

Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Thursday, November 30th
Ashleigh's Jeep

Book One Day 6
(Three Days since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

Part One of Six

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

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

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November 30th, Ashleigh's Jeep

(3 Days Since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

*A*shleigh woke up to the song, "Sixteen Tons," by Tennessee Ernie Ford.

She: listened to the whole song, she hit the snooze button when the DJ's started to talk, she woke up to the DJ's laughing, she turned off the alarm, and sat up. Her long blond hair was a mess, her dark green eyes were barely open, she rubbed her already frizzy hair, she stood up, she blinked her eyes, she walked passed Nikita, she stepped into the head, she splashed water on her face, she put her long blond hair into a pony tail, and did her business.

She resisted the temptation to go back to bed.

Nikita was excited. Best Friend was up earlier than normal.

Ashleigh stepped into her walk in closet and blinked her eyes open. She: reminded herself she was meeting a mom, she was conscience of her five foot one frame, she was conscience of her medium sized breasts, she was studying her wardrobe, and she felt she needed to look conservative. She was thankful she took a shower the night before.

Nikita watched her.

Ashleigh: slipped off her Kenney Chesney t-shirt, her pink shorts, her undergarments, placed all of these items into her hamper, she put on a brand new matching bra and pantie set, she tried on five different shirts, a couple dresses, a pair of slacks, and a couple pairs of jeans. She decided on: a brand new indigo aged washed bootcut jean, a blue cashmere tee, a conservative looking blue and white cotton button shirt with thin white stripes, and she neatly rolled up the sleeves. Modeling herself in the full length mirror in the closet she felt: her breasts were barely noticeable, her shirt partially covered her reared and hips, and having a monochrome look made her look taller.

For fifteen minutes she mumbled about her: heals, wedges, sandals, pumps, and in shoes in general; she selected a brand new pair of blue and brass thongs. Matching the brass

color she picked out a brass necklace and simple gold studded earring posts. She: stepped into the Yacht's head, brushed her teeth, put on a small amount of makeup, and fixed her long blond hair. Stepping out of the head she felt the desire to go to bed. Instead: she left her suite, went up the four steps into the lounge, walked through the lounge in the dark, and stepped into the galley, using the dimmer she kept the lights really low, she again blinked her eyes, she looked at the cabinet with the coffee in it, she sat down at the table with the intention of waking up before making the coffee; in less than a minute her head was down and she was asleep at the table.

When Nikita realized her companion was asleep: she went to her spot, laid down, but remained vigilant. She could hear and smell Favorite Male. Many times in the morning he would give her what was called a “treat”; she loved treats. When Best Friend was asleep he took her “outside” to do what was called “her business.” Nikita liked to study the area she did “her business” in. She often sensed the thing her ancestors hunted.

Nicole and Julie were silent as they stepped out of the minivan and headed toward the Yacht.

Nicole was wearing a navy and white thinned striped long sleeved cotton poplin shirt; this shirt had flower eyelet insets on the sleeves. The folded cuffs could be seen sticking out of Nicole's unbuttoned navy tweed coat. Nicole matched the shirt and coat with navy blue straight fit flared leg slacks. Nicole was grateful her Mother-in-law tucked and hemmed these pants so they fit proper. She accessorized with: a blue and silver sixteen inch charm necklace, a matching bracelet on her left wrist, simple earrings, a very nice navy belt, and was carrying a newer navy purse. The finishing touch was her short healed navy dress shoes. Nicole spent extra time setting her long brunette hair. She made sure her makeup was proper for meeting the newest leaders in her community. Her intention was to be a positive representation of all the people who called Eastbank their home.

Julie felt her momma was way over dressed.

Nicole felt her daughter was under dressed.

Julie was wearing her favorite red and white Adidas outfit. It included: a red with white stripped open legged workout pant, a red and white jersey top, and a red and white track jacket. Clashing with this outfit was her silver and orange athletic shoes; Julie was aware these shoes clashed. Julie: was without makeup, her brunette hair was barely brushed, and the only accessory she was wearing was a sports watch. Julie's plan was to run and play with Nikita on the beach, she felt it would have been foolish to over dress.

This very casual outfit led to a heated discussion on how they were both dressed. The end result of this discussion was Julie convinced her Momma to allow her to dress in athletic wear. Based upon what Nicole communicated to Julie, Julie now understood why her Momma was dressed the way she was. They both understood the motives of the other, but because of the discussion, they were silent from the time they left the house.

Julie broke the silence and stated with an excited tone, “You see it?”

Nicole answered with a look, “It's hard to miss.”

Nicole felt Mr. Waller wrecked the natural beauty of the yacht by overdoing the football symbols. She completely understood why a fan would have one symbol painted on a vessel or named a vessel after their favorite team; but Nicole felt he took his passion for his team way to far. What she wanted to see was the military tribute her family kept talking about.

Julie proclaimed, "The yacht is bold."

"You feel it's bold?"

Julie smiled, "Yes Ma'am."

"I'm feeling it's obnoxious."

Julie made a face, calmed down, and stated with a mature tone, "Auntie Diana says rich folks are often times eccentric. Don't Y'all feel he's being himself?"

"There's a way of being your own person without being obnoxious." Nicole added; "It's easy being eccentric when Y'all are as wealthy as he is."

Julie ignored her Momma's implication, "I'm still looking forward to seeing the inside."

Julie followed her Momma to the stern of the yacht. Nicole briefly stopped to look over the plants and flowers growing under Megan's sign. She then stopped to study the stern of the yacht. Julie watched her Momma. She observed her Momma spend about half a second on the military tribute; then focused on the pinup of the cheerleader. Julie waited.

Nicole asked, "I wonder who the gal is?"

Julie played ignorant, "Who?"

"The gal in the cheerleader outfit."

"She's a cheerleader."

Nicole frustrated with her daughter stated, "I'm understanding she's a football cheerleader."

The two ladies looked at one another.

Julie waved her arms.

Nicole rolled her eyes, then responded with, "Don't play games with me."

"What games?"

"Do you want to walk this dawg or not?"

Julie restrained herself from making any remakes verbally or physically.

Nicole expressed her idea, "Men don't paint a portraits like this without it being based upon someone they knew."

Julie looked at the pinup.

She turned toward her Momma, "It's odd a guy would have a pinup with small breasts."

They again stared at the pinup.

Nicole made the observation, "She's to average looking to be made up or to be a model."

This caused Julie to wonder.

"I don't want you to be late for school."

With this statement Nicole stepped onto the wooden pier.

Julie made a face. It was her Momma who took her time. Julie felt it was better to keep this observation to herself.

The wooden pier next to the yacht reminded both of them of a well built public pier.

The two women were in awe of the yacht to the right of them. Julie memorized the numbers painted on this side of the yacht. She had the impulse to look through the door four feet from the stairs; the stairs went up to the entrance on the second deck.

Nicole mentioned, "Ashleigh's been decorating."

Julie glanced at her Momma.

Nicole answered the glance, "A man like Mr. Waller isn't worried about curtains."

Julie was again reminded on how observant her Momma was.

After a few steps Nicole asked, "What is the animal with the W on it?"

Julie made a face, "It's a Badger. It's the symbol of the Wisconsin Badgers. They're a Big Ten school."

"Oh."

Julie started to mention, "I was feeling if I can be responsible walking Nikita it'd prove..."

Nicole interrupted Julie, stopped on the steps, and with some forcefulness; "We've talked about this before. We ain't ever getting a dawg."

Julie: went up a couple steps, stopped, turned toward her Momma, and tried to sell her idea, "But with the experience I'll have walking Nikita I'll be able to take care of one."

In a controlled whisper Nicole stated, "I'm the Momma. Don't forget I haven't given you the approval to walk the dawg."

Julie couldn't help herself, she made a face, "Why are you worried?"

"I haven't met these people."

"I've met Ashleigh."

Nicole took a deep controlling breath, "I haven't. It's not just Ashleigh I want to observe. I want to see the dawg."

"She's a good dawg."

"I want to see for myself."

Julie decided to be quiet. Julie had felt this little meeting was a formality. Julie recognized her Momma was taking this as a job interview; one her Momma could refuse for the both of them.

Nicole asked, "Are you ready to act professional?"

"Yes Ma'am."

With a tone, "This ain't something to take lightly."

Julie was frustrated, "I ain't a baby."

In a controlled whisper, "Mr. Waller and Ms. Ashleigh might be new in town but they have a lot of power. The people in this town might like it or despise it."

"I'm...."

Interrupting her daughter, "I'm hoping you'd see this as a greater opportunity than just walking their dawg. I'm still your Momma and if I'm feeling they'll hurt you. Or the dawg would hurt Y'all. I ain't allowing it."

Julie was well aware she needed to respect this; but she felt her Momma was being paranoid.

Nicole pulled on the bottom of her blue twill jacket, adjusted the sleeves, and started back up the stairs.

Julie was certain the reason her Momma acted this way was because of Mr. Waller being single and all of the rumors associated with Ashleigh and her Auntie. Julie felt Ashleigh was cool. Julie was confident in a few months her favorite Auntie would come out of the closet, and after she came out of the closet, would announce Ashleigh was her girlfriend. Julie heard from a few of her teammates Megan had showed Ashleigh around town. This caused many to automatically believe the two were dating.

Before Nicole hit the doorbell she stated, "I'm expecting you to act proper."

They heard Nikita howl.

Julie was thankful Nikita started to howl.

Julie said, "It's Nikita howling."

Nicole gave her daughter the glare.

Julie pretended she missed it.

Nicole pushed the doorbell. Instead of a normal doorbell they heard the beginning of “2001: A Space Odyssey Theme Song Or The Sprach Zarathustra,” By *Richard Strauss*.

“I wish we...”

Julie trailed off because of the look she received from her Momma. Julie felt her Momma was being stiff.

They heard Nikita howl again.

Julie did like the view from up here. She briefly looked up and down the river.

Nicole scolded, “Julie.”

She turned and stood properly.

Then silence.

Julie was wise and remained silent.

Nicole pressed the doorbell again, the theme they heard next was the original them to, “Monday Night Football.”

Julie answered her Momma's look, “It's the old Monday Night Football theme.”

Julie felt this was great.

Nicole was sure this Bob Waller was an eccentric mess.

They stood there for a few moments.

Nicole out of frustration rang the bell again, they heard, “Gonna Fly Now, the theme from the movie Rocky,” by *Bill Conti*.

Julie again felt this was awesome.

Nicole shook her head.

They heard a commanding male voice, “Stay.”

“Be proper.”

Julie made a face and sarcastically stood up straight.

Julie received a glare. Julie again pretended to have missed it.

The two women heard a female voice yell, “I'll be right there.”

“Okay,” Julie shouted. She looked over at her mother and speaking softly said, “It's Ashleigh.”

Nicole made a face.

While they were waiting Nicole and Julie heard the muffled voices of Bob and Ashleigh. What annoyed Nicole and Julie; they were unable to understand the muffled voices.

Ashleigh heard “2001: A Space Odyssey Theme Song Or the Sprach Zarathustra,” By *Richard Strauss*. She reached over and tapped the table, by coincidence the bell ended, Ashleigh kept sleeping.

Before the first doorbell rang Nikita was sitting in front of the door. Nikita was excited because she sensed Strong Scent at the door. Nikita hoped they'd play “stick.” Nikita could sense Strong Scent was the offspring of the other female human.

Nikita alerted everyone in the territory by howling.

When the “Monday Night Football Theme,” played; Ashleigh reached for what she thought was her alarm and just about fell off the kitchen chair.

Ashleigh: stabilized herself in the kitchen chair, blinked her eyes, her eyes began to

focus, she recognized she was in the galley; watched her brother stop at the dimmer and turn up the light.

“Ugh.”

Little lights flashed in front of Ashleigh's eyes and was again trying to focus.

Bob stated with a tone, “Someone is at the door.”

Her brother was wearing his business casual wear. Ashleigh wished her brother would purchase a wide variety of expensive suits from an upscale department store. Instead he was wearing: a plum wine colored long sleeved button shirt, with a dark red and gray patterned tie, a pair of pleated pants in a leather gray color, plain black socks, and a pair of black dress shoes with shoestrings. Ashleigh assumed he purchased this outfit from the mid-level department store *Dimes* or the mid-level store from Wisconsin named *Boston Place*. She was certain his executives were dressing better than he was. This frustrated Ashleigh because he was the owner and executive of *Renewed Mastery*.

It took a couple of seconds for Ashleigh to recognize her brother just walked passed her.

She heard “Gonna Fly Now, the theme from the movie Rocky,” by *Bill Conti*.

Ashleigh stood up and quickly caught up to her brother

Bob commanded Nikita to “Stay.”

Ashleigh yelled, “I’ll be right there.”

She heard Julie yell, “Okay.”

With an annoyed tone Bob asked, “Who is at our residence?”

“It’s Julie and her Mom Nicole. Julie’s the girl I’m wanting to walk Nikita. Nicole wants to meet me before she allows Julie to walk her.”

Bob pushed up his glasses and inspected his sister.

Nikita became fidgety. She heard the sound “walk.”

“Is this young lady a teenager?”

“Yes.”

Bob asked, “Is she responsible?”

“Megan says she’s very dedicated and likes dogs.”

Bob in a serious tone asked, “What are the full names of this Julie and Nicole?”

“Their names are Julie and Nicole Steward.”

Bob’s facial expression changed, “Are they related to Mary Steward and Dave Steward. I’m certain Dave is also known as Captain?”

“Yes.”

“Mary and Dave Steward are the local couple who’ve been treating my employee’s fairly with their rental units?”

“Yes they are.”

“Have you had the opportunity to meet this older couple?”

“They helped find Pirate books. I would have formally met them if my Jeep would’ve arrived.”

“The company delivering your vehicle promised me it would arrive today. I want to remind you, you’re not to report to work until Monday.”

With this statement he pushed up his glasses, “You may allow them into the Yacht.”

Ashleigh gave him a stern look, “I was going to anyway.”

He made a face.

She answered the face, "Are you going to walk Nikita everyday?"

Nikita whimpered. She heard the sound "Walk."

"Just the other day I took her on an adventure."

"Everyday?"

He pushed up his glasses, "To be a good host one must remember the people who are waiting to enter the dwelling of your home."

He turned and headed to the galley.

Ashleigh: rolled her eyes, gave him a face, but appreciated his approval.

Ashleigh turned to Nikita, "You be nice."

Nikita was unsure of what the noises meant but Nikita liked the joy she sensed from her companion. Nikita wanted to greet Strong Scent.

Ashleigh adjusted her clothing and answered the door.

Nicole smiled politely when the door opened.

Ashleigh greeted them with a, "Hi."

"Howdy."

Nicole being proper said, "Hello."

Julie noticed her Momma was concealing her southern accent.

Before Ashleigh fully opened the door she commanded Nikita to, "Sit."

Nicole was impressed when the dog obeyed. It appeared friendly and excited.

"Please come in."

Ashleigh fully opened the door.

Nikita was extremely anxious.

What continued to impress Nicole was how the dog sat there. Her tail was dusting the deck; but it remained sitting.

Julie was the one who could no longer contain herself: she shoved her way into the yacht, bent down, and yelled, "Nikita!"

Nikita was unable to recognize her name because of the accent. She ran to Julie because Julie bent down and made some gestures.

"It's nice to meet you."

Nicole being very proper answered, "Likewise. My name is Nicole Steward."

Julie was focused on Nikita.

"I'm Ashleigh Waller."

"I'm assuming you knew where we were?"

Ashleigh was keeping an eye on her dog and the way Julie was petting her.

Nicole politely smiled, "Yes."

Ashleigh made a face, "The yacht is probably the talk of the town."

Nicole caught the layers. Being positive she started to say, "The tribute to..."

Ashleigh startled Nicole when she burst out with, "Stop!"

Julie was startled and said, "What?"

Nikita thought she did something wrong.

Ashleigh gently walked up to Nikita, pet her, and said, "You're a good girl."

This caused Nikita to howl and again be joyful.

"No howl."

Nikita was still joyful.

Nicole being a smart woman recognized, Ashleigh as an owner prevented something from happening; Nicole was reassured by this.

Ashleigh instructed, "Dogs find hugs very uncomfortable. I used to hug them when I was little. I'm really surprised I wasn't ever bit. Hugging a dog is very stressful to them."

Julie humbly answered, "I didn't know."

Ashleigh very sternly said, "I'm sorry if I frightened you. I don't want you or anyone bit."

Nicole felt the same.

Julie stated, "I didn't know."

Ashleigh in a friendly tone mentioned, "Don't worry. Most people are unaware dogs don't like being hugged. She really likes you."

"She does?"

Julie and Ashleigh stood up.

Nikita was on all fours now. She was studying the new human in her territory.

"She doesn't let everyone pet her belly."

"She lets me."

Ashleigh winked, "It's how I know she likes you."

Julie felt special.

Nikita cautiously walked over to Nicole.

Nicole let the dog approach her, Nicole stepped to the side allowing Nikita to sniff her, Nicole watching the dogs body language knew the dog liked her; even still Nicole let down her fist.

Nicole could sense this woman was friendly. She sat down and allowed Nicole to pet her.

This was the first time Julie ever observed her Momma show any indication she knew how to handle a dog.

Nicole mentioned, "She has beautiful eyes."

"I agree."

Nicole was finished petting this animal, she did everything possible to avoid getting dog hair on her clothes.

Julie again pleaded, "Nikita."

Because of Julie's accent Nikita was unsure if this was her name.

"Nikita."

This time Julie bent down and made gestures.

Nikita ran to Strong Scent.

Julie started to pet her and allowed Nikita to lick her.

Nicole felt this was disgusting.

"This is an interesting lounge."

Ashleigh smiled, "We call it our Dance Hall."

Julie: looked up from petting Nikita, turned, focused on this area of the yacht, stood up, and just walked into the room.

Nicole cringed at this sudden rudeness. Before she could say anything to her daughter, Ashleigh mentioned, "I like your outfit."

Nicole answered politely, "Thank-you."

Ashleigh was surprised Nicole was without a southern accent.

Nicole was surprised at Ashleigh's down to earth demeanor.

They were studying one another, Nicole felt she needed to be formal, "Ms. Waller I'm grateful your giving Julie the opportunity to walk Nikita."

Ashleigh smiled. She waved her hand and gently touched Nicole on her arm, "Friends call me Ashleigh."

Nicole smiled and answered, "Yes Ms. Ashleigh."

Julie rolled her eyes.

Very gently Ashleigh mentioned, "Just Ashleigh."

Nicole nodded her head, "Ashleigh it is."

Julie felt her Momma was being to formal.

Ashleigh mentioned, "I'm glad you brought Julie."

"Your welcome."

Julie informed them while gazing at a neon pink flamingo, "I'll be biking most days."

"When you bike you can lock it at the end of the pier."

Nicole was annoyed they would just assume Julie was already walking the dog.

Ashleigh mentioned, "Before we make plans you need to make sure it's alright with your Mom."

Ashleigh and Nicole continued their introductory small talk.

Julie was studying this room as if it was a museum. Julie loved all of the unique and interesting things in this lounge. Julie found it cool to have a DJ set up in the front of a room; she wondered how the system worked. She found it fascinating records were hung on the wall like they were works of art. The prints on the wall were just as fascinating as the records. What seemed cool to Julie was the custom made neon signs; by the condition of these signs Julie suspected these once hung in a public place. She focused on the small round records with the large hole in the middle. She knew about albums but never seen these small records before. She liked the album artwork but felt it would have been awful clumsy to actually listen to music this way. Julie was making mental notes of: the artists, the names of the albums, the names of the song titles, and the artists represented on this wall. Many of the prints were concert tours and many were autographed. She was about to review the dates and places these concerts were touring to find a connection; what stopped her was when she heard Ashleigh ask her Momma about coffee.

Ashleigh asked Nicole, "Would you like some coffee?"

"I'd appreciate it."

Before Ashleigh could respond to Nicole, Julie interrupted, "Where did you get all this stuff? It's cool."

Ashleigh smiled, "It's my brothers."

Nicole observed a man in his thirties step out of the galley. She caught his brief glance. He focused his eyes into the dance hall. Nicole assumed this was Mr. Waller. The person her Sister-in-law complained about and the person who was the focus of so much discussion in her community.

Nicole was taken back at how he was dressed for work.

Looking into the Dance Hall he spoke, "I'm a consoeur of music. I'm the one who has collected those items on the wall."

Ashleigh trying to save Julie interrupted Bob, "Bob this is Nicole Steward. She's the

Mom of Julie Steward. Julie is the young lady admiring the decorations.”

Nicole was used to East Coast accents. It was obvious these folks were using a Midwestern accent. Nicole felt Ashleigh talked fast and both Mr. Waller and Ms. Ashleigh pronounced every syllable.

Julie felt this older gentleman was interesting.

Bob smiled, “I’m pleased to meet a Steward. The reputation of your family is well regarded.”

This statement surprised both Julie and Nicole.

Nicole replied with appreciation in her voice, “Well thank you.”

They gently shook hands.

Bob asked, “If I may be so bold. What is your career?”

Ashleigh cringed.

Nicole was taken back by his boldness. Because of his status she remained a lady, “I’m currently a stay at home mother and wife. I have kept my license up in both nursing and physical therapy.”

“I’m honored to meet a woman who has chosen a very honorable profession. Choosing to be a stay at home mother is a very important life choice.”

Ashleigh recognized her brother was interviewing both her guests. At this moment Ashleigh felt the best thing was: to watch, listen, and if necessary intervene.

Nicole was again taken back. She was surprised this man of means would find it respectable for a woman to be a stay at home mother and wife, “Thank you sir.”

Bob pushed up his glasses and looked over at Julie and shocked all three ladies by asking, “Ms. Julie are you a young woman who appreciates the gargantuan influence music has on our quotidian existence? If you don’t have an appreciation for the delights of music what are you a consoeur off?”

Nicole felt this man was trying to insult his daughter.

Ashleigh was about to intervene.

Julie quickly answered, before her Momma would say something and ruin what Julie felt was a playful challenge, “I’ve observed how music has both been a positive and negative influence on my peers. Music might be playing to big of a role in our day to day lives. I reckon I can’t stop it.” She paused for effect. Then quickly started up again, “I’m one who likes listening to music but it ain’t my passion. I’m a person who likes playing sports over spending all my time listening or playing a musical instrument.”

Bob pushed up his glasses and smiled.

By observing Bob’s body language Ashleigh knew he was impressed with Julie.

“Ms. Julie.”

“Yes sir.”

Nicole expected the respectful tone her daughter took, but there was an admiration to the tone; Nicole very rarely heard this from her daughter.

“I’m sure you are a valedictorian of your school. I’m equally certain others view this as an accomplishment but you find it routine. If you are not a valedictorian. Being bored at the redundancy of school isn’t an excuse to slack.”

Nicole’s eyes went wide.

Julie was deeply surprised this man knew how she felt about school. She honored him by answering, “I’m indeed a valedictorian. I’m finding school difficult because it’s so boring.

I've thought about dropping out and getting' my GED."

Nicole was absolutely appalled and shocked to hear this statement from her daughter.

Bob responded, "It would be disappointing and a tragedy if you were to be so rash."

"Why?" She found herself saying, "I'd easily score in the top five percent if I took it today. Even without studying for it."

In a very serious tone he answered, "Young lady don't sell yourself short. I'm sure you'd score in the top one percent. Don't feel it's necessary to downplay your intellectual gifts when having a discussion with me. For you. The obvious challenge of school will be putting up with the everyday existence of school. I'm sure the drudgery of this existence is madding to you. The challenge within your soul is to finish high school. I'm completely aware the public education system is in all intense and purposes inept."

Julie asked honestly and with some desperation in her voice, "Why should I finish?"

"Is it your desire to complete a college degree?"

"Yes sir."

Bob answered, "As intelligent as you are a secondary education is essential. It'd be a travesty to waist it."

Julie felt she could be honest with Mr. Waller, "To acquire a good job we're all forced to suffer the indignity of high school and college. What's important to me is playing volleyball and softball."

Ashleigh could tell her brother appreciated this young woman's boldness.

"Our company will be providing college scholarships to young women and men who have the fortified to complete high school."

After being jolted to hear her daughter was contemplating getting a GED, Nicole was overjoyed to hear this man gave her an incentive to finish.

"I'm of the assumption you're intelligent enough to avoid the traps of alcohol and drugs?"

She smiled, "I'm a Christian. When people drink they end up acting foolish. Drugs hurt people." Julie felt she could be sarcastic, "I'm wanting to keep my brain cells. I'm needing them to get through the redundancy of school."

Nicole glared at her daughter.

Julie made believe she missed this glare.

Ashleigh could see two large ego were going to drive her crazy.

Bob smiled, "If a young woman continued to keep her brain cells she might actually be worth having a meaningful conversation with."

Julie with a smile answered, "I was of the assumption you were involved in a meaningful conversation."

"It's never wise to assume."

Nicole was unsure of what she felt about this conversation.

"I'm a young woman who avoids assuming. I'm intelligent enough to understand most things."

"We shall see."

Julie loved this and answered, "I'd like to see what intelligence an older gentleman possess?"

"Julie!"

Nicole's body language was as intense as her voice.

Bob smiled, "If my sister is smart enough to hire you. I'd take this challenge."

Julie smiled and her eyes became large.

"Young lady let me address your mother."

She did a curtsy, "Yes My Majesty."

"Julie!"

Bob pushed up his glasses.

Ashleigh could tell her brother was: impressed, irritated, and admired this little gesture.

Bob mentioned, "In the future when you address others in my type of authority such sarcasm would be frowned upon."

Very seriously and respectfully she snapped to attention, "Yes sir."

Julie felt embarrassed. This reprimand felt similar to when her Daddy or Captain scolded her.

He smiled and turned to Nicole.

"It's obvious your an exceptional mother."

Nicole was surprised at his comment.

Julie and Nicole glanced at one another.

"Ms. Steward did I hear you correctly? You still certified as a registered nurse?"

She was curious on why he would ask, "Yes sir."

Before her brother would continue Ashleigh politely jumped in, "May I interrupt?"

Bob nodded, giving Ashleigh permission to speak.

Ashleigh instructed, "There's always been a nurses station at my brother's company. He's planning on adding a full walk in clinic for all employees."

Bob spoke very seriously, "My desire is to find a lead nurse who can communicate well with the local population as well as employees from other parts of the country. I'm of the persuasion you were a lead nurse in the past. If you have. I'd like to offer you a position within my company. If you haven't performed as a lead nurse I'd like to give you the opportunity."

Julie admired this man even more.

Nicole was completely caught off guard by this job proposal.

Julie felt Nikita push her body against her legs. Julie smiled. She bent down and pet her.

Nicole answered, "I'd have to discuss the opportunity with my husband."

"If you choose to accept the position we would have to confirm the licenses and your credentials."

"This would be expected."

Bob asked gently, "I'm guessing you worked outside of the south where your natural accent was frowned upon. If you took the position I'd want you to communicate to my local employees in the dialect they would feel most comfortable."

Nicole maintained her southern charm, but allowed herself to speak as herself, "I'm needing to speak to my husband."

Bob smiled, "If you choose to further inquire about this job opportunity contact Ashleigh and she'll make sure Gracie contacts you."

Ashleigh added, "Gracie Gessler is our human resource manager."

Ashleigh felt awkward. Ashleigh wondered why Nicole would have to contact her first.

He turned to Julie, "Young lady."

She immediately stood up and answered, "Yes Sir."

Nikita wanted to be pet some more. She quickly stood on all fours wagging her tail.

"I'm of the assumption I don't need to go over the historical background of World War Two."

"No sir."

Julie answered as if she was being questioned by a college professor.

Nicole was curious on how this had anything to do with walking a dog. At this point Nicole was questioning if Ashleigh and Bob were truly brother and sister.

Bob asked, "When our troops landed on the beaches of Normandy why did Hitler wait to send reinforcements?"

Julie smiled, "The British and American armies under direction from British intelligence built a fake army and convinced Hitler General Patton would invade at a place called Pas-DE-Calais. They accomplished this by giving false intelligence General Patton was the lead General in charge of the D-Day landing."

"Who was in charge of the allied invasion?"

"General Eisenhower and representing the British was General Montgomery."

Bob smiled. He turned and looked at Nicole and Julie, "I'm sure this fine young lady wants to be prompt for school. It'll be difficult for her to walk Nikita and be prompt if we continue to converse. It was a pleasure to meet both of you."

He specifically looked at Julie.

"I'll be awaiting for your in depth thoughts on the works of Walt Whitman."

Julie gave him a face, "Okay."

"Are you familiar with Walt Whitman."

"He's the poet?" she made a face, "Right?"

"You are correct."

With this Bob: walked away from them, stepped into the galley, picked up a coffee cup from the table, placed it in the sink, went down the starboard hallway, and up the spiral staircase to his office on the third deck.

There was a moment of silence just after Bob left.

Ashleigh putting on a smile and trying to cover for her brother, "With that let's step into the galley."

Nicole recovered from the shock of this whole exchange.

Nicole mentioned, "Mr. Waller is correct. There are things I'd like to discuss. If we wait to much longer Julie could be late for school."

Julie felt bold after the conversation with Mr. Waller, "I'm looking forward to walking Nikita."

Nicole was serious and asked Ashleigh, "Whats your expectations?"

They were moving toward the galley.

"What's important to me is for Julie to be here at the same time. Nikita will look forward to the walk."

"I won't disappoint her. I'd be here every morning before school."

Nicole asked, "How are you going to get here?"

Julie gave her momma a look, "It ain't to far. Like I was saying before I'm planning on biking or running."

Nicole asked, "What if the weather's poor?"

Ashleigh wondered if the weather was ever really poor.

"Well..."

Ashleigh answered, "I wouldn't expect you here if the weather is bad."

Nicole asked, "What about holidays?"

"I wouldn't expect her to walk on holidays."

Julie jumped in, "I could in the morning."

Nicole mentioned, "Holidays are important family times."

"I'd be back before anything starts."

Ashleigh suggested, "We could work out the details later."

Julie on purpose shifted the conversation, she still felt bold by Mr. Waller's earlier comments, "May I walk Nikita today? It's not like I ain't here?"

"Where are you planning on taking her?"

Nikita's tail went whipping back and fourth anytime she heard the word "walk".

"Does it matter?"

"I'm your mother."

Ashleigh interjected, "Why don't we figure out something in the galley."

"I'm wanting to know where she's walking."

Julie was annoyed, "I'm not a baby."

Ashleigh calmly said, "Lets have some coffee or some sweet iced tea Megan made for me and we can discuss this."

They heard Nikita howl.

Ashleigh winked, "It's looking like Nikita wants to get going. How about if you take her along the beach. Do you have a cell phone?"

Nicole answered, "Yes she does."

Ashleigh turned toward Julie, "Don't go any further than fifteen minutes from here. Be back here within a half hour."

"May I run her?"

Nicole commanded, "Don't take her off the leash."

With the word leash Nikita tore through the galley, stepped into the starboard hallway, and sat in front of what Ashleigh called Nikita's Closet.

Ashleigh defended Nikita, "Nikita get's a little excited with walks."

Nicole voiced her concern, "I've worked on dog bite victims. I'd hate to be responsible for someone getting bit."

"Momma ain't you seeing she's a good dawg?"

"It ain't always the dawg. It's the people approaching a dawg inappropriately."

"Why are you given me such a hard time?"

Ashleigh stopped an argument, "We need to honor your Mom. She's being wise."

Nicole liked hearing this. Nicole changed her tone and asked, "Where are Y'all taking her."

"I'll run her to the lighthouse."

Nikita was sitting in front of the closet door but she was having difficulty being still. She howled when she heard the word "run".

Nicole wondered about her daughter's strong body odor after she exercised.

Julie was afraid her Momma would mention her body odor.

"I'd like her to be run. Run her like you did when you were with Megan and I. If you'd

like you can take a shower here.”

“It'll depend on what I'm doing after walking her. But I can always take one at school.”

Nicole mentioned, “I'd like you to walk her the same way.”

“It'd get boring if I have to walk her the same way everyday.”

“I'm wanting to know where Y'all are.”

Ashleigh inspired by the schedule at *Renewed Mastery* suggested, “Julie if you had three routes would you get bored?”

Nicole wondered where Ashleigh was going with this.

“I wouldn't with seven routes.”

Ashleigh smiled, “Nicole; if Julie presented you four maps with maybe three routes on each.”

Nicole asked, “What do Y'all mean.”

“Each map would have one long route on it. But each long route could have smaller routes along the main long route. This would help with variety and time. It'd be helpful if it mentioned what direction she took. So she could vary it a little but be on the same map. If she used *Google Maps* or *Map Quest* and made a print out we could know where she's going.”

Nicole answered, “I'd agree to two maps with two routes.”

Julie countered, “How about four maps with three routes on each.”

Nicole countered again, “Three maps with one route. Or two maps with four routes.”

Julie asked, “How about three maps with two routes each?”

Nicole agreed.

Ashleigh instructed, “Plot them out in some way where we can easily know what map and route you are taking. This way if something should happen we'll both know where you were going or where you were last seen. It'll be easier to find you if you call us.”

Julie immediately mentioned, “I'm sure nothing will happen to me.”

Nicole mentioned, “Something could happen and we need to prepared for it.”

Julie rolled her eyes, but agreed by promising, “I'll put the routes on the refrigerator.”

Ashleigh encouraged Julie and Nicole, “I feel that's a great idea. Why not put the same routes on my refrigerator too.”

Nicole interjected, “I ain't putting up with some game playing with these routes. You better not tell her one route and put a different one at our house.”

“Yes Ma'am.”

Nikita wanted to go for a walk and voiced her irritation by howling again.

“Ms. Ashleigh you may show Julie what she's needing to do.”

Ashleigh suggested to Nicole, “Would you like to sit down?”

“No thank you. I'd like to see what's expected.”

Ashleigh communicated to Julie with her eyes.

Julie listened to Ashleigh's communication and remained quiet.

Ashleigh walked Julie and Nicole into the long starboard hallway.

Nikita: stepped away from the door, her tail was whipping back and forth, and she was physically shaking.

Ashleigh: opened the closet door, she showed Julie where the leash hung, where Nikita's treats were, where the pooper scooper was, and where the plastic bags were kept. After showing Julie these things, Ashleigh began to go over all the commands Ashleigh expected Julie to use.

Nikita waiting anxiously. Due to this anxiety when Ashleigh mentioned a command Nikita performed it. A few of the commands were confusing to Nikita because they were commands only used when they went for a “walk”.

During this instruction Nicole became intrigued by the pictures hanging on the wall. Nicole felt the wide variety of frames held a clue to the history of Ashleigh's life just as much as the photographs themselves. It was easy for Nicole to recognize: a momma allowed Ashleigh to pick out frames, at other times the momma picked out the frames, and at some point a more mature young woman started to pick out all of the frames.

The photographs in this hallway started just passed the open door of Nikita's closet and went all the way down to the spiral staircase. This hallway was sequenced: there was the head door, a long wall with many photo's, where it appeared there was a laundry room, a door that Nicole assumed was a walk in closet, before the end of the hallway was a railing and three steps, a door to what Nicole believed was a master suite, to the starboard side of this door was a spiral staircase, on the starboard wall of this hallway was a door; Nicole assumed it went down to the first deck. Nicole found it interesting there was room to put more pictures up.

On the section of wall between the open doorway and the head were family portraits in a square pattern with two photo's in the middle. Nicole felt a sympathy for the brunette haired woman in these portraits. As a momma, Nicole could tell the wife and mother in these photographs was trying her best to conceal the stress she felt preparing her family for these yearly photos. What amazed Nicole was this momma was brave enough to allow the dogs into the portraits. Nicole suspected the addition of the family pet had everything to do with the addition of the four or five year old Ashleigh.

Nicole focused on the two photographs in the middle.

It was obvious to Nicole one of these portraits was taking very recently. The other one was taken when Ashleigh was a teenager. Nicole felt the parents in these two center photographs were brave to raise two sets of children. Nicole knew there were two sets of children because there was an elder daughter who appeared in the photographs in the big outside square; after the first three portraits this daughter appeared sparsely and later she appeared with a husband. Nicole was curious as to why this elder daughter was so sparse in the later portraits. She was pictured in this most recent portrait standing next to her husband. In the same portrait an old golden retriever was laying in front of the family. Next to Ashleigh on a leash was Nikita; Nicole liked Nikita's bright blue eyes and the dark patch on her ears and head. Standing left of the father was a daughter around the same age as Julie; next to this teenage girl sitting up was another aged golden retriever. Nicole assumed the woman in this photo was done battling cancer, Nicole reasoned if this woman was still battling cancer, Ashleigh would have never moved to Florida. Nicole made this deduction by observing their body language through out all of the portraits. It was just as reasonable for Nicole to conclude, their relationship had been a bumpy ride; these family portraits encouraged Nicole.

Nicole wondered what was important about the picture to the left of the more recent family portrait. This portrait was taken in the late nineties early 2000's and it was obvious a teenage Ashleigh was stressed out but was trying very hard to look natural. Nicole found it interesting Ashleigh was leaning toward the mother in the portrait. The dad who was next to the momma seemed a little stressed. The younger daughter was in the middle of everyone with a legitimate smile. Standing in front and on either side of the family were the much younger golden retrievers.

Nicole suspected, even though Ashleigh's momma was around Ma's age, Nicole would have a lot in common with Ashleigh's Momma.

Nicole looked over at Ashleigh and Julie when Ashleigh handed Julie a small plastic grocery store bag; Nicole never heard of the store printed on the side of this bag. Nicole watched her daughter put this plastic bag in the front pocket of her Adidas pants. Nicole felt her daughter picking up dog poop was a good life experience. By her daughter's reaction Nicole felt her daughter was taking the idea of picking up dog poop in stride.

Nicole again studied the framed pictures on the wall. Nicole began to study the pictures between the head and the washer and dryer. Most of these photographs were taken by a 35 mm camera and were put into a variety of different frames; many held multiple pictures. Based upon these photographs it was obvious: Bob was indeed Ashleigh's older brother, Bob took her to many places, Bob made a point to be involved in Ashleigh's life, Ashleigh enjoyed this time with her brother; Nicole made this assessment by Ashleigh's relaxed demeanor and big smiles.

A picture on the left hand side of this short wall caught Nicole's attention. What originally caught her attention were all of the evergreen trees and the northern type of foliage. What kept Nicole studying this photograph was a very young Ashleigh standing in front of a large group of college students. In the background: there was a cliff, there was a bright summer sky, she spotted two large birds flying in the air, there was an open space, she was unable to see the bottom, but she could see there was another cliff directly across from where they were standing. Nicole focused on a smiling Ashleigh: she was wearing a pink baseball cap, a pink t-shirt with some sort of printing on it, khaki shorts, red socks, and big brown hiking boots. Hiking boots Nicole herself wore on a camping trip with her Dad. Nicole noticed the brunette haired gal, who was in the family portraits, was wearing similar boots. With Nicole being a mother she was certain Ashleigh was happy they were wearing matching shoes. Directly behind Ashleigh was a group of guys with a much younger Mr. Waller standing directly behind Ashleigh, to the left and right of Ashleigh were a bunch of gals kneeling down in a row, with a brunette haired gal to Ashleigh's right. Nicole noticed Mr. Waller had his hand on this young girl's shoulder, if Ashleigh would have been out of the picture, Nicole was certain the young woman would have been in front of Mr. Waller. Nicole felt by their body language Mr. Waller and this brunette haired gal were truly in love with one another. Nicole made a face at the hair and the late eighties clothes. Nicole was thankful she never had the poofy hair, but she remembered her own set of: neon colored shirts, a couple pairs of stone washed jeans, and the same wide shorts.

Nicole glanced over at Ashleigh and Julie. They were going over Nikita's commands one more time. Nicole was grateful to hear Ashleigh explain to Julie why she made Nikita sit down and tried to teach children how to approach a dog appropriately; Nicole liked how Ashleigh made the analogy between an unruly dog and an unruly child.

While Nicole was glancing at the different vacation pictures it became obvious Mr. Waller ended his engagement with the brunette girl. It was obvious this brunette haired girl, who was the same girl in the family portraits, just vanished from these sets of photographs. If Nicole was figuring the time line correctly in about a year or two after the brunette haired girl vanished she was replaced by an attractive blond. Nicole assumed this blond was either a dancer or a department store model. This blond woman first appeared in the photo's when Ashleigh was around eight or nine and was in them until these series of photographs ended. It

was apparent the trips ended around the time Ashleigh entered High School. This blond girlfriend was pictured standing next to a smiling Ashleigh or a content looking Mr. Waller, they were in front of many different attractions and at many different locations. While studying these pictures Nicole became a concerned mother. Nicole recognized in many of these photographs, especially in the camping photos, this blond haired woman was going through withdrawal. Nicole made the assumption: by her eyes, the lack of track marks, her body language; she was on prescription pills and/or smoking a lot of pot.

Nicole made a face.

Nicole heard Ashleigh say, "It's okay to wrap the leash around your waist but wait until your passed the piers."

Nicole turned to hear and see Julie answer, "Yes Ms. Ashleigh. I'm trying to keep the same pattern with Nikita. I'm planning on keeping her on the same side you walk her on."

Ashleigh smiled, "That'll help."

Nicole watched her daughter interact with this dog.

Julie commanded, "sit."

The dog sat.

Ashleigh commented, "Good girl."

Nikita's tail was whipping back and forth.

Julie clipped the leash onto the collar.

Right away Nikita stood up and started to yank Julie.

"Heal," commanded Julie and then voiced, "Sit."

Nikita reluctantly sat and started to whimper.

"Good. Don't be afraid to tell her to heal."

Julie smiled, "Yes Ms. Ashleigh."

Ashleigh gave Julie a pleased facial expression, "Go take her on her walk."

Nicole felt compelled to ask, "Where are you planning on walking her?"

Julie sighed, "To the lighthouse and back."

"We have..."

"I'll be back in time for school."

Nicole suggested, "Well get going."

Julie gave her Momma a look.

Nicole decided it was the inappropriate time to comment on her Daughter's glare.

Julie focused and commanded Nikita, "Come."

Nikita and Julie practically ran through the galley to the front door; everyone heard Nikita's collar jangling as they went.

Ashleigh decided and communicated her decision loudly to Julie, "Next time put her leash on by the door."

Julie shouted back, "Yes Ms. Ashleigh."

They heard Julie command, "Sit."

Nikita howled.

The door flew open and Julie command, "Come."

The collar jangled and the door slammed.

Nicole looked over at Ashleigh, "I do apologize."

Ashleigh interrupted with a hand wave and smile, "It's alright."

Ashleigh being a good host asked, "Want to sit down and have that coffee now? Or the

sweet iced tea Megan made? I'd enjoy the company."

Nicole wondered about the rumors she heard concerning Ashleigh and Megan.

Nicole politely answered, "I'll have a sweet iced tea."

Ashleigh smiled and very sweetly commented, "Make yourself comfortable and sit down."

Nicole pulled out a kitchen chair. It paralleled the sliding window and was directly across from the cabinet dividing the galley from the lounge. After sitting down Nicole glanced to her left: the blinds were open, her Sister-in-law had taken the charter out.

Ashleigh commented, "I wouldn't just ask anybody to walk Nikita."

Nicole was in awe of the yacht. Nicole assumed Mr. Waller spent a lot of money on the remodel. Nicole felt it was wise of Mr. Waller to keep the pillars between the kitchenette and the galley. Two of these pillars went from the floor to the ceiling and were on either side of a long counter. In between these two outside pillars were two pillars and they went from the counter to the ceiling. Between the counter and the long elaborate kitchenette was a comfortable amount of space for a person to perform any task necessary. Nicole admired the kitchenette: she liked the modern double oven, with envy she imagined what she could accomplish with the large electric burner, she liked both of the new microwaves, she assumed they were purchased at different times because they were two different brands, the double tubed sink was nice, she wondered how expensive the heavy duty dishwasher was, and she loved the elaborate cherry cabinets.

