

The Lexicon

Moving Forward, Looking Back

"We can get the flight at about eight," Steve said when she came back in. "I've got reservations at the Clift if that's okay."

"I trust you," Kate said with exaggerated sincerity, "you've done pretty well so far."

"Only pretty well? What do I have to do to get a really well?"

Kate looked at him with what she could only call a coy smile. "You've done really well at some things thus far."

"So, does that count as extra credit?"

"That accounts for about everything right now."

"Are you saying I could have skipped the plane ride, and the hotel room, and the bracelet and the champagne and just fucked you madly for three days?"

"The plane, the hotel, the bracelet, the champagne were all great accessories, but it's definitely you that counts the most."

"The journalism background certainly explains your facility with words, but it certainly doesn't explain all of your skills."

Between them, they were only wearing one T-shirt and one pair of shorts, and even that amount of clothing was superfluous in a about 30 seconds. There would be plenty of time to pack in the morning.

Lexi heard the beep on her cell phone, meaning Kate had responded to her text message. She clicked it open, and laughed as she read Kate's attempt to abbreviate her message. But, holy shit, she had just lost her job, met her soulmate, and now, she had to get to San Francisco to meet Steve and either hear Kate's confession or plans for future bliss.

"Andrew?" She said, as she called him quickly on her cell phone. "Do you have any excuse to take a day or two to go down to San Francisco?"

"I have clients in the city that I could visit, but it's more important that you need to go to San Francisco and for whatever reason, you want me to be there with you. I'll see you in a little bit."

Lexi felt his unquestioning support, and she was grateful that she could wait to explain Kate's friendship and the interesting path that led to this invitation. She didn't know if he had some moral objection that would surface when she told him about Kate and Steve, but she trusted his judgment of both Kate and of herself.

The knock on the door brought Lexi out of her haze. She'd been sitting on her overstuffed couch, looking out onto the forest of trees and blackberry bushes outside her living room window. *It must be Andrew...*

Expecting a comforting presence, she found Evan, nervously standing at her doorstep.

"What do YOU want?" Lexi stood in the doorway, not offering to let him inside.

"You wouldn't answer your phone, so I decided to drive up to see you. We have to talk."

"Um, no. Not really. You can go away now. I'm really tired and I would appreciate it if you would leave."

"Lexi, please. Five minutes?"

"You have three and a half. Go."

"Look, I called David right after you left..."

"You mean after I was ESCORTED OUT of the building?"

"Well yeah...after you were escorted out..."

"After I put on a happy face so as not to be too dramatic even though I was traumatized?" Lexi knew she wasn't really traumatized, but figured that Evan didn't need to know that. Guilt had immense bargaining power.

"Can I come in? I don't like explaining this on your doorstep."

"Tough. You only have two and a half minutes left, so you should get to your point."

“David wants to talk to us...to you...about the offer. He wants to - - bring you back on.”

“NO...FUCKING...WAY.”

Lexi slammed the door in his face, as she should have 3 minutes ago. She heard Evan pounding on her door, pleading with her to come in. She looked out onto the trees, wondering what to do. Then she felt an immense fire in her solar plexus, a very deep-seated anger that may not be logical, but one that certainly needed venting.

Evan had no idea what a risk he took by coming to her doorstep. Lexi opened the door, grabbed him by the shirt collar, and physically threw him into her apartment. She pulled him by his white, highly-starched buttondown, to the point that their two noses were 2” apart. Lexi’s eyes blazed as she saw the deep fear in Evan’s face.

All of these damn men, who think they are so smart, so powerful, so strategic in their thinking and planning? They have no idea of the strength, and viciousness that can live in a woman’s soul when she is threatened and tested beyond her limits. The many years of fixing situations for others, playing nice, and keeping people from making obvious mistakes welled up in her, to the point she could no longer hold it inside.

Kate may be a cougar. But Lexi was a jaguar, ready to rip out her enemy’s throat.

“Evan. I will say this slowly, so that little brain of yours can understand. You – are – a – wuss. An idiot - who kowtows the moment he wants to impress someone. The day you get it through your head that all David wants to do is use you, you will finally wise up. And I will NOT stand by to advise you, or save you, from Sydney, Veronica, David, yourself or anyone else EVER again. DO –YOU – UNDERSTAND?”

Lexi grabbed his shirt collar closely, enough to give her momentum to throw him away from her, where he stumbled and ended up on the unvacuumed floor.

“Now you can leave. And you can tell David what he is in for should he ever choose to confront me. You got that? And I will not be working for you – or David – or Warner – or any of your other golf-playing, Internet millionaire, self-absorbed, pussy friends ever again. Your egos are much too large, your will too small, and you don’t have enough brains to think for yourself. Now – get – out!”

Evan’s eyes left Lexi’s and glanced toward the door. Lexi’s eyes followed his until she saw Andrew standing behind her.

“I was going to jump in to help you ward off this guy, whoever he is, but I guess you can do that by yourself. “ Andrew looked at Evan getting up from the floor. “I don’t know who you are, buddy, but I’d get the hell out of here before she REALLY hurts you.”

Evan shook himself off and walked toward the door, visibly shaken. He turned toward Lexi, apparently getting ready to say something.

Lexi pointed angrily to the door. “NOW!!! “

He rushed through the door, closing it behind him.

Andrew looked at Lexi, obviously surprised by what he saw. “Rough day at work, honey?”

Lexi doubled over in laughter, letting out an AARRRGGGHHHH as she paced around the living room. “I need to go for a walk. Do you want to join me?”

“I think I might make you ride in the back of the truck with Dakota. I’m not sure I want to get near you until you’ve cooled off.”

Despite her anger and adrenaline, she grabbed Andrew, giving him a very passionate kiss. “Now you know what happens if you make me really mad. If I promise to be a safe walking companion, will you go to the park with me so I can burn off some of this crud? I’ve had one hell of a morning.”

