**Summer at Cache Lake**

 **Chapter 131: Fences**

“Yes . . . thank you, but time is short.”

“Jane’s a lifeguard. She has her WSI,” said the redhead.

Was this woman’s name really Jane? Jill wondered as she asked, “WSI?”

“Water Safety Instructor, a Red Cross certification program,” the short woman explained. “I’m hardly a paramedic. But he was breathing, right?”

“Oh, yes. Breathing and a heartbeat. Unconscious, but alive,” she replied.

“You need someone with actual medical training . . . not me. Better yet, you need to get him to a hospital. Head injuries are the worst…” her voice trailed off. She looked as if she suddenly realized that she shouldn’t have said that. “I’m sure everything will be all right,” she added, attempting a smile.

One of the other guys held up a store-bought bottle of water, offering it to Jill. Seeing a look of interest on Jill’s face, Jane took it from him and walked it over to her. She accepted it gladly.

As Jill unscrewed the cap, she said, “So, he told you we were brother and sister. He told you my name. What else did he tell you?”

“Well, let me see,” said the redhead. “He said that you liked being naked, but were always acting as if you didn’t. He said that if we met you, that you’d be shy and hide . . . or maybe ask us to loan you some clothes. But that secretly you would be hoping that we wouldn’t . . . because you craved exposure. He said that the two of you had a game going. You always went to great effort claiming not to want to be naked . . . he called it a face-saving effort. He’d push back and you’d remain naked . . . happily naked.”

“Oh, great,” muttered Jill under her breath. Glancing around the group, she saw two shirts looped through belts. Either one of them would be perfect. She shook her head and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before taking a drink. Even David was conspiring to make this more difficult than it needed to be.

As she took a second long drink, she heard, “Smile, ladies.” She looked up in surprise and noted that she and Jane were being photographed.

‘Why does this always happen to me?’ she thought, stepping quickly behind Jane.

“Come on, Lola. Jane deserves a Tarzan and Jane photo,” said the guy photographing them.

‘Why? No she doesn’t,’ thought Jill, but looking at the phone, she asked hopefully, “Is there cell reception here?”

The guy holding up the phone looked at the screen and replied, “Hmm . . . doesn’t look like it.”

“Jane, get them to delete any photos they might have . . . please . . . taken here or up on the mountain,” she whispered to her. Not seeing a very cooperative looking expression on her face, she added, “At the very least, do what it takes to keep them off the internet.”

Jill tried to hand the bottle back, preparing to depart. “Keep it. I think you need it,” the guy who had given it to her replied.

“Thanks,” she said forcing him to take it. “But I’ve got to hurry. It might slow me down.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Jane.

“Let’s all go with her,” proposed one of the guys.

Jill looked at them skeptically. She didn’t think they’d be committed to keeping up. “Sure, I need all the help I can get,” she replied indifferently. “But no more photos, and delete any that you have of me . . . please.” She didn’t think that they would, but she wanted her wishes to be on record even if she didn’t have any time to devote to the effort necessary to get them to actually erase the images.

With that, she turned and took off. The entire encounter had lasted barely a minute, but the time combined with the water had been enough for her to regain some of her energy. At the next switchback, she saw that a few of them had already dropped out.

For some reason, she didn’t really want them tagging along. She couldn’t imagine them being of any real help. With that in mind, she set a particularly grueling pace. When she next looked back about a minute later, not a single one of them was running. A couple of them were still visible, but they were no longer trying to keep up.

Continuing on alone hadn’t necessarily been Jill’s goal. Getting down the mountain quickly was.

Six or eight minutes of hard running later, Jill again spotted hikers on the trail just ahead, a couple. She was now so close to town that she believed that there might be cell reception.

She immediately started noticing things that seemed unusual about the couple, as she stopped to catch her breath. Their color-coordinated hiking outfits looked so new that she imagined they’d had the tags cut off of them that morning. Typically people hiked in heavily-worn, comfortable clothing. Not this couple. Similarly, they both wore their hair perfectly coiffed, seemingly better suited for an upscale office environment than a dusty trail.

Trying to not think about how naked she felt, she jumped right in and asked, “Is there cell reception here?”

“Umm . . . excuse me?” replied the woman, looking Jill up and down suspiciously.

Resisting the urge to cover up and allow her nudity to become the topic of conversation, Jill stuck to her guns. “Would you mind checking? I’m in a big hurry.”

“You’re in a big hurry?” asked the woman indignantly.

“Sorry,” replied the man politely. “We wouldn’t be roughing it if we stayed in touch with the outside world.” He was much less bold than the woman when it came to staring at Jill’s nude form.

“Okay…” said Jill suspiciously. She resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. She doubted that their ‘roughing it’ definition matched her own.

“Why are you nude?” asked the woman point blank. From her expression, it was more than obvious that she didn’t approve.

“There was a rockslide,” explained Jill. “Two injured hikers, my brother and a friend, both in…”

The woman cut her off. “I suppose you expect us to believe that this alleged rockslide ripped off your clothing. You have no cuts, no bruises.”

Turning to the man, Jill continued, “As I was saying, they are both in need of medical assistance. I’d like to call 911 . . . if you have your phones.”

He reached into his pocket, but instead of a phone, he produced a business card, handing it to Jill.

“Norman J. Baldwin, Jr., Esquire,” she read aloud. “Are you a doctor?” she asked, even though she already knew the answer.

“I’m an attorney,” he replied. “If someone’s hurt, chances are, I’ll be able to help.”

“Umm . . . I don’t have any pockets,” said Jill. With that, she handed the card back and resumed her trek toward town. She chuckled to herself; no phone, but a business card at hand. Yep . . . this guy was definitely ‘getting away from it all.’

She realized that she should have ducked out of that conversation as soon as she had found out that they didn’t have their phones with them. Even if one of them had been a doctor, it wouldn’t have made sense to hike all the way back up to David and Ryan without first getting in contact with the authorities. What might a doctor be able to do without any medical supplies or equipment?

In order to steer her mind away from her ever-present grave concerns, Jill decided to update her tally. It had stood at forty-three. The two male hikers near the top would bring it to forty-five, and the group of five would make for an even fifty. However, at that point, Jill remembered that the group was already in her tally. They had lifted the number to forty-three. So, forty-five, plus the two with perfect hair and color-coordinated outfits brought her tally to forty-seven.

She tried not to think about how much higher the number might go as she arrived at the trailhead parking lot. There were about half-a-dozen vehicles there, but no people. She made a beeline for the gravel road exiting toward town.

“Now the fun begins,” she said aloud as she raced for the intersection she could see about a quarter mile ahead. She was so tired and thirsty, but somehow she found it within herself to keep going. She even managed to speed up given that she no longer needed to pay such careful attention to her footing.

At the intersection, the road turned hard right. Looking along that section of road, she could see where it again turned hard left. The arterial was obviously taking a route to town that respected property lines.

Jill decided to take a shortcut. A few seconds later she was doing her best to climb carefully through a barbed-wire fence. Barbed wire was always challenging; however, it seemed much more perilous given the amount of exposed skin involved.

As she put one leg through, straddling one of the wires, she came into light contact with the wire above. Reacting quickly, she jerked her butt down. Glancing down she saw just how narrow the margin of safety was between her delicate girl bits and a certain sharp point. She shifted her arms through, one by one, all of her attention focused on the scary looking angle-cut wire nearly touching the inside of her thigh close to her crotch.

Gently pushing the wire down, she moved her pointy nipples through the gap as carefully as possible. Yet another benefit of small breasts, she thought, as she was able to get her chest through completely unscathed. She did get a minor scrape from one barb just below one of her knees, but that seemed like a small price to pay. Fortunately, such contact had not occurred with any of her most delicate skin. The last thing that she wanted was a painful mark visible at her crotch where her bikini bottoms might typically be.

A moment later she was up and running across a dirt field. It seemed as if a crop had just been harvested, but she could see green up ahead. The green turned out to be a number of baseball diamonds.

The ball fields were bordered by a chain-link fence, but fortunately, there was a narrow zigzag gap designed into it; one intended to keep bicycles off the grass while allowing foot traffic to pass. Once inside, Jill found herself in the outfield of one of the diamonds. A couple of ballfields over, she could see some boys playing baseball.

Studying them, she noticed that there were no uniforms. It looked to be a neighborhood game with no adults present. She decided to continue on toward town. She started around a field that had sprinklers running; however, when some water hit her leg, she made the snap decision to run straight across. It was easy to justify running through the sprinklers as it would be a shortcut that would shave time off her journey.

The spray had felt good. Looking down at the water on her leg, she saw just how dusty her skin was. She ran straight at a sprinkler, the water hitting her full in the chest. It was cold, but also so refreshing. It felt absolutely wonderful. Spinning round in the spray, she was instantly soaked. She ended up taking the quickest bath imaginable.

She paused at the sprinkler head and grabbed it. She cupped her hands around the nozzle, doing her best to kill the velocity. She took a much-needed drink, even though it was difficult, the water going every which way. She was glad that her hair was in a ponytail: otherwise, it would have been a complete mess. A second later, she was again up and running, the cool water spraying her naked body from behind as she raced off the field.

Under different circumstances, she might have stayed and played. However, her urgent mission drove her on. She regretted that she was soaked, but it seemed better than being covered in trail dust.

Negotiating the next fence zigzag to leave the baseball park, she quickly found herself on a concrete sidewalk following a narrow but paved road. The part of town she was in appeared slated for development; however, as of yet, all the lots were vacant.

Down a road to her right, she saw what looked to be one of the national-chain daycare places. She pictured herself running in their front door naked. That didn’t seem like a good idea. She expected that the majority of the employees in that building would be female. Ultimately, they might be sympathetic to her cause; however, it seemed as if their initial reaction might be quite negative. She could see them being quite concerned about protecting the young children from a naked woman.

Straight ahead, she saw a large grocery store, a big parking lot in front. Just past it, the town began in earnest, the street looking entirely residential. Studying the grocery store, she decided that they were about to have a nude female visitor. The thought of running into a grocery store naked sent shivers along her spine. It was the last thing that she wanted to do, yet it had to be done.

“For you David. Everything for you,” she repeated to herself aloud, hoping to find strength in those words.

Hopefully, she wouldn’t be in the store long. Surely there would be an adult there who would help her without getting too distracted by her nudity. She had to locate someone who could help her get in contact with the appropriate authorities. As she had no phone and didn’t know the lay of the land, she needed to find someone, anyone, who would listen to and then befriend her.

Jill slowed to a jog for the last block, again trying to catch her breath. She knew she’d be speaking with the first adult she met. That might not go well if she was so out of breath that she couldn’t say what had to be said.

As she raced for what looked to be one of two main entrances, she saw a woman loading groceries into the back of a large white Suburban. Jill veered toward her.

**Chapter 132: Mrs. Brooks**

The woman looked up. Jill saw an expression of fright form on her face. She slammed the hatch and raced for the driver’s door, quickly hopping in. Jill was not particularly surprised by the woman’s reaction. No one was used to having nude girls run at them in parking lots, and to make matters worse, she was still wet from the sprinklers.

Jill ran up to the driver’s window and stopped. The woman stared at her, a look of dismay on her face. Jill tried to indicate with her fingers that she should roll down her window.

