

Kelly

(Inspired by Mike C, based on characters in his novel: “James”
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Chapter 22

Todd sighed, wishing he could have a cold beer and a hot smoke. Two intense orgasms and his lovers were upstairs. “Damn, it’s still early in the day as well,” he thought. But he was going to fix Kelly and Laura. Slowly, he got to his feet and staggered out of the darkroom.

Vanetta didn’t say a word as he passed by her desk, but she was smirking as he stumbled into the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of Evian and Kelly’s cigarettes then collapsed onto the couch. The same couch where he had first made love to Laura. The same one he and Laura had first experimented in a three way with Kelly, and where Vanetta and Bobby so often spent delicious evenings.

Todd lit up, had a drink, and then sank back into the soft material.

Cara and Ami, having satisfied their itch in the shower, had slipped on panties and T-shirts and came out holding hands. They flopped on the couch sandwiching Todd.

“Since when did you start smoking, Todd?” Ami asked.

“Generally I don’t,” said Todd. “Just two occasions make me want to light up. When I’m really down and ...” he stopped.

“And when he’s totally sexed out in the middle of the day,” finished Vanetta laughing.

“Maybe we should have one too, then,” said Ami with a self-satisfied grin.

“Don’t you dare start!” said Todd. “I think you two have picked up enough bad habits from us as it is!”

Vanetta walked over, took Todd’s cigarette, and had a drag herself, before handing it back to him. She inhaled deeply and let the smoke slowly stream out of her nostrils. Todd smiled at her as he took another drag.

Vanetta parked herself on the coffee table and said, “I don’t think they’re going back with any bad habits, Todd. What have they learned? That nudity is natural?”

Giving is better than taking? Sex with love is better than sex for the sake of having it? Sharing and laughing is as good for the heart as it is for the soul?"

Todd handed the cigarette back to Vanetta, and smiled. "Yeah, I guess that those aren't bad values to adopt, are they, Vanetta?"

She handed the cigarette back to Todd and got up. "Nope, not bad values at all."

"There he is," said Laura. "And would you believe he's already trying to seduce them?"

Kelly laughed. She and Laura were wearing nearly identical outfits to what Ami and Cara were wearing, except of course, their T-shirts had Star Trek symbols on them.

Vanetta said, "Women dream, men fantasize."

Kelly took out a cigarette for herself as she and Laura parked together in one of the facing chairs. "Sit with us, Vanetta," she said. "Your homework can wait a little bit. We've been so busy the last few months we don't get a chance to just sit any more."

Kelly and Laura shared the cigarette that Kelly had lit. Vanetta shrugged, grabbed her bottle of water from her desk, and took the other chair.

"Laura!" said Ami. "You smoke, too?"

"Hardly," said Laura. "If I bought a pack it would probably last me two months, but..."

"We know," said Cara. "You're sexed out in the middle of the day."

Laura's eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

"I told them that was one of the times that Todd lights up," said Vanetta.

"Ah!" said Laura. "Actually, I'm just helping Kelly cut down."

Everybody laughed.

"I got a call from the catering company this afternoon," said Vanetta. Everything is all set for the company picnic, but the band they had booked cancelled. They're trying to find a decent replacement but with it only being two weeks away, they're not sure if they'll be able to get a good one."

"Hey," said Todd. "I wonder if that band from the floating restaurant would be willing to play that afternoon. The music is only from 2 till 6 which means they could still fly back in time to play that night if they're booked."

Kelly got up to get her day planner out of her purse, bringing back a cordless phone and a note pad as well.

“There’s something wrong with this picture,” said Vanetta.

“What’s that, Sweetie?” asked Kelly.

“Well, to start with, you’re doing my job, and Todd’s sitting between two other girls!”

“As long as we’re all comfortable with it,” said Kelly, “who cares?”

Vanetta laughed and put her feet on the coffee table. “Who am I to say anything? Just go with the flow!”

Todd chuckled. “Besides, Vanetta, you might as well get used to it. When you graduate, you’ll have a full time job running TKO’s corporate headquarters.”

Vanetta bolted upright. “Are you kidding me?”

Kelly stopped and looked at Vanetta very seriously. “No, Honey, we’re not. You know how Todd hates details in everything other than his pictures. Laura’s got her modeling and a new married life to think about, and I’m going to spend most of my time with my baby and my lovers. You already know everything about how to run the business, right down to how to deal with New York. Besides,” she laughed, “what do you think we’ve been training you for?”

Vanetta just sat there, slack jawed, all her hopes and dreams coming together in this casual conversation.

“In the last couple of years,” Kelly continued, “as our reputation has grown, I’ve been traveling more and more with Todd, and you’ve been running this place all by yourself. Eventually we want to shut down the office in New York and handle all that business out of Charlotte. Then we’ll probably buy an office, but for the time being, you know that everything is run from here anyway. When we do make a move to a proper office building, there will probably be a lot of the New York staff coming down, but they’ll be reporting to you. I’ll focus on special projects for Todd to shoot, but I’ll be handing them off to you as well once I have the initial pricing done.”

“Earth calling Vanetta,” said Todd.

He draped his arms over Ami and Cara’s shoulders. “She gets like this once in a while,” he explained.

