

Reunions & Surprises

They look happy, Kate thought as she looked at the blissful photo Lexi had e-mailed from Hawaii. They needed some time alone and out of the Northwest. Funny though that they'd choose to revisit the places where they each needed to purge some baggage. Hawaii had to be a hard trip for Lexi; when she had started her Quest there, she'd churned out a short story that was a thinly disguised narrative of her romance with Mike.

Mike? Kate looked at the To: line of the e-mail. Why was Lexi sending this photo to Mike? A little revenge, perhaps? She looked at the line again. Why was she sending this photo to Jordan? They'd become closer at the wedding, but... Sirens went off in Kate's head: Lexi and Mike, Jordan and Mike. This was a Venn diagram that she should have figured out long ago. Mike was Lexi's military man from Hawaii and Jordan's mystery man from Moscow. The photo Kate had forwarded from Jordan to Lexi probably brought all her feelings of betrayal and abandonment to the surface.

Nice honeymoon gift, Kate thought. How good of me to drop that on her. I should call and apologize about, and I should probably call Jordan and give her a clue as well.

I'm an idiot. I just figured it out.

Mike is a common enough name. It was the photo that gave it away.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your honeymoon with an update on an old flame.

We needed to talk about him anyway. That's one of the reasons we came to Oahu first. A little emotional clean-up.

Still, I didn't mean to expose your past like that.

You want to expose some past? Compare Mike's photo with your father-in-law's arrest photo.

Kate didn't have to look. She knew exactly what Lexi was talking about. One of the serious looking men accompanying the handcuffed Stuart MacMillan was Mike.

Why didn't you say anything before?

What was the point? 'Oh, by the way, the really good-looking guy with Schteve's dad is the guy I hooked up with on a beach?' Did Jordan say anything to you, because I'll bet she recognized him too.

Kate snickered.

Tell me that there's not some comic relief in that? Both of you scratched up bail money for the son of the man that a guy you both slept with arrested.

I'm not sure that comic relief is the right phrase, but it is strangely coincidental. Are you going to tell Schteve?

My more immediate question is 'What am I going to tell Jordan?'

Tell her not to get attached because he can't commit. He's what you would call a 'catch and release.' She can catch him occasionally, but she'd better be ready to throw him back. And you can tell her I may still love him in some historical sense, but I'm not going to cat-fight with her about him. Maybe sometime we can compare notes...

Jordan's reaction to the revelation was a snicker similar to Kate's.

"It is a small world, isn't it? Does Lexi hate me for violating some 'girlfriend rule'?"

"No, but she does want to caution you about getting attached to him. He's not a commitment kind of guy."

"I'm not looking for commitment. An occasional dinner and follow-up breakfast work fine for me."

"You're becoming such a slut in your middle age," Kate laughed, knowing that a 40-year friendship would allow this kind of teasing.

"Like jumping your boy-toy puts you in a pious category..."

Kate shook her head. "Speaking of Steve, sort of, did you recognize Mike from the arrest picture of Steve's dad?"

"Yeah, I thought the G-man looked pretty familiar, but I didn't think it was a detail you would be too interested in at the time."

"It probably means that Steve and I shouldn't plan a double date with you and Mike."

"Scott and I would be a better choice, although there's some weirdness there, since Scott was your husband's security detail."

"You know what Jordan? We are all becoming so improbably connected we could be a case study for a Black Swan seminar," she said recalling the best seller shelved in her office.

"I'd rather be a feature story in 'Town & Country,' where my fabulous international adventures are revealed," Jordan said, "and the new complication with Mike makes the story all the more compelling."

"Speaking of fabulous adventures, what you doing tonight?" Kate asked.

"I was going to rent the DVD of 'Mamma Mia' and make popcorn. Got a better idea?"

"Rent the DVD, bring it to my place and I'll take care of getting dinner."

"Did Steve dump you for some teenager?"

"Steve has to meet with his advisor tonight, and they routinely go out for dinner. So, what time can I expect you?"

It was great spending some time with Jordan, and the movie was a totally fun chick-flick.

"If you've got some time this week, and I'm guessing that you do," Jordan said, "I'd like you to meet my friend Chloe when I got back from Moscow next week. She's trying to open a new business, and I think she could use some of your expertise."

"What kind of business?"

"A gourmet take-out specializing in comfort food. The ideal deli for stressed-out Baby Boomers living on the northeast side."

"I'd love to meet her. Does she do meatloaf?"

Steve came home about two-thirds of the way through the movie, and although the music by ABBA was completely retro to him, he sat quietly next to Kate on the sofa.

"Greece looks so beautiful," Kate said.

"Have you ever been there?" Steve asked.

"On a teacher's salary? I don't think so," Kate replied.

He didn't need to ask anything else, but he had a pretty good idea where they'd go on a vacation or on their honeymoon.

"Shit," Steve said after he hung up the phone the next morning. "I have to go to New York and make a statement, a deposition for my father's hearing."

"When?" Kate asked. "I'm free next week, and we could take a couple days in the city."

"I need to leave tomorrow. The attorneys want to meet tomorrow afternoon, and the hearing is day after tomorrow."

"I could probably find a sub for some of my classes, but I'm scheduled to do one of those seminars for Booz Allen tomorrow."

"I don't want to drag you into this," he said. "We can go to New York another time and really enjoy the city together. I'll just get a flight in, make my statement, and get the hell out."

Kate knew he'd only be gone a couple days, but it was the first time that they hadn't been together since he'd been driven away by Homeland Security in Boston. And now, Homeland Security was separating them again. She slept snuggled in his arms that night, unwilling to let him go.

The seminar was part of her consulting gig with Booz Allen and was filled with a variety of sales and marketing professionals, whose companies thought they could benefit from new media strategies. Many of them seemed bored long before the Hilton served lunch, but others seemed genuinely interested. Like teaching graduate classes, Kate thought, some are in it to fulfill a requirement and others learn something.

"Dr. Katherine Shaw and marketing metrics?" a 40-something man from her seminar said, as she finished tucking her notes into her briefcase. She looked at him, getting ready to shake his hand and give him her business card. She didn't recognize him, but a tiny little bell pinged in her head.

"And I knew you when you were just Kate and always dodging out of the math-related tasks of our group projects."

The pinging got louder. Oh, my lord, she thought, it's Sam.

