

## The Lexicon

### *Throw Away the 'Shoulds'*

Kate typed the quick e-mail note and returned the polished version of Lexi's intro.

*I read your intro. I only made a couple of edits, but it sounds like you wrote it specifically for me -- challenging boundaries, ignoring the shoulds, pursuing a heartfelt goal. Was this written before or after my foray over the lines? How psychic could you get? I would like to say that it has to be a coincidence, but you are very, very close to all of my thoughts and all of my actions for that matter. We have to talk. I'll call you tonight when I can escape with my cell phone and share everything that's going on today. I'm sure you have news too. I'm dying to know if you heard anything from Mike or if you've decided that you're going to take the deal -- or if something else extraordinary has happened today. This intro is a great start to what I know is going to be an interesting and important work for you, for me and for many of the women that I'm sure will read it.*

As she was paging through the nearly 80 e-mails that came in from various listservs and from people within the university asking for one favor or another, she thought idly about preparing a lecture for the seminar class she was supposed to teach one night a week. Marketing nonprofit entities, she thought, seems incredibly boring right now. I have too many other things on my mind to concentrate on marketing causes.

She looked up from her computer, hopeful, but not at all expecting to see Steve in her doorway. He must be enjoying the research, she thought, or he would drop by with brownies or cookies or something. You have to quit thinking about brownies, she scolded herself, or you will never accomplish anything in work life again. She went to the bookcase on one side of her office and pulled out two books she'd ordered from a non-profit association and a workbook from a professional seminar she'd developed for a conference last year. They would at least provide a start.

Kate enjoyed teaching the seminar on non-profits because it was a limited duration continuing education course and most of the students were adult professionals already working in the field or trying to get into it. She knew the weekly session provided great networking opportunities for the students, and their interactions were at least as informative as the material she'd present. She didn't need to entertain, as so often happened in regular classes, but just offer enough inspiration for discussion. She flipped through the seminar workbook and started outlining topics for the five classes.

“You look pretty self-satisfied,” Steve said, handing her a cup of coffee to interrupt her finally-not-Steve-obsessed concentration.

“Sometimes I still do very good work,” she said.

“You do very good work a lot of the time. Your idea about the changing metrics is a very hot topic right now from what I read, and I don’t think anyone has quite figured out the solutions.”

“That’s going to be our mission.” Kate paused to shift into a different mindset: set some sort of truth-trap and find out the situation with Stacey. “I think you left your phone on my desk this morning.” She casually gestured toward the sleek silver and black phone.

Steve looked at the phone, arched his eyebrows, reached into his backpack pocket, and pulled out a Blackberry PDA. “That toy is not my phone.”

Kate looked at his Blackberry, looked at the cell phone (she thought it was an Apple iPhone) and she looked at Steve. “Okay, I knew you didn’t forget it this morning,” she said opting for an honest approach. “Stacey dropped it by this morning and said you’d left it at home.”

“Stacey?” he said with some confusion.

“Your fiancé?”

He sighed and then sat down. Long story, Kate thought, this can’t be good. She took a sip of her coffee – hazelnut, she noted, how did he know that was her favorite?

“Stacey is my step-sister. We had dinner last night to talk about our father’s birthday, and I vented a little about changing jobs.”

“Step-sister?”

“Yeah, my parents got divorced when I was about 14, and I got a couple siblings when my father re-married.”

“She seems very nice,” Kate mumbled.

“She’s a scheming little bitch,” Steve countered with some hostility. “Did she do her stupid sorority girl act for you?” When Kate gave a vague sort of nod, he continued. “She is in a sorority here, but she was also a National Merit Scholar. She hasn’t chosen which field to go into, but we’re putting our money on pre-law.”

“She must care about you though, if she had to drop by and check me out.”

“More curious than caring, I suspect. Did she tell you any other family secrets?”

“You got engaged in Aspen, but you’re not planning the wedding until you finish school – I kind of hinted you might be pursuing a PhD, by the way --, you have a condo on the beach.” She left out ‘he adores you.’”

“My father got engaged in Aspen when he married her mother. Obviously, I have no marriage plans, but I do have a condo on the beach. Did she mention my Ferrari?”

“You have a Ferrari?”

“No, I have a five-year old Jeep, but she often credits me with a sports car. Why did you tell her I was going for a doctorate?”

“To push off your wedding date,” she answered without thinking of consequences.

“Didn’t want me getting married?” he said with an evil flirting smirk.

She glanced at Steve, as he crossed his arms. She read his body language as a cross between arrogance and defiance.