Nicole watched Ashleigh open the large refrigerator door; this refrigerator faced the bow of the boat and was on the end of the U shaped kitchenette. Nicole found it humorous the only thing Nicole could see of Ashleigh behind this tall silver refrigerator door was the bottom of her blue bootcut jeans; if Ashleigh would have reached up her shoes would have stuck out.

Ashleigh shut the refrigerator door and in her hands was a blue pitcher filled with sweet iced tea, "I never drank iced tea until I moved here."

Nicole asked very politely, "When did you move here?"

"The Monday after Thanksgiving."

Ashleigh shut the refrigerator door, she was holding onto a pitcher of lemon flavored sweet iced tea, and glanced at Nicole between the first middle pole and the end of the counter.

"I'll be there in a second. You can call me Ashleigh."

Based upon this young woman's facial expression and her body language Nicole made the assessment Ashleigh was uncomfortable with titles.

Nicole watched: Ashleigh set the pitcher on the counter, grab two glasses from one of the cabinets behind her, she easily poured the iced tea into the glasses, Nicole was astounded as this wealthy young lady put the pitcher and two glasses onto a tray, easily balanced these items, and delivered them to the table.

Nicole was feeling a little apprehensive and was keeping herself guarded. When Nicole was living in Virginia she was hurt by two northern ladies when their friendships ended badly. Nicole being older and wiser was sure their friendships ended poorly because of her youth and simple misunderstandings. Nicole's intention was to keep her friendship with Ashleigh formal. A difficulty for Nicole was the possibility this young woman was Megan's new undercover partner. Nicole was surprised at her own uneasiness. Nicole never felt uncomfortable around a homosexual before. Nicole hated to admit to herself, with Ashleigh possibility being Megan's undercover lover this made the whole issue of homosexuality more

personal; which made this meeting slightly uncomfortable for Nicole.

By the way Ashleigh set the glasses, the pitcher, and the tray on the table; Nicole felt at one time Ashleigh was a waitress.

"Just ask if you'd like me to pour you some more," Ashleigh said with a smile and sat across from Nicole. "Megan obviously has a lot of respect for you."

Nicole appreciated the compliment but was still feeling cautious.

Nicole smiled and answered Ashleigh, "We've been family for a long time."

"Family is very important to me."

Nicole smiled and took a sip of her lemon flavored sweet iced tea. While she took the sip Nicole wondered about Ashleigh's motives. Nicole wanting to keep this a professional conversation. She steered the conversation to some lingering concerns she had about the dog walking.

"Ashleigh," this was difficult for Nicole, she wanted to say Ms. Ashleigh, "It's obvious Julie's looking forward to walking Nikita. With Julie being excited to walk her she might push the boundaries of what she can handle. Can I trust you to tell me if she's starting to leave late for school?"

Ashleigh answered honestly, "Of course."

"You already have my number."

"Yes, but let me double check my cell phone."

"Okay."

Ashleigh: stood up, went over to the counter with the pillars, grabbed her cell phone, and walked back to the table. Ashleigh took note she would have to charge the phone soon. She reminded herself to always charge the phone before bed. She left the phone on the counter while talking to Felicia the night before.

Nicole noticed the state of the art cell phone.

They double checked their numbers.

Ashleigh mentioned, "I'd be great if Julie could walk her from Monday through Saturday. I wouldn't feel right if walking her interfered with church."

This surprised and pleased Nicole.

"If it'd be up to Julie she'll walk her every day."

Ashleigh observed Nicole's concern, "I'm not expecting Julie to walk her on holidays or during family functions. If she could call me the night before or as soon as she realizes she's not feeling well."

"I wouldn't expect anything less. I want her to embrace a good work ethic."

"Is she working?"

"We're not expecting her to work because she's involved with sports. During the summer this might change. What I'm hoping is walking Nikita will help her to appreciate the value of a good job."

Nicole noticed Ashleigh's face cringe then smile, "I'll keep this in mind as this moves along. I'll remind her this is a job. While checking to see if she's still enjoying walking Nikita."

"As a Momma who doesn't allow pets in her home. It'd mean a lot to me if you'd teach her how to handle dawgs. She wants one so badly. As an expert if you taught her It'd be appreciated."

"I'm not an expert. But Mom says I've always had a special bond with them. Even with this bond I'm always careful when it comes to dogs. You never know what could happen."

Ashleigh took a drink of her lemon flavored sweet iced tea.

"I really like the way she makes this stuff."

Nicole could really hear Ashleigh's Midwestern accent when she said "Stuff."

Nicole feeling a little more relaxed mentioned, "It's my receipt."

"Megan was telling me it was. I was hoping you would give it to me?"

Nicole was delighted this young woman would want her receipt.

"I'll make sure Megan gives it to you."

Ashleigh interrupted with a look, "Why don't I just give you my email address."

This surprised Nicole and again she felt a little uncomfortable, but Nicole felt it would have looked awful if she'd refuse the email address.

"Let me get a piece of paper."

Ashleigh: stood up, turned around, grabbed her purse from off the cabinet, and struggled to find a pen and a piece of paper.

While Ashleigh was shifting things in her purse, Nicole studied the objects inside of the cabinet. Secured to the top two shelves was a Jeep collection. The bottom two shelves were filled with trinkets. On closer inspection many of these animal trinkets had writing on them: "Wisconsin Dells," "Six flags Great America," "Milwaukee County Zoo," "Door County", and names of Wisconsin State Parks she was unsure of how to pronounce.

Nicole assumed Ashleigh enjoyed traveling and outdoor activities. Nicole wondered if Megan knew this. Nicole hoped Ashleigh could convince Megan to travel. With this thought it occurred to Nicole she took Ashleigh as the "girl" in their relationship. Nicole felt guilty for thinking this way.

Ashleigh asked very politely, "If you'd write down your email address on the other half of the sheet I'd appreciate it."

"Certainly," mentioned Nicole.

Nicole took a pen out of her purse and wrote down her email address.

Ashleigh was curious, "I'm hopping I'm not being to forward. But what does your husband do?"

Nicole was trying to be positive about her husbands career change, "He sells insurance."

"Does he handle car insurance?"

"Oh yes." Nicole remained a lady, "He sells home, life, boat, and car insurance. He's very honest."

"Doesn't that make it hard to sell insurance?"

Nicole was defensive but nice, "He believes being honest will help him in the future."

Based upon Nicole's tone, the way she answered, and body language; Ashleigh felt sorry she made a joke.

"I'm sure he's right."

Ashleigh observed Bob step off the circular stair case and walk toward the galley.

"I'm going to need insurance for my Jeep. Currently my insurance is with a guy up in Wisconsin. I was hoping to find someone local."

Nicole felt Ashleigh pronounced Wisconsin awful funny. She never heard Wisconsin pronounced with such emphasis on the C and the SIN. At the same time she was more than willing to promote her husband. She opened her purse and grabbed and gave Ashleigh: Jimmy's business card, the paper, and the pen.

"I'll call him later."

Bob gently stepped to the front of the kitchen table and pushed up his glasses, "Ms. Steward"

"Yes Mr. Waller."

Bob asked, "Was I hearing you correctly? Your husband sells insurance?"

"Yes."

Ashleigh mentioned, "She gave me his card. I heard you were looking for a different insurance agent?"

Nicole deeply appreciated what this young woman was attempting. Nicole assumed if these two were Jimmy's clients many of their employees, who were transplants, would choose her husband because of their recommendation.

"As my sister has stated I'm in need of a better agent. Does your husband handle corporate health insurance?"

"My husband only sells personal insurance. Such as home, life, boat, and auto. But his office has sold corporate insurance to local companies for years. This was how my husband became interested in selling insurance. The company he now works for sold insurance to the construction company my husband worked for."

Bob pushed up his glasses, "As soon as I'm finished talking to my executive secretary I'll give your husband a call."

"Yes sir."

"Again I'm pleased to meet you."

Nicole stood up and took his hand. Nicole appreciated how gentle he was.

"I'm having to leave," Bob turned to Ashleigh and said, "Call me if the Jeep isn't here by lunch."

"I will."

Bob nodded his head and walked toward the front door.

Ashleigh smiled and was about to whisper something to Nicole, but she caught out of the corner of her eye her brother stop. Ashleigh: glanced at her brother, recognized his body language, spotted him push up his glasses, she could tell he was thinking about something, she made a facial gesture, and winked at Nicole; Ashleigh made believe she missed all of her brothers reactions.

Nicole caught Ashleigh's gesture.

"Ms. Steward."

"Yes Mr. Waller."

Bob turned around and asked bluntly, "Is your husband as honest as his father David Steward?"

"Yes sir."

"I'm in no means trying to offend your sensibilities or criticizing your husbands ability. But Is your husband currently successful selling insurance? Is he enjoying this career choice?"

He studied her.

Nicole thought for a moment. She would have normally found a more middle of the road answer, but she felt the Holy Spirit encourage her to give a more blunt answer. This was a difficult choice under the circumstances.

Ashleigh hoped Nicole would be honest with her brother. Ashleigh knew her brother was testing Nicole. Ashleigh considered Nicole a friend and heard enough from Megan to

know Nicole's husband was struggling.

"My husband's first choice is to work construction. Because of the housing crash he was laid off. He believed he'd be successful at selling insurance. He's working really hard."

A very serious Bob asked, "What was his trade?"

"He originally started out as a carpenter. On the GI Bill he went to night school and received a degree in business management."

She was nervous but held her nervousness inside as only a southern woman can.

"After he was promoted to Construction Lead."

"What did this title entail?"

"He was in charge of every construction project. The only person Jimmy answered to was the owner."

"Hmm."

Nicole watched Mr. Waller push up his glasses.

"Was he a good carpenter?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you feel he'd be happier working in a factory?"

Ashleigh smiled and gave Nicole a look.

By this look Nicole knew she should be honest, "My husband's never worked in a factory before. He's a hands on type of guy. He's always trying to figure out how things work. He likes to fix things."

Bob in a very serious tone asked, "Did he spend more of his time in his office or on site?"

She decided she still needed to take a direct approach, "It depended on who the lead was and what they were building."

Nicole was relieved to see a positive change in Mr. Waller's facial expression.

"I'm looking for a lead to handle the making of my wooden games and art work. He would have to be responsible for many departments. I'd like him to apply for this position as soon as possible. If he is or isn't interested in working in a factory I'm looking forward to purchasing insurance from your husband and the company he's working for. I'm sure with the business we can provide it would lead to higher commission."

"I'll call Jimmy as soon as possible."

Very serious Bob answered, "It would be wise if you contacted him now. I'm sure Ashleigh understands the situation and would give you grace. I need to get this insurance situation settled quickly."

Nicole looked across the table at Ashleigh, Ashleigh winked and gave her a big smile.

Bob looked over at Ashleigh, "If your Jeep arrives I'll expect you at the meeting with Nicole's husband."

Ashleigh gave her brother an odd look and wondered why she'd need to be at this meeting. Ashleigh was about to ask why she needed to attend the meeting but he just walked away. She was about to get up and ask him, but felt better of it because Nicole was there.

Ashleigh could see Nicole was hoping her husband would take her call. Ashleigh leaned in and whispered, "It'd be a great opportunity for him."

Just as Bob was reached the front door, the door swung open, Nikita and Julie piled in.

Nikita was startled Favorite Male was there; she growled in response.

Ashleigh quickly looked down the hallway, and commanded, "Nikita no."

Ashleigh took note of: Nikita's tongue was hanging out, her chest was rapidly rising and falling, Julie was breathing heavy, but Ashleigh was shocked on how quickly Julie was recovering.

Ashleigh yelled, "Sit Nikita."

Julie repeated the command, "Sit."

Nicole was grateful Jimmy answered the phone, "Jimmy."

Ashleigh: turned toward Nicole, pointed to the balcony outside of the sliding doors, and gave her a look of reassurance.

Nikita howled again and ran to her spot after Julie released Nikita from her leash.

Nicole: appreciated Ashleigh's gesture, with how the dog was slobbering water all over Julie ran Nikita, Nicole brushed her concerns of Julie running with a dog aside, and stepped out onto the balcony.

After Nicole closed the sliding doors, Ashleigh stepped into the hallway where Julie and Bob were already having a conversation.

Julie looked at her watch. She knew she would be late if she continued to play fetch. Julie wanted to be with Nikita as much as possible.

Nikita placed the stick in front of Julie's feet.

"We have to get back to the yacht."

Nikita wanted to continue to play fetch not return to the territory named "yacht".

"Sit."

Because of Nikita's training and because she liked Strong Scent she listened.

What helped was Julie walked and ran Nikita on the same side as Ashleigh. Julie: read about dog training, watched a cable TV show about dogs, read about how to walk dogs, and talked to friends who owned dogs. From this research Julie surmised it would be easier on both herself and Nikita if she walked Nikita on the same side as Ashleigh did. Julie again tied the leash around her waist.

She said, "Let's Fly."

The only human who used this command was Strong Scent. Nikita would learn this meant to run. Strong Scent ran a lot faster than her companion. Strong Scent even allowed Nikita to chase things on the beach. Strong Scent never let her catch anything.

It took a few moments for Nikita and Julie to adjust to one another.

People in the marina were shocked when the two of them flew by them. Gina and her current girlfriend, who were both getting out of Gina's houseboat, were amazed at how fast they ran passed Gina's houseboat and turned the corner.

Julie flew open the door and both Julie and Nikita were startled when Bob was there.

Nikita growled.

Ashleigh yelled.

Julie quickly recovered, told Nikita to, "Sit."

Bob scolded, "Nikita you know better."

Because Ashleigh yelled at Nikita she sat and was wagging her tail.

Julie was temporarily fascinated with this older gentleman in front of her.

"I'm under the persuasion you enjoy running?"

Julie. was slightly out of breath but was recovering. She: released Nikita from the leash,

stood up, noticed her own body odor, was terribly embarrassed, took a couple deep breaths; in so doing she calmed herself and was now breathing easier.

"I'm all about running'."

Bob was aware of her body odor but gave this young woman grace.

"It's important to train."

Julie smiled, "I like working out. I'm always pushing myself to improve."

Bob smiled, "It's important to believe in self improvement. Your discipline shows your dedication."

"I believe in training."

"I'd like to know when your next athletic competition is."

This worried Julie because her volleyball team was horrible; especially after how bad the team played the day before. She wanted to lie but because of how she was brought up she answered, "Our next meet is Monday at six pm."

"I'm assuming it's volleyball."

"Yes sir."

Julie watched Ashleigh walk toward them.

Bob smiled and asked, "Has my sister discussed your compensation?"

"No Sir."

Bob pushed up his glasses and turned toward his sister, "I'll have Gracie give you the paperwork to make Julie an employee of the company."

"Okay."

Ashleigh answered with an odd facial expression.

Julie wondered what all this would mean.

"Unfortunately if you are a regular employee I'm unable to pay you in cash. The IRS does like to steal people's money."

"Captain says the same thing."

"Your Grandfather sounds like a very wise man."

Julie heard the respectful tone Mr. Waller used in reference to her Grandfather; this increased her respect for Mr. Waller.

"With you being on our payroll it will help you on any college application."

"Yes sir."

"I'm sure the committee who decides on whom should receive scholarships would take great consideration of an employee getting recommended by me."

Julie understood clearly.

Ashleigh winked at Julie.

Julie smiled.

Bob continued, "Are you as athletically gifted as it appears?"

"Yes sir."

"Let's just say if a young woman was to continue to serve my sister. A certain man who will remain anonymous could make a few calls to some athletic directors."

Julie lit up like a Christmas tree, "Awesome!" She caught herself, "Yes sir."

Bob smiled, "I'm sure colleges are already inquiring about your skills."

"Yes sir."

"Hmm."

He looked over at Ashleigh, "I'm assuming seventy five dollars a week would be a good

start.” He looked over at Julie, “You feel this fair?”

Julie's eyes were as big as an owls, “Yes sir.”

“With this type of money I expect you to take this job seriously. Are you responsible enough to save money?”

“Sir. I don't like spending money.”

Bob and Ashleigh could tell she was being honest.

Bob instructed Julie, “With your first paycheck I'd like you to go down to our credit union.”

“It's the new one downtown?”

“Yes it is.”

“Yes Sir.”

“When you arrive specifically talk to a Mr. Moore. He'll know you are arriving. He'll have a special savings account for you.”

“Yes sir.”

Julie wondered what was so special about a basic savings account.

“Whatever you save from walking Nikita I'll double it on the moment you graduate high school.”

She asked, “You promise?”

Nicole heard her daughter when she shut the sliding glass doors of the yacht.

“I'm a man who believes in promises.”

Julie smiled.

“Young lady I'm giving you three days to tell me what you feel about Walt Whitman.”

With this comment he stepped passed her and went out the front door.

Ashleigh gently told Julie, “He's not very good with goodbyes.”

Julie was calculating on how much money she'd make at the time of her graduation.

“Ms. Ashleigh Julie needs to arrive at school.”

“Alright. If It's alright with your Mom. You could start tomorrow.”

“Yes it is.”

Julie was thrilled, but in a serious tone told Ashleigh, “Y'all won't regret it.”

Ashleigh smiled, “I'm sure you'll do fine.”

“My husband Jimmy is looking forward to Mr. Waller calling him.”

Ashleigh answered Nicole, “If my brother promises something he'll do it.”

It was Julie's experience, when a person in Mr. Waller's authority promised something it was really a maybe, with Mr. Waller taking promises seriously this impressed Julie.

“We really have to go.”

Ashleigh stopped them one more time, “Megan was telling me your good at fashion?”

An energetic Julie answered, “She's the best.”

Nicole gave her daughter a look.

Julie went back to listening to Ashleigh.

“By the way you've dressed I'd consider you an expert. I've realized people here dress better than where I'm from. I could use some help.”

“Your an attractive woman.”

Ashleigh made a face and interrupted Nicole, “I'm trying to look professional. You think you could help me pick out some suits? Maybe Megan could go shopping with us?”

Julie and Nicole glanced over at one another and made faces.

Ashleigh saw this and answered, "With Megan being a jock girl shopping is probably the least thing she'd like to do. But I'd only go if she's going with us."

Based upon what Julie learned: from a friend from school who had two moms, a friend of hers who was a lesbian, and from talking to a teacher who was a lesbian; Julie assumed Ashleigh was the "girl" in the relationship.

Julie mentioned with a tone of caution, "It ain't easy shopping with Auntie."

"She goes shopping with us on our annual Christmas shopping trip. We'll work it out."

Ashleigh smiled and asked, "Give me a hug."

Julie was surprised Ashleigh would want to hug her, but Julie allowed this woman to hug her.

Nicole reluctantly hugged Ashleigh.

Nikita could sense these two ladies were leaving. She sat where she was taught and wagged her tail.

"Bye Nikita. I'll see you tomorrow."

Nicole looked at her watch, "We have to get going'."

"Bye Ms. Ashleigh."

"Bye."

Nicole mentioned with a sincere tone, "May God bless your day."

Ashleigh felt Nicole was being sincere. Ashleigh closed the door.

Once the door was closed Julie asked her Momma, "If she marries Megan would she be considered an Auntie?"

This upset Nicole but answered with dignity, "I'm sure if you'd ask them after they've admitted to being a couple. I'm sure Ashleigh wouldn't mind being referred to as an Auntie."

At this moment Julie considered Ashleigh her newest Auntie, and considered Mr. Waller her adopted uncle.

End of Part One of Six

November 30th, Ashleigh's Jeep

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



*Thursday, November 30th,
Ashleigh's Jeep
Day 6 of Book One
(Three Days since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)*

Part Two of Six

*Authored By:
R. P. Voght*

*Posted on ashleighandmegan.com on:
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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 1st, Ashleigh's Jeep

(4 Days Since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

Julie stepped out of the bathroom. Her: long wet brunette hair hung loosely over her shoulders, she was wearing a pair of light blue wide leg utility jeans with cargo pockets, a black long sleeved french cuffed shirt, and a pair of black leather ankle booties with a silver chain, simple silver necklace, and post earrings. With her height, her larger sized breasts, the way she carried herself, and her intelligence she could have passed for a freshman in college. She knew being five eleven was a blessing as an athlete. What she felt was becoming a nuisance was her breasts. A frustration was the belief her breasts were starting to grow again. What she disliked the most was their pointy shape and how her areolas were growing larger too. She recalled the attention she received when she wore this shirt four days earlier.

She: opened the door to her bedroom, stepped in, made sure the door was shut, stepped in front of her closet, slipped off the shirt she was wearing, yanked on her bra to hopefully have it fit better, put on a dark blue Faux Wrap long sleeved shirt, and added a black double-breasted vest. Julie felt this concealed her breasts and she felt more sophisticated. She slipped on: her light blue Adidas jacket, grabbed her backpack, quickly swung the backpack over her shoulders, grabbed her watch next to her gym bag, and strapped it onto her wrist.

With her routine changed she felt stressed out. She knew her Momma would stop her from walking Nikita if she was late. She took a long deep breath to fight off the impulse to relieve the inner stress she felt. When her eyes were closed she focused on how relaxing it felt to walk Nikita.

She: opened her eyes, she grabbing her gym bag, ran out of her room, stepped back before she reached the steps, slammed her door, went running down the stairs, as she was running down the steps she heard her Daddy making noise in the den, Julie suspected her Daddy was getting ready for a meeting with Mr. Waller and Ms. Ashleigh; Julie silently prayed

everything would go well.

She aggressively opened the front door.

Nicole was headed for the front door.

A very apologetic Julie shouted, "I'm sorry Momma."

Nicole gave her a look.

Ester was sitting in the front passenger seat. Julie felt it was unwise to argue with Ester on where the two should sit; she opened the large back sliding door and slipped into the van.

Nicole cringed when Julie slammed the door.

Ester liked it when her sister rode with her; it forced her big sister to talk to her.

Ester was very curious, "What was it like?"

Julie pretended to miss her little sister's question.

Ester was ready to ask the question again but the garage door opened.

Nicole was already seated and put the mini van into reverse.

Ester asked, "Where's Daddy going?"

"He's trying to sell insurance."

"Oh."

Nicole backed up, stopped a safe distance, and allowed Jimmy to pass her.

The three ladies in the car waved.

Jimmy waved back.

Julie was certain Mr. Waller and Ms. Ashleigh would purchase insurance from her Daddy.

"Why is he driving so fast?"

Nicole answered, "He's making sure he gets to his meeting."

"Oh."

Julie rolled her eyes.

Nicole drove toward the High School.

Ester asked, "Julie?"

"Yes."

"are Y'all walking a dawg?"

Nicole added, "It'll be her job. We ain't getting a dog."

This statement disappointed both girls.

"What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"The dawg?"

"She's very friendly and has lots of energy."

A concerned Momma asked, "Y'all ain't taking her off the leash?"

"I wrap the leash around my waist when we go running."

Nicole glanced into the rear view mirror and was about to comment.

Ester blurted out another question, "What type of dawg is it?"

"It's called a Siberian Husky."

Nicole mentioned, "The type of dawg in the movie, *Call of the Wild*."

Ester replied, "Oh."

Julie mentioned, "She has beautiful blue eyes."

Ester asked, "What's its name?"

"Nikita."

Ester made a face.

Nicole answered Ester's look, "Nikita."

Ester made a face again, "Why is it's name Niy-kia-ta?"

Julie snickered.

"Y'all are always making fun of me."

"I ain't making fun of you."

"Y'all were laughing at me."

Nicole stopped a loud debate, "She shouldn't pick on you."

Nicole glanced back at Julie.

Julie pretended to miss the look.

Nicole was sure Julie heard her.

Ester asked, "Julie."

"Yes."

"Can I..."

Julie corrected, "It's may I."

"Why are Y'all telling me what to say?"

Nicole gently corrected, "The proper term is may I. To say can is implying you can't do something."

Ester pleaded, "But I can."

Nicole continued, "When asking someone's permission you should use may I."

Ester sighed, "May I go with you."

"Where?"

Life seemed very difficult for Ester. Her response to this difficulty was saying in absolute exasperation, "May I walk with you. When you walk Knee-key-Ta?"

Julie smiled at the way Ester said Nikita. Julie failed to realize Nikita herself was having difficulty understanding Julie.

"Maybe."

Nicole witnessed Ester's disappointed countenance.

"Maybe she'll take you on a Saturday or when Y'all are off of school."

Julie kept her opinion of Ester going with her to herself.

"Yea."

"It's her job. Y'all will have to listen to her and she'll have to get permission from Ms. Waller."

"Who's Ms. Waller?"

Julie answered, "She owns the dawg. She lives next door to Auntie."

"Auntie Megan?"

Julie answered, "Yeah."

Julie explained, "She's friends with Ashleigh the sister of Mr. Waller."

"Who's Mr. Waller?"

Nicole answered, "He's the gentleman who owns *Renewed Mastery*."

"Ain't he the guy Daddy and Pa are always talking about?"

Nicole answered, "Yes."

Julie commented, "I think I've seen Mr. Waller before."

Nicole answered, "I've been feeling the same way. But it'd have been impossible for us to meet him before."

Ester asked, "Why?"

Nicole answered, "They just moved here."

"Oh." Ester asked Julie again, "Julie may I walk Nee-key-taa with you."

"I'd have to ask Ms. Ashleigh."

Ester crinkled her forehead.

Nicole mentioned again, "We ain't getting a dawg."

Both girls sighed.

Nicole turned into the high school parking lot, "Are you getting a ride after practice?"

"Stephie's momma is taking me home."

"Okay."

Nicole stopped the vehicle in front of the high school. Julie quickly slid the back door open.

Ester in an excited tone, "Bye Julie."

Julie smiled. Julie loved her sister even when she was being completely annoying, "Bye."

Ester loved it when her Big Sister acknowledged her.

Julie: slammed the door shut, turned, witnessed Amanda waiting for her, Julie spotted The Snob Club walk over to Amanda; Julie wished she would have arrived a few minutes earlier.

Nicole watched as Julie and her new friends reached Amanda.

A concerned Ester asked, "Momma are you alright?"

Nicole looked over at Ester and commented, "You should always choose good friends."

"Danielle will be my best friend forever."

Nicole smiled, "She's a good friend."

"She's my bestest friend in the whole world."

"Danielle is a good gal."

"Are we picking her up?"

"Tomorrow."

Ester disappointed answered, "Oh."

The mom and daughter talked about things important to a ten year old. They pulled in front of the primary school. Ester was excited to see her best friend Danielle. Ester: flipped off her seat belt, opened the door, and ran toward Danielle.

Nicole had to shout, "Ester the door."

"Oh."

Ester turned and headed back to the minivan.

When Danielle reached the minivan she shouted, "Howdy Ms. Nicole."

"Howdy."

"Bye Momma."

"Y'all behave."

"We will."

Ester shut the minivan door.

Nicole enjoyed watching the two of them run to the school.

Nicole pulled out of the primary school parking lot.

Nicole decided: she'd go grocery shopping, later she would talk to Ester's teacher about Ester's struggles with math, would call Jimmy, and after lunch she would volunteer at the *Eastbank Community Outreach Center*. Nicole hoped Jimmy would get a job offer from Mr. Waller or would get a large commission from selling this man insurance.

Nicole was trying to shake off the dreadful feeling she received from Julie's new friends. Ever since Diana and herself talked about Julie, Nicole was keeping a close eye on Julie and her friends. Nicole never spotted any signs her Daughter was using any drugs or abusing alcohol. She felt something was wrong with her Daughter but was unable to figure it out. Nicole assumed the feeling she was having would disappear the moment Julie found new friends. Nicole assumed if Julie was contemplating changing friends this would be difficult.

With this thought Nicole pulled into the parking lot of a large box store; the only time she ever shopped at this store was when she was concerned about the families finances. She: stepped out of the minivan, shut the minivan door, locked the doors with her key fab, cringed when she witnessed a dirty looking white couple grab a cart, looked toward the front of the store, she hated this store; but she would make the best of it.

Ashleigh was carrying a brown box, on the side of the box written in her handwriting was the word, *Pictures*. She was thankful this was the last box she needed to carry down to the first deck. When she reached the end of what she called the bedroom hallway, she glanced out the sliding glass door; depending on how the day went she would take her first dip into the yacht's pool. After: talking to the cleaning crew, the pool cleaning service, and her own cleaning; she felt the pool was clean enough to swim in it. The service crews were told by Mr. Waller they needed to listen to Ashleigh. These service companies expected Ashleigh to raise the level of expectations even before she ever called or talked to them. As each person came in contact with Ms. Ashleigh they reported to others she was: detailed, was fair, was patient, was flirtatious, tipped well, and was different from most Yankees; she was acquiring a good reputation.

All morning Ashleigh wondered why her brother wanted her to attend the meeting between himself and Nicole's husband. Ashleigh was relieved to receive a phone call from Haley informing her, she was no longer required to attend the meeting, because Bob was having the meeting with Mr. Steward. It was Ashleigh's feeling her brother had something planned and was purposely not telling her.

When she reached the bottom of the ladder (she called them stairs) she was in a short hallway. She stopped to look at a large aerial picture of *Renewed Mastery*. This picture was taken a few months after the company first opened. Ashleigh knew the picture was taken in early spring: there were buds on the trees, a pick-up truck in the parking lot had a plow still attached to it, and there were melting piles of snow around the edges of the parking lot. Ashleigh recalled her brothers confidence the day he opened this factory.

She turned from this picture and stepped into the recreation area of the yacht. Ashleigh loved the three rows of Roman styled white pillars. She secretly wondered how expensive it was to double the amount of pillars and redesign the old ones. Ashleigh liked the U-shaped windows at the bow end of this large room and felt the side windows were an awesome touch. She gazed upon the double row of eighties arcade games; these machines were a short distance from the U shaped windows and were back to back. In the center of all

the pillars was a large antique table. She smiled. She spend many hours at this table playing board games or working on art projects. In between the next set of pillars, lined up in a row: was a blackjack table, roulette wheel, and Craps table; the top of the blackjack table could be flipped over to be a poker table. A few feet from the last set of pillars was a custom built oblong cherry wood bar. Along the starboard side in between the pillars and the exterior wall were two electronic dart boards. In front, at the proper distance was tape on the floor so a player knew where to stand. Scattered throughout this deck were small enclaves of brand new chairs, six love seats, two couches, large tables, and small round end tables. A favorite item of hers was a very large antique roman numeral clock she had the movers hang above the engine room door. She was afraid to ask the cost of this item. When she asked about the clock, her brother smiled, and said it was an interesting artifact. This meant he would never tell anyone where he purchased it and if someone wanted to find out he gave them enough of a clue for them to figure it out.

She was proud of her setup. The day before her brother gave her the task of directing the movers. She hated to admit it, but she enjoyed the task of arranging the room. She directed the movers to place the: Foosball, pool table, air hockey table, the three pinball machines, and the antique arcade bowling game in one of the two garages her brother rented. This decision became a point of contention between herself and her brother. Ashleigh maintained: he put her in charge, he could still use them, and she felt these games should be played on solid ground. In spite of their disagreement, she was certain her brother liked the set up, because he spent the previous evening in a love seat reading a book. Her green eyes scanned this room and was satisfied at her results.

Nikita ran downstairs with a ball in her mouth.

What Ashleigh found outlandish was the painted collage on the port side (she considered left side). Painted on the wall were: chess pieces, checker pieces, Monopoly pieces, dice of varying sides, Clue pieces, Risk pieces, a Backgammon Board, a Checker board, marbles, and other recognized game pieces. She believed he used a local artist because she was unable to recognize the artist who did the work. She knew just about every artist who worked for her brother in Wisconsin and New York. She appreciated the talent it took to paint this collage and the outside of the yacht, but she wished her brother would have commissioned something more conventional.

She contemplated what her brother would be like if he was conventional.

This is when an impatient Nikita howled and dropped the ball in front of her.

Ashleigh bent down and pet Nikita, "Not now."

This confused Nikita. This is where they played "fetch" at this territory named "yacht."

Ashleigh: stood up, she stepped passed the engine room wall, went passed the storage room door, stepped over to a port side cabin, and shut the door. This corner cabin started just beyond the door of the storage unit and ended near the port side entrance. Ashleigh: opened the door to the storage unit, turned on the light, and they stepped in. Along one full wall of this storage unit was a heavy duty built in cabinet. This long cabinet protected a collection of games. There were a variety of classic board games, antique board games, odd games most people never heard about, card games, antique decks of cards, and copies of every game *Renewed Mastery* produced. There were two similar collections, one at her brothers home in Wisconsin, and at *Renewed Mastery*. Directly opposite of this game cabinet was another storage cabinet.

She: unhinged one of the doors, she opened the door, she glanced over at her two sections of this shelf, she placed the box marked *Pictures* on top of another box, sighed, shut the door, hinged the door, stepped out of the storage area, glanced up at the large antique roman numeral clock, considered moving back home, again decided to stay, imagined what her family in Wisconsin was doing, this caused her to tear; this was when she heard Nikita make a noise.

Nikita: dropped the ball, sniffed, her ears perked up, howled, ran up the stairs; leaving the ball behind.

Ashleigh: quickly gained her composer, picked up the ball, turned off the light, headed upstairs, once she reached the lounge she set the ball in a spot Nikita could find, she heard the doorbell playing the "Pink Panther" movie theme; she hoped her Jeep was being delivered.

When Ashleigh reached the door she immediately noticed Nikita.

Nikita's: ears were down, her tail was down, her fur was stiff, she was showing her teeth, and she was growling.

This concerned Ashleigh because she was home alone and she wanted to heed her dog's warning.

Ashleigh commanded, "Nikita sit."

Nikita disliked the scent of the male human on the opposite side of the door.

Ashleigh commanded more sternly, "Sit."

Nikita finally sat, but was still in a defensive posture.

Ashleigh listened to her dog by stepping up to the door and asking, "Who is it?"

"I'm Larry from *Move-a-Vehicle*."

Nikita: stood up, her hair bristled, she was growling, and her teeth were showing.

Ashleigh commanded this Larry, "Wait a second."

"Alright."

Ashleigh disliked this man's tone.

Nikita aggressively rushed the door.

"NO SIT."

Nikita felt: she needed to protect her friend and the territory."

Ashleigh was far more stern and commanded, "Come."

Nikita reluctantly listened to Ashleigh and followed Ashleigh into the galley.

Ashleigh pointed to Nikita's spot, "Lay down."

A reluctant Nikita obeyed.

Ashleigh went to Nikita's closet.

Before Nikita ran to the closet Ashleigh yelled, "Stay."

Nikita reluctantly did so.

Ashleigh: grabbed Nikita's leash, walked back to the cabinet next to Nikita's spot, opened her purse, placed the leash into the purse, took her wallet, grabbed her cell phone and the Jeep's registration, headed toward the door, a few feet from the door she stopped, and called Florence.

Florence promised she would help.

Turning off her cell phone she heard Nikita's collar jangle.

"SIT!"

Nikita whimpered but obeyed.

Ashleigh felt she needed to keep Nikita inside the yacht. Ashleigh opened the door,

Nikita rushed the door, Ashleigh kept her back to the door but made sure she was facing the delivery driver, and kept an angry Nikita in the yacht.

Ashleigh focused her green eyes. She immediately mistrusted the man in front of her. He: was wearing a plain blue uniform, was over six feet tall, skinny, and had straight black hair, average features. What made her uncomfortable was looking into this man's green eyes. What added to her distrust was the way he was holding onto the clipboard and his mannerisms.

Nikita slammed into the door.

The driver commented, "Your dog needs some discipline."

With a tone she answered, "She's normally a sweetie. She tends to like most people."

He glared at her.

Ashleigh felt an inner warning.

He stated, "Are you an Ashleigh Waller?"

She squinted her eyes and answered, "I'm Ashleigh Waller. My brother wants me to inspect the vehicle."

She stopped talking when he stepped into her personnel space and he asked, "I need to see ID and registration."

Nikita banged against the door.

This startled the delivery driver.

Ashleigh was feeling the need to get away from this man, "I'd like to inspect my Jeep."

His tone intensified, "It's not necessary."

She was about to shove him out of her way, "It's my Jeep."

In a distinct New Jersey accent she heard, "Shorty? U's doing okay?"

At the bottom of the wooden stairs was an intense looking man who was: a few inches taller than Ashleigh, his black hair was slicked back, he wore sunglasses, a bright orange and white Hawaiian shirt, dark blue jeans, and black boots. Standing next to him was a woman: who was three inches taller than her husband, her arms were crossed, she was wearing a black leather jacket, a purple button shirt, skinny jeans, her body was shifted to the right, and she was tapping her right foot on the wooden pier of the yacht.

"Mister. You're a little too close to Shorty? If I was U I'd back away from her."

Ashleigh yelled, "He's delivering my Jeep and he isn't wanting me to inspect it."

The delivery driver's countenance changed so fast it scared Ashleigh, "I'm needing to see ID and proof of ownership."

Nikita again slammed herself against the door.

"How's about she shows U's the ID down here."

The woman yelled, "Mister U's need to be down here."

Because of Barbara and Stan the delivery driver backed out of Ashleigh's space. This gave Ashleigh room to move down the stairway. As Ashleigh made her way down the stairs Frank and Florence arrived and immediately Florence yelled to Ashleigh, "Sweetie. Y'all alright?"

When Ashleigh reached the four of them, Barbara whispered, "Florence called us."

Stan studied the delivery driver walking down the stairs of the yacht.

Stan mentioned, "Shorty U's have the right to inspect the vehicle. I should know 'cause I's a lawyer."

Barbara rolled her eyes, "In the state of Jersey."

She looked at Ashleigh and said, "We're retired."

I?" He waved his hands, "I'm still a lawyer and I've appeared in court around here. Haven't

This tall woman rolled her eyes and commanded, "We've made appearances."

She pointed, "U's make sure to help Shorty."

Ashleigh smiled at her friends.

Florence stepped over to Ashleigh and whispered, "I ain't liking him."

Ashleigh nodded her head.

"Hey U's," Stan mentioned as the delivery driver stepped up onto the concrete pier, "What are you pushing Shorty for?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm her friend. More important to U's I'm her lawyer."

The delivery driver made a face, "Your a lawyer?"

This pissed off Barbara, she pointed, "For your information we're good lawyers."

"I don't care if your a lawyer or not I need to see the registration and her license."

Stan and Barbara could hear the same Midwestern accent as Ashleigh.

Ashleigh in frustration dug into her purse and held out her license and registration, "Here's my license and registration."

The delivery driver grabbed these items and started to flip through the paperwork on his clipboard. He stopped at the page where Ashleigh's license and registration could be verified.

Barbara asked an obvious question, "Is that your Jeep on the flat bed?"

Ashleigh looked to where Barbara was pointing. There was a single gray ten wheeled flatbed truck parked in the parking lot a short distance from the metal fence. The trailer section of this truck was open and Ashleigh could see her yellow Jeep secured to the bed of the truck. She felt as though she received her freedom back. Ashleigh deeply appreciated Megan and Florence driving her around, she enjoyed being introduced to everyone, but it felt good to have her precious Jeep back.

"It's a new one," commented Barbara, "I see U's added pin strips and some decals?"

"The dealership did that."

Stan asked, "What'd U pay for it?"

"The dealership put it on for me."

Stan and Barbara glanced at one another.

The delivery driver took a pen out of his pocket and put an x on a few sheets. When he was finished he interrupted their conversation and pushed the clipboard into Ashleigh's face and commanded, "Sign on this line."

Frank just about knocked the clipboard out of the delivery drivers hand, "She ain't signing nothing. She's inspecting the Jeep first."

Stan glared and moved his hands, "Look. U's better let us inspect her vehicle."

The driver made an attempted at protesting, "She..."

Stan interrupted, "We're looking over the Jeep first."

Frank added, "I'm assuming it's on the truck over there?"

Barbara stated, "Yes we are."

"Lets get going," mentioned Stan and headed toward the flat bed truck.

Ashleigh never witnessed Frank so upset.

Florence secretly elbowed Ashleigh and gave Ashleigh a wink.

Ashleigh knew this wink came from a wife who trusted her husband. Ashleigh suspected Frank was at one time a force to be reckoned with.

Julie was bored with her History class. She finished the assignment the teacher was discussing two months earlier. She could have asked a few questions to stump the teacher but she liked him. Her mind wandered to the struggles of her volleyball team. She understood there was only so much she could do. She picked up her backpack and took out the current days photocopies of the *Wall Street Journal*. Based upon what she read, she wanted access to the internet immediately, she wished she owned a laptop. Instead she would go into the computer room during study hall. She felt stressed both by what she read and the failings of her volleyball team. She glanced up at the classroom clock. With ten minutes left in class it would have been foolish for her to leave. She felt more in control with the idea of leaving her next class and using the restroom then.

Ashleigh was standing next to Barbara, Stan was to the left of Barbara, to the left of Stan was a family: Julio, Rosa, and a baby carrier. In this carrier was a two month old baby boy. To the right of Ashleigh: was Florence, to the right of Florence was Frank, and standing next to Frank was Mike the owner of the Marina. Behind them were other people from the marina. Gina was watching from the stern of her houseboat.

They watched the Jeep being driven off of the flatbed.

Stan looked over at Barbara, "He's not driving Shorty's vehicle right."

Barbara nodded, "We'll need to give it a once over."

Ashleigh allowed Stan to call her Shorty because she knew he meant well, "Are you sure? I wouldn't want anything to have happened to my Jeep. My brother bought me the Jeep. I didn't need such a good car. But now that I..."

She trailed off.

Even Barbara was losing track of what she was saying. Her strong Midwestern accent was odd but when she talked fast; just about everyone local lost track of what she was saying.

Ashleigh calmed herself and asked in a clear voice, "Is he really doing it wrong?"

Barbara answered, "He ain't doing it right. I's know. Because My Papa owned his own shop. He'd been pissed if he saw someone remove a vehicle like he's doing."

Stan waved his hands, "Shorty we'll give it the once over. Don't U's sign nothing."

Ashleigh winked, "Thanks."

All the men were visibly happy to help Ashleigh.

Barbara was doubting the rumor Ashleigh and Megan were lovers.

Florence assumed Ashleigh's flirtatiousness was just who she was.

Rosa was watchful of her whole family. Rosa wanted to trust Ashleigh but she loved Julio more; she'd be cautious.

The delivery driver: parked the Jeep in the middle of the parking lot, he stepped out, slammed the drivers side door, made a face, he slapped the clipboard against his hand, and then headed toward the group.

Stan waved and demanded, "Men lets go."

Barbara gave him a look, waved her arms, "What? Em I chopped liver?"

Stan stopped, sighed, and was about to say something.

"U's said guys. If you hadn't noticed..."

Stan waved her over, "We don't have time for this."

Barbara answered, "Fine."

Barbara looked over at Ashleigh, "U should come along. Just in case they miss something."

"I ain't missing nothing."

Barbara gave Stan a look. She looked over at Ashleigh, "Men can be such a pain."

Florence agreed, "You ain't whistling Dixie."

Barbara asked, "What does it mean to be Whistling Dixie?"

Florence answered, "It's just a southern expression."

Ashleigh stated, "I like the southern custom of bringing apple pie over. I'll bring the dish back."

Florence guessed at what Ashleigh said, "Y'all liked the apple pie?"

Ashleigh winked, "You can bring more over any time. My brother ate most of it."

Florence was delighted they both liked her pie.

Barbara asked, "Ashleigh where exactly are you from?"

"Wisconsin."

Barbara asked, "Huh?"

"Wisconsin."

Florence mentioned, "She always pronouncing her C's funny. She's trying to say Wisconsin."

"You aren't saying it right."

Barbara stopped walking and asked, "Whats an aren't?"

