

Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Monday, April 10th
Ashleigh's Choice

Day 2 of Book I

(16 Years, 10 Months, and 4 Days Since Ashleigh's First Camping Trip)

Part One of Four
Full Day

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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 characters 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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Monday April 10th, Ashleigh's Choice

(16 Years, 10 Months, and 4 Days: Since Ashleigh's first camping trip)

Ashleigh heard the Male DJ say, "This Josh Turner song titled "Your Man," is climbing up the Billboard country charts."

She was about to hit the snooze button but the DJ stopped talking and the song started to play. She enjoyed listening to one of her favorite country artists. When the song was just about over she reached over and hit the snooze button. She promised herself she would get up the next time her digital alarm clock turned on the radio.

She wished she would have finished college. When she dropped out she had a 3.9 average. She was well on her way to getting a degree in business management with an emphasis on creative arts. She wanted to go back to the day she dropped out: she would shake herself, she would tell herself she understood what the real world was like, she would tell herself of the hardships, and she would tell herself to finish; but most of all she would tell herself to listen to her parents and her brother. They were right.

She was tired of working two job. She found it disturbing she was contemplating being a topless dancer. Her full time job was a secretary for an up and coming VP of Insurance Claims named Mr. White. The other job was being a waitress at a restaurant where her parents were disappointed she worked there. If her parents knew she was being tempted to be a topless dancer they would have been devastated. What stopped Ashleigh from being a dancer was: her moral compass, the knowledge of what dancers went through, the idea of becoming what so many of her high school classmates accused her off, how hurt her parents would be, and how disappointed her Big Brother would be.

The alarm went off again. The male and female radio team were talking about the popular TV show *The West Wing*. She thought about the controversy her brother created when he stated bluntly "...that show isn't remotely unbiased. They should renamed the show

from it's current name *The West Wing* to the more accurate title "*The Left Wing*."

She reached over and hit the snooze button.

There was so much to think about and so much she needed to face.

She watched the red digital numbers of her clock flip.

She was forced to face the VP of Insurance Claims named Mr. White. As his secretary it was impossible for her to avoid the ego maniac who thought he was God's gift to every woman. She felt his work ethic and how he treated those underneath him was even worse than his personality. He expected complete dedication to him, then to the company, and he micro managed everyone. This was all about manipulation instead of production. She believed with all her heart he was trying to control the work flow to look better than everyone else. He purposely created problems to look like a hero and fix the very problems he created. It would have been tolerable if he fixed these created problems, instead he delegated these problems to others; while taking credit for the solution. There were other things he was doing which disturbed her.

After her full time job at *Captain Investments & Insurance*. She worked a second job as a waitress. She took this job to save enough money for a down payment on a good used car. Instead, this extra money was being used to get caught up on back rent after her roommate just up and left. Even before her roommate up and left, Ashleigh's mountain of bills and expenses seemed impossible to over come. She knew without the part time job she would have really been in trouble. Overall she liked it but this feeling was offset by how uncomfortable she felt anytime someone she knew stepped inside of the restaurant. She especially felt uncomfortable when a group of guys from *Captain Investments & Insurance* came in after work. She handled this awkward situation by putting these coworkers into her section and being an excellent waitress. Having the personality of an actress she was able to cover up how uncomfortable she felt.

She watched the numbers of her digital clock flip.

She was contemplating going back to the Italian restaurant she worked at during her Freshman and Sophomore years of college. Or she would go back to the hotel she worked at during high school. Either choice would mean less tip money.

An option, which bothered her more than wearing the skimpy waitress outfit, was being a topless dancer. Two weeks prior she ran into a burlesque dancer who used to work for her Brother. This dancer was now a manager at a brand new Vegas style topless club. This woman assured Ashleigh she would make more money than the secretary job and the waitress job put together. There were times in the last two weeks Ashleigh would stare at this woman's business card. After talking to the electric company about her bill she was prepared to buy a cheap lingerie outfit and go straight to the topless club. Based upon the manager's information Ashleigh assumed she would be able to pay off the electric company and regain her food money; she would have used her food money to buy the lingerie outfit.

The other option was to take her parents suggestion and move back home. Victoria's plan was to make half of the basement into an apartment. The only stipulation was she needed to complete her degree. As much as Ashleigh hated the idea of moving back home she was ready to accept her parents offer.

The alarm alerted Ashleigh she should get out of bed, the radio station was playing the Alan Jackson song, "A Night in Montgomery."

She left the song play.

The song started to crackle. One of the things she wanted to purchase with her second job was a new alarm clock.

Half way through the song Ashleigh moaned.

Flipping the covers off of herself she reluctantly sat on the edge of her bed.

She mustered the courage to stand up.

She stood up, moaned, and stretched her five foot one frame.

What Ashleigh hated about being short was everyone considered her cute. Instead of being cute she wanted to appear elegant and gorgeous. Even though she believed tall women were far more glamorous than herself; she was confident in her frame. She took good care of what she believed God gave her. Ashleigh would have never felt this way without Victoria.

After blinking and rubbing her beautiful green eyes she turned off the alarm clock radio.

Out of frustration she violently shook her naturally wavy long blond hair. She brushed some of the hair from her face.

She was wearing a pair of pink and white striped cropped pajama bottoms and a two year old Kenny Chesney concert t-shirt. She bought this shirt when he was the headliner for Summerfeast (a yearly music festival held in Milwaukee).

She yawned.

She stepped in front of her closet. With the closet doors left open it was easy to see why she despised her wardrobe. Being behind in rent for the last four months made her feel irresponsible any time she even thought about making a clothes purchase. With her clothes budget being small, even before she started to struggle paying rent, her clothes had a very generic feel. One of reasons she felt her clothes looked worn and outdated was she could only afford department store clothes. She missed shopping at the higher end retail stores.

She decided to wear a blue conservative full length business dress. She liked this dress because it concealed her shape from her boss. Even though the dress looked a little worn she hung it on the bedroom room door. She went to her dresser, a dresser her foster mom gave her when she moved out of the Anderson house, opened a drawer and took out her undergarments. Holding onto these undergarments she: stepped out of her bedroom, passed an empty bedroom on her left, opened the door to a small closet, took out a wash cloth and two towels, she stepped into her bathroom, set all these items on the down toilet seat, pulled back the shower curtains, and turned on the water.

She: casually took off her sleeping clothes, tossed them on the floor, checked the water stepped into the bathtub, she shut the shower curtain, pulled the lever to the shower, stepped away from the initial shock of cold water, stuck her hand out when she was confident the water was warm enough, and gladly stepped underneath the falling water. She loved the feeling of the clean fresh water on her morning skin. The only activity more delightful to her was a nice hot bath. The joys of baths and showers were evident by the two wire shower caddies full of soaps, body washes, bubble baths, and bars of soaps. She wanted to indulge in a long shower. She recognized if she took a long shower she'd be late. Instead of taking her normal forty minute shower she only took a half hour. Once she turned off the water and stepped out of the shower she grabbed a towel and dried herself off. Once she was done drying herself she hung the towel up on the towel rack in the shower.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the full length mirror she hung on the door. Overall she liked her shape. She felt her breasts were the perfect size for her petite frame. Ashleigh

liked how she could easily accentuate or conceal them. She noticed some small weight gain in her hips and stomach. She knew she needed to eat better and needed to work out more. She again promised herself she would. A benefit of being single was allowing her pubic hair to grow back. Her last boyfriend was so good at oral sex she was willing to honor his request and trim her pubic hair down to a landing strip. She felt her hair grew out enough where a slight trim would be wise for the upcoming summer. She turned and shook her ass.

She smiled.

When she shook her rear end it reminded her of Bob's past girlfriend Shelly.

Ashleigh made a face.

Ashleigh knew her Big Brother Bob and Shelly were more than friends, even if they insisted they were only friends.

Glancing at her butt she smiled. Because of the orange boyshorts she wore at work she discovered men liked her rear end. This was shocking to her. Before working at this restaurant she purposely bought clothes to hide her rear end felt this was the worst part of her body. She looked away from herself and put on her undergarments and stepped over to the sink.

Looking at herself in the mirror above the sink she thought she looked horrible this morning. In reality she was better looking than what she felt. Her heart shaped face was an asset to her looks. Her roman style nose blended in very nicely with her small cheekbones. Her smile was neither long or short, but when she smiled her cheekbones were highlighted and added to her overall look. She liked her cupid shaped lips. She was correct in feeling her skinny upper lip and a more pronounced lower lip enhanced her looks. She had a rounded jaw line. To Ashleigh's dismay her chin came to a rounded point like her real Mother, Ashleigh's pointed chin was slightly more rounded than her mother, but it was pointed enough to remind Ashleigh she was a descendant of Ashley Vindavane.

The clearest memories of Ashley Vindavane were all horrendous. She was a mother who took Ashleigh to bars, beat her, put her in situations to be molested, tried to kidnap her, and was a bitter alcoholic. Ashleigh believed the reason she was able to escape a life of total destruction was due: to the prayers of people who were concerned about her, the persistence of her Big Brother, her loving Foster Parents, and her growing faith. Ashleigh was forever grateful to have a step brother who loved her in spite of the situation. Who fought to have custody, lost, but honored a visitation schedule he received. She was deeply grateful for her foster parents. Being twenty-three she understood how difficult she made it for her Foster Parents. She appreciated how they stood by her through all the years of counseling, they loved her unconditionally, and stood by her during her own recovery from alcohol abuse. She felt a deep love and loyalty to her Foster Parents and her Big Brother.

The one thing Ashleigh learned from living with her real mother was if she was flirtatious and willing to give her body away men would have been willing to give her things. If she wanted she could have used her flirtatious personality and her body to receive what she needed from older gentlemen. Ashleigh being moral and a Christian never pursued the benefits of this type of lifestyle even when older men suggested "helping" her. She was certain without the loyalty of her brother, the love of her foster family, especially the love of her foster mom Victoria, and the integrity of her foster dad Blake; she would have accepted this "help". These were the same reasons she was finding it difficult to accept a job as a topless dancer.

Standing in front of the mirror she grabbed her long hair and wrung it out, dried it out with the other towel she brought into the bathroom, and quickly brushed her hair back. She

would set her hair after she put on her clothes. She brushed her teeth. Once this was done she stepped out of the bathroom and into her bedroom.

She made a face when she grabbed the dress hanging on her bedroom door. Ashleigh hung this dress back into the closet. She stood there contemplating what she should choose instead. She grabbed a suit she purchased six months earlier; this was a simple white blouse, black and gray striped slacks, with a matching gray and black jacket. She wished she had enough money to wear something with more flare; but she was thankful she was able to purchase this suit at a department store.

Hanging on her bedroom wall she looked at herself in the mirror Victoria gave her; along with most of the furniture in her apartment.

Ashleigh liked the white blouse with the gray and black suit coat but she was not in a slacks type of mood. She slipped out of her slacks and took out of her closet a gray and black pencil skirt. She went to her dresser and pulled out a pair of black tights. With these items on she felt taller. Ashleigh turned making sure she looked good at the back end as well. She pictured herself in a newer suit with a shorter coat and figured she would have looked even better. What was important, she looked modest, and the outfit felt right.

She turned and looked at herself. She adjusted her clothing. She went back into her bathroom to put on her makeup and set her hair. Ashleigh bent down, opened a cabinet under the sink, grabbed a nice makeup kit she bought on sale, and took out what she needed to dry and set her hair.

It was Shelly who taught her how to apply makeup. With this memory it was easy for Ashleigh to recall the many memories she experienced with Shelly.

One memory in particular still astounded Ashleigh.

This memory happened during the time her brother owned his upscale club and restaurant. Many of her favorite memories happened in this club. The club itself had three large halls, two of them could be split into two, and all were able to handle stages of various sizes. In the center of the building was a sound proofed upscale restaurant. The restaurant had two outside entrance doors and doors leading directly into the different halls. The large kitchen and the offices were directly in back of this restaurant. In the center of the restaurant was a large round bar made out of cherry wood and gold trim. What was different about this club and restaurant was her brother never tolerated drunkenness; in southeastern Wisconsin this was unique. At night the halls were filled with bands, dances, plays, special events, and weddings. During the day these halls held dance instruction, business meetings, conferences, art classes, and other events. The restaurant was open from ten to close.

After school Ashleigh: learned some ballet, became an expert at ballroom dancing, enjoyed swing dancing, and looked forward to every country line dancing class. Being older she now understood how special it was to meet so many musicians and artists at a variety of success levels and in many different disciplines. She collected many pictures of herself with many of these artists from the time she was little to the time her brother shut down the club. This is where her interest in the entertainment business started. By the time Bob shut down the club, Ashleigh knew more about the media, how difficult it was for a business to make money, how the business world worked, and knew about the “real” world more than many adults. This was a large part of her frustration during college.

The present day Ashleigh recognized having a girl tagging around must have added to the pressure of being a business owner. What amazed Ashleigh, she always felt she could

interrupt her brother with a question or a need. There were vivid memories of her Brother yelling at anyone who tried to stop her from getting her Brothers attention. As time wore on she learned what she should interrupt her Brother with and what could wait. Besides Her brother there were a few select ladies who always seemed to be near her. Besides watching an event, the best way to pass the time was by talking to employee's, watching employee's, and/or helping employees. She learned quickly she was never suppose to bother an employee, unless the employee talked to her first, or was invited to help. The reason many of the employees never minded her around was she knew how to behave herself and she knew she was to never tattle on employees. One of her favorite things to watch the sound and stage crew. She quickly learned their order and what type of act was coming based upon how things were being set up. What was even more fascinating to Ashleigh was when a sound crew for a famous musical act would set up. She loved observing everything involved in a play. A place she often found herself was in the back kitchen, the head chief had a place for where she could sit and be safe. This head chief always kept a close eye on her. The one other place she went, and only under trusted employee supervision; was downstairs in the very elegant employee break room.

Besides watching she looked forward to any opportunity to help. These were mostly safe and small tasks like: wiping tables, delivering small items, being a messenger, folding napkins, or sorting silver wear. She especially liked helping her brother on on Saturday mornings. What she liked best about helping her Big Brother on Saturday's was they worked by themselves and many important conversations happened during this time. The work they accomplished: checking inventory, reorganize the cooler, checking the contents of the freezer, organizing dry goods, "helping" her brother order, and they would go down into the basement and personally check on the guests staying in the club's secret hotel. This hotel was made exclusively for the artists and the staff of any artist who wanted to stay. Her brother employed a hired staff to make sure everything was well taken care off. Many times in this small but elegant hotel Ashleigh: heard a variety of stories, she saw many of these musicians hung over, high, heard their worries about family or friends, overheard many private conversations, observed writers writing, artists painting, witnessed actors and actresses practicing their lines, but her favorite was when a musician or a group of them would be sitting together in what was essentially a communal living room of the hotel. The music they played was magic to her. There were many songs she heard before they ever were played on the radio.

The one event Ashleigh was banned from viewing was the burlesque show and dinner. Not until Ashleigh was fourteen did she find out exactly what happened at this burlesque show, even then, Shelly forced Ashleigh to secrecy. Before she was fourteen she was told burlesque dancing was a dance only big people did. The show was held every Tuesday and Friday night. On these nights a hall would be selected. Extra security was placed outside and inside of the hall to protect the dancers from anyone who stepped out of line. The other doors would be set so a person could leave but not come back in. Every window on these doors was covered and only a person twenty-one or older was allowed in. A stage was set up and either a band or a DJ was set next to the stage. The women had to abide by a dress code enforced by Bob and Shelly. What this dress code accomplished was it kept the show classy and unique while being flexible enough to allow each dancer to express their own personality and creativity. The dress code forbid any g-string or thong, the dancers had to wear some covering for their legs, and any two piece had to be approved ahead of time. If a dancer chose to go topless they had to have their mid-drift covered and they had to wear a pasty. The club

provided dancers with a selection of outfits and a variety of pasties if she was unfamiliar with the dress code or was too poor to purchase an outfit. The consequence of this dress code was many of the dancers started to show up in burlesque type of outfits or sexy costumes. This show ended up to be known for its sex appeal and creativity without ever being sleazy.

How the show worked was on the front stage a performer would dance to a selected song of her choice or would be forced to dance to what the band would play. In front of the stage, but behind the dance floor, were evenly spaced tables where patrons could watch the show. How the ladies made money was by eating with a patron or by dancing with a patron. Inappropriate touching was forbidden in the club. What happened after was sometimes a great speculation, but inside of Bob's club nothing happened, unless a person was to include the "friendship" Bob had with Shelly. Because this was far from a Vegas style show, many of the dance instructors used this as an opportunity to promote their classes and make extra money. A couple of the ladies who showed up to dance did so as a way to express their dancing ability but never interacted with the patrons. The vast majority were dancers who worked Vegas style clubs or topless clubs the majority of the time. Once this show became popular many of the dancers chose to work this show instead of their regular clubs. The show, due to its class, brought in both men and women. It was featured in the local media and on a couple cable shows.

Being banned from this show frustrated Ashleigh because Shelly and a couple of her favorite dance instructors worked the show. At the time she believed they kept her out because they were afraid she'd misbehave. She knew if she deviated from any of the rules her Big Brother had her follow; he would ban her from seeing a show for awhile. Ashleigh would have rather been beaten by her Real Mother than miss these shows. She was well aware if anything bad happened her Foster Mom would stop her from ever stepping into the place. Even though her Foster Parents never missed one of Ashleigh's recitals and they felt it was an upscale establishment; they would have stopped Ashleigh from hanging out in her Brothers club.

There were many conflicting thoughts and feelings to her brother running a burlesque show. She felt if he never started this show, he would have avoided the mess with Shelly, but maybe without Shelly's encouragement he would have never shut down the club and started his manufacturing business. She felt this show was a mark on how well he treated women. She never witnessed him be disrespectful to any woman, being honest with herself she knew he could be a difficult boyfriend; yet she never physically hurt or purposely hurt a woman's feelings. One of the things Ashleigh respected her Big Brother for was he never owned pornographic materials. This was very different from many of her friends' dads, brothers, and a few moms who owned pornographic material. They were usually hidden in closets or dressers. So the idea her brother ran an event like burlesque dancing was difficult for Ashleigh to accept. Anytime Ashleigh ran into a past dancer she heard stories on how her brother helped many of them complete college, pay for treatment, help connect a few to lawyers for various reasons, and many wanted to know how the Shelly and Bob thing worked out.

This was the background to one of the most astonishing events in her life.

With a scowl she asked herself out loud, looking at herself in the mirror, "What was Bob thinking?"

She answered herself, "Who knows and he avoids the question all together."

She shook her head and went back to applying her makeup, but in her mind she went back to her first paying job. On a Friday night, on a her visitation with her brother, she was at

the club. One of the burlesque dancers babysitters canceled. Shelly suggested Bob find a babysitter. This is how an eleven year old Ashleigh watched a five year old little boy in the large break room downstairs. They were checked from time to time. It was obvious Ashleigh handled the situation well and was a good babysitter. In a matter of weeks Ashleigh was watching up to ten to twelve children, granted many of the mothers, and other female employees came down to check on this group of children. There was already a TV and VCR down in the break room so Bob bought a large selection of kid's movies, added board games, and many of the mothers brought old toys. Ashleigh liked being in charge. She was smart enough to get an adult when something bad happened, but mostly she played with them all. To Ashleigh this was very similar to helping her Foster Mom with Felicia. She felt rich, not only from the money her brother paid her to do this job, but from the tips she received from the mothers. The real treat was being able to stay up late. Until she babysat, Bob always took her back to his house between 8:30 and 9:00 PM; many times she would fall asleep in the car. But now she stayed up late and when she was done babysitting was able to sleep on the couch in her Brother's office. This made her feel important.

What stopped this enterprise was an upset Victoria. The current Ashleigh would never forget when Victoria arrived at the club, went downstairs, and "helped" Ashleigh watch all these children. This was the last time Ashleigh ever babysat at the club. It was also the only time she ever heard her Foster Mom threaten her Brother. They often times snipped at one another but this turned into a full blown argument.

What astonished the twenty-three year old Ashleigh was her brother listened and hired a day care provider, who watched Ashleigh as well. At the time Ashleigh was told she was an assistant and her brother still paid her. Maybe a year or two later Bob shut down the club and started his manufacturing business. After this, Ashleigh ended up to be a popular babysitter for the parents at her church and in her neighborhood. To Ashleigh watching a couple kids was easy after watching ten or eleven of them. She still babysat while working at the hotel, but stopped babysitting after going into alcohol treatment.

Ashleigh finished putting on her makeup and was contemplating if she liked her hair. She noticed how tired she looked.

"You are simply working too hard," speaking out loud, "You should be in college. No. You had to be stubborn and not listen. I refuse to be stubborn again. You don't have to act like your Brother."

She felt guilty for saying this out loud.

She felt justified for being angry at her brother.

Tears started to slide down her face.

"Your makeup will run."

She took a deep breath and stopped the tears.

The feeling Bob abandoned her was terribly hurtful. The only reason she knew he was alive, was because of the telephone conversations she was having with his executive secretary Haley. Ashleigh's plan was to go down to her brother's company named *Renewed Mastery*, search his office, and find out exactly where he was. A very emotional Ashleigh threatened Haley she would accomplish this on Tuesday. What pissed Ashleigh off was when Haley told her, Bob's business partner would have her arrested for trespassing.

Ashleigh never liked Bob's partner and was more than willing to challenge him on his idea of arresting her. Ashleigh assumed if she was arrested her Brother would snap out of

whatever was bothering him and come out of hiding. There was the possibility something happened to her brother, if something did, she would do what was necessary and fight for her brother's company. There were people she worked for, who she felt, would help her gain control of her brother's company. She hated to think something horrible happened to him.

She discounted something happened to her Brother. This feeling was based upon the conversations she had with Haley. Furthermore, Ashleigh surmised Haley knew exactly where her brother was hiding. This fact angered Ashleigh. Ashleigh wanted to know why her Brother would just leave without telling her where he went. This was so unlike her brother. This hurt her dearly.

She cried.

She got a hold of herself.

She reapplied her makeup.

She looked at herself.

She was wearing just enough makeup and was satisfied on how her long, wavy, blond hair looked.

She: left the bathroom, stepped into her bedroom, went straight to her dresser, opened her jewelry box on the top of her dresser, put on a plain pair of gold earrings, a cross necklace, a plain silver necklace, two gold chain bracelets, and her wrist watch. She looked at the watch and realized she had to hurry or she would be late.

She grabbed her pink duffel bag sitting next to the dresser. In this duffel bag was her waitress uniform and the clothes she would wear when her shift was done. She left her bedroom. She opened her almost empty refrigerator and pulled out her cooler. In a hurry she dropped both the cooler and the bag.

She went back into her bedroom and looked at herself in the full length mirror.

She stopped and took a deep breath.

She pulled and adjusted her outfit.

She again looked at herself.

She ran out of the bedroom.

On the way out of her apartment building she: picked up her cooler and duffel bag, picked up her purse next to the door, took out her keys, unlocked her apartment door, she opened the door, locked the door, she made a quick left, ran down a short hallway, turned right, and headed down the stairs, her large key ring with the five key chains were jangling as she carried them in her hand, she was about to push open the big black entrance door, and this is when she stopped.

She exclaimed, "You dummy!"

She: ran back up the stairs, she made a quick left, ran down the short hallway, turned right, when she reached her door she unlocked it, went inside her apartment, she set down her things in front of the door, ran into her bedroom, she quickly knelt down and began to look through the pile of shoes on her closet floor. After comparing and contrasting a bunch of pairs she narrowed her choices to two pairs. The one pair was a black sandal and the other was a Wolford brown. Trying to go as fast as she could she headed to her front door, still holding onto her shoes she bent down and grabbed all her stuff in front of her open door, and was about to close the door when the phone rang.

The answering machine caught the caller; "Ashleigh it's Mike. I need a payment. I'll work with you one last time. Lori from *Wonderful Hair* told me your car broke down again.

Just call me and I will work with you.” He paused, “I know your a good girl. Call me as soon as possible.” The machine started to beep telling her there was a message on her machine.

Ashleigh sighed and in frustration went to the answering machine and deleted the message. She wanted to pay off her land lord but she needed to pay the large energy bill. The only reason her electricity was still on was because of a Wisconsin state law. The law forbid the electric and gas company from turning off anyone's heat or electricity between October and April. She hoped to God she would receive her tax return money. She hated using her tax return for the electric bill. Her original plan was to use her tax return to get caught up on her rent.

She had to block this out of her mind.

Running late: she swung her purse over her shoulder and across her breasts, she grabbed her bag and cooler with one hand and her two pair of shoes in the other, and managed to lock her door.

She took a breath.

She made a quick left, walked down a short hallway, turned right, headed down the stairs, and pushed open the big black metal door. She was on the sidewalk of Apple View Street of Falls Town Wisconsin. This was one of two main streets which made up the small “historic” downtown of the largest village in the state of Wisconsin. If traffic was in her favor she could make it to downtown Milwaukee in about a half hour. She looked at her watch. She knew if she left now she would make the half hour, if she left ten minutes from now the drive could take as long as an hour.

She looked up and turned right. She walked in front of her building. She walked past the hair salon *Wonderful Hair*, which was directly underneath her apartment. She walked past the sports memorabilia store, this store was underneath the apartment across from her. She made a right, passed a wire garbage can the village permanently cemented into the ground; it was next to the municipal lot and left of the building. In this municipal lot she spotted her rusted, white, Toyota Corolla.

Seeing her car she exclaimed, “Dammit.”

The tenants who lived in the apartments were to park their car in one of two back lots after the tattoo parlor closed. The previous day she only worked at her primary job so she parked her car in the municipal lot and was going to move it after the tattoo parlor closed. Instead of moving the car she fell asleep on the couch. When she woke up: she turned off the news on her TV, she stumbled into her bedroom, changed into her sleep clothes, and went to bed forgetting she needed to move her car. She could have purchased a monthly parking pass for fifty dollars a month, with Ashleigh's tight budget she was unwilling to purchase this pass. As she walked toward her car she hoped the police would have ignored her car but underneath the windshield wipers was a parking ticket. Being disgusted with herself she took the ticket out from the wipers. She: unlocked her car, threw the duffel bag in the back seat, she set her purse and cooler on the front passenger seat, and tossed her shoes in front of the passenger seat. She looked at her shoes unsure of which pair of shoes she wanted to wear. Ashleigh leaned over and shoved the parking ticket into the glove box; and out of complete frustration slammed the glove box door. She then slammed the passenger side door; rust fell off the door.

She sighed.

When she marched herself around the car to the drivers side she hoped her car would start. She opened the drivers side door and sat in the drivers seat.

She closed her eyes and hoped.

When she opened them she looked up at her many different colored beads and her multicolored crystal cross hanging from her rear view mirror. She stuck the key into the ignition, she started the car, relieved she put the car into reverse, the car moved two inches, and then the car stalled. This was frustrating but this happened on a regular basis.

She yelled at the car, "Its sixty degrees. If it was cold I'd understand you stopping. Don't mess with me."

She turned the key again.

A clicking noise.

"NO!"

Tears of frustration came down her face.

In a calm manner she reminded herself, "Don't cry or your makeup will run."

She tried starting the car again and again she heard the clicking noise.

She tried a different approach with the car, "Honey. I'm sorry for yelling at you. Could you please work?"

She prayed silently.

She again tried to start the car and all she heard was the clicking noise.

In exasperation she put her head against the wheel of the car and started to cry.

It took her a few minutes to gain her composure. The only option was to take the Express Bus which ran on a limited basis from Falls Town to downtown Milwaukee. She would have to go back upstairs and call her employer and tell them she would be late. The worst part about taking the bus was after her waitress job she would have to get a ride home. She was fortunate there was a bus that ran from downtown Milwaukee to her waitress job in Brookside. Knowing how her parents felt about her waitress job she hoped a friend would drive her from the restaurant home.

She collected her things from inside her car. After getting out of the car she yelled in a fit of rage, "Someone should steal you. You piece of shit!"

She slammed the door so hard a chunk of rust came off the door. She was ashamed of her own behavior. She took a deep calming breath. She restrained herself from crying. She disliked the fact her first response to any stressful or upsetting situation was to cry.

Growing up the two people who understood why her first response was to cry was her big sister Patty and Victoria. The other person who was comforting to her when she cried was her past boyfriend Neil.

More tears fell.

Standing there she felt all of the emotions related to her past boyfriend Neil. At first she felt a longing to have him back. Neil was the best guy she ever dated. He was kind, polite, would open doors for her, was there for her when she felt stressed, and was respectful. Of the three men she slept with he was by far the best sexual partner. He took his time and actually cared about her satisfaction. Ashleigh appreciated how rare this was. The other part of Neil she liked was he worked very hard at furthering his Engineering career and she admired the fact he worked a second job at the only country western night club in Milwaukee. His dedication to school and engineering led him to receiving a job offer in Seattle Washington.

She reminded herself on why she let him go to Seattle Washington. Determined to stay sober she was finding his increased drinking and his drunk friends very taxing. She was growing impatient with the fact his drinking was increasing. Twice she took care of him

when he became drunk; she felt this was twice to many. The worst part about his drinking was he became agitated easier. What was a huge concern was the last time he was drunk he blamed her for his drinking, then the next day apologized, and promised to never drink again. Two days later he was drinking. She warned him if he ever became drunk again she would break up with him or he would have to go to treatment.

Ashleigh respected people who admitted to an addiction and lived a clean lifestyle after. This was the only reason she gave Neil another chance. Her Foster Dad confessed to her he was a recovering alcoholic and found quieting difficult. What kept him sober was his faith. Blake's personal example of being sober and his encouragement helped Ashleigh stay sober. Ashleigh hoped Neil was one of those people who would see where his life was headed, would accept the strength God could give him, and would turn his life around. Blake pointed out to Ashleigh, how all the people he knew who turned the corner from any addiction refused to live in denial. Unfortunately or fortunately; Neil assumed he was fine and treatment was unnecessary. Ashleigh was ready for the one more time he would become drunk. She felt relieved when he moved to Seattle before she would have to deal with this one last time. With Neil moving she was learning how to live a life on her own without being obsessed with needing a man in her life. During the year and a half since Neil's departure she recognized she was missing the dancing and the things they did together more than Neil himself. Being honest with herself she missed the sexual relationship she had with Neil and wanted to have sex with someone other than herself. She reminded herself of two personal promises. She would only date a man with the same Christian faith as hers and the next time she had sex was after her wedding night.

Ashleigh felt she learned a valuable lessons with the three men she had sex with. Having sex was not a magical cure to fix a guy; this was a difficult lesson to learn. A difficult lesson to learn was just because she sexually gave herself away there was no guarantee he would love her for it. Sex often times fell short of her expectations. The biggest lesson, sex would never fill the void of never knowing who her real father was. She accepted the fact she had two adopted earthly fathers. One was Blake, and the other was her Brother Bob, neither were perfect but they loved her like a father should.

Feeling a special kinship with her Brother caused many hurts to bubble up. She was worried about her Brother. She pushed all of these emotions aside.

She would have to focus on getting to work by the bus.

Victoria was wearing her favorite brick colored velour jogging outfit. An outfit she only wore around the house.

She was thank-full she was alive at fifty-five years of age and was extremely grateful she was starting to feel healthy again. She was struggling with the feeling she was less of a woman. She was deeply grateful for her husband of thirty-six years who stood by her during her sickness and still loved her even after her breasts were removed. What was deeply touching to Victoria was all three of her daughters surrounded her when it was far from certain she would survive Christmas. This past Christmas proved her families love to her.

She smiled at the feeling she was loved and took a sip of her coffee.

From where she was sitting she could look through the sliding glass doors of her kitchen. She was watching the families two golden retrievers Ariel and Guinevere. She recalled

on how Victoria and Felicia picked out Guinevere at a pet store and Blake picked out Ariel at the local human society. On Ashleigh's thirteenth birthday she received these dogs. Once this mistake was made turning back was impossible. The reason Ashleigh received these dogs for her birthday was because Belle, the mutt that replaced Maxine, passed away a month before Ashleigh's birthday. Belle was Victoria's favorite dog of the four. The reason Victoria liked Belle was it was smart, it listened well, but mostly it was a key to Ashleigh becoming the woman she was today. Even though Maxine, the old temperamental dog before Belle, was her least favorite dog; Victoria would never forget how the dog saved Ashleigh from being kidnapped. Her thoughts went back to Belle and she smiled. Victoria was convinced Belle taught Ashleigh how to be a friend but more important Belle was Ashleigh's constant friend.

Based upon Ashleigh's relationship with these four dogs and any dog she came in contact with, Victoria believed she should become a veterinarian. The last time they discussed Ashleigh's situation Victoria suggested to Ashleigh she should become a nurse. Ashleigh vehemently disagreed with this career choice. As Victoria sat at the kitchen table she was trying to decide on how she should approach and convince her daughter to move back home and finish college. The only stipulation to living at home was she needed to finish college and have a part time job. She hoped this would stop Ashleigh from working at the worst restaurant imaginable.

Victoria blamed this on Bob's influence. She secretly wished he would remain a hermit and never return. As a Christian she felt guilty for thinking this way. She knew every day Bob stayed away without contacting Ashleigh was one more day Ashleigh would worry about her Brother. She was sure he faked his little breakdown and was far from hiding. She believed he was way too stubborn to abandon his company or Ashleigh. Victoria wished for everyone's sake he would have abandoned Shelly Roth.

The distaste for Shelly began way before Bob and Shelly were friends. Holly was Shelly's mother and was showing up at Victoria's home Bible study even before Shelly and Bob met. It was a regular occurrence for the ladies of the Bible study to give Holly encouragement. Many of these women, including Holly, all felt at one time or another Shelly would land in jail or end up dead. Even if they all felt this way; any time Holly asked these ladies to pray for Shelly they always did. So when Victoria and Holly recognized Ashleigh was talking about Holly's daughter this concerned Holly and Victoria. Their concern increased when Shelly began to run events in his club and Shelly was hanging around Bob and Ashleigh outside of the club. The situation in Victoria's mind worsened when her daughter started to look up to this rebellious young woman.

At the time Victoria already felt the situation was becoming dreadful. She never liked the fact Ashleigh spent so much time at Bob's club. Victoria felt the dancing lessons were positive. What bothered her was the bar and many of the music acts and plays Bob allowed Ashleigh to see. Their worry increased when Blake and Victoria found out about the Burlesque show. Bob assured them Ashleigh was never allowed to see the show. Victoria believed him. What she detested was the idea her daughter was watching children while their mothers performed as strippers; while she was trying her best to train her daughter how to be a lady. Victoria felt these women would be a horrible influence. If Bob would have allowed Ashleigh to continue to babysit all those children by herself Blake and Victoria would have tried to change the visitation schedule. Like other concerns they had during Bob's visitations, Bob compromised by hiring a woman Victoria knew to watch these children; while making sure

Ashleigh felt as though she was an assistant. Victoria was relieved when a short time later Bob sold the club to a couple dance instructors. What was bothersome was Bob and Shelly continued to see one another and Shelly went back to dancing at Vegas style clubs.

The one positive to the babysitting was Ashleigh became the premier babysitter for families around the neighborhood and at church. This lasted until Ashleigh started to work at the hotel. Even then she could have continued to babysit but Victoria stopped promoting her daughter when she noticed she was starting to drink.

This was a horrible time for Victoria. She very rarely thought about the details of this time period. Any time she did she would pray her daughter never drank again and thanked God her family was able to get through it all. She was extremely thankful her daughter was still sober.

Victoria took a sip of her coffee.

Contemplating her daughters present day situation she was completely disgusted with Ashleigh's second job. Victoria was trying to convince herself the uniform Ashleigh was wearing was exactly like an orange and white swimsuit. This was simply an impossible task. Victoria and Blake assumed their daughter was worse off than she was letting on. They felt they needed to intervene and present their daughter with a better alternative. Overall they were tired of seeing her endlessly struggle and not get anywhere.

Victoria was feeling guilty for kicking her out when she dropped out of college. Victoria felt this was the hardest decision they made as parents. At the time Ashleigh raved about wanting to live in the real world. She complained about the professors and how ignorant they were. Both Blake and Victoria tried to explain to her she felt this way because of her life experience so far, but the degree would help her live fully in the real world. They reminded her how hard she worked in college to get the grades she was getting. Victoria and Blake believed, to be taken seriously in the fields she was choosing a degree was necessary; Ashleigh disagreed. What angered Blake and Victoria was when she pretended to go to college even though she already dropped out. This is when they agreed she needed to find out what the real world was actually like. Their hope was after a short time she would ask to move back home and finish her degree. Victoria was convinced the reason this never happened was the Waller family trait of stubbornness. A lesser person would have given up. A part of Victoria admired Ashleigh's efforts and the other half was frustrated her daughter would fight on without asking to move back home.

Victoria was reviewing what happened after she left the house. Ashleigh found a receptionist job at a local factory and took on a second job working at a gas station. Blake told Victoria this local factory installed and supplied equipment for Bob's company. This irritated Victoria on many levels. Ashleigh took this experience and found the job at the insurance company. This was working out well until the gas station was bought out by an Arab couple who decided to run the gas station themselves. Then her car started to break down and her roommate moved out without notice. Victoria hoped this was enough difficulty for her daughter to move back home and finish school.

Victoria felt, part of the reluctance of her daughter moving back home, was the loss of her daughters personal freedom. On Blake's suggestion he was prepared to build Ashleigh what was in essence a small apartment in the basement where the family area was. This was in the same place he wanted to add more train tables. Blake's plan was to put in a full sized bathroom with a small shower, he would build her a small living room, with brand new

electric outlets, a bedroom large enough to fit a full sized bed, and he would install two closets. Blake would make sure she could easily get out of the basement windows in case of a fire.

What frustrated Victoria was her brother was pushing her to finish college while he was unwilling to help her. The idea of Bob helping Ashleigh go back to school was a two edged sword. Just the thought of Bob made Victoria's face contort with frustration and contempt.

She again wondered if she should have stopped the visitations.

She took a sip of her coffee.

Blake and Victoria felt pulling them apart would have hurt Ashleigh a great deal and in turn would have hurt their relationship with her Daughter. The relationship between Bob and themselves was difficult enough. There were many talks with Bob. Victoria reluctantly admitted he listened and many times would proposed compromises.

She was still watching the two dogs in her backyard.

What bothered Victoria the most was he hurt two of her daughters the day Bob and Patty broke up. After the break up Victoria felt the emotional trauma on two fronts. Patty was devastated they called off the engagement, even though Patty thought it was the best thing for both of them. The hardest front to deal with was Ashleigh's shattered dream of her brother marrying Patty.

Victoria finished her coffee.

Victoria felt what changed Bob was a series of events beyond Bob's control. The first event was when his real Dad chose Ashley Vindavane over Amanda and himself. The second event was when his first high school sweetheart ended her life after being raped by her father; there was some question if the three month baby she was carrying was Bob's or the fathers. The last event was when Amanda's life ended in a tragic car accident. Victoria was certain Amanda's death and the death of his first girlfriend in high school affected every area of his life.

She went over everything Ashley Vindavane put everyone through. Instead of being angry she forgave this woman.

Victoria: finished her coffee, she stood up, she rinsed out the coffee cup, set this cup into the dishwasher, and stood at her counter. She decided after bringing in her dogs she would take a nap. She knew she needed to go grocery shopping but decided she would wait until Felicia arrived home.

The only time she liked leaving the house was when her family was with her.

Ashleigh took a deep breath.

She closed her eyes.

A vehicle pulled up behind her.

In the morning the municipal lot was always busy. There were apartments on either side of this lot. Across from this municipal lot was a twenty-four hour diner. The street in between the lot and this diner was Apple Street, one of the busiest streets in all of Falls Town. The mornings were the restaurants busiest time. At the rear entrance of this municipal lot was a four corner intersection. The only one way street in Falls Town ran parallel of the building Ashleigh lived in. Going right from this entrance the road led to Main Street, going left the street went behind a string of downtown businesses and ended at a suburban street. Across the street and on the right side of this intersection; it was impossible to miss the bank parking

lot, the large drive thru, and the largest bank in Falls town. In front of this parking lot was the street directly in front of the entrance of the lot. The street went slightly to its left, then went down to another street. This street ran parallel of the river. On the left corner of this street was a large suburban house, a car parts store, and a row of houses. On the right side were more than one entrance to the parking lot. On the road running parallel of the river was a park.

