# Finding Karen

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*A blizzard blows in, bringing with it a woman with no past.*

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( A Les Lumens story )

*Nebraska – Winter, Late 1800s*

The wind cut across the prairie, every snowflake like a tiny razor cutting into her skin. She stumbled forward, not knowing what else to do, unable to remember how she had come to be out in this storm. Her mind was nearly as blank and impenetrable as the blinding gales of snow that kept her from seeing more than a few feet in front of her, as she slogged through the calf-deep drifts.

*Is that a light? Is that a house?* She stared with eyes that refused to focus properly at the tiny beacon of hope ahead. It appeared like an angel through the wall of white, a golden haze of light indicating something was out there. She took another step forward, and more details emerged.

She saw a window, the glass thick and milky. It was from there that the beautiful light was emerging. Right next to it was a stout wooden door. She could almost feel the warmth even though she was several feet away.

Hope surging within her, she lurched toward the door. Her strength was failing, as was her ability to think clearly. *Keep moving,* she thought, vaguely recalling that to stop moving was to die. Even though she was confused and weak, she remembered that much.

A final step, and she fell heavily up against the door. She raised a hand to knock, but the elements at last overwhelmed her will and determination.

She knew no more.

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Kenneth Willis heard the thump against his door, and immediately went for the shotgun over the

mantle. On a night like this, a man did well to be ready for danger when he heard strange sounds in the night. Peeking carefully out the window, he could see nothing, save for the blowing snow outside from the storm that had come raging in during the late afternoon. Walking back to the door, he held his shotgun ready and opened the door a crack.

Kenneth propped the shotgun up against the wall when he saw her lying in front of the door. It was obvious the woman was frozen, and it was impossible to tell if she were even breathing. A quick look around revealed only her fading tracks leading to his door. Cursing, he picked her up and brought her inside, shutting out the weather by kicking the door closed.

Inside in the light, he could see that all her clothing was threadbare. Petticoats shown through numerous tears and holes in her woolen dress, and her fur-lined cape was just as tattered. Her shoes looked as if they would fall off in a stiff breeze. Long, dark hair hung in matted tangles, but still reached down well past the middle of her back. She was a small woman, almost childlike. Kenneth guessed she would only reach his chest if she were standing, and he only stood six feet tall. The swell of her bosom and her features belied her stature, and announced beyond any doubt that she was no mere girl, but a woman.

Carrying her to the bed, he could see that her skin was pale and ashen, frost rimming her lashes. She drew only shallow breaths, and all of her clothing was stiff with ice. Shaking and calling out to her drew no response, so he tried to remember what an old trapper from the Yukon had once told him about freezing.

Her skin was ice-cold, and defying propriety, he unhooked one of the latches of her dress and slid a hand over the skin beneath. It too was near ice-cold. If not for the slight rise and fall of her chest, Kenneth would have assumed her dead.

*What was it that old man said? Once you get so cold, you can't warm up again 'cause your body just can't heat up.* Kenneth pinched his fingers and thumb against his forehead with one hand, and toyed with his short, dark beard with the other, trying to remember what the old man had said to do if someone he knew got so dangerously cold.

"Get her out of the wet clothes," Kenneth muttered. It was highly inappropriate for him to consider undressing her, but he decided that life was better than modesty, and she was surely close to death.

Working the frozen latches of her dress open proved to be nearly impossible, so Kenneth retrieved a knife from the table and simply cut the fabric. Upon trying to figure out the stays and petticoats beneath the dress, he shrugged and sliced these with the sharp blade as well. The dark tangle of hair on her mound and the sight of her firm breasts once again reminded him that it was no girl who

appeared on his doorstep this night.

Shaking those thoughts out of his head, Ken pulled off her shoes. He frowned upon seeing the obvious signs of frostbite on her toes. Her fingers and the tip of her nose evidenced hints of frostbite as well.

The trapper had told him that your body just couldn't warm back up on its own once it got so cold. Heat would have to come from the outside until a person recovered enough that their body started working properly again. A warm place would work, but Kenneth's house was only just warm enough to be tolerable. That left the alternative the old man had offered for when you couldn't get the victim to an enclosed space.

With more than a little trepidation, considering the chill of the house, Kenneth started pulling off his clothes. The best and quickest way to transfer heat was to wrap up in a blanket with direct skin-to-skin contact. Attraction to the beautiful woman intruded upon his concern, but Kenneth pushed those improper thoughts away, and finished removing his clothes from his lean, muscular frame.

Crawling into the bed, he pulled all the blankets and furs over them both, and then gently rolled her onto her side, facing away from him. He nestled up close to her, wincing from the biting chill coming from her as their skin touched. He pulled a blanket up over their heads, thinking that his breath would help warm the space as well. Wrapping one arm over her body, he tented the woolen cloth so that it would not obstruct the woman's shallow breathing.

Just the touch of her skin had him shivering, and not in any way that he would normally while touching a nude woman. He wondered if all of his efforts were in vain, considering how cold she was, and how slowly she breathed. He endured, trying to get their skin in contact wherever possible, to give his body heat to her.

