

Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Monday
December 25

Christmas Surprise:
The Next Day

Day 9 of Book I
(One Day after Nicole's Annual
Christmas Eve Party)

Part One of Five

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

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

R. P. Voght

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December 24, Christmas Surprise Christmas Eve Day 8 of Book I

(One Day after Nicole's Annual Christmas Eve Party)

Nicole was listening to her husband's breathing. She was still wearing her red rose bud lace flared chemise. On the floor was: the Ms. Santa inspired robe, the thin belt, and the red g-string. She would never wear a g-string again; having fabric between her butt cheeks was way to annoying for her. She studied the digital alarm clock. There was a window of time before Ester would wake up and want to open presents. Even though she found initiating sex to be exciting she avoided it because it still made her feel uncomfortable. On this Christmas Morning she was so turned on she ignored her normal inhibitions. The way she planned on waking her husband would have been unthinkable after he returned from Iraq; even now she would be careful.

She: crawled out of bed, went around to his side, she aggressively nudged him, and stepped back.

He immediately sat up awake and alert, "What!?"

In a very soothing voice, "It's okay. It's me."

"Huh? What?"

She calmly whispered, "It's Nicole. Everything is okay."

She carefully approached him and gently touched his bare chest, "Everything is wonderful."

He asked concerned, "Did I have an episode?"

She was gently touching him and in a very soothing voice said, "No. Y'all haven't had a nightmare in a long time."

“Y’all alright?”

She removed the covers off of him, her hand went underneath his pajama bottoms, “We’re fine. I love you.”

He answered, “I love you too.”

She passionately kissed him, he returned the favor.

She slid his pajama bottoms and underwear off, she eased herself on top of him. Jimmy was surprised on how ready his wife was. Normally she needed foreplay to get this ready. He believed she looked hot in the lingerie outfit and loved touching her through the fabric. Without this outfit he would have been unprepared for her aggressive maneuver.

She glanced at the digital clock.

She felt she should risk it.

She suggested a position that was less intimate for her and was difficult for them to get into. If it worked she could get the relief she craved before Ester arrived at the door. An eager Jimmy was all for this position. She was about to remove her chemise, Jimmy asked for her to keep it on, she agreed. To get into position: they fumbled, they adjusted, they talked it through, she moved to a different spot, they readjusted once again; they were surprised on how quickly they found a rhythm. She added to the experience by reaching up and touching her button. It surprised them both on how quickly she reached her peek. Having compassion for her husband, the same compassion he showed her when he finished first; she made sure he reached his zenith. She: used tissues to clean her hands, went to the linen closet, grabbed an old towel, carefully removed the chemise, set it on the floor, used the towel to more effectively clean her hands and breasts, wrapped the chemise in the towel, carefully placed them into the hamper, quickly washed her hands, more effectively washed off her breasts, and crawled back into bed. She loved it when they cuddled.

She smiled when she heard, “I love you.”

Teasing, “Is it only because I make love to you?”

He poked her.

They laughed and joked with one another.

All at once she felt the need to become serious and say, “I love you too.”

He leaned in and kissed her. This kiss quickly became passionate. She felt Jimmy’s hands reach for her breasts. She was all for another round. The problem was they lost track of time.

The door handle started to turn.

They immediately stopped.

Nicole yelled, “Ester Y’all wait right there.”

She knew it was Ester because her two oldest children would have knocked on the door.

“Yes Ma’am.”

He whispered, “Every time?”

She whispered back, “It doesn’t happen every time.”

He questioned this.

There was a quick knock and the door handle was turned.

Jimmy yelled, “Y’all were told to wait.”

“Yes Sir.”

The door was quickly shut.

Nicole: rushed out of bed, quickly slipped on a robe she had draped over her chair, grabbed all of the pieces of her Ms. Santa outfit, tossed these things into the hamper (she would pull the belt out later), stepped into the attached bathroom, and again washed her hands.

Before she entered the bathroom she yelled, "What are Y'all wanting?"

Ester answered, "When are we opening presents?"

Nicole answered, "After your brother and sister wake up."

Ester in a voice of hurt and frustration answered, "I tried to wake em' but they yelled at me."

Nicole was stepping out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom. Jimmy walked passed her toward the bathroom. They winked at one another; he playfully tapped her on the rear end. She acted like this displeased her. They gave one another funny faces.

While this was happening Nicole answered, "I need to take a shower."

Ester pleaded, "I'm hungry,"

Nicole focused and answered in a serious tone, "Make a small bowl of cereal until I make everyone choose your own breakfast."

"Okay."

Nicole yelled with a directors voice only a Momma has, "Ester!"

"Yes Ma'am?"

"After eating wake your brother and sister."

In a voice of worry Ester asked, "They'll yell at me?"

Jimmy stepped back into the bedroom and commanded, "You tell em'. It's family time and they should get up. Per my orders."

Nicole smiled.

Ester replied with excitement. "Yes Sir."

Nicole and Jimmy heard Ester run down the hallway.

Nicole wrapped her arms around his neck and suggested, "We could take a shower together."

His eyes became wide, "Yes Ma'am."

She gave him a look and replied, "We only have time for a shower."

Jimmy joked, "Why are Y'all always teasing me?"

She smiled.

She answered, "Because Y'all like it."

He again tapped her on her rear end.

She made believe this was offensive to her and slipped into the bathroom. He playfully followed her. Once they were both into the bathroom: they briefly kissed, she padded him on the chest, they focused, they kissed again, they reluctantly separated, she grabbed what they needed for the shower, and he started the water.

Ester was excited as she entered the kitchen. Ester knew if her Daddy commanded her siblings to wake up they would. She wanted to believe, with her Daddy telling them they needed to wake up; they would be nicer this time. This mornings interactions with her siblings was an example of how her siblings unintentionally hurt Ester's feelings.

Ester opened a cabinet and looked over the boxes of cereal. Ester wished her Momma would buy the type of cereals Danielle's Mom purchased; Danielle was Ester's best friend. The closest thing to a sweetened cereal was an organic wheat cereal with dried blueberry chunks in it. She grabbed this box, set it on the kitchen table, grabbed a small bowl, set this on the kitchen table, grabbed a half gallon milk, prepared her cereal, put the milk and cereal box back, climbed onto one of the tall chairs in front of the counter, and turned on the small TV. Her Daddy placed the TV back after the guests had left. She was disappointed there were only three types of programs on this non-cable TV. Her choices were: news programs, the show Cops, and a nature program on the local PBS station. She choose to watch the documentary on lions. Ester cringed as the British narrator in a monotone voice describe why the male lion was killing the patriarchal female hyena.

*A*shleigh felt a dog nose and heard a snort.

She glanced at her Siberian Husky and went back to sleep.

Nikita went to the suite door and sat down. She was expecting to hear and sense Strong Scent. Nikita was confused when Strong Scent never showed up. She whimpered for a while. She went back to Best Friend.

Ashleigh again felt a dog nose and heard a snort.

Ashleigh looked at her Siberian Husky.

This time Nikita sat down and howled in protest.

Ashleigh went back to sleep.

Nikita whimpered and again howled.

Ashleigh opened her eyes.

Nikita went back to the suite door and sat down. She needed to make her markings. If she made her markings in the territory called Yacht the humans in the territory reprimanded her.

Ashleigh: moaned, climbed out of bed, mumbled incoherent things, aggressively shook her long blond hair, stumbled into her large closet, took off her Trace Adkins concert T-shirt, slipped off her polka dot pajama shorts, without putting on a bra slipped on a tight orange tank, stepped into a pair of plaid shorts, barely tied them, slipped on one red tennis shoe, and a blue one; she never bothered to wear socks. She found a well worn Milwaukee Brewer Baseball Cap, before putting on the hat, she managed a very sloppy pony tail.

Nikita followed Best Friend to the closet where her leash was.

Ashleigh opened the door to what they called Nikita's closet. She commanded Nikita to sit and put on her leash. Ashleigh managed to: grab a plastic shopping bag, grabbed the little shovel, stumbled out of the yacht, took Nikita to where Nikita did her business, struggled with the shovel, tossed the plastic bag into the dumpster, set the shovel near the dumpster, started to walk Nikita in front of the mansions, when she passed the first mansion a breeze came off of the ocean, it was then she realized she was without a bra, immediately turned around, grabbed the shovel, went back into the yacht, stepped to Nikita's close, managed to unhook Nikita's leash, the leash landed on the floor, the shovel landed on the floor, made a mental note she needed something better than the little shovel, left the closet door open, went back to her cabin, left suite door open, stepped back to her closet, kicked off her shoes, noticed she

had two different shoes on, tossed her cap onto the top shelf, stepped into her head, washed her hands, crawled back into bed, and went back to sleep.

This walk was odd to Nikita. When Strong Scent took her: they went a longer distance, she would command “let’s fly”, and they often played fetch. After taking a drink from her bowl she went back to her bed and laid down. She continued to wait for Strong Scent and was ready to protect Best Friend. Nikita heard Woman Friend leave the territory called Megan’s Houseboat.

Megan: was wearing a pair of red glittered booty shorts with a belt, slipped on a red silk button shirt, while buttoning the shirt her breasts reacted to the feeling of her fabric; once buttoned she used the fabric of the shirt to caress her nipples. It felt extra intense. She stopped teasing her nipples and stepped into the galley. She grabbed a pitcher of iced tea and started to drink out of it. She set the empty pitcher onto the counter. She turned and looked toward her kitchen table.

She became angry.

Bob was sitting at the kitchen table.

She scolded him, “You ain’t allowed in here.”

He gave her a creepy smile and said, “I like the jeans Y’all are wearing.”

She looked down. She was wearing a red colored pair of skinny jeans. She purchased this pair at the thrift store for the purpose of enjoying the fetish she was indulging in; what embarrassed her was the obvious camel toe.

She scolded, “You ain’t watching.”

In an odd voice he said, “I’m sure you’d enjoy me watching.”

“I ain’t ever letting you watch me. Only my husband will watch me.”

“But I’m your husband.”

“Y’all are a liar!”

She pointed and shouted, “Get out of my houseboat!”

“No.”

She: ran into the head of the houseboat, slammed the door, and locked it.

She yelled; “If Y’all don’t leave I’ll call my brother Duke.”

There was silence from the galley. She assumed he left. She promised herself she would change her locks and find out how he was able to get into her houseboat. She slid open the corner shower door and stepped into the shower. Standing there she began to drink water out of a very large plastic cup. She was feeling the pressure of her bladder.

The lights went out.

She yelled, “Bob Y’all better turn those lights back on!!”

The lights turned on. She was now on a circular stage. All around her were attractive men. They were from: the underground male strip club, the nude men she viewed on the internet, a couple of the guys she admired at the Y, a couple of the men from the Eastbank Police Department, and a couple guys who consistently ran on the beach. They started to cheer.

She was now wearing: tight blue denim jeans, a matching denim blue shirt, a blue jean jacket, and red over the knee boots.

She found her morality and yelled out her true desire, "I only want my husband to watch me. I ain't allowing Y'all to watch me."

With loud banter they demanded she pick one to marry her.

She yelled back, "I ain't marrying Y'all."

The ones naked yelled, "You seen our cocks."

"I'm sorry. I regret seeing Y'all naked."

The crowd started to jeer and boo just like she heard playing softball. She was now on a pitchers mound. She was wearing a very tight bright red uniform. When she looked at the plate Ashleigh was the batter, she was wearing a bright green and gold uniform, Nicole as the catcher was in a regular red softball uniform, and Diana as the umpire was in a jaguar patterned dress. In the first three rows of the wooden bleachers were her family and close friends. Behind them was everyone from town. To her horror they all came out to watch her.

Ashleigh yelled to her, "It's alright. Let it go."

"I can't."

Nicole took off her catchers mask and stood up, "Everyone knows."

The crowd started to laugh and point.

"How do Y'all know?"

Ashleigh answered, "Bob told us."

"He ain't allowed to tell Y'all about my fetishes."

They laughed.

Ashleigh yelled to her, "Just let it go."

Nicole added, "Y'all want to show us."

Diana in a seductive way yelled, "It's alright with me if Y'all are a little kinky."

Megan started to panic and wanted to run off the field but she was stuck in place.

Everyone started to chant, "Let it go."

She spotted Ma. She was standing on the sideline, holding her Bible, and was in a dress she often wore to church.

She was waving her finger, "Y'all should be ashamed of yourself."

To her horror she started to feel her bladder let loose. She heard cheers from the crowd as she started to cringe in pain...

Megan: quickly sat up, blinked her eyes open, felt how full her bladder was, rushed herself into the head of her houseboat, and properly did her business. Her heart was pounding in a combination of fear and arousal. This was a very disturbing combination.

She felt an urge to view pornographic material on the internet.

Instead she: stepped back to her room, sat on the edge of her bed, said a prayer, and took a deep calming breath. She stood up and decided to go on a run. She slipped on: a pair of panties she often used to run in, a pair of black Capri running tights, an athletic bra, a yellow athletic top, a pair of socks, a pair of New Balance running shoes, a digital sports watch, put her dark blond hair into a pony tail, slipped on a yellow baseball cap, put on a yellow light zipper jacket, and a pair of sunglasses. Before stepping out of her houseboat she strapped on a fanny pack: in it was an extra set of houseboat keys, a few dollars, and there was a place for a water bottle. She filled this bottle up with water. She wished the images and feelings of the dream would go away. As soon as she locked her houseboat and stepped onto the first pier she was running: she ran up the first pier, through the parking lot, went across the street, up the

short path, always watchful for snakes, turned onto the bike path, and headed south toward the pier.

She was attempting to run the memory of the dream away and the impulse to click onto the internet. She was tempted to: view naked men, to read personnel stories of other women with fetishes, and to get off multiple times. She was unable to convince herself viewing pornographic material as a woman was liberating; especially when she found it rude when men watched it. During her sexual research she fell into the trap of viewing pornographic websites designed for women and reading erotic stories. She was disappointed in herself for falling into this temptation. She was afraid she would start viewing video clips; up until now she was able to fight off this temptation. She was afraid if she got off one more time with the assistance of pornographic material it would be a life long battle. She read personal accounts of women addicted to porn. She thought of her college friend who admitted to having an addiction to porn. Megan reminded herself, of her own personal masturbation boundary, of never using pornographic material to get herself off. She was ready to forgo masturbating if she again used porn to get off.

She strongly believed a consequence of porn was causing people to focus on sex instead of a relationship. She now understood how a person, no matter if they were male or female, could become fascinated with certain traits of a person based upon the porn they enjoyed. She believed a person who viewed porn could miss out on a real human relationship because a real human might be devoid of an infatuated trait or traits. It was easy for her to believe this was happening to both men and women both consciously and subconsciously.

She felt viewing nude pictures of men was negatively affecting her. She felt she was getting a wrong expectation of how big her husband's cock should be. The porn she liked centered around muscular men with large cocks. She read the average size of a guy's erect penis was six to seven inches. The least thing Megan wanted was to be disappointed in her husband's cock or how he appeared nude. She was sensitive to this idea because she believed a husband would be disappointed in her small breasts; breasts she felt were hideous looking.

She purposefully avoided looking at any of the athletic men running on the beach. There seemed to be a lot of them on the beach today. The truth was, because she was turned on, she was noticing every guy on the beach.

She ran: passed the lighthouse, the walking pier, passed the sign everyone ignored, stepped onto the road, went up *Bluff Beach Parkway* in front of the mansions, passed the marina, and decided to run the loop again.

When she neared the pier for the second time she heard Nikita's howl. She glanced up and was disappointed to see Bob and Nikita. This was the first time she ever witnessed Bob at this public pier. She was upset at him for showing up in her dream. She would have dropped dead before sharing any of her fetishes with him; especially anything related to watersports. Her impulse was to run underneath the tall wooden pier. What stopped her was Nikita's carrying on as she approached the pier. Megan observed Nikita being held in check by Bob.

She was unable to ignore Nikita.

She: made a right, ran along the pier, stepped onto the pier's parking lot, stopped, did some minor stretches, adjusted her hat, and pulled her hair behind her ear. She reluctantly met them between the pier and the parking lot. She noticed he was dressed as if he was going to work. He was wearing: nice brown shoes, Dockers pants, a green button shirt, and a Christmas Tie with a print of a Christmas Tree on it.

Catching where his eyes went she zipped up her jacket. It was painfully obvious he noticed her erect nipples; nipples she often caught him glance at. This made her feel self conscience.

She purposefully greeted Nikita first.

Nikita adored the attention from Women Friend.

Bob waited for a few moments then stated, "Merry Christmas."

Megan looked up at him, "Merry Christmas."

Nikita was laying on her back, she was enjoying her friend pet her belly.

Bob commented on this, "She doesn't allow many people to rub her underside."

Megan stood up and set her sunglasses on top of her hat.

"She's a good dawg."

"Yes she is."

Nikita sat up and watched two of her favorite humans. She would occasionally turn her attention to the birds that hung around the pier, someone running on the beach, the tourists on the pier, a young couple at the edge of the pier; besides Megan they were the only locals on the pier.

Megan felt compelled to ask, "Is this your first time on this pier?"

"As a matter of fact it is. I needed to take a walk and felt this was a good destination."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She could feel something was bothering him. She believed this was connected to the phone call he received at her Sister-in-law's Christmas Party the night before.

She mentioned, "This is a good place to think and reflect."

"It appears as though you ran here."

Her dimples flashed.

She purposely mentioned, "Exercise is very positive."

"We have plans on putting in a gym for the employees and their families."

Her dimples flashed.

"I'm impressed."

"It was Ashleigh's idea."

"She has a lot of good ideas."

Megan found herself walking with Bob to the end of the pier.

"It's one of the reasons she's a vice president."

Megan gave him a very serious look.

She felt this was a good time to voice a concern, "She works hard for Y'all."

Bob pushed up his glasses, "It's one of many reasons she's a vice president."

"She seems to be working a lot of hours?"

"She's working against peoples scrutiny."

He pushed up his glasses.

"Scrutiny I am very displeased with."

"You ain't concerned Y'all are taking advantage of her?"

"I would never take advantage of my sister."

They reached the end of the pier, the young couple stepped away, birds were flying, and they were extra loud because of Nikita. Nikita watched them. She turned to the water and could sense something dangerous lurking in the water.

After taking a sip of her water Megan mentioned, "Make sure she doesn't jump."

It surprised Megan when Bob said, "Heal. Sit."

Nikita listened.

Megan looked over at Bob, "If Y'all believed she'd receive so much scrutiny why did Y'all promote her?"

"She's one of my best employees."

Bob pushed up his glasses.

"I have demanded she avoid working so many hours. Because of her stubborn streak she's ignoring my wishes."

Megan believed stubbornness was a family trait.

Megan acknowledged, "I'm sure the scrutiny is driving her."

"She can handle it."

Her dimples flashed.

"Hasn't it occurred to Y'all she's working so many hours because she's stressing out?"

"Not at all."

"I feel she is."

"If I thought she was I would remove her as vice president."

This caught Megan off guard, based upon his body language and tone; he meant it.

"She knows I can't stand overtime. It's expensive and it's a sign of inefficiency."

Her dimples flashed.

Megan pointed out, "She's a salaried employee."

Bob pushed up his glasses and answered seriously, "I only keep a small amount of salaried employees. They are well taken care of. Of the small percentage of salaried employees there are only a handful of these employees I trust working more than forty-five hours a week. One of them is my sister. I'm sure she's finding ways to work more hours. This is unacceptable to me. But I won't stop her."

"Why?"

"It helps her confidence."

This was a surprising answer.

Bob answered Megan's facial expression, "It's my belief the only person who should ever work more than fifty hours a week is an owner or CO."

Megan could tell this was something he never intended to let slip out.

With this Bob turned, leaned on one of the railings, and looked toward the marina. In between was the abandoned lighthouse.

During the silence she was trying to find a way to discuss in more detail the ridicule Ashleigh was receiving.

Bob broke the silence by stating, "Julie mentioned people would like the lighthouse restored."

This was a subject Megan was very passionate about, this was why she was willing to forgo her discussion about Ashleigh.

Nikita became excited by the word "lighthouse." This is where Strong Scent stopped and they played fetch. She stood up. She sniffed and looked for Strong Scent.

Bob commanded, "Heal."

Nikita reluctantly obeyed.

Megan leaned on the railing, looked toward the lighthouse and commented, "It was the first lighthouse in Eastbank. I remember when it was operational. It's a shame it ain't working. People are fighting to make it a historical land marker."

"Sounds like a good idea. Why hasn't it happened?"

Megan rolled her eyes.

"The Town Council wants tourists to visit the new one on the south side of town."

"Why can't tourists visit both?"

"You ain't the first to point this out. We've all mentioned this to the Town Council numerous times."

"Julie mentioned they might remove it."

"They've bounced around the idea. They locked the door to the top on account people were finding their way in there."

"For what?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

She blushed.

She found herself saying; "People were caught being intimate."

Bob mentioned, "That's understandable."

Megan found herself asking, "Why?"

"It would be a very romantic place to make love in."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Using an aggressive tone, "You ain't implying we'all should have sex in there?"

"I'm not interested in just having sex with you."

She glanced at him and made a face, "I ain't having sex with Y'all."

"I'd like to make love to you."

Her: teeth clinched, stood straight up, brushed her hair behind her ear, and glared at him. She imagined throwing him over the railing and watching him splash into the ocean. She recognized this could hurt and there was a possibility the bull shark was close by. She then thought of five ways of dropping him onto the pier. One of these would have been somewhat gentle, but the other four would have been painful.

She voiced her warning, "Y'all should apologize."

He pushed up his glasses.

He stated, "One of the reasons I'd like to date you is because you are a woman of integrity. How about if we start with a lunch at Lucy's? I understand this is where everyone in town has their first date. When we find out we're meant for one another we'll get married. Imagine us holding hands on a moonlight night and we'd break into the lighthouse and make love. I believe it would be wonderful. Can't you imagine it?"

She chose to answer him by stepping into his space and waving a finger at him, "I ain't falling for this smooth talk of yours. I'm waiting to make love to my husband on our wedding night. You ain't it."

She glanced over at Nikita. Megan knew if she approached Ashleigh this way Nikita would growl. Instead Nikita was standing there, wagging her tail, and looked ready to play.

Nikita believed Women Friend and Favorite Male were ready to mate.

Megan put on her sunglasses and said, "I'll finish my run."

Bob ignored this statement, "When are we going to have lunch at Lucy's?"

This stopped her from running away, she answered, "We ain't ever dating. We're just friends. I'm friends with Y'all on account Ashleigh is my best friend."

"Maybe it's our destiny to be together?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

She stated; "I doubt it highly."

"How about..."

She interrupted him, "How about if I say goodbye to Nikita and finish my run."

"I'm a gentleman so I'll avoid telling you what to do."

She avoided the sarcastic comment and focused her attention on saying goodbye to Nikita.

She found herself giving Bob advice, "Maybe if Y'all weren't so sarcastic a gal would find Y'all appealing."

"Maybe."

She was about to reply but felt something was really bothering him.

Her desire was to make this discussion positive, "I'm sure one day Y'all find the right gal. But I ain't for Y'all."

Bob pushed up his glasses.

"If you ever change your mind you know where I live."

Her dimples flashed.

She replied with, "Merry Christmas."

She was about to turn around and run, but Bob mentioned, "I'm grateful your family invited Ashleigh over."

This caused Megan to stop and again set her sunglasses on her hat.

She replied, "Everyone believes Ashleigh is a great gal."

"I'm sure of that."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I ain't telling Y'all how you should treat your sister but..."

She trailed off.

"What?"

Megan chose to say, "We're delighted to have her."

There was an awkward silence.

Megan sternly said, "We're just friends."

Megan: quickly turned, put her sunglasses on, and ran down the pier. She glanced back and witnessed Bob staring at her rear end. While running she pulled her jacket down over her butt. When she ran off the pier and headed back to the marina she heard Nikita howl.

She felt an affection to Nikita and wondered what was bothering Bob.

She focused on her run. By the time she reached her houseboat she no longer had the urge to view pornography or read a sexy story. She still felt the urge to relieve her sexual tension. She: unlocked her houseboat door, stepped in, glanced at her watch, estimated the time it would take to get herself off, considered how long her chores would take, and how much time it would take to get ready. She reasoned it would be irresponsible of her to get herself off; instead she would work off her sexual urges.

Her dimples flashed.

She turned to the sound of her work cell phone ringing.

Julie: was sitting in front of her computer desk, her left leg was hanging over the arm of her computer chair, her sleepshirt was pulled over her breasts, on the screen was a video of a college aged guy enjoying himself, it was a turn on whenever a guy sent a homemade video of themselves, it was disappointing when he finished so quickly, she clicked this video off, labeled the download to show her disappointment, looked over her downloaded clips, clicked on a video sent to her by a married couple, because she viewed this clip before she was able to pace herself until the wife caused her husband to reach his peek; she wished younger men would last as long as older ones.

She contemplated another round but knew she was running out of time. She: clicked off the download, clicked out of the folder these clips were stored in, stood up, slipped her night shirt down, opened the top drawer of her nightstand, pulled out some strong smelling disinfected hand soap, made sure to really rub her hands, smelled her hands, again used more soap, smelled her hands again, put the soap back into the drawer, and used a small hand towel to dry her hands.

Julie stepped over to her bedroom door and opened it. The TV was on in the kitchen. She made sure she was quiet when she shut the door. The least thing she wanted was for Ester to hear her. She suspected Ester would again ask her to open gifts. Julie felt guilty for yelling at Ester but she was about to enter when Julie first opened her laptop; a laptop no one knew she owned. Before opening presents she needed to accomplish some tasks.

She: went back to her desk, opened the right bottom drawer, lifted up a bunch of books, set them on the floor by the desk, at the bottom were two large accounting books, set these on the desk, grabbed a small lock box, set this on the desk, grabbed a pencil out of a pink colored plastic pencil box, sat down in her computer chair, clicked out of a bunch of websites, but left open two stock websites. Looking at the stock reports she wrote down some numbers in one of the accounting books. She opened up the lock box. She took out a dozen fake ID's. Rubber banded to each fake ID was a series of bank business cards and a receipt card. She opened a variety of online bank accounts and credit union bank accounts; she knew which ones to open based upon the receipt cards. She accomplished her online banking and sending out a series of emails; she again wrote information in her accounting books. When she was done with this she carefully put everything away making sure these things were well hidden in the bottom of the drawer. During the week she was determined to implement a plan where she could easily cross reference everything but would confuse everyone else.

She went to her closet and opened a blue trunk. Underneath the top shelf of this trunk were gold bars and jewelry. This jewelry was stored in plastic craft bins and fish tackle bins. She opened one of the fish tackle bins and pulled out a diamond cross necklace. She would wrap this for her Momma. Another goal during her brake was to cut a hole in the floor of her closet and move all of this jewelry under the floor. She had a different plan for the gold bars. She put the top back on and shut the trunk. She grabbed the clothes she was intending on wearing for the day. She decided to take a shower before wrapping her present for her Momma. All of the other gifts for her family were already under the tree.

She purposefully made noise when stepping out of her room. As predicted Ester ran to the bottom of the stairs.

Ester yelled up to her big sister; "Daddy said we should open presents."

Julie went to the top of the stairs still holding the clothes she wanted to wear.

"I need to take a shower."

Ester made a face, trying to ask as politely as possible: "Do you have bad body odor?"

"Yes."

Julie caught the smirk on Ester's face.

Ester trying to be an adult said, "Y'all should hurry."

