

## Complicated Endings and Creative Beginnings

"No comment, no comment, no comment," Steve kept repeating, as journalists yelled questions to him and photographers snapped photos while he tried to steer through the hall to the front door to the curb. His arm tightened around Kate's shoulders when he felt that media proximity was a threat to her balance. His frustration was growing, and he was nearing an explosion of anger, when an arm reached out in front of him, and Scott pushed into the crowd to clear their way to the door. He preceded them onto the curb, flagged a cab, opened the door and helped Kate inside.

"I don't know if your accounts are frozen yet," Scott said jamming a handful of cash and credit cards into Scott's hand. "Use these if you need them. If you're leaving town, stay in the country – at least for a couple days until the prosecution has moved on to the next target."

"Shit, Scott, ripping my guts out wasn't enough?"

"We can talk about it some other time," Scott said, giving Steve a push into the cab. "Get the hell out of here now. I'll talk to you later at the hotel."

"What did he mean?" Kate asked after Steve gave the cab driver their destination.

"I think he means we should lay low for a couple days until things clear up a little."

"You mean stay in New York?"

"At least for tonight, so we can talk to him. He'll probably be able to find out if our accounts have been frozen or our passports have been tagged, and then we can make plans."

Kate shook her head, rolling her eyes. "I've come a long way from being a nice, bland Midwestern girl with academic credentials."

"You're still a nice Midwestern girl with academic credentials," Steve said, "and I don't think you were ever bland – nobody that loves heavy metal the way you do could have been called bland. You've just married the heir to an international crimes syndicate who's making your friend Sam look more like a better option all the time."

"Sam never was and never will be a better option," Kate said, taking his hands. "If I wanted to bail on this relationship, don't you think I would've done it in Boston while you were vacationing two weeks with the Feds?"

Lexi and Jordan walked out of the courthouse and into the chilly air. They decided to head off to a diner to decompress, hopefully with some hearty east coast cooking followed by something large and chocolate. As they exited the building, they both turned after hearing their names called.

Both women stopped abruptly, Jordan with a smile and Lexi with a look of consternation.

"Hi Jordan – Lexi." The international man of mystery was here on the street, dressed in a dark suit, sporting a professional demeanor to his two "exes".

Jordan elbowed Lexi out of her stupor as she said "Hi Mike" with the sweetest of smiles.

"Good to see you, Jordan. Do you mind if I speak with Lexi for a moment?" Mike stepped forward abruptly, taking Lexi by the elbow and escorting her off down the sidewalk to speak with her privately. Lexi looked back at Jordan who looked a bit disgruntled, but pointed toward the diner where she would meet Lexi when she and Mike were done with their discussion.

"What the...."

"Lexi, I don't have much time but I need to ask you a few things."

Lexi's stomach turned, tuning into his seriousness. "Okay. Like what?"

"Where are Kate and Steve headed?"

"I really don't know...."

"Lexi, I'm not kidding here. Where are they?"

"I really don't know. I am guessing they went to their hotel to pack and then to the airport. I'm not sure they knew where they would be off to next. Weren't their bank accounts going to get frozen? I doubt they can get out of the state or country without their American Express."

Mike picked up a cell phone in his pocket, relaying the information Lexi told them to some unknown cohorts on the other end of the line. He closed his cell phone and put it into his pocket. "We just spotted them going into their hotel. We can take it from here."

"Do I get to ask..."

"No, but I will tell you. Stuart MacMillan grabbed one of the bailiff's guns and put a bullet through his brain."

Lexi stood in front of him, watching the puffs of cold air physically manifest the description of a major criminal's suicide. "I should...go...find Kate...and....um...Jordan...."

"Lexi, it's okay. It's over." Mike looked into her eyes. His words were professional, but his eyes were full of love and concern for her. She guessed that there were other agents in the area and he couldn't embrace her even though she felt like she was going to tumble to the ground. "Lexi, I really need you to be strong right now. I can't have you collapse here on the street."

Lexi inhaled the cold air, feeling the brisk air against the tears on her cheek. "I'll be okay." She inhaled deeply, and turned to face him. "I'm guessing all charges are dropped and that they probably won't be going after Stuart's family?"

"No need to. They just went after the family to get to him to get to testify. But about 10 minutes ago, he put an end to that."

"Did he leave a note...or anything?"

