*Maxxwell’s Equations is a romantic thriller that takes place in the Washington DC area in 1999. It features our heroine, Sasha Alexander, her two dogs Maxxwell and Harley (who are featured as major characters), and Brad, the love interest.*

Prologue

The woman facing her in the elevator had a swollen, purple cheek, incompletely masked in makeup. The woman's arm, from elbow to fingertips, was encased in a royal blue Cordura tube. Sasha thought the blue Cordura harmonized with the purple cheek in a wife-beater sort of way, but it clashed with the woman's pale peach blouse. Sasha refocused her gaze down, obliterating the unwholesome vision. She was a sight. .Even the softening effect of the brushed aluminum walls’ reflection was disturbing. This was much worse than a bad hair day.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She wished she could have stayed home. Hiding from the chaos at AXiom was tempting. But if she was to have any say in how the company was going, she had to be here. Staying home would be just another excuse for Reid to end-run her. She would just have to swallow her vanity and grit it out. She sneaked another look at her reflection. It was bad. She'd better try to make a joke of it. She ran her left hand over her shoulder length, dark hair, tucking it back behind her ears. At least her hair looked pretty good today.

As the elevator doors opened, she lifted her briefcase with her left hand and straightened her spine. Plastering what-she-hoped-was a jaunty smile on her face, she breezed down the hall and through the double glass doors of AXiom Corp. Julie waved at her as she walked briskly past the receptionist desk; Sasha nodded. Julie was on her left and couldn't see her cheek. Sasha proceeded down the corridor, past the closed office doors, toward the back of the building where her own office was. Passing through the open area where the hoteling desks and printers were located, she spied Reid. He was leaning over a printer, waiting for a document to finish.

*Wouldn't you know it*, she groaned mentally. *I would have to see him first thing.* She braced herself and walked faster, nodding to Reid as she passed. He glanced at her, raising one pale red eyebrow as his laser stare took it all in. She suppressed an emotional cringe as his harsh gaze assessed her and found her wanting. Reid didn't speak. She walked briskly past him, holding her breath; reaching the sanctuary of her office, she closed the door and collapsed into her chair. It was going to be a long day.

\*\*\*

Brad was in her office at four o'clock when the call came. He had been entertaining her with tales from his Alma Mater, Brandeis University. Sasha surprised herself by being able to laugh at the Texan’s romantic exploits.

She shook her head as he recounted his bizarre choice of college. “So, you went East because you were tired of Texas blondes, is that it?”

“Yes, ma’am. Wanted to get me a raven-haired beauty with the voice of a screech owl. A genuine (he pronounced it *gen-u-wine*), sophisticated New Yorker.”

Sasha shook her head, again. “That’s why you chose a school in Massachusetts…”

Brad shrugged laconically. “Eastern states are so small I thought New York City was the next town over. Anyway…” He lowered his voice. “They were the only ones who would take me.”

Sasha laughed outright. It felt good. She hadn’t done any laughing since the accident. “You mean the University of Texas wouldn’t take you so you had to go to Brandeis? That’s your story?”

“Naaahh. It’s just that I’m not that kind of Physicist. Or rather, I’m not that kind of ‘Physic”. Need more than a bachelor’s degree in Physics to be a Physicist.”

Sasha frowned. “I don’t follow…”

Brad rolled his eyes. “You Eastern women don’t know shit about the West…”

Sasha interrupted. “I’m from Nevada!”

Brad ignored her protest. “Well, then you should know that UT has one of the best Astrophysics programs in the country. But that’s not how I roll. I’m one of those ‘spooky action at a distance’ types.”

Sasha snorted. “Yeah, I just bet you are.”

That’s when the phone rang.

It was Julie, the receptionist: "Reid would like to see you in his office," she said.

"Now?" Sasha didn't bother to hide her annoyance.

"As soon as you can get there, I guess."

"Why doesn't he ever call me himself?" This was so Reid. Recently he’d been using Julie as his personal secretary. Now he had her calling his subordinates to summon them for meetings. He acted like he was 10 levels up the hierarchy from Sasha, rather than her direct supervisor. It was just another way in which AXiom Corp. clashed with the easy comradery of The Gibson Group.

"I'm just relaying the message, Sasha." Julie used her don't-shoot-the-messenger tone.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Sorry." Sasha hung up.

