

## Chapter Thirteen

### The Courtship

There's a psychological condition called the Stockholm Syndrome wherein captives actually develop positive feelings, and even love, for their captors and tormentors. That's all I can really think of to say in my defense for what happened next between Keri and me.

Danielle and Bradley moved out of my house in the middle of October. For the eight weeks we lived together, the weather was temperate, we spent a lot of time outdoors, and had silly fun. We'd play games we made up. We'd play music loud and disco dance on the portal. We'd barbecue. Daniele and I would drink some wine. We'd sit around the outdoor fireplace and make s'mores for dessert. We'd even let Bradley stay up an extra hour or so before he and his mother would go to bed.

After they left, my house was thunderously quiet. Even Sparky seemed to tiptoe around me. I went to Colorado for Thanksgiving. I left Sparky with my dog sitter and went to Aspen to go skiing. Thanksgiving Day is opening day for a number of Colorado ski areas. There are people who will proudly tell you, "I've skied every opening day and every closing day at such and such ski area for fifty years!" They actually had quite a bit of snow and the skiing, for early in the season, was pretty good.

On the long drive home, I made up my mind that I would make one last pass at having a real relationship with Keri. If it didn't work out this time, then I would quit trying for good. I might even have to sell the stores and move. I wanted resolution. Having her around all the time simply re-enforced the fact that whether I wanted to admit or not, I was totally in love with her. The fact that I was in love with her had negatively affected every other serious relationship I'd tried to have with a woman from Maria to Danielle. I hadn't exactly violated the Stein Honesty Principle, because no one had asked me directly what was going on with me emotionally. On the other hand, it would have been the right thing to do to tell these women that I was in love with someone else who didn't want me.

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On December first, I was driving to Albuquerque as heavy sleet was falling. It wasn't sticking to the highway, but it did stick to the sonar panel on the front bumper of my car which made it beep incessantly until I stopped and brushed it off. Keri and I had made lunch plans at her favorite restaurant, Benjamin's. Benjamin was the name of the owner's young son. I think Keri liked it because a "Benjamin" is slang for a hundred dollar bill.

The sleet I'd encountered on the highway had turned into a steady rain out of a steel grey sky by the time I got to town. I ran from my car across the parking lot and bolted through the front door of the restaurant. I saw Keri waiting by the hostess stand. "Hey," I said softly and kissed her on the cheek. "Hey," she said in return, "you're really wet!" "Yeah, I know," I said wearily, feeling like this was not going to turn out well from the get go.

The hostess led us to our table and we sat down next to each other in a corner booth. As always, Keri looked spectacular. She had on a nice pair of black wool slacks, a cream colored silk blouse with the French cuffs turned on the outside of a pale blue cashmere sweater. Hair and nails were also done perfectly. "You look very nice," I said honestly, "got a hot date later?" "Bill!" she said as she poked me in the ribs with her elbow, "I told you, I don't have time to date. I work toooo much." "Whatever," I said and picked up the menu. The hostess had taken our drink orders and the waiter came by and set them down. He came back after a few more minutes and looked at us with anticipation. "Ready?" he said in a waiter voice. I motioned to Keri, "What would you like?" She looked one more time at the menu, wrinkled her nose and said, "I'll start with the fried calamari. Then, I'll have the steak sandwich, medium rare. Can I get extra black truffle butter on the side and a double order of French fries?" "Very good," the waiter said in a deep, respectful tone, "And you, sir?" "I'll have a few of her calamari to start. Then, I'd like the chicken special," I said, handing him both menus. "Also, very good choices," he affirmed.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that my initial concern that getting together with Keri would go badly turned out not to be the case. Keri was clear-eyed and seemed at ease and not in any pain. She laughed and joked a bit. So, after we finished the calamari and were waiting for our main courses, I turned to her and said, "Keri, I'm in love with you. I'd really like to try to do the boyfriend and girlfriend thing again and give it a chance to go right. I was serious this summer when I asked you to marry me." "Hey, Bill. Wow! It's a little hard to understand this because you were living with a woman and her son until about a month ago. Remember?" she said in a skeptical voice. "That's right," I admitted, "but, I told you this summer that I was going to look for someone to marry if it wasn't you. Danielle is a wonderful woman, but she just has to live in her own world. And over the long term, even if she had managed to adapt somewhat to my lifestyle, there is the complicating factor that I'm in love with you." "Well, I'm flattered. I'm also just about ready to try a relationship again. Give me a couple of days," she said in a completely reasonable tone. "Take whatever time you need, sweetie," I said, getting a little familiar given the circumstances and squeezed her hand under the table.

