

The Lexicon

Control Issues, In & Out of Control

Goddamn you, Lexi, Kate swore to herself. Goddamn you for being honest and for reading my thoughts so well.

When Steve had explained about Scott and Reg leaving for their financial arrangement, Kate began to feel a disturbing and somewhat nauseating sense that Steve felt that he could buy his way out of anything, or for that matter, buy his way into anything. She didn't want him to act out and do something foolish like Bill had done in Chicago, but he could confront a problem with something other than a checkbook. She tried to determine if his expressions of love were defined as either sex or paying for something. Had they really come this far so quickly from their not-quite-so innocent kisses in her office?

And Lexi just slam-dunked the feeling into Kate's heart with eloquence and criticism only a really good friend could make. She couldn't just shake off the feeling after Lexi's articulate and angry and maybe even appalled and disappointed condemnation

"I obviously have behaved like an inconsiderate chicken-shit.." She remembered what Steve had said after their first night together and the broken toe and the fainting. He must have a modicum of personal responsibility, she thought, but damn Lexi for cultivating and fertilizing the seeds of doubt.

And I could say the same thing about myself, Kate cursed herself, I have behaved like an inconsiderate sex-obsessed giggling teenage chicken-shit. I not only screwed Steve, but my husband who deserves at least the truth, if not fidelity, and one of my best friends who deserves more than a cursory nod about her professional and personal life, who certainly deserves more than involvement in this melodrama.

Kate knew that Lexi's invective mandated some kind of conversation and although a park bench wouldn't have been the ideal place for talk, she feared choosing somewhere else because of the kind of distractions that had started this chaos. Earlier in the day, Steve told her she was amazing because she asked the right questions; she only hoped that she could invoke a tiny bit of her skill in posing the questions now. She looked into his hazel eyes.

"Is she right?"

He stared back with flashes of anger, fear, arrogance and insecurity. "She was harsh, and I can't speak for you and how you feel about what she said, but a lot of it was right, humiliating, but right."

Kate hadn't expected that from him. She expected rage, denial, insult, almost anything other than agreement. Why was no one in this script following prescribed dialogue? Why was no one playing the character that she cast them as? This seemingly random selection of personalities confused her, and made her linear logic useless. But, she thought, blinking her eyes shut for a moment, you know how to ask the right question.

"Why humiliating?"

Steve hesitated before answering. "Nothing like being smacked with the truth by a person you've known less than 24 hours. I do use money to avoid doing things myself. It's just always been easier. That's no excuse, but it's the truth."

Kate wanted to ask him if he had looked at his wealth as a way to buy her as Lexi had suggested, but she wasn't sure she could answer the corresponding question, had she had looked at his wealth as a postmenopausal windfall?

"And I don't always finish things. Call it a commitment issue or attention deficit disorder or just casual disregard because most of the time someone picks up the pieces for me."

That certainly sounded as if Steve had discussed this with a professional at some point, Kate thought, which could be expected in his economic setting and in the wake of his parents divorce.

"And if I've hurt you or misled you," he gulped, "I'm... I'm... sorry."

Kate wanted to shake him by the shoulders, and not quite scream 'where did you think this was going between us?', but again, she wasn't sure she could answer that question if he rebounded it back to her.

Dammit Lexi, Kate swore, he's trying to be honest, and I can't give up my control issues enough to reciprocate. You would push me for an answer, but I don't think Steve will. He doesn't have the history with me that you do, and he's, she ached to admit it, he's young.

In her classic way of avoiding issues and emotions (Lexi would never let her get away with that), she shifted into advisor mode.

"Do you want to finish your degree at MIT?"

"Sure," he said, "and I have been working on my thesis. I didn't lie to you about that."

"Do you want to finish our research and finish this model, paper, project?"

“Yes,” he said emphatically. “It’s a great project, and it’s important work...and it’s important to both of us.”

Kate could understand why a groundbreaking new theory would be important to her and to her career, but she didn’t know why Steve would give a damn about the results.

“Why is it important to you?”

He took a long deep breath. “You and your friend have been harder on me today than any shrink ever was. It’s important because I can put my name on something that matters. My name, not my father’s.”

Another unexpected turn. Kate’s mind ticked through choices and alternatives and courses of action.

