

Kelly

(Inspired by Mike C, based on characters in his novel: “James”
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“Annie 2”

A special by: *Dream Painter*

1998: Phoenix, AZ

She felt his hot breath on her face, in her hair, the familiar weight of him blanketing her. She tipped her hips upward to meet and greet his as the velvety softness of his knob brushed her inner thigh. Within an instant the head of his cock was poised at her entrance, his hands in her hair. She moaned as he glided deeply inside her, her inner muscles twitching and squeezing him tightly. She could feel each ripple passing into her. Together they rocked to each other. God, they fit together so perfectly, like pieces of a puzzle. She would cling to him tightly both inside and out. He groaned, his fingers curled deep in her hair. She felt the twitch inside her, the warmth of him spilling in her as she ground her hips to him hard. Driving him into her deeper. Together they gasped for air.

He finally rolled off her, still panting. “You’re really going to do this?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m really going to do this,” she replied breathlessly but with determination.

“Damn it, Annie, we can make it work... you aren’t the first woman this ever happened to... ah, fuck it!” He rolled over on his side, turning his back to her in an effort to go to sleep.

She remained there consumed in her own thoughts until the steely light of the Arizona dawn crept through the cracks in the bedroom drapes. She rose quietly, showered, and brushed her teeth. Dressing, she tossed her bra in the bathroom trashcan. That’s about the last thing she remembered until she got the Bronco turned east at Flagstaff. She quietly swore to herself, “...and if I never see another fucking saguaro again, it will be too damn soon!”

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## 2002: Charlotte, NC

*The scene had replayed in her mind hundreds of times. “Damn it,” she swore to herself softly. Bubba lifted his head off the hardwood floor to look at her quizzically. Annie looked down to the right-hand corner of her monitor. 2:38 in the morning! She groaned, gazing around at the surroundings as if trying to find her bearings... the apartment, her home above the restaurant turned catering shop.*

Annie rubbed her face and tried to re-focus on the spreadsheet she was working on, the invoice for Gerald’s. “How about a drink, Bubba?” she asked the German shepherd that lay sprawled beside her desk. She rose from the old rolltop and padded to the tiny kitchenette. Reaching into a cabinet she withdrew a rocks glass and a bottle of Jack Daniels. She poured two fingers of the golden bourbon, topped the glass with water, took a sip, and then wandered barefoot through the tidy apartment.

Since the day she bought the building in 1999, the upper floor had always been her inner sanctum. No one from the days of the restaurant had ever been allowed in, and since ‘A Woman’s Space’ had folded, only Jacob, her handyman/helper/jack-of-all-trades, had seen the apartment.

Jacob was timeless, about a million years old, mahogany skinned, a southern gentleman in the truest sense of the words. She had met him at the mission shortly after the restaurant opened. Annie had always made it a point to give the leftover prepared dishes to the mission after closing time.

Jacob at the mission... She had met him in the kitchen, but he was also a resident. She never inquired about his past, but asked him if he could work an old Hobart dishwasher, (referred to by her as ‘the wish-dosher’). She told him he had to be reliable, and for that, he would receive a fair wage for hard work. The following morning he was waiting at the front door when she opened.

After ‘A Woman’s Space’ closed, Jacob continued to work for Annie. He helped in the kitchen, the herb garden they planted in the small lot behind the building, and with the endless repairs on the old building. Jacob was her right-hand man. Part philosopher, part preacher, part historian, that was Jacob, and for all his parts, they respected each other’s privacy, and had become close personal friends.

“Well there, lookie what da cat dragged in,” said Jacob around 6:30 that morning.

“I don’t need your crap this morning,” replied Annie as she and Bubba trudged down the stairs, Annie nursing her sore head, her hair splashing over her shoulders. She wore an old black tank top and a tattered pair of loosely fitting purple sweat pants rolled down to her hips, “coffee ready?” she asked.

“Ya’sum Mizz Annie, coffee’s ready,” Jacob replied, pouring her a cup.

Rubbing her face, she took a sip from the cup and pulled up a tall stool behind her, sitting at the brushed aluminum 'prep' table in the commercial kitchen on the first floor. "God, you make the best damn coffee, Jacob," she said with a moan.

"That would be the egg shells. My mama said ifin you puts egg shells in the grounds it cuts the bitter," He grinned to her. He had told her this a hundred times at least in the two years they had been together, and it had become a ritual with them.

"You make the best," she replied still rubbing her eyes. "Okay, we **gotta** make a list for what we need for that company picnic. How do you feel about another pig roast?"

"Sounds like another all-nighter to me," Jacob groaned.

"Yeah, but it pays damn good," Annie sighed. Reaching for the pad and pen she began the list. She thought back to the conversation the day before with Kelly Jennsen. "Strange girl," Annie thought, but hell, people said the same thing about her.

A chance encounter with Harry's daughter on Slocum road, and two hours later a phone call asking her if she could cater a picnic. Some picnic! She was going to be the second caterer on site at Carowinds, and she'd be required to feed up to 200 people. She had told Kelly she would get back to her with a price on Monday, and then she called Harry Williams at the precinct.

Annie didn't have much use for the law, but Harry was an okay guy. He'd been the one who had gone to bat for her when that bitch wanted Bubba put down. He had treated Annie fairly and had fought the court order to end Bubba's life early. Harry was the one who had convinced the captain of Bubba's potential as a training dog, and between Harry and his partner, they had gotten a stay of execution from another judge who wasn't dirty.

When Harry had said that Kelly and her partner were good people, and confirmed that they did run a big business, it had eased Annie's mind. She was damn tired of getting screwed.

But Kelly had promised a certified check the same day that Annie had her price together, and had said the left over food would go to the homeless and shelters... hell, maybe there were some good people left in the world.

She went back to her list. Five hundred cobs of corn... She'd roast half of them, and boil the other half in the big cauldron. Two hundred pounds of baby back ribs along with homemade crusty rolls and tubs of real butter. With that and the whole pig, it was a big job. Probably the biggest she had since she started catering. Hell, and that was just the meat part. She'd have to drop some samples of her coleslaw, and cucumber-tomato salad, and potato salad with Kelly. Maybe she'd make enough on this job that she could hire some of her old staff back.

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“Mizz Annie?” Jacob asked as he puttered around the enormous kitchen. “You and me been friends for few years now, right?”

Annie raised her head from her list; Bubba’s tail was thumping on the floor at the back door. She rose and padded barefooted to the door to let the GSD out into the enclosed yard behind the shop. “Yeah, wazz up Jacob?” She asked in concern.

“Mizz Annie, is you one of those womens dat don’t like mens? Is you one of them lez.. lez...?” Jacob asked sheepishly.

“Lesbians?” Annie interrupted.

“Yeah, one of dem.” He finished, looking up from the floor he was sweeping.

She stared in to his weather beaten face in utter amazement. After pausing for a moment to collect her thoughts she replied, “Jacob, you’re a man and I like you.”

“Dat’s not what I mean Mizz Annie. I means you ain’t never had a man here since I know’d you.” Jacob looked up at her earnestly.

“Ah, no, Jacob, I’m not a lesbian. Hell, I was married for 15 years. We even had a baby and everything. You see this silver ring on my foot, right next to my big toe?” Annie stuck out her bare foot for him to see the wide band on her toe. “Well, first of all it isn’t silver it’s platinum, and second of all it was my wedding band!”

“Where he at?” Jacob inquired.

“In Phoenix, I guess... least that’s where I left him.” Annie jotted something down on her note pad.

“... and the child... he wiff his daddy?” Jacob continued.

“A little girl,” Annie shook her head. “She died.” Annie grabbed her pad and coffee and started for the steps back to her apartment. “Let Bubba in if he starts barking.”

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## **1998: Winchester, TN**

“Come on, darlin’, get in this house so Granny can see you.”

Road weary and aching, Annie stumbled from the Bronco after her four-day drive and into her Grandmother’s home in Winchester, Tennessee.

“Brought you a present Gran, all the way from New Mexico,” Annie said tiredly, trying to shake off some the exhaustion.

“Wha’d you get your ole Gran?” the old woman asked in surprise.

“Some cheesy turquoise jewelry.” Annie giggled. “Hmmm, a piece of petrified wood from the Petrified Forest... Some really hot salsa, it’s in the back, I’ll go get it.” Granny was not amused. She hated stupid guessing games.

Annie returned to her grandmother’s side, lugging what appeared to be a very large, and heavy banana box. From the scratching noises and whimpering inside, her Grandmother Anne knew that whatever was in there was alive, and knowing Annie it could be any number of creatures.

“Oh, Annie, what **is** it?” Granny asked almost afraid to look.

“What’s it look like Gran, it’s a puppy!” Annie lowered the box so her grandmother could look inside. The old woman lifted out a fuzzy squirming, puffball of a beast that immediately began licking her chin. “Remember, you said you wanted a dog around here, so... well, now you have one.”

Gran sat in her easy chair cuddling the fuzz-bucket to her ample chest. “What kind of a puppy is he... what’s his name?” she asked.

“He’s a German shepherd,” Annie replied, “... and his name is going to be ‘Dirty Mud’ if he doesn’t stop puking and crapping in my car!”

“Oh, Annie, he’s just a baby, that’s what babies do, they puke and crap all over everything.” The instant she said it, Granny covered her mouth with her hand, regretting her comments. “Oh baby, I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“Its okay, Gran. Did I get any calls?” Annie asked offhandedly, changing the subject.

“If you mean from Allen, no. But I read in the Herald that someone was burning up the phone lines between Mobile and Phoenix and I can only assume it was your mama calling him.”

Annie had to laugh at her Gran’s wicked sense of humor.

“Anyway, I don’t believe this here’s a German shepherd. I think he’s a wolf. You’re a wolf, aren’t you boy... you nothing but a baby wolf in German shepherd’s clothing.”

“He’s not a wolf, Gran, I promise,” Annie said calmly as she stretched her legs.

