By Alison A. Armstrong

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VIII. The Soul of a Man

CLAUDIA prepared for Saturday’s session mindful of her commitment to support and enhance Karen and Kimberlee’s journey—instead of being accountable for the outcome. She caught herself humming as she laid out the tea and coffee supplies. She added a coffeecake she had made that morning in a sudden mood to bake. Smiling to herself, she recognized the urge as a sign she was truly returning to the feminine.

It had been relatively easy to plan their sessions in the old mode. She had points to make and a destination. Contemplating the new role she intended to play compelled her to breathe more and anticipate less. And Claudia was trying to accept a slower pace, telling herself that it gave the younger women time to research and practice on their own.

After the three of them settled at the table, she opened the conversation with, “We have arrived at the fifth word of the Language of Heroes. Can either of you guess what it is?”

“Accountability?” Kimberlee replied and Claudia shook her head. “Good choice since accountability goes hand-in-hand with being a Provider. But no.”

“Focus?” Karen offered and again Claudia demurred. “Another good choice since testosterone shapes the brain to focus on Saving anyone within reach, Helping those he can, and being able to Provide what is most Needed. But, alas, that is not it either.”

“Problem?” Karen ventured. “Burt used that word several times last week.”
Claudia was pleasantly surprised. “Actually, there was a long-running debate in my family about whether ‘problem’ is the sixth word of the Hero Language. Men certainly respond to that word, and women hesitate to use it as much as the other words.”

She felt sad. “My mother died before it was ever resolved and I have not had anyone with whom to discuss it.” She brightened, “I suppose it will be the three of us that carry on that debate. But that’s not the word I’m looking for today.”

She saw their faces fall in disappointment and caught herself. How can they be accountable if I don’t let them follow their noses?

“Okay, why not? Would you like to talk about problems?” she asked.

Karen groaned, “I guess I started this, but truthfully, I never want to talk about problems.”

Claudia laughed, “Most women cannot stand to even say the word, my dear!”

“Really? I thought it was just me.”

Claudia frowned. “The words that mean the most to men seem to be the most difficult for women to say.” She chuckled, “I have heard women do anything to avoid the word ‘problem.’ They will say ‘challenge,’ ‘difficulty,’ ‘hiccup.’ Almost anything to avoid ‘problem.’ The worst, of course, is ‘issue.’”

“Why is that the worst?” Kimberlee asked.

“Because of the effect it has on a man,” Claudia replied. “If you say ‘I have a problem’ to a man, he perks up. By definition, problems have solutions. They are finite. If you say, ‘I have an issue,’ you will see his shoulders fall and the energy drain out of him. ‘Issues’ seem interminable to them.”

Kimberlee looked excited, “Like they can’t win! I’ve seen that look on Raul’s face.”

Claudia felt gratified. “When what he provides never amounts to more than the energy he spends, a man says, ‘I can’t win.’ And men have been defeated by women’s ‘issues’ for decades. Give him a problem, and truly let him solve it, and he will be happy. But spare him an issue.”

Karen groaned. “And all this time, I thought I was helping Mike by hiding my problems until I could solve them myself.” With her head in her hands, she said in despair, “How much more don’t I know about men?”

“Karen, look at me,” Claudia insisted. The golden-brown eyes met hers. “How many years have my family studied men?”

“About five hundred?” Karen guessed.

“And how many years have you studied men?”

“Less than one. Less than a half, actually.”

Claudia cocked her head to the side, “Any chance you might give yourself credit for beginning this journey before you have reached the end?”

“Maybe,” Karen replied.

Claudia’s pulse raced, but she had to know. “I have been at this all my life and I am still discovering who men are. If you feel hopeless every time men surprise you, you might want to give up now.”

She waited while Karen considered the choice and felt relieved when she saw her shoulders square. “Nope,” Karen replied, “I’m not giving up. I’m humbled but determined.”
Claudia looked at Kimberlee and was happy to see her grinning. “No way are you 
scaring me off!” she said. “I can stand to feel stupid over and over again. It’s worth 
it.”

