

## RefLexions

### *Quest and Challenge*

Lexi scanned through the spreadsheet she had just prepared for Andrew's meeting to pitch a new indoor landscaping service developed by Cameron Designs to a long-time client. After everything that had happened, no matter how happily the story had turned out, she was back at a computer doing accounting.

She yawned with weary frustration. Lexi wanted to publish her work and be an inspiration to other women to do something extraordinary with their lives. That was the plan that she'd outlined to Kate before the distractions of men and jobs and money and headlines and heartache had changed her direction. She still echoed her sentiments that there was a time when she imagined her life would be so much different, and even though her life had totally turned around since she had first offered her plan, she still was not where she wanted to be.

Andrew was a wonderful partner in so many ways. Their life together was filled with joy and love, and they'd accomplished so much together in pursuit of his professional aims. But as it had happened often enough in her life, she had shelved her goals in deference to someone else's. But, godammit, she thought with some defiance, I still have those goals and maybe now's the time to reach for my own stars.

She got up from her desk, wandering outside to the wooden deck that overlooked their Asian themed backyard. Dakota followed her expectantly, hoping that she would detour into the kitchen to retrieve his mid-day treat, but to no avail. She stood on the deck, overlooking the vista of the Cascade Mountains. Beauty surrounded her. And she needed to leave it behind.

Lexi spent the afternoon on her deck, in the chill of a rainy summer afternoon. *I should be happy to be at ease ....* But she wasn't. A gnawing feeling filled her gut, yet one different from the one she sensed 6 months ago before her former job, new husband, and dear friend filled her life with daily drama.

She didn't realize how long she had been on the deck until she heard the front door close. *Andrew is home....it must be close to dinner time...*

"Hon? Where are you?"

"On the deck."

Andrew joined her, coming up behind her and kissing her on the nape of the neck. After 6 months of marriage, they were still in their honeymoon phase, being complimentary and considerate of each other. She appreciated his love and support, despite the tears that streaked her face. Reluctantly, Lexi turned to face Andrew, knowing that she would have to explain her emotion.

"Lexi. What's wrong? Bad news?" "What is it?" Andrew was genuinely concerned and searched her eyes for meaning.

Lexi stared back into his eyes, opening her mouth, words spilling out from her heart, not her mind – something that was difficult for a sharp minded woman to accept.

“Andrew....I...need to get away....”

“That’s fine, hon. We can leave now. Where do you want to go?”

“Not us. Me.”

Andrew leaned back, as though being shot in the heart. After a few moments, he opened his mouth, speaking slowly. “Are ....you...leaving me?”

Lexi was taken aback by his assumption, synching the synapses of her mind to start working. “Oh my God – no! No! I love you. I’m not leaving us....I just need to...go...for awhile....”

Andrew looked at her with a mixture of fear, concern, and misunderstanding. “I don’t get it. I thought you – we – were happy.”

Lexi hated moments like this. She could be so eloquent when her temper flared and terribly unclear when explaining her deep emotions. She took a deep breath. “Can you let me talk for a few moments, without interrupting? It’s going to sound like I am thinking out loud, but I think it will help me sort things out.”

She could tell that Andrew was extremely nervous and uncomfortable. She had seen that same body language in her ex-husband when she uttered the word “divorce”.

“When you came into my life, I was trying to sort it out. My job was extremely unstable, and I was considering pursuing my avocation of writing. I had this pain in my gut that I could not explain away. I guess you could call it a mid-life crisis feeling, that sensation when you know there is something you have to do, but you may not know what.”

She took a sip of water and leaned down to hug Dakota. “I love you, Andrew. I love Dakota, this house, my friends, and our company. I feel very proud of all we have achieved in such a short time.” Lexi walked over to where Andrew was sitting and leaned down to kiss him on the head. “You are such a blessing in my life, Andrew, that I may never be able to explain. I feel very fulfilled in – us. But there is a part – in ME – that isn’t fulfilled. And I need to find that.”

A stillness set in between them. Andrew drew his gaze up to meet Lexi’s eyes. “What do you want to do?”

“I need to...go on a ...quest...I think....”

“A quest?”

The word had slipped out of Lexi’s mouth without her comprehending it. “Well it’s not like I want to go to the outback and practice survival skills. I just want to .... go.”

"Go where?"

"I'm not sure yet. I think I just want to go see some friends...reconnect...and go to some places I've never seen before. I don't have it all figured out yet, but I feel like a lion that needs to get out of its cage." Lexi stopped her pacing and looked at Andrew. "Have you ever felt like that before?"

"Well, I haven't done a cross country trip, but that's how I used to feel when I needed to go camping. I just needed to get a way and be by myself." He paused for a moment and looked at her. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I am."

"How long do you need?"

"I don't know. I especially don't know how to have my freedom and stay married to you. I don't know how to have both. But I NEED both. More desperately than I thought."

Andrew got up from his chair and stood next to her, the couple staring out over the mountains. "You've been spoiling me, Lexi. You just take care of ... EVERYTHING...so I can do what I love."