“Well, Madame President?” asked Kelly. “Will you accept this challenge?”

“I ... I mean, um ... I, uh ...”

Laura wrapped herself closer around Kelly. “She’s a whiz with words, isn’t she?” she asked with a smile.

“She probably has to talk it over with Robert and discuss this with her business manager and lawyers,” said Todd grinning.

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Vanetta’s mind was racing. It had only been this afternoon that she told Bobby of her dream of one day running one of the offices for Kelly and Todd. She had never told anybody else, not even her mother.

She had studied so hard to make them proud of her, trying to get the best grades possible to justify the money they had given her for her education. She wanted to be the best, to make a name for herself and slowly move up the business ranks until one day she would be a manager, but now, now she was being offered the presidency of the TKO business! And she *knew* how big that business was! Few people did, other than perhaps their lawyer. And she was black! Not a fourth generation, watered down, American stereotype like Halle Berry, Vanetta was black, 100 percent pure bred Jamaican.

She would be one of the few black females in the country to be the president of a multi-million dollar business, and maybe the only one in Charlotte! Hell, maybe the only one in North Carolina!

And all she could do was stutter.

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“Yes!” Vanetta shouted. “I will, I mean I do, oh shit!”

Everyone was laughing with her.

“We were going to wait until you graduated before we told you,” said Kelly, “but it was so nice and comfortable, just the six of us sitting around.”

“We’ll wait until the company picnic to make the official announcement,” said Todd, “maybe by then you’ll have found your voice again,” he added with a warm smile.

“And seriously, Vanetta,” said Kelly, “I think that you are the best qualified for the job. You’ve got the education and the practical experience, but if you decide to take it, I’ll still be around to help you out.”

“If I decide to take it?” Vanetta said. “This is a dream come true. Mom will be so happy.”

“We’ll get Steve to write up the legal stuff along with your new salary and bonuses and perks,” said Kelly. “Might as well get all that legal paperwork done at once, right, Todd?”

“Right,” he said. “But we’ll celebrate properly at the picnic. How about seeing if you can get us that band?”

“Yes, it would be nice to have them play, wouldn’t it?” Kelly said, remembering the night at the restaurant with a fond smile.

Todd got up. “Now I’m afraid I have to get to work,” he said grabbing Ami’s hand. “And I’m taking my apprentice with me. We’ve got a lot of film to develop, don’t we, kiddo?”

“Yeah, I’ll say,” said Ami. “Ten rolls of mine and 12 cartridges that Todd shot today.”

“Oh, right,” said Todd. “Can you order a gross of Kodak 200 Gold for Ami? Twenty-fours, not thirty-sixes.”

“I’ll do that, Todd,” said Vanetta.

“Okay,” and he started to walk away when he suddenly stopped in his tracks. “Kelly,” he said turning around, “how about inviting Laura’s family over for a barbeque Wednesday night?”

“Are you sure, Todd?” Kelly asked.

Todd smiled. “Yeah. You’ve met Laura’s parents. I think it’s time I did as well.”

Without another word he walked to the darkroom with Ami following close behind.

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“Oh, wow,” said Kelly. She turned to Vanetta. “Did Todd light up or something while we weren’t here?”

Vanetta knew what Kelly meant. This was so out of character for Todd – he usually avoided contact with people unless he had a camera focused on them. “The only thing he lit up was one of your cigarettes, Kelly. And he only drank water.”

Laura was beside herself with joy. Todd was taking a big step just for her family.

“I know why he picked Wednesday,” Kelly said.

“Why?” asked Laura.

“Enterprise will be on,” said Kelly.

“Duh, I must be losing my marbles. I never even thought of that,” said Laura.

“Never underestimate the power of the Mensa mind, Laura,” Vanetta said, “Or his memory!”

“Damn,” said Kelly. “Sometimes, I’m enjoying myself so much that I forget there are other things to be done. We’ve got to get invitations off to the James Gang for the picnic as well and I want to invite your parents and sisters as well, Laura,”

“Don’t forget Chuck and Deanna and Anna,” said Laura.

“Oh God! And Al and his family,” said Kelly. “Vanetta, do we have any copies of the invitations we mailed?”

“Yep, standard ten percent overrun as usual.”

“Then what say we get to work as well,” said Kelly.

TKO’s multiple phone lines were all busy for the next while as Vanetta called and ordered film, Kelly dialed the number for Al’s office and Laura called home.

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Todd turned the fan on the minute he and Ami were inside the darkroom. “Sorry about the smell in here,” he said.

“It’s not bad,” said Ami. “A bit musky, but not that much different from what I smell in the morning,” she said laughing.

Todd brought out the chemicals and Ami made herself right at home getting out the measuring beakers and the developing canisters.

It didn’t take long with two people working at winding film on spools, and Ami had shown a knack for working in the dark and threading film. Kelly had been right, Todd thought. Ami was just what he needed. A young apprentice who was keen on learning the ropes from the ground up. She was dedicated and careful and absorbed information with ease. He wondered why he hadn’t done this before. Then he realized it was Laura. She had made both him and Kelly see the world through different eyes.

