

Kelly

(Inspired by Mike C, based on characters in his novel: “James”
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Chapter 20

“Hi Daddy!”

Chuck turned toward the voice and froze, his eyes wide in shock. For a moment, he saw his Helen, but she wouldn’t be calling him Daddy...

Then she stepped into the full light of the morning sun.

“Deanna!” He stood and walked hesitantly toward her, stopping a pace away. “I’ve missed you, Poppin.”

“I’ve missed you too, Daddy!”

They looked at each other for a moment, and then Chuck opened his arms. Deanna took the last step between them, wrapping her arms around him.

“Oh, Daddy!” she cried, and the others saw the tears on her face.

“Oh, Poppin! I’m sorry!” Tears were rolling down Chuck’s face as he held his daughter tight to him. “I’m so sorry!”

Anna was clutching Todd’s hand. “Why are they crying?” she asked. “I thought they’d be happy!”

“They *are* happy, honey,” he answered her. “Even guys can cry when they’re very happy,” and she saw the tears forming in his eyes. “I think you should go hug them too,” he added, turning her toward her mother and grandfather.

Anna went to put an arm around her mother’s waist. “Mom? Are you all right?”

“Oh, Honey!” Deanna drew her daughter close, and Anna put an arm around her grandfather’s waist as well. “I’m so happy! Thank you, darling!” She nuzzled her daughter’s hair as she hugged her close, then turned her face up and kissed her father tenderly on the lips.

The kiss lasted only a moment, and then they drew apart to look wonderingly into each other’s eyes. Chuck smiled tearfully at her, lifted a hand to caress her hair and drew her close to rest her head on his shoulder.

Kelly was hugging Todd’s hand to her breast, the tears on her cheeks matching Todd’s, while Laura hugged her from the other side, her eyes glistening. Cara and Ami were holding hands, looking uncomfortable at the raw display of emotion from the adults.

“I thought they were supposed to be happy!” came Ami’s stage whisper to Cara.

Todd saw Chuck’s shoulders shake and thought he was weeping harder, but then heard his chuckle. The chuckle turned into a laugh, and Deanna’s giggle joined him. He turned his tear-streaked face to Ami, a grin from ear to ear. “We are happy, honey. This has got to be the second best thing to ever happen to me!”

“***Second*** best!” Deanna exclaimed, digging him in the ribs. “So what was the ***first*** best, then?”

“Two first best, honey. The day I married your Mom,” he said tenderly stroking her hair. “And the day you were born. And I had forgotten!” he choked, the tears starting anew.

“Oh Dad! Daddy, it’s all right!” Deanna hugged him fiercely. “I won’t let you forget again.”

“Promise?” He smiled through his tears. “You’ll probably have to remind me every day!”

She looked into his eyes. “I think maybe we can work something out, Daddy.”

“Thank you, honey.”

Todd moved over to Chuck and Deanna. “Mr. Regan, I’d like to introduce you to Master Designer, Master Builder and the owner of this fine vessel. Ms. Deanna Regan. Or have you two already met?”

Both Deanna and Chuck laughed.

“Breakfast is going to get cold,” said Laura.

“Oh, Deanna, I’m never going to let you go again. I’ve been so stupid,” said Chuck.

“No Daddy ... I was the one who was pig-headed. I let you down.”

“No you didn’t, Sweetheart. Look what you created,” Chuck said, looking down at Anna nestled between them.

Chuck walked back to his seat, carrying Anna and holding on to Deanna’s hand. Todd held out the chair for Deanna, who never took her eyes off her father. How he had changed. Never before had she seen him cry.

Todd sat down after Anna and slowly people began opening the insulated containers that held their breakfasts. Laura poured orange juice for everyone, and then she and Kelly and Todd and Cara and Ami took their vitamins.

Ami and Cara dug into their breakfast with gusto. Kelly was still misty eyed but started on hers as well.

Laura was the only one really smiling, though she understood that both Todd and Kelly were dealing with their own demons.

“So, Chuck,” she said. “Deanna told us last night that a detective you hired found her yesterday. It was quite a story.”

Chuck looked up, looking at Todd and Kelly and Laura. “You mean this wasn’t a set up? You really didn’t know that Deanna was going to be here?”

“Not a clue, Chuck,” said Todd. “It surprised the hell out of us when she showed up last night. We didn’t even know that this yacht was hers!”

