



*Ashleigh & Megan
Book I: Friendship*

*Tuesday, June 6th
A Scary Place*

(6 Years, 2 Months, and 1 Day Since Ashleigh's Birth)

Part One of Four

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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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June 6th, A Scary Place

(6 Years, 2 Months, and 1 Day: Since Ashleigh's Birth)

Ashleigh blinked her dark green eyes open and studied her bedroom. What was special about her bedroom was the pink and white bedroom set her foster parents allowed her to pick out. She was taken to what she felt was a huge furniture store. What was amazing to Ashleigh was all of the furniture was new. What was unexpected; was her foster parents allowed Ashleigh to pick out from five different bedroom sets.

This six year old: focused her eyes, crawled out of her brand new pink with white trim bed, stepped over to her brand new pink dresser with white trim, and with caution looked around her brand new bedroom. One of the reasons she liked this pink dresser was she could reach every drawer. She turned around and looked at her bedroom door. When she felt it was okay Ashleigh opened the drawer and gazed upon the piles of neatly folded clothes; clothes her foster mom helped her gently pile.

Ashleigh disliked being the shortest kid in school.

Her long blond hair was a mess, her heart shaped face, her medium length nose, her soft gentle cheeks, and her round and gentle youthful facial lines gave Ashleigh a cute look. What would follow her into adult hood was her rounded jawline and chin.

Ashleigh's real mother, named Ashley Vindavane taught Ashleigh, when a woman went someplace they were to look special. Ashleigh picked up and moved items of clothing, many of these items ended up on the floor. She proceeded to open every drawer at least twice until she found the clothes she felt were special. The items Ashleigh considered special: was a bright neon pink short sleeved shirt with a Care-bear print with hearts around the Care-bear, she picked out a brand new pair of denim jean shorts, green neon socks, and a pair of bright neon pink tennis shoes. These items were special to her because her big brother Bob and his girlfriend Patty bought these items for her. Ashleigh quickly changed into these clothes. She felt she was a big girl and often times resented her foster mom trying to help her. When she was finished changing she immediately picked up all the clothes off of the floor and shoved them into the second drawer. By shoving the clothes downward and pushing as hard as she could she was able to close the drawer. With everything off of the floor Ashleigh felt she accomplished what her foster mom wanted.

After the drawer was shut she grabbed a brush from off her pink dresser to brush her frizzy blond hair; she was looking into a mirror her foster Dad attached to the wall. When she felt she looked special she ran to her pink Care-bear backpack hanging on the wall. Like everything else hanging in her bedroom this low hook was hung by her big foster dad.

What was confusing Ashleigh was he acted different from any other dads she knew.

She quickly removed the backpack off of this metal hook and slipped the backpack onto her shoulders. This backpack was slightly heavy for a six year old girl but Ashleigh was determined to carry it all by herself. Her foster mom told her to be careful and ask for help when carrying this bag. Ashleigh felt her foster mom was being foolish to tell her such things; Ashleigh was used to doing everything herself. This was an important backpack; everything she needed to go camping with her Big Brother and Patty were inside of this bag.

Ashleigh swiftly stepped out of her second story bedroom. She ran down the hallway until she reached the stairs. Hanging on the wall above the stairs were a series of professional family portraits and family pictures. Ashleigh stopped and gazed upon her first grade picture. She lowered her eyes onto the two pictures underneath. One of these pictures was of Ashleigh hugging Patty, and the other picture was of Ashleigh standing next to the family dog Maxine. Ashleigh wanted to hug this dog but her foster mom told her, "doggies didn't like hugs." In her six years of life the only people who took pictures of her were Patty and her brother Bob, this was the first time pictures of herself were ever displayed on a wall. She felt this was important because her picture was next to Patty's pictures.

Ashleigh stopped gazing at her pictures when she noticed Maxine was at the bottom of the stairs. Maxine was too old to climb up the stairs so. Maxine waited anxiously for Ashleigh to come down. Victoria's compassion for orphans led to this dog being brought into the house. Maxine was a mix. The Anderson Family was sure Maxine was mostly German Sheppard, however; there was a great debate between the family members as to what other breeds were mixed in. What the Anderson family could agree on was Maxine was temperamental and old.

The members of the family consisted of: Blake, Victoria, their oldest daughter Patty, and Victoria's surprise baby Felicia. All of the adult members of the family watched Maxine around strangers and were vigilant any time Ashleigh was near Maxine. Based upon the dogs temperamental behavior and how Maxine protected Victoria everyone believed Maxine would have needed to be put to sleep. They were all mistaken; Maxine and Ashleigh became instant friends. Victoria was the only one who understood the connection between Ashleigh and Maxine, to Victoria it was simple; the two adopted members of her family lived the same life before moving into the Anderson household. What was unacceptable was Maxine's over protection of Ashleigh. It was completely unacceptable for Maxine: to snip at Victoria for trying to give Ashleigh a hug, to growl at anyone who came near Ashleigh, Maxine almost bit Patty when Patty accidentally knocked Ashleigh over and Ashleigh started to cry; what bothered Victoria the most was Maxine's eyes when someone was around Ashleigh.

The reason Maxine was behaving this way was because she kept sensing fear from Ashleigh. Maxine's growing temperamental behavior, which was a growing danger to the baby, Maxine's arthritis, and growing medical problems led to the difficult decision this was going to be the last day of Maxine's life. Blake's plan was to come home on lunch and take the dog to the vet. With Ashleigh being away from the house the adults of the family, along with Ashleigh's brother Bob, felt this was the perfect time to put Maxine to sleep. The only one unaware this was to be Maxine's last day of life was the little girl who was running down the stairs to greet her best friend. Once Ashleigh reached the bottom of the stairs she stopped as she was taught and stuck out her hand, she allowed Maxine to smell her hand, Ashleigh then pet her kindred spirited friend; she wanted to hug Maxine but her Foster Mom told her dogs disliked hugs. Ashleigh considered hugging Maxine anyway.

Ashleigh heard baby noises in the kitchen.

Ashleigh heard Victoria respond to the babies noises.

These noises in the kitchen caused Ashleigh: to bolt passed the open front door, she hit the screen door button, she held the screen door open for Maxine, she commanded Maxine to “come”, Maxine stepped out of the house, Ashleigh let the door slam behind them, and stepped to edge of the little concrete porch. Once at the edge of this large square concrete slab: she slipped off her backpack, she set the backpack next to one of two large white pillars, and sat on the edge of this slab. Her small feet were on the sidewalk. This sidewalk lead from this slab to the blacktopped driveway. To her left and right were the white pillars supporting the small porch roof above Ashleigh and Maxine. Parked on the far left edge of the driveway was what Ashleigh felt was a big truck(this was Ashleigh's view from this small square porch). She felt this black top driveway was really long. In front of the driveway was a culdesac, and all around this circular dead end were upper middle class homes. She felt these were the biggest houses in all the world, not even the house her step dad moved herself and her mommy into was as big. In her little corner of Wisconsin she liked it when Victoria and Patty drove in a big circle to pull into the driveway; Ashleigh loved gazing upon these homes from the backseat of Victoria's car. Unlike Blake who scared Ashleigh when he sped into the driveway; Ashleigh felt he would run into the garage or hit Victoria's parked car.

Ashleigh looked over at her friend Maxine laying next to her. Ashleigh pet her on the head. She wanted to hug Maxine but could hear Victoria making noises at the baby.

Maxine felt it was a privilege to protect this pup.

Ashleigh speaking to her best friend, “My brother is taking me camping. I wish I could take you with me.” Her face crinkled, “They won't let me.”

Bob and Patty told Ashleigh she could bring a friend. At first the idea of bringing a friend was exciting to Ashleigh but when they told her Maxine needed to stay home; bringing a friend hurt her feelings. Ashleigh felt her only friend was Maxine.

Ashleigh became quiet. This was rare when sitting next to Maxine, Ashleigh loved talking to Maxine; she talked to Maxine more than anyone in the house. Maxine sat up and became vigilant when Maxine sensed fear and excitement coming from Ashleigh.

What caused Ashleigh to become silent was the name of the State Park her brother was taking her too: the park's name was *Devils Lake*. Ashleigh heard about this Devil in Sunday school. What scared her the most about the Devil was he could turn into a snake. The other reason the Devil was frightening, was her real mother Ashley Vindavane passed out on the couch leaving the TV on, Ashleigh became frightened by the images of a horror movie left on. This movie was about a devil scaring kids in a neighborhood. Ashleigh was so frightened she hid underneath her bed until she succumbed to exhaustion and slept.

She wanted to believe with her Brother around the Devil would leave her alone. She liked the feeling her Brother would protect her, but the conflicting idea was how the Devil could do scary things. Her Brother was always nice to her, and never once did anything bad happen to her when her Brother was around. Ashleigh certainly knew what mean was. Ashleigh felt her Brother and Amanda were always nice to her. Ashleigh liked Amanda because she took Bob and Ashleigh to get custard(a Wisconsin dessert similar to Ice Cream).

Ashleigh was unaware she was the consequence of an affair and the breakup of Amanda's marriage. Ashleigh knew Amanda as: Bob's Mom, Ashleigh's Sunday School teacher, a dance teacher, a nice lady who bought her desserts, and sometimes picked her up to take her to see her brother.

The most upsetting thing about her visits with her Step Brother was when her real mother would interrogate her after the visitation. This debriefing confused and hurt Ashleigh. Ashleigh never felt her brother ever did anything mean to her and Ashleigh was often

confused on what her drunken mother wanted her to say her brother did to her. The day Ashleigh figured out what her Mommy was trying to accuse her big brother of was the day Patty explained to Ashleigh what good touch and bad touch was. Patty felt it was absolutely necessary to explain to Ashleigh what the difference was between good touch and bad touch after Patty met Ashleigh's step dad. Patty went on to instruct Ashleigh on what she should do if anyone would ever touch her in a bad way. The person Ashleigh thought of, was a boyfriend of Ashley Vindavane and her Step-dad. On Christmas break, her Mommy went to the store to get everything needed for a big party, in so doing Ashley Vindavane unwisely left Ashleigh home alone with Ashleigh's step-dad. Patty's instruction saved Ashleigh from being completely destroyed as a human being. Patty's instruction gave Ashleigh the courage to run away from her step dad, to put a chair underneath her bedroom door knob, and to hide. This was good enough to keep Ashleigh safe until Ashley Vindavane arrived home. Ashleigh hated it when she thought about the day she saw her step dad's "thing."

Victoria and Patty were taking her to a nice lady who was helping her feel better about what happened on the day she saw her step dad's "thing" and when her step dad would try and "tickle" her. Ashleigh was wondering if she should tell this nice lady about the boyfriend with the deer head on the wall.

The second part of Patty's instruction saved Ashleigh from her step dad finishing his growing perversion. This life saving event happened after Ashleigh's concerned first grade teacher took Ashleigh out in the hallway. The teacher met Ashleigh at eye level and again asked how how she received the bruises on her upper arm, why she was sitting funny, and why she was so quiet. In the hallway Ashleigh remembered all what Patty told her about her bruises and about good and bad touch. Ashleigh with supernatural bravery answered honestly; instead of saying she fell. This teacher took her hand and gently led her to the principals office. Ashleigh was taken from the principals office and talked to a nice lady. Ashleigh knew this lady because she would come into their classroom and talk about things. While in this office a woman police officer and another lady from the police station talked to her. Ashleigh told this lady on how her mommy hit her and grabbed her. Ashleigh mentioned to the lady on how the judge, her big brother, and Patty told her mommy she could no longer "spank" her. Ashleigh told this police lady how her Step Dad made her feel funny by how he was "tickling" her, and how she saw his "thing." With tears Ashleigh told the lady from the police station what her mommy did to her first Christmas present from Santa. These accounts, along with the bruises on Ashleigh's shoulder, and the welts on her rear end; led Ashleigh to be placed in a foster home.

It took two months and twenty-five days of intense legal work for: Bob and Amanda's lawyer, the Anderson family lawyer, and months of prior legal preparation to convince a State of Wisconsin Judge to over rule Milwaukee County, and move Ashleigh from an approved Milwaukee County foster family; to the Waukesha County system so Ashleigh could be placed with Anderson family. What paved the way for the Anderson family being awarded foster parents was Bob trying for custody a year and two and half months earlier. Milwaukee County refused to grant Bob custody; instead they believed the lies of Ashley Vindavane. The judge was unwilling to move a child away from it's mother to live with a twenty year old step brother. After Bob lost the custody battle, Victoria and Blake approached Bob with the idea they would make excellent foster parent; Bob agreed. What happened to Ashleigh on Christmas break happened a week prior to the Anderson family putting in a motion on Ashleigh's behalf to move Ashleigh from living with her mother and step dad and to be placed with the Anderson family.

Ashleigh; sitting on the small concrete porch watched as Ms. Applegate, the kind neighbor drive passed the house. Ms. Applegate paid close attention to make sure this little

girl was okay. Seeing she waved back and parked back into her garage.

Maxine watched the car closely as Ashleigh waved to this woman who often gave Ashleigh cookies and let her play with her dog.

After the wave Ashleigh gave a disappointed look. What she wanted was her big brother and Patty to be the ones driving by. Ashleigh was sure one day her big brother would marry Patty and she would live with them. She believed living with her big brother and Patty would be the same as a princess living in a giant castle. Ashleigh often imagined living in a castle as a princess, where a good dragon protected her, and she would have a herd of unicorns in her back yard.

Sitting there waiting Ashleigh in her mind played one of the songs her big brother played when she came over to his house. Ashleigh started to move her feet on the sidewalk to this remembered beat. Ashleigh was recalling a series of dance steps one of Amanda's dance instructors taught her. Ashleigh loved going to Amanda's dance studio to watch her big brother and Patty dance. What made her feel special was when she was allowed to dance with the elegant dance instructors.

Ashleigh changed locations in her mind and was now at Bob and Amanda's house. This house was: big, old, fancy, next to a lake, and in a town with a funny name. Many times at her big brother's house Amanda would teach Bob how to dance. In this same room; Bob would play records and CD's. During the songs they would sing or talk about the song. When her big brother talked to her she wished he would stop using such big words. She would grow impatient when he would take a big round record with lots of songs on it and look for a certain song to play. What Ashleigh liked better were the small records with the big holes in the center. She knew they were called a 45, but was unaware of why they were called a 45. She liked CD's because her big brother let her hit the play button and this made her feel important. Ultimately; what was special about these times were not the records, the CD's, or the music; but someone was simply spending time with her.

She never felt scared when she was with her big brother.

Victoria was making faces and indulging in baby talk with her baby girl Felicia. As a thirty-eight year old woman she was blessed with an oval shaped face. Her smile dominated her face, her blended cheekbones moved effortlessly when she showed her happiness, and her long nose seemed to match her long smile. When she smiled she showed her perfect teeth; teeth Blake and Victoria spent a fortune getting fixed. She kept her long dark eyebrows trimmed, always maintained her long black wavy hair, and her high forehead was perfect for her facial shape. What separated her from most women was her shiny green eyes that were filled with love and life.

Victoria considered Felicia her surprise miracle baby. Giving birth to a strong and healthy baby after her early pregnancies was a huge blessing for her. Victoria's first baby girl died after six months of complications. After Patty was born Victoria went through three miscarriages. A baby girl died at the beginning of the third trimester, the second baby girl died at the end of the second trimester, but the most heartbreaking for Victoria was a full term still birth. What made this still birth heart breaking was two days prior to the birth, this baby boy was given a clean bill of health from her doctor; Victoria even listened to the baby's heart beat. It was impossible for Victoria to express the immense amount of joy she felt when her latest arrival was strong and healthy. Victoria named this baby girl Felicia. The meaning of the name meant happy, lucky, and prosperous.

Victoria was equally happy being a foster mom to Ashleigh.

The worrisome part of being a foster mom was the possibility of another child being taken away from her. Victoria already loved Ashleigh with all of her heart. Victoria was determined to pour her love upon this child so Ashleigh would carry this love into adulthood; no matter if Ashleigh lived with her a few years or she entered college. Victoria believed with all her heart God brought Ashleigh into her family's lives. This belief brought a youthful vigor into Victoria's life. Victoria was confident she was up for the task of being a mother to both Ashleigh and Felicia. She based this belief on her oldest daughter Patty who she felt was a wonderful eighteen year old woman.

While Victoria was making faces and speaking baby talk, Victoria heard: Ashleigh run down the stairs, a pause in sounds, Victoria heard the screen door creek open, Victoria heard Ashleigh command Maxine to "come," and heard the screen door slam.

Victoria's eyes and facial expression showed concern.

Victoria looked up at the kitchen clock.

Victoria was surprised Ashleigh was up before her husband Blake left for work. Mornings were a battle between herself and her foster child. It was painfully obvious Ashleigh struggled to get up and get going. Her heart felt crushed on those mornings when Victoria found Ashleigh sleeping underneath the bed. On these mornings Victoria reminded herself this little girl went through hell. Even with this reminder, many times Victoria felt her foster child was reacting this way because of her failing skills as a foster mom. What added to Victoria's feelings of inadequacies was when the only one able to convince Ashleigh from underneath the bed was Patty.

Victoria being a loving mom reached down and picked up her baby girl. Felicia was very content in her mothers arms. Victoria carried the baby to the front door.

Victoria stood in front of the screen door; it was a beautiful June day. Victoria promised herself she would take advantage of the light breeze, the sun, and the clear sky by taking a short walk.

Victoria peered down upon her foster daughter. She watched as her foster child was practicing to dance. This confirmed Victoria's suspicions Bob and Amanda were teaching Ashleigh how to dance. Victoria was sometimes displeased with Ashleigh's brother. What bothered her the most was the feeling he never fully disclosed what he was up to. Victoria was impressed with Bob's stubborn determination to protect his little sister. Victoria knew for a fact Amanda used a portion of her wealth and influence to help Bob try for custody and the legal fees to convince a judge to award Victoria and Blake custody. Even though Bob's attempts at custody failed, their lawyer was a key to Ashleigh becoming a member of the Anderson family.

Victoria looked over and felt remorse for their family pet; a pet Victoria lovely and unlovely called the Mutt. This remorse ended any time Victoria rehearsed in her mind the day this dog snipped at her for trying to hug Ashleigh. Victoria was so angry at this dog, she wanted the dog put down on the day it snipped at her; it was Blake who suggested to wait until the camping trip. The dog spent most of the last three days tied up by it's doghouse; Victoria being sentimental let the dog into the house.

Victoria felt her baby move in her arms. She heard her husband Blake making baby noises; this playfulness pleased Victoria. Victoria responded with a happy expression.

"Good Morning," Blake announced and stepped next to Victoria.

Victoria gave her husband of nineteen years and nine months a concerned look. Blake was a tall man, with a trimmed graying beard, he was wearing large clear glasses, and was dressed in a suit. He was the Operations Manager of the Engineering Department, he was paid very well for his exceptional managerial skills. He often refused to take the offer of a Vice President. At forty-one he believed the most important things in life were his faith and his

family. He believed the new additions to his family were a blessing; especially given the fact his wife was overjoyed at being a mother

Their nineteen years of marriage were not as happy and fulfilled as they felt and thought currently. Despite the difficulties they were always a loyal couple. After Blake became a Christian he stopped drinking. When Victoria witnessed the changes in her husband she found the same faith. With their faith as a bond and a strength, they were able to heal and forgive one another. This in turn helped turn Victoria and Blake's marriage into a blessing to themselves and the people around them.

Victoria wished Blake would have never fought in Vietnam. Victoria witnessed the effect Vietnam had on the love of her life. She was forever grateful on how God healed her husband's emotional wounds. Victoria still felt her husband was never the same after going over there.

Blake suggested, "I could take her to the vet now."

"Patty wants to say goodbye before they go on the trip," Victoria asked right away, with a concerned look, "Do you think it's a good idea to let Patty go."

"We talked about this," Blake stated in a matter of fact way, "She's going with other friends and our daughter is a good girl."

With a sharp tone Victoria responded, "It isn't Patty I'm concerned about."

Blake looked at his wife and smiled.

Victoria ignored his smile. She was too concerned about their temperamental dog sitting next to Ashleigh.

Victoria and Blake were watching and listening to Ashleigh talk to Maxine about being a princess.

In a concerned voice Blake asked Victoria, "You think she'll ever feel comfortable around me."

Victoria looked over at her husband and answered, "That little girl has been through a lot. Just be patient."

He smiled, "You're a good Mom."

Victoria pleaded nicely, "Please take Maxine out back."

"Maxine," Blake yelled in a commanding voice threw the screen door.

Ashleigh stood up, whipped around, and glared at Blake. It was easy to see Ashleigh's look of fear.

Blake opened the door and with extreme authority stated, "Come."

Maxine listened to Blake and stepped into the house.

Victoria witnessed Ashleigh flinch and give Blake a frightened look. Victoria stepped to the side and let Blake and Maxine pass by. Victoria wished Blake could have avoided being so demanding around Ashleigh. What concerned Victoria was Ashleigh's worried face and posture.

Victoria made sure her baby was wrapped in her blanket. Victoria put on a smiling comforting face and stepped outside holding an awake Felicia.

Ashleigh liked Victoria's smile.

Ashleigh carefully observed every movement: Victoria sat down on the edge of the step, Victoria gently set the baby on her legs, Victoria purposefully made happy faces at the baby, Ashleigh noticed how Victoria would look up at her from time to time, and after Victoria glanced up at Ashleigh she would again make happy faces directed toward the happy baby. Ashleigh felt Victoria's long black hair was pretty. This was in complete contrast to her mommy's long blond unkempt hair. The only time Ashleigh ever witnessed her Mommy making her hair nice and pretty was when they went someplace. Ashleigh wanted to touch Victoria's hair but was afraid to ask.

Ashleigh focused on the baby.

Out of the corner of her eye, Victoria watched as Ashleigh cautiously stepped forward.

Blake out of curiosity observed out of the front picture window. Witnessing what his wife was trying to accomplish he went out through the garage.

"Felicia is awake." Victoria encouraged Ashleigh, "I'm sure she'd want to look at you."

Ashleigh was suspicious. Ashleigh was afraid Victoria might get angry with her. This fear was the reason Ashleigh was careful when she would sneak a peak at the baby. What frightened Ashleigh was if she looked at the baby and it would cry; this happened once. Ashleigh was sure she would get in trouble for making the baby cry and ran upstairs and hid underneath her bed.

As Ashleigh cautiously stepped forward she prepared to be yelled at or worse.

Ashleigh wanted to like her foster mom, but Ashleigh was afraid once she started to like Victoria; Victoria would hit her. A hindrance to Ashleigh accepting Victoria as a legitimate mom figure was Ashleigh's desire of wanting Patty to be her Mom. Ashleigh was incapable of articulating and understand all of these feelings; but all of these desires surrounded Ashleigh's heart.

Ashleigh jumped at the sound of the big truck door opening and closing. Ashleigh watched closely as Blake started his Ford Bronco.

"It's okay," Victoria spoke in a relaxing voice.

Blake waved at Ashleigh and Victoria.

Victoria and Blake nodded their heads toward one another.

Blake rolled down the window and yelled, "You have fun camping. I'll see you when you get back."

With this big intimidating man believing she would return gave Ashleigh a feeling of comfort about going to a place called *Devils Lake*.

He smiled and backed the Bronco up and onto the street. When he reached the end of the street he made another right; Ashleigh watched him drive away.

Victoria studied Ashleigh.

At this moment Victoria recalled the first time Patty and Bob brought Ashleigh over. Victoria would never forget Ashleigh clinging onto her daughter Patty and Patty's look of, "What do I do?" Bob and Patty brought Ashleigh over to receive medical advice from Victoria; with Victoria being an ex-nurse they felt she would be the best ones to assess Ashleigh's bumps and bruises.

Ashleigh focused on Victoria holding onto the baby. This reminded Ashleigh of the day Patty brought her to this house to fix her bruises.

After being Ashleigh's nurse Victoria called the police herself. The police promised they would investigate the matter. After Bob, Patty, and Ashleigh left, Victoria and Blake talked about being foster parents. When they heard Bob lost his bid for custody Victoria and Blake presented the idea to Bob they should be Ashleigh's foster parents. Bob was terribly upset he lost his bid for custody but agreed Blake and Victoria would make great foster parents. The next day Blake and Victoria contacted a family lawyer they knew from church. They knew this woman would fight a justice system unwilling to look passed assumptions and would fight for an abused child.

One of the most difficult things for Victoria was to hide the disgust she felt toward Ashley Vindavane. Victoria wondered what type of mother would name their daughter after themselves. Victoria heard from the grapevine Ashley despised her own name. Victoria restrained herself from saying anything horrible about Ashley Vindavane around Ashleigh; around other people Victoria was very vocal about her displeasure of Ashley Vindavane.

With a gentle smile Victoria spoke; "I'm sure she'd like to see her big sister."

Being a big sister was very important to Ashleigh.

Ashleigh smiled and adjusted her clothing.

This reminded Victoria of Ashley Vindavane, but understood some habits were already learned. Victoria was being selective on which habits to change, this habit was insignificant enough to ignore.

Ashleigh approached slowly. Victoria was paying attention to Ashleigh's movements to see if Ashleigh would repeat learned violent behavior. Victoria was also using this as an opportunity to study the progress of Ashleigh's overall comfort level toward herself.

Victoria caught Ashleigh looking at Felicia any time Ashleigh thought Victoria was distracted. Ashleigh would stare at the baby, and many times Ashleigh would talk to the baby. What was difficult for Victoria was Ashleigh talked to Patty, the dog, her stuffed animals, and the Baby; what Victoria and Blake wanted was for Ashleigh to have the same type of conversation with them.

Ashleigh was standing very close to Victoria and leaned over and moved her face two inches from Felicia's face.

Victoria found this adorable but was very watchful.

Ashleigh stood up and made a face. Ashleigh felt compelled to ask a question she held inside since Felicia arrived; "Why do babies cry?"

"Baby's cry to let big people know they need something."

Ashleigh crinkled her face. Ashleigh thought of the way her counselor was teaching her to ask questions: "Do you get mad when little kids cry?"

Victoria could hear the hurt in Ashleigh's tone and could see the worry in her facial expressions. Victoria held in her tears as she imagined what happened to Ashleigh when she cried.

This imagined happenings were confirmed by the tears coming down Ashleigh's face.

Victoria held in the impulse to hug her foster child.

Very calmly, holding in her emotion, Victoria spoke, "No Honey. I don't get mad at little girls when they cry."

Ashleigh let some tears fall.

Victoria was surprised at Ashleigh's sudden emotion.

Victoria was overjoyed at this breakthrough but her heart went out to this little girl.

"They call me shorty and midget. They don't like me. I don't like being short."

Ashleigh expected Victoria to get angry.

When Victoria gently reached out to touch her, Ashleigh flinched; Victoria reminded herself to never just reach out to her foster child until Ashleigh reached out first.

"You are not a midget," Victoria was recovering quickly. "You're in a new school and it will take a while for everyone to see what a wonderful little girl you are."

Ashleigh liked it when Victoria told her nice things.

"You just be who you are. If you cry it's okay."

"But they call me cry baby."

"You will find friends to play with."

With hurtful tears she expressed, "No body will play with me."

"It's summer and I'm sure when you go back to school things will be different. Susie across the street likes to play with you."

Ashleigh smiled, "We played princess."

Victoria was holding back her tears. These were the most words Ashleigh spoke to her since February. She wished these were happier words, but Victoria would greedily take any communication from her Daughter.

Felicia started to move around in Victoria's arms and legs.

"I have to feed the baby. Why not come into the house with me?"

Ashleigh became stubborn, "Wait for Bob and Patty."

"Honey," Victoria spoke very gently, "They will be here in an hour."

Ashleigh showed Victoria a look of confusion.

"A while," Victoria corrected herself. "Let's bring your backpack in and we'll have breakfast while we wait for them."

Victoria felt very uncomfortable with Ashleigh being outside alone.

Ashleigh looked at the backpack and when Victoria went to grab it, Ashleigh immediately said, "I'll do it."

Victoria sighed and allowed her foster child to pick up the backpack; a backpack Victoria felt was too heavy for Ashleigh to carry. A duffel bag would have been a better choice but Ashleigh insisted on taking her Care-bear backpack. Victoria held the door open with her body as Ashleigh stepped into the house. With a look of a lioness Victoria gazed upon the culdesac and the road connecting to the culdesac.

The screen door shut behind them.

Megan wanted to help her Daddy with his charter. Instead she was spending the morning cleaning the house with her Momma. The worst part of this morning's cleaning was when her Momma went through all of Megan's clothes and put all of Megan's old clothes into a big plastic bag to take over to the Eastbank Community Center. Megan wanted to help girls who were poor but it was upsetting to Megan when her Ma ransacked her clothes without any prior warning. Every time her Momma sorted out her clothes and shoved them into the plastic bags Megan felt a piece of herself was put into the bag.

Megan was wearing her softball pants, and a short sleeved baseball shirt. She would have preferred to wear shorts but she liked to slide.

Megan was kneeling in front of her closet and her head and shoulders were inside. She was organizing her shoes. She sat back onto her calves when she heard the sewing machine start. Megan was sure her Momma was working on the wedding dress Ms. Ratcliff and her daughter brought over. Megan recalled the story on how this dress: was once Ms. Ratcliff's Mamma's dress, was at one time Ms. Ratcliff's wedding dress, and was to be prepared to be Ms. Ratcliff's daughter's dress. Megan was overjoyed Ms. Ratcliff's daughter was somewhere else. The last time Ms. Ratcliff's daughter was over Megan was stuck helping her Momma pin the dress.

Kneeling she looked up at her clothes and felt they were now in order. She looked at her shoes and decided the order of her shoes was insufficient. She again went on all fours and for the third time put them in what she felt was a better order; from left to right, each shoe was lined up with the toes pointing toward her small room and the heels were facing the back of the closet. Her first two pairs were Adidas athletic shoes. One pair was strictly for running and long bike rides (she was only allowed to go on long bike rides when someone older went with her), and the other pair of shoes were her everyday shoes. Up next were two pair of baseball shoes. One of these pairs of shoes were a black Adidas pair and the other was a bright red Nike pair. She owned the red Nike pair because her team's sponsor bought all the girls on her team the shoes and the uniform. Megan would have preferred to wear the Adidas pair but the red pair were mandatory. She would have preferred to play on the boys little league baseball team. She liked watching her brother Timmy play for his little league team; plus experience taught her playing baseball with boys was more challenging than playing girls softball. Megan still enjoyed girls softball and played with all her heart. Between her talent and her desire she was one of the most dominating girls in the league. Next in line was a pair of black Adidas soccer

shoes. These shoes were important to Megan because these were the shoes she wore when her team won a state tournament. Megan was lucky to have played the whole season, twice she was almost kicked of the league for being too “aggressive”. Next were her two pairs of sandals; the first pair were ideal for her Daddy's charter and the last pair she wore on the beach. Megan made a face when she set her nice church shoes at the end of the line. Megan loved God, liked church, all her friends at church; but she hated getting dressed up for church.

Megan's dimples flashed.

She thought about getting dressed up for church. What irritated her about getting dressed up was every female, no matter what their age, was expected to wear skirts or dresses. This was not a mandate from the pulpit but every woman who was a member of their church expected every other woman member to wear a skirt or dress. Megan wondered if the building would explode if she ever wore nice slacks to church. Megan was of the strong opinion God could have cared less if women wore dresses or not. Until she was out from under her “*parents roof*” she was expected to wear a dress to church.

Megan glanced over at her digital alarm clock. If she wanted to play baseball with all the kids in the neighborhood she needed to get going. This was a daily pick up game during the summer where the kids ran it themselves. With this game being coed Megan was eager to showcase her natural athletic ability. She was grateful to have three older brothers who were more than willing to show her how to play sports.

She glanced around her room. Her room was decorated with sports memorabilia, sea animals, and one plant; a plant given to her by her Sister-in-law. Megan's favorite animal in all the world were dolphins and this was evident by the dolphin prints hanging on her walls. Megan was in complete delight every time she was allowed to go onto the bridge of her Daddy's charter and watch the dolphins. She felt extra special because she was allowed to stop working and watch the dolphins while her brothers needed to keep working.

She smiled her big dimple smile and quickly stood up.

Megan was only a few months away from being eleven. Megan was tall with a slender build. This build was very deceptive; Megan was actually very strong for her age. This strength came from: willingly working with her Daddy on his charter, working around the house, playing with her three older brothers, and her dedication to playing sports. She reached up to the top shelf of her closet and pulled down a Miami Dolphins baseball cap. She was well aware the Dolphins were not a baseball team, but they were her favorite professional team. She hoped this would be the year Dan Marino and Don Shula would take her team to the Superbowl. Without crushing the hat she put the hat between her thighs; she dug into her pocket and took out a rubber band. She immediately used the rubber band to put her long dark blond hair into a pony tail. She slipped the pony tail through the back of her hat. She looked into the mirror she hung in her closet, she adjusted her hat; it looked perfect. She briefly looked at herself. Her eyes were a dark blue, so dark they sometimes appeared plum. She was developing an inverted triangular shaped face with higher cheekbones. Megan was annoyed with her long bridged celestial type nose, she despised her natural bump just above her nostrils, and she was disappointed with how her nostrils curved up and almost out. She was given the Steward family extended chin, the long defined jawline, and skinny lips. What was unique about Megan she inherited the signature long mouth and dimples from her Momma's side of the family. These dimples were at least slightly visible all the time, but they seemed to shine when she smiled a certain way. She never considered herself attractive in any way. At this point in her life being attractive was the least of her concerns.

Megan: sat down on the floor, slipped on her Adidas running shoes, and quickly tied them. She grabbed her black pair of Adidas baseball shoes, she temporarily tied them together, and draped them over her shoulder. She closed the closet door. She stepped up to a

metal bin with the Miami U symbol printed on the side; a bin her Daddy bought for her. In this bin were four baseball bats given to her from her three older brothers. She selected the baseball bat her brother Jimmy taught her how to swing. This baseball bat reminded Megan of the time he spent an afternoon with her before he married Nicole. She grabbed her baseball mitt, this was a gift from her oldest brother Duke; she now felt ready to play.

Megan stepped out of her bedroom. Her bedroom was the last one in the hallway and it was the smallest of all the bedrooms. Her door faced the long hallway of this one story ranch. Megan heard Ma sewing, Megan assumed this gave her a chance. As quietly as possible she shut her bedroom door. She turned slowly and started to tip toe up the hallway. With only a few steps she passed an open doorway on her right, this doorway was a second entrance into the living room. While on her left she was passing her brother Timmy's room. Timmy was currently two years older than Megan. Megan tried to love all her brothers the same; but loving Timmy was sometimes difficult for Megan. She was thankful he kept his bedroom door shut. Megan slowed up as she approached the sewing room. This became Ma's sewing room when Jimmy left the house after marrying Nicole. Jimmy's wife of eleven months and his baby boy of a few weeks were both living with Jimmy's-in-laws. Jimmy was an active duty US Marine training in Virginia. Megan was the first one in the family to accept Nicole as family and this act led to an instant sister like connection. Megan loved being an auntie. Before this was Jimmy's bedroom this was her oldest brother Duke's room. Duke was now married to a woman everyone was still trying to figure out how to get along with. This was opposite of how the family felt about Duke's daughter Laura. Laura was sweet, outgoing, and gentle. Megan vividly remembered Duke leaving the house to go into the Marines and how excited Timmy was to finally get his own room back. There were times when Megan questioned if her brother Timmy really liked her. She suspected her brother Timmy resented the fact she had her own room while he was forced to share a room with Jimmy until Duke left. Megan often times missed her second oldest brother Jimmy.

Megan felt it was safe to peek into the sewing room with the sewing machine making so much noise. It appeared to Megan her Momma was focused on the wedding dress. Mary Steward was a forty one year old woman who took her faith seriously, who always wore conservative but nice clothes, her dark blond hair with some gray highlights were currently in a bun, she wore very little makeup, and always wore a skirt or a dress. Megan noticed Ma changed out of her plain blue skirt and was now wearing a nice flowered dress. Megan immediately recognized one of four activities were about to happen today: Ma was expecting company, Ma was going to church (this could mean a prayer meeting, a woman's meeting, or something related to what Mary called God's work), going to volunteer at the Community Center, or was going to interview a prospective renter.

Megan assumed she could reach the bathroom. Going to the restroom was avoidable because this was where the sunblock was kept, otherwise Megan would have went through the living room. Megan tipped toed passed the sewing room, made it passed the doorway, this is when Megan heard: "Young Lady. Where are Y'all going?"

Megan stopped and sighed but managed to answer, "Ma'am I was headed out to play ball with my friends."

"Honey. You better get your rear end in here."

Megan rolled her eyes. If Megan's Momma observed this eye roll and Megan's facial expression Megan would have been in trouble.

Megan answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Megan reluctantly turned around and stepped into the sewing room. Ma stopped sewing, turned away from the sewing machine, and gently gazed upon her daughter.

Megan easily spotted the big white dress laid out on the sewing table. On a different

table were finished projects. They were neatly folded into brown grocery bags labeled with Ma's excellent handwriting, other items were put into large white plastic bags with neatly written receipt cards pinned to the bag. On a different table were the unfinished projects people gave Ma to work on. These projects included: simple hemming, fixing curtains, making new curtains, fixing clothes, there was a wedding dress neatly folded, and two sets of patterns on the table. Megan felt her Momma never really charged enough for the work she did and there were other times when her Momma conveniently forget there was a fee. It never occurred to Megan her family might be considered in a lower economic class. Megan knew by the mansions on the beach and the big houses on the other side of town who the really rich were; but she never felt her family was poor. She felt this way because her Daddy treated both the rich and poor the same. Plus her parents never allowed themselves, her brothers, or Megan to use social class as an excuse.

Mary stated with a tone, "Young Lady. What makes Y'all feel you should be headed out anywhere after the way you were treating me this morning. The way you were carrying on was simply dreadful. It ain't the way a young lady should be acting. What was disturbing me is we're trying to help the less fortunate."

Megan was aware she was suppose to answer but felt the best thing was to shrug her shoulders.

Mary made a face, "Y'all are normally a good girl. What I'm wondering is why you make such a fuss and carry on when it comes to your clothes. I know I'm repeating myself but it's appearing to me you've closed off your ears. There's girls who will be happy to receive them cloths. With you growing like a weed you ain't even fitting in them any more. You understanding me?"

Dead silence.

Megan was trying to come up with an answer.

Mary wished her daughter would choose to look more feminine. What frustrated Mary was she witnessed her daughter dress up in social situations. Mary felt she gave her daughter a lot of grace when it came to the way her daughter dressed. The reason Mary gave her this grace was because of the influence of her three brothers and her Daddy; an influence Mary was getting concerned about. Mary assumed her daughter would have grown out of being a tomboy.

Megan observing her Momma's facial expressions was expecting a blunt question from her Momma.

"I hate repeating myself. I shouldn't be repeating myself," her pitch went up, "Why is it every time we're cleaning out your clothes for the less fortunate Y'all start whining and acting up. I'm having trouble understanding why? Y'all never act this way with anything else."

Megan shrugged her shoulders, "I ain't sure."

Mary as the mother and Megan as the daughter glared at one another.

Megan noticed her Momma's stern and serious look, "I'm either fixing' to take you over my knee and use a wooden spoon. Don't you think I wouldn't catch ya."

Megan was lightly spanked with a wooden spoon once. Megan assumed she could out run her Momma and enjoy the day; but the consequences when arriving home would be drastic.

Mary with wisdom, based upon her daughters body language made a different suggestion, "How about I keep you in the house doing chores until I feel Y'all are tired."

