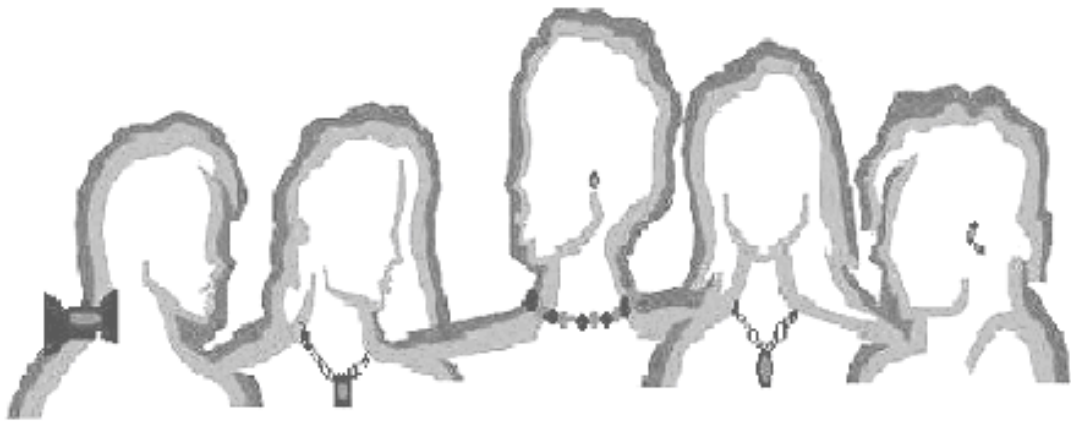


BEST OF FRIENDS



SHERY BRANTLEY

BY SHERRY BRANTLEY

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This is a work of 'faction'—a mixture of fact and fiction, with over 90% devoted to experiences which occurred with me personally. It is not meant to depict, portray, or represent any persons, group of people, or particular gender.

While the names have been changed to protect the innocent—any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or having crossed over is not coincidental.

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- Sweet Potato Pie for the Heart
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Sherry Brantley was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. She has three adult daughters. She resides in the state of Arizona.

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BY

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BRANTLEY**

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BY SHERRY BRANTLEY

POSTED ON-LINE READER REVIEWS:

4 Stars from RAWSISTAZ National Book Club!

In the *'BEST OF FRIENDS,'* author Sherry Brantley takes readers on a whirlwind excursion among these five best friends. Peppered with a bit of spiritual solace the ride, though often humorous at times, is filled with lessons on friendship, relationship-building and family dynamics. Each of the main characters could have been a book by herself. I was amazed at how Ms. Brantley was able to capture the essence of each character in these few pages. I enjoyed the time I spent and loved the lessons I gleaned from each one.

Reviewed by Brenda M. Lisbon, RAWSISTAZ.com

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Reviewed by Paige Lovitt for READER VIEWS (4/07)

'Best of Friends,' is truly an enjoyable novel. The author, Sherry Brantley has an awesome imagination which she puts to use in dreaming up plots for Liz's family to use against each other. She does an excellent job of character development. These ladies are very three-dimensional and Brantley lets you into their heads and hearts to make them seem more real. Brantley also incorporates a touch of spirituality throughout her writing. *'Best of Friends'* is a must-read for a women's reader group. This will be a fun book to discuss. It is also the perfect book for a lady that needs an evening to her self, where she just wants to cuddle up with a great story. **Don't miss this one!**

BY SHERRY BRANTLEY

A Must Read!!

By Lori S.

After reading the first few pages of 'Best of Friends,' I was hooked! I started reading the book on Friday and couldn't put it down 'til I finished it on Sunday. The storyline is infused with humor, poignant dramatic moments, and characters that are so real you feel as if you know them. Sometimes when there's division in a family it's your friends that help you keep it together and '*Best of Friends*' definitely embraces that ideal as it celebrates the friendship of these 5 incredible women. **I hope there will be a sequel!!**

Best of Friends

By kajvka

BY SHERRY BRANTLEY

I am currently reading this book and it is so interesting, that when I finish this review I will be ordering (2) two more books for my two Best Friends! Sherry I am glad there is someone like you. **I am not a Book reader but if you ever come out with another book, you better believe I will get It!** Thank You Sherry, You are definitely the Best, and Keep up the good work. Thanks!
Karla J.

Great reading! Very descriptive!

By mcbarber930

Great reading! Very descriptive. I felt like I was really there! I would love to find out what happened to the brother that "forgot" his wallet in the restaurant! Did he wash dishes or go to jail? I find myself asking questions about the characters intermittently and feel compelled to read the book again! Great job Sherry! A definite stocking stuffer this holiday season.
Will there be a sequel? Can't wait!

