

Kelly

(Inspired by Mike C, based on characters in his novel: “James”
Characters and situations copyright by Mike C, 2002)

Chapter 18

Todd eased the Hummer onto I-77 heading south towards Columbia. Cara and Ami, having claimed the rear seat for smooching and snoozing, started to sing, “Hit The Road Jack,” and Laura and Kelly playfully joined in. Todd just shook his head.

The ride was smooth and traffic was light. Kelly and Laura, not being able to decide who would ride solo on the middle bench, had squeezed in together on the wide ‘shotgun’ seat up front. As they left North Carolina, Laura had said, “Here I go again!”

Todd slipped on his aviator sunglasses as the light from the rising sun hit the driver’s side window like a halogen searchlight. Even with the darkest legal tinting on the Hummer’s windows, it was a very bright morning.

“Celeste couldn’t have asked for a nicer day to unveil the Wheel,” he said.

“I hope this is as big a success for her as the InterCoastal project was for the others,” said Kelly.

“I think anything any of the ‘James Gang’ does will be successful,” said Todd. “Look at Regan. They came in as models and now run the place. And I’ll bet JulieAnn tied up a small fortune investment wise on IC stock before the wing was unveiled.”

Kelly laughingly agreed. “She’s a smart cookie all right.”

They rode for over an hour, clipping along at a good speed listening to CDs, when a sleepy voice piped up from the rear bench.

“Didn’t you promise us a real breakfast, Todd?” asked Cara.

“Yes I did, Kiddo,” said Todd. “Can you hold out a little longer? Once we get to Columbia, we’ll be more than halfway there.”

“Yeah, we can hold on,” said Ami. “Just wake us when we get there. There’s nothing here to see except cows and cotton.”

“Don’t forget rice,” added Cara.

“Yeah, lots of rice too,” said Ami.

“I’m shocked to hear such nonchalance about the ‘Okra Capital of the US,’” said Kelly.

“Yes, mother,” snickered Cara. “We’ll eat our okra and get big and strong when we grow up!”

“You want me to sing again?” threatened Kelly. “Just so the ride isn’t so boring?”

Cara and Ami both laughed. “No, mommy. Please don’t. We’ll be good little girls and go back to sleep!”

“Humph...” said Kelly. “ You’d think I sing like a banshee in heat!”

Neither Laura nor Todd said a word. They were trying to cover their smiles.

“And thank you two for all the support!” Kelly said, but she couldn’t hide her own smile.

“That sounds rather nice, don’t you think?” mused Laura.

“What’s that, Honey?” asked Kelly.

“The way the girls call you mom. It suits you.”

“God ... I don’t think it’s really sunk in yet,” said Kelly. “Either that or I’m really comfortable with the idea that I’ve got a little person inside of me.”

“Think Maurice’s will be open this early?” asked Todd.

“It’s Saturday, I can’t see them not being open for business in the morning,” said Kelly.

“Who’s Maurice?” asked Laura.

“It’s actually Piggy Park / Maurice Gourmet BBQ,” said Kelly. “People Magazine named it the best all-in-one Barbeque Restaurant. Maybe we can get a real breakfast of ham and eggs!”

The miles passed quickly and soon the road signs and billboards were starting to crowd out the scenery. At the juncture of I-77 and 20 Todd took the off ramp and drove to Devine.

True to their word, both Cara and Ami were asleep in the back seat when Todd shut off the engine after parking in the little shade there was.

“We better pick up some road supplies here too, before we head out again,” said Todd. “We’ll be heading east after this and the sun is going to come right through the windshield.”

Kelly woke the girls up as Laura stretched herself. “It’s a great ride, Todd, but I’m not used to long distance road trips.”

As they sat down to order, Kelly’s cell phone rang.

“Now I wonder who the hell that could be,” said Todd laughing. “Everybody who has that number knows Kelly isn’t awake this early!”

Kelly shot him a dirty look as she flipped the phone open. “Hello?”

“Sure, that’s not a problem, JulieAnn. No, Todd won’t mind a little side trip. Just let me write down the address.”

Kelly scrambled for a pen and scribbled on a napkin.

“Okay, I’ve got it, and I’m sure Cara or Ami can point it out if we can get them to stay awake long enough,” she said with a laugh. “So we’ll see you in a while.”

Kelly disconnected and put her phone back in her purse.

“We’ll be picking up Erin before we get to the marina,” said Kelly. “Seems she had a practice yesterday and everybody’s too busy getting the final details done to pick her up.”

“Okay,” said Todd, “It’s not that far out of the way.”

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

Forty-five minutes later, after a very satisfying breakfast of steak and eggs with home fries, they climbed back into the Hummer.

At Kelly’s insistence, they had picked up a case of Maurice’s Gourmet Blend BBQ Sauce for Sara. Todd loaded it into the back of the Hummer.

“You realize of course that we’ll have to pick up some for ourselves on the way back, right, Honey?” Kelly cooed in his ear.

Todd just smiled. He would do anything for Kelly or Laura, he realized.

“I hope you guys don’t mind,” said Kelly, “but I think I’ll grab the middle bench and try to nap for a bit.”

“I think I’ll join you, Kell,” said Laura. “Todd wore me out last night.”

“Can you handle it by yourself, Honey?” Kelly asked Todd.

“Sure, no problem. There’s just an hour left to go. Grab a few winks. I’ll be okay.”

Todd put the other items they purchased in the front seat, broke open a near frozen bottle of water, and pulled out of the parking lot with both visors lowered and the air conditioner on.

Cara and Ami dropped right back to sleep again, and shortly after Todd turned on to I-26 towards Charleston, he heard Kelly and Laura’s gentle breathing, fast asleep.

Todd was looking forward to seeing Chuck again. While Vanetta had told Gloria about the pregnancy, neither Todd nor Kelly had any family to break the happy news to. They had decided last night to wait with telling others of the news until the company picnic, but had made an exception for the “James Gang” and Chuck and Anna.

Todd’s thoughts of Chuck and his admiration for the older man were interrupted as Ami crawled over the seats to join him up front.

“Cara still asleep?” he asked.

“Like a log!” said Ami. “You don’t mind if I ride shotgun for a while, do you?”

Todd chuckled. “Not at all. Glad to have the company.”

Ami had her camera out and twisted in the seat till she sat cross-legged focusing on Todd, her shorts riding up her thighs high enough for Todd to see her panties.

She noticed him looking. “You don’t miss much, do you?” she asked.

“Real photographers don’t,” he chuckled.

“I’ll have to keep that in mind,” Ami said with a smile, but did nothing to change her position.

“Did you know that photographers are the most camera shy of all people?” Todd asked.

“Really?” CLICK “I would never have guessed it,” said Ami. She adjusted her position a bit, exposing yet more of her panties, placing her feet against the wide center console and her back against the door, her knees wide apart so she could see Todd through the viewfinder.