Lexi had not realized how much anger and energy she had built up inside until she confronted Evan. She grabbed a ball from the back of the truck throwing it and running after Dakota. She became an animal herself, rolling in the grass, running after him, and even barking at him upon occasion. Whenever she glanced at Andrew, he smiled at the both of them, sometimes joining in the fun, but mostly letting Lexi and Dakota burn off pent up energy.

Lexi rolled over on the grass, drinking in the sunlight, when Dakota, also exhausted from his joyous run, joined her, panting as he lay down on the cool grass. Andrew joined them, bringing a bag of food.

“I stopped by the grocery store on the way to your place and picked up some food. I thought you might have been a bit distracted this morning.”

He offered her a sandwich, sharing it with Dakota. She looked at Andrew, the two of them smiling at each other in a relaxed way. “Thanks for giving me my space, Andrew, and not trying to fix things. I needed to do this one myself.”

“If you’d been threatened, I’d have interceded. But, hell girl, you look like you were doing fine yourself. You want to tell me what happened this morning?”

Lexi gave Andrew the details of this morning, and of the last few weeks of how she felt that she had been running the company without much management intelligence or support. She explained her brief, but complex relationship with David, and overall, how she was just plain DONE with it all. Done with the corporate attitude, small minds, and big egos.

“So what are you going to do next?” Andrew was patient in his questions. Kurt, Lexi’s-ex, would have been nervous, caring less about her welfare and more about his own.

“I guess it’s time to pursue my writing, and focus on getting published. In the meantime, I can do some independent contracting. Good money and less politics. “

“I might be able to help you with that.”

“I’ve known you for about 48 hours and you’ve already been a huge help.”

“Well, let me start with this. Why are we going to San Francisco?”

“Another long story. I have an old friend, who lives in Florida, who will be visiting The City, and she asked me if I would come down to meet her.”

“Sounds like a nice getaway. Why do you need me to go with you? Isn’t this a girl kind of weekend?”

“Not really. I will probably only have dinner with her – and her new boyfriend.”

“Okay. That sounds pretty uneventful.”

“Not really. She’s 51. Her boyfriend is mid-twenties. And her husband is in Florida.”

Andrew took a minute to take it in. “Complicated. Definitely...complicated.”

“To say the least. She’s got a mind of her own, and will do what she wants, and nothing I say will stop her. I think she wants to show him off, let me meet him, etc.”

“Is she looking for your blessing?”

“I kind of gave it to her already and told her to go ahead and fuck her brains out. Nothing I’m going to do will stop her. She’s writing her own script. She’d probably edit anything that I wrote for her.”

“Speaking of scripts, I might be able to help you out with the publishing thing.”

“How?”

“My sister is an editor with HarperOne in San Francisco. In fact, I thought we would stay with her when we went down there. She lives in Marin County.”

Lexi was overcome with a feeling of love, synchronicity, and just plain good fortune. “You are amazing!” She gently tackled him, rolling him to the ground. Dakota got up from his spot, trying to lick them and join in the fun. She kissed him quickly and repeatedly, each time saying, “thankyouthankyouthankyou!”

“There is something you can do for me, by the way.”

Lexi felt a brief alarm bell, wondering what he might ask of her, and if it was something she was prepared to do.

“You can be my independent contractor. I need someone to do my books, schedule my appointments, start a marketing program, and help me run my business. Could you do that?”

Lexi smiled at him teasingly. “Probably. I don’t know if you will be able to afford me....”

It was Andrew’s turn to tackle Lexi, pinning her to the ground so he could kiss her. His lips were soft, warm, strong yet gentle, and she melted to his touch.

Lexi looked into his eyes. “Can you take me back home now?”

“Tired?”

“Yeah. I’d like to take a nap, but wake up next to you if that’s okay. Can I make that your first appointment as your new office manager?”

He leaned in to kiss her, nudging his erection between her legs. “I think I can pencil it in. Let’s go.”

Bill thought about his conversation with Kate. San Francisco. Could she really be that blatant, showing off her new beau on the West Coast?

He briefly thought about booking yet another plane flight, but having never been in San Francisco, it might be even tougher to find her. Yet – he needed to know.

Bill picked up the phone, dialing the phone number of an old high school buddy, having recently made the papers by being the master mind private detective behind a Cuban Mortgage Fraud scheme in South Florida. Reggie was having his moment of fame, after many years in the private detective business. Reg had seen some rough times, but Bill doubted that an adulterous wife would be too much of a dilemma for him to document. Bill had used him to investigate some insurance fraud a few years ago, and Reggie came through with the explicit photos Bill's company needed to turn down a dozen car accident claims, and stop many more from being filed. Bill trusted Reg, ever since the 7th grade when they were both pestered for being the class geeks. They'd been friends ever since.

“Reginald Townsend”

“Reg. It's Bill. I need your help.”

Bill explained the situation, giving Reg the names details, and locations of Kate and her lover.

“They're in San Francisco. I just need to know what they are doing, who they are seeing – and some photos to back it up. “ Bill explained his half-hearted attempt at confronting them in Chicago, and the nosebleed that may or may not have been Kate's lover.

“Oh, man. You need to leave this to the professionals, Bill.”

“I know that – now. Can you help me out?”

“I hate to see you and Kate having problems, but I got some time and could use a trip to West Coast. I haven't been out of town in ages.”

Bill and Reg caught up on old times, arranged a trade of services, and Reg promised to have pictures and tape back to him in a few days. Bill hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair.

I'm not sure what I've done – but I need to know what she's up to....

After dropping Dakota off at the farm of one of Andrew's clients, they headed toward SeaTac airport in the early morning hours. She sat next to him in his truck, holding his hand, as safety would permit, the entire way.

They breezed through the check in and security gate with minimal delays, boarding their Southwest Air flight on time. Lexi grew silent on the plane, enjoying the view of the many volcanoes along the West Coast, pointing them out to Andrew along the way. He confessed it had been a long time since he had gotten out of town, and an even longer time since he'd seen his older sister Amy.

