

## *Strategy & Commitment*

"I'm picking up Lexi at Midway tomorrow and I'm going to spend the day with her. We may go to dinner too," Kate mentioned casually over dinner.

"I take it that I should spend the day studying at school or going to a Cubs game or buying you gifts -- as long as I'm just out of the way," he said.

"We need to have some time together for a little face-to-face catch up," Kate tried to tactfully explain. "And don't buy her things or try to be too charming when you do meet her again."

"I've never considered charm to be one of my fortes," he shrugged.

"You've got the well-mannered graciousness of the wealthy," she laughed, "and that is often perceived as charm. She wants your help with this new venture of hers, so you can be intelligent and honest and willing to share your connections and influence as needed."

"But do it without being charming," he said shaking his head. "You know that I respect her, don't you? She gave me the reality kick that I needed in San Francisco, and I'll even give her some credit for mercilessly motivating me to accomplish a few things."

"Motivation is her thing," Kate said, "although I think she generally is a little more positive about it." But, she thought, she is very good at pushing the right buttons and shoving when she must. "I'll make arrangements for her to meet with both of us about her strategy, so be prepared to be brilliant."

Kate took a cab to Midway, arriving early enough to read the front page of the Tribune. She looked up every time a group of people came through the security check to enter the main terminal, and the fifth time she checked, she saw Lexi pulling a carry-on bag behind her. She stood up and went to greet the friend she hadn't seen for far too many months.

"Welcome to Chicago," Kate said. "I am so happy to see you, that you came here."

"This felt like the right thing to do after finishing my quest. I definitely needed to reconnect with you, because you always been good about encouraging even my craziest dreams."

"Your dreams aren't crazy, and this one especially isn't crazy. It takes advantage of your talent and your caring qualities."

"You thought about that answer ahead of time, didn't you?" Lexi said with a slight chuckle.

"No, it's what I believe. Although I have my moments, I haven't entirely lost my linguistic skills. I promise not to be a giggling imbecile this time."

"Does that mean that you and Steve have calmed down a little?"

Kate sensed that Lexi wanted to hear they were in trouble, that she didn't want to know that they were happy, that things were still working out. But at the same time, she knew that Lexi wanted her to be happy, and even though she didn't like Steve -- didn't like it might be a mild term -- Lexi knew that Steve made her happy.

"I think I'll take the 5th on that question," Kate said. "Let's drop your luggage at the Beadle and make our plans for the day."

The first stop after the hotel was a trendy vegetarian restaurant on Clark Street. Lexi ordered herbal tea and a salad, and Kate chose raspberry lemonade and yellow gazpacho. Lexi began the conversation with a not-quite-complementary evaluation of Kate's ring.

"You should've insisted that I keep my sunglasses on," she said, poking at her salad with her fork. "I could be blinded by that bling."

"Envy is not becoming."

"I could make some crack about conspicuous consumption, but I'll let it go. Are you any closer to setting a date?"

"I don't know that we've even decided to get married," Kate said. "It's still just a possibility."

"Is Schteve waiting to see if something better comes along?"

"He would've married me while we were in Paris. I'm the one that won't make a commitment."

"Are you waiting to see if something better comes along?" Lexi laughed.

Kate shook her head and changed the subject. "How is Andrew reacting to your business uncoupling? Does he understand?"

"I think he understands. He knows much it means to be involved in something that you love, and that you've dreamed about. His landscaping work is his passion."

"And you're not?"

"I'm a different kind of passion, just like the new efforts I want to start are a different kind of passion for me. We talked before I left, and Andrew knows that I love him and that I love our life together, but part of me wants something else. He knows that my trip to Hawaii and my trip here aren't practice runs at leaving him."

Kate knew that Lexi was implying that Andrew knew that she had no intention of 'doing a Kate.'

"So tomorrow," Kate said, "you have to come to the condo so we can plan a strategy for you."

"Can't we just go do some neutral Starbucks?"

"Hey, you're getting about \$25 grand in consulting so the least you can do is come to our place where we have our think tank tools," Kate firmly stated. She too could play hardball when she needed.

Lexi woke up very early the next morning, and decided to take a short walk to a little corner diner for breakfast before getting a cab to Kate's condo. She loved Chicago, and she loved being back in the Midwest. Although she'd lived many places and had changed a lot since she'd left Indiana, there was still a familiar, friendly feeling in the heartland. And as much as she wanted to dislike anything that had some connection to Steve, she had to admit that their real estate choice was great. She pushed the buzzer in the lobby and waited for the door to unlock. Their condo was on the 10th floor, and Kate was waiting at the door with a mug of coffee in her hand.

"I like the MIT shirt," Lexi said, commenting on Kate's outfit.

"I've done some of my best work in this shirt... and no snotty comment is necessary." She had after all added a pair of capri pants to the ensemble this morning. "Do you want some coffee or tea?"

Lexi followed her into the condo, and as she looked around, she was surprised in a way that it was not overdone or ultra-modern chic. The furniture and the décor felt like Kate, albeit more upscale than their Ikea days in school. The feeling was comfortable, but mildly professional, and Lexi was in tune enough with the environment to sense nothing but good and none of the incarnate evil she imagined Steve would project.