Julie smiled, "I'll meet Y'all downstairs."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

Ester became excited, "I'll wake up Jeff."

Julie reminded Ester, "Knock first."

"Okay."

Julie: turned, stepped to the end of the hallway, opened the door to the linen closet, took out towels, stepped into the bathroom, and started the water. She wondered how Nikita's walk went. She again shrugged off her disappointment Ashleigh and Megan were straight. Observing her family dealing with Megan being a lesbian seemed interesting to Julie. Just as fun was Rebecca, for the first time, bringing her life partner over. Julie volunteered to write the invitation to her cousin, but Nicole insisted she would do so.

Julie wondered why her Momma still sent out paper invitations for both the Christmas Eve party and the Christmas Day party.

She: turned on the water, removed her sleepshirt, checked the water, adjusted it, checked it again, stepped into the shower, and washed herself. To relieve some stress and because she was nude she again brought herself to an orgasm. After she: dried herself, dressed, went back to her room, told an impatient Ester she would be right down, wrapped her Momma's present, and went downstairs to open presents with her waiting family.

*A*shleigh was laying in her bed.

She stared at Nikita's empty bed. It was nice to have one day away from her dog. If Bob was taking her for any longer than a day Ashleigh would have missed her constant companion.

She was debating if she should take a bath or a shower. It felt like an eternity since she indulged in a steamy bubble bath.

She cringed.

She knew she needed to shave her legs and needed to trim her pubic area. She hated shaving her pubic area but she needed to trim the area because of her two piece swimsuit. Because she needed to shave she chose to take a bath. This caused her to get out of bed and walk over to the head attached to her suite.

She suddenly realized she was wearing one of the tightest tops she owned and lilac colored plaid shorts. What was more horrifying than the color scheme; was being out in public without a bra in a top she used primarily to layer. If anyone spotted her they would have known exactly the size and shape of her breasts. With Ashleigh being five foot one her breasts appeared larger than they were; on an average sized woman they would have appeared smaller. She liked: how even they were, how round they were, her tiny nipples, and how she could easily conceal or enhance them. However; she never allowed the whole world to know exactly their size and shape through a shirt she wore. She hoped no one took a picture of her.

The idea of someone posting embarrassing pictures of her on the internet was horrible. She was relieved to have no memory of passing anyone. Even so, she promised herself she would always leave the yacht wearing a bra; the exception being if she was wearing a swimsuit.

She reminded herself of a saying of Bob's, *"You can't change yesterday, you can only change today to make tomorrow better."*

She appreciated this saying a great deal.

Once in the head she: turned on the water of the bathtub, sat on the edge of her bathtub, and adjusted the temperature of the water. She reminded herself the water system on the yacht was very different from many of the houseboats in the marina. She was unsure of how the yachts system worked but the yacht's system was far more reliable than the other vessels in the marina. They always had water. She was aware Bob was having technicians come in and inspect the yachts water system. She was excited and nervous about the technicians taking the yacht out, she would have felt better if Megan was on the yacht during this inspection; Megan had a scheduled charter on that day

Ashleigh went over the idea of taking her family to Key West on the yacht. She believed Captain and Megan would be the best captains for the trip. A side motive was to force Bob and Megan to be together. There were two concerns with this plan: Bob getting along with her family and the possibility Megan and Bob would argue the whole time. She wanted to believe everyone would get along. Ashleigh was excited about a trip with the yacht and yet she worried the vessel would sink; it was odd to imagine a place where she lived could sink.

While she was thinking about vacation she was going through her: bubble baths, soaps, shampoos, and conditioners. She decided on a scent and doused her bath with bubble bath. It was easy to tell which ones Julie liked. She turned and went into her closet and went through her overstock. A perk of being a Vice President was receiving free items delivered to the company. Whenever she ordered something online or through a catalog she would address it as Vice President Ashleigh Waller and have it sent to the company. Without fail she'd begin to receive free samples. She loved receiving beauty products. This benefited the ladies through out the company. Anything Ashleigh disliked a product or had an abundance of a product she would give it away. Looking through these cases she found the brand Julie liked and would give her a complete combination of soaps offered by this brand. She would wait a week to give her these because of the basket of soaps she gave Julie for Christmas. Ashleigh wondered if the strong body odor she sometimes had was a medical condition; if she did she would find someone who could help her.

Ashleigh placed these items on her bed.

She: stepped back into the head, turned off the water, breathed in the scent of the bubble bath, removed her clothes, gently checked the temperature of the water, slid her five foot one frame into the bathtub; this was a touch of heaven for her. The yacht was quiet, she was laying in hot bubble bath, and had time to enjoy it. She loved how big her tub was. She: closed her eyes, dunked her head under the water, rose up out of the water, sat there for a few minutes, calmly, and slowly washed herself. This turned into a private moment. She took her time enjoying every moment. At the end let loose without the worry of her dog bothering her or her brother hearing her. When she was done she rested herself in the warm water.

Laying there she noticed water spots in an odd place. She believed these water spots were caused by Julie using the water spigot to get herself off. Ashleigh also believed Julie placed herself under the faucet. Ashleigh heard the sound of the tub water and Julie's

verbalization. Ashleigh briefly debated if she would have experimented in a tub like this when she was Julie's age. Ashleigh decided it would be hypocritical for her to criticize Julie. She promised herself if Julie ever ran late or if her behavior became inappropriate she would talk to her.

Relaxing in the tub she reviewed her brother's behavior at the Christmas Party. She was grateful he arrived. She felt he acted great until he received the phone call. She believed this phone call was from a girlfriend. She assumed if he was dating someone she disliked he would hide this from her. She immediately thought of Madison. Haley told Ashleigh, Madison came from a wealthy family and had a couple different love interests. She treated Madison professionally and they had a good working relationship. This is what was their relationship ended. She made a face and shivered with the horrifying idea of her brother dating this woman.

She stood up, stepped out of the tub, and grabbed a towel from a wire rack attached to the wall; she received the idea for this rack from a hotel suite she stayed in. She wrapped the towel around her body, tied the towel, reached into the tub, unplugged it, wrung out her long natural blond hair into the tub, and started to really consider her brother's behavior. When the water reached a certain level: she plugged the tub again, she grabbed her shaver and shaving cream from one of her cabinets, set these items on the edge of the tub, combed her hair, unwrapped the towel, placed it into a hamper, tested the water, added some hot water, when she felt the water was warm again she set herself into the tub; once in the tub she began the process of shaving her legs and private area.

While shaving her right leg she connected Bob's behavior to when Bob came back from his trip to Mammoth Caves. She made the assumption Bob spoke to Shelly.

She heard the phone ring. Ashleigh let her phone take it. She assumed it was her Sister Felicia. Felicia sent Ashleigh a message on Facebook complaining about her parents. Ashleigh could see the potential in Facebook. It was gaining popularity with college students and high school students. The least thing Ashleigh wanted was to disturb her peace with a discussion about Felicia's boyfriend.

She again focused on Bob and Shelly. She believed there were three reasons they were no longer dating: Shelly hated Florida, Shelly was avoiding a relationship, and Bob would never move back to Wisconsin. Ashleigh knew Bob kept the house he grew up in and paid to keep it maintained. Ashleigh felt if Bob would have wanted to have a relationship with Shelly he would have stayed living there and never moved to Florida. Ashleigh felt her brother was keeping the house for when she felt it was time to move back to Wisconsin; Ashleigh pictured herself as a snow bird. In the meantime he was considering turning it into a bed and breakfast.

As she was shaving her left leg she was considering a list of reasons why Shelly would call her brother. The obvious one; was she was using again and was asking for money. If this was the case, her brother would have sent her money one last time, and would never speak to her again. Ashleigh wanted to believe Shelly was still clean and sober. Ashleigh felt if Shelly was using again she would have avoided contacting her brother. This caused Ashleigh to review the last conversation she had with Shelly.

Ashleigh bumped into Shelly while shopping at a deli in an upscale Wisconsin grocery store. This was the first time she ever spotted Shelly's natural red hair. Ashleigh recalled how delighted they both were when Shelly took her lunch break and they talked in a cafeteria area

of the store. Ashleigh recalled how Shelly apologized for being high. Ashleigh accepted her apology and encouraged Shelly to remain clean and sober. Ashleigh recalled Shelly asking her a series of questions on how Bob treated her throughout Ashleigh's life. She first reviewed every question individually and then she took them as a group. The questions Shelly asked were the type of questions a mother would ask. She quickly did some math. It was possible she could have had a baby between the trip to Mammoth Caves and the time Ashleigh bumped into her at the store.

She shouted, "YOU DUMMIES."

She then yelled, "SHIT."

Blood was now coming off her leg.

She: set the shaver on the tub, stepped out of the tub, sat on her covered toilet, grabbed some toilet paper, and was trying to stop the bleeding.

She was angry.

After a few minutes Ashleigh was able to stop the bleeding.

She set her anger aside to accomplish the task of finishing shaving her leg and trimming her pubic region. She hated shaving this region of her body. A benefit of being single and avoiding any sexual activity was the lack of incentive to completely shave the area. She trimmed enough to look good in her two piece. Once she accomplished these tasks she: used the shower spigot to rinse her lower body, pulled the plug, stepped out of the tub, wrapped herself in another towel, used the spigot to rinse the tub, hung the spigot back up, completely dried herself, stepped into her walk in closet, grabbed a clean pair of panties, slipped them on, and began the task of deciding on what she was going to wear.

This is when being an Aunt hit her. The first emotion she felt was an excitement at being an aunt and then she wondered if they had a boy or a girl.

She became angry at her brother. She was furious he would keep the knowledge of being a father away from her. Then she became disappointed and hurt with the idea her brother was shrugging off his responsibilities. If this was true she would resign and move back to Wisconsin. While crying she started to think it through. She gained her composure. Knowing her brother, she believed the least thing he would do was ignore one of his own children. This is when she considered the possibility the first time he was told was during the phone call the night before; this made more sense to Ashleigh.

She directed her anger toward Shelly. She started to go over a list of questions. *Was she using again? Was it a boy or a girl? How old was the child? What was Shelly's financial situation? Was she going to use her brother? Was she going to take him to court? Why did Shelly keep it away from Bob? What was her motive for calling him now? Would she send her brother into a tailspin again? Why didn't Shelly ever tell her? Would she use a child to extort money from her brother? Was she going to try and keep this child away from them? Would she be able to see her niece or nephew? Would she go to the media?* With each question Ashleigh began to shake.

It was difficult for her to stop asking herself these endless questions.

She thought of what her brother always told her, "*Consider the big picture then attack it one thing at a time.*" There were times when she absolutely hated this saying and then there were times when she found it reassuring. She recognized she needed to confirm her belief. Before doing this she needed to get dressed and collect everything she needed to take to Megan's parents house. She would confront her brother and/or directly call Shelly. She was

unsure of which one she would accomplish first, this would depend on how she felt and if she left before Bob showed up. After loading the Jeep she would call her family in Wisconsin.

She slipped on a robe, sat on the edge of her bed, grabbed some Kleenex, and finished her cry. When she was done crying she sat there holding her Kleenex. She was taking in the feeling of being an aunt. A few minutes into this process she heard a knock on the door. She had been so upset she never heard her brother step into the yacht.

Nikita howled.

She yelled, "No howl."

Bob stated, "I'm a father."

Ashleigh sighed and rolled her eyes. She wished her brother was tactful with personal things. This greatly annoyed her because he was tactful at work or with the media.

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy. She named him Robert but calls him Little Bobby. The rest of her family calls him Robert."

This disturbed her.

Ashleigh being sarcastic stated, "If he lived here they'd call him Junior."

Bob answered in a serious voice, "We will not be calling a son of mine Junior."

She smiled.

Then in a serious tone asked, "Would Bobby work?"

"That sounds appropriate."

Ashleigh tossed out her Kleenex and waited.

"I was unaware I was a father until yesterday."

She perked up.

It was obvious he was becoming emotional.

He shut it down.

He stated, "I could use your help."

This shocked Ashleigh to the core. It took her Brother to be a father to bluntly ask for help.

She cut off her tears and stated matter of fact, "Of course I'll help."

Silence.

She heard Nikita make some noises.

Ashleigh shouted, "Go lay down."

She heard Nikita's chain jangle and recognized she laid down in front of the suite door. Ashleigh wanted her to go to her spot in the galley; Ashleigh let it go.

"I was thinking I should ask her to marry me."

Ashleigh stood up, ran to the door, stopped herself from opening it, but yelled, "Don't do that!"

Silence.

Ashleigh broke the silence, "It's noble. I'd wait to see if the two of you could have a.."

She trailed off.

"Have what?"

She used a term Megan used, "A positive relationship. I don't think she's ready or wants you to have that type of relationship with you."

"Makes sense."

"Is she taking you to court?"

"I was of the belief I should. I want all of this in writing."

Ashleigh shook her head and reluctantly believed this was a good idea.

"Let me get dressed and we could talk about it."

"I need to get going. I'd like to take Nikita with me."

"You said you were going to watch her for me. Just don't leave her in the car. It gets hot."

"Alright."

By his alright she could tell he changed a plan.

Bob added, "I hope you have a good time at Megan's parents."

"I will. I'm sure they wouldn't mind you over."

"I want to finish watching *Band of Brothers*."

"Okay."

Before Ashleigh could say anything she heard Bob say, "Want to go for a ride?"

Ashleigh heard Nikita get up and run for the door.

She felt a great deal of sister love toward her brother. She was proud of her brother for fulfilling his duties as a father; knowing her brother she believed he would take this seriously. With her brother requesting help she felt as though she was the patriarchal female of their little family. This idea gave her more confidence than being a vice president in his company.

She focused on what she needed to accomplish. She decided: she would call her Foster Mother and see if she knew Shelly's number, imagined how this conversation would go, talk to Felicia, a conversation she knew she would need patience for, would organize everything she needed to take to Megan's parents, would head over to Megan's parents house, and once home she would call Shelly. At the moment she needed to figure out what she was going to wear.

She went back to her walk in closet. She pulled out the first dress. She looked at it and made a face. She put it back. She pulled out a second dress; she hung it on the closet door hook. She was about to pull out a third dress when her phone rang. Still in her robe she stepped into her suite, grabbed her phone, looked at the small screen, didn't recognize the number; all she knew it was from Wisconsin. She assumed it was Felicia using the cell phone she received for Christmas. She took the call.

She heard, "Ashleigh."

She sat on the edge of the bed.

"Shelly."

Ashleigh could tell Shelly was nervous.

To avoid yelling at Shelly, Ashleigh closed her eyes, clinched her jaws, but managed a, "Yes."

Shelly answered, "I'd understand if you're angry."

"That's good."

Shelly felt horrible but continued, "I'm assuming Bobby told you?"

"He just did."

Ashleigh heard an emotional Shelly on the other line. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. I should have. I was so upset at the time. I was confused on what to do."

She paused.

There was an awkward minute of silence.

Shelly broke into it, "I should have done the right thing and told both of you right away. I couldn't keep it a secret anymore. I'd understand if you'd hate me. But please forgive me. He's such a good boy. He'd love to have an aunt."

Ashleigh held the phone, tried to grab a Kleenex but was out; she stood up and went into her walk in closet.

Ashleigh said, "I forgive you."

This meant everything to Shelly.

She became excited, "He's a very good boy. I call him Little Bobby but the family calls him Robert."

Ashleigh grabbed a new box of Kleenex; she was grateful some company sent her a free case.

"That's nice."

Shelly said with all of her heart, "I want you to see him."

"I'd like that."

Silence.

This was rare for the two of them.

Ashleigh: took herself and the box of Kleenex back to her bed, opened the new box, tossed the old one into the trash bin next to her bed, and grabbed a new one.

Shelly imagined a long in depth talk. Instead she felt it would be wise to keep the conversation short. Shelly understood.

"Bobby and I have a lot to work out."

Ashleigh became serious, "Yes you do."

Shelly answered, "I plan on staying clean and sober."

"I'm glad."

"My life is on track. Little Bobby is safe and..."

Ashleigh heard Shelly start crying, she stopped and asked again, "Do you forgive me?"

Ashleigh hated to put on the spot for the second time but again answered, "Yes."

The word and her heart were not exactly meshed together but Ashleigh would make sure it would. Ashleigh heard Shelly collect herself. Ashleigh was too serious to show any emotion or use the Kleenex.

Shelly broke the silence by saying, "I guess I need to get going."

Ashleigh said, "I have to too."

Shelly asked, "We still sisters?"

Ashleigh closed her eyes, in her mind she pictured the two of them together, the many conversations they had, it was impossible to shut down how she felt about Shelly.

From her heart Ashleigh answered, "Of course."

Ashleigh heard Shelly become emotional.

Shelly said, "I have to go."

"Okay."

Shelly hung up.

This is when Ashleigh allowed herself to cry again. Ashleigh: grabbed a few Kleenex from off the bed, tossed them in the garbage, looked into the garbage bin, and smashed all of the Kleenex flat.

She made a face.

She placed the new box of Kleenex on her nightstand.

She was an Aunt to a boy Shelly called Little Bobby but her family called him Robert. Ashleigh wondered if this confused her nephew. She did the math and guessed he was between a year and half and two years old. She would buy him a Christmas present and make sure Bob gave it to him. She was sure her Brother would see his son soon.

She pulled herself together and stepped into her walk in closet. She selected three more country style dresses and started to rummage through her cowgirl boots.

This is when she received another call. She reluctantly took the call from her sister Felicia. While trying on dresses and different boots they discussed: Felicia's frustration with their parents, she told Ashleigh on how dreamy her boyfriend was, and how her friends were turning against her. Felicia believed her friends were jealous she had a boyfriend; Ashleigh believed her friends disliked the guy. After they discussed general things, Ashleigh gave Felicia tips on how to encourage their mother to come down for vacation. This led to discussing what Felicia wanted to see in Florida. Ashleigh suggested things Blake would want to see. Ashleigh swore Felicia to secrecy. Felicia promised she would keep a secret. Ashleigh told Felicia she was an Aunt; immediately Felicia announced to their mother Ashleigh was an aunt. This ended the conversation with Felicia. Victoria instructed Felicia to turn off her cell phone. Even before Felicia turned off the phone Victoria called Ashleigh on their land line phone. Just before Felicia ended the call, they acknowledged how they missed one another.

Ashleigh took the call from Victoria. They talked about: in great detail Bob being a Father, Victoria acknowledged she knew Shelly had a baby but only speculated it was Bob's, neither Shelly nor Holly would say who was the father, Ashleigh appreciated the advice Victoria gave her, discussed Felicia's boyfriend, about the growth of Patty and her husbands church, Blake finally accepting a promotion at work, Victoria explained with Felicia getting older he would have time to devote his full attention to his new position, Victoria informed Ashleigh about a women in her church group who passed away, this upset Ashleigh because she had known this lady for as long as she could remember, they talked about Blake meeting some Vietnam war buddies, Victoria asked about Ashleigh being a vice president, Ashleigh could hear how proud Victoria was, Ashleigh again promoted the idea of coming down in Easter, Victoria balked at this but there were some signs of hope, and they acknowledged the love they felt for one another.

On a rare occasion Blake wanted to talk on the phone. The majority of the conversation was about Ashleigh's promotion and how things were going as a vice president. Ashleigh was deeply grateful for her Foster Dad's advice on how to handle situations at work. What Ashleigh appreciated most was advice on how to handle the scrutiny she was receiving because she was so young. Then they talked about: his HO train layout, he asked if she received the model engine he sent her, she reassured him it arrived on time and in great shape, they acknowledged they missed one another, Ashleigh could tell he restrained himself from being emotional. To help out her foster Dad she mentioned a couple of places he would be interested in visiting. It was obvious by her Dad's response he was all for a vacation in Florida, but could also tell they would have to convince Victoria to come down. He said his good byes and hung up.

Ashleigh pictured Victoria rolling her eyes and telling him there were more things she wanted to talk about. She then pictured Blake reminding Victoria on how their daughter needed to get going. Ashleigh pictured Victoria acknowledging this truth and then the two would move on.

Because of Captain and the volunteer work Megan's family was involved in she was interested in her Foster Dad's experiences during the Vietnam War. It was the one subject her Foster Dad never talked about. She understood why.

During these conversations she was able to: get dressed, put on makeup, set her hair, collect everything she was taking, set everything in front of the first deck door, take the Jeep out of the garage, park it as close as she could to the first pier, grabbed one of the four wheeled carts, set it in front of the wooden pier of the yacht, loaded this cart, and as she finished talking to her Foster Dad she locked up the yacht.

She was running late.

As quickly as possible: stepped to the cart, pushed it to her Jeep, Florence and Frank helped her load the Jeep, Florence and Ashleigh spoke for a while, Frank encouraged Florence to leave, Ashleigh locked the cart, and headed back to the Jeep.

This is when Ashleigh spotted a woman step out of Gina's houseboat; Gina was right behind. Ashleigh was surprised on how feminine this new girlfriend looked. Usually Gina dated more butch type of lesbians. Ashleigh knowing Gina, knew she needed to rush to the Jeep, otherwise she would be caught in a long conversation. She felt guilty for this but it was something she needed to do. For one of the few times she was grateful she was without Nikita. She wondered where her Brother took her. She climbed into her Jeep before Gina and her new girlfriend reached her. Ashleigh was grateful for Megan's map and Jake's verbal instructions on how to get to Megan's parents house. At the end of the Marina parking lot she turned on her Ipod, she chose a Country playlist with a mix of Christmas songs sprinkled in, *Christmas Shoes* began to play.

End of Part One of December 25th, Christmas Surprise: The Next Day

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Ashleigh & Megan
Book I: Friendship



Monday
December 25

Christmas Surprise:
The Next Day

Day 9 of Book I
(One Day after Nicole's Annual
Christmas Eve Party)

Part Two of Five

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 character getting up and ends with one or more characters going to bed; while during the day you experience the Characters actions, feelings, and their thoughts.

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

R. P. Voght

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December 24, Christmas Surprise Christmas Eve Day 8 of Book I

(One Day after Nicole's Annual Christmas Eve Party)

Megan was wearing a Spanish inspired outfit. She was motivated to wear this style because of a magazine article and a couple catalogs. This was the first time appearing in public where she was embracing her height. She ordered a white corset blouse from a catalog. She liked this blouse because of: the lace-up detailing and the billowy sleeves. She added a red colored lace bolero jacket. Wanting to be bold she matched this top with a dark red pencil skirt; she was excited to find a brand new one at the thrift store. She accessorized by added: sheer red stockings, a red and white ankle bracelet on her right ankle, and added red anklestrap sandals; this was the first time she ever wore a four inch heel in public. It took practice to wear these shoes. She spent extra time setting her hair. She hoped she would receive at least one compliment.

Megan parked her truck on the edge of the driveway directly across from the front door of her parents house. She was reminded of the house she grew up in when she spotted the sign saying *Keep Christ in Christmas*. She remembered the patience her Daddy showed when making this sign. She was certain her Daddy had the sign on a timer. When they lived in town her Daddy and her Brothers always decorated the outside of the house. With the house being so far from the road her Daddy no longer felt the desire to fully decorate the outside of the house; she was happy her Daddy put up the sign.

Her parents were happier with this house after the two additions. Her parents enjoyed the addition on the left side of the house, everyone else favored the right side addition. The right side addition included: a brand new changing area, a whirlpool, a small bathroom, an

electric panel with outlets, and a small dryer. Megan was one of many who hoped it would warm up so they go swimming. She believed the only adult willing to swim in the current temperature was Ashleigh. Megan witnessed Ashleigh swimming in the yacht pool the day before when the temperature was in the upper sixties.

Megan liked the blue and white color of the house and the white picket fence that surrounded the house and pool. There was a much larger fence bordering the four acre property. Every male family member, many male friends of the family, Julie, and Megan helped build this large fence. Before they built this fence they removed: the four interconnecting horse corals, the small horse barn, and the original fence. Megan's favorite section of this border fence was along the road. Part of this fence went across the driveway. When Megan entered the property she unlocked this fence and propped it open. Megan hoped Ashleigh would spot the mailbox and the American flag sticking out from the fence.

This was not the only flag. There was a flag pole fifteen yards from the left front side of the house. On the pole was an American Flag, a Navy Flag, and a Coast Guard Flag. Along the bottom was an area for flowers, it was surrounded by white rocks, there was a small walkway to get to the flag pole, and a sign reminding everyone about the POW's left in Vietnam. The flags were slightly moving.

She: shut the drivers side door, walked around her truck, opened the passenger side door, grabbed her red sandals, quickly removed her athletic shoes, slipped on her high heels, swung the red purse she purchased at the thrift store over her shoulder, grabbed her box of gifts, shut the drivers side door with her hip, walked across the driveway, when she reached the white gate of the picket fence she set the box down on the fence, she reached over and opened the gate, kept it open with her foot, stepped through the gate, the gate closed on its own, her heels clipped on the short sidewalk to the front of the house, stepped up onto the wood porch, went through the opening of the white railing attached to the porch, stepped up to the door, set her box down, was careful on how she bent over, opened the front door with her key, pulled open the door, held the door open with her leg, pulled the key out, slipped the keys into the side of her purse, bent down, grabbed the box, stood up, and stepped into the house.

She loved the glass windows on each side of the door and the large window of the door; she wished the door was a little lighter.

She heard Ma yell, "Megan?"

She doubted it was Megan because she heard the sound of high heels.

While stepping into the house she answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Megan heard her Daddy open a door from the left addition of the house. Megan correctly assumed her Daddy was stepping out of his train room. The opening to the left side addition was beyond the open wooden L shaped staircase. This staircase was a few feet in front and to the left of the dinning room. Looking straight passed the L shaped staircase was a room in back of the house. Ma turned this into a very elegant looking dinning room. Megan liked the French doors separating the dinning room from the rest of the house. Two things surprised Megan: the French doors were open and the dinning room table was empty. For as long as Megan could remember her Momma's first task was to set the table. Before her Daddy would insist on helping her she stepped forward and turned right into the large living room. In the front of the room in between two large windows was a very tall Christmas tree. She loved the tall peaked roof of the living room.

Ma yelled from the kitchen, "I was beginning to worry."

Megan rolled her eyes.

"I needed to complete a few chores. Just before leaving I received a call from a new client. He had a lot of concerns about privacy."

"Was it one of Duke's friends?"

"I ain't sure."

Ma answered, "Let's hope it ain't."

Megan continued, "I received a request from my morning charter so I had to change the setup on the charter."

She thought of her: personal struggles, her run, and her private time. Things she would never tell her Momma.

Ma yelled, "Is everything all right?"

"Yes. I'm ready for both my charters."

Captain walked through the kitchen to see if there was any prepared food on the counter. He was about to graze. Thought better of it when he received a look from his wife. He proceeded to the living room. He entered the living room through a passage way between the living room and kitchen. This passage way was on the right side of the house. Directly left of this passageway was an opening in the wall; an opening Ma called the serving window. In front of it were four tall stools, a brand new counter had been added a few weeks prior; Ma believed this wider counter was a much better way to serve people who sat in front of the opening.

Captain was shocked on how feminine his daughter looked. This was the second day in a row he witnessed his Daughter wear an outfit she never wore before.

As Megan started to set her presents under the tree, she became flustered on how the presents were scattered around the tree. Forgetting she was wearing a pencil skirt she knelt down organizing the presents. She placed each family together and then individually put each persons gift near one another. She hoped when others dropped off their gifts they would have enough sense to follow the pattern.