Todd set the timer for the developing process and Ami turned the lights back on. Todd was surprised to see she had taken her T-shirt off.

“I guess you’re not worried about me making a pass at you any more,” he said, laughing.

“Hell, no,” she said. “Just a few hours ago you saw me in a lot less under a zoom lens, and last night I wasn’t wearing anything either.”

“True,” said Todd, “but we weren’t alone in a darkroom together either.”

Ami laughed. “Sorry, Todd, but I’ve got your number now. You’re just a big softie,” she said and then laughed at the joke. “I mean you’ve just a softie at heart. By the way ... what is it about girls in school uniforms that gets you guys going?”

Todd laughed. “Yeah, mostly it’s us older guys. We see the uniform and all we can think of is all the girls we missed out in high school when our hormones were at their peak.”

“Guys hit their peak in high school?” Are you serious?”

Todd rotated the canisters. “Yeah, really. A guy hits his sexual prime around 16 and after that, it’s all downhill. Slowly at first, but yeah, we need more stimulation after 30. When a guy is between 13 and 16, just about anything will turn him on.”

The timer went off for the developer and between the two of them, they soon had the canisters emptied, the film rinsed and filled with fixer. Todd reset the clock.

“Why aren’t girls turned on that easy at that age?” Ami asked. “I only started to get feelings when I turned 16, and it’s only certain things that turn me on.”

“That’s God’s cruelest joke,” Todd laughed. “Women hit their sexual peak around 30.”

“So that explains it,” said Ami. “I always wondered why so many older women went out with younger guys. They’re easier to turn on. And, why you see so many old guys with young girls.”

“Yeah, I guess that explains most of it,” said Todd, “but I think another reason why women in their 30’s go for younger guys is because they can get it up more often in a day than a man their own age.”

“But, skill and technique has to count for something doesn’t it?” Ami asked.

“It sure does,” said Todd with a laugh. “Otherwise guys like me would never stand a chance!”

“Nah, I don’t think that’s true, Todd. I think that personality and a good heart has a lot to do with who women chose to mate with. I don’t see you as doing without, even if Kelly and Laura weren’t in your life.”

Todd thought about that as they dumped the chemicals back into their containers. “Yeah, you’re right, Ami. It wasn’t like I was lonely or deprived before Kelly and Laura, but it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t as intense or as gentle or loving. Feelings have a lot to do with it.”

Todd and Ami spent the next half hour wiping the negatives and hanging them up to dry while they put the chemicals away and cleaned up the work area. They stopped for a drink before they set up the enlarger and the trays with the new chemicals.

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“So, Al, ‘Rebel Heart’ is the name of the band? Can you get me a number for them?” Kelly asked. “Thanks Al, you’re a sweetheart. I’ll see you soon. Bye.”

It had taken Kelly a little while to track Al down, but finally had gotten him through Lucy. Now all she had to do was convince the band to play a double on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Meg had been thrilled when Laura called home. As Laura later realized, her dad was usually home Wednesday nights to begin with, and her Mom said they would love to come to Kelly’s for a barbeque. Meg asked if there was anything she could bring.

“Just the family, Mom. Todd wants to meet all of you, and he wants to talk with Kat and the twins about them singing.”

Meg promised they would all be there at 6 o’clock.

Vanetta had ordered the film to ship overnight, and then she and Cara had dug out the invitations for the company picnic celebrating the fifth anniversary of TKO. Cara had flawless penmanship so Vanetta gave her a list of names and addresses of the new people to invite. While Cara was scripting the names with a calligraphy pen, Vanetta continued to find addresses. Soon they had a growing pile of finished envelopes between them. Checking the time, Vanetta realized, with the extra help from Cara, that she could get them picked up by Fed-Ex for overnight delivery. She called while she continued to dig out more addresses on the computer database.

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“Hello, Dan?” Kelly asked.

“Yes, this is Dan,” said the voice on the other end of the connection.

“Hi. My name is Kelly Jennsen, I’m not sure if you’ll remember me, but we were at the restaurant a few weeks ago, and your band played so good, that we were wondering if you were available to do a company party on short notice.”

“I’m glad you liked the music, Miss Jennsen,” Dan said, “but we’ve got a pretty steady gig here. We like it.”

“I understand, Dan,” said Kelly, switching into business mode. “You don’t recognize my name and that’s not surprising since we were never introduced. I had to call the mayor of Brookhaven to get your name and number. We were the ones on the dance floor when you did a set of Blue Rodeo songs which you followed up with an impromptu rendition of Tom Jones’ ‘You Can Leave Your Hat On.’”

“Oh! Yeah, sure I remember you. Actually, I’m not sure which one of the two women you are, but I remember that night real well. The next day, that show was the talk of the island. We heard afterwards that you were some kind of VIPs.”

“Well, we sure enjoyed ourselves, Dan,” Kelly said, “but we aren’t really VIPs, just working stiffs like everybody else.”

“Right, that’s why Al gave you my number. Are you the one in the picture in his office? The one with the dolphins?”

Kelly laughed. “No, that’s Laura.”

“Okay, I remember you now. I saw the picture of the two of you at Ray’s T shop. Nice!”

Kelly blushed. “Why, thank you, Dan. I’ll pass that on to Laura.”

