

Connections & Opportunity

They met Jordan for dinner at a restaurant in Greek Town for dinner and to pitch the social networking plan for Lexi's writing and speaking.

"Shit, marketing's changed a lot since I started with Citicorp," Jordan said, sipping her wine. "The two of you are speaking in languages I recognize because I keep up with these things, but I'm not sure I completely understand how it's going to work."

"It's all about making connections," Kate said. "You were the greatest person I ever saw work a room to network your way into cliques and power circles." Jordan shrugged at the compliment. "This is all just doing the same kind of networking, but in different ways."

"You're the marketing pro," Jordan said, "with a theory to prove. If you and Steve think this will work, and if it's worth all of our time, I'm in. You may have to e-mail me specifics of what I should do next. Oh, and I want to read some of the things you've written," she added gesturing to Lexi. "If I'm going to endorse you as a motivational guru, you need to show me some motivation. Give me a good example of someone you've aggravated into action."

Lexi ran through various examples in her head, the women that she and Kate had discussed as testimonials, the women she'd pushed into crossing boundaries. Then she smiled and came up with her best example for Jordan.

"There is a woman I know, that I've worked with, that was on the fence about a commitment decision, and I apparently annoyed her enough or angered her enough that she had to confess her issues so she could make a decision."

Kate looked at her knowing full well that Lexi was talking about her and about Steve and about marriage. This wasn't how she would have broached the subject with her longest term friend in the world, but if she didn't bring it up now, she knew Lexi would tease her way around it.

"So I admitted that Steve and I will get married," Kate interrupted before Lexi could go any further with the narrative.

"And that's a surprise?" Jordan asked incredulously. "Kate, you had to have been the only one that didn't know that."

"I wasn't sure she'd go through with it," Lexi said.

"That's because you've only known her twenty some years. When you've logged twice that, you learn that if Kate starts something, she finishes it. I guessed that when she and Steve first got involved, this was going to be an all-or-nothing deal, and when she got the ring – which is gorgeous, by the way – it was clearly going to be all."

"I didn't know that," Kate protested. "The way Steve proposed left the options open."

"You had already closed those options when you left Bill and left Florida and left your job and moved to Boston and went up against Homeland Security." That reminded Kate that she had to thank Jordan for providing bail money. "Steve was smart enough not to give you an ultimatum, but he knew just as well as I did that you were going to get a matching ring. I bet he already has it in a safety deposit box somewhere."

"So, if this is a done deal for all the rest of you, I might as well start planning an extravaganza. Do you think you could get Steve Perry to do music at the reception? It's too late though for Lexi to book Robert Palmer."

"Did you tell her everything?" Jordan asked Lexi accusingly.

"Our conversation got a little confrontational," Lexi said defensively, "and Steve already had the information. He's just too young to have decoded it."

"I don't know exactly how to thank you," Kate said.

"Oh, don't make a big deal about it," Jordan said dismissively. "I figure two grand a year for the irreplaceable lifetime we've shared might keep some of my secrets filed away in your memory a little longer."

"I do have one question though," Kate said. "Was Rick Springfield's name too obvious to use as cover?"

"I talked to Dr. Broadhurst last night about the dissertation idea that Lexi gave me, and he loved it," Steve said over breakfast. "And he especially liked the idea to develop a product to test the model. More points to Lexi on that."

"And he's pretty sure that he can get a lot of required coursework waived since I already have degrees in Engineering and Business, so choosing a dissertation topic might not be as premature as I thought he'd say it was. If we can kick ass and get our product out to test the theories, and I write the paper, I could be finished in two years."

Kate stirred some cream into her mug of coffee. "That's amazing. Have you always been a curve-breaker?"

"I think meeting you has thrown me into overdrive," he said taking a bite of his bagel, "although I've always been an overachiever."

"Any ideas for the product?" She hoped he had some idea because she hadn't come up with anything so far.

"Well, and don't take this the wrong way, babe, I really haven't been able to come up with some common passion that we share like Lexi said – except for the obvious which would be really hard to market to an audience unless you're looking for a hard-core porn career...'

"We've already had our brush with law enforcement," she said, "so let's try to stay within the lines."

