

Let Your Love Exceed Your Need For Each Other

Once he'd settled into the house in Boston and given himself a couple days to get over his panic, he called his advisor at the Sorbonne and scheduled a time to defend his dissertation over a computer cam conference call. Scheduling some time to do the call at the placement center at MIT was no problem. He was on the final lap of the Ph.D. racetrack, desperately wishing that Kate was with him to share his victory lap.

IM reviewing my notes to do my defense. IM wishing U were here 2 ask me the hard questions. U can ask me ALL the hard questions.

Kate had been reading all of his text messages, although she hadn't responded to any of them. When she read his latest message before she changed for dinner, she wanted to congratulate him on achieving this goal, wish him luck on his defense, but it was his last offer that got her attention. She replied to his text.

Any question?

His response was almost immediate.

ANY question. Call me so we can talk.

She took a deep breath and hit the button to speed dial him. He picked up even before the phone even before the first ring could finish.

"Any question... go ahead and ask." He knew what was coming, and he hoped he had an answer that she would accept.

"Why?"

Steve had thought a lot about my why, and although he could come up with reasons and excuses, none of them seem to really answer the question completely. But he knew from talking with Scott, he should be honest and very willing to admit the mistake.

"I was weak, and I was stupid, and I gave in to immediate gratification, rather than really thinking about what I was doing. I'm not going to try to offer you some lame excuse, because there is no good excuse. I love you, and you have always given me everything that I've needed or wanted, so there is no excuse, no good reason. I am so sorry, and it there is anything I can do to..."

"What was she like?"

"She was French. She wouldn't give up. She had purple hair."

That detail made her laugh. "Well, purple hair explains it all."

Steve breathed a sigh of relief. "Any advice for my dissertation defense?"

"Wear a good tie with your jacket, comb your hair, speak clearly and be confident. You'll do fine." She wished she were there to pick out this tie, to run her fingers through his hair, and to kiss him good luck, but she wasn't quite ready to go back to him.

"My treat." Lexi felt exuberant and felt like treating her friends to a grand, dress up dinner. She wasn't quite able to afford the Steve-and-Kate kind of budget, nor did she want to. She was feeling quite pleased with herself, her accomplishments, and having her loved ones all in the same room.

They had walked a few blocks from the hotel to a trendy Tex-Mex fusion restaurant, a hole in the wall that one of her L.A. friends had told her about for the last few years. Essentially, it was the same eight ingredients that all Mexican food had, but with a few unexpected herbs and unique plate presentation. After some citrus mint margaritas, Lexi turned to Andrew, held his hand tightly, and announced to the group, "I am now an Executive Producer."

Their glasses clinked all around as Kate and Jordan grilled Lexi on her meeting. "We bonded really well. They were anxious to build a trust level with me – and with Andrew – so they pulled out their portfolios of films, talked about the movie making process, and basically put us through Movie Making 101."

Andrew chimed in. "She was very impressive. You would have thought Lexi made these kind of deals all day long."

Kate smirked, knowing Lexi could rise to the moment. "I've seen her negotiate for a bike at a pawn shop, talk to my dead great aunt, and bring a few corporate execs to their knees. I have no doubt in her abilities." Kate lifted her glass, sloshing down the last of her drink, and asking for a refill.

Lexi continued. "They asked me how much I wanted to be involved in the movie making process. I told them I wanted to oversee it, but not be involved in too many details that I wouldn't know how to do anyhow. Sam and Keri were very willing to work with us and solicited our input."

Jordan looked at Lexi with a curious glance. "Yeah, but what is your REAL take on them, Lexi? The Other World got anything to say about this?"

"The Other World phoned in and said I could do what I want. It looks like Sam and Keri are really good with the process and adapting content, but I need to stay involved to make sure the content of what I wrote – and what we have all been through – stays true to form in the movie."

Kate sloshed back another big gulp of her icy drink. "Great! So I get to see myself on screen fucking that rock star backstage in '83?"

Lexi looked at Kate, realizing that she was on the verge of getting very, very drunk. "That depends, Kate. Did you want me to keep that part in?"

"Sure why not. I am sure you'll probably pick some villainesque guy to play Steve. I know how much you just LOVE my husband." She sloshed down another gulp, reaching for the remains of the pitcher.

Lexi gave a Jordan a quizzical look. "Did you two start drinking before dinner?"

"We shared a bottle – or was it two? Of some kind of clear wine." Kate was starting to slur her words and thoughts.

"That was vodka, Kate." Jordan reached to remove the glass from Kate's hand. "Yes, Lexi, she started drinking an hour ago and hasn't had much to eat today."

"I'M FINE YOU TWO. QUIT TREATING ME LIKE A BAY...BAY..BABY."

Lexi had not seen Kate drunk before. A little tipsy, but not entirely bereft of her faculties. "How about some food, Kate?"

"I DON'T WANT ANY GODDAMN FOOD. I WANT MY HUSBAND, DAMMIT. BUT NOOOO. HE HAS TO GO FUCK SOME FRENCH SLUT AND THEN ASK ME WHAT HE SHOULD DO TO DEFEND HIS DIS..HIS DISSES...HIS DAMN PAPER TOMORROW."

Jordan and Lexi didn't realize Kate and talked to Steve, but it must have been what set her off on her drinking binge. "Kate, did you talk to Steve?"

"YES I TALKED TO..TO... HIM!" Jordan and Lexi tried to indicate to Kate that she should be using her indoor voice, even though the techno-latino music was blaring. "AND THEN I GOT....THIS!"