When she didn’t, Jill knocked on the glass and shouted, “Please!” Glancing into the backseat, Jill saw the faces of a couple of surprised and curious kids.

The woman opened the window a crack. “Please stay away from us,” she begged.

“There are two severely injured guys above Stanton Ridge . . . the hiking trail,” she explained, pointing back in the direction from which she had come. “I desperately need help. Do you know where the Ranger Station is?”

The woman hesitated but then nodded, pointing off into town. “Eight or more blocks down Stanton Creek Road, turn right on Poplar.”

Jill looked where she was pointing, committing the directions to memory. “Will you drive me? It’s a matter of life and death . . . please?” she begged. “I’m not always naked.”

The woman seemed to consider the request briefly, but then she shook her head and the crack closed. She turned her head away, obviously indicating that the conversation was over.

‘I’m not always naked,’ thought Jill, scolding herself. What an inane thing to say.

She looked around, trying to decide what to do. She was exhausted and her legs ached, but she made the calculated decision that she could probably run the distance indicated in less time than it might take to go into the store and convince someone to drive her there. Other people might react as this woman had.

Taking a deep breath to summon any remaining stamina, she headed across the parking lot at a trot. With a little bit of difficulty, she managed to again break into a run. As she turned onto Stanton Creek Road, she passed a large group of teen boys hanging out by the corner of the store. They were all sitting astride bicycles and eating ice cream bars and popsicles. She remembered doing just that, riding her bike to the store for ice cream with David as well as others from the neighborhood.

As she passed them, she saw their jaws drop almost in unison. Hopefully, their ice cream will keep them from following, she thought wishfully. However, it was not to be. A few moments later, they were all in hot pursuit. As those in the lead caught up to her, she saw that one of them had managed to hold onto his ice cream, but that all the others were now without.

The group surrounded Jill, some ahead and some behind, as she ran down the road just to the right of the center line.

“Leave me alone,” she yelled, knowing full well that they wouldn’t. In their world, a naked girl running down the street was probably the most exciting thing that had happened all summer. They all seemed to be middle school age, a few of them younger.

They pestered her with questions. Jill tried to ignore them as she ran, reading each street sign carefully, searching for Poplar. However, there was one boy who was particularly persistent and daring. He was obviously doing his best to show off to the rest of the group with his lewd remarks. She tried to tune out his nasty comments about her tits, pussy, and ass, but finally, she could take no more.

She swerved abruptly and grabbed his handlebars. Lifting up, she jerked his bike out from under him. A second later, he was sitting on the pavement and she was climbing onto the bike.

As she started pedaling away, she wondered why she hadn’t done that at least a block sooner. Glancing back, she saw that he was up on his feet and giving chase. Being larger than they were, Jill started to leave most of them behind as she accelerated.

“She’s getting pussy stink all over your seat, Jimmy,” she heard one of the other nasty boys call out.

Disgusted, Jill glanced down. Maybe the seat was getting a little wet where she was sitting on it, but that was mostly because of the sprinkler.

“You’re in a hurry, aren’t you?” she heard a friendly sounding voice on her left say. Glancing over, she saw a boy who looked to be closer to her in age. He was keeping up; whereas, the majority of the smaller boys had fallen behind.

“I’ve got . . . to get . . . to the Ran . . . ger Station,” she replied, huffing and puffing. “My brother . . . and a friend . . . were hurt. Got to . . . get help!”

“Got it,” he replied. “Follow me. I know all the shortcuts.”

He sped up and cut across in front of her, obviously heading for an alley.

‘Finally some help!’ she thought, deciding instantly to trust him.

She veered off into the alley right behind him, lifting her butt up off of the seat as she went over a pothole. Jill was quickly lost as the two of them raced through a series alleys and streets, cutting every corner as they went.

The boy set a blistering pace, and Jill did her best to keep up. Fortunately, pedaling seemed to use slightly different muscles than running. They passed a number of pedestrians, all of whom seemed to turn and follow them with their eyes as they passed. Jill imagined how strange the two of them must look. A boy pedaling as fast as he could, seemingly doing his best to try and escape the naked girl chasing him.

She tried to focus on her mission rather than think about how she must look on the bike, bare-naked but for her hiking boots. She did her best to watch for traffic as the boy she was following didn’t seem to be. At one point a car slammed on its brakes as the two of them raced diagonally through a four-way stop intersection. Glancing around at the cars at the stop signs, Jill saw wide-eyed expressions of astonishment on a number of people within.

As they raced along the street from there, Jill glanced back. In addition to the boys on their bikes, still doing their best to keep up, there was someone in a small pickup following her. From there, they fortunately turned and cut across a vacant lot. Jill didn’t look back, but she suspected that the pickup would not have followed.

A block later, they arrived at the back of an older building. It was clearly a ranger station as Forest Service trucks were parked haphazardly in the dirt lot they were cutting through.

The boy who had led her there gave her the thumbs up, and she took the lead, heading around the building towards the front. Once she saw the front door, she dropped the bike and took the front steps two at a time, bursting inside. A couple of bells hanging on the door announced her brusque entrance; they seemed to wake the woman behind the desk.

“Can I help you?” she asked, but then she blinked her eyes as she realized that Jill was naked. “You can’t come in here like that,” she added in a startled tone, shaking her head.

“Unfortunately, I have no choice,” said Jill. She launched into her entire spiel about how two boys were hurt, how they were miles away up in the mountains, how they needed to be rescued and taken to a hospital.

“Come back in here dressed as a young woman should be,” said the woman calmly but sternly, “…then we can talk.”

The woman’s attitude was not sitting well with Jill. “Don’t you think I’d be dressed if at all possible?” she asked rhetorically.

“I doubt you would be,” scowled the woman. “Just look at you!”

“Fine!” said Jill, the woman’s attitude making her upset.

There was a restroom right there. Realizing just how badly she needed to pee, Jill dashed in. After relieving herself, she paused to look at herself in the mirror. The girl staring back at her was quite a sight. She splashed water on her face and took a long drink from the faucet. Unfortunately, there were no paper towels. There was only an electric hand dryer. Realizing that she didn’t have time for that, she left the restroom, water dripping from her chin down onto her chest.

Upon returning to the lobby, Jill saw that a dark-haired ranger had emerged from a back office. He stood next to the woman she had been talking to.

“Oh, good,” said Jill. “I need to speak with you.”

“Mrs. Brooks tells me that she believes you’re on drugs,” he said, struggling to keep his eyes focused above Jill’s neck.

“I’m not on drugs!” Jill shouted in frustration, her adrenalin pumping. She clenched her fists; she didn’t have time for this. Realizing that shouting was not the best way to get her point across, she relaxed her hands and took a deep breath to calm down. “I’m sorry,” she continued in a calm voice. “What I meant to say, is that I’m not on drugs. I’m just in desperate need of help. My brother and a friend were injured in a rockslide.”

Suddenly they all heard the bells hanging on the door. “She’s a bike thief,” yelled a boy, thrusting his head inside.

“I am not, you little runt!” she shouted, charging at the door to get him to stay out.

Through the glass door, she saw the boy who had led her to the ranger station just outside. He took ahold of the foul-mouthed boy whose bike she had borrowed and pulled him back. Seeing a latch on the door, she turned it to prevent further interruptions.

“The door’s not supposed to be locked during business hours,” said the woman.

“Come back to my office,” said the ranger.

Jill nodded and followed him toward a hallway.

“Are you sure you should be alone with a naked girl, especially one behaving like this?” asked the woman. “You don’t know what she might claim happened while you two are in there.”

He glanced back at Jill as if he were attempting to evaluate her mental state. “I’ll leave the door open, Mrs. Brooks,” he replied.

“Have a seat,” he said, once they were in his office. Jill looked around the room for something to cover up with. There was a coat tree in the corner, but there was nothing on it. That was hardly surprising; it was summer.

“I’m not on drugs,” she said, doing her best to sound calm and collected. “I’m just in a hurry. I’m so worried about my brother. For all I know, he’s bleeding inside his head. As I said, he was unconscious when I left the two of them there to go for help.”

“Above Stanton Ridge, you said.”

“Exactly!” she said.

“On the side of Spaghetti . . . while hiking back from Pimple Peak, you said.”

“Uh . . . yes,” said Jill, suddenly realizing her error.

“Miss, with all due respect, none of those places exist,” said the ranger. “Why don’t you tell me why you’re really here? I’m a little inclined to believe Mrs. Brooks’ theory.”

Jill bit her lip. She took a deep breath while trying to decide how she might recover. “We were kids. We named all the mountains ourselves. We didn’t have any maps,” she said. “The ridge and those mountains . . . they exist, you just have different names for them. I know the mountains and all the trails around here like the back of my hand. I’ve been hiking here every summer since I was little. I just don’t know the official names for things, Mister Ranger, Sir.”

“Call me Hicks,” he replied.

Jill glanced down at the nameplate on his desk. It read, ‘Jeffery S. Hicks, SAR Officer, NFS.’

“You look thirsty,” he said standing up. He went to a small refrigerator located under the window and returned with a bottle of water. Jill accepted it gladly. “Thank you,” she said, doing her best to sound as if she was not under the influence of anything.

Jill saw him eyeing her forearms as she unscrewed the cap. Realizing what he was looking for, she held up both her arms, turning them outward so that he could verify that there were no needle marks.

Somehow, she needed to break through quickly, she realized. She saw the phone on his desk. “May I make a call? A long distance call?”

“Sure,” he shrugged.

A moment later, her mother answered. “Mom,” she said, tears filling her eyes. “Something terrible has happened . . . you better sit down. The three of us were hiking the trail, the one on the side of Spaghetti, coming back from having lunch on Pimple Peak. There was a rockslide . . . caught us by surprise.”

She heard her mother gasp in shock.

**Chapter 133: Hicks**

“Yes, I’m fine, but David and Ryan . . . they aren’t. They got caught up in it. They both went downhill. I’m so sorry to be telling you all this in this way . . . so abruptly, but . . . David . . . he was unconscious. Ryan . . . he’s hurt too. He has a broken leg, but at least he wasn’t unconscious. I expect they both have multiple injuries. I’m in the Stanton Ranger Station. I ran all the way down the mountain, mom,” she said, starting to cry. She wiped her tears on a forearm as she continued, “But, mom, I’m having trouble convincing them that I’m telling the truth. They think I might be on drugs, but we need to launch a rescue effort and get them both to a hospital. Will you tell the ranger to believe me? It’s been quite an ordeal, and I’m sure I’m not looking my best. Frankly, I’m frustrated and exasperated . . . worn out from the run . . . nearly an hour to get here. And, mom, tell him the official name for Spaghetti, if you know it. That might help.”

“Oh my God, Jill,” she heard her mom say. “Yes, put him on.”

Jill extended the phone toward the ranger, covering the receiver. “Please don’t tell her that I’m naked,” she requested.

“Jeffrey Hicks, SAR Officer, National Forest Service,” he replied to her mother’s first question. “Uh, huh. Uh, huh,” he repeated at various intervals.

As Jill watched him, he stood up and went to a file cabinet. He returned with a map and handed it to Jill. She unfolded it and spread it out on the desk. It only took her a moment to get oriented.