This shocked Ashleigh.

Florence answered, "It's meaning ain't."

"Did you grow up on a farm or something?"

Because Ashleigh grew up around Bob's blunt behavior Ashleigh was fine with Barbara's tone and question, "No. I grew up in a town named Brookside just outside of Milwaukee. I had a private school education..."

Barbara interrupted and asked, "Excuse me. What's my husband doing?"

They looked to where Barbara was pointing: Stan and this Larry were arguing, they could clearly hear Stan threatened to sue them, and then they witnessed Stan grabbing the clipboard out of the drivers hands.

Ashleigh said, "I'm not sure."

Barbara answered, "Don't worry. We'll get this taken care off."

She then yelled at Stan, "What are U's doing?"

An impatient Stan yelled, "Are you finished?"

Barbara answered, "What happens if we ain't?"

"I thought U wanted to inspect the vehicle? The guys waiting."

Barbara looked at Stan and strutted past him.

Stan pointed to the ground, "U's stay right there."

"This isn't right."

Stan answered the driver, "The way U's been acting ain't right."

He focused and demanded, "Guys wait a second."

They looked at him.

Barbara asked, "I thought we're suppose to inspect the vehicle?"

"Can't you see I'm doing something here?"

Barbara: rolled her eyes, crossed her arms, shifted her body, and again started to tap her foot in a way only a Jersey woman can. "I guess we're waiting."

Stan pretended to be deaf.

Stan walked over to Ashleigh and stated, "You should ask everyone out loud to inspect your Jeep. It's a nice Jeep."

"Thanks. Alright."

She stepped over to where Frank, Julio, and Barbara were.

"Would you help me inspect the vehicle?"

Stan sternly asked the delivery driver, "Did U's hear that?"

The delivery driver answered with disgust, "Yes."

"U's got a bad attitude."

The delivery driver gave Stan a face and mumbled something.

Stan looked over at Barbara.

Barbara shook her head.

"Shorty we're inspecting every inch of your Jeep."

Ashleigh in a gentle way answered, "Thank-you."

Ashleigh smiled as Stan stepped away and waved the three to inspect the vehicle.

The crowd from the marina grew.

Ashleigh was feeling guilty her friends were inspecting the vehicle while she just stood there. She headed toward them.

Florence gently grabbed her and whispered, "Where Y'all going?"

"I was going to help."

"You'll offend em'."

"Shouldn't I help?"

Rosa stepped up to Ashleigh.

Ashleigh noticed a sun shield attached to the carrier.

The baby was now awake. It looked up at Ashleigh and smiled.

Ashleigh waved at the baby.

Rosa spoke, "If something is wrong my Julio find. He's helping 'cause you've been good to my family. Yes?"

Ashleigh gave Rosa a puzzled look. She wondered how she helped her family. Rosa was a couple inches taller than Ashleigh and around the same age. Ashleigh felt she was a very beautiful looking woman.

"You hired Julio to work for you."

"My brother did."

Rosa's eyes were filled with gratitude, "People hire Julio to work on yards. Yes? Julio gets hired to work at people's homes. Yes?"

Ashleigh answered, "I guess. Bob appreciated Julio."

Rosa was trying very hard to say what she felt, she wished she knew English as well as Julio, "You give us good job. No? Job is already helping family. No? We look to when full time. He hired teacher. We citizens now."

Ashleigh was unsure of why she was feeling so uncomfortable with Rosa's gratitude. So, she reassured Rosa, "When the construction is done Julio will be working full time in our maintenance department."

Rosa's dark eyes lite up, "Mr. Waller tell same. Julio work hard for you. Yes. We have money now. Not worry. Yes?"

Ashleigh held back tears, "I'm sure everything will be alright."

Barbara shouted in her Jersey accent, before Ashleigh could hug Rosa, "Look at dis."

Ashleigh and everyone else looked over to where Barbara was standing.

Barbara pointed at the Jeep, "Ashleigh was this here before?"

Barbara glared at the driver, "You should be ashamed of yourself."

"What did I do?"

Barbara answered, "As if U's didn't know."

Ashleigh: glanced over at the driver, she felt he looked guilty, stepped over to where everyone was now standing; she could tell by their faces it was bad.

Everyone was pointing at the back wheel well and the corner of the drivers side door. What Ashleigh saw infuriated her. There was a dent just at the edge of the door, from this dent there were large obnoxious scratches, these scratches tore off the green pinstripe, and tore the bottom half of her squiggly lined decal with hearts.

She suddenly turned and looked at the delivery driver, "When did this happen?"

Everyone was shocked at Ashleigh's intense body language and her tone.

He looked at her and bluntly lied, "It was there when I picked it up."

Ashleigh's face turned red, "My brother bought me this. I take great care of it. It was not like this when you picked it up. It was in perfect condition when I left. You're an ass hole."

Everyone was shocked and staring at her.

He answered, "It's in the paperwork. I picked it up that way."

"You put it in the paperwork after."

"What are you accusing me off?"

Frank stepped in and with a stern voice stated, "Shorty might be a Yankee but she's a good gal." He pointed in anger and pushed his glasses up, "I'm suspecting you'd call an alligator a lizard if it gets Y'all out of this mess. We ain't listening to Y'all pissing on my leg and telling us it's raining."

The delivery driver glared at Frank, "This isn't any of your concern."

Frank's body language intensified.

Florence yelled, "Frank."

He looked at her,.

Florence shook her head; in frustration he pushed up his glasses.

Stan stepped into the delivery drivers personal space, "Look buddy. We're her friends."

Barbara snapped, "If she says the scratches were never there. Then U's put them there. I was watching you drive the Jeep off the truck."

This is when Julio, a man of average height, but many muscles, stated; "She ain't lying."

What was either great boldness or stupidity, the delivery driver looked at them, with what Ashleigh felt was a creepy stare stated, "She needs to sign this paperwork."

Ashleigh answered, "I'm not signing the paperwork. That dent and scratches weren't there before."

He bellowed back in the same noticeable accent as Ashleigh. "That's not true. The

paperwork says they were on this vehicle when I picked it up.”

Julio was holding in his anger, “Sir. What I think is you wrote something in the paperwork to cover your ass. Ms. Ashleigh isn't the type of gal to be stretching things.”

The delivery driver acted bolder, “How'd you know? You barely speak English.”

Julio swore in Spanish and was about to rush the guy; but Rosa yelled to him in Spanish.

He looked at her.

Ashleigh yelled, “Don't fight.”

Julio temporarily listened to these two women. He was hoping this delivery driver would start something.

At this moment, Jimmy drove into the parking lot. He took note off: the truck, a brand new yellow jeep, a guy he assumed was the delivery driver, and the people he recognized from the marina. He was concerned about the Latino woman and her baby, the other women standing around, and he took special notice of a short blond haired gal. Jimmy assumed this was the Ashleigh he heard so much about. Seeing her for the first time he could understand why his sister would be attracted to this gal. It was difficult for him to accept his sister was attracted to women but he felt there was little he could do about it. What concerned Jimmy; was it looked as though there was going to be a brawl. He parked his pick-up-truck in a visitors spot in the main parking lot.

A police car drove passed Jimmy as he parked his truck. The Eastbank police department made it a point to check on the many marina's along the river. What was important about *Mike's Marina* was Megan Steward lived and worked in this one. Dave Steward was a life long friend of Chief William Salisbury, and grew up with Captain Andrew Wiseman. This marina “happened” to have twice as many patrols along the river; these patrols included both car and boat.

Stan now irritated, “I'm suing you on Shorty's behalf.”

He looked over at Ashleigh, “I'll do it for free.”

Ashleigh felt bad and tried to say, “My brother has a lawyer.”

Stan ignored Ashleigh. Stan pointed and in a bold voice stated, “I'll sue you and your outfit.”

The delivery driver grunted and made a face.

Barbara became very angry, “Are you saying we ain't good lawyers?”

With a disgusted look the delivery driver said, “He doesn't strike any fear into me.”

“I outta...”

Barbara yelled, “Stan.”

He looked over.

She pointed toward the front of the marina.

She pointed at the reason why everyone was leaving; two Eastbank police officers were walking toward them.

The people who stayed were: Mike the owner of the marina, Julio and Rosa (the baby), Barbara and Stan, Frank and Florence, and a few others; with the police showing up everyone else was returning to their vessels or were moving back to the beach.

Stan looked over at Ashleigh and asked, “You want me representing you.”

She felt compelled to tell him, “For now. But my brother has a lawyer.”

Stan asked, “Who's the lawyer?”

Ashleigh was afraid she would offend her friend but answered Stan's question, with a puzzled, I ain't sure who it is tone and body language, "A Mr. Shelby."

There was immediate silence from anyone who knew anything about Florida.

Ashleigh asked, "Is this bad?"

This Larry showed is ignorance, "I don't give a shit who your lawyer is. You need to sign the paperwork."

The residents of Florida were shocked at this guys ignorance.

The delivery driver was interrupted by the female police officer, "There isn't any need to be swearing. What seems to be the trouble?"

Reading this mixed raced woman's name. Her name was Janet Foster. Ashleigh suspected she was white and Latino decent. Janet had a: long oval shaped face, soft blended cheeks, soft puffy lips, light brown hair with blond highlights, her hair was currently tied in a bun under her police cap, and bright brown eyes. Ashleigh imagined a few people made the mistake of thinking Janet was a push over. Ashleigh was certain this woman could bring someone a world of hurt when necessary. It was obvious to Ashleigh there was a lot of power in her lower body. Ashleigh felt she would have looked very feminine out of her uniform because of her toned but noticeable rear end and her medium sized breasts.

Because Janet was a new police officer in Eastbank everyone was surprised at her commanding voice; everyone studied her.

She shifted her body, the leather of her belt and gun squeaked. She again asked with a demanding tone, "What seems to be the problem here?"

The delivery driver became nice, "Officer. All I'm trying to do is deliver this Jeep. I can't because she won't sign the paperwork. I'm from Wisconsin and I'd like to head back."

Stan was about to speak but an upset Ashleigh broke in first. "Officer I'm Ashleigh Waller."

She then suddenly stopped. Ashleigh witnessed an attractive police officer move into her line of site. It was an instant attraction. He was five eleven, was wearing sunglasses, was in shape, she liked his thin but squared chin, and was delighted he was clean shaved.

Janet bellowed, "Ma'am?"

Ashleigh's reaction caused: Rosa, Florence and Barbara to dismiss the rumor Megan and her were lovers. Barbara contemplated the possibility Ashleigh might be bisexual, this caused Barbara to have concerns for Megan, Barbara was certain Megan would be hurt to find out Ashleigh liked guys too.

"Oh...uh..."

Barbara came to Ashleigh's rescue, "Is this vehicle yours?"

Stan jumped in, "Officer. Ms. Waller's vehicle was damaged in delivery. This delivery driver is claiming the vehicle was damaged when he picked up the vehicle."

Ashleigh answered, "Yeah."

Ashleigh adjusted her clothes. She wished she was wearing one of her new sundresses.

Janet could tell Ashleigh was fascinated with Marcus. Janet was sure her partner missed the fact this northern gal liked him. It amazed Janet how he could asses any police situation with wisdom but easily missed any indication a woman liked him. Janet felt the reason Sgt. Tyler missed a girls infatuation was due to his ex-fiancee'.

Janet looked over at Ashleigh, "Ms. Waller Do you have any proof he damaged this vehicle?"

"It wasn't like that before I moved here."

"I picked it up at someone's house."

"The Jeep was fine when I left my mom's house. I won't sign that paperwork. My decal wasn't all scratched up. If something would have happened to my vehicle parked at Mom would have called me. Sir. He's calling me a liar. I'm not a liar. I'm telling you I didn't give them my Jeep that way. It was a beautiful Jeep," she pointed at the delivery driver in anger, "Before he touched it."

She was so upset she was holding back tears.

Silence.

There was about ten seconds were everyone just gazed upon Ashleigh and wondered how anyone could say so much in such a short time.

The delivery driver, because he was from the same area, answered "Obviously it was damaged while it was parked."

Frank mentioned politely, "Ma'am. Ashleigh might be a Yankee but she's a sweet gal. She ain't a gal to be stretching the truth."

The delivery driver lied, "I'm not saying she's lying."

Stan was angry and his arms were talking just as much as he was, "But that's what U's been saying?"

In a nervous tone, "I'm a good delivery driver."

Stan pointed to the delivery truck, "It's obvious you ain't. I wouldn't trust you with a moped."

"That's offensive."

Stan yelled back, "Well get some tissues."

The delivery driver was obviously sick of Stan, "You don't know your ass from a hole in the ground."

"I ought..."

"Back down."

Janet stepped in between the two of them.

Julio was smart enough to gently move Stan away.

Barbara whispered to Stan.

Stan contemplating spending a night in jail. This happened before because of a southern judge who slapped him with contempt charges. Instead he made a face and pulled down his shirt and stepped away.

All of this threatening to fight upset Ashleigh.

Florence noticed Ashleigh's demeanor change with the possibility of another physical fight. Florence wondered if Ashleigh was ever abused as a child or was once a battered wife.

This is when Marcus spoke in a commanding tone, "Y'all just stand right there. There ain't to be any fighting? I'm more than willing for Y'all to spend a night in jail."

The way Marcus took over made Ashleigh feel secure. This caused her to find him more attractive. This turned her on, but she stopped her mind from going to this place, at this time.

Stan turned and mentioned to Ashleigh, "If Mr. Shelby won't help you I'll sue em'?"

His wife looked at him, "Stan."

Stan stated "I've seen this before."

Marcus stated, "Sir that'd be enough."

Marcus knew Stan was a good lawyer. Everyone in Eastbank knew about the story of

him defending his nephew in a murder case. Stan himself made a couple appearances in the local courthouses to defend his friends. He was mostly paid in beers and small favors.

Stan answered, "Yes sir."

Barbara and Florence glanced at one another and smiled.

"Ma'am."

Ashleigh answered, "Yeah."

"There isn't anything we can do."

Ashleigh's friends were upset with this statement.

"Ma'am I'd suggest taking photo's of the scratches and get yourself some estimates and try and sue the company delivering the vehicle. Ma'am; I'd suggest writing down on the paperwork what's wrong and then signing for the vehicle. It'd be in everyone's best interest if this Man can mossy on along and these fine folks can go back to what they were doing before this all started. If these folks are saying Y'all are an honest gal I'm sure a judge would be interested in seeing the report of this here incident. I'm sure with Mr. Shelby being Mr. Waller's lawyer these damages will be taking care off."

Ashleigh answered in a whisper, "I'm just wanting him to admit he did it."

Marcus took off his glasses.

Ashleigh loved his brown eyes; "I'll sign it because I don't want my friends to spend a night in jail. They're meaning well."

Marcus was impressed this Yankee was concerned for what would happen to locals and he was surprised she was willing to compromise with him. In Marcus's point of view most transplants and visitors were bluntly uncooperative.

Sargent Marcus stated loud enough so everyone could hear, "Thank-you Ma'am. Ma'am, with you agreeing with the situation, would you please sign the papers."

None of Ashleigh's friends liked this.

Marcus spoke in a loud tone, "Now you fine folks head it home now."

He looked down at this short gal, "I appreciate the wisdom Y'all are using here."

With this he put back on his sunglasses.

Everyone was turning around and heading back except: Florence, Frank, Stan, and Barbara; they would wait for Ashleigh to finish signing the paperwork.

Ashleigh wanted to talk to this Sargent Marcus but realized her friends were waiting for her.

Ashleigh in a flirtatious voice stated, "Thanks."

Some distance away from the concrete pier Jimmy noticed the *Dolphin Queen* float pass.

"Ma'am," Janet asked loudly, "You ready to sign?"

"Sorry."

Ashleigh adjusted her clothes, put on a confident attitude and walked up to the delivery driver. She wrote down a description of the damage and the behavior of the driver. After signing her name, directly under her signature she wrote: *Your company is going to hear from my brother. And you'll regret it.*

The delivery driver answered, "Sure lady."

Ashleigh felt it was worthless making a return comment.

Janet commanded, "Folks step out of the way so he'll be able to leave."

This is when Jimmy approached the two police officers.

Ashleigh stepped into her Jeep and parked it in an open space; she would park it in her garage later.

While she parked the Jeep, Jimmy and Marcus greeted one another and Jimmy introduced Janet to Jimmy. They conversed.

Ashleigh made sure nothing was missing in her Jeep. She reached up and touched the crystal cross hanging off of the rear view mirror; it was hot from being in the sun. This cross reminded her of Felicia. Ashleigh made the decision she would try to call Felicia or talk to her on Myspace, or would try Facebook for the first time. She took the necklace down from the mirror and hung it off of the heater dial. Unless she was driving north she was certain she would never use the heater again.

Before she stepped out of the Jeep she watched the truck carrier drive out of the marina. Her cell phone rang. She grabbed her Blackberry phone and answered it. Bob informed her: Jimmy was coming over to inspect the yacht and talk about insurance, he was considering hiring him, and wanted her opinion of him. Ashleigh was confused by this request. In the past her Brother would have made this decision himself. After their brief conversation: she clicked off the call, finished inspecting the inside of the Jeep, and decided she would have the hard top removed.

Ashleigh stepped out of the Jeep.

Her friends were waiting for her.

Frank being encouraging mentioned, "I'm sure everything will be worked out."

"Thanks. I'm sure my brother will get it fixed."

She looked toward the two police officers and a man Ashleigh never met before; she felt he looked familiar

Florence stated with a wink, and in a whisper said, "He's single."

Ashleigh answered in a whisper, "How long?"

"Oh, about a year. I've been hearing he's ready to start dating again."

Ashleigh thought about her promise, "Is he a Christian?"

"He takes the Lord pretty serious. I've seen him at revival meetings." Florence added still speaking in a whisper, "He's a gentleman. Ain't he a looker?"

Ashleigh slightly blushed.

She felt he looked great in his uniform.

Stan and Frank were discussing what happened; clueless to the ladies conversation.

This is when Ashleigh spotted Megan and Jake leading a group of guys to the end of the concrete pier. Ashleigh assumed the fishing went well based upon Megan's body language and the smiles on the men's faces. Ashleigh wondered why Megan was wearing a jacket.

Megan took note of: her brother talking to the police officers, Ashleigh talking to a group from the marina, a yellow Jeep with Wisconsin tags; Megan was grateful her friend's Jeep arrived.

"Ma'am."

She turned and looked at Marcus.

Florence and Barbara smiled at one another.

Janet spotted how pleased Ashleigh was to be called over.

Ashleigh stepped over to the two police officers and the guy who looked familiar to Ashleigh.

Ashleigh again adjusted her clothes. She thought of five sundresses she could have worn instead of the clothes she was in.

She answered him, "Yes."

Marcus asked, "If Y'all don't mind confirming what Y'all were saying?"

"Oh no."

"Is your lawyer a Mr. Shelby?"

"My brother met him at some sort of charity event. I'm guessing they're friends."

Everyone standing there looked at her.

Janet asked, "Y'all have any idea who he is?"

"I'm assuming by everyone's reaction he's influential."

Marcus along with Janet would relay to all of the officers Mr. Waller's lawyer was thee Mr. Shelby.

Marcus with prudence stated, "Are Y'all planning on being a permanent resident?"

This was an encouraging question, "Oh. I'm only living with my brother for a few months. I'll soon be getting a condo of my own." Ashleigh winked and waved her hand, "Why are you asking?"

Janet covered her mouth and remained professional.

"Y'all will be needing a Florida license and your tags legal for Florida."

Disappointed Ashleigh answered, "I plan on it."

Even though all of the ladies were talking among themselves they were closely paying attention to this conversation.

"I hate to address this but we've heard you have a dawg'?"

"Yea. She's a good dog."

After Megan walked her group from Quebec to the parking lot she stepped over to where Jimmy was standing.

Megan confirmed, "Marcus she's a good dawg."

"Howdy Megan."

It was obvious to Ashleigh they respected one another. Ashleigh assumed they grew up together; this seemed to be the pattern.

Marcus continued, "No matter how good of a dawg you have she needs to be licensed with the town of Eastbank. When she's being walked she needs to be on a leash."

"I'll take care of this in a couple days."

"Ma'am there's time," Janet stated, "But please get this taken care of as soon as possible."

"Okay."

Janet asked, "What's the dawgs name?"

"Nikita."

Everyone else was discussing different things.

Janet asked, "Was she named after the Elton John song?"

Ashleigh smiled, "Yes."

The female officer engaged Ashleigh in conversation about dogs to get to know the newest influential person of their community.

The two ladies heard the guys and Megan talking about Eastbank business.

Ashleigh and Janet knew the guys conversation was over when Marcus tipped his hat, and told Jimmy, "Nice talking with Y'all."

"Like wise."

At the same time they said; "Semper Fe"

The two men smiled and shook hands.

Ashleigh adjusted herself again. She liked the fact he served in the military. She caught herself staring at his buttock and stopped herself from imagining what sex would be like with him. She focused. She observed: Janet and Marcus walk back to the police car, Janet get into the drivers side, she could tell they were talking, and observed the car drive out of the marina.

Megan stated for the second time, "Ashleigh."

"Huh?"

The women gave one another looks.

"This is my brother Jimmy."

In a respectful tone answered, "Hi."

He reached out his hand, "I'm assuming Y'all are Ms. Ashleigh Waller."

She appreciated he was gently with her hand. Ashleigh believed: he had been an athlete, was attractive, and Ashleigh hoped when she was Nicole's age she would have a husband in as good a shape as he was.

"Yes. But you can call me Ashleigh."

"Your brother wants to discuss business."

Being very professional, so professional it surprised everyone but Megan, "My brother wants me to discuss insurance with you. If I understand correctly this includes the companies insurance?"

"Yes."

"We're looking for better company insurance."

Because of this statement in less than forty-eight hours the town was buzzing with the news; this was opposite of the rumor the company would cut benefits.

She gently turned to everyone else, "I'm sorry but you'll have to excuse us we need to talk business."

Everyone understood and everyone said their goodbyes and started to walk away. The only ones left were Megan, Jake, Jimmy, and Ashleigh.

Megan said, "I'll leave Y'all alone."

Jimmy said, "I'd like you to tag along."

Ashleigh gave Jimmy a confused look.

"When a lady is at the office I always keep the door open. If Y'all are around I'm keeping my promise to my wife."

Megan interrupted with a suggestion, "How about having your meeting on my charter or on the bow of the houseboat. I'll be outside getting ready for my next tour."

Ashleigh answered, "It doesn't matter to me."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"It's up to you."

From what Jimmy observed so far, and how everyone was responding to Ashleigh, he would try his best to accept the woman who was likely his sisters love interest. He promised his wife and himself he would treat any lover of Megan like a sister-in-law. Plus; this Ashleigh was the sister of Robert Waller. After spending time with Mr. Waller, Jimmy was certain he was unlike any business leader he ever met. Jimmy was well aware Mr. Waller was wealthy and powerful.

Jimmy stated, "Lets head to Megan's charter."

"It'll be fine if Y'all stay sitting at the breakfast table. If Y'all go onto the bow of the houseboat it'll be cold."

Ashleigh was wishing she was in shorts.

Megan concerned for her friend suggested, "Y'all should be wearing a jacket."

"I'm fine."

Jimmy smiled. Their conversation reminded him of many conversations he had with his wife.

Ashleigh stated, "Lets get started."

With this they headed toward the concrete pier. This is when Jimmy asked her about her Jeep.

End of Part Two of Six

November 30th, Ashleigh's Jeep

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Thursday, November 30th

Ashleigh's Jeep

Day 6 of Book One

(Three Days since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

Part Three of Six

Authored By:

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

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

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December 1st, Ashleigh's Jeep

(4 Days Since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

Ashleigh was surprised when Jimmy pulled out one of Megan's black outdoor chairs.

She casually winked, "Thank you."

Ashleigh liked the red and white striped cushions of these chairs.

"Y'all are welcome."

Ashleigh: allowed Jimmy to push her chair forward, rolled up her sleeves, crossed her legs, pulled her skirt down passed her knee, and then commanded Nikita to lay down.

This disappointed Nikita but she placed herself next to Ashleigh's chair. Nikita could sense this male was: the father Strong Scent, was in the same pack as Woman Friend, was friendly, was a leader of his pack, but remained vigilant and alert.

Megan turned toward Ashleigh when she heard her say thank-you. From the outside of the bridge it was easy to observe Ashleigh and her brother. Megan appreciated Ashleigh changing into a more conservative outfit. Ashleigh changed into: a long sleeved white thinned stripped cotton button shirt, a brown hat with a blue ribbon around it, and a white colored skirt with a blue and green printed Riviera scene on the front. Megan was surprised when she witnessed Ashleigh roll up the sleeves. What bothered Megan felt this outfit was inadequate for November. Megan restrained herself from grabbing a light coat for her friend.

Megan was impressed with how obedient Nikita was. Megan wondered why this well behaved dog decided to ignore Ashleigh's commands and tore her journal. She was fixing the journal by photocopying every page and putting the pages into a three ring binder. If a page was smudged she'd rewrite it.

Megan's dimples flashed.

This is when she heard Jake's voice coming from out of the bridge. She hurried into the bridge to answer his call from the engine room. To honor her brother she left the sliding glass

doors open.

After Ashleigh was settled in her chair she looked over at Jimmy. Ashleigh felt: his square shaped face was masculine, his smile was just as wide as Megan, they had very similar chins, she liked his dark blue suit, his dark blue button shirt with it's white collar, she liked his matching blue and white stripped tie. What Ashleigh liked best about Jimmy was how loyal Jimmy was to Nicole; she associated this loyalty to her Foster Dad Blake.

Ashleigh focused on Jimmy's dark blue eyes.

After some small talk Jimmy mentioned, "You have a good dawg."

Nikita began to wag her tail, looked up, and was hoping for attention.

"I love her."

Jimmy smiled and very politely answered; "It'd be easy loving your dawg."

Ashleigh smiled, "She has her moments."

In a direct but polite manner he asked, "I understand Y'all are looking for car insurance?"

Ashleigh adjusted herself in her chair, remaining professional, she stated; "Before we discuss my car insurance. I'm suppose to ask you about the yacht. From what I understand you've presented my brother with two different polices for the yacht?"

"Yes Ma'am. He's chosen one."

She made a face.

Jimmy answered this look, "From what I gathered your brother wants you to choose car insurance. I was told the Jeep is in his name?"

Ashleigh stated, "That's true. He hated paying for some gift tax. So technically the jeep is his but I'm the only one who drives it. He was considering selling the Jeep to me. But my brother was telling me he wanted me to look over some other type of insurance? He didn't give me a chance to ask him what it was. I assumed it was the insurance for the yacht?"

"Ma'am; this is partially true. He's wanting' you to review the insurance my company is able to provide *Renewed Mastery*. I gave a Ms. Geissler a copy. I believe she's the HR manager?"

"She is."

"I'm giving you the same information I gave her."

Ashleigh was surprised her brother wanted her to look over insurance for the company. In the past this was something her brother handled himself. Ashleigh watched in amazement as Jimmy: set his briefcase on top of the round glass table, opened the briefcase, and gently placed four thick folders of insurance onto the table top.

All at once she felt overwhelmed.

"Ma'am."

"Please call me Ashleigh."

"Yes Ms. Ashleigh."

She politely smiled and asked, "Did he say why I'm suppose to look over my brother's companies insurance?"

"I was under the impression Y'all were aware he wanted you to look over it? This is a little awkward."

Ashleigh adjusted herself, "This isn't your fault. Could we wait on this. I'd like to go over my car and renters insurance first. Even though I'm living with my brother I wouldn't mind having my own insurance."

Jimmy was caught off guard. He remained professional and managed to say, "I'd be glad to go over car insurance. Let me look for the information about rental insurance."

She made a face as Jimmy dug into his briefcase.

Ashleigh remembered a conversation she had with Blake.

Ashleigh asked; "Does your company offer Life insurance? My Dad was mentioning I should get term life and long term life insurance. Especially since my situation has improved and I'm living here and my family is in Wisconsin. I wouldn't want my parents to be worrying about things if something should happen to me."

This upset her, but she decided she needed to face the situation.

I wouldn't want my brother to be worrying about things either. I'm sure they'd all be upset."

The only reason Jimmy caught everything Ashleigh said was because he served with northerners in the Marines.

"I'd be glad to discuss both types of insurance."

He placed the paperwork about rental insurance to the side.

Ashleigh watched him again dig into his brief case. She could tell he was really trying. He found the paperwork and put this with the other paperwork.

In a blunt tone asked, "What would you like to go over first?"

"Let's start with the car insurance. Before I start driving my Jeep I'd like to have a local agent."

Jimmy easily reached into his briefcase and pulled out some paperwork. This is when they started to discuss plans. Ashleigh was impressed with his fairness and honesty. He was so fair and honest, Ashleigh was sure this was why he was having a difficult time selling insurance.

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan spotted the brief case and four large stacks of file folders bound by rubber bands. She made a mental note to check the table for scratches once she was alone on her houseboat. In spite of the briefcase being on top of her table, she was pulling for her Brother to receive a large commission. This caused Megan to smile a big dimple smile. Her smile disappeared when an instrument on her bridge beeped.

Ashleigh tested Jimmy by asking him about a very expensive car insurance policy. Ashleigh knew from working as a secretary for an insurance company this package was way over priced. She learned to test salespeople after observing her Brother. Jimmy was honest about the shortfalls and suggested a more inexpensive plan.

With him being honest she: agreed to a higher priced car insurance policy, took a more expensive rental insurance, an excellent term life insurance policy, and a very hefty life insurance policy. This alone was an excellent commission for Jimmy. After this, they began to discuss the insurance for her Brother's company *Renewed Mastery*. What no one knew was: her brother, Haley, and herself received a premium insurance the employees of *Renewed Mastery* were never offered. With her brother trusting Ashleigh to go over all of the companies insurance, she explained this situation to Jimmy, and called Bob and received the okay to change their coverage over to Jimmy's company. After this they began to discuss the companies insurance for the rest of the employees. The employees already had insurance better than ninety percent of the country.

Ashleigh understood why her brother would want to hire Jimmy. It was equally obvious

selling insurance was a challenge for Jimmy. This was why Ashleigh started to weed in questions related to open positions at *Renewed Mastery*. If he chose to sell insurance Ashleigh would make sure he was the companies contact. If Jimmy took a position at *Renewed Mastery*; she assumed Jimmy would do everything he could to honor his promises. She was certain there would be another meeting with Jimmy's bosses and maybe an execute; she promised herself she would attend this meeting.

Julie heard Jeannie sigh.

Julie stopped just before she opened the school libraries glass door.

Jennie shifted her weight and asked; "Why are Y'all talking to these losers?"

It took a lot of restraint to be nice, "Y'all could wait here."

"I better step inside."

"Why?"

Jennie made a face, "Just in case someone of importance sees Y'all talking to them again. I'm trying to keep you out of trouble."

Julie asked, "Why would I get in trouble?"

Jennie rolled her eyes, "For someone as smart as Y'all are. Sometimes you just don't get it."

Julie had a list of things she wanted to say.

Jennie gave her a look, and with a tone, "Let's get this over with."

Jennie swung open the library door.

Julie stopped the door from hitting her. In frustration Julie made a gesture for Jennie to proceed first. Jennie: made a face, sighed, adjusted her purse, and marched into the library. This exchange and what it meant frustrated Julie.

Julie's school had two lunch periods. When a student was done eating they had three approved choices: stay in the cafeteria, go to the gym, or go to the library. An unauthorized choice was leaving lunch and coming back before the next class. This choice excluded any of the athletes. If an athlete left they were banned from the next sporting event. The exception to this athletic rule were the star football players. Julie suspected she could have gotten away with going out to lunch; but she never did.

The library was longer than wide with a center aisle separating the room in half. On opposite ends of this center aisle were a set of glass doors. On the side Julie and Jennie entered the right side was filled with long tables with computers on them. A few of Julie's accelerated classmates took note of Julie stepping into the library. Many of the boys hoped she would stop and talk to them. The girls leaned in and began to discuss a rumor they heard about Julie.

Julie acknowledged many of the students by nodding her head.

This made Jennie's eye's roll.

On the left side of this middle aisle were: newspaper and magazine racks, a couple coin operated photocopy machines, there were two rows of eight desks with high sides, passed these desks were four tables set up long ways two by two. Four female students sitting at the end of the second set of tables watched Julie and Jennie walk passed them. This group of girls began to discuss the rumor about Julie. They discussed this rumor more as a philosophy than a cutting session.

In the middle of the library, on the left side of the center aisle, was a large circular desk with swinging half doors on either end. This is where students needed to check into the library or check out books. Behind this desk was an extensive card catalog. Beyond this desk on both sides of the center aisle were long rows of book shelves. Among these bookshelves were small tables to sit one or two students.

Sitting in the center of this large circular desk Hannah was reading a book. Hannah enjoyed being a library aid: she could read, she could study, some of her friends hung out here; most important she avoided the drama of high school. Hannah was currently reading a book titled, *The Adventure*, written by her favorite author Robert Heart.

Julie gently spoke, "Hannah?"

Hannah: glanced at Julie, she slipped in a bookmark, she set the hardcover book down with the back cover up, she pushed up her glasses, and smiled.

Jennie rolled her eyes and sighed.

Hannah frowned and now felt self conscience.

Jennie in a snarky tone asked, "Why are you talking to her again?"

Hannah's countenance fell. She felt hurt.

Julie looked at Jennie and out of frustration stated, "It shouldn't matter."

Jennie rolled her eyes, leaned to the side, and was now in a defensive posture.

Julie ignored Jennie's response.

Julie turned toward Hannah, "Do we have any books written by Walt Whitman?"

"Who?" asked Jennie, "Have they made any of his books into movies?"

Hannah tried, "He's a classic poet."

Jennie rolled her eyes, "Poetry?"

Julie frustrated answered, "Yes. He's a poet."

Jennie sighed again. "Why would you read poetry?"

Hannah tried again, "Poetry is very enlightening."

Jennie gave Hannah a look. "I'm sure it is to some people."

Julie defended Hannah, "I like poetry."

Jennie rolled her eyes, "We all know Y'all are a brain."

"What are Y'all saying?"

"Nothing."

Julie asked, "Then why are you criticizing?"

Jennie commented while looking at her finger nails, "What sort of name is Walt? Sounds stupid."

Julie and Jennie gave her a look.

Before Julie could comment, Jennie answered, "I'm sorry if I'm not a nerd like Y'all are. Especially you Hannah." She flipped her hair, shoved her purse upon her shoulder, gave a dirty look at Hannah, and told Julie, "I guess I'll meet Y'all later."

Julie tried, "Why not try giving poetry a chance."

Jennie rolled her eyes and stormed out of the library.

Julie was frustrated with Jennie.

Hannah was grateful Jennie left. It was easy for Hannah to observe how many guys lusted after her. Hannah knew why the snob club was popular. Hannah wondered why a girl had to perform a sexual act on a boy to be popular. What Hannah desired was a guy who liked her for who she was. Hannah felt the worst part about all of this popular business was how

girls treated one another.

Julie asked again, "Hannah?"

Hannah focused on Julie.

Julie asked, "Is Walt Whitman a good poet?"

Hannah answered Julie as a friend, "He's an American poet. I've read some of his stuff. I'll show you where his books are."

"I'd appreciate it."

Hannah waved over the librarian. The woman who ran the library stepped into the center of the large counter.

As Hannah stepped out of the check out area she told the librarian, "She's looking for a collection of Walt Whitman's poetry."

This tall librarian glared at Julie and asked, "Young Lady have you checked in?"

Julie replied, "No Ma'am."

"Ms. Steward you need too."

"Yes Ma'am."

Julie: set her backpack on the counter, she unclipped her student ID off of the front pocket of her backpack; Julie liked this backpack because of all the zippers and pockets.

The librarian took the ID, scanned the ID, Julie was officially in the library, and handed the ID back to Julie.

Julie clipped the ID back onto her backpack.

Other students stepped up to the counter.

Hannah pushed up her glasses and stated, "I'll show you where his books are."

Hannah stepped out from behind the round checkout counter. Julie put her backpack over her shoulder and followed Hannah.

Hannah felt she could express her feelings, "I miss us hanging out."

Julie answered, "We used to have a lot of fun."

Hannah answered, "You remember?"

"Why would I forget?"

Hannah smiled, "Zoe and I were headed to the mall on Saturday Y'all want to go with us?"

There were times when Julie really hated high school. She liked Hannah, Zoe, Amanda, and Jennie but because of drama she felt she was unable to hang out with both groups.

Hannah understanding Julie's dilemma suggested, "Maybe Y'all could come over to my house. Momma would love to see you."

Julie answered with honest intentions, "I'd love too."

Hannah doubted Julie would ever come over.

Hannah pushed up her glasses and said, "Here's his books."

Hannah asked, "Is the book for English?"

Julie took a book off the shelf called, *The Complete Works of Walt Whitman*.

"A friend was asking' me if I'd ever read any of his poetry."

Hannah smiled, "How romantic. I wish I'd have a friend who read poetry."

Julie mentioned innocently, "He's smart and older."

"Oh."

Julie corrected Hannah, "I'm not dating him. I'm walking their family dawg."

"Oh."

"He asked me if I'd read any Walt Whitman."

Hannah gave Julie a complex look.

The bell at the counter rang, Hannah and Julie looked over at the counter and could see the librarian was busy. The line of students needing to be checked in had grown and there were students who needed books checked out. Hannah stated, "I need to get going."

"I'll check this out."

"Okay."

Hannah led Julie to the desk.

Julie stepped into line.

Hannah pushed open the swinging doors and began to help students.

As Hannah was checking in books Brenda stepped into the library and went up to the circular desk.

Hannah could tell Brenda was picked on again. Brenda was tall and heavy. Brenda did everything possible to look nice: she wore makeup, wore jewelry, tried to wear the most modern styles, and was by nature a very nice person; even with all this effort she was relentlessly picked on. Hannah was certain without the love she received from her family and the friendship she had with Zoe and herself; Brenda would have killed herself. This angered Hannah. Hannah believed Brenda was a great person; but very few people gave her a chance.

When Brenda noticed Julie standing at the end of the line: Brenda recoiled, stopped herself from crying, she swung her backpack over her shoulder, she sat herself at a table, and tried to appear strong.

Julie felt sorry for Brenda. She was certain her group of friends picked on her. Julie wanted to leave the line and talk to Brenda, but she knew if she stepped out of line, it would have been impossible to check out the book. Julie promised herself she would find a way to encourage Brenda. Julie was grateful when she reached the circular desk.

Hannah mentioned with a tone, "I'll need your school ID."

Julie: set her backpack and the book on the counter, pulled off the ID, and handed the ID to Hannah.

Hannah swiped the ID and scanned the book.

Julie noticed the back cover of the book Hannah had been reading. The author: had a full beard, he was wearing nerdy glasses, his hair was long, and the picture was from a distance. Julie asked, "What book are Y'all reading?"

"*The Adventure*. Are Y'all going to make fun of me for reading it?"

"I wouldn't pick on anybody."

"Your friends do."

"I try stopping them."

Hannah was aware this was true.

Julie looked down.

Hannah pushed up her glasses.

Julie asked, "Who's the guy on the cover?"

Hannah answered simply, "His name is Robert Heart. He writes some good books. Rumor has it he moved to Florida."

"Where in Florida?"

"It's hard telling," Hannah was excited to talk about her favorite author. "He's very shy. He's never once did a book signing. He's only appeared in a couple interviews."

Julie asked, "Y'all know anything else about him?"

"He's a real character. They're saying he'll never write a book again. Some have said he's died. I don't believe he's dead. He's most likely hiding."

"Why is he hiding?"

"It's because the *Dancer* was true. He was angry at how the movie was made. Everyone knows he's frustrated with his publishing company."

Julie smiled.

Hannah continued on; "I hope I get his newest book for Christmas, *A Little Bit About Her*. I heard it's a good book."

Hannah could tell Brenda was only pretending to read a textbook; Hannah suspected Brenda was tearing.

Julie followed Hannah's look. Julie wondered what her friends said to her.

Hannah could tell Julie felt sorry for her friend Brenda. With all of the students processed, and only Julie left, Hannah asked; "I'm hoping Y'all will come in here again."

Julie smiled, "I'd like to do something with Y'all."

Hannah gave Julie a half smile. "Excuse me I want to talk to Brenda."

Julie caught Hannah's meaning.

Julie watched Hannah step away from the circular desk and head toward Brenda.

Julie: picked up her book, set it down again, reached into the circular desk, picked up Hannah's hardcover, she was certain her Momma read this author, set Hannah's book down, picked up the Walt Whitman book, glanced at her sport watch, went over to a small table, set her backpack on the floor, and began to read the autobiography of the poet. The library was disturbed when seven popular guys stepped into the library. Julie felt they were following her around since she agreed to go to Melissa's party.

The librarian quickly walked over to them and told them they needed to check in and be quiet if they wanted to stay in the library.

While the librarian was talking to this group of young men: Julie quickly put the library book in her backpack, stood up, pushed in the chair, swung the backpack over her shoulder, left the library by hiding between the bookshelves, stepped into the empty hallway, headed to her locker; this was when the bell rang. The hallway filled with students and teachers.

Ashleigh was standing at the end of the cabinet separating the galley and the lounge.

After trying on four different outfits she was satisfied with a teal colored floral paisley-print crinkle silk dress with shirred straps. She felt this dress was perfect for her five foot one frame, her hips, and was perfect for concealing her medium sized breasts. She matched this dress with green t-strap stiletto shoes. She picked up a pair of topaz earrings from the counter and slipped them into her ears. These earrings matched the green topaz necklace and the topaz watch on her left wrist. She felt her long wavy blond hair was set appropriate for work. She pulled out a mirror from her purse and double checked the makeup she applied to her heart shaped face and her cupid shaped lips.

She lifted up her left leg and adjusted the shoe strap.

"Nikita I hate shoes."

Nikita looked up at her friend and started to wag her tail.

Ashleigh set her foot back down onto the deck.

She: took out a handwritten map Jake and Megan made for her, she studied it again, she slipped this handwritten map into her purse, this handwritten map and a store bought map were hanging out of her purse, she swung her purse over her shoulder, she grabbed two overstuffed manila envelopes, and picked up her keys.

When Nikita heard the keys she ran to the front door. She liked “rides.”

Ashleigh smiled, then commanded her dog, “Nikita sit.”

Nikita: stepped backwards, sat, her tail was wagging, and she was excited by the door opening.

Ashleigh stepped out onto the platform.

Ashleigh commanded, “Come.”

Nikita was excited to be outside.

“Stay.”

Nikita's tail was whipping back and forth. She loved rides. She looked down the stairs.

Ashleigh: locked the door to the yacht, the two of them headed down the stairs, once off of the steps she admired the curtains she put up, they stepped off the first deck of the yacht onto the wooden pier, they walked down the pier, onto the first pier, they turned to their left, they passed the entrance sign to Megan’s charter, Ashleigh glanced at the charter, Megan and Jake were most likely inside, Ashleigh and Nikita made their way passed Megan’s houseboat, passed Frank and Florence’s houseboat, they stepped off of the first pier, and toward the yellow Jeep Wrangler.

Stan and Barbara waved to her. Ashleigh waited. Stan and Barbara approached her. After some small talk Stan reached down and started to pet Nikita.

Nikita liked this male. Nikita wondered why he made himself smell funny. She rolled on her back to allow him to pet her belly.

Stan with a smile told Nikita, “U's like this.”

Ashleigh commented, “She doesn't let everyone rub her belly.”

Barbara smiled.

Barbara turned to Ashleigh and asked, “What's happening with the Jeep?”

“Bob's angry at what happened.”

Stan stood up, animated, and in his Jersey accent asked, “Is he suing the bastards?”

Ashleigh witnessed Barbara roll her eyes and cross her arms.