“Let’s not go there,” she said. Another set up line, she thought to herself seconds too late to avoid saying it at all. She expected a comeback suggesting where they might go, and she had no idea what her response that might be. But he surprised her with a point-blank shot to the heart.

“You seem more concerned about my pretend marriage than your real one.”

This is something I haven’t even thought out myself and definitely not something I’m prepared to discuss with Steve. She wracked her brain for a response. No comic rejoinder, no smart-ass rebound, no casual brush-off came to mind. Not even a plausible real answer without a long drawn out discussion seemed to work for her. She hated that her only source of inspiration was the flirtation that put her in this position to begin with.

“That should tell you something, shouldn’t it?”

She didn’t know for sure what it told him, but it was enough to drop this line of discussion. And to be honest, she didn’t know for sure what it told her, and she suspected it would take a long conversation with Lexi to even come close to figuring it out.

“I think I’ll go back to the library tomorrow to do more research,” Steve said, “unless you need me to come in for something.”

“Okay. Do you want to take the phone to give back to Stacey?”

“I think we should wait until we get a really good idea how to give it back,” he said with an evil smile. “Think about it.”

As if I have nothing else to think about. I’m going to try to avoid answering any of Steve’s questions and the dilemmas they pose, go back to my seminar plans, try to knock out one complete session, and then get on the phone with Lexi. Oh, and go home for dinner with Bill. Did life only get this complicated in the last two days?

“Got a few minutes to talk about what you want out of a deal with Archbold?” Lexi asked Veronica.

“The nail-biting atmosphere in here today is making it impossible for me to think. Has Evan recovered?”

“He’s more interested in knowing if you’ve recovered. He really has the best intentions for moving this company to the next level...”

“For God’s sake, Lexi, you don’t have to defend him. We were just feeling bypassed this morning.”

“The way Evan and I might have felt if you moved on a sale to Kar-Kon?”

“Our life’s work gives us a geometrically bigger peeve. Go get Sydney and let’s go out for a salad. I’ll meet you both in the lobby.”

“Can I call Charlene and ask her to join us? Her participation may be vital to sealing this deal.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had lunch with all three of you,” Charlene said. “I get the idea that this is not just girl talk.”

“We’re trying to put together a merger with the Archbold Group,” Sydney said very casually before she nodded to the waiter to fill her wine glass.

“The Archbold Group,” Charlene repeated with some admiration lighting up her expression.

Lexi could read her thoughts. We're playing with the big boys, and I am so ready, her mind growled like a bulldog. But she put her game face and rimless glasses on and became a clear-minded legal professional.

"I'm assuming this is not hostile, so let's talk about your terms. I'm sure Archbold has all theirs lined up already." She also indicated that chardonnay was needed.

Lexi listened without interrupting as the two women outlined their history with the company and their hopes for the future. Although she'd heard much of their story before, she was oddly and unexpectedly moved by their honest evaluation of both challenges and victories, not the least of which involved sacrificed relationships and families. This merger and its financial bonus wouldn't compensate them for opportunities missed and moments lost. It could only offer some chance for splashes of redemption.

Veronica and Sydney had pushed aside the 'shoulds' in a women's world in business thirty ago. They had overcome their fears and crossed boundaries. They had pursued a heartfelt goal. And now they would get the opportunity to try it all over again. Lexi thought about the parallels in her writing and decided that she would dedicate her book to them.

Or maybe not.

After two and a half hours of listening to wants, needs, money, criticism of Evan's overgrown eyebrows and nasty dishing on key clients, Lexi was ready to make a polite exit and head for the door.

"I think we've got it all. Charlene, can I send these notes to your office tomorrow? I want to go through my wine-stained papers and put them into a readable form. I will email them to you."

"Don't you want to go to have drinks with us? There's another wine bar down on the boulevard. They have great brioche." It was hard to pass up an offer by Veronica, but it didn't seem like a command, so Lexi felt they would understand.

"Sounds like a great time, but I need to go work off that chocolate mousse cake we had after lunch. I'll see you in the office tomorrow." Although she had no plans for moving past the front door of her apartment, Lexi thought it sounded like a viable excuse for leaving.

Despite the boss/worker relationship, they gave double-cheeked air kisses to Lexi on her way out. Lexi liked to keep a clear boundary between personal and professional life, but with female bosses, those lines got a bit blurred.

Sydney and Veronica were truly the best bosses she had ever had, and they rewarded Lexi well. But she could grow tired of their antics, especially after the last two days. There was a part of Lexi that was reserved for only a few friends, not bosses, and the caller ID on her cell noted that one of those friends was trying to contact her.