“You came because you wanted to?” Chuck asked Deanna.

“Daddy, I’ve missed you so much!” Deanna said throwing her arms around him again.

This time there were no tears in Anna’s eyes. She was smiling as she started to eat, realizing that they would finally be a family again.

“But you did trick me into coming here this morning,” Chuck said, although he smiled as he said it.

“Actually, that might technically be true,” said Kelly, “but I had forgotten to ask you if we could have our baby christened at your lake. My friend in the nursing home said that that’s where it should be done.”

“Of course!” said Chuck. “You didn’t have to ask. Just promise you’ll let me throw the party.”

Todd laughed. “It would only be right for the baby’s grandfather to do just that!” he said.

“Baby’s grandfather?” asked Deanna.

Chuck laughed a hearty rolling laugh. “It seems I have adopted a son,” he said smiling at Todd.

“And inherited two daughters-in-law as well,” said Deanna, “speaking of which, when is the ceremony going to take place?”

“The third week of September,” said Todd. “InterCoastal is supplying a boat to take us to Jamaica where Kelly and I first met. It will be our first real vacation, and I can’t think of a better way or reason to celebrate.”

“I take it this won’t be an elaborate affair,” said Chuck.

“Well,” said Kelly. “Todd and I have no family to invite, and Laura doesn’t think her parents would quite understand.” Kelly looked at him earnestly. “But we’d be honored if you would join us if you can find the time to get away.”

“No, Kelly,” said Chuck. “That would be my honor.”

“Who’s going to design your gowns?” asked Deanna.

Kelly looked at Laura. “Gowns?”

“Well, you can’t get married in the nude,” said Deanna.

Kelly and Laura looked at each other again and got big grins on their faces.

“And why shouldn’t we get married the way Mother Nature designed us?” asked Laura.

“You can’t be serious!” said Deanna.

Kelly and Laura just laughed. Todd had a broad smile on his face.

Finally Deanna started laughing as well. “Well, I suppose that since everything else is about this wedding is unconventional...”

“Can I take the wedding pictures?” Ami asked. “I bet I could sell those to Playboy!”

Everybody was laughing now.

By the time they had finished eating, Cara and Ami asked if they could spend some time with Erin. Kelly said that would be fine, but reminded them to be back by six since they planned on driving home then.

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Shortly after Cara and Ami left, a deep voice shouted from below.

“Ahoy, CL1, Permission to come aboard.”

“That sounds like Al,” said Kelly with a surprised look at Todd.

Todd said, “It’s your boat, Deanna.”

Deanna walked to the edge of the deck and shouted down, “as long as your intentions are honorable, you are welcome aboard.”

Al came up with Lucy in tow.

Cara and Ami had cleared the table before they left to find Erin, and Kelly was sitting back enjoying her first cigarette of the day.

“Hi, Al, she said smiling, “hi, Lucy.”

Lucy was a bit shy around all these adults and clung to her father’s hand.

Todd and Laura said hi to both of them, and then Todd introduced Deanna, Chuck, and Anna.

Al shook everyone’s hand, and then said to Todd that he knew Chuck Regan, and had been trying to get Chuck to let him sell some Regan boats at his marina at Brookhaven.

Chuck laughed. “I’m afraid that it’s out of my hands now Al. I’m just a figurehead. Brenda is the General Manager of Regan Boats now, but if you like I can put in a good word for you.”

Al laughed and said that would be appreciated but that wasn’t his reason for coming on board. “This is a day for celebration for our young friends and the successful completion of Mueller’s Wheel.”

“Hear, hear!” said Chuck raising his glass of orange juice.

Laura went to the galley and brought up two fresh glasses for Lucy and Al. After filling them she sat back down beside Todd.

“Actually, I came looking for the best photographer and his exotic dance partners,” Al said laughing.

Chuck looked confused.

Al explained what the rumor mill was churning out at Brookhaven. “The restaurant has been jam packed every night,” he said to Kelly. “Jim Fredy – he’s the owner - said if I ever ran across the three of you again to tell you that your next meal is on the house. When I told him that I wanted Todd to do the new brochure of the island, he extended his invitation to free meals for the duration of the shoot. He’s a boating man himself and he loved that shot of the Cuddy with the spray. He’s even got an autographed print of the one with Sara standing Chuck’s boat on its stern.”