Barbara scolded, “It's only been a couple hours.”

Stan answered his wife, “I'm wanting to know.”

Nikita: was now sitting, tail was wagging, was listening to the noises, was hoping to hear a noise she recognized, and wanted more attention.

Ashleigh answered, “I'm sure he will.”

“If he doesn't I'll take the case.”

“I'm planning on talking to him at work.”

Barbara commented, “I like your dress. Where did U's get it?”

“A store back home.”

Barbara commented, “It looks really nice.”

Stan added, “U are looking cute.”

“Thank-you.”

Barbara gave him a look.

“What?”

Barbara ignored her husband, "You look professional."

"I was worried this wouldn't be good for work?"

Barbara encouraged, "Honey, it's looking good. How's work treating U?"

Barbara was checking the rumors she heard.

"I'm helping my brother with the move."

Stan asked, "How's U helping?"

"We're bringing most of the manufacturing and the offices down here. We can't move our lumber mills or any of our transportation branches. I'm suppose to make sure everyone moving here has a smooth transition."

Barbara asked, "How's it going?"

"It's a challenge but it's going okay. Bob wants me to put together a pamphlet about this area."

Barbara volunteered, "If you need help knowing where things are we'd love to help."

Ashleigh mentioned, "We have a group of East coast employees moving down here and they'll need help."

Stan became animated again, "We'd be glad to show them around."

"If you could tell me where you guys like to shop and where you guys like to hang out that'd be helpful."

Barbara added, "I know of a good hair dresser. Look at my nails."

Barbara and Ashleigh spent the next five minutes talking about nails and hair.

Stan having enough of nail talk butted in and asked, "Where are they from?"

Ashleigh answered, "Most are coming from Boston. There are a few artists moving from New York."

Stan made a face, "Oh."

Barbara with a tone scolded Stan, "It doesn't matter if they're Boston Red Sox fans."

Barbara crossed her arms and glared at Stan.

The only reason Ashleigh knew the Boston Red Sox was a baseball team was because of attending baseball games with her Dad, "Bob's company just bought a box thing."

Stan asked with excitement, "U's mean a luxury box?"

"Yea."

"What team?"

Barbara rolled her eyes.

"It's in Miami."

Stan asked, "The Marlins?"

Ashleigh made a face, "That sounds right. It was a fish. We're planning on letting our employees use the box."

Barbara hoped he would be able to contain himself.

"Is he taking friends?"

Barbara rolled her eyes.

Ashleigh winked, "Would you want two tickets ten times? Or would you like five tickets twice? Or ten all at once?"

Barbara rolled her eyes. She knew this would turn into a thing for their family and friends. She tried to stop it by saying, "It'd be to much of a bother. We couldn't take any tickets."

Ashleigh waved her hand and touched Barbara, "It isn't a bother. Just don't tell anyone

how many tickets I'm giving you.”

Stan quickly answered, “Promise, I'll need to look at the schedule.”

Barbara demanded, “We'll discuss it. When should we tell U's how many tickets we'd like?”

Ashleigh answered, “Before baseball season.”

Stan wondered, “I'd love to bring some friends down here to see the Jets.”

Ashleigh commented with excitement in her voice, “Megan wants me to see the Jets fly out of the Miami airport. She says she knows of a place where it looks cool.”

Barbara gave Stan a glare, then stopped Stan from embarrassing Ashleigh by saying, “We need to go.”

Ashleigh looked at her watch, “Oh, I do have to go. Let me know in a couple weeks of what games you'd like to see. I'll get you those tickets.”

Barbara gave Stan the stare again.

Stan wanted to pick on Ashleigh for the Jets comment, but he wanted those luxury box tickets, more important he liked Ashleigh, “Shorty I'll tell U.”

Barbara knew this would be Stan's mission when he said, “I'm not in the mood for a walk. Lets head home.”

Her stern answer was, “So Tickets are more important then me?”

He looked at his wife.

She gave him the look, crossed her arms, and started to tap her foot on the concrete pier.

Stan smiled and said, “U's are more important. Lets walk toward the pier.”

She hugged him.

After the hug they headed toward the mansion side of the beach.

Ashleigh heard this part of the conversation and smiled.

Ashleigh and Nikita headed to the Jeep.

She greeted a few people walking by.

Nikita sniffed and tried to sense if any of these people would be a threat to Ashleigh. She was enjoying the “walk” and was excited to approach the moving territory. She wanted to run. She heard “heal.” Nikita reluctantly remained next to Ashleigh.

They reached Ashleigh's yellow two door Sport Edition Wrangler. When she walked around to the drivers side she stopped and looked at the scratches on her vehicle. The worst part was her heart decal was torn. Ashleigh bent down and touched the scratches.

She mentioned to Nikita, “Look at what they did.”

Nikita was anxious to get into the moving territory and howled. She turned around when she could hear, smell, and sense the two females who liked to pet her.

Ashleigh answered this howl, “I feel the same way. I hope Bob's lawyer does sue them. If not I will get Stan to go after them.”

Gina asked, “What happened?”

Ashleigh turned around. Gina and Daisy were standing behind her.

Ashleigh casually stood up.

Nikita was enjoying Daisy petting her.

Ashleigh felt Gina was showing her curves and appeared very feminine. Her blond hair was in a loose wave so when there was a slight breeze her hair moved. Gina was wearing a white dress with cocktail glass print; the print was in all pastel colors. Her accessories were: a

big bright blue purse, blue roped wedges, a blue ankle bracelet with a wine glass pendant, blue wine glass earrings, and sunglasses with a parrot attached to it. Ashleigh was amazed Gina was able to make this all work.

Daisy was dressed simple. She was wearing a blue pair of straight fit jeans, a simple red button shirt, her short dark hair was in a bob, she was wearing two simple stud earrings, and was wearing plain white boating shoes.

Ashleigh took note of how close they stood next to one another.

Ashleigh answered Gina's question, "This is the Jeep I was talking about."

"I like how bright it is."

Daisy asked, "It's the Sport Edition before the new changes?"

"Yes it is."

Daisy smiled, "I've always wanted a Jeep."

Ashleigh smiled, "I love driving it without the top off. I replaced the stereo so it plays my Ipod."

Gina concerned mentioned, "We're looking to get an Ipod."

Daisy mentioned, "If we had a vehicle like this we'd go camping."

Gina cringed.

Ashleigh commented, "This is why I like Jeeps. My brother used to take me camping when I was little."

"Where'd you go camping?"

"Mostly in Wisconsin."

Daisy asked, "Were you ruffing it?"

"We used tents and we went to State Parks."

Daisy mentioned, "Camping can be romantic."

Ashleigh answered without any flirtation, "I guess it could be."

Gina purposely changed subjects, "Hey, so what happened to your Jeep? It's looking like there's some scratches there?"

"They messed up my decal."

Daisy made a point to smile at Ashleigh, she bent down toward the scratches, "Let's all have a look at it."

Ashleigh stepped back.

Nikita watched this woman get close to the moving territory. Nikita assumed by Ashleigh's tone and body language it was alright for this woman to touch the moving territory.

"Them are bad scratches."

Ashleigh mentioned with a tone, "They said I did it."

Gina and Daisy heard the anger in Ashleigh's voice.

"The worst part was they accused me of lying. They messed up the heart decal. I love the stripping."

Gina said, "I like how it's on both sides."

Daisy commented sternly, "The people who delivered the Jeep should be paying for the repairs."

"My brother is going to talk to our lawyer."

Gina volunteered, "Stan is a lawyer."

"A Mr. Shelby is representing my brother."

Daisy being from Florida interrupted, "Thee Mr. Shelby?"

"Yeah."

"Whooo bee," Daisy shook her head, "This'll get fixed. I'd bet you'd even get a whole new vehicle."

"I don't want a new one I just want the scratches fixed."

Daisy and Gina were impressed with this.

"If you ain't getting another vehicle may I recommend a local guy."

Ashleigh answered, "Of course."

Nikita decided to lay down.

"There's a place just off of *Beach Way*. You can't miss it. They repair everything even boats."

Ashleigh asked, "What's the name of the place?"

"*Timmy's Garage*."

Ashleigh felt better someone other than Megan's family suggested Timmy's place.

Gina mentioned, "That's Megan's brother's place."

Daisy replied, "I didn't know."

Ashleigh looked at her topaz watch and mentioned, "I have to get going."

An inquisitive Gina asked, "Where are you going?"

Daisy gave Gina a look.

Ashleigh mentioned, "I'm headed to work."

"Maybe later," Gina sort of stammered, "If you don't have anything going on maybe Megan and yourself could go dancing with us."

Daisy only liked this idea if Megan and Ashleigh were a couple.

Daisy stepped next to Gina, "There's places we'd be accepted and have fun."

Ashleigh catching the obvious implication answered, "I wouldn't mind going dancing once I find a boyfriend."

Gina and Daisy gave one another looks.

Like most people in Eastbank, Gina and Daisy were personally debating if Megan and Ashleigh were indeed a couple. Even though Megan told Gina she was straight, Gina had her doubts; Gina wanted to believe Megan was in the closet.

Nikita caught the sent of a rabbit. She sat up and looked passed the gate and near the preserve.

Gina suggested, "We're open to double dating. He'd have to understand we're lesbians."

Ashleigh smiled, "I'm sure I wouldn't date anybody who'd treat anybody else rudely."

Gina and Daisy smiled.

Ashleigh looked at her watch, "I have to get going."

Gina spoke from her heart, "It's nice having you as a neighbor."

"Thanks."

Gina answered, "We'll see you around."

When Ashleigh opened the front driver side door Nikita jumped in and instantly went in back. She stuck her head in between the front seats.

Ashleigh: sat down in the front seat, opened the glove box, pulled out a pair of sunglasses, tossed the pair onto the front passenger seat, this would be the last time she placed her sunglasses in the glove box, opened her purse, pulled out her Ipod, stuck the Ipod into the auxiliary jack of her new car stereo, clicked the device to the list of playlists, debated between a massive playlist with every type of song imaginable or between three hundred of

her favorite songs, clicked on the top 100 songs played, hit random, picked up her sunglasses by the tips, waved them, and set them on her leg.

The first song to play was, "Mountain Music," by *Alabama*.

She turned the volume up. She reached over and scratched Nikita's chin and asked, "You ready for a ride?"

Nikita howled. Nikita loved "rides".

Ashleigh: again picked up her sunglasses, waved her glasses until she felt they were cool enough to wear, put on her sunglasses, touched the charm hanging off of the heater button, pushed down the clutch, put the Jeep into reverse, stopped, quickly drove to the entrance of the marina, stopped at the entrance, pulled out the handwriting directions from Megan and Jake, smiled, put the directions back into her purse, hit the clutch, put the vehicle into gear, made a left turn, tires squealed, in an easy transition pushed down the clutch, her yellow Jeep was now moving at a greater speed, quickly traveling five miles over the speed limit; as she headed north on *Bluff Beach Parkway*.

*M*egan and Jake instantly looked toward the marina parking lot when they heard the song "Mountain Music," by *Alabama*.

Jake mentioned, "Shorty's listening to one of my favorite's."

Jake was standing on the stern of the boat securing the three seats of the charter.

Megan's dimples flashed and in a worried tone, "She'll go deaf and catch a cold. Why'd Y'all remove the top?"

"She asked us too."

Megan was holding onto three fishing poles.

"If she asked all you guys to jump off a bridge you'd all jump."

Jake answered with a chuckle, "That'd be ridiculous. I ain't ever jumping off a bridge."

Megan's dimples flashed.

In a stern voice stated, "If Ashleigh wasn't the gal she is. The women in this here marina would've sent her back."

"Why?"

Jake slipped a chair into a slot on the starboard side of the charter.

"She's way to flirty."

They turned toward the marina entrance when they heard the tires squeal. They watched the Jeep speed along the preserve side of the marina.

Jake commented, "She's wanting a ticket."

Megan stood up and smacked Jake on the arm, "She'll catch a cole. The way she's blaring the music she'll be deaf in ten years."

"Y'all said this already. It ain't my fault."

"You should've told her no."

"We're all being polite. I ain't a mind reader."

In an angry but concerned tone Megan stated, "We'll all need to be watching out for her."

She put her right hand on her hip just below her red spring jacket, with the *Dolphin Tours* logo on the right hand shoulder. Matching this jacket she was wearing: a long sleeved white polo shirt with the same logo, red cascade capri pants, and swim shoes with a zipper. She was on the lookout for the UPS driver to deliver her new swim shoes; the athletic catalog

sent her an email informing her they would arrive today.

Jake gave her a face and commented, "She's a sweet gal."

"It's why we're needing to watch out for her. She thinks anybody who talks to her is her friend. People ain't trusting her because of her brother."

"What's he all doing? I'm thinking he's been treating everyone pretty good."

"Y'all are feeling this way because he hired Linda."

"We've never been paid so well."

"I'm wanting to believe his intentions are pure."

Megan pointed to the yacht next door.

"Y'all know he's causing a stir. I'm afraid it'll hurt my friend."

Jake was angry at this statement, "People are always complaining about wages and now we're getting great wages and people are still complaining."

He was so upset by this he took off his hat and smacked the chair.

"Why ain't people seeing he's a good guy."

Megan answered the outburst, "It ain't the ones working for him who are complaining it's the other business owners losing their employees. With the exception of the shop owners and the construction companies."

"They've been fixing up and buying a lot of houses. I've even heard they're ready to build an apartment complex."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She mentioned, "His credit union is buying up the houses."

Jake's eyes went wide, "People ain't trusting a company buying houses."

"Ain't it my point? I'm sure Ashleigh ain't part of anything illegal. I'm sure she'd just believe whatever he's been telling her."

Jake shook his head, "I've talked to Mr. Waller. He ain't the kind to take his tongue out of his shoe."

A very stern Megan answered, "Are you sure?"

"He ain't one of us but he ain't a snake in the grass. Linda was checking on line and his companies have always treated people right. She's feeling people are making things up."

"I'm worried Ashleigh will get hurt."

Jake felt this was as good a time as any.

"She's a smart cookie. I don't believe he'd be able to fool her. I'm sure if anything would happen Y'all would be there for her. I'm certain she'd be there for you too."

"She's becoming the best friend I've ever had."

Jake put his hat back on and talked calmly, "With how many times she's been visiting us I'm sure she's feeling the same way. For being a rich gal she ain't afraid of helping."

They stopped what they were doing and looked at one another.

Jake asked, "Why is she always helping?"

Megan wondered why he'd ask this question, "It's her way of telling us she's a friend."

"She don't act like she's rich and all."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"It's a blessing."

Jake took the risk. He stood up and asked in a serious tone, "Is it why Y'all are liking her?"

Megan missed the intent of the comment, and slotted the last of the three poles, "It's

one of the reasons we're becoming best friends.”

Jake scratched his head.

Megan turned around and asked, “What's mulling around in that head of yours?”

At this moment Jake wished his wife would never go into town.

“It seems to me you like, ah.”

They stared at one another.

He waved his arms and made a face, “Y'all like her.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

She gave him a confused stare.

He thought about the many conversations he had with his wife. He was sure they would have another discussion about Megan's sexual identity. He made a face.

He reluctantly asked, “Are Y'all into dating gals?”

She was shocked Blake would assume she was gay.

He answered Megan's facial expression, “Are you dating Shorty?”

These two questions hit her hard. Megan felt angry and hurt. Megan: grabbed some loose line from off the deck, marched into the living quarters, slammed the doors, the doors shook, marched into the galley, opened the hatch to the garbage can, tossed out the line, slammed the hatch shut, stood up, held in her tears, ran down to her office, slammed the office door closed, sat in her office chair, put her hands into her face, and wept. She wanted to climb to the top of the charter and tell the world she was straight. The other impulse was to pick up a guy and sleep with him.

Her dimples flashed.

She knew she would never be able to have a one night stand.

There was a knock on the door and Jake's voice came through the door, “Little sis.”

It was many years since Megan heard Jake call her this.

“What?”

“I ain't mad at Y'all. I ain't wanting to quit working for Y'all.”

In an odd way this comforting.

“If Y'all want to stay in the closet I ain't telling. Maybe Linda. Unless Y'all tell me I shouldn't. Hell.”

He paused.

Megan held in her tears.

“We feel Ashleigh is a good gal and all. I'd just be worried she'd move back home. I ain't wanting Y'all to fall in love with somebody who ain't sticking around. It's what's eating Linda.”

There was silence for a few minutes. Because Megan was so angry and hurt she had the idea of pretending she was gay; everyone thought so anyway. She thought better of it. Instead she closed her eyes and stated in a loud tone, without shouting, “I'm straight.”

He was unsure if he was vindicated or Megan had lied to him. For years he kept telling everyone Megan was indeed straight. He began to change his mind with how much time Megan was spending with Ashleigh. There was the rumor Ashleigh convinced Mr. Waller to move to Eastbank because Ashleigh and Megan meet on line. A lot of the citizens in Eastbank were shocked they moved the company to their town. The rumor Ashleigh and Megan meet online answered both questions. Jake was uncomfortable with the idea Megan was gay but: he had known her since they were kids, took her as a younger sister, they worked hard to build the charter up, he was a friend of the family; so he would be loyal to her. What was upsetting

to him was the idea Megan just lied to him.

He thought of something Linda mentioned, which would explain Megan lying, "Y'all ain't needing to hide anything from me. I ain't telling anybody if that's what Y'all are wanting. It's just...well...with you hanging around Ashleigh I was feeling Y'all were dating."

The door swung open.

For one of the rare times Jake could tell Megan was emotional.

Megan quickly brushed away a couple tears, "I appreciate you asking me instead of spreading rumors. I know I ain't always acting very lady like. I want to meet a man some day and get married. People are feeling I'm gay because I wouldn't sleep with Luke. Remember Luke from high school?" She went on without his answer, "Since I wouldn't sleep with him people have been saying I'm gay. I ain't ever sleeping with a guy who treats women the way he does. I'm a virgin. I'm assuming the reason people are believing I'm gay is because talking about sex is difficult for me."

She blushed.

She let it out, "I ain't sleeping with someone so everyone will believe I'm straight. It's been difficult finding a guy who'll marry me."

Her dimples flashed.

Tears fell.

"I ain't sure there's a guy who'd like a gal like me."

She quickly wiped away more tears.

Her dimples flashed.

She was shocked all this spilled out of her; she was trying to gain her composure.

Jake was suddenly uncomfortable, "Y'all ain't needing to tell me all of that. All you needed to tell me is Y'all like guys."

As upset as Megan was, she tried to reassure Jake, "Ashleigh's just a friend. The person's who's gay is Gina."

"You were hanging around her?"

Megan gave a face, "It doesn't mean I'm into gals."

"Maybe Ashleigh is?"

In an angry tone she answered Jake, "She likes Marcus."

He made a face, "Sergeant Marcus?"

"Yes."

"Why him?"

Megan's dimples flashed, "He's a good guy for her. She's been looking for a gentleman and a Christian."

Jake apologized, "I'm sorry for thinking Y'all were a lesbian."

"Stop thinking such things. We're needing to get ready for the next charter."

"You ain't sore?"

"I'm wishing my close friends knew I was straight."

She could see how guilty he felt. She answered this look, "I'm grateful Y'all asked. Go and tell all those gossips out there I ain't a lesbian."

Jake smiled, "I'll tell em."

What he never told her was, he had been telling everyone she was straight since she started high school.

Her dimples flashed.

“Lets finish setting up.”

She was hurt by this accusation. The reason Megan was able to handle this accusation was because of her journal writing. She often felt the struggles she faced with her sexual identity would have been easier if she was a lesbian. She knew from a personal experience she was indeed straight. Megan was brave enough to go online and see if anyone else questioned their sexuality but realized they were straight. Seeking other people's experiences she found a questionnaire: it took some bravery on Megan's part to actually fill out the questionnaire. The results confirmed she was straight. What was obvious to Megan, many of the women who felt they were lesbians or were struggling with a same sex attraction wanted: a sexual encounter with a woman, wanted a relationship with one, or were attracted to women. Megan never once wanted to perform a sexual act with a woman and never wanted to have a romantic relationship with a woman. This inner knowledge helped her feel comfortable in her sexuality but added to her difficulties with sex.

She wished people would stop thinking she was gay.

Jake and Megan went back to setting up for the next charter. At the beginning they were silent but as time wore on they again became mates.

Ashleigh barely recognized the two lots Haley and herself inspected in the summer. As she drove along the front of the complex she was taken back by the immense changes to the properties. When they inspected these lots there were two separate buildings and two distinct lots. This was now one giant complex of four combined lots. Ashleigh knew about the two lots the company purchased behind the two original lots. She had seen photographs of the new building that covered all four lots, but to see the changes in person caught her breath.

Ashleigh was surprised to see a semi-truck pulling out onto the road from a brand new driveway. This driveway: was on the edge of the property, it went behind the complex, it was wide enough for two vehicles, she spotted the sign directing vehicles with delivers to go down this driveway; this was something her brother never mentioned to her. She believed this was a recent addition.

She turned right into the complex. She was stopped by a construction shack with two lift gates. In front of her was a long orange lift gate and directly to her left was the construction shack. It was obvious the construction of the complex was still under way. There was: a temporary metal fence splitting the left side of the parking lot from the right side, a brand new parking lot was just behind the construction shack, to the right of her was a crane lifting some big square thing onto the roof of the complex, it was easy to see the exposed earth of where there once was a parking lot, and the construction crew was working diligently throughout the complex.

Ashleigh caught the movement of a guy sticking his head out of the shack.

Just as he spoke, the semi drove passed, she guessed he said; “Howdy Ma'am.”

He was: wearing a yellow hard hat, a name tag, his blond hair was barely seen under the hat, he was wearing an orange construction vest, a short sleeved blue shirt, he had bright blue eyes, was tanned, had muscles, and was well mannered. It was obvious he was just out of high school. She wondered if he was experienced. The idea of being with an inexperienced younger man was a recent fantasy of hers. She killed these thoughts by reviewing all of the consequences she would face if she actually had sex with him. She reminded herself, if he was

inexperienced, the fantasy of the encounter would be completely different from the reality of the encounter.

She winked and said, "Hi."

"Ma'am I'll need to see a drivers license and if Y'all have one a company ID."

"I thought the new I.D.'s weren't in yet?"

He asked, "Hugh?"

Ashleigh slightly sighed, "Never mind."

"Ma'am. I need to see an I.D."

She: put the vehicle into neutral, pulled up on the emergency brake, grabbed her purse, she pulled out a small woman's wallet, from the wallet she took out her drivers license, and handed it to him.

Nikita was making a mental note of the area. There was a lot to see and sniff. When Ashleigh reached her arm out Nikita watched closely; she sniffed the guy in the shack.

"Ma'am you have a nice dawg."

"I do love her."

He smiled, glanced at the I.D., made a face, paused, and replied very politely, "Ma'am; Mr. Waller told us you might be showing up today but I'm needing' to check everyone who enters this here complex with a list of employees."

Ashleigh smiled and mentioned, "We wouldn't want anyone just to get in."

"Yes Ma'am."

He paused. He starred at Nikita.

Ashleigh spotted his behavior.

She was about to say something but he stated, "Ma'am I'm thankful for your patience."

Ashleigh pet Nikita while this young man: took one step into the shack, turned to his left, on the shelf he opened a blue three ring binder, he paged to the back, he studied the page he was looking at, then the ID, and he made a face.

Ashleigh could tell he was thinking about something.

Ashleigh was annoyed her brother told the construction crew she would show up today. He had instructed her to take the rest of the week off. Her plan was to take a tour of the new facility, meet as many of the new hires as possible, and to prepare her work area for the following day. Her other goal was to inspect as much of the facility without her brother's knowledge. After these were accomplished she would surprise her Brother with her presence.

The guy from the shack turned to her, stuck his head out, and repeated himself; "Ma'am I'm thankful for your patience..."

She gave him a look when he stopped talking.

Nikita turned to her right.

Ashleigh noticed Nikita tensed up and her ears went down.

Ashleigh turned. Ashleigh assumed the man approaching her Jeep was a supervisor from the construction company.

"It's okay."

Ashleigh comforted Nikita.

This man spoke to Nikita, "Girl I ain't about to hurt you."

Nikita could smell other dogs on him. Which made her sniff him more than usual. She could sense he was friendly. She allowed him to pet her.

"By your tags and this Jeep I'm assuming Y'all are Ms. Waller?"

Ashleigh responded by saying, "You can call me Ashleigh."

Ashleigh placed her sunglasses upon her head.

He smiled, "Yes Ms. Ashleigh. Let me introduce myself I'm Hank Nelson I'm the owner of this construction company."

"I'm glad to meet you."

Ashleigh gently stuck out her hand.

Nikita watched them shake hands.

He stood up and twitched his lip, "Y'all are putting me in an awkward situation."

"I'm not trying too."

Her sincerity surprised him.

His lip twitched. He focused, "I can't stop you from bringing in this here dawg..."

She interrupted, "She's a good dog."

She saw Hank nod his head toward the shack.

She heard the young man from the construction shack say, "Ma'am."

Ashleigh took back her license and was handed a temporary badge.

The young man from the shack mentioned, "Y'all can keep the temporary badge until you're given a new ID."

Ashleigh answered, "Thanks."

This was a privilege, everyone else needed to turn in the temporary badge at the end of the day.

Ashleigh put her license back into her wallet and placed the wallet back into her purse.

Nikita sniffed both items.

Ashleigh out of habit (from other jobs) hung the badge around her neck.

Nelson commanded, "This lady deserves a clip."

Immediately; the young man stated, "Yes sir."

"I'm used to the..."

Before she could finish the sentence she heard, "Ma'am."

Ashleigh gently took the clip, "Thanks."

Nikita sniffed the clip as she put the clip into her purse.

"Ms. Ashleigh," Mr. Nelson spoke, "I'm letting you in with your dawg on account Y'all are Ms. Waller. I'm seeing she's a good dawg. But I don't want something to happen to the dawg."

He paused.

Ashleigh stated, "Just say what's on your mind."

Her attitude shocked this supervisor.

"Any dawg no matter how good they are can bite. I don't want anyone bitten."

Ashleigh agreed, "I'm always watching her. The only time she would bite someone is if someone would want to hurt me."

He smiled, "A dawg like her might think someone's hurting you when they ain't have any intentions of doing anything at all."

"I wouldn't want this to happen either."

"I don't want myself or my company in trouble if something should happen to my guys or the dawg. I'm assuming if something happened something would be worked out. But I'm hoping nothing will happen."

Hank was expecting some sort of slack. As he spoke a couple supervisors, a guy holding

drawings, and a couple construction workers approached the Jeep. One of these construction workers knew: Gina, Daisy, and Megan. This woman recognized why Megan would be attracted to Ashleigh. This woman assumed Ashleigh was a feminine lesbian. This woman hoped Megan would come out of the closet; she secretly had a crush on Megan all throughout high school.

Nikita kept a close eye on the humans who approached the moving territory.

Ashleigh said, "I'll make sure I keep her close. She won't get hurt. If something happens it'll be my fault. I hope nothing happens to her?"

Many of the construction crew had trouble understanding her; they all felt she talked way to fast.

Hank stated, "Once you go into the building keep her away from the construction areas. As a matter of safety we're telling humans to stay away from the construction areas. If Y'all enter one of these area's please follow the safety rules."

"We take safety important. This includes me. I'll stay out of those area's."

Ashleigh couldn't help herself she winked harmlessly and asked, "Are Y'all having a good day?"

Silence.

The crew was surprised by how friendly and down to earth Ashleigh was.

"Yes Ma'am we're trying."

"Good. I'm glad to see everyone is doing a good job. Don't be angry at Eric. He was just doing what he was suppose to do."

Eric was surprised she knew his name.

"Yes Ma'am. It's noted."

"I just don't want him in trouble for something I'm doing. I promise Nikita will behave herself."

Silence.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you. But we're needing to get back to work."

Ashleigh winked, "If my brother has promised you guys a bonus he'll give it to you."

Silence.

"I'm sure my brother has given you almost impossible dates. My Dad was an engineer. So I understand how much work you are doing to reach those dates."

The crew gazed at one another.

The woman who had a crush on Megan could understand why she liked Ashleigh.

Ashleigh thought for a second, "Did you guys need water or something?"

She observed their shocked faces.

"No Ma'am. We provide our crew with water."

The water was far from cold, they tried, but they were outside.

"Okay," Ashleigh continued, "I'll let you guys back to work. You have a good day. I promise I'll keep Nikita from getting hurt. And I promise she won't bite anyone."

Hank answered, "Thank-you Ms. Waller."

She crunched her forehead together, "Call me Ms. Ashleigh."

Hank smiled, "Yes Ms. Ashleigh."

"That goes for everybody."

They all smiled.

Ashleigh winked and was about to step off the clutch but Eric called out to her, "Ms

Ashleigh.”

She turned to look at him, and answered, “Yes.”

“Only park on the new area to the left.”

“Okay.”

Ashleigh turned toward the crew and stated, “You guys stay safe and if you are needing anything you just come find me. Okay?”

Nelson was surprised by this, but felt she was being sincere, “Yes Ms. Ashleigh.”

The gate went up.

Ashleigh: pushed down the clutch, dropped the parking brake, lifted up the clutch, and went to find a spot in between the newly painted yellow lines on the new parking lot.

Nelson and his supervisors looked at one another. They all talked about: how authentic she was, a couple mentioned she might be a “friend” to Megan, Hank was impressed she was driving a manual transmission, and they all reasoned when your the sister of the owner you are allowed to bring in a dog. The crew appreciated and talked about Ashleigh having: cold water, sandwiches, and cookies, delivered to everyone on the construction crew.

End of Part Three of Six

November 30th, Ashleigh's Jeep

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Thursday, November 30th

Ashleigh's Jeep

Day 6 of Book One

(Three Days since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

Part Four of Six

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 1st, Ashleigh's Jeep

(4 Days Since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

Ashleigh parked her yellow Sport Wrangler Jeep on the left side of the metal fence. The industrial park was on the north-western corner of Eastbank. Ashleigh recognized her brother's vision; he wanted a property in where he had room to expand. She was in awe at the size of her brothers company.

Nikita was making a mental imprint of another territory.

Ashleigh commented, "I now understand why he bought this location."

Nikita cocked her head. She was hoping to hear a noise she recognized.

Ashleigh became silent when she focused on the activity on the other side of the metal fence. A crane was lifting a large metal box off of the ground, Ashleigh was unsure of what this box was, but she imagined it crashing into the six story glass front of the building. Ashleigh watched a group of men on top of the building guiding the box, she noticed a guy talking into a walkie talkie; she assumed he was talking to the guy in the crane. She sighed with relief when the large metal box was placed onto the roof. The reason she felt so much relief is because she knew how expensive the six story front was. The glass was a special weather resistant glass. Plus, as Ashleigh understood what it was, in the event of a hurricane a metal plate would come down and protect this glass.

This building housed the Art Division of *Renewed Mastery*. Directly behind this six story glass wall was the *Renewed Mastery* commercial art showroom. This showroom presented replica commercial art work *Renewed Mastery* made. Many of these items were to scale, and some were not, but all of these pieces needed space. Behind the commercial art showroom was the main art gallery. This gallery showcased the artwork of the artists working for the company, this gave them the opportunity to freely sell their work; this was one of the largest art galleries in the country. Directly behind the main art gallery was a large assembly,

manufacturing, testing, warehouse, and shipping area of the art facility. This area could quickly be adjusted to make any type of custom made art piece. These custom pieces were found at: Universities, corporations, non-profits, schools, parks, stadiums, churches, airports, government buildings, commercial buildings and appeared in movies. *Renewed Mastery* was never the cheapest, but *Renewed Mastery* had a reputation of being the best in the country.

Behind the commercial art showroom, in front of the manufacturing area of the art division, and above the first floor art gallery were the offices. The first three floors were devoted to the artists of *Renewed Mastery*. These floors would end up to be termed the hives (they were not constructed yet). The reason for the nickname was the way the working area's were sectioned off. Each area would be shaped like an octagon, each wall was three feet wide by seven feet high with one section open for an entrance. The term hives started shortly after these were installed in the Milwaukee office. An artist could be a regular employee of *Renewed Mastery* or an artist could rent out one of these spaces. The next two floors were the general offices for the art division. The top floor was the location of the advertising department; except for the one branch in Minneapolis Minnesota.

The back of the art division had doors similar to the ones used in airport hangers. Along the back of the whole complex was a section of dock doors for trucks and another section for rail.

The three railroads who operated in southeastern Florida were ecstatic when *Renewed Mastery* published the estimated amount of rail volume the company would use. There was a huge effort by these companies to sign a contract with *Renewed Mastery*. The largest railroad company in Florida, which happened to be one of the largest railroads on the whole Eastern seaboard, was dumbfounded when Mr. Waller signed with a regional railroad. The large railroad would still benefit from this added freight coming into and going out of Florida. The large railroad took missing out on *Renewed Mastery* signing with them as a huge failure. The regional railroad took the *Renewed Mastery* signing as a major victory. The regional railroad was surprised Bob signed with them; they knew the larger railroad outbid them. Bob signed with this regional railroad because of the companies: customer service, the integrity of the owners, and Bob believed signing with this regional company would help the local and state economy. This regional company: hired more employees, added another rail line next to the old line, they were able to replace the rail from the main line to *Renewed Mastery*, they added a long siding, and a few miles outside of Eastbank they added a small freight yard. Ashleigh was aware of all the politics and business dealings that took place with this railroad deal.

Ashleigh: pulled up the emergency brake, stepped out of the Jeep, placed her sunglasses into her purse, swung the purse over her shoulder, and at this moment looked over at the business strip mall across the street. The owner of this strip mall and the owner of the main business in this mall asked Bob if he was interested in the company and the property. Bob took a tour of the company and the building. Ashleigh knew her brother would jump at the chance at purchasing an internet company specializing in selling bowling equipment. Her brother talked to the one restaurant owner left in the building. Within a few hours the owners worked out a deal. Once the legal paperwork was finished *Renewed Mastery* would own the building. Ashleigh was aware the internet company: everyone would be kept on, they would receive raises, they would receive the same benefits as every other employee of *Renewed Mastery*, and they would be added to one of the largest private owned companies in the country. Bob planned on putting into this strip mall a: daycare center, gym, a credit union,

and a walk in clinic. He was sure other restaurants and maybe a small store would want to occupy the empty spaces left after the remodel of this fairly new building. The owner of the restaurant was overjoyed with the new lease.

Ashleigh commanded Nikita to, "Stay."

Nikita was confused as to why her master would stand next to the moving territory.

Ashleigh was parked in front of the widest part of the complex. This side of the complex was one and a half stories. The front of the first floor would have: offices, cubicles, a very large cafeteria, a variety of meeting rooms, and mail rooms. The office section of the second floor would have offices, a very large meeting room, a large customer service area, a couple small mail rooms, and a large amount of spacious cubicles. On the first floor behind the office area was a huge manufacturing area, and behind this manufacturing area was a very large warehouse and shipping area. From what Ashleigh understood: the office area's were still being finished, the manufacture area was in the process of being put together, and the warehouse was nearly completed.

She now understand the floor plans. Ashleigh studied this complex from left to right. On the far left side of the building was the main entrance. She could see the two glass doors, another set of glass doors inside of the building, and it was impossible for Ashleigh to see any further. Next to these glass doors were colored glass windows; she looked forward to seeing these windows up close. In front of these doors was: a large overhang, colorful rocks on the left and right side, colorful bricks along the sidewalk leading to the glass doors, a patio type area on the left side of the doors; there were two stone benches in this area. To the left of this patio but still in front of of the building were three flag poles. The three flags that flew were: the American Flag, the Florida State Flag, and the flag of *Renewed Mastery*. The American Flag was on the tallest pole and was the largest flag. In front of the building on the ground were colorful patterned bricks. The front of the building was currently painted white with a blue brick outline. Ashleigh was aware; Bob and the Art Director wanted to repaint the front in the companies colors. It was easy to spot the rectangular shaped tinted windows: they were spaced in a symmetrical pattern, they were located on the first and second floors, and they were brand new. On the far right of the building, the wall went in for about fifty feet and met up with another wall, this wall connected the main building with the art building; Ashleigh believed this was a highway for people and forklifts.

Since her brother hired her, Ashleigh visited just about every location of *Renewed Mastery*. Ashleigh thought about the branches of the company that were unable to move to this location. These were: the trucking companies, the lumber mills, the art studio in New York, the art studio in London, the small manufacturing plant and warehouse in London, and the advertising firm in Minneapolis.

She again faced the responsibility of moving all of the employees who wanted to relocate to this location. The plan was to have this location fully functional by the end of March. Ashleigh was tempted to: call her brother, quickly leave the complex, go to the yacht, quickly pack, and move back to Wisconsin. Instead; Ashleigh: walked to the back of the Jeep, she took out her keys, and opened the plastic lock box.

When Nikita observed the lock box being opened she quickly stood on her feet and her tail showed her excitement.

Ashleigh pulled out the leash.

Nikita became excited, because she was a good dog, she waited.

Ashleigh walked around and clipped the leash onto Nikita's collar.

"You have to listen. Or I can't bring you here. You need to be a good girl."

Nikita could sense her best friend wanted her to listen; but was unable to understand the meaning of every noise her friend voiced.

"Come."

Nikita was excited to step out of the moving territory.

Ashleigh shut the Jeep door, the two of them walked toward the entrance of *Renewed Mastery*.

Nicole was working on her garden. She was wearing: an old pair of jeans, a long sleeved denim button shirt, an old pair of white tennis shoes, and a faded yellow colored light jacket. Her brunette hair was in a pony tail and she was without make up. She was in the section of the garden where she was attempting to grow her own herbs. This was a learning process. She began to grow garlic around her garden when a friend told her slugs disliked garlic. She was now trying to grow purple basil and thyme. She was currently checking her purple basil. A plant she used for cooking and felt the plant was pleasing to the eye.

While out in the garden she was contemplating the real possibility Ashleigh and Megan were lovers. Nicole heard the rumor they had met over the internet and Ashleigh convinced her brother to move to Florida; this rumor seemed plausible to Nicole. Megan had mentioned Ashleigh numerous times and they seemed to be spending a lot of time together.

It was difficult for Nicole to accept the possibility her sister-in-law was a lesbian. Nicole believed with all her heart Jesus could heal someone of their homosexuality. But there was little Nicole could do if Megan liked being a lesbian or felt she was born this way. Nicole would never reject and hurt her Sister-in-law; Megan was like a younger sister.

Nicole was unsure if it was wise for Megan to be involved with a northern gal. Nicole believed Megan was an extremely monogamous type of person and was only capable of loving one person in her lifetime. If this very flirty northern gal cheated on Megan or moved away this would deeply hurt her Sister-in-law. Nicole feared if Megan was hurt by a partner splitting up with her, she would never want another relationship; Nicole felt this way if Megan was either straight or gay.

Nicole felt Ashleigh and Megan were an odd pair. It seemed odd to Nicole they would be attracted to one another. With Megan being so tall and tomboyish and Ashleigh being short and feminine. Nicole now agreed with Julie, Megan was more of the "guy" in the relationship and Ashleigh was the "gal" in the relationship. With their height difference she wondered how they were able to have sex.

Nicole blushed.

She heard a car pull into the driveway and the garage door open.

Her impulse was to run into the house and ask her husband how everything went. If she reacted this way her husband would suspect she talked with Ashleigh. Nicole believed, if Jimmy suspected she intervened he would feel pressured or manipulated. The least thing she wanted was for her husband to feel manipulated. She wanted her husband to feel better about his job and wanted to improve their families situation. Nicole knew from talking to Megan, based upon what Ashleigh told Megan, Jimmy would be invited to a formal interview.

This brought up a concern for Nicole. Nicole wanted Jimmy to get hired by *Renewed*

Mastery, but worried the only reason Ashleigh hired him was for future favors. She wondered what would happen if Ashleigh and Megan broke up? Would he then get fired? She wanted to believe Ashleigh was a good gal who would never retaliate against Jimmy or Julie; both were working for or around Ashleigh.

Nicole heard the sliding door open and shut.

She heard his footsteps.

She recognized how happy he was by the way he said, "Howdy."

Nicole: stood up, took off her gloves, turned around, and made sure she held in her excitement.

"I have some good news."

"You sold a lot of insurance?"

Jimmy smiled.

With a surprised tone said, "Yes Ma'am. They're good folks."

Nicole played dumb, "Who?"

"Mr. Waller and Ms. Ashleigh. They bought both car insurance and insurance for the yacht. She bought term and long term life insurance. They're buying health insurance, 401k's, and health insurance from my firm."

Excited he added, "Yes Ma'am. This is good for us."

Nicole smiled.

She hid her concern he would continue to sell insurance.

"What's even better?"

"The commission?"

"No better."

"What?"

"They're thinking about scheduling an interview. I could tell they were interviewing me today."

Nicole could now act excited, "What are you talking about?"

"After we'd talked. I was thinking about what Y'all told me and how he wanted to hire you. Y'all are right. He's a straight shooter. After Mr. Waller was done buying insurance for his vehicle. He started asking me what I did before trying to sell insurance. I was honest with him and told him my job history. I made a point of telling him how I made it through tech school."

"Huh huh."

Nicole answered with a smile.

"I told him it was difficult but I ended up graduating. Then he started asking me about what I did when I worked at *Ernie's Construction*."

In a serious tone she asked, "He didn't look down on Y'all for working construction?"

Jimmy's facial expression changed. "He started asking me some weird questions. It was obvious he was interviewing me. The same thing happened when I was talking to Ms. Ashleigh. She's a good gal."

Nicole asked with a concerned tone, "You feel she is?"

"If Megan's a lesbian she's picked a nice but flirty gal. It's sort of surprising Ashleigh's a lesbian."

"You can't always tell. We shouldn't be jumping to the conclusion Megan is a lesbian. Even if she is we should wait until she tells us."

"I was wishing she wouldn't tell us."

This surprised Nicole, "Why?"

"We've suspected for years she's into gals. It wouldn't be easy on Ma or Timmy so it might be better if she keeps it to herself."

"Would it be better for you?"

Jimmy gave her a look, "It's better than making a big fuss. If we make it into an event then it'll turn into a bigger mess. It's better if we're all in the knowing she's into gals but we ain't bringing it out in the open."

With some force in Nicole's voice she said, "I don't want you treating Ms. Ashleigh or your sister badly."

"I ain't. But I ain't responsible for how Timmy would react."

With frustration in her voice, she asked, "Why does he act the way he does?"

"We've been asking ourselves this for a long time."

Nicole made a face.

"What's important. I'm getting' a large commission. I'll just have to wait and see if I get an interview."

Nicole smiled, "It would be good for the family."

He grabbed her and kissed her.

She liked the feel of his lips on hers.

He pulled away and whispered, "Lets celebrate."

"I ain't that type of gal."

He gently pinched her ass.

"Hey!"

"Y'all can be that type of a gal with me because Y'all are..."

He stopped talking.

"What?"

She was concerned.

"Y'all just stand over here."

He gently guided her away from the garden and off to the right.

This confused her, she let him lead her, but asked with concern, "What's the matter?"

She was confused on why her husband would leave her standing there when they were in the mood.

Nicole asked, "What's bothering Y'all?"

"Just stay right there."

She rolled her eyes. She watched him: he trotted to the shed, stepped inside of the shed, he came out with a clever, she followed his eyes into the garden, she immediately turned around, she focused on where her husband peered into the garden; she was unsure if it was a poisonous snake or not.

She watched as her husband cut the snake's head off.

He told her, "It was a coral snake."

"I thought you were taken care of them snakes."

"Jeff and I will lay more traps and we're planning on building a fence around the garden."

She pleaded again, "I ain't a fan of a fence."

He started to walk over to her.