Todd chuckled. “I guess you won’t suffer from that problem.”

“Well, you’ll be seeing a lot more if you do the portrait of me that Cara wants, the way she wants it, and you did promise to do a series of pictures of me and Cara like the ones you did of Kelly and Laura together.”

“That I did promise, Ami, but there’s a difference between me behind the lens shooting a subject and you sitting there as a person.”

“Does it bother you? Me sitting this way?”

“No,” Todd said with a smile. “Even if you were trying to hit on me which I know you aren’t, it wouldn’t bother me. Maybe I’m just a bit curious.”

CLICK “I guess that after all these years of pent up frustration and hiding my feelings in the closet,” she giggled at her own pun, “I just feel more like a woman now and I feel very sexually liberated.”

“It must feel good to finally be yourself,” Todd said.

“Oh, it feels better than good,” Ami laughed.

CLICK

Todd laughed again. “What’s your shutter speed set at?”

“250,” said Ami. “There’s more than enough light to shoot at that speed and still keep the F stop at 5.6.”

“And you’re taking your light reading from where?”

“I’m splitting the difference between the shadows on your face and the light coming in through the window,” she answered.

“I’ll tell you a trick,” said Todd. “To get a sense of movement, decrease the shutter speed to 1/60 and tighten up the F stop to get a meter reading just from my face.”

“Won’t that over-expose the picture?” asked Ami.

“Not if you focus only on my face,” said Todd. “I’ll be perfectly lit and clearly focused, but it will blur the view out of the window and increase the light outside. A nice study in contrasts.”

CLICK!

Todd pointed to the Jerky and bottled water. “Help yourself, kiddo.”

As Ami opened up a bottle of Evian, she mentioned that if they took a right turn now, they would be at her home in ten minutes.

“Should I turn here for Erin?” Todd asked.

“No, James and Erin live closer to the other end of town. I’ll tell you where to get off for the shortest distance.”

“Are you homesick, Ami?” Todd asked with concern.

“Nope, just making an observation is all. We’re used to being gone for weeks at a time. I know we’ve only just been with you guys for a week, but you know... it feels like that was another life, one that I remember but it seems like so long ago now.”

“I think I understand,” said Todd. “Been a lot of changes eh?”

“To say the least. When we were in training, we didn’t think for ourselves. We were told what to do and when to do it. Even when we weren’t competing or training, the time we had to ourselves was still focused and to a schedule.”

Todd laughed again. “I know what you mean. It’s like the military. You have ten minutes of free time. Have fun! That’s an order!”

Ami laughed with him. “That’s it exactly!”

“Any plans on how you’re going to deal with things when you go home?”

Ami turned serious. “Yeah, Cara and I were discussing that last night. We know we still have to finish the mandatory classroom hours, but you got us thinking about our future. We think we can deal with things knowing that we are welcome at Kelly’s and both Cara and I are going to apply to UNC early. Our grades are good, and though it didn’t earn us any money, making it to the Nationals looks good on the application forms.”

“I see you’ve given this a lot of thought,” said Todd.

“Well, it’s because of you guys. We can’t go back to our old way of life now. Too much has changed.”

The surrounding scenery was changing. Heavy forest growth crowded the road only separated by the occasional small town. Todd had been following the Ashley River and soon after passing Magnolia Gardens, turned north on US-17. Soon they passed the airstrip where Laura had taken the girls for their flight to Charlotte.

“Okay, turn at the next intersection and I’ll guide you,” said Ami.

“Have you and Cara decided if you’re going to tell Erin about your new relationship?”

“Well, we think that the fewer people who know, the easier it will be to get through the last year at school,” said Ami, “but we think we’re going to tell Erin.”

“Smart thinking. People want to think that we’ve evolved and we’re more open-minded, but the truth is, there are still a lot of people uncomfortable with their sexuality. But just out of curiosity, why tell Erin?”

“Cara and I think she’ll be able to handle it cause of the situation with her brother and all his girlfriends. She knows they keep each other ‘company’ when he’s not with them. Besides,” Ami added with a laugh, “Erin has known us too long for her not to catch on that something has changed.”

With Ami giving specific directions, they arrived at the Mitchell house in minutes. Erin was sitting outside with a small travel bag at her feet. “I thought you guys would never get here,” she said to Ami after saying hi to Todd.

“Well excuse us,” said Ami, “we had to stop and eat, you know!”

Erin laughed as she climbed into the front seat with Ami after seeing Cara asleep in the rear and Kelly and Laura cuddled on the middle bench. “How did you guys like your first week as models?”

“Well, we haven’t been doing any real modeling yet,” said Ami. “We’ve been planning and prepping for the poses, and Kelly has been working at taking years of wear and tear off our bodies. Look at my hands!”

“Wow. I noticed the haircut right away, and your face has a glow to it. You’ll have to tell me what you use.”

Ami laughed. She wasn’t quite ready yet to tell her friend that the glow was not the result of anything that Kelly had found in a bottle.

As Todd got back on the freeway, the girls guided him to the quickest route to the marina.

“Just keep your eyes out for the Dam Road,” said Todd.

Ami laughed. “Which damn road do you want?”

Todd couldn’t help but laugh with her. “It’s called the Dam Road because it leads to the dam just outside of the Marina.”

“I knew that,” said Ami. “Remember? I grew up in this neck of the woods.”

Twenty minutes later they were following the Dam Road on the left. It was as narrow as Todd remembered, and heavily wooded. He was thankful he had ordered three layers of clear coat for the Hummer as branches brushed against the vehicle on this stretch.

Even moving at a much slower pace than he had maintained on the highways, and with the Hummer’s excellent suspension, the ride was just bumpy enough to wake the other three.

“Where are we?” asked Laura.

“We’re on the Dam Road,” said Ami.

“I know that!” said Laura, “which damn road?”

Todd, Ami, and Erin laughed.

Todd pulled over to give the girls a chance to stretch and freshen up before he pulled into Max’s Marina.

Cara, Ami, and Erin moved away from the truck and did some stretching from their warm up routines.

“How much further?” Laura asked.

“Another five miles from here to the marina,” said Todd, “and a bit more to the village.”

“Are we going to the village?”

“No, Honey, we’re going to spend the night on a boat,” said Kelly. “Julie-Ann has arranged it for us.”

“Oh, kinky sex!” gushed Laura.

Todd looked up with surprise, the water he had been drinking dribbling down his chin. “What’s so kinky about sex on a boat?” he asked.

“It’s like on a water bed, I guess,” said Laura. “All you have to do is stay hard and Kelly and I can just ride you to the rhythm of the waves!”

“And ALL I have to do is stay hard? That’s not so easy with you two!”

“Don’t worry, Sweetheart,” said Kelly. “What goes down we can always blow back up!”

Laura laughed as she climbed back into the Hummer.

“Rock me gently ... Rock me slowly,” Kelly was softly singing as she climbed in after Laura.

