

### *Learn Them Before You Break the Rules*

Kate hung up the phone and walked into Steve's office. "Lexi's going to LA to talk to a studio about making her movie. I think it's really going to happen."

"Uh huh. That's nice."

Kate sensed that Steve wasn't paying attention, so she added some test vocabulary. "They said it would make a great triple X film, you know with lots of middle aged women having an orgy. Doesn't that sound great?"

"Sure. Sounds good." Steve continued to punch numbers into the computer, angrily backspacing over his data.

"You're not listening to me, are you?"

"What do you want???" Steve looked at her with a slightly angry face, indicating that he was involved in a problem.

"You're busy. I'll come by later." Kate left the room, tears streaming down her face. *I shouldn't have interrupted him. I knew he was busy.*

"Kate, I'm sorry, I just am having a hard time thinking, and I have to get back to campus soon. What was it?"

"Nothing."

He hated it when women, especially his wife, did this to him. Instead of bluntly saying their opinion, they hid, and denied they said anything. He tried to remain patient, but with approaching deadlines and a block in validating his theory, Steve was at his wit's end. "Look, I KNOW it's not nothing. So just say the hell what it is!"

Kate stood back, shocked at his angry demeanor. "I just said that Lexi is going to visit a movie studio that is interested in her book...."

"That's it??? You interrupted me for that???"

"I just...."

"Look, I have to get to campus." Steve packed his backpack hastily and headed toward the door. "I'll be back later and we can talk about it." Steve quickly kissed Kate on the cheek as he headed out the door, leaving Kate alone with the aftermath of his outburst.

Kate sat down in his chair, crying into her hands. She looked about his desk for the European version of a Kleenex to blot her nose, but resorting to her t-shirt hem for assistance. She looked at his computer screen, left up in his hasty access, seeing a complex formula in Excel that she had no idea what it meant. Due to the occasional power outages that frequented a quaint country town, she decided to save his work and shut down his computer. She closed all the Word programs and the European database program he had grown

so fond of. Last but not least was his school e-mail account, with 3 recent messages titled "about last night". Kate's heart stopped as she read the series.

"But Doctor Steven, you can not leave me. I refuse to forget the feel of you, naked against my skin, as you thrust inside me. It was NOT wrong. Just because I am your student – your devout student – does not mean that I do not love you as a man, a partner, someone to share my life with. You know it to be true. You SAID it to be true....."

Kate's heart stopped. The series of e-mails discussed their nights of passion, while she was away in the states. She discussed details that only an intimate partner would know – the mole on the small of his back, the scar from a bike accident on his inner thigh, the strawberry S-shaped birthmark on his lower spine. Whoever this was, she had seen all of him – without his clothes.

Kate stood up, looking out the window into the dark. She wondered why Steve had to go back to campus so late, but she hadn't questioned his hours or schedule – just tried to support him by giving him the freedom he needed.

She left the computer screen up, with the incriminating evidence, placed a post-it note with a "Gone to see Lexi – nice e-mails!" on his monitor.

With determination, Kate packed a suitcase, still half full from her last inter-continental flight. She called the airline, refusing to book online lest she had to touch that computer one more time. Kate grabbed her passport, credit cards, and available cash as she headed out the door to the cab she had just summoned. On the way to the airport, she made a single phone call.

*Can you pick me up in the morning? About 8 a.m.?*

*Where???*

*At SeaTac?*

*You're coming to visit?*

*Maybe to stay a while. I hope Andrew doesn't mind.*

Lexi sensed a peculiar tone in Kate's voice. *What happened?*

*Steve had an affair with a student.*

*Oh.*

*Yeah. I'll be the one with sunglasses and Kleenex.*

The hurricane at the mall had arrived.

"Hi, is this Jordan?"

"Yes it is," she said, checking her caller ID, but not recognizing the name or phone number.

"Hi, my name is Sam Teller, and I'm a friend of Kate's. I waited with her while you having surgery."

"She told me," Jordan said, intrigued by why he was calling her.

"I was in town, and I know from an e-mail that Kate went back to France, so I thought I'd just call and see how you were doing. She was pretty concerned about you and I think she felt bad that she had to leave."

She was even more intrigued. Why was Kate e-mailing him about her? And why would he feel an obligation to check on her for Kate?

"I'm doing okay. I still have my cast, but it probably comes off in a couple days."

"That's great," he said, not at all certain where he should take this conversation. Kate had asked him to check in on her, and he felt some obligation after their last encounter. He couldn't exactly call it taking advantage of her when he and Kate had connected in the waiting room, because, although she was obviously upset or relieved about her friend's surgery, she had been a willing participant in their kiss and their embrace. But still – even though it felt really good and really right at the time – this might've been something they should have done 20 years ago, and not something they should have done now. "Are you a shut-in or can you go out?"

