

## The Lexicon

### *Professional and Personal Mergers*

Kate finished typing the first draft of the case study she was writing, and decided to take a quick break before proofreading it and leaving for the afternoon. She spun her desk chair around so she could look out the window she'd earned by staying with the university for so many years. The sunny sky had a few white wisps for accessories, but no sign of rain clouds that could reduce the fire risks caused by drought.

She wished there were more than crumbs of her morning brownie remaining. The memory of the morning made her smile and indulge in a newly fueled fantasy.

*She was filing a few papers in the cherry wood barrister case she kept against the east wall of her office when the phone rang. The tone signaled an internal call, so she took it on speaker.*

*"Kate," Dr. Heil said in his slightly accented English, "I wanted to thank you for zending Schteve to my area. He has already been a godzend."*

*"I thought he'd do well with you," she said, "and he seemed very interested in your project."*

*"He finished about two weeks of equations in ein afternoon and identified drei collinearity vulnerabilities in de model."*

*"Great," Kate replied without more than just a vague idea what he was talking about. "I'm glad he could help."*

*"He's very skilled with de math, but he isn't very friendly. He didn't vant to talk with me at all."*

*Kate rolled her eyes, trying to imagine Steve not being friendly, but she had certainly been wrong about him being gay. "I'm sure he just wanted to accomplish his goals to impress you."*

*She hung up just as Steve tapped at her door and came in. She felt awkward trying to compose her thoughts.*

*"Dr. Heil says you're a great worker, but not very friendly. He talked in some kind of code about your stellar efforts this afternoon."*

*Steve shook his head slightly. "It was a bunch of equations, not a whole new algorithm. Simple stuff compared to the combinatorics I used to do." She looked at him with admiration for understanding something that sounded so technically complicated.*

*"Besides it took my mind off..." He paused, and she jumped into the lion's den for conversation.*

*"I think this morning was confusing for both of us, but sometimes things happen on impulse, and maybe we just need to move on."*

*"Except it wasn't just impulse for me," he said leaning forward and resting his palms on her desk. "And you're ready with reasons why it shouldn't have happened:*

- *You're married*
- *You're older than I am*
- *Your professional reputation"*

*He ticked them off with great resolve.*

*"Quite a thorough analysis," Kate said, giving him credit for at least seeing it from her point of view.*

*"But missing the critical variable," he continued, never breaking the eye lock that he'd established. In response to her non-response, he firmly defined that variable, "Desire."*

She was roughly (mercifully?) pulled out of her fantasizing by the blink noise from her computer notifying her of incoming e-mail. She turned to the keyboard and retrieved Lexi's message.

Kate got a cold shiver. She had remembered Mike this morning when she was pondering Lexi's plan adventures, and she hadn't thought about him in a while. Talking to Lexi about him still felt like she was poking at an open wound, and even in jest, she would only make oblique references to their convergence. But it was eerily coincidental that Kate had him on her mind in the jumble of emotions this morning, and this call about Mike had come in for Lexi this afternoon.

She typed back a quick e-mail, sure that they would have a long conversation this evening.

*Is there something in the alignment of the planets that's making men from our pasts come back to haunt us today? If I read about Sam in the alumni magazine tonight, I may have to start drinking heavily.*

Kate looked at the jumble of papers on her desk in preparation for leaving for the night, deciding to place the melee of memos and reports into neat piles without any particular order. Her trademark Flair pens were placed back into her university-issued accessory holder, and in a rebellious fashion, she brushed the brownie crumbs onto the floor knowing the housekeeping staff would overlook them. *Let the ants get them.*

Hearing her office door hinge squeak, she reluctantly turned to see who might be intruding into her world at this late afternoon hour.

“Hallo. May I speak with you for ein moment?”

“Of course, Dr. Heil, please come in.” Her discourses with the quirky German professor had been brief, but cordial, and she didn’t know him well enough to tell him that she was tired and wanted to go home. She hoped that he was bringing news of Steve. Kate’s heart fluttered in anticipation.

