sorry, it seems I can't do anything right today."

Peering over his shoulder, she saw Cort and Kelly enter and followed them with her eyes as they joined a table with Trisha and Daniel and Tina and her husband John.

At the end of the song, she assumed John would be heading back to the bar, but he started

leading her towards Cort and Kelly's table.

"I think I'll head back to where I was sitting. Buggy and Zack are there", she emphasized with a no-nonsense look.

John looked where she was pointing. "They must have left. No one is at your table."

Damn it, he was right! She looked hopelessly around for someone else to latch on to. "It's all right John. You can go back to serving drinks. I'll find some company."

He informed her that his shift was over. "We should consort with the others. It would be the courteous thing to do."

Karen made a beeline for a small empty table that was large enough for just two people. "You go ahead. I don't feel particularly cordial tonight."

Obviously, she was still being perverse. However, he thought it would be humiliating to join a group knowing that they would be wondering why he and Karen were not together.

"I hope you won't find me negligent then if I retire early", John commented, wishing she would simply take his hand and smile with her eyes in that secret way she had with him. She didn't

"Not at all. I'll be up soon", she promised.

She deliberately sat with her back to the gang. Sipping an apple martini, she brooded.

Her thoughts were intruded by the sound of the chair in front of her being pulled out.

Ainslee sat down. "Hello Karen. I thought it might be a good time to have a chat."

Karen was so startled that she missed her mouth, and her drink dribbled down the front of her shirt.

Wiping herself off with a napkin, she gave Ainslee a hard look. "What could we possibly have to say to each other?"

Ainslee declared, "You might have nothing to share. I, on the other hand, have a few things to say."

Karen leaned back in her chair. "I can hardly wait", she said sarcastically.

"Good, then listen up. You made it quite clear the other day that you see me as some sort

of threat to your relationship with John. When you didn't believe me when I said nothing could be further from the truth, at first I was insulted. Later on, I thought more about our encounter, and it occurred to me that if wasn't me that you had misgivings about, it was yourself."

Karen made a big production of yawning and trying to conceal it.

"Be blase if you want to. I'm certain I'm correct." Ainslee leaned forward. "For John's sake, because he is my friend, let me give you some advice."

"Do tell", Karen interjected with false enthusiasm.

"Grow up! Stop looking for others to blame for your unhappiness. You're the only one who can turn things around. If you and John have problems, then express them to each other. Get them out in the open. Do you think he can read your mind?"

From where I stand, John loves you. But even love can't survive secrets and phony facades you put on because you're too stubborn to show that you're frightened and unsure of your place in his life. You may be proud Karen. But is it worth it if that's all you have to show for your time here?" Ainslee got up and walked away.

Karen rubbed her temples and wished she was as minuscule as she felt. That way, she could be almost invisible and she would be able to observe John and know every thought and feeling John had about her.

Part Eleven

In the morning, John found Karen sleeping on the couch. He covered her with a blanket. He sat down in the chair opposite.

What was happening to them? He had thought the trauma of his disease would be the hardest struggle that the two of them would have to overcome. This charade they were both trying to maintain was absurd. They could barely be polite.

He held himself as accountable as Karen, maybe more so. He equated confrontation with conflict and strife. He went out of his way to be conciliatory. He abhorred harsh words and scenes that could implode into violence. He was accustomed to harmony and solitude whereby he was alone but not lonely.

If he had the choice, he would never have selected Karen for his mate. She was his antithesis. She craved commotion and recognition. But love left him no option. It didn't allow for rationality and wisdom. It struck people down with unforeseen consequences.

John hadn't bargained for the liveliness and impetuous exploits that she brought to his world. Karen's vitality and flair for the dramatic somehow appealed to his pedantic

nature. She lightened his spirit, and she could make him laugh like no other.

Yes, she was unpredictable and quick to anger if riled, but he was miserable when she was gone even if only for a few days. She challenged him in so many ways. If she hadn't whirled into his life like a hurricane at the exact time that she had, he would have wasted away. He owed her his life. He had already given her his heart.

When Karen stirred and opened her eyes, he greeted her with a feather-like kiss on her forehead.

She smiled and stretched out her body luxuriously. "I didn't want to disturb you last night. My dreams sometimes both keep us awake", she explained her absence in their bed.

He brought her a large mug of coffee and sat in silence while she drank it.

"Do you have an agenda for today?", he queried.

"That golf tournament is coming up fast. Some of the girls want to get some more practise in. I thought I'd team up with them."

John had forgotten about it. He was pleased though that she was getting out with the others.

"Why? Did you have something in mind?", she asked.

"I thought we might go on a picnic. But that can wait for another day. All of us will have to drill very hard to surpass Jeffrey."

She laughed and then compromised. "A picnic does sound delightful. I'll just golf for a few hours and meet you back here."

"I'll have Annabella make us up a basket", he offered.

"Sounds wonderful." She kissed him goodbye.

The ladies had plenty of fun on the green. Some were very good while others were completely hopeless. Most fell somewhere in between.

Karen was happy that so many of them had gathered. She hadn't seen some of the women in a long time. Kaz, Laura, Tina, Wendy, Donna, Buggy, Lisa, Norma Jean, Jennifer, Chriztine, Kath, Rachel and Beej were there. Karen lost her uneasiness when she noted that Kelly and Ainslee hadn't come out.

Missing as well were Evelyn, Aurore, Lady, Tawny, Chelle, Jan, Annabella, Denise, Roberta, Stef, Trisha, Sophy, Suki, Ilaria and Stephanie. Hopefully, the majority would be present on the day of the tournament.

They only played nine holes before most wanted to head to the clubhouse for refreshments. Karen promised a rain check and went back to find John.

With basket in tow, they sauntered to the beach. Spreading out a blanket, John poured the wine while Karen emptied the basket.

She had begun tapering off the laxatives after Kelly's threat, but her system was now in withdrawal. She was afraid to eat because she was a bit nauseous and also still reluctant to gain back the lost pounds. She nibbled at the cold chicken and filled most of her plate with fruit salad.

Conversation proved to be trivial and light which suited both of them. Neither wanted to break the armistice or spoil the gorgeous weather.