With Kelly and Laura riding shotgun again, Cara, Ami, and Erin climbed into the rear seat so they could talk quietly and catch up.

“The coaches all said to say hi to you guys,” Erin said as Todd eased back on to the road. “God, I can’t get over the change in you two in just a week!”

“Well,” said Ami, “aside from the vitamins Kelly has been forcing down our throats we’ve been to salons and spas.”



“It’s amazing what good clean living can do for you,” added Cara. Ami snorted in amusement, causing a puzzled expression on Erin’s face.

Changing the subject before Erin could ask what that remark was all about, Cara asked if she was going to be competing in the Southwestern Friendship games. She herself had been twice and Ami had gone last year for her first time. Erin had still been just a bit too young to go last year.

“Yeah, the last week in August,” Erin said, “the coach thinks I will be ready to introduce the ‘Mitchell’ there cause it’ll be the last meet of the season. If I don’t screw up or break anything, it’ll be the talk of the meet, and something a lot of people will want to learn before the next season starts.”

“You’ll pull it off, Erin,” Ami said.

Cara nodded in agreement, adding, “I’m glad I won’t have to compete against you!”

“Amen to that,” said Ami. “I really don’t want any more sprained or broken bones!”

“Uh, will you be bunking with us tonight?” asked Cara.

“No,” Erin said regretfully. “James wants me to stay at the cottage, though why he wants another girl there is beyond me. You’d think he has his hands full already!”