Is he asking me out? Jordan thought. He's got guts; I think I have to give him credit for that. "I can venture outdoors, for good reason."

"Do you want to have coffee? I know this is weird, but I spent two or three hours listening to Kate tell stories about you two, and it feels strange that I haven't ever met you." Sam knew that this was an odd situation, but he was truly curious about a woman whose friendship merited leaving one's husband, and flying across the Atlantic.

Jordan thought about this one. What had Kate told him that would make him want to meet her in person? Where was this going?

"Coffee would be great," she said. "I can meet you somewhere. I'll be the one with my arm in a sling..."

What do I know about this guy? Jordan thought after they'd agreed to meet at one of the ubiquitous Starbucks on Michigan Avenue. I remember Kate was obsessed with him in grad school, but that was 20 years ago, and I can't remember why. Then she remembered an incredible resource she had right on her bookshelf, Middle Aged Girls in Love. She flipped through Lex's book, looking for a character that might be based on him, and then she jotted down a couple notes.

"Sam?" she asked the attractive man who rose when she came through the door. "I'm Jordan Logan."

"Sam Teller," he smiled. "I'd shake your hand, but..."

"No problem," she said, fervently hoping that he wouldn't try to hug her or kiss her in greeting.

"Could I just have a vanilla latte?" She sat down in a well-worn armchair, making sure there was some place to put coffee on her left side. Being temporarily handicapped, she had a whole new appreciation for the disabled and their coping strategies. Sam returned with her coffee, and settled into the armchair on her left.

"I feel like I know you," he said, "after Kate told me about growing up with you."

"Don't believe everything she says," Jordan shook her head. "Kate embellishes sometimes, when she tells stories. She'll get the basic facts right, but she's creative enough to want to make the story more interesting than it often is."

"Then she must tell one hell of a story about me," Sam said, rolling his eyes.

"I feel it some disadvantage here, so had to consult an expert." Jordan was amused by his reaction; he looked like he was searching his memory for someone who might qualify as an expert.

"You were in school with Lexi too, right?" He nodded, with a vague look of fear in his eyes. "So I checked her book to find a character that might resemble you."

"I haven't read her book. Maybe I should have." He paused, looking skeptically at her.

"Here's what she says about the character that I think might be you. He's a quirky, Gen X, science geek, with a MENSA intellect and a 17-year-old's sex drive." She knew from his laugh that this was indeed the character Lexi had based on him.

"She can be brutal, can't she?"

"Was she right? Is she still right?"

Sam considered his options. Denial was always a good choice, but he suspected that Jordan knew Lexi well enough to know that her book did have some factual basis. Confession was a choice, but he'd just met her and didn't want to drop the entire past on the table. He decided that honesty with a shot of humor would be the best choice.

"Quirky? True then, probably still true now. Gen X? Absolutely, can't change that—it's all about me. Science geek? Well, I'm in pharmaceuticals, but behind the desk instead of in a lab." He took a slug of coffee. "What was next?"

"MENSA?"

"I don't pay dues, I don't go to meetings, but I could probably still make a fortune on Jeopardy." He pretended to press his buzzer to answer the quiz question. "What is the atomic weight of plutonium? And having confessed superior intellect, it would be hard to say I'd forgotten the final comment about my character. 17-year-old's sex drive, huh? Well, at the time I was only 22, so that was probably right. I hope that I've matured a little bit since then. Maybe a 25 or 30-year-old's sex drive?"

"And what would the difference be there?" Jordan couldn't believe that she was flirting with him. Where was this going?

"Better pacing," he smiled. I can't believe she's flirting with me, and I can't believe I'm flirting right back. "And a recognition that it's not a solo act."

There was a long, but not quite awkward, silence as they both seemed to be considering possible conclusions to this coffee date, and any implications or consequences involved. She's very attractive, she's obviously intelligent, she's willing enough to take the risk to meet me for coffee, and she's a very good friend of Kate's. He's young, pretty good-looking, gutsy, funny in a quirky sort of way, and Kate saw something in him sometime. What the hell, they both thought finishing their coffee.

He wasn't Mike. He wasn't Scott. But he wasn't as controlling or as domineering as either of them or as intense. Sam was fun, and not focused on performance, but on making sure they both enjoyed themselves. He had no hidden agendas and no shrouded past tied up in national security. He was just a Midwest boy carrying a little baggage, but generally a good guy with a little bit of history with her friends Kate and Lexi.

Oh shit, Jordan thought, slipping her shoes back on, what do I tell Kate? Do I tell Kate? Will Sam say anything to Kate? Oh shit, what did I get myself into? "Sam, this has been great, but..."

He watched her struggling with a cornucopia of emotions – Embarrassment? Guilt? Guilty pleasure? A shot of remorse? -- and he understood because he was feeling exactly the same things. Plus, he was being smacked in the head by a betrayal even more serious than his sudden disappearance from Kate's life 20 years ago. He suspected it would take a cosmic miracle to let him off the hook this time.

