

The Lexi Con

Lexi's Plan, Kate's Younger Man

Another sleep-deprived night, Lexi thought, as she turned over to read the bright red numbers of the digital alarm clock. My back hurts (curse you, pilates class!), I drank too much coffee (curse you, Starbucks!), and I stayed up too late watching cable movies (curse you, George Clooney! Okay, maybe not him.) Another sleep-deprived night which will be followed by another intelligent co-workers deprived day, she thought as she kicked the comforter off the end of the bed. There was a time when I imagined my life would be so much different, she sighed as she closed her eyes and foraged through her memories for those different hopes and aspirations.

She didn't like to play, "What if?", but something was gnawing inside of her. At one time she thought she would be on stage, in the mint-green pant suit, encouraging millions to have a positive attitude by doing something extraordinary with their lives. *I'm not sure what happened to that desire...I guess I will let all the charlatans inspire the masses.* Her knees cracked and popped as she walked across her apartment's threadbare carpeting towards the kitchen. Damn, she needed a caffeine jolt, but none would be found. *When will Starbucks start home delivery?* Dreams. Is that all they were? Her newest desire was not a dream, but the silent prayer of her cadre of middle-aged girlfriends.

God, can't I just have some cash and a boyfriend?

She found a Snickers bar hidden in the freezer, rationalizing that chocolate was a reasonable substitute for caffeine. That was a mantra for her middle-aged girlfriends as well: chocolate was a reasonable substitute for just about anything. She mentally shrugged, "Except for cash and a boyfriend."

While carefully nibbling at the thawing edges of the Snickers bar on her way to the so-very-used but so-very-comfortable leather armchair in the living room, she pondered her hoped for career as an inspirational motivator. The mint green pant suit required an adjustment, so she opted for hunter green with a bright vertical striped shirt in her vision. And peep toe pumps, she decided, with a heel low enough to keep my height dominance in check.

She still believed that she had the power to encourage others to think positively and accomplish great things. On so many small-scale frontiers, she had done this with friends and even some co-workers. *You can turn that idea into a column for your local paper...and it would be popular...and it would be syndicated...*she remembered telling a now-published author friend. *You can take that training course in customer service and adapt it to other organizations...you can volunteer to train the leaders of non-profits in your area on how to serve their clients/customers...you can present at a nationwide*

conference to widen your audience...you can make it into a brand...she had coached a young woman from a former employer who currently had a consultant role with NBC.

I do have that power, she assured herself, before critically asking why can't you prod yourself toward a similar success?

Licking the essence of Snickers off her fingers, she looked outside for inspiration. Despite the rain of the Great Northwest, she loved the sight of the trees against a cloudy sky. Nature, chocolate, and friends were truly her inspiration.

The tinny sound of Beethoven's 9th symphony caught her attention. She reached for her cell phone, noting the caller ID. A friendly call from sunny Florida. It was just what she needed.

Hey

Hey back atcha.

How 're you?

Fine.

Whatcha doin'?

Evaluating my life. What are you doin'?

Kind of the same. I'm trying to decide what flavor of bagel to have with my raspberry schmear. Did your soul-searching lead you anywhere?

Yep.

What did you decide?

I have a plan....

Kate (the friend in Florida with the bagel dilemma) got one of those cold shivers in her spine. Lexi had a plan.

Her plans always sounded good at the beginning, they even made sense, and then they always seemed to turn into an escapade, which Kate had to admit to herself, she may have had a part in creating. Most notable (and little of Kate's involvement was needed in developing this plot-twister) was Lexi's plan to take some time off to relax on a beach in Hawaii when she met a seemingly great guy who had issues with communicating. (Okay, who would ever have imagined

national security issues would turn an intimate relationship into an e-mail stand-off?)

What kind of plan? Does it involve passports or stalking or potential indictments?

You remember too damn much! Get over it. It's a great plan.