“Yeah, Ray was totally blown out of the water when he got that in the mail. Told us we had to come down to see it.”

“Ray’s a good man,” Kelly said, “We enjoyed his shop as much as we enjoyed your music. We’re going to be back in a few weeks and we have an even better and bigger picture for him, to go with the Star Trek corner of his store.”

“You guys really made an impression with a lot of people here, Kelly,” Dan said. “Tell me what your problem is and maybe I can help out.”

Kelly explained what had happened to the band that was booked to play at the annual company picnic, stressing this was a special one since it marked the fifth successful year. Told him about the number of people coming, dropping some names that he would recognize, and where it was being held.

“We’ll be glad to pay for you to fly in and back,” said Kelly concluding her pitch.

Dan laughed. “That’s okay, Kelly. Really, we only do three weeks a month anyway. The owner likes to bring some fresh talent in every month to see how it shakes out. I think that we can convince him to switch the week so we’ll be free, then we’ll just haul our gear up the way we usually do.”

“Thanks, Dan. I realize it’s really short notice, but I would really appreciate an answer as soon as possible.”

“I’ll have it for you in a couple of hours, Kelly,” Dan said. “You realize you haven’t even asked what we charge for a single day out of state gig?”

“Oh, gosh, I figured union scale,” said Kelly and then started to laugh.

“You know, Kelly, you nearly had me going there for a second. We get three grand a week here. I would say for a one day gig, plus travel ...”

“Forget it, Dan, you don’t need a calculator,” Kelly said. “I’ll give you five.”

“Five thousand?”

“Yes, on condition that you allow a few singers to do an hour with you.”

“Hot Damn! Oops, sorry about the language. Can I call you back in ten minutes?” Dan asked.

“I’ll be here,” said Kelly.

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“What are you grinning about?” asked Laura, who had just whipped up a big pitcher of juice.

“I’m going to make you sing for your supper on the day of the company picnic,” said Kelly. “You *and* your sisters.”

Laura smiled. She didn’t normally seek to be the center of attention, but she was also comfortable singing in front of an audience. She’d have to sit down with Kat and get together a list of songs. “That’ll be cool, Kell,” she said. “We’ve never sung with a professional band before. It’ll be quite a shock to Kat and the twins not to have to sing a cappella for a change.”

“You mean that you and your sisters sang at all those nursing homes and hospitals and never had a band?” Kelly asked.

“Well, a couple of times we had the Salvation Army Band there near Christmas, but most of the time,” she shrugged, “the only instruments were our voices.”

“Are you looking for someone to provide back up for Laura’s sisters?” Vanetta asked.

Kelly smiled at her. “I’ll bet that you know someone.”

“Well...” Vanetta slowly said, “You know Robert still tutors a few nights a week, right? He was telling me about all the cutbacks in the schools’ music programs and he has this one group of kids that he works with and they have their own little band.”

“Budding rock stars?” Kelly asked.

“No, quite the contrary,” said Vanetta. “They took music all the way through school only to have the school cut the funding in their Junior year. There are three of them all around 16. They play just about everything but they were hoping to go on to Juilliard when they graduated.”

“What do they play?” asked Laura with interest.

“If I remember correctly, one plays the Cello, but is also good on an electric bass, the other studied piano but now just uses a synthesizer, and the other one is one of those percussionists.”

“You mean drums, don’t you?” said Kelly.

“Yeah, he does those too, but his main interest is in those other things. The ones with the steel tubes under them,” Vanetta said.

“Hmm,” said Laura. “That’s nearly a full band on its own.” She turned in her chair to look at Kelly. “Think you can get them to volunteer, Kell?”

“Volunteer who for what?” asked Todd coming out of the darkroom.

Kelly quickly brought him up to speed on the latest news.

Vanetta smiled at Cara, and they returned their attention to the invitations. Each one was placed in a Fed-Ex envelope, and Vanetta printed out address labels for them. This way, there would be no delay in getting them to the new guests, and when they opened the Fed-Ex envelope, inside would be a hand written, personalized envelope. They finished stuffing the envelopes just as the Fed-Ex truck pulled up.

“Thanks Cara, you’ve been a big help,” said Vanetta.

Ami came out of the darkroom, blinking rapidly. "I need something for my stomach!" she hollered. "I can't go this long without food!"

Laura poured six ice filled glasses with the home made vegetable drink she had finished juicing. She set them on the kitchen table and opened up a box of crackers and a package of assorted cheese chunks. She was busy slicing a large pepperoni sausage, and Ami went to help her.

"How'd it go in there?" Laura asked.

"Great!" said Ami, "we've started printing already. Some of those pictures though..." she rolled her eyes.

"That good?"

"Better than you can imagine," said Ami. "It's funny, you know. I look at the pictures and I know that it's you and Kelly and me and Cara, but we look so different."

"I know what you mean," said Laura. "I see that one that Todd did of me, and I catch myself thinking 'what a great looking woman'." Laura blushed. "That sounds vain, I know, but ..."

"No. No, it doesn't, Laura. Wait till you see the pictures of Cara and me. I was watching them develop and as I put them up to dry, I kept thinking, wow, those are really hot chicks." She laughed. "I guess that's what Todd does best. He shows us as we are inside."