"Yeah, I know..." he said, buttoning his shirt.

"This has been great," she repeated. Oh, what the hell, in for a penny... "How about Thai food?"

Steve got home and was surprised that Kate hadn't left any lights on for him. That was unusual, because even if she went to bed, she'd normally leave some light on. He turned on a lamp and dropped his backpack on a table by the front door.

"Kate?" he said beginning to look into different rooms. He looked into the den and saw that his computer was still on. He sat down behind his desk and flipped on the desk lamp, seeing the yellow Post-it note message that Kate left for him. Nice e-mails? he thought, reading her note. He pushed the mouse to reactivate his screen, and he saw exactly what Kate was talking about.

He didn't exactly know how to describe the feelings that grabbed his heart and his mind and twisted him as if he were in a vise grip. Panic? Disgrace? Anger at himself? Disappointment in himself? Shame? Overwhelming stupidity? Fear that he might have traded a few nights of adolescent satisfaction with the girl with purple hair for perhaps the best thing he'd ever had in his life with Kate?

He wanted to type a message back to Gillian that said, "Hey, fuck you." But that's what created the problem, wasn't it? He kissed her, and he knew that was a mistake, but even though he told Kate about that, he hadn't done anything to discourage Gillian. She didn't give up, and one night as they studied, she got too close, he got too taken in the moment, and because Kate was out of town, he went home with her, downed

far too much wine, and casually fucked her. It was easy after that, but it never meant much to him, obviously judging by her e-mails, not as much as it meant to her.

Or as much as it meant to Kate. Her briefcase was gone, her purse was gone, and he knew with a sinking, almost nauseated feeling, that she was gone too. He desperately prayed that it wasn't permanent, that he could find some way to bring her back into his life, and he had destroyed the fairy tale that their life together had been.

"Jordan, it's Lexi..."

"I was just going to call you. I need to ask you a couple questions about Sam Teller."

"Forget him. You need to come to Seattle ASAP."

"Is something wrong?" Jordan had never been anywhere to see Lexi; their encounters were always linked to Kate.

"Kate's flying in as we speak..."

"Is something wrong?" Jordan repeated, suspecting that this wasn't just a casual visit.

"Steve had an affair, and Kate's leaving him."

Jordan's first thoughts after the obligatory "oh, shit" and "Goddamn him" were "leaving him for good or just for the moment?" But she kept the questions to herself because they were better asked of Kate and in person.

"I'll book a flight as soon as we get off the phone. Do you need anything?"

"Just another shoulder for her to cry on, I think, and someone who's been with her through a lot more than I have. She's going to need all the support we can give her."

"Isn't this what we were saying in a hallway outside a New York courtroom? Damn Steve for putting her through this after everything she's already gone through for him. It'll be a cold day in hell before I decide I can like him again."

"I know. Just about when he'd redeemed himself, he had to do something shitty like this. Call me when you get to SeaTac." She paused and then returned to Jordan's original question. "Oh, and you wanted to ask about Sam?"

"Seems pretty inconsequential now, but I wanted to get your take on how Kate would react if I was – um – dating him."

"YOU'RE DATING SAM?"

"Well, he called me and we had coffee..."

"Is coffee the new Midwestern aphrodisiac? I'm guessing you did more than have coffee, but whatever it was, – is – now is not the time to bring it up with her. Let's go for one dose of getting screwed at a time."

I've got to finish this goddamn paper, Steve said to himself as he threw a few things into a suitcase. I'm stuck on that stupid equation, but otherwise I'm done. He thought about calling his advisor at the Sorbonne, but it was the middle of the night in Paris; he dialed Dr. Broadhurst in Chicago. Within minutes, he explained the problem he was having, and just as quickly, Dr. Broadhurst offered him the solution. After he finished that call, he called the airline and booked a ticket on the next flight to the U.S.. He knew that Kate had gone to see Lexi and would be in Seattle, but he thought he might need to do some penance and prep work before landing on Lexi's doorstep. He booked a flight to Boston, before going back to his computer, finishing his dissertation, and e-mailing it to his advisor.

*Have to go out of town. Paper attached. I'll call as soon as I can.* His message was short and to the point, and he was out the door in less than an hour. It was no surprise that Kate wasn't picking up her cell phone; he sent her a text message.

*IM a shit. IM sure you hate me. IM SO sorry. IM still in love with you. IM scared that we can't work this out.*

Jordan hurried through the terminal at SeaTac, dragging her wheeled suitcase behind her. She spotted Lexi pacing outside the security gate.

"It's great to see you," Jordan said, "although I wish the circumstances were a little bit different. Have you heard anything more from Kate?"

"No, I'm guessing she's on her plane crying her eyes out, drinking herself unconscious, sleeping after a good dose of something or any combination of those," Lexi said taking the suitcase from her. "I can't say I'm surprised that this happened, but I was really hoping that Steve would do better than I expected. I thought he really loved her."

