

## PerpLexing

### *Be Careful What You Wish For*

Paris was an exciting city. Beautiful, cultural, artistic, historic and definitely romantic. Kate loved that she and Steve were able to get away from the media blast that they would have taken if they've been more readily available in the United States. Kate was more than pleased that the Sorbonne was willing to take her on as a visiting professor and Steve could transfer his credits to get his dissertation. Dr. Broadhurst from the University of Chicago had been a great advisor through the process, and she was certain that having recommendations from distinguished scholars, including a Nobel laureate hadn't hurt.

Steve was well into completing his dissertation, despite the distractions that she and Paris offered. His fluency in French was very impressive, especially in a not-strictly-conversational atmosphere. She loved when he spoke French to her, as if he'd ever had any problems seducing her in English. She was often plugged into the Rosetta Stone computer program that Olympic gold medal winner Michael Phelps was endorsing to learn French beyond what she had learned long ago in high school.

She found it difficult to select her favorite place in Paris – one of the galleries in the Louvre filled with Impressionist art, outdoor cafés on the Champs Élysées, the awe-inspiring cathedrals, the neighborhood patisserie where she bought brioche for the intimate breakfasts she and Steve shared, the trendy little boutiques on the Left Bank that were continental versions of Victoria's Secret, where she could pick up delightfully obscene and age-inappropriate undergarments that Steve appreciated in their intimate moments. Being in Paris made her feel young and loved and secure. The French just seemed to shrug about their age difference, and the media seemed to have no interest in pursuing them.

Steve had also decided that they needed a 'get away' somewhere on the water, so they found a country home on the Riviera. This was a classic example of what Jordan called 'an easy adaptation to an affluent lifestyle,' but Kate couldn't deny how much she loved spending some time out of the city. They both sat in the sun, enjoying the clear air and the comforting sound of waves against the shore. Steve worked on his dissertation in the evenings, savoring the peace and quiet. Kate spent her evenings catching up on e-mail and intercontinental phone calls, as well as reading classic French literature to improve her language skills. They took walks under the stars, wrapped in each other's arms, barely able to control their passion until they returned home. Kate euphemistically called these walks physical therapy for her ankle.

*You guys are like teenagers. It's kind of sickening.*

*Jealousy is not becoming.*

Lexi rolled her eyes. *I'm glad you guys are so happy. You deserve it after everything you went through.*

*You deserve happiness too. How soon can I come back to the States so I can stroll into a bookstore and casually remark to the arrogant grad student with me that I know the author of that new bestseller featured in the window?*

*I can't guarantee a bestseller, but the book should be on the shelves in a month.*

*And when were you going to tell me?*

*As soon as I knew for sure. Are you and Steve planning to fly in so you can stroll through bookstores?*

*Absolutely. Name a city, name a book store, and we are there.*

*You're serious, aren't you?*

*Absolutely.*

*And Steve agrees with this plan?*

*He will.*

"We need to make quick trip to New York," Kate said casually to Steve over breakfast.

"The last time we made a quick trip to New York wasn't exactly pleasant, if you recall," Steve said as he tore apart his brioche.

"I remember," she said, wondering if she'd ever be able to forget. "But this will be different. Lexi's book is being released, and it's being launched in New York."

"Can't you just go online to Barnes & Noble and buy it?" he teased her.

She scowled at him, even though she knew he was only kidding. "I can go by myself, if you don't want to come..."

"Of course I want to come. Lexi means a lot to you, and therefore, she means a lot to me. I still owe her bail money, which by the way, she still resists me repaying. At least Jordan let me pay off her home equity loan..."

"I think Scott convinced her you had no ulterior motive."

Steve shook his head. "Tell me when to make the reservations, and we'll be there with dozens of Mont Blanc pens for her to sign a lot of books."

"I love Paris," Kate said over cappuccino after the book signing, while Lexi flexed her right hand. She hadn't realized that autographing would provoke carpal tunnel syndrome. "I love Paris, but I miss the United States sometimes."

"Homesick?" Lexi said, dropping an ice cube into her very hot tea.

"Not exactly, but I miss the values of the heartland. I occasionally feel like – what the word I want? -- an anachronism, an anomaly, a country yokel? -- when I say something to my students at the Sorbonne, and they look at me as if I'm speaking in Chaucer's English." She sipped her drink. "And I miss being within a couple time zones of really good friends like you."

"So why don't you come home?" Lexi said pointedly.

