

The Lexicon

Connect, Reconnect, Disconnect

After she and Steve spent at least an hour going over her notes from the meeting and at least another hour making out, Kate dialed Jordan's home phone hoping that she was in the city. Her international travels kept her not only out of Chicago, but out of the country two or three weeks each month. In her previous job with Citibank, she might be anywhere from London to Hong Kong, but her current job with the MacArthur Foundation usually meant Russia, Mexico or Nigeria.

"Hello, Kate," Jordan said, obviously using her caller ID to identify and not simply screen calls. "How are you?"

"Great. I'm in Chicago for research – by the way, I dropped your name at Kellogg to set up interviews – and I was hoping we could get together."

"Are you free tonight? I leave for Moscow first thing in the morning."

"Sure, whatever works for you."

"I have to finish packing, so why don't we say 7:30? Is Rinalli's okay?" Rinalli's was a great neighborhood restaurant around the corner from Jordan's Lincoln Park West condo that they had been frequenting for about a quarter of a century since Jordan had moved into the city after college.

"Do I ever turn down their cheese bread? And when is pizza ever a bad choice?" Kate smirked at Steve. "I'll see you there."

She clicked off the line, and started to explain their history to Steve. "I have known Jordan much longer than you've even been alive. We went to grade school together and high school and have never really lost touch. She's a high-powered executive, and I am a lowly academic, but we share a love for good rock music and when we were young, we spent much of our macaroni and cheese budgets on concert tickets."

He laughed. "You don't seem like rock music would be your thing."

"Oh," she sighed, "there is a strong shot of heavy metal head-banging in my past and Jordan's too, although she seems even less likely than me to have had a backstage food fight with Australian musicians."

"I'd like to meet her."

Kate weighed the invitation for one brief moment, but decided that Jordan had been in on every twist in her life since fourth grade, and although this one might be more of a shock than acing the SATs or stalking Ed Burns, Steve was nothing Jordan couldn't handle. "You'll like Rinalli's," she said. "I think you'll like Jordan."

She was running a little late, so Kate and Steve got a table near the window in the crowded eatery to wait for her. When she breezed in, wearing shorts and a Northwestern t-shirt, Kate got the unusual perspective of seeing her through someone else's eyes. She knew that Steve noticed her trendy short blonde haircut and her sparkling blue eyes, as well as her long legs and perfectly manicured nails. Jordan had always been beautiful, and had come into her best, most-polished look in the last few years. Her self-assurance showed through in every setting, from the boardroom to the ballroom to the bedroom.

"Jordan Logan, this is my friend Steve MacMillan. Steve, this is Jordan." They exchanged a look tinged with vague recognition, and Kate was as puzzled as they were.

"MacMillan," Jordan repeated. "Were you on the Copernica a couple years ago?"

The Copernica was his father's yacht. Kate only knew that from the Google search she had done before they left Florida.

"Were you with the film crew?" he responded.

"I was in charge of the film crew," she said. "It was an advertising shoot for Citibank."

"I think you took my picture." Kate remembered the picture she had seen, and it did look like professional photo.

"You were younger," she said.

"You weren't as friendly," he replied.

"The context was different," she said signaling the waiter. "I'll have an Allagash summer ale," Jordan said. She probably wants a Sam Adams pale, and what would you like Steve?"

"Heineken would be great."

"How did you two happen to meet?" Kate knew that Jordan was trying to be subtle, probably in deference to Steve. If she and Jordan had been alone, she

would have been much more forthright, and somewhat accusatory, in questioning their connection.

“At school,” Steve said, with an equally coy subtlety. Neither of them was willing to give up their position yet. “If you both will excuse me, I need to adjust my contacts.”

He got up from the table, and both Kate and Jordan watched him retreat down the hallway.

“What is the deal with him?” Jordan asked.

“Complicated story...”

“You're sleeping with him?”

Kate nodded, noncommittally, but affirmatively. Why did she find it so hard to confess this particular transgression to her oldest friend in the world? Lexi had accepted it and encouraged her, despite some initial misgivings. Why did she think that Jordan would have an overwhelming objection?

“I hope he's as good as he looks.” That comment certainly overcame any doubts she might've had about sharing this experience with Jordan. “I don't think we ever paid him for the photo shoot,” Jordan commented taking a drink of her Belgium imported beer.

“I don't think it matters. His father owns the boat.”

“And is he funding your tryst here?”

“Not intentionally, I don't think. We borrowed his plane to get here.”

“Oh, and like Dad wouldn't notice that his Cessna was missing,” she scoffed.

“It's a Gulfstream.”

“Oh, that makes all the difference.”

“I don't think Steve can stay in the bathroom long enough for me to explain it.” That was the moment that Kate realized that Steve had taken a gracious exit to leave them alone, and the moment she remembered he didn't wear contact lenses.

“He's special,” Kate said.

“He’d have to be to hook up with you. You do have standards after all. Otherwise we’d be having drinks with some grunge guitarist.”

“I never had a thing for grunge bands.”

“One of your few saving graces. Good luck with this whatever it is.”

“Whatever it is,” Kate repeated, as Steve rejoined them.

“So what deep dark secret about Kate do you want to tell me?” he asked as he picked up his beer.

“How deep and how dark can you tolerate?” Jordan slyly replied, hinting that there might be something truly evil in her past.

“Oh please, Jordan, don’t mention Rick Springfield.” The three of them laughed conspiratorially, as if there was no secret that could not be shared. “What are you doing in Moscow this week?” Kate asked to shift the conversation into safer territory.

