

Dissolving & Warning

"Kate Shaw, this is my friend Chloe Sadovski," Jordan said, making introductions after Kate limped from the kitchen to open the condo door. "We brought over dinner, thanks to her culinary skills."

Chloe was another one of Jordan's very impressive friends. She had an Ivy League education and had worked for two decades in public relations and advertising, but her passion was cooking. So when she reached "a certain age," she thought the time was right to make a change in her life and pursue her interests. The comfort food deli idea was perfect for the demographics of her area, and she had a great business plan. She'd finally found the ideal location, hired a contractor, and began plans for a remodel on an existing restaurant. But activity had stalled, and Chloe was looking at maxing out her loans to continue.

"This all looks great," Kate said, as they sat down at the dining room table and Chloe began unpacking dinner. Chloe was happy to provide an assortment of her specialties for their dinner – salmon meatloaf, veggie meat balls, several different kinds of side salads, an elegant tossed salad topped with blue cheese crumbles, crostini with two kinds of tapenade, espresso crème brulee, and fruit sorbet scoops. If the weather hadn't been so dismal, she might have grilled some vegetables – asparagus and eggplant – for an appetizer.

"Jordan told me there's a hold-up on launching your deli?" Kate commented, putting tastes of everything on her plate.

"Building permits," Chloe grumbled. "We've applied for them, but the department is way behind in approval. My contractor won't start work without them, but I still have to keep him on retainer and still pay for the property. I've just about used up all the loan money I could pull for this venture."

This wasn't a simple dinner at all, nor was Chloe's problem a marketing issue. Kate had no connections with city government, but she suspected Jordan knew she had sources for cash investment. Kate also knew that Jordan would have given Chloe the investment herself if she hadn't borrowed \$80,000 on her home equity line to bail Steve out.

"How much do you need?" Kate asked, cutting to the bottom line and dabbing some of the olive tapenade on a crostini. "Ask Jordan's lawyer friend Chris Hale write up some sort of agreement – Steve's trust people are definitely going to want something in writing – and get it to me. I'll talk it over with Steve, but I don't think there'll be a problem."

"I don't even have to grovel or show you reams of spreadsheets?"

"I trust Jordan, and your recipes are great," she said taking another bite of the non-pizza nutrition. "Steve and I may have to hire you to bring dinner one or two nights a week until I'm mobile again."

A broken ankle gave Kate a convenient excuse to stay at home and work out some of the details of the Kat Project. Chris Hale, the lawyer Jordan recommended, had convinced Kappa Kappa Gamma headquarters that this was a legitimate project and that all proceeds would go to their

project/charity in New Orleans. He had negotiated licensing contracts and had filed incorporation papers for their company. Kate spoke with a contact and old friend she had in Florida about different types of promotional merchandise, and Dexter Harding provided her with information about shirts, baseball hats, pins, and every item she'd listed in her insomnia-induced planning session.

"We haven't seen you at any Chamber events for a while," Dex said. "I was sorry to hear about you and Bill. Did you move?"

"A couple times. And I got remarried. I'm in Chicago now."

"And you want me to do this for you even though you're in Chicago?"

"I need someone I trust. Can you handle fulfillment for me like you used to?" Dex had always been very helpful with the volunteer projects she'd handled in Florida. He made things happen, he made things happen well, and his commissions were very reasonable.

"For a great client like you? Of course I can. I'll mail you all the catalog pages, so you know what I've been talking about."

"Why don't you FedEx them to me? This all has to happen relatively quickly."

"I don't think I've ever worked on anything with you that moved slowly. You'll have it tomorrow. And thanks for remembering me."

Kate worked on a number of other aspects of the Kat Project, including talking daily with Stacey. She and her sister-in-law -- that still felt weird to say -- had come to a common understanding after Steve had been released from detention -- that still felt weird to say -- and Kate had been talking with her about school and many college girl concerns. Steve had been right when he described her as very intelligent, but Kate still hadn't seen the 'conniving little bitch' side. She was clearly upset about her stepfather's legal dilemma and distraught about her financial status taking such a nosedive, but she stayed in school and off substances that could throw it back into rehab.

Kate was happy that Stacey wanted to be involved with the Kat Project, not only because it made her feel like she'd been accepted, but her participation was critical to success. She was their best connection to KKG and a genuine believer in the whole Kat Project. Plus, Stacey had no hesitation about using cyber social networks. She was making connections before they even had a product to offer -- the perfect advance team for the introduction of the campaign.

"Are you guys ever going to come down here? Or is all this going to be over the phone?"

Interesting question, Kate thought. If Lexi was willing to go to Hawaii to clear her slate, I should at least be brave enough to go to Florida and face a few of my own demons. Not that Bill is a demon, or that Jack Staunton is a demon, or even that Dr. Heil is a demon, she reasoned to herself, and I'm probably the one that's seen as the demon. I cheated on my husband and got involved with a student, I got the university involved in springing my boyfriend -- she hated that term -- from federal

custody, and produced a significant piece of research that the university paid for while I wasn't even a working professor. I'd probably hate me too.