"Hello Steve," she said acknowledging him coolly. He was sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter, eating a bagel with his coffee.

"Good morning," he replied, very conscious of Kate's admonition not to be charming.

"Enough small talk," Kate said before anything else was said. "Grab your coffee and let's go into the study to get started."

Kate and Lexi settled on the sofa opposite Kate's whiteboard. Steve sat in the leather armchair in front of the window.

"So, Lexi, why don't you describe to us what it is you want to do," Kate said picking up a pen and pad of paper.

"I want to take my motivational talents to a bigger market. I already do the writing..." she began as Steve went to the whiteboard with a marker to document what she outlined. "But it's only in a newsletter to about a hundred people. I want to publish, but I don't think I'm looking at a traditional method. I'd like to support the published work by speaking to people at their own levels, offering a practical way to achieve goals. I think there's a product line here too, although my thoughts about potential products are a little sketchy."

She looked at what Steve had written: Writing, Publishing, Speaking, Products. She noted that Kate had written significantly more on her paper.

"I just don't think I want to take traditional routes, and your paper focused on a lot of the alternate media available, so I figured you'd know about new directions.

"Who do you see as your market?" Steve asked.

"The average person."

"Gender?" he continued to define the constituency.

"Mostly female I guess, but men that might be involved in entrepreneurial ventures."

"Age?" he asked what jotting on the whiteboard.

"Probably post-teen through retirement."

"What do you want to write?" Steve said, moving into a new column on the whiteboard.

"Inspirational motivational pieces."

"Essays, columns, newsletters, books?"

Damn, Lexi thought, he's just not going to let me off easy. She looked to Kate for support.

"Call them short essays," she said nodding to Steve. "What about collections of bios on success stories as examples? They could almost be testimonials for you... And what about fiction? You did some in Hawaii that was fairly compelling."

Steve was recording all the ideas on the board in an organized fashion, and he underlined the word Publishing. "Who do you want to speak to? Large or small groups? One-on-one?"

"Ideally large groups, but I don't want to set up a speaking tour per se."

He wrote down Focus Groups in the speaking column. "What were your ideas for a product line?"

"Something like a tool kit for making dreams into realities, a how-to kind of guide."

He wrote down Workbook and after a moment, he added Inspiration Products.

"How committed are you to new media outlets?"

"As committed as I need to be." She rationally understood the drill-down process he was pursuing, but she was a little annoyed at Kate's non-participation. She had the doctorate and the consulting gig after all, and she was Lexi's friend.

As if on mental cue, Kate started to offer her thoughts.

"Writing is the foundation for all of this," she said, tapping her pen on her notepad. "You can do speaking engagements, but you have to have something tangible as either an entre or a take-away. Only people like me go to lectures and take notes anymore."

"You can start with an expansion of your newsletter into a website if you don't already have that set up. But your site is probably going to need an upgrade, so you'll need to either pay someone to manage it for you or find a responsible kid who wants the experience as a resume builder."

"I think you should also work on a collection of success stories – talk to that woman who went to consult for NBC or any of the people you've motivated into action in the past. You need to build your credibility with people who don't know you yet. And we'd try to leverage some of those successes into media exposure at least at the local level or in University magazines, wherever we could get mentioned as being part of the success."

Kate sipped at her now cool coffee and continued. "Publishing is another choice you'll need to make. I know you want to pass on an agent and a 1-2 year wait time to see your work in print, so there are a couple options. Vanity press is almost passe, given new technologies, but it still exists. You pay to print a specific number of copies and then you hand them out or try to sell them yourself."

"Self-publishing with connections to an on-line seller like Amazon or Barnes & Noble is probably your best choice for now, although there may be a future in e-books and e-publishing on demand. We can keep an eye on that. Also the publisher of the 'Chicken Soup' books just launched a new series called 'Ultimate,' and I know him though my old church in Florida. I'm sure he and Bill know each other if I can't make the connection for you."

"Your fiction writing can go any way you want, but if we're tying it to your brand – I'll talk about that in a minute – it needs to be focused on motivation and taking steps toward fulfilling goals and success, rather than soft-core porn," she smirked. "Steve, talk about web presence."

"As you probably know, our paper focused on new marketing strategies that included social networks. You need to get linked through every option you can – FaceBook, MySpace, LinkedIn, anything Indiana may have for alumni, any other group you belong to may have a network set-up. You need to set up a page that links to your web site, and if you have the option, set up your own sub-group for others to join."

"Google just announced a new virtual reality social networking system called Lively. You need to get into that, create a professional but friendly avatar, and get someone as a plant to start a discussion with. Then open up the discussion so others can join you. You could set up a schedule of meetings that can be posted on your website with the necessary links, so people could enter in that way and interact with you at planned sessions. My friend Trevor from MIT works with Google, and I can talk to him about beta testing a virtual speaking engagement for you."