*Hey. Aren't you ready for bed? It's almost 10 pm in your neck of the woods.*

*The day I had! I just had to call. Has life been a bit surreal these last few days or is it just me?*

Lexi juggled her cell phone, purse, and overfilled Coach tote as she walked toward her car. *Let's see. In the last 48 hours, my somewhat-ex military man is missing, but maybe found, my company is considering a buy-out that only me, 4<sup>th</sup> rung down in the hierarchy, can seem to coordinate all the key players, I'm trying to plan my long term future with an inspirational best seller, and oh yeah – my best friend is having an affair. How was your day?*

*I'm your BFF? That's totally cool. Do you mind if I share my day?*

*If you don't mind me trying to pack my car, navigate traffic, and drive home. But I'm an expert at multi-tasking, so share away. I'm assuming this conversation has something to do with Steve?*

The giggle returned to Kate's voice. *Ev-ery-th-ing to do with Steve! Bill is volunteering at a church basketball tourney tonight so I have a few more minutes before he comes home.*

Kate shared the entrance of the unkempt boy-toy into her office, the molten kiss-fest, the appearance of the so-called fiancé – and explanation of the misunderstanding, splicing a few references to marketing metrics in between the porn references.

*Kate, can I say something?* Lexi had a quiet tone of concern in her voice that Kate instantly recognized.

*Am I going to get a lecture?*

*I don't think I have ever lectured you. I would probably get one in return, which I really don't want.*

*Ok. Go ahead. But just to warn you, I am having fun.*

*I know you are. But I got one thing to say.*

*You never have just ONE thing to say.*

*This time I do.*

*What is it?*

*It's the woman who always gets screwed in these kind of relationships.*

*Kate laughed. That's what I'm HOPING for!*

*Unfortunately, I am speaking from experience of being the Other Woman on two occasions, both of which I would like to forget.*

*This was before Mike?*

*Way before. Once when I was 19 and the other time before I met Kurt. Let's just say there's always so much more for the woman to lose in an affair than there is for the man – no matter which one of them is married.*

*I thought you said you weren't going to lecture me.*

*I'm not. I'm trying to drive, talk illegally on a cell phone, and relate a personal experience.*

*Okay, fine. But I sense a big Buzz Kill on the way.*

*The bottom line is that it is easy to get into a relationship with a man who is unavailable – emotionally, physically – in all ways. But it is devastating to get out of one of those. Both times it happened to me it was just plain ugly. And even more painfully ugly when I had to divorce an emotionally unavailable husband. I'm not trying to dissuade you – think of it as the passing along of female experience.*

*Should I just put a big red letter "A" on my chest now?*

*I'll send you the appliqué the next time I go to Joann Fabrics. I just want you to be careful, because there's going to be a downside to the roller coaster that you are on, and I'm not nearby to help you. And Bill won't be able to console you on this one either.*

*Let's review. It's only been 2 days since he kissed me.*

*But those last two days have been, like, in dog years, so it's really been about 2 weeks.*

*Does that mean it's time for the 3<sup>rd</sup> date?*

*Oh for godsakes. There is just no stopping you, is there?*

*Can I blame hormones?*

*Of course. Or just about anything else. Do I have to give you the “safe sex” talk or do you think you can remember that all by yourself? Can you get Trojans at Office Depot along with your Flair Pens? I wonder if they have a matching accessory holder for pens, post-it notes, and office condoms...*

*A new market niche! I will have Steve check it out tomorrow.*

*Will the evil step-sister be stopping by anymore? Will there be an appearance by a witch with an apple, or some singing dwarfs?*

*That was kind of weird. I didn't pick up on her being so psycho when I spoke with her.*

*But he does seem to confide in her if he has told her all about you. I'd be careful.*

*So far you've told me to be careful with Steve, office accessories, and his psycho sister. Do you have any more advice?*

*Yeah. Make sure you dump him before he dumps you. It will be, shall we say, more “empowering” for you.*

*Kate heard a car in the driveway. Gotta go. Bill's home. Let me know what happens tomorrow.*

Lexi pulled into her carport, exhausted and hungry, and trying to remember the inventory of her refrigerator. As if on auto-pilot, she looked around the interior of her car and gathered up her purse, tote, and water bottle, and headed toward her door. She retrieved her keys out of her purse, opening the door to a chilly apartment, as her cell phone jingled. *Kate, I swear – now what do you want?*

Lexi looked at the caller ID, expecting Kate's name to pop up. Instead, she saw it was him, and she desperately wished she had had time to pee before she took this call.