"Maybe after Steve gets his degree. He needs to finish before we'd even think about relocating again."

Lexi looked at her thoughtfully. "You two really do take care of each other, don't you? And we thought it was just sexual obsession..."

"Well, that helps," Kate smirked.

"Bonnie from the bookstore just called," Andrew said when Lexi came got back to the hotel room. "How many books did you sign today?"

"A couple hundred I guess," she said, flexing her hand for emphasis.

"So, nowhere near the 2000 and some books that they sold?"

"HOW MANY?"

He looked at his notes from the phone call. "Two thousand, three hundred and seven."

"At one store?"

"She said there were some big cash purchases. With shipping instructions."

"Shipping to where?" Lexi had a feeling she knew, but was surprised with Andrew's answer.

"Someplace in New Orleans..."

Lexi expected it was going to be an overseas shipment, not to the Kat House. "Kate ordered them?"

"Apparently not. Bonnie said some really good looking young guy bought them. I'm gonna take a wild guess that Steve ordered them. About \$20,000 worth of books. Does that amount ring any bells with you?"

Lexi sat next to Andrew on their first class flight home to Seattle from New York. Long ago, New York had been Lexi's home for a year, courtesy of a one year job transfer on behalf of her first employer, when she got out of graduate school. She learned to love the diversity and excitement the city had to offer, but 20 years later could only take the excitement of a few million people in small doses.

"Glad to be going home?" Andrew leaned over Lexi to look at the skyline as they departed LaGuardia.

"You know, I love to get away, and had a great visit with Kate, and enjoyed the three bookstore events, but I also love our home. I need to be near trees, and Dakota – and you. I'm glad you came with me."

"That's what we wanted, didn't we? You being the working woman and me as your sidekick?"

"It works for me – but does it work for you?"

"For now." Andrew settled back in his seat, focusing straight ahead and diverting his eyes from Lexi.

Lexi detected a subtle change in attitude, as though Andrew was hiding something. "And what's on your mind?"

Andrew sat silent for a moment, avoiding Lexi's stare. He stared at his feet as he remarked, "I have an idea of something I would like to do."

Lexi secretly hoped that Andrew was not intentionally holding back on her, and what intrigued by what might be on his mind. "What is it?"

"Since I sold the business, I've had more time on my hands, and I got thinking about some of the things I've always wanted to do."

"And what would that be?"

"I'm not sure if you will be angry or happy for me."

Despite Lexi's psychic skills, all she could get from Andrew was a feeling of discomfort and restlessness. "It must be big."

"I want to go live in the Australian Outback."

Lexi's psychic or intellect would never have guessed this desire. "Really?"

"Yeah. Maybe it's a guy thing, but there is something about being in the rugged wilderness with no phones, no commitments – just me and nature – that I want to explore."

"So that's why you looked like you were so intently surfing the internet in the backroom of all those bookstores for the last few days?"

"I've been thinking about it for a while. I first started to read about it when I lived in Arizona, you know when all the Crocodile Dundee movies came out. I never had a chance to get there, but I would like to go now."

"Sounds like you want to go on your own Quest."

Andrew gave a small, nervous laugh. "Maybe I do – unless you want to come with me?"

"I wouldn't mind taking an afternoon tour, but living in the wilderness doesn't appeal to me. But if you want to go, I think you should."

Andrew appeared a bit shocked. "Really?"

"You sound amazed. You let me go on my Quest."

"I know, but I guess I thought you'd raise a little bit of a fuss."

"I can if it would make you feel better, but I am going to be busy, so if you have the time, I think you should do it." Lexi looked into his eyes to make sure he got the message. "There's not going to be any attractive women out there with you, are there? Playboy's Miss July isn't going to be your tour guide, is she?"

"No, strictly a guy thing. It looks like the tour would only be 3 or 4 guys max."

"I will certainly miss you, but I think you should go."

"I think I know how you were feeling when you went on your Quest to Hawaii."

Lexi doubted that he understood her feelings completely, but let him continue.

"As much as I want to be with you Lexi, and that I love our life, there is a part of me that is very restless and needs to go exploring."

"You sound like you want to go grunt in the woods."

"Something like that. As much as I love nature, I haven't spent much time in the middle of nowhere as I would like to. And there are parts of Australia that are still untouched by cell phone towers."

Lexi leaned over to kiss him, whispering in his ear. "Do me a favor – come back with a beard. I think you'd look like a serious manly-man and very sexy."