"I think he does love her, but he's a guy and we both know that men don't always think with their heads."

"Andrew says that most men," Lexi smiled, shaking her head, "don't remember much except the last woman they last slept with."

"How is Andrew after his adventure in the outback?"

"Really buffed up, and very at peace with himself, until this began. He's never liked Steve much and trusted him even less, but now he is threatening to take him down."

"If we want a clean killing," Jordan said as they got into a cab, "we should get in touch with Mike."

"Kate's the only one who has the right to pull the proverbial trigger."

Scott parked the Cessna next to the hangar in Boca and checked his cell phone for messages.

*IM an idiot. Kate left me. Call.*

He read the message twice, even though it was short, just to make sure it was real. What did Steve do this time? What kind of trouble was he in? He hit the button on his cell phone return the call.

"Scott," Steve said with a sigh of relief.

"What the hell are you? What the hell happened?"

"I'm in Paris waiting for a plane to Boston. Kate read some e-mails on my computer from a student that I screwed. Okay, I cheated on her, and this girl sent me e-mail with some details. Okay, I was an idiot, and Kate had every good reason to walk out. But, it didn't mean anything to me..."

"I'm betting Kate doesn't see it quite that way," Scott said, rolling his eyes.

"Of course not. After she screwed with a student – me --, she divorced her husband and moved in with him, me. I'm sure she doesn't see this as some fleeting weakness, and even if she does, it's not likely that she's going to shrug it off. I know I made a really, really bad mistake, but I love her and I don't want to lose her over some chick in France. I need some advice, some help. What the fuck can I do?"

"Don't do a MacMillan and try to throw cash at the problem. Let's talk this through."

"There she is."

Lexi and Jordan pointed at Kate as she walked towards them past the TSA agents. The threesome just silently stared at each other, realizing that they were there for support of each other but not being the overly affectionate type of women who wept openly.

Lexi offered a bag from McDonalds. "I brought you some fries."

Kate laughed and cried at the same time, her shoulders slumping forward for her friends to hold her. "I can't believe I didn't see this coming. I can't believe that I actually thought a boy half my age could be trusted."

Lexi, the tallest of the trio, looked over Kate's head, and exchanged glances with Jordan that said, "Now what do we do?" Jordan raised her shoulders indicating that she didn't know, but that they should just go with the flow. Kate continued to cry as they held her, until Jordan couldn't take it anymore.

"Kate – you're getting slime all over my shoulder."

Lexi chimed in. "There are napkins in the McDonalds bag. You should think about using them."

They weren't the typical supportive trio, and supported each other in their unique way, with a mix of compassion, humor, sarcasm, and verbal slaps upside the head. Kate laughed, opened the bag to grab a napkin and a handful of fries. "They usually don't have fries at this hour of the morning."

"I didn't think you liked hash browns. And besides they have to cater to weary international travelers who have lost all connection with their biological clocks."

Kate grabbed a cold fry out of the bag. "Good. I needed that." Kate reached into her purse, extracting her cell phone and handing it to Jordan. "Could you get rid of this please? He keeps texting me."

"Okay." Jordan promptly dropped the sleek rectangular box onto the cold tile floor, using the chunky heel of her shoe to smash it to bits.

Lexi and Kate stared at the shrapnel in amazement. "Hmmm. That oughta get rid of him. Good thinking, Jordan. Kate didn't really need that phone anyhow."

"I did have about 300 phone numbers in there, Jordan."

"So you'll have something to do when you get your new phone – and number." Jordan grabbed Kate's elbow and headed toward the exit. "Shall we go?"

"Sure." Lexi picked up the remainder of Kate's cell, depositing it into a nearby trash container. "Welcome to Seattle. Your chariot awaits." The threesome stepped outside and crossed the skyway to the parking garage. She put everyone's luggage into the back of Andrew's truck and piled everyone into the front cab.

"Don't you think you guys could afford a new car?" Jordan was mildly inconvenienced at the prospect of riding in a 15-year-old truck.

"Andrew likes it. Keeps him close to his roots. No pun intended for the former landscape artist."

Jordan and Lexi kept up the conversation while Kate sat in a daze for the 30-minute ride to Lexi's house. A beautiful day full of sunshine and gorgeous view of the mountains awaited them.

Jordan bunched her coat closer to her. "I thought it was summer here. It's cold."

"Quit being a wuss, Jordan. This IS summer. We don't get much above 75 degrees, which is where we are headed today, even though it's about 55 right now. I thought you lived in Chicago and had a decent temperature tolerance?"

"It's still cold."

"And you're still a wuss."

Lexi led them into the sprawling two-story home. Andrew greeted them at the door, spending extra time wrapping Kate in his arms.

"Can I just stay here a while?" Kate's voice was muffled as she buried her head in Andrew's shoulder.