“Hi.”

A nervous, tired deep throated man's voice came thru the tiny phone. “Aloha”.

It was their greeting – Aloha – the term that meant love, hello, and goodbye.

“Aloha to you too. I'm glad to hear you're safe.”

“I am. I just have a minute. I’m calling to say “thanks” – you know, for....”

“Yeah, I know. Do you get to tell me where you were, or where you are calling from?”

“No. And I can’t tell you what happened. What did you tell Brandon?”

Lexi felt the military-ness of his voice when he mentioned the colonel’s name. “I just told him that it felt like you were safe, but tired, and still in work mode. I guess it gave him some kind of clue.”

“A very valuable one that I can’t tell you about, but can thank you for.”

“Always the Mystery Man, aren’t you?”

“And you’re still the Perfect Woman. I read your website when I get a chance. I get to keep up on how you’re doing.”

Mike was using his diversion tactics again. Whenever they got near an untouchable subject, he diverted to another line of questioning.

“Thanks. I enjoy writing it.”

“But – nothing about men, dating, anything like that...”

“I can hear the sniggering in your voice you know.”

“But seriously, have you found someone?”

Lexi debated about what to say. Should she tell her vulnerability and say “No”, or make up a fictional beau to make him jealous? Tiredness made her decision for her. “Nope. No one since you.”

Silence.

“Are you still there, Mike?”

“Um. I’m here.”

Four years of non and mis-communication. “I could give you a lot of excuses, but I’m not going to. I love you, Mike. I always have and always will. But I know we can’t be together, and I have accepted that. It took me a long time to get over that, but I did, and am moving on. Since you moved on, I’ve been working a lot, changing jobs, dealing with my mom’s death, and my dog’s death. It’s been hard. I’m not sure I would have had the energy to deal with a new relationship if it landed in my lap.”

There. She said it. Four years of revelations packed into a 40-second speech. Probably not the perfect time to unload her heart's secrets onto a recent MIA, but it might be the only chance she got.

"You still... love me?"

"Of course. You're very important to me. I wouldn't be able to sense you like I do if I didn't care deeply for you. That's how I was able to find out that you were okay. That and I asked another psychic friend of mine to check in on you, and we discovered you were okay."

"I'm never going to believe that psychic shit."

"A man of convictions. That's why I love you."

"I'm off tomorrow to my next assignment, and I have some prep work to do." Another conversational diversion and attempt to end an uncomfortable discussion.

"Of course. I'll let you go. Thanks for calling. It's good to hear your voice."

"Lexi - - all I can say is – Aloha. You know?"

"I know. Aloha to you too."

Click.

They had finally said all they had ever wanted to say, in the only way they knew how. Briefly, to the point, and each in their own way.

Lexi let the weight of old emotions slide off of her as she stepped into a warm bath. She'd been counseling all day, and nurturing her own need for solace during this time alone. Kate, Evan, Sydney, Veronica – and Mike – were people who helped to shape her heart and character. But she was ready to let them all go for a few minutes of peace and quiet.

She thought about her wants and needs. *Cash and a boyfriend*. It looked like the cash was on its way, somewhere between a company buy-out and a new writing career, she would have all the financial support she could dream of.

*But what about a boyfriend?* Her life was moving so fast, perhaps one would land in her lap when she least expected it.

Kate sat at her desk first cup of coffee for the morning while she reread Jack Staunton's latest memo he definitely wanted to see some productivity from members of his department. She knew that he came from Booz Allen, but beyond that she didn't know that much. Thank God for Google, she thought as she clicked into her computer. She thought his name was distinct enough that it wouldn't require much more than typing in his name to get a wealth of information. And smiling to herself, I am so right. Booz Allen specialized in global consulting with emphasis on technology, especially information technology. The firm had funded a marketing professor's position at Northwestern. Jack had done consulting work for Booz Allen, just on the edge of its change over to information technology, so he would understand precisely what her metrics research was all about.

She wondered if she should write him a memo in response, or if she should just schedule a meeting with him to talk about her project. The choice was simple when she saw Jack opening the door to his office down the hall. She picked up a legal pad with her notes on it, confident of her abilities and ready to discuss the details of her work.

"Mr. Staunton?" She opened the conversation with the tone in her voice implying that she hoped he had a bit of time to talk, but if not, she'd be happy to reschedule.

"For God's sake call me Jack," he said. "I still haven't gotten used to the feigned formality of the academic world. All of these idiots demanding to be addressed as Dr. and tacking Ph.D. on every note or memo."