She and her partner, Caroline, lived in a small nook of a house in Marin, not far from Muir Woods. Much like the dress code in Washington, they were a fleece & Birkenstock wearing couple having been in their "alternative", yet seemingly normal, relationship for nearly 20 years. Andrew emailed and called Amy periodically to catch up and keep a familial relationship. They loved one another, but didn't know the details of their daily life. He guessed that Amy would be glad that he had found someone, since his work had consumed most of his time and effort.

"I hope Amy doesn't think I am using you – or her – to get published."

"She's very laid back. She'll love you – and your work. Don't worry about it."

"So you have a few clients to see?"

"I did a couple of jobs in the North Bay area. Actually they were clients of Amy's, and she referred me to them. I thought I would stop in and see how they are doing and how my work has fared."

"I'd love to see them with you, if you don't mind me coming along. I am not sure what kind of time Kate will have to spend with me. Not much, I'm guessing."

"Are they still in that period of their relationship where they are mostly horizontal?"

Lexi laughed. "I think so, and that she is really enjoying it. Let's just relax and enjoy ourselves. I'm sure we have nothing to worry about."

Checking out was more of a challenge than Kate had imagined it could be. The steward and the bellman were incredibly polite and more helpful than they might have been to guests who had had a normal and uneventful stay. The concierge who had rescued them on more than one occasion and provided pizza and champagne and truffles almost looked sad that they were leaving.

"You two are not like the usual guests we have in the penthouse. You two were far more..."

"A pain in the ass?" Kate suggested.

“I was going to say entertaining, in a friendly way.”

“Entertaining is a very polite way of saying a pain in the ass. But I think I accept that back-handed compliment.”

Steve finished settling the bill (Kate didn't even want to think what the total might've been) and joined them to hand the concierge yet another stack of \$100 bills to thank him and guarantee his discretion. “We appreciate everything you did.”

“Thank you sir, he said, shaking Steve's hand. “It was a pleasure to help you.”

Steve turned to go to the door, where the bellman had already hailed a cab to go to the airport. Kate paused to say goodbye.

“You have made what could have been a nightmare almost fun. Thank you so much.”

“It was the challenge of my career thus far,” he said with a smile. Then he looked up as if he were deciding what to say and he took both her hands. “I don't know what the story is with the two of you, but I think it's complicated. Good luck with it.”

She gave him a quick hug, which Steve watched with a look of curiosity, and then she went to get in the cab.

“Did you two have something going while I was passed out?” Steve said, protectively putting his hand on her back.

“Inside jokes,” she said, shaking her head, “and he was a great dealer supplying a Chicago pizza junkie like me.”

“So, what sort of food obsession will we be indulging in San Francisco?”

“Ghirardelli chocolate?”

“Could be a new flavor for oral sex,” he suggested casually, confident that the cab driver's English-language skills wouldn't pick that up.

“The concierge said he thought our relationship was complicated,” Kate said about 10 minutes into their flight. “Do you see it as complicated?”

“Not really,” he said stretching out across two seats. “We are two adults who are mentally, emotionally and physically attracted to one another. We have a great

working relationship, a great friendship and a great sex life. If you want, you can add in complications, but I just choose not to."

She couldn't decide whether to bring up some of the complications or just let it go. She had made a similar comment to Jordan when she met Steve, and her longest term friend (hated to be called oldest friend) had not pushed for graphic soap-opera detail, but had seemingly accepted that Kate had already made the decision about intimacy with him. Kate knew most of the complications were her issues and obviously not his, except when his nose became a target of jealous hostility. But every time she thought she could look at the situation with some objectivity, her emotional attachment and physical desire for Steve clouded all rational thought. Maybe Lexi could corner her and demand answers to the tough questions that Kate was avoiding.

Kate opened her briefcase to avoid any more discussion and spread out her paperwork on the long table in the cabin. Steve unpacked her laptop and sat across from her ready to take notes to prepare for the meeting with the FaceBook execs. Because social networking sites were such a recent innovation, and there had been some controversy about the use of the sites for commercial purposes, Kate knew that her questions could be unanswerable because of lack of information or legal confidentiality.

"Why don't we just ask them what they think the implications of social networking would have on marketing?" Steve suggested.

"That could work," Kate agreed, "but it might be a little open-ended to get a meaningful answer."

"But, if we ask questions that are too specific, are we steering answers the direction we want them to go rather than getting a true response?"

"That's the mathematician in you talking," she said, "and you're absolutely right."

She read through more of her information about Zuckerberg to find some angle of approach.

"Maybe we could start by asking why he thought social networking would appeal to people."

"And," Steve said, building on her thoughts, "what he thought it could accomplish both in the short term, which would probably have to be making connections between people, and in the long term, which might open up discussion about marketing implications."

Inspired by their collaboration, Kate and Steve spent at least half the flight discussing their strategies for their meeting later in the morning.

Hey.

Where are you?

We just landed, we have one meeting in about an hour, and we're checked in at the Clift.

For gods sake, Kate, are the two of you trying to fuck your way through Steve's entire trust fund in one frenzied week of passion?

He has expensive tastes. Where are you?

Andrew and I...

Andrew?

We have a lot to catch up on. Andrew and I are staying at his sister's in Marin County. Do you want to meet for drinks or dinner?

That's probably a good place to start. How about Tommy Toys?

At about six-thirty?

That's good. Starting early might mean we won't have to close the place.

"Lexi wanted to know if we're trying to fuck our way through your trust fund in expensive hotel rooms," Kate said to Steve after she hung up.

"Not a bad idea. How long have you got?" he asked.

"How long do you think your trust fund would last?"

"Decades at least, if we cut back to a cheaper champagne."

What started out as almost a teasing repartee quickly became an unspoken question about commitment. How long would you be willing to do this? was Steve's question that hung unasked. Kate struggled to come up with some response when she honestly didn't know when or if she could call it quits with him.

Kate was uncharacteristically star-struck when she and Steve met Marc Andreeson. She had done all her homework and knew that this wunderkind not

much older than Steve had helped create the Internet functionality as she knew it. He had gone with the right partners and became a multi-millionaire not too long after college graduation. She had read his blog and knew he followed a score of issues including politics. Fortunately, she retained enough of her journalism practicality to get by the nervous tension and talk coherently about her project and ask pertinent questions.