“I need to make a couple phone calls,” she said, but going back to advisor mode, she added, “If you think I’ve been tough on you thus far, get ready for a grueling torture.”

He looked at her with skepticism. How could this get much worse than the gut-wrenching condemnation and true confessions? I must really care for this woman if I’m not just going to walk away.

“Make a list of things that you need to tell me,” she said, “and a list of questions you need to ask me. We can have ice cream while we go through your lists.”

She stood up and walked to another bench before dialing the phone.

“Bill,” she said when he abruptly answered the phone with a growl of impatience.

“Kate,” he said almost apologetically, “I was expecting another call.”

“Reg isn’t going to be calling,” she said without expression. “You didn’t have to sneak around like a stalker – it was Steve you punched in Chicago -- or send your detective friend after me. You could have just asked me the questions you wanted answered.”

“You wouldn’t even answer your goddamn phone, but you’re telling me you would’ve given me a straight answer.”

“I would have. Ask me now.” Kate thought she knew what the question would be, and she thought she owed to him to be honest.

In spite of this righteous anger, Bill still remembered how much he loved her and how hard he had been willing to fight to hang on to her. But he did want an answer to many questions, even though he feared in some ways what her answers might be.

"Are you coming home to me?" he finally asked, after considering all the options.

Of course, that wasn't the question she expected. She was all ready to answer, "I'm fucking Steve every chance I get, and I'm loving it." But was she coming home to him?

She looked across the park, never imagining this was a conversation she would have on a cell phone. It felt like getting fired in a voicemail message.

"I don't think so," she said at last. "I'm coming back to Florida, because I have a job and I have an amazing project that I need to finish up. And Steve is still in school, and needs to finish his degree and help me finish my project." She took a deep breath, anticipating another life-changing moment.

"But I don't think it would be fair to either of us to pretend that the past two weeks never happened or that I'll give up what Steve and I have right now. I have no idea where this is going, but I'm willing to ride it out."

Bill didn't know how to respond. He expected at least some vehemence from her, not rational--especially in the irrational situation--logic. She continued, before he could even mutter anything in reply.

"You are a wonderful man, and I know I have been very lucky to have you in my life, but something has changed. I still care about you, love you, but Steve fills, maybe even creates, needs that feel like top priorities right now," she said, trying to invoke both honesty and humanity.

Bill reeled a little, even though this was pretty much what he was expecting. "Do you want the house?"

She winced as she remembered all the time and energy that they had put into renovating and redecorating, the sweat equity and the devotion that they had invested in building not only a home, but a life together. "It's yours," she conceded. "I'll be in touch when I get back."

She hung up and dialed Jack Staunton's office number, hoping that he'd still be in.

"Kate, how's it going on your project?"

“Great,” she said, “but I think this is going to take more time than I thought.” She was getting weary of these life-changing moments, but she had things that she had to accomplish. “Can I take a sabbatical for the rest of the summer term?”

“Well,” Jack said, obviously not willing to indulge her whim on this. But, if she had learned nothing else over the last week or so, it was the power of name-dropping.

“I talked to Deirdre Rossi while I was in Chicago,” she said with casual ease, tinged with an edge of extortion. “She had a lot to say about you.”

Jack had the feeling that he’d just been yanked by the short hairs. “I guess as long as you’re working on your project, taking a couple months wouldn’t be so bad. Any idea where you’re going?” He half expected her to say she’d already lined up a visiting professorship with an Ivy League school; her answer almost confirmed his suspicion.

“I’m thinking about Cambridge.”

She went back to join Steve on his bench, where he was busily scrawling his assigned lists.

“Everything okay?”

“I think I just separated from my husband and gave up my house.”

“You can move in with me,” Steve said. “I do have a condo on the beach. We can work on the model, you can go through a separation or divorce, I can finish my thesis for MIT, we can get through this together.”

“I also am going on sabbatical to finish the model,” Kate said thoughtfully. “How would you feel about a semester in Cambridge to finish and defend your thesis?”

“How would you feel about a townhouse near Kendall Square? It was a gift from my mother when it looked like I might do something legitimate at MIT,” he said, suddenly very aware that he could be seen as using money to influence her decision. “No strings attached.”