While Karen sunbathed, John read. When she skipped down to take a dip in the ocean, he observed that she was leaner. She always had refused to wear a bikini, but he was positive she would look fantastic in one.

When she ran up to splash and drip all over him, he suddenly thought that she was looking a little too thin. Come to think of it, she had eaten sparingly the last couple of weeks. Was she still ill?

Her fair skin on her arms was sprinkled with freckles. Her face though was pale, and her cheeks had hollowed. He knew instinctively that if he enquired about her health, she would casually brush it off. He had other methods of investigation at his disposal. He would find out on his own.

Just before sunset, they packed everything up. Karen's stomach was in turmoil, and she crossed her arms over it hoping pressure would alleviate the upset. They tramped back slowly as John evened his pace to hers.

Once they were on the paved path, Karen had to stop to rest. "I just had too much sun" was her excuse.

While waiting for her to recover, John's muscles tensed as he saw out of the corner of his eye a flash of purple. John could accept many things calmly without getting ruffled. Having Sid for a brother was not among them. It took a couple of minutes before Karen viewed him as well.

Sid, not in the least frazzled by their take on him, strutted up to them. "Oh how cozy. You've been having an intimate lunch for two. Karen, I expect you ate like a sparrow. And John, I wouldn't have thought you had the leisure between working on your brilliant

speculations and undergoing psychotherapy."

He paused and his face took on an expression of curiosity. "How do the two of them mesh together? Do you ever wonder if those marvels of insight you get in your work are just the product of the fallacies and fantasies that flit through your mind? I mean it's not like we have another prodigy mathematician to confirm and verify your notions. For all we know, the chicken scratch that you write down and etch on windows could be as scientific as UFOs or the god you no doubt pay homage to."

"Get lost Sid!", Karen barked. "Leave us alone."

John put a hand on her arm to restrain her.

Sid was enjoying himself. He had no intention of quitting just yet. "Karen, you're in such a passion. Surely John can stand up for himself, right John? I mean you wouldn't let someone else speak for you or act as your champion?", Sid snickered.

John said nothing but boiled underneath.

Karen, however, was on the surface livid. "You're nothing but a dirt bag hiding under your expensive and bad taste suits. Take your bad ass attitude and shove it where the sun don't shine. When I tell the rest of your brothers what you've said, they'll go ballistic on you for harassing us. They might even finally shut you down. After all, you're just a machine."

Sid took a step back as if he'd been shot. "Oh you wound me grievously Karen. It doesn't take too much to bring out the bitch in you, does it? Is she like that in bed John? Just when you're ready to do the deed, does she throw a hissy fit? Do you ever have to restrain her John? Tie her to the headboard so she doesn't chew your balls off?"

John steadily took Karen's arm and started leading her around Sid.

"Aren't you going to say anything John? We can't let him get away with thinking he can talk to us that way? John?", Karen jabbed him in the arm.

Sid continued to chuckle. "Face it Karen. The maniac is a drone. You'll forever have to build a fire under his ass to get him to be a man."

She broke away from John's grip and stalked towards Sid.

"I wouldn't if I were you", he warned believing she would try and slap him again. "There is no one here to defend your honour. Your white knight has tarnished armour."

"Karen", John finally found his voice. "Just ignore him. He's not worth it."

She got up close in Sid's face. "You should be really careful in what you say to me

Sidney. You see I'm the keeper of what you need to survive."

That bullet hit home. She watched as his face turned purple with wrath. "Some night when you least expect it, you might find yourself in a real jam with not a speck of glass around so you can re-boot. When that happens, I'll be there and I won't alert a single soul." Karen goaded him.

"You must have forgotten to take your distemper shots today", Sid retorted. "Nash, watch out if she starts foaming at the mouth. Rabid dogs should be put of their misery." Sid left them both standing there frozen.

Karen uncoiled at John like a viper. "Why didn't you do something? You let him get away with not only reviling me but yourself as well", she yelled. "You just stood there and did nothing to retaliate. What's wrong with you? Don't you have any guts?"

John fumed. "Perhaps you're confusing me with my brother Bud", he quietly stated. "Undoubtedly, he would convey the belligerent, aggressive stance you require."

Karen lowered her voice. "You're damn right Bud would have pounded him to dust. He'd do it for any female here, let alone his woman. Don't I mean enough to you to fight for? I never thought I'd say this John, but I'm ashamed of you." With tears of fury starting to flow, she began to run away from him as fast as she could.

John, full of her contempt, did not chase after.

Karen ran until her lungs nearly collapsed. She finally slumped to the ground near the dock. While she tried to catch her breath, the last of the evening's sunset burnished on the wooden planks of the HMS Surprise. It was an incredible sight to see. The frigate was captured in a moment of full glory.

Oh what she would give if she could just sail away on it right this second. Teetering a little on her unsteady legs, she advanced towards it. Its power and freedom called out to her. It stood as a symbol of adventure and heroic engagements. By the time she was at its side, the darkness of the night had fallen.

Jack coming up the ladder from the lower decks didn't catch sight of her until he put his eye to the glass. He often would survey the landscape from his ship at the close of day as it filled him with such profound peace.

He saw a small female figure looking up as if gauging his vessel's seaworthiness. He crossed the deck to see if her could surmise who it was. Her long auburn hair narrowed it down slightly. Lighting a lantern, he shone it a few feet from where she was standing. He didn't want to startle her.

Karen, nevertheless, jerked at the sudden illumination of her surroundings. She never expected anyone to be on board.

"Who goes there?", Jack called out in sonorous tones.

Karen could now plainly see Jack's long un-plaited hair blowing in the breeze. She didn't know whether to abscond or remain. She naively supposed that Jack would have been at the apartment he had been given over the tavern. She should have known better. He would, of course, feel more comfortable and at home in his hammock in the great cabin.

"D'ye hear me there?"

As if one couldn't. The whole bloody hotel could probably hear his roar.

"It's me Jack. It's Karen", she announced softly.

He lithely jumped onto the land. "Karen, upon my word, I couldn't recognize you. My eyes aren't once what they were."

She felt awkward as he greeted her warmly. Why was she always tongue-tied around the Captain? She wasn't with any of the other boyz except maybe Max.

"Are my services required?"

"Huh?", she looked at him blankly.

"The others, do they have need of my assistance?"