“So,” Chuck said with a smile, “you girls also know how to dance!”

Laura blushed but Kelly said, “With the right partners you can do anything!”

“Amen to that!” said Chuck.

“So, Al, how did you like the picture of Laura with the dolphins?” Kelly asked.

“That was a great shot!” said Al. “I got it framed and hung it in the Mayor’s office. It’s amazing how you got the water to look so clear, Todd.”

“It’s just a matter of polarizing the lens properly,” said Todd.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’d like to have that one included in the brochure,” said Al.

“You’re hiring us for the job?” asked Kelly.

“Absolutely! I was pleasantly surprised at the price you quoted, Kelly. We’ve had a number of photographers over the years do our brochures and they look at the boats and the golfers and the private planes and think they’ll make their fortune on one job,” said Al. “The worst part is, they don’t have a feeling for the place, and I’ve always been disappointed in the results.”

“I know what you mean, Al,” said Chuck. “I hired TKO on the recommendation of a friend figuring I had nothing to lose, and in a shorter time than anyone else, Todd put together an entire package of pictures so good that we increased the size of our sales brochures. On top of that, the picture of Sara you mentioned is going to be the centerfold in next month’s International Powercraft!”

“What I don’t understand,” said Al, “is with all the big companies you work for, and the quality work you provide ... why aren’t your prices higher?”

Todd laughed. “That’s easy, Al. This is just part of what we do. We also have a model agency that gives Kelly and I a very nice income. If the prices for my services were too high, I would miss out on the jobs that challenge and stimulate me. By keeping our prices reasonable, we get offered jobs we wouldn’t normally see, and I don’t have to take on any job I don’t want. It can get addictive if people keep offering you a pile of dollars for a few weeks of your time, and then you feel obliged to give them what you think they want.”

“I understand,” said Al slowly. “That’s why you soaked Peter and me in that cascade shot. Instead of focusing on what he wanted, you could be creative.”

“You got it, Al,” said Kelly, “and look at what that Mensa brain can do when he’s doing his own thing.”

“Oh,” said Al. “You don’t have to convince me! I’ve got copies of all the pictures that IC ran in the different papers. Seems it was a waste of time having the news people show up. They were just doing a job. Todd was making art.”

“Okay guys,” said Todd. “You’re going to give me a swelled head. I just like taking pictures and doing it my way. Chuck was kind enough to let me have a weekend doing his pictures my way without any interference and I enjoyed it. And Chuck seems happy with the results.”

“I think I would have been even happier if I had known enough not to ask you to get those posed shots,” said Chuck. “Best thing you can do, Al, is to let my boy here have free rein. You’ll be happier than if your stock in IC tripled!” he said laughing. “Now tell me about this water cascade.”

Al took some time recounting how Todd and Sara had figured out a way to show the wing on the Cuddy and then had called him and Peter over on the pretense of seeing ahead of time what the picture would look like. “Of course Kelly and Laura were wearing rain slickers and Todd had one on himself but he was holding it up and said it was to stop spray from hitting the camera.”

“Well, that part was true,” said Todd.

“So there’s Peter and me, watching Sara doing something like 75 knots and she’s heading right at us. At the last second she turns the boat, right on the wake and the last thing I see is a wall of water that appeared out of thin air. You can’t believe how much water there was. It was like a swimming pool got dropped on us! We were totally soaked!”

Chuck had tears running down his face as he laughed. He could picture the surprise on Al’s face. He’d have to remember to tell Peter the story again when he took over as the chairman of IC.

Anna and Lucy had wandered off during the conversation and returned bearing a platter of cups and a steaming pot of coffee. “I’ve got tea brewing right now for you, Kelly,” Anna said shyly.

Kelly put her arm around the young girl. “Are you happy, baby?”

“Oh yes, Kelly,” she said. “Mom and grandpa haven’t stopped holding hands!”

“Do you think that maybe you and Lucy want to find your friends from the James Gang?” Kelly asked.

“You think that would be a good idea, don’t you?” asked Anna.

“I think you are way too smart!” said Laura. “You go ahead and I’ll take care of the tea.”

Anna blushed, and then gave both Kelly and Laura a kiss on the cheek. The girls told their parents where they would be and that they would be back in two hours, kissed them and ran off down the gangway.