Kate pulled out her cell phone, unable to punch the tiny buttons. "JORRR_DANNN. LOOK FOR..UM THE PIX- THE PIXTURE ON MY NEW PHONE."

Jordan pulled the phone away from Kate, scrolling through the menu to the latest picture. Jordan looked at it, and then rested against the back of the booth. "That motherfucker."

Lexi reached across the table to snag the phone, as she and Andrew leaned together to see the tiny screen. There on screen was a young purple-haired woman in the throws of naked passion with Steve. Apparently their fling was captured on digital, and she somehow was able to send the picture to Kate with a caption that said, "he's still mine."

Andrew grabbed the phone, pushing it into his back pocket, and sensing a need to take charge of the situation. "I think I would like to walk you ladies home and stop by that taco stand we passed on the way here. I think we will enjoy it better in the fresh air."

They all piled out of the booth, Andrew putting an arm around Kate, with Jordan on her other side, as Lexi paid for the bill. Andrew turned and looked at Lexi, mouthing the words, "we'll celebrate later".

Lexi tried to take in the moment. She had just reached a pinnacle of her career, as her best friend's love life had taken another turn. But she had a man who loved and appreciated her and knew how to take care of almost any situation.

What she hadn't gotten a chance to share with the group was that Andrew would take an equal part in producing her upcoming film, providing a much needed testosterone shot to an estrogen filled project. During the meeting, he had some great ideas of how to portray the men in the book as real humans, not clichés that the female gender imagined them to be. He provided a much needed balance to the project, and Sam and Keri were receptive to the idea, developing a bit of a crush on the tall handsome man who sat next to her.

They filled up on burritos, chips, beer, and water at the taco stand, totaling about \$30 for the best Mexican food to be had in L.A. They parked themselves by the pool at the pink hotel, gorging on the mix of rice beans, chicken and cilantro that could only be called "authentic".

Kate's drunken buzz started to wear off as she downed ½ a burrito, suddenly slipping into a food coma that made her sleepy and non-talkative. "I better get her to bed." Jordan helped to get Kate into a standing position.

Andrew, being the true gentleman, stood up to assist Kate and Jordan, carefully placing Kate's phone into Jordan's pants pocket. "She may want this back later. I erased the picture."

"We'll be alright, won't we Kate? It's been about 35 years since I had to do this, but once she put some rum into her Mister Misty after she got off work at the Dairy Queen when she was 16. She threw up all over her parents' driveway before I could get her to the door."

Lexi and Andrew watched the pair slowly walk off toward the pink building. "That's quite a pair of friends you got there, honey."

"They are, aren't they?"

"So you're going to wait to tell them what actresses we are going to get to play them in the movie?"

"I think they have enough surprises for one day."

"Congratulations, Lexi. You did an amazing job today." Andrew leaned over to kiss her, sinking into the side of her neck to nuzzle her.

Lexi pulled him close and looked in his eyes. "I couldn't have done it without you. You were incredible. And I think it's awesome that you can give them some advice on how guys think, feel, and act. It will make the characters much more credible. And I think I will get to learn something in the process too."

"What's that?"

"Just more about who you are and how you think. I was totally mesmerized by you today with your explanations of how guys react around young women vs. middle aged women."

"You mean the fact that middle aged women intimidate most men?"

Lexi smiled. "Is that really true?"

"Of course it is. By nature, men want to conquer. It's easier to conquer a pretty young clueless thing and more challenging to relate to a woman who can think for herself."

"Do you think that is why Steve had an affair with a pretty young thing?"

"He can give Kate all the excuses he wants, but that purple-haired freak was easy pickin's. And all that pleading and texting he is doing is wearing down her defenses so he can conquer Kate again."

"So you don't believe her when she talks about how wonderful and giving he is?"

"Not at all. I think she has challenged him to grow up, but he's still having difficulty with that concept."

Lexi stepped closer to Andrew. "And how about you? Are you all grown up and ready to relate to a woman who can think for herself?"

"Most of the time. When I first saw you, yeah, I did have that hormonal conquering thing going on. But it is so much more gratifying when you show the other person your vulnerabilities and they still accept you for that. I think that is why I am enjoying middle age."

"You know they are going to want you to write a screenplay based on a man's outlook on middle age, don't you? They love you already."

"Let's get your movie made first. We have a long road ahead of us." Andrew looked up a few floors to where Jordan and Kate were staying. "And those two have a long road ahead of them too."

IM done. Meet me in Chicago 2 celebrate? Champagne at the Peninsula?

When she woke up around midnight to take a few aspirins, Kate read his message on her cell phone that Jordan conveniently left on the nightstand. She stared at the text, trying to think her way through the offer. She was still recovering from downing too much alcohol to function with complete clarity, but she tried to be logical. Steve had owned up to screwing that little French whore and had obsessively apologized; he wasn't the one that e-mailed the photo that sent her into last night's tailspin. Kate knew that any woman with half a brain and a modicum of self-respect would kick him to the curb, but right now, even though she guessed that only half her brain was not in need of some kind of detox, she still wanted him.

She could predict Lexi's tirade, and she had a pretty good idea of what Jordan would say. "You've fucked him enough. Get over it." "You're on hormone overdrive. Try to get a grip on reality." "You're 50 years old, not a teenager. You don't need this hassle in your life." "Take the jewelry and a big alimony settlement and lose the kid. You can buy other young men if you want them." She found it hard to even listen to their imaginary voices. She hurriedly and decisively typed her reply.

