

Ashleigh & Megan

Book I: Friendship



Saturday February 17th

The Fence

Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Part One of Five

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*Posted on ashleighandmegan.com on:
March 1, 2022*

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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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February 17, The Fence

Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Nicole woke up to the sound of Jeff and Jimmy in the back yard. She was grateful they were waiting to turn on the saw. She reached over and turned off her alarm before it would beep.

Friends and family were coming over to help finish the fence. Once complete it would surround all of the back yard and the side of the house; only the front yard would be without the fence. The goal was to finish the fence today, if not, it would be finished by the end of tomorrow.

They considered postponing the project because of the morning temperature being in the low forties. What they were counting on was the projected high temperature being in the mid sixties. The goal was to get most of the fence done before the temperature was to drop to the mid fifties after dusk. Jimmy was prepared to set up generators and lights to work after dusk. She was certain the current temperature was just about fifty. She reasoned anyone from the Midwest would find this to be a comfortable temperature.

She was delighted they decided to continue with this project. The main reason was a series of metal poles sticking out of the concrete footer; she felt they looked awful. She also wanted her backyard back to normal. Currently it was filled with: generators, mobile lights, stacks of wood, building materials, and a couple canopies. The canopies were needed the previous weekend and during the week. She worried about her garden. She was happy Jeff and Jimmy roped it off. Even with roping it off she noticed: footprints, a patch of herbs were flattened, and a section of flowers were chopped in half; she promised herself she would never ask how this happened.

She liked the color of the wood.

The best part of the project was Ester and Danielle going out on their own to help Jeff and Jimmy. She knew Ester loved both, and she knew her Son and her Husband loved her a great deal; but they very seldom did anything together. She was delighted when Ester and Danielle followed Jeff and Jimmy's lead and slipped on protective eye wear and ear protection. What touched her heart was how both men, even though they were pressed for time; showed them how to use the tools and work with wood. Nicole was surprised these girls went out every time Jeff and Jimmy went out to work on the fence.

This would change today. It was Nicole's plan to have Danielle and Ester helping her inside of the house. Plus, this was Nicole's way of keeping both girls safe during the main construction of the fence. It was one thing to have these two girls working with Jeff and Jimmy, it was a different matter to have these girls working out in the back yard during the main construction of the fence.

Nicole knew Julie wanted to work outside; Nicole would let her if there was enough help inside of the house.

This caused her to contemplate all of the people who were coming over to help.

She was impressed Bette volunteered herself and her family to help. Nicole was surprised her oldest son was in love with a girl like Bette. Nicole believed Bette took in everything around her. What made Nicole feel this way was Bette's quiet nature; but when spoken to was very articulate. Nicole felt it was a good sign Bette and Julie were becoming friends. Nicole believed if a girl was a lousy choice for her brother Julie would dislike her. Bette's patience with Jeff's friends impressed Nicole. Nicole believed when Jeff and his friends were together they were a handful. Nicole liked the feeling Bette helped convince Bobbie-Sue to date Billy.

Nicole was delighted Billy found himself a girl who would watch out for him. Nicole worried he would end up with a girl who would belittle him or he would end up desperately lonely.

She felt this project was a wonderful way of meeting Bette's family. This included: her Mom, Father, Younger Sister, and Younger Brother. Bette told Nicole her older brother was attending the University of Wisconsin Madison. Nicole was aware Bette and her sister were attending the youth group Jeff and Julie went to. The church Bette's family went to was too small to have a youth group. A few years prior; Nicole met the married couple who started this church and often worked with this couple at the community center. She believed the good reputation of this church started with this couple. Ashleigh had high praise for Bette's mother and told her she worked in the art department since *Renewed Mastery* was opened. Nicole was disappointed her Son was unable to confirm this information; Jimmy had too. Bette's Father was a certified electrician with a background in construction. Ashleigh confirmed what Bette told Nicole, *Renewed Mastery* offered him a position, but Bette's parents had a mutual understanding they would never work together; Nicole respected this a great deal.

Sal, his Daddy Lester, Sal's neighbor, and Sal's Friend promised they would help. She heard Mr. Copper, who was a mutual friend of Lester and Jimmy promised to volunteer. She was looking forward to her pastors arriving and a few couples from church volunteering. She cringed at her brother-in-law Timmy showing up. This Brother-in-law frustrated her on many levels; more important she never really trusted him. She could never pinpoint why she felt this way but she kept a close eye on him. His wife Sam was unable to show up because of a crisis at one of her woman's shelters.

She was looking forward to Diana, Duke, and Dustin showing up. (Dustin was the youngest of three. This was both Diana and Duke's boy. The two older brothers were from Diana's first marriage.) She felt guilty for being grateful Laura was still residing in county jail (Laura was Duke's child from Duke's first marriage). Nicole was surprised when she received a letter from Laura asking Nicole to call her. On the phone Laura: admitted to being the one who threw the bottle under the bush, apologized for her behavior at the Christmas party, and assured Nicole she was dedicated to staying clean and sober for the rest of her life. Nicole hoped this was true. She suspected county jail woke up her Niece.

The truth was, without her niece throwing the bottle under the bush, the fence would still be in the planning stage. When Nicole bent down to get this bottle she was almost bit by a coral snake. This motivated her husband to finish his plans and start the project.

Of course Ashleigh and Megan were coming over. These were the times she questioned if they were a couple. She reminded herself her Sister-in-law was dating Christopher. Two weeks prior Nicole and Jimmy ran into Rebecca and her life partner Meredith at a restaurant (Rebecca was Jimmy's cousin and niece of Captain). Without Nicole and Jimmy bringing it up, Rebecca and Meredith reassured both Jimmy and Nicole they believed Megan was straight. Nicole felt if Meredith believed Megan was straight; Megan was telling everyone the truth. Nicole wanted to believe with all of her heart Megan would never lie to her.

She was happy her in-laws were coming over. She liked the idea of Captain overseeing everything. She knew Ma was willing to help. At one time Nicole would have been nervous her Mother-in-law was coming over. During the last few years Ma was allowing Nicole to lead; this was both an honor and a relief.

This thirty-six year old wife and mother of three started to feel guilty watching the numbers flip on her digital alarm clock. She motivated herself to get up and get ready. This was a quick process until she opened the french style doors of her closet with a towel wrapped around her body. Her long brunette hair was hanging loosely and drying after her shower. Nicole was grateful her hair was all natural, Nicole received a resistance to gray hair from her mother. Her beautiful brown eyes were filled with frustration. This frustration carried over to her: oval shaped face, Ruina shaped lips, round chin, and lower cheekbones. She was aware her face was showing the signs of aging. She had a difficult time believing she was aging well. She disliked her roman style nose and was still surprised her Husband liked her lips. She always disliked her full upper lip. The time she spent working out and having good eating habits kept her youthful and in shape.

She worked out on a regular basis to fight of what she called "gravity". Her two biggest complaints were her wider hips and how her large breasts changed after nursing three children. Because she worked out her hips were never as bad as she perceived. Her breasts had changed but her husband still adored them. She correctly believed her husband found her attractive. She learned early in her marriage to inform every single man who approached her she was happily married. With how much she loved her husband she was unable to fathom having an affair. This feeling was affirmed by seeing the consequences of affairs on other families.

Standing there she said out loud to no one, "I hate clothes."

If only family was coming over she would have chosen something more comfortable and warm. She felt there were many things to consider: being the host she should be one of the best dressed, she envisioned the sliding door being opened and closed which meant she

needed to dress warm, she was spending most of the day in the kitchen, and there was a high possibility her clothes could be ruined. She pulled out of her closet a brand new athletic outfit. The reason she put it back: people from church were showing up, she was meeting Bette's mother for the first time, she reminded herself she was the host, and her sister-in-law Diana was coming over. She removed a top she: wondered why she purchased it, was grateful the tag was still on it, would find the receipt, and would return it. She hung it in front of all her clothes so she would remember to return it. She pulled out a long sleeved tattoo print top. This was the perfect top if she was spending time with Megan and Ashleigh; she hung it back into the closet. She felt she was making progress when she narrowed her search down to a decent pair of jeans or an olive colored cargo pant. This was one of the few times she was grateful cargo pants were in style. She pulled out her one and only featherweight sweater. She temporarily hung it next to the shirt she planned on returning. She tried on different combinations of outfits: she discounted a couple outfits because of their lack of warmth, the thought of grease splatter disqualified a few, and a half a dozen were too casual.

She glanced at her alarm clock; this caused her to panic.

She settled on: a brand new pair of blue stretch jeans with detailing on all the pockets, she slipped on a red turtle neck t-shirt, over it she selected a brand new multi-colored floral printed Henley. She debated about purchasing this top but was now happy she did. She selected it because it: was new, it would be warm, and she was okay with it being ruined. She knew it was casual but came to the conclusion everyone would be dressed casual; with the exception of Diana. She accessorized with: a good leather belt with stones on the buckle, she was happy to find dangling earrings (earrings she forgot she owned) with matching colors of her Henley, and a pair of blue and black cowgirl boots. She pulled out an older but nice denim jacket, she would only put it on if she became cold; like the Henley she was okay if the jacket was ruined. She applied a small amount of makeup and started to tie up her hair; these were the times she thought about cutting it short.

She heard Ester and Danielle screaming and giggling.

She: quickly opened the bathroom door, then her bedroom door, and yelled out into the house: "What are Y'all doing?"

Ester answered, "We're just funnin'."

Danielle became quiet.

Ester's brother stop spinning Ester in circles.

Danielle was disappointed because she hoped Jeff would spin her too. Danielle felt Jeff was the strongest man she knew. She believed he'd be the best professional football player to ever play.

Nicole yelled, "Stop it! There's a time for funnin' but this ain't the time."

Both girls said at the same time said, "Yes Ma'am"

She yelled, "Jeff why ain't you helping your Daddy?"

He made a face, "I was getting a water."

"After Y'all are done take out the garbage."

"But I'm..."

She interrupted with a loud irritated voice, "If you have time to be twirling around the girls. Y'all have time to take out the garbage."

Jeff: made a face, grabbed a bottled water, slipped it into a pocket of his cargo pants, headed to the cabinet under the sink, yanked out the full bag, tied it, and placed the new one into the garbage can.

Nicole yelled, "Girls are Y'all ready?"

Danielle and Ester looked at one another.

Ester answered, "Yes Ma'am?"

Based upon this reply Megan responded with, "If I stepped into the kitchen and looked at how Y'all were dressed what would I be seeing? Or are Y'all in your pajamas? Is your hair brushed? What would Y'all look like to anyone helping us today? If Y'all are in your pajamas I suggest you get upstairs and change."

Nicole heard Jeff open the door to the garage and two sets of feet run up the stairs.

She: stepped back into the bathroom, decided to change her hair, grabbed some hair pins, headed to the bathroom in the hallway, left the hallway bathroom door open; this way she was able to finish her hair and hear what was going on in her house.

This is when she heard: Julie run down the steps, open the refrigerator door, zippers of her backpack open and close, maps being selected, there was a loud noise in the backyard, she noticed Julie stop; Nicole was quickly getting up. Before Nicole stepped out of the bathroom she heard Julie click the maps onto the magnetic clip. Nicole never heard any screaming or yelling so she assumed everything was okay. Nicole rolled her eyes and sat back down in front of the mirror. She heard Julie: open the door to the garage, slam this door, the garage door open, about ten minutes later she heard someone open the front door, shut the door, and run up the stairs. A few minutes later she heard: the sound of doors, Julie talking to Ester and Danielle but was unable to clearly hear what was said, Julie running down the stairs, going back to the refrigerator, the sound of the magnetic clip being snapped shut, the front door being opened, and the noise of the front door being slammed; this sound echoed through out the house.

While Julie was running down the stairs the saw started. This is when Nicole decided she would personally give her surrounding neighbors flowers and a thank-you card for being patient. She was grateful they received the blessing of their neighbors and the permits to put up the fence. All of her neighbors were made aware the saw would be turned on early; Nicole was happy they warned them. Nicole felt giving her neighbors flowers and a hand written thank-you card would only be proper.

Once she was done getting ready she stepped into the kitchen and made coffee. Danielle and Ester informed Nicole it was cold outside. Nicole immediately marched them back upstairs and made them dress warmer. Danielle borrowed a hoodie from Ester, both wore hoodies, both wore jeans, and both wore cowgirl boots; they insisted on matching one another and Nicole. All three went back downstairs to start preparing for breakfast. Nicole decided to make: scrambled eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage, grits, fruit, and yogurt. She was impressed with how Ester and Danielle set up the yogurt; Nicole was happy to answer the variety of questions Ester and Danielle asked.

The saw was temporarily turned off.

*J*ulie: embraced the waves of her self induced orgasm. During this fleeting moment she felt in control and all of her stresses seemed to disappear. It was disappointing when the feeling

subsisted. What stopped her from attempting another round were thoughts of Nikita and the noises in her backyard. When she turned to look at her digital alarm clock she knew she needed to motivate herself.

Julie: stood up, pulled down her nightshirt, and stretched her six foot athletic body. She was a cross between an athlete and a model. What made this fifteen year old look like a college student was: her rectangular shaped face, her wider jawline, her beautiful greenish blue eyes, her naturally winged shaped dark eyebrows, her roman style nose, her large banana shaped breasts, her long legs, and the way she carried herself. Her small dimples and her upper lip moved upward to show the top row of her naturally straight teeth. She felt better after the short stretch.

She again glanced at the digital alarm clock and reminded herself she needed to get going. Julie: picked up her panties from off of her bed, quickly slipped them on, went over to her backpack, opened it, took out a hand sanitizer Ashleigh gave her, rubbed it over her hands, sniffed her hands, placed the sanitizer back, double checked her backpack, zipped it up, set it on her bed, stepped to her closet, grabbed a pair of panties she often used while biking, selected the tightest pair of black athletic shorts she owned; they ended just above her knees. She: grabbed a supportive sports bra, an athletic orange and white t-shirt, stepped out of her bedroom, set her clothes in the upstairs bathroom, went back to the linen closet, opened the door, grabbed a towel and wash cloth, took a shower, fought off the urge to masturbate again, slipped on her clothes, briefly brushed her long black hair, decided to forgo makeup, went back to her room, slipped on a pair of short socks, put on a pair of orange and white Adidas shoes, swung her backpack over her shoulder, grabbed her brand new bike helmet off of a hook; this was hung to the left of her bedroom door. She quickly: opened her door, closed it, ran down the stairs, opened the refrigerator, grabbed her bikes water bottle, grabbed two water bottles, shoved these into her backpack, and selected the route she was walking Nikita. Just before she hung the maps back onto the refrigerator she heard a loud noise in her backyard. She immediately looked out into the backyard. She was grateful the blinds on the sliding windows were open and the lights were on. She was relieved her Brother and her Daddy were okay. She attached all of the route maps onto a magnetic clip her Momma purchased. She: again swung her backpack over her shoulder, stepped into the garage through the door next to the hallway, placed her bikes water bottle into the carrier, pushed her bike to the garage door opener, grabbed her bike light from off a nail hanging off a beam (she hammered this nail in herself), attached the light to her bike, turned the bike light on, put her hair into a pony tail, secured the bike helmet, slipped on her biking gloves, hit the garage door opener, and this is when she sat on her bike. The cold air hit her as the garage door opened. She forgot to check the weather before leaving. She believed she would stay warm biking. She: hit the button to close the garage, quickly biked out of the garage, made it a half a block, came back to the house, set the bike next to the garage, stepped into her house, placed her helmet on the table next to the stairs, ran up the stairs, opened her bedroom door, and went to her closet.

She thought about Ashleigh's advice on how to survive cold weather. Layering was a fashion trend but she would layer for a purpose. She: immediately removed the t-shirt, the shorts, and her shoes. In place of the shorts she selected a black pair of athletic Capri pants with an orange strip down the sides; she hoped this would be warm enough. She grabbed an athletic blue long sleeved bra top shirt, she was grateful it still fit, and slipped on her athletic

shoes. Just in case it was still cold when she walked Nikita she stuffed these items into her backpack: an old pair of green drawstring jogging pants, the matching green zippered hoodie, a white zipper jacket with pink piping, a regular pair of gloves, and a blue beanie; this was the only beanie she owned. She hoped no one she knew would spot her today. She removed the still camera from the backpack and placed it in a drawer of her desk. She quickly put on her digital sports watch. While stepping out of her room and closing the door she heard Danielle and Ester talking. She pushed Ester's door open and told them it was cold outside.

Danielle and Ester asked her a few questions about the cold and again asked if they could go along. Julie promised she would take them on another day. This was disappointing but they believed Julie would some day take them.

Julie: excused herself, ran downstairs, again stopped at the refrigerator, and changed the map to the shortest route possible. This is when she debated about putting on the jacket she stuffed into the backpack; she felt she would be fine without it. Normally on Saturday she took the longest route, played fetch with Nikita, and took pictures. Because of the cold weather and the fence being built she changed her plans.

Julie: stopped, put her bike helmet on, stepped out of the house, sat on her bike, turned on the light, and headed to the yacht. When she reached the stop sign near her house she quickly slipped on the jacket from her backpack and glanced at her watch. This caused her to pedal as fast as she could; this was a difficult task with the slight breeze. She was happy when she reached the end of the pier next to the yacht. While locking her bike she pulled the yacht keys out of a side pocket of her backpack. She felt it was an honor Ashleigh gave her a set of keys to the yacht.

This was the first time entering the Yacht without Nikita waiting at the door.

She heard Nikita howl and whine.

She: took a deep breath, turned on a light, shut the door, calmly set down her backpack in front of the China cabinet, removed her jacket, and turned on a nearby lounge light.

Nikita became quiet.

Julie suspected Ashleigh commanded Nikita to be quiet.

Julie: stepped through the lounge, went down the four steps, was in a hallway, stepped in front of Ashleigh's suite, and knocked on the door. While standing in this hallway she briefly glanced into the two cabins and the head on the other side of Ashleigh's suite.

She heard, "Who is it?"

"Julie."

With a grown Ashleigh asked, "Why are you early?"

"Y'all wanted me to make sure Y'all were up today."

In an odd voice, "Ah..."

A pause.

Julie waited.

"The fence is being built today?"

"Yes Ma'am. You promised Y'all would go with Auntie."

Julie heard some moaning and grunting.

Julie heard, "Come in."

"Yes Ma'am."

Julie opened the door.

An excited Nikita was waiting for her.

“Sit.”

Nikita was excited because Strong Scent met her in this part of the territory. The normal routine was to meet Strong Scent where humans showed up.

Julie spotted Ashleigh turn on her side and face the wall. She could tell Ashleigh was asleep. Julie wished Ashleigh was already up. Ashleigh made Julie promise to keep her awake.

Julie command Nikita, “Sit.”

This frustrated Nikita. They were to go for a walk. Nikita focused as Strong Scent approached Best Friend. Best Friend was asleep. She: stood up on all fours, her tail went down, and she watched closely. Nikita disliked Strong Scent approaching Best Friend. She liked Strong Scent but if Strong Scent hurt Best Friend she would defend Best Friend.

When Julie reached the bed she gently pushed Ashleigh.

“What?”

Nikita watched closely.

“Y’all said I shouldn’t leave with Nikita until Y’all were done with the shower and in the galley.”

“Did I really say that?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Julie watched as Ashleigh: reached up and turned on a light, glanced at the alarm clock radio, mumbled, crawled out of bed, stretched, she shook her long blond hair, and headed to a chair next to her walk in closet. Julie felt the black concert t-shirt Ashleigh was wearing had seen better days. Julie rarely paid attention to music but she liked Kenny Chesney. She felt the stripped sleeping shorts Ashleigh was wearing looked cute on her. Julie sat down on her bed and started to pet Nikita. She observed Ashleigh grab a pile of clothes off of a nearby chair, stop, hold the clothes to her chest, and turn around.

An excited Nikita turned over onto her back.

Julie pet her tummy.

Ashleigh turned around and asked, “What’s the temperature?”

Julie stopped petting Nikita and answered very seriously, “It’s really cold outside.”

“What’s the temperature?”

Again serious, “In the upper fifties.”

“Oh.”

Barely coherent, “I heard the high is to be in the high sixties?”

“Yes. But it ain’t happening until three.”

“That’s a good temperature for working outside.”

Julie made a face.

She watched Ashleigh turn around and step into the head of the suite. Shortly after shutting the door Julie heard Ashleigh turn on the water. Julie believed, after knowing so many Midwestern people; the cold made this group of Americans a very hearty people.

Until she was told otherwise she would wait for Ashleigh.

Julie regularly took showers in Ashleigh’s head but she never explored or studied Ashleigh’s suite in detail. Often times Ashleigh was in the galley while Julie showered. She felt it would have been an invasion of Ashleigh’s privacy to inspect Ashleigh’s suit without Ashleigh there. The first thing she noticed was the three paintings of Nikita. Julie believed she moved other pictures around to make a wall dedicated to Nikita paintings. Even from Ashleigh’s bed, it was obvious each painting was from three different artists.

She heard the shower start.

She liked the blue and white patterned bed spread and liked the feeling of the sheets. She wished her curtains matched her sheets and owned as many pillows as Ashleigh did. A picture of Ashleigh's Nephew was on one of the two nightstands. She: stood up, stepped over to it, picked it up, and studied it. She felt he was cute and looked a lot like Mr. Bob; except his son had lighter skin and his hair had a red tint to it. She felt when this little boy visited Florida he would have to wear a lot of sunblock. She suspected with his Momma living in Wisconsin the boy would never move to Florida. Julie wondered why Mr. Bob never fought for custody. And yet, Julie respected the fact Mr. Bob never did. Julie was happy for Ashleigh because Ashleigh would finally meet her Nephew next month. She set down the picture.

Nikita studied Strong Scent.

Julie started to study the paintings and prints like she was taught in the one art class she ever took; it was the worst grade she ever received. She thought about what *Renewed Mastery* called the *Museum* and *The Hive*. From what she understood *The Hive* were two to three floors where the artist of the company worked; her Daddy often mentioned how the artists decorated these floors. *The Museum* was where the artists of *Renewed Mastery* sold their art work. She heard from numerous people this was an amazing place. Julie wondered what the entrance way into the building looked like.

This led her to think about the new mailroom lady building upon the system she started. She was happy to hear this from both her Daddy and Ashleigh.

She stopped thinking about these things when she stepped in front of a painting of a pink and purple flower. She focused on the flower. Her eyes went big, within the flower was a woman's vulva. She was surprised Ashleigh would own a painting like this. This caused her to wonder if the rumors of Ashleigh being bisexual were true.

Immediately; lesbian porn scenes flashed in her mind. She recalled a pornographic scene where an older woman caught a younger woman masturbating. She imagined herself being this younger woman. It would be easy to lay down on Ashleigh's bed and start enjoying herself. She never followed through on this idea because of a promise she made to Ashleigh. She remembered a scene where an older woman invited a younger woman into the shower.

Julie: stepped to the head door, put her ear to the door, heard the shower, took a breath, and opened the door,

Julie felt guilty seeing Ashleigh's nude silhouette behind the shower curtain. It felt wrong seeing her washing herself. This was nothing how she imagined it.

Julie shouted over the water, "Ashleigh?"

Ashleigh stopped washing herself and shouted, "What?"

Julie asked, "Would it be alright if I walked Nikita?"

"What?"

Ashleigh: opened the shower curtain, stuck her head out, mishandling the shower curtain, the right side of her body was exposed; Ashleigh quickly covered herself with the shower curtain.

This felt so different than what Julie imagined it would feel like. In the pornographic scene the older woman purposefully opened the curtain, used seductive language, and invited the younger woman to join her. Julie recognized how awkward it would have felt if Ashleigh actually repeated what the actress did in the scene.

Ashleigh answered, "Why not take her. I'm up. Megan will be here in about forty-five minutes. I'll take you home."

"Thank-you."

Ashleigh asked, "Are you alright?"

"Why?"

"You sound funny?"

"I'm just cold."

"I'm not sure they'd fit but I have winter jackets hanging in the closet."

Julie answered, "I've brought extra cloths."

"Okay."

Ashleigh stuck her head back behind the curtain.

Julie had the fleeting thought of stripping naked and stepping into the shower. This felt really dark to her.

Instead; Julie shut the head door.

She stood against the door. She no longer wanted to have a sexual encounter with Ashleigh. The way Julie wanted to find out if Ashleigh was bisexual was by Ashleigh telling her. It was obvious, if she had sex with Ashleigh; it would change everything.

She heard Nikita's chain jangle.

Julie looked and Nikita was sitting in front of her.

She asked, "Ready for a walk?"

Nikita bolted to the suite door.

Julie followed and opened the door.

Nikita bolted to what Bob and Ashleigh called Nikita's Closet.

Julie: shut the door behind her, grabbed her backpack, went to Nikita's Closet, and they left the yacht. Julie ended up playing fetch with Nikita anyway. This led to her: adding the hoodie, slipping on the white jacket, adding the gloves, beanie, and slipping on the joggers.

She hoped no one she knew would see her dressed like this.

Megan was sitting at her small kitchen table writing in her journal. The galley light was on. Blocking out the moonlight night and the marina lights were the starboard side blinds next to the table. Her inverted triangle shaped face showed her intensity. Her: visible dimples were still, her lips were tight, and her dark blue eyes were focused on what she was writing; often times her eyes appeared plum. She was breathing through her celestial shaped nose with it's bend to the left and natural bump above her nostrils. The bend to her nose was the consequence of playing collegiate volleyball. She disliked how her nostrils curved up and almost out. What added to her intense look was her long dark blond hair was in a purposeful braid. She very seldom braided her hair but she felt this would be the perfect day for it. Being six feet tall, having an athletic body, long legs, and small breasts added to her intense look.

Some people would have been intimidated by: the clothes she was wearing, the clothes hanging on the opposite kitchen chair, and what was sitting on the kitchen table. On the table was: a half a cup of coffee, an empty yogurt container, earmuffs, safety glasses, an empty tool belt, a tool box, a camouflaged baseball cap with a gun ammo companies logo on it; she ordered it free after collecting the companies UPC labels. On the kitchen chair was a woodland patterned long sleeved jacket and a woodland camouflaged hoodie with a US Marine symbol

embroidered on the right chest. Her brother Jimmy purchased this hoodie for her when he was in the Marines. She was wearing: a pair of military green cargo pants, her top was a woman's woodland patterned long sleeved shirt, and a pair of black work boots. Her only accessories were silver post earrings and a cross necklace. She could have cared less if she matched. These clothes were warm and they were perfect for working outside.

