

Kelly

(Inspired by Mike C, based on characters in his novel: “James”
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Chapter 9

The ringing of the phone did not wake Kelly up Thursday morning.

The poking in her ribs by someone in bed with her did.

“Are you going to answer that fucking thing?” Laura asked. “My head is going to explode.”

Glancing down at their nude bodies, seeing the partial glass of wine on the nightstand, and feeling the dried remains of last night’s multiple orgasms brought back a rush of memories. Kelly blushed slightly and peeled her sticky body off the bed, untangled herself from Laura and reached for the phone.

“Hello?” she said, feeling relaxed but drained.

“Hi Kelly, did I wake you?”

It was Todd. Sometimes his constant cheeriness was enough to drive her bonkers. It was especially irritating in the mornings. Kelly did not do mornings well.

“No, Todd” she replied looking at the wall clock. “I’m always up and raring to go at seven in the morning.” Cursing herself for her lack of self-control she lit up another Cameo and took a deep drag. She chased down the acidic taste with the lukewarm wine still in the glass. She could hear Todd laughing on the other end of the line. “Jesus Todd, it’s Thursday. What’s so important that it couldn’t wait until the afternoon?”

Todd, still laughing, said, “I got the proofs from the Regan shoot done. I worked all night on them and would have called you earlier but I know how cheerful you are in morning.”

Kelly should have been excited now. This was a big step up for their agency. This was the kind of work that paid the best and gave their company the greatest exposure, but her mind was still on last night.

“That’s great, Todd,” said Kelly, looking longingly at the supine, languid body of Laura. Kelly took her nails and dragged them softly, teasingly across the smooth belly of her lover.

“Well?” she asked, forcing herself to the business at hand, “How do they look?”

“Fan-fucking-tastic” was his response. “Remember that blonde... Sara? The one that came with James?”

“Yeah,” said Kelly becoming interested because Todd was not usually this enthused regarding a model. “What about her?”

“Did you see the stunt she pulled with the boat where it looked like she was airborne? Standing the boat on its tail?”

“Okay,” she thought. “Different kind of model.”

Kelly racked her memory but it was just seven in the morning and she barely recalled anything from those two days other than Brenda and the experience with James.

“Refresh my memory,” she said.

“Forget it, Kell. If you had seen it you would have remembered. Anyway, the pictures turned out fantastic. This is a no-brainer sale, and if old man Regan distributes them the way he was talking, we are going to be the hit of the next boat show circuit!”

“That’s great, Todd”

“No, wait a minute,” he continued. “There’s one shot of Sara that I want to submit to one of the major boating magazines!”

“He’s positively on fire!” Kelly thought.

“This is front cover material!” he continued. “I don’t mind the reputation boost, and our agency’s profile wouldn’t be hurt by the publicity either, but since it was on the customers dime and using his boat, we need a release form allowing me to submit it.”

“Hmmm...” Kelly was thinking out loud now. “The publicity wouldn’t hurt Regan either,” she continued. “Do you feel like taking a trip out there to deliver them personally? I can call and see if he’s available.”

“I’d love to go,” said Todd, “but you’ll have to make the arrangements. I want to crash for a few hours. Call me if Regan wants to see what he hired the best for.”

“Okay,” said Kelly. “If I don’t wake you up with a call, then obviously today is a no go, but if it’s a go, I’ll give you time to make yourself look human first.” She was laughing quietly as she hung up the phone.

As much as Kelly wanted to climb back into bed with Laura, she called Regan's. It was still early, but the plant was open and after explaining to the receptionist who she was, she was instantly patched through to Chuck's office.

"Good morning, Kelly," he said. "I was just having coffee with Brenda and Amanda. Brenda just arrived back this morning. She's also brought her friend Amanda."

"My God," thought Kelly. "Has it only been a week? It felt like a lifetime ago!"

Kelly explained her reason for calling.

"You're telling me the brochure is done?" Chuck asked.

"Just so we're perfectly clear Mr. Regan, the film has been developed and the proofs are done. This is what you contracted TKO for. I'm sure you have your own choice of printer for the brochure, but if not I can certainly put you in touch with a few of the best in the country."

"You're right of course, Kelly, I do have a company that does all my copy-editing and printing. I guess I just assumed it would take longer before I would see the prints. I've had lots of ad agency photographers over the years, but never one that delivered in such a timely fashion. If the pictures are any good, I will owe my friend who recommended your agency a bottle of my best wine."

Kelly was smiling to herself as he said this. Had it not been for the delay in getting Sherri's contract signed, Todd probably would have finished the pictures by Monday.

"I'm quite sure you'll like the pictures, Mr. Regan. I haven't seen the proofs yet, but Todd was very excited when he called me a few minutes ago. He worked all night on them, and you know we put our reputation on the line with every shoot we do, and as it says in the contract, if you don't like the results, you don't pay a cent."

"That was another reason I thought I would give your company a try," said Chuck. "I like to see that kind of self assuredness in all the people I do business with." He sighed. "Regretfully, these days, for most companies CYA is SOP."

Kelly laughed.

"And please," he added, "No more Mr. Regan. Just call me Chuck."

"Okay Mr. ... Chuck, I understand you spoke to Todd about us flying in?" Kelly asked.

"That's right, Kelly, as long as you don't try to land in my lake with a modified L-1011, you should have plenty of space."

Chuck Regan was as excited to see the pictures for his new brochure as Todd was about showing the results. Kelly explained Todd's special request and Chuck was quite obliging, telling

her to bring along the consent form and even suggested that since he advertised in nearly all the boating magazines he would be glad to be of help in making sure it got to the right person. They made arrangements to meet after lunch and Chuck insisted they stay for dinner at his house.

“Wow,” thought Kelly as she hung up the phone. “His mood and disposition has really changed since the week of the shoot.”

Kelly next called Chris and asked how long it would take before his floatplane would be ready to fly and if he had a pilot available.

Chris told Kelly he would have the Cessna 170 floatplane fueled, inspected and ready to roll in three hours.

“Thanks, Chris, will there be any problems coming back? We might be a little on the late side.”

“How late are you talking, Kelly?”

“Possibly as late as 8.”

“Hmm... It won't really be dark yet, but that's a long time for the pilot to sit around. Especially with how busy we are right now. Is there any chance of you staying the night and getting picked up the next morning? If not, I'll have him drop you off and I'll come and pick you up myself when you're ready to head back. I'll give you a special rate for any inconvenience.”

“You're a sweetheart, Chris. Let me check to see what we have on the go and what kind of accommodations they have there. Maybe it would be better if we stayed the night. I'll let you know just as soon as I know. But we will definitely be flying out at 1 o'clock, okay?”

“You got it!”

As Kelly hung up the phone she felt a hand slide around her waist and work its way up to tweak her nipple as a soft mouth kissed her back.

“Another trip?” Laura asked.

“I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I'm afraid so. I'm just trying to figure out what to do now. If we come back late, we're going to be bushed and rushed. This is a lucrative deal for us, and I don't want to screw it up by watching a clock.”

“So why not spend the night? There must be a sleazy motel you and Todd can spend the night at,” Laura laughed.

“Oh God. I hadn't even thought about that. We've shared rooms before, but that was before...”

“So? Why not take the opportunity to get better acquainted?”

“Without you there? I’m not sure, Laura.”

“Well, you can always do what you did in the past and pretend what happened the other night didn’t happen, but you’ll be missing out on an experience. Trust me.”

“Maybe,” said Kelly. “Are you sure you’d be okay with this if it did happen?”

Laura laughed as she rolled off the bed, pulled Kelly up and hugged her tight. “Kelly, I love you, and I love Todd. I also know that Todd loves you as well as he loves me. Love grows as you share it, it doesn’t diminish.” To emphasize her point, Laura trailed a wet tongue over Kelly’s neck, gently nibbling on the tender areas.

“Mmm... you smell good,” said Laura kissing Kelly’s throat.

“That’s because I smell like you!”

Laughing and kissing Laura and Kelly fell back on the bed.

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Just after 9, freshly showered, the girls were having breakfast and vitamins together. Breakfast of course consisted of fruit and raw vegetables. They were discussing what Laura would be doing with her free time when Gloria came in.

Gloria saw the two girls sitting, laughing and smiles on their faces. She had never seen Kelly so happy. This wasn’t the way she had expected to see Kelly happy, but the Obi-man had said Laura was going to play a large part in Kelly’s happiness and future. He had also said something else to “G,” something she had not even told her daughter. She just smiled at Kelly with the secret knowledge deep inside.