What they had always called Stanton Ridge was labeled, ‘Buckner Ridge.’ Spaghetti was apparently Bearhead Summit. Makes a little bit of sense, she thought; it was round on top just as a bear’s head might be. Pimple Peak was actually Hayford Peak. She wasn’t too impressed with that name.

Finding the trail along the side of Bearhead Summit, she placed her finger on the approximate location of the rockslide.

Waving her other hand to get the ranger’s attention, she said, “Here’s where they are . . . right here . . . here on the side of Bearhead Summit.”

“Okay, Mrs. Wahlund,” he said, leaning down to see exactly where Jill was pointing. “I’ve got to go. Yes, yes . . . as quickly as possible.”

Jill took the phone from him. “I’ll call you back when I know more, Mom,” she said into the receiver. “Let Ryan’s parents know.” She hung up the phone without listening to her mom’s response. Time was of the essence. She felt a little bad for having sprung the bad news on her like that; however, she had to know. Fortunately, involving her did seem as if it had made the difference. It seemed as if she was now going to be taken seriously.

“Oh, yes . . . that hillside,” said the ranger. “Not that surprising, really. One of our many steep hillsides.”

“By the way, thank you,” said Jill. “Thank you for not telling my mom.” She waved her hands indicating that she was referring to how she wasn’t dressed.

“Not a problem,” he said. “I would have, mind you . . . had it seemed relevant.”

“What did my mom say?” she asked.

“That I better get my butt in gear. That’s not exactly the word she used . . . if you know what I mean.”

Jill chuckled. “I’m pretty sure I do. I know my mom.”

“She also told me to put you in charge. I guess she trusts you more than me.”

Jill shrugged. “I get things done. I make things happen,” she explained. “But we obviously need to work together. What’s the next step?”

“Tell me again about who we have to rescue and what you know of their medical condition,” he requested. “Your mom said he is your twin brother. I’m sorry. I didn’t know that. You’d only said ‘brother.’”

“Yes, David and I are twins. We’re nineteen, as is Ryan,” she explained. She went on to answer the rest of his questions to the best of her ability.

A short time later, Jill was out in the lobby. Officer Hicks was making a few quick phone calls. ‘Setting the wheels in motion,’ had been the expression he had used. Jill had wanted to participate but knew that the process would likely go faster if she gave him his space. She was more than aware just how distracting a nude girl could be for a guy.

Even though she was theoretically helping by not being a distraction, Jill still felt antsy. She couldn’t just sit and wait. To take her mind off of things, she was studying a beaver diorama. It featured a cutaway of a beaver lodge, attempting to show what a beaver’s life might be like while inside their home. It looked as if it would be an unimaginably dark and damp existence; she knew she wouldn’t like it. There were also dioramas that dealt with geology, even one covering plate tectonics and earthquakes. Jill had walked past that one. Given all that had happened, it had felt much too close to home.

To her surprise, Mrs. Brooks came out of the back and approached her. She had a jacket in her hand.

“I found this in the back,” she said, holding it up. “It’s been hanging there since early in the year. It belongs to Patty, but I don’t think she’d mind.” Jill reached for the jacket as she continued, “It’s bound to be tight, mind you. Patty’s very petite.”

From the look in Mrs. Brooks’ eyes, Jill could tell that she was being tested. She knew that Mrs. Brooks had not believed her earlier when she had said that she’d be dressed if at all possible.

Jill felt tears again welling up in her eyes. She hugged the green Forest Service jacket to her chest. She could tell that it was short, but it felt heavenly. Having the material against her skin brought back feelings of comfort and safety. Holding in her hands a reminder of what she had been lacking served to highlight all the vulnerability that she had been experiencing.

“Oh, Mrs. Brooks,” she said leaning toward her. It was a bit awkward, but Jill gave her a hug. Finding her something to wear was the kindest thing that anyone had done for her all day.

Being caught off guard by Jill’s reaction, Mrs. Brooks initially reacted quite stiffly. However, once she was convinced that Jill was genuinely appreciative, she softened up.

“Here, let’s see how it fits,” she said, offering her assistance.

At first, Jill didn’t want to let go of the jacket, not even long enough to try it on. It just felt so wonderful to hold. For the first time since she’d left camp that morning, her breasts were covered.

“Just how small is this woman?” Jill asked as she put an arm in a tight sleeve and pulled the jacket around her back.

“About as tiny as they come,” chuckled Mrs. Brooks as she helped her locate the other sleeve. “But you don’t have an ounce of fat on you either. Well, maybe one or two,” she added, glancing down at Jill’s small breasts. “You just have a bigger frame.”

Jill did manage to get both of her arms into their respective sleeves. It was a tight fit.

“You do have broad shoulders,” remarked Mrs. Brooks, taking a step back.

Jill was able to get the zipper started, but she had to suck her stomach in to do it. Breathing out, she managed to zip it part way up. The jacket was definitely tight on her; however, even with the front zipped to just the bottom of her ribcage, her breasts were largely covered. Looking down, Jill saw that her nipples were completely hidden from view, even with the jacket open wide across the center of her chest.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” she said to Mrs. Brooks who was standing a few feet away and looking at her dubiously.

“I guess it’s not going to work,” she replied.

“Oh, it’s going to work,” said Jill adamantly. “I’ll make it work!”

“Well, good luck with that,” said Mrs. Brooks. Turning to return to her desk, she continued, “Just get it back to me in one piece. I don’t think that Patty would mind that I’m loaning it to you, provided it comes back.”

Jill nodded. Once Mrs. Brooks was back at her desk, Jill slipped into the restroom. She needed to see how it looked in the mirror.

In addition to being tight, the jacket had one serious shortcoming; it was just a jacket. Jill stood there looking at herself in the mirror. She bit her lip trying to figure out if there was anything that could be done about it.

The jacket covered her belly button, but that was about it. Had she been wearing pants, she could tell that it would extend down over her belt, but not by a lot. It was definitely cut for a much shorter woman. She lifted her arms to see what would happen. As expected, her belly button peeked out.

Lifting her arms also revealed another issue. The jacket was so tight on her shoulders and upper arms that she had a limited range of movement. I’d never be able to play basketball in this, she thought.

Putting her arms back down, she grasped the hem and tried to pull it down. As expected, it didn’t give. It was a very sturdy, no-nonsense jacket, meant for warmth.

Standing there looking at herself, she admired the cut, the sharp crisp shoulders. ‘I look so official,’ she thought, turning so that the Forest Service patch on the shoulder was completely visible. ‘But I’m definitely a bottomless girl’ she thought, glancing down at her completely bare lower half.

She might have been disappointed; instead, she decided to view the cup as half-full rather than half-empty. The jacket was a wonderful development!

She placed both hands over her crotch, tucking her fingers back between her legs. That worked quite well. She smiled at the girl in the mirror. This is the most dressed I’ve been all day, she thought. The girl smiling back at her had all the important points covered.

Feeling much less naked, she left the bathroom. Hicks was just coming out of the back.

“Are you ready?” he asked, looking her up and down.

“Yep,” she said, forcing herself to think, ‘half-full.’

“She’s going with you?” asked Mrs. Brooks in surprise. “Since when do family members go along on search and rescue missions?”

“I’m afraid she has to come,” he replied. “She knows right where the young men are. It wouldn’t do anyone any good if we wasted time searching for them. This is a rescue mission . . . not a search and rescue mission.”

“I have to come,” announced Jill resolutely. She’d never imagined that she might be left behind. Surely there was more she could do to assist with the effort than merely guiding the Rangers to David and Ryan.

“But maybe you should leave Patty’s badge here,” he said. “Not that anyone would accuse you of impersonating a ranger . . . there’s just no chance it will go missing in Mrs. Brooks care.”

He stepped up to Jill and reached up to unpin it. Jill pulled back. Seeing his hands approach her chest, even though the thick jacket was in between, had surprised her.

“Oh, pardon me,” he said, realizing that he needed to be more careful.

“I’ll take care of it,” said Jill. A moment later she handed it to Mrs. Brooks.

Glancing out the front window where many of the boys seemed to be waiting for her on the front lawn, she asked, “Can we go out the back?”

“We are going out the back. That’s where the vehicles are parked,” he replied. Glancing over at Mrs. Brooks, he added, “We’re taking Search and Rescue Two.”

As they made their way through the ranger station, Jill looked into every room they passed, hoping to see something that she might borrow to get her lower half covered. There didn’t seem to be any spare clothing lying around.

A moment later, they went down the back steps and headed toward a long, official-looking Jeep. Jill hadn’t been conscious that the ranger station was air conditioned until they stepped outside. It seemed to be at least twenty degrees warmer than in the building. The increase in temperature made the winter jacket particularly uncomfortable.

Even though she was much more dressed than she had been when she had entered the ranger station a short time before, it was still very scary to leave the relative safety of the building. Jill looked around apprehensively. She realized she’d have to stay with the ranger if she saw someone, but she felt a strong need to know if she was being observed in her bottomless state. It felt unusual, to say the least, to only be naked from the belly button down. She scampered towards the Jeep, wanting to get herself hidden within as quickly as possible.

The Jeep was painted the typical pale ‘Forest Service’ green color and had the official seal on the door, the one with a pine tree between the letters ‘U’ and ‘S.’ On top it had a red light bar similar to a fire engine as well as two all-metal stretchers, nested one on top of the other. There were other pieces of equipment on the back; a giant jack, several shovels, and a large metal can that surely contained additional fuel or perhaps water. Unlike their Jeep, it had four doors; it looked like a stretch model.

Suddenly she saw a man come out from behind the Jeep.

“All set?” Hicks asked him.

“Gassed up and good to go,” the man said, his eyes never once leaving Jill’s pelvis.

She blushed anew.

“Take shotgun,” said Hicks, noticing Jill’s discomfort.

Jill was glad to find the door unlocked, and she jumped inside, closing it as quickly as she could manage.

“Welcome to Search and Rescue Two,” Hicks remarked once he was also inside.

**Chapter 134: Yet Another Surprise**

Jill looked around. The interior, like the exterior, was all business. In addition to radios and GPS devices, the dash was configured with a compass and an inclinometer.

“Do you always have the stretchers on the roof?” she asked.

“No,” he replied, pointing at her seatbelt to indicate that she needed to buckle up, “Those are called Stokes Rescue Litters or Baskets. I had the guys strap them on while I was making calls. I also had medical kits loaded into the back.”

Jill turned to look, but the rear seat kept her from seeing what he was talking about. Jill was glad to hear that the time she had been waiting had been put to good use. She knew that it had amounted to little more than a few minutes; it had just seemed longer due to the urgency of the situation.

As he started the motor, he continued, “Today is your lucky day. If you saw my title on my desk, you might realize that I am a Search and Rescue Officer. In fact, I’m the district’s senior SAR Officer. Most days, the Stanton office is staffed with a Naturalist. They might know more about flora and fauna; however, I’ve had all the medical training of an EMT, and then some.”

Jill nodded. “I’m not feeling so lucky today,” she replied.

“My apologies,” he said. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know,” she said, attempting a smile.

Jill saw him switch on the emergency light bar as he turned out of the parking lot and mashed the accelerator pedal to the floor. There was no siren, but there were no cars in their proximity. She saw the boys waiting on the lawn with their bikes turn and look. Their wait was destined to be fruitless. Did they really think that she was going to come back out the front door naked?