She considered wearing an all orange hunting outfit. She discounted wearing it because she disliked the memory of hunting deer. During this hunting trip she could have shot two bucks; but she was never able to pull the trigger. She believed if she was in a survival situation she would be able to shoot one.

She purchased the woodland camouflaged clothing for a duck hunting trip with her older brother Jimmy and a couple of his friends. She enjoyed it, she was good at it, but never went again because she felt she was infringing on her Brother and his Friends time. She often times wore the hat and shirt skeet shooting or when she went to the gun range. Anytime she went shooting or worked with loud tools she wore the earmuffs and the goggles.

She was currently writing about the previous days date with Christopher. After Christopher was done teaching they: went mini-golfing, went to a park, took a walk, and went to a Bible study at Megan's church. Two things annoyed her. It always irritated her whenever a guy would get angry when they lost to her. She recognized a difference between a guy getting angry because they in general lost and a guy getting upset because they lost to a woman. What irritated Megan was Christopher acted like losing to a woman was no big deal when in fact it was. She suspected this was the last time he would ever suggest going mini-golfing. Another annoyance was how he could carry on a conversation with everyone at the Bible study but when it was just the two of them they hardly said anything. She wondered why he was talkative at a group event but was tongue tied when it was just the two of them.

In spite of these things, she felt the date went well. She enjoyed having a boyfriend go with her to a Bible study. She really liked the short walk they had. She wished they would have held hands; she assumed this would happen later in their relationship. She defiantly liked his passion for his family. She was impressed he was helping a member of his family move. Both wanted to help the other but they agreed it would be easier if each helped their own particular family.

She: looked up at the galley clock, clipped the pen onto the cover of the journal, took a sip of her coffee, set the beat up Seminole coffee travel mug on the galley counter, went to her cabin, locked the journal into her trunk, and grabbed a red backpack out of her closet; embroidered on the front was the symbol of a popular fishing company. She was able to receive this free from collecting UPC's from selected products. She: stepped back into the galley, set this free backpack on the table, stepped back to the coffee pot, filled the travel mug with fresh coffee, walked back to the table, set the coffee mug on the table, folded the hoodie, placed it into the bag, folded the work belt, placed it on top of the hoodie, placed the earmuffs into the bag, zipped up the main part of the bag, placed the goggles in a front zippered pocket, swung the bag over her shoulder, slipped on her hat making sure her braided pony tail was through the back, grabbed the coffee with one hand, the tool box with the other, stepped out of her houseboat, set her coffee mug and tool box onto the wooden bench attached to the deck, unhooked her keys from her pants loop, locked her houseboat door, clipped the keys back onto her pants, and headed to the yacht. Megan surmised the only way Ashleigh would arrive early, like Ashleigh proclaimed she wanted, was if Megan went with her.

She spotted Julie's bike locked to the wooden pier. This meant Julie arrived earlier than normal. She assumed Ashleigh would drive because of the bike rack attached to Ashleigh's Jeep.

Megan: stopped, took a deep breath, and her dimples flashed.

She hoped Bob was still sleeping. She felt they were having good conversations but it always felt they were close to having an argument. The least thing she wanted was to play Foosball. They were now playing by the correct rules. The last time they played he won best of seven after she won the best of three; she knew she should have stopped playing when she was ahead. She was tired of him winning. She believed she needed to practice against good players. Ashleigh and Megan were often playing but Megan was already winning the majority of the time. Megan's plan was to take Jake to a bar in town known for their barbecue lunches. What interested Megan was the half dozen Foosball tables. She assumed she could get Jake to play or would be able to play with others. The only way she would go to this bar: is if someone went with her, they went before the evening crowd, and to be safe she would bring a gun with her. The only way she could justify spending all this money on eating out and playing Foosball was if she received a large tip after one of her charters.

She walked up the steps to the main door. She rang the doorbell. The doorbell played the theme from, "*Rawhide*". Her dimples flashed and she rolled her eyes at the doorbell; she really felt this was childish. She thought of Julie saying to her, "*Mr. Bob is just eccentric.*"

She was surprised when Ashleigh opened the door, "Hi."

"Y'all are up?"

Ashleigh let Megan in, "Julie came over and woke me up."

"Y'all just ain't into mornings?"

"Nope."

They giggled.

"Want something?"

"I have my coffee. Just a reminder Nicole is making breakfast."

"Thank-you for reminding me."

They stepped into the galley.

Megan was surprised on how casual Ashleigh was dressed. Usually when she was out in public, especially around a group of people she: would be monochromatic, tried to wear clothes to make her look taller, and dressed nicer. Today she was in an old pair of light blue straight leg jeans, an old Gretchen Wilson concert T-shirt, was without makeup, and was wearing simple post earrings.

Ashleigh asked, "Are you planning on working outside?"

Megan answered, "Yes. The guys won't stop Y'all if you know what Y'all are doing."

Megan set her backpack where Julie placed hers, then set the toolbox next to the backpack, she set her coffee down on the kitchen table, and hung her coat over a chair across from where Bob was sitting. The chair to her left had a hoodie hanging over it. On the table was a box of ear buds and a box of plastic eye protection glasses. Megan felt this was a nice thing for them to do. While she hung the jacket she looked over to see what cereal Bob was eating.

This is when Bob looked up and said, "Hi."

"Howdy."

"I see Y'all are eating shredded wheat."

“We seem to be out of any good cereals.”

Megan looked over at Ashleigh. There were four Roman looking pillars. Two were on the opposite ends of the island they went from the deck to the ceiling. The two center pillars went from the top of the island to the ceiling.

Megan winked.

Ashleigh nodded her head.

Bob mentioned, “Someone could order better cereal.”

Ashleigh answered, “If you want different cereal you order it yourself. You say you like the way I order.”

Bob pushed up his glasses, “Fair enough.”

Megan became serious, “We all appreciate giving Jimmy off these last two weekends. Everyone’s talking about how busy Y’all are while setting up production.”

“The reason we’re on schedule is because of the young lady standing over there and your brother. Jimmy has been one of my best hires.”

Ashleigh asked, “If we’re on schedule why are you going in?”

“Leah and I want to go over some project ideas.”

Megan noticed Ashleigh’s countenance change.

Bob stated, “It’s only involving the art department.”

Megan found herself suggesting, “Y’all are welcomed to come over and help.”

Bob looked up at Megan, “I have plans.”

Ashleigh asked, “What are you doing?”

“I have a date.”

This caught Megan and Ashleigh’s attention.

Megan’s dimples flashed.

She brushed her hair behind her right ear.

Ashleigh, walked over to the table and with concern asked, “With who?”

“Susan King.”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

Megan knew exactly who this was. She understood why Bob would date her. Megan considered her: very pretty, affluent, smart, cultured, and felt Susan was everything she was not. With Susan being three years older than herself they went to the same High School but were never friends. After High School, they never had a reason to dislike one another, but were never friends.

Susan Father’s story was legendary. In Eastbank and the surrounding counties this family was very influential; to a lesser degree within the whole state. Megan assumed Bob needed permission from Susan’s grandfather and father to relocate his business to Eastbank.

Bob stated, “It’s nothing formal.”

Ashleigh asked, “Where are you going?”

“An advisor on another project is meeting us at a maritime museum in Boca Roton. After we’re thinking about going to a couple art museums.”

Bob asked Megan, “Are you familiar with the museums in Boca Roton?”

“There are a few art museums between here and there. I believe there are a couple maritime museums. What are Y’all researching?”

Ashleigh found this conversation surprising.

“We’re looking into the history of pirating.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

Very serious, "Y'all should talk to my Daddy."

"I've heard he found a pirate ship?"

"Yes Sir. As a family we spent years bringing up it's treasures and artifacts. I'm sure if you visit a maritime museum Y'all will see many of the items we'all brought up and a painting of what an expert believed the ship looked like."

Ashleigh asked, "You have a painting of it in your room?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Megan added, "There is a huge model of it at Benny's."

Ashleigh answered, "I saw the model when Bob purchased the yacht."

This comment stung. Because Ashleigh was her best friend and Bob was a friend (this was sometimes difficult for Megan to admit) she tried to let the sting of Bob buying the yacht go. Still; anytime she stepped onto this yacht, it was impossible for her to imagine how the yacht would have looked if she purchased it. She strongly believed if she would have received the loan for the yacht her business would have grown. She would never forget the day she found out someone purchased this yacht. The worst part was when she spotted the yacht docked next to her charter.

Bob stated, "I'll defiantly find the time to talk to him."

They heard Julie open the door and command, "Sit."

Nikita became excited because Woman Friend was here.

Bob continued, "I'm grateful your father and yourself have agreed to sail this yacht on Ashleigh and I's vacation to Key West."

Ashleigh and Megan looked at one another.

Nikita ran to Megan.

Before Julie stepped into the galley she set her backpack next to Megan's. She remained bundled up; if someone else was in the galley she would have removed the green outfit.

Ashleigh glanced at the awful outfit Julie was wearing.

Ashleigh commanded Nikita, "Go to your spot."

Nikita: turned away from Woman Friend, drank some water, and sat in her spot. This was upsetting. Instead of playing with her they were making noises. She would stay awake and listen for a noise she knew

Julie stated, "It's cold."

Bob looked at her, "Try minus fifty wind chill."

Julie gasped.

Ashleigh stated, "It's why those of us who've moved from the Midwest are at the beach swimming when it's seventy degrees. The longer we live here the more our bodies will adapt to living here."

Julie unzipped her jacket and felt warm enough to remove her gloves and beanie, "I'd love to see snow."

Bob suggested, "I've heard Ashleigh wants to take you up to Wisconsin."

Ashleigh stated, "We'd need your parents permission."

"May I bring a friend?"

"Of course."

Ashleigh suggested, "Why not see if Bette would come up. I'm sure she'd want to see some of her friends."

Julie liked this idea but made a face, "Y'all know I hang around Bette?"

Bob answered, "Her mother works in the art department."

Julie said, "Oh."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Bob smiled and pushed up his glasses, "You might have to wait until winter to see snow."

Ashleigh commented, "Maybe not."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Both Julie and Megan wondered what this comment was about.

Julie repeated herself, "The reason I'm wanting to visit Wisconsin is to see snow."

Bob pushed up his glasses, "Before you embrace the winter may I suggest coming up during spring and early summer. I'd like your family to stay at my house during the summer."

He turned toward Megan, "Ma and Captain would be welcome to visit as well."

Ashleigh mentioned, "I'm sure Captain would enjoy fishing on the lake by your house."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I'm sure they'd appreciate the invention. But Captain ain't a fan of flying."

Ashleigh said, "I don't blame him."

Bob crinkled his forehead, "We use a very safe company."

"I envisioned crashing into Lake Michigan when I flew out of the airport."

Bob mentioned, "Flying in and out of the airport we fly around and turn sideways."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Ashleigh said, "I'd wish they'd take a different way."

Julie asked, "Y'all are taking a trip to Key West? On this yacht?"

Bob stated, "Your Aunt and your Grandfather are sailing this vessel in April."

Ashleigh added, "My family is coming down for a few weeks. Give a take a few days. One of those weeks we're all spending it on this yacht."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Bob added, "A reminder Mary is more than welcome to attend."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"She knows."

Julie thought about something. She asked in an excited manner, "What's happening with Nikita?"

Ashleigh liked the moments when she let the world know she was a teenager. Ashleigh was feeling this was happening less frequently. She glanced at the galley clock and recognized she needed to get ready. While everyone was talking Ashleigh: poured her coffee into the sink, put the coffee mug into the dishwasher, tossed out her apple core, stepped over to the chair next to Bob, grabbed a dark blue Milwaukee Brewer zipper hoodie; *Brewers* was printed on the front. She then slipped on an old black fleece jacket; she never bothered to zip it or put up the hood. She was happy to put on a new Brewer hat with the old ball in glove logo; she made sure her hair was coming out of the back of the hat.

Megan's dimples flashed.

She looked at her niece, "Your Momma ain't about to let you have Nikita stay at your house."

Julie thought about this.

Without the money Megan would have never agreed to sailing the yacht. She glanced up at the galley clock.

Megan stated, "I'm sure they've started already."

Julie mentioned, "If I know Momma she's serving breakfast."

She watched Ashleigh put on the hat.

Julie asked, "Are Y'all wearing a Milwaukee Brewer Hat?"

"My foster Dad bought it for me the last time we went to a game."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Bob watched and listened.

"Why do Y'all like the logo?"

Ashleigh answered, "It's cool."

Julie asked, "Why? It's just a mitt?"

"You never noticed?"

Megan's dimples flashed and watched.

Julie asked, "What am I to notice?"

She took off the hat. She could tell her pony tail was too loose and her hair was now a mess; she was unfazed by this because of who she was with.

With her finger traced the embroidery, "There is an M and a this is a B."

Julie smiled, "Wow."

Ashleigh stated, "Very few people outside of Milwaukee seem to ever notice this."

Julie grabbed her backpack.

Ashleigh placed her hair into a tighter pony tail and slipped her hat back on.

Megan: swung her backpack over her shoulders and picked up the tool box.

This is when Ashleigh asked Nikita, "Want to go for a ride?"

Nikita recognized this noise and immediately ran to the door.

Julie and Megan looked at one another.

Megan suggested, "I'd suggest leaving her here."

Bob volunteered, "I'll take her to work. Before I go to the museum I'll bring her back."

Ashleigh stated, "Let me know when you drop her off. If your date runs late I'll come back and get her."

Julie hopeful suggested, "If Y'all tie her up outside and clean any mess I'm sure Momma won't care."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan became shocked as she watched Bob: set the bowl in the sink without rinsing it, shoved the cereal box into the cabinet without really closing it, and slipped on a windbreaker he had hanging over his chair.

He pushed up his glasses, "I hope the fence goes up without any problems. See you soon."

They acknowledged this.

Nikita was surprised when Favorite Male commanded her to follow him.

"Mr. Bob. You forgot her leash?"

"Oh."

Julie apologized, "I'm sorry Sir."

"No need to apologize."

He pushed up his glasses and said, "You did a good thing."

She handed it to Mr. Bob. Bob hooked the leash and they stepped out of the yacht. Ashleigh motioned they should wait.

Julie asked, "Why wait?"

Ashleigh answered Julie, "Nikita will want to try and follow us into the Jeep."

Megan's dimples flashed.

The door shut and they heard Bob and Nikita head down the stairs.

Ashleigh turned to Megan, "I've met Susan King once. Do you know anything about her?"

Julie's eyes went big, "Why?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Mr. Bob has a date with her."

Julie stated, "I'm surprised he'd like her."

Megan brushed her hair behind her ear.

"I'm not surprised. She's pretty. She'd be able to handle the politics of dating Bob. And she's very feminine."

Ashleigh asked, "Would she be after his money?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Not at all."

Julie added, "Their family is loaded. Plus she goes to our church. She takes her faith serious."

Megan pushed her hair behind her ear.

"Let's go."

Julie and Ashleigh gave one another looks. If Megan spotted this look she'd have questioned them.

Ashleigh stated, "Julie could you grab the protective glasses."

"Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh stated, "Let me grab my purse and keys."

Megan suggested, "You might need a water bottle."

Julie stated, "Momma is providing water."

"I'll bring my own."

Ashleigh: grabbed a water from the refrigerator, grabbed her purse, keys, the ear buds, and they headed to her Jeep. During this time they talked about a wide range of things.

The only stop they made was unlocking Julie's bike.

Nicole instructed Bobbi-Sue, "Watch the bacon."

"Yes Ma'am"

Nicole felt a lot of compassion toward Bobbi-Sue. It was obvious Bobbi-Sue had one of the largest pairs of breasts in the town of Eastbank; maybe in the whole county. Nicole believed Bobbi-Sue wanted to receive attention for anything else. As a woman who grew up with larger breasts she could only imagine the unwanted teasing and attention this teenager received. What impressed Nicole was how Bobbi-Sue tried to be modest by wearing a very nice stripped baggy top. Nicole was grateful her breasts, even though they were large, were smaller than Bobbi-Sue's breasts.

Nicole: quickly washed her hands, wiped her hands on a towel, and stepped over to the short L section of her kitchen counter. She studied the food situation. Normally in front of this counter were tall chairs, today they were moved into the side room. The only thing in front of this counter was a walkway to reach the counter and the kitchen table. Sitting at the table were: Jeff, Billy, Buck, Sal, and a couple teenage boys from church. They just finished talking about the Indianapolis Colts beating the Bears in the Superbowl. A conversation Billy was happy Buck started was about the infractions handed out before the Daytona Five Hundred. She shook her head at how passionate they were about sports but real life things they often times ignored.

In the dinning room she could hear: Jimmy, Lester, Mr. Cooper, and a couple guys from church discussing how to divide up labor and the steps they needed to take.

Nicole was glad the saw was silent for a little while.

Nicole grabbed an empty serving plate and walked it over to the plugged in fryer; Bobbi-Sue jumped into action and filled the plate. They nodded at one another. When Nicole set the now full plate back onto the counter: Billy, Jeff, and one of the teenage boys rushed up to the counter.

Nicole gave them looks, "Y'all. There are other people arriving."

Bobbi-Sue looked when she heard Billy say, "Yes Ma'am. May I have some scrambled eggs?"

Nicole smiled, "Of course."

Both Bobbi-Sue and Nicole watched him take a spoonful from a heating tray and plop it on his plate.

One of the teenagers stated, "Ma'am you make the best grits."

Buck answered, "I've been telling folks for a long time Ms. Nicole makes the best grits."

Nicole smiled.

"Thank-you."

Bobbi-Sue asked Ester, "Where's the serving plates?"

Danielle quickly opened a cabinet, "They're in here."

Bobbi-Sue was surprised Danielle knew where it was.

Ester said, "She stays over a lot on account of her Momma's job."

Danielle added, "We're best friends."

Bobbi-Sue smiled, "We'all need one of those."

The men from the dinning room walked through the kitchen.

Lester bellowed, "Boys finish up and lets get to work."

A couple of them replied, "Yes sir."

Jeff said, "Thank-you ladies."

Nicole smiled, "I'm glad Y'all are building the fence."

Bobbi-Sue placed a plate of sausages on the counter.

Mr. Cooper who was in his early Sixties stated, "I'd put in a vote for the bacon."

She watched as the men grabbed either a piece of bacon or sausage as they stepped out of the house.

Everyone inside of the kitchen felt the breeze.

Jeff asked, "Momma. What should we do with the plates?"

"Just leave them there. Ester and Danielle will pick them up."

"Yes Ma'am."

Ester and Danielle gave one another disappointed looks. They knew better than to complain.

They all left the table and headed outside.

The front door opened. It was Bobbi-Sue's idea to hang a note on the door saying to just step in. Nicole disliked this idea but until more help arrived she would go along with it. Nicole's addition to the note was asking everyone to shut the door.

"Thank-you for setting out the sausage."

Bobbi-Sue whispered, "Y'all might want to check the scrambled eggs."

"I'm appreciating the help."

Nicole touched Bobbi-Sue on the arm.

"Honey; get yourself something to eat."

"Ain't you needing help?"

The door opened and they heard in a northern accent, "Hello."

Bobbi-Sue whispered, "It's Bette's Dad."

"Watch the eggs for me."

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole pointed at the sink, "Y'all wash them."

Ester gave a face, "What about the dishwasher?"

"It'll be faster to wash em' ourselves."

Nicole answered in a loud tone, "Howdy."

She quickly: wiped her hands, stepped into the hallway, and approached her guests.

Danielle volunteered, "I wash this time. Next time Y'all wash."

Ester said, "Okay."

Bobbi-Sue smiled.

"Y'all trade?"

At the same time, "Yes."

Danielle added, "We'all like taking turns."

Ester stated, "It's how we help one another."

Bobbi-Sue grabbed a serving bowl and filled it with scrambled eggs.

"Y'all think we should make more?"

Ester said, "Last time we ran out."

Danielle said, "Y'all remember Nicole bought a lot for today."

Ester with a face asked, "There in the refrigerator."

Danielle answered, "Y'all remember how many she bought?"

Ester smiled, "Momma was happy they were on sale."

This exchange gave Bobbi-Sue the confidence to go to the refrigerator and grab a carton of eggs.

Nicole approached the people stepping into the house.

In front was a woman in her early forties who looked very similar to Bette; it was obvious she was Bette's mother. She was carrying a fairly large baking dish. The mother was five four and had long dark hair. Nicole noticed both mother and daughter had longer heart shaped faces, both wore glasses, and both had the same shape. Where they were different was: the mother had bright blue eyes where Bette had greenish blue, the mother a larger nose, Bette had larger fuller lips, and the mother had bigger breasts. This by no means made them large, they were at most a B cup. Bette's breasts were very tiny.

The mother was wearing a teal colored belted V-neck top, she matched this with a tie-dye skirt; teal was one of the dominating colors of the skirt. Her footwear were flats with flowers on them. All her beaded jewelry matched: beads were attached to the back of her bandanna, she was wearing dangling beaded earrings, a beaded necklace, one bracelet on her left wrist, and a beaded ankle bracelet on her right ankle. Nicole wondered if she made this jewelry herself or purchased this jewelry from one of the shops downtown. Over her shoulder was a large canvas bag; on the side it had a collage of pictures and over the pictures it read, *"Renewed Mastery."* Nicole could tell she owned this bag for years.

Following her was Bette. Nicole was surprised by her appearance. She was wearing: dark green shorts that went down to her knees, a large red Wisconsin Badger sweatshirt, a red t-shirt underneath, she was wearing very little makeup, had post earrings, was in brown hiking boots, a plain red baseball cap, and a set of round glasses Nicole never observed her wear before. It was obvious she intended to work outside because of an old work belt she was wearing around her waist.

Behind Bette was a girl who was in seventh grade, behind her was a boy near Ester's age. All of the children had the same straight dark hair. The boy had a more square face and brown eyes. Unlike the other women in the family the girl had an oblong shaped face and brown eyes. Nicole believed this girl had braces by the way she was trying to cover her smile. Nicole believed this young girl would end up taller than her mother and older sister. Nicole reasoned one day she would blossom but it might be a difficult trek getting there. The girl was dressed in a nice button shirt, cargo pants, sandals, and was without makeup. The boy was wearing yellow shorts, a Green Bay Packer hoodie, and hiking shoes. Julie could tell this boy was full of energy and felt this was an adventure.

The man shutting the door, was six feet tall, was muscular, had a mustache, had dark hair, a mans oblong shaped face, brown eyes, and long lips; other than the mustache he was clean shaven.

He turned after shutting the door and stated, "I'm Fred Schmidt."

"Howdy."

"This here is my family. I'm sure you've met Bette."

"Yes I have."

Bette sighed.

"This here is my beloved wife Sherrie."

"Howdy."

"Nice to meet you."

"This is my second oldest daughter, "Ida."

"Hi."

"Nice to meet you."

Just then the door opened and Diana, Duke, and Dustin stepped in. Diana was carrying a dish.

Behind them: Ashleigh, Megan, and Julie stepped in. Ashleigh was carrying a box of earbuds, Julie was carrying a box of protective eye wear, and both over Julie and Megan's back were their backpacks. Julie offered to take the earbuds. Ashleigh gave them to her. She quickly left the house to see where her Daddy wanted them.

Everyone was greeting one another and talking about miscellaneous things.

Fred continued, "This is my youngest Earl. I have an older son named Lloyd attending college at the University of Wisconsin."

Ashleigh and Sherrie spotted one another and hugged.

Diana waved her hand, "Oh my."

Nicole could have spoken in a northern dialect but decided to keep her natural one, "Let me introduce everyone."

She did.

While doing so she took note of how Diana was dressed. Even dressed casual it seemed she out dressed everyone. She was wearing dark blue skinny jeans made for a woman in her early forties; the bottoms were rolled up as if they were capri pants, she had chains dangling off the left side of her pants. She matched these jeans with dark blue pumps. She matched the jeans with: a white tank top, a dark blue silk-blended cardigan, and a white trench style jacket with dark blue trim. This jacket was both purposeful and fashionable enough she could just leave it on. She accessorized with: hoop earrings, a couple nice beaded necklaces, bracelets, and a brand new matching dark blue purse. Nicole suspected this "casual" outfit costed a pretty penny.

The door opened again.

Nicole stated, "Please step into the kitchen and help yourselves."

Sherrie stopped Bette, "Take this into the kitchen. Make sure both sides are marked."
"Okay."

Nicole wondered what she brought.

Conversation filled the house.

Nicole noticed Sherrie step to the side.

Nicole greeted a couple guys from Jimmy's passed jobs, like other guests she encouraged them to eat breakfast.

Sherrie waited until Nicole was done and approached her, "I have something for you."

Sherrie: reached into her bag and took out a plant with a homemade clay pot; it was neatly wrapped in fancy tissue.

Sherrie stated, "I hope you like it."

Nicole removed the tissue. Nicole liked the plant and how the blended blue and green pot.

"Of course."

"Well thank-you. You didn't need too."

Sherrie added, "Bette told me you like growing herbs and have houseplants. I'm sure you know it's a mint."

"I never thought of growing it inside. Outside they take over."

Sherrie answered, "I'm unsure of what grows here."

Nicole enjoyed telling Sherrie, "Easy ones are spider plants. One of my favorite are African Violets."

"How about outside?"

She was about to list a few but Bobbi-Sue stepped out into the hallway.

"Ms. Nicole."

"Please excuse me."

Nicole carried her plant into the dinning room.

Sherrie followed Nicole. Sherrie appreciated the way Nicole decorated her house. What touched Sherrie's heart was when Nicole unwrapped the plant and set it in the center of the table. Sherrie was impressed with Nicole's hosting skills and formally introduced her to the men sitting at the table. Sherrie watched as Nicole started to direct her volunteers. Sherrie was about to help with dishes, but Nicole encouraged her to sit down and eat. Sherrie listen to the host.

Nicole encouraged Bobbi-Sue to eat.

Nicole motioned Julie into the kitchen area.

Friends of Jimmy showed up.

Megan stepped into the hallway and encouraged them, "Come on in."

Soon after Nicole's pastor's stepped in. Lilly, carrying a dish, headed into the kitchen, Ester helped her put it in the refrigerator; Lilly insisted on helping.

The glass door opened. Anytime this sliding glass door opened the breeze came in. To anyone from the south this was cold to anyone from the Midwest it was nice.

An excited Jeff, Buck, and Billy stepped in from outside. Billy made sure to shut the door.

Jeff asked, "What's a Kringle?"