Lexi and Kate had built their memories, and their friendship on observing life's dilemmas of boys, school, food, jobs, crying jags, shopping, husbands, psychic insights, pets, friends, ex-friends & ex-husbands, and how they all wove an intricate web of problems and joys in their lives. It started twenty-some years ago, back in grad school, on the warm spring evenings spent sitting on a curb in that small southern Indiana town. That's when their plan-hatching schemes started, and they continued for two decades even though they lived a continent away.

Here's what I'm thinking. I have this gnawing-thing happening in me, which means I have to do something. I am not sure what – but you know me, things seem to happen in ways that I could never expect. Remember that Hawaii-thing? You get my drift... Anyway, I think I am now old enough at age 46 to not care so much what people think. It seems to have held me back quite a bit, you know? But now, I am just tired and I don't care. I think I might try writing again – and actually go through with it this time.

Kate remembered the many occasions where she had read and edited Lexi's work, knowing that it was terrific and should be shared with the world. Did this new plan involve a work that would go nowhere – again?

What I want to do is take a lot of the writing I have done and publish it myself. I saw a website that can help me, and for once I have the time and money to be able to do it – a luxury I didn't have in the past. I just feel I have something to say, to a bigger audience than just you and me. But in the past I felt like I HAD to do it – now I WANT to do it – for me.

It was a simple plan, really. One that was designed to help her enjoy her talents, and not tied to a business plan. Lexi was tired of structure, responsibility and obligation, and desperately needed fun and a creative outlet. Maybe that was the gnawing feeling inside, a wild I-don't-give-a-shit attitude that was ready to be expressed.

That's my plan. What's yours?

Kate took a bite of her bagel (whole wheat was her final decision) before answering.

I have no plan. I personally hope to just make it through the day. But you sound much more positive and motivated. Maybe if I read your stuff again, I'll get an idea about where I should be headed.

In spite of any misadventures they'd gotten entangled in over the nearly thirty years they'd known each other, Lexi had been a great motivator, both personally and professionally. Kate missed the regular and frequent interaction, especially on days like these when the screen saver on her computer featuring the kitten asleep on a keyboard using the mouse as a pillow reflected her energy level.

I know it's Monday, but you must have some deep hidden goal you could divulge.

If she hadn't been tired and so annoyed by the tedium of her office, Kate might have admitted to her musings about finally getting a second doctoral degree or running for some local political office. It was officially the year of change, after all. But it felt too early and too lacking in caffeine or chocolate to craft even the most basic plan.

Okay, fine...I want to walk by a rack of books in Barnes & Noble and casually remark to the arrogant grad student I am with how well I know you, the author of that new best-seller.

I'm working on my part of it. Who's the grad student?

Kate felt a chill down her spine, thinking about the latest in a series of grad students she had mentored over the years. They were in that stage, somewhere between immature adolescent and jaded adult, where they were ripe to learn about life's philosophies and potential for adventure. They listened, they laughed, and were genuinely interested in what she thought. Her experiences were new to this tribe of formative males, and she could influence them in many ways – and have a delightfully intriguing, albeit one-sided, romantic interlude in the process. It didn't hurt to have an attractive male giggling over your morning latte, attentive to your every utterance – even if you were married.

His name is Steve.

You mean it's not "Stephen" with a PH or a European "Stefan" - just plain ol' "Steve"?

Yes. Just plain "Steve". He's very nice.

Is that code for "he's seriously HOT"?

I have a vocabulary you know. I would have said "HOT" if I meant "HOT"!

Why was Kate over-reacting to an obviously well-intended jibe? She wouldn't have expected any less from Lexi than to point out the obvious.

Lexi felt the hot button, and backed off. *What's his major? How did you meet him?*

Recovering from her momentary confusion of feelings, she took another bite of her schmearred bagel.

He's volunteering in my office as part of his work study....

Lexi could not contain herself. *You're swooning over a WORK STUDY student????*

YES! I AM, OKAY? I KNOW HE'S ONLY 23 BUT I DON'T CARE!!!