"I know. And now I need you to do EVERYTHING so I find out what I love, and figure out what I want to do with myself."

Andrew brought her close to him, hugging her tightly. "Okay. Go do it. I'll be here when you get back. Although it might be a tough transition for Dakota to move away from that heater in the office and get back into my truck."

They spent the night, holding each other close, desperate to give each other what was needed, not knowing when they would be back together. It would be tough on their marriage, their home, their business, and their hearts.

Lexi stepped off the airplane, feeling the humidity of the Honolulu airport. She was at home again in the tropics, a place she loved and had fell in love. She didn't know she was coming here, just picking the ticket after Andrew dropped her off at the airport.

She pulled her cell phone out of her purse, texting Andrew that she had landed safely in Hawaii. *That will be a shock....*she thought as she hit the SEND button.

Lexi scrolled hit the speed dial for Kate, ready to shock her too with the news.

*Hey.*

*Hey yourself.*

*Where are you? There's a lot of noise in the background.*

*Honolulu.*

*What??? Are you crazy? Please tell me you didn't go on your honeymoon there.*

*I'm not. I'm here alone.*

*Because?????*

*It's the start of my Quest.*

So Lexi was off on a quest, and she was starting in Hawaii. Kate didn't think the quest (where did she get that term?) was a bad idea, because it would give Lexi a chance to get her thoughts together and refocus on what was important to her. However, she wasn't sure that Hawaii was the right place to start, given that her last journey to the islands had turned into a romantic fantasy with a man who, in some ways, still controlled her heart, despite her commitment to Andrew. Kate recognized the irony in her worrying about Lexi's fidelity; she had not exactly been a good role model. But traveling had always been a good escape for Lexi, and Kate wanted to share her enthusiasm. And, she thought shaking her head, maybe a little romantic fantasy wouldn't be a totally bad idea.

Thinking about travel, and romantic fantasy brought back all of Kate's wonderful memories of her trip to Paris with Steve at Christmas. She remembered the surprise, the joy, the seduction, and the life-changing decisions of their short stay during the holidays.

"I think we should spend Christmas in Paris," Steve had suggested at breakfast as snow began to fall in Boston.

"Sure," Kate said, still not completely certain when he was being serious. "When did you want to leave?"

He picked up his orange juice. "We have plane tickets for tomorrow night."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, but I need to know if you're going to dump me because we're flying commercial."

"Only if you hit on the stewardess... You're not kidding, are you?"

"Nope. I thought we should celebrate all we've accomplished and survived in the past year. I thought Paris would be nice."

Kate rolled her eyes. *Paris would be nice.* How typical of him to understate something like that, something that anyone from a different economic strata would be a bit more enthusiastic about.

"I think my passport's expired," she said focusing on the details.

"I took care of it." Then replying to her skeptical look, he continued, "No, I didn't bribe anyone; I sent in the form."

"How long have you had this planned?"

"Since before my stay with Homeland Security, although that episode did change my transportation plan."

Scott and the Gulfstream were no longer in the picture. "Can you really afford this?" she asked.

"I keep telling you that my trust was untouchable because it was established by my grandfather, and my father was not involved in managing it. It would still take decades to -- how did Lexi phrase it? -- fuck our way through it. Even flying first class and staying at the Napoleon."

"You couldn't book us into the Crillon?"

She been to Paris shortly after college, and although she couldn't afford much more than the French version of the Motel 6 (a charming little pensionne near the Crillon), she could recognize luxury.

"It's passé," he said, "too many concessions to corporate ownership." And my father and I stayed there when we were in Paris, and I don't need to dredge up those memories, he thought, impressed but not really surprised that Kate would know the name of one of the city's most expensive hotels.

"Tomorrow night? I have to think about packing." She began to make a mental list.

"All you need are your jeans and a sweater or two, your MIT shirt..." He began to smirk. "And a few lacy choices of lingerie. It is Paris after all."

*I think I just want to go see some friends...reconnect with them...and go to some places I've never seen before.*

Kate continued her journey down memory lane while Lexi offered more non-specific details about her quest.

Not long after the complimentary wine and something that resembled a meal on the plane, Kate had downed a Dramamine which she had long ago discovered as not only a good motion sickness deterrent, but an effective and non-addictive sleeping pill. She leaned over, using Steve's shoulder

as a pillow, and soon was soundly asleep. He stayed awake long enough to put his arm around her and to kiss her forehead before he too slept through the transatlantic flight. They both woke when the cabin lights came up, little bells chimed and the stewardess offered them warm wet washcloths and coffee about a half hour outside Charles DeGaulle Airport.

Because they had both packed as lightly as Steve had suggested, they had only carry-on luggage and could go straight outside the airport to get the limo the hotel had sent for them. At the elegant and historic Napoleon Hotel, Steve had booked the Errol Flynn suite.

"I will spend all my time sitting on the terrace, freezing my ass, but getting great views of the city," she said looking out the window at the Eiffel Tower.

"I doubt that," Steve said tipping the bellman and then plopping onto the huge almost canopy-like king sized bed.