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“But you have a strange way of setting prices, Kelly,” said Al after the kids had gone. “You discounted your own price if I could arrange the same suite at the Hampton, and you specifically requested a fully optioned Argo 8 wheel ATV, minus the snow tracks but with a trailer, all of which will be yours to keep when the job is done. I don’t get it.”

Deanna spoke up. “I think I do. They’re showing you that they intend to put money back into Brookhaven. Instead of buying their own ATV, they’re letting a company on the island provide it, and instead of staying off the island at night, they are using some of the money and spending it on what I assume is an expensive room at one of your hotels. Which tells me they will be taking their meals on the island as well. Have I got that right, Kelly?”

Kelly smiled. “I’d love to do business with you, Deanna. You hit the nail right on the head!”

Well, I’ll be damned,” said Al. “How come I didn’t realize that?”

“Probably because you think like a man, Al,” said Deanna. “No insult intended.”

“You know... previous photographers did stay off-island,” said Al. “And none made the impression you did on Ray or Jim Fredy. I told the Hampton you may be back and they offered the suite at a discount off their corporate rate, for as long as you want. Deanna, maybe I can take a quick crash course from you on selecting my business associates.”

Deanna laughed. “Maybe sometime in the future, Al. First I have some family matters to catch up on.”

Laura came up with mugs of tea for herself and Kelly.

“But I don’t understand the need for the Argo,” said Al. “There are all kinds of golf carts available to use.”

“Ah,” said Todd, “but they wouldn’t be able to ride into the water so I could sit off shore and shoot in, especially when it comes to the wildlife preserve, and as far as I know golf carts aren’t that great on beaches either.”

“Good point,” said Al, finishing off his coffee. “So, what do I do with the contract now? Our lawyers have checked it all over and they see no problems, though they were as stymied as I was about the unusual requests. Wait until I explain this to them!”

Kelly gave him Steve’s number and said for Brookhaven’s legal beagles to get in touch with him. As soon as Steve arranged the details, Todd would start. Kelly said they figured they would spread the shoot out over the next three months if that was acceptable.

“That would be great,” said Al. “That way we can get a variety of shots and be just in time for the winter mailings.”

Al stood up and shook everybody’s hand, saying he had to get back to his other obligations.

Chuck told him to give Brenda a call any time through the week and they would arrange to display Regan boats at Al’s marina.

Chuck poured himself another coffee and refilled Deanna’s cup as well. When he saw Kelly light up, he politely asked her for one.

“Dad, are you smoking again?” asked Deanna.

“Only when I can bum them off Kelly,” he said with a grin.

After a few more minutes of pleasant conversation, Todd, Kelly, and Laura excused themselves saying they had better say their goodbyes to the James Gang before they started packing up and loading up to head home.

As they left, they noticed Chuck holding both of Deanna’s hands with the two of them deep in discussion.

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“I think that went much better than expected,” said Kelly, “what do you think, Honey?”

“It went well, but when they come off their emotional high, they will have a lot to talk about and work out,” said Todd.

“But most of their issues have already been resolved, Sweetheart,” said Laura. “Chuck found her and made it clear that all he wanted was to know if she was happy. Deanna decided on her own to come.”

“Laura’s right, Honey,” said Kelly. “They’ve taken the hardest step already. Putting aside the past, willing to start fresh.”

“Well, we’ll see how they make out now that they’re alone,” said Todd. “I really hope they can make a go of it.”

“We better find Sherri,” said Kelly. “We need to get her studio portfolio done pretty soon, so we can find work for her.”

“Speaking of which,” said Todd. “I want to present Sara to some of the TV and movie studios as a stunt boat driver. She’s got the looks and the talent, and you know what kind of shortage of females there is in that line of work!”

“That’s a good idea, Todd,” said Kelly. “I’ll get the pictures you took of her at Regan’s and the ones for IC and I’m sure I can get letters of endorsement from both Chuck and Peter.”

“That is if they don’t come knocking on our door first,” said Todd. “I didn’t realize Chuck would get that center spread in so fast!”

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Sara was, as usual, at the open barbeque, cooking that night’s dinner.

“How come a beautiful speed demon spends so much time at the grill?” Todd asked, flipping her skirt to show her naked butt.

“I don’t know,” said Sara. “Maybe it’s because I’m a better cook than the other girls?”

