V. Pumpkin Hours to Desserts

MELISSA stared at the screen and contemplated Kimberlee’s email. She felt hurt and confused and angry. This breach in their friendship could not have come at a worse time.

Scott had returned home the second morning, just in time to roughhouse with the boys. He interacted with her seldom and in a cold, detached sort of way.

In turn, she didn’t look at him directly. She stared out the window or kept her eyes on her tasks while she responded to him with as few words as possible. In front of the children they both kept up a false cheerfulness by only speaking to them and not each other. No matter that the weather was nice, she was never warm inside or out.

Is this how it will be from now on? Will we maintain this charade until the kids are grown up? Or give up and become like other families, split in two?

She admitted to herself that she had crossed a line. *But Scott crossed it first,* she thought. There was no way she’d apologize when he started it.

*I sound like a child in the schoolyard. Well, dealing with Scott is like dealing with a child. I’ve been saying that to Kimmee for years.*

Her train of thought had brought her right back to her friend and their predicament. When she and Scott and had blowups in the past, she could always find a sympathetic shoulder to cry on. *Why did Kimmee have to change? Damn those man-lessons.*

Melissa didn’t begrudge Kimberlee’s efforts to improve her life. But she hadn’t expected them to take her in such an odd direction. *There’s a good reason for everything Scott does? What kind of nonsense is that?*
She thought about their last conversation. As upset as Melissa had been at the time, she’d still noticed the difference in Kimberlee’s reaction. She was calmer, more confident.

*Kimmee hasn’t been confident about men ever.* Melissa’s curiosity was piqued again. *What’s her grandmother teaching her? Could it get me out of this mess?*

The two friends had always preferred talking to email, which they used rarely and only in times of strain. Reaching back from her side of the gap, she hit “Reply” and typed:

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Hi K - I’m okay. Scott came home the next morning but you could freeze oil when we’re in the same room. I don’t know how I’ll ever forgive him. Keeping up a front for the kids. Would love to see you. Come by sometime next week? Luv, M
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KIMBERLEE drove up the highway Wednesday evening with dread. The moment she had been hoping to avoid was nearly upon her. Within minutes, she would be seated in front of her grandmother, talking about sex. And not only her grandmother.

Uncharacteristically, her grandmother had called her the night before. She told her that Karen’s husband, Mike, would be joining them for their lesson. “Why?” Kimberlee had asked bluntly. *I’m rude when I’m tired.*

Claudia replied, “I promised Karen and Mike I would help them with the problems their quest for a child has created in their sex life. Now that we have worked on the first word of the Hero Language, I can keep that promise.”

“Do I have to be there for that?” Kimberlee asked, trying to sound put out instead of scared. *Have mercy, please,* she begged silently.

“*We were going to have to cover this topic at some point, Kimberlee,*” Claudia answered, with no sign of budging. “*A woman cannot understand men, and bring out the best in them, without understanding their relationship to sex.*”

Kimberlee had acquiesced at the time and now experienced her regret in the pit of her stomach. It was bad enough having to discuss this topic among women, challenged all the while to conceal her shame and embarrassment. Having to endure this conversation, in the company of a man whom she’d only met over Thanksgiving dinner, was unimaginable.

She hoped that Claudia would do most of the talking. If she could manage to sit tight and take notes, she might get through this without revealing her greatest wound and deepest fears.

KAREN had arranged to meet Mike at Claudia and Burt’s house after their yoga class. She was curious and a little anxious to see how incorporating Mike into their session would affect the conversation — and Kimberlee.

Since discovering that everything Mike did around the house was personal and all about the difference it would make for her, she had seen their life with new eyes.
Instead of treating everything her diffuse awareness brought to her attention as if it had an inherent good in being accomplished, she looked to see specifically what each task would provide.

This process had two distinct outcomes. It caused her to be both more articulate and appreciative with Mike, who was providing everything from trash take-out to furniture rearranging. And, it caused her to leave things undone after she weighed the energy expenditure against the actual — not assumed — benefit. The home management part of her life finally looked bearable.

About tonight, though, she was both nervous and excited. Nervous because she knew that Mike had been upset about their sex life for quite some time. And excited because she knew the difference Claudia’s information had already made in her marriage. On the topic of sex, if Claudia could accomplish a fraction of what she’d done for trash, maybe they could get pregnant — and love sex again.

She’d waited years for Mike to be “ready” to start a family and only with Claudia’s insights had she been able to understand the source of his reticence. Her newfound compassion had evaporated the resentment she’d felt. Then, shortly before Christmas, Mike announced that they could stop using birth control and try to get pregnant.

Karen had attacked the baby-making project with all her pent-up maternal instinct and well-developed masculine pursuit of results. She bought all the books and spent hours researching fertility on the Internet. She had ovulation kits and basal thermometers. She’d read *Choosing the Sex of Your Baby* and was doing everything possible to give Mike a son. This, even though he said he didn’t care about the gender.

She’d interrupted Mike’s workday with “Fertile Myrtle” text messages, demanding that he come home and impregnate her. In the beginning it was kind of fun. But after several months with no success, it had become a chore.

Having read that it took an average of twelve months for women to get pregnant, Karen was giving it a year before she went to see a fertility specialist. She knew that route was expensive and could quickly eat through their savings. Mike said, with a wink, that he was willing to use whatever technology was available but preferred the old-fashioned approach.

Since she didn’t feel comfortable explaining all this to Claudia in front of Kimberlee, Karen laid it out when she called to invite Mike for the session. Her mentor had listened patiently and, typically, said something incomprehensible: “Karen, the problem is that focusing on getting pregnant is redundant and self-defeating.”

“How can it be redundant? The point is to get pregnant,” Karen replied.

Claudia had explained matter-of-factly, “Focusing on getting pregnant is redundant because, from the point of view of biology, the point of sex is reproduction. Unless you have a reason to worry about your fertility, focusing on getting pregnant is unnecessary and even harmful. If you focus on having great sex, the sex will take care of getting pregnant. And you will have more fun in the meantime. Couples that focus on getting pregnant often ruin their sex lives and the intimacy that depends upon it.”
Karen had made Claudia repeat herself, all the while feeling sick to her stomach. That is exactly what had happened to her and Mike. Until recently the distance between them had been growing to chasm-like proportions. The last few weeks’ spontaneity had helped, but how could she fix it entirely?

“Are you saying we should only have sex when we want to? And not think about whether I’m ovulating or not?” Karen asked, still skeptical.

“Actually,” Claudia had replied, “I am not saying that either. Having sex when both of you want to is almost always insufficient, even when you are not trying to create a new life. Most couples need to have sex more often than that.”

“Huh?”

“Karen, let us save this part for Wednesday night. Kimberlee and Mike need to hear it too.”

*What could she possibly have meant?* Karen thought as she pulled up to the house.

If you weren’t trying to get pregnant, why would you have sex more than you want to?

KIMBERLEE appreciated the growing darkness as the four of them gathered around the garden table; Mike looked a little strange on an ordinary kitchen chair. She arranged her note pad and pens conspicuously, silently declaring her intention to merely listen and record.

Mike suddenly blurted, “Karen said that you said we’re supposed to have sex more than we want to. I’ve been doing that for months and, believe me, it’s a bummer.”

He looked lamely at Karen, “Sorry, Darlin’, nothin’ personal. But sperm-on-demand sex is lacking most of the elements I’m looking for in a love life.”

Claudia smiled at him affectionately. “Let me explain.”

“Please do!”

Kimberlee kept her eyes lowered. Claudia began, “What is normal for couples is to have sex when you both want to. That is usually fine in the beginning when sexual tension is high. The tension gets sex started and that is always the most difficult hurdle. But as time goes on, two people wanting sex at the exact same moment, when conditions are favorable and the opportunity exists is like trying to line up the moon and the stars. Especially since sex drives depend greatly upon hormone levels for both men and women.”

She added assertively, “I believe you cannot leave something as important as your sex life in the hands of something as undependable as your bodies’ cyclical and circumstantial hormones.”

“Now I’m really confused,” Mike growled. Kimberlee tensed.

“Let me put it this way, using the word that will make the most sense to you.” Claudia paused. “Mike, do you ever want to take out the trash? Are you ever overcome by a desire to do that?”

Mike laughed. “No. Never.”

“Then why do you do it? Besides the obvious that it needs to be done.”
Mike looked over at Karen. “Well, for years I took out the trash when I remembered because it upset Karen when I didn’t. But that changed after what she learned from you last weekend. Now I do it gladly because of what she told me it provides for her.”

“Exactly!” Claudia grinned. Mike looked puzzled.

“What exactly?” Karen asked.

“The modern context we have adopted for sex is one of ‘Wanting’ being the cause of our sex lives,” Claudia said. “This is obviously an improvement over ‘Duty.’ It was certainly a human rights victory when women could legally refuse their husbands whenever they did not ‘want’ to have sex. But wanting to have sex is still too puny. It almost never makes sex happen often enough or reliably enough. Healthy sex lives are too important to a vital union to depend upon sexual desire.”

“If it’s not ‘wanting’ that you think should make sex happen, and it’s not duty or my ovulation, what is supposed to get the party started?” Karen asked.

Mike suddenly beamed. “I know.”

“Yes, Mike?” Claudia asked, and Kimberlee looked up long enough to notice her eyes twinkling with satisfaction.

“It’s the same as me gladly taking out the trash, even when I don’t want to. Because of what it provides. You’re saying providing is supposed to cause sex. Right?” He immediately revised himself, “Well, maybe not ‘supposed to,’ but I think you’re saying that it would work better if sex was based on ‘providing,’ which is a kind of commitment to your partner, instead of physically ‘wanting.’ Am I right?”

Claudia smiled at Mike. “You are absolutely right. When you have sex based upon what it will provide for your partner, your attention is now on the benefit to your partner and your union instead of on something as unreliable as physical impulse.”

Karen looked distressed again. “But Claudia, we were just telling you about how having sex when I was ovulating, instead of when we wanted to, killed our sex life. Won’t having sex to ‘provide’ make it as dry and boring? Isn’t there a way to get the excitement back? Like we did last year after I learned how to listen to Mike?”

“I never said we were going to throw out desire altogether,” Claudia replied with a smile. “That is what makes sex juicy and fun. I am recommending you not have it be the source of your sex life. Try thinking of it this way: If you are not waiting for ‘wanting sex’ to cause your sex life, to get the party started as you said, you can consciously cause wanting to spice up a particular sexual encounter. And I am going to show you how to do that.”

Karen sighed. “Oh good. I don’t think I can take another six months of this. Mike is a bear when our sex life is off.”

Claudia smiled, glancing at Mike. “And I am sure he could say you are not such a pleasant person to be around either.”

Mike coughed into his fist. Karen stuck her tongue out at him playfully. Kimberlee kept her pen moving, watching out of the corner of her eye.

“This is perfect,” Claudia declared. “Let us start right here. If you are going to have providing be the source of your sex life, it is critical to know what sex provides for your partner. This is the first item of information that every couple must share with each other if they are going to have a delicious sexual partnership.”

Mike replied, “Isn’t it obvious?”
Kimberlee panicked and looked up as Claudia responded, “You may be surprised. Who wants to go first?”