Lexi knew something was rumbling in Kate's loins, and it wasn't the result of an overly acidic latte. *"Alright, alright. Why don't you tell me what is going on...."*

How could Kate explain Steve? He was young and attractive and very intelligent. He was in business grad school, but his undergrad background was in science. He had a great sense of humor and although very self-confident (hence her reference to arrogance), also a little humbled by the unfamiliar territory of case studies and corporate analysis. He was the reincarnation of her obsession in graduate school, and absolutely as mesmerizing.

He reminds me of Sam.

Lexi caught herself between a gasp and a groan. Sam and his All-American, yet funky good looks, his flippant attitude toward the overly intense atmosphere of grad school, and his jokes about his Garfield underwear had served as a platonic bridge for Kate as she hit age 30. Yet, he'd managed to break her heart with casual indifference which diverted her from her original goals in pursuing an MBA.

Sam was a bastard. Why would you be attracted to someone like that again?

And left unsaid was: betrayal like that was enough for all time.

Kate could feel her stomach squirming. She knew that no matter how she responded, Lexi would sense the real reason.

Because I want to get it right this time.

Boy trouble – does it never end? Lexi remembered a remark that Kate made during one of their grad school curbside chats. *Emotionally, we never get past 7th*

grade, do we? That comment still applied to many of the baby-boomers Lexi knew today. There was her friend Sally, who at age 50, got a divorce, shed 40 pounds, and got an intricate tattoo. She posted her new image on an internet dating site and PRESTO - she had to create a spreadsheet to track all of the men she met online, including their names, discussion topics, children's interests, and place of work. Yet they all seemed to have the same, if not more, emotional baggage than they had at puberty. And Lexi guessed that some of that same ancient baggage was ready to be unpacked from Kate's heart.

So what do you want to do differently?

Well, all of these boys in my life I've handled the same way – I obsessed, advised, then lost them. I don't want to play that game anymore.

So what does the game look like this time? You don't want to start a new one, do you?

No.....not really.

But?

I want to try something different.

Like what?

I want to be the one that "breaks up" with them first.

That's kind of hard to do when you don't have an "official" relationship.

Our "official" relationship is student and advisor. And I can change that.

How?

I can get him transferred to a different department.

Wielding your political power to get rid of a guy??? That's so... 'Dynasty'-like. There's probably a more recent example, but I don't know any of the current TV shows – I go to bed early.

So do I. I am usually in bed by 9 pm.

Me too. I get up about 4:30 am to work out. I may be turning into one of those old people who start eating dinner at 4 pm.

Can we get back to me now?

Yes, I digress like most women do. Where were we? Oh yeah, you were doing your Joan Collins impression. Do you have an outfit with shoulder pads?

No. You know they make me look like a football player.

Okay. So you are going to get him transferred. Where? Why? Won't you miss his company?

Yes, but if I nip this in the bud – something I have not done before – I think I will end our relationship right.

Can you really go cold turkey?

Yes! Of course, I can!

He would be right down the hall, wouldn't he?

Damn Lexi all to hell! It sounded so good when she said it out loud. She would banish Steve to being a work-study student for that goofy German Marketing Professor, Dr. Heil.

So tell me exactly, Kate – how was this cold turkey plan of yours going to work if you would still see him every day?

Dr. Heil is gay.

So...

I think Steve has a crush on him.

You mean....! Oh, that just sucks!

Silence. Kate could not respond. Her plan had a devious component to it.

Kate – are you there?

Yes.

You're being quiet – you're up to something.

I don't think that Steve knows he is gay.

Lexi had no response for Kate on that new variation in her platonic cougar relationships. The younger men in her past had gone on to get married, have children, become lawyers and doctors, have affairs with other women, but never turned out to be gay.

There was a quick tap-tap on Kate's office door, Steve came in, tossed his brown leather jacket on a chair, and dropped a Starbucks bag on the corner of her desk.

"They had those brownies you like," he said, "the kind that have that green layer."

"Thanks," she replied before returning to her phone call.

Have to go.

I heard. Are you going to tell him now?

I'll call you back.