"Sam Teller who was always just dodging," she said flatly. "How are you?"

"I'm good," he said, abandoning his seminar folder on her table/podium and stuffing his hands in his pants pockets. "I work with Pfizer now. I guess I don't have to ask how you are since your bio notes in the packet said most of it, and those rings say the rest."

She rolled her eyes. "You look good," she said finally. "Different, but good." Kate did have to admit that the twenty years had mellowed his precocious brat look and the pink Oxford button-down with the mauve sweater gave him a casual professional look.

"You look great, and your talk was really interesting." He seemed a little uncomfortable, as though he were searching for the right words. "Do you want to go have coffee or something?"

She closed her eyes for a moment. There is some high irony happening here, she thought; I hope that Lexi's picking up these vibes.

"That would be great," she sighed, praying that he wouldn't offer her a brownie.

Settled at a Caribou Coffee shop about a block from the Hilton where the seminar had been held, they watched each other sip hot coffee, neither quite sure where to start the conversation.

"We sort of lost touch, didn't we?" he said.

"About the time you took off with a coed for a couple weeks." She really didn't want to be mean, but she didn't want to gloss over his behavior, as though it was perfectly excusable.

He squinted at her, not so much trying to remember, but trying to understand her memory of the incident.

"That was a mistake," he said.

"Hindsight or immediate reaction?"

"Hindsight," he sighed. "I wound up marrying her after graduation and divorcing her five years later."

"I'm sorry," she said instinctively, although to herself, she was saying 'Serves you right.'

"It was for the best. It was ugly, but it gave me the chance to get out of Indianapolis and work with Searle, which is Pfizer now."

"What do you do for them?" she said, glad that they were on safe ground, even if there had been no apology.

They chatted through a second cup of coffee, discussing his job and her work at U-Chicago, sharing updates on classmates – "You still keep in touch with Lexi?" he said with some shock. "I never could figure out why you two were friends. You seemed so different." – and never straying near her current personal situation. Kate figured the rings said more than he wanted to know.

"I suppose I should get going," Kate said. "I'm sure Steve is wondering why I haven't checked in with him."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken up so much of your time."

"No, it was good to catch up," she said getting up from the table and accepting his help in putting her coat on. They threw away their cardboard cups and went out to the curb where Kate intended to hail a cab.

"It was great to see you," Sam said, before extending his arms to give her a hug.

A friendly hug and maybe a kiss on the cheek was fine, she thought, and it was only after he tried to kiss her seriously that she quickly backed up, lost her footing on the slippery sidewalk, fell off the curb and hit the cement. Sam watched her as if the scene was in slow motion. He tried to grab her before she fell, but reacted too slowly. He knelt down beside her and could tell she was breathing, but not conscious.

"Shit," he thought pulling out his cell phone to dial 911. The he checked the outside pockets of her purse and pulled out her cell phone, paged through the address book and punched the call button for Steve.

"Hey, babe," Steve said picking up the call.

"Steve?" Sam said watching for an ambulance.

"Yeah, who the hell is this?"

"My name is Sam Teller. I am a classmate of Kate's from Indiana, and I was in her seminar today."

"Yeah?"

"We went out for coffee, and she fell on Monroe Street..."

"Is she okay?" Steve said with panic rising in his voice.

"I called an ambulance, and I see it now."

"Tell them to take her to Northwestern," Steve said with authority. "If there's a problem, call me back. I'm not in town, but I'll call one of her friends to see if she can meet you at the hospital."

Sam hung up her phone and stuffed it in his pocket. He stood aside as the EMTs checked Kate's vitals, put a splint on her twisted ankle and put her on oxygen. "Take her to Northwestern," he said as they were getting ready to put her in the ambulance.

"There's an extra charge to go anywhere other than Cook County," the lead EMT said.

"I don't think that will be a problem," Sam said, glancing at her ring. "Can I ride with you?"

Steve hit the memory button on his Blackberry to dial Jordan. He got her "Out of country" message and thought about what to do next. The only thing he could think of was to call Lexi for advice. He punched the memory button next to her name.

"Lexi?" he said when the call connected.

"Steve?" His name came up on her caller ID, but she still couldn't believe that he was calling her.

"Thank God you're there. Kate's in the hospital, and I'm in New York."

"Shit, what happened? Is she okay?"

"She did a seminar and fell and passed out, I guess. Some guy named Sam was out with her for coffee, and he called an ambulance and called me."

Sam is a common name, Lexi thought to herself, but I have a bad feeling about this.

"Did he give you his last name?"

"I think so, but I don't remember. He said he went to school with you in Indiana."

Bad feeling confirmation, she thought. Sam Teller. "Yeah, I remember him."

"Can he be trusted? I can't get back to Chicago until day after tomorrow, and Jordan's out of the country."

"How about Kate's mom?"

"In Arizona until May. Can I trust Sam?"

Loaded question, she thought frantically, but this is not the time to drop that story on him, and I'm not the person to do it.

"I can red-eye in if you want," she offered.

"You're on your honeymoon with Andrew. He hates me enough already, without having you fly off to Chicago. If Sam's a friend of hers, I'll just ask him for a couple favors until I get there. It didn't sound like Kate was seriously hurt; she fell, and he didn't say anything about it being really bad, like getting hit by a car or anything..."

"He was a friend," Lexi conceded. "I'm sure he can help you for a day or two." I hope, she thought, trying to focus her thoughts on Kate.

Steve called Kate's phone and hoped that Sam still had it.

"Hello?" Sam said tentatively as he watched the EMTs and orderlies push Kate on a gurney into the bowels of the hospital, after he had filled out some paperwork after rummaging through her purse for information. Fortunately, she was as organized as ever – he remembered calling her obsessive/compulsive in school – and everything was available in her wallet. Plus she had a collection of credit cards to match her diamonds...

"Hey, this is Steve. How serious is she?"

"I think she broke her ankle, but she may have hit her head. She wasn't bleeding though, and she didn't stop breathing."

Damn good thing, Steve thought, because if you'd given her mouth-to-mouth, I'd probably have to kill you. "Okay. I can't get in touch with Kate's friends in Chicago, and I can't get back until day after tomorrow. Any chance you could keep track of her until I get there?"

I have two cups of coffee with a woman I haven't talked to in twenty years, and now I am going to take care of her? Sam thought. But I'm not heartless, so hard could it be?