"Steve's in school, and I'm supposed to be teaching, but maybe at spring break, we could come down for a couple days." She'd have to remember to tell Steve that she made this vague promise, before he made other plans for their holiday.

Jordan hung up the phone, confused by the recorded message that Mike's phone gave her. She pushed the speed dial button for Kate.

"Hi, I just tried to call Mike and his phone's been disconnected," she said with some mild distress.

"Lexi warned you that if you seemed to get too close, he'd be gone."

"I didn't think that I was giving any signal that I was looking for some kind of commitment."

"Men sometimes see signals in anything. If you bought the kind of coffee he liked, he might see that as commitment. Or maybe it was something that made him think he was getting too involved. And I thought you were just using him for sex?"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't expect to get dumped. I thought that's what most men wanted out of a relationship -- sex and no strings," Jordan sighed. "I wonder if the connection with Lexi was too weird for him. Has she said anything about him?"

"Not lately. Do you want me to ask her?" Kate really hoped that Jordan would say that she didn't need to bother; that love-sex-intrigue triangle was just a little uncomfortable.

"No, if he calls me, he calls me. I'm not going to lose sleep over him," she paused, and Kate could almost hear her giggle. "It's much nicer to lose sleep with him."

Even though she felt awkward about asking Lexi about Mike, Kate was curious why Mike's phone might have been disconnected. Maybe Lexi knew, maybe she didn't, and maybe she wouldn't tell even if she did know. Kate hit her speed dial.

Hey.

Hey, how are you doing?

Okay. I'm trying to take fewer painkillers, and the therapist says I'm doing pretty well.

Did you find something other than pizza to eat?

Jordan's friend Chloe has been a godsend.

How much did that cost Steve?

We invested in her business, and I don't think you want to know how much. But speaking of Jordan...

Great avoidance segue.

I can't walk very well, but I can still communicate.

So what about Jordan? Lexi had a pretty good feeling that Mike was involved, but she didn't know the extent of the devastation he'd left behind.

She tried to call Mike and his phone's been disconnected. She's not heartbroken, but she doesn't quite understand what happened. Is he okay?

This was a conversation Lexi didn't want to have, a discussion she couldn't have without giving some obscure clue to what might be coming for Kate and her husband and his family. She knew there was nothing she could do to really warn Kate.

I'm sure he's fine. He enjoys being a man of mystery.

Kate sensed that Lexi was avoiding this subject, but she wasn't going to push it.

Okay, if you talk to him, he can tell him that she's... never mind, she's not losing any sleep over him.

Taking a break from reviewing student paper proposals, Kate checked her e-mail and found a message from Sam buried in the messages from list-servs she belonged to. She was torn between a desire to drop it into the deleted items box and a vaguely aching curiosity about what he might have to say. She chose to open it.

To: DrKate597@aol.com

From: STeller@msn.com

Subject: Broken dates...

Kate –

I thought about calling, but wasn't sure you'd be willing to actually talk to me. Steve gave me \$500 in his thanks note, and I thought maybe it was some kind of payoff to get me out of your life. I hope not because I really did enjoy talking with you and reminiscing about 'the good old days.' It occurs to me – finally! you're thinking to yourself – that I was kind of a jerk in school and treated you pretty callously after you'd been such a good friend. I'm sorry for that and hope that some of my recent good works have at least made up for some of my shitty behavior. I hope you're recovering from your spill, which I've begun to see as my fault. I hope we can see each other again sometime or at least talk now and then.

Well, Kate thought, Steve gave him \$500 for taking care of me. She didn't think it had anything to do with buying him off, since she hoped Steve would put a higher price on that and his gesture had been before their talk about Sam's kiss. She suspected it was just a reversion to Steve's old habit of throwing cash at a problem.

She was more interested in Sam's recognition of and confession to his cold and heartless actions twenty years ago and his terse apology. Isn't that what she told Lexi she wanted, long before they had discussed his kiss or her unrealized desire? So was that enough? Could they be friends? Or was there too much baggage involved in this kind of friendship? There was only one way to find out, and that was to take the chance.

She hit the reply key.

To: STeller@msn.com

From: DrKate597@aol.com

Subject: RE: Broken dates...

Sam –

Sure, call me sometime. We can have coffee or some non-injurious beverage.

Kate had been right to choose Dex as a partner for the Kat Project. He wasted no time in finding manufacturers and creating a supply chain for Kate's product line. He had made the connection with his webmaster Toby to create two Kat websites, one to serve the traditional markets and one to serve the new media markets. Both were tied to Dex's site for purchase purpose, because Kate didn't want to deal with IATS or getting security setups to take credit cards. He was more than willing to take on the assignment of responsibilities, because he knew Kate was committed to this idea and her commitments were usually based not only on strong research, but really good hunches.

She offered Chloe a consulting fee to develop some print advertising for the KKG magazine and chapter newsletters and for three different kinds of general publications. Kate called Deirdre Rossi at Booz Allen for some advice on advertising placement and purchase. She talked with Stacey about social networking and gave her the go-ahead to talk about not only the ideas for the Kat Project, but the products available on the website or by phone order.