She opened her eyes and glanced over her right shoulder.

Pulling up behind her was a red colored small SUV. Ashleigh knew it was a Ford by the symbol attached to the grill. Based upon this vehicles shine and black bottom trim this was a brand new top of the line model. The driver gave her a large amount of space. He ignored the yellow lines and irritated more than one person by parking in a way to block out two spaces.

She immediately took interest in what she felt was an adorable puppy. She loved this husky's big bright blue eyes. It's white paws were resting on the back passenger side door, its tongue was hanging out, and its nose was making an imprint on the window. She liked the black patch on top of its head; it reminded Ashleigh of a hat. Being excited the puppy jumped onto the front passenger seat and looked at her through the passenger window. It was obvious the puppy wanted to greet her. Ashleigh thought about the song Nikita, by *Elton John*. She was unsure of why this song came into her mind.

The front driver's side door opened.

Ashleigh felt a strong wave of conflicting emotions.

Bob her: older half brother, a person she loved, was the same person who disappeared for six months, was making an attempt to step out of his brand new Ford Escape.

She closely watched him: stop the puppy from jumping out of the SUV, close the vehicle door, he took a couple steps to his left, and he spoke over the hood of his brand new vehicle, "Greetings my sister."

"That's all you can say?"

"I..."

Shacking she interrupted him, "How dare you abandon me! You promised me you'd never abandon me."

"I'm perplexed."

"Why are you perplexed?"

"It was never my intention for you to feel abandoned. I was of the persuasion you'd understand my intentions. I was of the general belief you were capable of living without my assistance."

Based upon his facial expressions and his body language he truly believed this mess. In spite of how dumbfounded this sounded, knowing her brother, she heard the compliment as well.

She made a face, "Why wouldn't you feel I'd need to hear from you? Huh? Even if I didn't need your help I wouldn't have minded a call."

He squinted his eyes, "In reflection I might've had an erroneous idea."

"And what is that idea?"

"I assumed. Unless you heard otherwise You'd have believed I was being prosperous."

A clump load of sarcastic answers filled her mind. Along with five impulsive ideas. Only one seemed even remotely mature.

In an angry tone she spoke, "When you find my brother I'd like to talk to him. The one who cares enough to call me and tell me he's doing alright."

She turned around and headed back to her apartment.

She stopped with tears coming down her face, turned around and spoke again, "It's the worse thing you've ever done to me."

She again turned and headed back to her apartment. At this moment she was so upset she considered calling both employers and telling them she was sick. It would have been the first time she ever missed a scheduled day of work.

At thirty-seven years old Bob took her outburst in stride.

"Ashleigh. Please wait. I have something to discuss with you."

Ashleigh reluctantly stopped.

She closed her eyes.

She was feeling an overwhelming amount of hurt and a feeling of relief her brother was okay.

She heard him walk up to her. He gently stepped in front of her and asked, "As a gentleman I'd like to carry a few of those items for you?"

She restrained herself from saying something sarcastic.

Ashleigh studied her brother's face. His dark wavy hair was cut short and looked nice. He appeared to have gained ten pounds. She liked his new pair of glasses. His new glasses were rounded on the bottom and were straight across the top. She found this pair far more respectable than the bohemian round glasses he was wearing before he disappeared. She was deeply grateful he shaved off his annoying beard and mustache; she despised the beard. What concerned Ashleigh was how different his brown eyes seemed. What was even more bothersome was his unique smile was gone. What was stressing to Ashleigh was at this moment she was unable to read his facial expression.

"You broke a promise." Ashleigh stated breaking the loud silence as she gently gave Bob her duffel bag. She was starting to tear, "You never broke a personal promise to me. You could have been dead. What then? Huh?" She looked at him and rolled her eyes. Her arms were flailing as she spoke, "This is the most selfish and arrogant thing you ever pulled. There are so many people counting on you and you just decide to take a stroll away from everything. Why? Huh?"

Her angry tone concealed her hurt.

People passing by were staring at them.

"What's worse is you broke the most important one."

She could feel the tears and makeup running down her face.

It was painfully obvious his Beloved Baby Sister was as hurt as he feared.

"Where were you these last five months?" She retorted. "No one knows where you've been. You just show up and say, 'Greetings my sister.'" She paused looked at him and in a very sarcastic and mocking tone spoke to her brother, "Greetings my brother."

She gained her composure.

Very somber, with tears, she repeated, "You abandoned me."

Since Ashleigh was two years old she looked forward to Bob being there for her. At one time she fantasized about Patty and Bob being her full time parents. There were times when she considered moving in with him. Being older she was grateful she stayed with her Foster Parents. She recalled: all the camping trips, the times he encouraged her when she was taking dancing lessons, and those times he told her she could accomplish anything. The one moment which stood above the rest, was when she was nine, and he stood against her real mom Ashley

Vindavane.

Instead of using the situation to get custody of Ashleigh, Bob supported Victoria and Blake, and testified in court. He went into detail about the bruises Ashleigh received while under Ashley Vindavane's care. He testified on how terrified Ashleigh was to move back. He brought with him photographs of Ashley Vindavane stumbling out of different bars and clubs. Along with these pictures he captured her regularly coming in and out of a liquor store. This went against everything Ashley Vindavane was saying about herself. On Bob's own expense he flew in a mother and daughter from Ohio. They testified on how Ashley's new fiancée molested all four of his children; three girls and the youngest boy. (Right after the hearing US Marshals put this man into handcuffs and took him back to Ohio.) Ashleigh was forever grateful her Foster Parents and her Brother kept herself from being molested again. It was bad enough her Step Dad and a boyfriend of Ashley Vindavane both touched her inappropriately. Ashleigh often wondered what would have happened to her if she continued to live with her Mommy and the four different Step Dads. She was grateful to never spend a moment with the other three.

For the longest time she wondered why her real Dad never loved her. It took treatment for her to realize it was her Real Dad's fault for never showing her any interest. In her real Dad's place she ended up with a very loving and trustworthy foster dad and a step brother. It took these honorable men to make up for the one dad who abandon her. Her real mom was a lying drunk, basket case, but she ended up with a Foster Mom who loved her more than a team of real mom's.

What Bob said next shocked Ashleigh, "I do apologize for my error. I should have considered your feelings and understood no matter how mature you are. I've made a fatal error believing you didn't need to hear from me."

Based upon this last comment she knew he was keeping track of her.

Ashleigh considered her Brother to be the strongest willed person she knew. Because of his: strength, creativity, intelligence, determination, stubbornness, and his ability to do the opposite of everyone else; he accomplished everything he intended. Ashleigh could tell her Brother was shaken by the tone he used when he said, "*I do apologize*". Ninety-nine percent of the population would have missed this tone; Ashleigh caught it. The implication of this tone caught Ashleigh off guard and worried her.

With this concern she regained her composure and asked, "Why did you leave?"

She started to clean the makeup off her face with her fingers.

"Is your car broken down again?"

Ashleigh made a face, "We've just fixed the stupid thing. Dad and I are trying to get a loan for a new car."

"I have important business downtown. I'll drive you to your place of business. On the way we'll discuss what appears to be my disappearance."

Ashleigh gave him a face.

He turned around, "This will benefit both of us."

She was about to tell him she preferred the bus. She hated the bus ride. The infuriating part was he was walking all her things to his new vehicle.

She reluctantly followed him. She studied the clothes he was wearing. He was wearing simple brown shoes, dark brown Docker khaki's, a blackberry button shirt, and a purple striped tie. These clothes bothered Ashleigh. She wanted her brother to wear fitted suits or

more upscale clothing.

She stopped him before he opened the back passenger side door, "You have a meeting?"

He managed a smile.

She witnessed this one before.

"You could say it's a meeting of sorts."

She recognized the tone, "What's going on?"

"Since you are my Sister and there will be an announcement later. I'm involved in a corporate takeover."

"Your company is being taken over?"

Ashleigh; working for a company that specialized in corporate takeovers, and protecting companies from takeovers, was surprised she never heard about *Renewed Mastery* being taken over.

He chuckled and with a look of fearlessness asked, "Do you truly believe I'd allow my company to be taken over?"

His overconfidence annoyed her.

"It's possible."

"I'll never allow anyone to take over any of my companies."

She made a face.

She was digging in her purse and found her mirror and a Kleenex to fix her makeup.

"As a matter of fact. Instead of *Renewed Mastery* being taken over I'll be acquiring four companies. Each one will advance the company and move product. My personal actions will save countless jobs."

Ashleigh believed her brother. Her brother tried to keep as many employees as possible, when this was impossible *Renewed Mastery* always provided a very fair severance package. Most employees after their company was acquired by *Renewed Mastery*, preferred to work for her Brother. There were always exceptions, there were always a group from every company who struggled with her Brother's business philosophy. Being his sister she knew he gave everyone fair warning about any changes. Those managers and workers who were able to accept her Brothers vision of business were ultimately blessed with: more pay, better working conditions, and their places of business becoming far more efficient.

Ashleigh knew for a fact, her Brother believed in retraining and creating an atmosphere of change and efficiency. There were four exceptions to his rule of retraining and keeping an employee. The first exception was the accounting department. Her brother hated to retrain accountants. He quickly became annoyed at any accountant who's temperament was to make policy or try to manage other departments. The other way an accountant lost his job was those accountants who came running into his office, in what her Brother termed; a panic attack. The biggest pet peeve of her brother was when an accountant would get hung up on a small detail while missing the big picture. Ashleigh knew of only one accountant he kept from any of his corporate takeovers. This accountant was now the vice president of accounting. The rumor was, this accountant was about to be fired by the company Bob acquired. This accountant was about to be fired because he was honest and was frustrated with the "tried and true" methods of the company Bob bought. The second department her brother had little patience for was marketing. This was a love hate relationship. He felt marketing was important but often grew tired of their reactive mindset and the reliance on numbers. What Bob wanted were people who wanted to become the trend setters instead of the trend

followers (Ashleigh knew this was a made up word but it was one everyone in the company knew). The quickest way a person would loose their job in marketing was to have a formulaic mindset. The third employee her brother had little patience for was any mid-manager who believed in the “status qua.” One of the quickest ways for anyone to get fired at her Brothers company was to hold to the idea of “*the tried and true is the best way.*” The forth way, which was a huge pet peeve of her Brother, was to have anyone or any department rely on overtime instead of looking for a more efficient process. The quickest way for her Brother to stop having a hands off policy in a department or departments was when he witnessed a consistent amount of overtime.

Ashleigh mentioned, while looking at herself in her mirror, “If you are going to an important meeting why are you dressed the way you are?”

He smiled, “Why do I need to be fashionable? Everyone knows who I am.”

“You make all your executives wear suits.”

He smiled, “I want them to look their best...”

Interrupting she asked, “What about you?”

He snickered, “I’ll represent myself any way I choose.”

Ashleigh stopped wiping off her makeup and answered him with a statement he hated, “So what you are saying is they should do as you say and not as you do?”

“I would never hold to such a primitive and backward philosophy.”

Ashleigh answered, “But your not wearing a suit. You make your executives wear them.”

She gave him a face.

Bob would consider this.

Ashleigh heard the dog howl. She finished removing all her runny makeup. She put away her mirror and Kleenex and decided she would reapply her make up later. She walked over to the Ford Escape.

“You’ll have to be careful handling her.”

In complete sarcasm she asked, “Why?”

“She likes to jump out of the vehicle.”

Ashleigh asked, “Who’s she?”

Bob answered, “The husky.”

Emphasizing the word she, Ashleigh turned toward her brother, “Does SHE have a name?”

“Who?”

“The puppy.”

“I was using the philosophy of some Native American’s and name the dog after it’s personality.”

“You can’t do that.”

He answered with some sophistication, “As the owner of the dog I’m able to name the animal in any manner I so choose.”

“What have you been calling her?”

“She or her.”

Ashleigh purposely gave him a look of dismay, and scolded him, “She will think her name is she. The dog is to cute to be named she.”

Right after Ashleigh said this she opened the back passenger side door. The Siberian

Husky jumped from the front seat into the back. Before her brother could set Ashleigh's things into the back of the Escape the dog was trying to get into Ashleigh's arms. Ashleigh set her purse down. Ashleigh reached out with one hand, gently pushed the puppy's butt down, and stated with a firm tone, "Sit."

The puppy looked up at Ashleigh and wagged her tail.

"Now Nikita," stated Ashleigh in a calm voice, "You need to stay. Once you stay I'll pick you up."

Ashleigh stood up.

Bob observed his sister in silent reverence.

Nikita was found Best Friend. Nikita liked Male Human who played with her, fed her, but he was different. Nikita felt connected to Best Friend.

Ashleigh looked at the cute puppy and reached her arms out and commanded, "Come."

The puppy was unsure of this noise.

Ashleigh moved forward and said the word "Come" and gently picked her up. Nikita was wagging her tail, and started to lick Ashleigh's face. Ashleigh pet her and started to talk to Nikita, "You are the cutest little thing." Ashleigh changed her voice to be both sarcastic and nice, "Has my big brother been mean to you?"

The puppy was clueless as to what these noises were. Nikita felt at ease and safe with Best Friend. Nikita was wagging her tail as fast as she could.

Ashleigh lifted Nikita up and the two looked at one another, she let the puppy lick her face, and cradled Nikita in one arm. Her tail was still wagging back and forth, its front white paws were hanging over Ashleigh's arm.

"She has a tendency to jump."

Bob warned as he put his sister's things in the back and picked up her purse.

Ashleigh gave her brother a look of disbelief and stated, "She seems fine to me. She's a good girl."

Ashleigh loved the puppy's blue eyes.

Its tail was wagging.

"Your a good girl?"

Nikita felt the love from Best Friend.

Ashleigh again gently cradled Nikita.

Ashleigh waited for Bob.

Bob: closed the back passenger door, opened the front door for his sister, handed the purse over, and shut the door after she sat in the vehicle.

The driver's side door opened and Bob stepped in.

Ashleigh informed him, "I'll need to call in and tell them I'll be late."

"You are more than welcomed to use my cell phone."

"Where is it?"

He put on his seat belt and shut the driver's side door.

From off the counsel, in between the two seats, he handed her his phone.

Just by its appearance she knew it was an awesome phone.

Nikita wanted to play and bite the phone.

"No Nikita," Ashleigh scolded gently, Ashleigh gently took her fingers and kept Nikita's mouth closed and commanded, "No Bite."

"I feel I should be the one to name my pet."

"You didn't name her."

Nikita started to whimper.

"No bite," and Ashleigh released her hand. Nikita was about to sit up and play with the phone again, "Lay down."

Ashleigh gently made Nikita lay on her lap.

Nikita was unsure of what "Lay down" meant but knew by the noises she made and by the direction of her hands. Nikita obeyed because she wanted to please Best Friend.

Ashleigh called her employer.

Bob listened to the conversation.

Ashleigh explained to Mr. White how her car broke down and her Brother would be taking her to work. She was loudly reprimanded. His voice was loud enough for Bob to hear every word Mr. White spoke to her. What crawled under Bob's skin was when Mr. White said she was a horrible employee and even threatened to terminate her. Mr. White recommended she choose between the bus or get a new car. When she was done with the conversation she placed the phone back.

She felt belittled and was less than motivated to go to work.

Bob asked more like a business owner than her Brother, "Are you consistently being tardy?"

"This is my third time," she made a face and confessed, "Many times I'm down to the wire."

He took note of this.

"Before I drive you to work may we discuss your part time waitress job."

"No."

Ashleigh felt her face turn red.

There was silence in the vehicle.

Bob noticed her embarrassment, "Instead of taking on a second job. Especially at a place a sister of mine should never find herself. Why didn't you ask for my help?"

"How could I?"

They looked at one another.

"You were gone for five months," this comment was filled with hurt and defensiveness. She added, "I'm behind since my roommate left. I need a second job just to make it."

There was a pause.

Before he could ask a question, she answered, "I have a friend I work with who is looking for a roommate she could move in a couple weeks. Once she moves in I'll stop working at the restaurant."

"Is she a trustworthy friend?"

Ashleigh answered matter of fact, "I don't have much of a choice."

She assumed he would tell her to go back to college and move in with her Foster Parents.

Avoiding her brother's commentary she asked, "Have you heard from Shelly?"

Bob made a face.

Ashleigh could see the hurt but felt compelled to ask anyway, "When did you last see her?"

"Two Christmas's ago," Bob replied meekly. "It's obvious she's moved and has an unlisted phone number."

Ashleigh doing the math in her mind knew this was a few months after the third time he proposed to her. Ashleigh loved Shelly like a sister but knew her Brother needed to move on. What she loathed, were those women who were more attracted to her Brothers money, than truly loving her Brother. Ashleigh wanted her Brother to find: a strong, loyal, honest, woman who could have cared less about money, and would love him for who he was. She hoped and prayed they'd be companions for the rest of their lives. What she worried about was her Brother marrying to two or three gold diggers and end up dying alone.

"I've resigned myself to the fact I'm unlucky in finding a delightful woman."

She heard his disappointment, she felt sorry for him, but recognized his own attitudes were part of the reason he was single.

Making a point, Ashleigh reluctantly stated, "You should have married Patty."

He answered this comment with frustration, "If she wouldn't have gone to Africa we'd still be together."

Ashleigh reminded him, "She wanted you to go with her."

Pointing at the vehicles counsel, "Together we'd have done great things. She didn't need to go traveling around the world to accomplish great things. She hears one missionary begging for money and all at once she feels she should reach the less fortunate in Africa. She starts saying it'd heal me and help our relationship."

Ashleigh detested his tone and his body language.

"Everyone feels..."

Interrupting, "Are repeating what you heard others say? My calling is right here. I'm tired of people thinking the only way a person is fulfilling what God wants is participating in some religious activity."

Ashleigh sneered at him, "Stop being angry with God."

"I'm not angry with the good Lord."

"Then understand she's doing what God wants her to do."

He became silent.

Ashleigh continued, "When she came back home from Africa she kept reaching out to you and all you did is put up walls."

"If she stayed here instead of breaking off the engagement we could have worked everything out." Bob looked frustrated and stated, "How come I can't find someone who will want to work things out?"

This statement annoyed Ashleigh, "So what is your excuse with Shelly?"

Staring at him, she could read the conflict in his eyes.

"What the hell is the matter with you two anyway?"

Bob answered matter of fact, "If I had an answer I'd have solved the problem."

She suggested, "Next time don't write a national best seller about a personal love affair. This isn't a way to warm a woman's heart. A woman doesn't want to have all her business be put into a novel. What was worse is you killed her at the end of it."

"Are you referring to *The Dancer*?"

"What else do you think I'm referring too? You know dam well the *Dancer* was about Shelly."

"I'm not understanding why you would accuse me of writing a book about our friendship."

This was a pet peeve of hers.

"Let's review," a very perturbed Ashleigh stated, "You named the book *Dancer*. It's about a woman who falls in love with an owner of a club. This owner doesn't feel comfortable with this woman stripping. He wants to break it off with her. Oh, but he can't. They have steamy passionate sex while telling themselves and everyone else they were friends. The owner of the club asks her to marry him a couple of times. Tries to get her to go to treatment. Does this sound familiar?"

She observed him crinkled his face.

"Your being like so many others who are drawing a false connection between a novel and what appears to be my real life. It's perplexing anyone could draw such a conclusion."

Ashleigh was astounded at her brother's sincerity.

"Everyone one of us. Who ends up in your books draws this conclusion." With an angry looking face she stated, "Next time you put me into one of your books would you ask my permission first? Wait? Why not just put me in each one of your books and deny I was in them."

He asked very honestly, "Why do you keep insisting I'm putting you into my books? I purposely avoid putting anyone I have known in my works of fiction."

She glared at him.

She wondered if she ended up in his books on purpose or if it was truly a subconscious act. She wanted to believe he was being honest with her. Other times she believed his denial was a ruse. Either way; being in his books irritated her.

She looked down and pet Nikita.

Ashleigh spoke matter of fact, "I have to get to work."

He: glanced over at her, he started the engine, he turned behind him, he waited as a car passed his new vehicle, he headed toward the back entrance, he stopped, he made a left turn on the only one way street in Falls Town, and he glanced at the content puppy laying on Ashleigh's lap.

He felt compelled to ask, "How did you manage to get her to settle down?"

An agitated Ashleigh asked, "Manage what?"

She was trying to tune him out for a few minutes. She was upset on how he talked about her foster sister Patty and her "adopted" sister Shelly.

"Manage to keep her quiet and still."

Ashleigh snapped, "It's not she. Her name is Nikita. Nikita is resting."

He stated, "It's my dog."

Ashleigh stated matter of fact, "She isn't happy with you."

"If you look at the papers on the dashboard you'll see I purchased her."

"This is irrelevant," Ashleigh stated with some bravado, "She's an animal and doesn't care who purchased her. She's now my dog."

"She howls and whimpers all night."

She glared at him and wondered why her brother would even try to be a dog owner. "It's a Siberian Husky, why wouldn't it howl?"

"I was informing you she howls. I wasn't sure you were familiar with this type of dogs behavior."

She rolled her eyes, "Don't you remember my neighbor?"

"It seems I've forgotten you lived next to a husky."

Based upon his facial expression, she could tell he clearly remembered how much she

enjoyed the neighbors dogs. She squinted her eyes. It was obvious her brother was plotting something.

"Patty asked how you were doing and was worried about you."

"Did she come back from India to help take care of Victoria?"

"Yes."

Bob glanced at her. They were waiting at a set of stop lights.

He asked, "I thought she was married?"

"She is married to a real nice Canadian guy named Isaac. They are practicing missionaries in India. I met him a couple times. He's very friendly and Mom likes him."

She was aware this was a low blow but she was paying him back for the tone he just took.

"I'm delighted Patty found someone."

Ashleigh responded in sincerity, "Maybe Patty is adult enough to look beyond the past. Maybe just like all of the Anderson family we want you to be the person you could be."

Bob glanced over at her sister.

Ashleigh was scratching Nikita's head on top of the black patch.

He asked, "Why are you mentioning all this to me?"

"I was hoping you'd forgive Patty."

"I've forgiven her a long time ago."

Ashleigh very gently asked, "Have you forgiven God for moving her away from you?"

He remained silent.

Ashleigh wished he would reply to her comment.

Bob changed the subject when the light changed, "Why Nikita?"

She looked at Bob, "She reminds me of when I was little and we would listen to all those records. You remember how much I liked the *Elton John* song, "Nikita".

They looked at one another.

Bob spoke, "I'm glad you remember how much we enjoyed playing records and listening to music. I think Nikita is a very good name."

Ashleigh shook her head. Ashleigh grabbed the phone she used earlier.

Bob was glancing at her every few moments.

She noticed the camera on the phone. She flipped open the phone and took a picture of Nikita.

"What are you doing?"

Ashleigh instructed, "Have one of your techs download this for me and send it to me by email."

"Sure."

She made a face.

Ashleigh was feeling relaxed. She took note of how loaded this small SUV was. Ashleigh was sure her brother could have afforded a more expensive vehicle but this was far from what he cared about. This being her thought she took notice of the state of the art six disc changer. She liked the leather seats and knew it was her brothers style to have a sunroof. The cover was shut so the sunroof was difficult to spot when she entered the vehicle.

Ashleigh was bored with looking at his new vehicle. She looked down and studied her puppy. Ashleigh loved the small patch of black on the top of Nikita's head. This patch went from ear to ear. Some of this black patch made its way to the front, but the black just missed

her face. Ashleigh still felt this black patch looked like a hat. This patch quickly blended into a real thin bright silver horizontal stripe on her back and neck. This silver was so bright it almost looked blue. After this small stripe her color turned into a sable pattern, this pattern went from her shoulder down her front legs, but this pattern quickly ended on her back. On her back was a red and a light black pattern. This pattern went to the back of her legs and on the wider part of her tail. This pattern ended at the back of her legs. Along the black pattern there was a real bright gray; again it almost looked blue. Surrounding all this color her fur was white. This included her face, her belly, the bottom of all four legs, and her paws. What Ashleigh felt was Nikita's best feature was her bright shining blue eyes. What gave her eyes an illusion they were so bright were the two round gray patches around her eyes. They were not exact circles, but instead they looked like half moons blended together. These moons started at the corner of the eye and fanned out toward the outside of the eye, and just touched what Ashleigh considered Nikita's hat. Both eyes were identical looking. The white of her nose kept the dark gray separated. Ashleigh was in love with Nikita.

Nikita was falling asleep on Best Friends lap.

Bob turned onto a major road. All of the stores and restaurants were lined up like soldiers. He drove past all this congestion. He made a right onto the freeway and was now headed toward downtown Milwaukee. They were sitting in silence, neither one really knowing how to say what they were feeling or thinking.

Concentrating on the road he asked his sister, "Are you feeling fulfilled working for *Captain Investments*?"

Ashleigh wanted to avoid the whole topic of college, "Why?"

"I'm concerned about you."

She made a face, "I'm frustrated. My boss is a jerk. I'm at a dead end unless..." She paused herself, and repeated, "I'm frustrated."

"How would you like to work for me?"

She looked at him like he was crazy.

He answered her look, "This is a legitimate offer."

She assumed this job would be: as an entry level secretary, answering phones in his customer service department, or an entry level production job. She knew her brother would never play favorites with her.

"Don't you have twenty to thirty people doing any job I'd qualify for?"

"Why would you assume I'd hire you as a regular employee. I'm needing someone I trust to handle a specific project. After the project the duties would change slightly."

He looked at Nikita sleeping soundly. For three days all Nikita did was howl and whimper. In less than twenty minutes she was fast asleep. He would never tell Ashleigh how difficult these last three days were.

"What project?" she assumed this was filling or keeping track of something, "Haven't you had the same secretary for three years now? Why would you get rid of Haley?"

"I'd never consider releasing Haley."

Ashleigh: gave him a confused look, she turned and looked out the passenger window, she watched as they were passing cars as they headed south on highway 45; they were headed to I-94 east.

Bob continued speaking, "I need someone I can trust. Someone to..." he paused.

Ashleigh turned and looked at him, she wondered if he could find the courage to ask for

help. Her brother admitting he needed help was the equivalent of moving Mount Everest.

"I want to begin the process of moving my company to Florida and I need someone I trust overlooking the progress. This would be the temporary aspect of your employment. After this is accomplished I need someone to look after my writing affairs."

"What's the matter with your agent this time? I thought you liked her?"

"I like her as a person. But I want an editor I can trust."

Ashleigh shook her head, "Why pick me?"

"I'm looking to buy a publisher. Until I buy one I'm in need of an agent. My current agent is competent but I'm tired of hearing about the controversy my books cause. I'm tired of hearing how I should be concerned about the next trend."

Ashleigh observed the scowl on his face.

"I trust you."

"Maybe the experts are right about your books. They can be controversial?"

"Politically correct wimps."

This summed up her brother.

Ashleigh tried to convince him to rehire his old agent, "Angie was very nice to you and showed you a lot of patience."

He rebutted his sister by saying, "She didn't get my stories. On the other hand you understand my stories."

Ashleigh answered this statement, with a look of confusion, "I yell at you."

He smiled, "I prefer to call them debates."

"Debates?"

Her facial expression spoke more than her words, "I thought the real term for how we discuss your stories are called arguments."

He smiled.

She looked out the window.

She felt her brother had lost his mind. For years he told her she should learn to make it on her own. He told her the company politics would interfere with their relationship as brother and sister. She wondered what happened to her brother. This reaffirmed her belief he needed someone to look out for him; without letting him know someone was looking out for him.

Traffic was going slow as they were turning onto I-94 east headed toward Downtown Milwaukee.

He talked as an executive and less like her brother. "I'll give you a substantial raise. I need someone with wisdom and has vision to see the future. This position would require being selective on who we discuss future plans with."

"I hate secrets." She reminded him, "You and Patty were the ones who taught me secrets were horrible."

"I despise secrets. I have my reasons and I will explain them to you once you start working for me."

"There is the possibility we'd kill each other?"

He smiled but answered, "With your growing maturity I'm sure this could be avoided."

She was unsure of how to take this statement.

She looked out the window. Traffic started to pick up as they passed the *Wisconsin State Fair Park*.

Bob continued, "I've decided I want out of the limelight. I'm tired of politics and fighting for causes. All I want is to run my company my way and write my books."

She asked with complete seriousness, "Where did my brother go?"

He again stated, "I'm sick of church. I'm tired of the government lies. I'm tired of playing politics. It's impossible to avoid politics with how large *Renewed Mastery* is. I've decided I'll play the chess game of politics. But I'm going to change the rules."

With love in her heart she asked, "What about your charities?"

"I have a lawyer friend. I have another friend who helped me conceal my involvement in other charities. It'll appear to the outside world I've shut all my charities down. In reality they will function better if I'm not personally attached to them."

"I thought you hated lawyers?"

Ashleigh was worried about the friend who helped him with the charities; Ashleigh assumed this friend was a she.

"I do. Except I've found an exceptional lawyer in Florida. I enjoy our conversations. He has done an excellent job at handling my affairs and I appreciate his honesty."

She looked at him, "An honest lawyer?"

"He is upfront and honest with me. We like one another. We met at a charity event held by my friend while I was in Florida." He smiled, "I even convinced Mr. Shelby to go bowling."

She wondered who the woman friend was. This was the first time he mentioned bowling for years. This concerned Ashleigh. There were two things her brother could easily get addicted too. The company of a woman; especially one involved in charities. The other was bowling.

Ashleigh looked out the window and watched *Miller Park* go bye. Ashleigh was never a sports fan; but there were many fond memories of her Foster Dad taking the whole family to baseball games. A special memory associate with the *Milwaukee Brewers* was when she still lived with her real mom and Bob and Patty took her to a *Brewer game* at old *County Stadium*.

As she viewed *Miller Park* go by, she asked, "How are you planning to move your whole company to Florida?"

She just wanted to have him admit he needed help.

"I need good people around me," was his confident answer, "I especially need people I can trust and count on. I trust you more than anyone else."

This surprised her.

He took a quick glance at her reaction and again turned his attention to the freeway.

"How can I trust you?" She asked from her heart. "You just abandoned everyone you cared about? Worse you abandoned me."

She would wait for the answer.

"It was necessary for me to address some personal and professional issues without being in the public eye. While away I've orchestrated a plan. Today is the beginning of a symphony."

All her emotions bubbled up on the surface, "You could have left a message telling me you were alright? You left me wondering where you were? If it wasn't for Haley I'd thought you were dead." She added, "She kept your secret."

Silence.

Ashleigh broke the silence, "How do you think that makes me feel? We're family. All we have is one another. After all the stuff we went through. How about all the times I helped you

with your books? I..."

She stopped herself from repeating herself. Instead she stated, "I'm your sister."

She looked out the passenger window. She took a few sheets of Kleenex from her purse, she wiped her tears, and again took a mirror from out of her purse. Looking at herself she would need to reapply her makeup when she arrived at work.

Nikita woke up sensing Best Friend was upset. Sniffing Best Friend she decided Best Friend was okay. Nikita felt comfortable enough to go back to sleep.

They were headed at a stop and go pace.

There was silence for many minutes.

He broke the silence by sounding like a salesman, "Look there is a lot of things I need done and I trust you."

Ashleigh felt the need to test her brother.

He turned onto an off ramp and ended up in the far left lane of a busy Milwaukee street.

"I bumped into one of the women who used to dance at your club."

"Which one?"

She smirked, "Candy."

She watched his reaction closely.

Very suspicious he asked, "What is she after?"

"She's a manager at a club. She offered me a job. I was thinking I could..."

He cut in front of two cars. There was honking of horns, squealing of tires, someone flipped him off, and there was almost an accident. He somehow pulled into a parking spot.

She screamed in a panic, "You could have killed me!"

He yelled back at her. "I forbid you from being a dancer."

"You can't forbid me from doing anything," she shouted back. "I'm an adult."

"Your my sister."

She felt hurt. Her brother actually thought she would dance. She was having trouble wearing the waitress outfit at her current job, much less dancing naked in front of complete strangers.

"Watch me!" she announced like she was already a dancer, "I'm my own person and I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions." She realized she sounded like she was in a bad movie, but she was upset and on short notice was all she could think up, "I'll please everybody by paying off my back rent and all my bills. I'll wiggle my ass and show my tits and be able to pay off everyone and even finish school. I'd do it all..."

With anger he shouted, "I forbid you."

"You can't!"

"Look I'll get you squared away with your back rent and all of your bills."

She instantly felt guilty. She felt guilty for accidentally forcing her brother to pay off her bills. The guilt piled on because of his tone and body language.

She heard him say, "Maybe Victoria was right."

She again felt shocked.

"I would prefer if you chose a different career. Living the lifestyle of a dancer is filled with pitfalls and consequences. Maybe you were too young to see how dancing tore Shelly apart and was a contributing factor to her drug addiction. I'll pay off all your back expenses if you'll choose to avoid exotic dancing."

Ashleigh looked at Bob and asked, "If I danced would you abandon me?"

He stated softly and kindly, "I'd feel disappointed you were dancing but I'd still love you. Instead work for me. Take night classes and get your degree."

She just put her brother through an emotional hell.

She meekly answered, "I have to get to work."

He pulled into traffic and headed down Wisconsin Ave and maybe two blocks before the insurance building he asked, "So when do you want to start? I assumed you will give your two week notice and when the two weeks are up we'll sit down.."

She interrupted and scolded loudly, "What happened to my brother?"

Nikita and Bob looked at her.

This look irritated Ashleigh.

"You arrogant ass!"

He yelled back confused, "I'm not being arrogant."

She commented in a sarcastic tone, "You were bad before but now..."

They reached a stop light.

She grabbed Nikita, and put the puppy carefully into the back seat, she pushed Nikita's butt down and commanded, "Sit."

Ashleigh: grabbed her shoes, flung her purse around her chest, and stepped out of the car.

The light turned green.

Bob in shock watched as his Little Sister slammed the passenger door.

People were shouting and honking their horns.

Ashleigh barely noticed.

She opened the back door, she again pushed Nikita's butt down and commanded, "Sit." She grabbed her cooler, her duffel bag, and she slammed the back passenger door. She decided at this moment she would walk the rest of the way.

Cars were honking and people were swearing: with dignity she ignored all the ruckus, she adjusted her clothing, and keeping her dignity started to walk toward her work place.

The light turned red.

Bob watched Ashleigh walking up the sidewalk.

She stopped and slipped on a pair of brown shoes. These shoes added a few inches to her height.

This surprised Bob. As long as he could remember his sister hated shoes.

Nicole was a thirty-five year old housewife, mother of three, a non-practicing nurse, and a non-practicing physical therapist; she believed it was wise to keep her licenses current. She was reading a book and peddling on a stationary bike at the local YMCA. The paperback book was resting on the rack attached to the front of the exercise bike. She turned another page. Her sweet smile was currently replaced by the exercise and the interest in the book. Her long brunette hair was in a pony tail. At the appropriate times she was overjoyed to tell anyone who would listen this was still her natural color. Her oval shaped face showed the beauty of a clean lifestyle. Her lower cheekbones were starting to slightly drop and her jawline was not as tight as it once was but because of a healthy lifestyle this was barely noticeable.

She was wearing a fashionable blue and green printed adjustable Bra-Cup Racerback

Tank. She was grateful this top was practical enough for her to forget about her chest and what she was wearing. She matched this top with a blue fitted athletic crop pant. What made wearing these crop pants a secret treat was the fact at thirty-five she looked attractive wearing them. On a suggestion from her oldest daughter she was wearing Adidas running shoes. She liked the shoes but to Nicole running shoes were running shoes.

She bought these workout clothes from a catalog her sister-in-law Megan gave her. Megan suggested this athletic wear company after years of struggling to find a proper sports bra. It was the only time Megan ever gave her fashion advice. Nicole felt the only fashion advice to receive from Megan was athletic wear.

She was peddling harder as the exercise bike was reproducing the effects of a hill; Nicole knew this by glancing at the red lights on the small electronic indicator.

Nicole felt she was in the best shape of her life. She felt this because her husband of seventeen years still found her attractive and she noticed men checking her out. She knew her body would never be exactly what it used to be. What was important to her was how healthy she felt and she was able to accomplish anything she wanted physically. The greatest feeling was how comfortable and confident she felt in her skin.

What contributed to this feeling of confidence was how fulfilled she felt. As a realistic thinking Momma she felt her three children were doing well. She knew from being a nurse in a treatment facility a wrong decision related to drinking or drugs could send anyone in a tailspin. She felt confident her husband loved her and was dedicated to their family. She felt spiritually fulfilled and felt a very close relationship with God. She felt a deep fulfillment being a full time wife and parent. She was aware of her faults and her families faults. She never made any excuses for these faults she just met them head on as: a momma, a wife, and a woman. She gave her children the freedom to be who they were while teaching them responsibility and faith. She felt fortunate everyone in her immediate family loved one another; even if every member showed this love differently.

A current concern was her husband Jimmy. There was the possibility Jimmy might end up unemployed with the current state of construction. She again reminded herself, if they avoided any large ticket items, they had enough in savings to cover their daily expenses for a couple years. Nicole felt some security in having a lot of money in their savings, but felt some insecurity with the idea of their savings being cherry picked a little at a time. Adding to her concern was Jimmy's desire to sell insurance. When they talked about this career choice, he was certain with his connections, he would be successful. She was happy he had a plan but felt this was a bad career choice for her husband. She would support and encourage him in this adventure if he lost his job, but she hoped he would keep his operations manager position. This job was a stable income for them since he left the Marines; while working for this construction company he was promoted twice because of his wisdom and how well he managed his employees. He received the third promotion after going to night classes and earning a degree in business management.

If he struggled at the beginning their plan was for Nicole to again go back to work as a nurse or physical therapist. With Jeff being sixteen, Julie being fourteen, and Ester ten; she felt her children were old enough for her to start working part time. She knew with her connections at the *Eastbank Community Hospital* and with the nursing shortage it would be easy to for her to get either full or part time work. The only job she would resist taking was a job in a treatment facility. In contrast she would gladly take a job as a physical therapist. She

enjoyed helping a person get back on their feet. The drama a nurse dealt with at a treatment facility was something she was unwilling to go through again. She knew working full or part time would have its reward but her greatest rewards in life were: being a mother, she enjoyed being a housewife, she felt her volunteer work at Church was important, and she liked the feeling she received from helping people at the *Eastbank Community Center*. This volunteer work was what kept her from taking a part time job.

She turned a page of the novel. Reading was now a challenge. She peddled harder as she went up the imaginary hill of the exercise bike. This imaginary hill was causing herself to push herself, she was sweating, and her breathing was increasing. She gave up on reading as she battled the little red lights on the exercise bike. She felt a sense of accomplishment as she reached its peak and was now biking down the imaginary hill and began biking on the cool down period.

Once she was peddling at a steady pace she again concentrated on a book titled, *A Little About Her*, written by this recluse of an author named Robert Heart. His books were national best sellers. She could have cared less if they were controversial or not, she found herself pulling for the characters in the story. She watched the three interviews this author gave on television, these interviews were frustrating for all of his fans because they never clearly showed his face. He wore extra makeup and the lighting was purposefully darker. After watching these interviews Nicole felt this author was: opinionated, a little odd, arrogant, somewhat condescending, and Nicole felt his ego was wider than the Gulf of Mexico. Even with this opinion, she kept reading his novels. She received this book last Christmas and now wished she would have started to read the book right after Christmas. She felt this was his best book. The cool down period ended and she stopped peddling but stayed sitting on the bike to finish the last page of the book.

This last page caused her to tear.

She heard, "Ma'am."

Standing next to her was an attractive young man in his mid-twenties. She felt he had the right amount of muscles. She tried to ignore the fact his clothes highlighted these bulging muscles.

"I do apologize for just sitting here."

She removed herself from off the bike.

He winked one of his dark brown eyes, "The book must've been awful interesting for you."