“Jim Clark doesn’t know who the hell you are,” he said as they shook hands after two hours of talking, “but he gave you points for chutzpah in dropping his name when you called.”

Kate blinked trying to come up with a clever reply, but he continued, “You get points from me for knowing your material and your willingness to change the rules by creating new ones. That’s always worked for me.”

“Are we creating new rules?” Kate asked Steve as they changed for dinner.

“In a professional or personal sense?”

“In either sense?” she replied hoping that he would provide some profound answer for many of her internal questions.

Instead he kissed her, holding her protectively, “In every sense,” he said, “and we’re going to win.”

Steve and Kate were a little bit early and were already seated in Tommy Toys at a round table in a semi-private room when Lexi and Andrew arrived. Kate popped out of her seat and exchanged a hug with Lexi.

"Thank you so much for coming."

"You've been there for me a couple times, so I probably owed you this."

Kate appreciated the sentiment, but it was too close to maudlin to just let it go. "Oh, face it, you just wanted to meet Steve."

"Well, that was certainly among my motivations." They disengaged from their hug, and turned toward the table. "Can I assume this is Steve?"

Steve stood and extended his hand to shake her hand, but was captured in one of her hugs.

"Lexi, Steve McMillan. Steve, Lexi Michaels." Kate said, making the belated introductions.

"Kate, Andrew Cameron. Andrew, Kate Shaw," Lexi quickly said. Andrew and Kate exchanged a hug, and Steve and Andrew exchanged a brief look of disbelief. Reading the thoughts behind their look, Lexi grinned. "I know this seems weird to all of us in some way, but I think we can play nice together and have a great dinner and what's got to be a fascinating conversation."

There was a community sign of relief as they all sat down.

"I ordered a bottle of Chardonnay to start," Steve said, "but it's anybody's choice for what could be many subsequent bottles."

During dinner, they exchanged details, current events, and a few odd topics such as headwinds and astrological charts. xeriscape, differential equations and integrating mathematical expressions. The dinner was exquisite, the wine was plentiful, the service was attentive, but not intrusive, and the conversation overcame any awkwardness that they might felt initially. After three hours, Steve's age difference didn't feel so insurmountable to Kate.

"Could we get our check?" Lexi asked when the busboys had finished clearing and resetting all the other tables in the restaurant.

"It's been taken care of," replied the waiter.

Andrew looked confused, Lexi looked surprised, and Kate looked innocently at Steve, who simply looked as though he had done the most gracious and natural thing he could do. They left the restaurant, hailed cabs and exchanged hugs and handshakes again.

"Can we meet for coffee tomorrow? I think we still have a lot to talk about," Lexi said to Kate. "And I would hate to think that I came all this way and didn't get details."

"We have a meeting scheduled for tomorrow morning, but I'm sure will be done by noon. I'll call you when we finished, and I can take a cab to where ever you choose. I know Steve will graciously let us have girl talk while he goes shopping is outrageously expensive stores or he'll go sailing on the Bay."

Steve gave her a sideways glance and then shared a sympathetic look with Andrew.

"I'm sure we can find something to occupy ourselves," Andrew said.

"She's not at all what I expected," Steve said as he and Kate got in a cab. "I thought she'd be some kind of ball-buster businesswomen crossed with a crystal ball gazer."

"She's not what I thought she'd be," Andrew said as he and Lexi got in a cab. "I pictured her as a weird combo of a frumpy academic and a cougar species sex-kitten."

"And what do you think now?" Kate and Lexi each asked her companion.

"She's a lot like you," both Steve and Andrew responded.

Meeting Marc Zuckerberg should have been at least as intimidating as meeting Marc Andreessen. He had only been a sophomore at Harvard when he had dreamed up Facebook which made him younger than Steve now. He had turned down millions of dollars to remain independent, but he was more than happy to talk about his social networking phenomenon and some of its challenges. He and Steve shared some fond memories of Cambridge, which eased Kate's launch into the discussion.

"We screwed up when we launched Beacon as an opt-out system," he said self-critically about the marketing effort. "All of our friends felt we had lied and betrayed their trust. You just can't piss off eight million people and walk away without an apology. Remember the New Coke fiasco?"

After nearly 90 minutes, Kate politely thanked the young mogul, shook his hand and left with Steve to find the limo he had hired to take them to Palo Alto. She dug into her briefcase to find her cell phone.

"What time should I ask Lexi to meet me?"

"In about an hour and a half," Steve said. "That should give us enough time."

"You look great," Kate and Lexi said, almost in unison, as they met at the door.

"Whatever you're doing certainly works," Lexi added, stirring her herbal tea.

"I think it's whatever he's doing that works," Kate laughed.

"And what is it that he's doing?" Lexi began, quickly amending it with "Please spare me X-rated details."

As grateful as she was that Lexi asked and as much as she wanted to answer, Kate stumbled over her words. "He... adores?... worships?... pampers?... respects?... turns me on?... loves me?"

"And aside from hot and confused, how does he make you feel?"

"He makes me feel the way I've wanted to feel for as long as I can remember-- smart and attractive and cherished and wanted," she paused. "And young."

"Kind of like Bill made you feel fifteen years ago?"

"It was always comfortable, natural with Bill, not laced with this raw sexual tension. Maybe it's my hormones gone wild, but Steve is definitely an obsession."

"How much are you willing to sacrifice for an obsession?" Lexi's stare ate through her soul.

"Right now, I could sacrifice everything, but in a rare rational moment, I might not be that willing. That's what scares me -- that I'll make a decision that is based on something ephemeral, fleeting."

"I think it scares you to make a decision, not coming from your brain, but from your heart."

"I'd be much more comfortable trusting my heart than my libido."

"Sometimes you trust what's screaming the loudest... and Steve's sex appeal is yelling fairly loudly."

Kate smiled, shaking her head. Lexi may not have solved her problem, but she gave her a little bit of perspective. "Andrew is not exactly what we might call a catch-and-release candidate. What's the deal with him?"