The rain had stopped by the time we left the restaurant. I walked her to her car and put my arms around her waist. She tilted her face toward me and gave me one of those memorable kisses. "I'll call you in a couple of days. Hey, would you remind the guys at the Douglas Avenue store about getting the rug fixed in the back corner?" she said going from possible girlfriend to general manager in a heartbeat. "Yes, I'll do that," I said, "But, before you go, I need another kiss."

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Three days later, Keri called me. "Okay," she said in a semi-demanding voice, "I'm willing to try this on one condition. I want an exclusive relationship. I don't want to be sharing you with ten other women. And no communication with any of them, especially Danielle." "All right," I said as evenly as I could, "exclusivity is what I want, too. I haven't spoken or texted Danielle since four days after she moved out of my house. And that was only to find out if she'd gotten settled back in her house okay. The other women I text are just pals." We made plans to get together at her house over the weekend.

At first, we were walking on eggshells around one another. We kissed when I first arrived. I put my overnight bag in her bedroom. We figured out what we wanted for dinner and used an on-line delivery service to have it delivered to the house, so I wouldn't have to run out and get it. We ordered ribs and all the fixings from a great little chop house we both liked. It all arrived hot and ready to be eaten. I had a glass of red wine. Keri had a Captain Morgan and coke. We found a sappy rom-com movie and ate dinner on the couch as we watched. About ten thirty, we both got up and headed for the bedroom. I brushed my teeth, washed my face, put on my bed shorts and tee shirt in the spare bathroom, and then climbed into bed. Keri did whatever ever it was she did in her bathroom with the door shut. There was only one dim light on in the bedroom. Keri emerged from her bathroom wearing a pair of lacy pink panties and nothing on top. "I'm cold," she said, folding herself into my form. "I've really missed you, Keri," I said in a warm and loving tone as I held her close. "Fuck me, Bill" she responded and stuck her tongue in my ear.

On Saturday, I got up about eight and made myself a cup of coffee. Keri was dead to the world. I told her when we were making plans for the weekend that I had several things I had to do on Saturday to get the big store ready for Christmas. I would probably be busy until dinner time. I suggested that maybe Dylan would like to join us for dinner. "Yeah, maybe so. I'll ask him," she said sounding pleased that I had thought to include him in our plans. Dylan told his mother that he would like to join us for dinner, but that he had to work until six-thirty. Also, he wanted to bring a woman he had befriended who managed one of my other stores in Albuquerque. "We probably can't make it for dinner until seven-thirty," he told me on the phone when I was trying to set things up for the evening. "I don't think that's a problem," I said and hung up. I made reservations for four at seven-thirty at a fondue place that Keri said she liked and that I had never tried.

I had hired Josephine to manage one of my stores, but I didn't know her very well. Her resume was very strong. She was Chinese-American and had been an assistant manager at one of her uncle's smoke shops for two years. She had a business degree from State. She told me she didn't like the clientele at the smoke shop. She also was allergic to tobacco smoke. She was a couple of years older than Dylan, but they seemed to enjoy each other's company in a relaxed, no sexual tension way. She wasn't exactly pretty, but she had pale skin and long black hair that framed her smile in a pleasing way. She was very smart and had a rapier wit. Over dinner, she, Dylan, and I began to make outrageous puns. Keri was lost. She'd roll her eyes, but she couldn't keep up. Against his mother's wishes, Dylan was getting a little drunk. Hey, he was twenty one and Josephine was driving. When Josephine and I would make a joke about something on the menu, Dylan would laugh uncontrollably and Keri would glower at me. Dylan was having a great time. His mother was not.