Oh, there will be plenty of strings, she thought. We just haven’t started to unravel yet.

Her last call was a text message to Lexi, because she didn’t think either of them could handle a one-on-one conversation just yet.

U R right. I am sorry. IOU big time.

To: DrKate597@aol.com
From: Jord892@macfound.org
Subject: FWD: Thanks for the Update
Date: 09/10/2008 1:07pm

Kate – FYI

Jordan

To: Jord892@macfound.org
From: LexiJo@CameronDesignsInc.com
Subject: Thanks for the Update
Date: 09/07/2008 11:14 am

Jordan – Thanks so much for the update about Kate. I was wondering how she's been these last 3 months. I didn't realize she went to Boston with Steve, but c'est la vie? The last I saw of them was in San Fran and it wasn't pretty. I can't shake the feeling that he just isn't good for her and I can't watch her damage herself anymore. Tough Love, ya know? I hope you are doing well and it sounds like you really like your job and all the travels you do. I don't know how you do it!

Happy Labor Day!

Lexi Jo Cameron
Vice President, Cameron Designs, Inc.
We bring your inner landscape to life!

Kate read the brief email, leaning back in her chair. She glanced out over the busy city she was becoming more familiar with every day, yet felt the loss of an anchor in her life.

She didn't hear Steve come up behind her, juggling his coat and backpack. "I'm getting ready to leave, babe. What's your schedule like today?"

"Um, I'm working at home." She paused a moment, "Lexi got married."

“Nice. Why don’t you go get her something nice at Copley Place? Maybe some Waterford crystal? You can put it on our account. Gotta go.” Steve kissed her on the head and disappeared through the front door.

Kate snickered. *Waterford Crystal? Copley Place? Lexi? I don’t think so. Maybe some antique folk art from Royka’s on Newbury Street, but even that might be a stretch.*

Dakota crawled under Lexi’s desk, hogging the hot air blowing from the space heater in her office. It was another cold and dreary Seattle day, a fall day that wasn’t much different than winter, spring or summer in the past year. Fleece and a heater seemed to be her closest business companions.

Andrew was off to see another new client on Mercer Island, a few blocks from the Gates residence. Word got around quickly in a competitive, wealthy neighborhood, of the hottest decorator, pool guy or landscape designer. It didn’t really matter to Andrew. His laid back, but gracious attitude put people at ease, no matter what their demographic. The ease Lexi found when she first met him was how most people felt about Andrew. A friend for life.

Friends. Lexi seemed to be missing one of those these days. The pain had eased a bit over the last few months, but there was still a hole that a 20-year friendship used to fill. Lexi had received Kate’s text message that sunny afternoon in San Francisco, but had not responded. Kate’s emails were deleted before reading, and the greeting card shredded while still in its envelope. Lexi was mad, and hurt, and ready to cut Kate out of her life. How could Kate and Steve do that to Lexi? Put her – and others – in danger? In an affair that was ten days old, she and Steve had managed to shred a relationship between Kate and Bill, Bill and Reg, and Kate and Lexi. What had they done in the ensuing months? Lexi didn’t want to know. It would just hurt even more.

But the pain of losing a friend was replaced by an unbelievable love story between Lexi and Andrew. After returning from San Francisco, Andrew had opened up his home, and his business financials, to Lexi to take over. She organized his personal and business finances, setting up interest bearing checking accounts, and incorporating the business to protect their personal assets. A new website, marketing materials and contact list brought them further out into the community, allowing Andrew to spend more time with designing, his true vocation.

After a month of living and working together, without any major traumas or setbacks, Lexi awoke to find Andrew and Dakota looking at her as she opened her eyes, adjusting to the daylight. “How about we get married today?” Dakota barked, sensing a playful moment between the two of them.

“Yeah. I think I’d like that.”

Lexi needed none of the fanfare of her first white dress wedding. A simple courthouse ceremony and a gold band, fashioned by an artisan friend that Andrew had arranged two weeks beforehand. He thought of everything, as he did in his work, in a simple, yet elegant manner. Lexi was still amazed at how blessed she felt to be loving a man, and loving the work she did.