Pizza?

He smiled. He had already talked to Gavin, who was very excited about the new chef, but still was more than willing to arrange for pizza.

Absolutely. How soon can U get there?

2day.

Kate took his business card out of her wallet and called Rob. "I need a ride to LAX."

"What time?" he asked.

"Now, actually. If it's a problem for you, I can see if the hotel can take me in the limo."

"No, it's no problem." After \$150 in tips, it better not be a problem, he thought. "I'll be there in about 20 minutes."

He pulled on his jeans and a clean – well, almost clean – shirt. While he splashed water on his face and ran a comb through his hair in the bathroom, he wondered why Kate was making such a quick getaway at this hour. He didn't know her very well at all, but he hoped nothing was wrong. She and her friend Jordan had seemed happy at lunch and excited about their friend's possibilities for the movie. What had happened?

He locked the door behind him as he left, and realized he forgot to tell her that he was off the clock, so he'd have to pick her up in his car, not the cab. The trunk was probably filled with crap, but he could put her luggage in the backseat, if she was willing to sit in front. He drove to the hotel to pick her up.

"Is everything okay?" he asked opening the car door for her and stowing her small suitcase in the backseat.

"Potentially wonderful," she said with an expression that was a cross between a grin and a grimace. "I'm going to Chicago for pizza with my husband."

"I'm going to Chicago to meet Dr. MacMillan," Kate's message on Lexi's cell phone began when Lexi played it back at breakfast.

"He finally got his degree, but I can't believe she's going back after that photo on her cell phone," Lexi said.

"Get serious, Lexi," Jordan said. "We always knew they'd get back together."

"Jordan, it's okay to date Sam," Kate's message continued. "I e-mailed him from France, asking him to check up on you, but hoping you two might hit it off. He likes you, or at least that's what he said in his text message. Oh, and I gave to your cell phone number to Rob if he calls and you wonder how he got your number. And Lexi, I have a great theme for your new book – the IM Chronicles."

"Why didn't she just stay to talk to us?"

Jordan shrugged. "She knew what she wanted to do, and she didn't want to argue. She didn't want to try to explain. Or maybe she just wanted some decent pizza."

"I think indecent pizza might be a better description."

After too long a wait at LAX, a flight that she couldn't sleep through, a blistering headache, and a hike through O'Hare to get transportation into the city, Kate was frustrated about the cab ride; the driver wasn't nearly as good-looking as Rob and had only a small capacity for conversation in English. She wished she had been able to book a limo, but with plans so last minute, there hadn't been the opportunity. Oh, honestly, she thought to herself, I have crossed over into Steve's world of the affluent lifestyle; there was a day when taking the EI would have been a perfectly fine option.

The Chicago skyline was as impressive a silhouette as it always was, and this time, it felt welcoming to her, in spite of her headache. When she got out of the cab at the Peninsula, she nearly cried because it felt like

home as Gavin greeted her in the lobby. Too much emotional overload in too short a time, she thought, sniffing a little, and when I see Steve, I'm probably going to have a mental collapse. Please let him catch me, she silently pleaded.

"You're here early, Dr. Shaw. I don't think Dr. MacMillan was expecting you in before this evening."

"Is he here?" she asked with nervous anticipation.

"He's checked in, but I think he went out to do some errands. Can I get you anything and have it sent upstairs? A cappuccino perhaps?"

Kate went up to the suite, and while she waited for her coffee to arrive, she poked around Steve's closet and the paperwork he had strewn all over the coffee table. She wasn't sure what she might be looking for, but she was curious if there were changes she would see. Everything looked familiar, and at the same time, gave her a weird thrill as if she were discovering it all for the first time.

The room service porter appeared with her cappuccino, and she took it out on the balcony. The last time I was here, she thought sipping the hot coffee, I was meeting Steve, which was a confusing mix of joyful lust after a three-week absence and tragedy when I got the call from Ilene about Bill. Maybe that was when my life started to spin out of control, she speculated. Bill, Stacey, Steve, his French connection, Lexi and her book/movie. Toss in Sam and Jordan and the chaos is complete. I've settled some of these things, she decided, some are out of my control (I can't dictate casting roles in the movie) and a resolution with Steve is imminent. When did my life get so complicated? After all, in my heart, I'm just a middle-aged, Midwestern woman with a PhD...

...and a break-through new media marketing model

...and a very successful jewelry enterprise

...and a best-selling writer friend

...and an incredibly wealthy young husband

The door behind her slid open, and Steve joined her on the balcony. She stood up, looked into his gorgeous blue eyes and surrendered herself into his outstretched arms.

Steve really tried to remember Scott's advice to restrain himself.

Let her take the lead, dude. You don't want to push her too far or too hard too fast.

"I am so happy you came," he said. "Can you forgive me?"

If she wants to hit you, let her. She probably owes you at least a slap or two.

"Scott says you should hit me," he said, taking a step backward.

"I'm not going to hit you," Kate said smiling. "My ex-husband already tried to break your nose. My late ex-husband..." She bit her lip as she amended her statement, remembering her final conversation with Bill.

"I'm sorry, I didn't need to bring..."

"I brought it up, you didn't. But I still don't want to hit you."

"Do you want to at least yell at me?"

"Do you want me to yell at you?" Kate was interested in what sort of retribution he was expecting or seeking.