"H.R.H. demands an audience?" Brad stretched his longs legs out in front of him, crossed his hands on his stomach as he leaned back in the visitor chair.

"How did you guess?"

"You always get that sour look on your face when summoned to The Presence." He laughed.

"Yeah, he's definitely my favorite person." She lifted her lip in an exaggerated sneer.

Brad smiled. "I wish I had a picture of that expression. You look like Evander Holyfield after the Mike Tyson fight: bloodied but still defiant."

"Thanks. I needed that vote of confidence."

Brad was immediately apologetic. "Hey, sorry. I was just kidding around." He paused. "You don't look so bad. Really."

"Oooooh, you silver-tongued-devil you! Bet you say that to all the girls!" Sasha liked to needle him about his love life. Brad was 28, a bachelor, and holding out for the perfect girl.

"The secret to my charm," he grinned. "Keeps 'em coming back, hoping for a kind word."

Sasha stood up and grabbed her palm pilot from the desk top. "A kind word would be nice, but I know what to expect and it's not that." She was already bracing for her "audience."

"Hey, champ. Give 'em hell. Watch out for that left hook!"

Sasha headed for the door. She glanced at Brad as she passed. "So what's with all these fight metaphors suddenly? I thought you were one of those New Age Sensitive Males."

"Nah!" He shrugged. "Sensitive Males are out. Women want He-Men now." He grunted, aping a Neanderthal. "You know, the 'Run-Hit-Eat' type."

"Huh!" Sasha dismissed it. "When you're in a mood to listen, I'll tell you what women want."

He grinned. "You promise?"

"Down, boy!" She smirked. "It's not what you think!"

"eCity! 5 o’clock!

"You're on!" She shook a finger at him as she walked out the door. "You're buying this time!"

...

Sasha and Cameron faced Reid across the expanse of his new Bird's Eye Maple desk. They were pinned uncomfortably between the office door and the slab of maple which seemed to occupy a third of the room. Sasha noticed that the visitor chairs were new, too. Rather than the standard-issue Gibson Group chairs, these had no arm rests and shorter legs. The effect was to have her looking up at Reid, rather than regarding him levelly. Reid had rolled his black leather chair away from the desk so that its back was braced against the window. The sun glared through the louvered blinds into her eyes, making it hard to see.

Sasha stood up and, adopting a breezy manner, walked around the desk to the window. "I hope you don't mind, Reid, but I can't see a thing this time of day with the sun in my eyes!" Without asking permission, she adjusted the Venetian blinds, obliterating the glare. "There we go! Isn't that better?" She didn't wait for an answer, but returned to her chair and sat down, smiling.

Reid was clearly annoyed. His pale red eyebrows twitched. "When you're through redecorating, perhaps we can start."

Sasha waved a hand. "Whenever you're ready!"

Cameron sneaked a look at her out of the corner of his eye. He suppressed a smile, instantly trained his eyes forward.

She tried to seem chipper and attentive, but Cameron's look had told her she was playing with fire. *The man just annoys me*, she thought. *If he weren't so damned smart, I’d ignore him.* But he had a mind like Stephen Hawking and the temperament of a viper. *Well, the Stephen Hawking bit was really overdoing it, but the viper part was right-on: mean and cold-blooded.* She smiled at Reid as she pulled the stylus out of her Palm Pilot. "So, what's up?"

He turned his cool gaze on her. "Better to ask 'what's down?' What's down are revenues. We missed our quota last quarter and this quarter isn't looking any better." He looked at her pointedly. "That needs to be corrected."

Sasha became serious. "I'm starting a new project with RTM Corp on Monday; that should be worth $42,000."

Reid's gaze was unblinking. "Not enough. We need more billing activity on that contract."

"After the Use Case Analysis, I'll be bringing in developers to do the implementation..."

Reid cut her off. "Must I remind you that AXiom is a professional services firm." He swiveled his chair away as if he intended to gaze out the window; noticing the blinds down, he quickly swiveled back, an expression of pique on his face. "We are not a band of ragtag consultants..." He stared pointedly at Sasha, clearly identifying her as one of the ragtag number that AXiom had acquired in the Gibson Group takeover.