They sent announcements to friends and relatives, receiving calls with good wishes. Fiji would be the location for their honeymoon, scheduled for late December when outdoor work became near impossible due to cold weather and incessant social events. In the meantime, Lexi got to scream her excitement with a few friends, but not the one who would appreciate it the most. That person was on the other side of the country, ruining her life for all Lexi knew.

She tried not to disturb Dakota as she jumped navigated to reach the house phone. Her voice sounded a bit rushed as she answered on the 4th ring.

“Lexi, it’s Renee.”

Lexi had reconnected with her oldest friend, Renee in recent weeks. Renee had worked her entire career for one of those secret, 3-letter, government agencies. Lexi had a good idea of what Renee did, moving from country to country every 2 years, always about 300 kilometers from a war torn area on the globe. Not in the middle of the action, but close enough to keep tabs on it. Renee recently moved back to the DC area, making it easier for she and Lexi to manage talking over a 3 hour time difference instead of the International Time Line.

“Renee! Sorry, I tripped over the dog on the way to the phone.” Lexi noticed the time and that Renee was probably still at work, making it an unusually timed phone call.

“I’ve only got a minute, Lexi. I need to give you a heads up about something. I remember you telling me about that boyfriend of a friend of yours, the one you didn’t trust very much?”

Lexi turned somber. “Yes. What’s up?”

“That guy’s dad? I knew I’d heard his name before. Let’s just say he’s not a good guy. Not at all.”

“Is this the part where you tell me I can’t ask you how you got this information?”

“Yes. Most of it’s confidential, but some has been released via FBIS. I Fedex’d you a packet that you should have gotten today. It’s nothing you’d find on the Internet.”

“The line keeps breaking up. Are you in a dead zone or something?”

“I’m calling from a pay phone. Dude - it’s not like I can talk to you from work or my cell.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse.”

“I need to just stay away from him, and her – right?”

“It’s good you have a lot of land between you. Hopefully there is an ocean between you and his father.”

Lexi was lucky to have such loyal friends. She and Renee had gone in and out of each other’s lives since they were 4 years old. They mostly shared gossip, not feelings like Lexi and Kate did, but Lexi knew Renee cared about her.

Lexi knew that the real reason she stayed away from Kate was because of Steve. There wasn’t anything that Kate and Lexi couldn’t forgive, and would in time. Anger and sadness subside over many months. But threats last a lifetime. Lexi felt an imminent threat from Steve and refused to have him in her life. And if Steve and Kate came as a package, then the package would have to be rejected as well.

Lexi opened the front door, seeing the promised FEDEX package on her doorstep. Normally, Dakota would have barked at any delivery truck, but these days preferred the heater to a potential intruder. She took the package into the living room, sinking into the overstuffed couch she’d brought with her from her apartment.

A pile of documents slid out of the pouch, about 20 separate reports & pictures in all. Between the marked out lines of text, she pieced together the picture that was Stuart MacMillan. Iran-Contra. Money. Private jets to Panama. Photos of meetings with South American high ranking military officials. Warehouses. Guns. Lots of men in black, always within less than 10 feet of Stuart.

The pictures and sparse documents confirmed her feeling that something was terribly amiss with the MacMillan family. The family money came with protection, and lots of it.

Lexi pulled out the last picture in the packet.

A couple on a park bench. Golden Gate Bridge in the background. And a 6' tall woman standing in a very animated fashion over the two of them.

Sometimes the best memories come from times that seemed wonderful. Sometimes the best memories come from times that didn't quite work out as you thought they would. Sometimes the best memories come from quite unexpected circumstances, in spite of everything that should make them bad memories. Or at least memories that you try to avoid.

Your heart needs to overrule your brain every once in a while. Not too often. Not all the time. Just often enough to prove that you do have feelings, that your life isn't without emotion. You need to enjoy those times, even if they are just moments. You need to know that not everything in your life, no matter how trivial it may seem, plays by a set of rules that you may or may not have established.

Lexi read the two paragraphs she'd written what seemed to be ages ago when she was thinking about Kate's "little fling." Now she didn't know if she had been on the right track at all; Kate had let her heart (or whatever) overrule her brain, and overrule was a bit of an understatement, and look at the pandemonium that created. She found that her life wasn't without emotion, since she got wrapped up in love and passion, got smacked with fear, and throttled by rage.