She felt her Daddy next to her. This is when she realized Ma had left her alone during the time she was organizing the presents; normally she would have received instructions from her Momma.

When Ma first looked through the serving area she was stunned into silence. She mustered the self control to keep her opinion about her daughters outfit to herself. It was made easier when she spotted her daughter kneel and look up at her Daddy. Ma recognized, her daughter looked feminine in the Spanish outfit; she acknowledged she liked the rose in her hair.

Her Daddy stated, "I'd like to Y'all something."

"Let me set this box over here."

He wondered why she would want to keep an empty box.

She answered his look, "We'll use it for the wrapping paper."

"Good thinking. It's why Y'all are running a successful business."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"It ain't successful yet."

Captain lifted up his train engineering hat and set it back down again, "You've outlasted many other folks who've started charters. In my lifetime I've seen many come and go. You've

done a marvelous job. Don't let my compliments go to your head. You'll need to keep working to remain successful."

Megan was unable to help herself, she stood up and hugged her Daddy; the only reasons she was the same height as her Daddy was due to her heels.

She whispered, "I ain't slacking."

Megan could tell he was keeping his emotions in check. She was delighted he embraced her back; it was rare for their family to show physical affection. She hoped this was something she could change. She was determined, if she ever had a family of her own, appropriate physical affection would be encouraged. With the rest of the family she would have to pick her spots.

Mary Steward smiled when she witnessed Megan embrace Captain.

She went back to preparing the Cajun Glazed Ham. As a side she would use the shank bone to make Cajun White Beans. Originally she planned on making an Apple Cider Ham. Ma was surprised when Megan, Nicole, and Diana insisted Ashleigh would love the Cajun style. Ma disbelieved them until she witnessed the amount of spices this short Yankee put on her food at Nicole's Christmas Eve party.

At one time Ma prepared the whole meal. As time had gone by, the ladies of the family started to bring items over, Ma would never admit she appreciated this newer tradition. Even still Ma insisted: on cooking the ham, preparing the main salad, and at least one dessert. She would let Megan prepare a fruit salad and a broccoli and cheese casserole. Ma believed the reason Megan suggested a broccoli and cheese casserole was on account of Ashleigh. She witnessed this young lady eat a lot of cheese at Nicole's Christmas Eve party.

The most important thing to Ma, no matter the year, no matter who was invited or how many people were invited; there was enough food for everyone.

A task she was giving to Megan was setting the dining room table. This was something Ma was having difficulty giving away, but felt it was time to pass on; Ma believed this showed Megan how much she loved her. She questioned the wisdom of this decision the whole morning because she felt Megan was late.

Ma glanced up at the kitchen clock when she spotted Captain leading their Daughter to his train room.

Captain mentioned, "I'm showing Megan my model railroad."

"Don't be long. I'm needing her to set the table."

Captain answered, "Yes ma'am."

Megan was shocked to hear this.

She stopped, turned toward her Momma, and stepped to the edge of the kitchen; "Am I setting the table?"

Ma looked over at her daughter, "I was feeling it's time to pass the tradition on."

"May I set it anyway I'd like?"

"Just make sure there is enough settings for everyone and the children ain't using the good China. Captain and your Brother have already extended the table."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Ma smiled when Captain said, "Y'all heard Ma. Let's get a move on."

Ma decided to mention, "Just a second."

Megan was prepared to hear some negative comment about her outfit.

Ma chose to ignore the skirt, but was honest; "It's nice seeing Y'all being ladylike."

Megan produced a big dimple smile.

"I was feeling you'd dislike the outfit."

Ma caught the layers and answered in a serious tone, "I might've chose a different skirt. But I'm liking the rose."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She caught the layers.

"Thank-you."

Captain rolled his eyes.

Megan's dimples flashed.

She watched Ma turn around and go back to prepping the ham. Megan would later consider what it mean to set the table and the half compliment of the outfit.

Captain finally said, "Y'all coming?"

Megan turned and answered, "Yes sir."

Megan: stepped out of the kitchen, followed Captain, they made a right (they were temporarily facing the dinning room), stopped when she reached the L-shaped wooden stairs, took off her shoes, slipped off her purse, set these items on the fourth step, turned left, followed her Daddy into the new addition of the house. To the left was the wall between the two car garage and the hallway. On the right in order was the: train room, a laundry room, Ma's sewing and prayer room, and a guest bedroom. This section went passed the two car garage and into the yard. Megan admired all of the pictures her parents had of the sunken pirate ship and their work bringing the cargo to the surface. Each room of this addition had medium sized windows facing the back yard. Captain wanted to go without windows in his train room but Ma overruled him.

They stepped into the large train room, he quickly shut the door behind him.

"I ain't wanting the little ones in this here room."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Ain't this a toy?"

With a tone, "This ain't a toy."

"What is it?"

Captain answered, "Young lady we've discussed this before. It's my hobby."

Megan made a face.

When her Daddy shut the door, he turned, dropped a section of the layout in front of the door; he was careful to reconnect the two sections of track. This track was on the skinny side of a large lopsided rectangle. The two long sides were both sixteen feet long. The front side where they just entered the room was two feet wide. The section along the back wall were two four by eight foot wooden tables made out of: a sheets of plywood, two by fours, and four by four legs. These two tables were bolted together. On either side of this long table were two four by eight tables; creating the short end sections of the rectangle. They were built the same way as the other two four by eight tables and were bolted to the other tables. There was a three foot space between the back of this long section of of table and the wall. This space made it

possible to reach the layout from the back. The two foot section along the front of the wall, was bolted to the two short ends. This section was made with one by four boards and the legs were made with two by fours. Captain designed this room to fit the dimensions of this layout.

The main track connecting all of the tables was laid out and operational. On the right back table the inside track was laid out and was connected to the outside track. A large section of the outside track was elevated, it was obvious to Megan this is where her Daddy was representing the Appellation Mountains. Megan could tell where the outside track would connect to all of the inside tracks by specifically placed switches. Besides the track: the mountains were starting to be decorated, she noticed a black bear on a side of one of his mountains, a sea side town was starting, there were a couple buildings in it, foam was scattered all over the table, there were sections of track laying everywhere, screwed into the front of the wooden boards were electric switch levers, and taped to the right wall were three maps of the train layout; Megan was unsure of what the colors and patterns meant.

Underneath the table she could tell Jimmy and her Daddy were working on cabinets to use as storage. The whole bottom of the table was made for storage and hiding the electric outlets attached to the table. Megan observed a couple important features of these cabinets: they were attached to wheels, they were shorter than the bottom of the boards, and they could be locked together. Currently there were no doors on these cabinets, so it was easy to see: tools, craft items, model buildings, train cars, a variety of different sized trees, plastic people in their packaging, train items, a variety of different colored wire spools, a large amount of track, and she could spot holes in the four by fours; Megan correctly assumed these were for the wires and switches. Hanging on the wall above the two foot section was a completed glass covered cabinet; this displayed all of Captains engines; there was room to add a dozen or so more engines. They left enough space between the bottom of the shelf to the table to make a scene against the wall. She watched her Daddy turn on the power source, and a train started to slowly move along the outside track.

He asked, "Y'all like it?"

Her dimples flashed.

She chose to be positive, "It's looking better."

As the train moved around the outside track, he would point to sections and tell her of his plans. All at once: he stopped talking, stopped the train, and looked at her.

This upset her.

Based upon his body language she prepared herself for the question. She was trying to understand why everyone believed she was a lesbian. It hurt to think her Daddy thought she was. She held in her tears.

"I'm understanding Ms. Ashleigh was invited?"

"Yes sir."

He lifted his engineering cap and set it back down.

Her dimples flashed.

He said in a very serious tone, "I ain't one to be believing rumors."

She managed to hold in her tears.

"I ain't wanting believe this nonsense of Ashleigh and you being lovers."

She asked with a serious tone, "You believe it's nonsense?"

"Y'all should know I'm a straight shooter."

"Yes sir."

"I reckon' if Y'all were a lesbian you'd have told us."

Megan answered honestly, "I would have."

"That's what I reckon'."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"At first I was believing the rumors Ashleigh was a lesbian. After meeting her I'm figuring this was hog wash. I was told she's one of them bisexuals? Is this true?"

"She hasn't told me she is."

He made a face and was about to ask a question.

Megan made sure she spoke before he asked the question, "I ain't worried. She's the best friend I ever had."

Captain in a serious tone stated, "It's why I'm asking."

"Why would Y'all ask?"

"She ain't a bad influence?"

Megan somewhat annoyed but with forcefulness stated, "She's been a positive influence."

Captain made a face.

"With Y'all spending so much time together I've been thinking she's wanting to turn Y'all into one."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"No one will be turning me..."

He interrupted her, "I ain't one for believing this horse poop someone's born gay."

Megan believed a discussion on what caused a person to be gay would have been counterproductive.

She calmly answered, "Many would disagree with Y'all."

"People ain't got the sense God gave a goose. So I'm asking. Is Ashleigh one of them who likes both? If she is. Is she wanting Y'all to be turning?"

"She ain't. But if she was she ain't turning me into a lesbian."

He made a face, smiled, lifted his hat and set it down again.

"I reckon' if your friend Michelle couldn't turn Y'all into one. Then no one else has a chance."

Silence.

Captain stated matter of fact, "I've always believed she wanted to sleep with Y'all. I'm assuming if it happened you'd have told us you were into gals."

Megan's dimples flashed.

In shock she leaned against the train table and stared at her Daddy. She thought about Michelle and the night she tried to seduce her. The belief among their friends was Megan was the one in the closet; they assumed she was in the closet because of her religious beliefs. Everyone was surprised when, after Megan refused Michelle's seduction, Michelle came out of the closet. This happened a couple years after Michelle had met her parents. At no time had Megan told her parents Michelle was a lesbian.

Megan recognized this was the first time in their lives Captain ever discussed anything sexual with her. By the way he just acted it would be the last time. Megan appreciated this.

While Megan was staring at him, Captain started the train.

To reassure her Daddy she found herself saying, "Ashleigh is fond of Marcus."

"Sargent Marcus?"

She snapped out of her shock, "Yes sir."

He exclaimed, "Well ain't that the berries!"

"Don't be telling."

He nodded, "I promise."

There was a knock on the door and the door opened. Ma demanded, "I'm needing Megan to set the table and help with chores."

Megan snickered. She did so because of the look Ma gave the section of track in front of the door.

Captain all smiles answered, "You get."

Megan smiled a big dimple smile.

"Yes sir."

Ma scolded Captain, "You need to get ready."

"I have some..."

"What happens if our guests arrive? Y'all know some will arrive early. With Megan here she can watch the kettles while I'm getting ready. It ain't proper you looking like a horses behind. You old buzzard it's Christmas."

Megan slipped under the train, out of the door, and headed toward the dinning room. She heard: the train stop, Captain lift up the train, shut the door, and lock the door.

Ma asked, "What on earth are Y'all doing?"

"I'm locking this here door."

"Why?"

"I ain't wanting the little ones coming in."

"I'd reckon' they'd be the ones most interested in seeing it."

"It ain't for them."

Megan stopped and turned around when Ma said, "So only the big children may play with the toy. What am I to do with Y'all? Between Jimmy and yourself you'll drive me crazy with this here toy train!"

"It ain't a toy!"

Ma answered, "It ain't?"

"It's a hobby."

"Hobby or not I need you looking like the man I know is in there."

"Yes Ma'am."

"You come out when you believe Y'all are finished."

"Alright."

"Please don't be wearing a white shirt."

"I like white shirts."

Ma somewhat scolding, "I bought you a nice green shirt. I Y'all to try it on. Or wear the light blue one you wore at the VFW."

"At the Christmas dinner?"

"That'd be the one."

Megan's dimples flashed.

The only person who could tell her Daddy what to do was Ma. Everyone else made suggestions. Megan turned and headed into the dinning room. Once in the dinning room she headed straight toward the antique China cabinet; it was against the back wall between two sets of windows. She turned and looked at the table. She started by counting the chairs around

the antique dinning room table. This table was built just before the civil war by her Daddy's Great Grand Daddy. As long as Megan could remember this table was the center of holidays or important functions.

She heard Ma step into the kitchen. On purpose Megan yelled, "Is Rebecca bringing her lover over?"

Ma shook her head. She answered, "May God have mercy. Yes."

Megan asked, "What's her name?"

Ma answered, "Meredith."

Megan added Meredith to the count.

Megan became serious, "Is Destiny's Daddy bringing her over?"

In a very serious tone, "I was told she's coming this year."

Megan heard this from Nicole.

Megan's dimples flashed.

With a tone she asked, "Is Peter bringing Stephanie?"

"You'd think he'd have the sense to leave that girl."

Megan answered, "They say love is blind."

"She's faster than a hot knife through butter. Your cousin is smart but he's blinded by her seductive ways."

This answer surprised Megan.

Megan heard her Ma mumble. Megan was to far away to hear what she said. Megan decided this was a good time to bring up the subject of sex. In the last few months women, many of them Christians, had offered to answer any question she had about sex. The one woman Megan wanted to hear from was her Momma. Megan felt if they could talk about sex maybe they could talk about everything else. She understood she was pushing buttons but it was her way of trying to patch up their relationship; she knew this approach might fail miserably.

"What are Y'all meaning by she's fast?"

Silence.

While Megan waited for her Momma's answer she counted the chairs; by her figuring they needed two more.

Ma blushed, "Y'all know she ain't the type to be waiting until the night of her wedding."

Megan stepped into the kitchen and gently asked, "What's it like?"

Ma blushed.

This frustrated Megan. She purposely waited for an answer.

Finally her mother answered, "I'm hoping Y'all are waiting."

A disappointing answer.

Megan answered honestly but with a tone, "Momma I'm a virgin."

Ma blushed again.

"I'm happy to hear it."

Ma asked, "Is there enough chairs?"

"I'm believing we're short two."

Mary communicated to Megan on who was all showing up.

They both recognized the table was short three chairs. Megan went to the storage area: she selected three chairs, she purposefully picked a taller chair than the rest, she checked for

spiders and bugs, she washed them, set them around the dinning room table; making sure the taller chair was where she intended to put Ashleigh. During this time both remained silent.

Megan yelled into the kitchen; "May I set everyone where I'd like?"

Ma reluctantly answered, "You may."

Megan: turned, opened a drawer of the China cabinet, and pulled out a stack of white decorated cards. Next year she would print them out on her computer; she imagined one day this meal being at her house. She wondered if Christopher would be her husband. She was blending the idea of courtship and modern dating. She had three goals: to remain a virgin until her wedding night, to discuss sex before she was married, and to only date with the intent on finding a husband. She stepped into the kitchen and opened a drawer, inside were markers; markers Ma used to mark food items.

Ma mentioned, "There are better markers in the prayer room."

Megan asked, "Are the markers in the prayer room the exact ones in this drawer?"

"They haven't been used."

Megan: dropped a marker into the drawer, Megan shut the drawer hard, all of the items shifted in the drawer, and she entered the sewing/prayer room. She collected: a marker, a couple pencils, she made sure they had new erasers on top, and a pad of paper. As she walked back to the dinning room she drew a map of the table and chairs. By the time she reached the dinning room she was writing down names inside of the squares; these squares represented chairs.

Megan looked at her little seating chart and stepped into the kitchen, "Who should I sit Rebecca and Meredith next to."

Ma decided to ask, "What are Y'all feeling?"

Megan answered, "I was intending on sitting Auntie Ruth and Rebecca together. I was having Uncle Wayne sit next to Auntie Ruth, but who should sit next to Meredith?"

Ma thought for a minute, "Diana."

"I was thinking about Sam."

Ma made a face, "It ain't a bad idea but she called and said she's running late."

"Why?"

"Someone important was visiting her shelters. I've been hearing he's been donating a lot of money."

Megan mentioned, "It'd be nice if I could meet a guy who'd care about women getting abused."

"It ain't right when a man beats on his wife."

"Daddy never hit you."

Ma stopped working and turned to Megan, "It's one of the reasons I married him. I knew from the very moment I met your Daddy he was a gentleman."

"How?"

Ma happily answered, "He's always treated the ladies around him as a gentleman. I ain't once heard him sass his Momma. And I never seen him mistreat your Auntie. He was very respectful to Pa and even asked permission to marry me."

"What did Grandpa say?"

"His only concern was if he'd return home from Vietnam."

"What did Y'all tell Grandpa?"

"I was feeling he'd return. Every wife and Momma needs to feel their Daddies and sons are returning home. It's why it's so hard when they don't make it. War is an awful thing. But because this is an evil world we need to be prepared for our sons and husbands to go and protect us."

She paused and acknowledged.

"Now Momma's and wives too."

This was the first time Megan could recall her Momma ever speaking to her about this.

Ma blushed, "I guess I'm being foolish. But at the time I'd rather have had the two weeks with em' than never been with him at all."

Megan wanted to ask a follow up question but her Momma said, "Just remember to put Timmy on the opposite side of the twins. I ain't wanting Timmy to say something. If Sam's there or if he knows Sam is coming he'll behave."

Megan looked at her chart erased a bunch of the names and renamed them.

Ma made a suggestion, "Set your Uncle next to Sam."

"Why?"

"Until Sam arrives I ain't wanting Rebecca's friend sitting next to the girls."

Megan felt the need to ask, "What if I was a lesbian? Would I be moved away from the girls?"

Ma stopped and glared at Megan, "I was told you ain't one of them."

"I ain't."

"The reason I want them separated is on account of the twins. They're bound to be asking a lot of questions. I ain't wanting any embarrassing talk."

Ma looked down at the soup.

Megan decided to break family boundaries, "For a while I was believing I was a lesbian."

"I'm grateful you came to your senses."

"I was feeling I was a lesbian on account sex has always been a struggle for me."

Ma asked in sincerity, "With Y'all being a virgin how could sex be a struggle?"

Megan was shocked at her Momma's sincerity.

Before Megan could ask a follow up question Ma made a point to say, "Times ticking the chores need to get done."

This frustrated Megan.

"Are we ever going to talk about sex?"

"That is enough."

"Of what?"

"It ain't appropriate for us to be talking about such things. It just ain't the time."

"I'm twenty-nine years old?"

"Our talk has already been inappropriate."

"Why?"

"A lady shouldn't be talking about sex until it's time."

Megan's jaw clinched, her dimples flashed, and her eyes went wide.

Ma blushed, "It's Christmas and it ain't proper until..."

"Until when?"

Ma felt she had said enough but promised, "When the time is right we'll talk."

Megan: sighed, took herself, and her chart into the dinning room.

It took great effort for Ma to remain silent when all she heard was the clanking of drawers and dishes.

Even though Megan was angry and was clanking things, she was very careful with the family China. The China she was putting out was a gift from her Daddy's parents when her parents bought their first house in 1970; this set was dated 1969. Over the years Captain and Ma added more of the rose decorated pieces to the set. Megan was told this China costed a "pretty penny." It was one of the reasons only adults received China.

Megan made three decisions by herself: she folded the napkins like she did on her charter, gave all the teenagers China plates, and placed Ashleigh across from her but next to her Daddy. She wanted Ashleigh close without them sitting next to one another, she was trying to avoid any talk about the two being together. More important, she felt her Daddy would be a good influence on her friend.

A tradition she kept was Ma was at one end of the table and Captain was on the other. On Ma's side was Nicole and Diana. An unwritten rule, Megan was the main helper before the meal but Diana, Nicole, and Ma took care of everyone during the meal. This was to avoid any small conflicts between Megan and Ma. After the meal was over all of the ladies helped.

Nicole flung the door open between the house and garage and yelled, "What are Y'all doing?"

The garage door was going up, her Husband was sitting in the mini-van, and the engine was running.

Jeff answered, "We're setting up the dart board."

Nicole stepped out into the garage and turned left; her son was holding onto an electronic dart board.

She turned toward Jimmy and yelled, "Why not load the van before pulling it out?"

Jimmy stuck his head out the window, "I'll park it near the sidewalk. We'll load it through the front."

Nicole made a face and asked, "Where are Y'all setting up the board?"

Jeff answered, "On the wall."

This answer irritated Nicole. Staring at Jeff she asked, "Which wall?"

Jimmy answered by pointing, "This one."

Sarcastic, "Won't it make holes?"

Jeff laughed.

"It ain't funny."

Jimmy answered, "The darts have plastic tips."

"Momma it's electronic."

Nicole shook her head and said with a tone, "Since when have Y'all wanted anything hanging on the wall? I was told it would interfere with the vehicles."

Jimmy again stuck his head out the window, "This is different."

She reluctantly remained silent.

Jimmy excited said, "I'll be setting it up with the drill and bits Julie gave me."

Jeff added, "The dart board will be secure against the wall."

She glared at Jeff. For years she wanted to decorate this wall but Jimmy balked at the idea of putting holes into the wall.

Jeff answered the glare, "I'm wanting to try out the darts Julie gave me."

With a tone, "Alright. But we only have a couple hours."

Jeff answered, "Yes Ma'am."

With this Jimmy backed the mini-van out of the garage and parked it. He headed into the garage.

Nicole watched.

Jeff mentioned "The instructions tell how high the board is to be hung and where the line should be."

"I'm sure it does."

Nicole rolled her eyes, "You better look at them."

Jimmy reluctantly grabbed the instructions and commanded Jeff, "Go help your mother."

Nicole on a rare occasion openly disagreed with Jimmy; normally they were an impenetrable team.

A frustrated Nicole stated, "Julie and I will load the van. Y'all enjoy your time with Daddy."

Jimmy looked at her, "Y'all sure?"

"Yes."

Jimmy smiled, "Okay."

Nicole stepped into the house and used some self control and calmly shut the door. She rolled her eyes. It always amazed her on how her teen son and her adult husband could turn into boys.

At the kitchen table Julie was showing Ester how to view the pictures she took with her digital camera; a camera Julie purchased for her sister. Nicole was delighted her oldest was paying attention to her youngest. Nicole was bothered by the her internal question, *when did Julie become an expert at cameras?*

"Julie help me load the van."

"Momma..."

They both received the look.

Ester knew enough to ask, "What should I do?"

"Pick up all of the wrapping paper. Your sister and I will load the van."

Ester asked, "Are we headed to Ma's?"

"In a couple hours."

"Am I needing to get ready?"

"After picking up all the wrapping paper and putting your presents neatly under the tree."

"Yes Ma'am."

Ester made a face and left the kitchen.

Nicole commanded, "Y'all will need a new garbage bag."

Ester stopped and said, "Oh."

She ran to the cupboard under the sink, grabbed a plastic bag, and ran into the living room.

This was Nicole's favorite time during Christmas. She loved spending time with her family after everyone opened gifts and before heading to Jimmy's parents house. After Jimmy's parents they spent the evening at her parents. This time was tempered by the gifts her frugal daughter gave. It was highly unusual for Julie to spend so much money on gifts. She

wondered why her daughter was willing to spend so much money. More important where did her Daughter get the money. These were difficult thoughts for Nicole because she adored the necklace she received, she liked it so much, it was already hanging around her neck.

Nicole and Julie started by collecting the presents under the tree.

Nicole was about to mention her concern but Julie asked, "Y'all like necklace?"

"It's beautiful."

It occurred to Nicole, if she voiced any concerns it would ruin her daughters Christmas. She made the decision to have a drug sniffing dog go through her daughters room. Nicole was wise enough to understand her Daughter would be in trouble if the dog found anything; but believed her Father-in-laws police connections would stop her daughter from getting too deeply into trouble. More important this would explain Nicole's feeling Julie was hiding something from her. Nicole had a treatment facility in mind if her daughter was found in possession of any drugs.

"Let's load the van. Except for the food. We'll bring it into the van before we all leave."

Julie answered in a happy tone, "Yes Ma'am."

Ester asked, "May I take a picture of everyone before we go?"

Nicole smiled, "Of course."

Then Ester asked, "May I take the camera with me?"

"Don't lose it."

Famous last words, "I won't."

Julie recommended, "Y'all should keep it in the case and set it on the steps when Y'all ain't using it."

Ester answered with a look, "I won't lose it."

Nicole focused on the task at hand: she realized she needed the van keys, she set the gifts down, and stepped to her purse.

Ester and Julie made faces.

They heard the drilling.

"What's Daddy doing?"

Nicole answered, "Putting up the dart board."

"Will they let me play?"

"You may ask them after you get ready."

This excited Ester, "Yes Ma'am."

It was rare to find something her Daddy, her Brother and herself liked.

Julie mentioned, "Maybe we should play teams. I bet we win."

Ester's eyes went big, "Really!?"

Nicole was paying attention even if it looked like she was focused on picking up the presents.

"I've been practicing at the yacht."

Nicole opened the door, and asked; "They have a dart board?"

Ester carrying the plastic bag with the wrapping paper followed. She was listening because it was interesting to hear about darts.

"They have two electronic boards. They have the type used in bars."

Ester asked, "Really?"

"They have old school arcade games. The type in bars and at the arcade at the mall."

This was far from surprising to Nicole.

"Ashleigh mentioned they might have a costume party in March."

Nicole asked, "Why March?"

She commanded, "Ester drop the bag and open the van door."

Ester did as commanded.

"To break up the winter."

Ester stated, "March is spring?"

Julie answered, "Not in Wisconsin."

"Oh. I'd like to go."

Julie made a point to say, "The party is for adults. Mr. Bob would throw them when he owned his own club."

"Oh."

"Ashleigh wants to start the tradition here. She said she'd hire people to handle the bar and the gambling tables."

Nicole answered, "This ain't surprising."

They both put items in the van, "You should see what's in their garage."

Ester excited, "What's in there?"

"They set up a small rec room with pinball machines, a pool table, air hockey, and a Foosball table."

Ester responded with, "Wow."

"Mr. Bob has a drawer full of darts."

"He has a drawer full?"

Julie looked at her mother.

"Y'all should see how many he has. He's been collecting them. Ashleigh told me which board to buy."

This was Nicole's chance, "It wasn't expensive?"

"Y'all promise not to tell."

Nicole answered, "Depends."

Ester knew enough just to listen.

"Their company designs dartboards. She gave me a deal. I bought it at cost. Mr. Bob gave me the darts."

"Oh."

Ester was unsure of what this meant, she was about to ask, but was instructed by Nicole, "Go through the garbage away."

"Yes Ma'am."

When Julie realized Ester was a distance away Julie asked, "You think Megan likes Mr. Bob?"

Nicole gave Julie a face.

"Just a few weeks ago Y'all felt Megan and Ashleigh were lovers."

The truth of this hit hard.

Nicole answered, "I don't believe so."

Julie was disappointed in this answer.

Nicole mentioned as they picked up more gifts, "Y'all should give them a thank-you note for the gifts."

Julie sighed.

Ester quickly returned.

Nicole answered, "It's only proper."

Ester asked, "What's proper?"

Nicole asked, "Did Y'all close the lid of the garbage can?"

Ester answered, "Yes Ma'am."

"Y'all need to get ready."

"Yes Ma'am."

Ester ran into the house.

Nicole and Julie finished loading the van.

Nicole said gently, "Y'all need to get ready."

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole stopped her, "Tell Amanda if she ever wants to talk I'm here for her."

Julie gave her Momma a serious look, "She believes she's okay."

Nicole answered, "It's obvious she ain't okay but denial can be a powerful thing."

"What am I to do?"

"Be a true friend to her. Remember, just because someone believes something doesn't make it true. I've witnessed this my whole life."

"Yes Ma'am."

"The balance. Is anything great starts with belief."

Julie smiled.

Nicole slid the van door shut. In silence they stepped back to the house.