As they accelerated, Hicks remarked, “I don’t want you to take this wrong. I am, after all, nearly twice your age . . . happily married with two young children . . . but this look . . . the jacket only thing. Pretty damn hot!”

Jill looked out her side window and sighed. She felt the familiar warmth surging in her cheeks. She couldn’t really blame him for noticing that she was still naked below the waist; however, it seemed inappropriate for him to bring it up. Jill glanced down at her legs. Her knees were as close together as she could get them.

“Sorry,” he apologized, noticing her reaction. “Forget I said that.”

“Okay . . . I will,” she replied, trying to get her voice to sound strong and confident. She hoped that he would respect that she didn’t want to talk about how naked or dressed she might be. She wanted them to be able to have a professional working relationship during their time together.

“There’s a thrift store a mile or so away. We could stop . . . grab you some shorts and a T-shirt. You’re going to boil in that jacket.”

“No,” she replied. “We need to hurry. I do wish I had clothes, but I’m not willing to waste a single moment on that until David and Ryan are receiving medical care.” She hoped he believed her. She didn’t want him to think that she was using that as an excuse to stay naked.

“Okay,” he said nodding. “I’ll crank the AC. Maybe that will keep the jacket from getting too uncomfortable.”

“Thanks,” she replied. She was already sweating. She only had it zipped where it was against her belly, so it was wide open across her chest. That helped, but not all that much as there was very little room for air to circulate between the jacket and her skin. And it was certainly a winter jacket, two substantial layers with some thin insulation in between.

Jill looked down at her bare chest. Her nipples were covered, but her cleavage, if she had been a girl with cleavage, would have been on full display. As it was, the wide-open plunging neckline seemed to enhance just how flat she was. That no longer bothered her as it once had.

“Can you explain what we are doing?” she requested as they turned onto Stanton Creek Road heading away from the grocery store she had passed earlier. “We can’t very well drive up to . . . the ridge.” She was racking her brain trying to remember its official name. She knew it wasn’t Stanton Ridge.

“Actually we can,” he replied as he switched the siren on to pass a car. The loud noise forced Jill to slap her hands over her ears. Hicks pointed at some ear muffs hanging from the dash in front of her, but as she started to reach for them, he switched the siren back off.

He continued, “The road is not nearly as direct as the trail you came down, but we can drive to Buckner Ridge. The first section of road we’ll be on is one that the sheepherders in the area use. That connects to a logging road. Above the tree line, this will be unadulterated four-wheeling.”

Jill looked around inside the Jeep. It was outfitted with a serious roll cage. That was a little comforting given how fast they were driving and how steep she knew the slope up to the ridge to be.

“Now it makes sense,” she said. “But we get there . . . then what? We can’t very well strap David and Ryan on the roof and then drive back down, right?”

Hicks chuckled. “Certainly not. As I was just about to tell you, I’ve arranged a medevac helicopter. It’s based out of Elk Bend. You have heard of Elk Bend, haven’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” said Jill. “There is a popular little bakery there. My parents get David and me our birthday cake there each summer.”

A tear formed in her eye. She’d never had a birthday that hadn’t involved a shared ‘twins’ birthday cake. With trepidation, she wondered what next year’s birthday cake might look like.

“I think I know the bakery,” said Hicks. “So the helicopter is coming from Elk Bend, but one never knows how long it will take them to locate a crew. They have pilots on call, not on duty. But it shouldn’t take long. The helicopter might beat us to the ridge. It might not.”

“Wow . . . so it’s on its way?” she asked, surprised but delighted at the news.

“It might still be on the ground, but if so, they’ll be airborne shortly,” he replied. “We’ll rendezvous on the ridge. They should be able to locate your twin brother and your friend from the air. A fresh rockslide stands out like a sore thumb. They’ll land as close as possible. They’ll have Stokes Baskets with them, as well. I brought these in case we get there first. Whoever gets there first will triage the two boys. That’s the first step.”

“Triage?” she asked.

“A medical term . . . means that we’ll evaluate each patient from the standpoint of urgency . . . determining priorities for their treatment. Given how you have described their injuries, they’ll be flown to the hospital in Elk Bend.”

“Elk Bend? I was assuming they’d be taken to Stanton.”

“The hospital in Elk Bend is larger, and they have a neurological treatment center. So it’s not just because the helicopter is based there, but once you’re in the air, it only takes a few more minutes to get to Elk Bend.”

Jill sat there thinking through all that she’d just heard. “They won’t be able to land close to where David and Ryan are,” she informed him. “It’s way too steep there.”

“They’ll land as close as they can,” he replied, again switching on the siren to turn left against the light at an intersection. “They know what they’re doing. At least that area’s above the tree line.”

Jill again covered her ears as she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She felt as if a huge weight were being lifted off of her chest. She’d told Ryan that she’d be back with the cavalry. Based on what Officer Hicks had just said, the cavalry was indeed en route.

She didn’t know how serious David’s injuries were, but suddenly she felt as if she could breathe. She burst into tears. She’d done it! She was on her way back with the cavalry! A variety of emotions – strong emotions – surged through her.

“Are you all right?” asked Hicks, concern evident in his voice. He handed her a box of tissues.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m just so worried about David. At least now, help is on the way. Thank you so much,” she added quietly.

He didn’t reply. Using a tissue, Jill dabbed her eyes. Somehow she’d managed to discharge her duties quite admirably. She’d raced to town as quickly as possible. Even David himself might not have been able to cover that distance in less time. And there had been no delays of significance. She’d stopped briefly at one point due to feelings of despair, but she’d probably made that time back up. She’d run through a sprinkler, but that had happened because she’d taken a shortcut. A little time had been wasted convincing Officer Hicks that she was telling the truth. That was regrettable but also unavoidable; however, even that had been accomplished relatively quickly. Hopefully, David would be fine, but no matter the outcome, she knew that she should be proud of how much she had poured into the effort of getting help to him quickly.

“Skyline Adventures? Why are we stopping here?” she asked in surprise. Officer Hicks had just turned off the paved road to enter a gravel parking lot right in front of the aerial park’s huge sign.

“We’re going to need some help. We’re picking up one of our volunteers . . . he works here. That was one of the calls I made while you were waiting.”

Jill knew just one person who worked at Skyline Adventures. ‘What are the odds?’ she fretted as Officer Hicks accelerated toward the entrance gate. She shook her head in disbelief as Nick came into view.

Officer Hicks rolled down his window as he slammed on the brakes to come to a stop. “Hop in the back,” he called out to Nick.

‘Oh, my God!’ thought Jill in disbelief as Nick pulled open the door and clambered into the seat behind Hicks.

A second later, Nick had the door closed and Hicks was executing a quick U-turn. Jill slid way down low trying to disappear. She felt like crawling under her seat, but she knew that hiding was not going to be possible. The last time she had seen Nick, she’d been topless. This time, she was bottomless.

“Thanks for coming,” said Hicks gratefully, looking at Nick in the rearview mirror.

“No problem. Always glad to help with search and rescue,” he replied. “My boss didn’t mind. Things were slow . . . even for a Thursday. So what’s up? You said, some climbers, a rockslide.”

Jill had gotten herself down so low that Nick had not yet noticed her.

“That’s right,” said Hicks, turning back out of the parking lot and hitting the gas. “A short time ago, this young lady showed up at the ranger station. It seems that she and two young men, her twin brother and a friend, were hiking along the trail that runs along the side of Bearhead Summit when…”

“Young lady? Twin brother?” asked Nick, interrupting Hicks and leaning forward to peer into the passenger seat.

Jill knew that he was going to recognize her right away. “Hi, Nick,” she said bashfully, peering up at him. With her hands and arms, she was doing the best she could to cover herself so that he wouldn’t notice that she wasn’t wearing pants.

“Jill?” he exclaimed in surprise.

“Wait, you guys know each other?” said Officer Hicks in astonishment.

Jill looked over at Hicks and shrugged sheepishly. She slid back up in her seat. Since Nick had seen her, there was no longer any point in trying to hide. She knew that sitting up would help her conceal the fact that she was bottomless . . . for a little while, anyway. She had a sinking feeling, realizing that he was going to find out sooner or later; however, she definitely wanted to put that off as long as possible.

An uncomfortable silence ensued as she and Nick looked at one another. “I think we went on a date or two,” said Jill, after giving Nick more than enough time to reply.

“What do you mean ‘you think’?” chuckled Hicks.

Nick ignored him. “So, David, Ryan?” he asked, looking into Jill’s eyes.

She nodded, her expression revealing deep mental anguish.

“Oh, Jill. I’m so sorry. How badly are they injured?” he asked, genuine empathy evident in both his tone and expression.

“Pretty bad,” she replied, “…but I don’t know.” She went on to describe what had happened and everything that she had told Hicks about their condition. Nick listened attentively.

“Now, I’m feeling bad. I didn’t believe her at first,” Hicks confessed.

“Why wouldn’t you?” asked Nick. “Do many people make phony reports of backcountry injuries?”

“It’s not so much that,” explained Hicks pausing.

Oh, no, thought Jill. Here it comes.

Hicks continued, “It’s just that her story was full of fictitious place names. What would you think if someone told you that they had just sprinted down from ‘Stanton Ridge’ because two people had been hurt in a rockslide on the side of ‘Spaghetti’ while they were hiking back from ‘Pinnacle Peak’?” He chuckled. He obviously thought it was rather funny.

“Pimple Peak,” said Jill, hesitantly correcting him.

“Spaghetti!” laughed Nick, shaking his head. “They’re a funny bunch. They call Inspiration Peak, ‘Sharp Tooth.’”

“It looks a lot more like a dinosaur tooth than an inspiration . . . whatever that might look like,” said Jill defensively.

Hicks chuckled. “Kids these days,” he said, shaking his head.

A moment later, he came to a stop in front of a gate. The pavement had ended a mile or more earlier and the road had started climbing steadily. “Nick, you’re up!” he exclaimed.

As Jill watched, Nicked jumped out and raced to the gate. After unlatching it, he gave it a shove, swinging it wide open. He stepped aside so that Hicks could drive through. Nick then closed the gate behind them and hurried back into his seat.

“The gate’s to keep the livestock where they belong. BLM land,” explained Hicks, looking over at Jill.

She didn’t reply. She knew very well what the gate was for. They’d done their share of four wheeling. Hicks talked as if he thought she was new to the area even though she had told him otherwise.

**Chapter 135: The Road to the Ridge**

Jill observed as Hicks shifted into gear to continue up the dirt road. Once the Jeep was rolling along slowly, he shifted into 4x4 low-range. In that regard, this Jeep was exactly like their own. She was glad that Hicks seemed as if he were well versed in piloting a Jeep over rugged terrain. He did a good job of maintaining momentum.

“So, do I get to hear about your dates? How you two know each other?” Hicks asked as he accelerated.

Jill looked back at Nick. Staring into his eyes, she shook her head ever so slightly. That was the last thing that she wanted to have discussed. Her love life was far from interesting, and the Nick chapter had not gone well; she knew she wouldn’t come off looking very good. One, less than exemplary, chapter had seen her letting Nick believe that she was going out with Ryan so that he’d give up and stop asking her out.