"Yeah, I figured that was not a viable option. So, I called Stacey yesterday afternoon, and we talked about her sorority."

Kate didn't get the connection, but she let Steve continue without interruption.

"They do charity projects all the time, usually small time stuff like bake sales for school supplies. But the one that their national organization has been pushing is a halfway house, recovery center kind of place in New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina and all the damage. But it's not going as easily as expected to raise the money to rebuild and renovate and operate the place."

"And you were going to send a check?"

"No, we are going to develop a product or product line that will raise the funds they need."

Kate was beginning to see where he was headed.

"And we can use the whole sorority system as our social networking variable, plus if we come up with a great product line, we can use traditional marketing strategies as our control group as Lexi called it."

Kate gave him credit; he had listened to what Lexi was saying and had already started to move the process forward. Damn, he probably would have his PhD in two years and a cover page write-up in Business Week.

"So, having come up with that much of the plan, I still haven't got a product, but you're the creative one and have gender in common with these sorority girls, so you can come up with the product."

"No pressure there," she smirked. "But give me a day or two so I can do some research."

"I think Lexi would say that research is good, but you need to go with your gut." Steve had no idea the gut feeling that Lexi most wanted her to act on, but Kate couldn't think of a more opportune time to bring it up.

"Lexi asked me yesterday when we were getting married," Kate said, even though this discussion still frightened her a little.

"Yeah," Steve said, "I was kind of wondering that myself. I do want to marry you... someday... soon."

"How soon?" she asked quietly.

"As soon as you say 'I do'."

"How soon can we get to Las Vegas?"

Steve sat up straight and looked at her with surprise. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," she replied with genuine tenderness that brought tears to both their eyes. "I want to marry you, Steve."

"We can be there as soon as I call Scott, and he can find us a plane or as soon as I can get a commercial flight booked. Are you sure you want to go to Vegas and not somewhere for a more traditional wedding?"

"Been there, done that once. But it's your first wedding," she said, "so maybe you'd like more tradition."

"It's going to be my only wedding," he said, "and the only tradition I need is kissing the bride."

Kate woke up that morning at 3:02 a.m. with a start and only one word on her mind: CATS. She knew that she had the concept for the product, and it had to do with CATS. She slipped out of bed, pulled on her MIT shirt, and took a quick look at the sleeping Steve before she went into the study.

She wasn't sure if she was nervous about her impending nuptials, but her insomnia energized her with creative ideas for the product. She wiped the whiteboard clean and began randomly jotting down her ideas.

"Kat" for Katrina – "Kat" House!

Ninth Ward – nine lives!

"Paws" to Remember pins – general market? Silver or gold paw shape pins with initials engraved – "Memory" from "Cats"

Social Networking strategies:

"Kat"sup – casual dinners

"Kat"nip – cocktail parties

Meow Mixer – coed party or networking?

Hair Ball – dance party?

French "chat" – on-line chat groups

Chat Groups:

Cool Cats – northern states?

Jazz Cats – east coast?

Boca Katz – Jewish members?

Stray Cats

Cat's Meow

Cats in Hats?

Fat Cats
Alley Cats – urban members?

Group leaders called “Kat” Women? Herding cats?

T-shirts:

Cougar Pride - general market or with sorority logo to sell to alumnae?
Kitten Pride – for current sorority members with logo and chapter name?
Cat Litter – for mothers with logo?
Tom Cats – husbands or boyfriends
“Purr”fect 10
Cat’s pajamas

Let the cat out of the bag - packaging

Design by women, children involved in house?

KH BFF – “Kat” House Building Fund Friend pins – just initials pin aka WWJD – status symbol? Gift for women/girl friends to give each other?

Brian Setzer/Stray Cats?
Cat Scratch Fever?

Rain cats and dogs?
Cat got your tongue?
Curiosity killed the cat?
Look what the cat dragged in?
While the cat’s away, the mice will play?
Cat who swallowed the canary?
Cheshire-cat smile?