Vanetta closed the door and locked it up again, before heading over to the kitchen area. Cara had gone to the bathroom and joined them soon afterwards. Kelly and Todd were still huddled deep in discussion.

"We might as well start," said Laura. "I don't like to interrupt them when they're talking business."

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"We don't work for free," said Todd to Kelly, "we can't expect others to do it."

"You're a fine one to talk, Mr. Ayres, you do a lot of portraits and other stuff for free."

"But that's only because nobody asks me to do it," said Todd, "and I do it because I like it! And I can afford to do it. Other people aren't as fortunate, you know that."

"I know," said Kelly, "but you're asking for a commitment from a lot of people. It could add up."

“Tax deductible?” Todd asked.

“Yes, but.”

“And is it going to break us?”

“No, but.”

“And really, Kell, this was your idea. You’re the numbers magician, figure out what incentives we need and how much it will cost, and then stretch it to two years.”

Kelly sighed and turned on her calculator. “Twice a month okay with you?” she asked. “We can’t ask them for more than that.”

“Then twice a month it is,” said Todd.

As Kelly was punching in numbers, Todd lit a cigarette from her pack and held it to her lips. Kelly smiled at him, thanking God for this wonderful man, then wrapped her lips around the filter and took a drag. Leaning back, she held the smoke for a moment, and then blew it toward the ceiling in a long plume. Hmmm. 2 times 24 was 48. That was the easy part. 48 times 5 only brought the number up to 240, which seemed awfully low. Then she took the figure and multiplied it by 6. Hmm, 1440.

She turned her face toward the cigarette and Todd held it to her lips as she drew in the tangy menthol, and then sighed as she breathed out the smoke. She turned the calculator so Todd could see it. “I don’t know why, Honey, but all of a sudden I feel so cheap.”

Todd put his arm around her. “I know, Babe, remember I ate a lot of Rice-a-Roni while I worked my way through school.”

“I’d toss in 10 grand of my own money,” said Kelly, “just to know that people like Muriel will have something other than TV as their entertainment.”

“I’ve been thinking about that a lot,” said Todd. “The problem is, we don’t have enough time to work it all ourselves.”

“We certainly can’t ask Vanetta to handle this,” Kelly said. “She’s busy enough as is, and she’s only going to get busier.”

Todd smiled.

“You’ve already got somebody in mind, don’t you?” Kelly accused.

“Actually, not only do I have somebody in mind, but I’d like to expand the project a bit. Make it a corporation of its own. We’ll put up the initial costs, and if we need to, we’ll keep paying for it. But I think that by the time our baby is born, we’ll have some other people interested as well.”

Kelly took the cigarette from Todd’s hands and stubbed it out. “Let’s rejoin the others and we’ll discuss your other plans a bit later,” she said, sealing it with a kiss.

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The phone rang right after they were finished with their mid afternoon snack. It was Dan calling to confirm that Rebel Heart would be in Charlotte on August 1<sup>st</sup> and stay till the 4<sup>th</sup>. They would drive themselves in. Kelly told him she would arrange the contract through their lawyer along with payment arrangements.

“See what I mean, Kelly,” said Todd after she hung up the phone. “We rely on Vanetta for the running of the office, we get Steve to take care of our legal matters, Rachel to handle our real estate holdings, Jim takes care of our investments. Let’s face it, Kelly, you and me, we’re idea people. Then we delegate. We’ve been lucky in our choices of who we let handle our affairs, but part of that I think is from our instincts. We’ve been hurt a lot, and I think we built up a wall that only lets certain people in.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad you two let me in,” said Vanetta.

“That goes for me too,” said Laura.

“Us too,” said Cara and Ami in unison.

Todd and Kelly laughed. Then Todd turned to look intently at Vanetta. She looked back with just the slightest hint of a question.

“Vanetta, could you bring Robert by later on this afternoon?” Todd asked.

Vanetta shot an anxious glance at Kelly, who was now looking at Todd, a big grin on her face. She leaned over and whacked him soundly on the shoulder.

“Ow! Stop hitting me!” he exclaimed. “What was that for?”

“That’s because I can’t read your mind,” she replied. “Yet! Anyway, I think that’s ideal!”

Todd smiled back at her. “Let’s just see how it goes eh?” They both looked at Vanetta, who was sitting from one to the other, totally confused at this byplay. “Well?” they asked simultaneously.

“I think he’s free, Todd,” said Vanetta. “Can I ask why?”

Todd smiled. "I'd like to meet him."

Vanetta looked doubtful.

"Don't worry, Vanetta. I won't bite. But I think it's time I met the man in your life, especially since he seems to like the studio so much anyway," Todd said with a grin.

"How ... how do you know ... why do you think he even knows where the studio is?" she finally sputtered out.

Todd shook his head. "Vanetta, no matter how many coconut scented candles you burn, every time we come back from an overnight trip, I smell his cologne."

Kelly punched him in the arm again. "And you never said anything to me?"

"Oh, I knew that you already knew, Kelly. I just never had a reason to mention it before."