Kelly and Laura laughed. “More likely because you can’t say no,” said Laura, laughing.

“Oh? Is that a proposition I hear?” Sara said with a blushing smile.

“Maybe not the one you’re thinking of,” said Laura, “but if you’re free at the end of September, I sure would like it if you sang at our wedding.”

“Wedding???” said Sara. “Who are you marrying?”

Todd and Kelly just stood back smiling.

“Well ... I’m going to marry Kelly.”

Sara’s eyes got as big as saucers. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Nope,” said Kelly, stepping up and putting her arms around Laura. “And then we’re both marrying Todd!”

“Oh shit, oh shit, ...” Sara sputtered as she hit the speed dial on her cell phone.

“Celeste? Look ... you’ve got to clear the last week in September. We’re going to sing at Laura and Kelly’s wedding! I mean at Todd and Laura’s wedding ... I mean at Kelly and, oh fuck it. ***They’re all getting married!!!***”

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Kelly sat down at one of the many picnic tables left over from the Press soiree the day before and lit up another cigarette. She felt she was doing pretty well, being down to about four a day. Todd went into Sandy’s and picked up some cold drinks.

He had no sooner passed out the bottles when they heard a car scream to a halt in the marina parking lot, its screeching tires making them wonder if it missed the fences. At the same time they heard the throb of powerful marine engines racing into the marina.

Todd smiled. Generally he wasn’t fond of so much attention, but this was the “James Gang.” His friends. If it hadn’t been for them, this day might never have happened.

In less time than it took Kelly to finish her cigarette, the entire gang was there as well as Cara, Ami and Erin, and Lucy and Anna.

It was congratulations all round on the successful completion of Mueller’s Wheel and Todd and Kelly and Laura getting married.

“So, you’re going to make an honest woman out of Kelly after you knocked her up?” said James laughing and pumping Todd’s hand.

“No, they’re going to make an honest man out of me,” Todd grinned.

The gang wanted Todd and Kelly and Laura to stay another night, but Todd explained that they had to hit the road soon, with lots of work waiting for them in Charlotte.

They set a date for Sherri to come to Charlotte to get her portfolio done. Laura offered to fly down and pick her up, but Brenda promptly spoke up and said she would drive Sherri up the next weekend if that was okay with Todd.

Todd didn’t even need to look at Kelly as he said that would be a great idea. Laura just smiled at her lover.

The gang, as many as could get free, promised they would attend the TKO company picnic on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August. Kelly said she would send down all the details.

There were hugs and kisses from everyone as Todd and Laura and Kelly led their group back to the CL1. Erin had asked if she could hitch a ride back since she had to pack for the tournament next week. She walked ahead with an arm around both Cara and Ami.

Lucy said goodbye to Anna and wished her luck with her mother and grandfather before heading off to find her own father.

Kelly exchanged a last kiss with Brenda and whispered, "I'll be looking forward to your 'visit.' Maybe we can just slip away quietly and enjoy a nice weekend by ourselves."

"Honey, that's the plan!" Brenda whispered back, punctuating it with a lick to her earlobe.

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Chuck and Deanna had spent the last hour just hugging and crying, both of them regretting the wasted years.

"You look so beautiful, Deanna," Chuck said. "Just like your mother when she was your age."

"And you, dad, I've never seen you so relaxed and at ease," said Deanna. She brushed a few loose strands of hair from the side of his face. "What happened to all those wrinkles?" she asked laughing. "You look younger."

"It's because I've got my baby girl back," said Chuck. "I was so afraid that I'd never see you again, Deanna."

"There's some things I need to tell you," said Deanna softly.

"It's okay, Honey," said Chuck. "You don't **have** to tell me anything. I promise you that I will never ask about anything either. You've grown up and I want to **share** my life with you."

"Oh, daddy," Deanna started crying again. "I've missed you and Anna so much. It's been eating away at me for years. But when I saw your note, and all you wanted to know was if I was happy ... I just knew I had to come."

"How did you know that I'd be here?" Chuck asked. "Sorry. Never mind. I said I wouldn't ask any questions. I'm just happy that you're here."

“I can’t believe that you gave over control of your company, dad,”

“Well, it’s not as ominous as it sounds, Deanna. A wonderfully bright young girl named Brenda now runs the company. She’s got the support of a great group of designers, and she keeps the company running smoothly. Made a lot of changes that I hadn’t even considered possible. But I see that you’ve turned out to be quite a ship builder yourself. This boat is remarkable. The quality is unbeatable.”

