

Kelly

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

Chapter 26

Laura was up early the next morning. She hadn’t slept well. She felt something was wrong, but couldn’t place it. All she knew was there was something bad coming.

Cara and Ami were next up, bright eyed and eager to go back to Joanne’s salon for a trim and more work on their calluses.

Cara sensed Laura’s mood and asked, “What’s bothering you, Laura?”

“I don’t know, Cara. Something’s wrong, I can just feel it.”

“That’s what Todd and I said last night,” said Ami. “It’s like there’s something out of place. We haven’t figured it out yet either.”

The girls got the vitamins out and the ‘go-juice.’ Laura scrambled up a dozen eggs and fried up a slab of the turkey bacon that Kelly liked so much. The smell of the food wafting through the house woke up Kelly and Todd.

“Toast, anyone?” asked Kelly.

“Uh, uh,” said Ami. “Protein for us, no carbs!”

Kelly sat down as Laura served up eggs and bacon for everyone, while Cara sliced up four large beefsteak tomatoes. Ami poured the orange juice.

After eating in relative silence, Kelly asked, “Is it just me or is everybody acting a little funny this morning?”

Todd didn’t want to worry Kelly needlessly, so he said, “I guess I’m preoccupied with the meeting with Steve later on.”

Ami knew better, but understood that all they had were feelings. “I think Cara and I are getting psyched for the shoot,” she said.

Kelly didn't believe it for a second, but they must have their reasons, she thought. She'd corner Cara later and bring it up again.

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

*"Goddamnit anyway. That nigger bitch had spent the night at the studio with her boyfriend again. He had hoped to get inside and take a look around being Ayres hadn't spent a night there in the last week. Wouldn't hurt to have more for the boss when he arrived. But knowing the name of the nigger lover wouldn't score him any points. He'd just been lucky on that one. Following him home early one morning, he'd seen the house where he lived with his folks. Morons hung their name out proudly on a shingle by the driveway. Hadn't taken much asking to find out who the kid was.*

*He still had no idea who the black cunt was. He never saw her leave except once when he lost her at the university. Never spotted her coming back out, but it was a big fuckin' place and there was only him trying to watch all the exits. That's how he had found out about Payne though. Thought it might be worth a look through the faculty directory and saw him listed as a TA. Shit. Initials. Had to ask what that meant, and that meant a phone call to the school. That was risky. The boss wouldn't like that. Asking questions at the industrial park was downright fuckin' dangerous. Mostly small businesses, and they wouldn't take to a stranger askin' questions. He'd thought about calling the studio, but that would have been his biggest mistake. One he wouldn't live to regret. His job was to find Ayres, not to make him jack rabbit.*

*It had taken him the better part of a year tracking Ayres down. Had followed the skimpy leads he had been given and then paid off a bad debt to a bookie for a news reporter to find out that Ayres had changed his name. Followed a fool's trail half way around the country till the boss had told him about TKO. Seen Ayres' name on a picture of a boat couple a weeks ago, and then the hunt turned serious.*

*"Fuck it. Must be nice to sit in an office and just read newspapers all day. Go home at night instead of sleeping in rental cars and cheap motels. He finally spotted Ayres coming out of the studio driving a Hummer, followed him to Jennsen's place. That was last Friday. A call to city hall told him who owned the property, and a check on the computers at the public library had shown pictures of her. Some shit assed model, but now at least he could put a name to the titless wonder. He had no clue as to who the others were. Watched them drive away Saturday morning and had been tempted to follow them but the traffic was too thin and he was parked in a bad spot. He would' a been spotted. That wouldn't go well with the boss.*

*He'd waited for them to come back, but they had fucked off someplace overnight. Spent most of the night in the car for nothing, then had crashed at a fleabag motel. He figured that if luck held, they'd be gone for a couple of days and by lunchtime Sunday, he'd been ready to do a little inside work. Was all set too, when a fat nigger bitch showed up. She had a key and went inside. He waited for three hours*

*before deciding he had stayed too long in the daytime. Try again on Monday, but they were back Monday morning.*

*He'd gotten a couple of decent shots Saturday morning, had them developed at an instant print shop where some pimple faced kid was willing to rush the job through without any questions for twenty bucks.*

*Now he was waiting again.*

*Ah, FUCK! They were leaving in two separate vehicles. No telling which one would be back first. Ayres and the Titless Wonder were in one of those Jap compact cars, the nicely stacked one took the younger poons in the Tracker.*

*Fuck it. His job was to find Ayres, not baby-sit him. As long as he stayed out of sight and just verified that Ayres would still be there when the boss made it down, he could relax now. Hopefully in a few days, he'd be back in Cleveland. But for now, he had to stick around and wait and watch.*

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

Laura and the girls had a laughing good time at Joanne's. As one of the girls worked at Ami's feet, scrubbing away more layers of calluses, it became apparent that she was ticklish. Cara planned to put that news to good use!

After having worn down two complete pumice stones, Joanne had done a follow up waxing on Cara and Ami, this time doing their underarms as well, and then had suggested that she be allowed to adjust their haircuts before they left. Both Cara and Ami readily agreed and even agreed to having their eyebrows waxed.

Joanne was hoping that more TKO business would come her way.