"One thing that's key to building some of these social networks is getting 'influencers' involved," Kate said looking at her notes. "Remember my bridal shower?" She glanced apologetically at

Steve before continuing. "I looked around the room that day, and there was a small business owner, an engineer, an international banker, a Montessori teacher, head of a small social service foundation, a lawyer, a health care consultant, an accountant, and a couple other teachers at different grade levels. It was about the strongest and most diverse women's networking group I've ever been in, and we all had connections to one another. You need to meet with those kind of groups – women or men – and present your ideas, so they can share them with other people and 'influence' them to link up with you. You need to make a list of people in a few cities that you can meet with."

"Sounds like a Tupperware party," Lexi suggested.

"More like a grassroots political movement," Kate said. "You aren't 'selling' anything but your ideas and you're offering connections. Call them focus groups if you need a name for them. Jordan would be a great contact for you here in Chicago; she knows a lot of people you'd love talking to, including the producer of a local TV talk show."

"Speaking engagements," Steve continued smoothly, "develop out of your writing, any media exposure we get, and the connections you make through social networking or your focus groups. Your goal is to get invited to speak, not to book yourself somewhere. Simulcasts like Tony Robbins does are a possibility for the future, but they're a pricy project without the interaction you're so good at."

"Any products will probably come from suggestions made by your connections. The 'I need a' product-push strategy, rather than a pull strategy. It'll save you time and money if you respond to, rather than try to create demand. Not that you should shelve your ideas, but keep them dormant until you feel the demand." Steve wrote frantically on the white board to catch up with his ideas.

"Which brings me back to establishing a brand," Kate said. "It may sound weird, because you don't think of Branding yourself but some of the most successful people have done it. There was great article in business week a while ago now, that outlines some strategies were some ideas for creating your own brand."

"And you just happen to have a copy of it, don't you?" Lexi said.

"I'm a professor; I keep files. Whose brands do you most admire, what person or celebrity do you admire, and what makes them different?"

"I like Oprah Winfrey. She does good things, she helps people... she's one of the richest woman on the planet."

"How did she set herself apart?"

Lexi thought for a moment, before Kate went on. "Did she come up with a clever saying? Did she write a book? Did she come up with a look? Did she get a nickname?"

"She took her talk show, and did some of the same things, celebrity interviews, for example, but she talked to real people also. She encouraged people to read by founding a book club. She started a charity and gave away a lot of money."

"Why do you think she did those things?"

"She wanted to improve people's lives," Lexi said impatiently.

"And some people would call that a cause, a mission linked to society's concerns. What's your cause?"

"I don't have a cause."

"Then why do you want to motivate people?"

"Because they could achieve things if they got..." she paused, "a push in the right direction, help to make the right start."

"So, what's your cause?"

"Helping people achieve their dreams."

Steve wrote Dream Enabler on the whiteboard.

"So Steve, what kind of image to she made to get that kind of brand?"

He wrote down each point as her said it. "Positive attitude... record of success... assertive, but not necessarily aggressive... approachable... helpful authority... good heart, not a bleeding heart... realistic... practical... enthusiastic... hopeful... a little bit of a risk taker," he listed with thought and confidence.

"Sounds like Lexi to me," Kate said.

"She's got her brand," Steve said. "She just needs to refine it. Her writing can do that."

"Thanks," Lexi said, not completely certain she trusted Steve's faint praise.

"I want to go back to your market, because that could have an impact on how you present your brand choice," Kate said. "Here are a few markets that you might want to consider: baby boomers looking at retirement from their primary careers, but wanting to break into something new."

"My uncle Paul is in communications with AARP," Steve said, "and I'm sure we could set up a regular or semiregular column in their magazine for you. Traditional retirement does not seem to be an option for most Baby Boomers, and their efforts are sometimes promising and sometimes far-fetched, but goals that they may have shelved in favor of stable, well-paying jobs. I think Kate's right that they would be a great market, because they have dreams and they may need both a kick in the ass and a dose of reality."

"Another good market," Kate said, "might be teachers. They teach for a few years, or perhaps many years, and then they hit the wall. Teacher burnout is an issue, and what do these educators do when they are finished with the classroom?"

"Aside from all of Kate's contacts in the University world," Steve said, "my mother has very good connections to the Secretary of Education and therefore a lot of education groups, both nationally and in a few different states. I'm sure she'd help you make the connections you need."

"Given your background," Kate said, "talking to athletes might also makes some sense. Not everyone in the sports world can be Michael Jordan, who excels in basketball, and then decides maybe he'd like to play baseball, and then realizes he really should go back to basketball before retiring with more endorsements than his CPA can count, so he can just go play golf. A lot of the athletes and the pros retire, and because they don't have all those endorsements, have to find new careers. Plus, there are all those college athletes, who will never make the pros, but some don't necessarily want to pursue a career in the academic major they chose to make grades good enough to satisfy the NCAA. You could have a very good connection through Jordan. She knows the sister of former Miami Dolphin football player, John Offerdahl.

"Small business groups could be another avenue for you. Your local connections through Andrew would probably be best place to start," Kate said. "You could also think about successful business people who leave their careers to start or manage foundations. I'm not necessarily talking about Bill Gates, but I'm sure Jordan would know a few people you could talk to."

"Recovery groups like Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous might be another possibility. These might be people who are looking to change their lives, in addition to their habits. They may have goals that need some motivation, apart from their 12 steps," Steve said. "I know some people through my stepsister, and maybe you do too through your ex."