"I don't want you to yell unless you need to."

"If I needed to yell to make myself feel better, I would have stayed in Paris. Then I might have hit you."

"So I owe Lexi some gratitude for saving me from bodily harm?"

"You probably owe her more gratitude for not openly encouraging me to dump you and demand a huge alimony settlement."

"Not openly encouraging?"

"She was angry, and I think disappointed in you."

Steve could believe that Lexi was angry, but he suspected that the disappointment was more Kate's than Lexi's expression. "I didn't want to..."

"I know. You've been text messaging apologies nonstop."

"Have they worked?"

"IM here with U," she said, as she gestured to spell out the message. "UR 4given."

He put his arms around her again and kissed her, not with overwhelming passion, but with relief and happiness.

"Can we talk for awhile?" she asked. "I think there are things we need to tell each other."

"Of course we can, babe. Do you want to stay out here or go inside?"

"Let's stay out here. The sun feels good after being in overcast Seattle."

They sat in the patio chairs opposite one another at the small wrought iron table.

"You start," she said. "Tell me about your dissertation."

He related the frustrating story about trying to finish his dissertation with trans-Atlantic and trans-national connections, adding several times that he really wished she had been there to offer him advice and/or assistance.

"I think the computer cam defense was a first for my professors at the Sorbonne," he said. "They didn't ask too many questions or challenge my conclusions. Plus I think it helped that I was testing your model with real examples."

"Our model," she corrected him.

"Our model. I guess that's another debt I owe Lexi, even though I did cite her as promised in my paper." He paused for a moment and smirked. "I also think they were a little afraid to ask too many questions about the Kat House, even though I explained it was not a brothel. So tell me what you've been up to the last few days..."

"I went to Lexi's, and Jordan flew in too."

"Circling the wagons, huh? How badly did I get pummeled?"

"Not as badly as you might imagine, except for Andrew who's back from Australia and has found his macho soul. I think he wanted to beat the crap out of you." She took a sip of coffee and collected her thoughts on confrontation. "Oh, and you might want to e-mail that French bitch that if she ever e-mails me anything again, I'll call Interpol, and I'll drop a lawsuit on her faster than she can send out her pornographic photos. And we do have a few connections that I could call to just have her disappear entirely."

"Gillian e-mailed you?" Steve said, nearly choking on the question.

"Just a photo and a short note. The purple isn't very flattering to your skin color..."

"Oh, shit," he said, imagining what Kate might have seen. "I am so sorry."

"Not as sorry as she'll be if she ever tries anything like that again."

Steve was a little surprised at the depth of her vehemence, especially how cold and logical she made her threats sound. Maybe it was a good thing that she didn't want to hit him; she could have just hired someone to do it for her.

"So, we were in Seattle briefly, but then we all went to L.A., because Lexi had to meet with the studio about making her book into a movie."

"A movie?"

"Yeah, like a real movie. An independent film, not some heavy celebrity blockbuster, but a real movie."

"Is she writing the screenplay?"

"I don't think so," Kate said, slugging down more of her coffee. She honestly couldn't remember much of what Lexi had said, and she suspected that her drunken condition had cut the conversation short. "She'll be involved, but I think she got a good feeling from the studio – Madison Street? – and Andrew must have approved too."

"I think he'd approve of anything she did," Steve said, not with hostility, but with an undercurrent of dislike. Kate ignored him.

"And Jordan 'fessed up that she had gone out with Sam..."

"Jordan and Sam?"

"I know, it seems weird, but I told him all about her while we were waiting for her surgery," she said, trying to skim past the memories of the waiting room encounter, "and I thought they might like each other."

"Did they?"

"Uh, yeah," she confirmed, but not sure how much detail to divulge.

"She slept with him, huh?"

"Uh, yeah."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Given that I set them up, I have no option but to be okay with it. Oh, and in L.A., Jordan and I went to the Getty Museum and then we had lunch with our cab driver, who she might go out to dinner with..."

"You had lunch with your cab driver?" he said with surprise. "And Jordan is going out with him?"

"He was really interesting and pretty good-looking too in a California kind of way. So I gave him Jordan's cell phone number."

"Sounds like you had a productive trip..."

"I put closure on a lot of things, I guess."

Thank God, she didn't put closure on me, Steve thought. "Is that why you don't need to hit me?"

"Do you want me to hit you? I've got a mean right cross. I do have a younger brother, you know. I learned a few things growing up."

"I'm certain you learned a lot of things growing up," he said. "A lot was chronicled in Lexi's book, although I don't remember any fist fights."

"There was that episode at the Tina Turner concert, but I think that ripping the guy's leather jacket was the extent of my violence..."

Steve laughed. That was another one of Kate's secrets that made her irresistibly intriguing.

"I love you," he said, shaking his head. "I have never known a woman as honest, and yet as disguised as you can be. I think I could spend a lifetime trying to figure you out."

He leaned across the table and kissed her, before jumping out of his chair. This is a good time to give her the gift I picked up this morning, he thought. This is a good context for it. He excused himself, went into the suite and picked up a box from the coffee table. He returned and dropping to one knee as if he were going to propose, he offered her the jewelry case. She looked at him a little skeptically, but opened the case.

"It's a 'forever' necklace," he said, looking at the eight diamonds in the s-shaped pendant. "I want us to be forever."