Dex called her daily to report on sales. He never had bad news, and some days, Kate could only describe him as exuberant. One particularly frigid evening – didn't Elliot say February was the cruelest month? -- Kate and Steve celebrated the success of their company over champagne in the living room.

"Babe, how soon should I start compiling results for my dissertation?" Steve asked.

"I'd wait because I think we're going to get more sales when the KKG newsletter comes out. You can certainly start collecting information about our strategies and our execution..." Kate smiled shaking her head. "I'm acting like your professor, aren't I?"

"I don't sleep with my professor," he said, taking her hand. "But I do sleep with a brilliant market strategist who knows a lot about the academic world, and I asked for her advice."

"Let's see how sales go in the next couple weeks," she said, "and maybe you'll have a definitive idea then."

"I have a definite idea now that has nothing to do with marketing, and the only connection to cats is you purring in my arms." He abandoned his champagne and carefully joined her on the sofa, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close.

"Kate," Dex said breathlessly over the phone. "I'm glad I caught you."

"Is something wrong?" she asked, concerned about his urgency. "I thought sales were going well..."

"They are. Amazingly well. But I wanted to ask you about something before I did any checking or any estimates..."

"What? Go ahead."

"The BFF pins have been selling really well, almost all on-line purchases..."

"That's good. What's the problem?"

"I got five calls in the past two days – I have all the names and phone numbers – from women who wanted to know if they could get the pins with diamonds instead of rhinestones."

"No shit," she said, thinking about this opportunity. "Can we get them made with diamonds?"

"I can check with the manufacturer to see if they have the capability to use diamonds and probably switch the setting to at least sterling silver," he said, clearly excited that Kate was at least interested.

"Check into white gold too. Chances are if these women are willing to spring for diamonds, they'll go for gold." She took a deep breath. "If this works out, we could raise a lot of money quickly, couldn't we?"

"Given that retail on high end jewelry is around two or three times cost, yes, we could make a good amount with a handful of sales."

"Check on the possibility with the manufacturer and get me a cost. Then we can talk about a price to charge, and I'll personally call your five contacts and see if they're willing to pay what we'll ask. If they are, then it's a go; if not, we'll have to make lame excuses and bag the idea."

"Okay..."

"And Dex, play hardball with the manufacturer, because we could probably go with another maker can get it done."

"You're really committed to this, aren't you?"

"It started out as a dare that became an academic project that became an obsession, so yeah, I'm committed," she admitted.

"It's a pretty cool concept, and it's interesting how the different orders are coming in. You're going to compare all the tracking results, aren't you?"

"My husband Steve is going to do all that for his dissertation, but we're definitely going to run analysis on responses."

"I don't think I've ever been part of someone's dissertation," Dex said. "That's something to add to my resume."

"If this works out as well as it looks like it might, we're all going to have successes to add to our resumes."

Hey. Dex called me about sales.

Hey. How's the company working out?

We're pulling kick-ass sales. Do you ever wear diamonds?

Oh, yeah, all the time with my fleece hoodies...why?

Our BFF pins can now be made with diamonds, and I need to get a few into circulation beyond the women who've already ordered them.

I don't think I run with a crowd that's going to be ordering diamonds. Why don't you send one to Oprah through Jordan's friend the TV producer? Maybe it'll get you a phone call or at least a thank you note.

Kate sat sipping her morning coffee, listening to the quiet of a cold winter morning. Steve kissed her before going to school, and both were amazed that entire week had passed without a major expense, accident, unexpected reunion with old flames. She ate her last bite of eggplant parmesan, left over from Chloe's hand-delivered dinner last night. Life was good. Her cell rang, noting Lexi's phone number, and that she must be up early again on the West Coast.

Hey.

Now I know you have not seen today's newspapers if you have that chipper of a greeting.

Kate felt a feeling of dread. *Why shouldn't I be chipper?*

You apparently have not seen today's Wall Street Journal.

Did the stock market crash or something?

No. But your sister-in-law is making quite a splash. I believe they are ranking her as one of today's top young entrepreneurs.

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT??

Let me read to you from the front page of the 'Marketplace' section:

"Stacey MacMillian, Kappa Kappa Gamma member and first time business owner, turns a brilliant idea into a fund-raising bonanza. Citing her dedication to her sorority and willingness to assist victims of the Katrina Hurricane, she single-handedly came up with the idea for the newest fashion trend – the BFF pin – that is making it to the lapels of Women of Influence across the country. Her association with the Fischer Group, a member of the Fortune 500, and renowned for their marketing and distribution expertise, goes back to her connection at college with the Fischer heiress, Danielle Fischer, now the Vice President of Marketing for the Fischer Group. MacMillian inked a deal last week for an undisclosed amount but estimated to run approximately \$10 million, to distribute an entire line of BFF jewelry. Stacey was quoted as saying, "I've worked really hard to generate an audience for my line of jewelry and am just glad it's been so readily accepted. And Danielle's faith in me means the world to many women affected by this great tragedy."