Sasha felt a smirk threaten to ruin her earnest demeanor*. It’s like he’s channeling Professor Kingsfield from The Paper Chase.* She recalled a pivotal scene from her aunt’s favorite movie: *Take this dime and call your mother; tell her you will not be becoming a … computer consultant.*

"... We are a professional services firm with a well-developed business model." He placed his hands on the desk top. "Let me tell you how a professional services firm maintains profitability." His voice held tired resignation, as if explaining an obvious fact to an idiot child. "If you need one person for a contract, you use two. If you need two, you use four." He paused. "If you can bill for them, you do. If not, they're on the job and learning." He smiled, but there was no humor in the smile. "And much of that learning can be done at the client's expense." He examined Sasha's expression. "Bother you, Miss Alexander?"

Sasha shrugged. It did bother her, but she wasn't going to admit it.

"When you can push the work down, you do." Reid looked at Cameron. "You delegate to a more junior person whose external billing rate remains the same as the senior person, but his internal rate is much lower." He turned back toward Sasha. "That's called 'margin'. We try to leverage our margin." He paused again. "That's how we maintain profitability. Clear, Ms. Alexander?"

"Quite." She was crisp.

"That's why Cameron will be backing you up on the RTM contract." He didn't ask for her consent. "You'll bring him in, promote him to the client, make him indispensable." Reid's gaze wandered to a shelf of books on the wall of the office. He seemed to have become bored with the meeting and had already transitioned to other thoughts. "When the first opportunity arises, you will establish him on the contract in a billing role." He looked toward the door. "At the appropriate time, you will transition the work to him and we will move you to another contract." He looked at Sasha, again. "Questions?" He didn't expect any.

"No. It's pretty clear."

"Good." Reid turned to Cameron. "If you'll excuse us for a moment, Cameron; I have some things to discuss with Miss Alexander." Cameron left the office, shutting the door behind him. Reid stared at her for a long moment, looking critically at her face and arm. When he spoke, his voice was dry and uninflected. "You seem to have had an accident over the weekend."

Sasha raised her right arm, encased in Cordura. She touched her fingertips lightly to her cheek. "Riding accident," she said. She wasn't going to elaborate.

One eyebrow twitched. He seemed to consider. "Maintaining a professional demeanor is part of the ... " he paused "...corporate culture of AXiom." He went on. "That includes a professional appearance." He gestured toward her arm and face. "I would hardly call that a professional appearance, would you?"

Sasha felt herself begin to boil. "It was an accident. I didn't plan for this to happen." She took a breath. "It's not like I showed up at a client site wearing dirty jeans and sneakers or something." She was going to tell him about the time when, unaccountably, three people at The Gib had broken their right legs in three different accidents. They had commissioned an artist to paint The Gib logo on the casts and had made a big joke of it. The clients had thought it was equally funny and it had been a source of jokes and laughter for some time. But she didn't think Reid would be amused; she kept the incident to herself.

"While I can't dictate your extracurricular activities," he responded "I would hope you had enough regard for your responsibilities to avoid ... " he waved at her injuries "...this kind of thing."

Sasha didn't say anything. She didn't trust herself to speak.

He went on: "If it weren't for the fact that RTM is your client, I would encourage you to take short term disability." He looked resigned. "As it is, we'll just have to make the best of it." He turned away, dismissing her.

Sasha left the door open as she left. It was too big a temptation to slam it after her.

**\*\*\***

A pale gold stem of Chardonnay sat alone on her side of the bistro table. Brad had already settled in on his side, striking a characteristic pose: leaning back in his chair with his long legs stretched out, his cowboy boots resting under the opposite chair. He sipped at his beer, one eyebrow cocked as Sasha breezed up to the table and grabbed the glass of Chardonnay before even sitting down.

"Good meeting?" he asked, as Sasha let her leather briefcase drop to the floor, collapsing into her chair at the same time.

She stared at thim over the wine glass as she took a hearty sip. The glass clunked down. "Just peachy!"

"Well, remember that the company health plan doesn't cover liver replacement," he gestured at the glass as Sasha picked up the Chardonnay for another swig.

She glared at him as she swallowed. "It does cover mental health care 'though and I can assure you this is purely medicinal!"

"So what happened?"

"He's putting Cameron on my contract!"

"You knew that was gonna happen."

"No, I didn't! Why in hell would he do that? Cameron knows nothing about ... It doesn't make sense except from his ...." she waved her arms "professional services point of view." She filled Brad in on Reid's philosophy of 'padding' an engagement. "It's borderline unethical ... No, it's just damned unethical! Period! The Gib was never run this way!"