Deanna blushed. “Well, I learned from the best, didn’t I?”

Chuck’s chest swelled with pride. “I’m glad there are still things we have in common, Deanna.”

Deanna took Chuck for a complete tour of the CL1, briefly cursing the celebrity who had commissioned her, and then reneged on the order. “I’ve got hundreds of thousands tied up in this boat, dad, and all I have to show for it is her initial deposit. The bitch even wanted that back. I should have known better. It’s less of a hassle creating a good boat and then mass producing it and letting dealers handle customers.”

“Well, Deanna, some dealers can be as bad as customers. But I understand what you’re saying, though I don’t think you’ll have any problems selling this one.”

Deanna gave him a hug. She finally had what she had always needed so badly: her father’s approval.

As they finished the short tour and headed back to the upper deck for more coffee, Deanna asked, “How did you come down, dad?”

“I drove ‘Jackie’ down,” said Chuck. “I’ve decided to give her to someone who appreciates her. Her name is Amanda. She came on board about a week after Brenda did. I seem to find myself surrounded these days by remarkable women.”

“Well, do you think one of them could drive my car back to your house?”

“It’s still your house too, Deanna,” Chuck said.

“Thanks, daddy. But what do you think? You’ve got no plans on how to get home, and if somebody can take my car to our house, you, me, and Anna could sail the CL1 back together.”

Chuck’s eyes misted up. “That would be great, Deanna. The three of us on a leisurely cruise back home. But don’t you have prior commitments?”

Deanna looked at her father and smiled. “Nothing is as important as sailing with my dad again. And maybe we can go skinny dipping in the lake again!”

Chuck laughed. “You heard about that, did you?”

Deanna laughed as well. Laughed even harder when Chuck told her about Anna’s initial reluctance to come out of the water. “I like Kelly and Laura, dad. Todd seems to be a really nice guy, too, and I can see you two took to each other real quick.”

“They are an amazing group,” said Chuck. “Kelly is a dear, but there’s something about Todd... He’s talented and gifted and bright. But his family abandoned him when he was a teenager, and I think it still bothers him. Just wait until you get to see them in a normal situation,” said Chuck. “Laura is sweet and loving and I think she’s the one that holds the other two together. Kelly’s a real gentle soul and gives much more than anyone will ever know. Todd is like me. Quiet, doesn’t much care for crowds.”

“I saw a lot of that last night,” said Deanna. “He talks only when he has something to say. He’s very caring and sensitive and Anna adores him.”

Chuck shared just a bit of the information he had gathered on Kelly and Todd, enough to get her misty eyed. “Now maybe you’ll understand better why they have a special place in my heart,” he said. “I was telling Todd how mean I had been to you and he asked me if I ever beat you. I couldn’t imagine parents doing that to their own child. I might have neglected you when you needed me, Deanna, and we might have had words, but I never once thought of raising my hand to you. But that got me thinking and when I asked Marcus about trying to find you so I could tell you how much I missed you, I had him do a background check on Todd and Kelly.”

“God, being beaten by your parents is bad enough, but to be sold by them? It makes you wonder how they managed to stay sane.”

“That’s why I think the bond that keeps them sane is Laura. I don’t know a lot about her, but I understand she comes from a very happy and supportive home. I liked her the first time I met her, and I’m a pretty good judge of character. What you see in Laura is exactly what you get.” Chuck said. “She sees the world as a wonderful place.”

“And this business about the three of them getting married, that doesn’t bother you, dad?”

Chuck laughed. “Nope. Who am I to judge what makes people happy? If it makes them happy, then by God, I’m happy for them and I will do anything I can to help them be happy.”

“You really have changed a lot, dad,” said Deanna.

“Is this a test?” Chuck asked laughing.

“No, daddy, I’m just trying to get a feeling of the new you. Actually ... it’s not so new. I sort of remember this was the way you were before mom got sick.”

“Yes,” said Chuck sadly. “I wasted a lot of years, and took out my pain on those I loved, especially you, baby. I guess I’m just now seeing how I hurt those closest to me.”