'Wow what a book! I could not put it down until I had read the whole book!'

By wen777

I received the *'Best of Friends'* in the mail Monday Oct. 3rd at 12:30 PM. **Started reading it about 1:00 PM could not put it down until I had read the whole book. Wow what a book! I have never read a book at one sitting before that held my attention from start to finish.** You have written a wonderful and up lifting book, much to think about and wonder why family's act the way they do. I really feel like, I knew the people in the book. You had all the feelings in the book. Happy, sad, mad, caring, loving. OK do I need to go on? In this day and time it is really nice

BY SHERRY BRANTLEY

to have friends that will stick together as the ones in the book. We all need friends like them. **Thanks for an enjoyable book. I for one will be waiting for you next book to come out.** God Bless and keep you, and his face continue to shine upon you.

Wendy V.

ONE

Elizabeth laughed as she watched one of her favorite t.v. shows. It was rare she was able to enjoy even a half-hour show these days, and she relished the moment. She was caught off-guard with the ringing of the phone, irritably glancing at the caller I.D., deciding if the call was important enough to warrant any attention. She saw the 3-1-3 area code and knew immediately it was her older sister, Donna. She grudgingly picked up the receiver, wondering what gossip Donna had to tell her, and what unlucky family member it would involve.

“Liz!” Donna shouted into the phone. “Mama’s dead! She just passed away.”

Liz was sure she’d misheard the message. Her mom hadn’t even been sick. She automatically reached for the t.v. control and put the sound on mute. Now, she could hear Donna crying, but still, she was sure it was related to something else.

“Say that again Donna. And stop crying. Shit, for a second there, it almost sounded like you said Mama was dead.”

“I did Liz!” Donna was even louder now and crying hysterically. “We both should’ve been called earlier. I got here as soon as I could. We’re at Detroit Receiving, and Mama’s gone. I didn’t even get a chance to see her

beforehand. By the time I was called, she'd already left us. They'd been coding her for two hours, but I knew immediately that it was of no use. I gave the word to discontinue the efforts. Liz... Mama's dead."

Liz's head started to swim, and she began to swoon gently on the couch. She glanced over at the t.v. set as if to confirm she was indeed, still awake—and not dreaming. *What the hell was Donna talking about, 'Mama's dead?' Who's Mama? Certainly not ours.*

"Donna," Liz began again, "You're not making any sense right now. Why in hell would Mama be dead? I was just there a week ago. She was fine. I was recording her life story with her. She was telling me about the funny shit that happened when she was growing up in Little Rock, Arkansas. I'm scheduled to go back next week. She wasn't even sick. Are you sure this is it? What happened?"

Donna seemed to take her voice down a notch or two, trying to decide which question to answer first, but it didn't change the validity of the message that she was determined to deliver.

"Liz," she stated in a military fashion, "I am a registered nurse. I have a Masters in Nursing. I teach nursing and medical procedures at the college in my area. I damned sure know when a person is dead, and believe me, she's been dead for at least two hours now. Mama said her legs were hurting her. She called Tony to tell him she was taking herself to emergency. Only when he meets her there, she seemed to have gotten worse. He called Ruby, and together they waited for them to admit Mama. Only you know how emergency rooms are in Detroit. They're worse than the army is with their 'hurry-up-and wait' attitude. And unless there is blood pouring from a wound, you'll lay on a gurney for hours in hopes someone is able to see you. That's exactly what Mama did too. And Tony and Ruby didn't call me until hours later. Almost a full eleven hours!"

Liz pictured Tony and Ruby, their younger siblings, as she slowly began grasping the full magnitude of what Donna was relaying to her. She

reached for straws as she tried to think what her own next steps would be.

“Listen,” she reasoned, as if she were about to give instructions to a child to not talk to strangers, “Let me call my boss. I’ll let him know I won’t be in tomorrow. I’ll take it off and be there for the weekend. In fact, I’ll come down tonight.”

Donna, seemingly becoming calmer by the moment just by hearing her sister’s voice, collected herself, and stated, “There’s no need for you to come now. It’s almost eleven o’ clock. It’ll take you at least an hour and a half to get here. You may as well wait until morning. No use getting on the road now. It’s not like it’ll make a difference for Mama. But remember what I told you years ago?” Donna’s voice took on a new sense of urgency, as she began to cry again. “I told you if something ever happened to Mama and she wasn’t able to call me, Tony and Ruby wouldn’t call me. They’ve never liked me. Remember how I used to always say that? And now look. Mama got sick and laid alone on a gurney for *hours* before any staff was finally able to see her. If *I* were here, I would’ve made sure they took care of her immediately. But nooooo... Tony and Ruby tried to be slick. They thought that Mama could go to the hospital for a short stay and not tell us so they could say she was sick and we didn’t visit. Only this time, it backfired on their asses. She died on them! Turns out the pain in her legs were due to blood clots. They traveled to her heart and lungs and that was it. If they’d only called me sooner. This would never have gotten to this point. Pain in your legs can be a sign of a stroke or blood clots. Their dumb-asses wouldn’t have known that, but I would’ve. But they were trying to be slick. Take control of a situation that they don’t know shit about. And look what happened. They gambled with Mama’s life and she’s the one that lost.”