“Yes, you is a wolf, aren’t you... come on Bubba, Granny’s gonna let you outside so you don’t puddle and crap all over Granny’s nice clean carpet, then Granny **would** have to kill you, and we don’t want that now, do we, Bubba.” said Granny in her sweetest Granny voice.

“You’re sick, you know that don’t ya, Gran?” Annie asked as the puppy tumbled from the old woman’s lap and onto the floor and headed toward the back door.

“Oh I know baby, but it’s good to have you home anyway,” replied her grandmother.

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Annie remained with her grandmother for two weeks before she began to feel like a fish in a fish bowl rather than a houseguest. She was edgy and knew she couldn’t stay. She had managed to avoid her Mother; still an endless parade of distant relatives, (most of whom she didn’t know), seemed to troop to Granny’s house offering Annie their condolences for her loss the previous year.

Referring to her road atlas Annie formed her plan. “I’m going to head east, Gran. I can’t stay in East Jesus Nowhere, Tennessee and hide for the rest of my days,” she announced to her grandmother.

“You ain’t hiding baby, you and Bubba are on vacation... you visiting your ole Gran,” said Granny, “Anyway, you can’t go too much further east, you’ll run out of dry land. You got that ole ‘wander-lust’ just like your Grandfather had.”

“Maybe so, but that’s what I’m going to do.” said Annie.

“Well you’re taking this wolf with ...” Gran was cut short.

“He’s not a wolf Gran, he’s a...” Annie said calmly.

“Whatever the hell he is, Bubba’s going with you.” she stated firmly, then added quietly, “Lord, I couldn’t sleep nights knowing I had a wolf in the house with me.”

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The envelope from the attorney’s office in Mesa, Arizona, arrived at her grandmother’s house a few days before Annie was set to leave. “That Allen, he doesn’t waste any time,” she thought grimly to herself. Not wanting to open it around Gran, she held back until she got to the first ‘rest stop’ just outside of Chattanooga after crossing over Lookout Mountain. All she had to do was sign the paperwork, have it notarized, and return it to the attorney; they even gave her a stamped envelope. Those attorneys think of everything. The paperwork revealed no surprises. It even included the clause that Annie

would be changing her name from Anderson, back to Prince, her maiden name. The settlement was generous by most standards, but Annie cared nothing about the money. She cared more about the crashing end of a big chapter in her life than the numbers and dollar signs.

The hours on the road gave her a great deal of time to think, to plan, to try to make some sense of the last 18 months, or at least put them into some kind of perspective. Leaving Allen Anderson, her husband of 15 years, was difficult enough. In college they had called themselves the 'Triple A Team.' The fact that he had only made a half-hearted effort to try to convince her to stay was even worse. Perhaps he knew what she had been trying to tell him for over a year. After the death of their daughter, the only thing they had in common was the same last name and the same address. That had been the most difficult of all, the loss of their daughter, their one shared link to each other.

Before leaving Phoenix, Annie had run a tiny Marketing Services Agency out of the spare bedroom. Two Macintoshes, one PC and one very persnickety laser printer made up 'Custom Graphic Design' or 'CGD'. With eight small businesses for clients, it proved to be a minor thorn in the side of some of the larger advertising agencies in the area. CGD was a local small business for local small businesses, using only other local small businesses as vendors. Her clients included an appliance repair company, a power washing company for aircraft, an executive suite complex and a small family-owned bookstore, to name a few.

In glitzy Phoenix, CGD was a welcome and refreshing change for the 'mom and pop' type shops who were struggling to make ends meet and get their faces or word out to the public. By the time she closed her books a few months before leaving Allen, she had managed to sell her client base to one of those same larger agencies for a tidy sum. The new agency devoted an entire team to winning over the small business owners, and after training the team, she was confident that her clients were in good hands.

In the months before, Annie had little time for her work, she was mourning, healing, and licking her own wounds. But Annie had always loved hard work and being her own boss she had driven herself hard, perhaps too hard.

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2002: Charlotte, NC

"Jacob, the roast 'beast' and the turkey breast for the box lunches to go to the bank are in the fridge," Annie called to her helper as she bounced down the steps, her hair braided tight in a single long rope trailing down her back. "We need 48 sandwiches, half turkey, the other half roast 'beast'. The sandwiches rolls are proofing in the oven. If there's any dough left make some round loaves for bread bowls."

“Mizz Annie, when’d you do all this?” Jacob asked as he began to tie the long white apron around his waist. “Why don’t you start buying all this stuff rather than do it all yo-self?”

“Cause, it keeps our costs down, Jacob, and we can say it’s all homemade. Besides I don’t have anything better to do at night,” Annie replied. “I’m gonna run this invoice over to Gerald’s.”

“What, you ain’t got no stamp? I suppose you made the brownies too?” Jacob could see Annie was back to her old self again. He had felt badly about prying or asking too many questions.

“Smart Ass!” Annie snorted, “You know baking the brownies is your job and they’ll be warm and chewy when we deliver them. Don’t forget the soft drinks! Come on, Bubba, let’s go for a ride in the car-car!”

The shepherd’s ears perked at the words “car-car” and he bounded happily to his Mistress’s side to sit at a perfect heel. Annie attached the leash to his choke chain collar and offered him the slack remains of the leash to hold in his mouth. The GSD danced around Annie happily as together they headed to the rusty Bronco, Annie’s huge knapsack size purse slung over her shoulder.

“You gonna hurt yo-self wiff dat purse of yours Mizz Annie,” Jacob called to her from the doorway as she headed towards the truck. Annie waved to him and together she and Bubba were off.

Taking the old Bronco down the main street and making a left, Annie recalled the night “A Woman’s Space” had closed. Jacob had been there, working the “wish-dosher.” Thank goodness the place hadn’t really been packed with customers that night. Word of these things occurring at local businesses spread fast enough through Charlotte.

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## **2000: Charlotte, NC**

Annie could sense the tension in the air when the Harley Sportster roared up to the front door of “A Woman’s Space” and parked in the handicapped-parking zone. She didn’t really mind ‘biker chicks,’ as she called them. Hell, their money spent as good as anyone else’s did. It was the noise and the rough talk that bothered her, and her other customers most.

“A Woman’s Space” had a reputation as a nice, quiet, and friendly Ladies’ Club. A place where women could have a good meal and a glass of wine or a beer and conduct business or pleasure without the blaring noise of a sports event on television, video machines or pool tables. There were equally good, if not fancier, places to eat in

Charlotte, but none that catered directly to women not only on a gastronomic but a sensory level.

It really was “A Woman’s Space” with fresh crisp linen table clothes and napkins, a smattering of antique sideboards and buffets about the dining room and fresh cut flowers on every table. The dinner menu may have been limited to three or four main items but each was lovingly and individually prepared. Annie had worked hard to turn the old storefront building into the perfect atmosphere of fine dining for women.

Even Annie peeked out of the kitchen when the biker chick and her apparently new girlfriend entered the dinning room and loudly demanded two ‘Buds’. The biker chick was built like a linebacker; stocky and heavy with upper arms the size of old growth timber. Her girlfriend was a small willowy woman with a swollen lip and darkened eye. Together they had taken table nine near the door.

For her own part, Annie was probably in the best shape of her life. Two and a half years in Charlotte and a strong sense of independence had seen to that. Loading and unloading the Bronco with food, produce and supplies for the restaurant as well as training Bubba and bounding up and down the 18 steps to her apartment had made her lithe and muscular. “Not bad for 38,” she would often think to herself as she glimpsed her reflection in a mirror.

It was a few minutes after the loud couple’s drinks had been served that all hell broke loose. The front door of the old building flew open and an obvious male voice boomed out, “You fuckin’ dyke, that’s **my** girlfriend and I’m gonna kick your ass!” He screamed while the wispy shrieked.

“She ain’t going with you fuck-face, she’s mine now!” bellowed the biker chick.

“Great!” thought Annie sarcastically, “This is **just** what I need,” as she dropped her towel and left the kitchen.

Annie was across the dinning room in a flash, and standing between them while they continued their exchange. “Look, I don’t know what your problems are, and frankly I don’t care, but this is **my** restaurant and you can take yourselves and your problems and head on down the road,” Annie said calmly but forcefully, but inside, she was shaking like a leaf. By this time Jacob was standing nearby at table 7.

“Leanne, honey, you sit right there while I take this asshole outside and beat the shit outta him,” the biker chick said to the willowy girl as she pushed Annie out of her way and headed towards the door.

“You cunt, I’m gonna clean your clock right out there on that sidewalk,” shouted the scraggly looking man as he turned to follow the woman.

Annie turned to Jacob and to mouth the words, "Call the cops," but Jacob was already on his way behind the counter and picking up the phone, staring out the window.

The entire restaurant could hear the oaths and swearing outside. Annie saw Jacob's eyes grow wide as he cried, "Mizz Annie, she done cold-cocked dat boy wiff a pool cue!"

Within seconds the front door swung open and a battered 'biker chick' came in huffing, puffing and brandishing what looked to be the back half of a pool stick through the dining room.

"You wanna piece of this, bitch," the biker chick roared at Annie. Annie jumped backwards, catching a flash of something lunging at the woman from the corner of her eye. Annie blinked as the woman hit the floor hard, on her back, and watched as the pool cue slid across the hardwood floor of the dining room. She looked back at the woman lying on the floor and saw one very pissed off German shepherd standing over her.

Ears flat to his head, lips curled, teeth bared and hackles raised, Bubba was a menacing sight. The willowy girl took one look at her new girlfriend on the floor, screamed, and flew out the front door.

"Easy, Bubba," Annie said as calmly as possible, "No bites."

By this time many of the restaurant's dinner patrons were also starting to rush out the door, most not bothering to pay their bills.

Annie pulled up a chair and sat near Bubba and the biker chick. "You wanna piece of *this*, bitch?" Annie calmly asked the woman, her heart still fluttering from the excitement.