"You never cease to amaze me, Lexi."

"Let's keep it that way, shall we?"

Two weeks later, Andrew was off for a 4 -week tour of Australia, leaving Lexi home alone with Dakota and a very empty house. As much as she enjoyed being married, she enjoyed her time alone, especially after living by herself for so many years. She enjoyed Andrew's companionship, but also had a fierce independent streak that enjoyed making her own schedule without having to include other's concerns.

Seeing the phone ring with an international phone number on the caller ID, she knew it was Kate calling to check on her.

*Hey.*

*Bonjour.*

*I see you have mastered the 9 hour time difference and are not calling me at 3 in the morning any longer.*

*I only did that once.*

*And you'll never do it again, will you?*

*Not after you told me to do something rude with my phone and hung up on me.*

*Yeah, yeah. So.... Andrew left yesterday.*

*How do you like having the house alone?*

*It's great – for now. But at some point I will miss him and be glad that he is returning home to me and the pooch.*

*I can't believe you let him go.*

*I didn't 'let' him go – he's a grown man who can do what he wants. I trust him. And besides, he did the same for me.*

*I just can't imagine Steve going away for that long.*

*That's because you two would hurt yourselves with all the 'I-missed-you' sex you'd have upon his return. But since I don't want to explore that topic with you, I will move on. What's new with you?*

*Honestly, I am wondering how much fromage a person can eat.*

*Tired of French cuisine?*

*I just had 3 Giordanos pizzas flown in from Chicago.*

*What's next? Going to airlift a KFC to the south of France?*

*I think they would burn it down. The food is really good here, but it's just not American food.*

*And what else do you miss from America?*

*Chicago. Friends in the same time zone. A freeway where people travel less than 90 miles an hour.*

*When are you coming back?*

*I've mentioned it to Steve a few times, but we have no serious plans. He's really busy with school.*

*You better have that conversation soon, or you'll be off on your own quest before long. Don't repress what you really need to make you happy. We've both done that before and are too old to do it again.*

Lexi sat down at her Mac, once again with a dog at her feet and a hot mug of tea. There was a January chill in the morning air of Seattle, an environmental situation that supported a few thousand coffee shops to nourish the cold and tired souls of the Great Northwest.

She looked at her calendar. Book signings next week in LA and San Francisco, and the following week in Seattle and Portland. Middle Aged Girls in Love was becoming a chick fiction best seller, and Lexi was having fun reading all the e-mail congratulations from her loyal readers.

But to sustain her career, she was going to have to keep on writing, not just ride the coat tails of her currently published work. Andrew's sister, Caroline, had assisted her greatly in getting her book to market quickly, and she was grateful. In less than a year, she submitted, edited, and got a book to market with help from a number of amazing people at Caroline's publishing house.

And now they were asking, "What's next, Lexi?"

Lexi didn't know, but had some ideas. Her ideas came best when she sat in front of her computer and let her ideas flow. And that is where she would start.

After she checked her e-mail.

Her fan mail would wait, but her daily routine included checking her personal e-mail, catching up with friends, and looking at the most recent FWD:FWD:RE internet spams from her close relatives.

She browsed the list of names in her inbox, spotting one she hadn't heard from in quite a while. She nervously clicked on the link to see what this unexpected letter had to say.

To: [Lexi@gmail.com](mailto:Lexi@gmail.com)

From: [Dgoldman@archbold.com](mailto:Dgoldman@archbold.com)

Subject: Success

Lexi – congrats in order I see. Just walked by Barnes & Nobles and saw your book in the window. Looks like I missed you when you were in New York. I'm coming to Seattle on Friday – do you have time for coffee with an old friend?

David

"Old Friend"? Not hardly. "Potential User and Abuser" more likely.

To: [Dgoldman@archbold.com](mailto:Dgoldman@archbold.com)

From: [Lexi@gmail.com](mailto:Lexi@gmail.com)

RE: Success

Thanks for the congratulations. Life certainly has been crazy, but I am enjoying it.

Honestly, David, I am not sure I want to see you since you fired me. I really felt like you were trying to manipulate me for your personal gain, and I don't like dishonesty.

Lexi

Wow, that was direct. Lexi surprised herself as she re-read the note, but hit the SEND key anyway. She wasn't sure what he had in mind, but was also not sure she wanted to find out. He tried to manipulate her, using his suave charms, to make a move on her and create a relationship so she would join his private venture into the world of motivational speakers. Since he was an attractive man, she almost fell for it. But since she was a smart woman, she told him to get out. And they had not communicated since he punished her by firing her. Or was it a blessing? It didn't matter, it was in the past.