In response she gave him a fake smile. She was flattered as well as annoyed. She knew of many married women who would have enjoyed a fling with this young man. He was attractive in his red shirt with a black strip on the left side and matching shorts. Nicole happened to notice when she stepped off the bike his personal equipment would have been interesting to see and fondle. Being a Christian woman she avoided looking at his equipment again. She felt it was one thing to notice, but it was something completely different to dwell on another man's equipment. With this being a light workout day she was wearing her wedding ring. She felt this young man was flirting with her because she was married.

"I'm finished. You can use the bike."

"Y'all must work out a lot." He winked and moved himself in a way to emphasize his physic and his personal equipment. "Because Y'all are the most attractive woman here."

It was one thing to admire and notice how attractive she was, but to bluntly hit on her

was something all together different. She was about to rebuke this young man but he made the mistake of opening his mouth.

“Since graduating college I've enjoyed the pleasure of reading.” With a smile he asked, “What book are you reading?”

She squinted at him.

This little conversation was becoming a show for all the women exercising in this large nautilus room.

She answered the question out of politeness, “A Robert Heart book.”

“I've enjoyed his books,” by his look and speech Nicole was sure he never read any, “How about we sit down over a drink and discuss the book?”

Nicole purposely took a tone, “I'm sure my husband and I would love to discuss this book with you. Are you part of a book club?”

She was sure this would end his little conquest he was on.

His facial expression reminded Nicole of something her mother-in-law would say, “*It was like the chickens were watching a snake slithering into their chicken coop.*”

With the sternness of a mother she said, “I'm an upstanding woman who is married to a wonderful husband. You should learn some manners.”

Before he could reply to her comment she wiped the bike with her towel and before she left she recommended, “If you don't want your membership pulled I'd suggest you learn how to be a gentleman.”

She quickly stepped away from this young man. There was a scowl on her face.

Nicole witnessed to many consequences of affairs to be part of one. As part of the woman's leadership team at church she took part in to many counseling sessions with wives who's husbands had affairs. She found herself counseling the opposite as well. There were those times when a wife and mother came to Nicole filled with regret and guilt as a tryst or an affair destroyed everything the woman truly cared about. In Nicole's mind the worst part of an affair was what happened to the children. She simply loved herself, her husband, and her children to much to have one.

She was honest to admit her sex life was currently in a rut. The two of them talked about this rut after their last love making session. In the course of their marriage ruts happened before but because they loved one another and believed in open communication the rut never lasted long. She liked an idea Jimmy presented and she was contemplating a couple ideas of her own.

Before she left the nautilus room a wife who's husband worked under Jimmy wanted to talk with her. In a short time two more ladies joined their conversation. These women from the time they started this conversation in the nautilus room until they were leaving the building discussed: the *Community Center*, what was happening in every church in town, the book Nicole just read, general information on who was doing what, about the rumored company moving into town, and one woman asked about the handsome young man who approached Nicole.

The rumor mill was alive and well in Eastbank Florida.

End of Part One of Four

Monday, April 10th, Ashleigh's Choice

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Monday, April 10th
Ashleigh's Choice

Day 2 of Book I

(16 Years, 10 Months, and 4 Days Since Ashleigh's First Camping Trip)

Part Two of Four
Full Day

Authored By:
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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 characters 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"

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Monday April 10th, Ashleigh's Choice

(16 Years, 10 Months, and 4 Days: Since Ashleigh's first camping trip)

Ashleigh stopped and slipped on her brown Wolford shoes. Once they were securely on her feet, or as Ashleigh felt as good as they were going to get, she continued to march toward her employer; *Captain Investments & Insurance*. She was angry at her brother for just assuming she would take his job offer. She knew the job would be beneficial in the short term but she was unsure of the long term consequences.

She was having difficulty identifying with the brother who showed up today. She was yearning for the brother who fought for her when she was little. She was unsure of this hurt brother who vanished. The Bob she was familiar with would have never abounded anybody; especially herself. She missed the open and honest Bob who hated secrets.

Ashleigh was reliving the memory of her brother telling the judge what happened when she lived with her biological mom and how she improved as a person living with the Anderson family. She could clearly remember her brother's lawyer showing her Mommy stumbling in and out of bars and her trips to the liquor store. These photo's led to Ashley Vindavane being arrested for breaking her parole, ended the talk of custody, and ended the supervised visits. After this Ashley Vindavane, Ashleigh Waller's own mother, ended any relationship she had with Ashleigh. Ashleigh often acknowledged this was better; but it still stung.

She knew there were legitimate reason why Patty and Shelly found it difficult to stay with her brother. He was arrogant and over confident. She heard many rumors of how Bob manipulated situations behind the scenes to produce the results he wanted. Ashleigh felt his intention was to help people but sometimes the results fell short of his intentions. Being older she understood why Victoria would get upset with him. Ashleigh mistrusted his "other" personality named "Robert Heart." The whole justification for this second persona was so he

could write what he wanted without affecting his business. Ashleigh's discernment told her there was a lot more to this second personality than protecting his business.

Ashleigh resented Robert Heart.

Bob's Ford Escape drove passed her and parked in an open space not to far away.

Her goal was to pretend she was disinterested in what he was doing and just walk right passed him. His vehicle was about ten yards in front of her and to her left, she watched as Bob tried to step out of his vehicle, but to Ashleigh's horror Nikita almost jumped out of the small SUV. Ashleigh's panic subsisted when her brother grabbed Nikita and set her down onto the drivers seat. Ashleigh found it funny when he pushed Nikita's butt down and said, "Sit." Nikita proceeded to ignore him and again just about jumped out of the vehicle. If this happened one more time she was ready to intervene by rescuing Nikita from a brother who could handle: book deals, his company, corporate takeovers, the media, contracts, lawyers, politicians, but somehow was unable to handle a puppy. She was relieved when he gently set Nikita in the back seat and managed to shut the drivers door before Nikita could escape out of the vehicle. This was when Ashleigh realized her clothes were marked by puppy hairs. She would take care of these hairs as soon as she reached her desk. When she reached her brothers SUV she ignored Bob. She hid the fact she waved at the puppy looking at her through the passenger door window.

Ashleigh focused on what was in front of her. In front of her and to the right was the only high-rise building in Milwaukee. Just beyond this building was the Milwaukee Art Museum and the War Memorial. When the weather was nice Ashleigh enjoyed eating lunch at the War Memorial. Beyond these structures Lake Michigan dominated the horizon. Across the street from this one high-rise was Ashleigh's employer.

She heard her brother call out to her, "Ashleigh."

Ignoring her brother was difficult.

He again called out to his sister, "Wait."

She closed her eyes and reluctantly stopped.

"Let me assist you with your cooler."

She found herself giving him the cooler.

She made a face and stated matter of fact, "I have to get to work."

She: set the duffel bag down, zipped it open, placed her black dress sandals into the duffel bag, and handed him the duffel bag. They glanced at one another before they headed toward Ashleigh's employer

Bob began, "I shouldn't have assumed you were interested in working for me."

"I'm not sure it'd be good for us in the long term. Mom is wanting me to move back home and complete my degree."

Bob asked, "Is your plan to finish your degree in Business Management? I believe it'd have had an emphasis on the creative arts?"

Ashleigh sighed. "Victoria feels I should be a nurse."

"Is this your choice?"

Ashleigh shrugged her shoulders.

They walked a short distance without speaking.

When her brother started to speak she noticed his tone changed to one of a caring brother. "It would please your foster parents as well as myself if you'd finished. If you choose to work for me or you decide to move in with your foster parents I'd like to help you. I want

you to fulfill your destiny. I've been observing your efforts. It appears as though you've worked hard but are having trouble achieving your destiny."

She interrupted his speech, "I want to make it on my own."

"I can relate to what you're saying. I struggled for a time."

She gave him an odd look when he mentioned he struggled.

They reached a cross walk.

"I'm leaving the media attention and the limelight of my lifestyle behind forever. My desire is to continue to build my company."

Ashleigh whispered, "What about your pen pal Robert Heart?"

In a quiet voice Bob answered, "I'll continue to write under this name. I'll continue to remain anonymous unless I'm called out on it. Or keeping it secret hurts people. This is the exact opposite of my intention."

The walk light changed and they crossed the street with a group of pedestrians. The group of pedestrians were either headed to the tall high-rise or to Ashleigh's employer across the street.

They stepped onto the curb turned and waited for the next walk signal.

"I will honor and respect your wishes if you'd like to move in with Victoria and Blake."

Ashleigh felt encouraged.

The light changed and they headed across the street.

"If you choose to work for me I'd expect you to take night classes. The salary you'd receive will allow you to live on your own and finish your degree."

They stepped onto the curb and turned right.

"I want to add. I know I'm repeating myself but I want you to understand I'm here to help. Regardless if you choose to work for me or not I'll help you in your current circumstances."

They stopped in front of Ashleigh's employer. Her employer owned an eight story building, it was twice as long as high. There were marble steps in front with two giant marble lions on either side. The stairs were long and went up to the building in a wave pattern. There were five steps, the stairs flattened, five more stairs, it flattened again, then there were ten more steps; at this point the steps were level with a series of glass doors. The stone railings were evenly spaced and followed the pattern of these stairs.

They stepped onto these stairs. Ashleigh was standing on the platform of the first level. She dropped all her stuff onto this landing, Bob placed the items he was carrying for her next to these. Bob stood on the second step; for one of the few times in their lives they were eye to eye.

Ashleigh felt this was his way of asking for help. She wished he would just come out and ask her. She also knew this was his way of helping her.

She crinkled her forehead and asked with sincerity, "Why should I work for you? Do you have any idea how I've felt these last five months? We're family. True family doesn't just leave," she spoke with all of her heart, "What happened to you? Why would you feel the need to keep secrets and hide from me?"

"I just needed to step away for a while and settle some things. I didn't have any intention to drag you into this situation."

She pointed to herself, "Don't you feel I'd understand? I'm not a little girl anymore. I'm a grown woman. We're all we got as far as family goes. We're needing to stick together."

She adjusted her outfit, pulled off a couple dog hairs, and held back tears.

"It's obvious your an adult. Even of greater importance to me is how trustworthy you've become."

She gazed upon him.

He stated again, "My life's desire is to fulfill my destiny in peace."

She studied his eyes. She could tell this was far from the full answer. The full answer to why he wanted to hide and completely change his motives was someplace buried in his wounded soul.

Ashleigh felt compelled to ask again, "Why would I work for you?"

"I trust you. I will pay you an exceptional salary. What I'm expecting is your best effort. You'll be handling some secretive and sensitive issues. As well as many of the day to day operations of my company."

She understood exactly the blessings and stresses of what her brother meant by best effort.

She cocked her head, pointed at him, and again reminded him, "You taught me to despise secrets," she rethought her statement, "You and Patty taught me never have secrets. What the hell is the matter?"

He looked into his sisters green eyes and answered her true concern, "I promise I'll never abandon you again. If I decide to move I will discuss the consequences with you and make sure you know my intentions. I can say with assurance I'm not checking out. I'm wanting to move my life forward like I should have a long time ago." He paused for a mil-a-second, and promised with all his heart, "I'm planning on moving but I'll never abandon you again."

Ashleigh's impulse was to hit him with her purse. Instead she looked toward Lake Michigan. When work was stressful or she wanted to think about life she often times took a walk along the lake front.

While looking at the lake she said, "I want to talk with Mom and Dad first."

She heard Bob ask, "How's Victoria doing?"

Ashleigh was surprised by this question. She turned her head and answered, "She's a fighter. We're all happy she's doing well."

With compassion in Bob's eyes, "She's a very fine lady and was a great Mom to you."

This meant a lot to Ashleigh.

He focused, "If you take the position I'll be expecting you to move to Florida."

There was a pause in the conversation as this statement sunk in.

"Who knows in your company?"

He answered matter of fact, "Only Haley. There is a faction within my company who were under the belief I was an easy pawn. They think they can take my company from me."

Ashleigh in a panic asked, "Why?"

"Foolishness."

She made a face, "Why do they want..."

Bob interrupted, "They're of the estrous opinion the company would be far more successful and profitable..."

Angry she interrupted, "But *Renewed Mastery* is one of the most profitable private owned companies in the country." She crinkled her forehead, "Or is it in trouble?"

He smiled.

"In a few hours it won't be."

"Are you being overconfident?"

"I'm not overconfident."

She stared at him, "It's happened before."

He pushed up his glasses, "My sister."

She crossed her arms and shifted her body. This statement annoyed her but he'd let her arrogant brother continue.

"In all actuality I'm saving my company from those who want to make it a more traditional run company."

In anger she flailed her arms, "You've made it successful by running everything different."

"Exactly."

She was angry at anyone who would try and take her brother's company away. She made a mental list of executives she worked with who would help her brother.

"These individuals want to make my company a public owned company and take it..."

In a rant stated, "They can't do that. You've worked too hard..."

Bob interrupted by saying, "It's okay."

"No it's not. We're going to go in there," she pointed to her company. "And talk to a couple people I know."

"There isn't any need too."

"I'm not a little girl," she was turning red and tears were coming down again, "Would it be so terrible to want help from your sister? There's..."

He gently interrupted, "With the help of my lawyer and your employer I'm putting a halt to this plan of theirs. I'd never let anyone else run my company unless I'm the one who passes the torch. They've been brewing this little plan for three years."

She felt the layers.

She gazed upon him.

He continued to speak with determination and focus, "I strongly believe you're the perfect person for what I'm planning both short and long term. I'm wanting you to coordinate the move of a majority of the company's branches to one central location in southeastern Florida. They've made it clear they'd appreciate the business I'd bring to their state."

She understood exactly what he meant.

"What about my family here?"

"You know my policy concerning time off and vacations. I'll pay for plane fare for your family and yours any time you'd like. I'll pay for all of your move and I'm giving you more than enough time to put all your affairs in order. I'd like you to stay here in Wisconsin until Thanksgiving. Most likely in fall I'll move to Florida permanently. My plan is to have the company up and running in Florida by the first week in March."

She looked at him like he was crazy, "You want the majority of the company's divisions down there by March of next year?"

He simply stated, "Exactly. While handling the day to day projects my company effectively handles."

She made a face, "What projects?"

"You'll receive the information on these projects once hired on. I'm expecting you to work closely with Haley."

"Mr. Plan out everything. Where am I suppose to live?"

There was a pause.

"I have a plan. I want to reassure you I'm trying to enjoy a more settled existence."

"What does that mean?"

"Until you find a place you could live with me rent free."

She made a face. Living with her brother seemed; odd.

"Wherever I choose to live and whatever type of housing I live in I can quarantine you'll have your own quarters."

This statement seemed just as odd as the last one.

"You settled?" She retorted matter of fact, "You hate to be tied down."

"I've been making some long term plans. These plans will benefit a lot of people. I fell in love with Florida."

"No. You realized how much you truly loved Shelly." She glared at him, "In Florida."

"This is an imperfect conclusion. For many years I've grown tired of the culture here in Milwaukee. I'm tired of the attitudes they have toward business and I'm tired of this backward city. I feel southeastern Wisconsin is haunting me."

"I like it here." Ashleigh pleaded, "The Anderson's are here. I have friends here."

"I have to move. If you remain here I'll respect your decision. All I ask is we maintain our relationship. If you feel comfortable visiting me I'll pay for your plane fair and a hotel room."

She saw it.

He continued, "I'll make sure you know where I'm at all times."

"Leave his ass here," commented a woman walking into the building.

Ashleigh recognized this middle aged woman from customer service.

Annoyed at the implication Ashleigh yelled, "He's my brother!"

"Sure he is."

If a looks could kill this woman would have been murdered on the steps. Ashleigh paid attention to this woman's body language as she made her way into the building. Ashleigh hated it when people felt her brother was her sugar daddy. Ashleigh wanted to yell at this woman, but instead she spotted Mr. White come out of the building.

Ashleigh rolled her eyes, quickly adjusted her clothing, faced him, and frowned.

Megan stepped from the pier of her charter, onto the first pier. At one time this was the oldest of the three piers in this marina; three years prior Mike finally replaced this first pier. It was now the best pier of the three. It was the only one capable of handling the large yacht docked alongside of Megan's charter.

This twenty-seven year old, six foot athletic woman, was in a hurry. She was wearing a siesta hat. As soon as she received this simple brown hat she curled up the sides like the model in the catalog. Her dark blond pony tail was hanging out of the back of the hat. She was wearing an orange short sleeved polo shirt; on the right shoulder was the insignia of her business named *Dolphin Tours*. Because she was wearing short sleeves, her well defined but small girl muscles were easily seen. This shirt covered a simple patterned brown and blue halter swim separate. This swim separate supported her small breasts; breasts she felt were disappointing. She was wearing brown cargo shorts she specifically bought to wear on her

charter. She was grateful to find these shorts on sale at a popular department store, she went ahead and bought four pair, each a different color. Clipped onto the right side of these shorts was a large key ring and a wad of clanking keys. These shorts covered her tight rear end, her athletic hips, and covered some of her thigh. Her dedication to working out was clearly noticeable in her thighs and calves. On her feet were sandals perfect for her charter. She loved the traction these sandals gave her while walking on wet surfaces; a bonus was they dried quickly.

She graduated from college with a major in business with two minors in French and Athletic Training. She was working hard to pay off: her school loans, the loan on her current charter, and she was working on a business plan to purchase a houseboat yacht. She felt if she received the loan for this yacht it would be a breakthrough for her business. During her peak times she worked part time at the YMCA; mostly leading a few aerobics classes. During her slow season she worked close to full time at the local YMCA as a volleyball and swimming instructor, led many aerobics classes, and handled many miscellaneous tasks. She taught self defense at: the local police station, many of the athletic clubs in the area, schools, and her Sister-in-laws women shelters. A job she enjoyed was being an assistant girls volleyball coach at the Eastbank High School. Her personal goal was to make enough money running *Dolphin Tours*, so she could quit working these side jobs.

She was currently disappointed in herself. The next scheduled charter; was a sight seeing charter with three families. Megan wanted to make sure the children attending this tour would have sunblock. Based upon past experience people from the both middle America and middle Canada failed to recognize how easy it was to burn while cruising on the ocean. As a captain she felt responsible for her passengers and her crew. This was why she felt disappointed in herself. To make up for this mistake she would take sunblock from her personal stash.

She: stepped down from this first pier, onto the pier of her houseboat, then onto the stern of the houseboat, she checked a new hanging plant given to her by her Sister-in-law Nicole, it was moist, she felt compelled to check all of the hanging plants on the stern of her houseboat; after she was finished with her plants she stepped in front of the entrance door. This door was toward the starboard side. At the port side of this door and against the wall of the living quarters, her brother Jimmy and her nephew secured to the houseboat a wooden bench they built. These men secured the bench so tight to the deck Megan was certain she would never be able to move it.

She removed her wad of keys off her belt loop.

In the shadow created by her hat and the overhang of her houseboat her very dark blue eyes looked plum. Her inverted triangle shaped face exhibited a serious expression as she fumbled around with this big wad of keys. She never liked her long celestial nose. She despised the natural bump just above her nostrils, she hated how her nostrils curved up and almost out. What she felt permanently ruined the look of her nose was caused by a volleyball spike in an NCAA woman's volleyball tournament. Megan would never abandon her team, the consequence of staying on the court and not coming out of the event, created a permanent left bend from the middle of her nose downward. Just above her nostrils was a natural facial line leading from her nose to her high cheekbones. Underneath these cheekbones were very noticeable dimples. When she was filled with great joy or pleasure, her skinny lips pushed these dimples up; creating a wonderful dimple smile. Below her lips and mouth her long chin

with its rounded point were clearly seen. Connected to this chin was a long jawline.

She was well aware she needed to change this key system and needed a new door handle. At this point she was mainly using the deadbolt, but if she was leaving for an extended length of time she would reluctantly use the handle lock. It was painfully obvious this one large key ring was insufficient. This ring held keys for: the Y, her houseboat, the gate locks for her charter, all of her charter keys, her storage keys, her parents house key, her pick up truck key, and a few miscellaneous keys. Her plan was to color code the keys, get a couple key rings, and get a new door handle. She postponed spending the money on these items choosing to spend her money on things she felt were more important. She chose a key she thought would work. When it failed to work she looked at the key more closely and realized it was her parents deadbolt key.

Her dimples became visible when she frowned.

Laying the keys out in her long left hand, she paged them with her right finger, being patient she finally found her key.

Her dimples flashed.

She: pushed open the door to her houseboat, she pulled the keys out of the door, she shut the door behind her, she stepped down the two steps into the lounge of her houseboat, and set her keys on a coffee table she bought at the Eastbank thrift store. This nice wooden coffee table was in front of a plain black metal futon her Sister-in-law Sam gave her. The futon was underneath a long window. She purchased the curtains for this window at the same thrift store as the coffee table. Every female member of her family despised these curtains; the plan was for Ma to sew her a new set for Christmas.

She considered checking all her inside plants. She glanced at her sport watch her Sister-in-law Nicole bought her for Christmas. She decided to wait. She needed to convert her charter from a fishing tour, to a tour where the families taking her charter: were safe, had fun, and were able to take photo's of the sea life.

She quickly went through her lounge, her galley, and stopped in a small hallway in between the galley and her cabin. In this hallway was a linen closet, next to the linen closet was a combo washer and dryer; the dryer was on top. Directly across the linen closet was the head. She quickly opened the door of her linen closet, she bend down, and at the bottom of this closet was her personal case of sunblock. She pulled out of her left cargo pocket a Swiss Army knife, she used this knife to cut open the plastic case of sunblock. She decided four tubes would be enough. One of the ways she made extra money was by selling small souvenirs, small snack items, beverages, and by selling sunblock. She thought about innocent children getting sun burnt on her charter, she looked at the bottles, and decided if these children needed sunblock she would give the bottles away.

She sighed.

Her skinny lips pushed up her dimples.

She stood up and stepped into her galley.

She set the bottles on her small kitchen table. She purchased this table at a yard sale a couple days earlier. The sale was being run by a wealthy retired couple tired of the table after only one season of use. The table was in the galley underneath windows on the starboard side of the vessel. In front of the window and above the table were a row of evenly spaced hanging plants.

She stepped into the head and opened the mirrored medicine cabinet.

She only glanced at her reflection. She felt staring at herself was unnecessary; after all she felt she was an average looking woman with a big crooked nose. She felt she was the complete opposite of every feminine type of woman guys seemed to admire. She was legitimately surprised when a man or a woman found her attractive. She hoped one day a Christian man would like her. This ideal man would be: athletic, would like her for who she was, would actually find her physically appealing, and hoped he was a virgin like herself. She doubted there was man who would find her physically attractive. The only parts of her body she felt a man would find enticing was her rear end and her long legs. The reason her legs and rear end were an attention grabber was due to: the effort she put into working out, working on her Daddy's charter from the time she was a little girl, the last three years working on her charter, playing a variety of different sports, her natural athletic form, and her healthy diet. She caught both men and women catching glances at her rear end. What annoyed her was when a person gawked at her butt; this made her feel uncomfortable. What Megan failed to recognize was how many men found her whole physical profile alluring.

Her dimples flashed in disappointment.

She highly doubted there was a male virgin her age or older. It seemed to her any guy with faith and morals were already married or were interested in other women. She had an overall low opinion of modern guys. She felt: they were wimpy, only after sex, or they wanted her to be their buddy. She was tired of being the woman giving her guy friends advice on how to handle their girlfriends. What was even more hurtful was after making a friendship with a guy and feeling there was a mutual connection she would find he asked out a more feminine type of woman. By the end of college this was so hurtful she avoided having any male friends.

She grabbed her own personal bottle of sunblock. She closed the cabinet and applied the sunblock on the exposed parts of her skin and face. She kept this bottle. She quickly stepped out of the head and into the galley. She placed her own personal bottle next to the other bottles on the kitchen table. Still in a hurry she opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottled water, opened it, and began to drink it. Looking out the galley window above the sink she spotted him.

Her dimples flashed.

She: set the water bottle down, leaned over her sink, pulled the curtain open above the sink, and felt vexed. Her New York neighbor was talking to her first mate Jake.

She hated it when this neighbor stepped onto the charter.

Jake was: Jimmy and Duke's friend for as long as she could remember, he was an excellent mariner, her one consistent employee, and to Megan he was like a fourth big brother. Mike the owner of the marina felt it was a good idea to dock the yacht Mr. Allen owned next to her charter. The bothersome, sexist, pushy, prideful, egotistical, Mr. Allen; actually believed Megan wanted to sleep with him. What Megan truly wanted was for Mr. Allen and his sugar babies to sail away. She decided to prepare Jake a sweet iced tea in the hope by the time she was done, the bothersome Mr. Allen would have grown tired of waiting for her.

She took her time searching in one of her cabinets for a container and lid. She set two different colored containers on her counter.

She again looked out her kitchen window; her dimples showed her displeasure.

She opened her freezer and grabbed an ice cube tray. She thought about her neighbors sexist comments. With force she snapped the ice cubes from the plastic tray. She recalled the

day she caught him looking at her rear end with binoculars. She slammed the ice cube tray onto the counter. She picked out some ice cubes and set them into the containers. She thought about the many sexual passes he made at her. She yanked open the freezer door and slammed the ice cube tray onto the other ice cube trays. Thinking about the many times he whistled at her she slammed the freezer door. She opened her refrigerator and took out a pitcher of sweet ice tea. Her face contorted when she thought about his sugar babies. So many of them had breast implants and plastic surgery. She heard their giggles as she walked passed Mr. Allen's yacht. These type of women hurt Megan. Megan felt she was at best plain looking and knew she was without the curves and looks these sugar babies flaunted. Megan wondered why women like them went out of their way to point out what Megan felt were obvious deficiencies? She wished women like them would stop making her life miserable.

She filled these two containers with sweet iced tea. Being hurt and angry she shoved the ice tea back into the refrigerator and slammed the door shut. She cringed when she heard items on her door clank. She reopened the door and was grateful nothing was broke; especially with her food money running out. While the door was open she grabbed a plastic container filled with fresh sliced lemons, she opened the lid and took two out, and placed the plastic bin back into the refrigerator. She wondered if Mr. Allen's beach bunnies were capable of cutting a lemon or were able to make sweet iced tea. She placed these sliced lemons into the drinks. When she put the lemons away she felt the need to slam the door; instead she gently shut the refrigerator door.

She again checked to see if Mr. Allen was talking to Jake.

Her dimples flashed.

She was dumbfounded on why this sexist pig wanted to sleep with her. At this moment she decided if he made one more rude comment, no matter how it affected her friend Mike, she would teach this guy some manners.

She opened a cupboard and took out an inexpensive antique Coke waitress wire basket. This was a special find at the thrift store, it was an antique she liked, and she was able to afford it. She put the two containers of Ice Tea, a couple of napkins, and the bottles of sunblock onto this tray.

She once again glanced out the window and again witnessed Mr. Allen standing there.

Her dimples flashed.

It was obvious he was lingering just for her, she wished while he lingered he'd fall into the river and get eating by a bull shark.

She reluctantly headed out of her houseboat: on the way she picked up the keys from her coffee table, she went up the two steps, she carefully opened the door, she used her hip to shut the door, she set the antique basket on the wooden bench, and started to fumble through her keys.

She heard the sexist pig with the New York accent, "How's my girl?"

She crunched her teeth.

Jake warned him, "Sir; it ain't a wise thing to be saying."

Mr. Allen felt this big southern guy was ignorant and answered loud enough for Megan to hear, "All women want my attention sooner or later."

Jake was about to knock this guy out cold. What stopped him was a look from Megan. He hated the politics of this situation, but because the politics involved Megan and Mike, he reluctantly restrained himself.

Megan again heard the snake speak, "You coming to talk to me."

She glared at him. The worst part was she found this older athletic man to be physically attractive. She knew from past experience she found herself having crushes on her professors or older professional men in her community. What doubly annoyed Megan was this man acted like he was in his early twenties. She suspected he paid a lot of money for: his bright flowered Hawaiian shirt, his white cargo shorts, his brown loafers, his white brimmed hat, and his sunglasses. What made this man so unbearable was his mouth.

His next action was a prime example of this poor decorum, he took off his glasses and commented, "When are you coming bye to take a trip on my yacht. By the way this here is a real vessel. I'm thinking we could take a cruise to Miami. I'd show you a good time down there. So when are you going?"

She stared at this man in his early forties, "Sir I'll tell Y'all again I ain't that type of gal. Why are you messing with me? Ain't your sugar babies enough?"

Megan heard a woman snicker. Megan looked up. Hanging over the side of the yacht were two big breasted women. One was wearing a skimpy bikini top, Megan's thought of this one was, *at least her boobs are real*. The second woman was showing of her breast implants by being topless.

He spoke again, "I could teach you things."

Her dimples flashed.

Jake mentioned with authority, "Sir I'd start treating her like a lady."

Mr. Allen assumed because of his money and his connections Jake would leave him alone.

Megan stopped Jake from beating this guy senseless by saying, "We're being polite to Y'all because we ain't wanting any trouble."

Jake again showed great personal restraint.

If Mr. Allen was engaging in harmless flirting Megan would have handled the situation differently. What completely offended Megan was his intent, she was sure he believed if he persisted long enough Megan would agree to have sex with him.

"I'm sure you'd enjoy my company."

One of the sugar babies mentioned in a snide voice, "She's probably doesn't even know what a blow job is."

Megan blushed.

The young woman laughed.

Megan immediately focused on her keys, after some fumbling found the key she needed and locked her door.

The neighbor stepped off of Megan's charter onto the first pier. With his hands out he said, "Why not come onto my yacht now?"

Megan glared at Jake.

Jake seen this look before, "Sir. It ain't wise to keep messing with her."

He stopped and pointed, "You should mind your own business."

"I reckon I've warned you enough."

"What would you do to me?"

Jake replied, "You're just too big for your own britches."

"Would you speak English?"

"I reckon talking to you makes as much sense as a bull with tits."

"Hey!" yelled the big boobed woman still wearing her bikini top.

Jake reluctantly looked up, but answered politely, "Sorry Ma'am,"

In an east coast accent, she said, "How about these tits."

She pulled off her bikini top and wiggled them.

Jake answered her, "Ma'am I'm a married man so I ain't having anything to do with yours."

This took this northern transplant by surprise.

Mr. Allen suggested, "Live a little."

"A true gentleman understands he should play in his own yard. I ain't interested in hurting my wife by laying with something that's been spreading herself around like a wandering alley cat."

Both women in the yacht were offended.

During this conversation Megan: picked up her antique Coke basket, stepped off her houseboat onto her pier, and was now on the concrete pier of the marina. Megan was proud of Jake. When Megan felt the time was right she would tell Linda, Jake's wife, what Jake just said.

Megan was able to calm herself down by reminding herself how much money her friend Mike would loose if this Yankee moved out from the marina.

All Mr. Allen needed to do was keep his mouth shut. Instead when she passed him on the way to her charter he stepped in front of her.

She glared at him.

Jake watched as well as the two sugar babies.

"You run a nice operation."

Her dimples flashed.

If anyone else said this she would have responded but she was wise enough to mistrust his intentions.

He was now talking in a hushed voice, "It must be awful hard running your charter. I've seen you working at the Y. I'm sure it's difficult paying all your bills."

He smiled.

She crunched her jaws together.

He was stupid enough to continue, "Even if you ain't thrilled to be with me it could be to your advantage if we were friends If you just were a little nicer and visited me once in a while. I could get you get more clients." He winked and commented, "I'd love to touch your fine ass."

This pushed her over the edge. Dream or no dream she would never sleep with someone to fulfill her dream. She would never "fund" her business in the manner he just suggested. She figured he needed to be taught some manners.

Just as she made this decision he tried to slap her on the ass and said, "I've been wanting to slap that ass."

She moved, he missed, and Jake was now headed off the charter.

Megan crunched her jaws together and with a tone asked, "You want to play with my rear end?"

He smirked and answered with a seductive voice, "Certainty."

She observed his ego raising. In a very lady like fashion, making sure her butt was facing the pier, set the wire basket down.

"Let's start by teaching you some manners."

He smiled, "I never thought you'd..."

This was all anyone heard of this sentence. Mr. Allen found himself flipped over by a simple defensive move Megan taught in her self defense class; he splashed into the Eastbank River.

The sugar babies gasped.

She looked down at him when his head came out of the water.

He pointed, "You'll pay for this."

She answered, "Not in this town."

Jake reached Megan and mentioned, "He'd give a shark indigestion."

They both laughed.

He commanded as he tried to lift himself up onto the pier, "I could use some help."

Megan thought this was pathetic, but she still nodded to Jake. Jake reached down and grabbed Mr. Allen's under the arm pit and lifted him up.

Gina a woman who moved into the marina two months prior was overjoyed to see Mr. Allen tossed into the ocean; she witnessed this event through the lounge window of her houseboat. This Minnesota transplant found herself watching Megan a great deal. Gina's infatuation with Megan went beyond a physical attraction. Megan and Florence were the only ones who were nice to her since she moved into the marina. She was grateful when Megan introduced her to the people in the marina and showed her around town. She appreciated all the help Megan gave her with living on a houseboat. Gina knew more than she let on, but it was her way of getting Megan to come over. Even though Megan made it appear to her family and friends she was straight, Gina felt Megan was a closeted lesbian. This bothered Gina because she made it a rule to only date women who were out. She felt Megan was the type of woman she would want to settle down with. She liked athletic woman and she liked the idea Megan could protect her.

Mr. Allen was soaked from head to toe when he yelled, "Where's my sunglasses?"

Megan answered, "At the bottom of the river."

He pointed at Megan, "I'll sue you."

She looked at him square in the eye and stated, "For acting like a slithering snake?"

"I have friends!"

With absolute seriousness Jake answered, "I'd be careful on who Y'all are threatening. I'd suggest you start treating Ms. Megan with some respect."

Mr. Allen spoke with authority, "After I'm changed I'll talk to the Chief of Police myself."

Matter of fact Megan said, "Give him my regards."

Mr. Allen and Jake gave her a look.

She gave the sexist pig a look in return.

At this moment Megan started to feel guilty for tossing him into the river. Recalling the fact he proposed a sugar daddy type of friendship, helped Megan discount any feeling of guilt.

She spoke loudly as Mr. Allen was about to step onto the pier next to his yacht, "I ain't the type of gal Y'all can keep disrespecting. You remember this when discussing this little incident with Chief Salsiberry. He'll see Y'all are a snake in a chicken coop."

Megan watched him walk up his pier and up into his yacht. Jake and Megan watch as his two sugar babies acted upset Mr. Allen was tossed into the ocean.

Megan easily picked up the basket.

Gina liked Megan's backside.

Megan spoke to Jake, "Here's an ice tea for a good guy like yourself."

"Thank you Ma'am."

Blake quickly took the ice tea knowing she made it just the way he liked it.

"We can't take to long of a break. We're needing to get the charter ready for the families we're taking on tour tonight."

Jake asked, "You think will talk to the Chief?"

Megan shrugged and answered with very little emotion, "If he does I'm sure Captain will tell me."

Jake smiled, "I'm sure the matter will be taken care off."

"I'll make sure nothing happens to the snake."

They nodded their heads in agreement. They disliked him but neither one wanted Mr. Allen to disappear.

They stepped onto the *Dolphin Queen* and prepared Megan's charter for a sight seeing tour with families on board.

Ashleigh imagined the scene Mr. White created when he made his way through the building. She pictured him standing outside of his office announcing to the world on how awful of an employee Ashleigh was. From there; she pictured him storming out of the Insurance Claims office. She was sure he took the longest route possible to the first floor. On the way she envisioned him telling any supervisor or any employee who would listen on how "he" was going to "fix" her deteriorating attitude. She was sure he went out of his way to talk to one of the Vice Presidents and tell them what a liability she was to the company. She was sure he used the word inconsistent every time he talked to someone. This was his new term of trying to make her work look substandard.

Mr. White spotted Ashleigh and Bob talking on the front steps. He stood up from his desk, buttoned the most expensive suit coat he could afford, he straightened his tie and prepped himself for his exit. He wanted to show his superiors and the employees underneath him how he was the person in charge. From the moment he stepped out of the office to the moment he stepped out of the building; Ashleigh's imagined sequence of events were pin point accurate.

Once Mr. White saw the two of them talking he assumed she found a sugar daddy to pay off the bill collectors who were calling the office. What was embarrassing for himself was a few of his colleagues were served by Ashleigh at her waitress job. Moonlighting was unacceptable to Mr. White, especially at the particular restaurant she was employed. Of course, he never considered it was his reluctance to pay employees what they were worth, the reason she was driven to take on a second job.

Mr. White's disdain for Ashleigh began when he recognized she was a popular employee. He was infuriated to find out other managers were ready to offer her positions in their departments. Before she received a promotion he wanted her to "serve" under him until he was sure she was a "buddy". Only when she was a buddy would he present her to another manager. This system assured himself and his "buddies" they could create work for their departments without changing anything of real importance.

Ashleigh never kissed his ass. She was an honest employee and was a threat to what he was trying to accomplish. Worse than being honest she was efficient. He was outraged when she went over his head and mentioned to his boss the inefficiency of the claims department. He liked the inefficiency so he could fix the inefficiency he was creating. When Ashleigh started to fix the inefficiency without asking his direct permission this was when he began to look for ways to fire her. At the very least he was determined to stop her from every getting promoted until she understood, as he put it, *"things worked around here."*

Ashleigh was working exactly how her dad, her brother, and Victoria taught her how to work. The benefit of hanging out with her brother at his club was she witnessed first hand: how to be efficient, how to work with a variety of different people, and how to be smart about what you were doing. During the summer she worked for Blake's company. This is where she was taught how excellence and professionalism were important in a well run office. She learned the value of fulfilling her promises by babysitting and her job at the hotel. Victoria made sure if Ashleigh promised to babysit, no matter what other things came up, Ashleigh was at the place she agreed to babysit. The same rule went for the hotel. When she was scheduled Victoria made sure she was there. Ashleigh found Mr. White's philosophies and work approach disconcerting. She hated the fact he wanted everyone to kiss his ass and became angry when someone told him anything he disagreed with. This irritation increased as she saw how ineffective he was as a manager. What she despised the most was his dishonesty.

As Mr. White approached them, Ashleigh prepared herself to deal with what her brother termed a boss. Her brother taught her there was a difference between a boss and an effective manager.

Bob asked his sister when she lost focus on their conversation, "Is something bothering you?"

Ashleigh found it annoying when Mr. White puffed up his chest, "Ms. Ashleigh Waller."
"What?"

"I should be addressed as your supervisor," he answered in a rebuke and made a production of looking at his watch. "Did you realize you are thirty seven and a half minutes late?"

Ashleigh making a face simply answered, "I called..."

"Now your wasting company time by standing here instead of being at your desk working."

Bob casually stepped up to where his sister was standing. He was averaged height between five ten and eleven, depending on the shoes he wore, this was still much taller than the five foot one Ashleigh.

Mr. White continued, "You shouldn't be wasting the companies time."

She crunched her forehead, "I'm talking to my brother."

He stated with a snicker, "Sure you are."

Mr. White caught her pet peeve, she replied with a tone, "What's that suppose to mean?"

"We all know you have taken on a second job. And if your willing to work as a waitress maybe you'll find other ways to pay your bills."

Bob was incensed his sister was accused of seeking a sugar daddy. He was calming himself as he paid closed attention to this conversation.

"How many calls do you receive from bill collectors every day?"

Ashleigh began to physically shake, "If you'd pay me what I'm worth I wouldn't need a second job. I'd have the money to pay off the bill collectors."

"If you want more pay you'll just have to work harder."

She knew what his version of working harder meant.

She replied, "I'm doing more than anyone else in the department."

With his hands he held onto his suit coat, "To get a raise an employee needs to understand what is expected. If you truly wanted to get promoted you'd keep your nose to the grind stone and your mouth shut. Making suggestions and talking back is not the right way of doing things. You should only do what...."

Ashleigh crunched her teeth together, "But I'm doing..."

When he interrupted he waved a finger, "Not if you want a promotion or a raise. You should trust me. I'd love for you to be promoted." This was a bold faced lie. "You have so much potential. You just need to understand how things work around here."