Liz was a bit taken aback by this exchange. “Donna,” she asked slowly, “where are you now?”

“I’m in Mama’s room at the hospital! She shouted. “What do you

mean where am I?”

“Where’s Ruby and Tony then?” Liz asked a bit cautiously.

“They’re right here with me,” Donna answered, bravely and unashamedly.

“*Listen*,” Liz said, she began all of her important sentences with that one word. Emphasizing it, so that the listener would be sure to take heed. “Don’t speak ill of them while you’re there alone. I’m too far away to have your back, and you know how ignorant they can be. Just calm down and get the hell outta there. Just like there’s nothing I can do for Mama now, there’s nothing you can do either. Let’s put our heads together and come up with our next moves for tomorrow. I’ll be on my way in a half hour.”

“I told you,” Donna sighed as if this were the hundredth time she was giving Liz this message. “Stay there. Mama’s already gone.”

“I’m not coming there for Mama,” Liz stated softly. “I’m coming there for you. You stay at the hospital if you want. I’ll meet you at your house.”

“I dunno...” Donna stated hesitantly. “I’d prefer you wait until tomorrow. It’s no use...”

Liz interrupted her before she could finish. “I said I’m coming tonight. I don’t need permission to do so. I’ll see you soon.” With that, she said a quick good-bye, before hanging up the phone.

Two

Liz quickly dialed the home number of her supervisor. She'd never called him at home before, and certainly didn't anticipate doing so at this hour, but it would soon be evident to him the circumstances warranted it. Christina, his wife, answered on the second ring. After exchanging a brief hello with her, Liz quickly asked to speak with her boss. You could hear the surprise in Arnold's voice as he recognized who was on the other end of the line.

"Liz?" He knew immediately something was amiss. "Is everything alright? What's going on?"

Liz took a deep breath as she began to fill him in on the details.

"Sorry to call you at home, and at this hour. This will come as a shock so... I'll just say it. My sister just called me from Detroit. My mother just passed away." She paused for a brief moment to let the news sink in, wondering what his response could possibly be. But what does one say with unexpected news such as that?

"I'm sorry to hear that," he stammered. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, but thank you. I just wanted to let you know that I'm leaving

tonight, so I won't be able to be at the office tomorrow."

"Of course not," he readily agreed. "Take the time you need." Then with an awkward pause he asked, "Is there anything of any significance that needs to be done? I mean... I could get Leeann, from the clerical unit to help out."

"No, no need for any of that. I'm actually ahead in my workload. I just don't spread that kinda news around too often. You might get the wrong impression that I'm Wonder-Woman or something and really load me down," she said at a slight attempt to be humorous. "Everything you've requested, all the way up to the manager's meeting next week, has been dutifully completed and judiciously placed in your box." She knew she could safely be out of the office for a week and a half, but she neglected to pass that information along to him. No sense in letting him pile her with the workload of other office members. As long as he was informed all of his work requests were filled, he'd be fine.

"Well, I'll probably be able to make it down for the actual service, if that's okay with you," he offered.

"Sure. I could call you back with the details, or better yet," She paused as she thought for a moment, "why don't I give you the number to my mom's house now? That way, if things get too hectic, you would have a way of getting the details for the dates and times."

"Sure. One moment," Arnold said, as he quickly mouthed the words for his wife to hand him a pen. "I'm ready. What is it?"

"555-4873. If I'm not there, someone will be able to get the information to you. Thanks, I'll check with you later." Liz quickly placed the phone in its cradle before Arnold had a chance to respond. She simply wasn't in the mood for further chit-chat.

Liz thought about calling Kim or Quineeta, but she hadn't as of yet, gotten used to the idea of her mother having crossed over. She found herself mesmerized, in an almost trance-like state, as she caught her

reflection in her full-length mirror. She stood frozen in time, wondering what her mom must've looked like when she was her age.

Liz was a woman with a curvaceous figure. She stood five feet six inches tall. Her permed hair was black, with auburn highlights and swung a few inches past her shoulders, parted in the middle. She had a slender face, showing baby-like teeth whenever she smiled. Her light brown eyes were almost doe-like in their roundness, and they seemed to smile as well. She had a lean thin nose and small round lips. Her skin was the deep color of coconut shells. She was a buxom woman, and her breasts usually garnered your attention before one would quite focus on her.