After an hour or so of making notes and pacing back and forth with a marker in hand, she was satisfied that she’d captured all her current thoughts about CATS on the whiteboard. It was still dark outside, so she stretched out on the couch so she could either continue her sleepless revelations or catch a -- oh, she popped up to write it on the board – catnap. But, shit, she had to catch Lexi before she left town, so she dialed her cellphone.

Lexi – glad I caught you before you left town.

I don’t know why I insist on taking these early flights. I always end up taking a 6 a.m. flight and am barely awake to get on the plane. And I have yet to figure out why the airlines don’t staff their check in stations earlier than when passengers arrive. I always end up standing in line with 40 other early bird passengers who pay attention to the ‘please arrive 2 hours before your flight time’

rule. Lexi took another sip of her tea as her cab sped along in the darkness to Midway airport. By the way, what are you doing up at 4 am?

Insomnia. But good use of it. Anyway, make sure that Andrew doesn't drag you away on your next honeymoon until you come to my wedding.

Lexi nearly spit out her tea against the taxi's plexiglas divider. Is this part of the good use of insomnia – wedding planning?

No. Long story. I will tell you later. Can you meet me in Las Vegas tomorrow night?

I guess. Where shall I meet you – at the Little Chapel of Love and Drive In Liquor Barn Will Elvis be performing the ceremony cuz I really need to bone up on the lyrics to 'Blue Suede Shoes'.

No. Elvis was booked. It's the Bellaggio. We'll have rooms reserved under Steve's name.

Will the FBI have adjoining rooms to Brad Pitt and George Clooney?

I thought we weren't going to be snippy.

It's 4-fucking-aye-em. I'm cranky.

Just meet us for dinner about 6 p.m. in the lobby, and I will fill you in.

And Andrew and I will be staying for....how long?

Two nights would be good. We have a 'couples-outing' planned for everyone to mingle.

Wow. You're pushing it. If you think I'm snippy, wait until Andrew finds out. I'm honestly not sure if he will come after – everything....

Do your best...I've gotta go.

Steve calling you for another roll in the sheets?

No, smartass. But I did hear him get up, and I need to...

I SOOO don't want to hear this.

Then I will see you tomorrow night. Bye.

Lexi put her phone in her purse, staring out at the dark and snowy morning. This quick trip to Vegas was going to be a tough sell to Andrew. She wondered how she was going to manage it.

She paid the cab fare and quickly exited the cab to avert the freezing weather. The airport was somewhat lively for this hour of the morning as she headed for the security line. After a minor wait, she headed toward the food court, always busy, even at this hour.

"I thought I would find you here. I know you love your breakfast burritos."

Lexi dropped her bags and put her arms around her husband. "ANDREW!!! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE??"

"I told you I'd meet you at the airport."

"Gee, I guess I just thought it would be, you know, Seattle. When did you get in?"

"Late last night, and I stayed at the hotel across the street. Not a good stay by the way. It is seriously cold here. But we're headed somewhere warm."

Lexi's stomach got a bit queasy at the thought of a honeymoon conflicting with Kate's nuptials. "Andrew..."

"What's wrong? You don't look happy. I know it's a surprise, but I think you will like where we're going."

"I'm absolutely sure that I will LOVE where we are going because I will be with you. But I just got off the phone with Kate, and she is getting married in Vegas tomorrow and wants us to be there."

Andrew dropped his embrace and began to pace, his anger apparent. "Lexi, I've been a nice guy to have put up with your friendship for the entire, yet short, time that we have been together. And I have seen what she and her boy toy have done to you. And you still want to stand up for her?"

"We did reconcile to some degree. She's just a very old and dear friend. I kind of got over a hump with Steve, and it did lead to a new beginning." Lexi saw the frustration in Andrew's eyes. "She's not just a friend, Andrew. She's - family."

"Is that why you bailed her boy out of jail?"

"Yes. I couldn't get near her but - she, they - needed help."

"And how are they going to re-pay you?"

"I don't think they can. It's just something that you...do...for others. You put yourself aside and just...help...when it's needed."

Andrew paced for a moment. Lexi could see this relationship really bothered him. He turned to face Lexi. "I had a great travel plan for us, you know."

"Can it be delayed two days? Can we just go to Vegas first?"