Bob wanted to fire Mr. White. He reminded himself Mr. White was an employee of *Captain Investments & Insurance*. Bob was reminded on why he kept the mid-management level of his company to a minimum.

"What happens if I don't care how you think things should be run?" She yelled, "Mr. Tumble liked me and thought I was a great employee. I'm not about to kiss your sorry ass."

Mr. Tumble was the supervisor before Mr. White. Mr. Tumble was missed but everyone wished him well when he retired.

She felt empowered to speak this way with her brother standing there. Mr. White was helping her make the decision to accept her brothers job offer.

"How dare you talk to me like this. I'm your supervisor." With a smug smile added, "You need me. The company needs me. The sooner you understand this the sooner your situation will improve."

The fact was he enjoyed promising promotions and raises but when it came down to it, he really hated giving them. What he enjoyed was manipulating employees to work harder.

Ashleigh snickered, "Who says I need you?"

He pulled on his coat and puffed his chest and answered, "If you'd like to fix your financial situation. I might add its embarrassing to the company. Your attitude should improve. Now you tell your friend..."

Bob with controlled anger interrupted Mr. White, "Sir. And I'm using this term very loosely. I'm very curious as to what you are insinuating the relationship is between this fine young lady and myself? I would hope you wouldn't lack the intelligence to alluding to a supposed arrangement in where my sister would sleep with someone to pay off her bills? Ms. Waller is correct in her assessment."

Ashleigh's eyes were filled with concern. She suddenly realized her Brother could possibly get her fired.

Mr. White gave Bob a belittling face and answered sarcastic, "What's that?"

Bob pushed up his glasses, "With you being in authority you could give her a raise. I know how hard she works. I'm aware of her salary. I've been told your the one freezing her salary. Compared to other employee's completing the same tasks you've been underpaying Ashleigh."

Ashleigh question herself; how much did he truly know? She reviewed her brothers actions. She considered the possibility her brother's meeting was at *Captain Investments*.

Mr White replied with a condescending tone, "It's none of your concern what I pay my employees."

"This young woman is in fact my sister. Her start in life might have been filled with difficulty but she has overcome many obstacles and has grown to be a woman of great honor. She would never put herself in a compromised situation. I believe you should apologize."

She began to tear. This statement touched her heart deeply. The only thing better than this statement was if he could buy her a magical castle filled with unicorns.

"My sister is like a vintage wine and I'm sure you'd be unaware of what a fine wine would taste like."

Mr. White snipped back, "For your information I enjoy fine wines."

Ashleigh was sure this cheap bastard only drank a fine wine when someone else bought him one. She was sure the only wine he ever bought was in a box.

Mr. Waller continued matter of fact, "It's painfully obvious my sister's full time employer has hired a bumbling idiot as her boss. It's obvious this moronic, simple minded, imbecile; is unaware of how good an employee he has working for him. She is now forced, because of this dim-witted baboon to take on a second job."

Mr. White made a face.

Ashleigh recognized Mr. White's face. This face implied Bob was unimportant. His body language screamed indifference. Mr. White strongly believed in do as I say, not as I do; and felt because he was the manager he was allowed to treat everyone below him the way he wanted. Ashleigh heard him many times speak of his "authority" and his "influence."

"She is a flirt and a tease," Mr. White fired back. "I'd suggest if you don't want your young friend fired you should mosey on along and get back to whatever you do."

There was a group of employees standing at the top of the concrete stairs watching this exchange. One of these employees knew who Mr. White was talking to, she was content in seeing his work career at *Captain Investments & Insurance* topple like a demolished building.

This statement agitated Ashleigh, "I'm not a tease."

"You act like one."

Ashleigh speaking with her hands answered in an angry tone, "You get mad because I wouldn't date you. If you were the last man on earth I wouldn't date you. I've been watching how you get women promoted. You probably have a flaming case of herpes."

A bunch of ladies at the top of the stairs snickered and laughed.

Mr. White looked up at this group of women. With this look many of them headed into the building, except a curvy white woman, and a tall skinny Afro-American woman smoking a cigarette.

Mr Waller spoke as if he was giving a speech to a company he just took over, "You are the type of manager I fire. You are an unabridged..." Bob became silent for a brief second. "I'm sure your vocabulary isn't above a third grade level so I'll say this bluntly. You are most likely a fuck up."

Ashleigh's eyes went wide. Her brother very rarely if ever swore.

Mr. White puffed himself up and replied, "I'm an executive and I have the power to fire whoever your friend is."

People were watching from inside the building.

"If you actually could release my sister you'd have already done so. I suspect the situation is someone above you is being wise and has witnessed how great of an employee my

sister is. I'm sure there are executives above you ready to promote her. I would imagine this same individual has forbidden you to fire her. This is why you are making a production out of her being late."

His retort to Bob's comment was, "She doesn't have a degree."

Bob asked very bluntly, "I'd gamble my life savings you were the type to marry a nice unsuspecting woman so you could get promoted?" Mr. Waller paused, "So who's your connection to working here."

The white curvy woman was certain Ashleigh's friend was someone important, not by the way he dressed, but by his attitude. She shouted to Bob, "His father-in-law is an executive."

Mr. White yanked on his coat.

Bob looked at Mr. White. "You're the type that's a cancer to productivity and good moral. I suspect there is a clump of you..."

Mr. White interrupted with disdain and even chuckled, "Who are you to tell me anything?"

Mr. Waller asked, "Are you familiar with *Renewed Mastery*?"

Without a shadow of a doubt Ashleigh was convinced the meeting her brother was having was with her company. She was annoyed at the fact he kept it a secret, but she was aware it was his pattern to work behind the scenes. Ashleigh was anxious to see what her brother would say next. She enjoyed her brother defending her honor.

Ashleigh started to answer, "*Renewed Mastery* is the fastest growing company in the state of Wisconsin."

Bob interrupted his sister, "May I finish."

"Yes my brother."

They smiled at one another.

People watching found this funny but Mr. White was stewing at such a display.

"*Renewed Mastery* just acquired a paint company, a wood processing company in upper Michigan, and it acquired an Art Graphics company from the east coast."

Mr. White sneered, "You forgot the one that will be announced in a couple hours. Only a select few of us know about this acquisition."

Mr. White assumed the guy standing in front of him read about *Renewed Mastery* in some magazine or in the newspaper. Mr. White was sure the guy in front of him was anyone but Robert Waller the executive of *Renewed mastery*. This guy who was wearing simple dockers, simple glasses, a purple shirt, an ugly tie, and simple shoes was most likely a manager at a local retail store. To Mr. White an executive of Robert Waller's wealth and growing status in the business community would be wearing an expensive tailored suit and would have pulled up in a limousine. It was beyond Mr. White's perceptions to see a man of Bob's status standing on his company's steps talking to the likes of Ashleigh. He was so ignorant he felt Ashleigh's last name was a coincidence.

Based upon Mr. White's look, Bob felt the need to bury this guy, "One of the companies being acquired is a Minneapolis advertising firm. It's the largest advertising firm in the mid-west and the fourth largest in the country. The President of the advertising firm approached me with a merger offer. Mr. White do you know why?"

Mr. White suddenly needed to find air.

Ashleigh was angry at the fact her brother talked to an executive during his

disappearance and was unwilling to call her.

Speaking with authority Mr. Waller continued, "It's obvious you have very little understanding of what I'm speaking off. The executive who started the firm in the 1970's wanted someone who would continue to grow his firm at the same time respect his employees. I'm also acquiring a small firm in Kentucky. My lawyer Mr. Shelby has advised me to keep the names of these companies in confidence until the merger is over. Does any of this sound familiar?" Bob looked over at Ashleigh and stated very gently, "Ms. Waller would you feel honored if I escorted you into the building?"

Mr. White felt like he was just hit by a professional football player.

"Yes my brother."

Ashleigh gave him a smiling smirk.

Mr. White only knew as much as his Father-in-law told him. The one thing Mr. White knew for sure was a southern lawyer named Mr. Shelby took over *Renewed Mastery's* legal affairs. This information was never released to the public.

Ashleigh asked in a whisper, "When did this happen?"

Bob smiled, "Did you really expect me to be idle these last five months? You of all people know I'm not one to remain idle. Why should I stop now?"

She couldn't disagree.

Bob ignored Mr. White and said to Ashleigh, "We have to see someone."

Mr. White was left standing on the steps.

Ashleigh collected her things and started to follow her brother. She was enjoying this moment a great deal. She held her head up high and kept pace with her brother.

Mr. Waller stopped and looked at the two women standing in front of the building smoking cigarettes. Bob stopped and asked; "Are either of you two ladies willing to quit smoking?"

The curvy woman asked, "Why?"

"How would you like to make four more dollars an hour and move to Florida by this time next year. It will most likely be sooner."

The two women looked at one another. The white curvy woman was to afraid of change.

The tall black woman named Charlette was sick of Milwaukee. The only family living, in what Charlette felt was an armpit of a city, was her worthless cousin. This tall Afro-American woman was desperately trying to figure out a way back home to either Georgia or Florida. Charlette's Momma told her on the phone, "I've heard the Lord and he will move you back home." Charlette saw Bob's request as an answered prayer. She trusted Bob because he was standing next to Ashleigh. Charlette believed Ashleigh had a good heart, in this very prejudice city a white person was willing to talk to a black person, the white person was most likely trustworthy. More important everyone knew Ashleigh was a straight shooter.

"Yes sir. I'm ready to move back home," Charlette asked in her Georgia accent, "What are Y'all wanting me to do?"

"First I'd like you to carry my sisters belongings. You give a two week notice before you come to work for me. I'd like you to stop smoking. If quitting is difficult my company will refer you to a specialist."

Bob took out two business cards from his wallet.

"I will honor your word. If you'll honor yours and quit smoking."

Charlette looked over at Ashleigh.

Ashleigh knew her and answered her look, "My brother always keeps a promise. Except when he leaves town."

The two women looked at one another.

This tall woman thought for a second, "Sir. If it ain't polite I do apologize. Am I required to give my two week notice?"

Bob asked, "Who is your current manager?"

She pointed at Mr. White, "Him."

Bob stated, "Forgive me for swearing."

"Y'all are forgiven."

"Mister Kiss Ass over there?"

Ashleigh knew without a doubt her brother was furious.

"Yes Em' Sir."

Mr. Waller promised, "I'll give you a weeks pay off. Call on Monday and I'll have an appointment set up with our HR manager to find a good fit for you. Until the move to Florida."

She looked at these two people in front of her. She stated with confidence, "I quit." She flung her cigarette, "I only started smoking while working for him. I'm sick of working here. I'll never smoke again. Y'all won't be disappointed in hiring me. I've heard Y'all treat people well."

Bob smiled, "I appreciate the compliment."

Charolette stepped over to Ashleigh and was about to take all of her things.

Ashleigh felt this was unfair and handed over her duffel bag and cooler. After this exchange the three of them walked straight into the building.

Ashleigh noticed the companies security guard paying close attention to them.

Mr. Wilson was the current chief of security for this particular building of *Captain Investments & Insurance*. Wilson served in Vietnam, became a decorated police officer, retired from the FBI, and for the last five years was Chief of security. He worked to keep himself busy until his wife retired. Many times this security guard met Bob at a secret back entrance of the building and personally led Mr. Waller into the executive suit to talk with the executives of *Captain Investments*. Mr. Wilson was aware Mr. Waller was coming for a large meeting in where Mr. Adams the Chief Executive of the whole company was making a special trip from London to be here. What surprised Mr. Wilson was Bob Waller came into the building using the front entrance.

Mr. Wilson was a very in shape, medium height, muscular Afro-American in his late fifties. He smiled as Ashleigh Waller was walking beside her brother. Mr. Wilson being an expert at observations was one of the few people who recognized the family resemblance. This observation was made easy for him because he was one of a select few in *Captain Investments* who knew Ashleigh Waller and Bob Waller were related.

When Bob and Ashleigh reached the front desk Bob in a very professional tone spoke, "I'm Bob Waller executive and owner of *Renewed Mastery*. I'd like to see Mr. Adams. I'm well aware I'm early but he is expecting me today."

Mr. White who followed them in, heard this, and sheepishly slipped into an elevator.

A receptionist sitting next to Mr. Wilson glanced at Ashleigh. Ashleigh dug into her purse trying to find her work ID, once she found it she hung the ID around her neck. The receptionist recognized her last name was the same as the Executive of *Renewed Mastery*.

The receptionist was aware Mr. Waller was a wealthy executive and was an eligible bachelor.

"I'll call Ms. Meyers."

The receptionist obviously flirted with Bob.

Ashleigh instantly mistrusted this woman. Ashleigh witnessed the way she unbutton the top couple buttons of her blouse. Ashleigh was proud of her brother for averting his eyes elsewhere.

Ashleigh was contemplating her next move, thinking about Mr. White this move became easy, "Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes."

Ashleigh asked with a wink and a smile, "You know I wouldn't lie?"

Mr. Wilson returned the smile with one of his own, "Of course not."

Every morning he witnessed Ashleigh running into the building carrying her shoes, rushing to get to her desk; while fumbling with bags and her purse. What impressed him was no matter how rushed she was, she at least acknowledged him with a "Hello." Like Charlette he recognized this short woman had a good heart. When Ashleigh met him somewhere in the building she would talk to him about everything and nothing at the same time.

Mr. Wilson considered Ashleigh a sweet girl.

Ashleigh stopped being flirtatious, "I know you are head of security."

"Yes Ma'am."

"You could make sure..." she winked at him and decided to go a different direction. "May I suggest going into Mr. White's desk and if you open the bottom right drawer. You'll find a stack of colored file folders. They'll only be there until he leaves for lunch."

He now understood a tip his staff received a month ago, his response was professional, "I will take this advice under consideration."

Ashleigh smiled but became serious, "You'll find it interesting."

Mr. Wilson whispered, "We've received rumors of some wrong doing."

Ashleigh smiled and winked.

The receptionist said, "Mr. Waller."

"Yes."

"Mr. Adams and the others are expecting you."

Ashleigh caught what this women said, but spoke to Mr. Wilson, "Your the best."

Mr. Wilson doing his job spoke in a very professional manner, "I'll escort the two of you up to the executive offices."

Ashleigh answered, "I'm glad you're walking us up. But Charlette is coming up too."

He gave a puzzled look.

Bob answered, "She's now my employee."

Charlette confirmed, "Yes sir."

"Before you leave today turn in your badge and formally resign."

Charlette answered, "Yes sir."

"But I need..."

Mr. Wilson said, "We'll ignore the rules so she can help you with your things."

"Your the best," Ashleigh stated with a smile.

He smiled, "It's my pleasure."

Ashleigh was finally able to acknowledge her work friend Charlette by nodding her head. Charlette returned the gesture. Both of these ladies felt nervous.

Bob, Mr. Wilson, Charlette, and Ashleigh were riding up an elevator only used by the partners and executives of *Captain Investments and Insurance*. This company was once just a bank. It added insurance and began to serve more regional corporate clients. When Milwaukee was a growing industrial city the company grew. After the 1960's and Milwaukee started to become part of the rust belt, and the city seemed resistant to any change, the company started to buy out small companies and financial institutions. By accomplishing this *Captain Investments and Insurance* found a niche in helping other companies take over other firms. The company quickly out grew Milwaukee and moved it's headquarters to New York. In New York the company merged with many insurance companies and financial institutions, the newest one was a large firm in London. The company now had offices across North America and Europe, all branches had different names, but there was one wealthy group of owners. With Milwaukee becoming a dying small city, and for many of the same reasons Bob was moving his company, there were plans to move the jobs from this facility to other growing cities. Most people were unfamiliar with this history. The general population believed their profits came from selling insurance and helping the small investor. The owners of *Captain Investments and Insurance* liked it this way. The truth was, most of their profits came from helping companies buy out other companies, and helping other companies from being bought out.

Unlike the rest of the population Bob knew the history of *Captain Investments and Insurance*.

Ashleigh looked over at her brother and wondered how he could be so calm. The last time she felt this nervous was when she was a supporting actress in a college play. Her intention was to gain a couple credits working on the sound and stage crews, because of her background she was an excellent crew member. This was short lived. The director of the play happened to catch Ashleigh helping an actress before rehearsal. Even before he witnessed Ashleigh's natural talent, he noticed she was lip singing all of the play while she was working around the set. Witnessing her talent, made it easy for him to make her the supporting actress.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened.

The men in the elevator allowed the women out first.

Directly in front of them was a large wooden desk. Attached to the front of the desk the words: *Captain Investments & Insurance* were printed in big bold gold letters. Sitting up on a platform, behind this bold front, was a very lovely looking brunette.

Ashleigh and Charlette gently set Ashleigh's bags down on the floor.

This receptionist looked up and immediately, spoke, "Mr. Waller I've been instructed to call Ms. Meyers because of the sudden change in schedule."

"This is understandable. Tell Ms. Meyers to let Mr. Adams know I'm sorry for the sudden change in time. I realize I'm changing my own protocol and arriving at the very beginning of the meeting."

This attractive brunette smiled, "We're used to changes Mr. Waller."

"I appreciate the understanding."

"I'll have Ms. Myers come and escort you to the meeting."

“Thank-you.”

This woman picked up the phone and called Ms. Myers. Ms. Meyers was the lead executive secretary and the personal secretary of Mr. Adams when he was in Milwaukee. Mr. Adams official title was *President of Acquisitions*. Ms. Myers and Mr. Adams were long time associates. She kept him well informed.

With Ashleigh recognizing this brunette was far from interested in having a relationship with her brother, she become transfixed on a classic painting hanging on the wall behind the receptionist. The painting was of a young woman in a fifteenth century dress laying on a green hill waiting for a young man in the distance. Ashleigh wondered what all the symbolism in this painting meant. What fascinated Ashleigh was how the focus of the painting was on the woman's bare feet, an umbrella, a lamb, and the young woman's facial expression.

Ashleigh stopped studying the painting when the receptionist hung up the phone and addressed Ashleigh and Charlette, “What brings you two up here? Let me see your badges.”

“Oh,” Ashleigh answered and lifted up her badge.

Charlette was unclasping her badge from her slacks.

“This is my sister Ashleigh Waller. In a short time she'll be an employee of *Renewed Mastery*. I'd like her to be my personal assistant in the meeting today. Charlette is my sister's assistant.”

Ashleigh gave her brother a look. He again just assumed she would work for him, she was pretty confident she would take the job, but this was far from the point.

The secretary answered, “I'll notify Ms. Myers. I'll tell her another chair should be set at the table.”

“I'd like Ashleigh to be sitting on my right.”

“Yes sir,” the secretary then pointed to her left and mentioned, “Ms. Waller's assistant has to wait over there.”

Ashleigh and Charlette looked over to where the receptionist pointed. There were six very large and comfortable looking chairs in a large U. In the center of this U was a glass coffee table with magazines placed upon the table. What fascinated Ashleigh was a large grandfather clock placed against the far wall. She especially liked the face of the clock. On either side of this grandfather clock were two big potted plants. It was obvious the paintings on the wall were priceless works of art. Ashleigh was too far away to see the details of these treasured paintings. On the right side of this long waiting area, just before this furniture, was a concave glass wall. Where Ashleigh was standing she could only see where the glass met the wall.

The receptionist reminded them, “Ms. Myers will be out in a few moments.”

Charlette was about to pick up all of Ashleigh's things, but Ashleigh helped her assistant by lifting up her own duffel bag and kept her purse. Walking with her assistant she looked through the glass wall. Ashleigh estimated there were ten to twelve very expensive desks lined up in this room. Sitting at each desk was an executive secretary. Behind each secretary was a large wooden door. This large office area was filled with expensive furniture, plants, and more priceless paintings. Ashleigh was certain each piece of furniture was more expensive than the sum total of every piece of furniture she owned. She assumed the paintings were worth more than her parents house.

The two of them walked all of Ashleigh's things to a chair. Charlette and Ashleigh neatly piled Ashleigh's belongings against this chair.

Charlette grabbed a magazine and whispered to Ashleigh, "Y'all. They have all this expensive furniture but ain't given any of us a raise."

Ashleigh liked Charlette's accent.

Ashleigh whispered back, "If you work for my brother he isn't like that."

Charlette smiled at Ashleigh's accent. She found the way people in Milwaukee pronounced their C's and T's were funny.

The secretary called out, "Ms. Waller."

Charlette and Ashleigh nodded their heads. Walking back to the receptionist desk she almost tripped. In frustration she lifted one leg at a time and slipped the shoes off her feet. Ashleigh was now a couple inches shorter and was her five foot one self. She walked these shoes to where Charlette was sitting and set them next to the chair. Ashleigh felt if she was accepting the job offer from her brother abiding by a dress code for *Captain Investments & Insurance* was pointless. Walking back to where Bob was standing she noticed Mr. Wilson left without saying goodbye. The receptionist was already talking on the phone when Ashleigh reached the desk. Ashleigh decided to stand in a spot where she could watch what was happening in the offices as well as stand near her brother.

Listening to the receptionist tone and watching her facial expressions Ashleigh believed there was some interpersonal politics between this receptionist and whomever the receptionist was talking too.

Ashleigh looked toward Charlette. She appeared comfortable even though her legs were sticking way out in front of the chair.

"Fine."

The receptionist restrained herself from slamming the phone.

Bob and Ashleigh smiled at one another.

As if this was a cue from a movie, Ashleigh observed an elegant woman in her late fifties open the concave glass door and step out into the lobby. Ashleigh assumed this woman was Ms. Meyers. Ashleigh hoped when she reached fifty she could appear as elegant as this woman. Ashleigh felt she looked similar to a hostess at a very fancy restaurant. Or a mother of a wealthy family who was able to handle all the families drama in stride. Her bright blue eyes shone through her elegant glasses. There were signs of age, but her long square shaped face still held a model look. Ashleigh was sure in her day many men pursued her. Ashleigh felt this woman was dressed very appropriate for her age and this added to her sophistication. Ashleigh liked her tweed blazer and her lightweight but very conservative matching skirt. Underneath the blazer she was wearing a very elegant flowered blouse and a corsage belt along her waist. Matching this outfit she was wearing two elegant looking flowered pumps with two inch heels.

Ashleigh felt the same need for spring as this woman did.

Ashleigh liked the look of her shoes but was sure they would hurt her feet. Ashleigh secretly wished she had the shape to wear clothes like this, she felt very poor, and very out of place. She wished she was wearing a brand new suit separate she tried on at the mall in a store named, *Taylor's*.

"Mr. Waller," Ms. Myers took Ashleigh's brother's hand. "It's very nice to see you again."

"Likewise," was Bob's simple response.

Ms. Myers took off her glasses, she crossed her arms, her glasses were being held in her right hand, "Is this Ms. Waller?"

Ashleigh's defenses went up.

Ashleigh squinted at this lady.

Ms. Meyer noticed the squint but pretended to miss it.

Ashleigh maintained a professional tone, "I'm Ashleigh Waller. Bob's sister."

This older woman responded with a serious look as she bit on the tip of her glasses and spoke, "Indeed."

Ashleigh felt an overwhelming sense of suspicion from Ms. Meyer.

Ms. Myers spoke very professionally, "I'll take both of you to the executive conference room where the others are waiting for you. Ms. Waller there is a chair being placed next to your brother."

Ashleigh answered, "Thank-you."

Ms. Myers asked, "Ms. Waller would you mind stepping over here so we may talk."

"Sure."

The two ladies stepped away from the receptionist and a few feet from Bob.

Bob watched closely.

Ms. Myers asked Ashleigh a question as only a sophisticated mother would ask, "Young lady were you aware of this meeting?"

"No," Ashleigh answered worried. "He just showed up and brought me here."

She again chewed on the tip of her glasses, "Indeed."

"I shouldn't go to this meeting?"

Like a mother Ms. Myers stated, "It's like a man to miss the social status of things. In the future may I suggest being prepared for a meeting at a moments notice."

Ashleigh knew what she was referring too, "I don't have the money right now."

Bob stepped up and defended Ashleigh, "She is dressed just fine. If someone wants to complain they can discuss it with me. I'm sure in the future she'll be dressed in a manner fitting for this type of meeting."

By his tone and body language Ashleigh believed her brother was being way to cocky but she appreciated the fact he was defending her.

Ms. Myers smiled and politely suggested, "Mr. Waller I do respect your honor and how you respect your sister."

"I'm proud of her."

Ashleigh kept herself from tearing.

"If you'd like to have others take her as seriously as you take her she might need a clothing allowance."

"I hate vanity."

Ashleigh was going to reply but based upon Ms. Myers look decided to remain silent.

"As well as I. The fact is because she is a young woman she'll be judged more harshly than yourself for being so casual."

Ashleigh was glad someone else told him what she was trying to tell him for years.

Ashleigh heard her brothers tone, but based upon his body language knew he respected this personal assistant.

"With the salary I'm prepared to give my sister she'll be able to afford clothes others will find acceptable. As of now if anyone complains have them talk to me and I'll explain the situation to them."

Ashleigh took note on how Ms. Myers held in her smile of approval.

"Very well," she let her glasses hang on a chain. "I will escort you to the meeting."

Ashleigh again caught Ms. Myers look of approval.

She opened the concave glass door. Ashleigh and Bob stepped through the door. Once in this large rectangle shaped office area Ashleigh noticed more than a few of these secretaries prepping themselves and paying close attention to the three of them. Ashleigh was certain these very beautiful women were either looking for a quick husband or a sugar daddy. This worried Ashleigh. She wanted her brother to marry someone who loved him for who he was. This is when it dawned on her there were thousands of these type of gorgeous women in Florida. She pictured one of these type stealing her brothers money and then stomping all over his heart. She knew her brother's heart was far more fragile than he ever let on. This added to her growing feeling someone needed to watch out for him; without ever letting him know someone was watching out for him.

Ms. Myers led them passed these desks. At the end of this room she led them into a hallway. On the left side of this hallway were the bathrooms and a bubbler (in Milwaukee this was the term used for a water fountain). They passed three conference rooms, two on the right and one on the left. The door to this left conference room was open. Ashleigh glanced into this room. She witnessed a blond haired woman and a mailroom guy from Bob's company placing white banker boxes on a table. Ashleigh could tell this blond woman was making sure these boxes were being placed in a specific order. A security guard from *Captain Investments & Insurance* quickly shut the door. Ashleigh wanted to question her brother but instead they turned left. Ashleigh heard a symphony of voices. She inspected the hallway; at the end of this hallway was a window, standing next to this window were a group of well dressed men and women she recognized from her brothers company. It was easy for Ashleigh to notice their surprised look, and once they noticed her brother they stepped into the conference room to their right.

Ms. Myers led them to a similar entrance door but on the other side of this room: "Mr. Waller if you need anything I'll be here."

"I'm grateful."

They nodded their heads.

While they talked Ashleigh surveyed the conference room through the open door. To Ashleigh's horror the room was filled with executives and their well dressed assistants. There were a couple of Vice Presidents and Bob's business partner Mr. Cooper from *Renewed Mastery*. Adding to this uncomfortable feeling was when she spotted a couple of vice presidents and assistants from *Captain Investments*. Both sets of employees were staring at her. She was sure they were confused as to why she was there. She was keenly aware the dresses and suites these executives were wearing cost more than her whole wardrobe. She felt poor gazing upon the tailored suites the female executives were wearing. She looked down upon herself and wished she was wearing a tailored woman's suite. She regretting being shoeless and was horrified at all the dog hairs. She realized she never reapplied her makeup but she was thankful she was able to remove the runny makeup. She was about to pull her brother

off to the side and explain to him how out of place she felt. Her hope was her brother would have enough sense to excuse her from the meeting.

He never gave her the change.

Being a gentleman he motioned for both ladies to enter the room first. To Ashleigh's horror he closed the door behind them. Ashleigh watched as Ms. Myers quietly and with elegance sat down in a chair next to a phone hanging on the wall. Ashleigh felt Ms. Myers defined the word lady as she sat in the chair.

The conference room felt long to Ashleigh. The feeling of length was helped by the long executive table in the center. There were two long rows of leather seats on both sides of the table and on either end was a large leather chair. In front of each chair was a white three ring binder, a red folder, a yellow legal pad, a pen, a glass of water, and a coffee cup. On the center of the table were fancy water pitchers. Most of the chairs were filled except for a few people hanging around a corner coffee station, it was easy for Ashleigh to recognize this coffee station, this was the exact same type of station she set up and maintained for all the meetings on her floor.

Ashleigh contemplated running out of the conference room. She came to the conclusion this course of action would have been completely childish, instead she would just have to face the situation. She adjusted her clothing and acted like she belonged in the room. She was grateful she took drama in high school and in college.

Mr. Adams walked over to them.

Ashleigh knew Mr. Adams; he was the Chief Executive Officer of *Captain Investments & Insurance* for Mr. Adams to be at this meeting meant her brother was accomplishing something extreme.

In the background she heard, "Mr. Adams I'd like you to meet my assistant. Ms. Ashleigh Waller."

This English gentleman smiled.

Ashleigh always found Mr. Adams interesting and adorable. He was only two inches taller than her, he was sophisticated, he was attractive in his own way, he was successful, and she found his English accent appealing. She often fantasied about being married to him. How she would move to the Scottish castle he was rumored to own. To focus on the upcoming meeting she needed to push aside this fantasy.

Mr. Adams spoke honestly, "She's a delightful and ambitious employee."

Ashleigh like a well trained actress held in her nervousness and answered, "Thank-you sir."

Ashleigh could feel the room talking about her.

Ashleigh observed everyone taking their seats along the table. She felt the best strategy was to remain near her brother.

She heard her brother whisper to Mr. Adams, "Before we start the meeting I want to discuss a situation."

"Oh certainty?"

Mr. Adams was sure this young executive was nervous about the corporate takeovers. Mr. Adams was of the belief Mr. Waller was contemplating the responsibility he would now have as the sole owner of *Renewed Mastery*. He was well aware the way Mr. Waller was taking over *Renewed Mastery*, it would now be difficult for anyone to take him over. Mr.

Adams was of the belief Mr. Waller knew the elites were watching him and this was making him nervous and this was why he wanted to talk to Mr. Adams.

Mr. Adams was shocked at what Bob was going to discuss.

"I hope you'll give my sister some grace," Bob said simply. "I need her as an assistant today and I'd hope your company would excuse her for being unable to perform her normal business duties within your company."

"Completely understood. Grace will be given."

Ashleigh had a list of things to say but remained silent.

"I wanted to inform you my sister was unaware I was working with your company."

Mr. Adams nodded his head and spoke in an English accent, "I'm grateful for this information."

Ashleigh was listening to her brother as she was closely inspecting everyone's body language and movements. She noted those people who were staring at her, those who were whispering, or passing notes.

Bob's Vice President and business partner, Glen Cooper, sat at the head of the table. Ashleigh felt this was blasphemous and wanted to rip the chair out from underneath him. She reluctantly held in this impulse. She never liked him and expressed her displeasure to her brother every time she had the chance. She really began to despise him while observing his attitude at her brother's company.

Ashleigh happened to catch Ms. Myers watching Mr. Cooper as well.

Her brother continued, "I offered Ms. Waller a position with my company. I'm expecting she will be treated well in the next two weeks."

"She's been a valuable employee," Mr. Adams commented with honesty, "We're sorry to lose her."

Ashleigh could not keep it in, "If I decide to refuse my brothers offer would it be alright if I still worked here?"

Mr. Adams smiled, "Of course."

Ashleigh smiled back, "I'm not looking for any special treatment because our company is working with my brothers company."

Ms. Myers watched and listened from her corner of the room.

Mr. Adams appreciated her sincerity, "Young Lady. May I recommend you take the position at *Renewed Mastery*. Your brother is running a very successful venture. I'm certain after today your brothers company will be a contender." Mr. Adams paused, "Based upon your performance here you'd be a wonderful asset to your brother."

She answered with a flirtatious face, "Women love compliments."

"Maybe what your brother needs is a wise sister to watch out for him."

He winked in return.

She blushed.

"If you take the opportunity to work with your brother. I'll miss watching a fine lady with a very fine stature, running into our building making it to work on time."

She blushed again but felt it was okay to flirt back, "I wasn't aware you liked me running into the building?"

She winked.

They smiled at one another.

Ashleigh out of the corner of her eye took note of people watching them.

Bob spoke. "We did run into trouble this morning."

"Yes Mr. Waller?"

"A Mr. White implied my sister and I..."

Ashleigh rescued her brother when he lost his words, "My boss implied I was not being a good girl and my brother and I were an item."

"What a rude trap."

Ashleigh felt the freedom to speak freely, "He continued even after we told him we're brother and sister."

Mr. Adams was very serious, "We'll just have to take care of such unsavory behavior." He thought for a moment, "What type of manager is Mr. White?"

Ashleigh simply stated, "I wish Mr. Limpet was still here. But I've heard he's enjoying retirement."

"He was a fine gentleman wasn't he."

"I believe so."

Ashleigh was unaware Mr. Adams and Mr. Limpet ran in similar circles when Mr. Adams was in London.

"We'll just have to handle the situation with Mr. White."

Ashleigh was being turned on by his accent and his short stature.

Ashleigh wanted to be there when the two English Ex-Commando's, who were part of security, would escort Mr. White out of the building. This was especially pleasing to Ashleigh because Mr. White enjoyed firing people and eagerly watched any time an employee he fired was escorted out of the building.

If they were in London Mr. Adams would have asked Ashleigh out on a date because of work customs in the States he restrained himself.

Bob speaking from the heart asked Mr. Adams, "I need to take care of what we've discussed. I hope you don't mind."

"Certainly."

Ashleigh spotted the hurt on her brother's face. It only lasted a brief moment. She watched Bob's facial expression change to the same look he would get playing a board game.

Bob walked toward the table. Everyone knew enough to sit down and pay attention to Bob except for Mr. Cooper. Mr. Cooper felt he was the one who should address the room. And was foolish enough to put his arms out onto the table and unbutton his suit coat.

Bob started by saying, "I want to begin by saying Ms. Ashleigh Waller will be my assistant today. Until a short time ago she was unaware of this meeting. She's very professional and if she was made aware of the situation I'm sure she would have prepared herself accordingly. I expect everyone to treat her with the respect and dignity she deserves. Ms. Waller would you please take the seat next to the head chair."

Ashleigh adjusted her clothes. She felt a little more embolden, but she was the only one who knew how deeply nervous she felt. When Ashleigh sat down she purposely smirked at Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Cooper made the mistake of saying, "I didn't say you could sit there."

Bob with some boldness stated, "She doesn't need your permission."

Ashleigh smiled when her brother pushed up his glasses.

Mr. Cooper: pushed back his chair, stood up, and was eager to accept Bob's retirement. Once he retired he would gladly send the annoying sister home.

After all the plotting and planning, Mr. Cooper felt a zealous joy at becoming the President of *Renewed Mastery*. He was determined to run *Renewed Mastery* the way a company should be run. This meant everyone and everything would be run with tried and true methods. Mr. Cooper was tired of new ideas and experimenting with new procedures; especially when an idea came from an insignificant peon. He was looking forward to stopping this nonsense of management listening to employees. He already had a clear theocracy in mind. He would start by creating more middle management positions. In these positions would be an employee who would agree with him and implement those policies which reflected a more rigid form of discipline. He was determined to force tried and true methods even if it meant forcing employees to act the way he wanted.

The second part of his plan was to make *Renewed Mastery* a public traded company. Once this happened he would work with a group of elite backers who were concerned about the wealth and power Bob was accumulating. The plan was for Mr. Cooper to sell sections of *Renewed Mastery* to these backers in a predetermined period of time. Once this was accomplished, Mr. Cooper looked forward to a splendid retirement enjoying the lavish lifestyle he so greedily wanted.

Bob turned to a standing Mr. Cooper and was about to speak, instead Mr. Cooper butted in and said, "It's nice to have your sister here on this day."

Mr. Cooper turned to everyone sitting at the table and started to say, "The reason for this meeting is to announce changes..."

Bob smiled, pushed up his glasses, and stated matter of fact, "I'm the sole owner of *Renewed Mastery*. Your fired."

Glen gave Bob a very angry look, "You arrogant prick. I'm now running the company."

Mr. Adams stepped up and said matter of fact, "No sir. Mr. Robert Waller is now the president and sole owner of *Renewed Mastery*."

Shocked silence from everyone.

A person Ashleigh never met before stood up. She was wearing a very expensive but plain blue suit, it covered a body most men would have lusted after but none of the men noticed, her long blond hair was in a bun, she was wearing larger glasses, and very little makeup, stated while shoving a file folder toward Glen, "Mr. Cooper the proof of Mr. Waller's ownership is written here."

The room erupted in talk.

Ashleigh could tell by her brothers smirk and body language they planned this part.

Furious, "What proof?"

Ashleigh winked at Glen. She could tell Glen wanted to come over and strangle her.

This blond woman pushed up her glasses, opened a brief case, took out paperwork. She held it in front of her.

Ashleigh knew she was important because once she began to read the paperwork the room became quiet again.

"As of 12:00 AM Eastern Standard time," she pushed up her glasses and looked at the clock on the wall, "This was nine hours forty eight minutes and thirty-five seconds from the current time." She again pushed up her glasses. She began to read the paperwork, "Mr. Bob Waller is the sole owner of *Renewed mastery* as well as these acquired companies..."

Ashleigh only passively listened to this woman's reading. Instead she was enjoying Glen's face contort with every word. She was delighted this guy who was part of the reason her

brother decided to leave for five months was getting what came to him. When the woman was done with her short reading is when Ashleigh watched this woman. This woman pushed up her glasses, she set the paperwork down on the briefcase, she made sure her skirt was proper, and very professionally sat down.

Ashleigh loved the silence.

She waited for her brother.

On a rare occasion Bob spoke simply and to the point.

Ashleigh loved every word of it.

"Mr. Cooper your relieved of duty. You can take your ass kissing buddies with you. They are," refusing to use any names he pointed, "you, you, you, you, you and you are all going with him. In the conference room next door there will be a box with your personal items and a severance package. You should feel privileged I'm a man of honor and I'm still giving you a severance package after the way you treated me, my company, and all of your employees. I can assure you those employees who were on your side are now being escorted out of my company. I'm not one to put up with manipulation. I'm not pleased on how you've participated in Coopers plan to take the company from me. It's disappointing to let you go."

Glen Cooper who clearly was unable to believe what he heard the woman read and what Bob just spoke lashed out, "You arrogant bastard. If you knew what's good for you will..."

Mr. Adams very politely, as only an English gentleman could announced, "You are mistaken. Mr. Waller as of midnight New York time became the sole owner of *Renewed Mastery*."

Glen shouted at Mr. Adams, "You back stabbing ass."

"Sir. You approached me."

Bob stated, "You shouldn't have tried to take the company from me. Even if you hadn't my intention was to remove you" Bob looked at the quiet and shocked room, "I'm very aware of how you were trying to back stab me and how you worked more diligently on creating a buddy network and maintaining your office than actually accomplishing anything. The worst part about you. Is how you want everybody to reach high standards while in fact you yourself can't attain the standards you yourself set. You get so hung up on the little things you mess up the big picture. More important I don't like people who want their assess kissed."

Ashleigh loved her brothers bluntness.

Bob looked over at Glen's assistant, "You're fired too. Your dishonesty makes me want to vomit. Plus I don't appreciate..."

Ashleigh scolded, "Bob."

Everyone knew what the rumors were.

To Ashleigh's surprise her brother listened and simple said, "Leave with the rest."

Mr. Adams instructed matter of fact, "Follow Ms. Myers to the conference room. After security will escort you out of my building."

Ms. Myers announced, "Ladies and gentleman follow me."

It was obvious to Ashleigh security was outside of the door listening. Ashleigh watched as four big, strong, and attractive men made sure, the four male executives and the two women executives, along with Mr. Coopers assistant left with them. These security officers included two retired English Commando's, a retired British Naval security officer, and an ex Marine Ranger who just came back from the gulf.