“Well then, how about the last word of the Hero Language?” Claudia continued. 
As their faces screwed up in concentration, Claudia gave a clue. “Remember, the 
Language of Heroes speaks to the heart, soul and spirit of a man. That is why it is 
effective. It calls to him, rouses him, honors him. This is not a learned behavior. The 
language is there at birth. A boy who has never heard this last word before will still 
respond to it.”

They still looked befuddled. She tried again, only prompting and prodding, 
unwilling to take up the lead. “Think about what appeals even to small men; also 
known as boys. How do they play act? What do they dream of being?”

“Superheroes?” Karen responded.
Claudia smiled, “Go on,” she said, declining the reins.
“The boys at school are constantly role-playing superheroes. The one who is killing 
the dragon, rescuing his playmates, saving the day.”

“Then that’s the word?” Kimberlee asked. “The fifth word is ‘Hero?’ Men want to 
be heroes?”
Claudia smiled. “You cannot separate Hero and Man,” she said, “They are one and 
the same. The soul of a man is a hero.”
Karen gasped.
“It was right there all along!” Kimberlee laughed. “And Jack said it to me the 
other night. That he might need to be my hero. I told him it was the most beautiful 
thing anyone had ever said to me.”

Claudia felt her heart leap and her eyes tear up. Without hearing it from her first, 
Kimberlee had aptly received Jack’s gift. She lives in my world now, Claudia thought 
joyfully.

“Are you okay, Grandmother?” Kimberlee asked.
Claudia patted the young woman’s hand and noticed how much more beautiful she 
had become; softer, radiant. “I am much better than okay, my dear. I am proud and 
pleased as can be.”

“Um, Claudia?” Karen said hesitantly.
“Yes?”
“What exactly is a hero? As opposed to a good man? Is there some standard?”
“That is a great question, Karen. And very relevant,” Claudia responded. “It all 
dePENDs on whose point of view you are looking from. For many men, they would 
have to save a life to qualify as a hero for themselves. For me, men are my heroes by 
being accountable for what matters, by providing what is needed, by helping a 
stranger, by saving a spider.”

She noticed Kimberlee smiling. “What makes a man a hero for you?” Claudia 
asked.
“When he makes me feel safe. Or beautiful. Treasured. Special. Valued,” 
Kimberlee responded. Claudia had the distinct impression she was not speaking 
abstractly.
“How about you, Karen?”
Karen looked thoughtful. “Remember Corey, the boy in my class who started helping me?”

Claudia nodded, remembering it well. Karen had begun treating him as a Page, a young Knight, when she was learning about the Stages of Development.

“By giving him meaningful things to do, to provide for me, his attitude and behavior completely changed. Even though his parents still show little interest in him. It makes me think that a man only has to be a hero for one person to affect his life. Even a very young man.”

“When is Mike your hero?” Claudia persisted.

Karen looked perplexed, thoughtful. Finally her eyes cleared and her face lit up. “He is my hero when he provides for more than himself and more than me. Like the things he said about sex, knowing he’d be helping Kimberlee.” She glanced shyly at the younger woman and Kimberlee grinned back — and winked. Karen cracked up and the mood of the morning changed completely.

“Yeah, he’s my hero in our bedroom too. I guess I should tell him,” said Karen.

Claudia laughed lightheartedly. An exchange like this was unimaginable a couple of months before.

“Heroism is in the act. ‘Hero’ is in the acknowledgement,” Claudia asserted. “To acknowledge a man as our hero requires recognition of his truly noble intentions. I asked what makes a man a hero for you because they might have a hard time receiving that acknowledgment. In fact, you may have to help them receive it by making sure they know you need them to.”

“Huh?” Karen and Kimberlee said in unison.

Claudia explained, “Your homework is going to be to acknowledge the heroes in your life. Do not be surprised if this is difficult for you. Women have been acculturated to believe that they should be their own heroes. Women’s television delivers this message over and over again with movies in which, at most, one good man might provide some small assistance as the heroine rescues herself.” She shook her head sadly.

Then she elaborated on her original point, “It is also difficult for men to accept it; especially the ones who think they have to save a life to deserve that word. To help them, you say, ‘I need you to receive this. What you did was heroic to me.’”

She looked from one to the other. “Men have a hard time receiving. But they will do so in order to provide something for another. For example, to let someone else experience the joy of giving.”