Kate was a little taken aback by what she considered a sudden shift to approachability. She nodded, and gave him a smile of friendly agreement.

"I was wondering if you had a moment to talk about the project that I'm taking on. In response to your memo."

He laughed with what she might have considered a chortle as he settled behind his desk. "You're the first one to even acknowledge that I wrote a memo, that I ask expect some tangible results for the salaries we pay you. Go ahead, tell me about your project."

She launched into a description, much like she'd outlined for Steve. She did however, in deference to his background and experience, throw in a few scraps of business jargon.

"That sounds very promising," he said. "What can I do to help?"

This is a jump off a cliff, Kate thought, knowing that a positive answer could lead to a whole new set of dilemmas. But I still have to do it.

"I'd like to go to Chicago if I can set up some meetings."

"Meetings with who?"

"Dr. Fogel at the University of Chicago might be a great source because of his work with quantitative methods."

"The Nobel Prize winner, Dr. Fogel?"

"I know it's a long shot, but his research, and that of his colleagues at U. Chicago in econometrics might be a good place to start."

She could tell Jack was impressed, not only with her background on the subject, but her guts for even suggesting that a Nobel Prize winner might be a good source.

"And some of the professors at Northwestern have been doing research in the e-commerce area and its applications in marketing. I think I could schedule appointments with some of them through a friend of mine who's a Kellogg grad."

"Is Phil Kotler still at Northwestern?"

It was her turn to be impressed. Dr. Kotler was the foremost authority on most types of marketing. He'd written her textbooks from graduate school. And Jack called him by his first name.

"I think he's still there," she said with some hesitation.

"If you want to talk to him, let me know and I'll call to see if we can get you a meeting." He paused for a moment before he committed himself to anything else. "So you want some travel money for a research trip to Chicago?"

She took a deep breath. Here's the edge of the cliff.

"I'd like to take the graduate student I'm working with along on the trip. He's been doing some of the initial research and he is much more of a quant jock than I am."

"Grad student?" Jack asked. "You're not going to start a disaster, like Dr. Heil, are you?"

"Disaster?"

"Well, most of us consider lawsuits against faculty as a disaster. Christ, if we didn't have that tenure tourniquet, he'd be long gone."

Interesting, Kate thought. She thought her best course of action here was not to make any kind of response. Instead, she waited for a reply.

“Sounds good to me,” Jack said, obviously sensing an end to their discussion. “Write me some kind of proposal with an estimate of your costs, and I'll put it through channels.”

Kate couldn't decide whether her exhale was a sigh of relief or her last gasp of innocence.

For someone on the fourth rung of authority, Lexi did have amazing organizational skills. First thing in the morning, she retyped her notes from the meeting and faxed them to Charlene as promised. She correctly suspected that Charlene had spent many hours, wine fueled or not, working up a far more legal document than Lexi could produce. By noon, Charlene had her document messengered to their office.

Lexi shared the document and the terms that Veronica and Sydney had outlined with Evan. He concentrated fiercely and eventually nodded in agreement.

“Should I call David now?” he asked when he recognized that the plan from their side was ready.

“I don't want to look like a control freak here, but how about if I make the call and conference you and Veronica and Sydney into it? The two of them might be more receptive to me, and if David's got the brain, as I think he has, he'll understand.”

Evan thought for a moment, and then resolutely agreed.

Lexi was very pleased with the call. Veronica and Sydney hadn't gone off on some tangent, and Evan hadn't tried to pull some last minute power grab. David had sounded happy (relieved?) about the timely and thorough response. He scheduled a meeting to finalize the deal that day after tomorrow and would fly into Seattle with his administrative assistant.

She poured herself a cup of tea and went back to her desk. She checked for cell phone for messages and wasn't surprised to see that Kate had called.

*Hey. You called?*

*Yeah, I'm guessing you were working on the Archbold deal.*

*We are almost there. Have another meeting set up to seal the deal.*

*Great. Did you get a piece of the pie?*

*A pretty good slab.*

*Are you going to trade your Birkenstocks and fleece for Manolo Blahnick and Dolce Gabbana?*

*At most new Nikes and a Burberry raincoat.*

Lexi didn't get as much of a laugh as she expected. Clearly something was on Kate's mind, and although she wasn't giddy, that something was probably Steve.