At the girls' request, Laura took them back to the deli downtown for another hot pastrami on freshly baked rye bread. Lots of mustard dripped from each sandwich and the girls ate nearly a plate full of baby dill pickles with it. They finished lunch with an iced French vanilla cappuccino.

Next, Laura drove the girls to the Bank of America on US Highway 29 North where they signed the papers for their new accounts and debit cards. Laura had her own account at another branch of the same bank, and knew that with the fifty branches and all the ATMs around Charlotte, getting cash was never a problem. Then they headed back to the studio to meet up with Kelly and Todd.

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

Kelly and Todd had spent the better part of the morning in conference with Steve. There was the matter of the contracts for Vanetta and Robert to have drawn up. Then it

would be up to them to sign at either Steve's office or with a lawyer of their choice. Through Steve, they transferred enough money to keep the new non-profit entertainment company afloat for the next two years. Steve was impressed with Robert's self written contract request. He advised Todd and Kelly that they could save money by transferring the entire amount for the new enterprise all in one shot, allowing interest to grow on it for the two years, and then surprised them by saying he and his partner would be the first contributors to the project to start it on the third year. Steve's father was in a long-term care facility due to an early onset of Alzheimer's disease, and so Steve knew the frustration of seeing patients in nursing homes relegated to television as entertainment. When they asked about the amount he and his partner were donating through the law firm, he shrugged it off and said that it was a small price to pay for doing something good. Yes, it was tax deductible, and he and his partner would be sure to pass the word on to their other clients as well.

"I wish I had thought of something like this," Steve said. "The entertainment on its own is fantastic, but having school kids visiting the seniors. I love it! We'll strongly advise our clients to donate."

They settled on a salary for Vanetta of \$120,000 for the first year with a bonus of three and a half percent of the net profit. Future raises would be dependent on performance. Steve thought the figure was a bit high, but Todd and Kelly reminded him that Vanetta was basically running the operation now, she had the education, and more importantly, they trusted her.

"Now the tricky part, Steve," Todd said. "We're getting married and we need civil contracts that will allow us to sign for each other in the event of something happening."

"If you get married," Steve said, "you won't need any contracts. It'll be covered by law."

Kelly laughed. "Todd's going to be a bigamist, Steve. He's marrying two of us, and that isn't legal. We need something of a spousal equivalent."

Steve's eyebrows shot up. "You're marrying Kelly and who?" he asked.

"Kelly and Laura," Todd answered.

"You are one lucky man," Steve said. "But I think we could still get away with it legally if you're willing to keep it quiet. You could marry Kelly in one country and marry Laura in another. Since neither can claim they didn't know about it before hand, all they can do is ask for a divorce in the future. No real legal harm or risk."

"That would probably work, Steve," said Kelly, "and I do appreciate your input, but this is going to be a true three way wedding. I'm marrying Laura as well, and we know how the law stands on gay marriage."

Steve let out a low whistle.

“Shocked, Steve?” Kelly asked with a smile.

“Maybe just a little,” he said, “where are you guys planning to get married like this? I can’t see this happening anywhere on US soil.”

Todd laughed this time. “You’re right, Steve, it won’t be on land at all. We’re getting married in international waters where no country rules defining marriage apply.”

“Are you sending out invitations?” Steve asked.

“Why?” asked Kelly. “Would you and Melanie come?”

“Damn right we would!” he said.

Kelly laughed and said she would consider it. It was still nearly two months away.

“I guess while we’re here,” said Todd, we might as well get a tenant contract put together for the new apartment complex. And one for the management of it.”

“You aren’t going to use the same company you’ve been using?” Steve asked.

“No,” said Todd. “They were okay for the houses we had, but they’re gone now. We don’t need anyone for the industrial buildings or storage buildings since that all goes directly to you or our accountant, but we want a family to live in the complex. Somebody that can be there 24 hours a day in case one of the tenants needs something.”

“Okay,” Steve said. “And if I know you two, you’ve already got somebody in mind.”

Kelly smiled. “We do, but I think we should leave the names off the contract so that it looks like we might offer it to somebody else if the family we hope takes it is hesitant. We don’t want them to think we’re offering this as charity. Lord knows, it’s going to take some real work!”

“Just give me the information and I’ll send over a copy later this afternoon,” Steve said.

Kelly laid out the cost for the rental of “Muriel’s Place.”

“It’s set up as an 80 unit building,” Kelly said. “The top floors are all two bedroom units. Rent on those will be \$750 a month, but that includes utilities and basic cable. The ground floor is single bedroom apartments except for the manager’s

apartment. The builder was a smart man. He created a three-bedroom luxury apartment right across from the entrance and the common room. The common room is big enough to hold 100 people and has a separate kitchen and two washrooms. I think it was originally designed for family gatherings, and maybe the odd wedding reception, but it will be perfect for the seniors who want to spend time with friends to play cards or watch TV together. Maybe a few pot luck dinners so that they can get a break from their own cooking. We fully intend to have a tenants' committee. Rent on the single bedroom units is \$700. We have ten single bedroom apartments that have been modified for wheel chair access and ten two bedroom apartments set up the same way. There are two elevators in the building, so no one has to walk up and down the stairs."