Lexi continued on with her e-mails, sending a quick note to her Seattle friends to meet for dinner tomorrow night. A few moments later, she saw a return e-mail from David, and clicked on the link.

To: [Lexi@gmail.com](mailto:Lexi@gmail.com)

From: [Dgoldman@archbold.com](mailto:Dgoldman@archbold.com)

RE: Success

Wow, that was harsh.

But maybe I deserved it.

Would still like to have coffee. Friday, 11 a.m., the Seattle's Best location from last year?

D

To: [Dgoldman@archbold.com](mailto:Dgoldman@archbold.com)

From: [Lexi@gmail.com](mailto:Lexi@gmail.com)

RE: Success

Yes, you deserved it.

See you at 11.

Lexi

Lexi didn't know what David wanted to talk about, and would be on her guard lest he try to manipulate her again. She realized that she wouldn't be doing this if Andrew were in town, but as he faced the dangers of the Outback, she could face the discomforts of her past.

With the daily communiqués out of the way, Lexi sat down to write. She always first connected to an image of herself in her brain, and then followed that image, watching what she did next. It was like watching a movie, and then doing the screenplay. But it was her own personal technique that allowed her to write quickly, with minimal edits, and use the creative part of her brain.

The part of herself that she saw was the old, business-woman, Lexi, dressed in a dark pantsuit, carrying a leather briefcase and hurriedly driving to work with tea in one hand, the steering wheel in the other, and a Bluetooth in her ear.

She didn't miss those days.

But Lexi guessed that other women could connect to that image, because it was the life they led.

Chapter One started with a typical Monday, getting up early from not enough physical or mental rest from the previous workweek. Then starting off to a day where time was of the essence to do all the "shoulds" of life, from flossing, to exercising, to eating a breakfast full of fiber and nutrients to replenish what stress burned off during her 10-hour workday.

In Chapter Two, she described the arrival at work to a barrage of e-mails, inane requests from executives, and abounding complaints from her co-workers. Lexi described the life of a senior middle manager, showing that it was a pressure cooker from above and below. But most of the stress was caused by miscommunication, turf protection, overblown egos and general adolescent behavior on behalf of adults.

### *Adolescent Adults*

That would be the working title of her new book, the description of her old life before she broke out on her own. It would be a semi-autobiographical fictional account of her career that included thinly veiled descriptions of some of the people she met along the way, including those who helped – and hurt - her career progress.

Lexi printed out the first two chapters, getting a visual and visceral feel of how the story would read.

It would be great.

She posted her chapters to a secure website, with a cover letter to the publishing house to describe the general overview of her novel. She then e-mailed Caroline to let her know the chapters were ready for her review after typing in her password. Lexi's knowledge of fraud gave her a healthy skepticism of e-mail and other "open" environments where her artistic creations might be confiscated and published.

After a long walk with Dakota and a few errands, Lexi returned to check her e-mail. She clicked on the letter from Caroline, anxiously awaiting her reply.

*I love it. Keep writing. Will show it to the editors. ~ Caroline*

Friday came, and Lexi nervously drove to the coffee shop to meet David. Instead of a dark pantsuit, she wore slim jeans and a raincoat, a casual yet professional look for a budding writer. She kept her guard up, not knowing what David had in mind, for he always had an agenda.

"Lexi!" As she opened the door, she heard her name called from behind, seeing the tall man in the Armani suit rushing toward her. She wished he weren't so handsome, but had he been in sweat-soaked gym attire, David would make her heart pound.

"David. Nice to see you." Lexi stuck out her right hand, hoping to avert a hug from this tall man from her past.

David ignored her outstretched hand and hugged her anyway. He held onto her a bit too tightly for a professional relationship, and she pulled away, politely but firmly.

David looked at her strangely, sensing something amiss. "David – I'm married ."

"I – I – didn't realize. Your name on the book...."

"..is Lexi Michaels. But my legal name is Michaels-Cameron. I got married last year."

"Oh."

"Would that have prevented you from asking me to meet you?"

David sighed, regaining his composure. "It didn't keep you from meeting me."

Damn. He had a point. And Lexi didn't like it.

"Why don't we go inside, David. It's starting to rain."

He opened the door for her, and he ordered beverages as she found a quiet corner for them to talk.