Ashleigh was sitting at the table eating scrambled eggs and sausage.

She pointed, "It's over there."

Megan looked at this dessert.

Her dimples flashed.

Sitting at the end of the kitchen table she could clearly see this dessert, "Is there any dessert in Wisconsin healthy?"

Fred who was stepping in from the dinning room stated, "Not on your life."

Following Fred was Earl and the friends of Jimmy.

Bette followed her Dad outside.

This impressed Megan and Ashleigh; but surprised everyone else.

Before they stepped outside Fred told Earl, "You thank them."

Earl yelled, "Thank-you."

The ladies shook their heads or giggled.

Nicole answered, "Your welcome."

Fred stated, "I'm surprised I liked grits."

Nicole asked, "You liked them?"

"First time I ever tried them. I think I'll have them again."

Nicole smiled.

Megan scolded the boys, "Only one. Y'all; there are other people here."

Billy answered, "Yes Ma'am."

They looked at one another and reluctantly stepped outside.

Julie sitting next to Ashleigh leaned in and whispered, "He's Billy."

Ashleigh nodded her head.

Fred asked, "Where should we put these plates?"

One of the ladies said, "I'll take em'."

A couple guys Jimmy worked with stepped into the house.

Jimmy stepped into the kitchen from outside.

“We’ll have set this up in pairs and in fours. If Y’all pair up it’ll help us. If Y’all are a single we have a couple jobs for Y’all.”

Julie smiled when Bette stepped up to her Dad.

Everyone heard Diana and Sherrie yell at the kids in the dinning room for being to loud. Nicole, Ashleigh, Megan, Julie, and Fred found it funny how two clearly different accents yelled at the children.

Nicole commanded, “Just leave them plates on the table.”

They did.

Fred yelled, “Earl!”

“Yeah.”

“We have work to do.”

He: cringed, left the dinning room, and followed his Dad outside.

Megan, and Ashleigh turned in their plates and stepped outside.

Once outside Fred pointed at Ashleigh, “Nice hat.”

“No doubt.”

Jimmy was shocked when Bette teamed up with her Dad.

Julie originally wanted to work outside but changed her mind because of Bobbi-Sue.

Fred walked Earl up to Jimmy, “Give Earl here an important job.”

The two fathers nodded their heads.

Jimmy gave Earl: gloves, ear protection, and goggles. Earl was tasked with trying to keep the yard clean and keeping everyone supplied. Everyone was impressed with how serious he took this job.

People were surprised at how well Billy was at measuring and cutting. Only Jimmy and Jeff knew; Julie was the person who taught him how to measure.

February 17th, The Fence

Part One of Five

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Ashleigh & Megan

Book I: Friendship



Saturday February 17th

The Fence

Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Part Two of Five

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*Posted on ashleighandmegan.com on:
April 8th, 2023*

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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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February 17, The Fence

Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Ashleigh was bent down, was on the outside of the fence, and held the pre-stained cedar wood stringer in place. Bette was on the inside of the fence with her own drill. She fastened the lag bolts to the already attached bracket. What Ashleigh, Megan, Fred, and Bette were doing were attaching five stringers to a sets of poles: there was one on the bottom, two in the middle, one on the outside top, and one for the top. Another four people were doing the same thing, both teams would move to the next empty set of poles. Way ahead a team was dropping the amount of stringers needed at each set of poles. There were three lengths. It was their job to make sure the correct sized lengths were at each pole; Jimmy marked each set of poles with a number and A or B for reference. Ashleigh recognized this was the same system Jimmy used to set up the warehouse. There were two teams of attaching the top caps. This took longer because: they were placing two foot by six foot wooden boards on top. This covered the length of two sections. They needed to be more careful because they were using ladders, the spacing was slightly more difficult, and the boards were longer. What concerned Jimmy about the top caps: were the corners, the forty-five degree angles needed to fit securely, they hung over so the pickets and trim would fit underneath, and the corners were cut correctly. The one stringer Jimmy was most concerned about was the one Ashleigh and Bette were attaching; this bottom stringer had to be flush with the concrete.

Before Jimmy would send anyone on a task he'd show them what the result should be. He was using a section of poles as examples. As each step was reached he would show the next step to the next volunteers. Ashleigh felt this was an example on why he was their best manager. He was very patient and he seemed to know what task would fit a person. He listened to someone when they volunteered for a task; a case in point was Bette. He had some

doubt until, without saying anything, she took her drill and attached the lag bolt to the wood stringer.

Megan and Fred were doing the same thing with the top stringers. With these two being taller they only needed a small step ladder to reach these. One person held the stringer in the middle or on the end; depending on the length of the board or where they were in the process. The other would attach one side with one and half inch long quarter inch lag bolts, then go over to the other pole and repeat this action. The other team was attaching the stringers different. Jimmy could have cared less as long as the result were the same. When a team was struggling with something or something was wrong either Jeff or Jimmy approached them.

Where Ashleigh stood it was easy to watch Billy and Buck work the top cap. She was impressed with how easily they lifted these long boards off of the ground, climb the ladder and drill in the top cap. She was surprised she very rarely heard a screw get stripped. It appeared to Ashleigh these screws were fairly long. The other team doing this was Sal and Lester. She was impressed with how strong they were and how nimble they were on the ladders. It was obvious attaching the top caps took longer than attaching the stringers.

Bette yelled, "Earl."

This commanding voice surprised everyone who could hear her over the noises of saws, drills, yelling, and talking.

"Yeah."

"Bring me some lag bolts."

The four of them spotted him push up his safety goggles.

"Okay."

Ashleigh was impressed Bette knew enough to yell for the same bolts before she ran out. Ashleigh slid over to make sure the stringer was flush with the concrete.

Earl ran a handful to her. He pushed up his safety goggles.

When he reached her big sister he stated, "Here."

Bette: signaled he should stay there, she placed these bolts into a pouch hanging off of her tool belt, moved her now sunglasses to the edge of her nose, she made these prescription glasses into sunglasses by attaching tinted lenses, they sat on top of little magnets on the rims; she looked at her brother.

Sternly she instructed, "Down here you use yes sir or yes ma'am."

"Why?"

"It's a respect thing."

"Okay."

He pushed up his safety goggles again.

"No."

He gave her a look.

"What would you say to me?"

"Yes Ma'am."

She winked, "Instead of bringing a hand full ask Mr. Jimmy for a cup or a box to give to us."

"Okay."

"What are you suppose to say?"

"Yes Ma'am."

She stopped and knelt on her knees, "How do you ask Mr. Jimmy?"

Ashleigh watched and listened.

"I should say. Mr. Jimmy do you have a cup or box. So I can give everyone more lag bolts?"

"There. Now go."

He was about to run off.

"Wait."

"Okay."

He stopped.

"Oh. Yes Ma'am."

She set her drill down stood up and gently took the goggles of his face.

"You can adjust these."

She showed him and gave them to him.

They were still big but it was better.

"Thanks."

"What do you say?"

"Thanks Ma'am."

She immediately focused turned and went back to the brackets and stringer.

He went running over to Jimmy.

Ashleigh watched: as Jimmy listened to him, Jimmy smiled, it was obvious Jimmy asked Earl something, Earl pointed to his sister, they talked some more, and Jimmy led him to the shed. What Ashleigh missed was Earl running out of the shed with parts bins and then running into the house. She missed Jimmy call over Jeff and they moved an old fold out table from the garage out into the yard. They quickly wiped it off and set it up. Jeff quickly set plastic bins onto the table. Earl and Julie came outside carrying a bunch of plastic butter bowls and miscellaneous bowls her Momma were keeping. Ashleigh missed this because she needed to focus on making sure the stringer was flush with the concrete footing.

Megan noticed where Ashleigh and Bette were. She finished drilling in the lag bolt.

She yelled, "With Y'all down there watch for snakes."

Bette slid her glasses down.

"Snakes?"

Fred smiled, "You mean Jeff didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Ashleigh smiled.

Megan flashed her dimple smile.

Her Dad informed her, "The reason their putting up this fence is to keep snakes out of the yard."

Bette answered, "The two things I hate about Florida is all the snakes and all the bugs."

Ashleigh added, "Don't forget alligators."

Megan in serious tone added, "If Y'all go swimming don't forget about barracuda and sharks."

Fred looked at Megan, "Barracuda?"

Megan was very serious, "They attack more people than sharks. They've been known to bite a leg or two."

Fred smiled and with gratitude said, "Thanks for the tip. Next time we go swimming we'll watch for them."

Bette looked at Ashleigh.

Ashleigh shrugged her shoulders.

Ashleigh mentioned in a softer tone, "Then there is the Skunk ape."

Bette asked, "What's that?"

"It's their version of a Sasquatch."

Bette became serious, "Don't tell my Dad."

"Why?"

"He'd probably go looking for it."

Bette made a face, "He claims while working on a house he saw one."

Ashleigh asked, "In Wisconsin?"

"Washington County."

"There?"

Bette made a face.

"Everybody laughs at him. But he will tell everyone the story if they want to hear it or not."

Fred asked, "What are you talking about?"

Bette focused, "We're trying to make sure this is flush with the concrete."

"Good."

Ashleigh whispered, "Do you believe him. Washington County is only a county away from where I grew up?"

Bette whispered back, "My Dad doesn't lie. But people think he's crazy whenever he talks about it."

Ashleigh added, "My Foster Dad spotted one hunting in upper Wisconsin."

Bette again whispered, "Don't tell my Dad."

This is when Earl showed up with a small parts bin, "Here."

Bette scolded, "What are you suppose to say?"

He gave her a look.

"Say. Ma'am or sir."

"Yes Ma'am?"

"That's better."

Megan heard this because she still had her earmuffs off.

Megan was impressed.

Fred asked Megan, "I like your hat. So you shoot?"

"Yes sir."

This stopped Earl, "Ma'am."

Megan found the way he said it funny.

She answered, "Yes."

"You shoot a gun?"

"Yes I do."

He made a face.

Megan's dimples flashed.

Earl asked, "I've never heard of a girl shooting a gun before?"

"Down here many ladies shoot guns."

"Oh."

Bette saved her brother, "Go deliver the other parts bin to those guys over there."

"Yes Ma'am."

Ashleigh, Bette, and Megan all smiled at one another. Bette filled her pouch with bolts. All four looked at the five stringers they put up and briefly tested them. With this they moved to the next set of empty poles.

Bette was the one who spotted a boy step out of the house. Bette nudged Ashleigh and pointed.

"His name is Dustin. He's Duke and Diana's son."

Bette said, "He's looking for someone."

All at once he ran up to Earl and asked, "Y'all Earl?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Momma told me I should help Y'all."

"Okay. We have to get everyone what they need to keep working."

"You sound like Ms. Ashleigh."

Ashleigh yelled, "We're from the same place."

"Yes Ma'am."

Dustin turned toward Earl, "I'm Dustin."

"Okay."

"What are Y'all doing?"

"Making sure they have lag bolts."

Ashleigh pointed, "It looks like those guys over there are yelling at you."

Earl said, "I'll show you where they are."

Dustin answered, "Okay."

They ran to the table Jeff and Jimmy set up. On this beat up table were: bolts, screws, nails for nail guns, a pile of parts bins, and plastic bowls. Before they reached this table Jimmy stopped them and pointed to some boards. They did what they were told.

Megan said, "Your son is a good boy."

He answered, "He has his moments."

Bette answered, "He thinks he can do everything."

Fred stated, "Sounds like his sister."

Bette with a face said, "Ida is exactly like him."

Ashleigh and Megan smiled at one another.

Fred's eyebrow went up.

Bette without saying a word grabbed one of the boards.

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan grabbed one as well and was about to slip on her earmuffs.

The twelve people working on the stringers looked over at Jimmy when he started the generator. He was at the teaching set of poles. He was showing four guys on how to put up the pickets. From a distance Ashleigh could tell this was a tedious job. Ashleigh wondered what would happen after the pickets were up and the top cap was finished.

She spotted Jeff taking splintered pickets and cutting them into small pieces. Jimmy took a nail gun and everyone turned toward the sound when he hit the wood. This caused Ashleigh to pan the yard. She spotted Dustin and Earl lugging nail guns to a group of guys.

It was easy to spot the difference between anyone local or from up north. Anyone local was still wearing coats; where anyone from up north were wearing sweatshirts or hoodies.

This is when she spotted the guys who laid out the stringers start counting out what most likely would be the pickets. Ashleigh felt this was a well thought out process; this again reaffirmed why Jimmy was one of their best employees.

Fred stated, "Lets get a move on."

She focused and helped Bette with the middle lower board. While Megan and Fred worked on the middle top one. Soon they were on the top outside one. Where they slowed down was the very top flat one.

Nicole set a watermelon on the counter.

Diana set her plate on the pile of dirty dishes. She hid the fact she was disappointed her son was helping Ester and Danielle instead of going outside and helping the men. She sent him to Earl. She knew to send him to Earl because of Jeff explaining to Nicole why they were looking for empty bins; Jeff and Earl were clearly in the way. To get them out of the kitchen Nicole handed them over a dozen plastic bowls.

Ester stated, "I don't like dishes."

Danielle agreed, "Yea."

Nicole turned and asked, "Y'all like something else?"

The two girls observed Nicole's tone and body language.

At the same time they answered; "No Ma'am."

Nicole smiled.

Bobbi-Sue and Ida looked at one another.

Julie leaned over, "It's called work duty."

Ida was happy to be included. She: was shy, wished she still lived in Wisconsin, felt alone, was unsure of everything, and disliked how small her church was. She volunteered because she had nothing better to do.

The sound of the nail guns was the dominating sound; every so often the saw would be turned on.

Diana asked, "Are they shooting out there?"

Sherrie looked out the sliding door, "It looks like their starting to use nail guns."

Ida said, "They make so much noise."

Nicole answered, "They do."

Diana waved her arm and her bracelets jangled.

"Honey. We'll be hearing them all day."

Sherrie added, "It looks like their starting to remove planks from a huge pile."

Nicole answered, "Ever since they put them poles up. They've been using the saw."

Diana touched her necklace and looked over at Ida, "Honey. If Y'all don't mind me asking? Where you named after someone?"

Julie gently tapped her.

"Me?"

"Yes darling."

She looked at her Mom.

"Tell them."

Ida made a face.

"It started with my oldest brother. He's named after Grandpa."

Sherrie made sure to say, "This was my husbands Dad."

Ida continued, "Then Bette was named after my Mom's mom."

Sherrie added, "This is because she passed away."

Nicole said, "Sorry to hear."

"It's okay. She was suffering but she had faith in Christ. She's with the Lord."

This caught all of the ladies attention.

"Because my Grandma was upset."

Again Sherry explained, "She complained."

"I was named after her."

Diana was smiling, waved her arm, and her bracelets jangled.

"Interesting."

Ida shook her head.

Sherrie added, "Earl is named after my father."

Julie had to ask, "Is he alive?"

Nicole scolded, "Julie."

Sherrie answered with a smile, "He's alive and happy."

Ida added, "Alice is sort of annoyed."

Sherrie clarified, "Alice married my Dad about six years ago."

Julie decided to be a smart ass.

"Well if Jeff and Bette have a girl they'll have to name it Alice."

Ida covered her mouth and giggled. She hated her braces.

This caused Julie, Bobbi-Sue, and the other ladies in the kitchen to laugh. Both Sherrie and Nicole were less than pleased.

Nicole's response was, "You've won the prize of cutting up this watermelon and making it into a basket."

Julie tried, "Megan usually makes those."

"She's outside working. Obviously Y'all want attention. Receive some positive attention by cutting up the watermelon."

"Yes Ma'am."

Bobbi-Sue volunteered, "I know how to make em."

"You two ladies stand here and start."

Julie asked, "Ida want to help?"

Feeling included answered, "Yeah."

All three made their way to the other side of the counter.

Julie was happy she never needed braces.

Nicole stated, "Y'all know where the knives are. Try not to make a mess. Place the cubes into this bowl. Make sure Y'all wash your hands."

Bobbi-Sue answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Julie led them to the sink on the island. Where they washed their hands. Julie pulled out a knife from a drawer. Julie was surprised at the large knife Bobbi-Sue selected.

Nicole addressed needs. General conversation was happening around the kitchen. Sitting at the kitchen table was Lilly and a few other ladies. Diana was standing at the edge of the L shaped counter. While standing there she was surprised at the conversation Pastor Lilly was having with Sherrie. Most of the ladies assumed by how she dressed she was an artistic northern liberal. It was surprising to Diana when she mentioned the church she was going to.

This church was a blend of Evangelical and Charismatic. This blend was one of the reasons it was a smaller church.

Nicole turned and told the two girls, "Make sure all the plates are dry. Stack em on the towel."

Ester asked, "Are we using them for lunch?"

"Yes we are."

Danielle asked, "What are we having?"

"Yesterday I made a seafood salad. Some of the ladies here brought dishes. Soon we'll be making sandwiches and I'll be starting to make macaroni and cheese."

"Ms. Nicole I like your macaroni and cheese."

She winked and touched Danielle, "It's one of the reasons I've decided to make it."

Danielle and Ester smiled at one another.

Nicole continued, "We'll set out the yogurt again. We'll have the watermelon fruit salad and we'll soon start cutting up vegetables."

Ester asked, "Y'all make vegetable dip?"

"Yes I did."

This they liked.

Ester made a face, "I heard Daddy talking about ordering pizza?"

"Later."

Ester and Danielle looked at one another. This was a treat because Nicole hated ordering out.

Ida was unsure of what Bobbi-Sue was doing.

Julie thought it was interesting on how Bobbi-Sue made her watermelon basket.

Diana was curious, "Sherrie. How long have Y'all known Ms. Ashleigh?"

Sherrie used this as an excuse to get up and move near the counter. She wanted to see what Bobbi-Sue was doing with the watermelon.

Bobbi-Sue asked after cutting two half moons, "Y'all have an ice cream scooper?"

Julie opened a drawer and handed her one.

This was different from Megan but it worked.

Sherrie looked at Diana, "Since she was little."

Nicole perked up and stepped close to Diana.

Diana asked holding onto her necklace, "I hate assuming. But were Y'all a friend of the family?"

"I worked for his Mom as a dance instructor."

This surprised everyone.

Ira stated, "Mom and Dad go ballroom dancing."

Diana waved her arm, "Y'all go dancing with your husband?"

"Yeah."

Nicole rolled her eyes, "I wish I could get Jimmy to dance."

Picturing her Daddy dance seemed odd to Julie.

Diana rolled her eyes, "Duke tries. Y'all seen him at the wedding?"

Nicole with a disappointed tone, "At least he tries."

Sherrie stated, "You made a basket?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"That is clever."

Ida stated, "We'll have to try that."

Diana was taken back by this and played with her necklace.

"Y'all never seen a watermelon basket before?"

Ida answered, "First time."

Nicole instructed, "Let's add more fruit."

While conversations were going on Nicole was placing fruit onto the counter.

Lilly asked, "What'll Y'all do at Renewed Mastery?"

"I work in the art department. I sometimes work with advertising. But mostly I'm with the development team."

Nicole grabbed the pot from the dining room, "Look at what she made me."

Diana asked, "Y'all made it?"

Sherrie said, "God made the plant I made the pot."

They all giggled.

Ida, Bobbi-Sue, and Julie rolled their eyes.

Nicole set the plant on the window sill in front of the sink. She complimented the girls and excused them; but warned them to be prepared to come back to work. They ran upstairs to Esters room. They came back down carrying jewelry making kits. They were smart enough to go into the playroom. In this room they could listen to all the adults talk.

Diana asked, "How long have Y'all worked there?"

"I was one of the first employees hired. I helped Bob design some of his first wooden games and clocks."

Diana asked, "If Y'all don't mind me prying."

"No."

"Why did Y'all stop working for his Momma?"

Sherrie held in tears.

"She died in a car accident."

Nicole put her hand on her chest, "We had no idea."

Sherrie asked, "Please don't bring it up to Bob. It was a very upsetting time. I don't believe he's completely over it."

Lilly stated, "Y'all must've been close to her."

"She's the one who led me to the Lord."

This meant a lot to the ladies standing in this kitchen.

Sherrie hoped the conversation would switch to something else.

Diana asked, "It was nice of Mr. Bob to hire Y'all."

Ida encouraged, "Tell them."

Sherrie answered her daughter, "They don't want to hear about that."

"It's how you met Dad."

Now everyone wanted to hear.

"After his Mom died he opened a club."

Everyone sort of gasped.

Sherrie felt compelled to explain it a little, "It wasn't like a dive bar."

Julie asked, "What's a dive bar?"

"A small corner bar for locals."

Ida stated, "There's a lot of them in Wisconsin."

Sherrie confirmed, "Alcoholism is a huge problem there."

Lilly felt compelled to ask, "Why did he open a club?"

"There was a few reasons. I'd like to think he opened it to help us girls who worked for Amanda. He always loved music."

She paused and gazed over her audience.

"A lot of people laughed at him for how he wanted to run a club. Many felt it would be a disaster."

Nicole believed if Mr. Bob was told he was unable to start something he would start it.

Diana asked, "Was it classy?"

"No drunkenness was tolerable there."

Ida said, "Mom showed us pictures."

Sherrie added, "In it's hay day it was the place to go to. It had a huge elegant restaurant. Two large dance halls."

Ida pressuring, "Tell them about the hotel."

Sherrie gave her the stare.

Julie pushed, "A hotel?"

Sherrie answered, "When acts came in from out of town they could stay in rooms down in the basement."

Sherrie glared at Ida.

Everyone spotted Ida shrink.

Julie wondered why anyone would put a hotel in a cellar.

Nicole felt Sherrie was growing uncomfortable with this conversation, "I understand Y'all work in the art department?"

Sherrie jumped at this, "My favorite is designing the wooden games and I still work on the clocks. Lately I've been assigned bigger projects."

Danielle and Ester came running into the kitchen.

Ester asked, "Ms. Sherrie Y'all paint?"

Nicole was about to step in but she spotted Sherrie's whole countenance change.

Diana played with her necklace as she watched.

Sherrie: stepped out from where she was standing, moved in front of the table, and bent down in front of the two girls.

"I'm not the greatest painter. I like to draw and I like to do what is called three D art."

Danielle asked, "What's three D art?"

"It's like the pot I made for Nicole."

Ester asked, "Y'all make jewelry?"

"Yes I do."

Danielle asked, "Y'all want to see the jewelry we're making?"

"Of course."

Ida jumped in, "Instead why not show everyone your sketch book?"

Sherrie would have enjoyed working with Ester and Danielle more.

All of the ladies noticed this.

Sherrie tried to get out of it, she wanted to help, but everyone wanted to see her sketches.

"They don't..."

What swayed her was when Danielle asked, "Ms Sherrie what's a sketch?"

Ester added, "Ms. Sherry show us."

Ida jumped at this, "It's like a drawing before it becomes a painting or a big project."

Sherrie smiled at her daughter.

Bobbi-Sue and Julie looked at one another.

Bobbi-Sue asked, "Ma'am I'd like to see em'."

Nicole smiled.

"There just sketches."

Ida said, "There really good."

Everyone watched as Sherrie stood up and stepped over to her big bag and took out a big sketch book and a variety of pencils; there were a variety of colors and widths.

Ester said, "I want to see."

Nicole was about to scold but Sherrie became very patient, "What's your name?"

"Ester."

"Yours?"

"Danielle."

"Stand over here and I'll show you."

They stepped up to Sherrie and watched. The rest gathered around the table to look at her large sketch book.

Julie stepped into the garage, wiped down a few chairs, and brought them in. As soon as she set them down Danielle and Ester were knelling on them.

Nicole glanced up at the clock. She felt there was a long story between Sherrie, Bob, and Ashleigh. She would wait for a more private moment to ask her.

While they were looking at the sketches Captain and Ma stepped into the house.

Nicole excused herself and went to greet her In-laws.

Sherrie flipped to an empty page, took out a charcoal pencil and started to show everyone how she sketched. Danielle and Ester were overjoyed she was sketching the two of them.

During this time Ma watched and Captain went outside to help.

Diana thought of a few people Sherrie should meet.

Sherrie was about to give this sketch to Ester, Nicole intercepted the picture before Ester and Danielle had a chance to grab it.

As only a Momma can say, "We're framing it."

This ended the discussion. Nicole took the picture into her bedroom.

Diana glanced at the clock. She then suggested, "Lets start making sandwiches. Y'all need to finish the fruit salad."

Bobbi-Sue answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Diana suggested, "Maybe add more strawberries."

When Nicole came back she observed what was happening and started to set out everything needed to make the sandwiches.

Shelly looked over at her son.

He was playing with his cars, animals, and wooden blocks his Daddy gave him. It was obvious they were made at his Daddy's company. Shelly rightly assumed he: collected the blocks from scrap wood, had someone sand them, and had someone else paint them. She was sure this would turn into a new item the company would sell. Shelly believed this would

branch off into a variety of custom selections. There was the possibility he would even devise a way to get people to collect them. She would keep this vision to herself.

She focused back on her painting. In the corner of the canvas was a winter photograph of the river and park down the street. If she: stepped out the back door, went down the stairs, she would be in the back parking lot by a tattoo parlor. Across the street was the small parking lot she needed to park her car at night. The one thing she disliked about living in this apartment was having to park in the municipal lot during the day and then move her vehicle in back during the night. She learned to move the car after Little Bobby was tucked in at night.

How Shelly survived prison was her: faith, educational classes, and the art classes. The reason she took these classes was the admiration she felt for all of the artists that worked for Bobby. She never intended to sell any of her art, this was a hobby of hers she found therapeutic; her art helped her stay clean and sober. She felt if she started to sell her art it would ruin the joy of it.

Today was an example.

She felt she had two really good weeks without feeling the temptation to use. She felt this was a bad day because of two things. The first was her mother invited her to dinner; Shelly suspected there was an agenda to this dinner. Her mother was voicing her displeasure in the visitation schedule; this was something Shelly expected to happen. What was irritating was Holly's hints she should be power of attorney in case "something" should happen. It was obvious Holly wanted to have custody of Robert if she starting using again or if she would pass away.

This consent complaining about the visitation schedule was annoying. She felt everything in the custody paperwork was fair, especially since this was covering two states and Bobby was constantly flying up every other weekend to see his son. Holly insisted Bobby would kidnap Robert. Shelly wanted to believe he would never do so but it was a concern.

Shelly believed one of the best things Bobby ever did was pay for the apartment she was living in; granted he added terms to the lease. Terms Shelly felt were fair. A blessing to living in this apartment was it gave the clean and sober Shelly a way to consider things without the influence of her Mother.