“Good morning, G,” said Kelly with a beaming smile on her face. “You remember Laura?”

“Morning baby gal,” said Gloria, “Ya man, me remember Miss Laura.”

“Please Gloria, just call me Laura, otherwise I’ll have to call you Mrs. Clarke.”

Gloria laughed, “Cha, you no call me that. Let it be, you friend wit my chil’, you call me G.”

Laura laughed as well. “Okay, then it’s settled. I’m Laura and you are G.”

Kelly had hidden her face and her smile during this exchange. After four years of trying, Todd still couldn't get Gloria to call him anything other than Mister Todd.

Gloria was shaking her head as she put the kettle on to make her morning cup of Blue Mountain instant coffee.

As G sat at the table lecturing the girls on the need for a more substantial breakfast, Laura mentioned what a delightful daughter Gloria had.

"Ya, me proud of her, but ya know, that girl, she got a gift of the gab. Me fret she talk too much. Big problem that."

"No," said Laura realizing she should not mention the discussion about Gloria's spiritual consultant. "She was just telling me how beautiful it was where she grew up. St. James Parish?"

"Very beautiful, but no opportunity fee me kids."

Kelly excused herself and made a phone call to the tourist center in Jacksonville asking for names of motels close to Regan's. Half an hour later she had booked herself and Todd into a room. She then called Chris back and confirmed they would be staying the night and arranged for a pickup time the next day just after lunch.

Kelly could hear Gloria and Laura discussing Miss Cleo and Gloria in an excited voice proclaiming the woman as a fraud and had never practiced anything from the psychic world in Jamaica. As G got more vocal her English dropped further into patois and Kelly smiled as she realized Laura was not only keeping up, but was starting to use some of the same expressions.

Kelly was happy. Gloria had always been a good judge of people and if she liked Laura then it was a good sign.

Kelly remembered Chuck saying Brenda had just had coffee with him and she knew from Brenda's email that she was supposed to be back at Regan's today so the next call she made was to her.

As her fingers dialed the phone she realized she was shaking with anticipation. She had not seen Brenda in over a week and though both Kelly and Todd were planning to attend the grand opening of the Marina's new "Wheel" office in a week, she couldn't wait to see Brenda. She needed to talk to Brenda. Hell, she plain needed Brenda right now. So much had changed since the last time when Brenda had asked Kelly if she trusted her.

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"Hello?"

"Brenda?" Kelly asked, a catch in her voice.

“Kelly!” said Brenda, her voice brimming with joy and happiness. “How are you feeling, Honey?”

Kelly started to say she and Todd would be visiting that afternoon, but Brenda told her that she had already heard the news.

“Tell me the rest of what’s going on in your life, Kelly. I was getting a little bit worried about you based on your emails.”

“I think you turned me into a lesbian,” Kelly whispered.

Brenda snorted. “Bullshit. If you were inclined that way you would never have tried to hit on James.”

“Yes, but I’ve had two really bad experiences with former boyfriends over the weekend, and yet last night I had a fantastic time with a girl.”

“And this is what you’re basing your conclusion on?” Brenda asked laughing.

“Well, no... the night before Todd and I got physical as well, something we always said wouldn’t happen, but we weren’t alone.”

“Sounds interesting,” said Brenda. “Who was the other person? Wait, let me guess... the girl you spent last night with.”

“How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” said Brenda. “How did it turn out?”

“It was good I guess,” said Kelly, “It didn’t go, you know, all the way, but it was satisfying and fun.”

“Just not as good as last night though, right?”

“Last night was different, Brenda!”

Brenda looked up and saw Rick, one of the young technicians hovering around her desk. Covering the mouthpiece she told him to find something useful to do, out of her sight. Alone again, she turned her full attention to her friend on the phone. “What do you mean, Kelly? Why was last night different than the night before?”

“Well, the night before was like it was planned. Do this first, and then do that. It was more like connect the dots than making love.”

Brenda laughed. “That’s okay, Kell, I’ve been having a devil of a time getting people to stop playing connect the dots with my freckles. But you said it was fun and satisfying. That sounds like a step in the right direction to me, so what’s the problem?”

“It just wasn’t the same as last night. Oh Jesus. I don’t understand this. I really love Todd and want it to be the same with him as it is with Laura, but it’s not.”

“Laura, huh. Nice name. So tell me what’s different with her alone than when you’re with Todd?”

“This is going to sound really stupid, Brenda, but when I’m with Laura, I feel like a real woman.”

“Did James make you feel like a real woman?”

“James...? Yeah, well, even though we didn’t do anything except for me humping his leg. God, I still can’t believe I did that.”

“That’s okay, sweetie,” said Brenda, “You just need to learn how to enjoy men. You’re coming later today? How about we spend some time together and work this out?”

“Thanks, Brenda... I knew I could count on you.”

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Kelly lit up another and contemplated calling Todd. Knowing he could be showered and dressed in minutes, Kelly decided to let him sleep a few hours more.

She re-entered the kitchen to a heated debate on the merits of Brad Pitt’s new bride. Gloria of course was devastated.

Kelly put the kettle on and made a pot of tea. “Well, it looks like we’ll be off again this afternoon, hopefully back tomorrow.”

“Don’ fret pon it chil’, tings gunna be a’right. Run ‘long now, go tek care ya business.”

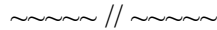
“Thanks, G,” said Kelly. “Once this job is out of the way, we should be home a bit longer. Todd has that gymnastic equipment shoot to do and that will keep us in town for a while.”

As Kelly poured the tea, Laura said, “Well, at least this way I get plenty of time to study and catch up to the rest of my class.”

“One day girl, it’ll be you that’s off running to catch a plane,” Kelly laughed. “We’ll be the ones staying behind.”

“I doubt you’ll ever stand still too long, Kell. Something in you just drives you to succeed.”

Gloria nodded in agreement.



Kelly packed a small overnight bag with a few changes of clothing and underwear, her makeup case and slipped into a pair of safari shorts and a light cotton blouse. Laura helped her tie her hair back into a tight roll held together with a wooden comb. That, and an oversize shoulder purse carrying all the essentials she might need on the trip was all she needed.

It was getting on to 11 so they drove back to the studio in Laura's car. She would have the honor of waking Todd up.

Friendly greetings at the studio with Vanetta and Laura rushed upstairs while Kelly explained to Vanetta about the impending trip. As she waited for Todd, she read over the morning mail, updated her database and took a Gravol for motion sickness chasing it down with a bottle of mineral water. Knowing her smoking time would shortly be limited she indulged herself as she heard the shower running upstairs.

Todd and Laura came down the stairs both with huge smiles. Even Kelly had to smile. Laura could be insatiable!

Todd had thrown on a set of scrubs, packed another pair and a few t-shirts into an old canvas bag, running shoes without socks though he had at least packed a couple of pair as well as underwear.

Out of the closet he took his travel camera, filled a small artice cooler pack with film from the fridge, slipped in a few chemical cold packs to keep the film cool, checked his batteries and packed it all in a polished aluminum case.

"Todd, you haven't even combed your hair," said Kelly.

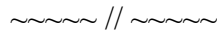
Todd looked at her in surprise, then shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. Everything fell into place. "All set?"

Wincing from the scathing look Kelly threw his way, he gave Laura his cell phone. "It's fully charged, sweetheart. Just leave it on and I can call you from Kelly's. When we get back we'll have to get you one of your own because in this business, you never know where you'll be when you're needed."

Kisses and hugs exchanged, Todd and Kelly took a cab to the airport.

The flight was uneventful and the pilot comfortable with water landings. Receiving permission to land, they were directed to a dock where they were greeted by the technician who had cleared the lake traffic for them. As the Cessna took off again the boats headed back into the lake

and the technician led them to a side door opening on a walkway that took them directly to the main office.



During the flight, Todd had shown Kelly the 11" x 14" glossy prints he had made the night before. Kelly was impressed, and knew that Chuck would be amazed. It filled his criteria to the letter, and the quality and lighting was perfect.

Announcing themselves at the main reception area, they were asked to have a seat and that Mr. Regan would be down shortly. They had barely seated themselves when Chuck bounded down the stairs from the upper offices.

"Kelly, Todd," he said, shaking hands with both of them. "Good to see you again!" Chuck sat down beside them in the spacious reception area and offered them drinks. Kelly asked for a diet 7-up while Todd, the real caffeine addict, asked for coffee. Chuck asked the receptionist to arrange for it and then turned to Todd.

"I understand you've got something exciting to show me, Todd," he said.