Kimberlee saw Karen stiffen. She could feel herself blushing. Oh, please, no, please, please. Mike looked at them both and, it seemed to Kimberlee, decided to come to their rescue.

“I can go first,” he said. “Should I speak in general or be more explicit?”

Claudia nodded, “Excellent question, Mike. It would be good for you and Karen to be more explicit when you have a chance to talk about this privately. Specifically, I want you to share with each other what different kinds of sexual experiences provide. Such as the difference between a quickie and a banquet. Between ‘making love’ and ‘having sex.’ And what happens when you include certain activities. For example, plenty of kissing can alter what a particular incidence of sex provides.”

Kimberlee shifted uncomfortably, ducked her head, and wanted to melt into the darkness. This is gross.

Claudia concluded, “But for now, if you are willing, I know it would help Karen and Kimberlee to have a better idea of what sex provides for a man in general.”

Mike nodded and touched Karen’s arm. “Is this okay with you, Babe?”

When Karen didn’t answer right away, Kimberlee looked up. To her surprise, Karen was watching her and she blushed. She held still as Karen gazed thoughtfully into her eyes. She smiled tentatively, half hoping Karen would say “no.” But half hoping Karen would allow it.

Karen smiled and looked back at Mike. “Sure, Honey. Thank you for being willing to talk about it. If I had a chance to find out what sex provides for a man, any man, at Kimberlee’s age, maybe we wouldn’t be in this pickle.”

Kimberlee felt her face get hot. “Am I that pathetic?” she blurted.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Kim. I’ve been married for nearly twenty years and I’m still mostly in the dark about sex. I think all women need to hear more about sex from men. Real men.”

Claudia looked at each of them. “Shall we?”

After they each nodded, Mike sat thoughtfully for a few long moments and then began. Since Kimberlee had no intention of speaking again, it wasn’t hard to practice what Claudia had taught them about listening to men. She soon began writing furiously, not wanting to forget a word.

“Well,” Mike said, focusing on Claudia, “as a home-builder, I think of sex as different structural parts. Physically, the act of sex fills a need, a hunger, a distracting ache that grows unbearable over time. The hunger grows more slowly as I get older, taking days instead of hours, but it’s still a strong physical need, a yearning, to feel Karen … frankly, to be inside of her.”

He paused for a sip of water. “There is also the release that happens with climax. When all the tension that’s built up in my body over time floods out of me, leaving my body spent and relaxed. Like someone pushed a reset button.”

Claudia nodded encouragement. Kimberlee tried not to fidget but her body was responding in surprisingly stirring ways to Mike’s candid description. She watched him through lowered lashes.

He continued, “I can’t prove it but I’d swear intercourse supplies essential nutrients that can’t be found in any food or beverage. It gives me the fuel to be a
man; to be protective and to provide for Karen. Without it, I am inevitably emasculated.”

“Emotionally, sex is the one time — besides watching a great race — when I can let go.” He took Karen’s hand. “I don’t have to be careful or conceal myself. I’m not on guard. I can be vulnerable and it’s okay.”

He looked directly at Karen, “When these small, soft hands touch my shoulders, my back, my face, I’m moved beyond words.”

He turned back to Claudia and stated simply, “When she gives herself to me, I melt. As I hold her and feel her holding me — all of me — I’m safe. I can be.”

Kimberlee looked up as Mike reached over and gently lifted off the tear sliding down Karen’s cheek. She smiled at him and he scooted his chair closer. Kimberlee’s heart took a little leap. When he looked back at Claudia, she nodded for him to continue.

Mike shrugged, “I don’t know if most men could or would talk about the spiritual side of sex, but they sometimes allude to it. The older I get, the more significant the spiritual aspect becomes. As I said, the physical part is not as urgent as it used to be, even though it’s still absolutely essential. But the emotional and spiritual parts, which blend together, are more important than ever.”

He paused and looked at Karen, “Which means that what I get out of sex depends more and more on my ability to make Karen happy in bed.”

Kimberlee glanced up. Karen looked pained but smiled through it.

“I know you said I should be more explicit later, and I will. But I think Kimberlee needs to know this.”

Kimberlee’s stomach clenched then eased as Mike clarified, “I wish every woman knew it.”

He sighed. “Almost everything great about sex depends on Karen feeling secure with me and letting herself experience my love for her in this way. When she surrenders to me and lets me give her pleasure, my entire spirit is altered. I’m lifted to another dimension. The boundaries blur. I flow into her and sometimes I feel her flowing into me. Afterwards, the connection I feel to her nurtures me for days. Truly. I’m not exaggerating.”

Kimberlee was stunned. She had nothing in her own sexual experience to validate Mike’s comments. And yet she knew, in the core of her being, that what he’d expressed was true for more than him. WOW, she thought. For the first time, sex seemed more than a dreaded predicament that inevitably complicated a relationship or ended one.

Mike placed both hands on the table. “That’s what sex provides for me. All that. There is no substitute. Nothing even comes close.”

KAREN wept quietly, having given up all attempts to keep it together. What a tumble of emotions, she thought, sadness, regret, gratitude, hope, even desire. No wonder Claudia wanted this information shared. She had no doubt that her teacher knew from long study and experience the kinds of things Mike would say.
“I’m sorry I didn’t know that,” she said, looking deeply into Mike’s eyes. “You didn’t?” he asked, amazed. “Isn’t it the same for you?”

She shook her head. “Not exactly like that. But to be honest, I’ve never thought sex was the same for you as for me. I thought my experience of sex was all those things — physical, emotional and spiritual. I thought sex was merely physical for you. And fun.”

Mike laughed. “I forgot to mention fun. It’s great fun. I can’t think of anything ‘funner.’” He grew serious, “You mean it, don’t you? You thought it meant less to me?”

“Yes,” she acknowledged, regretting the hurt in his face. “I’m sorry. I would have been more enthusiastic, even when I didn’t feel like it, if I’d known it meant all that to you.”

Karen felt tingles down her arms as it dawned on her. She looked at Claudia with amazement. “That’s what you’re talking about, isn’t it? Me having sex with Mike for what it will provide for him. Not caring whether I want to or not.”

Claudia smiled and nodded. “That is it, dear. And vice versa for him getting to provide for you. Would you be willing to tell Mike what sex provides for you?”

Karen’s stomach lurched. She looked at Mike, who smiled hopefully. She glanced at Kimberlee, who resembled a deer in headlights. She thought about her commitment to her marriage. And she thought about her longing to teach Claudia’s information to other women. If she couldn’t talk about sex in front of this group, what chance did she have to contribute to others? Suck it up.

“Oh boy,” she sighed. “I’ll have a go at it. Is it okay if I try doing it in Mike’s categories?”

“I think that is a great idea. It might help you to see the differences and the similarities in your experiences,” Claudia said.

Karen took a deep breath. It wasn’t enough to calm her. She tried another and began. “The hunger Mike spoke about I only experience when I’m ovulating. But it doesn’t last long; maybe a day and a half. If sex doesn’t happen during that time, the desire fades back to nothing, except when I feel an urge, to a lesser degree, the day before my period starts. Both times, this desire feels like being a ‘bitch in heat,’ to be a little graphic. Mike walks by and I catch myself checking out his crotch. That’s how I can always tell I’m ovulating, even without taking my temperature.”

She glanced quickly at Kimberlee and Mike and refocused on Claudia, who somehow felt safer to talk to.

“If we did have sex during that time — which was unlikely — I didn’t need or want foreplay. If Mike tried to be all romantic and touchy and tender, I’d get impatient. I’d be thinking, ‘Give it to me!’ The ‘it’ was his ejaculation. That’s all my body wanted. And when it got it, I felt calm again.”

Karen now looked over at Mike to see how he was taking this in. She didn’t dare look at Kimberlee.

He smiled at her ruefully and joked, “Now it’s my turn to say ‘I didn’t know.’ Especially that last part. If I’d known what you were after, I could have provided it without delay!”
He said more seriously, “But, I’m curious. You said it wasn’t likely that we’d have sex when you were ovulating. You were taking the pill. We weren’t using the rhythm method. I don’t understand why we didn’t have sex.”

Karen had to laugh. “Maybe because of the ‘bitch’ part. I’m not exactly attractive. The need my body has for sex has a way of turning you off almost every time.”

Mike looked guilty. “Oh, now I know what you mean. That’s the sex on demand that happened even before we were trying to get pregnant. Yeah, it’s a real turn off.”

Karen nodded. “I’ve been doomed. When I most need to have sex, when I have the most physical desire, is when I’m least likely to get it. It’s made me resentful. But I see no way out.”

She was surprised when Mike brightened. “What?” she asked.

“I have an idea,” he said with enthusiasm. “How about you tell me when you’re having those desperate needs and I’ll rescue you. I could charge in on my white horse, with my sword drawn, so to speak!” His eyes dancing mischievously.

Karen heard Claudia chuckle and saw Kimberlee’s cheeks darken as she kept her eyes on her notes. Karen shook her head with a smile. “Are you telling me that this notion of ‘providing’ could solve this too?”

Mike nodded, “Why not? I’m all over providing. I’m a king now, remember?”

Karen loved this. “Okay, I accept — gratefully. And to practice what Burt told me: What do you need from me to provide what I need?” She added, hastily, “Or should you tell me in private?”

Mike shook his head. “It’s pretty simple. Tell me when it’s one of those two days for you. I only need to be informed and I’ll do my duty.” He grinned. “Duty may be way last century, but as a man it’s still quite a motivator.”

Claudia nodded and spoke for the first time. “That is probably why men tried to motivate women with it, even in the area of sex. But we are not built the same, which means ‘duty’ does not have quite the same freedom in it for women as for men.”

Karen was intrigued and it seemed Kimberlee was too. “Freedom? Can you say more about that?” she asked.

Claudia shook her head. “I can see why you would want to know more — when I use the words ‘duty’ and ‘freedom’ in the same sentence. More on that another time.”

Karen chose to honor Claudia’s agenda and brought the question back to her real concern. “Mike, you’re saying that you ‘rescuing me’ from my ‘desperate need’ as a duty will be different than the demand you’ve felt in the past that was such a turnoff?”

Mike nodded. “Absolutely. In the past I’ve reacted to this weird, distasteful demand put on me. Now I can see it in the context of being a hero and a provider. That changes everything. It makes it an opportunity to take care of you.”

Karen felt herself choke up. She had barely begun saying what sex provided for her and already they had solved a big problem.

“Claudia, can I go on? If saying that little could change that much, I want to keep sharing what sex provides for me.”

Claudia nodded. “Please do. You have barely scratched the surface.”
Karen looked over at Kimberlee. She felt pity for the younger woman, who looked so sullen, and wondered what caused this conversation to be painful for her.

“I was talking about what sex provides for me physically and only addressed the simplest part,” she began. “I want Mike to know what else happens for me.”

Mike squeezed her hand, “As Claudia said, ‘Please do!’”

“I don’t know if you can understand this, Mike, since you are such a physical being — from your construction work to your fitness routine to your appreciation of beauty in all physical forms.”

“Try me,” he said.