MacMillan's father is currently under investigation and goes to trial next week on charges of money laundering and international terrorism. When asked to comment, Stacey replied, "I'm just so glad that I could assist in bringing him to justice. I've worked closely with our national agencies to highlight his infractions, despite my relationship to him."

The silence on the other end of the phone was a strong indication that Kate had no idea what Stacey had done.

Kate – are you still there?

Silence.

Kate? Could you let me know if you are still breathing?

Kate inhaled after what seemed an eternity. *Please tell me this is a joke, Lexi.*

I wish it were Kate. Didn't you already sign a bunch of manufacturing contracts for this and set up a corporation?

Yes. I thought I had all the bases covered. Kate thought for a minute. Damn that Facebook!

You think she connected with Danielle that way? I did look at the site, and Stacey did put a lot of info out there on what you were manufacturing and distributing. I would think you would have one heck of a legal case against Fisher, but you might spend a few years in court trying to prove it.

I know. Kate looked at her phone, seeing an incoming call from Dex. Shit. I gotta go. I think I have a busy day ahead of me.

You always said she was a conniving bitch. I guess she proved it.

That she did. Talk to you later.

Lexi hung up the phone, feeling awful for Kate. She and Steve just got screwed big time by Steve's little sister.

"Hon – I'm getting ready to go to the new job site and I'm taking Dakota with me."

Andrew startled Lexi out of her concern for Kate. "Um – okay. Have a good day." Dakota ran over to her for a last butt scratch before they went out the door.

"What's up? You look distracted."

"I think Kate and Steve's world just fell in again."

"What happened this time?"

"You know that new jewelry line I showed you that Kate developed? Steve's little sister just went on the record in the Wall Street Journal that she developed it, and she sold the rights to another company."

Andrew heaved a sigh, feeling the depth of trouble they were in. "God, even those two didn't deserve that to happen to them."

"I know. And there really isn't a damn thing I can do for them this time."

Andrew walked forward to kiss her on the head. "I guess not even Mike can get them out of trouble this time." He stood back smirking at Lexi, letting her know that he was kidding.

"Nope, no international crime drama this time. I think they are saving that for next week when his father goes on trial."

"Are our cell phone bills going off the chart as you text each other every other minute?"

"No, I think I have the unlimited text plan with Verizon Wireless."

"Good. Then I will keep texting you to remind you that you should be writing. That's what you're supposed to focus on, right?"

"Yes, sir." She stood up to hug him, thankful that she was married to the right man – this time.

They came home from Hawaii about a week ago, after spending a glorious time in the sand and surf, learning about each other inside and out. She felt truly close to her husband and that they were closer than ever. They let go of their own demons and learned about each other's pasts. Oddly enough, learning about each other's love lives brought them closer together. Unless he was great at hiding his feelings, Andrew heard about Lexi's loves, from Steven, her prom date, to Kurt, her ex-husband, to Mike, the-whatever-he-was. Lexi learned about Andrew's wife, and string of girlfriends as a result of an internet-dating spree a few years ago. They discovered that he had dated a former co-worker of Lexi's, and she shared stories that she heard about their sex life and the real reason they broke up. Her friend was looking for a life partner, but Andrew wasn't ready for commitment. Lexi asked him why he felt that way and his answer was simple, "I was waiting for you, Lexi."

Despite their combined reticence to carefully plan their futures, they did come to a couple of agreements. Andrew would start to target some more clients who were truly appreciative of his landscape art, and if he still felt dissatisfied with his work after the busy season this summer, he would sell his business at the end of the year.

Lexi agreed to write more of her non-fiction works and find a marketing whiz that could help her with both internet and traditional marketing channels. A trip to San Francisco to work with Andrew's sister's literary coworkers was in the works for next week, and a meeting with their new accountant and lawyer to set up an LLC was on the books for tomorrow.

And as much as they both felt that the Northwest was their home, they agreed that they needed to get away upon occasion. They fell in love with the Big Island and contacted a realtor to work on finding a small house for them to purchase. Prices were high, as they were in the Northwest, but they would need to have a Getaway House, where they could leave the fog and dreariness behind them. It would be their dream home.

Lexi put aside the WSJ in favor of her new Mac notebook, typing away. She wrote about the many revelations she had of love and relationships while in Hawaii, and another article on friendship based on her ups and downs with Kate, especially in recent years. Before she knew it, the sun had lowered in the horizon, and it was nearing 3 p.m. A very productive day with few interruptions. No bosses to manage, no subordinate arguments to settle, and apparently no clothes to put on since she was still in her pajamas from this morning.

Lexi stretched in her chair, feeling stiff from sitting still for nearly 9 hours. Her cell phone rang, with an unfamiliar area code from somewhere back east.

"This is Lexi Michaels"

"You sound so professional."

A 40-pound butterfly instantly appeared in her stomach, or at least that's what it felt like. "Hi."

"I got the picture of you and Andrew."

"I know. And you bailed on Jordan too I hear."

"News travels fast with you and your friends."

"Women are like that. We talk."

"Did you say anything?"

"I thought you were monitoring our phone calls and emails."

"I could. But I'm not. Did you?"