"Probably not, but we'll search his cell." Mike looked around, trying to maintain the looks of a professional discussion. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Not really. But there's not much you can do about it, is there? I don't mean to be snotty, but I know you're on the job."

"I am, and I have to get back. Go tell Jordan and get back to your hotel. There's going to be a media frenzy here soon, and if they think that you are part of the case you'll be on CNN for the next four days straight."

Once again, Lexi felt that there was so much to say to him, but circumstance prevented them from saying all they could. "Okay...I guess I'll go."

Mike beamed his bright, loving smile at her. "Go on – GO! Get out of here."

"Just one thing before I go..." Lexi looked at him tentatively wanting to ask but knowing she shouldn't.

"She could never be you. It was just research. And yes, I'll always love you." He reached to touch her arm, knowing that was the closest they would ever come to physical contact. "Go on, Lexi."

Kate and Steve ducked into the hotel, dodging the obvious FBI agents eager to intercept them. There was obviously something wrong, because the hotel staff was visibly nervous. As soon as she got into the room, Kate flipped through the channels on the television, and it was patently clear that something big happened. She settled on CNN, and sat down a nanosecond after she read the ticker. Stuart MacMillan had killed himself. She stared at the television screen, barely able to breathe.

"Steve," she said weakly, "I think you should see this."

He sat beside her, putting his arm around her shoulders, as he began to read the screen. Kate began to cry quietly as she watched reality sink in for him.

"What kind of cold, heartless bastard am I that I almost feel relieved?" Steve said, before burying his head against her chest and surrendering to tears.

Lexi turned away from Mike abruptly and headed for the diner, bursting in the door, finding Jordan with a sticky menu in her hands. "Come with me. We have to go – NOW!" She grabbed Jordan out of the booth, running out of the restaurant and onto the street. Lexi hailed a nearby cab,

seeing the CNN mobile vans two blocks away. She shoved Jordan into the backseat, and gave the driver the address of their hotel.

"Jordan, just be quiet until we get to the hotel." Lexi sat in silence, staring out the front window, not wanting the cab driver to overhear the dramatic news she was about to share with Jordan.

Jordan shifted restlessly in her seat, staring at Lexi, trying to get the slightest clue of what was happening, but she revealed nothing. Most of the time Lexi was just trying to recover from the shock of talking to her ex-but-maybe-forever-love, let alone the events that Stuart MacMillan just set into motion. The semi-silence of the bumpy cab drive allowed her to breathe a bit, and assimilate what she'd learned in the last few moments.

As they approached the hotel, Lexi got out money to pay for the cab and got ready to quickly jump from the cab. She stood on the sidewalk, looking at Jordan who was visibly pissed at the lack of information and being dragged from a much-needed meal. Jordan was about to be the receiver of a Lexi-attack of major information that she would have to act upon quickly.

Lexi pulled Jordan close to an alley to get away from any eavesdropping bypassers. "Mike just told me that Stuart MacMillan pulled a gun from a bailiff and killed himself. They're dropping the case, but are heading off Steve and Kate at their hotel. They were going to freeze their bank accounts..."

"AND YOU KNOW THIS BECAUSE???"

"Let's just say that I know Mike better than you do."

"Bitch."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, I think they have all the money they need to go wherever they want, and I am guessing they'll be leaving the country. And now we're going to be pursued by CNN since we are close to Kate and Steve. So do what you want, but I'm packing up and going home."

"Damn. I guess that explains her text message. All it said was 'Paris'."

"Well, good for them. I'm headed home to Seattle. How about you?"

"I think I might stay here. Scott may need some comforting."

"You're just a slut at heart, aren't you?"

"Just having fun." Jordan followed Lexi as she quickly headed up the stairs to the entrance of the hotel. "Lexi – I'm sorry about, you know, Mike, and all."

"No you're not. You were just having fun."

"Yeah. I guess I was. He's pretty good, isn't he?"

"Well, I'm not a member of the mile-high club, but we did all right."

They continued walking down the hall to the elevator. As they stood staring into the polished brass doors, Jordan slowly said. "He called out 'Lexi' when he was with me, and in his sleep, too."

Lexi looked down at the floor. "I guess that should be some kind of consolation."

Jordan put her arm around Lexi in a sister-like hug. "No, it just means he still loves you."

Lexi smirked at Jordan. "Thanks, Jordan." The elevator doors opened and Lexi stepped inside, leaving Jordan in the lobby. "Aren't you coming up?"