Todd smiled and opened his portfolio case. Although Todd had shown them to her on the plane, Kelly still got a rush seeing that first picture of Sara standing Chuck's stepped hull on its stern. Its stark angular lines only helped accentuate the smooth curves of its driver. Her blond hair billowing behind her while her hands gripped the controls and a smile of pure satisfaction on her face showed her complete mastery of the boat.

"Sweet Jesus," Chuck mumbled turning the picture from side to side. "Look at that control, and the spray coming off the stern," he said. "It makes you want to go and sail forever." Todd just smiled.

The drinks arrived and Chuck still couldn't take his eyes off the photo. Finally he said, "That girl... she did more than stand the boat on end, she and her friends have managed to stand the industry on its end." He looked up at both of them. "I want you both to know how pleased I am that you brought this group out here." Looking at Kelly he asked if they were all under contract to the agency.

Kelly thought quickly. The contract was legal and binding of course, but they had been hired for a brochure, not a secondary promotion campaign. But she knew that the "James Gang" was involved with Chuck now on a business level as well.

"Mr. Regan," she began carefully, "we billed you scale rate, and paid scale to the group to be fill-ins for background, and our contract was for pictures for an ad brochure..." She held up her hand as she saw him start to speak. "However, it is one of the best action shots Todd has ever captured and we won't charge anything for any other use of this photo for publicity purposes." She turned to Todd. "Is that kosher for you Todd?"

Todd quickly nodded his enthusiastic response.

“That leaves only Sara to clear it with then,” Kelly said. “And since the ‘James Gang’ has other business dealings with you, I think this can be settled between you and their company. We’ll even forego any fees if she agrees to your using it.”

Chuck looked at Kelly closely for a few minutes, no sign of emotion could be read on his face. “They hooked you too didn’t they?” he finally asked breaking out in a smile.

Kelly and Todd both laughed.

“They are an unusual group,” Kelly said, “and yes, we got hooked the same.”

“Mr. Regan,” Todd started.

“Please,” Chuck interrupted. “Call me Chuck.”

“Okay then, Chuck,” Todd continued, “I’d like to get your permission to submit this to various boat magazines.”

“Yes, Kelly mentioned that on the phone this morning,” Chuck said, “but tell me, Todd, how would you feel if I placed this in the biggest one, ‘International Powercraft,’ as a pull out poster? Double page? That will guarantee it being on the cover as well.”

Todd’s mouth dropped open. “That would cost you a fortune,” he finally managed to get out.

“Not quite as much as you might think, Todd. You see, the magazines also want something spectacular that people would put on their walls instead of the inside of a bird cage. They’ll absorb most of the cost if we let them put the name of their magazine in...” He paused and looked at the picture again. “Say in this corner here,” pointing to a blank section of water. “Our name will go underneath as the builder and yours and the TKO logo will be directly below that.”

Looking at Kelly for approval, which he got in the form of a smile, Todd grabbed Chuck’s hand and said, “You’ve got yourself a deal!”

Chuck laughed and asked Todd how large they could make a print from the original without losing quality. Todd assured him that with the Hasselblad’s larger format, they could easily enlarge in segments up to wall size.

“That’s great!” Chuck said, “Because that is just what I want to do with that main wall across from the reception desk,” pointing at a wall that currently held smaller pictures of the different Regan boats.

“Now what say we go upstairs and plan on lighting a few fires under the sales staff,” he said with a smile. Turning to Kelly he said, “And I know there is someone here who has been asking about the time of your arrival every half hour or so.”

Kelly hoped her blush wasn’t showing.

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Ten minutes later they were seated in Chuck’s office in nice plush leather chairs, fresh drinks at their sides. Chuck had his secretary contact their local Digital Print and Copy center to dispatch a pick-up courier. Because he was Chuck Regan he was told that everything would be put aside to run this job through the minute it arrived. He ordered five 20” x 30” prints, and 100 8” x 10” glossies. Apologetically he told Todd that he knew it wouldn’t quite be up to the quality of the original print, but he wanted to put them on the wall so people could see them without having to pass the original around.

“Why the glossies?” Todd asked.

“Because I know that Sara is going to get a lot of requests for autographed pictures,” said Chuck with a knowing smile.

Kelly placed a call to Sara at the marina. She had to wait some time before Sara could make it to the phone but had an interesting chat with JulieAnn. Kelly explained to Sara what had transpired and that she was entitled to renegotiate for this shot. Sara discussed this with Jules while Kelly stayed on hold and when she came back on line said, “So I’m going to be a centerfold model?”

Kelly laughed at that. She hadn’t thought of it quite that way, but yes, technically she would be. “Yes, complete with the staple on your navel!”

“Cool!” said Sara. “Wait until my folks hear about this! My dad’s going to have a heart attack!”

Sara said she had to get back to finishing work on a boat she was demonstrating later, but to fax the paperwork and she’d sign it.

JulieAnn came back on the line and asked if they could find time to meet the two gymnasts. “They’re going to be in Brookhaven on Monday for lunch. Sara will be demonstrating a boat we fine-tuned. I realize it’s short notice, but...”

“No, that’s okay, JulieAnn. Sherri’s father had told us about going to Harbour Town this weekend for golf. From his enthusiasm, it sounds like a great golf get-a-way. Besides, we’ll be here until tomorrow and there’s really no need for us to rush back to Charlotte for the weekend. We’ll just have to see about accommodations and renting a car. Let me get back to you on this, okay?”

Kelly hung up the phone and turned to Todd. "Feel like spending the weekend in South Carolina? Those gymnasts are going to be where Doctor Prevan is playing golf this weekend, though they won't get there until Monday."

"A weekend at a golf resort?" asked Todd, "You're kidding me, right?"

"Are you talking about Brookhaven?" asked Chuck. "If you are, then it's much more than a golf resort. It's actually a beautiful island with wildlife sanctuaries and of course lots of boats. It's a prime vacation spot."

Kelly knew what Todd was thinking. "Chris is sending the plane back tomorrow anyway, we could have him fly Laura down to join us."

"It's really busy at Brookhaven this time of year," Chuck continued, "I doubt I could get you a place on the south end of the Island on this short notice, but there's a Hampton Inn directly across Short Creek. That's the commercial area and right next to the marina. I've got a few connections there. If you like, I'll make sure you get one of their best business suites and I'll have one of my boats take you there tomorrow." Chuck then asked his secretary to book them into a two bedroom executive suite with a living room.

"That's really kind of you, Chuck," said Todd. "We really appreciate that."

"Guess I better make a few more calls too," said Kelly. She called Chris and explained the change in plans, and then called Laura, telling her to pack for a weekend holiday and where to meet Chris in the morning. Finally she contacted Jules to confirm the Monday lunch meeting.

"Where are you two planning on spending tonight?"

Kelly told him that they were booked at a nearby motel.

"Nonsense." Chuck said. "You'll stay at the house with us."

Todd looked at Kelly who looked back at Todd. This was so different from the man who had hired them.

Todd said, "Thanks, Chuck. We'd love to!"

With all the arrangements made, Chuck smiled and asked them if they wanted to go to their rooms and freshen up. Todd was all in agreement, hoping to catch a few more hours of sleep, but Kelly hesitated.

"Don't you worry, Kelly," Chuck said with a smile, "I haven't forgotten."

Chuck asked his secretary to page Brenda. "Just tell her there's a problem here only she can solve. Ask her to please hurry."

Turning to Todd and Kelly he once again thanked them for bringing this group into his life.

Looking directly at Kelly he said, “Did I hear you correctly downstairs when you referred to them as the James Gang?”

Kelly laughed and asked if Chuck had met the entire group yet. Chuck said with a wry smile he had only just met the entire group on Monday. Kelly and Todd both laughed. “Quite a team, aren’t they?” asked Kelly.

“Well,” said Chuck. “If Brenda is any example of dealing with them full time, I’m sure that my life will be the richer for it. I like all of them, and Amanda is here with Brenda this week. They are truly an amazing group. Brenda has been here nearly full time since last Thursday staying up at the house with Anna and me. She has been both a breath of fresh air and a candle in a dark room for us. The house hasn’t been this lively or happy in many years.”

“Chuck,” asked Todd, “do you understand anything about this Ferris wheel showroom at Max’s?”

Chuck looked at him strangely for a moment and then laughed. “Yes Todd, I do know a bit about it,” he said and then started to explain Mueller’s Wheel.

After a couple of minutes Todd started laughing as well, finally understanding.