"Yeah, I guess I can make a couple of calls."

"It would mean the world to me. And if for some reason they are shitty to us, we can hike on out of there, ok?"

"I hate Vegas."

"Other than the airport, I don't think I have been there."

"I got married there once."

Lexi stared at him in silence, cocking her head. I guess this trip really is about getting to know each other better, and it apparently started with a 4:30 am conversation at Midway airport.

"Um...maybe you should...um tell me more about that. Can you change our plans first?"

"Sure. But I'm still not telling you where we're going."

"Agreed. But could you fill me in on that...Vegas wedding thing of yours?"

Steve woke at 4:30 because of some noise, and he was surprised that he was alone in bed. Please don't let her have run off because she regrets saying we should get married, he thought frantically as he got out of bed and began to wander through the condo in search of her. Please don't let her wish that we'd never had that conversation, please don't let her have changed her mind, please just let her be making coffee. His nerves were shoving him toward panic, when he found her in the kitchen making cappuccino.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you by clattering around."

"Why are you up so early?" he said, rubbing his eyes.

"I couldn't turn off my brain long enough to sleep for more than a few minutes," she said handing him a mug. "C'mon, I'll show you."

He followed her into the study, and in response to her gesture toward the whiteboard, he was intrigued by all that she had written.

Damn, he thought, she lectured me about being a curve-breaker, but she came up with all this within a few hours, the equivalent of thousands of dollars of billable consulting fees, while he was sleeping. He was proud of her and admired her from a professional standpoint, as well as being turned on by her intellectual passion. He considered his options: snuggle up to her on the sofa and start the day with wild abandon or drink some cappuccino and start the day with a caffeine rush that could evolve into wild abandon after they talked about her scrawling. He smiled to himself and chose coffee.

"I am possessed by cats," she sat sitting cross-legged on the sofa.

"I can see that," he said settling next to her.

"Cat fight...cat on a hot tin roof...house cat...skin a cat...not to mention the entire musical score by Andrew Lloyd Webber."

"I get it," Steve said. "It's all about cats. You did some amazing work, and given another hour or so, you'll probably have a complete business plan written up. I'm a little scared about what you might have done by the end of the day."

"I still need to do some research, and I have to make some phone calls, but once I make the right connections with Stacey and the national office of Kappa Kappa Gamma, we should be on our way. So what are you going to do today?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Going to class, and maybe going to the library, oh, and getting us a flight to Vegas, and planning a wedding at the Bellagio. You were serious about doing this as soon as we could, right?"

"Absolutely." Because I'm too far down this road, Kate thought, to turn back now or to slam on my brakes. "I called Lexi and told her to meet us tomorrow night, and we'd book rooms. I still need to call Jordan."

"If I have any suspicions that Jordan is a sane human, you may want to wait until the sun comes up," he said

Jordan squealed with delight and a little bit of I-told-you-so gloating, and although she had just booked her flight to Moscow, the travel plans could be changed for such a momentous occasion. "And you can fly out with us tomorrow morning, if you want. We're meeting Lexi and maybe Andrew tomorrow night. Steve's taking care of booking suites at the Bellagio."

"God, you have done a great job in adapting to an affluent lifestyle. Do I need to find my first bridesmaid dress and get it cleaned quickly?" Like it would still fit, she thought, or I'd want to wear it again after 15 or 16 years.

"Since he didn't mention me needing to run out and get something to wear, I suspect Steve's going to make some arrangement."

"Like I said, a great adjustment to being incredibly rich. I'll go along with this as long as you swear there's no imminent indictments or arrests."

Kate understood that both Lexi and Jordan shifting their plans to accommodate her sudden matrimonial impulse was difficult, but she would have missed having them there to share this major defining moment. She knew she had their support, even with their sarcasm and snippiness, and she was happy that support would be proximate. This wedding was going to happen, and if Steve was planning it, they would have a beautiful, special and no doubt, extravagant ceremony. One

very much different from her charming, but low-key and almost casual wedding to Bill, she thought, wondering if she should at least call Bill to let him know.