"As to the management fees," Todd said, "we've basically agreed to go by the rental income. We figure the family that takes this on can do the minor repairs and they can either delegate the cleaning, just vacuuming the hallways, cleaning the glass doors, and sweeping the steps, or can subcontract it. The same for the lawn maintenance and parking lot. In exchange, they will get free living quarters, all-inclusive utilities and standard cable free plus 10% of the rental income. That's about \$6,000 a month the way we figured it with full occupancy."

"It's a very generous amount for the work involved," said Steve. "The apartment for the managing family would cost close to one thousand right off the bat. So you want the name left blank so that it looks like a regular management contract offer, right?"

"You got it," said Todd.

"I wonder if these people know how generous you two really are," said Steve. "Okay, it's pretty straight forward. I should have a contract template on file that I can use and email to you this afternoon. Now, are there any more surprises I need to know about?" he asked with a smile.

"Not yet," said Kelly with a laugh, "but the day's not over either!"

Kelly and Todd took Steve out to lunch after they had confirmed all the work they required, and then headed back to the studio.

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

Vanetta was still working out the final details on her proposal for Kelly and Todd. What had originally started off as a challenge for Vanetta to prove she could put together a one time modeling contract to bring Kelly out of retirement had turned into a logistical nightmare. Kelly would not allow herself to be associated with any products she didn't believe in, and that removed most of the major magazines since they wanted to sell ad space to whichever client had the largest advertising budget.

But, she had done it. She had convinced Fit Pregnancy International to add eight pages to their monthly edition, rather than displace other advertising. The publisher and

chief editor were originally amused at her proposal, stating they sold their pages on ad rates of \$1400 per page per 10,000 copies, and that their current guaranteed circulation was 280,000 subscribers plus 200,000 newsstand sales. They tried to tell her that just a single page would cost her 70,000 dollars.

Vanetta had sighed and reminded them that newsstand sales were not guaranteed; therefore it would only cost her less than 40 thousand.

The publisher started to take Vanetta more seriously. This girl knew the business. "But, Ms. Clarke, you are still talking 8 pages, which is 320 thousand dollars a month. Surely you don't have that kind of money on hand," said Lisa Greenwood.

"Ms. Greenwood, how much I have on hand is irrelevant. I am the president of TKO Inc. My models have appeared in your magazine dozens of times for your other advertisers. If you aren't interested in discussing this in realistic terms, we should end this call now, and I will move on to my next call."

"Please accept my apologies, Ms. Clarke," Lisa Greenwood said. "We were taken off guard by your ... unique request."

Vanetta laughed. "What you're trying to politely say is that you thought I was out of my mind, but no apologies are necessary. I've been working at TKO for some time now and I understand marketing and advertising better than most of your regular clients because we provide the talent for them. What I am proposing is more of a co-op venture."

"You certainly have my attention, Ms. Clarke," said Lisa, "but as a rule, we generally shy away from co-ops. Though I am interested in what you have to offer."

Vanetta spent the next hour explaining in detail the need for eight back-to-back pages starting with the first available right hand page. Lisa's attention peaked the minute Vanetta told her the project would run for 16 months, and was impressed that Vanetta knew about the rule of eight of magazine expansion. Even more impressed when she heard that Vanetta already had a complete group of advertisers lined up ready to pay for their products to be showcased by Kelly and that Todd would be the photographer. Yes, Lisa knew who Todd and Kelly were. Who in the industry didn't?

Vanetta explained that TKO would write their own copy, subject to oversight by the magazine's editorial staff, and that advertising pictures would be supplied in complete layouts, all done by Todd and the various companies including one of the largest diamond companies in the world. Johan had been very interested.

"So you see, Lisa," said Vanetta, "there is very little cost to you other than page layout and editing of the progress. Since I brought the advertisers, I expect the sales commission to go to our company and modeling fees as well as photographer and writer's

fees. I think you will find us to be much less expensive than your regular staff, and you will have no overhead.”

“I must say, Vanetta, may I call you that?” Lisa asked.

“By all means, Lisa,” said Vanetta. “If we are going to discuss millions of dollars, we should be on a first name basis.”

Lisa laughed. “I agree 100%. Obviously you’ve figured out that adding four pages to the magazine won’t affect weight by much, and by adding pages instead of taking out a page of advertising, the cost will be considerably less. Especially on a long term commitment.”

“That was what I had in mind,” said Vanetta. “The upside for you is a top drawer model willing to be photographed right through her pregnancy and the first eight months after. According to my calculations, we are talking five million, one hundred and twenty thousand dollars, which would be a tidy sum for your magazine on its own, but I am bringing in clients who have never advertised with you before, and if handled right, they could stay with you after the project is complete.”

“And,” said Lisa, “as a running documentary style story, we might increase readership and subscriptions as well.”

“I might even go so far as to suggest that you take the entire project after completion and print it as a separate bonus for new subscribers,” Vanetta said.

“Now that’s an interesting idea. Normally we couldn’t afford a model of Kelly’s standing. There aren’t that many top models or celebrities who would consider being showcased in our magazine. Contrary to TV news, there aren’t that many pregnant, and those willing to be photographed want top dollar.”

“I know what you mean, Lisa,” said Vanetta. “A few magazines offered well over a million dollars for a chance at this, but Kelly refuses to have any product associated with her that she does not personally use. She is very adamant about this which reinforces the product value.”