"You have spoiled and corrupted me," she said peeling off her wool pea coat and joining him.

"Admit that you love it," he said wrapping his arms around her.

"I love you," she said. "Everything else is just a bonus prize."

The hazy light of dusk had provided them with a great excuse to get dressed and go outside for a walk. The Champs Elysee was only blocks away, and the cool refreshing air was perfect for getting some outdoor exercise.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful and magical this is," she said as they strolled past trendy boutiques and cafes as they headed east toward l'Arc de Triomphe.

"I knew you'd love it," he said putting an arm around her waist. "Shall we stop and get something to drink?"

They ducked into a bistro and got a table near the window so Kate could see the boulevard's lights when it got darker.

"Champagne, s'il vous plait," Steve said to the waiter. "Krug, si vous l'avez, mais Dom Perignon est bien."

"Très bon, monsieur," he replied, no doubt pleased that this young man was willing to spend \$200 on a bottle of sparkling wine.

"Et fromage?" Kate added ordering some cheese with the tidbits of her French class she could remember.

"Puis-je choisir les sortes de fromage ?" he asked. She thought he was asking about selecting cheeses, so she nodded.

"Merci," he responded shuffling off.

"Do I dare ask where you learned French so well?" she said.

"A summer semester at the Sorbonne studying math," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, clearly occupied by other thoughts. He happily welcomed the waiter with the champagne bucket and two flute glasses. He lifted his glass in a toast to her.

"To the woman I can never repay for everything she has done for me." They clinked glasses and as she sipped her wine, she watched him reach into his jacket pocket. He pulled out another Tiffany blue box, but this time a square box, obviously a ring. She didn't know how to react when he pushed his chair far enough from the table to drop down on one knee. The waiter backed away from them, holding a small tray of cheese in his hand. Steve opened the ring box, and there was a flash of diamonds and the glimmer of sapphire. He took her left hand in his and pushed the white gold ring on her finger.

"This can be an engagement ring or a promise ring or a going steady ring or just a pretty ring from a guy you're sleeping with, and I hope you'll accept it," he said, holding her hand. "It doesn't matter to me if we get married in a week or ten years or not at all as long as we can stay together."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Of course I'll accept it," she said, leaning down just enough to offer her lips to him for a kiss. "And I'll stay with you as long as you still want me."

He rose, never letting go of her hand.

"Votre fromage," said the waiter putting the cheese tray on the table. "A-t-elle dit oui ? Puis-je vous féliciter ?"

Steve nodded as he sat down, acknowledging that Kate had said yes and the congratulations were in order. The waiter smiled offering them his best wishes. "Les meilleurs vœux à vous tous les deux."

"Where do we go from here?" Kate asked smearing some brie on a cracker.

"I was accepted into the PhD program at U-Chicago. Would you come with me if I go?"

"Shit, Steve, is there anything else you're going to drop on me tonight?" She didn't mean to sound irritated because it was wonderful news, but there was a limit, even on good news, to the amount of information she could absorb in so short a time, and she was still reeling a little from his proposal.

"I suppose this wouldn't be the best time to mention that Dr. Broadhurst would be my advisor or that he also says you can have a visiting professorship at U-Chicago if you're interested or that

Jordan can get us a condo in her building if we want it. Or that from what Dr. Heil tells me, Jack Staunton is aching to get you back. But, we can stay in Boston and cut the same deals with MIT as U-Chicago if we want them, or from what everybody keeps telling me, you have one of the hottest tickets around for any kind of marketing professorship or consulting and think tank job, so we can probably go anywhere. Or that your husband's friend Reg and his family love the islands or that..."

She tried to keep her jaw from dropping into the cheese tray. "You've been busy."

He shrugged. "After living and working with you, I've learned the value of just getting on the phone and making connections. It got us our interviews and from what I gather, it got me out of detention faster than anyone could have imagined. I didn't mean to overwhelm you."

"You always overwhelm me," she said smirking. "I just don't know how to evaluate so many options thrown at me."

"What do you want to do?"

Before she answered, Kate realized this was another life-changing moment. This wasn't a unilateral decision, and it wasn't a trivial joint decision like choosing a restaurant, it was a grown-up adult shared decision. "What do we want to do?"

"Gut feeling?" he asked. When she nodded, he said, "Gut feeling is that we want to go to Chicago. It's a great opportunity for both of us. You'll be close to your friend Jordan and your mother, right? Despite some of the weird things that happened, we had a great time there last summer. They have great pizza and plenty of Starbucks."

They had gone to Chicago in January, Steve had started his doctoral work, she had extended her sabbatical and taken the visiting professorship with U-Chicago plus a consulting contract with Booz Allen, and they had passed on the condo in Jordan's building, but found a great condo on Lake Shore Drive. And now Lexi wanted to go on a quest, and Kate had just one reservation about her journey.

*I know this is going to sound fucking ridiculous, but I think I'm unhappy.*

*Any reason?* Lexi was a little confused and concerned. Kate had an incredibly rich life – rich husband, great job, travel all over the world – and she always seemed to move past any of the obstacles that ever blocked her headstrong path.