Scott congratulated Steve and promised to find a plane to get them to Vegas. Steve feared asking for any details, but trusted that Scott would not cross any legal lines to accomplish his task. Then he invited him to the ceremony. "I might need some male support, a best man," Steve said, not sure if Andrew was coming with Lexi or not. He had no idea if Jordan was bringing a date.

Although the wedding planning staff – they put him on speaker phone -- at the Bellagio was happy to take his American Express card number, Steve sensed that they were more accustomed to dealing with the bride than the groom in making arrangements. He wanted the wedding on the terrace – Terrazza Di Sogno, to be specific, he was told – and he wanted flowers – bouquets? --, champagne, some kind of reception afterwards, and a really good suite – he was assured the Chairman Suite was the best and the accompanying Entourage Suites were perfect for wedding guests -- and he chuckled as he requested "Addicted to Love" for their musical choice.

"She'll need to buy a dress," he said, but cut them short on their descriptions of wedding dresses. "Just a nice silk dress, blue maybe. And probably a couple dresses for her friends. You must have stores..." He was assured that the Chanel store at the Bellagio would have a selection of dresses that would be waiting in their suite. The Armani boutique would have a tux if he wanted to buy something rather than rent formalwear – of course he would – and an appointment for a fitting could be scheduled for him and for any groomsmen. The hotel would also provide a limo to get the marriage license, and no thanks, he already had the ring – Jordan had been right about that – so any trip to Tiffany's would be for a gift. May we pick out something to go with the dress, perhaps a pendant and earrings? – Paloma Picasso or Frank Gehry have some lovely sets... "Picasso," he said, knowing how much Kate liked the bracelet. "Maybe some of those hearts of hers? White gold and diamonds?" The planner was impressed with his decisive good taste, and promised they would be wrapped and waiting in the suite. "And maybe you can pick out two bracelets for her friends?" The planner was elated at taking care of these arrangements as well, guessing that if he was dropping this much cash, he was going to tip her very well. Hmmph, he shrugged, that wasn't so hard. Why do women need a year to plan a wedding?

"I need a lawyer," Kate said to Jordan in her second much later call of the day.

"Pre-nup?"

"No, I hadn't even thought about that... We need to set up a limited liability corporation for this project Lexi wants us to do to prove that our consulting skills are up to par, and I need someone to talk with the KKG lawyers about use of their logos and trademarks."

"White hoods and burning crosses?" Jordan asked as she flipped through her Rolodex.

"Not KKK, Kappa Kappa Gamma, the sorority we're going to raise funds for with our project to support their charitable program."

"This sounds far too complex for me to understand in a short call, so I won't even ask. Try talking to Christopher Gale," she suggested. "He's got a solid corporate law background, but he's pretty good with civil cases too. I don't think he handles criminal cases. He can probably do a pre-nup if you want one."

"I'm sure that if Steve wants one, he has people that will take care of it."

"I can't imagine that his people would let him get married without one," Jordan said looking out for her best interests. "You may have some intellectual property to protect, but I'll bet he has a web of financial assets. If he asks you to sign something, please don't blithely giggle and give away your future."

"You don't trust him?"

"I don't know him well enough. But I know you trust him implicitly, and I'd hate for you to do something that only leaves you with a few diamonds."

"So you want to tell me about your wedding in Vegas?" Lexi asked as they sat in the terminal in Midway waiting for some ticket agents to appear.

Andrew was a little uncomfortable with this discussion, not because he didn't want to tell her, but because he instinctively knew he should have already told her. At the same time, Lexi was pondering the irony of her lecture to Kate and Steve that they needed to get to know one another when she apparently didn't even know her husband that well.

"Did you love her?"

Andrew gazed off to the side, indicating a painful memory he did not want to explore. "Did you love your ex-husband?"

She refused to answer the same question that he had just avoided. "I had to step forward to acknowledge that it was over. I had to save my life, and give up being helpful, being a codependent. Kurt needed me, and I needed to be needed."

He carefully watched her, while he thought about their relationship.

"Is that why you had to go on your quest? Because I needed you too much?"

"I didn't need to save my life, I needed to find it again. And you needing me to help run your business wasn't anything like Kurt needing me to support him through addiction and recovery. I was using professional skills that I've been using for years for you, not emotional investments that were killing me."