Lexi heard the click of the hang-up before she could even wish her good luck with the "break-up." She looked at the clock and realized she should probably make some effort to get to work. The Snickers bar hadn't been much of a breakfast, so she might try to grab something on the way. But she really wanted to tune her thoughts to Kate, to mentally support what she was going to do.

"Steve," Kate said as she flipped some unrelated papers on her desk to avoid looking in his cool hazel eyes, "I was thinking about your work here..."

"Oh yeah?" he said as he settled into the chair beside her desk.

"I was thinking that with your math and science background, you might be better suited to a placement with a professor doing serious quantitative work, rather than the qualitative and linguistic work I do." She looked up from her desktop and saw that he seemed interested in her line of thought. "Dr. Heil in the Marketing department..."

"I went to one of his seminars last week," Steve interrupted with some enthusiasm, "and he is doing amazing stuff with predictive modeling based on data mining and statistical analysis. I'm not a big fan of the SAS programs he's using, but the differentials are too accurate to contest."

Kate found it difficult to understand how anyone could coldly analyze people into categories and by a plethora of characteristics to predict consumer behavior and be so excited about it. Maybe, in spite of her ulterior motives, Steve would make a better match with Dr. Heil.

"Well, good, because I talked to Dr. Heil and arranged to have you transferred over to his area for your work study. He agreed that your background better suited the work he was doing." Kate watched Steve carefully as he took in

the new development. His expression indicated to her that he was positively accepting it and thinking through any implications, so despite any regrets she might have about severing their contact, she knew it was going to be the outcome she wanted.

Kate stood up and extended her hand to shake Steve's hand. He stood and looked at her quizzically.

"So you're not my supervisor anymore?" he asked extending his hand.

She shook her head as she took his hand.

"Great," he said slipping his other hand around her waist, "then the rules don't apply anymore." He pulled her closer to him and leaned down to kiss her.

It was exactly the way Kate had imagined his kiss would be. First, he kissed her lightly, and then pulled back ever so slightly. Feeling no resistance, he tightened his hold on her, and his next long kiss fulfilled all the promises that his first kiss made. Only in the seconds (nano-seconds?) after she felt his tongue slide over her lips and into her ever-so-slightly open mouth, did reality (or morality?) smack her up side the head.

"Steve," she mumbled with uncharacteristic breathlessness, "I..."

"Don't say I shouldn't have," he said backing away from her, "because I'm not sorry."

He turned, picked up his jacket, and left her office. She stood frozen for a few minutes, watching his retreat and replaying their embrace in her mind. She picked up her cell phone.

Hey, didn't expect to hear from you so soon.

He kissed me.

Who – Dr. Heil? I thought he was gay?

No! You KNOW who I mean...

Lexi noticed a dramatic change in Kate's tone. A few moments ago, she was lucid and logical. Now there was a druggy-dreaminess to her words. *Please tell me that you didn't just kiss that...that...BOY!*

Kate giggled. *Well, technically, he kissed me...*

Oh for Christsakes, Kate – what the hell were your thinking???

Kate tried to remember what she was thinking, but couldn't. She was engulfed in a Southern-style swooning sensation ever since Steve's lips touched hers.

He bought me – um – a brownie....

Oh, well, now. That explains everything. You were overcome by a gift of chocolate. I'm sure Bill will understand.

Bill?

You know - your husband?

Bill. Her husband. Oh, right. She was married. For about 15 years now. How could she forget that? Apparently, fairly easily. Kate still had that tingling sensation on her lips and was savoring her recent encounter.

Lexi tried to regain her composure. What had her friend just done? Was it just a momentary mistake – or the beginning of an errant path? She was concerned for her friend – yet, excited and jealous. Kate now had 2 men in her life to Lexi's 0 count and nobody up to bat.

Why don't you tell me what happened. I just talked to you 3 minutes ago when he came in. How did you have such a life changing moment in that short of a time period?

He came in the door..and um...let's see – he, um gave me a – a- um, a brownie. I told him – I told him, um, that he - he was going to be working for doctor – um doctor – um what is his name? Heil. Yeah. And he was excited....