Ashleigh turned off the divided highway onto a very narrow road. The roof and doors were off of her yellow Sport Edition Jeep Wrangler. How well she was driving on these roads was a testament to her manual driving skills; only once did she jerk the Jeep. She was thankful for her Foster Dad and her Brother teaching her how to drive a stick shift vehicle. Like usual the music of her Ipod was coming through the radio; at this time the radio was turned low so she could concentrate.

She was wearing the sunglasses she purchased with Megan. Her long blond hair was pinned up tight, she gave herself some bangs, and some length; she did this to protect her hair from the wind and to match the outfit she was wearing. Her original idea was to wear an outfit she would have worn country line dancing; after trying on many different combinations she felt dressing this way was cheesy and fake. Instead, she was wearing a white pique tank dress, a white pointelle-knit cardigan with floral detail on the left shoulder, she matched this with fancy white and brown open backed platform shoes. To give her outfit some pizzazz she: rolled up the sleeves of the cardigan, she carefully pinned up the right side of her dress, attempting to match the flowers of the cardigan she was wearing a multi-colored gemstone flowered necklace, on her left wrist she added a multi-colored rainbow bracelet, on her right wrist was a topaz watch, her earrings matched the watch, and she was using a teal colored leather satchel as her purse. She knew the purse was not exactly a match but she liked all the pockets and the zippers; it was great for her blackberry phone and her Ipod. She felt the cardigan made the outfit slightly more casual, it was more suitable for winter fashions, and went with the fall trend of wearing white. She was certain her feet would pay the price for her shoes; she would wear them because they gave her height and they matched her outfit. Currently these shoes

were on the passenger side floor; she was wearing athletic shoes while she drove. She was very conscience of the fact she would have to be careful eating or drinking anything.

After driving these network of roads she felt this area of Eastbank was: menacing, thick, and creepy. The Floridian foliage reminded her of a World War Two South Pacific movie. What added to her feelings of uneasiness was how skinny the roads were. It was a careful process letting two cars pass and many of the roads were unpaved.

Not everything was menacing. She liked all of the horse fields and the couple large ranches she passed. She was impressed with the work home owners put into the: gates, signs, entrances, driveways, and corrals. She felt their landscaping skills was superb. She was astounded at the variety of different colors the houses were painted in. She wished she could have viewed all of the houses but a large portion were behind foliage and were a distance from the road.

She was struggling to find Megan's parents house because of the way everything was marked. There were street signs marking the roads but they were just names. She now understood why visitors to Wisconsin complained about the odd grid system and every road having a name. She slowed down to look at an address on a mailbox; she realized she had passed this property at least three times.

She set her sunglasses on her head; she was careful to keep her hair nice. She looked at the road map and the map Jake made her. She heard a vehicle coming down the road. She looked up. She set the maps aside and was about to back the Jeep into a near by driveway.

She heard a female voice yell, "Ms Ashleigh?"

Ashleigh focused on the vehicle in front of her. It was a large Ford Pickup truck. The only reason she knew it was a Ford was because of the symbol on the front grill. She spotted Betty-Sue, she was leaning over and talking to her husband. She was in her early fifties, she was in shape, had wiry tanned skin from being outside all the time, she obviously died her hair dark, and at work she always wore southern style dresses. This woman decorated her cubicle with a variety of horse pictures, pictures of her own horses, a large horse calendar, and many pictures of her family. She was an asset to the customer service team.

Betty-Sue and her husband stepped out of the truck; Ashleigh knew it was her husband because of the pictures in her cubicle. Betty-Sue was wearing: a brand new cowgirl hat, her long black hair was in a very neat pony tail sticking out in back, a plaid shirt, brand new blue jeans, a large belt with a fancy belt buckle, and very nice cowgirl boots. This was the first time she ever spotted Betty-Sue wear jeans, with how they fit; it was obvious she had strong legs. Ashleigh felt her husband was handsome for being in his early fifties. He was: tall, lean, clean shaven, walked with authority, and was rugged looking. In her mind he represented a southern gentleman. He was wearing: a brand new cowboy hat, in a nice red cowboy shirt, a western style tie, an NRA belt buckle, a new pair of blue jeans, and was wearing expensive cowboy boots.

Betty-Sue said, "Howdy Ms. Ashleigh.

As Ashleigh stepped out of the Jeep she said, "Hi."

Lee was surprised on how short she was. Betty-Sue reasoned she was wearing athletic shoes because she was driving. She was used to Ashleigh running around without shoes in the office areas.

She caught the face of Betty-Sue's husband.

"This here is my husband Lee."

"Howdy."

He tipped his hat.

"Nice to meet Y'all."

Ashleigh was sure if he shook her hand it would hurt.

Betty-Sue asked, "What brings you out to these parts?"

Ashleigh sighed, "I seem to be lost. I'm trying to find Mary and Dave Steward's place. I'm driving in circles. Do you know where their house is?"

Betty-Sue immediately said for her husbands benefit, "She's looking for Ma and Captain."

The reason he had trouble catching what she said was on account of her strong Midwestern accent and how fast she talked.

"Little Lady Y'all need to turn this here Jeep around."

"Huh huh."

Lee stated, "You see the big palm tree?"

Betty-Sue asked, "The one on the Wilson place?"

Lee answered, "Yup."

Betty-Sue added, "You can't miss the house. It's green with white trim."

Ashleigh answered, "The cute one? I think I passed it a couple times."

"Yes Ma'am. Ain't it nice?"

"I like the flowers."

"Katie works magic with flowers."

Lee interrupted on purpose, "When you reach the Wilson Place make a right."

"Okay."

"Y'all need to drive passed two intersections and then make another right. There will be a boulder and a tree with a swing."

Betty-Sue mentioned, "The Briers have many youngins'. They're good kids."

Lee added, "Just don't get the little one talking she'll never stop."

Betty-Sue felt the need to clarify, "She gets it from her Momma."

Before his wife would add to the conversation Lee stated, "About half way up the road. Passed a couple drive ways Y'all see a big boulder. Captain's house will be on the right. Y'all can't miss it."

Betty-Sue added, "They have a flag and a brand new gate. I'm sure it'll be open for Y'all."

"Thanks. I appreciate the help."

Lee said, "If you end up passing a horse ranch you've gone to far."

"I'll watch for it."

Betty-Sue smiled, "That'd be our place."

"I've seen the pictures of your horses."

This excited Betty-Sue, "Y'all noticed?"

Ashleigh smiled and touched Betty-Sue on the arm, "I like how you decorated your cubicle."

This encouraged Betty-Sue, "We're all liking how you let us decorate. It gives it a home town feel. The last place I worked. Well. It ain't polite to say what I feel about it."

"I'm glad to hear you like it."

Before his wife would start a long conversation, Lee mentioned a true concern, "Little Lady I ain't trying to scare Y'all. But I'd be careful driving around these parts at night. A lady like yourself ain't wanting to be lost at night. Next time Y'all drive in these parts at night I'd put the top and doors on. It's a good one but I wouldn't be riding around at night with it open."

"Why?"

Both Betty-Sue and Lee had serious looks.

Lee mentioned, "There's wildlife out here a lady shouldn't be tangling with."

Betty-Sue added, "Nobody should."

Ashleigh reassured these two, "I'll follow Megan out."

He smiled because she listened to him, "Nothing is bound to happen if there be two of Y'all together."

Ashleigh smiled and asked, "Are you two having a Merry Christmas?"

This encouraged both of them.

Ashleigh recognized their looks and stated, "I'm never going to say Happy Holidays. Its a shame people want to stop us from saying Merry Christmas. As long as we're running our company its going to be called Christmas Break."

Betty-Sue knew what was coming.

Lee felt the compulsion to add, "What has the world come too? How dare these high minded liberals tell me what I should call Christmas. I ain't every saying Happy Holidays. If someone ain't liking it they can kiss..."

Betty-Sue interrupted, "Lee!"

Betty-Sue reminded him, "Lee she's the vice president."

"Ma'am forgive me of forgetting my manners..."

Ashleigh winked and interrupted, "Its okay. I think liberals are full of shit too."

He smiled and Betty-Sue gave a shocked look.

Ashleigh was unable to help herself, "My brother and I don't like being told how to run our business. It's the reason Bob moved the company here. Without having so many regulations we're able to really bless our employees. The taxes in Wisconsin are terrible. From what I have witnessed all Democrats do is take. My brother says they're nothing but greedy Socialists."

She winked and added, "We should all be able to carry a gun."

Hearing this relieved Betty-Sue. Her biggest worry was her politically minded husband would offend her employer.

A very serious Lee stated, "Socialism ain't flying in these parts. I ain't letting them take my guns away. Even though they keep trying."

Ashleigh made a face, "My brother believes they like shootings."

"I've never considered this. I might enjoy talking to your brother."

Ashleigh touched his arm, "It's part of the reason I say Merry Christmas. I kinda hope they get offended."

Betty-Sue was again relieved.

Lee commented, "Ain't you a whipper snapper."

"I've been told that before."

Lee asked, "May I tell Y'all something?"

"Sure."

"Many folks are grateful Y'all are giving everyone off during Christmas."

Ashleigh answered, "My brother started it because everyone works so hard before Christmas. It's the one time during the year he allows overtime. To make up for it he started the tradition of everyone having off between Christmas and New Years."

Betty-Sue asked, "I was hearing some are working it?"

In a very serious tone she answered, "It's because of the move and it will only be us executives and a few chosen managers. Everyone else has off."

"We're much obliged."

Ashleigh made a face, "Don't worry about it."

Betty-Sue added, "I'm glad Y'all hired me. Because of the way Y'all handle schedules I'm able to take care of my horses."

"It's why we set up schedules that way."

Lee knew if his wife started talking about horses they would be in for a long conversation.

Lee stated, "We're needing to get a move on."

Betty-Sue smiled, "Nice seeing Y'all. You can't miss the Steward place."

Lee nodded and tipped his hat, "Nice meeting Y'all."

Ashleigh liked how he tipped his hat.

Betty-Sue smiled, "I'll see Y'all after New Years."

"I'll look forward to it."

"Thanks again."

Betty-Sue answered, "We're glad to help."

Ashleigh then called out before they stepped into the large truck, "I'll let you pass."

Lee answered, "Much obliged."

Ashleigh quickly stepped into her Jeep and backed it into a nearby driveway. She waved when Lee drove passed. Two things she noticed about the large pick-up truck; the double wheels in back and the large trailer hitch.

She left the driveway and followed Lee's instructions. She spotted a flag and a brand new opened gate. She pulled up to the mailbox. She was relieved when the address matched the one Megan gave her. She looked at the driveway. It was obvious the opened gate, the wooden fence, and the flag were only a few years old. She was impressed with the effort put into the landscaping of the area. The area: was mowed, there was a mound of flowers, there were six shrubs in a row; two were showing their flowers. Ashleigh felt the orange spiky flowers of these shrubs were pretty.

She backed up the Jeep and drove onto the long gravel driveway. Ashleigh admired the work it took to keep the foliage from spreading onto the driveway; she suspected someone had a large riding lawn mower and made about four swipes to keep the foliage from creeping onto the driveway. She: slammed on her brakes and clutch, put the Jeep into neutral, pulled the parking brake, left the vehicle, stepped up to a red and green turtle, studied the turtle, decided it was harmless, being very careful not to soil her dress she picked it up, she set it down on the other side of the driveway, stepped back into her Jeep, opened her purse, grabbed some napkins from a drive thru restaurant, cleaned her hands, stuffed the napkins in a plastic bag she kept underneath her seat, undid the parking brake, and followed the driveway to the house. Ashleigh was unaware the turtle was headed to a small pond she was unable to see: it was behind the foliage on the other side of the driveway. The driveway made a left, she was

now passed the foliage and in an open area. She glanced at the white and blue house. Looking up the driveway she noticed a wide variety of vehicles parked on or near a black topped area in front of the house. On her right was a large shed with two large awnings: underneath the right one was a large riding lawnmower, underneath the left awning was an old 1980's pick-up truck; Ashleigh assumed this was starting to be restored but the project was moving at a snails pace. She spotted Megan's pickup truck, Nicole's mini-van, and a collection of other vehicles. She parked her Jeep behind Nicole's mini-van, but was smart enough to give Nicole enough room to pull out.

Ashleigh took off her sunglasses and put them in her purse.

Ashleigh liked the two story blue and white house. Where she parked she could easily see the pool, a changing area, the white wooden fence, and the back right of the house; glancing into the long window it was obvious this is where the dinning room was. She spotted Megan and Nicole placing items onto a very long table. Ashleigh wished she would have arrived earlier to help. She focused on what she considered a large pool. She brought both of her new swimsuits. This would be the first time she ever went swimming on Christmas; she was all for it. She suspected with it being under seventy she was the only one willing to swim. She: grabbed her purse, stepped out of the Jeep, walked to the back, using a key she opened the cargo hold. This is when she heard the front door close and voices. She recognized: Julie's voice, the twins, and Diana's youngest; Ashleigh thought Dustin was cute. She suspected this little boy had a crush on her, this was cute to her; unlike Jeff's crush.

Ashleigh hoped Nicole or Megan would address this. The least thing she needed was a rumor she was having sex with Jeff. She believed seducing him was the same as an adult male seducing a teenage girl. As the adult she felt it was her responsibility to take the high road. The difficult part of this decision was: Jeff was a very attractive young man, he was well mannered, she often fantasied about teaching an inexperienced man about sex, and in general she was missing sex. She was determined to wait until she was married to have sex again, this was sometimes an easy goal, and other times it was difficult. She could easily rush into an unhealthy relationship or just sleep with someone. She was well aware, because of her standing in Eastbank, having a sexual fling would have consequences.

She smiled when: the twins rushed around the mini-van, Dustin and Julie where behind them; Julie was smiling. Ashleigh liked the dresses the twins were wearing, they were the same style but were different colors. Stacie was wearing a blue and white dress and Tina was wearing a purple and white dress; Ashleigh appreciated the fact both were without shoes. Ashleigh liked their pinned up hair. Ashleigh was grateful Stacie was slightly taller and both had birthmarks in different places. Without these two things it would have been impossible to tell them apart. At four the two were adorable. She wondered what these two would be like at fifteen; Ashleigh suspected they would still be inseparable.

Stacey yelled, "Ms. Ashleigh..."

Tina finished, "We're needing to ask Y'all if you need help."

Dustin sheepishly approached. It was easy to see he had a crush on her. His red hair was neatly combed. He was wearing: a red and blue stripped button shirt that was neatly tucked in, dark khaki's, black socks, and brown shoes. Ashleigh felt he took after Diana and was most likely going to be the shortest of the Steward boys. She could tell he wanted to be confident but his shyness overtook his goal.

Ashleigh answered with a gleam in her eye, "I could use help carrying in the presents. I also need someone to carry in some Custard."

They were excited about the presents but made a faces.

Stacie asked, "What's a custard?"

Ashleigh bent down and said in a gentle but seductive voice, "It's a dessert creamer than ice cream."

This of course excited the children.

Tina answered for both, "We'll try it."

Stacie volunteered them, "We'll carry it in."

"Make sure they get into the freezer."

At the same time they answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh turned and opened a cooler filled with ice.

As she did this Stacie asked, "Y'all bought us presents?"

Tina mentioned, "We ain't allowed to ask what we're gettin'."

Stacie answered, "Momma says it wrecks the surprise."

Ashleigh answered, "Your Momma is right. Yes I bought you gifts."

Dustin smiled. He was just as curious as his younger cousins but he wanted to be what his older brothers called "cool."

She turned and looked into the large heavy duty cargo hold, she reached in, grabbed two square boxes, lifted them up, turned and showed them, and then shook them.

They heard the boxes rattle.

"What's..."

Tina finished, "In the boxes."

Julie mentioned, "What do Y'all say?"

At the same time, "Thank-you Ms. Ashleigh."

Julie added, "Y'all get the dessert into the kitchen."

They answered at the same time, "Oh."

Immediately: they turned, they tried to run, but were unable to because of the buckets of custard.

Dustin was hoping for a gift too.

Dustin approached Ashleigh, "Ma'am may I help Y'all?"

Julie and Ashleigh glanced at one another.

"A big strong guy like you should be able to handle the guy gifts."

This caused him to puff up his chest.

Julie rolled her eyes.

Ashleigh took out a box of wrapped calendars, taped to each one was a blue envelope, on the top was written "*Boy Person*," she carefully handed the box to him.

He took it, he strained a lot.

Julie asked, "Y'all sure..."

"Yes Ma'am"

Julie insisted on handing out the presents asked, "Who are they for?"

"Those are for the guys. If there are presents left over give them to Ma and have her give them to someone she believes needs them."

Dustin said, "I'll tell Ma."

Julie instructed, "Put them under the tree."

Grunting he said, "Okay."

He was grunting as he walked toward the front door.

Ashleigh whispered, "Will he make it?"

Julie made a face, "I think so."

This is when Julie mentioned, "Y'all look great."

"Thank-you."

"So do you."

Julie was in a full length dark blue halter dress. It was obvious to Ashleigh, Julie was trying to be modest, with the size of her breasts there was only so much she could do. What impressed Ashleigh was a lot of teenage girls would have made them a focal point; this was something Julie never seemed to do. Ashleigh liked Julie's gold necklace and matching earrings. She also felt Julie's long dark hair was set very nice, she was wearing an appropriate amount of makeup, and was in flats. Ashleigh reminded herself Julie was still a high school student.

Ashleigh: reached in, grabbed another box, inside were wrapped calendars, and pink envelopes were taped to the top.

Julie took the box from Ashleigh.

"Calendars?"

Ashleigh winked, "Each one is different. I don't care if you trade them."

Julie noticed, written on the top of each envelope were the words, "*Girl Person*". Julie heard this was how *Renewed Mastery* gave out the Christmas bonus and small Christmas gifts.

Julie turned away from the calendars and watched Ashleigh: set another box of presents to the side of the cargo box, shut the cargo box, locked it, and picked up another box of presents; this is where the Twins presents were kept.

Julie again thanked Ashleigh, "Thank-you for the soaps and the backpack."

Ashleigh smiled, "I could tell which ones you liked. I also have another set waiting for you. Don't tell anyone."

Julie slightly blushed and answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh asked, "You like all the pockets?"

Julie's eyes went big and answered, "It's what I like about the bag."

Ashleigh winked, "I thought so."

The two of them started to head toward the house.

"When do we open gifts?"

"After dinner. I'm the one who hands out the gifts."

"Maybe your sister would like to help?"

"She wanting to take pictures."

Ashleigh smiled.

Ashleigh really studied the earrings and the necklace. For the first time Ashleigh was concerned about Julie's spending habits. These items were far from the most expensive jewelry pieces but they were not the costume jewelry sold at a department store. Ashleigh would ask Julie about this on a latter date.

Ashleigh repeated, "If there are any calendars left over give them to Ma. I'm sure she knows of someone who would appreciate the gift card and calendar."

"Momma will too."

Tina said, "We can't open the door."

Julie smiled, "We'll get it."

Stacie pleaded, "It'll melt."

Tina asked, "What's it called?"

"Custard."

The twins made a face.

Ashleigh stopped Julie before they stepped onto the porch, "I believe your mother does. But if I bypassed Ma and asked Nicole wouldn't Ma be upset?"

Julie smiled.

Ashleigh winked.

Ashleigh mentioned, "I like the sign."

"Captain made it a long time ago."

Stacie pleaded, "It'll melt."

Julie made a face. Dustin who was standing off to the side reached over and rang the doorbell.

"Did Jimmy build the swing?"

Julie looked at the swing on the porch, she smiled, "Both Daddy and Jeff built it."

"Your Dad is a great carpenter."

This impressed Julie.

This is when Captain opened the door. The twins: rushed passed him, Tina yelled something about the gifts, and Stacy mentioned something about the custard. Dan and Darrin were there to grab Ashleigh's boxes.

Dustin insisted on carrying the box into the house himself. Without Captain standing there they would have argued about this.

"Howdy Ms. Ashleigh."

With a wink and a smile, "Hi."

"Glad Y'all could make it."

Very serious, "I'm honored."

Captain gently shut the door behind them. Ma was there to greet Ashleigh.

"Howdy Ms. Ashleigh."

"Hi."

"Ain't Y'all looking pretty."

"Thank-you."

She touched Ma's arm, "You look wonderful yourself."

Ma smiled and ignored the compliment.

"Let me introduce Y'all to our family and friends."

Ashleigh with a smile said, "I'd like that."

End of Part Two of Five

December 25th, Christmas Surprise:

The Next Day

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Monday
December 25

Christmas Surprise:
The Next Day

Day 9 of Book I
(One Day after Nicole's Annual
Christmas Eve Party)

Part Three of Five

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 character getting up and ends with one or more characters going to bed; while during the day you experience the Characters actions, feelings, and their thoughts. On a large overview; there is a beginning, a middle, and an end to this "Story Cast"

R. P. Voght

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December 24, Christmas Surprise Christmas Eve Day 8 of Book I

(One Day after Nicole's Annual Christmas Eve Party)

Megan spotted Ashleigh parking her Jeep.

Nicole: nudged Megan, nodded her head toward the window, and whispered; "Ashleigh's here."

Megan responded with a whisper of her own, "Should I go..."

The whole house heard Julie yell, "Ms. Ashleigh is here. I'll help her."

Everyone heard Stacie and Tina yell at the same time, "We'll help too."

Dustin ran up to Julie and asked, "Y'all think she'd want my help?"

Julie responded with a smile, "I'm sure she'd love for Y'all to help."

His brothers and Tyrone snickered.

Julie glared at them.

With a tone stated, "She dislikes immaturity."

If it was any other girl the boys would have lipped back. They kept their cool by pretending they never heard her. Tyrone was the grandson of Owen.

Jeff was no longer paying any attention to the men standing around him. He was smart enough to remain where he was. The only reason he was showing any restraint was because of a talk his Mother had with him before leaving the house. Otherwise he would have volunteered to help.

Tina and Stacie ran from the stairs to the door.

Ma yelled, "Girls!"

They stopped and turned toward Ma.

Sternly Ma yelled, "No running in the house."

They both answered at the same time, "Yes Ma'am."

"Y'all are excused."

"Yes Ma'am."

Julie glanced back from where the youngest set of twins ran from: her sister Ester, her cousin Luke, and Tyrone's sister Renee were all playing near the bottom of the stairs.

The twins walked as fast as they could toward the door; just a hair faster and they would have been yelled at.

Julie commanded, "Stop at the door."

They answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Julie: turned around, opened the door, and led Dustin and the twins outside.

Diana, Dustin's mother, stepped into the dinning room carrying a bean casserole.

She stated, "Dustin is sweet on her."

Nicole believed this pleased Diana.

This added to the discussion about Ashleigh. While everyone was talking Nicole was inspecting where everyone was to sit. Being subtle, to avoid offending Megan, she was glancing at the white folded cards carefully placed just behind everyone's plate. Nicole appreciated where Megan placed her son; he was next to her on the same side as Ashleigh. In this spot he would have to lean over Nicole to stare at Ashleigh. She took noticed he was given a China plate. Along with her son: Betty-Lynn, Violet, Dan, Tyrone, and Julie were all seated in front of China plates; this was the first year teenagers were given China plates.

Nicole moved a dish so Diana could set the bean casserole down.

Rebecca stepped into the dinning room carrying a pitcher of sweet iced tea. At six three Rebecca was the only woman taller than Megan. She had: long dark wavy hair, her white skin was tan, an oblong shaped face, a wide nose, very large luscious lips, dark winged tipped eyebrows, high cheekbones, dark brown eyes, small breasts, long strong legs, and a padded butt. She was wearing a beige colored crocheted tape yarn cardigan with a full peasant skirt with Caribbean print; the top of the skirt was white but blended into a dark red color. She accessorized with simple loop earrings, a few gold bracelets, a simple watch, and nice looking flats. With Rebecca wearing flats and Megan wearing heels they were the same height.

Rebecca and Megan always had a bond. They were similar in age and enjoyed many of the same activities. Megan always liked Rebecca because she never criticized her for liking sports. Like Megan, Rebecca liked a variety of sports. Rebecca's favorite sports were: softball, basketball, golf, tennis, bowling, and surfing. As adults they adored one another and respected the others career choice. Rebecca believed Megan was brave to purchase her own charter. Megan admired the work Rebecca put into becoming a successful dentist.

Megan was surprised Rebecca was a lesbian. Growing up Rebecca: talked about boys, talked about getting married, had a long term boyfriend in high school, a lot of guys liked her, and she enjoyed many girly things. Megan felt like a hypocrite thinking this way. Megan was often times hurt when people considered her a lesbian because she enjoyed what people considered male activities.

Megan felt compassion toward Rebecca. Megan felt the only reason Rebecca came out of the closet was because of the erroneous belief she was a lesbian. It was obvious to Megan, Rebecca was nervous and was trying to prove she was the same person the family always knew. Megan sensed an uneasiness between the two lesbian lovers and the family. Megan felt

they wanted to encourage one another with non-sexual touch but refrained from doing so. Megan believed if a heterosexual couple showed outward signs of affection this would cause a controversy; she surmised if two lesbians showed outward signs of affection the awkward truce between everyone would come undone.

Megan smiled at Rebecca before moving a dish.

In the empty spot Rebecca placed the pitcher.

Rebecca believed a lover encouraged Megan to wear the Spanish inspired outfit.

Rebecca nodded her head and stated, "Thank-you."

Meredith stepped into the dinning room carrying a seafood macaroni salad. She: was three inches shorter than Rebecca, was four years older than Rebecca, had long brunette hair with red highlights, a long rectangular shaped face, a long skinny nose, long skinny lips, under the lower lip was a permanent scar, had light green eyes, and her white skin was tan. She was wearing: a white quarter length puff-sleeved button blouse with a large tie in front, black leather pants, black flats, one simple black watch, light makeup, two post earrings, and her hair was done nice. The shirt somewhat hid her medium sized breasts but her leather pants highlighted her long legs. It was obvious she spent time working out. This was easy for her. As a college professor and an assistant volleyball coach for the University of Miami; she took advantage of the Universities facilities.

When Meredith was a senior at the University of Florida and Megan was a freshman at Florida State University; their volleyball teams played against one another. Megan was trying to find a good time to mention this.

Nicole asked the two ladies on how they met. They explained. While Meredith was coaching she was beamed with a volleyball. A bottom tooth gave her the scar under he lip. She was rushed to the University Hospital, the emergency room was able to remove the front tooth from her lower lip, but Meredith needed to see a dentist. The emergency room doctor suggested the clinic Rebecca worked for. While Rebecca was fixing Meredith's teeth, Meredith asked Rebecca out.

Megan felt Meredith was brave in asking Rebecca out. Megan assumed it was difficult knowing if a woman was one or not. She wondered what made Meredith believe Rebecca was a lesbian.

Meredith studied Megan: Megan grabbed the pitcher she was holding, handed her a different bowl, asked her to hold it for a second, Megan set the pitcher in the place of the bowl, handed a different dish to Rebecca, rearranged some items, then took the items back, and placed these items in different spots.

Meredith understood why a straight person would believe Megan was gay. She took this thought a step further and envisioned the heartache a lesbian would go through if she fell for Megan. She imagined more than a few lesbians testing the waters with Megan and Megan completely missing the fact she was being hit on. Meredith believed a lesbian would have to throw themselves at her. Meredith felt sorry for any women who would try to seduce Megan. Meredith believed if another woman tried to even touch Megan, Megan would have made a hasty retreat to the door or punch the gal. If by some miracle a lesbian was able to seduce Megan, Megan would have never performed oral, and would have likely refused the lover to perform it on her. Meredith imagined Megan doing what Meredith termed a reverse coming out. Meredith imagined the shock and hurt the lover would go through when Megan would announce being with a woman was a mistake and she was straight.