“And aside from printing the extra pages and copy editing, what is it you would like for us to do?” Lisa asked.

Vanetta laughed. “Why, the fun stuff of course, Lisa. We know the ad clients are more than capable and willing to pay, but the advertising contracts should be handled through your office along with the billing etcetera. I will draw up a contract for all those who want a part of this, and forward it to you with the advertisers. And you will pay TKO on a monthly basis for 16 months.”

“And you already know how much you want as your percentage, I assume?”

“But of course,” said Vanetta. “I did my homework very carefully,” she added with a laugh. “Your sales reps earn 30% of all ad revenue. Your editorial staff earns an average of eighty cents a word for articles under 1,000 words. There are bonuses for bringing in new clients and more bonuses for yearlong contracts. Based on the benefits for your magazine, and the work we will provide in the way of services plus the model, I think that 40% would be a reasonable and equitable sum, don’t you agree, Lisa?”

It was Lisa’s turn to laugh. “And how much will your advertisers pay?”

“Full rate based on my word of 300,000 circulation. I convinced them you would easily sell that many more subscriptions in the first month Kelly appears,” Vanetta said.

“Based on the photographs you emailed me, *and*, with the understanding we can use Kelly for at least four covers starting with the first month,” Lisa said, “I would agree with you. Will we be able to use one of these for our first edition?”

“That’s why I sent the ones I did,” laughed Vanetta. “As a magazine for expectant mothers, you have a bit more leeway with the implied nudity issue. Nothing is showing that shouldn’t be, and we believe a woman should celebrate her body during pregnancy.”

“I must say, Vanetta. Some of these companies ... we’ve tried for years to get their business. I hope sales for all of them increase because of this project so we can convince them to stay afterwards. Especially the vitamin company,” said Lisa.

“I’m quite certain that sales will increase, Lisa. Kelly is positively glowing, and these are not high priced products. All your readers will be able to afford the same.”

“So,” said Lisa, “I’m doing my own calculations right now. At full rate, for eight pages, it will generate three hundred and thirty-six thousand a month in ad revenue. That means every month I will be writing a check to TKO for one hundred and thirty-four thousand four hundred. Two million one hundred and fifty thousand, and four hundred dollars over the course of the next 16 months. Is that the figure you came up with Vanetta?”

“That’s what my calculator reads as well,” said Vanetta, “so, when would you like to sign the paperwork, Lisa? I can have our company lawyer draw it up and send it to you.”

Lisa knew she was getting a hell of a deal on her end, and thanked God that Vanetta had contacted her first. Kelly’s insistence on only being sponsored by products she herself used might have caused some flack for Cosmo or Vanity Fair, and Lisa could see where the major housekeeping magazines would chafe at the bit being told they couldn’t insert their own ads, much the same way parenting magazines would quibble. But for Fit Pregnancy, an additional eight pages with fresh ads would really help their

circulation. Lisa was really impressed with the way Vanetta had planned out all the details right to an unheard of ad content of less than 40%, all of it including pictures of Kelly using the products. To have snared Todd Ayres as the photographer was an added bonus and Vanetta's idea of combining the resulting 128 pages into a bonus magazine for new subscribers was fantastic.

"Vanetta," said Lisa after a short silence, "why don't you bring all the paperwork yourself to our office. We can make a day of it, go out for the evening and let our legal beagles check to see that all the Is are dotted and the Ts crossed."

Hmmm ... A flight out to California. "I could get used to this," thought Vanetta.

"I'm afraid I'm booked solid for the rest of the week," said Vanetta, "next week is pretty busy as well, but ... how about I fly out on Sunday? Then you can buy me lunch and I can fly out Tuesday. I'm sure the office can get along without me for a day and a half."

"Excellent," said Lisa, who was anxious to meet this powerful woman who could put together such an irresistible package deal. "Email me the time your plane arrives and I will have you picked up at the airport."

"Thanks, Lisa. I'll do that," said Vanetta. "I look forward to meeting you in person." After she hung the phone, Vanetta thought, "**IF** I can just get Kelly to accept the proposal now!"

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

After lunch, everyone trickled back into the studio where Vanetta was muttering as she crunched some final numbers and added the figures to the document on her computer.

"She's really taking this all very seriously, isn't she?" said Kelly.

"I have no doubt of that," said Todd. "How about it, Vanetta? Got something for Kelly to see yet?"

"Just ten more minutes, then I want both of you and your undivided attention!"

"Yes, Boss," said Todd with a laugh.

While Cara and Ami discussed their morning's adventure courtesy of Laura, Kelly sat back with an ice-cold bottle of mineral water, and lit her first cigarette of the day.

"Sounds like the three of you had a good time," said Kelly.

“It was great,” said Cara. “We signed the papers for our bank accounts, then we saw the money you guys put in there to start us off. Thank you for that,” she said blushing.

“Well that means we can start transferring all your earnings into the account now,” said Kelly. “Did you get debit cards? It’s so much better than cash.”

“Yes, we did,” said Ami. “But Cara’s not telling you the really interesting news,” she said with a smirk.

“What’s the really interesting news?” Kelly asked.

“At Joanne’s, Cara got her nipple pierced!” said Ami.