"Sure," he said, grateful that since Pfizer was a health care firm, his employer might have some empathy for his situation.

Sam shuffled uncomfortably in the waiting room, not quite sure what he should do. He wanted to make sure Kate was alright, but he wondered if he should get something to eat or go back to the hotel to change clothes. He opted for sitting down to watch inane television shows until Kate's cell phone rang. Figuring it was Steve, Sam answered the call.

"Steve?" said Sam surprised that he would call back so soon.

"Sam?" Lexi asked.

"Yeah, who's this?"

"A voice from the past. It's Lexi Michaels Cameron."

"Shit, this has been a week for reunions. How did you know that I'd pick up the phone?"

"Steve called me to check on your reliability."

"I'm guessing you vouched for me," he said, "since I've been assigned to check on Kate."

"Knowing Steve, he'll make it worth your while." She wanted to say that Sam owed it to Kate, and this might be his last chance for redemption, but she thought this might be a conversation he should have with Kate.

"Kate said you two still were in touch. That's amazing."

"We might as well be sisters. We've been through a lot together."

"So what's the deal with this guy, Steve?"

"They love each other, they got married in Vegas, they have an incredible amount of money." This was another conversation that he needed to have with Kate if she wanted to.

"So what about you? What are you doing? Where are you?"

"I live in Seattle, although I'm in Hawaii right now. I'm married for the second time. My husband and I have a great dog. I'm working on motivational writings and programs that Kate and Steve set up a marketing plan for, and we have yet to test it."

"So Steve and Kate work together?"

"You can say that," she said smiling to herself. There was way too much that she'd have to leave to Kate to explain if she chose to. "What about you? What you doing these days?"

Lexi really didn't care, because she wasn't the one that had been so obsessed with him in grad school, but she listened to his brief biographical sketch. She got the feeling he was single, and that idea made her a little nervous. She was sure Kate wouldn't cheat on Steve, but she never would've imagined Kate would have cheated on Bill. She didn't know how Steve might react to Kate and Sam together, even casually. And she didn't know Sam well enough at all to even guess what his motives might be. She'd have to stay tuned in, using her psychic skills.

"Just thought I'd check on you," Lexi said, "considering I put my reputation on the line for you."

"I won't let anybody down," Sam said, wondering even more about the matrix of relationships he'd walked into.

About an hour later, a doctor came out of the doors to the main hospital area and talked with a nurse. She looked around the waiting room and pointed him out.

"You're here with Dr. Shaw?" the young doctor asked him.

"I brought her in," he said, and I can get her husband on the phone if you need to talk with him..."

"No, I just wanted to let you know that she is out of surgery and her ankle has been set. There were no complications, but we did give her a sedative so she'll sleep through the night."

"Thank you," Sam said, breathing a sigh of relief even though he didn't think it was really serious. "Can I see her?"

"She's in Recovery, but we'll be taking her to her room shortly if you want to wait there."

Sam got the room number from the nurse after she checked the computer, and he roamed his way through the hospital corridors until he found it. He sat down in the corner and waited for her to appear.

When the orderlies wheeled her in and put her in bed, a nurse followed to hang up close in the closet. "We took all her personal effects and jewelry, and put them all in an envelope at the nurses station."

"I think you might want to take the envelope to some administrative office and put it in a safe." He remembered the diamonds and sapphires in her rings alone and suspected that they weren't costume jewelry. "That's for your protection as well as to keep her stuff safe." The nurse nodded and left him alone with Kate.

He looked at her sleeping and had a 20-some-year-old flash of memory. He remembered her falling asleep on his sofa after they spent an evening studying economics. She had been a little weak on calculus principles, so some of the economic equations needed decoding. What

happened that night? he asked himself. I know I didn't sleep with her, because I never slept with her. Did I just leave her sleeping on the sofa?

He pulled her cell phone out of his pocket and speed dialed Steve.

"Kate?" Steve said, hopefully.

"Still just me," Sam said. "She's out of surgery and doing great, no complications, but they sedated her for the night. I thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks. I really appreciate your help."

"I'll stop in tomorrow morning," Sam promised, "but I'll leave her phone here for in case she wakes up early."

When Sam appeared the next morning with a cup of coffee and a muffin from Starbucks, Kate was awake, and judging her ready acceptance of him being, Sam assumed she had already spoken with Steve.

"Thank you for getting me here. Steve told me you talked to him."

"I'm guessing he's connected to the rings that the nurses are holding for you."

"Yeah, he's attached to them; we got married a few weeks ago."

"I've talked to him a couple times now, but I don't know anything except his first name is Steve. And he's in New York. Care to share any details?"

"Oh, this is the story that makes you running off with the coed seem like a minor drama," she laughed. She talked about their research trip to Chicago and San Francisco, about the encounters with her ex-husband and the private investigator, their move to Boston, the research paper they wrote, the subsequent recognition and the opportunities in Chicago, but she quite consciously avoided both his age and role as her grad student, as well as his father's legal complications.

Kate didn't even realize how long they'd been talking until the nurse came in with her lunch on a tray.

"I'm sure you have better things to do," she said. "You don't have an obligation to keep me entertained."

"I told Steve that I'd take care of you. I'll let you rest this afternoon, they'll come back with dinner. Should I pick up a pizza?"

Kate's reaction was very well masked terror. "A salad would be fine, thank you."

Hey.

Hey, how are you? Steve called to say you were in the hospital.

Broken ankle in a cast... I'm okay. Steve called you?

Yeah, I was pretty surprised too. He was checking up on Sam Teller.

Some irony there, huh? I was doing the seminar, and a guy in the class stopped to talk to me afterwards, and it was Sam. We went out for coffee and talked for a while...

I talked to him yesterday. How does he look?

Good, fairly normal.

No more Garfield underwear?

He called an ambulance and came with me to the hospital, and apparently called Steve on my cell phone. And he told Steve he would take care of me...

Oh, that is classic. You connected with Steve over a brownie that you thought Sam had given you...

Don't go there. We've just talked.

Is that all you want to do?

Don't go there, Lexi. I'm very happy with Steve, and the most I would want from Sam is some vague apology for being such a shithead.

Like that's going to happen 20 years later?

One can hope.

Sam did come back with dinner, a Cobb salad and a mocha frappucino for her and a Stromboli for himself.