Ma witnessed Megan's look of horror when she replied, "Don't momma. I'm wanting to play ball. I was hoping I'd go over to Debbie-Lynn's house. We're talking about me staying over night. I'd help her feed the chickens then we'd ride horses."

"Are you truly wanting to do these things?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"I'm wanting some answers."

"Yes Ma'am."

"Are you aware your old clothes will be helping other girls?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"So why are you whining and acting up when we're sorting them? I ain't to pleased with the way Y'all have been acting."

Megan mustard up some bravery, "I'd like some warning."

"I ain't promising Y'all a warning. With me visiting the Community Center I decided to go through your clothes. What I'd suggest is when your clothes ain't fitting' you Y'all set em' to the side."

Megan smiled, her dimples flashed, "Yes Ma'am."

"This ain't meaning I don't have the right to go through your clothes. This is my house you're under my roof. Are you understanding?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"I ain't liking how Y'all have been acting lately."

Megan pleaded right away, "I'm sorry Momma."

Megan hoped beyond hope this conversation would lead her to the baseball diamond at the park.

Ma stated with conviction, "This ain't an easy decision."

Megan's heart sank. Megan would have gladly taken the beating with the wooden spoon over being trapped inside of the house. The worst part would have been the chores. These tasks were never easy and her Momma made sure these tasks were done to completion.

"I'm letting my heart lead me over the wisdom of disciplining you. I'm going to let you out of the house."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan excited answered, "Thank-You Ma'am."

"Young Lady. My grace won't continue if Y'all keep disobeying me and keep giving me a difficult time. Are Y'all understanding what I'm saying?"

"Yes Ma'am," Megan answered hoping she could be formally dismissed.

"I ain't playing. I ain't putting up with the way you were acting this morning."

"I'm done whining. I'll start separating my old clothes," Megan hoped this would get her excused; she already thought of a way to sort them.

"All right Y'all are dismissed."

Megan was waiting for this.

Megan's dimples flashed.

She was just short of running as she made it up the hallway. Ma was known to change her mind or add annoying errands. Megan dreaded the idea of biking around town running errands instead of playing baseball. What worried Megan was after accomplishing the errands the game would have ended because of how hot it would be.

To Megan's dismay she heard Ma yell, "I know you ain't leaving the house without sun block?"

Megan: stopped, rolled her eyes, and debated about fibbing. Megan assumed her Momma noticed she was without sun block. Megan being self aware knew she was horrible at fibbing.

"No Ma'am."

Ma shouted, "Don't be sneaking out of this house like a rabbit coming out of a hole. I ain't a fox waiting to have you for dinner. Y'all better put on sun block."

Megan shouted down the hallway, "I was about to put some on"

Mary loudly snipped back, "You ain't fibbing? I hate fibbing."

Megan was worried she would now get stranded inside the house, she yelled in response, "I'm getting it right now."

There was a pause and Ma listened as Megan stepped into the bathroom, Megan was about to apply it on herself but heard; "Young Lady. Y'all bring it in here."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Megan opened the medicine cabinet, grabbed the sunblock, shut the cabinet door, and debated about running out of the house. She made a face at the deep consequences for this type of action, instead of fleeing like the rabbit, Megan slowly walked herself and the sunblock back to the sewing room.

Megan stood there in silence and politely handed the tube to her Momma.

Megan felt ridiculous as her Momma started to put the sunblock on, worse than the sunblock: her Momma started to lecture her.

"Your Papa," Ma started as she put the sunblock on Megan's nose and face, "Died of skin cancer. Haven't Y'all forgotten?"

Megan's thought was, how could I forget my favorite grandfather dying of skin cancer? His recent death hurt everyone in the family. Megan missed him a great deal.

"He's with the good Lord," stated Ma as she put sunblock on Megan's neck. "I ain't wanting to see my children being with Papa just yet. There's a destiny Y'all have to be fulfilling. As your Momma I'm wanting to see this destiny? Y'all understanding what I'm saying?"

"Yes Ma'am."

This was embarrassing. Megan was grateful all of her friends were elsewhere. Megan was well aware all her friends would notice the amount of sunblock she was wearing. Once; she was teased because of this. Megan's solution was to punch the boy just like her brothers taught her.

Mary handed the sunblock to Megan and scolded, "I'm expecting Y'all to carry this sunblock with you all at all times. I might just take a drive to see if Y'all are wearing it. Y'all understanding me?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Looking at one another they knew the boundaries. Megan hoped she would be excused without errands.

"Y'all are excused."

Megan bolted out of the sewing room. The shoes she hung over her shoulders fell off, she changed the hand she was carrying her baseball bat and glove in and with ease and with speed picked up her shoes while carrying the sunblock. She stopping when she reached the end of the hallway.

She recognized her Momma gave her a lot of grace today. Normally if her Momma was this upset she would have been housebound. Megan yelled; "Thank-you Momma."

Mary Steward yelled with a tone, "Don't you for one minute think this will happen every day!"

Megan as polite as possible responded, "Yes Ma'am."

Mary waited to hear the front door slam. With this noise Mary went back to her work. She made sure the needle was on the correct spot and adjusted a couple dials of the sewing machine. Mary focused on her task. While working on the dress she prayed in the Spirit for the young lady who was getting married in this dress and she prayed for her daughter.

Megan stepped out of the house and felt the Florida humidity. Based upon the feel of the air she was sure there would be sunny rain. She quickly stepped into the small garage. She pulled the bike from off the wall, a bike her Daddy bought at the thrift store. What made this

an exceptional bike was her Daddy and Jimmy made it into a wonderful bike.

She put her water bottle into its slot. She threw her mitt, her sunblock, her baseball shoes, into the brown milk crate attached to the back of her bike. She took out a few of the bungee cords she kept in this milk crate and wrapped her bat to the middle bar of her bike.

Megan quickly was on her bike and sped off to enjoy her day.

Megan decided after the game she would check out how far the remodel of the “haunted house” was coming along. All of the kids in Eastbank were astonished someone would want to remodel this house. When this house was built in the mid 1800's it was the primer house of three counties. This house was purchased and inherited many times in it's history, the house experienced many remodels, and like the fate of many houses it fell into disrepair when the last owner became too old to maintain the house. While it remained empty it became the “haunted house” of Eastbank. Megan never felt any actual spirits in the house; instead she felt this house was part of her personal destiny.

Megan quickly reached the park with the baseball field. Megan at first was disappointed everyone started to play without her, but this disappointment quickly subsided when Bubba a friend of her brother Timmy whistled and wanted Megan on his team. Soon both teams wanted her to play on their side; most times when girls came to play all the boys moaned and wished they would just watch. She quickly parked her bike next to her brother's bike. She unwrapped her bat and grabbed her mitt and headed to her brother Timmy's team. Timmy nodded his head in approval, Megan responded in kind, after setting her bat next to the fence, she went to her usual spot on second base.

She longed for the day she could overhand pitch against the guys. With or without pitching she enjoyed playing; especially when she fielded a ball, tagged second base, and threw the ball to first plate for a double play. If Megan was any other girl someone might have considered the runner at first safe simply because a girl threw the ball. The reason all the boys were quiet was her brother Timmy was there to defend her sisters honor. More important, everyone knew Megan would have defended her own honor; in this way she was different from every other girl they knew.

Ashleigh liked how Victoria mixed cheese and bacon into her scrambled eggs. A real treat to this breakfast was the grape jelly on her whole wheat toast. Ashleigh was happy to finish all of her breakfast. Ashleigh sat up on her knees and very carefully took a drink of orange juice.

Victoria was watching Ashleigh without Ashleigh being aware she was being studied.

Victoria noted how careful Ashleigh was with drinks and taking things out of the refrigerator.

It was evident to Victoria she was punished for spills. This was why Victoria felt so horrible about an incident a few days earlier. It was another day of Ashleigh doing everything herself and Ashleigh being resistant to Victoria's love and care. Ashleigh went into the refrigerator and grabbed a full gallon of milk, she dropped it, and the gallon jug burst open. In a moment of weakness Victoria sniped at Ashleigh and asked, “Why didn't you ask for help?” Ashleigh took one look at Victoria and even before Victoria was done with the sentence, Ashleigh went running up to her room. Seeing Ashleigh's frightened face grieved Victoria. After Victoria was done cleaning up the spill she went upstairs to talk to Ashleigh; for almost an hour Victoria tried to coax Ashleigh to come out from under the bed. What finally convinced Ashleigh to crawl out from underneath the bed was when Patty, who happened to come home during the time Ashleigh was underneath the bed, promised Ashleigh nothing would happen to her.

Ashleigh very gently set the glass down onto the kitchen table.

“Did you like your eggs?” asked Victoria.

“Uh huh,” was Ashleigh's simple answer.

“Did you want more?”

Ashleigh shook her head no.

It was obvious Ashleigh enjoyed her breakfast but Victoria was displeased with Ashleigh's table manners. Victoria would address this issue as time wore on.

Ashleigh was curious about the way Victoria was feeding the baby. She only fed the baby this way when the three of them were alone. If others were around Victoria would step into another room or would cover herself with a blanket. Ashleigh decided she would ask Patty about the odd way Victoria feed the baby.

Ashleigh observed everyone in the Anderson family placed their dishes on the counter next to the sink when they were done with a meal. With Victoria feeding the baby Ashleigh assumed she better put the dishes on the counter. When she grabbed the plate all the crumbs fell onto the floor and she almost dropped the glass.

Victoria instructed with gentle authority, “Ashleigh just put the plate and glass onto the table I'll get it.”

Ashleigh at once heard the change in Victoria's voice and gazed upon Victoria with worry. Ashleigh took notice of how the baby was looking up at Victoria and the baby seemed happy and content. Ashleigh without giving Victoria a difficult time or feeling any fear clanked the dishes back upon the table.

Victoria was thankful the plate did not break.

“Thank you for listening to me.” Victoria did say in an encouraging tone, “I like it when you listen.”

Ashleigh felt uncomfortable with a Mom figure telling her nice things. Even though she felt uncomfortable with this sort of encouragement Ashleigh was starting to respond to this positive influence. Another reason Ashleigh was beginning to like living with the Anderson's was Victoria did many of the things she had to while living with Ashley Vindavane. Instead of Ashleigh needing to wash dishes or using paper plates she “helped” Patty put the families dishes into the dishwasher. Ashleigh was surprised when an upset Victoria explained to Ashleigh in the Anderson home it was unnecessary for her to wash clothes by herself. An interesting thing about the Anderson house was the model railroad Blake was putting up in the basement. At this point the model railroad was two four by eight sheets of plywood, there was some track nailed down, there were a couple buildings put together, and scenery was starting to be added. Ashleigh liked watching her Foster Dad work on the train from the basement steps. Twice he tried to show her how the trains went around the table and twice Ashleigh ran back upstairs.

Victoria very gently stated, “As a good girl you should respond by saying your welcome.”

Victoria witnessed the odd face Ashleigh made.

Ashleigh found it strange how Victoria was always telling her: how to eat, how to say things, and how a little girl was to act. What really confused Ashleigh was Victoria never screamed at her, hit her, or grabbed her.

Ashleigh was unsure of what to do. What she did was: grab her backpack, put it on, ran out the front door, and again sat down on the front step.

Victoria heard the dog start to bark. Victoria loudly knocked on the back window near the kitchen table. Maxine reluctantly became quiet and laid down in front of her dog house. With Victoria feeding the baby Ashleigh was too quick for Victoria to stop Ashleigh from grabbing the backpack and running outside. Victoria assumed Bob and Patty would arrive

within fifteen minutes. If Victoria believed they would arrive later than fifteen minutes Victoria would have grabbed a blanket and sat with her foster child. Victoria took advantage of this alone time with her baby. Victoria looked down upon Felicia with love and gently caressed the dark hair she was born with.

Ashleigh was of the persuasion if she left her backpack on Patty and her brother would arrive sooner. Ashleigh heard her friend Maxine bark when she sat down. She was excited to see her brother otherwise she would have went into the back yard and talked to her friend. Ashleigh wished her friend Maxine was sitting next to her. The world seemed less lonely when her friend was with her.

Ashleigh was waiting as patiently as a six year could wait. The three minutes she was waiting felt like an eternity to her. She stood up and walked down to the end of the driveway. Once she was standing at the end of the driveway, Ashleigh remembered she was suppose to stay close to the house, instead of going back she looked toward the stop sign where every vehicle turned into the culdesac. She hoped if she really focused on the end of the street she would see her brother's Jeep.

Standing at the end of this driveway began to feel like an eternity.

Ashleigh worried her brother forgot about her. Before Ashleigh ended up in foster care her Mommy would say, "Once he figures out how horrible it is to take care of children he'll forget about you." She would take a drink, "It's good you learn it now. All men leave."

Ashleigh became scared this was the day her brother forgot about her.

Ashleigh started to cry.

She wanted to be a big girl because Patty told her some of her friends were coming. She liked Patty's friends. As big as Ashleigh wanted to be, the idea her Big Brother forget about her, made the tears come anyway.

The tears immediately stopped when she saw her step dad's: white, four door, Honda hatch back, turn onto the street. This car was only six years old, but the way he took care of the car it appeared ready for the junk heap.

A strong fear came upon Ashleigh and she momentarily froze.

A supernatural urge to run up to the house flooded Ashleigh. Ashleigh recognized this pull to run. This was the same urge she felt when her Mommy was really drunk and angry. It was the same feeling she received when she ran up the stairs getting away from her Step-dad on the day he wanted to "hug" her. Once upstairs this pull would give her a direction to either go underneath the bed or hide somewhere else.

As fast as her little feet could take her she began running up to the front door of the Anderson household.

Maxine sensed an extreme fear coming from the pup.

She became frantic.

She immediately pulled at the chain. This hurt but she was focused on saving her pup. She began to bark wildly. There was anger in Maxine's bark. This dog was doing everything she could to get to the front of the house.

Victoria: stood up, put Felicia into the baby cradle, made herself presentable, she stepped to the back sliding glass door, opened it, and with a tone shouted, "No Bark!"

Maxine did a dance with the chain, she growled at Victoria, and barked with more viciousness.

Maxine's behavior puzzled Victoria, she was always temperamental, but she never acted crazy. At this moment Victoria was thankful Blake put the dog in back and Ashleigh was away from the dog. Victoria felt the way the dog was acting justified her fear of Ashleigh being hurt. Victoria slid open the patio door and would settle this dog down before every dog in the neighborhood began barking.

“With authority Victoria yelled, “No bark.”

Maxine could sense Pack Leader was angry. In response Maxine calmed herself by standing in one spot; but kept barking.

What added to the frustration was the neighbors husky was now barking The neighbors husky was a gentle family pet who took to Ashleigh just like Maxine did.

The step-dad swung the car around the circle so Ashley Vindavane could easily jump out of the car. Ashley quickly blocked Ashleigh's path to the front door.

Ashleigh was petrified.

Ashleigh was certain her Mommy was angry. What was frightening for Ashleigh was her Mommy was seeing her away from the “safe place”. The safe place was where a nice lady would sit in a room and watch them play and talk. Patty, Victoria, and the nice lady she visited with every week; explained to Ashleigh this was the way she would need to visit with her mommy. Out of these six supervised scheduled visits Ashley Vindavane ended up at only two of them. Ashleigh was sure her mommy would finally be able to punish her for telling big people how she really received her bruises.

Ashley grabbed her daughter and forced Ashleigh to look into her blue piercing eyes.

This mother was encouraged by the fear she witnessed.

Little Ashleigh was so frightened she peed herself.

Ashley would punish her daughter for this when she had more time.

It was obvious they were mother and daughter. They were given: the exact same blond hair, the same thin lips, the same wide smiles, their eyes were elegant, and their fingers were both long.

This is where the similarities ended. Ashley Vindavane had a diamond shaped face with a long pointy chin. Her jaw line was very defined, with very high defined cheekbones. Her long skinny nose blended well into her diamond shaped face. Her thin lips could look very sweet or could contort to look fierce. Her body was ideal for many men; her breasts looked larger on her long body, her rear end was noticeable without having a large one, and somehow she was the ideal weight. Ashley knew how to dress and act in a way to seduce most men; this was how she trapped Bob's father. Her model looks were disappearing because of her lifestyle. The anger she carried was being imprinted on her face. Her constant drinking was ruining her once model looking body and her face was aging quickly because of all the cigarettes she smoked.

This was in complete contrast to Ashleigh's gentle heart shaped face. At this moment Ashleigh's face was filled with fear.

Ashley Vindavane acted as nice as Ashley could ever act.

Ashley spoke in a seductive voice, a voice similar to a black widow spider calling it's pray into a web. “I'm not going to hurt you,”

This statement surprised and confused Ashleigh, she believed she was going to be beaten for peeing herself; tears of embarrassment were rolling down her face.

Ashley was trying to act quickly. She assumed if her daughter chose to go with her there was less of a chance they would be caught.

“I've changed,” she spoke with a gentle voice, “I've gone to treatment and I've been sober for a month.”

This was only partially true. Ashley went to treatment; but she was a high maintenance pain in the ass. During treatment Ashley blamed everyone else for why she was in treatment. She never considered getting drunk on beer to be a slip. The day before she indulged in her first rum and coke. She justified this action by saying it was only one.

“You should come with me,” the Black Widow stated with a smile she usually reserved for her current husband of convenience, “We've bought this big wonderful house. It's really

pretty,” Hearing the dog she added, “We'll get a puppy and will let it run around the big back yard. How's that sound? That sounds good doesn't it? It's warmer were we're going and there are beautiful mountains.” Ashley waved in a way to discount the Anderson house, “It's even bigger than this old house. Doesn't that sound wonderful?”

The house was bigger but it was an old two story house in Kentucky. The house was owned by Ashley's current husband's mother. The mother moved from Wisconsin when she married a man from Kentucky, this man died of a heart attack a few years earlier. This mother only knowing half of the story, was more than willing to allow her son to move his wife and daughter into her home.

Ashleigh felt conflicted. It was obvious her Mommy wanted an answer immediately and only one answer would be correct. Ashleigh wanted to believe her Mommy had changed, but Ashleigh heard this before.

“Now you be a good girl,” Ashley spoke as nice as Ashley could speak, “and come with us and everything will be better.”

A sudden boldness came upon Ashleigh. The way her mommy voiced how she was to be a good girl was completely different from Victoria's tone and manner. More important, Ashleigh suddenly remembered something Victoria told her everyday since she moved into the Anderson house. Ashleigh never once acknowledged she was listening to Victoria but Ashleigh listened closely to what Victoria told her.

“NO!” Ashleigh shouted with a supernatural boldness she received from living in a place where she was loved.

Victoria could barely control Maxine. She was ready to march back into the house and call animal control.

This was when she witnessed the husky running up and down the fence line, and it almost hurt herself by trying to jump over the fence.

Victoria focused on Maxine, she was still very intense, and yanking on the chain.

Ashley the mother scolded Ashleigh and raised her hand, “Don't sass me.”

Ashleigh bent down and covered herself and pulled as hard as she could.

She replied with tears of fright, “You can't hit me no more.”

Trying to cover but in a half-hearted tone, “I've changed.”

This was such an obvious lie; a six year old girl felt it was untrue.

“A girl should be with her Mommy,” Ashley growled. She yanked Ashleigh, so Ashleigh would be directly in front of her. This hurt Ashleigh's little arm, and Ashleigh instantly remembered what her arm felt like when her Mommy grabbed it. Ashleigh wished she was inside of the Anderson house. Ashleigh was forced to look at her Mother.

“Don't you want to be with your Mommy?”

Ashleigh felt fear in the way her own mother said: “*Mommy*.” Ashleigh shook her head and with great fear forced back her tears and stated, “I'm going camping.”

After this statement Ashley Vindavane let go of her pulling daughter, Ashleigh fell hard onto the ground. Hitting the hard ground really hurt. What added to this hurt was the heavy backpack Ashleigh cared so much about. Ashleigh being determined to get away tried to get up, looked up at the house, and desperately wanted to be inside the house. Ashley Vindavane quickly stepped in front of Ashleigh and acted concerned, “Are you alright? See you need your Mommy.”

Tears were coming down Ashleigh's face.

Ashleigh felt confused and hurt.

In this pause Ashley mentioned in a soothing voice, “You don't want to go camping. Oh no. A bear will come and eat you. Or you'll fall off a cliff. Or Your brother will do mean and horrible things to you. The nuisance ass.”

These statements frightened Ashleigh. Patty and Bob told her about campfires, hiking up a hill, swimming in a lake, and sleeping in a tent. They told her they were going to a place called *Wisconsin Dells* where they were taking her to a place with water rides; which sounded fun. She was never told about bears. She was told to be careful on stairs carved into the giant hill but was never told about falling off cliffs.

What made Ashleigh feel even worse was the tone her Mommy used. Ashleigh was unsure of what nuisance meant, but she could tell by the way her Mommy said this word it was meant to be mean. Ashleigh was tired of her Mommy picking on Patty and her brother.

"These people don't care about you. Only I," Ashley emphasized I by pointing to herself, "Care about you. Your brother is mean. He only took me to court because he hates me. I shouldn't have let them see you. He's only pretending to love you." She smiled at her daughter's hurt look and said, "He's pretending to like you."

This statement hurt Ashleigh more than if she was physically beaten.

Ashley noticed how long this was taking and losing patience grabbed Ashleigh's upper arm and said, "Fuck this. You're coming with me."

"Owww. That hurts," Ashleigh screamed.

Ashleigh felt her Mommy's grip tighten.

Ashley Vindavane snipped, "If you'd have just come along it wouldn't hurt."

When Maxine heard Ashleigh's cry and could sense her pups fear and pain; Maxine went ballistic. The only thing saving Victoria was the chain and the fact Victoria was athletic enough to fling herself backwards. Victoria landed hard onto the ground. Victoria crawled away from her crazed dog and was about to call animal control when she happened to catch a glance at the husky next door. This glance caused Victoria to really focus on this normally very friendly family pet. Her neighbors family pet was at the front corner of the backyard fence growling, her hair was standing up, her teeth were showing, and suddenly started to dig under the fence. This dog never acted in such a vicious manner before. Victoria again looked at her dog and realized the only time Maxine ever tried to bite her was when...

In a mini-second Victoria was up and running full force around her house. This woman who loved to swim, enjoyed her aerobics twice a week, would have given an Olympic sprinter a challenge.

"You're a naughty, ugly girl," Ashley raged as she yanked Ashleigh. Ashleigh felt her Mommy's long nails dig into her arm, "What? You aren't you potty trained? What are these people doing to you? And who gave you that ugly nasty backpack!"

Ashleigh was crying. She wanted to be back in the house. She wanted her brother. Ashleigh heard Victoria yell in a tone she never heard Victoria use before, "Let her go!"

When Ashleigh looked up; Victoria reminded Ashleigh of the charging rhinoceros she saw on TV.

The step dad opened the passenger side door and yelled, "Get in."

He was too slow.

Victoria collided into Ashley with the same amount of force as a linebacker hitting a standing quarterback. This caused Ashley to thud onto the ground, Ashleigh fell to the ground as well; Victoria quickly picked up her crying foster child and swung Ashleigh behind her.

Victoria was facing Ashley who was laying on the ground and the step dad who was now facing Victoria.

Ashleigh was behind Victoria.

"You bitch!" yelled the Black Widow getting up from the ground.

"You shouldn't swear in front of a child!"

Ashley was up and the step dad was slowly stepping onto Victoria's front yard Victoria was backing up. With her arms she was checking to make sure Ashleigh was always behind

her.

Ashleigh held onto Victoria's leg.

Ashley pointed to her chest and with a vicious look said, "She's my daughter."

Victoria felt this mother was acting like a spoiled brat in a toy store.

Ashley seemed to prove Victoria's feeling by pointing to herself and saying, "She belongs to me."

Victoria's mind flashed to the day she treated Ashleigh's bruises. She thought about the times she cried out to God when she lost her babies. She thought about laying on the floor trying to get Ashleigh to come out of from underneath her bed. Her mind flashed to the many nights Patty and herself would comfort Ashleigh because of nightmares. Victoria recalled the anger she felt toward Ashley Vindavane when she lied in court. The cumulative emotions from all these events were driving Victoria's passion to protect a foster child she loved.

"She ain't a dress or a toy," with loving passion Victoria added, "she's a little girl."

At this exact moment, the nice neighbor Ms. Applegate who lived next door to the family who owned the husky, whom Ashleigh waved to earlier, stepped out of from the back of her house. She stepped out because of both dogs behavior. When she spotted what was happening she rushed into the house to call the police. The Anderson's warned everyone in the culdesac of Ashley Vindavane's promise to kidnap Ashleigh.

"No," Ashley, pointed at herself, "She's my daughter. You took her...."

Angry Victoria interrupted, "You don't have the right to be a parent. You're a drunk."

"I'm not a drunk!" Ashley was so filled with rage her eyes were bulging. "Give her to me right now!"

"So you have a punching bag?" Victoria sneered back. With absolute authority Victoria proclaimed, "I'm not letting you take her."

Victoria could feel Ashleigh on her leg and would still reach back and touch her.

With what Victoria felt was an evil looking face Ashley stated, "She's mine."

"I'm not letting you hurt her anymore!" Victoria stated this with such intensity it stopped Ashley cold.

Victoria was prepared to fight even though she never fought anybody before. The idea of fighting was frightening to her but she was prepared to use her self defense training. No matter the consequences to herself they were never taking Ashleigh without a heated battle.

Ashleigh was clinging so tightly to Victoria's leg without the stretching and the aerobics Victoria would have fallen.

Ashley yelled, "Ashleigh come to Mommy."

This sent a chill up Victoria's spine. The way she said *Mommy* was terrifying.

"She's not going with you," Victoria stated with authority still backing up. "Ashleigh you stay where you are."

Ashleigh would go wherever Victoria was stepping.

Victoria knew by passing the two maple trees and her small evergreen tree she was half way up her front yard. She was watching both the step-dad and Ashley Vindavane. Victoria was calculating the time and distance it would take to grab Ashleigh and head for the front door.

The step-dad was sure he could reach them before they reached the front door. His plan was to shove Victoria to the side grab the kid and run back to the car. He hoped his wife would be smart enough to follow him.

Bob drove his brand new Jeep Cherokee in front of the beat up Honda. Patty sat beside him in the front seat and Patty's two girlfriends were in the back. Bob's four friends in a Lincoln Town car pulled alongside of the Honda, while still giving the four young men enough room to get out of the car.

Patty screamed, "WAIT!"

Patty grabbed her boyfriend so hard it hurt his arm.

All the step-dad saw was a gray and black blur.

What everyone witnessed was an angry Maxine running directly at the Step Dad, her chain was bouncing up and down; at the end of the chain was a metal plate, with screws flinging from the holes. Maxine was determined to and save her pup. Before anyone could command Maxine to stop, she was on top of the step dad. His quick reflexes saved his life. His arm took the brunt of the attack.

He felt sharp teeth pierce his skin. He screamed when he heard a crunch. Out of sheer momentum man and dog came crashing down onto the ground.

Bob's four friends were out of the car gawking at something they would never forget and talk about decades later.

As Maxine ravished the mans arm Ashley screamed for her husband to get up.

If Victoria knew this dog was a trained guard dog, she would have never allowed it into the house.

Victoria yelled to Maxine, "Heal."

Patty was shocked at what she was witnessing.

"Maxine heal," Victoria yelled with authority and even clapped. "Come!"

Maxine looked up at Victoria and died of sudden heart failure.

The step dad, pushed the dog aside, stood up screaming; he was trying to put his skin back onto his arm. He turned white when he could see his own bone.

When Victoria stopped pushing Ashleigh backwards Ashleigh was able to look between Victoria's legs. Ashleigh witnessed her Mommy run over to her step-dad and start screaming at him to go and get Ashleigh. Ashleigh turned away from her step-dad when she noticed her friend looked funny laying on the ground. She tried to run over to Maxine.

"No honey," Victoria gently held onto the little girl.

Ashleigh yelled, "Maxine."

Ashleigh tried to run to her friend.

Victoria: rushed over, grabbed her, picked her up, and somehow managed a soothing voice; "She's sleeping."

The little girl wrapped her arms around Victoria and clung onto her foster mom. Victoria made sure her daughter was facing the house away from the dog's lifeless body.

Among the carnage, Victoria noticed sitting in between the two front seats of Bob's Jeep a box for a car phone. Victoria commanded Bob with an authoritative tone, "Call the police with that phone of yours."

Patty was standing in front of the Jeep in shock.

A couple of Bob's friends went up to the dog and was about to shout information to everyone.

"Boys!" Victoria yelled cutting them off. "My Little Girl loves that Mutt."

Victoria became choked up contemplating how this annoying dog just saved them.

Ashleigh could feel the fear around her; but clinging onto Victoria she felt safe.

Victoria again in a commanding mother voice, yelled: "Girls. Help me with Ashleigh."

Patty and her two friends quickly ran up to Victoria and Ashleigh. Patty tried to take Ashleigh but Ashleigh refused. Ashleigh felt the safest in Victoria's protective embrace.

In the background police sirens could be heard screaming toward the Anderson home.

Even as Ashleigh's step-dad was going into shock he stumbled back to his car. He was well aware they were in deep trouble for this stunt and wanted to make a clean get away. Instead of getting away his wife was yelling at Victoria. He somehow had enough strength to tell her to shut up and get in the car.

The step-dad was stopped by Bob's four friends who nicknamed Ashleigh their "*Little Mascot*." Instead of Ashleigh's step-dad escaping, Ashleigh's step-dad fell to the ground and put his back against the blood stained car.

With sirens blaring and lights flashing the police and rescue squad pulled into Ashleigh's little corner of Wisconsin suburbia.

Victoria yelled to Bob, "I'm taking care of Ashleigh."

"Go!"

Before Victoria took Ashleigh into the house, Victoria took note of Bob making a call on his car phone.

Bob was calling his attorney.

When the police ran up onto the property. Ashley Vindavane started yelling at the police frantically accusing everyone else of things they never did.

Bob Waller was standing next to his Jeep Cherokee observing everything as he waited for his attorney to come onto the phone. Bob watched and listened to Ashley's made up stories and enjoyed watching her become more frantic as they were trying to question her. He observed the EMT working on saving the perverted step-dad from dying on the Anderson front lawn. Bob fought the impulse to go over to these EMT's and restrain them from saving this man's life; he remained standing. Bob observed two more police cars pull up. Two officers were already talking to his friends. He observed Patty escorting two police officers into the house. Bob recognized the female officer, she was the one who took the original report of Ashleigh's abuse. This officer's report was a huge key in Ashleigh being moved into the Anderson household.

An officer approached Bob, Bob looked at him and stated, "I'm talking to my lawyer."

The police officer was shocked at this. Bob being prepared for Ashley Vindavane claiming he kidnapped Ashleigh, grabbed a folder off his dash, and handed it to the police officer.

He stated matter of fact, "I'm presenting you with the documents from the State of Wisconsin in conjunction with Waukesha County explaining Mr. and Ms. Anderson are Ashleigh Waller's legal guardians. I'm her older brother with secondary custodial rights and have a visitation schedule granted by Milwaukee County." The officer was glancing at the paperwork, Bob continued, "Those documents prove my statements and my visitation schedule. The perverted ignorant fool over there," Bob pointed to the step-dad on a gurney, "was ignorant enough to listen to the lying excuse of a woman over there. It appears as though they're carry out her promise of.."

"Shut the fuck up," Ashley screamed and pointed at Bob. "Arrest him!"

A police officer shook his head and stepped up to her and commanded, "Ma'am."

Bob stated matter of fact, "I'm more than willing to speak to you about all that has transpired. Before I do I'd like to discuss this incident with my attorney."

The police officer again paged through the paperwork.

Bob became delighted as Ms. Vindavane was showing all the police officers her true character.

The first set of paperwork laid out the visitation schedule. The officer took note of how unusual it was for a court to award visitation to a stepbrother. In the second set of court papers; it was clear Victoria and Blake Anderson were awarded temporary permanent guardianship of Ashleigh Waller (in layman terms this meant Victoria and Blake were permanent guardians. They were not adoptive parents. Ashleigh's permanent residence was with Blake and Victoria Anderson). There was a paragraph within this paperwork reaffirming the visitation schedule along with a few amendments.

Still carrying Ashleigh, Victoria took Ashleigh to the upstairs bathroom. Once in the

bathroom she instructed Patty to show the officers the same paperwork Bob was showing the police officer outside.

When Bob was done talking to his lawyer he called Blake on his car phone to tell him what was happening. It normally took Blake fifteen to twenty minutes to get home from work, this drive only took him ten minutes; Bob smiled as Blake almost smashed into a police car as he squealed into the culdesac.

A police Lieutenant told an officer to flag down Blake before going into the house. The officer asked Blake questions related to all the court documents, after these questions were answered, the Lieutenant asked Blake if they were having any problems with Ashley Vindavane. Blake explain how Ms. Vindavane threatened to kidnap Ashleigh.

At this moment everyone turned to observe a screaming Ashley Vindavane being slammed down onto the front lawn. She was yelling obscenities at: the police officers, Blake, Bob's friends, and Bob. They handcuffed her and used ankle zip ties. Bob, Blake, and Bob's four friends found great delight in the fact Ashley Vindavane was lifted up and shoved into the back of a police car. As Ashley was being put into the police car a heavily sedated step-dad was put into the rescue squad on a wheeled gurney; everyone standing on the front lawn watched the rescue squad and the police escort leave the neighborhood. The car with Ashley Vindavane was headed the police station.

After Bob and Blake were done talking with the lieutenant they watched as the lieutenant walked over to the other officers. As the police were having their conference Bob introduced Blake to his four friends: Al, Scott, Roy, and Will. Blake knew Al and Will from being boyfriends of Shaye and Janna. Shaye and Janna were currently Patty's friends. As a concerned father of both Patty and Ashleigh, Blake paid close attention to how these young men behaved themselves.

The group of police disbanded and the Lieutenant talked to Blake alone. The Lieutenant told Blake under the circumstances he was not liable for the dog attacking the Step-dad.

The officer notified Blake: Ashley and the Step-dad were being charged with various crimes. The lieutenant expected prison time for both of them. The officer complimented Blake and Victoria on the restraining order they filed. After this conversation the lieutenant left. There was now one police car left. Blake suggested Al should move his car, Al being respectful listened and parked it on the road just passed the Anderson driveway. Blake while talking to all these young men took note of Bob's Jeep filled with camping equipment and supplies. Blake was sure Bob would want to still continue with the camping trip. This is when a truck arrived to remove the Step-dad's car.

The group of men watched as the female officer and her male partner: stepped out of the house, walked to their police car, and headed to the station. Shaye and Janna came out of the house and started to weep over the dog, Al and Will walked up to them and began to console their girlfriends.

These weeping women amazed Bob. All they ever did was complain about the dog and they were grateful the dog was to be put to sleep today.

Blake gathered the young men together and suggested, "Lets put the dog into the shed so Ashleigh doesn't see her friend in its current condition."

This upset the girls and they went back into the house. Patty saw enough from the picture window to refuse to come outside.

Blake took off Maxine's collar and dog tags; he keep them for sentimental value. Roy who was gentle, tall, and very strong picked the dog up and followed Blake to the back shed. Once in the shed Blake put a big piece of cardboard on top of the riding lawnmower, and Roy gently set the dog upon the cardboard.

Blake felt Maxine was his responsibility and would bury the dog later. He appreciated the offers from these young men to help, but Blake wanted to bury his dog by himself.

Bob was grateful Blake wanted to bury the dog himself. Bob felt the best way for Ashleigh to feel better was for Ashleigh to get away from this place and have an adventure. Bob was confident Ashleigh would have a great time on her first camping trip. He wanted to fulfill his promise to his sister and was convinced she would be disappointed if she was forced to stay home.

Victoria and Ashleigh heard a knock on Ashleigh's bedroom door.

"Who is it?"

They heard a female voice in a gentle tone; "Ma'am we'd like to talk with you and if possible Ashleigh Waller."

"Give us a minute. I'm with my daughter." Victoria would have made the President of the United States wait. Victoria was making sure her Foster daughter was okay before they left Ashleigh's bedroom.

Ashleigh heard what Victoria said to the police lady. Ashleigh in spite of many inner contradictions gave Victoria a softer look.

Victoria took to heart this softer look.

Victoria: was on her knees, gazing into her foster daughters eyes, Ashleigh was clean after a quick shower, and was wearing clean clothes.

"Are you mad?"

Victoria smiled, "Why would I be mad? You didn't cause any of this. You're a good girl."

It was still difficult for Ashleigh to believe she was a good girl.

Victoria looked at Ashleigh and instructed as nicely as she could, "Now you have to be a brave girl and tell the police everything you told me. I believe in you."

Ashleigh was getting used to talking to police and felt they were awfully nice. She answered, "Uh huh."

Ashleigh wondered if she could become a police woman, the only reason she was considering this was because: Patty, Victoria, Bob and Blake kept telling her she could become anything she wanted.

The woman police officer knocked on the door again, "Ma'am."

Victoria yelled to the woman police officer. "We'll be out in a second. I want to make sure she's okay."

Ashleigh yelled, "I'm going camping!"

Victoria crinkled her whole face. She hoped Ashleigh would have forgotten about camping. Victoria felt the best thing for her foster child was to stay at the house and maybe, if Ashleigh was less stressed out go camping in a couple days.

Victoria said, "We'll see."

Based upon the tone Ashleigh wondered if she was going camping.

Victoria asked gently, "Are you ready to talk to the nice police officer?"

"Uh huh." Ashleigh paused and asked, "Are you coming?"

"I'm not ever going to leave you," Victoria spoke from the heart and hoped this would be true. For the first time Ashleigh hugged Victoria; Victoria would never forget this beloved embrace.

Victoria heard her baby crying.

Victoria instructed. "Let's go get the baby and then we'll talk to the nice police lady."

Ashleigh wanted to make sure she went camping and grabbed her backpack.

Victoria was about to protest but held her tongue.

Megan and her three friends were straddling their bikes in front of the newly constructed and freshly painted light green wooden fence of the town's "haunted house." This fence surrounded the rectangular shaped property. A year earlier Megan ventured into this "haunted house". Once Megan was inside she imagined how beautiful this house was when it was first constructed. She then imaged how she would restore the house for her future husband and her own children. This was the first time in her life she played house without being forced to play.

This large three story house was in one of the oldest neighborhoods in Eastbank. When this neighborhood was constructed it was considered to be a secluded upper class neighborhood. As Eastbank grew the status of this neighborhood faded but it was still a very affluent one. The neighborhood had always been well maintained and managed to stay secluded. There were many reasons it remained seclude: the H shape of this neighborhood, the rectangular shaped park on the south side of the neighborhood, the coastline on the East side, and an upper middle class neighborhood on the North Side, and *Town Hall Road* on the West Side. This house was on the inside corner of this H.

The people living in this neighborhood were delighted this house was finally being restored. They assumed this would stop locals from entering this neighborhood to view the "*Haunted House of Eastbank*."

For nine months Megan and her Friends enjoyed watching this large corner house with its large L shaped yard being restored. Megan and her two friends were dirty from playing ball and were sweaty from the Florida heat and humidity. These inconveniences were everyday events but watching a construction crew work on the outside of the towns haunted house was a special event.

It was obvious the construction was done because a boy their age was in the backyard tossing a baseball high into the air and catching the ball himself. This boy was so focused on catching and releasing the ball he was oblivious to Megan and her three friends standing alongside the fence.

The reason he missed someone watching him was his focus on what he was doing and he was in the long part of the yard.