"No, I think I'll go find Scott. Have a good trip home." The elevator doors closed, and Lexi pushed the button for the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. She fumbled in her purse for her cell phone, dialing speed dial for Andrew when she stepped onto the plush carpeted hallway that led to her room. Andrew answered on the first ring.

"ARE YOU OKAY???"

"You're watching CNN?"

"MSNBC, Fox – they all have it. What happened?"

"Steve testified. Steve and Kate left. Jordan and I came back to the hotel." Lexi gulped before she mentioned Mike's name. "Mike pulled me aside on the street to tell me what happened, and suggested I leave town – quickly."

A few seconds of silence indicated Andrew's mixed feelings on the subject. "I'm glad he did. Are you coming home?"

"I just got to my hotel room and am going to pack. I need to call to see when the next flight out of town is."

"Why don't I call and make reservations for you?"

Lexi sighed with relief. "That sounds great. I should be able to get to LaGuardia in about an hour. Thanks, hon. You have no idea what a feeling it is to have you there for me when I need you."

She knew that Andrew wondered if Mike was there for her when she needed him, but was gracious enough not to ask. "What about Jordan? Is she leaving too?"

"No, she is going to see if she can find Scott so she can console him." Lexi snickered into the phone at Jordan's audacity and ability to go after what she wanted. It was an admirable trait.

"So what do you think we should do?" Kate asked Scott when he met them at the hotel.

He looked relieved, but a little bit nervous.

"Your passports are clear, and as far as I can tell the only financial account that has been frozen is the trust set up by Steve's mother's family, so if you want to skip the country, you're free to go."

"It's not as though we're looking to flee justice," Steve said. "We just need some time away from the press and lawyers and all of these questions."

"I understand," Scott said, "because it shouldn't be a major media event to catch a cab, but be aware that it's probably not just the press that following you."

"Are we in danger?" Steve asked, looking for some intelligent answer.

Scott looked away, staring into space, but at the same time, appearing to be considering all the possibilities. Kate was nervous that he didn't immediately deny there was any danger, but grateful in a way that he took this very seriously.

"Because Steve didn't really know anything about his father's dealings, there's no reason to harm him because of what he said. And with his father," Scott struggled to find the correct word, "gone, there's no leverage in threatening him. I think you guys are clear."

Steve put his head in his hands and sighed, grateful that he didn't have to protect himself or protect Kate. He had college degrees in science and engineering and business, not criminal justice. He could sail yachts, but he didn't know self-defense martial arts, and he sure as hell had never fired a gun.

"If you think you need protection, how well are you connected in Chicago?" Scott said, as if he had a sudden revelation. "Not necessarily in the academic community..."

Steve looked as if he didn't understand what Scott was asking. Kate had lived in the Midwest long enough to know exactly what he was asking, and oddly enough, if you considered the 'six degrees of separation' rule, she was connected.

"I hope this doesn't spoil your relationship with Jordan," Kate said, "but I think she knows people who know the people you're talking about."

"Jordan?" Steve said incredulously.

"When we were young, we made jokes about this mysterious uncle, great uncle, of hers. He was someone in their family, albeit extended family, that they never talked about and was never included in family gatherings. "

"Jordan?" Steve repeated. Scott, however, nodded as if he knew exactly what Kate was talking about. Jordan Logan, he thought to himself. While you generally associated Italian names with the Mob, the Irish in Chicago were pretty well-connected too -- on both sides of the law.

"He went missing, I think it was our junior year in high school, and weeks later, his body was found in a forest preserve. There were reports that it was a professional hit."

"Jordan?!?" Steve still couldn't believe that connection. He'd find it more believable if Kate had said Lexi was tied to organized crime.

"Call Jordan, or I can call Jordan." He took a moment to consider this. "Let me call her. I'm pretty sure my phone isn't being tapped."

"Our phones are being tapped?" Steve asked with disbelief. This drama went way beyond any episodes of "Law and Order."

"They were. I'm surprised your friend Lexi didn't tell you that," Scott said, rolling his eyes.

"Lexi knew our phones were tapped?" This time it was Kate who was incredulous.

"I'm sure Mike told her," Scott shrugged.

"Mike?" Kate didn't know how much Scott knew about Jordan and Mike, and if connecting Jordan with the Mafia hadn't spoiled their relationship, linking her romantically with Mike might seal the deal. She looked at Scott and looked at Steve. "Our passports are clear?"

