

### *Letting Go is the Hardest Thing to Do*

Kate left for the Peninsula, barely containing her excitement at seeing her husband. *He still feels like my boyfriend.* Despite their year together, the initial, burning flame that she first felt in her office was still present. She couldn't deny it.

As she daydreamed in the cab on the way to the Peninsula, her cell phone abruptly tore her out of her erotic, marital daydreams. Looking down at the caller ID, she could barely contain her shock.

"BILL??"

A female voice on the other line spoke tentatively. "Is this Kate?"

Expecting to hear Bill, her ex-husband's voice, Kate was confused as to who the caller might be. "Yes, this is Dr. Kate Shaw. To whom am I speaking?"

"Kate, this is Ilene, from Bill's office. Remember?"

*Ilene.* Bill's long-time office-wife. Kate heard through the grapevine that the dowdy widow and her ex had become a couple shortly after the divorce last year, cementing the adoration for Bill that she'd see in Ilene's eyes for the past decade.

"Yes, Ilene. How are you?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news Kate. Bill has been in a serious accident."

Kate and Bill had been friends first before they married and had remained congenial, with occasional emails, since the divorce. Kate still had a tug of respect, and maybe guilt, in her long time relationship with Bill and was therefore concerned about his condition.

"What happened?"

"It was kind of freakish, actually. He was walking across the parking lot at work towards his car, and an older gentleman lost control of his car, drove across the median into the parking lot, running into Bill, pinning him against a car."

"Is he going to live?" Kate felt a rock in her stomach.

"No. He only has a few days left. His lower torso is crushed and he's on life support and occasionally comes out of unconsciousness. I thought...you know...you'd like to know." Ilene was sobbing at this point, obviously in shock over the impending death of a loved one.

"I do want to know. I am really not sure what to do – or how I can help at this point." Kate rambled, not knowing what to say to Ilene and dealing with the onslaught of this news herself.

"He keeps calling your name, Kate, when he comes to. He's asking for you...." Kate knew this was hard on Ilene, having to listen to another woman's name come out of the mouth of the man she loved.

Kate sat silently as the cab turned the corner towards the hotel, trying to keep a controlled tone in her voice. "Ilene, I need to think about this, but I do appreciate your call. Will you give me a call later tonight and let me know how he is?"

"Of...of course. I just...thought..."

Kate wanted to interrupt Ilene before she asked her to fulfill a promise of a bedside visit that she wasn't sure she was ready for. "Just call me if you need me, Ilene."

Kate closed her phone, putting it into her purse as the cab drove up to the front of the hotel. A team of bellmen came towards the car, simultaneously opening the door and unloading her luggage from the trunk. She overpaid the cab driver as she exited the cab in a fog of confusion, watching the bellmen escort her and her luggage through the open doors. "We've been expecting you, Dr. Shaw – right this way." Steve had already checked into the hotel, and warned the staff to escort her to their room upon her arrival. She was glad for their help because she was not entirely sure where she was, or what she should do next.

Andrew looked at the brown, but beautiful land around him. The outback was a scene to behold with its raw, natural beauty. It had been three weeks since he came here and in that time Andrew felt his bond to the land again, forgetting his everyday life where, despite his former career, he had minimal contact with nature. This trip included a group of five men, from around the globe, who had to kill if they wanted to eat and depend on their survival skills if they wanted to live. It was invigorating to leave the trappings of the Western World behind and venture back into the equivalent of ancient times where his only relationship was a close bond with Mother Nature.

But in this wilderness tranquility, Andrew still felt connected to Lexi. He still felt the need to protect her, even when he was 10,000 miles away. His senses were heightened here without the interference of thousands of people and their accompanying agendas. *Maybe this is what Lexi is talking about with her psychic skills.* He could actually sense Lexi and how she felt. He would get a picture in his mind of her and see her being creative while she wrote, playing with Dakota, and even feel the loneliness Lexi felt at night, but would never admit to. But Andrew also sensed the presence of another male, one he wanted to protect her from.