“How old is Dakota? He doesn’t have any gray yet, but doesn’t look like a pup. About seven?”

“He’ll be seven in the fall. There’s Squeeze and Grind around the corner with a view of the park. Does that sound okay?”

Lexi was still a bit in a dream world, wondering what she was doing having lunch with a strange man when she intended to just take a short break from her work. “Sounds good, I’m not terribly hungry. Could you wait a minute while I text my boss?”

Andy held the small of her back while he directed her toward a table. “So you’re one of THOSE.” His smile softened any terseness of his remark.

“One of what?”

“Those folks stuck on an electronic leash. Never without a cell phone, or PSA.”

“I think you mean PDA. A PSA is a Public Service Announcement.”

“Oh.” The twinkle in his eye showed that he knew exactly what he had said.

“Could you order me a tuna sandwich and a shot of wheatgrass? I’ll send my PSA while you’re gone.”

“Hold Dakota, I’ll be back in a minute.”

There was a natural ease between the three of them. She told Dakota to lay down at her feet as she pulled out her phone to text Evan. “Early lunch. Be back in an hour.” Within seconds, a text back from Evan with the remark “k” – a not-so-cool-for-a-middle-aged-man trait he had picked up from his 16-year-old son.

He returned carrying their sandwiches and drinks. Dakota lifted his head, sniffing the food in the air, but not begging for morsels.

“Thanks, Andrew.”

He stopped and looked at her. “Why did you call me Andrew?”

“That’s your name, isn’t it?”

“No one has ever called me Andrew, except my grandmother. She was a very loving presence in my life.”

“It just seems like the right name to call you. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. It sounds nice – coming from you.”

Lexi couldn’t figure out if it was her exhaustion from work or her sense of ease with this man, but she didn’t feel nervous when she was with him. “So why don’t you tell me how you got that dirt on your sweater? It looks very natural there. Most people would look like a homeless person with that much dirt and a dog, but you don’t.”

Andrew laughed. “I think there was a compliment in there somewhere, so I will take it. I’m a landscape designer. I’m working on a job in Greenlake, and I bring Dakota with me to work. I came down here to get some supplies at the Asian nursery around the corner.” Lexi’s office complex was in the middle of the International District of Seattle, housing large office buildings near many grocery, book and specialty wares stores for the large Asian community.

Greenlake, the area Andrew was working in, was a wonderful part of Seattle, kind of like what Central Park is to New Yorkers. An oasis full of walkers and runners around the 3 mile circumference of the lake, a neighborhood full of urban, conscientious families, and parks to accommodate them. It was a homey, yet pricey area of the Emerald City.

Lexi grabbed his hand, running her fingers over his dirt encrusted nails. “It looks like you enjoy your work.”

Andrew returned the touch by putting her hand in his. "I do. I was always gardening and designing, so it made sense to leave my architecture career and start my own business. I love what I do and do what I love." He took a bite of his sandwich, tearing off a piece to give to Dakota. "What do you do?"

Lexi thought of how to answer that question. "I can't say I do what I love, but I am working towards it." She flashed him one of her *I'm trying to be mysterious so you will ask me more questions* kind of smiles.

"What does that mean?" He complied with her wish.

She explained her current job, her desire to be published and speak, and how she was going to get there.

"Sounds like a lot of work. Will it be worth it?"

"Your transition from wearing a suit to a dirty sweater couldn't have been easy. Was it worth it to you?"

Andrew sat back in his chair, not losing eye contact with her. "Every minute of it. If I did everything so I could have this meal with you, I'd do it all over again."

Somehow, she felt that he meant it. Lexi lifted her shot of wheat grass to his carrot and beet juice smoothie. "Here's to remarkable transitions. Cheers."

They sat silently for a moment, each staring in each other's eyes, engulfed in the moment.

"When can I see you again, Lexi?"

Lexi snapped out of her momentary bliss, re-engaging her left brain to visualize her calendar. "What are you doing tonight for dinner?"

"I need to spend more time than that with you."

"Like, how long?"

"Forever."

Lexi and Andrew had agreed to meet for dinner, right after she got off work, so they could continue their conversation. On her walk back to work, she was engulfed in clouds, daydreams, and feelings she hadn't experienced in what felt like lifetimes.

She stood outside of the office building, realizing she needed to switch gears, come back to earth, and be prepared to enter a focused business environment. She decided to take the stairs to the fifth floor to allow her a few extra minutes to think about what she needed to accomplish this afternoon.

Before she could enter her office, Evan interceded, asking her to join him in her office in 5 minutes. She put down her purse, took a cursory look at her email queue, and groaned at the flashing light on her phone, indicating voicemail messages. It just felt plain – rude – to have all these electronics interrupt her fantasy-like lunch of a mere ten minutes ago.

Lexi walked down the hall, entering Evan's office. "You rang?"

"Sit down. We have a conference call with David in 2 minutes." Evan pushed the speaker phone and dialed David's office number in NY. "Yes – David Goldman please." Evan gave his name to a female voice with a thick Brooklyn accent and was rudely put on hold, in that way that only a New Yorker can do.

"What does David want to talk about?"

"I have no idea. He called an hour ago and asked that both of us call him at 1 pm. Do YOU have any ideas?"

"Not really. "

"Evan – Lexi –you there?"

"Yes, Lexi is here with me. How's the weather in NY?"

"Fine." David was in a New York, no pleasantries kind of mood. "Look, I was going to give you a little time to settle in, but that's isn't going to happen. I need updated financial projections from you that I can present to my Board of Directors."