“But that’s okay, dad,” said Deanna. “You’re back now, and so am I, and we have Anna and a bunch of new friends, but most importantly, we have time. Although...” Deanna said with a smile, “I always wondered what it would be like to have a brother!”

“Wait until you see the portrait he did of Anna,” said Chuck. “Then you’ll see what I mean about talent. Now how about we call up the marina and get the tanks topped off. I’ll tell Brenda and Amanda that they’ll be on their own for a few days, then we can stock the galley and sail off into the sunset.”

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Todd, Kelly, Laura, and the rest of the crew arrived just in time to see Chuck casting off.

“Hey, Chuck” hollered Kelly. “Are you planning on taking off with our stuff?”

Deanna looked over the deck and said, “don’t worry, Kelly, I’m just going to move her over to the fuel wharf and get her topped up. Dad’s going to sail home with Anna and me.”

Anna squeezed Todd’s hand tight. “This has turned out better than I could have ever hoped for,” she said.

Erin had to run to get her own stuff, and Cara and Ami climbed on board to pack while Deanna skillfully maneuvered the yacht next to the pumping stations.

Laura volunteered to pack Kelly’s stuff as well as Todd’s so that they could spend a little extra time with Chuck and Deanna, though she was quickly learning how to pack light and quick, and soon she joined them at Sandy’s.

Besides being the marina’s only restaurant, Sandy’s was also the place for boaters to stock up on supplies. Chuck and Deanna wrote up a list of what they would need to fill the galley and gave it to the staff to take care of.

Chuck bummed another cigarette off Kelly and as he inhaled the mentholated smoke he looked at Todd. “Do you think you could make time to do a family portrait, Todd? I’ll pay your regular fee.”

Todd smiled. “We have a weekend free after the company picnic.”

“But then we’ll be tied up in New York for two weeks,” added Kelly. “Tell you what, Chuck, you put us up for the weekend, and my beautiful bride to be and I will work our feminine wiles on this poor besotted suc... I mean, *wonderful* man here to take some nice pictures for you!”

By this time Chuck was roaring with laughter.

“Besides, Chuck,” said Todd putting an arm around Deanna. “I can’t very well charge to take a picture of my sister can I?”

Deanna blushed, Anna beamed from ear to ear. Kelly and Laura smiled.

“Then you’ll stay for the weekend?” Chuck asked hopefully.

Todd looked at Kelly. “If we did, we could go to Brookhaven on Monday and spend a few days shooting and scouting.”

“But we’ll still have Cara and Ami with us,” said Kelly. “They’ve just discovered something special, and I don’t want to send them home early.”

“Bring them along,” said Chuck. “We’ve got the space, and they’re more than welcome!”

Cara and Ami arrived back with Erin, all three of them carrying their bags. Ami was still wearing her camera around her neck.

“I think I’m going to have to pick up some film Todd,” she said shyly. Ami was still cost conscious and the idea of having gone through ten rolls of film was outrageous. But there had been so many great things to take pictures of, and some special moments as well.

“Looks like the first thing I’ll have to do is teach you how to make soup,” said Todd.

Deanna looked up. “Make soup?”

“That’s what we call the chemicals we develop our negatives in,” said Ami.

Todd smiled.

“So that’s why I haven’t seen flashes going off when I didn’t expect it!” said Kelly. “You ran out of film!”

Ami blushed.



A marina worker arrived and told Deanna that all the provisions had been delivered and stocked and that the CL1 was fully fueled. Chuck tipped the boy and took the bill. “How about we have an early supper together?” he asked. “I hate to say goodbye.”

Todd nodded and asked Kelly to order for him while he fetched the Hummer and loaded their luggage. Ami announced she was going to help Todd, and Cara said she would order for her. As they walked away, Deanna asked Kelly, “another one sweet on Todd?”

“Yes,” said Kelly, “but not in that sense. More like a big brother to her. He accepts her as she is, and is mentoring her in her ambition to become a professional photographer. Ami doesn’t lean towards men for affection.”

“Oh!” said Deanna looking at Cara. “I thought you two were just friends.”

“We are,” said Cara. “Just closer than most friends.”

“I’ll say,” said Erin. “I’ve been friends with both of them since we started gymnast training way back in the Stone Age, and trust me... *I* never knew that kind of closeness.”

Deanna laughed. “The Stone Age huh? Just how old are you, Erin?”