They looked at each other, wondering with some fascination with else they might discover about one another their date/honeymoon.

"So are you going to Vegas with me for Kate and Steve's wedding?"

Lexi was waiting in line with Andrew after the ticket agents finally arrived, as they tried to figure out their travel plans to Las Vegas, when her cell phone rang.

Hey.

Hey, you haven't decided to cancel the wedding, have you?

No, but Jordan is coming after all. Have you left for Seattle yet?

Slight change of plans. Andrew met me at Midway this morning.

No shit? That may answer my question. We've got a charter flight tomorrow morning, and Jordan's coming with us. Do you guys want to come too?

It's not daddy's plane?

No, Federal impound doesn't make exceptions for special events. Scott arranged for a charter, and we're paying for it.

Hang on, let me check.

"Kate's offering us a ride to Vegas on a charter flight tomorrow," Lexi said, interrupting Andrew's conversation with the ticket agent.

"So Steve's still trying to buy his way back into our good feelings?"

"I think he's trying to get his future wife and her friends -- Jordan's going too -- to his wedding. I don't think there is any nefarious motivation here... it would save us some money that you could spend on our date, and maybe a five-star hotel or an upgrade of our cabin on the cruise? "

"You can't trick me that easily," he said. "I still won't tell you where we're going. But having a little extra cash couldn't hurt..."

Lexi smiled at him, and squeezed his hand, before returning to her phone call.

We're in. What time and where should we meet you?

The trip to Las Vegas and everything associated with the wedding was as special as Kate had imagined it would be, and even more extravagant. Lexi, Andrew and Jordan decided to get a cab to the hotel from McLaren, and Scott would follow when he got paperwork filled out for the plane. A limo from the Bellagio picked Kate and Steve up at the airport and whisked them off to get their wedding license before taking them back to the hotel. They checked into their suite – complete with a solarium, a whirlpool, fireplaces and a sunken bar – to find a selection of dresses for the wedding and a note confirming Steve's tux appointment at Armani.

"Steve wants me to go down and get a tuxedo fitting," Andrew said after he and Lexi had settled into their suite. "I agreed to come to this wedding, not to be a character in the drama. I don't think an Armani tuxedo is going to change my perspective."

Lexi smirked, remembering the very positive impression that David Goldman's suit had created, and that was just a regular business suit. Plus, she was going to Kate's suite to try on dresses from Chanel, not exactly her regular outfit either.

"Dude. A man in a tuxedo is a chick magnet. A man in an Armani tuxedo is likely to have bridesmaids dropping their dressers at the reception."

"That better be a promise," he said, "although I can probably wait until we get back here."

"I'll try on dresses while you get fitted," Kate said. "It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her dress before the wedding."

"I'd rather see you out of your dress," he said, "and your jeans and your sweater and ..."

She looked at him, thinking she would like nothing better than to make love with him on what looked to be satin sheets on the mammoth king-sized bed, except that there would be more time later when other people weren't waiting to complete preparations for them. He seemed to read her thoughts.

"I'll order some champagne while I'm downstairs," he said, "and we can indulge later."

After he kissed her, almost passionately enough to make her change her mind about keeping people waiting, he grabbed Scott and Andrew from the suites next door, and they went down to get fittings. Kate buzzed Jordan and Lexi and together they surveyed the dress options. Clearly the royal blue silk was the best choice for Kate, and she was impressed that Steve had known her size to tell the Chanel people. She slipped the dress over her head, and after Jordan zipped her, they all knew it was perfect. One of the other dresses, also a gorgeous blue was Jordan's choice, and Lexi – although she'd probably never get another chance to wear it in the rugged Northwest – chose it as well.

"I think we should all do something together this evening," Kate suggested as they shed the dresses and went back to jeans and sweaters.

"Please don't suggest some show, even Cirque du Soleil," Lexi said. "I got Andrew here, but I can only push him so far."

"What would he enjoy?"

"Something outdoorsy."