"Kate told me that Jordan tried to contact you, but couldn't. I told them you were a man of mystery and that this was typical behavior, which is the truth I believe."

Lexi heard Mike heave a great sigh. "So what else is new?"

"I just got back from Hawaii last week. But you knew that."

"I did. You looked very happy."

"I am. I mean...I was. You know."

"The smartest woman I know and she still has a hard time completing a sentence."

Lexi felt the need to gain control of the conversation before they moved into dangerous territory.

"And you broke your code of silence to call me because???"

"What code of silence?"

"You didn't call me for years, and then on the rare occasion when I save your ass, I get a jingle."

"I told you I wasn't a good communicator."

"No, I believe you said you weren't good at relationships. You PROVED that you weren't a good communicator by just – you know – disappearing."

"Ok, well I am trying to make up for that with this phone call."

"This can't be good."

"I'm just trying to protect you."

Lexi swallowed the monster frog in her throat, who apparently appeared to join the mutant butterfly still caught in her stomach. "I know. So what can you tell me – without having to kill me?"

"You need to stay away from the trial, and so does Kate, and any MacMillan relatives. There's some death threats against the family members in order to get at – to punish – Stuart."

"I think Steve has to go and testify, doesn't he?"

"He gave a deposition, but the prosecuting attorney is trying to make his career, and is going to try to get as many people on the witness stand as possible, but Steve isn't vital to the case. If they do get on the stand, Steve, Kate, and any other family members will get grilled beyond their wildest imagination."

"Kate? Why would they talk to her?"

"That current business venture of hers. They are going to see if any of McMillan's money is funding her venture."

"She told me it came from Steve's trust fund."

"A trust fund set up by his mother's family?"

Lexi thought for a moment, feeling like she had not figured out the obvious. "I'm starting to feel like an idiot. So you're saying it didn't come from Steve's wealthy grandfather?"

"His maternal grandfather only became wealthy after his daughter married Stuart McMillan. The grandfather was a Baltimore cop and knew about McMillan's questionable past. Stuart has been sending him money for years, establishing trust funds, off-shore bank accounts, and other investments for everyone he comes in contact with. That's how he shuts them up and keeps them happy."

"It sounds like he has been doing this for a long time."

"Stuart's maternal grandfather was from Sicily, and let's just say Stuart's talents for international crime are hereditary."

Lexi felt a cold snake slither down her spine as she heard the front door open. *What is it with a friggin zoo going on inside my body?*

Andrew walked in, saw her on the phone, and turned to leave, but she invited him in. It was important for her to be honest with Andrew, even though she was about to make both of these men horribly uncomfortable by introducing them.

"Mike, I am going to put you on speaker phone so you can share this with my husband. We both need to know what we are up against."

She set the phone down on her desk, sensing the cold sweat coming off of all three of them simultaneously.

"Andrew, Mike called to tell me the seriousness of the trouble that Kate is in so he warn us."

Mike cleared his throat and assumed a professional tone. "That's right Andrew. It's important that the two of you stay away from Kate and Steve."

Lexi admired Andrew for keeping calm under pressure as Mike re-told the story of death threats and family money secrets.

"Are we in any trouble – Mike?" Andrew had problems even spitting out the man's name, but managed to keep his voice stable.

"No. As long as you stay out of it."

"Mike, so the bottom line is that the money that Kate and Steve are living on is from money laundering?"

"Among other things. We just connected the dots this week."

"You're going to freeze their accounts, again aren't you?" Lexi stared out the window, feeling the severity of the issue.

"That's why I am calling. It should come down tomorrow. And don't send them any more money for any reason or you'll have the Treasury Department and a few other agencies asking questions of you. The bail money you sent them may come up at the hearing, but it's pretty miniscule in comparison to the hundreds of millions that he's been moving around the globe."

Lexi was silent for a moment as she twirled her hair, stared at Andrew, and thought about Kate.

"She had a feeling this was coming up, Mike."

"Oh yeah, she's psychic, right?"

"As a matter of fact, I believe she is, Mike. Thanks for calling." Andrew leaned down, hitting the END button on her phone. "Okay, how much of the conversation did I miss?"

"About 10 minutes. He hoped that we had fun in Hawaii, and then he launched into Kate's problems. Not much personal, although I reminded him that he is lousy at relationships. I also

confirmed that he cut off communication with Jordan since Kate called me to ask about him the other day."

"Anything else?"

"No. I think that's enough, don't you?"

"Kate, did you see the story..." Dex began.

"In the Journal. Someone read it to me,"

"Is that really Steve's sister who's screwing you, us over?"

"That's Stacey. But here's the thing, Dex. Have you made enough money off the project thus far?"

"I've made a hell of a lot more than I ever made peddling T-shirts to college groups."

"We made a lot of money for Kappa Kappa Gamma and the Kat house, and though we didn't hit \$5 million and I won't get to meet Brad Pitt to hand me a matching gift, I'm pretty pleased with what we accomplished."

"You want to just cave on this?"

"I don't know that lawsuits would do anything but cost a lot of money and time and energy."