She certainly didn’t want Hicks to hear about that. Shortly, he’d be meeting Ryan. Everything was already as awkward as it could be. It would be worse if Hicks were left with the impression that Ryan was her boyfriend. And she didn’t want to have to tell Nick the truth, that she’d deceived him, especially not right then, not in front of Officer Hicks.

The drill with the gates repeated itself twice more, each time Nick getting out to open and then close them after they’d driven through. Jill could tell that the two of them had a bit of a routine established. They’d obviously done this before.

After the third gate, the slope of the dirt road increased and they entered a dense section of the forest. It was obvious that they were now on a logging road; it was narrow and very steep.

The road branched in several places. Jill could see clear-cut areas off to her right. At each fork, Hicks stayed to the left. He obviously knew exactly which way to go even though the road was completely unmarked.

“So, Jill . . . what’s with the Forest Service jacket?” Nick asked out of the blue.

The question didn’t surprise her. The jacket seemed hard to miss. Hopefully, he’d just seen the shoulders and not that it was open across her chest. She’d expected that the color would stand out to him. She’d thought of trying to zip it up further, but knowing that he was going to find out sooner or later that it was all she had on, she hadn’t made the attempt. Getting it zipped up over her ribcage was probably impossible.

“Mrs. Brooks found it and loaned it to her,” explained Hicks. “When she came in . . . she was . . . umm . . . cold.”

Jill looked over at him and saw him wink. She didn’t know why he thought that she might be naked. They’d both avoided talking about it. Now that Nick was with them, she’d been dreading the topic – hoping that it wouldn’t come up – at least not for a while.

Hicks’ explanation seemed to satisfy Nick. Was he really that gullible? However, maybe he was thinking of the AC.

Jill blushed spontaneously as she considered just how embarrassed she’d feel once Nick found out that not only was she bottomless, but that she had run all the way down from the ridge and then into town to the ranger station, stark naked. He’d probably realize that she’d been hiking in the nude. What might he end up thinking of her? What did he already think of her?

She thought back to her now very regrettable decision to leave her clothes behind in camp and how she had voluntarily chosen to meet the boys at the bridge that morning. She’d been imagining a lonely hike up a trail that saw minimal use, one that hopefully would not include any chance meetings with strangers. She’d never imagined that she might encounter someone she knew while naked. Somehow that seemed a thousand times worse than any of the stranger encounters that she had experienced.

In the case of a stranger, she could maintain her anonymity. She could be a nameless girl, who happened to be naked, and then she could disappear back into the obscurity from which she had emerged. In Nick’s case, that possibility did not exist. He knew exactly who she was. He’d met her parents and grandparents. There was no anonymity.

He did not seem like a person who would talk, and yet if he told just one person, the word would get out. In no time at all, people in Agency and Stanton might be talking about Jill Wahlund, the skinny girl who spends summers with her grandparents on the east side of Cache Lake, and who hikes naked. She shuddered at the thought. If that happened, even her grandparents would start being asked about their granddaughter’s penchant for nudity.

First, David and Ryan had been injured, now this. She had known there might be repercussions when she had made her choice – when she had decided to go for help. She had known that she might pay a price. Now that help was on the way, her perspective was changing. But as she thought about it, she realized that her resolve was just as strong as ever. She was still willing to pay a price, even a high one, on the chance that it might make the difference for David. But that didn’t mean that she wanted to.

Suddenly the Jeep lurched to a stop. Looking ahead, she saw that there was a large tree down across the road. It was clearly much too large in diameter to drive over in the Jeep.

“Anyway to go around?” asked Nick.

“Afraid not,” replied the ranger. “No other roads, and the forest it too thick. We’ve got to go through.”

“Through?” she asked.

“Fortunately, we’re equipped for this sort of thing,” said Hicks. “Nick and I will have this taken care of in no time.”

“Oh . . . Nick and you,” she said scornfully after the two of them had climbed out. It struck her as a very sexist remark. “So what am I, chopped liver?” she muttered to herself as Hicks opened the back of the Jeep. He must have a chainsaw back there, she realized.

“Just like a baby diaper service truck,” she heard Nick remark.

As she listened to them getting the equipment that they needed out of the back, she found herself getting more and more upset. David was her brother; Hicks knew that. Sawing up the tree and removing it would probably go faster with all three of them working. Did he really think that she was too weak to be of any help? Sure she was skinny, but she was also strong – and she had the heart of a lion. He might not know that – but he ought to by now. He was probably a male chauvinist, plain and simple, she realized.

Another possibility occurred to her as she watched them walk forward toward the tree. Hicks was now wearing gloves and a full-face shield. Just maybe he had decided to let her sit this one out so that she could keep her naked butt hidden in the Jeep’s passenger seat. Considering that, she realized that she would have most likely reacted quite negatively had he suggested that she get out of the Jeep and help – bottomless.

Deciding that the chainsaw could only cut as fast as it could cut, she decided to stay right where she was. If it didn’t get help to David any faster, there was no reason for her to reveal how little she had on. Keeping Nick in the dark a bit longer was just fine with her, even if it meant swallowing her pride.

The chainsaw roared to life as Hicks let it bite into the log. Wood chips flew. It cut like the big powerful saw that it obviously was; however, the tree was large in diameter; the first cut took over a minute to complete. Hicks stepped to the side and started the next cut.

“What the hell!” shouted Jill from inside the Jeep. He’d only moved over something like sixteen inches. He was intending to cut firewood length rounds! At this rate, he would be spending over ten minutes sawing. That just wouldn’t do! Realizing again that in the end, Nick was going to see her bare ass naked, she opened her door and climbed out.

After Hicks completed the second cut, she watched as Nick struggled to roll the large round. Hoping that there would be a pair of gloves for her, she raced to the back of the Jeep. There were several pairs; she grabbed one that looked about right. She searched around quickly in the back of the Jeep, hoping to find a blanket of some sort – nothing!

She tried swinging her arms, testing just how restrictive the jacket was. “Shit, shit, shit!” she said aloud, realizing that it was limiting her movement and would be in danger of getting a popped seam or otherwise ruined. She shrugged it off. After all, they’d both seen her topless.

Seconds later, she was running past the Jeep, heading into the thick of the battle. She was wearing only leather, just her boots and the gloves, her hair still back in a ponytail.

“This is for you, David!” she said aloud even though there was no way she could be heard over the deafening noise of the big saw.

Hicks was almost halfway into the third cut when she reached him. She tapped him firmly on the shoulder, unavoidably startling him. The chainsaw dropped down to an idle as he turned and stared at the naked girl, a look of profound astonishment on his face.

“We don’t have time for this!” she yelled, trying to be heard above the noise of the engine. He seemed frozen in place. Jill glanced back and caught a glimpse of Nick just behind her. His eyes were as big as saucers and his mouth was hanging open.

“We don’t have time for this!” she said a second time, turning her attention back to Hicks. She stepped over next to him. Placing her hands on the handles next to his, she gave a yank, pulling the long blade up out of the kerf. She could tell that Hicks had no idea what she had in mind as she guided the blade over about another sixteen inches and set it back against the wood.

To her astonishment, he just stood there acting as if he had no idea what to do.

“Cut the goddamn log!” she yelled at the top of her lungs.

Hicks nodded, finally acting as if he understood. He turned his attention back to the saw, instantly giving it gas.

Chips flew everywhere, forcing Jill to take a step back toward Nick. He had just finished getting the first round out of the road. She sensed that he was staring, but she didn’t look over. Even though there was no need to watch, she maintained her focus on the sawing operation, but from a safe distance as she didn’t have eye protection.

She knew that Nick had to be quite surprised by the fact that she had just appeared naked. She was glad that the noise of the chainsaw prevented any discussion. The situation was as awkward as it could be, but it was better to just stand there, trying her best to ignore him. It would have been much harder to look at him and invite discussion about how she had nothing on.

As Hicks completed the cut, Jill jumped into position. Nick stared at her but didn’t move. To get him to snap out of it, she pointed at him and then pointed at the ground where she wanted him. Finally cluing in, he hopped over next to her.

Even though the section of log was twice as big as what Hicks had been cutting, it was still short. It placed the two of them shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip.

Jill noticed Nick peeking down at her legs as the two of them placed their gloved hands on the log. She braced herself, extending her legs back, one a little further than the other. Leaning forward like that, her nipples pointing almost straight down at the ground, she poured every ounce of her strength into her half of the log. Nick did the same. The log moved! Seeing that the two of them were going to be able to roll the big section, Hicks gave Jill the thumbs up and shifted into a position to cut another round of the same length.

Looking down, Jill took her turn stealing a glance at Nick’s legs; they looked so sturdy, his thighs flexing where they emerged below his shorts. Her legs, much more exposed than his, had a similarly solid yet decidedly feminine muscularity about them. As the two of them pushed, her muscles rippled just below a thin layer of smooth, bronze skin. There was a fair amount of skin-on-skin contact between the two of them; it was unavoidable.

Jill did her best to not think about that lest she get distracted from their important project. It was a little difficult to be naked around guys and behave as if she were indifferent about it, especially when they were attractive – and so very close. And it didn’t help matters that it was coming immediately after riding in the Jeep where her bare loins had been on the vinyl - being affected by the vibrations coming from the low gearing. She’d been doing her best to ignore that; it had probably only been possible given the serious nature of their mission.

She couldn't match Nick’s strength, and yet he wouldn't have been able to roll the large round by himself. However, together they had it rolling in the chosen direction. They got the large section of tree trunk off of the road and were back ready for the next one just as Hicks completed the cut.

As Jill brought her strength to bear against the second large round, she found herself glad that she had not been any more ambitious when she had chosen where to place the blade. The sections were almost too heavy; however, she and Nick, struggling and sweating side by side, were getting the job done!

As Jill and Nick struggled, Jill did a little math in her head. One round at sixteen inches plus three at thirty-two equaled – one-hundred-twelve inches. That was over nine feet. That would be wide enough for the Jeep to fit through. Those four pieces would take five cuts – probably about six or seven minutes. The same gap would have required seven rounds – eight cuts – had she not joined the effort. Just four or five minutes difference, however, unquestionably worth the effort – and the exposure.

The last cut seemed to be taking longer. Jill was antsy to get going. As Hicks finished the final cut, he switched off the saw and set it down. Jill realized that he was moving into position to help roll the last big round out of the way.

“Nick and I will have this taken care of in no time,” she said with a stiff jaw, deliberately repeating Hicks’ line from earlier. Her words came out quite a bit louder than necessary; it was suddenly so quiet. “Load up the chainsaw!” she added to get him moving in a productive direction.

He shrugged, but picked it up and headed back toward the Jeep.

**Chapter 136: The Road to the Ridge, continued**

“Jill, you’re naked,” remarked Nick as the two of them worked as a team to get the final section off the road.

“No shit!” she replied. She’d felt plenty naked without the reminder.

He laughed out loud. She was glad that he didn’t continue talking.

Once the road was clear, she smiled at him gratefully. “Let’s go!” she said, dashing back to the Jeep. Nick followed. Jill blushed yet again as she tossed her gloves into the back. She dusted the wood chips off of her skin. There were also chips in her hair, so she took out her ponytail and quickly shook out of her hair, combing through it with her fingers.