"Ge..ge..get him off!" she cried.

"...Ah, no, I don't think so. Not until we've had a few word with the cops first." Annie replied. "Jacob, go check on scraggly outside. See if he's still alive." Jacob scurried out the front door.

"Get him off me!" The biker chick howled.

"I wouldn't yell if I were you, it tends to make him nervous," Annie said calmly. She was actually beginning to enjoy this. "Good boy, easy now... easy... no bites. Damn. Now I'll have to give you a flea bath as well. No bites, Bubba. I don't think she's had all her shots."

"Mizz Annie, da po-leese is here," Jacob called through the front door, now standing open. Annie could hear Jacob talking to someone outside. As she looked to the

door a uniformed officer walked in. The officer took one look at the girl on the floor and the beast standing over her and prepared to draw his weapon.

“No! Don’t,” Annie yelled to the policeman, jumping up out of her chair to stand between the cop and Bubba.

“Bubba, heel!” The dog stepped away from the biker chick and trotted over to Annie’s left side. “Down! Stay!” Annie ordered and the shepherd dropped to the hardwoods on his belly.

The cop allowed a small smile to touch the corner of his mouth as he saw how well trained the German shepherd was. He respected the K-9 unit of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg police department as valuable assets in many situations, but not even their best trained dog heeded as well as this fine looking animal. He released his grip on his pistol and took out a notepad from his vest pocket.

“You want to tell me what’s going on here?” The officer asked.

“That bitch sic’d her fucking dog on me and I was just...” the ‘biker chick’ began to prattle.

“Tonya, I wasn’t talking to you. You’re in enough trouble as is... and don’t try to leave ‘cause Lew’s outside waiting if you do!” interrupted the cop.

The policeman turned back to look at Annie, “are you the manager here?”

“I’m the proprietor,” replied Annie calmly though she could feel the heat rising to her face.

“Would you tell me what happened here, please?” the officer asked in a professional tone.

“Well,” Annie began, “It seems ‘scruffy’ out there, didn’t like ‘biker woman’ here, messing with ‘wimpy girl,’ where-ever the hell she is now. So ‘biker woman’ and ‘scruffy’, at my urging, went outside to discuss their issues. Then this one,” Annie said pointing to Tonya the biker chick, “decided to take a swing at me with that thing laying over there and then Bubba,” pointing to the GSD, his tail thudding against the hard wood floor after hearing his name, “gave her a little ‘Come to Jesus’ meeting. That’s about it! Now I have a business to run, officer...” Annie looked at the name tag, “Officer Williams, so would you take her, and that,” pointing to the piece of pool cue on the floor, “and get the hell out of my restaurant?” Annie had lost her sense of humor.

Officer Williams gently took Annie by the arm and led her towards the kitchen, “Listen, you may not realize this, but that’s Tonya Richardson, Judge Richardson’s step daughter.”

“I don’t give a good god damn who she is” Annie replied hotly.

“Keep your voice down. Do you want to press charges?” asked Officer Williams.

“No, just get her the hell outta here, but if you give her a breath test you’re gonna find out she’s drunk... just a tip *ossifer* Williams,” Annie said. “I got girls here,” nodding towards her wait staff, “on the clock, doing nothing so just take her and ‘scruffy’ away!”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to shut down for the night,” said Sergeant Williams. “We have an incident report to write up involving an accusation by Tonya.”

Harry Williams handcuffed Tonya and handed her over to his partner.

He looked remorseful. “There’s no way I can cover up what happened here. Even if you don’t press charges, Tonya is going to make life hell for you for having a dangerous dog loose on the premises of a public establishment.”

“Bubba’s not dangerous,” said Annie. “He was just protecting me!”

“I understand that, Miss Prince,” said Sergeant Williams, “but I don’t write the laws. Ever since the whole pit-bull thing started, the rules have been that unleashed dogs in public, much less a restaurant, are serious violations. Tonya’s step father is going to twist this around that once again his daughter is just a victim of inept policing, and he’ll probably sign a court order to make sure you aren’t around to contradict him.”

“What in the sweet chocolate hell does that mean?” asked Annie.

“I’m sorry, Miss Prince,” Harry said. “This looks like a real nice place, but you had the misfortune to have Tonya Richardson pay you a visit.” Harry looked around before speaking again. “She’d be serving life by now with her history, if it wasn’t for her daddy bailing her out every time she gets into trouble. I’ve been on the force twenty-two years, and I can’t even count the number of times that I’ve arrested her just to see the charges dismissed by the court. You embarrassed her today, you saw her scared, and she’s not going to let this rest. If I were you, I’d get this dog the hell out of here. Send him to relatives or something. I’ll do my best to buy you some time.” With that he closed the notepad, and with a sad look walked out the door.

“Jacob! Girls, let’s call it a day. Go ahead and clock out!” Annie called to the three waitresses and her dishwasher. She could see Sergeant Williams outside with Tonya, having her blow into the clear plastic tube.

“Mizz Annie, I’ll stay and help you clean dis mess up,” Jacob said softly.

Slowly the girls streamed out of the restaurant while Annie and Jacob together busied tables, washed dishes, and put away food. Annie released Bubba from his

‘down/stay’ and went behind the counter to add up meal tickets, trying to wind down from the evenings events, sipping on a glass of wine. Amazingly, most of the girls didn’t even know of Bubba’s existence, even Jacob had only seen him rarely but he remained at his mistress’s side while she worked this evening, even closer than usual.

“Make sure you get yourself something to eat, Jacob, God knows there’s enough back there...just help yourself,” Annie called to her helper.

“I’ll feed Bubba too,” replied Jacob. Annie could hear Jacob talking to the shepherd as she tried to work through her figures.

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Annie didn’t have any place to send Bubba, and she wouldn’t have anyways. He was her protector, and the most loyal friend she had ever had. Hell... she’d fight this in court if it came right down to it. There’s times when a person has to do what’s right.

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It was a pity that Judge Richardson didn’t see things that way. He bailed Tonya out of the CMPD lockup a little after midnight, and listened to her sob story of how she and a friend had gone to a restaurant to eat and a man there attacked her and then there was that woman who had turned that vicious attack dog loose on her!

After taking Tonya to the hospital, he went back to his office and wrote out a court order for the seizure and destruction of the dog that attacked his daughter. Another for the arrest of the dog’s owner, and finally one to close down “A Woman’s Space.” As far as Judge Richardson was concerned, he had already been shown enough proof that the licensed establishment served way too much alcohol and drew in the wrong kind of people. He hand delivered the warrants himself, after midnight, to the watch commander of the CMPD station across from the courthouse.

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Annie came downstairs at 7:00 the next morning intending to calculate how much revenue she had lost the night before. Damn those customers who felt they didn’t have to pay for their meals because of that stupid biker bitch.

Even though Jacob hadn’t gone home till well after midnight, he was in the kitchen and had a pot of coffee on. He knew that Annie liked her coffee hot and strong early in the morning. He remembered the first time he had met her.

Being black and poor in the south wasn’t what Jacob had planned to be. No sir. His granddaddy had been the first in the family born a free man, but had sharecropped like his daddy had done after the war between the north and south. Jacob’s daddy had some schoolin’ but not enough to get out of the hard life of

sharecroppin'. Jacob had worked on the farm himself when he was younger and had planned to get himself more of an education than his daddy. He had plans. And then history happened around him.

He had lived through the rough years when Rosa Parks had taken a seat at the front of the bus, and had been charged and found guilty in 1955. Jacob had been 15 at the time. Her actions in Alabama hadn't helped the attitudes towards Negroes and life got downright dangerous when the boycott started. Jacob had to drop out of school, but he had vowed he was not going to spend the rest of his life working on the farm. He drifted for a few years before joining the army. Things hadn't been much better there, and after a few too many times standing up for his own rights had been dishonorably discharged for striking an officer. Jacob had felt he was in the right when that lily-white boy fresh from West Point with shiny new bars on his shoulders had come back late from liberty the night Jacob was on walking guard duty around the base. The lieutenant was drunk and when challenged by Jacob, had called him a no account nigger, but Jacob had stood his ground. It was 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis had just ended and after the "Bay of Pigs" disaster the year before, tension was high in the south, but the lieutenant, refusing to show papers to Jacob, had taken a swing at him. Jacob was sober and easily sidestepped the punch, but the lieutenant continued to fall forward until he hit the ground breaking his arm. The court martial had been over quickly. No one believed that Jacob had not struck the lieutenant. And Jacob left the army after a humiliating six months in the stockade.

When he was released, it was 1963. George Wallace was governor of Alabama, so Jacob headed north. He was in Washington, August 28th and heard Martin Luther King deliver his "I have a dream" speech. Jacob followed Dr. King, believing in, hoping in, the dream, and then President Kennedy was shot dead in Dallas in November, and Jacob's dreams died the same day. He drifted west working at one odd job or another never staying too long as the mid west was not overly kind to 'colored folk.'

Jacob took up the drink as one after another of his hopes was shattered. The assassination of Robert Kennedy, the assassination of Dr. King, the Watts Riots, crazy Charlie and increasing racial tension in cities like Chicago and Detroit. By the time "A Summer of Love" arrived, Jacob had a history of one-night stands in jails across the country, and wasn't feeling too much love. He headed back to his roots to find his daddy had died and his mother had remarried and moved away.

Jacob woke up sometime in 1988. He was living on the streets, panhandling and working when he needed to, to keep him fueled up. A stroke of luck had landed him at the mission one night when he was hungry, and a kindly volunteer had fed him and found clean clothes for him. A shower and a bed for the night, a luxury Jacob couldn't even remember. The volunteer had sat with him all night and was with him in the morning. Mogen David had washed away 18 years of his life, and Jacob woke up to breakfast and people who cared. They told him that times had changed, but while he wanted to believe, he was just happy to be warm, clothed and fed. He stayed on at the

mission from that day forward, never once looking back, and never once wanting to touch another drink.