David approached their table. "How does it feel to be a famous author?"

"When I get a few more books under my belt, I'll feel more at ease. At this point, I'm still a novice. But I like it so far."

"You look more relaxed than when I talked to you last year."

"I had a lot of stress in my life if you remember. I had a difficult job, a buyout offer from your firm..."

"Which you screwed me on."

"Oh please. If I remember correctly, you fired me, asshole."

David took a quiet drink of his coffee, leaning back in his chair to stare at her. "I guess I deserved that. But you did take the information on our original deal and gave it to a competitor."

"And you still made a few million dollars after owning the firm for about a week. Not a bad return. Don't give me any of your sad stories – I just don't buy them." Lexi was feeling confrontational, with no remorse.

"And as I said before – harsh."

"And as I have thought before – bullshit." It was Lexi's turn to stare him down. "Why exactly did you ask me here, David?"

"I can't stop thinking about you."

Struck by the absurdity of his remark, Lexi spit her tea on the table, splashing on his \$200 white shirt. After cleaning up the mess, she remarked, "Oh for godsakes, David, get a friggin' grip. We would never have made it together. Your business motives always get in front of your personal desires or you would have left Archbold already."

"Next Friday is my last day. I'm a lame duck with not much to do at the office, so I am flying around with a new associate to 'introduce' him to the deals I have in the works. That's why I am in town so I can introduce the new flunky to a bank we are getting ready to buy out."

"Well I guess that sub-prime fiasco is making somebody a winner. Picking up failing banks and turning them around, I assume?"

"So to speak. It's just business."

"You don't get it, do you, David? It's never just business. There's always people, passion, hopes and dreams involved."

"Like when you screwed me on that deal?"

"You're just a manipulator at heart. You come to my home, with a romantic dinner and an agenda for me to work with you in a new business. You didn't want me, you wanted a product."

"So why did you decide to meet me here today?"

Lexi stared at him, knowing a dare when it was presented to her. She smiled at him politely and said, "I really don't know. So I guess I should just leave." She stood up, reaching for her coat and purse, intending to leave David and his sub-agendas behind, mentally promising to make him a character in her book.

"LEXI – DON'T GO!" She turned around, shocked at the volume of his voice, to see that he was equally as amazed at what he had done. In a quiet tone, he grabbed her arm and said, "Please, sit back down. I want to ask you a question."

"Ask. And then I will leave."

"Okay, okay." Lexi saw that David's façade left his face, and the controlled expression he normally carried was gone. "My partners and I are starting the seminar and publishing business I told you about. It just took me longer than I thought to put it together. I am asking you to be our headliner."

You'll get paid a bundle, and I think you'd really enjoy it. You're a natural and I think we would work well together."

Lexi thought about his proposal. It went straight to her heart, offering her what she really loved to do – speak. Using her first book as a premise, it would offer an opportunity for other Middle Aged Girls in Love to tell their stories, and have fun in the process. She had lots of ideas, but the publishing house could only arrange book store events, not major arenas. "I'll give you five minutes. Tell me more."

Lexi wasn't sure how she got home that evening, and felt a restless mix of opportunity and anxiety in David's proposal. She asked him to send her a contract to review and more information to consider before she moved forward. And she would have to tell Andrew at some point. After her rendezvous with Mike, she wasn't certain that Andrew was ready for another man from her past to influence her future. After a fitful attempt at sleep, she arose at midnight to call Kate.

*Hey. It's late there – is something wrong?*

*Yeah. I saw David this morning.*

*The equity firm freak?*

*One and the same. He's starting a company to book motivational speakers and wants me to be his first client and headliner. What do you think?*

*I think you'd do great. But does it have to be him?*

*No, it doesn't have to be him. But it would take more work to sell myself to someone else so they could market me. And I would be a small fish in a big pond. With David, I'd be a big-mouthed bass.*

*Did he say that?*

*Think about it. Would I let any guy call me that?*

*You'd let Mike do it.*

*Not without repercussions.*

*Have you heard from the man of mystery?*

*Not a peep. I should keep it that way.*

*Have you heard from the man in the outback?*

*Not a peep. No internet in the Bush. At least that is what I am told. He calls when he can, but not much opportunity there in the wilderness. After meeting David today, I'm glad he wasn't here.*

*So back to David. What are you going to do?*

*That's why I'm calling you.*

*I guess I would look at the contract and documents and run them by a lawyer. Is there something, other than a tall handsome man that makes this deal attractive?*

*Yes, the Armani suit helps, but he wants to use some alternative media – Webinars, etc. – to broadcast across the world. There would be a great profit margin if I could speak from home instead of in person.*

*But wouldn't you miss the personal touch that you like so much?*

*Good point. But there would be some interactivity and occasional live gigs.*

*What do you think Andrew would say?*

*I think he would be very protective and never go to the Outback again.*

*Then do it.*

Kate wasn't surprised when her phone buzzed to alert her to a text message, but she was surprised the text message was from Jordan, and not Steve or Lexi.