As long as Ashleigh could remember she admired men in uniform. Starting in adolescence and now as an adult this fascination was a turn on. Ashleigh especially liked the dark haired, brown eyed, commando. With her abstaining from sex, many thoughts about what it would be like to have sex with him were crossing her mind. She stopped her fantasies.

The noise from all of the discussion echoed in the room.

The employees who were just let go were surprised most of all. They were looking forward to Glen taking over and they would start receiving bonuses for their loyalty.

Glen was about to protest.

Ashleigh hoped he would. She was angry someone would try and steal the company her brother worked so hard to build. Plus, she knew Glen would treat her brothers employees in ways her brother disliked. Many of these employees she knew since she was a teenager. The security guard Ashleigh was attracted to stepped in between her brother and Glen.

Glen restrained himself and followed out his crying assistant.

The room was still a buzz of talking.

At this moment Ashleigh loved her brothers over confidence. With resolve he gently moved the head chair out of the way. Ashleigh focused on her brothers speech. "Like I mentioned earlier and for those of you who are unaware," he gently motioned with his hand, "This is Ms. Ashleigh Waller she'll be my personal assistant during this meeting and if she chooses will take the position of moving coordinator. She will help coordinate our companies move to southeastern Florida. The exemptions are the advertising firm I will officially purchase today, our trucking facilities, and our lumber operation." Before the meeting erupted in loud chatter, Bob stated, "I will explain this matter shortly."

Ashleigh grabbed a pen and the legal pad of paper. She assumed Bob would want exact notes on what was said and what happened. She started to write down what her Brother was saying."

Bob continued, "I want to apologize for falling short as the President of *Renewed Mastery*. I'm unaccustomed to apologizing in this manner. I'm willing to do so because I'm confident by the reactions of my employees I have treated you well. I can assure you I will never allow this to happen again. On the day I truly retire I will make sure the person taking over will honor my promise to treat employees like they should be treated. I guarantee I will find a person dedicated to being efficient, creative, and will allow a true open door policy. From this day forward, *Renewed Mastery* will be run with vision."

Ashleigh caught the wink of Mr. Adams, she pretended to miss the wink. If he was younger and was never her boss, maybe; but it was flattering to have someone like him to show interest in her. She again imagined living in a Scottish castle. She recalled how this would have fulfilled her brothers stories about: princess, castles, dragons, witches, frogs, fairies, and unicorns.

She smiled her own personal smile thinking about these stories.

She again focused on her brother.

"Since Mr. Glenn has started to run this company into the ground with his..."

Ashleigh knew where her brother was going with the speech. She stopped writing; she would fill in this section later. Pretending to ignore everyone at the table she quietly started to read all of the paperwork in front of her. This action helped her watch everyone's reaction to her brothers speech and allowed her to get caught up on some of the details of the meeting.

Very few people in this room were bold enough to read the paperwork until they were directed too.

Ms. Meyers bit on the tip of her glasses. She was standing next to a back window of the second floor. She was making sure every past employee of *Renewed Mastery* made it to the parking structure next to the building; they were easy to spot because they were carrying white boxes. She took notice of the security officer who just finished a tour in Iraq standing next to the back door where all of the executives just left. She took note on how he remained standing there even after all the executives left.

She was grateful she stayed.

A police van showed up.

As soon as the van arrived: the security officer walked up to the police van, two police officers stepped out of the van, and they began an impromptu conference. Within minutes two police cars pulled up. Four minutes after the last squad car pulled up, Ms. Myers witnessed the security guard touch his communicator and walk over to the back door and hold it open. Stepping out of the building was Mr. Wilson and a British Commando, they were dragging a very subdued handcuffed Mr. White. At one time in this process Mr. White was uncooperative. Behind him were three employees, two males and a female, with one of the commando security guards behind them. The last person being led out by a commando was a protesting Vice President. Her dress was disheveled and one heel was broke. They lined all of these people up. Ms. Myers noticed the woman employee was starting to cry. Ms. Meyers shook her head. She knew this employee was a wife and a mother of three children. It was obvious to Ms. Myers they were being read their rights. She watched them being handcuffed one at a time. As they were in the process of being arrested a woman from their *Fraud Department* stepped out from the building. Behind her were a series of employees pushing large carts with white banker boxes neatly stacked. Ms. Myers watched the security officer who held open the door shut it and follow them. The woman from the *Fraud Department* talked to a detective and a district attorney who arrived while everyone was being handcuffed. Ms. Myers enjoyed when all of these employees were shoved into the van. Ms. Myers truly hoped this was the last of them but if there were more they would be caught.

When Ms. Myers told the *Fraud Department* she felt it was Ashleigh Waller who wrote the two anonymous notes about Mr. White, the *Fraud Department* took their investigation up a level. Ms. Myers and the fraud team admired the courage and the cunning of Ms. Waller for the photocopies and recorded calls she was able to hand over to *Fraud Department*.

She observed the police van pull away and the security team of her company go back into the building. She headed back to her desk. She took the stairs of the fire escape so she could organize her thoughts related to Bob and Ashleigh Waller.

Ms. Myers under Mr. Adams direction researched: *Renewed Mastery*, Bob, Ashleigh, their families, and their friends. Ms. Myers felt *Renewed Mastery* would continue to grow and set trends. Trends other more established companies would despise and would need to prepared for. Ms. Myers felt if Ashleigh worked for her brother she would be a key to the companies success. She felt Mr. Waller was a determined individual who was destined to achieve, but was vulnerable to his own over confidence, arrogance, and was vulnerable to manipulation. It was difficult to manipulate him, but it was a strong enough weakness for Mr.

Cooper and other executives to try. Ms Myers believed Ashleigh alerted her brother to Mr. Cooper or reaffirmed a feeling Mr. Waller had.

Ms. Myers: scanned her security card, opened a door, was now on the top floor, she went through the office, and sat at her desk. Ms Myers felt if Ashleigh worked for her brother she would try to protect him from himself. She was just as certain Mr. Waller was trying to protect and help his sister. She felt their strong sibling bond was a strength.

She was chewing on the end of her glasses.

She imagined the day when Mr. Waller would buy out *Captain Investments*. She was tired of the corporate world. In three years she would retire. Her plan was to move to South Carolina where her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren lived. Once moved she would buy a condo and look for a new husband. She missed her husband of thirty-nine years. A good man who died of a sudden heart failure three and a half years earlier. She missed sex. Of course she would never tell anyone. She believed a woman should only give herself away on her wedding night.

She wiped off the tip of her glasses and pulled the chair up to her desk. She focused on her work before Mr. Adams would ask about Bob and Ashleigh Waller. She was equally sure he would give her a stack of tasks to accomplish.

End of Part Two of Four

Monday, April 10th, Ashleigh's Choice

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Monday, April 10th
Ashleigh's Choice

Day 2 of Book I

(16 Years, 10 Months, and 4 Days Since Ashleigh's First Camping Trip)

Part Three of Four
Full Day

Authored By:
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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 characters 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"

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Monday April 10th, Ashleigh's Choice

(16 Years, 10 Months, and 4 Days: Since Ashleigh's first camping trip)

Ashleigh pulled her long blond hair away from her face. She welcomed the light breeze. The sky was blue and the white clouds dotted the sky. To feel more comfortable she undid a few of the top buttons of her white top, she left her coat in her brothers Ford Escape, her tights were off, and she was without shoes.

She looked down at Nikita.

Ashleigh was holding Nikita's brand new bright blue leash and a matching bright blue collar. She liked how these items matched her puppies bright blue eyes. Dangling from this collar were dog tags letting the world know Nikita was Ashleigh's puppy.

Nikita was exploring the freshly cut grass and the world around her.

Ashleigh looked toward her brother. He was standing next to his Ford Escape talking on his cell phone. Since the public announcement he was bombarded with calls. The public announcement stated: he was soul owner of *Renewed Mastery*, four companies were acquired by *Renewed Mastery*, the company as a whole would be moving to an undetermined location in Florida, it discussed the termination of executives, and there was a promise to keep as many employees as possible; Ashleigh knew her brother meant to keep this promise. What compounded the calls was Mr. Glen Cooper and a couple of his investors made there own public announcements.

These announcements angered Ashleigh.

They said her brother's behavior was "erratic" and his "unconventional" working philosophy would end up destroying the company. She strongly believed his working philosophy is what made the company successful. She understood it might look as though her brother was erratic, she knew he always had a plan.

Ashleigh forgave Mr. Cooper but would never forget. She never: liked him, trusted him, she always felt he was a back stabber, she was grateful her brother listened to her warnings, but was sad she was correct.

The third group to come onto TV was the Democrat governor, some local union, and a couple political leaders. The governor talked about creating jobs and pleading with her brother to stay. Ashleigh knew this was all crap. Her brother tried to work with the politicians in Madison Wisconsin. They were so anti-business and were pushing his company to be union he decided to move. What irritated the union, Renewed Mastery employees voted down the union three times; by very large margins. The push to unionize was coming from a few of Mr. Coopers investors. Instead of Bob's employees being harassed and being lied to, Bob made the decision to move to a pro-business state. What pained Ashleigh's heart was the whole state of Wisconsin would be hurt by a political party claiming to care about workers and helping the middle class.

Ashleigh assumed all of these calls were important because Haley, his Executive Secretary, was screening his calls. With all the calls her brother was receiving Ashleigh suggested he stop chauffeuring her around and he get back to his company. She stopped making this suggestion. It was obvious to Ashleigh he was determined to proceed helping her if she wanted the help or not.

Right after the meeting Bob and Ashleigh went down to the lake front to talk. During this walk Ashleigh made sure Nikita, "went Potty." They discussed many important business and personal issues. One of the issues they discussed was Nikita going to a vet. Ashleigh was more than willing to wait a few days for an open appointment, Bob's solution was to take over the call, have a talk with the clinic manager. After this talk and some extra money being promised, Nikita became an "emergency" and was seen by the vet Ashleigh's family trusted. At the vet Nikita received a routine doggie physical, Nikita's papers were authenticated; they confirmed Nikita was a pure bred Siberian Husky. Ashleigh as a responsible owner scheduled the rest of Nikita's shots.

After leaving the vet Bob wanted to purchase Ashleigh a new vehicle. Ashleigh explained all she needed was a co-signer. This lead to an argument. The only agreement they could reach was they would discuss it after Ashleigh talked with her real mother Ashley Vindavane. Ashleigh knew if she was to move to Florida she needed to confront her Mother. She felt today was the day. In the last two years she tried to confront her Mother but failed. With her brother close by, she felt she could accomplish what she planned.

Before Bob fulfilled her request to visit with Ashley Vindavane, he took her to a top of the line cell phone store. Ashleigh mentioned to her brother there was a cheaper cell phone she liked at *Wally World*. He gave her a disgusted face and stated, "I will never shop at that monstrosity of a store." At the cell phone store she kept fighting the feeling she was taking advantage of her brother.

After purchasing the cell phone. Ashleigh picked out a local grocery store chain with a very nice floral department. At this grocery store her brother purchased her: dog food, dog treats, a bottle of rum, a bottle of coke, a food gift card, and a variety of roses. Ashleigh again felt guilty her brother purchased all these items for her. She found it sweet when her brother warned her about the dangers of drinking. She reminded him she was sober since she was sixteen and wanted to remain sober for the rest of her life. Bob reminded her the consequences of drinking. Sometime during this shopping trip he scolded her for apologizing.

She recognized she was hurting her brother with every protest. As difficult as it was, she would accept the grace her brother was giving her.

He took her to lunch. She picked a local owned restaurant. They enjoyed more conversation and the meal together. After lunch they took Nikita to a park where again Nikita could, "go potty." After the park, Bob took her to confront Ashley Vindavane.

She again brushed her long blond hair from her face.

She looked over at her brother. He was standing in front of his car talking on his phone. Based upon his body language she knew he was giving specific instructions to someone. Where she stood she could easily see and hear cars driving past the largest cemetery of Falls Town. This cemetery was used by many of the communities between Falls Town and Brookside.

He brother was parked on the center hill of this cemetery. Where he parked was where the upper classes buried their dead. In this section were a variety of grave markers; most were large and expensive. One hill over were the headstones of the founders of Falls town, both rich and poor, and many of these headstones were difficult to read. These two sections were very well maintained and many of these grave sites were decorated with: flowers, flags, trinkets, and military markers. These two sections of the cemetery were: decorated with flower patches, the grass was pristine, trees were specifically placed to give it a serene feel, and the section of the road was paved.

Ashleigh was to the right and back of where her brother was parked. This area was considered the third hill; in reality it was two large flat sections at different heights. It was easy to spot these sections because a gravel driveway cut to the left of this divide. This gravel driveway did split and loop around these two sections and again met up with the paved road of the cemetery. The graves in these sections were all simple flat concrete markers on the ground. Ashleigh was sure by the look of the flags and the flowers everything here was placed by loved ones. This area was kept clean and mowed but was never given the same attention the other sections were given. There was one very large oak tree twenty yards from where she was standing; to her it looked creepy and out of place. She assumed no one wanted to spend the money to remove this tree; instead the caretakers just buried everyone around this tree. She imagined the roots of this tree ripping into the caskets. She cringed at her own thoughts.

This is when Ashleigh looked down at her puppy. Nikita was currently scratching the back of her head. Nikita sensed Best Friend was looking at her. Nikita: stopped, stood up, wagged her tail, and approached Best Friend.

Ashleigh smiled at her puppy but ignored her.

Ashleigh was having trouble looking down upon her Mommy's simple marker.

Ashleigh again pulled her blond hair away from her face. She watched a sparrow fly from the ground and into the oak tree.

Ashleigh was fighting back the strong desire to leave the cemetery.

She felt very weak.

She started to recall the vivid memory of the day her Mommy tried to kidnap her. She would never forget this day. Being older, she wondered how her Brother convinced Victoria to take her camping. Ashleigh managed a smile recalling the memory of her first camping trip. This was when she felt the leash wrap around her legs and heard paper being torn.

Ashleigh quickly stopped Nikita from wrecking the flowers.

"NO," Ashleigh scolded. She stepped out from the leash and bent down and picked Nikita up. Ashleigh held her muzzle and scolded, "Don't bite."

Nikita whimpered.

Ashleigh let go.

Ashleigh smiled.

Nikita licked Best Friend's face.

Ashleigh scratched Nikita's black patch on top of her head.

Nikita could sense Best Friend was upset.

Ashleigh gently set Nikita down and pushed her butt down and commanded, "Sit."

Nikita being smart and wanting to please sat for about four seconds.

Ashleigh smiled when Nikita went to investigate a yellow moth.

"Stay."

Nikita looked up reluctantly sat down.

Ashleigh smiled.

Ashleigh's smile disappeared when she mustered up the courage to look upon the grave marker.

She read her mom's name out loud: "Ashley Vindavane."

Below the name was the year she was born and the year she died. Ashleigh was sixteen years old when Ashley passed on. This was the third time Ashleigh visited this grave.

The first time was at the burial.

Ashleigh clearly remembered the second time. She recalled on how cold she felt because of the inappropriate outfit she was wearing for a November day in Wisconsin. She could still feel the anger her sixteen year old self felt toward her Brother. At the time she was under the impression her brother was allowing her to move in with him. The reason she wanted to move in with her brother: she wanted to freely date Clyde, she could party without being harassed, she felt she'd have more freedom living with her brother, and she felt Shelly would support her choices. Ashleigh reasoned, if anyone understood what it was like to have a little fun and being free to love a boyfriend it was Shelly. A huge faction in wanting to move in with her brother was to avoid counseling and the possibility of alcohol treatment.

The second emotion the twenty-three year old Ashleigh clearly remembered was the guilt the sixteen year old Ashleigh felt. The sixteen year old Ashleigh was feeling guilty for the way she treated Victoria, Blake, and was feeling responsible for hurting Felicia. Ashleigh knew the struggle between herself and her Foster Parents started the day she first brought Clyde over to the house. The battle between herself and alcohol started the day after Ashley Vindavane's funeral. All it took was one drink with a coworker at the hotel. The struggle with her parents turned into a battle when Victoria caught Ashleigh and Clyde kissing and fondling one another in the basement. The battle with the bottle increased when Blake became suspicious of Ashleigh's behavior and asked if she was drinking. The battle with her parents escalated when Victoria found birth control pills. Her battle with the bottle was being lost when she stole a bottle from the hotel. It was becoming an increasing problem when three months from the first drink she started to bring small bottles to school. The battle between her parents and the bottle increased when Clyde dropped her off at her house drunk. The battle with her parents turned into a verbal war when a drunk Ashleigh was caught sneaking into the house after being grounded. This was after Ashleigh promised them she'd never drink again. The day after this verbal war, Victoria and Blake told Ashleigh they were taking her to

treatment. When she heard this she called her brother and demanded she live with him. This led to another round of hurtful verbal fighting with Victoria and Blake. What bothered Ashleigh the most was when a crying Felicia begged Ashleigh to stay and asked her to stop saying mean things. The fighting continued when her parents confronted a very calm Bob. The twenty-three year old Ashleigh could easily recognize Bob had something planned because he never said a word during Victoria's rant.

A hung over sixteen year old missed this obvious detail.

The twenty-three year old Ashleigh clearly remembered her brothers actions. He acted happy she was moving in with him.

She again cringed at the tongue lashing he took from Victoria. Thinking about this incident she wondered if Blake knew Bob had something planned. She would ask him.

The sixteen year old Ashleigh felt guilty for the tongue lashing her Brother received, but once Bob allowed her to put a few suitcases into his Jeep; the sixteen year old Ashleigh felt she was getting everything she wanted. The plan of the sixteen year old Ashleigh was to call her boyfriend and they would go to some party where she could drink the guilt away.

Instead Bob dragged the sixteen year old Ashleigh to the very spot the twenty-three year old Ashleigh was standing. This was upsetting for the sixteen year old because it was only five and a half months since her mother was buried here. It was six months since her mother arrived at the hotel and accused Ashleigh of: never loving her, blamed Ashleigh for her drinking, and told Ashleigh it was her fault her Real Father never wanted a relationship with either of them. The worst thing Ashley Vindavane told Ashleigh was she was a mistake and was a traitor for living with the Anderson's. Ashleigh retaliated by telling her Mother it would be better for everyone if she just died and went to hell. So standing at the grave site was the least thing the sixteen year old Ashleigh wanted to do.

The twenty-three year old Ashleigh could no longer remember how Bob was able to get her to stand in front of the grave sight; but she would never forget what he said and did once they were there.

He simply pointed to the empty plot next to Ashley Vindavane and said, "Should I buy this plot next to your mother?"

This stunned and frightened the sixteen year old into silence.

Then her brother said, "Imagine myself and those who love you standing over your grave."

She had a one sided argument with her brother. All her brother would say, no matter what awful things the sixteen year old was screaming, "*Imagine how much I'd miss seeing you. Imagine me standing here looking over your grave. Imagine your foster parents standing here.*" Ashleigh could still remember the long list her brother gave her, there were two which affected her the most, "*Imagine your sister asking your foster mom why you didn't stop drinking.*" And of all things, "*I'd never be able to listen to music with you ever again.*"

When he was finished he stood looking over the empty plot.

Because he refused to respond to her shouting, she pushed him. He simply went back to standing over the grave. She shoved him again. The twenty-three year old Ashleigh would never forget the worst thing she ever said to anyone. She told her beloved brother, "I hate you."

This was her bottom.

The sixteen year old, burst into tears, and went running to his Jeep.

He gave her a half hour to consider what he said by standing in the cold weather standing there staring at the empty plot. The sixteen year old Ashleigh recognized in the last five months she treated everyone the same way Ashley Vindavane treated her. This frightened her. Bob stepped into the Jeep and out of an inside coat pocket pulled out a pamphlet of a faith based treatment facility; Ashleigh simply took it and nodded yeas. Without saying a word he drove her to this facility. During this silent drive the sixteen year old Ashleigh wanted to have back the last seven months. She willingly followed her Brother into the place. Bob scared her enough, so when she was out of detox, she was given the opportunity to try their outpatient program. This outpatient program came with strict guidelines: Ashleigh, Bob, and her parents all agreed too. If she broke any of these rules her parents and Bob agreed to put her into inpatient treatment. The twenty-three year old Ashleigh could clearly remember the rules: she no longer could drink, she could never use an illegal substance, she went to individual therapy, family therapy, group therapy, and she agreed to listen to her parents.

Ashleigh was surprised when Shelly praised her for going to treatment. Ashleigh tried to get Shelly to go to a meeting with her; but Shelly refused.

Two months of being sober she found out Clyde was exactly what her mom said he was. Her boyfriend kept pressuring her to drink even after she repeatedly told him she would never drink again. She realized if she wanted to stay sober, which at the time was a daily struggle, she would have to break up with him and change her friendships. After she broke up with him; he told everyone about their sexual exploration.

The twenty three year old Ashleigh believed without her parents she would have failed treatment and would have been a horrible drunk. She also believed, without the faith based program and her Foster Parents she would have acted out sexually. It would have been easy to do so because she was now known for being a slut and a tease. This hurt because she only had sex with Clyde; on her part it was an act of love.

Nikita yanked on the lease and stopped suddenly.

Ashleigh smiled when Nikita recognized it was impossible for her to chase the yellow moth. Nikita sat down and with her back legs scratched herself; her dog tags jangled.

Ashleigh took a deep breath, her heart pounded, she looked down at the headstone and blurted out what she always wanted to say, "Mommy you drink too much."

With this expel of energy Ashleigh sat down in front of the marker.

Nikita ran up to Best Friend.

Ashleigh allowed her puppy to lick her face. She pet her puppy.

Ashleigh: collected herself, she set her puppy onto the ground, and sat with her legs folded pointing to her left.

Ashleigh began with something simple, "It was my brother who bought you the headstone. If he hadn't purchased this marker no one would know your buried here."

Ashleigh crunched her forehead together and took a deep breath.

"I told him it didn't matter if you had one or not. But he told me it was the right thing to do. Mommy he was never mean to me. He never touched me the way you said he did. You know who kept trying to touch me? It was my creepy Step Dad" She became quiet but spoke with confidence, "It wasn't my fault he kept touching me. I wasn't being naughty. I ran from him."

She looked over to where her brother was and he was walking away from his vehicle.

She meekly sat on her knees, "I have two men in my life who loved me and treated me right. My Foster Dad Blake. He's treated me better than most real dads I've met. The other person is Bob who loves me even if he never tells me. Just once I wish he'd tell me." She paused, "He doesn't because of all the mean things you said about him."

She was growing angry, even being angry she needed to mustered up the courage to blurt out, "I'm not ugly."

She suddenly heard the cars driving past and felt the breeze.

Ashleigh moved the blond hair from her her face.

She found the courage to say, "You were ugly the day you came to the hotel and embarrassed me. You were very ugly. Not only because your skin was yellow and you looked like a skeleton but because of all the nasty things you said to me. I don't know why I believed you. It wasn't my fault you died." Tears dropped down with the next statement, "A Mommy is suppose to love their children. You never loved me. I'm sorry I said you should go to hell. I'm sure your there. You hated God so much. I wish I would have said anything else."

She sighed. Took a deep breath and stood up.

Nikita looked up at Best Friend.

"I started drinking after your visit and started to treat everyone just like you did. I.."
Ashleigh changed the direction of her conversation, "Mom forgave me for those six months and she helped me for the next two years every time I wanted to drink again." Ashleigh smiled thinking about how her Foster Dad would ask her how she was doing, with this thought Ashleigh spoke, "Blake did too." Ashleigh wiped away a tear and said with affection, "And so did Bob and of all people Shelly. Patty wrote and called me from India to see how I was doing. Where were you?"

Ashleigh paused for a half a second and yelled a question she kept inside her and wanted to know from her Real Mom and Her Real Dad, "*WHERE WERE YOU DADDY? WHY DIDN'T EITHER OF YOU LOVE ME?*"

Ashleigh heard her own voice echo over the serene cemetery.

She wiped away a few tears.

She was shaking.

She spoke the truth, "It isn't my fault they didn't love me. I'm truly loved by a lot of people. Did you hear that Mommy? I'm loved by a lot of people."

She gained control of herself and adjusted her clothing. She bent down very lady like and grabbed the rum bottle from out of the bag, "If it wasn't for the people who loved me and my faith I would most likely be drinking this while talking to you. Unlike you I love the people around me more than this bottle. I've chosen a better destiny." She spoke this as she opened the bottle and poured her Mommy's favorite rum onto the ground, "I'm thankful I didn't choose your destiny."

She stopped pouring when the bottle was half way empty.

Ashleigh bent down very lady like and grabbed the Coke bottle. Very carefully she poured the Coke into the rum bottle until the bottle was full. She put the cap back onto the bottle and shook the bottle. She laid the bottle in front of the gravestone and said, "You always loved this more than you ever loved me."

Ashleigh went to grab the flowers.

Nikita went for them as well.

An emotional Ashleigh yelled, "No!"

Nikita stopped, sat down, and watched.

Ashleigh grabbed the bag of wrapped flowers and opened them. She again sat down on her knees. The first flower she pulled out was a dark red rose.

"I'm giving you this dark red rose to show you I'm not ugly. Everyone considers me cute. Except for Mom who has told me ever since I could remember I was pretty. A good Mom tells their children encouraging and nice things. A true mom tells their daughters their pretty even if a daughter is disappointed in the fact they are only cute. I'm not ugly like you told me."

Ashleigh set the flower into the flower cup of the headstone; with this gesture Ashleigh felt a little more free.

She took out another rose, "This white rose represents everything you were not. But it represents everything God has made me into. I now feel I can be like he wants me to be. The next man is just going to have to wait." Ashleigh decided to be honest with herself and God, "It's difficult waiting. I really like sex. Help me to make it."

Ashleigh sighed and hoped she would make it.

She put this white flower into the cup.

She reached into the wrapped flowers and pulled out six out of eight black flowers she purchased.

"This first black flower represents the day you killed my first present from Santa. Why would..."

She stopped herself and just put the flower into the cup.

"This one is for telling me it was my fault my Step Dad was touching me and making me feel funny. That I was being naughty." She shook her head and held back tears. "I was little. I wasn't coming on to him."

She felt a healing as she put the black flower into the cup.

She separated another black rose, "This one represents every time you beat me. Mom disciplined me but never once was I beaten. Only once did she spank me" Ashleigh remembered this. She felt the same remorse she did on this day. "She ran into her room and cried. Her crying was worse than the spanking."

She put the black flower into the cup.

"This one is for the day you tried to kidnap me. I'm overjoyed Maxine tore Step Dad's arm. He deserved it. I forgive you for killing Maxine. Okay you didn't kill her but because you tried to kidnap me she died."

She felt the pain of losing Maxine, but once the flower was in the cup she felt the pain leave.

"This one is for the time you tried to take me from the Anderson's. Remember that? I was nine. I remember you telling everyone how you went to treatment and this time it worked and you were dedicated to being sober." Ashleigh became angry, "You told everyone you suspected it was my brother who molested me. He never touched me. Not once!" She paused to catch her breath and to calm herself. "He's so afraid of what people would think he doesn't even hug me." Tears started to flow. In a very angry tone, "He never once tried to touch me. You lied about your drinking. I believe it was God's justice when it was my brother who caught you lying to everybody about your drinking."

Ashleigh gladly put the black flower into the cup holder.

She grabbed the last two black flowers.

"This one is for the time you showed up at the hotel and blamed me for all of your

drinking. You blamed me for my Real Dad not wanting to be with you.” Ashleigh sat on her back legs again. “You told me I never loved you. But I did.” She took a deep breath, “You blamed me for your sickness and impending death. I started drinking after you were buried. I felt so guilty. I’m glad my brother brought me here and I..” She paused and with strength stated, “The people who truly loved me were there for me.”

She wiped away tears.

She put this black rose into the flower cup.

With the last black rose she stated, “This represents the death you; not I, chose. You chose your destiny. You chose never to face your disease. You choose to hate God. You choose to hate me.” She stopped. Sighed. “I wish you choose to stop drinking.”

She put this last black flower into the cup.

She gained her composure and wiped away a few tears.

She took out a yellow rose, “This is to show you I’m headed for joy, gladness, and friendship. I can attain this without your blessing because of the blessing of my family. I have learned to live without your approval.”

With joy she placed this rose into the cup.

She picked up a second yellow rose and stated, “This second yellow rose represents all those promises you never kept.”

There was a lot of personal hurt represented in this flower.

Nikita again stepped up to Best Friend.

Ashleigh scratched Nikita.

Ashleigh pushed Nikita's butt down and again said, “Sit.”

Nikita sat down wagging her tail.

Ashleigh grabbed a pale peach rose, “My mom taught me to be modest. I’ve dedicated myself to be modest. I might be flirtatiousness but this doesn’t mean I’m easy. I could easily dress and act in a way to get a man. What I want is a man to love me for me. You understand? You never taught me this.” She spoke to herself, “I wish I wouldn’t have given her such a difficult time.”

She gladly slipped this peach rose into the cup.

Ashleigh looked at the last rose, this was a dark blue rose, she picked it up and stood up before speaking, “This flower represents how we never had a true mother daughter relationship. I have a wonderful Mom. I love her with all my heart and I’m glad she never rejected me and I never lost her.” She paused, “You lost me every time you promised me you’d stop drinking. Or when you’d promise you’d come and see me and you never did. Maybe it was better you didn’t see me.” Ashleigh made a face, “The worst visits were waiting for you and hoping you wouldn’t be drunk. But you’d staging into the place. You’d scream and say mean things to the counselors. I felt so sorry for them.” This angered Ashleigh. She took a deep breath and calmed herself, “What made you think I’d want to see you when you were drunk? Every time you were drunk you hit me.” Ashleigh paused and with confidence spoke, “I’m glad I’ve been clean and sober since I was sixteen.”

She knelt down and put this flower in the cup. She made sure all of these roses were secured in the gravestone's cup.

Ashleigh stood up, she adjusted her clothing, and grabbed onto Nikita's leash. She spoke with a supernatural strength, “I forgive you for everything.”

Forgiving Ashley Vindavane was a process. A process Ashleigh started when she was

young, struggled with during her early days of her sobriety, recently she would feel angry toward her mother, but visiting the grave and speaking this forgiveness out loud went a long way toward her healing.

She looked down and grabbed the paper that once protected the flowers and the grocery bag.

She scanned the cemetery, she again pulled her hair out of her face, and simply stated; "Lets find Bob."

She commanded Nikita, "Come."

The two of them walked out of this flat area. They went up one of the hills and toward the Escape. There were many stops along the way because Nikita was exploring the odd world around her. She could smell both life and death. When they reached the Escape Ashleigh tossed the paper and the bag into the small SUV. Looking at the interior of this vehicle she speculated on her brothers wealth.

Nikita yanked on her leash.

Ashleigh looked at her puppy.

Nikita was pulling toward the third hill.

Ashleigh looked over at her brother standing in front of a large gravestone. He was exhibiting body language she never seen him use before.

Ashleigh commanded, "Come."

Nikita looked up as Best Friend walked past her. Nikita became excited and was figuring out what the noise, "Come" meant. Nikita quickly ran ahead. She could only go so far because of the leash and she heard "heal". Nikita stopped. Best friend kept going. Nikita being a smart puppy started to walk Best Friend's pace.

When they reached him he asked, "I heard you yelling."

She was embarrassed.

"There are people who only think about themselves. Trying to get those people to love us is a battle not worth fighting."

She wanted to hug him but restrained herself.

He asked, "Did you express everything you needed?"

"Yes."

Ashleigh looked over at the very nice gravestone her brother was studying. In the middle of the gravestone, in fancy cursive writing, was the name Amanda Waller. Engraved on one corner was a boutique of flowers with dancing shoes hanging from them, and on the other corner was a cross and a Bible. Underneath her name, in a very feminine looking font was the twenty-third Psalm. At the bottom were ten quotes engraved into the headstone.

Ashleigh always wondered why Amanda never went back to her maiden name. Her maiden name around southeastern Wisconsin would have brought instant credentials. She realized standing there her brother never once talked about his Mom's side of the family; or any of their extended family. She understood why she never meet them, but all at once it seemed odd he never mentioned them.

Bob asked Ashleigh, "Were you aware my Mom was buried here?"

Ashleigh could feel her Brother's sadness.

"I remember the accident and how sad everyone was. Including me." Ashleigh brushed her blond hair out of her face, "I never went to the funeral so I didn't know she was buried here."

Bob smiled, "Victoria felt it wouldn't have been good for you to go. This was wise advice."

Ashleigh being encouraging stated, "Your Mom was always nice to me."

Bob looked at her Sister and smiled.

Ashleigh being older and knowing the full situation finally felt it was okay to ask, "Why did your Mom bring us together?"

"You were very young at the time. You remember this?"

"Yes I do."

"It amazes me on what you remember and what you don't."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

He smiled, "I'm glad you remember our first meeting."

Ashleigh was about to comment but he spoke first.

"She always felt we would need one another."

Ashleigh could feel he was holding back details.

"She was able to recognize it was never your intention to hurt anyone. It was never your fault my Father and your Mother had an affair. With us being siblings she felt we should get to know one another and decide if we wanted to have a relationship."

"But seeing me must have been difficult?"

"What's important. Mom made sure we were brought together and she gave us the opportunity to have a relationship. It took great faith and prayer for her to do so."

Ashleigh felt the need to ask, "Did she force you to like me?"

He turned from the gravestone and stared at her.

Ashleigh commanded. "I don't want you lying to me."

"At first. But I recognized you were my sister and it was not..."

He stopped.

She could tell he was going to state something about their Dad, her Mom, and maybe other things.

"You were my sister."

"I'm old enough to take your truthful answers," she announced with a soft tone. "I can take it."

Bob respected her sisters wishes, "I was able to recognize it was not your fault my Dad divorced my Mom. I became aware of how my Dad treated your Mom and abandoned all of us. This mess. If one was to take the time to see how God handle people's choices. This mess gave me a delightful and wonderful sister. The reason for the divorce was my Dad's fault not yours."

Speaking with wisdom Ashleigh said gently, "He abandoned both of us."

"This I'm aware off."

They looked at one another experiencing hurt. It was caused by the same person but felt differently. Ashleigh at this moment was grateful for Amanda Waller. Ashleigh was sure Amanda explained the situation to her young son.

"What's important is after a couple of visits I..."

"What?"

She hoped he would express how much he loved her.

"I had a wonderful little sister."

He turned and looked at the gravestone.

She gave him a very disappointed look and she was about to ask a follow up question but he asked, "Mom was your Sunday school teacher?"

"Yea."

Ashleigh felt there was so much more they needed to talk about.

"Do you remember what the Sunday School students did after the crash?"

"Yea. Patty took over the class and we were suppose to write down what we missed about Ms. Amanda."

"Do you know what happened to what you wrote?"

"Patty posted all of what we wrote onto a bulletin board at church."

Ashleigh crinkled her forehead wondering how this related to the subject they were discussing.

Bob stated matter of fact, "I took my favorite quotes and engraved them on this gravestone. Before we leave you should take the time and read the quotes. I want to get going and purchase you a vehicle."

She became angry, "All I need is a cosigner."

He simply pushed up his glasses and made a face.

Ashleigh stated with frustration, "Based on what you promised to pay me I don't need you to buy me a brand new car. I'll buy one myself."

Her brother answered her with a smirk, "Very well."

Ashleigh was about to yell at him.

Instead, he turned and walked toward his vehicle and shouted, "I'm still going to purchase a vehicle for you."

She repeated herself, "I told you all I need is a cosigner. If I'm going to work for your sorry ass I should be able to afford payments."

He stopped, turned and looked at her, "Why are you so stubborn?"

She answered, "It's learned behavior."

He smiled and raised his right eyebrow.

She resented this smile. She expressed this displeasure with a glare.

"Okay I'll sign. We'll make sure you can afford the payments. Is this okay with you?"

She despised his whole tone and demeanor. She seen this before and it meant he thought of something.

"I guess."

"You promise if you don't take the job you'll finish your degree?"

"I told you. Mom and Dad want me to move in and finish."

"If you moved I'd expect you to finish."

"Why does everyone tell me what to do? Don't you think I regret not finishing? Why do the people I love keep reminding me of something I regret? Don't I have enough of it without everyone pointing it out to me."

He approached her.

Nikita was paying attention as soon as she heard their voices raise, she watched Favorite Male Human walk up to Best Friend and stop.

"We're not trying to remind you of something you might regret. I've observed how intelligent you are and observed your struggles. In the face of adversity you have done everything in your power to be responsible. You have been successful on your own just like you promised. I want you to fulfill your destiny. I firmly believe and I'm certain Victoria and

Blake believe you could fulfill your destiny if only..."

He stopped speaking when Ashleigh spontaneously hugged him.

She could feel how awkward this was for him. She needed to hug him. What he just said meant everything to her.

She let go and with emotion stated, "I'll go to college even if I take your crummy job."

She could see he was holding back tears but commented, "Mom," he looked toward the the gravestone, "I offered my little sister a job. If she takes it she'll be a great help to me. You were right. We do love one another."

Ashleigh teared. He finally said it. She reasoned, he just needed to tell his Mom. Ashleigh was again ready to take the job but she felt she needed her parents approval. She was unsure they would give it.

Her brother turned and headed back to the vehicle and commanded, "Don't take to long."

Ashleigh made a face and looked down at her Puppy who was sniffing the gravestone.

"Nikita what am I going to do with him?"

Nikita cocked her head and wagged her tail. She was listening for a noise she understood.

Ashleigh pet Nikita as she bent down and looked over the ten quotes. Each quote was spelled out exactly like a third grade student would. At the end of each quote was the name of the student who wrote the quote. Second to the bottom was what she herself wrote about Amanda, "She gets me ice cream. She dances. She told me I'm pretty."

Ashleigh slid her finger across the engraving. It made her wonder how often Victoria and Amanda talked. Victoria and Amanda knew of one another, they never hung out together, but this made it obvious to Ashleigh they discussed her situation.

Bob yelled, "Are yo ready?"

Ashleigh stood up and yelled back, "You told me to read this?"

He made a face and stepped back into his vehicle.

Ashleigh looked at the gravestone and stated to Amanda, "I'm watching out for him as he watched out for me. He's been a good brother to me."

Ashleigh wiped away tears.

Nikita pulled at the leash.

Ashleigh ignored it.

Ashleigh spoke to Amanda as if she was standing in front of her, "As a mom you should be proud of him. Thank you. I'm sure I wouldn't be able to do what you did for me."

She stood up and said to Nikita, "We better get going before my impatient..."

She spotted her brother step out of his vehicle, he was on the phone, but yelled, "Are you..."

She yelled back, "Yes."

She turned to the grave, "Thank-you. I do love him. This was the first time he said he loved me. Don't be mad at him for it. I understand."

She turned, commanded, "Come."

On purpose Ashleigh took her time to reach Bob's small SUV.

Nicole shut the front door. She was carrying: five plastic bags of groceries, a gallon of milk, a purse over her left shoulder, over her right shoulder was her work out bag, and in between her teeth was her keys. She wondered why the two most important men in her life left bike parts laying across the garage.

She glanced up at the living room clock.

She was thankful she took her shower at the Y instead of waiting to get home. She was wearing a twill fit bootcut pair of khaki's, a yellow drapery tee bra top with a not so revealing V neckline; it was decorated with ruching below the breasts and along the modest V neck. She liked the support this bra top gave her. She picked out the perfect casual sandals. This outfit was ideal for personal shopping and visiting with friends. These plans changed when her Mother-in-law called her just before she left the Y. Instead of shopping for her son's birthday present, enjoying some personal shopping, and meeting some friends at the local restaurant *Lucy's*; she only had the time to go grocery shopping.

She set her work out bag and a couple of the plastic grocery bags onto the wooden console table. A piece of furniture her husband built himself. This table was to the left of the carpeted stairs and was in front of the fancy wooden railing. It faced the large opening to the living room; the living room was to the left of the front door. On the right side of the front door was the bottom of the stairs. This flight of stairs went up to: Julie and Ester's bedrooms, a large linen closet, and a full sized bathroom. Nicole took the keys out of her mouth and set them next to the plastic grocery bags. She carried everything else down a center hallway toward her kitchen. She passed the end of the stairwell and was now walking along a supporting wall of the house. On the other side of this supporting wall was the garage and above her was the second floor. To her left she passed the door to the family den. Once she was out of this center hallway she was in her very large kitchen designed by Jimmy and herself. To her right: was a short hallway, on the left was the door to her son's bedroom, directly across was a door out to the garage, and just passed the wall of Jeff's room was a small family room.