Kate picked up the phone and punched the button for the concierge who offered her the perfect alternative. "That sounds great," Kate said. "Can you get us a rental car? And a casual dinner up here around 4 would be great."

"So, where are we going?" Jordan asked, fearing that Kate had just arranged for a rock-climbing-repelling adventure.

"Red Rock Canyon," Kate answered. "We can take a scenic drive and then if we're up for it we can do an easy evening hike of about two miles."

"A hike through the mountains and the Mojave Desert," Jordan said sarcastically, "sounds like the perfect pre-wedding activity."

As expected, Andrew loved the idea and both Steve and Scott, although not quite as traumatized by the tuxedo fitting, agreed to the plan. Scott volunteered to drive and went down to the lobby to confer transportation arrangements. Kate meanwhile tried to tidy up the suite before room service arrived to set up dinner.

She called the concierge again.

"I know this is so Eddie Murphy from 'Beverly Hills Cop,' but are there a couple guys wearing bad suits and ear phones hanging out in the lobby?"

There was a pause while he went to check. When he confirmed that she was correct and asked if she would like hotel security to deal with them, Kate laughed.

"Oh, no, I'm sure they're FBI. I would however like to send them the same casual dinner you're bringing up to us. Can you please do that?"

While he was intrigued by a guest knowing she was under FBI observation on the eve of her wedding, he agreed with her comparison to 'Beverly Hills Cop' and to her unorthodox room service request.

The 'casual dinner' was at least as formal as meals Kate had had at restaurants in Chicago, but sharing sandwiches -- roast beef with what seemed to be horseradish aioli, chicken with chipotle sauce, egg salad with caviar, portobello mushrooms with spinach and red peppers -- served with small trays of fresh fruit and vegetables, and an amazing selection of cheeses, began the activities on the right note. Several kinds of iced tea were served, and although she might've ordered wine, Kate was glad that the concierge remembered that they might be hiking later on. They also shared their narratives about tuxedo fittings -- "I think that guy grabbed my crotch. Are you jealous?" -- and about choosing bridesmaids dresses -- "It was a beautiful dress, but I think it cost more than my first car." Kate was very happy that everyone seemed comfortable and that there was no overt hostility; she saw that as a positive start to the evening.

"Are you sure we can't just go somewhere and gamble?" Jordan ask, as they drove west on the Strip toward Red Rock Canyon.

"I think that being in a car with all of you is a big enough gamble," Kate said, and Lexi reached into the front seat and put her hands around Kate's neck, pretending to strangle her.

"Oh, don't kill her yet," Andrew said joining in the discussion, "Steve's got too much invested in this wedding not to get a wedding night."

"Like there is going to be any surprise there," Lexi said sarcastically.

"You never know," Kate said casually. "I read a lot." Her implication evoked smiles and laughter, and Steve looked at her with surprise, doubt and hope.

The scenic drive of Red Rock Canyon was breathtaking. The rock formations and the different colors of the strata were both regular and intricate, and seeing the Keystone Thrust Fault was like finding the Holy Grail for Kate.

"Plate tectonics," she exclaimed, with excitement. "Come on, Jordan, you remember this from Dr. Russell's class don't you?"

"That was junior year in high school," Jordan complained. "Just because you had a thing for Dr. Russell doesn't mean that everyone in the class remembers it as well as you do."

"You had a thing with a teacher in high school?" Steve said with some amazement.

"Unless decorating bulletin boards or writing 200-page term papers or slogging through the mud on field trips count as having a thing, we didn't have a thing."

"She had a serious crush on him," Jordan continued. "Ask her if she can still name the geologic ages or Moh's scale for mineral hardness."

"Cambrian, Ordovician, Silurian, Devonian, et cetera, and a diamond is 10 on Moh's scale," Kate shot back. "That's the most important one this weekend."

"With that much geology, you'd know about the rivers cutting the canyon," Steve said, demonstrating his engineering background, "when synclines and anticlines altered the course of water flow. Strictly fluid dynamics principles."

The thirteen mile drive continued with more revelations.

"Look at all the junipers," Andrew said. "And Joshua trees, and all the rabbitbrush on the side of the road, and the manzanita on the rocks. This is landscape heaven."