“I vill be brief. I do not sink Schteven vill verk out for mee.”

Kate’s brain tried to mentally compensate for Dr. Heil’s inability to speak correct English, even though he left The Homeland 20 years ago. “May I ask why?”

“Anuhzer stoodent vas recommended to mee, und hiz qualifications are much bezer zan Schteve’s.”

Translation: Dr. Heil found a gay student that was more to his liking. And Schteve wasn’t gay.

“What would you like me to do about this, Dr. Heil? I have already filled out the paperwork ....”

“Paperverk! Dat means nuhsing to mee. Take Schteve back. I vill have my department pay yourz for his time today.”

This was better than reading about Sam in the alumni newsletter. The Cougar was purring.

“Und I vould appreciate it eef you vould tell Schteve of our...mix up?”

Kate knew that she didn’t have the political power, or personal desire, to go toe to toe with Der Professor. His relations with the university’s powerful alumni were solid, accounting for over \$10 million in donations last year. He had given her a directive, not an option.

“I’ll take care of it tomorrow and give Steve a call.”

“I already told Schteve to come und zee you at 9 am. Dat verks for you?”

Kate’s heart jumped into her throat, possible knocking out her teeth on its way to her desk. She briefly fantasized about not one, but two brownies tomorrow morning – a smorgasbord of chocolate.

“Yes, Professor. That works for me.”

“Vielen Dank.”

Kate didn't know her German, but guessed by the big smile and warm handshake that he was thanking her. They both had dreamy smiles on their faces, realizing they had made a pact to get what each wanted, together, even if they did it in a clandestine fashion.

*I think Lexi is rubbing off on me. This sounds like something she would do.*

Dr. Heil left, leaving Kate a moment to sit at her desk and potentially learn to breathe normally again. Her cell phone rang.

*Hi honey. You ready for dinner?*

Her heart panicked. It was Bill.

*Um, yeah...I am just now...um leaving. I should be...home...in about a half hour?*

*You sound funny. Are you okay?*

*Yeah. Someone just left my office, and I was a little distracted. What's for dinner?*

*I don't know. What do you feel like having?*

*Chocolate.*

Meanwhile, back in the Great Northwest, Lexi had a quiet moment to herself to take in the events of the day. It was 2 pm, and already she had played counselor to Kate, therapist and coordinator to irate staff members, and was about to play psychic detective. Her boss, Evan, had asked her to meet with him this afternoon. *What does he want now?* Evan was direct, liked short meetings, and didn't want to fuss with details. That's what he had hired Lexi for.

He had scheduled an hour long meeting, which was unusual for a man who got his point across in 2 minutes or less. *He wants something from me. He's probably going to pick my brain again. Probably another new business deal he wants to brainstorm about.* She would have played psychic detective a bit more, but after the news about Mike, she was emotionally worn out and wasn't ready to predetermine what Evan wanted.

*Mike.*

He still remained a question mark in her life. She would always love him, but never have him. They had a silent agreement to be concerned for one another, but always at a distance. Lexi and Mike. Mike and Lexi. It had a nice ring to it. And they were great together, at least for a week. But she knew that if they were ever together for the long term, they just might ruin each other. His job was killing people. Hers was motivating people to live long and happy lives. It should have been a clue, right from the beginning.

The beginning. Magic. A week in Oahu. Strangers with no history or baggage, coming together to explore one another. *He really woke me up and I will always be thankful for that.* Lexi had gotten trampled in her divorce, mentally, physically, emotionally, and financially, and Mike brought her out of her stupor, reminding her that she was desirable. She loved him more in that one week than she had loved Kurt in 11 years.

But she was ready to move on and had accomplished a lot since that Hawaiian Adventure. She hadn't dated, but focused on herself, creating a solid personal and professional foundation she was proud of. Sure, she had her self-defeating moments, like this morning, when she woke up tired, cranky, and alone. But overall she had worked hard, completed a rough chapter, and was ready for something new.