She yelled, "You ain't stepping one more foot closer to me."

He smiled, "We could make some soup."

She gave him the look.

"I'll toss this out. Why not meet me in the house?"

She looked at him, "After Y'all were mean to me?"

"How was I being mean?"

"You were about to throw the snake at me."

He made a face, "I could bring..."

She pointed, "Y'all keep it over there."

He lifted it up, "It's dead."

"Showing me a headless snake ain't exactly putting me in the mood."

"The way Y'all are looking is putting me in the mood."

"Shh. I ain't wanting the neighbors to hear."

She was surprised her husband would find her attractive.

"If you go put it away. I'll get a shower ready."

Jimmy smiled, "Well I better get a move on."

Even though he teased her with the snake she was very much in the mood; she wanted to make love to her husband. She collected all her gardening items and placed them in the shed. Where it just so happened Jimmy was putting away the cleaver he just cleaned.

She said to him, "I'm glad Y'all saved me from snakes."

He turned and answered, "I love you."

She could hear it in his tone.

They showed their love to one another by: kissing passionately, he shut the door of the shed, he leaned her against the bench, he unbuttoned her jeans, manually touched her in the way she liked, she played with one breasts, they continued to kiss one another, this stopped when Nicole had an orgasm; she was able to bury her concern of being caught. What made this moment special was: he thought of her needs, it was spontaneous, and he touched her in a way she really liked. She was certain they'd never do anything in the shed again; this was now a remembered moment between them. She: made herself presentable, she grabbed his hand and she led him into the house. With the house empty they had an intimate bath together where: they massaged one another, they exchanged orgasms, they enjoyed a sexual position they felt was intimate, they finished the bath, dressed, cuddled, and talked.

Ashleigh stopped at the first set of glass doors.

Ashleigh reviewed the sign announcing open interviews at a local hotel on Monday. She was pleased all of the information was correct.

She focused on the side windows. She loved the colorful tear drop design of these windows; she especially liked how each teardrop and the background was a different color. Ashleigh recognized the artist who did these windows. She slid the badge over a black square, there was a buzzing noise, and Ashleigh stepped into the building.

Nikita was sniffing and making a mental imprint of this new territory.

They stepped through a foyer to a second set of glass doors. Like the first set of doors she stopped to study the side windows of these glass doors. She liked how each lighthouse was different. She suspected they were real lighthouses and her brother personally selected what

lighthouses to copy.

Once Ashleigh opened this set of glass doors the noise of hammers and drills dominated the area. The noise suddenly stopped. Ashleigh and Nikita were in an office area: there were a couple chairs, a plain blue wall, and a fancy glass table. Ashleigh was sure this area would be changed in a few days. It was unlike Leah or Bob to leave something so plain. In front: was a blue wall, in the center was a plastic sliding window, behind this sliding plastic window was a small plant, and a long blond haired receptionist. Ashleigh believed it would only be a matter of time before the blue wall would either be painted or have artwork displayed.

The receptionist graduated from college in the spring. She believed working at *Renewed Mastery* gave her a good chance at using her Business Management Degree. After having difficulty finding a job after graduation she was delighted to take a job as a receptionist. This young woman was: local, attractive, she had a long rectangle face, larger nose, dark green eyes, a longer mouth with skinny lips, high cheekbones, and dimples.

Ashleigh approached the door to the right of the window. Ashleigh noticed this young woman was wearing: a dark blue long sleeved charmeuse button shirt, she matched this with winter colored straight leg pants, and a matching dark blue belt. She was wearing simple gold looped earrings, and wore an appropriate amount of makeup. Ashleigh suspected this woman spent a lot of time putting a wave into her natural blond hair. Ashleigh assumed: she was taller than average, had a smaller chest, most likely had a bump to her rear end, was smart, friendly, and was hired by her brother.

Ashleigh observed this woman's facial expression change. Ashleigh surmised she was trying to make a decision.

Andrea noticed this short gal was wearing a temporary badge.

Before Ashleigh had time to speak. Andrea: stood up, slid the plastic window open, and said, "Ma'am."

Drills and hammers started up again.

Ashleigh was correct: she was around six feet tall, was smaller chested, was athletic, friendly; Ashleigh was positive her brother hired her.

"Hi."

Andrea paused when she caught the northern accent.

Nikita could sense this woman was friendly. She disliked all the loud noise.

"Ma'am," Andrea was being super polite in spite of all the background noise, "I'm having to stop anyone who tries to enter."

Ashleigh gave this woman a confused look and yelled over the noise, "I have a temporary badge?"

The noise stopped.

Everyone appreciated the silence.

Andrea spoke in a normal tone, "Until we receive the new badges I'm instructed to check everybody's badge with a security scanner. And I'll need to see a license."

Andrea was concerned this was indeed Ms. Ashleigh Waller.

Ashleigh was impressed with this woman, but wondered why this receptionist was so nervous, "I'm Ashleigh what's your name?"

"Ma'am it's Andrea Adams."

Nikita sat.

"Call me Ashleigh," Ashleigh smiled, "Why are they wanting to check ID's?"

Andrea knew a bunch of badges ended up compromised but she was ordered by Ms. Haley to keep the reason silent; while IT and security figured out which ones were compromised.

Ashleigh could tell Andrea was thinking of an answer, "It's just a temporary measure until we all receive the new badges."

Ashleigh would find out why.

Ashleigh: dug into her purse, took out her female wallet, pulled out her drivers license, then removed her badge from off her neck.

When Andrea looked at both ID's she hoped: this was a compromised ID and this was someone other than Ashleigh Waller. Andrea worried the real Ashleigh Waller would get angry for stopping her at the door. Andrea swiped the temporary badge across the advanced security scanner. Andrea waited for the small screen to produce the name and picture of the person in question. Ashleigh's work photo appeared on the screen. Andrea worried she would get fired. The previous summer (at a different job) she witnessed a friend of hers get fired for stopping an executives wife.

Andrea was very polite when she handed the ID's back to Ashleigh, "Ma'am I apologize for keeping Y'all waiting."

Ashleigh smiled, "Don't be sorry. You were doing what you were suppose to do."

Andrea hit a button.

There was a buzzing noise, the door clicked, and Ashleigh led Nikita through the doorway.

Nikita disliked the buzzing noise.

Andrea was sure there was a rule about having pets at work. Andrea reasoned the only employees brave enough to bring a dog to work was: a handicapped employee, the sister of the owner, or Mr. Waller himself.

As soon as they stepped into the main part of the building the noise of putting up cubicles started up again.

Ashleigh noticed the two level mail cart. On the top level were empty envelopes with the *Renewed Mastery* symbol and a pile of papers. On the second level were stuffed envelopes ready to be stamped.

Andrea felt Ashleigh was approachable and felt the need to ask loudly, "What's your dawgs name?"

Ashleigh answered loudly, "Nikita."

Nikita heard her name and looked up at Ashleigh.

"Ms. Waller..."

Loudly, "Call me Ashleigh."

The noise stopped and her name rattled the sudden silence.

Ashleigh was still holding onto Nikita's leash.

Andrea looked down at Ashleigh and Nikita, "You have a pretty dawg."

Nikita was starting to recognize these serious of noises. Nikita sat down and waited to be greeted.

"May I pet her?"

"Of course."

Andrea approached Nikita with caution and when Andrea noticed Nikita was receptive

Andrea gently started to pet Nikita.

"I grew up with dawgs. What type is she?"

Ashleigh answered, "A Siberian Husky."

Nikita liked this woman. She stepped closer. She brushed up against Andrea's legs.

Ashleigh commanded, "Sit."

Andrea instantly realized why Ms. Ashleigh commanded Nikita to sit, her winter colored pants were now covered in dog hair.

Ashleigh mentioned with an apologetic tone, "I'm sorry. She's shedding with how warm it's down here."

Andrea smiled and talked sweet, "Ma'am it's okay. She's a good dawg."

Nikita enjoyed the attention this woman was giving her.

The silence was interrupted by hammering.

Ashleigh looked toward this noise.

About ten to fifteen feet from where they were standing office movers were putting up the last cubicles of the last row. Putting in this row of cubicles created a long hallway between the row of cubicles and the building wall. Ashleigh assumed this hallway went all the way to manufacturing. Ashleigh turned toward Andrea and started a casual conversation.

Nikita was overjoyed to receive attention while the two humans exchanged noises.

Ashleigh closed the conversation by saying, "I'm sure I'll see you every day."

They both giggled.

"I'm sure you will."

Ashleigh said in a sincere voice, "I hope you have a good rest of the day."

The noise of putting up the cubicles started again.

Over the noise Andrea yelled, "I will Ms. Ashleigh."

Ashleigh turned and looked down a long hallway. To the left were rows of cubicles and to her right was a long row of offices. This is when it occurred to Ashleigh she had no idea where her brother's office was.

Ashleigh turned toward Andrea and shouted, "Where's Bob's office?"

Andrea yelled, "What?"

Ashleigh yelled over the irritating noise of the drilling, "Is it always this loud?"

Andrea answered, "Y'all should've heard it yesterday."

"I thought they were only suppose to work at night?"

Andrea shouted, "Mr. Waller gave em' permission to work during the day if they'd get it done today."

Ashleigh yelled, "Where's Bob's office?"

"You mean Mr. Waller?"

Ashleigh yelled, "Yea."

Andrea stood up; they both were grateful the noise stopped.

Andrea pointed and in a softer tone stated, "Ma'am. You can't miss Mr. Waller's office. It's down a ways. It'll be on your right. You can't miss it because of Ms. Haley's desk. His office is behind the glass wall. I could walk Y'all down there?"

The noise started up again.

Ashleigh answered Andrea by shouting, "I'm okay."

"Are Y'all sure?"

Ashleigh reassured Andrea, "You've been a big help. I'll see you later."

This made Andrea feel better.

The noise stopped.

Ashleigh was about to walk over to the office movers but Ashleigh noticed they began to pick up their tools and equipment.

Ashleigh mentioned to Andrea, "It looks like they're finished."

"They've been working hard."

Ashleigh answered Andrea, "I'm sure they have."

Andrea caught the layers in Ashleigh's comment.

"I have to get going."

"Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh commanded, "Come."

Andrea watched as Ashleigh headed down the long hallway. Andrea was surprised, when Ms. Ashleigh stopped and talked with a woman carrying a legal pad. It was a short conversation but to Andrea this was an indication of what type of person Ms. Ashleigh was. When Ashleigh headed back down the hallway the woman with the legal pad gave Andrea a look of surprise. Andrea returned a similar look. Andrea was sure the office would talk about how nice Ms. Ashleigh was and there was bound to be talk about the dog. Before Andrea sat down she took out a lint roller from her purse and removed the dog hair from her slacks.

Ashleigh proceeded down the long hallway. On her left were rows of plain gray cubicles. Ashleigh wondered why the locals, who were now working in them, left them plain; it was a *Renewed Mastery* tradition to decorate them. On her right side were offices. Each office: had a door on the left, a large window on the right, and a name plate on the door. She could tell by the names, when an office was occupied they were a local; most of the offices were still empty. When anyone walked by she would say, "Hi," and if a conversation ensued she would introduce herself.

Nikita enjoyed the attention she received from the employees who pet her.

The offices suddenly stopped. In place of the offices was a long wall. When the wall stopped: there was a wide open space, in the center of this wide open space was a large custom build desk; sitting in this desk was Haley. When Ashleigh approached Haley's desk, Haley pointed to her headset indicating she was on the phone, and motioned for Ashleigh to stand around the side of the desk.

Nikita sensed one of her favorite people. She tugged on the leash.

Ashleigh gently commanded, "Heal."

With this Nikita stopped pulling. She liked standing over sitting. She disliked standing next to the large object. Nikita tried to show her friend how happy she was to see her friend by whipping her tail back and forth. Nikita started to howl.

"No howl."

Nikita quieted down.

This howl caused employees to stand up and look out over their cubicles. Word of Ashleigh was spreading quickly. They talked about: how young Ashleigh was, how friendly she appeared to be, they questioned if she was indeed a sister, some employees were speculating on how long it would be before Ashleigh turned mean, they wondered if she actually worked, some mentioned this was Megan's girlfriend, and they talked about the dog. If any of these local employees had worked with Ashleigh, the speculation would have been to a minimum, but because they had never worked for her or with her; there was a lot of talk.

Concerning Nikita. Everyone just assumed Nikita was a privilege of being the “sister” of the owner. This rubbed some of the employees the wrong way. While other employees just accepted things could be different for the people at the top. Some talked about bringing in their pets. One gentleman was bold enough to bring in a five gallon fish tank with five fancy goldfish; Bob complemented this employee on his tank after making sure it would never leak.

While Ashleigh and Nikita waited for Haley to get off the phone, office movers were pushing metal filing cabinets passed them; it took some effort on Ashleigh's part to keep her eyes off their toned rear ends.

Ashleigh moved herself to the other side of Haley's desk and studied the very large desk in front of her. The front of this bowed desk was made of cherry wood, and printed on this front panel in gold lettering was the name *Renewed Mastery*. Ashleigh and Nikita were standing next to steps and a railing. These steps went up to where Haley was sitting. Where Haley sat: the desk was made off dark brown hardwood, the floor was carpeted, there was a large telephone panel in front of Haley, to the left of Haley was a computer shelf, behind Haley there were built in cabinets, the cabinets were built in a U shape, on top was a U shaped shelf, this shelf started by the steps and ended by the computer shelf. On this shelf were neat piles of paperwork, a covered coffee cup, and pictures of Haley's two boys.

Whenever an employee walked by; Ashleigh casually greeted them. If an employee stopped she would introduce herself. Some of these employees purposefully came by to inspect Ashleigh.

Nikita enjoyed the attention she received. When anyone passed Nikita, she sensed: who was friendly, who was angry, who was afraid of her, who was indifferent, she knew who had a pet at home, sensed a pregnant woman (this women was unaware she was pregnant), knew the women who were on their menstruation cycle, knew a person had cancer, knew who smoked, she sensed everyone's own scent, and sensed a person who was a threat to people. Ashleigh and Haley were unaware Nikita studied this man who worked for the furniture delivery company.

When Haley was done on the phone she turned toward Ashleigh and simply said, “Hi.”

Ashleigh smiled, “Hi. How's everything going?”

“Do you have ten hours?”

Ashleigh suggested, “How about the short version.”

“It looks as though they're finally done up there. It's been loud the last couple days.”

“I've heard. I thought they were only suppose to work at night.”

Haley answered. “Your brother decided with the limited work force it wouldn't be so bad. He felt if he was around they'd speed up the process. He assumed the disturbance would be at a minimal. It's disturbed me though.”

“Who are the people in the building?”

“Some of the locals we've hired. Most will start after January.”

“What are they doing?”

“They're organizing. Sending out fliers and other mailings.”

“What's up with the badges?”

“A bunch of the ID's were compromised in New Jersey. We're just being cautious.”

Ashleigh nodded, “Was it someone pissed off at us?”

Haley scolded, “You shouldn't swear.”

Ashleigh made a face and commented, “You sound like Megan.”

Haley made a face.

"What's that for?"

Haley in a very serious tone mentioned, "You've been hanging out with her a lot?"

"What are you saying?"

"You could have told me you were into girls."

Ashleigh answered Haley's implication, "I'm not a lesbian."

Haley smiled, "I've met Megan. Are you sure she isn't?"

"Actually she's tired of people thinking she is."

She made a face.

"She likes guys but guys are afraid of dating her."

"She is intense."

Ashleigh answered sternly, "She's been a good friend to me."

Haley respected this.

"How's the boys?"

"They're wishing I was home and are worried about moving. We visited a couple private schools."

"Were they good?"

Haley answered with heart, "You should've seen him."

"How did he behave?"

"He acted like a Dad."

There was an affectionate pause.

"Because of your brother they'll get the best education possible. Don't tell anyone he's paying for the schooling."

Ashleigh rolled her eyes, "Why doesn't he ever tell anyone about the nice things he does?"

"Don't go there again. I want what's best for my boys."

Ashleigh interrupted, "So does my brother."

They smiled at one another.

"You have two choices for an office. You can be behind the glass wall or the large empty one down a ways."

Ashleigh realized the set up was very similar to the insurance company she worked for in Milwaukee.

"Where is Bob's office?"

"Do you see those double doors?"

Ashleigh looked through the glass. On the right side were two fancy doors with the handles directly facing one another; it was easy to see one door opened to the left and the other opened to the right. This area was just as large as a good sized studio apartment.

"Yup."

"It's his office."

"Why the other room?"

"The section behind the glass is either for his assistants or for you."

This statement puzzled Ashleigh, "But I am his assistant?"

"This could have changed some."

Based upon Haley's body language something big happened.

With a face and a tone, "What changed?"

"You'll need to talk to your brother about those changes."

Ashleigh was ready to storm into her brother's office, "I'm going to go talk to him."

Haley demanded, "Just hold it."

Haley stood up, picked up a phone message from the U shaped shelf, handed it over to Ashleigh, and sat back down.

Nikita hoped her friend would notice her. Nikita was growing impatient.

"It's the number to a Theresa Fox."

"Who's that?"

"She's an Associate Attorney of Mr. Shelby. She's going to settle the issue with your Jeep. I've heard she's just as tough as Mr. Shelby."

"Everyone seems to know him?"

"He's everything you've heard and then some."

Ashleigh wanted to meet Mr. Shelby.

Ashleigh looked into the room behind the glass, "Are you sure I'm suppose to get the whole room?"

"Only if you want it."

Ashleigh asked, "Where would I get the furniture to put in it?"

Haley was grateful Ashleigh choose the room. She smiled, "Every piece of furniture is being marked and organized. Bob said you should pick out anything you want. He's hoping you'll pick out something brand new."

Ashleigh made a face, "That isn't fair to the other employee's who've worked here longer than me. Why would I pick out executive furniture? I don't want to cause any trouble."

Haley became stern, "You can pick out anything you want."

"Where did they put the furniture?"

"The furniture from Wisconsin and the Virginia offices are stacked in the cafeteria. The brand new to lightly used furniture is in a roped off section in the warehouse. There is some furniture in the Art Building warehouse."

Haley paused and mentioned, "The cafeteria is amazing."

"Bob told me he went with the plan Leah and I thought off."

"Your suppose to meet with Leah and finish designing the cafeteria."

"Why me?"

Haley smiled, "It was your idea."

Ashleigh made a face.

"How do I get to the cafeteria?"

"We need to talk about Nikita."

Haley set her headset down, hit a button, and stood up.

Nikita's tail started to whip back and forth; Nikita was sure her friend would greet her.

"What a good girl."

Haley stepped down the steps.

Nikita showed her excitement by making dog noises and her tail being a weapon.

The employees were casually watching.

After a few minutes of Nikita receiving attention: Haley stopped, stood up, looked at Ashleigh, and was about to speak.

"Heal. Sit."

Nikita reluctantly listened.

Haley looked at Ashleigh very seriously, "May I suggest you keep Nikita in your office."

"The construction?"

"Not just during construction but from now on. I know Bob will never say anything but she should stay in the office."

Ashleigh thought about this advice.

Haley continued, "This isn't like back home. This place is much bigger. Something could happen. She could get hurt with machinery and the forklifts."

"I would never take her to production."

"Something could happen while walking her through the offices. What happens if someone approached you in a way Nikita thought was a threat?"

"She's a good girl."

"Good or not something could happen. It's my suggestion you just leave her in the office."

Nikita could sense they were talking about her.

"I'm sure she'd be fine if she stayed next to my desk."

"Be careful when you walking her in and out of the company."

Ashleigh asked, "You think the construction crew would have a piece of rug she could stay on?"

Nikita knew the word "rug." She looked for it. If she found a rug she knew she would have a "spot." Once she had a "spot" this was a new territory.

"Just ask one of the construction guys they probably have a bunch of it laying around here someplace."

Haley stopped when they heard a beeping.

"Go get Nikita settled and pick out new furniture."

Ashleigh heard Haley say over the phone, "You've reached the office of Mr. Robert Waller. President and owner of *Renewed Mastery*. Your speaking to his assistant Haley may I help you?"

Ashleigh appreciated Haley's wisdom. Ashleigh was about to step into the area behind the glass wall when Haley snapped her fingers.

Nikita hoped she would receive attention.

Ashleigh went up a couple steps. While Haley was talking on the phone she handed Ashleigh a note.

Haley nodded.

She looked down at the note it read: "Your brother is in a meeting for the next couple hours. Stick around until he has a chance to talk with you."

Ashleigh looked up and nodded.

Haley put up a finger for her to wait.

Ashleigh watched Haley open up a file on her computer. In a few seconds the printer printed out a bunch of pages. Haley pointed to the printer. Haley accomplished this while having a conversation with the person on the phone.

Ashleigh commanded, "Stay."

Nikita sat down and watched Best Friend go up into the area where her friend sat.

Ashleigh grabbed ten sheets of 11 by 17 inch paper, this was the full layout of *Renewed Mastery*. Ashleigh tapped Haley on the shoulder and nodded her head. Haley smiled and waved.

Ashleigh carrying the sheets left the desk and led Nikita to the glass doors. Printed next to the right side door in gold lettering; was *Renewed Mastery Inc.* underneath this *Bob Waller* was written, underneath this *Owner and President*. Ashleigh smiled reading those words. With how many hours and what her brother sacrificed; she felt he deserved having this title printed on the glass wall. She pulled open the right side glass door and stepped into the large open area. Ashleigh stopped and looked around. Nikita sat right next to her. Across from her on the wall were three evenly spaced windows; this meant this area was larger than most of the offices in the building. From inside it was impossible to notice these windows were tinted. To her right were the double doors leading into her brothers office; on the right door was another name plate. These doors were currently closed. She liked the dark brown carpet. Ashleigh imagined how she would make this room into her office, when she felt her vision was complete, she gazed upon Nikita.

Ashleigh spoke to Nikita, "This is our office."

Nikita looked up at her.

"Let's pick your spot."

Nikita looked up when Ashleigh commanded, "Come."

Ashleigh let Nikita explore her empty office while on the leash. Nikita enjoyed sniffing and studying the area.

"Now you find your spot."

Nikita knew the word "spot." She settled underneath the farthest window on the right, this was next to Bob's office. This area felt similar to the territory called "yacht."

Ashleigh bent down and took off her leash, "You stay until I come back."

Nikita understood "stay."

Ashleigh set her purse on the window sill, she studied the map, she rolled it up, and headed out of what would be known as Ms. Ashleigh's office.

Ashleigh stopped just before she left the room and spoke to Nikita, "You stay there. That's your spot. I'm going to get you a rug. Don't move. You protect my purse."

Nikita knew enough to stay where she was. She looked for her rug again. Nikita watched her companion turn and step out of the office. Nikita witnessed her stop and take "shoes" off her feet. Nikita wished her friend would have left "shoes" behind. Many times when Nikita was left alone Nikita would feel better by smelling "shoes." Nikita heard loud human noises. Nikita paid close attention as Best Friend stopped and put her "shoes" back on, and then walked away. Nikita believed this was like the old territory named "office," she needed to stay in her "spot" until her companion returned. Just like the old "work" territory her working friend and Favorite Male sometimes ignored her, what was different was in this new territory they walked through the territory called "office." They even stopped and made noises toward one another. No matter if Nikita was completely laying down or had her head up she: watched, sniffed, sensed everyone, and everything that passed by the glass doors and everyone who went into the area of Favorite Male. She felt there were a lot of people in this new "work" territory, but she liked this new "office" territory because she could see and sense many things. Nikita lifted her head when she heard and sensed Best Friend; she was at the end of the hallway.

Ashleigh was walking toward her new office. Underneath her right arm was a dark green rectangle piece of rug a construction guy cut for her. In her left hand she was carrying her green t-strap stiletto shoes and her maps. When she reached the end of the walkway and

was in the center of the T shaped corridor; she turned around. To her left stood the cubicles, to her right was the last quarter of Ashleigh's empty office, and behind her was the hallway leading to the main entrance of the building. When she turned around she was looking at a parade of construction workers and office movers.

She complimented a gentleman who was in his older forties, she knew he was a construction worker because of his uniform and his orange construction helmet, "You guys are doing great."

"Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh read the name on his uniform, it was Bud.

His construction buddy was on the other end guiding the bottom of a large dark brown computer desk; she read his name and it was Hal.

Bud stopped the parade to talk with this short gal, some of the men in this impromptu parade appreciated this, others wanted him to continue walking. "Ma'am we'd be more than willing to build Y'all one of those new desks."

Hal mentioned, "They'd be without those scratches."

Ashleigh answered in a gentle tone, "I'm sure you would build me a new one but I feel this desk has more character. Besides I wanted this one when I saw it in Waukesha."

Bud started, "Wheres Wauk..."

"Wauk-E-shaw," Ashleigh pronounced with a smile, "It's an old Native American name. It's the town where Mr. Bob started *Renewed Mastery*. This is an old desk. I saw the new ones but this desk has more character. You guys better get going before there's a mutiny."

A guy pushing a big wooden bookcase on a hand cart stated, "Y'all heard the lady."

Ashleigh winked to the guy who shouted, then turned toward the gentleman with the desk, "Just put it into my office."

"Yes Ma'am. But which one is Y'all's office?"

"Oh," Ashleigh mentioned, "Just set it against a wall I'll move it later."

"Ma'am which one's your office?"

"Behind the glass where my dog's laying. If you don't touch her she'll be fine. She's really a good dog."

Hall stated with a concerned tone, "She looks like a wolf."

Ashleigh made a face, "Just wait a second."

There were sighs from the men. They all watched Ashleigh: run into the office, they watched her set her green shoes and maps onto the window sill next to her purse, she held onto the rug, this short gal quickly grabbed a leash from her purse, she clipped the leash onto her dog, she rushed the dog out of the office, and Ashleigh and the dog disappeared on the other side of Haley's desk.

They heard Ms. Ashleigh shout from this large desk, "I'll be right there. I'm tying her to the side of Ms. Haley's desk."

Haley shook her head.

One of the movers asked, "Y'all understand what she said?"

A southern woman who was watching this event by looking over her cubicle told this man; "Sonny, she just informed Y'all she'll be back after tying her dawg to the desk."

A young man in line asked, "Who's allowed to bring a dawg to work?"

Another local gal mentioned, "The short gal is Ms. Waller."

Another guy down the parade mentioned, "I wasn't in the knowing Mr. Waller was

hitched.”

Another employee mentioned, “She ain't his wife it's his sister.”

They all looked at one another with doubt.

Another woman mentioned, “I've heard from Nicole Steward she really is Mr. Waller's sister.”

“How'd she know?”

This woman mentioned, “My son plays on the football team. I was talking with Nicole when we were picking up our sons from practice yesterday. Her daughter is walking the dawg she's securing to the desk. I've heard it's a good dawg unless you mess with her.”

Ashleigh ran over and yelled down the hallway, “I'm sorry to keep you. I'm grateful your helping me. You don't have to put the stuff in a certain spot. Just set it in the office I'll move it later.”

“Ma'am,” Bud said in a demanding tone, “It ain't right for us to allow you to move this furniture around.”

This puzzled Ashleigh.

In a pleasant and concerned voice Ashleigh commented, “But you have other things to do.”

Bud looked at Ashleigh, “We ain't allowing a gal to be moving this heavy furniture. We'll put it where you'd like.”

She remembered what Bob had taught her since she was little; that there was more than one way to do things.

“How about if I choose two of the office movers to help me. While they're helping me you can all go back to doing what Mr. Bob wants.”

A guy down the line shouted, “Who's Mr. Bob?”

She yelled, “Start calling Mr. Waller, Mr. Bob. That's what he's known by everywhere else.”

Ashleigh was stretching the truth.

One of the ladies watching all of this from her cubicle asked, “Y'all sure he ain't going to mind?”

Ashleigh smiled, “It's what he likes to be called.”

Again this was a half truth. Bob expressed to Ashleigh he wished locals would call him Bob instead of Mr. Waller. With Ashleigh hanging around the locals she assumed they would feel uncomfortable calling her brother Bob. Once her computer was up she would send an email to certain managers telling them to start addressing Robert Waller as Mr. Bob. This email and what she just announced started the tradition of everyone across the company and every local to call Robert Waller; Mr. Bob.

A woman answered, “If it's what he's liking to be called we'll start calling him Mr. Bob.”

Ashleigh gently said to Bud, “I'll pick a couple guys to help me.”

Ashleigh in a directive without being offensive asked, “If you guys could just wheel all this stuff to my office. Its the open space behind the glass walls next to Mr. Bob's office. I'd appreciate it.”

The next guy in line answered, “Yes Ma'am.”

The dark brown computer desk, which was laying on a four wheeled cart, was wheeled over to the glass doors.

Ashleigh watched them pull open the doors and prop them open with the clear door

stops. She admired one of the construction guys. He was pushing a hand truck with the computer hutch to go with the computer desk. Ashleigh liked this construction guys muscles. She turned away before anyone would notice.

“Thank you.”

She said this to another guy pulling a cart full of drawers for this computer desk.

Tipping his construction hat he stated, “Ma'am it ain't a problem.”

Ashleigh watched him pass her. She glanced at his rear end. She quickly turned away. She turned her attention to the line of guys moving her furniture up the hallway. The next guy was one of the office movers who helped put up the cubicles. He was pushing a brand new computer chair; this gentleman pulled the chair out of the box and assemble it for her. Ashleigh felt he was average looking, but he was handy and treated her nice, Ashleigh secretly wondered if he was a Christian.

“Just follow them.”

She mentioned, “You promised to show me how to lift the chair.”

She winked.

“Yes Ma'am.”

He replied back with some eagerness, tipping his baseball cap with the moving companies name on it.

The local women were simultaneously watching this parade of men walk by and were closely studying how Ms. Ashleigh was handling this impromptu parade. Ashleigh was a big surprise to these local woman. The biggest surprise was how she listened to suggestions and never once acted like she was smarter than anyone around her. Many of the ladies were impressed with the fact she was willing to move her dog without being asked. Word was spreading quickly on how well Ashleigh was treating everyone. There was talk on how nice Ashleigh was when she asked where the cafeteria was. Unlike many northern woman who only talked about work, Ms. Ashleigh went out of her way to talk about subjects outside of the office. The reason Ashleigh was doing this was because of a conversation she had with Jake and Megan. A few of the ladies mentioned how Ms. Ashleigh went rummaging through the mess in the mail room. Many of the employees assumed she would have demanded someone else go through the mail room and then demand to clean it up. On the other end of the spectrum these women noticed: how she was able to bring her dog to work, her flirtatious, she ran around without shoes, and how she was able to get every available man to line up and move her furniture to her office.

To sum up the opinion of this male parade, a wise local older woman made the comment to a coworker; “The way she's leading the men around. I'm feeling she's needing a Jesus meeting.” And another added to this comment by saying, “Well bless her heart.” All the local ladies who were part of this conversation agreed.

The next three furniture movers were using hand carts to push large wooden bookshelves still in their boxes, Ashleigh surprised these guys by wanting to help put these bookshelves together. She quickly realized just offering to help offended them.

She winked and told these guys moving the shelves, “I see Bud is directing traffic inside of my office. Could you tell him I'd like these put on the left side of the room? If he doesn't have the room I'll have someone move it for me.”

The movers were impressed on how this northern gal remembered the construction bosses name. Two answered at the same time, “Yes Ma'am.”

The next set of guys were construction guys, they were moving a large heavy old school filing cabinet. One mentioned, "Ma'am, your feet will feel like they've been bitten by a rattler if you don't put on some shoes."

She stopped him, winked, "I'll be fine. They've been bit before, but that hurts less than shoes."

The two guys looked at her.

Ashleigh winked and stated in a teasing matter, "Because I'm a woman. I can watch my feet and direct traffic. I can do more than one thing at once."

The guy smiled, "But you gals need us."

Ashleigh winked, "Why?"

"Otherwise nothing would ever get started. You'd be discussing everything first."

He laughed believing his joke was funny.

Both male and female locals were sure Ashleigh would have him fired.

Ashleigh became serious and used this as an opportunity to promote *Renewed Mastery* philosophy, "Here at *Renewed Mastery* we believe everyone can have a different way of doing things. Sometimes we need big strong guys to just get the stuff done. There are other times when we need to step back and think about what we're doing. I can handle joking and having fun but there are some who'd take offense at your joke."

"I apologize."

Ashleigh reached up and touched him on the arm and winked, "I'm taking what you said as a joke. I thought it was funny."

"I'm much obliged."

"Just watch what your saying around others."

He smiled.

Ashleigh directed like nothing happened, "Just get the cabinet into the packed office. It's over there."

He answered in a relieved tone, "Yes Ma'am."

What surprised everyone was when Ashleigh asked the man who made the joke, "How would you like to help me rearrange my office?"

He smiled knowing his job was okay, "Yes Ma'am."

The last two guys were office movers pulling metal carts filled with miscellaneous office items; these were the items she dug out of the mail room. Ashleigh felt the mail room was a complete disaster; she hated how boxes were scattered everywhere. It appeared to her someone started to put items away, but became overwhelmed between the new and old items. Ashleigh decided she would check all of the mail rooms, she would get help, but would make sure they were organized.

"Thank-you for wheeling that stuff up to my office."

Haley announced over the paging system, "Ms. Ashleigh please report to the front desk."

Haley knew to call Ashleigh, Ms. Ashleigh because of all the guys moving the office furniture referred to Ashleigh, as Ms. Ashleigh.

Ashleigh turned to look over at Haley. A *Renewed Mastery* maintenance guy and Bud were having a heated discussion next to Haley's desk.

Ashleigh quickly went up to the desk and asked, "What's the matter?"

Haley felt the best way to tell Ashleigh was to lay it out there, "Well Ms. Vice President

of Operations its time for your first decision.”

Ashleigh instantly became defensive, “I'm not a vice president.”

The maintenance guy asked, “You ain't Ms. Ashleigh Waller? I was told Y'all are Ms. Ashleigh Waller.”

Haley smiled.

“I'm Ashleigh Waller?”

“Ma'am I've been instructed by Mr. Waller.”

Ashleigh corrected him, “It's Mr. Bob.”

Haley stated, “From now on call him Mr. Bob.”

Haley went along with this title for two reasons. The first was for Ashleigh's sake. The second because Haley was tired of hearing Bob complain about everyone calling him Mr. Waller; Haley would convince Bob this was a good title and he should live with it.

The maintenance guy studied these two gals.

He stated, “Mr. Bob has instructed me to put these here gold letters on this here glass door. But I can't put these letters up with the door propped open. Ms. Ashleigh I've been working since you've been knee high to a grass hopper. With Mr. Bob telling me to place this here lettering on the door I'll determined to do so. I ain't wanting to look sloppy now.”

Ashleigh liked this old black skinny gentleman, she could tell he spent a lot time in the sun because his skin looked a little leathery, he had a big nose, receding gray curly hair, and intense dark eyes. Ashleigh felt he was a good soul.

“Gus,” she read his name tag, “I wouldn't want you to mess up whatever my brother told you to put on my door. It's just I didn't know he was going to make me a Vice President and I need to talk with him.”

“Hmm,” he made this noise. “I'm surprised at the poor communication.”

Bud said, “Sir.”

Gus answered, “Now you just be still.”

Ashleigh stopped an argument, “What I'm needing is for my guys to finish moving all my office furniture so I can be ready to be a Vice President. Gus. I'd like you to wait to put up those letters until I tell you.”

“I ain't wanting any trouble with Mr. Bob. We've been getting along good. I've been treated fairly around here. I like Mr. Bob and I ain't wanting nothing messing with it.”

Ashleigh answered, “I'll work it out. I'll make sure nothing happens to you. We're not the type to get rid of people for a misunderstanding. Especially when it isn't your fault.”

“I'm feeling I'm able trust Y'all. If you be lying to me others around here will hear about it.”

Ashleigh with a stern facial expression answered him, “If I go back on my word you have every right to tell the world. This isn't going to happen. You know why?”

“No Ma'am.”

“Because I'm a woman of my word.”

“I ain't used to Yankees being good on there word unless there's a lawyer being around.”

“I'm not a Yankee. I'm a Milwaukee Brewer fan.”

This caught everyone by surprised and a few of the guys standing around laughed.

Even Haley smiled.

Gus with a smile answered, “Well I'll be. Youngin' I'll take these fancy letters and wait

until you tell me it's okay to put em up.”

“What does he want you to put on the door?”

Gus handed Ashleigh a piece of graph paper. On this paper in three lines and in gold letters: the first line said, *Ashleigh Waller*, the second line read *Vice President*, the bottom line read, *Media, Operations and Personnel*.

Ashleigh was looking at this paper in a state of shock. Ashleigh honestly never expected this sort of title or responsibly. While standing there staring at this paper she contemplating running out the door and moving back to Wisconsin.

Haley intervened by getting down off her desk and gently nudging Ashleigh toward the two men who were standing there waiting for her direction.

“Ma'am.”

Ashleigh was unaware he already called on her three times.

“Yes.”

Ashleigh responded with a different tone.

Bud asked, “Y'all still wanting us to finish?”

“Yes.” She paused, adjusted herself, “Would you come back in about an hour? I need to talk to Mr. Bob.”

“Yes Ma'am,” Bud said. He stepped into the office and commanded, “Three of us will come back in an hour.”

Ashleigh stepped up to Bud and mentioned, “Bud I'd like Buster and Mike to help organize my office.”

This surprised Bud but responded, “Yes Ms. Ashleigh.”

Buster was the guy with the joke and Mike was the guy who helped with the chair.

Ashleigh watched the men leave her disorganized office.

She turned and looked at Gus, “Are you able to make changes to this?”

“Depending on the changes.”

“I'd like a comma put in between operations and and.”

“I ain't sure the art people will like it.”

“I like writing a sentence with a comma in front of and. It's how the English do it and I like it.” Using a joking tone, but without the wink, said; “Are you going to disagree with the new Vice President of Operations?”

“No Ma'am..”

“Especially because I'm now your bosses supervisor.”

“Well ain't you a whipper snapper.”

“The only one who should have gold writing is Mr. Bob.”

“What are Y'all wanting?”

Haley suggested, “How about pink with a flower on the side.”

Gus gave Haley a look of surprise.

“Make a pink rose on the right side and I like the idea of dark pink lettering.”

“I ain't used to a company like this.”

Ashleigh asked concerned, “Is it bad?”

“No. Ms. Ashleigh it's one of the best I've been at. My daughter was on the computer. She was saying Y'all have a reputation of treating people well. We've heard this before Ms. Ashleigh. So forgive us locals if we're not believing Y'all. I'm trusting I ain't in trouble.

“You won't get into trouble. Tell Ms. Leah.”

"Ain't she the Art Director?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

Ashleigh said, "I want the lettering in dark pink with a pink rose on the right side."

"Yes Ma'am."

"If she has any questions she should call me."

"Yes Ma'am."

This started the tradition of anyone with a name plate to pick a font color other than gold and if a person wanted they could have a small picture to the right side of their name.

"Ma'am I'll tell her."

He stood there.

Ashleigh told him after giving him back the paper with her title on it, "Gus your excused."

"Yes Ma'am."

He picked up his supplies and headed toward the back of the complex.

Haley heard the phone ring and quickly went up the stairs and into her large desk.

Two incidents came into Ashleigh's mind. When Ashleigh was first hired she expressed doubt and nervousness to Bob. Ashleigh worried she'd disappoint him and was concerned on what other people would think. Bob told her in complete sincerity, he thought one day she would make a better executive than he was and if she continued to improve he'd give her the reigns of *Renewed Mastery*. Ashleigh took her brother's statement seriously. Ashleigh was well aware Bob was of the opinion most executives and managers lacked the vision and skills to be executives and managers. When her brother mentioned this she assumed it would have been years from the conversation; not six months later. The second memory was during a conversation she had with her brother in Washington State. The trip to Washington State was an intense one and more than once Ashleigh felt overwhelmed and there were moments of fear. The fear started when Ashleigh and Haley were assigned armed body guards. The fear magnified the first night staying in a small but secured cabin. Any time Ashleigh thought about the noises they heard around the cabin, while they tried to sleep, she could feel the fear she felt. After this night and seeing the intense work of the lumber jacks she approached her brother and asked him; what she should do if she was unsure of what to do. Bob told her: to be who she was, to trust her gut, to trust her past experience, and to use the wisdom he believed God gave her. He informed her, if he felt she was incapable of working for him he'd have never hired her. He went on and really scolded her. It was his opinion she was worrying to much and needed to trust her instincts and vision. Ashleigh felt at the time of this scolding this was easy for him to say because: he was completely arrogant, overconfident in everything he did, everything worked out for her brother, and she was still freaked out by those weird noises; noises she never heard camping before.

Haley watched Ashleigh and her two assistants set up her office. Haley was impressed with Ashleigh's seriousness and her lady like approach; without ever being a dictator or losing her flair and personality.

Bob was pleased this area was looking like an office. The one thing he questioned within himself, was the big metal cabinet; if his sister felt she needed a big metal cabinet he'd accept it.

When she was just about finished she noticed Bob step out of his office. She watched

everyone from the meeting leave, she excused her two assistants, then demanded he go into his office, she flung the door open, and stepped into this office.

He turned and looked at Haley before he gently shut both doors.

Haley rolled her eyes. She was sure these two would drive her crazy, but Haley felt if they could work together nothing could stop them.

Haley was grateful Bob hired Ashleigh.

End of Part Four of Six

December 1st , Ashleigh's Jeep

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Thursday, November 30th

Ashleigh's Jeep

Day 6 of Book One

(Three Days since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

Part Five of Six

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 1st, Ashleigh's Jeep

(4 Days Since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

*M*egan was both grateful and disappointed her evening charter was canceled. She felt God had blessed her morning charter by: having understanding clients, catching one barracuda, her clients wanting to go back to shore early, and the men scheduling another charter for the following year. She believed the water would be just as choppy in the evening as it was in the morning. What disappointed her was the loss of money and the time wasted in setting up for the evening charter. Jake and Megan decided to take the rest of the day off. Megan headed into town and Jake went home.

Megan first went to the local hardware store. She picked up: some cleaning supplies, fishing gear, miscellaneous supplies, and talked to friends of her Daddy. She went to the YMCA. At the Y she: was asked to lead an aerobics class, swam some laps, and was asked about Bob and Ashleigh Waller.

After this Megan decided to shop at the Eastbank thrift store named; *Eastbank Thrift For You*. This thrift store had been in Eastbank for as long as Megan could remember; this store opened in the mid 1960's. The ownership had switched from the parents to their son Brady. In the last few months: he changed the name to encourage tourists, redesigned some of the store, was buying more resale items from large chains, and was working more closely with the *Eastbank Community Center*. For many years these organizations had worked together. This stopped because of a personality conflict between Brady's mother and a few members of the *Eastbank Community Center* staff. Nicole, Ma, Megan, and many in the community were grateful these issues were now resolved and the two organizations were again working together. Megan liked the combination of personal donated items and the resale items.

She stepped into the store and grabbed an orange plastic shopping cart. It was obvious this cart was originally used in a large hardware store chain; the name of this retail chain was

blackened out with paint. These carts were exactly like the red ones the store purchased three months earlier from a large department store chain. Megan was happy these carts replaced the old metal carts the store used for decades. To her left and maybe six feet in front of the red and orange carts were six cash registers. Currently two of these lines were being manned. A friend from high school waved; Megan replied in kind.