Liz wondered how her mother's last hours were spent. What were her thoughts as she lay alone on a gurney in an empty hospital corridor? She shook her head slightly to force back the flood of memories that began rushing through, like a waterfall cascading over a mountainous terrain. *Don't fall apart*, she admonished herself gently. She packed a light suitcase, and backing out of her driveway, glanced at the clock on the dashboard, as she estimated her time of arrival to Detroit.

THREE

Liz pulled smoothly into Donna's dark driveway. She'd managed to get there in a little over an hour, but it looked as if everyone was already asleep. She was sure that this was not possible. She'd barely rang the bell, before her niece flung open the door. Liz stepped in and placed her bag on the floor. "Where's everyone?" she asked softly.

"They're all down at the hospital," Miesha said. "I was asked to be here to let you in. Are you Okay.?"

Liz took her first clear breath of the night since hearing the news. "I'm fine," she stated. "I guess I got here in record time. I'm not going to the hospital though. I'll just call your mom to let her know I'm here."

"I'll call her now," Miesha offered sympathetically. "Why don't you go and unpack your things?" At twenty-seven, Miesha was tall and slender. She wore her hair in tiny, french-braids called zillions, so named because it seemed like you had about a zillion of them criss-crossing your scalp. It was a beautiful style and Miesha always wore the latest ones. No matter the occasion, she always looked like she'd just walked off a runway in New York, showcasing its latest fashions. Her skin, as close to being a

walnut brown as possible, was smooth and cocoa butter soft.

As Liz reached to take her bags upstairs, she noticed Miesha's fuchsia-colored pedicure, in the strapless sling-backs she wore. Miesha was a newlywed and had purchased a home not far from her parents. She was always willing to give the family a helping hand, especially in times of crises like this. She looked so much like her mom, that it was not rare for strangers to confuse them for sisters. Which actually said more about her mom, Donna, who looked to be closer to her daughters' age, than the forty-seven years she possessed. Liz headed for one of the bedrooms upstairs.

There was plenty of room in this spacious Southfield home, and she knew her sister and brother-in-law, Jared, kept everything fully stocked, from the linen cabinets to the kitchen cupboards. They had both worked hard to obtain the status they now enjoyed, and they were generous, giving people. Both being the oldest sibling of their families, they spent years doling out loans, assisting family members with getting jobs, and helping out in many other ways. It proved to be a losing battle for both, as their siblings simply relied on them more and more throughout the years. Not having the knack to simply say 'no,' they were constantly drained with requests for help at all times. If not from Donna's family members, then from Jared's. Liz didn't envy them one bit. She too, had played the giving game in the early years, but soon wised up to the role which was expected of her. Developing her own expectations of the kind of life she chose, she soon learned to master the word 'no,' and frequently did so, during the few times anyone ever asked her for a hand-out. Instead, she'd give them resource information they could use, and stepped back enough for them to come to their own realizations—or not. *'Some of us live and learn—and some of us just live,'* was her philosophy and she wasn't spending a great deal on those that refused to learn lessons in life. They had every right to choose their own paths, but she had a right not to walk

it with them. She tried to impart that bit of wisdom along to Donna, but Donna always gave in to requests. Liz knew that now with this unexpected turn of events, and the dynamics that had constantly wreaked havoc among the family, there was the possibility that all hell would break loose. She was determined to assist Donna in keeping things peaceful for as long as possible. After the funeral, there'd be no reason for family members that didn't get along, to be bothered with one another again. She secretly felt a surprise relief from that thought alone. She'd been the family mediator and peacemaker for years and had only recently stepped down from that role as well. Now, without warning, she may have been unwittingly thrust back into it.

"Liz?! Where are you?" she heard Donna's voice heading up the staircase.

"I'm in Miesha's old room," Liz returned. "I'll be right down." They met each other in the middle of the corridor and stopped to hug. Donna didn't seem to want to let go. Donna, at six-feet two inches tall, wore her height proudly. She never slumped her shoulders or tried to appear shorter than she actually was. But while some people with height used it as an intimidating measure, she used it to put people at ease with her quick wit and toothy smile. She wore her long hair in a french-twist most times, with a hint of curls cascading around her cheeks. With her glasses on, she actually gave the impression of a school marm. She'd recently had surgery to enhance her breasts, and her way of showcasing them was with sexy tops and blouses. On this day, she wore a hot pink top, which criss-crossed her bosom, and tied into long ribbons towards the right side of her waist. She wore a pair of black dress pants that just fashionably covered the backs of her black sandals where it was evident that she had just gotten a french pedicure done earlier in the day. Both women descended the stairs to sit at the expansive marble table in the dining room. Jared walked past and gave a solemn hello to Liz as she

hugged and exchanged a greeting with him. Soon after, Miesha and Jared disappeared into different sections of the house.