On the way home, Keri was deeply in a foul mood. "Dylan isn't supposed to drink," she spat at me when she finally decided to address me. "Well, you're his mother, you could have said something to him. Besides, he's of age, dear. He gets to make his own decisions," I said evenly. "Don't 'dear'"me," she said, still angry. When we got into bed at her house and I put my arm around her, she rolled away from me and said coldly, "I'm very tired. Goodnight."

On Sunday morning, I edged my way over to Keri's side of the bed. I had an erection and was gently rubbing it in the crack of her butt on the outside of her pajama bottoms. "Ick, stop that!!" she shouted as she became aware of what was happening and crawled away, "I don't do morning sex!" After I

showered and dressed, I offered to go to our favorite breakfast place and get take out. "I'm not very hungry," she said in a detached way. "No problem," I said as I kissed her forehead while she was still under the covers, "Sparky and I will just get in our speed wagon and head north." I gathered my dog and my bag and headed to my truck. Biscuit didn't want Sparky and me to go, she jumped in the front seat of my truck, snuggled up beside me, and started to whine. "I know," I said in a sympathetic voice, "but Mommy got her feelings hurt last night and wants us to leave now."

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I let Keri cool down for a couple of days before I called her. "Hey, sweetie, what would you like to do for Christmas?" I asked by way of making plans. She seemed to have gotten over her pique from the other day, "Hey, my love, I'm glad to hear your voice. Um, Christmas I always do something special just with Dylan. You know. Family. Maybe we can get together the Friday or Saturday before?" she offered. "I'm game to get together for both nights," I countered. "Nooo, I can't do two nights," she whined, "I've got too much to do with the stores and getting ready for Dylan and me." "Okay," I said in a resigned way, "Let's do Friday. Can you get here in time for dinner?" "Yes, I can get there in time for dinner at seven-thirty," she said sounding enthusiastic, "and sex. I want to have sex. I'm a sex addict. But, only if you want to, I mean." "Oh, no problem. I want sex, too," I said with sexual sugar plums dancing in my head, "I'll see you Friday."

Friday about four in the afternoon, I called Keri just to confirm our plans. "Seven-thirty still good for you, tonight, baby?" I asked when I got her on the phone. "Oh, Jesus, Bill, what time is it?" she asked in a panicked voice. "It's a little past four," I responded. "Oh, shit!" she sounded even more panicked, "No, I can't do it tonight." "Okay, no problem. How about tomorrow at seven or seven-thirty?" I asked without a hint of possible disappointment in my voice. "Yeah, tomorrow at seven is good," she said, thankful for the life raft I'd thrown her. "Okay. Seven tomorrow it is," I said sounding as nonchalant as I could. "What are you going to do tonight?" she asked. "I don't know, maybe go to the Club for a burger. I don't feel like cooking," I replied honestly.

Later that evening about ten, I was sitting at home watching a movie on cable after having gone to the Club and had dinner. Keri texted me, "Who did you have a date with tonight?" "What are you talking about?" I texted back. "You were pretty quick to have other plans tonight after I told you I couldn't make it because I was working so hard in your damn stores," she shot back. "Uhhh, I ate alone at the Club. Burger. Sweet potato fries. Two beers. Home. Movie on cable," I texted back, "Your accusations scare me." "Your reputation as a womanizer is well known. Bastard. I knew I shouldn't have trusted you," she texted back. "Hmmm. I'm tired of this. I'm blocking you until tomorrow morning. Goodnight," I replied.