To her right at the front of the store were four long shelves. These aisles were filled with miscellaneous items and trinkets. Passed these shelves attached to the right wall of the store was a large repainted wooden shelf. This shelf started just passed the large store windows and ended against the back wall of the store. This shelf was now filled with larger items, one time events, seasonal items, and wall hanging items; at one time it was filled with vinyl records, VHS tapes, and DVD's. Running parallel of this side wall shelf, were ten rows of: home goods, office supplies, pet supplies, and other smaller items. In the back of the store, some feet away from the home goods shelves and to the left of two swinging doors were: furniture, appliances, odd large items, head boards, foot boards, and there was a rack for bedclothes and curtains. This had always been the area for these items but the new owner organized it better and added racks for the bed items and curtains. To the left of the home goods shelf, were multiple rows of hanging clothes. In the middle of these clothes was a very visible changing area. This wooden changing area had been there as long as Megan could remember. The changing area was recently repainted and repaired. Currently it was a modern khaki color. There were three sections and the opening faced the wall with the built in shelf. The middle section was for employees: employees checked the number of items people were bringing in and out of the changing rooms, there was a large table to fold clothes, a couple chairs, and this was where the store's phone was. To the right of this middle section was a hallway with ten changing rooms for women. Left of the employee area were three changing rooms for men. In front of this changing area was a table with three inch sides where people put the clothes they decided not to take. Passed the clothing racks, and against the left wall, were a series of shelves filled with: DVD's, VHS tapes, CD's, albums, games, toys, and puzzles. Brady told Megan he received a good deal on these racks from a Miami video store owner who was going out of business. Starting in the left hand corner, near this entertainment shelf, and ending a few feet from the first cash register was a locked glass case. There was space between the case and the wall for employees to walk behind. This case was given to Brady from a local southeastern Florida jewelry chain. This case was filled with jewelry, antiques, and smaller expensive items.

While shopping Megan noticed a stack of brand new plastic dog bowls. It took some effort to pull apart the different colored plastic bowls. She compared each color pattern by placing the ones she liked on one shelf and the ones she disliked on another. She was debating between: a bright red, orange, yellow, and pink dog bowl or a purple, yellow, and white bowl. Just as she was about to select the red, orange, yellow, and pink dog bowl; her eye caught an old fashioned tin dog bowl. Before physically grabbing the tin bowl she organized all the plastic bowls by the colored pattern.

She moved herself and the cart down a section and grabbed this slightly dented tin dog bowl. She decided this bowl could take any abuse Nikita would give it. She felt a good washing made this better than any of the plastic bowls. She made sure the tin bowl was separate from the planters.

She was delighted the store had varying planters on sale. She picked out a selection of varying sized planters. What she was debating about were three large retro style planters. She

felt these planters were perfect for her larger plants and her palm tree; the price was what bothered her. Megan decided if she reached her budget she would keep only one large planter and put back the smaller ones until she was under budget. The one item she was determined to keep was a vintage homemade hanging plant holder made out of small shells. Megan knew exactly where she wanted to use this hanger.

When she set the tin dog bowl into the cart she spotted a blue mat. She reached down, pulled the mat off the shelf, and unfolded it.

Her dimples flashed.

She liked the large white bone print on the mat. This mat was used before but she felt a good washing would make this as good as new. She set this mat on the shelf below the basket of the cart. She scanned the doggy toys. She decided she could wait with a toy because Ashleigh usually brought a toy over. Megan decided, if Ashleigh ever forgot a toy, Megan would give Nikita an old baseball or tennis ball.

Megan continued to shop these ten shelves. Megan spotted items on these shelves she liked but felt she could wait to purchase or felt the items were unnecessary. From this area she went to the back of the store. She was looking for: two matching couches, a futon that matched one of the ones she had, a couple headboards her Ma would like, furniture for her charter, or a good deal. Megan found a bigger TV stand and a newer tube TV. She avoided purchasing these items because of the switch over to digital. Her plan was to use the coupon everyone was being sent to purchase a converter box and then she would buy a brand new tube TV.

As she weaved around these larger items her attention was drawn to the racks of clothes. She purposely focused her attention on the bed supplies. She found a couple headboards she believed her Ma would like. Avoiding eye contact with the racks of clothes she stepped over to the curtains. She was beginning to feel the only way to end up with curtains she both liked and could afford was having her mother sew her a set.

When she stepped away from the curtains she stared at the rows of clothes.

Her dimples flashed.

She had the impulse to purchase any clothing item she felt sexually drawn too. The conflicting idea was to leave the store and pretend clothes never affected her. Since the previous September, when she accidentally discovered what an orgasm was, she was in the process of self discovery. A shocking discovery was the sexual feeling she received from wearing certain clothes. She was battling the idea of purchasing a selection of clothes she would only wear in the privacy of her home.

She heard, "Ma'am excuse me."

She blushed and her dimples flashed.

"Oh sorry."

Megan moved out of the center of the aisle.

In a Mississippi tone, "Well bless your heart."

Megan answered with her own tone, "It's blessed."

Megan's dimples flashed.

The woman sighed and walked on.

Megan headed toward the clothes with the determination to be honest with herself. She felt her sexual responses were initially based upon the look and feel of an item. Based upon the style and feel of these clothes, she would imagine a variety of sexual situations; many

made her feel guilty. She wondered why she would imagine such powerful sexual situations.

She believed there needed to be a respect for these powerful feelings. This idea was tied to her Christian morals and her life experience. Her life spent on the ocean taught her anything powerful could be a blessing and a curse. Megan felt the way the Bible discussed alcohol was an example on how something could be a blessing and a curse. The Bible suggested using alcohol for medical purposes and Jesus turned water into wine. The Bible was absolutely clear in how being a drunkard lead to serious consequences. She was using this principal when it related to self exploration. She felt: she needed the physical relief sexually exploring herself gave her, was determined to maintain a list of personal boundaries, would stop a sexual practice if it caused her to cross one of these boundaries, believed God allowed masturbation as a relief, but felt God's ideal was to explore these desires with a husband. There were desires she enjoyed with minimal guilt, there were sexual practices she felt guilty she enjoyed, and there were desires and practices she was curious about but would wait until she was married to try them. There was one desire she was avoiding.

In October she ended up having difficulty entering her houseboat and had an accident. As a grown woman this was very embarrassing. What bothered her about this experience was: how powerful it felt, how often she thought about repeating it, the personal caution she felt toward it, how much she actually enjoyed it, how naughty she felt, she questioned herself on why this experience was sexually stimulating, but her biggest fear was if she started to repeat this experience she would end up crossing her boundaries.

When she was finished exploring the racks she knew she selected way to many items. Very sheepishly she pushed her cart to the wooden table with the three inch sides. Employees would take the items off of this table and fold them on the table inside of the changing area; customers would often times browse the table in front of the fitting rooms. While standing next to the table Megan removed many clothing items from her cart. A few of these items she hid underneath other items. Megan was grateful no one she knew saw the items she placed back onto the table.

She stepped over to the dressing rooms. She briefly talked to the woman who was currently running the room. They knew one another for years. This woman was surprised Megan was trying on so many clothes. They: counted the amount of clothing items, the employee gave her a plastic card with a number printed on it, and the two talked briefly about Ashleigh. The clerk assumed: the clothes Megan was trying on, the long standing rumor Megan was a lesbian, and how Megan talked about Ashleigh; Ashleigh Waller and Megan were lovers.

When the conversation was over Megan: made a right, walked down the hallway of the dressing room, she was thankful when one of the larger rooms was open, looked both ways, quickly stepped in, hung her shirts on a hook, place a dozen pairs of jeans and a skirt on a bench, she put the number on a nail made for the tag, stepped out of the dressing room, again looked down the hallway, took a deep breath, and shut the door.

She: closed her eyes, took another deep breath, found the courage within herself to proceed, opened her eyes, took off her light jacket, her polo shirt, her cargo pants, and her shoes; she neatly set these items on the bench of the dressing room.

Her dimples flashed.

Standing in front of three brand new full length mirrors, she decided to try on her shirts as she would have worn them in the privacy of her houseboat. She slipped off her bra

and hung it on a hook.

Megan started by putting on a light pair of blue jeans. These were one size smaller than what she normally wore. She liked: the color of the jeans, she liked how she looked, and she liked the feeling of the fabric on her skin. After putting on this pair of jeans she tried on one of two blouses she brought in with her. She skipped a breath when seeing her own cleavage. She never wore a blouse like this before.

Her dimples flashed.

She blushed.

She quickly removed the red revealing pull over blouse. She placed it on the hanger and hung it on an empty hook. The next item she tried on was a black military style shirt with decorative military style patches on the right shoulder and on the sleeves. She liked how powerful she felt, she liked how tight the shirt was, and liked the aggressive look. Megan imagined herself in a full military outfit directing an aerobics class filled with nude athletic men. She shut this vision down.

She: quickly slipped off the shirt, she placed the shirt on the hanger, she noticed she was shaking, and hung the shirt on the last empty hook of the dressing room.

She blushed when she grabbed a red and black corset. She removed the corset from the hanger. While inspecting it she debated about hanging the corset back up; instead she tried it on. Wearing this corset: she felt erotic, she liked how she looked, how feminine she felt, and how much fun it was to wear.

She became disappointed.

Her dimples flashed.

She felt inadequate.

Megan was sure a prospective husband would be disappointed in her breasts. She assumed a husband would find her unattractive wearing an outfit where her breasts would be the focus. She took off the corset, put it back onto the hanger, and put the corset on the same hook as the revealing blouse.

She tried on the second blouse. She blushed with how quickly her breasts reacted to the silky fabric. Seeing her nipples and her aurora react through the fabric of this blouse embarrassed her. She was about to: put her bra back on, the clothes she came in with, and leave everything in her cart and go home. She stopped herself. She decided to really study her bodies reaction to her arousal.

Her dimples flashed.

While blushing she stood up straight and pulled her shirt tight. The feeling on her nipples was intense. She felt her sexually stimulated breasts looked awful. She was certain her larger aroused auroras and her protruding nipples would be displeasing to a future husband. This reaffirmed her idea a husband would ignore her small breasts and would find her nipples to be odd. Despite this feeling she really wanted a husband to touch them. She was sure she'd have to forgo the pleasure of a husband touching her breasts. She was reminded of what an instructional sexual book suggested. Since college she had thought of trying it, until now lacked the courage, she promised herself she would try it.

She blushed because of an impulsive idea.

Megan closed her eyes, took a deep breath, calmed herself, and reopened her eyes.

She left the silky shirt on but removed the light blue pair of jeans. She proceeded to try on several pairs of denim jeans. These jeans were different styles, different colors, each were

of different grade of denim; all were one size smaller than the jeans she normally wore. As she studied herself, she began to imagine modeling in front of a professional football player. She imagined a strong athletic man taking her into a bedroom and teaching her everything she needed to know about sex. She shut this fantasy down when she started to imagine sleeping with a stranger.

She took a deep calming breath. The same she used before a major sporting event.

It took some bravery but she slipped on a shiny bright red skirt made of a plastic type of material. This was the shortest skirt she ever tried on. She had an immediate and strong sexual response. She imagined herself being experienced and mounting a guy.

She quickly slipped off this skirt and let it drop to the floor. She sat on the bench. She started to focus on a pair of light blue jeans with beaded sequencing on the rear end and on the right side pant leg. She was having a mental debate; the question was if the dressing room was indeed private. She felt it was far from private because she could hear others talking and heard someone step into the fitting room next to her. The idea of relieving her sexual stress in this dressing room was a fascinating thought; but she was apprehensive to try it.

Megan blushed and her dimples flashed when she noticed how moist she was.

Megan immediately: stood up, carefully removed the silky blouse, put on her bra, slipped on the polo shirt she came in with, slipped on her cargo pants, put on her shoes, was grateful she wore her light jacket into the dressing room, pulled it down as far as it could go, sat on the bench, and calmed herself by saying a short prayer.

Her dimples flashed.

Megan stood up and started to check the prices of the items she brought into the dressing room. Megan was shocked at the price of the light blue sequenced jeans. These were her favorite but even at the thrift store price these were too expensive for her. She set this pair of jeans off to the side. She picked up a very tight light colored blue denim pair of jeans. She almost left this pair on the outside table. Instead, she used this pair to start a second pile of clothes. She added: the black military style shirt, the silky shirt, she picked up the red mini-skirt from off the floor, she tried to hide it by putting it on the bottom of the pile, and she added a pair of bright red jeans by placing it underneath the light blue pair. She picked up the rest of the clothes and neatly set them on the jeans with the sequencing. She hung all of the hangers onto one of the hooks. She again double checked the prices of all the items she was going to keep and mentally added up what was in her cart. If she added one more item she would have needed to put one of the large planters away.

She quickly grabbed the two piles of clothes, she swung the door open, and almost hit someone in the changing room hallway.

She apologized.

The tourist accepted Megan's apology.

Megan left the dressing room without checking with the store clerk working in the changing room. The employee knew Megan and trusted her. She felt it was odd for Megan to forget to check with her. The employee went back to the dressing room and collected the plastic card with the number on it. The employee was surprised Megan left the hangers behind.

Megan: put the pile of clothes with the sequencing jeans on the table with the three inch sides, quickly found her cart, placed the clothes she wanted into the cart, and rushed to the checkout lane before she would change her mind. Megan felt awkward. The only line open

was the one being maintained by her high school friend. Even before Megan started to unload her cart this friend started to talk to Megan. The last thing Megan placed on the counter was her clothes. Megan's friend was surprised at the style of clothes Megan was about to purchase. Megan blushed when her friend stopped speaking when she was about to ring up the skirt. The friend assumed the only reason Megan would purchase a skirt like this was to please a lover. The friend drew the conclusion this lover was Ashleigh Waller. This friend helped Megan out by scanning the skirt in a way to keep it underneath a pair of medium colored jeans.

Being sly, the friend asked, "Did you get a dawg?"

Megan was more than happy to talk about Nikita.

An associate of the store, who was a friend of Nicole, was collecting hangers. This woman noticed the clothes Megan was purchasing. The way Megan talked about Ms. Ashleigh and her dog confirmed for this woman they were a couple. The friend of Nicole's wondered what this Yankee was getting Megan into. This woman assumed Megan would have never purchase these type of clothes without someone influencing her. The woman promised herself she would talk to Nicole about what she just saw and heard.

Megan was grateful her friend from high school hid the skirt. Megan was delighted when she was done checking out. Megan: rushed to her pick up truck, she placed the planters and the dog items underneath the snap cover of the pick up truck bed, and she shoved her clothes underneath the drivers seat.

When she was bent over she heard a car pull up behind her. Megan was prepared for someone to make a comment about her rear end.

Instead Megan heard a female voice, "Howdy Megan?"

Megan was grateful the clothes were hidden.

She: turned around, spotted the police car, stood up, shut the drivers side door, and walked toward the car.

"Howdy Janet."

Megan looked into the car. Marcus sitting on the other side.

"Howdy Marcus."

"Hi Y'all."

Megan asked Marcus, "How's your sister?"

Marcus took off his glasses and looked through the open passenger side window, "She's doing fine."

Megan told Marcus, "I'd love to talk to her. There ain't any bad feelings on my part."

"I'll tell her you'd like to talk with her. I'm sure she'd enjoy reconnecting after all these years."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"It would be a blessing."

Janet recognized there was an incident between these two families.

Janet changed the subject, "Sam was at one of the defense classes."

"How are they going?"

Janet smiled, "Y'all could run them again."

Megan answered sternly, "I'm done running self defense classes."

Marcus mentioned, "We're missing the classes you'd teach."

Megan smiled.

The dispatchers voice was heard over the radio. The three of them listened. Someone else took the call.

Megan's big dimple smile showed how pleased she was with Marcus' statement.

She endorsed Janet and Karen, "I'm sure the ladies running it are better than me."

Janet gave Megan a nod of approval.

Marcus asked, "I've heard Julie was promoted to varsity."

"She's trying."

Janet asked, "I'm assuming Julie's your niece?"

"Yes Ma'am. She's upset they keep loosing. It ain't her fault. Overall the talent on the team ain't what it should be."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I do apologize if I'm being biased."

Janet reassured her, "You ain't being biased. She's the best player on the team."

Marcus added, "I was at the game and she's putting everything she has into it."

"She's hiding her frustration."

Marcus added, "They ain't losing because of her."

"I'll tell her you said so."

Marcus asked with a tone of a concerned police officer, "Is she still a good girl? It'd be a shame for her to get into trouble."

"She's still on the honor roll and she's able to outrun a jack rabbit."

Janet asked, "Is she fast?"

Marcus answered, "Y'all have no idea. After helping Megan with a self defense class she performed a floor exercise."

Megan stated, "She was into gymnastics for awhile."

Marcus made a face, "Shoot. She should have tried out for the Olympics."

Janet asked, "What she'd do?"

"You've been in our gym?"

"Yeah."

"In a blink of an eye she went from corner to corner performing somersaults. Like Megan was saying she was as fast as a jack rabbit."

Megan mentioned, "She's tough to beat on a flat run. If you'd like to see how fast she is watch her run Nikita."

Janet asked, "Is she the one walking Ms. Waller's dawg?"

Megan felt better someone was checking on her niece.

"Every morning."

Marcus stated, "I told you. Julie was the one running Ashleigh's dawg on the beach."

Janet asked, "How old is she?"

"Fifteen."

Janet asked, "Why is she a sophomore?"

Megan answered, "She skipped fourth grade."

The police officers looked at one another.

Megan's dimples flashed

Marcus stated, "She hates it when people notice how smart she is."

Janet turned and looked over at Megan, "It'd be a shame if she'd get herself in trouble. I'm tired of seeing promising kids throw their lives away."

Marcus mentioned, "Heroin is making' a comeback."

Megan answered, "She hates taking drugs."

Janet was grateful to hear this, "I'm tired of arresting strung out kids."

Megan nodded, "She's shooting for an athletic scholarship and is even being offered an academic one. I'm assuming she's smart enough to keep out of trouble. Plus, her Momma used to work in a treatment center. She ain't one for living in denial."

Janet cautioned, "They sure can hide things from their folks. While working in prison I was seeing a lot of suburban girls finding themselves in prison."

"If she ain't I'd whoop her ass and drag her into treatment myself."

They all chuckled, but behind the chuckle was a hope Julie would indeed avoid drugs.

Marcus asked, "We've been hearing Jeff's been getting scholarship offers."

Megan mentioned, "Nicole wants him to play at the U."

Marcus asked with some excitement in his tone, "He's looking to play at the U?"

"I'm saying the U's hoping he'll play for them."

The dispatcher announced another call; a different unit took it.

Megan asked Janet, "How's adjusting to Eastbank?"

"It seems we've moved into town just before a group of Yankees. It was difficult buying a house."

"Did you find one?"

"Near downtown."

Marcus answered for Janet, "It's not too far from the station."

Janet asked, "With all the people moving here we're all wondering how big the company will be."

Megan believed they were finally discussing the reason these officers wanted to talk to her.

Marcus asked, "We're all wondering how many transplants are moving here."

Janet asked, "Ain't I a transplant?"

Marcus answered, "Y'all are from Florida. It doesn't exactly make you a transplant."

Megan asked, "How many more officers are they hiring?"

Marcus leaned over, "It's depending on our budget."

Janet in a whisper stated, "We've been hearing it's increasing."

"Maybe you shouldn't be saying."

Janet pointed out, "It's Megan. It ain't like Chief hasn't talked to her Daddy."

Megan being blunt asked, "What are Y'all hearing?"

Marcus parked next to Megan's pick up truck. The two officers stepped out of the police car.

Janet stood on Megan's right.

When Marcus reached Megan, Janet asked, "We noticed your neighbor is Bob Waller."

Megan answered, "Yes Ma'am."

"What's he like? Is he up to something?"

Megan was sure it was illegal but worried about her friend Ashleigh. Megan tried to keep this worry hidden but Megan was terrible at tells.

The police officers observed Megan's change in body language.

Marcus mentioned, "We ain't suspecting anything illegal. We're wondering what it's like to be his neighbor."

They stopped talking when some locals parked close by. They greeted one another and when they left all three spoke in a lower tone.

Marcus stated, "We're hearing he's spreading money around."

Janet added, "Rumor around the station is we're receiving more support with the council."

Megan asked with some suspicion, "What's he wanting in return?"

Janet made a face, "What we've heard is there will be an increase in pay and they're hiring more officers. He's worked out something."

Marcus cautioned, "It's only speculation."

"Speculation or not we're receiving brand new vehicles."

Megan asked, "How many?"

Janet answered, "A fleet of em'."

Marcus added, "Except boats."

Again a different group of locals waved and acknowledged everyone.

Once they reached the store Megan answered honestly, "I'm suspected with him being a transplant he ain't understanding how many hours Y'all are on them."

Marcus mentioned, "Well it seems the Florida Coast Guard was given an increase in budget this year. Both stations near Hollywood Florida and Fort Lauderdale are receiving new ships. It's rumored they might be updating one of the stations in Miami."

The three looked at one another.

Megan asked again, "What's he wanting?"

Janet answered, "What we've gathered. Nothing."

With a tone Megan answered, "He's wanting something?"

After this statement she crossed her arms and put her body into a more defensive stance.

Her dimples flashed.

Marcus answered honestly, "What we're speculating is he's trying to help the town transition."

Megan asked, "Why ain't anyone raising a ruckus?"

Marcus answered bluntly, "He's putting a billion dollar company here."

Janet added, "What we've been hearing is if a Council Member has a problem and they come to Mr. Waller he's working it out. It's the reason the school is able to hiring all the teachers."

Megan asked, "But a lot of folks are upset."

Janet mentioned, "There's been some rumbling from Washington. They're starting to pressure Tallahassee. Neighboring business are upset people are leaving their companies because they are getting hired at his company."

Megan made a face, as much as she despised the power Mr. Waller was appearing to have, she despised Washington DC more.

Megan mentioned, "I'm guessing the other owners are needing to start paying a higher wage."

Janet mentioned, "It ain't just what's he's paying. It's how the company is treating their employees."

Megan wondered, "How's Tallahassee handling things?"

Marcus was blunt, "Receiving tax money. The politicians in Tallahassee started bending

over backwards when they heard he was bringing his company down here.”

Megan asked, “They didn't go to him?”

With a serious tone Marcus answered, “The lots he purchased were purchased at a very generous price and then the announcement was made the company was moving here.”

Janet finished, “This is when the politicians started bragging about creating jobs.”

The dispatcher's voice went over the radio. Someone else picked up the call.

Janet poked, “Everyone's wondering' about the credit union buying' up houses?”

This Megan did know about, “What Ashleigh was telling me...”

Janet interrupted for confirmation, “She's the short Yankee we met today?”

Megan answered, “Yes Ma'am.”

Marcus asked, “She said she was Mr. Waller's brother?”

Megan's dimples flashed.

“Why are Y'all asking?”

Janet was hoping for this, “We've been hearing a lot of rumors.”

Megan's dimple's flashed.

Megan was sure the rumor mill was in full swing.

“She's Bobs half sister. But she's a good gal.”

Marcus mentioned, “With her having the same last name I was figuring they were married.”

Janet mentioned, “We've heard other things.”

Megan with a tone replied, “I can only imagine what everyone has been saying.”

There was a moment of silence.

These rumors were exactly why Janet was conducting a personal investigation. Janet felt Marcus liked this short Yankee. Before they spotted Megan's truck in the parking lot they were discussing the towns newest members. One of rumors they discussed was the rumor Megan and Ashleigh met online. The rumor progressed to where Ashleigh convinced her brother to move to Eastbank so Megan and Ashleigh could be together. After Janet met Ashleigh, Janet discounted the story, Janet believed Ashleigh was straight. Janet was having trouble believing Megan was a lesbian. If Megan was a lesbian or not, with how often everyone was seeing them together, Janet assumed Megan would know if Ashleigh was seeing someone.

Janet asked, “Why is she living with her brother?”

“With her moving' from Wisconsin her brother is helping her out until she gets settled. After all the employees are done moving' she says she'll start looking for a condo.”

Marcus mentioned, “I was hearing she's one of the owners.”

“She's working' for him. She's been organizing the move.”

Marcus asked, “She can't get a loan?”

Megan's dimples flashed.

“I believe she's wanting to buy one outright.”

The police officers gave Megan a look.

Megan answered this look, “I'm feeling she's watched her brother buy large items with cash and she's repeating what he's done.”

This caused Janet and Marcus to glance over at one another.

Janet turned back toward Megan and asked, “Are you feeling she's part of the behind the scenes dealing.”

“I'm sure she'd be loyal to her brother. She ain't apart of anything illegal. If she'd get

mixed up with anything illegal it'd be out of ignorance. She's honest and a Church going gal."

Megan witnessed a slight body change from Marcus when she mentioned Ashleigh was a Christian and an honest gal.

Janet jumped on this, "Does she have a guy waiting back home?"

Megan caught Janet's implication and quickly made a plug for Ashleigh, "I've only known Ashleigh for a bit. It's obvious she admires a guys who serves. She's already looking for a church in the area. She was telling me she went to treatment for drinking but has been sober for years. She's looking for a guy who'd be fun without the drinking."

Marcus asked very serious, "She seems awful flirty."

Megan felt Marcus would be good for Ashleigh, "I'm feeling she's been through a lot. What's impressing me is she ain't using her past as an excuse for behaving badly. She ain't meaning anything terrible behind her flirtatiousness."

Marcus asked, "There ain't?"

"She's just over friendly and maybe a little to trusting. I'm sure she's thinking' all of the people in the marina are her friends."

With concern he asked, "Are they?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

She wisely answered, "She's already popular. But if Y'all are implying' she's sleeping' around to make them friends. She ain't that type of gal. She's looking for a Christian guy. I'm feeling she's wanting to wait until she's married."

Janet mentioned, "Maybe she's needs a good guy looking out for her."

Marcus gave Janet a look.

Megan cautioned, "Don't be fooled now. She's a survivor. Y'all should see how she helps us out on my charter. She's a quick learner."

Janet and Marcus' facial expressions showed their surprise.

Janet asked, "She's helping on your charter?"

"We were talking and I was changing some riggers and all at once Ashleigh starts helping."

Marcus started to ask, "Y'all are saying she's just started helping?"

This is when the voice of the dispatcher came on. This time the police officers had to go.

As they hurried into the car Marcus asked, "Is it alright if we talk some more?"

"Tell the Chief he can talk to me."

Janet winked at Megan and secretly pointed at Marcus. More voices came over the radio. Janet turned on the lights and Marcus put the car in reverse; with sirens blaring they headed out of the parking lot.

Megan prayed for both.

Megan turned and stepped into her pick-up-truck. She sat there. She debated about returning all of the clothes she purchased. Instead; she headed back inside of the thrift store to pick out a trunk. The store received a one time shipment of trunks from a Midwestern retailer going out of business. She would lock it with a combination lock she received from her college volleyball team.

*A*shleigh stepped into Bob's office. This was the largest office he ever had. She was intrigued by it's sophistication and style.

She: heard a male voice call out to her brother, she turned around, her brother stepped out of the office, and shut the door behind him. Ashleigh was unsure of what was spoke or who was addressing her brother.

Immediately she noticed how quiet the office was.

She turned to the front of the office. Ashleigh estimated the length of this office was equal to five of the offices on this side of the building. It was obvious the inside wall of this office was the same wall of the long hallway. In the back corner against the outside wall a TV was built into the wall; as of now the TV was visible. On this outside wall were five tinted windows. These windows were evenly spaced. Her brother was able to look out but it was impossible for someone to look in. In front of this TV and parallel of the windows was a long skinny table with ten chairs around it. She: stepped up to the table, touched the dark finish of the table, noticed a thin line across the table, bent down; by looking under the table she knew this table could be extended. She stood up and based upon the space from where this table was to where the desk area of her brother's office was, she was sure the table could double in length. She felt compelled to touch the table again.

From this table she gazed at the opposite wall of the office. Along this wall was a custom built cherry wood cabinet. This cabinet started next to the office door and ended at Bob's desk. The wall above this cabinet was covered with framed art pieces. On top of this cabinet were statues and glass art work. All of the artwork represented a variety of styles and subjects. Just by sight she recognized many of the artists who painted or sculpted an art piece. In her mind she pictured what every artist looked like and how they treated her. There were both happy memories and sad ones. Many of these artists still worked for the company, others moved on, and few had passed away. Thinking about all of these memories made her smile and tear at the same time.

Underneath the cabinet top were three refrigerators, a freezer, and a variety of different sized drawers; all of these drawers had the same elegant handles.

She stopped herself from tearing when she focused on her Brothers desk. She walked into this area of the office. Ashleigh made a face when she reached this area. In front of Bob's exquisite desk were four elegant looking high backed chairs in a shape of a U. These chairs were evenly spaced, in between each chair was a small table, and on each table was a small notepad with a pen on top.

She rolled her eyes.

She focused on the custom built desk in front of her.

This custom built desk: was attached to the right side wall, it was in front of the long cherry cabinet, this cabinet was attached to the desk, six feet of this desk was a traditional rectangular shape, the last three feet of the desk was in a hexagon shape, still on the desk but near the wall were two very large computer monitors, the rest of the top was open, there was enough room from the edge of the hexagon to the outside wall for Bob to easily step behind his desk. She knew he loved to spread things out on his desk. The hexagon end represented the artist work area. A single hexagon space was nicknamed a "cell", everyone called the area where these cells were grouped together as the "hive." Ashleigh was looking forward to when the hive would be built in this facility and be filled with the companies artists.

Directly behind the desk was a tall comfortable looking office chair. Behind this office chair was an elegant looking cherry wood cabinet. Left of this cabinet and in the corner of the office was another door. Ashleigh suspected there was a full sized bathroom behind this door.

She focused on the cabinet by putting her hands on the desk and leaning over. On top of this wooden cabinet were two square wooden towers, they were directly opposite of one another and stopped a quarter of the way from the ceiling. On top of the left hand square wooden tower was a wooden sail ship, on top of the right side tower was an antique globe. On each one of these tower doors was a stained glass lighthouse scene. How they were similar: they were lighthouse scenes, both were in the corners, both were white, and both were at dusk. This is where the similarity ended. The lighthouse on the right side: was in the upper right corner, was large, on a rocky shore line, the lighthouse was being bombarded by a violent storm, but the light was shining through. The left side lighthouse was in the upper left corner: it was smaller, was just passed a beach line, the beach line went on forever, the sunset was being drawn out by a large dark storm in the sky, the water was violent, but the light of the lighthouse was visible as it beamed out onto the ocean. In between these wooden towers: was the flat top of the cabinet, there were custom made wooden lamps with simple multicolored stained glass shades, in the center of these lamps was a statue of an in flight bald eagle landing on a wooden branch, and in front without blocking the view of the eagle were a variety of framed pictures. Ashleigh smiled. Ashleigh remembered the day Shelly purchased this for her brother. Shelly was clean on this day and Shelly let Ashleigh pick the eagle statue.

Ashleigh was about to walk around the desk and take a closer look at the pictures and the eagle; but Bob stepped into the office.

She: stood up straight, turned, and studied her brother. She could tell he was all business.

Bob: walked passed her, he stepped behind his desk, and stood behind the hexagon part of the desk, he hit a button; based upon his Wisconsin office Ashleigh correctly assumed this is where he had a control panel. This is where he would have a telephone.

Haley answered, "Yes."

"Hold all calls and meetings until I'm finished communicating with Ms. Waller."

"Okay. Mr. Bob."

Ashleigh immediately took note on how Haley addressed her brother.

"Why is everyone addressing me as Mr. Bob?"

"Your new Vice President, Ms. Ashleigh, just informed all of your Floridian employees you liked being called Mr. Bob instead of Mr. Waller."

Ashleigh was concerned on how he'd take this message.

"Being addressed as Mr. Bob is better than being addressed as Mr. Waller."

Haley answered, "Yes it is."

"You like addressing me as Mr. Bob?"

"I believe this will be easier on our southern counterparts than having them address you by your first name."

"Mr. Bob it is. Quietly alert employees from my other divisions I will now be addressed as Mr. Bob. If they have any questions tell them it's an adaption to our new location. Remind every one the philosophy of *Renewed Mastery*. I'm of the expectation we're all capable of learning from one another. There isn't any need for us to be combative unless it's a healthy competition to improve."

"Okay."

They heard the link between the two switch off.

Ashleigh took note of a different button her brother pushed. She followed her brother's

eyes and turned around; she witnessed a sliding door start to close and conceal the TV. In turning around she noticed four decorative ceiling fans. She was surprised she missed this detail when she first stepped into the office.

Bob pointed to the four chairs and said, "Sit."

Ashleigh chose one of the center ones. When she sat down in the chair she suddenly felt like she was in a principals office; this feeling increased when he sat down and pulled up his high backed office chair.

Ashleigh with a tone mentioned, "I feel like I'm in a principals office."

"My intention was to have a second meeting area more comfortable and intimate than the conference table."

"Switch out these chairs."

"I'll take this into consideration."

This meant he would approach Leah the Art Director; Ashleigh made a mental note to call Leah and talk to her about this "second" meeting area.

"Why are you calling me Ms. Waller?"

"We are indeed brother and sister. While we are working I'd like for us to address ourselves in a formal manner. I believe this small change will help us differentiate our roles from home and work."

Ashleigh made a face.

"Maybe it would be easier to differentiate our roles if someone would have told me I was going to be a Vice President."

"I'm sorry about the slight..."

She interrupted, "Slight?!"

"I hope you'll accept..."

"Why the deception?"

"Deception isn't the word I'd choose."

"What word would you choose?"

He ignored the question. "You've been a vice president in training since I've hired you."

Ashleigh stood up, "I quit!"

"Ashleigh would you please sit down."

Ashleigh pointed at his desk and glared, "Tell me why the deception?"

Bob pushed up his glasses and stated, "In my zeal to have you learn the operation. I wanted your work experience to be a positive one. I was concerned you'd have to deal with a mistake I regret making."

She was shocked her brother admitted to a mistake. This disarmed her and kept her listening.

"I came to the conclusion one of my biggest mistakes since starting *Renewed Mastery* was keeping our production manager."

"Dave? The production manager in Milwaukee?"

"I have trouble speaking his name. He is by far one of my worst hires. He was never an outstanding employee but was never horrible enough for me to let him go. After I regained the reigns of my company. I made the decision to keep him because replacing him would have been more difficult than it's worth. If he knew you were the acting Vice President he would have made your life a living hell."

Ashleigh appreciated Bob's wisdom concerning this manager.

"But..."

Bob interrupted, "You've done a fantastic job since I've hired you. You've never acted in any way unethical."

Ashleigh made a face, "I don't ever want to be used as a spy again."

"The term spy is a little harsh."

"What else would you call it?"

"Performing the job duties I hired you for."

While Ashleigh was processing this whole matter she was unsure of how she felt.

Bob reminded his sister, "Watching Dave's decisions was a small portion of your duties. The reason I've decided to move you beyond training and announce you as Vice President is due to the marvelous job you've accomplished with the move."

"Anybody..."

He bluntly interrupted her, she disliked his body language, he stated; "This is untrue. There are many people who would have managed to botch the whole operation"

"But I've made so many mistakes."

"If you've made mistakes your the only person who's noticed. My assessment of your job performance is one of excellence. What made you ideal for the task of moving my employees is you cared about them just as much as I do."

Ashleigh answered, "I'm not sure I can be their boss."

"Why would I want you to be a boss?"

He scowled and pushed up his glasses.

"What an awful term. I'm looking for managers who have an inclination to be teachers. You are aware I have an eye for spotting talent? You're excellent with people and you've quickly adapted to the business aspects of my company."

She made a face, "It's because I've hung around your businesses since I was little."

"The talent I've mentioned goes beyond being familiar with myself."

She made a face.

"What is essential is how I'm able to trust you."

It was the first time in her life she ever heard her brother say he trusted someone. She heard him say he trusted God but never another person. It touched her heart to hear he trusted her.

This was the reason she asked, "What exactly is my role?"

"The only person you answer to is myself. You are in charge of overseeing the day to day operations of *Renewed Mastery*. The only other person with the same status as yourself is Leah. She is to manage all of the art related projects. It's obvious you'll have to work closely with her. Haley will continue to report directly to myself. I'm expecting Haley and yourself to continue the good working relationship you two have already shown."

"What about your books? I can't run the company and be your editor and agent."

"Handling my books is still your responsibility."

"I can't do both."

He pushed up his glasses and stated, "I'm aware of the time constraints. Being my agent and running *Renewed Mastery* is to much for one person to handle. My solution to this dilemma is for you to hire an editor. This woman will report directly to me with the added task of helping Haley and yourself. Her primary duty will be the editing of my books. Only Haley and yourself will know she is working as an editor."

"You promise not to fire her right away?"

"Her performance will determine her longevity. Training her well and using her sparingly will ensure her longevity. I'm looking for quality over a body to fill a spot."

Ashleigh knew exactly what Bob was meaning.

"How many months?"

"Be selective but sooner than nine months from now."

Ashleigh assumed he was working on a new writing project and this project would get off the ground within six months.

"Also, this woman should be capable of helping you with your agent responsibilities."

Ashleigh crunched her forehead.

Before she spoke he answered her look, "You've done an excellent job at keeping my identity as an author hidden."

"Thanks."

"If you are unwilling to take the position of Vice President. As time moves forward I'd expect you to learn and gain the experience you feel is necessary to accept the role as Vice President."

"But I know how everything is run."

"This is why I've announced you as Vice President."

Ashleigh made a face.

They studied one another.

Bob broke the silence, "As acting Vice President what is your thoughts and feeling about hiring Jimmy Steward on as our operations manager."

Ashleigh gave him a look and crunched her forehead together.

Bob allowed Ashleigh to think of her answer.

Ashleigh was annoyed he just assumed she took the offer; but she found herself answering her brother's question. "Jimmy is the type of person we like as an employee. He's honest and works hard."

Bob asked, "Do you believe he's efficient?"

Ashleigh answered, "I believe when he's building things. You'd have to be efficient to be in charge of a construction company. I feel he'll be happier working for us than being an insurance salesman."

"Interesting. Why do you feel this way?"

"He's trying really hard and is making what he feels is improvements." She stopped herself and redirected her answer. "It's like you say, sometimes you can't stick a square peg into a round hole. Being an insurance salesman isn't his forte. He's the one who built the fence and bench in front of Megan's charter. You should feel the bench on her houseboat. I doubt she'll ever be able to remove that bench."

"The bench near her door?"

"Yup."

"Do you feel he'll have a difficult transition from working construction to a factory?"

Ashleigh crunched her forehead together.

"It depends on where we put him."

"Fair answer. Do you feel he's ready to be our operations manager?"

Ashleigh wanted to say yes because he was Megan's brother. She thought about everything her brother taught her about running a business and what she learned from

listening to and working for her Foster Dad.

She answered, "How about if we start him as the woods manager. Where he'd be in charge of the incoming wood, building of crates, in charge of the wooden games, and wooden art pieces we manufacture on the floor."

"Since I purchased a furniture manufacture I've been looking for someone with these traits. Hire him for this role."

"I'd feel more comfortable if you'd hire him."

"Why?"

"He's my best friends brother."

Bob smiled, "Contact Gracie. Tell her he should start next week Monday. Tell him to find someone just as honorable as he is to be our insurance agent. I believe he'll take this task seriously."

"Okay."

"Ms. Ashleigh I'm grateful you are our new Vice President."

A sheepish Ashleigh answered. "I have to get the office squared away."

"Just wait a second."

Ashleigh watched him pull open a drawer on the hexagon side of his desk; he set three very thick business envelopes on his desk.

"In the next three days stay at home and review this on your own leisure."

Ashleigh made a face, "Shouldn't I be here?"

"I want you to have a few days off."

"I need to be here."

"Why?"

"I have a lot of responsibilities. I can't just take time off."

"Next week I'll need you here every minute. We'll be fine."

"But..."

Bob pushed up his glasses.

He interrupted her, "Just go and get some rest."

Ashleigh made a face.

Bob answered this face by opening a drawer to the left of himself and set an envelope on the desk.

"It's for you."

"What is it?"

Bob pushed up his glasses, "Look for yourself."

Ashleigh grabbed the envelope, opened it, she read it, and started to cry.

"There isn't any crying in my office."

She: ran around the desk and hugged her brother, let go, grabbed the three manila envelopes, stopped when she reached the door, calmed herself down, wiped away her tears, stepped out of Bob's office, was greeted by Nikita, turned, shut the office door, stepped over to her purse, placed the envelope into the purse, placed the three manila envelopes on the window sill, hung her purse over her shoulder, led Nikita out of the office, passing Haley she stated with a tone; "You're in trouble."

Haley smiled and jokingly answered, "I don't answer to you."

Ashleigh shook her head and stuck her tongue out.

Haley answered, "A VP needs to be more professional."

“Who says I took the job?”

“Because I know better.”

Ashleigh made a face, “I’ll be back in five minutes to finish the office.”

“Okay.”

Haley smiled observing Ashleigh taking Nikita out of the building.

Megan tightly wrapped a long shower towel around her athletic body. She took a couple steps and looked down at the head floor.

She felt guilty for what was on the floor.

She picked up off the floor: the skirt she just purchased, the silk blouse she just purchased, a three page computer printout of a woman's private area, and her body pillow. She stepped out of the head and into her cabin. She temporarily set the printout on a brand new red and black vintage looking trunk at the end of her single bed. It was easy for her to toss the clothes she was carrying into the hamper. Once she did this she: pulled off the pillow case of the body pillow, tossed the pillow case into the hamper, shoved the body pillow up onto the top shelf of the closet, turned around, bent down, opened the trunk top, placed this printout in the trunk, shut the lid, and locked it with the combination lock she received in college. She: stood up, turned around, stepped to her closet, dropped the towel, slipped on clean undergarments, walked back to her bed, picked up her polo shirt off of the floor, shook it, inspected it, slipped it back on, did the same with her green cargo pants, reached down and picked up her jacket, set this on her chair, sat in the chair, put on her socks, checked her shoes put these back on, grabbed her undergarments that were on the floor and the towel, placed them into the hamper, closed both closet doors, opened all her blinds, slightly opened one window to allow some fresh air into her cabin, stepped out onto the bow, shut the door behind her, felt chilled but welcomed the breeze, and walked to the edge of her houseboat.

She looked across the river. She watched the activity in the town. She turned and faced north. The sun was obviously setting and the sounds of the preserve were starting to echo. The lights of the town turned on and the lights of the marina turned on.

She was grateful for the relief she felt after this last session.

What was a spur of the moment decision was wearing the clothes she just purchased and using the pillow. Many times when she used the body pillow she felt guilty. She enjoyed the fantasy of a husband finding her attractive in a risque type of outfit. She often imagined what it was like to be on top. She wondered if she would have the courage to wear what she considered her “special” clothes in front of a husband.

She was embarrassed she needed to use a printout to find her private parts. Before this session she held onto the idea a husband was would know exactly how to touch her. She recognized the folly in this ideal. If she needed what Megan considered a map, to know the names of her parts and where they were, how was a man able to know how to touch her? She recalled the one sex book she read in college. It suggested a woman should lead a mans hand to where it felt good to be touched. Along with this suggestion, she now understood why it suggested masturbating in front of a partner. She wondered if she'd have the courage to do either of these tips. She doubted any guy, especially if he was a virgin, could figure out how anything worked.

She was disturbed by all of the porn on the internet. In trying to find a picture of a real

vulva with everything labeled she ended up clicking onto many pornographic sights. She never stayed long on a sight. She was surprised on how many were being marketed for women. She was angry with herself for clicking onto some of these sights and checking out nude pictures of men. She promised herself she would never view pornography again. She believed these sights were a negative influence. She also believed the men and women performing on these sights were being exploited. She thought of her college roommate who admitted to being addicted to porn.

She felt it was a positive clicking onto sites with pictures of different types of VD; this reaffirmed her choice of being a virgin. She recognized she could still be a virgin, be a Christian, and be knowledgeable about the subject of sex. She surmised keeping a high moral ground was difficult. She felt being completely naive about sex was a black hole. A darkness she felt she was crawling out off. Just as plunging oneself into every whim and desire was a different type of blackness. She was determined to avoid both paths.

