

Follow My Lead

by Stephanie Soden

[Excerpt]

A very definite buzzing noise actually made it through my wall of fatigue.

I opened my eyes to see my phone ringing furiously past a curtain of brown hair. It took several tries to actually pick it up, but when I did I swept back the stringy mess and answered, "Hello?"

Isaac fidgeted beside me, lying on his stomach amidst the billowing white cotton of my sheets.

"Is this Evangeline?" came an unfamiliar woman's voice. A telemarketer?

But for some reason I answered, "Evan. Who is this?" I was lying down with my hand over my eyes. It couldn't be later than six o'clock in the morning.

"Evan." The woman sighed as if in disappointment, "This is Cynthia."

I was silent.

"...Your mother?"

"Holy shit." I sat up, "Cynthia?" I looked around, lost for words, "Um...why are you calling?" my voice sounded scratchy and raw. It still wasn't enough to wake Isaac from his coma.

"Honey, I need to talk to you about something. Do you have a moment?" she said, actually calling me a pet name. I didn't know why. The last time we spoke, I was thirteen.

"Yeah." Was my reply, too shocked to decide between happiness or anger, "Hold on."

I set the phone down long enough to find a shirt and slip it over my head. Stumbling into my living room, barelegged, I sat down on the leather couch and crossed my ankles.

"So what's up?"

It had been twelve years. I began to run down the list of reasons this woman might be calling. She could be bankrupt, having a mid-life crisis, or maybe even calling about a terminal illness. Either way

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/stephanie-soden/follow-my-lead>»

Copyright © 2013 Stephanie Soden. All rights reserved.

I was clueless, as I had absolutely no emotional bond with the woman I came out of.

"Evan. That's interesting. I always wanted to call you Angie." She said, a random statement.

"Well that will happen when you're raised by a guy." I tried to explain in the least hostile way possible, "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I just got married."

"Oh, congratulations." It was a feat to sound mildly enthusiastic at this hour.

She sighed. Did she expect me to say more? "I want to see you."

I was completely silent, holding the phone against my leg for a second. I nibbled on my nails. I didn't have a desire to ever meet her, but there was some amount of curiosity. Taking a deep breath, I brought the phone back to my mouth, "Why?"

Cynthia was ready for this one, "Because I've changed a lot. I've turned my life around. This man, his name is Michael by the way, is wonderful and I'm really happy."

I nodded as if she could see it.

"I want you to come spend Christmas with me."

I squeezed the bridge between my eyes, "Cynthia." I sighed, "Mom...I don't know if that's going to happen."

"Do you have plans?"

"Yes." I said, "I mean no. It's just...I don't even know you. Or your husband." I knew I shouldn't say it, but I did anyway, "I'm twenty-five. You already missed the mother-daughter bonding boat."

I expected her to cry, but instead she said very confidently, "Who says?"

"I do."

Silence.

Awkward, uncomfortable silence.

I felt awful in my own skin.

"What do you do now?"

Despite my best efforts, I answered, "I dance."

There was a smile in her voice, "I'm glad you stuck with that. Do you have a boyfriend?"

I leaned over peek in my bedroom, then rocked back, "No."

"I see." A pause, "Evan. I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm sorry. I'm not asking us to get matching outfits and wear friendship bracelets. I won't even be a part of your life if you don't want me to. But give me one Christmas. That's all I ask."

"Okay."

"Alright."

"Bye Cynthia." I hung up before I heard an answer.

I sat still for as long as I could before succumbing to the compulsion to pace. After making several furious but silent arm movements, I sauntered back into my bedroom. The white sunlight was beginning to glow through the dirty windows, bouncing off of the wooden floors and glistening upon the brick walls.

I took a seat on the edge of my bed, pressing the phone against my forehead before taking a deep breath and shaking Isaac's leg. He came alive with a sniff, blinking about.

"Wassup?" he slurred, "You okay?"

I peered at him from a profile, "My Mom just called. She wants me to spend Christmas with her."