Excited enough to kiss you?

I'm getting to that – I'm still a little dizzy....

Lexi had those feelings of a typical girlfriend. When you're in love, you enjoy being a 7th grade giddy schoolgirl. When you watch someone else in love, your job is to try to be happy for them without barfing at the all-pervasive sappiness of romance.

So you say he was excited about working for Dr. Heil....

Yeah – yeah. Um okay – now I remember. He said something about statistics – and um not liking SAS and uh....

Could you maybe take a bite of that brownie so you could clear your head and talk in complete sentences?

Yeah – I can do that. Kate reached for the small brown bag, smelling the delicious scent of chocolate with a hint of mint. *Wow, this has GOT to be the best brownie that Sam ever gave me...*

SAM????

Kate snapped back to earth.

Oh my god. Did I just say that?

Yes, you did. You weren't kissing "Steve", were you?

Kate leaned back in her chair, letting out a deep sigh that brought her back to reality.

Are you okay, Kate?

I'm not sure.

Kate - tell me what you're thinking...

Kate closed her eyes. Lexi had said it, she wasn't kissing Steve. It instead was Tom or Mark or Kevin or Tim or Rob or Craig or of most recent reference Sam. All those young men who had drifted through her life and fantasies, and Steve was the only one to have crossed the line and smashed into her reality, and even he was carrying the other guys' baggage.

I'm thinking that you should charge me \$250 an hour for the impending conversation.

I'll put it on your tab. Where do we start? The hell with getting to work, Lexi thought, this is far more important, and she shrugged to herself, far more interesting.

I don't want to bore you with ancient history, nor do I want to dredge up high school, so let's start with the premise that for my whole working life, I have always felt younger than my actual age, primarily because I work with a 19 to 26 age group of students. While other women my age are worrying about Botox, I'm thinking about Bon Jovi concert tickets.

Many women our age go to see Bon Jovi.

Yeah, but they take their teenage daughters. So I've always felt that my students were my peer group, and it made perfect sense to find the guys attractive. But I've always been their supervisor in some sense...

Until Sam happened in grad school? Lexi tried to remember how Kate and Sam had gotten connected in Indiana. Through some student club project maybe. Kate might have been the leader, but she hadn't been his supervisor then.

Until Sam, and then it made sense that we were friends that had the potential to develop into something more. We had so little and yet so much in common, Kate thought. We shared so many conversations and secrets and confessions. I thought we were going somewhere.

Until he got on his scooter with some undergrad and ran off for a week or two. Lexi did remember that part of the Sam saga, and how a shopping trip to Chicago with deep dish pizza attached had been required to push Kate out of heartache. Sam was a bastard.

But I honestly thought I loved him.

So, do you honestly think you love Steve?

No. Kate admitted to herself that she had not anticipated anything developing with Steve, nor did she harbor any fantasy of leaving her husband for him. He was smart and attractive and shared a lot of her ideas, but she was old enough to be his mother. There was an unconscious grimace in that thought.

And it's unfair of me to confuse him with Sam, since he's done nothing to hurt me the way Sam did.

Instead he did something that despite its challenges made you as happy as a teenager getting her first kiss. Lexi still heard a vague cougar-like purring.

Kate smirked and marveled at Lexi's talent for turning such an uncomfortable situation into something less threatening.

It was a very good kiss.

Most first kisses are good, unless you are in 3rd grade, and then it is totally weird.

Kate was coming back to earth, realizing that a brief error in judgment had led to a life changing moment. She made a mental note to write about it later in her journal – one that Bill would never see. He was good about giving Kate privacy. She liked that about him, and loved him for many more things.

When was your first kiss, Lexi?

Lexi delved back deep into her memories. First boy-kiss ever? My high school prom. I was such a "good girl". I waited until I was 18. I was tipsy from wine

coolers and tickled by his beard. It was truly memorable – and went no further than my parents' doorstep.