Miss Annie showed up one night with a truckload of cooked food. He had seen her before. Though she was short and skinny, her long auburn hair was hard to miss. She smiled enough, but Jacob was leery of white folks who smiled at him. Especially white women who came to the mission. He had been helping in the kitchen since he had given up the bottle. In exchange he got a room and meals. Jacob was too old to face the world again. The mission was his home now. Over the years, he had learned to listen and not say much himself. He had done nearly every kind of job that most people didn't want to do themselves and had picked up a few other skills along the way. The mission wasn't too bad religion wise. He could recite gospel with the best of them. He just wasn't much of a believer in the good book or the goodness of people. As far as he was concerned, he had been converted. Then one night Miss Annie came right into the kitchen and asked him if he could operate a "wish-dosher" she called it. She said that she would pay him a fair wage for hard work.

Jacob hadn't had any money in years. Didn't really need it, but the people who ran the mission said that she was a good person and maybe he should give it a try. He could still live at the mission. So, the next morning he was at her restaurant. That was over a year ago, and he hadn't missed a day since.

Annie was sorting through the unpaid bills from the night before when the knock came at the door.

"I wonder who the hell that is," said Annie, getting up.

Jacob continued cleaning when he heard Annie cussing at the door. He got to a window just in time to see Bubba being muzzled and put into an animal control van and Annie in handcuffs, being shoved into a patrol car.

Jacob was scared to go outside, but the policeman who had taken Miss Annie was driving away while another was hammering a sign on the door and putting a padlock on a chain over the door handles.

Jacob waited for the other police officer to drive away and then he cautiously walked out and read the sign.

"Closed by order of the City of Charlotte for violation of article ..." Jacob didn't understand the rest except for a line that said Judge Richardson.

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Jacob felt useless. What could he do? Why was Miss Annie in handcuffs? She was a good person. He was pounding his fist on the kitchen counter in frustration when he looked at the telephone.

Jacob had never said much to Annie about his past, but he had recognized both police officers last night. They treated him okay, just checking in now and again at the mission to see if he was still keeping out of mischief. They remembered more about him before he woke up than he did himself.

Going back to the dining room and behind the counter Jacob found the Charlotte phone directory. He punched in the numbers for the only H. Williams in the directory.

“Harry Williams,” said a familiar voice.

“Mister Harry?” asked Jacob.

“Yes, this is Harry Williams,” the voice replied.

“Mister Harry, dis is Jacob... Jacob Hanson... you ‘member me?” Jacob asked.

“Yes, Jacob, sure I remember you. Why are you calling me at home?”

“Mister Harry, dat Judge Richardson he done arrested Mizz Annie and Bubba and hauled them away,” Jacob began.

“What? Hauled who away?” asked Harry.

“De po-leese. Dey put Miz Annie in han’cuffs and hauled Bubba away... You know Bubba, Mizz Annie’s dog. Mister Harry, he’s a good dog, he didn’t hurt no one. An dey put chains on de door and a sign dat sez Mizz Annie’s place is closed by de law! I’s sorry Mister Harry, but I don’t know what to do!”

Harry could hear the anguish in the old man’s voice. Fuck. He had told Annie to be careful. The Judge wasn’t a person you wanted to mess with. He had told her to get the dog out of the city and told her to do it before the night was over. Damn! Fuck but that Tonya bitch caused more grief every year. Harry was tired. He hadn’t had enough sleep. He was going to go back to bed after he had driven Meg to work, but Jacob, he hadn’t ever given them a problem, and since he had started working, the people that ran the mission said he was giving his pay to them to help keep it open. He was one of the few success stories that he and Lew could brag about. Now this!

“Jacob?” said Harry. “You stay in that restaurant and don’t let anybody in. I’ll go and get your boss out and see what the hell is going on.”

“Thank ye Mister Harry. I din know who to call.”

“It’s okay, Jacob,” said Harry. “You did the right thing. Now I’m going to hang up and go downtown. I’ll see you soon.”

Harry hung up the phone and put his uniform on again. Just before he stepped out the door, he gave Lew a call and told him what had happened and that he was going to find out what the hell Richardson had done.

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“What the hell is going on?” demanded Harry as he walked into his captain’s office.

Harry had stopped at the duty sergeant’s desk and sure enough, there was paperwork for the arrest of Annie, an order to have the German shepherd put down and the restaurant closed. He was fuming.

“What are you on about, Williams?” asked the captain.

“I handled a drunken brawl last night. Tonya Richardson and some guy she bashed over the head with a pool cue. We tested her, found her over the limit, got witness statements saying she tried to kill the guy, and I get a phone call this morning telling me that the owner of the restaurant is the one in jail, Tonya’s out, and that the restaurant has been shut down, all on the orders of Judge Richardson. When did he become chief of police?”

“Calm down, Harry,” said the captain. “Let’s see what’s going on first.” He pressed a button on his intercom and asked for the arrest reports for Annie and the reports from the previous night.

Harry paced back and forth in the captain’s office till Lew showed up a few minutes later. Lew repeated everything that Harry had said and was cussing a blue streak about Tonya and how the hell did she get released after the charges they filed against her should have kept her in lock-up till for at least three days till she faced a judge.

The paperwork arrived and the captain read through the reports. His scowl grew with every page he turned. Finally he slammed on the intercom again and demanded that someone contact Mercy South and find out what condition the victim was in. Then he called booking and told them to release Annie and escort her to his office.

While they waited, the captain said, “I can release her right now, but the charges against the dog... they look serious.”

“Ah, hell, captain. If anybody had bothered to look at Tonya they would have seen there wasn’t a mark on her from any dog,” said Harry. “I should know. I was the first officer at the scene and I saw the situation.”

“You’re looking at making some powerful enemies,” said the captain. “Judge Richardson demanded the dog destroyed today.”

“Ah, shit,” said Harry.

“Wait a minute, Harry,” said Lew. “Animal control can’t do that without first putting the dog in quarantine to see if he’s rabid.”

The captain reacted faster than Harry could and he dialed the Animal Control Center. After talking into the phone for a few minutes, the captain was visibly relieved. “Cancel the order to have the dog destroyed,” he barked into the phone. “I don’t care who gave the order,” he said after listening for a few minutes. “You have no authority to destroy an animal on a citizen’s charge, you should know the rules better than that, God damn it! I don’t care who the citizen is! An order for that comes **after** an official police charge and then it goes to a judge. If that dog is harmed in any way, you’ll spend the rest of your career doing scoop patrol, have you got that?” And with that he slammed down the receiver.

“The dog is safe,” he said after he took a few breaths to calm down. “They’re not going to release him till they hear from the chief himself, but you can bet he’ll be treated like royalty till then.”

A knock on the door interrupted his tirade, and he bellowed, “Enter.”

A defiant Annie was ushered into his office wearing orange prison coveralls. She was still handcuffed.

“**God Damn it**,” he shouted. “I said to release her and escort her here, not to shackle her and embarrass her,” he said to the policewoman. “Take those cuffs off Miss Prince and you double time it back to get her clothes and her possessions!”

The policewoman quickly removed the cuffs, apologizing as she made a hasty retreat.

“Miss Prince,” said the captain, “I apologize for what has been done to you today. As soon as we get your clothes up here, we’ll take you home. The charges against you have been dismissed by me on the basis of what these officers told me.”

The pure hatred coming from Annie’s eyes caused the captain to look away.

“False arrest and imprisonment should sound good on a lawsuit,” said Annie.

“Annie,” said Harry, “you can try for it, and I’ll be happy to be your witness, but you’ll find out from any lawyer that a judge can issue a bench warrant for nearly anything as long as he has **reasonable** grounds. We just convinced the captain that the judge didn’t, so he can undo what was done to you, but the law is on the judge’s side for the initial arrest. I’m afraid that we can’t do much about your dog either, but we did manage to stop the order to have him put down.”

“You were going to kill Bubba?” she asked incredulously.

“Not us personally,” said the captain, “that falls under animal control jurisdiction, but we work pretty close together, and we’re going to fight this, if what Harry says is true.”

“What was that?” asked Annie.

“I told the captain that Bubba never bit Tonya, and a medical exam would prove that.”

Before Harry could say anything else, a timid knock came at the door, and the policewoman entered carrying Annie’s clothes, shoes and personal possessions.

“If you’d like to go with officer Dale, she’ll show you where you can get changed,” said the captain.

“Hell, why fuck with tradition now,” said Annie in a voice dripping sarcasm. As she peeled off the orange coveralls, baring her breasts to the men in the room, she said, “I was publicly stripped when I was hauled in here this morning, so why should **you** boys be embarrassed?”

Annie kicked off the coveralls standing defiantly in just her panties, and took her time putting on her clothes.

“So, Bubba’s got to pay the price because some dirty politician’s shit for brains daughter lost a fight she started.”

“I’m afraid it isn’t just Bubba, Annie,” said Harry. “Judge Richardson ordered your restaurant closed as well. He wrote up some bullshit charge about serving people who were clearly inebriated in a place of ill repute. That one’s not ours to call, and you’ll be shut down till there’s a liquor license hearing. Of course Richardson will make sure that it’s not for another six months at least and then he’ll be attending the hearings with sworn affidavits. Jesus, Annie. I told you last night to get Bubba out of town. Just because we don’t like the way Richardson does things mean we can just change his orders. He’s an elected judge.”

Annie was looking at Harry with a defiance that hid her real emotions. “Elected eh? I’m going to make it my number one mission in life to make sure he doesn’t get re-elected,” she said with more bravado than she felt.

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Harry drove her home in his own car. “Shit. I’m sorry that this all fell on you at once, Annie,” he said.

“Were you on duty when all this shit went down?” she asked Harry.

“No,” said Harry. “I was at home trying to get back to sleep when Jacob called.”

“So, why’d you come riding to the rescue?” she asked him.

Harry sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “Partly because of what you’ve done for Jacob, partly because of my disgust at Tonya,” then he chuckled. “And I like your dog.”