My friend blinked hard, unprepared to be assaulted with such deep content two seconds into the waking world.

"Do you want to?" he breathed in, no doubt desperately trying to wake up for this conversation.

But I was determined to keep it light, immediately switching into indifference mode, "Not really." Looking to him I said, "How are you feeling?"

"Hungover." He ruffled his dark hair.

"Same." I sighed sleepily, "You mind heading out early today? I need time to process this."

"No problem." He groaned, exiting the bed rather ungracefully for a dancer.

As per usual he got as far as his pants and decided to put on everything else during the five-story descent. We stood there by the

door and exchanged a tender peck of a kiss. Goodbyes were uttered and I was alone.

The Michigan Avenue Starbucks, in all its corporate glory, had a wonderful way of calming my nerves. I don't drink coffee. It made my movement jittery and clumsy. So I clutched my hot chocolate like a lifeline.

Three months ago I was offered a job in a New York dance company whose clients include Mtv, NBC, and FOX. There was still a considerable amount of negotiations to be had, but I'd begin in early January.

Two weeks after receiving the offer, I met Isaac at a mutual friend's party. We had a few too many, and the night ended with large portions of time I don't remember and an awkward wake-up call in an unfamiliar bed.

A week after that he showed up at my dance studio and I suddenly remembered what I had forgotten during my blackout. For all his socially hindered, robotic displays of "emotion", Isaac is an incredible dancer. Soon, hanging out became sleeping over. And then sleeping over became dating. But still mostly sleeping over.

A week after that, things became difficult.

Isaac's company fell on hard times, and with little support in Southside, was disbanded. He'd come around my afternoon classes and amble around, but it wasn't the same. As winter approached, I told him about my plans to move to New York and any heat between us quickly cooled. I was beginning to see the end of our relationship. If that was even the right word for it.

I don't think we honestly liked one another's personality. The talent. The camaraderie. That was what kept us coming back for more.

But even that wouldn't last forever. Not with the distance between Chicago and New York.

And that's why I was sitting in Starbucks, trying to find the right words to say.

Thirty minutes and a blue line trip later, I was in the North side opening up the studio.

Lucy would be there soon, along with my fellow instructors.

But as soon as I flipped on the lights of our large, hardwood floored space, I gasped. There he was, sitting in the chair by the stereo. Isaac had his legs stretched out in front of him, rocking the steel black chair backwards. He looked at me unassumingly.

My reaction was very honest, "What are you doing here?" Being creepy.

"You gave me the spare remember?" he held up the little key ring on his finger, "When I came to pick up your music?"

"Oh." I dropped my things, feeling a sad look on my face and quickly replacing it with a faux-confident smirk, "You were supposed to give that back."

"Lets talk." He said, slamming the chair legs back on the ground. He walked to the center of the vast room with his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah. We need to."

He pointed, his dark eyes staying on the floor, "You're moving to New York, and I'll be picking up the pieces." He said that last bit with a little bit of genuine Isaac sarcasm, "Maybe move to Boston with my brother."

"I know." I said, eager to say it before he could, "We shouldn't draw this out any longer than it has to be. Do you want to come get your stuff from my apartment after work?"

Those black eyes found mine in an instant.

He looked shocked. Of course Isaac's version of the expression was a single brow slowly rising.

I was confused, "You...want to break up, right?"

"No?"

"Isaac." He dropped my arms, a little baffled myself, "Are you serious?"

"Are you?"

The fact that he wasn't agreeing with me was startling.

I was about to sound very mean, "You had to have thought about this. What we've been doing...it isn't really..."

"A serious relationship." He crossed his arms, finishing for me coolly.

"Well no!" I said, "Are you going to sit here and tell me that you actually like me?"

That remark seemed to break his shield of calm interest. He growled, "I don't know who you think I am, but I don't just sleep with random girls. Don't get me wrong, you're beautiful. But that's not why I did what I did."

I was appalled, "What am I supposed to think?! You've made every effort to make sure I know nothing about you!"

"You're guilty of the same!"