Will that “good girl” image ever go away? Kate pondered how often she had played by the rules, done what she was told, but longed for something different.

I think you just proved that with your “Brownie Incident”.

You're not going to let me forget this, are you?

Oh, HELL NO! But I think it is kind of cool to have these tawdry, lustful moments that we can remember, yet keep an upstanding citizen exterior. Everyone needs their secrets.

And Lexi had a few of her own.

Do you have a “Brownie Incident” that you haven't shared with me? Kate smiled at the phrase. It sounded like a Girl Scout cookie extortion plot.

Let's call it a “Smoothie Incident.”

That sounded even more heinous than the brownie.

Involving? Please don't say a blender; I'll never be able to look at the Cuisinart in the same way.

Involving my alleged trainer when I was living in California.

And still married to Kurt? Kurt, who was also a bastard, by the way. And what do you mean alleged trainer?

Well, he did some exercising. Mostly he was a drug dealer, I think.

YOU HAD A THING WITH A DRUG DEALER??? This was certainly not upstanding citizen behavior, and Kate couldn't believe Lexi would not have told her about this, however obliquely.

I hope there's no one near your office. No, I did not have any kind of romantic thing with him.

Then explain the “Smoothie Incident”?

I did a deal with him at the juice bar at the gym to set up a low-life I used to work with.

YOU SET UP A DRUG DEAL FOR THIS GUY?

God, I hope your door is closed. I set up a meeting for my trainer with the guy from work. And then ratted to my boss about the guy's coke habit which he was funding with embezzled money from the company. Lexi tried to make it sound perfectly planned and reasonable, and not the high drama that it was.

That's certainly an unusual way to combine your accounting background and love of pilates.

You have no idea.

Lexi's life was full of these seemingly tragic and unusual circumstances that she rationalized as normal behavior. The "Smoothie Incident" was just one example of how to take care of a complex problem, with a straightforward, albeit unusual solution. There was her marriage to Kurt, a recovered alcoholic who eliminated the vodka, but not the manipulative mindset of a drinker. The only way out of that co-dependent marriage was to leave unexpectedly and lose seemingly everything – a house, two dogs, and all her cash – and simply start a new life that served her better. She healed her heartbreak with an enticing affair with a mysterious military man, who loved her and then left her so he could kill terrorists in unknown lands. Lexi kept her friends close, lovers at arm's length, and secrets hidden – unless there were a girlfriend and chocolate nearby.

And speaking of ideas, I thought it might be a good one to get out the door and off to work. At this rate, I will only be 90 minutes late and can still sneak into that 10 a.m. marketing meeting unnoticed. Did I tell you that my boss asked me to be in charge of new business development plans?

Aren't you their accountant?

Kind of. Accountant-advisor slash de facto IT director.

Is there a raise with this new title?

No. All extra titles are unofficial. My actual title, Director of Program Management, is nebulous enough to cover a lot of categories.

Including new business development?

Sure. Why not? All those years of doing operations consulting for big organizations prepared me for this little firm pretty well. I can look like a hero and cover a lot of bases.

How long will you stay at this job? Lexi felt a little stab in her gut at Kate's offhand comment. Occasionally there was a twang of guilt that ran through her knowing that she couldn't stay at a job more than a couple of years. When the

creativity ran out, the red tape got too thick, or the boss too manipulative, Lexi hit the road.

You know I'm not very good at long-term planning. We will see what happens. Lexi sighed. *I honestly don't know how anything is ever going to turn out in my life. It's usually one surprise after another, so I just kind of go with the flow. I like it so far...*

Because they give you a lot of freedom and let you be in charge.

Lexi laughed. *And your point is....*

You should still have your own business.

That's part of the plan. Lexi grabbed her keys as she headed for the door, cell phone perched on her right shoulder. She wasn't ready to attach one of those Star Trekkie blue earpieces to her ear. The less Borg-like, the better.

The publishing plan?

Yes. My long term dream is a vision of me leaving this cold cruel accounting slash IT slash marketing slash MBA-like world and hitting the road as an author and speaker. Lexi got in her car and turned the ignition.