At that point, she picked up Patty’s coat from the back of the Jeep where she had tossed it earlier. She didn’t bother putting it back on as she raced forward to get into the Jeep. Along the way, she renewed her ponytail. As she had never been too picky about how her hair looked, she was good at putting in a ponytail on the fly.

“Hurry up, guys,” she yelled back at them through the Jeep. “Shut the hatch. We’ve got to get going!” She could hear them talking back behind the vehicle. She couldn’t make out what was being said, but she was positive they were talking about her. “Talk all you want about the naked girl . . . just do it in front her . . . once we’re driving!” she shouted.

That seemed to do the trick. A moment later the hatch was closed and they were climbing into their respective seats.

“How did you know we were talking about you?” asked Hicks as he buckled up and started the motor.

“Wild guess.”

“We could have been talking about how the saw was getting dull. It was. Each cut was taking longer than the one before. You probably noticed how the trunk had embedded itself into the ground, forcing me to cut all the way down to the dirt. Chains don’t like that.”

Jill had noticed the last cut taking longer. It probably meant that her efforts had saved more time than her initial estimate. She also knew that a dull saw could stop cutting altogether. She didn’t know what they might have done had they not been able to clear the road.

“That’s not what you were talking about.”

“You’re right. We were talking about the naked girl . . . but not about how she was naked,” said Hicks, driving through the gap they had just made.

“Yeah, sure,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s true,” he pleaded. “Nick, tell her what I said.”

“That you’ve got a beautiful ass,” replied Nick with a smile.

“Not true!” Hicks snapped. “I mean, it is . . . you do . . . but that’s not what I said. Come on, Nick! Goddamit . . . tell her what I really said.”

“Okay,” said Nick begrudgingly. “He said your mom was right. He said you should be in charge.”

“That’s what I said,” said Hicks looking over at her.

Jill laughed. “Okay. Much better than talking about a girl’s ass behind her back. But get your speed up. Time’s a-wastin’.”

“So, why are you naked?” asked Nick.

Jill glanced back. She knew that he had every right to be curious.

“Born this way,” she replied.

“So was I,” said Nick. “But I’m not naked.”

When Jill didn’t respond, Hicks said, “Man’s got a point.”

Jill took a deep breath, trying to think of what to say. Both of these men were going to great effort to help her in a time of tremendous need. She didn’t feel as if she ought to simply ignore their question; it was a valid question. “I got talked into hiking naked,” she said at long last. “But truth be told, I was one of the people talking me into doing it.”

“You talked yourself into hiking naked?” asked Nick, astonishment evident in his voice.

“I certainly had some help . . . a lot of help . . . but something like that . . . I guess,” she said, her cheeks glowing red.

She couldn’t really deny that she’d played a role in what had happened. No one could have gotten her to do what she had done had it been completely against her will. Feelings of embarrassment surging within her, she found herself again wanting to crawl under the seat to hide. Sitting there as she was, she couldn’t very well put the jacket back on. Instead, she pulled it up in front of her. She felt a little more comfortable having it just below her chin, hiding much of her body from view.

“Do you like being naked?” asked Nick.

“Not today,” she replied truthfully, turning to look out the side window so that neither of them would be able to see her face.

Fortunately, Nick did not continue grilling her. She hoped that her short, evasive answers would convey that she didn’t want to talk about the matter.

She knew that soon they’d be on the ridge. Circumstances would again require her active involvement. That would mean that she’d again be outside the Jeep. Likely she’d have to help carry the stretchers to where David and Ryan were. Such tasks would mean that wearing the jacket would again be inconvenient; it would hamper her ability to help. She knew that she didn’t really care all that much about the jacket. After all, it didn’t cover her butt or her pussy, and both Hicks and Nick had now seen everything. The helicopter would have a crew, probably two people, she realized. Those two individuals were also likely to see her naked.

As she considered the helicopter crew, Jill realized that her tally was going to need to be updated. She decided to save that mental task for the end of the day, but in order to not forget anyone, she quickly thought through what had happened since she had last updated her tally to forty-seven. There had been the woman and her kids in the grocery store parking lot. There had been the boys on their bikes. There had been pedestrians and motorists who had seen her en route to the ranger station. She thought back through all that, seeking to fix the encounters in her memory. There had been Mrs. Brooks, Officer Hicks, the man near the Jeep and now Nick. She could tell that some estimating was going to be necessary. She couldn’t say for certain just how many boys on bikes there had been, for example.

“Got any snacks or anything to drink?” she asked as the dirt road faded and then disappeared altogether. They were now above the tree line, driving straight up a rocky slope. There was still vegetation, but not a lot of it.

“Actually, we do!” said Hicks. “Nick, look in the box down behind Jill’s seat. Nothing cold, but there are juices and other things.”

Nick opened the box and listed off its contents for Jill. A minute later, she had a bag of trail mix in one hand and an apple juice in the other.

“My God, did I ever need this!” she remarked. The coat had fallen down. It lay all but forgotten in her lap. Hoping that it would look inadvertent, she pushed it a bit to the side so that the air could circulate against her skin.

Every once in a while, she would notice Hicks stealing a peek over at her. Something about being looked at was exciting, but she did her best to ignore him. Having him occasionally glance over at her kept a little redness in her cheeks, but other than that, it didn’t really bother her. He was working his butt off on behalf of David and Ryan; that was what mattered.

“Get Officer Hicks something to drink,” she called back to Nick. He was quite sweaty from running the saw.

“Water, Nick,” he said. Looking over at Jill, he added, “Just Hicks. I think we’re all on friendly terms here.”

“Sure . . . Hicks it’ll be,” she replied with a smile.

During the ensuing lull in the conversation, David again crossed Jill’s mind. She’d been doing her best to keep herself from thinking about him. His condition was something that she couldn’t control. It was much better to try and focus her thoughts on the things that were within her realm of influence, things like the tree across the road.

“We made quick work of that tree,” she commented.

“We did,” acknowledged Hicks nodding, a smile on his face.

“That reminded me of an experience I once had that involved a baby diaper service truck,” said Nick.

Suddenly Jill remembered an earlier comment about that truck. It was obvious that Nick had a story that he was itching to relate. He paused as if waiting for some encouragement.

“How in the world could that remind you of a baby diaper service truck?” she asked, tossing him the ball. She glanced over at Hicks and saw him wink.

“A few years back, I happened to be driving right behind just such a truck, heading out of a newer neighborhood. We came around a bend, and there in front of us was a tree across the road, much like what we just encountered, only a lot smaller. I didn’t know what we would do, other than stop and wait. As far as I knew, there was no other route out of that particular neighborhood.”

“What did you do?” asked Jill.

“Well, to my surprise, the driver hopped out, chainsaw in hand. He must keep it right next to his seat! He yanked the cord and it spit to life as he walked to the tree. He and I had the road open in a matter of minutes, but, as I said, it was a much smaller tree than the one we just cleared.”

“That’s funny,” said Hicks.

“I guess a chainsaw is a tool of the trade . . . in the baby diaper business,” said Nick.

“That’s what I love about this part of the state,” said Jill. “Here, people take responsibility. Back home, everyone would wait for the government to send someone out to reopen the road.”

“Where are you from?” asked Hicks.

Jill decided to sidestep the question. It was bad enough that he knew her first and last name. “I think I’m going to put our chainsaw in our Jeep,” she said. “I think we should keep it there. It would surprise the livin’ daylights out of someone at home if one day I hopped out and cut up a tree that had fallen across the road . . . just like the man in the baby diaper truck.”

“You should do that!” said Nick. He seemed happy that he had found an audience for his story.

As they crested the ridge, Jill looked all around. She was disappointed that there was not a helicopter in sight.

“They’ll be here,” Hicks assured her.

From the top of the ridge, he started driving along the trail heading toward Bearhead Summit – the same one Jill has run up earlier in the day after seeing the group climbing toward the ridge. At the cutoff, Hicks went left, following the trail that went around ‘Spaghetti.’ They hadn’t gone far before Hicks stopped. “Any further and we risk rolling,” he said. “Jeeps can go up hills that are much steeper than those which they can safely cut across. How far from here, Jill?”

“Maybe half a mile,” she replied.

“Okay, let’s have at!”

Jill turned and looked back at Nick. Putting on her best puppy dog eyes, she asked, “Nick, loan a girl your shirt?”

Nick smiled compassionately. “What, and force you to have to talk yourself into hiking naked . . . a second time in one day?” he asked.

“Wait . . . what?” she asked taken aback. She hadn’t expected such a response. He seemed like much too nice of a guy to refuse.

“Those were your very words, as I recall. You said you talked yourself into hiking naked today. Whatever that might have entailed, I doubt we have time for you to go through it right now. For David’s sake, I think it’s best if I save you the effort . . . make it easy for you.”

Jill didn’t know what to do. She looked over at Hicks.

“Don’t look at me. I’m supposed to stay in uniform.” He shrugged. “And besides . . . the man has a point.”

Jill had thought that Nick would quickly surrender his shirt. As it was now clear that he wasn’t going to – certainly not quickly – she gave the jacket a second thought.

She knew she should wear it, and yet she knew that it would be uncomfortable; more importantly, it would slow her down. The hot blast of air that swept into the air-conditioned vehicle as the doors all opened made up her mind for her.

She thought about just holding it to her front. In that way, it could be positioned to cover her crotch in addition to her breasts; however, she couldn’t give that serious consideration. She would need both hands free if she was going to help. Resolving to put the jacket back on when it came time to meet the helicopter crew, she climbed out, leaving it behind on the passenger seat.

Once Hicks had the stretchers free, Nick and Jill lifted them down from the roof.

“My, you’re tall,” remarked Hicks, looking at Jill with her arms up over her head.

The remark sounded innocent enough, but Jill tried to ignore it nonetheless. Her nude body was obviously a distraction. He had only mentioned her height, she felt, as most other comments about her body would have been inappropriate. She was sure he was looking at her girl parts while trying to pretend otherwise.

Once the stretchers were down, Hicks opened the rear hatch and pulled out a few items to bring. Two of them appeared to contain medical supplies. One was a small hard-sided case and the other was a large loosely packed army-green duffle.

Jill was feeling extremely impatient. They were so close! She could think of nothing else than racing back to where David and Ryan were, but getting Hicks there was what was important. To Jill, he seemed to be moving in slow motion. She felt like yelling, ‘Let’s go! Let’s go!’ But she knew that would surely distract him. He was just being thorough, which was of course important. It would be counterproductive if something essential were left behind.

As soon as Hicks was happy with what he had loaded into the stretcher, the two men picked it up, Nick in front, Hicks in back.

“Okay, lead on,” said Hicks looking at her.

“What can I carry?” she asked. “The other stretcher?”

At first Hicks’ expression betrayed what he was thinking, that she had to be joking, but then the look on his face changed. He had probably realized that she would somehow manage to carry it – if he gave the word.

“No need,” he replied. “We’ll have to carry the boys out one at a time. We’ll take the second one back next trip.”

“Okay,” she agreed. As instructed, she started along the trail, leading the way; however, it didn’t feel right to not be carrying something. She went a short distance but then had to stop and wait. The two men with the laden stretcher were not able to cover ground nearly as quickly as she could.

She walked back toward them. Passing Nick on the uphill side, she reached into the stretcher and lifted out the largest item, the dark green duffle bag. It was heavy but lighter than she had been expecting.