*Need a favor. Call me.*

Jordan hadn't asked for a favor and a long time. Maybe when she'd been laid off her job and needed some friendly distraction, but Jordan was very independent, and it had been a long time – a very long time – since she needed someone to score REALLY good concert tickets or to help write one of her term papers. Kate punched the button to speed dial her.

"What's up?"

"I just thought I should call and let you know that I have to go in for some surgery, and I'll probably be at home recovering for a month or so."

"What kind of surgery?" Jordan had been through several surgeries, including a couple dental procedures and 'girl things' that Kate didn't really want details about, but she'd never felt the need to really notify Kate about any of them. "What's the matter?"

"My right hand seems to have decided that it no longer wants to function properly."

"Carpal tunnel?"

"No, Dupuytren's contracture."

Kate knew that whatever details Jordan gave her, she'd have to go on to Web MD, to find the complete story. "Did you make that name up? It sounds like something you would have made up."

Jordan laughed. "I often concoct names of bizarre maladies to generate sympathetic response. No, it's real – Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher both had it."

"Is it serious surgery?"

"I don't need a long hospital stay if that's what you mean, but my hand and my arm are going to be disabled for a while, and I have to do physical therapy. Plus writing and driving and anything requiring my right hand is going to be a little difficult for a while."

"Is Scott going to be there with you?"

"When he can be..."

"Okay, I'll be there with you. When is your surgery scheduled?"

"You don't have to come across the ocean to – I was going to say hold my hand, but that's not exactly appropriate – take care of me."

"I absolutely have to come across the ocean to take care of you. When is your surgery?"

"Two weeks," she confessed. "But really, you and Steve don't have to come."

"Steve doesn't have to come, but I do."

"I talked to Jordan today," Kate commented casually over pate before dinner.

"Where is she headed next—London, Moscow, Africa?"

"The hospital actually."

"Is she okay?" Steve asked with some concern.

"She needs some surgery, and I'm going to Chicago to help her during her recovery."

Steve didn't even have to ask if she really had to go. If Lexi's book launch had required a quick trip to New York, Jordan's surgery – he didn't even want to know what kind – mandated her best friend's presence and support. "How long will you be gone?"

"She thinks her recovery and physical therapy should take a month or so. I get the feeling that Scott has jobs and can't take the whole time off to stay home with her."

"I can't take off for that long," Steve said, knowing what her response was going to be.

"I know. I don't expect you to drop everything. I can go," Kate said, trying to choose the right thing to say, "I can go by myself, and I'll be staying at Jordan's condo, so it shouldn't be a problem. I know a couple really good pizza places, and if I'm truly inept, I can always call Chloe for food."

"I have no doubt about your abilities or your survival skills. After all, when your toe was injured and your boyfriend was passed out on the floor, you still managed to order cappuccino." He smirked, recalling their first visit to Chicago. That memory, although a trifle embarrassing, was still very close to his heart; he knew that first day and night had spanned the whole gamut of their emotions and had firmly convinced him that Kate truly was the great love of his life. "I'm guessing you probably already have plane reservations."

She nodded. "I leave on Saturday."

"Then I have three days to convince you that although you had to go, you absolutely have to come back."

Kate wasn't entirely sure why she didn't feel an aching emptiness without Steve right away. She suspected that her concern for Jordan was blocking a lot of other emotion, and she feared that when she knew Jordan was going to be fine, everything else would just explode. She missed his beautiful blue eyes, his pouty half smile, and, who was she trying to kid?, she missed his body pressed against hers, making love with him. She knew she didn't ache yet, but it was close.

"Isn't this where we last chatted?" Kate asked, as Sam handed her a cappuccino from Starbucks when he joined her in the hospital waiting room.