And something new did not include something old – like Mike. She was somewhat surprised that he was still alive considering his professional path. Would Lexi ever find out if anything happened to him? *I guess that question got answered, didn't it?* It did bring an aura of comfort that someone would reach out to her to let her know how a loved one was doing.

Lexi opened her cell phone, looking at the Calls Received log. She pressed the button from early this morning.

*Colonel Brandon.*

*Colonel – this is Lexi. We spoke this morning regarding Mike? I am afraid I cut you off without receiving a full explanation. I know you said the information was "Classified" but I was wondering if there was anything else you could share with me.*

*Not really, ma'am. I was one of the men traveling with Mike in Hawaii when he met you. That's how I know who you are.*

*Oh.*

*You made quite an impression on him.*

*I did?*

*And the rest of us in his squadron.*

*His squadron? Really? How's that?*

*He showed us the note.*

Lexi blushed. On their last morning together, he was running late and said he would have a hard time explaining it to the rest of the guys. Lexi had scribbled a humorous note on the hotel's stationery saying something to the effect of "Please excuse Mike for being late. He had a difficult night and was very busy." Sometimes Lexi's outlandish ways came back to haunt her.

Lexi laughed nervously. *Oh yeah. I remember...*

*We all had a great time kidding him about it.*

*I'll bet. So there is nothing you can tell me about where he was – or where he might be?*

*No ma'am. But I was hoping you could tell me.*

*Tell you what?*

*Ma'am – we typically don't rely on unconfirmed information. But Mike joked with us that you said you were a psychic. He didn't believe in it – but I do.*

*You do? I thought you were hard core military?*

*I am. But my mama – and grandmamma both – could tell when things were going to happen. They are strong women and I respect them. So if you know anything...*

*Not really, but...*

*But?*

Lexi hesitated. *I did have a friend "check in" on him. I think he is okay, in a serious spot, but not in danger. I think I would feel it if something were really wrong with him.*

*Have you heard from Mike?*

*No, I haven't. Not in a very long time. But sometimes I can feel him. And all I can tell you is that he is really focused right now wherever he is. Does that make sense?*

*Lexi, I have an idea that I am going to check out. You might have given me a clue as to where he might be. I'll be in touch.*

*Thanks, Colonel.*

*Lexi clicked the OFF button. Mike is going to be pissed if I he's found due to psychic powers. But it would serve him right to get busted on his "I don't believe in that kind of crap" attitude.*

*Evan's voice came through her office phone, startling her back to her responsibilities. Are you there? You're five minutes late!*

*Whatever, dude. When did he become such a stickler for on-time meetings? I'll be right there – just finishing up a call...*

*Lexi walked down the hall to the corner office, trying to muster up energy and focus her attention back to the business world.*

*Come. Sit down. There's someone I want you to meet.*

*Lexi looked at the tall, olive-skinned, curly haired man, dressed to the nines in an Armani suit. He couldn't possibly be from the northwest. If people wore ironed khakis with their fleece, they were trying to make an important impression.*

*I'm David. Nice to meet you, Lexi.*

*You are dressed far too well to be the new IT guy.*

*And far too technologically-challenged, I'm afraid. I'm David Goldman, the lead attorney representing the Archbold Group.*

*Of course, Lexi had heard of the Archbold Group. It was a private equity firm, maybe one of the largest private equity firms, based out of Manhattan that had been swallowing up dozens of diverse businesses in presumably friendly mergers.*

*This came up very quickly. Evan searched for a good way to explain this. You're a key part of our team, and I thought your background would make your input valuable to our discussion.*

*Archbold believes in sticking with the strong management teams of the partners that we add to the group, and Evan has indicated that your contributions have pushed the firm to a more forward perspective. David ran through his patter without any hesitation, very professional but not cold.*

*And I thought everyone just considered me a...*

*Why don't we sit down?* Evan didn't want David to get the wrong idea about conflict in the management ranks because he knew this deal was going through (Archbold was after all the elephant in the living room, and if Archbold wanted peanuts, you just handed them over) and he wanted it to go through smoothly.