A solid knock at the door interrupted any further conversation and Brenda entered the room. Kelly looked at her and a lump formed in her throat.

Brenda spotted Kelly, grabbed her by the waist as she was getting out of her chair and gave her a big long hug.

“Hi, Kelly,” Brenda said with a twinkle in her eye. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too, Brenda,” said Kelly her eyes misting over.

Still holding on to Kelly, Brenda said Hi to Todd and to Chuck she said, “This had better be what was important Chuck cause as of now, I’m off the clock!”

Chuck just laughed. He still didn’t understand all of the interpersonal dynamics of the “James Gang,” but he knew enough never to argue with a winning combo.

“I was only going to ask you to show our friends to the guest rooms, Brenda,” he said with a smile.

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Brenda led them to the house. “Separate rooms?” she asked with a smirk.

Todd and Kelly looked at each other.

“Oh, this is just plain silly,” said Kelly. “We had only booked one room at the motel. Just one room, that’s all we need.”

Todd laughed and unpacked his bag.

Anna heard voices and came to investigate. She remembered Todd and Kelly, and with all the grace a young lady could muster greeted them with a happy smile.

Todd was captivated by her delicate childlike features that were offset by her dark, beguiling eyes; eyes that seemed to have seen too much. He hadn’t noticed those eyes last week. Something had changed in this little girl’s life.

Sleep was suddenly the last thing on Todd’s mind. He had to capture those eyes.

“Anna, why don’t you show Todd the garden and the swinging tree,” Brenda said. “I’ve got some business to talk over with Kelly.”

Anna grabbed Brenda’s arm as she looked at Todd. “Is he a bag of candies too?” she asked.

Brenda smiled at the little girl. “Yes sweetheart, but somebody else’s candy.”

Todd was looking at Anna, then he said solemnly, “Ms. Regan, I would like to take your picture, may I?”

“Sure!” She giggled, “What do I have to do?”

“Just be your beautiful self,” smiled Todd.

Todd looked at Brenda, “Brenda, can you find something light, a pale beige top for her? I want to do a natural light portrait. Kell, can you accent the eyes? I’d like more depth. Shadow both top and bottom lids in a light charcoal shade. Not too dark, thin out the lips a little and maybe tie her hair up on her head? Do you mind?”

Brenda was already thinking of how Chuck was not going to like this, but took Anna and exchanged her t-shirt for a camisole and for good measure added a hand crocheted shawl of natural cotton thread.

Before long Anna was decked out in off white colors and her hair done up in a high spray, exposing her ears with slight wisps of hair just noticeably brushing her cheeks. Her eyes, the ones in which Todd saw such knowledge and sadness were now highlighted to amazing depth and maturity. Anna’s face was a fascinating study of the conflicts between a child and a woman.

Grabbing his camera case Todd held out his arm to Anna who took it gracefully. What Todd didn't know, and couldn't know, was that Brenda and Kelly had managed to transform little Anna into a younger version of her mother. They strolled out together leaving Brenda and Kelly alone together for the first time in a week.

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Pulling back from a soft kiss, Kelly whispered, "I couldn't stop thinking about you all week, you totally spoiled me for any man."

Brenda laughed. The two girls were sitting on Brenda's bed and she had taken the precaution of locking the door to ensure their privacy.

"Now you know that's not true, Kelly, you told me you had a good time with Todd when Laura was there with you."

"But that's just it. I think I did it more for a chance to be with Laura than for Todd. I mean I really love him and he makes me feel good but..."

"But what, Kelly?" asked Brenda as she softly stroked Kelly's cheek.

Kelly sighed and allowed Brenda to pull her close. "With a man I feel like I'm just another conquest. It's so predictable."

"Is that the way it was with Todd?"

"Well, no, he was much more considerate and gentle with me but..."

"No Kelly, no buts. He was different with you because he loves you and cares for you." Brenda was stroking Kelly's arms now, sending goose bumps up and down Kelly's body.

"I guess I'm just not used to being treated like anything other than a trophy fuck," she said sadly.

"I think it's that and a bit more, sweetheart. Remember when you convinced us to let you kiss James? You tried to set the pace and the speed of the entire episode. I think you've become used to just giving it up for the man of the hour and then setting the pace to get things over with."

Kelly slowly and with tentative fingers reached out and stroked Brenda's breasts until her nipples became stiff.

The two girls leaned towards each other and shared a long passionate kiss.

"Mmm, I like that, but keep talking," Brenda said as she slipped her hand under Kelly's blouse.

“James just caught me off guard is all,” said Kelly as she helped Brenda remove her top.

“No, I think he broke your rhythm of how fast things should move along and that’s why you responded like you did. You weren’t in charge any more.”

“What? I’m never in charge!” declared Kelly.

As the girls repositioned themselves on the bed so they could leisurely stroke each other, Brenda asked, “Okay, so with you and Laura, she took charge, right?”

“Argh... No! That’s not how it happened either. It just happened. She’s fun, loving and caring and somehow we just ended up in bed together.”

Brenda stopped nibbling on Kelly’s nipple long enough to say, “So it wasn’t planned. Kind of like you and me last week.”

“Mmm... Yeah, just like that. You and I were goofing around and things moved on from there. I guess with Laura it was the same way.”

“And on the night that Todd participated, did you let things just happen or did you start off by thinking who was going to do what and how?”

Kelly suddenly tensed and sat up.

“I do take charge, don’t I?” Wistfully, she added, “I told myself, once, that I would never be used, never be manipulated... So long... So long ago...” Tears formed in her eyes and she turned her back to Brenda, feet on the floor and covered her face.

Brenda snuggled up behind her, hugging her, letting Kelly cry as she came to terms with her own demons.

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“Why do you want to take my picture?” asked Anna.

“Because little angel, you’ve changed since last week. I know that look, and I want to capture it on film.”

With a bit of defiance in her voice, Anna asked, “What look?”

Todd looked at her and smiled a sad smile. “The look that says you’ve seen something that hurt you.”

“I did not!”

“It’s okay, Anna.” Todd knelt down so they were eye to eye. “I won’t tell anybody and I won’t pester you about it. I think you are a very mature young lady with incredible strength. It’s not easy knowing something that you can’t share.”

Anna’s eyes started to brim with tears. “I promised not to tell.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart. No one is going to know. Just be strong.”

“But how did you know?”

Todd laughed gently. “If I tell you will you dry your eyes and let me take your picture?”

Anna nodded.

“Okay, this is a secret too. Look at my eyes and you’ll see the same thing, Kelly’s too. If you want to see the difference look at Brenda’s. You’ll see pretty quick that Kelly has the same look as me and you, but Brenda doesn’t.”

Anna looked closely and did some serious thinking.

“I understand,” she finally said. “I didn’t realize it before. You know who else has sad eyes? My Grandpa. Does it ever go away?”

Todd hugged the fragile little girl. “It goes away for a while if something makes you really happy, but unless the problem is fixed, it always comes back.”

Todd positioned her in front of the swinging tree. The dark wood made a beautiful contrast to her blonde hair and her pale outfit. Kelly had done a super job bringing more depth to Anna’s eyes, yet in a subtle way.

“Should I smile?” asked Anna.

This was the difficult part. Todd didn’t want to hurt the little girl any more than she had been.

“How about you think about your special secret,” Todd suggested and immediately Anna’s face changed from a little girl to one of a mature adult who had seen tremendous pain. Yet even through that pain there was the face of a beautiful child.

Bracketing his exposures, Todd snapped off an entire roll of high-density film, moving all the time, zooming in and out with his lens. Anna’s eyes followed him constantly though her body never moved.

“Oh my God!” Chuck’s voice sounded from behind Todd, then in a whisper, “Deanna?”

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He stumbled towards them with tears stinging his eyes. He had left the office after a meeting with the sales staff. He had been enthused like he hadn't been in a long time and as he did whenever he had something on his mind, he went to Helene's garden to have a talk with her.

He had not been a happy man for a long time, Chuck suddenly realized. He missed his wife. He missed his daughter. Anna helped fill the void left by the two women he loved, but for years he had slid deeper and deeper into a depression, becoming reclusive and controlling.

Then a week ago a group of kids had come to help out with the brochure shoot. They were just kids. Oh sure they were nice enough, even knew something about boating and perfect as models. But they hadn't been there one day before one of them, Sara, had told him what was wrong with his boat. He had been furious. This girl had actually scolded him for being stubborn and did something with his boat, something that was so unconventional, so simple and, in retrospect, so ingenious. And she had been right too, but she wasn't satisfied and pointed out an embarrassing sideslip problem. He had stomped off to his tech people wanting to know why they hadn't caught this problem.