Scott nodded. "Try to go to friendly countries, if you're traveling internationally. It just wouldn't look good if you wound up in Afghanistan or Iraq or Columbia or..."

"How about Dubai?" Steve said sarcastically. "I don't even know where the fuck Dubai is, but it was featured in Fortune so it must be okay."

"We don't need to go to Dubai," Kate said, looking at her rings. "I know exactly where we should go."

"It's done!"

Andrew came running into Lexi's study. "Let me see it..." He picked up the heavy manuscript. "Wow, you did that fast!"

"I'm pretty good at concentrating when I have a husband supporting me and a dog keeping my feet warm."

"I know that Caroline is looking forward to reading the last chapter. She thinks it's going to be a great seller. Semi-autobiographical chick-lit fiction – whatever that is."

"Your sister is a very astute editor with great connections and knows good work when she sees it."

It was hard to describe the last two months since the end of the trial, and end of Stuart MacMillan. Kate and Steve were doing their thing, traveling, studying, and screwing like bunnies. Kate should be glad for menopause or she'd be on her second kid by now. And Jordan would probably have a brood of her own now that she and Scott were a couple.

Lexi followed the old adage when she arrived back in Seattle. *Write what you know.* And she knew friendship. And international intrigue. New love. Unrequited love. Excitement and courtroom drama. And girlfriends.

Lexi had 'seen' that Middle Aged Girls in Love would be a bestseller very soon, and she should enjoy the solitude of her writer's life while she could. The 300-page manuscript would soon undergo an editing frenzy, but would be read in droves by pre-menopausal women and the men who loved them. She'd even had some interest by a couple of female screenwriters – Keri and Samantha -- who thought it would be a good movie for "women of a certain age".

Lexi stepped out of her chair and encircled her arms around Andrew, kissing him on the neck. "Thanks for everything, Mr. Cameron."

"You're welcome Mrs. Cameron. " He kissed her full on the lips. "Are you ready to be married to an unemployed, middle-aged man?"

"Well, you're not exactly poor. I'd say \$4 million was a pretty good take away."

"Not bad. But I'm glad it's over with. I think selling the business required more paperwork than starting it up."

"Did you decide what you want to do next?"

"Yeah, I want to take my wife and dog to our home in Hawaii."

"Did the realtor call??!!!"

"Yep. We got it. The owner has been trying to unload it for about a year since he moved to Thailand, so we got a good price. She's got the keys, and we can go as soon as we want."

"How about tomorrow?" Lexi was half kidding, but could use a break from her Northwest routine.

"How about tonight? I have tickets for 6 p.m."

Lexi had learned to move quickly in recent years. "That....sounds....GREAT!!!! Let me pack a few things, and my laptop, and I'm ready to go. Dakota's going too?"

"He better. We're going to be there for a month."

"Yowza."

It was a perfect end to another busy time. Kate and Steve were settled in Paris, and it would take some algorithms to figure out how many time zones away from each other they were. But they learned to manage distances over the last 20 years. And math.

*Hey.*

*Bonjour.*

*Enough of the French stuff.*

*But I'm learning to speak French. I can order a baguette and fromage like a native.*

*Yeah, like an Illinois native. I have news.*

*I love news. What kind?*

*The kind where I finished the manuscript, and I'm moving to Hawaii with my husband.*

*That would be news. I have some too.*

*Ewww. I don't like your kind of news.*

*Stop it. It's good news. I have learned to walk again. They have some fabulous massage therapists here, and I am walking unaided again.*

*You'll be wearing stilettos in no time.*

*Not so much. But I do have some professors at the Sorbonne who like us. In fact, Steve has transferred here to finish his dissertation.*

*Is he still working on the same topic?*

*Yes, social networking is alive and well here in Europe. We just don't have Stacey to deal with.*

*And how is she?*

*Don't know. Don't care. Don't send checks anymore.*

*And Jordan?*

*With Scott. He travels with her as her bodyguard.*

*I'm guessing that there are several interpretations of that term that I don't want to know about.*

*Pretty much.*

*Look, I have to get going. I'll call you in a few days, okay?*

Lexi hung up, and looked out over the afternoon sun above the mountains. Andrew came in and stood beside her. "Life just keeps getting better, doesn't it, Andrew?"

"That it does. Glad you married me?"

"Of course. Now I have cash and a boyfriend!" Lexi laughed, knowing that she would have to explain that to him, but he would be as happy as her with her much deserved fortune.