She heard the yacht door open. She turned and walked to the port side of her houseboat. She witnessed: the drapes to the sliding glass doors of the yacht open, Nikita drinking water, Ashleigh stepping away, and the entrance door to the yacht slam. Megan decided to go and see how her friend was doing.

She decided to fix her hair and wear a light jacket.

Ashleigh stood in front of her Sport Edition Jeep Wrangler. The sun was setting and she was trying to take pictures of the scratches on her Jeep. This was the first time Ashleigh had tried to use this digital camera. She purchased it at the airport while waiting for her brother to pick her up. She was instructed to send pictures to an associate lawyer of Mr. Shelby named; Ms. Fox.

Ashleigh was still processing the idea she was a vice president of her Brothers company. Ashleigh was astounded at the raise she received. A heavy issue on her heart was how this title would effect both her work life and her personal life. In spite of the positive thoughts, Ashleigh was focused on all the people who were depended upon her; there was the nagging idea she would wreck her brothers company.

Ashleigh was so focused she never heard Megan approach her. The way Megan decided to fix her hair was by putting it into a pony tail and putting on her siesta hat; with it's curled up sides. She was dressed in a polo shirt, her green cargo pants, and was without makeup.

Megan said, "Howdy."

Ashleigh was startled.

"Oh."

Megan reached out and said, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

Ashleigh calmed herself and mentioned, "I'm trying to take pictures of these scratches."

"Okay."

"I would've taken the pictures already but I'm only seeing black."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan was gentle, "It'll help taking off the lens cap."

Ashleigh proclaimed, "Shit!"

Ashleigh pulled off the lens cap and tried to focus the camera on the scratches.

"It isn't working."

A frustrated Ashleigh proclaimed, "It's either too close or too far."

"Let me try."

Ashleigh handed the camera to Megan, and in a frustrated tone stated, "Go ahead."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan: took the camera, studied it, pressed a few buttons, turned the lens, figured out how to focus the camera, and set a few of the settings. Once Megan was comfortable with these settings she bent down and took multiple shots from many different angles.

"This is a very good camera."

"I guess."

Ashleigh felt inadequate.

Megan stood up and handed Ashleigh the camera, "Don't feel bad. I'm always taking pictures with different cameras. With it having lenses it's going to take practice."

"I wanted to take some really good pictures. I'm hoping they'll convince my mom to come down and visit."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I'll take you places where she'll want to come down."

Ashleigh smiled, "I'd like that."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Ashleigh was paging through the pictures Megan took.

"I'd like to take you to Wisconsin. By the way. Thank-you. I'll be able to send these to the lawyer."

"Y'all are welcome."

Ashleigh nodded.

Megan broke the silence, "I've traveled being on the volleyball team and softball team. It's different than traveling as a tourist."

"I'd love to show you my home town. We'll go camping like we talked about."

Ashleigh noticed a look of disappointment on Megan's face, "My Daddy promised he'd take me. After a hunting trip they never went hunting or camping again."

Ashleigh wondered about this, "Why?"

"They ain't saying."

"Did you want to try it?"

"I'm game."

Ashleigh smiled, "If I take you to Wisconsin we'll either go to Devils Lake or Wyalusing State park."

"Wya what?"

Ashleigh laughed.

"Wyalusing State park. It's a Native American name. A lot of places in Wisconsin have Native American names."

"Y'all pronounce Wisconsin funny."

"It's how we pronounce it. I'm told I don't pronounce Boca Raton right."

"It ain't ran."

"I'm not saying ran."

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

She answered; "I'd hate seeing the spelling of Wya..."

Ashleigh finished. "Loosing."

They just looked at one another and smiled.

Ashleigh commented, "It's really beautiful. It's on the border of Iowa and Wisconsin. It's where the Wisconsin River flows into the Mississippi River."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She found it interesting in the way Ashleigh pronounced Mississippi.

Megan refocused the conversation, "A Ms. Fox is handling this?"

"She's an associate lawyer of Mr. Shelby. Her full name is Theresa Fox."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She slightly moved her siesta hat, "I've heard she's like a shark circulating you in the water. They say she's tougher than Mr. Shelby."

"I just wish my Jeep would have arrived okay."

The lights of the marina turned on.

"You might want to get the Jeep into the garage. Its one thing leaving it out with the hood on but Y'all wouldn't want to leave it out without it on."

"Okay."

"What's eating you?"

Ashleigh admitted, "Bob just promoted me to Vice President."

"Congratulations."

Megan could see from Ashleigh's body language and facial expression her friend was worried.

"Or ain't it a congratulations."

Ashleigh answered honestly, "I'm not sure yet."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Is your brother forcing Y'all into something you ain't wanting?"

"Nope," was Ashleigh's honest answer, "I only do the things I agree too. But sometimes I make him think he's the one telling me what to do. Besides, who's going to watch out for him?"

Megan understood the love and admiration a younger sister can have for a good brother. Megan believed this bond was even more intense between Ashleigh and Bob.

Based upon Megan's facial expression, Ashleigh recognized her best friend understood the love she had for her brother.

Nikita began to howl, they heard this howling all the way from the yacht.

Ashleigh yelled, "No HOWL!"

"Why is she howling?"

"I don't know."

This is when they witnessed the headlights of Bob's Escape lead the way into the marina driveway.

"She's knowing the vehicles Y'all drive."

"She's a smart dog."

"I have something for her."

"What?"

"For when you come over. I bought her a mat and a bowl. I've washed em'."

"You didn't have to do that."

"It ain't a big deal."

Megan became quiet when Bob parked the Escape. The vehicle faced the side of the Jeep they were standing on; both ladies moved to avoid the bright lights. He left the motor and the lights on.

Megan prepared for Bob to say something rude to her.

Bob: stepped out of his vehicle, walked straight passed these two women, stepped up to the scratches, touched them, made facial expressions, stood up, thought for a second, bent down again, touched the decal, and all at once stated, "I hope you've taken detailed pictures of these scratches?"

Megan was flabbergasted at this man's rudeness.

Bob stood up but was still looking at the scratches.

"It's what we we're doing. I'm going to email Ms. Fox the pictures we've taken."

"I'd suggest doing this tonight. I don't want the company who delivered this vehicle to get away with this. They will be held accountable."

"I agree."

"They said you did this?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"The delivery driver said the scratches were on the vehicle when he picked it up."

Bob turned toward Ashleigh and asked, "Where was the Jeep parked?"

This question offended Megan more than Ashleigh.

"It was parked in the side parking space. You know the one I'm talking about right?"

"Was it parked at the Anderson's side parking space."

"Yes."

"It'd be impossible for someone to accidentally back into it."

Ashleigh reassured Bob, "I did exactly what you told me. I checked the vehicle before they picked it up. I also checked it when they delivered it to me. Everything was fine before I left."

"If you have pictures of the Jeep before this vehicle was delivered send them to her as well."

"Okay."

Megan shifted her body and crossed her arms. Megan felt he was being demanding.

"Did you call our current insurance company?"

"Yes and I talked to Jimmy. He knows of someone who could fix this."

"I'd take his suggestion and have them look at it tomorrow."

"I've already made the appointment."

Bob's tone was a little intense for Megan when he said, "There isn't any reason why you should have to pay for these damages."

"I'm a big girl. I can handle this. If you feel I can't handle this maybe I shouldn't be your vice president?"

"Deciding to promote you is an excellent decision on my part."

Bob mentioned, "It appears you have everything handled just fine."

Ashleigh answered, "I'm glad to receive your reassurance."

Ashleigh could tell he ignored her sarcastic response because he finally take note of Megan.

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan crossed her arms and focused.

Ashleigh hoped her brother recognized he spent the last five minutes ignoring her Friend. Ashleigh wanted Bob to say something simple, park the Escape, and relax in the yacht. Based upon her brothers facial expressions and body language Ashleigh could feel a disaster about to happen.

Bob asked Megan, "How is the most attractive woman in the marina doing today?"

Ashleigh's countenance collapsed.

Megan's eyes glared and her body language screamed sarcasm, "Why don't you ask her?"

Bob glared back, "Based upon my observation I believed I was."

"Are we dating?"

"How about if we go out for coffee and see if we have the possibility of turning our acquaintance into a relationship."

Ashleigh closed her eyes and shook her head.

"I only date Christian gentleman."

"I do consider myself a man of manners. As a matter of fact I'm a Christian."

"I'm sure a gentleman doesn't go around insulting ladies."

"How was I insulting?"

She answered with a tone, "Y'all were studying the scratches and talking to your sister for five minutes before Y'all said anything to me."

"I needed to make sure everything was taking care off."

"If Y'all trust Ashleigh as a vice president you should trust her taking' care of those scratches."

Bob stated with conviction, "This unfortunate situation is because of the delivery company I selected. This makes me responsible for this situation. I'm just watching out for my sister."

Megan spoke from the heart, "Us sisters appreciate it when our brothers are watching out for us but we ain't helpless."

Ashleigh noticed how Megan's tone changed.

Bob with a tone answered, "My Sister isn't helpless. She has more fortitude than eighty percent of the population."

Ashleigh was touched. Ashleigh stepped into the conversation, "Bob. Megan wasn't meaning anything wrong. You were sounding demanding. I'm your sister and I know you. Megan doesn't know you like I do. I'd like it if you'd be more respectful to Megan. Like you treat every other lady you know."

"I'm not trying to be disrespectful."

Megan's dimples flashed in disbelief.

"She's been telling you she doesn't like the way you've been complimenting her. I understand you aren't meaning anything bad. But some of us ladies only want to hear it from someone we're in a relationship with."

Bob looked over at Megan and stated in a more gentle tone, "Would you be interested in a night of find dinning."

Megan thought about what Jake told her earlier, "I'm not interested in dating you. I'm Ashleigh's friend and I ain't interested in losing a great friendship over a relationship I ain't sure about. I'm serious when I was saying I'd only date a Christian."

"I'm a Christian."

"I ain't once seen you going to church or go to a Bible study."

Ashleigh was surprised at Megan's tone, but cringed at this statement because Ashleigh knew what her brother thought of; what he called, "*religious activity*."

"I'm a Christian Man who has a very intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. What I find to be a hindrance to knowing the God of the Bible is these religious activities."

"These activities are very important to me. I want a man to be interested in attending these activities. Maybe God has something for you to accomplish. In spite of not liking these activities."

"If I go just because I like someone doesn't this make me a hypocrite?"

Ashleigh was absolutely shocked on how this conversation was going.

Megan with a serious tone answered, "This is respectful. I'd say there's times when we all feel like hypocrites and sinners. I'm knowing this by my experience with God lately. God's meeting me at church when I'm feeling guilty or feeling like a hypocrite for going. Maybe it's what Y'all are needing."

"I meet him when I'm praying and reading the Bible."

"We ain't meant to serve God alone."

"My relationship with God is just fine."

"It's obvious God's blessed you with success. Y'all care about family by the way Y'all are treating Ashleigh. Many people are feeling your company is an answered prayer. I'm hoping you'll be a blessing to these folks. What I'd say is maybe God's wanting Y'all to be a blessing to some of the folks who go to church."

Ashleigh wanted her brother to ask Megan to marry him and wanted Megan to say yes.

Megan's dimples flashed.

Bob broke the silence, "If we started to date I promise I'd go to church with you. I'm not saying I'll like it. I'm not saying I'll get involved in anything. Most likely I'll offend somebody."

"I ain't dating Y'all. I'm seeing more than I'd ever thought I'd see, so I'm willing to be your friend."

"I'm grateful my sister has found a friend with your level of integrity. I will honor the friendship you have with my Sister." Bob turned to his sister, "I'm going to park my vehicle."

Megan was curious, "Y'all want to be friends?"

"I will honor you as my Sisters Friend and in so doing Y'all have full access to my yacht except my living spaces. I'm sure you will honor this."

"I'd honor those wishes without you telling me."

Bob said, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to keep our friendship at an arms length for I do want to have a relationship with you. It's unfair to both of us if we're agreeing to a friendship when in reality it's a relationship."

Megan respected this a great deal.

Ashleigh wanted these two together. Bob was suddenly the man everyone wanted him to be and the one she remembered when she was little.

Megan looked at Ashleigh, "How'd you like to come over. I'll make you some snook and show you what I bought Nikita."

Ashleigh asked, "What's a snook?"

Bob answered, "It's an ocean fish. I've been told it's a good tasting fish. I hear its a tough fish to catch."

Megan's dimples flashed.

“Y’all like answering for others? Y’all are right it’s a tough fish to be catching but I’m excellent at catching fish. My Daddy taught me well. Y’all have a problem with me catching fish?”

Ashleigh silently sighed and her body language again crumbled.

“I feel a woman is absolutely capable of catching a fish. I’m annoyed you’d assume just because of your gender I’d think you were incapable of catching a fish. It’s obvious your running a successful charter.”

“Why are Y’all talking to me like your a professor?”

This was something Ashleigh wondered for years, “Why not talk to people like normal people do?”

He made a face, “How can I inspire people to great things if I’m lowering my standards to appease someone else.”

Megan was again irritated, “What happened to the guy I just talked to. Do you have to be an arrogant ass?”

This shocked Ashleigh.

Megan’s dimples flashed/

“Y’all have me swearing.”

Ashleigh stated, “Now you know why I swear.”

“Ms. Ashleigh are you ready to try my cooking.”

“Yes.”

Bob made a face.

“I’ll park the Jeep first.”

Bob commented, “Let me park the Escape and then you’ll have room to park your Jeep.”

“What side should I park it?”

Bob thought for a second, “I’ll park to the right. If we need to move anything we can. We’ll talk to Mike and get you your own garage.”

Ashleigh looked at Megan, “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“I’ll watch.”

Ashleigh suggested, “Why not ride with me to the garage.”

Megan looked over at Bob, “You need to learn manners.”

“I’m all about manners.”

“If Y’all are wanting to go out with a southern lady, you’ll need to revisit them.”

“I’m sure any other lady would appreciate them.”

Megan looked at Ashleigh as they stepped into the Jeep, “Is he always needing to get the last word in?”

“It’s why I slam doors.”

They all entered the vehicles. Ashleigh started up the Jeep and Bob was backing up his vehicle.

Megan started to apologize, “I hope I ain’t offending Y’all.”

“There isn’t any doubt he can be annoying.”

Megan: wanted to dislike him, she was surprised at the respect she felt for him, she felt he was arrogant, she took note he needed an exercise plan, she knew it took a lot to run a business, he was a Christian, he was shifty, she wondered what his true motives were; as they drove to the garage Megan recalled the night he danced.

Ashleigh asked, "Want to hear the radio?"

"I ain't into heavy metal."

"I'll play some *Nora Jones*."

The song Chasing Pirates started to play.

Ashleigh was thankful she could park in the garage without having to move anything.

Ashleigh and Megan were grateful when Bob left the garage by saying a polite goodbye to Megan.

Megan responded in kind.

End of Part Five of Six

November 30th, Ashleigh's Jeep

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Thursday, November 30th

Ashleigh's Jeep

Day 6 of Book One

(Three Days since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

Part Six of Six

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 1st, Ashleigh's Jeep

(4 Days Since Nikita Destroyed Megan's Journal)

*E*ster was overjoyed. Ester felt important because her Big Sister spent time showing Danielle and herself how to serve a volleyball. Ester: stepped out of her room, she was wearing pajamas, her long brunette hair was gaining more red pigment, she was loosing her childhood circular face and was beginning the transition into an inverted triangle shaped face, her light brown eyes were shining, and her longer lips were all smiles. What concerned Nicole was in the last three months her ten year old's red pigment was meshing with her dark hair to create a whole new color. A family trait on Nicole's mother's side of the family was for the children to start with blond or red hair but right before or during puberty their hair would darken; but she had never heard of the colors meshing together. Nicole called a couple doctors and a nurse friend of hers about Ester's changing hair color. Nicole was told this was rare but it could happen. Ester was indifferent to this change.

Ester became concerned when she heard strange noises coming from the bathroom. She heard her sister make these noises while in the shower numerous times. Ester believed Julie was keeping an injury or an illness a secret. She tiptoed to the bathroom door and put her ear to the door. The sounds her Sister were making reminded her of someone with a stomach ache. Ester made the brave decision to go downstairs and tell her Momma to come upstairs. Ester knew if she told on her sister, Julie would get angry with her, but Ester wanted her Momma to fix whatever was hurting her Sister.

Ester noticed the volleyball they had used at the Y was keeping Julie's door ajar; this put a stop to Ester's plan. Her Sister's room was a place of great speculation. A year earlier Julie banned Ester from stepping into her room. What hurt Ester's feelings was when Julie told her she was to little to step into her room. This hurt because she had been allowed in her sisters room for as long as she could remember. What Ester missed the most was the talks the

two of them used to have.

Ester: gently pushed open the door, picked up the volleyball, and she cautiously stepped into the room. Ester panned the room: Ester was glad to see her sister still had the net with all the stuffed animals, Ester was envious of her sister's big bed, she liked Julie's desk, what was fascinating to Ester was the new bookshelf her Brother and her Daddy built for Julie. Ester was happy her sister received this big brown shelf, because her sister's old bookshelf was now in her room; Ester felt bigger anytime she was given something her Sister once owned. Ester felt Julie's bookshelf was huge. The six shelves looked really long to Ester. The top of the bookshelf was filled with trophies, awards, and achievements; Ester felt her Sister won everything. The next four shelves were filled with three ring binders. The bottom shelf was filled with a collection of little ceramic animals.

She set the volleyball down and walked over to the bookshelf.

Ester focused on the ceramic animals. Ester looked for the ones she bought her Sister for Christmas. She spotted a couple new ones. Ester wanted to pick up a white baby seal but knew her Sister would get angry if she "touched" it. When Ester lost interest in looking at the little ceramic animals she studied the three ring binders. Ester recognized: they were organized by color, went from bright color to dark color, each binder had a subject name printed on the side, this subject name was in black on long white labels, and each colored binder had the same subject printed on it. There was one exception to this pattern and this was a black binder unmarked and was in front of the yellow binders on the top shelf. Ester became fascinated by what was in this one binder. What stopped Ester from grabbing this black binder was Julie's sigh.

Ester prepared to be yelled at.

Julie's impulse was to yell and shove her nosy little sister out of her room. She changed her mind. Julie reasoned if she used this approach it might cause her sister to want to sneak into her room again.

Julie asked gently, "Why are you in my room?"

Ester was surprised at Julie's tone.

It took Ester a couple seconds to answer, but she said, "The volleyball blocked the door."

Ester prepared to get yelled at.

"Where is it?"

Ester pointed, "It's over there."

Julie smiled, picked up the volleyball, and asked Ester, "How'd you like to keep this one?"

Ester's eyes became large and asked, "Y'all are giving it to me?"

"Why not keep it for when we play again."

"Wow!?" Ester in her excitement: grabbed the volleyball, ran out of Julie's bedroom, she stopped at the top of the stairs, and yelled down the stairs, "Julie gave me HER volleyball."

Nicole yelled back, "That's nice. But you keep it upstairs."

"Yes Ma'am."

Ester ran the ball into her room.

The reason Julie was willing to give her the volleyball was because she owned five of them. This particular volleyball was slightly used, she had newer and older ones, but she

figured her sister could use a decent one. Her Momma suggested if she was nicer to Ester and did something with her every once in a while Ester was more likely to leave her alone. Her Momma also suggested; Ester would respond better if Julie talked to Ester as if Ester she was a student. These suggestions helped Julie put up with her Little Sister at the Y today. Julie admitted to herself she enjoyed teaching both Danielle and Ester how to serve.

Julie was dressed in: an older pair of red yoga pants, an old long sleeved gray t-shirt with a graphic of a woman running on the front, and was in comfortable socks. She wished she could have gone without a bra with her brother downstairs; she wore one. She understood guys were guys, but she found it annoying when her own brother would glance at her boobs. She was grateful he never did anything creepy.

Ester came out of her room feeling she could ask her Sister anything. Before Julie could close the door she stepped into her big sister's room. She asked, "What's in the binders?"

Julie took a tone of indifference, "It's just schoolwork."

"Oh."

This was disappointing to Ester.

Julie still using her Momma's advice asked, "How'd you like to play a couple games of UNO?"

Ester felt like it was Christmas, "Yea!"

Julie gently stopped Ester before she ran down the stairs.

Ester was sure Julie would yell at her.

Instead, Julie asked in a polite way, "Would Y'all want me to go into your room?"

"To play!"

Julie rolled her eyes, "No."

Ester's countenance was shattered, "Oh."

Julie qualified her question, "Would Y'all like it if I went into your room when you were away from the house and went through your things."

"It's my room."

"That's what I feel like when Y'all were in here without me."

"I was giving Y'all the ball back."

"Next time move the ball and gently shut the door. Please don't enter my room."

"Okay."

Ester knew she would get in trouble for sneaking into her room. More important her Big Sister was talking nice to her.

"I'm only playing a few games."

"Why?"

"I need to research something on the computer. It'll be your bed time soon."

"I wish I could stay up late."

Out of concern Julie asked, "Do you think I stay up late?"

Ester missed Julie's concerned tone and asked in a disappointed tone, "Why can't I stay up later?"

This was a relief to Julie, "When I was your age I wasn't allowed to stay up late."

Ester made a face and sighed.

"Instead of complaining lets get started."

Ester asked, "You still want to play UNO?"

"Yea."

Ester cheered and ran downstairs.”

Ester thought about what her Momma told her. Her Momma suggested if she asked her sister to do things less often there was a better chance they would do more things together. Ester felt this worked at the Y. What was even more fun was Danielle and herself were able to play with Julie's YMCA friends. Ester liked these friends a lot more than: Jennie, Chelsey, Kendall, Pamela, and Tiffany; Ester especially disliked Jennie.

Ester eagerly opened a drawer in the kitchen with the selection of card games and decks of cards. She was delighted her big sister would play UNO with her during her quiet time before bed. Ester reminded herself she needed to be quiet or her Momma would send her to bed before she wanted. UNO was Ester's favorite game.

She quickly ran to the table and sat down.

Nicole asked, “Y’all want a juice?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

When Julie stepped into the kitchen Nicole winked at her Oldest Daughter. Julie smiled in return.

Ester had the cards out, “You should deal.”

“We’ll play for points.”

“Oh,”

Ester wished her sister would just play. It seemed to Ester her Big Sister always wanted to keep score. Even so, Ester ran to a different drawer with office supplies in it. She became excited when Julie started to shuffle the cards. Ester: found a pencil, sharpened it, grabbed a pink pad of paper, and took it over to Julie.

“Remember Y’all can’t play a Draw Four unless Y’all can’t play any other card.”

“Okay.”

Ester wanted to tell her sister she knew the rules instead she collected the cards Julie dealt her.

Nicole set a juice down for Ester and gave Julie a bottled water.

Julie was frustrated with the families four year old desk top. She wanted a more powerful laptop. This four year old computer was running one of the first versions of Windows XP. When her parents bought this computer it was an awesome running computer. Currently it struggled. She knew if she clicked on one more site the computer would crash.

She was grateful for her three nerd friends and Brady Williams. They told her a new version of Windows would be out in January. They were eager to teach her whatever she needed to know about computers. They taught her how to: clear a search history, turn off parental controls, how to build a website, and other things. She took what they taught her and expanded on her skills. She was sure her three computer friends were curious as to why a woman would want parental controls turned off a computer. She would never tell them.

She thought about the day she snuck up behind her three nerd friends in the computer lab. They were clearly embarrassed and were sure she would: tease them, tell on them, spread rumors about them, and embarrass them in front of everyone. Instead she asked them how they were able to view nude women on the schools computer. One was brave enough to ask if she would tell anyone. She promised if they showed her how to disable every parental control

system and how to hack as many systems as they were able she would never tell. The three boys were surprised: she continued to talk to them, was a very quick learner, would treat them with respect, were shocked she never told anyone, and even bought computer components from them. Because Julie never told anyway or ever teased them, they were more than willing to teach Julie whatever she wanted to know about computers. It was obvious they really liked her. She often times had to reassure them she would never tell anyone what they were showing her. Julie felt sorry for one of the other boys. She asked him a question when he was standing next to his locker and he immediately placed his books in front of himself. She approached one of these guys in the computer lab. Being bent over looking at the computer monitor she caught him glance down her shirt, because of the months of help; she pulled her shirt down. He immediately became agitated, he tried to sit back down in the computer chair, but caused a scene when he almost fell. After these two incidents she only asked these three boys a question when they were sitting.

Sitting in the den she again became angry at all of the guys who teased her Computer Nerd friends for being virgins. She believed many of the guys who teased these guys were inexperienced themselves. She was growing tired of kids at school teasing one another. Her biggest pet peeves were: a boy picking on another boy for being a virgin, boys picking on a girls with large breasts, a boy being picked on for how small he was, when a girl was a slut for having sex but a guy could sleep around, how kids joked about masturbation, and how girls teased other girls about their looks.

She currently had five webpages up. One of these pages was an auction website. She was waiting until the last moment to place a bid for a digital camera with lenses. Another site was a stock exchange website. This website had up to date articles and information about the market. She set the website so she could glance at the scrolling market information on the bottom of the screen. In plain view were two sites split in half so Julie could compare the articles and pictures of each site. One of these sites was a business website detailing the history of *Renewed Mastery* and the owner of the company Robert Waller. The other site was displaying all of the information known about the author Robert Heart. The last page she had open was her Yahoo home page; this was the page she clicked on if someone would step into the den.

She was ready to put in the bid for the camera. She stopped when she heard her Momma walking down the stairs and toward the den. Instead of putting in her bid she quickly clicked off the webpage and the stock market site. This helped the computer to move a little faster. She had another camera in mind. She reminded herself to reply to the owner's email.

Julie reasoned Robert Waller and Robert Heart were the same person. Julie understood why the publishing world would get frustrated with Robert Heart. The Robert Waller person, was already a multimillionaire and there was speculation he was a billionaire, this meant Robert Heart could afford to do whatever he wanted. The wealth of Robert Waller allowed the Robert Heart person to: act aloof, avoid public appearances, to look disheveled in the couple interviews he agreed to, to write whatever he wanted, and allowed Robert Heart the luxury of disappearing. Julie believed Mr. Bob wrote because it was an intellectual hobby.

It was obvious Robert Waller loved to push boundaries. From the moment Robert Waller opened his night club he always did things different. Many times Robert Waller was told his concepts about business would never work. Julie was certain others in the political and business community found Mr. Bob's concepts threatening because they were working

out too well. The current problem for the enemies of Robert Waller and *Renewed Mastery* was: the company was privately owned, it was worth billions, and overall it was a popular company with many different political and social groups. Julie reviewing the history of *Renewed Mastery* saw opportunities where the company could have been shut down or taken over. Julie speculated the reason this never happened was: the belief by the establishment *Renewed Mastery* would never amount to anything, the slow stable rise of the company, then the company in a short amount of time bought out many companies, it's large profits in a slow economy, Mr. Waller's sneak attack on keeping the company for himself, and moving the company to her home town. Julie felt it was genius moving eighty percent of the company to Florida and establishing a base of operations. The company was now dug in deeper than a tick on a dog. She smiled at the thought of what this meant to Mr. Bob's enemies.

She heard her momma step into the room.

Nicole warned, "If Y'all want to walk the dawg you'll have to get up early."

Julie turned around, "I'm almost done."

With a mother tone Nicole asked, "What are Y'all woking on?"

"I was comparing Mr. Bob to the author Robert Heart."

Nicole started to ask, "Why are you..."

Jeff asked loudly from in the kitchen with a teasing tone, "Who's reading this Walt Whitman book?"

Julie forgot she left her Walt Whitman book on the kitchen table. She stood up from the computer chair, stepped passed her Momma, and stepped into the kitchen.

"It's mine."

"Why are Y'all reading Walt Whitman?"

Jimmy was sitting at the kitchen table preparing for a Bible study.

Jimmy commented, "It'd do Y'all some good to be reading."

"I'm..."

An irritated Julie took the book from Jeff's hands, "He's to ignorant to read."

Jeff in defense of himself, "I'm a good reader."

In a sarcastic tone Julie replied, "When it's a picture book."

In an annoyed father tone, Jimmy scolded, "Hey."

They looked at one another.

They made faces.

Then looked over at their Daddy.

Jeff stated with confidence, "A professional football player ain't needing to read poetry."

Nicole walked into the kitchen, "You'll need to finish college first. I ain't wanting an ignorant son."

Jimmy mentioned, "Knowing poetry might help with the gals."

Julie rolled her eyes and stated, "Jeff writing poetry is a bigger miracle than Moses parting the Red Sea."

Before Jimmy could respond Nicole stepped next to her son and defended him by saying, "Daddy wrote me poetry."

Julie with a surprised tone asked, "Really?"

Jimmy answered sheepishly. "I did."

Jeff said, "Hmmm."

Julie gave Jeff the strangest look.

Nicole noticing the look mentioned to Julie, "Instead of criticizing Jeff why not give him tips."

"Momma I ain't needing Julie's help."

Julie snickered, rolled her eyes, "Y'all are needing a team to help you."

Nicole scolded, "Y'all should be more encouraging."

Julie answered with a face of exasperation, "Y'all ain't seeing how he's acting in school. It's embarrassing."

"How am I embarrassing?"

"It's the mixed messages you keep sending."

Jeff asked, "What mixed messages?"

"Y'all talk about asking gals out. But you ain't asked out any."

Jimmy mentioned, "It's smart to be selective."

Julie wanted to roll her eyes but knew better.

"Daddy he's scared to ask em' out."

"I ain't scared."

"Why not ask out Jenny?"

"I ain't interested in Jenny."

Nicole trying to help, "I'm sure it ain't easy to ask out a gal. Maybe you could set him up."

Jeff interrupted with fake confidence, "I ain't needing any help."

Julie was about to list many time he lacked confidence with girls; but Jeff quickly changed the subject.

"After the playoff game tomorrow may I go to Sal's house to celebrate?"

Jimmy mentioned, "You haven't won yet."

"It's our destiny to win."

Julie wished she felt this way about her volleyball team, after loosing yesterday, and the teams earlier practice; Julie felt it would be an accomplishment if her team won half their games.

"Will his parents be there?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Jimmy asked, "Who'll be there?"

"Just Sal and a couple of the guys on the team."

"As long as Sal's driving," mentioned Nicole, "I know he doesn't drink."

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole added, "Did you invite Billy?"

Jeff made a face, "He's coming."

Julie interjected, "Are you watching out for him?"

Jeff answered, "With how well he's playing people ain't so willing to pick on him."

"Still watch out for him."

"I am."

Nicole added, "He's a good boy. He's been through a lot."

Jeff agreed, "Yes Ma'am."

Nicole turned toward Julie and asked, "What are your plans?"

Julie wanted to be sarcastic but with her Daddy there she decided to be honest, "I ain't

sure yet. Amanda and I wanted to watch the game and we were thinking about headed back to her house.”

“Is Jennie...”

Julie interrupted, “Momma she's my friend.”

Nicole restrained herself. Nicole chose a different direction, “Why not see what Zoe or Hannah are up too? Y'all are welcomed to invite them here?”

Julie made a face and shrugged her shoulders.

Jimmy mentioned, “Having good friends makes a difference.”

“Its just Hannah and Zoe don't like hanging around Amanda any more.”

Jeff stepped over to the refrigerator and opened the door; he stood there looking into it.

Jimmy with wisdom said, “Maybe there's a reason they ain't friends with her any more. She's changed.”

Nicole mentioned, “I'm getting' worried about her. She seems to be loosing a lot of weight.”

“She's fine.”

Julie herself was worried.

Nicole with a tone asked, “What are Y'all looking for?”

Jeff answered, “Huh.”

Julie rolled her eyes, then asked; “Is there an apple in there?”

Jeff grabbed one out of the fruit drawer and handed it to Julie; Julie loved Pink Lady apples.

“I...”

Nicole stepped in front of Jeff and pulled out a freshly made citrus fruit salad, “Have this.”

Jeff answered, “Yes Ma'am.”

Nicole stepped in front of the counter with the tall chairs.

Jeff went back to looking into the refrigerator.

Jimmy with a tone asked, “Y'all trying to cool the house? The refrigerator ain't an air conditioner.”

Julie tried to use this as a way to sneak back into the den.

Nicole stopped her by stated, “You wait young lady.”

The tone her Momma took usually meant she was in trouble, she stopped, and looked at her Momma.

Nicole was opening the cupboard above the counter.

Nicole asked, “You want some?”

Julie answered, “I'll take a bottled water.”

Jimmy mentioned, “I'll have some fruit salad.”

Nicole took out two bowls and filled them, Jimmy briefly stood up from his chair and grabbed the bowl of fruit salad, and sat back down.

Nicole mentioned, “With Ester in bed we're needing to talk about a few things.”

Jeff looked over at his mother.

Julie: rolled her eyes, she stepped in front of her big brother, purposely backing into him so she would have room, this is when he finally moved, she rolled her eyes again, she grabbed a bottled water, closed the refrigerator, turned around, and for her brother's sake made a show out of stepping away from the refrigerator.

Jeff mentioned, "Sorry."

"It's okay."

Julie answered with a sarcastic tone and an eye roll.

Nicole squinted at Julie.

Julie pretended she missed this squint.

After a spoonful of fruit salad Jimmy stated, "I might be getting a new job."

Julie: smiled, took a bite of her apple, and would find the opportunity to promote her Daddy to Ashleigh.

Jeff asked, "Where?"

"I received a call from *Renewed Mastery* and it looks like they're wanting to have another interview with me."

Nicole in a happy tone, "For what position?"

"They ain't saying."

Jimmy was the most restrained. Jimmy was grateful for the new opportunity but he was feeling like he failed at being an insurance agent. Jeff, Julie, and Nicole were sure Jimmy felt horrible about how his experiment at selling insurance went; so they kept their excitement to a minimum.

Julie stated, "Daddy It'll be a good job."

Jeff mentioned, "I've been hearing good things about the place."

Nicole stated, "Jake's wife was saying..."

Jimmy asked, "Linda?"

Nicole continued, "Yes. She was telling me they have a weird way of interviewing people."

"I was thinking the same."

Julie interjected, "I heard a couple teachers at school mentioning this."

Jeff adding to what Julie said, "They're calling everyone if they've hiring you or not. Sal's dad was saying how well they're paying. He mentioned being honest with em' they'll work with Y'all if a person has something else going on. Everyone's wanting to work there."

This confirmed Julie's personal experience and what she was currently researching. She still couldn't believe she was making seventy-five dollar a week to walk Nikita.

Nicole stated, "I've heard there's a huge work fair scheduled."

Julie suggested, "Momma Y'all should take the job they offered you."

Nicole answered politely, "With Daddy working there I'll find some other place to work."

Julie believed her Daddy would get hired, "Daddy with Y'all working at the company maybe Momma won't need to work."

"I ain't forcing her to do anything she ain't ready or ain't wanting to do."

Nicole mentioned, "With Ester getting older and if your daddy gets the job at *Renewed Mastery* maybe I'll find a part time nursing job."

Julie smiled, "That'd be great."

"If I get a job..."

Jimmy finished Nicole's sentence, "You three will have to start taking care of yourselves. We're needing Y'all to act more responsible."

Both Jeff and Julie produced faces of disappointment.

Jimmy scolded, "With Y'all having two arms and two legs this ain't stopping Y'all from

helping out around here. If I'm willing to help out Momma. Y'all can start pulling your weight around here."

They answered at the same time, "Yes sir."

Jeff and Julie knew when their parents agreed on something they were a battle front no one could penetrate.

"We'll seem to be running out of ink awful fast. I was trying to print out a cookie..."

An intrigued Jeff interrupted, "Y'all are making your Christmas cookies?"

"I'm making them with Ms. Jennifer and Danielle on Saturday before she goes to work. It wouldn't hurt if you'd help us."

"I'll be busy."

Jimmy put in his opinion, "Julie, I ain't forcing Y'all to help with them cookies but I've been noticing you ain't helping Momma and you've been ignoring Ester."

"I'm..."

Jimmy forcefully interrupted, "I'm realizing you have friends and you have your own activities. I'm just saying there might be a time you'll regret ignoring Ester. Just maybe when Y'all will want to have a relationship with her she'll be reluctant because of how Y'all treated her."

Julie thought this was insane. She answered, "I was just showing Danielle and Ester on how to serve a volleyball."

Nicole mentioned, "She's growing like a weed' and she looks up to you."

"I have my own life."

Nicole with a tone, "We're just reminding you."

"This goes for you too."

Jeff was about to step out of the kitchen.

"What?"

Nicole suggested, "Just talk to her."

Jeff answered, "I ain't a girl."

Julie shook her head and took a sip of her bottled water.

Nicole suggested, "Ask her how school's going and help her with bullies."

Jimmy became a little intense, "Is someone teasing her?"

Jeff started, "I'll put a..."

Nicole warned, "It ain't helping her if Y'all go acting like brutes."

Nicole took one look at Julie's face and stated her opinion on fighting, "I ain't wanting sweet Ester learning how to fight. Y'all teach her some self defense but I ain't wanting her to be punching anybody. I ain't liking how much Y'all practice fighting."

Julie was going to deny this.

Her Momma mentioned, "I've been seeing you two practicing self defense in the back yard."

Jeff came to her sister's defense, "There ain't anyone willing to mess with her."

Nicole leaned in, "Has she shown them what she's made off?"

Julie and Jeff glanced at one another.

Nicole suspected there was a fight and Julie was the victor.

Jimmy was pleased.

Julie answered, "They don't mess with me because of Jeff."

This made Jeff puff up his chest.

Nicole mentioned in an angry tone, "I ain't liking Y'all fighting."

"If anybody messes with my sister they'll have to face me. Plus Julie will..."

Julie saving them both interrupted, "We'll teach Ester a couple things."

Jimmy winked at Julie, Julie winked back.

A part of her was grateful her children could protect themselves; especially Julie and Ester. Nicole just assumed people would leave Jeff alone.

Nicole stated the boundary, "I ain't wanting Ester starting anything."

Jimmy reminded everyone else, "It's self defense."

Julie added, "I ain't into bulling."

Nicole reaffirmed this by saying, "Y'all hearing us?"

Julie answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Jimmy asked Jeff, "What about you?"

"Yes sir," Jeff answered, "Who's picking on her?"

Nicole answered, "Just help her stand up for herself."

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole could see teaching Ester self defense would be enjoyable for Jeff. Nicole wanted Ester and Jeff to learn something about one another. They were the two siblings who knew the least about one another. Until recently, Julie made it a point to be involved in her sisters life, Nicole hoped Julie would once again allow Ester into her life; even if sparingly.

Nicole redirected the conversation, "We need to start watching what we're printing."

Jimmy, Jeff, and Julie gave Nicole a look.

"I needed to replace all the ink in our colored printer. I could swear I just replaced the ink a couple weeks ago."

Jeff mentioned, "We're printing a lot for school."

Jimmy mentioned, "I was printing a lot for work."

Nicole did acknowledge, "Ester was saying she's been printing animal pictures."

Jimmy stated, "If I get the job at *Renewed Mastery* we'll get us a new printer."

Nicole added, "Until we get us a new printer just watch what Y'all are printing. I'm still expecting Y'all to have those routes printed."

Jimmy asked, "What routes?"

Julie smiled, "The routes I'll be walking Nikita."

Jimmy answered, "It's a good dawg."

Jeff asked, "May I be excused?"

Nicole mentioned, "Get some rest."

Jimmy warned, "'Don't be overconfident. But we're all looking forward to Y'all playing tomorrow. Win or loose we're proud of you."

Jimmy answered with a smile and a puffed up chest, "Yes sir."

Nicole's comment was, "Play safe."

Jimmy, Jeff, and Julie gave their Momma a look.

Jeff answered his Momma by saying, "Yes Ma'am."

Nicole went up to him and hugged him. He blushed. He then turned and went into his room.

Jimmy lowered his voice, "I'm hoping Y'all are taking this job seriously."

"Yes sir."

Nicole lectured, "If we like it or not they're leaders in our community. This could lead to

an opportunity for you.”

Julie wanted to be sarcastic but answered, “Yes Ma'am.”

Jimmy asked, “What's this route business?”

Julie sighed, “They're wanting me to tell them which way I'm walking Nikita.”

“It's for your own safety.”

Julie rolled her eyes, “Nothing will happen.”

Jimmy cautioned, “You should be prepared if something does happen.”

“With me being prepared why would anything happen?”

Nicole responded, “No matter how prepared we are something can happen. What I don't want to happen is the dawg biting someone. And I don't want anything happening to Y'all.”

“I can take care of myself. Plus; Nikita will protect me.”

Jimmy asked, “So what's the routes?”

“I've decided on four routes and I'm suppose to show em' what routes I'm taking. One will be along the beach. On the road in front of the mansions. On the same road to the look out. On Saturdays I could walk her passed the pier and around. I was considering walking her along the river up to the walking bridge and around.”

Jimmy demanded, “Anytime Y'all are walking along the preserve be watchful. I'd recommend avoiding walking along the river. It's up to Y'all.”

Julie answered, “Yes sir.”

Nicole demanded, “Don't be changing your mind from posting the route here to when you get over to the yacht.”

“Yes Ma'am.”

“I'm hoping your taking this seriously.”

“Momma. I'm taking it seriously.”

Jimmy stated for both, “We believe Y'all are. I'm hoping walking the dawg will be fun as well.”

Julie smiled.

She was about to mention how she liked to run Nikita but decided to with hold this information, “It's already fun. She's really a good dawg.”

“With it being early I want you to be careful biking to the yacht.”

Julie rolled her eyes but answered, “Yes Momma.”

“Are you prepared for tomorrow?”

Julie sighed, “Yes Ma'am.”

Jimmy smiled.

“Don't be afraid to ask for help.”

“I'll be fine.”

Nicole slightly frustrated did answer, “Okay.”

Julie took a drink of her water.

“Don't stay up to late.”

Julie answered her Daddy, “Yes sir.”

Julie knew she was excused.

Jimmy and Nicole watched her leave. They smiled at one another. They went back to what they were doing before their kids entered the kitchen.

Once Julie was back in the den she took the routes: off of the printer, started to sort,

and stapled the routes. While she was organizing these routes she was thinking about her friends. She was looking forward to the football game. She did have concerns related to the Snob Club. Julie wanted to hang out with Jennie and Amanda but if Jennie was around they would end up hanging around the Snob Club. Julie was growing tired of the popular kids. Julie wondered what Hannah and Zoe were up too. Julie was certain if she left the snob club many of the girls from the volleyball team would be willing to hang out with her. Julie was just as certain if she stopped hanging around the snob club Amanda and Jennie would stop hanging around her. The routes were now into two piles, Julie decided she would walk on the beach along the mansion side, she put this route on top, and set the sheets off to the side.

She again sat back down in front of the computer. When she touched the mouse the pipe screen saver turned off, the monitor made a noise, and she was again looking at the two web pages with the information about Robert Heart and Robert Waller.

She easily focused.

Julie was trying to figure out if Robert Heart disappeared during the same time as Robert Waller. Julie considered the possibility Mr. Bob had an identity crisis or a breakdown when “they” disappeared. Julie felt a breakdown made sense because he was trying to be two different people. Julie could easily see how he could end up with snakes in his head. She decided he avoided the snakes but was close. She felt he somehow reconciled his two personalities into one; this blended person was the interesting man she met earlier in the day.

Considering the person she met earlier in the day, she entertained the idea Mr. Bob faked his disappearance, and was simply testing everyone. Julie was certain Mr. Bob had the money and connections to pull this off. If indeed; Mr. Bob faked his own disappearance, Julie appreciated his cunning. Like Megan she spotted his cockiness. Unlike Megan, Julie felt if a person was as successful and exceptional as Mr. Bob, they had every right to be cocky. Mr. Bob being: cocky, not apologizing for who he was, and not feeling guilty for what he gained; impressed Julie. She admired how he: respected her intelligence, respected her as a person, liked how he talked to her as a professor, and enjoyed his sarcasm; Julie was sure this sarcasm irritated her Auntie.