Are you driving and talking?

Yes. And if I were chewing gum while talking to you I might max out my neural capacity. I should probably go.

Ok. Thanks for the help with Sam – um – Steve.

Whatever I can do. Call me.

Lexi pulled out of her carport and into the gentle mist of a Seattle spring. Before leaving the parking lot, her phone chimed to her favorite country music star's done-me-wrong love ballad, sending chilled beads of sweat down her neck.

It's him.

Choice here, Lexi thought, as she stopped the car. Pick up his call and spend the morning on the phone with him or go to work and pick up his message and return the call later.

I would love to talk to him, she thought gesturing with her right hand, because it's been so long, and I do still miss him. But, she thought gesturing with her left hand to weigh the decision, I've spent the morning thus far dealing with Kate's

emotional instability, and how much impact would that have on her conversation, and therefore how would that skew what she really wanted to convey to him.

You were just whining about Kate having two men in her life and you having none, her right hand argued. Pick up the phone.

You just got assigned to do business development, her left hand countered, and you're going to blow off the first marketing meeting to talk to a guy who may be calling from a different continent with no plans to venture into your life.

But he might be planning to drift into my life again, her right hand argued, and you just finished saying that you don't know how long you even want to stay in this job.

However, you have the job and you don't have him. Not that you ever had or could ever have him.

Her cell phone stopped ringing and she hoped that he left a message, but at least she'd have a number in memory to return his call. She pulled out of the parking lot and sped through the already post-rush hour traffic to her office.

With a cup of green tea in one hand and a legal pad in the other, Lexi discreetly entered the conference room where her marketing meeting was already in progress. If you could call sniping and posturing progress, she thought as she settled into her chair. This team needed serious adjustment, and her consulting intervention experience was going to be valuable in herding these cats.

She spent the rest of the two hour meeting leading discussion and corralling egos until finally a rough outline emerged for program development. Lexi looked at the scribbling on her notepad, noting that she had doodled Mike's name and created a maze out of it. That was our relationship, she sighed before going to her office to return his call.

He hadn't left a message, but his number wasn't blocked so she pushed a couple buttons to make a connection. Fully expecting to get switched to voice mail, she mentally prepared her message. Sound happy and pleased that he called, but not overjoyed. Don't giggle and don't whine.

Colonel Brandon.

Lexi was surprised by the deep voice that answered because it was not Mike.

I'm sorry. I was returning a call I got this morning, but some wires must have gotten crossed.

Are you calling for Michael Taylor?

Yes. She had a hint of confusion in her voice, but at the same time a warning bell in her mind. This can't be good.

Are you Lexi?

Yes. Now the confusion was growing and mixing with some annoyance. Why did this guy have Mike's phone? And why was he calling her?

Are you the woman he met in Hawaii?

Who the hell are you? What is all this about?

Michael Taylor has been classified as missing, and yours was the only phone number on his speed dial. We thought you should be notified.

What do you mean missing? The alarm was wailing in her head.

I'm sorry ma'am, but that information is classified.

Everything about Mike's life and missions had been classified. But his heart had been hers long enough to earn her the only listing in his cellular memory.

Lexi thought about their time together in Hawaii. It was truly magical, the kind you read about in a chick-fiction novel. And had she remembered those modern day romance novels, she would have been forewarned that this dream could never last, have a goofy turn of events, but would always be remembered.

She hadn't spoken to Mike in 4 years. Why would she be on his speed dial? That took extra effort to program, and she was sure that his cell phone wasn't 4 years old. He always had access to the latest in electronics, courtesy of Uncle Sam.

I'm doing it again. Reading between the lines.... Since they had very little direct communication, Lexi was always trying to decipher nuances. Were his email sentences short, or did he have time to write a whole paragraph? His message length, number of capital letters, and punctuation were her only indication she had of how he felt about her. And now she was trying to interpret his speed dial programming. Lexi wondered if he had assigned her the #1 button or some other number... *Aghh! STOP IT!*

Lexi refocused on the important issue at hand. *Where is he? And is he in trouble?*

She knew she had two ways to find out, both of them unconventional. She had old friends, dating back to kindergarten, who had government "Classified"

clearance, and might be able to find out more information for her. It would take some whining and emotional blackmail, but she could get them to find out something – anything - for her, but at a cost.