Tom looked over at Megan and asked, "Should we talk to him?"

Tom was a year older than Megan, he was the tallest kid in his age group, he was daring, cleaver, and an average student. What Megan liked about him was how he treated every girl in school with respect. At their age it meant: he never teased any of the girls, he never pushed any of the girls, and he even opened doors for all her friends.

Forrest mentioned, "I've been hearing he's a Yankee."

Forrest was: the same age as Megan, dark hair, average sized, he put a lot of effort into school, and playing sports. It took all of his effort to be average at every sport he tried with the one exception running; he simply could out ran everybody.

Megan protested, "South Carolina ain't a Yankee."

Leonard added, "I've heard his family is from Massachusetts,"

He became serious, "I've heard they're practicing witches and this was why they bought the house."

His three friends gave him an odd look.

"What? I heard from Bubba who heard it from..."

Leonard stopped talking when he started to listen to what he was saying.

Leonard was a book learner. Every kid in school asked him for answers on test or homework. He was shorter than most boys his age, wore glasses, and was plainly awkward. This awkwardness seemed to vanish when he concentrated on two of his passions; one was

baseball and the other was music. All his friends were amazed at how, Leonard with his glasses secured to his face by a red strap going behind his head, could make the most amazing plays on the field. A new passion was his dedication to playing guitar and piano. He was certain if he told anybody he was taking music lessons, especially piano lessons, he'd be teased; so he kept this passion to himself. Leonard's greatest downfall was how gullible he was.

Leonard tried to recover, "This is what I've been hearing. If they're normal folks maybe we should tell them they're living in a haunted house."

Tom's response to Leonard's comment was, "I'm betting the house will be like Amityville Horror."

This interested all of the boys.

Leonard jumped in, "I bet spirits will be coming out of the TV like the movie Poltergeist?"

Forrest with excitement in his voice commented, "I'm betting the dad will go crazy like in the movie Shinning. He'll be screaming with an ax."

Leonard quietly commented, "The book was better,"

Leonard received stares from Tom and Forrest.

The three boys started to discuss every horror movie they secretly watched by VHS tape and movies on cable.

Megan barely heard a word. She was transfixed on the boy throwing the ball into the air. She admired his graceful throwing motion and his obvious athletic ability. She admired his practice and determination; something her Daddy and brothers lived out every day. Megan was wondering how he treated his Mother and if he was a boy of moral character. She heard her Momma tell many single women these were the things to watch when a woman was considering dating a man.

Megan was unclear as to what feelings she was receiving from watching this boy; she never felt these feelings from watching anyone else before. These feelings were so strong she completely forgot she was standing next to her friends.

"Megan!"

Tom gently shoved Megan.

The boys wondered if Megan would knock Tom out.

Megan answered, "Huh."

Leonard asked, "Whats eating you?"

"What?"

Leonard asked concerned, "Y'all believe the house is haunted?"

When Leonard was unsure if someone was fooling with him he would ask Megan. There were many times Megan told Leonard he was being fooled. Leonard and everyone else knew if you asked Megan for her opinion she would hand this opinion to you; if you wanted to be served the truthful answer or not.

Megan made a face of concentration.

Her dimples flashed.

The three boys waited for Megan to collect her answer, "When Tom and I went into the house on the dare we didn't feel anything. If there was spirits in there I would've felt em'."

They believed her. Her friends, from past experience, knew any time she had feelings about something a person better listen. These feelings kept the four of them out of trouble and safe. Her friends and Megan were too young to understand this was how the Holy Spirit worked through her.

Megan added, "My brothers worked for the construction company working on the house. If the house was haunted I'd have heard about it. Daddy would have asked me what I

was feeling about the house.”

The three boys took this very seriously. The whole town knew who Megan's brothers were. They were known to protect their friends and those who were unable to defend themselves. They were known for their natural strength, intense character, being awesome fishermen, great athletes, and every kid in town knew they protected Megan; even if Megan was unaware they were protecting her. If a kid was dumb enough to try and fight Megan or was dumb enough to say, *“You're only a girl.”* Megan made this boy bleed or he curled over with a hurt stomach. It was only a matter of time before one of the brothers would discuss with this individual on why they picked on their sister. Just having the brothers “talk” with them was good enough for kids to never bother Megan again.

There was an incident when their mere presence was insufficient. This involved a group of teenage boys who went to school with Jimmy. These young men found it enjoyable to unmercifully tease Megan and her girlfriends while they were playing in a park. Megan was smart enough to avoid fighting these older boys, but she warned them to stop picking on them or she would tell her brothers. They laughed at Megan, were sarcastic, and continued to harass them. This group found it especially funny to pick on a younger sister of one of Megan's friends who walked with a severe gimp. This very sweet and tender girl ended up crying and they left the park. Megan went and found her older brothers. Her brothers went and found these boys. The first time Duke and Jimmy talked to these teenage boys they failed to see the error of their ways and lipped off and threatened Duke and Jimmy. This led to the brothers getting their trusted friend Jake and had a more intense “discussion”. After this “talk” young people were reluctant to pick on Megan or the girl with the gimp.

The boy tossing the ball into the air finally took note of the four kids staring at him.

“Forrest commented, “He spotted us.”

Megan suggested, “I'm betting he's a good guy.”

The three boys looked at Megan oddly.

The boy started to walk toward them and yelled, “Hi Y'all.”

Leonard commented, “It's getting to hot. I've got chores waiting for me.”

Forrest added, “My Momma will be making us dinner.”

Not one of these excuses were true.

After watching his two best friends quickly mount their bikes and pass him, Tom followed after his friends. The boy was disappointed. The only one left was an odd looking girl. The reason he knew Megan was a girl was the pony tail hanging out of the back of her hat and she was standing over a girls bike. This was very disheartening; where he grew up he was popular. Here in this small tourist town he was finding it difficult making friends.

He stated, “Hi Y'all.”

Megan responded with, “Howdy.”

They studied one another. Megan was different from every girl he ever knew. This being stated he admired her grass stains and the dirt marks on her pant legs. He found her interesting because she played baseball.

She stated very lady like, “My name is Megan Steward.”

“Names Simon.”

He gave her a look and asked, “You into playing ball?”

Megan disliked his tone, “Is there something wrong with a gal playing ball?”

She was used to being criticized by boys for playing sports; this was until she played against them.

He answered truthfully, “No.”

He was bored and friendless so he asked, “Want to toss the ball around?”

Megan thought he would never ask. Megan immediately stepped off her bike and

stated, "I'm good at pitching."

Megan was pushing her bike on the public sidewalk. Simon was on the other side of the fence keeping pace. While talking they made it to the corner of the road, made a right turn, and followed Simon to the gate in front of the house.

Simon stated with confidence, "Back home I was the schools best hitter. I'm not a home run hitter but I'm great at getting on base."

"Every team's needing them runs hit in. Getting on base is important when Y'all are great at stealing."

Simon was both surprised and happy to be talking about baseball with someone who knew what they were talking about.

He smiled when he told her, "I love playing shortstop and second base."

Megan liked the fact he was comfortable talking to her about baseball.

Megan suggested, "I could hit Y'all some grounders. Little league will be starting with school ending. You should sign up."

"Momma is wanting me to wait until we're completely done moving."

Megan smiled when Simon opened the gate in front of the house. Megan recalled the day the construction crew put in the new sidewalk from the fence to the front porch.

"Where did Y'all move from?"

"Jacksonville."

By Simon's body language and tone Megan could tell he was disappointed he moved to Eastbank.

Simon continued as they walked along the right side of the house to the back yard, "We moved here cause my Daddy will be the lead doctor in the new clinic here in town."

This impressed Megan; what Simon would say next just about blew her away.

"One day I'll be a professional ball player. After I'm done playing baseball I'll be a doctor just like my daddy. When I'm a doctor I'll take care of poor people and won't charge em' "

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

She was star struck. She admired how he talked about helping poor people.

Megan laid the bike down on the ground. She found herself saying, "I'll be running one of my Daddy's charters. When I'm the best fisher person in these parts I'll be buying my own vessel and people from all over the world will schedule charters."

She expected criticism from Simon. It seemed to Megan the only one who supported her idea of being a business woman was her Daddy and her Brother Jimmy. Captain believed his daughter would own her own business one day but assumed his daughter would choose a business more appropriate for a lady. The families assumption was Jimmy would take over the family business after serving in the Marines. This was assumed because Duke went to college to become an accountant after serving in the Marines. To everyone's surprise Captain gave Duke his blessing to pursue accounting. Duke was currently trying to get his own accounting business off of the ground.

Simon asked, "What type of charter?"

Megan's dimples flashed, "I'll be running three charters. I'll have the best fishing charters anyone ever has been on. I'll be the most famous woman captain this worlds ever seen. Then I'm buying a charter for scuba diving. It's annoying I'm forced to wait to try scuba diving."

"Why are Y'all waiting?"

"My Daddy promised me he has a friend who will teach me. But he's wanting me to wait until after high school. If I wait his friend will teach me for free. I'm guessing he's owing Captain something."

“Who's this Captain?”

Megan flashed her dimples, “With you being new around these parts you probably ain't in the knowing. My Daddy's name is David Steward but everyone's used to calling him Captain.”

“Why?”

“On account he's the best Captain in all of Florida. Maybe in the whole country. With me learning' from my Daddy I'll make enough money to buy a big ship for scientists.” She took a breath. “We'll follow dolphins around to tell people they shouldn't kill em' in their nets.”

Simon smiled, “Sounds cool.”

Megan was impressed someone found her ideas interesting and attainable.

“My Momma is working on opening a flower and gift shop. She's thinking during tourist season she'll be successful with the gift shop.”

He paused and bite his lip and spoke uneasy, “While year round she'll be selling flowers.”

Megan knew of a lot of gift shops in the center of town. In spite of this she was encouraging, “We're needing a good flower shop. I'm sure there's lots of reasons for folks to buy flowers.”

Megan noticed an odd face come upon Simon, “My Momma is making me help her after school.”

Megan asked, “Y'all like flowers?”

He blushed.

She smiled her big dimple smile.

If Simon was talking to a boy he would tell them his Momma was making him work at the flower shop.

The blush told Megan everything and stated, “You might want to tell everyone she's making you work there. I feel it's awesome a boy would like plants. My sister-in-law likes plants. She gave me this real spiky thing. It'll heal cuts and things.”

“Is it an Aloe Vera plant?”

“That'd be it.”

Simon and Megan both felt something between them.

There was an awkward silence.

Simon speaking respectfully, “Momma says a girl should go first.”

Megan liked the fact he would listen to his Momma.

Simon asked, “Y'all want to bat first?”

Megan spoke with confidence, “I'll hit em' far.”

“Do you need me to pitch em' to ya?”

Megan gave him a face and very sternly stated, “I'm able to hit em' myself.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

She asked, “Where's the baseballs?”

He pointed near the edge of the yard, “Over yonder in the bag.”

“Okay.”

She headed over to the bag. Simon backed up.

She looked up at how far he went and smiled. She enjoyed it when boys assumed she could only hit a ball so far.

Megan: knelt down next to a large duffel bag, she unzipped it, her eyes went wide, and her dimples flashed. She never beheld so many expensive baseball bats in one place before. She was surprised to see a big batch of brand new baseballs with the major league emblems on them. There were even a few bright neon orange baseballs. She never came across colored baseballs before. She thought about using one of these new bats. She reckoned using someone

else bat was like using someone else gun; she just picked up a half dozen white baseballs. She looked up at Simon who was pounding his hand into his glove and looked impatient.

She yelled, "Just give me a second."

He smirked and adjusted his hat.

Megan walked some distance away from the bag and dropped the baseball on the grass. She walked over to her bike: unhooked her bat, took the glove out of the milk crate, and walked back to the pile of baseballs.

Simon yelled, "Are you sure Y'all want to be so far from me?"

This comment annoyed Megan.

In her anger she: reached down, tossed the ball into the air, she swung, and missed.

He made a face.

Even at a distance Megan could see he looked irritated.

What annoyed Megan he walked forward cutting the distance in half.

She crunched her teeth together. If her friends saw her look of concentration and determination, all of her friends would have backed up. She tossed the ball up and "Crack" went the ball; on purpose she drove the ball right at him.

"Wooooo," he screamed and like a good infielder made a spectacular grab. She was impressed he caught the ball. She smiled when he grimaced with pain. She was sure his hand hurt.

"Good hit."

She smiled, "I'm sending' you a pop up."

He backed up.

She felt better when he backed up.

She picked up another ball and hit it high in the air. He backed up and adjusted to the ball and caught it. They were impressed with one another.

They were unaware of Simon's mom and his two older sisters watching them from the den of the house. All three ladies could see what was happening to their eleven year old brother and son.

All Megan and Simon knew was they were having fun playing baseball. They played for a couple hours until Megan heard a shout from Timmy; "Megan!"

She heard the shout but ran after a ball Simon hit. She fielded the ball and ran the ball back to her new best friend.

Megan mentioned in a panic, "I'm needing to get home."

Simon smiled as she tried to hand the ball back to him.

"You can keep the ball."

She smiled her big dimple smile, this was the best baseball she ever owned, she usually received the baseballs her brothers were finished with. The baseballs her brother's gave her were never official Major League baseball's.

Simon and Megan stood looking at one another.

This time she heard her Momma's voice, "MEGAN!,"

Megan believed her Momma was in her car.

She heard, "Megan where ARE YOU!"

Megan cringed at the tone of her Momma's voice.

He said, "Y'all want to play again?"

She ran to her bike and put her baseball mitt and her new ball into the milk carton she told him, "Every morning we start playing ball. If you come tomorrow I'll introduce you to everyone."

He smiled, "What time does everyone start playing?"

She shrugged her shoulders as she hung the bat around the bike frame, "When we're all

there.”

She heard her Momma again, “MEGAN!. Y’all BETTER NOT BE HIDING AGAIN! IT AIN’T FUNNY!”

“I have to get going,”

Megan was sure Timmy and his friends looking for her. With this thought she quickly peddled back to her house, fortunately for Megan, her house was across Town Hall road. At most two miles away.

Simon's sister opened the front door and yelled, “Simon; Momma wants you in for dinner.”

He answered, “Okay.”

Looking at his older sister, he wondered why she was giving him such a goofy looking face. Simon wished instead of two older sisters at least one of them would have been a brother.

End of Part One

Tuesday, June 6th, A Scary Place

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Ashleigh & Megan Book I: Friendship

*Tuesday, June 6th
A Scary Place*

(6 Years, 2 Months, and 1 Day Since Ashleigh's Birth)

Part Two of Four

*Authored By:
R. P. Voght*

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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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June 6th, A Scary Place

(6 Years, 2 Months, and 1 Day: Since Ashleigh's Birth)

Ashleigh was lifted into Bob's Jeep Cherokee. Patty set her on top of two pillows so she could look out the front window.

Victoria commanded, “You better strap her in.”

Ashleigh and Patty winked at one another. Patty made sure the seat belt was tight.

Annoyed at how long this was taking Bob: leaned over, looked out the passenger side door, and was about to announce his displeasure.

Janna leaned over the front seat and asked, “How's the CD player in this thing?”

Bob shifted sideways and gazed upon Patty's friend.

Bob answered Janna's question with a smile, “It happens to be the top of the line,”

Janna had a long rectangular face, with a square chin, a long nose, dark blue eyes, and what added to her look was her luscious shaped lips. She tried to hide the length of her face by keeping her blond hair long and curly; while making sure her bangs were perfect. She was a healthy curvy. Many guys found her attractive, this included her boyfriend Will, who happened to be Bob's friend.

Janna could have cared less about the radio but Janna was of the opinion if Bob and Victoria had another argument Ashleigh would most likely be staying home.

Patty very sweetly asked, “Are you able to see out the window?”

Feeling big she said with a confident tone, “Uh huh.”

There were a lot of reasons to feel big: she could see out the window, she was with her big brother, she was in a big vehicle, she was with big girls, and she was big enough to go camping.

Victoria in a very serious tone, “Could I talk with you?”

Patty kept her eye roll hidden from her Mom. Patty was a modest eighteen year old woman with an oval shaped face. She kept her long dark hair curled up on top and allowed her naturally wavy hair to grow just passed her shoulders. Her bright brown eyes shined. Her eyes matched her: short simple smile, her short jaw line, and her round chin. She kept in shape by walking, biking, and going to a woman's only aerobic class. To keep her chest from being a focal point she was wearing a neon blue baggy pullover with short sleeves. Matching her shirt she was wearing a longer pair of light blue shorts with white Nike shoes; with a plain blue

stripe on the side. One of the reasons she was in love with Bob was he loved her for who she was instead of the one physical attribute guys stared at.

Victoria led them a distance away from the Jeep so they could talk.

Before Victoria spoke she heard Bob comment to the three ladies in the Jeep, "Let me demonstrate this top of the line sound system."

Ashleigh watched as her brother reached down below her feet and picked up a CD case.

Bob asked Ashleigh, "Should we play our favorite type of music?"

"Yea!" Ashleigh answered with excitement.

Shaye asked Ashleigh, "What's your favorite music?"

Shaye was the second friend of Patty going on the trip. She took being healthy very seriously. Growing up she was always over weight but never believed she was obese. This denial ended at the beginning of her Junior year of high school when she became exhausted climbing the stairs from the first floor to the second floor; she sat at the top step trying to catch her breath for nearly five minutes. After this incident she forced her mom to take her to a nutritionist and began the slow and healthy process of losing weight. By working hard and being dedicated, she went from being ignored, to being one of the most desired women on campus.

Shaye had a diamond shaped face, with a more rounded pointed chin, her cheekbones were high, and her jaw line was pronounced. Her long pointed nose matched her longer face. Her smaller mouth with her pearlque lips were very attractive. Her long natural straight brunette hair was in a pony tail. Her body was now very toned. A side effect Shaye was delighted about, her breasts shrunk and were now more proportionate for her frame.

Bob answered Shaye's question, "My sisters favorite music is country. We have conveniently brought a wide selection of this type of music."

Shaye and Janna looked at one another and wanted to leave the Jeep and go ride with their boyfriends. The reason they stayed was their promise to Patty they would ride with her.

Bob added, "To enhance the riding experience for my Sister I went and purchased a computer program where I have the capability to make my own CD's."

"Do you always have to talk like that?"

"Like what?"

Shaye squinted, "Like your above everybody."

"I'm unaware of why you'd accuse me of conversing over people."

Ashleigh was becoming upset at the rising tone between her brother and Shaye.

Both Shaye and Bob recognized this.

Shaye stated, "I know you care about people."

"Yes I do."

Ashleigh feeling she needed to tell Shaye. "He's my brother,"

Shaye and Janna stated at the same time, "We know."

Bob looked over at his little sister, "Are you aware of what this player is capable of?"

A frustrated Janna said, "Do you know what the radio does?"

Ashleigh answered, "No."

Bob and Janna glared at one another.

"This player can play up to six CD's."

Ashleigh thought six was a big number.

Shaye asked out of concern, "They're not all going to be country?"

"Of course not. A wide variety is a welcomed delight."

The two women rolled their eyes.

Ashleigh loved her brother but wished with all her heart he would stop using big words.

Bob added, "These CD's are filled with all of Ashleigh's favorite songs."

Watching Bob put in one CD at a time was fascinating for Ashleigh, "What is even better is this CD player has an anti skipping feature."

Shaye asked sarcastic hoping he'd shut up, "Does it play?"

Shaye understood why Al and Bob were best friends. Shaye understood Bob better than most people; but there were times she wished Al had a different best friend. This was one of those times.

"Yes this player certainly does play. Ashleigh are you aware of what a remote is?"

Janna was about to explain what Bob just said but Ashleigh stated, "We have one for the TV."

"The Anderson's do have a remote for their television. This one is for the radio."

In between the seats was a comment just behind the cup holders, he lifted the cover off, and pulled out a remote for the stereo.

The two girls in back leaned forward to look at the remote.

Bob said gently, "I'm sure you'd like to hit the play button."

Ashleigh excited answered, "Uh huh."

"This is the play button. Did you see?"

With a smile she answered, "Uh huh."

"You may hit the button."

She knew exactly what this meant. Ashleigh felt special being able to touch her big brother's car radio; he never let anyone touch his car radio. The one time her brother became angry at Patty was when she touched his radio.

When Ashleigh hit the button, Johnny Cash's song, "Ring of Fire" started to play.

It was obvious to the two women sitting in back Bob was showing off; this was annoying to both of them. They were both curious as to how much he spent on this radio. Based upon Bob's past reactions to anything involving money they kept this question to themselves. As far as the song they were indifferent to it. What they liked was the overall sound of the car stereo. What worried them was this toy of Bob's would somehow turn into an unintended torture device. What surprised these two young women was Ashleigh was singing the song word for word; Ashleigh singing made the song more interesting.

Patty was growing impatient. When the song came on her Mother stopped talking and ached the Jeep. The least thing Patty wanted was to listen to her Mom's concerns, she wanted to be in the Jeep having a good time.

Victoria screamed, "That's too loud for her."

Ashleigh replied back, "It ain't loud."

All the passengers in the Jeep looked over at Victoria and Patty.

Victoria observed Bob's look of impatience. Victoria could have cared less about his schedule, a schedule he mentioned to the group four times. This was a point of contention when Bob, Victoria, Blake, and Patty deliberated over the issue of Ashleigh going on this camping trip. It disturbed Victoria's sense of priorities on how focused he was about the schedule instead of what she felt was Ashleigh's readiness to go on a trip; especially when she was almost kidnapped by her own mother and her best friend ended up dead on the lawn. Victoria was feeling Bob was in a sense kidnapping her foster child and her oldest daughter.

Patty was pleasantly surprised when Bob picked up the remote and turned down the volume.

The sarcasm in his movements made Victoria want to take the remote and smash it. The reason she restrained herself was the little girl who looked happy sitting on two pillows singing a song. This look of joy, a look she witnessed when she asked Ashleigh if she wanted to go camping, was the only reason Victoria agreed to allow either daughters on this trip. She was certain this was the biggest mistake of Patty's life.

Victoria turned to her daughter and with a snarl stated, "He's got a phone and remote in his Jeep."

Patty sighed, "He isn't wasting money. I keep trying to tell you. He keeps telling me on how I should be more responsible with my money."

The looks they gave one another spoke volumes.

Before they would speak about the unspoken words they exchanged, they heard two car doors open, they witnessed two of Bob's friends get out of the car and head toward the Jeep Cherokee.

Al, Bob's best friend and Shaye's boyfriend, leaned up next to the open car door and asked Ashleigh, "How's our Little Mascot?"

Ashleigh was unsure of what Little Mascot meant; by the tone her brother's friends used she could feel it was something nice. Ashleigh liked Al the most.

Victoria motioned Patty a little farther up the lawn.

Victoria started by saying, "I'm not happy you are going on this trip."

"Ashleigh wants to go and Dad said she should go."

Patty recognized there were layers to this last statement.

Victoria was very conservative and believed with all of her heart people should wait until they were married to have sex. She strongly believed this based upon her experiences of indulging in the sexual revolution in the mid to late sixties.

"I'm hoping," Victoria stated bluntly, "Your waiting."

"Bob is a gentleman."

Bob always stopped when Patty asked him too and what endeared Patty was he sometimes stopped on his own. There were two incidents when Patty was close to losing her virginity. The first incident was after spending the day together. They started the morning at the Milwaukee Public art museum, after he provided a picnic, they talked about many things, and they enjoyed walking along Lake Michigan until dinner. After they ate dinner at Bob's house, they spent the time on his boat, when they came back they made a fire and cuddled under the stars. As much as she felt ready, she recognized as she reached the point of no return she was far from ready. She put on the brakes. The second time was while they were heavy petting on his anchored boat. During this particular session the physical and emotional feelings were intense. After she reached a powerful orgasm she felt if he entered her it would lead to another orgasm; she bluntly just wanted it. At this moment he put on the brakes. This was completely frustrating for her. Based upon his physical response she imagined how difficult it was for him to stop. In spite of this extreme physical need for relief they put their clothes back on, raised the anchor to his large boat, they docked the boat, and he immediately drove her home. There were times on this ride home where she wanted him to park somewhere and finish. Later she was grateful she was still a virgin.

Victoria looked over at the Jeep to check on Ashleigh. Ashleigh was enamored by all these young adults around her.

Victoria voiced her concern as a Mom, "If you ever feel pressured you can talk to me."

This annoyed Patty, "He doesn't pressure me."

"Are you able to say no?"

Patty blushed, "Yes."

"It looks like stopping is getting difficult."

Patty answered sheepishly, "We stop."

"I don't want to take care of another Baby especially if it isn't mine."

Patty was frustrated, "I'm waiting until I'm married."

"Bob hasn't."

It was difficult for Patty to ignore the comment but answered it by saying, "We're running late."

"I don't care," Victoria snipped, "There's something else I want to discuss with you."

Patty knew where this discussion was headed.

"There is a lot of responsibility taking care of Ashleigh," Victoria found herself saying again. "Nothing better happen to her."

Patty felt her Mom was misjudging everything, "I..."

Victoria interrupted, "Your not understanding what is happening here. There is a great amount of responsibility to raising a child. Much less one who's gone through what she has."

"Mom I..."

Victoria interrupted Patty again and whispered, "You two are not her parents."

"I thought you liked how he was taking care of Ashleigh?"

They very rarely argued but they were close.

This irritated Victoria. Her daughter never spoke this way until she started to go out with Bob.

"What he's doing is noble." Victoria honestly believed this, but felt compelled to point out, "You feel he would have done any of this without Amanda?"

Patty whispered, "She's leaving this all up to him. She's told me how difficult it is for her." Patty and Victoria looked over at Ashleigh. It was plain to see she was enjoying the attention she was receiving. Patty repeated in a respectful tone, "Mom I've seen her struggle when Ashleigh's around."

Victoria speaking while gazing upon Ashleigh stated, "Why his dad would cheat on her is anyone's guess," She recovered and studied Patty's body language, "I'm very aware of how difficult this is on Amanda. What I'm sure about is the two of you are unaware of how this is effecting Ashleigh and..."

This was the part Patty was tired of hearing, "We're helping..."

Victoria interrupted and said again, "You and Bob aren't ready to handle the responsibility." Patty pointed to where Ashleigh was sitting, "Did you see what I saw this morning?"

Patty crunched her forehead together, "Bob can just about afford anything."

"I know his family is wealthy," Victoria sighed. "It's not just the money."

"He used it to get visitation and..."

Victoria raised her hand and shook her head, "I'm not sure I want to know how he uses his money."

They glared at one another.

Victoria pointed out, "He has a remote for his radio."

"You don't understand him like I do."

"He's arrogant, stubborn, and really..."

Victoria stopped talking.

Patty looked over at her boyfriend's vehicle because her mom suddenly glared at it.

With a tone, Victoria demanded, "Just wait."

With determination Victoria made her way to Bob's vehicle.

She managed to be polite and say, "Excuse me Al."

Al very politely stepped to the side and answered, "Oh sure."

Victoria was at the open passenger door.

Ashleigh looked up at her and became quiet.

Victoria stuck her head in, and asked very intently, "Is this the song Cocaine Blues?"

All conversations stopped. The only sound being heard was the Johnny Cash song.

Ashleigh never witnessed her Foster Mom this angry before, Ashleigh could feel her

Foster Mom was angry at her Brother, but was upset they were angry at one another.

"As a matter of fact it is," Bob answered with a look of why does it matter.

"I used to listen to Johnny Cash before I found Jesus."

Bob responded with, "If I recall Mr. Cash became a Christian."

Ashleigh was afraid they would start yelling at one another again.

With a knife in her voice, "No matter. This is not a song for a young child."

Just before Johnny Cash sang: "*I shot the bad bitch down.*" Victoria covered Ashleigh's ears.

Ashleigh detested her ears being covered.

This gave Victoria an opportunity to voice her concerns, "All of you better take care of this little girl I don't want anything to happen to her. I didn't just save her to have something happen to her."

"I'm more than capable of taking care of my sister."

Victoria's glare would have knocked Bob dead, "Be respectful. Don't play songs with swears in it."

To everyone's surprise Bob looked at Victoria and hit the forward button. Everyone wondered if this was an act of obedience or an act of sarcasm.

Janna and Shaye hoped the song would be anything but country, to their disappointment it was country, but they liked this crossover hit by a new country artist Garth Brooks; the song was "The Dance".

With passion and intensity in her Victoria stated, "I'm expecting her to return here safe."

"Mom we'll watch her close," Patty stated opening the back passenger side door and slipping in.

Janna trying to support Patty. "I'm used to watching my little brothers and my sister on family camping trips."

Victoria gazed upon all of these young adults, "She has to be back here Friday. It better be before four in the afternoon. Am I understood?"

In a calm demeanor Bob answered, "I'll make sure she arrives at your home safely."

Very calmly and with a brotherly love added, "She's my little sister."

Al was trying to reassure Victoria, "She's our Little Mascot. We'll protect her."

"Promise," stated Shaye.

Patty and Janna made faces at Shaye; it was obvious in her tone and body language she was nervous. This was Shaye's first camping trip.

Ashleigh was tired of her ears being covered and reached up to try and push them off.

Victoria lifted them off and looked Ashleigh straight in her dark green eyes, "You be safe. You listen to them."

Ashleigh could see and feel her Foster Mom's intensity. She assumed she better answer correctly or she could end up staying home. She answered by saying, "Uh huh."

Victoria holding back tears stated, "I love you," and kissed her on the forehead.

This surprised Ashleigh.

Al stated, "Bob we'll follow you."

Bob shouted to Al, "We're still going to ride on the car ferry."

Al answered, "It's up to you."

Everyone was surprised Bob would take a side trip with how late they were running.

Bob's two friends walked back to the car.

Victoria pulled away from her foster child and looked at the three young woman and glared at Bob, "You be a good big brother."

Ashleigh's face contorted and wondered why her Foster Mom would yell at her brother,

she responded by saying, "He's my Big Brother.

"Yes he is. And as a big brother he'll take care of you."

Bob answered Victoria's look, "The need to worry is unfounded."

"You call me on that phone every day."

Patty answered, "We will."

Bob was tired of the drama, "I'd like Ashleigh to start enjoying the day we have planned."

All the girls in the Jeep, this included Ashleigh, cringed at the tone Bob just used.

Victoria wanted to yank Ashleigh out of the Vehicle.

Instead she recognized how upset Ashleigh would be if she stopped them from going,

"Be safe."

Resisting the temptation of slamming the door she backed away. Victoria as a nervous Mom waved.

Ashleigh waved back.

With this wave Ashleigh suddenly felt the need to be in her Foster Mom's arms.

As Bob started to drive out of the culdesac Ashleigh started to think about: bears, cliffs, sleeping outside, and getting lost.

These things were temporary put to the side when she realized she could see the road.

Nicole at the age of eighteen was: married for eleven months, was a Momma of a three week old baby boy, she was attending a two year college to become a nurse, and she was finding the time to work part time at the local YMCA. With this being the life she always wanted she never felt any of these responsibilities were a burden; they were simply part of the life she chose.

Nicole felt fortunate to find a man who loved her with loyalty and honesty. In return she loved him with dedication and passion. What she admired the most was the way he handled his commitments: Nicole observed him being dedicated to his faith, he was loyal to both his family and friends, he honestly enjoyed church, he took school seriously, she admired his athletic ability, and always was working; even if these jobs were working for his dad or at small construction company. A character trait she found exceptional was how he fulfilled his promises. If at any time he showed a less than exceptional character she would have never married him.

She felt so strongly he was the man for her she convinced her parents to allow her to marry Jimmy a month after they graduated. She was married on July 30th, a month after high school graduation. In the first two months of their marriage Jimmy worked construction and they lived in a tiny apartment where they were expected to pay a reduced rent; even this reduced rent was a challenge. Living in the real world Jimmy decided to join the United States Marine Corp. While Jimmy was in boot camp Nicole sent him a letter announcing she was pregnant.

Her parents encouraged her to move back home. What impressed and surprised her folks was every month Jimmy sent Nicole's parents a check for room and board. This was a small amount but her parents were impressed with the gesture. Nicole felt fortunate to have picked a husband who, without asking, sent money to her parents.

She was proud of her husband after receiving a letter informing her, he moved up in rank, and was accepted into officer training school. Jimmy encouraged her to move herself and the baby to live with him on a base in Virginia. She wanted to live with her husband but was frightened to move. After seeking her Mother's council, Nicole's mother stated, "Talk to your mother-in-law she lived as a military wife and mother for most of her adult life. She'll teach Y'all what is expected of a military wife. You both agreed he should join the Marines.

Y'all have to live with your decision."

Jimmy's parents were known for being deeply dedicated to the military and the veterans who returned home. Captain was a dedicated Navy man. He received the Navy Cross while cruising the rivers of Vietnam in a river boat. After two tours and eight years, he put in another eight years in the Coast Guard, and he was currently serving as a Coast Guard reservist. From the moment Ma married Dave Steward Ma volunteered at the Veterans Hospital, the local VA chapter, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Dave and Mary Steward were known for making personal visits to both male and female vets coming home from active duty with either an honorable or medical discharge; they made it a special point to visit any veteran who came home wounded. Captain took special interest in helping Veterans suffering from post traumatic stress and survivors guilt. Two topics they cared deeply about was bringing the veterans home from Vietnam and the link between agent orange and cancer. These were the reasons Nicole pulled into the driveway of her Mother-in-laws house.

Nicole never felt her Mother-in-law wanted her to marry Jimmy, but as of late Nicole was feeling both her in-laws were more receptive to her. Even with this recent acceptance she was still feeling nervous visiting her Mother-in-law. This was why Nicole was sitting in her old white Toyota Corolla (by title it was her parents car but her parents considered it her car). Nicole looked over at her sleeping baby. Jeff was sleeping in an expensive car seat given to Nicole by Ma at her baby shower. Nicole assumed this chair was a financial stretch for her in-laws.

Nicole took a mirror out from her purse. Nicole was a beautiful young woman, but she never considered herself to be beautiful. Nicole was blessed with an oval shaped face. Her rounded chin and her lower cheekbones started just above her smile. Her jaw line was rounded. Her lips had a Rubina look; she never liked how her upper lip was smaller than her lower heavier lip. She was unaware her husband loved the look and feel of her lips. What she thought made her face look average was her roman style nose. This was a very inaccurate self assessment. In reality her nose gave her face a slightly longer look and added to her beauty. What facial feature stood out was Nicole's beautiful brown eyes; what added to their shine was her dark eyebrows and her long dark eyelashes.

She tried as best as she could to check her hair. She was not impressed with the current style of puffy hair and bangs, instead she put a part just to the left of center, and added enough wave to look current. Nicole out of nervousness brushed her hair. After checking her hair she checked her makeup. She normally worn more makeup, but knowing how conservative Mary was she kept the makeup light.

Nicole and her Mother-in-law were Christians. Nicole accepted Jesus as her personal savior when she was seven. The difference between Ma's church and her church was how they felt a woman should represent their Christian faith. Nicole respected Ma's more stricter customs and was able to look past these customs and see the love and faith her Mother-in-law expressed. Nicole was never sure if these traditions increased the intensity of her Mother-in-laws faith or if Mary found comfort and strength in these traditional customs; Nicole was beginning to surmise it was a little of both.

With this being the first private meeting with her Mother-in-law, Nicole was conscience of her appearance. Nicole was wearing a white and blue patterned flowered blouse with a modest neckline. She matched this blouse with a long blue skirt with matching flowered trim. With Nicole being taller this outfit looked appealing. At this time Nicole was vehemently disagreeing with anyone who suggested she was attractive. What disturbed this young woman was how her body changed during her pregnancy and she was determined to get back the body she had before becoming pregnant. Before she became pregnant she felt her breasts were perfect: they were bigger, firm, and were a nice round shape. She wondered if

they would ever be back to normal. She always felt her hips and rear end were just right. She felt her hips were now wider and her rear end felt a couple inches. One of the reasons she was working a part time job at the local YMCA was to get her shape back. With her Momma eager to watch her baby, Nicole would work out a half hour to an hour five days a week and on every Saturday morning she attended an aerobics class. Nicole feared when she reunited with her husband he would no longer find her enticing. Nicole wanted to make sure her very handsome, hard working, and loving husband would never find another woman more attractive than herself. Nicole's fears were unfounded because she married a man who: loved her, was very loyal, and believed cheating was wrong.

She: took a deep breath, closed her eyes, opened them, she reviewed in her mind how and what she would ask her Mother-in-law.

There was a heavy knock on the window.

Nicole was startled.

She caught her breath and put a hand over her chest

Megan laughed, but managed to yell, "Hi Y'all."

Nicole calmed herself down, opened the window, and answered, "Hi Y'all."

"Ma is wondering why Y'all are sitting in the car?"

Megan looked in back at the baby, "He's cute."

"When he ain't fussing'," Nicole corrected herself. "He's a good baby."

"We've just finished eating," Megan's dimples flashed, "Ma's concerned something will happen to the baby with it being so hot and humid. I'm to bring Y'all in."

Megan answered, "It's cool with the air on."

Megan answered, "I wish we'd have central air. The conditioners ain't enough. What's making everything worse is I ain't allowed to turn it on until night."

Nicole stated with a smile, "It shouldn't be bothering Y'all any. With Y'all being outside all the time."

Megan shrugged her shoulders. Megan asked with joy in her voice, "Are Y'all coming in?"

Nicole: took a deep breath, rolled up the window, turned off the car, swung her purse over her left shoulder, and stepped out of the car.

Megan was delighted to hold the door open for someone she loved as a sister.

Nicole smiled when Megan shut the drivers door and asked, "May I carry the little guy?"

Nicole gave her Sister-in-law a concerned look but with a gentle tone stated, "I could use help carrying my bag?"

It was impossible for Megan to hide her look of disappointment.

Nicole witnessed this facial expression. Nicole commented as she opened the back passenger door, "It's a big help carrying the bag."

Megan pleaded, "I'd be careful. On Daddy's charter I'm always carrying heavier stuff than a baby."

Nicole reached in and grabbed her bag and swung the bag over her purse. She glanced at her sleeping baby in the car seat. She undid all the straps and pulled Jeff out of the car seat and put him into a baby carrier.

Megan looked upon the baby with fascination.

"I'll carry the bag," Megan volunteered. She wanted to carry the baby but if carrying the bag helped her Sister-in-law she was content carrying the bag.

"It's heavy," Nicole warned but slipped the bag off her shoulder.

Megan quickly grabbed the bag.

Megan's dimples flashed.

With a serious tone stated again, "I'm always carrying heavy things on Daddy's charters."

Nicole smiled. In the two years they knew one another they already developed a sister bond. Nicole who grew up as an only child always wanted a younger sister. Megan being the youngest of three older brothers secretly wished one of her brothers could have been a sister. Nicole accepted Megan as she was.. Megan felt if she had an older sister she would have wanted one exactly like Nicole.

Megan was straining as she approached the front door.

Nicole smiled and shook her head.

When they reached the front door Megan dropped the bag with a thud and opened the door for Nicole and the baby. Nicole could have picked up the bag, but decided to allow Megan to carry it in.

"Thank You."

"It ain't nothing."

When Jeff's dark blue eyes opened and looked at Megan; she gave him her big dimple smile. A delighted Megan picked up the bag and followed her Sister-in-law and nephew into the house. Megan loved being an auntie and was looking forward to the day she was a Momma. Anytime she thought about being a momma all the questions referring to human development were peeked.

Megan was about to set the bag into the mud room.

Nicole instructed Megan gently, "I'm needing the bag."

"Okay," Megan answered.

They heard Ma yell, "Hi Y' All."