Kenneth's day had been filled with laying in firewood, and he was tired to the bone. His mind drifted and his eyelids were heavy. He nodded off a few times – for how long he didn't know. Upon awakening again, he realized the woman was shivering, and he could hear her teeth chattering.

*That's a good sign, I think.* She was still unresponsive when he tried to talk to her, so he just remained up against her, noticing that she did feel a bit warmer. Soon sleep overcame him again.

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It was still a few hours until morning when Kenneth awoke, groggy and confused. After a few moments, he remembered the woman in his arms. He was encouraged to notice that her breathing

was much stronger, and that her skin felt warm against him – *very* warm.

His arm was also draped over her body and across her breasts. One very stiff nipple pressed against his wrist, sending an unavoidable surge of blood into his loins. He fought the arousal, but his cock still swelled slightly against the back of her legs.

Thinking that the danger was likely past, and not trusting his baser instincts at the moment, Kenneth crawled out of the bed and dressed, leaving the woman beneath the warm blankets. She rolled over on her back as he stood, a slight smile on her face. He matched that smile as he dressed in his underclothes and picked up one of the blankets. After stirring up the fire, he settled into his rocking chair and pulled his blanket around him to doze.

When he awoke with the dawn, Kenneth saw that the young woman was still resting comfortably. His grumbling stomach and aching bladder let him know that it was time to get up. He pulled back on the rest of his clothes and a fur-lined coat, and then headed outside to the outhouse. The storm had blown itself out during the night, leaving the prairie covered in a blanket of white. Even a man like Kenneth, who wasn't fond of the cold, could appreciate the untouched beauty of the scene.

After drinking it in for a moment, he slogged through the snow to the outhouse, and then to the barn to get some eggs, and feed the stock.

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She awoke confused and aching to the smell of pork sizzling and coffee brewing. Sleep was reluctant to release its grip on her, and it took quite some time for her to open her eyes. It took even longer for her to come to her senses and take in her surroundings.

She muttered, "Where am I?"

Kenneth turned from his skillet, sliding it off the stove to avoid burning the bacon, and asked, "You alright, Miss? You were in a bad way when I found you outside my door last night."

"Who are you? How did I get here?" The young woman muttered as the world slowly came into focus. She tried to sit up, and then started when the chill air kissed her bare breasts. She quickly jerked the blanket back over her body and gasped out, "Where are my clothes!"

Kenneth turned his eyes away from her, with no small amount of difficulty, until she covered up again. "I had to cut them off you, they was frozen solid and only would have leeched the heat out of you if I'd left them on. My name's Kenneth – Kenneth Willis. Found you outside my door last night,

near frozen to death."

He walked over toward the bed, "You'd better let me have a look at them fingers and toes, they looked frostbitten. They'll need some doctoring, and if it's bad, I may need to run to town to get a real doctor for you."

Memories started to emerge in her head now. She remembered stumbling through the snow in the dark, and the light from the window. After that, she couldn't remember anything else. There were faint flashes of memory about being warm, with someone lying next to her, but she was not sure if that was a dream or reality. The man stood at the foot of the bed, looking into her eyes, silently asking if he could lift the blanket that he was holding to examine her toes. She nodded to indicate it was okay and then said, "My name is Karen."

"Karen," Ken acknowledged, and then lifted the blankets. She winced a little as he touched her toes, looking them over. She did the same a few moments later as he examined her fingers.

"Well, you got feeling and the color ain't too off. I think I got you in here just in time. Let me get you a shirt to put on for now. It ain't hardly gonna fit right, but it should cover you well enough that you can sit up and eat. Are you hungry?"

"Oh, yes," Karen admitted, her stomach nothing more than an empty hollow within her.

Kenneth nodded and smiled, going to retrieve one of the few other articles of clothing he possessed for her. He turned his back as she put it on, and then returned to his cooking, noting that the sight of his shirt hanging loose over her petite frame was very eye-catching.

A few minutes later, he brought her a plate of bacon and eggs, as well as a steaming cup of coffee. She ate quickly, and felt a little of her strength returning as the food helped warm her.

Ken finished his meal, took a drink of coffee, and then asked, "I don't wanna offend, how did you end up out there in that bad blow all alone?"

Karen's brow furrowed as she tried to remember. After a few minutes, her lip started to quiver and she said, "I... I don't know. I remember being out in the snow. I remember walking."

"Where you from?"

Tears started to flow down her cheeks, "I don't remember. I remember coming West in a wagon with my family, and then... But that was summer. Why can't I remember?"

Kenneth's heart broke seeing the woman sob. "I'll help you, Miss, don't you worry. You almost died last night, things in your head are sure not to be right for a bit."

Karen looked unconvinced but nodded her head and smiled weakly. "Thank you, Sir."

"Just call me Ken."

"Ken," she acknowledged with a wider smile.

"Drink up that coffee. It'll help warm you up inside," Kenneth suggested.

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Karen dozed off again for a while shortly after eating, still recovering from her ordeal. She was awake just long enough for Kenneth to care for her frostbitten fingers and toes, which he now believed were not as bad as they had first appeared.

When she awakened a few hours later, Karen quietly said, "Ken, I need to..." She stopped, unable to continue, as her cheeks turned bright red.