Karen finally got what he was asking. "No, no, it's nothing like that. I was just taking a walk or a run rather and ended up here on your doorstep", she stammered.

"Well what luck! I was thinking it was damned unpleasant to be alone on such a capital evening", Jack exclaimed. "Would you like to come aboard and have a glass of port or sherry? I would immensely enjoy the company."

Karen actually had to think twice before graciously accepting his invitation. She just had a fight with John, and she was here now with another man who she was quite taken with, to be honest.

He helped her embark. Karen had already had a tour of the ship some time ago, so she was vaguely familiar with its various decks but had forgotten all their names.

"Since it's so splendid outside, would you mind if we shared a glass out here instead of going below."

Karen readily agreed.

They sat in chairs that he had moved from the gunroom. Jack had brought up a bottle of fine Madeira.

She gulped down the first glass at record speed simply because she was so nervous. It also meant that she didn't have to speak and acknowledge her ignorance as Jack spoke of the wind and how many knots his ship could make. He also talked about flying jibs, topsails and taffrails.

"I dare say I must be making myself tiresome", he finally confessed. "That will simply never do."

He refilled her glass. "What news of John?"

The last thing Karen wanted was to discuss Nash with this man. She glossed over in thirty seconds a recap of John's current status.

"I am heartily glad of it", he declared hearing John was well on the mend.

Jack was making quite an indent of the bottle as well. In fact, Karen was sure he had been imbibing before her arrival. The wine had loosened her tongue, and she was beginning to feel at ease.

He told her a few jokes laughing all through the telling until he could barely remember and eke out the final line. "Did you smoke it?", he would ask. Soon Karen was joining him in laughing hysterically at his wit.

The second and then the third bottle followed the first. Karen timidly requested if he would mind playing the violin for her.

"I should like it of all things", he obliged.

Seeing the rough, calloused fingers stroking the bow and making such beautiful music riveted her.

She amazed him by laying down on the deck and keeping time by wiggling her feet and hands. He stopped to partake of more wine.

"That was fabulous Jack. It really was", she smothered him with praise.

"Thank you, my dear. Lord, it's been quite a night. It does my heart good to hear laughter and high spirits again on Surprise."

She raised her hand so he could replenish her glass. She watched as he raised his own to his lips.

Karen didn't see his scars nor indeed any flaws at all. His yellow hair dazzled her as he brushed it away from his eyes. She wondered how the wine would taste on his lips and tongue. She imagined his impressive and imposing build looming over before slowly covering her. She leaned up on her arms.

He was gazing at her bosom. In the tight-fitting tank top she was wearing, it was displayed amply. He reluctantly looked away as she caught him mid-gape.

Jack was aware in a general way that he had drunk more than was prudent. It was also highly improper to have a young woman on his ship at this hour with no chaperone in sight.

Before he could caution himself in his behaviour, Karen sat up on the deck rather giddily. He reached out a hand to help seat her again in the chair.

Without warning, Karen let him pull her up and then launched into his arms. She pressed close to him, reached up and caught his head in her hands, then pulled it down and kissed his mouth hungrily.

He was stunned beyond all belief at the boldness of her move. His brain, however, seemed to have lost the ability to focus on anything else but the softness of her lips.

His own parted and his tongue hesitantly tasted hers. An ardent fever swept through him as he drew her closer. Their kiss deepened, as passion overrode his sensibilities.

It was bad luck at its worst that a man who was blessed with uncommon good eyesight happened at that exact moment to glance up at the railing of the Surprise.

He waited until the couple unclinked to see who the amorous woman was. He was utterly shocked at her identity.

What a scoop this would be! How deliciously scandalous, Kim mused as he slithered back into the dark.

Part Twelve

When they separated, they were both breathless. Karen felt weak in the knees. Jack was a little more balanced but not by much. They were unable to make eye contact.

When he didn't make another motion towards her, Karen eased herself away from him and sat back down on the deck floor with her legs over the side of the ship.

Several emotions were running through Jack at the same time. He had a desirable woman who had offered herself to him. In the past, he would not have given another thought about savouring her exquisite charms. However, here, there were numerous complications to consider.

Karen's head was resting on her arms. She appeared to him to suddenly be so delicate and fragile.

He settled down beside her. He felt sober now as a judge. "Karen, I fear I've done you a dishonour", he began.

She raised her head. "You don't have to say the words Jack. I was the one who made advances", she conceded.

"And I was the one who didn't protest", Jack asserted.

She stared out into the deep silent waters. "I just wanted a few minutes of carefree abandon."

He caressed her cheek tenderly, wiping away a stray tear. "I would be an infernal scrub to take advantage of this situation. It would never answer. You would despise me in the end. You love my brother, and he thinks the world of you."

Karen laughed hollowly.

"You know as well that I have reached an understanding with a very special lady here. I cannot betray her trust."

She turned to face him. "You are an honourable man Jack. In this day and age, it's not only almost impossible to find a man with principles, but it's precious to be acquainted with one. I consider myself very lucky indeed to count you as a friend. I think it's time for me to go."

He saw her off, and when she refused his offer to escort her back, he bowed and whispered, "Godspeed".

It was very late when she came in. John hadn't anticipated her coming home at all. It wouldn't have surprised him in the least if she had just packed up and taken off.

She didn't come in their room, but he heard her moving restlessly around, first in the kitchen and then the living room. Eventually, the lamp was turned off, and he assumed she was again sleeping on the couch. Only this time he knew it wasn't her dreams that kept them separated.

At dawn, he woke to find her gone. A note was left on his bedside table.

"John, I need time alone to think things through. I don't want to make you any more unhappy than I already have.

I'm afraid if I continue to stay with you, we will only quarrel, and I don't want any more bitterness between us.

We both need space and distance to judge what we really want and can aspire to give to each other. I've decided not to run away, so I will be still residing at the Point.

Please believe me when I say I never meant to hurt you.

Love Karen"

At least she had left some hope for him to grab a hold of. As for hurting him, he had done much worse to her in comparison.

He rolled over onto her pillow on the bed. He could still smell traces of her perfume and the scent of her shampoo. He held on tight pretending it was her.