Megan and Nicole looked into the house and Ma was in front of the sink wiping her hands; it was obvious she was washing dishes.

Nicole smiled a nervous smile.

With a respectful tone Nicole said, "Howdy Ma'am."

Ma smiled at her Daughter-in-law and stated, "Y'all are part of the family call me Ma."

Megan wondered what she should do with the diaper bag.

Nicole smiled, "Yes Ma."

"Come in."

Nicole and Megan followed Mary into the kitchen.

"I just finished making a citrus fruit salad. I'm getting worried. If you don't start eating I'd miss your shadow."

Nicole was surprised her Mother-in-law noticed.

Before Nicole could refuse Ma: opened the refrigerator, placed a Tupperware bowl on the table, stepped over to her cabinets grabbing bowls, grabbed a spoon from another drawer, and set them on the table.

Nicole was obliged to say, "Thank-you."

Megan caught Nicole's signal to put the bag on the kitchen floor near Nicole.

Megan was about to set the bag down when Ma setting two bowls on the table instructed Megan, "Y'all look like you've lost last year's Easter eggs. Why not set the bag down and find yourself something to do."

Megan's expression said everything. She knew enough to keep her thoughts to herself and put the bag down next to Nicole's chair.

Nicole set the baby on the table and made sure she sat like a proper southern lady.

Megan made faces at the baby. The baby smiled back at Megan; Megan was looking forward to the day he would start crawling around.

"Let me look at the darling'," Ma demanded as only a Grandmother can.

Nicole as a proud momma stated, "He's a very good baby."

Ma gave Nicole an approving smile.

Ma asked as an experienced Momma, "Is he sleeping? Y'all are going needing your rest."

She focused on her grandson and reached in and picked him up. "He'll be a big boy."

The baby felt very comfortable in his Grandmother's arms.

Megan was trying to avoid any attention and casually slid over to the refrigerator.

Megan knew she was avoiding taking a shower. She was trying to be as quiet as possible so she could find out why Nicole was visiting. Megan never repeated the family news she heard but she enjoyed hearing the news.

Nicole answered Ma's question, "He's getting up around the same time at night. But he's sleeping okay the rest of the night."

"Jimmy was a good sleeper," Ma was instructing her Daughter-in-law. "Duke and Megan were fussy at night. Timmy he was content doing his own thing. They'll all act different."

Nicole caught the many layers of Ma's instruction.

Megan trying to act like she belonged poured herself some sweet iced tea.

Ma asked, "How's it working out at the Y? If Y'all are needing someone to watch the little fella I'm more than willing."

Nicole never told Mary she was working at the Y. This was proof Ma and Captain knew everyone. Nicole caught Ma's way of trying to see the baby.

"I'm liking' it," Nicole answered, "I'd love for you to watch him."

Ma was enjoying holding the baby and smiled, "Just give me a call."

Nicole as the baby's Momma was focused on every action her Mother-in-law made.

Ma affectionately holding onto her grandson mentioned, "I was hearing on how well Y'all are doing in school."

"I've been working hard."

Megan made a face. This was proof she had to behave all the time.

"Y'all are a good boy," Ma stated affectionately.

Jeff smiled at his grandmother.

Nicole mentioned, "He has the Steward smile."

Megan watched and listened.

"Yes he does," Ma looked at Nicole, "He'll be a good boy. Might be a little bit of a handful but I'm seeing Y'all are a good momma."

Nicole took this surprising compliment seriously. Ma never passed off a compliment without meaning it.

Ma very gently handed her grandson to Nicole, to do so Nicole stood up from her chair.

Ma spoke, "Now let's get talking about you moving to Virginia."

Megan's eyes went wide and her dimples flashed.

Nicole was shocked.

Ma spoke in a very matter of fact manner, "I'm needing to finish these dishes."

"Y'all needing help?"

"You just sit. Y'all are needing your rest. I remember being married and struggling."

Nicole sat down and cradled her baby.

Megan's fascination with her nephew took over the wisdom of just staying out of the way. Megan waved at him and smiled.

Nicole smiled. "He has your eyes."

Megan exclaimed, "You think?"

"Megan." Ma scolded. "I told you before to get out of them clothes and clean your

room.”

“You didn't tell me to clean my room?”

“Are you sasin' me?”

Megan's countenance was crushed, “No ma'am.”

Ma rinsing the last few dishes stated, “How come you ain't leaving?”

Megan was aware she was given the task of cleaning her room because she hug around the kitchen. What was embarrassing was Ma telling her to shower with Nicole sitting in the room.

Nicole stopped Megan as she reluctantly headed out of the kitchen, “If it's alright with your Momma I might need someone to help me this Saturday afternoon. Maybe your Momma could drop you off.”

Ma answered, “After the two you could spend the afternoon here.”

Megan's dimples flashed.

“I'd love watching him.”

Ma was finishing washing up the last bowl, “I'm sure it'd be okay.”

Megan smiled her big dimple smile, “Yes Ma'am.”

Ma was now facing everyone while wiping her hands in the dish towel, “You get going young lady.

“Yes Ma'am.”

Megan turned toward Nicole, “I'm looking forward to helping.”

Nicole whispered, “You better get.”

Megan and Ma smiled for different reasons.

The doorbell rang.

“I'll get it,” Megan announced running to the door. When the heat of the afternoon was over Megan wanted to introduce Simon to her friends.

Ma yelled, “If it's your friends they'll have to come back after you're cleaned up and Y'all bedroom's is squared away.”

Megan was about to protest.

“Y'all ain't hard of hearing'. Don't start sassing' me especially in front of company.

Megan answered, “Yes Ma'am.”

Nicole wondered if this exchange embarrassed Megan. Nicole dished herself a bowl of the delicious looking citrus salad.

Jeff was starting to get a little fussy.

Megan at the door reluctantly told her four friends they would have to come back in a couple of hours. They stood at the doorway whispering.

Ma looked over at Nicole and whispered, “As a Momma Y'all have to do many things you really ain't wanting to do. Doing'. I'm looking forward to having Y'all over. I'm feeling it'd be good for my daughter to be associating herself with a feminine lady as yourself. I'm grateful you went and asked her to help.”

“She's like a sister to me.”

“She's needing a sister after being around her brothers and Daddy all the time.”

Megan asked by yelling, “Ma can they help me clean my room?”

Ma turned away and yelled, “What friends are wanting to help?”

Nicole could feel her baby was about to cry. Nicole looked up at the kitchen clock.

“It's Tom and...”

Ma interrupted, “I ain't allowing' boys into your room.”

“Why?”

Nicole took note of Ma's tone.

Megan wondered why Ma was being so strict.

Ma stepped to the kitchen entrance and projected her voice, "You heard me."

"Yes Ma'am."

While this exchange took place Nicole started to breast feed her baby. Nicole thought nothing of this with only ladies in the house.

When Ma went to talk to her Daughter-in-law she was shocked Nicole would breast feed in the open. She stated, "I'd hope you'd cover up with Megan being around."

Nicole was surprised at this statement.

Mary added, "Sometimes Timmy and his friends will just come running in and I ain't wanting them getting a show."

Nicole understood about the boys but wondered what the harm was if Megan spotted her. It was hard to miss the expression on her Mother-in-law's face as she put down her dish towel and met Megan in the passageway to the kitchen.

Nicole heard Ma's very serious tone, "I'm needing you to stay out of the kitchen."

Nicole never heard Ma use the tone she used. Nicole felt the citrus fruit salad tasted wonderful. Nicole observed Megan and her Mother-in-law from the kitchen table.

"Nicole and I have some talking to do," Ma purposely blocked Megan from looking inside the kitchen.

"Yes Ma'am."

Nicole watched as Ma escorted Megan down the hallway.

Megan caught a glimpse of Nicole gently covering herself with a light blanket from her diaper bag. Megan was curious about what she saw.

Nicole caught Megan's glance and her curious look; Nicole wondered why breast feeding would be such a surprise to Megan. Nicole felt this was an insight as to why Megan was struggling with preadolescence.

Stepping into the kitchen Ma decided to keep her views of modesty to herself.

Based upon Ma's look, and this event, Nicole would bring a bottle next time.

Ma broke the silence as she went to her sink, "Again forgive me I just want to put a few of these dishes away." Ma grabbed the last bowl on the counter and started to wash it, Ma spoke, "Jimmy in his last letter told me he was accepted into officers training."

"Yes Ma'am." Nicole was proud of her husband but wondered what he was saying to his mother.

Ma stopped speaking.

It was obvious to Nicole her Mother-in-law was in deep thought.

Ma rinsed the bowl and set the bowl into the drying rack.

Ma gently turned around and again wiped her hands with the dish towel.

"My son really loves you," Ma stated with affection. "I've been witnessing why. I might've been a little late in seeing this. Please forgive me. The Lord is truly working and he's picked a wonderful woman to be my Daughter-in-law."

Nicole deeply appreciated this sentiment.

"You don't need to apologize," even though Nicole felt there needed to be one.

Ma nodded her head.

It was obvious Ma was choosing her words carefully. Nicole watched as Ma: turned around, pulled out the plug in the sink, started the water, and began to rinse out the suds.

Ma began speaking, "It's hard on them."

Nicole heard the quiver in Ma's voice but needed clarification, Nicole asked, "What's hard on em'?"

Ma: picked up the water sprayer, she brushed away a tear, and stated; "Let me finish."

When Mary was done with her dishes, Nicole witnessed Ma pull out a tissue from her dress and wiped her eyes, after wiping her eyes; Ma's body language changed.

Megan was standing next to her bedroom door listening. Megan was holding onto her clean clothes just in case Ma was suddenly interested in what she was doing. Megan was frustrated at the sudden silence in the kitchen.

Ma gently turned. Seeing her Daughter-in-law breast feed reminded Ma of how precious life really was.

Looking into her Mother-in-law's eyes Nicole wanted to rush out of the house. Ever since her husband entered the Marines, Nicole was avoiding what Ma was in expert in. Nicole held in her emotion.

Ma walked over to the table and pulled out the chair next to Nicole and sat down. “

“They won't say they 'all are needing Y'all.”

Nicole looked at Ma and knew exactly what she was saying.

“When they're in some God awful place they don't really want to be in. What they're fighting for is their buddies and the woman they have waiting for them back home. With them being men they'll very rarely tell Y'all they're looking forward to your letters but it could mean the difference between him fighting or giving up.” Nicole was tearing but felt a strength from the woman sitting across from her, “You don't want your man losing hope.” Ma gently touched Nicole's hand, this meant a lot to Nicole, Jimmy's family very rarely showed any outward displays of affection. Nicole grabbed onto her Mother in laws hand. Ma spoke sternly, “Are Y'all hearing what I'm trying to say? I'm his Momma and will always be his Momma but he's depending upon you. I need you to help' me bring em' home. One day they'll start sending them boys to a God awful place doing whatever they'll be telling my boy to do.”

Nicole could no longer hold in her tears.

Ma focused, “There ain't anything happening now but Y'all never knowing when something will start happening. Living in Virginia will be different but what's important is spending as much time as possible with the husband Y'all are loving'. You never can tell when it could be the last day Y'all will be spending with him.”

Nicole wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“None of this is easy on us woman who are loving' their husbands and sons,” she shook her head, “Lord have mercy.”

Nicole felt Ma grip her hand, “The best advice I can give is to start praying. If he's ever sent some where God will be wondering if his wife is praying for him. I believe he loves hearing Momma's and wives praying. This ain't meaning it might not go the way you've been praying but he's always listening and until you hear something different you continue believing he's coming' home.”

They both felt a long lasting connection.

Nicole wanted a hug, but Ma let go of Nicole's hand and reached into her pocket and handed Nicole a list of names and numbers, “Now when you get home you call these people. You be real nice now. You tell em' your Dave Steward's daughter-in-law and you tell em' I sent ya.”

“What?”

Ma gently tapped her Daughter-in-law's hand, “They'll know what Y'all need. One of these friends will help you with your schooling. It's important for your family to finish what you've started.”

This statement frightened this young wife and mother, but knew the implication was real, and would heed the advice.

“Now you don't go fretting' about a thing. There's some of my friends waiting to meet you once Y'all arrive. They'll show Y'all how to get around.”

Nicole was feeling so many things she could barely breath.

With love in Ma's eyes, she stated; “Your a strong gal. You'll get through. No matter

what happens you'll always be my Daughter-in-law. I'm believing you and Jimmy will be moving back here and giving me more grandchildren. But we just don't know what'll happen. Are you understanding what I'm saying?"

Nicole nodded her head and wiped away tears.

"My Jimmy will be looking forward to seeing you. Just as I'm seeing Y'all are needing to see him."

Ma stood up, "You want some sweet iced tea?"

Before Nicole could answer the glass was filled.

Ma sat down and stated, "Captain was telling me of a guy he knows, who knows a guy, who could get Y'all a better car."

Nicole took a sip of the ice tea and started, "My car is fine."

"With Y'all driving to Virginia Y'all be needing a better car."

Nicole knew she would need a new car.

Ma asked, "How's your Momma?"

Nicole gained her composure. She could feel Jeff was finished and falling back to sleep. She became what Ma considered presentable and answered her Mother-in-law with a newfound respect and kinship, by saying, "My Mother is doing' fine. She was saying she'd like to meet you at Lucy's."

This is when the conversation became boring for Megan. She walked to the bathroom. As she prepared the water she thought about losing her brother in a war. After imagining her brother's military funeral and what his death would mean to everyone, she discounted all her thoughts and feelings. Megan was counting on her favorite brother keeping his promise he'd return.

Ashleigh was trying to use her body to push the front glass door open.

Janna with a smile opened the door.

Ashleigh stumbled out onto a concrete porch but maintained her balance. She was wearing a girl's bright neon pink baseball cap with a flashy unicorn decal on the front. She was still wearing the Care-bear shirt from the morning, but was wearing a brand new pair of khaki-colored shorts, pink socks, and pink and white walking shoes. Patty felt as long as Ashleigh was wearing this pink unicorn hat she would be easy to spot.

Patty being as patient as possible said, "Wait."

Ashleigh being a good girl stopped on the edge of a concrete porch of the large convenience store. Ashleigh watched as a semi drove into the lot. She watched with delight as a bus with a running dog printed on the side drove out of the back of the lot. Ashleigh never knew a bus could have a dogie printed on the side.

"When crossing this large parking lot I need you to take my hand."

Ashleigh looked up at Patty confused.

Ashleigh was carrying in her left arm a stuffed dog she picked up and hugged and named Maxine. This spontaneous action caused Janna to purchase this stuffed toy for Ashleigh. In Ashleigh's right hand was a white plastic bag. In this bag was a *Hot Wheels* car purchased by her Brother who was impressed his little sister recognized a Jeep. There were two handfuls of candy she felt she won in a machine with a candy claw. The more accurate assessment was Al and Scott's help was the reason Ashleigh won all the candy in this bag.

Along with this candy Will bought her a small bag of gummy bears and gummy worms. Shaye noticed all the candy. Shaye bought Ashleigh a couple sticks of string cheese and a banana.

With Ashleigh holding onto this plastic bag full of goodies in her right hand and gripping the stuffed bog in her left arm she wondered what hand she was suppose to give to Patty.

Patty realized her mistake, "Why not give me the bag."

Ashleigh protested, "I'll do it."

Patty sighed but gently bent down, "We need to be careful when we crossing a parking lot."

"Yes," Janna added, "You could get hit by a car."

"Or a big truck," Shaye added.

Patty smiled and added, "We don't want you to be hit by a truck."

Shaye chimed in, "Us big girls are careful when we walk across a big parking lot like this."

Janna looked at Ashleigh, "We know your a big girl but we don't want you hurt."

Ashleigh looked out into the huge parking lot.

"I'll just hold the bag until we get to the car," Patty used a trick her Mom was using to help Ashleigh to refocus when she was insisting on doing something herself, "Where's your brothers car?"

Ashleigh focused and pointed, "There."

Shaye pointed out to Ashleigh, "Look at all the cars between here and there."

Ashleigh noticed the big scary trucks.

"Be a good girl and let me carry the bag," Patty was trying to be patient, "I promise I'll give the bag back to you."

Before Ashleigh could decide if she should give this bag to Patty; she felt herself being picked up and twirled in the air.

Ashleigh screamed with joy.

Shaye scolded Al, "You put her down!"

Al looked at Shaye and somewhat listened to his girlfriend. After twisting her in the air and then securing her, he asked Ashleigh, "How's our Little Mascot?"

"Look at my puppy."

She pushed it up to his face.

Al asked, "Does it have a name?"

"Maxine."

He acted as if this was indifferent to himself, "It's a good name."

The rest of the guys showed up and this was when Ashleigh asked, "I can do it."

Al smiled and set her down.

Bob walked up to his Step-sister and asked, "Want to swing?"

She knew what this was and her dark green eyes became wide and she shouted, "YEAH!"

Immediately Ashleigh gave her items to Patty, "Hold this."

Patty sighed as she gently took Ashleigh's things and watched as Al took one arm and Bob took the other and every three steps they swung Ashleigh into the air yelling "Wheee."

Shaye shook her head and said, "Boys."

Patty was beginning to question a lot of her assumptions.

The three young ladies followed the boys to their vehicles.

Shaye asked, "How long after the ferry is Devils lake?"

Patty answered, "Not too far."

Janna asked, "How come we're not just going straight there?"

Patty answered, "Bob wanted Ashleigh to ride on the ferry. Every time we go someplace he's taking a different route."

They smiled.

Shaye asked with a sly grin, "What was it like when you watched Ashleigh at his house?"

Janna was curious about the same thing, "Yea. What was it like?"

"It was only for a few days while Mom was in the hospital delivering the baby," Patty answered matter of fact, "His Mom was there and Bob slept on the couch downstairs."

"So what?" Shaye replied with an implied grin. "It's not like it's a big house."

Janna trying to be funny mocked Patty, "I'm not going to do anything with his mom there."

With a tone Patty answered, "That's not funny."

This was one of the times she wondered why she remained friends with Janna.

Janna asked, "What about the times she's not around?"

Patty answered with complete honesty, "Nothing happens,"

Janna and Shaye were filled with doubt and again being funny made faces.

Jenna asked, "So there wasn't any making out?"

This was when Patty blushed. Hoping to change the subject Patty concentrated on Ashleigh, "Here let me help you."

Ashleigh asking in a statement, "I'm a big girl?"

"Yes your a big girl," Patty sighed, "I just need to help you get onto the pillows."

Ashleigh ignored Patty and tried to climb into the Jeep Cherokee herself and almost fell but Patty was there to catch her.

Patty in frustration spoke, "See."

When Ashleigh glanced up at Patty, Patty noticed how this off handed comment hurt Ashleigh.

"It's okay," Patty stated, "Your still a big girl."

Ashleigh smiled again.

Patty reflected on what her Mom was saying. Patty gently helped Ashleigh into the Jeep by giving her a boost.

Ashleigh protested, "I can do it."

Patty smiled, "Mom wants to make sure I buckle you in tight."

Ashleigh acknowledged with frustration in her voice, "Okay,".

Ashleigh climbed onto the pillows and Patty put the seat belt around her and made the seat belt as tight as she could.

"It's too tight."

"It's exactly like last time."

Ashleigh protested, "It's not."

Bob: sat in the Jeep, started the vehicle, slipped on his newly purchased *Green Bay Packer* baseball cap, and a new pair of sunglasses.

Bob spoke simply and sternly, "Ashleigh you must wear your seat belt."

"It's tight," Ashleigh commented in exasperation yanking on the seat belt.

A frustrated Patty commented, "I'll fix it."

Patty undid the seat belt and put the belt in the exact same place.

"Here hold onto your puppy."

Leaning in from the back seat Shaye suggested, "Try some of this string cheese."

This stopped Ashleigh from noticing where the seat belt was placed.

Ashleigh smiled.

A frustrated Patty managed to ask nicely, "Hows the seat belt now?"

"Its good."

Bob smiled at Patty; Patty took the compliment.

Shaye showed Ashleigh, "Here's how you eat string cheese."

Patty shut the passenger side door of the Jeep and stepped in the back seat with her two friends.

Ashleigh watched as Shaye pulled off a slice of the cheese and ate what looked like a string. Ashleigh never ate cheese like this before and ate the cheese exactly like Shaye just showed her.

They drove out of the station.

Bob asked, "Did you enjoy the station?"

"Uh huh," Answered Ashleigh. "I liked the claw thing."

He started the CD Player. "Staying Alive," by the *Bee Gees* started to play.

The three young women in back were thankful a song came on they knew all the words too. Ashleigh was making these three woman feel awkward, during the whole road trip. Ashleigh was singing song after song, word for word, while they themselves were unfamiliar with many of these songs.

"I see you won some candy," Janna asked in a joyous voice.

She picked up the bag and showed it to Janna, and with a happy tone answered, "Huh."

Ashleigh was enjoying this three hour road trip. She liked this car ride because they asked her questions and talked to her. The other times she went on long rides she was told to sit still and be quiet; and was yelled at when she asked even simple questions. Ashleigh especially enjoyed the singing. Ashleigh wished the big girls would sing all the songs with her.

Ashleigh remembered her brother told her she would like every song.

Ashleigh reached into her bag and said to the big girls in back, "You have some."

Shaye avoided candy but took a few pieces.

Janna stuck out her hand and stated, "I'll have some."

Ashleigh gave Janna and Patty some too. When they took the candy from her this made Ashleigh feel special.

Shaye passed her candy to Janna when Ashleigh was looking the other way.

Shaye unbuckled her seat belt and reached in back, "Anyone want a water?"

"Yea," Ashleigh answered.

"I'll take a soda," Bob announced.

"I wish you would not drink so much soda," Patty commented out of concern, "Water is better for you."

Patty took a water and unbuckled her seat belt and helped Ashleigh take a drink; with how difficult this small task was Patty wished she would have listened to her Mom and put Ashleigh in the back seat.

Patty instructed, "You be careful."

"Uh huh."

Ashleigh took a drink.

"When you want a drink you ask."

Patty set the water bottle into the cup holder in between the seats.

Bob was given a water.

Patty saw the look of disappointment on his face, and watched as Bob handed it back to Shaye, and said with a defiant tone, "I specifically asked for a soda. If I wanted a water I would have requested one."

Patty gave a look over at Shaye, Shaye shrugged her shoulders, Patty sat back down in her seat and buckled herself in. Shaye rolling her eyes put the water away and handed Bob a single bottle of Pepsi, "Here's the unhealthy drink you demanded."

Janna avoided a possible discussion between these two again by asking Ashleigh, "Are

you looking forward to riding on the car ferry?"

Ashleigh pictured in her mind a bunch of large winged fairy's carrying cars over a giant magical river. Her brother would tell her stories about: magical rivers, dragons, knights, princess, and her favorite unicorns.

Ashleigh became excited, "I like fairies."

Patty asked, "Have you ever seen a car ferry?"

"On TV." She made a face when she bit into a sour candy. "I don't like these."

Bob smiled and stated, "I enjoy those. They're my favorite."

She would never forget this. She gladly gave the little flat circle candies to her brother.

Patty wondered, "What did the fairy look like?"

"They're pretty. They have wings. They're nice and fly in the air."

Bob smiled at his step sister, "We are not seeing those type of fairies."

Ashleigh was upset and interrupted her brother, "You've told me about fairies."

The three ladies stopped talking and were suddenly interested in the conversation between Ashleigh and Bob.

Bob answered, "Those type of fairies are in our imaginations."

All three young woman made a face.

Janna clarified for Ashleigh, "What your brother means is they are made up."

Ashleigh answered, "Oh."

Bob ignored Janna and continued, "We'll be crossing the Wisconsin River on a large vessel being pulled by a cable. We'll drive this vehicle onto this large vessel and pulled to the other side."

"Oh."

Shaye made a face, "We're going to park this Jeep onto a big boat and go across the river instead of going over a bridge."

"Really?"

This sounded interesting but a giant fairy would have been far more interesting.

"Ash," Shaye felt compelled to ask, "Who told you about fairies?"

"Bob," Ashleigh answered with a joyous intensity. "They live near a castle and are Princess Ellie's friends."

Janna was surprised.

Patty was curious herself.

Shaye asked, "Where is this castle?"

"It's in a faraway place," Ashleigh stated matter of fact, "Where there are giant flowers that talk. In back of the castle there are unicorns. They live in a big yard with flowers. The princess gets to ride them." She imagined what they looked like and stated, "They like the princess and don't care the princess is short."

The ladies all looked at Bob with surprise.

Bob smiled at his sister and said, "We don't..."

Shaye interrupted Bob, "Yes. We want to hear more about these fairies Are there people in the castle?"

"Oh Yes." Ashleigh was excited to tell about this castle, "In the castle they are all nice. No one is mean. They don't call people names."

The three ladies looked at one another.

Patty asked gently, "Why?"

"The princess don't like it when people call people names."

The three young ladies could feel the hurt coming from Ashleigh's personal experiences.

Ashleigh asked, "Patty?"

Patty was preparing herself for a deep question. "Yea,"

Ashleigh simply stated, "I'm thirsty."

Patty helped Ashleigh take a drink of water.

Shaye asked Bob, "Why are you telling her this story?"

"I believe some of the greatest lessons ever told are in fiction. Fiction stories and legends out last real tales. There are exceptions of course but the reality is fiction tales can convey meanings far better than a straight telling."

The ladies looked at one another.

Bob continued, "I tell her this fairy tale to help her contemplate and deal with the situations she is facing in her world."

Shaye asked, "What inspires you to tell her the story?"

Shaye noticed Bob raising an eyebrow and asked Ashleigh, "Ashleigh is this just my story?"

Ashleigh finished taking a drink and answered with joy in her voice, "It's my story too."

Shaye glared at Bob.

Shaye followed this up by saying, "How is it your story too? How does the story make you feel?"

These were like the questions the lady she talked to every week would ask.

"When telling Ashleigh her fairy tale I ask her questions and based upon those answers I add to the complexities of the fairy tale." Bob added, "or if she blurts out an idea I incorporate these into the story."

Shaye counted on Bob answering her question.

Janna was thankful she was never in any of Bob's college classes. Bob was known to challenge professors and would push discussions to the limit.

Janna was tired of hearing Bob and asked Ashleigh, "What else is in the castle?"

Ashleigh was excited to answer this question, "There are magical doggies who play and dance."

Janna asked, "Does everyone dance?"

"Oh yea," Ashleigh answered. "They dance all the time. They like country."

Janna answered in a fun manner, "Icky,"

Bob glared at Jenna through the rear view mirror, "The people in the castle are capable of dancing other styles like the waltz."

"Uh huh," Ashleigh added missing the uneasy feeling between Janna and Bob, "The unicorns like to dance too."

Patty mentioned, "You like to dance with Amanda and her teachers."

"Uh huh," it was obvious to everyone Ashleigh was enjoying the conversation, "We dance all around the floor."

"Ash," Shaye asked, "Who else lives in the castle?"

Shaye was recognizing the many layers of this story.

"Patty lives in the castle."

"Really," Patty asked casually, "What am I?"

"You're a Mommy."

This surprising comment caused a sudden silence from everyone in the Jeep; the only sound was the song no one was paying any attention too. This powerful comment hit Patty like a car smashing head on with one of the semi truck.

Bob quickly announced, "This is the first time she ever mentioned this."

Patty started to say, "I can't..."

Shaye quickly signaled to Janna and Patty to be quiet; they listened.

Bob countered quickly, "Ashleigh how about if Patty is an older princess of Ellie's and

instead is a beautiful fairy God Mother.”

This felt familiar to Ashleigh.

Ashleigh protested, “But I want Patty to be the Mommy of the castle.”

Shaye again made sure the other two ladies kept quiet.

Patty loved Ashleigh like a sister. She herself imagined Ashleigh moving in with Bob and her, but Ashleigh saying she was already her Mommy was a reality check.

Janna whispered into Patty's ear.

Bob stated, “But this Fairy God Mother is magical and powerful. She can drive the old witch away.”

Shaye asked with a tone of a psychologist, “Ashleigh who is the witch?”

Bob explained the witch, “Shaye it's not who is the witch but what is the witch.”

“Yeah.”

Shaye in a rebuttal, “Ashleigh. I'd like you to tell us what the witch is.”

It was obvious Shaye was irritated Bob answered the question for Ashleigh.

Ashleigh wanting to sound like the women around her, adjusted herself and answered, “The witch used to be pretty. But she ate this potion. It made the witch ugly. The witch doesn't know she's ugly because of the potion. The witch now hates little kids. Every little kid has to watch out for the witch.”

This again felt familiar to her.

The budding child Psychologist asked, “Are you safe in your castle?”

Ashleigh answered matter of fact, “The castle protects everyone who lives in it.”

The three women in back were whispering their opinions to one another.

Bob mentioned to Ashleigh, “Patty should be an older princess.”

Ashleigh became stubborn and shook her head, “No.”

Bob adjusted their fairy tale, “The fairy God Mother is very special. She protects all the kids in the kingdom from the witch. But there are three princesses the God Mother especially cares about and protects.”

Ashleigh liked the sound of this.

Patty asked, “Does she chase the mean witch away?”

Ashleigh subconsciously wanted her brother to say yes.

Bob answered simply, “Oh yes.”

Patty interrupted with a tear and felt she was growing to love Bob even more, “The fairy God Mother loves little kids and would do anything to protect her three favorite princesses. This Fairy God Mother isn't perfect but loves all little kids.”

At six she was having difficulty making the connection between Bob's story and her real life; but could feel there was.

Ashleigh asked with a lot of heart, not understanding her own question, “Does the dragon like her?”

The three woman looked at one another.

Bob answered quickly and honestly, “Of course. Ashleigh the good dragon tries to chase all the bad dragons away. He's the one who sent the Fairy God Mother to the castle. He likes the Fairy God Mother.”

Shaye rolled her eyes. She reached over and nudged Patty, Patty looked at Shaye and rolled her eyes as well.

Patty took a deep breath and met reality head on, “Ashleigh I'm not your Mommy.”

This upset Ashleigh.

Bob glanced at Patty, based upon Patty's look he decided she should have her say.

“I'm you're big sister,” Patty tried to make this sound special.

“But you should marry Bob and...”

Patty interrupted, "Even if we get married and you lived with us I'm not your Mommy. I'll only be your big sister."

Janna spoke up, "A big sister helps you with things and..."

Shaye interrupting stated, "They teach you things and they love you too."

Ashleigh never thought a big sister would be nice, "They do?"

Shaye answered, "Good ones do."

Janna added, "They teach you a lot of stuff."

Patty mentioned, "They play games with little sisters."

"My sister taught me how to..."

Shaye was not sure what Janna would say and interrupted, "Don't you feel Patty would be a good big sister?"

Patty felt Janna grab her hand. Patty glanced at Janna. Janna winked a reassuring wink toward Patty.

The Cherokee was silent except for the song "Reflex," by *Duran Duran*.

Ashleigh answered, "Yeah."

"Ashleigh I will always be your big sister," Patty answered. "I love you as a sister."

Only her foster Mom told her she loved her and this was before bed every night.

Ashleigh immediately answered, "I love you too."

Patty unbuckled herself and hugged her little sister.

Bob felt compelled to say, "While we're camping you need to listen to your big sister. Victoria is your Foster Mom and she does love you. You remember Victoria telling you to listen to us?"

"Uh huh."

Patty added, "Your brother is right. Victoria loves you like a Mom. She would really like it if you called her Mom."

Ashleigh was not ready to call Victoria Mom but she would never forget this.

Patty and Janna leaned over and hugged one another.

Patty was determined to be the best big sister any little sister could ever have. She hoped one day Bob and her would get married and Ashleigh would live with them. Until then she recognized her attitude should change around the house.

"Ashleigh," Shaye started, "What does..."

Bob cut Shaye off by turning up the volume and announced, "Here is our favorite song."

Shaye was annoyed until the song, "Bohemian Rhapsody" by *Queen* started to play.

Janna asked, "Ashleigh this is your favorite song?"

"Uh huh."

As soon as the vocals started Ashleigh and Bob started to sing.

Patty knew her mom would hate the fact Ashleigh was listening to this song.

Shaye decided to sing the song.

Janna and Patty looked at one another, they shrugged their shoulders, and joined in.

It was obvious Ashleigh was too little to understand what was being sung but the three ladies were happy to see Ashleigh having fun and expressing herself. They all smiled at one another when Ashleigh screamed with passion, "No, No, No." She pretended to drum the song. With just the music playing the young women looked on at the normally reserved Bob who was swaying back and forth. Ashleigh did the same. What surprised these three ladies was when Bob sang the next few lines with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

Shaye took note on how Ashleigh was making the same exact gestures as her brother at the exact same time. This was evidence Bob was spending time with Ashleigh. As the song ended Janna tapped Bob and pointed at the exit sign to the car ferry. This sign alerted all

travelers if the ferry was open or closed. Bob pulled off the freeway and headed to a huge tourist attraction on the way to *Devils Lake* and *Wisconsin Dells*. As they pulled onto the road and headed to the car ferry the next song started to play. They all continued to sing along with the hit, "What I Like About You," by *The Romantics*.

During this song Shaye nudged Janna and pointed at Ashleigh during their own outburst of singing and moving around in the back seat to the beat. The young women leaned in and watched Ashleigh making certain steps in the air; it was obvious to these three women Ashleigh was being taught how to dance. This song ended and to everyone's surprise, "A Wonderful World," by *Louie Armstrong* started to play.

Shaye asked, "You like this song?"

"Uh huh," Ashleigh informed everyone. "Amanda plays this song."

All three of these women found it exceptional Amanda would allow a relationship to develop between them.

Ashleigh wanted to tell the world, "She buys me ice cream."

Bob corrected, "She buys you custard."

Patty in a sharp tone, "Does it matter?"

Bob agreed by remaining quiet.

All the ladies looked at one another and were pleased Bob avoided a debate; especially one as insignificant as the difference between custard and ice cream.

Janna and Shaye turned around to make sure their boyfriends were still following.

They happily waved at them.

This part of this short road trip was a detour through Wisconsin farm country.

Ashleigh became excited when she spotted horses.

This interested Janna, "I love horses. You want to go horseback riding this week?"

This sounded exciting to Ashleigh, "Yea."

Patty added, "We're going to take you later in the week."

Shaye tried to announce, "At Wisconsin Dells there's horseback..."

Bob interrupted, "Ladies let us not forget the water park."

Ashleigh was interested in the water park. When Victoria took Ashleigh shopping to purchase items for the camping trip, Victoria tried to get Ashleigh to talk to her by explaining all what was in a water park and how to behave in one.

"Uh huh." After eating salty candy Ashleigh blurted out, "I'm thirsty."

Again Patty helped.

They needed to stop because of the row of cars in front of them. The road they were on stopped at the edge of the Wisconsin River, they could see the yellow ferry on the other side of the river.

Patty pointed just over Ashleigh's head, "You see it,"

Ashleigh looked and could see the big yellow boat moving its way toward them. She wished the river would be a magical river with mermaids, talking fish, and big pink frogs like in the magical kingdom. Still the boat was interesting.

The yellow car ferry made it to their side. Ashleigh marveled as a big gate fell, in total three big gates fell one at a time. Ashleigh was thrilled when they followed the cars in front of them onto this big yellow boat. She was overjoyed when the young adults led her out of the vehicle. Bob and Patty led her to the edge of the boat; Patty lifted Ashleigh up so she could see. Ashleigh loved watching the long river move passed her. Patty set Ashleigh down and rushed everyone together to take pictures of the car ferry and her friends. Ashleigh felt special when Patty took a picture of herself and her brother. Patty directed all the guys behind Ashleigh. Ashleigh was really happy when she was able to stand next to her big brother and Patty while Shaye took a picture of them. Ashleigh really enjoyed the picture where she stood in the center

of the big girls. When this picture was done Ashleigh found it fun to run back to the two cars.

Patty managed to move Ashleigh into the back with herself. Shaye volunteered to sit in front.

Shaye immediately placed the two pillows in the center of the back seat for Ashleigh. Shaye: took off her shoes, stuck her right foot out the window, and rested her foot on the side mirror. Ashleigh thought it was cool she could stick her bare foot out the window.

Ashleigh noticed Janna slipping off her sandals. Before Patty took notice of what Ashleigh was doing, Ashleigh took off her shoes and socks she felt like she was part of the group.

They drove off the Ferry and continued to Devils Lake.

Patty scolded, "Bob."

"What?"

"Mom would explode if she knew Ashleigh was listening to the song, "White Rabbit."

Bob made a face and hit the forward button.

The song, "Mess Around," by *Ray Charles* started to play.

Ashleigh started moving back and forth to the beat of the song. She smiled and was having fun when the two girls sitting next to her started to sway back and forth with her.

Janna made the mistake of saying, "It will not take us long to get to Devils Lake."

"I can't wait," Shaye answered honestly but, "I've never been there."

Jenna mentioned, "It's a cool park."

Ashleigh all at once wanted to hide. Ashleigh: loved the singing, being with the big girls, the ride, stopping at the big gas station, and receiving positive attention. What she forgot during this exciting ride was where they were headed. All she could think about were: cliffs, the Devil, getting lost, and bears. She wondered why the people she loved her would take her to a scary place.

She sulked down and leaned into Patty and started to cry.

Once Bob caught a glimpse of this he was about to ask Ashleigh what was the matter.

Shaye seeing the same thing hit the pause button.

"Hey!"

Shaye glared at Bob, "I don't like that song."

Ashleigh sat up and stated matter of fact, "You don't touch Bob's radio."

Shaye looked at Ashleigh and was going to protest, I..."

"She's a smart girl," Bob said sarcastic and hit a button on the remote and the CD player started to play the song again.

Shaye gave Bob an intense glare. Shaye wondered why she volunteered to sit up front.

Ashleigh again remembered where they were going and again curled up against Patty.

Shaye again hit the pause button and asked, "What's the matter?"

She grabbed the remote before he could even reach for it.

He was going to protest, but he noticed Ashleigh's body language and her facial expression, he let the fact someone else was touching his radio go (this was not easy for the twenty year old Bob).

Ashleigh was not sure of what she should say.

The three young women looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders.

Patty recognized her little sisters body language and asked, "Are you scared?"

Ashleigh nodded her head.

"Why are you scared?"

Ashleigh shook her head. She felt like she was being a baby.

Very gently Janna asked, "Are you scared of camping?"

Ashleigh nodded her head yes.

Bob was glancing frequently in his rear view mirror checking on his little sister.

"Camping is fun," Janna used a tone of enjoyment, "I've been camping since I was little."

Patty added, "I camped here when I was little with Mom and Dad."

Ashleigh assumed if Patty could survive camping in a place with the Devil in it, maybe she could too. Ashleigh thought about how big and scary her foster Dad was, maybe if he was with them he would scare the bears away. Ashleigh now wanted Blake with them.

Shaye mentioned, "We're going swimming there."

Janna in a happy tone mentioned, "We're going to have campfires."

Patty trying to promote campfires stated, "They're so much fun."

They all smiled.

Ashleigh liked and disliked campfires. Her Mom took her to campfires and they started out fun but they sometimes ended up scary. The camp fires she went to started out with all the kids at the campfire playing with one another. What usually happened was after the marshmallows were being roasted someone would start to argue. There were even fights. The scariest fight was when a woman called her Mommy names and slapped her Mommy. The two women fought until they were pulled apart. Ashleigh would never forget the other woman screaming as her Mommy held a handful of hair. Once this woman was done screaming she slapped one of the men at the campfire and said more mean things about her Mommy. They were told to leave the party. On their long scary walk home a man from the party came by and picked them up. Ashleigh ended up sleeping on the couch. Ashleigh would never forget the scary living room with the deer heads and dead fish on the wall. The other scary thing was her Mommy was making loud moaning noises in the place where she was "sleeping".