Rebecca asked Megan, "Y'all fold the napkins?"

Megan flashed her dimple smile.

"It's how I fold em' on my charter.

Meredith asked, "You own a charter?"

Megan flashed her big dimple smile.

"The name of my business is *Dolphin Tours*. I specialize in tours and fishing"

Nicole jumped in, "She also schedules scuba dives."

Megan acknowledged, "The safety of every scuba diver is a top priority."

Meredith asked, "How would I schedule a tour?"

Megan immediately asked, "Would it be business or personnel?"

Stephanie pranced into the room carrying a salad. Stephanie was engaged to Megan's cousin Peter, Peter was the younger brother of Rebecca; they had an older brother named Nelson. Their parents were Ruth and Wayne. Ruth was Captain's younger sister, making Ruth Megan's Aunt and Wayne her Uncle. Nelson was married to Erica. Who happened to be carrying a dish of gravy into the dinning room. Erica cringed every time she spotted the engagement ring. Erica who disagreed with same sex marriage would have felt better if her Sister-in-law received an engagement ring from Meredith. Erica had a list of negative feelings toward Stephanie. Erica believed Stephanie's sexual expertise caused her Brother-in-law to loose all of his common sense.

Megan again shifted some things on the table and both Erica and Stephanie set down the items they were holding.

All of the ladies while having their own conversations were secretly paying attention to the conversation Rebecca, Meredith, and Megan were having. There was still an ongoing debate between many of the family members as to Megan's sexual orientation. Many believed: if Megan was gay she would have come out already, her faith kept her from being gay, because of the families religious beliefs she was in the closet, was in the closet because of Ma, and many family members just hoped Megan was straight. Those who believed Megan was in the closet assumed Ashleigh and Megan were lovers.

"I was feeling our friends would love a tour."

Rebecca mentioned, "I'd love to view dolphins. I'll never forget when Captain took us to see whales."

Megan answered, "My promise is Y'all will observe sea life. It ain't a guarantee Y'all will see a specific species."

Diana holding onto her necklace mentioned, "If anyone is able to take Y'all to see a dolphin or a whale it's Megan."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Daddy was better."

Nicole answered, "Honey; with Captain being retired Y'all are the most knowledgeable charter captain."

The doorbell rang.

Meredith stated, "Sounds like I should schedule a charter."

Megan answered, "If you schedule one I'll give you the family discount. If it's just you and Rebecca Y'all wouldn't have to worry about the cost."

Rebecca touched Megan on the arm, "Y'all would give us the family discount?"

Megan answered, "Just call me a couple weeks ahead of time."

This impressed Meredith. Meredith's idea was to invite two other lesbian couples and a single male coach; she believed he would like Megan.

They heard Tina yell "Ms. Ashleigh bought us presents!"

Stacie added, "She gave us custard."

Timmy, the youngest of Megan's three older brothers yelled at his daughters, "Girls!"

At the same time they stopped and answered, "Yes Sir."

Ester, Luke, and Violet went to see what the twins were carrying.

The ladies in the dinning room smiled and shook their heads.

Ma stepped into the dinning room, "I could use some help?"

Many of the ladies immediately stepped into the kitchen; leaving Meredith, Rebecca, and Megan in the dinning room.

Megan glanced at the table making sure there was room for a few items and the ham.

Rebecca gently grabbed Megan on the arm stopping her from leaving the room. Rebecca felt this was her chance to confront her cousin.

Megan worried Rebecca believed she was a lesbian.

Rebecca envisioned herself being confident and bold but found this day nerve racking. Because of Megan's look, the anger and frustration Rebecca felt toward her cousin dissipated. At this moment, she decided if Megan wanted to stay in the closet this was her choice.

In an appreciative voice Rebecca whispered, "Thank-you."

Meredith was pleased.

Megan flashed her dimple smile.

"Let's see what Ma's needing."

All three ladies turned. They allowed Ruth to pass them. Ruth wondered what the three ladies were talking about. She was certain Rebecca would tell her later. Megan walked passed her Auntie Ruth because she trusted where her Auntie would set the bowl.

They observed: Captain holding open the front door, Dan and Darrin moved from the living room into the hallway, Tina and Stacie insisted on carrying the buckets of custard into the kitchen; this burden was lifted when one of the ladies took the buckets and placed them into the freezer. They: smiled, thanked their elder for taking the buckets, watched the buckets being put away, and eagerly found Ester. In hushed tones guests expressed their knowledge and feelings about Ashleigh. The three ladies observed Ma take off her apron, step out of the kitchen, and approach the door. With Ma approaching the door the signal was, Ashleigh was a guest of Ma and Captain instead of being a guest of Megan.

Captain stated, "Howdy Ms. Ashleigh."

With a wink and a smile, "Hi."

"Glad Y'all could make it."

Everyone heard Ashleigh's serious tone and some witnessed a change in body language, "I'm honored."

They observed Captain gently shut the door.

They witnessed Ma instruct the boys. The boys did as they were told: Ashleigh understanding the situation allowed Darrin to take the box from her hands, the boys along with Dustin set the boxes near the tree, Julie followed behind, and she promised Dustin if he helped her organize the gifts under the tree he would be able to help hand out gifts. He was eager to help Julie. He often wished Julie was an older sister; having three older brothers was sometimes difficult.

Ma stated, "Howdy Ms. Ashleigh."

"Hi."

"Well ain't Y'all looking pretty."

"Thank-you. You look wonderful yourself."

Because of Ashleigh's tone and facial expression Ma knew she was being sincere, "I'll introduce you to family and friends."

"I'd like that."

This is when Nicole started to openly direct everyone on the finishing touches of the meal. She hoped her Son would behave himself. When Nicole spotted Megan heading toward the door, she called out; "Megan."

Megan looked over.

"Help with the fruit basket."

Bessie and Elsie, who were currently working on this project, looked toward Nicole.

Megan asked, "Y'all need help?"

Rebecca smiled, "Yes Ma'am."

Meredith followed them into the kitchen table.

One of Megan's favorite family members was Cousin Bessie. She was the oldest of Auntie Alice and Uncle Cliff, Bessie was married to Lewis; they had two children Betty-Lynn and Luke. Elsie was Bessie's sister-in-law, she married Elsie's younger brother Paul. Elsie and Paul had a daughter named Violet.

Julie instructed Dustin, "Set this by Captain's presents. Don't be dropping it."

"Okay."

He took the gift from Julie and carefully set it down.

Julie was taking interest in Ma introducing Ashleigh. Julie correctly surmised it was her Momma's idea to have Ma introduce Ashleigh.

Julie observed Ashleigh being introduced to Owen and Louise, most everyone in the Steward family called them Uncle Owen and Auntie Louise. This title was by no means a bloodline title, they were both Afro-American. Owen was a Vietnam war buddy and best friend of Captain. Captain encouraged Owen to move to Eastbank after leaving the Navy. Owen was the first Afro-American police officer in Eastbank; he retired as the first Afro-American lieutenant from the Eastbank police force.

Dustin stepped up to Julie, "What else?"

"This is Y'all gift from Ms. Ashleigh."

"What did I get?"

Julie smiled, "I ain't sure."

"Oh."

His disappointed look spoke volumes.

Julie reassured him and whispered, "If Ms. Ashleigh bought Y'all something Y'all will like it."

He smiled, "Really?"

She purposely gave him a face, "Set it by your other gifts."

He again did as he was instructed.

Julie watched Ms. Louise introduce Ashleigh to their oldest son LeRoy and his wife Jasmine. Julie always believed Jasmine was a very beautiful woman; Julie found it ignorant when people discounted her beauty because she was Afro-American. Julie was unable to catch what Ashleigh said but the group honestly chuckled. Like always her Uncle Duke and Leroy were sitting near one another. Julie was told Leroy and her Uncle were the highlights of a terrible Eastbank high school football team. Julie made a face when her Uncle Timmy leaned over and asked Duke what was so funny. Julie looked for Owen and Louise's youngest daughter Annassa and her husband Kevin. Julie spotted Kevin talking to: her Daddy, a close friend of the family Brent, her Uncle Wayne, and her Cousin Nelson. Annassa met Kevin at college. Everyone was excited when Annassa married him. He was a famous football player from the University of Miami, for a few years he was a back up defensive safety for the Washington Redskins. He was now the defensive coordinator at a neighboring school district and was the lead math teacher at a private Christian school. Julie could see why Annassa married him right after college.

Julie felt guilty for her thoughts and turned away.

She studied Captain's best friend Brent. The only time they lived in different towns was when Captain served in the Navy. Julie felt Brent's sense of humor and loyal friendship helped her Grandfather.

She observed her Cousin Nelson and her Uncle Wayne having an intense conversation with her Daddy. Based upon their body language Julie assumed they were discussing: politics, business, Rebecca, or Laura. Julie correctly believed everyone in the family hoped Laura, spending time in the Eastbank County Jail, would get the help she needed. Julie was equally certain they were discussing Rebecca. Julie believed Nelson was worried Rebecca would influence one of his daughters to become a lesbian. Julie felt this was foolish on many levels. All of his daughters had or were in relationships with men; Emma the oldest was pregnant and married. April the second oldest had been in two long term relationships with men. Julie disliked the last guy. This was reaffirmed when: he convinced her to move in with him, strung her along for three years, accepted a job in South Carolina, and wanted her to move without getting married. He moved out when she insisted they get married. It was obvious April was still upset by this. The twins Bree and Casey liked guys but because of their faith took dating seriously. In general, the idea Rebecca would cause her cousins to become gay seemed ignorant. With how tall April, Bree, and Casey were; it was easy to spot them at the open counter talking to Stephanie.

Julie rolled her eyes when Stephanie showed her engagement ring. Julie felt her Cousin Peter deserved Stephanie. Julie was tired of him trying to prove he was smarter than herself; especially when it came to any thing academic. She was keenly aware of the family discussion on whom was smarter.

Julie observed their older sister Emma approach the opening in the wall and communicate something. Emma served in the Navy. She was the shortest of the four sisters but was taller than average. Julie felt sorry for her because she was pregnant with twin boys and her husband was serving in Iraq as a corpsman. Julie half expected her to go into labor before the dinner was over. Julie was certain Jackie and her Momma (Nicole) had a plan if Emma went into labor. Julie felt observing Emma was a reason to avoid an unwanted pregnancy. Julie was well aware, with twins running in the family, she could have twins. Julie

observed the mothers and military wives of the family comfort Emma throughout the gathering.

She spotted Jackie. Jackie was the oldest daughter of Ruth and Wayne. She was the head nurse of a neighboring community hospital. Julie admired her husband George because of the way he treated Jackie; plus she enjoyed his sense of humor. Growing up all Jackie wanted was to be a mother. Due to a medical condition she suffered shortly after getting married she was unable to have any. Everyone correctly believed George was a key to Jackie getting over this huge disappointment. It was well known within the family if you needed help at a moments notice it was Jackie and George to the rescue. They both were heavily involved in their church and were strong Christians. George was a successful franchise owner of five auto supply stores, a couple car washes, and they just purchased a laundry mat.

Julie believed the greatest emotional support for Emma was Betsy. Betsy was the oldest woman currently in the house. Julie spotted her sitting at the kitchen table. Betsy was the wife of Mel Bracken. He was Owen and Captain's commander of the patrol boats in Vietnam. Both Owen and Captain credited Mel for getting them through the war. After the war, Captain encouraged Mel to transfer to Florida, where they both served in the Coast Guard. After Mel retired from the Coast Guard he served as a patrol boat officer on the Eastbank Police force. Julie believed Mel's death, even though it was ten years earlier, still affected Owen and her Grandfather.

Her cousin April called out, "Julie."

She looked toward the voice.

Both Bree and Casey waved Julie over.

Julie nodded indicating she would be right there.

Julie panned the crowd and spotted Ma introducing Ms. Ashleigh to: Auntie Alice, Uncle Cliff, and Bessie's husband Lewis. Auntie Alice was Ma's younger sister. They always sat in the same corner and for the most part huddled together.

She heard Ms. Ashleigh saying she was happy to meet everyone.

Dustin asked, "What's next?"

Julie focused, then answered, "Lets set these over there."

He asked, "What's in these?"

She smiled and answered in a whisper, "Calendars."

He grunted as he lifted the box.

She worried he'd drop the box.

She quickly changed her expression when he looked at her.

She encouraged him by saying, "Y'all are strong."

Julie made Dustin's day with her compliment; which caused him to move quickly.

Julie jumped into action by grabbing the bottom of the box; otherwise these calendars would have spilled onto the floor.

She reassured Dustin, "It was the bottom of the box."

He smiled, "Okay."

Her Auntie Alice: gently nudged Julie, winked, and whispered; "Good catch."

Julie: smiled, set the box down, and whispered, "It'd have been a mess."

Julie heard, Ester say, "Dustin we need to take your picture."

He answered, "You did already."

Auntie Alice suggested, "A picture by the steps would look wonderful."

Ester: eyes went big, she grabbed Dustin's hand, and dragged him to the stairs; where Renee and Luke were waiting to resume playing detective.

When Julie stepped away from the presents Alice waved her over.

Her Auntie Alice asked, "Is it true Y'all walk Ms. Ashleigh's dawg?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Auntie Alice asked, "She ain't like any Yankee I've ever met before."

"No she ain't."

Her Uncle Cliff asked, "What type of dawg is it?"

"A Siberian husky."

Lewis asked, "What's it's name?"

"Nikita."

Auntie Alice commented, "I wasn't figuring Ashleigh was a Russian?"

Lewis rolled his eyes.

Julie answered, "She named it after an old Elton John song."

Alice answered, "I remember it."

Julie knew she needed a clear break or she would be stuck in this conversation, "May I be excused? I believe April was needing help."

Alice smiled, "Honey. Don't worry. Go on ahead."

Julie smiled. When Julie turned around she noticed Ma was leading Ashleigh toward her cousins. This encouraged Julie to quickly cross the living room.

*A*shleigh answered Ma, "I understand."

Nicole winked at Ashleigh.

Ashleigh smiled back.

Ashleigh: watched Ma step over to Nicole, observed them start a discussion, observed Megan and Bessie leave the kitchen each holding watermelon bowls made out of the skin of the watermelon. The other ladies in the kitchen were talking to Rebecca and Meredith.

"Ashleigh."

She turned toward Julie, "Yes."

A few feet from Ashleigh: April, Bree, Casey, and Julie were huddled together. It was obvious Bree and Casey were twins. There were two characteristics which prevented them from being identical. One was their heights; Bree was five nine and Casey was five eleven. The other distinguishing feature was their eyes; Bree had darker blue eyes and Casey had light brown eyes. It was equally obvious the twins were part of the Steward family by their: dark blond wavy hair, their chins, long smiles, high cheekbones, long noses, their long legs, and tiny breasts. It was equally obvious April was a Steward family member. She had: the long smile, high cheekbones, long nose, long legs, and athletic shaped body. The differences between April and the twins were: she was a few years older, had long dark wavy hair, her nose came to a point, her butt was flatter, and her breasts were a cup size larger; which made them a B cup. A huge difference between April and every Steward was her dark brown eyes; they were so dark it was difficult seeing her pupils. All three were wearing very conservative but nice looking dresses.

Ashleigh stepped toward these women.

April was looking forward to talking with Ashleigh. She was grateful Julie called this woman over. After her boyfriend moved out, she needed to move back home with her parents. She desperately wanted to move out. She recommitted herself to Christ and promised herself she would make better life choices. A key to moving out was a better job. After getting a degree in counseling, she found out, there were thousands of college students getting degree's in counseling. Even though they lived an hour north of Eastbank, the word was out, *Renewed Mastery* was paying well. She correctly believed if she was hired on by this company she could move out and pay back her school loans. She was interested in hearing more about internships. She recognized an internship would mean more in the real world than her degree.

Julie reintroduced everyone.

Julie asked Ashleigh, "I apologize I forgot. Would Y'all mind telling us where Y'all are from?"

Ashleigh smiled, shifted her body, and spewed out the information like she had done a thousand times in the last few months; "I don't mind. I grew up in a suburb of Milwaukee Wisconsin. It's called Brookside. Brookside is in Waukesha county. Waukesha county is on the western border of Milwaukee county. Milwaukee is about ninety minutes north of Chicago on Lake Michigan."

The three sisters looked at one another. They were having trouble with how fast she talked and her Midwestern accent. To pronounce Waukesha would have taken some practice.

April covered for all three, "Y'all like living here?"

"Yes I do."

Ashleigh paused.

She reminded herself to speak slower, "Everyone has been real friendly to me. I love how warm it is."

The ladies glanced at one another.

Julie informed her cousins, "Last week my Daddy was in Wisconsin. He told us it was below zero on two of those days."

Bree gave a look.

Casey's eyes went big.

Ashleigh answered, "Weather that cold isn't fun."

Bree commented, "I'm sure it ain't. Shoot, I thought sixty was cold."

April was compelled to ask, "What's snow like? On TV it looks awful pretty."

Ashleigh smiled and waved her hand.

"It's especially pretty after a snowfall. Having snow ball fights or building snowmen is always fun but after a while the cold and snow will wear you out."

Casey asked, "How does it?"

"Shoveling it. The worst is driving in it."

Casey with an amazed voice stated, "Y'all drive in it!?"

Julie jumped in, "Daddy told us people were driving while it was snowing."

The three cousins looked at one another.

Ashleigh answered this look, "They plow and use salt on the roads."

Casey and Bree said with an odd tone, "Oh."

Casey mentioned, "I can't imagine what it feels like."

Ashleigh answered, "You know what I mean by a locked freezer?"

April answer, "The type of freezers they all use in a restaurant or a grocery store?"

“Exactly.”

A pause of shock.

Ashleigh added, “If you ever want to know what it’s like. Strip down to your underwear. Step into the locked freezer. Stand there for ten minutes. Then imagine a wind blowing on you.”

They looked at one another.

Casey asked, “How do Y’all stay warm?”

“Layers.”

Julie mentioned, “Daddy said wearing layers helped.”

“I’m glad the suggestion helped.”

Bree asked, “Y’all enjoy these parts?”

Casey added, “Have you been to Disney? Or have you visited Miami?”

“I saw Miami from Megan’s charter. I just haven’t had time to really visit anything.”

April said in an excited tone, “What else did she show you?”

“She took me out to see some islands. And where Captain found the pirate ship. I enjoyed watching the seals. My favorite was when we followed dolphins.”

Bree mentioned, “I remember when Uncle Dave and Megan first took us out. It was amazing.”

Casey added, “We spotted whales for the first time.”

Bree excited, “It was amazing watching a momma and her calf.”

April smiled, “They were swimming among a full pod of humpback whales.”

Bree added, “Right whales are cool to see.”

“She raved about them. She tried to find em’ but we never came across any.”

Casey with a concerned tone stated, “They’re endangered.”

Bree added, “They ain’t hunted anymore. But they keep running into boats.”

Ashleigh made a face and held in tears.

Casey with a face of her own said, “It’s horrible.”

Knowing the answer April asked, “What has Y’all so busy?”

Ashleigh focused. She accepted the fact locals would often times ask about work.

Casey and Bree were pulling for their sister. Erica who was standing in the kitchen, focused on Ashleigh’s answer, while appearing to be completely focused on the conversation she was currently engaged in. When Nelson heard this question he turned toward the ladies. This caused the men near him to focus on Ashleigh. Which in turn caused others to turn toward Ashleigh.

Ashleigh immediately felt everyone focus their attention on her. This was another confirmation to what: Megan, Diana, Nicole, and her Brother told her.

Ashleigh answered, “I moved down here to work for my brother.”

This is the statement which made Diana turn.

Megan, Nicole, and Ma were making their final touches on the meal.

Bree helping her older sister, “We’ve heard your brother owns *Renewed Mastery*?”

Because of a conversations she overheard between Jimmy and her Daddy, Casey felt transparency was the best approach, “Please forgive me. We’ve heard Y’all are hiring?”

Bree following her sister’s lead, “We’ve all heard good things.”

This is when Diana stepped in, “Ladies.”

She was twirling her necklace.

She stated, "This is Christmas. Ms. Ashleigh is our guest. We ain't wanting to discuss business today."

The twins answered, "Yes Ma'am."

This disappointed April but she understood, "Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh was more than willing to talk about the companies employment needs, but she respected Diana. At the same time, Ashleigh was grateful Diana stopped the direction of the conversation.

Julie witnessing Ashleigh's reaction believed Ashleigh would ask about April.

Diana added, "Let's be showing our guest proper hospitality."

Ashleigh reassured everyone, "We're grateful to hear how much we're appreciated. We are trying our best to bless the surrounding communities."

She smiled.

Winked at April, then whispered, "If you go onto our website there is a list of job openings."

Diana smiled.

April whispered back, "I've heard Y'all have internships?"

"That's a little different. But fill out the application first."

In a very serious tone, "We don't show any favorites."

April whispered back, "Yes Ma'am."

Julie smiled.

Diana nodded her head, she spoke loud enough for Nicole to hear, and wrapped her arms around Ashleigh, "Let's all head into the dinning room and find our seats. They'll be marked."

Nicole looked over at her sister-in-law. There were a few things left, but she trusted Diana.

She stepped out into the living room and announced, "Y'all start sitting down for our annual Christmas Dinner."

There were cheers, people stood up, and loud chatter dominated the house.

Nicole scolded the little ones, "No running."

Diana was about to corral Ashleigh to make sure she reached the dinning room but noticed Ashleigh stop and let the three sisters pass her.

Diana being wise knew to wait for Ashleigh.

Ashleigh whispered, "What's the story?"

Diana: made a face, rolled her eyes, and shook her head.

Erica found an excuse to hang back and listen.

Diana whispered while talking with her hands, "She was being young."

Ashleigh making a face, "It was a guy? Wasn't it?"

Erica wanted to jump in and tell Ashleigh he was the backside of a donkey; she maintained her southern dignity.

"She's a good gal. She's graduated from college and is looking for steady work."

Ashleigh asked, "What's her degree in? Dance?"

"Counseling."

Ashleigh made a face, "Is this the only degree the Universities are handing out?"

Erica wanted to jump up and add her two cents; again she maintained her dignity.

Nicole looked over, "Ladies."

Ashleigh nudged Diana, "You first."

Erica smiled and hurried herself into the dinning room.

Diana smiled, "Y'all are the guest."

She bowed and somewhat glided into the dinning room.

Diana: rolled her eyes, smiled, waved her hand, and touched her necklace.

"Oh my!"

Nicole held in her smile.

Megan spotted Ashleigh and pointed to her spot. Ashleigh quickly noticed her chair was higher than the others. These were the times she wished she was taller; but she appreciated the chair. She liked the fact she was sitting next to Captain, she observed Megan walk around the table, and sit across from her.

They all heard the front door open and close; Sam hurried into the dinning room.

When she reached the room they all heard Ma's comment, "Look at what the cat dragged in."

Sam was annoyed by this but answered, "I was taking care of something important at my shelters."

With a tone added, "I'm here now."

Everyone gave her a look.

Sam answered ladylike, "I'm looking forward to dinner and visiting with Y'all."

Ma smiled, "It ain't to late. We're just sitting down."

Many times Sam was purposely late. Today, she wanted to observe Ashleigh.

Her twins ran up and hugged her; no one would stop this.

Ashleigh watched as Sam settled her twin girls and herself at the table. Ashleigh was certain she had met Sam before yesterday; Ashleigh was annoyed she was unable to figure it out.

Shelly was grateful for her cousin Naomi.

They were spending Christmas afternoon together. Shelly's: mother, step-father, two step brothers, and her son were spending the Christmas afternoon with the Phillips family. Shelly would have been welcomed, treated well, and would have been met with encouragement. Experiencing encouragement from Phillips family seemed just as stressful as the doubt she received the day before. Shelly believed Little Bobby would have a lot of fun with all of the children on Phillips side of the family. To Shelly, spending time with Naomi without Little Bobby was a Christmas Gift; this would have turned into worry if they were separated longer than a half a day.

Naomi's family emphasized Hanukkah over Christmas. On Christmas morning they ate breakfast together. Later in the day everyone would see a movie. On this Christmas, instead of going to a movie, Naomi felt it was better if she spent the time with her Cousin Shelly. Her parents felt this was a good idea. The family as a whole spent many years praying for Shelly. On this particular morning they spent extra time praying for her because of: Shelly contacting Bob, the news Shelly wanted information about her real father, and it was Naomi's feeling Shelly was being tempted to use.

The two cousins were sitting on the couch. On the coffee table was: the opened metal box, court paperwork, newspaper articles, some letters, and old photographs.

Naomi felt great empathy for her cousin.

They spent a few hours reading the legal paperwork. Shelly having a mother as an attorney helped her understand many of the legal terms of this paperwork. However; It was a great benefit to have Naomi explain the legal implications in detail. There were many disheartening items within this paperwork. The two biggest heart breaks was the responses her mother received for a motion to pay child support and paperwork of a criminal court case. Holly filled a motion of child support when Shelly was three. The response to this motion was Holly's father was deceased. Newspaper articles and criminal court paperwork were the answer to how her father passed away. At the time of his arrest he was living in a hippie commune in the State of Iowa. Himself and a group of his friends were driving back from a protest in Des Moines Iowa. Their VW van collided into a Baptist Minister's station wagon. In the station wagon a total of five people were killed and in the van a total of six were killed. Between both vehicles the only survivors were: the minister's wife, a son of the minister, a young woman in the van, and Shelly's father. The young woman perished five days later from the burns she received. The police claimed Shelly's father was the driver and was "under the influence of a variety of illegal substances." Her father claimed he was never driving the vehicle. Based upon eye witness testimony he was the driver. He refused counsel and represented himself. In countless newspaper articles it was often claimed he was overconfident in his own abilities; it was pointed out he never finished his law degree at the University of Wisconsin. The prosecuting attorney made it a point to show how irresponsible he was in every area of his life. The local papers made it a point to inform their readers on how surprised he was at the guilty verdict. Two weeks after his sentencing, while waiting to be transferred to a maximum security prison; he hung himself.

It was Naomi's expert analysis he was: ignorant of his own plight, was foolish in how he handled his own case, his rants against American Justice, and his speeches about socialism were a determinant to his case. Naomi believed he should have taken the plea deal. If he had taken the plea deal: he would have been sent to a minimum security prison, would have received a lesser sentence, and was offered the opportunity for treatment. Naomi believed Shelly's Father struggled with reality.

The minister's wife was the biggest surprise. It was obvious just about every person attending the sentencing wanted him to rot in prison for the rest of his life; many expressed the wish of a death penalty. Based upon the newspaper accounts and court transcripts the Minister's Wife hobbled to the podium. The left side of her body was badly burned and her left leg was severely crippled. The court was silent when she was sworn in. In a very passionate speech: she pleaded for the court to have mercy, she openly forgave Shelly's father, and she warned everyone in the court room. She believed the accident was a sign from God. She passionately warned the country was headed down a wrong path. She believed the young people of her day were being led astray by: the Universities, the media, drugs, soft minded churches, and bad parenting. She believed this was the reason a whole generation was turning away from God and despised the greatest country ever founded. She warned if people continued down the same path each generation would get worse. She made a tearful plea to Shelly's father to accept Jesus into his life and to turn his life around. When she was done an officer of the court gently helped her back to her seat.