"Take all the time you need." Andrew knew how to give a hug, as Lexi well knew, and how to be a manly and mature protector of women.

"Okay, that's enough – I'm next!" Jordan continued to lighten the mood, forcing Kate aside so she too could hug Andrew. "Wow, you did buff up in the Outback! What a mate you are!" Jordan tried using her best "A dingo's got your baby" Aussie accent, but it came across more like Liza Doolittle in "My Fair Lady."

"That's what my WIFE says too." Andrew let go of Jordan, giving her a gentle reminder of who belonged to whom. "I have a refrigerator of food, wine, and chocolate per Lexi's request. I guess that is the sustenance you all need at a time like this."

"Thank you, Andrew. I really appreciate all the trouble you – all of you went to." Even in trying times, Kate knew and practiced her courtly manners.

Lexi gave Andrew a loving look as he made himself scarce, taking Dakota in the truck for a run at the dog park. The threesome settled down in the living room with a bottle of wine, bagels, chocolate and other non-breakfast items.

"So are you going to tell us what happened or what?" Jordan had little sleep and wanted full details of what brought her out here on short notice."

"I guess there's not much to say. I guess Steve got lonely while I was here in the states. I had just gotten off the phone with Lexi, and I was telling him about your movie deal...."

"YOU HAVE A MOVIE DEAL???" Jordan lost track of the situation, inquiring Lexi for details.

"Not yet. I'll tell you later. What else happened, Kate?"

"He was being very short with me, which is very unlike him. He rushed out of the house to go to campus. I went to shut down his computer, his e-mail was up...."

"Ewww – you found an e-mail?" A knot twisted in Lexi stomach when she thought of the prospect of finding a deep betrayal electronically.

"Yeah. He had told me he kissed a girl in his class...."

Jordan sat down her wine glass. "You are fucking kidding me. He told you he kissed someone?"

"Yeah. We have an honesty thing...or at least I thought so. I told him I had kissed Sam..."

Lexi shot Jordan a look. "Let's not go there right now. What happened next, Kate?"

"I found an e-mail that pretty much said she adored Steve, and detailed all his birthmarks on his lower back, and how much she enjoyed...." Kate started to break up at the memory of the words she read.

"What a fucker." Jordan was in no mood to mince words. "Why aren't you chiming in on this one, Lexi?"

"Because she's going back to him."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. You're the big psychic. There is no way she's going back to him." Jordan and Lexi were on opposite sides of the Steve verdict.

"Look in her eyes, Jordan. She still loves him. If she didn't, she would show us that determination that it's OVER, you know, like when she moved on from other guys – even Bill."

"I am in the room, you two realize." Kate suddenly felt a need to be part of the conversation, not just an object of it.

"Kate, I think you just need some time to rest and think about what happens next. Jordan and I are here for you. If you want to move into downstairs bedroom, you can come and go as you please. I know you won't figure this out right now, but if you need to drink and thrash and scream for a while, we're here for you."

Jordan scanned Kate's face, knowing her moods since grade school. "Crap. You are going to stay with him, aren't you?"

"I don't know. But I do love him, more than I have loved anyone else in my life."

Lexi silently disagreed with Kate and thought nothing would be better but to leave him behind and move on with her life. Steve and his family had caused Kate, and everyone surrounding her an enormous amount of pain and suffering. But apparently there was never too much to sacrifice for this relationship – at least not yet.

After a few more minutes of realizing that this therapy session would have a definitive, but not satisfactory end for Jordan and Lexi, they let Kate retire to her bedroom. Andrew had hurriedly cleaned it and put fresh linens on the bed and attached bath. Kate looked worn and weary as she shut the door to her room.

Lexi escorted Jordan upstairs to her room, also freshly prepared by Andrew. "You really think she's going to stay with him, Lexi?"

"She's been with him through so much already, I am not sure where her bottom line is – or if there is one."

After a few hours of naps, Lexi, Andrew, Jordan, and Kate enjoyed lunch out on the deck overlooking the mountains. They told Andrew how they all met, and Andrew revealed how he and Lexi came together. After catching up, Lexi broke the news that she needed to go to L.A. the next day to discuss the movie options.

"I think we should all go together. I will be in meetings for a few hours, but we kind of wanted to tour the city. Why don't you two come along? It's supposed to rain here again for the next few days, and although that might fit Kate's mood, I think some L.A. action might be a good distraction."

Jordan consented to the idea, and Kate had little energy to disagree. Lexi made hotel arrangements for all four at the Beverly Hills Hotel, providing central access to tour Hollywood, beaches and celebrities. "They might even have a pool boy available for Jordan's pleasure."

"Really?" Jordan perked up at the idea of a young thing at her beck and call.

Andrew looked at Lexi, "Is she for real?"

"Do you mean – is she a slut?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it that, but now that you mentioned it..." Andrew winked at Jordan.