Shaye mentioned, "We're going to take walks."

Janna mentioned, "We're going to walk up these stairs carved into the side of this giant hill."

Ashleigh thought about what her Mommy said about falling off a cliff and getting lost.

Ashleigh started to cry and said, "I want to go home,"

The three woman looked at one another and Bob looked at his baby sister.

Patty being reassuring stated, "We're going to be around you the whole time. Nothing bad is going to happen."

Bob stated, "The time we spend at the park will be fun."

Ashleigh thought about Al who seemed big. Ashleigh thought about how tall Roy was. There was Will who Janna seemed to always want by her side at the Anderson house. There was her big brother who helped her feel safe.

She asked her big brother, "Can you scare big bears away?"

They all glared at Ashleigh.

Janna said, "You don't need to be afraid of bears."

She shook her head and buried her face into the side of Patty.

Patty and Shaye gave Janna a glare.

Bob tried to be reassuring, "Bears live farther north,"

Ashleigh was clueless as to what farther north meant.

As they neared the park the two large hills were becoming more visible. To anyone living near a mountain range they would have thought nothing of these hills; but in Wisconsin they were a big deal. It was possible to reach the top of these large hills by carved in rock stairs. These stairs were carved into the hill during the work projects of the 1930's. In between these two hills was a small lake. At the time of this trip it was one of the most visited Wisconsin State Park.

"You don't have to be afraid of bears they..."

Bob was interrupted by a frantic scared little girl, "Mommy said bears will eat me."

They all looked at one another.

Patty was angry at this, but kept her cool by saying, "You're Mommy was mistaken. There isn't any bears in this park."

Trying to reassure herself and cover her own fears Shaye stated, "The park rangers chased them all away."

Janna insisted, "Camping is fun."

Ashleigh shook her head.

Bob reminded Ashleigh, "What do I say when you get scared?"

"Bob what are you talking about?" asked an annoyed Shaye.

Bob ignored Shaye, "What have I told you when you get scared?"

Ashleigh sat up and meekly answered, "To be smart."

"Okay. In the park we never take food into the tent and we always throw away all our food into special bins. You know why?"

Ashleigh shook her head.

Shaye was interested in knowing.

"To keep bears away from tents. This is an example of being smart."

"Always walk with us," instructed Patty, "If you stay near us we'll never let anything happen to you."

Janna insisted, "Always stay on the trail."

Ashleigh in a meek voice, "I'll fall off."

They looked at one another.

Bob asking in an angry tone, "Who told you you'd fall off?"

"Bob..." Patty scolded.

Bob looked at Patty.

Patty returned his look.

Ashleigh answered meekly, "Mommy."

They reached the park entrance.

"If you stay with us and on the trail," instructed Patty, "We will be in front of you and in back. If you stay on the rock stairs you'll be fine."

Janna pointed acting more excited than she really was, "Look at the beach."

Shaye added, "Look at the slides and monkey bars."

Ashleigh looked passed the two cars in front of them and there was a beach. At the beach people were starting to set up for picnic lunches. Grills were going. What made Ashleigh feel better is when she witnessed kids playing and swimming. Ashleigh liked the large playground toys. She tried to look for monkeys but was unable to spot them.

"There is nothing to be afraid off," Bob repeated himself. "We're going to have loads of fun. We need to be what?" Bob asked Ashleigh and expected his baby sister to answer right away.

"Smart."

Patty thinking on her toes and meaning what she said, "Just stay with us one night. If you don't like it we'll take you home early tomorrow."

Bob stated, "But..."

Patty bristled and with the same forcefulness as her mother commanded, "We'll drive her home and we'll just have to drive back. I don't want you arguing. Or I'll make you take me home too."

Ashleigh disliked the tone Patty and her Brother were starting to use.

Bob nodded his head as he reached the ranger booth.

"Hi," the college student said. She looked in the car and thought it was odd to have a

bunch of college students with one small child.

Bob informed this young woman, "We reserved a camp site."

Patty was watching closely.

"The young woman stated, "You've entered the wrong entrance." This student instructed, "You need to get back on the road. Keep going the way you came and in a couple miles the campsite entrance will be on you're left. Tell them you have your state sticker."

"I'll alert them I have a state sticker." Bob answered with a friendly tone, "Thank you for your assistance."

Patty eyeballed the young woman's reaction.

They turned around in the parking lot.

Ashleigh looked around and felt conflicted. Ashleigh wondered why people were walking up those two big mountains where the Devil could be hiding in all those big trees or under the rocks. At the same time she wanted to go swimming and play on the outdoor toys.

On their way to the Ranger Station: the three young women were trying to encourage Ashleigh.

Bob was concealing his anger toward Ashleigh's mother.

Ashleigh focused on: all the tall trees, the skinny road, and how anything could hide in these woods. She was thinking about the scary moves she watched on TV. She again wondered why the people she loved would take her here. She believed Patty when she promised she would take her home. What frightened Ashleigh was the possibility they would never survive the night in this scary place.

End of Part Two of Four

Tuesday, June 6th, A Scary Place

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*Ashleigh & Megan
Book I: Friendship*

*Tuesday, June 6th
A Scary Place*

(6 Years, 2 Months, and 1 Day Since Ashleigh's Birth)

Part Three of Four

*Authored By:
R. P. Voght*

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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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June 6th, A Scary Place

(6 Years, 2 Months, and 1 Day: Since Ashleigh's Birth)

Victoria stepped into Ashleigh's room. With Felicia sleeping and Blake back to work, Victoria felt it was time to fix the middle drawer of Ashleigh's dresser. Victoria felt lucky she was able to find the khaki shorts and a pair of matching socks in the other drawers.

Victoria tried to pull the jammed middle drawer again. The dresser shook and the drawer stayed exactly where it was.

Victoria took a deep calming breath.

She yanked the drawer again.

This time the dresser really shook but the drawer went a little farther.

Victoria made a face.

She again yanked the drawer and again received the same results.

Victoria sighed and shook her head.

Victoria being angry firmly planted her feet on the floor and grabbed the handles of the pink and white dresser. Victoria: took a deep breath, pulled as hard as she could, the drawer gave way, and she fell onto the floor backwards. The back end of the drawer hit the floor with a thud. All of Ashleigh's clean clothes spilled onto the floor. Victoria watched in horror as Ashleigh's dresser fell forward onto the floor with a loud thump.

Felicia started to cry.

Victoria out of frustration yelled, “Ashleigh you don't have to do everything yourself!”

Victoria despised the cheap bedroom set Ashleigh picked out. Blake and herself were willing to buy their foster daughter an expensive set. Instead; Patty and Blake honored their word and bought the one she wanted. Ashleigh's counselor thought it was wonderful they allowed Ashleigh a choice and then honored it. Looking at the fallen dresser Victoria doubted: herself as a parent, the counselor's praise, the wisdom of allowing Ashleigh to pick out her own furniture, and allowing Ashleigh to go camping. This was the root of Victoria's anger and frustration She again questioned her own wisdom on allowing Bob and Patty to take Ashleigh camping on the same day Ashleigh's mom tried to kidnap her.

Victoria stood up and took care of her crying baby.

It was a short time later when Victoria brought Felicia into Ashleigh's room in a baby

cradle. The baby was changed and content. Victoria made faces at Felicia. Felicia responded with baby noises and smiles. Victoria glanced at her wrist watch.

Victoria was expecting Patty to call her as soon as they arrived at the state park. When Victoria first saw the car phone she wondered why a twenty year old needed a car phone, now she wondered why they were ignoring it. Victoria calmed herself and decided to focus on the task at hand.

Victoria lifted up the pink dresser and placed against the wall. Before putting the drawers in place, she removed the small amount of clothes still left in the drawers, and gently set these pieces of clothing onto Ashleigh's bed. She shoved the drawers back and inspected the dresser; she noticed a few chips. She would go to the hardware store and purchase a pink furniture repair kit.

She sat down and began to sort all of the clothes.

Speaking to Ashleigh, "I've showed you this four times now. You should keep your clothes organized. Stop shoving all your clothes into one drawer. I'm tired of hearing I can do it," Victoria made a sad face and said quietly, "It has to be your favorite saying."

She continued to place Ashleigh's clothes into neat piles.

"You have to do this. You have to do that. You climb up onto the cupboards. You want to carry everything. I'm afraid you'll fall down the stairs. I wish..." She trailed off speaking and ducked her head down for a closer look. Tucked in the far corner under Ashleigh's bed was an off colored red shirt with a unicorn print on the front. Victoria retrieved this shirt. This was one of the shirts Ashleigh washed. This meant, Ashleigh took this shirt from the garbage and tried to hide it.

"You always like prints."

Tears started to fall.

Feeling guilty about her anger Victoria stated, "I can't imagine what you went through."

She checked on her baby and her baby was sleeping.

Victoria cried.

In the midst of the tears her mind went back to the night Ashleigh washed her brand new clothes. On the day Ashleigh was brought over, Victoria felt outside a few items Bob purchased for her; her clothes were terrible. The next day Victoria took an extremely tentative Ashleigh shopping. Victoria's hope was her foster daughter would open up to her. Patty mentioned to Victoria on how Ashleigh would become animated anytime Bob and Patty took Ashleigh shopping. The trip ended up to be an afternoon of a quiet and timid Ashleigh pointing and Victoria repeatedly trying to encourage Ashleigh to pick out what she wanted. What was even more difficult was at the time of this shopping trip she was a week away from her eight month. She was risking her pregnancy because of the well being of her foster daughter.

Three or four nights after the shopping trip Blake and Victoria heard through the vent the sound of their washing machine. Blake volunteered to investigate but Victoria felt she knew what was happening and insisted she go herself. When Victoria reached the bottom of the stairs she could hear over the sound of her washing machine the sound of Ashleigh's voice. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs to listen.

Victoria heard Ashleigh say, "You need to look pretty."

Victoria assumed Ashleigh was playing with at least one or more of her five Barbie dolls. Maybe a Barbie car. There was the Barbie case with extra Barbie outfits and if Ashleigh was ambitious she could have brought down the Barbie doll house; there was a good possibility she would have done so. Blake's excuse on why they should splurge on Ashleigh was a little girl needed toys. Victoria being wise understood this was her husband's way of welcoming Ashleigh into the family. The frustrating part for Victoria was this purchase was

pushing their monthly budget to the extreme edge of bursting. This was very rare in the Anderson household.

After a moment of silence Ashleigh mentioned, "Now you look pretty. You need to look pretty too."

Victoria very carefully stepped off the few bottom stairs and as quietly as she could stepped a few feet to the laundry room. She stood in a place where she could look in and where Ashleigh would have needed a direct line of sight to see Victoria. Victoria was grateful her Foster Daughter's back was to her and she was sitting on the floor. Victoria was now thankful for the cheap rug they installed in this room. Even with the rug Victoria resisted the temptation of going into the room and making sure her foster daughter was warm.

Ashleigh changed her voice when she said, "Now that you're pretty we're going to the bar."

Patty watched as Ashleigh put three dolls into the Barbie car and pushed this car to one of the tables. Laying on the floor underneath the table was the Ken doll. Ashleigh picked up the Barbie driving the vehicle and another Barbie. Using one voice she said, "You better be nice to the bar tender."

In her own voice she answered, "Yes Mommy."

Ashleigh using a different voice spoke, "If you be nice he'll give you soda and snacks. Don't be naughty. Otherwise you'll get what's coming to you."

Ashleigh in her own voice, "I'll be good."

Again Ashleigh changed her voice, "Mommy's hate ugly naughty girls."

"Patty says I'm pretty."

Victoria witnessed Ashleigh's body language and voice change, "I'll slap you for talking back to me."

Victoria held her breath and put her hand on her mouth when Ashleigh in essence slapped herself by hitting the doll.

Keeping the same angry tone Ashleigh said, "They're all lying to you. The only one who loves you is Mommy."

Ashleigh became quiet when the washing machine made a noise. When the washing machine started up again Ashleigh put the one doll who represented her mother into the imagined bar. Ashleigh picked up the other doll and using her own voice, "You be good. Mommy's don't like ugly naughty girls."

Using a different voice from the other two voices Ashleigh just used hers, "We want to go shopping with Victoria and Patty."

She set down the one Barbie, the other doll she switched hands, and grabbed the Barbie doll representing her mother, "You ugly naughty girl. You behave."

Ashleigh took her own doll and spanked herself.

Victoria gasped and her heart leaped. She was about to rush into the laundry room when Ashleigh grabbed a different Barbie doll with black hair laying on the floor and said, "We're going shopping."

She put this one with dark hair into the car. She put the doll representing herself into the car along with the other two dolls. Ashleigh pushed the car to the long table.

"We're going to go to the store with beds."

Ashleigh took the dolls and placed them under the long table and moved them around.

Victoria easily recognized every item Ashleigh pretended to look at Patty, Blake, or herself pointed out to her in a store.

All at once Ashleigh picked up two dolls and said, "You can't like anything they buy you."

Ashleigh changed her voice, "Why?"

"She gets mad when we get things. Mommy says Bob is a busy bee."

There was a pause.

Ashleigh in her own voice spoke to the doll representing the friend, "Ms. Victoria is going to get mean. She's going to get angry and spank us. Mommy says she's faking. It'll get better when Bob and Patty get married. Patty can be our mommy."

This play held a lot of answers for Victoria. More important it filled the compassionate woman with a rush of feelings.

Ashleigh continued, "Mommy says she's going to take us far away. Mommy says she's going to make the Anderson's pay for being bee's. And Make Bob pay for not minding his busy ness. Mommy says they hate me."

Changing her voice to represent the friend, "Mommy will take us far away from these busy bee's."

Victoria heard enough of this nonsense. She gained her composure and gently stepped into the laundry room.

Speaking very gently she asked, "Are you playing?"

At this moment she caught a whiff of bleach. She glanced over at the washing machine. On top of the machine was a bottle of *Snuggle* bleach and in front of the washing machine was a chair. Hearing the washing machine Victoria knew the machine went into a spin cycle.

Ashleigh in fear dropped her dolls, stood up, and her dark green eyes held a petrified look.

Ignoring her doctors orders of not bending down she sat on the floor as comfortable as she could; but kept a chair close by.

In a compassionate tone said, "I'd like to play."

Ashleigh was too worried to answer.

"I think it's fun when we go shopping. Did you know I like going shopping with you?"

Ashleigh shook her head no.

Victoria made as nice a smile as she could and picked up the blond haired doll Ashleigh used to represent herself and with a very gentle voice said, "This girl looks very pretty."

This statement reminded Ashleigh of the nice lady she went to talk with the other day. Patty told her she would see her once or twice a week. This lady played with her just like her Foster Mom was doing now.

Victoria asked, "Did you dress her?"

Ashleigh shook her head.

"You did a great job."

Ashleigh gave Victoria a confused look. Ashleigh never heard nice things like this from a mother figure before.

Victoria speaking softly mentioned, "Some Mommy's don't understand when a little girl is pretty like this girl is here." Victoria still holding onto the Barbie doll mentioned, "Some Mommy's think little girls like you are pretty and do wonderful things. As a mommy I feel your pretty and you are a very good girl." Holding in tears, "Do you know that?"

How this affected Ashleigh came out by her yelling, "I'm ugly and naughty!"

Continuing to hold in tears Victoria answered, "I don't feel your ugly or naughty at all. We're happy your here. No one ever his going to hit you while you stay here."

Ashleigh heard this before. She heard this from her Mommy all the time. She was told by Bob and Patty her Mommy was never to hit her again. She was spanked at her last foster house. She wanted to believe this dark haired woman in front of her but she was too scared to believe this woman.

Victoria on purpose repeated herself, "With me being a mommy I feel you're a good girl. You are very pretty."

These good things coming from a mother figure were overwhelming to Ashleigh.

"In my house little girls don't have to do laundry. They..."

Ashleigh felt she was in trouble for doing her laundry and because she was so upset by the things Victoria told her, Ashleigh went running up to her room and hid under her bed.

With Victoria being pregnant and being on the floor she was unable to get up fast enough to chase Ashleigh up the stairs. Victoria could have grabbed Ashleigh but felt this was the wrong action to take. Victoria was confident Ashleigh went underneath her bed and in a far corner where it was impossible to reach her.

Victoria managed to stand up using the chair in arms reach and the table. Once she was standing she could move the chair Ashleigh used to turn on the light. Once Victoria tried to put the chair underneath the table she realized her mistake of getting up before she picked up Ashleigh's toys. The laundry basket was on the floor in front of the washing machine, this was the same basket Victoria told Ashleigh to put all her dirty clothes in. The idea Ashleigh brought down the laundry basket full of clothes worried Victoria. She needed to use a paper towel from off the laundry shelf to grab the bleach bottle. Victoria was sure the reason Ashleigh picked this brand was because of the pink bottle and the picture of the teddy bear on the front. Victoria used the paper towel to wipe off the bottle and put the bottle back onto the shelf. The washing machine stopped when she lifted up the lid.

She reached in and pulled out an odd colored red shirt with a unicorn print on the front. She quickly recognized this once was a white colored shirt. Worse this was one of the new shirts she just purchased for Ashleigh. She pulled out a few more items. It was obvious her Foster Daughter just washed all of her dirty clothes and all of the clothes Victoria just purchased for her. Blake and Victoria were hard working people, who happened to be upper middle class but they believed in keeping a budget, buying Ashleigh a second set of clothes would push their budget and almost cut them short for the month. This second set of clothes, which Victoria would have to purchase the next day, would be of a lower quality and would push their budget over the edge. Blake and Victoria hated to use their credit cards. Victoria was reluctant to admit she was grateful Bob and Patty took Ashleigh clothes shopping on his next visitation.

The present day Victoria was sorting out the clothes. She would glance at her sleeping baby. This made her wonder if another baby was going to be living in her house; but this baby would be a grandchild. Victoria questioned if her oldest daughter was being honest with her. She wanted to believe Bob was enough of a gentleman to stop when she asked him too. What worried Victoria was the possibility Patty wanted to have sex. With this being Victoria's concern she reflected on the night of the ruined laundry.

As Victoria removed the ruined laundry she heard the car pull into the driveway.

At this moment she wished the laundry room faced the front of the house. She heard the front door open and close. Victoria as quickly as she could stepped in front of the basement stairs.

Victoria yelled before Patty would head up to her room, "Patty I need your help."

Victoria needed help with: the basket, toys, and she wanted someone to check on Ashleigh. Victoria knew if she went up the two flights of stairs to check on Ashleigh she would have been too tired to come back down to the basement.

There was a pause.

To Victoria's surprise Patty stepped in front of the stairs.

Patty asked in a curious way, "Why are you doing laundry now?"

"Maybe I was waiting up for a young lady who should be home a long time ago and I decided to do wash."

Patty heard the sarcastic tone.

Patty wanted to take a shower before she went anywhere near her mother, "Can it wait until morning?"

"No," was Victoria's short answer.

Victoria stepped away from the stairs and heading back into the laundry room.

Patty quickly: opened her purse, took out her perfume and sprayed too much on, and used a strong smelling hand lotion.

Victoria yelled up the stairs, "I'm really needing your help?"

Patty wanted to wait until they were married. Tonight was one of those nights she felt she was pushing her luck. If Bob was a weaker man and would have continued on she would have been more than willing to lose her virginity. What impressed Patty they discussed better boundaries and they dedicated themselves to them. Patty felt lucky to have the type of boyfriend who would be willing to honestly discuss boundaries and honor her wishes. Many of her friends' boyfriends would either pressure or blackmail her friends into having sex. So many of her friends regretted having sex. Patty wondered if any boy regretted having sex before they were married.

"I'm coming down," Patty answered.

When Patty stepped into the laundry room all she could smell was bleach. The wet bleached cloths were in the basket and the Barbie toys were laying on the floor. This was a strange occurrence late at night.

"Where were you?"

Patty's untactful response was, "I'm eighteen."

Victoria somehow contained herself. "I realize you're eighteen but I'm hoping you'll not end up like me."

They glared at one another.

Victoria asked, "What's that smell?"

A concerned Patty answered, "The bleach?"

"No," Victoria leaned closer to Patty and sniffed, "What did you do?"

Patty quickly answered, "The cap to my perfume bottle fell off and it spilled all over."

Victoria gave her a look and answered, "Before I was a Christian and before being married I'd douse myself with perfume to cover up the scent of sex."

Patty kept herself from blushing and answered, "I'm not having sex with Bob."

Victoria snipped back, "Then. Where were you?"

"We were with Al and Shaye and we lost track of time. Don't you trust me? I guess I should have sex with him."

Silence filled the room.

Patty felt guilty for saying what she just did. She honestly hated arguing with her Mother.

Based upon her daughter's facial expression and body language she let Patty speak first.

Patty answering honestly, "We're waiting."

"I hope so." Victoria decided on a different approach, "I really regretted having sex before I was married. There were times I liked having sex but the after was when the fun really ended."

Patty tried to reassure her Mother, "We're waiting."

Patty purposefully changed the subject and asked an obvious question, "Why are Ashleigh's toys down here?"

Victoria tried to remain calm and answered, "Ashleigh came down and washed her own clothes."

"Is this why I smell bleach? You hate using a lot of bleach?" Patty reached into the basket on the floor and pulled out a pair of jeans. Patty looked at the pair and joked, "She's in

style with the white washed look.”

“This isn't funny.”

Victoria grabbing the jeans from Patty's hands.

Both felt childish by this action.

Victoria scolded in a question, “Do you understand the seriousness of this?”

“Yes I do,” Patty insisted. As Patty in anger took the laundry out of the basket and in anger threw the clothes into the dryer, “I saw the bruises. I'm the one who was with Bob on those visits. Don't tell...”

Patty stood up.

“I don't believe you do,” Victoria stated with the same passion as Patty, “You should have heard what she was saying. She's looking up to you as a Mom. You understand this?”

“I can handle it. It's you who...”

Interrupting, “We're the ones who have taken responsibility for Ashleigh. While your at school or working part time I'm struggling...”

Replying with an angry tone, “I'm not a child. I'm aware of what she's been through.”

“Then stop hindering me and start helping me.”

“I'm helping you.”

Patty resented being accused of not helping with Ashleigh.

“Stop trying to be her Mom and allow me to do my job.”

Patty made a face, rolled her eyes, and answered, “I'm not being her Mom.”

“You could have fooled me.”

“Where's Ashleigh?”

“She's most likely underneath her...”

Interrupting, “I guess I shouldn't act like her mom and get her out from underneath the bed.”

Patty felt guilty by what she just said. Instead of leaving Patty grabbed an empty laundry basket and filled it with toys. There were always three to four empty baskets stacked on the table.

Victoria answered in a grateful tone, “Thank-you.”

Both were feeling horrible about this argument.

It seemed to Patty they were competing for something neither one should be competing about. Patty promised, “I'll start making sure Ashleigh knows you'd never hurt her.”

“I'm sure she's been lied to in the past.”

Patty mentioned, “You know your not suppose to get upset.”

“I'm human.”

They looked at one another.

Victoria mentioned, “Without carrying this baby the judge wouldn't have allowed us to be Ashleigh's foster parents. God has a plan.”

“I'm sure he does.”

Patty picked up the basket full of toys.

Victoria started the dryer.

Victoria stated as they turned off the laundry room light, “I'm going to tell her at this house we wash clothes different from the other places. Then I'm going to show her how I like clothes washed. When you wash clothes would you respect me and wash them the same way. I don't want Ashleigh feeling like she did anything wrong.”

“We've always felt she was washing her own clothes.”

They nodded their heads. With Victoria pregnant and Patty carrying the basket they ignored their feelings of wanting to hug one another.

They went up to the second floor and both checked on Ashleigh.

She was sleeping soundly on her bed underneath her covers. The correct assumption was Blake put her here. They both knew Ashleigh fell asleep under the bed, otherwise they would have heard Ashleigh scream if Blake tried to pick her up.

The present day Victoria was setting all of Ashleigh's clothes into Ashleigh's dresser. Victoria loved how Felicia looked sleeping.

Victoria clung to the memory of how excited Ashleigh was when she put up Ashleigh's picture. Victoria could have cared less if Patty and Felicia's first pictures were newborn photographs and Ashleigh's started with her being in first grade. What was important to Patty was she was blessed to have a third daughter in her house. As soon as she started to put Ashleigh's pants away Felicia jerked in her carrier and started to cry.

Victoria looked up at the pink neon clock hanging on Ashleigh's wall.

Patty gave this neon clock to Ashleigh after Ashleigh followed Patty into her room for the first time. By what this neon clock indicated it was time to feed Felicia. Victoria would finish putting away the rest of the clothes after feeding Felicia.

*A*shleigh was petrified to leave the Jeep.

Ashleigh was checking out the round isolated camp site. The metal fire pit looked interesting and menacing. Based upon Bob's fairy tale she imagined a witch coming out of the woods and cooking her over the fire. A few feet from the fire pit was a big wooden picnic table. She expected the Devil to jump out from the tall evergreens and the northern trees. Ashleigh liked the wild flowers around the campsite. Ashleigh watched Bob set down a cooler onto the picnic table. Even though it was obvious to Ashleigh everyone was having fun, Ashleigh was focused on the idea the Devil would come out from behind the trees, grab her, and take her into the dark forest.

Bob spent extra money to get this large isolated site. Unlike most of the sites in this state park the sites were clumped together both in big open sites and even in the wooded areas. When Bob realized these isolated sites were already reserved he made a few calls to some influential political friends. With Bob willing to work out deals with these friends he was able to get a large isolated site for himself. The family who reserved this site was finding out there was a "mistake" in their reservations. This family was moved to a smaller but nice forested campsite across the park. With this "mistake" the family's week long reservations were paid for. Bob made sure this family received: four days worth of free passes to a large indoor and outdoor water park in Wisconsin Dells, they received a packet of already purchased tickets to almost every popular attraction in Wisconsin Dells, and they received gift certificates to many of the restaurants in the area. This ended up to be a huge blessing to a family who saved up for two years for: a week of camping, one day at a smaller water park, two attractions, and one time going out to eat. Bob never told a soul what he did.

The hatchback to the Jeep Cherokee was opened. Ashleigh turned around when Bob and Patty's friends started to pull equipment out from the Jeep.

Patty asked, "You want to help?"

Ashleigh shook her head.

"How come?" Shayne asked seeing Ashleigh was afraid.

Ashleigh remained quiet because she felt safer standing in the back seat.

Patty and Shayne sighed and looked at one another.

Patty spoke to Ashleigh, "If you want to come out just come on out."

Shayne asked "Okay?"

Ashleigh was sure she would stay in the Cherokee but shook her head yes.

Shaye and Patty shrugged their shoulders and pulled items from the back of the Jeep and walked them to the picnic table.

Ashleigh looked out the drivers side window. She watched as Bob and Patty, along with their friends were pointing at different areas of the camp ground. They were trying to figure out where to put their tents. Ashleigh thought they were pointing at things in the woods. She grabbed onto her stuff dog and held onto it; she was ready to start crying and ask to go home. This was when Scott opened a cooler and pulled out a brown bottle and started to drink. This added to Ashleigh's worry.

"Hey," Scott looked into the Jeep. "Why is our Mascot sitting in the jeep?"

Ashleigh was now very suspicious of Scott and shrugged her shoulders and remained quiet.

"Leave her alone," yelled Shaye. "She's probably scared."

Ashleigh wondered how Shaye knew.

Scott who was average sized, was good with mechanical things, and was not the greatest looking guy. Looked into the Jeep and asked, "You want a root beer?"

Ashleigh liked root beer and shook her head yes.

Ashleigh watched as Scott opened the cooler again and pulled out the same type of bottle he was drinking from. He opened the Cherokee door, he twisted the cap off and handed Ashleigh the root beer.

Bob asked, "What are you doing?"

Scott answered, "I'm giving Mascot a root beer."

Bob answered, "I'm holding you responsible if any of that root bear gets spilled on my leather seats."

Scott asked, "Did you hear your brother?"

Ashleigh with a smile answered, "I like root beer."

"Here," Scott said and placed the bottle next to her in a cup holder on the door, "You be careful."

"Uh huh."

Scott gently shut the door and walked to the back and picked up another cooler and walked it to the picnic table.

She took a drink of what she felt was the best tasting root beer she ever drank. She looked at the label and there was a dragon on the label with fancy writing. She took another drink; not wanting to spill she carefully put the root beer into the cup holder.

After this she heard a vehicle pull up into their campsite. She grabbed her stuffed dog and looked out the window.

An old Ford Pickup truck came into the site. Ashleigh noticed there was a tree on the side of the door; because of her Big Brother and Patty she knew the outline of Wisconsin was behind this tree. She could not read what was written underneath this symbol but it read, "*Wisconsin Forest Service.*"

Ashleigh witnessed a larger woman and a tall skinny man step out of the truck and walk toward everyone. Ashleigh thought they were police in green uniforms. Seeing what she thought were police made her feel better; she was sure the Devil disliked police.

The woman ranger asked, "Who's Robert Waller?"

Bob answered, "I am."

Ashleigh watched as all of Bob's and Patty's friends stopped what they were doing and looked at what Ashleigh believed were police.

"Is there a problem?"

The woman ranger answered truthfully, "We're checking the sites."

The rangers always checked these sites. What they left out was the fact they were

making a special trip to this particular site. The college aged woman who worked the parks entrance, was worried about Ashleigh's safety, so she alerted the rangers.

The male ranger asked, "May I see everyone's Id's?"

"Is this necessary?" Bob pointed out, "We're obviously not causing any trouble."

The ranger glanced at him and answered, "It's just routine."

Ashleigh watched as the guys pulled out their wallets and the girls went back to the vehicle; Ashleigh observed every young woman take their drivers license out from their purses.

The woman ranger stared into the Jeep.

The woman ranger gave Ashleigh a smile and asked, "What's your name?"

Ashleigh liked police ever since Patty and the nice lady she saw every week told her police would help her if bad things happened to her again. She answered, "Ashleigh."

Bob watched suspiciously. Bob was of the belief Ashley Vindavane was let out and called the ranger station. Ashley used this ploy before, this was why Bob kept all of the court paperwork with him.

The officer asked Ashleigh, "What brings you here?"

"That is my younger sister Ashleigh Waller," Bob answered for Ashleigh walking toward them. Patty and all of their friends glared at Bob and started to silently pray.

"Sir," The male ranger stepped in front of Bob and stated, "You let the little girl answer the questions."

Patty grabbed Bob's arm and gave him a warning glare. Since losing custody to a drunk woman who beat his little sister, he was leery of anyone who represented the State of Wisconsin. In spite of how everything worked out, he felt the circumstances were obvious enough where he should have been awarded custody from the very beginning.

The ranger after hearing Bob yell, gently asked Ashleigh, "Where is your mommy?"

"She..."

Patty tugged on Bob's arm.

Al was ready to defend his friends but Shaye stopped him.

Patty whispered to Bob, "Let me talk to her."

The Male ranger told Bob, "I have some questions for you."

Bob reluctantly walked with the ranger to a corner of the site.

Ashleigh watched as Patty walked toward her and the officer.

When Ashleigh was unable to answer the rangers question she asked, "Ashleigh please come out of the car."

Ashleigh felt with a police officer there nothing was going to come out of the woods. More important she felt police were nice.

Patty was very polite, "Ma'am,"

Ashleigh stepped alongside of Patty.

The ranger looked at Patty.

"My boyfriend has visitation rights and my parents are her legal guardians."

"Is your parents here?"

"No."

Ashleigh was fascinated by all what was happening.

"You say you're boyfriend has..."

Bob yelled, "There's paperwork in the glove box."

Ashleigh looked over at her brother. For the first time she witnessed her big brother truly angry. Ashleigh heard the tall male ranger scold her brother by saying, "Son.."

The female Ranger asked, "May I see this paperwork?"

"Yea," Patty answered.

Janna and Shaye walked over to support their friend Patty. The young men were watching everything from the picnic table.

Janna tried to reassure the ranger, "We're all watching her."

"Are you all able to watch.." the female officer looked at Ashleigh, "How old are you?"

Ashleigh puffed up and answered excited, "Six."

"She is awful young and many of the college students who come up here cause us trouble."

Shaye answered, "We won't."

"I hope not," stated the female ranger.

She looked at Ashleigh and asked, "Have you ever camped before?"

Ashleigh answered with a worried face the officer noticed right away, "No."

Patty gave the paperwork to the officer.

She looked at this paperwork. By the ID's the ranger could tell the woman in front of her was telling her the truth.

"Now," the Ranger gave the paperwork back to Patty. She could see the male officer was going through the two coolers on the table, "I don't want her getting lost or anything happening to her."

This worried Ashleigh.

Shaye promised, "We'll watch her close."

Janna answered, "We promise nothing will happen to her."

Surprised the male ranger stated to the female ranger, "There isn't any alcohol here."

Al answered, "We don't drink."

Hearing this made Ashleigh smile.

"Ashleigh," the lady ranger asked. "When you go walking where do you walk?"

Patty was going to answer, but the Ranger gave her a look, this caused Patty to stay silent.

"On the trails. I'm suppose to stay close."

"That's right."

"How about fire?"

The girls looked at one another and realized they never talked to Ashleigh about the dangers of a camp fire.

"It's hot. Little girls should not touch it," Her Mommy yelled at her to stay away from the fire all the time. Plus Ashleigh saw a guy fall into a camp fire and an ambulance had to take him to a hospital.

This large imposing female ranger asked, "Do you walk up to animals?"

"They bite. I watch them and not touch them."

Jenna smiled she reminded Ashleigh of this one.

This female ranger smiled.

"You seem to be a smart girl."

Ashleigh liked being called smart by what she thought was a police officer.

"Do you know how to swim?"

Ashleigh answered honestly and shook her head, "No."

The officer looked at the girls, "If you take her swimming in the lake you watch her. It's swimming at your own risk. There isn't a life guard posted."

Patty answered, "We will."

Patty pulled Ashleigh close to her.

"How about at night? If you have to go potty do you go by yourself?"

The girls looked at one another. They told her repeatedly to never wander away but they never thought about this one.

"I'd ask Patty." Ashleigh answered with some fear, "I'm scared of the dark."

The ranger bent down and asked, "Why?"

"The Devil might get me."

"The devil doesn't live here," stated Patty. "Is this why you've been afraid?"

Ashleigh started to cry, nodded her head, and answered; "Uh Huh."

"Honey," The Ranger spoke and bent down to Ashleigh's eye level, "The name of this state park is *Devils Lake*. It's only the name of the park. The devil doesn't live here."

All three young women would explain to Ashleigh where the Devil lived; but for now they all gave one another a puzzled look. The three women were making the connections as to why Ashleigh was so frightened. All three girls would remember this for the rest of their lives.

"He doesn't?"

"What you have to be worried about is getting lost or falling off the big hills. You stay on the trails young lady. You think you can do that?"

Ashleigh felt so much better. "Uh huh."

The officer winked, "I like your hat."

Ashleigh winked back and flirted by saying, "Thank you."

Patty was shocked at Ashleigh's behavior.

Ashleigh at six was an expert at flirting; she received many free sodas and candy at bars for flirting.

"What a cutie," the officer tapped Ashleigh on the head.

Ashleigh was beginning to dislike being called cute and she never liked being tapped on the head. She grabbed her hat and put it the way she liked it.

"You watch her now," scolded the Ranger, "If anything should happen you call us."

The male officer walked over and asked Patty, "I'd like you're parents number." Patty gave him the number.

"Don't go off the trails," the male Ranger reminded them, "and keep any camp fire small."

Ashleigh answered, "Uh Huh."

Ashleigh was no longer afraid of being dragged into the woods because the police woman explained to her the Devil lived somewhere else. Ashleigh no longer being afraid allowed herself to be curious and wanted to "help." She observed Bob's four friends putting up, what looked like to her a big house with poles. She turned her attention to her Big brother when he pulled out a big bag from the back of his vehicle.

The male ranger promised, "We'll be checking up on you."

Patty gave Bob a look, Bob ignored Patty's look and answered the male ranger, "It's unnecessary to babysit."

The Ranger glared at Bob and wrote something in his little book.

Patty wondered why Bob felt the need to push people.

The woman Ranger gave Ashleigh a stern look and said, "You behave."

"Uh Huh."

All the ladies watched the Rangers leave.

Patty was about to ask Ashleigh if she was still afraid but Ashleigh was already "helping" her Big brother with what she felt was a cloth house.

Bob asked, "While we're putting up our tents why not make us lunch?"

Scott asked, "What are we going to do after lunch?"

"Lets go to the lake and hike up the hills," stated Will. "Would you like that Ashleigh?"

"Yea," She said out loud looking away from the tent her brother was putting up.

Patty was trying to encourage Ashleigh by suggesting, "We'll go swimming since it's seventy two."

"I like swimming," yelled Ashleigh. But she thought about being alone in the water and her whole countenance changed and asked Patty, "Are you swimming too?"

Patty wondered about this question, "Of course."

Ashleigh felt special when her Big Brother let her help put up the tent. Patty and the young women were honestly impressed with how patient he was with his Little Sister; especially with the fact Ashleigh was in the way. What impressed Patty was they never heard Bob yell.

Al stated, "Ashleigh."

Ashleigh stopped and looked over at Bob's best friend.

Al asked, "You want Lasagna?"

"Uh huh," Ashleigh answered. She loved eating lasagna at Bob's house. She wondered where the oven was.

Roy suggested, "How about fish?"

Will answered, "Let's go fishing tomorrow."

Al went in the middle, "Let's see how it goes today. What do you think Bob?"

"I'll skip fishing for today."

It was legendary at how horrible he was at fishing and they knew he was never going to admit to being horrible at it.

"Okay," Al answered.

Roy agreed by saying, "Let's play it by ear."

Ashleigh was again "helping" Bob put poles together.

"This is the boys tent," Al announced, "the tent your putting up is the girls tent."

"Uh huh."

Bob asked, "Patty could you come here?"

Patty and Janna came over and helped with holding onto poles. Ashleigh thought it was cool girls could put up tents too. Later when the ropes were stretched and the tent was steady, Ashleigh was allowed to pound in what she just learned were stakes. Bob ended up taking the mallet with each individual stake and finishing the job. Ashleigh enjoyed pounding in stakes.

Patty instructed Ashleigh, "Let's get lotion on you."

Patty was on strict orders from Victoria to make sure Ashleigh never received a sunburn. After applying the lotion Patty made a small sandwich for Ashleigh to tide her over until they went to the lake. This turned into everyone sitting by the picnic table and everyone talking to Ashleigh about what all the fun stuff they were planning for the rest of the week. She liked taking about: walks, swimming, *Wisconsin Dells*, bumper boats, go carts, water parks, and she was even hopeful she might be able to play volleyball with the big people. Roy mentioned he brought a Nerf football and said they could play catch with it in the water; this sounded fun to Ashleigh.

After this impromptu lunch, the guys made sure they had everything they needed for the lake; after they casually tossed around the football. The young women finished unpacking and prepared their tent for the week. Ashleigh was delighted she was allowed to help. She felt important when she laid out her sleeping bag next to the big girls sleeping bags. Ashleigh wanted her brother to buy her a *Care Bear* sleeping bag but he explained to her the *Care Bear* sleeping bag would not keep her warm enough at night; instead she ended up picking out a big brother approved light blue one. The young ladies put Ashleigh in the center between Patty who was on the left edge of the tent and Janna was to the right of Ashleigh; Shaye was nervous about being on the right edge of the tent.