“Yeah,” said Cara with a meaningful look at Ami, “We’ve sort of got something to tell you about a similar situation.”

~~~~~ //

Brenda spotted them first and waved them over to where she was standing with Nicole and JulieAnn.

Todd pulled the Hummer right up to her and Kelly jumped out and gave Brenda a big hug and kiss. Laura followed Kelly, who introduced her to Nicole.

Todd shook Nicole’s hand, gave Jules a hug, and then hugged Brenda. “Now if somebody can tell me where to unload this stuff, I can get our ride out of the way.”

JulieAnn laughed and pointed to the CL1, berthed less than fifty yards away.

“Wow,” said Kelly, “that’s not a boat, that’s a yacht!”

“The CL1, nothing but the best for our friends,” said JulieAnn. “Of course the, ahem, ‘Lady’ who commissioned her might not approve of your lifestyle, but she’s currently busy with a financial setback in her own company.”

“Not to mention being investigated by the SEC for insider trading,” added Nicole.

Laura looked puzzled. Kelly started to laugh. "I get it," she said. "CL one! Clone! I love it!"

Todd shook his head in amusement and moved the Hummer closer to the boat. Cara, Ami and Erin went along to help him stow their stuff, then Erin grabbed her bag and asked if it would be okay to take her friends with her to find her brother.

"Sure," he said. "Tell Kelly where you're going. You've got our numbers, right?" he asked Cara and Ami. "Just give one of us a call if you need something. I'm sure there'll be a cell close by wherever you go. Have a good time."

Cara and Ami grabbed their bathing suits and tore off with Erin to tell Kelly and Laura while Todd parked the truck. By the time he made it back to where Kelly and Laura were still chatting with Brenda, JulieAnn, and Nicole, the younger ones were out of sight.

"I've put all the stuff in the berth," he said, "I'll leave it to you ladies to unpack it!"

Laura gave him a playful punch in the arm. "And where do you think you're going?"

"Well, I was hoping to find Chuck. I've got the pictures he wanted, and this is a pretty crowded place."

Nicole laughed. "You and Chuck are a lot alike. He's not much into crowds either. He's staying up at the Marriott Inn in the village. He has the executive suite with a beautiful view of the marina so he can keep an eye on what goes on while he stays back and out of it."

"Looks like I'll take a stroll to town then," said Todd, shifting the large mounted prints to his other arm.

"Let me give you a ride," said Nicole. "JulieAnn and I need to drop off some paperwork with him anyway, and I think these three want to do a bit of catching up themselves."

Brenda and Kelly both blushed. Laura looked a bit lost, a look that did not go unnoticed by Brenda. Wrapping her arms through both Kelly and Laura's she said, "You go and shoot the breeze with Chuck. He really likes you, Todd. And I want to give your ladies a very detailed look at the sleeping arrangements. Just to make sure all three of you will fit in the bed."

It was Todd's turn to blush but Nicole just laughed. "Just remember to leave your phone on 'ring' mode, Brenda. I don't want to have to get another new battery for it just because you turned it to vibrate and then asked all your friends to call you!"

Everybody laughed as Brenda haughtily lifted her chin, deeming the comment beneath her dignity to bother to reply.

Jules brought her car over and Nicole and Todd got in.

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

Todd knew there had to be a speed limit on the road from the Marina to town, but that fact seemed to escape JulieAnn's attention. Within five minutes she had the car parked in front of the Marriott and they were entering the lobby.

Nicole used the house phone and buzzed Chuck's room, who promptly told them to come up.

"Is Anna here with her grandfather?" Todd asked.

"She came with him last night," said Nicole, "but she's been clinging to Amanda. I have no idea where they are right now."

Chuck was standing in the doorway of his suite, bidding them to enter. Nicole said that she and JulieAnn couldn't stay, she just wanted to drop off the paperwork on the project they had discussed earlier and since Todd needed a ride...

"Anyway, I still have a thousand things to do, all small details," Nicole said. "I'm sure you understand, Chuck."

Chuck smiled at her, took the papers, and said he would read it over carefully tonight. Quick hugs and Nicole and Jules were gone.

Chuck looked at Todd who was still standing. "Son, you look like you've got something on your mind."

Todd nodded and absently handed over the picture of Anna.

Chuck took it from him and closed the door. "You want a beer, son? You look like you could use one."

Shaking his head to clear the cobwebs, Todd said, "Thanks, Chuck. A beer would be good right about now."

Chuck brought out two bottles of Corona and they moved to the balcony to sit and watch the goings on at the marina.

Todd took a deep swallow and sat back. From their position on the hill, they could clearly see the marina, the people looking like ants scurrying around. Todd was soon transfixed in thought again.

“Todd ... I don’t want to interfere or poke my nose where it’s not wanted but do you want to talk about what’s on your mind? I haven’t seen a look like the one you have right now since ‘Nam.”

Todd turned slowly, the enormity of his situation growing large in his mind once again. “Chuck... I’m going to be a father.”

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

“You’re WHAT?” and a hot and sweaty Brenda nearly fell off the bed.

The three girls had unpacked and stowed their clothes and Kelly and Laura had started to strip down to change into their bathing suits. Laura had been a bit shy with Brenda in the room even though she had felt at ease with Cara and Ami. These were confusing thoughts for Laura. Why did she feel at ease with the gymnasts and shy in front of Brenda? Was it because Brenda was the one who had made it possible for Kelly to love? Or was it because Kelly and Brenda had shared intimate pleasures?

Brenda noticed Laura was hesitant and knew what the other girl was thinking. She also knew that Laura was not jealous as she shared herself with Kelly and Todd. The outgoing vivacious girl she had met at Regan’s seemed to become demure, almost passive. Deciding to take a chance Brenda got up and moved closer to Laura and with agile fingers slipped Laura’s top off and had her bra undone in a second.

“Don’t mind me,” Brenda said to Laura. “I’ve been dying to see what Kelly is so hot about.”

Kelly laughed and Laura blushed.

“Damned if I know,” said Laura, “but she never seems to get enough of me! And I know I can’t get enough of her!”

Kelly had moved in behind Brenda and undid her top, leveling the playing field. Brenda got goose bumps as Kelly’s hands cupped her unfettered breasts.

“Look, Laura,” Kelly exclaimed. “Ever see freckles on goose bumps?”

Laura had to laugh, breaking the tension. She looked closely at Brenda and then gave her a deep, soulful kiss, “Thank you again for what you did for Kelly. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be the luckiest girl in the world!”

“Well, I’m not sure who’s the luckiest,” said Brenda as she kissed Laura back, “but you are most certainly very welcome!”

True to her word, Brenda made sure that three could fit comfortably on the bed, and they were into a very serious smooch and grope fest when Kelly had said, “Mmmm, Brenda, guess what?” When she saw she had Brenda’s attention, she went on, “I’m going to have a baby!”

Brenda's mouth fell open, and then she squeaked as her knee slipped over the side of the bed. She caught herself and looked at Kelly "For real?"

"Yes, for real!" Kelly smiled.

"Oh Wow! That's wonderful! Congratulations! Ooo! I have to tell the... Please don't tell me I can't tell the rest of the gang," she finished, pleadingly. "I can't keep this a secret! I just can't!"

Kelly smiled. "It's not a secret from our friends," she said, "we just wanted to wait until we got here to tell you the news. We just found out ourselves."

Brenda grabbed her cell phone and punched a speed dial number.

"Amanda? Listen! Kelly's going to have a baby!"

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

Chuck saw the tears forming in Todd's eyes and quickly moved to embrace the younger man, with the thought that he would be proud to call this man his son.

"I know, Todd. I understand." Todd cried silently for nearly five minutes, his shoulders shaking in Chuck's arms. Chuck had his eyes closed for fear of tears himself. He really did understand what Todd was feeling. The joy of fatherhood coupled with the anxiety of bringing a new life into this world and the uncertainty about being up to the job. Chuck had listened when Todd had spoken about his own parents, and knew what was troubling Todd.

"You're going to make a great father, Todd. I think I know you well enough to say that without any hesitation. You're a kind person, you have a real heart, and you care. You are not your father or mother. I've seen you with Anna and I've seen how happy Kelly and Laura are. This is going to be one lucky baby."

Todd sniffled and looked at Chuck. "Thanks, Chuck. When I first heard the news all I could think about was how happy Kelly was and Laura got caught up in it, and I was overwhelmed. Then we decided we would tell you and Anna and the 'James Gang,' but it wasn't until I saw you that I realized I have no family to give this child."

"Maybe not a biological background family, Todd, but you certainly have family. I'd be right proud to fill in as a grandfather, and the baby will have more aunts to fuss over it than most babies!"

Todd's eyes threatened to mist over again. Chuck smiled at him and said, "You think about that, son, and I'll get us another beer."

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

Powered by cell-phones, Kelly's news spread through the James gang from Brenda's single call to Amanda just short of the speed of light. Jules and Nicole caught the call while JulieAnn was breaking yet another land speed record, Celeste heard it while checking the ribs on the smaller wheel they were taking to the Eyrie later that afternoon. Sara heard the news from Sherri who was molesting her. Within minutes return calls of congratulations were flying to both Todd and Kelly.

Todd looked at Chuck and smiled as he received more congratulations from yet another member of the "James Gang."

"I guess you were right, Chuck. Friends are the family you pick out for yourself. That was Amanda, she and Anna are headed back here to share the news personally. They're going to pick up Kelly and Laura on the way."