Karen got a funny look on her face. Claudia’s intuition told her it had something to do with sex, but she did not know how.

KAREN had been enjoying the morning even though she found the topic challenging. It was clear she was stingy with the Hero word; even the concept. Most of the fun was generated by Claudia’s mood. She seemed lighter and more playful; less serious and significant. Karen was wondering why when Claudia changed the subject.

“I need to speak to you about my role in our lessons,” Claudia said and Karen’s heart skipped a beat. “I cannot continue as I have.”
“Do we need shorter sessions? Less often?” Karen asked, hoping to prevent a long hiatus, like the one she’d had to endure while waiting for Kimberlee.

Claudia shook her head and Karen’s stomach plummeted. But Claudia’s answer surprised her. “The sessions themselves are fine,” she said. “It is how I am being in them that must change.”

“How so?” Karen asked and noticed that Kimberlee was quietly studying her grandmother.

Claudia responded, “When I met you at yoga and heard about your struggles with Mike, I wanted to provide the Stages of Development. To give you understanding and compassion. And tools to deal with the transition he was in.”

Karen nodded, remembering the lifeline Claudia had extended.

“And, as you know, I prayed every day that Kimberlee would come in search of her inheritance. It was the one qualification I placed on defying the Covenant. Kimberlee had to ask.”

Karen saw the surprise in Kimberlee’s dilated pupils. She never told her.

“When you came to me, Kimberlee,” Claudia addressed her granddaughter directly, “in pain about being a Frog Farmer, I made myself accountable for your transformation.”

“Thank you. Your lessons changed my life,” Kimberlee said.

“No, Kimberlee,” Claudia said, shaking her head. “Only you could change your life. I provided the information, the new point of view, the challenge to the status quo and the salve for your pain. But you transformed yourself. It is what you did and what you must continue to do because I cannot be accountable anymore.”

Karen gulped. Even though Claudia spoke to Kimberlee, she knew the message for her was the same. She felt like a bird being shoved out of the tree. What if I don’t know how to fly?

“Claudia,” Karen ventured, “I know all about being accountable. And how tired it can make you. I need vacations just to recover. But it would be a privilege to be accountable for this knowledge.” She hesitated, “But, can you tell me exactly how this will work? You speak about a changing role but I don’t know what that will look like.”

Claudia smiled and Karen felt somewhat relieved. “You have made it abundantly clear that you regard this as a privilege. It is one of the reasons why I can entrust it to you. As to what it would look like: Instead of providing your training, I am shifting into a supporting role. You generate your training. I am an encyclopedia, a resource; a coach or a guide. I will reveal all of the elements of the Queen’s Code; its secrets and its conduct.”

She glanced at Kimberlee and back to Karen. “You can design it however you want. Take turns asking questions; alternate weeks for subjects you wish to pursue. Or align on an agenda ahead of time. I will happily comply with whatever you decide. So long as I am not accountable.”

Kimberlee roused herself, “Grandmother?”

“Yes, my dear?”

“Will this help you regain your strength? If we’re accountable and you’re not?”
Karen watched Claudia swallow like she had a lump in her throat. She replied to Kimberlee’s question, her voice husky, “Burt thinks so. And I hope so. I already feel better. I even had the inclination to bake.”

Kimberlee pointed at the half-eaten coffeecake. “I remember your pastries. As a child, they were one of the best parts of visiting. It was worth Myra’s grumbling the whole way over and back.” She smiled and said jokingly, “Heck, I’ll be accountable if we get more coffee cake.”

Karen was grateful for the humor and the way Kimberlee had played down the threat to Claudia’s health. She’d often thought of Claudia as an encyclopedia of knowledge. If that were true, Karen knew they’d barely explored the first volume.

BURT cleaned up his workbench and headed for the house. Where will I find her today? he wondered. Crossing the path between his workshop and the patio, he heard a high-pitched wolf whistle. Startled, he turned in its direction and found his beloved sitting on the bench he’d carved for her last year. His breath caught in his throat as she smiled and waved him over to one of the prettiest parts of her garden. It worked, he thought, it really worked.

Flooded with relief and joy, he automatically started whistling himself. When the notes of Popeye the Sailor carried toward Claudia, her face lit up like an angel. My angel, he thought, not for the first time.

