

*Ashleigh & Megan
Book I: Friendship*



*Monday
November 27*

*Ashleigh Arrives
Day 5 of Book I
(Two Months and Four Days since Julie
Sprained her Ankle)*

Part Two of Six

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I hope you enjoy this pioneering format I call, "A Story Cast."

What the term "Story Cast" means; is this story is designed to be read in small to medium intervals. This particular story is broken up into "days." These portions are broken up into part or all of a particular fictitious "day" of the story. Each day surrounds the characters lives, relationships, adventures, struggles, mishaps and triumphs. This story is very different from a Novel or conventional story in many ways. Again, THIS IS NOT A NOVEL AND IS NOT WRITTEN IN A CONVENTIONAL NOVEL FORMAT. Instead; as the reader you are following the characters thoughts and actions during the course of this "day." This fiction story is set up like a TV series and or a third person journal. It always starts with one or more character getting up and ends with one or more characters going to bed; while during the day you experience the Characters actions, feelings, and their thoughts.

On a large overview; there is a beginning, a middle, and an end to this "Story Cast"

R. P. Voght

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November 27, Ashleigh Arrives

(2 months and 4 Days Since Julie sprained her ankle)

Megan climbed up the six runs of her charter's ladder. This ladder started in front of an outside freezer on the port side; this freezer was covered by the same replacement wood the rest of the charter was redone in. Just a few weeks earlier this was a simple enclosure, with Megan's brother Jimmy having some extra time, Jimmy rebuilt this enclosure into an extra freezer. The ladder: went up two rungs, it bent toward the port side on a slight angle, Megan pushed open a hatch above her, and stepped onto the deck with the enclosed bridge.

Megan's dimples flashed when she was forced to look straight at the first deck of the starboard side of the houseboat yacht docked next door to her charter.

She made a quick turn to her right. On the bow side was a ladder with multiple rungs going up the forty-five foot tuna tower. In front of her was the vessels enclosed bridge. She stepped a few feet forward and opened the door to her enclosed bridge. A great portion of the money Megan received to renovate this vessel was spent on this enclosed bridge. Megan and her family transformed this bridge from an open and antiquated bridge into an extended forward enclosed modern bridge, with the best safety and electronic equipment Megan could afford; while maintaining the 1960's look of the charter.

She stepped up to the control panel.

Megan smiled when looking through the brand new windows of this bridge. The vast horizon of the Atlantic ocean was in front of her. On this horizon were many different kind of vessels but her favorite vessel was a sailboat yacht sailing by. She noticed one of her competitors fishing and a friend of her fathers cruised by. On the horizon on her starboard side she could see a large cargo ship with crates headed south.

Megan focused.

She turned her attention to the control panel making sure every electronic device and every instrument was set correctly. She sat down in the captains chair in front of the wheel.

She scanned the panel. On her left she hit what appeared to be a square blank spot on the panel, immediately a metal tray popped out from beneath the panel. In this open tray was a silver Smith and Wesson 686. This revolver with its six inch barrel had been her daddies when he served as a police officer. He was only a police officer for a short time, and this was when Megan was very little, but she clearly remembered her daddy wearing the police uniform. This was the first weapon her daddy taught her how to shoot.

She popped out the cylinder and could see all six bullets were in the revolver. She picked this weapon for the bridge based upon its speed of use and its accurate shooting. Her thought was if an intruder was to come onto her bridge she needed to score a kill with one shot. With this weapon just cleaned after target practice a couple days prior, she set the weapon back into the metal bin, and slid the bin back into place.

She stood up and left her cabin.

She stopped in front of the cabin door, took off her brand new set of keys off her belt loop. These keys were now color coded and were separated by a series of rings. With this new system she easily locked the door to the bridge. She desperately wished she would have switched to this new key system before the boat and recreation show at the end of October. Her dimples flashed, she blushed, and her face created a scowl when she recalled the memory of the night she returned home from the boat and recreation show.

She focused her thoughts on her current task.

She headed off this deck by closing the hatch above her and making her way down the six rungs of the ladder; this ladder bent around and over the outdoor freezer attached to the port side of her charter. When she stepped off the last rung she was forced to again look at the houseboat yacht docked next door. Her dimples flashed with disgust over the look of the yacht and its owner. She still felt this yacht should have been part of her small company *Dolphin Tours*.

Her dimples flashed and she again focused on the task at hand.

She turned right, took a few steps, opened one of two doors leading to the inside of her vessel, she stepped into the lounge, carefully shut the door behind her, she walked through the lounge, stepped into her galley, stepped between the main counter with the stools and the kitchenette, she opened the custom built refrigerator, took out a bottled water, she drank a large portion of water, taking the water with her, she made her way down the four carpeted steps, and before she was down onto this deck she could hear Jake singing to himself in the engine room.

She produce a big dimple smile.

Megan loved hearing Jake's horrible singing voice. When Jake was doing something by himself and was singing like he was, this meant her friend and one regular employee, was content and happy. She ignored the suite directly in front of her: this suite slept four, it was tight quarters but was nice, the open doorway into this suit was covered by a thick dark blue curtain her momma sowed specifically for this doorway. Megan went around the stairs and was now in a skinny hallway facing the stern of the vessel. With her now facing the engine room, the door was opened slightly, she could really hear Jake; she was thankful he was doing regular maintenance on the engine (something Megan was capable of and was capable of fixing the engine in an emergency). She passed some plain French doors on her port side, behind these French doors were bunk beds. She passed a brand new redesigned head. Behind her on the starboard side was the long master suite. She briefly stopped at the washer and

dryer. When she was sure nothing was in the washer and dryer she stopped at a skinnier custom made door.

“Megan!” Shouted a concerned Jake.

Megan hearing the concern in his voice asked with equal concern, “Is everythin' alright?”

“It's lookin' good. I was checkin' to see who was down here.”

“Just me.”

Megan smiled as she separated a key from her ring and opened this skinnier cabin door.

She heard, “When are we goin' to be eatin'?”

“You can eat whenever you'd like.”

“Hmm.”

She rolled her eyes with the way he answered her.

Megan smiled, her dimples flashed, she pushed open the door to her office cabin, turned toward the engine room, and opened the engine room door. In the center was Jake, she wondered how he could move around in this tight room, but somehow this man she affectionately thought of as her gentle professional wrestler was always comfortable in this engine room.

He looked at her, “You were promisin' to make me a lunch.”

Her dimples flashed, “Didn't Linda make a lunch for ya'?”

He made a face, “I ate it already.”

Megan rolled her eyes, “We're tryin' to keep you fit.”

“I'm appreciatin' what you ladies are doin' but I need to eat more than rabbit food.”

“Can you wait until I'm done checkin' the weapons?”

He smiled, “I might end up starvin'...”

“The way you're lookin' you're ain't leavin' food for Linda or Katie.”

He became serious, “I'd never eat so much they'd be hungry.”

Megan seriously replied, “I wish you could work...”

“I'm enjoyin' workin' for you all. I ain't one who likes workin' at one place for eight hours a day. I'm seein' we're doin' better. I'm countin' on the day when I won't be needin' to do other odd jobs. But I enjoy doin' them too.”

Megan smiled.

Jake was bursting, “Linda received a call from the new company movin' into town.”

“The one our neighbor is movin' down here?”

“If they were bein' honest with her we won't be hurtin' for money.”

“What about Katie?”

“She was told they're workin' with a couple of day cares in the area. If we take her to one of em' they'd pay for the care. These ain't the cheap ones. Linda was sayin' they must've done their research because the ones they've picked are about educatin' and treatin' kids like they should be treated.”

Megan felt conflicted with hearing this information.

Jake added with hope, “We're hopin' they'll call us back.”

“What would she be doin'?”

“She's ain't sure yet. Linda was tellin' me they asked her what three departments she'd want to work in. She was sayin' the interview was different and she was sayin' Mr. Bob was a

character.”

“This ain't surprisin' me any.”

“Don't be to hard on him',” Jake said, “The company he's ownin' is treatin' his employees good.”

Megan again felt some personal conflict hearing this; she was unsure of why.

“What departments?”

“She originally was applin' to work in the shippin' area or answerin' phones.”

“She's been workin' on the docks a long time she'd be good at workin' in their transportation or shippin' department.”

“She was thinkin' this too.”

Megan noticed the odd face Jake gave her.

He continued talking, “What's crazy is they asked her what departments she'd like to try. Linda was tellin' me how happy she was hearin' this question. She's been gettin' sick of the stress of all them crates movin' in and out on them trains and ships. She told em' she'd like to try workin' in the paintin' area or she'd like workin' someplace were she could feel like she was helpin' people.”

“But she's never worked in them type of area's?”

“I was tellin' her this but she was sayin' she felt it was okay tellin' them what she was feelin'.”

Based upon how Jake shrugged his shoulders and his body language Megan tried to be encouraging, “I'm sure if she was feelin' she could speak her mind she's knowin' somethin' we ain't.”

“I'm hopin' and prayin' she ends up workin' at the company. It'd help if she wouldn't have to keep drivin' down to Boca Raton every day. She's even been drivin' down to Miami a couple times a week.”