Karen had moved back into her plain old ordinary hotel room. The bed was a twin, and she couldn't get over how tiny it seemed. She had laid down on it, and when she stretched her arms out, she touched thin air and emptiness. There was no warm body to embrace and nuzzle up to.

She felt a little hungover and wanted to block out of her mind the image of Jack's face. Her indiscretion, though relatively minor in the fact that nothing further had occurred, bothered her sufficiently to obsess about.

What if Jack hadn't resisted? Would she have progressed in her seduction? If they had made love, her unfaithfulness to John would have sat upon her heart as heavy as an anvil. Even if John could forgive her, she was certain she would not forgive herself.

But nothing had happened, she reminded. One kiss she could reason away. She had been drunk and so had he. Karen, even before Jack's arrival, knew him from O'Brien's novels. There was so much in them to make him real before he even existed. He was larger than life, and she adored his heroism, his courage and his zest.

Perhaps she had done herself a favour even by getting him partially out of her system. No one would be hurt by their actions, as no one would be aware of them. She had no intention of confessing her guilt to John. She was sure that Jack felt the same way about

his lady.

She closed her eyes to rest and dreamed of Jack's ship, but on the quarterdeck in his brown suit holding a sextant for navigation was John.

Kim had a big secret that he was eager to tell. He didn't consider himself an informer or a snitch. He would be telling everyone the truth. Didn't they deserve to know about assignments that weren't kosher?

Surely Jack's and Karen's respective partners had a right to know about any hanky panky going on.

Kim, though not in the same class as Sid for being vile, felt occasionally snubbed by his brothers. Information brought power and attention. Maybe the others would respect him more if he brought this illicit affair to light. Jack's lady and Nash should be grateful in having their eyes opened.

One thing had to be done first though to set the stage and make everything perfect.

Karen borrowed a bicycle from the gym and hoped the exercise and fresh air would clear her headache. She rode several miles to try to dust the cobwebs from her brain.

Her stomach pains had lessened, as she had now completely stopped all artificial methods to flush food out. She was still dieting, however, and the alcohol from last night on virtually an empty stomach was playing havoc with her. She had to brake the bike twice to bend over in the bushes and dry heave.

She had forgotten to bring water on her trip, so her head continued to pound in her eardrums. By the time she got back to the hotel, she needed to eat something in a hurry. She felt lightheaded and didn't want to pass out.

In the restaurant, there were mercifully few people. She briefly greeted Mannie and Norma Jean and then helped herself to yogurt and cottage cheese from the buffet table. Scarfing it down, she felt a little more human.

Hando and Stef came in as she was blowing on her coffee. She looked away pretending not to see them. Sid's words about Hando dumping her still rankled. She didn't believe that Hando had used her. He had cared about her, and she recognized that. She just didn't want to be reminded that her love hadn't been enough. It made her question whether history would repeat itself with John.

"Hi Karen, mind if I join you?"

She looked up to see Kim smiling with a tray in hand. Kim wasn't one of her favourite people, but he had already seated himself opposite her.

"Sure Kim, feel free to take a load off", she replied sarcastically.

He dug into his bacon and eggs. The sight of all that grease made her nauseous again.

He continued to eat without saying anything further. She got herself another cup of coffee.

Kim wiped off his plate with a piece of toast. "Well that certainly hit the spot", he professed.

Karen put on a face of complete disinterest wanting him to leave faster. While she was contemplating what to do for the day, he leaned over the table until he got her attention.

"It seems you've been a very bad girl Karen."

He said it in such a straightforward way that she was sure she had misheard him. "What?", she said rather dunce-like.

"You and the Captain parading around last night on the Surprise." He tsked tsked.

That got her vigilance right away. "What are you raving on about?", she said calmly hoping to bluff her way out of this. OMG, she was reeling inside.

"If you wanted your involvement to remain secret, you really should have taken care to be more discreet."

Karen dug her fingernails into his outstretched hands. "You don't know what you're talking about", she lashed out at him in low tones so no one would overhear.

"Let me clarify what I saw, and you can enlighten me if I misperceived the situation." He detached her claws. "You and the big guy were on the upper deck of his boat. Lit lanterns created enough light for me to see you and him in a pretty intense liplock. Before you try to deny it was you, I'll just reiterate in case you've forgotten that I have 20/20 vision." He waited while she took it in.

"What will the dear Professor have to say Karen?"

She was paralysed for a moment where she could not think, speak or act. Then she gushed out, "You've misinterpreted what you saw Kim. You saw only one kiss. It ended there and then."

He gave her a look like she was a simpleton. "What do you take me for? You may be able

to hoodwink Johnnie most of the time, but I'm far more savvy and on to you."

"Kim", she barely contained a shout from erupting. "I'm telling you the truth. Nothing happened. It was a mistake."

"Oh, I'm sure it was Karen", he mimicked the earnest look on her face. "These things usually are when viewed in the light of the next day." He rose and she did as well.

"You can't tell anybody. All it will do is create a hornet's nest. You don't have the whole story."

He smiled down condescendingly at her. "I know enough. Don't worry Karen. He patted her on the arm. "The truth shall set you free." He strode out.

She sank back into her chair. Please tell me he's bullshitting Lord, she prayed. I have to warn Jack, she thought and hurriedly grabbed her purse and leapt up.

"Where's the fire?", Hando questioned. He had seen Kim speaking with Karen and then he had seen the panic rise in her eyes. While Stef went to visit with Trisha, he decided to see what was what.

"Hando", she gasped. "I don't have time to chat. I've got to do something very important right now." She was frantic.

"Easy on", Hando soothed putting his arms on her shoulders. "What did that bastard say to get you so worked up?"

She started to hyperventilate.

He pushed her down into a chair. "Talk to me", he ordered.

"He's going to tell everyone something that's not true. It will upset certain people needlessly."

"By people, who do ya mean?"

"John for one, and I can't tell you who else, but trust me Kim's going to blow everything out of proportion."

Hando thought rapidly about what he could do. He could rip Kim a new one but that would only make him as mean as cat's piss. In the end, Kim would still plot revenge.

"Is there any part of what he's threatening to say that is true, or is it all hogwash?", he asked her bluntly.

Her eyes shifted uneasily.

"Okay, so it's not all bogus. Your best bet is to come clean with John and whomever before he gets there first", he advised.