"I've known him a couple days, but we connected the first time we met."

"I'm guessing this is more than animal attraction," Kate said.

Lexi smiled. "Well, Dakota is a beautiful, beautiful animal. His dog," she explained, "but I think this is more than just wanting to jump Andrew's bones."

"Does this have long-term potential?"

"At this point, my psychic powers don't seem to be giving me a clear vision of where this is going. But it's going pretty well right now."

Lexi got up to stretch and ordered a second round of tea and brownies for she and Kate. There was a time in life where drinking, at least in the day time, wreaked more havoc on the body than the buzz was worth, so they stuck to tea. At least for Lexi. She assumed that not much from the earth plane was affecting Kate at all these days.

Lexi looked around, sensing something uncomfortable in her midst. She leaned forward and whispered to Kate. "We need to get out of here."

Kate, assuming Lexi was joking, leaned forward with a stage whisper. "Are your psychic antenna picking up a solar flare?"

Lexi looked around, continuing her whisper. "I don't know what it is. There's a guy three tables over who has not turned the page of his newspaper in last twenty minutes. Something about him doesn't feel right. Can we just get out of here?"

Kate never quite knew what to do when Lexi had these moments of intuition. But after twenty years, she learned to trust them, along with Lexi's common sense.

They exited the coffeehouse, running toward a nearby streetcar. Despite their age, they hopped on the back of the car, facing toward the coffeeshop. Lexi caught a glimpse of the man from three tables over, exiting the establishment and looking up and down the street. The streetcar rounded the corner, just in time to leave his line of sight.

"Kate, would someone be following you?"

A flush came to Kate's face. "What do you mean?"

"That guy was not after me, I just don't feel it. I think he's after you." Lexi noted the red creeping up Kate's neckline. "Is there something you'd like to tell me? Is Steve an international white collar criminal or something? Are you aiding and abetting a felon-turned-grad-student?"

Kate shared the nose-punching incident with Lexi, of how Bill must have traveled to Chicago and stalked them, encountering Steve on the street and planting a firm jab to Steve's sinuses.

"The guy I saw was African-American and definitely not Bill. But someone is watching you, so I'd be careful if I were you. Okay?"

Lexi wasn't sure how many more alarm bells needed to go off before Kate snapped out of her love affair. Physical violence and stalking was just not part of a healthy relationship. Lexi knew. She'd been there. And she didn't want anyone to go through that hell, especially not someone she loved.

Shifting the mood, Lexi leaned over to Kate as they both looked out at the Embarcadero. “How about we put on our invisibility cloaks and go somewhere a man would never guess we would go?”

They looked at each other, being of one mind. Ghirardelli Square. A man would never spend more than 5 minutes in a chocolate factory. A woman could set up a second home in there right next to the assembly line.

They exited the street car, walking up the steep hill to the factory, and strolling by the many street vendors displaying their crafts. Lexi caught up Kate on her surprise departure from work and the job offer from Andrew. Kate showed Lexi the bracelet from Tiffany’s and shared the astonishment at meeting and speaking with some of the greatest marketing minds in history. Interspersed with the conversation were a few lurid text messages from Steve, who apparently could not spend five minutes away from Kate, sending her into a constant stream of romantic giggling.

“Kate, are you sure this Ghirardelli excursion will work for you? I’m not sure you should have any more sugar. You’ve had enough stimulation from diamonds, champagne, great marketing minds, and overused bedrooms with fabulous views. You’re ready to float off the planet.”

“Aren’t you going to give me any more advice? Tell me what I should do with this ridiculous situation I find myself in?”

“Don’t forget your girlfriends. You will need them when you come back down to earth.”

They walked amongst the craft vendors, some truly gifted and some trying to make a buck for their next meal. They all seemed to fit into the melee that was the San Francisco landscape.

“So what about Andrew?”

Kate was good at picking a moment when Lexi was off guard, totally immersed in the Mexican Tile crafter selling handmade brightly colored trivets.

“He’s just a great guy. I feel very natural with him. In fact, I’m not sure we ever really had a date. None of that first date tension, where you’re concerned about how you look, how clean is your underwear, what kind of general impression you are making. We just kind of came together, like we’ve known each other forever.”

“Have you thoroughly checked him out yet?”

Kate had helped Lexi investigate her dates in the past, investigating their financial and criminal history before Lexi pursued even a first Starbucks date.

“I guess it didn’t even occur to me. I don’t have any red flags about him like I have had in the past. The first two guys I had relationship were married, Kurt lived in his mom’s basement until he was 38, and Mike had that whole lethal thing going on. Andrew has a good job, a dog, a home, and friendly demeanor. And what little time I spent with his sister and her partner showed me that they had a pretty good upbringing.”

“But how’s your sex life?”

“Terrific. It isn’t intense burning passion that burns you out, like it was with Mike. After a week with him, I could hardly walk....”

Kate let out a hysterical laugh. “You never told me that!”

“It was a bit embarrassing. I even went to my gynecologist to make sure everything was okay.”

“And Kurt?”

“What a nightmare. Do you know that in the last 2 years of our marriage I actually had to make an appointment to sleep with him? No kidding. I had to schedule 2-3 days in advance.”

Kate stood and stared at Lexi. “I had no idea. Were things really that bad?”

“After a while, I just stopped asking and even moved into a separate bedroom. We continued to lead separate lives, kind of like brother and sister, and then like mother and son, which is why it was time for me to leave.” Lexi winced at the old memory. “But enough of that... It sounds like you have the energy of a 17 year old.”

The giggling schoolgirl returned. “He’s amazing, and we do all kinds of....”

Lexi stopped and grabbed Kate’s arm, whispering in her ear while turning the other direction. “Kate, that guy from the coffeehouse is back. He’s there at the end of the line of display stands, on the left side. He’s looking right at us.”

“Lexi, I don’t see anyone, I’m sure you’re just paranoid.”