"I can't believe this shit," Donna started. "Can you believe this shit?"

"I'm still in shock. Start from the beginning. What the hell happened?"

Donna explained how their mom didn't think her trip to the emergency room would be anything out of the ordinary. At sixty-eight, she was still quite healthy. While she lived alone, she maintained the palatial home they all grew up in. Although she'd had triple by-pass surgery done, that had been over ten years ago, and she had since improved her quality of life dramatically. She had quit smoking and drinking and while retired, enjoyed taking a vacation every now and then. "*Just a routine trip to the emergency,*" Donna explained their mom had told Tony. "*Meet me there.*"

At this point, just like during the earlier phone conversation, Donna began to weep uncontrollably. "Eleven hours, Liz. Mama laid on that gurney for a full eleven hours before any of the staff were able to see her."

"But that doesn't make sense. Tony waited in the emergency room area for eleven hours? He's never exhibited that kinda patience in his whole freaking life!"

"And he still doesn't. He didn't wait there. He went home and went to bed."

This time, it was Liz's turn to become unsettled. "He went home and went to *bed*? And left Mama there?!"

"That's what he told me. He left word at the front desk that when they were ready to admit her, to give him a call back."

"A call back?! And it didn't occur to him, that maybe, just maybe, he might want to give the sister who just happens to be a registered nurse, who knows how to talk that medical lingo, a call?"

"You know damned well they'd never call me. They'd rather let Mama

die first.” With the realization of the situation, and with a slight pause, she continued almost inaudibly, “and that’s just what she did.”

“Okay, let’s get real. We all know *you’d* be the last one to get a call. But why in hell didn’t he call *me* then?”

“He said he did. But your number was changed to an unlisted one. Remember? Mama and I are the only ones that have it now. That’s why I called you as soon as I got to the hospital. But even then, it was already too late.”

Liz had forgotten all about having her number changed. She’d done it at least a few years ago, in an effort to restore some semblance of peace to her household. She’d figured Donna could always call her if there was a true emergency. Of course, their mom had her number, but with her being incoherent shortly after getting to the hospital, that information was useless. Tony and Ruby, determined not to call Donna, didn’t do so until they absolutely had to. It was all too crazy to contemplate. There was a brief silence between the two sisters. Donna was the first to pierce it.

“I have Mama’s purse. Tony and Ruby gave it to me. They said she has some cash in her checking account. Since I’m named after Mama, and I can write like her, they thought I should just write a check out to myself, to help cover expenses.”

“Let me get this straight. You get there, only after they made *sure* they called you at the eleventh fuckin’ hour, and they just hand *you* her purse and access to her account? I can only surmise it’s because they love you so much and didn’t want you to feel bad.”

“Liz— ”

“Don’t Liz me! They’ve got something up their sleeves, and again, you fall willingly into their hands. Besides you only have Mama’s first name, not her last. You’re married—remember? Why didn’t they write a check out to themselves? Or have you write one to them? Something’s not right, and mark my word; it will come out sooner or later. And since I’m only

here for the better part of the week, I'd rather it'd be sooner and not later." There was an uncomfortable pause as both sisters sat in silence, contemplating the situation.

"Well, I have something else I hate to tell you," Donna hedged as she cautiously began, "But I have an important doctor's appointment tomorrow. It took me three months to get it. I can't cancel it, and there's not much I can do now with our situation."

"Three months to get it? I hope it's not serious, or you'd be in for big trouble right about now." When there was no response from Donna, Liz continued, "Well... is it serious? Is there something else you're not telling me yet?"

"No, nothing like that," Donna said, still hesitating on how much information to share, "It's not for a physical appointment. It's... well... with my therapist."

"Well that's a relief. I never understand why you act as if you must apologize for having a therapist. I've told you over and over, we should have a national health care policy that includes one for all of us. But a good one. Not one you go to for decades without seeing any success or improvement. But one where you're able to make better decisions in your life on a day-to-day basis. Well good for you! Three months to get in though? He or she must be damned good."

"One of the best in his field I hear. But we'll see. With Mama passing and all..." Donna looked down as her voice began to fade, "Well, I just thought it wouldn't be too wise to cancel it, especially now."

"Of course not. No need in trying to adjust to too much all at once. You go on to your appointment. I'll go over to Mama's first thing in the morning. What time is your appointment?"

"It's at 9:00. It won't take long. I should be done by 10:00 or so. I could meet you over there after that."