"It's your commitment and your decision."

Kate thought for a moment before deciding that there were too many other things on the horizon to get into – she laughed to herself – a catfight with Stacey. She and Steve had started their company and tested their model and maybe now was a good time to walk away.

"Have Toby pull the websites, or better yet, put a forwarding address to Stacey's FaceBook page. Let her deal with the complexities of being one of the nation's top young entrepreneurs."

She called Chris Hale and asked him to start filing dissolution papers on the company.

Kate practically hugged her physical therapist after she confirmed that Kate's ankle was healing well and that the bulky plaster cast could be replaced with a light weight cast. Kate knew that would make mobility much easier, and she might even get back to her normal life. After the replacement had been made in the therapist had left with some of Chloe's cookies, Kate picked up her cell phone.

Hey.

Hey again, I was just thinking of you and Stacey. How's everything going?

I decided to just take what we had raised and fold my hand on the project. Let her try to deal with fulfillment on orders coming in from 10 or 12 different media.

That's probably a good idea. Lexi still didn't know how to warn Kate.

You'll still be cited on Steve's dissertation... Oh, and I just traded my old leg accessory for a new model, which will be much more comfortable.

I don't want any details. But I'm guessing the change means that you're recovering.

Yeah. So now if Sam calls, we can go out for coffee.

Isn't that what got in trouble in the first place? And why do you think Sam will call? And more important, why do you want him to call?

He sent me an e-mail, and he kind of apologized -- for sins of the past and recent mistakes -- and he wondered if Steve's financial gesture was a payoff to stay out of my life...

Steve really did pay him off?

Steve sent him cash with a thank you note, but the point is I answered Sam's e-mail and said he could call me sometime.

And again I ask: why do you want him to call? After everything you and Steve have done to be together, are you going to do something stupid to risk that?

God no, I want to see if we can be friends.

Be careful Kate, I don't think there's a graceful way out of this if it goes wrong.

You've already threatened him, so what could go wrong? I have a weird good feeling about this.

Lexi was happy that Kate's ankle was getting better and that she had handled the Stacey situation with such grace, and although she had doubts about Sam, she was glad that Kate was getting some closure. But she had a flash that more of today's news wasn't going to be that good. She still didn't think she had any legitimate way to give Kate a heads-up on what might happen, but it was important for Kate to know that she would support her.

Just keep your head attached to your heart, and keep your eyes open.

The front door slamming startled Kate while she was reading Dex's latest, but not quite final, reports on the Kat Project.

"Steve?" she called with some confusion.

"Yeah," he grumbled.

"You're home early."

"I got a subpoena on my way to class this morning. I was a little too distracted to teach undergrads today."

"Well, we kind of expected that you get called, didn't we? Maybe not quite this soon, but we knew it was coming."

"We expect that we have to have our wisdom teeth out, but it's not something we look forward to and not something we expect to enjoy. Scott called. He got served too. Have any of your friends called to report the same thing?"

"I talked to Lexi this morning and she didn't say anything, but it was very early there. I'm sure she would have called back. Who knows if Jordan's even in the country?" Kate could tell that he was upset about the subpoena; maybe it was a smack of reality that hit a little harder than anticipated. "It'll be okay."

"How can you be such a goddamned optimist all the time?" he demanded. "Does everything always work out for you?"

"Why are you getting so annoyed with me?" she asked. "I just wanted to..."

"You wanted to make everything all right. You always think that everything can work out."

"Most of the time everything can work out, if you can get past negativity."

"I got a subpoena this morning to testify in a federal trial involving Homeland Security against my father, for God's sake. It's not like I got a bad grade on an exam."

"I know what happened Steve. I just think that you're overreacting."

"I'm overreacting," he said coldly. "Like you've ever had anything like this happen to you?"

She resented his dismissal of her concern and her willingness to help, plus his implicit denial that anything bad had ever happened to her. She'd never been involved with the FBI or Federal authorities or Interpol, but she had had issues to deal with.

"No, I've never had to testify against my father or any other international criminal. But, despite what you might think, my life has not been all easy... Let me see, I got involved with the graduate student half my age, ran off with him to Chicago and California, and had to divorce my husband of 15 years, cut most of my ties with my life in Florida, get screwed over by my sister-in-law in business, play referee with my friends over what they saw as the sheer folly of my life, and now argue with him," she said, starting with righteous indignation and ending in tears, "because I want to be there for him, because I love him so much, and I don't understand why he's attacking me."

Steve stood across the coffee table from her, looking at her piles of papers, her injured ankle in some new kind of cast, and at her beautiful teary-eyed face, as she abandoned anger in favor of love. It was the first time that she had expressed how much their relationship had unsettled her life, and he regretted that it took this kind of confrontation to make him see it. He wanted to be realistic about what was happening to him, wanted Kate to recognize that this was a serious situation and not something that could so easily be smoothed over. He wanted her to understand, but not necessarily feel, the pain and panic that was clutching his heart.

"I don't know what you want from me," Kate said quietly.

"I don't know what I want from you either," Steve admitted.