After he had cooled down, he had to admit this group of kids knew their stuff. What the hell they were doing modeling was beyond him. He invited them to spend the night and for the first time in a long time had smiled and laughed. James, Brenda, Sara and Sherri. They had made the evening something to remember. They were far from typical teens. He had discovered they were troubleshooters in a number of areas, and even had a contract researching for InterCoastal. But he had managed to contract their services to help his design team and the redheaded one, Brenda had stayed and in one day designed a brand new hull using a revolutionary method that would turn the world of boating upside down. The design was not without some technical problems, but her approach to it had been so unique and she had managed to pull all the staff together, working like a team. Something he had not been able to do since his daughter had left his life.

It had been a glorious weekend having Brenda in the house. She surprised him at every turn and Anna adored her. He had felt the years dropping off of him like weights. Then he had flown her back to their base of operations and met the rest of the group. What he wouldn't give to have them all working for him. And then he had. Given it all. Now the plant was working with renewed enthusiasm and spirit. Brenda was back as well as that pixie Amanda.

Amanda. He still didn't know what to make of her. She was a born speed demon and could make a boat perform as nobody could. She had a way of knowing just when the setup was right and, last seen, she was up to her armpits in grease with the mechanics in the garage. She was a bit too affectionate for comfort, but perhaps that was just his age talking. Maybe teenagers are just different kinds of people.

He thought again of his daughter Deanna. Maybe if he had seen her with a bit more compassion he would know where she was now and he could try to mend things with her and to unsay those things he had said.

Chuck sighed and strolled out of the garden. “Oh Helene, if you could only see the changes.” He thought back to the picture Todd had taken of Sara, how proud he had felt, as if she was his... his own daughter. His eyes were misty as he headed towards the swinging tree when his breath caught in his throat.

Deanna was back!

“Oh my God...”

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“No Grandpa... It’s me, Anna.”

Chuck froze in his tracks. He realized his eyes and desires had played a cruel trick on him. Todd was obviously taking pictures of his granddaughter.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just an old man’s eyes and memory. You look beautiful Anna. Just like your mother.”

“If you miss her, Grandpa, why don’t we try and find her? I’ve seen it done on TV lots of times. You call this detective and he can find anybody who’s missing.”

It hurt Anna to lie to her grandfather like this, but she had promised her mother she wouldn’t tell where she was, but, in her own young mind she justified that convincing her grandfather to look for her wasn’t breaking her promise. Besides, he seemed to miss her so much.

Todd looked at him but stayed silent.

Chuck gave way to an awkward smile. “My daughter, Anna’s mother, we had a falling out when she was still a teenager. I didn’t make life very easy on her and I’m afraid I’ve lost her for good.”

“I understand, Chuck. Maybe better than you know. I haven’t seen or spoken to my parents in 10 years, but if you have the stomach for it, ask Kelly for HER story. I’ll bet you never treated your daughter the way Kelly’s parents treated her. Anna’s right. If you want to find your daughter, just get on the phone. The world is just a village now and finding people is a lot easier than it ever was.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to be found?” Chuck sighed. “Thanks, Todd. I’ll think about it.” With those words he walked away deep in thought.

Todd turned to Anna. “I think I know what you’ve learned in the last week.”

“Please don’t say anything, Todd. They have to work it out themselves. It’ll ruin everything if you let on that you know.”

Todd smiled. She was still so young and innocent but mature beyond her years. “Don’t you worry, angel. I’m an expert at knowing nothing.”

Anna laughed. “Well, I know something else.”

“And what would that be?” Todd asked.

“None of the girls here, not Amanda or Brenda or your girlfriend wear bras!”

Todd laughed out loud. “Well Anna, that is pretty observant of you, but I had noticed that myself. I also noticed you’re not wearing one! And Kelly is my partner, not my girlfriend.”

Anna blushed. “Well, if she’s not your girlfriend, then why do your eyes go all mushy when you look at her?”

“Okay, little lady. I think we’ve got enough pictures. Let’s put the film on ice and get a cold drink.”

“Okay. Huh! It’s not just Grandpa who’s good at changing the subject when he wants to avoid the truth.”

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Kelly and Brenda had moved out to the patio where Kelly could smoke. And she badly needed one. Her eyes were red rimmed from an hour of crying and she was using Todd’s icepacks for her eyes as well as for the headache that had started.

Kelly hadn’t bothered putting her blouse back on, and with a shrug, Brenda left her T-shirt off as well. Chuck was at the plant; Todd and Anna were off taking pictures... Besides, it was a lot like life at the Eyrie.

“The way I see it,” said Brenda, “You’ve spent years being told how to stand, how to walk and when to sit... everything. Then when you weren’t on show, you didn’t know how to act. But you soon found out that men wanted you, although you knew they didn’t love you, so you became the one to set the rules and the conditions because you knew that you would eventually be obligated to end up in bed with them, so you learned to set the pace.”

“God, am I that transparent?”

“No honey, it’s just that I’ve watched you work, remember?”

“What do you see, Bren?” asked Kelly. “Please, tell me honestly how I look to other people.”

Brenda smiled and said, "You look foxy!"

"Brenda!"

"Okay, I'll be serious for a minute. You look confident and self-assured when you're working. It's because you know all the answers and can take care of anything that comes up. But when you let your guard down... when you don't have to be in charge, there's a playful side to your nature. Good humored and funny. You really can be a girl's best friend."

"Then what happened when I pestered you girls to let me kiss James?"

"Ah, now we see the other side of Kelly. You haven't been treated very well by men in your life, have you?"

Kelly took another cigarette out, lit it up, took a deep drag and looked away. After a while she said, "That might be the understatement of the year."

"And that's why you have a split personality."

Kelly's head snapped up, "What?"

Brenda laughed and patted Kelly's hand. "No sweetie, not that kind of split personality. It's just how you deal with men. I've seen how you act and work around Chuck and other men when it's business. As long as sex stays out of the picture, you can get along with them just fine. That's why you managed so well at the marina after Amanda told you that James was off limits and she reminded him that he was to keep his hands to himself. He became 'safe' for you and you got along fine with him."

"But then last week when you wanted to know what made him so special, and we let you find out, he was a sexual male again in your eyes and you took charge. If it weren't for the fact that James is such an adorable and loving goofball you would have just ended up disappointed and disillusioned again. But James really respects women and knows how to make them feel good. He broke your pace and that's why you were forced to let go. And once you weren't in charge, you really relaxed and enjoyed yourself."

"Does that mean I have to let the man take the lead?" Kelly asked.

"No, because real love is shared and nobody should be in charge. The pace is set by both parties for their mutual pleasure, and it's different each time or situation, and how much each wants to do. There is no simple plan for making love. You can create one for having sex, but not for making love. When you and I spend special time together, do you think we're having sex?"

"No, and that's the funny thing. I tried explaining that to Laura. I said that for the first time I really made love."

“And what about you and Laura? Did you make love or have sex?”

“Oh, Brenda,” Kelly laughed. “We made love all night long and it was the greatest sex ever!”

Even Brenda laughed. “See... Making love is not about giving up control, it’s about allowing yourself to share with somebody. To enjoy an encounter with somebody you care about.”

“And last week... Did you care about me then?” asked Kelly.

“Oh Kelly, I love you. You were so good with all of us. You were fun to be around, you could get things done, and you were foxy as hell! I would have loved to have had you for a sister growing up.”

Kelly took Brenda’s hand and kissed each of her fingers. “And I would have loved to have had you for a sister and a friend.”

“So, what about Todd. Do you really love him?”

“More than I could ever say, Brenda. For a quarter of my life he had been my best friend and the closest thing I’ve had to family.”

“And are you ready to take your relationship to the next level now?”

“Yeah, I think so, but I feel like a virgin all over again. I’m all nervous and jittery.”

“Well, just relax and remember there’s no timetable and you only need to go as far as both of you want to take it. I know you had a hard time growing up Kelly, let Todd and Laura make it up to you.”

“Thanks, Brenda. I really do love you. I’ll always be grateful to you for opening the door for me to see the other side, and now especially indebted for holding a mirror up for me to see myself in.”

Brenda leaned back in her chair and smiled. “I think we’re going to be good friends for a long time, Kell. I hope Todd and Laura aren’t the jealous type.”

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Supper was a modest affair. Despite Chuck’s protests, Kelly had insisted on cooking.

“I like to cook, Chuck, and I rarely get an opportunity to do it for family.”