*Something's missing.*

*Any ideas?*

*Months and months ago, you asked me for a plan, and I said I wanted to walk by a rack of books and tell the grad student with me how well I knew you, the author of that smash-hit best-seller.*

*You've still got the grad student, albeit not the geeky schmuck I imagined he'd be...*

*But you don't have the best-seller yet, and that makes me unhappy because you have a great talent that you should share.*

*So what should I do to ease your distress? Lexi knew she was about to get a well-deserved and probably very necessary kick-in-the-ass lecture.*

*Sit down and write. And e-mail me something once a day. I'll collect it and edit it and compile it, and if I have to, I'll persuade a university press somewhere to publish it. But YOU have to write it. That was your plan, your goal, and I wonder if you've lost track of that.*

Shit, Lexi thought, not just a lecture, but a challenge. A challenge that matched her goal, and actually forced some action toward it.

*You won't red pen what I write too seriously, will you?*

*Only if it needs it. Haven't I always been a fair editor?*

*Sure, but that was before...*

*Before what?*

*Before you changed your life.*

*And now I want to help you change yours, so get to work.*

Lexi sat on the beach, settling into her "Tangerine Sunset" routine of gazing out at the surfers of Waikiki. This was the beach where she fell in love with Mike oh so many lifetimes ago. He went his way and she went hers, which included a month long stay for business 6 months after she met him. That's when she fell in love with the island, not the man, fell in love with the rhythms of mountains, water and sun, all in the same vista. That's when she read about the line of kings that included several Kamehamehas and Kalakaua, whose name was given to the street where she currently stayed. As memories of romantic love faded, an inspirational and healing love took its place, the kind that only Mother Nature, gods, and goddesses could do.

It had been a week since she left on her quest, and she reveled in the private time. Perhaps she had gone from singlehood to marriage too quickly, and her need for independence and space had unexpectedly reared up on her. Whatever it was, she felt an extreme need to break from normality and go immerse herself in tropical comfort.

The wakeup call from Kate had certainly gotten to her. Kate was always good at bluntly expressing her opinion, as Kate had gotten used to Lexi's honesty. Lexi wasn't in the mood for goal setting at present, but writing, without an agenda, might prove to be a viable outlet for her.

Lexi grabbed her beach bag and walked the short distance down to the Ala Moana Shopping Center, a haven for tourists who couldn't be far from mainstream retail therapy. She headed to her all time favorite techie outlet, the Apple Store. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and lei, a salesperson helped her pick out a MacBook Air, just slim, light, and powerful enough to suit her needs. After loading up with the necessary software, the associate promised it could be picked up tomorrow, ready for use. She loved Apple. They made life easy.

Too bad other people weren't like that.

Andrew had become a bit of a pain in the ass, conveying worry at every opportunity during their daily phone calls. *How ARE you? Are you OKAY? Can I HELP????* All with the underlying tone of *PLEASE COME HOME....*

She didn't blame him for caring, and at most times would have welcomed it. He just didn't know Lexi well enough to know that she was fine, and not just surviving but thriving on her own. He had met her at a time when life was dramatic, a new development every day, and she had been worn down from the emotions of job changes, love, and friendship. She needed time to recuperate and stand back from all those folks who loved her, but had expectations of her that she did not always want to fulfill. She felt herself regenerating, and no guilt from Andrew – or Kate – was going to stop her.

Beneath the well-lit streets full of tourists, she ventured back to the beach to sit alone on a park bench and listen to the waves. The sounds of music, laughter and clinking glasses came from the outdoor bar behind her. She closed her eyes and swayed to the music, feeling the waves lap over her.

"Aloha."

It couldn't be.

Lexi was fearful to open her eyes, fearful of seeing her greatest love and greatest nemesis stand before her. Yet she knew it was him.

She opened her eyes to see a time-worn version of the face she had looked into lovingly a mere four years ago. A face she had not forgotten.

"Aloha."

"Nice evening. Can I join you?"

"Of course." Lexi moved over to make room for Mike to sit down, and allow space between them.  
"Can I ask what you are doing here? Or will you have to kill me afterwards?"

"No. I'm between assignments and technically off-duty."

"I didn't think you were ever 'off-duty' in your line of work."

"What are you doing here?"

"Nice change of subject. You're good at that, aren't you?"

"It's more of a tactic to make sure people don't ask too many questions."

"How about if I ask 'What are you doing here – this evening?' Is that acceptable?"

"I flew in this morning, checked into the base and just unpacked. I thought I would come out for some air. And then I found you."

"No offense, but you looked tired."

"I am. Work has been – difficult."

"Yeah, whenever I think about how hard a day I am having because of rude people or a slow internet connection, I think that some folks – like you – might have a worse day than me. I've never had to traipse through a monsoon to get to work. Or have rats eat my computer cables."

He laughed heartily, his body language visibly relaxing as he dropped his head back to look at the stars. Lexi remained a bit on guard, not knowing where this conversation would lead, but anxious to see where it might end.