"That's probably just as well," said Chuck, "I see the media wolf pack starting to converge on the parking lot. It must be getting close to show time."

Todd looked down and watched as various TV news vans gathered around the marina parking lot, satellite dishes unfurling and rotating to point at their unseen targets. He was trying to read some of the names on the news vans when Chuck handed him a set of high-powered binoculars.

"Try these, Todd. I've learned from experience that if I want to stay out of the crowd, these can help me still get a bird's eye view of the action."

Todd laughed. "I used to use my camera with the 800mm lens to do the same thing."

"Todd..."

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure how to put this delicately." Chuck said.

Todd put down the glasses and turned to face the older man. "So just say it, Chuck."

Chuck grinned. "It's funny but I've always been accused of saying exactly what was on my mind and damn the consequences, but this is ... well, it's about you and Kelly. I wasn't going to say anything, but seeing you today, how you felt about your 'family,' well, damn it, after you left my place I made a few phone calls."

Todd was looking with interest at Chuck, whose smile had disappeared.

"So, you made some phone calls. As far as I know that's not a crime," said Todd.

"No, it's not a crime, but I don't want you or Kelly thinking that I've been snooping into your personal affairs either."

“Oh?”

“You suggested that I call one of the TV ‘talk show’ people to get in touch with somebody to help me find my daughter. I took your advice, but damn it, I’m not without means, Todd, and what you said about beating kids really bothered me. I called on an old friend from my days in the service who has established a really good private investigation agency in Hollywood. He’s already got a lead on Deanna and told me that he would probably have an agent talking to her this weekend. I only asked him to pass a message on to her.” Chuck sighed and gathered his thoughts. “Kelly was the one who suggested that I try to let Deanna know I love her and miss her, so that’s what I told the agent to say: I love her, and I miss her so much and if she can forgive a stubborn old man I really want her back in my life and especially in Anna’s.”

Todd was nodding in agreement, his eyes misting.

“This way I’ll be sure she got the message, and if she wants to have contact with me, she’ll call. If she doesn’t then the agent will just confirm that she is alive and well and knows I miss her.”

“That’s a good plan, Chuck, but what does that have to do with Kelly and me?”

“Well, when I was talking to my friend, I remembered what you said about a real horror story, that if I wanted to hear one to ask Kelly. I didn’t want to dredge up any bad memories for her, so I asked my buddy to do a background search on both of you.”

“Ah, I see,” said Todd.

“I really hope you won’t be upset at me,” Chuck said.

“If you hadn’t said anything about it, Chuck, we wouldn’t even know. I suspect you have a reason for telling me this. But before you tell me, just let me say that I’m not upset and I’m sure Kelly won’t be either. Most of our lives are public knowledge anyway.”

“Thanks, Todd, but I doubt if what I found out is common or public knowledge.”

Todd tilted his head with an enquiring look but said nothing.

Chuck took a swallow from his beer and began reciting from memory the report he had received just two days ago.

“Todd Ayres, born September 29th 1974, to Adrian and Betsy Vanden Ayres. Born in the town of Helmond in the province of North Brabant. Moved to the US in 1981 supposedly to find better employment opportunities for Adrian.” Chuck paused for effect. “However, the real reason for the sudden move was because the Dutch version of the Child Protection Agency had followed up on a complaint made by a neighbor about abuse of their son.”

Todd's head snapped up. This was news to him!

"Though there was evidence that abuse had taken place, the neighbor had been afraid to testify and the case was dropped with a severe warning. Three months later you landed in a suburb of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Raised in a very strict Catholic home, your parents moved from state to state when the church couldn't protect them from the constant calls to the CPA. By the time you were 14, you had a record with the Child Protection Services that was over an inch thick. People did really care about you, Todd, and your mother and father soon discovered that Americans seeing a young boy beaten were much more willing to give statements and testify. Seeing they might be deported, your parents eased up on the physical punishment, but according to the report I read, you had already discovered your love of photography. You moved out of your parents' house when you were 17, already earning a good living with your creative eye. You attended University with a partial scholarship, and paid your own way through obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. By 20 you were in therapy, had legally changed your name to Ayres and though you had earned your first million by the age of 22, you didn't seem to get focused in your work until you did a certain swimsuit edition of a popular Sports magazine in 1995. I guess I don't need to tell you what happened at that shoot in Jamaica."

Todd shook his head in wonder. "That's amazing, Chuck. I didn't even know all that. So, you think that Kelly had a lot to do with the direction my life took?"

Chuck laughed. "Well, after that shoot in Jamaica, your work load started to gear more towards runway and fashion shoots and you turned down more work than any living photographer today. You seemed very selective about which models you would work with and gained a reputation for bringing the best out in each of them. Most of the top models in the 90's had you listed for 'preferred photographer' and were willing to wait or pay. If you like I can look up the paperwork and tell you how much you earned during those years."

Todd laughed. "No, that won't be necessary, Chuck. That's a hell of an investigation service your friend runs!"

Chuck nodded. "That's why I know they will find Deanna and pass my message on to her. But let's get back to your life. It's very interesting. You quit straight fashion photography when you and Kelly opened your own agency in '98. You're still a long way from the biggest, but your clients are big corporations and you supply over 300 models with regular work. You changed from fashion photography to a very diverse field but the results, as seen in the IC shoot last month, have been fantastic. You only take jobs now that interest you and your interests are very diverse. You do as much photography for free or at cost as you do for the big bucks. And it came as no surprise to discover you were a card carrying member of Mensa."

Todd blushed. "It's not something I advertise," he said.

“So, when I say you are going to make a great father, Todd, I’m basing it not only on personal observations, but on documented facts. I can understand you not wanting any relationship with your parents, but you still have a rich cultural history to pass on to your child.”

“This was eye opening and fascinating, Chuck, what did you find out about Kelly? She rarely mentions anything about her life before she became a model.”

Chuck rubbed his face as if thinking. “I guess I can tell you about Kelly. After all she is carrying your baby, but unless she asks, I won’t ever mention this to her. What I’m about to tell you might surprise you. Are you sure you want to hear this? It’s a pretty gruesome story.”

Todd thought about it for a minute and then said, “Yes, please. I know her so well, yet I don’t really know anything about her at all other than who she is today.”

“Okay. Kelly Jennsen was born October 15th 1977 in Buffalo, New York. Her birth name was Kelly Melissa Johnson. Her father never married her mother and earned money in every shady deal possible. He had a criminal record that consisted mostly of petty theft and assault. Her mother, Melissa Johnson, also had a record as a prostitute and for petty theft. Both were heavy drug users. Though there is evidence to support allegations of abuse, Kelly managed to keep clear of them from the age of six. Quite a smart child, she took care of herself for the most part. There is nothing really outstanding in her early life until shortly before her twelfth birthday. One day, she was spotted in a local mall by a model scout. He managed to get her name and address from her friends, and he approached her parents about her becoming a model. They said they weren’t paying for any pictures, and he saw an opportunity. The bastard *bought* her. He paid her parents twenty-five thousand dollars, and became her legal guardian.

Todd interrupted. “Her friends remembered this?”

“No, they got it from records. I’ll explain in a moment. Anyway, Kelly made her modeling debut at the age of twelve. She was making good money and it should have paid for any kind of education she wanted, but her ‘agent’ was taking almost all her earnings. By the time she was fourteen, she had figured out what was going on, and filed an emancipation suit against her parents for selling her into servitude, and another against her agent. Her father did three years; her mother got a good behavior bond. The agent ended up with worse.

Chuck paused. “This is where the story gets nasty. Are you sure you want to hear the rest of it?”

Todd sat back breathing deeply, slowly nodding his head.

“Aside from selling her as a model, there were allegations that he was forcing her into sex from the age of 12 till she figured out a way to escape his clutches and avoid being returned to her parents. Kelly never did find out that her father went to jail; those charges and the ones against the agent were made after the hearing by the state. The

agent made a plea bargain with the New York Assistant District Attorney. All of his assets were liquidated and placed in a trust fund for Kelly. He lost everything and aside from not admitting his guilt in the rape of a minor, pleaded no contest to all the other charges. Kelly soon found a reputable company to represent her and became one of the more popular models on the circuit. The judge at the hearing who allowed her to gain her independence had placed one condition on the release of her trust fund. As it was a very sizable amount - they recovered over half a million from the bank accounts and the agent's assets - the judge didn't want a 14 year old living on her own with that much money so he appointed a financial investment banker to keep her on a living allowance but not to release the entire amount until she turned 21 or had finished school. Aside from the obvious reason of age, Kelly had to meet with a psychiatrist for a number of sessions to see if she was mature enough to handle life as an emancipated minor. The psychiatrist's report to the court was that she was stable, but had a borderline personality disorder. She could turn into a full blown bi-polar personality but at the time and up to the present she has shown no further signs of it other than her OC traits."