She gazed at him with puppy dog eyes. "I can't do that Hando. I can't bear to tell John what Kim saw."

He tried to ease her distress even though he was admittedly curious more than ever about Kim's tale. "Kim has a way of getting people's backs up. There's a chance that no one will believe him anyways. If he does shoot off his mouth, take the high road. Tell your side then and derail him. He may not do anything at all. He likes to fuck with people's minds."

She blurted out, "I've really fucked up this time. John will never understand."

"Nash's berko about ya. Sure he may chuck a spaz, but he'd be a bloody nong to shitcan you after all you've done for him. And if he does, then he's not worth the angst. Tell him to get stuffed."

Karen attempted a smile for his kind words.

"Chirp up", he urged. "If Barrett flaps his gums, I'll try and do damage control for you."

She got up and hugged him. "Thank you for being a friend as always. I really needed one."

"Mate's rate for you. Don't tell anyone else. I don't come cheap."

It was now a waiting game. Karen got in her car and simply drove. What could Kim possibly hope to gain by telling? She had thought her only enemy at the Point was Sid. Kim was now his menace in training. Did he dislike her that much? What had she ever done to him?

Another thought suddenly occurred to her. Maybe she wasn't the primary target. Maybe it was Jack!

Since Jack had came, he had received lots of attention and admiration. Kim had been at the Point for so long now, and he still didn't command any respect or much good will.

The more she ruminated about it, the more she was certain that Kim was out to get Jack. After all, why else would Kim be roaming around the docks at that time of night? He was looking for dirt.

When she got back, she went directly to the ship. Jack was no where to be found. She could be shitting bricks for nothing like Hando had said. Kim probably just wanted to see

her sweat for his own sadistic pleasure.

As she approached the tavern, she felt a deep sense of foreboding. Before she got to the door, Kelly came out and grabbed her arm.

"You do not want to go in there right now."

Karen turned to face her former friend with desperation in her eyes. "What's happened?" She followed Kelly who kept walking away.

"An ugly rumour has started spreading", Kelly recounted.

Karen caught up to her. "Rumour? What kind of rumour?"

Kelly did an about-face on her. "They're about you and another man whose name is not John Nash."

Bad news travelled a fast horse, she mused. Karen shifted uneasily on her feet. "How did that start? Who's spilling?"

Kelly studied her friend's eyes. Yes, she still regarded Karen as her friend. "I don't know how it began. I just came in here about an hour ago with Tina, and I overheard Steve and Andy talking. Hando then came over to them and they suddenly shut up. Some of the girls have heard it too."

Karen rubbed her temples.

"Karen", Kelly sighed. "Is it true?"

She reached out for Kelly's hands and held them. "Not like you think. It was stopped before it began."

Kelly could see plainly how distressed Karen was. "Do you want to go back to my place and talk?"

Karen looked relieved. "I really would like that. But before we do, I need to say I'm sorry. I abused our friendship when you were only looking out for me. I want to make things right." She started to weep.

Kelly offered her hand. "Come on then. Let's see if we can salvage this disaster."

Part Thirteen

John Nash had no notion that he and Karen were being discussed so avidly by certain residents. He only knew that Karen was somewhere on the premises.

He was unable to work, and for once, he didn't feel like being alone. He wanted male companionship.

He went down to the games room looking for someone to shoot pool with. Alex and Colin were at a table. They welcomed him to play the winner.

He stood back and assessed the players. They were both excellent competitors, but it seemed that Alex had the edge over Colin. He was soon proved right. Colin forked over money and went to get a cold one.

They racked up the balls and John broke. He had played pool many times at Princeton so he felt confident in being a worthwhile opponent.

During the middle of the game Colin came back accompanied by Dominic and Steve. When the latter two saw Nash, a glance passed between them. Steve had already had Hando come down on him like a ton of bricks for sharing what he had learned with Andy, so he kept mum. He did wonder if John had heard the news. He didn't look upset, but then John always seemed to have a poker face on. It was hard to read the man.

They watched while Alex hustled Nash and won more dough.

"Okay boys, any other takers?", Alex challenged the men.

When they refused, Alex called them all wusses. They did sit down together though with their pretzels and beer.

Dom kept peeking at Nash every now and then. Steve kicked him under the table and shook his head subtly.

They jabbered on about sports and cars. Neither topic was particularly interesting to John, but he felt good simply being a part of them. Wiegand came in a little later and taunted them all about the golf tournament which was to take place the next day.

A lot of female guests had arrived which meant a good size crowd would be at the tavern tonight. John had a few beers and felt pretty relaxed. When Jeffrey asked him if he would be there tonight, he said yes before he could form the word 'no'. He didn't know quite how that came about. How would he feel if Karen showed? He was a man of his word so he agreed to meet Jeffrey and Wendy later.

Walking through the hotel lobby, he saw many of the ladies checking in. Ilaria and Massimo came over to say hi. Sophy, Roberta, Aurore and Evelyn waved to him. Going

down the front steps he ran into Suki, Denise and Jan. It would definitely be a full house tonight.

What he didn't need to see was Sid holding court with Lady and Tawny. He couldn't be impolite to the ladies so he dipped his head in their direction.

Sid darted out to intersect him. "My condolences Nash. I never would have thought Karen could be so inconstant. I mean the two of you were a match made in hell, but after all this time, to have it end like this. It would be a blow beneath the belt to anyone, with the exclusion of myself, of course." He smiled an oily smirk.

John would just have kept on going, but Zack and Cort suddenly appeared to put a muzzle on Sid. They dragged him off loudly objecting.

John was left there clearly baffled. He wasn't going to take anything Sid said at face value.

Before he got back to his suite, Chelle gingerly approached him.

"John, I just want you to know that I don't think it's true. Kim is just playing nasty. You know he hates Jack."

When he gave her a puzzled look, she put a hand over her mouth.

He tilted his head. "Chelle, what is it I'm supposed to have deduced but obviously haven't?"

"Oh my", she stuttered and looked around for a way to get out of this jam. "I think you should speak with Karen." She dashed off leaving him more perplexed than ever.

Getting ready to go out, he decided to call Jeffrey but hung up before he picked up. He hated gossip and had reprimanded Karen on more than one occasion as she seemed to revel in it along with most of the ladies.