"Petroglyphs!" Jordan cried, pointing to images scratched onto the sandstone. "Let me think. Probably created by one of the more nomadic Native American cultures, maybe the Anasazi who might have traveled through this area."

"How does she know that?" Steve asked with some amazement.

"She studied cultures in college, along with governments and languages..." Kate said.

"It would make sense for the Anasazi to come through here to hook up with the Southern Paiute tribes for trade, until the Army took over the land and hostilities were common," Scott added with historical military background.

"Enough," Kate said. "Are we up for a little hike?"

At that point, no one was willing to make what Kate would've called lame excuses anyway for not going on the twilight hike. They met Ranger Kathy at the Visitor Center and began their exploration.

"We call this hike our Two Sides of the Moon at the Rock, and we hope it gives you a different perspective on the conservation area under the light of the full moon," the ranger explained to start

the adventure. They followed her, listening to her give a quick rundown of 600 million years of history in the Canyon.

"The full moon is perfect," Lexi said, sharing both her astrological knowledge and her psychic insight. "It brings people together to make positive changes and to set the record straight. It's a time for coming together, a chance for opportunity, a time for renewal, a great time for playing hunches."

Andrew strayed from the path to more closely examine the desert shrub near the edge of the escarpment. "Spanish bayonet!" he said triumphantly as he lost his footing and slipped to his knees. Lexi clutched his hand, and automatically Steve seized her other hand. Kate grabbed Steve's hand, Jordan snatched Kate's hand and Scott took her other hand in both of his and steadied himself as the base of this lifeline.

"I'm okay," Andrew said. "I'm not going to fall into the canyon." He was impressed by how everyone had reacted and amazed that the chain had formed so spontaneously. But, no one was letting go, even after his assurance, and he found that funny.

"If we're all going to hold hands," he said, "are we going to sing 'KumBaYa' or 'We Are the World'?"

There was no aisle to walk down, no wedding march, simply all participants joining the justice of the peace on the terrace on a mildly cool afternoon. Kate sparkled in the sun from her joy as much as the diamonds Steve had given her. Jordan and Lexi were stunning in their dresses, and smiling with what might be unexpected happiness since both had doubts about this relationship, and whether it would go any further than just fucking like ferrets. Steve and Scott and Andrew, despite his protests, were gorgeous in their tuxedos, definite chick magnets. Lexi and Kate both knew where they were going to end up this evening, and Jordan and Scott were eyeing each other and beginning to hope that they would come to a similar conclusion.

"We are gathered here..." the justice began.

Kate had certainly heard this before, but it had special meaning today. She tried to pay attention, and she noted that Steve was concentrating on every word. Despite everything he had done, and his insistence that this was exactly what he wanted, she still had a tiny twinge of doubt, a fear that he'd choke when the moment of commitment came.

"Please repeat after me, I Stevens Hamilton MacMillan take you..."

"I Stevens Hamilton MacMillan take you Katherine Elizabeth Shaw to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward..."

She returned his vow and was a little surprised when Jordan handed her a ring to give Steve after he slid the ring Scott gave him on her finger. She exchanged a look with Jordan that conceded she had been right when she predicted that Steve probably had these rings tucked in a safe deposit box.

"By the authority of the State of Nevada, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

As promised, the Bellagio fountains exploded with splashing showers, perfectly timed to the unlikely wedding ballad "Addicted to Love." Both Jordan and Lexi knowingly rolled their eyes as Kate and Steve shared their first kiss as a married couple. Butlers from the Bellagio appeared with glasses of champagne.

"Can I make the toast?" Andrew asked, not at all certain that he'd be accepted as the appropriate person to offer the first toast of the celebration. But no one refused, and everyone looked at him expectantly. "To the very lucky young man who won over one of the smartest women I've ever known and to the woman who inspires friendships that have no limits or boundaries. I wish you great happiness in your future together."

Kate was touched and tears welled up in her eyes. Steve wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed her on the forehead. Lexi squeezed Andrew's hand, proud that he could make such a caring gesture.

"To three of the most amazing women I've ever known," Steve said, raising his glass. "Thank you all for everything."