Megan's dimples flashed, “I'm hopin' she gets the job.”

Jake smiled, “With Captain comin' here yesterday I told him to tell Ma to pray.”

Jake and Megan smiled at one another.

Megan stated, “Let's get back to work.”

Jake smiled, “Yes mam.”

He wished Megan and Ma could figure out how to get along. This sentiment was felt by every Steward family member; except Timmy who could have cared less one way or another.

Megan stepped into her cabin. She pulled out the small chair in front of the desk, she reached down to the bottom left drawer and pulled out the drawer. It appeared as if the only thing in this drawer were hanging file folders with paper work inside; but in a back folder was a CZ-USA semi automatic stainless steel pistol. She pulled out the weapon from the file folder, she removed the clip and checked to see if the 10 bullets were still in place. This was the gun she used to train any woman who wanted to learn how to shoot a semi-automatic pistol (part of Megan's self defense class was basic training in how to use the Smith and Wesson). When she was satisfied: she set the weapon on the computer desk, she finished the last of the water in the plastic bottle, she shoved the hanging files to the front of the drawer, she looked at the bottom of this drawer; she felt more assurance when she saw the two full clips at the bottom of the drawer. She put the file folders back the way they were and closed the desk drawer.

She picked up the weapon and slid the clip out of the weapon.

Megan keeping the gun and clip in her hand stood up and closed the door to her small

office.

From the door of her office she stepped over to the starboard side to where the master suit was.

On her last overnight charter, the men scheduling the charter, were unwilling to pay for the master suite. When a guest was unwilling to pay for the master suite she either slept in this master suite or she slept on an air mattress on the first deck. The majority of the time her guests chose the suit against the bow of the vessel or the bunk beds.

When she opened the door to this master suit she smiled at this dolphin themed room. She was grateful for Nicole's expertise in decorating this wonderful themed suite. There was a nice queen sized bed, an entertainment center, and a redone head with a shower. She set the gun and clip on a shelf above the head of the bed. She laid down on the dolphin decorated comforter, the beds new mattress felt good on her back, laying there she imagined someone trying to sexually assault her. Megan was so against gender bias she imagined this could either be a man or a woman. She practiced reaching behind her and in a quick motion pulling out a blue Cowboy Style Derringer. She pretended shooting a fictitious assailant first in the groin and then in the middle of the forehead.

This gun was a modern day Derringer, it was capable of shooting two forty-five caliber shells. Captain bought her this gun as a High School graduation present, her Ma was upset Captain would purchase this gun for her, but Captain insisted a gun like this was perfect weapon for a lady staying in a dorm room.

There was one incident Megan could have used the Cowboy Style Derringer. This incident happened when Megan stepped into her room in college and a serial rapist was in the process of raping her roommate on Megan's bed. Everyone knew this rapist had killed one of his victims and it was Megan's assessment he was about to kill her roommate. If Megan would have known this was happening to her roommate she would have shot him with her Smith and Wesson. Instead; when the rapist jumped up and tried to attack Megan, Megan reacted quickly and broke his arm. In this rapists anger and persistence he pulled out another knife and lunged at Megan; with this move the rapist took his last breath. Megan very seldom thought of this moment. At the time of this incident many people viewed Megan as a hero. Megan never considered herself a hero. Megan was grateful she saved her friends life and was deeply relieved when all charges of manslaughter were dropped. She felt justified in killing him, but because she was a moral person killing someone was a traumatic experience. What helped her heal: were her two older brothers and her dad who experienced killing people in combat, all those years she taught self defense, and her personnel relationship with Jesus.

Megan still ignored her Momma's disapproval of the Derringer as a graduation present; this gun was one of Megan's favorite gifts of all time.

She sat up on the edge of the bed. She decided she needed to clean this gun. She took out the two shells and put the gun and two bullets into the right front pocket of her khaki colored cargo pants.

She glanced up at the entertainment center and suddenly remembered she left a few DVD's for the charters collection in her houseboat. The DVD's in this collection were given to her from various family members or Megan purchased them from discount bins or at the second hand store. The only reason she knew what movies to purchase was from a list of movies she kept in her woman's wallet. This list was increased anytime Megan was told of a good movie or heard someone talking about a movie she thought was good for her charter.

She very rarely to never watched any of these movies she purchased. The newest movie added to the collection was a romantic comedy titled, "*How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*." Nicole felt if a couple was staying in this suite this would be a good movie for them to watch.

Couples scheduling overnight charters were rare for Megan. When this happened she always felt uncomfortable when an unmarried couple had sex in any of her rooms. She never felt uncomfortable if a couple was married but an unmarried couple made her feel particularly responsible for what Megan felt was wrong sexual behavior.

She picked up the CZ-USA semi automatic Stainless Steel pistol from off the bed, she left this suite, she closed the door behind her, and went back up to the main deck where: she tossed the plastic water bottle into the recycling side of the pull out garbage unit, she stepped over to the breakfast table, she set the CZ-USA semi automatic Stainless Steel pistol onto the breakfast table, and took out the Derringer and the two shells from her front pocket.

She heard Jake yell, "Are you goin'..."

"Give it an hour," Megan answered back, "Have a piece of fruit?"

"What do we have?"

Megan stepped over to the refrigerator and opened it and yelled, "a couple oranges, grapes, and apples."

"Give me an apple," Jake answered loudly.

"Come to the ladder."

He stepped over to the four stairs, when Megan stepped over to the top of the stairs she tossed the apple down, and he caught it.

"Thanks," was his reply.

He immediately took a bite and headed back to the engine room.

"You're welcome," she called back, her dimples flashed with gratitude when she saw him wave his arms.

She stepped back into her galley and turned to face the back of the center counter, this counter separated the galley from the lounge. This counter started at the starboard side of her charter and went out into the middle of the vessel; there was comfortable space to walk between this counter and the end of the breakfast table. The two stools in front of this counter were in the lounge. Behind her from starboard side to the ladder (the four stairs leading to the bottom deck) was: a custom built refrigerator, a double sink, an electric six burner cooktop, above this counter top and refrigerator were new cabinets and a built in microwave. Megan stepped up to the back of this center counter. On the back of this counter was a wood carving of swimming oceanic fish Jeff and Jimmy carved and stained with loving care. She separated her arms, put her hands over carved swimming fish, she pushed these fish in, quickly turned her right hand left, and her left hand right, and pulled back. There was an immediate thud and the top of the counter flipped up. She reached into the shelf below the counter and took out an AR-15 rifle (or more commonly known as an M-16).

This automatic rifle was the one weapon Captain was unwilling to teach her how to use. He felt it was inappropriate for a woman to use a weapon of this type. What Megan suspected, and her feeling was confirmed by her brother Duke, was an AR-15 rifle brought back memories of her Daddy serving in Vietnam. Megan was patient and waited until she graduated and owned the charter before she purchased this semi automatic rifle; shortly after she purchased this weapon she made this weapon into an automatic. Her two older brothers, Duke and Jimmy were the ones who trained her on how to use this weapon. Within an

afternoon of practice she was able to accurately shoot a full magazine onto a target in semi-automatic mode. Three weeks later Jimmy and Duke took her to the shooting range, she was a crack shot with the weapon on automatic. The shooting she performed was equal to the shooting Duke and Jimmy performed to win their; *Marine Corp Rifle Expert Badge*, not only did they win this medal, they both won different competitive metals while in the Marines. This was the first automatic rifle she ever learned how to shoot. The second was her brother Duke's WW2 issued BAR.

Megan carefully pulled out the full magazine from the AR-15 and set this weapon and the clip onto the breakfast table along with the Derringer and her automatic pistol.

She stepped back to the center counter and pushed the top back down.

She stepped into her lounge and stood in front of her L-shaped settee.

She removed the pillows and cushions her ma had hand sown specifically for this settee. She loved how her Ma made the pillows with different seaside scenes without having them look cheesy or out of place in her nostalgic looking lounge. Below the cushions there only appeared to be a flat board. Megan knew exactly where to put her hands, she pushed, pulled, and slid the board onto the back two ends. In this secret hiding place was a hand gun weapons case. There were two other secured areas to put two full rifles. What weapons she put into this secret hiding place depended upon: the type of charter, the crew, her passengers, and what criminal activity was active at the time. She reached in and took out the handgun case from it's secured location and set the L-shaped settee back to the way it was.

She took out a key and opened this hand gun case. In this case was an official FBI Smith and Wesson 1076 10mm pistol; there was a full magazine already in the gun, plus two clips filled inside the gun case. She smiled at the memory on how she obtained this weapon. In her Sophomore year in college herself and three of her friends from college stayed at her house for Thanksgiving. These college friends were: Crystal, Marcy, and Krissy. At the time Megan was reluctant to allow Krissy to go with them but Megan knew Krissy's parents were overseas at the time. To Megan's surprise Krissy behaved herself and treated her family respectfully. During this same Thanksgiving Captain had invited an old war buddy and retired FBI agent to visit and go hunting.