“Well, fuck you and the white horse you rode in on,” said Annie. “Good for Jacob and Bubba, but that’s my life savings tied up in that restaurant that’s now closed because of a trumped up liquor violation.”

“I’ll do everything I can, Annie,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” sneered Annie. “And I trust you about as far as I can spit a rat comfortably!”

“I don’t need this grief!” said Harry. “I’m not the one who did this to you. I’m trying to help, and you keep spitting it back at me.” Harry pulled up to the curb at Annie’s place and Annie just got out without saying another word. With a squeal of tires, Harry left.

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“Sweep up around here and put things away,” said Annie to Jacob. “You’re now on vacation and that’s all she wrote! Lock the door behind you when you leave.” Annie crossed the dining room to the kitchen and Jacob could hear her bounding up the steps to her apartment above.

Jacob walked into the kitchen; through the open door he could hear Annie’s heart wrenching sobs.

1998: Charlotte, NC

Annie had driven from her grandmother’s place fully intending to hit the Atlantic and then decide whether she wanted to head north or south. The old Bronco decided for her by breaking down in Charlotte, North Carolina. Parts for the Bronco were back ordered and after waiting around a couple of weeks, Annie decided it was a sign that this is where she was supposed to end up.

She was living in a motel room you could rent by the week, and called her grandmother to let her know the news. The puppy was lying on the bed beside her. Some stranger answered the phone at her Gran’s place and without any sympathy told Annie that he was under retainer to the estate lawyer. After she told him who she was, he

told her that her Grandmother had died of heart failure two days after Annie had left, but they weren't able to get hold of Annie.

Annie cried for a long time that night. She cried more that night than she had when her daughter, her baby girl, had died less than a year ago. Complications late in Annie's pregnancy had given the child multiple afflictions from which she never seemed to fully recover. Then one day, before the baby was six months old, her tiny body gave up the fight.

Annie had mourned silently then, throwing herself into her work trying to bury the pain, but her Gran, she had loved Gran forever! Gran was the only adult relative that Annie could relate to and who didn't judge her.

Annie was the sole beneficiary of all Gran's earthly possessions. She allowed the estate agent to sell the house and contents. She was weeks too late for the funeral, so Annie didn't bother to go back to Tennessee. She took the money she had left from the sale of her business in Arizona, combined it with her divorce settlement and the funds from Gran's estate, and bought the old store on South Harvard. She opened "A Woman's Space" in February of 1999.

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## **2000: Charlotte, NC**

Every morning for the next four days, Jacob came in and tidied the kitchen and dining room. Annie, if she heard him, never let on or came down. Jacob was feeling bad for her. On the fifth day, he risked his life and took a pot of the coffee that Annie loved up to her apartment. Annie was curled up in an overstuffed chair staring blankly out the front window. She didn't say anything as Jacob poured a cup of coffee for her, but she took it and drank it.

"Mizz Annie," said Jacob, "we needs to do something about the meat in the freezers."

Annie turned and looked at him. Her red rimmed eyes having trouble focusing.

"Give it to the mission," said Annie.

Jacob didn't dare press it farther, but left the pot with her and went back downstairs. The next morning when he came in, the pot was back downstairs and washed. Taking this as a good sign, he made another pot and risked another trip upstairs to Annie's sanctuary.

Annie had spent everything she owned buying the building, which was why she was still driving the old Bronco, but "A Woman's Space" had been making a tidy profit.

Not enormous or enough to retire on, but more than enough to make some much needed repairs to the building. When Jacob brought her coffee up this morning she decided that the two of them would start to make some improvements in the event she had to sell the place.

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Meanwhile, on the other side of town,

Harry had finally gotten another judge to force the release of Tonya's hospital admission papers to determine if in fact she had received the dog bites Judge Richardson claimed she had, in his order to have Bubba put down.

There were none. Just as Annie had said, and just like Jacob had sworn Bubba hadn't done. The hospital report showed the typical signs of a street brawl, but not one puncture wound or even teeth marks. He and Lew drove right from the hospital to the Animal Control Center.

Tony, one of the handlers at the center had Bubba out of his cage and was playing with him when they got there. "That's some dangerous dog," Tony said, laughing.

Harry smiled. Bubba was a fine looking specimen of canine breeding. He liked the dog the first night he had seen him. "I can see you're deathly afraid of him," said Harry.

Tony laughed again. "Dogs this smart, you don't see them often. This big guy has been well trained. Better than some CMPD dogs whose names I won't mention."

Harry laughed and asked what Bubba could do. Tony went through a whole list of standard commands, all of which Bubba did without hesitation. "But he's smarter than this standard crap," said Tony. "I swear that dog understands everything you say to him. Just look into those eyes."

Harry had been, and Bubba was looking back at him like he remembered Harry from the night of the fight. Harry reached into his pocket to pull out a copy of the hospital record. As he tugged it out, one of the quarters that his oldest daughter, Laura, had slipped in there for coffee, fell out and started to roll across the floor. Bubba, who had been sitting close by, just reached out with a big paw and slapped the rolling coin to the floor. Never even moved, just shot out a paw and the quarter stopped, hidden by his massive paw.

"Hey," said Harry. "That's my quarter. Give it back!" He was smiling as he said it, amazed at Bubba's fast reflexes, but what happened next caused Harry's jaw to drop. Bubba took his huge paw off the quarter, bent over and put his mouth to the ground and when he raised his head the quarter was gone. Harry felt Bubba nuzzling his hand and

when he cupped it under the dog's chin, Bubba dropped the quarter into it, before sitting back down.

"I'll be damned," said Lew. "You told him to give it back to you and he just did!"

Tony was laughing. "Told you he understands!"

Harry asked if the dog was free to go now, and Tony said the tag on the old beat up leather collar on Bubba was valid. He'd had his rabies vaccination, and there was no reason to keep him though Tony said he'd miss his new playmate. Bubba nuzzled Tony's hand as if to say goodbye and went and stood beside Harry.

An hour later, Bubba had been treated to a full service 'wash, rinse and wax' at one of the best pet care centers in the city. His nails were trimmed and his coat was guaranteed free of fleas or anything else he might have picked up from Tonya, as Harry explained the cost to his captain later that day. Bubba's coat shone with a glow, and his teeth had been cleaned as well. Harry stopped at the pet store that supplied the department and got Bubba a brand new leather collar, one of the heavy black ones the CMPD K-9 unit used, and a short heavy braided leather leash to match.

They were headed to Annie's when the call came through about unknown trouble at one of the new strip clubs that had popped up just on the limits of the city border. Since they were close, Lew and Harry took the call.

Bubba started wagging his tail the minute the siren was turned on, thumping it in time with the whoop of the siren.

"Looks like your friend here likes action," said Lew.

Harry laughed as the big German shepherd pushed his head against the Lexan dividing the front from the back, blowing hot air against Harry's neck through the small holes.

The squad car came to a screeching halt outside of "Deja Blue" and Harry and Lew stepped out of the vehicle. Bubba started to bark from the back seat, and Lew could see the look in his partner's eyes. "Harry, we aren't K-9. Hell, he's not even our dog!"

Harry shrugged and said, "We can't leave him alone out here. Somebody might steal him."

Lew rolled his eyes as Harry put the leash on Bubba. Bubba led the way through the dark oak doors.

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“Mister Harry, he be a good man,” said Jacob as he and Annie hung the freshly painted shutters on the front windows. They were the big old heavy kind, made for hurricane winds and rain, and over the years they had faded. Annie had always planned to take them down, but Jacob had convinced her that it would be smarter to leave them, cause you just never knew when the next storm might come rolling in. So, to take away from the drab front, Annie and Jacob had repaired them and painted them and the main door in a high gloss white. They had coated the finished paint with a tinted weatherproof urethane, and the door and shutters now seemed to have a light purple pearl finish.

Annie had taken the chain and padlock off the front door herself. Taken down the notice that the law closed the restaurant as she had been given formal notice of a liquor review hearing. So, a small “Closed till further notice” sign now sat in the window, underneath which read, “renovations in progress.”

“If Mister Harry is such a good man,” mimicked Annie, “why am I shut down and why is my dog in jail?”

“Now, Mizz Annie, you know dat wasn’t Mister Harry who done dat,” Jacob gently said.

“Yeah, I know it,” said Annie, “but he’s part of the system that did this to me. Some drunken bitch screws up and it’s just you and me, Jacob. We pay the price for it, and look where Bubba is. Locked up in some jail for protecting me.”

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Actually, at that moment, Bubba was crouched, coiled, and ready to spring at the man behind the cash register as he held a big knife against the throat of a frightened waitress.

Harry and Lew had their service revolvers out, but as Bubba growled, Harry holstered his weapon.

“Aw, shit, Harry,” said Lew who lowered his revolver, “you aren’t going to let the dog do it again are you?”

“Why not?” said Harry bending over to unclip the leash from Bubba’s collar. “He’s so good at it.”

“Hell, Harry, we just got the dog back, and the captain said that if he ripped another guy’s nuts off, he’d be taken away from us permanently.”

The guy behind the register was shifting his eyes back and forth between the two sergeants. There were a few customers in the club and about a half dozen topless women milling around. “Put that leash back on the dog,” he shouted, “or I swear to god, I’ll slice this bitch!”

Harry looked at Lew, as if pondering the demand and then turned back and said. "Nope. If you've got to cut the young lady, well, I'd have to shoot you. That means a lot of paper work, a couple of months on desk duty while they investigate the shooting... Hell, if I let the dog take you down, I don't lose any street time."

"I'm not messing around," said the robber. "Put the leash back on the dog!"

Lew kept his gun in his hand but lowered it even further. "Yeah, partner, you got a good point there. Let "Killer" do what he does best."

"What ya say, Bubba?" asked Harry. "Want a weenie treat for lunch?"

Bubba responded by inching forward, his hackles raised, his fangs bared and a low growl emanating from the pit of his stomach.