"No, I am not a slut. I am just – sexually confident."

Kate smiled at the interchange amongst the group, knowing that they were trying to distract her. Part of her ached for Steve, and another part wanted to punish him severely for what she'd done. And then there was the part that was so totally confused she didn't know what to do next.

Steve appreciated Scott's advice. "Don't say it didn't mean anything," and "Don't say you missed her and that's why you did it," and "Be honest, willing to confess, and very willing to grovel." Scott had spent enough time with both of them to have a pretty good idea that Kate was hurt, that Steve was incredibly guilty, and that they still loved one another. So Steve needed to get around his guilt to help Kate get over her hurt, and they had to rediscover their love. "Keep communicating with her, even if you don't get a response back. She's a communicator, so eventually she'll want to talk, and you need to make sure the lines stay open."

*IM having coffee in Boston at our favorite coffeehouse. IM thinking about walking with U when cool autumn air made refreshing mornings. IM sorry U aren't here with m. IM sorry IM such a jerk.*

*IM having ice cream for dinner tonight. IM ashamed of myself for this and for other things. IM so missing you.*

*IM so spoiled because I only want to have wine at dinner if I'm sitting with U at a café in Paris. IM sick about us not being together. IM sorry that I caused this split.*

Steve sent her text messages at least twice a day, heavily relying on the IM theme. She was a marketing expert; she'd appreciate the brand consistency.

Before they left for L.A., Kate stopped in an AT&T store to get a new phone and chose one that made texting much easier and could play music as well (she picked a Matchbox Twenty ring tone.) Not quite an iPod or a Blackberry, but a definite upgrade. "I have an account with you, but I lost my phone..." She didn't mention that Jordan had crushed it.

"No problem," the clerk said, tapping into his computer. "I can put a forward on your old number to the new number, so you don't lose any calls..."

Kate almost told him not to, but even though she had hated Steve's texting her initially, she didn't want to cut him out of her life entirely. Lexi thought that she'd go back to him, and while Kate was still having issues in her own mind, she trusted her friend's psychic ability. When the clerk handed her the new phone, Kate checked text messages that had been forwarded and nearly began weeping in the AT&T store.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" the clerk asked. "Is there some problem with the phone?"

"No, the phone's fine," she said trying to clear her throat, "it's the text messages I missed. They're just very emotional."

She jammed the phone in her purse and went out to rejoin her friends in the limo she had hired to make Jordan more comfortable for the drive to the airport.

It didn't take much effort to get all of their seats on the three-hour flight upgraded to first class; between Jordan and Kate, they had collected enough miles and VIP ratings to promptly displace any passenger that might have been in their way. Kate's offer to buy drinks all the way to L.A. for the two re-seated business travelers appeased their annoyance.

"You've become a lot like Steve," Lexi said with some annoyance, "throwing cash to solve problems."

"I was being polite," Kate protested, "and having the resources to back up my courtesy doesn't hurt. I didn't buy them off, because they were going to get sent back to Business class anyway. I just made their trip a little easier. If either of them had been attractive, Jordan would have probably offered to just sit on his lap."

"You two have given me such a pornographic reputation," Jordan said, taking her Bloody Mary from the flight attendant.

"We didn't make up your adventures," Lexi said. "We just retell them. Which might be a good starting point for conversation this morning..."

"I am not going to tell my mystery man from Moscow story again."

"How about your 'coffee' with Sam story? Kate might like to hear that one now."

"You shit," Jordan said, before turning to Kate's quizzical expression. "Your friend Sam called me because he said you'd e-mailed him to check on me..."

"Oh, for godssake, Jordan, cut to the chase," Lexi pleaded.

"Okay, fine, we had coffee, we had sex, we had Thai food for dinner."

Kate pretended to be shocked by her friend's behavior, but couldn't hold back a giggle.

"Was he any good? I've been wondering for about twenty years," she said laughing.

"God," groaned Andrew. "Individually, you each seem so nice, but when you get into groups, you can make me blush. 'Was he any good?' That sounds like a guys' locker room question."

"Then I suppose my answer would be just too much information," Jordan said, stirring her drink with the stick of celery. They tried to keep conversation out of the gutter for the rest of the flight.

Kate couldn't help chuckling a little when the four of them checked into the Beverly Hills Hotel.

"Not up to your standards?" Lexi asked sarcastically.

"No, it's wonderful," Kate said, thinking that if Steve were here he'd love the classic appeal of the "Pink Palace" and would have booked a bungalow without a second thought. "Did I ever tell you how Eddie Murphy figured into my wedding?"

"No," Jordan said. "Did I miss something?"

"Remember the scene in 'Beverly Hills Cop' when he sends food out from the hotel to the police sitting in their car on the stakeout?"

"Yes, vaguely." Jordan still wasn't getting the connection to Kate's celebration at the Bellagio.