KAREN, for once, was in a hurry to complete the review of her notes and the creation of her flip chart. Not because she was anxious to get home. Rather because she wanted to work on something else: the list of everything she intended to ask Claudia about. I could love this new format!

She munched on her sandwich and flipped through her pages from today. She gleaned the main points for her flip chart and put some of them into her own words:

- The Soul of a man is a Hero.
- It’s there from birth.
- Men get to be Heroes when they Provide for us, being Accountable.
- When they give us what we Need.
- When they Help us.
- And Save us.
- They may think it only counts if they save a life
- But they save our lives every day — from drudgery, loneliness, fear, despair.
- Heroism is in the Act; Hero is in the acknowledgment.
- Queens have always been the ones to acknowledge Heroes.
Karen added the last line in a sudden burst of insight and felt a piece click into place. She saw the perfect balance of masculine and feminine power. Next, she reviewed their assignment:

Homework:
1. See the hero in every man. Ask yourself, “How is this man a hero?”
2. Use the Hero word to acknowledge them and their noble deeds.

Karen had a lot of acknowledging to do. She had, indeed, been stingy. But like last week, she was looking forward to it. In the absence of resentment she was naturally generous with her appreciation. *I wonder if that’s true for all women?* She thought. *It would be interesting to find out.*

It dawned on her that when she began teaching women what she’d learned about men, she’d probably learn more about women too. *That should be interesting.* Then she started on the list of what she wanted to understand about men. She soon realized it would be more fun to develop the list with Kimberlee.

KIMBERLEE had used the “Help” word frequently on Monday and Tuesday. As predicted, every time she asked if one of the men could help her, the response had been, “Yes, what?” or “Yes, how?” Or if she asked in advance for time to be helped, they would say, “Yes. When?” Less predictably, they had been that willing in the middle of the month-end push.

Gloriously, for the first time, her team was not expected to show up on Wednesday. Kimberlee slept in, lay around most of the day, and spent the night at Jack’s house. The only downer was the thought that, circumstances being different, she could have spent part of the day vegging with Melissa. She still hadn’t received a reply to her email and she had the heart-wrenching feeling that she may never. She could relate to the predicament men are in: you can only be a hero for someone who lets you.

She was a little rushed getting to work on Thursday. Partly because her morning routine was off at Jack’s house. And partly because of the distraction of Jack himself. Kimberlee had expected the sex to be good. She was realistic enough to realize that a man in Jack’s position would have plenty of opportunity to develop skills. What she hadn’t expected was how much she enjoyed their conversations before and after. He was smart, funny, interested, and a great listener.

Often, something she said would spark an opinion on his part. But Listening to Learn saved her again and again. Whether she agreed or disagreed wasn’t the point. She let go of that and concentrated on seeing what he was inadvertently revealing about himself. As a result, she loved his company and experienced a growing admiration for the man and his values. Sometimes she berated herself for being so wrong about him, but she let go of that too.
On Thursday her team hit the ground running. Everyone was fresh and on their game. And surprisingly grateful to her. Occasionally she looked up to see Raul smiling as he observed the hum of activity. He looked satisfied and Kimberlee congratulated herself on a win-win deal.

Now it was Friday and time to thank Raul. Kimberlee had been working herself up to using the Hero word. When she contemplated it, she had a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. On an impulse, she called Claudia from her desk.

When her grandmother heard her voice, she responded in alarm, “Are you okay?”
“Sure, Grandmother. Why do you ask?”
“Because you never call me during your work day.”
Kimberlee laughed. “I guess you’re right. I usually hunker down when I’m here.”
“Being accountable?” Claudia asked.
“Exactly. Although since Saturday I have been asking for more help. And I’m wondering if there is a way to do my job with less stress.”
“Do you think, maybe, the two go together?” Claudia offered.
She heard Claudia chuckle as well. “Did you need something then?”
Kimberlee remembered the reason for her call and the funny feeling reappeared.
“Ya, I have a question for my favorite encyclopedia of men and women.”
Claudia giggled and Kimberlee was delighted to hear the childlike delight.

This new role is going to suit her.