During the Thanksgiving meal (a meal Nicole and Ma made with help from Megan and her friends) Megan's brothers, Captain, and the retired FBI agent started talking about guns. In this discussion this 1076 was brought up. Megan asked if she could try shooting this weapon. This shocked her college friends and the retired FBI agent. The agent made the fatal mistake of telling her, in his Ohio accent, the gun was too powerful for her. She bet him her Smith and Wesson .686 for the 1076; anyone who knew anything about weapons knew this was an uneven bet. The overconfident FBI agent took the bet. The next day after all the men went hunting; Megan's friends and Nicole showed up at the firing range to watch this shooting match. This was the only time Nicole ever went to the firing range, Megan suspected the reason Nicole went along was do to Marcy and Krissy being around Jimmy. After a couple rounds of practice, Megan proved to this FBI agent she was more than capable of firing the 1076. Later in the afternoon he privately suggested to Megan she should go into law enforcement and try for the FBI. As Megan recalled this memory and set this hand gun onto the table; Megan was grateful she stayed out of law enforcement.

She stepped onto the stern of her vessel. She felt the breeze and went back in and slipped on her orange jacket. She stepped back out onto the stern of her vessel and on the

starboard side was a long skinny hatch with one handle. She opened this door and grabbed the spear gun. The main use of this gun was to kill sharks while diving. Or to kill a large fish brought onto the boat no longer fit to survive on it's own. In an human emergency this spear gun was a lethal one trick pony. She checked this weapon to make sure it could be used for fish and put the spear gun back into it's slot.

From here she went over to the port side of her vessel and opened a hatch built on this side of her vessel. She opened it and took out the supplies and set them on the deck beside her. She reached in and pulled out a cut out portion of the deck; underneath was a large gun case. She glanced up at the gates to make sure no one was about to come onto her vessel. This was a weapon she especially hoped she never had to use. The only time she ever moved this weapon from this spot was to clean it or if she felt her passengers were in sever danger; she was grateful she never had to use it. Anyone who knew the history of Eastbank or sailed in any length of time between Eastbank and Key West; knew enough to leave the *Dolphin Queen* alone. She began to put the items on the deck back into the storage unit.

She looked up when she heard HIM close a door.

From Megan's vantage point she could only hear the door. She assumed he was leaving the yacht.

Megan felt curious. Normally he would have left for work hours ago.

She wanted to know the reason he changed his schedule, but in anger decided he was to much of a pain in the rear end for her to be overly concerned; plus she had heard from a reliable source his sugar baby was arriving today. Ignoring him lasted until she heard the mumbling voices of him talking to a female voice. There was a part of her who wanted to know what was being said, she was also angry at herself for wanting to know what was being said, and who was talking to him.

When she had all of her items back into the storage unit she found herself walking to the stern of her vessel. She found herself leaning over the stern of her boat and looked down the length of the concrete pier. Standing in the middle of this pier was Gina, her current girlfriend Daisy, and her neighbor. Observing their body language and gestures, he was indeed being polite, and Gina and her girlfriend were being polite in return. This whole scene confused Megan. Gina was very friendly to women and gay men, but was very cautious with straight men. Megan saw them all shake hands and Bob politely stepped away and walked toward the parking lot of the marina. Megan ducked down before Gina and Daisy spotted her. When Megan heard Gina and Daisy go into Gina's houseboat Megan again lifted herself off the deck and leaned over the stern of her charter; she watched Bob step into his garage.

She watched his small SUV leave the garage and go to the front of the marina. Normally he made a right turn but today he turned to his left. She was frustrated with herself for watching the most annoying man on the planet.

She pulled her hair behind her right ear and stood up regaining her dignity.

She headed back to her living quarters: she grabbed the gun case, she opened one of the wooden doors, she stepped into her lounge, slammed the wooden door, and walked up to the breakfast table.

She still felt a little cool from the breeze but was hotly angry at herself for acting so foolish.

She focused.

She separated another key from her new key ring and unlocked this gun case.

She wondered how her Yankee neighbor could be warm only wearing a Hawaiian shirt and shorts. She was certain he would catch a cold.

She focused.

With the case open she pulled out a semi-automatic .590 pump action shot gun. She had witnessed the power of this gun when she saw a tactile police officer demonstrate this weapon. She had first heard about this gun when Duke was stationed in Iraq during the first gulf war.

She took out the full clip and inside of this case were two empty clips. Filling these two clips was going to be her first task to getting her weapons into the condition she preferred. She was determined to protect her passengers, her crew, loved ones, and herself from anyone who felt they could board her vessel without her permission.

Megan wondered what his sugar baby looked like.

She again became angry at herself for wondering about this woman.

Her dimples flashed as she focused on taking care of her weapons.

*J*ulie looked up at the clock in her Chemistry class and felt the last ten minutes lasted ten hours. Her teacher was giving a lecture on their current assignment; an assignment she finished at least two months earlier.

When she looked forward she noticed out of the corner of her eye Bradley Williams was trying to focus on the teacher, his assignment, and was trying to stop himself from staring at Julie's breast. Bradley Williams was five foot three, was scrawny, wore glasses, was smart, was awkward, knew a ton about computers, and followed both baseball and football to the point of obsessed. The reason Bradley was hopeful Julie would like him was because she asked him a bunch of computer questions without once teasing him.

Julie shifted her body so Bradley was no longer distracted. Julie realized as soon as she stepped into the building her mistake in wearing her black long sleeved stretch french cuffed shirt without a vest or something to pull over her breasts. She hoped her friend Amanda would have something to match this shirt and her plain light blue bootcut jeans, she hated being a show to these immature boys in school.

Without the rest of the class knowing it she glanced and could tell Bradley was trying to hide an erection. She found it interesting how many of the boys in school had very little control over their own cocks. She turned her head to get a better angle, while appearing as if she was paying attention to her teacher, she tried to guess how big it was and what it looked like. She would never tell anyone in school she tried to guess at how big each one of her classmates cocks were. She was sure if she ever admitted she liked imagining a guys size and look, even to her close friends. they would consider her a slut.

Julie noticed Bradley was putting in an effort to focus and his erection was gone. This effort impressed Julie. Julie felt it was normal for a guy to admire her body but it was unacceptable when a boy acted immature about it. What irritated Julie was this boy was picked on for being a virgin by boys she was certain were virgin themselves. She hated it when boys in her school tried to make themselves appear better by picking on other boys .

What Julie was unaware of was this boy along with many of the nerds in school liked her. The reason she was well liked was because she never picked on any of them and actually talked to them from time to time. In general most of the boys and young men in Julie's school

wanted to go out with or have sex with Julie; this was especially true for the nerds in school who would have given anything for the courage to ask her out.

The reason most of the male students in her school found her attractive was her blend between being an athlete and a model. Julie's face was very unique and appealing. This look started with her long rectangular shaped face, her high cheekbones, her pointy chin, her winged tipped eyebrows, but what gave her a model look was her very bright and beautiful greenish blue eyes, her long straight lips, and the classic pointy steward chin. Her long dark wavy hair was parted in the middle and she allowed it to naturally fall by the sides of her face. She knew how to apply makeup and was wearing just enough to look feminine while highlighting her eyes. She yawned; her pointed chin went down and her already long mouth went wide. When she was finished yawning she focused her beautiful greenish blue eyes on her teacher.

It was a great relief to her when he finished his lecture.

Julie used her beautiful greenish blue eyes to pan the class. Most of her classmates were: struggling, reviewing, concentrating, or were having quiet conversations about the assignment. She was sure her "friends" Chelsey and Leslie were talking about anything else. Glancing at the two of them Julie changed her thought pattern and decided, Leslie was trying to understand the assignment while Chelsey was bothering Leslie. Julie preferred the students in her honors classes over regular classes and based upon what she heard about basic classes she was glad she never was a student in one. Even though she was of the opinion honors classes behaved better, it still was Julie's opinion ninety five percent of the whole student body acted terribly immature. Since the first couple weeks of second grade Julie learned never to express her displeasure of her schoolmates.

Julie looked up at the clock. She imagined being sixteen getting up from her chair, grabbing her backpack, going to the office, dropping out, going to the Eastbank Community College, and completing the GED. Julie loved the idea of having the equivalent of a high school degree at the age of sixteen. Three days earlier she reviewed the GED and felt she could have passed all the sections without having to study. The only reason she would stay in high school was because of how upset her momma would be if she dropped out and because she wanted to play sports in college. Julie was convinced in the big scheme of things high school meant very little, but because it meant a lot to everyone who counted, she understood she needed to graduate.

She noticed her teacher was giving her an odd look. Julie was used to these looks and expected her teacher would invite her up to his desk. She hated it when a teacher knew she was done with her work and would insist on checking up on her. She was grateful when a fellow student walked up to his desk and distracted him from bothering Julie.

Everyday before school started she would go into the schools library and quickly scan the stock reports of the *Wall Street Journal*. After quickly reading these reports she would photocopy the sections she felt were interesting. She was about to pull these photocopied stock reports out of her backpack. Whenever she read these reports she made it look as though she was reading something else.