After they were done setting up the sleeping bags the ladies brought all their things into the tent and prepared their backpacks for the rest of the day. Ashleigh enjoyed "helping" her big sister with the back pack. Under Patty's instruction she put in her: brand new mermaid

swimsuit, her mermaid towel, and her bright pink swim shoes. What was even more exciting was Patty gave her some money. This was Victoria's money, but to Ashleigh this was her own money. Ashleigh was delighted she could have her own money, this was the first time in her life she was allowed to carry her own money.

She ran to the Jeep when they told her they were going swimming. In this vehicle was everything young adults needed to have a good time on a beach in Wisconsin; all Ashleigh wanted was for these big people to play with her.

Megan was finished with her shower and dressed. Megan was wearing a simple pair of blue athletic shorts and a bright orange button shirt. Her hair was again in a pony tail and she was currently without shoes.

She was standing on her bed looking at herself in the large mirror attached to her dresser. She took a pillow from her bed and stuck it underneath her shirt. Since Nicole's pregnancy she was fascinated with how a baby grew inside of a woman; with equal curiosity she wondered what caused women to become pregnant. She looked at herself in different angles trying to imagine what being pregnant felt like. Megan recognized a pillow was never going to be the same as carrying a real baby: she pulled the pillow out from underneath her shirt, stepped down from her bed, and remade the bed.

Because of: natural curiosity, Nicole's pregnancy, the odd behavior of her brother Timmy, and what she heard in school she was asking her Mother about pregnancies and sex. Megan felt all her questions seemed related, but was unable to make the connection on how her pregnancy questions and her growing up questions related to the subject of sex. Megan heard the word sex just by normal day to day living, but when Megan asked Mary what this word meant, Megan received a negative response from her Momma. With Mary being closed off and unwilling to explain sex in an age appropriate way, she was causing Megan to bury all her question and all her normal prepubescent feelings toward sex inside of herself. The effect of burying all these feelings caused Megan to created within her soul a protective box to handle the fear and apprehension related to sex. At times this box felt very comfortable to Megan. At other times this box would feel very uncomfortable. The worst part of the box was Megan was unaware of what she was really placing in this box. This box was quickly becoming a Pandora's Box of sexual attitudes and energy.

With Nicole leaving and being done with her chores she wanted to leave the house.

She grabbed her *Miami Dolphin* baseball cap, her old mitt, her new baseball, and decided she would go find some of her friends. She opened the closet and again looked at herself in the mirror as she slipped her ponytail through the back of her hat and made sure the cap was on perfect. She wondered if her new friend was at the park or at his house. If finding her friends at the usual spots were unsuccessful she would see what was going on around town. She decided after biking around town she would visit her Daddy at his charter; she assumed it would be okay to visit her Daddy in the late afternoon.

Holding onto the mitt she left her room and again heard her Momma in the sewing room. This time Megan stopped at the sewing room door, "I'd like to practice playing ball. After I'll visit Daddy."

Ma stopped sewing and gazed upon Megan, "You can't go down by your Daddy today."

Megan's body language screamed disappointment.

Mary Steward observing Megan's body language ordered her, "You ain't allowed to visit the charter today."

"Daddy ain't minding me being there."

"I'm not in the mood for any more of your sassing' today."

Megan answered, "Yes Ma'am."

"Where are you planning on playing ball?"

"I was going to find Forrest..."

"I'm getting concerned with you running around town all by yourself. You have to be understanding'..."

"I'm a girl." Megan interrupted with a tone of sarcasm.

"Yes." Ma added with concern for her daughter's safety, "You are a girl. Us ladies have to be more careful than boys."

"Why?"

Mary blushed.

Mary calmed herself, took a deep breath, and managed to say, "Because not all men are gentlemen and they would enjoy hurting girls."

Megan decided to ask, "How would they hurt us?"

"You ain't ready for me to explain what a man can do to a woman. Y'all should just trust me and listen."

"But..."

"Let's be hoping you never have to find out," Mary spoke with an upset tone, "Y'all need to be careful."

Megan stated with confidence, "I'd kick him in the balls."

Mary slapped her hand on her sewing table and stated, "Megan!"

Megan was startled.

Ma asked "Who's been teaching' you such words?"

"Forrest talked about.." Megan changed direction of her answer because of Ma's look. "When Jimmy was teaching me self defense."

"I'm sure Jimmy's intentions were good ones. But they ain't suppose to be teaching you such language," Ma being visibly upset stated, "A girl shouldn't be saying nasty things."

Megan wondered and honestly asked, "Guys are saying it. Why can't I?"

"It ain't proper for a gal to be using such language."

Megan knew where balls were and new this was a "sensitive" area for guys. She knew what happened when she kicked a guy there and by the boys reaction it hurt deeply. She was curious and asked, "What are balls? Why shouldn't I be talking' about them?"

Ma turned a couple shades of red, "I'll tell you when you're older."

Megan in a very honest way asked, "Why can't you tell me? What are they?"

"It's good enough to be knowing if a guy is treating you in a way he shouldn't to kick him there. But I don't want you saying such words in this house." There was a frustration in her voice and very seriously added, "I ain't having my girl talk with such a filthy mouth."

Megan's dimples flashed.

Ma noticed and with a tone said, "I ain't sure you should be hanging around all those boys anymore."

Megan was tired of hearing this.

"Why not?"

"They're starting to grow up to be young men just as you'll start growing into a young lady."

Megan wondered what the big deal was; Ma always called her three brothers young men.

Megan rolled her eyes and asked, "So?"

Ma answered; "In a while Y'all will understand."

Megan asked with a tone of fear, "What'll happen?"

Ma blushed.

Megan wondered why her Momma would blush.

For Ma; this conversation was pushing the conversational boundaries about sex with Megan, "There will be changes to make you into a lady and the boys will start going through changes. With these changes Y'all will start noticing these changes. It'll make everything different."

This statement freaked Megan out. Megan: liked her friends, liked playing baseball, she loved going fishing with her brothers, she enjoyed being with her Daddy, and she enjoyed her girlfriends too, but Megan felt boys were more fun. She liked being a girl especially when as a girl she did things better than boys. The idea of "changing" was a frightening concept for Megan.

Compounding this fear Megan observed how uncomfortable her Momma appeared; Ma was never uncomfortable about anything.

Megan asked in complete fear, "What changes?"

If her Ma would have simply explained these changes in an age appropriate way Megan's fear would have lifted. Ma missed the fear in her daughter because she was feeling so uncomfortable talking about sex and puberty. Ma felt she was being open to Megan based upon her personal experience with her Momma. Mary felt being willing to talk to her daughter when the time was right was far more progressive than never hearing anything at all.

Ma blushed. Ma felt she spoke enough about this topic, "Y'all watch yourself. I ain't wanting you to go outside without you wearing sun block."

Megan felt like she was hanging on a cliff. Megan wanted more specific answers and asked, "What's groin'..."

Ma with a snip in her voice stated what she truly believed, "Us ladies should be showing restraint when it comes to talking about what we're talking about."

The worst part for Megan she was unaware of what they were really talking about.

"I ain't talking to you about this until Y'all are ready. It'll start happening soon so just have some patience. Y'all are a youngin' and a good girl."

To Megan it seemed like she was always hearing how being a girl was so different. None of this was making any sense because she was better at many of the activities boy's claimed to be so good at.

"Why..." Megan started.

"It matters," Ma interrupted Megan again.

Megan looked at her Ma and asked, "What are we..."

"We're talking about when a girl turns into a lady. You should start taking this seriously." In a tone of embarrassment and exasperation Ma stated, "It ain't right of me talking to you until Y'all are older."

This statement felt very confusing and hurtful to Megan. Megan liked being a girl and thought she acted like a lady. She enjoyed acting like a lady at weddings and special functions. This comment made Megan feel very awkward; for the first time she wondered if there was something wrong with her.

Mary's intention was far from making Megan feel uncomfortable. Mary honestly felt she was being very open; especially with Mary feeling awkward. Mary felt she was being very progressive with this subject matter.

Mary stated, "Remember to wear sunblock."

With this statement Mary Steward went back to her sewing.

Megan felt this whole conversation was a confusing mess. She felt all of her questions were related but was unclear on how her questions were related. Instead of Megan finding some security and comfort she felt a fear and deep apprehension to this unnamed topic. Instead of asking another question she just buried all her emotions related to this unknown

subject into her growing Pandora's Box. The worst part of this box was it was all subconscious and it was wrapped up awful tight

Mary commanded, "Be home before dinner."

Megan answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Megan stepped out of the sewing room and instead of thinking about all what was just said she concentrated on what and where she was headed next. She listened to her Momma and went into the bathroom and put on sunblock. After she ran outside. Once she was outside: she put her mitt and glove into the milk carton, attached her bat to the bike, and rode off in search of something to do. While biking she started to focus on the idea her friends and herself were about to change. This lead Megan to wonder about her Momma's comments about being a lady. Megan always felt secure about being a girl, she liked being a girl, she never felt she was a boy.

She wondered if she should feel like a boy? She liked participating in boy things because they were more fun to her than girl things. She wondered if her Momma's comments meant she was more of a boy than a girl? Megan felt she liked girl things too. Megan resented the feelings she was receiving from her own questions. How Megan dealt with the fear of her future changes, the odd emotions she was feeling from her Momma's vague answers, was to bury all these emotions into her Pandora's Box.

Megan reached the park and saw her friends Forrest and Leonard playing catch on the far end of the park. She smiled when Leonard looked up to catch a pop up and Leonard lost the ball in the sun and the ball thudded next to him. Megan smiled when Leonard picked up the ball and chunked the ball back and it went flying over Forrest's head. Forrest ran to get the ball. Megan shook her head when Leonard swore at himself and pumped his fist. This was learned behavior from playing golf with his dad.

Megan was biking on a pathway through the park. She passed the fenced in playground to her right. This was beginning to be filled with parents and children. Megan noticed a frazzled looking nanny with two very active boys, these boys were hanging onto some jungle gym and kicking at one another.

Megan heard the woman yell, "Stop it..."

Megan was moving too fast to hear the rest.

Megan continued toward her friends. Megan avoided hitting: walkers, roller bladders, joggers, and other bikers. A young couple were flying kites. Megan wanted to believe they were in love. On her left were three wooden playground toys; where boys often played fort or army, and the girls played house or work. Megan enjoyed playing fort with her friends, she felt she was great at this game. She avoided playing house because of how boring this game was.

Megan took note of the group of teenagers standing next to one of these playground toys. This group consisted of four young woman and three young men. By their mere presence they were keeping children away from the area. Megan knew to stay away from this group of teenagers. Without Megan knowing it she kept many of her friends from starting drugs by leading them away from anyone or any situation where drugs would be offered. She knew from the stories of her Daddy how: pot, pills, heroin, drunkenness, and cocaine were all bad news. Megan with her strong Christian upbringing and her own secure faith was against drugs and getting drunk. What made her cautious about drinking was when her Daddy told her he thought he was headed to a drinking problem after coming home from Vietnam. The idea of something hurting her Daddy caused Megan to avoid drinking. Certainly the idea of illegal drug use was completely against the families beliefs. The family often times talked openly and honestly on how drugs affected the people they knew. This included who was rumored to be addicted to drugs, who Captain found out was arrested for drugs, who was selling drugs, and who was having any sort of drinking problem. Any time this subject came

up Ma with compassion would lead the whole family to pray for those addicted to these substances.

Megan biked off the path and once she reached her friends she yelled, "Hi Y'all!"

Megan yelled this at the wrong time and Forrest was beamed just above his right eye. He: grunted, dropped his mitt, and put his hand to his forehead.

Leonard yelled, "Sorry."

Megan quickly dropped her bike and ran to her friend.

A concerned Megan asked, "Y'all all right?"

Forrest acted brave by quickly standing up, which caused him to stumble a bit. Megan's natural instinct was to hold him up.

In response to Megan's question Forrest answered, "I'm okay."

Leonard was laughing at Forrest as he reached his friend.

A laughing Leonard asked, "Y'all okay?"

With a red knot on Forrest's forehead he managed to say, "I'm fine."

Megan wondered why guys always pretended to be fine when they were obviously hurt.

Megan suggested in a concerned tone, "Sit down."

She was repeating the actions of coaches when they were confronted with an injury.

Leonard responded to Megan, "Yea."

Megan led her friend to sit on the ground and managed to say, "We'll just sit a bit. I'm tired from biking anyway."

Leonard gave Megan a funny look, "Y'all are never tired."

Megan gave Leonard a glare.

Leonard missed her look and mentioned, "You out run everybody when.."

Megan scolded Leonard, "Just sit down."

Leonard sat down.

While sitting Forrest would check his bump. It did hurt, but he would never admit it in front of his friends. What was odd for Forrest was he felt better with Megan being near him.

Megan felt she needed an ice pack. Ice was the remedy all adults used at her sporting events and her Momma always put ice on her bumps and twists.

Megan asked like a nurse, "How is the bump?"

If something bad happened to her friend, Megan's plan was to bike to the fenced in area and get a momma to help them.

Forrest blinked his eyes, "I'm better."

Megan made a face, her dimples flashed.

The three remained sitting.

"Wow. What a bump," Leonard commented and started to laugh again.

Megan wondered why boys found it funny when something like this happened to one of their friends; Megan never found someone getting hurt funny.

Forrest looked at his friend, "It ain't funny."

"Yea," Megan scolded and pointed out, "How many times have you've been hurt?"

Leonard became insistently quiet. All of his friends loved it when Leonard tried any activity other than baseball, something funny was bound to happen where Leonard would end up being hurt or embarrassed.

Megan broke the silence with an excited tone, "The new kids' name is Simon."

Forrest asked, "Whats he like?"

Leonard asked, "Is his house haunted?"

"His house ain't haunted," Megan answered in a tone. She smiled her big dimple smile, "We talked. We ended up playing ball. He's a good player."

Forrest asked, "You think he'd be a good player on our team?"

His team was second to last place and this irritated him. He touched his big red bump. Megan promoting her friend stated, "I bet he'll be one of the best."

Leonard pointed out, "If he's as good as you say how come he ain't playing on little league?"

"His Momma ain't allowing him to play because they've just moved in."

Forrest was acting like his head was fine. "Where did he move from?"

"He's from Jacksonville."

This disappointed Forrest and Leonard.

Megan thought for a second, "He's coming to play tomorrow."

Leonard asked, "Why?"

"Cause' I asked him too."

An upset Forrest mentioned, "We ain't needing some other guy playing at our pick up games." Megan was shocked at her friend Forrest's behavior. Normally he was ready to invite anyone to play. She asked, "Why? We should be neighborly."

"It ain't right," was all Forrest could manage to say.

Leonard asked in frustration, "Why are we inviting' a stranger?"

Her friends behavior was upsetting to Megan. She demanded, "He's playing with us tomorrow." She felt this upset Forrest and was unsure of why. "Let's play catch with the new ball Simon gave me."

Forrest asked with some intensity, "Why would he give you a ball?"

"He's got a bag full," Megan mentioned matter of fact.

"No ones got a..." started Leonard.

Forrest interrupted Leonard, "Megan ain't a liar."

Leonard knew this was true.

"I'm telling Y'all, he has a bag of baseball stuff."

"Let me see..." started Leonard.

Before Leonard could finish the sentence Megan was up and went over to her bike and grabbed her mitt and ball. She walked the ball over to the guys.

Forrest stood up; he was okay except for the red bump on his head.

Forrest asked, "Toss it here."

She put on her glove and gently tossed the ball to him.

He caught it.

After studying the ball he reluctantly admitted, "This here's a good ball."

Leonard demanded, "Let's play."

Forrest threw the ball to Megan who easily caught it.

"Throw it deep," yelled Leonard as he was running into the open field.

She did as he requested. What amazed Forrest and Megan was the diving catch he made. They wondered how he could play baseball with excellent skill and completely struggle at every other sport. Forrest casually found a spot as Leonard threw him a ball and Forrest caught this thrown ball from Leonard. Forrest threw the ball to Megan and she caught the ball. They were having fun playing catch. In no time they were yelling at one another, what they yelled depended upon what happened.

Leonard pointed behind Megan and threw the ball as hard as he could. She wished he would have given her more warning. The ball went flying over her head. She ran after the ball as fast as she could. The ball landed a distance from her and rolled toward one of the wooden playground toys.

Leonard yelled, "Sorry."

Megan yelled back, "It's okay."

Megan picked up the ball, threw it back to Leonard, as she walked away she heard the

girls whisper and snicker. Megan heard the boys laugh at whatever comment the girls made. Very rarely did anyone ever pick on Megan. Megan went against her own instinct and glanced back at this group of teenagers.

A nineteen year old woman sneered, "What are Y'all looking at?"

Megan chose to be quiet.

Megan took note of which one yelled this question at her. This young woman had long badly bleached blond hair, the left side of her head was shaved, and the part unshaven was spiked straight up. Her long face was filled with an intense look. She was wearing boots, a black skirt, black nylons, black boots, a black cam lace cover, leather gloves, and a bright pink shirt underneath the lace Cami. Megan was of the opinion this girl was wearing way too much makeup and was crazy for wearing black in this Florida heat.

Megan heard from Leonard, "Come on."

"Okay," Megan replied and walked passed the bikes to her spot.

While Forrest was running after a deep ball thrown by Leonard, Megan glanced back to the group of teenagers. Megan became memorized as she noticed a guy and a gal laying on the ground passionately kissing. She stopped playing catch and stared at them. Megan was finding this young couple's open affection fascinating. She wondered what it would feel like to have a guy kiss her; the natural progression for Megan was the idea of a guy liking her so much he would want to kiss her in public. This was in contrast to her families belief open affection was inappropriate. Ma felt so uncomfortable with this type of display she was known to: drag her kids away from any public displays of affection, turn off TV or a rented movie, and openly complained about public any displays of affection. The practice of touch and open affection was obviously not practiced in Megan's home. Megan as long as she could remember craved this type of affection and was drawn to watching any affection between couples.

Leonard yelled, "Watch it."

Megan ducked and the ball just missed her.

Forrest worried about Megan yelled, "You should watch what Y'all are doing?"

Megan stood up and shouted to Forrest, "It's alright It's my fault. Where's the ball?"

Leonard answered, "It's behind you."

She looked for the ball and it was passed the bikes and near the young adults.

Megan was reluctant to run up to them but she wanted her new ball. As she drew closer to the group she found herself staring at the young couple. The guy was rubbing the side of this young woman, and the young woman's arms were wrapped around him. Megan felt an odd; a feeling she never felt before and was unable to recognize.

Megan heard, "Hi."

When Megan looked there were two young ladies standing up against the wooden playground toy; she never spotted them before. Based upon this woman's accent she was from the upper east coast. This girl was to the blond girls left.

Megan casually walked up to the ball and answered, "Hi Y'all."

Megan was being cautious. She took note of another young woman sitting on the ground to her right who hung around town. She took special note off the two guys who were standing off to the left. She recognized one of these guys. At one time he tried to pressure her and a friend to try pot. She was suspicious of the one guy standing and the guy making out with the girl; it was obvious they were Yankee's.

The young woman asked, "U's enjoy watching?"

Megan blushed.

The group found this funny and snickered.

Megan hated being laughed at. Megan wanted to leave as fast as possible and bent down and picked up the baseball Simon gave her.

The woman standing next to the girl with the spiky hair asked, "I bet U's are wishing two girls were kissing?"

All the teenagers laughed except for the two women standing next to one another.

Megan stood shocked looking at this young woman. This young woman: had a bob haircut, she was without make-up, she wore tight cargo pants, black boots, and a plain blue polo shirt.

A very shocked Megan answered "No."

The group laughed at how Megan answered this question, even the couple making out stopped what they were doing and glanced over at Megan.

Megan despised being laughed at and for the first time in her life felt very self conscience. She never heard of two women kissing before; as it was Megan felt uncomfortable watching the guy and the girl making out. The thought of two women kissing hung in her head like a clanging bell and was unsure of what she should do.

Forrest being concerned for his friend yelled, "Megan!"

Megan missed her friends call.

This young woman with the short hair looked at Megan; if this woman was clearly thinking and instead of her current drug induced state she would have left Megan alone. But she was high, "I'm just like you." And asked in a seductive voice, "Do you like me?"

Megan wondered what she meant and felt very uncomfortable.

The group laughed at Megan.

The local girl sitting off to Megan's right was enjoying the feeling the pills gave her. She was trying to figure out who was in front of her. The couple making out became bored with the conversation and went back to their aggressive fondling. This local gal involved with her passionate activity failed to notice who Megan was.

Megan answered. "I ain't like you."

"Your a girl?" the young woman with the blond spiky hair asked. "I guess your right." She mentioned to the woman with the short hair.

"I'm always right on these things," the short haired woman answered, her eyes were glazed over.

Megan felt hurt by this woman's statement. She never thought anyone might consider her a boy. She possessed enough self awareness to know many people were disturbed at how intense she took sports and how she enjoyed many "boy" activities, but never felt anyone would consider her to be a boy. She liked being a girl, being asked if she was a boy, deeply hurt her feelings.

"I'm a girl," Megan spoke in defiance. "My name is Megan."

They laughed at her when they recognized how upset she was.

The woman with the blond spiky hair stated, "I was assuming you were a little lesbian."

The rest of her group laughed.

Megan was clueless as to what the word lesbian meant. She could feel this word was very important to the two women in front of her, but Megan was upset she was being called a name she was unaware of what it meant.

The woman with the short hair, this woman in a fog of drug use, managed to ask Megan gently, "Are you a lesbian? I knew when I was your age."

Megan just stood there feeling trapped because she was unaware of what this word meant.

The woman with the spiky hair stated, "I'm feeling it. It's okay to embrace it."

The woman with the short hairstyle mentioned, "I like acting like a boy? I bet you like acting like a boy?"

The woman with the spiky hair asked with a wicked smile on her face, "You want to see

to girls kiss?”

Megan was in shocked silence. She never knew two people of the same sex would ever kiss one another.

The two guys hoped the short haired woman and this blond would kiss.

What stopped these two young women from showing Megan what two women kissing looked like was the local girl laying on her arms to Megan's right found enough sense in her clouded brain to ask, “What'd be your name?”

This young woman looked out of place within this group. She was barefoot, was wearing very tight daisy duke jean shorts, a red and blue patterned tank top; where at any moment her medium sized breasts could pop out, and her long straight black hair was sticking out from underneath her plain brown cowgirl hat. Megan could see her eyes looked funny. It appeared to Megan this young woman was not very stable by the way her arms were supporting herself.

The two women considered this woman to be a hick. They were annoyed she interrupted them.

“Megan.”

“Honey...”

This local girl laughed.

Everyone else laughed too.

It bothered Megan to be laughed at.

“Honey, Your last name?”

“Steward.”

The young woman on the ground started to laugh and looked up at Megan, “How's your brother Jimmy?”

“He's okay.”

Megan was unsure if she should tell this gal anything. Megan wondered where her brother would know a girl like this.

This local woman lost focus.

The local guy who offered Megan to smoke pot rushed Megan and grabbed the ball Simon gave her. This sudden action by this guy worried Leonard and Forrest and they were starting to discuss what they should do.

This quick action was such a surprise to this group it stopped the couple from making out and continued to hold off the two women from kissing.

“Give me the ball,” Megan yelled. “I'll tell my brothers.”

This local guy smiled, “Y'all brothers are Duke, Jimmy, and Timmy?”

“Yes,” Megan felt more confident and was sure she'd get her ball back.

The guy studied the ball and then at Megan. Megan was annoyed with this guys look of disrespect. It was obvious to Megan her brothers ran into this bunch before, “Imagine I'm talking to the little sister of them annoying' boys.”

Megan was disturbed by this guy's wild eyed look. With him being close she noticed all the pits on his cheeks and his long dirty looking face. Megan also took notice of how he was dressed; he was in stone washed ripped jeans, wore boots, there was a chain from his wallet to his belt buckle, he was wearing an old rock concert T-shirt with some band printed on it she never heard of, and his long curly hair looked unwashed.

“You have to be...” he started to say.

The local woman sitting on the grass stood up, she brushed the grass off her body and warned everyone, “I wouldn't be messing' with her.”

The woman with the blond spiky hair asked, “Why?”

The blond local woman laughed because she thought this question was funny.

The Yankee guy who stood off to the side, spoke for the first time; "You have to pay for what you used so far."

Do to the many hours Megan helped her Daddy on his charter and being forced to tag along with her Ma when she showed rental units, Megan easily recognized the upper east coast accent. Her parents owned two apartment buildings and rented three houseboats. The Steward's were still paying off the loans and the mortgages to these items, but the extra income helped the family.

The dark haired local woman managed to keep standing. Once she was somewhat secure on her feet she was able to make the suggestion to the guy holding Megan's ball, "You'd better give her the ball back."

"I ain't giving her the ball back."

Megan yelled at him, "I'm telling my brothers!"

"You only have one brother left and it's only Timmy," the local punk clarified. "If I were you..."

He was interrupted by the local black haired woman who was warning everyone to leave Megan alone; somewhere in her clouded mind she remembered her friends name,

"Daisy-Lou."

The male Yankee commanded, "You can't leave."

"I ain't staying."

The woman making out who a moment ago acted like this was the greatest moment of her life stopped cold, "What?"

This angered the guy making out with her.

The black haired local asked, "Y'all know who the girl is?"

"No," answered a still clear headed Daisy-Lou.

"Megan Steward."

This attractive brunette with a braided pony tail looked over at Megan. She immediately pushed the guy off of her.

The guy screamed, "Hey! What are you doing?"

Daisy-Lou quickly stood up.

Megan's eyes became wide as she saw this woman pull her bra over one of her small exposed breasts. Megan realized the guy was touching her breasts; she wondered if other gals let guys touch their breasts. Megan being a girl understood a woman's breasts grew out and became noticeable, but this was the first time Megan ever considered guys liked to touch them. Along with this revelation, this was the first time in Megan's ten years of living where she actually witnessed a woman's exposed breast. Megan watched as Daisy-Lou buttoned up her blouse, and reached down and buttoned her tight daisy duke shorts. Megan being very naive wondered why she needed to zip up her shorts. Daisy-Lou: stepped into her cowgirl boots, bent down, swung her purse over her shoulder, and grabbed her cowgirl hat.

The guy she was making out with said, "We had an agreement."

Megan recognized the same upper east coast accent as the other non local guy. Forrest and Leonard eyes became wide seeing real live boobies; they both wished they would have been up near Megan instead of being afraid waiting by their bikes.

Daisy-Lou opened her purse and threw a Ziploc bag at him, and with a tone said, "You keep em'."

"What's going on?"

Daisy-Lou who happened to be clear headed, warned with absolute seriousness, "I'd suggest leaving this gal alone."

The Yankee watching the locals yelled at the other Yankee, "You be quiet."

The Yankee whose fun just ended was annoyed his buddy was allowing the local to

leave without fulfilling the deal they worked out and asked in defiance “What?”

Daisy-Lou made one more suggestion to the local guy holding onto Megan's ball, “Give the girl her ball. You don't want Duke talking to you. Do you?”

The guy looked at Megan and held it out, “Here's your ball.”

When Megan went to grab the ball, he chuckled the ball as far as he could, “Now go get the ball.”

Megan watched it fly over her head and into the open area where she was just playing catch with her friends.

This same guy commanded everyone, “Let's get going.”

Daisy-Lou used this opportunity to walk over to her friend with the straight black hair and grabbed her arm. Daisy-Lou was about to leave the park but her friend with the pattern shirt yelled to Megan, “You tell Timmy he's a lot of fun and if he wants to...”

“Come on,” Daisy-Lou yanked her friend, the local gals cowgirl hat fell off. Daisy-Lou picked the hat up for her friend and handed the hat back.

The Yankee who was making out with the local gal was so angry he was going to teach this little girl a lesson; instead he was stopped by the other Yankee.

The local guy who threw the ball looked at Megan and said, “If you don't go around telling anyone what I'm doing around here. I'll leave you alone. I ain't wanting to hurt little girls. Are you getting' what I'm saying?”

Megan nodded her head; but she was ready to try and defend herself like her brothers taught her.

The short haired blond who asked Megan if she was a lesbian suggested, “Let's go and party.”

Megan turned away from what Megan felt was an odd gal and headed for the ball.

While Megan's back was turned Leonard and Forrest would tell all their friends how they saw two gals kiss one another.

Megan as she ran to get the baseball felt hurt and confused by this event.

She wondered why the one gal thought they were the same; especially since Megan felt like they were completely different.

Megan always understood a woman developed breasts but up until this moment never seen fully developed breasts. Her momma went out of her way to make sure Megan never changed clothes in any area with open nudity. Mary always made sure Megan took a shower at home after every sporting event or spending time at the Y. Megan often found this inconvenient and even embarrassing, she never understood why her momma kept her from changing or showing with the other girls. As long as Megan could remember anytime they went somewhere where there was public swimming and Megan needed to change, her Momma always took her someplace private for Megan to change. Her Momma would help her change but Mary would never change in front of Megan. With Megan now seeing a woman's breast for the first time this gave Megan a healthy curiosity about a woman's body. This frightened her as well.

Megan assumed this development would happen to her. She wondered why this happened? She wondered if this would hurt? She wondered why a guy would touch a woman's breasts? Even more important why a gal would want them to be touched? She wondered what they felt like? She wondered if this was part of what her Momma meant by changes? With her Momma never being able to talk to her about human development Megan was afraid. Megan wanted her honest and healthy questions answered, she wanted to ask her Momma and wanted the answers from her Momma, but she was afraid of her Momma's reaction. What bothered Megan more than these honest human development questions was the one gal asking her if she felt like a boy. Up until this moment she never once felt like a boy and never

once felt uncomfortable being a girl. With her always feeling like a girl, having a person question if she was a boy; deeply hurt her. For the first time she felt a crack in her own personal self awareness. She felt she needed to know what a lesbian was. She was now curious on why two women would want to kiss one another.

Megan was determined to block out all her feelings and have fun with her two friends. She was thankful when she reached her baseball. As she picked up this ball she buried all her thoughts and feelings about human development and any question related to being a boy into her now ever growing Pandora's Box.

Megan threw the ball to Leonard.

Ashleigh was determined to stay in the water of Devils Lake. This water normally remained cold until the first week of July, and this depended on how warm the previous April and June were.

Ashleigh would look up at the two giant hills on either side of the lake and to her these could have been the Rocky Mountains. To anyone who lived near a mountain range these two large hills would be very mundane, but to anyone living in Wisconsin and the surrounding states these hills were a very popular natural attraction. The State of Wisconsin was smart enough to make this lake, the hills, and the surrounding area into one of the largest Wisconsin State Parks.

The reason Ashleigh wanted to stay in the water was the fun she experienced in the last hour and half. This fun started with Bob and his friends running into the water acting all tough and diving into the water. The young ladies found it funny when these young men received a blow to all of their ego's. The water was cold and as much as these guys tried to act like it was of little importance all the women knew this cold water was a shock to them. In contrast it took Patty, Janna, and Ashleigh about ten minutes to get accumulated to the water. Shaye walked up to her knees and decided this was enough swimming for her and stepped out of the lake. Once the girls were in the water the boys started to grab and dunk the girls. At first Ashleigh thought maybe the boys were going to hurt her friends but Ashleigh quickly realized they were playing and the girls were having fun as well.

Bob and Al taught Ashleigh how to hold her breath under water and once Ashleigh could handle holding her head under water Bob and Al started to gently dunk her. Ashleigh found this fun and wanted more; this led to the boys gently throwing her. Being thrown felt great for Ashleigh and she wanted to be tossed around some more. This game ended when she freaked out when Bob accidentally tossed her a little too high and too far. Patty immediately grabbed hold of a crying Ashleigh and reminded them she was just a little girl. Al and Bob personally apologized to Ashleigh for throwing her too far. Patty and Janna asked Ashleigh if she wanted to come in, they both hoped she would say yes, but Ashleigh was determined to stay in the water. Once she felt okay and was no longer scared she asked her big brother Bob to throw her again.

Instead of having Ashleigh tossed around Patty decided to take her into the deeper water. This was both exciting and scary for Ashleigh, but Ashleigh felt big because she was in the deep area with the big girls. There was a moment when Ashleigh became afraid and she ended up choking Patty. Luckily Patty was a modest young woman who wore a one piece. After Patty was choked another time they decided to go back into the shallows where Ashleigh was asked if she wanted to come in; right away Ashleigh wanted Patty to set her down.. Patty and Janna no longer could take the cold water and left the lake, they slipped on t-shirts, wrapped themselves in beach towels, slipped on sandals, tied up their hair, put on sunglasses, and sat on a large blanket just passed the beach.

After watched Ashleigh pick up rocks and drop them back into the water. The guys started playing catch with the football. Ashleigh yelled to Patty telling her she saw little fish. They acknowledged Ashleigh and again asked Ashleigh if she wanted to come in. Ashleigh was grateful they actually spoke to her but she was having too much fun and stayed in the water. What added to her fun was when Ashleigh and a girl her age became friends they started to build a sand castle and a river to the lake. The play time ended when the mom recognized how cold her daughter was and dragged her from the lake. Ashleigh was disappointed her friend left. She sat down in the water and again played with the pebbles and rocks in the shallows. Ashleigh sitting there watched as Will, Roy, and Scott stepped out of the lake. Janna and Shaye on Patty's okay followed these young men and they started playing beach volleyball. They chose the first of three evenly spaced out, man made beach volleyball courts that were maybe thirty yards away from the beach line.

Patty wanted to play volleyball but felt responsible for Ashleigh and stayed sitting near the beach line. This caused Patty to consider what her Mom was telling her. Patty observed Ashleigh having a great time splashing around and every so often picked up a rock and came running up to the beach to give her a rock. This ended when Patty asked Ashleigh if she wanted to stop swimming and go to the playground toys with her. Ashleigh replied, "No," and ran back into the lake and no longer came out of the water to give Patty rocks.

Al: left the water, grabbed his beach, towel talked to Patty, and when Shaye came over from playing volleyball; the two of them gently kissed. After a brief conversation Al knew enough to leave these two woman alone.

Patty was finally warm and unwrapped herself from the towel and set her sunglasses down on the blanket so she could talk to Shaye.

Shaye was sitting next to her best friend

"So what's up?"

Patty answered, "Watching Ashleigh."

The two ladies looked over the lake and both were surprised to see Bob gently swim over to Ashleigh instead of coming out of the lake to play volleyball. Patty and Shaye knew for a fact Bob never seemed to pass up any competition especially if this involved board games and sporting events. It was obvious to Patty and Shaye they were cold, and Patty felt Bob was ready to leave the water, but it was equally obvious Ashleigh was somehow having fun in the cold water.

Shaye broke the silence, "She's a cutie."

Patty smiled and looked toward Bob and Ashleigh.

Patty asked her best friend while holding back tears, "Why would her own Mom hit her? Look at her."

Shaye could feel what Patty was thinking and feeling.

"Her mother just resents the fact Ashleigh was born."

Patty responded in kind with, "We're taking care of her."

Shaye nodded her head and turned away from Patty and looked out onto the small lake.

Patty and Shaye watched as Bob was playing boat with Ashleigh. This game was where Ashleigh would climb onto his back as Bob supported himself by walking on his hands. The fun part for Ashleigh was every so often the boat would "sink." Ashleigh would get dunked, quickly stand up, laugh, and want to repeat this action.

Shaye answered, "Oh."

Patty stated, "She's better with us."

"Do you really believe you can take care of her?"

Patty was annoyed her friend would talk like her Mother, "Bob has money."

Shaye tried to talk to Patty about this before and met a brick wall but this time

something seemed different.

Patty changing the subject asked, "What's going on?"

Shaye answered Patty's question matter of fact, "We're going to hike up the hills. We're hoping we'd all go as a group."

"We'd want to go as a group," Patty answered. "Ashleigh likes you."

Shaye smiled, "She likes everybody."

"I'm not sure she likes Scott."

"Does anyone like Scott?"

Patty felt bad about criticizing someone else and mentioned, "He's a good guy."

Shaye made a face.

Patty was looking out over the lake and became upset and put on her sunglasses. Shaye who was watching Patty asked; "What's the matter?"

Patty became emotional watching Bob and Ashleigh pick up rocks from the shallows of the lake and they would discuss the rocks. Ashleigh was relaxed and enjoying herself; this was worth all the trouble of taking Ashleigh on this trip. Patty felt her potential boyfriend was acting like an excellent father and husband.

Shaye asked surprised watching him be patient and gentle with Ashleigh, "Is that really the Bob I know?"

"He's like that with me," Patty mentioned. "He's like this with Ashleigh all the time."

They both knew this was a rebuttal to Shaye's earlier question. Shaye critiqued the situation by saying, "He needs to act this way all the time."

Patty answered, "I'll convince him."

Shaye doubted Bob was ready for a relationship, she felt he needed to deal with the hurt that was haunting him from his first girlfriend. Shaye wanting to support her friend mentioned, "He's very good with her. He's one of the few males she is not tentative around."

"I know," Patty answered with a smile, "I feel he'll be a great father one day."

Shaye was suspicious of Patty's tone and gently reminded Patty, "Remember Ashleigh is not yours and you're not married yet."

Shaye observed how this comment bothered Patty. This in her friend's stiffing body

Patty responded with, "We're talking about it. I know Bob can be difficult but he has great qualities."

Shaye and Patty were friends for years and Shaye knew how far to push her friend. Shaye with more of a submissive tone asked as gently as she could, "I know he loves you and you'll most likely marry Bob. But Victoria is never going to allow you to take her full time unless something bad happens. I'm not saying anything will. But Victoria is a strong woman. I bet your Mom is worried beyond belief at this moment."

They looked at one another and Patty wanted to disagree with Shaye, but Shaye was her best friend.

Patty mentioned in a panic remembering her promise, "I have to call her from Bob's car phone."

"Good idea."

Patty and Shaye briefly glanced out over the lake.

Al from a distance asked, "Are you going?"

The girls turned around and could see everyone but Janna was being impatient. The girls looked at one another, Shaye responded, "I'm going to get out of this suit."

Scott, obviously clueless yelled, "We're only going hiking."

"Exactly," Shaye yelled back giving him a face.

Al with wisdom looked at Scott and whispered, "We might as well change out of these suits and we can play until they're ready."

The guys took Al's advice and headed back to the vehicles.

Patty and Shaye watched as Janna walked over.

Patty said, "I have to get her out of the water."

Shaye smiled, "I'll wait."

Patty: stood up, nodded toward her friends, wisely took off her sandals, she took off her t-shirt, and headed toward the lake

Janna asked, "Where is she going?"

Shaye answered, "Going to get Bob and Ashleigh out of the water."

Janna watched Patty approach Bob and Ashleigh.

Janna asked very sincerely, "Can anyone get Bob to do anything he doesn't want to do?"

"No," Shaye answered matter of fact. She changed her mind, "His Mom."

They glanced at one another and made faces they both could read.

Janna who went to Patty and Shaye's youth group suggested in a joking matter, "Maybe we should pray."

Shaye and Janna laughed but Shaye wondered if this was what it would take to get them out of the water.

Patty stopped at the water's edge and glanced over at the few brave families swimming in this lake, she took a deep breath and as she stepped into the lake; the water felt like little needles hitting the skin. Her body insistently reacted by making her shiver, her body produce goose bumps, she became very aware of her bodies reaction to the water, and her modesty took over; she was embarrassed and wished she would have left her t-shirt on.

"Bob," Patty stated folding her arms over her chest as her body shivered.

"Yea," Bob looked up.

"We're going hiking," Patty yelled hoping to encourage Ashleigh to leave the water. Ashleigh: made a face, stood up, turned, and looked at Patty. the water was waist high on Ashleigh, she was shivering, and her lips were turning blue but she still said, "I don't want to."