A copy of a personnel letter written from the minister's wife to Shelly's father was of interest to both ladies. Based upon the date, she had written this letter after his conviction and

before he hung himself. In this letter: the wife forgave him, encouraged him to change his ways, encouraged him to ask God for forgiveness, and to accept Jesus as his savior. She wrote a few scripture verses in the letter and she encouraged him to read the Bible she sent him.

Shelly and Naomi wondered if he replied to this letter.

They also read the other letters in the box. It was obvious her father wanted Holly to have an abortion. It was equally painful for Shelly to read an angry letter from her Father in response to the news Holly decided to have Shelly. It was even more painful reading her Father's response to the news Holly delivered a baby girl. It was equally hurtful to read a letter from Shelly's paternal grandfather telling Holly the family wanted nothing to do with her Mother or herself. What confused Shelly, was a letter written from an Aunt Vera. In this letter she expressed an interest in seeing Shelly; it was Naomi who pointed out it arrived a few days before the grandfather's letter. Fifteen years later Vera wrote another letter. In this letter Vera informed Holly the grandfather had died and requested to see Shelly. Based upon a follow up letter, it was obvious Holly sent a response to Aunt Vera. This follow up letter follow up a letter expressing remorse and an understanding to why Holly would refuse her invitation. It was obvious by the variety of envelopes, little notes within the envelopes, and the pictures themselves this Vera had been sending photographs of Shelly's family.

Initially Shelly was angry at her Mother. This anger was turned into remorse after reading three specific letters. One was from a supposed high school sweetheart, who accused Holly of knowingly sleeping with her Fiancee while he attended the *University of Wisconsin Madison*. This woman went on to say the family of Shelly's father hated Holly. There was a second angry letter from a different woman in Iowa. She discounted Holly's claim Shelly's father would refuse to pay child support and claimed Holly had been impregnated by someone else. The last letter in the pile, was from an anonymous family member who claimed: Holly was a slut, slept around with a variety of men, it was unlikely Shelly was related to the family, the family always despised Holly, and she was out of line for asking for child support. The worst part of the letter was how this family member blamed Holly for Shelly's Father's downfall. This was a very similar letter to the one Shelly's grandfather wrote; based upon the handwriting it was mostly likely written by a female.

When Shelly put down this letter, with tears falling down her face she asked Naomi, "You think Mother would have slept around?"

Naomi answered by gently showing Shelly a photograph of Vera and Holly; "She looks a lot like you."

Shelly was keeping herself from breaking down.

Naomi pointed out, "She has the same color of hair as you and very similar facial features."

Before Shelly could comment on Naomi's statement she handed Shelly a picture of five ladies standing together. Shelly took the picture, flipped it over, taped to the back of the photograph was a slip of paper, on this paper were their names, and how these ladies were related to Shelly. Vera in this photograph was around the same age as Shelly.

Naomi stated, "She looks exactly like you. Three of those ladies in the photograph have red hair. It's not a coincidence. We are unsure of what Holly was like before she was a Christian. What's important is that woman believes you are her niece."

Shelly wiped away her tears.

Shelly caught a glimpse of her mother in one of the photographs. She picked it up.

Naomi asked, "What did Holly tell you?"

She again wiped away tears and spoke timidly; "She told me when she became pregnant my Father wanted her to have an abortion. When she refused he left her."

Naomi made a face.

"You think this is my Dad?"

She showed Naomi a picture of her mother standing next to a young man; it was obvious they were in college.

Naomi made a face, "I guess Mom was right."

"About what?"

"Holly changed a lot after becoming a Christian."

Shelly commented, "She looks like a hippy."

"They both do."

"I think Mom's high."

Naomi made a face, "Aunt Holly would never get high."

"Look at her!"

Naomi studied the picture, "How can you tell with those awful sunglasses?"

Shelly gave her a look, "Unfortunately I'm very familiar on what people look like high."

They gazed at the picture.

Naomi mentioned, "Whats with the patches?"

"She complains about skinny jeans. The top of those jeans are painted on her."

"Why is your mother wearing a headband?"

"Look at that shirt."

Shelly pointed out, "She's bra less."

"No!"

Shelly made a face, "Look."

They again studied the photograph.

Naomi with a shocked facial expression stated, "Your right."

Shelly commented, "Maybe it's why she's wearing that leather coat?"

"Is it really a coat?"

"It's leather and goes over the front."

Shelly stated, "With how long those fringes are. I'm surprised the coat didn't start on fire."

"Why would she wear that at a campfire?"

Shelly answered, "Who knows."

Naomi pointed out, "If the button to her shirt comes undone the whole world would see her breasts."

They looked at one another with odd faces.

Naomi stated as kindly as she could, "She did have you out of wed lock."

It occurred to Shelly she had never seen a picture of her Mom between her later high school days and college years. Shelly wondered what this young woman was like. If she went back in time would she even recognize the woman she knew as her Mother? Shelly wondered if becoming pregnant was a factor in her Mother becoming a Christian.

Shelly asked in a sincere tone, "Do you feel they loved one another?"

"Lets go with the worst case scenario. Lets say your Mom met your Dad while she was exploring what they called free love."

With a face Shelly answered, "Okay?!"

"I believe based upon this picture she stopped practicing free love and focused on the love she had with your Father. Even if Holly was not a Christian I don't believe she would have slept with someone else while going out with your father. Look at how loyal she is to Phillip."

"That's true."

Shelly was unable to hold back her tears and stated, "He's disappointing."

Naomi again felt compassion for her Cousin.

"Look at him."

They did.

He was wearing: patched bell bottoms, long blond hair, was wearing a tie dye t-shirt with a big white peace symbol plastered on the front, a leather vest, was wearing what they both felt were awful shoes, round sunglasses, and the worst part was the white belt with the large buckle.

Shelly asked, "What's on the belt buckle?"

Naomi took the photograph, she removed her glasses, and brought it near to her. "You don't want to know."

In a demanding tone Shelly stated, "Tell me."

Naomi made a face, "A naked woman."

Shelly started to cry, "I'm a loser."

In a very angry tone, "You are not."

Shelly looked up and wiped away the tears.

"I imagined him different. I'm just like him."

Naomi in an angry tone repeated herself, "No your not!"

They looked at one another.

"You have turned your life around and you have Jesus in your life."

"No wonder she hates me."

Naomi asked, "Who hates you?"

"Holly."

"She doesn't hate you. What she wants is for you to live a clean and prosperous life."

Tears.

"I guess."

"Do you want Robert to have a better life than yourself?"

"Of course."

"Would you want him arrested for drug use?"

"No."

"Okay. I'm sure Holly never wanted you arrested. When you disappeared she believed you had died of a drug overdose. She was preparing herself to view your corpse."

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Naomi made a face, "You never thought about that?"

Shelly made a face and shook her head.

"Shelly!"

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

Naomi was purposely waiting for Shelly to break the silence.

Shelly finally spoke, "I turned out just like him."

Naomi was angry, "The hell you are."

This shocked Shelly, Naomi never swore.

"He obviously didn't accept Jesus. You've gone to treatment. Your turning your life around. He killed himself when faced with prison. You were frightened but you faced your time."

"It wasn't easy."

"It isn't suppose to be."

They both looked at one another.

Naomi continued, "You've made similar mistakes but you aren't a hippy hiding yourself away from your responsibility. How dare you compare yourself to him. Just because your parents have chosen a path doesn't mean you have to take the same path."

Naomi lifted a picture from off the coffee table and handed it to Shelly. Holly and Vera were standing in front of a Christmas Tree. This time her mother was in a baggy type of flower dress, her hair was set nice, she was wearing cheap jewelry, and was in platform shoes.

Naomi pointed at the photograph, "You see your mother standing next to Vera?"

Shelly wiped away a tear and focused.

"There is a woman who knew both your mother and your father. She doesn't look like she hates your Mother. She even wants to have a relationship with you. I'm sure Holly has told her how you are doing."

"You think so?"

Naomi gave Shelly a look.

Tears. Shelly restrained herself from fully crying.

"Why didn't he want me? Why is everything in my life a mess? I wish I would have known her."

Naomi hugged her crying cousin.

While they embraced Naomi whispered, "You'll have to find out for yourself."

Shelly knew this to be true.

Shelly could no longer hold it in and just cried.

Her faith was: giving her the courage to face her family who disbelieved she was staying clean, the strength to contemplate what it meant to have Bobby back in her life, the maturity to look through the metal box, the patience to refrain from being completely angry with her Mother, the ability to forgive her Mother for keeping her away from her Father's family, the wisdom to know there was more to the story, the compassion to see what her Mother had faced as a single mother, and the bravery to reach out to an Aunt she never met. She trusted her faith would see her through. She also believed the people who truly loved her would be there for her.

She especially appreciated her Cousin Naomi.

*M*ary Steward along with everyone else in the family was very conscience of the empty child's plate. At one time there would have been two adult plates on opposite sides of this plate. This plate belonged to a girl named Destiny. Her mother was Stacy, Stacy was the second oldest daughter of Ruth and Wayne. While serving in Iraq Stacy was a victim of a roadside bomb. What was upsetting; she was miles from the front being used in a support role.

Destiny's father was now remarried and had a family of his own. Everyone in the family understood why he remarried. It was frustrating for the family on how they were losing contact with Destiny.

Captain purposefully procrastinated making his yearly Christmas speech and leading everyone in prayer because he was told Destiny was to arrive before dinner started.

Ma reluctantly nodded for him to start.

He glanced at the empty plate and reluctantly stood up.

End of Part Three of Five

December 25th, Christmas Surprise:

The Next Day

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Monday
December 25

Christmas Surprise:
The Next Day

Day 9 of Book I
(One Day after Nicole's Annual
Christmas Eve Party)

Part Four of Five

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 character getting up and ends with one or more characters going to bed; while during the day you experience the Characters actions, feelings, and their thoughts.

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

R. P. Voght

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December 24, Christmas Surprise Christmas Eve Day 8 of Book I

(One Day after Nicole's Annual Christmas Eve Party)

Ashleigh's northern accent stood out when she said, "A-man."

The dinning room erupted in conversation.

Captain's short speech and prayer reminded Ashleigh of her Foster Dad. She was grateful the Steward family invited her to participate in their festivities. She believed this kept her from feeling a little depressed.

She unfolded her napkin and gently set it on her lap.

Ashleigh looked over the table. She wondered how many generations and family functions were held at this antique table. She was astonished at the: quantity, quality, and variety of foods on the table. She was looking forward to trying many of these southern dishes. It brought her comfort to see a bean casserole; this was a must have dish any time her family had a get together. This is when she spotted an empty child's plate. She quickly counted the children, based upon the number of gifts she purchased; the table was short a girl. She wondered about this. She was about to ask Captain about the empty plate but Louise interrupted her.

Louise asked very politely, "Ma'am. Would you like some salad?"

Ashleigh politely grabbed the large bowl of salad, "Yes I'd like that."

Megan grabbed a small dish, "Here is the French dressing."

"Oh thanks."

Rebecca gently bumped Meredith underneath the table and winked.

Meredith gently shook her head no.

This surprised Rebecca.

Nicole was irritated when her Son started to lean over his plate to catch a view of Ashleigh; who was at the end of the table.

She made a face and kicked him.

He sat at attention.

He avoided looking at his mother.

Ma who was sitting at the end of the table next to her Grandson, now understood why he was sitting where he was. Ma completely supported her Daughter-in-laws action. Ma believed Nicole was the best mother of all her Daughter-in-laws; as best as she could she tried to hide this from the others. Ma was keeping an eye on their Yankee guest. She felt there were many layers to this young lady. She believed this young lady looked up to her Husband. She completely trusted her Husband but mistrusted many of the other men sitting at the table. If she believed Ashleigh would have entangle herself with one of these men; there was no way she would be sitting at the table.

Nicole believed many of the men sitting at the table found Ashleigh fascinating. If Nicole felt Ashleigh was the type to sleep around Ashleigh would have been absent from this Christmas get together. As well as, Nicole would have discouraged her Husband from working at *Renewed Mastery*. She was concerned about the rumor, something more than one family member confirmed, was the amount of young women working at the company. Nicole promised herself she would find an excuse to visit Jimmy at his new place of employment. She was listening to the women whisper about Ashleigh. She noticed everyone was avoiding any discussion related to Rebecca and Meredith. While enjoying as many of the conversations as possible she was keeping an eye on the table.

Diana, who was sitting directly across from her nephew, felt he deserved the kick. Diana was aware, Dustin her youngest son, had a crush on Ashleigh too. Because of this crush she began to notice her son was equally fascinated with: Julie, April, Bree, Casey, and seemed to be following around Renee. She was wise enough to recognize, her youngest was unaware of why he was becoming fascinated with the opposite sex. If Diana felt Ashleigh was the type to fool around she would have protested the invite.

All three ladies noticed both the pitcher of iced tea and the spicy sauce Captain and Ashleigh were using were getting low.

At the same time Diana and Nicole stood up.

"I'll get the sweet iced tea."

Nicole volunteered, "I'll get the sauce."

Nicole gently tapped her Son on the shoulder. He knew he needed to behave.

Julie felt her brother was stupid.

She believed it was about time she was given a China plate.

She enjoyed the shocked looks when Ashleigh dumped a large amount of hot sauce on some shrimp. She observed her Momma politely ask Captain and Ashleigh if they needed more.

With Julie sitting near Rebecca, she heard Meredith lean over and whisper, "Megan's straight."

This caused Julie to completely focus on this conversation. Julie found it fascinating Meredith, who clearly was a lesbian, believed Megan was straight. Julie wanted to lean over and tell Rebecca, just about everyone in the family believed Megan and Ashleigh were lovers; at one time this included herself. This was until Megan was confronted and told everyone she was straight.

She turned her attention to Dustin when he asked her another question. She found it sweet on how Dustin kept talking to her. It was obvious he had a crush on her.

While answering Dustin's question she was listening to April explain why she broke it off with her live in boyfriend. Julie disbelieved April when she said she was over him. While feeling sorry for April, she wondered why April was surprised at this outcome; Julie was certain every person in her family warned April about moving in with him. Julie always disliked him.

A conversation she wanted to be involved in was the discussion Ashleigh, Megan, and Captain were having about Nikita. She agreed with Captain when he praised Nikita. She also agreed with Megan when she mentioned how loyal Nikita was to Ashleigh. All at once Megan lowered her tone. Julie surmised she was talking about how protective Nikita was of Ashleigh. Julie appreciated her Auntie speaking softly, because her Momma was worried Nikita would bite someone while she walked her; Julie felt her Mother was being paranoid.

Julie rolled her eyes when she heard Peter say, "So Julie..."

Julie used a sarcastic comment to excuse herself from talking to Dustin; Dustin was too young to catch how sarcastic this comment was.

Julie smiled then focused on her Cousin Peter.

Peter resented her comment.

She was determined to embarrass him this year. She felt this would be the year she would bash him over the head with her intellectual knowledge and her improved debating skills. She planned on using everything she learned from her conversations with Mr. Bob; an example of this learned technique was rightly placed sarcasm.

She smiled when he asked her a question about classical literature. In years past this topic would have overwhelmed her. Today, because of the book reports and discussion she had with Mr. Bob she was prepared for Peter's "discussion." She started it by quoting Walt Whitman word for word and asking him what he felt about it.

Rebecca and Jackie loved the fact her brother was put into his place.

Stephanie came to his rescue by talking about wedding plans.

Jackie was showing a great deal of restraint. She was tired of hearing about their wedding plans. She made her husband George talk to Peter about this woman. She was disappointed her Little Brother failed to listen to her Husbands advice.

Julie's disdain for Stephanie had grown since knowing this woman. She wanted her know it all cousin to be put into his place; however it was something else to have this woman burn her cousin at the stake. Julie believed she was using her sexual skills to blind her cousin. Julie could feel the disdain Stephanie had for her; this went both ways. The reason they were cordial with one another was because it was a family function. Julie believed if the fashion mall closed Stephanie would have a nervous breakdown.

Dustin sweetly mentioned, "I like to read too."

Julie smiled and asked him what books he liked to read.
His brothers laughed at him.
Julie, dripping with sarcasm, put them into their place.
Dustin's response was to puff up his chest and say, "Yea."
His brother threatened him.
Duke immediately said, "Boys."
All three brothers immediately replied back, "Yes sir."

Julie gladly went back to talking to Dustin about books. She clearly remembered many of the children books he talked about.

Julie was aware his oldest Step-brother Dan was jealous. She found it rude her own cousin was continually looking at her breasts. Based upon his body language there were times he became excited while looking at thime. She understood teenage guys had trouble controlling themselves. Even still, Julie felt he needed to get a grip. She understood they were only step-cousins; but they were still cousins.

Bree, Casey, April, Betty-Lynn, and Violet wished their breasts were half the size of Julie's. None of them were aware, Julie wished her breasts were the size of Aprils; and would have been happy if they were as small as her twin cousins.

While talking to Dustin she would glance up at Emma and Ms. Betsy. She wondered if Emma would go into labor before the meal was over. Julie felt it was smart of her Auntie Megan to put these two together.

Nicole held onto the bowl filled with fresh hot sauce.

Diana was now carrying a full pitcher of Sweet Iced Tea.
They were standing in the middle of the kitchen.
In a whisper, "We have to believe what Megan told us."
Diana responding in a whisper, "Are Y'all watching them?"
Still in a whisper, "It ain't any different than Captain and Owen."
Diana gave her a look.

Nicole said, with emphasis, but still in a whisper, "I was hearing Meredith tell Rebecca she believed they were straight."

Diana was shocked by this and touched her necklace, "Do tell."
"I heard her when I was picking up the hot sauce."
"Y'all are pulling my leg."
"I ain't."

Diana touching her necklace, again in a whisper, "No offense now."
"None taken."

"If she's believing Megan and Ashleigh are straight. I'm certain they've been telling us the truth."

"It ain't a stretch."

Nicole made sure everything was okay between them by stating, "Lets see what else we're needing to bring to the table."

"Good thinking."

Diana whispered, as they headed to the dinning room, "Y'all ready to start delivering a baby?"

Nicole answered, "I'm glad I never had twins."

"Y'all ain't whistling Dixie."

This is when the doorbell rang.

They heard Ma, "I'll get it."

Nicole and Diana stepped over to the hallway so they could observe the door. Ma opened it. In the doorway was Destiny and her Father.

Diana whispered, "It's Destiny."

Ruth rushed passed them. It broke the two ladies hearts when this ten year old girl rushed into Ruth's arms and yelled, "Nana!"

It was impossible for these two ladies to hold back tears. They quickly regained their southern dignity.

*A*shleigh witnessed: the little girl run up to Ruth, Ruth picked her up, they embraced, after a few moments Ruth gently set the girl down, she stepped up to the man in the doorway, they hugged, they spoke for a short time, Ruth parted when the little girl tugged on Ruth's dress, Ma watched Ruth lead this little girl to the table, Ma talked with this young man, grabbed his hand, and then prayed for him. Ashleigh could tell there was a mutual respect between all three of them. What confused Ashleigh, was everyone at the table was in a relationship or was single; as far as she knew no one was divorced. She observed: the man thank Mary, step away from the door, Mary shut the door, looking at the door she reached into a pocket and took out a tissue, Ashleigh observed her use the tissue to wipe away tears; like everyone else at the table they turned away before Mary looked into the dinning room.

Captain leaned over and told Megan, "Destiny arrived."

It was rare to see Megan hold back tears.

Louise gently touched Ashleigh, they leaned in, and Louise whispered, "Her Momma passed servicing in Iraq."

This surprised Ashleigh.

Ashleigh could tell this little girl was nervous. She had many physical features of the Steward side of the family: long dark blond hair, dark blue eyes, and was tall for her age; Ashleigh was certain she was the tallest girl in her class. Based upon her facial features Ashleigh estimated her age to be around ten.

Captain stood up, "Howdy Destiny."

Destiny looked over at Captain.

Her Grandmother whispered in her ear.

Destiny turned around and pointed, "Sir."

"Yes."

"Y'all are Captain."

"Yes Darling."

He held in his emotion, "We're delighted Y'all could make it. We have a seat waiting for Y'all."

Ruth tried to lead her to this seat. This stopped when Destiny spotted her Grandfather. She became excited and started to repeat "Papa!"

She ran over to him.

No one said a word when this tough man teared up. He lifting her up and gently hugged his Granddaughter.

Nicole somehow refrained from breaking down. She went around the table, touched Ruth on the shoulder, grabbed Destiny's plate, touched her leg, and asked; "Honey. Y'all hungry? What would Y'all like to eat?"

"Auntie Nicole."

Ruth: regained her strength, took a deep breath, stepped up to Nicole, and nodded.

Nicole: winked, touched Ruth on her shoulder, and sat down.

Slowly conversation picked up again.

Ashleigh wiped away tears. It touched her heart when every single lady was helping her. These ladies reminded her of her Foster Mom Victoria. This added to the respect she felt toward the women in this family.

There were times when Destiny would make a face. Great grace was given. It was impossible for Ester to refrain from talking to her favorite cousin. Julie suggested Dan move so Ester could sit next to Destiny. This forethought encouraged Nicole. Somewhere within her teenagers brain was planning and courtesy. Nicole rethought her own thinking. This suggestion was not only about Ester it was about Dan sitting in a place where he was unable to glance at Julie's breasts.

Captain sat down when Destiny was settled and was ready to eat.

Ashleigh leaned into Captain and whispered, "What Happened?"

Captain was wise to give Ashleigh grace, "She was in a support role and her Hum V was hit by a road side bomb. She survived but lost both her legs."

Ashleigh could feel how difficult this was for Captain.

"We were happy she made it back."

He held in tears.

Ashleigh was having difficulty doing so.

Everyone knew what they were talking about.

Captain continued, "Almost a month after arriving home she developed an infection. Within forty-eight hours we lost her."

There was a pause.

Captain said, "She was fighting it until the end. One of the reasons she was fighting was on account of the little girl."

As a good soldier, he regained his composure, and purposefully asked, "Darling Y'all enjoying the dinner?"

She smiled, "Yes sir."

"Youngin' you are welcomed here any time. Y'all understand?"

She smiled again, "Yes sir."

Destiny loved her Momma's family. What was difficult about visiting her Momma's family was memories of her Momma flooded into her. All at once she stopped eating.

Ruth leaned in and asked, "Honey what's the matter?"

She started to cry, "I miss Momma."

Silence.

Ma broke it, "Honey; it's alright to be missing her. We're missing her too."

Destiny looked at Mary, "Y'all are?"

"Y'all understand because she loved the Lord she's in heaven."

Destiny answered, "It's what Daddy and my Step-Mom says."

Silence.

Ma broke it, "Honey they're both right."

Conversations and eating started up again.

Ester stated, "After eating we're going swimming."

Destiny gave a sad look, "I don't have a suit."

Ma jumped in, "We have extra suits in back. Y'all welcome to one."

Destiny smiled, "I'm in a swimming meet next week."

Captain leaned in, "You give em' hell."

Her eyes became wide, "You ain't suppose to swear."

Everyone laughed.

Ma glanced at Captain then looked at Destiny, "Youngin' Y'all are right."

Ashleigh noticed every adult and just about every girl teenager was making sure Destiny was happy. Ashleigh felt the emotion of loosing a man in battle was terrible; but loosing a Mother in battle; was beyond anything Ashleigh could express.

Ruth lovingly helped her Granddaughter.

What Ashleigh found comforting was when: Ester, Destiny, the twins, and all the young girls started to talk to one another. They had to be quieted down.

Nicole and Diana both pulled out from the table, grabbed a couple empty dishes from off the table, and headed into the kitchen.

Emma left the table and followed the two ladies.

In the kitchen Nicole comforted a military mother.

While this happened Diana washed out the dishes and place them into the dishwasher.

Diana went back into the dinning room.

Before sitting down she stepped over to Betsy and whispered in her ear. Betsy knew what to do. Since the darkest days of Vietnam she had been there for: wives, mothers, sisters, sons, and as of late husbands. She spotted Ma getting up as well. All Betsy had to do was nod. Based upon Betsy's look Ma felt it was best if she remained seated.

Megan spotted Ashleigh lean back over to Captain and ask, "What's her full name?"

Captain leaned in, "Destiny Renee Clark."

Ashleigh would never forget this girls name.

The room was full of many conversations.

Megan noticed Nicole, Betsy, and Emma step back into the room. All three started to take empty dishes and food off of the table. Nicole was about to grab the dish with the seafood salad.

Megan heard Ashleigh state, "Just a second."

Megan looked over concerned, "Honey, Is everything alright?"

Ashleigh winked touched Nicole on the arm, "It's fine. I'd like the rest of it."

"Go right ahead."

The whole table watched as Ashleigh took a giant spoonful; which was the last of it and plopped it on her plate.

Ruth asked, "Sweetie. Y'all must like it?"

Megan was unsure of how to rescue her friend.

"This is some great stuff. Until I moved here I never knew how good seafood could taste."

Ma answered with a smile, "We're happy Y'all like it."

Ashleigh smiled, "It's been great. I'm glad you invited me."

Everyone was pleased with Ashleigh's authentic answer and actions. Ashleigh sat back down and with manners started to eat the seafood salad.

Many of the women were envious of Ashleigh's metabolism. They were unaware of the time she was spending with Julie and Megan working out; Ashleigh felt her biggest accomplishment was surviving Megan's beginners aerobic class at the YMCA.

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

She heard Ester explain to Destiny why Ashleigh talked funny. Megan was happy her friend was accepted. She was enjoying the moment by listening to the stories, debates, and the tall tales. Her dream was to one day host this Christmas dinner at her house with her own family. She wondered if Christopher was to be the husband in this vision.

Owen snapped Megan out of this vision and asked how business was.

Many in the family listened.

The ladies of the family, started to pick up a plate or a dish and walk it into the kitchen. Megan excused herself from talking to Owen and did the same. Everyone at the table gasped when Ashleigh: grabbed her plate, Louise plate, Captain's plate, and a couple empty dishes from off the table. She was holding all of these plates like a waitress.

Megan's dimples flashed as she walked on by.

She was tired of telling her stubborn friend to stop helping.

Captain snapped out of his shock, "Shorty."

"Yeah?"

"What are Y'all doing?"

She gave him an odd look.

"Helping."

He was about to say something but Ma from across the table shook her head.

This shocked everyone who never met Ashleigh before today. All of the ladies in the kitchen were dumbfounded when they spotted Ashleigh step into the kitchen holding the dishes like a waitress. In the dinning room there was surprised talk about Ashleigh helping.

Nicole rushed over and gently commanded, "Give em' here."

"I was trying to help."

Megan's smiled her big dimple smile.

Nicole whispered sternly, "Y'all get back to the table."

"You don't need any help?"

Megan gave Ashleigh a tray of Christmas cookies.

"Help me bring the desserts out."

Diana with a smile, "Honey."

"Yeah."

"We'd be honored for Y'all to sit at the table and enjoy our fine desserts."

"You don't need any help?"

Ruth smiled, "Honey. We're fine."

Ashleigh shrugged her shoulders and carried the tray of cookies into the dinning room.

Megan was following Ashleigh in a way where it was impossible for Ashleigh to turn around.

Ashleigh tried to turn around after setting the cookies down. She changed her mind because of Megan's look.

Rebecca again looked over at her lover. Meredith again shook her head no.