Kate was touched more than she'd ever been by his gesture and pledge of commitment. The pendant was dazzling, but his thought behind it sparkled even more. They loved each other enough to get by all the history and all the shadows and missteps in their pasts and see forever with one another.

"You really want to be with me forever?" she asked.

"I want to be with you now and forever ." He reached around her, and fastened the clasp on the necklace.

The diamond S rested on her T-shirt with a little bit of incongruity. He smiled. "This looks beautiful on you, but I think it would look better with a different neckline. I put a dress in your closet that it would look stunning with, and I sort of promised Gavin we'd go down to The Lobby restaurant, at least for appetizers."

"I thought you promised me pizza?"

"That's why we're just going down for appetizers. It gives Gavin a few minutes to get the pizza and the champagne up here. And I want to go out with my beautiful wife and have people think how lucky I am to be with her."

"How soon do we have to be downstairs for appetizers?" she asked, leaning closer to him.

"Scott said not to push you too far too fast," he said, standing up and opening the balcony door.

"You have never pushed me anywhere I didn't want to go. And right now, I want to go inside, and I want to..."

"Unless things have changed, I don't think I need instructions. I think we have plenty of time before appetizers."

Kate looked at the caller ID on her cell phone after their late breakfast and saw it was Jordan calling. "Hey there, are you back in Chicago?"

"No, I'm still in L.A."

"Is Lexi still having talks with the studio?"

"No, she and Andrew went back to Seattle."

"And you are still there?" Kate was a little confused about why Jordan was still in California.

"That younger man thing of yours kind of works," Jordan admitted. "First Sam and now..."

"ROB? You're still in California because of Rob?" Kate had given Rob Jordan's cell phone number, hoping that they might get a chance to go to dinner before she went back to Chicago.

"He's fun, and it's nice to spend time with him out here. And yes, before you even can ask, he's pretty good."

"So you're calling to gloat?"

"I'm calling, this is almost embarrassing, to ask your advice about younger men. I know Rob's not as young as Steve, but you must have some insights."

Kate smiled, not only because of Jordan's question, but because of the quizzical look Steve was giving her from across the room where he was working. As he shrugged, he mouthed the phrase 'you fixed them up' and went back to his paperwork.

"You seem to be doing pretty well on your own, but you may want to watch your cultural references. Try not to go any earlier than the '80s if you can help it, unless he has a passion for retro." She looked up at Steve for confirmation. "So what's the deal with you two? Are you finally moving from Chicago or are you moving him here?"

"Be serious. I'm having a little vacation fling."

"Hey, Jordan, don't you find it fascinating that we're doing things now that we might've wanted to do in our 20s, but never actually would've done then?"

"Does that mean you're going to jump a rock star?"

"Are you? Just have fun, but don't completely lose your attachment to reality." She clicked off the phone.

"What would you have wanted to do in your 20s that you still want to do now?" Steve asked with genuine interest and a sliver of fear about another revelation.

Kate had to think about this answer. Steve had already made so many of her wishes come true, that she suspected if she expressed some new wish, he'd find a way to make that one come true too. Well, within reason, she thought. It's very unlikely he'd set me up with a senior citizen heavy-metal rock has-been, and I'm not sure I'd even want that anymore.

"Do you really need to ask that?"

Hey.

Hey. Where are you?

We're still in Chicago. We're probably going to move back into the condo here for a while.

You're not going back to Paris?

Not to live there. No, I don't think so. At least not without a restraining order.

Lexi was amazed that Steve hadn't yet found a way to buy off his former student. If a good grade didn't work, he could certainly come up with a few Euros and perhaps the name of good hairdresser.

I want to apologize for ruining your cinematic celebration. It was very rude of me.

You had issues to deal with, and I'm frankly surprised it was the first time you found solace in the bottle.

I like that phrase. Solace in the bottle. Sounds like a great advertising tag line.

You're not the only one who took a marketing class in grad school.

Kate had to acknowledge that they both had taken the classes in graduate school, and while she had taken her creativity to write academic papers, Lexi had written inspirational pieces and a best-selling novel, soon to be a film.

I also have to confess that I don't remember much about what you said about your talks with the studio.

You were concerned about the on-screen portrayal of your '80s rock encounter...

Typical. So fill me in on what I missed.

Lexi enthusiastically reviewed the high points of her negotiations with the studio, filling in details when Kate asked. She was especially pleased to discuss Andrew's role in the development of the film.

I vaguely recall saying that I expected you to cast a villain in the role of Steve. I'm sure Andrew would agree with that casting call.

Andrew thinks Steve still has a lot of growing up to do. He thinks you intimidate Steve and that he doesn't know how to handle a woman that actually has a mind of her own.

Kate had to think about that. She'd been told she was intimidating for years, even though she had no intention of intimidating most people.

I probably do intimidate him. I used to be his professor after all. That's where all this began. She took a deep breath before she began one of the hardest conversations she'd ever had. I shouldn't have bailed on you. Both you and Jordan – who's still in California dating our cab driver, by the way – were so supportive of me and so willing to be there for me, and I got drunk, slept it off for awhile and then skipped town in the middle of the night. And I left you a cell phone message! That's like breaking up with someone with a Post-It note. She stopped, remembering that she'd left Steve with a Post-It note farewell. I have become so tacky, she thought, in my avoidance strategies.

Lexi remained silent, instinctively knowing Kate was getting to some BIG ISSUE, but trying to scuttle around it as she approached her point. This took less psychic ability than a long history of friendship.