The crook was starting to sweat. "Call him off!"

"Put down the knife," said Harry.

"No way!"

"Okay," said Harry pulling out a chair and sitting down. "Do whatever you got to do. But best do it quick. The dog is faster than lightning, and he's not going to wait."

"How many pounds per square inch can he clamp again?" asked Lew.

"Over 250 I think the doc said. That last guy, he was wearing leather biker pants and Bubba went through that like butter. Stronger than a bear trap, the doc said, and with those teeth, they couldn't sew the guy's dick back on. Pisses out of a little tube now."

"That's got to ruin a man's sex life," said Lew.

Harry laughed. "More like ruin his whole life!"

Turning back to the would be robber, Harry turned icy sober and said, "I figure you got maybe a minute left before the dog does you in the same way. Your choice."

The man dropped the knife and let go of the waitress. Bubba moved forward a few inches.

"Stop the dog!" he shouted.

"He'll stop when you step away from the knife and get on your knees," said Harry.

Slowly, the man came out from behind the bar, his crotch wet when he had pissed himself. Slowly, and keeping an eye on Bubba, he got to his knees with his hands up in the air. Lew moved in behind him and slapped the cuffs on him, while Harry called it in stating the problem had been resolved and requesting a unit for transport.

Bubba got up and wagging his tail went to check on the waitress who had been held hostage. By the time Harry got to her, Bubba was kissing her all over and she was hugging him and calling him her hero.

Seeing the coast was clear, most of the customers left before more cops showed up. Harry started to take statements from the strippers who didn't bother to get dressed.

As the transport wagon got there and took the bad guy away, the waitress asked if Lew or Harry wanted a drink.

"A coffee would be great," said Harry. "We can't drink anything else while we're on duty."

By the time Lew and Harry had all the statements, Bubba had been stroked and petted by most of the strippers. Bubba was a good looking dog, and seemed to enjoy the attention."

A final look around, and with a sigh, Harry, and Lew left, Bubba proudly leading the way, his big tail wagging.

They had to drive back to the station to give their report and write up the paperwork, and then the captain called them in.

"You took that dog from Animal Control and let him threaten a suspect? Are you two crazy???"

"Bubba could teach our own K-9 troops a few lessons," said Lew. "We couldn't draw down on the guy without a risk of hurting his hostage. This way worked best for us in this situation."

"What part of this isn't getting through to you two?" the captain shouted. "This dog doesn't belong to you!"

Bubba stood at attention beside Harry and growled.

Harry laughed, which caused Bubba to look at him. "Captain, you might want to lower your blood pressure a tad. Bubba tends to sense hostility and he's very protective!"

Finally the captain smiled as well, and got on one knee and extended his hand to Bubba who licked it. "You're right of course. He's very well trained and he helped much better today than if either of you two had to shoot the suspect. But I think you

should take him back to Miss Prince. She's had it rough enough and she might appreciate her dog back."

The captain stood up and reached into his desk drawer. "If either of you ever say a word about how he got this, I will put you both on meter patrol," and then from his desk he took an official Charlotte-Mecklenburg Auxiliary Police badge and attached it to Bubba's collar. "Maybe Miss Prince will let us use him sometime if we have a missing child or something like that."

"Thanks captain," said Harry. "Shift's over in twenty minutes. I'll take him back now."

"I'm going to let you fly this one solo," said Lew. "I'm pulling a second shift tonight. Bar patrol."

"Well, you take it easy," said Harry. "I'll see you on Friday." With that, Harry left the station; not realizing today's adventure was the last time he and Lew would ride together as partners.

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Harry pulled up in front of "A Woman's Space" and got out with Bubba. He noticed the freshly painted shutters and door and sighed with regret when he read the "Closed for renovations" notice. The door was unlocked however and Harry opened it and walked in. Bubba was straining at his leash.

"Annie?"

"Miss Prince?" shouted Harry once inside.

"In the kitchen," came a muted response.

"Take me to the kitchen, Bubba," Harry whispered and the dog dragged Harry behind him till they entered the large industrial kitchen. As soon as Harry saw Annie, he let go of his hold on the leash and Bubba leaped forward, knocking Annie over as he licked her from one end to another.

Annie was laughing and rubbing Bubba all over, as the two of them wrestled on the floor. Harry blushed and then took the offered cup of coffee from Jacob. The two men watched as Annie continued to maul the dog and he, her. Finally she got up and checked out Bubba's new gear. Then she saw the badge pinned to the collar.

"What the hell's this all about?" she asked. She tried to remain angry, but having Bubba back made her day.

Harry started explaining about the personal time at the beauty parlor for Bubba just in case he had picked up any fleas from Tonya, which made Annie laugh. She grabbed his coat and felt how smooth and clean it was. Then she bent down to smell it.

“So,” said Harry, “we were on our way here when we got a call about an unknown situation at the new ‘Deja Blue’ club on 77.”

“You took Bubba into a peeler club?” asked Annie. “You tryin’ to corrupt this poor dog?”

Harry sighed. “Bubba single-handedly convinced a robber to put down his weapon and surrender. There’s a very grateful waitress at that club who is very happy that Bubba was available to rescue her. You ought to be proud of him!”

Annie ruffled Bubba’s head. “I am,” she said. He’s a good boy,” to which Bubba wagged his tail like a fire hose without control, threatening to knock everything not nailed down over like dried leaves.

“So,” said Harry, “we can’t ask for Bubba’s help on every call, even though he’s much better trained than most of the PD dogs, but the captain asked if Bubba would be allowed to assist the next time there’s a child missing.”

Annie didn’t even have to think about that. Kids were precious. She said yes without reservation.

“So, how long before you open again?” asked Harry.

“Open what?” asked Annie. “Can’t sell alcohol? Means this ain’t nothing more than a lunch bar. I can’t afford to run a lunch bar with all this equipment,” she said pointing to the industrial ovens and other equipment.

“There must be something else you can do with all of this stuff that doesn’t need a liquor license,” said Harry.

“Cater maybe,” said Annie. “I don’t know. Seems like a lot of work.”

“As much as cooking for a restaurant filled with customers?” asked Harry.

“Maybe Mister Harry is right,” ventured Jacob. “You be keepin’ busy makin’ yo own kind of food dat de peoples like so much, and den you just wait and see what happens next.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Annie. “Take some time to get the word out, do some advertising.”

“What happened to that woman who stripped in the captain’s office?” asked Harry. “Lose your nerve? There’s an old Latin saying we use at the department when we face jerks like Judge Richardson. *Illegitimi Non Carborundum*. Don’t let the bastards grind you down. Do something with what you have! At least then you won’t sit around feeling sorry for yourself!”

“Well, fuck you very much ‘Ossifer Williams,” said Annie. “I’ll take your suggestion up with my consultant,” she said looking at Jacob.

“What ever I can do, Annie,” said Harry. “Just let me know. My number is in the book.” He tousled with Bubba for a minute more before he left.

“What da ya think Jacob?” she asked the old black man. “Think we should give it a shot?”

“Mizz Annie, you already know you want to,” said Jacob.

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The phone call came at nine o’clock that night, as Harry was watching TV with his younger daughters and his wife.

Sally, Lew’s wife, was crying on the phone. A drunk driver had t-boned Lew’s cruiser and Lew’s back was hurt. Sally didn’t know if the damage to Lew’s spine would put him in a wheel chair or not.

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Over the next six months, Lew underwent all kinds of tests and physiotherapy. Finally convinced that his spine had not been seriously damaged, the doctors released Lew, but his career as a street cop, spending eight hours a day riding in a squad car, were over. The pothole situation in Charlotte was the worst it had been in years, and every bump caused him a twinge of pain. He was assigned a desk job and promoted to duty sergeant.

Harry refused another partner and ended up as a supervisor on patrol. As time permitted, Lew would still hit the streets with Harry for short rides, chewing a few Tylenol to help him cope with the pain. Most times they would cruise by Annie’s to see how she and Jacob were holding up.

## **2002: Charlotte, NC**

The sign out front had been changed from “A Woman’s Space” to a smaller plaque that said “A Woman’s Place.” It looked more like an office now than a storefront, and Annie remained in business, slowly growing and expanding.

Bubba was always glad to see Harry and Lew, and every once in a while Annie would let the two men take Bubba for a ride in the cruiser. She liked the men, but had no love for the justice system that had screwed her over.

Annie continued to cuss a blue streak and took her coffee by the pot. She always made sure though that Harry, who had been buying her coleslaw and salads from her since the day she officially opened her catering business, got more than he paid for.

Annie never let them forget that she held them personally responsible for corrupting Bubba, who seemed to like women even more since his adventure at the strip club.

While Bubba had not been called in by the police department to help find missing kids, thank God, they used him once when an elderly woman had wandered away from a long term care facility and it had been Bubba who had found her. He had a certificate of appreciation from the Mayor's office for his work and a commendation from the Police Commissioner.

Annie had settled into life in Charlotte and things were looking up. She had been on the wrong side of the tracks herself on Friday, but she had Bubba with her and not too many people paid attention to the old Bronco. Those who knew it also knew better than to mess with the woman who drove it. Then she had seen the Chevy Tracker stuck on the old rail crossing. At first she was going to continue on, but her sense of decency had tugged at her conscience and she had stopped to offer assistance to the young brunette behind the wheel.

A chance encounter with Laura Williams, who turned out to be Harry's daughter, and now she was adding up the price for the biggest catering job to have come her way.

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Chapter 30

Brenda and Sherri flew in on a chartered flight to Charlotte early Friday afternoon. It was going to be a surprise to Todd and Kelly as the only person who knew they were coming was Vanetta, who had assured them the weekend was probably the last free one for Kelly till October.