What Holly was unaware off, something she would be angry with, Naomi was coming over with the paperwork giving Naomi power of attorney. This would kick into effect if either Shelly passed away or she started to use again. They wrote this paperwork in such a way where Naomi would act as a legal guardian for Robert. This would give the courts a chance to review the situation. As Robert's guardian it gave Naomi a lot of influence on where Robert should be placed. In this paperwork it was made clear Shelly was against her Mother receiving custody. Her preference was to have Naomi and her future husband Levi have custody. But, Shelly gave Naomi the ability to transfer custody to Bobby, if Naomi felt this was the best for her Son.

She looked over at Little Bobby (her nickname for Robert). She quickly looked at the painting. If he never recognized he was being gazed upon; he was content in his play. It was obvious to Shelly her Son had a very vivid imagination. Shelly was certain Bobby would encourage their son to use. Shelly knew he encouraged all of his employees and Ashleigh to use their creativity. Listening to Little Bobby play Zoo, when he never visited one; was an example of Bobby encouraging his son to have an imagination.

What made this a bad day was the possibility she would pass away or face the consequences of her slipping. The unclean Shelly would have taken drugs to face these questions and these possibilities. Part of: being clean, being a parent, and growing up was to face these things without the drugs. One of the reasons she liked drugs was it was a way to avoid growing up and facing responsibility. She recognized it was a false coping mechanism. Temporarily drugs made it feel like she could face anything. The reality it was a false confidence. She understood being high was selfish. Once she took a hit or drank this would be the primary focus of her life. The clean and sober Shelly, knew there needed to be paperwork transferring custody; from a high or drunk Shelly. Shelly believed, if she ever started using again, there was the likely hood she would die of an overdose.

In the middle of the painting there was a little boy with his arm up.

She was about to paint a woman reaching down for the hand. There was a knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Naomi.”

She smiled when Little Bobby jumped up and yelled, “No-me.”

Shelly replied, “I’ll be right there.”

Shelly: set her paint and paint brush onto a near by bookshelf, walked up to the front door, opened the door, quickly grabbed the easel and the painting, walked both back to her bedroom, and shut the bedroom door. This is when she decided she needed a better set up.

Naomi made sure the front door was shut behind her. She set down her briefcase. Took off her: boots, long coat, hat, and gloves. This is when she picked up an excited little boy.

“What are you playing?”

“Zoo.”

Naomi smiled, “Have you been to the zoo yet?”

Shelly entering the living room answered, “Only in his imagination.”

They smiled.

Naomi set Little Bobby down and they hugged.

Shelly whispered, “This is hard.”

“I know. But it’s the best thing.”

They let go.

Little Bobby looked up at his Mommy and pointed.

“You sad.”

Shelly whipped away tears.

“Mommy is okay. You play Zoo.”

With this he went back to playing.

Naomi grabbed the suitcase and they stepped into the kitchen.

Megan put in the last top stringer and stated, “She’s in.”

She heard Bette stop her drill.

Bette replied, “It’s in.”

Fred stated, “Just like downtown.”

Megan gave him a look.

Ashleigh said, “It means it’s well done.”

Megan would never criticize someone else sayings; she recognized the south had way to many.

This last set of stringers were against the left side of the house. There were many sections to this fence: it turned right, went the width of the property, then turned right again, this section went the whole length of the property, turned right, went the width of the property, turned right again, these last two sections were flush with the garage; everyone was told Jeff and Jimmy were planning on cutting out a gate near the garage. On the inside of the fence, in front of each section, were four piles of different planks. The first was the one long top cap that covered two sections, second was the pile of pickets cut to fit pole to pole, third was the long trim pieces cut at the same length as the top caps, and there were boards for the poles; which included three long boards and small boards for trim. On the outside of the fence, in front of each section, were three piles: the boards for the pickets on this side, the trim, and vinyl paneling. The paneling was the same color as the wood.

The four of them looked at the progress of the fence. Attaching the top caps had slowed because of the left corner (this is where the length of the fence met the width of the fence). The measurements were off by a half an inch They fixed it by cutting a half an inch off the boards on the long side of the fence. After this: Jeff, Jimmy, Buck, and Captain measured the corner toward the house. They were happy the boards matched the measurement. The pickets were being put up; this was evident by the sounds of the nail guns. This looked like a tedious process. It was assumed with the majority of the people working on this it would get completed in a few hours.

Megan mentioned, "If one person was putting up them pickets it'd take days."

Fred agreed, "It sure would."

Bette asked, "What are the canopies for?"

Megan answered, "Try working when it's eighty or ninety degrees outside."

Bette answered, "It's hot now."

Megan replied, "I still can't imagine what Y'all consider cold."

Fred replied, "For us living near Lake Michigan it gets humid in the summer. But from what I'm researching. The humidity down here makes that humidity seem mild."

Megan never thought about this.

Ashleigh sighed, "I'm sure people from up north will complain to me about how it needs to be colder in the building and the locals will complain it's to cold."

Megan answered, "Not in July or August."

Ashleigh never thought about this.

Fred suggested, "How about you and I help them with the top caps. With you two being short why not work on the bottom trim.

Bette and Ashleigh looked at one another.

Megan suggested, "Just ask Jimmy on how he wants the bottom trim put in."

Ashleigh said, "Okay."

Bette asked, "Megan are those panels on the outside for snakes?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"How tall are they?"

"Just about five feet."

The three people from Wisconsin looked at her.

“Most of the communities around here believe a twenty-four inch fence is tall enough. With Jimmy working construction and building some of these snake fences he’s heard of longer snakes climbing over. What people in the knowing are finding out is a long rattler can prop themselves up and climb over a twenty-four inch fence. With the concrete footing and the trim I believe it makes it a thirty-six inch barrier.”

Bette stated, “With the concrete bottom this is an eight foot high fence. Why do you need the vinyl?”

“Without the vinyl they’d crawl up the wood.”

Fred laughed.

Bette said, “It isn’t funny.”

Fred teased, “You love snakes.”

She pushed her glasses down to the edge of her nose and gave her Dad a look.

Fred asked, “Isn’t this wood costing a pretty penny?”

Megan answered, “Well. Ah.”

Ashleigh answered for her, “Jimmy told me he got a good deal.”

This was a half truth. Jimmy knew a guy. The same guy knew Captain. He happened to be a salesmen for a local Florida supply company. With how Bob worked, even though the wood was slightly more expensive than an out of state company or even a foreign company; Bob as often as he could went with Captain’s friend’s company. After only a few orders this salesmen told Bob if he ever needed wood to let him know. For Jimmy; Bob turned in the favor. This wood was from a huge construction project, but the stain was the wrong color; Jimmy went to the warehouse this wood was kept and liked the stain. Instead of all of the wood being sold to a wholesaler a portion was delivered to Jimmy’s house. Jimmy was surprised when Bob paid for it out of his own pocket. Jimmy was asked to never tell anyone. The only ones who knew were: the salesman, the person who processed the order, Captain, Nicole, Ashleigh, Megan, and Bob.

Jimmy and Nicole were telling everyone they received a good deal. It was up to everyone else to guess at what this meant. Everyone knowing Jimmy’s friends in the construction business and Captains family friends; never pressed any further.

Fred smiled, “A construction contact?”

Ashleigh elbowed him and winked, “You could say that.”

Fred answered, “Those come in handy.”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

Bette looked at him.

Fred answered his daughters look.

“How do you think I could afford the additions to our house in Wisconsin?”

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

Fred became serious, “Lets get to work. We should keep the snakes out of the yard,”

Bette replied, “Not funny.”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

They headed over to Buck and Billy. They asked how they were installing the top cap.

*A*shleigh watched Bette unzip her hoodie.

They reached Jimmy who was making sure the pickets were plum. Ashleigh and Bette were watching a team tack up the pickets. Two people were putting on the back layer pickets. One of them set a three inch spacer with a cheap handle on it flush with the concrete footer, the board on the left, and the four stringers. The other took a picket and laid it plum with the spacer, this person would put two nails into the picket wherever the stringer crossed the picket; Jimmy instructed them if there was a gap in length to put the gap up on top. Ashleigh noticed if there was a gap it was very small. All of the outside pickets were five and a half inches wide until the corners, all the inside ones were five and a half inches wide until they reached the pole. Each section had its own set of pickets, this was why the inside was lagging behind. Every so often a new picket would need to be made because it was measured wrong or it became splintered. Everyone was grateful this was rare. Like the stringers when a section was finished the team would bounce to a section without pickets. What was taking a while was keeping the pickets plum; this extra time would save time later. The next person would lay down the front layer over the back layer using the same process as the person laying the first layer, everyone was doing their best to avoid hitting back nails. A staggering system was implemented which helped stop hitting nails.

Dustin and Earl were keeping everyone supplied by handing out supplies and helping everyone with small tasks. Both Bette and Ashleigh believed this was turning into a competition.

Ashleigh was surprised, with how many people were helping, how long everything was taking. She believed Jimmy created a successful process but so much of this project was filled with tedious repetition.

Jimmy stepped out of the shed carrying a hatchet.

Bette asked Ashleigh, "Why is he carrying a hatchet?"

"I think to chop snakes head off."

Ashleigh noticed the look on Bette's face.

"You could go in if you'd like."

"No."

Ashleigh admired her determination.

Ashleigh was able to get Jimmy's attention.

Jimmy stepped over and asked, "Ms. Ashleigh Y'all needing anything?"

"Today I'm Ashleigh. Your the boss today."

He smiled.

"Alright Ashleigh. What are Y'all needing?"

"Fred suggested we start on the outside trim."

"Y'all would be perfect for getting low to the ground."

He turned to Bette, "I'm betting your Daddy was in construction?"

"Yes sir."

"I bet he was a lead."

"Yes Sir. Besides being a lead he was a certified electrification."

Jimmy answered, "I'm impressed."

Bette asked, "How could you tell?"

"Because I was a construction lead."

Bette immediately respected Jimmy.

Jimmy became serious, "Y'all have to start on the outside by the garage and make Y'all way around."

He took off the machete attached to his hip and tried to hand it to Ashleigh.

"If Y'all see a snake chop it's head off. Or Y'all can call me over and I'll take care of it."

Ashleigh made a face, "We'll yell."

"With all the noise and all these people I'm sure they've scurried away."

Both ladies looked at one another.

"Take one of them small generators and wheel it around. When you make it around attach the air hoses. Make sure the bottom is flush with the concrete. I'm adding the trim not only so it'll look nice. But I'm wanting to set the vinyl panel on top of it."

He heard someone yell, "Jimmy."

"Excuse me."

Ashleigh answered, "Okay."

They watched Jimmy run over to a section of pickets.

Ashleigh and Bette looked at one another.

Jeff stepped over, "How are Y'all?"

Ashleigh was relieved he was dating Bette because he was no longer infatuated with her. It occurred to Ashleigh, minus the black hair and her very tiny tits, Bette and herself had the same exact shape and similar facial features.

Bette mentioned, "I'm okay except for all this talk about snakes."

Jeff stated matter of fact, "It's why we're building the fence. A coral snake almost bit Momma."

She pulled her glasses down to the edge of nose, "You never told me that."

Jeff gave her an odd look, "Y'all didn't ask."

Ashleigh smiled.

Jimmy yelled, "Jeff get over here!"

"I'm needing to get a move on."

He quickly ran over.

Ashleigh instructed, "Unless you ask they'll never tell you a thing."

"Why is that?"

Just then Fred and Megan showed up.

Megan stated, "With the four of us it wasn't difficult attaching the top cap."

Frank added, "We were thinking of helping you put up the trim."

Captain stepped over, "Hi Y'all."

"Howdy."

Ashleigh smiled, "Hi."

He lifted an old blue hat with the word Navy printed on the front and placed it back down.

"My name is Captain. I'm Jimmy's Daddy and Jeff's Grandfather. I'm told Y'all are Jeff's girlfriend and Y'all are her Daddy."

Fred smiled, "My name is Fred and this is my daughter Bette."

Fred took Captain's hand.

Fred stated, "My Dad was in the Navy."

This perked Captain's interest, "Later Y'all have to tell me where he served. Jimmy was hoping Y'all and Megan could help us with something we need working out. With Y'all

working construction we were thinking you could help us. Megan Y'all are good at problem solving. Y'all follow me."

They followed Captain to a pole where the pickets were already tacked up. Soon Duke and Jimmy arrived. Jeff was back at the saw.

Ashleigh asked, "You ready?"

Just then Nicole stepped out.

"I bet it's time for lunch."

Bette looked at Ashleigh.

Nicole tried to yell but it was difficult over all the noise.

She stepped over to Jeff.

Jeff turned off the saw.

He yelled, "Lunch!"

The two who heard it first were Billy and Buck. They stopped others and told them lunch was ready.

Bette said, "We should run in there."

Ashleigh stated, "Don't worry?"

"Why?"

"Nicole will make sure everyone's fed. Did you see breakfast?"

"Like a pot luck dinner at church?"

Ashleigh answered, "Exactly."

February 17th, The Fence

Part Two of Five

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Ashleigh & Megan

Book I: Friendship



Saturday February 17th

The Fence

Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Part Three of Five

Authored By: R. P. Voght

*Posted on ashleighandmegan.com on:
May 20, 2023*

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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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February 17, The Fence Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Julie and Ida went with Diana. This local grocery store was in Eastbank for as long as anyone could remember. It was a cross between a large convenience store and a small grocery store. Locals went to this store because of the excellent deli, bakery, and produce. Tourists found it because it was a block from the beach. It was known to have excellent live bait. Customers could pay to have live bait chopped up into smaller bait. The store had a wide selection of souvenirs. Only locals knew this convenience store was owned by the same family who owned a fairly large gas station on the other side of town. Many of the same trinkets and souvenirs were in both stores.

Ida stated, "I didn't know this was here."

Julie smiled, "The deli is great. They make the best sandwiches. Daddy grabs lunch here."

Diana mentioned, "The bakery is just divine."

"I'll have to tell my Dad."

Diana asked, "Where do Y'all live?"

"We live on the western part of town near Target and a small strip mall."

Diana said, "Nice area."

Diana parked the large SUV.

The three ladies stepped out of the vehicle.

Diana smiled, "We need ice and drinks."

They headed into the store.

Diana asked, "Y'all like Florida?"

Ida held back tears.

"I miss my friends and my cousins."

Diana being encouraging said, "Y'all are a good gal. I'm sure Y'all find some friends soon."

Ida smiled in response.

Julie was grateful she never needed braces. Julie was amazed Ida was only wearing a hoodie.

Diana stated, "I'll get the drinks. Y'all get the ice."

Julie said, "Yes Ma'am."

The two of them grabbed a cart.

Julie asked, "Are Y'all into sports?"

She shook her head.

"Elmer is. Bette's into marshal arts for as long as I remember."

"Y'all try it?"

"It wasn't for me."

Julie led the two of them to a big freezer filled with bags of ice.

A clerk walked up to her, "Howdy Julie."

"Howdy."

This college student said, "I thought Y'all were tourists."

"This here is Ida. Her family is helping Daddy put up our fence. Her Momma works at *Renewed Mastery*."

"I should have known. Y'all from the Midwest or East Coast?"

"I'm from Wisconsin."

He said, "Y'all say it funny."

Ida answered, "It's how we say it."

He answered, "It's how Y'all pronounce the C's."

Both noticed he glanced at Julie's chest. Julie zipped up her jacket.

Ida wished she had breasts a guy would want to glance at. At the same time she thought the guy was rude.

His manager said, "Bubba."

"Nice Meeting Y'all."

They studied the sign on the freezer door.

Ida said, "We'd get more if we buy six small ones than the two big ones on sale."

Julie smiled. She would test Ida.

"What are Y'all meaning?"

"It's about forty cents more for the six small ones but we'll get more in ounces. I feel the extra forty cents is worth it. We brought big coolers."

Julie knew this.

"Y'all are right."

Ida gave Julie a look.

Julie asked, "Y'all feel school is boring?"

"I'm having to make adjustments to how the school is down here."

"Where Y'all go?"

"I'm attending a private school."

"I've heard it's difficult finding friends in a private school?"

She sighed.

"The one I'm attending is the one Bob suggested. They were excited to accept me."

"Are Y'all attending North Beach Academy?"

Ida shrugged, "Yes."

"I could see why Y'all are having trouble finding friends."

"Don't make the mistake I've made."

"What's that?"

"It ain't worth being popular. I'm happier with my old friends and the new friends I made are turning out to be traders. Being popular just ain't worth it."

"I just wish we had a church group."

"The youth group Bette goes to is big."

"I don't want to go with her."

Julie smiled, "Go anyway. Y'all find your own friends."

"Bette does everything better than me."

"I bet you get better grades."

Ida smiled, "No one cares about that."

Julie lifted two bags of ice at the same time and easily set it in a cart.

Ida was shocked at how easy it was for Julie to lift those heavy bags.

Julie looked at her, "Y'all know who cares about those useless grades."

She shook her head.

"Colleges."

"I guess."

"I'm attending collage to play sports."

Ida made a face. "I suck at sports."

"What are Y'all good at?"

She sighed, "I played the clarinet and I was in a play."

Again Julie grabbed two bags and easily tossed them into the cart.

"Y'all know what Mr. Bob told me?"

"No."

"He's taught me how to make a game out of school."

"Huh?"

"If he hadn't shown me how to make a game out of it. I'd have dropped out taken the GED. I'd be attending college right now."

Ida looked at her.

"You promise not to say anything?"

"I promise."

"I'm being offered academic scholarships."

"What about sports?"

"I'd loose both sports and academic scholarships if I dropped out. If Y'all make a game out of it. It won't drag Y'all down. But Y'all have to do the work."

"Mr. Bob tell you that?"

"All the time."

"Mom says they have a scholarship."

"I'm sure Mr. Bob is watching how well Y'all are performing."

Ida blushed, "He helped my brother get into the University of Wisconsin Madison."

"See."

There was a pause.

Julie asked, "Did he deserve it?"

Ida said, "He's smarter than me."

Julie asked, "He helped with the tuition?"

Ida nodded her head.

Julie tossed the last two bags into the cart.

"Let's find Diana."

"Okay."

Ida sighed.

"I don't like being smart."

"I used to hate it. Now I'm understanding how great it is. Y'all know what the key is?"

"What's that?"

"Never let em' know how smart Y'all are. If they realize it on their own it's okay. If Y'all need to show someone how smart Y'all are show them. Go and use those smarts at a play or in band. Smarts ain't just about books."

"Sounds like something Mr. Bob would say."

"Yes Ma'am."

They smiled at one another.

Ida said, "Bette likes you."

Julie asked, "As a friend?"

Ida blushed, "She'd never have sex with girls. Bette will make Jeff wait."

Julie smiled and said, "He deserves it."

Ida asked, "Does Jeff like Bette?"

Julie thought of a lot of sarcastic things to say.

"Promise not to tell anyone?"

"Yes."

"He's a good brother. He gets goofy around gals."

Julie considered his behavior lately.

"He's acting better since meeting Bette."

Ida would never forget this.

"There's Diana."

Ida asked in whisper, "Is she rich?"

They happened to be passing through the frozen aisle to get to where Diana was standing. Julie stopped and pointed to a concentrated can of orange juice.

"Y'all have this brand in Wisconsin?"

"Yes."

"Her family owns the company."

Ida gave her a look.

"Just like we ain't liking being treated different because we're smart. Diana ain't liking the family treating her different because she's rich."

Ida understood.

"There ain't any doubt she's in. What I'd say is an upper class. But to us she's Auntie Diana."

"I like her."

Julie smiled, "She's cool. But Auntie Megan is my favorite."

"She's kinda scary."

"She had three older brothers. One of them was my Daddy."

Diana heard this.

She turned to Julie, "Y'all feel this is enough?"

Julie answered, "Auntie. Y'all ain't needing to buy all of this."

"People will be thirsty."

The two girls smiled.

Diana encouraged, "We'll need to get a move on."

They both took a cart and pushed it to the checkout lane.

Diana gave Julie the keys and instructed the girls to go to her vehicle. The clerk let Julie through the aisle before Diana paid because she knew Julie. When they reached the car they: opened the back tailgate, filled the bottom half of both coolers with ice, filled one cooler with water, the other with a variety of non-alcoholic drinks, they dumped the rest of the ice over the drinks, and Julie shut the tailgate. Diana arrived when they were dumping the ice onto the drinks. Ida and Diana stepped into the car. Julie put the cart away.

Diana asked Ida, "Honey."

"Yes Ma'am."

"I'm assuming your Momma shows her art?"

"She shows her art at work and in a couple art stores in Wisconsin. She sells a lot of paintings in Door County."

Brief moment of silence.

Ida realized the woman had no idea what Door County was. She explained, "Door County is a tourist area in upper Wisconsin."

Diana asked, "I ain't trying to be rude. But may I have your last name?"

"Schmidt."

"She travel to shows?"

"We've been helping Mom setup forever."

Julie stepped into the SUV.

Diana started the vehicle and headed to Julie's house.

Diana commented, "Those coolers will be heavy?"

Julie smiled, "We ain't lifting them."

Diana waved her hand and her bracelets jangled.

"Y'all are a smart girl."

When they reached the house Julie and Ida found: Jeff, Buck, Billy, and Sal. These young men moved the coolers back by the sliding doors. When they stepped into the house Nicole was grouping all the ladies for prayer. The ladies took turns praying. When they were done Nicole stepped outside and demanded everyone come inside to eat.

Ashleigh set her bowl and plate on the dinning room table making sure she was sitting next to Megan. The other people at the dinning room table were: Duke, Dustin, Fred, Earl, Captain, Jimmy, and a couple of Jimmy's friends (both from church and a few of his jobs). Timmy left before lunch. Nicole would keep the empty bowl until she met up with Sam.

They looked at Ashleigh's plate. On it was: a spoonful of Nicole's seafood salad, a spoonful of Jambalaya, a half of a sandwich, southern style potato salad, broccoli grape and pasta salad, and in a bowl was Ma's corn pudding. She went back into the kitchen and came back with a glass of iced tea.

Everyone smiled when Earl looked at Fred and whispered, "What's this?"

Megan who was sitting next him whispered, "Jambalaya."

Captain looked at him, "Son. It'll cause your breath to start on fire."

Fred asked, "If you didn't know what it was why did you take it?"

"Mom said if I want to be a missionary I should get used to eating things that look funny."

Everyone smiled or giggled.

Pastor Tucker (husband of Pastor Lilly) asked, "Son Y'all want to be missionary?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Being shy he answered, "I don't know."

Every adult smiled.

Ashleigh commented, "The food is better here than in Wisconsin. Especially the seafood and fruit. More important they know how to spice stuff up."

Captain added, "A good Jambalaya should have a kick to it."

Ashleigh smiled, "Yes sir."

Everyone at the table looked at her.

Pastor Tucker asked, "Y'all like the food here?"

She answered, "I didn't know how awesome citrus fruit could taste. The way you guys make your seafood is just wonderful. My favorite is the key lime pie."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"She puts cheese on everything."

Fred stated, "They don't put enough cheese on anything down here."

Ashleigh said, "You've got that right."

Megan's eyes rolled.

Her dimples flashed.

Fred looked at his son, "Try it. If you don't like it I'll finish it."

Floridians were happy when Earl liked the Jambalaya; he drank a lot of water eating it.

Various conversations were happening.

The conversation abruptly ended when Duke asked Ashleigh, "Where do Y'all put it?"

Ashleigh asked, "Why are you asking?"

Duke made a face.

Jimmy smiled, "Yeah. Why are Y'all asking?"

Captain shook his head.

Duke answered, "With Y'all being so petite I'm wondering where it all goes."

Ashleigh winked.

"I'm able to eat all this because of Julie and Megan's workouts."

This is when: Julie, Bobbi-Sue, Ida, Bette, Jeff, Buck, and Billy all stepped into the living room. Each one found a place to sit.

This is when Sal, Sal's friend, Lester (Sal's Dad), and Mr. Cooper entered the dining room. Sal and Buddy went into the living room as a sign of respect to their elders. Lester and

Mr. Cooper found empty seats around the table. The day before Jeff and Jimmy extended the table and added chairs.

Both rooms were filled with conversations.

Ashleigh asked just above a whisper, "Jimmy. What do you know about Billy?"

The men at the table were surprised Ashleigh would ask about him.

Jimmy answered, "He's a little slow but he's a turning into a fine young man."

Lester who was sitting close to Ashleigh said, "He's good at fixing things. He'll listen."

Jimmy added, "Julie's been helping him with his school work for as long as I can remember."

Lester stated, "Without him I don't believe the football team would have made it to the playoffs."

Ashleigh remarked, "It looked like he works hard?"

The men at the table now understood why she was asking.

Megan nudged him.

"Look at how he's treating Bobbi-Sue."

Jimmy mentioned, "Don't tell Nicole. She's not one for fighting. But the reason she likes him is on account he stood up for her."

Ashleigh asked, "She's picked on?"

Megan whispered, "On account of her breasts."

Ashleigh asked, "What did he do?"

Jimmy asked, "Where's Nicole?"

Ashleigh looked into the kitchen, "She's preparing to set food out."

Jimmy leaned in, "What I'm understanding he beat a fella into next week on account he was trying to force her to show her breasts."

Ashleigh crinkled her forehead.

Fred leaned in, "It's the same fight where Bette met Jeff."

Jimmy appreciated this information.

Earl was about to add to the story, but Fred shook his head; Earl listened.

Pastor Tucker added, "Our youth pastor has been mentoring Billy since third grade. He's a good boy. He takes care of his Momma."

Ashleigh asked, "I've heard this. Something happen?"

The Pastor said, "His Daddy up and left them. I ain't one for divorce but it was good for both he left."

Ashleigh glanced at Megan.

Megan nodded her head.

Captain added, "I'd pity the fool who'd hurt his Momma. Pastor I reckon' he hasn't missed a service."

"On both accounts. Y'all ain't whistling Dixie."

Ashleigh asked, "Julie says he's been picked on?"

Jimmy answered, "Until he played football he was the town joke."

All at once they heard Captain, "Billy. Y'all come here."

"Yes sir."

He: set his food on an end table, stood up, and approached the table.

Everyone could tell he was nervous.

Captain asked, "Are you graduating this year?"

“No Sir. I graduate next year.”

The pastor asked, “What are Y’all planning after graduating?”

“If I ain’t able to find a job I’m planning on joining the Army.”

Ashleigh asked, “Are you sure you want to go into the Army?”