David checked his Rolex. *Can we just go downstairs to Starbucks to talk? I'm beginning feel the impact of the flight from New York and could use some coffee.*

*A man after my own heart...but if we go downstairs, it's Seattle's Best.* Lexi smiled indulgently. *We'd have to walk at least a block to get to Starbucks.*

He's really attractive, Lexi thought, as the three of them took the elevator to the lobby. Granted that just about any male wearing an Armani suit would be attractive, but he's got friendly eyes that have a look of intelligence in them. No wedding ring. Maybe he'll buy me a brownie and sweep me off my feet...or at least a chocolate chip cookie and seal a great business deal.

Bill apparently felt that chocolate was an inappropriate dinner choice and opted for turkey and black bean chili instead.

"If you squint and look at it in what's left of sunlight, it's kind of the same color," he said as he sprinkled some blue cheese crumbles on top of the homemade concoction in her bowl.

"Probably not the same taste," she replied. Or emotional jump start like this morning's brownie.

Kate and Bill had been friends before they got married fifteen years ago, when Kate was 35 just as she had predicted since high school. They were one of those couples that casual friends described as devoted, and they loved each other despite of or perhaps because of their idiosyncrasies. He didn't quite understand the combination of a doctoral degree and her rock music passion, and she didn't understand why he wasn't the A-type personality he should have been to accomplish what he had in entrepreneurial efforts. Their link was nothing either one would have foreseen, and yet was something that made perfect sense.

"What was distracting you when I called?"

Kate was not very good at lying, but she was skilled at diversion.

"This professor that came by my office to talk about some student has the most annoying accent. It's like the finance professor I had in grad school – maybe

from India or Pakistan – who always said ‘variable’ instead of ‘variable.’” It was funny as hell, but really distracting.”

Variable, she remembered Steve saying in her fantasy. That was one distraction of the day she wouldn’t confess to Bill tonight.

“So this prof is from India?”

“No, from Germany.” She stalled as she tried to get her mind back into the reality of dinner conversation. “I wonder if he could translate some of the stuff from the owner’s manual of the stereo.”

“I think Bang & Olufsen is Scandanavian, not German,” Bill said arching his eyebrow, since it was so rare to catch Kate in an error. “What is on your mind?”

She paused, searching for a good answer.

“Lexi got a call today about Mike,” she sighed. “She didn’t give me any details in her e-mail, but she’ll probably call tonight.”

Lexi ordered an herbal tea, the red kind that tasted like watery raspberries and flowers, knowing that caffeine might make her a little more talkative than she wanted to be. This was an important meeting and she wanted to observe, be thoughtful, and not act too much like a 7<sup>th</sup> grader around this very handsome man. Evan ordered a decaf and David went for a shot of espresso, pulling out his AMEX Platinum card to pay for it all.

*Be on your toes.* That little voice went off inside her, or around her, telling Lexi to remain sharp, focused and at attention during the upcoming discussion. She could see Evan shifting into salesman mode, posturing himself to take part in The Deal. Evan’s passion was negotiating, and his body language showed it. His shoulders were thrown back, and eyes narrowed, ready to psychologically debate the alternatives. Lexi learned a long time ago that her #1 job priority was to support her boss, and she did that by making him consider details he had not thought of, expanding his perspective, and doing her best to keep him out of trouble in front of strangers.

“Let’s sit over here”. Evan pointed to a semi-secluded table of 3 bistro chairs near that back corner window. Lexi was going to have to find a way to remind him that he was not in charge of this meeting. Archbold had called this meeting, and they had an agenda. This wasn’t a friendly discussion, and there was a subtext that was not yet revealed. Lexi gave Evan a quick glance, focusing on his eyes, then his cell phone, giving him the message that he should silence it so

there would be no distractions. Evan reached down to casually mute his Blackberry.