After an orientation tour, Kelly had insisted on absolute privacy in the kitchen, but allowed Brenda to help. Soon they were whirling in there like dervishes, but Todd was not sure how much cooking was done and how much was just joyous fooling around.

Todd had retired with a Heineken to the living room with Chuck and his snifter of brandy. Anna was sitting on the floor watching him dust off and reload the camera equipment, as he made idle conversation with Chuck. Amanda was semi sprawled on the love seat leaning lightly on Chuck's shoulder. Her eyes seemed to close periodically like she was falling asleep. Obviously she was very enamored with Chuck.

"Can you imagine, Todd, this little girl was covered in grease just an hour ago?"

Todd laughed. "Nothing about the James Gang surprises me, Chuck."

"Maybe I'm just old fashioned," offered Chuck.

"No, I don't think so," said Todd. "Times change and sometimes it's people who don't. Maybe it's because I capture the times on film that I see it more clearly, but I've learned to just keep an open mind. My values aren't the same as other peoples', but that doesn't make theirs any less valid."

"Hmmm... Maybe you've got something there." And Chuck took a drink and settled back in deep thought. Maybe Amanda's affectionate nature was part of the culture of the new generation or it could be from her background. Either way he decided that he really didn't mind the warmth this little blonde was sharing with him. He was jolted back to the present when he heard the distinctive click of the shutter of Todd's Blad firing.

"That should prove to be an interesting picture," said Todd. "Your face looked like it was carved in bronze. Like a Rodin."

Meanwhile, Kelly had browned thin bite-sized slivers of a standing rib roast in a wok with a mixture of her own recipe of spices and herbs. Brenda had sliced potatoes that Kelly was pan-frying along with the batch of Jamaican style bannock made the way Gloria had taught her. Between the two girls they had prepared a medley of steamed green and wax beans mixed with cauliflower and broccoli. There was also a garden salad garnished with devilled eggs.

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"That was delicious Kelly," said Chuck.

"Shucks, t'weren't nothing really. If I had known I'd be cooking in a kitchen like that I would have ordered in something special to whip up, but with this gorgeous girl helping me it was sheer delight." Kelly said wrapping an arm around Brenda's waist.

"I think I've been living in the past too long," Chuck said. "Too much ritual and ceremony and doing things cause that's the way we do it. Instead of heading back to the living room, how

about we go sit on the dock? It's still daylight and it might be nice to sit back with a couple of beers."

Working together, they quickly cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher.

With a cooler loaded with ice cold Heinekens and soft drinks, Chuck, Todd, Kelly and Brenda headed out to Chuck's private dock complete with nicely padded reclining solid patio chairs. Kelly sang, badly, all the way down the walk.

"We don't need no buried treasure
No buried treasure - we don't need it.
We don't stand on ceremony
Cause life is phony in spite of it.
You can never be all you wanna be
When you're living for gold.
We don't need no buried treasure
I still got you...
I still got you in my soul"

"That's the way, Chuck," said Brenda as she saw him take a swig out of his bottle. "Let your hair down and relax."

"Just give me time, Brenda. I don't have much hair left to let down and these changes are coming faster than I'm used to."

Ten minutes later Amanda and Anna came down each carrying a tall glass filled half with root beer and half with ice cream.

Kelly settled back and lit up a cigarette. "I've been meaning to ask you, Chuck. Are Anna's parents on vacation? We didn't see them last week and I thought they would be joining us for supper."

Todd and Brenda looked away as silence descended on the group.

"Ah hell, this is getting to be the worst kept secret in this house, Kelly so I might as well tell you the story. But first, do you mind if I have one of your cigarettes?"

Kelly passed the package and the lighter.

"Grandpa, I didn't know you smoked."

"Well, sweetheart, I don't really, not any more, but sometimes temptation is hard to resist. And that, Kelly, is why you don't see my daughter Deanna around here."

“I went into deep mourning after my wife Helene died and I neglected my daughter who was in mourning herself. I loved her, but every time I looked at her all I could think about was her mother. I didn’t pay attention to her or her need to be comforted and she found it somewhere else. That’s how Anna came to be.”

“I was furious with her and we fought long and hard. I simply refused to allow her any human weaknesses and over time we drifted so far apart we didn’t even talk any more. Then one day she couldn’t take my rejection any more and moved out. I couldn’t handle losing her and Anna, so I fought and won custody of Anna.”

“In the beginning Deanna came to visit quite often, but business was booming and I was unable to delegate – you see, I had every expectation to pass the business on to her, even though I was too stubborn to admit it. Instead, I kept reminding her of how disappointed I was in her and soon the visits started to dwindle until she stopped coming altogether. I drove her out of our lives and it is something that I have regretted ever since.”

“I haven’t seen or heard from Deanna in years. I have no idea of where she is or how she is doing. I hope one day she finds it in her heart to forgive this old man who is just beginning to accept his own role in what happened. Like Todd said to me earlier tonight, times change but sometimes people don’t. I really want to show her I’ve changed. I really miss her and feel horrible for the way I treated her.”

Brenda bit her lip as Anna fought to keep her tears back.

“So, there you have it, my skeletons.”

Kelly got up and gave him a warm hug, as did Brenda. “As long as you have the will, Chuck you can set things right again,” said Kelly. “I’m sorry for bringing up such painful memories.”

“No, Kelly, you didn’t bring them up, they are on my mind every single day.”

Trying to lighten the mood a bit, Todd turned to Chuck. “You know, Anna told me all about your beautiful garden, but we got so tied up in doing a natural light portrait that I never got a chance to see it.”

Chuck got up, grateful for the change of subject. “Well, step right this way Todd and let me introduce you to my darling Helene’s garden. I just have the privilege of keeping it for her.”

“Chuck, do you mind if we went swimming here?” Amanda asked.

“Me too, Grandpa?”

“Sure, go ahead! Anna practically grew up in the lake!” Chuck laughed as he led Todd up the hill. “Anna can show you where to find clean towels down here and there’s a heated shower that’s supplied by water from the house.” He called back over his shoulder.

“I have to get my suit...” Anna said.

“Why? Haven’t you skinny dipped before?” Amanda asked.

“No!”

“Like your grandpa said, ‘We don’t have to follow customs here’ – not between friends, right?” chuckled Amanda who, as soon as Chuck and Todd were out of sight, slipped out of her blouse and shorts, sliding her panties down at the same time. Her sparse pubic hair glistened in the sunlight, and with her sneakers off, she dove off the end of the dock.

Following that lead, Anna quickly peeled off her own t-shirt showing the beginnings of breast buds. Pulling off her shorts she followed Amanda into the water.

Brenda looked at Kelly. With a conspiring wink she stood up, and slowly peeled off her top exposing her freckled breasts. Her skirt followed and she pulled Kelly up out of her chair. Brenda slipped Kelly’s blouse off and unbuttoned her shorts and then the two of them waded into the lake.

Chuck was showing Todd his Saffron garden when laughter from the dock trickled up the hill.

“Do you hear that, Todd? That’s a sound that gladdens my heart. It’s been too many years since I’ve heard that.”

“Chuck, I know this is a touchy subject for you, but what about Anna’s father? I’m old enough to be her father and if I thought I had a daughter somewhere you can damn well bet I’d be either fighting you for custody or visiting her every week. Doesn’t he know where Deanna is?”

“I don’t know who her father is,” said Chuck sadly. “I was so angry with Deanna and so miserable that when I finally got around to asking, she wouldn’t tell me anything except that he was a good man and had left before he knew she was pregnant. I told her that he was a poor excuse for a man, but Deanna has her father’s stubborn streak - I never did find out.”

The two of them started walking back to the dock.

“If you really miss her, Chuck, then don’t let pride stand in your way. Do what your heart is telling you and find her. Even if she doesn’t want to be found at least she’ll know you loved her enough to look for her.”

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do, Todd. With Brenda taking over the day-to-day operations at the plant, I’ll be letting their company run things. They are an extraordinary group of young adults, and I could do much worse than let Anna learn from them. I’ve seen their investments, Todd, and I’ll tell you, there’s nothing that could surprise me any more about any of them.” He stopped short and stared.

“Er, Chuck... Your mouth is open.” Getting no response, Todd continued, “Well I guess there was at least one more surprise you weren’t expecting.”

They had made it back to the lake and found the source of the laughter in the water. The four girls were swimming, laughing and splashing. And they were naked. A fact well demonstrated as Amanda climbed up on the dock and dove in, her naked butt flashing in the sunlight.