If he went out, he would more than likely be swallowed by a horde of busy bodies prattling out mere hearsay. Fine, he would not go. He phoned room service to order in and left a brief note under Jeffrey's door.

It was Jeff who brought up his order. He was red-faced as he put the tray on a table. He hesitated after John thanked him.

"John, it's probably not my place to say anything, but I think Kim is just spewing for a chance to cut Jack down. I mean, bugger it! Karen would never leave you in the lurch to chat up the Captain."

John held up a hand to stay Jeff. "I do not choose to attend to a whispering campaign of

idle rumours and innuendo."

Jeff, seeing the light, started to sidle towards the door.

"But Jeff, if I did happen to give credence to a particular anecdote, I would take into account the circumstances at the time of the incident and the state of mind of the people in question. Do I make myself clear?" John's voice was stern and unyielding.

Jeff eased out the door saying, "Yeah mate, crystal."

Nash assumed that Mitchell would get his point across to any other scandal mongers that he would not be trifled with on this matter.

Karen, needless to say, did not go to the big party at the tavern. She had urged Kelly to go with Cort, but she had sent him on ahead and stayed with Karen.

They played cards and drank coolers. They didn't speak any more about what had happened. Couldn't really do much now anyways. John would either believe Kim's half-truths, or he would wait to hear her side of it.

She wasn't ready to face him. Kelly insisted she sleep over, and she was glad the cottage was far enough away not to hear the music and noise that would be blasting through the hotel.

Despite her anxiety, she went to sleep almost immediately.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny. Karen debated with Kelly over the wisdom of playing in the tournament.

"I think you should go", Kelly professed. "Show everybody that you have nothing to hide. If you're absent, people are only going to think the worst. You just go; hold you head up high, and dare them to say boo to you."

Karen was still on the fence. At least Jack wouldn't be there. John was supposed to be though.

"Cort and I have to go early and organize things, so think about it and you do what's best for you", Kelly advised.

When they left, she had a strong temptation to call John. In the end, she resisted the impulse.

John hadn't slept well and had no intention of golfing today. What had kept him awake most of the night was thinking about the skirmish that had taken place with Sid when he and Karen had come back from their picnic.

He had let Sid say reprehensible things to Karen. It didn't disturb him to have Sid babble on about him. He was used to being made sport of. However, letting Karen be verbally abused was another kettle of fish.

He ought to have stood up for her. She was right to be furious. He should have put Sid in his place. At the very least, he should have made it clear that he would not tolerate his badmouthing. Instead, he had been complacent and had let Karen down.

A slow fire began to be stoked inside him. He could still set things right. Sometimes a man had to engage in battle for causes he believed in or people he purported to love.

He dressed in a hurry. This was one combat he couldn't postpone anymore. He went down the back stairs to tackle his adversary.

He rapped hard on Sid's door. There was no answer. He knocked again even louder and was surprised to see the door open on its own. It wasn't even locked.

John turned to leave when it occurred that he should leave a note for Sid that he wanted to see him. He entered the room simply to find a piece of paper and pen to scribble his message.

Sid had a large workstation that housed his computer. John found a blank piece of paper and was shifting through the items on his desk to find a pen when his attention was arrested by seeing his name in bold type on a computer printout.

He picked it up to read.

"Operation S-NASH"

Objective: To purge the Point of Karen Summer's presence.

Plan of Attack:

1. Make KS see she's doing more harm than good for Nash.
2. Hint of a mutual enchantment between Nash and Ainslee.
3. Work on Karen's poor body image and stress the fact she's becoming fat again.

John's eyebrows rose as he skimmed down the rest of the list until he reached the final point.

10. Show Karen what she's been afraid to face. Nash will never take a stand for her, will always be willing to be led on a leash and will never be a strong, powerful force in her life.

Written in red underneath this was Mission Accomplished. Nash acted on cue and was predictable in his behaviour when provoked, which meant he did NOTHING. This was almost too easy.

The slow fire that had started in the pit of John's stomach blazed and branched out until it consumed his whole body and mind. He not only saw red flames; he saw his life flash past. He recalled instantly all those events and chances where he had let the volcano inside remain dormant. He remembered each one vividly where he had been less of a man because it had been easier to do so. No great ups and no great falls. He only had ever taken risks in his schooling and work.

That would end today at this hour in this actual chamber. He left the door wide open as he vaulted his way out and down the stairs.

In the end, after much hemming and hawing, Karen acted on Kelly's counsel. By the time she walked to the golf course, there were people everywhere.

Refreshment carts were being set up all along the route. She had never seen so much golf regalia assembled in one area. There were sun umbrellas, visors, sunglasses, shirts, shorts, carts, caddies, clubs, food and drinks.

Jeff came up to say hello.

"Wow what a turnout", Karen raved. "Jeffrey must be thrilled."

"Yeah, every bastard and his dog has shown up", Jeff agreed.

She didn't even know whom she would be teamed up with.

"Jeffrey has everything organized. The teams are posted right where Trisha and Daniel are", he pointed out to her.

She thanked him and headed over in that direction. She was more than dismayed to see Sid right in the middle of the action. Why the fuck would he be here?, she wondered. He hadn't signed up.

He looked utterly redic in a dark red Ralph Lauren suit with the requisite designer shades. Mr. Narcissus probably craved the undivided focus of both his ladies who were playing. The sight of Sid revolted her.

Karen poured herself a lemonade and started chatting with Laura and Kaz.

"Who's that on the bike?", Zack asked to no one in particular. "He's riding it like he's in the Tour de France."

Cort who had been practising a few putts looked up and squinted. He also saw someone riding at a reckless speed over the grassy knoll. "Can't tell, but you're right. He's sure putting the pedal to the floor." Cort then took another glance as the cyclist came closer.

"We might have trouble. It's Nash", he warned over his shoulder, already heading fast for Biebe and White.

Cort alerted John and Bud.

John Biebe found it hard to take Cort's warning seriously. "Cort, come on now. It's Nash. He doesn't have a mean spirit in him. What do you think he's going to do?"

Nevertheless, the four men followed John as he jumped off the bike without braking, almost falling in his haste to alight. Nash made straight for the crowd.