"Same hospital, different room. How's your friend doing?" He sat down, sipped his coffee and focused his attention on her. He'd read all about what had happened with Steve's father, and he knew from e-mail that she and Steve had moved to France. He had been surprised to get an e-mail from her, asking if he was going to be in Chicago, because she was going to be there for a few weeks taking care of a friend. No mention of where Steve was, so Sam guessed he was still in France. This is a weirdly uncomfortable situation, he thought, but it can't be worse than last time that we were together.

"She's doing all right. Her surgery is not really serious... any surgery is serious," she corrected herself. "She's just going to need some help during recovery."

"You're a hell of a good friend to come in from France to be with her through this."

She shrugged.

"We've been through a lot together. We owe each other a lot, and she's been my friend since fourth-grade."

"You have a lot of history."

"We've shared a lot," she said with a nervous edge in her voice.

Sam didn't know exactly why Kate had called him or what she wanted from him. He was flattered in a way that she trusted him enough to call him, to ask if he could share what he imagined must be stressful enough that simply reading a book didn't offer enough distraction. But still, he thought, what am I supposed to do? He wished he could remember more clearly what had brought them together as friends twenty years ago.

"Do you have some stories that you want to tell me now about the two of you? I mean, stories about things that you did together?" He realized that that came out completely wrong. "How did you guys become friends, and how did you stay friends for so long?"

Kate smiled. She calculated that she could find enough memories to easily fill a couple hours, while Jordan was in surgery without divulging secrets and stories that would only prove embarrassing. She nodded, sipped on her straw and began.

"We met at the bus stop, waiting for the school bus, Bus 9, I think..."

She was about to the point in her story when she and Jordan were both finishing their master's degrees, when a doctor opened the door to waiting room. Kate stood up and took a few steps in his direction. Sam also stood and sensing that her balance was a little unstable, he took her arm.

"Everything went very well," the doctor said. "There were no major complications, and we got control of the bleeding."

Kate's mouth moved, but she seemed unable to speak.

"Bleeding?" Sam asked for her.

"Just more than we expected," the doctor explained. "Nothing that we couldn't handle. She's going to be fine."

"Thank you very much," Sam said, sensing that Kate was still speechless.

The doctor turned to leave, and Kate turned to face Sam, falling into his arms. He held her and could feel her trembling. In many ways, this must have been very stressful for her, and the phrase 'got control of the bleeding' had opened the floodgates of emotion. He bent his head down and kissed her forehead. She looked up at him, her eyes shimmering with tears, unsure of what her reaction should be.

Sam remembered the last time he held her and how her quick back up had landed them both in this hospital. But she wasn't pulling away now, and this felt so right.

"I'm not letting go this time, he said, looking into her eyes.

Oh, shit, she thought, but what the hell... When he kissed her, she didn't resist and responded tentatively. Jordan was okay, and Sam was here for her now, and Kate only remembered this was what she had wanted twenty years ago.

*Hey.*

*Hey, how's Jordan?*

*She's fine. I'm going to hell.*

*Again? What did you do this time?*

*I kissed Sam.*

*A couple days away from your boy-toy, and you're trading him for a new model?*

*I only kissed him.*

*Then you're not going to hell – yet. Why were you with Sam anyway?*

*I called to ask if he could wait with me while Jordan was in surgery, so we were in the waiting room...*

*And the doctor said Jordan was okay, and you kissed him to celebrate?*

*Not exactly...*

*The doctor said she was okay, and the bleeding was under control...*

*The bleeding?*

*I guess she was bleeding more than she should have. But when he said that, I lost it, and Sam was there...*

*And you kissed him to say thank you?*

*Not exactly...*

*Okay, I'm out of a guesses. What happened?*

*I lost it, and Sam was holding me, and he said he wasn't letting go this time. And he kissed me, and I kissed him back. Seriously kissed him back.*

*And then?*

*I went to Jordan's room. Sam went home.*

*Of your many transgressions, I'd say this is the, one of the least likely to merit eternal damnation. Just don't take it any further.*

*I don't intend to, but I don't know that I'm sorry that it happened.*

*You don't need to be sorry. It was a moment, it's over, and it makes a great story that I can use to blackmail you for a few years at least.*

About three weeks after she left for Chicago, Steve began to realize how much and in how many ways, he missed Kate. Obviously, he knew that he'd miss waking up next to her and making love with her, but he didn't know that eating breakfast by himself would be depressing, that working on his dissertation in the evenings would be quiet and lonely. They talked on the phone at least once a day, and texted back-and-forth throughout the day, but she still felt very far away. In her absence, he realized how much he depended on her for moral support and intellectual challenge.