But there was a quicker route with a more powerful network. Her psychic sisterhood could find just about anyone, anywhere. She pulled out her cell phone and hit #3.

Hello?

Hi. It's me. I only have a few minutes, but I need to you to put your antenna up. It's Mike. I got a phone call that he missing.

MIKE??? You've got to be kidding! Who called you?

Lexi gave Joann the background information in short, bullet point fashion, as though she were conducting a meeting during a crisis.

I don't know anymore than what the guy told me. Any ideas?

Give me a minute.

Lexi, Joann and a few other buddies were friends and sisters of a different nature. They were all highly intuitive, and none of them worked for an 800 number. Her team of friends used their intuition and intelligence in careers as social workers, business owners, and teachers, and were highly respected in their communities. They just didn't always advertise all of their talents.

Joann sighed. *Well, there's a lot of covert energy around him, so I can understand why it's classified info. But he looks okay and doesn't look in danger, just really serious.*

He's got his "game face" on. Lexi remembered that when Mike went to work, it was all work, and he could not focus on anything else. He was a warrior through and through, and had the incredible ability to focus on his target. For a few days, four years ago, she was his target, and she knew what it was like to be in his line of sight.

Lexi breathed a short sigh of relief. She would have put up her own antenna to look for him, but if her emotions were running high, as they always did when it came to Mike, her psychic powers were useless. If he really wanted to get her a message, he would come to Lexi in her dreams, as he did occasionally. He was a pretty powerful psychic himself, but would never admit it. He told her once, "If I can't see it, touch it, or kill it, then it's not real." His mind might believe that, but his heart knew something else. He would find her if he really wanted to. But he

stopped trying a long time ago, and it would be a heartbreaking decision that Lexi would have to live with.

Are you still there, Lexi?

I wonder if he knows he lost his cell phone....

Joann laughed. *I think that is the least of his worries at the moment! Look, he's not in danger, but he's not in a safety zone either. You're just going to have to wait this one out.*

Is this the part where you tell me not to worry about him?

Yes, but you will anyhow. Are you still in love with him?

You're the psychic. You tell me.

I don't need to tell you the obvious. How about I call you tonight? I have a welfare addict mom with 4 kids that I have to figure out how to get housing for by 5 pm.

My, what a jam packed day you have. Assessing national security concerns and keeping the indigent housed. Do you have an "S" on your chest too?

I much prefer Wonder Woman, but thanks. I needed the laugh. Gotta go ~

Lexi felt relieved. She trusted Joann's intuition and it felt right in her core. Or was that her stomach rumbling? She needed lunch. And a break from a hectic, emotion filled morning. Lexi foraged through the company refrigerator, looking for leftovers from yesterday's take out. Some microwaved Pad Thai, the Asian version of spaghetti with chicken, which would do just fine. A bag of small carrots would add color to her all beige lunch. Comfort food. She needed it.

Lexi inhaled the warm noodles as logged onto her personal email. She wanted to share the latest Mike escapade with Kate, but didn't have time for a phone call. With a three-hour time difference, they had to make some concessions when it came to communicating. Kate was probably leaving work for the day, so Lexi would leave her an email to greet her the next morning.

She tapped the big keys on her ancient keyboard. Lexi wondered when this company would jump into the new millennium and get her an ergonomic key board. She would put in the request in tomorrow with the corresponding 4 signatures that would take 2 hours of her day to find the correct people and convince them of the necessity of this \$30 purchase. Tomorrow....

Lexi logged in, clicked on Kate's name in her email favorites, and wrote a brief yet enticing email.

OMG. I got a phone call re: Mike. He's missing. Joann "found" him. He's okay. Will talk later – Lexi