"No problem. I can handle going into the Lion's Den alone. Don't

worry about me. I won't let those knuckleheads cause me any grief. You make your appointment. I'll go by Mama's for both of us and check things out. How much damage can our silly siblings do in just two hours?"

"Don't ask," Donna said somewhat solemnly. "After leaving Mama for eleven hours, who knows what can happen next?"

"We'd better get to bed now. It's gonna be a long day tomorrow, and I'll need to be rested for it." Both sisters hugged once more, and then retreated to their separate rooms.

FOUR

Kim considers herself an optimist. Sometimes even to her own dismay.

Like the time she tried to assist a neighbor that was being beaten by a boyfriend, but by the time the dust had cleared the two of them made a failed attempt at pressing charges against her for interceding. Said she'd been at their property against their wishes. She couldn't help but be disturbed by the sheer irony of it all, but she resolved to still try to do what she felt was right in any given situation. At times, she paid a huge price for giving people the benefit of a doubt, but as with any true optimist, she preferred not to dwell on those experiences. No matter the outcome of a situation, she silently stressed to herself the axiom that *'even when you lose, it was important not to lose the lesson.'*

Kim savored being able to leisurely prepare herself for the day. It had been a long while since she'd actually taken a day off from work. She was planning to enjoy it to the hilt. She wasn't sure what she'd do, only that it wouldn't be work-related and it would be fun!

As she looked in the bedroom mirror, she was reminded why others

were always complimenting her on her beauty. She never had to use astringents, oils, or creams. She was grateful for that. She did not experience acne or pimples, even during her teens and she was glad she'd been different in that respect. She hardly ever wore make-up. Not that she had anything against it, she just felt it was better to allow her inner beauty to shine. And shine it did. Her smooth, mocha-colored skin was soft as velvet and flawless. Her brown, almond-shaped eyes let you know her true feelings long before she actually verbalized them. On rare occasions when upset, her eyes would narrow to small slits, which flashed as quick as lightning. It was during those times when she'd quickly remind herself life was too precious not to enjoy, and almost instantly, the steely flash would shoot from her eyes to her bright smile, catching those around her completely off-guard. Although she dressed to accent her shapely body, it was her smile that everyone noticed first. Straight, pretty white teeth that seemed to light up her entire face, like a football field whose lights had just flooded the stadium. Her hair was straight and black with red highlights strategically placed. To cut down on her preparation time in the mornings, she kept it cut in a medium length, easy-to-maintain style. Parted on the right side and falling to slightly above her shoulders, topped by pageboy style bangs, it framed her face nicely, giving her a youthful look well below her forty-three years. Her small nose was slender and narrow, and her lips, shaped like lemon drops, appeared to be the right vehicle for her voice which usually carried a lilt, as if she were asking a question at the end of most of her sentences. A voice that seemed to carry itself across even the most crowded rooms effortlessly, only to land as softly as a feather upon the ears of its' occupants. Her eyebrows raised automatically whether she was slightly surprised or totally shocked, as her lips formed in the perfect shape of an "O," just before exclaiming "O-Mi-God!" Her hands, showcasing professionally shaped nails, and a french manicure, were so soft and warm, you immediately felt at ease from their

slight, gentle touch.

Kim took a few moments to give herself a once-over in her full-length mirror to assure herself she had everything together. Not a strand of hair out of place. Today she chose to wear a comfortable outfit which consisted of a black blouse with pearl beads looping from the right shoulder down midway of it, and crossing back up to the left shoulder. She wore black Calvin Klein jeans with it.

She decided to go to the new museum, which had opened recently in the downtown district. She had always enjoyed the old Museum of the Arts and was glad to have the opportunity to visit the new one. Once there, she was so exhilarated over the beautiful paintings, sculptures and other works of art, that she promised herself she would definitely do this more often.

Ever since childhood, Kim possessed the ability to be able to look at the brighter side of things no matter what the situation. Although it didn't always work out, she tried to get others to see life in that way.

Kim could easily get lost in a museum and often did. She loved the paintings, the colors, the sculptures and the entire atmosphere. She always marveled at the talent people had to actually be able to create simply by using their hands. As she looked at the works of art here, the colors seemed to jump off the canvasses to her. She wondered how many people never used their God-given talent to its fullest potential? How many of them never even realized what talents they possessed?

She especially liked the paintings that depicted peaceful, quiet, serene settings. The types that made her want to enter their world for just a little while. A few of the paintings had this effect on her. There was one with a small country home in it. It was a winter scene. Ice-covered snow blanketed the porch and there was a warm fire blazing through the front window. She pictured herself in the home preparing a one-person meal of hot soup, about to curl up for the night with a good book.