Hannah taped Julie's back; this stopped Julie from going into her backpack.

Hannah and Julie became best friends when Julie skipped fourth grade and they ended up being in the same fifth grade class. Their friendship was put on hold shortly after Julie met Jennie. The difficult part for Hannah was after Julie met Jennie, Hannah felt she lost two

friends, when Amanda and Julie became part of the popular girls and Hannah was left behind. Hannah truly missed the close friendship with Julie and hoped one day they again could be friends. She was unsure if she ever wanted to be with friends with Amanda ever again because Amanda took part in teasing Hannah. To have Amanda tease her hurt far more than being teased by the Snob Club or any of the popular kids. Hannah suspected if Amanda would have been around Julie, Amanda would have treated her better; everyone student knew when Julie was around the Snob Club was less likely to harass anybody.

Due to Hannah's: round face, her lite colored skin, her medium length blond hair, her full cheeks, her wide chin, her thin but wide lips, her small dimples, her gentle looking green eyes, her short skinny nose with its roman style end, and the rectangle shaped glasses that sat on this nose; gave Hannah a very gentle and studious look. This gentle and studious look was not always an asset in high school. With all the drama she often times felt high school was a terrible experience for her. She hated how kids were cruel to one another and many times felt an affection to those students who were picked on; while doing everything possible to avoid being picked on herself. She assumed the point of high school was to survive it and move onto college where she made the assumption college would be better.

Hannah dressed very modestly. She was currently wearing light blue relaxed fit jean overalls with contrasting stitch. She rolled up the leg bottoms and matched the overalls with snakeskin print wedges. She was wearing a red long sleeved Henley shirt. With the style of shirt she was wearing and the overalls this concealed her small to medium sized breasts. She really wanted larger breasts but was unwilling to wear any clothes to make them look larger than they were. She felt nature was cruel to her by giving her a flat rear end, average legs, and an overall average looking body. She never thought of herself as the ugliest girl in school but never considered herself one of the attractive girls.

She wished there was at least one boy in school who thought she was nice looking. Better yet, she wished a guy would notice how good of a girlfriend she would be: she believed in being loyal unlike many of the other girls, she hated drama unlike other girls, she never drank, she hated drugs, and she could think for herself. She was sure many of the boys in her school hated the fact she had a brain and never acted dumb to impress a guy. She desperately wished one of the good guys in school would actually like her for who she was. She was tired of all the boys who were just after sex. She was determined to avoid the traps of giving her virginity away like so many of her classmates.

Hannah was aware Julie was one of the “popular” girls and was part of the “Snob Club”. Since Julie became a part of the “Snob Club” Hannah was afraid to talk to Julie. Hannah was beginning to feel the fear was short sighted. What helped Hannah feel she was being short sided was based upon Julie talking to some of the nerd computer students and Hannah observed Julie talking to Brenda while Brenda was standing next to her locker. When Julie left Brenda and went down the hallway, Hannah rushed over to her friend to see if Brenda was okay. Hannah was relieved to hear Julie asked Brenda about the hand made magnetic flowers and butterflies Brenda decorated her locker with. Hannah was surprised Julie went out of her way to talk nice to Brenda; especially while she was standing in the hallway. This act of kindness by Julie kept Brenda going for a couple weeks. Someone being nice to Hanna's friend was very rare, especially from someone as popular as Julie. This incident helped Hannah feel comfortable enough to ask Julie a question.

Julie's intention of reading her stock reports was interrupted by a second gentle tap on

her back and a whisper, "Julie."

Hannah glanced over at Chelsey and Leslie. They were sitting a few rows over on the right side of the classroom. Hannah was grateful they were distracted and talking between themselves.

Since kindergarten Julie looked forward to helping other students.

Julie was overjoyed when Hannah was the one wanting her help. Julie was feeling guilty for what had happened to their friendship and was worried Hannah hated her. Julie understood if the only reason Hannah wanted to talk was to receive help; Julie was just happy to talk to Hannah. Being young Julie was unsure how to fix her friendship with Hannah without losing Jennie and Amanda as her friends.

Julie turned around with a smile on her face and greeted Hannah with a, "Howdy."

Hannah pushed up her rectangle glasses and gave Julie a genuine smile; Hannah was unable to treat one of the best friends she ever had horribly. Hannah was hurt and sometimes angry at what transpired between them but Hannah felt this was part of the drama of high school.

Hannah said in exasperation, "I'm not understandin' this formula."

Julie turned to her side and was happy to help her friend. Julie went over the formula with a lot of patience. Many of the students around them started to pay close attention to how Julie was explaining the the formula. Julie based upon a couple questions from students ended up explaining the whole experiment better than her teacher. The reason she was better than her teacher was due to the fact she could relate to her students, she was truly gifted as a teacher, and she was smarter than her teachers. Julie knew she was smarter than her teachers but because of the way Julie was raised she always treated each one of her teachers with respect. What was difficult for Julie was when a teacher resented the fact she was smarter and tried to belittle her.

After Julie explained the problem Hannah smiled, pushed up her glasses, and said; "now I'm gettin' it."

"You're..."

Chelsey watched Julie fraternizing with all the undesirables long enough. Chelsey especially disliked the fact she was talking to Hannah, to stop what Chelsey thought was foolishness she faked coughed.

Julie rolled her eyes and ignored Chelsey.

Hannah found Julie's eye roll funny. Hannah delighted in the fact someone was brave enough to ignore Chelsey. Hannah caught the look Chelsey gave Julie and herself. With this look Hannah became concerned Chelsey and Leslie would pick on her in a later class. What irritated Hannah was Chelsey should have been in regular classes and even in a few basic classes; but because of her parents booster money Chelsey was in the honors program (which bumped out a more deserving student).

Besides Julie, Leslie was the smartest one of the Snob Club. She was by far one of the prettiest girls in school. Coming from a mixed raced family she received the best features of her white grandfather and the best features of her Latino genealogy. Her mom and dad were both Latino decent so she was a little darker skinned than most of her mixed raced cousins.

Her oval shaped face was the beginning of her beauty, her cheekbones were very soft and blended in perfectly with her mouth and chin. What added to her beautiful appearance: was her pearlike shaped lips, her catlike shaped eyes, and her light brown shiny eyes. Above

her eyes her winged tipped eyebrows and her long black eyelashes matched her naturally long dark straight hair. Her overall appearance was aided by her shape. She had medium to large sized breasts and the perfect sized hips with a noticeable rear end; both of these features Leslie was more than willing to flaunt when she was away from her family.

Leslie was willing to work at being an elite and was smart enough to recognize if she failed at school the goal of living and playing as an elite were over. Her desire to live as an elite was so strong she was willing to manipulate her way in so she could live the life she felt she deserved.

She despised being poor and was terribly angry at what she felt were her ignorant religious parents. Leslie truly believed she was smarter than both of her parents and was defiantly smarter than anyone who went to church. There were two different Leslie's, there was the Leslie her family knew and who those who saw her at church and there was the Leslie who behaved the way she wanted around her adolescent friends. She felt the whole religious idea of waiting until you were married to have sex was foolish. She felt as long as a guy wore a condom and she took her birth control pills everything was fine. She slept around to get what she wanted. She was certain the reason she was popular was because: she was willing to have sex, she went to every party, and when she felt it was a benefit she followed those people she could get what she wanted. She believed she understood how the game was played but unlike others she believed she was playing the game to the benefit of herself.

This included leaving the house dressed one way and pretending to listen to everything her parents said, but when she arrived at school she went into the schools bathroom and changed into the type of clothes she felt elites wore. Her parents would have been horrified to find out these clothes were shoplifted or were the clothes Chelsey received honestly or dishonestly from her modeling gigs. Leslie's goal when she dressed was to look older and as sexy as possible. Going with this theme she was currently wearing a cranberry colored long sleeved lace top with jewel trim, underneath she was wearing a black push up bra. This blouse hugged her upper torso and due to the lace exposed her bra. She matched this lace top with a pair of black skinny leg pants, on purpose she was wearing a size smaller than she needed to, they hugged her legs, her rear end, and privates very tightly. She matched the whole outfit with black high healed dress sandals. Her goal with this outfit was to make sure every popular boy noticed her and if necessary any male or female teacher who she felt she could manipulate for better grades.

Julie wondered how Chelsey could walk with how tight her black denim mini was, the only reason Chelsey avoided a full blown show while sitting at her desk was because of her footless leggings. Chelsey matched this skirt and leggings with a skin tight black short sleeved ruched shirt and a black denim bomber jacket with front pockets and a zipper. She used a fancy black hat to accessories this whole outfit. Julie wondered if Chelsey was given the outfit or stole it at one of her modeling gigs.

Chelsey annoyed Leslie by turning around and asking; "Can you believe her?"

Leslie concealed the fact Chelsey was stopping her from understanding the assignment, Leslie understanding the politics of her friendship whispered back, "Why don't you just stop her from hangin' out with us."

"Because my sister and to many people are likin' her," Chelsey paused. "Besides who'd we cheat off of."