I called Keri the next morning about ten. "What?" she said with the sleep still in her voice. "I don't know what gave you the impression that I'm a womanizer. I never cheated on either of my first two wives," I said honestly, "and I don't intend to start a new trend with you. I want an exclusive relationship with you, truly. That's all I want." "I know. That's what I want, too," she said sounding contrite, "I'll see you tonight at seven." "Okay, sweetie. Seven it is," I said lovingly.

Keri and Biscuit got to the house about ten of seven. I was waiting on the front portal as she drove up. She flew out of her car, ran up to me, threw her arms around my neck, and gave me one of those kisses I craved so much. "Mmmm," I purred, "It's really, really nice to see you." "I missed you so much, baby," she said in her little girl voice. It gave me an erection just hearing her words. "Would you like dinner?" I asked, not wanting to sound presumptuous. She got up on her toes and slid her tongue in my ear. "Sex first. Dinner later, baby" she breathed in my ear. "Right!!" I said, picking up her bag, and led her and Biscuit into the house.

A man in his sixties who has more than one orgasm a night can become convinced he's probably never going to die. That night, Keri and I stopped counting how many times we came. "Lick me," she'd say. "Suck me," I requested later. It would be salacious to recount all the particulars, but it was more than even your dirtiest mind could imagine. Except, nothing anal, thank you. That's just Keri, which was fine by me.

In the morning, I awoke with an erection. Par for the course. Keri sensed the instinctual rubbing of my hard-on through her pajama bottoms, turned to face me, stroked me, and then got on top of me. "I thought you didn't like morning sex," I said sounding surprised. "This morning's different," she said while riding me. "Wow!," I thought, "I'm completely in love with this woman!"

We had a very nice day together. We went shopping. I bought her some Christmas presents. Some silly. Some one of a kind. Expensive. I bought her son a high-end single lens reflex digital camera. We laughed. We kissed. We said we loved each other. I was higher than a kite on my love for Keri. When she was getting into her car in front of my house about to leave, I said, "Keri, I really want to marry you. Really. This is what I want." "You're teasing me," she protested. "Not at all. Truly. On the lives of my grandchildren. On their fair heads, I'm not lying to you," I said in all sincerity.

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Tracy had three nephews who lived and worked in Keystone, Colorado. We had visited them frequently when she was alive to ski, hike, fish, smoke pot, and generally enjoy a younger age demographic. I made plans to go skiing with them over New Year's that year. Keri didn't ski because of her back problems, but she could do spa treatments and power shop like a pro. I had booked a very nice suite. Keri surprised me by booking a flight and charging it to my credit card. Back problems would make it impossible for her to drive to Colorado, she told me. "Okay, baby," I said in an exasperated voice, "I'll pick you up in Denver. Just give me your flight info."

The night she arrived, she was tired, so we just cuddled. The second night, she was raring to go. I took a Cialis to be prepared. We had rigorous and loving sex. At about three in the morning, she was still awake. I was exhausted and out. She took my mobile phone into the bathroom and began to rifle through my texts, which I didn't protect with a password. I had nothing to hide. I was a serial dater. I'd meet a nice gal and say, "I think we're going to be better friends than lovers. I would be abusing you to have sex with you knowing that I don't think we have a long term opportunity." The Stein Honesty Principle in action. I kept up with many of these women each day with a nice "loving" thought. We all knew we were mildly

flirting, but with no serious intent. It made everyone feel happy. Keri exploded. At five in the morning, she slapped me in the face and shouted, "You motherfucker!! You've got a girlfriend!! I'm leaving as soon as I can!!" I shook my head and said in a bewildered voice, "What are you talking about?" "You're texting all these women!! Sending them little love messages each day! I knew I was right about you!" she was hysterical. "Keri, these women are not threats to our relationship. They're friends. I've made that clear from the get go," I protested. "What about Maria?" Keri thought she had me. "What about Maria?" I responded. "You asked her if she was still in love with you. When she said she was, you said you had to think about it," Keri said in a challenging voice. "Well, I did have to think about it , Ker. And I chose you," I said in as earnest a voice as I could muster. I managed to get Keri calmed down and promised to quit the daily "feel good" texting to my female friends. However, invasion of privacy is never allowed or justified in any way. She'd crossed the line. But, I was in love with her and chose to ignore it. The Stein Honesty Principle be damned.