"I was looking through my seminar notes," Sam said over dinner, "and I paid more attention to your list of sources. You obviously rely a lot on the paper you wrote, and I couldn't help but notice that your co-author was named Steve. Would that be..."

She nodded, sipping her drink.

"He seems to be the only one of your sources who doesn't have a doctorate."

"He's finishing it up. He's a quant jock like you are, which made him ideal to work with." Among other reasons, she thought to herself. "Actually, his dissertation is an application of the model we developed in the original paper. We put together a marketing and product plan for a nonprofit fundraiser, and his paper is going to compare the results of traditional marketing and new media market."

"It's good that you guys can work together. I don't know many couples who could."

"Lexi and her husband work together, or they were working together," she commented.

"I still can't believe that you and Lexi are still in touch. She called yesterday, by the way. I don't think I've talked to anybody from grad school, except for you and Lexi in years."

"I talked to her this morning. She wants to know if you still wear Garfield underwear."

Before he left, Sam explained that he really did have to do some work tomorrow, but he'd come by in the afternoon. He also knew that Steve was due back in Chicago tomorrow and curiosity was killing him. Kate had been so sketchy with details, highly unusual for a woman who had always been willing to dump her life on the coffee table. Sam did remember that about her; she was very honest and he had always thought very open and forthcoming.

He reappeared at about 2:30 the next afternoon and found that Steve had indeed returned and was sitting by Kate's bed holding her hand. Sam watched them talking quietly to each other, never breaking their adoring gaze at one another. He wondered how old this guy was and what exactly he and Kate had together. He wasn't some kid that might have been in her classes, but he had to be thirty tops. "You must be Steve," he said extending his hand for a handshake.

Steve spun to face him head on. "Yeah, you're Sam?"

"Sam Teller," he said putting his hand in his pocket since Steve did not seem inclined to shake it.

"Yeah, thanks for calling me, and the ambulance. What happened?"

"I was in her seminar at the Hilton, and since we knew each other from grad school, we went out for coffee after the seminar," Sam explained. "After we finished, we went outside so Kate could get a cab, and she slipped and fell off the curb."

"And she passed out?"

"She may have hit her head..."

"Excuse me," Kate said, "but I am in the room."

Both Sam and Steve spun their heads to look at her.

"Sorry, babe," Steve said. "I want to thank Sam," he said, "for getting you to the hospital and checking on you while I was out of town."

"It wasn't exactly what I would've chosen for a college reunion," Sam said, "but it was no problem, and it was good to talk to Kate after so many years."

"You were at Indiana together?" Steve asked. Sam was definitely younger than Kate, but definitely older than he was. Steve couldn't help but wonder what had happened between them twenty years ago. Dammit, he thought, Lexi would know, but there's no way she would tell me. He'd ask Kate when the moment was right.

"Yeah," Sam said. "We had a few classes together, most of which she aced while I struggled."

"I aced them because I applied myself," Kate explained coolly.

"You aced them, because you understood what the professor wanted and you expressed yourself very well. Remember your answers on the statistics final?"

She rolled her eyes. "I remember writing something like 'if we really cared what the chances were of the two trains hitting one another, we'd take the bus.'"

"And then I believe you calculated the right answer, so you got it right, and you made the professor laugh. How about your extremely scientific method for calculating consumer spending for the GNP predictions?"

"Okay, you guys were all doing differential equations, and I was figuring out how much I might spend. My estimate was just as good as any of yours."

Steve found that exchange interesting, because he sensed a mutual admiration behind their competition.

"Well, before I waste any more of your time skipping down memory lane with your wife," Sam said, "I'll get back on the road and back to my job. It was good to see you again, Kate. Maybe next time we can have coffee without paramedics."

"I'll walk you to the elevator," Steve said, standing up.

"Thanks for keeping me company," Kate said. "Call me if you have any questions about the material I presented at the seminar."

"Thanks again for helping," Steve said, shaking Sam's hand at the elevator.

"Really, it wasn't a big deal. It was fun to catch up."

"It was a big deal to me," Steve said, "and I hope you'll accept this as a gesture of gratitude." He handed Sam an envelope before he got in the elevator, and Sam casually stuck it in his pocket, figuring it was one of Kate's thank you notes.

Sam didn't even think about it until the next day at the office when he was looking for a business card that he got from another seminar participant. He pulled the envelope out of his pocket to read the note which he assumed Kate had written, but the note simply said ' thanks' with five \$100 bills enclosed. Pretty good compensation for a salad and coffee, Sam thought, but I suspect there's more to it than that.

Damn it!

Mike looked at the picture of Lexi and her new husband in Hawaii. Why the hell had he taken her there? Or was it her idea? Not that he could stop her from going there, and taking him with, but did they have to go THERE – to their place?

Why the hell do I care?

Because I still love her.

Mike had conveniently avoided that truth, over and over again, the last four years. He knew he couldn't be near Lexi, but he could certainly track her. And that he did.

Over the years, he'd tracked her credit record and charges, watching the trail of what she did and did not do. Her bank accounts indicated her several employers over the years, and Lexi was quite revealing in that blog she posted each month. He knew her moves, and most of her stories, but not all the details.

When he saw the Marriage License come up on her background check last year, he was more than interested, and verged on shocked. It didn't take long to check on Andrew Cameron. Clean guy, no record of anything devious. A few minor misdemeanors in Arizona and California in his twenties, but was building a good lifestyle and good standing. If Lexi had to pick anyone but Mike, Andrew would be good for her. And the picture was proof.

But he wasn't sure why Lexi allowed loyalty to a long term friend get her into that mess with McMillan, and that mess was about to turn into a crises when the real news came out at the trial. Mike knew that Lexi must have felt pressed against a wall to bail that misfit kid out of jail, especially when he discovered that Lexi's childhood friend mailed her the pictures from her FBI file that resulted from her association with Kate and her new husband. Lexi was in the thick of it, and he knew she didn't want to be there.

Mike still felt protective of Lexi and monitored her e-mails to Kate, finding an interesting link to someone named Jordan. It was a way to get close to Lexi, but not let her know, and have some fun in the process. Sex was important to Mike, but his job and concern for Lexi rose above that carnal need. By being close to Jordan, he could monitor communications between the 3 women to keep tabs on Lexi, and see if anything on McMillan came up in the process.