Lexi knew something was amiss. David was up to something, having no trouble pulling his Alpha Dog rank less than 72 hours after the ink dried on the buy out agreement.

Evan paled. "When do need them by, David?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Lexi's previous conversation with David clicked. He was going to sell their firm. NOW. Looking at Evan, she saw that he was stone cold and could not respond. He too, felt something was awry, and that he was perhaps in over his head.

Lexi spoke up. “No problem, David. You’ll get them by tomorrow. Do you need anything else?”

“No, Lexi. That should do. Make sure you do 1 year, 3 year, and 5 year projections, okay? Send an email through our secure server. My admin will tell you how.”

“Got it. Thanks, David.” Lexi leaned over to push the silver button to end the call.

Evan looked gazed out the window to the overcast sky. Lexi joined him, gazing in silence at the horizon. A dramatic shift had happened in her priorities over the last couple of days. She’d have no personal relationship with David, and wondered about committing to a professional publishing relationship with him, after sensing that he was getting ready to sell her firm, only a couple of days after telling her that he would wait 6-12 months to do so. He could feign pressure from his execs, but she had a feeling that this was standard procedure for a NY M&A guy. Buy low, sell high. She sensed that an opportunity loomed that David was taking full advantage of, and he wasted no time in jumping on it.

Lexi looked at Evan’s slumped shoulders, indicating a deep weariness and concerned.

“Evan. You need to start looking for another job.” He turned around to look at Lexi. “You wondered this morning if you still had an office ally, and you do.” Lexi liked Evan, and felt a dedication to him, having given her a job, a lot of responsibility, and a playing field for her talents. She told Evan about her Friday night dinner with David, the corporate transition plans he shared with her, and her interpretation of the revised plans based on the phone call they just had.

Evan and Lexi had a responsibility to the company first, and to make good decisions for it’s short and long term health. The negotiations of the last week had wreaked havoc on the owners, the management, and the staff, and no one was prepared to take on more of this negative behavior.

Evan stood up and paced his office, getting some of the fire back that had been lost during the negotiations. “Do you have the projections ready?”

“Yes. I had to put them together last week. I just need to review the 5 year estimates, but it shouldn’t take long.”

“I have an idea.” Evan picked up his cell phone, choosing a number from his contact list. He dialed the number into his desk phone, pushing the speaker phone button.

“Warner Bruckholdt.”

“Warner. It’s Evan. Remember that deal I told you about this weekend?”

“Yes. Sounded interesting.”

“I have my director, Lexi Michaels, here with me, and we would like to discuss it in more detail.”

Evan, the consummate networker of the Northwest, had more unique business contacts than Lexi had ever encountered in her business career. Warner, Evan’s brother-in-law, was an Internet millionaire, having built and sold 3 Internet companies in the last 10 years. He was between projects right now, but always looking for a new opportunity. Evan and Warner had discussed the sale of their company over the weekend, including ideas on how to re-invent the organization. He told Warner how it looked like David was going to sell the company immediately, probably already having a buyer in mind.

“It’s Kar-Kon” Lexi added. “I’m sure of it.” She didn’t want to share that she symbolically saw the letters “KK” floating in the air during their phone call with David, but it logically made sense that their biggest competitor would be their ultimate owner.

“Warner – if we send our financial projections to you, are you ready to make an offer?”

Warner asked, “Sure. I will get my financial guy on it today. Did you tell Lexi what we plan to do?”

Sensing the technology-induced, Internet millionaire’s pattern for establishing Internet companies, Lexi knew their plan was to take the benefits firm from the middle ages to the 21st century. “I’m guessing that you are going to harness the power of the information we collect and money we process into a streamlined offering to our current – and potentially larger – clients?”

Evan interjected. “That’s right. Warner was in the same fraternity at UW as 4 of the CEOs of the primary insurance carriers in the area. They have been talking about a technical vehicle to offer to brokers and just needed a vehicle to do so. I think it could be us.”

It was times like these when she really admired Evan. He could pull a sales opportunity out of nowhere, and come up with a brilliant idea. They made a good team – Evan in sales and Lexi as head of operations and psychic advisory services.

“Warner, we’re going to send you our financial projections so you can make the offer we talked about to Archbold. Do you need anything else?”

“That’s it. Give me David Goldman’s contact info, and we’ll put a plan together. As long as he makes about an 8% profit, he should take it. I looked at the last deal Archbold did in this area, and they got about 10%. In this market, they’d probably take lower just to get out of the deal.”

Lexi leaned back in her chair, smiling at Evan. “You guys are amazing. That’s a great idea. We can really do some great things together to offer some advanced technology in a much needed market.”

Evan and Warner were on a testosterone, frat boy, high. It was nice to sense that excitement after a tense week. They ended their call with the verbal version of a High Five, promising to talk throughout the day.

“Nice job, Evan. I really like the idea.”

“We talked about it over the weekend at my wife’s birthday party, and it just made sense. If you hadn’t told me about David’s plan, we couldn’t do this.”

“Glad I could help.”

“David is going to throw you under the bus for this.”

“David and public transportation? Now there’s a visual. I think David’s primary motivation is profit, and spending as little time as possible in the Northwest. He’ll be fine.”

It was nice to be in a jubilant mood again. A great lunch and good business idea gave Lexi the fuel she needed to finish her projections and head out early. She reviewed the numbers with Evan before sending the secure email, and headed out for her 6 pm dinner with Andrew.

She came out the door of the building, seeing Andrew and Dakota walking around the planter outside her office building. A deep joy she had not felt in ages filled her heart as she approached him.