Todd handed Vanetta the phone. "Ask him if he would like to join us for dinner. We'll be ordering in tonight and then go back to Kelly's."

Vanetta stared at the phone.

"It's okay, Vanetta," Todd said reassuringly as he got up. "And you can talk to him in private. I've got to get back to work. Come on, Ami. We've got enlargements to do."

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It took Todd and Ami nearly two hours of non-stop work before they finished off the 8 x 10 prints they had chosen from the proof sheets. Just as he had predicted, Ami had gotten the best possible shots of the deployment of the wheel showing the military helicopter lifting it from its limp position, then folding up like an umbrella and finally flying out across the lake. The ones of the wheel coming down were as good as could be expected shooting that kind of distance and Todd explained to Ami about the particles in the air that clouded long distance photographs.

"There's limits to how far you can shoot with a camera, Ami," he said to her. "I know it's theoretically to infinity, but when they wrote that book, they didn't take into consideration the smog and general pollution in the air. If this had been an assignment, as soon as the helicopter left, you would have been in a boat or had someone on the other side ready for when they put it down."

"Hmm," said Ami. "Now I understand why you keep saying practice and more practice. This is how you learn, isn't it?"

“Yes, my sweet apprentice, and you will learn only the best if you stick with me 'cause I can explain it all to you!”

Ami laughed. They had hung the pictures in the drying cabinet and were getting ready to do the super large prints. Ami wanted one of her and Cara in a large size and Todd thought it would be fitting to have one hang in the darkroom as well. Ami had taken close to 200 pictures on the weekend, and aside from a dozen excellent ones of the wheel being moved, she also had captured great candid shots of Erin, Cara, boats, and even one of Deanna and Chuck on the CL1. Todd told her they would print the best of them in order to start building her portfolio, and later he'd teach her how to scan negatives so she could send jpegs to potential customers and her friends.

The pictures that Todd had taken of Kelly were stunning. He picked the six best and printed them for Vanetta to submit as part of her package deal pending Kelly's approval.

And the ones of Cara and Ami... Well, just looking at the pictures got Todd aroused all over again. Even Ami was squirming. They finally settled on ten that showed the girls in their uniforms and progressive steps till they were nude and kissing. There was one in particular that showed the girls hugging that showed their faces and parts of their breasts and even a slight hint of pubic hair. That was the one Ami wanted to hang in the darkroom. Todd selected one of the girls fully dressed that he wanted to hang in the studio.

Of the Trek pictures, Todd had selected three that were outstanding. The smiles on the girls' faces were full of promises. Mischievous and sexy as hell!

It took them another 45 minutes to finish these prints and then they cleaned up and shut down the darkroom for the day, methodically labeling and storing the chemicals and negatives. The only exception was the negatives that Todd would scan with Ami later. The dryer was still running, and between the two of them, they had decided to wait to show the pictures after they were all dry.

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After Todd and Ami had left the kitchen, Vanetta had looked pleadingly at Kelly. “What should I do?” she asked.

“Well, I'd say call Robert and ask him over for supper,” said Kelly.

“Oh, God,” said Vanetta and promptly misdialled the number for Robert three times. She had been anticipating, waiting for the day she could introduce Robert to Todd at the company picnic, but Todd had beaten her to the punch.

“Hello, Robert?” she said. “Ah, Todd has invited you over for supper at the studio.”

She listened to his response and said, “How can you be so happy about this? Yes, I know you’ve wanted to meet him, but he knows about us!”

Robert laughed and said, “You mean Laura told him?”

“NO! He’s known all along about our nights here,” she whispered into the phone.

“Did Kelly tell him?” he asked, a little more nervous now.

“No, he said that he could smell your cologne every time he came back from an overnight trip.”

Robert laughed again. “Good. That means he’s not only smart, but accepts us as a couple.”

Vanetta was getting agitated now. “I’m sure you two will hit it right off,” she said.

Kelly was sitting close by and gently took the phone from Vanetta. “Hello, Robert? This is Kelly. Vanetta is a little shook up right now. Is pizza okay with you? We’ve been busy working here today, and I really don’t want anything fancy tonight.”

“Hi, Kelly,” said Robert. “It’s nice to finally hear your voice. Please tell Netta not to worry. Things will be just fine, and yes, 6 o’clock will be great. See you then.”

Kelly said goodbye to Robert and hung up the phone and then turned Vanetta’s chair around so that she was facing her. “Vanetta, you’ve got to have a little more faith. Trust me on this. Everything will be just fine.”

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After Laura and Cara had cleaned up the dishes from the afternoon snack, they sat together as Laura went through some of her homework on line. It was much easier than Laura had thought it would be. So much of what was discussed she was learning firsthand. It was only the math and analytical data assessments on large-scale groups that caused her to work at her studies. She had always been a quick learner and this was so much easier than spending time in a classroom. After an hour of online tests, she logged off and went to the shipping bay with Cara to look at the gym equipment.

“Will you spot me, Laura?” Cara asked.

“Am I qualified to do that?” Laura asked her.

“Sure. I’m not going to do anything dangerous, just get used to the feel of the equipment.”

“Okay,” said Laura.

“Great,” said Cara. “I’ll go get changed.”