"The night before the wedding when we had that great dinner up in our suite..."

"Before we were forced to hike for a couple hours?"

"Yeah, the dinner before the hike. I sent some dinner down to the FBI agents in the lobby, and I made a reference to Eddie Murphy when I talked to the catering staff."

"You sent a catered room service dinner to the FBI?" Lexi asked with surprise.

"Well, they had to spend all that time sitting around in the lobby. I thought it was a nice gesture."

"A nice gesture? There's a part of me that wants to say something about the Stockholm Syndrome of hostages, but I get the feeling it was that Midwestern manners thing that Lexi's always telling me about," Andrew said, shaking his head as he joined the discussion. "No wonder you'd even consider going back to that bastard husband of yours. That would be a nice gesture too."

"Don't go there, Andrew," Lexi said seeing the potential for an ugly public scene in the lobby. "But, wouldn't you have loved to see the FBI agents' faces when they got those great sandwiches?"

"They liked them and were very grateful," Kate said coolly. "They sent a thank you note that's in my wedding album."

After breakfast in the hotel's Fountain Coffee Room, Lexi and Andrew left for their meeting with Samantha and Kerry and some studio execs. Lexi had a lot of questions that she wanted to ask, but most of all she wanted to get a feeling for the people she might be working with. A Midwesterner at heart, she was a little nervous and skeptical about Californians in general, those 'nuts, fruits, and flakes' who were the subject of too many bad jokes. She had briefly worked in California and had most of her stereotypes confirmed. She wanted to make the movie deal, but she didn't want to turn her book into a cinematic joke.

Andrew was just curious, not only about the process, but about how Lexi was going to handle this. He knew she was good at negotiation, but he sensed this had a personal dimension that most of her business negotiations didn't have. Publishing her book had been a soul-baring experience, but seeing her characters/friends on the big screen could be even more exposing. And like Kate and Jordan, he was very interested in who might be cast to play him.

"So, what do you want to do this morning?" Jordan asked, hoping that Kate would not say "go shopping on Rodeo Drive."

"I suppose I should say go on a studio tour, but I'm really more interested in going to the Getty."

Jordan breathed a sigh of relief, pleased that her friend hadn't completely abandoned the culture that they had both valued for so many years. Growing up, they'd make visits to Chicago's Art Institute and galleries every couple months. Every Christmas, they would look at Marshall Fields windows on State Street, but shopping never became an art form for them. Kate had always been more attracted to Picasso than to Prada. Jordan recognized the dichotomies in their lives; her CD collection included Dvorak, and Guns & Roses. She had gone to see "La Traviata" one month, and Van Halen the next. Kate's contradictions were similar, never more than in the recent past when she was professionally lauded by the academic community and obsessively fucking her young research associate.

Although the hotel probably would have given them a limo to go to the museum, they caught a cab and talked with cab driver who was more than willing to give them an insiders tour of the city. Jordan paid the fare, and Kate tipped him \$50.

"Thank you so much," Kate said as she got out of the cab. "Could you pick us up here at about noon and recommend a good restaurant for lunch?"

"No problem ma'am. I'll be waiting right here."

Jordan rolled her eyes in disbelief. "There are a lot of other cabs in town..."

"But he was nice, and I felt comfortable with him. I'd bet that he comes up with a great place for lunch."

The Getty Center had a striking and dynamic architectural design and views that could rival some of the artwork the museum featured. While Jordan loved the Italian sculpture exhibit, Kate especially liked the photography. The nature images by Eliot Porter were stunning, but she was especially taken with Alfred Stieglitz' "portraits" of clouds. She knew about his troubled marriage with painter Georgia O'Keefe, but Kate still saw them as an amazingly artistic couple who created great things of beauty. Her thoughts drifted to her troubled marriage while she stared at Stieglitz' cloudscapes.

"You look pensive," Jordan commented.

"I love Steve," Kate said, breaking her focus on the photos. "I know he's been a shit to have screwed that French girl, but I still love him. You and Lexi would probably say he's been nothing but trouble for me since the beginning, but times with him have also been great joy. It's not the money, although Andrew would probably focus on that. It's..."

She searched for a word or a phrase to describe what she felt brought them together.

"I know, Kate. I know that you love him, and you want to make this work." Jordan gave her a quick hug for support. "You may just have to ignore our bitchiness and negativity about him. We only want to protect you and for you to be happy."

"He makes me happy. I know that we don't make any sense to anyone. He's so young, and we don't have that much of a history..."

"I think you two have a short, but very concentrated history. Couples who've been together for decades don't have the kind of dramas that you have," Jordan assured her. "I'm surprised in some ways that this is the first hint of marriage troubles..."

"We have been through a lot," Kate conceded, "but we've gotten through it because we've had each other. He makes me feel protected, and he makes me feel cherished."

"I know, Kate. I can see how much you care about him."