I knew you'd try to convince me not to go back to Steve, that I was being stupid and deluding myself that love – my love -- could overcome all the obstacles thrown at me. I knew that everything you would say would be absolutely right in a rational sense. But dammit, Lexi, this isn't a rational relationship – and I know it. Being with Steve hasn't been reasonable since he seduced me with a brownie from Starbucks. It wasn't reasonable to run off with him on a research junket or to divorce my husband in a cavalier manner. It wasn't reasonable to sabbatical out of a perfectly good job in Florida to go to Boston so he could finish his engineering degree or to flee to Paris after his father's suicide.

Oh, let's face it, that whole mess with his father and National Security wasn't even fathomable, much less reasonable. What was I doing in that scene? I'm a nice girl from the Midwest who doesn't even have a traffic violation, much less a criminal record.

And this globe-trotting lifestyle? About as far from reasonable as I could have imagined. Go to Paris to get engaged...go to San Francisco to do an interview... fly into New York to go to a bookstore...fly pizzas in from Chicago... This is a fairy tale life with some plot twists, and I know it.

But I love him... As teenager as that sounds or you'd probably say as sex obsessed as it sounds, I love him, and I want him, and I want to be with him. I want this fantasy in spite of everything and in the face of reason. I heard a line from a Nickelback song -- 'I got caught up in favorable slavery' -- and I'm wondering if that resonated with me because that's where I am.

Lexi listened carefully to what Kate said and realized the BIG ISSUE was that she had faced her reality head-on and recognized what everyone else might be seeing or thinking, and she had decided she was going to let her heart override reason. 'Favorable slavery' indeed; but Lexi wondered if Kate or Steve or both of them were chained to their relationship.

That was hard for you, wasn't it?

You know it's tough when I have to revert to song lyrics as explanation.

So, I guess I understand what you were trying to say. Except for one thing – did you really say Jordan's in California with your cab driver?

Lexi had a hard time buying Kate's excuse of an irrational slave relationship, having had one of those interludes with a married man when she was 19. Love – or lust – can be quite blinding, encouraging you to dash your ethics, morals, and consideration for others in the name of something illusive. *But even though Kate is grown up, she still seems to be acting like an immature teenager.*

Lexi didn't know Jordan all that well, having heard of her mostly through Kate's stories over the years. She didn't remember the descriptions included lusting after a stream of casual acquaintances, no matter how old they were. She had said goodbye to Jordan as she headed off in Rob's sorry-ass car, ready to try a cougar adventure of her own. *What's up with those two anyhow?*

"Hon, Dakota and I are going to go out for awhile. Do you want to join us?"

After spending the morning checking emails and talking to Kate, Lexi was ready to stretch her legs. "Of course. Where are you headed?"

"Over to the park so he can run. I think Dakota was restless while we were gone and needs a good workout."

They leashed up the pooch, put on their running shoes, and headed to the grassy area a few blocks from their home. Andrew and Lexi took turns throwing the ball to Dakota, occasionally diving for it themselves. The sun and grass of the summer morning felt good on their skin. They found a nearby park bench, allowing all of them to rest and enjoy the outdoors for a while.

"So that was Kate on the phone?"

"Yep."

"Did she apologize?"

"Yes – and tried to explain her irrational relationship with Steve. I guess we have all had weird relationships of our own, and there's nothing I can do to stop her, but it's just not what I would want for her – or me – or anyone else."

"I guess there's a price to pay for all that fame and fortune."

"Yeah, but I don't think you have to lose yourself to passion, money, and fame - and be blind to ongoing hurt. That's just plain self-destructive."

"But you have to let her live out her own life."

"That is true. But I won't be rescuing her any longer. I offered our home, no questions asked, when she called, and three days later she goes running back to him after being drunk and insulting to us. I'm going to have to say no next time she has more trauma with him. Let Jordan take her in."

"Are you going to write her out of your movie?"

"Honestly, I might. I really haven't decided yet."

"You sound like you're mad. You're getting that snippy tone in your voice."

Lexi looked at Andrew, her eyes starting to flare. "You know what? You're right. I am pissed. "

Andrew turned toward Lexi, giving her his full attention, along with a smirk of pride in his passionate wife.

"Tell me about it."

"You know, I don't think it matters if I like Steve or not. If she were in love with a 57-year-old jerk, she wouldn't have an age difference to blame it on, and then I wonder what her excuse would be. Anyway you look at it, I don't like the guy."

"You have my full support on that point. Please continue."

"I am fairly certain that if I met Kate for the first time today, I wouldn't give her a second glance."

"Why not?"

"Because she's self-absorbed and blames all her actions on some song title that I can't remember. And I am supposed to sit here and say, 'Oh, that's okay. You're in love. It's okay to treat everyone else like shit.' I'm just not going to take it anymore."

"But you said she was family."

"And every family has their assholes, don't they?"

Andrew laughed, leaning forward to kiss Lexi, trying to snap her out of her pissy mood, but to no avail. "So what are you going to do? Are you going to tell her she's disowned?"

"As a matter of fact, I think I will."

Andrew leaned back, taking in the full meaning of Lexi's words. "You're serious aren't you? Are you really going to break a 20 year friendship?"

"I don't believe we're friends anymore. If she were, she'd have an occasional interest in the lives of her friends, but it feels more like an obligatory question in a stream of conversation that is always focused on her. I just won't be her doormat any longer."

"Would you still write her out of the movie? She plays a pretty pivotal role."