Karen glanced at Claudia and Kimberlee and focused on Mike. She sighed. “The easiest way to say it is that sex makes me physical. When you touch me for an extended length of time, I get in my body. I inhabit it in a way that I don’t usually. I am embodied — instead of having a body that I dress and drag around. Inch by inch, caress by caress, tingle by tingle, my body wakes up and becomes alive and vital.”

She gulped. “You make me aware of my body in a good way. You make me feel beautiful.”

Mike grinned at her, “Cool. You are beautiful.”

Kimberlee still kept her head down, ostensibly focused on her notes. For this next part, Karen was grateful. “There’s this other thing. When you’re inside of me, every time I’m surprised at how it feels. I’m whole, I’m home.”

Karen shook her head. “And the darndest thing is that I can never remember that feeling for more than a few minutes afterwards. If I did, you’d never be lacking for sex.”

She laughed. “On the other hand, if I could remember it, you might not have time to work!”

“I’d be willing to explore that,” Mike teased.

Karen smiled and made herself continue. “I think I’ve blurred the lines between the physical, emotional and spiritual. But I can’t help it. Sex only remains physical when I’m ‘in heat.’ At any other time, the three domains flow together in a blend that’s never the same.”

Claudia nodded in encouragement. “Is there anything else that sex provides?”

Karen sorted through her private and even-more-private thoughts. Finally, she said, “Each act contributes its own dimension to sex. But I’d rather talk about that privately. I will say that kissing — lots and lots of kissing — makes sex the most personal for me and the most exciting.”

She frowned and searched for the words. “I know women are supposedly more articulate than men but I’m struggling to distinguish between the spiritual and the emotional. The way sex makes me physical seems to bring my spirit to Earth. I can be kinder, wiser, and more generous when I’m having sex regularly. I feel more feminine and youthful, more silly and more serene. Sex makes me more myself.”

She glanced over at a smiling Mike. “Guess that’s worth providing, huh?”

Mike squeezed her hand, “ Heck yeah!”
CLAUDIA reveled in what was being shared by Karen and Mike, as her heart ached for the obviously suffering Kimberlee, sitting stiffly in her chair. She knew her granddaughter, the daughter of her heart, would be mortified if asked to share her personal experience of sex. Claudia decided to take the conversation in a new direction.

“I want to talk about sex beyond the individual,” she began. “I want to explore, if you are willing, the impact of sex on your union.”

“What do you mean?” Mike asked.

“Each of you has shared what sex provides for you as an individual. And for that, sex is worth having more often than your bodies compel you. But sex is the physical representation of the spiritual bond that can grow between two people. And not only a representation — the actual expression.”

Now Karen’s interest was piqued. “What do you mean by ‘expression’?”

Claudia warmed to one of her favorite subjects. “Think about it this way: Human beings are a duality of the spiritual and the physical. A spiritual experience of communication and intimacy will almost immediately translate into a physical desire to be close. The spiritual experience can even make it feel uncomfortable to not be close. This is why an expression of love brings on an impulsive hug or a kiss. Or we may feel compelled to sit close for our bodies to touch, or to take another’s hand. The physical affection is an expression of spiritual intimacy. It expresses it and gives it a sense of wholeness, of completion.”

Karen interjected, “That’s it. That’s what I was trying to say earlier. I never thought of it as spiritual. When Mike and I are physically united, it feels right. The separation has ended.”

Claudia smiled. “And it can work in reverse as well. Which is another reason I encourage couples to have sex more often than their physical desire is telling them to. The physical union can reestablish the spiritual connection. It can heal it.”

At the word “heal,” Claudia noticed Kimberlee’s narrow shoulders tighten even more. She thought, We have got to wrassle this alligator to the ground. Tonight! “I think we have covered enough for now,” she added with a wink to Karen and Mike. “And while the evening is cooling off, it seems to be heating up as well. Could we four reconvene Saturday to finish this conversation?”

Karen chuckled at her innuendo and asked politely, “You want Mike to come again?”

Claudia turned to Mike, “If you are willing, there are several things I still want to go over. I call it Sex from Beginning to End. There are six pieces of information couples need to exchange to ensure a satisfying sexual experience every time. Karen could relay them to you, but I think it helps to get your perspective.” She glanced purposefully at Kimberlee’s studiously downturned head. “Again, if you are willing. We could meet in the afternoon.”

Mike nodded in understanding. “I’d be happy to. Around two?”

As they all began to rise, Claudia reached out and grasped Kimberlee’s hand. “I am going to see Mike and Karen to the door. But I need to discuss something with you. Will you wait for me?”

Kimberlee nodded, barely looking up. She mumbled, as she sat back down, “Bye Karen. Bye Mike. Thanks for everything.”
Karen patted Kimberlee’s shoulder as she walked by, giving her an affectionate squeeze. Kimberlee looked miserable as she sat hunched in the magnificent chair her grandfather had carved especially for her. She currently bore little resemblance to the glorious woman in the “future portrait” Burt had carved on the seat back.

Claudia made fresh coffee for Kimberlee and put water on for tea. She reorganized the mugs, tea, cream, sugar and honey on the tray, buying time to organize her thoughts. She had consciously avoided this topic for more than twenty years, all the while looking for — hoping for — an opening that had never materialized. Now she was taking the proverbial bull by the horns and hoped she would not regret it. As Claudia left the kitchen, she added a box of tissues to her tray.

She found Kimberlee as miserable as she had left her; hunched over in her chair, staring numbly at her notes, wrapping her sweater tightly around her. After setting down the tray, Claudia cleared her throat.

“Kimberlee, I love you with all my heart. I have waited all these years hoping that what happened to you as a child would mend, hoping life and love would heal you.”

Kimberlee’s head shot up, eyes flaring in the dim light. “You know what happened to me?”

Claudia shook her head sadly. “Not specifically. I only guessed after you changed drastically from the happy-go-lucky spirit I knew to a quiet, reserved, suspicious child. I have since studied the effects of child molestation a great deal, in the off chance that I might one day be able to help you.”

Tears rolled down Kimberlee’s cheeks. “I can’t talk about it,” she choked out.

Claudia put her hand on top of Kimberlee’s and felt her stiffen. “You do not have to, if you do not want to. My only request is that you give me a chance to share what I have learned and concluded. It could set you free.”

Kimberlee suddenly grabbed the box of tissues and cradled them in her lap. She nodded, “Okay.”

Claudia sent up a silent prayer. To Kimberlee she said, “Forgive me if I am not as articulate about this as I am in our lessons. I have never shared my observations with a victim before.”

Kimberlee eyes narrowed at the word “victim” but she nodded again.

“As near as I can tell, the process of child molestation is one of the cruelest results of human instinct and human need colliding.”

Kimberlee was clearly surprised by this opening statement.

“As a female, the instinct to please and avoid displeasing is incredibly powerful. Our instincts tell us that our lives depend upon being liked, being found agreeable, and not upsetting or disappointing anyone. Grown women find it difficult to say ‘no’ when there is the slightest chance it will anger a man.”

“Add to that the instincts of being ‘smaller and weaker.’ They compel us to adapt to be attractive to and supportive of whoever is perceived as ‘bigger and stronger.’ An adult would be perceived as bigger and stronger by a child. And a male adult would be perceived as infinitely bigger and stronger by a female child.”

Claudia reached out to Kimberlee again. This time she didn’t stiffen at her touch. “May I attempt to surmise what happened to you?” she asked quietly.

Kimberlee met her gaze momentarily. “Okay.”
Claudia took a deep breath. “I am guessing it went something like this: probably a neighbor, since your mother does not tolerate even male friends.” She paused and Kimberlee nodded slightly.

“Without a father or any father figures, the attention of any man would have been extremely powerful for you.”

She paused as she saw Kimberlee swallow uncomfortably. The young woman grabbed a handful of tissues and wept quietly, even as she nodded for Claudia to continue.

“A man’s need for sex is more intense than most women can imagine. Unhealthy men do not stop to examine the appropriateness of meeting their needs with a child. This makes them dangerous people. It is never appropriate with a child. These people usually may not mean harm but they cause it nevertheless. I am so very sorry.”

Kimberlee suddenly sobbed loudly. Claudia watched for a release of her pain and when it had not come, after a long while, she ventured another guess. “Kimberlee, listen to me. Are you blaming yourself? The child is never to blame. Never.”

Kimberlee blurted, “But I liked it! Not all of it, but some of it! The attention, the presents, the flattery. I should have said ‘no.’ I should have told my mother. I’m so ashamed.” She burst into tears all over again.

Claudia sighed and waited while Kimberlee cried herself out. It was a long time coming and exactly what needed to happen. She resisted the desire to touch her, letting Kimberlee initiate comfort.

Finally, when Kimberlee had wiped her face and calmed herself, Claudia purposely used her childhood nickname: “Will you look at me, Kimster?”

After a few moments, Kimberlee looked up, shyly meeting her gaze.

“It does not matter what you liked. It does not matter that you liked any of it or all of it. It was not your fault. You were a child. It is always the adult’s responsibility. That is what it means to be an adult.”

“But I should have said, ‘No!’” Kimberlee repeated plaintively and reached towards her.

Claudia took her hand and looked earnestly into the tear-swollen eyes. “How could you? How could you battle millennia of instinct, telling you to keep that man as an ally no matter what? How could you, a mere child, say ‘no’ — when grown women can barely do so?”

KIMBERLEE’s eyes widened as it dawned on her. She felt something come undone within her. An emotional dam broke and her own sense of damnation broke with it. She wept. Huge wracking sobs that expelled more than twenty years of shame.

She felt Claudia’s arms reach around her and she surrendered to them. She leaned forward and sobbed into her grandmother’s soft chest. She wept until there was no weeping left in her.

After a long time, she lifted her head and smiled shyly, wiping the snot and tears from her face. She motioned at the residue on Claudia’s dress but her grandmother — her dear, dear grandmother — waved a hand, dismissing the mess. That’s when she
saw the moisture in Claudia’s eyes. It overflowed and ran down her soft, wrinkled cheeks. Then they were both laughing and crying, tears of release and peace and joy.

MIKE sighed in contentment. With Karen resting peacefully in the pocket of his shoulder, her hand buried in the hair on his chest, he was completely at peace. He smiled as he remembered his initial skepticism about the woman who had adopted his wife as her student. God bless Claudia, he thought once again.

After a while, he kissed the top of Karen’s dark head and asked, “When do you want to finish the conversation we started today? You know, Claudia’s assignment.”

Karen rose up on her elbow and looked at him. He regretted her moving off his chest, but this angle gave an excellent view of the slope and fullness of her breasts.

“I thought we did finish that conversation,” she teased. “You want more?”

He smiled and cupped a breast. Looking into her dazzling eyes, he drawled, “Always, Darlin’. This cowboy always wants more of you.”

More seriously, he touched her face and added, “But I think it’s important that we tell each other everything that sex provides. I’m still shocked that you knew that little about me. I thought it was obvious.”

He watched as Karen’s eyes teared up. “I had no idea sex meant that to you. If I had, you’d have gotten all you wanted. And more.”

He brushed the tear away as it rolled down her cheek. “Don’t feel bad. I got plenty. More than most guys.”

She shook her head. “I don’t feel all bad. What you said makes me feel beautiful. Wanted. And necessary.”