He smiled at her and said, "That color in your cheeks is a good thing. You were pale as the snow last night. I'll find you something to put on and give you a pair of my shoes. I'll have to cinch them all up a bit, but they should be good enough to get you to the outhouse."

Getting dressed with her bandaged fingers proved to be a trial, and Ken was unable to help her, because he was facing away from her the whole time. Eventually she managed, and between the two of them, they raised the legs of his pants high enough she wouldn't walk on them. Ken assisted her, breaking a path through the snow, and then stepping away from the outhouse while she answered the call.

Once back in the house, Ken said, "We need to get you some clothes that fit. I don't have much myself as it is. Yours were all tatters, even before I had to cut them. I could go get something for you in town, and then we could both go and see if we can't help you find your way home."

"I'm so sorry to trouble you," Karen apologized.

"It's nice to have some company. I don't see many folks out here. Shouldn't take me more'n an hour or so if I ride hard. You be okay by yourself for that long?"

"I... I suppose I must. I certainly can't go with you like this."

Ken nodded his head in agreement, "You really shouldn't be up much until those toes heal right, either. Should probably wait before you go into town. I'll leave the shotgun over here close, just in case, but don't be afraid. I ain't seen no trouble here in years."

Her eyes were pleading when she replied, "Please hurry."

"I will."

He bundled up then and left the house. Karen looked around, trying to remember how she got here, and how she had been separated from her family.

The word *family* left a bitter taste in her mouth. That much she remembered. The trip west was with her husband and his parents. It was a journey she had never wanted to take, with a man she did not love, and his parents who treated her like a slave.

The marriage had been arranged, and although her husband was handsome and rich, she could never love him. To please her parents, she had gone through with the wedding and became his wife. Almost immediately, he announced that they were going west to seek their fortune, and would be traveling with his parents, who planned to open a dry goods store.

Karen missed her family – her real family – and she missed her friends. The entire journey had been horrible for her, sleeping on the ground and riding in the bumpy wagon. Her husband barely acknowledged her, save to remind her of her duty to please him. His parents looked down their noses at her, treating their daughter-in-law worse than the family dog.

Her memories simply stopped there. There were vague impressions of other people, and other places, but they felt more like dreams than reality. Summer, fall, and the beginning of winter had all passed her by. She remembered being in the wagon, and the next thing she could recall was wandering through the snow to this house.

"Why can't I remember?" she sobbed, holding her head in her hands. Pulling the covers up over her, she cried herself to sleep.

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Karen steadily recovered, happy to have proper clothing once Ken returned from town. The pain in

her fingers and toes went away the second day, allowing her to get up and move around more. She didn't talk much, lost in her own little world, and Kenneth didn't press her.

She took over the cooking the third day, improving the fare considerably. Ken talked about his life, and things that were happening as he went about his chores each day. Karen responded to him sometimes, even relating a story from her youth on occasion, but she pointedly avoided any mention of recent times. Ken thought it sad that such a beautiful woman wasn't quite right in the head. He wondered if perhaps it was some lingering symptom of her collapse in the snow.

Karen drifted in and out of reality.

At times, when she was talking with Ken, she felt fine, and came to like the man. She also noticed that he was handsome, and her cheeks flushed when she noticed him looking in her direction sometimes. He tried to hide the glances, and even appeared ashamed by the action, but she saw them nonetheless. She was both embarrassed and flattered by those looks, not finding them at all disturbing, because he made no improper advances toward her.

Whenever she thought about her husband and his parents, she would simply lose hours, even whole days. She would remember nothing until something jarred her back into the world again. It frightened her, and at the same time, she felt comforted whenever she emerged from one of the spells.

After a week, those periods of missing time became less frequent, and Karen's strength returned. Ken suggested that they go into town, and see if they could discover where she belonged, and what had happened to her.

The wagon ride into town was a blur, because the moment she sat down on the wooden seat, memories of the ride west assaulted her. She only emerged from her cocoon of semi-consciousness when they rolled into town and the sounds of people going about their daily business penetrated the protective cocoon around her mind.

Most people indicated that they had not heard anything, and had no idea who might. Kenneth was about to suggest that they might try a different town another day when he saw a goods-laden wagon rolling down the muddy main street of town.

The man was obviously a merchant, or employed by one, and so he was likely well-traveled. Karen followed Ken over as he went to talk to the man, who was climbing down from his wagon and about to enter the general store.

"Excuse me, sir," Kenneth said to the merchant when they reached him.

The man smiled and responded, "Yes, what do you need?"

"This young woman here can't remember the last few months. I thought maybe you might know something, because you travel."

The merchant looked hard at Karen, and then his eyes lit up. "I believe I do. I've heard about a woman that looks like her as I came west. Doesn't remember things, and sometimes doesn't seem to know what's going on around her?"

Ken looked at Karen for a moment with an apology in his eyes, and then turned back to the other man and nodded. "Yeah, that's about right."

"People have been talking about her, because she appears in a town, and then just vanishes in the middle of the night. First place I heard about it, they mentioned a wagon they'd found not long after she vanished, where a young fellow and an old couple got scalped by Injuns."

Karen gasped as the images came back to her in a rush. She remembered seeing the Indians off in the distance, her husband and in-laws grabbing their guns, and then a red-skinned man falling from his horse amongst the sounds of gunfire. The painted men on horseback riding in. Arrows everywhere. The terrible sound of screams.