As much as he loved the vastness of the world around him, Andrew knew he would have to return to his life, and his love, very shortly. But the clarity of being in an open space was amazing and helped Andrew re-discover what it felt like to be virile and – purposeful. His goal was to take in every day and the sights around him, as well as to be very aware of his surroundings, lest they get him first. On their trip, they had come across a variety of snakes and even a crocodile that would have eaten him for lunch had he not had his wits about him.

He felt alive – truly ALIVE. Andrew knew that it was his destiny to take the feeling, the urgency of being awake in the moment, back with him to Seattle. He would teach Lexi to get out of her head, and into the moment, and he was sure in his very soul that it would change their lives forever.

Lexi paced her office, thinking about the email that David had sent her. *Come work with me – I need you.* It was an enticing offer, with lots of money, but lots of strings attached, and a fair amount of risk signing an exclusive contract with David's new company. She walked out onto the deck with Dakota following closely behind her. "What do you think Dakota?"

The glossy golden retriever looked back at her with clear eyes and anticipation in his face. There was no food for him out here on the deck, but she knew he could coax her into the kitchen for a biscuit. She looked at his smiling, furry face, focusing his energy solely on her.

*It has to be fun.*

Lexi wasn't sure where the voice came from, whether it came from Dakota or some voice from high above, but it was quite clear. *It has to be fun.* She no longer needed to work to pay the bills or just survive, like she did not too many years ago after her divorce. Those lean years were spent close to home, doing whatever job she could network herself into. But those years of loneliness and an empty checkbook were past her, and prosperity was the avenue that was now open to her.

Lexi wondered to herself, *Why would I do something hard? Or something I didn't like? Do I need to work for someone out of obligation – or to help them make a name for themselves? Isn't it right to help somebody else out and forget past transgressions?*

It was probably "right" to work with David. But it wasn't going to be much fun.

She had 'peered' into what it would be like working for David and his partners. They had all the energy of a new entrepreneur, and all the fear that came along with that title. David had money, his partners had connections, and many doors would be open to them initially, wanting to give a young company with a new and inventive publishing idea lots of press and a few opportunities. But would they last?

Probably not. And this Lexi knew for sure – if you aren't in alignment on the inside of you, it won't be long before your personal and professional ventures fall apart. Her history with David showed that he had ulterior motives, insisted on keeping the upper hand, and liked to use her for his own benefit.

Lexi turned to Dakota on the way inside to the kitchen. "And let's not forget he fired my ass when he got mad at me, Dakota." The large furry creature looked up at her and barked in agreement, leading her to the kitchen for a crunchy treat. "And in the long run, he probably wouldn't be much fun, either."

Lexi called David, leaving a voicemail that indicated she appreciated the opportunity, but would not be signing on with his firm. She returned to the comfort of her Mac, creating the next chapter of *Adolescent Adults*, with a hint that one of those adults would soon be calling her.

Within five minutes of her original voicemail, her cell rang simultaneous to the instant message flashing on her Mac. He'd gotten her message and was going to grill her on it. She picked up the phone, steeling herself for the coming onslaught.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU'RE NOT GOING TO WORK FOR ME?"

"David, David, David – you're just no fun." Lexi tried to keep the conversation light, but doubting that it would do any good.

"WHAT THE HELL DOES FUN HAVE TO DO WITH IT?"

"David..."

"IS THIS PAYBACK FOR ME FIRING YOU?" David continued on with his conversation, yelling, blaming, and attempting to invoke guilt with each sentence.

Lexi thought of how inane this conversation would sound when she retold it to Kate. *"Yes, Kate, it's true...I did think about working again for the asshole who fired me in order to help him get his business started...but then I realized he wasn't much fun and I didn't want to be his professional doormat..."*

Lexi laid down the cell phone on her desk and picked up her pen. Ah yes, "Professional Doormat" – a great title. Lexi scribbled it down in the notebook next to her Mac, capturing a great idea for a future book.