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By the next day, things between us had pretty much returned to normal and we got in the car to drive home. Although Keri had purchased a non-refundable round trip air fare, she decided to drive back to Albuquerque with me, which pleased me despite the waste of money.

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I'm not religious, but there are things that happen that make me believe that there's something going on that our little pea-sized human brains cannot comprehend. The car accident that happened directly in front of us on the ride home should have been a metaphor for what was in store for me with Keri. But, I chose to ignore it,too.

Keri and I stopped in a small southern Colorado town to get fast food so that we could keep driving while we ate. We were in the drive-thru waiting to get our food when we heard "BAM--SCREECH!!" Right in front of us a car ran a red light and t-boned another car that had the light. The impact was so severe that the car that ran the light spun around twice and came to rest in the highway pointing the wrong way. The car in the right was stopped in the middle of the intersection. No motion was detected in either car. Keri grabbed my mobile phone off the dash and called 911. "There's been a bad accident in front of the Fat Bob's Burger place on highway 415," she reported. "Thank you, Ma'am. What's your name, please?" the dispatcher asked. "Keri Saubert," Keri responded without a bit of hesitation. Within minutes four police and emergency vehicles were at the scene. "You need to go tell them what happened," Keri said to me. "I was paying for our food. I didn't see anything. You saw the impact. You go chat with them," I responded. "No. I don't like talking to cops," she said with finality, "Let's go."

As we got into metro Albuquerque, Keri said she needed to go to the airport to get her car. "No problem, sweetie," I responded. "I'll follow you to your place once you get your car," I said in a tone that truly betrayed how tired the drive from Colorado had made me. "You're not staying at my place tonight," she said angrily. "What?" I was completely not comprehending that Keri would make me drive another hour to Santa Fe. "I'm exhausted!" I said with some venom. I pulled over into the breakdown lane and said, "GET OUT!" "You motherfucker!" she shouted. "OUT!!" I wasn't having any of it. "I HATE YOU!!" she shouted. Finally, after many more iterations of this, I relented and said, "I'm exhausted. I'll take you to your car and then drive home alone to Santa Fe."

Keri could melt my heart with kind words and flattery. She never quite acknowledged wrong-doing or being at fault, but when she sensed a possible fatal rupture in our relationship, she would do enough to mend it. "You were tired. I was sore and tired," she said the next day by way of a pseudo-apology, "But, thanks for letting me get a good night's sleep alone. I had an amazing time in Colorado. I love you."

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Keri hated the notion of being controlled by anyone, for any reason, about anything. So, she would occasionally do things against her own interest which amazed me. One night, out of the blue, I received an email that said simply "Please sign and return." The attachment was a crude contract that said that if our relationship ended for any reason she would return all jewelry and clothing that I had purchased for her since December first the prior year. She had signed and dated the document and there was a place for me to do the same. Now, with the exception of the wedding ring and engagement ring, which by law in New Mexico must be returned to the purchaser in the event of a break-up, all the other items I had bought her were legally gifts. She had no obligation to return them to me at all, under any circumstances. Apparently, however, she decided that I might use my generosity towards her to make her feel guilty about some unspecified something or other at a later date. At any rate, I printed out the document and signed it, made a file copy for myself, named the file I returned to her "Nuckin Futs" and sent the signed document back.

We spent the next several weekends together. One Saturday night, we were in bed watching a show about four old geezers who were reliving earlier life experiences as a group. It was funny in a sort of pathetic kind of way. I reached to pull Keri close to me, which was a kind of sex interest signal. She rolled away and said, "We can have sex with anybody we want." "What? What are you saying?" I was truly bewildered, "I thought you wanted an exclusive relationship with me." "Well, why not? It's just sex," she said coldly. "Well, for me it's more than that," I tried to convey my love, "Isn't that what you want?" "Well, yes," she was a little distant, "I guess so." "You know, Ker," I said, "sometimes you say the craziest things." And then we made love.