“No Ma’am.”

Megan nudged Ashleigh.

Because of this Ashleigh asked, “Why not?”

“People around here ain’t wanting to hire me because I’m slow. I just have trouble reading. I tried getting a job last summer but people ain’t willing to hire me. I’ll sign up for the Army on account of Momma and Bobbi-Sue.”

Ashleigh asked, “What are you good at?”

“Fixing things.”

Ashleigh stood up and waved him over, “Would you come here?”

Captain nodded his head.

“Yes Ma’am.”

She stepped into the hallway just off the living room.

Everyone smiled.

Megan flashed her dimple smile.

Julie and Bobbi-Sue were watching.

Ashleigh led Billy far enough so no one would hear.

“If I talk to fast you tell me. I know I have an accent. I often talk to fast. Okay?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“You know who I am?”

“No Ma’am.”

“I’m Ms. Ashleigh.”

“Y’all are the gal Julie talked about.”

“What’d she say?”

“I promised I wouldn’t tell.”

“Was it good?”

“She says Y’all ain’t like other Yankees. She told me Y’all like it when people tell it straight.”

“Yes I do.”

Ashleigh touched him on the arm.

“I’m not like other Yankees I’m a Milwaukee Brewer fan.”

He was unsure about this woman touching him, but he liked the joke, and they both laughed.

“I understand you sometimes have trouble reading?”

“Sometimes.”

“Are you good at maps?”

He pointed to his head, “I have maps in my head. I ain’t ever forgot how to get to a place once I’ve been there.”

“You have a good memory?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Is that how you get through school?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

He paused.

"Julie helps me. She says I ain't to tell. Now Bobbi-Sue is helping me. People tell me I'm stupid. But Julie and Bobbi-Sue tell me I ain't. I know I ain't the smartest person but I ain't stupid."

It took everything within Ashleigh to hold in her emotion.

"Have you found a job for this summer?"

"No Ma'am."

"On June fourth I want you to come to Renewed Mastery and you ask for me."

It took everything within her to hold in tears.

"You remember my name?"

"Ms. Ashleigh."

"You know where Renewed Mastery is?"

"Yes Ma'am. I've driven passed it."

"What do you think?"

"I like how Y'all are painting it."

"Anything else?"

"Momma said after I graduate I should try and get a job there."

"Why?"

"She told me it's a good place."

Serious, "You have to work hard."

"Yes Ma'am. Momma says the only way I'd keep a job is if I work harder than anyone else."

"Why?"

"With me having trouble reading and studying. Momma says I might have to work at places others ain't wanting to work at."

Ashleigh held in all of her emotion.

"Everyone is good or bad at something. Just because you have trouble reading doesn't mean you aren't good at something else."

"Ma'am."

"Yes?"

"Whats aren't?"

She was very polite, "It's a northern way of saying ain't."

"Yes Ma'am."

"You like Bobbi-Sue?"

"She's my girlfriend."

"I heard you protected her?"

He whispered, "They were asking to see her boobs. A gal ain't suppose to show her boobs unless she's married."

She leaned in, "You kick his ass?"

He was shocked.

"I ain't ever heard a gal cuss before."

"I apologize."

Brief moment of silence.

She broke the silence, "You know what your suppose to do when school lets out?"

"You talk awful fast."

“When school lets out. Where are you to go?”

“Renewed Mastery.”

“Who are you to ask for?”

“Are you testing me?”

“Yes.”

He looked concerned.

“I’m just making sure you remember.”

“I ain’t forgot.”

Ashleigh added, “On June fourth you pull up to the gate at 11:00 AM. You bring a pen, your social security card, your drivers license, wear steal toed shoes, and you tell the person at the shack you were to talk to me. Can you remember all that?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Are you good at promises?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Two things I want you to promise.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“I only want you to tell Julie, Bobbi-Sue, and your Momma about what we’ve talked about. No one else.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“One other thing.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“If you want to work at Renewed Mastery I never want to hear you call yourself stupid.”

“I promise.”

“Ma’am. May I ask Y’all a question?”

“Sure.”

“Do Y’all work there?”

It took everything within her to hold her emotion.

“You could say that. I’m assuming you are honest?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Are you able to follow orders?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

He then became concerned, “The only time I’d not follow orders. On account it goes against what the Lord says.”

She became real serious.

“If anyone tells you to do something God says not to. You come to me and tell me.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Go sit with Bobbi-Sue.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

He turned around and did as Ashleigh said. She rushed into the hallway bathroom. This is when she allowed herself to cry for a few moments. She knew what it was like to be picked on. As a vice president of her company she knew many people believed the only reason she was vice president was because of her brother. She knew there was some truth to it but she was determined to prove she deserved the title.

She was determined to help Billy.

Megan watched Billy step into the living room grab his plate and sit right next to Bobbi-Sue. Billy liked it when she leaned up against him.

Captain asked, "Where's Shorty?"

Megan answered, "I believe she went to the restroom."

He then asked, "Y'all having a good year?"

"Outside of the normal cancellation here and there. Business has been good. I'm getting noted on the internet by French speaking people in both Canada and in France."

Captain smiled, "Y'all wanted to quit taking it in High School."

Her dimples flashed.

"I'm grateful for a Daddy who told me I needed to follow through."

They smiled at one another.

Duke asked, "Where's Christopher?"

She glared at her oldest brother.

"He's helping his sister move."

"Oh."

Megan made a face, "Why?"

"Just asking."

"So Y'all can chase him away?"

Duke asked, "What are Y'all talking about?"

"I've heard. Y'all threatened anyone who liked me in High School."

Ashleigh returned. She tried the corn pudding.

Duke answered, "Not everyone."

Jimmy added, "We put with Simon."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Duke added, "Maybe we should have..."

Megan interrupted, "Done what?"

Jimmy protested, "It didn't work out did it? He shouldn't treat our sister the way he did."

"Why were Y'all in my business?"

Jimmy matter of fact stated, "We're protecting our little sisters honor."

This was a two edged sword. On one side this was very noble and loving, on the other it was irritating.

"Y'all taught me how to protect myself?"

Duke answered, "Little Sister sometimes it ain't enough."

"Y'all are saying I can't take care of myself?"

Duke answered, "Y'all are putting words in my mouth."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I'm wanting Y'all in the knowing. Christopher is a gentleman and I like em'."

Duke answered, "I ain't sure I like him."

Megan snipped back, "None of us liked your first wife? Every one of us tried to warn Y'all. Y'all told us she was wonderful. So maybe Y'all ain't the best judge in whom I should be dating."

Duke answered, "Y'all like Diana."

Ashleigh spotted Diana immediately turn toward the dinning room.

“Diana keeps Y’all in line.”

Megan was about to mention his business connections but knew to keep this to herself.

Diana stepped into the dinning room, “I was hearing my name?”

Megan answered, “We were discussing on how good Y’all are to my brother.”

Diana touched her necklace and winked.

“Honey. I’m happy to hear Y’all are saying good things about me.”

Jimmy: looked at his watch, finished his plate, stood up, stepped into the living room, and asked Jeff to follow him.

Jimmy made sure to tell everyone to relax and finish. Jimmy claimed they had something to do before everyone else started to help again. By the time Jimmy left the dinning room Lester was up and he waved Sal to follow. Billy and Buck followed them.

Anyone with an empty plate started to leave.

Diana waved her arm and grabbed her necklace, “Well. Well. I see I’m popular.”

Ashleigh and Megan stood up.

Ashleigh encouraged her, “It isn’t you.”

“Y’all are such a darling.”

Duke was up, before he left the room he approached Diana, they kissed, Duke headed out.

Diana was about to step into the kitchen.

Ashleigh stopped her by saying, “Diana.”

“Honey.”

Ashleigh asked, “What do you know about Susan King?”

She: made a face, waved her arm, and her bracelets jangled.

“It was a nasty divorce. There ain’t anyone who’s feeling sorry for him.”

Ashleigh glanced at Megan.

Diana gave them a glare and touched her necklace.

“Y’all wouldn’t be holding back on me?”

With this Fred stood up.

Megan said, “We’ll have to get to work.”

Ashleigh smiled, “I have trim to tack up.”

Diana became serious, “Why are Y’all being mean to me?”

Ashleigh winked, “We’ll talk soon.”

“Y’all promise?”

Megan’s dimples flashed

Ashleigh answered, “I promise.”

When Bette spotted Ashleigh and Megan stand up; she did as well.

Julie was about to sneak out with them.

Nicole stepped into the living room.

She demanded, “Y’all ready to help.”

The girls knew to get up and help.

*A*shleigh and Bette looked at one another.

Bette asked, “Which way?”

Ashleigh answered, "Get your boyfriend."

"Huh."

"We'll go through the garage."

Bette pulled her glasses down, "To get to the garage we'd have to go through the kitchen?"

Ashleigh thought for a second, "Not a good idea."

Bette said, "We'll have to drag it around."

"Let's move this to the first open section. We'll roll it over."

"That's a long way?"

Ashleigh commented, "I bet we won't have to roll it far."

Bette: smiled, put in her earplugs, and waited for Ashleigh to do the same.

Megan rolled her eyes.

She nudged Fred.

"What?"

Megan pointed.

At this point Jeff and Billy were carrying the compressor generator over the concrete footing. Bette and Ashleigh were following behind.

Fred smiled.

They focused on the pole.

The sound of nail guns were dominating.

Fred nudged Jimmy and pointed to the boys running with nail rolls.

Jimmy immediately whistled.

The two boys stopped.

He yelled, "Don't run with the nails. Put them into bins."

The two boys talked and they walked back to the table.

Megan found it interesting when they tried to put three or four nail rolls into a bin but they could barely lift it. They went with two. She spotted Billy and Buck walk over and talk to them. They set the bins back on the table and ran to Jimmy.

"Mr. Jimmy."

"Yes boys."

Fred, Megan, Captain, and Duke smiled.

"Y'all have a wagon or a wheelbarrow?"

"The wheelbarrow might be too heavy for Y'all but there is a wagon in the shed."

They became excited and were about to run to the shed.

"Boys."

They stopped.

Dustin said, "Yes Sir."

"Good thinking. But before you bring it out check to make sure there ain't black widow spiders."

Dustin said, "Yes Sir."

Earl questioned Dustin.

It was obvious Dustin made it sound like black widow spiders were no big deal. They smiled and ran to the shed.

Jimmy asked, "Y'all have an idea."

Megan suggested, "It'll be easier if we paint the brackets before we start."

Jimmy added, "We could cut a piece of cardboard and shape it around the bracket."

Megan acknowledged, "It'd stop the paint from spraying on the pickets."

Duke added, "I'm thinking we should drill through the side of the bracket instead of the pole."

Fred stated, "It'd be easier going through the bracket instead of the thick poles. They are good poles by the way."

Jimmy mentioned, "It was a devil of time drilling them in."

Fred mentioned, "You've done a good job of putting them in."

Jimmy nodded, "Thanks."

Duke suggested, "Lets pre-drill."

Megan added, "If we'all placed the picket next to the pole like this."

She showed them.

Duke jumped in, "We drill it through the picket and leave a mark into the bracket where it ain't connected to the pole."

"Pull the picket back out."

Fred stated, "Then drill a full hole through the mark."

Duke nodded, "It's what I was thinking."

Megan pointed out, "Place the picket back and drill it together. If we're level with the top gap the measuring should be easy on account of how accurate the brackets have been drilled in."

Captain mentioned, "It's a lot of steps."

Jimmy agreed but stated, "It'll be faster than trying to drill through both."

Megan picked up the small pieces of wood, "What are these for?"

"It's the trim to go around the top."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"If this ain't done today. Jeff and I'll will drill em' in tomorrow."

Fred mentioned, "If you are using a weed wacker."

They gave him a look.

"A trimmer."

Jimmy said, "Yea."

"They make a metal bracket..."

Jimmy smiled, "Y'all attach it to the bottom. They are in the shed."

Fred smiled, "Smart man."

Jimmy looked at Megan and Frank.

"Y'all want to start?"

"No problem."

Jimmy looked at Duke, "Would Y'all paint the brackets? I'm sure It will be easy for Y'all to reach em."

"Okay."

Captain volunteered, "I'd like to check on the girls before I start helping Y'all."

Jimmy gave him the machete.

Megan decided to ask, "Will a boa constrictor climb over?"

Frank gave Megan a look, "A boa constrictor?"

Jimmy made a face, “Andrew hit a pet warehouse. Plus. People have been releasing them in the everglades.”

Captain stated, “A few years back I killed one crossing my drive way. Y’all couldn’t count the amount of eggs in her.”

Megan flashed her dimple smile.

She stated, “It made excellent boots.”

Captain took the machete and suggested, “Lets get a move on.”

Megan and Fred stepped over to the first pole.

When they reached it, they could hear the compressor, and the sound of nail guns.

Megan asked, “Are they nailing the top and bottom?”

Fred answered, “If you tell Bette she can’t do something she’s going to do it.”

Megan asked, “I swear. I’m feeling every person from Wisconsin is stubborn.”

Fred laughed.

Megan laughed too.

Fred answered, “Your probably right.”

Megan became serious, “Lets start by painting the brackets.”

Fred and Megan headed to the shed.

*A*shleigh and Bette: grabbed the trim, lifted it up over the generator, climbed up their own ladders, held onto each end of the trim, pushed it against the top cap, they signaled one another, then they nailed it, they climbed down from the ladder, Ashleigh set her nail gun on the generator, moved her ladder to the middle, climbed the ladder, nailed the trim in the center, climbed down the ladder, moved the ladder to where she believed the next trim ended, while she did this Bette rolled the generator to the center of the next set of poles, made sure the nail guns were out of the way, they carefully lined up the bottom trim with the previous bottom trim, they made sure it was flush with the concrete footing, they signaled one another, they nailed the trim, this time Bette went to the center, she nailed in the trim, Bette walked back to her ladder, they grabbed the top trim, went up the ladder, and repeated their process. They were able to accomplish this task because the trim was thin and light. If this trim would have been the thickness of the pickets or the stringers it would have been impossible. Or, if the generator was without the large back wheels, they would have struggled moving it.

Ashleigh spotted Captain while they were up on the ladder. He turned off the generator when they were finished nailing in the trim.

He asked in a demanding tone, “What are Y’all ladies up too?”

Bette looked at him.

Ashleigh answered, “Putting up the trim.”

In an angry tone, “Y’all come down here.”

Ashleigh nodded her head at Bette.

They: climbed themselves down carrying the nail guns, they set them down on the ladder, walked over to him, and both removed their earplugs.

“Y’all are doing fine job.”

He lifted his hat and set it down again.

“But we didn’t ask Y’all to be setting the trim.”

Ashleigh answered, "We know."

"Then why are Y'all putting it up?"

The two ladies looked at one another.

Ashleigh answered, "No one thought we could."

Captain chuckled and leaned in, "The reason Y'all are my favorite Yankee is how Y'all are a straight shooter."

"Thank-you."

"What happens if Y'all fall and brake something. I ain't even sure we should be allowing Y'all to use a nail gun."

Ashleigh became a little defensive, "You know I'm good with tools. Bette's Dad has taught her how to use them."

He made a face, "It ain't about the tools."

"What's it about?"

"If Y'all get hurt who will take care of your employees?"

Bette studied this man.

"Who'd watch out for my son?"

He again leaned in.

"I ain't saying you shouldn't be living. I see Y'all want to be like everyone else. Like how you act when Y'all are helping me with the train."

"I guess."

"If Y'all get hurt who will watch out for your brother?"

Ashleigh looked at Captain, "Should I stop?"

"No. They'd think Y'all quit. I ain't wanting anyone believing Y'all are a quieter. Cause you ain't. Just go and finish the bottom trim. Let others finish the top trim."

"I don't like being short."

Captain looked in her in the eye, "Who told Y'all being short or tall has anything to do with a person's height?"

Bette would never forget this.

"Y'all are a smart gal. Don't be foolish by getting hurt. There's a lot of people who are counting on Y'all. Many of them look up to Y'all. Even if they ain't admitting it."

She started to tear.

Captain looked at her, "Now why are Y'all crying?"

"It's good to hear."

She winked.

He became serious, "Cause I know Y'all are a straight shooter. I'm telling Y'all this. People keep talking about the reason Y'all are a vice president. What these folks ain't seeing is if your brother didn't think Y'all could do it. You'd be working in the warehouse or painting something."

Bette would never forget this either.

"Just finish the bottom trim."

Bette out of respect said, "Yes Sir."

Captain glared at Bette.

Bette felt the look.

He said bluntly, "Honey. Y'all are good for my grandson."

With this he turned. He went into some nearby bushes and chopped a snakes head off. He lifted it up with the intent on teaching them a valuable lesson.

Ashleigh asked, "Is that a coral snake?"

"Naw. It's a scarlet snake."

Ashleigh asked, "How can you tell?"

Both ladies cringed as he walked it to them.

When he reached them he said, "Never forget this saying. Red touches black it's a friend of Jack. Red touches yellow it's bad for a fellow. Look at these here stripes. See what I'm meaning."

Both ladies nodded their heads.

"I sees Y'all are afraid of snakes but they eat vermin. I killed this here snake to show Y'all what to look for."

The two girls nodded their heads.

"Y'all know what a rattlesnake sounds like?"

Ashleigh said, "I heard one camping with my brother once."

"They have rattlesnakes in Wisconsin?"

Ashleigh answered, "Along the Mississippi."

Captain looked at her, "Explain to Bette what it all sounds like."

He tossed the body into the strip of woods to the left of him. He took out a rag cleaned the blood and stuff off of the machete, put it into the leather sleeve.

"With Y'all being tough girls I'll leave it with Y'all."

He hung the machete on the handle of the generator, leaned down, and started the generator.

He yelled, "Y'all need to finish the bottom. As you see they're making their way around."

He then tipped his hat and turned around.

Ashleigh turned to Bette, "The reason the men in this family are the way they are is because of that man."

Bette believed her. She felt she could spot a good man by comparing men to her Dad.

"You ready to finish the bottom."

Bette agreed, "Lets get going. So they can finish the top trim."

Ashleigh reminded her, "I believe they want us to attach it on the inside too."

"Okay."

They put in their earplugs and focused.

Ashleigh looked at the ladders, "Lets put the ladders back?"

Bette pointed out, "Won't the guys putting up the top trim need them? Did you see all the ladders they had?"

"Good point."

They focused by nailing in the bottom trim.

When they were finished with this section they moved the generator. They kept the machete hanging on the generator.

*J*ulie, Bobbi-Sue, and Ida were in the process of putting the food away. They were instructed to keep the sandwiches, vegetables, and the fruit out. Every so often when someone came to

the cooler they would step inside and grab something quick to eat. Or when someone needed the use the bathroom they would grab a snack. Bobbi-Sue impressed Nicole when she volunteered to quickly clean the bathroom in the hallway. Through out the day these three young ladies talked about a variety of things.

All three of their mothers were there

Julie and Bobbi-Sue believed their mothers barely knew one another. It became obvious they were wrong: they knew one another from the Y, they sometimes volunteered together at the Community Center, Nicole went to the beauty salon her Mom worked at, and they went to a couple Bible Studies together. They were far from best of friends but they liked one another. It was obvious to both Bobbi-Sue and Julie the reason her parents showed up was to check on Bobbi-Sue and Billy. Julie assumed her Daddy would appreciate Bobbi-Sue's Daddy helping with the fence.

Julie turned her attention from the conversation the girls were having.

Diana stated matter of fact, "She ain't a push over."

Rose, who was Bobbi-Sue's Mother, questioned, "I've heard she's awful flirty?"

Julie restrained herself.

Diana said what Julie wanted to say, "She's flirty but she's looking for one man. I ain't believe she's dated anyone since moving here."

Diana turned to Julie, "Has she dated anyone?"

Julie was surprised she was invited into the conversation.

"No Ma'am."

Pastor Lilly's question surprised many.

"What about the rumor concerning Megan and Ashleigh? We're in the knowing Megan's dating Christopher. But are they a couple under cover?"

Nicole was about to jump in and answer, but Sherrie answered.

"For as long as I've known Ashleigh. Unless of course something has changed. Ashleigh has always liked guys. I really don't believe she's into women."

Nicole added, "We made the mistake of feeling Megan was into gals. When we asked her she told us she was straight. I feel if she was a lesbian she'd have told us. Lets not forget she's dating Christopher."

Diana turned, "Julie have Y'all witnessed her with a gal?"

Julie answered, "No Ma'am."

There was a moment of silence.

Pastor Lilly purposely changed the subject, "What's it like walking her dawg?"

Julie smiled, "Nikita is a good dawg. I walk her every morning except Sundays and holidays."

Nicole added, "Sometimes Y'all walk her on Sundays."

"I ain't allowed to anymore."

Nicole stated, "Sunday is family time."

Julie made a face.

Sherrie mentioned, "She's always been good with dogs."

Diana grabbed her necklace, "Do tell?"

"I've witnessed her get along with dogs other people couldn't get close too."

Julie mentioned, "Nikita and Ashleigh love one another."

Nicole mentioned, "I'm surprised she hasn't brought the dawg here."

Julie mentioned, "Nikita's with Mr. Bob. He's bringing her back to the yacht. If this goes late Ashleigh's planning on driving back to the yacht and leaving her outside."

Nicole asked, "Outside here?"

"I didn't think Y'all would mind?"

Nicole was about to answer.

Sherrie stepped in, "She's a very good dog. A bunch of us from the art department walk her during lunch."

Violet asked, "She brings it to work?"

Nicole answered, "Where ever Ashleigh's at. The dawg is close by."

Julie jumped at this, "She listens to commands and is really good with children."

Nicole asked, "How are Y'all in the knowing she's good with children?"

"When we walk we'll pass the little ones and she's very good."

One of the ladies asked, "Ain't she young to be a Vice President?"

This Diana answered, "Now. Y'all know my family is knee deep in business."

Nicole added, "Of course."

Diana continued, "She's as smart as whip. Now she might not have a college degree but she's loaded with common sense and street smarts."

Pastor Lilly asked, "I've heard she'll move employees to different departments?"

Julie jumped on this, "She's not one for firing folks."

Nicole added, "From what I was told they try and find a better spot for someone. Sometimes if a person wants to be moved and there is an opening they'll move them."

Julie became real serious, "She ain't one to like being lied too."

Sherrie pointed out, "It's one of the reasons I don't believe Ashleigh is bisexual. If she was gay we'd all know about it."

Diana added, "The company has been helping many of the businesses through out Florida."

Lilly mentioned, "Since they've moved here the local train company has hired many folks."

Ma who was sitting in the corner listening mentioned, "Since Mr. Bob's company has moved into town the Community Center hasn't been lacking a single thing."

Lilly almost started to cry, "Y'all should have witnessed what was dropped off on Christmas."

Julie jumped in, "Something Y'all have to remember about Mr. Bob. If he helps someone and says not to say anything he means it."

Ma gave her a look, "Y'all feel he donated it?"

Julie refused to answer.

Nicole pointed out, "We've heard the rumors. How about Mr. Jones who couldn't get hired but now is working customer service. Who'd have thought he'd be good at it? Ms. Ashleigh thought so. An example is the Community Center. When it's needing something it gets it. How about the school? Or the expansion of the police department? It ain't a coincidence this is been happening since the Company has arrived. I've been hearing we might be getting a new football stadium. Haven't we all been wanting one?"

Julie became real serious, "If anyone starts saying Mr. Bob is helping to get attention. He'll stop helping."

Diana asked sincerely, "Sherrie do y'all know why he never wants to admit to helping?"

“Many reasons.”

She became very somber, “His Mom was like that. She liked to help people but didn’t want any attention for it. So when he got involved in politics and the media lied about what he was doing angered him. I believe he feels he can help more people if he remains behind the scenes. But mark my words. If he feels he needs to step out into the limelight he’ll do so. Whomever he’s fighting will have a tough go of it.”

Diana touching her necklace.

“I’ve heard others say the same thing.”

Pastor Lilly stated, “I’ve heard they’re planning on buying a popular game company?”

They looked at Julie.

She lied, “They never talk business around me.”

She stated a half truth next, “They stop talking business when they are away from work.”

It shocked everyone when Sherrie asked, “Why is Ashleigh living with Bob?”

Diana answered, “We thought maybe Y’all could tell us.”

Sherrie answered, “Bob was more of a father figure to her than a brother. I believe there is a thirteen to fourteen year difference between them.”

Diana turned toward Julie, “What are Y’all feeling?”

She repeated what Ashleigh was telling everyone instead of what she felt, “She says she’s been looking but hasn’t found a place of her liking.”

Ma glared at Julie, “Honey. I know it’s what she’s saying. But I ain’t for one minute believing such non-sense. I ain’t knowing the story. To be honest we shouldn’t be snooping in her business. But she has his back. I suspect she’s trying to protect him from some gold digger. It’s rare to see such loyalty in Yankees. But it’s how we’d feel if someone was messing with our loved ones. If someone did something to Ashleigh or someone was to take advantage of Mr. Bob. I believe Y’all would see a different side of both of them. I agree with Captain she’s a straight shooter. She ain’t pissing down anyone’s legs. Be understanding there’s times when she ain’t telling the whole story. What we should all understand. If she’s a friend she’ll be there for Y’all. Julie you were saying she ain’t liking to fire anyone?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Y’all mentioned she ain’t fond of someone lying.”

“No Ma’am.”

“I suspect if someone did something to hurt Mr. Bob or purposely hurt the business Ashleigh herself would make sure they were finding the exit.”

All Sherrie said was, “Your right.”

Julie took note of this.

Diana spotted Ashleigh and Bette approaching the sliding door.

She said, “She’s approaching.”

Julie spotted them.

Ashleigh slide open the door, “Sorry.”

She practically ran through the house to the hallway bathroom.

Bette stepped up to the counter.

Julie asked in the hopes they would need her, “Y’all needing anything?”

Bette noticed everyone was focused on her, she removed the sunglasses, and was looking at them through her regular lenses.

Pastor Lilly asked, "Honey. Those are some cute glasses."

Diana asked, "Darling. Would Y'all show us how they work?"

"There's little magnets on the side."

Diana said, "How clever."

Ma asked, "How are Y'all getting along?"

Bette answered, "Ma'am. We're doing good. Ashleigh and I are putting up the trim. We've just started on the inside. The outside pickets are done. The inside ones are taking longer. Some have started working on the poles."

Nicole asked, "Are they hiding those poles?"

"Yes. They're putting boards around the poles."

Nicole stated, "What a relief to hear. I just hated them poles."