He almost blew it last year when he got cornered by McMillan's international "associates" for three days and couldn't communicate with his staff. But Lexi "found" him, knew he was safe, and told his 2nd in command about it. He was secretly relieved when his highly trained team came and got him

and led him to safety. Mike felt even more indebted and in love with Lexi. The two of them secretly watched out for each other, using any "communication" means possible.

And this e-mailed picture was a reminder that Lexi was the most intelligent woman he'd ever met, and that a 3-way e-mail to him, Jordan and Kate proved her point. Lexi was sending a message to him that she was on to him, knew about his relationship with Jordan, and probably guessed there was much more than coincidence at work.

There was only one thing to do. Break off all communication with Jordan. It was too dangerous to get near her, now that Lexi knew about it, and she may soon guess that he was in the relationship to get information on McMillan, and keep tabs on her in the process.

Mike looked at the blinking cursor on his email, knowing there was one thing he could do.

To: Lexi@CameronDesigns.com

From: 125Man@msn.com

Re: Congratulations

Lexi,

Congratulations. You look very happy and I wish you the best.

I'm going to do a disappearing act with Jordan. You know why. Don't let on to her or Kate that you know about it.

Stay away from the newlyweds.

If you need me, use my old e-mail. I'm taking this one down.

Mike

Lexi took Andrew to the Buddhist Temple in the Valley of the Temples as part of her tour of the island. It was a quiet place for them to relax and take in the silence of the lush surroundings of the replica of a 900-year-old Japanese temple. They returned to their hotel, and then went to sunny Waikiki beach, sunning and swimming the afternoon away. On the walk back from the beach, they stopped at her favorite fast food tourist restaurant, getting the large, cheap soft serve chocolate ice cream cone she remembered and loved. Lexi and Andrew laughed and held hands on the leisurely walk back to their hotel, enjoying the scent of Plumeria flowers that filled the park near their hotel.

When they arrived back at their hotel, an onslaught of messages greeted them both. Andrew had a couple of 911 business emergencies to handle so she took her phone down to the plush, quiet European styled lobby to answer her e-mails.

Just as she sat down, there was the call from Steve that Kate was in the hospital. Really, could those two have just a little bit MORE drama in their life? She felt a pang of anxiety knowing that Kate was in the hospital, but more of a stab of anger when she heard that Sam – for godsakes – SAM??? – was there with her.

She remembered what an immature jerk he was in graduate school. MENSA grade intelligence packed into the maturity of a pre-teen, with the sex drive of a 17-year-old, prompting him to go off with the blond ditz, leaving Kate in his dust as he scooted out of town. Now Karma was at work, bringing the two of them back together, probably to work out the past.

After talking to Steve, and then Sam, Lexi sat contemplating what to do next. She felt a sister-like protection toward Kate, and could only remember the goofy Sam of twenty years ago. During the phone call, she made sure to get Sam's contact info in case she needed him, always desiring to be prepared in case of future emergencies. She e-mailed him a note after the phone call to make sure he had her contact information in case Sam needed to get in touch with Lexi. At the end of it, she added a warning –

Sam, I swear to god, if you hurt her again, I will come and kick your ass. You got that? You just about killed her 20 years ago. Trust me, you don't want to get in the middle of her new marriage. Keep it friendly – and keep your hands off her. ~ Lexi

Lexi looked out the window. What an asshole. First Sam, then Steve. How did Kate find these guys anyhow? She let out a frustrated sigh and glanced down at the rest of her emails.

Despite the 85 degree heat, Lexi felt a cold shiver. She read the brief e-mail from Mike, reading the words 3-4 times to get their meaning. And then a psychic flare arose. This wasn't a convenient dalliance that Mike had had with Jordan, it was part of a mission to nail McMillan. She saw flashes of Steve's dad again. Wasn't that trial coming up soon? Lexi sat still as a wave of nausea overtook her. Last year's international incident might have been rough, but it felt like the trial was going to be rougher.

She wasn't going to be able to save Steve - or Kate - this time.

"Are you okay?????"

"Um...what??"

"Lexi – you're white as a sheet! Are you feeling okay?" Andrew sat next to her, hugging her close and worried about her condition.

Lexi inhaled, feeling the life return to her. "Yeah, I'll be okay. Give me a minute. Can you get me some water?"

Andrew walked to the complimentary drink bar, returning with a bottle of Pellegrino. "Here – I wish you drank alcohol. I'd give you a shot of whiskey."

"Sometimes, I wish I drank too." Lexi felt the bubbles slide down her throat.

"What happened? You look like someone just died." Andrew held her hand, making sure she was coming back to earth.

"Kate's in the hospital....."

"Is she dead??"

"No..no...nothing like that. She broke her ankle falling off a curb. Steve's out of town giving a deposition for his dad's trial. But the guy who was with Kate is her old flame from college who broke her heart 20 years ago."

"Oh god. Is she cheating on Steve already – like she did with Bill?"

Andrew did have a point. Why were Kate and Sam talking together, anyway? Outside – away from the conference? They were meeting together – maybe Kate wanted to revisit an old flame? "I don't know. I haven't spoken to her yet. But I trust Sam about 5% less than I trust Steve. So I spoke to Sam – and also warned him to keep his hands off her."

"You certainly are protective of her, despite all the crap she seems to get herself into."

"But the part that makes me sick is that whatever comes up next, I won't be able to help her." Lexi took another sip of the bubbly drink, bringing her back to life.

"You're turning white again. This must be bad."

"I need to explain something first – about Mike."

A defensiveness came up around Andrew, indicating that he thought the subject matter was – OVER.

"He's trying to protect me – protect us."

"Wow. I just gotta hear this." Andrew's snippy attitude indicated that he was not entirely open to the impending conversation.

"He and Jordan did not hook up out of mere coincidence. He sought her out."

"To get near you?"

"Partly. But to stay near the McMillan case. Remember when I showed you the newspaper article where he was one of the arresting officers? Today he sent me this in response to the picture of us that I e-mailed him yesterday." She picked up her phone and showed his e-mail to Andrew.

Andrew read the congratulations and warning. "Fuck." Andrew leaned back into the deep green, jacquard sofa. "Does this mean I have an FBI file too?"

"Probably. Look, Mike can be an asset if we absolutely, positively, need him."