"Movies differ from their books all the time. It's not like I'm JK Rowling with a legion of 1 billion Harry Potter fans evaluating my every scene." Lexi looked at the concern on Andrew's face. "Don't worry – I'll get Sam and Keri's advice before I re-write anything"

Andrew sat back, taking in Lexi's comments. "Maybe you could re-write Steve too. He's a pretty one-dimensional kind of guy who does a dis-service to his gender."

"Why don't you write that part? Give your screenwriting abilities a whirl."

"I just might." Andrew grabbed her hand, holding it tightly. "So what do we do now?"

"Sam and Keri wanted us to review the meeting notes that they e-mailed me this morning, so I guess we could go over those. They hired a screenwriter JayCee Crue, a woman who is fairly well known in Hollywood for her indie scripts. It seems there's this whole little clique of folks associated with Madison Street that is pretty tight and awfully good."

"Does that mean we are becoming one of the Madison Street tribal members?"

"Yes. I've heard there's a pretty difficult hazing ritual where you have to prove yourself to the women who run the place. But your Australian machismo seems to have won them over already."

"They seem to have accepted you pretty quickly. Do your guides say anything about working with them?"

"I did have a dream last night about being on the set, talking to people, that kind of thing, so I think we are headed in the right direction. Overall it feels pretty good."

"Except the part about Kate."

"Yeah, but I'm going to put an end to that. I think it's time to head home. I have a phone call to make."

The trio enjoyed their walk home from the park, chatting with several neighbors along the way. The old timers in the neighborhood were the first to be friendly to Lexi, Andrew and Dakota, leading the way for the rest of the eclectic group of people to accept them as well. Everyone seemed to have dogs, which served as a bonding ritual amongst people who didn't know each other very well.

After some friendly chatter, they arrived home. Lexi took off her shoes and headed for her office. Her cell phone indicated a new picture had arrived, a tiny, fuzzy snapshot of Kate snuggling next to Steve, both biting into a single thick slice piece of Chicago pizza.

Oh God. I just cannot stand those two any longer.

Lexi dialed Kate's phone, a bit of nervousness in her stomach based on the impending conversation she needed to have.

Hey.

Hey.

Did you get my picture? Chicago's great! I'm so glad to be here. We're on our way to Brooks Brothers to buy Steve some suits, and then there are some stops I want to make along the Miracle Mile...

Kate, I'm really not interested.

Wait a minute. Stevie, tell the driver we have to make a left at the corner...

Oh Christ. Now she's calling him by a pet name. I'm going to barf. Lexi regained her senses to form a coherent question. *Hi. Remember me?*

Yeah. I'm here. Go ahead. What's new?

Maybe when you have some time to talk, you can call me.

It's okay, really. No secrets between me and Stevie you know.

If I wanted to talk to STEVIE I would have called STEVIE wouldn't I?

What are you so pissed about? I'm having a great time!

Yes, and we know it's all about you, all the time isn't it?

What does that mean?

Kate, it means you are a sorry excuse for a friend, and I am officially dumping you.

Wait a minute? You're fucking breaking up with me on the phone while I am on my way to Brooks Brothers?

Gee, sorry I couldn't make it a more convenient time, but it so hard to schedule time between your shopping, traveling, and constant fucking.

Look, if this is about L.A., I told you I was sorry.

No, you gave me an excuse for bad behavior which, upon reflection, I choose not to accept.

Well, maybe I'm not so thrilled with you either, bitch. You put my life's story in that damn book of yours and made a killing off of it.

Well, that's about to be corrected. I'm writing you out of the movie, so you won't have to worry about your past mistakes belittling you on screen. Write your own damn novel.

Both women took a moment to breathe and release some of the tension. *Lexi, please, can't we work this out? I'll call you, really I will.*

Honestly, Kate. Don't bother. Whether or not Steve is in your world, I don't care. The bottom line is I don't like the person that you have become, and I am not going to be your doormat and rescuer any longer. I told you before in San Francisco that you hurt the people around you, and blame it on others not understanding what an "unusual" relationship you have. Guess what – EVERYBODY has an unusual relationship, no matter if there's age, race, gender, medical, financial or other issues involved. But people can still choose to be supportive, interested and kind to others, which is something you've forgotten how to do. I can't remember the last time that you were truly interested in someone else other than you, Steve, or you and Steve, and I've had it. I don't care if he's 27 or 87, he's a jerk and you've lost yourself in some illusion about how life works, forgetting who you are in the process. I liked the Kate I knew who wore the same red sweater for 10 days in a row. I don't know the Dr. Kate who can't wear anything less than Ungaro, makes excuses for outlandish behavior, and tries to convince the rest of us that we're wrong and don't understand her unusual life.

Kate sat silently in the limo, looking out onto the busy city streets.

Next time you have a problem, go tell Jordan. I'm done.

Steve got out of the limo at Brooks Brothers, and Kate motioned that she was going to stay to finish her phone call.

I can't believe that you gave me that whole damn lecture about me being a selfish and self-possessed bitch as if you are some sort of saint with a perfect point of view of what life and friendship should be like.

Are you denying that what I said was true?

I'm not getting into a semantics debate with you. And it was a little holier than thou for you to tell me what a shit I am as a friend.

So, this is another conversation that's all about you?

SHUT THE FUCK UP!! It's not all about me. It's about us as friends, and it's about you.

Lexi was a little surprised by the ferocity in Kate's voice. Maybe her tirade had been Kate's wake-up call.