Ma asked, "What about the vinyl walls. Y'all believe it'll keep out the snakes?"

Bette said, "I hate snakes."

Julie smiled.

Diana said, "Honey. I've lived here my whole life and I ain't liking snakes."

"Captain chopped the head off of one."

Everyone gasped.

Julie asked, "Was it poisonous?"

"No."

Slight pause.

Bette answered, "He was showing Ashleigh and I the difference between that snake and a coral snake."

Julie asked, "He taught Y'all the saying? Red touches black it's a friend of Jack. Red touches yellow it's bad for a fellow."

Bette answered, "That's what he taught us."

This is when Jeff, Billy, Buck, and Sal stepped in.

Julie rolled her eyes. She knew they stepped in because they spotted Bette in the kitchen.

Nicole asked, "Ain't Y'all working?"

Jeff answered, "We're taking a break."

Ma asked, "What's next?"

Billy answered, "Ms. Steward."

"Howdy Billy."

Buck answered, "We're about to start putting up the vinyl fence."

Julie asked, "Y'all think it'll keep the snakes out?"

Jeff said, "Of course."

Bobbi-Sue handed Billy a plate and a napkin.

Without saying a word he grabbed both.

Rose liked Billy. The hurdle was Bobbi-Sue's Dad. Her Dad believed she could do better. Rose could see the love in her daughter's eyes for this boy. What Rose liked about Billy was how he treated her daughter and how respectful he was to her.

Ashleigh stepped out of the bathroom.

Ma asked Billy, "Billy how's your Momma?"

Billy very serious answered, "She's well."

"Y'all are graduating this year?"

"No Ma'am. I graduate with Jeff next year."

Nicole asked concerned, "What have Y'all planned after you graduate?"

"I'm thinking I'll be working around here."

Pastor Lilly asked, "I've heard it's been difficult for Y'all to find a job in town?"

Ashleigh was listening to see if he would say anything.

Julie was sure Ashleigh had set something up for him. She knew Ashleigh would be upset if he said something.

Julie blurted out, "I'm seeing Daddy looking for Y'all."

The boys became real concerned.

Jimmy opened the door and stated, "Get something to drink and get a move on."

Billy right away said, "Bye Y'all."

Nicole said, "Bye Billy."

Ma gave a look at Ashleigh.

She winked.

Ma smiled.

Ashleigh stated, "Bette lets finish."

"Okay."

The two: stepped outside, grabbed waters, and headed to where they left off.

Pastor Lilly stated, "Last time I talked to Billy he was talking about joining the Army. On account no one would was willing to hire him."

Rose asked, "He told Y'all this?"

Bobbi-Sue said in desperation, "I've been telling Y'all he takes good care of his Momma."

The ladies in this room had witnessed this look before.

Julie was one of the few who believed with all her heart it would work out between them.

Julie suggested, "Maybe he was offered a job. But his tongue is locked."

Bobbi-Sue looked at her.

Ma smiled, "I'm guessing it'd be wise for us to keep ourselves from asking where he's planning on working."

Julie jumped on this, "It'd be a good idea."

They all smiled.

Other conversations started.

Ida was happy when Julie asked her a question. Ida enjoyed talking to Julie and Bobbi-Sue.

Ester and Danielle were coloring in the playroom. They knew if they went into the kitchen and spoke their opinion or asked questions they would have been given tasks. It was highly likely they would no longer be able to hear all of the gossip. They whispered about everything they heard.

February 17th, The Fence Part Three of Five

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Ashleigh & Megan *Book I: Friendship*



Saturday February 17th

The Fence

Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Part Four of Five

Authored By: R. P. Voght

Posted on ashleighandmegan.com on:

July 2nd, 2023

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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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February 17, The Fence Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Shelly shut the door to her Mother's office and bluntly stated, "The visitations are going just fine."

"I don't appreciate the tone."

Shelly was angry, "I don't appreciate you bringing up any of this in front of Little Bobby."

"I'm his grandmother."

"I'm his mother. Like it or not Bobby is his father. For your information he hasn't missed one visitation."

Holly answered, "For now."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

"Sooner or later he'll abandon the two of you."

She said closer to a growl, "I'm not with him!"

Sarcastic, "I thought this was about you winning him back?"

Shelly's impulse was to storm out of the office and out of the house.

Shelly stood her ground, "I've told you before it's about doing the right thing. I don't want Little Bobby to go through life feeling the reason he doesn't have a father is because of who he is."

"You know what happened to your father. What was I suppose to do?"

"You should have told me."

"I was trying to spare you..."

Shelly interrupted, "You were sparing yourself."

Holly sat down in her office chair.

Shelly said, "You could have told me. Instead I imagined all of the reasons why my Dad would never want to see me."

"Was he what you imagined?"

"Maybe if I known my father was a drug addict I'd never tried it."

"That's a low blow."

"To assume the only reason Bobby is in my Son's life is so I can get back with him. Is just as insulting. If it wasn't for Little Bobby I'd never called him."

She pointed to herself.

"You think this is easy for me?"

"Maybe you should ask yourself why it's so difficult."

"I do."

"How come I..."

Shelly interrupting, "Why would I tell you?"

"Because..."

Shelly interrupted her, "Don't finish the sentence."

They both were hating this argument but neither one wanted to stop it.

Shelly asked, "Are we ever going to get passed this?"

Holly asked, "Passed what?"

"Arguing and fighting."

Based upon Holly's look Shelly stated, "Don't answer."

Shelly broke the silence and Holly's glare, "Little Bobby loves you. You are his Grandmother but I'm his Mother. I'm not using."

"What happens if you start?"

Shelly was unwilling to tell her mother of the paperwork Naomi wrote up.

Shelly took a deep breath.

"I've been planning on writing up a living will."

"There. Now you are making sense."

Holly: opened a drawer, took out a file folder, set it on the desk, and slammed the drawer shut.

"In here is paperwork for just such an instance."

Shelly made a face, "What else is in it?"

This irritated Holly.

She opened the drawer back up and pulled out a different file folder.

"Maybe this is what you are referring too?"

Shelly glared, "You better not try for custody. I'll..."

"Do what?"

She stated bluntly, "I'll call Bobby."

"Run back into his arms and destroy your life all over again."

"I wouldn't have to do that."

"What would you do?"

She looked at her Mother, "I'll tell him you're trying to take his son away from him."

Holly stood up and snarled, "Why not just run down to Florida and marry him."

"If I wanted to marry him I would have already."

"You've told me this before."

"You don't believe it? Do you?"

"I thought you didn't want to use him like you did before."

It took some courage on Shelly's part to stand there.

"I wouldn't be."

Holly snarled and waved her arm, "You do love him."

Shelly calmed herself and said, "Not in the lets get married way. But he is the father of my child."

"Keep telling yourself that."

"So you want me to marry him?"

Angry, "Of course not!"

"Then what are you wanting?"

Holly pointed to the wall, "I don't want him involved in my grandson's life."

Shelly calmed herself and answered, "It's not up to you."

Holly tapped her finger on the file folder, "I can make it happen."

"Not if I live in Florida."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"With my probation over it'd be easy for me to move."

"You hate Florida."

"Maybe I hate arguing with a Grandmother who wants to choose our destiny."

Holly snarled, "All this talk about destiny."

"What's so bad about it?"

"It's all what Robert talks about. All you have to do is read his books."

Holly waved her arms.

"If you could only see what he's doing to you."

Shelly answered in a sarcastic calm, "What's he doing to me?"

"He's seducing you."

Shelly sighed and rolled her eyes.

"What's that for?"

"I'm going home."

"Don't you run from me."

Shelly looked at her, "I'm not running from you. I'm asking you to stop ridiculing his Daddy in front of him. It'd be nice if you'd stop bitching about the situation all together."

"Alright."

Shelly managed to say calmly, "I enjoyed the meal up until your snarky comments. I dislike both the comments and our arguments. If you were not my mother I'd have to question the relationship I have with you."

Shelly started to cry.

Holly did too.

"I just want the best for you and my Grandson."

Without raising her voice, "You want what you feel is best for you. If you wanted what was best for Little Bobby you'd see how much he loves his Daddy. I sometimes don't like it. But it's the reality."

Shelly cut off her tears and stood her ground.

Holly glared at Shelly.

"I've been clean and sober since prison. I plan on staying that way."

Holly honestly answered, "I'm glad."

Whenever Shelly spoke the word I she pointed to herself, "I know you believe Bobby will send me into some spiral. It's not Bobby, nor you, nor anyone; it'll be my poor decisions that sends me down a spiral. It's much easier to blame him than to be honest and admit I was the addict. I was the one who chose to use drugs. I was using before I met him. He was one of the few people who wanted me off of drugs. He asked me to marry him more than once. I used him. He didn't use me."

"What am I suppose to feel about that?"

"See the honesty of it and move on."

Slight pause.

They stared at one another.

Shelly stated, "Stop punishing me for my mistakes."

"I'm not."

Shaking, "If you are willing to go for custody without just cause you are."

Holly stood there.

Shelly declared, "If I was using or being a horrible mother I'd understand. Your angry at Bobby for being his Dad."

There was silence for a few moments.

Shelly broke the silence, "You know how many women I know wished their children's Daddy's wanted to be involved? Didn't cancel visitations? Or paid child support."

"I see it every day."

"If you see it every day why do you rag on him? Bobby flies up here from Florida to spend the weekend with him."

"This is bound to be a disaster."

"Until then."

She pointed to herself, "It would be wrong for me to keep him away. If Bobby was anything like some of the dads who deserve not to see their children. There is no way I'd allow it."

"I guess we'll have to wait for that day."

Shelly again held in her tears, "What's sad is you want that day."

Shelly turned and headed out of the office.

Holly stared.

Shelly said, "I'm going home. I'll call you in a few days."

"Alright."

Shelly stopped and turned around, "If that day was to come. What makes me feel you'd be on my side and not yours?"

With this Shelly: turned, opened the door, stepped out of the office, and managed by some miracle to gently shut the door; this was the difference between immature Shelly and the more mature Shelly.

She met Phillip in the hallway and told him how much she hated the arguing. She promised she would come back with Little Bobby. Phillip was cordial and believed her. He knew his wife disliked the arguments as well. He felt caught in the middle because he could see both sides.

Little Bobby wanted to stay because his step brother Issac was playing with him. Shelly believed one day Isaac would make a good dad.

Holly came out of the office to say goodbye to Little Bobby. This was her way of apologizing for the argument. Shelly was aware of this, but she wanted a formal apology.

Holly and Little Bobby hugged. Little Bobby never knew the two most important women in his life were struggling over his destiny.

Megan and Ashleigh were building a wooden box around one of the poles. Three other sets of people were building boxes around poles: Fred and Bette were at the next pole, Buck and Billie were two poles from their poles, and Lester and Mr. Cooper were three from theirs. Julie, Ida, Bobbi-sue, and Jimmy's first cousin Jackie were attaching the top cap and trim of the boxes. Jackie and Julie would drill in the top, then they would use a small battery powered nail gun for the side trim. Ida or Bobbi-Sue would hand Julie or Jackie the two trim pieces for each side of the box; there was one longer back piece and a shorter top piece. Even with the temperature dropping these ladies were happy to be outside. The ladies in the kitchen were setting up for a pizza delivery. This annoyed Nicole but understood the reason. This was scheduled to arrive just after sunset. Pastor Tucker and a friend from church were finishing the top trim on the inside of the fence. On the outside of the fence the sounds of drills were heard. On this side of the fence was: Jeff, Jimmy, Captain, Duke, Owen, and Leroy. Owen and Leroy were long time friends of the family. Leroy's Wife Jasmine was inside with the ladies.

Dustin and Elmer were playing ball with Nikita until someone needed something. Before the arrival of Nikita, Dustin and Elmer played catch, this was more detrimental to Nicole's garden than anytime during the construction of the fence. The best thing for Nicole's garden was when Ashleigh staked Nikita into a dog tie-out in the corner of the yard; this kept all three boys out of the garden. What annoyed Nikita was the inability to run as far as she wanted.

Megan looked down the row. At a glance each group would only have to put up three or four of these boxes. What disappointed Megan was the recognition it would get dark before they would finish. She took a drink of water and set the water bottle on the ladder. She drilled in the last screw to this box.

Ashleigh asked Megan while she climbed down the ladder next to the fence, "Is there a better way of doing this?"

Megan answered, "We've tried different ways and we end up coming back to this."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"The positive is we only have this wall and the short section to the house."

Ashleigh said, "This is an awesome fence. I'm just not a fan of putting up these boxes."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"They're time consuming. But they make the fence look better."

Ashleigh answered, "Agreed."

They looked at one another.

Ashleigh stated what they both thought, "Nicole didn't like the poles?"

Megan flashed her big dimple smile and shrugged her shoulders.

Ashleigh had her answer.

They collected their: waters, tools, ladder, and headed to the next empty pole.

Walking to the next empty pole they heard a screw strip.

Megan whispered to Ashleigh, "I'm glad we ain't the only ones."

“No lie there.”

Megan mentioned, “Nikita is having fun.”

“I feel bad she kept jumping into the garden.”

“The boys should’ve known better than to throw the ball toward the garden. Be glad Y’all brought the tie-out.”

“I just bought it a couple weeks ago. It’s the first time I’ve used it.”

They reached the next empty pole.

They looked at the boards.

Megan asked, “After my charter Y’all want to come by tomorrow and help Jimmy finish?”

“They won’t get done will they?”

Megan mentioned, “I ain’t believing so.”

“I’ll help with the poles and the clean up.”

Megan smiled, “Y’all hear?”

“No?”

“Marcus and a couple officers are helping tomorrow.”

Ashleigh asked excited, “What should I wear?”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

“What Y’all are wearing today is fine.”

Ashleigh gave her a look.

Megan laughed.

Ashleigh was unsure of what was so funny.

Megan stated, “Let’s try to finish this one before dark.”

Ashleigh answered, “Alright.”

Ashleigh, Captain, Owen, Fred, Ma, and Jennifer were sitting at the kitchen table; on Ashleigh’s end was a large box of boneless wings. Megan and Jasmine were sitting on the tall chairs (a few of the teenage boys brought them in from the side room). Diana, Ma, Jennifer, Pastor Lilly, Sherrie, Jackie, and Nicole were standing in the kitchen area. The teenagers were in the living room. Danielle, Ester, and the two boys were in the side room. Lester, Sal, Mr. Cooper, Pastor Tucker, George, Duke, Jimmy, and Leroy were in the dining room. People were moving around and everything was pretty relaxed.

It was cafeteria style. On the counter were boxes of pizza, salad, two bowls of pasta, garlic bread, another box of chicken wings, a pitcher of lemon aide, a pitcher of iced tea, a two litters of Coke, and a two litter of Root Beer. The only reason there was Coke in Nicole’s house was because of the coupon she used.

The house was filled with a variety of conversations.

Ashleigh grabbed a few more boneless wings.

Captain mentioned, “These ain’t tasting like Ma’s.”

Ashleigh smiled, “No lie there.”

Owen asked, “Don’t take no offense.”

“I won’t.”

“Where did a Yankee like yourself learn to appreciate spicy foods?”

Ashleigh answered, "My brother likes spicy foods. Plus, I often ate spicy foods at the club he owned."

Diana heard this and asked, "Sherrie was telling us about this club?"

"It was a premier place. After my brother sold it was miss managed. They turned it from a classy place to a place about cover bands and drinking."

Ma asked, "Did your brother allow drinking?"

Ashleigh answered, "There was a drink limit. No one was allowed to get drunk. This was one of the reasons it was so different from other clubs."

Sherrie mentioned, "One of the problems with Milwaukee is the alcoholism."

Fred spoke, "Our church spent a lot of time ministering to people with an addiction to alcohol."

Captain stated, "Without the Lord I'm sure I'd have taken drinking to far."

Owen acknowledged, "Many vets arrive home being a drunkard."

Ashleigh decided to open up a little, "When I went to treatment. My Foster Dad was an inspiration to me. I never knew him when he drank. But when he came back from Vietnam he struggled with it."

Ma asked, "Honey, Y'all drink anymore?"

She was so serious it took others by surprise, "I don't ever want to be like my mother."

Owen asked, "Your Daddy served in Vietnam?"

"Yes."

This conversation was gaining some attention from others. It was rare for Owen or Captain to talk about their war experience.

Owen asked, "Y'all know where he served?"

"No Sir. It was the only subject we never talked about. My Foster Mom told me to never talk to him about his experience in the war unless he brought it up."

Ma was curious, "Did he ever talk with Y'all?"

"My Mom, my sister Felicia, and I would always go to a big Fourth of July parade in a nearby town. Normally Blake wouldn't go. One year he went with us. They would have veterans of different wars walk by. I'm sure you do it here. In front were old guys or wives with banners and the veterans followed."

Megan mentioned, "It's a tradition on our Memorial Day parade."

"I'm glad you guys have a Memorial Day Parade."

Ma jumped in, "They might not have it this year?"

This shocked everyone.

Megan upset, "Why?"

Captain stated, "It might offend people."

Ashleigh made a face.

Owen asked, "What's the world coming too?"

Captain angry, "We've had a memorial day parade since the end of World War One. It just ain't right."

Ma redirected everything, "This ain't the time nor the place to talk about this."

She looked at Ashleigh, "Y'all were saying your Daddy went with Y'all to the parade."

"Yea. When the veterans from Vietnam walked by he stood up and saluted."

Ashleigh teared up.

"It was the first time I ever seen him cry. I asked him why he was crying."

She paused.

The kitchen was silent.

Many of the guys from the other room found excuses to step into the kitchen to listen.

"My Foster Mom tried to change the subject but he knelt down and told me he was in that war. I was little. Thinking back I wish I would've let it go."

Megan asked, "What did Y'all ask?"

Ashleigh brushed a tear away.

"I asked him if he killed people."

Silence.

The conversation would have ended, but Ma feeling this would help not only Ashleigh but her family asked, "Honey. What was his answer?"

"He told me he had too. He said it's something he wished he never had to do. But it's what a soldier does."

She paused.

With regret in her voice stated, "Then I asked if this is why he was crying."

Silence.

Captain asked, "What was his answer?"

"You don't want to hear it."

Captain said, "I believe it might help some folks here."

"He answered. Because of his friends who didn't come home."

Silence.

Ashleigh broke it by stating, "He never spoke of it again until I was in treatment."

This surprised most.

Captain asked, "Why then?"

"He told me it was Jesus who helped him get through the guilt of surviving the war. It was Victoria and Blake's belief if they never accepted Jesus their marriage would have fallen apart. Blake believed it was his faith that got him through the times when he wanted to go back to drinking. If Blake could be sober and get through all that. I could get through being sober too."

Captain said, "We're glad Y'all ain't a drunkard."

Ashleigh answered, "Me too."

Owen stated, "Your Foster Dad sounds like a good man."

Ashleigh said, "He is. He was always good to us."

Nicole asked, "Who is the us?"

Ashleigh smiled.

She liked the question and she appreciated Nicole changing the subject, "The us includes my Foster Mom Victoria. My older sister Patty and my little sister Felicia."

Diana asked, "If Y'all don't mind me asking."

"No."

"Were Y'all sisters blood?"

"No. But we love one another as sisters."

Ashleigh became excited.

"My oldest sister was a missionary in India for a long time. She married a guy from Canada. She's an assistant Pastor there."

Megan asked, "She's a lot older than you?"

"She's thirteen years older than me."

Right away Diana said, "There seems to be a gap?"

"Victoria had a few miscarriages between Patty and Felicia. There is about a five year difference between myself and Felicia."

This touched the ladies.

Jackie, who was glued to this story, was unable to stop herself from moving up to the counter and ask, "Y'all believe your foster parents made a difference in your life?"

Without batting an eye Ashleigh answered, "Oh yeah. I'm sure I'd be a completely different person without my foster family. It was Victoria who led me to the Lord. I learned a Dad could be a good person."

Ashleigh paused.

Everyone waited.

"I'm sure I made their life difficult but I'm very grateful for what they did for me."

She stopped.

Everyone waited.

"My brother was a big part of my life."

Ma said, "It sounds to me as if God has been watching out for Y'all."

"It took me a while to realize that. My life would have been a lot worse if Jesus hadn't sent the people he did. It's like having all you guys as my friends. How would I know moving down here would be such a blessing."

Everyone believed she was being sincere.

Captain changed the subject. He asked because it always interested him, "Why do Y'all like the old Brewer symbol?"

Megan encouraged, "Y'all have to show him."

She took off her hat and said, "Have you ever noticed there is an M and B in the symbol?"

Owen looked at her, "Go on."

She smiled, "I'll show you."

Many of the people in the kitchen looked as she traced the M with her finger and then the B with her finger.

Sherrie went, "I never knew that?"

Fred laughed, "You didn't?"

"No."

Everyone laughed.

Ma shook her head.

This led to a discussion about baseball.

Ashleigh admitted to knowing very little. The only reason she owned the hat and the hoodie is because her Foster Dad would take her to games.

Nicole was aware Ashleigh's family was coming down. Nicole's plan was to invite them over for dinner. She correctly believed other members of her family were interesting in meeting Ashleigh's foster parents.

They all talked for a while but people started to head home. Before anyone went home Nicole made sure they had the dishes they brought with them.

The first ones to leave were: Mr. Copper, Sal's friend, Sal, and Lester. They needed to get back home and finish some of their own work on their farm.

Sherrie approached Nicole, "I'm glad we met."

Nicole accepted her hug.

"So am I."

Nicole mentioned, "I liked the dessert."

Fred who was behind his wife stated, "That was the best Jambalaya I ever had."

Jimmy who was following behind asked, "You had it before?"

Fred stated, "It wasn't as good as it was here."

Sherrie looked over at the teenagers in the living room, "It's time to go."

Bette and Ida went up to their parents.

Julie followed.

Bette asked, "May I go over to Bobbi-Sue's house?"

"Not tonight."

Bette's body language changed.

Fred stated, "We have church tomorrow."

Ida reminded Bette, "We have nursery tomorrow."

Fred asked, "Where's Earl?"

Jimmy smiled, "They're playing darts in the garage. I'll get them."

Bette smiled.

Julie suggested, "One of these times Y'all should stay over here."

At the same time Nicole and Sherrie stated, "No."

Bette gave a look.

Jeff looked over.

Sherrie was very stern, "Don't you dare suggest anything."

Bette remained silent.

Bette was about to say something to Jeff but Fred stated, "I'm sure we'll meet again."

This is when Earl met them at the door. Dustin was disappointed Earl was leaving.

Jimmy stated, "Y'all were a big help. I appreciate it."

Earl asked, "I was?"

Jimmy smiled, "Yes you were."

Dustin said, "We'll have to play darts again."

Earl asked, "I want to say by to Nikita?"

Ashleigh looked over.

Sherrie answered, "We have to get home."

Bette and Julie were whispering.

Fred spotted this, "Young Lady we have to go."

"But..."

Fred looked at Nicole and Jimmy, "Thanks. I enjoyed it. We're leaving."

With Jimmy being a father of two daughters he appreciated how eager Fred was to get Bette home. Jimmy felt he was moving them along as a bouncer would.

Nicole appreciated the fact Sherrie felt the same way about Bette spending the night. Nicole suspected it was about to get hot and heavy for the two of them, as much as she could help it, nothing sexual would happen under her roof; unless they were married. She felt very strongly a guy was just as responsible for a couple remaining virgins as much as it was a girls.

Bobbi-Sue and her parents were the next in line to leave.
Everyone except Julie cringed; when Bobbi-Sue went up to Billy and hugged him.
Billy being Billy, asked Bobbi-Sue, "Y'all attended chapel with me tomorrow?"
Her parents were unaware of this, "Yes."
Jimmy thanked her Dad. Nicole and Jimmy told Bobbi-Sue they were glad to meet.
Nicole thanked both ladies for their help.
Nicole spotted; Ashleigh lead Captain, Owen, and Leroy outside.
This is when Billy and Buck approached Nicole and Jimmy.
Jimmy said, "Y'all did a good job today. I'm grateful Y'all helped."
"Your welcome."
Billy answered, "Yes sir."
Nicole asked Billy, "I'm assuming Y'all are treating Bobbi-Sue right?"
"Yes Ma'am."
Buck added, "Ms. Nicole. He is."
Nicole winked at Buck, "If you believe so I'm sure it's true."
Billy commented, "Thank-you for another tasty dinner."
"I wasn't the only one to cook today."
Billy smiled, "Bye Y'all."
"Bye Billy."
Nicole made sure to mention, "You tell your Momma we liked her sweet potato's."
Billy smiled, "Yes Ma'am."
Jeff led them out of the house.
Nicole looked at Jimmy, "They're growing up."
Jimmy asked, "What does she see in him?"
"She feels safe with him."
Julie stepped into the kitchen.
This is when Ester and Danielle ran out from the side room and asked Julie, "Y'all want to play Uno?"
Jennifer, Danielle's Mom suggested, "Y'all like to stay at my house?"
Ester asked, "May I?"
Nicole and Jennifer nodded their heads.
Nicole answered by saying, "Get your things."
The two girls went running down the hallway and up the stairs.
Nicole yelled, "No running."
They stopped and answered, "Yes Ma'am."
Julie said, "Ms. Jennifer I thank you."
Jennifer winked, "I was the oldest."
Nicole asked pointing to the empty chairs, "Where'd they head off too?"
Jasmine answered, "Ashleigh is taking them to meet Nikita."
Julie became excited by this: she rushed out of the house and shut the door behind them.
Nicole stated, "I feel she loves that dawg more than Ashleigh does."
Megan's dimples flashed.
Megan stated, "There ain't any doubt Julie and Nikita are pals. But if Julie did something to Ashleigh. Julie would pay a price."

Jasmine asked, "I've heard she's good with dawgs?"

Jimmy stated, "Y'all should see how she treats Nikita. Not to mention how much attention the dawg gets everyday."

Diana asked, "Y'all have mentioned she brings it to work."

Jimmy answered, "The dawg sits next to her desk unless someone takes her for a walk. I swear the dawg is being taken for walks all day."

Duke said, "They remind me of a K-9 unit."

Diana was listening.

Ma stated, "Captain said the same thing."

Ma stood up and continued, "Like always Y'all did a great hosting."

This is when Danielle and Ester came running down the stairs

This time Jennifer yelled, "No running."

Everyone chuckled.

Jennifer said to Nicole, "I'll bring her back here later tomorrow?"

"Anytime after one."

Jennifer promised, "I'll help."