Meredith was determined to prove Megan was straight. Based upon whispered comments and conversations she heard the majority of the people at the table believed Megan and Ashleigh were lovers; this included her own lover. She disapproved of the comments Timmy made about his own sister. Meredith took special note of the chastisement Sam gave Timmy for these comments. Meredith felt Timmy was being awful hypocritical. Meredith suspected Sam was bisexual and guessed they participated in threesomes. Meredith felt Sam was attracted to: Rebecca, Jasmine, Annassa, Megan, Bree, Ashleigh, and herself. Meredith was equally certain Sam would never act on this attraction because these people were family. Meredith was attracted to Sam, but Meredith believed no matter if a couple was straight or gay; adding partners was a disaster. Based upon Sam's comments to her Husband, Meredith believed Megan was deeply hurt her family believed she was a lesbian. Meredith believed it was just as hurtful for a straight person to be accused of being gay, as it was for a homosexual to feel as though they should live straight.

Ashleigh sat down.

Megan was setting down an apple pie.

Meredith said, "Megan."

Megan stood up and smiled. "Yes."

Meredith continued, "I know a great guy. He's one of the assistants of the football team. Are Y'all interested in double dating with Rebecca and I?"

Anyone in ear shot focused on this conversation.

"Of course."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I promised Christopher I'd go out with him first. If it doesn't work out I'd love to meet him."

Meredith smiled, "Let Rebecca know if it doesn't work out. I'm sure the two of you would hit it off."

Megan asked, "Is he seeking a long term relationship?"

"Yes."

"If you don't mind me asking. Is he a Christian?"

"He talks about Jesus all the time."

This encouraged Megan a great deal. "

He wouldn't get angry at me for knowing as much about football as he does?"

Meredith was honest, "He ain't that type of guy."

Megan produced her big dimple smile.

Then suggested, "We could go out to lunch and then mini golfing."

"Y'all like mini golf?"

"It's fun."

Ashleigh while eating a cookie was paying close attention.

Rebecca jumped in, "Some of our friends like mini golfing. Y'all like to go with us?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I hope Y'all won't take this the wrong way."

Rebecca answered, "Off course not."

Megan sighed, "Sometimes lesbians get the wrong idea."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Somethings."

She stopped and thought about the way she wanted to phrase her thought.

"Ladies get the wrong idea about me."

Rebecca could visibly see how hurtful this was to Megan.

Captain smiled.

Megan's dimples flashed.

"What's worse is I've been led on by guys"

Her dimples flashed. It was obvious she was trying to say what she felt.

Ma was about to stop this conversation. Nicole stopped Ma. She understood what Meredith was trying to do. Nicole set down her version of key lime pie; there were two other versions on the table.

Megan found the words, "Without trying I've led a few ladies on. I ain't intended to do so. I ain't wanting anyone getting the wrong idea."

Rebecca sunk in her chair.

Meredith answered, "You shouldn't take it personnel. We'll make mistakes. I see lesbians get crushes on straight gals all the time."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"It's awkward."

Meredith being reassuring said, "It's awkward for us too."

Megan looked around and asked in a whisper because there were young children in the room. "May I ask Y'all something?"

"Sure."

Megan blushed.

This shocked the family because it was rare to see Megan lack confidence.

Rebecca whispered, "Notice one another?"

Julie appreciated what Meredith was doing. What Julie found funny was the fact her Auntie was clueless. At the same time, Julie felt sorry for her Auntie, because it was obvious her Auntie was upset people believed she was a lesbian.

Diana set down a brown sugar pound cake. She stood there. She was unable to stop herself from hearing the answer.

Ashleigh admired Meredith for what she was doing.

Meredith made a face, "Sometimes we just know."

Rebecca feeling foolish answered, "I could tell by how she was dressed and by how she was talking."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan replied, "I know of many gals who dress feminine and they are. Sometimes people believe someone is when they ain't just because of the way they dress. Or because of what a person likes."

Rebecca felt horrible; it was obvious being accused of being gay hurt Megan a great deal.

Nicole winked at Ma and went back into the kitchen.

Meredith understanding her surroundings said, "We all make mistakes. Sometimes stereo types are true and sometimes they ain't. Sometimes Y'all don't know until a pass is made."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She thought of Gina and Michelle.

"Y'all should forgive us ladies for making a mistake now and then. I just knew Rebecca was."

Rebecca added, "I felt she was when she stepped into the office. To make sure I hinted."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I'd never have guessed just by looking at either one of Y'all."

This comment surprised everyone who heard it. It was obvious Meredith was and it was no surprise Rebecca admitted she was.

Sam kicked Timmy hard. She believed this conversation was happening because of his big mouth.

Nicole overheard Renee ask her mother, "Tell what?"

Diana jumped in and asked, "Y'all like some brownies with ice cream?"

Tina mentioned, "It ain't Ice Cream."

Stacie added, "It's called custard."

Sam turned toward Ashleigh, "You brought custard?"

"Yes."

Everyone looked at Ashleigh.

Ashleigh answered, "It's like a creamer ice cream. It's big in Wisconsin."

Tina said, "You say Wisconsin funny."

Sam scolded, "Girls."

"Yes Ma'am."

Everyone smiled.

Renee answered, "I'll try it."

Jasmine winked at Nicole.

She winked in return.

Others requested to try this Wisconsin dessert.

Nicole asked, "Megan help us bring out the rest of the desserts. We'll need to start dishes."

Megan looked around, she whispered, "May we all talk about this some other time?"

"Of course."

Megan making sure they knew whispered, "I ain't a lesbian."

Meredith whispered back, "I could tell Y'all are straight."

This caused Megan to flash a big dimple smile.

She then whispered, "I'm trying to understand why gals find me attractive."

Meredith smiled, winked, and answered, "Because Y'all are an attractive woman."

Rebecca was completely blown away by the whole conversation.

What surprised Rebecca was when Megan whispered, "A lot of gals like my rear end and legs."

Realizing she said this with family around: she blushed, she stood straight up, and said somewhat loudly, "Excuse I'm needing to help."

Meredith with a smile answered, "Oh go on ahead."

*A*shleigh giggled.

Captain mentioned to Meredith, "She's single on account she's looking for a gentleman. These days it ain't easy finding a man who knows how to treat a lady."

Rebecca acknowledged with a smile, "You've always treated Auntie Mary well."

"It's nice Y'all noticed."

Ashleigh smiled.

Captain turned toward Ashleigh and asked, "Shorty have you seen a man treating his wife well?"

"My foster Dad treats Victoria. Victoria is my Foster Mom. Like you treat Ma."

Ashleigh choked up a little.

"Without them I wouldn't know who God was and I don't believe I'd be the person I'm today."

He leaned in, "Shorty; if Y'all needing anything you can talk to either Ma or myself."

Ashleigh was unable to stop the tears, "I'd like that."

Megan set down the last dessert.

Ashleigh asked, "What is it?"

Meredith smiled, "I made it. It's a receipt from my Brother-in-law. It's a Puerto Rican Pineapple Rum Cake."

"That sounds good."

Ashleigh stood up and put out her plate and took a slice.

Meredith mentioned, "He'd admire how you indulge in spicy foods."

Captain looked at this young lady when she said, "It isn't a big deal. I've always been able to eat spicy foods."

Duke stated, "Y'all have to try Ma's buffalo wings."

Megan looked over at Nicole.

Nicole smiled.

Diana touched her necklace.

Jimmy spoke up, "Y'all have to be careful with them wings."

Ashleigh asked, "Why?"

Duke answered, "On account of Daddy's sauce."

The whole table was staring at Ashleigh. She made a face, "There hasn't been a sauce I haven't been able to eat."

Captain was about to speak but Ma caught wind of the conversation and scolded, "Pa it's Christmas. We ain't talking about wings."

Ashleigh was able to recognize this stopped something.

Rebecca whispered to Meredith, "I'll tell Y'all later."

Before conversation broke out again, Ashleigh said loud enough for everyone to hear, "Ma and Captain I'm honored to be here today. I feel like I'm at home."

Ma smiled, "Darling. May God bless you. We're thank full Y'all are here."

Captain admired this Yankee, "I'm repeating myself on purpose. If Y'all are needing anything the door is open."

"I won't forget."

He nodded his head.

Everyone at the table knew what this meant.

Julie was about to chastise her Cousin Darrin. These were the times she disliked her breasts. She wished: they were smaller, were shaped different, and disliked how her nipples reacted when she was aroused. She admired her Uncle Duke when he reached over and snipped him on the back of the head. She would have had a little bit more understanding if they were swimming or playing a sport, but she was just sitting there in a modest dress.

What helped her feel better was when Dustin asked, "Y'all like the brownies?"

Julie smiled, "Yes."

"Y'all like the pie?"

"I love my Momma's key lime pie."

"My Momma makes key lime pie."

Julie winked, "I've tasted your Momma's pie. I think it's good too."

He smiled.

"Y'all like the custard?"

"It tastes funny."

Julie asked, "Why does it taste funny?"

"It tastes funny. I ain't like any ice cream I've tasted before."

Destiny said, "But it ain't ice cream."

She turned toward Ashleigh, "Ma'am I like it."

Ashleigh smiled, "I'm glad."

Ruth said, "Her name is Ms. Ashleigh."

Julie knew what was coming.

"Ms. Ashleigh I like it."

Ashleigh responded with, "You don't have to call me Ms. Ashleigh call...."

Captain gently nudged her, leaned over, "In the south we teach our children manners. With Y'all being a leader in this here community and Y'all are an elder she needs to have manners."

Ashleigh would never openly disagree with Captain. She answered, "You call me Ms. Ashleigh."

"Yes Ma'am,"

Destiny said, "Step Mom should buy this."

This tug at everyone but not a single person said a word.

"I ordered it from Wisconsin."

"Oh."

Julie smiled, "It's up north."

"Oh."

Tina said, "She lives next to..."

Stacy finished, "A big lake."

Julie answered, "It's called Lake Michigan."

Julie observed the ladies sit down one at a time. Each with their own bowl of custard. Julie was surprised on how much Megan had. She never ate a lot of dessert.

Many told Ashleigh they liked it. She mentioned how she liked the key lime pie; which was true.

Conversations started up again.

Many of the guests were on their second helping of desserts. Some of the children were now being excused from the table. Before being excused many of them asked when they were going to open presents.

Julie was enjoying her selection of desserts. This is when Peter started to ask her about World War Two fighter planes. She matter of fact answered his question, gave extra information, and then asked him a question about the P-38 fighter plane. She loved his look of dismay. She was grateful for Mr. Bob's fascination with World War Two. This fascination caused her to look up the history of World War Two; which in turn helped her embarrass her cousin. He obviously picked this topic in the belief she would have cared less about World War Two airplanes.

Dustin was excused from the table.

Jackie decided to sit next to Julie. Julie was delighted she sat next to her. The disappointing part of the conversation was discussing her volleyball team. Just like everyone else Julie knew, Jackie encouraged her, and reminded her volleyball was a team game. A favorite part of the conversation was talking about Nikita. What surprised her was when Jackie asked her if she had any boyfriends. Julie answered by telling her how frustrating boys her own age were and how she wanted to avoid the complications of dating. This impressed Jackie and most of the ladies who were casually listening to this conversation.

There were four women who took note on how she bluntly attacked the notion of dating but tapped danced around the obvious obsession she had with men. Because of this conversation these four women believed Julie was starting to become sexually active. Diana heard similar answers when she confronted Laura about being sexually active. Annessa was bluntly seeing through this teenagers coded conversation. Rebecca said the exact same things when she became sexually active in high school. Diana and Annessa both believed having sex before marriage had detestable consequences. Rebecca and Sam hoped she was being responsible and would avoid getting a sexual transmitted disease or end up pregnant. Never once did Rebecca or Sam believe Julie was interested in women. All four wondered how deep she was getting. Diana promised herself to discuss her concerns with Nicole. Sam would find the time to talk to Julie herself. Annessa and Rebecca felt it was far from their place to bring it up; both would have said their piece if they were asked. Ashleigh missed this conversation because Duke sat next to her and started to talk business.

Diana knew enough to never interrupt her husband when he was talking business. Diana believed he was helping Ashleigh out by having this conversation next to Captain.

*A*shleigh looked Duke squarely in the eye.

She was blunt, "My brother will shut down the company before he'll ever allow a union in."

Duke was taken back by Ashleigh's immediate change in demeanor. She had gone from the bubbly outgoing Ashleigh everyone knew; to a stern business woman. What occurred to Duke was a hidden talent of Mr. Waller was teaching and mentoring. He spotted this influence in both Ashleigh and in his Niece. He was certain the reason Julie was able to put Peter in his place was an influence of knowing Mr. Waller.

Ashleigh answered Duke's look, "He's so against unions he wouldn't even sell it. He'd finish all of his orders and empty out the complex. He's pushed out unions before."

Duke commented, "We're here to protect..."

Ashleigh sternly and politely interrupted, "We don't buy the unions bull shit."

Captain and Duke looked at one another.

"Because of the way other companies have treated their employees and have been treated they need a union. My brother cares about his employees. We treat them well. He isn't going to sell. As long as I'm around. The policies he's started are going to stay. There isn't a need for a union in our company."

Captain smiled. Captain recognized she was being trained up. He wondered what her Foster Parents were like.

Duke answered honestly, "We've heard good things."

"I'm certain you have."

Duke mentioned, "People have noticed how well Y'all have treated the construction crews."

Ashleigh gave Duke a look and turned to Captain.

Captain nodded.

This gave Ashleigh the assurance to proceed.

"You tell your people if they stop trying to infiltrate our company I'll make sure your people are blessed in other ways."

Duke was surprised Ashleigh knew the union was trying to get a foot hold into the company. His colleagues were surprised at the push back they were receiving.

"We. I'm speaking for Bob and I. Understand a worker has the right to choose a union. What we don't like is how the unions protect crappy workers and how they steal from employees. Again, we treat our employees in such a way where having a union would hurt our employees. We aren't happy about your people sniffing around."

Captain could tell Ashleigh was fired up because of the speed in which she spoke. It had been years since he heard the word aren't.

"What are Y'all meaning by blessing?"

"We've hired a local dump truck company that's friendly to your friends? Haven't we turned a blind eye to a couple of your friends taking bets on our property? One of the train companies we use is union. Understand?"

"Fair enough."

"My brother always does what he says. It'd be easy for us to let go of your friends. We both know we have friends who would be upset with your friends if..."

She trailed off.

They looked at one another.

Choosing her words carefully she said, "There was a disagreement or a disruption."

Duke took this seriously.

Ashleigh winked, "There is more money to be made by everyone if our two sides don't have, let's say, disagreements. There are many people who resent our company for making the money it does. Just like they resent your organization and the way you make money."

Duke answered, "True."

Captain admired this young woman.

"Let's just say hypothetically. If none of our trucks ever disappear. Maybe there is what we'd call a bonus in services reaching its destination."

Duke answered, "Y'all might be onto something."

"If your friends are dishonest with us we'll drop your associates in other areas. We've done it before."

"They've heard."

"We want to play nice."

"If we play nice?"

"Your trucking companies and shipping companies make money. Understand we have our own fleet. It'd be easy for us to purchase more trucks and maybe buy a shipping company?"

He gave her a look.

"We've done similar in the past."

Everyone in his circles knew about these incidents.

"I'll talk to my friends."

"I'll talk to my brother."

Duke being honest answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh answered with a concerned tone, "We believe we all can get along. They're bigger threats to our company than your friends."

He was shocked and impressed with this answer. He knew it to be true, he respected her boldness in saying it.

Ashleigh somewhat turned into the Ashleigh he witnessed before this conversation, "No matter what we're friends? Right?"

Duke smiled, "Yes Ma'am."

Diana gently interrupted, "We're ready to open gifts."

Captain smiled, "I'm believing business is done here?"

Duke answered first, "Yes."

Ashleigh smiled, "I've stated our position."

Captain answered, "No more business. Let's enjoy Christmas as friends."

Ashleigh answered, "I'd like that."

Ashleigh took note of Captain's look to Duke. Ashleigh and Bob had gone over this many times. Bob believed Duke or someone from his organization would reach out to Ashleigh. Ashleigh wondered if Duke was lying to Megan when he told her he wanted out. This conversation reminded her of all of the organizations who were jealous of her brother's success; she detested this envy.

The conversation turned casual.

While stepping into the living room Ashleigh mentioned to Duke about the luxury box the company owned at the football stadium and baseball stadium. Duke and Captain caught the layers. It was obvious she knew very little about sports.

Ashleigh spotted Megan and sat near her friend.

Ma was standing in the middle of the room and reminded everyone what the true meaning of Christmas was. She led everyone in prayer.

Like at the table, Ashleigh's "Amen" stood out.

She smiled when: Julie handed a Christmas present to Dustin, whispered, and Dustin handed the gift to his Momma. The twins became excited and ran up to Julie. Soon five children were handing out presents; of course they stopped when they were handed one of their own. Eventually, Julie and Megan hand to finish handing out gifts.

Ashleigh hoped everyone would like the gifts she purchased for everyone.

End of Part Four of Five

December 25th, Christmas Surprise:

The Next Day

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Monday
December 25

Christmas Surprise:
The Next Day

Day 9 of Book I
(One Day after Nicole's Annual
Christmas Eve Party)

Part Five of Five

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 character getting up and ends with one or more characters going to bed; while during the day you experience the Characters actions, feelings, and their thoughts.

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

R. P. Voght

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December 24, Christmas Surprise

Christmas Eve

Day 8 of Book I

(One Day after Nicole's Annual Christmas Eve Party)

Ashleigh and Megan met one another in front of the Yacht.

Ashleigh: removed all of her makeup, her long blond hair was in a pony tail, she changed into a lemon and pink three-quarter sleeve tee; the main part of the shirt was yellow and the sleeves were pink. She matched this with gray colored straight leg jeans. She was wearing a well worn pink colored zippered hoodie; the zipper was down. She chose an older pair of brown hiking shoes. At this moment she was more interested in comfort than her appearance.

Megan was surprised on how many compliments she received in her Spanish inspired outfit. She believed the outfit was fairly provocative for a family function and believed she would have receive negative feedback. Thinking about her mother's comments, she would discount what she felt was a rebuke and take the compliment; she understood why her mother would dislike the red pencil skirt.

At this moment she wanted to look as plain as possible. She was certain, while Ashleigh and herself were putting things away, Bob would find a way to talk to her. She started with a pair of violet and rose colored striped foldover yoga pants; the main color was violet the strip and the foldover material were rose colored. She added a simple rose colored t-shirt, and over the shirt she was wearing a red colored loose fitting sweatshirt. She pinned up her dark blond hair and was wearing green camouflaged patterned baseball cap with silver detailing over the front. She removed all of her makeup and was wearing red Adidas athletic shoes. The only

accessory was her fanny pack. In it was her keys and her garage door opener. She was comfortable and believed she would avoid any compliments from Ashleigh's brother.

Ashleigh suggested, "Let's start by getting the cart."

"It's what I was thinking."

They headed toward the four wheeled carts.

They heard Nikita howl.

Ashleigh turned and shouted, "No Howl."

Nikita stopped.

Ashleigh and Megan both smiled.

"No Nikita?"

"She's a good dog but it'd be easier if she isn't around."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I heard Julie telling April how much she enjoys walking Nikita."

"I'm sure she runs Nikita."

"Many folks have asked me if she's running your dawg in the morning."

"I'm glad she does."

Megan grabbed the cart on the way to the garages and storage units, once she was pushing it, they went back to walking side by side.

Ashleigh asked, "You feel they liked the calendars?"

This question surprised Megan.

"Everyone was surprised seeing your note encouraging trading. Y'all could tell they enjoyed it."

Ashleigh smiled.

They did?"

Megan's dimples flashed, "They loved it."

"Did you trade?"

"I traded for a Miami Dolphin calendar."

"You got a guy to trade one?"

Megan's dimples flashed, "George traded with me. On account George and Jackie are into gardening. You should see their garden. It's both purposeful and beautiful. When Nicole is having trouble with her garden she calls Jackie. I believe she's the one who told Nicole how to keep slugs out of the garden. I'm feeling this is why he was willing to trade me for the flower calendar."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan commented, "He wasn't willing to trade the gift cards?"

"Did you try?"

"No. He was excited to visit the hardware store."

They first went to Ashleigh's garage. She pulled the keys and the opener out of her pants pocket.

Ashleigh out of concern mentioned, "Some of the guys were arguing over the cards."

Megan became serious, "Y'all gave cards for a hardware store and the most popular sporting good store in the country. There's bound to be discussion."

"Why do men act that way?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I reckon they're all bragging about who they out traded. Them being able to trade was the highlight of their day."

The garage door went up.

"Maybe next year I'll give out one type of card."

"Y'all have worms in your head?"

"Huh?"

They: stepped into the garage, they reached into the back of the Jeep, took out her belongings, and set them on the cart.

"They'll never admit it but they're hoping Y'all be there next year so they can trade them cards and calendars again."

Ashleigh smiled, "Okay."

Megan reassured Ashleigh, "Everyone appreciated the gift cards and the calendars."

"Captain liked the train calendar."

"He did some dealing to get it."

Ashleigh smiled.

Megan mentioned, "Daddy was overjoyed with the engine."

"It was my Foster Dad who found it for me. I assumed he wouldn't have a *Wisconsin Central* train engine."

They were now walking toward Megan's garage; Megan was pushing the cart.

Megan asked, "He didn't drive Y'all crazy showing you his railroad."

"Oh no. I enjoyed hearing his ideas."

"Y'all understand what he was talking about?"

"I spent countless hours helping Blake work on his model railroad. I love working on models and things like that. After work I might stop by and help him."

"He'd love it."

"You sure?"

Megan became serious, "If Y'all show up on the same day every week. Ma will start making dinner. He'll start arranging his schedule around it."

"Would he understand if I canceled from time to time?"

Megan: took out the garage opener, pointed it at the door, hit the button, and they watched the door open.

"Just call em' the day before. Don't promise to be there and not show up."

Ashleigh understood. She asked, "Was it Jimmy who built the tables and cabinets?"

"I suspect they built the table together. But my brother is building the shelves and cabinets."

"You think Jimmy could build me a swing?"

Megan: held onto the garage door opener, they stepped into the garage, she set the opener onto the cover of the pickup truck, took out the keys for the tailgate, opened the tailgate, reached below the cover, and started to remove her gifts. Immediately Ashleigh started to help.

"Like the one my parents own?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sure he would."

"Victoria has always wanted one."

"You talked to your parents today?"

"This morning. I'll call them later."

"I'm sure they appreciate you calling them."

Ashleigh smiled, "They do."

She made a face.

"I'm sure I'll hear about Felicia's boyfriend."

"Your Momma still doesn't like him?"

"No."

"Should your sister be listening to your Momma?"

"From what I'm hearing I wouldn't like him either."

Megan: grabbed her keys and garage door opener, she closed and locked the tail gate, they moved the cart out of the way, hit the button to the door, and put the keys and garage door opener into her fanny pack.

Ashleigh asked about the curtains, "I heard Ma sewed these for you?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"She did a great job."

"While growing up she used to sew to make money. When she is sewing now she's helping folks."

"Do you sew?"

"I know on account Ma forced me to help."

Ashleigh smiled, "You got wrangled into it?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"You say it funny."

They laughed.

Ashleigh mentioned, "Gina has a new girlfriend."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I wonder how long she'll keep this one."

"She looked very feminine."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"She usually picks gals who dress like boys."

Ashleigh answered, "Kind of makes sense with how feminine she is."

They reached Megan's houseboat. She: stepped down to the stern of her houseboat, opened the door, stepped into her houseboat, turned on a light, and stepped back to the cart.

Ashleigh grabbed the toaster.

"Set it on the kitchen table."

"Okay."

While walking through Megan's houseboat she admired Megan's plants. When she reached the galley she turned on the light and set the toaster on the table. She liked the pine smell and admired on how clean the houseboat was. As much as everyone accused Megan of being gay and a tomboy, Ashleigh felt the houseboat had a real woman feel to it.

Ashleigh mentioned, "Did you get a new plant hanger? I like this one."

Megan was setting a roll of curtains on the futon next to the stern window.

She asked loudly, "What are Y'all liking?"

Ashleigh pointed to a plant hanging in front of the galley window, "This one with the shells."

Megan glanced into the galley, "I bought it at the thrift store."

Ashleigh smiled and headed toward Megan.

Ashleigh proclaimed, "I should shop there."

Megan mentioned, "People would be surprised if Y'all shopped there."

"Why?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"People assume rich folks don't shop at a thrift stores."

Ashleigh sighed, "It's my brother who's rich. I know I'm doing better than a lot of people. Don't get me wrong. I'm very thankful. But there are far more wealthier people than me."

"People feel my parents are rich."

"Are they?"

"Not as rich as everyone believes."

Megan paused.

They looked at one another.

Megan asked, "What is rich?"

Ashleigh made a face, "That's a question a Democrat never wants to answer."

"You ain't whistling Dixie."

They shook their heads.

Ashleigh clarified, "I feel a Democrat believes anyone who isn't depended upon them is rich."

"Daddy would agree with Y'all."

Ashleigh followed Megan to the cart.

Ashleigh changing the subject said, "The hanging planter is pretty cool."

Megan smiled at her northern accent.

She answered, "I like it too."

They each grabbed a coffee pot.

Megan asked, "Y'all want one?"

"Which one do you like?"

"I've been wanting one with a timer for a long time."

Ashleigh looked at the one she was carrying.

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Every year I get a double gift."

Ashleigh mentioned, "Florence was complaining about her coffee pot."

Megan instructed, "Put the one your carrying on the futon. I'll ask her if she needs one."

Ashleigh joked, "Maybe she'll make you an apple pie."

"I love her apple pie."

Ashleigh commented, "I loved the key lime pie."

"Which one did Y'all try?"

"Nicole's."

"She makes a great key lime pie."

There was a slight pause.

Megan mentioned, "I heard you liked Ma's watermelon muffins."

"Until yesterday I never ate watermelon muffins."

This surprised Megan but kept this to herself.

They stepped through the door and into Megan's houseboat.

Megan mentioned, "Everyone liked custard."

"Except Dustin."

Megan was surprised, "He didn't like it?"

Ashleigh set her coffee pot on the coffee table.

Megan walked hers into the galley and set it next to her toaster.

Ashleigh spoke loudly, "You didn't hear?"

Megan answered loudly, "No."

"He didn't like it because it didn't taste like ice cream."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I know what he does like."

They: met one another, went back out to the cart, and divided up the last of the bags. In the bags were: left overs, Megan's calendar, and a few more gifts. They stepped into the houseboat, Megan shut the door, Ashleigh removed her hoodie, and moved everything but the curtains into the galley. There they separated the leftovers. The only items Ashleigh kept were: a couple slices of ham, a few pieces of leftover shrimp, bean casserole, a small bowl of soup, and key lime pie; Ashleigh felt this was a good dinner for her brother.

While placing items into her refrigerator Megan mentioned, "Dustin hardly left Julie's side."

Ashleigh slightly chuckled, "Julie handled it well."

"How was things with Jeff?"

Ashleigh sighed.

Megan turned and looked at her.

In a serious tone asked, "Was he inappropriate?"

"Not really."

Megan shut the refrigerator door.

Ashleigh sighed.

"What happened?"

"While swimming it was obvious he was still infatuated with me."

"You were the only adult swimming."

"I'm glad I was wearing my one piece."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Why?"

"Jeff stared at me the whole time."

Megan gave her a look.

Ashleigh blushed.

"What?"

"I believe he jacked off in the changing room."