But wasn't that the point, in some obscure way? If you're too tied in your box, you'll never know what else is out there. Lexi remembered a woman she knew who took a family vacation with her kids every year to Disney World. It was probably a great vacation, but weren't the kids missing out on going to Washington D.C. or New York or the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone Park? Kate might not have made the best decisions, but she had taken the risk and was now coping with the consequences.

Women-of-a-certain-age, as they are euphemistically called, may especially fear trusting their hearts. They may have played by the rules for far too long. But if they do trust their hearts and keep a lifeline to their brains, they can build great memories that they won't have to regret.

Lexi added a paragraph and prayed that Kate wouldn't regret the choices she had made, even though she had let go of her lifeline.

Kate went into the study of the townhouse, the room that she'd selected to be her study, because she loved the bay window, and the incredible view of the backyard. Her desk and her laptop were on one side of the room, a ream of

paper, some wadded up in frustration or fury, were scattered around the desk, and on the other side of the room was the white board, where she and Steve had worked so long on the mathematical model for her new marketing metric.

They had finally crashed the impasse in July. For weeks, while she went methodically through her notes, she couldn't quite figure out a way to count the number of messages that were distributed through all of the new technologies. Then one evening, when she and Steve were practically cat scratching each other because they couldn't get an answer, inspiration finally hit.

"It's not a number," she said, staring at the massive equations that Steve had posted on the white board. "It's the truth/false or a positive/negative field, it's binary."

"Yeah," Steve said, eagerly scrawling on the white board and gesturing to her computer. "We can easily run the integration if we make a bunch of these columns into binary code."

By no means was that the first time since they had left San Francisco that they had made love, but it was the first time that the passion of sex was infused with the passion of intellect. Since that evening, Kate had worked conscientiously on the narrative parts of her paper, while Steve worked on his thesis. In the past two weeks, they had collaborated to develop the mathematical formulas and explanation. Kate knew that they were very near completion, but she had still called Jack Staunton to ask for an extension of her sabbatical through the fall semester. She wasn't ready to go back to Florida yet.

Steve had successfully defended his thesis and would be awarded his Master's degree at December commencement at MIT, he was taking coursework toward his MBA certain that all his credits would transfer, and with the right paperwork, he could earn his MBA from the university in Florida at the same time. Their paper would be published by the time, and Kate thought they could probably present it at a conference. Not bad for a young man, who had been accused of and had admitted to not being very good at finishing things.

Kate wanted to share this accomplishment with Lexi, but their only communication these days seemed to run circuitously through a globetrotting Jordan. She missed their phone calls and their e-mails, most of all the friendship and trust that they had spent so much time developing, and she had spent 10 days destroying. Kate didn't necessarily regret what she had done, but she did regret her inability to see what the consequences might have been.

Kate's favorite stay at home work outfit was an oversized T-shirt over her underwear. It was comfortable, and she knew Steve thought it was adorable when he came home to find her puzzling out a solution, while pacing barefoot around the study, wearing her MIT T-shirt. Plus, the whole sabbatical had been

great for her physical health and appearance. She had lost some weight, because although she ate breakfast with Steve before he went off to class, she usually wound up forgetting about lunch entirely, and dinner for the two of them was more likely to be something quickly whipped up in the kitchen, rather than an extensive restaurant meal. Boston and Cambridge were particularly suited for walking, rather than hailing cabs, so he got a lot more exercise than she'd ever gotten in Florida, where having a car to get anywhere was practically mandatory. Freed of teaching responsibilities and scheduled office hours, as well as minor administrative tasks, she was much less wound up, and less in need of nonstop caffeine infusions.

But the occasional coffee in a neighborhood coffee shop or an outdoor café in Harvard Square was a great distraction. She decided to get dressed, go for a walk and read the morning paper over a cappuccino. She smiled as she dressed, remembering the shopping trip with Steve to buy new jeans. He had conceded to going with her to a store she felt she could afford, and Kate thought he was surprised that the saleswoman was so helpful. When the first pair of jeans that she picked out was too big, the saleswoman not only brought her smaller size, but a different style that Kate probably would not have considered age-appropriate, until she tried them on with the V-neck crop top the saleswoman had also picked out.