Lexi looked up quickly, as Kate hastened to explain. "I told him about Kurt, when we were talking about our first husbands."

"If you're interested in the incarcerated or soon to be released prison population," Steve continued, "I have a couple connections with the criminal justice system." He smiled as if he had shared an inside joke.

"So, any questions?" Kate asked, tapping her papers into a neat pile.

"You worked on this before I walked in the door, didn't you?" Lexi said. "I know you guys are smart, but this comprehensive an analysis can't be off the top of your heads."

"We did a little brainstorming," Kate admitted. "There was a lot of material that we thought we should cover. You'll get our written report tomorrow, along with a list of all the contacts we mentioned and phone numbers, so we can set up conference calls. Oh, and you and Jordan and I are having lunch tomorrow, so we can talk about these ideas, and we'll schedule your first focus group in Chicago."

Lexi let out a sign of relief. "Anything else?"

"You need some time – this afternoon would be good – to think through these ideas, and we're taking you to dinner to answer any concerns or questions you have," Kate said firmly.

Lexi stood up and walked to the window of their condo. This Chicago twosome had just tag-teamed her with a flurry of internet marketing advice, some of which she knew, but much of which they expanded upon. She was grateful for their help, but couldn't get over the emotional block she felt ever since she landed at Midway. There was tension between Lexi and Kate, Lexi and Steve, and a raging undercurrent between the three of them that was palpable throughout the room. She and Kate had been snippy to each other ever since she landed, and the air needed to be cleared.

Steve startled Lexi out of her silence. "You don't look very appreciative."

Lexi had thought about how she would react to Steve should she see him again. As much as she wanted to punch him, she needed to handle this situation with minimal violence, but still speak her truth. She casually turned around to stare at Steve.

Kate noticed the rigidity of Lexi's jaw, feeling like she would have to play referee between these two. She sternly spoke up. "Perhaps we can discuss this – calmly – over dinner tonight."

"No, I think we ought to talk about it right now." Steve's irritation at both Kate and Lexi was apparent in his voice. He stepped forward to Lexi, standing within a foot of her face. "Go ahead. You're the authentic, truthful guru. Why don't you say what's on your mind?"

Kate had not seen Steve be so confrontational before, and was unsure of how to react. "Steve, why don't you..."

Steve whipped around to stare at Kate, his anger quite apparent. "Why don't I WHAT?"

"It's okay, Kate. I got this one." Lexi stood in an authoritative, yet not aggressive stance, signaling to Kate that it was okay for her to stay on the couch.

"You're just jealous, Lexi. Admit it. I spend more time with Kate than you, and I know her better than you do."

This must be some kind of Universal Test, the kind where you tell God that you are ready to move on to a higher level, but He presents you with irritating people to see if you are committed to your goals.

"No, I am not jealous of you Steve. I know Kate in a very different way than you do, and we have 20 years of history together that you have not been a part of." Lexi still stood close to Steve, pulling up to her full height where she was eye to eye with him.

"Then why do you hate me so much?" It was the question that none wanted to ask, but needed to be answered.

Lexi had thought about why Steve pissed her off. He was charming in his own way, and was definitely intelligent. He treated Kate well, and obviously knew a number of influential people that he could connect Lexi with in order to advance her career. Lexi tried to balance her emotions, her truth, her desire to maintain her friendship with Kate, and hope to establish some non-combative relationship with Steve.

"If you will sit down for a moment, I will explain." Lexi gestured to a chair for him to sit. Instead, he crossed the room to the sofa, putting a protective and symbolic arm around Kate. It was apparent that the two of them were a definite couple, and would defend each other to the end. Things had definitely changed between Lexi and Kate, and would never be the same.

But that was the end result of any romantic relationship. Girlfriends became secondary when a woman coupled with her mate. And the friendship distance varied depending on the maturity of the relationship, and that distance was a virtual chasm with Kate's new mate.

"Steve, I realize that you love Kate and want the best for her. I am also old enough to watch how relationships change over the years, and that her relationship with you will create a bigger life distance with me than when she was married to Bill. It's not good or bad, it just is. And I have to adapt to that, and it is something that I am willing to do."

"So you are jealous!"

Lexi inhaled deeply. "I'm not jealous. I am mourning the loss of the type of relationship that I had with Kate that I can no longer have because she is with you."

Kate's mouth dropped open, showing confusion. "Lexi, we'll keep in touch. Nothing has changed!"

"It's not about the quantity of time, Kate. You are sharing a very exciting period in your life with someone you love, and I can't be a part of that. It's a fact that you just cannot share your life with me or with Jordan to the extent that you did in the past."

"I'm not sure I understand, Lexi." Steve said.

"Someday you will, but you will be much older than 27. I don't know you very well, but I am guessing that you have not lost much in your short life that has been important to you."

"Well, I kind of lost my dad in that International Incident last year." Steve smirked, wearing his jail time like a badge of honor.

"Which leads me to another point. I think it would be helpful if you both remembered your manners." Lexi caught both of their attention by staring into each of their eyes.