There was still noise coming out of her cell phone when she looked down at it. It sounded like David was winding down from his tirade, and she would have a chance to interject in a moment or two. He was another example of an *Adolescent Adult*, needing to spew his needs, guilt, and blame on others while seemingly maintaining control of the situation. Didn't 13-year-olds do that? Or maybe it was toddlers...

Lexi picked up the phone. "Are you done yet, David?"

"What do you mean 'am I done yet?' Weren't you listening?"

"No. It sounded like you just needed to rant for a while so I was doing some other stuff."

"You didn't pay attention to what I was SAYING?"

"No. You were being unprofessional and cranky. You're lucky I didn't hang up on you."

From the silence on the other end of the line, she guessed that David didn't know what to say to her surprising comment.

"David, you're going to have to realize that you do not have the clout that you used to have. You are a new business owner, and you need to suck up to your clients and associates alike. I don't think you have it in you to create a fair deal that works for both of us. And after the tirade that I just half-listened to, you validated my decision not to work with you. And by the way, that is work WITH you, not FOR you. Do you understand the difference?"

"You don't understand what I can do for you and your career, Lexi. The connections I have..."

"I don't need you or your connections. If the people you surround yourself with are willing to put up with your crap, then I don't want them around. Like I said David, you're no fun."

David took a moment to swallow and audibly clear his throat, trying to bring a lower tone that meant respectability and authority over her. "You used to be a team player, Lexi. But you've changed."

"I know! Isn't it GREAT???"

"I promise you, you will regret your decision Ms. Michaels."

And with that stern comment, the other end of the line went dead, along with any big-league opportunities that David might offer her. She wished him the best, but made a decision, right then and there, that as a writer and entrepreneur, she wasn't going to tolerate the behavior that she had taken in the corporate world. And David was just a leftover from that time period that needed to stay in her history, not her future.

The bellmen let her into her hotel room, sensing her distress as they quietly put down her bags near the closet. She furtively looked into her purse for cash, but ended up dumping its contents on the floor in her haste. "No need, Dr. Shaw. It's our pleasure." Apparently Steve had tipped them enough and the entire staff of The Peninsula knew they would be taken care of monetarily.

"Steve? Steve?" Kate anxiously walked around the suite, looking to see if he were hiding to surprise her, but to no avail. After the third pass by the credenza, she saw a handwritten note indicating that he went out and would be back shortly.

Tiredness, nervousness, and confusion caught up with Kate, leaving her in a sobbing release as she sat down on the plush couch. Being a typical female, she needed to connect with someone during her anguish and pushed her speed dial.

*God, it's about time you called. I haven't spoken to you in a week!* Lexi greeted Kate with typical sarcasm, not knowing what she was in for.

*I..um...(sniff)...and Bill...um (sob) and.. Steve..(sob, sob) but Sam...* Kate was blithering unintelligible sentence fragments through her tears that only a woman could appreciate.

*Kate...get a hold of yourself. Is it Raining At The Mall?*

*YESSS!!!* A rousing sobfest followed indicating that there had been either a mass suicide or a really bad mood swing, and Kate needed someone to talk to. *Raining At The Mall* was their code phrase since graduate school, starting on a very wet afternoon when Kate was stuck at the mall after a horrid final exam and dead car battery, compounded by raging hormones. Lexi had not said a word, but hung up the phone to go rescue her friend from a traumatic afternoon and take her to Burger King for extra large fries.

*Okay. Can you tell me where you are?* Lexi knew to keep her sentences, and therefore Kate's answers short in order to get the full story.

*Chicago...The Peninsula Hotel.*

*And you are there because...?*

*Steve came to meet me.*

*And is Steve there with you?*

*No. He's out.*

Lexi had accomplished Mission #1: Find the location of the sobber. If she's alone, she can talk. If she's with someone, they'd have to talk in code. Mission #2 was more difficult: Define what's wrong.