The kitchen was her favorite room of the house. The five things she adored was the open feeling of the room, the exposed wooden beams, the treated wooden cabinets, the series of picture windows looking out into her back yard, and the decorated wall next to the kitchen table; on the other side of this decorated wall was Jeff's room. Through the windows above the sink she observed two frolicking birds in her bird bath. This bird bath was in the middle of her beloved garden. She set her purse onto the kitchen table and put all her groceries on an island cabinet next to the kitchen table. This separated the kitchen table from the practical part of the kitchen. The kitchen table and sliding doors were to the right of this island. On the same side as the kitchen table against this island were three tall chairs. On this island next to the wall; was a small tube TV. Below the islands counter top facing the practical part of the kitchen were drawers and cabinets. Against the wall, attached to the end of this island was a long counter. Above the counter were the windows she adored. In the middle of the counter and underneath these windows was a large double bowl sink. Just passed the sink was a large dishwasher. After the dishwasher another counter started; this was the short side of the U shaped counter. This counter was attached to a supporting wall separating the kitchen from the dining room. Above this counter were fancy cabinets. They were decorated with diamond patterned windows. The cabinets were built using the same wood as the rest of the kitchen.

Just passed the cabinet and before the opening to the dinning room was a very modern double stacked oven. Running parallel of the long cabinet was a large center island. This island was three feet from the island with the tall chairs, and was four feet from the long cabinet underneath the windows. On top of this center island was: a large stove top, space to prepare, and on the edge was a small one bowl sink with a tall curved faucet. At the end of this island, below the counter top, was a small turn type of cabinet. When Nicole and Jimmy designed this kitchen she thought this was a good idea; she was now looking forward to the day they would remove this annoying idea. Against the center wall of this kitchen, and next to the center hallway, was a large side by side refrigerator and freezer. Left of the refrigerator and freezer was a long counter space with cabinets below. Above this space were two microwaves sitting side by side on their own shelf. On either side of these microwaves were skinny cabinets decorated in the same design as the rest of the kitchen cabinets.

She looked up at the kitchen clock.

Picking up the pace she opened the refrigerator and placed the gallon of milk in a slot on the door. She temporarily left the door open and grabbed the plastic bag with the orange juice; she put this bottle next to the gallon of milk. She quickly sorted the groceries she brought into the kitchen and placed them into the refrigerator or freezer. She shut the doors to the refrigerator and freezer.

Out of a lower cabinet she grabbed a wide selection of plastic containers for the items still left on the counter. She was extra careful with the red grapes; grapes she bought on sale. She opened her utility drawer. She took out masking tape and a marker. She pulled off just enough tape for some of these containers. Once the tape was secure she wrote "*Megan*" on the tape. She assumed this message would keep her family from taking Megan's containers. She quickly put the remaining containers back into the lower cabinet. She put the filled containers into the refrigerator.

She again looked up at her kitchen clock.

In a fast paced walk she went back to the console table and grabbed the last few bags of groceries and her work out bag. She went back into the kitchen. She set the grocery bags onto the island counter with the chairs. Nicole: stepped out of the kitchen, through the dinning room, and into her bedroom hallway. In this hallway was: a half bath, a linen closet, a huge storage closet, and a laundry room. The laundry room was large enough for a good sized washer and dryer, a couple laundry baskets, a wooden cabinet above the washer and dryer, and one adult to feel comfortable; two could work in the room but it was cramped. This area was the newest addition to the house. They created this addition by: eliminating the old laundry room and storage closet, they added space to the living room, and extended the house into the side yard.

Once Nicole was in her very roomy and comfortable bedroom she shut her door and went over to her large closet. This closet was directly to the right of their full sized bathroom. She: opened the closet door, temporarily set the bag on the floor, she unzipped the bag, she put her work out clothes into her hamper, she took out her athletic shoes, she placed them into a shoe caddie, folded the work out bag, and placed it onto a shelf.

She glanced at her white digital clock.

She: took off her sandals and placed them into a specific shoe caddie, she slipped off her top and placed it into a hamper, she slipped off her khaki's and neatly draped them over a

chair, she selected a red and white printed flower dress; this modest dress covered her larger breasts, her in shape body, and went passed her knees. She grabbed a pair of wedges from her wooden shoe caddy and slipped them on. She stepped in front of her full length mirror and quickly brushed her long brunette hair and double checked her makeup. She was of the opinion her pair of plain earrings and the light amount of makeup was perfect. She: stepped out of her bedroom, shut the door behind her, and raced into the kitchen.

She glanced up at her kitchen clock, she stopped, and this time calculated how much time she felt was left.

She stared at the groceries on the counter. The mental debate lasted a few seconds. She opened a cabinet and grabbed a couple grocery bags. She shoved some of these groceries into the plastic bags; these went into a cabinet. She hated being this sloppy but she needed to be flexible. She shoved all the loose items left on the counter into drawers. She went over to the counter with the two tubed sink and opened one of the bottom cabinets, she grabbed cleaning spray, and a couple cleaning pads. Being in a hurry she started to clean her already clean counter space and kitchen table. Before she was done she heard the doorbell ring.

She glanced up at the clock. Her mother-in-law was ten minutes early. Nicole assumed her Mother-in-law would be early, but the timing was still inconvenient.

She yelled, "Ma I'm coming."

Living in the upper east coast she quickly recognized anyone with a southern accent was looked down upon. Nicole worked at concealing her accent and she learned to speed read. This being stated, her southern accent was always just under the surface.

She: shoved the cleaning supplies into the cabinet, in a hurry washed and dried her hands, rushed to the door, she stopped at the door, took a deep breath, she wiped her hands on her side, and opened the door.

Standing at the door was her fifty-eight year old mother-in-law.

The instant Nicole opened the door she could tell Mary was upset.

Mary was attractive for a woman of her age. She was wearing: a light blue and white patterned watercolor dress, a matching jacket, white dress shoes, post earrings, and a cross necklace. Her blond and gray hair was pinned back and set very conservatively. The reason she could wear these clothes was due to her recent efforts at being healthy. Nicole and Megan were pleased she was putting in the effort to get into shape. Mary started slowly with walks. She was now enjoying a low impact aerobics class, went to the Y on a pretty regular basis, and was eating better. Ma realized these workouts helped her accomplish what she referred to as "God's work." She was carrying her Bible.

"Howdy."

Nicole was concealing her concern.

"Hi Y'all."

Nicole stated, "Come in."

"Thank-you."

Ma stepped into Nicole's house.

Nicole shut the front door.

Ma speaking sincerely, "I do apologize."

"It's alright," Nicole answered. "You want some sweet iced tea?"

Ma responded, "That'd be delightful."

Nicole being respectful let her mother-in-law take the lead into her kitchen.

Nicole took out two glasses from the fancy cabinets.

"Again I do apologize..."

Nicole interrupted gently, "It's okay I wasn't planning anything for today. You are always welcome."

Ma smiled, "Your grace is welcomed."

"It isn't a bother."

Ma set her Bible onto the kitchen table, she pulled out a kitchen chair, and sat down in a very ladylike fashion.

Nicole assumed by Mary's tone and body language one of Mary's children was in trouble. Nicole remembered the last time Ma appeared to be this distressed was when Duke's first wife was having an affair. Nicole's initial thought was maybe something happened to Duke. Nicole observed Ma staring into her backyard through the sliding glass doors in front of the kitchen table. Nicole: set the glasses onto the table, set the container of sweet iced tea back into the refrigerator, and gently sat down next to her mother-in-law.

As soon as Nicole sat down Ma turned from Nicole's garden and with a concerned gaze looked upon Nicole.

Ma started with a simple question, "You're aware Marsha's daughter went off to college this last year?"

"Marsha from the woman's group?"

"That'd be the one," Ma replied. "I recommended she send her child to a Christian college."

"You recommend everyone send their children to a Christian college."

"Honey. I've been telling folks for a long time to stop sending their little ones off to them secular universities. They'll get a child all turned around. If it ain't happened again. I warned Marsha not to be sending her daughter off to the university. They done brainwashed her so she's turned back on God'."

"Stacy was always a nice girl."

Ma mentioned, "Don't be so quick with them assessments. They just filled her mind with awful things."

Ma took a sip of her sweet iced tea.

Nicole wondered what Stacy did.

"Honey. How do you always make such good iced tea?"

"It's a gift."

Nicole smiled and winked.

Ma answered with a smile, "I have my secrets too,"

Nicole's mind went to Ma's exceptional pies. No matter how much a person begged Ma would never give anyone her pie receipts.

Ma became serious, "Marsha was ready to start talking to me even before the meeting started. I was feeling she was needing to talk."

Nicole mentioned, "She's always talking to everyone after a meeting."

"She does let her mouth overload her tail."

"You ain't whistling Dixie."

"I ain't saying it's a good thing. She's always saying something she ought not to be saying but what I'm saying," Ma paused briefly and took another sip of sweet iced tea, "She was acting different today. I was feeling she was really hurting. She kept on staring at me."

Honey. I've been around a long time and I can see when someone is about to be asking for my advice."

Nicole knew this was true. Women of all ages came to Ma for advice and prayer; especially those women who were just married or were having problems with their children.

"She was ready to start crying."

"That isn't like her."

"Honey, she was hiding it all during the meeting. Which broke my heart. Us ladies who are leading the meeting are wanting the ladies to come as Y'all are feeling. I wanted to approach her first but the spirit was telling me to wait. If the Holy Spirit is telling me to wait I'm waiting."

They both took a sip of their sweet iced tea.

Mary stated, "I could just feel she was itching to talk to me."

Nicole encouraging her mother-in-law said, "We all like your advice."

Ma spoke matter of fact, "By the good Lord's grace I've been given the wisdom to help people. Honey, there's a lot of people who don't like what I say. I've been trying to season my speech with salt."

Nicole from her heart answered, "We know you care."

"I do love y'all."

Nicole could hear how upset Mary was.

"We all know you care about us."

They both took sips of their ice tea.

"When we started praying for one another I forgot about Marsha needing prayer. This ain't like me to be forgetting."

"We're human."

"I'm still feeling I let the poor girl down. I was waiting while we're standing around after the meeting."

Nicole new for a fact a lot of socializing would happen at this time.

"If I'd remembered. I wouldn't have left Marsha waiting. Even though she likes talking it was like the cat was biting her tongue today."

Nicole found it interesting how Ma considered Marsha a girl when Marsha was a couple years older than Nicole.

"When we all said our good by's Marsha started following me out of church. I ain't a lady for gossip. The good Lord doesn't like it. In my years of living I ain't seen nothing good come from gossip."

Nicole answered, "I agree."

Ma smiled, "Y'all are a wise woman. Cause' of Y'all I've never had to worry about my Jimmy."

"I appreciate it." This comment meant a lot to Nicole. "What did she ask you?"

"I'm trusting you won't say anything until we figure out what we'all are doing?"

The *what we'all are doing*, meant all the ladies in the family would get together and discuss whatever was upsetting Mary.

"Her daughter came back from college..."

Ma stopped and took a sip of her sweet iced tea.

Nicole worried about her mother-in-law and asked gently, "Did she come home pregnant or with a bad boyfriend?"

"That'd be easy. There's been so many young gals with babies in their baskets It ain't even surprising any more. May God have mercy. What's happening to them?"

Nicole kept calm and asked, "What happened to Stacy?"

Ma took a deep breath, "Marsha comes to me and asks me how she should handle her daughter coming home with a girl friend."

Nicole made a face, "You've heard this before."

Interrupting, Ma held in tears and took a sip of her iced tea, "She was feeling I could give her advice as a momma."

"We've seen this all before."

"Honey it's different."

"Okay."

Ma held in tears but managed to recover, "She was assuming with me being Megan's Momma I'd have advice on how to handle a lesbian daughter."

They stared at one another.

"Marsha was assuming I'd be an expert on how to handle it," Ma was so upset she repeated herself without realizing it, "Because she assumed Megan was a one of them."

Nicole getting clarification, "You mean a lesbian?"

"Yup."

Ma took a drink of iced tea.

There were times when Nicole wondered if Megan was gay.

It took courage for Ma to say, "With you two being so close I was feeling you'd know if she is."

Ma stopped speaking. She looked at her glass of sweet iced tea, she took a sip.

Nicole wisely waited for Ma to speak.

"Does my daughter like women? If she is why haven't Y'all told me? Y'all are like sisters. I was assuming she'd told Y'all if she was."

Nicole answered honestly, "She's never told me she was one."

"You ain't answering my question."

Nicole was a little perturbed at her mother-in-law's tone and implication, but calmly answered, "I don't feel she's a lesbian. If she was I'd feel she'd have told us."

The two ladies looked at one another.

"She's the little sister I always wanted. If she is I'm still loving her. I ain't rejecting her over this. I ain't saying I'm liking it any but rejecting her ain't helping."

There was a dead silence in the kitchen. They both looked out the sliding doors.

Nicole breaking the silence by repeating herself, "I believe if Megan was a lesbian she'd have told us. She's had boyfriends in the past."

"I've seen people change their minds. Maybe she likes both."

Nicole was about to comment but Ma broke the silence

"I started asking Marsha. May God forgive me for failing as a friend. I was so upset I forgot to pray for her. I'll have to call her back and apologize." Nicole was wise enough to sit and listen, she waited for Mary to take another drink of sweet iced tea. "Marsha was saying Megan was hanging out with her neighbor Gina. Megan was taking her around town introducing her to everybody."

"Ma," Nicole was being reasonable, "Megan shows just about everyone around who moves into the marina. She's probably just being friendly. Just because Megan is talking and

hanging around a known lesbian doesn't make her one.”

“I've been hearing rumors of Megan being one since she came back from college. She's never been the same since Simon didn't take her to prom. He hurt her good.”

“Ma if Megan is a lesbian. It isn't because of one incident. It's showing us she wanted to be with guys.”

Ma answered, “I wish I knew.”

They both took sips of their sweet iced tea. Nicole: stood up, opened the refrigerator, took out the pitcher of iced tea, shut the refrigerator door, filled Ma's glass, filled her glass, set the pitcher onto the table, and sat back down.

Neither one knew what to say. They both took sips of their sweet iced tea.

Nicole wanted to tell her mother-in-law without a shadow of a doubt Megan was straight. Nicole heard about Megan being a lesbian even before Megan finished middle school. Nicole was wise enough to understand outside appearance were deceiving. There were women she knew who she believed were lesbians but found out they were straight. Nicole thought about friends of hers who no one would ever guess they were homosexual. Gina was an example of this type of lesbian. The only reason Nicole knew Gina was a lesbian was because of Gina's openness. Based upon outside appearance it was easy to jump to the conclusion Megan was a lesbian. Nicole being involved with the family since she was seventeen knew if Megan was a lesbian this would be difficult for the family. What surprised Nicole was her current conflicting emotions.

Ma asked, “You ain't hiding it from me?”

“No ma'am. I believe she's straight.”

Mary recognized Nicole's tone, “I do apologize.”

Nicole suggested, “Let's talk to Diana and Sam.”

“We know what Sam will say.”

In Ma's tone there were misgivings about the woman who married Timmy; her youngest son.

“She's still part of the family and she might have some insight,” Nicole mentioned. “Let's not rush to judgments. If she's a lesbian we should respect her wishes and let her tell us.”

Ma asked from her heart, “If she's hurting how am I able to help her?”

Nicole said very gently, “She could feel everything is fine. If she's struggling and we ask her she'll feel hurt. If she is wanting help we should be there for her. Making fun of her or pushing her away is a receipt for disaster.”

Ma again asked from her heart, “How come guys ain't seeing she's a good woman? She ain't the type of woman I'm wishing she'd be, but she'd make a good wife.”

Nicole could feel the layers to this statement, “I'm sure Megan is feeling the same way.”

There was the nagging questions in the back of Nicole's mind, *What if Megan was to afraid to tell the family she was gay? And all those conversations about relationships were not really about a guy, but a gal?* Nicole put these questions in the back of her mind to be addressed later.

“I'll take you on your word,” Ma answered standing up. “But I'm calling the girls and see if she said something to them. I'm feeling if she was uncomfortable telling us she'd have told Diana or Sam. I'm feeling you should be the one asking her if she's keeping her lips locked.”

"Maybe she..."

Ma interrupted; speaking from a wounded heart, "If I'd ask she'd take it the wrong way and we'd be farther apart. I'm trying to fix what's broken. I've made my mistakes with her and I ain't the one to confront her. I wish I could sit down and ask her but I'm feeling she ain't wanting me asking." Ma proclaimed, "She might become one in spite of me."

Nicole stated with wisdom, "If she's gay it's not in spite of you. I know Y'all are hurting but you have to use the wisdom God has given you to handle this."

"I'm grateful for talking with you. Again I do apologize for calling on short notice."

Nicole stood up, "It's alright."

"I need to think about this."

Nicole followed Ma to the front of the house, "I'm sure we'll figure all this out. I ain't convinced she's a lesbian."

At the door Ma stopped and with a concerned look spoke and asked again, "Could she be one of them that likes both?"

Nicole felt the need to repeat herself, "She ain't the type to like both. If she's a lesbian. God forbid. If she's one she'd like just gals. If she's straight she'd just want to be with a man. I'm believing either way she ain't the type to be sleeping around. Y'all know she'd cling to one and it'd be all she wrote."

Ma opened the door and stepped out, "I'm hoping Y'all are right. But I'd feel better if this was out in the open. I'll love my daughter no matter what. But I ain't a fan of lying. If she's suffering I want to start helping her."

Nicole reminded her, "If she doesn't feel she's hurting we might have to accept what she is even if we ain't liking it."

"Well I ain't liking it."

"All we can do is pray."

"What should I be doing as her momma?"

Nicole answered, "I'm not about to reject her."

Ma made a face of concentration.

They looked upon one another.

"Lets pray."

Nicole and Ma prayed with their hearts.

"Thank-you," Ma stated, "I'll see Y'all soon."

"Bye Ma."

As Ma was walking to her new Buick she shouted, "Lord have Mercy."

Nicole stood at the door for a second and sighed.

She made sure Ma entered her car. They waved their good byes.

Nicole: stepped back into her house, shut the front door, and stepped into the kitchen to finish putting away the groceries she shoved into the drawer and refrigerator. As she began to put away these grocery she started to mull over how she would proceed with the task her ma just gave her. In times past she considered asking Megan if she was dealing with same sex attraction. Nicole felt Megan was struggling with sex and relationships no matter what her sexual orientation was. Nicole assumed if her Sister-in-law was a lesbian she would have told her. Nicole felt if she asked Megan and Megan was indeed straight; this would only add to Megan's growing difficulties with sex and relationships. The immediate dilemma was if the rumors were catching up to Ma, there was a high probability another family member would

confront Megan in a hurtful way. The least thing Nicole wanted was for Megan to be hurt again.

She stood standing in front of the counter contemplating all the angles. After considering every pattern and in every combination. What Nicole hoped, if Megan was gay, she would just come out of the closet without being asked. Nicole was aware if she was a lesbian this would be a difficult situation for everybody. The angle she worried about was the men in the family confronting her.

Nicole gasped at the thought of her coming out on Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Nicole glanced at her kitchen clock. Her quick analysis was Ester would be coming home soon and most likely the neighbor girl would want to stay for dinner. Nicole was used to her house being the house all the kids in the neighborhood came too. She was the type who enjoyed her house filled with children. The only frustration was trying to keep them out of her garden.

Thinking about her garden she looked out into her backyard. Nicole smiled observing the many birds in her bird bath.

She spotted something moving on the ground, she squinted, she smacked her hand on the island with the tall chairs. She: walked over to the sliding doors, she slipped off her sandals and set them on a chair, she checked the garden shoes she kept next to the sliding doors, when she was sure they were free from any crawling thing, she put them on, and stepped out of the house, she shut the sliding doors, and marched to her shed. She grabbed a broom and a large garbage can and carefully went out to the bird bath.

The birds flew away.

Nicole was an expert at moving snakes into this garbage can. She disliked snakes; especially snakes in her garden. After some careful pushing and encouragement the snake slithered into the garbage can. Once the snake was in the garbage can she flipped it and snapped the lid down. She was unsure if this colorful snake was poisonous or not; nor did she care. She would leave the snake and the garbage can sit where it was until Jimmy or Jeff came home. She was hoping her husband would put up the fence he promised. The fence he was talking about would keep snakes out of yard. Standing next to the garbage can, she decided the following day, would be a great day to work on her Daylilies. She planted these flowers around the edge of her garden. She made a face toward the garbage can. She headed inside to finish putting away her groceries.

She stepped into her house through the sliding doors. Once the doors were shut she took off her garden shoes, she could see her sandals were clear of any creeping thing, and was about to begin preparing for the afternoon. This is when she spotted Mary's Bible on the kitchen table. This was an indication on how upset her Mother-in-law was. This was the first time Mary forgot her Bible. Nicole immediately went into her purse, took out her cell phone, flipped it open, and called her mother-in-law.

It was easy for Nicole to tell Mary had been crying.

After a brief conversation Nicole grabbed the pitcher of sweet iced tea and placed it into the refrigerator. She grabbed Mary's Bible and walked it to the console table. Nicole looked up the stairs and wondered what her response would be if one of her two daughters ended up liking girls. She would review these feelings and the whole situation with Megan while getting the house ready for the evening.

Ashleigh crinkled her forehead together and asked her brother, "What do you mean?"

Kathy, the saleswoman of the Brookside Dodge/Jeep dealer hoped they would purchase the vehicle; she hated to lose another sale by being honest. Based upon the price range and type of car Ashleigh wanted, this bright blue 2003 Saturn Ion, was perfect for her. The saleswoman even discouraged a more expensive vehicle because it was over Ashleigh's monthly price range. On purpose Bob never introduced himself as Robert Waller. Like always Ashleigh went along with her brother's ruse. Kathy believed Bob was an upper middle class brother helping his sister pick out a car.

Kathy believed it was the typical sugar Daddy affair.

Bob answered Ashleigh's question, "This car is inadequate for any sister of mine."

Ashleigh rolled her eyes and her body language was of complete frustration.

Kathy stated, "This car would be in the price range."

Ashleigh looked at Kathy and said, "I like it."

The saleswoman became quiet and waited.

"You deserve a better vehicle."

Ashleigh protested, "All I need is a cosigner. I like the bright color and how roomy it is."

Bob pushed up his glasses and pointed, "The doors are awkward."

Ashleigh insisted, "They're cute."

"It's unthinkable for you to drive with doors swinging like they are. They were once called suicide doors."

Ashleigh glared at him, "The doors are cute. I can afford this car and the payments."

The saleswoman started to mention, "The payments are in the exact price range."

Bob recognized her honest effort and in a gentle professional tone stated, "I've appreciated how honest and how patient you've been with us."

Ashleigh crunched her forehead together. She gave up. Out of frustration allowed her stubborn brother to talk.

"The station wagon we previously viewed. The one you expressed to us would be out of my sister's price range."

The saleswoman looked at him confused, "Yes Sir. I remember."

"I would like to purchase the station wagon with this card," he pulled out of his wallet the top American Express card available at the time, and handed it to the saleswoman.

This surprised Ashleigh.

"The only stipulation I have. I want this car should be delivered...." he raised a finger, "Give me one moment." He dug into his wallet again and pulled out a folded posted note, "If you can't read the address I'll rewrite it for you. I'd like the station wagon detailed and delivered to this address."

Ashleigh and the saleswoman were staring at him.

"I will have to check on the card." Kathy announced after the shock of receiving a credit card for a car, "It's against our policy to deliver a vehicle to a person's house but we could have someone pick her up." She looked at the note, "Irene Jones could easily be picked up by our courtesy van and brought here. She'll have to sign for the car and have insurance."

Bob interrupting in a nice way, "I don't want her to pay for anything."

"She'll need to pay for insurance, plates, and registration."

"Ashleigh."

"Yea," a surprised and mixed emotional Ashleigh stated, "As my employee would you make sure Ms. Jones signs everything and the vehicle is paid for."

Ashleigh with a face said, "I guess."

Kathy reminded him, "Sir I'll have to check on this card?"

"Where is your Jeep Wranglers?"

Ashleigh piped up, "I can't afford a Jeep."

"Would you check on the card and see if Ms. Jones could be picked up while my sister and I discuss her new vehicle."

The sales woman was more than willing to listen to someone who could buy a car with a credit card, "I'll be right back."

She quickly took the card, her clipboard, and headed back into the dealership.

Bob in a nice tone, "Let's go and find you a Jeep Wrangler. I believe you always wanted one in a dark red."

"What are you doing?" Ashleigh asked sternly with mix of emotions, "I liked that car."

"Let's find you a vehicle fitting for a sister of mine. I'm well aware you always wanted to own a Jeep."

Ashleigh was irritated.

Bob started to walk toward the new Jeep Wranglers.

In complete frustration she yelled, "Wait!"

Other people in the lot looked at her.

She made a face, bowed, and headed toward her brother.

He stopped.

She walked right up to him and pointed at him, "You can't just buy me a car."

"Why not?"

Visibly upset, "Look. You can't bribe me to work for you."

Bob sternly answered, "If your decision is to stay here instead of taking my job offer you'll need a reliable vehicle to drive. I've watched you struggle and you never asked me to bail you out. You've taken on life's challenges and you've never blamed anyone else for your choices. Why not accept my generosity? Why not accept my offer? You need a reliable vehicle if you want to finish college."

Ashleigh stood there. Tears started. She answered, "I'd love to add to my collection of Jeeps."

Bob stated, "I was unaware you had a collection of Jeeps."

She smiled, "You know I do."

"Wouldn't it be amazing if this started a collection of real ones?"

The two of them smiled at one another.

They headed toward the Jeeps.

Ashleigh mentioned, "I still have the Hot Wheels car you bought me on my first camping trip."

"I do recall this," Bob answered with a smile. "Look there is a dark red one."

She fought the impulse to hug him.

This impulse left when he instructed, "When Ms. Jones arrives to pick up the station wagon I don't want her to believe I purchased the car for her. With you possibly working for me you'll have to find a way to have her sign and pay for her transaction without being there."

Ashleigh asked with a face, "How am I suppose to do that?"

"You'll find a way."

Ashleigh stood there and gave him a look.

They heard, "Sir."

Kathy was a very pleased saleswoman. She gave Bob his card, "All we need is your signature."

"Before I sign I'd like to add a Jeep Wrangler to this purchase."

She smiled, "Of course."

Ashleigh who watched Blake buy large ticket items was determined to get the best deal.

"Ma'am," Ashleigh stepped in front of her brother, "I want the best used Wrangler for the price."

"Over.."

Bob interrupted, "I'd prefer if she picked out a brand new one."

"A used one is fine."

She gave her brother a warning glare.

"You give her what she wants."

Bob gave up.

Ashleigh squinted at him. She felt there was a plan she knew nothing about.

Ashleigh became very serious, "I see the Rubicon over there, the standard Wrangler over there, and the Sierra over there."

The saleswoman was surprised at this short woman's knowledge of Jeeps, "I'll be glad to show you any vehicle you want."

Ashleigh became demanding, "Lets go."

Bob was impressed.

Ashleigh started to ask a ton of questions.

There were three reasons she was letting Bob purchase a vehicle for her. The first was simple desperation. The second was far more important to her; it was the sibling love she received from her brother. She knew this by the things he just said. The third, it was true; she always wanted a Jeep of her own.

End of Part Three of Four

Monday, April 10th, Ashleigh's Choice

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Ashleigh & Megan
Book I: Friendship
Monday, April 10th
Ashleigh's Choice

Day 2 of Book I

*((16 Years, 10 Months, and 4 Days Since Ashleigh's First
Camping Trip))*

Part Four of Four

Authored By:
R. P. Voght

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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 characters 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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Monday April 10th, Ashleigh's Choice

(16 Years, 10 Months, and 4 Days: Since Ashleigh's first camping trip)

Ashleigh was sitting in the service waiting area of the Dodge/Jeep dealer. Ashleigh was trying to look as professional as possible: her long blond hair was set nice, she was wearing a light amount of makeup, the white shirt she wore earlier was buttoned as if she was at work, her gray black pencil skirt was over her knee, she was in the black tights she had on earlier, her right leg was crossed over her left, her foot was slightly moving up and down, her shoes were neatly placed next to the chair, on her lap was a magazine, and wrapped inside of her left hand was Nikita's leash. On the chair to her left: was an open cooler, her purse, her coat, pet supplies from the grocery store, and her duffel bag.

Ashleigh grabbed a string cheese from her open cooler and ignored Nikita staring up at her.

In this waiting area was a woman in her late sixties who was appalled a woman would bring a dog into a car dealership.

Sitting across and to the left of Ashleigh was a mother in her early thirties and a small boy. Ashleigh guessed he was around three or four. People were walking around the dealership. She was facing a long serious of desks. Salespeople were sitting at these desks by themselves or were talking to customers. To her direct right was the service area. She liked the large windows of the showroom. She liked the small trees in big pots. It was hard to miss the row of brand new vehicles parked in front of the row of desks. She especially liked the bright Red Rubicon Kathy was showing a prospective buyer.

When Ashleigh finished with the string cheese she shut the open cooler and went back to reading a fashion magazine.

Nikita turned her attention to everyone in the car dealership. Nikita was watching and sniffing every person who walked by or sat down in the service area. She watched a service

guy and a man sit in the area and make noise; then leave. She watched salespeople and service people walk by. She could sense a mature woman disliked her. Many times Nikita's attention went to the adult female and her pup. Nikita sensed this pup was the female's offspring. Nikita became excited any time the pup would point at her, eat anything, sat down, moved around, or made noises. Many times Nikita felt her rear end go down and heard the command, "Sit." Occasionally Nikita would look up and wanted attention. Or receive the food her master was eating. Nikita became excited and went running after the pup. The pup was running toward a door. The excitement increased when the mother went running too. Nikita ran to the end of the leash, heard, "No run. Sit." She was dragged back, heard "Sit". Best Friend made noises, based upon the tone of these noises Best Friend was displeased, and her butt was pushed down again. She heard the pup make an odd noise then the mother made noises. Nikita heard again, "Sit." Her behind was pushed down again. She liked other commands better but she loved wanted to please Best Friend so she listened. She noticed the pup was making noises at her. She heard the mother make noises toward them.

The woman asked, "What type of dog is it?"

"It's a Siberian husky."

The little boy looked up at his mommy and stated, "I want to pet the dogie."

The mom answered, "That's up to the nice lady."

Ashleigh in a soft and sweet tone stated, "Before you can pet her you have to tell me your name."

"I'm Davy," he answered. He quickly raised three fingers and stated, "I'm three."

"My name is Ashleigh and this is Nikita."

"Hi."

"Mine is Gale."

They smiled, "Nice to meet you."

The mom winked at Ashleigh.

Ashleigh smiled in return.

Ashleigh put her foot on the floor and leaned forward, "Davy are you going to be nice?"

He nodded his head.

The Mom answered, "He's a good boy."

From Ashleigh's observations she believed the mother. What little boy isn't going to run away bored.

Ashleigh smiled then spoke gently, "Your mommy needs to come over with you. When you get close you stick our your hand and let her sniff you. You should always be careful with dogie's. They don't like to be surprised or hugged."

Nikita again felt a gentle hand push down her rear end and heard, "Sit."

Ashleigh caught a glimpse of Nikita's swift moving tail.

Gale mentioned, "You be gentle Nikita's only a puppy."

"Pet Ni-keeeey-ta."

Ashleigh smiled at the way he said her dogs name.

"Like this."

The mom showed Davy by example, she took a couple very cautious steps, and bent down. "You bend down like this," the mom stuck her hand out, "Now you let her smell your hand."

She started to pet Nikita.

Nikita enjoyed the touch.
Davy suddenly became cautious.
“My in-laws have dogs.”
“What are they?”
“We wonder that ourselves.”

Ashleigh made sure to answer, “My favorite dog growing up was a mutt. Of course I love Nikita.”

Nikita was: on all fours, her tongue was hanging out, and her tail was a minor weapon. Following his mom’s lead he held out his hand.

Nikita heard, “No Bite.”

She knew what this meant and restrained herself.

The little boy started to pet Nikita.

The reminded Davy, “Be gentle.”

The elderly ladies name was called over the loud speakers. She lifted herself up and went into the service area to pick up her car.

The little boy in excitement told Ashleigh, “Grandpa has puppies.”

“Really,” Ashleigh answered with a smile. “Do you pet them?”

The little boy was very serious, “They bark.”

Ashleigh asked, “Do you like it when they bark?”

“They loud.” He crinkled his nose and shook his head, “Don’t like when they loud.”

The mom clarified, “They’re just over friendly.”

Ashleigh smiled, “I have two golden retrievers.”

The Mom smiled.

Nikita greeted him by licking his face.

Davy responded with, “Icky.”

He stepped backward trying to remove the slobber.

Ashleigh responded, “You be a good girl.”

Nikita: sat down, her tongue was out, she looked up, and her tail was still a weapon.

“Don't like.”

Ashleigh commented gently, “It’s her way of kissing you.”

“Don't like kisses.”

Ashleigh commented, “That'll change one day.”

In a playful tone the mom answered, “Don't remind me. He's growing so fast.”

The little boy feeling inspired stated, “Take dogie home.”

Ashleigh felt relief when the mom instructed, “It not our puppy.”

A name was announced.

“Davy we have to get going,” The woman stood up, grabbed her belongings, and picked up her son, “We have to get our car.”

“Take Key-ta home.”

A grateful mom said to Ashleigh, “Thank-you.”

The three year old said, “Mine. Key-ta Mine.”

The Mom pulled down his shirt and gently explained, “It’s not your puppy.”

“Me like.”

The wise mom distracted him by saying and waving, “Bye Nikita.”

“Bye Key-ta.”

The little boy liked saying bye and waved at the puppy.

On a bit of inspiration Ashleigh bent down and lifted Nikita's right front paw and spoke, "Bye."

Nikita became excited, she was ready for Best Friend to play with her. She tried to lick Ashleigh's face but Ashleigh was fast enough to avoid this gesture.

The Mom smiled at Ashleigh.

Ashleigh winked in return.

Ashleigh wondered if she should teach Nikita how to wave on the command of bye.

On the floor she noticed a married couple in their early fifties staring at her. She recovered by: standing up, she adjusted herself, acted like nothing just happened, casually sat down, she pulled her pencil skirt over her knee, acted like she was reading the magazine the whole time, and started to wave her foot up and down.

In a commanding tone, "Nikita sit."

Again Nikita felt her rear end gently being pushed down.

This lasted until she noticed a woman walking toward them. She sensed this woman liked her.

Walking toward Ashleigh and Nikita was: an attractive brunette, she was in her early twenties, she was wearing a nice pair of glasses, wore a conservative but comfortable dress, she was carrying a plastic microwave bowl filled with water, and was walking carefully. She performed multiple tasks around the dealership.

Smelling the water caused Nikita to stand up on her hind legs and to lunge forward.

"Heal," Nikita heard first. Immediately after Nikita felt a hand, "Sit."

Ashleigh trying to encourage her puppy stated, "Good girl."

"Are you Ms. Waller?"

"Yes." Ashleigh answered, "Call me Ashleigh."

"Is it okay if I give this to her?"

"Sure. She's probably thirsty."

The woman set the water down. The young woman looked up at Ashleigh, "I begged my parents for a puppy all my life. They thought it would wreck our house."

"They're a lot of work."

"We apologize for the wait." This young woman added, "Soon the sales manager will be here to talk with you."

Ashleigh crunched her forehead and asked, "Is there a problem?"

The young woman shifted her body, "No. Bruce just wants to make sure you're receiving everything you asked for."

Ashleigh felt the need to ask, "Did he ask you to bring the water?"

This young woman gently shook her head and said, "I thought she might be thirsty."

Ashleigh with a reassuring face answered, "Well thank you."

The young woman felt compelled to ask, "Is your brother Mr. Waller?"

Ashleigh sighed, "Yes."

Ashleigh watched this woman's reaction and braced herself for a list of questions.

Instead the young woman stated, "If you need anything let me know."

"Just wait a second."

The young woman was concerned.

Ashleigh went into her purse, tried to conceal an envelope filled with cash, she took a

bill from out of the envelope, and handed this to the young woman.

"I can't..."

Ashleigh whispered and gave a face, "Don't worry. I know what it's like to live paycheck to paycheck and hope for tips."

Nikita looked up at Best Friend and went back to lapping up the water.

In a whisper this woman said, "It's so hard working two jobs."

Ashleigh took a risk, "Would you like to move to Florida?"

The young woman's body language became very serious and answered, "I couldn't move away from my family."

Ashleigh answered, "Wait a second." She went back to her purse and took out another bill and handed it to her.

The young woman finished stated, "You're not what I expected."

Ashleigh understood what type of town Brookside could be and winked, "Thank-you."

The two young women ended up talking for a while until the attractive brunette heard her name called.

Ashleigh watched as this young woman secretly slipped the two bills into her gray business slacks.

Suddenly; Ashleigh felt uncomfortable. This was the first time anyone ever treated her as a member of the upper class without her brother present.

Nikita was done with the water and looked up at Best Friend.

"You were thirsty. I'll have to treat you better."

Nikita started to wag her tail. Based upon the tone she believed she was about to receive attention. Instead she heard Ashleigh commanded, "Sit."

Nikita sat down.

"Good girl," Ashleigh said with a smile and began to pet her puppy; this caused Nikita to stand up on all fours.

Ashleigh stopped petting Nikita. Nikita watched Best Friend stand up, she took a couple steps, Nikita in her excitement ran toward Best Friend.

"Heal."

Nikita sat down.

Ashleigh shook her head but sitting helped.

Ashleigh grabbed a woman's magazine from off the table and sat down. The reason she selected this magazine was because of spring fashion advice and an article on female masturbation.

When Nikita realized Best Friend was ignoring her she sat in a way where she could smell and sense anyone who walked by. It took only a few moments for Nikita to fall asleep.

After reading both articles she wondered where her Mom was. Her mom was the only person Ashleigh completely trusted with the money her brother gave her.

She wondered how wealthy her brother really was. In one purchase he paid for the used station wagon and her brand new Jeep Wrangler Sport edition. She would have gladly taken a used car, but her brother insisted she get a brand new Jeep. She suggested getting a cheaper model. This frustrated her brother and almost led to another argument. She decided to listen and picked out a new Jeep. To fulfill her personal promise, of getting her brother the best deal, she picked a Jeep off of the lot instead of ordering one. She avoided getting a Rubicon or Unlimited versions of a Jeep Wrangler and selected a yellow Sport model. She felt lucky. The

current Jeep Wranglers were discounted because of style changes arriving in a few months. She felt if her salary was going to be as high as her brother promised she would purchase a more expensive model in a few years. Her Jeep: had manual transmission, the dealer was putting on dark green pin striping, heart decals she picked out, and she accepted their offer to put in a better CD Player and speaker system. She worked out a deal to make this a soft top combination vehicle (this meant she was able to have a hard and soft top on her Jeep). A tempting feature was purchasing the Golden Eagle Version. This was a large eagle decal with special trimming. It was tempting because of the Jeep in the TV show *Dukes of Hazzard*. She felt it was unfair for her brother to pay so much just for a decal. She told her brother she liked the pin striping better.

In the end it was a huge relief to own a reliable vehicle. She knew her Mom and Dad were thinking about putting a down payment on a vehicle and were willing to cosign. She was looking forward to showing them how her brother helped her. When she thought about what it would be like driving her Jeep to her parents house; she caught a glimpse of Victoria step into the dealership. Ashleigh hoped her mom would gain weight and longed for the day she no longer needed to wear a scarf.

Victoria gave Ashleigh a look.

This look caught Ashleigh by surprise. There were only two times in her life when she received this combination of worry, frustration, anger, and disappointment. Ashleigh would never forget at the age of thirteen being arrested for shoplifting. The worst part of this whole experience was her mom picking her up at the police station; Ashleigh was lucky to avoid juvenile court. The second time was when she was sixteen and had to face her parents at the treatment facility.