As she came near him, she saw that he had washed his face and hands, but little else. “Did you come straight from work?”

He leaned forward, gently touching the back of her neck and bringing her face toward his. Andrew’s lips touched hers, in a sensual, gentle, yet strong kind of way that felt – perfect. He leaned back a few inches, studying her face. “I just couldn’t wait.”

Lexi dropped her Coach tote and purse to the ground with a thud. She wrapped her arms around Andrew’s neck, allowing him to pull her close to him again. This

time they kissed longer, until they felt Dakota trying to wedge between them and be part of the action. She pulled away from Andrew and leaned down to give Dakota a hug, scratching his hindquarters.

All Lexi had ever dreamed about was having a gentle man, a dog, and a peaceful connection to both – all at the same time. She had had one of the three throughout her life, but rarely all at once. And in this very public cement atrium area, she felt her heart open to the potential of that unlimited dream and more.

“Dr. Kotler,” Kate said, “it's such an honor to meet you.”

The professor smiled. “I'm glad that you could meet me here in Chicago. My office in Evanston is constantly filled with students and other professionals interested in learning what they apparently can't read one of my books.”

“I hope we won't bore you,” she said, “because what we're working on may have some relation to things that you've written in your books, specifically your recent book on lateral marketing. “

Kate was impressed by Dr. Kotler, and the comfortable feeling he created by treating her, not as a newcomer to the field, but a fellow researcher trying to discover some answers. She was also relieved, because this time the connection with this academic leader was hers, not Steve's. It felt good to be the grown-up for a change.

“The economical landscape has been fundamentally changed by technology,” he said. “Companies and therefore marketers have to pay attention to the tools that consumers have now and the kind of power that creates for them.”

“So you're saying that the Internet is power for consumers,” Steve said. “Does that make marketing more of a science than it used to be?”

“Science has always been important in marketing,” he said. “Marketers develop their findings for research and modeling and predictive analytics. They developed the old marketing metrics to indicate the impact of their activities on sales and profits, and I admire you, Dr. Shaw, for taking such an aggressive approach to developing a new system.”

Kate didn't want to admit that job security, plus a need to find some appropriate study with Steve and his scientific background, was more of a motivation than breaking new ground or competing on this level.

Their discussion didn't last long, or get nearly as technical as yesterday's meeting, but she did learn a lot that could contribute to the metrics theory that she and Steve were developing.

"Before we leave," Kate said, "I wanted to tell you how glad I am that Jack Staunton recommended that I talk to you."

"Jack Staunton," he said, shaking his head with the memory of working with Staunton on a consulting assignment. "You might want to look up Deirdre Rossi. She's still in the Chicago office of Booz Allen. I'm sure she could give you an interesting perspective on Jack."

Bill was getting frustrated as hell. He had called Jordan's phone number, and her message said "out of country." He knew that Kate wanted to meet with Philip Kotler -- it wasn't as if she didn't have all of his books on the shelf at home -- but when he went to Evanston to the Northwestern campus, a woman in his office said that he had gone to the downtown campus today for an early meeting. So he had missed Kate again, and she wasn't picking up her cell phone.

He decided to drive downtown, knowing that just running into her in a city as large as Chicago was very, very unlikely, but he could at least start on campus.

Kate made the call to Deirdre and connected with her to meet for coffee.

"You probably want to meet her without me hanging around," he said. "I do know that sharing information between two women is much more likely if it's girl talk. I'll walk around a little and meet you back at the hotel."

He kissed her in a publicly acceptable manner, and helped her hail a cab before heading west to Michigan Ave. He knew exactly where Tiffany's was.

Bill was even more frustrated when he found Dr. Kotler's office -- as if parking wasn't an expensive nightmare -- and Kate was already gone. He politely thanked the secretary outside Dr. Kotler's suite and decided -- what the hell -- to go up the block to Crate & Barrel because she loved that store, and maybe she would've gone there.

After a quick look around the store, he realized she wasn't there, and he went back outside to survey other choices on the Miracle Mile. God only knew that he could use a miracle about now.

And he got one. He saw a guy across the street, who looked a lot like that graduate student. He dodged traffic, violating every jaywalking law on the books, and caught up with the guy on the corner on the east side of the street. He grabbed his shirt and twisted him around to face him.

“Quit fucking with Kate!” He practically yelled as he slugged him in the nose.

“Kate who?” Steve reacted quickly, ignoring the blood that was pouring down his face.

The look of confusion and rage on Steve's face and his haste to get in nearest cab to speed away made Bill think that he had made a mistake, punched some random guy, and was letting his jealousy make him a raving maniac.

“I'm Katherine Shaw, and I work in Florida with Jack Staunton.”

“Lucky you. I'm Deirdre Rossi. I worked and lived with Jack for much longer than I should have. They have great coffee here, all imported from different places than you find at Starbucks.”

“How about a cappuccino with your blend of the day?” She said to the waitress, assuming that the frothy milk would dull any bitterness that an exotic brew might have.

“Has Jack made unreasonable demands yet?”

“I don't think unreasonable describes his expectations for any of our faculty.”

“Has he hit on you yet?”

Kate was taken aback by what she perceived as hostility, and it must have showed in her unconscious reaction.

“I'm sorry,” Deirdre apologized, “I haven't heard from Jack in years, and you appear out of nowhere. I guess I'm suspicious that this is some kind of setup that Jack arranged.”

“He didn't know I was going to see you. I didn't know I was going to see you. If Dr. Kotler hadn't suggested it, I never would've thought to call you. I'm sorry if this is awkward, and I thank you for it even agreeing to talk to me. But I understand perfectly if we just finish our coffee and go.”