"How about you answer my question -- What are you doing here?"

Lexi realized that she was guarded and a bit unsure of herself last time they were together, since she was aching from a recent divorce and undergoing an extreme transition in who she was, not knowing what persona to portray around this confident man. That seemed to have changed in recent years, resulting in a more confident woman – who wasn't in the mood to take crap from anyone, but also allow her to BE herself, even with a man who held an uncertain position in her life.

Lexi boldly looked him in the eye and said, "I'm on a quest."

He laughed at her, disarming any defensiveness she may still have had towards him. "What the hell does that mean? Is there a golden fleece you're after?"

"A man knowledgeable about mythology. There's a rarity...."

"I saw the movie 'Jason and the Argonauts'. That hardly qualifies me as a mythology expert, but I will take the compliment." He shifted his body, as she did hers, so they were facing each other.

"I don't know that I have been able to tell anyone this, but I will tell you now. I just got so wrapped up in the drama of fighting to be heard in my job, by my friends, by my husband..."

"YOU'RE MARRIED?"

"Long story. Maybe later. Would you let me finish, please?"

A smile broke out on his face, as it did hers. She had no name for what kind of relationship they had, other than he made her feel at ease, and gave her the freedom to be herself with no historical strings or expectations attached. "Continue..."

"I don't know how to explain it other than I needed to get away from everyone to remember who I was. And I needed to come home – where I feel most at home – to do it. I can do whatever I want, whenever I want, when I am here."

"Is that anything like "What happens on Waikiki, stays on Waikiki?"

Lexi felt the most at ease she had felt in ages, even more than she was with Andrew. "Something like that. I'm not really a lazy person, but I just like to do things on my own terms, and sometimes it may look like I am not doing anything, when in fact, it could be the most productive work I have ever done – working on myself."

"So coming here is really a self-improvement course for you?"

"Shut up."

"Well, it is, isn't it? A time to examine your soul, discard the ideas of others, find your bliss?" He was challenging her on a personal level. And she liked it.

Lexi got up from the bench, feeling a need to move, pace and perhaps yell at him. "Look dude. I FOUND myself on this island 4 years ago, and it was because of YOU."

He stood up to Lexi, facing her in the eye, and raising his voice. "What the hell did I do?"

"YOU LET ME BE ME, YOU IDIOT!"

Mike stepped back a few paces. "I just don't get women..."

"You did back then."

"Look, all I did was show you a fun time...". He turned away from her to stare at the ocean. "...and care for you. I could see you ... had some things to work out." He turned to look back at her, eye to eye. "And so did I."

Lexi stepped forward to gently fold his hand into hers. "I know. And I think it was the best gift we could have ever given to each other. There just aren't that many people around who let you be you, and don't judge you for something, some expectation, that they had for you."

Lexi stepped forward, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I fell in love with you that week, in a deeper way than I have ever loved anyone before. And I will ALWAYS appreciate that." She nuzzled her head into his neck. "I just have the feeling that we would kill each other if we had to live together for more than 5 days...."

He nuzzled into her neck as well, laughing into her shoulder. "I know what you mean. You're so – different – than me. But you didn't care what I did, even though I know you know what I do...."

"I know there is a reason for it, and you're passionate and dedicated. That is a rarity."

He stepped back, to look meaningfully into her eyes. "And you're the same, Lexi. You love people, are dedicated to helping them. That's what you have to do – that's how you get to be who you are. It's not an expectation – it's a truth – and one you need to accept. No one is pushing you, they just want it as badly as you do, and are trying to remind you of it when you forget about it. I have a feeling that's what your friends, and co-workers – and yes, your HUSBAND – want for you. Despite your need to be independent, you are more connected to people than anyone I have ever met. Not many people are willing to do my job, to kill people in order to protect others. But not many are willing to inspire others in a personal way, like you do. I read your writings every month. They're true, they're inspired, and they're valuable. And people believe your stories because they believe in you. You don't have to believe all the crap, the power struggles that people throw your way. Just believe in you, and what you gave to me that week. No judgment, just love. And that love helped rescue me last year, even when you didn't have to, but did it any way."

By now, Lexi was sobbing openly, while he held her tight. "Lexi, you don't need a quest. You've found it right here. I believe in you. And so does everyone else."

She back away, sneaking a tissue out of her purse to wipe her face. "How come you keep swooping into my life just when I need you most?"

"I guess it works both ways."

"Yeah. I guess it does." She lifted her head to look at him. "I love you. I always have."

"I love you too."

"But I'd kill you if we were ever together for a long period of time."

"Not if I killed you first for all the psychic crap you believe in."

"That 'psychic crap' saved your life, Mister."

"I'd rather call it a lucky guess."

"Whatever, dude." They returned to their normal bantering, lightening the mood from the serious overtones.

"Look, I'm hungry and was headed to the Thai Restaurant for dinner. Want to join me – just two old friends having dinner?"