"I'm still nice...." Kate defended herself against the comment.

"Yes, you are still nice, and supportive when I need you. But it's been a very long time since I have heard either one of you say 'Thank You' or 'I'm Sorry'".

Steve leaned forward defensively. "I didn't see you be very thankful for the time and effort we took to help you today."

"Since we just completed your presentation a few minutes ago, I have not had the chance. But I do thank you. I know you both put time and effort in to help me, and I appreciate it. I am sure I will use your advice."

"So, I don't get why you think we need to thank you for anything." Steve still sat forward, showing both a sarcastic, but inquisitive look on his face.

"A lot of people went to a lot of trouble to save the two of you last year. And we all incurred damage because of it. All of us now have an FBI file because of you and your father, and my friends at the CIA and DOD told me to stay away from you, and yet here I am, and the government is probably still following all three of us. Kate's friends pulled strings for you to get out of prison and get your record cleared. But the two of you act like you EXPECTED these things to happen, but I have not seen you reach out to anyone to acknowledge their help. The Kate I know would have had a hand-written thank you card in the mail within hours, but I have not heard word one."

Steve looked down at his feet and Kate leaned back further into the couch. Steve looked up at Lexi, "I did try to find the two guys who bailed me out. I think they were friends of my dad."

Kate looked at him quizzically. "You never told me that. Who were they?"

"I was never able to find them and couldn't quite ask my dad, but they ponied up the \$100K to get me out. The guys names were Steve Perry and Robert Palmer."

Kate blanched as she held a pillow to her stomach. "OH FUCK! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought the less you knew, the better. It turned out okay."

"Steve Perry is Jordan's favorite singer from Journey. Robert Palmer is Lexi's favorite. Ever hear the song 'Addicted to Love'?" Kate realized that despite Steve's trust fund wealth, it was her friends who bailed him out – because of their loyalty to her. And she had overlooked it.

"How was I supposed to know?? They didn't use their real names!!"

"We couldn't use our real names to bail out a relative of a domestic terrorist, although I am guessing the FBI figured it out anyway." Lexi walked over to the window to avoid their eye contact. "Did you think everyone gets out of a 3 day prison term so easily? You talk about it as though you did hard time or something. That is what makes me angry – the fact that the two of you can inflict damage upon others without an apology and still be ignorant of the support network that is working to help you."

"Lexi, I couldn't have been expected to figure out who bailed him out. He never showed me the paperwork."

"Kate, you and I both know you are an incredible researcher, but yet you are terribly reluctant to know the details of the man you sleep with. Look, I don't want to start an argument, I just want to tell you how I feel, and my perception of how things have changed. I think we all have a lot to digest, so I think I will just head back to my hotel. I could use the air."

Lexi grabbed her purse and headed for the door as Steve and Kate remained silent. "If you still want to go to dinner, give me a call."

Lexi walked out of the building, meandering down the streets of the neighborhood. The chill and snow reflected the gray mood that they were all in. She said what was on her mind, and felt at peace that she didn't over-react, despite Steve's confrontational attitude. She wasn't sure where she stood with Kate. Things had changed tremendously, and they had not figured out how to navigate this part of their 20 year adventure.

She reached down to pull her cell phone out of her purse. She speed dialed Andrew's number, getting his voicemail greeting. "Hi. I just needed to listen to a friendly voice. Things are cold here in the Midwest..."

"Please don't cry," Steve said as Kate began to snifle and tears dropped on her cheeks.

"I...we...my..." she stammered unable to complete a sentence before burying her head against his chest. He didn't know what to say, and he wanted to be angry at Lexi, but dammit, she was probably right, and Kate was probably thinking exactly the same thing.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, gulping hard so he wouldn't cry too, "for every way that I've hurt you." He wrapped his arms around her even tighter, afraid that if he let go, she'd be gone.

"It's not you," Kate said, finally breathing rather than sobbing and hyperventilating. "It's me and it's us and the way we've isolated ourselves, because..."

"Because we love each other?"

"Because we aren't as open and as honest as we could, should be with each other."

"You don't think that I've been honest with you?" Steve asked with a hint of defensiveness in his tone.

"I know you try to protect me," Kate said, "and I probably try to protect you, so sometimes we aren't totally honest. We need to be honest, and we need to tell each other things that might hurt a little." My control issues rear their ugly head again, she thought, but honesty should trump control.

"I just apologized for anything I might have done that hurt you, and I meant it," Steve said. "I don't ever want to hurt you, so if trying to protect you by keeping something from you hurts you, I will need to work really hard to overcome that."

"I'll have to try really hard too." She sniffed and almost smiled. "That may be one of the few maternal impulses I have, trying to protect my young."

"Do you think of me as a child?"

"Oh God no," she said, "I think of you as someone I love."

"But loving me creates problems for you, with friends like Lexi."

"I don't know that it's loving you, as much as it is the way -- incredibly thoughtless way -- that I've behaved with friends like Lexi, who deserve so much more."

"Why do you think you've been thoughtless?"