Kenneth cursed and caught Karen as her eyes went glassy and she collapsed.

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The first thing Karen saw was Kenneth hovering over her, with a concerned look on his face. When her eyelids fluttered and opened, he asked, "Are you all right? I'll go get the doctor."

Karen let out a choked sob. "My husband... The Indians killed him and his parents. There was so much blood. So much screaming." She paused as sobs wracked her body, preventing her from speaking. "One of them grabbed me by the hair and put a knife to my throat, but another one yelled at him and he stopped. They just left me there."

Sympathy was obvious in Ken's features as he listened to her gasp out the tale between sobs. "I'm sorry about your husband, Miss. Do I need to fetch the doctor for you?"

Karen shook her head in the negative, and then said with her lip quivering, "What will I do? My family is in the East. I have no one here. I'm alone in a strange place."

"Miss, don't you worry about that none. You can stay at my place as long as you need. Maybe we can find some way to get back East."

Karen let him assist her to rise. "Thank you, but you've already done so much."

"Miss, wouldn't be right to leave you without kin or a roof over your head out here. Especially not with Christmas coming. I told you it's nice to have someone to talk to." Ken didn't realize that he was holding her hand tenderly the entire time he was speaking.

Karen did notice, however, and the gesture made her feel secure. "Thank you, Ken. Please call me Karen?"

Kenneth smiled. "I will then. Now, let's get back to my place. That merchant fellow said the Sheriff in that town is looking for anyone who knows about that wagon. I'll get someone to write a letter for you."

"I can write," Karen told him.

"Well, that'll make it a whole lot easier. You could write a letter to your kin too, then. I'll have to get something to write on. Don't have much call for it, on account of not being able to read, nor write."

"I could teach you, to repay you for your kindness."

Ken let out a surprised snort. "Well, I reckon it couldn't hurt me to get some learnin'. Let's get them writing things and get back to the house."

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Karen proved to be a good teacher, and Ken a good student. He was even able to read some of the reply from the Sheriff when it arrived several days later. The local lawman also sent a message with the letter that he needed to talk with Karen about the matter, to make sure she was the rightful owner of things found with the wagon. The man who delivered the letter and the message said the Sheriff would be around come morning.

Although she went to bed feeling good, Karen awoke deep in the night from a nightmare reliving the attack that had stolen her memory. She woke sobbing and distraught, rousing Kenneth. He walked over to the bed, to ensure she was okay and comfort her. When he reached her, Karen pulled him down close, clinging to his arm.

Ken climbed into the bed next to her when he could no longer stand in his groggy, half-asleep state. She showed no signs of releasing his arm, even when it appeared that she had fallen asleep again. Kenneth lay in the bed on his side facing her, his arm enfolded in hers, a little ashamed to be in bed with a woman to whom he wasn't wed.

As he started to drift to sleep once more, his shame faded, overpowered by the touch of her soft skin, and the sight of her sleeping peacefully once more. It was hardly unpleasant, after all, no matter how improper it might be.

Kenneth awakened early, and quickly got out of bed since Karen had released his arm in the night. She had thrown the covers off at some point as well, and the sight of her clad only in a thin chemise sent a rush of warmth into his loins.

In the time since remembering the Indian attack, Karen had not slipped back into the distant state that had overcome her so often previously. She laughed at little jokes Ken made, and they generally got along well together.

For just a moment, he entertained a thought of courting her. The thought had no more entered his head before he shook it out and turned away from the enchanting sight of her on the bed, pulling the covers up over her at the same time. She had lost her husband to violence only a few months before, right before her eyes, and it would just be cruel to make her think about those emotions again.

He could still feel her arms wrapped around him the night before, no matter how hard he tried to push the sensation away.

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The sheriff slapped his hat against his thigh, saying, "Well, I reckon you about have to be the rightful owner of what was in that wagon now. Ain't nobody coulda known so much about what was in it unless it were theirs."

"I don't know what could be left," Karen said quietly, hugging her arms about her.

"Well, somethin' you didn't know about, obviously. There was a sack fulla gold under the seat of the wagon. Enough for you to be right well off."

Karen looked up at the lawman with surprise. "Gold?"

"Yep. Yer kin musta been better off 'n you knew. That's why Barret wanted to make sure that the folk it belonged to got it."

Ken smiled and turned to Karen. "Well, that should help get you back East." Even though he was happy for her, the thought of her leaving was painful. No matter how hard he fought against it, he was becoming deeply enamored of the beautiful little woman.

The Sheriff put back on his hat and said, "I can send word to Barret, or I can just send a letter with you. He said he'd trust my thinkin' on it."

"We'll have to sleep in the wagon. It'll take longer than a day to get there," Ken explained to Karen.

She shivered and whispered, "I don't know if I can."

Turning to the other man, Ken asked, "Would this Barret give me her things, if you told him it was me that was comin'?"

"I reckon so. I could send 'round a deputy to keep an eye on the place, if you'll be staying, Ma'am," the Sheriff offered.

"I don't want to trouble anyone," she responded softly.