*Kate, you mentioned something about Bill. What's up?*

*Ilene called...and Bill's hurt...dying...and I should go...* Kate's sobbing intensified, but Lexi felt they had deciphered the first problem.

*Kate, you are not traveling when you feel like this. Wait for Steve to come back, and he can go with you if you need to go, okay? I don't want you going anywhere when you're not thinking straight.*

*Okay.*

Lexi wanted to ask more questions about Bill, but knew Kate wasn't clear enough to give her details. Lexi had always liked Bill and was sorry to see the two of them break up, but knew Kate would never stay with him now that she had found her Inner Cougar. But there was more to figure out - didn't Kate mention Sam? Lexi was not looking forward to this discussion.

*Kate, you talked about Sam – did you run into him again?*

*At the hospital. He was with me. Jordan was bleeding...and he kissed me...*

*Oh for godsakes, Kate!* – Lexi thought to herself. When Kate was coherent again she would ask her what if the real story was more than she'd already told her, but in the meantime could only offer one piece of advice.

*Kate, listen closely to me. Do...NOT....tell...Steve...that you kissed Sam.*

*But why? We always said we would be honest....*

*Honesty is not needed right now. You can do that later when you are more yourself and can explain it better. He won't understand right now. You can tell him later, okay?*

*Okay.*

Lexi spent a few more minutes on the phone with Kate, calming her down and figuring out what to do. She wished she could be more help and not be 2,500 miles away, but it was the best she could do. And Lexi came away with one feeling at the end of it all.

Kate would tell Steve the truth – the whole truth – the minute he walked through the door.

And then there might be a *Hurricane At The Mall* to address.

*Finally, a few silent moments.*

Lexi took a deep breath after dealing with David's tirade and Kate's trauma, and leashed up Dakota for a walk around the neighborhood. She put on her fleece sweatshirt and favorite cross-trainers for a well deserved walk in the rain. Dakota led her down the steps and out to the neighborhood sidewalk, urgently heading toward the first tree that required marking. Over the years, she had spent many hours walking her dogs and enjoyed the opportunity to let her mind go.

She thought about David's warning, "you'll regret this, Ms. Michaels", talking to her as if she were a schoolgirl and not a middle-aged, independent woman who could think for herself. Lexi thought of all the times her bosses, male coworkers and even her ex-husband had tried to give her daunting warnings of how she couldn't possibly succeed without them or their directives. Most of her life, people (mostly men) had been telling her to tow the line, and stay with the status quo, and she'd had enough of it. The status quo was boring, and certainly wasn't progressive. If she'd followed the advice of all the people she'd met, she'd be a non-traveling, mother of 4, CPA in her hometown, who was submissive to her husband, didn't acknowledge her intuition, and certainly didn't take risks.

And most of these people who tried to tell her what to do had one thing in common – they were truly Adolescent Adults who followed the code of "be one of US – not one of THEM". Lexi had learned to like being one of THEM, even if it bugged the crap out of the US contingent. Her need to get out of the Midwest had bothered her family, but she found a new home and culture in the Northwest. Instead of being a CPA, she became a consultant to hundreds of companies, helping thousands of people. And in difficult situations when she was lied to, abused and then blamed for the resulting situation, she told the truth, or left to let the abusers face their fate alone.

"Dakota, I think I finally have an idea for Chapter Four!" Dakota ignored her revelation and continued to intricately sniff a blade of grass. "I'm going to have the main character tell the USes of the world that she's tired of them and she's ready to join THEM. What do you think of that?"

Lexi was excited that she'd finally gotten a creative ah-ha to continue on with her book. Other people's issues had temporarily sidetracked her from her writing and she was anxious to get back home and start writing again.