When she emerged from the dressing room, she didn't even have to look in the full-length mirror. The saleswoman praised her look, and Steve's jaw literally dropped.

"Hey, are you the same woman I've been living with? Babe, you are hot."

Once dressed for the morning's activities, Kate pulled her Harvard baseball cap on backwards, because Steve said it gave her 'street-cred,' and headed downstairs and out of the townhouse to take the short walk to Spill the Beans, one of her favorite local coffee shops. Before she sat down at the table on the sidewalk, she dropped change into a machine and picked up the morning paper.

A black-and-white photo on the front page caught her attention as she ordered a mocha cappuccino; it was Stuart MacMillan being escorted out of an office in handcuffs.

Kate pulled out more quarters, buying every newspaper in sight to read more about Stuart. They portrayed Steve's dad as a globe-trotting, behind the scenes, political aficionado, who liked to play on the darker side of the fence. Despite his US affiliations, he had apparently crossed the line with someone in the US Senate, and the Homeland Security Department was now going to make him an example of what not to do with money and suspicious world leaders.

Engrossed in her reading, she barely heard her cell phone ringing. It was Steve, and she wondered if he knew yet.

“It’s me. Do you have any money? I’m on campus, trying to get some breakfast and none of my credit cards work. I tried four of them.”

Alarm bells went off in Kate’s mind. “Have you seen the papers yet, Steve?”

“No. I’m kind of concerned about get something to eat. I’m light-headed.”

“Borrow some cash for a vending machine and get home quick. I’ll meet you there.”

Kate grabbed her papers and the remainder of her cappuccino. She walked home briskly, her mind turning at 100 miles an hour. Her heart pounded as she turned the corner, seeing 4 black sedans with flashing lights outside their townhouse. She ran toward the doorstep, but was stopped by a tall man, in a cheap suit, but authoritative presence.

“I’m sorry ma’am. You can’t go in there.”

“But, it’s my home... I live there.”

“Are you Ms. Shaw?”

“Dr. Shaw,” she corrected him. “Yes....”

“Come with me.”

The tall, obvious G-Man led her across the street, preventing her from getting near the steps leading to her and Steve’s love shack. Through the windows, she saw more men in suits, rifling through the living room, overturning pillows, unwiring the home entertainment center, and in general taking everything apart.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO MY HOME??”

“We have a search warrant, ma’am. Homeland Security.”

With her mouth still open from shock, she saw Steve round the corner, the glare of red lights and black sedans hitting him like a brick wall. As he approached the townhouse, another agent spoke to him, and led Steve to a black sedan, driving off down the narrow street before Kate could speak with him.

“WHERE ARE YOU TAKING HIM?”

“He’s being taken into custody ma’am.”

“WHERE?”

The agent looked silently at the townhouse. Kate realized he would not be answering her, and followed his line of sight. Four agents carried both their computers, boxes of notes, and anything else that was electronic or paper. Kate’s heart sank, knowing that all her research – and Steve’s – was housed in those boxes they were carrying.

Her phone rang, and noting Stacey, Steve’s sister on the caller ID, her rational thought overcame her panic.

“Am I allowed to answer my phone, sir?”

“Yes. Just don’t leave the area.”

“Stacey....”

“WHERE IS STEVE? HE’S NOT ANSWERING HIS PHONE!!!”

“Stacey, calm down. I know. Are you okay? What’s happening?”

“They ransacked all our homes, even in Boca. They froze our entire families’ bank accounts, and took mom in for questioning, but left me here. I’M SUPPOSED TO GO SHOPPING AT SAKS TODAY!!! AND I HAVE NO CREDIT CARDS!!!”

“Stacey. It’ll be okay. Just stay calm.”

“Kate. We have no money. And they took all our stuff. What are we going to do????”

“We’ll figure it out. I will talk to you later. I have to find Steve.”

Kate was beginning to fill in the blanks. Stuart MacMillan was being labeled as a terrorist, and it would take many years, and lawsuits, to resolve. In the meantime, anyone connected with Stuart, including his family, was going to be taken on a wild ride that would require a cadre of lawyers, accountants, and therapists to resolve.