The lawman laughed. "Ain't no trouble at all. A couple of them boys ain't been earning their pay lately. They could do with a little cold and wet."

Ken asked, "You want me to go get them things for you? I could go today. I'm sure you're yearnin' for home."

Even though the thought of home – her real home – did warm her heart, Karen didn’t relish the trip. The thought of leaving Ken also caused her a little twinge of regret as well. He was everything she hoped her husband would become once they were married, despite knowing his nature. She had thought she could change him, but he proved her wrong quite quickly. *Perhaps it would be best if I didn't see Ken for a couple of days,* she thought.

Nodding her head, she said, "If you don't mind."

"I'll get the wagon hitched up, then. You should have enough to eat while I'm gone."

The Sheriff laughed, adding, "And I'll tell one of them lazy boys that they're gonna be ridin' out this

way regular for a couple days."

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Karen found that she stared after Ken long after he vanished from sight in the distance. Sighing, she finally turned away from the window. Catching a tangled lock of her hair between her fingers, she thought that it could use a washing, as could the rest of her. Although Ken said he thought bad weather was coming again, for now it was quite warm in the house, despite the season. Her hair should dry well enough that she wouldn't catch cold, if she did it now.

She felt and smelled quite a bit better after a good washing. The deputy greeted her, shortly afterward, and she saw him twice more during the day. The Sheriff also came to call, to make sure the other man was doing what he was told, and that she didn't need anything. The house was lonely without Ken, even though she took on his chores – at least those she could manage – to keep her busy once her hair dried.

The bed also felt empty when she lay down that night, and that thought caused her cheeks to burn. She didn't know what had possessed her to grab Ken's arm, or to hold it so tight that he couldn't possibly retreat without being rude. Even though she had feigned sleep, she had lain awake for quite some time, enjoying the feeling of holding him, even if it was just his arm. He helped to chase the nightmare away, letting her sleep comfortably again. She fell asleep thinking about it.

Once again, she awakened deep in the night. It was not the horrors that awakened her this time, however, but something equally distressing. She remembered the dream vividly, and shame burned in her breast for dreaming such things. She had dreamed of Ken lying with her, not taking her as her husband had, but loving her as a man should love a woman.

She could still hear every sound, and feel every touch of the dream. It was so real that she found it hard to believe he was not in the bed with her when she awakened. The aching need the dream caused in her loins was nearly unbearable, and before she realized what she was doing, her hand crept down to relieve that pressure.

She snatched her hand away from her heat after a moment, ashamed that she was touching herself. Karen remembered vividly when her mother had caught her doing this. The cuff upside her head and the scolding about *dirty things a good Christian girl should not do* echoed in her mind almost as vividly as the dream.

Almost.

Karen frowned, thinking, *I did the right thing – what a good Christian woman should do. I married the man my parents wanted me to, and I submitted to him, as a proper wife should. All that earned me was being here and watching him die.*

The insistent need from her loins continued, unabated, and she wondered why God would judge someone for feeling good. It didn't sound like the loving God she had always been taught watched over folks who believe in him. Those feelings were good, and they were a gift from him, why would he punish someone for rejoicing in that gift?

Once again, her hand crept toward her need, and this time she pulled up her chemise to expose her sex to her hand. The shame was still there, but it was dulled now. Her arousal was quickly overshadowing her inhibitions. Ken had felt so good in her arms, and he was so much unlike her thoughtless husband. *What would it be like for him to love me?* She wondered as her fingers stroked her folds.

Karen's body came alive, her nipples pressing hard against the thin material of her chemise. She could smell the musty scent of her arousal in the air as her fingers moved ever faster. Her eyes closed, and once again she lay beneath Ken, feeling pleasure such as she had never imagined. Her fingers moved faster, the sounds of them rubbing her nether lips in fast circles reaching her ears now.

A tight numbness spread through her, starting in her depths and reaching well up into her chest. She could feel wetness coating her fingers now, and her mouth opened in a silent scream. In a rush, the numb sensation changed to something much different, an explosion of pleasure that rocked her entire body, forcing a high-pitched moan from her throat.

She climaxed until she thought she would surely faint from the light-headed, floating feeling it imposed upon her. She panted and curled up into a fetal position, her hand clasped tight over her throbbing clit.

She felt absolutely no shame as she drifted in the beautiful afterglow of her orgasm. Such a thing could never be a sin against God, and she certainly didn't feel dirty. She felt wonderful.

Karen slipped back to sleep, her hand still between her bared thighs.

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As though a dam had burst within her, Karen's body screamed for attention shortly after awakening in the morning. This time, she didn’t ignore the need for even a moment, bringing on another intense climax with her flashing fingers before rising. In her mind's eye, it was once again Ken giving her such

wonderful feelings.

She couldn't get him out of her mind through the entire day. She feared to satisfy the need to pleasure herself that assaulted her the rest of the day, unable to endure the thought that the deputy or Sheriff might hear her sounds of pleasure, or see her through the milky-glassed window. Once night fell, however, she once again reached a shuddering climax beneath the blankets. Her shame was gone now, replaced by confusion as to why she would be so enamored of a man whom she had only met not so long ago – and why he caused such intense needs in her.