Todd tilted his head fixing Chuck with a quizzical look.

"Yes, that's well documented too, Todd. Her smoking habit is probably the most noticeable, but she is also obsessed with justice and fair treatment, which in the case of your agency works to the advantage of your models. Unlike many Obsessive / Compulsives, she's managed to avoid drinking to excess and gambling, and the only other obsessive trait she has shown is her fixation with vitamins and health food supplements. I'd say she's made some healthy choices."

Todd nodded his understanding and agreement.

Chuck continued, "They were good years investment wise, and the bank earned substantial interest on the money and they were left to tend most of it because Kelly turned out to be a model in high demand. She made it a point to get her education though and when she graduated High School in 1993, the bank turned over control of her portfolio which at that time had grown to just over \$800,000. Kelly had also accumulated a huge bankroll on her own during this period as she needed nothing fancy in the way of a place to live because she was constantly working and staying on location. Then in 1995 she landed the center spread in a swim suit edition wearing little more than a smile, and her career really moved ahead and her fees tripled."

Todd was smiling as he recalled meeting Kelly that first time in Jamaica.

"Then in 1998, Kelly, who had officially changed her name to the one the agent had given her, Jennsen, retired from the runways and opened up an agency of her own with a photographer friend she had met in 1995."

"Now if you like, Todd, I could tell you how many visits you've made to various dentists and doctors, but I think that you see the picture."

Todd sat for a few minutes both absorbing the information Chuck had uncovered and wondering about Kelly's past. She had never told him anything about the abuse from

her parents and had only hinted that her relationship with her agent at that time was a very unpleasant experience.

“Chuck, I appreciate you telling me all this, and I understand why you felt the need to know more about us. I agree it would be better if we don’t tell Kelly about what you uncovered about her parents or the man who bought her. She’s really happy with life now and has kept this a secret to the point where I think she’s blocked out the past in her mind. I don’t think bringing up her past would accomplish anything positive or healing to her life.”

Chuck nodded and said, “I agree, Todd, the only reason I told you was because you felt the need to give your child a family, and the truth is, neither you nor Kelly really has any family except the family the two of you have created for yourselves. A family I hope you will allow me to be a part of.”

Todd stood and embraced the older man. “You’re stuck with us now, Chuck!” he said with a smile. “Thanks for understanding and thanks for filling in the blanks.”

They were still in an embrace, a tear of relief and happiness rolling down Chuck’s cheek when the door opened and Amanda, Anna, Kelly, and Laura walked in.

“Grandpa, why are you crying?” Anna asked.

Chuck wiped away the tear and smiled at his own precious gift. “We were celebrating the good news, Sweetheart.” Then he turned to Kelly and gave her a sweeping big hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Congratulations, Kelly.”

Kelly smiled, blushed, and then kissed him back.

Chuck next turned to Laura and gave her a hug and a big welcome.

“Hey,” said Amanda, “when do I get the royal hug treatment?”

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

Twenty minutes later, after they had devoured most of the fruit and snack foods in Chuck’s suite, they were seated on the balcony. Amanda claimed Chuck’s lap while Anna had managed to climb on to Todd’s. Kelly and Laura took a chair each and blocked Todd and Anna in.

Chuck no longer seemed uncomfortable with the displays of affection he received from Amanda, and lightly held her when the noise of an arriving helicopter stopped all conversation and drew their attention to the marina parking lot.

“This is what I like,” said Todd. “I get to see it all and yet don’t have to be in the middle of it.”

“Look at all those reporters trying to fight the rotor wash,” said Chuck. “Seems like too close isn’t close enough for them.”

Amanda picked up Chuck’s binoculars and watched the reporters being held back by Celeste’s crew. “They’re going to be pretty upset,” she said. “The best view is going to be from... Hey! Erin and her friends are on the roof of Sandy’s!”

“What?” said Todd. “Where’s Sandy’s?”

“Sandy is the owner of the restaurant. The one facing the marina,” explained Amanda.

Todd took the glasses from Amanda and swept the area then started laughing. He handed the binoculars to Kelly and said, “Looks like Ami might get the best shot of all!”

As Kelly looked through the glasses, she could see Ami sitting on her heels with the camera glued to her eye and her elbow on Cara’s shoulder. She laughed as she passed the glasses to Laura.

“Looks like you were right about her, Todd,” said Kelly. “She found the perfect spot to see it all.”

“Yeah, she’s in the right place for the picture,” said Todd, “but I don’t know yet what’s going to happen. I thought the ‘Wheel’ was finished.”

“It is,” said Amanda. “That’s the first one over on the side of Max’s. It’s now our office. This is a smaller one that Celeste had her cubs put together for us to go where Mueller had originally planned it to stand. Out by the cottage on the island. It’s got a large bedroom, a bathroom and an indoor / outdoor Jacuzzi and a wedge for a front patio with a high-diving board!”

“Celeste’s cubs?” asked Laura.

“Yeah, her construction crew. She was a bit of a bear with them when they first started. Didn’t think a girl could be hands-on contractor, but after she growled a few times they took her seriously. Since then we’ve called them her cubs.”

“So, how come you got a military helicopter?” Todd asked.

Amanda fixed him with one of those, ‘how dense are you’ looks. “Duh... We need to get it out there! It’s not exactly something we can carry over on a boat and lug up the cliff.”

“Duh yourself, Blondie! That much I had figured out myself. That thing in the parking lot has a hook on top of it, and I didn’t think you’d build something so floppy to stay in the parking lot. I was just curious as to why a military helicopter!”

“Oh,” said Amanda blushing.

Chuck was roaring with laughter.

“I understand that Mueller’s widow had something to do with that,” said Chuck.

“Yeah,” said Amanda. “Marjorie contacted the military and told them about the project and how Mueller’s design could be used for deploying pre-assembled quarters to any area no matter what the terrain. And when they’re done, they can just pick them up again and put them someplace else.”

“Hmm,” said Todd. “So I take it that the limp form is intentional.”

“Right. You’ll see in a minute,” said Amanda.

The big cargo helicopter moved closer to the wheel and hovering, lowered a large hook down to the structure below. It was easy to spot Celeste and one of her workers on the roof of the ‘Wheel.’ Celeste appeared to be talking into a radio while the worker pushed the heavy hook into place. The cable tightened and for a minute it looked like Celeste might fall off, but after a last minute check to see the connection was secure, she quickly scrambled off the building.

Slowly the helicopter started to rise, drawing up the cable as it did. The sides of the wheel started to close upwards like an umbrella.

“What about the worker still on top?” asked Laura, “isn’t he going to get off?”

Amanda took the glasses. “That’s not one of Celeste’s cubs ... That’s James!”

As the sides of the wheel kept climbing higher and higher, everyone stood to see when James was going to get off, but with a rush of power, the helicopter started to pull away.

“It’s quite an ingenious design,” said Chuck. “Folded like that, I can see where the military would be interested. It would be easy to store and easy to deploy. I think they’ll find an easier way of hooking up to it and releasing it.”

“But James is stuck in there!” wailed Amanda.

Chuck placed a calming arm around her. “He’s not stuck, he’s only going along for the ride. Somebody has to unhook it at the other end.”

They watched Celeste as she got into one of the boats. The driver kicked the throttle wide open and in just minutes, they had passed the helicopter and were on their way to the Eyrie.

As they sat back down watching the helicopter make its way across the marina, Chuck said, “I’d sure like to see the support structure on the other end.”

“Why’s that, Chuck?” Todd asked.

“Well, since it’s not going to be sitting on flat ground, Celeste must have designed it to sit on a pedestal of sorts. Probably something like a support column.”

“You’ll get to see it unfold, Chuck,” said Amanda. “You couldn’t hear it because of the helicopter, but look up there.” Everyone turned to look at where she was pointing. Up above, but out of the way, was an Ultra-Light. “Jules is video taping it from the ground at the Eyrie and Sara and Sherri are taping it all from the sky. Once it’s up and assembled, we’ll be making copies of the video available for the press. James bought a multi copy burning unit and we’ll burn CDs in bulk while the press is quizzing Celeste and stuffing their faces.”

“Smart thinking,” said Todd.

“And everybody will get to see how quick and easily these units can be set up,” said Chuck.

Laura raided Chuck’s fridge and brought out bottles of Evian as everybody sat down again. Amanda returned to Chuck’s lap and Anna planted herself on Todd again.

It only took the helicopter crew 15 minutes to get the ‘Wheel’ in place and from their vantage point, they could see the ‘Wheel’ slowly open up just as it had closed, like an oversized umbrella, the arms and ribs slowly started to expand until it was completely opened.

“Celeste has part of her crew out there now with the smaller pieces that will lock it into place after it’s all level and the cables are tightened,” said Amanda. “She figures it will take them about half an hour and then Mueller’s dream will have become a reality.”