*What's going on, Kate?*

*I'm going to hell.*

*I can give you some names you can check on when you get there. What have you done to merit damnation this time?*

*I pitched a research junket to my boss, and I'm pretty sure it'll be approved.*

*Trip to Paris?*

*Trip to Chicago to talk to some profs at U Chicago and Northwestern.*

*And why would this deserve hell?*

*Because Steve can go with me.*

If she had heard alarms before, Lexi now heard alarms and screams, crashes and explosions, all the signals of Armageddon.

*Say something, Lexi, even if you're going to scold me.*

*You've obviously chosen your direction. I think it's too late to steer. She took a deep breath. So tell me what you know about this guy, aside from what you may have already told me and that he's a great kisser.*

*I don't know that much...*

*Kate, get back your inquiring mind. You work in a university; I'm sure you can hack into the records.*

*I don't even have to hack into them.*

Kate clicked into the student database on her computer and pounded through all the security clearances.

*Stevens Hamilton MacMillan.* She picked up her glasses to read the screen.

*Stevens Hamilton MacMillan?*

*Who knew? He's older than I thought.*

*He's really 45?*

*No, he's really 27. I'm probably not supposed to be telling you this. You aren't going to report me to the FERPA police, are you?*

*Are they some kind of ninja agents or something?*

*Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act enforcers, and I think I just made them up.*

*So, what else about Stevens?*

*He has a really good GPA here, and his undergrad grades are stunning.*

*Like I expected you to fall for a moron...*

*He does have an address on the beach here, in a very good zip code. One outstanding parking ticket. He has two siblings here. Anastasia Devlin MacMillan – that must be Stacey – and John Carpenter Devlin. Oh, God, that just connected.*

*What?*

*Jack Devlin plays on our football team. And father is Stuart MacMillan, listed at a Connecticut address.*

*You're beginning to get that investigative tone back in your voice. Where else can you look?*

*I get the feeling I can probably Google any of their names and come up with a lot of hits. And LexisNexis.*

*Then go to it, and get back to me. In the meantime, I'll work on another cautionary tale for you.*

*Thanks, and don't forget that list of references in hell. I think I'm going to need it.*

Bill heaved a great sigh as he opened the door to his offices.

“Good morning Bill. Coffee’s ready. I picked up some of the Jamaican Blue Mountain beans that you like.”

“Thanks, Ilene. I’m going to need it.”

*He doesn’t look well – really distracted – he’s going to have a rough day.* Ilene was Bill’s Office Wife, a partner for him for the last 18 years. Her official title was “Office Manager” at the small insurance agency that Bill owned, but Ilene knew the inner workings of the copier, insurance industry, rude clients, and Bill’s mood swings. She went to the kitchen, filling Bill’s favorite 20 ounce Starbucks mug with the dark brew.

Ilene walked across the worn berber rug into Bill’s office, handing him the mug.

“Thanks, Ilene. You’re a godsend.”

“I know. I know.” Ilene smiled at Bill as she took in all the nuances that only a woman can read. The dark circles under his eyes, the rolled up newspaper that he typically would have opened into the sports section by now, and a computer that was yet to be logged onto. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” But his gaze out the window into the sunny suburban vista belied his true meaning.

“I’ve known you for 20 years Bill, and I have never seen you so distracted as you have been in the last week. Do you want to talk?”

“No. That’s okay. It’s just that....never mind.”

*He can’t complete an entire sentence. Something must really be wrong.* Ilene sat down in the dark blue visitor’s chair that had graced Bill’s office since they moved into the “new space” 12 years ago. “You know you can trust me, Bill. You really look like you could use a friend right now.”

“Is it that obvious?”

Ilene nodded her head. She’d known since the minute he walked in the door yesterday that something was dramatically wrong. The phones had been routine accident calls, so she knew it wasn’t a client issue, and the accountant had given them a glowing review on their financial statements. Whatever was bothering him was personal.

“Something’s wrong with Kate.”

Ilene pulled her hand to her chest. “Oh my! Did...she go to the doctor...or something?” Bill was open about most of his life to Ilene, but she never really figured Kate out. Kate was cordial to Ilene, but never talkative. Kate wasn’t one of those homey-types you’d think you’d find from the Midwest – she was *different*. Ilene never understood Bill’s friendship, attraction or marriage to Kate.

“No, no. Nothing like that. She’s just acting – funny...”

“In what way?”

Bill took another swig of coffee. “Little things. Like the other night she couldn’t remember the country of origin for some speaker equipment. It may sound strange, but she always – and I mean *always* – remembers little facts like that. Usually she’s very sullen in the mornings, but the last few days, she can’t wait to get up and go to work. She even left early this morning.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“She hates her job. Has for the last 6 or 8 years. I’ve never seen her go to work early unless it was mandated by her boss.”