He leaned over and kissed her firmly on her full lips. “You are absolutely necessary.”

She smiled and he relaxed. With a mischievous twinkle, she said, “We could take turns sharing specifics, but I might get turned on again. Like tonight.”

“That was hot, wasn’t it?” Mike laughed. “And not only for us, I think.”

Karen smiled and rubbed her hand across his chest. He was surprised to see gratitude in her eyes. “You were awesome, Honey. Besides changing my life, I don’t think Kimberlee will ever be the same.”

“I hope it makes a difference for her. But you’re my main concern.” He touched the tip of her nose. “What else do you want to know, Gorgeous?”

“Well, Claudia said to give each other specifics about what each sexual activity provides. And to talk about things like duration and frequency ....”

Mike stretched and bunched the pillow under his head. “Hmmm, duration and frequency. Okay, I can start there ....” He thought a moment. “If we have a quickie. Or a ‘drive-by’ as Claudia called it.”

He chuckled. “What a crack up to hear that lovely little lady say that. Who’d a thunk? Anyhow, what a quickie provides for me depends upon whether you come or not.”

Karen looked surprised. “I thought quickies were all about your needing release ....”
He shrugged. “In some ways. They usually happen when the tension has built up in me and I have to have you immediately. I can’t wait until we have time to make love. But if you come too, I feel like I’ve given something and not only taken.”

She shook her head and it was his turn to be surprised. “I’m not taken from when I don’t have an orgasm. Sometimes I don’t want to be bothered to concentrate that hard. I like ‘servicing’ my husband. It’s a turn on. Even remembering it is a turn on.”

She smiled and continued. “If that’s all we ever did, I would probably start to feel used. But when you’re desperate, I like it. I feel important.” She smiled, “I guess I’ve always liked being a ‘sexual provider’ even before I knew what that meant.”

He touched her cheek and his hand fell to her breast again affectionately. “You walkin’ by with all your curves, your tatas, your tummy, your back porch. Hmmm. You’re providin’ by merely existin’.”

He was gratified when her hand cupped his, holding it firmly to her breast. She laughed, “If you keep doing that, we’re not gonna end up talking much!”

That gave him an idea. “Well, since this information sharin’ is such a ‘hot topic,’ maybe we should draw it out. You know, share a little bit of information each day. You get my meanin’?” He raised his eyebrows.

She grinned. “I think that’s a great idea. But before we take this particular conversation to its obvious conclusion, could we make a pact?”

That intrigued him. “What kind of pact?”

“To focus on providing sex, for at least three months, and not worry about making a baby. No thermometers, no kits, no nothing. I think that would help me be sane again.”

Mike laughed in relief. “That’s one pact I’d be happy to make. And if I ‘accidentally’ knock you up in the meantime . . . .”

She smiled and began licking her lips. The movement was interrupted by him planting his lips firmly upon hers.

BURT finished the last of his ice cream. He scraped the sides of the bowl, Claudia’s legs across his lap, her eyes closed, her breathing steady. She wasn’t asleep; only resting from her ordeal. He waited patiently, knowing she would need to talk after she’d let the experience settle into her bones.

About five minutes later, with a deep breath, she opened her eyes and smiled appreciatively at him.

“Thank you, my love. That was exactly what I needed.”

Burt began with her calf, massaging firmly. “Would you like to tell me about it now?”

After pointing her toes and stretching from side to side, she replied, “It was as I suspected. On the one hand, I am saddened to have my fears confirmed. On the other, I am relieved that talking about it seems to have given Kimberlee some relief.”

Burt shook his head as he felt the stirrings of anger deep and resolute. There was no crime, in his opinion, greater than the theft of innocence. And he knew that while some did it unwittingly, others did it purposely. For some strange reason, a small percentage of men and women had a perverse relationship to innocence. Instead of protecting it, they wanted to possess it or destroy it. It was evil. And while he was
glad to have never fired a shot in WWII, he would not hesitate to strangle the man who had thus altered the course of his dear granddaughter’s life.

He was brought back from his thoughts by Claudia firmly taking his hand. “We are both angry. But our anger will not help Kimberlee. Neither your anger at the immoral people who do such things. Nor my anger at Myra.”

She sighed, “She should have foreseen the effect on Kimberlee of her vehement disdain for all things male. Failing to provide healthy relationships with men made her daughter infinitely more vulnerable.”

“You are correct, as usual, Sweetheart. Anger never rebuilds. But what can we provide for Kimberlee?”

“I imagine compassion. Mountains of compassion. And a refusal to treat her as if she is damaged goods. There is nothing that cannot be healed if she is willing. And I believe after what Mike and Karen provided today, she has the will.”

“How so?” Burt asked.

“A person’s will is enabled, strengthened, by love. The greater their ability to dwell in love, the more potent their will.”

She shook her head, “Shame leads to despair. Despair locks up love and passion tight inside the chest. They are imprisoned, cutting off their experience and expression. And weakening a person’s will.”

She pursed her lips and added simply, “Hope is the hero. It busts open the prison, freeing love and passion; returning a person to the power of their will.”

Her eyes crinkled. “What Mike and Karen shared today, about what sex can provide individuals — and a union — showed Kimberlee a new horizon for sex. I think it gave her hope.”

“And that, you think, can lead to her healing?” Burt was fascinated by her train of thought.

Claudia nodded vigorously. “Some people are getting too great a psychological benefit from their wounds to will themselves to be healed. They have incorporated the injury into their identity and do not know who they are without it. You can hear this when a person says, ‘my cancer’ or ‘my rape’ or ‘I am an incest survivor.’”

“You think Kimberlee has done that?” Burt asked.

He was relieved when Claudia shook her head. “No, fortunately, she has not. And, luckily, neither did she react the way some children, usually teenagers, do — by deciding that sex is all they are good for. That is equally damaging.”

“How can you tell she didn’t do that?”

“Because that would have made her promiscuous. And Kimberlee avoids sex,” Claudia said.

“That’s too bad,” Burt replied. “Sex can give a couple the most joyous moments in their relationship.”

“And you certainly have given me thousands of those moments, my love,” she said, laying her hand on his cheek.

Burt’s chest swelled. “Do you want to tell me about that part of your day? Did it go as you anticipated?”

Her face lit up. “Even better than I imagined. Mike was articulate and incredibly generous. Karen was amazed, as I knew she would be. Then, to my delight, Karen was
equally generous — for both Kimberlee and Mike — in sharing what sex provides for her. I think many women would relate to what she said. I know I did."

“Like what?” Burt asked.

“Karen spoke about the way a woman becomes physical by being touched. This is something I think men do not understand fully. They may think of touching a woman as ‘foreplay’ and, especially for young men, maybe as an inconvenience to get to the part they need.”

She shook her head. “But if a man touches her and is adoring her body, that part wakes up and becomes engaged in the act. His touch is what involves her senses. Whatever part he consciously touches, becomes part of the lovemaking. If he leaves it out, it stays left out.”

Claudia chuckled. “It reminds me of the poster at the dentist’s: ‘Floss only the teeth you want to keep.’ Women should have a sign on their headboard: ‘Touch only the parts of me you want to turn on.’”

Burt grinned. “Touching you is one of my most favorite things to do. Whether I start at your feet or your head, I want to awaken every inch of you.”

Claudia grinned back. “If you keep talking like that, you will have to chase that ice cream with a blue pill.”

Burt brightened up. “Shall I? I’m happy to provide!”

Claudia straightened up on the couch. “Actually, I want you to take one. But first, can I thank you for something?”

Burt was surprised. He wasn’t aware of having done anything — yet. “Thank me for what?”

Her brow furrowed. “When Viagra was first made public, the culture of women reacted predictably, as if it was another example of men misbehaving. They assumed that the drug was created to allow ‘horny old men’ to get an erection for their own benefit. Most don’t know that men can have an orgasm without an erection. An erection is for her pleasure. They never guessed that Viagra is another example of men wanting to provide for women. And that is what I am thanking you for — for doing whatever it takes to provide me with pleasure.”

Burt smiled, “Sweetheart, I would do almost anything for you.”

He paused for a moment, scratching his cheek. “I admit that when my equipment didn’t rise to the occasion like it used to, I assumed it was psychological and I tried to handle it on my own.” He shook his head. “Like most men, I didn’t know that testosterone levels naturally drop off as we get older — and that there are side-benefits in the form of verbal abilities and more emotional experiences.”

He chuckled wryly, “But a good stiffy is not one of them. God bless the people who figured out how to fix that problem.”

Claudia shook her head. “And while you were thinking it was your problem, I was thinking it was mine. That I was less attractive. And that created a vicious cycle. Because I thought I was not attractive enough to excite you, I stopped expressing my desire for you. I was afraid to hope for something that might not happen. In my self-centered concern, I forgot that my desire for you is one of the things that makes the system work.”
Her head tilted to the side, she added, “Remember how uncomfortable it was, sorting all that out? But I am glad we did. We have countless moments of joy yet to be shared.”

Suddenly she grinned. “That is one my favorite things about the blue pill. It makes you a sure thing.” She batted her eyelashes shamelessly. “Which means I do not have to hedge my bet or temper my desire.”

That was enough for Burt.

KIMBERLEE sat on her bed in her pajamas and drew Lancelot into her lap. Stroking the big lunk of a cat soothed her and at this moment, she needed some serious comforting.

Thinking about her night was like trying to remember a wild roller coaster ride. There had been some remarkable life-altering highs, and some hard but healing, gut-wrenching lows. It was a ride she hadn’t wanted to take but now she wouldn’t give up for anything.

She looked inside herself, to the place where she normally found unbearable shame. Surprisingly, there was none of the emotion she normally felt. There was only a memory of a story she’d known, rather than the intense reality of something that had happened to her. She realized then that it hadn’t happened to her. Not Kimberlee Lambert, the full-grown woman. It had happened to an innocent, needy child who got in over her head.

Could I forgive that child for her stupidity? For her simple need for love and acknowledgment from a man? She decided she could. Finally.

Tears fell freely down her face and landed in Lancelot’s fur. She blended them into his tabby stripes. His luminous eyes reminded her of Karen. Her honey, gold-brown eyes had ignited from within as she shared with Mike what sex provided for her.

Kimberlee had never known anything close to what Karen described. Sadly she remembered struggling with Mathew to have satisfying sex. Every moment of pleasure was a reminder of shame; suffocating any enjoyment she might have had. This was how sex had become a predicament. She’d often thought relationships would be better off without it. Now she wasn’t sure.

As she remembered Claudia explaining sex as a physical expression of a spiritual connection, Kimberlee had a vision. She saw two fields of energy swirling and curling and binding together in a rainbow show of lights and emotion. Suddenly, she wanted to experience that more than anything she’d ever desired. Union: physical, emotional and spiritual connectivity.

She idly replayed Karen’s description of what happened when Mike made love to her. She imagined being touched and held and completed like that. It felt beautiful and exciting, warm and safe. In her fantasy, she looked up at the face of her lover, and was startled when he had smiling gray-green eyes.
KAREN settled into a table at the café on Friday after school, to complete her notes from Wednesday night. Her new ritual had been postponed due to more pressing matters. Matters which had continued to press upon her several more times since then.