Leslie became serious, "If she finds out we're cheatin' she'll be angry."

Chelsey made a face and commented, "Why are you worrin'? She aint' goin' to find out we've been sneakin' into her locker. If she does find out what's she goin' to do?"

Leslie shrugged her shoulders.

This confirmed for Leslie, Chelsey was underestimating Julie, leslie felt underestimating Julie was a big mistake.

Hannah with a smile expressed to Julie, "Thanks for helpin' me. I'm an English person..."

They were interrupted by an upset Chelsey, "Julie."

Chelsey gave Julie a face.

The whole class heard Chelsey's complaint.

Julie glared at Chelsey and raised her arms in a questioning gesture.

Chelsey was infuriated with Julie's response and was even more frustrated when Julie turned and continued to talk with Hannah.

Julie spoke with a gentle tone, "If you're ever strugglin' just ask."

Hannah answered Julie, "I'm a library aid durin' lunch. It'd be easy for you to come in on lunch and help me."

Before Julie could answer the bell rang.

The teacher yelled, "This assignment is due tomorrow."

There were moans and the sounds of students rushing to get out of class.

"Thank-you," stated Hannah kindly.

"Julie," Chelsey yelled.

To Chelsey's dismay Julie simply ignored her.

"I'm glad to help you and anyone else who's needin' help," Julie announced loud enough so everyone in the classroom could hear.

Chelsey made a noise and stormed out of class; Chelsey's high heal shoes were clipping on the floor as she left the classroom.

Julie made a face watching her leave.

Hannah appreciated Julie's comment but Hannah was deeply concerned she would meet Chelsey and the Snob Club later. The only time Hannah or any other student was safe from being bullied from the Snob Club was when Julie was around. The fear of what Julie could do started on the third day of Julies Freshman year. On this day she happened to walk by a group of upper class girls trying to shove a freshman girl into a locker. Julie put a halt to this when she told the upper class girls to stop. One of the Senior girls made the mistake of asking Julie, "What she was going to do about it?" In less than twenty seconds this girl was bound like a pretzel, could barely breath, and Julie made this girl apologize to the freshman. This incident and other incidents caused both teachers and students to wonder why Julie hung out with the snob club; for the most part Julie was the only one of this social group anyone really liked.

Julie casually stood up.

Julie watched: Hannah collect her backpack, grab hold of her books, watched Hannah make a hasty retreat out of class, and out of fear avoided Leslie and Chelsey. These incidents were deeply concerning to Julie.

Julie made a face.

Julie walked up to the front desk and set the finished assignment on the teachers desk.

In a concerned tone the teacher stated, "Did you want to go over it?"

“No,” answered a confident Julie, “Its easy stuff.”

He shook his head. Glancing at the assignment he could see it was a perfect score. Before he could say anything, Julie walked away from the front desk, picked up her backpack, she put her books into the backpack, and stepped out of class.

He smiled. His face turned serious as his next wave of students started to step into his class.

Julie saw Leslie and Chelsey standing in the hallway.

Julie was more interested in getting to her accounting class than talking to these two. Julie wanted to ask her accounting teacher a question related to an off handed comment her Uncle Duke made; a comment Julie was certain her Uncle Duke hoped she missed. After Accounting she was looking forward to her English class because her teacher Ms. Swanson made English interesting and Julie wanted to ask Ms. Swanson about Walt Whitman.

“What's your problem?” asked Leslie.

Julie crinkled her forehead and answered directly, “I'm needin' to get to class.”

Chelsey with a tone stated, “You're makin' us look bad by talkin' to such undesirables.”

Julie gave Chelsey a look of complete frustration, “Hannah was askin' me a question about the assignment.”

“Your such a nerd,” stated Leslie.

Julie was about to answer but Chelsey spoke first, “I'm wonderin' why we let you hang with us?”

Julie was about to make the most sarcastic comment imaginable but decided not to.

“Look. We're understandin' you're Jennie's friend and you and Amanda are friends,” stated Leslie making it sound as if she was handing Julie some sort of grace, “if you want to keep hangin' out with them you better start shapin' up.”

Julie was sure as a group they could bully Jennie and Amanda into ignoring her. Julie to protect her friendships reluctantly answered, “Alright.”

Chelsey smirked, “My sister is still wantin' to invite you to one of my sister's parties.”

Julie wondered if this was the same type of party Chelsey invited her before summer brake. Julie was intrigued by this party but had a list of concerns and worries about going.

Julie asked, “What type of party?”

“It'll be fun,” Chelsey stated. “Nothin' is like my sisters parties.”

Leslie teased and tempted Julie by saying, “From what we're hearin' you'd like it.”

Chelsey and Leslie glanced at one another and in a childish tone giggled, they turned around, and whispered to one another as they walked along the hallway.

This was a concern for Julie.

Julie temporarily shrugged off the actions of her friends and headed to her accounting class. As she headed upstairs many of the kids she knew shouted at her, nodded their heads, or were asking her quick questions.

An example of this was one of Jeff's friends, who happen to be on the varsity football team, and shouted her a history question down the stairwell. Julie shouted back the answer. He quickly wrote it down and headed to his class. It would be another two years before she could take the senior level history class Jeff's friend just received an answer too.

Julie reached her Accounting class right before the bell rang. It was this teachers pattern to lecture first and then give everyone the opportunity to work on the assignment in class. When this time would arrived, she would turn in the assignment and ask the teacher

about Duke's comment; she would phrase the comment in a way to conceal any suspicions.

While laying on the couch for two full weekends: Julie finished all the assignments in her high school accounting book, she read all of the college text book she checked out of the library, and out of boredom completed half of the assignments in this college edition accounting book. Julie acknowledged to herself studying this had great personal value, she still would have preferred some sort of physical activity.

Julie already comprehended the excitement of accounting was in the delay.

As Julie found her seat and the kids were talking and greeting one another. Julie wished the school day would be remotely exciting.

She rolled her eyes when she noticed a couple of the girls were whispering about her top, she was annoyed at a couple popular boys comments; which she ignored, and she noticed one of the computer geeks stare at her and look away. She would ask this boy who lacked confidence a question about laptops.

Julie had a fleeting thought about this computer nerd. She wanted to indulge in this thought but it was the inappropriate time.

She sat down in her chair and the bell rang.

The teacher took over the class.

Julie: opened her backpack, she took out her accounting book, the completed assignment, and her photocopied stock reports. She felt this was the perfect time to review and make notes related to these *Wall Street Journal* stock reports.

Nicole took two steps backwards and looked at her Christmas Tree.

Her long dark hair was in a pony tail, she was without makeup, and was as comfortable as possible.

She was wearing a blue pair of jeans with rhinestone studded belt loops, a Persian green y-neck long sleeved button shirt she was leaving unbuttoned, underneath this unbuttoned shirt she was wearing a simple red long sleeved crewneck tee, being alone she found it refreshing being without a bra, and her footwear was a pair of silver and green colored New Balance running shoes with short socks.

Nicole rearranged the furniture so she could place the Christmas Tree in front of her big picture window. Stretched out on the floor were a variety of different colored strings of Christmas lights; some were lite and some were not. In past years she would have just gone out and bought new Christmas Lights, but this year she was combining as many sets as she could to make six well working multicolored sets. This was the first time in years she was using multicolored sets. Her tradition was to pick two different colored lights, carefully put them on the tree, she would have her children hang up the ornaments, and she would finish by decorating the rest of the tree based upon the color of lights.

She was trying to finish putting up the Christmas lights before Ester and Danielle arrived from school. Nicole was sure both Ester and Danielle would enjoy trimming the Christmas tree. Nicole hoped her two older children would get involved seeing their younger sister and her best friend trimming the tree. Nicole remembered a time when her two oldest children enjoyed decorating the house with her. Nicole understood why this was no longer a priority to her teenagers; even with Nicole's understanding it stung they no longer wanted to help.

She stepped back and almost tripped over one of the many boxes of Christmas decorations on the floor. She picked this box off of the floor, stepping in between the strings of lights, she set this box near the dining room and hallway.

She stood and stared at the tree.

Nicole was deciding if she liked the appearance of her artificial tree. She wanted to purchase a new artificial Christmas Tree, she kept the idea of an artificial tree to herself; instead she was working harder to make this old one look beautiful. Nicole: stepped over a few strings of lights, she picked up the box of garland, again being careful she stepped over the lights, she set the box of garland near the tree, she stepped over a couple strings, and stooped down to fluff up a section of the tree she missed close up but could clearly see across the room.

While she was making sure each branch was in its proper place she was feeling an anger toward her brother-in-law Timmy. Nicole was grateful Megan missed the off handed lesbian comment he spouted off during Thanksgiving dinner. Nicole and the rest of the women in the family suspected Megan was a lesbian. They felt the best course of action was for them to wait for Megan to tell them; but before Megan confessed to them she was a lesbian the women in the family wanted to make sure Megan knew they all loved her. Nicole was feeling the possibility they should change their plan. Nicole was contemplating approaching Megan before she came out of the closet to maybe curve off some unnecessary hurt or drama. Nicole assumed if Megan was struggling with being a lesbian or was comfortable being a lesbian; Nicole wanted to be there for her sister-in-law and certainly wanted to avoid Megan being hurt. The worst possible scenario, was for an off handed comment similar to the one Timmy spouted off, to lead to a hurtful situation where Megan felt she needed to come out defending herself in anger and hurt.