Cara was back in five minutes sporting one of CrossTrain’s new uniforms, a nice snug fitting material that wouldn’t get caught on any part of the equipment. And a nice design as well. After a few minutes of warm-up exercises, Cara hit the uneven bars and did a few simple flips and crossovers.

“This is so cool,” said Cara after doing a somersault dismount. “Brand new equipment, and good stuff too! You can feel it in the wood as it moves with you.”

Kelly and Vanetta, hearing the equipment as it creaked under the strain of the forces Cara put on it, came to see what was going on. They arrived just in time to see her somersault dismount.

“Are you sure it’s safe for you to be doing that?” Kelly asked.

Cara laughed. “It’s what I’ve been doing most of my life,” she said. “Watch.”

With a single push up, she managed to get her legs up and over the balance beam, holding that position for about five seconds before she twisted and turned till she was balanced on just her hands, her body in a straight line above her. With a half twist and a flip she landed on the beam facing the end. She did a little dance routine on the beam and then did a hand over walk over starting at one end and ending at the other with a hands free flip. Doing a pirouette in place, she did a back flip off the bar landing squarely on her feet, arms in the air. Taking a breather while she blushed at the spontaneous applause, she chalked up her hands again and did a series of mounts and dismounts on the vault. Cara made it look so easy, but Kelly, Laura, and Vanetta knew that this was what the girl had given up most of her life for.

“Show off,” said Ami from behind. Todd stood with her, smiling.

“Well, if that’s a challenge, get changed and strut your stuff,” said Cara with a loving smile.

“Yes, let me get changed and show you how a pro does it,” said Ami, running for cover.

“All done in the darkroom, Honey?” Kelly asked.

“Yep, just waiting for the prints to dry,” said Todd. “Then I’ve got some scanning to do and I do want to get that done today. Ami did get some of the best shots

of the Wheel going up. I'm going to forward them to Reuters and AP and see if anybody is interested in them."

"Oh, this will be priceless," said Kelly. "Photo by Ami Phillips, TKO photography."

"That has a nice ring to it," said Todd. "Hey, speaking of publicity, Vanetta, can you get someone from the university's broadcast department to film the company picnic? I want them to use real television cameras. Tell whoever is in charge that we will pay for four students for the day with two cameras and make a donation to the department."

"How much?" asked Vanetta.

"You haggle with them," laughed Todd. "It's going to be your fulltime job pretty soon anyway, might as well start now."

Vanetta laughed. She knew that the students would love the work and she could get them for a flat fee of \$50 each. Todd regularly donated a thousand at a time to any department that would let him use their equipment. She made the call and had it all settled in a matter of minutes. The only change was that TKO was going to have to take out the insurance for the TV equipment while it was off the school's property. Vanetta readily agreed, and then called the company's insurance agent to make the arrangement. Since they already had insurance for the picnic, the cost would just be added on as a rider.

Vanetta made it back to the large bay just in time to see Cara boost Ami up on the uneven bars.

After a few practice swings to get used to the feel of the new wood, Ami threw her body into it and stopped at the top with her feet over the top bar, held up by just her hands. Then she let her legs drop down in front of the bar, snapping her arms just in time to change position. She flipped around again, released and caught the lower bar, holding her body away from the bar in a stiff position before rolling forward and spinning and releasing to latch on to the top bar again.

It was scary to watch. Beautiful, poetry in motion, but with each swing or release, her audience held its breath.

A few minutes later, just for the sake of showing off, Cara and Ami did a joint routine on the balance beam.

Finally Todd said that it made him nervous to watch, and he had some unfinished business to take care of before Robert showed up. Taking Laura and Kelly by the hand he led them upstairs promising to be back shortly, giving the girls a big wink.

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Upstairs, in Todd's apartment, Kelly said she was sure she had some unfinished business of her own and really couldn't take time out for whatever Todd had in mind. She winked at Laura.

"I'm sure that if I get started right now, I'd be able to finish another study unit before supper time," said Laura.

Todd just growled and scooped them both up, throwing them over his shoulders and carrying them into the bedroom. Laura and Kelly pretended to squirm and fight, but both were having too much fun.

Todd placed them on the bed, side by side, and threatened that if they didn't behave, he would tie them down. This was rewarded with a burst of giggles as Todd quickly stripped both girls from the waist down.

He pulled them forward until their butts were at the edge of the bed then put Kelly's leg over Laura's. Placing one strong hand firmly on each smooth stomach, Todd knelt beside the low bed and with a broad swipe of his tongue licked Kelly's exposed slit. She twitched at the contact and let out a low breathy moan.

"Ohhh, I think I'm going to like this..." squirming her crotch up and moving her free leg to allow him easier access. He pointed his tongue and used the tip to separate the lips, licking her juices toward her suddenly hard little nub and catching some to taste, then suddenly covered her with his mouth, licking and sucking hard at her tender inner lips. A few more minutes of this and Kelly was moaning continually, squirming under his ministrations and he felt she was near her climax.

He stopped suddenly, pulling back and blowing a stream of cooling air on her hot wet folds, feeling her stomach twitch under his hand.

She moaned, feeling him move as he repositioned himself in front of Laura. "Ohhh... I'm so close, finish me, make me come..."