"It'll be fun."

Patty tried to say this in a convincing tone, but standing in the cold water stopped her from sounding convincing.

Bob took note of patty's situation and stood up and walked off the beach to where Shaye was sitting on the blanket.

Ashleigh started to cry.

Patty could not help herself and even though the water was ice cold stepped forward,

"You don't have to cry."

"He left me."

"He'll be back," Patty answered, "He's getting ready to go hiking and..."

From behind Patty heard, "Here."

Patty turned around.

Bob was holding her t-shirt and her towel.

Shaye was surprised Bob could act like a gentleman.

Patty grabbed the t-shirt and immediately put it on and Bob gently wrapped her body in a beach towel. This meant a great deal to Patty. In Bob's hand was Ashleigh's beach towel.

Bob commanded, "Lets dry you off and go hiking."

This shocked Patty and Shaye.

"I don't want to."

"It'll be an adventure."

Her eyes became big and she asked, "Really?"

"Yea," Bob spoke, "It's like climbing a magical mountain without the magic."

This sounded interesting to Ashleigh, "Will there be unicorns?"

"No," Bob answered honestly and walked up to his little sister and picked her up. This was the first time he ever picked up his sister, he was always very careful on how he handled her.

"But you see the birds in the sky? And you see all those people walking up the side?"

"Uh huh."

"When we're up on top you will see the water." Bob pointed as a train passed between the lake and the hill, "Look at the train."

"A train," Ashleigh responded, "At my new house there's a train."

Patty's eyes went wide.

"I bet Blake would love for you to help."

Ashleigh shook her head out of fear.

Patty and Shaye were surprised when Bob was able to carry her onto the beach and heard him support Blake, "Blake is a very good guy. He'll always be nice to you."

Patty deeply appreciated Bob supporting her family.

"What do I tell you?"

Bob set Ashleigh on the ground and handed Ashleigh's towel to Patty.

Ashleigh shook with being cold until she felt Patty's gentle hands wrap her towel around her.

"Don't be scared but be smart."

Ashleigh was unable to fully understand what this meant, but she knew this was what her Big Brother would want to hear.

"When we hike up those stairs we need you to be smart."

Ashleigh was listening to her big brother.

"One of us will be right behind you the whole time while we're trekking up those stairs. You never go off the rocks. I'm wanting you to take your time and go up one stair at a time."

Ashleigh shook her head yes.

"If you hear a rattling sound I'm going to need you to stop. This rattling sound is created from a snake called a rattlesnake. It has a very vicious...."

Patty mentioned, "Bad bite."

Ashleigh nodded her head.

"Patty is correct. If you get bit by one we'll have to take you to the nearest hospital. Okay?"

She nodded her head and was afraid.

Bob answered in a fun voice, pointing to the two large hills, "This is all part of a real life adventure."

This comment made the rattlesnake seem interesting to Ashleigh.

Patty added, "If you hear this sound you stand real still and tell us."

Shaye heard this conversation and held in her fear. Personally she was unsure of this camping stuff but she liked how Bob helped Ashleigh handle her fear. She recognized the wisdom in this saying and would later use this advice when she worked with children.

Ashleigh answered, "Hu Huh."

Bob asked with excitement in his voice, "You ready for an adventure?"

"Yea!"

Patty instructed, "We have to go take a shower and change."

The guys were changed and wearing shorts. While waiting they played volleyball.

Patty encouraging Ashleigh reached out her hand, "Let's get going."

Ashleigh liked adventures and grabbed hold of Patty's hand, "Okay."

Patty took Ashleigh's hand and led her to the shower and changing area. Ashleigh felt

big when she was able to walk with Janna, Shaye, and Patty. She felt grown up when they allowed her to join them in the big person shower. She could not change and shower fast enough, but the big girls made sure Ashleigh's hair was brushed and she was wearing proper attire for camping. Ashleigh was given brand new hiking boots exactly like Patty's, the only difference was Ashleigh's boots had pink shoelaces in the boots.

Ashleigh was hungry.

This temporarily stopped the group. Bob bought everyone an ice cream at the vending stand and souvenir shop. Ashleigh loved all the attention she received while sitting at the picnic table eating her ice cream.

End of Part Three

Tuesday, June 6th, A Scary Place

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*Ashleigh & Megan
Book I: Friendship*

*Tuesday, June 6th
A Scary Place*

(6 Years, 2 Months, and 1 Day Since Ashleigh's Birth)

Part Four of Four

*Authored By:
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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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June 6th, A Scary Place

(6 Years, 2 Months, and 1 Day: Since Ashleigh's Birth)

Megan was happy she could easily cross the Eastbank River on the new bridge on the new section of Highway IA1. The Eastbank River was a north and south running river that paralleled the ocean. This river connected to the Warrior River. The Warrior River flowed east and west and connected to the ocean; it divided Eastbank into a northern and southern sections. Or as some townspeople consider it the older and newer sections; with the southern section being older.

This new section of IA1 split from Highway One creating a three corned intersection. Directly behind Megan was: the bridge crossing the Eastbank River, twenty yards of newly built road, and a newly created three corned intersection. One of these intersections was IA1, the second was slightly curved road named Crossway Avenue, and at the other side of this intersection was Highway One. If a traveler was driving north on Highway One this road split into a boulevard twenty yards after this intersection; it remained a boulevard until a half mile outside of town. If a traveler was traveling south on Highway One; just passed this intersection and before reaching the bridge the road merged. It remained this way until reaching the southern border of Eastbank where it again split into a boulevard. If someone was to travel north on Crossway Avenue: it went north east for fifteen yards, curved straight north, followed the Eastbank River for two miles, and then it turned in a north west direction. Where the road crossed a newly constructed and expanding subdivisions, open country, crossed Highway One again, passed a growing industrial park, and out of town.

With Megan traveling east on IA1 it headed directly toward the ocean but then made a ninety degree left hand turn. Everything behind her to the three cornered intersection was a brand new road. From the point she turned left this section of road at one time stopped right here and it was a private nameless road. This road traveled in front of a string of mansions built between the 1920's and 1940's. The people who owned these mansions were more than happy having PO boxes where their servants picked up the mail at the post office These mansions were built on land between the ocean and the Eastbank River. The owners of these mansions were happy it was difficult for people to reach these mansions by car. The way to reach these mansions by car was to drive north on Crossway Avenue until reaching a road

named Swamp Road, they turned east to this nameless road, then turned south to the mansions. This nameless road was on the edge of what was recently made into a nature preserve and the beach. With this now being Highway IA1: the road was widened, Highway IA1 was extended north passed Swamp Road to the next northern town, a bike path was being added on the east side of the road, three outlooks were being added, and a small park and ride was being built where IA1 met Swamp Road; which was now a T intersection. The Town of Eastbank was planning on shutting down the current lighthouse (this was between the beach and the marina), their plans were to add a lighthouse near the ninety degree turn, they were already adding to the public beach, their was plans on adding parking, and there was rumor the people who owned a private pier were donating it to the town of Eastbank. Once this happened the town was planning on rebuilding it and expanding the public beach to this pier.

The Town of Eastbank were able start this project because the last original owner of the mansions passed away. The people stopping the township from these projects were the wealthy and often times famous people who owned these mansions. They coveted their privacy. This started to change as newer larger mansions were being built on the western part of town and in the southern town bordering Eastbank. As these owners passed away or moved to these newer mansions the older mansions were bought by companies and owners who turned these mansions into time shares or short term vacation homes for the wealthy.

As a local she often times biked on it this private road; it was much easier to bike on it now. She often times glanced over at the construction crew putting in the bike path on the east side of this road. She was looking forward to when this was finished. While glancing she noticed a large vessel headed south on the ocean. She focused forward as she neared the marina where her Daddy docked three of his charters.

When the marina was maintained by the wealthy owners of the mansions it was the most prestigious marina in the county. As the owners passed away and sold their mansions this marina fell into disrepair. The clubhouse was abandoned and the four buildings on this property were crumbling. Before the Town of Eastbank sold this property to the State of Florida, Mike, a close friend of Megan's Daddy, purchased the marina. Without Megan's Daddy this transaction would have never taken place. With this road now being a public road her Daddy moved his three charters to this location.

She turned left into the marina.

This entrance was on IA1. The two piers of this marina were in the Eastbank River. Between was an awful parking lot. To the right of this entrance where the clubhouse once stood, was a brand new house and office. Based upon: the brush piles, cut down trees, and a huge pile of cut wild grass; Mike was in the process of clearing land behind his house on what he considered his property. His goal was to put in grass and a large fence. The reason these two things were in the planning stage was because of a debate between himself and the State of Florida on where his property ended. There was a discussion if the Town of Eastbank owned this side of the Eastbank River or the State of Florida owned it. Both had different plans on how to handle the bank of the river. To the left of the marina were three new buildings and room to build a fourth. On the left border of this marina was a large abandoned mansion. Megan was aware Mike took out a loan and purchased this property. His plan: was to remove the mansion, add garages, storage unites, and a third pier.

To Megan's right, ten yards from the entrance, and twenty yards from Mike's house; Mike and two men from church were putting in a new double row of mailboxes. This allowed the postal service: to easily pull up to the mailboxes, drop off the mail, turn around, and leave the marina. With the preserve now being protected land this would be the last thing built from here to Swamp Road.

Megan assumed her Daddy was busy or he would have been helping. Mike and his

helpers were about to pick up a row of brand new mailboxes attached to a newly stained two by eight.

Mike acknowledged her by saying, "Howdy Megan.

Megan answered, "Howdy."

She assumed as long as she was quiet she could watch. She enjoyed observing these men pick up these mailboxes and secure it onto cemented in two by fours. She wondered what would happen if someone crashed into this setup. This is when she noticed a heavy duty guard rail. She rightly assumed one of Captain's friends were able to get Mike an old section of road guard rail.

Megan observed birds flying toward the preserve. She was overjoyed the State of Florida made this area a nature preserve. Everything she loved about nature was in this area: a long bluff, shoreline, waterfowl, seals, sharks, fish of all type, sea turtles, dolphins, and every so often whales.

The ocean itself was a love of Megan. Since Megan was old enough to wear a life preserver she wanted to be with her Daddy on the ocean. While spending countless hours on his charter Megan observed: his hard work, helping the local police, she enjoyed it when he would talk to his Coast Guard buddies, his concern for his passengers, and how he treated both the rich and the poor with equal respect. This is where she embraced the values of life and faith.

This is where she took on the value of balance. She understood how much fun the ocean could be, but she experienced the ocean when it tested a persons: faith, wisdom, courage, instincts, and patience. What helped Megan respect and maintain responsibility; was by observing her Daddy never letting enjoyment overshadow his wisdom, his integrity, and his experience. Her Daddy taught her how faith was a key to getting through the storms of the ocean and the storms of life. Her daddy never boasted of the miraculous actions he took to get through a storm; instead he would humbly apologized for putting everyone in harms way. Her Daddy was teaching Megan how to survive the ocean when it was a scary place.

There were other lessons she was learning from her Daddy. She witnessed how being honest with people always seemed to work out in a person's favor; even if in the short term lying seemed to be the best answer. She took on the value of treating others with respect no matter what the color of their skin was, or what their economic status was. An important lesson Megan would never loose was how to enjoy life in its fullness without taking advantage or purposely hurting another person. This being stated, not a single sane person would ever want to start a fight or hurt any of Captain's friends or family; especially the two women in his life. He was a man who strongly believed in justice and protecting others who were unable to protect themselves.

Megan turned her attention to the mailboxes. She watched for a while. She held a short conversation with these men before politely saying her goodbyes. She fully sat on her bike and headed to the first pier. She enjoyed dodging and jumping over the pot holes in the driveway and parking lot.

When she focused forward, parked alongside of the first pier was a pristine white Cadillac Limousine. She slowed her peddling as a large muscular gentleman stood in front of the vehicle. Megan instantly understood why Ma wanted her to stay away from the marina. Her Daddy was hosting a charter for his boyhood best friend's father. This man was a leader of a very powerful underworld family who retired in the Town of Eastbank. Twice a year Captain, Captain's best friend, and the influential father where just friends. Her Daddy often times politely turned down the offer to work for this organization. With mutual respect they somehow maintained their friendships. In any other town or city this would have been an uneasy situation but with the unwritten "treaties" within the borders of Eastbank they could

maintain their friendships.

Megan decided to stop at the front of the pier. Normally she would have biked down to to the charter her Daddy was on and felt free to step onto this charter. Based upon the activity on the charter she would have helped out, entered her Daddy's office, or would sit on the bridge; she was always careful to never get in the way. She stepped off her bike and put the kickstand down and decided to sit down on the edge of the parking lot. Here she could observe: the river, the preserve, and what was happening on the pier. Any other time she would have biked home but she had a strong need to visit with her Daddy. She wished she could have walked along the river but her Daddy forbid her to walk or bike along the preserve by herself.

Sitting in this spot she waved to a couple friends of her Daddy who were fishing in a boat along the bank of the river. Later she waved at Frank and Florence, a couple who moved into this marina a month ago; their houseboat was only a few vessels away from one of her Daddy's charters. While waiting she went to her bike grabbed sunblock from out of the brown milk carton: she rubbed it on her legs, arms, and her face.

The man in the suit stepped to the edge of the parking lot and asked in an upper east coast accent, "U's Megan?"

She turned from watching the guys fishing on the river and in a respectful tone answered; "Yes sir."

Megan observed this guy open the back door of the limo and someone from inside the limo handed this man a sweet iced tea. Megan was very polite and waited. The iced tea, the straw, and the lemon on top looked awful tasty.

Very politely the man stated, "It's an ice tea. Nothing will happen to U's."

Megan cautiously walked up to him and stated, "Thank-you sir."

He smiled and went back to standing at his post.

Megan wanted to ask some questions but wisely remained quiet and went back to her spot. Megan enjoyed the ice tea. When Megan finished she very politely stated, "Sir Y'all want the glass back?"

He smiled and waved her over.

Megan stood up and walked the glass over. Megan observed this man's nod and nodded back.

She was about to head back to her spot when she heard her name being called, "Megan!"

She observed a group of men walking on the pier toward the limousine. Her Daddy gave her a look. She smiled a big dimple smile but nothing was returned. She knew she was in for a reprimand but was far from being in trouble. Behind her Daddy was her brother Duke. Next to Duke was their family friend Jake. Her Daddy's best friend was close by. Being a tall black man made him difficult to miss. Owen and her Daddy were friends since Vietnam. Near Owen was another friend of Dukes. Megan recognized Captain's childhood friend and this man's father. The father had white hair, was wearing shorts, an expensive Hawaiian shirt, and white tennis shoes. This was the person who called out to Megan. Around these two gentleman were two other older gentlemen and three men who dressed and acted like the man who gave Megan the sweet iced tea. Both of these men were pulling large coolers with wheels. Megan immediately knew the fishing trip was successful.

The grandfather commanded, "Young lady U's come down here."

Megan gazed upon her daddy, he nodded his head, Megan walked very politely and as lady like as she could to this group of men.

When she reached the group Captain who was a tall man gently put his hands on his daughters shoulders and Megan without hesitation allowed her Daddy to gently lead her

toward the limousine.

Everyone was quiet until the grandfather spoke to Megan in an upper east coast accent, "I've heard Us' been helping my granddaughter with softball?"

Megan made a face and looked up at this intense looking man, "I've been helping' a lot of gals play softball."

Everyone laughed.

Megan wondered why everyone laughed.

Captain explained Megan's comment, "My gal likes helping' the team."

The grandfather smiled.

"I'm hearing U's enjoy playing pitcher. It's my understanding U's put a lot of pepper on the ball."

Megan smiled her big dimple smile and with a happy tone responded, "I have more strikeouts than any other gal in the league." She thought for a second, "I strike out the guys too."

Again the group laughed. They all began to talk among themselves about many topics.

Megan wondered why they laughed. To her pitching against boys and striking them out was a great accomplishment.

They reached the front of the pier and the big guy next to the limousine opened the door for the grandfather, the son, and the two other powerful retired family members. They were about to step into the limousine but the old man stopped.

This influential man spoke in an approving voice, "It's appreciated U's helping my granddaughter."

Megan answered very respectfully, "Yes Sir."

This man smiled, "I'll be seeing U's pitch soon. U's won't let them down?"

"No sir."

This gentleman mentioned to his crew, "There's a girl with confidence."

Captain understanding the layers of this comment asked as a command, "Duke could you take Megan back to the charter?"

Duke gave Captain a look and Captain's best friend Owen nudged Duke.

Duke understood and spoke to his little sister, "Lets prepare for the next charter."

"Young lady I'm looking forward to watching you play," the grandfather commented as all the men stood around. Megan noticed how their body language was now far more intense than a few moments ago.

Very politely she answered, "Yes sir."

Duke gently turned his baby sister around, Megan followed her big brother down to one of the three charter's her Daddy owned. Soon Jake arrived to help.

This happened while Captain and this grandfather had a serious discussion about Duke.

Ashleigh lifted her small leg up to the next rock stair step. She looked over to her right; the train tracks looked far away and the lake seemed to have shrunk. This seemed odd to her because when she was swimming in this lake it felt large to her. The people walking on a path next to this large hill seemed tiny.

Patty spoke behind her, "In a few steps we'll stop if your tired."

With boldness she declared, "I'm not tired."

Ashleigh looked up this path of man made rock stairs and marveled at how it twisted and turned up the hill. This path so far went around big rocks, went in between trees, sometimes the trail became a regular dirt trail and after a short time the stairs would start

again. She liked seeing squirrels, rabbits, birds, and Bob pointed out small things she would have never considered to be anything. This was an adventure and with Patty and her brother behind her she never once felt scared.

Ashleigh wanted to catch up to everyone else but Bob and Patty banned her from running up these stairs. She was scolded repeatedly for wanted to run up ahead by both Patty and Bob. Ashleigh took this reprimand pretty serious because Bob never yelled at her.

Ashleigh lifted her leg up and put her little foot on the next stair. She liked looking at her brand new hiking boots with the pink shoe strings. What she liked about these boots they were smaller versions of Patty's boots; except Patty's shoestrings were bright red.

This was helping Ashleigh recognize the difference between her Mommy's surprises and other people's surprises.

Ashleigh heard Janna yell down to her, "Keep coming. You should see what everything looks like from here."

Ashleigh wanted to run up the stairs but she heard Bob say sternly, "No running."

Ashleigh with determination moved a little faster and almost fell, she would have scrapped her knees but would have stayed on the trail; Patty was the one who kept Ashleigh from falling by gently guided her up the next step.

Ashleigh protested, "I can do it."

Patty was getting tired of hearing Ashleigh say this every time Patty kept her from falling but Patty answered with patience, "You're doing good job."

Patty shook her head and made a face Ashleigh was unable to see.

Ashleigh simply loved this real life adventure.

Victoria was standing in front of the sliding doors in her kitchen holding onto her baby. She was watching Blake dig a hole; laying on the ground wrapped in an old blanket was Maxine. The love hate relationship she felt toward this dog went full circle. When Victoria woke up this morning she was relieved they were putting the dog to sleep, but now after the dog came to their rescue, she was feeling a strong affection for their family pet. Watching her husband Blake digging this giant hole next to her flower garden was very troublesome. Victoria was contemplating the idea of getting another dog but she simply had enough of: taking a dog out for a walk, feeding it, vets, and cleaning up the messes out in the back yard. She started to cry when she watched Blake step out of the hole, pick it up, and set it into the grave. It was terribly upsetting to watch her husband start to fill the hole with dirt.

What was bothersome to Victoria was how upset her husband appeared to be. He was a tried and true strong willed person who very seldom showed the emotion he was displaying. Victoria felt her husband would be a basket case without her and knew for a fact she could get along just fine without him; but she wanted him beside her. Blake was a very good husband and father. Victoria knowing her husband suspected some of the tears he was shedding were related to their foster daughter. Her impulse was to walk out and comfort her husband, knowing her husband, she just stood at the sliding doors watching and waiting.

Victoria stepped back and glanced at the kitchen clock. Victoria knew exactly how long it took to get to Devils Lake and Victoria was well aware her daughter should have arrived at Devils Lake a long time ago. Victoria decided she'd give them the next hour to call or she'd make Blake take them to Devil's Lake. Victoria felt if she was the one taking Ashleigh camping everything would have been fine. What bothered Victoria was the three to four hour distance between them. The other reason Victoria wanted to drive up to Devils Lake was to keep her oldest daughter from becoming pregnant.

Victoria again walked up to the sliding doors and studied Blake, he was more himself

but there was still a pile of dirt he was transferring into the hole. She grabbed Felicia's teddy bear printed baby blanket from her baby carrier. Felicia woke up for a few seconds, but went back to sleep as Victoria gently held her. Victoria opened the screen door and was delighted to feel the warm gentle breeze.

When Victoria reached Blake she avoided looking into the hole.

Victoria commanded, "We should get them."

Blake was dirty, he was wearing an old button shirt, and was wearing an ugly pair pair of blue jean shorts he should have thrown away years ago. He looked up at his wife and waited.

"She's going to end up pregnant and she hasn't called. We should drive up there and get them both."

Blake gently pointed out a fact, "Patty is eighteen."

"She's living under our roof."

"I agree," Blake said simply, "But there isn't anything we can do to stop her if she wants to have sex. All we can do is pray and hope she stays a virgin. There is the possibility she's already had sex."

Victoria faced this awful blunt truth by saying, "She's my daughter."

Blake responded in a very practical manner, "She's able to make her own decisions."

Victoria felt Blake needed to be more supportive.

A tone filled with anguish, "So you feel she's sleeping with him already?"

"I didn't say they were."

"I thought that's what you said?"

Blake knew: his wife, she was upset, he blocked the view of the dog, and she would need to get it all out in the open.

"I don't like Bob. He's so arrogant and he's changing her and the thought of him sleeping with our daughter infuriates me."

"We have to trust her."

"How come you let her go? We need to go and get them. She promised me she would call me. How come she hasn't called me?"

Blake looked at Victoria.

His lack of response frustrated Victoria she wanted an answer.

Victoria in a more angry tone stated, "Why hasn't she called?"

"They're probably having a good time."

"What happens if something happened to Ashleigh? What happens if they release her Mother and she goes up there?"

"They..."

Interrupting, "She's gotten away with hurting our little girl before."

Blake being supportive stated, "We're doing everything we can."

Victoria wanted to cry but she was so upset she was unable to cry, "She doesn't know how to swim. We need to get Ashleigh into swimming lessons."

Blake replied gently, "I think this would be a good idea."

This helped Victoria, "You know Stacy from our woman's group?"

"Yea," he was unsure of who this was, but this was his answer.

"She's putting her daughter into swimming lessons at the school for the summer. You feel this would be a good idea?"

"Lets get Ashleigh signed up. Maybe this will help her make friends."

Without looking at Maxine Victoria admitted, "Her best friend was Maxine."

"Maybe we should get another dog."

"No!" Victoria answered with some authority. "I'm not interested in having another dog"

around here.”

Blake proposed, “Maxine was helping Ashleigh maybe a puppy would even be better.”

“I’m aware of how Maxine helped and hindered Ashleigh. I don’t want to add a dog into this house,” Victoria added with some intensity, “Especially with the baby.”

Blake smiled.

“Are we going to get them?”

“How about if you let me finish this. I’ll take you out to dinner. After dinner if they still haven’t called we’ll go and get them.”

Victoria made a face. She knew the ploy and answered, “It would be dark by then.”

There was an awkward silence. Both adults were trying to figure out what they should say without having this lead to an argument. During this brief silence Victoria checked on her sleeping baby and made sure Felicia was covered by the blanket.

“Okay let me finish this, we don’t want Ashleigh to see her best friend laying here,” Blake purposely added this comment, “and then we’ll go up and get Ashleigh.”

Victoria made a face, “Okay. But we’re not getting another dog.”

Felicia lifted her head. Immediately Victoria supported her daughters head and turned Felicia around to see her Daddy. Blake was going to touch Felicia but he heard, “Don’t think for one minute your touching our baby with those dirty hands.”

Blake smiled.

Felicia smiled in response.

Very serious Victoria laid out the plan, “After your shower we’re getting them.”

“We can’t force...”

“Okay,” Victoria interrupted. “Hopefully there were will not be another baby in our house. And by some miracle Ashleigh hasn’t been kidnapped.”

Victoria turned around and headed toward the house.

Blake understood his wife and when he would come back into the house she would apologize, but he was mentally preparing himself for a three hour drive to Devils Lake. While burying his family pet he prayed: Patty would have enough sense to call her mother, he thanked God for the dog, Ashley Vindavane would remain in county jail until the trip was over, Ashleigh would be safe, and Patty would remain a virgin.

Victoria opened the sliding doors and stepping into her house and looked over at the answering machine. Victoria gave her daughter a half hour to call or she was determined to end their camping trip. At this moment she was angry at herself for allowing Bob to take both her daughters on this camping trip. Felicia started to get fussy. Victoria: shut he blinds, sat in her chair, calmly feed her baby, and started the half hour countdown.

She made a face at her own inspired thought of calling them. This idea was infuriating to Victoria but she would listen to this thought, but if they were unable to answer she was would make Blake drive up to Devils Lake. She was intending on bringing Patty and Ashleigh back; but she was considering the discussion she just had with her husband. It would have been unfair to force Patty home but she would take Ashleigh home. She made a face, when in the stillness of the house, she considered the idea Ashleigh was safe and having a good time.

Megan gently took her mitt and ball from her Daddy. She watched as Captain carefully picked up her bike and set it into the back of his six year old, two toned, blue Ford F-150 pick up truck. This six year old truck was very sentimental to him because it was the first brand new vehicle he ever owned. This truck transported everything from dirt to scuba equipment. In every trip was a memory, it was impossible to recall every memory, but he remembered

enough of these memories to keep this workhorse of a truck running.

Megan looked down at the ground after Captain set the bike into the bed of the truck.

Captain instructed his daughter, "Young lady you need to get into the truck."

"Yes sir," Megan answered with a very disappointed tone.

After her horrible ordeal in the park all she wanted was to be around her Daddy.

As she made her way around the truck. She touched the white line between the dark blue top and the light blue bottom of the truck, she purposely touched the white lettering printed on the tailgate of the truck one letter at a time; F, O, R, D. When she reached the passenger side she opened the door and reluctantly stepped into the cab. She slouched down and put her mitt and brand new ball on her lap. She was aware this posture was something her Daddy would dislike but the world felt like it was crashing all around her.

This feeling of the world crashing started in the early morning with her Momma ransacking her clothes without warning. She was feeling like she was being sucked into some dark pit with how evasive her Momma was with any of the questions she asked. The teenagers at the park were miserable and confused her. Meeting Simon would have been fun but she was unsure of the feelings she felt toward him. The best part of the day was seeing her nephew and her Sister-in-law. The day was now dreadful as she was being driven home instead of being able to stay on the charter with her Daddy.

Megan looked over at her Daddy as he opened the driver side door. She decided by his posture and look she better sit up straight.

Captain stepped into the truck. His long legs were stretched out as far as they could, his red Coast Guard baseball cap touched the ceiling of the truck, he was wearing a plain blue button shirt with a white tee shirt underneath, he was wearing plain blue shorts, and he was currently wearing his plain white sneakers without socks. His skin was weathered and tan. At six foot three he looked tall and skinny but he was deceptively strong and fast.

His deep blue eyes studied his daughter.

Megan seeing the disappointment in her Daddy's eyes caused her to look down at the floor of the truck.

There was a moment of silence.

She was preparing herself for a talking too.

He began speaking, "Baby Girl."

She no longer liked being called Baby Girl and she expressed this before, but she knew this was the wrong time to tell him.

He began the meat of his discussion, "I ain't mad 'cause you came down here. I've always told you..." He paused to remove his cap, this expose his dark straight hair, and he again put his hat down. "You could come on down here. I even allow you to come on down here when Y'all are working on homework. I ain't said a thing with you studying' while sitting in the charters galley. Ain't that right?"

Megan knew there was only one acceptable answer, "Yes sir."

Megan was assessing how much trouble she was in. This assessment included: how many times he moved his hat, how he was looking at her, and she was paying close attention to his tones. It was easy for Megan to tell he was irritated. She was relying on the fact her Daddy could easily separate one issue from another, and of course he was his Baby Girl. Megan knew Captain was upset Duke because he was now working for Captain's friends. What compounded the temperamental mood of Captain was Ma radioing the charter and asking if Megan was there. This led to Ma yelling at Captain for allowing her to stay when as Ma spoke in a sarcastic tone, "...his Friends were at the pier..."

Captain and Megan glanced at one another.

Megan in an honest gesture looked down at her feet.

"What's getting me' is Y'all ignoring Ma's wishes."

He paused and again lifted and set his hat on his head, "Why ain't the two of you getting along? It's starting to feel like a ticks crawling under my skin."

She was about to answer but Captain answered some of what he thought.

"I'm getting the fact Y'all are growing up and becoming a lady and this can be difficult on a momma and a daughter. I was a witness to this growing up with you're auntie and my momma. I was hoping my house wouldn't have this pressure cooker." He made a face. "I'm supposing' I'm just needing to survive it." Captain looked at his Daughter, "But this ain't giving you the okay to start disobeying Ma."

Megan was not sure what to say.

"I's remember you two were two peas in a pod," Captain mentioned, "Why ain't you talking to Ma? Is there something happening a Daddy should know about?"

Megan answered this question with frustration and intensity, "She ain't answering my questions. She says I'm to young to be asking the questions I'm asking."

This confused Captain. By accident he opened a can of worms when he asked, "What sort of questions are Y'all asking? I'm sure Ma would answer any them?"

Megan crinkled her forehead and bluntly blurted the question out, "How does a baby get into a Momma's tummy?"

This was a question Captain was completely unprepared to hear from his Baby Girl. Captain was always open and honest with his boys when it came to sex. As soon as his sons asked him sexual questions he was ready to give age appropriate questions. He always emphasized how he believed a good man treats a gal with respect and never pressures a gal to do anything while emphasizing his belief a good man is willing to wait until he's married to have sex. Being wise he informed them waiting was very difficult. What stumped and surprised Captain was he never expected his daughter to ask him a sex related questions.

He sat there.

Megan witnessed her Daddy having a strange and confused look.

Megan with more frustration in her voice asked her Daddy again, "Daddy how does a baby get started in a Momma's tummy?"

In a surprising gentle tone he asked, "Why are you asking?"

Megan observed her Daddy's look of worry, even in the face of a hurricane her Daddy never looked worried, this frightened Megan.

They sat in the truck looking at one another.

Captain lifted his hat again wiped his brow, "It ain't right for me to be telling Y'all."

"Why?" Megan asked frustrated, "Y'all answer all my questions"

"This is something a Ma needs to be telling a daughter." Based upon his daughters exasperation he asked, "What is she saying?"

Megan's dimples flashed and her face became a scowl, "She's saying I'm to young to be talking about babies in Momma's." Megan looked at her shoes and then back to her Daddy, "Ma says I'm suppose to be learning how to to be a lady. Daddy Y'all feel 'm a lady?"

He took off his hat and scratched his forehead while still holding onto the hat.

Megan remained quiet and waited for him to answer.

He answered truthfully, "Y'all are a fine young lady."

She mentioned with a frown, "But I do boy things."

"Just because Y'all like doing boy things doesn't make Y'all a boy. The reason Y'all are good at boy things is because your my Daughter. Steward's were always good at sports. It ain't surprising me Y'all are loving the ocean and wanting to play sports. Your auntie liked playing sports."

Megan made a face, "Really?"

"She sure did. She could put a good whipping on some of the boys in the neighborhood too. When it came to playing ball and running she was as fast as a rabbit running away from a fox."

She was surprised her Auntie behaved this way.

"I'm thinking," He paused and thought about his words, "What Y'all will be finding important will be changing in the next few years. Changes will be coming soon."

Megan instantly protested, "I ain't interested in changing. I'm liking how things are."

"Honey everything changes and we need to be adapting to these changes."

With her Daddy telling her this she took it to heart, but she would contemplate the meaning later.

"These changes is something Y'all need to talk to Ma about."

Megan's dimples flashed in disappointment because she was just about to ask him about these changes.

He again raised his hat and put it back on his head, "When it comes to those women things. You need to trust your Ma. If she thinks Y'all should wait then Y'all will need patience and wait until she's ready to talk to you."

"But..."

He interrupted, "Megan I ain't telling you where a baby comes from it ain't a Daddy's place to be telling his daughter about those things. Y'all need to wait until Ma is ready to talk to you."

"Megan asked, "Make Momma tell me."

"This ain't up to me," Captain answered, "When your Momma is ready she'll talk to Y'all about babies and growing up. Y'all know Ma. She ain't telling until she's feeling Y'all are ready."

Because her Daddy always answered any question she ever asked this subject was even more frightening.

Captain on purpose changed the subject and went back to what he started the conversation with, "If Ma ever says you ain't suppose to be coming down here you better listen."

Megan replied, "Yes sir."

"I was thinking about bringing you down here after dinner," this was his way of saying she would have ended up here anyway and should have listened to Ma.

This added to Megan's disappointment she loved watching the sunset on her Daddy's charter; she especially liked the sunset near the preserve and the river.

Captain smiled, "What I'm thinking is tomorrow I'll take Y'all on the scuba expedition and after we'll head on down to the island I found. I'm believing you'd enjoy spending the time on the charter."

Megan perked up and answered, "Yes sir. May I ask a new friend to come along."

"Who's the friend?"

"His name's Simon."

"The new family who just moved into town? The lady who's starting another one of those tourist shops?"

"Yes Sir," Megan replied, "But she ain't just selling tourist things, she'll be selling flowers."

"Don't we have one of them already?"

"Daddy we could always use another one."

Again he lifted his hat and scratched his forehead, "I reckon I ain't an expert on flowers."

"Nicole likes em',"

He smiled, "She bring over a plant again?"

"Naw," Megan answered, "But Momma and her were visiting today."

There was silence in the truck.

Captain changed the subject and mentioned, "I'd need to go and talk to Simon's Daddy before he can go fishing with us."

"Yes sir."

This was normal procedure for riding on Captain's charter. Once this person stepped onto his charter they would receive a safety speech. What Megan liked was he gave the same speech to everybody. It was comforting to her to hear it again and again.

"We'll need to be heading home."

He turned the key and the V8 engine started up, he hung his left arm out of the open drivers side window, and started the drive home.

Megan was looking forward to the next day. She was really curious about this uncharted island, there were a few around, but having Captain discover one made this particular island special. She loved any charter where scuba diving was the emphasis. She was looking forward to the day when she was old enough to take scuba lessons; in the mean time she was learning as much as she could.

Megan looked out the passenger side window as they drove out of the marina parking lot. She stopped looking out the window when her daddy pulled over to the left. Megan watched as Captain parked alongside of the new mailboxes.

Megan noticed the second set of mailboxes were up. Megan liked how one set was in front of the other with the back one taller than the front one.

Captain called out of the window, "Hi Y'all."

Mike responded, "Howdy."

Megan watched Mike walk up to the pick up truck.

"I see it's coming along."

"It's looking better but there's a lot to go," Mike was now in his mid thirties, his belly was starting to grow, and his hair was starting to thin. He smiled and stated "Howdy Megan."

"Hi Y'all."

Mike commented, "Y'all ain't your self today."

Megan shrugged her shoulders.

Captain become serious, "I've been thinking about the plans Y'all have cooking."

"Yea."

Megan heard Mike's tone of hope.

"I was talking to the construction company my sons were working for these past couple summers."

"Yeah."

"Joe was saying if Y'all are patient and willing to wait until he's not so busy he'd work on this here marina."

Mike answered in complete honesty, "After buying the property and paying for the wrecking crew I ain't having the money put up six to seven garages. I'll have it in a couple years."

"Joe's aware of the situation and with Y'all being a man of your word he's willing to work with Y'all." Captain pulled off his hat and put it on again, "What he's thinking' is you'd pay em' when you get half the money for a single garage. Based upon your word you'd finish paying em' a little at a time and if he gets extra materials. He'd start the next one. By using the extra materials his company doesn't use he'd keep the cost down. With me knowing Joe he won't short change Y'all. He just gets big projects and sometimes theirs a change in plans and he's left with materials. He ain't one to be wasting anything. Them garages will be

withstanding the strongest winds. I'd assume it would be okay if the garages ain't looking exactly the same?"

Megan heard deals like this everyday. Megan turned and looked out the window of the cab and started to envision what the parking lot would look like when the mansion was removed and the new buildings were up.

"I ain't worried about the garages looking exactly the same. I'd appreciate just getting some strong standing buildings up. Whats a concern was the measuring we were doing today and I miss calculated. I need to be rethinking the second and third piers and where I'll put the garages." Mike stood up from leaning on the truck and looked over the landscape and leaned back on the truck, "I reckon' the parking lot really doesn't need to be growing any. I'll have to wait on the garages and just go with the idea of sheds."

Megan being polite said, "Daddy."

Captain and Mike looked over at Megan.

Megan stated the obvious, "Ain't the parking lot a mess?"

"Honey," Captain corrected, "We've all been driving' on this here lot."

"I'm always avoiding the holes with my bike when I'm coming in here," she again mentioned something obvious. "I've been hearing people complaining about no where to store things."

Captain answered with patience and a smile, "Baby Girl this is what we're discussing."

Megan became quiet out of respect but was seeing the parking lot looking different.

Captain offered to help his friend, "Y'all could make money with storage units."

Mike answered, "The sheds wouldn't be to expensive."

"We could ask for volunteers from church to come down here."

Megan feeling the need to express her vision, "Why not have em' make the driveway into a parking lot and have them help you make the parking lot bigger."

They looked at Megan and Mike answered, "Megan this ain't a short driveway and making it larger ain't easy."

Megan made a face and stated a fact, "But Daddy and the guys from church put in Ms. Nelson's driveway?"

Captain commented, "Baby Girl you have to understand the driveway was a lot smaller than this here parking lot."

She knew to be quiet but she was really studying the parking lot and the property where the mansion was.

"Home Depot," Mike started to say, "Has em' pretty cheap and I'd appreciate the help putting them up. I'd at least..."

Megan was feeling an inner pressure to express what she was seeing, "Y'all should put another one of them garages up. Over yonder Y'all could put in storage units. While they are being put up Y'all could put in a couple sheds Y'all could take down. Y'all should make parking spaces for when people are visiting or they ain't wanting a garage."

Mike started, "Honey I know Y'all..."

Captain looked over at his daughter, lifted his hat and put it down on his head again and asked, "Baby Girl what Y'all seeing?"

Mike was surprised at Captain's reaction and looked strangely at Captain.

"I was seeing Y'all from church putting in a new parking over there," She was focused and intense and pointed out the back of the truck, "I was seeing a fence protecting the marina."

They stared at her.

Captain turned toward Mike, "I could talk to a guy and get us the material needed to make a parking lot here."

"I'd be much obliged if the men's group would be helping' me."

Megan was bursting at the seams and pulled on her Daddy's shirt.

Captain smiled and turned to look at his daughter and even before he could say anything she spoke, "I was feeling' people would feel safe. They'd start telling their friends about this place and you'd have yachts docked here."

"Honey," Mike asked in shock, "Were you hearing me talk to the guys about my future plans while we were putting in the mailboxes?"

"No sir," Megan answered matter of fact. "I was just seeing it."

Captain smiled and asked Megan, "Are you seeing anything else?"

She wanted to say more but Captain always told her when she was having one of her visions into the future to only express what she was seeing and never add a thing.

"No sir."

Mike asked Captain, "What are Y'all thinking?"