Nicole stood up and stepped back from the Christmas Tree. She studied it. She stepped over the strings of lights while studying the tree. Nicole noticed another small section she felt she needed to fix. She again stepped over the strings of Christmas Lights and moved out of the way a small box of small Christmas lights. As she worked on another section of the tree she wanted to believe the family would be able to purchase a new Christmas Tree before the next Christmas.

Just as she was about to put a branch into place the doorbell rang. Nicole hoped the person at the door was Megan, in years past Megan came over to help with the decorating. Nicole stopped working on the tree and stood up and looked out the big picture window.

Nicole immediately felt self conscience.

Standing in front of the door was Nicole's sister-in-law Diana; the wife of Jimmy's older brother Duke. This was the first time Diana showed up at any function without calling first.

It was obvious to Nicole her sister-in-law was upset.

Nicole wished she was wearing different clothes and the house was picked up.

Nicole took a deep breath and prepared to apologize for her personal appearance and the appearance of her house. She stepped over a couple strings of lights. She reached down and pulled out the lights from the wall.

The doorbell rang again.

Nicole yelled, "I'll be right there."

"Okay," Diana responded back.

Nicole stood up.

As she made her way around the tree, over all the decorations, through her living room,

and to the front door; she was buttoning up her Persian green y-neck long sleeved button shirt; if a man would have been at the door she would have made him wait and would have put on a bra and changed into a different shirt. Nicole decided if Diana was here long enough for Jeff or Jimmy to arrive she would simply excuse herself and change.

Before Nicole opened the front door she was sure something happened to her brother-in-law Duke. Nicole mentally prepared for the news everyone was dreading. Nicole assumed correctly if anything happened to Duke, Diana would have reached out to Nicole.

Nicole took a deep breath and opened the front door.

Nicole instantly felt under dressed.

Diana at the age of forty-two was the oldest of the three daughter-in-laws. She had a square shaped face. Her long wavy hair was a light brown with natural red highlights. This natural hair color matched her light brown eyes. Diana had a very defined block style chin and lower cheekbones. This went well with her cute snub nose and her pearlque shaped lips.

Nicole was surprised to see Diana wearing a black pant set; normally Diana wore bright colored dresses. The top of this set's primary color was white; it was patterned with wavy lines in black, gray, and a couple yellow waves. Matching the top she was wearing a black wide leg pant. Diana accessorized this outfit with black and silver high healed sandals and beautiful expensive jewelry. Nicole especially liked Diana's charmed necklace and her bracelets; bracelets that slightly jangled when she moved her arms. The white Coach purse hanging from her shoulder was more expensive than some of the outfits Nicole wore. Nicole suspected this pant set Diana was wearing was more expensive than the sum total of five of Nicole's best outfits.

Based upon Diana's facial expression and body language, Nicole could tell whatever caused Diana to arrive at her house was important.

With the door fully opened Nicole was going to greet Diana and apologize for her appearance, but Diana grabbed the charm at the end of her necklace and spoke first, "I do apologize for showin' up unannounced. I'm a woman of strong etiquette but I was feelin..."

"Did you hear Timmy's..."

Diana reached out to Nicole, her bracelets jangled, "It was so appalin'..."

Diana stepped into the house and Nicole shut the door behind them.

Nicole's eyes went wide, "I'm so sorry..."

"I'm the one who should be apologizin'," Diana gently touched Nicole's arm.

Nicole felt the affection and love from Diana.

"Like I was sayin' I'm one to always call first but I was feelin' we needed to talk. I do apologize for droppin' by."

"It's okay," Nicole lied answering Diana's apology.

Nicole felt uncomfortable and a tinge inadequate as a housekeeper.

Nicole was being a good hostess and asked, "Are you wanting somethin' to drink?"

"I'd like a sweet iced tea."

They both started to walk toward the kitchen.

In Diana's southern aristocratic way she was making the attempt at Nicole feeling better, "I'm startin' to decorate the condo for my annual Christmas party."

Diana's Christmas party was no ordinary party. It was a very formal party held the Saturday before Christmas. The who's who of the business and political world of South Eastern Florida were known to make an appearance at this party. Jimmy and Nicole were

invited every year, they went every year, every year they felt very uncomfortable, and left early. At the upcoming Christmas party Nicole hoped one of the business contacts Diana always invited would lead Jimmy to a more fulfilling career choice.

Nicole asked, "I thought you hired a decorator for Christmas?"

Diana gave Nicole a look of exasperation, "Last year the tree looked absolutely dreadful. I was feelin' the need to apologize to every guest for how my little place looked."

Nicole thought about what she called a little place, their condo was in a tall high rise next to the ocean, by square footage it was the size of a small mansion.

Nicole responded, "It was very beautiful..."

Diana smiled and again touched her charm necklace as she set her white coach purse on the counter with the tall stools, "You're bein' sweet..."

"I was..."

Diana stepped up to Nicole and again gently touched Nicole's arm, "I'm not one to have favorites but you're a blessin' to have as a sister in law."

Nicole felt Diana was being sincere and was grateful for all the unspoken layers.

"I just..."

"No," Diana waved a finger and her bracelets jangled again. "I wish I was half the mother you are."

Nicole answered, "It isn't your fault for how Laren's turnin' out."

Diana held in tears, "It's reassuin' to hear you sayin' such wonderful things."

Diana quickly recovered and very lady like sat on the tall stool.

"We could..."

Diana fibbed, "I'm doin' just fine,"

Nicole smiled and knew Diana was lying. Nicole filled her best glasses with sweet iced tea.

"Speakin' of parties," Diana spoke with a smile, "Are you havin' your traditional Christmas get together? We're so lookin' forward to it," Diana's bracelets jangled with how her right arm waved.

Nicole appreciated Diana's sincerity.

"I was decidin' on the invitations."

With a smile and a hand wave Diana answered, "You always have such beautiful invitations."

It would have been a scandal of huge proportions if something ever happened to Diana's invitation.

"I'm glad you're lookin' forward to receiving the invitation."

Both ladies smiled, they were studying the others body language, and took sips of their sweet iced tea.

Diana making an attempt at easing into what she came to discuss, started with a fib, "I was considering decoratin' my house myself. I was uncertain on what I should place on my dinnin' room table."

Nicole heard the compliment and was sure Diana would hire someone to decorate their condo.

"How about a nice place setting with an ice sculpture."

"What a splendid idea," Diana spoke when her right arm waved and again her bracelets jangled, "I could have..."

Diana asked Nicole's advice on a theme every year, Nicole being prepared for this spoke her idea, "You've never done an elegant portrayal of the twelve days of Christmas."

Diana gave her seal of approval by being flamboyant, "My god, you're right. What a splendid idea."

Nicole added, "If you're chosin' the twelve days of Christmas it'd be very elegant."

"I do believe you're onto something magnificent," Diana stated with her bracelets jangling again, "I was thinking the theme could be in..."

Nicole knew Diana wanted to be interrupted, "How about blue and white."

Diana "I guess I've found the perfect theme for my party."

They both knew Diana was going to call her decorator as soon as Diana stepped out of Nicole's house.

Diana smiled, "You'll simply have to attend."

Nicole stretched the truth, "We wouldn't miss it for all the world."

Diana knew Nicole was exaggerating. Diana understood why Nicole and Jimmy would feel a little uncomfortable at her party, but to Diana the love she felt toward her family was more important than Nicole and Jimmy's social class. Diana knowing their situation planned on introducing Jimmy to some key friends. Diana would discuss this with Nicole closer to the party.

Diana instructed Nicole, "This might be the year the two of you should enjoy the festivities a little longer than usual."

Nicole understood. "We'll stay."

Diana smiled, grabbed her necklace, and was delighted she could help her family.

With this accomplished Diana brought the conversation to what they started to discuss at the front door. Diana lost her flamboyant tone and gestures, she became silent, played with her necklace, she dropped the necklace onto her neck, and spoke; "Did you happen to hear Timmy's dreadful comment?"

"I'm glad Megan didn't hear it."

"Are you certain Megan missed this dreadful accusation," asked Diana sincerely. "What I found so appalling was it was in a jokin' manner."

"It was awful," Nicole stated bluntly.

They looked at one another.

Nicole spoke, "I'm sure he isn't likin' the fact we suspect she's a..."

"This ain't a reason for him to act so rudely. I've been hearin' what he's been sayin' when she ain't around. He should be ashamed of himself. Megan's been a good sister to em'. He should be knowin' better."

Nicole gave Diana a face of agreement.

Diana waved her arm in an angry gesture and her bracelets jangled. "I was hearin' Duke and him talkin' about it the other day..."

This worried Nicole.