Upon awakening, she again remembered a dream. This time, her husband rode her like a mare, rolling off her afterward with no care for her satisfaction. Against all propriety, her dream-self had demanded to know why he was so thoughtless of her. He struck her once, and then Ken was there. Kenneth hurled her husband from the bed, and he gave her the pleasure a good husband would have provided.

Karen's nipples stiffened even more as she tossed back the covers, the chilly air kissing her barely clad body. Not a single thought of shame or social norms entered her mind. Her chemise was off just as quickly as the covers, and soon her fingers played over her sex in a rush. Ken's gentle, incredible lovemaking played through her mind again as she reached her peak on her flashing fingers.

Once she regained her senses from the orgasm, Karen rose on wobbly knees to dress. She knew now that there was more than simple appreciation to her feelings. She prayed that Kenneth would notice the signs she intended to give him, and that her feelings were returned.

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Karen was pleased by how much of her clothing had survived the attack when Ken returned with it later that evening. She was also in awe of the amount of gold in the sack he handed her. If there were any lingering doubts about her feelings, they immediately vanished when she wrapped her arms around Ken in joy.

She did everything in her power for the next week to indicate her attraction to Ken, and she was sure he had noticed, but he still gave no sign of his own feelings. Karen started to lose heart, thinking she had imagined his glances, or that they were perhaps simple lust with no gentle emotion behind them.

Kenneth had noticed, and he was utterly torn. At first, he had denied the truth of his eyes, the subtle indications of her attraction easy enough to dismiss in his mind. As those signs became more obvious, it was not so easy to ignore. As much as he desired her – as much as he thought about her – he knew his feelings were wrong. Even if she felt attraction to him, it was likely misplaced gratitude

and a way to fill the void in her soul caused by the loss of her husband.

With Christmas only a couple of days away, Karen decided to use some of her newfound gold to prepare a feast for the holiday. She already did every little domestic task she could think of, keeping the house in a manner it had never before seen. Her goal was to show what a good wife she would be, hoping to sway Ken's attentions. What she didn't expect was him proving what a good husband he would be, helping her with the chores in the house, and remarking that she was as good at teaching how to keep house as she was at teaching him to read.

It took a lot of searching to find everything Karen wanted to prepare the holiday meal, and she paid far more than many of the ingredients were worth. Some simply were hesitant to part with their stores, and some she gave more to because they appeared to be struggling, and the extra money would make their holiday far more joyous.

When Karen noticed Ken eyeing a new Spencer rifle, she found the time to sneak away and purchase it while they were in town; wrapping it in some cloth she had purchased to conceal it in the wagon. She knew he would be surprised and pleased when she gave it to him for Christmas.

The day finally arrived, and Karen went into a flurry of activity when the sun was barely above the horizon. In late afternoon, she laid out a feast fit for a King. They both ate far more than was good for them, and had more than a little difficulty getting up from the table. Even once neither of them could eat another bite, there were leftovers aplenty. Karen suggested they could take the food to someone who would appreciate it. Ken said he knew just the family, who lived nearby, but laughed and said it would be an hour or two before he felt up to hitching the wagon.

Karen made an excuse that she wanted to get started cleaning up, sending Ken with the leftovers to the neighbors by himself a short while later. She did start cleaning the pots and pans, but only after wrapping her gift in bright cloth and tying a ribbon around it in a bow.

When Kenneth returned, he saw the gift on the table and looked at Karen with a puzzled expression on his face.

"It's for you, Ken. I just wanted to thank you for all you've done for me, and for being such a good man."

"You didn't have to do that," Kenneth told her.

"I wanted to. Just open it,"

Ken's eyes opened wide when the cloth fell away, revealing the rifle. "Karen, this here is too much," he muttered in wonder.

"Do you like it?"

Kenneth laughed and said, "Of course I do. Now I know why you sent me off to the Sheriff when we was at the store that time. I know I shouldn't be taking this, but I know you'd be upset if I didn't. Thank you, Karen."

Karen beamed, seeing the wide smile on Ken's face. "You're welcome. I wanted you to have it."

"I got you something too. I didn't think it was right, you not having a gift on Christmas." He then went over to his cedar chest and rummaged around for a moment, returning with a small wooden box. "It ain't much, but I thought you might like it."

Karen opened the box and let out a little*Oh* of surprise. Her eyes filled with tears when she saw the string of pearls in the box.

"They were my mother's. Them are supposed to come from the sea, and I thought they'd remind you of home, since you come from them parts."

Karen threw her arms around Ken, sobbing against his chest. "They're beautiful, I love them."

Ken slid his hands around her, trying to ignore how good the woman felt in his arms. His heart had leapt in his chest when he saw her reaction to the necklace. He knew he couldn't pay court to her, no matter how much he wanted to, but he had to do at least a little something to show her his feelings, because it was driving him crazy not to.

Karen fastened the pearls around her neck, and then they both finished with the cleaning. After putting all the pans away, they sat down to eat some of the leftovers they had saved for their supper. Once Karen finished rinsing the plates from their quick meal, she pulled up a chair next to Ken, where he sat before the fireplace.

Laying her hand on his arm, she looked up at him and smiled. "I don't think I've actually said it today – merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you too. I'm sure you'd rather have spent it with your kin, though," Kenneth replied, returning her smile.