Sherri was excited about having her portfolio done. It was time to move on with **her** career. The news of Sara landing a spot on Miami Blue reminded her that she was the only one without plans for the future. Brenda and Amanda were working at Regan's full time now, Celeste had her hands full with building contracts and Jules was rapidly becoming a financial wizard, investing and divesting at dizzying speeds. Nicole was still working on her bar exam and James was tied up at the new medical center when he

wasn't with Nicole. All of the "James Gang" seemed to have moved on to careers of their own. Of course, Sherri could have easily gone to work with any of them, but she and Sara had been the last of the girls who had not found their niche. Then when Kelly called, fulfilling Todd's prophecy that Sara's skills and looks as a boat driver would get her into television, Sherri decided it was time to jump in the deep end.

Brenda of course had her own reasons for wanting to be the one to go with Sherri. It had been a while since she had seen Kelly. Not that she missed companionship of either sex, but the two of them had developed a special rapport that first time they had kissed. Kelly was complex, though the last time she had seen her, at the grand opening of Mueller's Wheel, she had seemed much happier than when they had first met.

Vanetta had suggested the Hilton Charlotte University Place as a good spot to stay. It was only 15 minutes from the airport and 15 minutes from the studio. She had also provided Brenda with a detailed map of how to get to the studio. It had sounded good to Brenda. The executive suites included high-speed Internet access, the continental breakfasts and evening appetizers in the executive lounge. It had a fitness center though Vanetta had recommended they pass on that if they were inclined to exercise and use the jogging path around the man-made lake. The suite came with its own coffee maker and hair dryer, entertainment area and though they wouldn't bother with it, it did come with a wet bar. Vanetta said the view from the suites was fantastic as it overlooked the lake surrounded by a shopping area full of top end boutiques and bistros. During NASCAR season the hotel was virtually booked solid. With the latest renovations done just five years ago, Brenda was sure they would not be disappointed by Vanetta's recommendation.

Brenda had booked a 2002 Mercedes SLK32 AMG from one of the upscale rental companies prior to leaving for the airport. The two-seat roadster, hard top convertible of course, was fueled and waiting for them, and with its hot-rodded, supercharged V6 engine and AMG SpeedShift automatic transmission programming, and Z-rated high-performance tires, Brenda made the trip from the airport to JM Keynes Drive in under 10 minutes. It would have taken her less time than that, but Sherri had insisted on checking the Sat-Nav against the map the rental company had given them!

After letting the bellhop drool over the little luggage they had brought along, the two girls took a shower, dressed in their "Sunday go to Meetin'" clothes and applied a bit of makeup. Two hours after arriving in Charlotte, they took off for the studio.

Vanetta's directions were quite easy to follow.

From the Hilton, they turned right onto Harris Boulevard and merged with I-85 S. 5 miles later they took exit 39 and turned right onto Statesville Road and after less than a mile; they turned left into the industrial park on Hutchison McDonald Road.

They were surprised to find the studio door locked, but after having seen the latest pictures of Kelly and Laura in their Star Trek outfits, Brenda figured the door was locked

on purpose. There were cars in the parking lot, so someone had to be there, but it wouldn't do to have people just walking in, even if the studio was located well away from the city, so they tried knocking on the heavy steel door.

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Todd and Ami were working at a frantic pace. They had made fresh soup for the CrossTrain negatives and had just finished the final rinse. Todd was in his usual scrub pants while Ami was just wearing panties. It would take 15 minutes for the negatives to dry, and Todd turned the venting system on high to remove the last of the fumes. It was time for a short break! Todd didn't bother to put a top on so neither did Ami. Laura laughed and winked at Kelly. "It's getting impossible to keep that girl dressed around our man," she said.

"It's a good thing I'm not a jealous woman," said Kelly, "or I'd be wondering just what *is* developing in the darkroom!"

Ami cocked her head and lowered her eyelids suggestively. "You'd be surprised at what I've learned to enlarge," she said coyly.

Kelly and Laura both laughed, as did Vanetta and Cara.

"I hope you aren't planning on walking around here like that when Robert is here," said Vanetta.

Ami instantly turned serious. "Shit! I'm sorry, Vanetta. I wouldn't try and tease Robert! Honest I wouldn't."

"Honey," said Vanetta. "That's not what worries me. It won't upset me, and I'm sure that Robert wouldn't mind either, but I might end up having to take more and longer coffee breaks!"

Everybody laughed at that!

Todd came back from the studio kitchen with mineral water for himself and Ami.

"Just another 10 minutes and we start to print proofs," said Todd.

"How do the negs look, Sweetheart?" asked Kelly.

"They look perfect," said Todd, "the poses and the way the girls did them really show action! All I'm concerned with now is the color. If everything is set right, we'll be able to free up the bay next week and I'll set up a permanent light studio for you!"

"Sounds good, Honey," said Kelly, "but where are the girls going to exercise once the equipment is gone?"

Todd pulled a chair out and straddled it. “Hmm... I wonder if I can convince CrossTrain to leave the tumbling mat. That’s all we’ve been using for exercise anyway, and I’d kind of like to keep doing it with the girls.”

“If you don’t mind,” said Vanetta, “Robert and I would like to join you as well. I know that I’d like to be a bit more flexible.”

Kelly and Laura both laughed.

“Sure, you two can laugh,” said Vanetta, “but I’m telling you that Robert is pretty energetic. You’d be surprised at the passion that man of mine has hidden behind that quiet scholarly looking face!”

“Still waters do run deep, don’t they, Kelly?” said Laura.

“That’s what I’ve heard,” said Kelly.

Cara shook her head. “The way you guys are always talking about it, you’d think you never got any.”

Ami put her arm around Cara’s shoulders, her nipple just grazing Cara’s cheek. “This is called oral sex, Honey. All they do is talk about it!” She was laughing all the way back to the darkroom.

Cara smiled and went back to her study of magazine page layouts. Todd pushed his chair back and said it was back to the coalmines for him as well.

Kelly and Laura went back to writing the copy for the first issue of Fit Pregnancy. While Vanetta returned to her calculations of cost of operations in New York.

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Robert had the pleasure of hearing Kat and the twins sing as he drove south on Statesville road to pick up the boys at their homes close to John T. Williams Middle School on Carmine Street.

“Look at that,” said Sam as they passed the school. “We’re not even famous yet and they’ve already named a school after us!”

Robert laughed. “Maybe you’re related to John T. but you would have to ask your parents that, or better yet, look it up as an assignment.”

“Ah, you’re not going to play teacher with us are you?” asked Jen.

“I don’t have to play teacher,” said Robert. “I really am one. But, I’m not your teacher, so if you’re interested, look it up. I encourage looking into anything that interests you. But I also won’t tell you to do it. That’s not my job. Actually, it’s your job.”

Bill and Jim were waiting at Ted’s house. Robert had tutored all three for the past year, preparing and qualifying them to start grade nine at the new Phillip O. Berry Academy of Technology in September. They would be part of the first graduating class of the new high school.

Robert introduced the suddenly shy twins and Kat to the boys, who were amazed at the van. Kat as the oldest had already claimed the front passenger seat.

“So,” said Robert, “anywhere you want to eat, that’s where we’ll eat! It’s all courtesy of our sponsors. Anyone interested in squid or snails?” he said smiling to himself.

“Ugh, Gross,” said Ted.

Kat had seen Robert smile and decided to play along. “Well, I could certainly go for some French cuisine,” she said.

“Kat!” said Sam and Jen together. “What’s the matter with Pizza Hut?”

“Yeah!” said Bill. “Let’s take a vote, and Robert isn’t allowed to vote!”

“Why don’t I get to vote?” asked Robert.

“Cause you aren’t going to be part of the band,” said Jim laughing.

Robert laughed as well. “You kids are right. This meal, the clothes, the scholarship funds... it’s all for you guys so you’ll be motivated to stick to your end of the bargain.”

Silence hung in the van for a few minutes as Robert guided the van back into downtown Charlotte.

“We don’t need to be motivated,” said Sam quietly.

“We’d do this without all the extras that Todd and Kelly are offering,” said Jen.

“Yeah,” said a quieter Ted. “I just want to play and have somebody appreciate the music.”

Robert knew these kids had good hearts and decided to lighten the mood. “Okay then. Who wants Pizza Hut?”

Six enthusiastic voices clamored in approval.

During lunch, while pitchers of sweet tea were washing down three different pizzas and side orders of spaghetti, Robert explained the need for this to be an adventure and for everyone to enjoy him or herself and have fun.

“This is an important project,” said Robert. “If it works out, there are going to be a lot of happy seniors. You six will be the start of a much bigger thing that years from now people will be talking about. I think it’s exciting, and it will look really good on your university applications as well!”

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After lunch was finished, Robert followed the list of clothing suppliers his father had given him. Robert was also told by his father to keep track of which stores they bought from and what kind of service they provided as he intended to follow this adventure right along with his son by reporting on it on a regular basis.

It turned out that the kids had much different ideas from what Todd had envisioned for them.

“He’s kidding, right?” asked Sam looking at the frilly Western blouses on display. “I mean... rhinestones?”

Robert sighed. Samantha was right. Todd could really capture a look on film, but these kids were going to perform in front of live people. Dressing them up like young versions of Hank Williams or Loretta Lynn just wasn’t going to cut it. Even Dolly Parton didn’t dress like that anymore.

“Well,” said Robert. “We can’t have you going on stage in low rider jeans and tank tops, and the boys are not going to be wearing baggy saggy pants either,” he said as they climbed back into the van. He eased out into traffic, not sure now where to head, but feeling somewhat in control as he drove.

“Okay,” he said finally as he turned northward on York road. “What do *you* think you should wear?”

“Excuse us Robert,” said Kat. “We younger adults need to have a private discussion.”

Robert smiled and allowed them the van for their conference after he turned on to South Tyrone and pulled into a Krispy Kreme franchise. He went in and indulged himself, after telling the kids to join him after they had decided. This was a good sign, he thought. Only a couple of hours together and they were already discussing things like a team.

Robert was on his second coffee when the six teens came strolling in looking quite smug.