Nicole interrupted, "If she's strugglin' with bein' a lesbian and isn't likin' bein' a lesbian these sort of comments ain't goin' to help her. She could get so angry she'd experiment bein' a lesbian on purpose."

Diana asked, "What if she's comfortable bein' a lesbian?"

"I ain't likin' it. But I ain't ever goin' to put up with her bein' picked on." There was a pause. "I love Megan like she's my sister and..."

Diana's bracelets jangled when Diana declared, "I'm feelin' the same way."

Nicole finally answered Diana's earlier question, "I'm glad she didn't hear the comment."

"Good," Diana started to pace the charm of her necklace back and forth, "Timmy's comment would've caused Megan to be hurtin' even if Megan was sayin' she hadn't heard anythin'."

Sometimes people in Nicole's social status missed on how much Diana truly cared about people.

Diana asked, "Has she spoken to you about her preferences?"

Nicole took a sip of her ice tea, shook her head, and answered. "No. What I'm feelin' is she might not be tellin' us because she worried we'd stop lovin' her."

"With how we were encouragin' her to tell us when we went to the spa. I'm surprised she hasn't told us?"

"I'm sure she went to the weddin' by herself."

Diana made a face, "I..."

"I'm sure the way she was brought up she might be missin' our encouragement."

Diana reached over to Nicole, and her bracelets jangled, "I have a friend who enjoys the company of a lady. She truly is a nice gal. After talkin' to my friend she was relieved to high heaven, when her Momma asked her about these preferences." Diana paused and waved her arm, her bracelets jangled, she again touched Nicole's arm, and continued; "I'm understandin' how you and Ma are hopin' she'll take the Lord's healin' and get what you're feelin' is better. No matter what happens I'm still goin' to love Megan."

"I've been sayin' the same. I'm always goin' to love Megan no matter what."

Nicole took a sip of her sweet iced tea.

Diana was pleased to hear this, but she pushed her viewpoint, "If she's seekin' healin' or not she might want to be asked."

A worry for Nicole was the men in her family were talking about Megan's sexual preferences among themselves.

Diana mentioned something, Nicole thought about from time to time, "I'm hopin' she'd want to be with a man. But I'm preparin' for the day she brings a lady friend over." Diana slid the charm up and down the chain, "I do believe calling a lover of hers a lady friend would go over with many of our family members who'd struggle with her choices. I'm of the persuasion she's with someone."

"We've heard this before. I ain't goin' to jumpin' to conclusion..."

"Why else would she have went to the spa with us? A gal like her only goes to the spa when she's datin' someone."

"Maybe she was hopin' to meet a guy at the weddin'? She's dressed up before."

"She could've been lookin' for a gal or goin' with one." Diana again was playing with her charm by sliding it back and forth on the necklace chain, "I'm feelin' she's so nervous we'd reject her she wouldn't tell us if she had a lady friend."

"I wouldn't ever reject her."

"She might not know this," Diana declared with hurt in her heart.

The truth of this hit Nicole hard.

Diana declared, "If she's goin' to bring a lady friend over I'm goin' to be treatin' them like the refined lady I am."

Immediately and with a tone Nicole answered, "I'm a lady."

"I do apologize if I was hintin' you weren't a lady."

They took sips of their sweet iced tea.

Diana knew Nicole was the unofficial leader of the family and was making sure the two of them were on the same page.

"Are you feelin' we should go from the plan we agreed upon. I'm proposin' in a way so Megan isn't feelin' we're accusin' her we find out if she's a lesbian. If Megan's strugglin' and seekin' healin' or if she's likin' her choices we should ask Megan what her personal preference might be?"

Nicole speaking from her heart answered, "I'm hopin' she'd just tell me. I'm afraid if she's straight and we're accusing her of bein' gay she'd be deeply hurt."

Diana adjusted herself in the tall stool. They both finished their sweet iced tea. Nicole filled the two glasses.

Diana broke the silence by declaring a truth difficult for Diana to admit, she even rolled her eyes before declaring it, "Sam might be right on this one."

The idea their sister-in-law Sam might be correct was painful for Nicole as well.

"The only thing good about Sam is she's been keepin' Timmy from bein' more of a..."

Nicole added, "A donkey's big behind."

Diana's bracelets jangled and she reached out and touched Nicole's arm and said, "I'd chosen a different word. Thank-you for keepin' me a lady."

Nicole winked, "You're welcome." Nicole continued, "She's our sister-in-law too. She's doin' a lot of good work with her women shelters."

"We've volunteered in many of them," Diana was again touching her charm, "I just wished she'd behave herself."

"Agreed."

They again took sips of the iced tea.

"If Sam's right I should be the one to ask her."

Diana declared, "Of the three of us you know her best."

Diana observed how difficult this was on Nicole.

"I tried to ask but it was..."

Diana assumed Nicole was having trouble asking Megan what her sexual preference were, "I was thinkin' I could make her a special dinner at my place. I'd certainly make her feel comfortable and ask her nice and ladylike. Maybe it'd be easier on everybody if it'd come from me askin'? Are you feelin' this is a good idea?"

Nicole looked at her, made a face and honestly said, "She looks at you like a sister..."

"She takes you as her sister she looks at me as her sister-in-law. I ain't jealous. Megan knew you when she was just a youngin'. I'm knowin' she respects me and loves me the way she does just as she loves you the way she does. What I don't want happenin' is either Sam or the boys askin' her."

Nicole crunched her forehead together, "I'm agreein'. We talked about this before."

There was silence as they both took sips of their sweet iced tea.

"I'll be more forceful but before we ask her at your condo lets wait until after Christmas. I'm feelin' if we ask her before Christmas and she's straight it'll ruin her Christmas. If she's a lesbian and we ask her before Christmas the stress of everyone knowin' could be difficult on her. I was feelin' if she brings a friend over and the family ain't given' some time everythin'

could get difficult. I ain't wantin' Christmas ruined.”

Diana was hoping before Christmas, but Diana knew how important Christmas was to Nicole.

Diana with some sarcasm mentioned, “I'm hopin' nothin' happens before Christmas.”

“I'll talk to Captain and Jimmy.”

Diana reached out to Nicole in surprise, her bracelets jangled, “Captain?”

“He was askin' me if Megan was a lesbian in April.”

Diana's eyes went wide.

“Megan was takin' Gina around town and introducin' her.”

“Well there...”

Nicole warned, “She's done this with other transplants she's liked.”

“Gina makes it known she likes gals.”

“Goes to show you ain't always knowin' by looks or rumors,” Nicole commented with a tone.

Diana caught the warning.

“This is why we're bein' careful,” answered Diana, “I'm hopin' if we're a little more forceful she'll just tell us before Christmas.”

“It's goin' to make this Christmas a difficult one. But it's better than accusin' her and she ain't.”

“Agreed.”

Nicole and Diana took sips of their sweet iced tea.

Diana crossed her legs, she pulled her black pants down so they were adjusted correctly; she started to gently swing her foot.

Nicole was now aware Diana had another subject to cover.

Diana began, “I'm a Momma of three boys and a step Momma to Dukes girl.”

Nicole could tell by Diana's body language and tone this was a hurtful topic.

Diana continued, “If my boys or my step daughter were doin' somethin' I was unaware off I'd want someone tellin' me. I've learned this after dealin' with Lauren.”

As a momma Nicole was immediately concerned. What was spoken was enough to put any parent on edge, what really alarmed Nicole, was what Diana's body language was communicating.

Diana almost started to cry. “I wish with all my heart my husband had all honest clients. I worry...”

“We all do,” Nicole answered reaching out to her.

They nodded.

“I love Duke with all my heart. I've made him promise he'd keep our children away from those clients I'd not approve off.”

This put Nicole on edge. Nicole was well aware of whom the Steward family called friends.

“Duke has honored this. He's an honest accountant with everyone else. I wish he'd...”

“We all wish it,” Nicole answered.

Diana held her tears and focused. She grabbed hold of her necklace and started to twirl it around, “I heard Julie talkin' to Duke about Accountin'.”

An alarmed Nicole asked, “When?”

“The weekend before Julie hurt her ankle.”

Nicole was puzzled.

“It was after watchin' the boys.”

Nicole asked, “Have you heard her talkin' to him since she hurt her ankle?”

“No. She's was talkin' to him a second time before sprainin' her ankle.”

“Why haven't you told me this before? She's capable of doin'...”

“I do apologize,” Diana reached out to Nicole. Diana was surprised Nicole would get this upset over Julie learning accounting, “I've been thinkin' they were talkin' about a school project or somethin'.”

“Is this all they're talkin' about?”

Diana was surprised again, “What Duke was sayin' she's as sharp as a whip and...”

“What are they talkin' about. I don't...” Nicole calmed herself and asked more calmly, “What's he tellin' her?”

Diana gave Nicole an odd look.

Nicole clarified, “Julie is takin' accounting. Was she just seekin' accountin' information or did it feel like somethin' else?”