*Luv u, miss u. come home soon.* He texted her before he packed his backpack to go to school. He knew she would tell him that he needed to concentrate, that the sooner he finished his dissertation, the sooner he could defend it and get his degree. He didn't know exactly what they'd do then, but he knew they'd be together, which right now seemed ideal. He loved living in France, especially splitting time between Paris and the Riviera, but if her heart was set on the Midwest, he'd understand. He envied her having such good friends, such long-term friends – she hated when he used the term 'old friends' – who would go to incredible lengths to help her and support her. He knew that Jordan and Lexi still thought some of his gestures, especially those involving a checkbook, were a little lame, but he never had friends like them in his life. He smiled to himself; Kate was his first BFF.

Clearly confused about some of the differential equations that had been used in class, a young woman with a purple streak through her hair grumbled and looked at him for help.

"Monsieur MacMillan, s'il vous plait..."

She spread some of the papers on the desk and leaned over to point out where she was having issues. The closer she bent to read the papers, the clearer view Steve had down her V-neck shirt. It wasn't a spectacular view, but she was fairly well built. He stood, and gestured to her to come around the desk to review her equations. Standing beside her, he explained the steps involved in solving the equations and jotted notes on her paper. She moved closer to him to read what he was writing, and he had a memory flash of being with Kate in her office in Florida when he was just another work-study graduate student. Is this how it begins? he thought to himself.

The young woman turned to face him, and Steve sensed that she had more in mind than math. Yet, he didn't back away, and he didn't make some sort of protest.

"Ah, merci," she sighed, looking up at him and pushing up against him. "Merci beaucoup."

Almost as if it were some sort of animal instinct, he put his hands on the desk on either side of her, leaned down and kissed her. She certainly didn't object, parting her lips for more than a friendly kiss. He remembered backing Kate against her desk to initiate their passion, and he remembered Kate's confession about her encounter with Sam, and he backed off very quickly.

"De rien..."

She looked disappointed, but turned to pick up her papers and leave the classroom. Steve took a deep breath, sat down and began to straighten up his desk. Shit, he thought, I miss Kate, I miss my wife. How hard could it be to get a redeye to Chicago for a couple days with her?

Kate was washing breakfast dishes, supervising Jordan's physical therapy, which essentially was flexing her fingers in and out with slow deliberation, when her cell phone buzzed. She checked messages.

*Miss U2 much. Meet me at the Peninsula 2night.*

"Oh my," she said with surprise and a surge of excitement.

"What?" Jordan asked, looking at her hand and wishing there was some way she could get a manicure.

"Steve's apparently coming into town this evening. He wants me to meet him at the Peninsula."

"God, he really loves you. To come all this way to be with you. I wish..."

"I'm sure Scott would be here if he could."

"I'm not sure Scott and I will ever get to that point. We don't have the same drama that you two share." Jordan replaced the splint on her arm and snapped the cast back on her hand. "So call

Chloe, have her pack up some clothes and some meatballs, and beg her to spend a couple days with me."

"I don't want to abandon you," Kate protested.

"Let's see...you flew in from France, you spent hours in the waiting room at the hospital, you've spent three weeks catering to my every whim and changing a really disgusting bandage, and you have some delusion that I'm going to think you're abandoning me if you meet your husband in an incredibly expensive hotel for a day or two? Call Chloe. Steve must be desperate."

"Oh, I certainly hope so."

The Peninsula sent a car at O'Hare to pick Steve up at the international terminal, and even though he'd slept on the flight, he was grateful he didn't have to flag a cab. This Chicago skyline was familiar, and called up nothing but good memories—except maybe getting his nose smashed on Michigan Avenue. He was very happy that he recognized several of the staff people as he checked into the hotel, the bell man, the porter, and especially Gavin the concierge who had been such an ally.

"Mr. MacMillan, it's so good to see you again," he said. "Will you be staying with us long?"

"Just a couple days this time," Steve answered.

"And will Dr. Shaw be joining you?"

"She should be here this evening sometime." Steve smirked knowing the reaction he would get with his next request. "We'll need champagne and pizza..."

"Should I put the doctor on standby?" Gavin laughed.

"I hope we can avoid injury this visit." He and Gavin exchanged nods, and Steve turned to go upstairs to take a quick shower. "Can you give me a call when Kate gets here?"