“I’m contemplating telling my boss he’s my hero. For lots of reasons. And every time I think of it, I feel naked and I get a weird feeling, like my stomach is sunk in. There’s a funny space below my sternum. It feels strange and kind of scary.”
“Ahh, yes,” Claudia replied.
“You know what that is?”
“Yes, dear. That space is what we feel when we’re being feminine. I call it an ‘unoccupied space’ and it’s the source of women’s magic.”
“That’s cool,” Kimberlee replied, liking the idea of being magical. “But why do I feel exposed when I think about saying ‘hero?’ Like I’m naked?”
“We call that ‘strong woman, voluntarily vulnerable,’” Claudia answered. “It is the most empowering and attractive quality you can be. I am surprised you have not noticed it with the other words in the Language of Heroes.”
Kimberlee sat back in her chair, stunned. Strong woman, voluntarily vulnerable. That was exactly what she had been. From the moment she asked her grandmother for help.
“Wow, Grandmother. No wonder men treat me differently. I’ve been being this way for weeks.”
Claudia sniffled. “I know dear. It has been a great privilege to watch. For Burt and me both.”
Kimberlee felt herself tearing up too. “You’re the best Gram-Cracker.”
“As are you, Kimster. See you tomorrow.”
Kimberlee hung up and thought about their plans for Saturday. The idea was to have one of their newfangled sessions in the morning and a barbecue with Burt and Mike afterwards. On another impulse, she called back.
“Hey, if he’s available, could I invite Jack to our barbecue?” Kimberlee asked a bit nervously.

“Of course, dear. I would love to meet him,” Claudia responded.

“Oh goody,” Kimberlee giggled and hung up.

She and Jack were supposed to get together later Saturday night. Kimberlee quickly sent him a text: “Would you like to join me at my grandparents’ for lunch tomorrow?”

A few minutes later Jack texted back, “Sure. Meet you there?”

She responded, “1 p.m. Bring the Porsche?” and included her grandparents’ address.

He replied: 😊

All delays having been exhausted, Kimberlee took a deep breath and left her office. She passed slowly through Processing, smiling at the men and women, encouraging them individually. She was glad the freeze had thawed after the women realized that she treated them as warmly as the men. She marveled again at how different this part of her life had become.

Kimberlee saw through the glass that Raul wasn’t on the phone. She knocked lightly and entered. He looked up and said, “Hey, Kimberlee, what’s up?”

“Would this be a good time to thank you for something?” she asked, committing herself.

He straightened up, his face brightening. “Sure. What for?”

Kimberlee noticed a version of “Yes, what?” and smiled. How come I never noticed how willing men are before? Well, goober, ’cause you were too busy thinking they were hairy women.

“For being my hero,” she said simply and sincerely, profoundly aware of the feeling in her stomach.

He looked like someone had thrown him back in his chair. His hand went to his chest and he looked like the air was forced out of his lungs. His eyes teared up.

“Whoa,” he gasped. Embarrassed, he laughed. “What did I do to deserve that?”

Kimberlee took a seat across from him and began enumerating, “First, you believed in me all these years. Second, you’re giving me a future. Third, you’ve noticed and encouraged the changes I’ve been making in myself.”

He shrugged, mostly recovered. “All really obvious things. I don’t think that qualifies for hero status.”

She smiled internally at Claudia’s wisdom. “It makes you a hero to me.”

He shrugged again and this time she saw acceptance, somewhere in the relaxing of his shoulders. “If you say so.”

“Plus, you suffered being the go-between for me and Jack,” she added, blushing.

“I was wondering about that. Every time I poke Jack about it, he gives that line from That Thing You Do: ‘It would be ungentlemanly of me to elaborate.’” Raul complained but Kimberlee could tell he was faking. The warrior code of honoring privacy was well intact.

She felt she owed him more, though. “Let’s just say that he’s a hundred times the man I ever thought he was. You pick your friends well.”

He shrugged, “I could have told you that.”

She laughed, “If I had been listening.”
JACK received the text from Kimberlee after the markets had closed on the East Coast and he was wrapping up his week. It was an offer too good to pass up. **I’ll get to meet the woman responsible for the miraculous changes in her. And the family that matters most to her.**

That got him to thinking about Kimberlee’s father. His memory readily delivered the name. Compelled, he began searching the Internet and found a Stanley Whitehall in Wisconsin. Following the trail, he found a picture showing an elderly man. Still sorting, he found Stanley Whitehall III, in San Diego, and the resemblance to Kimberlee was striking. **That has to be him,** he thought, feeling like a hunter tracking prey. He wasn’t sure what he’d do with this information but it bothered him that Stanley apparently had no idea what a terrific daughter he had.