A second of shocked silence was immediately followed by an indignant, “**I did NOT!**”

“**Did too!**”

“**Did NOT!**”

“**Did too!**”

“**Did NOT!**”

“**Prove it!**”

Without a second’s hesitation, Cara pulled up her T-shirt and bra in one motion showing everybody she had not had her nipple pierced. Then as she realized she had been had, she lowered her bra and T-shirt, blushing as everyone laughed.

“Gotcha!” said Ami.

“Yeah, well next time, we’ll see who gets who!” said Cara.

“Todd,” said Vanetta as she entered the kitchenette. “Mom said somebody was looking for you but didn’t want to be seen. She called while you guys were out. I don’t understand it, but you know Mom.”

“That explains it,” said Todd to Ami.

“It’s not a good thing,” said Laura. “I don’t know what it is, but I get a really bad feeling about this.”

“A gray Buick,” said Todd. “That’s what was wrong with the picture yesterday, Ami. I saw it when I was van shopping with Rob. I think I saw it near Kelly’s one night.”

“I saw it across the road yesterday,” said Ami. “I didn’t think anything of it, I mean, it’s just another old car to me, but it caught my attention because it had really dark tinted windows.”

“That’s the one,” said Todd.

“Laura,” said Kelly. “Should we be worried?”

“I’m not sure,” said Laura. “I don’t think it’s a physical danger, but it disturbed my sleep last night and woke me up early this morning. It’s something bad, and it’s coming soon.”

“Well, let’s just all keep our eyes open,” said Todd. “Maybe we can figure out who or what it is. Forewarned is forearmed.”

“Right,” said Kelly. “We’ll deal with it when it arrives. Now, Vanetta, do you want our undivided attention now?”

“Yes,” said Vanetta. “If you two can pry yourselves away for a minute, I have some documents I need you to approve.”

“My, but she’s getting positively bossy, isn’t she, Darling?” said Kelly as she and Todd followed Vanetta back to the office area.

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

“Okay,” said Vanetta as she handed them both a three-page document. “I know you said I could give this a try, and if you didn’t have to endorse any products you would consider modeling again for the baby,” she said. “At first, I thought it was a hopeless cause because I was thinking only of one magazine, but the really big name magazines just wanted pictures of you to put next to advertising and Kelly, I knew that you wouldn’t go for that. So ... I came up with a different approach and I have what I think is the best deal I could ever put together for both of you.”

“Both of us?” Todd asked.

“Yes, Todd, both of you,” Vanetta said.

“I’ve worked it all out on a 16 month schedule, which means that you never need to leave the studio and you only need to pose for Todd once a month. In exchange for that, and your willingness to show your happy pregnant body as it is now, and to the

point where you are all toned up again, along with pictures of you and the baby, this is what I put together.”

“Fit Pregnancy International will pay just over two million dollars. This is for the model, the photographer, and the writer of your progress. I think you said you wanted Laura to do that. The vitamin company that makes most of your capsules will pay one hundred and fifty thousand for the right to use the magazine pictures as posters in health food stores, plus they will supply you with all the vitamins you can use for the 16 months. The prune juice people will not only supply you with enough juice to drown all of Charlotte, but for a picture of you holding a glass of prune juice, based on the magazine spread and your endorsement of prune juice, will pay seventy five thousand. I have a similar offer from the company that makes the milled flax seed, but that one is just for fifty thousand.”

Kelly’s eyes grew a bit wider. Vanetta had her full attention now.

“Evian wasn’t interested, but the company that makes the mineral water you *do* drink sure was, and they offered a two year supply for your household, and another fifty thousand. All of these companies are also paying for ads in Fit,” Vanetta added. “The extra money is just for the right to promote your good health in publicity posters.”

“That is a whole lot more than I expected,” said Kelly.

“Well,” said Vanetta, “I will need an answer soon because I will need Steve to write up some contracts, so I can fly to San Francisco on Sunday.”

“But other than taking the pictures,” said Todd, “what does this have to do with me?”

“Ah, did I say I was finished?” asked Vanetta with a smile. “The Journal of Modern Photography has offered two hundred thousand for a nine month photo journal of ‘the pregnant nude’. No blatant nude shots since they like to keep things artistic, but a hint of cheek. No nips and no pubes. In this case, they want the photographer. Following on that line, and knowing Kelly is comfortable with nudity, I contacted Health Natural magazine in Europe, and they want a similar style photo journal but this time showing all skin. Their circulation is over half a million nudists in five languages. They’re offering free lifetime memberships for the three of you, to all of their European clubs and two hundred thousand Euros. I had to tell them that it was three or none. I could have easily gotten you more exposure in the gay advocacy magazines, but considering the unusual marriage relationship you plan to have, I thought it best to stay under the political radar. There are a couple of other small perks and companies that are paying extra fees, but aside from the free merchandise I’ve mentioned, Hasselblad is ready to send you a brand new H series 645 camera complete with lens. It’s their latest and greatest new medium format camera, Todd. Now all I need from the two of you is a yes.”

Kelly fanned herself with the papers. Todd was just truly amazed. Faced with the restrictions Kelly had placed on Vanetta, she had managed to put together a deal worth close to three million dollars for what basically amounted to one day of shooting a month.