She had to think for a moment of how to phrase this, and she wiped new tears from her eyes. "Because I haven't been willing to ask questions that I would've asked in any other situation. Because I blindly accepted so much that I might at least have thought about in my life before you. Because I very willingly surrendered a lot of my personal identity in becoming part of our shared identity."

Steve looked at her, wondering if she was contemplating and creating justifications for breaking free of him, of their relationship. He didn't know how to respond, so he waited for her next revelation.

"My life has changed. There's no question about that, and I don't regret that, but I can't, I shouldn't abandon my sensibility to... idiotic hedonism. I should have questioned how you got out of detention, and not taken it for granted that the right connections could, of course, have made the difference. I'm not stupid, and I should've known that more than phone calls had to be exchanged. And, if I thought that far, I could have figured it out that no one connected with you could have come up with the bail."

"I didn't recognize the two guys' names," Steve said. "It never occurred to me that they were fake names."

"They aren't fake names, they're rock stars. From the 80s, when you were far too young to even be aware of MTV or power pop music." She thought for a moment. "And I think problem Robert Palmer died sometime in the past couple years. If you'd told me, I would've recognized the names and made the ties to Jordan and Lexi."

"Do I need to say I'm sorry again?"

"No, but I don't know how to make it up to my friends."

"And I'm not even going to suggest writing a check," Steve said. "If Lexi has taught me nothing else -- and it's not the only thing she's taught me by any means -- it's that I can't just throw money around to solve a problem. Could it be as simple as starting with a thank you note?"

"It would probably be more of a thank you and forgive me letter from me, and some kind of note from you."

Steve nodded, knowing that her eloquence and ability to write was going to make his note seem juvenile and amateurish. But he owed her his best effort, and he certainly owed Jordan and Lexi so much more.

"And Lexi's right that we need to get to know each other," Kate said, very aware that simply running a Google search was an inadequate way to evaluate someone she intended to spend her life with. "We need to get to know each other outside the bedroom or wherever we happen to be fucking our brains out, because I think that we may be fucking up our brains."

He smiled, shaking his head. "And how should we get to know each other? Do we both need to make lists like you made me do in San Francisco?"

"That's not a bad idea," she said, remembering that the list had started a truthful exchange. "But, we might start by talking over lunch. And should I call Lexi and say we still want to continue our consulting discussion over dinner?"

"Definitely," he said, thinking that it would be better to confront issues now than to let them fester.

They met Lexi at Prosecco, a relatively new Italian restaurant on Wells Street that was getting great reviews, especially for some of its salads. Kate brought her clipboard and notes, and Steve had his Blackberry handy to take any notes; they were both nervous about facing Lexi, but tried to remain professional about the meeting.

"So, did you have anything we can follow-up on for you?" Kate began after the waiter had finished pouring wine.

"God, you two are cold. After everything I said this morning, you just want to skip that part of the discussion and get back to business?" Lexi said with both surprise and disgust. She didn't know if Steve gave a damn about anything she said, but she expected some reaction from Kate. She couldn't really believe that she would throw away twenty years of friendship that easily for this boy.

Kate took a deep breath. "What do you want me to say? That you were absolutely right? That we were self-absorbed? That I was incredibly thoughtless and uncaring? That I ignored my instincts for easy options? That I lost track of some really important things like friendships in an avalanche of lust?"

"That's a start," Lexi said, satisfied that Kate hadn't just glossed over her tirade this morning.

"Okay, all of that's true. I know it, Steve knows it. We can grovel asking for forgiveness..."

"Groveling is good."

"And we can trip all over ourselves thanking you and asking fruitless questions about how can we ever repay you..."

"Gratitude is good."

"But none of it is any good at all if we can't get by whatever has you so wound up. We recognize that we have ignored realities and neglected to offer our thanks where it was due. We get it that we need to say we're sorry. I get it that I may have caused irreparable damage to one of the best friendships I've ever had...and ..." Kate gulped and tears welled up in her eyes, "I don't want to lose you."

Steve reached across the table and took Kate's hand. Lexi picked up a completely different feeling from him than she expected; he wasn't angry or defensive, but grateful for the release Kate had just made. Shit, she thought, he really does love her and care about her, and he understands her. But, Lexi didn't want to give up her advantage quite yet.

"We aren't going to lose each other," she said, "but you have changed. You used to be so giving, so volunteer queen, and now you both seem so selfish."

Steve had to answer this one. "We still give, but in different ways. I support my step-sister every month financially so she can get through school and not get hooked again on coke or ecstasy or whatever. Not enough to support shopping sprees at Neiman-Marcus, but enough to live a moderate student lifestyle, because she 's intelligent and doesn't deserve to be punished for my father's indiscretions. Kate probably calls her once every week or so to give her little pep talks.

"And Kate does a good amount of pro-bono consulting for some of the people you're trying to reach. Do you think we came up with your potential markets out of thin air? She knows them, and while she can help draft business plans and strategies, she knows that you'll be better at motivating them.

"Do we tutor in the 'hood or do walk-a-thons?" Steve continued. "No, but I'd say we give in other ways."

"I have changed," Kate said, "but you've changed too. You got remarried to a guy I only met one time at dinner, and you didn't even directly let me know you married him."