Megan gazed at Ashleigh.

Ashleigh said, "Its kind of awkward."

They both gave one another looks of disappointment.

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Should I tell Nicole?"

Silence.

Ashleigh made the decision, "No."

Megan made a face, "Y'all sure?"

"He at least chose the changing room."

Ashleigh shrugged.

"I guess its private."

Megan found herself asking, "Y'all believe a changing room is private?"

"Not really?"

There was a pause.

"He was probably watching me."

Megan reassured her, "The way Jimmy and Captain built the changing area Y'all can't stare at the pool."

Ashleigh thought about the set up, "That's right."

"What makes Y'all believe he did it?"

Ashleigh made a face and rolled his eyes.

"It was obvious he was watching me the whole time. All at once he gets out of the pool and walked funny to the fence. He wrapped a towel around his lower half and went straight into the changing room. He disappeared for about ten minutes. When he came out of the changing area he had a guilty look on his face. He went back to the fence grabbed his backpack went back into the changing area. And went straight back into the house."

Megan thought about her fantasy of masturbating in a changing room and her attempts at it. This put the fantasy into perspective for her.

Megan commented, "Ten minutes doesn't seem like a long time?"

Ashleigh made a face, "A teenage boy without experience isn't going to last much longer. It takes us women a lot longer than a guy takes. Especially if the guy is young or inexperienced."

"I thought they lasted longer? When I get married I was hoping we'd finish at the same time."

Ashleigh made a face, "That takes practice."

"Oh."

"In my fantasy life it happens every time. In real life it only happened twice. It's just easier when you take turns. I'd be happy with a guy who cares enough to get me off."

Megan's dimples flashed, "You've mentioned this before."

Ashleigh sighed.

"I want to believe most care. Except I've been with two guys who didn't. The third guy sometimes took getting me off to seriously. This was sometimes stressful too."

"Why?"

"Sometimes getting off just isn't going to happen. I feel sorry for the guy if he really wants to get me off but I can't."

"Experts say Y'all should be honest."

"Some guys get upset when you can't get there. You can feel like it's your fault. Or you feel sorry for him because he's disappointed you didn't get off."

"I've read a lot of gals don't get off when they're doing it?"

"This is true. A good guy will at least try to get you off before or after intercourse."

Ashleigh touched Megan's arm.

"This is better than a guy who feels all they need to do is jam it in and that'll get you off. Then blames you if you don't."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"You told me you had a partner who believed this."

"Two of the three believed humping was enough. I've also found out I'm smaller down there."

"Until Y'all mentioned this I never considered our privates are different sizes."

"I really need foreplay to get off. If a guy is patient I'll orgasm with a guy inside me."

Ashleigh shrugged, "I'm hoping whomever I marry will take his time."

Megan would never forget this.

"I'm assuming it takes practice?"

"To get off at the same time?"

"There is a learning curve from one partner to the next."

Megan was disappointed to hear this.

Ashleigh encouraged Megan, "Its where you are correct."

"How?"

"The key is good communication."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She wondered if she would be able to talk to Christopher about sex.

"Like we talk about it?"

Ashleigh chuckled, "Its different when you talk to a guy about sex."

Megan took Ashleigh's word for it.

Ashleigh asked, "Do you have a couple bags for this?"

This snapped Megan out of her thoughts.

"Sure. Lets start hanging up the curtains?"

"I'd love to help."

"I'll put her meal in the refrigerator and we'll get the ladder."

Ashleigh watched her place Bob's meal into the refrigerator.

Megan headed toward the utility closet.

Ashleigh stated, "This is when I hate being short."

"Why?"

"I'm always needing to get a stool or a ladder."

Ashleigh followed Megan through the galley and into the closet.

Megan mentioned, "I bump my head all the time."

"Guys love your long legs."

"There are a lot of guys who won't date me because of my height."

"Would you date a short guy?"

Right away Megan answered, "I wouldn't mind dating a short guy. What's important to me is if he's a Christian and a gentleman."

Ashleigh felt this was cool.

Megan grabbed a three step ladder and walked it into the lounge.

Ashleigh followed.

Megan set the ladder down and moved her ficus alley out into the middle.

Ashleigh suggested moving the rest of her plants out of the way.

Megan agreed.

For the next couple hours they hung up Megan's curtains. Ma pinned labels on every curtain letting Megan know where they went. Megan was overjoyed with the curtains. In the galley, Megan liked the curtains Nicole gave her, but the ones Ma gave her went with the other

curtains; plus Megan liked the leaf pattern her Ma picked out. When they were finished they both agreed the houseboat looked better. Megan especially liked the curtains for her Cabin. Megan and Ashleigh rolled up the old ones and placed them on the two futons. Ashleigh was able to convince Megan to throw them away instead of giving them back to the thrift store; Ashleigh agreed to help her the following day. They were too tired to throw them away.

Megan thanked Ashleigh and gave her Bob's dinner.

Megan followed Ashleigh out of her houseboat and shut the door behind her. Ashleigh always liked it when Megan followed her to the yacht. Megan left the cart there.

Ashleigh grabbed her backpack. In it was her swimwear.

"You should have brought in your swimwear."

"Someone would take it?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Y'all can't be too careful."

Ashleigh smiled, "I just assumed you'd hit them over the head with the flashlight."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan: stopped, she showed Ashleigh the flashlight, and stated, "I was taught how to use it as a club."

"I'm certain of that."

They chuckled.

Ashleigh became serious, "Where did Emma serve?"

"Navy. It's where she met Ben."

Ashleigh made a face, "I heard he was serving on the ground?"

"He's a corpsman attached to a Marine unit."

"Oh."

"Pray. He only has a few months to go. Because of Emma being pregnant he ain't reenlisting."

"I hope he makes it."

"We all do."

Ashleigh was seeing first hand the sacrifices military families make.

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I believe I'll have twins."

"Why?"

"It skips a generation."

"Nicole didn't have twins."

"She was lucky. I believe Ester and Julie have a good chance of having them. Twins run on Daddy's side."

"Captain is a twin?"

"His twin died shortly after birth."

"Oh."

They stopped at the wooden pier of the yacht. They heard the door open and Nikita rushed out.

Megan made a face when Bob stepped out and headed down the stairs carrying Nikita's shovel.

Megan asked, "Why does he always wear Hawaiian shirts?"

Ashleigh made a face and shrugged her shoulders.

Ashleigh greeted Nikita. She watched him set down the shovel on the cart and how he was eye balling Megan.

"I assume both of you ladies had a Merry Christmas."

Ashleigh answered, "We did."

Bob pushed up his glasses and looked over at Megan.

With how she was dressed she was surprised and somewhat annoyed at his look. She felt it was insane for him to find her attractive in what she was wearing. She felt this look bordered on being patronizing.

"I like your outfit. The hat adds to the look."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She gave him a face, because she was friends with Ashleigh, answered somewhat politely, "I like the hat too."

"You look very attractive in red."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She managed a, "Thank-you."

Ashleigh hoped he took note of her tone and headed back into the yacht.

Instead he pressed on, "You look especially attractive in those pants."

She just glared at him.

Ashleigh tried to rescue her brother, "I have left overs for you."

She hoped he would focus on the dinner and move on.

Instead he stated, "Ashleigh gave me an exciting board game for Christmas. I thought maybe you'd like to play a round with Ashleigh and I. Or we could play darts."

Megan pushed her hair behind her right ear.

She answered, "I'm not a real fan of board games. Plus I'd want to know the rules before we played."

Ashleigh was standing.

Nikita was sitting; Nikita wondered if Favorite Male and Woman Friend were going to mate.

Ashleigh hoped he would let it go; her hopes were dashed.

"I always play by the rules."

"Like Foosball?"

"I believe we play..."

She interrupted Bob, "made up rules."

"The only rules I make up are the games my company develops."

"I beg to differ."

"Why would you accuse me of cheating?"

The way he said it caused her to pause.

She pulled her hair behind her ear.

This calmed her down, "A ball has to fall into the hole to count. If it bounces out it's considered in play."

Megan observed him push up his glasses and give her a concerned facial expression, one she never seen him have before.

"I'll have to check on it."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Y'all don't believe me?"

With an eye roll and annoyed body language, Ashleigh saved her brother; “When there is a discrepancy on any rule it's our practice to look it up.”

Megan answered, “Sounds like a good practice.”

Bob replied back, “We could play by your rule until I find out.”

She was shocked he would agree to this rule.

Megan pulled her hair behind her right ear.

“I can't play anything because of an early charter.”

“Fair enough.”

It was: surprising, annoying, flattering, and awkward when he eyeballed her. She felt she was in an outfit no guy on earth would find any woman attractive in; much less herself. The flattery part of herself kept her from snipping at him.

Bob saved himself by turning toward Ashleigh, “I'll let you two ladies continue.”

Bob turned to Megan looked directly into her very dark blue eyes, “If I was wrong about the rule I apologize. I deeply appreciate your family inviting my sister over for Christmas.”

“She was a blessing to us.”

Ashleigh felt a strong sister love toward her brother.

“I'll head back...”

Ashleigh interrupted him. She made sure his dinner fit into one bag instead of two and took the now empty bag. She made sure every thing was fine.

She told him a half truth, “For Nikita's droppings.”

“Makes sense.”

They watched Bob: grab Ashleigh's swim bag, turn around, head up the stairs, and into the yacht.

In silence they pushed the cart back and locked it to the fence.

Megan followed Ashleigh and Nikita to where Nikita did her business.

Nikita made her markings.

Ashleigh was grateful for keeping the plastic bag and for Bob giving him the shovel.

Megan walked with Ashleigh to the dumpster.

They headed back to the yacht.

“Why was he patronizing me?”

Ashleigh answered honestly, “He only gives compliments when he means them. I'm sure he liked you in the yoga pants.”

She stopped and yanked on her pants, “These?”

Ashleigh sighed.

Blushing she answered; “Most likely.”

Megan was about to criticize this. She stopped herself from saying anything because of the list of things she found arousing. She stood there for a second.

Ashleigh wondered what came over her friend. Before she could ask, Megan broke the silence, “Next year Y'all should enter the yacht in the Parade of Boats.”

“What's that?”

“Every Christmas people around the area take their decorated Christmas vessels to Boca Raton and they show off their boats. It's like a parade but it's with boats.”

“I'd like to see that.”

They stopped at the wooden pier.

Megan said her goodbye to Nikita.

Ashleigh touched Megan's arm, "I'm grateful you guys invited me over."

Very serious Megan mentioned, "Daddy is watching out for Y'all just as if you were his own daughter."

"This doesn't upset you?"

"No."

Her whole countenance changed, "It means he really respects you."

"I'm honored."

Very serious Megan answered, "It is an honor."

Ashleigh answered just as serious, "It's good to have people watching my back."

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

"Y'all are my best friend."

Ashleigh hugged her.

Megan hugged back.

Ashleigh pulled away with a smile, "See you later Alligator."

"After while crocodile."

They smiled.

Ashleigh went up to the yacht and Megan headed back to her houseboat.

Megan spotted Florence and Frank heading toward their houseboat. Based upon how they were dressed they just came back from a Christmas get together; Megan assumed it was with Florence's family. Megan approached them and they met in front of their houseboat.

"Howdy."

Frank excited said, "Merry Christmas."

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

"It was a Merry Christmas. Did Y'all have a good Christmas?"

Florence smiled, "Yes we did."

Frank asked, "Did Y'all have a good one?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

All at once the hurt of the day bubbled up on her, "It was."

"Honey. What happened?"

Frank recognized how upset Megan was; this was very rare.

Frank said, "I'm getting tired. I'll mossey on home."

Megan gained control of herself and instructed, "Just a second."

This stopped Frank. Frank and Florence glanced at one another, "Y'all need a coffee maker?"

"We sure could use a new one."

"I was given two of em'. Wait here. I'll give you one."

Before Florence or Frank could object she: quickly went back into her houseboat, set her flashlight on the coffee table, grabbed the coffee pot without the timer, and walked it out to her friends.

"I was given two. Instead of returning this one Y'all can have it."

Florence smiled, "Of course."

Frank said, "I'll take it in."

Florence winked.

Normally Frank would have teased Megan, but because of how upset she was he answered, "Thank-you."

Florence smiled.

He winked back and headed to the houseboat.

Megan was surprised he avoided teasing her.

Florence in a kind voice said, "Dear. What happened?"

Megan's dimples flashed and tears started to fall.

This surprised Florence.

"My family still believes I'm a lesbian. Except for my cousin's lover. I don't understand why people don't believe me."

She removed tears.

"Even when I've told them I'm straight. Just because I like guy things? This doesn't make me a lesbian."

Florence commented, "What gets into people heads?"

With tears falling, "I've been accused of being gay for a long time."

Florence put her hands on her hips, "You are in the knowing Y'all are straight?"

"Yes."

"Does it matter?"

Megan removed tears.

"They thought Ashleigh was my girlfriend? Why would anyone think we're girlfriends? I can see why people think she's cute and all. But even if I was gay I don't believe I'd be attracted to her. Much less..."

She trailed off then stated, "You know."

Florence forced herself from giggling, "Uh huh."

"We're best friends."

With an angry tone, "What are people thinking?"

This stopped her from tearing.

Her dimples flashed.

She asked Florence, "Why does everything have to be sexual?"

"Everything is about sex."

She repeated herself, "Even if I was. Which I ain't. I couldn't do anything with her."

Florence shook her head and waved her hand, "Hell would freeze over before she'd touch a gal. Just like I ain't ever suspected Y'all would be into gals."

This encouraged Megan a great deal.

Florence put her hands on her hips and sternly asked, "You'd have told us if you were."

"Yes."

"I thought they asked you when Y'all went shopping?"

"I told them I was straight."

"There ain't a thing Y'all can do about it. If Y'all told em' they should treat Y'all as a straight person."

Megan let this sink in.

"I know a guy who doesn't believe Y'all are a lesbian?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Bob."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Maybe he's asking me out because he thinks I'm gay."

Florence said, "What's gotten into your head?"

Megan pushed her hair behind her ear.

"He's the type to want more than one gal in his bed at a time."

"You ain't talking with any sense. If he believed Y'all were gay he'd leave you alone."

This caught Megan by surprise.

"Look at his yacht?"

Florence put her hands on her hips, "We're all in the knowing he's eccentric. I'd suspect he'd be a little kinky in the bedroom."

She paused.

"But based upon how he treats Gina he ain't looking to hook up with a lesbian. He ain't the type to be wanted to share his bedroom with anyone but the lady he's in love with."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Y'all see the way he treats Ashleigh?"

"Yes."

"I imagine he'd treat a gal he marries even better. It's why Ashleigh is watching out for him."

The truth of this hit Megan.

"I've heard a lot of foolish talk. If people can't tell they're brother and sister they ain't got the sense God gave a goose. I'm feeling people are just sick in the head believing they're into one another. Just watch em' and Y'all can tell it's a stupid."

She shook her head.

Florence repeated, "What gets into peoples heads?"

Megan answered, "Ashleigh wouldn't let it happen."

"Mr. Bob wouldn't ever ask for it."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Florence pointed out, "It's just as foolish as when people are saying Y'all are into gals."

"You've heard people say I'm a lesbian?"

"Y'all know they say it."

The tears again started.

"How long have I known Y'all."

Megan answered, "Since I was little."

"Not once did I ever believe Y'all were into gals. You were always a little rough around the edges but Y'all were a gal. They should have known you ain't gay. You liked that one nice Jewish boy."

"Simon."

"I'm believing the reason Y'all didn't try dating is because he broke your heart when he didn't ask Y'all out. Instead he went out with the other gal."

"She was a lot prettier."

Florence became stern again, "Why are you talking non-sense again?"

Megan became defensive, "Guys ain't finding me attractive. I ain't pretty like other gals. I ain't even cute like Ashleigh."

"You ain't suppose to be pretty like other gals and you ain't suppose to be cute like Ashleigh. What Y'all are suppose to be is attractive like Y'all are."

“But I ain’t attractive.”

“Y’all need to listen.”

Florence was stern, “There have been both men and gals who have found Y’all attractive.”

Her dimples flashed.

“They like my legs.”

Florence stated, “Some guys like gals with small tops.”

This surprised Megan.

“But a good guy ain’t dating a gal because Y’all have great looking legs or because of what type of boobs a gal has. A guy like Mr. Bob would chose a gal because he liked who she is.”

Megan would think about this.

Florence continued, “Just like the guy who asked Y’all out. He might’ve been attracted to your legs. But he’s trying to find out if Y’all are compatible.”

Megan smiled.

“This ain’t meaning the rest of Y’all ain’t attractive.”

Megan wanted to mention her small boobs.

Florence decided to be blunt, “Mr. Bob would love to see Y’all naked.”

Megan gave her the most surprised look.

“Florence.”

“I’ve been around for a long time. I’d understand Y’all not wanting to be with em’. But don’t be blinding Y’all self to the idea he ain’t interesting in dating Y’all.”

“We’re just friends.”

“He ain’t just wanting to just be friends.”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

“Y’all listen now.”

Florence became gentle, “You stop fretting about what others are saying or thinking. Y’all know your straight. It just doesn’t matter if they think you are or you ain’t.”

“Maybe it’s why guys ain’t asking me out?”

“You are better without them fools. You hear me?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“You can’t stop the rumors. They’ll happen. But it doesn’t mean you have to be hindered by them.”

Megan embraced her long time friend. Florence let Megan cry. Florence knew she needed it.

When they separated they gave one another comforting looks.

“I better make sure Frank doesn’t sink the boat.”

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

“Thanks.”

Florence returned her smile, “I’ll see Y’all soon.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Megan watched Florence walk over to her houseboat.

Megan turned and found herself staring at the yacht. She stared at the Christmas decorations and all of the Green Bay Packer memorabilia painted on the vessel. She

questioned the idea of Bob wanted to see her naked. She would ponder the wisdom Florence just gave her.

She considered the idea Bob was kinky because he found her attractive in yoga pants. She asked herself, *Did he have a thing for yoga pants? Did he have fetishes? Did he want to see her nude?*

She stopped herself from thinking this way and headed toward her houseboat. Her charter was early.

Nicole was cleaning the kitchen before she went to bed. She assumed the only other family member up at this hour was Julie. She loved Christmas, even so she was glad it was over. The next event was New Years Eve and then Ester's birthday. She put in extra effort to make Ester's birthday special because it was so close to the holidays. She would contemplate her ideas later.

She was thinking about Emma. Nicole felt being pregnant with Ester during the holidays was difficult, she could only imagine how difficult carrying twins would be. Nicole promised herself she would check on Emma the following day. Nicole, based upon the short conversation she had with her, knew she was struggling more than she was letting on. Nicole knew what it was like to be pregnant and have your husband fighting for the country.

She thought about Peter and his sleazy fiancé. It really bothered Nicole her nephew would marry this girl. She suspected she slept with more than one guy and she was his first. She believed if he had waited until he was married he would have found himself a good girl. She was certain there were nice girls who wanted to date him. Instead, he was taken in by her snake like charm.

She thought about April. Who was used by her live in. Nicole suspected April fell in love with him because she made the mistake of having sex with him. She was unsure if this guy was her first, but she wanted to believe so, because she knew who April was. She again believed if April would have waited she would have avoided all of the pain of moving in and the break up. She felt April would have recognized the guy was a jerk and would have found herself a gentleman.

She thought about what Diana told her. To have Diana express to her the concern Julie was contemplating being sexually active or was already sexual active worried Nicole. The least thing she wanted was to have a pregnant daughter carrying twins. Nicole wanted to believe Julie when she said she was a virgin. What bothered her was when she caught Julie enjoying herself on the arm of the couch. Since this incident, she recognized her Daughter had used other objects around the house; this was after Nicole expressed concerns about this practice. It was equally obvious both Julie and herself were being vigilant; neither one wanted to have another embarrassing moment. Nicole considered the idea her daughter was masturbating more than her son.

She again reviewed what happened the night before. She detested Julie's new group of friends. The only redemption was Julie stayed behind, but she had done enough to deserve work duty. If she had left the party her work duty list would have been a lot longer, would have included grounding, her new bike being taken away for a while, and the idea of getting a drivers license before graduation would have been out of the question. Jimmy and Nicole were

entertaining the idea of paying for Jeff and Julie's drivers education at the same time. They were feeling they were both responsible enough to handle driving. With Jimmy working at *Renewed Mastery* they were able to handle the insurance and the expense of the two driving. Nicole would question this if she was hanging out with friends who partied or was starting to be sexually active.

She felt the need to talk to Julie.

After she finished cleaning the kitchen and putting away the cleaning supplies she headed to Julie's bedroom. When she reached the stairs she noticed Julie's light was on. Since the incident with the couch any time she went up the stairs she was purposely loud. The least thing she wanted to do was wake Ester. She had no choice but to quietly walk up the stairs. When she reached the top of the stairs she quietly closed Ester's bedroom door. If Ester heard the door close she would have called out to her.

Nicole stepped over to Julie's door. Through the door she heard her daughter. She waited. She waited because of the many times her children throughout her marriage had interrupted her or interrupted making love to her husband. She felt uncomfortable with the idea of standing there and felt the need to talk to her immediately.

In a weird voice Nicole heard, "Ester?"

"It's your mother."

Silence.

Nicole said, "We need to talk about yesterday and some concerns I have. If it wasn't for yesterday I'd leave Y'all alone."

Nicole heard: a loud sigh, rustling, Julie approaching the door, and her opening the door. Nicole pretended to miss the fact her daughter: was flush, her hair was a mess, and the outline of her breasts and nipples were easily seen through her sleep shirt. Nicole actually felt sorry for her daughter.

She asked, "I assume you've looked at the packet I gave you yesterday."

"Yes Ma'am."

"You've looked at the work duty list?"

Julie was starting to calm down, but only managed to say, "Yes Ma'am."

"It would be longer if you would have sneaked away."

"Yes Ma'am."

Very serious, "I might suggest no longer hanging out with Jennie and her group of friends. I'd suggest encouraging Amanda to do the same."

In all honesty she answered, "I'm considering it."

Nicole smiled. "I'm happy to hear it."

"I believe you when you say Y'all are avoiding drugs and alcohol."

"It is."

Nicole motioned for Julie to sit down on her bed. She did so and Nicole pulled out Julie's computer chair and sat down.

"As a Christian woman and a Mother I hope Y'all abstain from sex."

Julie gave a half truth, "It's why I masturbate."

"It's how I stayed a virgin."

It was a slight shock every time her Mother admitted to masturbating but there was a comfort to it as well.

"I want you to feel free to talk to me if Y'all are struggling with sex."

"I know Momma."

Julie smiled and in an excited tone said, "I have something for you."

Julie stood up and stepped over to her desk. Nicole was glad her daughter's body was back to normal. It occurred to Nicole, based upon her daughter's shapely body; if Julie wanted to have sex it would have been easy for her to find a partner. Nicole watched Julie open the top drawer and pull out the catalog and the note attached to it.

Nicole felt the need to say, "I'm assuming you read every thing in the packet?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Julie smiled.

Her eyes became wide.

"Did those bad things really happen?"

Nicole answered seriously, "They were articles and stories from the internet. I ain't sure if the stories are exactly true but I witnessed everyone one of those things while serving as an emergency room nurse."

Julie made a face, "Oh."

Nicole hid her bravery and acted like this conversation was easy for her, "It's why I gave you the catalog. You shouldn't be using objects around the house."

Julie blushed.

"It's normal to experiment."

Julie felt this was cool. She believed many mothers would have been less understanding and she believed others would have been weird the other way.

Julie was surprised on how awkward she felt, but she found the courage to ask; "Momma could you increase the budget and I have a question about two toys."

Nicole asked, "You'll respect my wishes on never showing Ester?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole repeated herself, "I'd rather have you masturbating than sleeping around. You are aware twins run in the family?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"You see how miserable your cousin looked."

"Yes Ma'am."

"Did you look at the pictures of what sexual transmitted diseases look like?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"I heard an interesting take on masturbating."

"What is it?"

"God would prefer us to wait until we're married. Just like he doesn't like people being drunk. There are times when the Bible instructs people when to drink. But it always warns against being drunk. Her idea, one I agree with, is if masturbating keeps Y'all from having sex and it isn't an addiction I don't believe it's a sin. I'd add you should be careful with your thoughts and keep it as a physical act."

To Julie this sounded like Megan. She was surprised the women in her family talked about sex. She wished she was involved in these conversations.

She knew enough to say, "Yes Ma'am."

"Y'all are keeping your promise regarding Ester?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole smiled, "I think you were wonderful when we talked to Ester about growing up and where babies come from."

Julie smiled, "I felt like a teacher."

"What is nice you were more than a teacher to her. You were being a good sister."

Nicole purposely stressed an ideal again, "I don't feel you'd be a good sister if you showed her how to enjoy herself or gave her anything I purchased you."

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole became very serious and said, "It was very difficult for me to give you the packet. I hope Y'all respect my wishes and understand why I gave it to you. I'll never purchase anything like this again. When you are eighteen you are allowed to do so. But always respect my wishes."

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole blushed.

This surprised Julie.

Nicole said, "This isn't always easy for me. Y'all are my daughter."

Julie wondered why this was difficult for her Momma.

She answered anyway, "I get it."

"Before I increase the budget. I want to know why and what is your question?"

Julie smiled.

Julie put the catalog down on the desk.

This is when Nicole noticed posted notes sticking out of the catalog. The first thing Julie turned to was a toy.

She asked, "What is the difference between this one?"

She then turned to a different page with a posted note, "And this one?"

Nicole blushed.

This caused Julie to blush.

They giggled.

Nicole and Julie proceeded to talk about a variety of toys and a couple books. Nicole insisted on the book she picked out. But agreed to raise the budget because she recognized the book her daughter asked about would be helpful.

When they were done. Nicole again stated, "I'm doing this on account I don't want you sleeping around. I'm hoping Y'all wait until you are married."

"Yes Ma'am."

"You understand I love You?"

Julie hugged her mother.

Julie whispered, "I love you too."

Nicole let the tears drop, "Its difficult seeing Y'all grow up."

"You raised me to?"

Nicole smiled, "Doesn't make it easy."

Julie felt this statement was sort of foolish but she tried to understand what her Momma was feeling.

Nicole: separated from her Daughter, grabbed the catalog, and the sheet. It had been a changed a few times, but Nicole knew what her daughter wanted. She again hugged her daughter and then left.

*J*ulie felt her mother was being over dramatic but she loved and respected her Momma. She followed her Momma out of the room, watched her walk down the steps, Julie stepped back into her room, shut the door, thought about what was on the work list, walked over to her bed, pulled open the covers, uncovered a three ringed binder, grabbed it, put it in the proper spot on her bookshelf, turned off the light, and went to bed.

She planned out her following day, this included some of her work duties, and she made a personal promise to call: Amanda, Hannah, and Zoe. Her hope was Hannah and Zoe would forgive Amanda and they would become friends again. She was tired of the Snob Club and the importance of being popular. She believed the ones who coined her nickname of Fingerpainter belonged to the Snob Club; she was determined to find out who started the nickname and the rumors. She wondered how her Cousin was doing in county jail. She added visiting Laura to her biking stops. She decided she should call Diana if there were any rules to visiting her.

She fell asleep thinking about the two books and the toy she finally chose. She would secretly order another one in a few days. Before showing her mother the catalog she wrote down the internet address of the catalog company and the product numbers of two other toys.

End of Part Five of Five

December 25th, Christmas Surprise:

The Next Day

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