"Or...we could just stay away from Kate and Steve."

"That too.....but the reason it makes me sick to my stomach is that Kate and Steve are about to get slammed with something and nothing I can do will help them. I can feel it in my bones and 'see' that it's about to happen."

Andrew leaned over to hold her closely. "I know this hurts, Lexi, but they have to face their own issues, right? Maybe it's time you let them do that – even if you feel like she's family. You gotta let them do their own thing."

"I know, I know...."

"Just don't go contacting Mike without me knowing about it, okay?"

"I won't. And you need to remember that YOU are the one I love, YOU are the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. Can you remember that?"

Andrew heaved a heavy sigh. "You're a lot more complicated than the business woman I thought I knew."

"That's why we came here – to 'meet' each other, right? And I still have some questions for you."

"Like what?"

"How about we go to the Big Island tonight instead of tomorrow and get started on our REAL vacation?"

"How about we use the room – one more time – to work off some frustration?" He smiled at her, pulling her up from the couch.

"Me...frustrated? Never....."

"Well I'm frustrated. I just got four new contracts – all due at the same time. You're not going to see much of me when I get back home."

As she stood there in his comforting embrace, a flash of insight came to her. "That's okay. I'm going to be busy too."

"Doing what?"

"Writing."

They exchanged their tickets for the last two seats on the 7 p.m. plane to Kona, a 40-minute flight with a moonlit view of the ocean. Lexi was excited to leave Kate's tragedies as well as her own emotional baggage, back on Oahu. She and Andrew would have to savor these next few days since it might be the last time they had together for a while. They had rented a condo for their stay, a nice private change from a hotel that allowed them to create their own 'home' while on the island for the next five days.

Lexi got to bed early as usual, feeling emotionally exhausted after a full day of touring Waikiki and confronting emotional issues. She arose around 3 a.m. to find herself sleeping alone. Lexi arose, wandered around the condo, not finding Andrew anywhere. She stepped out onto the balcony overlooking the ocean, to see his familiar tall frame standing near the beach. She slipped on her bathing suit and beach robe to go down stairs to join him.

Andrew turned around in the moonlight to watch her approaching him. "I'm glad you joined me. I was just wishing you were here. I know you had a big day and needed to rest, but I still felt a little geared up, so I came out here."

Lexi stood next to her husband, admiring the moonlight on the lapping waves. "It's beautiful." She snuggled into his shoulder, breathing in his scent, and relishing his strong arms around her. "I'm glad we came here."

"Lexi, I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't bumped into you that day and taken you to lunch. It scares me to know what a random event that was. I watched you coming down the sidewalk and I couldn't take my eyes off of you. But you were so distracted and upset. All I knew was that I had to know you."

"I think Dakota helped a bit. I'm a sucker for dogs."

"That you are. I think he had you spotted too. He hadn't had any female attention in a long time."

"And neither had you!" Lexi reached up to kiss him lightly. "But do you think you know me, Andrew? I mean you just said you wanted to know me when you first met me and this afternoon said that I'm different than who you expected."

"No, I don't think I know you. I learn more every day. But that's also what makes me get up in the morning, knowing that I have a life full of surprises ahead of me with you in my life."

You have no idea, Lexi thought to herself. "What do you think about the surprises so far?"

"Other than all the Kate and Steve stuff? Nothing I can't handle. That Quest Adventure surprised and scared me, but I knew you'd be back."

"Is there anything you want to know that you haven't found out yet?" Lexi was instantly afraid of what his questions might be.

"Well, I am concerned about this whole Mike thing. You guys have a strange relationship, if you can call it that. But I guess if I can hang onto my dead wife for 25 years, you can have your odd past too – as long as it doesn't jeopardize us now."

"It won't. I will PROMISE you that. As I told you, I can't be with him, and honestly, I don't want to. He has a life of drama that would leave me in constant worry, and that would turn me into my mother, and I just can't do that to myself. Anything else?"

"What about the whole 'firing yourself from Cameron Designs' deal? I could really use you in my business."

"I know you could. But I would die of boredom out of obligation to you. The one thing you should ALWAYS remember is that I get bored easily and need new experiences and information. I believe in growing and learning, and being your accountant and business manager made me feel stagnated after I got it up and running smoothly."

"I'll try to remember that was a compliment and that you are not insinuating that my business bores you."

Lexi pinched him on his firm behind. "It was a compliment. I think it's amazing that you are expanding your business with new clients and ideas, and I think you should have a staff that really wants to help you do that. It's something I can't do."

"I wouldn't have been able to grow my business so fast if it hadn't been for you. I hate to lose you."

"You'll do fine. And if you really need my advice, I'll give it to you. I'm not totally bailing on you. I do sleep with you at night, so I think you know where to find me if you have problems."

"Except when you go off on your quest."

"Hey Mister, I needed that time. It helped me figure out that I need a career for myself. And I am in the position to finally do what I want to do – write and motivate others."

"My only concern about that is that there are a ton of people who do that. I mean, just look at the infomercials out there on "How to Change Your Life in 30 minutes or less." What are you going to write about? And Marketing – did Kate and Steve give you any decent ideas?"

"Yes, they did give me good ideas. Marketing has to be done through multiple channels, and HAS to incorporate the internet. Even if I get a strong niche of people and am not nationally known, I'm okay with that." Lexi stepped back to look him in the eye. "That's how I am in service to others and what I was meant to do. All the experience I got from crunching endless numbers and finding a meaning behind them, from designing business plans for executives who don't have any idea how to run a business, and working with abusive bosses and overcoming the hurt, and basically saving clueless leaders from themselves – is how I can inspire others. There has to be an audience who still believes in being authentic within themselves and strives to be leaders for others. And I'm going to find them."

Lexi felt it in her core that this was her mission, and why she had put up with 25 years of working in crisis situations. People had forgotten who they are, what they can do, and how they can lead others to remember their potential.

"You want to change the world, don't you Mrs. Cameron?"

"Yes, I do Mr. Cameron."

Andrew felt that he had gotten a deeper insight into his wife, making her all the more enticing since he knew that she was his no matter what. He'd seen first hand her loyalty toward him, Kate, and even Mike, and knew he could trust her with his decision, the one he'd made out here in the moonlight alone, without her.

"Lexi, I'm going to sell my business."

"EXCUSE ME???"