Brenda spotted them and waved, her breasts bobbing invitingly. Kelly waved as well and hollered an invite to join them, showing her puckered nipples.

Anna squatted down so that her little buds were covered by the water, but Amanda seemed to make it a point to jump up and down trying to coax the men into the water.

Both Chuck and Todd politely declined.

“It shows, you know,” said Todd.

“What shows?”

“That you’re trying real hard not to look.”

“Damn. Nobody does that here. At least not any more.”

Todd looked at him quizzically.

“Okay,” said Chuck. “When we first started here, Helene and I used to go skinny-dipping all the time. Even after Deanna was born we used to take her into the water with us. We stopped about the time that Helene became sick, when Deanna was 12.”

Todd just nodded.

“Todd, is there any more beer in that cooler? And could you pass Kelly’s cigarettes over.”

Todd laughed and passed Chuck a beer and the smokes. Taking a deep swallow Chuck gestured at the bathing beauties, “This doesn’t affect you or bother you at all?”

Todd turned in his chair and looked at him, “Chuck, I’ve been a photographer for close to 15 years, with my share of glamour shots and swimsuit editions and lingerie. I’ve also shot on the beaches of Rio, the Caribbean and Europe. Chuck, you must know that beach nudity is the accepted norm outside of America! After a while you become aware that nudity and so-called mores are socially induced standards. It’s fine when you apply them to yourself, but it is not fine when you impose your standards on others – it is a gross invasion of their privacy and rights. Deanna must have proved that to you.”

“I have a right to ask you not to smoke around me because there is some evidence showing second hand smoke can cause harm to others. But to tell you how to dress, or when to enjoy yourself...?”

Chuck sighed deeply and put out the cigarette.

Todd laughed. “Sorry Chuck, I can get a bit preachy at times. And I didn’t mean that you couldn’t smoke. Hell, it’s your house and your lake! I was just using a common reference. Something you could relate to.”

“I know, Todd, but it’s a lousy habit that I picked up in Vietnam. I rarely ever light up any more, but it seems like all day I’ve been talking about a daughter I love and that I haven’t even tried to find. I’m not exactly a model parent, am I?”

“Chuck, you described a beautiful scene to me a little while ago. I could see myself as a father doing that with my wife and kids. Unless you beat Deanna, all you have done is been stubborn because your pride was hurt.”

“Beat her? Hell no. I never laid a finger on her. I was loud and angry, but no parent can hit their own child!”

It was Todd’s turn to sigh and he turned back in his chair to look out over the water. “You’d be surprised, Chuck. You would really be surprised at what parents can do to their kids.”

Chuck suddenly remembered what Todd had told him earlier. “Hell, I’m sorry, Todd. I forgot.”

“It’s okay, Chuck. You want another beer? This Heineken is good. Kelly always gets us Molson’s Extra Dry from Canada. It sure beats the near beer we have here.”

“Near beer?” Chuck asked.

“Yeah,” laughed Todd, “But closer to water!”

Chuck was laughing with him when Kelly came out of the water and walked up to them, doing nothing to hide her beautiful body.

“Hey, beautiful,” said Todd, “did you have a refreshing dip?”

“The water’s great, you should have come in and joined us,” she said as she opened a cupboard and pulled out a towel.

“We were talking about world affairs and such,” said Todd. “It’s not often you get to hear a perspective on it from somebody who remembers Nixon resigning.”

“Not to mention the first time the Beatles played in the US,” said Chuck.

“The who?” asked Brenda as she climbed up the ladder, her beautiful breasts jiggling like bowls of Jell-O.

“Not the Who!” said Chuck laughing, “The Beatles!”

Brenda looked perplexed. “Then am I supposed to guess who?”

Chuck was howling with laughter. “Not the Guess Who, they’re Canadian! The Beatles! They were the beginning of Rock and Roll the way you know it today.”

Kelly looked at Brenda. “I have a lady friend who’s old enough to be my great grandmother. She lives in a retirement home and she’s always talking about the past.” Turning to Chuck she said, “But Muriel, my friend, she insists that it was Elvis who started the Rock and Roll era.”

Brenda shrugged, smiled, and snatched Kelly’s towel away from her to dry her face. “I listened to a lot of Queen growing up cause it was my mom’s favorite band, but personally I like classical music.”

Further discussions about musical tastes were interrupted by a small voice coming from the water.

“Grandpa. Will you cover your eyes? I want to get out of the water.”

“Why should I cover my eyes?” asked Chuck.

“Because I’ve got no clothes on!”

“Oh. Did you lose them in the water?”

“NO! I left them on the deck!”

“Did someone force you to take your clothes off?”

“NO!”

“So you took off your clothes because you wanted to. Have I got that right? And now you think maybe that wasn’t such a good idea because I’m here? You might not remember Anna, but I was changing your diapers when you were a little girl.”

With the frustrated “ha” that only a preteen can properly do, Anna climbed out of the lake with defiance. “Fine! Be that way, then!”

Chuck looked at his granddaughter. “You look beautiful baby. And it’s pretty easy to see that you aren’t grandpa’s little girl any more.”

Anna smiled and blushed and ran over to give Chuck a big wet hug. “I’ll always be your little girl, Grandpa.”

Todd smiled. She was starting to sprout breasts and was rapidly developing a real hourglass figure. He also noticed that although Chuck wasn’t blatantly staring, he had been admiring Kelly and Brenda as well.

With a final splash, Amanda leapt out of the water and stood proudly on the lawn, hands on her hips and her legs just slightly spread. “Okay, Anna, how about you show me where the shower is?”

Though she was just a few years older than Anna, Amanda was without a doubt a full woman. She was smart and self confident with more than a bit of pride in her well-trimmed figure.

Todd saw that Chuck looked at her a bit differently than he had the other girls.

And his hand trembled as he relit his cigarette.

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Showered and dressed again the girls sat with Chuck and Todd and watched the sun go down. It was a glorious sunset, the perfect ending for a glorious day.

The girls were yawning, it had been a long and hectic day for them all, but Kelly, who should have been tired, was trembling with anticipation of the night ahead.

Chuck bid everyone a good night and headed off to bed to do some serious thinking and reflection on the day.

Brenda tucked Anna in and quickly washed up. Chuck had left the room assignments to Amanda and her and they had again picked the same room she and Sara had shared. They had been up since before 6 a.m. and although she longed to join Amanda, Brenda had one more task to perform.

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Todd closed the door behind him and just stood there looking at Kelly.

“What are you looking at?” asked Kelly. She had been slowly pacing around the room pretending to be checking out the furniture.

“I’m just watching my best friend,” said Todd. “You are so beautiful, Kelly, but I don’t want you doing anything different. I’m not pushing for anything.”

Her smile melted away his apprehension. “I know you aren’t, Todd. That’s maybe why I’ve always loved you. You’ve never tried to use me or take advantage of me. Just bear with me a little longer, okay?”

“I’ll tell you what, Kell, I need a shower, so why don’t you think about what you want to do while I get cleaned up?”

Todd headed towards the attached bathroom, but Kelly beat him to it. “Let me wash your back for you, Todd. I’ll bet a good soak in a tub filled with bubbles will get you feeling good and relaxed.”

Todd smiled and stepped aside.

Kelly ran the water in the tub and picked a scent of wild flowers from the bath beads, not overpowering but a delicate essence. Chuck had good taste. As she adjusted the temperature of the water, she noticed Todd slipping out of his clothes. She tried not to look but even with her head bent forward trying to focus just on the bubbles that were rising she could see Todd was rising as well. She felt herself blushing.

With a deep breath she turned off the water and turned to face him. She tried to look him in the eyes, but his cock had swelled and his sack had tightened. It was his turn to blush. “I’m sorry, Kelly, but I’ve thought about this moment for a long time. Years actually. I’m not putting pressure on you, but I can’t control or hide how he reacts to you knowing there is a possibility.”

Kelly beckoned him to come closer. She was still seated on the side of the tub but stopped Todd just before he put his foot into the water.

Delicately, with a hand on his belly and one on his ass, Kelly leaned forward and gave the head of his cock a long soft kiss. It bounced in response. “I think they call that a ‘Lick and a Promise,’” Kelly said scooting aside to let Todd get into the tub.

“I hope you don’t make too many promises, Kell, I’ve got a loaded weapon and it’s set on automatic fire.”

Kelly laughed with him and gave him a shove. “Let’s just hope your phaser is set to maximum pleasure then!”