“I am NOT paranoid. How could he find us this quickly?” Lexi thought through her plethora of fraud magazine articles, keeping up on the newest methods of accounting fraud and interrogation techniques. She had just read an article

about GPS tracking through cell phone signals and was sure that was how he could have found them.

“Kate, you’ve been texting Steve every few minutes, right?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice, but yes, I have been.”

“That guy has triangulated onto your signal and got our location.” Lexi looked off onto the San Francisco Bay, trying to look casual as she tried to sense if they were in any real danger. “I don’t want to keep running away from this guy all afternoon. What do you say we walk right past him and see what happens?”

“Good. Then you will see that you are TOTALLY nuts! Have you been watching too many ‘Law and Order’ reruns?”

“Shut up and act natural. And quit texting so you can pay attention.”

The two of them walked down the row of vendor stands, approaching the end of the line. Kate looked over, spotting the African American man in his 50s that Lexi had noticed. Something about him looked familiar. Kate made eye contact with him for a few moments, then he turned and walked up the path away from the park.

Kate’s heart sank, along with her blood pressure. “I think I need to sit down.” They found a nearby park bench that faced the sunlit bay.

“Kate, are you okay?”

“I know who he is and why he’s here.”

“Then I’m not crazy? Who is he?”

“Bill’s friend, Reg. He’s a private investigator.”

“Holy fuck. I think I need to sit down too.”

Steve knew that tipping well in the hotel in Chicago had definitely been worth the money when he retrieved the text message from the concierge on his Blackberry.

Guy asking about U 2.

Steve correctly suspected that some guy wasn't asking about the Irish rock band, because even if he was, the concierge wouldn't have felt the need to notify him. He forwarded the message on to Scott Carter, his pilot and quasi-bodyguard.

FL PI ??s re SHM location.

Scott Carter read the message from his connection at the Boca Airport on his cell phone. Scott also picked up Steve's forwarded message. Damn, he thought, what kind of trouble am I going to have to bail Steve out of?

Stuart MacMillan, Steve's billionaire father, had hired Carter not only because he was a great pilot, but because his Special Forces background made him the ideal security man for his family. Scott could be practically invisible (hide in plain sight), but he could be intimidating and deadly, if necessary. Thus far, Scott had only seen security issues at two of the G-8 conferences and Stacy's brush with narcotics. Steve had never been a problem, and Scott was sure this had something to do with the woman Steve was flying around the country.

The cell phone buzzed again, and he saw it was Steve calling this time.

"Don't worry Steve," he began before Steve could begin. "I'm on it. I do need to ask the question though. Is your travel companion married?"

"Yes, and she's a professor at the University, and technically my supervisor." Confessing that much made Steve wonder how crazy Scott, and everyone else saw his--he didn't even know what to call it -- Romance? Affair? Sexual fantasy? with Kate.

"I don't need an explanation," Scott said, "I just needed the information for my investigation."

"So you think her husband is behind the questions?"

"That would be my guess," Scott said. "Jealous spouses are always the first suspects."

"Can I use your cell phone?" Kate asked.

"Going to call Bill to have him call off the dogs?" Lexi asked handing over her phone.

"Calling Steve to let him know." She dialed the phone, and Steve's pick-up was immediate.

"Are you okay?" he asked with more concern than she would have expected.

"I'm being followed by a guy that Bill has worked with. He's a private investigator named Reg Townsend, I think, and he's about 50 feet from us in Ghirardelli."

"Go into that Irish pub in Ghirardelli. Act perfectly natural, like you need a break."

"And...?"

"And wait there. We'll be there as soon as we can." He hung up.

"Let's go get an Irish coffee," Kate said, injecting some spunk into her voice and wondering who the 'we' was that Steve referred to.

Lexi read that this wasn't just a sudden need for alcohol, although it was beginning to sound better and better as the day went on. They started to wander off toward O'Neill's when Kate pulled out her phone to text Steve.

"If he's going to track me," Kate said, "we certainly don't want to lose him."

"Scott, the guy's a PI friend of Kate's husband," Steve said on the phone to Scott quickly as he dashed from the Bulgari store where he'd been picking out more jewelry for Kate. "He followed them to Ghirardelli, and Kate and her friend are waiting in the Irish pub there until we get there."

"On it. I'll take care of it."

"By 'take care of it,' you mean talking to whoever's asking questions, right?"

Scott shook his head. He always found it interesting that as much as someone might want a violent solution to a problem, there was always a reluctance to use anything except friendly persuasion.

"A good discussion and a potential financial transaction could be all that's necessary."

"Я могу взять ваше пальто?" the attractive young woman said as Jordan went into the first class cabin.

"Спасибо," Jordan said to the flight attendant who offered to hang up her coat. "Я могу получить чашку кофе пожалуйста?" It was too early in the morning not to get coffee even if it was some hideously strong brew.

Jordan guessed that it was also the early hour that left her as the only passenger in first class, so she slipped into her window seat waiting for the 12+ hour flight to take off.

Moments before the flight attendant closed the door to the jetway, a last minute passenger dashed in.

“Жаль, чтобы быть поздно. Я проспал.,” he apologized for his late arrival explaining that he overslept.

He glanced around the first class cabin, and even though every other seat was empty, he sat next to Jordan. She couldn't decide whether to be annoyed or flattered that he'd like to spend the day with her. He was not-quite drop-dead gorgeous, probably because he had a great body earned not by a regular play-date at the gym but by work and experience that gave him a little bit of an edge. His tousled graying hair did look as though he'd overslept, but his dark eyes were clear and very aware of everything around him.

“Good morning,” she said extending her hand, “I'm Jordan Logan with the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago.”

He shook her hand firmly, but didn't let go. The plane began taxiing down the runway.

“Mike Taylor with my uncle's international consulting firm. What brought you to Moscow?”

“The Foundation funds programs here, and I go over there periodically to see how they're doing.”

“And to see if the money's being spent the way you intended?”

“A little bit of oversight, yes. What brought you to Moscow?”