“We’ve decided to compromise,” said Kat, obviously having been elected to be spokesperson. “First thing we need are gospel gowns for us girls. Ones that come down to just below the knee and are open at the front. Not plain white because we don’t want people to think we only do gospel music, though its clear we’re all comfortable with some upbeat up tempo versions of old classics. Then, suits, for all of us.”

Jen cleared her throat.

“Excuse me,” said Kat. “Pants and blazers for all of us. We’ll compromise and go with black bell-bottoms as long as they aren’t too wide. Black blazers for all of us as well with the split cuffs. We’ve seen them in that last Western store you took us to. The boys don’t want to be in black all night, so they will take their blazers off during the performance at some point. They will need plain colored shirts, best to stick to primary colors and white. It will show up better. No bow ties, no bolo ties, no string ties. Just straight ties, preferably clip on or slip on so that they can easily remove them. No flowers or horses on the shirts and absolutely no tassels!” Kat stopped to take a breath. “Are you going to write this down?”

Robert laughed and said he had it memorized already.

“Okay. We girls will not wear a tie all night, but we would like one to wear so at some point we can look just like the guys. Then, plain blouses, no tassels or fancy embroidery, though we wouldn’t complain about a few pleated ones. No cowboy hats for any of us. We’ll be doing some country and western music but it isn’t our overall theme. We were thinking of matching fedoras for all of us, as that will be the main theme of our music. Songs from lounge acts going back to when Frank and Dean were still doing Vegas.”

“Don’t forget the sunglasses,” said Ted to Kat.

“Right! The boys want to do a couple of pieces by the Blues Brothers. So we should all get dark sunglasses. We can use them for Ray Charles pieces as well.”

“Have a donut,” said a smiling Robert, handing Kat some bills. Then he sat back and pictured the six teens in his mind. Black suits, white shirts, black ties, fedoras, and sunglasses. Not quite what Todd had suggested, but he had said it was Robert’s show. He liked the look in his mind. It would make a great publicity photo, as would the gospel gowns. He knew exactly where to go and buy them. Complete with colored cuffs and cowl.

While the kids were munching through chocolate glazed donuts, Robert made a couple quick calls to his dad. Might as well keep the business in the family so to speak.

With his dad paving the way for the new enterprise, he would be sure to get discounts. His father pointed him to the first store and said he would call back after he had spoken to a few others to see who was willing to help this very worthy cause.

“Just a few items you left off the list, Kat,” said Robert. “Shoes, socks, pantyhose and I’d like you and your sisters to consider a plain black dress. Have you ever seen videos by Robert Palmer?”

The teens cracked up. Finally Kat said, “Yeah, those girls in those funny dresses. Sure. We could do that, right, ladies?” she asked pointedly of her sisters.

“Why not?” said Jen. “It would make a nice change.”

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It took another four hours to complete all the shopping. Robert had lucked out with black ties pre-tied in half Windsors and stitched in place. The part of the tie that went around the neck under the collar was in fact part of the real tie, but slightly longer and held together with Velcro fasteners.

The boys settled on black half boots with a slight heel and a rounded toe, while the girls got matching low-heeled pumps.

As Robert drove the boys back home, they teens agreed on a first practice time, after supper the next day at the studio. One of the stops they had made had been at ‘Music Go Round’ on Independence Boulevard. Realizing that space might be a premium at some of their locations, Ted had opted for electronic drums. It gave him a wider range of striking surfaces, which he was well accustomed to as a percussionist, without all the bulk.

Bill selected a Fender Active Jazz V series five string bass, while the girls had finally convinced Jim that the Yamaha S80 synthesizer was ideal for him even though it was larger than most models. The S80 was a full size piano keyboard with weighted keys, and an outstanding sound selection that would allow him to duplicate most instruments. He had played on it for ten minutes while the teens and Robert had stood back in awe. Jim played a few classical selections starting with Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor. As he switched through various instruments, effortlessly, the classic song took on a new meaning. The girls had laughed as he had sampled the piece in a bank of clarinets and then in brass. It was clear that Jim was a virtuoso.

For the girls, Robert selected Shure PG58 microphones, along with solid stands and quick release clips. Robert’s father had forewarned the owner of the store that this group needed quality, and not to try and clear out old stock no one else wanted. For their sound system, the owner had recommended the Peavey Escort 2000.

“This is the world's finest packaged portable PA system,” the owner explained. “It’s self-contained in a molded case with wheels and handle that you can transport like a piece of carry-on luggage. When you reach your destination, open up the case, and you’ve got two speakers, complete with connecting cables & speaker stands. The five channel powered mixer provides 75 Watts per channel and Peavey's exclusive DDT™ to prevent clipping. There are four XLR microphone inputs with 15 Volt phantom power and two stereo line level inputs (each with its own bass, treble and reverb controls). Main input and output controls use 60 mm linear faders. There’s also a 5-band graphic equalizer, digital reverb and a FLS® Feedback Locating System. And you can store the microphone stands and microphones right in the case.”

Robert was impressed with the ease of set up and packing and the two impressive 2-way speakers with 10 inch woofers and piezoelectric horn tweeters. For the boys he selected three different Peavey amps. A ‘BAM’ series bass amp for Bill, a ‘Classic’ 5150 for Ted’s drums, and an ‘Ecoustic’ 112 EFX for Jim’s synthesizer.

By the time the day was done, Robert had spent quite a few thousand dollars of the enterprise’s money. Tomorrow he would hear if it sounded as good as promised.

The teens would be picked up by Robert, and they would practice till they felt they were either too tired or had worked to the point of perfect harmony. Robert was in for a musical weekend!

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“Isn’t there a buzzer?” Sherri asked Brenda, when their knocking had failed to produce any response.

“I’m looking,” said a frustrated Brenda. “I told you we should have called first.”

“No way,” said Sherri. “I want to surprise them!”

Brenda wanted to surprise them as well, but she was more pragmatic. Obviously, Todd didn’t encourage or look for unsolicited business. But, perseverance paid off as she found a non-descript button in the molding of the doorframe. She rolled her eyes as she read the small sign beside the door: “Deliveries In Rear.” That was something she didn’t care to relive. James had tried to make a delivery in her rear one time and that had been enough! She had a hemorrhoid for a week afterwards and walked funny for two days. Uh,uh. It might be a fun place for a finger or a tongue, but nothing bigger than a finger was going inside *that* orifice again!

Vanetta heard the doorbell and looked at the clock. Robert had his own key and wasn’t expected back till at least 6:00, after he dropped Laura’s sisters off. It was barely 5:00. Vanetta smiled. It had to be Brenda and Sherri. Vanetta hadn’t met any of the girls of the James Gang personally yet, but knew all of their names from the photographs Todd had taken and had spoken to a number of them. She knew Sherri was coming for

her portfolio, but that it was Brenda who had broadened Kelly's mind and horizons. She wasn't sure if she could do something like that herself. She loved Kelly, but more like a sister, and though she had grown to adore Laura, the thought of sexual contact with another female just didn't arouse or excite her. She was happy for Kelly and Laura, and for Cara and Ami, and never thought to judge, but Vanetta wasn't sure if it was her Jamaican upbringing or something else that allowed her to view nude females with an eye for beauty and photogenic qualities without emotion. She had discussed it one night with Robert, wondering if perhaps she was missing something by not trying it. Robert, who had gotten hard at the thought, and freely admitted there was something about woman-to-woman love that aroused most males, said that perhaps it just wasn't in her genetic disposition. He asked her if she felt satisfied with their sex life or did she have an urge to explore. Robert could be so supportive of her. She showed him just how satisfied she was with their sex life by mounting his hard shaft and riding herself to three wet orgasms before he splashed his seed into her womb for the second time that night.

Todd and Ami were still in the darkroom; Kelly was in the kitchen making tea with Laura when Vanetta got up to open the door.

When Vanetta unlocked the door and swung it open, she instantly recognized Sherri and Brenda. Sherri's eyes got big as Vanetta said "Hello," and asked them to come in.

"I'm sorry," said Sherri, still staring, "You're black!"

"**I am?**" said Vanetta. "How come nobody ever told me that? Oh, Lordy. What am I to do now?" before she burst out laughing.

Sherri blushed a beet red. Brenda explained, "We never thought about it one way or another. Your use of the English language... I guess we thought you were British."

Vanetta was still smiling. "Well, there's some of us in England as well, but I understand. I've seen pictures of you girls, but there aren't a lot of me floating around."

***"Oh my God! I can't believe I said that!"*** said Sherri. She was stuttering, trying to find a way to apologize for her insensitive remark, but Vanetta was just chuckling telling her that it was okay... It was a common mistake. Kelly and Laura came to see what the laughter was all about.

After exchanging hugs, Kelly and Laura escorted Sherri and Brenda into the main office, Kelly asking what the laughter had been about.

When Sherri explained, Kelly turned to Vanetta and deadpanned, "Vanetta, you know you're supposed to give us 30 days' notice if you intend to change your gender or race. How could you do this to me?"

This set them all off on a laughing spree. All except for Cara who remained at her desk, her blue eyes slowly turning green.

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Brenda was beautiful. Flaming red hair and milk white skin. Emerald eyes and freckles to boot! She looked so healthy and wholesome, how could Kelly not love her? She knew Brenda had introduced Kelly to Sapphic love, and while Cara knew she could never have Kelly herself, the familiar way Brenda put her arms around Kelly's waist made her steam.

That was "her" waist! The one she so lovingly oiled in every single night. "Her" body that this stranger was touching, and Cara realized her hands were trembling.

She loved Ami with all her heart, but there was a part of her soul that adored Kelly. It was okay for Laura to be with Kelly, cause Laura was her friend. Laura told and shared secrets with her, and Todd, well; he was a man and didn't count.

Why wasn't Laura upset??? Brenda was touching Kelly in an all too sexual way! My God, she's even kissing Kelly!

LAURA! ... Do something! MAKE THEM STOP!!!

To be continued...