“Anything else?”

“She’s constantly on the phone with her friend Lexi in Seattle. I mean...they’re friends and all, but they usually talk once a month, not every day. And not that Kate’s a schlump or anything, but it’s like there’s this glow about her. She wore one of her best outfits this morning and even gave me a huge kiss on her way out the door. Not that I minded....”

Ilene had a clue about what was going on, but wasn’t about to share it. “I’m sure it’s nothing, Bill. You know, middle aged women are known for acting – a little strange, so to speak.” Ilene added up the clues. Good dressing. Frequent calls to best girlfriend who knows all her secrets. Urgency to do things out of the norm. Unexpected increase in affection, usually a substitute for guilt. Ilene thought to herself, *Kate’s got a new man – probably at work, but I’m not going to be the one to tell Bill.*

“Maybe you’re right. It’s good to see her so happy. I haven’t seen her this way in a long, long time.” Bill took another big swig of coffee. “How about we work on those new accident claims that came in yesterday? That big pileup on the interstate is going to keep us busy for a few days.”

Ilene left Bill to his work. He was focused on being productive, and it was her job to help – in any way she could, professionally or personally.

Ilene adored Bill. She liked his slightly above average looks, salt and pepper hair, the easy way he had with clients, and his contribution to the community. He was a solid, good companion, something she had missed greatly since her husband, Edward, died of a sudden heart attack three years ago. Bill helped Ilene arrange the funeral, organized her finances, and helped her to get on with her life, giving her the work she needed to get her out of the house, and giving her more responsibility than she had before. He was a good, supportive companion, and she appreciated him being there for her when she needed him most.

*And if Kate wants to step out on Bill, I would be happy to be there for him too.*

*Kate's gone crazy and there's no stopping her.* Lexi remembered those times when no one got in her way, not her best friends, the US Military, or any other type of power structure. If she wanted it, she went after it. And Kate had that streak in her too.

*If she's not going to stop, I wonder why she's so unwilling to just jump this guy's bones?* Lexi pondered Kate's situation as she took a moment to eat a Starbucks brand chicken sandwich. She had a short break to sit outside before she went back in to herd the kittens – or bosses – who were enraptured about the end of, and beginning of, a new future for each of them. *They can wait. I need information.*

Lexi pulled out her cell phone, finding the number for her good friend, and astrologer, Pam. Where Google and rational behavior failed, astrology could find a reasonable answer.

"Pam. Got a minute? I need a favor. Do you mind if I interrupt you?"

"No problem. I was just doing some natal charts for some clients I have this afternoon. I could use the interruption. What can I do for you?"

"Can you run a relationship chart for me? And no, it's not for me unfortunately. I have a friend who's acting irrationally. I think I know what the problem is – it's probably what I ran into when I first ran into Mike."

"Ohh...." Pam replied with a knowingness in her voice. "Pluto at work?"

"At the very least. Let me get his birthday...." Kate had emailed the detailed information she found on Schteve, which included his date of birth. No time of birth noted, but Pam could wing it. Lexi gave Pam the birthdates and names for Kate and Steve.

“Give me just a minute here....how are you doing by the way?”

“Good. Really busy at work with some unusual stuff.”

“I told you that Uranus was crossing your ascendant and you’d have to be flexible.”

“And you were right. But there’s cash and recognition involved for me, so I’m okay with it.”

“But your relationship house is going to be a bit chaotic for awhile...I don’t feel Mike very strongly.”

“Yeah, I know. Feast or famine, right?”

“And watch out for that New Moon next week. It’s in Cancer....”

“I hate those Cancer moons. It’s like 48 hours of PMS.”

“For you dear, not for everyone.” Pam clicked away in the background for a few moments, ending her silence by emitting a deep hearty laugh. “You’re friend’s having an affair!”

“That’s why I called...you noticed their age differences?”

“You know, I have been meaning to submit an article on what do they call them? Cougars! I think they have a void of course moon in their chart....”

“I’m just an intermediate astrologer with a few minutes to spare. What’s going on with her?”

“Hmmm...he’s a Scorpio, she’s a Sag...it’s a wonder they go together at all! Oh, but she has a Gemini Ascendant and so does he....”

“You got a bottom line for me here?”

“They’re both communicators and thinkers who need a lot to keep them mentally stimulated. But she’s working out her subconscious desires through sex. She’s about 51-52, the time of Saturn return, when she gets to review her life. Anything that went ‘untouched’...”