Karen thought, *I spent this day exactly where I want to be.* "It was a wonderful day," she said aloud.

"I'm glad you're happy," Ken said, turning to look back into the fire. He was having a difficult time ignoring her hand, so soft and so warm, caressing his arm. He was getting chills from her touch, and his mind raced beyond his control. "You sure know how to lay out a spread, Karen. I reckon I ain't never had such good food."

"Thank you, I love to cook."

Kenneth yawned then, and that caused Karen to yawn too. They both chuckled at the near simultaneous expression of just how tired they were.

"Having my belly this full is making my eyes heavy too. We should probably get abed, so we can get up early and go get that letter from your kin the Sheriff said was waiting for you in town."

Karen sighed quietly, unable to suppress her disappointment that he was not responding to her attempts at attracting his eyes and his heart. She stood up and said, "Goodnight, Ken."

"Goodnight, Karen," he responded as she walked toward the bed.

As she had done ever since his return, Karen removed her dress without even a hint of modesty, looking at his back and willing him to turn toward her. She sighed again when she was dressed in only her thin chemise, and he still stared into the fire. Once she climbed into the bed and closed her eyes, she heard him rise. After a few moments, she opened one eye a sliver, feeling her breath catch as he stripped down to his long underwear before bedding down for the night.

She drifted off to sleep, wondering how she was ever going to leave this place and return home. Even if he didn't return her love, the thought of never seeing him again cut straight to her heart like a knife.

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The war cries mingled with screams of pain and terror, the snorts of spooked horses, and the sound of Karen's heart beating loudly in her ears. Everywhere she looked, there were painted men and wheeling horses.

The arrows finally stopped thudding into the wagon, and into flesh. Her in-laws lay dead across the wagon seat, feathered shafts sprouting from their bodies like the quills of a porcupine. Her husband lay next to her, a single shaft through his back. She tried to roll him over, sobbing in terror, begging him to help her – not to leave her.

At last, her fear gave her strength and she managed to roll him over. Blood poured from his mouth. His eyes were unfocused and glassy. He was dead, but it wasn't her husband who lay before her.
It was Ken.
Karen awoke with a choked scream that changed into gasping sobs. Kenneth started awake and scrambled out of his blankets to the bed. She looked up at him – her eyes filled with horror and anguish – and then reached out to grab his arm.

"Please don't leave me!" She croaked out to him.

"I'm right here. I won't leave you. You were just havin' a bad dream," he said as calmly as he could muster.

Karen sat up and put her hand on his chest, over his heart. "Thank God. It was only a dream. A terrible dream." She threw her arms around him and held him, her tears running down his muscled chest. She held him as tight as she could, just to make sure that he couldn't possibly be taken away from her.

Kenneth stroked her hair and made comforting sounds, not knowing what else to do. Despite how concerned for her he was, he couldn't escape the feeling of her breasts pressed up against him. He felt unclean for such a thought even entering his head at a time like this, but could do nothing to chase the sensation away.

At last, Karen released him from her grip, grabbing his arm and lying back on the bed, moving toward the side opposite at the same time. "Please," she begged, "I can't wake up alone again. I couldn't bear it."

The look in her eyes was impossible to ignore, and overcame Ken's resistance. He allowed her to pull him into the bed, and she immediately laid her head on his chest, draping an arm over him. After a few hesitant starts, Kenneth wrapped an arm around her as well, the scent of her hair making him feel light-headed. Her sobs faded quickly, and he could feel her cease to tremble against him. When her breathing slowed, he allowed his eyes to close.

He could still see her beautiful face, one cheek against his chest, even with his eyes closed.

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Karen awoke exactly as she had fallen asleep, in Ken's arms. The sun had not yet come up, although the faint sound of roosters crowing indicated that it was indeed morning. She snuggled up against him, and he stroked her back in his sleep. Karen could think of no more perfect moment from

her entire life than this one, and let out a contented sigh.

She had dreamed of him again, making love to her so gently, giving her pleasure beyond anything she had ever imagined. She ached for him, and when she shifted into a more comfortable position, she could smell the musky scent of her arousal wafting from beneath the blanket.

Her hand was moving before she even knew what she was doing, coming to rest on his manhood. At first, she sucked in a sharp breath and simply held it in wonder as she traced the outline of his considerable cock, then her breaths started coming faster by the moment. She felt him growing beneath her caress, and that in turn increased her own desire.

As he hardened beneath her fingertips, Karen looked up to see him smiling in his sleep. He was so handsome, and so wonderful. She was simply too aroused to turn away. Her body conquered all her inhibitions at that moment, and she pulled off her chemise, baring her body to the chill air.

Her hand returned to his cock, now fully erect beneath the course woolen underwear. She let out a little gasp at the size of him. She had only known her husband, but Ken's manhood put him to shame by half again. For a moment, fear assaulted her, as she wondered if she could even endure being filled so full.

Ken stirred a little, his cock throbbing beneath her palm, and Karen's fears melted away. She moved over him as he roused, and when his eyes opened, she leaned down to kiss him.