Nicole smiled, "I appreciate it. I'll walk Y'all out."

Jennifer smiled, "You don't have too."

Jennifer led the two excited girls out of the house and to her car.

Dustin was bored sitting at the kitchen table.

Ma watched Jeff step outside and grab a water from the cooler and step back in.

"Jeff."

"Yes Ma'am."

"You have a good gal on your hands."

This surprised Jeff.

He tried to ignore the statement but everyone was staring at him.

Nicole asked, "What do Y'all say for yourself?"

"Uh." he shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know."

Everyone except: Nicole, Megan, and Ma found this funny.

Jimmy bailed him out, "I've taught him well."

Ma took this and said, "I'd hope so."

Jimmy further bailed him out, "Jeff lets clean up and prepare for tomorrow."

Ma asked, "Y'all get Captain in here."

"Okay."

Duke mentioned, "I'll help."

Dustin perked up, "May I help?"

Duke answered, "Sure."

Jasmine asked, "I'd appreciate it if you'd tell my husband and father-in-law to come in too."

Jimmy winked, "Yes Ma'am."

When they stepped outside Jimmy turned on the rest of the outside lights and even a light attached to a generator.

Nicole said sincerely to Jasmine, "I'm happy Y'all stopped by."

She smiled, "We like coming over here. I'd stay but if I know Louise. She's worrying about him."

Ma smiled, "She watches out for Owen as I watch out for Dave."
Jasmine answered, "Yes Ma'am."
Jasmine looked out the sliding doors.
Jasmine turned to the women left in the kitchen, "Gals. Something is bothering me."
Nicole concerned answered, "What?"
"How did she get them to talk about Vietnam?"
Diana waved her arms, "I do declare. If I didn't know that girl. There ain't any way I'd let her even breath on Duke."
Jasmine concerned said, "She's awful flirty."
Megan answered, "She's flirty but she ain't the type to cheat."
Jasmine asked, "She makes me uneasy."
Megan assured her, "She ain't the type to be cheating. She likes men but she's a one at a time gal."
Nicole mentioned, "I've heard she likes Sgt. Marcus."
Jasmine asked, "You don't say."
Ma added, "If God brings them together I'm believing they'd be good for one another."
Nicole would think about this.
Diana waved her arms and touched her necklace, "He's the cute police officer?"
Nicole clarified, "He's a good man. He asked the last gal he was with to marry him."
Jasmine stated, "I heard. She wanted him to stop being a police officer."
Megan stated, "It's what Officer Foster told me."
Jasmine answered, "You can't blame her for wanting him to stop."
Nicole mentioned, "But she knew he wasn't ever stopping."
Diana said, "This Y'all ain't heard from me."
The ladies looked at her.
"He told her no."
Jasmine touched her chest, "Go on."
"As I heard it. She wanted to sleep with him but he was insisting on waiting until their wedding day."
Nicole mentioned, "I thought it was mutual."
Diana's eyes became large, "It ain't mutual when his ex-fiance has a baby in the basket."
Ma shook her head.
Nicole asked, "You ain't pulling our legs?"
Diana said, "I have it from a good source."
Nicole mentioned, "They're coming."
Captain, Leroy, Owen, and Ashleigh stepped into the house.
Nicole led everyone to the door except for Ashleigh. She purposely hung out in the kitchen.

*A*shleigh took this as an opportunity to start collecting the garbage laying around the kitchen.

Megan stood up from the tall chair and started to help out too.
Diana smiled, "Y'all know Nicole ain't liking it when Y'all help."
"That's why I'm doing it now. I don't know why she doesn't like me helping."

Diana stated very serious, "This is her nest."

Megan and Ashleigh stopped and looked at her.

Ashleigh said, "She lets other's help her?"

"As Y'all would say. That's different."

Ashleigh became serious, "I never say that."

Diana answered, "Oh."

Ashleigh continued, "But why? I'm just trying to help."

Diana touched her necklace, "We've been all trying to tell Y'all."

Ashleigh's countenance sank, "Is this about being a leader in the community?"

"Lets say this was back in the day with Kings and Queens."

"Yeah?"

"If a Nobleman's wife was to invite the Queen over and the Queen started to help the help what would everyone say about the Nobleman's wife?"

Ashleigh said, "But I ain't a Queen."

"But ain't you like a princess? If ain't the princess are you not part of the royal court?"

"Bob isn't a king."

Diana looked at Ashleigh and tapped on her necklace, "Darling. In a way he is. If your brother asked the city council something. What would happen?"

Ashleigh made a face but answered, "They're the ones calling my brother."

"Don't nobles call the king?"

"I guess."

Ashleigh's forehead crinkled.

Diana became very serious, "In this here country there are many kings and many nobles. The kings and nobles rise and fall. They even move around. There are kings more powerful than your brother. But he's more powerful than other kings."

Ashleigh mentioned, "There are a lot of people who don't like him."

"What your brother has going for him he's a benevolent king. If he wasn't the nobles wouldn't be asking for his advice. They'd be plotting with other kings to take him out."

Ashleigh and Megan would never forget this.

This is when Nicole stepped into the kitchen.

She was upset to see Ashleigh helping.

Ashleigh lied, "I was just putting my paper plate over here. I wouldn't want to mess up your kitchen."

Ashleigh stepped out of the kitchen area and climbed up on one of the tall chairs.

Diana winked at Ashleigh.

Nicole smiled, "I'm sure Y'all wouldn't mess it up. But a woman's kitchen is her own."

"No problem."

Diana stated, "I can prove to Y'all your brother is a king."

"How?"

Nicole recognized she came into a conversation.

"If your brother wasn't a king he wouldn't be dating Susan."

Ashleigh was shocked, "I hadn't told you yet."

Nicole smiled, "Diana knows all."

Ashleigh smiled.

Diana answered, "I ain't in the knowing of everything."

The ladies stared at her.

She touched her necklace and answered, "There's some things God keeps from me."

Nicole gave her a look, "Diana."

Diana smiled then became serious, "If the powers at be disliked your brother he wouldn't be dating her."

Ashleigh asked, "Is she a good woman?"

The concern in Ashleigh's voice caught the ladies attention.

Diana answered, "Yes she is."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"She's looking for someone loyal."

Ashleigh answered, "He would be."

Nicole mentioned, "He was such a loser. It's hard telling how many times he cheated on her."

Diana mentioned, "All of his brothers are successful."

Megan mentioned, "She has a son?"

Diana was quick to mention, "He's a good boy. He's been hurt by the divorce."

Ashleigh would think on this.

She did ask, "Is he involved?"

Nicole stated, "Never misses a visitation. From what I've been told he's a good dad. Even Susan says so."

Diana made a point to mention again, "He was a terrible husband."

Megan dimples flashed.

"Bob flies up every other weekend to see your nephew?"

"Yes he does."

Nicole asked, "Have you met him yet?"

Ashleigh became real excited, "I'm flying up with Bob on March ninth and again on March 23. I'm going to visit with my family on these weekends."

Megan asked, "You ain't spoiling him are you."

"No."

None of the ladies believed her.

"What's his name?"

Ashleigh answered Diana, "His Mom calls him Little Bobby."

Megan disliked this.

Nicole smiled, "I thought Bob hated to be called Bobby?"

Ashleigh sighed, "Shelly. That's Little Bobby's mom. Was and still is the only one who called him Bobby."

Megan brushed hair behind her ear, "Do you feel it's a good name for him?"

The ladies looked at Megan oddly.

Diana played with her necklace.

"Bob isn't a Bobby. I just don't like the name Bobby."

All three ladies looked at Megan strange.

Megan's dimples flashed, "What?"

Diana asked sincerely, "Is he called Junior?"

Ashleigh declared, "Bob hates the name Junior. His family calls him Robert."

Diana nodded, "It's sophisticated."

Nicole asked, "Y'all have a picture?"
Ashleigh said, "Let me get my purse."
She ran out of the house to her Jeep.

Megan felt Bobby sounded childish.

She missed Nicole and Diana looking at one another.

Diana asked, "He flies up every other weekend?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"He leaves every Friday night."

Nicole asked, "Does he talk about his son?"

"He does. His son likes animals a lot. Bob showed me some animals he bought for him."

Nicole finished cleaning she opened the sliding door and yelled, "Y'all take out the garbage and the recycling."

Julie stepped inside.

Nicole added, "Don't forget the boxes."

Julie answered, "Yes Ma'am."

She was not in any hurry to take out anything. Nicole noticed. She remained silent because there was company. Julie lack of urgency was frustrating to Nicole.

Diana asked, "Y'all feel Bob spoils him?"

Megan answered honestly, "I don't believe so."

Julie stopped to listen.

This is when Ashleigh stepped into the house with her purse.

Julie said, "He's a lot like his Daddy but he has reddish hair and light skin."

Diana used this as an opportunity to ask, "Am I imagining it or is Ester dying her hair?"

Nicole answered, "I asked her doctor about it. She is one of the rare people who's hair is changing color just before puberty."

Julie mentioned, "What's odd is Ester's hair ain't getting lighter."

Diana agreed, "It's turning to a very dark auburn color. I don't believe she'll ever totally get rid of her dark tint but she isn't a pure brunette anymore."

Ashleigh set her purse on the table and took out a smaller woman's wallet.

Julie asked, "Is the Mom a red head?"

Ashleigh answered, "She hated it until recently. I knew her as a blond but she no longer dies her hair. She defiantly has red hair. Speaking of red hair is Ester dying her hair?"

Diana smiled.

Nicole answered, "She's one of the rare ones. Her hair is changing before puberty."

Ashleigh asked, "Usually doesn't hair go from lighter to darker?"

Diana answered, "We've decided it ain't getting lighter. It's turning a dark auburn."

Ashleigh answered, "I agree."

She took out a few pictures and handed them out.

Megan became concerned, "If he comes down Y'all better make sure he wears sunscreen."

Ashleigh asked, "You think he'll burn?"

Nicole as a nurse stated, "Megan's right. He'll burn easily. He does look like Bob."

Diana asked, "Honey. Is his mom pretty?"

Megan was irritated with this question.

Ashleigh answered, "She could easily get attention."

Julie asked, "Why didn't she marry him?"

Ashleigh in an odd voice said, "Never ask him about that."

All the ladies now wanted details.

"He asked her at least three times. Wait. Maybe four?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Just like when he asks a gal out on a date."

This put a halt to the current conversation; it quickly made a sharp turn.

Diana asked, "Bob's asked Y'all out?"

Julie perked up.

Nicole destroyed it by saying, "Why ain't the garbage and recycling out?"

Julie's mouth dropped open.

All the ladies became quiet and stared at her.

She restrained herself from mumbling. She took both bags and stepped out into the garage. They heard the garage door open.

Nicole: grabbed all of the pizza boxes, opened the door to the garage, and set them to the side.

They heard Julie ask, "Why am I the one throwing them away?"

Nicole with a frustrated look shut the door to the garage and stepped into the garage.

The ladies in the kitchen made faces.

Diana playing with her necklace questioned, "He's asked Y'all out?"

Megan's dimples flashed, "Many times."

Diana asked, "Why haven't Y'all gone out with him?"

"I'm dating Christopher."

Diana asked, "Did he ask Y'all out before Christopher?"

"Does it matter?"

Diana looked over at Ashleigh, "Does Bob ask out many ladies?"

"No."

Megan's dimples flashed.

She found herself saying, "Obviously he ain't the marring type. This Shelly didn't marry him."

Megan tried deflecting, "Why didn't she?"

This is when Nicole decided to step into the house, she frustrated Julie by shutting the door between the house and garage.

Ashleigh decided with only her friends there she could be honest, "Their relationship was a mess. Partly because she was using drugs and drank to much."

The ladies looked at her.

They heard in the garage Julie mumbling and the cardboard being picked up.

"Plus they could never figure out what they were to one another."

Diana asked, "They were shacking up but nothing ever was made official?"

Ashleigh said, "Exactly."

Megan jumped in, "See."

Diana gave Megan a look, "See what?"

"I ain't dating a man who'll just shack up with someone."

Ashleigh jumped to her brother's defense, "They loved one another. While they were together they never once slept with anyone else. They just couldn't come to terms with how much they loved one another."

Ashleigh sighed.

"It's what's always frustrated me."

Nicole sat down on one of the tall kitchen chairs.

Diana waved her arms, "What has?"

"I believe she's the only woman he's made love too."

Megan asked, "She's attractive right?"

Ashleigh admitted, "Yeah."

Megan with a scowl, "Don't take offense."

"I won't."

"Powerful men like your brother are always choosing big boobed model types."

Ashleigh reluctantly answered, "She could've been a model."

Megan answered, "It's the reason I ain't dating him."

Diana mentioned, "Susan has a very similar shape to you."

Megan looked at her sister-in-law.

Her dimples flashed, "What are Y'all saying?"

Diana touched her necklace, "Maybe the reason he's attracted to Susan is on account she looks like you."

This is when a frustrated Julie stepped into the kitchen. She knew to sit in a kitchen chair and act like nothing was frustrating; otherwise other tasks would be handed to her.

Ashleigh asked, "She does?"

Nicole jumped in, "She's tall. She's blond. She's always in the gym."

Diana mentioned, "She's great at tennis."

Megan felt annoyed by this whole conversation.

"She'd be better for him."

Julie asked, "Who?"

Nicole whispered, "Susan."

Diana asked, "Why would Y'all believe such a thing?"

Megan answered, "She's wealthy. She'd be able to handle all of the politics he's getting into. She can enjoy playing tennis with him at her fancy club. With how rich she is I'm sure she ain't needing his money. She's very attractive. Plus."

Nicole curious asked, "What?"

"They both have children. I'm sure it's a bond between them."

Diana said, "Y'all are making a lot of assumptions."

"I ain't assuming."

Just then most of the outside lights went off and the door slid open.

Megan along with the rest of the ladies became quiet.

Duke joked, "Y'all talking about us?"

The guys laughed.

They received stares.

Megan wanted out of this conversation and suggested, "Y'all want to play against Ashleigh and I in darts."

Duke laughed, "Y'all still haven't beat me shooting."
"It's your awful math."
Jeff mentioned, "The board is electronic."
Julie perked up, "Jeff and I will be on a team."
Jimmy said, "Lets play."
Julie said, "Let me get my darts."
Duke asked, "Y'all have your own darts?"
Ashleigh stated, "I bought them for her."
Nicole and Diana gave Ashleigh her nephews pictures.
Ashleigh mentioned, "You two should play."
Nicole made a face, "Us?"
"Why not?"
Ashleigh set the purse down and took out three sets.
They looked at her, "I was hoping we'd play."
She said, "Let me check on Nikita."
Jimmy volunteered, "Tie her up in the garage. I have a rug she can lay on."
Nicole's look was priceless.
Diana and Megan found this funny.
"Sure."
Jimmy stated, "I'll get my set."
Duke smiled, "Alright."
Julie and Jeff both rushed into the garage from the kitchen.
Megan encouraged, "Y'all should play."
Nicole said, "Let me bring the drinks out first."
This is when Ashleigh left her purse on the table and headed outside to get Nikita.
Megan said to Duke, "You ain't winning today."
"I'm up for the challenge."
They stepped into the garage.
Duke was impressed with the four sets of darts Julie owned. Julie explained Ashleigh gave her these sets. She went on to explain Mr. Bob had two dart boards and many sets in the yacht.
Duke and Jimmy looked at one another.
Megan produced her big dimple smile.
She looked at the board, "Lets play cricket."
Duke asked, "Y'all know how to play it?"
Megan's dimples flashed.
She answered with a tone, "Yes sir."

February 17th, The Fence

Part Four of Five

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Ashleigh & Megan

Book I: Friendship



Saturday February 17th

The Fence

Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Part Five of Five

Authored By: R. P. Voght

*Posted on ashleighandmegan.com on:
September 16, 2023*

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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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February 17, The Fence

Day 12 of Book I

(Twelve Days after Julie Made the Deal)

Shelly: was done with her homework, the next time she was scheduled for work was on Monday; with Holly moving dinner to lunch this gave Shelly an opportunity to enjoy time with her son.

She decided to take Little Bobby tobogganing. They first went to a regional store chain. This store was a combination: department store, hardware store, car repair, and farm supply store. The reason she chose this store was because of a sale on toboggans and winter outerwear. The soft lines department was far from elegant; the store jammed a lot of product on metal racks. She correctly assumed there would be a variety at a reasonable price. She was happy to find two racks of boy sized winter jackets. Little Bobby liked a blue and white jacket because of a polar bear patch. She selected: a pair of matching blue snow pants, blue mittens, and a winter hat. The hat was embroidered with a polar bear ice skating on the front. She liked this hat because it had a face mask. She assumed he would pull it down but his ears and neck would be covered. For herself she found a nice red and white winter jacket with matching snow pants. They went to the shoe department and found brand new winter boots. When she reached the aisle with the toboggans she was overjoyed at the large selection. She was grateful they had long plastic toboggans with an attached rope. He became excited about a bright orange one. She purchased these items and went home; this only took a few minutes because the store was only a couple miles from her apartment.

She left the toboggan in the back of her car and they headed into the apartment. Where they changed into warmer regular clothes and put on their winter outer wear. Dressing Little Bobby was somewhat difficult but nothing horrendous. Like she predicted he pulled the mask

down under his chin. She brought an extra scarf along just in case he needed it. Because of the boots he was wearing it was a slow climb down the stairs of the apartment building. He wanted to be a “big boy” and walk down the stairs himself (she held onto his hand as he gripped the railing).

Once in the car it was about a ten minute drive to a hill she heard about. This hill was on *River Parkway Road*. This parkway started at the back of the police station, made a couple turns, went up a fairly large hill, and ended at a large park. This hill was at the back of the park. Below the hill was: a plowed blacktopped walk way, a small river, trees, shrubs, a walking bridge, and on the other side of this walking bridge was the main park. Shelly parked on the street next to the hill. The other side of the street was lined with residential housing. What Shelly liked was the hill was lite by tall street lights. There were: a series of cars parked on the hill, there were kids, families, and teenagers sliding down the hill. She felt lucky to find a parking space on the hill and not to far from the top.

At first Little Bobby was unsure of what was happening. This changed when Shelly finally convinced him to leave the car. The difficulty was his desire to bring his rubber toy wolf with him. She told him it would be in the car when he came back; only then was he willing to leave the wolf behind. He became excited when he spotted other kids slid down the hill. She watched him closely as she went to the back of her car and took out the toboggan.

He looked at his Mommy pointed and said, “Down.”

Shelly smiled, “That is what we’re going to do.”

She: took out the orange toboggan, shut the hatch, carried the toboggan in one hand, and took Little Bobby’s hand with the other. It was a clear winter day and the temperature was in the mid-twenties. She felt this was a perfect day to enjoy tobogganing.

Shelly found an open place near the top. She sat down in the toboggan. He looked down the hill and became unsure. She convinced him to sit on her lap and let him take the rope. She pushed with her hands and they went down the hill. She never let Little Bobby know she was the one steering the toboggan. She was surprised how fast they went. They slowed when they reached the thicker snow at the bottom of the hill. The best part for Shelly was hearing her son laugh all the way down.

Even before getting off of the toboggan he said, “Go again.”

The walk back up the hill took some work. She was surprised they never fell. Once up on the hill they went down again. They did this multiple times. They went far and fast when she laid on her stomach and he laid on her back. The second time they did this she purposely tipped over. He loved this. She ended their ride a few times this way until his face accidentally hit the snow. He cried. She felt bad. Once the snow was brushed off he was ready to go again. What was getting more and more difficult was the walk up the hill. Shelly started ending their rides sooner. Little Bobby never figured out she was cutting the ride short. Stopping sooner was still a struggle getting back up the hill. A couple times when she reached the top she told Little Bobby to “wait”. During a couple of these waits she talked to other parents. She found it flattering when a single dad flirted with her. This surprised her because she felt she looked hideous in the winter outerwear. She was polite to him; as she brushed off his advances. The least thing she wanted was to have a man in her life.

Little Bobby’s excitement was wearing out; especially when climbing the hill. When she asked him if he wanted to go home he would say, “again.” He’d find the energy to scurry up the hill. Before one of the trips down she took off her gloves and checked his cheeks. She

believed he should only go down a few more times. This is when she had an idea. They moved to the highest point of the hill. She asked a mom to really push them. She purposely went as far as the toboggan would go. When it stopped: they were in much deeper snow, they were near the blacktopped walk way, and the top of the hill seemed a long way.

They took a few steps.

Little Bobby reached up his arms and said, "Up."

"No we have to walk."

They trudged through the thicker snow. In a few steps they would be out of the deep snow.

He sat down, "Rest."

This is what she was waiting for.

In an excited voice she asked, "Want a ride?"

He answered, "Yeah!"

"You have to get into the toboggan."

He sat himself down in the toboggan. This was the blessing of the rope. She pulled him along the side of the plowed walk way. He pointed at a rabbit. She managed to acknowledge it with excitement. She stopped at the bottom of the hill directly below her car. She was able to pull him up to her car. She was surprised when he ran to the back door. She was prepared to go up and down this section of the hill a couple more times.

She: took off her gloves, dug into one of the pockets of the jacket, took out her keys, unlocked the back door, helped Little Bobby into his car seat, removed his hat and gloves, and handed his wolf back to him.

He showed her the wolf and said, "Grrr."

She smiled and made a howling noise.

He repeated this noise.

She laughed.

He laughed too.

She smiled when he focused on the wolf.

She shut the door, went around to the back, opened the hatch, put the toboggan in, went to the drivers side, stepped in, and drove back to her apartment.

It was now passed dusk. With the tattoo parlor still open she needed to park in the municipal lot next to the building. The municipal lot was lite up by the overhanging lights. Shelly slipped on Little Bobby's hat and gloves; she made sure to give back his rubber wolf. She led Little Bobby out of the car and to the front of the building. While doing so it was easy to gaze through the large picture window of the small diner across the street. It looked empty. She wanted to enjoy a hot chocolate and a cheeseburger with her son. Just before leading LB across the street, she spotted a couple enter the back entrance and sit down at the counter. She had partied with this couple before being arrested in Florida. The least thing she wanted was to talk to them.

She remembered the hot chocolate packets in her apartment.

She looked down at Little Bobby, "Lets make some hot chocolate."

"Like hot choc-o-light."

She smiled, "You want macaroni and cheese?"

He became excited, "Like mac-o-non-ee."

She smiled and led her boy into their apartment.

He made sure to never drop his rubber wolf.

Once in the apartment: they removed their winter outerwear, Shelly hung their wet clothes over the shower bar, they changed into dry clothes, she changed his diaper, made him hot chocolate; she made him sit at the table and drink it. The rubber wolf was carried wherever Little Bobby went. After preparing the hot chocolate, for both herself and Little Bobby, she made the macaroni and cheese.

He became excited when Shelly placed the bowl of macaroni and cheese on the table.

He yelled out, "Mac-o-non-ee and cheese."

She said with a smile, "It's a favorite."

When he was done eating he went and played in the living room. Shelly: cleaned the kitchen, took out an easel from her bedroom, set it in the corner of the living room, went back to her bedroom, grabbed a painting she was working on, set this on the easel, she again went back to her bedroom, grabbed her CD radio, set it on a end table near the easel, plugged it in, stepped to her bookshelf, selected a classical CD, took it with her, placed the CD into the player, hit the play button, again went back to her room, slipped on an old button shirt, selected the paints and brushes she would use, and headed back into the living room. He started to watch her paint. This inspired Little Bobby to take his large crayons and a thick coloring book from off of the same bookshelf with the CD's on it. Shelly intervened when he set the coloring book filled with farm animals onto the coffee table. She allowed him to pick out a picture, she cut the picture out, and gave it to him. The reason she did this was to avoid Little Bobby scribbling on page after page without really trying to color.

After a while he wanted to help her paint.

Instead; they again watched an animated dog movie. Shelly was happy when Little Bobby fell asleep. Shelly: was able to wake him, change his diaper, change his clothes, and put him to bed. She was happy to turn off the movie. After she grabbed a different classical CD, took out the other one, set it upside down on the end table, placed the new one into the player, and went back to her painting.

Ashleigh yelled to Megan, "In about an hour?"

Megan looked over, waved, and simply answered, "Yes Ma'am."

This was good enough for Ashleigh.

Megan: removed her keys, unlocked the door to her houseboat, and stepped into the living quarters.

Ashleigh focused on the yacht: the outside lights were on, Bob's office light was on, the light in the galley was on, and the lounge light was on. She stopped when she reached the wooden pier of the yacht.

Nikita sat down and waited for Best Friend.

Ashleigh assumed the wood and the stairs would be cool on her feet. She: bent down, removed her boots, removed her socks, placed the socks into the boots, and carried her boots. She was grateful the wood and stairs were indeed cool and was overjoyed she was no longer wearing boots.

As soon as Ashleigh was walking up the stairs Nikita went running ahead of her and waited at the door.

When Ashleigh reached the main door she: dug her keys out of her purse, unlocked the yacht door, pushed it open, Nikita ran into the galley, Ashleigh stepped into the Yacht, turned, and locked the door.

Ashleigh heard Nikita lapping up her water.

Ashleigh yelled, "Bob!"

No answer.

Nikita came around the corner.

Ashleigh asked her dog, "No Bob?"

Nikita waited for a noise she understood.

Ashleigh assumed Bob was on a date. She wanted to believe what she heard about Susan King. She was concerned about the advisor her brother mentioned.

She set her purse on the front side of the china cabinet. She decided she would take a shower and change clothes.

Nikita reached the suite door before Ashleigh.

When Ashleigh reached her Siberian Husky she pet her.

She told her, "I'm going to take a shower."

Nikita new the sound "shower." This meant Best Friend or Strong Scent would stand in the box where rain happened; while it rained they made themselves smell funny. When Strong Scent made it rain she would make odd human noises. Nikita mistrusted the sound "bath." This meant two things. Best friend would sit in the box filled with water, often times this is when Best Friend would make the same type of noises as Strong Scent, but always ended up smelling funny. Bath could also mean: she would be lifted into the box, Best Friend made it rain on her, she would be made to sit, stuff would be rubbed on her, and she would end up smelling funny. Nikita always watched to make sure what the sound "bath" meant. If Nikita sensed she would end up smelling funny she would run from Best Friend.

Ashleigh: put her boots away, set her socks into a hamper, stepped into the head of the suite, started the shower, stepped into the walk in closet, quickly picked out clothes, and took her shower.