Ashleigh stood up and headed toward her foster mom. Victoria gave one look at Nikita, held in her anger, and headed toward the center of the dealership.

Ashleigh realized she never explained to Victoria what she needed help with. Ashleigh knowing her mom, grabbed her purse, picked Nikita up, and tried to reach her mom before she would accidentally embarrass herself.

Victoria hung up the phone.

She stood in front of the counter pondering the situation her daughter found herself in. What worried Victoria was the possibility her normally responsible daughter was making an irresponsible decision. With how hard Ashleigh worked and how she was dedicated to maintaining her sobriety they never questioned helping Ashleigh. What confused Victoria was why Ashleigh would purchase a car without consulting Blake. Just three weeks earlier Ashleigh discussed in detail her financial situation. After this discussion Blake took her car shopping, after car shopping, Ashleigh promised she would talk to him before purchasing a vehicle on her own. At the present time Victoria and Blake were discussing how much of their savings they would use for a down payment on a new car. Their goal was to make the payments small enough so Ashleigh could get caught up on her bills and finish college.

The second part of their plan was clearing out a large section of the basement and setting it up like an apartment. Blake was ready to install a small bathroom with a corner shower, a large enough space for two rooms, he would enlarge a couple of the basement windows in case of a fire, and would add outlets. They hoped this would help Ashleigh feel

comfortable moving back home.

Victoria liked this better than expanding the model train; again.

Victoria went upstairs to her bedroom to change. She dreaded changing clothes and was terribly uncomfortable leaving the house. The only reason she was leaving the house was because her daughter requested help. She avoided looking at herself in the mirror. The two scars across her chest were very difficult for her to gaze upon. Only after being fully changed did she look at herself in the mirror. She was wearing a nice pair of dark jeans, short socks, plain white tennis shoes, and a wine colored sweater. She longed for her healthy breasts back. She wanted to believe her daughters when they told her she was beautiful wearing the prothesis breasts. Believing them was difficult; but it felt good to hear. When putting on a scarf, she felt the scarf touching the small amount of hair on her head; this was deeply encouraging. She was thankful the preventive chemotherapy was over. Victoria felt she looked nice and headed out of her room.

Without the constant encouragement of her Husband she would have stayed in the house. Blake expressed his love to her by telling her she was beautiful and he loved her with or without breasts. Proving his words he took her out to dinner. She would never forget this very emotional dinner. She loved and hated every moment. Recalling the dinner, she felt it was her favorite moment with her husband.

She headed down the stairs. She glanced at the pictures hanging on the stair wall and appreciated every moment these pictures captured. They were a reminder her three daughters were trying to get her to leave the house. This was especially obvious when her sixteen year old daughter wanted Victoria to go places with her. When her oldest called about every three days from India. During every call Patty found a way to ask her what she accomplished outside of the house.

When Victoria reached the bottom of the stairs she did some introspection on her middle daughter. She felt Ashleigh was the families cheerleader and coach. Ashleigh was brought into Victoria's house when she was six and was afraid to show Victoria any affection. It amazed and touched Victoria on how the present Ashleigh insisted on hugging Victoria anytime they met.

It was Ashleigh who stubbornly fought for Victoria's favorite Christmas present. It was a family tradition for all the ladies to go: Christmas shopping, see a movie, and then go to dinner. For years this tradition included Ashleigh, Felicia, a few friends, and Victoria; only once did Patty participate. The previous Christmas was when Patty was living at home taking care of Victoria. Patty was perturbed by Ashleigh's insistence they maintain this family tradition. This added to the tension between her two oldest daughters. Victoria was aware of their heated disagreements even when they pretended everything was fine. What added to the tension was Felicia kept backing up Ashleigh no matter if Ashleigh was correct or not. Ashleigh in her persistence, against the wishes of her older sister Patty, was making plans for the yearly Christmas tradition. This caused the pressure cooker of emotion between the three sisters to explode. The only reason Victoria decided to participate in this tradition was when Victoria heard, "Patty your not my mother! And who made you our chief? I'll take her with or without you."

Patty's response was, "Not over my dead body."

Felicia screamed at her Older Sister, "You aren't our boss."

This was when a very sick Victoria intervened. She yelled at all three of her girls. In a

midst of tears they all worked it out.

The shopping trip was not the usual all day affair, but the four ladies spent a wonderful three hours shopping, and an hour going out to lunch. After lunch they took Victoria home and Victoria insisted they finish shopping. Instead they stayed home, rented a movie, and as a family enjoyed the rest of the day; they shared this day with Blake when he came home. This ended up to be a very special day for all of them.

Victoria grabbed her purse to go out and help her daughter.

She stood in front of the front door. This was the first time since her surgery she would venture out of the house alone.

She desperately wanted someone with her.

With bravery Victoria opened the door.

She stood there.

It took courage for her to step out of her house. She forced herself out the door. Once outside she made the decision there was no turning back. She: put the key into the deadbolt, locked the door, she pulled the keys out, and stood there. She closed her eyes. She: turned and walked across the newly black topped driveway, stepped into her parked car, with personnel bravery backed the car out of the driveway, and headed toward the dealership.

By the time she reached the stop sign at the end of the culdesac she was confronting two questions. *What if she is being responsible and has the money to purchase the car?* The second question; *How would she get the money to purchase a car?*

These two simple questions caused Victoria to forget about her self conscious feelings.

These two questions led to a list of other questions.

What lead Ashleigh to go to this particular dealership instead of a dealership specializing in lower priced used cars?

Did her car brake down?

Why wasn't she at work?

There were a list of answers to the long list of questions rolling in her mind. The answers to these question caused Victoria to feel a combination of anger, worry, and disappointment. By the time Victoria finished her fifteen minute drive from her house to the dealership this fifty-five year old mother was determined to find out what mess her daughter was involved in.

She parked her car in the dealerships parking lot.

With determination she headed toward the car dealerships showroom.

A salesman politely asked her if she needed help. Victoria asked this salesman where the service department was. The salesman pointed to a side entrance.

Before stepping into the showroom two salesmen were talking at the end of a row of used cars; Victoria overheard one of these salesmen comment on how the short blond girl with the dog purchased two cars with cash.

Victoria immediately looked into the large building. She witnessed Ashleigh: stand up, adjust her clothing, sit back down, cross one leg over the other, pull her business skirt over her leg. Victoria stared at her daughter: her leg was over the other, her shoeless foot was swinging back and forth, laying next to her on a leash was a puppy. This irritated Victoria. Somehow her daughter, who had been struggling with money for three years, was able to acquire enough money to take care of a puppy. She forced in her tears. She felt all the love and dedication she poured into her daughters life was in vain. The only way a non college educated woman of

twenty-three would be able to purchase two cars with cash and afford a husky puppy, was in a way a loving mother would be mortified to hear. She was unsure if she was more upset at the puppy or the two cars.

Before stepping inside she surveyed the inside of the dealership.

Bruce, the sales manager noticed Victoria step into the dealership. He was average height, wore a blue button shirt with a white tie, a nice pair of slacks, loafers, his gray hair was in a pony tail, and he took life as it was. By accident he found out he was great with people and found selling cars enjoyable. He was honestly shocked when the owner offered him the job as the sales manager and was again surprised he enjoyed the job. He was currently helping one of his salesmen with paperwork. He was paying attention to what Victoria was doing, if one of his salespeople were unable to reach her, he would.

Victoria was to fast for him, she walked directly to the desk marked sales manager.

Victoria was determined to find out exactly how her daughter was able to pay for two cars with cash. Victoria was aware of Ashleigh's ability to spin facts. This reminded her of Ashleigh's skill at flirting and being an actress. These character traits many times angered Victoria. At the present time Victoria assumed these were the skill sets needed to convince a sugar daddy to buy her two cars. Or her daughter was making a lot of money being a nude dancer. Victoria cringed when she imagined Ashleigh using her flirtatiousness to convince old men they should pay her to dance for them. Victoria wanted to strangle both Bob and Shelly for exposing her daughter to this seedy side of life.

Out of the corner of her eye Victoria caught a glimpse of Ashleigh pick up her puppy and carry it like a baby. The idea this was a baby caused Victoria to frown.

Ashleigh called out, "Mom."

Victoria reluctantly turned around. She stood there until Ashleigh reached her.

Nikita could sense this woman loved Best Friend. Based upon what Nikita was sensing Best Friend was approaching this woman as if she was an offspring of this woman. What confused Nikita was Best Friend was not a biological offspring of this woman.

Bruce witnessed Ashleigh Waller: shoeless, carrying her puppy, reach the woman he was just about to approach; this woman was only a few feet from his desk. The sister of Bob Waller was breaking a lot of rules today. This was allowed based upon a promise Mr. Waller made to the controller and Bruce, more important Bruce recognized everyone in the dealership generally liked Ashleigh Waller. Bruce was tempted to ask Ms. Waller if she would join his sales force.

Victoria whispered in an angry tone, "What the hell are you thinking?"

This caught Ashleigh by surprise, "What?"

"Don't what me young lady," Victoria snipped back, her body language was screaming anger, "How are you able to afford two cars."

Ken the service manager approached Ashleigh. He was in his mid forties, shorter, wore glasses, and took his job as a service manager very serious. He worked very hard, put in a lot of extra hours, and kissed some ass to become a service manager. He felt being a manager made him successful and was a step above most people. It was debatable if his feelings of superiority matched the reality of his daily life.

He stepped along side of Ashleigh and spoke as gently as he could, "Ms. Waller I hope I'm not interrupting."

Victoria wanted to answer but chose not to.

Ashleigh noticed the look on her Mom's facial expression. Ashleigh knew from talking with this man she needed to answer his question. Out of impulse she winked and simply said, "Yes."

Victoria was displeased.

The service manager stated, "I'm wanting to give you an update on your cars. Do you have time?"

"Oh yes," Ashleigh stated with a small flirt, "I'd so appreciate the update."

This very serious manager actually smiled.

Victoria disliked this display of flirtatiousness. She: crossed her arms, made a strong face of disapproval, and shifted her body to the left.

Nikita was unsure of this man standing in front of Best Friend; Nikita would defend Best Friend if he was a threat.

The service manager became serious again, "The station wagon is finished. We're putting on the Jeep's pinstripe."

He paused.

Ashleigh felt a sales speech coming, she hated up selling, but based upon Ashleigh's acting he was clueless she felt this way.

"I understand," Ken started, "When you talked to Kathy you were interested in the Golden Eagle Package. We'd give you this package at half cost."

Victoria was clueless to what he was talking about. What she understood, was for this dealership to just offer her daughter something half price, she already spent a lot of money.

"I'm not sure it'll look right," Ashleigh was hiding her distaste of up selling, "You don't have to put on the extra decals. I just want the extra pin stripping, the nice mats, and the updated stereo."

This angered Victoria.

He smiled, "We're working on that."

Nikita was starting to get restless, Ashleigh calmed Nikita down by gently scratching her head.

Ken maintained his air of seriousness, "The station wagon has been detailed and is ready to be picked up."

Ashleigh focused.

Victoria noticed how Ashleigh's body language changed and listened to her tone, "Has Ms. Jones been called? Is she on her way?"

Ken answered, "As soon as your ready we'll pick her up."

Ashleigh smiled, "Give me a second."

She turned around, looked at Victoria and stated, "Hold Nikita."

Victoria found herself holding Nikita.

Nikita was just as surprised to be handed to Victoria as Victoria was to be suddenly carrying a puppy. Nikita sensed Victoria's tension. Nikita could smell many odd smells inside of this female.

Victoria gave Ashleigh a glare.

Ashleigh missed the glare.

Victoria's impulse was to drop the dog.

Instead she gently set the dog down and commanded with a tone; "Sit."

Nikita heard the exact same tone as Best Friend and sat down.

"It's okay to go and pick up Ms. Jones," Ashleigh winked, "I appreciate all your efforts."

To Victoria's horror; Ashleigh opened her purse and pulled out a bill from what looked like an envelope filled with cash.

Ashleigh winked, "I appreciate all the extra help."

Victoria was horrified.

The manager took the bill and casually slipping it into his pants pocket, "I understand you want someone else to represent your brother when Ms. Jones arrives."

This caught Victoria by surprise. She noticed Ashleigh's body language and demeanor change again.

"My brother is giving Ms. Jones this car."

Bruce the sales manager was concerned as soon as he witnessed Ken walk up to Ms. Waller. He would have already interrupted but a salesman interrupted him. Bruce was grateful he arrived when he did. Based upon what Mr. Waller told him having Ken babble any information about this sale out in the open jeopardized future business with Mr. Waller.

"Hello, Ms. Waller. I know we've met but let me again reintroduce myself. I'm Bruce the sales manager. Is there anything I can help with?"

Based upon Ken and Bruce's body language Ashleigh and Victoria felt there was a strain between these two men.

This was affirmed.

Ken spoke, "I was trying to collect some information."

Bruce acting upon Bob's instructions very politely suggested, pushing Ken out of the discussion, "Let's all go to a meeting room and discuss what is needed," focusing on Ms. Waller, "I deeply apologize for any rudeness on my part."

Ashleigh crinkled her forehead and managed a smile, "Don't worry. It's okay."

Victoria and Ashleigh looked at one another and were now currently supporting one another.

Bruce looked at Ken, "I know what's needed."

He turned to Ashleigh, "Ms Waller if you could introduce me to this lady standing next to you."

Ashleigh smiled and with love in her tone, "This is my mom, Victoria Anderson."

With a friendly smile he said, "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Victoria replied. Feeling it was necessary to be bold she asked, "Who paid for my daughters vehicles?"

"Mom!"

Bruce could feel an argument coming.

Ken left frustrated and would make a point of talking to Bruce later.

Nikita was feeling the tension as well.

"If you ladies wouldn't mind let's discuss this in one of our meeting rooms."

Nikita sensed the woman who gave her the water walk pass her, Nikita headed wanted to follow her.

Nikita felt the leash and heard Older Female say, "Heal."

Nikita stopped and looked up at Victoria.

"Take your dog," Victoria scolded. "Why aren't you wearing shoes?"

Feeling like she was seven years old Ashleigh responded, "They're where I was sitting."

They gave one another a look. Ashleigh assumed her stuff by the chairs would be okay,

she could have cared less if her shoes were stolen.

As they walked to the meeting room, Bruce waved a sales woman over and told her to secure Ashleigh's things. The woman went to retrieve Ashleigh's belongings.

An irritated Victoria said, "See."

Ashleigh understood Victoria was upset and ignored the comment. Ashleigh was keeping Nikita close as they walked through the large showroom.

Nikita was enjoying the walk.

Victoria with a stern tone asked, "How can you afford a dog?"

"I'll explain."

Victoria snipped, "You better."

The three of them reached a decent sized meeting room. Just as they entered the room the saleswoman brought over Ashleigh's things. Ashleigh thanked her. Again to Victoria's shock Ashleigh pulled out money from her purse and tipped this saleswoman. Ashleigh caught the vicious look from Victoria. Victoria yanked a chair out from underneath the table and sat down. Ashleigh and Bruce, without the frustration, sat down as well.

Ashleigh wished she would have been able to discuss all what happened today at the dinner table over a cup of coffee or a meal. This was how important issues in the Anderson household were brought up and contemplated.

Ashleigh felt trapped at the moment.

The saleswoman thanked Ashleigh, Ashleigh concealing her concern thanked this woman.

Bruce shut the door behind them.

As soon as the door was shut Victoria asked with a very sharp tone, "How's your brother?"

Bruce interjected himself into the conversation, "Ms. Anderson if you give me a few moments I think everything will be cleared up."

Victoria sat stiff and said, "Okay."

Ashleigh cringed at her mom's tone.

Bruce looked over at Ashleigh and repeated what Ken told her, "The station wagon is finished and ready to be picked up."

Victoria made a face and her body language was tense.

Ashleigh being serious instructed, "My brother wants to have Ms. Jones receive the car without her realizing Bob is the one buying it for her."

"Your brother told me of his wishes," Bruce continued, "He told me you'd have a plan on how this would be accomplished."

Ashleigh felt very uncomfortable, she concealed this from Bruce, but Victoria knowing her daughter could tell Ashleigh was unsure of herself.

Ashleigh opened her purse and pulled out some cash and placed it in front of Victoria.

Victoria started to get up.

Ashleigh spoke quickly, "Wait."

"Why should I?"

Ashleigh took a deep breath, "My brother and I want you to make sure Ms. Jones has enough money to pay for registration, plates, stickers, and insurance for six months. If there is money left over you should keep it."

Victoria was sure there was some spinning going on.

Based upon her brothers vague instructions Ashleigh felt this was true. Ashleigh justified her statement by reasoning: her brother would have done similar, her mom deserved some extra cash, and this was an honest way of getting the job done.

There was an announcement over the loud speaker, "Bruce Olsen please dial 0784."

"Excuse me for one moment."

Ashleigh flirting answered, "No problem."

Victoria rolled her eyes. Victoria watched the sales manager get up and walk a safe distance from the table. She: put her hands on the table, stood up, leaned over, and boldly whispered, "Where did you get the money."

Just as intense Ashleigh answered, "Bob gave it to me."

Victoria without missing a beat, "Why and how? I thought he disappearance."

Still in a bold whisper Ashleigh answered, "Bob bought me a Jeep. He bought the station wagon for some one who works for him. He doesn't want this lady to know he bought her the vehicle. If she sees me at Bob's company..."

"Why would she see you at his company?" Her voice was moving past a whisper, "When did you start working for your brother?"

"Today. He offered me a job today."

A shocked Victoria answered, "Oh."

There was silence as Bruce hung up the phone and calmly announced, "Ms. Jones is here. Ms. Waller how do you want us to proceed?"

Victoria could feel there was a lot to discuss but crossed her arms and stood there waiting for her daughters answer.

"Mom could you take the money and make sure everything is taken care off."

Angry and sarcastic, "What do I tell her?"

Ashleigh suggested, "Tell her one of Bob's charities donated the vehicle. Or tell her she won a contest."

Victoria gave her a look, "I'm not going to lie and tell her she won a contest."

Ashleigh made a face and looked over at Bruce.

There was silence in the room.

Victoria asked, "Did a charity really purchase the vehicle for her?"

"If you look at the right way." Ashleigh trying to sell this white lie to someone who hated white lies, "Bob is being charitable by giving her the car."

Victoria stated, "I don't like lying."

"If you look at it right it's charity isn't it?"

"Don't pull your spinning with me young lady."

"I'm sorry for interrupting," Bruce was being polite, "Ms. Jones is in our showroom. My secretary says she is excited and waiting with her children."

Victoria found herself asking, "How many?"

He smiled, "You can see for yourself."

Victoria followed Bruce to the meeting room door. He gently pushed it open and spoke softly, "You see the desk with the short woman and the three kids. Mr. Waller is purchasing a car for that family. Someone willing to buy someone a car just out of the goodness of their heart doesn't happen everyday."

Victoria could see a woman who was obviously very excited to be getting a car. She was middle aged, was dressed in a nice dress, nothing fancy or expensive. There was a small girl

sitting on this woman's lap. There was a little bit older girl standing on the other side of the mom. Standing next to the mom was a boy who Victoria guessed was just about thirteen and was trying to be the “man” of the house.

Bruce spoke very softly, “Her husband used to work for Mr. Waller's company but he left her and his kids for some woman he met on the internet. She can't find him. Bob had someone find her and without her even applying he offered her a job. She was unable to take the job because she didn't own a car.”

Victoria looked over at Ashleigh.

“He doesn't allow me to tell anyone.”

Bruce continued, “She had to move from a nice house in the suburbs to a fairly poor neighborhood in Milwaukee.”

Victoria and Ashleigh cringed at this news. It was one thing to move from Milwaukee to the suburbs but to move from the suburbs to Milwaukee was a completely different story.

Ashleigh asked, “Why couldn't she take the freeway flyer?”

“We all know the freeway flyers go from the suburbs to the city in the morning and from the city to the suburbs in the afternoon. They refuse to pick up anyone going the opposite direction.”

“Not surprising,” Victoria answered in disgust, “The prejudice in this city is unbelievable.”

Ashleigh asked, “How do you know this?”

Bruce politely shut the door.

“Your brother called me a couple days ago and told me in confidence he was going to come and purchase...”

Bruce stopped and thought about what he was saying.

Victoria and Ashleigh glanced at one another.

“He wants to work with us on some other projects. But he'll stop if people find out his charities are behind it.”

The compassion for this woman was overwhelming Victoria, “I'll represent the charity.”

Her body language was intense as she spoke to Ashleigh, “We need to talk.”

Ashleigh nodded her head.

Victoria: grabbed the envelope, stepped out of the meeting room, motioned for Bruce to take the lead, Bruce opened the door, whispering the two of the stepped out of the room, and Bruce quietly shut the door behind him.

Nikita fell asleep on the floor next to Ashleigh.

Sitting in this empty meeting room Ashleigh wondered how the talk would go. Ashleigh was facing many changes at once, all from people she loved.

She looked down at her sleeping puppy and asked, “What should I do?”

Nikita opened her eyes and looked up at Best Friend and started to wag her tail.

Ashleigh reached down and picked up Nikita and pet her while contemplating each option.

Victoria with poise handled the transaction with Ms. Jones. Victoria gave Ms. Jones the extra money. This lead to Ms. Jones and Victoria crying and hugging one another. The woman assumed the charity was one of Mr. Waller's charities, but kept her promise and never spoke of how she received the car. Victoria was surprised Bob did something for someone without having reporters around. His normal routine was to stand in front of a camera and make a

speech. She would analyze all of this.

Victoria would have a talk with Ashleigh.

Ashleigh followed her mom home.

She enjoyed driving her brand new Jeep to the Anderson house.

She was thankful for: her Jeep, the job offer, financial freedom, and the love she felt from her Brother.

She was equally thankful for: her foster parents, Felicia, Victoria's help with Ms. Jones, Victoria being alive, and the love she felt from her Foster Family.

She was feeling a move to Florida would be: a fresh start, an adventure, a good way to watch her brother, and would lead to living on her own. This choice was very appealing and equally frightening.

The move into her parents house was: very secure, she knew she would complete college, but it would be years before she would live on her own. This choice was appealing but frustrating.

There was the third choice. She could: continue to live on her own, continue to work at *Captain Investments*, finish college at night, and maintain all her personal freedom. This felt very foolish on many levels but felt empowering.

When she woke up this morning she felt there were very few choices. Now they were coming at her. What was difficult, these choices were from people who loved and cared about her. She knew the wisest thing was to choose the help. The question was how much? Which one? And how to do so without hurting the other? She was currently unaware of what these answers would be.

She loved choices but right now they felt equally: powerful, fulfilling, frightening, and frustrating.

Nikita was loving what was called a "Ride." She would remember this command. She liked this moving territory.

Ashleigh pulled into the culdesac where she grew up.

Ashleigh spoke to her puppy, "What do you think? Should I move or stay?"

Nikita bounced up front and sat in the passenger seat.

"NO," Ashleigh commanded. She gently put Nikita back and commanded in a strong tone, "You stay in the back seat."

Nikita was confused but sat there for now.

Victoria pulled into the two car garage. Ashleigh pulled into the driveway but parked on the right edge giving her Dad enough room to drive into the garage. She: pushed down the clutch, she put the vehicle into neutral, she lifted up the parking brake, put the car into first gear, and turned off the engine.

She recalled her Dad teaching her how to drive a manual transmission. Ashleigh remembered wanting to quit, but he told her, "*You never know when you're going to need to have to use a stick shift car.*" She smiled and was grateful for the persistence and patience of her Dad.

She again picked up Nikita and put her into the back and said, "Stay. I want you to always to stay in back. Unless we are getting in and out."

Ashleigh smiled when Nikita's blue eyes gazed upon hers. Ashleigh purposely waited

and again Nikita jumped up front. Again she gently set Nikita onto the back seat. Ashleigh and Nikita practiced on sitting four times before Ashleigh recognized this was turning into a game.

Ashleigh grabbed her purse, put the leash on her puppy, and stepped out of the Jeep. Ashleigh stopped and admired her yellow Jeep Wrangler. She was defiantly happy to add a real Jeep to her collection Jeeps. She smiled. Her Dad kept her Jeep collection on one of his shelves in the basement along with his model train cars and engines. On this shelf was a yellow Jeep model the two of them put together when she was eight.

She would have preferred a white or red one but this one was the best one on the lot for the price. She felt the thick dark green pinstripe across the side of her yellow Jeep gave her vehicle an outdoorsy look. She liked the decal in before the front doors. The word "Sport" was blended into this thick green pinstripe. She appreciated how the dealership added a thin green pinstripe. It started just under the thick pinstripe, it followed the front black wheel well, above the side step, and ended past the metal door. At the end of this stripe and just before the back wheel was a feminine looking decal. She liked the many squiggly lines with the little white hearts at the end of the lines. This decal was also placed underneath the back window on the upper corners of the tailgate. There were two green thin pin stripes placed on the hood; these lines started just above the grill and went up to the windshield. On both sides of the pinstripes smaller versions of the squiggly lined heart decal were placed on the hood and underneath the windshield.

Ashleigh was named as an "occasional" user on the registration and Bob was the official owner. The reason Bob went this route was because of a gift tax. After paying a luxury tax, sales tax, federal tax, the fees associated with registration and plates; he hated the idea of paying a gift tax. Bob promised he would never take the vehicle away without just cause. He had three conditions: after six months she would have to pay for the car insurance, he would take the vehicle away if she ever drank, and she was responsible for general maintenance. She felt disappointed her brother would mention the drinking, even so, she felt these requests were all reasonable. Above all else, she was delighted to drive a reliable vehicle; an added bonus was it was a make and model she loved.

Nikita yanked on the chain and started to howl. This was in response to the two golden retrievers barking.

Ashleigh turned around and spotted Victoria through the large picture window scold both dogs. The barking stopped.

The front door opened and Ashleigh heard, "Are you coming in?"

Ashleigh smiled.

Victoria gave Ashleigh a serious look, "Lets have a cup of coffee."

"I'll be there in a minute."

Victoria approved: she pushed the two golden retrievers back into the house, yelled at them in a mumbled tone, and the door shut behind her.

Ashleigh glanced up at the corner second story window and recalled the times she climbed out of that window, went down the long ledge, and climbed down the supporting pole, and would head off to meet her first boyfriend Clyde. Clyde turned out to be a nightmare. She wished she would have never given him her virginity. What she would never forget was how he pressured her to drink. The present day Ashleigh wished the Ashleigh who climbed out of the window would have listened to Victoria.

As she lead Nikita to the front door three memories flashed in her mind. The first

memory was of herself clinging to Patty and meeting Victoria for the first time. The part she would never forget was Patty and Victoria taking pictures of her bruises. The second memory was a vivid memory, a memory she wished was forgotten; it was the day Ashley Vindavane tried to kidnap her. The third memory was the time she was standing in front of the front door of this house: in the back yard she was hearing a dog bark, she was standing next to a social service lady, and she was holding onto a pink backpack her big brother bought for her. She could still feel the fear of moving into another house. The adult Ashleigh was certain being brought to this house was the best day of her life.

When Ashleigh and Nikita reached the front door her two golden retrievers; Ariel and Guinevere started to bark again. She loved these two dogs. Ashleigh's favorite dog of all time was Belle, this was the mid-sized mutt who arrived two weeks after Maxine saved Ashleigh from being kidnapped.

From inside the house Ashleigh and Nikita heard, "No Bark."

This stopped Nikita from howling.

Nikita sensed two dogs behind the door. Best Friend opened the door. Nikita tried to rush into the house and felt herself being picked up.

Ariel and Guinevere loved Best Friend. They were sitting patiently waiting for her to greet them. They were at the same time sniffing the pup in her arms, they could sense the connection between Best Friend and this pup.

Ashleigh instructed Nikita, "This is how you greet."

Ashleigh set Nikita down, pushed her butt down and commanded, "Sit," and shortly after, "Stay."

This kept the two retrievers sitting as well.

Nikita wanted to greet these two adult dogs without restraint but Ashleigh gently held Nikita in place. The golden retrievers were just as excited to meet New Pup and they wanted Ashleigh to greet them.

Ashleigh held Nikita in place, and was encouraging, "You're being a good girl."

Victoria yelled, "You should be a veterinarian."

Ashleigh could tell it was time for all four to greet one another.

All Ashleigh needed to say was, "come."

Ariel and Guinevere rushed Best Friend.

Ashleigh enjoyed greeting her two old friends.

Nikita became excited and started to howl and this caused the two golden retrievers to bark.

They all heard Victoria yell in a loud commanding voice, "That's enough!"

This caused the golden retrievers to stop but Nikita kept on howling,

Ashleigh commanded, "NO Howl."

Nikita sensed her disapproval and stopped.

Ashleigh said, "We need to behave."

Victoria commanded, "They need to go outside."

"You think Nikita will be alright?"

Victoria peeked her head out of the kitchen, "We'll watch from the kitchen table."

Ashleigh smiled and lead the three dogs to the sliding door in front of the kitchen table. Ashleigh let them out into the fenced in backyard. A fence Ashleigh remembered "helping" her Dad put up so Belle could play with her in the backyard. An adult Ashleigh understood this

fence was to discourage Ashley Vindavane from trying to kidnap her again. In this fenced in back yard was a small wooden “house”, a house Felicia and Ashleigh spent many hours playing in, it was still maintained. It was now a decoration piece with plants surrounding it.

Ashleigh asked as she watched the three dogs run outside, “Why doesn’t Dad take down that playhouse?”

Victoria answered as she poured two cups of coffee, “If he took it down it would mean his two youngest girls were grown up.”

“I’m grown up.”

Victoria set Ashleigh's cup of coffee in front of a kitchen chair, “Don't tell him we know.”

Ashleigh was well aware what this cup of coffee meant. All important things were discussed on this very table over: diner, breakfast, coffee, soda, milk, cookies, or a nice dessert. If the girls wanted to talk to their Dad they knew the best time was during breakfast.

It took many months of living at the Anderson household to recognize it was a safe place to talk and socialize.

Ashleigh set her purse onto the table and sat down in what was her chair. The way Ashleigh was able to sip coffee was by putting in extra sugars and a lot of cream.

Victoria stated, “That woman appreciated the car and the help.”

“I'm glad to hear it.”

“I mentioned one of Bob's charities and told her if she spoke of this at work it could make things uncomfortable.”

Ashleigh took a sip of her coffee.

Victoria: looked outside, stood up, opened the screen door, and yelled, “Guinevere let her up.”

Ariel looked up at Victoria and let the whimpering puppy up.

Victoria yelled, “You play nice.”

Ashleigh smiled. Every animal and child who ever spent any time in this house heard Victoria say this.

Victoria in frustration slammed the sliding door, “Between dogs and kids.”

“Well thank you,” Ashleigh replied in sarcastic humor.

Victoria gave her a look, “I've never regretted you being here.” Ashleigh was about to reply but Victoria stated, “Your brother did a wonderful thing today.”

“I know you don't like my brother very much.”

Victoria was reading her daughters body language.

Ashleigh asked sincerely, “Why don't you like him?”

Victoria sat down in her chair and took a sip of her coffee and asked, “Are you sure you want me to tell you?”

Ashleigh braced herself for the answer, “Yes. It hurts sometimes the way you talk about him. He was always there for me.”

Victoria made a face and crinkled her forehead together, “I apologize.” She took a sip of her coffee and again spoke, “I agree he was always there for you. What you don't know was he and I had some go a rounds. Many times I wanted to stop his visitation.”

“Why didn't you?”

“It would have hurt you,” was Victoria's simple answer. “I especially wanted to end it with the babysitting thing.”

Ashleigh knew enough not to comment on this. Instead she took a couple sips of coffee.

"If you worked for your brother would you be able to quit that god awful part time job of yours?"

"Yes." Ashleigh added, "I put in my two week notice today but she asked me to work the next two Saturdays."

"Hmm," Victoria answered, "Your better than that place."

Ashleigh wanted to tell her she enjoyed working there. She would keep it to herself how self conscience she felt anytime someone she knew stepped into the restaurant.

There was a brief silence and Victoria stated, "I have to confess I've always resented the fact he hurt two of my girls."

"How?"

"Your brother changed the day Amanda was killed in that car accident."

"What happened? No one ever told me."

"It was an icy road." Victoria took a sip of coffee, "The woman in the other lane was drunk and slid in front of Amanda."

There was a slight pause, Victoria broke the silence, "Do you remember her?"

"A little. I remember her taking me to get custard and dancing at her dance studio."

"She came from a very rich and powerful family." Victoria paused and remarked with disgust. "Bob's Dad was an ass."

"You meet my Real Dad?"

Victoria interrupted, "He's not like your brother. If he was I've stopped the visitation. One thing I've always admired about your Brother he was never a womanizer. And he was dedicated to you."

Ashleigh heard the layers.

Ashleigh stood up and opened the screen door, "Nikita come."

"What's the matter?"

"She's trying to dig under the fence."

With this command the two retrievers came running into the house. Nikita following stumbled up the deck and into the house. It was obvious she was excited. The retrievers went to their water dish, Ashleigh was concerned about Nikita, but Victoria was already setting a water dish away from the retrievers, "Here Nikita."

Ashleigh smiled.

Victoria looked at Ashleigh and finished her thought, "After the accident and after Patty's short term missionary trip he never treated Patty the same."

Ashleigh apologized for her brother, "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," A slight pause. She said in a tone, "You shouldn't apologize for him." There was another pause, "I can't believe he gave that woman a car without having a group of reporters recording the event. He's learning." She made a face, "But he has a way to go."

Ashleigh gave her mom a look.

Victoria answered the look, "He doesn't have a lot of it, but it's enough for now."

"Here," Ashleigh stated. All three dogs came to her. She stood up and headed toward the living room.

Victoria stated, "The rope is under the chair."

Ashleigh simply answered, "Okay."

Soon the three dogs were playing with a rope and a ball.

Ashleigh asked from the living room, "What does he need?"

Victoria answered after a sip of coffee, "You shall see."

While Ashleigh was in the living room Victoria glanced at Ashleigh's coffee and cringed. Victoria wondered how her daughter could drink coffee the way she prepared it.

Ashleigh stepped into the kitchen and recalled how beautiful Victoria's hair used to be.

Victoria immediately noticed Ashleigh's facial expression, "What's the matter?"

"I remember when I was little and you'd let me touch your hair."

Victoria held in tears, "You know why I loved it?"

Ashleigh shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

"Other than the one hug," both knew what hug they were talking about, "It was the first time you wanted to touch me. Before that first hug you were so afraid we'd hurt..."

"I'm sor..."

They embraced.

With love Victoria commented, "It wasn't your fault. We all knew where you came from. You've overcome those things and are a wonderful young woman. Don't let what happened to you before you lived here define you."

This meant a great deal to Ashleigh.

Victoria added, "You were like that old battered dog Maxine."

There was silence as they separated.

Ashleigh felt the need to defend Maxine, "I loved her."

"She loved you so much she was snipping at anyone who came near you."

Victoria was still annoyed the dog snipped at her.

"I don't remember that."

They heard Nikita yelp and start to whine.

Victoria yelled, "Let her up."

All at once Nikita came running into the kitchen looking for Best Friend.

Victoria smiled.

Ashleigh told Nikita, "Get the rope."

With this command Ariel: stepped in holding a rope, stopped, looked at Ashleigh, dropped the rope, and her tail was wagging.

Victoria smiled.

Ashleigh grabbed the rope and tossed it, "Go get it."

Three dogs ran for it.

Victoria felt this was a perfect time to suggest a career change, "You were always good with dogs and animals. Why not be a veterinarian?"

Ashleigh answered her mom gently, "I don't want to be a veterinarian."

"What do you want to be?"

"An actress."

Ashleigh found this answer funny.

Victoria answered in a sharp tone, "You already are."

Ashleigh stopped laughing, gave her mom a look, and took a sip of her coffee.

Victoria found this to be a great opportunity, "Dad and I want you to move back in. We'll clear an area in the basement. It'll be like an apartment. All you have to do is finish college."

There was the choice and the personal conflict.

Victoria wanted her daughter to jump at the chance.

Ashleigh avoiding this proposal, unsure of which choice she wanted stated, "I'm sorry I treated you the way I did. I shouldn't have given you such a hard time. I should have listened to you more. I..."

Victoria interrupted, "I've forgiven you every time. Your my Daughter."

They both were tearing but Victoria was holding it in better.

"You've always been a good daughter."

Ashleigh looked at her with shock, "How could you say that?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

Ashleigh was dumbfounded.

"The way I lipped off. The mistakes. The outpatient treatment. The shoplifting."

"I've always been proud of you for staying sober," Victoria added, "But I was worried about you at the time. I'm hoping I'll never have to worry about you drinking again."

Recalling how dumb Neil acted. Ashleigh answered, "I'm never going to drink again."

Ashleigh felt compelled to ask, "What about the whole Patty thing?"

"She took on the responsibility of being your Mom before she was able. Don't be to mad at her.."

Ashleigh was honest, "I'm not."

Victoria replied, "Don't be so quick to discount this. I sometimes feel you resent her for it all falling apart."

Ashleigh would consider the wisdom of her mom.

"It's worked out," Victoria continued. "You think my daughter would be running an orphanage? How about all those girls she keeps on trying to save from the sex trade?"

"That's not because of me."

"Of course it is."

Ashleigh was unsure of the connection.

Victoria seeing her look answered, "She loves you."

"I love her too but she can be so bossy."

Victoria smiled, "Patty asks how you are doing all the time."

Ashleigh wished Patty would ask her how she was doing, instead of asking her mom. "But we couldn't get along for three months."

Nikita came into the kitchen: growling, the rope in her mouth, and whipping it back and forth. Ashleigh grabbed the rope and tossed it. Again three dogs ran after it.

"She's been on a different train track for years."

"Huh?"

Ashleigh was having difficulty fully understanding the analogy.

"Look," Victoria stated, "Life is like the trains you and your Dad like playing with. She's been on one track. The rest of us are on another track. Of course we knew about one another but we were not living on the same track. When she came back she was not expecting our track and train to be so different. Subconsciously she was trying to put everything back the way it was."

"I still can't stand how bossy she was."

"This is exactly my point," Victoria answered. "You grew up and she was not ready for it."

The two ladies took a sip of coffee.

Victoria yelled, "Quiet."

She stood up, stepped into the living room, and commanded; "Go to your spots."

The retrievers found their spots in the living room and laid down.

Nikita was confused. She grabbed onto the rope and started to wrestling with it.

Ashleigh yelled, "Come."

Nikita stumbled over the rope, she picked herself up, and dragged it to Best Friend.

Victoria coming back into the kitchen reminded Ashleigh, "Patty loves you."

"I love her too."

Victoria mentioned, "Your heart was broken when the two of them split. You were more devastated than either one of them were. I think you resent Patty for breaking up with Bob."

Ashleigh never considered this before.

Victoria seeing her daughters body language knew she said enough. She changed subjects by mentioning, "I haven't always liked your choices in men."

"I did break up with Neil a year and a half ago and I haven't dated a guy since."

Victoria smiled, "I'm glad."

"I want a good guy. I'm only going to date Christian guys from now on. I'm sick of the bad boy types."

"You deserve a good guy. You'll learn they're not boring."

Ashleigh made a face, "I don't think they're boring."

"Don't lie to me," Victoria scolded. "You've always had an adventurous spirit. How many times did you lead Felicia into trouble?" Victoria smiled letting Ashleigh know there was not any resentment in this statement, "I imagine if you were given the chance to jump off a perfectly good airplane you'd do it."

"I was never trying to get Felicia into trouble," Ashleigh spun, "We were having fun."

The face Victoria gave her was enough for Ashleigh to stop talking. Ashleigh was well aware this was a present day warning to make wise choices.

The golden retrievers ran to the front door.

Nikita hearing them ran out of the kitchen and to this door.

Ashleigh: followed Nikita, looked out the picture window, and announced; "Felicia is home."

Ashleigh asked with a sister concern, "How's she doing?"