Mike had found a new hobby. He’d asked her — over breakfast and over dishes, in the car and at the movies — what else did sex provide. They didn’t get far because every question instigated a “practice session,” as Mike called it.

She smiled as she realized there were dozens more questions to answer about possible activities and combinations of activities. And therefore, dozens more practice sessions. This intrigued her because a particularly interesting conversation had to do with “frequency.” She was surprised to learn that Mike felt tense and disconnected after two days of not having sex with her. And that more frequent sex had a compound effect of making him feel secure and focused.

Marveling at Claudia’s genius in suggesting this assignment, she made herself focus on creating a concise description of the lesson.

- Wanting to have sex is caused primarily by hormones and sexual tension.
  - Sexual tension is a function of unfamiliarity or emotional distance.
- Men and women both get hurt by thinking wanting is personal.
  - They feel rejected when their partner doesn’t want to.
- Wanting to have sex is an insufficient basis for a sex life.
  - Individuals need sex more than wanting will insure.
  - Unions need sex more than wanting will insure.
- “Providing” is a more empowering context for a sex life.
  - Share what sex provides for you, as individuals and as a union.
  - Being specific is necessary and valuable (and a turn on!).

When Karen was done, she wasn’t quite satisfied. It didn’t capture the fun, excitement and hope that being Sexual Providers had created for both of them. The past two days had been more pleasurable than their honeymoon. Because we had no idea what we were doing on our honeymoon!

Karen closed up her notepad and finished her iced tea. Contemplating the second installment on sexuality, she wondered what else Claudia had in store for them.

KIMBERLEE had looked for a decent segue for two days, but she couldn’t find one. There was no way that processing goals could lead to nonchalantly asking, “Is your best friend available?”

Their meeting was almost over and another weekend would pass without a chance to ask. Hence her surprise, embarrassment, and relief when Raul suddenly blurted out, “Are you seeing anyone?”
Watching the look on his face and recognizing that he was as embarrassed as she, Kimberlee burst out laughing.

“What’s funny?” Raul demanded.

She shook her head, still chuckling. “I’ve been embarrassed to ask if Jack is available and you’re as distraught having to ask me.”

“You’re interested in Jack?” Raul was visibly taken aback. “I was afraid to ask since I thought you couldn’t stand him. Until lately, you’ve never given him the time of day.”

She shrugged, “My feelings have amended themselves somewhat ....”

Suspiciously, he asked, “Is this another result of the changes you’re going through?”

“What changes?” Kimberlee asked, feigning innocence. Is it that obvious?

“What changes?” Raul mimicked and laughed. “Did you think we wouldn’t notice?”

“No, really. I-I-I want to know,” she stuttered and shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “I feel different on the inside. And I’ve been treating my guys better. But I didn’t know anyone else could tell.”

Raul laughed again. “The fact that you call them ‘your’ guys is a huge change. A few short weeks ago, they were anonymous drones being buggy-whipped to meet your deadlines.”

He held up his hand before she could protest. “And that was fine with me. Thank goodness your new softer approach is more effective or we’d have a real problem.”

Kimberlee’s jaw dropped. He knew I objectified them?

Kimberlee added sternly, “I’m delighted but concerned. We’re talking about a significant shift here. You used to ball-bust with the best of them. And I admired it, since I was only occasionally on the other end.” He looked at her intently, “What’s up? You got my best buddy all flustered and my processing pit in an uproar — with you on the men’s side.”

Kimberlee watched as Raul steepled his fingers. That meant he was going to wait for an answer. She might as well be truthful because he wouldn’t settle for less.

“Okay,” she began, “I’ll tell you. But when I’m done you have to promise either to tell Jack or to not tell Jack. Whichever I want. Deal?”

Raul nodded. “Deal. Although I’d rather you choose not tell Jack. Being the go-between here is a pain in the ass.”

It was Kimberlee’s turn to laugh. “I’m sorry. This took me by surprise too.”

Raul smiled then looked at her pointedly. “I’m waiting. I’d like to know what got me in this pickle.”

Kimberlee thought for a moment. Finally, she said, “A few weeks ago, I found out I was a Frog Farmer.”

“A what?”

“A Frog Farmer,” she replied. “A woman who brings out the worst in men — thus turning Princes into Frogs instead of vice versa.”

She laughed. “Yes. Some of us are more successful than others.” With a shrug, she added, “But I retired about ten days ago. Turned in my hatpins and stilettos, as my grandmother would say.”

“What’s your grandmother got to do with this?”
Kimberlee smiled, with the strong affection she felt. “My grandmother, or Claudia as I call her to keep my head straight, comes from a long line of women who’ve studied men to learn how to live in partnership with them.”

She added, “She’s been teaching me to see and understand men differently. She’s absolutely brilliant.”

“Is she the one who taught you to listen better?”

“Do I like it? Are you kidding? It’s amazing. I can finish a sentence. A paragraph. A chapter without being interrupted.” Raul looked hopeful, “Could you teach Sally to listen like that?”

She frowned. “I don’t know, Raul. There’s more to it than technique. It’s an attitude adjustment.”

Raul nodded vigorously. “That’s what Jack and I have been talking about. Your attitude adjustment. You’re more feminine and yet more potent. Softer but stronger. Gentler but more real. I could go on and on. It’s fascinating to watch.”

It was almost more than Kimberlee could take. They could see all that?

Raul slapped his desk. “That’s exactly what he said. That he’d been seen or something.”

Feeling naked, she retreated to the conceptual. “Claudia has been teaching us to see men as men. Instead of as misbehaving women.”

Raul chuckled. “Misbehaving women? That explains why we’re in trouble most of the time!” His head tilted. “But who is ‘us’? Is this a class?”

“No. There are only two of us. Karen is a schoolteacher. She’s great. I learn a lot from watching her apply the information to her husband.”

“You’re gonna end up with a husband if you’re not careful,” he said.

Kimberlee gasped, “Not so fast, okay? I thought we’d start with dinner.”

Raul shook his head. “Mark my words. If it’s not Jack, it’s gonna be some other lucky guy. Any woman who truly gives up her ‘hatpins and stilettos’ winds up with a man devoted to her.”

KAREN and Mike snuggled together on the couch, thinking location might allow the conversation to get further. What a great problem to have. We keep being interrupted by sex!

“Where do you want to start, Darlin’?” Mike asked.

“Well, we’ve covered frequency and duration. From quickies to multicourse feasts. I thought we could get into ‘activities’ tonight. Maybe take turns saying what something provides?”
He looked at her, eyes bright. “Okay. You go first. What does me going down on you provide?”

She looked away, embarrassed. “You get right to it, don’t you?”

“Yes! That’s the idea,” he joked.

She smiled. “Alright. But don’t tease. This is a sensitive subject for me. Pun intended.” She giggled nervously.

He laughed and she relaxed, saying, “It’s very personal and intimate. But I have to be fresh out of the shower, or else I’m self-conscious and worry that it’s yucky down there.”

“I think it’s different for every guy,” Mike said seriously, “but you know I don’t care, right? Or rather, I do care. I have a primal reaction to your smell and taste. Fresh is nice, but seasoned drives me wild.” He smiled, “Marinated yoni turns me on.”

She shook her head. “You’re crazy, you know?”

“About you, I am,” he replied earnestly.

She laughed. “Okay, your turn. What does me doing that to you provide?”

Mike screwed up his face. “That’s harder. It feels great but I’d rather be doin’ something. I like giving more than receiving.”

Karen thought about her words carefully. “But what if receiving is providing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” she replied, “you like giving me pleasure that way, right?”

“Duh. Most men do.”

“And what if I didn’t let you?” she asked gently.

“I’d be bummed.”

“See?”

“Hmm.” He chewed on his lip. “You’re saying that my receiving pleasure from you, provides something for you.”

“You’re not the only person who needs to give,” she answered, touching his jaw.

“Well, then, purely for your benefit, I’d be willing to work on that.” He grinned.

She laughed and grabbed him. End of discussion.

CLAUDIA noted the warmth between Mike and Karen and the lack of tension in Mike’s shoulders. She thought with an inward smile, Plenty of sex can do that for a man. She was also pleased to see a newly relaxed Kimberlee. She seemed happy and had hugged both Karen and Mike in a warm greeting.

Wasting no time, Claudia set up the lesson: “Now that we’ve shifted the context of a sex life from ‘wanting’ being the cause to ‘providing’ being the cause, we can talk about various ways to cause wanting.”

“Huh?” Karen squeaked out. “I thought we weren’t supposed to worry about wanting.”

“That is correct,” Claudia replied, “as the cause of sex. Because it is unreliable and almost everyone takes it personally and gets hurt. But once sex is about providing for your partner, you can intentionally cause yourself and them to want to have sex. Because sex is more fun when you want to!”
They looked like they couldn’t decide between blushing and grinning. She had to smile. *It must be odd listening to a septuagenarian talk about sex being fun.*

“We can spend all day pretending this is not odd or uncomfortable,” she responded calmly to their expressions. “Obviously it is.”

She waited while they sputtered and looked at each other. Mike stepped into the awkward moment boldly. “Claudia, I have to say that you and Burt are an inspiration in many ways. I would rather be surprised and uncomfortable — and learn about sex from someone who is still doing it after fifty years.”

Claudia grinned, causing a new round of chuckles and the tension eased. She smiled gratefully at Mike. “Thank you, Mike. Burt and I learned a great deal ourselves, but because of my family heritage we have the benefit of twenty-five generations of dedicated lovers that came before us.”

“Cool,” he replied.

She looked from Karen to Kimberlee. “Shall we begin?”

When they had both nodded and were in position with their pens above their papers, Claudia embarked.

“In this part, I am assuming that a couple has already included sex in their relationship. Later, if you like Kimberlee, I can talk about what men and women might want to consider before that point. We call it the ‘Cover Charge.’”

Kimberlee reddened and mumbled, “That’d be great.”

“There are six areas we are going to address. They include what makes a person open and available for sex, getting the systems started, and the ‘end game’ or ‘aftermath’ that is critical for preventing resentment and keeping the good feelings alive.”

Claudia sipped her tea. “These areas work together to create what I like to call ‘Delicious Sexual Partnerships.’ Each element involves information to be shared with your partner to have fun, continuously satisfying and union-nurturing sex lives.”

Karen and Mike exchanged a look. He took her hand and held it on his thigh. Claudia continued, “Before a man or a woman is available for sex, they have to have certain capacities. If they do not have these capacities, nothing anyone does will make sex satisfying. For example, if someone is exhausted or upset or off balance, the focus and receptivity that good sex demands will not occur. Thus the first information to exchange is what, exactly, fills your ‘Sexy Tank.’”

Karen brightened, “This is like what I learned before, right? When you were teaching me about being a Queen to Mike’s King?”

Claudia was glad she had made the connection. “Yes, Karen. There are activities you can engage in, and people you can have contact with, that leave you in better condition than before. We call it filling a tank. Every activity that nurtures or empowers you gives you specific capacities; fills a specific tank.”

Karen nudged Mike’s shoulder. “This is how I prepared for you returning to me as a King. I did all the things that made me feel serene and open and receptive to you. That’s why I spent time at the beach and smelled of a bubble bath when you got home. And I rode a horse for the first time in many years. That filled my play tank.”