“You're from the Midwest aren't you? No one else would be so polite.” She took another drag on her cigarette. “How long have you been working with Jack?”

“Not long,” Kate admitted, feeling more comfortable now that Deirdre knew there were no hidden agendas in her call.

“He's very smart. He's very savvy. He's very good at reading situations and taking advantage of them. He's very good at reading people and taking advantage of them too.”

“You sound like a casualty,” Kate said, “but you are still with Booz Allen and Jack has retreated into academia. You sound like you came out ahead in the game.”

“Jack broke the rules and got ejected from the game,” Deirdre said.

Interesting twist, Kate thought. How much is she willing to divulge?

“Next time he'll change the rules before anyone sees he's broken them. Have you got a few minutes or maybe more than a few minutes to talk about this?”

Steve was still bleeding when he got to the hotel, and the bellman immediately flagged the concierge, fortunately the same concierge who had rescued Kate. He motioned to the steward to help Steve to go upstairs.

“Can I order some champagne?” Steve asked, trying to pretend that his shirt and face were not covered with blood. “Bollinger Blanc de Noir if you have it, but Krug would be fine.”

“No problem,” said the concierge, fascinated by Steve's composure. “I'll get a doctor, and send the champagne up with some truffles in case you need some chocolate.”

Once up in the room, Steve set down on the sofa and accepted the wad of Kleenex the steward offered. When the doctor arrived, showing no surprise, to be in the penthouse suite again, he instructed Steve to put his head back and asked the steward for a wash cloth and a bag of ice.

Kate gratefully accepted, the bellman's hand to get out of the cab.

“I think you should talk to the concierge,” he said with some hesitation.

Kate immediately felt some concern, which spoiled the good feeling she had after her talk with Deirdre. “Is something the matter?”

“Mr. McMillan’s nose seems to have had a collision with someone’s fist,” the concierge said, trying not to create panic. “He did order champagne though, and your doctor is upstairs.”

“We’ll probably need a pizza.”

“How about Giordano’s tonight? I’ll take care of it myself.”

She waved a thank you as she headed toward the elevator.

“Are you okay?” she asked Steve as the doctor adjusted the ice pack on Steve’s nose.

“It’s not broken,” the doctor said, “but he should keep ice on it for a while. How is your foot?”

“Good,” she said. “Any advice?”

“Stay out of the Jacuzzi,” he said packing his medical bag. “With your luck, I’d be back here for a case of drowning,”

“What happened?” she asked Steve when they were alone.

“I think I ran into your husband on Michigan Avenue. He told me to quit fucking you and then smashed me in the nose.”

Kate was torn. Certainly she was angry that Bill had taken a violent approach to dealing with the problem, but at the same time, she felt a twinge of pride that Bill cared enough to come to Chicago to reclaim her. That made her both happy that Bill loved her that much and annoyed that she was some sort of chattel that he could fight over.

“If it wouldn’t have negated my denial that I even knew what he was talking about, I would have taken him down.”

She was still torn. How valiant Steve could have been, and at the same time how stupid. She had never been the kind of woman that men fought over, and this was a whole new experience for her. The most jealousy she could ever remember piquing was when she had chosen a different classmate than Sam as a partner for a case presentation in grad school.

“I didn’t know you were such a tough guy,” she said joining him on the sofa. “I thought you were a lover, not a fighter.”

“You are amused by this,” he said, reaching inside his pocket.

"I am amazed that I am in the middle of this conflict."

"You're a woman that is worth fighting for." He handed her a flat light blue box.

She knew that color. She knew it meant Tiffany's. She knew that she should say that she couldn't possibly accept this gift. But she also knew that wasn't what she was going to say. She gingerly opened the box. Inside was a beautiful, what she guessed white gold bracelet with a small diamond set at the center of a simple and delicate flower. The tag on the bracelet read Paloma Picasso.

"This is incredible," she gasped. "I don't even know exactly what I should say."

"Say you love it," he said.

"I love it." She paused to consider what a second declaration of devotion might mean to him or to her. The same sense of being too far down one path to turn around struck her. "I love you. I don't know how this is going to work, but there's nowhere else I'd rather be right now than in your arms."

"I think we have two choices," Steve said, carefully unbuttoning her blouse. "Either we stay in the hotel, or we get the hell out of town."

Although it was uncommon for Lexi to date, it was very common for her to fall in love, or at least lust, very quickly. Within weeks of starting her summer job at age 19, she and her married supervisor started an affair that would take 7 heartbreaking years to end. She started dating her ex-husband Kurt shortly after meeting him at a vendor function, and they were engaged 4 weeks later. Then there was Mike. Only a few hours after their fateful plane trip from Seattle to Honolulu, they were rolling in the Waikiki sands by moonlight. The older she got, the less time it seemed to take for Lexi to be smitten, if not fully immersed, in love.

Lexi and Andrew had a wonderful dinner at the local Thai restaurant, ordering a separate plate of braised chicken for Dakota. They traded stories, backgrounds, likes and dislikes, until nightfall came and the owners had to tell them to leave. Based on the smile from the waiter when Andrew paid the check, he must have tipped him handsomely for their time together.

Lexi looked at her cell phone, seeing that it was 10 pm. She had another big day at the office tomorrow, and she guessed that Andrew arose early, as did she. He leaned forward, kissing her on the forehead, holding her close with Dakota nearby. They were beginning to master the three way hug of man, woman, and dog.