"I'll give you two some time to think this over," said Vanetta, "but I would like an answer this afternoon so I can book my flight."

Vanetta got up and walked back to the kitchenette to join Laura, Cara, and Ami. She felt she deserved a coffee break!

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

"Fuck!" said Kelly

"Now?" asked Todd.

"No, not now, I meant ..." she stopped when she saw him smiling.

"I'm not sure what we've created," said Kelly, "but I sure am glad she works for us!"

"We can't turn this down, Kelly," said Todd. "Aside from the fact that it is a heap of money, Vanetta wanted this chance to prove herself, and I would say she did a wonderful job!"

"I know," said Kelly, "and I feel like she should get more than the standard 5% commission on this. She's more than earned it, but that's what we pay to the company reps who bring in new clients. God, this is confusing."

"Not really, Kelly. Acting on behalf of the company, she is renting out your body for a series of photo shoots. She just took it a step further by renting us out as a team, and also a solo for me. Let's try to break this down into tangible numbers."

Kelly sighed and lit another cigarette.

"In any case, the company would get at least 30% of the deal. That's how we work it with all models we send out on shoots," said Todd. "You'll be working and even at a conservative fee of five thousand per hour," he paused to turn on Vanetta's calculator. Sixteen days at five hours per day comes to four hundred thousand. There's not a chance in hell that you would work for less than that for anybody, me included. Since there's no travel required doesn't mean you shouldn't count the extra hours you would spend otherwise. It's not 16 days in a row either, so don't short change yourself, Sweetheart."

"Our accountant is going to love me this year," Kelly said. "Okay, I see your point, Todd, and I'll take five if you do the same."

“Jesus, Kelly. I can’t do that. I’ve never charged that much for eighty hours of work.”

“But you’ll have darkroom time on top of the shooting time, Honey,” she said. “If you don’t take the same, we’ll disappoint Vanetta, because I won’t do it if you don’t take the same. It was your art that sold the idea.”

Todd pulled a cigarette out of Kelly’s pack, lit it, and slowly exhaled, watching a stream of smoke head for the overhead air vent. “The advantage is,” he said, “we can probably put forth a really good case for Cara and Ami to stay in Charlotte. Offer them fifty grand each to stick it through to the end of the project. I think that will help convince their parents.”

“And we need to pay Laura so she can help keep together what she brought together in the first place,” Kelly said with a laugh.

“A hundred?” Todd asked.

“That’s what I was thinking as well,” said Kelly. “This wouldn’t be happening if not for her showing us we could love each other and still be friends.”

“And she still has her own career growing,” said Todd.

“I think we should give Vanetta two fifty as a bonus for putting it all together,” said Kelly finally.

“Say three and we can settle this right now,” said Todd stubbing out his cigarette. “That’s 10% and I think she deserves that much. That still leaves five for expenses and what we don’t use, we’ll turn back into the company.”

Kelly laughed. “Deal,” she said. “You know I don’t do math well under pressure. I was just thinking of a fair figure, and didn’t think of a percentage.”

“Let’s start off by telling Vanetta the news and about her bonus, then she can go to Steve’s and sign her own contract at the same time for taking over as president of the company,” said Todd.

“Robert should go to see Steve as well and get his contract signed,” said Kelly. “But unless you want to dip into our company funds, we can’t pay bonuses or commissions in one shot now because the way I understood Vanetta, this will all be paid over the next year and four months.”

“Want to pay it quarterly?” asked Todd.

“Probably the best thing,” said Kelly. “We don’t need it, so we’ll just take half of ours before the end of the year so that we don’t end up paying taxes on the entire amount in one shot. Pay Vanetta, and Cara, and Ami, and Laura 25% as soon as Vanetta has the big contract signed, and then another 25% every four months.”

“I think we should just quietly deposit Laura’s share into her bank account, and we’ll tell Cara and Ami about the job offers so they can call home before we head out of here. In case you forgot, it’s Wednesday night and we have company coming for supper!”

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

Vanetta protested of course, but Kelly and Todd used the same argument on her. If she didn’t take what she earned, then Todd and Kelly wouldn’t do the project. With a big hug and kiss she relented, then learned what her salary and bonuses would be. She could hardly keep the smile from her face as she rang Robert to pick her up, and ten minutes later they were on their way to Steve’s office.

Ami was the first one to call home and explained to her parents that she had been offered a part time job as an apprentice to Todd Ayres, one of the world’s best-known photographers. Her parents were equally concerned about her schooling as they were about her being gone from home for months at a time. When they were told TKO was supplying her and Cara with a private certified high school teacher, and that she would be accepted into the University of North Carolina when she completed her final high school credits, they were happy for her. They had seen the picture of the wheel, as it was a major issue in their hometown being so many local people had been involved in making the wheel a reality, but previously they hadn’t paid attention to the photo credits.

Ami told them to take a close look at the picture again, and waited until she heard her mother squeal with delight. Her father asked if this apprenticeship would be a paying position, and after telling him that she had made over two thousand on those pictures, her father was duly impressed. Receiving her parents’ blessings, Ami passed the phone on to Kelly.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Phillips,” Kelly said.