She signed reluctantly, knowing what a great feeling it was to wake up next to him, but knowing that it couldn't happen – shouldn't happen – now that she was once again a married woman.

"Sure. I'd love to."

"Quest over?"

"Not until I have some Pad Thai. Then I'll think about it."

"Lexi – it's good to see you - Aloha." It was the island greeting - their greeting.

"It's kind of weird loving someone, but knowing you can't be with them..."

"Welcome to my life."

He was right. There were people all over the world who could not be with the ones they loved, whether it be family members or Island Lovers. But Lexi had a life filled with people she loved, that she saw each day, and she just needed to – adjust. She certainly needed time for herself, and accomplishments of her own, and would just have to draw some better boundaries. It had always been a quandary – if you feel in service to others, do you put them first – or you? She'd spent most of her life putting others first – her family, job and husbands. But that would have to stop. She would have to renegotiate her boundaries so she could do what she needed to do.

Lexi spent the next 3 days, touring the island, fighting, and flirting with the man she loved. They had made an agreement – he didn't want to hear about Andrew, and she agreed not to ask about his job assignments. And they tacitly agreed to be loving, but not make love, neither wanting the guilt or connection that may come with it.

But perhaps it was too many beers, a starlit sky, and a warm blanket on a mid-winter eve that brought them together on that final night as they sat on the beach, knowing that they would be departing into reality the next day. Lexi would be flying home, and he would be off to somewhere on the other side of the International Date Line. No longer could there be an invisible boundary drawn between the two of them, no rationale for keeping them apart.

When they were through making love, they lay silently together. Lexi turned to him, looking into his eyes. "My quest is over. I found you – and me again."

Lexi leaned back, re-reading her tale of two lovers on the beach of Waikiki, watching the text glow from her new laptop. "HAH! How's THAT for writing! Take THAT DR. KATE!" It might not be the kind of writing that Kate was expecting from Lexi, but it was the kind she needed to write.

Compassionate writings might be her need, her vocation, but hard core fiction was much more therapeutic.

Lexi knew that she would never jeopardize her new marriage with an old flame, but she did realize that her idea of a traditional marriage was about to be trashed. She would need more freedom than the restraints of caring for a house, a dog, a husband, and a business. Like Fiction-Lexi in her story, she would have to re-negotiate her life with Andrew to allow less responsibility and more room for joy, travel, friends, and speaking.

And she knew her speaking and writing career wouldn't follow that of current NY Times best sellers. As a thinker and leader, she would speak of passion and inspiration in practical terms that Average Joe and Joann could buy into. As a business woman, she knew there was a burgeoning market in alternative media, and that the traditional route of publishing a book, speaking on tour, and trademarked products was going to have to be re-engineered. There was something about tradition that Lexi rebelled against, and if she was going to have a career, it would be on her own terms, using new ways to connect to the public.

Kate might have kicked her in the ass, but Steve owed Lexi a big-ass favor. He was attuned to market trends and lots of contacts, and she wasn't afraid to ask for him to step up to the plate. He had been good to Kate, even though his father was evil-incarnate, and there had to be a few flaws flowing in his genetic cesspool.

Lexi walked out onto her balcony, making a few mental adjustments to Her Plan. She would fly home tomorrow and start reconnecting with Andrew, and disconnecting from his business. Lexi needed to work full time on her own business, and it might require a trip to Chicago to get some favors initiated.

She walked back to her Mac, connecting to her Safari browser and Gmail. Composing a letter to Kate, she included the works of Fictional-Lexi on the beach, but framing the email more as a postcard to show her the type of Writing Quest she was pursuing.

At the end, Lexi posed a question – *Got room for a visitor next week?*

"Hey, babe, what are you reading?" Steve asked coming in to find Kate behind her laptop and piles of paper.

"Lexi's writing," she said shuffling through some of the papers.

"I thought she was in Hawaii seeking the Holy Grail or something..." he said sitting next to her on the sofa.

"She is in Hawaii, but she's been writing. An interesting love story about a romance on the beach." Kate had worried about her choice of Hawaii, and she had considered that a little romantic fantasy

might be a good thing for her friend, but apparently Lexi had used her fantasy to purge her feelings about Mike through her story.

Kate had hunted through Lexi's earlier writing to find the piece she had forwarded so long ago with such psychic acuity and that might be applicable to Lexi's current discoveries .

*Your heart needs to overrule your brain every once in a while. Not too often. Not all the time. Just often enough to prove that you do have feelings, that your life isn't without emotion. You need to enjoy those times, even if they are just moments. You need to know that not everything in your life, no matter how trivial it may seem, plays by a set of rules that you may or may not have established.*

*Women-of-a-certain-age, as they are euphemistically called, may especially fear trusting their hearts. They may have played by the rules for far too long. But if they do trust their hearts and keep a lifeline to their brains, they can build great memories that they won't have to regret.*

"This is something I think she wrote to inspire me," Kate said handing him the sheet of paper. Steve read the paragraphs carefully.