~~~~~ //

“Well, I suppose we should go and mingle a bit,” said Chuck.

“Yep,” said Todd with a grimace. “I’m not thrilled with the crowd, but we should give Celeste and the gang our congratulations.”

“Just congratulate me,” said Amanda who was nestled on Chuck’s lap. “I’ll pass it on to the rest.”

“Somehow I don’t think it will sound the same,” said Chuck as he untangled her lithe body from his.

“Hey, Kell, are you up for a walk?” Todd asked. “All I’ve done all day is sit.”

“I’m up for it,” Chuck said. “It’s good and healthy so I’ll walk with you.”

“Yeah,” echoed Kelly. “It’s just a few miles. By the time we get there, the press should be done asking questions and feeding their faces.”

“I’m game,” said Laura.

“Me too, Grandpa!”

“Damn it,” mumbled Amanda. “Outnumbered by health freaks. Oh, all right. If you insist on slow motion.”

Chuck laughed. “Now Amanda, you can drive down if you want, but sometimes it’s good to take life at a more leisurely pace.”

And it was a pleasurable walk. Something about walking makes conversation easier, and 45 minutes later, they entered the parking lot, a ragtag group of smiling faces.

Ami spotted Todd and came running towards him.

“Did ya see it?” she asked all excited.

Todd smiled at her. “Yeah, we saw it and we also saw you had the best seat in the house. What made you think of going on the roof?”

“When I heard that it was going to be lifted to the island, all I could think about was going up, so I looked for the best spot that was higher than the crowd,” Ami said. “I hope the shots come out as good as they looked through the lens!”

“We’ll know soon enough, Ami. We’ll process all your film when we get back.”

Todd spotted Sara and remembered the case of BBQ sauce in the Hummer. “You guys go ahead. I’ve got something for Sara. I’ll catch up to you a bit later.”

“I’ll meet you there, Sweetheart,” said Kelly.

“Maybe we can all meet up afterwards at the restaurant,” suggested Chuck. “Say in about an hour?”

“That sounds good, Chuck,” said Kelly. “We’ll meet there in an hour, then. I enjoyed the walk and the company, but I think that’s all the walking I want to do today.”

Chuck laughed with her and gave her a hug. “You take it easy, little momma.”

Anna was undecided as to who she wanted to go with. She really liked Todd and wanted to tell him about her latest visit with her mother, but she also wanted to stay with her grandfather and Amanda. With a sigh, she gave Todd a hug and whispered in his ear that she had something to tell him later, and then trotted off to catch up with her grandfather.

Kelly and Laura headed to the open barbeque grill where Sara was overseeing the racks of ribs.

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

Sara was talking with Kelly and Laura when she felt the back of her dress lift.

“I see that you still don’t believe in panties,” Todd chuckled.

Sara laughed and gave him a hug. “Nope, I’ve decided that I’m never going to wear them again. Every time I put a pair on, somebody steals them, so I removed the temptation.”

Kelly and Laura laughed at Sara’s logic.

“But aren’t you inviting more temptation going bare?” asked Kelly.

“Maybe, but I like the attention it gets me as well,” said Sara with a big smile.

Todd picked up the case of Maurice’s BBQ sauce. “Kelly thought you might like this,” he said.

“Thanks, guys. I love his sauce! Mom and Dad used to take us out there for Sunday dinners. You know, that feels like another life ago.”

“I know what you mean,” said Laura.

“We better get moving and congratulate Celeste,” said Todd. “The news people are starting to pack up.”

“I’ll see you guys later?” asked Sara.

“You bet, sweetie. We’re going to be here all night,” said Kelly.

“Okay, have fun!”

Todd, Kelly, and Laura managed to find Celeste and congratulated her on the successful media launch of the ‘Wheel.’ As most of the gang was nearby, they stayed on exchanging pleasantries and congratulations with all of them until it was time for them to hook up with Chuck.

With all the free food outside, the restaurant was nearly empty which suited Chuck and Todd just fine. Brenda and Amanda joined them for a while and they sat around talking about the changes their respective lives had taken this year.

Chuck sat beside Kelly and repeated the offer he had made to Todd to be the grandfather of her baby.

“Chuck, that is so sweet. I really love you for that, and yes, we accept.” Then Kelly asked how the search for his daughter was going and the two of them headed out to the patio to talk privately.

Brenda and Laura were in a deep discussion about Kelly.

“Are you sure you don’t mind, Laura?” Brenda asked. “I’m not trying to come between you guys.”



Laura leaned forward and gave Brenda a tender kiss. “How can anybody ever get too much love? The more you give, the more you gain.”

Brenda’s face lit up with a big smile. “Oh, yes! We found that out!”

Meanwhile, with Amanda helping to keep the details straight, Anna was telling Todd about the lunch invite from her mother. “She misses him as much as he does her,” Anna said, “but she’s still not sure. I hope that she changes her mind soon. I want us all to be a family again.”

Todd nodded and told Anna to keep holding on to her dream. “People do change,” he said. “Look at how much your grandfather has changed this summer.”

Soon though, Brenda and Amanda had to leave. Chuck and Anna stayed with Kelly, Todd, and Laura and shared a light dinner with them. They were nearly finished when Cara and Ami came in.

“You guys hungry?” asked Todd.

“Are you kidding?” said Cara. “We’ve been eating all the free food outside. Erin finally had to leave with James and Amanda told us we could find you here. We were thinking of going to the boat and sunbathing for a while if that’s okay with ‘Mom.’”

Kelly laughed and said as long as they put sunscreen on they could catch some sun but not to overdo it. “Can’t have you looking like lobsters when it’s time to get your pictures taken.”