Mike brightened, “That’s how come you weren’t all stressed out. Good job, Babe.” He addressed Claudia, “That was a good trick. She was amazing. Smelled good, too,”
he added with a smile. “You’re saying a person can prepare themselves for sex that way?”

“Exactly. By doing the things that put her in her body, receptive to the pleasures she can feel, a woman creates the physical capacity for sex. Bubble baths, massage, dancing and sleep are in this category,” Claudia explained. “By doing the things that make her feel comfortable and connected to her partner, she creates the emotional capacity for sex.”

Mike smiled, “That’s awesome.” His forehead furrowed. “But she has to do those things, right? Or is there something I can provide?”

Claudia smiled at Mike’s natural use of the first word in the Language of Heroes. “Since diffuse awareness will have her take care of her environment instead of herself, she may need your support. Making a commitment to keeping her Sexy Tank full is one of the most important things a woman can do for her lover. And letting him provide support would be one of the smartest.”

Karen asked, “But what about a man? What tops off his Sexy Tank?”

Claudia put the question where it would make the biggest difference. “How about you tell us, Mike? What makes you receptive to an invitation and able to be there for sex?”

She observed Karen and Kimberlee waiting patiently while he thought about his answer. “I can’t have anything major on my mind. When I’m in the middle of an intense project, I don’t want to be distracted by sex. Unless I’m at the breaking point of needing it, then I’m already distracted, but that’s the opposite of what you’re asking.”

He paused. “Most of the time, challenges and accomplishments prime me for sex. It’s still all about providing. But the right amount of physical exertion can pump me up. I have to have enough rest, though. I think that’s why I usually prefer morning sex or weekend sex.”

Karen looked down, smiling.

Mike rubbed his chin. “That would make me physically able. Emotionally, I have to feel like Karen’s not mad at me. I don’t need to feel connected; the sex gets me connected.”

After a moment, he shrugged. “That’s all I can see right now. I’m good to go most of the time.” He leaned over and kissed Karen’s cheek.

KAREN was enjoying this conversation. Claudia was right that she needed to feel connected to be involved emotionally in sex. It was interesting to her that Mike got connected through sex. But he had confused her with his comment about “anything major” on his mind.

She raised her hand tentatively, “Could I ask a clarifying question?”

Claudia and Mike nodded simultaneously.

“Mike, you said you don’t want to be distracted by sex when you’re in the middle of an intense project. Does that mean the tanks aren’t full and we could do something to fill them?”
She was surprised when Claudia interjected, “Actually, Karen, that is the next area we are going to talk about: Pumpkin Hours.”

“Pumpkin Hours? That sounds weird.”

“I named it after the Cinderella story,” Claudia replied. “Pumpkin Hours are the times in which the enchanted coach turns back into a pumpkin and cannot give anyone a ride.”

Mike chuckled and Karen caught on. Claudia’s statement was even funnier with her formal “in which” and “cannot.”

“Claudia, you’re a crack-up,” Karen said.

“I try to think up unique terms that will help you remember these concepts.”

Karen laughed, “And a Pumpkin Hour is?”

Claudia explained, “For some people, their Pumpkin Hours are actual times of the day. For example, after ten at night or before six in the morning. It often has to do with sacrificing sleep for sex. This will cause upset, especially in sleep-deprived women.”

Karen could relate to that.

“For others,” Claudia continued, “it may be when they are premenstrual or menstruating. Or, like Mike said, when he is in the middle of an intense project.”

She shrugged. “Any set of circumstances can create a Pumpkin Hour for someone. The point is: We are individual enough that we have to share that information with our partner instead of assuming they know. Otherwise, they may ask for sex at a time when the request creates anger or resentment.”

Karen could easily think of times when Mike wanted sex and she was unwilling. Not because the invitation wasn’t a good one; it merely came at a bad time. And Claudia was right — she would have had to sacrifice sleep. When she’d slept plenty in the preceding days that was fine. But during the craziness preparing for a new school year, or finishing one up, she was living on the edge of exhaustion.

Letting Mike know those were “Pumpkin Hours” could prevent hurt feelings for Mike. Or vice versa, she thought. He’s not the only one who’s initiated sex at the wrong time and gotten crushed by rejection. And when his feelings were hurt, it made her feel guilty. Then I feel angry about feeling guilty because, after all, I should have a right to my sleep.

She raised her hand for Claudia to pause and turned to Mike. “Honey, this explains a lot. When you’re intensely involved in a project, I feel disconnected from you. Sometimes, to try to get you back with me, I initiate sex. When I’m turned down, my feelings get hurt and then I’m pissed. Which makes me feel even more distant from you.” She touched his arm. “Knowing it doesn’t work for you to break that focus — but that you’ll be mine when you’re done — could help.”

Mike looked totally confused. “I’m sure that’s all true. But what I’m talking about only happens a few times a year. You make it sound like it happens a lot.”

Now it was Karen’s turn to be confused, and she could feel herself getting upset. “Actually,” she managed to get out, “I got rejected fairly often. Even before we started trying to get pregnant.”
MIKE was completely baffled. Karen clearly meant what she said. The emotion in her face was real. But he could not remember an invitation for sex — real sex, not sperm donating — that he had refused in a long time. Why would I?

He looked from Karen to Claudia and was surprised to see a knowing look on the older woman’s face. “What?” he asked. “What am I not getting here?” He glanced at Karen and back at Claudia. “Help me out, please.”

Claudia nodded, turned to Karen and patted her hand. “Karen, would you consider the possibility that your invitation for intimacy was never received?”

Mike saw Karen gulp. “How could that be?” she asked, her voice strangled.

“Well, besides the fact that men’s auditory and visual perception is not as sensitive to subtleties as women’s,” Claudia said, “perhaps your Signal wasn’t as clear as you think. Perhaps,” she continued slowly, “Mike doesn’t know what your Signals are.”

“My signals?” Karen asked doubtfully.

Claudia nodded, “Your ‘Signals’ are the ways in which you express a request for intimacy. They only work if the other person interprets them correctly.” She paused, “If you are willing to say, Karen, how did you Signal Mike that you wanted him?”

Karen hesitated but Mike really needed the answer to this question. She blushed and looked down at her lap. “I-I-I touched him. You know, there.”

Stunned amazement sent tingles all over Mike’s body. “That was a Signal?” he gasped, “I thought you were being f-f-friendy!”

Karen looked put out. “If I’m touching you there, I am not being friendly!”

Mike sat back and absorbed this news. Memories flooded his brain. All those parties I was invited to. She must have been so bummed.

He could see the need for immediate action. He took Karen’s hand and waited until she looked in his eyes. ‘Darlin’, I’m so sorry.” He saw her tear up. “I had no idea you wanted me. Honestly. I would have been thrilled.”

He kissed her hand and said earnestly, “I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

Karen laughed and relief flooded his body. Who’d a known? he thought, shaking his head in wonder.

KIMBERLEE had remained quiet and, she hoped, invisible during the entire interaction. It was too precious to spoil. She was moved by how Karen and Mike took care of each other. Way different than Melissa and Scott, she thought. These two really are partners. She wished her friend could be a fly on the wall and learn from them.

The near-miraculous healing of her childhood experience had left Kimberlee with a fresh interest and curiosity in sex. She could see how each of the elements Claudia had explained could contribute to a satisfying sex life, virtually rejection-free.

The concept of Tank Fillers she loved, and she wanted to know more about it for the other parts of her life. Is there something I could do that would make me more fun? Or some way I could change my work that I’m not left dead on my feet?

Pumpkin Hours were clear and practical. They would prevent feelings of hurt and rejection from the right offer at the wrong time. She was fascinated by the notion of Signals. It reminded her of one of her favorite books, The Valley of the Horses, where
the main characters got all twisted up misunderstanding each other’s attempts to initiate sex. The author, Jean Auel, had even used the same term, Signal.

Kimberlee was brought back from her reverie by Claudia’s next statement: “It is as important to understand your partner’s Signals so you also know when they are not initiating sex.”

“Huh?” escaped Kimberlee’s mouth before she could stop it.

Claudia smiled and looked at her kindly, obviously trying to make her feel comfortable. She’s the sweetest, thought Kimberlee.

“Besides missing an invitation,” Claudia nodded at Karen and Mike, who simultaneously shook their heads with regret, “someone can interpret something as a request that is not.”

“Can you give an example?” Kimberlee asked, now officially participating.

“Certainly,” Claudia replied. “Because of my upbringing, I had occasion to do research with family members. I once spoke to my uncle who shared that he loved ‘spooning’ his wife before he fell off to sleep. He generously described to me the sheer joy of holding her body close to his.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Kimberlee saw Mike wink at Karen.

“But he explained to me that before they understood each other’s Signals, she assumed he was requesting sex.” Claudia frowned. “Sometimes she would ‘freeze up’ instead of curling into him, and he’d feel rejected.”

“I found out later, by talking with my aunt, that she thought he was asking for sex too late at night. She thought he was being inconsiderate and it made her angry. Can you see how it seemed like he was giving her his Signal after her Pumpkin Hours? She was mad and he was hurt. All from misinterpreting pure affection.”

Kimberlee was stunned. Is that what happened to Mathew and me?

Since sex brought up such terrible feelings, she had crawled in bed every night hoping Mathew didn’t want any. In the beginning of their marriage he snuggled up to her. Like her great-great-aunt, she thought her husband was signaling her for sex, and she’d turn to stone. After a moment, he’d roll back onto his side of the bed, and stay there the rest of the night. It wasn’t long before he rarely touched her at all — unless he was intent upon having sex, which reinforced her misconception.

“Yes, dear?” she heard Claudia ask, and realized she had gasped out loud.

“Oh, sorry,” Kimberlee said. “I’m realizing how come my husband stopped being affectionate with me.”

Claudia looked concerned. “It’s okay,” Kimberlee said. “I’m doing good. No worries, only light bulbs.”

“Expressing affection is always a risky thing to do,” Claudia said. “If another is not receptive to it, we quickly retreat. It hurts too much to extend your heart like that when it is not received warmly.”

They smiled at each other for a moment and Kimberlee was struck again by how kind and gentle Claudia was. How could I ever have been afraid of her?

Claudia was looking at her quizzically, white eyebrows raised over twinkling blue eyes. Kimberlee smiled, “All good, Grandmother.”
CLAUDIA paused for this moment of ecstasy. Her chest filled with energy. You cannot hope for what you cannot imagine, she thought. And I never dared to imagine this. To feel close to Kimberlee again was beyond a dream come true.

She smiled at the three of them. “I have more. Shall we stop, take a break or keep going?”

“Keep going!” Mike responded. “You haven’t taught us how to cause wanting yet.”

Claudia smiled at his enthusiasm, “This all adds up to causing wanting.”

“How?” Karen asked.

“Sexy Tank Fillers create the capacities in a person to be available for and receptive to intimacy. Knowing your partner’s Pumpkin Hours makes you a considerate lover, and has you ask at the right time. Understanding Signals prevents a host of hurts and,” Claudia winked at Mike, “missed parties.”

He laughed and had that look people got when they wondered if she had read their minds. She smiled to herself and explained, “All of these things set the stage for men and women to fully express desire — the surest way to cause wanting.”