Kelly stepped away from the tub and slowly, deliberately, started to remove her clothing. Todd had seen her naked enough times before, but knowing she was performing this slow, erotic strip for him made his cock pulse to the beat of his heart.

She slowly unbuttoned each and every button of her blouse and then her shorts but removed neither. Tantalizingly, she turned her back on him and looking at him over her shoulder she slipped the blouse off each arm in turn, then still hiding her breasts from his sight she stretched up, tightening her butt muscles and with a bit of wiggling and clenching managed to shuck her shorts without using her hands. She backed a step toward him, away from the shorts puddled over her

shoes then with her thumbs slowly slid down her panties, bending to show her ass, the hint of color of her asshole and her nether lips pouting.

She held that position for a moment and then sensuously stretched back up while doing a slow pirouette exposing her front for Todd. The look on his face just fueled her desire.

“Scoot forward so I can get behind you,” she said to him.

Climbing into the tub behind him she wrapped her long legs around his waist feeling his stiff prick against her calves. For a moment she just wrapped her arms around Todd and whispered, “I love you, Todd.”

Todd leaned his head back and replied, “I love you, Kelly. I always have.”

The planned quick bath turned into an hour-long affair as they took turns washing each other. Slowly, lovingly caressing each digit and part of the other’s body as if they were partaking in a sacred ritual.

Finally the bath water became too cool to continue the loving caressing and they stood to rinse off.

They dried each other with the same gentle and loving touches they had shared in the bath, gently kissing parts of each other’s bodies as they were dried. As Kelly brushed her hair, Todd went back to the bedroom to get their toothbrushes. He came back in with a smile wider than Kelly had seen in a long time. She looked at him quizzically.

“Take a look by the side of the bed,” was all he said.

Curiosity overtook her and Kelly went to the bedroom. On the nightstand there stood a silver bucket filled with ice and a bottle of champagne. Dom Perignon. Beside it, a matching tray arranged with cheeses and crackers. A note lay on the tray.

*Dearest Kelly and Todd,
May your journey tonight be filled with the same pleasure and gentle love you have given
so freely to others.
Love, Brenda*

Todd put his arm around Kelly as he saw her eyes mist over. Turning her face up, Todd said, “Honey, friends are the family we chose, not those we were born to. I’d say we’re growing a great family.”

Kelly just hugged him. There was nothing she could add.

Finally finished in the bathroom, Todd and Kelly retired to the bed. They sat facing each other as they shared a glass of champagne. Then Todd took the pillows and fluffed them up

placing them behind Kelly. A gentle push placed her in a reclining position and they simply kissed. Soft and gentle kisses on the lips and other places close by interlaced with deep and soulful kisses that threatened to steal their very breath away, even long after their glass of bubbly was finished.

Kelly's scent of arousal was matched by the stiffness of Todd's cock, so he slowly lowered himself on the bed until his face was at her feet which he kissed and licked, sucking on each of her toes before slowly moving up her body tracing his tongue along the way up past her calves and thighs just narrowly avoiding her steaming slit. Instead he moved upward and repeated the process starting at her hands and fingers gently sucking each one before moving down to trace a path of kisses along her arm. Kelly just laid back, her eyes closed in bliss.

Todd kissed and licked her underarms before moving on to her throat and ears where he nibbled gently. He kissed along her brow and on her eyes and nose before moving in a straight line down her chest to her belly. Todd gently licked her navel before venturing lower to just where her pubic hair started where he gently tugged with his teeth causing Kelly to moan in delight.

But Todd was far from finished. He moved back up and kissed and lavished a trail of concentric circles around her small but sensitive breasts each time drawing the circle closer and closer till finally he slipped the first nipple in his mouth causing Kelly to arch her back up in pleasure. Having teased her nipples long enough Todd resumed his path back downward to her hidden treasure. Positioning himself in the most comfortable way he gently spread her vulva with his fingers and blew soft puffs of air on her extended clit before reaching out with his tongue to give Kelly her first actual sexual kiss.

Kelly nearly blasted off the bed the minute she felt Todd's tongue touch her clit. She was so aroused, but had vowed to be a willing partner and not try to take charge or set the pace. She was glad Brenda had explained this to her. This was sheer ecstasy. Just letting Todd set the pace. Her own fireworks were close to going off and so far he had only planted one kiss on her blood-engorged clit. She would not be able to take much more. With her hands she let Todd know that she enjoyed what he was doing and continued to stroke whatever part of his body she could reach.

Todd caught the hint and judging by the flow of juices out of Kelly and her shallow breathing he knew that she was close to her first orgasm. Licking slowly along side of each of her outer and inner lips he finally dipped his tongue into her hot box drawing out enough nectar to coat her sensitive clit on to which he finally latched like a baby suckling at a mother's nipple. It didn't take long before Kelly crossed the threshold of desire and went directly into pleasure mode, her hips bucking as she thrashed on the bed beneath him.

"Oh fuck, Todd. Oh God... oh that is so fucking good." She clutched at his hair and pushed his face deeper into her now freely flowing cunt as she exploded into a second orgasm quickly followed by a third. Delirious with pleasure, she had been pushing his head around her juice-covered twat until that final peak where pleasure threatened to turn to anguish. Quickly she pulled him up and kissed his face all over licking her own juices off of his face. Her breathing was labored and her actions were sporadic as she slowly came down off the mountain she had peaked.

Releasing Todd she let him roll to his side as she took long slow breaths trying to find a sense of balance again.

She was still horny but too sensitive right this moment to take any more. Todd had asked for nothing in return, but seemed content to lie there watching her as she came down off her high. She graced him with a smile that showed she was utterly content and satisfied. Then she placed a hand on his chest and worked her way down his chest kissing him and suckling on his nipples until her mouth came close to the swollen cock glistening with pre-cum on it. Licking her lips she opened her mouth and swallowed him as deep as she could. She was rewarded with a slight bucking of his hips and a low animal moan that escaped his mouth.

Being careful not to scratch him with her teeth, Kelly latched a firm oral grip on the engorged cock in her mouth sucking in an alternate rhythm of soft caresses to as much suction as she felt she could apply without hurting him. She listened to his responses and discovered what he liked best. Pulling his foreskin forward she swirled her tongue between his glans and foreskin eliciting deep moans from Todd. All too soon he started to buck under her ministrations and Kelly could tell he was getting close. She wanted to prolong the pleasure for him but also wanted him to cum into her willing mouth. As his breathing shortened and stopped for short periods, she used her free hand to massage his scrotum and slid his foreskin back with her lips locking them just below the head of his glans and using short wet strokes with her lips to bring him over the crest.

His fists beat the sides of the bed as his cum flooded her mouth. Kelly swallowed as rapidly as she could so she could savor every single drop. He did taste delicious.

Slowly the blood left his penis and it became softer although it still throbbed in her mouth. Kelly contented herself by inhaling the aroma of his sensitive prick and every few minutes swallowing his cock totally into her mouth.

“God, Kelly, that was fantastic.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed that,” she replied from her position, “but we’re far from done.” She was rewarded with a twitch of his cock.

Knowing he would require a bit of time to recover from his first climax Kelly climbed back up to share more kisses with him.

“Why did we wait so long?” she asked.

Todd sighed. “I guess we both needed to learn that we could be okay with each other like this. You are okay aren’t you?”

“Fucking right I am!” said Kelly. “I wonder how long we would have kept up the pretense if Laura hadn’t made us acknowledge the truth about our feelings?”

“I don’t know, Kelly, but I’m sure glad she came into our lives.”

“That makes two of us!”

With gentle stroking from Kelly, Todd slowly rose back up to full attention. Keeping him on his back Kelly slowly straddled him, a knee on each side of his legs. She spread her aroused pussy lips with one hand and with the other slowly slid Todd’s hard cock back and forth across her clit and labia coating him with her juices. Then the moment of truth.

Taking a deep breath, Kelly guided the head of his dick into her tunnel. She heard his gasp as her heat enveloped him like a custom made glove. Kelly bit her lip, the pleasure was so intense. Slowly she continued to lower herself on to him until there was nothing left to insert. Leaning forward she said to Todd, “You just relax and let me do the work this time.”

Moving her hips back and forth and side-to-side crushing their pelvic bones together, Kelly managed to cum twice more before Todd finally erupted deep inside her. The pleasure for both of them was too great and Kelly allowed her legs to slide back until she was lying flat on Todd with his cock still buried inside of her.

With a contented sigh she cuddled him and he wrapped his arms around her. Deep sighs of contentment escaped both of them and before either of them had a chance to think they fell asleep.

To be continued...