Andrew looked off into the distance. “It pains me to think that I can’t spend the night with you, but I think we both have early morning commitments.”

“We do. There’s all kinds of leashes, electronic and work-related, aren’t there?” Lexi looked up into the night sky as well, noting a thick cloud cover without a threat of rain. They stopped near a bush, allowing Dakota to pee on a rhododendron, giving them another chance to lean into one another.

A sudden wave of rationality overtook Lexi. “You’re right. We should both get going. Are you available for lunch – or dinner tomorrow?” She wondered if she was being too forward, but she couldn’t help it. She was a planner, and liked to think ahead.

“I have a new client on the eastside tomorrow that I will be busy with for most of the day. But if you don’t mind the dirt-encrusted look, I could swing back over to this side of the lake for a late dinner.”

“How about my place in suburbia? You can bring Dakota. I miss not having a dog around.” *And a man too*, she thought as she leaned down to give Dakota a good night hug.

Andrew perked up at the idea, pulling her close to him. “Can I bring anything – other than my dog?”

“Nope. Just you. And Dakota. Seven pm. You have my leash – I mean my cell phone number?”

“I do. You got mine?”

“Yeah. I think I’ve got your number, mister.” She smiled and kissed him again. “I’ll see you tomorrow. “

They were at her car by the time they said their final good nights. Lexi felt relieved that they made it past the first date, although it never really felt like one.

She would have a lot to tell Kate in the morning.

Sleeping blissfully, Lexi arose to the thought of what a simple, and magical dinner she had had the night before with Andrew. If he was all he seemed to be, it could be a very special relationship. She had a lot to talk to Kate about, but unfortunately Kate was not answering her phone. Lexi tuned in to Kate for a moment, feeling a mixture of joy, excitement, and giddiness she had not felt from Kate in years. *She’s definitely getting laid*, thought Lexi. Perhaps Kate had time

for a quick text message, just to see if Kate was still alive. *Still in Chicago?* She clicked SEND, wondering when or if she would get a reply.

Six a.m. As much as she wanted to call Andrew, she wasn't privy to his personal daily schedule yet to know what he would be doing at this hour. So she called her friend, Claudia, the only other person she knew in her time zone to be a very early riser.

Dialing her work number, Claudia answered on the first ring. "This is Claudia."

"Hi. It's me. I see you're at work."

"No rest for the independent entrepreneur." Claudia and their friend Bev, owned a metaphysical bookstore in her second hometown of Sacramento, and spent most of her life at the store. "How are you?"

"Excellent!" Lexi could not hide the exuberance in her voice.

"I see you've met someone special." That was the nice thing about having a psychic for a girlfriend. You didn't have to explain much, just think it and she would know what happened. "Tell me about him."

Lexi told Claudia how she met him, and what little she knew about him in the few meals that they had spent together. "I fall for so few guys, but when I do, it's so fast and hard. I need to know if I can – trust him."

"It's not him you have to worry about. This is about trusting yourself. There's a lot of changes coming your way."

Claudia had a way of busting Lexi on her stuff, pointing out the hot buttons that she would rather kept hidden. "Geez. Could you be a little more vague? I'm not sure I get your meaning." Lexi and Claudia knew exactly what they meant, and that Lexi was just trying to use humor to evade the inevitable.

"Well, do you think you are ready to trust yourself, Lexi?"

Lexi glanced out the window to the trees outside her apartment. "Yeah. I think so. I've tried the controlling others, and that didn't work very well. And earlier in my life, I let others control me, and I certainly don't want that anymore. And then I had the one guy who I loved and disappeared..."

"But you know that one was never going to work out."

"My head knew it, but it took a while before my heart got the memo."

"Are you done with Mike?"

“Yeah. I told you I talked to him recently. It’s just one of those weird things where you love someone, and you can’t be with them, and even if you were, you would probably kill each other.”

“That’s not how it’s going to be with Andrew – if you let it.”

“I guess the thing that keeps in the back of my mind is that Pam the Astrologer said my love life would be bumpy for a while.”

“Because of you, not because of the men.”

“Is this one of those you-still-have-baggage-to-work-out kind of innuendos?”

“Of course. I went through it myself recently. You’d think after 50 some years, I would have figured this stuff out, but more comes up with every new person you meet.”

“Ain’t that the truth. So I just enjoy it in the meantime?”

“I give you permission to enjoy yourself with a wonderful man, who also has things to work out with you, but is willing to do so.”

Somehow, it did feel better getting permission, even from someone else, that it was okay to be you.

Lexi pulled into her parking space in the garage near work, heading for the outdoor walkway to work. Her cell phone jingled, simultaneous to the skip in her heartbeat. She juggled her belongings to quickly grab her cell phone, having no time to adjust her mind, or tone of voice, to the incoming call. “Hellooo??” Her tone of voice was rather loud to drown out some of the external noises.

“Lexi, it’s Andrew.”

“Hi. Just a minute. Let me moved to a quieter spot.” Lexi navigated between the morning commuters and their assortment of vente coffee cups to a quieter location near a small Japanese maple. “Hi, how are you?”

“I’m good. I was going to call you earlier, but wasn’t sure...you know, what a good time was.”

“I was going to call you at 6 am, but I wasn’t sure you’d be up yet.”

“Do it next time.”

Lexi laughed, a relieved and excited chortle, reserved for occasions of new love.

“What part of town are you in this morning, Andrew?”

“I’m just crossing the I-90 bridge so I can get off on Mercer Island.”

“Are you designing for Bill and Melinda?”