Kate sat down on the steps of a nearby brownstone. Her work was gone. Her belongings had been ransacked. Steve was in some undisclosed location. Steve’s money was frozen, so there might be no more home, travel or tuition payments for a while.

She had read about those surreal moments, when time stands still, and a turning point enters your life. What used to be important falls away, and new clarity sets in.

Kate knew exactly what she had to do.

Jordan picked up a copy of the *Chicago Tribune* in the international terminal at O'Hare as she went to catch a plane to Nigeria. She folded it under her arm, went no into the Admirals Club, gratefully accepted a cup of coffee, and settled in to wait for her flight to be called. She took a sip of coffee and unfolded the paper, so she at least could look at the front page. There was the usual headline screaming about economic woes and a photo of yet another white collar criminal been taken into custody. She glanced at the caption, secretly hoping he was some executive from Citibank, the company that had pink slipped her before she joined the MacArthur Foundation.

Stuart MacMillan, she practically said out loud. He was the owner of Copernica, the yacht she filmed on. He was Steve's dad. Kate's Steve.

Then a second face in the photo caught her attention. One of the serious looking men accompanying MacMillan was her first class cabin mystery man Mike.

"Oh shit," she thought, "I've got to call Kate."

Lexi was up early, as usual, before the sun had even completely risen. She loved the quiet, often misty mornings, she loved tiptoeing out of the bedroom, looking at Andrew with great affection, she loved going outside for a few moments with Dakota to retrieve the morning paper. She loved sitting at the island in the kitchen drinking for morning tea. She loved her life and what she had become.

And then she looked at the front page. She recognized one of the men in the black-and-white picture. Mike was doing something official, and even though he looked very sober and professional, she remembered what he had been like in Hawaii in what seemed like another lifetime. But her moments of blissful nostalgia were quickly dispelled when she read the short paragraph underneath the photo. Mike's name wasn't mentioned, as was always the case with law-enforcement, but Stuart MacMillan's was.

The name called up a maelstrom of emotions. Anger, rage, fear, betrayal, hatred, resentment, melancholy, loyalty. Stuart MacMillan's son had destroyed one of her closest friendships and had changed one of her oldest friends lives, but Steve made Kate happy, even if it was in a teenage imbecilic way. "Oh shit," she thought. "I should call Kate."

Steve sat silently in the back seat of the sedan, watching the landmarks of Boston slide by. He knew this had something to do with his father. He had always known that his father had taken the family money and looking for a shortcut to success had invested some of it very well and some of it very stupidly with people who weren't in the blue chip crowd. He didn't know details nor would his father have ever told him specifics, but right now he wished he did know every unsavory detail so he could spill his guts, help them -- whoever they were -- nail his father, and put all of this -- whatever this was -- behind him.

He was more frightened than he'd ever been -- scared of what was happening to him, scared of what was happening to Kate and their work, scared of what this would do to their relationship. In their Golden Gate Park conversation months ago, he had mentioned that he had some doubts about his father's financial dealings, but he had never imagined that anything like this could happen. Unleashed from a closet, the skeleton was truly a terror.

Ilene handed Bill the newspaper when he came in to the office. She pointed to the front page photo waiting for him he read the cut line. He recognized the name and looked up in disbelief. The divorce from Kate had gone without recrimination or accusation: she had given him the house, split their other assets perfectly fairly, and waived any alimony. She had picked up her clothes and her belongings -- some books, all the rock albums and CDs, a couple videos and DVDs -- all of it done with polite cordiality. The dissolution had seemed so cold, as if they weren't shelving fifteen years of history; he was angry about it, but also heartbroken. He hadn't really spoken to her since July, but he still didn't feel totally disconnected. And now, despite her cheating on him with this MacMillan bastard's goddamn son, he felt compassion that he didn't want to confess and that he didn't know how to act on.