"Well I'm sorry two introverted people decided to become fuck buddies." I threw my hands up in the air, "What in the hell were you dating me for?!"

"It certainly wasn't your personality." He said beginning to walk past me to the door, arms still crossed.

"Not for my body, not for my personality. Then what?!" I hissed as he passed under the frame.

Isaac just smiled in a conniving sort of way, "Forget it. Have a great life."

Just after the door slammed I muttered, "You too, ass."

And just like that, it was over.

The two of us sat in the middle of my empty, hard wood floored living room amidst a sea of brown boxes. I grunted as I stretched the packing tape over one of the last ones.

"I mean...I liked hanging out with the guy. He's an incredible dancer, and a really, really good kisser. But his personality...horrible!" I said, breaking the tape with more force than necessary, "The only time he was nice to me was when we were making—. When we were *fucking*. Otherwise, he was constantly

pushing my buttons, always trying to one-up me, and being a damned nuisance at work."

"Whoa." Lucy finally cut me off, "Ev...it sounds like you really liked this guy."

"I don't. I didn't." I spat, "I'm just angry that he didn't let me break up with him. He made it awkward, and now I've been in a horrible mood for a week." I plopped my forehead down on the cardboard box, "This is not how I wanted to feel when I left for New York."

Lucy went on, not missing a beat, "You know, when I met him, he seemed like the kind of guy that has a lot going on in his head. You shouldn't be hard on yourself. You unexpectedly got involved with a really complex person."

"We're both fucked up people." Came my muffled voice, back on the box.

She rubbed my back.

For a first timer maneuvering a U-Haul truck down a snowy highway, I was delighted to make it to Syracuse alive. Although I kept telling myself that it was because I hadn't found an apartment yet, I knew I was staying with Cynthia because I was a girl that needed her mom right then. The thought of it made me sick.

Cynthia had made her choices. She had a six-year-old daughter when she was my age, and chose her dreams over that child. I had been numb on the road, but a fire lit within me when I pulled up the driveway.

The house looked like something out of a greeting card with its shoveled, winding lane and milky lights. There was a frozen lake in the front with a giant pine beside it. I half expected a family of deer to peer out. My murky, sludge-slicked truck seemed out of place. As did my bad attitude.

Salt crushed beneath my boots as I stood in front of the door—its golden light scathing. The sudden urge to run bubbled to the

surface. In a fit of bravery I thrust the door open and stepped in. It was bright, warm, and smelled like candy.

Two unfamiliar guys were sitting in the living room and looked at me with the expected amount of confusion.

"Evan!" Cynthia erupted from the kitchen, "You're here! Why didn't you call?" she grabbed me in a hug.

"No signal." I lied.

She looked good. Not like the last time I saw her. She was wearing clothes that suited her age now and actually looked like a mom. It made me angry for some reason.

"Where are your bags? In the van?"

"Yeah. I'll get them in a sec."

"No no we'll get the boys to do it."

The thought of sending the guys who were glaring at me out in the cold was out of the question, "I'd rather you didn't."

For whatever reason she didn't contest me and I was pulled into the kitchen. "I want you to meet Michael."

It was happening very quickly. I immediately regretted coming there. I regretted breaking up with Isaac. I regretted moving away from Chicago. I wanted to be somewhere comfortable right then, which was in my apartment in Isaac's arms. Of course, that was all in a fantasy world that I destroyed two weeks ago.

I snapped out of it to see a hand in front of me, "Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure." The tall man smiled. He did seem genuinely kind. He had salt and pepper hair and was built like a retired baseball player. The way his dark eyes smiled at me made me feel a little better about being a stranger in this horrible place.

"I'm glad you could come stay with us, Evan." Michael said, "Did you have a good drive?"

"Yeah." I said, removing my coat and holding it, "Pretty good." I was never this quiet.

Two more boys I hadn't seen appeared behind them, grabbing things out of the refrigerator. When Cynthia saw my eyebrow raise

she laughed, "You should meet Michael's sons." The two boys had already left the kitchen so I was shoved back into living room.