Biebe approached him in a friendly manner. "John, it's good to see you come out. But you didn't need to hightail it here. We haven't even started."

He was astonished when Nash pushed past him brusquely almost knocking him into Bud. "What the hell?", he exclaimed.

Nash looked over the heads of the women and into the eyes of his brothers looking for a particular pair. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Terry advancing towards him. He pivoted and stretched out a hand in a gesture that plainly said, "Don't even try it!"

Terry respected the motion and cocked an eyebrow back at Biebe and White.

Bud said in a hushed tone. "He's looking for Jack. He doesn't know that he's not here."

Biebe nodded in assent. "Looks like. Never thought I'd see John with steam coming out of his ears."

The women too had become aware of John Nash who looked like a bull ready to charge.

Sid, oblivious to anything but his own entertainment, was smiling at Lady and had wrapped his arm around her waist. He was whispering in her ear what he would be doing to her later that evening.

Without warning Nash snatched Lady's arm and dragged her away from Sid. "Forgive me, my dear", he apologized to her for his rudeness.

Sid almost had apoplexy when he saw who had separated them. "What do you think you're doing? Have you gone fucking mental? You really are loony tunes!"

Nash didn't reply but hauled back his right fist and let it smash into Sid's face.

Sid staggered back from the unexpected blow. He regained his footing, but his nose was oozing heavily. He spat goo out and doubled up his fists ready to rush John.

Before he even managed a jab, Nash punched him a second time in the stomach. When he was doubled over, John drop-kicked him in the teeth.

Sid went down and Nash kicked him again with all his might in his ribcage.

Blue nanogoo came spurting out everywhere.

John's brothers were crippled, dumbfounded by this chain of events.

"Bugger it!" was heard from Lachlan. "Fuck me!" was discerned from Andy. "Holy shit!" came out of the mouth of Zack. The others expressed similar sentiments in the same colourful language.

Finally, when Terry and Bud regained their senses and raced to pull John off, Nash stood up. He too was covered in Sid's blue so-called blood. He raised his hands to let the boys know that the beating was over.

Nash leaned over the dazed Sid, grabbed him by his coif and twisted his head up. He threatened loudly in deep harsh tones. "If you ever so much as breathe in the same direction as Karen without my express permission, I will personally see to it that your little microchip you call a brainisrippedout and mashed like a pumpkin. Then your unattired, designer suitless carcass will be left to rot without even a decent internment."

John let Sid's head drop with a thud, spat on the ground beside him and walked away.

Bud went back to Biebe. "Nash decked Sid and not Aubrey? Go figure."

Biebe shook his head still not quite believing the violence he had seen erupt in Nash. "I'd rather have it Sid any day."

Karen was slow to pick up on the newsflash. When John had rode in, she was indisposed in one of the port-a-potties that had been erected. Coming out, she ascertained a general buzz of excitement in the air but had no idea as to its cause.

She saw a ripple in the crowd as someone pushed into the centre. Being short, she couldn't see over many heads.

When the fight broke out, people parted like the Red Sea. She heard the sound of flesh meeting flesh before she actually saw Sid reel back. His assailant turned and she caught his profile. Karen's heart literally paused in mid-beat.

"OMG, OMG, OMG!" she couldn't stop uttering it.

There was her John in front of his family and friends making a horrible scene and thrashing the tar out of Sid who was a formidable fiend and who could quite easily turn things around. Usually it took two or three men to subdue Sid.

What could have made John snap like that? She wasn't close enough to hear John's parting words to his combatant.

Like someone was walking over her grave, Karen suddenly felt chills and goosebumps pop out on her skin. She was afraid and instinctively tried to hide behind the tallest person near her. Luckily, Trisha had long legs. She ducked down behind her.

The men left Nash alone. Obviously, he had settled a grudge in the time-honoured way that men do. They respected him for that and gave him a wide berth.

But John wasn't finished searching. There was one other person he needed to find. This time, his eyes dropped and he studied the ladies' faces. He saw a bright movement of colour hunch down on his left side.

He peered closer and identified it was a woman. What was the colour of her hair? A grim expression crossed his face as he recognized the figure.

Karen, still concealing herself behind Trisha, gasped when she stirred slightly to the right.

"Trisha!" she hissed loudly. "For fuck's sakes, don't move if you value my life."

It was too late. Everyone was now looking at her, and all Karen could see was John barrelling down on her.

She thought about fleeing but John grabbed her hand. "You're coming with me", he commanded in a tone she had never heard him use.

He literally yanked her after him. His long-legged stride was forcing her to run to keep up with him.

"John, please stop. This is so embarrassing", she pleaded.

He paid her no mind.

"Someone's in big doo doo", Zack stated the obvious.

"You don't think he'll hurt her do you?"

They all couldn't believe who asked the question. It was Kim who now looked very young and very sorry. He, like the others, assumed John would be angry at Karen because of her "alleged" dalliance with Jack.

Terry dismissed him with a snort of disgust. "You would only have your self to blame then, wouldn't you?"

At Kim's glance of utter remorse, Terry let him off the hook. "Nah, John would never harm a lady. But it does look like she's going to get a stern talking-to."

Part Fourteen

John didn't let up on his pace, as he hijacked Karen, until they were almost home, nor did he let go of her.

In spite of all her breathless questions that she tried to shout out about what was going on, he didn't enlighten her.

Karen who had never seen John this outraged just assumed she was about to get her comeuppance about Jack Aubrey. What had happened with Sid blew her away, but she couldn't figure out why he had been the target.

She was scared and not scared at the same time. She wasn't worried that John would turn on her physically. She knew he would never do that. But she was fearful that she wouldn't be able to calm him down enough that he would hear her version of events. If he chose to end things between them summarily, then it would be a great tragedy.

In Karen's mind, she hadn't been disloyal with Jack. It was what she had told the Captain. She simply wanted comfort without analysis. She craved that abandonment that she had shared with John many many times. It wouldn't have mattered who it was. She had just needed big strong arms, an inviting smile and warm lips.

John climbed the tavern stairs two at a time forcing Karen to make tracks. Opening their apartment, he practically tossed her onto the sofa.

"John, please, let me...."