"I don't want to lose him. I've lost too much to be with him to lose him over some French fling."

That statement gave new depth to their relationship for Jordan. Kate acknowledged that she had made sacrifices for him, despite the financial rewards and professional success. She had given up her husband and her home, her roots in the Midwest, the close ties that she had once had with her friends, probably some of her individual interests, and very likely some parts of her character that she had always prized. Yes, there had been substitutes for some things, but not for everything, and Kate was unwilling to let go of him and the new person she had become because of him.

"It'll work out. Just do what you have to do without losing anything else."

The cab was waiting just where Rob the driver had promised, and Rob was leaning against the driver side door, reading The Economist magazine. He was sandy blond, tan, and wearing Raybans, jeans and a buttondown shirt that made him look like a surf dude, which made his reading choice all the more of a contrast. Now that he was out from behind the wheel, Jordan took a closer look at him.

"Have you chosen somewhere for lunch?" Kate said with enthusiasm.

"I'm guessing by your choice of the Getty rather than some of the other tourist meccas that you'd like some place relatively sophisticated, rather than fast food or a diner," he said, folding his paper.

Kate nodded.

"And I'm guessing," he added, gesturing toward her rings, "that we're not on too much of a budget."

They both nodded. Like staying at the Beverly Hills Hotel or dropping a \$50 tip wasn't a clue, Jordan thought. She was curious what he'd suggest.

"I think you'll like the WEST – no, it's not a cowboy bar," he said, practically reading Jordan's mind. "It's a great restaurant at the top of the Angeleno with nice salads at lunch and a view you won't believe. A good wine list too."

"Sounds perfect," Jordan concluded.

Rob pulled off the 405 and into the drive of the hotel. Kate could already tell he was right about the views, and the valet at the hotel opened their doors.

"Okay, so I'll wait out here for you," Rob said, looking at Kate in the rearview mirror.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, "you have to join us."

"I can't," he began.

"Oh, don't even try to argue with her," Jordan laughed, remembering her story about dinner for the FBI.

"Trust me, you have to have lunch with us. If you don't come with us upstairs, she'll send catering down with lunch anyway. "

Rob shook his head. "I've never been invited to eat with a fare before," he said. "This is certainly a new experience."

The maitre d' seated them at a window table and recommended a California wine to go with lunch. Kate was dazzled by the view and ordered tuna carpaccio and a chopped salad. Jordan opted for a pannini sandwich, and Rob chose the filet mignon burger. Since he was driving, he asked for iced tea rather than sharing their Chardonnay.

"Why are you here in L.A.?" he asked, searching for some conversation starter.

"A friend of ours is working out a movie deal for her book," Jordan said.

"How exciting," he said. "What's the book about?"

Jordan and Kate looked at each other and laughed. "Us," they said in unison.

Conversation from there was easy, although at some point Jordan wondered why they were dumping their life stories on the table with this virtual, albeit attractive, stranger. Kate even shared some of her saga with Steve with relative ease. Jordan chose not to share any details of Mike, Scott or Sam. At some point, Kate began asking questions about Rob and why he was driving a cab. He had a saga of his own involving a degree from Stanford, a dot com venture that exploded, a failed marriage, joint custody, and a not-yet-successful music career. Jordan wondered how Kate would find a way to rescue him, but she had offered no solutions by the end of their after-lunch coffee.

"This has been the best cab ride I've ever had," Kate said as she got into the backseat.

"This has been the most fun I've had in all my cab rides," Rob said. "You are both amazing."

Their new friend Rob dropped them at the Beverly Hills Hotel around 3:30, leaving them with a \$100 tip from Kate. He gave her a business card so she could call him if she needed another ride, and she put it in her wallet. Jordan might've thought this was some sort of pretentious behavior that she learned from Steve, but she knew Kate had been doing this for years. She would be willing to bet that Kate still had a business card in her Rolodex somewhere from their cab driver/tour guide in St. Martaan when they'd vacationed there after they earned their master's degrees. She'd also be willing to bet that Kate remembered his name.

Lexi and Andrew were sitting in the Cabana Club Café, drinking fruit smoothies and snacking on nachos.

"Lexi wins the bet," Andrew said, standing as they both sat down.

"What bet?" Jordan asked, flagging a waiter to order some Chardonnay.

"He bet me that you'd come back with a ton of shopping bags," Lexi said. "I said that Kate was already living her 'Pretty Woman' fantasy, so Rodeo Drive just didn't have much appeal. What have you been doing all day?"

Kate described their trip to the Getty, and then laughing as if it was an inside joke, she talked about their lunch and their cab ride.

"You took your cab driver to lunch?" Andrew asked with sarcasm. "I hope Jordan got a dinner date out of the deal."

"Speaking of dinner," Lexi interjected, "perhaps we should dress for dinner tonight, and I will tell you everything about our meeting with Madison Street Studios."