“No, but my client is a few blocks away overlooking the water. A beautiful view of Lake Washington.”

“I know, my friend Johanna and I would go down to Madison Park every July to watch the Blue Angels fly over. It’s one of my favorite places.”

“Got any other favorite places?”

“Fussen, Bavaria. There’s a nice castle there that I love.”

“You’ll have to take me there sometime.”

“I’d love to. In the meantime, how about I just make you some dinner tonight?”

“A home-cooked meal? I’m not sure what I will do with myself.”

“You sound starved. I’ll make sure and pick up something for Dakota too. About seven o’clock okay?”

“Sounds great. I’ll see you then.”

“What if I want to talk to you during the day?”

“There’s this little thingy called a cell phone. You punch numbers into an itty-bitty metal pad, and a satellite in space will let me know that you are calling, or it will let you talk to a fabulous recording of me if I’m not available.”

“How about I call you at 12 noon, and we can have a phone-in lunch? That way you can book me into your busy schedule.”

“Consider yourself booked. You might have to listen to me chewing but you might make out a word or two.”

“Works for me. I’ll call you and give you a report from Lake Washington.”

“Thanks Andrew. Have a great morning. Talk to you soon.”

“Lexi – I just wanted to tell you that I’m – looking forward to tonight....”

“I know. I am too. See you soon.” She closed the cover on her phone, and stood near the brilliant maroon tree, basking in the glow of a new love.

Lexi used the stairs, getting in the only workout she would have for the day. She unlocked the door to her office, where the phone was ringing. The caller ID showed a 212 area code. This can’t be good, she thought.

“Lexi Michaels.”

“Lexi. It’s David. We need to talk.”

“About what?” She was stalling for time, not knowing if Evan and Warner had submitted their proposal yet. Based on the tone of David’s voice, she guessed that they had.

“You know what.”

“No, I really don’t. If you remember correctly, I am 3 hours behind you, and it’s only 8:30 am here and I am not quite caught up yet.” Lexi felt comfortable using a personal, yet snippy tone with David since she guess this was a personal issue up for discussion.

“Then you should open your email from home.”

“Can I call you back, David? I would really like to be better prepared for this phone call.”

“You have 10 minutes. I’m still your boss you know.” Lexi guessed that David didn’t just hang up on her, but slammed the phone down. She had some quick reconnaissance work to do.

Although she wanted to run, she didn’t want to worry the staff, so she walked at a brisk pace to Evan’s office, where he was staring at his computer.

“We need to talk.” Lexi shut the door behind her. “What did you do? I just got a phone call from David and he is calling me back in 10 minutes. I tried to feign ignorance, which I am at the moment, but he isn’t buying it. What happened?”

“Walter and his guys spent yesterday and last night drawing up a proposal. It looks really good....”

“They sent it ALREADY?”

Lexi had just had the I-can't-control-things discussion with Claudia this morning and apparently the same subject applied at work. She inhaled deeply and leaned against the door.

"It's a good proposal, Lexi. 8.5% return, just like we talked about. I like it."

"I guess I'm the one who gets to take the heat for it, like we also talked about."

Evan smiled. "Pretty much."

"You're enjoying this way too much."

"Hey, last week it was my ass on the line with Veronica and Sydney. I guess it's your turn."

"Fine."

Lexi walked back to her office, to a ringing phone. She saw the 212 area code again.

"Lexi Michaels."

"This is David. You're fired." No talking. Probably no future book deal. And as they had talked about before, definitely no sex.

Although it was a shock, a weight was suddenly lifted off her heart. Everything felt okay. She sat down in her chair, breathing an unexpected sigh of relief. The last few weeks had been hard, and had taken a toll on her. She was ready for a much-needed break.

With a light heart, she strolled down to Evan's office. Sporting a big smile, she closed the door, looking at Evan with a mischievous expression. Evan smiled back at her.

"I'm going to pack up my things and go home now, Evan."

"Why. We have four meetings today. I need you."

"Well, I guess you might want to talk to your new boss about that."

"Why?"

"He fired me."

Evan's smile dropped to the ground. "He can't do that..."

“Of course he can. This is how the game is played. You make an alpha dog mad, and he bites back. And it’s just a warning bite – you’re next.” Lexi sat down in the chair across from him. “I’m going to take some time off. If you want me to be part of the new firm, give me a call.” She glanced out into the hallway, seeing two security officers wandering the floor. “I’m guessing those two gentlemen in blue uniforms are out there for me. I’ll get my things.”

Evan, still speechless, watched her walk out the door, shaking the hands of each officer. It took about 3 minutes to gather her most essential mementos, leaving all paper files behind, including those in her briefcase, and she handed over her office keys and electronic key cards. With a sense of freedom, she walked between the two hulking men on her way to the door, to the stunned and shocked amazement of the staff. “Goodbye, everyone. Thanks for all of your help.” She meant it.

They escorted her down the elevator and out into the atrium area. She sat for a moment, trying to take in the life changing event that had just happened. Lexi still felt an odd sense of excitement and freedom she had not felt in a while. She wasn’t sure how things were going to work out, but certain that they would.

There was no need to call or get back at David. That would happen over time. She would just not be a part of his new publishing venture, and frankly, was glad to have this turn of events to understand his true character. She would be better off in the long run without that New Yorker.

She’d never been fired before, but had quit unexpectedly and knew what to do next. Take time off. Call friends. Eat chocolate. Catch up on sleep. Redecorate. And budget wisely.

She picked up her cell phone and stared at the list of contacts. Whom to call first? Kate? She still had not returned her text message, so she was unavailable. Claudia? Her store was about to open for business and she was busy with customers. There was only one person that she wanted to talk with.