Mike couldn't even give her a broad hint on his assignment outside Moscow, nor would he want to because he was so disgusted by this new kind of work he was assigned. At least in the past, he felt that he was protecting people and national interests, not business interests like this last assignment to protect a chemical factory with political ties from the OMON, Russia's paramilitary police in one of their *reiderstvo* raids financed by a rival company. He hadn't trained and served his country so long to become a weapon in the capitalist arsenal. He wasn't sure what he was going to do with a profession that seemed to be selling itself to the highest bidder, and his disillusionment colored his entire attitude about his career choice. Still, he had some vestiges of the special ops mentality.

"It's classified," he said calmly. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you." Then he added his own twist to the familiar and usually overstated response. "When I'd really rather kiss you."

She smiled at him and looked down at their clenched hands. "You already have me restrained; no need for you to show any restraint."

He was charmed by her intellectual flirtation and leaned toward her to kiss her. He was more than pleasantly surprised when what he thought would be a friendly casual kiss developed into something more. If Kate can overindulge with her boy-toy in private planes and daddy-financed hotel rooms, Jordan thought, why can't I contemplate a first-class mile-high encounter with this man of mystery?

Reg had never seen so many people so tight lipped. The university in Florida invoked all sorts of privacy rules about releasing the student's name. Only a fabulously gay German professor with an office down the hall had said anything.

"Schteve MacMillan," he had said. "A smart boy, but not my type." He had fished his keys out of his silk jacket pocket, before going into his office with a young man who was apparently his type.

Even with a last name, passenger rosters were no help. He concluded that they left on a private plane, but no one at the airport would give him a clue about how Kate got to Chicago or who she got there with.

Reg then relied on the same source Kate used to do some initial research. Unfortunately, he didn't have Steve's full name, and he didn't think Steve was a chiropractor in Missouri or a dance teacher in Montana or an artist in New York or any of the first 500 listings that popped up on his computer screen.

So they had gone to Chicago before going to San Francisco. Bill knew that they had set up interviews with professors at Northwestern and the University of Chicago, but the most coherent information he could get from the intellectual contingent was that Steve had been to some conference in Paris. All Reg knew by the time he got to San Francisco was that someone was dropping a lot of cash to finance this affair, and he didn't think Kate's salary was big enough.

But fortunately she was using her cell phone with a vengeance, and he was able to use a GPS tracking system to catch her with some woman in a coffee shop and then to follow them to Ghirardelli Square. Steve was no where in sight, but Reg knew that he'd eventually connect with her. He bought a soda and took a seat on a bench with clear sight lines, wishing he could just go inside the pub, introduce himself, and buy a round of Guinness for all of them. He pretended to read the same page of the paper that Lexi had spotted him with earlier.

Not more than ten minutes later, a young guy hurried by him and joined Kate and her friend in the pub. That must be Steve, Reg thought, pulling out his cell phone to take a couple pictures, because although they were in a very tourist center, using a camera would be a little obvious.

He's subtle, Scott thought sauntering out of a cab to go the O'Neill's, but he's so out of his league. Scott saw him watching Steve and Kate and saw him surreptitiously taking photos with his cell phone. He expected Reg to get closer for a better shot of them holding hands, but he just waited on the bench for their next move. Scott sat down next to him.

"Can I buy you some coffee?" Scott asked with a tone of authority.

"No, that's okay," Reg said, certain that this was a pickup line.

"I really think that we should have coffee," Scott insisted.

The firm hand on his arm convinced Reg that coffee was a good idea, and he went with Scott into the pub. They sat down at a table just inside the door where everyone involved in this drama was visible.

"What will it take to convince you that this job isn't worth it?" Scott asked with cold calculation.

"What job?"

"Don't play stupid with me," Scott said, feigning a loss of patience. "We both know what you're doing, and I have a good idea I know who you're doing it for. I'll ask again, what will it take convince you that this job isn't worth it?"

Reg didn't know how to answer, but he suspected that having no answer was unacceptable. "What did you have in mind?"

"I could be thinking that you report you were unable to find them, but that you had a lead that they may have taken off for Hawaii. It's an easy flight from here, and I think you'd enjoy visiting the islands. And you might like it so much you'd want to relocate your family and your business there, and I imagine finding financing wouldn't be a problem."

This guy might know who I'm working for, Reg thought, but I don't know exactly who he's working for, and I don't think I want to find out. "Hawaii sounds very good."

Scott was glad that this was an easy negotiation, and that a simple talk had been enough. “Let’s go,” he said. “I’m sure we can find a bank that can handle the transaction.”

They got up from their table, and Scott nodded to Steve as they left.

“Why is our pilot leaving with Reg?” Kate asked.

“He’s more than a pilot,” Steve explained. “My father hired him to handle security.”

“For us?” Kate replied with confusion.

“For my family. I guess we were lucky he was with us.”

“Okay,” Lexi said, glad that she hadn’t had anything stronger than tea to cloud what was already becoming the pilot episode for ‘Law and Order – San Francisco.’ “Let me get this straight. You and your family are outrageously wealthy. You have a plane…”

“A Gulfstream,” Kate injected for accuracy, ignoring Lexi’s scowl.

“You have a pilot who is also your security detail,” she continued. “You are cheating on your husband.” Kate shrugged. “Your husband stalked you in Chicago and punched your boyfriend. He then hired a private investigator to find you in San Francisco. He tracked us down, and now your boyfriend’s bodyguard has confronted him and left with him.”

“That’s about it,” Steve said, sensing Kate’s relief and anxiety over the developing situation.

“Is there going to be some mysterious and heinous crime here that I’m going to need to deny to local authorities?” Lexi was only half-joking.

“I’m certain there will be no crime,” Steve said, “just a financial arrangement.”

Lexi sat back in their booth, taking in the situation. Her tolerance for bullshit had dramatically decreased in recent years, and especially after her recent work situation. She’d worked very hard to overcome a highly controlling and irrational mother, a recovering alcoholic ex-husband, and a series of moderately intelligent but highly egotistical bosses. Typically, there was a lot that Lexi would tolerate from her friends and family, but when they threatened her health or security, all bets were off.