She looked thoughtfully at another painting. It was one of a bowl of fruit that still had water droplets glistening on them, suggesting it had not been too long since they were plucked from their birthplace.

There were places in the paintings which she would love to visit. The African village where the women had mastered the art of carrying large loads on their heads, having washed their clothes in a nearby stream while their children played together peacefully. The ones which had scenes of parks, trees, and the great outdoors were favorites too. But there was one painting in particular which immediately caught her attention. At first, she almost didn't see it. It was off in a corner to the right of the room. An incandescent light was placed above it, cascading a soft, glow around its frame, seeming to give the painting an aura all its own. It was of a Bentwood rocker. It was sitting in a wheat field. The breeze going across the field swayed the tops of the wheat so that they bent down slightly from the force of it. There was a quilt lying across the back of the rocker, spilling over onto the front. It was a beautiful quilt of various colors. It reminded her of the biblical story of Joseph's multi-colored coat.

Seeing the rocker took her back to her childhood. Back then, she had a bad habit of rocking. Nothing spectacular, just a nice, rhythmic back and forth motion. Especially whenever she was nervous. She hadn't done it for years, but just seeing the painting of the rocker brought back a flood of memories.

She remembered how she used to get teased by classmates who wondered out loud what pleasures she could possibly get out of rocking. Her mother warned the teachers she may do it, and told them if she did, to quickly reprimand her for it. Which they did without hesitation. Until they realized she was a straight "A" student, and mannerable and considerate of the other students. She also proved to be helpful to the teachers after class hours. Pretty soon, she noticed they stopped reprimanding her altogether. And once her classmates got to know what a

class clown she was, they stopped teasing her too. At least about the rocking.

It was easier to give up rocking at home, since she was allowed to do it non-stop away from home. Besides, what harm did it do? Her mom was none the wiser and she was more peaceful and calm, just like the picture of the rocker which she was immersed in staring at. Until she was interrupted:

“Ma’am, did you hear the announcement? We will be closing within the next ten minutes. I hope you’ve enjoyed your visit. Come back soon to visit us.”

She looked over her shoulder to see a young girl who looked as if she should be in some high school classroom taking an exam. Kim noted she was dressed in the museum’s uniform and looking directly at her. *Probably one of the high school kids doing her internship here at the museum*, she thought to herself.

“Closing? But it’s not even noon yet. Is there something wrong?” she asked, slightly irritated.

“No ma’am,” the young intern replied apologetically, “However this is our annual inventory day. We close early to begin inventory and take stock of new pieces, which the curator decides upon. There are signs posted throughout the area with today’s hours. However, I am sorry if you have been inconvenienced. I hope you’ve enjoyed today’s visit, and please come to see us again soon,” she repeated as if reciting lines in a well-rehearsed play.

She had such a pleasant voice that Kim wanted to ask what time they’d be open tomorrow, but the young girl had already disappeared around a sculpture and was quickly headed down a long, quiet corridor, her heels resounding throughout the museum as she exited.

Kim stared at the painting of the rocker for a few moments more wondering if she could possibly purchase a copy of this particular piece,

quickly picking up a schedule of the museum hours on her way out.

Once out, she decided to take the long way home. *It's funny how we never noticed simple things in our daily rush to go about life*, she pondered to herself. She thought about a park which she could visit and headed in that direction. All around her people were walking swiftly. It was just before noon and she imagined some were probably rushing to get back to work after their brief lunch breaks.

The park was just up ahead. Kim paused at a newsstand to purchase a copy of an Essence magazine which had Denzel Washington on the cover of it. *Dang, where were you when I was looking?* she thought solemnly. She remembered the old adage about stopping to smell the flowers and she giggled as she took delight in doing just that.

Kim knelt down to smell a row of yellow tulips. They were all uniformly placed as if by some stern, army drill sergeant. Next to them lie a row of roses, deep red. She was sure she would've picked one if no one had been around. But at this time of the day that was impossible.

She noticed an empty bench and headed towards it. As she sat down, she looked out over her surroundings. It was certainly a gorgeous day. The sun wasn't beating down too hard, and a nice breeze continually swept through to help cool her thoughts. The park had been maintained in such an organized way. The grass was cut to a specific height. There was no litter defacing the landscape. The restrooms were renovated and freshly painted. The shrubbery was trimmed and the trees seemed to reach out as if giving a silent hello to one another. *It's amazing how wonderful the world could really be*, she thought, *if only we'd let it*. Having the museum close early was not going to ruin her day. Making lemonade today meant going to the park instead.

There were plenty of people out today. Many of them young mothers with children. The children were involved in various activities. Swinging, playing in the sandbox, and taking turns on a wooden-go-round, which

required that one child stay off, turning the other kids as they squealed in delight.