“You don’t need to do that,” said Hicks.

“Maybe not,” she replied, looping the long strap over a shoulder. “But I want to. Maybe you guys will be a little faster without quite so much weight.”

Hicks laughed. “You’re right. That will probably help. Let’s hurry.”

Jill again headed along the trail, the one that was now missing a large section. The canvas duffle sat low, resting against and covering her butt.

**Chapter 137: Whatever it takes**

“What’s in this?” she asked the next time she stopped to wait for them to catch up.

“Well, c-collars, among other things,” replied Hicks.

“C-collars?” she asked.

“Cervical collars . . . neck braces . . . in several sizes.”

“Oh,” said Jill nodding. “Makes sense.”

For a little bit, Jill continued on in silence. She was tempted to run on ahead, but she thought that she needed to guide them down off of the trail where she had come up on her run to Stanton. That route would be the safest and the quickest.

Walking along, Jill glanced down at her nude body. Leather boots and a wide green strap crossing her chest between her breasts; that was all there was to see other than skin. Her stubborn nipples were just as pointy as ever even though the temperature could not be to blame. Considering the vulnerability of her nipples, she made a mental note to renew her sunscreen as soon as there was a lull in the action. She didn’t have it with her, but it was waiting up ahead in David’s backpack.

Glancing down further, she looked at the raised fleshy area that had recently been Fuzzy Wuzzy’s home. ‘Good timing, Jill,’ she admonished herself. She wished she hadn’t gotten so daring. Why had she just shaved everything off? She wondered what Hicks and Nick thought of her bald pussy complete with its telltale white line. She was curious to know, but the last thing she was going to do was ask.

Given what Nick had just said – and Hicks’ response – she expected that both men thought she wanted to be nude, liked being nude. However, she had said that. Why in the world had she said that? They probably thought that she liked having her little lady bits seen; that she was a pussy shaving girl in order to be even more naked. How embarrassing! She knew she was again blushing. Yep, perfect timing. Shave your pussy, and then have all this happen! Beyond embarrassing!

But even as those humiliating thoughts passed through her head, she realized that it would be much the same if Fuzzy Wuzzy were still along for the ride. Naked was naked.

Upon reaching the place where she intended to leave the trail to head down the rocky slope, she stopped to wait for her companions to catch up.

“Ryan, we’re coming!” she yelled at the top of her lungs. Due to the curvature of the mountainside, she couldn’t see them; however, she expected that she might almost be close enough to be heard. “David, we’re coming!” she added, feeling bad that she had assumed that he would still be unconscious. She didn’t want to get her hopes up that he would be awake, but she didn’t remember ever wanting anything more. She held her breath, listening for a reply. She didn’t hear anything, but she convinced herself that the distance was still too great.

“How much farther?” asked Hicks as they came up.

“We’re probably halfway,” she replied. “Shortly after we get to the base of this slope, we should be able to see them.”

Jill held onto the side of the stretcher to steady herself as well as them, as they started down. Together, the three of them made their way down the steep hillside, sliding in places.

“Now we just go across,” she said once they had gotten to where it leveled out a bit. She again took the lead. A short distance on, she caught a glimpse of the boys lying on the rocks. “Ryan, David, we’re almost there!” she yelled.

She saw an arm go up into the air. She waved back as she took off running. There was no longer any reason to stay with the rescue team now that the boys were in sight.

Racing towards them, Jill felt excited yet apprehensive. Maybe David had woken up. Maybe he hadn’t. Maybe he’d stopped breathing. She couldn’t bear the thought of that third possibility. As she neared them, she took off the duffle, setting it down carefully.

“What . . . still naked?” asked Ryan.

“I went for help, not clothes,” she replied, mostly ignoring him as she was looking at David. “David, David,” she said, hoping to get his attention. He was right where he’d been more than an hour and a half earlier. Not only that, but he looked almost exactly the same.

“That was quick. I thought you’d need at least another hour,” remarked Ryan. “You’re a lifesaver!”

‘That remains to be seen,’ she thought. She liked that he was aware of the tremendous effort that she had gone to, but it was premature to know if it would end up making a difference.

Suddenly David’s eyes opened. He looked up at her without moving his head. He didn’t say anything, and his expression didn’t change, but he was looking at her!

It was more than Jill could take! Her tears burst forth as she collapsed next to him. She wanted to take him in her arms, and yet she knew better. Just seeing that he was alive made her realize just how much she had been worrying that he might not be. Despite her best efforts, her subconscious mind had been thinking that she might never see those eyes again.

“He’s been awake for some time now,” said Ryan.

Oh, David,” she said, speaking softly near his face. “Help is on the way. Hang on . . . for me!”

There was no reply.

“He’s said a few things,” said Ryan. “His brain and his mouth seem to work.”

Jill was overjoyed to hear that.

“But he’s not been very talkative. I think he’s quite uncomfortable. He must be in pain,” he continued.

“You both must be in pain,” she said glancing over at Ryan. His leg looked more swollen and there was more discoloration.

Ryan didn’t reply. Jill stroked David’s cheek with the backs of her fingers, speaking to him softly. She hadn’t heard him say anything, and his eyes had again relaxed closed. He appeared to be resting. She wanted to stay next to him, but the men were approaching with the stretcher. She got up to make room for Hicks.

“So, this is David?” he asked, kneeling down next to him.

“Yes. He had his eyes open a moment ago,” said Jill, choking on the words. She wanted to be as helpful as possible, but she was having difficulty speaking; she was feeling so very emotional.

“David, can you hear me?” said Hicks, raising his voice a little.

After a few seconds, David again opened his eyes. Emotions again surged within Jill, and her eyes moistened. She wanted to ask if that meant he was going to be all right, but she knew that it was too early for Hicks to know much. She tried to blink her eyes dry.

“Don’t try to move, David,” said Hicks. “I’m here to help, and there’s a helicopter on the way. We’re going to get you to a hospital.”

As Jill watched, he took a small flashlight and shone it in one eye and then the other.

“Equal and reactive . . . that’s excellent,” he said without looking up.

Jill wasn’t exactly sure what ‘equal and reactive’ meant, but Hicks’ word ‘excellent’ cycled back and forth in her mind. She continued to watch as Hicks checked David’s vital signs.

After taking his blood pressure, Hicks looked up at her. “So far, so good,” he said with a reassuring smile. He seemed to know just how much she had been worrying.

“David, how old are you?” he asked, looking into his eyes.

“He’s nineteen,” she volunteered.

“I know that,” said Hicks glancing up. “I’m trying to get him to say something . . . to evaluate brain function.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Jill, biting her lip.

“David, where are we?” asked Hicks.

Jill studied him carefully. She held her breath. He appeared to be trying to speak.

“Umm . . . Spaghetti, I think,” he said in a weak voice.

Hicks smiled and then chuckled. “Before meeting your sister, I would have considered that a wrong answer.”

Hicks went on to ask a few more questions, such as what year it was and who was president. David got the questions right. Jill was so happy to hear him talking even though his voice sounded feeble.

“So it is good to know who the president is?” asked Ryan.

“After a head injury, yes,” said Hicks. “It’s a very good sign.” Looking over at him, he continued, “Ryan, I presume. How are you?”

“I’ve been better, but I’m fine,” he replied, trying to sit up.

“Just relax. We’ll get you taken care of shortly,” said Hicks reassuringly, “but first things first.”

“I understand . . . David first. I wouldn’t have it any other way,” said Ryan, as Hicks turned his attention back to David.

“Can you feel your toes?” he asked. Looking down at David’s hiking boots, he said, “Jill, can you take off his boots . . . carefully?”

“Sure,” she replied. She was more than glad to be asked to help. While she worked on the laces, Hicks went about verifying that David had feeling in his fingers and had the ability to move them. As Jill started on the second boot, she suddenly became aware that her body position was the opposite of what might be considered ladylike. She was squatting, her knees apart. She shifted, bringing her legs together, even though it appeared as if Hicks, who was right in front of her, had not taken notice.

Once the boots were off and Hicks had confirmed David’s ability to move his toes in addition to his fingers, he got Jill and Nick busy helping with some other tasks. He showed Nick where he wanted him to try and make a level spot for the stretcher and he had Jill locate some things in the duffle she had carried.

“What we’ll do, working together,” he said, “is get a c-collar on David . . . to support his neck. Then we’ll transfer him into the Stokes basket. It is a backboard and a stretcher all in one. We’ll do that where he is, gently rolling him onto it as we slide it under him. Once he is on it, we’ll need to be very careful. It’s steep enough here that it might want to take off downhill. David doesn’t need a sled ride. So we’ll move the stretcher to the flat spot that Nick is preparing. There we’ll secure him to the stretcher and I’ll start an I.V. Questions?”

Nick started on his assigned project while Jill asked if it would be a good idea to take Ryan’s boots off, as well.

“It would be a great idea!” said Hicks. “Even being gentle, it might be a painful process for him. You were right . . . that leg is broken.”

Jill did her best to keep it from hurting, but there was no way around pulling on the boot to get it off. Looking up, she saw Ryan clenching his teeth bravely.

Once Ryan’s boots were also off, Hicks said, “I have something very important for you to do. I need you to hold David’s head in position while I go about fitting the collar. Making sure his neck and spine are not stressed in the process is critical.”

“Okay,” she said, drawing the word out in a sign of extreme nervousness. She was suddenly feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. “I’ve never done anything like that, but I’m sure you’ll instruct me.” She found herself wishing he hadn’t used the word ‘critical,’ and yet she knew that it was clearly the case.

While Hicks busied himself with preparations, measuring David’s neck and selecting the right size c-collar, Ryan remarked teasingly, “So, Jill, you didn’t have time to get any clothes, but you managed to find Nick and invite him along.”

Not liking what he seemed to be implying, Jill snapped, “Don’t look at me. I didn’t invite him!” But then realizing how that had probably sounded to Nick, she added, “But I’m very glad he’s here.”

She looked over at Nick. He was looking down as he worked, but he had a big grin plastered on his face. “So am I,” he said without looking up. Jill went on to give Ryan a quick explanation of how Nick volunteered on search and rescue missions and how Hicks had picked him up at Skyline Adventures.

“I’ll bet you were surprised!” said Ryan. “Shy little Jilly Bean. Everyone’s seeing her naked today . . . shaved bare and all. How many people saw you naked . . . just on this trip to town?”

“Stop it!” she said. “I have to concentrate.”

“Okay . . . sorry,” he replied. Jill looked at him curiously. It was so unlike him to apologize for teasing. “But you’ll be glad to know that I got your phone to turn on,” he added.

“You did?” she replied in surprise.

“I had some time on my hands, so I’ve been messing with it. It seems the ‘on’ switch itself is broken, physically broken. But you can do it with a fingernail. I’ll show you how.”

Jill looked at him apprehensively. “You better not have…”

“Don’t worry . . . what could I do? I can’t get past the password screen. Not that I didn’t try. I was so bored. You better believe I wanted to watch your Tarzan videos.”

“Shhhh! Dang you!” she scolded.

She shook her head, glaring at him in disgust. All she’d done for him and he still had to bring up those videos! Biting her lip nervously, Jill looked at Nick and Hicks out of the corner of her eye. Nick was obviously studying her reaction.