She pulled Dakota away from his trail of invisible markings and headed back home. As she approached the house, she saw two women exiting a cab in front of her home. One she recognized as Amy, Andrew's sister, and the other woman she did not know. Lexi hurriedly walked toward them, anxious to see them both, and secretly being glad for the company.

"Amy!"

She turned around toward Lexi, seeing her a block away. Lexi and Dakota jogged toward her, eager to greet her. Extending a big hug to Amy, Lexi excitedly remarked, "What are you doing here?! It's so good to see you!" Lexi was appreciative of all the work that Amy had done to assist her in the publishing of her first book and was glad to see her. "And who is this?"

"Lexi," Amy said making the introduction, "this is Samantha Jackson, the producer we talked about."

"Glad to meet you. I'm Lexi Michaels Cameron."

"Call me Sam. I've heard a lot about you from Amy. And I loved your book."

Lexi sensed there was an agenda beneath this congeniality. "Thanks so much. It's really based on a lot of women I know, and the relationship encounters they've had during their 40s and 50s."

"I could certainly identify with it, and so could my partner Keri Lewis. In fact, I'd like to talk to you about making a movie out of it."

Lexi felt the world swim around her, reminiscent of other times in her life where she felt a turning point was ready to happen. "A...movie? Like a Lifetime Movie of the Week kind of movie?"

Amy interjected, "No, like a red carpet opening kind of movie. Sam and I have been friends for years, so I just had to give her your book."

"I'm flattered...if not a little baffled." Lexi noticed the gray skies moving in from the west. "Why don't we head inside so we can talk? And Amy – I can catch you up on the latest email from your brother in the Outback. It's over a week old, but very entertaining."

*This certainly isn't the status quo*, Lexi thought as she opened the door, wondering what the coming moments might bring.

The elevator door opened and Steve burst into the room.

"They said you were upset. What's wrong?" He dropped his packages and a bouquet of a dozen red roses onto the coffee table.

"I got a call from Florida. Bill was hit by a car..." she began to cry.

"I am so sorry. Is he..."

"He's hurt very badly. He's going to die."

"Oh God, Kate, I'm sorry. I know you guys were close for a very long time and that you were still friends. I know he meant a lot to you."

"We were married for 15 years..." Talking with Lexi and sobbing to her made it easier to talk with Steve without unleashing another torrent of tears. "The woman that's worked for him for years, called to tell me. She's devastated, and I feel like..."

"You're hurting too. I know that. I understand that," Steve said, trying to be sympathetic and comforting, while at the same time feeling incredibly turned on. Kate's dress had a revealing V-neck and a slit in the skirt that bared much of her thigh.

Before she left Jordan's, her longtime friend had advised her to 'tart up' to meet Steve. Apparently Jordan didn't feel her sweatpants and T-shirt were the best choice for getting back together with her husband after three long months. Kate had taken her advice, stopped at Saks and Victoria's Secret on the way, had her

makeup done at the Clinique counter and found someone to spritz her with some sexy cologne. When Steve had been in Federal custody for two weeks, she remembered clinging to him when he returned home, unwilling to let him out of her sight, much less out of her reach. Their reunion then was relief; she hoped this reunion would be a celebration.

"It's okay," he said. He sat down on the sofa next to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

"I feel like... I don't know what I feel like. I feel a loss, but... I don't know why I don't feel destroyed by this. I should feel destroyed by this."

"You have a new and different life. He has a new woman in his life, and I'm sure he loved her, loves her..."

"I think he's always loved her in some ways. They've been together for decades." She gulped, "She said he called my name."

She buried her head against his chest and spilled more tears. Shit, Steve thought, this is confusing. I know she's in pain, and I want to help her, but she feels so good, and whatever this perfume is, it's intoxicating. He took a deep breath and held her closer.

"Do you want to go to Florida?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'll have to call Ilene... later..."

"What do you want to do?"

"Right now, I want to do something life-affirming."