Does Stevie agree with that?

SHUT UP. We were kidding around, because someone called me Katie this morning, so we we've been calling each other by cute names for about an hour. I have never before and will never again call him Stevie.

Lexi, we've been friends for 20 years, and we've been through a lot with each other. I was there to support you when you left Kurt. I was there to support you when you chose to move to godforsaken Seattle. I was there to support you through I don't even know how many job changes. I believed in your psychic abilities when everyone else thought you were full of shit. I encouraged you to write when you went off on your Quest to Hawaii. I encouraged you to write your motivational pieces, and Steve and I came up with a marketing plan that would have worked, but you chose to ignore. We celebrated with you when your book was released, and bought \$20,000 worth of copies so you could become an instant bestseller.

It isn't as if...

SHUT UP. I'M TALKING. I know you've done a hell of a lot for me too. In the past couple years, you've done amazing things to support me, and I RECOGNIZE THAT. If we're keeping score, you're probably ahead, because your father-in-law wasn't indicted on international criminal charges, you didn't fall off the curb and shatter your ankle so an unrequited love could crash back into your life, your husband didn't cheat on you, and your past wasn't shoved by someone else into a literary spotlight with potential for cinematic exposure.

I'm writing you out of the movie.

Good, go ahead and try it. It might be a little hard, given how much of the book is about me. Why don't you write me of the book when you go to a second edition? And don't forget to get rid of the dedication, because it seems to make little sense if you admire my courage for making some decisions I've made, and crucify me for the same decisions in real life. I did cross lines, and I did throw away some of the 'shoulds' in my life. And I continue to do so. I SHOULD have kicked Steve well beyond the curb, taken a huge settlement and RUN LIKE HELL. But WE worked through our issues and chose to stay together. We made that commitment, because we love each other.

You two just behave like teenagers...

Maybe that's because I NEVER GOT TO BEHAVE LIKE A TEENAGER when I was a teenager. I had responsibilities, and I had goals, and I had to concentrate on my damn grades and getting a scholarship and supporting myself through college and relying on the fact that I was the smartest person in the room to win every argument and to overcome every obstacle. And I was a nice girl, and there were things that nice girls just didn't do. I didn't score with the captain of the football team, I wrote about his scores on the field for the school newspaper. I didn't wear cute little miniskirts; I wore pleated skirts and knee socks and penny loafers.

You tried to hit on rock stars...

Not as a teenager I didn't, and even when I did, I didn't go as far as you credit me with your book. The most excitement in my life has come in the past couple years since I met Steve. Yeah, some of it has been scary as hell, but it's been professionally rewarding, unbelievably romantic, absolutely carefree from a financial standpoint and overwhelmingly sexually satisfying. You wrote in the dedication of your damn book – I'm in the right place right now. Is that being self-possessed? Yes, absolutely, but it could be the first time in my life I've been able to be self-possessed. But I don't think I've been selfish; I've just refocused giving and generosity.

And giving your time and attention to friends is no longer important?

Friends are still important. I don't want to sacrifice my friendship with you, because you've always been able to push me a little bit further than I thought I could go or push me back in the right direction, but all you've been doing lately is your best to PUSH ME AWAY. You might not agree with my choices or my decisions, but dammit, they are MY choices and MY decisions. And in spite of everything, you might think, I'm still pretty smart, and still pretty rational in my decisions. You may not see it, but I do think things through. I can't necessarily see the future like you do, but I can see the future I'd like to have, and I'll do what I have to do to make it that way. Isn't that what visionaries and idealists do? They see a wonderful future, and they work to make it that way, ignoring the naysayers and perceived limitations.

Even in anger, Kate managed to use her linguistic skills – even if peppered with obscenity – with great power, Lexi thought.

I don't want to lose our friendship, but I have no intention of dropping Steve to please you or Andrew or anybody else. It's interesting that Jordan's been my friend twice as long as you have, and she's never resented or disliked Steve as much as you do.

Maybe being independently wealthy has given her a better understanding of him...

Don't give me that BULLSHIT about affluent lifestyle. You and Andrew don't exactly live in the 'hood, and you have a second home IN HAWAII. I think Jordan was able to see him as an opportunity for joy, the same way I see Rob as an opportunity for her. Maybe neither of them makes rational sense, but they fulfill some need that we have at this point in our lives. Don't try to deny that Andrew came into your life at a time when you needed stability and normality -- or that you wouldn't take off with Mike if he suddenly was able to commit.

That's just not fair...

TELL ME THAT IT'S NOT TRUE that if Mike called, you wouldn't be on the first plane out of town. Or even better, if Mike called and made an offer for a one-night stand, you wouldn't be in your car on the way to a cheap motel. How fast would you cheat on your husband if you had an offer from Mike?

Lexi had forgotten how brutal Kate's honesty could be sometimes. When she wanted to, she could cut right to the bone, and her anger made it even easier for her to use the knife with amazing precision.

No immediate snappy comeback? You don't have to answer, but cut the holier than thou act. We both have our weaknesses. At least I'm willing to admit that Steve can dazzle me with romance and make me giddy and weak-kneed with sex. I'm a middle-aged woman, fighting off hot flashes with iced coffee, enjoying the most career success I've ever had in my life and fucking myself silly with a very wealthy, very young man. Kate took a deep breath. I hope we can get past this, but the ball's in your court now. You get to decide whether we continue playing or shake hands and go home.

Kate clicked off her phone.