“Nothing gets me going more quickly than Karen wantin’ me bad,” Mike said.

Karen looked at Mike in consternation. “Are you saying me wanting you, makes you want sex?”

“Yep. Guaranteed.”

Karen shook her head, “But you wanting me, makes me want sex.”

Claudia couldn’t suppress a smile. “Our partner’s desire for us is the biggest turn on for both men and women. Unless our Sexy Tanks are empty or we are past the Pumpkin Hours. At that moment, their desire is a problem instead of an aphrodisiac.”

She looked to see if they were following her. “Because most couples have not worked out their Sexy Tanks, Pumpkin Hours and Signals, both men and women have been rejected when they were most vulnerable. To avoid rejection in the future, they tone down their desire and make wimpy invitations instead of luscious, irresistible ones.”

Claudia concluded, “A half-hearted invitation is a turnoff at the moment when you most need to Jump Start your partner.”

“Jump Start?” Mike asked.

Claudia smiled at him, “As a car guy and a cowboy, you will appreciate this in both its modern and old West forms. Before automobiles existed, it was called ‘Yee Hawing’ your partner. Referring to the way a cowboy would slap his horse with his hat and set it off at a full gallop.”

Mike laughed outright. “So a Jump Start has a filly take off or a partner with a dead battery roar to life?”

Claudia smiled in satisfaction. “Good thing to know how to do, yes?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he winked, “a handy thing to know for sure.” He grinned at his wife.

Claudia poured more hot water in her mug and added honey to her tea; purposefully giving them time to contemplate what this might mean.

“Every man and woman has words, phrases and ways of being touched that will take them from zero to sixty in a mere moment,” she stated simply. “Knowing your partner’s Jump Starts gives you the ability to cause wanting for them. Knowing your
own Jump Starts, and sharing them, gives your partner the guaranteed ability to get you going.”

“This is why Jump Starts must follow Pumpkin Hours.” She looked at Mike in particular, “It would be plain mean to Jump Start someone when they needed to be sleeping or concentrating on something important.”

Mike turned to Karen, “I promise, no matter how horny I am, I’ll never Jump Start you during Pumpkin Hours.”

Karen smiled at him. “Me too. I promise,” she said throatily then laughed. “And from my body’s reaction, the word ‘horny’ might be a Jump Start for me ....”

She cleared her throat and her forehead furrowed. “But I’m still not clear how I Jump Start you. Are there ways I can touch you that don’t seem like I’m being friendly?

Mike laughed, “I won’t make that mistake again.”

Karen continued, “I’m usually too shy to be verbal. But if it’s only one word I could probably say it ....”

Before Mike could answer, Claudia interrupted. “I think you two should share that information privately. For two reasons: Sharing the words and phrases requires you speak them. That could Jump Start you right here, as Karen has generously pointed out.”

She looked at them earnestly. “I am serious about ‘Yee Haw!’ It creates a powerful urgency. Only do that when you are ready to engage immediately. It is the way to ask for sex now, not later.”

Mike grinned like a Cheshire cat, “This is gonna be fun.”

“You said there were two reasons,” Kimberlee said tentatively.

“Sympathy for others, dear. While there are many differences between individual Jump Starts, there are also many similarities. Mike sharing his could actually Jump Start you or me.”

Kimberlee’s eyes grew rounder. “Hmm. That would be inconvenient, wouldn’t it?” She giggled, “Especially when I don’t have a horse!”

BURT watched the gang in the garden gather up their things and leave. They all seemed happy, as if they’d had fun today. Even Kimberlee.

Whistling, Burt cleaned up after himself and put away his project. Although Claudia rarely entered his workshop uninvited, he didn’t want to take a chance on her discovering his surprise. Each structure was complete and the forms were recognizable. All that was left to do were the individual finishes and flourishes.

He found Claudia resting on the couch and marveled at the toll these sessions took on her. While she was healthier in some ways — her rheumatic hands continued to feel better and flex more easily — the energy she expended in a few hours took several days to recover. Once, when he’d asked her about it, she’d said, “It feels like childbirth.”

But she’s happy, he thought, ignoring the tug of worry. And that’s worth everything.
She opened her eyes when he settled her legs across his lap and began rubbing her calves. “Are you hungry, Sweetheart? Can I get you something?”

She smiled wanly and moved her head a fraction. Even that seemed like an effort. She yawned and closed her eyes again. *Maybe after a nap, she’ll tell me about it.* He loved hearing about their sessions. And he loved being part of them. He wondered how he could take some of the burden off her by providing more.

Karen gave Mike a warm, sensuous hug, molding her body into his. She kissed him and said provocatively, “Have fun.” Mike patted her rear, got in his Miata and drove off with a smile.

She poured some cold water and settled on the couch with her notes, determined to capture the rest of the session after Kimberlee’s funny “don’t have a horse” remark.

- One problem with desires out of sync: The one ready to go has “to convince the other to eat when they’re not hungry.”
- And if the woman wants sex, she’s got to convince him to eat and cook!

She laughed remembering the impish look on Claudia’s face as she said that.

- The solution: “DESSERT,” one thing people will eat when they’re not hungry.
- For most people, there is something pleasurable that could be offered that is almost always appealing.
- It'll often get the “party started” and is a gentler transition to sex than a Jump Start. (Why not start a meal with dessert? Teehee.)
- It must be something the Provider is happy to give even if nothing else transpires.

Karen thought about Desserts for her. *A massage is always a good idea. It feels great and puts me in my body.* She remembered reading somewhere that massaging the small of a woman’s back increased the blood flow to the pelvis, causing arousal and potentially heightening orgasm. *See? Validated by science.*

*What would be Dessert for Mike? You’d think I’d know that after twenty years.* Then she caught herself breaking one of Claudia’s rules. Regret is fine; recrimination is off-limits.

The topic of Desserts had completed the elements to cause wanting. Lastly, Claudia described the “End Game.”

“Or, if sex were Scotch, it would be called the ‘finish.’” Claudia smiled, “In other words, the taste left in a person’s mouth.”
Mike had grinned suggestively and Karen had pretended to ignore him, sure Claudia did not mean that literally.

- End Game or Finish: The point is to always leave your partner happy, satisfied and looking forward to having sex again.
- It might be how long you snuggle afterwards.
- Or the parting words or parting kiss.
- Or, even, a call the next day to stay connected and keep the buzz going.

The better the sex was, the more important the next-day call became for Karen. She had asked Claudia what caused that after-sex neediness and was surprised by the answer. Claudia had never recommended outside reading before.

She had said, “While we noticed this effect ages ago, it is only recently that scientists have been able to explain what happens at a biological level with hormones. The book I suggest you read is called The Female Brain. It was written by a neuropsychiatrist, Dr. Louanne Brizendine. Her information is compatible with what I have been teaching you: By understanding how we are put together, we can make better, conscious choices. Surprisingly for a researcher, the writing is fun and friendly.”

Claudia added, “The Female Brain also describes the process by which women become sensitive to the most subtle audio and visual clues, whereas men are not. And I do not mean as ‘misbehaving women.’ Most men will tell you that they need to be hit by a brick.” She had smiled and Mike nodded vigorously.

“Dr. Brizendine describes how the brains of infant girls are bathed in high amounts of estrogen from conception to the age of two. This is another reason why our Signals to men must be loud and clear.” Claudia added, “Both the “Yes” and “No” signals.”

That explains why a hesitant “Okay” means “I don’t want to” to a woman. And “Okay” to a man! Karen thought. And this explains why I have to be loud and firm with the boys but the same volume and intonation will put the girls in tears.

Back to the present, Karen added to her notes:


Satisfied with her notes, Karen created the flip-chart version for her hoped-for future lessons.

**CAUSING WANTING**

- **Sexy Tank Fillers**: activities you include in your life that make you available for and receptive to sex physically and emotionally.
- **Pumpkin Hours**: the times in which a request for sex will cause resentment due to the sacrifice it will require.
• **Signals**: verbal and physical cues that clearly let your partner know you’re asking for sex.
• **Jump Starts**: the words, phrases and touches that make a person want sex NOW.
• **Dessert**: a pleasurable activity that’s welcome almost anytime and may get sex started, but is not expected to.
• **End Game**: what happens in the minutes and days after sex that expresses love and/or appreciation, leaving the partners happy to provide and participate again.

Complete with her flip chart, she reviewed their assignment for the week:

Homework:
1. Finish telling each other everything from Sexy Tank Fillers to the End Game.
2. Make sure we understand what makes the other totally satisfied and delighted with every incident of sex.

Kimberlee had been given a different assignment, which involved figuring out all these things for herself, and she seemed to welcome that. Karen marveled at the dramatic change in Kimberlee’s relationship to sex. What did Claudia and Kim do after we left Wednesday night? The younger woman’s brutally self-conscious suffering had disappeared. And while Kimberlee was still shy, she seemed curious and engaged. Karen was happy for her.

Reconsidering their homework, Karen couldn’t wait to ask Mike about his Desserts and Jump Starts. Imagine being able to turn your partner on instantly. I would always look forward to sex. And Mike could too.

She made Mike a promise to keep her Sexy Tank filled. Humming, she put her notes away and started a bubble bath. Maybe she’d even take a nap.

KIMBERLEE was in a strange new land. To put it mildly, she was experiencing a stirring interest in having a Sexual Provider of her own. And being one, herself.

*I’ve never wanted a lover*, she thought as she drove home. *Nor wanted to be one. But now it seems like the most delightful way to experience a man.*

She’d have to ask Claudia to explain “Cover Charge.” An audacious plan was forming in her mind. Was she daring enough to attempt it?

MIKE was surprised that Karen needed it spelled out. *Isn’t it obvious?* He was beginning to suspect that he had as much to learn about women as Karen was learning about men.

“Darlin’,” he said, “you have to understand that men don’t get touched the way women do. We don’t hug each other. And we’d hesitate to hug a woman friend
without her initiating it. A single guy could go weeks without anything more than handshakes."

He paused, more than a little pleased that Karen was taking notes on what he had to say. *In the notebook she guarded as though it was gold.*

“That’s why you could Jump Start me by touching my arm or my leg and meaning it. It can’t be casual. If you put your desire into it, I’ll feel it. Otherwise, I will think you’re only being friendly.”

He was relieved when Karen smiled. “I can see now,” she said softly, “that when I touched you like that, I was being tentative, afraid to be rejected. I didn’t put my desire into my touch. It makes sense that it seemed ‘friendly.’”

She frowned, “But could we agree that, even if it seems tentative, that it’s a Signal? I have to be feeling pretty bold to be verbal.”

Mike gently touched her hair, “Well, then, you’ve been very bold lately.”

She shrugged, “It’s embarrassing for me, but I think it’s worth it. For us.”

“Thanks, Babe.”

“Can you tell me about your Desserts now?” she asked.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that.” Mike rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Most guys would probably say a blowjob. They talk about it like it’s the best thing since sliced bacon,” he paused. “They’re great, but I don’t usually want that.”

He rubbed her shoulder, soft and bare in a skimpy cotton dress. “Honestly, my Dessert is when you ask for yours. I love massaging you. I love touching you. Feeling your skin. All your curves. That’s a win/win whether it leads to sex or not.”