"Something life-affirming?" He hoped that she was asking for something that he was more than willing and ready to give her.

She looked up into his eyes. "Jordan told me that I should 'tart up' for you."

"I'm not sure I know what that means," he said, "but I think I owe her a thank you."

He reached behind her to unzip her dress. She stood up and let it fall to the floor. She slipped out of her shoes, carefully stepping over her dress. She picked up the violet silk dress and hung it over the back of the sofa. She turned back to face Steve, a little surprised at his open-mouthed stare.

"I think I owe Jordan more than just a thank you," he stammered.

When Kate had told the salesgirl at Victoria's Secret that her friend advised her to 'tart up' to meet her husband, the girl had laughed before bringing an assortment of lingerie and nightwear into the dressing room. Kate had looked at the initial choices with some disappointment. The salesgirl looked dismayed.

"He's 28," Kate said. That seemed enough of an explanation to the salesgirl, who returned in several trips with a much more exotic selection. Kate did a quick calculation, figuring that this black lace ensemble she was wearing cost about \$25 per square inch of material, and judging by Steve's reaction, it was worth every penny.

While Steve slept soundly after a very life-affirming night, Kate woke up early, pulled a terry cloth bathrobe out of the closet for a little more modesty, and went into the kitchen to make coffee. After pouring hot coffee into a mug and adding half-and-half, she took her drink and her cell phone out into the crisp morning air on the patio.

Still unsure of what she was going to do or say, she hit the button to call Ilene.

"Ilene, it's Kate. Is it too early to talk?"

"Like I've been able to get any sleep? I've been here in the hospital all night."

"And Bill is...?"

"Still here. On a lot of pain medication. The doctors say he probably won't last through the day."

"I am so, so sorry. I don't know what I can say to you..."

"I don't think you need to say anything to me." Ilene took a deep breath, already regretting what she knew she had to say. "I think you need to say something to Bill."

Kate caught her breath and looked out at the sun rising over the lake. She did need to say something to him, for herself as much as for him.

"Can you put the phone up to his ear? Is he awake?"

"As awake as he's going to get with so much morphine in his system. I'll hold the phone for him. Go ahead."

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"Bill, it's Kate. I hope you can hear me." She paused to compose her thoughts. "You were my first true love, and we had wonderful years together. I remember the first time we had dinner together, and the first movie we saw, and the first kiss we shared. I remember picking paint colors and crown molding. We had some great fun and happy times. You were my friend in some of the darkest times too, and I wish I could be there for you now." Tears welled up in her eyes, but she continued as best she could. "I'm sorry if I hurt you. I didn't want to hurt you. I was just so caught up in my own..." She shook her head, knowing that this was no time to talk about her obsessions. "I loved you very much, I still love you in some ways, and I will always love you for what we shared and for our time together. I hope, I pray... you still love me enough to forgive me."

Kate thought she heard the sound of an exhale into the phone. Then there was quiet, and a sharp cry.

"Thank you Kate," Ilene said, her voice cracking. "I think you gave him the peace he needed to finally let go."

Ilene started sobbing as she hung up the phone, and Kate put her head in her hands. While she was talking, she had heard Steve open the balcony door behind her. He put his hands on her shoulders, not completely certain, but fairly sure he knew what had happened.

"I heard what you said. I'm sure it meant a great deal to him."

"I think it meant enough."

"I think it was everything he needed to hear." He leaned down and gently kissed the back of her neck.  
"Was it everything you needed to say?"

"I should've said it a lot sooner. I don't ever want to regret not saying something to you," Kate said.

"You can always tell me anything, And I hope I can always tell you too." Steve reached down and took her hands. He hoped that she had settled things enough, not just with Bill, but with herself. "We have leftover pizza in the kitchen or I can call room service and order something for breakfast," Steve said changing the subject, as his stomach growled.

"In my younger days, I lived on cold pizza for breakfast."