There was a small bridge that passed over the river to the other side of the park. A group of kids there were throwing rocks into the river, trying in vain to catch the tadpoles that were leaping in and out of the water.

Some of the mothers were gathered at benches engaged in conversation. Others read alone, or actively participated with the children. A short distance away, there was a group of elderly men sitting at a table playing dominoes, and making light conversation. Every now and then their laughter would float over to Kim, like a fluffy cloud slowly passing overhead.

There were lovers here too. She noticed a young couple had spread a blanket under a weeping willow tree, which seemed to stretch its very limbs in an effort to protect them. Kim could hear the woman's laughter as he reached to remove leaves which had fallen from the tree into her long, flowing, red hair.

As she looked past this couple, she saw a young man whose face lit up when her eyes caught his. She didn't want to give him any ideas, so she quickly looked away without smiling fully.

With her peripheral vision she could see that he stared for a few hopeful moments before finally turning his attention elsewhere.

Kim was so engrossed in her own thoughts that she hardly noticed the noon hour was over and she was almost alone in the park. She was brought back to the present by some young teens cutting through the park, their radio blaring loud music as they passed. This did not disturb her, as it was a good sight to see and hear.

By now, many of the mothers had taken their tired, sleepy children home and there were just a few stragglers left. People were still cutting through the park, but not as briskly.

That was when she first laid eyes on him. She noticed an older

gentleman sitting at a bench not too far away from her. He was nice looking in a debonair sort of way. He was tall, dark-skinned and was graying in the area around his temples. He was dressed smartly in a Brooks Brothers suit which contributed to him looking a tad out of place in this setting. Somehow, Kim sensed something was amiss. His shoulders were slightly slumped as if they carried a weight too heavy to bear. He hardly seemed to notice her, staring blankly instead.

“Are you okay over there?” she asked lightly. When he looked up he smiled, which only accented his beautiful skin. He seemed surprised that Kim was there, let alone speaking to him, and glanced over his shoulder to be sure that she was directly addressing him.

Once convinced, he replied, “Yes, I’m fine.”

You certainly are! She thought to herself being sure not to appear too forward. She attempted to read her magazine, but now, it was a bit difficult to concentrate.

After what seemed like a lifetime, he got up to exit the park. Just as he walked past her, he asked, “Do you happen to have the time?”

The oldest line in the book, she thought before looking at her watch. “It’s about 2:30,” she replied.

“Well,” he began hesitantly, “If I were to leave now, I would still be too early for my appointment.”

Picking up on his cue, Kim said invitingly, “Why not join me? There’s plenty of room here on this bench and I was just finishing up with my reading.”

“Are you sure?” He inquired, while eyeing her half-opened magazine. “I don’t want to disturb you.”

“No, you’re fine,” she answered. “Besides, it would be nice to converse with another adult about topics that aren’t work-related,” she laughed lightly.

“In that case, I will accept the invitation to join you,” he said, as he

extended his hand to introduce himself.

It was the most interesting, stimulating conversation she'd had with someone of the opposite sex in years. It was as if they both hated to have the day end. They discovered so much about one another in just that short time in the park. His name was Daleford Dalton. Dale for short. Kim discovered he'd never been married, but he had a twenty-two year old son. He was fresh out of high school when he and the girl he'd dated moved in together. He'd gotten her pregnant within the first year. Although they both tried to make things work out, they weren't successful. The relationship lasted for four tumultuous years, before they both agreed to call it quits. He moved out, however, he never abandoned his son. He kept him every single weekend, and once, when the boy's mother was going through a very difficult time in her life, he had full custody of his son for two years. His son was fourteen at the time, and they really enjoyed the time they were able to live and spend together. Just the two of them. He was able to help with his homework, get involved with his school, and joined him in his extra-curricular activities. He said it was two of the best years of his life, and even now, he was still finding it difficult not to have him around.

Before either of them realized it, it was getting dark and the park lights were lit. "I guess I'd better be leaving," Kim said half-halfheartedly. "Although I hate to. I've really enjoyed your company."

"Not half as much as I've enjoyed yours. Time flies when you're having fun," he clichéd. There was an awkward moment as she waited for him to ask for her number. He hesitated, not quite knowing how to broach the subject. They reluctantly said their good-byes and began to each go their separate ways. Just as Kim was turning to glance over her shoulder once more at him, she saw him waving frantically in an effort to ask her to wait.

He quickly walked back towards her. "I hope you won't be offended,"

he started, “But I can’t let you go without at least asking for your phone number.”

“I would only have been offended if you hadn’t asked,” she joked as she rattled it off to him. He smiled gleefully and promised to call that week.

Kim was halfway home before she realized he didn’t make his appointment after all.