She had a pattern of accusing me of a plethora of evils at night via text. She told me I didn't support her sobriety. She told me I was emotionally abusive. She accused me of undermining her authority in the stores. She accused me of cheating on her constantly. She would say her invasion of my privacy by rifling my texts "Proved she was right." "Right about what?" from me went unanswered. Then I would spend a good part of the next day apologizing and trying to set the text record straight. It was exhausting. She got into voice to text. I would receive dense texts that were rife with typos and badly punctuated.

Indecipherable. But, a one second delay in responding and I was hiding something. Keri loved keeping me off balance.

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Finally, I decided that Keri's behavior must be driven by a lack of trust that I actually wanted to marry her. I said, "Keri, I really, really want to marry you," one night after we made love. "You're just teasing me!" she protested and rolled away from me. "No. I'm serious." I said emphatically, "You pick out a Tiffany ring and we'll get married." "Really?" she said. "Yes. My love. Really," I responded tenderly, gave her a squeeze, and kissed her on the back of her neck.

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One night when we were at her house in Albuquerque, Keri started a fight about my supposed infidelity. Finally, I said, "Look, if you had decided you wanted to date me a few years ago instead of moving to Colorado, there would have been only one woman I'd had sex with. You." I continued, "But you're one to talk. You've told me about six guys you've had sex with since your divorce, not including me!" "Six long-term relationships in six years doesn't seem unusual," she said with a tinge of anger. "All I'm saying is you've fucked a lot of dudes, Ker," I said with some venom. "Are you calling me a slut?" she retorted. "That's your word, not mine. I don't care as long as we are in an exclusive relationship. The past is the past. For you and for me," I said with my most earnest voice.

Later that night, she walked into the living room of her house holding a water color painting. "What's that?" I asked. "It's a painting of Biscuit," Keri said coyly, "Marcos painted it for my daughter." "Hmmm," I said in a confused voice, "You're still seeing Marcos?" Marcos was one of the six "former" boyfriends. "We were lovers. But now, he's just a friend, Bill. We have dinner once in a while," she said dismissively. "So, what does this Marcos do?" I asked in an even tone. "He's trying to be an artist. But, he's a handyman. He's VERY good with his hands," Keri replied in a tone dripping with double meaning. "I'll tell you the deal that Tracy and I had about former lovers, Ker," I said in my most lawyerly voice. "Tracy was still friendly with three of her former lovers when I met her," I said telling our story. "One guy was an actor, one was an investment banker, and one was a concert pianist," I concluded. ""What?" she interrupted me, "What's a concert PENIS?" "Very funny," I said flatly, "He plays the piano with orchestras."

"What I told Tracy about maintaining friendships with former lovers is that I had two requirements. First, tell me in advance when you're going to get together. And second, if I say I'd really like to join you, you say okay. Because there should be nothing you wouldn't say to your former lover if I was there that you would say if I wasn't," I said firmly. Keri didn't respond, but I'd made my point.

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What I found out later.

What I found out much later is that Keri wasn't very good with math or calendars. She asserted that she'd had six sexual relationships since her divorce in 2010. But the guys she'd told me about were all from her time in Albuquerque. She'd only been in Albuquerque since early 2015. If we went back to 2010, there was Coyote, whom I didn't even know about at the time, and me. And her anal rapist had to be included in the Albuquerque count. That made nine, not six. But, eventually, I found out that the number of sexual partners she'd had since her divorce from Colin was closer to twenty five. Keri fucked a lot of dudes. She told me at one time that she was a sex addict and apparently she wasn't kidding. I also found out that she and Marcos weren't "former" lovers, they were "active" lovers the entire time she and I dated, got engaged, and subsequently got married.