Scott was sitting in the small waiting room at the Boca Raton Airport when three black sedans swooped down Airport Road and skidded into the parking lot. He watched as what he knew to be federal agents got out of their vehicles and swarmed all over the Gulfstream. He half expected them to hand him some sort of warrant. Scott had flown Stuart MacMillan many places he shouldn't have been, and he knew that his Special Ops background was needed for more than just keeping Stacey out of trouble or for protecting Steve from himself. His verdict was that MacMillan was probably getting what he deserved, but that his family was going to suffer collateral damage, and that wasn't fair. He especially felt for Steve, who was apparently accomplishing good things after hooking up with that professor and moving to Boston; Steve had already asked if Scott would fly them to Paris at Christmas to celebrate his graduation. Scott wondered about what might be going on with Steve and who he could talk with to find out.

Less than a week later, Steve was home from detention at Devens Reserve Forces Training Area, a military installation approximately 40 miles west of Boston and he and Kate were picking through the debris left in the townhouse and their returned property. Kate was amazed at how quickly things could be resolved by enough people calling the right people; she didn't quite know the full extent of the mobilization by her friends and colleagues, but she did know that they hit the right buttons to free Steve. Even her brother's ex-wife Donna who had worked her way up the GS civilian personnel pay scale twisted a few arms at the Pentagon, calling in favors left over from her efforts after the bombing on 9/11. (She and Kate had bonded for life in the fifth row of a Rick Springfield concert not quite two and a half decades ago, paradoxically wailing along with his "Don't Talk to Strangers" entreaty.)

She knew Jordan had talked to contacts in the State Department. She knew Bill had talked to one of his policyholders who was a major campaign contributor to both the Republican and Democratic parties. She assumed someone from the university in Florida had contacted a couple high-powered attorneys in civil rights cases and intellectual property law who threatened lawsuits. She thought Scott had talked to some of his contacts in the military. She knew Lexi had talked to Mike, her Hawaiian fling and one of the guys who was in the photo with Steve's father.

Steve, although he never totally abandoned his fear, had spent the first day or two at Devens explaining the jungle of equations on the laptop they had seized. On the third day, experts were called in from USC where Homeland Security housed its National Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE). He discussed the model he and Kate had developed for marketing metrics, comparing notes with CREATE's modeling to, as they phrased it, "assess the risk of terrorism, and gauge its economic consequences." His interrogation turned into a graduate seminar without the requisite beer and pizza. In a week marked by phone calls to and from nearly every contact she'd had since her undergraduate years, none was more of a relief than the page from Steve's Blackberry.

"Hey babe," he said as if this was just a normal afternoon check-in, "can you remember why we decided to go with binary coding in the model?"

She lost her breath, and stammered, "St..St..Steve? Are you alright?"

"I'm okay," he said, "but I need you...to explain to Agent Cody why we chose binary coding."

Hey.

Hey yourself. How are you?

Good. We're getting back to normal...

As if the two of you together is ever normal.

She and Lexi had gotten by some of their issues during what Kate had come to call Week of Homeland Security Hell, but Lexi still didn't completely understand her attachment to Steve, especially now that his assets had been substantially, although not totally reduced.

Have I said thank you for all your support enough times yet?

You're getting close. How's the boy-toy doing?

Steve is back in class and catching up on his work. He's still on track to graduate in December.

Please don't ask what happens after that, Kate silently pleaded, because I just don't know yet.

And your epic theory project?

We're in final draft. What about your literary collection?

Lexi hadn't abandoned her publishing aspirations, but she'd been sidetracked by partnership with Andrew and hadn't made much forward progress.

Maybe it's time we both figure out where we want to go and find the best way to get there.

Lexi laughed, promising Kate she would call and check in next week to see what had manifested in her now topsy turvy life. They seemed to have swapped lives over the past few months. Lexi, the single woman who wanted cash and a boyfriend, got exactly what she wanted, along with a little stability thrown in, something that was still foreign to her after years of lovers, travels and job changes. Kate, the solid one with a stable job and husband, had traded in her story for a cougar life filled with love, lust, and a bit of international terrorism. But of the utmost importance was that they were both happy, and still together, after twenty years and a few ego battles. Husbands and lovers may come and go, but sisters are here to stay, even if they are of the non-blood relative kind of sibling.

Lexi closed her cell phone, and looked up into an unusually clear sky. That's how they started their conversations, twenty years ago, sitting on a curb under a

starlit sky, wondering what would happen next. Two decades later, they were still guessing, still star struck, and still together.

THE END