After listening to their questions, and confirming that, yes, there had been a bona fide high school teacher hired to help Ami finish off her high school credits and prepare her for university, the question about lodgings came up.

Kelly explained that since both Ami and Cara were comfortable living with her, until such time that they decided to move to a place on campus, they were more than welcome to stay living at her house. As to Ami’s finances, Kelly reminded them that besides the money she received for pictures she took and sold, she was also still receiving a check for five thousand for modeling the CrossTrain uniforms, but that as Todd’s

apprentice, she would also be earning a monthly income of one thousand dollars, plus bonuses for special projects.

Ami's parents were pleased to hear their daughter had found something to focus on now that her gymnastic dreams had ended and thanked Kelly for giving their daughter the opportunities to learn and grow.

"It's my pleasure," said Kelly. "Ami is a bright girl and my partner expects that with her natural talent and his mentoring, she will be one of the top earning photographers by the time she finishes university."

The call to Cara's parents went much along the same lines except that much to Cara's surprise, Kelly told her parents that she would be working at the TKO studios as an executive assistant to the new president of the company. The living situation and the base salary would be the same, as was the original agreement for them posing for the CrossTrain ads.

The Andersons were easy to convince. They had been worried about how their daughter would handle the end of her gymnastics career and were happy to hear the lift in Cara's voice and her excitement.

After getting off the phone, both Ami and Cara jumped Kelly.

"Thank you, thank you!!!" they both exclaimed.

"You won't regret this, Kelly," said Cara. "We'll behave and won't give you a reason for sending us packing."

Kelly smiled a sad smile at Cara. "Honey, I wouldn't send you packing. You're a lovely girl and you have so much ahead of you. I told your parents that you would be Vanetta's exec, and you will help in the office, but your real job is to keep me in shape. I'll need you to keep me going when I want to quit or when I slack off. Part of the deal that Vanetta put together means after I have my baby, I have to be back in this shape in half a year. We don't want to airbrush any pictures, so I'll need you to keep me well oiled so I can avoid as many stretch marks as possible. Since this will be a photographic record and journal, if you can manage to keep me in physical shape and reduce those marks, you will be in such demand after the birth that you will be in high demand as a physiotherapist at that club I told you about, and the money you will make... It will see you well past university and allow you to make the contacts that will get you on any sports team you want, if that's still what you want at that point."

"I'm not sure, Kelly, but I do know that I want to stay with Ami," she said.

"Yeah," said Ami. "I think that's the most important part for us right now, Kelly. Don't get me wrong, I love the photography and I love the fact that we'll be able to live

with you guys for I hope a long time, but I love Cara, and I couldn't give that up. We couldn't go back to the way things were before."

Todd stepped up putting his arms over Ami and Cara's shoulders, giving them both an affectionate hug. "Would you believe that it wasn't too long ago that Kelly lived in her house all alone? Now she's surrounded by love."

"Nobody ever questions the setup?" Ami asked. "I noticed that Gloria didn't even bat an eyelash, and Vanetta just seems to think it's all natural."

Laura, who had sat quietly through the phone calls, said, "It's because those who recognize true love never question it, and those who don't, they just don't see it. You watch tonight when my sisters and parents come over. Nobody will ask where we all sleep or how. We give off an aura."

"I hope not," said Cara. "I've already had two showers today!"

"Not odor!" said Laura, and was about to say more when she noticed everybody starting to chuckle.

"Gotcha," said Cara.

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

Vanetta and Robert came back just as a special delivery Fed-Ex truck pulled into the parking lot. Vanetta offered to sign for the package but the driver and his assistant said two signatures were required, and proof of identification. That's when Vanetta realized this was not a standard Fed-Ex truck. The driver and his assistant were both armed. Instantly she knew what the package was.

Inside, after showing proof of who he was, Todd's signature was accepted and Vanetta, who already had her photo ID out as well as her studio ID, was allowed as the second signature. Kelly and the girls just looked on with curiosity.

You could hear the breathing from everyone as Todd gently laid the parcel on his desk, and with an X-acto knife started to slowly cut through the outer layers of tear proof tape. The box was about a foot long and six inches square. Discreetly in the corner was the name of the sender. Only Todd and Vanetta had seen that information, but the label, "To: Todd Ayres, Confidential" had been clearly seen by everyone.

"You getting film delivered by armored car these days, Todd?" asked Kelly, though the shakiness in her voice could not be disguised.

"Only stuff I order for my Star Trek collection," he said with a grin.

Vanetta drew Robert off to the side by her desk so they could clearly see what Vanetta knew would be coming next. Ami had seen them move and discreetly tugged on Cara's arm, moving them back closer to Vanetta.

Kelly, who had been sitting was growing curious, as was Laura who was perched on the desk beside her.

Todd was taking his sweet time opening the package. Once the tear proof tape was removed, the package appeared to be wrapped in shiny plastic bag that had been folded over the box. Todd sliced the bag and removed a wooden hinged box from the wrappings. With a flourish he swept the debris off his desk on to the floor and examined the teak box, playing with the latch at the front until finally Kelly said, "Well? Are you going to open it or what?"

Todd smiled and opened the box. With both his hands he reached into the box and brought out two 3-inch heart shaped red satin covered jewelry boxes. Kelly's hand shot to her mouth. Laura gasped.