Kate started to make an effort to get to her feet, but Steve walked around the table and sat next to her on the sofa. She took his hands.

"You know, I'll give you anything, everything."

He felt a gut-wrenching pang of remorse for misdirecting his anger at her. He freed one of his hands and putting it under her chin, lifted her gaze to his. "You are everything that I ever could have imagined wanting or needing. I love you more than I ever imagined I would love someone. And I'm sorry to get you involved in all this shit."

At that moment, she saw, more clearly than ever, how much she loved him and how committed they were to each other. And she wouldn't have traded this involvement, no matter how deep the shit was, for any other relationship she might've imagined.

"Stacey screwed you in business?" he said reflecting back on what she said.

"It's an interesting story, but it's settled now, and I'll tell you some other time. I have a new cast," she said. "It's less bulky, and it should be less awkward."

"After all the hateful things I just said to you, you still want me?"

"More than ever."

Did you get a subpoena today?

No, did you?

Steve did, on his way to class this morning. So did Scott, I guess.

What are you guys going to do?

Talk to an attorney tomorrow, and fly to New York on Wednesday. The subpoena said that he should be ready to testify on Thursday.

Are you sure YOU want to go?

Absolutely. Don't even try to argue with me on this one, Lexi. This is a defining moment in Steve's life, and I have to be there for him.

Okay, I won't argue. It's going to be a defining moment in your life too, Lexi thought. How are you guys?

A little tense... we had our first fight...

Oh shit, are you okay?

We both vented a little. I think we worked it out.

So you're not making a date for coffee with Sam and leaving your husband?

Lexi, I love Steve, and I want to share my life with him...

I get it Kate. I wish I could help.

You help, just by listening and making me laugh. You help more than you probably even realize.

Lexi hung up the phone and considered her options. She wished Andrew was more supportive of her friendship with Kate, because in her heart, she knew he wasn't going to like the option that she was going to choose. She wished Mike hadn't called her, because she knew he definitely wasn't going to like her choice because she was explicitly ignoring him. She pushed the button on her phone to call Jordan and make plans to meet in New York and provide moral support for their friend.

"Of course they're going to ask about your travels," Chris Hale's law partner said. "They need at least two sources to confirm where your father went, in addition to flight logs and hotel records. Paper is nice, but people are better witnesses."

"So I tell them that we've landed in Hong Kong or Tokyo or Cairo, we'd checked into a hotel, and I played videogames in an arcade?"

"Unless you went with your father to meet international arms dealers or drug cartel officials, you should stick to the mundane details. They will probably ask about your finances, if you suddenly noticed at some point that your family was eating lobster not Hamburger Helper."

"Do you mean, do I ever remember when we weren't rich?"

"Do you?"

"No," he said, a little embarrassed to acknowledge his silver spoon heritage. "My paternal great-grandfather founded a very successful law firm, and he made some smart financial moves. My grandfather made some even smarter financial moves – all of them very legal – and my father inherited a great deal of money. My grandfather also set up a very healthy trust for me, which has been managed by his people, not my father and not me."

"What about trusts set up by your mother's side of the family?"

"What trusts from my mother's family? Steve asked with some confusion.

"There are several trusts set up by your mother's father in your name..."

"I never heard that before, and I've certainly never tapped them."

"The prosecution found them...And you honestly never heard about them before?"

"No, check any of the receipts for me big ticket purchases or my college tuition. They all say payment came from MacMillan, Cage & Pittfield which was the law firm my great-grand-father founded."

"So you haven't really relied on your father for financial support?"

"Not for a long time. My trust paid for all of my college costs, and almost all my expenses since I've been about 18." Steve thought for a minute. "I have taken advantage of some of the perks that dad could offer."

"Such as?" the lawyer asked, making notes on his legal pad.

"Using a vacation home, using some of his connections to get World Series tickets, dropping his name when I thought it would mean a better hotel room or a better table at a restaurant, borrowing the Gulf Stream sometimes instead of taking commercial flights, relying on Scott for security concerns sometimes ..."

"You'll get asked about that – especially the plane and maybe why you needed a security guard – but there shouldn't be a problem. Why did you need a security guard?"

"Because," Steve tried to think of a delicate way to put this. "Before we were married, my wife's ex-husband hired a private detective to follow us in San Francisco, and..."

The lawyer shook his head, smiling. "No organized crime activities then. There may be issues with the Morality Police, but Homeland Security has no jurisdiction over your sex life."

"Your name and your wife's are also on corporate registration papers for two companies." He referred to his notes to confirm the company names. "Chloe's and Kat House? Why do both of these sound like another issue for the Morality Police?"

"Chloe's is an upscale comfort food deli that should open in the next quarter. A friend of Kate's knew Chloe and suggested that it might make a good investment for us. Chloe makes killer meat loaves by the way."

"Perhaps the word 'killer' is not the best description to use at this point," the lawyer suggested. "And Kat House?"

"We filed to dissolve that corporation the other day...Kat House is a multifunction women's recovery facility in the New Orleans' Ninth Ward that is being restored and renovated after Hurricane Katrina by the Kappa Kappa Gamma international sorority. We, Kate and I, partnered with KKG, despite what my bitchy step-sister claims, to raise money for the project through a product line that we'd market through both traditional and new media outlets to test the model that Kate and I developed in our academic paper."