"I think it's a combination of inspiration and warning," he said. "It's about us, right? She's telling you to trust your heart, but hang on to your brain so you don't do something you'll regret. Do you regret getting involved with me?"

"Not for a millisecond," she said looking into his eyes. "Lexi's going to visit us next week."

"That must have been some trip," he said. "We haven't seen her for almost a year...so she must have reconsidered her hatred of me."

Kate was about to deny that Lexi hated him, but she didn't know if that was true. "I think that Lexi doesn't trust you, because she never really got the chance to know you last summer before the shit hit the fan."

"Don't get mad about this, but I wonder if in some way she's jealous of me."

Kate responded with a questioning expression. "What would she be jealous of?" His money, his connections, his lifestyle, his intelligence, his youth?

"That I'm closer to you than she is these days, emotionally in some ways."

She swallowed hard. Shit, she was getting tired of people smacking her with ideas that she didn't really want to recognize. She and Lexi had reconnected and recovered from most of the bad feelings between them, but there still were gaps. If there was anything that she regretted about getting involved with Steve, it would be her rift with Lexi.

But Steve was so wrong, she thought. Lexi and I have a bond between us that men simply cannot share. Steve cannot share my history, nor can he do what Lexi can do -- pull the truth out of her, to a deeper level, than Steve could ever do.

"I think seeing her will be good for all of us," she said finally. "Maybe we can find the common ground that we need." She picked up her cell phone and texted Lexi.

*OK, CU next week.*

Lexi stepped off the plane at Seatac, heading immediately for the restrooms. The closer she got to the mainland, the more her stomach tightened, not knowing what her interaction with her new, but slightly estranged, husband would be like. She guessed it would not have the ease they had with their first meeting, and that he may be feeling uneasy himself.

Lexi caught a glimpse of Andrew from a distance, standing just outside of the security gate. He was looking anxiously in her direction, but had not yet caught her eye. His nervousness, yet dedication to seeing her, was admirable, and she was surprised that the sight of him stirred her emotions more than any fictional lover ever did. There was something special about Andrew and she needed the interaction with him more than she liked to admit.

He finally caught sight of her amongst the crowd, visibly showing a sigh of relief as his shoulders relaxed from his tense, anticipatory stance. She silently, but gratefully walked toward him as he engulfed her in a warm hug. The smell of him, and sound of his leather jacket crinkling as she buried her head in his shoulder told her that she was home.

"You look great. I've never see you with a tan. You're glowing."

"We need to get away from here more often."

"We?"

"Okay, sometimes I still might need to get away by myself, but I think *WE* could use some time away together, away from our everyday life."

"So, I'm guessing that we need to talk?"

Lexi wasn't sure that a man had ever asked that of her, at least so sincerely. "Yes, we do." She smiled at him, forcing a smile from him in return.

"Let's go get your luggage. I've got Dakota in the car. I took the afternoon off so we can catch up – if that's okay with you?"

"Sounds great. It's good to get away, but also great to come back home."

They walked downstairs to the luggage carousel, waiting for her bags to appear in the avalanche of thousands of other bags from fellow travelers. After collecting her suitcases, they went to the parking lot where the sound of a barking dog pulled at her heart. She let Dakota out of the truck to

let him shake off some of his Happy Energy he accumulated in anticipation of seeing Lexi. "He missed you."

"I missed him – and you – too."

The chill and gray skies of Seattle reminded her that it was winter once again, another reminder that she was home, not on vacation. Lexi made small talk along the way, telling Andrew of the beach spots and tourist traps she visited on the island, keeping the conversation intentionally light. He spoke about his work and clients and some of the normal joys and frustrations of his business. After taking a shower to wash off Travel Crud, Lexi settled into her robe, sitting on the bed with her damp hair. Andrew joined her, along with Dakota, sitting on the bed, inviting her to sit next to him.

"Are you ready to tell me what happened on the island – for real?"

Lexi's stomach gurgled again, a frequent occurrence when she had to sincerely tell the truth to a loved one. It was still a talent she needed to hone, and took her many years to attempt to speak forthrightly without fear of criticism. Andrew's calm demeanor made her feel more comfortable, or at least that she wasn't going to hurl all over the bedspread.

"So what did you really do on your quest in Hawaii?"

Given the somewhat tenuousness of the situation, Lexi was not ready to reveal the whole truth of her writing exploits and fantasy life. "I did some thinking. About me. About us."

"And...???"

Lexi was afraid she might stumble on her words, and end up needlessly hurting Andrew, but went ahead anyhow. "Andrew – I love you, but you don't know me very well. It's the kind of knowledge that can only happen over years of being around someone, and I think only a few of my girlfriends know me and what I am capable of."

"That's true. I like to think I am pretty consistent, but my friends and family could tell you some stories...." Andrew looked off into the distance. Lexi noted that she would have to explore his "history" at some point.

"The bottom line is when I feel like I am trapped, I have to run. It's an instinctual thing. If I feel that someone is asking too much of me, or has crossed a line I can't accept, I have to leave – immediately."

"Are you saying that I am asking too much of you?" Andrew looked genuinely confused.