"I think sometimes you would have scared me if I'd known you when you were younger. You have so many things that you casually mention as part of your past that I never would've connected you with. I think that's part of what makes you so attractive, the hints of mysterious secrets, like the whole 'tarting up' thing."

"That was Jordan's idea; I was just in charge of execution. I don't think my past is so mysterious, and there are none of my secrets that I won't tell you."

"I might have to ask Lexi and Jordan what questions I should ask," Steve laughed. "I'll call down to get some orange juice, so we can make mimosas with the champagne we didn't have last night. Maybe if I get you tipsy enough, you'll divulge some of your secrets."

Knowing that although Lexi cautioned her not to mention what had happened with Sam, she would have to tell him soon. No secrets; no guilty secrets.

"I have something I have to tell you," Steve said, picking a slice of pepperoni off his pizza, "because of that honesty agreement."

"Okay," she said tentatively, knowing 'that honesty agreement' was going to require a confession from her about Sam.

"A woman, a girl in my class hit on me."

"No surprise there," she said calmly. "You're an authority figure, you're incredibly intelligent, and you're sexy as hell. I'm surprised it's the first time."

"I was surprised," he said, "and I kissed her. That's all. I kissed her, and maybe I gave her some mixed signals. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful."

Now Kate was sure she had to tell him about Sam. "In the spirit of 'the honesty agreement,' I should tell you something too. When Jordan was having her surgery, I called Sam to wait with me in the hospital..."

"YOU CALLED SAM?" Steve practically yelled with surprise and a dose of anger. "Does he even know Jordan?"

"Well, no, not really. I just needed not to be alone in the waiting room."

"Is that it? You and Sam sat for a couple hours in a waiting room?"

"Well, we talked – or I talked and he listened – until the doctor came in with a report on Jordan."

"And she was fine, and you shook hands, and that was that?" he said hopefully.

"Well, no, the doctor said that although she was okay, there had been a lot of bleeding during the surgery that they didn't expect." Steve looked at her expectantly, waiting for the shoe to drop. "I got a little dizzy, and Sam caught me. And then I started to cry, and he held me."

Dammit, that should have been me, Steve thought cursing himself. That should have been me catching her and holding her. That should have been me there to support my wife.

"And then he kissed me..."

This is déjà vu, Steve swore. I've been through this conversation before.

"And I guess I kissed him back."

"You GUESS you kissed him back? What the hell does that mean?" Steve loved the way she invoked honesty, yet still evaded the critical details.

"I kissed him, okay?" Kate bit her bottom lip, while she searched for anything to explain her indulgence. "Lexi says I won't go to hell for it, and she'll be able to use it as blackmail for years. I'm not sure what kind of leverage it gives you."

Steve thought about what she'd said. Lexi had condoned her behavior? Or at the very least said she wouldn't get eternal punishment... He stared at Kate, trying to figure out why she had even put herself in a position where Sam could kiss her again.

"Are you sorry it happened?" She could clearly see that Steve wanted to hear some regret in her answer. But honesty...

"No, not really."

"Shit," Steve swore. "Do you want him?"

"No... no, no," she protested.

"Babe, I don't understand why you called him. I don't understand why you set yourself up to have to explain yourself. I don't understand how you think you could be going to hell for what you did, but not be sorry about what happened."

"I'm not sure I understand either. Maybe I just needed some closure."

"CLOSURE? I thought this was a done deal months ago, when you were in the hospital with your ankle in pieces. I thought we already had this discussion. How many times do you need to slam the door to make sure it's closed?"

"More than once apparently," she snapped. "I don't know what I was looking for." With each of his questions and each of her lame answers, Kate felt herself slipping further and further toward the edge of a chasm she never intended to approach. "I adored him in graduate school, and we never went anywhere as a couple. Call it unrequited love, if that works for you. He may have hugged me, he never kissed me, and we sure as hell didn't sleep together."

"So you want to sleep with him now?"