Karen looked surprised. “You’re saying, if I ask you to massage me, that’s good for you? And if I’m thinking it might lead to something, that’s okay, too?”

“Either way, it’s good,” Mike paused and checked her out deliberately. “But if, after awhile, you feel me rubbing up against you with some lead in my pencil — that would be a very loud Signal!”

Karen’s eyes got big, “That’s a Jump Start for me, you know.”

“A chubby?”

She nodded, looking embarrassed and mischievous at the same time. “Yep. It turns me on. Like you saying you’re ‘horny.’”

Mike shook his head. “Claudia’s right then. Our desire for one another is the biggest turn on for both of us. And all this time I thought I should tone it down in case you didn’t want it. I didn’t want to pressure you.”

She grinned, “Most of the year, before ten-thirty at night, and after six in the morning, you can ‘pressure’ me all you want!”

Mike moved her hair aside, kissed her shoulder and, in a husky voice she loved, whispered, “I’m horny, Babe.”

Kimberlee had been puttering around her condo Tuesday night when the phone rang. Blissed out, she picked it up without looking at the screen. “Hello?”

“Kimberlee?” The voice on the other end of the phone was low and resonant. There was only one person she knew with a voice like that. Her heart skipped a beat.
“Yes?” She said, moving towards the sliding glass door. Suddenly, she needed some air.

“It’s Jack.”

“I know,” she said, surprised at her own frankness.

“Um, uh. Is it okay to call this late?”

She smiled at his consideration. “Anytime before nine is fine. After that, I think someone’s been in an accident.”

She heard a short laugh. “Okay. Good to know.” A long pause. “Would you be available for dinner Saturday night? Uh, Raul seemed to think an invitation would be welcomed.”

Kimberlee felt compelled to put him at ease. As if they spoke every day, she curled into the chair on her balcony, saying, “You should have seen his face, Jack. He was a wreck. We gotta let him out of the middle.”

He chuckled, his voice even deeper. “Well, you know, after years of … let us say, not quite a warm reception ….”

“I’m sorry about the chill,” she interjected without thinking. “I misunderstood you and reacted poorly. For a very l-o-n-g time.”

She heard him hesitate a moment. “I’d like to know more about that,” Jack said, sounding a little more relaxed. “If you’re willing to tell me.”

“I’d really like that,” she replied, surprised that she meant it. For some reason, she wanted this man to know her and understand her. “I could do that Saturday night.”

“That’d be great,” he replied, immediately. “I have soccer practice until seven. Is eight too late?”

“You play soccer?” she blurted.

“Not me,” he laughed. “There aren’t many teams for men my age. I coach an AYSO team.”

That was not something she would have expected of “Mr. Cool.” There may be a lot more to this man than I thought. And “man” is the operative term here. He is so not a “guy.”

“That’s something I’d love to hear about. I played soccer. It’s a great game.”

“Really? When?” he asked.

“In high school. It was part of my mom’s plot to toughen me up. She didn’t want no sissy-girl for a daughter.”

“I’d never call you a sissy-girl,” he said sincerely.

She laughed. “Quite the opposite, I’m sure. Myra’s plan worked a leettle too well,” she said, struck by how easy it was to be truthful with him.

“Parents tend to take things to extremes. Anyhow, I think you’re balancing out fine,” Jack said and Kimberlee reminded herself, Receive ….

“That’s a nice compliment. Thank you,” she replied.

“You’re welcome. It’s true. Maybe you’ll tell me more about that, too.”

Kimberlee felt a warmth growing in her center. I never thought he’d be like this.

“At eight o’clock on Saturday?”

“Sure. Where shall I pick you up?” he asked.

After she gave Jack her address, they said good-bye and hung up. Noticing it was still early enough, she called her grandmother.
When Burt answered the phone, she chatted for a few minutes. “Hey, Granddad, you’re spending a lot of time in your shop. What’re you working on these days?”

He chuckled and she noticed his voice was almost as deep but much rougher than Jack’s. Like a boat with barnacles. “It’s a surprise for your grandmother,” he replied. “I can’t tell you about it yet.”

That tickled her. “I love how you still make things for her. Remember how you used to make toys for me? And that whole doll house with the miniature furniture? Me playing house drove Myra crazy, afraid it would imprint me, but I loved it.”

She paused, choked up. “And then there’s my chair. It’s beautiful. Breathtaking, actually. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Honey,” came his simple reply. “Keep sitting in it and I’ll be more than thanked. I’ll go get her.” He hastily set down the phone.

Did he get choked up too?

Kimberlee waited, thinking about what she wanted to know. She sighed contently when she realized that she hadn’t rehearsed it for days in advance. Wow, our relationship has changed.

“You sound happy,” Claudia commented pleasantly.

Kimberlee replied, “You know— I am. Mostly thanks to you.”

She could imagine her grandmother’s soft smile. There would be nothing smug about it. “You are very welcome. But I do not think you called to thank me. Did you want to have that conversation about Cover Charges?”

Kimberlee suppressed a giggle. “How’d you know?”

“It is the way you speak about that friend of Raul’s,” Claudia said. “Am I right?”

“Yeah, Jack. I think I like him,” she said, a little embarrassed. “But he’s not my type and he’s not really a possibility for a long-term relationship.”

“Oh, good. Much the better,” Claudia replied unexpectedly.

“How so?”

“When a man is a woman’s type,” she answered, “he stimulates her most primitive instincts. And when he meets a lot of her criteria for a future, she usually becomes an idiot around him.”

“Why’s that?” Kimberlee was intrigued.

Claudia asked, “Remember how I told you that women are compelled to please men?”

Kimberlee vaguely remembered that was part of the conversation about her past, but due to the high emotion at the time, she only faintly recalled it. “Could you tell me again?”

“Certainly. Human instinct compels women to be pleasing to anyone we perceive as a potential protector and provider. It causes a woman to become whatever she thinks they want, and to conceal anything she thinks they wouldn’t like.”

“That’s funny,” Kimberlee responded. “I kinda do the opposite with Jack.” She mused out loud, “I’ve been more honest with him in one short conversation than I’ve ever been with a man.”

“Do you normally date your type?” Claudia asked.

“Always. Doesn’t everybody?” Kimberlee replied.
“Yes. That is usually the problem. A woman’s type — and a man’s for that matter — makes her the most susceptible to her instincts. The ones she is the most attracted to bring out the worst in her.”

“You’re saying that I’m naturally a better person with Jack because he’s not my type?” She was dismayed.

“And because you assume you have no future with him. There is nothing to protect by being careful,” Claudia said.

*That’s true. I think there’s nothing to lose.*

“Tell me, Kimberlee, do you feel like you want him to know who you really are?” Claudia asked, taking her by surprise.

“Gram-Cracker, are you psychic? I was thinking that a few minutes ago.”

“That is a good sign, my dear,” Claudia responded. “When we resonate with a person at a significantly deeper level than instinct, we are compelled to tell the truth and reveal our real selves.”

Kimberlee leaned back in her chair, shocked. *Who’d have thought I would ‘resonate’ with Mr. Cool?*

“That’s amazing,” was all she could say.

“He sounds like a good man to help you put your toes back in the water,” Claudia replied.

“Well, yeah. That’s kinda why I wanted to know about Cover Charges,” Kimberlee replied, hastily adding, “Not that I’m thinking about jumping into bed with him.”

“Karen called a little while ago. She forgot she has a school function tomorrow night. How about you come over and I will tell you how Cover Charges work. Then you can use the information whenever you want?”

“You’re the best, Gram-Cracker.”

“You are welcome, Kimster.”

KLIMBERLEE arrived at Claudia’s house as she was returning from her yoga class. Kimberlee noticed that her grandmother seemed tired when she was normally invigorated. *I better not stay too long,* she thought. It was about a twenty-five-mile drive, but worth it anyhow.

They hugged warmly, chitchatted briefly and settled at the kitchen table with mugs of hot tea. Kimberlee pulled out her notepad, “Okay, I’m ready. Thanks for doing this tonight, in person.”

Claudia smiled at her, “You are most welcome. I am glad you asked.” She sipped her tea and began, “Cover Charge is a tongue-in-cheek term referring to the fee someone might have to pay to get into a bar or other kind of establishment.”

“I’m familiar with the term from going to comedy clubs.”

“Wonderful,” Claudia replied. “In this case it refers to the ‘fee’ someone would have to render to enter your ‘establishment.’”

Kimberlee choked, “You don’t actually mean ‘fee’ do you?”

“Not usually,” Claudia laughed lightly. “The term refers to whatever you require to be intimate with a person. And the requirement will vary by the degree of
intimacy. For example, you wouldn’t allow someone off the street to hold your hand. There is a certain familiarity and affinity you would probably require first.”

“That makes sense.”

“There are two important things: First, to think ahead of time about what you require for every kind of intimacy you might ultimately allow. In the pressure of the moment, you might be confused or thrown off balance by an intimacy you were not ready for. If you have thought about it ahead of time, you can set a boundary more easily.”

“I can see that. It makes it more thoughtful, instead of merely a ‘yuck’ reaction,” Kimberlee replied.

“Yes. And that is important because, too often, a woman will ignore her ‘yuck reaction.’ She might think she is being unreasonable. But if she has thought about it ahead of time, it is easier to remember what she needs.”

“How do I think about it ahead of time?” Kimberlee asked.

“Start with making a list of everything on your ‘menu,’” Claudia said, stifling a yawn. “In other words, the kinds of intimacies you might engage in, given the right circumstances. Then think about what those right circumstances would be.”

Kimberlee wrote furiously.

Claudia continued, “It is easier if you remember times in the past when an intimacy worked for you, and when it didn’t. Notice the difference. What came before, when it worked for you? What was in place in your relationship? And what was not in place when it was not welcome?”

“Wait a sec. I’m writing all this down.”

“Tell me when you are ready,” Claudia replied. Kimberlee scribbled enough to be able to figure it out later.

“Okay. You said there are two important things. What’s the other?” Kimberlee asked.

“To tell the other person your Cover Charges before they run into a barbed-wire fence.”

“Huh?”

Claudia sighed. “Too often we do not tell the other person where our boundaries are. In other words, what we need. They find out by failing to provide it and upsetting us. That is like running into a barbed-wire fence. It would be kinder to let them know what we need in advance.”

The word “provide” got Kimberlee’s attention. *I’m supposed to tell a man what I need in advance?*

“Um, Claudia. I don’t exactly know how to do that,” she said, feeling dejected already.

“Well, it is a good thing I will be teaching you that on Saturday,” Claudia replied.

“Well, you’ve sure given me a lot to think about. And since I have a date Saturday night, I guess I better get busy!”

Kimberlee made a hasty retreat, leaving her grandmother to her rest. She barely noticed the trip as she thought about her “menu” and her upcoming date with Jack. When she arrived home, she got ready for bed and lazily checked her email. A short message from Melissa completely ignored the strain between them.
Hey K – Haven’t heard from you. Wanna come by Saturday night? Scott’s with clients. Luv M

Yo M – Gotta date that night. How about Monday after work? Love, K

Kimberlee pressed Send and immediately dreaded Monday night.