"I'm going to sell it after this year. And after that, I'm going to be your manager, or assistant, or whatever way I can help you. You're going to be on the road, meeting a lot of people, and I need to be there with you."

"You have that much faith in me?"

"That and I don't want to do landscaping anymore."

"Why not?"

"I was standing out here tonight, and the thought hit me – why am I running a landscape design company anyhow? I got into it by accident, because I loved plants and knew how to work with them. But now, people don't care about the plants, they want a certain 'look' that goes with their McMansion. The owners of these huge estates don't even go into their yards – they just hire people to take care of them, and most of these maintenance guys spend a few minutes whacking away at my work and then they leave. So why am I doing this work anyway?"

"Wow, I didn't know you felt that way."

"I didn't either, until about an hour ago."

"If you don't feel it's a creative outlet for you anymore, then I don't think you need to do it anymore. I know you need to do what you need to do. That's why I want to write. But are you sure helping me in my business would make you happy? I just don't want you going off on a Quest if you don't need to."

Andrew drew her close. "I want to be with my wife. And I like how my wife inspires people to do things they normally wouldn't do."

"But if you find something you're drawn to do, you'll tell me, right?"

"I will. In fact, right now I am inspired to make love to my wife, right here on the beach." Andrew removed her beach robe, seeing the floral bathing suit underneath. He took off her top, reaching down to gently massage her breasts. Lexi felt a great sigh unexpectedly heave from her as he lowered her down on the blanket. The two lovers embraced under the moonlight, letting go as they had not done before, not feeling the restrictions of time, responsibility or expectation. This trip was about getting to know each other in a deeper and meaningful way, and this was another way to explore and excite each other with new revelations.

After laying together, naked under the stars, they stood up, embracing each other closely. "Lexi, I don't really care what you do, I just want to be there with you, okay?"

"I'll be here, right by your side. And I'll promise you I'll be honest with you if you'll be honest with me."

"I promise."

"So I need to ask you one question. Was that the best sex you've ever had or what!???"

Trying to hide their giggling from their neighbors, Lexi and Andrew managed to gather their belongings and walk back half-naked into their condo just before sunrise. They were covered with sand, salt, and body fluid, and desperately needing the shower they took together. They crawled in bed for an early morning nap, being awakened a few hours later by Lexi's ringing phone. She looked at the receiver, saw it was Kate, and answered the phone.

Unable to sleep through their phone call from Kate's hospital bed, Andrew got up to make coffee and heat up water for Lexi's morning tea. A few minutes later, a sleepy Lexi walked into the kitchen to embrace her husband and smell the eggs and bacon he was cooking for breakfast.

"How is she?"

"Kate's still in the hospital, but should be released today. Apparently, Steve must have given his deposition in record time in New York, and flew back to meet her. And....Steve ran into her old flame."

"That sounds ugly."

"Kate's good manners always seem to smooth over rough situations, and if that doesn't work, Steve likes to use cash. But I just can't help but feel there was more to this meeting with Sam the Old Flame than she's telling me. I just cannot picture the two of them having a friendly cup of coffee after 20 years. There were too many sparks in that relationship for them to be supremely cordial to each other."

"Most guys just remember the sex they used to have with the woman and are thinking about that during the entire conversation."

Andrew's honesty could floor Lexi, but she loved it. "Really???"

"Oh yeah. Guys never forget a good lay. Whatever front he was putting on was totally fake. And especially if he had her alone, he probably made a move on her. She just might not be willing to tell you about it."

Lexi felt a ring of truth in what Andrew was saying, and remembered an instance where a married male friend grabbed her and stuck his tongue down her throat when he found a moment alone with her during her engagement party to Kurt. The male sex drive could make them do things a woman would never understand. "I'll have to interrogate Kate when she's feeling better."

They ate a leisurely breakfast on the lanai overlooking the ocean, planning their activities for the day. Both of them were still worn out after a late night, so they decided on a driving trip around the island to get their bearings. Between the ocean beaches and volcanoes, there would be a lot to do in the next four days. Thankfully, there were no more emergencies for either of them to address, either personally or professionally, and they had the time alone to get to know each other on a more personal and intimate level than they had before.

On their final day together, she called Kate to see how she was recuperating.

Hey.

Hey back.

So is that cast putting a crimp in your sex life?

Not as much as the pain killers. We've learned to work around the new foot "accessory".

Is that what the AMA calls it?

No, just a new marketing term we came up with.

I really don't want to know about this, Kate.

You started it.

Moving on....how are you doing?

I broke my ankle in about 7 places, so I really have a long recovery time ahead of me. It's rough to get around....

But I am sure that your doting husband has figured out a way to have servants assist you.

Yes, he did. We have a maid who comes in every day to clean up and a visiting Physical Therapist who makes sure I get up and move around to exercise. I'm trying to find someone to bring in meals since I'm kind of tired of pizza.

Helloooo....is this Kate??? Tired of pizza???

After you've had it three meals a day for 4 days straight, yeah it's a bit much. But Jordan has a friend who I am trying to get in touch with who does meals for Boomers. I may do a trade with her...

Will you be holding up a cardboard sign on the street corner that says, 'Will do Marketing for Food?'

Kate laughed. If I could actually get to the street corner, I would. I'm going to get one of those little scooters for my leg so I can wheel down the hallways at work. They're just a bit hard to maneuver in the snow and slush right now. So I am stuck at home doing webinars for my classes and grading everything online. For all they know, I'm teaching from a cave somewhere.

I remember having a few professors who felt like they were teaching from a cave even though they were in the room. Anyway.... I have to ask you a question.

Kate felt an uncomfortable feeling in her stomach, as though she were about to get busted for something she did not want to reveal. Shoot.

So what was the deal with Sam?

I told you. I met him in my seminar and we went out for coffee. Kate was trying to be strategic by not revealing more information than was safe to explore.

And....

I fell off a curb and he took me to the hospital.

Let's explore the logistics, shall we, Kate? Unless you were conducting your seminar on the Chicago sidewalks in February, I need a little help understanding how you got from the inside to the outside of the building.

Lexi was starting an inquisition that would put a "Law and Order" episode to shame, and Kate knew it. The coffee shop was across the street.

You're giving very stilted answers.

It was just COFFEE!

I don't believe you. You're giving one-line answers and being snippy. There's more to it than that.