Kenneth started as Karen's lips found his. He stiffened at first, but then he returned the kiss, his instincts taking over. As she pulled back from the kiss, he realized she was nude. His cock throbbed powerfully seeing her beautiful body, so close to him. "Karen, what are..."

Putting a finger over his lips, she said softly, "Shh. Just love me, please?"

He could see the desire in her eyes, and smell the heady scent that evidenced it in the air as well. His body screamed at him to pull her into his arms, and give her what she asked, but his sense of propriety pushed forward.

"Karen, this ain't right. You're just kindly disposed to me because I've helped you, and you're missing your husband."

Karen frowned and said, "My husband didn't love me. I don't think he even cared for me. He took me when it pleased him, and then ignored me. His family treated me like a slave and brought me out here away from my home." Her eyes misted with tears then, a single drop falling onto Ken's chest. "I just

want to know what it's like to be loved. Do you love me, Ken?"

Every muscle in Kenneth's body suddenly went slack and he let out a great sigh, "God forgive me, Karen, but I do."

"Then love me," she whispered, and leaned down to kiss him again, climbing over his body at the same time.

Kenneth's passions flared into a raging bonfire as the damp curls on her mound settled against his abdomen while they kissed. They both lost all sense of restraint, becoming more ardent by the moment.

Karen pulled away from his lips with a gasp, and slid off him to grasp the waistline of his long underwear. She gasped again as she pulled them down, revealing his manhood to her eyes for the first time. She curled her fingers around it, quivering as she felt him swell and twitch from her touch.

Ken wrapped his arms around her and rolled until they were both on their sides. Karen edged downward, moving closer to him at the same time, until the tip of his erection brushed against the curls between her legs. She looked up into his eyes and reached down, pressing the swollen head of his cock against her folds, while parting them with her fingers. She let out a squeal as he slipped between her lips into her heat.

Ken closed his eyes and sighed as she enveloped him in her clinging embrace. He found that he had to move slowly, her tight walls resisting him as he pushed his hips forward. She emitted gasps and high-pitched moans as his cock slid into her, at last reaching her depths.

Karen's fingers curled, as did her toes, and she trembled as his wonderful cock pressed up against the entrance to her womb. She held him tight against her, kissing his chest and moaning. She had never felt so full, or so wonderful, and she didn't want the moment to end.

When her muscles at last relaxed, Ken pulled back and thrust forward again. Karen screamed, looking up at him with wide eyes. He started to ask, "Am I hurting..."

"Please don't stop," she gasped, her walls contracting around him and causing him to groan.

Her whole body tingled as if from a chill, feeling lighter than air, as his thick shaft pushed into her depths. The itch deep inside her steadily grew to almost painful intensity, the bud at the apex of her nether lips throbbing in tune with the fast beating of her heart.

Ken gritted his teeth, fighting with all his will against the urgent need to slam into her, to release his seed into her hot depths. Her eyes popped open, and she let out a sharp gasp that transformed into a loud squeal. Kenneth felt a wash of hot juices envelop his cock, and her walls clamped down tight around him as she climaxed.

The world vanished as Karen came. A fog of pleasure consumed her mind, her body first going completely numb, and then exploding in sensations so powerful that she thought she was going to pass out. She heard her own cries of ecstasy, though she was mindless of having made them.

Kenneth growled, "I'm going to come up," unable to resist how wonderful she felt wrapped around his cock any longer.

Karen felt him start to withdraw from her, and a tiny sliver of her mind that was still conscious took action. She reached down and grasped his buttocks tight, rocking her hips fast against him, sending another shockwave of pleasure rushing through her body.

It was too late to stop or resist her climax-fueled strength holding him inside her. Ken thrust a final time into her depths, erupting with powerful pulses and a loud groan of release.

They lay in each other's arms, gasping for breath, until they at last settled down from their peaks of pleasure. They relaxed into a near doze, simply feeling the warmth of each other's bodies and the afterglow of their lovemaking.

Just as Karen was about to fall asleep, she looked up into Ken's also heavy eyes and asked, "Are you sorry?"

Her heart soared when she saw his eyes light up and he replied, "No, Karen, I love you and I'm not sorry at all."

"I love you too, Ken." Karen snuggled up against him and soon they were both sound asleep.

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*Christmas Night – One year later*

Kenneth rolled away from Karen, spent and having difficulty keeping his eyes open. It was the first anniversary of the day they declared their love for each other, and exactly six months since their wedding. They had taken to the bed to 'celebrate' many times during the day, and on top of the feast Karen had prepared, they were both feeling rather lethargic.

"Do you regret marrying me, Ken? It seems like I'll never give you a family," Karen said and sighed.

He sat back up for a moment and kissed her tenderly. "Never, Karen. We'll keep on tryin' too. Just because you haven't got pregnant don't mean you won't."

Karen smiled. "A miracle brought us together. Perhaps another will give us a family."

She snuggled up against him and Ken said, "If we're to have us another miracle, this would be the day. Maybe we'll get blessed again for Christmas. If not, I'm still blessed to have you for my wife."

"And I'm blessed to have you for my husband."

They drifted off to sleep in each other's arms, not knowing that even at that moment a fertilized egg was beginning its slow journey to settle in Karen's womb. For the second year in a row, the greatest gift they received was made not with their hands, but with their love.