He came full circle back to the invitation. Besides a great offer it was a sure sign that Kim was seeing him as something beyond a sex partner. Not that he minded that part; he just wanted so much more.

**I always thought women used sex to lure men into relationships. Am I the first man to go along with it to win the heart of a woman?**

KIMBERLEE was appreciating the wisdom in not trying to get together with Jack on Friday nights. Instead of being exhausted and trying to be social or sexual, they gave each other the space to recover from work alone. **He knows what he needs and I like that.** It occurred to her that knowing what you need and being direct about it could be a kindness.

That’s how Karen found her snuggled up at home with Lancelot on Friday night. “I didn’t expect to get you. I thought you might be out with your new man friend,” Karen teased.

“Oh, he’s smarter than that. As much as we enjoy each other’s company, he doesn’t give up on what he needs,” Kimberlee replied.

“Yeah, Mike’s the same way about his car time every Saturday morning. It used to hurt my feelings but then I figured out he’s a better person afterwards,” Karen responded. “I wonder if men are better at filling their tanks than women are.”

“I don’t know. Maybe only at the Breaking Point? Something to ask Claudia.”

Karen laughed. “That’s exactly what I called about. I’m wondering if you’ll make a list with me. You know, of all the things we want Claudia to teach us.”

“Sure, but how much paper do you have? ’Cause it’s gonna be a long one!”

Karen laughed again and then had an idea. “Maybe we could start with categories? Like money, fatherhood, health, stuff like that.”

“Or maybe all the things that men do that make us wonder what ‘the good reason’ is?” Kimberlee asked.

The two of them worked for more than an hour on “the list.” It was daunting how much they didn’t know. **But exciting too,** Karen thought.
CLAUDIA prepared for the arrival of her guests, filled with satisfaction for having completed the Language of Heroes. This journey was exhausting but also exhilarating. She felt compassion for Karen and Kimberlee, who had received in six short weeks the equivalent of what Claudia had studied for several years. She was immensely proud of them and excited about their futures.

*What about my future?* she thought. While she had taught Kimberlee and Karen the foundation of the Queen’s Code, she hadn’t taught them everything. *Sadly, not even close.* There were still many areas in which they could revert to their old adversarial ways simply by not understanding what to expect from men.

She could imagine Kimberlee struggling with questions about courtship and commitment in her budding relationship with Jack. She could easily anticipate Karen making her new baby her first priority and leaving Mike ignored and emasculated. And that was just the beginning ….

*I should make a list of all the things I have learned about men for the last six decades. Karen could probably help me organize the information. Even if we don’t end up with enough time to transmit it, they would know what to research on their own.*

She became conscious of a weight attempting to settle on her shoulders and recognized the burden of accountability. She shrugged it off, reminding herself that she could have a list but she was determined to follow their agenda. *Be the resource,* she thought and felt the weight release, mostly. *Starting next week. I have one more thing to do.*

With a contented sigh, Claudia finished stirring the lemonade and put it in the refrigerator for later. She was looking forward to meeting Jack and thanking him for the glow in Kimberlee’s cheeks. And she had observed the conspicuous fullness of Karen’s bust. She hoped to congratulate Mike on his newest project under construction but would honor their privacy if they did not make an announcement.

KAREN had brought their list and was anxious to get started on it. Her plan was to interview Claudia on every question and subject.

But Claudia was in a festive mood and waved away the list. “Beginning next Saturday, and for as many as I have left, I will be your encyclopedia. Gladly. First, there is something that your despair last week reminded me of, Karen. That we need to celebrate our accomplishments.”

“What do you mean?” Karen asked, perplexed by the statement and a little vexed at postponing her research.