"I'm believing I'll get Joe and we could figure something out," Captain mentioned, "I'm needing to go home for a bit. But I'll be coming back to prepare for tomorrow's charter. Just come over and we'll talk."

"I'll look for Y'all," Mike said with a smile. Before he stepped away from the ruck he looked over at Megan, "See ya' later alligator!"

Megan quickly replied, "After while crocodile."

Captain winked at Mike, Mike nodded his head, Captain looked at his daughter and instructed her, "I need you sitting and buckled up."

She looked at her Daddy, "You ain't."

He smiled and as he buckled himself in said, "I forgot."

Megan sat down and buckled herself in.

Captain pulled up to the entrance and asked, "Should we go passed the mansions or should we go driving' past the preserve?"

"Daddy I'm hoping they make the preserve bigger."

"I'm hoping too." Captain added, "This would sure help my charter."

Megan asked concerned, "Do Y'all like the preserve?"

He smiled, "Baby Girl it's wonderful seeing God's great creation."

Megan smiled her big dimple smile.

Captain was curious and asked, "Did you hear the guys talking?"

Megan looked at her daddy very seriously, "No sir. I ain't good at fibbing'."

"Was this like the time you were warning me about the storm?"

The day he was mentioning was when a seven year old Megan went on a charter with him. After only a few minutes being on the boat she told Captain a storm was coming. Captain discounted this because the sky was clear and the weather report was saying everything was fine. He ignored Megan's warning but half way through the Charter the sea became violent with very little warning. Captain barely made it back.

She asked Captain, "Daddy; I'm feeling God was showing me?"

When she was with her friends she would say she was feeling something was wrong and her close friends would listen. At church she'd tell people God was speaking to her but many discounted her warnings.

"Well I'm believing God shows you things."

"Y'all believe me?"

"Not everyone will believe what Y'all are saying."

"Why?"

Captain smiled, "People don't want to believe God talks to people any more and wouldn't believe God would be talking to my Baby Girl."

She made a face and looked out the window.

“You keep telling me when you feel God's showing Y'all something “

Megan answered, “Yes Daddy.”

Megan sighed when they made a left turn out of the marina and headed toward their house. She wished she could have spent the rest of the day with her Daddy but she enjoyed watching staring out over the ocean. She noticed a huge cargo ship heading south.

Nicole was sitting at her old desk, in her old room, and was talking on the families remote phone. On the other end of the line was a person who was in charge of military housing.

Nicole answered, “Yes sir.”

Jeff's cry pierced the silence of the room.

As a wife and mother this was the worst time possible, “Sir. I need to take care of my baby.”

Before this military man could answer, he heard the phone clunk down on her desk. This was not the first time nor would this be the last time this would happen to him.

Nicole rushed to her babies crib. When she picked him up she heard a burp and on her shirt was why her baby was crying. She looked at the shirt and sighed, she wondered how many shirts she was going to have to put in the wash today. She set Jeff back down but he started to cry again. She grabbed a towel from off a chair and wiped all the goo off her shirt and went to get her Baby. She gently picked him up. In his Momma's arms he became quiet.

“Shhh,” she said gently. Nicole was about to sit down on the bed and cradle her baby.

She heard from the phone, “Ma'am!”

“Shoot,” and she quickly picked up the phone while still holding onto her baby.

“Sorry sir,” Nicole managed to say. She held the phone between her ear and shoulder as she padded the back of her baby. She was thankful the man on the other end of the phone understood her forgetfulness. Nicole felt better when this man told her he had three of his own back home.

As the conversation progressed Nicole managed to take notes at her desk.

Every so often she would answer, “Yes Sir.”

This went on for a grueling ten minutes until Jeff started to cry again.

She apologized, “I'm sorry.”

She was trying to get Jeff quiet as she took notes. Her efforts at keeping Jeff quiet were unsuccessful until he burped again; like before goo landed on Megan's shoulder.

“Your tummy must be hurting',” Nicole said looking at her baby and was relieved her baby was quiet. She remembered who she was talking to, “Sorry sir not you.”

In the brief moment of silence Nicole wrote down the last bit of information which was an address.

“I'm sorry for sounding' so...”

Nicole smiled.

Then became serious, “Thank-you Sir.”

She set the phone down onto her desk when the conversation was over.

Jeff was making gentle noises and was transfixed on how his own hand worked.

She made a face looking at the stain on her shirt. She walked over to what she was using as a changing table and set her baby on the table. Jeff's response to his Momma changing him and making funny faces was for him to kick and smile. She put the dirty diaper in a plastic bag and set this into a covered garbage can. She changed his shirt.

The baby smiled at his Momma.

Nicole smiled back, "Y'all are a big boy."

They smiled at one another.

The smile ended when she thought about all the things she needed to get done. Nicole barely recognized the Nicole who lived here ten months ago. The present Nicole felt like she was missing a huge part of her life and this part was living on a base in Virginia. Carrying her baby she fought back tears feeling what the day would be like if he was deployed.

A worried young wife spoke out loud to make herself feel better, "Daddy will return no matter where they all send him."

She wiped away a tear. She wished she would have told him what she really felt about him going into the Marines. It was a mistake she would never make again.

She heard her Mother from the bottom of the stairs, "Dinner's ready."

Nicole yelled back like she was a child, "Yes Momma."

This startled Jeff and he began to cry.

Nicole pleaded, "Don't start crying."

She set him on a blanket on the floor and handed him a set of plastic toy keys. These keys were fascinating enough for her baby to stop crying.

Nicole walked over to her desk and flipped over the yellow lined paper and grabbed the phone as well, she bent down and grabbed her baby and headed out of her room. In her mind was a list of all the things she would need to move. She was worried about the summer class she was taking. At this moment she decided she would postpone moving until after the summer course was over. The good thing about waiting until the class was over it gave her time to prepare for the move. Thinking about this class reminded her of a paper she needed to finish and a chapter she needed to read.

She headed downstairs before her Momma would be upset with her.

Ashleigh liked talking on Bob's car phone. She gladly answered Victoria's question by stating with joy, "I was rock climbing..."

Patty grabbed the car phone from Ashleigh.

Ashleigh turned her attention to the interesting things happening at the campsite. One of the interesting things was Al making a fire and the second was her brother sitting at the picnic table. If Ashleigh would have been old enough to understand she would have heard one half of a heated conversation between Patty and Victoria; instead, Ashleigh stepped down from the Jeep and ran over to her brother.

The rest of the group, excluding Shaye who was asleep in the woman's tent, decided to hike on a trail that went around both hills.

"What's that?" asked Ashleigh as sat in front of her brother and leaned over looking at his large notebook.

Without looking up he said, "I'm in the process of writing a novel."

She asked, "Whats a novel?"

"It's a story."

"Oh."

Ashleigh was interested in the fancy pen her big brother was using. She looked at the paper in the three ringed binder. Her paper at school was brown and the lines were much wider.

"Is it about a princess?"

Bob smiled and looked up at his step sister, "You could say I'm writing about a princess."

Ashleigh asked in a very serious tone, "What's the princesses name?"

"I'd rather keep this information to my self."

"Oh," Ashleigh's tone was filled with disappointment. Normally he told her a name and an adventure would follow.

"Does the princess live in a castle? Does she ride unicorns?"

Ashleigh hoping this would get him to tell her an adventure.

Bob very calmly looked up at his sister, "This princess lives in a different type of world where there isn't any unicorns or castles." He thought for a second, "This is an analogy of a girl trying to survive in the difficulties of the real world."

Ashleigh gave him a face and wished her big brother would stop using big words.

He smiled and went back to writing.

Ashleigh said, "Bob. I wish I was a princess."

Patty and Al were watching the two of them.

Bob looked up at her and said very serious, "You are a princess to me and to the many people who love you. In all intense and purposes you are a princess.."

A princess was: pretty, people liked princess, they were enchanted, they did everything right, a princess owned unicorns, and other wonderful animals. Based upon these ideas she felt she was far from a princess: she felt she was ugly, she felt people ignored her, and she never owned a dragon or a unicorn.

She became sad.

Her brother looked into his little sister's dark green eyes and with a firmness spoke, "No matter what anyone has ever told you and no matter what anyone has done to you. Your a princess."

This confused Ashleigh but it felt nice to hear.

Patty sat down next to Ashleigh and asked, "Are you okay?"

Ashleigh asked Patty, "Am I a princess?"

With love in her voice Patty answered, "Yes."

"I'm not pretty and I don't own a dragon."

Patty answered, "You are a pretty girl."

"I don't like being little."

Patty answered, "What makes someone big is what's in their heart."

Ashleigh pleaded and tears started to come down her cheeks, "But they pick on me for being little."

Bob started, "They're picking on you because they themselves are very insecure...."

Patty rolled her eyes, interrupted, and spoke in a way Ashleigh could understand, "They feel ugly or bad and they try to make themselves feel better about themselves when they tease you."

Ashleigh thought about this, "I wish they wouldn't do that."

Patty impulsively hugged Ashleigh.

Ashleigh found comfort in Patty's arms.

This was what Shaye witnessed climbing out of the ladies tent.

She walked over to the picnic table and asked, "Ash are you doing okay?"

"I don't like being short."

Shaye rebutted, "Being short is cute."

Patty added, "Their are a lot of very cute short women."

"But I want to be a beautiful princess."

Bob stopped writing, looked up, and became serious, "Why would a princess have to be tall. A princess can be short."

Ashleigh heard the change in her big brother's tone.

"It's ridiculous to believe and think something has to be a certain way. I've never

understood the simple mindedness of people thinking something has to be done a certain way. What is especially bothersome is the idea something has a formula to success. This is the sign of laziness or bad accounting. Ashleigh,” he pointed the pen at her, “a princess doesn’t have to be tall. I believe a short princess can be just as effective than a tall one.”

He smiled.

The two women at the table were giving him the oddest of looks and Ashleigh simply wished her brother would stop using big words. The one thing she understood was her brother thought she was a princess.

He asked the two women staring at him, “What did I say?”

Patty answered, “It was your tone.”

“Yea,” Ashleigh was unsure of what she just agreed too.

Shaye added, “You should really start listening to how you sound.”

Bob's answer was, “It's not my fault people can't handle looking beyond a few inches passed what they're taught. It's frustrating at how...”

Shaye interrupted, “See you’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

The young ladies were now angry, in this anger Patty commanded, “Ashleigh lets go to the park.”

There was a small park at the end of the road, it was essentially in the middle of four different roads leading to four long sections of camp sites.

Bob raised his hands and asked, “What did I say?”

Al was smiling.

Patty ignored him and spoke in general, “Lets go to the park.”

Al called out, “We’ll be eating soon.”

Patty took Ashleigh's hand.

“Okay,” Shaye answered in return.

Al mentioned for Ashleigh's benefit, “We’re having lasagna.”

Ashleigh looked over and saw a small flame and a huge crock pot. This pot looked like something a witch would use. Ashleigh wondered if he made magical potions in this pot. She hoped there was a magical potion to keep bears away when everyone slept. She was sure he was teasing her about having lasagna, lasagna came out of an oven in a glass dish.

Shaye smiled at her boyfriend and answered, “We're looking forward to it.”

Ashleigh looked back at her brother and he waved to her.

Ashleigh with a smile waved back.

Ashleigh pulled away and yelled, “I want to go on the slide.”

Patty yelled, “Don’t run ahead.”

Ashleigh stopped and waited for the two big girls. These young women started talking about Bob and in a way Ashleigh was unable to understand what and whom they were talking about.

Ashleigh was delighted to play on the playground toys of this park. They stayed in this little park until Shaye and Patty saw the guys and Janna coming back from their hike. They all headed back to the campground, each hoped the lasagna would taste good.

Ashleigh was beginning to enjoy camping.

Megan was given the task of washing dishes and she was grounded for the rest of the night and the next day as well. Her Daddy promised Megan he would take her to the uncharted island before the end of the week. This still left Megan disappointed because Megan wanted to help with the scuba outing. Megan felt miserable doing dishes.

What added to Megan's disappointment was when she heard her Ma say to Timmy and one of his friends, "I want you home before breakfast"

Timmy easily agreed and was allowed to stay over night at a friends house.

Megan would have given anything to stay over night at one of her girlfriends houses.

For the most part Megan felt most of her girlfriends were boring but she still enjoyed their company. Megan heard the front door close.

There was a two tubed sink in the Steward kitchen. Megan was more in front of the first tub filled with soapy water, to Megan's left was the dirty dishes, to Megan's right was a second tub with a small level of rinse water covering a few plates. To the right of the second sink on the counter was a plastic drying rack for all the washed dishes. She picked up her brothers plate and food was still stuck to it. She could never understand why her brothers never rinsed their plates. Megan was certain the only man in the house who ever rinsed a plate was her Daddy.

Ma stepped into the kitchen.

Megan glanced over at her Ma and looked back at her brothers plate.

Ma approached Megan: Ma reached in and grabbed a plate from the tub with the rinse water, Ma inspected the plate, opened the bottom cupboard, took out a drying towel, wiped off the plate, and set this plate into the plastic drying rack.

Mother and daughter were angry at one another. In times past the two would have started to talk about anything and everything.

Megan was irritated with trying to wash her brothers plate.

Megan observed Ma put a dish she already washed back into the tub of soapy water.

"If they'd rinse..."

"Now you hush," Ma reprimanded, "You'd not be grounded if you'd listened. I told you not," she emphasized the word not, "to go over to your Daddy's charter today."

Megan said, "Nothing will happen."

"Something could have happened and I don't want my only daughter to get hurt."

The idea of anything bad happening while she was with her daddy seemed to be the dumbest idea Megan ever heard and expressed this feeling, "There ain't anything bad happening with Daddy there."

Ma interrupted with a tone, "You can't just continue to be reckless. You need to start washing these better."

Megan caught the frustrated tone and watched as Ma put a plate Megan thought was clean back into the tub of dish water.

Megan sighed, her dimples were clearly visible, and she commented, "I saw a dishwasher at the thrift store."

"We ain't getting a dishwasher."

Ma was frustrated on how everyone of her children suggested to purchase a dishwasher.

Megan mentioned, "You bought em' for the houseboats."

Ma would use this statement as a teaching tool, "The houseboats are different. Before you go and ask me what's the difference," Ma snapped. "The houseboats are an investment. The people renting' from us should be getting' the best we offer."

Megan asked with sarcasm, "Why can't we get the best we offer?"

"We are," Ma answered. On impulse Ma wanted to put a plate back into the first tub, instead she just rinsed it a little better and set the plate into the dish rack. The plate clanked. Megan made a face when she was finally done washing her brothers plate. She took one last look and dumped it into the water tub. Water splashed up. Megan quickly looked down into her wash tub pretending to miss the fact the water splashed up.

Ma took this plate out and managed to say, "It's looking better."

Megan heard the tone, but replied somewhat nicely, "Yes Ma'am."

Ma looked at her daughter with love, "When I was growing up I remember it feeling like I was rubbing on sandpaper. But it's all part of growing up. So I'm understanding how difficult things must be feeling for you."

Megan's dimples showed, she crunched her forehead together, and concentrated on her plate, but acknowledged Ma by asking, "It was?"

"It's difficult for a youngin' to grow up to be a lady."

Megan replied with fear in her voice, "I don't want to grow up to be a lady."

Megan managed to put a bowl into the other tub.

Ma rinsed another plate and set this plate down into the drying rack.

Ma answered "Growing up ain't all bad."

Megan stopped and looked at Ma, "I ain't looking forward to any changing."

"You can't stop it," Ma answered with wisdom, "Y'all are already starting to change."

This freaked Megan out, "How am I changing?"

Ma took the bowl out of the second tub, they stood in front of one another.

"Remember how you used to hate working with plants?"

Megan stopped and looked at her Momma.

Ma continued, "But now you have a plant in you're room."

Megan smiled, "Nicole gave it to me."

Ma asked, "Are you taking care of it?"

"Yea, I'm watering it like Nicole taught me."

"This is showing responsibility. Taking care of a living thing ain't easy."

"It's just a plant," Megan answered dumping a third bowl into the rinse water.

Ma wished her daughter would see what she was trying to teach her.

Megan asked with hope, "Does this mean we're getting a puppy?"

Ma made a face.

Megan knew what this face meant. Megan would keep trying. Megan wanted a dog ever since she started to hang out with her friend Debbie-Lynn; there were three dogs on Debbie-Lynn's farm.

There was silence as the two worked together doing dishes.

"I'll do the pots," Ma commanded. "You wipe the dishes in the rack again and set em' on the side."

"Why do we wipe em' twice?"

"It's the way we do em'."

Megan answered without sounding snotty, but it sounded snotty to Ma, "Captain says there's more than one way of doing anything."

"When you're running' your own house you can run it anyway you want. Young lady you're in my house."

"It's my rules..."

"You want to be grounded for a week?"

This would have been horrible.

"No Ma'am."

"Just 'cause Y'all are upset with staying here ain't given you the right to be smarting off.

You ain't old enough not to receive the spoon." It took half a second for Ma to be holding a wooden spoon, "You understanding young lady?"

Megan cringed and answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Megan purposefully turned her body in such a way where hitting her in the butt would be slightly more difficult.

Ma noticed and felt the threat was good enough.

Megan wiped the dishes in the drying rack and was flabbergasted on why they dried them twice. She was watching her Momma wash the kettle she made the spaghetti in.

Megan thought she would ask, "Can I..."

Ma interrupted, "It's may I."

Megan made a face and replied nicely, she was still remembering the spoon. "May I have Debbie-Lynn stay over."

Debbie-Lynn was Megan's best friend. At one time Debbie-Lynn's sister Amy-Lynn was dating Jimmy just before he asked out Amy-Lynn's best friend Nicole. Amy-Lynn was smart enough to understand Megan and Debbie-Lynn were caught in the middle so Amy-Lynn treated Megan well. This rest of the family treated Megan well because they respected Megan's willingness to work on the farm without complaint. The work on a farm needed to get done no matter who visited the farm. With Megan having such a good attitude she ended up coming over to the farm more than any of Debbie-Lynn's friends. The tasks given to these girls were different for ten year old girls but they were tasks just the same. There was times when the animals on their farm mated. At this time in her life she never made the connection sex, was the same as animals matting.

Ma answered matter of fact, "I ain't letting' you have any friends over."

Hearing Ma's tone Megan was smart enough to accept this ruling without any questions.

Ma put the clean kettle into the rinse water and looked at her daughter and asked, "Why are you thinking I'd let you have a friend over after the way you've been acting today?"

"You let Timmy stay at a friends."

"If Timmy would've disobeyed me. He had his chances of disobeying. He'd be staying here with Y'all. The two of you could've been to miserable cats sitting in a kettle of water." Ma gazed at Megan, "Tonight there is only one cat sitting in a bucket of water because Y'all decided to visit Daddy's charter."

In the silence they studied one another.

"Honey; it ain't like you to be disobeying me? Why'd you go down by your Daddy?"

Megan shrugged her shoulders.

Ma answered, "Y'all are acting like a scared chicken with a fox outside of it's coop. What's eating Y'all?"

Megan blurted out, "I was teased at the park today."

Ma's tone changed, "Playgrounds can be a hurting place. What happened?"

Megan felt safe to feel upset, "They thought I was a boy."

Ma looked at her daughter and crunched her forehead, "You ain't a boy. But what are you expecting with you hanging out with boys all the time and doing all the things boys are doing."

Her Daddy was more reassuring.

Ma turned very nice, "You've been hanging around your brothers and your Daddy as long as you were knee high to a grass hopper. This has been an influence on your uprising'. This ain't meaning Y'all are a boy. Your my daughter. It ain't nice what you kids are saying to one another."

Megan felt comfort from this and at the same time felt, based upon her Momma's tone and body language, she felt she was doing something wrong.

Ma asked, "Where they calling you names?"

"They called me a..." Megan needed to think of the word, "The one gal asked me if I was a lesbian. What's a lesbian?"

Megan witnessed her Momma's look of shock and almost panic.

"I'll finish here. I'm wanting' Y'all get into your room."

Megan in a voice of desperation asked, "What's a lesbian?"

"You never mind what it means. If you'd like you can ask Debbie-Lynn over. I don't want to ever hear Y'all saying such a thing."

Her Momma started to cry, the only time her Momma cried out in the open, was when she was really upset. All the kids heard her cry now and again, but she never cried in the open.

These tears frightened Megan.

With her Ma being so upset and she spoke her mind without thinking, "You kids are growing up way to fast. Y'all are a youngin' and Y'all are thinking about sex and lesbians. You just be waiting you hear?"

Confused she answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Ma began to rant, "I'm doing my best raisin' four kids. I'm knowing the worlds falling apart the way everyone's talking about sex. It just ain't proper. Especially for a youngin' like you."

"Yes Momma."

The conclusion Megan made was if sex could get her Ma this upset sex must be very dangerous. The idea sex was completely dangerous helped Megan's Pandora's Box grow. Megan was now afraid of the whole topic of sex.

This was far from Mary's intention Mary being human had a human moment.

"I'm seeing so many girls delivering babies when their babies themselves..." Ma realized what she was saying, she gained control of herself and looked at Megan, "Y'all forget what I was saying. You can call Debbie-Lynn and if she's needing a ride we'll go pick her up."

"Yes Ma'am."

What this little accidental outburst did was connect a couple dots for Megan. She knew sex and babies were connected. Megan was clueless to what a lesbian was, but after Ma's reaction she was afraid of what this word meant. Megan took all her healthy sexual curiosity and wrapped this curiosity in a tight ball and buried these healthy feelings and put them into her personal Pandora's box; this tight box of emotions and feelings were now sealed with fear and tension. This all happened in Megan's subconsciousness; her conscience mind was unaware she did this.

Wanting Debbie-Lynn to come over before her Momma changed her mind she called her friend.

Ma put a restriction on their fun, "You two can't be going outside."

Megan was disappointed in this but at least she could have a friend over.

Megan picked up the receiver of the phone dialed her friends number. Megan was delighted to hear Debbie-Lynn could come over.

Mary hoped her daughter would just forget about this whole conversation. Mary understood within the next two years she would have to talk to Megan about the basics of human development. Mary hoped all this talk about sex and homosexuality would go away until then.

Megan informed Ma after hanging up the phone, "Debbie-Lynn's Momma is bringing her here."

"How's her Momma doing?"

Megan made a face, "She's treating me like she used too."

"I'm glad theirs healing taking place. How's Amy-Lynn?"

"She has a boyfriend."

"Amy-Lynn's a good girl and should be with a good man."

Megan decided to keep her question to herself.

Ma wondered, "Does Amy-Lynn treat you nice when you Y'all are visiting Debbie-

Lynn?"

"Yes Mamma."

"Y'all get ready for you're friend,"

"Yes ma'am," with this Megan ran into her room.

Megan was already planning out the night. One of the things she was planning was staying up late telling scary stories. Megan hoped she would hear a new story about the skunk ape. Debbie-Lynn's Daddy and a couple of his friend would go looking for it.

Megan felt this day was difficult but it was ending positive. Megan assumed Debbie-Lynn would end up staying for a couple days and Megan would most likely end up on Debbie-Lynn's farm for a couple days. Megan felt this was a great way to start summer break.

Ashleigh was holding onto a long stick Bob and Patty helped her find; on the end of the stick was a marshmallow. She sat close to Patty, Bob and Patty were holding hands. Ashleigh liked the fact they were being nice to one another after the argument the two of them had after dinner. Ashleigh was used to big people arguing but she never heard Bob and Patty argue before. The difference between the fights her Mommy would have with people; was Bob and Patty never threw anything and after the argument was over Bob and Patty continued to treat Ashleigh nice.

Ashleigh liked how the campfire was keeping her warm. The June breeze was cool enough for Patty to make Ashleigh change into pink joggers, a blue sweatshirt with a horse head print on it, and made her put on her light pink jacket; all bought by Bob after Ashleigh washed her new clothes.

Patty nudged Ashleigh, "Your marshmallow is going to start on fire."

Ashleigh pulled it out of the fire.

Ashleigh made a face when Bob blew out the flame.

Bob teased, "You should cook them to the point of well done."

Ashleigh assumed this meant burnt.

Janna who was sitting on Ashleigh's left whispered, "I hate marshmallows when they're burnt."

This confirmed what her brother just said.

Patty asked, "You want help?"

"I can do it."

Shaye shook her head. She was sitting across from Ashleigh and next to Al, they were one step away from cuddling.

Ashleigh tried to touch the marshmallow and it was hot and said, "Ou."

"Here," Patty instructed.

"I..."

"It's okay," Shaye mentioned, "We feel you've been a big girl all day."

Patty and Shaye smiled and winked at one another.

Roy gently put more wood onto the fire. Ashleigh watched the sparks go up into the sky and looked up at all the stars; Ashleigh loved all the stars.

Patty gently stated, "Here."

Ashleigh took the marshmallow from Patty's fingers and ate it.

"Icky."

Ashleigh disliked the goo on her fingers.

"Here," Janna pulled a napkin out of her spring jacket and wiped the marshmallow off of Ashleigh's fingers.

Bob asked, "Did you want another one?"

“Uh-huh.”

Ashleigh watched as Bob reached for her stick. Ashleigh handed it over to him and he gently put another marshmallow on the end and handed it back to Ashleigh.

While this was happening everyone was enjoying the conversation.

Ashleigh was paying close attention to everyone. She liked how everyone was talking soft and enjoying one another. At six she already understood the reason for everyone's good behavior was because everyone was drinking soda, bottled water, or lemon aide.

Al observed Ashleigh was listening and studying everyone but no one was directly talking to her, so he asked her, “Did you like the lasagna?”

With a large smile she said, “Uh huh.”

All took note of her smile.

“Shaye asked, “Ash.”

Ashleigh looked at Shaye, “What did you like best about today?”

Excited, “On top the mountain.”

“Honey,” Patty tried to rescue the marshmallow, “watch...”

To Ashleigh's horror her marshmallow fell into the fire. She expected to get yelled at and started to cry.

Patty encouraged, “It’s okay.”

Scott handed Ashleigh a bag of marshmallow's and mentioned, “We have more.”

Ashleigh looked at everyone.

Janna pointed out to Ashleigh, “Look at the marshmallow bubble.”

She sheepishly wiped away a couple tears and Patty helped her put on a new marshmallow.

“Mine falls off too.”

Al let his catch fire and fall into the campfire.

Ashleigh smiled and now felt better.

Shaye showed she approved and snuggled up to him.

Will followed suit by grabbing his marshmallow and throwing it into the fire and exclaimed, “My marshmallow falls off too.”

Ashleigh laughed

Janna whispered to Will.

Ashleigh was thinking about taking the bag of marshmallows and throwing them in, but after the whisper Will stated, “It was naughty of me to throw one in like that.”

Janna smiled and winked at Will.

Janna hoping to distract Ashleigh from throwing the whole bag in asked, “Have you been to campfires before?”

“Uh-huh.”

Scott asked, “Were they fun.”

Ashleigh made a face.

Shaye asked, “Did your Mommy take you?”

Ashleigh shook her head yes.

They all glanced at one another.

“Let me help you,” Patty said and moved Ashleigh over to a part where the fire was just a little bit farther away.

Ashleigh let Patty help her.

Patty asked, “You like the fire.”

“Uh-huh.”

She was concentrated on the marshmallow making sure it would never become a torch and fall in again.

Scott suggested to everyone, "We should tell ghost stories," and managed to add, "Bob you tell the best ones."

They all gave Scott a face.

Al; on Shaye's prompting stood up and told Scott why ghost stories were out of the question.

Ashleigh looked around the dark woods and now wondered if a ghost would come out. The fire was very nice, she liked the stars, and the half moon; but around her was the dark forest. She imagined a lot of things coming out of the shadows of the forest. She moved closer to Patty. Because Ashleigh put the marshmallow on the stick it quickly fell into the fire. Patty reached for the stick and made sure the next marshmallow was secured onto the stick.

In Bob's way he put Scott in his place, "On this trip we're not interested in frightening anyone."

Scott was looking at Ashleigh as Al whispered to him.

Ashleigh picked up on a few of the big words and replied, "Yeah."

Ashleigh hoped this new marshmallow would stay on the stick.

Patty took the bag of marshmallows and behind Ashleigh's back passed the bag back to Janna. Janna quietly stood up and collected the bags. She explained to Will why she was taking the bag. He made a face. Bob gave Janna the second bag and his keys; Bob and Will observed Janna walk over to the Jeep Cherokee to put the marshmallows away.

Will suggested, "How about if we sing instead of telling scary stories."

Ashleigh asked while Patty was wiping marshmallow from Ashleigh's fingers, "Can I have another one?"

"Tomorrow okay?"

Ashleigh smiled.

Bob was making sure, "You want to stay?"

With a smile she answered, "Uh huh."

Ashleigh heard and watched Roy start to tune his guitar. This was exciting to Ashleigh.

"Wait," Shaye requested, "I brought mine."

Ashleigh watched as Shaye stood up and walked over to the Jeep and pulled out her guitar. The group became a little more quiet and serious. Ashleigh wondered if someone was angry with someone else, instead the group starting to talk about other people and themselves. At six she was unable to understand what everyone was saying or requesting. What fascinated Ashleigh was Shaye sat down and put the guitar on her lap. This was the first time Ashleigh saw a girl play a guitar. She watched closely as Shaye and Roy tuned their guitars together. The two of them mentioned different songs. Ashleigh was unfamiliar with the titles but as soon as they started to play and sing the songs she recognized these songs from her Big Brother's church.

Ashleigh was feeling tired but wanted to stay up with all the big people.

Patty encouraged Ashleigh to sit on her lap; Ashleigh without question crawled up onto Patty's lap. Ashleigh sang the first two songs. The third one she just listened too. She was able to stop herself from falling asleep during the fourth song because she sang the song. After the fourth song they stopped singing and they all prayed for one another. During this time she was dozing off until she heard: Will, Scott, Janna, Al, Shaye, Patty, and Bob all mention her name. This felt very special to her. A prayer Ashleigh understood and hoped God would listen to was when she heard Shaye ask God to protect them while they slept.

After this prayer Al asked Ashleigh, "Ashleigh is there anything you'd want us to pray for?"

Ashleigh was surprised they would ask her what she wanted to pray. She felt God would ignore her prayers because she felt she was a naughty girl. Ashleigh shook her head no.

Patty said, "God likes to hear girl's pray."

Al smiled and added, "You can pray to him any time you'd like."

Ashleigh thought about the times she prayed to God underneath her bed; based upon these prayers she was unsure if God listened to her.

Bob for once spoke very simply, "God does love you."

This was hard for Ashleigh to hear.

In a gentle tone Patty said,, "If you don't want to pray you don't have to."

Ashleigh became shy and cuddled up to Patty.

Ashleigh felt special when Al said one last short prayer for her. After praying for Ashleigh he prayed everyone would have a restful and safe sleep; it bothered her a guy like Al would pray for protection. When he was finished everyone said A-man. This is when Ashleigh clearly understood they were going to sleep overnight in what they called a tent. This was when Devils Lake State Park became a scary place again.

What was even worse was when the young women took flashlights and walked Ashleigh to a pit toilet maybe twenty yards away from their campsite. Ashleigh felt scared going in this odd toilet at night, during the day was one thing, but it felt scary at night.

When they came back to the campsite it was obvious to Ashleigh they were going to go into the tent, Ashleigh protested by saying, "I'm not tired."

Patty ignored Ashleigh for a moment and left her standing next to the tent.

Ashleigh watched as Bob and Patty hugged one another and they talked in a whisper for a few minutes. Ashleigh suddenly felt the need to go home. This need to go home was influenced by the fact Al and Roy were putting out the fire. The flashlights were still on and this light was shining through the smoke of the campfire; Ashleigh felt this looked spooky. She watched as the others were cleaning up the campsite and putting everything back into the Jeep Cherokee or into the car.

Ashleigh grabbed hold of Patty and out of freight said, "I want to go home."

Patty tried to be encouraging, "It'll be fun."

Bob again spoke simply, "You'll be fine."

"I'm scared."

Bob became serious and questioned Ashleigh, "What do I tell you when you're scared?"

Annoyed Ashleigh answered, "Be smart."

Bob smiled, "Yes."

"But I..." Ashleigh started to say but became quiet.

Things became a little less scary when Al turned on the Coleman light sitting on the picnic table. What scared Ashleigh was when she spotted Roy, Scot and Will step inside of their big tent and turn on a light. She observed Shaye and Janna slip into their tent and turn on a light as well.

Al yelled at the two women in the tent, "The green tent is acting like a movie screen."

The light quickly went out.

Ashleigh watched as the big girls turned off their light and heard the sound of their whispers. Ashleigh could see how dark it was inside of the tent. She hoped Patty remembered to bring a night light; Ashleigh wondered where they would plug it in.

Bob knelt down to Ashleigh's level and spoke, "You'll be fine inside of your tent. Look my tent is not far away. More important God will listen to our prayers and will protect you."

Ashleigh looked at her brother and she truly wondered if God would protect her.

Bob stated matter of fact, "God protected you by having you move in with the Anderson's so he will protect you here. It's never God's will for little girls to be hit and have to be scared of their parents. People have choices and we can choose to fulfill our destinies or not. Not everything is predestined as many people believe. God allows us to have free will, but in

our intersessions God changes his mind and in his power and grace change our circumstances. This is not to say..."

"What your brother is trying to say," Patty interrupted when she noticed Ashleigh's confused look, "Is God never wanted you to be hurt. So he moved you to our house to protect you so you could be safe."

Ashleigh never thought about this.

Patty bluntly stated, "Jesus is not going to take you this far and not protect you here."

Ashleigh would never forget any of this conversation. It would take many years and a lot more conversations with Bob to understand what he was trying to say to her.

Bob mentioned again, "Remember what I always say don't be scared be smart. Right?"

Ashleigh nodded in agreement.

"You see how Al is finishing cleaning everything and look how he put the cooler in his car."

Ashleigh nodded her head again.

Bob pointed out, "This is being smart,"

Patty asked, "Do you have any food on you?"

Ashleigh remembered the rule about bringing food into the tent and shook her head no.

"We'll be fine. Plus You'll be sleeping next to me."

Al walked up to them, "Is everything okay?"

Bob whispered to Al.

Al nodded his head.

Al spoke gently, "We'll stay up for a while and protect you. You like that?"

Ashleigh was unsure but agreed by nodding her head.

Patty encouraged and grabbed her hand, "Would you feel better if we brought your doggy into the tent?"

Ashleigh shook her head, "Uh Huh."

Patty lead them to the Jeep and took the stuffed dog out of the Jeep, "Now Lets go to bed."

Ashleigh waved at her brother.

Bob told her, "You'll be fine. You'll find this is to be a wonderful experience."

Patty winked and whispered, "It will be fun. It's an adventure."

"I don't like big words."

Patty calling out asked, "Did you hear that?"

Bob's answer was simply, "I want my sister to be articulate and sound intelligent."

Patty rolled her eyes.

Ashleigh was unsure sleeping in a tent would be fun or an adventure. When they reached the tent she looked back and saw Bob and Al sitting on the picnic table. Ashleigh could hear their voices but they were too soft to make out what they were saying. In the light of the Coleman lantern, it was easy for Ashleigh to see these two men were being serious.

Janna encouraged, "Come on in."

"It's dark."

Janna turned on a flashlight.

Ashleigh stepping into the tent noticed Janna was in her sleeping bag next to hers. Shaye was in her sleeping bag laying next to the tent wall. Ashleigh was grateful she was in the middle next to Patty.

Shaye wished she was in the middle. Shaye was just as nervous as Ashleigh but because of Ashleigh she was doing an excellent job of hiding her nervousness.

The light helped but there was a lot of shadows.

Ashleigh felt the need to ask, "Wheres the night light?"

Shaye suggested, more for herself, "We could leave the flashlight on?"

Patty answered, "Just for a while."

Ashleigh watched as Patty zipped up the tent. They left the flashlight on so Patty and Ashleigh could find their sleeping clothes. When they turned off the flashlight everything to Ashleigh seemed even more scary and felt even colder. She disliked Patty helping her change clothes but she never said anything because it was dark. Ashleigh was grateful her big brother and Al left the light on the picnic table. Ashleigh: enjoyed crawling into her sleeping bag, she liked her little camping pillow, and she felt big sleeping with the big girls; and yet her heart pounded as she laid there. She held onto her stuffed dog.

She imagined a bear, a monster, or the devil showing up and attacking the tent.

Once Patty was dressed and slipped into the sleeping bag she noticed how scared Ashleigh looked.

"Ashleigh," whispered Patty. "What stories does Bob tell you?"

"We..."

Janna whispered, "In a whisper."

In a whisper Ashleigh answered, "We talk about castles and unicorns."

Shaye added, "I like unicorns too."

Ashleigh felt better with the ladies talking to her.

Shaye asked, "What happens in your castle?"

Ashleigh kept an eye on the light on the picnic table. She told them about the adventures the princess would have in this far away place. As the young women asked her questions Ashleigh's exhaustion took over and she fell asleep clutching her stuffed dog.

Patty smiled at the three ladies, she crawled out of her sleeping bag and carefully without waking Ashleigh opened the tent, and informed the men, "She's asleep."

Al answered, "All right."

Bob walked up to her and they whispered sweet nothings; this ended when they kissed one another. They separated and Patty closed the tent.

To Shaye's dismay she saw the Coleman light go out. It took Shaye a long time to go to sleep. After falling asleep, she woke up when she heard a noise, she woke Janna up in a panic. Janna explained to Shaye those were raccoon's. Janna told Shaye to go back to sleep. After the raccoon's moved on, it took Shaye another two hours to finally fall asleep. She really wished she would have been in the inside of the tent where Janna was.

*M*egan and Debbie-Lynn screamed. They effectively scared one another, they laughed as only preteen girls can laugh. They were sitting on Megan's bed using a flashlight on their faces to make their stories more scary.

They heard a knock and the door opened.

They became quiet.

Mary said, "It's late."

Megan matter of fact, "We're talking about the skunk ape."

Mary answered with a smile, "Well I'd like both of you girls to get to some shut eye."

The two girls made faces and answered, "Yes Ma'am."

Debbie-Lynn crawled onto the cot next to Megan's bed.

Megan crawled into her bed.

Ma laid down some ground rules, "I don't want to be hearing anymore screaming and carrying on'."

Megan answered in disappointment, "Yes Ma'am."

Debbie-Lynn answered, "We'll be quiet Ms. Steward."

Mary smiled, “Okay you get some shut eye. You hear?”

The girls nodded their heads. Mary smiled and quietly shut the door.

Megan put a finger in front of her lips showing Debbie-Lynn they should be quiet. They waited for what to them felt like forever, in real time was only five minutes, the two best friends started to talk again but this time it was a whisper.

Mary heard their whispers. Mary smiled. As long as they were talking softly Mary was fine. Ma prayed for both and after this prayer went to bed.

It took about forty five minutes for Debbie-Lynn to fall asleep. After realizing her friend fell asleep Megan thought about everything she experienced during the day. She hoped she would see Simon again. She thought about the differences between boys and girls. She thought about how she missed going with her Daddy. She wondered who would end up wearing the clothes her Momma gave to charity. She thought about how much fun she was having with Debbie-Lynn. She wondered what upset her Daddy. She liked seeing her brother Duke. She was happy her brother Timmy was at a friends house. She hoped she would be able to watch her nephew. She contemplated what could happen if her brother went to war. She counted on her brothers promise he would be okay. She was looking forward to the rest of summer break. She wondered how sex and babies were related.

Megan fell asleep as she planned out the next day.

End of Part Four

Day One

Tuesday, June 6th, A Scary Place

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