He butted in, in a more sedate tone than he had used initially at the golf course. "I don't want you to say a word. It's high time for you to listen."

She shut her mouth.

John went to the kitchen to get a rag to wipe off Sid's residue. When he came back out, he appraised her with his hands on his hips. Yes, he had thrown the fear of God into her. Now, he could finally get somewhere.

He began to pace the living room. "I hate to having to resort to these brute tactics to make a point with you, but I saw no other way to break through your obstinacy."

Karen was confused. What did this preamble have to do with Sid or Jack?

"I haven't been able to make head or tails of you for some time. During the past three weeks, I've been trying to figure out why you've changed. You've been so quiet and subdued."

She started to speak but he held up his hand.

"I, at first, assumed things weren't well with your family or at work. I kept waiting for you to come to me, to open up, to lean on. You didn't."

Karen then realized this whole episode of John taking charge was not about Jack at all but something completely different and deadly more serious.

"So I reassessed what was taking place. The problem must lie at my door. I was sure of it. I couldn't fault you in the least if you were utterly bled dry by my constant fluctuations in mood with my illness. Again, I tried to open up the lines of communication, but you shut them all down."

As she heard his words, Karen felt such a wave of regret pass through her soul. She had no idea John would feel so useless or helpless in their relationship. Her only thought had been to protect him. She didn't conceive his pain at being locked out.

Catching the stricken look on her face, John sat down beside her. "It's not just your's or my decision what happens to us. It's ours. Alicia tried to make it hers as well, and I will not allow you to do it too. I can understand the reasoning behind it, but I cannot and will not condone it any longer. Not once, have you ever depended on me until this week when I abandoned you after Sid waylaid us. How do you think that makes me feel?"

Karen put her hand on his knee. "John, I have relied on you in ways that have been less obvious."

"In the bedroom, yes, or when everything was rosy", he agreed. "I believe I failed you somehow to make you think you could not come to me when the rain fell or when lightening struck."

He tilted her chin up as her eyes felt moist with tears. "The sun doesn't always have to

shine. I want to feel your problems, your concerns, and your pain. It must work both ways. That's what people in love do. They bear the burden for each other. They're each other's strength. Don't pretend with me. I know you're not invincible.

You need to comprehend that I do not want or need you as my nurse, mother, psychiatrist or keeper. Anthony takes care of my medical matters. I already have a mother, and I should be my own guardian. Do you understand that I feel less of a man when you take on these roles?"

She nodded slowly, and her big blue eyes filled with such sorrow that it almost made him stop where he was.

"In the past, I haven't taken responsibility for my illness so I don't really blame you for thinking that you had to be my salvation. I did a lot of shutting out myself. That will change. Your role is my friend, lover and lifemate.

I know you love me Karen, and I have never doubted that since the day you first told me. I believe in that love. I cherish it. Some days, it's all I have to get me through the hard moments.

I don't wish to hurt you with words. I know the reasons for your silence, but you didn't take into consideration my pride or give me enough credit. That cut me as sharp as a knife."

"Oh John", Karen sobbed. "I'm so sorry that I didn't trust in you, that I didn't trust in our love. I'd rather die than have you feel this way."

He lay her head on his shoulder and felt tears emerge in his own eyes. "There's something else we need to examine."

She raised her head and sniffed. "What?"

"Your own state of health."

She swallowed.

"I know that you have an eating disorder, and no, Kelly didn't tell me. I put two and two together. Your stomach cramps puzzled me and the long spells in the washroom. I found this empty vial in the garbage. It fell out of the bag as I was trying to tie it."

John reached into his pocket and took out a bottle of laxatives. "You were barely eating and exercising more. It was my own negligence that kept me from admitting that you were losing weight far too drastically.

I did go to Chelle and asked her directly if this was a first-time and brand new occurrence. I had to pull it out of her that you had suffered from this for a while when

you first came to the Point. She told me that when you came back and met me, it seemed to be in remission. Is this the case?", he gently probed.

"Yes", she answered simply. "I was seeing a psychiatrist before at home, but I stopped when I attained a more normal weight. It's become a problem again. I will make an appointment with Anthony this week, I promise."

"We will", he corrected her. "I have no intention of letting you go through something like this on your own. I want to know how to help."

She nodded again, too overcome with emotion to say words.

"I love you just the way you are." John tried to get her to smile by frisking her. "Everything seems perfectly in the right place to me."

She giggled in spite of herself.

"Now, there's only one more thing left on my "to discuss" list."

Karen waited patiently.

"Sid."

She groaned and covered her head with cushions.

"I didn't, at first, know where some of your insecurities were coming from. I know you tried to hide the fact that you were insecure from me. I didn't see that you were until it was too late. That's when it hit me how blind I was and also what a fool I'd been.

It was staring me right in the face. The minute you came home from the gazebo with Sid that morning, I should have connected the dots.

The man, if he can be called that, has not an inch of moral fibre in him and is totally irredeemable. He fed you lies and worked on your vulnerabilities.

I should have fought for you and fought him when he attacked you after the picnic. Again, I let my pride get in the way and sacrificed your's in the process. For that, I apologize most dearly.

When I acknowledged my qualms this morning, I knew I had to make reparation for my inaction and your shame. I know I surprised a good many people today with my conduct but, you, my love, are worth it." John pulled her onto his lap while she nestled into him.

"I hope I've erased all the doubt in your mind."

"Every smidgen of it", she murmured.

"You know after all this time, you still continue to amaze me each and every single day." He brushed her hair back from her face.

They had made love with such sweetness and tenderness. They then had curled up to sleep in each other's arms.

When they both awoke, it was early evening. John was famished, and even Karen confessed she could eat a small horse, well maybe a pony.

"I think we should go downstairs and mingle, so people know you haven't murdered me", she teased.

"I was pretty intense, wasn't I?", John owned up.

"Yes darling, you were. I mean I knew you wouldn't physically harm me", Karen said over her shoulder dressing to go out.

John shocked her by smacking her bottom soundly as she bent over to slip on a skirt.

"Ouch!", she yelped.

"Don't be too sure. I was strongly tempted once or twice to take you across my knee. I still might just to keep you on your toes."

Karen grinned at him. "The new and improved John Nash. I think I like him." She kissed him just as soundly.