Okay, fine! HE KISSED ME, OKAY??? ARE YOU HAPPY NOW?

Did you kiss him back?

Kind of...I can't remember...I fell and then I was in the hospital.

What was it like with him staying with you for two days?

Weird. I had a lot of memories from 20 years ago, but I think I must be feeling....married.

Why?

I suddenly felt like a married Quaker woman who was spending unchaperoned time with a single man and that I was going to get into trouble for it.

I think you would be going to hell for much worse things that you've done.

But I kind of...wanted him, you know?

You're not fantasizing about a threesome with Sam and Steve, are you?

Hey...you have an idea there.

Ick. If you continue, I'm going to have to tell Steve that his Quaker wife wanted a man who used to wear Garfield boxer shorts. They both snickered for a bit before continuing. But seriously, did anything happen?

No, I think after injuring myself after kissing me, he backed off.

There might have been another reason.

What?

I e-mailed Sam to stay away from you and keep his hands off of you or I would kick his ass.

I guess I should be flattered, but you didn't have to do that.

Well, I did for me at least. Lexi decided to carefully explore another topic. So Steve got home from New York okay?

Yeah, his deposition went fine. Shouldn't be any problems. I think he has to testify for a day, but we won't know when for a few weeks. So how's Hawaii?

Lexi couldn't tell her about Mike's e-mail or the impending McMillan doom, so she focused on her explorations of Hawaii and her and Andrew's planned career changes.

Wow, sounds like Hawaii has done a world of good for the both of you.

In more ways than I can explain. We're coming home tomorrow to start our next chapter, but I will be sorry to leave this place.

So why don't you just move there?

We are.

WHAT????

At least part time. It's probably going to be a year, but we both love the Kona area on the Big Island and are going to see if we can buy a place to live here a few months a year. Don't worry, I'll have an extra bedroom for guests!

"We're still doing honesty right?" Steve asked.

"Of course," Kate said, shifting a little in her chair to make her ankle more comfortable.

"You haven't asked about my deposition, but I figure I should tell you something about it."

"If you want to tell me, go ahead." Kate was very curious about what he'd been asked and what he'd said, but she wanted to make sure he felt comfortable about talking about it.

"They asked a lot of questions about where my father and I had gone, what countries we visited, and whom he met with. Most of the time my answer was that we'd gone to a certain place, and I was a teenager, and I wasn't paying attention to what my father did. I was more concerned about going to clubs that I was too young to go to and meeting girls."

She smiled at his confession. "So it wasn't all seminars at the G-8 conference, huh?"

"Not all seminars," he laughed. "They asked about financial things I had no clue about, and they had a few questions about my life and my academics and a couple about you."

"Me?"

"They were curious about how we met, and why we were living together in Boston, and if we got married so you couldn't testify against me."

"What would I testify about?" Kate asked. "How you seduced me with a Starbucks brownie? How you did all the math stuff for our marketing model? How you took me to Paris to propose?"

He shook his head. "I think they were fishing. Most of their questions made no sense. I think it was pretty clear that I didn't need to testify."

"I'm glad. I just want this to be over so we can get on with our lives."

"Can I ask you a question now?"

"Sure."

"What's the story with you and Sam? Did you have something with him in school?"

We promised honesty, Kate thought. Maybe it's time I admit things to myself, as well as telling the truth.

"Sam was one of my classmates, and we had a couple classes together. We had to work together on some group projects, case studies, other assignments. We got along really well. We shared the same kind of sense of humor and something of a disdain for the intensity of many of the students.

"I was about to crash 30," she said. "You'll understand that in a couple years..." That made her cringe to realize she was talking about a transition that she had experienced 20 years ago and he was yet to reach.

"I guess I saw Sam as a lifeline to get me through that. He was young, and I guess he saw me had some kind of stability. I convinced myself I loved him, and when the relationship didn't go anywhere, I felt betrayed in some ways. We never slept together; I don't know that he even kissed me. We just spent a lot of time together, and I thought we shared a lot."

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes to remember.

"If this is too hard," he said, "you don't have to talk about it."

"It's important to talk about it," she shrugged. "Sam accidentally became a part of my life again, and it's important for you to know what he was and what he wasn't to me because you trusted him."

"What did you love about him?"

"He was different, he played piano, but he also played soccer so we hung out with the IU soccer team instead of the accounting club. His father was a doctor, and extremely disappointed that his son abandoned biology to study business."

"He was a bio major?"

"Why do you think I understand fractals and chaos theory? He challenged me to learn different things, the same way my high school 'love of life' and encouraged me to read Jack Kerouac."

"What happened?"

"He hooked up with an undergrad, probably from a class he was a TA for, put her on the back of his motorcycle, and disappeared for two weeks. When he came back, he was definitely attached to her, and I was just another classmate. We didn't ever really talk after that, except about class."

"He was kind of a shit. I'm surprised you could be so cordial to him."

"It's been 20 years, and there's some poetic justice in him attending my seminar, and then being forced to rescue me."

"How did you fall?"

"I backed up too fast and slipped off the curb."

Steve wasn't going to let this go. "Why did you back up?"

We promised honesty, she reminded herself. "Because he kissed me, and if he was trying to make up for something 20 years ago, he was too damn late because I am so over him and so in love with you."

"He kissed you?" Steve paused for a moment, picturing the scene and thinking about how she phrased her narration. "Serious kiss, huh?"

"More serious than a polite peck on the cheek, more serious than I was comfortable with..."

Steve knew he was about to jab the dagger into his heart with the next question, but he had to ask. "You weren't comfortable with your response, were you?"

Damn, he knows me, she thought. But, he asked for honesty...

"I probably didn't put up enough initial resistance. I mean, I didn't let him stick his tongue down my throat or anything. But maybe I was curious enough about what kissing him would be like that I didn't push him away or slap him when I knew it was coming." She looked away from him because watching his reaction hurt too much. "I'm sorry."

"And then he became your hospital companion because I asked him. That must have been damn uncomfortable."

"I think I was so medicated I didn't feel much of anything. We talked, but never mentioned the kiss, and it certainly didn't happen again. I didn't get a declaration of penance for his behavior in grad school, but I got a subtle revenge."

"Subtle revenge?"

"His first kiss was nothing compared to yours," she said, "so if I ever had any fantasy about Sam, I flushed it. You are everything I want."