"So you raised this money and are donating some of it to this Kat House?"

"We raised a lot of money, and all net proceeds went to KKG for the Kat House. We personally didn't make any money off this; my bitch sister-in-law is the one who's making money. Your associate Chris suggested that incorporating as a nonprofit corporation would probably cause some concern even if the money was going to a nonprofit organization or nonprofit program. Kate and I did this as much for the research as for the recovery facility. Face it, if we only wanted to donate money, we could just write a check."

"And like writing a check made out to Kat House wouldn't look little suspicious?"

Steve was glad that if he had to spend three hours with a lawyer to prepare to spend many more hours with lawyers in court, this lawyer at least had a sense of humor.

Testifying was as brutal as Mike has indicated to Lexi it might be. And if the prosecutor was looking to make his career, Steve's attorney was doing a damn fine job of making his career too. He had reams of paper and one of his assistants kept running in and out of the courtroom with folders. Linking Steve to any of the illegal money finally got too complicated, so the prosecutor went back to establishing his father's involvement with other countries economics and politics. Neither Kate nor their investments even got mentioned.

And Lexi had to admit that Steve was a credible and sympathetic witness, while Jordan was certain his clean-cut good looks and gorgeous suit didn't hurt his case. His blue shirt brought out the color in his eyes that quite often flashed a loving glance to Kate. She was sitting primly in a conservative skirt and non-offensive pink twin set (cashmere, Jordan guessed) and a string of pearls, for godsake. This was the woman who'd worn red silk blouses with three buttons undone to heavy metal concerts to catch the band members' attention, Jordan said to herself, and now she's looking like a Republican.

It was a grueling couple of hours, but it was over by 3 p.m.

Steve went back to the witness room, slammed the door and dropped into a chair. He clenched his fists and put his head down on his arms on the table. Kate came in and started to pat him on his back.

"Don't," he snapped. "Don't try to talk me through this."

She backed off, unsure of what she should do. She thought she understood what he was going through, but if she couldn't talk with him and couldn't touch him, she didn't know how to help. A chocolate chip cookie might be good (they had always worked before with men and boys...) but she hadn't stocked her handbag with comfort food.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "There's no reason for me to go after you."

"I understand."

"Do you? Do you really? I sit in a courtroom and get grilled for information I don't know, and I listen to lawyers accuse my father of doing bad evil things, not just to other people, but against the United States. I hear them talking about him as a slimy, greedy criminal, and I hate him for that and for involving me and you and everyone else he tangled in this mess. I know he's the villain of this drama and I should be wishing that he would just go to hell..." he pounded on the table with his fist. "But dammit all, he's my FATHER." He started to silently cry.

Kate stood behind him, resting her cane against the table, and put her hands on his shoulders. She expected frustration and maybe even his anger, but she hadn't pictured Steve feeling sorry for his father or his surge of family loyalty. I don't know him as well as I should, she thought. He grew up with this man who had been a great father, maybe not a role model in recent years, but surely as a boy, Steve had looked up to his dad and admired him. He had taken care of Steve and his mother, making Steve's life – his world travels, his adventures like sailing in the World Cup, maybe his education at schools like MIT – possible. And now he was being pilloried in a courtroom for dreadful decisions with staggering consequences.

"I know it hurts," she said. "I know I can't make it stop hurting, but I'm here for you, and I want to understand."

"Kate, I don't even know if I understand it myself." He wiped his eyes, and stood up, shaking off what he saw as weakness. He turned to face her, slid his arm around her waist, pulled her tightly to him, and kissed her with a passion fueled by his anger and his need to regain control of something in his life. "Let's get the hell out of here -- out of this building, out of the city, out of the fucking country if we have to. I just need time to think."

"Let's go," she said breathlessly. "Our passports are in my briefcase in the hotel."

He smiled at her. "Were you planning a quick trip to a country with no extradition policy?"

Kate didn't have a snappy response, because she didn't know exactly why she'd packed their passports. To escape was the only reason she might have, but she didn't know whether that escape might be a romantic weekend in London, two weeks on a Caribbean island, or a

spontaneous relocation to a friendly foreign nation. There was a certain aura of desperation wrapped around Steve's subpoena, his preparation for testimony, and their hurried flight to New York; she just couldn't predict any outcome, but wanted to be ready for anything.

She hugged both Lexi and Jordan in the hallway on their way out of the building. Steve initially extended his hand and then decided a quick embrace would be better.

"We cannot thank you enough -- again."

"We're heading out of... town," Kate said. "I'll call you both."

She put on her sunglasses and wrapped her Burberry scarf around her neck. Steve buttoned two buttons on his camel hair coat and put his arm around Kate's shoulders. They walked down the hall, Kate using her cane and Steve as support, and encountered a phalanx of photographers.

"They're going to need every shred of good luck they can muster," Lexi said, "and every good wish we could give them. They have no idea that this is just the beginning."