She looked at her contact list under “A”. There was only one person to call. She pushed the SEND button, knowing she would probably access his voicemail. When Andrew answered the phone himself, she was somewhat startled.

“Couldn’t wait until noon to talk to me, huh?”

“Well, I seem to be free earlier than that, so I thought I would call.”

“You sound funny. What’s wrong?”

The tears came. They always did, at the wrong moment, when she was talking to someone she loved and trusted, as a relief. “I just got fired....”

“Let me finish up here. We’ll keep our lunch date. I’ll meet you at your place at noon. Don’t worry, everything will be fine. I’ll be there for you.”

“Thanks, I needed that. I’ll see you soon.”

Kate helped him push her blouse off her shoulders, and before he could unclasp her bra, she said, “Can I seduce you?”

“You’ve been seducing me the moment you hired me,” he said. “So why would I have any objection now?”

“Pour some champagne,” she said, thinking that a slight buzz might make her braver.

He opened the champagne and poured it into the two flute glasses. The golden liquid bubbled and sparkled as he handed her a glass.

“To the most incredible woman I have ever known,” he said.

“To the most amazing young man I have ever known.”

They touched the edge of their glasses, which rang with a crystal melody. She took a sip of the champagne, marveling at how intense it tasted, nothing at all like the bland toasts at weddings or the cheap concoction at special Sunday brunches.

“I sense this is far too expensive to be mixed into a mimosa,” she said. He smiled as he sipped champagne, not even considering that he should mention the price tag of the black bottle of Bollinger in the ice.

“Let’s take the champagne into the other room,” Kate said, “so you can get me drunk and take advantage of me or I can take advantage of you.”

Two hours, two new sexual experiences and one shower later, Kate pulled a T-shirt over her head and went to find her cellphone. If they were going to get out of town, she’d need to find a good reason.

“Hi, may I speak to Mr. Andreesen, please?” she said to the secretary at Replay Networks.

“Dr. Katherine Shaw,” she replied to the question from the secretary, also giving the name and location of her university and then name-dropping without hesitation, she said, “Jim Clark suggested I call.”

She could practically hear the bells of recognition chiming. Clark had worked with Andreesen to found Netscape Communications which had turned into a sizable chunk of change when it sold to AOL for billions of dollars. Okay, so she had never met Jim Clark, but she knew he had a home in Palm Beach and a connection to the Democratic Party and Barack Obama.

“Thanks so much,” she said when the secretary clicked her through. She launched into much the same spiel she had used with the professors from U-Chicago and Northwestern, but now she name-dropped Fogel’s and Kotler’s names as if they regularly had coffee together. She succeeded in setting up a meeting tomorrow afternoon in his Silicon Valley office. That was one.

She did a quick search on her laptop, and Steve appeared wearing his briefs.

“Does your father work with anyone in Silicon Valley?” she asked. “eBay, SRI, Oracle, Facebook...”

“He put money into Facebook. I remember him asking me if I’d ever heard of it.” He thought for a moment. “Some guy named Thiel got him involved.”

“Peter Thiel,” she said confirming the PayPal founder’s connection to the social networking site on a website. She picked up her phone again, making a similar cold call but throwing in Steve’s father as the reference. She got connected quickly to the founder Mark Zuckerberg. By the end of the call, she had their second meeting.

“You certainly have guts,” Steve said.

“Journalism undergrad study,” she shrugged. “You learn fast that the worst that can happen is a turn-down. Can you get us to San Francisco tomorrow morning?”

“I’ll call the pilot,” he said going to find his Blackberry.

Kate picked up her phone seeing a text message from Lexi.

Still in Chicago?

She typed back trying to use appropriate IM dialect.

*Going to San Fran. Can U meet us 4 dinner 2morrow or day after 2morrow?
More details 2 come.*

She sent the message and hoped that Lexi could make it down from Seattle on such short notice.

And now, she thought, I have an even harder call to make. She punched the memory button to get Bill's cell, half hoping she's just get his voice mail.

"I was beginning to worry," Bill said, "when I hadn't heard anything for a couple days." He was covering what he knew, as much as she was covering the truth. She took the phone out on the balcony to get some ambient city noise.

"I'm sorry I didn't call, but this trip has been amazing."

I bet, he thought, wishing he had GPS tracking capability on her phone.

"I met with professors from U-Chicago and Northwestern, really important scholars who I never thought I'd get to see, much less spend hours with analyzing my project." She was talking a little fast to convey her enthusiasm.

"That's great," he said.

"And they gave me referrals to other people to talk with, a couple here in Chicago, and a couple out in California, so I'm going out there tomorrow to talk to some serious Internet pioneers."

That was a new development. Was this the time to confess he was in Chicago trying to stalk her and that he knew what was going on and that he loved her as much today as he did fifteen years ago when he married her and that he could forgive her and that he'd run over that grad student with his Volvo if he had the chance?

"That's great," he said with feigned enthusiasm. "Did you get to see Jordan?"

"We had pizza one night, of course, but she was off to Moscow the next morning."

Did she get to meet your boy-toy? he thought. Did she approve? Did she condone your behavior?

"Moscow," he said, "that girl certainly travels the world."

"It's what she always wanted to do," Kate said, starting to tell a story about a high school trip to Europe, before Bill interrupted.

"Look, I've got a client here in the office," he lied. "Call me when you know your plans." He was thinking about her long term plans, not travel arrangements, and he was fairly certain she picked up on that.