She was being careful. She was aware a man of his age and stature could want sexual favors. She hoped Mr. Bob would never approach her in this way. She liked feeling there was a man like him who would never want sex from her.

Julie hoped her Auntie could get along with Mr. Bob so Megan's relationship with Ms. Ashleigh could continue to move forward; Julie truly felt Ashleigh and her Auntie would be good together. Julie especially liked the idea of her Auntie liking a short Yankee.

Julie was aware all her thoughts were speculation.

Julie heard her Momma step into the den.

Julie rolled her eyes and prepared herself for another lecture, instead, when her Momma stepped to her side, Julie heard; “I’m proud of you.”

This meant a great deal to Julie.

Julie turned and looked up at her Momma.

They stood up and hugged one another. Even though they sometimes struggled Julie relied on her more than Julie would ever admit.

When they gently pulled away Nicole asked, “What are Y’all studying?”

Julie smiled, “I feel Robert Heart and Mr. Waller are the same person.”

Nicole thought about this.

"Look Momma. If you compare their pictures they look alike."

Nicole bent down and looked at the two pictures. She stated, "They look different."

"He's purposely sitting in the dark."

Nicole pointed, "Heart has a beard."

"He could've been wearing a fake one."

Nicole gave Julie a look.

"It's easy to change a person's look by wearing a fake beard or by growing a real one."

"Y'all are reaching."

"Momma I ain't. Mr. Waller disappeared for a while. This was at the same time Robert Heart gave an interview."

"How do you explain Mr. Heart always wearing a beard?"

"Like I said before he was wearing a fake one. The earlier picture is with a fake beard and this one's a real one."

"I ain't sure."

"Obviously his pen name is Robert Heart."

"If he used Robert Waller he'd have sold more books."

Julie answered, "Maybe he didn't even care if anyone read his books and was surprised at how popular they became. To avoid anyone knowing he wears a disguise and acts the way he does."

"Ain't all of this a stretch."

"He'd have the money to pretend and to ignore the publishing people. Look."

Nicole asked nicely, "What am I looking at?"

"Are you seeing how *Renewed Mastery* is about to purchase a publishing company?"

"Daddy's been saying *Renewed Mastery* is buying up everything."

Julie knew this was a wrong idea. Julie was worried if she explained the accounting and the economic philosophy he was using, this would cause her Momma to look into her affairs.

She simply answered, "I'm sure he ain't buying everything."

"I heard he bought the business strip mall across the street from the company."

"Mr. Bob has a reason. Just like the reason he's buying his own publishing company."

"To make money."

"I'm believing he wants to publish any book he wants."

They stared at one another.

"We don't have the proof."

Julie answered her Momma, "There is a rumor Mr. Heart moved to Florida."

"It's just a rumor."

Nicole made a face and mentioned, "They're letting you into their home and Ashleigh's trusting you with her dawg. I'm feeling it'd be wrong to tell others what you suspect."

Julie thought about this.

"How'd you like it if we'd hired someone to clean the house. And this person started telling everyone our private going on's? Wouldn't you feel betrayed and hurt?"

"I wouldn't want to hurt Ms. Ashleigh or Mr. Waller."

"Right. It's wrong to be spilling Mr. Waller's beans."

Julie acknowledged this, "Okay."

"If it's true you can tell me." Nicole winked and smiled, "It'll be our secret until Ms. Ashleigh tells us."

Julie winked back and smiled.

Julie asked, "You've read his books?"

"Robert Heart books?"

Julie nodded her head.

Nicole made a face, "It's good reading."

"Why is Ma and others always complaining about em'?"

"He talks about a lot of subjects Christians are afraid of touching. To be honest what most people are afraid to talk about."

"Many at church are upset with him."

"They're upset with him because as a Christian he writes about sex."

"Hannah says he's just saying how things are."

Nicole shrugged her shoulders, "This is what's upsetting folks."

"You've read his books."

Nicole answered, "I'm seeing what he's trying to accomplish with his books. He ain't pulling any punches. I sometimes feel he's gone to far and other times I'm feeling he's bringing up things maybe as a church we should be talking about."

Julie commented, "We've talked about sex and we're Christians?"

"I'm your mother. I'm hoping Y'all decide to wait until your married. I don't want you to be scared or ignorant about the subject. I feel it's fool hearty to be ignorant you wouldn't have questions or thinking about sex. Sex is everywhere."

"With Ma being the way she is. Do you feel it's why Megan's a lesbian?"

"We ain't sure she is. If she is it's my belief she's making the choice to be one. I'm sure a person's environment has an influence. Maybe people are born with a disposition of being a homosexual. I still believe it's a person's choice. If someone chooses to be we shouldn't treat them badly as many in the church do. I feel God can heal anything."

"What happens if she believes she was born that way and likes being a lesbian?"

"What we ain't doing is rejecting her. We'll be the ladies God would want us to be."

Julie smiled and asked respectfully, "May I read one of the Robert Heart books you own?"

There was a pause.

"Your old enough. When you've finished lets discuss it."

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole put her arm around Julie's shoulder, "I'd suggest you go to bed. I ain't liking the idea of Y'all falling asleep in class."

Julie felt she could have slept through every one of her classes and aced them all, but Julie heard the layers, with a smile she answered; "I'll shut the computer down and get to bed."

"Okay."

They again hugged, easily pulled away, and Nicole stepped out of the den.

Julie went back to the computer: she selectively deleted her website history, she reset the parental controls, she made a mental note about buying her own ink to use on the printer, she grabbed the sheets off the printer, she turned off the lights, and stepped out of the den. She was about to place the routes on the refrigerator, but could see her momma was sitting on her Daddy's lap.

She felt they were ready to start fooling around, she cringed, and then smiled. It was

weird to think her parents acted sexual and at the same time it was cool. She was sure they made love and they would never cheat on one another. This brought her comfort. She turned and went upstairs.

Before Julie even reached the stairs Jimmy and Nicole were kissing heavily. They stopped locked up the house and went to their bedroom.

Ashleigh asked Megan, "That was a snook?"

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

It was obvious by her friends tone Ashleigh liked the meal. One of the ways Megan saved money was by keeping one in season fish. Megan never took more than what she needed. If it was a large catch she took the fish to her parents where they would fillet the fish, they would divide it up between the family, and they froze the left overs.

"Yes Ma'am."

"The sea food and the citrus is so much better here. I've never ate fresh ocean fish before."

Megan gently reminded Ashleigh, "I enjoy fishing. There ain't anything better than picking fruit off the tree."

Ashleigh smiled and took a sip of her sweet iced tea; flavored with a touch of lemon. She set the glass on a wooden fold out table that was placed between them. The two friends were on top of Megan's houseboat looking over the marina. With the light from the marina they were able to see the outlines of their facial expressions.

"I'm getting used to that. I was surprised when I saw orange trees in peoples yards. That reminds me. Where can I get a palm tree like the one you have on your porch."

"Porch?!?"

Ashleigh spoke with frustration in her voice, "The tree on the back of the boat. The end of your boat next to the pier."

"Are you meaning the stern?"

"That's it! Yes the palm tree on your stern."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I'm sorry. I'm having trouble with all these boat terms. My brother's tormenting me with them."

Ashleigh wished she would have chosen a different term for what her brother was trying to do.

Megan was sure her arrogant brother would enjoy belittling someone with boat terms.

"He isn't tormenting me."

Megan with a tone asked, "What's he doing?"

Ashleigh made a face, "He's been trying to teach me the terms. He keeps reminding me of what the names are. I'm learning some but I'm struggling with others."

"The terms are on the internet?"

"I made a print out."

With a determined tone Megan replied, "I'll teach you. In a week you'll be running circles around your brother. Y'all will learn em'."

They both took a sip of their lemon flavored iced tea.

Megan made a face, "Sorry. If I'm picking on your brother."

Ashleigh kindly answered, "He isn't always easy to get along with but he's my brother."
Megan understood.

Megan said, "It ain't easy being a sister."

"I agree."

"Even when I'm struggling with what they're doing I still love em.' Their family."

Ashleigh smiled, "That's true."

They again took sips of their iced tea.

Ashleigh changed the subject, "Until I moved here I never liked iced tea."

Megan in a joking manner stated, "It's sweet iced tea with a touch of lemon."

They both laughed at the sophisticated way Megan made the comment and took her drink.

"I didn't know you were so sophisticated."

Megan's dimples flashed.

In a serious tone Megan mentioned, "I was taught by Ma and Captain how to behave around rich sophisticated folks. Learning these manners has been helping me ever since."

Ashleigh sighed, "It's been a crash course for me."

Megan gave Ashleigh a concerned look.

Ashleigh answered the look, "My foster mom taught me table manners and things like that. I'm talking about those sophisticated manners business people and politicians use."

"My sister-in-law Nicole could teach Y'all everything you'd need to know."

"I liked her."

"She told me your brother offered her a job?"

Ashleigh crunched her forehead together, "We're looking for an in house nurse. In that strip mall we're putting in a clinic for our employees. I believe my brother wanted to make her the head nurse in the clinic."

"She's a good nurse and a good momma."

"It's probably the reasons he wanted to hire her. We assumed she could easily relate to the locals."

Ashleigh paused, "No offense."

"None taken."

"Bob figured with her working and living in Virginia she'd be able to deal with people from the north, south, and east."

Megan's dimples flashed, "There'd be some who'd be offended Y'all are figuring Virginia is east."

"It's east to me."

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

"If Y'all are having trouble understanding what we're up to. Or Y'all are not understanding why we're getting angry at you Yankees. No offense."

"Non taken."

They appreciated the others smiles.

"Just ask Jake and I."

"I'll do that."

They took a sip of their sweet iced tea.

They turned around when they heard Nikita growl; they witnessed her twitch.

Ashleigh mentioned, "She likes the mat you gave her."

"Are Y'all liking it?"

"Oh yes. You didn't have too. Did you want something for it?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

She responded, "Don't be offending me by giving me money."

Ashleigh gazed at Megan.

"I ain't being your friend because of the money you have."

"I know."

They understood one another.

"I like the bone print."

"I was feeling Y'all would like it. Before she laid on it she was sniffing it. I washed it before you came over."

"I don't think she minds."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan appreciated the fact this wealthy woman accepted her gift.

Ashleigh liked how Megan purchased something for Nikita. Ashleigh was well aware this meant Megan liked their visits.

Megan mentioned, "I'm sure she's dreaming about running with Julie."

"She'll enjoy it tomorrow."

"Julie will be on time."

Ashleigh asked with concern, "I'm sure Julie will be here bright and early."

"You ain't a morning person?"

"I'm getting better."

Megan could tell by Ashleigh's look this was more of a self encouragement than what was really happening.

Megan voiced something she was thinking about since they talked about the snook. "If I moved up north..."

Ashleigh interrupted, "You think you'll ever move?"

"No Ma'am."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"My families here. I love living next to the ocean. I can't imagine living away from the ocean."

In a tone of exasperation Ashleigh said, "It's so big."

"My Daddy is always reminding me of how big she is. He's always saying, ""She's to be respected just as much as she should be enjoyed.""

Ashleigh could tell Megan loved her father. Ashleigh still wished she knew who her real father was. She was now content with Bob and her Foster Dad Blake taking on this role.

"He taught you a lot?"

Megan could hear the envy and the hurt.

Megan answered carefully, "He was always teaching me things. He was all about being responsible and he was about treating people right. He taught me how to deal with rich folks. I'm grateful to have a good daddy. Just like everyone he ain't perfect."

They both took sips of their sweet iced tea.

Megan went back to discussing what she was thinking about, "I would miss catching and eating ocean fish. Is there something Y'all are missing?"

"Custard and Sprecher root beer." Ashleigh became animated, "I'll bring you some

tomorrow. My brother special ordered Sprecher.”

“It must taste good.”

Ashleigh with excitement answered, “It's the best. As long as I could remember my brother and I have been eating root beer floats. Just eating custard plain is good too.”

“What's custard?”

Ashleigh smiled at the funny way her friend said custard.

“It's like ice cream but creamier.”

“It ain't sounding healthy.”

“It isn't. But it sure tastes good.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

She responded to Ashleigh's excitement, “Like Florence's apple pie. Her apple pie sure tastes good but I'm sure it ain't healthy.”

Looking at one another they nodded in agreement.

Megan's dimples flashed.

They both took a drink of their sweet iced tea.

Ashleigh became serious, “What I miss the most is my foster parents and Felicia.”

“I'm assuming they were good to Y'all.”

Ashleigh smiled, “Without them and my brother I don't know where I'd be.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

She asked, “I'm assuming Felicia is a sister.”

“She's my younger sister and Patty is my older sister. Patty is a missionary in India. That's going to end soon because her husband. He's a good guy. Isaac is going to be the head pastor at a church in Canada. They feel their missionary work is done.”

“How long has she been a missionary?”

“Since the late eighties early nineties.”

“She's a lot older?”

Ashleigh made a face, “My brother was once engaged to her. That's how I met my foster parents. I so wanted Bob and Patty to get married.”

“Were they promising to raise you?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“Patty wanted Bob to be a missionary and Bob wanted her to stay.”

Megan could understand where this would lead to a breakup; Megan assumed Bob handled the situation poorly.

“It worked out for the best. I didn't feel that way at the time. I see how I was better off living with my foster parents. I'm sure it'd been tougher on Patty if I'd lived with them.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

Ashleigh continued, “I believe I needed older parents who cared and yet were wise. Both of them love me.”

“If you don't mind me asking?”

“It's okay.”

“Why didn't they adopt you?”

“My real mother was always fighting the adoption. She even fought me living with them. What's important is I never had to live with my real mom again. Without my brother fighting for me I don't know if I'd ended up with the Andersons'.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

This impressed Megan.

She was curious though, "Why was there fighting?"

"My foster parents were older. From what I was told the county was concerned they'd have trouble raising me."

"How old are they?"

"About the same age as your parents."

"What changed their minds?"

"My mom ended up pregnant with Felicia and my brother proved my real mom was drinking again."

Megan wondered if Felicia was a healthy girl or was a special needs child. She was unsure of how to ask.

Ashleigh saw Megan's look and answered the look, "Mom says Felicia was her miracle baby. She's a healthy teenager. Julie reminds me of her."

"They must be around the same age?"

"Yup."

Ashleigh took another drink of her sweet iced tea.

"Are they struggling?"

"I was worse."

"Y'all are good gal."

"I wasn't always good. I was sneaking out of the house to meet up with a boy named Clyde. Soon after I ended up in treatment for alcoholism."

Megan caught the disgust in Ashleigh's body language when she mentioned the name Clyde.

Megan in a serious tone asked, "Knowing what you know now would Y'all live your life the same?"

"No way!"

"See. You've answered your own question. I ain't seen you drinking. You were telling me you want to wait. This means Y'all are a good girl."

This meant a lot to Ashleigh.

"I was asking about your sister because Nicole says she's struggling with Julie."

Ashleigh mentioned, "From what I saw I thought Julie and her were close."

"This is true. Nicole is feeling something is wrong with Julie."

Ashleigh gave Megan a look.

"She's a high achiever. So Y'all can't be comparing her with others her age. She's very smart. She skipped fourth grade. That girl could've skipped more grades."

"Why didn't she?"

"Nicole was for it. Julie pleaded with Nicole to stop her from skipping grades. I'm assuming Julie received some teasing for skipping a grade. She doesn't like receiving attention for how smart she is."

Ashleigh commented, "With Nicole willing to listen to Julie shows how good of a mother she is. I'm sure Julie's okay."

"Both Ester and Jeff are doing well. Jeff's a starter on the football team. They're playing a playoff game tomorrow."

"The high school team is going to the playoffs?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

She turned toward Ashleigh and stated, "I ain't saying you have to like football. I'm of the opinion everybody can like what they like. If you want to get along with folks around here start paying attention to what happens with the high school teams. Especially football."

"But I don't know anything about sports."

Megan stated with a big dimple smile, "It's why you have a local friend."

Ashleigh winked, "I appreciate you driving me around yesterday."

"I'm looking forward to Y'all driving me around in the Jeep of yours."

Megan felt the need to bring the conversation around, "Nicole is a great mother they're close."

"You were mentioning this."

"If Nicole's feeling something is wrong she's probably right."

Ashleigh asked, "What are you feeling?"

"Neither of us have been witnessing any drugs or drinking. I ain't liking the friends she's hanging around with."

Ashleigh nodded her head.

Megan focused on the ocean, "Julie's one for doing her own thing. She's a strong gal. I'm feeling she's trying to be friends with everyone."

"Huh huh."

"She's always getting good grades. I'm sure she's upset with her volleyball team."

"They're not playing well?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

She shook her head and again looked over at Ashleigh, "I'm sure they'd be doing better if I was coaching them. They're really struggling."

"You shouldn't feel guilty for how their playing."

Megan knew her friend was right, but the teams performance bothered Megan.

"Loosing ain't easy on Julie."

"My Dad says loosing can teach us to be better people. Even though loosing is difficult."

Megan answered with passion. "I'm agreeing. We should take setbacks and make them into positives. What's worrying me is Julie would find loosing stressful. She ain't used to loosing'."

Ashleigh could tell by Megan's body language and tone she was concerned about her niece.

Ashleigh promised, "I'll watch her and if I see anything suspicious I'll tell you."

Megan answered seriously, "It'd be appreciated."

"From what I've seen so far I feel it's just they're going through the normal mother daughter teenager stuff."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I'm hoping Y'all are right."

This is when an awake Nikita: got up from the mat, sat in front of Ashleigh, and looked at her.

Ashleigh told Megan, "I think she's got to go outside."

Immediately Nikita's tail became a weapon.

Megan stood up, "I'm needing to get up early."

Ashleigh stood up and asked again, "Julie will be here on time won't she?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh asked, "Would you come with me?"

"Where?"

"I'd appreciate it if you went with me to take Nikita out."

"Sure."

Already Megan was carrying: the two chairs, the small wooden table, and the pitcher.

Ashleigh was holding onto Nikita's mat and the two glasses.

Ashleigh commanded, "Nikita pick up your rope."

Even though Nikita had to go outside, she was more than happy to pick up her rope; she hoped they would play.

Ashleigh suggested, "I'll take the pitcher?"

"How about if I take the rug?"

"Okay,"

They traded making sure none of the sweet iced tea spilled.

"You'll have to show me how you make the iced tea."

They started down the ladder to the first deck.

"I make it the way Nicole does it."

Megan paused.

Her dimples flashed.

"I ain't sure she's taught me exactly how she makes it. I like putting in more fresh lemons than Nicole does."

Ashleigh added, "They do add flavor."

They: were on the first deck, Ashleigh followed Megan through the bow of the boat to Megan's cabin door, Megan opened the door; this was the first time Megan lead Ashleigh through her cabin. Ashleigh felt Megan's cabin was as interesting as her friend. Ashleigh recognized the ship painting. She saw one exactly like it at the place where her brother bought the yacht, she made the educated assumption Megan liked football just as much as her brother, and she felt Megan was very organized.

"I like eating fresh food."

"Huh huh."

Ashleigh then said, "I like your cabin."

"Sorry it's a mess."

Ashleigh made a face of disbelief, to Ashleigh the cabin was immaculate.

What Megan felt constituted a mess was: the dust, a laundry basket full of clothes, a pile of neatly folded clothes which needed to be put away, a pair of shoes next to the bed, and she felt the room needed to be vacuumed. Megan was grateful: she placed what she considered her special clothes in the trunk and was especially relieved her body pillow was in the closet.

They stopped just passed Megan's cabin and Ashleigh set down the tea on the dryer; making sure nothing spilled. She helped Megan put the table, chair, and the rug away. Based upon the last few days they would again be on the top deck talking; this was why Megan placed these items where she did. Megan was still surprised on how willing Ashleigh was ready to help.

Nikita ran passed them to the door at the stern of the houseboat. She was being obedient and waited. She liked the territory named, "Megan's Houseboat."

it.”

Ashleigh mentioned, “She's sending me the receipt.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

“Still watch on how she's making the Iced Tea.”

Ashleigh winked.

They smiled.

Megan gently took the pitcher and the two glasses from Ashleigh.

Megan decided it'd be alright to say, “I'm sure Nicole will invite Y'all shopping with us.”

“When?”

“A family tradition is to have all the ladies in the family go Christmas shopping.”

Ashleigh could tell by the tone Megan used, this was a reluctant activity on Megan's part; Ashleigh remembered their conversation from a few days ago.

They stepped into the galley.

Megan placed the pitcher on the counter and Ashleigh stood next to Megan.

Megan rinsed out the cups, “If she asks I'd like Y'all to come with me.”

Ashleigh trying to be encouraging, “It'd be fun.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

She washed out the cups.

“I'm hoping shopping will be better if Y'all are along.”

Megan opened the dishwasher door.

“I love my sister-in-law's. I do. If it wasn't for them I'd only shop through catalogs and at thrift stores. I hate the mall.”

“Why go?”

Megan placed the cups into the dishwasher and answered.

“It's tradition and it's family.”

Ashleigh assumed this.

Nikita howled.

Ashleigh yelled, “We'll be right there.”

Megan quickly shut the dishwasher and wiped her hands.

“Y'all ain't needing a jacket?”

Ashleigh smiled, “I'm okay.”

“Before the lights turn off let me get a flashlight.”

“I've been taking one outside.”

Megan answered serious, “Good idea.”

Megan opened a drawer and pulled out a long heavy duty flashlight.

Ashleigh felt the flashlight was more like a small bat than a flashlight.

“Lets get a move on.”

Ashleigh smiled. Ashleigh imagined Megan leading her on a mission. Ashleigh assumed Megan led many of her childhood friends on adventures.

They headed out of the galley and just before they reached Nikita, who was wagging her tail and started to whimper, Megan went over to one of the end tables and turned on a light.

Ashleigh pet Nikita and told her, “Your a good girl. We're going.”

Ashleigh let Megan open the door, Nikita stepped out of the houseboat, behind Nikita was Ashleigh, and Megan shut the door behind them. The lights from the marina were bright

enough for the two ladies to step off of the houseboat, they stepped onto the first pier, the three of them turned left, and headed to where Ashleigh took Nikita to do her business.

This is when Megan addressed a concern, "From what I was hearing only Nicole and Diana are going."

"Oh."

"I've been wondering why the others are not coming."

"Who all goes?"

"Ma, Julie, and Sam. Last year a few friends went along."

"Why aren't the others coming?"

"I ain't sure why."

Gina glanced out the window and was jealous Ashleigh was along side of Megan. Gina heard the rumor Ashleigh and Megan met on line and Ashleigh was the one who convinced her Brother to move to Florida. Gina suspected most of this tale was rumor. Gina felt Ashleigh was a straight as an arrow. Gina felt sorry for Megan. Gina believed Megan was a closet lesbian, who was questioning her sexuality, but was now falling for a straight girl. Gina was getting tired of serial dating and wanted a consistent partner; she wanted this partner to be Megan. She watched them go out of range of the houseboat. Out of frustration Gina closed the curtains.

Megan continued, "I was feeling Ma changed her mind. It ain't like Ma to change her mind."

"Is something going on?"

"I'm feeling something has been bothering her but she's keeping it close to her heart. I wish she'd tell me what's eating at her."

"Maybe she has her reasons."

"I'm wishing she'd just tell me."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"But we've struggled for a long time."

When they reached the end of the concrete pier Nikita immediately went to her left. She sniffed in the air. She sensed many different animals in the air. On this night she felt safe, there was nights she smelled an animal she disliked a great deal, it was always behind the fence, and was on the edge of the bushes. She felt this legend was a threat to Best Friend. Nikita's ancestors worked with the people to protect them from these legends. She began searching for a spot to mark her territory.

"It's sometimes creepy here."

Megan turned on her flashlight.

"Always take a flashlight with Y'all. At night never go beyond the fence. Y'all might want to keep her on the leash."

"I just don't like her being on a leash. She's a good dog."

Nikita could sense they were making noises about her. She again went back to looking for a spot.

"She's a good dawg but what happens if she runs after something. Of what happens if something would lure her into the preserve. It ain't likely where we're at, but if she goes running' into the preserve something' could happen. I've heard of pets disappearing around these parts."

Ashleigh would consider bringing a leash.

Megan stated out of the blue, "I'm feeling they've got something cooking."

"Maybe I shouldn't go."

Megan turned to her friend, "I'm hoping Y'all would go. Shopping with them is always challenging. If something is cooking it'll be better if Y'all are around."

"What do you feel is going on?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I ain't sure yet."

There was a pause as they watched Nikita mark a bush, Ashleigh was grateful she only peed, Nikita's popper-cooper and plastic bags were in the yacht.

Megan reached inside of herself and decided to be brave, "I'm afraid they want to ask me if I'm a lesbian."

Ashleigh could tell this hurt her friends feelings.

"I'm starting to understand why someone would think I'm gay."

She held in her tears.

"I ain't having anything against gay people. It's hurtful thinking my own family is feeling I'm a lesbian."

Ashleigh suggested, "I'm sure they think your straight. If not just start talking about guys."

Megan blushed.

"I ain't talking about those things with them."

Ashleigh mentioned, "I'm sure Nicole would understand."

Nikita smelled and heard something crawling in a bush she looked over.

"Come."

Nikita turned.

Ashleigh waved Nikita toward her, "Come we're going back to the yacht."

Nikita was thirsty and hungry she liked the territory called "yacht."

The three of them casually headed back to the yacht.

Megan's dimples flashed and she mentioned, "I hate admitting this but I do love how the yacht looks at night."

Ashleigh smiled, "I never thought I'd ever live in one."

They stared at it: lights were on in the inside, the normal outside lights were on, Bob had someone install spotlights on some of the Packer symbols, and recently a new light was installed to better highlight the military tribute on the stern of the yacht.

"I sometimes feel it'd be easier if I was a lesbian."

Ashleigh answered honestly, "I hope you don't really feel that way."

Megan was a little annoyed with this comment, "It hasn't been easy for me. People kept telling me I was gay and then I ended up finding out I wasn't. What's worse is my family is believing I am."

Ashleigh could feel how this was hurtful, "Why not talk them?"

"I can't talk to them."

"Why?"

Megan stopped and turned toward Ashleigh.

Ashleigh stared back.

Nikita could sense the two were getting angry.

"We ain't allowed to talk about sex. I was taught Christian ladies ain't suppose to talk

about sex.”

“Well that's bullshit.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

“We ain't suppose to be swearing.”

“Who's decided what's a swear?”

Ashleigh heard her brother say this. Ashleigh was unsure if this was actually a good saying of her brothers.

This caught Megan off guard, “It ain't about who's decided what's a swear. Swearing. It ain't polite.”

“I'm trying not to.”

There was a brief silence.

Ashleigh broke the silence, “It's dumb.”

“Whats dumb?”

Ashleigh answered, “It's dumb to think a woman can't talk about sex.”

“Did your mom talk to you about sex?”

“If she hadn't I'd ended up pregnant believing I was a slut. After I had sex with Clyde he started spreading it around school. Everyone thought I was easy.”

Tears started to come down Ashleigh's cheeks.

“I was called every name in the book for sleeping with only one guy. But if you'd listen to everyone in school they thought I slept with the whole football team.”

Tears.

Megan's dimples flashed.

“If it hadn't been for Victoria telling me many girls make the mistake of sleeping with their first love and regretting it. Without her telling me I wasn't what the kids were saying I was. She kept reminding me I could act like they were saying or face them and do the right thing. I'd ended up acting the way everyone said I was.”

Megan answered, “I never believed I'd need to be facing my family. I can't talk to Ma. I can't talk to her about anything. Oh we talk about stuff but it ain't important things.”

Ashleigh wiped away her tears and Ashleigh noticed Megan was holding some back herself.

“All I've wanted is to talk to Momma about sex. I've only just started learning about sex. It's embarrassing and it's frightening. I'm just wishing they'd understand I'm waiting until I'm married. Guys ain't liking me. It's kind of frustrating gals like me. If I'd been a lesbian I'd had many girlfriends”

Megan blushed.

Ashleigh spotted the hurt and embarrassment.

Ashleigh wondered how much effort it was taking Megan to hold in her tears.

“When I'm saying It'd be easier if I was gay it's what I'm feeling. I'm a straight gal. It ain't in me to be sleeping with a gal. I like cocks....”

Megan trailed off.

Ashleigh gave Megan a look.

Megan blushed.

“You like cocks and what else?”

“I can't be saying.”

“You can tell me.”

"I like looking at cocks and I'm..."

Megan blushed.

Ashleigh waited.

Megan found the courage to say, "I ain't about to be touching a woman. I ain't wanting a woman touching me in a way a lesbian would. I'm a straight gal."

"Okay."

They stared at one another.

They smiled.

"Y'all have a wise foster Momma. She's right Y'all are a good girl. I understand how rumors can be hurtful."

"If you can't talk to your Mom I'm sure Nicole would listen."

"It's just awkward talking to her about sex. I have a friend from college who said I could talk to her. I've been feeling I should call her. It ain't easy calling her and talking about these things on the phone."

"There might be a time when you'll just have to tell them you're straight."

Megan wondered and asked Ashleigh, "Why haven't they asked?"

"Maybe they're waiting for you to tell them. You never know. Maybe they think we're a couple and that's why they invited me along."

Megan shook her head, "I just met Y'all. Even if I'd be into gals I wouldn't be dating Y'all yet."

Ashleigh made a face, "What am I chopped liver?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

She gave Ashleigh a strange look, Megan made an assumption on what this expression meant, and answered; "If I'd be gay I'd most likely be attracted to you. It's just..."

Ashleigh teased, "What?"

"I ain't in love with Y'all. Not in that way..."

Megan trailed off.

Ashleigh smiled, "I understand. I just thought you were saying I was ugly."

Megan was irritated with this, "Why are Y'all believing your ugly?"

"Look at me? I'm short. Look at my stubby legs? See my hips? Why would anyone find me attractive? They tell me I'm cute to make me feel better."

"I ain't lying to Y'all."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"People are always telling me I'm attractive to make me feel better."

Ashleigh used this as an opportunity, "My brother is attracted to you."

Megan was unsure of what she should feel about this honesty.

Ashleigh knew enough to let her just think about this statement.

"When are we going to go shopping?"

"I was thinking I should cancel."

"You told me Nicole never lets you cancel."

"I ain't good at fibbing."

They started to casually walk to the yacht.

"I feel you should go."

Megan asked, "Why?"

"Maybe your wrong and it's just like every other time."

Megan made a point, "It ain't mattering on what is going on they'd want to go shopping."

"My sister Felicia is that way too."

"Is your momma?"

"It depends on her mood."

Megan understood this.

"If they are thinking your gay maybe it'd be a good time to tell them how you wish sex was a more open topic. Tell them how you've been struggling."

"Would Y'all mind being there?"

"I'm your friend."

This meant a lot to Megan.

"I ain't ever talked to them about sex."

Megan blushed again.

"If you want it changed you might have to be the one to bring it up."

"I'm feeling it's like stepping onto the court during a championship."

Ashleigh smiled, "I'm sure it's the same."

They reached the pier of the yacht.

Ashleigh encouraged Megan by saying, "I never thought you were gay. You're just a jock girl."

"How come they don't feel like you?"

Ashleigh stopped for a brief moment. She chose her words carefully, "It's like when everyone was saying you were gay and it made you question your sexuality."

"Yes."

"Well maybe it's what's happening with your family."

This made a lot of sense to Megan.

Megan decided to say what was in her heart, "I'm starting to understand why your brother is wanting you to be his vice president."

"So I mess up his company."

Megan could see the worry and hear the lack of confidence.

Megan became very stern, "You need to be thinking more positive. Maybe God's using Y'all in ways you've never dreamed off. I'm seeing why. I ain't always liking your brother but I'm feeling the smartest thing he's doing is making you his vice president."

"If I make a mistake what's going to happen to everybody? Huh? I could ruin his company. Then what?"

Megan answered with a stern tone, "Y'all need to stop saying and thinking those things."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I'm feeling your brother is needing you more than he'll ever admit."

"He should tell me."

"He ain't telling anybody he's needing anything even if he's needing the whole world to help him. The arrogant ass."

Ashleigh winked, "I thought ladies shouldn't swear."

"I apologize for swearing."

Ashleigh laughed grabbed Megan on the arm turned back to the yacht and whispered, "I get so frustrated with him I want to ring his neck. But he's a good guy."

"He's your brother."

Ashleigh nodded her head.

"When we go shopping have Nicole teach you those etiquette things. Diana and Nicole will love dressing Y'all up."

"I'd love to find a couple women's suits."

Megan answered, "You have those ladies dress you so the rest of the world sees why your brother picked you."

"Arrogant ass."

"You said it."

"I know."

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

"I have to get going."

Ashleigh smiled, "See you later alligator."

"After while crocodile."

Ashleigh stopped and turned around, "Is it alright if I'd ask you something?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh asked very seriously, "You will stay my friend even if we sometimes don't get along?"

Megan answered, "My Daddy often talks about his buddies in the military."

"My Dad talked about his buddies once."

Megan produced her big dimple smile, in a serious tone stated, "I've heard stories where they ain't always getting' along but they were there for one another."

Ashleigh understood, "I have a lot of friends but it's good to have that one best friend."

Megan's big dimple smile glowed.

Megan bent down and pet Nikita, when Megan felt this was enough attention Megan answered, "After while crocodile."

With this Ashleigh nodded her head.

She commanded Nikita, "Nikita come."

Nikita followed after Ashleigh.

*M*egan watched: Ashleigh and Nikita step onto the wooden pier, step onto the yacht, go up the ladder, open the yacht door on the second deck, Nikita stepping into the yacht, Ashleigh following behind, and Ashleigh closed the door.

Megan turned off her flashlight and turned toward her houseboat. Megan thought about Ashleigh's analysis of why her family would consider her a lesbian. If her family members kept hearing she was gay, and she was unwilling to ever talk about how these rumors hurt her, and how they were untrue; what was her family to think? She considered the possibility Nicole would understand.

Megan considered many family scenario's. She decided the best time to bring up this subject was just around the women of the family. She was unsure of when she should bring this up. Megan hoped her family thought she was straight, but as she considered the behavior of her family she was sure they thought she was a lesbian.

This hurt her.

She stepped down onto her pier and onto the stern of her houseboat.

She felt she had a lot to consider.

Megan: stepped into her houseboat, locked the door to her houseboat, focused on what she needed to do, turned off the lights of her houseboat, headed into her cabin, turned on the light to her cabin, opened the door to her walk in closet, hung her jacket, turned and shut all of the blinds to her room, made sure the door to the bow of the boat was locked, and stepped to her closet.

She glanced up at her body pillow. She felt a lot of guilt toward this pillow. She decided when the time was right she would ask Ashleigh if masturbating with a pillow was “normal.”

She blushed.

Her dimples flashed.

She looked at her digital alarm clock and knew she needed to get to bed. She stepped out of her cabin, grabbed a towel, and wash cloth. She took a quick shower. When the shower was over she stepped into her cabin, made sure all of the blinds were closed tight, dropped the towel, and slipped into bed.

Laying in bed she went over all of the things she needed to accomplish to have successful charters. She imagined how Christmas shopping would go. Megan was grateful her best friend would be going with her. Before she fell asleep she promised herself she would try to have more patience with Ashleigh's Brother.

Megan fell asleep thinking about her own brothers.

*A*shleigh shut the door behind her.

Nikita eagerly ran into the galley.

Based upon Nikita's reaction Ashleigh suspected her brother was sitting at the kitchen table. She felt tired and wanted to go to bed. It was obvious to Ashleigh her brother was allowing her to have her own life and their was very little interference. In fact, she was going out of her way to include him into her life.

Looking forward into what they called the Dance Hall. She noticed he put up a variety of framed prints; she would look at them tomorrow. She tossed off her shoes and picked them up.

She heard Nikita drinking from her bowl.

Her intention was to call Nikita and go to bed.

She turned to her right and stepped through the opening. When she made it passed the bookshelf on her right and the wall on her left was in between the galley and the lounge; the lounge was on the stern side and the galley was on the bow side. She stepped into the galley; she tossed her shoes in front of the China cabinet. She noticed her brother was reading an old hardcover book. She looked at the title and it was a collection of poems by Walt Whitman. He took a sip from his bottle of Sprecher root beer and set it back down on the table.

This made her want one, but the way Megan ate and exercised, was making Ashleigh reevaluate her eating habits and the amount of exercise she was getting. Being honest with herself she was in Wisconsin shape; this was different from Florida shape and from Minneapolis Minnesota shape. She was far from overweight but she knew she could loose a few and would concentrate on her rear end. She decided to ignore the Sprecher root beer.

She stepped into the galley, “What are you reading?”

“The works of Walt Whitman.”

She made a face and was about to speak but Bob spoke first, "I'm certain the young lady you've hired has already finished a collection of his poetry."

"You just talked about him today."

"She's a speed reader and a genius."

She gave him a look.

He set the book down and looked up at his sister, "I'm just preparing myself for a rewarding conversation with a young lady."

"What happens if she develops a crush on you?"

He snickered, "I'm sure she could have the pick of anyone of her own age. I'm certain she looks at me as a professor nothing more. I'd accept this type of crush but I'd never take advantage of the situation. It'd be highly improper and morally wrong to have a sexual relationship with Julie. Yet, I could see why she would have a crush on a gentleman such as myself."

Ashleigh was less than enthused about this statement. She believed her brother would never try anything sexual with a minor. Ashleigh made the decision to always be around the two, to protect both of them from any rumor; she kept this decision to herself.

"I believe you."

Bob smiled, "I thought you did an excellent job today."

The emotion of her promotion surfaced but the things Megan said stopped Ashleigh from arguing with her brother.

"Thank-you."

Ashleigh looked at her brother and wanted to express her sibling love to him; but it seemed to be the wrong time.

Instead Ashleigh asked, "In a few weeks Megan wants me to go Christmas shopping with her I'd like to take the day off."

He picked up the book and started reading it again, "The comp time you've accumulated should be used."

Ashleigh watched him turn a page.

"Unless you need me."

"We'll manage."

This somewhat irritated Ashleigh.

Bob mentioned, "Concerning time off I'm of the assumption you'd be going home for Christmas."

Ashleigh annoyed answered, "With everything going on? No way. This Christmas I'm staying right here."

"It could be arranged."

"I have to much to do. If I go home I'll just worry about what is happening here."

He looked up at her, "Take the week off."

"If I'm a VP. As you've made me. This year you've asked all the executives and certain key personal not to take off during our usual break because of the move. I'm included. It's going to be difficult enough to get everyone's respect. If I'm under different rules how am I going to get their respect?"

"At most there will only be ten of us."

Ashleigh stated with a stubbornness tone, "No. It wouldn't be right."

Bob turned back to the book, "Then I'm expecting you to take an extra week off during

Easter. Schedule a charter go up there or bring them here. Have Madison make the arrangements.”

Ashleigh accepted this, “Okay.”

Bob completely focused on his sister and set the book face down, “Concerning Christmas are you interested in renewing our traditions when you stayed over as a child?”

Ashleigh smiled and a tear dropped.

“I'd love too.”

Bob smiled.

This caused more tears to drop.

“I'll have to find myself a Christmas tree.”

“Let's put it into the Dance Hall.”

“A wonderful idea. Concerning the way we decorate this fine tree. If we uphold our traditions we'll need to decorate it together and I'm expecting an ornament.”

“I'll be expecting one myself.”

She cautioned him, “I don't want you to spoil me.”

Bob smiled, “I'm not expecting you to spend a lot of money on me.”

Her body language showed her emotion, “It isn't about spending. You've done a lot for me and I don't want you to spoil me.”

“How about if we keep our gift giving to three gifts.”

Ashleigh demanded, “You can't buy me a big ticket item.”

Bob crunched his forehead, “If you wish.”

Ashleigh answered this, “Let's figure out a total price. I don't want to feel like I'm competing with you.”

“Unless we're enjoying a healthy game of competition I'd never expect you to compete with me.”

Knowing her brother, and based upon his tone, she took this as a heart warming comment.

Bob filled in the silence, “Good I'll expect us to open three gifts on Christmas.”

She added, “They will be able to fit underneath the tree. Agreed? And we'll discuss a max price.”

With intensity she said, “Agreed?”

Bob answered, “Agreed.”

She was suspicious of his tone.

She wondered, “Any other plans for Christmas?”

“Our usual.”

Bob mentioned, “I have heard rumors of a community center. Have you've gained any details about it's value to the community?”

“Megan's mom volunteers there. It seems the churches and charities must work together. Nicole volunteers there as well.”

“If you hear any more let me know.”

“Okay.”

Ashleigh thought of something, “Ms. Wagner...”

Bob interrupted, “I'm unfamiliar with her.”

“She lives on the small houseboat on the third pier. Megan mentioned she's behind in rent and her Ma was notified they might turn off the electricity.”

Bob made a face.

Ashleigh answered his look, "She's fighting workman's compensation."

Bob asked, "Is it a real claim?"

"Her job was piece work. Even with corporal tunnel she was going to work. But she hurt her foot. She's been out of work for six weeks."

Ashleigh noticed the look of recognition of her brother's face.

"Is she the older woman with the noticeable limp?"

"Yes. She told me metal parts fell out of a box and landed on her foot."

"Why wasn't she wearing steel toed shoes?"

"They weren't mandatory and she couldn't afford them."

Bob made a face.

"See if she's applied with our company. Have Gracie research how good of an employee she was. If she is an excellent employee give her an opportunity in one of our better departments, if not place her in a position of little responsibility. No matter if she's a good employee lets have a chat with Mary Steward and make a call to the electric company. If we make a call to the electric company they'll show some understanding to an acquaintance."

Ashleigh understood what this meant.

"Okay."

This is when Bob picked up his book, "I'm glad you have your vehicle back. It will be in tip top shape soon."

"I already emailed those pictures to Ms. Fox."

"I'm sure you did."

Ashleigh recognized he was now focused on the book.

Before she stepped away he looked up from his book, "It took a long time but I'm glad your living with me."

This touched her heart.

She managed to stop herself from tearing.

She smiled and answered, "You better get that tree up."

He smiled, "I will."

Ashleigh was sure Bob would start decorating for Christmas. She remembered the times when she was little helping him decorate his house. This reminded her of the previous year helping Patty decorate the Anderson house for her Foster Mom Victoria; Ashleigh held in a tear.

"Come Nikita."

Nikita stood up from her spot and followed Ashleigh.

"We're going to bed."

Nikita understood the word bed. She ran passed Ashleigh and was quickly in front of Ashleigh's cabin door.

As Ashleigh made her way to this door she was thinking about what Megan said, and this gave her the confidence to accept the tasks her brother had for her. She opened the door and Nikita stepped in.

Nikita watched Best Friend step in and shut the door behind her.

Ashleigh: walked into her walk in closet, stripped out of her dirty clothes, set them into her hamper, opened a drawer, selected a clean pair of panties, quickly stepped into the main part of the cabin, grabbed her shirt and shorts she wore when she slept, grabbed a towel and

washcloth, and stepped into the head. She took a shower instead of a bath. Once she was done with the shower: she dried her hair, put on her sleep clothes, placed the towel into the hamper, prayed, and crawled into bed.

Even before Ashleigh turned off the light Nikita was laying on her mat.

“Good night Nikita.”

With these sounds, Nikita expected the territory to become night in an instant; it did.

Ashleigh's eyes were heavy as she gazed upon her dog's bright blue eyes. Ashleigh wondered how long her dog stayed up and guarded her. This was the last thought Ashleigh had before she fell asleep.

End of Part Six of Six

November 30th, Ashleigh's Jeep

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