"Nope. I think what I discovered on my quest was that usually it's my own damn fault. I love helping others, but I can get so wrapped up in it that I forget to do things for myself. I have gotten better about it over the years, because when I was in my 20's I ended up in the hospital twice with stress-related seizures from overwork."

Andrew's look of shock was apparent. "I didn't know that!"

"See. I told you that you didn't know me." She smiled at him and appreciated his comforting hug. "But, it was my own fault. I didn't eat right, didn't have a life, and worked 80 hours a week. But I have done it in other ways too. Over work, over helping – and at some point it crosses a line where it becomes damaging to me. In fact, I'd have to say that was one of the reasons I got divorced."

"You said that the two of you went separate ways...."

"We did. But part of it stemmed from me taking care of literally everything because of his illness. After a while, he just expected it from me and did nothing. And I ran myself into the ground trying to fix everything – house, dogs, finances, his health, my health. We went from being spouses to patient & caretaker. I vowed I would never do "overdo" again, but I think I did, especially with your business. And now I need to divorce myself from your business, just like I divorced myself from my former marriage."

Andrew leaned his head back against the headboard, exhaling loudly. "Shit."

"What?"

"I had an entire list of stuff for you to do that piled up since you've been gone."

"You didn't know how much I did for you, did you?"

"Not at all. But I would rather that you divorce the business and not me. I didn't realize that you felt so...cornered."

"I did. But I didn't know it. It just kind of sneaks up on me."

"So what happens next?"

"I need to do more writing – and selling of that writing."

"I'm sure my sister would love to help you. She is very fond of you – in a, you know, familial, not 'gee-she's hot' kind of way...."

"Do you always have to give a disclaimer about your lesbian sister?"

"I love her, but I just don't swing that way. "

"I would be happy to have her help me, but I also want to investigate some alternative media. I think the internet could be a really powerful tool that could reach more people – and more targeted audiences – than a typical publisher and book tour."

"I don't think I know anyone in that area."

"I do. That's why I'm going to Chicago next week."

"Please don't tell me that you are seeing Kate and The Scumbag."

"The Scumbag owes me some big favors and I am going to make sure he gives me all the marketing knowledge and connections he has."

"Do you trust him?"

"Hell, no. But he is a source of information, and that is what I need."

"You know, you get a really cold, Godfather tone about you when you talk about him."

"What's the old phrase – 'Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer'? I'm keeping him at arm's length, and when I get what I want, then I'm leaving."

"Not to impose, but I am going to need help with the business in the meantime. I couldn't figure out your bookkeeping routine so a lot of bills and checks are sitting on your desk."

Lexi groaned. She was good at accounting, but wouldn't miss it. "After I get the money deposited, my first task is to resign. It's time you were in charge of your own affairs again."

Andrew slid his arms around her waist, pulling her under him. "And what if I don't accept your resignation letter?"

"Then I'll just go on another quest."

"Oddly enough, I think the Quest strengthened my marriage."

"Howb?" Lexi could hear Kate munching on something, most likely a bagel.

"I am cleaning up and resigning from his business and I'm finding that I knew more about him from a business persona and less of his husband-persona."

"That sounds like an Italian pasta dish – 'Husbanda-persona' – meatballs and fettucine in a cheesy alfredo sauce."

"Whatever. So you're picking me up tomorrow, right?"

"Yep at Midway. And although I am not happy about it, I got reservations near our UC abode at the Beadle Inn – here's the description:

The Beadle Inn is located on a beautiful, quiet, tree-lined street in the heart of Chicago's historic Hyde Park Community, home of the University of Chicago University and Hospital as well as several prominent museums and other cultural attractions. The property consists of new one and two bedroom suites with all the comforts and modern conveniences of a luxury home with private entrances, decks, full designer kitchens and baths, washer/dryers, state-of-art business communications and free off-street parking. We invite you to visit us and make The Beadle your home away from home. "

"It's a dump, isn't it?"

"I think the word is "charming". Are you sure you don't want to stay with us?"

"The Beadle sounds just fine."

"Lexi, are you ever going to get over this?"

"Wow. You should so NOT start with me on this one."

"But we're going to have to talk about it sometime."

"Bottom line. I love you. I don't like, trust, or want to be near him. I do need him for information though."

"That's kind of cold."

"Do you want me to go off on you like I did in San Fran? I'm about 3 seconds away from doing that."

"No. Is there anything I can do – that he can do – that would make things better? You know, other than me not leaving him because I'm in love with him?"

Lexi sighed and wondered if Kate would ever come out of her stupor. But she clung to the advice of Laura Petrie of the famed Dick Van Dyke show. "Don't take sides with a married girlfriend about her husband. If she stays or leaves, you will lose either way."

"Tell him charm and presents don't work on me. I just want facts and ideas. And a significant amount of time alone with you without him present. That would be very helpful."

Kate could feel Lexi's anger was still palpable months after the International Crime incident.

Sometimes, there was just no negotiating with Lexi.

"Okay, I'll pick you up tomorrow."