"Well, there you go," Brad gestured with his near-empty beer glass, then raised it high to attract a waiter.

"'There I go' what? What are you talking about?"

"Reid's Way isn't The Gib Way. That's the whole enchilada right there. Reid is here to wipe out The Gib Way and put in the AXiom Way."

Sasha stared at him, a look of surprise and then a kind of begrudging acknowledgement growing on her face.. It was obvious she had never thought of the situation that way. "It wasn't supposed to happen this way," she muttered, as she picked at the bowl of peanuts the waiter had just deposited on the table.

"C'mon, Sasha, you didn't really believe that hogwash about a 'merger of cultures' did you?"

"Well, no, of course not," Sasha looked a little sheepish.

"You did!" Brad shook his head, chuckling. "I can't believe it! Sasha Alexander, the Old Campaigner taken in by The Rhetoric..."

"No, I was not!" She frowned at him, but looked away again, slightly embarrassed. "I just ... It was just ... I don't know.... Maybe I hoped it would go down differently... Or something."

"So, what did they promise you?" Brad scrutinized her closely; she waved him away, but he persisted. "C'mon, out with it!"

"OK, they said they'd give me a partnership in six months to a year..." she trailed off.

"Did you get it in writing?"

"It wasn't that kind of situation... " Sasha looked away again.

"You didn't get it in writing? Is that what you're telling me?" Brad had leaned forward, pulling his long legs under him; he was looking at her closely across the tiny expanse of the table.

"Look, I talked to Reid and he said that the AXiom partners couldn't make a partnership offer explicitly before the merger, but after the merger than things would be clear to ...." She stopped. "What? Don't look at me that way."

"What have you always told me?"

"I know, I know.’Get it in writing.'"

"Right. And that's the way you've always handled clients and vendors we've hired to service clients. And it's saved our butts more times than ...." he grinned "The number of women I've loved." He paused, waiting for Sasha's response to his last braggadocio.

"Right..." She rolled her eyes.

Having gotten the reaction he expected, he went on: "But now, when it's something for yourself, what do you do?"

"I know, I know!" Sasha was annoyed and disgusted with herself. "But if you'd been there... He seemed so .... sincere."

Brad dropped back into his chair, picked up his beer, took a sip. "Yep, he said. "Sincere. Well, you know what they say about sincerity."

Sasha’s smile was tired. "No, but I guess I'm going to hear." She paused. "Alright, I'll bite: what do they say about sincerity?"

"'Sincerity," intoned Brad, "is everything." He paused for affect. "'And when you can fake that, you've really got something!'"

"Great." They both sat in silence for awhile. Sasha fiddled with the flickering candle on the table, poking at the light until it went out. She raised her hand to summon the waiter. "Can we get another candle, please? This one's gone out." She handed the waiter her empty wine glass; "And another glass of Chardonnay. Thanks."

When the waiter had gone, Sasha turned to Brad. "So, what do you think I should do?"

"You're asking me?" He grunted in surprise.

"Yes, I'm asking you. What do you think?"

"Fly low. Keep your head down. Go along."

"Go along, like... Fleece my clients?" There was distaste in her voice.

"That attitude won't win you points with HRH..." he laughed.

"No, really, is that what you're telling me?"

"Just lay low, Sasha," Brad was suddenly serious. "Just try to go along; don't buck the system." He smiled. "You know, 'give a little, get a little'."

She snorted. "Right. I'm going to 'go along' with that arrogant asshole and let his little sycophant take over my clients."

"Y'know", Brad drawled in his best sarcastic Texas twang "if you can't say what you really mean, you're never gonna get anywhere in life."

Sasha snorted. "Thanks. I'll try to be more forthright." She paused. "But, seriously, Brad, do you actually like these bozos?"

He spread a hand across his chest in mock surprise "M'wah?" his Texas drawl turned the French phrase into something resembling the low bellow of a steer. "No way. I just want to keep you from being shafted."

"I think that's already happened."

"Hey," he waved his beer glass and grinned, "you know what they say!"

"More philosophy? I can't wait..." When Brad didn't continue, Sasha finally relented. "Alright, what do they say?"

"They can always hurt you more.'" and he took a long swallow of his beer.