"Oh shit, no. I guess I just wanted to know what it might have been like to be close to him."

"And was it what you expected?"

"It confirmed that it was a juvenile obsession. Maybe it would've been okay twenty years ago, maybe it would've been GREAT twenty years ago, but it wasn't ANYTHING now. It was just a kiss. Lexi called it a moment, and it's over, definitely over."

Steve watched her as she struggled through her explanation and believed she was truly trying to be honest with him and to be open with herself. He didn't completely understand why it had taken twenty years to settle their accounts. He never had a crush on a girl or been attracted to a woman that was left unsettled: if he'd liked someone, he acted on his feelings and was accepted or rejected with no unanswered questions. Like Kate, he thought, I felt something for her and I did something about it.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I think I'd rather go to hell than hurt you."

"Well, Lexi said you weren't going to hell and I trust her psychic abilities. And we both had our transgressions, so you have as much justification as I do to be hurt. So maybe we can just get beyond this."

"Is it time for apology sex or forgiveness sex?"

"I'm thinking more like wipe-these-memories-out-of-our-brains-forever sex, which might take considerably longer."

*Do you guys ever come up for air? I've been getting your voicemail for two days.*

*We've been occupied.*

*So what happened? No graphic details please.*

*Ilene called. I talked to Bill before he died.*

*Oh God, Kate, I'm sorry. That must've been...*

*It was hard, but it's over. I'll get over it.*

*I'm glad Steve was there for you.*

*That's a refreshing concession to the fact that Steve can be very good to me.*

*Okay, I admit I've been a little hard on him in the past. Anything else happen I should know about?*

*We played true confessions over a pizza one morning.*

*You told him about Sam?*

*After he told me about kissing a girl in his class.*

*He WHAT?*

*We both had very brief kiss encounters that we admitted and regretted. We're past it now.*

*You fucked your brains out, didn't you?*

*Pretty much. We're leaving this morning to go back to Paris.*

*So you're abandoning Jordan and running off with your boy-toy?*

*Pretty much. Jordan's fine with it. Anything interesting going on in your life?*

*Lexi thought for a moment before she answered Kate's question.*

*A few interesting things.*

*Like what?*

*Hmmm...let's see....Dakota has been a perfect gentleman since Andrew has been gone. A great companion.*

*Okay....and?*

*Andrew is due home in the next few days. I think he is in the outback somewhere, still out of cell phone range. I am really looking forward to seeing him*

*Jordan had a great idea for me to prepare for seeing Steve. She told me to "tart up".*

*So you dressed like a strawberry torte?*

*I said "tart up" not "torte up".*

*Oh, well now, I guess there's a difference, isn't there. Did you get a French maid's outfit or something?*

*No, just a very expensive trip to Victoria's Secret.*

*I don't want the details.*

*I could probably teach you a few things.*

*I'll wait for you to write your own sex manual and then I'll read it.*

*Speaking of publishing, how's my favorite author?*

*Pretty good. My new sister-in-law Amy introduced me to her two friends, Sam and Keri. They want to make a movie out of Middle Aged Girls in Love.*

*Holy Shit! When were you going to tell me?*

*Eventually. I figured after hearing about the dog and the husband, I could throw it into the conversation.*

*What do they want to do?*

Lexi explained that it was just a "discovery" meeting to gauge her interest level in making a movie. There would be a number of changes to the story, and Lexi wasn't sure about how they wanted to alter the book. There were lots of legal and financial issues to discuss, along with the major decision – was Lexi – and Andrew – ready to join the big time.

*I think you are overdue for joining the big time, Lexi.*

*Probably so, but I want to talk to Andrew first. My gut says that I will probably do it, but I want and need to check out the details. There're still a lot of unknowns.*

*Lexi, just do it for godsakes, will you?*

*Like I said, there're a lot of unknowns, and I need to check them out first. I just met these women, but I want to check them out first.*