On the top of each of the heart shaped boxes, there was an initial in gold leaf, one an L, the other a K. With the boxes in his hand, Todd stood up and walked around his own desk till he was directly in front of Kelly and Laura and then dropped to his knees.

"Kelly, Laura, would you honor me, by becoming my wives?" With his thumbs he flipped open the boxes and presented them to his lovers.

Kelly's eyes welled up with tears of joy as she accepted the box from Todd. Laura started crying, her hand trembling as she reached for the heart shaped diamond in the box.

"And the answer is?" prompted Vanetta.

"Yes," said Kelly, "I will be your wife." Todd slipped the ring on her finger and waited for Laura.

"Oh, my god, YES!" she shouted, the tears still running down her face. Todd slipped the ring on her finger. Then he stood and kissed both his fiancées.

Vanetta, Robert, Cara, and Ami applauded then went to offer their congratulations. Hugs were exchanged all around and Kelly and Laura couldn't stop looking at the rings.

"This is so beautiful," Kelly said. "I've never seen anything like it."

"That's because Todd designed it," said Vanetta.

"You did, Honey?" Laura asked.

“Just the basic design, Sweetheart. Johan made it work.” From the box Todd took two more boxes also with gold foil initials on top. “These are the wedding bands that go with the rings,” he said showing them to the girls. “One on each side and it will line up into three hearts.”

“Oh, god, that is so beautiful,” said Laura.

“And you knew about this,” said Kelly to Vanetta.

Vanetta just shrugged. “I saw the design when it was complete and I sort of helped out with these two,” she said pointing to Ami and Cara, “in the plan that would get the perfect sizes for you.”

“You mean that day at the mall when you were talking about promise rings? That was just a diversion for this?” Kelly asked.

“I’m afraid so,” said Todd, “but,” he opened his desk drawer and pulled out the package that had been lying there so nonchalantly for the better part of the month, “I did buy these for you that night,” and he presented Kelly and Laura with the half carat diamond earrings.

Both Kelly and Laura changed their earrings on the spot, giggling like schoolgirls who had just won the prom queen title.

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

They were running a little bit late, but Kelly and Laura needed some time to settle down after the surprise and shock of the rings and the added bonus of the earrings. Laura said she was never going to take off her ring, and Kelly echoed those sentiments. Todd reminded them they would have to take them off once, when they officially got married.

While they were waiting, an email alert buzzed on Vanetta’s machine and the management contract for “Muriel’s Place” came through. Todd asked her to print it and drop it in an envelope so he could take it with him for the evening.

Robert and Vanetta confirmed they had signed their respective contracts at Steve’s and Vanetta had spent the time with Steve laying out the contract she would need to take with her to California on Sunday.

Robert said he was very happy and thanked Todd and Kelly for the opportunity.

“I gave my notice at work today,” Robert said, “and they said I might as well leave now.”

“That wasn’t very nice,” said Kelly.

“I think maybe they thought I might mess up their books before I left, though that only tells me they never paid much attention to my character,” he replied.

“Well,” said Todd, “Then I guess you can start as soon as you want.”

“The van is going to be ready on Monday, so I guess I’ll start the same day,” said Robert. “But in the meantime, I wouldn’t mind sticking around and getting used to things. If you and Kelly don’t mind.”

Kelly smiled. “Feel free, Robert. Get the feel of the place.”

“Yeah,” said Todd. “Might as well order yourself a desk and chair and a computer. Vanetta will tell you who our supplier is. And get yourself a company cell phone as well.”

Robert just gulped. At his other job, it had been a fight just to get a box of pencils! “I’ll be sure to get just what I need and try to get it at sale prices,” he said.

“That’s just plain silly,” said Kelly. “Don’t nickel and dime this job, Robert. Get what you want, what you’ll be comfortable with, and buy quality. Junk won’t last past the warranty.”

“Kelly’s right,” said Todd. “Get the best. That’s what we do, and we would expect you to do the same.”

“Wow,” said Robert. “This is such a change...”

“Get used to it Rob,” said Todd. “We expect your best effort, so we can’t very well expect you to give it with second rate equipment.”

“Honey,” Kelly said. “You see the time? If we don’t leave, Laura’s family will be waiting outside for us.”

“Got to go, guys,” Todd said getting up. “The boss has spoken.”

“I’m going to drive my own car back,” said Laura. “I’m going to give it to Kat tonight.”

“Okay, Sweetheart,” Kelly said. “You want to take the girls home? I want to stop at the butcher’s and pick up a stack of thick steaks.”

“Sure, no problem,” said Laura and she and Cara and Ami went out the back door to where she had parked her Accord.

Kelly and Todd got into the Tracker out front and started out. Kelly turned the air conditioner on, as it was hot outside. Todd turned left so he could hook on to the Hutchison McDonald road towards the butcher's, instead of turning right the way that they usually did. He didn't notice the gray Buick pull out a few minutes later, making a U turn to follow them. Todd and Kelly were too deep in their discussion of the management deal to be watching.

"Look!" shouted Ami as they pulled out from behind the studio. "There's that car again, and it's following Todd and Kelly!"

Laura turned casually to the right and opened her cell phone and hit the rapid dial for Kelly's cell. "You've got company," she said.

To be continued...