Diana now felt they were on the correct path. “When they were talkin' both on the phone and at the condo I wasn't understandin' what all Duke was sayin' to her. But I could feel he was concerned by her questions. I could tell by Duke's voice he wasn't tellin' her everythin'. He was concerned...”

A persistent and upset Nicole asked again, “What were they talkin' about?”

Diana waved her hand and her bracelets jangled, “Duke found her questions odd and disturbin' at the same time. She was askin' a serious of hypothetical questions surroundin' the idea of embezzlement.”

Nicole gave Diana an odd look.

Diana answered this look, “She was askin' Duke if someone was makin' a lot of money and they wanted to keep the money hidin' how'd they do it.” Diana hoped Nicole would be receptive to Diana's idea on how Julie was making money, “It seemed odd to me a young gal would be askin' about makin' a lot of money when she isn't even workin'.”

“Did Duke answer her questions?”

“He wasn't goin' to tell her anythin' over the phone. He doesn't want her doin' anythin' illegal. We're not wantin'...”

Nicole asked again, “Why did you wait until now to tell me?”

“I was feelin' it was about a school project or somethin'. But I was thinkin' about her question. I was feelin' I should talk with you when a friend of Duke's came over and Duke's friend was tellin' him he hadn't heard anythin' about Julie...”

“When...”

“A couple days ago.” Diana clarified a feeling, “I'm feelin' since she's asked him the questions Duke's been pokin' around seein'...”

Diana stopped her sentence because she wanted to approach her idea with Nicole carefully.

“As an Auntie I love my niece. I've had the unfortunate business of dealin' with a child who was havin' a drug problem.”

Nicole knew this statement was sincere. Everyone in the family knew about Lauren. What frustrated everyone involved with Lauren was how: she went into treatment for drugs, she stopped using drugs, and now was abusing alcohol. What compounded all of Lauren's

problems was how she manipulated Lauren's mother. No one in the Steward family liked Duke's first wife.

“Are you feelin' Julie is dealin' drugs?”

“This was what I was thinkin'. How else is Julie makin' enough money to hide it.”

Nicole acknowledged, “She'd want to hide it.”

Diana answered very carefully, “If a child is dealin' they're most likely usin'. They're good at hidin' it. It took us a while to figure out what was happenin' to Lauren.”

Nicole encouraging Diana, “You two have been doin' the right things.”

Diana nodded her head.

“If my niece is usin' I want her to stop it before it'll kill her or land her in jail.”

The two ladies looked at one another with respect.

They both took sips of their sweet iced tea.

Nicole was grateful Diana would come to her.

Diana was grateful Nicole listened to her.

Diana in her sincere love for Julie and Nicole felt the need to ask forcefully, “Julie isn't usin' or dealin' drugs?”

“I've been noticin' changes in Julie. I've been lookin' for the signs but I haven't seen any.”

Diana reached out to Nicole and in a gentle tone asked, “Are you watch...”

“Before you married Duke I was a nurse at a treatment center. After Julie sprained her ankle I talked to a friend of mine still workin' there. From what she was tellin' me the signs haven't changed to much since I was workin' there. The popular drugs are different but the signs are the same. It was reassurin' to me I was watchin' for the correct things. If she's usin' she's really hidin' it.”

“They can be good at hidin' it. I'm sorry If I'm upsettin' you...”

“You ain't upsettin' me,” Nicole announced, “It's showin' me how...”

In a broken heart tone spoke, “I came over tellin' you because I wished more people would have come and told me.”

Nicole witnessed the same pain Diana was expressing on a consistent basis. This was one of many reasons Nicole stopped working in the rehab center and took the job as a physical therapist at Eastbank Community Hospital.

“I'm glad you came over with your concerns.” reassured Nicole, “I've been watchin' for all the signs especially since...”

Nicole paused.

Nicole was going to mention Jennie, but Nicole felt if she mentioned Jennie, this would distract her from what was important.

Diana wondered about the pause.

“Julie isn't showin' any signs of chemical dependency but I'm goin' to keep watchin'.”

“The last time Julie was over watchin' the boys. When I took Julie home I was watchin' for the usual signs. I was feelin' with Julie bein' as smart as she is maybe she's just dealin'. If she's just dealin' this'll still land her in prison. With the truth in sentincin' laws she'd be locked away for a long time.” Diana mentioned again, “But they can hide usin' at the beginning.”

Nicole needed reassurance.

Diana spotted the guilt in Nicole's face even before Nicole mentioned anything.

“I checked all my medicine cabinets to see if anythin' was missin'. I even went into her

room and was searchin' to see if she was hidin' anythin' or if her room was changin'. I didn't find any drugs." Diana could hear the guilt in Nicole's tone, "Nothing was missing in my cabinets and their wasn't any drugs in her dresser or her computer desk."

"Girl," said a stern Diana, "Don't you feel guilty about checkin' up on her."

"I feel like I'm invadin' her space.

Diana suggested, "Next time have her with you."

Nicole liked this idea, "I'm goin' to be watchin' close."

Diana smiled and twirled the charm on her necklace, "Julie is a good gal. Maybe I'm jumpin' to conclusions. But I'm feelin' it's better to be safe than sorry." Diana thought about something, "Is she still gettin' good grades?"

"They're really excellent." Nicole mentioned, "She was hatin' the fact she needed to take pain medication after her ankle was sprained."

Diana considered the possibility she was jumping to conclusions.

Nicole caught Diana's look and stated, "I was meanin' what I said before."

Diana could hear the sincerity in Nicole's voice.

"I'm feelin' better knowin' another parent is carin' enough to be watchin' out for my children too."

Diana was going to say thank you but Nicole spoke first, "Is Duke teachin' her accountin'?"

With Nicole asking this question again, Diana now heard the concerned tone in Nicole's voice, and began thinking beyond the drugs.

"Are you feelin' Duke would be teachin' her the..."

"Ways of the lifestyle?"

This upset Diana. "Julie wouldn't be the type of gal to get into the lifestyle? Would she?"

"She's an excitement junkie. You've seen her pushin' everythin' to an extreme. Plus we're all knowin' how smart Julie is."

The two women were envisioning the consequences of Julie getting into a criminal lifestyle. Diana was well aware of these dangers and was against her niece following the temptation of this path. Nicole wanted Julie to live an honest God fearing life.

Diana looked at Nicole, and spoke from her heart, "Julie is a good gal. I'm sure she wouldn't do anythin' to get into..."

Nicole found Diana's sudden silence odd.

Diana would never forget her response to a friend who was concerned Lauren was taking drugs when Lauren was eleven years old.

Nicole was startled when Diana slapped her hand on the counter, stood up, and swung her white coach purse over her shoulder. "I ain't allowin' it."

"Allowin' what?"

"As soon as I leave here I'm drivin' down to his office and I'm goin'..." She changed her mind, "I'm goin' to call him and we're goin' to meet in a park and I'm goin' to tell him he's not allowed to teach my niece any more accountin'. If she's goin' to be an accountant she's goin' to be an honest one."

Diana's forcefulness was comforting but Nicole was well aware of her daughters capabilities and determination.

Diana walked around the counter and surprised Nicole by giving her a hug. They found

comfort being mothers.

“Its hard bein' a Momma sometimes,” Diana spoke with absolute confidence, “Julie is goin' to be just fine.”

“I'm hopin' so.”

Diana pulled away, held onto Nicole's shoulders, winked, “She's got a good vigilant Momma better than..”

“Lauren's made her own choices and you've been a good step momma.”

They again embraced.

“If you find out anything please tell me,” whispered Nicole.

“You have my momma's word on it,” Diana answered as they pulled away from one another. “Let me get goin'. Oh, don't forget my Christmas party. The Saturday before Christmas.”

Nicole smiled as she followed Diana to the front door, “We'll be there.”

Diana smiled.

As Nicole opened the front door, Diana mentioned, “I can see your decoratin' is as wonderful as ever. I always enjoy spendin' the holidays in this quaint house.”

Nicole could have taken offense but knew Diana was meaning well.

“I like havin' you over.”

Diana became serious and wanted to confirm their plan, “Are you certain we can keep the men from babblin'.”

“If we can keep Timmy from bein' Timmy. I'm sure if we keep droppin' lovin' hints Megan will tell us on her own.”

Nicole hoped.

Diana and Nicole agreed by their looks and body language.

“I do declare. I might have to go and do some volunteerin' with Sam tomorrow.”

Nicole smiled, “Sounds like a plan.”

Diana winked and in her normal tone waved, “Bye.”

Her bracelets jangled.

“Bye,” Nicole waved back and shut the door behind Diana.

Nicole appreciated Diana.

Looking at the tree she was pleased.

She went to clean up the kitchen. When she was done cleaning the kitchen. She went back into her living room and turned on the families stereo and started a Christmas CD Julie made for her on the family computer.

Nicole stepped over the lights on the floor, grabbed the box of small Christmas lights, and plugged the strings back into the wall. She focused on her project of creating multicolored lights.

While Nicole listened to Christmas music and fixed the lights she was contemplating what she discussed with Diana.

End of Part Two of Six

November 27, Ashleigh Arrives

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