"it was all very spur of the moment," Lexi said feeling a little defensive herself. "And I don't think I was speaking to you."

"We were communicating through Jordan and forwarded e-mails. Steve told me to get you some crystal for a wedding present."

"I probably would have just smashed it," Lexi said, remembering the unopened cards.

"You could have told me directly."

"Did you tell me that you and Steve got engaged? Did you tell me that you went to Paris?" Lexi asked pointedly. "If you decided to get married, would I even get invited?"

"Would you come when we do?"

Steve perked up at Kate's tacit acknowledgement that they would get married, and silently thanked Lexi for her willingness to push issues. Kate was surprised at how easily she said 'when,' rather than 'if.' Lexi was startled that she'd apparently forced a decision about their future together; she wasn't certain she wanted to push this any farther.

"I'll have to check my calendar since you're going to have me speaking to groups all over the place. Now, about the follow-up concerns..."

Kate was almost grateful to Lexi for shifting her back into the consultant role. She picked up her clipboard.

"Your marketing presentation was great, but I am a business owner," Lexi said. "How much of my time will it take? How much will it cost? How profitable is each link in a social network? Why don't you build me a real life, results-oriented business model for the Average Joe/Joan, not only an academia theory?"

Kate made notes about her questions, while Steve seemed to give the idea deep concentration.

"I'm sure..." Kate began before Steve interrupted.

"Oh, shit, Lexi." She looked startled but he continued quickly, "you've just defined my dissertation. Thank you, thank you." Before she could recoil, he leaned across the table and kissed her cheek.

She took a moment to get over that surprise. "I at least expect some citation for it," she said. "Wouldn't that – what did you call it? – help build my credibility?"

"Sounds like you had a tough day." Lexi could tell the concern in Andrew's voice. She'd been away a lot lately, and it was tough to keep track of her, especially when she was going through a midwestern therapy session.

"It was. I'm tired. I have one more full day here and then I will leave the next morning." Lexi laid back on the bed, letting out an exhaustive sigh. "Andrew, I miss you. I've been away more than I should have been."

"Are you feeling guilty?"

"You know, it's a tough line. I need time for myself, but want to share with others, especially you."

"How about we go on a quest of our own?"

Lexi sat up, intrigued by his idea. "What did you have in mind?"

"Business is slow, and I think I found someone who can handle the books if we want to get away for a while."

Despite her 'divorcing' herself from Andrew's business, she still felt an attachment. "You found someone?"

"I thought it was time to get a professional involved who can handle the next phase of our businesses – mine and yours. You know, all these big clients on Mercer Island have some great recommendations for lawyers, accountants and other professionals. And given the new business referrals I have coming in the door, I think I'm now a part of that network."

"That's' great! I think...how do you feel about it?"

"It is a jump from working out of the corner of my living room to a home office to getting full scale professional help, but I like the guy I talked to." Andrew mentioned that Jeff, their new CPA, worked for one of the most well respected wealth management firms in the city. They also had a variety of banking and legal services to support those who were now 'wealthy' enough to have it 'managed'.

Lexi laughed, thinking of how she worked out of her second bedroom for many years, scraping by to balance her checkbook and bills, as well as identify mis-management and fraud in large corporations.

"Why are you laughing? Is it a bad firm or something?"

"No, no, Andrew...you did a great job. I am just laughing at how far we have come to have to have our assets 'managed' for us."

"It is a little, weird, isn't it?"

"But in a really good way. So what kind of adventure did you have in mind for us?"

"I want to go somewhere – out of the Northwest – where we can get to know each other."

"So you want to start dating?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I would love to date my wife. And show her off to the natives while I'm at it. I thought we would pick somewhere we've never traveled to before, somewhere with no history for either of us."

Lexi had traveled quite a bit in her past for work and play, throughout the US, Hawaii (of course), Mexico and most of Europe. "So what did you decide?"

"I'm not going to tell you. When I meet you at the airport on Wednesday, I am taking you to the gate where we will fly off on our quest for marital bliss. It's a surprise though. I will pack for you in addition to what you have with you. Don't worry about a thing."

Normally, she didn't like surprises, especially those planned for her by others. But she wanted to be with Andrew, and being away from home, together 24/7, was the way to do it. "Okay, I'm in. I will see you on Wednesday. I'm looking forward to getting to know my husband."

"Be prepared. You don't know what you're in for. I have a few surprises in my background."

Lexi knocked on Kate and Steve's condo door at 9 a.m. the next morning.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself. Come on in and sit down. Steve and I have a few followup answers we want to present to you."

"Sorry. That doesn't work for me."

Steve looked a bit startled, not knowing if Lexi was going to start another "discussion" that would end in more weeping and internal revelations. Kate looked confused as well.

Lexi stood in the middle of the room, next to the whiteboard. "I need a bagel and hot water for the tea I brought. Today, I am going to teach you both what it is like to be a business owner. I have heard enough academic theory, and your theories are worthless unless they can be applied and proved profitable."

"I think I know enough about finance to figure out how to prove a profitable business venture." Steve stood next to her, somewhat competitively.