Lexi looked at Kate and Steve. “I need to meet with the two of you – outside. NOW.”

Steve interceded, “Just a moment, let me finish my....”

Lexi gave Steve a stone cold stare. “Dude. I said NOW. Move it.” After years of working with men, Lexi knew how to take on an Alpha Male stature, and wasn’t afraid to use it.

“Um...I think we’d better go, Steve.” Kate nudged him to leave the booth.

Lexi’s voice deepened. “Yeah, Steve. Why don’t you leave them one of your trademark hundred dollar bills? That is how you solve every situation, isn’t it?”

A stone cold pall overtook the threesome due to Lexi’s change in mood. Lexi casually exited the booth and strode for the door, her two companions following her. She opened the door, holding it for Kate and Steve.

Steve, not knowing when to shut his mouth, looked at Lexi, saying “What’s this all...”

“Shut up Steve. And you too, Kate. Now cross the street over to the park, out in plain sight, but away from any tourists. And I don’t want to hear another word from either of you until I’m finished.”

They crossed the busy street of tourists flooding the Fisherman’s Wharf area. They found a grassy vacant spot in the area near the artists’ booths, with a park bench for Kate and Steve to sit on while Lexi spoke.

Lexi had the ability to exert supreme control and logical thinking when she was angered and threatened. She showed that once by almost killing a teacher’s aide in her undergrad self-defense course after he attacked her for her Final Exam. And now, despite her middle age, she kept in shape, and surprised people with her mind, and the power of her six-foot frame. She knew how to use it to her advantage.

“I have had it with both of you. Kate, I have known you for twenty years and never seen you act like such a complete imbecile. What do you think you’re in love with more, Steve’s daddy’s money? Or his connections? Can you honestly sit there and tell me that if he was just some attractive grad student in a flea bag apartment, that you would be fucking your brains out with him? I sincerely doubt it.”

“Lexi, be reasonable...”

“Shut up, Kate. I’m not finished yet.”

“I can’t let you talk to her like that...” Steve started to stand up, until Lexi stepped into his space, towering over him.

“What are you going to do, Steve? Show her how much you love her by buying a matching diamond to put on her left hand? Marry her, perhaps?”

The blood drained out of Steve’s face as he sat back down. “Is that what you are dreaming of, Kate? That Steve will take you home to his world famous daddy and say, ‘Here she is dad, the love of my life – isn’t she great?’ That’s going to last about two minutes until Dad graciously greets Kate, and then asks to speak to you alone for a few minutes. Because we know that your dad has ALWAYS dreamed of you marrying someone 25 years your senior from the northern suburbs of Chicago.”

“That’s not fair. My dad is accepting of all...” Steve fell silent, not completing his sentence.

“Accepting of all...what, Steve? Go ahead, finish that sentence.” Lexi stared at him, daring him to complete what he started.

Steve swallowed, controlling his answer. “I’m sure he would love Kate just as much as I do.”

“Until he buys her off, like he did with that PI that was following us? How many dalliances of yours has Daddy had to pay for? Isn’t that your plan? Make Kate another one of your castoffs?”

Steve looked at the ground, silently acknowledging that he had more than one scrape that his dad had to bail him out of.

“Kate, we all want the “Pretty Woman” story to come true, but it’s not going to happen. Enjoy the diamonds while you can. They’ll last a lot longer than Steve’s so called ‘love’ will – and be worth a lot more.”

Lexi paced, letting out a breath. “And you, Steve. You think you’re a man? Taking care of the little woman, buying her champagne and diamonds? How sweet of you. How about when she gets sick, are you going to be there? How about those days that she has one of her migraines and is throwing up all over the place - are you going to clean up after her – or will you just throw some money after it and make someone else take care of her? I am willing to bet that you are the kind of man – no, BOY – who can’t handle a damn thing when things get tough. If you REALLY cared for her, and were REALLY a man, you’d be concerned about her emotional well being – in the long run. When those divorce papers hit her, because she’s been following you around the country, someone needs to hold her up. And I will be willing to bet it won’t be you. You’ve never finished a damn thing in your life, have you?”

Lexi paced some more, glancing out over the bay. “You know, I never liked this city. Too many people with a snobby attitude and little regard for reality. And now I have you two to add to the list.” Lexi stopped, staring them both in the eye. “But when the two of you complicity decide that it’s just fine to put me in danger by being part of a PI stalking, who just happens to get paid off by a Black Ops “Security Professional”, I’m not standing for it any longer. You’ve crossed a line that I cannot accept. How do I know what’s next? What happens when there isn’t enough money to pay someone off? Then what do you do, Steve? Or has that already happened, but you just couldn’t share that intimacy in bed? Apparently, you two have no regard for your own welfare. I’ve worked too hard at maintaining my character and safety. I am just not going to let you and your thoughtless escapades damage me.”

Steve and Kate sat silently in their bench. “Steve, you’ve given no thought to Bill, her HUSBAND, who has taken care of her for many more years than you can imagine. He supported and provided for her while she got her doctorate, took care of her and her migraines, and was a rock – a MAN – for her when her father died. I’m guessing that you give no consideration at all to anyone but yourself and to who might be the closest person you can impress. Have you ever considered what havoc you’ve wreaked on the people you’ve toyed with and left behind?”

“And you Kate. This is it. I am done. You can put yourself in danger, giggle and do all the Kama Sutra positions you want. You know you didn’t spend more than 2 minutes of concentrated attention to me today? You were texting, or giggling or off somewhere else thinking about your sex life. Now you can tell it to someone else. I’m leaving. When you decide to act in a way that positively supports you as a person, instead of a sex toy, I’ll be back in your life. Until then, don’t bother calling.”

And with that, Lexi picked up her purse from the ground and left, heading toward the walkway that led to Golden Gate park. After a brisk walk, she reached down to retrieve her cell phone.

“Andrew? Can you come and get me?”

“Where are you?”

“Golden Gate Park.”

“Are you done with your girlfriend afternoon?”

“You could say that.”

“Where do you want to go next?”

“Anywhere but here.”