"She's acting like a sixteen year old girl."

By Victoria's tone Ashleigh knew they were struggling.

The door opened and they immediately heard, "Did we buy a Jeep? Or is it Ashleigh's? Is she moving in with us?"

Felicia was about to run into the kitchen and hug Ashleigh, but she spotted the puppy.

Felicia pushed the puppy down and said, "Down."

The two golden retrievers were waiting patiently for Felicia.

"Is it yours?"

Ashleigh answered, "Her name is Nikita."

Felicia commanded, "Sit."

The puppy looked up and ignored her.

Nikita never felt any authority from this Young Female Human.

Ashleigh used authority, "Nikita sit."

Nikita sat.

Victoria winked at Ashleigh and whispered, "She sat didn't she."

Ashleigh answered, "Yup."

Felicia was in the process of becoming a dark haired beauty; Felicia was unaware of the beauty part. Her long face was a blend of oblong and square; with a tendency toward oblong. Her long dark brunette hair had a part on her left side just above her dark brown, almost black eyes. She was consistently trimming her long eyebrows. They stopped at the outer part of her eye. The facial feature she despised, but because of her mother accepted, was her long bridged nose with a roman style end. Her nose gave her face character. This nose matched her blended cheekbones and rounded jawline. Her average length cupid lips added to her looks. Her body was what every young man admired. She liked how every guy noticed her breasts while never feeling here breasts were annoying. The two things she disliked about her body was her flat rear end and her short fingers.

Felicia asked, "Where did you get her?"

"Bob bought her for me. If you see him. Tell him I'm taking care of his dog. It'll make him feel better."

Felicia snickered, "Oh."

Felicia always thought her brother was sort of "Weird" but yet "cool". What Felicia thought was cool was his wealth and the fact he was a published author. Felicia felt it was "weird" he never wanted anyone to know he was a famous author and she felt the way he talked was out of the ordinary.

Felicia felt compelled to ask, "Is he writing another book?"

Ashleigh watched her pick Nikita up. Once Nikita was in her arms the two retrievers wanted Female Pup to greet them. Felicia's attention was on the puppy. The retrievers took being ignored well and found their spots in the living room.

Nikita sniffed Female Pup and licked her face. Nikita then wanted down.

Felicia set down a very wiggly puppy.

Victoria leaned in and shouted, "You shouldn't read any of his books."

Felicia sighed and rolled her eyes. In her very conservative private religious school his books were very popular with the students; at the same time his books were shunned by the school staff. What her classmates liked about his books was he kept things real and he was never afraid of an issue.

Nikita ran back into the living room and grabbed a rope and started to wrestle with it, Felicia set her backpack down. She would have gone upstairs into her room and changed out of her green and blue uniform; but instead grabbed a red ball and threw it. Nikita dropped the rope and went running after the ball. The golden retrievers were tired and ignored the ball.

Victoria was annoyed, "Her brother is will be accountable for writing those books."

Felicia defended the books, "He talks about real stuff."

"I believe stuff a Christian shouldn't be writing about."

Victoria was about to ask Ashleigh why he wrote what he did; instead she took a sip of coffee.

Ashleigh defending her brother answered, "Bob believes a Christian should talk about everything."

"See."

Felicia picked up the ball and tossed it.

Nikita went running after it.

Ashleigh added, "But Mom is correct he is accountable for what he writes. His intent is never to lead anyone astray he..."

Victoria was angry at Bob's books, "He could do a better job."

Felicia rolled her eyes. She was tired of this debate.

She asked Ashleigh, "Are you going to be in his next one?"

"He says I'm not in any of them."

Victoria mentioned, "Just like Patty wasn't the main character in his first book?"

This statement was dripping with sarcasm.

Ashleigh answered Victoria, "He says I'm not in any of his books or anyone he knows."

Both Felicia and Victoria gave her the same look; it was obvious they were mother and daughter.

Victoria asked, "You don't believe that?"

Ashleigh's responded, "You used to like him."

"I know he's your brother and I shouldn't criticize. I've always admired him for how loyal he has been to you. Without your brother being involved I'm unsure you'd have ended up here. I sometimes feel it was your destiny to be here. Anyway. I'm glad you stayed and your sister never married him. I don't feel they'd have been good together."

The family very rarely talked about the time before Ashleigh moved in so Felicia found this conversation fascinating. Felicia threw the ball again. Nikita went running after it. Felicia knew Ashleigh was a foster child of her parents. This never stopped Felicia or Ashleigh from loving one another. Ashleigh always made time for Felicia and Felicia always followed her sister wherever she went. The most disappointing moment was when she found out her sister had a drinking problem. The most hurtful moment was when it appeared as though she was moving in with her brother.

Ashleigh defended them, "They were great together."

Out of principle Felicia backed up her sister, "If Patty would've married him she'd be able to fund eight or nine orphanages."

Victoria snipped, "What are you talking about?"

Ashleigh blushed.

Felicia tossed the ball and again Nikita went running after it.

Felicia answered Victoria by stepping into the kitchen. She gazed at both of them, "It was all over the news. His company bought out, like; I don't know, four companies. I guess he's moving them down south someplace. He was complaining about Milwaukee again."

Victoria asked her youngest daughter, "Where?"

Ashleigh answered sheepishly, "Florida."

They looked at Ashleigh.

"Is he expecting you to move to Florida?"

Felicia expected Ashleigh to stay in Wisconsin, if she thought for one second Ashleigh would move she would have never commented, "I bet Bob would buy her a mansion."

Victoria replied, "Why would this matter?"

Felicia backing her sister answered, "They said on the news he was a multimillionaire, and maybe, even; a billionaire. See Patty dropped the ball."

"Isaac is a great guy," Victoria defended the man Patty married, "He's very loyal and they're fulfilling God's work."

Felicia pushing buttons mocked his Canadian accent, "Eh' there. Lets all play hockey."

"That's not nice. He's your Brother-in-law."

Ashleigh felt their exchange was funny. She was wise enough to avoid laughing. What Ashleigh found disrespectful was her sister mocked their mom. Felicia made a face and tossed the ball into the living room. Nikita went running after the ball.

Victoria responded, "I bet he's bragging about his new conquests."

Victoria noticed how quiet Ashleigh was.

Felicia found it cool her mom was incorrect for once, "As a matter of fact; I'm sure, no one can find him. Some fancy English banker was talking on his behalf. He's refusing to talk to anybody."

Felicia tossed the ball again, the ball came close to Ariel, Nikita was about to ignore Ariel. Ariel barked and Nikita was pinned again; Felicia ran over and rescued the puppy. Felicia seeing the Jeep through the big picture window yelled to her sister, "Lets go for a ride in your Jeep."

"Later. After I'm done talking with Mom."

Victoria felt this was a big moment of maturity for Ashleigh. Any other time a request like this would have ended the conversation, the two of them would have been out the door, and it would be days before the topic was discussed again.

Felicia said, "I'm going to take Nikita upstairs and change."

"Okay," was Victoria's response. "Remember you still have homework."

As Victoria stated this the front door opened.

Felicia could tell by her dad's look things would get interesting. She spoke in her sweet girl voice, "Daddy look at Ashleigh's new puppy."

Ashleigh and Victoria gave one another a look.

Victoria demanded, "Go upstairs."

Blake added, "I'm assuming the Jeep outside is yours?"

The tone was far from what Felicia expected, "Okay Mom. I'll take Nikita with me."

Ashleigh suggested, "Take a toy."

Felicia: grabbed the rope, grabbed Nikita, and went running up the stairs.

"Ashleigh," Blake took a very serious tone, "How can you afford a dog and a new car?"

Ashleigh looked over at her 57 year old Dad, who would be 58 in a month. He's mustache was trimmed. His glasses matched his square masculine face. He was wearing a nice dark blue pinned stripped suit. Ashleigh was aware his office went casual but her dad still went to work in a suit. His hair was thick and gray. He was aging well. She loved her dad. Other than her brother, he was the first man she ever knew who treated women with respect; more important treated her well. The next time her Dad disapproved of a man she was dating she would listen. She was determined to find a man who respected and treated women like Blake treated Victoria. She knew of many girls, especially during her treatment days, who were filled with horror stories of horrible Step-Dads. This helped her really appreciate the fact she never once felt uncomfortable around her Foster Dad.

Ashleigh watched this tall man walk up to his wife. Victoria stood up and they hugged.

He expressed his love by saying, "I love you and you look wonderful."

They lightly kissed.

Ashleigh held in her tears. She knew how important it was for her Dad to call her Mom beautiful; Ashleigh knew he meant it.

"I love you too."

With love she patting his chest.

Ashleigh hoped when she turned fifty a man would tell her how much he loved her.

He gently pulled away, "May I have a cup of coffee?"

"It should still be warm."

Blake set his suitcase on the edge of the living room and kitchen. He stepped into the kitchen and grabbed a cup of coffee. Ashleigh knew her dad was concerned about her or he would have headed upstairs and changed out of his suit. She braced herself for her Dad's questions.

"Ashleigh," Blake started, "How are you able to afford a Jeep. I'm assuming that is your Jeep parked outside. Besides the Jeep how are going to take care of a dog."

Ashleigh looked at her mom.

"No," Victoria answered Ashleigh's look, "Young lady you have some explaining to do."

She mustered the courage, and started; "Well..." her cell phone rang, "Give me a sec."

Both Victoria and Blake were shocked Ashleigh pulled out a cell phone.

Ashleigh looked at the number, she answered the phone by saying; "Hello?"

Blake whispered to Victoria, "That's an expensive phone."

Victoria whispered back, "How is she affording a cell phone in the first place?"

At this moment Felicia came down the stairs dressed in a way she was sure her mom would approve of and in a way she would be warm if Ashleigh took her for a ride in her Jeep. She was wearing a simple dark blue pair of flared jeans, a short dark blue tee, with a casual thermal poppy colored Henley layered over the tee. In her arms she was carrying Nikita. When she entered the living room Felicia set Nikita and the rope down.

Nikita immediately started to wrestle with the rope.

Felicia rolled her eyes and walked into the kitchen. She loved Ashleigh's cell phone. Her parents glanced at their daughter.

Felicia answered their glances, "I'm getting something to drink and an apple. She's got a cool phone."

Victoria asked, "Is it expensive?"

"It's called the chocolate. It takes great pictures and it has a MP3 player." Felicia looked at her parents with hope, "May I get a cell phone?"

Blake asked, "Why do you need a cell phone?"

Victoria piped up, "It would be a good way of keeping track of her."

This was not the response Felicia was looking for.

"Sounds like a good idea," Blake said with a smile, "If we get you a cell phone we can call you at any time. With us paying the bill you better answer it."

This was exactly opposite of what Felicia had in mind.

Victoria asked, "You still want a phone?"

Blake remarked, "I have a wonderful idea. If you want a cell phone you'd have to pay the bill. This might encourage you to get a part time job."

Felicia wished she would have kept her mouth shut.

Ashleigh hung up and gave them all a surprised look, "Bob paid all of my back rent."

"All of it?"

Responding to her Dad in a surprised tone, "Yea."

Felicia responded, "That's cool."

Victoria sat at the table and Blake leaned against the edge of the counter. The long skinny kitchen was on the left side and the dinning room was on the other.

Victoria asked in a nice tone, "Is he bribing you?"

Ashleigh was still in shock but managed an answer, "He isn't."

Blake pushed up his glasses, "Why would he start helping you now? He never helped you before?"

"Because I never asked for help before. He feels guilty for hiding and not telling me where he was."

"You mentioned Florida," Victoria asked, "You have to consider the idea he's only helping you to get you to move."

"That isn't true." She paused. "Because I never asked for his help he wanted to help me. He offered me a job but it's separate from his help."

Blake asked, "What would you be doing?"

This is when he stood straight up.

Ashleigh answering, "I'm not exactly sure. I'll be some sort of personal secretary to Bob and H.R. He wants me to help coordinate the move of his company."

Blake pushed up his glasses, "His whole company? He has a big company. I know this because our firm does work for him."

In a fearful response Ashleigh said, "I know."

"I don't understand," Blake started, "Why does he want you to coordinate the move?"

"He says he trusts me and I'd be good at organizing everything."

Blake being practicable asked, "Would you have a job after the move?"

"He wants me to move with the company."

Victoria being practicable asked, "What about housing?"

Ashleigh tried to sell the idea of moving. An idea she was not sure about herself, "He says I could live with him for a few months until I found a place of my own."

"Here we go again." Victoria started, "What about school? You need to finish your degree you never know what will happen."

"I can't go unless I sign up for night classes."

Blake stated, "It's going to be expensive to live on your own and to pay for school. What happens if it doesn't work out?"

"If I don't like it I can move back. He just asked I stay on until after the move. He wouldn't stand in my way. He mentioned he'd give me enough money to complete one year up here and after that it was up to me. But if I stayed working for him he'd pay my tuition. All he asks is I pass. This is better than his employees who receive compensation based upon their grades. He says I could live with him as long as I'd like. I don't imagine this would be long."

Victoria warned, "You've never lived with him full time. It isn't going to be easy."

Ashleigh honestly answered, "I'm not planning on staying with him forever. I figure if I like the job I'll find an apartment down there. I'll go to two or three classes a week and after I graduate from some college I'll move back up."

Felicia loved her big sister, "You can't go!"

They all looked at her.

She was terribly shaken by the idea of her sister moving, "You should stay here."

"Felicia its up to her," but Victoria answered. She concentrated on Ashleigh, "If you go you better talk to us and come up for visits."

"He promised me enough vacation time to come up," the emotion was filling the room. "I wouldn't have to go."

"Then don't go. Stay downstairs; it'll be, like, it'll be really cool for you to live here again." An upset Felicia added, "My friends want you to move back."

"There's a lot of responsibility taking a job like this," interjected Victoria, "Are you really sure you can handle it? What happens if he wants to hide again? I'm not sure about this."

It was Blake who kept this from becoming an emotional mess and asked a very practical question, "How can he just afford to buy you a new car in cash? Does he really have the capitol to move all of his company to one spot? And what is the purpose of the move?"

The three ladies gazed upon him. They wondered how this had anything to do with Ashleigh moving.

He pushed up his glasses and spoke with wisdom, "I've seen upstart companies grow to fast. They borrow money based upon numbers instead of what the reality is. The situation becomes a mess. Plus I've heard rumors about turmoil in his company. He let go of a large number of employees. I knew some of those people. Before I give my daughter the blessing to go I want to know some things about the company. Young lady you realize if something goes wrong you are welcome to come back?"

Felicia hearing this from her Dad became angry at him. She was hurt Ashleigh would even consider moving away. She wanted her Mom to force Ashleigh to stay. All of these emotions caused Felicia to storm out of the kitchen and run upstairs. Ashleigh was about to follow Felicia but Victoria stopped her, "We'll deal with her in a minute. You answer your Dad's question."

Ashleigh wanted both her parents blessing before she moved to Florida. If they thought it was a bad idea she would listen to them. She was feeling a very strong pull to take the job and move to Florida, but this family meeting was causing her to have doubt.

"He truly helps people." Ashleigh started. "When he showed up today he was worried about me," Nikita was laying on the floor gnawing on a bone Blake just gave her. "He bought me Nikita so I'd have a friend down there. Of course he wouldn't admit that."

"This isn't answering my question."

Ashleigh understood her dad. She began to answer his question, "He's very responsible with his company and personal spending habits. You guys would like how he handles money. He doesn't spend a lot of money on himself. He's still living in Amanda's house. He only buys things in cash. He even does this with his companies."

"How can he do that?" asked Victoria, "Do you expect us to believe he bought a bunch of companies with cash?"

Ashleigh answered, "In a legal sense *Renewed Mastery* bought all four with cash."

Victoria checking to see if Ashleigh was spinning information asked, "How do you know?"

"He held a meeting at my company. He had me sit in the meeting. He used my company to help him take back his company and acquire the four other ones."

They gazed upon Ashleigh.

Blake broke the deafening silence, "I've never heard of this before. How can you just buy a company in cash?"

She answered, "He started his board game business with the money from his dance

club and restaurant.” Ashleigh paused and let them know of something she never told anyone, “He never expected this business to take off so quickly. He just posted a few games on the internet and wealthy people wanted them. He kept going with one idea after another and kept hiring an employee here or there.”

Blake asked, “What was his business plan?”

Ashleigh now knew how special his plan was, “His only plan was to do everything opposite of what he experienced after college. Dad you know. He’s always felt companies could do things better. He often asked you how you felt about the business world. He does plan but at anytime if the plan needs changing he’ll change it.”

Victoria being serious asked, “How does this answer your Dad's question?”

“After his company started to take off he started to buy small companies his company could afford and worked with.”

Blake asked, “Like the small lumber yard?”

Ashleigh smiled, “Yes.” Ashleigh immediately filled in the blanks, “Bob knew the owner and heard he was ready to retire and wanted to sell. Bob called him and they easily worked out a deal. This when other companies started to call him. The rumor was if the price was right you could honestly deal with him and he would give you cash on the spot. Many small companies he worked with started to contact him. One by one he bought them. As he did he would use what he calls, the philosophy of *Renewed Mastery*. The profits started to increase and he’s never stopped.”

“But it takes a lot of money to buy four companies,” interrupted Blake. “I knew he was buying out these companies but what he bought today was not small.”

Ashleigh trusted her parents, “He’s finally using the money from his books and the movie.” She shrugged her shoulders, “Plus the settlement from suing the movie company.”

Victoria said, “He’s made that much from his books?”

Ashleigh shrugged his shoulders, “He told me after the meeting.”

Blake looked at his daughter, “You mean he hasn’t used any of the money from his books or his movie?”

“He told me he helped some people. Plus he keeps on making money with his company.”

Victoria asked, “With custom games?”

Blake answered, “He’s not just making games. He’s making art projects out of wood and he’s buying out other companies. His company is now involved in large scale projects. He owns small companies all over the country and a couple in Europe. This is correct?”

Ashleigh very seriously answered her dad, “Yes. He would buy one small company and buy a company that helped the other small company. That helped another company. What surprised him was many small business owners started to come to him.”

Victoria was having a hard time with all this, “Why would they come to him?”

Blake answered, “Many were getting offers from foreign companies and didn’t want to sell. He has a reputation of keeping as many employees as possible and keeping the companies in the communities they were started.”

Ashleigh knew this last part was about to change.

Blake out of concern for the people who worked for *Renewed Mastery*, asked, “Why is he moving all the companies to one place?”

Nikita looked up at Female Pup who came back down to the kitchen.

Like a business woman Ashleigh answered, "Efficiency. There are only three companies he's not moving. The advertising firm in Minneapolis, the wood processing plants, and the hubs of the trucking company. He is moving the headquarters though."

Victoria's eyes went big, "How much is he worth?"

"Billions," answered Felicia. "I," she made a face, "like; everyone knows he's rich," Felicia looked at Ashleigh and very meekly spoke, "Don't go."

Blake answered, "It's her choice."

Felicia felt defeated.

Victoria was having a difficult time believing he made enough money from books and a movie to buy four companies, "He made money off that horrible movie?"

"Mom it was a top ten movie," announced Felicia. "People still talk about it."

Victoria said, "I've told you not to watch it."

Felicia felt like she was being picked on.

Ashleigh rescued Felicia, "He hated the movie. This is why he sued the studio. He now owns the rights to everything involved with his stories. They lied to him and somehow changed his story," Ashleigh's face changed drastically, "He's so angry he's claiming he'll never do a movie again un..." She stopped and changed direction of her speech. "He used very little for himself and put the money back into the artist part of his company. He really doesn't spend a lot of money compared to what he receives."

Ashleigh left out a detail about the charities. He gave a big portion of money to some charity in Florida while he was looking for a disappeared Shelly.

Victoria asked, "His art studio's?"

"Yes. He likes to give unknown artists a chance. This is part of the reason his games and his artwork took off."

"He prides himself on doing what others don't do or ignore," Blake explained to Victoria. "He's arrogant."

Felicia was bored and grabbed the rope and this immediately led to Felicia pulling Nikita across the kitchen floor.

"In the other room."

"Yes Mom."

"Don't get snippy with your mother."

Felicia in the back of her mind knew her Dad would never touch her. This never stopped Felicia feeling some intimidation when her Dad asserted his authority. She respected her Dad a lot. She quickly ripped the rope from Nikita and pretended to run into the living room. Nikita chased after her.

Ashleigh wanted to answer her Dad, "He's arrogant but he's making money when others are struggling. Plus he's helping the little guy and not sending jobs overseas."

At this moment the rope ended up near the kitchen table, Nikita came running in and slide on the floor grabbing it.

Victoria scolded, "Knock it off."

Felicia stepped into the kitchen.

Blake asked again, "Are you sure you want to take his offer? What happens if you don't?"

"I was honest with you guys," Ashleigh answered, "If I don't go I keep the Jeep and he wants me to move in with you and finish college. What happens if I take the job and I can't

help his employees?"

Victoria stepped up and answered her now upset daughter. "I've told you family is important. I'm not going to put a wedge between you and us. I feel this with all my heart."

Felicia grabbed the rope and stood in the kitchen.

"As an adult and you can go without our blessing. I'm assuming you're aware of how I feel about blessings?"

She answered Blake, "Of course."

Victoria was strong for her daughter; even though she wanted Ashleigh to choose a different course of action, "I want you to continue on your faith. I feel your back on track. Don't let it fall by the wayside again."

Ashleigh answered honestly, "I don't plan on it."

Victoria said, "Before we give you our blessing."

It hurt Felicia to hear her Mom say this.

"Like Dad told you earlier if you ever feel like you need to come home you better not get prideful and stay there being miserable. You understand me?"

Ashleigh answered in love, "Okay."

Blake instructed her, "If your going to work in an office and are representing your brothers company you should say yes."

She smiled at her dad.

"I..." was all Victoria could say and stepped over to Ashleigh, Ashleigh stood up and the two hugged. Ashleigh was frightened but it felt good to have her Mom hug her. She was still feeling undecided.

Ashleigh whispered with love in her voice, "I wouldn't move right away."

Felicia was feeling angry.

Victoria stopped crying and took Ashleigh's hand and led her into the living room. Felicia looked up at her dad. Blake shrugged his shoulders and the two followed Victoria and Ashleigh.

Victoria took Ashleigh to the stairs where the four sections of pictures were on the wall. At the top of the stairs was the first section; this was the history of family pictures taken every year around Christmas. At the top of these organized pictures was the last years picture, sick or not, Victoria insisted they take the picture. Below this picture were family portraits all the way up to a wedding picture of Blake and Victoria. (She used common sense and there were years left out, but the ones on the wall were all of Victoria's favorite family portraits.) After this section, each section was themed around one of her daughters. On top was a favorite child photo, beneath were pictures of memories Victoria held to her heart.

Victoria led her up the stairs and pointed at a second grade picture of herself.

Victoria asked, "Do you see yourself in that picture?"

"Yeah."

When this school picture was first put up on the wall it made Ashleigh feel special. It was the first time anyone hung a picture of her on a wall. As she grew older she felt differently about the photo. In recent years this picture made her feel uncomfortable. She could never pin point why this photo made her feel so odd.

"Do you see how scared that little girl looks? And how that little girl was being tore up by this world?"

Ashleigh suddenly knew why she disliked the photo.

"God gave me with you looking like that," Victoria pointed to a photo a few spots away "See that little girl?" Victoria pointed to a picture further down the wall, "See the smile in that one?"

"I was with Belle."

"You see the smile?"

Ashleigh shook her head yes.

Victoria pointed and said, "Look at the little girl there."

It was a picture of her playing with Felicia and they both were smiling.

Victoria made her way down the wall pointing and telling Ashleigh to look until Victoria reached the bottom picture and stated, "You see the wonderful woman there?"

In this picture were three very happy sisters. They received the greatest Christmas present. Their mom informed them her cancer was gone. In the center was Ashleigh with a huge smile, to Ashleigh's right was a smiling Patty, and to Ashleigh's left was Felicia's large smile. If one was to look closely their eyes were bloodshed from tears of joy and three months of stress.

"You know why I put this picture on your section of the wall?"

Ashleigh shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

"Without you." She wiped away a tear, "I wouldn't have three daughters to love."

Ashleigh started to tear.

Victoria grabbed Ashleigh's hand and led her up the stairs and stopped in front of her sections of photo's. Victoria directed her to stand a few stairs above herself. They were looking into one another eyes.

Felicia was tearing.

Blake was holding it in.

"I've been so blessed by you being here. You helped me heal? You understand me? God blessed me with three. Did you hear me? Three wonderful daughters. This includes you." Victoria pointed at Ashleigh. "If your Dad and I did our jobs well the two of you," she looked over at Felicia and again concentrated on Ashleigh, "You will move away and make families of your own. This doesn't mean its easy. So darn it." Victoria wiped away a tear and pointed at the door, "If it goes bad down there that front door is always open."

Ashleigh was speechless.

Victoria continued, "I had the chance to give you the smile you carry with you. The Devil didn't win. I had the privilege of God letting me take a scared little girl and helped her become a wonderful young woman."

Ashleigh felt like she was nine, "You think so?"

Victoria took off her scarf.

Her hair was coming back, but to everyone in the room loosing her hair was a big deal. Seeing the woman they loved look like she did was emotional for the people who loved her.

Victoria made Ashleigh focus, "Look at me."

Ashleigh's green eyes looked at her mom with surprise and emotion. "How many times did you visit me in the hospital? How many times did you clean the kitchen? How many times did you get my medication or drag me out with you to get it? How many times did you tell me not to give up? How many times did you take Felicia to where she needed to go when I physically could not? How many times did you tell Patty this wasn't her fault? How many times did you hug and support your little sister? How many times did you help your dad?"

Victoria pointed, "You; the scared little girl kept all of us going. While we kept you going as well. How can I not love you?"

Ashleigh not wanting to knock her mom off the stairs led her mom down the stairs. They grappled one another. Felicia was angry her Mom just gave her favorite sister permission to move, even still, she ran up to these women and embraced them.

Ashleigh felt two paws on her leg.

She looked down and Nikita sat wagging her tail.

Ashleigh and Felicia looked at all three dogs surrounding them and pet them.

Victoria nodded her head at Blake. Victoria could tell her husband was upset, later they would discuss all of this in more detail.

Victoria demanded, "We're having lasagna."

This was Ashleigh's favorite meal.

Victoria heard Ashleigh say again, "I'll help."

Felicia followed the two most influential women in her life into the kitchen. She stayed in the kitchen long enough to take the three dogs outside and to be told to go to her room and finish her homework.

After dinner Ashleigh took Felicia for a ride in her new Jeep.

Ashleigh opened the door to her apartment and Nikita went running into her new territory.

Ashleigh was met with the sound of her beeping answering machine. Ashleigh: turned on a light, she kicked off her shoes, set all of her other items on an old chair, and felt the relief of having the next day off of work.

"NO!"

Ashleigh quickly grabbed her puppy as Nikita was dragging one of her shoes across the floor.

"No Bite."

Holding the shoe she told Nikita, "I'll get your bone in a second."

Nikita looked at her and dropped the shoe. Nikita chased after the rope. This was the same rope she enjoyed at the territory called "mom's house." Nikita started to wrestle with the rope and when she became bored with the rope she started to explore this new territory.

Ashleigh was keeping a close eye on Nikita. Ashleigh was sure she would be okay, she went "potty" before she took her into the apartment. What made Ashleigh feel even more comfortable was all day when Nikita needed to go she alerted someone by sitting in front of a door. She easily did her business when the retrievers went.

Nikita ran for the door when Ashleigh opened it.

Ashleigh commanded, "Sit."

Ashleigh pushed her butt down.

She sat there. She watched as Ashleigh bent down and picked up a bag full of dog treats and dog food. She set this on her kitchen table. She went back and picked up more items. She did this trip a few times.

She reminded herself she needed to call someone to tow her old car away. She made a face. She would have to clean it out first.

Nikita could smell all the food and followed Ashleigh into a different part of the territory. Nikita was interested in this territory. There were a lot of food smells. Nikita's focus

was on the food in Best Friends hand, this was the same food she ate in the territory called "mom's house".

"Don't beg," Ashleigh said, "A lady should not beg. I'll feed you tomorrow you ate a lot today at Mom's house."

Ashleigh put the Tupperware bowl filled with lasagna into the refrigerator. Ashleigh almost stepped on Nikita; Ashleigh just smiled.

"Here."

Ashleigh tossed a bone onto the floor.

Nikita jumped and bite down on it. Nikita found it tasted good. She laid down on the floor and enjoyed the flavor.

After putting everything away she stepped into her bedroom. She changed into a two year old pink pinstriped tee and an old pair of jeans. She put her blond hair into a pony tail. Stepping out of her bedroom and into her kitchen she could still hear the beeping of her answering machine.

She spoke to Nikita who was on the kitchen floor, "You like the bone?"

Nikita looked up. She understood "bone." She liked the noises being made toward her so she: stood up, wagged her tail, and approached Best Friend.

Ashleigh bent down and pet her.

She stopped petting Nikita when she again noticed the beeping of her answering machine. She felt with her changing situation it was her responsibility to finally deal with the bill collectors and the electric company. Taking a glass of water with her she walked into the living room and sat down next to the answering machine. She set the water on the end table. She picked up the pen and paper from off the end table. She looked over at Nikita. She: was looking at her, her tail was a weapon, and in her mouth was the rope.

She took a deep breath and asked, "Nikita you want to pay these bills for me?"

Nikita sat down and cocked her head.

Ashleigh pet her friend.

Nikita dropped the rope.

Ashleigh lightly tossed it.

Nikita jumped on it.

Ashleigh again sighed and hit the message button. Just as she thought it was one bill collector after another. What shocked her was the bill collectors were informing her, her bills were being paid in full and they would remove the bill from her credit rating. The last messages were from the electric and gas companies stating her bill was paid in full.

She wanted to call Bob and thank him, but she knew he would wonder why she was bothering him, and might even get angry at the fact she said thank-you. She sat in the chair feeling the relief of all her bills being paid. The biggest relief was knowing her rent was paid in full until December. She wanted to pay her brother back but this attempt would have made her brother angry.

Nikita went running toward the door.

The doorbell startled Ashleigh.

Ashleigh walked up to the door and standing on her toes looked through the peep hole. In front of her door was an attractive blond woman in her early thirties, holding onto a child. Ashleigh recognized this women. This women was working on the white bankers boxes in the meeting room of her company. Ashleigh was grateful it was not the jock guy from across the

hallway. She liked the fact: he was in the reserves, he was attractive, he was very polite to her, he treated his last girlfriend well, he was single now; she was avoiding him as much as possible.

Ashleigh still yelled, "Who is it?"

"It's Haley your brother's secretary. I know we haven't met. We've talked on the phone off and on for the last six months." There was a pause, "Please forgive me for lying to you. Bob had his reasons."

"Just a second."

Ashleigh pushed Nikita's butt down and commanded, "Sit."

Nikita tried to sit there.

She smelled a female and two pups. This was exciting to Nikita.

Ashleigh heard a nervous voice through the door, "I'm truly your brother's secretary, he paid me extra to wait for you to come home. I know we never met."

Ashleigh set aside her anger and would give her a chance.

Haley started to say, "Look..."

Ashleigh opened the door, she blocked Nikita, pushed her butt down, and said, "Sit."

Nikita wanted to meet these people in front of the door. Nikita sat for a half a second, Ashleigh just picked her up.

"Let me introduce..."

"A puppy."

The boy pointed who was clinging to Haley's leg.

Ashleigh took Nikita and bent down, "Want to pet her?"

The little boy became real quiet and went behind his mom's legs. The little boy Haley was holding opened his eyes and studied Ashleigh.

Ashleigh stood up, it was obvious the little boy Haley was holding onto was tired.

"I don't have time for this Jack," she said to the oldest who was around six or seven years old.

Haley began, "I'm sorry. I'd talk more but I've had a very long day."

This was obvious to Ashleigh.

"We'll have time to talk later. I'm supposed to give you this envelope and make sure I watch you open it."

Ashleigh studied this woman.

Nikita could sense this woman was friendly. She could tell the pup next to the female wanted to pet her. Nikita sniffed the thing in her master's hand. Nikita smelled Favorite Male Human.

Ashleigh was about to open the envelope, but holding Nikita made this difficult.

Haley pushed up her sleeping son who was about four. She was frustrated on how long it was taking Ashleigh to open the envelope, "I will just tell you what's in the envelope. There is a bunch of gift cards in there. A grocery gift card. I hope you like *Bullseye* I didn't know what department store you liked. I was not sure which clothing stores you liked so there is one for *Hammer's*, *Dimes*, and *Boston Place*. I'm supposed to take you clothes shopping. I didn't know which gas station you liked so I split the money up into 25's. With the four different type of gas stations in this town. You can use it for food if you want."

Ashleigh looked at this woman and the unopened envelope and was about to give it back.

Haley reading Ashleigh's body language rolled her eyes, "Don't give it back to me. He'll just send me back to give it to you."

Ashleigh wondered what her story was. It was in her brothers nature to hire attractive women but there was more to the story with this woman. Ashleigh surmised this help had a lot to do with the two children hanging on this woman.

Ashleigh commented, "He's stubborn."

"Tell me about it."

she shifted her four year old.

"You want to come in?"

"No. I want to get the kids home. I love working for your brother but he just does weird things. I'm suppose to take you to find shoes you don't want to take off all the time. And to help you purchase some new clothes."

Haley recognized how difficult it must be for this short woman to shop for clothes.

Ashleigh commented, "I can't find shoes that fit. Woman's dress shoes are to big and girl sizes are to small. I hate shoes."

"Well I'm suppose to take you shopping some time this week. Which day do you want to go?"

"Thursday?"

Nikita was content but watching and sniffing everything.

Jack was watching the puppy.

Haley suggested, "How about Friday I can enjoy a three day weekend."

Ashleigh smiled, "Friday works."

"Normally I would be more polite, but I need to get these guys home. I'm glad you were home." She paused and said, "Oh; I almost forgot." Haley reached into her purse and took out a large yellow envelope. "Its the first chapter of his new book. He wants you to proof read it before Monday."

Ashleigh made a face but took the large envelope.

Nikita could smell this woman and Favorite Male Human on this item.

"Have you agreed to work for Bob yet."

"He's assuming. I'm pretty sure I'm going too. Nothing is official."

Haley smiled, "I can tell. You'll work for him?" Haley paused, "But you need to know for sure. I'm not going to tell him you will work for him until I know your ready."

Ashleigh knew her answer was going to change her life forever; along with the people she loved. Ashleigh said matter of fact, "I'll work for him."

Haley and Ashleigh gazed upon one another.

Haley pushed up her sleeping son.

Ashleigh broke the silence by asking, "How long should we leave him sweating?"

Haley smiled, "For having me drive all over. How about Thursday?"

"Sounds great."

Ashleigh liked how this lady thought.

Haley appreciated the huge smile. This smile helped her reconsider her feelings of what it would be like to work with Ashleigh.

"I assumed you'd take the job. He talks about you all the time."

This surprised Ashleigh.

Jack was wondering if he should pet Nikita or not. The puppy and this woman looked

friendly.

Ashleigh noticed his look and asked, "You want to pet her?"

His response was to move behind Haley's leg.

Ashleigh answering Haley, "I'll go shopping with you if you take the kids with us."

Haley looked at her, "Are you sure?"

Ashleigh spoke with a smile, "I'll buy them some clothes and take them to *Toys R Us*."

This ended Jack's shyness and he stepped out from his Mommy's leg and asked, "Are we going to *Toys R Us*?"

Ashleigh smiled, "You'd you like that?"

Jack responded, "Yeah."

"You two are a lot alike." Haley added, "Okay, but Lance here can be a handful," He opened his eyes at his name and closed them. Haley pushed him up and moved him over to the other side. He stayed sleeping.

Ashleigh asked, "Where was he?"

Haley made a face. "I promise I'll tell you some day. Just not tonight. I need to get these guys to bed. I'm being truthful when I say I wanted to tell you on the phone. He needed time away." Haley's countenance changed and added with heart, "He missed you."

They looked at one another.

"Don't tell him until Thursday night right before he leaves."

Haley smiled, "I'm going to like you. I'll call you tomorrow and we can set up the details for shopping."

"Fine."

Ashleigh answered with a smile.

Haley instructed, "Lets go."

Ashleigh listened as Jack asked, "Are we going to *Toys R Us*? I want to pet the doggy?"

"You had your chance with the doggy. We will pet the doggy on Friday."

Ashleigh an expert at listening heard, "Who is the lady?"

"She is the sister of Bob."

She heard two sets of feet move down the stairs, when they reached the bottom of the stairs Ashleigh heard, "Will Bob tell us stories about dragons?"

"Ask him the next time I take you to work."

Ashleigh heard the sound of cars then the big front door shut.

She looked at the manuscript, shut the door, stepped into her kitchen, and sat at her kitchen table. After spending time reading the new manuscript she put it on her bookshelf. She watched TV to find out what everyone was saying about her brother and the company he owned. After watching TV she took Nikita out and moved her Jeep in front of the tattoo parlor.

Ashleigh went back into her apartment. Watching Nikita she took off all her Jewelry and put them away exactly where they were suppose to go. She changed out of her clothes, put on a pair of joggers and her sleepshirt. She normally took a shower but she was way to tired. She took an old blanket, folded it, and set Nikita on it. Nikita watched Best Friend and tried to jump on the bed. Ashleigh for the next five times put Nikita back on her blanket.

Each time Ashleigh would say, "No my bed. Yes your bed."

She changed her voice to make Nikita's bed sound better.

Finally Nikita put her head down and watched Best Friend.

Ashleigh smiled.

Ashleigh set the alarm for 4:30 to take Nikita for a walk at around 5:00, it was Ashleigh's intention to take Nikita on walks every morning. She decided she would use the excuse of walking the dog to get up early. She slipped into her bed, she reached over and turned off her light. This was the first time in a long time Ashleigh slept without worries.

Nikita felt secure in Ashleigh's presence. She listened to all the sounds and smelled all the scents in and around this new territory until she fell asleep.

Nicole's eyes were closed as she was feeling his touch.

Their love making was intense at the beginning. His orgasm was to quick for Nicole. What she appreciated was he was spending the time to make sure she received one as well.

She squeezed her legs together, temporarily closing his hand, and as she felt the waves as he grabbed onto his arm.

When it was over he kissed her and told her, "I love you."

She smiled, "Your just telling me you love me because I let you take advantage of me."

Jimmy smiled and bent down and kissed her and whispered, "I have a wife who deserves good love making."

She reached up and kissed him. They started to passionately kiss one another.

All she did was smile and wink.

He smiled in return.

They started to passionately kiss. He reached down and started to touch his wife's already sensitive breasts.

They heard a knock on the door, "Momma."

Nicole gently pushed her husbands hand away and looked at the door, "What?"

"I'm scared."

Ester pleaded through the door.

Jimmy was already out of bed. He winked at his wife as he headed for the shower. Nicole still lusted after her husbands tall in shape body. She turned and focused on Ester.

"Why are you scared?"

"I was having a scary dream. Monsters were coming after me."

Nicole was up from her bed and was putting on her panties and her sleep clothes. She looked at her digital clock. She'd have preferred to make love to her husband again, based upon passed experience, she was grateful they finished. She even had the time to have an orgasm before the knock on the door. Nicole opened the door and walked her youngest back to her room.

An hour and a half later she stepped back into their bedroom.

Jimmy was asleep sitting up against the head board watching TV. A local TV announcer proclaime, "...we have news from a source the company *Renewed Mastery* is planning on moving to the southeastern part of Florida in..."

Nicole sighed and turned off the TV. The media always made these moves sound great. What usually happened: southern employee's were paid less than their northern counter parts, southern traditions were ignored, southern employees were belittled, politicians took credit, and the results never equaled the promises.

She was tired.

She carefully woke up her husband. When he just arrived from Afghanistan she might have just slept on the couch. He moved to his side of the bed.

She turned off the light.

Before she went to sleep she silently prayed. This is when she allowed herself to fall asleep.

End of Part Four of Four

Monday, April 10th, Ashleigh's Choice

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