“A wise man once said, ‘Celebrate your accomplishments so thoroughly as to burn the bridge to whom you were before,’” Claudia responded. “This is extremely important, especially on a lifelong journey. You must stop from time to time and lay claim to the progress you have made. And close off the option of retreating to a smaller version of yourself. Your accomplishments may be new skills or abilities, or new horizons that you could not see before. It could be new relationships or new
possibilities in existing relationships. By claiming them, you mark your progress. It helps to fight off the despair when the way before you seems endless.”

Claudia added with a flourish, “I am claiming a new horizon: my family’s knowledge going out into the world. Thank you.”

“Why ‘thank you’?” Kimberlee asked.

“Because you two created that horizon. In your thirst for knowledge, your courage in applying it, and your commitment to giving it to others,” Claudia replied.

Karen could hardly believe her ears. “Does this mean that we have your permission to teach other women?” she gulped. “Now?”

She held her breath as Claudia searched both their faces. She finally nodded, “Yes. It does.”

Karen replied, as the tears overflowed, “Thank you.”

Claudia took her hand. “As I said, Karen, thank you. For wanting it, for working for it. And for having the courage and audacity to teach others.”

“Raul wants someone to teach the other employees what I’ve learned. Both the men and women. Perhaps you could start there, Karen,” Kimberlee said.

Karen wiped her face and laughed nervously, “Dive in the deep end, huh?”

“My suggestion would be for you two to teach together. For support. For inspiration. For the different examples you can give,” Claudia said.

Karen turned to Kimberlee and they locked eyes. After a moment’s hesitation, Kimberlee said, “I think I would enjoy that very much.”

Smiling, Karen replied, “Me too. I think you’d make a great partner.”

“Thank you. I think I’m learning to be.”

“We both are,” Karen responded. “Okay, I’ll play this accomplishment game. I claim the freedom from having to do everything myself. I need help and I am able to ask for it.”

“Bravo!” Claudia commended.

“And I claim the ability to be supported,” Karen added. “I can speak my heart’s desire and make deals.”

Kimberlee nodded. “That’s a good one. Can I play?”

“Of course,” Karen and Claudia replied together and laughed.

“Then I claim the Queen’s Code,” Kimberlee said earnestly. “For myself and anyone I’m friends with,” she said, tearing up. Wonder what that’s about? Karen thought.

A deep voice inserted itself in their conversation. “Would now be a good time to give you a gift?” Burt asked.

As the three women turned toward the big man, Karen thought how appropriate it was for him to be part of this. Then she noticed his hands were behind his back and he was attempting to conceal something rather large with his body.

She remembered the astonishing gift he had presented last year: A garden bench carved with a mural depicting the Stages of Development. “What have you been up to now?” Karen teased.

In a grand gesture only a tall man could pull off, Burt held out his arms and placed before Kimberlee and Karen beautifully handcrafted music stands. Karen’s was a deep warm brown with handsome traditional hardware. Collapsible, how clever. There he goes giving his blessing again.
Knowing Burt was a carver at heart, she looked to see how he might have adorned this very practical tool. When she saw the image, her lower lip quivered and the tears overflowed again.

KIMBERLEE had been enjoying the warmth of their conversation, noticing how close the three of them had become. And how comfortable she felt with women now. *Funny, I thought it was only men I needed to work out.*

Now, standing before her grandfather’s gift, she was speechless. The black was as perfect for her as the warm brown was for Karen. The sleek, modern hardware pleased her immensely. The implication of the teaching tool was unavoidable and she willingly embraced the responsibility of her priceless inheritance.

Like Karen, it was the image in the center of the stand that caused her to lose it. *How did he manage to capture that expression?* she wondered, as she marveled through tears at the perfect depiction of Claudia earnestly instructing them. *He even caught the twinkle in her eyes.*

When both women turned toward him, their question implied, Burt answered, “This way, no matter what happens, and no matter where you go with the information, she’ll always be with you.”

 Appropriately, the man who foresaw this new future became the center of their embrace.

BURT reluctantly disentangled himself from the glorious hugs to answer the doorbell. Opening the front door, he instantly took the measure of the man standing on his porch. *Good.*

“I presume you’re the one that’s been making my granddaughter so happy,” he said.

Jack nodded and replied gruffly, “I hope to, sir. She’s worth a kingdom.” Satisfied, Burt shook his hand and invited him in.

The End
...and the Beginning
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