After the gymnasts left, Chuck said, “I understand that Anna will be staying on the yacht with you tonight. Brenda and Amanda set that up. I hope she won’t be an imposition on you.”

Todd chuckled and gave Anna a hug. “This little princess? An imposition? Not in a million years.”

Anna beamed from ear to ear. “Can I go now, Grandpa? I can join Cara and Ami on the boat.”

“Just remember your manners, young lady, and don’t give our friends a hard time,” Chuck said with a smile.

“I love you, Grandpa. I’ll see you in the morning.” She gave him a kiss and skipped out the door.

Kelly dug through her purse and pulled out a cigarette. “I’m really trying to cut down,” she explained to Chuck, “but...”

Chuck waved his hands. “No need to explain, Kelly. Sometimes it’s better to cut back than to quit altogether. Stress is the last thing you need. I’ll even join you for one.”

An hour later, they broke up the party, and Todd drove Chuck back to the Marriott while Kelly and Laura headed to the boat.

As he drove, Chuck told Todd what a lucky man he was. “You’ve got two beautiful women who obviously love you. And I can see that you love them. Enjoy it, son, and treat them special.”

“You don’t find it strange that I’m with two women?” Todd asked.

Chuck laughed. “If you had asked me that a year ago, I would have said that it was a very peculiar situation, but I’ve learned a lot this year. I think I’ve learned a lot more about love and devotion than I ever thought I could, so no, I don’t think it’s strange at all.”

Chuck got out of the Hummer and wished Todd good night.

“Aren’t you going to feel lonely all by yourself tonight?” Todd asked. “You’ve had a pretty full house for the last few months.”

Chuck laughed. “I’ve got a good book here with me and I know that my friends are close by. Who could ask for more?”

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

Kelly and Laura stepped on the yacht and were headed down to the berths when they heard laughter coming from above. Following the sound they found Cara, Ami and Anna sunbathing topless at the bow.

“Well, haven’t we become the exhibitionists?” Kelly asked with a grin.

“Ah, Mom, it’s nice and private up here,” said Ami.

“And it’s so warm and cozy too!” added Cara.

“Why don’t you join us?” asked Anna.

Kelly looked at Laura who shrugged and stripped off her top and shorts, leaving only her Victoria’s Secret thong.

“Laura!” Kelly exclaimed. “You aren’t setting a very good example for the children!”

“Come on, Mom,” Laura laughed. “It was you who showed us how nice this is!”

With an exaggerated sigh, Kelly peeled off her top and shorts and joined the others on the gleaming hardwood deck, leaning back against the pilot’s cabin. “Well, it does feel good,” she admitted much to the delight of the other four. “But someone will have to put some sun block on me!”

She closed her eyes, listening to the girls scabble for the bottle of sunscreen, until a triumphant “I win!” told her Ami had beaten the others.

She felt the cool cream dripping on her breasts and stomach, and then two warm hands cupped her breasts. A moment later, more hands were sensuously spreading the cream over her flat stomach, fingers playing under the elastic of her panties, then down her legs as they teased her inner thighs. “Oh, that’s nice,” she breathed. “I’ll give you about a year to stop that...”

They finished by spreading more sun block on her shoulders and arms, and then the hands left her, pleasantly aroused and relaxed.

A half hour passed in the warm sun with friendly conversation and long silences when Kelly heard Laura hum in pleasure, and then sensed a shadow over her. Warm lips pressed against hers.

“Mmm, hello, Honey.” She opened her eyes to see Todd leaning over her, adoration on his face.

“I really should have my camera with me,” he said as he straightened up, “but I doubt that I could do justice to so much beauty.”

Five beaming smiles flashed back at him.

Todd sank cross-legged to the deck facing the girls. “The restaurant closes at 9:00,” he said. “I’m not really hungry yet, and there’s not much to do here if you aren’t into water sports...”

“But, Honey,” said Laura, “you love to play in the shower.”

Kelly and Todd laughed.

“Well, I’m thinking we should grab something to eat before it gets too late. The galley is well stocked with fresh fruit and cold drinks, so we could just order something to go from the restaurant and eat it here on deck and watch the sun go down.”

“Oh, can we?” asked Ami.

Kelly nodded. “Why not? We can have our very own private picnic right here.”

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

An hour later with the aid of a brochure they found in the galley, the group had decided on steak and mushroom kebabs along with crumbed butterfly shrimp and fries for the younger girls. Todd volunteered to get it so that the ladies could relax and enjoy the gentle rocking of the boat and the setting sun.

“I’ll go with you, Todd,” Anna said, jumping to her feet. “I can help you carry everything back.”

Todd smiled at the precocious youngster and kissed her on the forehead. “Thank you, Anna. I would most certainly enjoy your company.”

Anna quickly slipped on her t-shirt and they walked to the restaurant hand in hand.

It took a good thirty minutes for the food to be prepared and Todd convinced Sandy to sell him a couple bottles of good Australian wine. Todd paid for the food and he let Anna carry the wine.

“My mom said she would come but I don’t think she is,” said Anna as they walked back to the boat.

“But,” said Todd, “You’ve seen her twice in the last two months, which is a lot more than in the last few years. Sometimes you have to give people a bit of time and a bit of space to let them come to terms with big decisions like this.”

“I know,” said Anna. “I just want Grandpa to be happy and I want mom to be happy, too.”

“And what about your happiness, Princess?”

“Seeing them back together would be the best thing in the world,” said Anna.

Todd stopped, and knelt down beside the little girl. “You really are amazing, Princess. Thinking about others instead of yourself. I hope your dreams come true and we can remove that look from your eyes forever.”

Anna kissed Todd on the cheek and smiled at him.

They finished the short walk back to the boat, Anna quickly shucked off her t-shirt again while Laura and Cara opened the food, and Todd opened a bottle of wine. The girls had put out plates, cutlery, and glasses with cold drinks in a handy cooler and soon everything was ready.

With soft music playing from the saloon and to the backdrop of the magnificent sunset, they all relaxed with their meal. The steak and mushroom kebabs were done just right, and the girls’ butterfly shrimp quickly disappeared along with the large platter of fries that everyone shared.

The gentle evening breeze puckered nipples all round as nobody had bothered dressing, feeling comfortable in the company of friends and good conversation. Kelly finished her glass of wine and leaned back on the rail to light a cigarette. Laura was drinking an Evian that Ami had brought her, and Todd was having a second glass of wine as they all picked at a large bowl of assorted fruit.

Laura bit into a mango, the juice running down her chin and dripping onto her chest. Todd pulled her to him and ran his tongue up between her full breasts.

“Ewww!”

They all looked at him as he pulled a face.

“Mango juice and sunscreen!”

There was a roar of feminine laughter.

No one heard the car as it quietly stopped on the quay, nor the footsteps on the gangplank.

~~~~~ // ~~~~~

“Who the hell are you people and what the **hell** are you doing on my boat?”

To be continued...