"Dude, sit down. You're not Warren Buffett. Until you have had to balance demanding clients, uncooperative vendors, irritable employees, and negative cash flow projections all in the space of 5 minutes, you have no idea what it is like to run a profitable business venture."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Today, it's my turn to share my consulting skills – with you – and take your thesis on the road. My guess is that you want your work to be known and profitable for longer than 15 minutes, which I am guessing is the average lifespan of your average PhD work of art. Am I right, Kate?"

"Pretty much. Usually there is a lot of excitement when it's published and then it hits the Used Bookstores for \$4.98."

"So what are you suggesting, Lexi?" Lexi had to hand it to Steve, he knew when an opportunity needed to be taken advantage of.

"I am suggesting that the two of you open a business."

Kate sat forward, intrigued. "What kind of business are you suggesting? Something on eBay?"

"I would hope you would think larger than that, but if that is where you want to start, it's a possibility. You could also expand your consulting business, but frankly that's kind of safe. No vendors, few clients – you don't really get the true perspective of a business owner if you don't sell 'stuff'."

"So the point of us opening a business is.....?" Steve was trying to trace Lexi's thoughts, but wasn't quite there yet.

"The point is to open a business, build an electronic social network, track how much time you – and others – spend building the network – and see if it enhances your profitability. You could essentially take two paths, a control group that is based on selling from non-social network contacts, and compare it to selling and operating a business in a social network forum. If you do

that, then you build not only academic credibility, but down and dirty business credibility for the average guy who just wants to find the best way to sell stuff.”

“Wow. Maybe I could sell all those arts and crafts projects I have in Bill’s garage in Florida...” Kate snickered. She and Kate shared a familiar smile and roll of their eyes. Lexi was the proud recipient of some of Kate’s artwork, and it graced the walls of her den to this day.

“I used to collect some albums, but I think they are out in Colorado somewhere.” Lexi could see Steve struggling to identify an idea that would be a viable business venture.

“The thing you have to remember about a business, especially a small business that would benefit from a social network, is that those businesses are built on dreams and passion. The business owners who succeed REALLY believe in what they do, whether it is selling feather boas, to renting upscale handbags (<http://www.bagborroworsteal.com/>) or selling financial services. Figure out what it is that you like to do, and what you would like to share with the world. I can’t make that decision for you, but the two of you can do that together.”

“I think we’re going to have to think about this for a while.” Kate looked at Steve, searching each others eyes, in a humorous, yet adventurous way. “But it could be fun.”

“If you need advice, let me know. But I think the two of you are smart enough to enjoy it and have some fun – whatever you do. And of course, don’t forget, I want some serious credit on your thesis.” Lexi knew the power of a great idea, and which ones she wanted to be associated with.

They spent the rest of the morning discussing possible ideas, but no viable solution arose yet. Steve started to pace, looking restless. “I’ve got a couple of things I want to check out, and I have to get to class. I’ve got dinner with my advisor tonight, so I guess you two are on your own.” Steve looked at Lexi, signaling that he was giving her and Kate time alone.

“Alrighty Steve, then I guess you should give me a hug. I’m leaving on the 7a.m. flight tomorrow, so I won’t see you for a while.”

He stepped forward to Lexi’s outstretched arms, embracing her. “Does this mean you and I are okay now?”

Lexi smiled. “Depends on how well your thesis turns out.”

Steve laughed, knowing this was an unwritten acceptance of him. “Okay. We’ll work on it.” He stepped toward the couch, kissing Kate meaningfully as he headed toward the door. “It was good to see you Lexi, and thanks for – everything.”

"You too, Steve. I appreciate your help. I'll let you know how everything turns out."

He closed the door behind him, leaving Lexi and Kate alone.

Lexi looked at Kate, staring into her eyes. "Enough business. When are you getting married?"

"That didn't just slip by you, huh?"

"It was hard to ignore the gasps in the room."

"I was surprised at how easy it was to acknowledge that getting married was, was going to happen."

"So you two haven't set the date?"

"We haven't even discussed it since Paris, since he proposed."

"Do you really want to marry him?" Lexi asked, with more concern than curiosity.

"Yeah, I do."

"Then why don't you do it?"

Kate was ready to launch into a discussion about timing, if they should wait until Steve finished his degree, if they should wait for some of the dust in their lives to settle a little. It had been less than a year since they'd become involved, less than a year since her divorce was final, so maybe they were rushing things. And then she decided to spare Lexi all the excuses, since she'd cut right through them anyway.

"I think I'm afraid of the commitment."

Lexi rolled her eyes. "You made the commitment over a brownie last summer. You may be afraid of getting married to him, but it's not a commitment issue. What really scares you about your relationship?"

"That it won't last," she admitted. "That he'll leave me."

"Well," Lexi responded with some compassion because she was a good friend and some reality because she was a good friend, "it might not last and he might leave you and that can happen in any relationship, but you two have stuck together through some interesting things in the past few months despite the odds against you. So if you love him – fairly obvious – and he loves you – equally obvious – I don't think you should worry about abandonment."

Kate was grateful for her encouragement and tacit approval.

"I would however worry about how you two lowly academics are going to support yourselves once you've burned through his trust fund. Andrew's found a great wealth management guy if you need one..."