Lexi broke out in a laugh.

Pam continued...“You know what I mean! But Saturn’s in her relationship house, and his Mars sits on top of her Venus....”

“I’m laughing because this makes so much sense!”

“Astrology is a science, dearie.”

“I know. Please continue.”

“He is a Scorpio and very passionate about whatever he does. He’s got a fair number of planets in air signs, so I bet he is really smart. But his Mars is in Aries, so he is very tenacious, and does not let anything stand in his way. That can be a good quality, but a dangerous one too. He might not think before he leaps. But he is attracted to her, in a very male/female kind of way. There is something about her that brings out a very passionate side to his nature, both physically and intellectually.’

“So he is an intelligent, driven male, with a strong sex drive?”

“Especially if she is involved.”

“Okay, what about Kate?”

“Well, as I said, she’s having her Saturn return, where it has now come all the way around her chart since her birth. She’s getting to review her life, what she has missed, and what she wants to do. He brings out her sexual nature, because of his Mars and her Venus. He makes her feel like a woman.”

Lexi remembered Kate’s 7<sup>th</sup> grade style giggling voice when she spoke of Steve.  
“From what I gather that is correct.”

“But she is working out a lot of subconscious desires that she may not be aware of, or in control of. If she is around this very passionate guy for long, there won’t just be sparks, there will be explosions. She’s a fire sign, and has a deep well of passion to begin with, though probably not well expressed. He’s a watery, emotional sign with a deep passionate, yet secretive nature.”

“Fire and water? That can’t be good.”

“Taken to the extremes, water can drown fire, or fire can totally burn up water. But if they navigate it well together...”

“They create ....steam. A steamy, sensual union.”

“Exactly – but highly secretive as well. I have no doubt that this affair will be kept under wraps.”

“There’s an awful lot at stake. But there’s no stopping Kate, is there?”

“Free will is always possible. It just doesn’t look likely.”

“How long does this last?”

“Because of the Cancer Moon next week, and opposition to Pluto, there will be a lot of intensity this week and next.”

Lexi knew that she would have to make sure that she didn’t run out of phone minutes over the next two weeks. “Anything else I should know?”

“You probably can’t stop her. This has nothing to do with rational behavior.”

“So what do I do?”

“You’re the innate psychic counselor. Be there for her.”

Lexi sighed, sensing two freight trains colliding and no way to stop it. “Thanks sweetie, I owe you.”

“My pleasure. Let me know what happens with Romeo and Juliet.”

“The star-crossed lovers?”

“The 2008 version.”

Lexi closed the black case on her new phone. *Well, I love her but I can’t fix her. She’s a big girl, and she will do what she wants to do. We’ll probably be laughing about this 10 years from now, wondering why we were so worried about having some fun.*

*I’m tired of handling other people’s emotions. I care about them, but they can do whatever the hell they want.* This was a new attitude for Lexi. Most of her life she spent caring about what people thought and felt, and now it just seemed like a waste of time. If Kate wanted to have fun and add some spice to her life, then why the hell not?

Lexi pulled out her cell phone, pushing #5 on her key pad. She put Kate’s phone number on speed dial yesterday after she realized there would be much more frequent calls than their monthly chat.

*Hi.*

*Hey.*

*Are you alone, or is the Boy there with you?*

*He's gone, and I'm alone. What's up?*

*I talked to my astrologer about you two.*

*Oh yeah? What did she say?*

*He's intelligent and passionate and brings out the woman in you. You're working out unresolved shit in your life through sex. Very convenient, don't you think?*

*Wow!*

*You're going to be irrational for awhile, so I'm just gonna sit back and give you the green light.*

*Really? No more cautionary tales or words of wisdom?*

*Naw. Go fuck your brains out. It's okay with me.*

*Kate laughed – and blushed. This IS a new attitude. What changed?*

*I did the same thing myself with Mike. Lost my mind. Found my libido. It took 4 years to find my mind again, and apparently I packed away my libido. Not sure where I put it.*

*I got room reservations at The Drake.*

*Hey, go for it. One room or two?*

*Adjoining.*

*Enjoy. I gotta get back to work and have a Come To Jesus meeting with the owners and Evan.*

*About what?*

*About getting on board before we sail into a new world. I still think there are divergent interests and a few agendas up their sleeves. And I'm going to find out what they are.*

*Got time to meet me in Chicago?*

*I'd love to, but I will be busy with this merger thingey. And I don't want to interrupt your Weekend O' Lust.*

*I haven't told Steve yet.*

*Let me know what he says. See ya later...*