There on the couch the four of them sat.

"We have here Simon, the oldest." Michael motioned to the brunette with short hair and glasses. He looked like he was in his thirties and was the only one who was not eying me like a piece of meat.

"This is David." The older teen stared back with dark eyes as if challenging me. Little punk. When he smiled he was sure to show off his tongue ring that I'm sure I was expected to flinch at.

"His younger brother Ryan." Ryan had sandy hair like Simon's but it was longer and straight. He looked like he was thirteen or fourteen and seemed still innocent. Hopefully his dick brother wouldn't ruin him.

"And this here is Thaddeus." I smirked at the kid with the crazy name. He looked fifteen and had black hair and blank eyes. He searched me up and down before looking back to the television.

Apparently no one in this family believed in hand shaking. Or normal human responses.

I put my hands in my pockets and swung in Cynthia's direction, "You two got busy."

But the woman laughed, "Oh no, they're from a previous marriage. And that's not all of them."

Michael smiled, "I'm Catholic."

Despite myself I laughed. Simon, the only one attempting to look friendly, smiled pleasantly at this.

"We'll get the others down to help you." Michael said stepping over to the stairway. I trotted behind him.

"No no don't do that. It's just one little duffle bag. I'm not one of those girls that pack five..." but I was cut off.

"ADAM. ISAAC!"

"Funny." I choked.

My inner thoughts came aloud for a moment.

It happened like that.

In a brief second of denial, dark hair popped around the corner of the stairs. Shock washed over me. I watched helplessly, paralyzed, as my ex hopped down a few steps before slowly looking up.

When our eyes met, his arms flew out to grip the banister on either side. I yelped and flung my back against the wall.

Cynthia called out, "Jesus. Isaac...did you fall?" she looked back and forth between our horrified expressions.

I could hear the wood popping beneath his grip.

Without answering his step-mother, he finished the remaining few steps and stood rigidly before me. Isaac extended a shaking hand to grab mine, nearly breaking it, "Bags? Outside?"

I was so shocked by his newfound ability to dredge up emotion, I couldn't find the strength to fight him. The door slammed behind us, leaving the warmth and the glow and the candy behind. What we had now was the cold—and the darkness. And each other.

"YOU?!" We said at the same time.

"Tell me what's going on!" I barked, pointing an accusatory finger.

"You think I had any idea?!" He snapped, advancing upon me.

"At some point you must have heard, '*Hey son! I'm getting married to this chick. Her name is CYNTHIA. She has a daughter named EVAN!*'" He didn't seem amused by my mockery of his father's voice.

"Please tell me you're not actually lecturing my about not communicating with my parents." He pointed to the house, "I didn't know the *daughter* that was coming over would be...fucking, *you!*"

"What the hell happened to Boston?!"

"Cynthia happened to Boston." Came the familiar deadpan voice, "Cynthia happened."

"You're a prick!" I hissed as he stomped over to the van door and ripped it open.

"Well you're a bitch, and you know what?" said anti-Isaac, a strange bizarre version of my ex-boyfriend, "You can't dance either."

"Good luck finding a job you fucking lunatic." I stepped over him as we walked back. Isaac dragged my bag through the snow as we

shouted, "I doubt too many companies are looking for someone that just mirrors his partner's moves!"

"You didn't seem to mind my moves at that party." His hand was on the door, "Or afterwards for that matter."

"You unbelievable dick!"

The door was open.

"Oh my! Did the snow pick up?" Cynthia was in the entryway staring at my bag.

"Yes." I said through my teeth.

"Here you go." Isaac slammed the parcel into my chest, soaking me, "Pleasure meeting you." Before darting up the stairs toward the remaining brother. Whatever his name is. Adam.

My eyes slowly drifted to the side, hearing the boys on the couch snickering. Even Simon had a smirk on his lips. Coming here was a bad idea. Cynthia must have seen the resolution on my face because she immediately said, "Come on Evan, I'll show you where you'll be staying. Maybe you can clean up a bit."

A very bad idea.