“I’m 14,” said Erin, “But just because I’m the youngest, doesn’t mean I don’t understand.”

Chuck laughed. “If you think you’ve already seen the Stone Age, you’re going to love it when I tell you about the days when telephones had dials instead of buttons, and when the best and most efficient calculator was a pencil with an eraser on the end!”

Deanna and Kelly were laughing now as well. “Let’s not forget Disco,” said Kelly.

Erin started laughing as well. “Sorry,” she said. “Look at it this way – Cara and Ami are 16 and are already retired from professional gymnastics. I might have two, maybe three years left if I don’t grow too much or have any serious accidents.”

“It’s a very short career expectancy,” said Cara. “You train from the time you’re old enough to walk, and by the time you really understand what the fuss is all about, like being able to do a no hands flip on a balance beam, you are ready to be put out to pasture. When most girls are just starting to think about what they want to do with their lives, we’re already trying to settle on our second career.”

“It must be hard on young girls,” said Deanna.

“Actually,” said Erin, “it has its upside. Because of the major concentration required, you learn to be very focused and school becomes easy. Then you can just concentrate on what you want to do and follow that dream. Physically it’s hard though. Look at my hands,” she said turning them palm up. It will take years or a lot of expensive work to remove the calluses and scars. Remember Tara Lipinski? She’s the young girl from Texas who won the Gold Medal in skating in the ‘98 Olympics. She’s had more surgery done on her knees than most old people, and she retired from skating professionally only two years after the Olympics. Last I heard she was trying out for television.”

The mood around the table had turned solemn.

“Hey,” said Cara. “Don’t everybody look so down! Tara’s not starving, and Ami and I are doing modeling right now and we know what we want to do with our lives. We already got to do things and go places other kids only dream about. And next,” she grinned at Kelly, “Disney World!”

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“I’m looking forward to seeing your shots of the wheel when they lifted it,” said Todd to Ami. “You might actually be able to sell your first set of pictures.”

“Really? You think?”

“If they’re clear and in focus, yeah, I do think,” said Todd. “You’ve got a natural eye for finding the right place. I was proud of you, kiddo!”

“Why didn’t you bring your camera along?” Ami asked.

“Well, sometimes, I just like to leave the camera behind. Then I feel like I’m taking a real break.”

Ami thought on that a bit. “Yeah, I can see where with all the pictures you have to take, you might just want to look at something with both eyes.”

Todd laughed. They tossed the girls’ bags into the back of the Hummer, and then Todd drove to the CL1 where he picked up the rest of the bags before he drove over to park by Sandy’s.

“Thanks, Todd,” said Ami before getting out of the truck.

“For what?” asked a puzzled Todd.

“You know... the modeling work, the chance to work with you, for you believing in me. It all really means a lot to me and Cara.”

Todd smiled and ruffled Ami's hair. You deserve it all, Ami. Both of you girls do. Just promise me you'll never do anything half way. Always give everything your best shot."

"I promise," said Ami. "I'll make you proud of me, Todd."

"I already am."

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Supper was an assortment of fresh grilled fish and deep fried battered shrimp with sides of wild rice with almonds and fries for the girls, while Todd and Chuck had baked potatoes with lots of sour cream and chives.

"It's funny," said Chuck to Todd, "being in boats and all, but I rarely eat fish. And none of that raw crap for me either or any marine life that has legs. I usually have chicken or beef."

"Well, I agree on preferring beef, Chuck, but you've got to think of your arteries. At least you eat chicken. I like fish, but with the exception of shrimp, I prefer mine to come with scales and filleted!"

They relaxed with a glass of wine after supper and then the younger and the more ambitious had ice cream sundaes for dessert. Kelly and Chuck had another cigarette together and then...

It was time to go.

It was difficult.

If it had been possible, they would have all stayed longer, but Todd really did have work to get back to, and Chuck and Deanna still had a lot of catching up to do.

Anna gave Todd a special hug and kiss and thanked him for everything.

"Honey, you'll always be my special angel," he whispered, holding her tight. "You take care of your Mom and your Grandpa. They both need lots of love!"

After everybody had hugged, the six climbed into the Hummer. Todd drove away slowly as the girls waved back at their new extended family. When they had disappeared from sight, Kelly leaned her head against Todd's shoulder.

"Take us home, honey."

***To be continued...***