Nikita sensed Favorite Male and a human female; Nikita remembered meeting this human at the territory called "work". Nikita liked this human because she made noises at her and pet her. She wanted to greet these two humans but the suite door was shut. She went back to to where it rained. She stuck her head where she sometimes received "bath." When the water hit her nose she backed out.

Ashleigh pulled the curtain back and asked Nikita, "What's the matter?"

Nikita used her dog noises to tell Best Friend; Favorite Male and a female human entered the territory. Best Friend failed to understand her. Nikita went back to Ashleigh's suit and sat by the door. She was listening to Favorite Male and this female human make noises. They were in what was called "galley." She liked the galley because "Spot" was there, "treats" were there, and "leash" was there. She heard them move from the galley into the lounge.

Ashleigh never heard Bob and Susan enter the yacht. When she was finished with her shower she: opened the shower curtain, grabbed a nearby clean towel folded neatly on a nearby rack, dried herself while standing in the tub, stepped out of the tub, slipped on her undergarments, added dark blue flared jeans, a pink and yellow shirt, and a worn pink hoodie with big bold white letters advertising *Wisconsin Dells*. Around these letters the hoodie was made to look like someone had taken: bright blue, bright yellow, dark pink paint, and

splattered it all over the hoodie. She often times considered throwing the hoodie away but never could. Shelly and her Brother purchased the hoodie the last time they took herself and her friends to *Wisconsin Dells*. For a couple years she wore it everywhere. Currently; she only wore it when she no longer cared about her looks. She added pink socks and pink athletic shoes. She tied her long blond hair into a pony tail and grabbed a very old zippered pink spring jacket; this jacket was just as beat up as the hoodie.

Once she opened the door Nikita went running out of her suite.

Ashleigh followed. She went up the four steps into the lounge; she was surprised to see them there.

Ashleigh heard Bob say, "Sit."

Ashleigh watched Susan reach out to Nikita and say, "Howdy Nikita."

What stopped Ashleigh from turning around and changing clothes was Bob acknowledging her by saying, "Hi."

Ashleigh answered, "Hi."

Susan; stopped petting Nikita, stood up, and with a smile said, "Howdy."

"Hi."

There was an awkward silence. Ashleigh felt so under dressed. They were dressed casually as well; but this was still further up the look nice scale than Ashleigh. Ashleigh appreciated Susan never mentioning the way Ashleigh was dressed.

Ashleigh broke the silence, "You two have a good day?"

She cringed at the horrible question.

Bob answered, "Yes it was. I enjoyed visiting the many museums. And I'm pleased with the amount of research that was attained."

Susan smiled, "Bob took us out to lunch."

"Who was us?"

Susan caught Ashleigh's concerned tone.

Bob answered, "Another advisor. The one I told you about. She's an expert in pirating."

Ashleigh answered, "Okay."

Susan added, "Y'all will meet her at our next meeting."

"I'm looking forward to meeting her."

Susan and Ashleigh were well aware of the many layers attached to this comment.

Bob mentioned, "I was telling Susan you were helping Jimmy and Nicole build a fence."

Ashleigh felt Bob was trying to explain her poor appearance.

Ashleigh stated matter of fact, "They were building a privacy fence. I'll be going over there tomorrow and helping them finish."

Susan asked, "Is there a reason they are building it?"

"Snakes."

Bob asked, "How high does the fence need to be?"

"Three feet."

Susan was shocked at this.

In a refined accent she stated, "Oh my. I've been misinformed. I was under the impression twenty four inches is the standard."

"From what Jimmy and Captain told me. They've found out bigger rattlesnakes can climb over a twenty-four inch fence."

"Oh my."

"That's what I say. The fence itself is eight feet tall. On the outside of the fence having they attached a concrete footing. On the outside they attached vinyl paneling. This is supposed to keep snakes out. There is a debate if this will keep out the boa constrictors."

Susan said, "Honey. I was told they haven't made their way up here."

"Megan and captain have cowboy boots made from a boa constrictor that was crossing Captain's driveway."

"Oh my."

There was a slight pause.

Susan commented, "I've never liked snakes."

Ashleigh answered, "I do like it here. But I dislike snakes, bugs, poisonous spiders, sharks, alligators, and whatever is called a skunk ape."

Bob asked, "What's a skunk ape?"

Ashleigh recognized her mistake.

Susan rolled her eyes and waved her hand, "Don't worry. It's Florida's version of a Bigfoot."

Ashleigh's countenance fell when Bob said, "I'll have to check that out."

Susan said, "It's a silly legend. Then again some reputable people have claimed to see it."

Ashleigh said, "Well I'll let you two be alone. I'm headed over to Megan's houseboat."

Susan turned to Bob, "I had a wonderful day. If Y'all don't mind I'm needing to get home."

Ashleigh offered, "I'll walk you to your car."

Bob made sure to say, "I'll walk both you out."

Susan smiled, "It'd be an honor if you did so."

Ashleigh smiled.

After she turned toward Ashleigh, "I'm looking forward to working with Y'all on the book."

Ashleigh smiled, "Me too."

They all left the yacht.

Megan was checking on her outside palm tree when she spotted: Susan, Bob, Ashleigh, and Nikita step onto the first pier of the marina. She watched them approach her houseboat.

It was obvious Bob and Susan were talking up a storm. Ashleigh was alongside listening. She felt odd watching Bob and Susan. She reminded herself having a relationship with Bob would be a nightmare. Especially with Bob flying up to Wisconsin to visit his son. The chances of him dumping Susan for the Mother seemed like a high possibility. There was the likely hood he was sleeping with her already. With Bob having a house up there it would be very convenient to have two girlfriends.

She felt envious of Susan. It was obvious they could easily carry on a conversation. This was completely opposite of her relationship with Christopher. Earlier she invited Christopher to come over after church and help finish building the fence. Deep down she wished he would have continue to help his sister move. She buried this feeling.

They all stopped in front of Megan's houseboat.

Megan stood up and brushed her hair behind her right ear.

Susan was polite and greeted Megan.

Ashleigh and Nikita stepped onto the houseboat pier and onto the stern of the houseboat.

They all enjoyed a brief conversation and said their goodbyes.

Megan watched Susan and Bob walk from her houseboat to her car. It was obvious they could easily converse.

Megan was knocked out of her trance.

Ashleigh asked, "You checking your plants?"

"I was worried it was too cold for em."

"Want me to help you take them in for the night?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Nikita was led onto the wooden bench attached to the houseboat; where she laid down and watched.

Megan went up her step ladder (the ladder she stored by bungee cording it to the houseboat). Megan handed down a couple plants to Ashleigh. Ashleigh would take them inside of the houseboat and she set them on the coffee table. They did this a few times. When they were done Megan again attached the ladder onto the railing of her houseboat.

This is when they heard Gina's houseboat door open.

They looked across the pier at Gina's houseboat. They observed Gina and Miranda kiss. Gina whispered something and Miranda left the houseboat. Gina stepped back into her houseboat.

Nikita: jumped off of the bench, ran to the stern of the boat, and snarled.

Miranda: glanced at Nikita, made a face, and pranced forward.

"Sit."

Nikita sat down, "It's okay girl."

With this Nikita immediately calmed down.

Megan mentioned, "Daddy always said to avoid a person dawgs or children don't like. He'd say this was especially true if the dawg or child normally liked people."

Ashleigh answered, "I don't like Gina's new girlfriend."

"She's the most girly woman Gina's ever dated."

"I just have a bad feeling about her."

Megan took note of this.

"I wished she'd take it easy with Miranda."

Megan answered, "She never takes it slow. I've spotted them together many times."

Ashleigh answered, "Me too."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Hopefully we're wrong."

They looked at one another.

Megan folded up the ladder and again attached it to her houseboat.

They stepped into the houseboat.

Ashleigh helped Megan by lifting up the plants.

Megan hung them on the empty hooks they were taken down from.

Megan asked, "It was nice of Sherrie to give Nicole the plant."

"She's a sweetheart."

Megan replied, "I'm assuming Y'all have known her a long time?"

"I met her before the court ordered visitations. Sherrie was a dancer at Amanda's dance studio. When I was little she'd often times teach me how to dance."

"If you don't mind me asking?"

"No."

"How does a step brother end up with visitations?"

"My earliest memory is Bob and Amanda showing up at the house. And I was allowed to go with them."

They kept working on the plants.

"Why did Bob's Momma go over to your Momma's house?"

"Victoria told me. Amanda felt it was important for Bob to know who his sister was. I guess she witnessed me with my mother at some store. Victoria felt sorry for me."

"It's an exceptional woman to feel sorry for a child conceived from an affair."

"I never understood how special she was until treatment. I just thought of her as Amanda. She was my brother's Mom. When your five what do you really know?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Ain't it true."

"He tried for custody but the county I lived in wouldn't give it to him."

"How old was he?"

"Nineteen or twenty."

"It'd be difficult for a court to give custody to a step brother."

Ashleigh answered seriously, "But my real Mom was an alcoholic and beat me? My Step Dad was trying to touch me."

"A caring step brother would've been better."

"It's what my foster parents believed."

"How'd they figure in?"

They were done with the plants.

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Y'all want to sit up top?"

Ashleigh made a face, "We could sit in the galley?"

"We could sit in here?"

Ashleigh answered, "Sure."

Megan mentioned, "I'll get Nikita's rug."

This was a sound Nikita knew. She ran into Megan's cabin and sat in front of the outside door of Megan's cabin.

On the outside, next to the door, was the ladder to the top deck; Ashleigh referred to them as stairs.

Ashleigh and Megan giggled.

"We'll all must have a pattern."

"She knows what Nikita's rug means."

Ashleigh yelled, "Nikita come."

This was different. Whenever they were at "Megan's houseboat" territory the humans: grabbed her rug, humans grabbed other things, Nikita was given a bone or a toy, they went up the stairs, Nikita sat on rug, Nikita enjoyed her toy or bone; while Best Friend and Favorite Female made noises.

Megan set the rug in front of the coffee table.

Ashleigh brought the pitcher of iced tea and cups. She set them on the coffee table.

While doing this they continued to talk.

"Some of this I sort of remember and some of it I've filled in the blanks because of what Bob and Victoria told me."

Megan said, "Makes sense."

"Bob went for custody. My real mother told the courts she went to treatment and was getting her life back in order. She claimed she no longer was seeing who I considered my Step Dad. She promised the court she would no longer beat me. Which she claimed was spanking."

Megan asked, "Y'all were beaten?"

"I remember hiding under my bed or in a closet to avoid being beaten."

Megan felt a lot of compassion toward Ashleigh.

"My foster parents knowing the situation because Bob was dating Patty. Who I now consider my older sister."

"The missionary?"

"Yes."

"Did she tell them?"

"The first time I met Victoria they brought me over to my house because of bruises. My foster mom called the police. This led to the visitations and the custody battle."

"Is this how Y'all ended up with your foster parents?"

Megan was sitting on the futon under the big window.

Ashleigh was on the port side futon.

Megan poured them iced tea.

"After Bob lost custody."

She stopped and took a drink.

"If Y'all are feeling uncomfortable Y'all wouldn't have to tell me."

"As crazy as this sounds. When I tell people I trust it helps me."

"By all means keep telling."

Ashleigh let some tears fall, she wiped them away, and gained control of her emotions; at least some of them.

"This part Victoria told me. After Bob lost custody my foster parents reached out to him. They suggested they should go for custody. Between their lawyer and Amanda's lawyer they eventually won."

"Bob's mother's lawyer?"

"Yes."

"I'm assuming she was paying for the lawyer?"

"I don't know. Bob refuses to tell me."

"Why won't he tell you?"

Ashleigh rolled her eyes.

"I don't know."

Megan brushed her hair behind her ear.

"His Momma sounds like an amazing woman."

"He was never the same after the accident."

Megan wondered what he would be like if she never passed away.

"While Bob had visitations they were working on a motion to get the Anderson's custody of me. During a Christmas break my real mother...."

Ashleigh stopped in mid sentence.

Megan's impulse was to stop Ashleigh and comfort her but she felt it was better if Ashleigh continued.

Ashleigh became real stoic and serious, "I never received any Christmas gifts until I started to go with my brother. Patty and Bob told me to keep my gifts at my house. But I wanted to show my Mommy the *Care Bear* I received."

Ashleigh was able to stop her tears.

Megan's were starting.

"My real mother was trying to get me to say Bob molested me. After seeing my Step Dad at court. Patty pulled me to the side and explained to me what good and bad touch was. When Patty explained this to me I thought of my Step Dad and a boyfriend. But Ashley wanted me to say Bob was touching me. She tried to force me to say Bob was molesting me by taking out a knife and stabbing the care bear. I'll never forget all the stuffing being torn out of it and the head on the floor. She then beat me."

"I'm assuming Ashley is your Mom?"

"She named me after herself."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Later in the week."

"There's more?"

Megan held in her tears.

Ashleigh took a sip of Iced tea.

"I don't remember why but my real mother left me alone with my Step Dad. He put porn on the TV and pulled out his thing. He wanted me to sit on his lap."

This angered Megan.

"Because of Patty's talk I ran up the stairs and hid."

An angry Megan asked, "Did he find Y'all?"

"No."

"I'm happy Y'all were able to hide."

Ashleigh with a smile stated, "Because the dummy forgot to pull up his pants he fell into the coffee table and knocked himself out."

Megan's dimples flashed.

An angry Megan stated, "It serves him right."

"I agree."

Megan held in her tears.

Both took drinks of their iced tea.

She resumed, "When I went back to school my teacher asked me how I recieved bruises. I want to say. She asked me many times before."

"What did Y'all tell her?"

"Ashley told me to tell people I fell. "

Megan's dimples flashed

They took sips of their iced tea.

Megan was patient. She could tell Ashleigh was processing many memories.

Ashleigh repeated herself, "Because of what Patty and Bob told me I told the teacher the truth."

"What'd they tell you?"

"I was to tell any big person how I received my bruises. They said if I told people the truth they would be able to help me. At the time Patty and Bob were talking about getting married. When they broke up I was devastated."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"Y'all were living with your foster parents when they broke up?"

"Yes."

There was another pause.

This time Ashleigh filled both cups with iced tea.

Ashleigh continued, "When the teacher asked me about my bruises I was living with Ashley. I wanted to live with Bob and Patty. I now believe because of all the people praying for me and what Patty told me I found the courage to tell the teacher the truth."

"Aman."

"You aren't kidding. I do believe without people praying for me I would have never said anything."

Megan nodded her head.

"The teacher took me to the office. At the time I didn't know who I was talking to. I ended up talking to a school psychologist. I knew who the principle was and talked to him. I then talked to a police woman. I quickly ended up in a foster home."

"With your foster parents?"

"No. I lived in one county and they lived in a different one. My foster families lawyer fought to make sure I'd be safe. Amanda's lawyer was no slouch either. She threatened Milwaukee County with lawsuits if anything happened to me. That was the county I lived in. This lawyer threatened to go to the media. Both counties agreed I should live with my foster parents. What swung the decision in my parents favor was the fact Victoria was pregnant with Felicia."

"Felicia? Was a surprise?"

"Yup. What surprised everyone was how healthy she was after my foster Mom's miscarriages."

"From what I've seen. It ain't easy getting through a miscarriage."

Ashleigh stated, "She says her faith and Blake got her through them. Blake told me she had a still birth."

Megan cringed.

"What was upsetting to them. The baby was fine a week before the birth."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"What can Y'all say?"

They both drank their iced teas.

Megan asked, "What ever happened to your real Mom?"

This Ashleigh started to tear over, "She ended up in prison for trying to kidnap me and for resisting arrest."

Silence.

Ashleigh broke the silence.

"After being released from prison she took my Foster Parents to court to try and get custody back."

"I'm assuming she lost."

Ashleigh smiled and laughed.

This surprised Megan.

“Why are Y’all laughing?”

“My brother hired a private detective. The detective took pictures of Ashley in bars, going to liquor stores, and never going to...”

She paused.

Ashleigh’s countenance completely changed.

Megan’s dimples flashed.

She would wait for her friend.

Ashleigh held in tears but managed to say, “She was telling everyone how she was going to treatment and staying on the program. There was not one picture of her going to group or doing anything to get better.”

Her tears stopped immediately.

“Of course she was with a different guy.”

Silence.

Ashleigh broke the silence, “The court listened to me when I said I wanted to stay with my Foster Parents.”

“Y’all were old enough to choose?”

“No. But they listened to what I said. I’m sure the lawyers had a lot to do with the court listening to me.”

They both giggled.

Then Ashleigh started to tear.

Megan’s dimples flashed.

Megan wanted to step over and put her arm around her. But she felt Ashleigh would have stopped telling her story.

“The worst part was.”

Megan wondered what could be worse.

“I tried to tell Ashley what my Step Dad was trying to do to me. And about the guy who touched me. Lucky he stopped when my Mom stepped into the living room. But she wouldn’t listen to me.”

Ashleigh cut off the tears.

“I was told by a friend of my Mother’s the only reason she wanted me back was to get back at both my Foster Parents and Bob. Worse. She wanted welfare money.”

More tears.

“She didn’t love me. Or want me.”

Megan couldn’t help herself and sat next to her friend.

Ashleigh cried on Megan’s shoulder.

“I’m glad Y’all stayed with your foster parents. It says a lot about your brother.”

Ashleigh tearing, “Without my Foster Dad and Bob I’d probably hate men. Or I would have been obsessed with them. I wouldn’t have known the love of a Mother without my Foster Mom. I was so mean to them.”

Ashleigh sat up and grabbed some tissues.

Megan said, “I’m sure they understood.”

“She says that.”

Ashleigh asked, “You believe me?”

“They sound like wonderful people.”

"Victoria can be tough."

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

"I'm assuming she needed to be."

Ashleigh giggled.

Megan stood up, grabbed some more tissues, gave some to Ashleigh, and used some herself.

"I miss them."

"As much as I'd hate to see Y'all move. Maybe Y'all should move back?"

Ashleigh became very serious.

"I've thought about moving but it doesn't feel right. I'm probably a terrible vice president."

"Who says?"

In frustration she stated, "They say I'm too young. They say I only got the job because of Bob. I'm going to ruin the company..."

Megan interrupted her, "Y'all know what I hear?"

Ashleigh grabbed a tissue and shook her head.

"I ain't about to piss down your leg. I've heard people say those things. But..."

"What?"

"The people around here are surprised."

"What are they surprised at?"

"How Y'all treat people. How Y'all listen. How Y'all joke around. But Y'all are serious when Y'all need to be. How Y'all go around and ask everyone how they're doing. Many are liking your tips. How Y'all let people have their own way of doing things."

Right away Ashleigh added, "It can't hurt someone else down the line."

"I've heard this too."

"What happens if I wreck Bob's company?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"How are Y'all wrecking the company?"

"with all the mistakes I'm making."

"The only one who's believing Y'all are making mistakes is Y'all."

"Haley gets mad at me for saying that too."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"She sounds like a smart gal. Y'all should be listening to her. If anything without Y'all I'm not sure the move would have went as well."

"I'm not sure about that."

"It's what Jimmy says."

"He's made my job so much easier."

They looked at one another.

Ashleigh asked, "What's he saying?"

"He says he's never seen a company as organized as Y'all are. While being able to adapt to people's suggestions."

"He did?"

"Don't Y'all tell Nicole or Jimmy I told you. Y'all hear."

"I won't."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"He believes the reason the move has gone so well is on account of Y'all."

Ashleigh answered, "Bob is the one who planned it all out."

Megan found herself defending Bob.

"I'm surprised to hear how he's willing to listen to suggestions. I've also heard Y'all have changed many of the original plans."

"He worked for a couple companies and was frustrated how short sided they were."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"When did he first work for someone else?"

"When he first opened up the club. He needed to work to supplement his income for a while."

"I thought he was always wealthy?"

"He took some risks. He almost lost his house. This is when he started working for others. He didn't do it for long. I suspect there is a clump of money he never wants to touch. So when he says he's almost broke. It's not he's almost broke he just never touches that clump."

Megan really respected this.

"Where did he get the idea to own everything?"

"Amanda."

Very serious Ashleigh stated, "He believes God blesses ownership. He doesn't like leasing or renting."

Megan respected this a great deal. Captain believed the same thing.

"He also believes if you own everything. Others have a difficult time taking it from you."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"So the rumors he owns everything is true?"

"We lease machinery now and then for certain projects. Otherwise. Bob owns it or the company does."

Ashleigh became very serious.

"There are people who'd love to take the company away from Bob."

Megan stated, "He's right. If he owns everything it makes it difficult for people to take it from him."

Ashleigh answered, "He's a sneaky bastard."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"With him being your brother why would Y'all say he's sneaky?"

"He did it quietly. At first he was discounted. This was until *Renewed Mastery* and his wealth ended up in those top 200 lists. By the time he was in the top 100 lists people realized taking him out would be a pain in the ass. He stopped his partner from making the company go public."

Immediately Megan asked, "Y'all are a private company?"

"Yup. We're one of the largest private companies in the country."

"Oh."

"This is why his partner wanted to go public. He had backers who would have immediately bought out my brother and made his partner the CEO. There are others who are still trying to take him out."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"The State of Florida loves him."

“Other States completely resent him. They’d love to have the Federal Government take him out. We still have to deal with those states. Being here has saved us billions of dollars. More important Florida appreciates what my Brother is doing.”

“Wisconsin didn’t?”

Ashleigh rolled her eyes and waved her hands.

“Never ask Bob about the Democrat Governor of Wisconsin. He’s a real creep.”

“Y’all met him?”

Ashleigh made a face.

“He hit on me.”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

Ashleigh continued, “Plus he lied all the time. He always talked about helping the poor. But he wasn’t interested in doing anything that would really help the poor. Bob wanted to keep the company there but the governor was one of the backers.”

Ashleigh became angry.

Megan believed her completely.

“In a press conference the creep of a governor said my brother was greedy when he stopped those jerks from taking the company from him. He then said my Brother didn’t care about Wisconsin. Which was untrue. He tried to work with the governor to keep Renewed Mastery there but Bob was unwilling to submit to his demands.”

Megan asked, “Y’all know what they were?”

“Nope. I don’t want to know. All I can say is never believe anything a Democrat says. They lie about everything.”

“Daddy would agree with Y’all. When we discovered the pirate ship. The government wanted it all. We understood they’d want their share but they tried their best to take it all.”

Ashleigh with some excitement in her voice.

“The greediest people on the planet are government officials.”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

“Y’all ain’t whistling Dixie. Y’all should see what I’m paying in taxes.”

“One of the reasons we moved from Wisconsin is because of all the taxes they make you pay. It was ridiculous. We’d have handled reasonable. My brother says the socialists who run the Democrat party are doing everything possible to ruin the state.”

“Y’all have socialists running the state?”

Ashleigh waved her hand, “These greedy little...”

She stopped herself from swearing.

“Milwaukee County and Dane County are filled with greedy little Socialists.”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

Megan added with a tone, “Y’all would think people would figure out raising taxes doesn’t help anyone.”

Ashleigh asked, “How did you graduate college?”

Megan’s dimples flashed.

“It wasn’t easy. I was downgraded all the time.”

Ashleigh became agitated.

“Some of our worst employees are college graduates. They lack common sense. Gracie and I are now grilling anyone who’s graduated with a degree. I’d rather have Billy work with us than some person with a degree. They’re so smart they’re stupid.”

Ashleigh calmed down.

"Of course some jobs you need someone with a degree. Like engineering. But when I see a liberal arts degree or a degree in dance. I'm inclined to toss out the application."

Megan mentioned, "April's so happy she's attending the apprentice program."

Ashleigh said, "She's an example on why I can't stand college. I'm starting to agree with my brother when he says you can't trust public education. April's told me. Just about everything she was taught was crap."

Megan stated, "April recommitted her life to Christ. Every chance she gets she's telling gals to wait to have sex."

Ashleigh said, "I'd agree."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"I'm glad I've waited. I just wish the Church wouldn't believe it's easy to wait. Or a person who's a virgin ain't struggling with sex."

"There is the nuts and bolts of it."

"Nicole says the same thing."

"Since Jeff's been seeing Bette he's forgotten about me."

Megan's dimples flashed.

"He's smitten."

"There isn't any doubt about that."

"Now. I ain't meaning anything bad now. But she looks like Y'all."

Ashleigh added, "She reminds me of Nicole. But has your determination."

They looked at one another.

They laughed.

Megan asked, "Y'all think he realizes what's happened?"

Ashleigh giggled, "Not a clue."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Very serious Megan asked, "Y'all think Bette knows?"

"Not yet. They are in that love in the clouds stage. But one day she'll mention it. Might not be direct but she'll see it."

They smiled at one another. Took sips of their iced tea. Megan stood up and grabbed a waist paper basket. They tossed the tissues into the basket. Megan put the basket back.

Ashleigh asked, "How's it going with Christopher?"

Megan's dimples flashed.

"He's coming over to help."

"That's good."

Megan made a face.

"Or not?"

"I like everything about him. It ain't easy to talk to him."

"Some guys are like that."

"I'm wanting someone I can talk too."

Ashleigh made a face.

"If it's that important to you maybe you'll have to date someone else."

"I'm hoping it'll work out."

"We all want it to work out. I wanted it to work out with Neil but he wouldn't stop drinking. Plus. He wasn't a Christian. I'm not making that mistake again."

Ashleigh shrugged her shoulders, "As difficult as it was I had to brake it off."

Megan would really consider this.

"Want to play Canasta?"

Megan gave her a face, "I wish Y'all wouldn't have taught me."

Ashleigh smiled.

They stood up. Megan went to her TV stand, opened a drawer, and grabbed two deck of cards. Ashleigh took the iced tea into the galley. They played a full game talking about everything but nothing real important. Ashleigh was unhappy when Megan came back and won at the end.

Nikita was content to sleep on her rug.

After they were done playing; Megan and Ashleigh led Nikita to where she did her business.

After making sure Ashleigh reached the yacht safely Megan went back to her houseboat. This is when she took a shower, knowing she would be starting her monthly at any time, and because of how cold it was; she wore pajamas.

While laying in bed she thought about: building the fence, everything she talked to Ashleigh about, what needed to be finished with the fence, thought about Bob and Susan's relationship, her mind focused on Bob, she quickly stopped thinking about Bob, and fell asleep reviewing what needed to be done before her short morning charter.

*A*shleigh changed clothes.

She thought about how horrible she looked when she met Susan.

She was comforted by her friend Megan.

When she crawled into bed she quickly fell asleep.

Nikita always slept lightly when Best Friend was asleep.

February 17th, The Fence

Part Five of Five

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