Laura reached a hand to help Kelly over the edge, but Todd caught it inches from its target. "Uh, uh, turn-about is fair play, ladies. Maybe next time you won't tease a man for his urges!"

Kelly moaned in frustration, trying to reach her own hand down, but Todd caught it as well. He could feel her belly ripple as she tried to clench her pussy muscles for more stimulation, and then bent to lick Laura and found her cunt already flowered, oozing her juices onto the sheet under her.

Damn! He had to be careful. Laura could explode any second; she had a hair trigger when she was hot. He took one hand and cupped her mound, spreading her labia, ensuring that she couldn't bring on her own release. Then he switched back to pleasure

Kelly. He licked and sucked slowly, drawing the juices out of her and lightly nibbling on her labia and tongue-teasing her blood-engorged clit. Her hips were bouncing off the bed trying to force Todd's face in deeper but he kept the pace slow, holding her off. He stayed on her for a few more minutes before switching back to Laura who was writhing, just on the verge.

"Maybe I should call those High School trollops to come in here and bring you both over the edge," he said. "You know you like them." He dipped his head to take a wide swipe across Laura's clit, stabbing it in the process.

"Try and tell me those School Girls in their uniforms didn't turn you on," he said as he took another deep spear attack inside Laura's channel.

"Argh!" said Laura as Todd pulled away just seconds before she achieved climax. This time Todd placed a finger inside Laura feeling her vaginal muscles rippling, so close, so close!

Kelly was moaning and squirming. All this hot talk and the memory of Cara and Ami as they had performed their little school uniform charade was flooding her mind with erotic images. Knowing that Todd would not allow her hand to get close to her own dripping snatch or Laura's, Kelly turned so that she could at least fondle Laura's boobs and kiss her lover.

Todd sucked on Kelly's clit, watching as they attacked each other in frenzied passion, tongues dueling in open-mouthed kisses and their fondling, teasing hands on breasts and nipples. They were too busy with each other to notice him move his hands as he slipped a forefinger into each wet hole. A powerful suck on Kelly's exposed erect clit sent her over the edge, her moan muffled by Laura's clinging mouth as he got a face full of her love juices, which he eagerly drank down. Pulling his face back, he pushed his ring finger full depth into her butt hole and tapped her clit with his thumb as she writhed in Laura's arms.

Kelly's orgasm and impassioned moaning had Laura so close to the edge that when he pulled his finger out and then just pushed two fingers into her cunt and tight bum hole, his sucking mouth stretching her clit, she totally lost it, bouncing on the bed and clutching on to Kelly for dear life.

Todd sat back, his fingers pushed as far as they would go into his lovers' spasming holes, a thumb on each of their clits prolonging their orgasms. A few minutes more, and both lay panting and twitching. He slowly pulled his fingers from Laura, leaning in to kiss her clit and getting a low exhausted moan, then did the same to Kelly.

She shivered. "Ohh, God! That was so... so..."

"Going to tease me again?"

“Oh, no, Babe, I’d wouldn’t survive it!” she moaned.

Todd smiled. “Payback could be so much fun!”

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As Kelly and Laura got into the shower with Todd after the two had double-teamed him for a fantastic blowjob, each taking a side and treating it like a Popsicle till finally Todd blew another load into two willing faces, he started to tell them of his plan.

They were washing each other, and conversation was difficult but Todd said, “The problem with most kids today is that they have no direction or motivation. TV and video games and computer chat lines are now keeping kids indoors more than ever and the nuclear family is dissolving, let alone the extended family. A lot of the time parents and their grown children don’t even live in the same state, let alone the same city! And then the kids will ship them off to a nursing home because it’s more convenient, instead of keeping them near.”

“Well,” said Kelly, “Muriel didn’t have any family to stay with, but I understand what you are saying, Honey.”

“And yet,” said Laura, “just because they’re older doesn’t mean they don’t have knowledge and skills that shouldn’t be passed on. That one woman, what was her name ... Yeah, I remember now. Greta. You should have seen her, Todd! She was crocheting with a needle so thin I could barely see it. I checked into it afterwards and it’s called Victorian Lace. One of the other women tried to teach me to crochet, but we didn’t have the time. But think of these talents that kids today won’t ever learn because there will be no one left to teach them.”

“And *that* is what I was thinking about,” said Todd. “When you mentioned Muriel and these women making all those baby blankets and socks and stuff, it made me think that we’re not giving the kids of today a chance to learn something important. Something that is much more valuable than winning at a computer game, and something that their own parents probably don’t know or remember.”

“But I don’t think most kids are interested in learning any more,” said Kelly. “I don’t want to be a pessimist, but look at the kids of today. Everything is centered around the mall, or a ride or a party. I’m sorry, Todd, but the majority of today’s youth does not give me much hope for the future.”

“Sometimes the apathy scares me too, Honey, but I was thinking that with a little incentive, we could try to change some of those attitudes,” he said as they were drying off. “Look at Ami. She’s working with a camera that most kids would scoff at because it’s fifteen years old, but she’s gotten publishable pictures in a short time because she took to it.”

“So? What do you have in mind, Mr. Ayres?” Kelly asked.

To be continued...