“Does it really rain all the time here in Seattle?” A common question for an out-of-towner.

Lexi took the lead. “Not always. There should be a sunbreak soon and you’ll be able to see our gorgeous vista of volcanoes. Actually, I’ve seen stronger rainstorms on the East Coast and in the Midwest.”

“You’re not from here?”

“I’m originally from Indiana, my family vacations in Florida, and I used to work for a consulting company with projects in Jersey, New York, and Connecticut.” Lexi specifically made the remark to let him know she knew his area of the country and the unique demeanor. She glanced at Evan, seeing him squirm a bit at being left out of the conversation. “Evan, what did you think of Chicago when you were there?”

Evan’s chest bloated slightly with the chance to participate. “Great cultural opportunities, but too cold for this Native Seattlite.”

“Seattle is a growing region for us. That’s why we wanted to talk to you.” David had a mission to fulfill, and was a master of the segue, regaining control of a conversation that could have gone many directions.

Lexi saw Evan inhale, getting ready to speak. She kicked him under the table, stopping his next comment. It was David’s turn to speak, and he didn’t need a distraction.

“As you know, health care is a continually expanding market and our firm is seeking out emerging players. Your company has a very respected name in the region with admirable growth over the last 10 years.”

Lexi had heard it before and could sense when it was coming. First the complimentary buildup, the focus on a weakness, and then The Pitch.

“But to grow any further, you need capital to expand your IT infrastructure, or you won’t survive. The national firms are taking business right and left from local and regional companies that just don’t have the capital to expand.”

Lexi was proud of Evan, as he sat still while David lobbed a FUD. Fear – Uncertainty – Doubt. It was the key to emotionally hooking in a potential client. Evan sat back in his chair, realizing that it was his turn to listen, and that no deal was ready to be negotiated. The Elephant was about to list its demands.

“Archbold would like to position you as a major player in the health care insurance payment handling market. It’s a niche that we see expanding, and it needs a company that is willing to focus on payment processing on a national and potentially international level.”

Lexi’s company already processed half a billion dollars a year with antiquated systems. She knew they could do so much more given additional money, updated IT infrastructure and sound management – all of which she had been pressuring Evan and the owners to pursue. David and Lexi were of one mind, but David had the financial power to make it happen.

Evan folded his hands in a contemplative fashion, but Lexi knew his heart was racing on the inside. “What is it that Archbold is proposing, David?”

“We want to capitalize your firm and take 25% interest in the resulting entity.”

The Pitch was thrown. Lexi knew it was a great idea, but also knew that Evan would have a hard time convincing the owners. Veronica and Sydney had birthed the company 15 years ago, and still thought of it as a small-peas kind of place, not the profitable and well-respected company that it was. Changing these two women’s mindsets from entrepreneur to corporate giant was a leap they might not be ready to take.

Evan gave a shy, non-committal smile. “Honestly David, it sounds interesting, but I will have some convincing to do with our two owners....”

“They won’t be staying.” David revealed the subtext to the agenda. “We’ll put our own management in place. Your owners have done great, but aren’t ready to lead a national company. A very comfortable settlement will be offered to them. We would, however, like the two of you to stay in a leadership capacity. You both have the breadth of experience and knowledge to move forward in the direction we want your firm to grow.”

*He IS a New Yorker*, Lexi thought. No fuckin’ around, just put it out there. Come with us and grow big, on our terms. Or stay small and die.

Evan’s diplomatic salesman took over. “Well, I guess we have a lot to think about, David.”

“We’ll need your answer in a week.” David was unfazed by these conversations, just putting what he needed out there for people to say yes or no. Archbold would just move on to the next cute, small company if Lexi’s firm said no.

“I’ll make sure you get a prompt reply.” Evan’s comment was tinged with sarcasm, and Lexi knew that they needed to leave soon before Evan erupted, as he was prone to do on occasion.

“I apologize, gentlemen, but Evan and I have a staff meeting in 10 minutes and we are going to have to run. David, it was a pleasure to meet you and thanks for coming out all this way to chat with us. It’s been enlightening.”

Evan picked up on Lexi’s cue to leave, despite the fact there was no staff meeting at 4:30 pm. The employees were on a fixed schedule, leaving at 5 pm, God forbid anyone who stood in their way if they blocked the path to the door. Lexi guessed that David knew this was a vague excuse, and was allowing them a face-saving maneuver.

The group said their goodbyes, and David walked off toward a waiting limo in the heavy drizzle, leaving a memento of Seattle raindrops on his expensive suit. Lexi and Erik walked to their building in silence. Lexi pushed the UP button for the elevator and glanced at Evan pacing the lobby.

“Fuck! Now what are we going to do????” Evan smacked his hand flat against the wall in frustration.

“Dude. Not your company, remember? You’re just the messenger. Tell the owners what the offer is. As my Jewish Mother once told me, ‘Ach. They’ll whine. They’ll moan. Then they’ll get over it...’”

“But I HATE giving them bad news.”

“Who said this was bad? Maybe they want out. Veronica is 2 years from retiring. Sydney has 2 girls she never sees and is torn between her family and work. They don’t really need the money, and we could hire them as consultants. This might be a blessing for both of them. You never know.”

Evan stared at her with his steel blue eyes. Lexi got the message.

“You want to head this new firm - badly, don’t you?”

The elevator doors opened and they entered in silence, both staring straight ahead.

“You called Archbold, didn’t you, Evan? Without telling Veronica and Sydney?”

“I know somebody who knows them, and I dropped a few hints. But this is my chance, Lexi. I want to run a big firm. And I need your help.”

Lexi appreciated the compliment, knowing she worked hard for many years and deserved it. “Look, the offer is good – great even. And it’s what I have been telling you we need to do for the last year. David is right – if we don’t grow, we die. But you stepped into the Den of Lionesses all by yourself, so you get to

incur their wrath and emotion. But honestly, this might be a life saver for both of them.”

Six p.m. Time to head for home. Evan was in a funk now that he created a dangerous professional situation for himself, and Lexi was happy to get the heck out of Dodge – and out of the way of the emotional spewing Evan was sure to do.

Lexi’s immediate feeling toward the new opportunity was more “let’s wait and see” than “Whoo Hoo! I’m running a company!” This felt a lot like her consulting days, when a project would come along that sounded great, but for which she’d developed a thick skin and a “hurry up and wait” attitude. *I have no idea if this is going to happen or not, so I’m not going to get excited about it.*

Lexi hurried and packed her red leather purse/briefcase, an homage to her need to be creative in a straight laced business world. She headed toward her car for the brief commute home. It was a nice change to live near work.

An empty apartment greeted her, a barrage of beige walls that someday she would trade in for a real house and yard. She kicked off her shoes, grabbed her sweats and headed outside for a walk. Walking was a time for her to clear her head, breathe some real air, and decompress. She petted a few of the neighborhood dogs and casually chatted with their owners. It was a nice routine that let her clear her head from the day’s crises and woes.

After shaking off the crud of the day, she arrived home to a half empty refrigerator. Ah – leftover meatloaf – perfect! Something warm, hot and satisfying that was actually good for her. Turkey, diced vegetables and fennel as a secret ingredient made her meat loaf award winning – at least at her office’s annual meat loaf cookoff.

*Crap. I wanted to call Kate!* The 3 hour time difference and early bedtime made it nearly impossible to talk at night. She’d have to catch Kate early in the morning. Lexi stretched on the floor, watched her favorite reality TV show and headed off to bed, ready for another day of playing counselor, work advisor, and whatever other role life threw her way.