“Tarzan videos?” he asked.

“Forget it. They’re nothing,” she said. Glancing over, she saw Ryan snickering.

“By the look on your face, I know they’re something. I want to see them,” replied Nick.

“Oh, you absolutely do! I’m telling you!” said Ryan, a malicious smile on his lips.

“Enough,” interrupted Hicks. “We’ll all watch them later. Right now, we don’t have time. We’ve got important things to accomplish. Jill, come here.”

Jill was glad that Hicks had put a stop to the conversation even though she didn’t like him suggesting that they would all watch the videos later. While she was glad to know that her phone would turn on, she knew she wouldn’t be unlocking it to share the videos.

Doing her best to clear her mind, she knelt down above David as Hicks talked her through what she needed to do. Cautiously, she took ahold of his head, firmly but carefully . . . lovingly. Through her touch, she sought to communicate to David just how much he meant to her.

Hicks talked about the importance of chin position as he fed one end of the unrolled collar in under his neck from behind. Wrapping it gently around, Hicks aligned it so that the integral cup would support David’s chin.

“Okay, Jill, you can relax,” he said after the Velcro straps were secure.

Jill breathed a sigh of relief. As instructed, she relaxed, but she didn’t remove her hands. She was glad to have that out of the way, but she was concerned. David’s eyes had remained closed the entire time.

They had all just finished rolling David onto the stretcher when the unmistakable rapid chuff-chuff-chuff beat of an approaching helicopter reached Jill’s ears. She couldn’t remember having ever heard a sound more beautiful.

“Oh, good,” said Hicks, looking off into the distance.

As they moved the stretcher to the flat spot, the helicopter arrived. It hovered loudly just overhead. Glad that her hair was in a tight ponytail, Jill squinted up at it. She presumed that they were studying the situation from the air before searching out a place to land, but they were raising quite a bit of dust. She couldn’t help but realize that they were easily close enough to see that she was nude. A moment later, the helicopter rose and banked as it departed.

“They’re headed for the ridge,” observed Hicks once the wind and the loud thrumming noise had died down so that they could once again hear themselves think. “And, Jill . . . I’ve got something else for you to do. I sense that you’re ready and willing to do whatever it takes.”

**Chapter 138: Tamara and Avery**

“Whatever it takes!” she echoed agreeably. “You name it.”

“Hypoxemia . . . a low level of oxygen in the blood . . . can limit recovery from a traumatic brain injury. David’s airways are clear; that’s not the issue, but we need to get his O2 sat . . . his blood oxygen saturation level up . . . standard protocol for prehospital treatment of head injuries, especially at altitude. David really should be on oxygen, and unfortunately, we didn’t have any at the ranger station to load into the Jeep.”

“The helicopter?” Jill asked, wondering why he was taking so long to get to the point.

“Yes, when I called, I requested specifically that oxygen be put on board. They know to bring it when they come, but I’d rather not wait. I imagine that you could get it quickly.”
.
Jill hopped up. “I’m on it!” she said energetically. She was ready to leave, but she paused to see if he had anything else to say.

“Make sure they follow you with another stretcher . . . for Ryan. Tell them that I don’t need anything else. Go!” he said with a jerk of the head.

One minute, she was helping to get David situated on the stretcher, the next, she was again running along the steep hillside – in hot pursuit of a helicopter that had only just disappeared from view. It was the exact stretch of ground that she had covered less than two hours before. ‘This running never ends,’ she thought as she realized just how glad she was to be able to assist in a way that might positively impact David’s recovery. She again had something important upon which to focus her thoughts and energy!

Everything considered, things seemed as if they were going quite well; although, David seemed to be slipping in and out of consciousness. She was uncertain about what that might mean; however, she was now feeling lucky. Earlier Hicks had used that exact expression, telling her that ‘today was her lucky day’ – because he happened to be a Search and Rescue Officer – someone with relevant medical training.

He certainly did seem to know exactly how to deal with head and spine injuries, and yet that made sense. The region was popular with both hikers and climbers. Falls were to be expected. What was more, he had taken important steps right from the get-go. As she had been waiting in the lobby worrying that nothing was happening, he had been making arrangements for everything that would be needed.

As she charged back towards the ridge, running as fast as she dared on the uneven rocky terrain, she wondered just how far she had traveled that day. She had already hiked about five miles when the rockslide had occurred. It had probably been another five to the ranger station – the trail portion alone had been 3.4 miles. She was glad that her feet were accustomed to heavy use and that her boots were fully broken in.

As she climbed back up to the trail, she turned her thoughts to the encounter with the helicopter crew just ahead. The saving grace was that it was destined to be brief. She chuckled to herself as she contemplated that. How could there be any saving grace to meeting people with her pussy on display? Even with the jacket, she’d still be bottomless. Ryan was right; everyone was getting to see her pussy, her freshly shaved pussy.

As the helicopter came into view, Jill was surprised to see that it was not where she had anticipated. The upside was that it was quite a bit closer; however, there was a significant downside: the pilot had found a spot to land that was well to the right of the path that went past the Jeep. Going by the Jeep en route to the helicopter would cost time, precious minutes that she knew she couldn’t justify.

It was beyond embarrassing how things were working out. Even though, if she put it on, she would have still been bottomless, she had been counting on the jacket. Alternately, she might have simply held it in front of herself. She decided to do her best to be happy that the helicopter was closer rather than lamenting that she was naked but for her boots. She’d have the oxygen back more quickly. Trying to put on a brave face, she put her head down and sprinted.

She had thought that the big blade might still be spinning, and yet it wasn’t. A large side door was open. She could just make out someone moving inside; however, that was difficult, given the shadows inside and how bright and sunny it was out. As she got closer, two people climbed out of the helicopter.

“Oxygen!” she shouted as she approached. Slowing so that she might be able to catch her breath and speak, she continued, “Officer Hicks wants me to bring back oxygen!”

She stopped just fifteen or twenty feet from them, placing her hands on her hips and gulping air as fast and as deep as she could manage. She needed oxygen and David needed oxygen. As she fought to catch her breath, she remembered Hicks mentioning the altitude.

At first, the two people didn’t move; they just stood there and stared at her. Jill wasn’t surprised. They obviously needed a moment to take in the view of the naked girl before their brains would switch back on. Of course, they must have known she was nude; they had just seen her from the air. She’d been holding the stretcher. Surely they would have been able to tell that she was not wearing anything.

The crew consisted of a man and a woman. The woman wore sunglasses and had her dark hair pulled back in a tight bun. She looked to be in her forties. The man looked to be much younger, probably in his twenties, she thought.

“Hicks said you’d have oxygen. I’m supposed to bring it back quickly,” she said, trying to force the issue.

“Do you know what she’s talking about?” asked the woman, looking over at her companion.

“I do,” he replied, turning his back and unzipping a gear bag on the floor just inside the helicopter.

As she waited, she studied the woman who was, in turn, studying her. Jill decided that she had to be the pilot. She had a serious, no-nonsense look about her. In addition to the sunglasses, she wore a dark leather bomber-style jacket. She stared at Jill, a slightly amused look on her face.

“Nice tan,” she remarked.

Jill glanced down at her body, trying to decide how to respond. Fortunately, the man turned back around right then.

“Here’s what he requested,” he said, extending a bag toward her.

Jill stepped forward to take what he was holding. It was a relatively small blue bag with a white stripe and ‘OXYGEN’ embroidered in block letters. It had carrying handles, but no shoulder strap.

“Everything’s there,” he continued. “The cylinder’s full and the hoses and regulator look good.”

“Thanks,” said Jill, feeling its weight. As she turned to head back, she added, “We need one more stretcher. But that’s all we need. Hicks said to let you know.” She noticed that they had some with them.

With that, she again broke into a run. She felt two pairs of eyes on her bare buns as she raced away. She suddenly realized that she had been blushing. This ‘being seen naked’ never gets any easier, she realized.

It had been a brief encounter, a minute if that. It had been embarrassing, yet she realized that she hadn’t made any effort to cover up; her thoughts had been on other things.

At that point, she thought back to how she had told Hicks and Nick that she had been among those who had talked herself into hiking naked that morning. She scolded herself for that statement. It had been truthful, but painfully so. Why be that honest? They had obviously taken it to mean that she wanted to be nude, to remain nude. And now she was paying the price. Had she been less than completely honest, Nick surely would have loaned her his shirt.

Remembering all that had transpired caused her to wonder if she really did want to remain naked. Of course, she didn’t; however, being naked was rather comfortable, given how hot it was. But it was still embarrassing; it was those first few minutes around someone new that were the worst. However, after that, she would start to adjust. It was no longer all that uncomfortable to be around Hicks and Nick.

Jill tried to clear her thoughts and concentrate on getting the heavy-for-its-size bag back to Hicks as quickly as she could . . . without falling along the way. She’d had a very good day in terms of staying on her feet, she realized.

Upon getting back, she saw that Hicks was busy with Ryan who now seemed to be wearing something that looked splint-like on his left leg. Hicks stood up and took the bag from her.

“Well done,” he said approvingly.

As Hicks went about pulling the contents out of the bag, Jill saw that there was now a short I.V. pole extending up from the side rail of David’s stretcher. A bag containing fluid was hanging on it. With her eyes, she followed the small tubing that extended down to a bandage on David’s forearm. She wasn’t the only one who had been hurrying. In the short amount of time that she’d been away, Hicks had started an I.V. and put on a leg splint.

She was delighted to see David’s eyes following Hicks as he went about hooking up the oxygen. He turned and looked at her. “I’m so sorry, Jilly,” he said. She was so delighted to hear his voice; she raced over and knelt down next to him, gently taking his hand in hers.

“Don’t be sorry. No one can predict rockslides,” she replied between breaths.

“I’m sorry you’re naked. Look what I’ve done to you,” he said.

“What we’ve done to me,” she corrected. “But if there’s anyone to blame, it’s Ryan,” she added, looking over at where he lay in his splint.

“Yes . . . let’s blame Ryan,” agreed David. He started to chuckle, but then a look of pain came over his face.

“Sorry,” said Hicks, sliding a small clear mask over David’s nose and mouth.

“We’ll talk later,” she whispered into his ear. “You focus on getting better, and . . . now that you’re being taken care of . . . I’ll focus on finding myself something to wear.”

He seemed to nod, but then his eyes closed. To Jill, it looked as if he were simply resting. She suspected he was still conscious.

“So, you met the helicopter crew. Who did they send?” asked Hicks.

“Two people, a man and a woman. There wasn’t time for introductions, so I don’t know any names.”

“Describe the woman,” he requested.

After Jill had done so, Hicks said, “Tamara Castillo. Quite a woman, that one.”

“I think she’s the pilot,” Jill replied.

“Oh, yes . . . ex-military. Fought in the Gulf War. Not a better pilot for search and rescue. She can do things with a helicopter even the helicopter doesn’t think it can do. You’d like her.”

Jill shrugged. The last thing she wanted to do was to get to know this woman who had just seen her naked.

“If you want to impress her, know the difference between Desert Storm and Desert Shield. She once told me that she’d never met a young person who knew the first thing about the Gulf Wars.”

Jill looked at him blankly. She wasn’t planning on discussing anything with her.

“I don’t think she thinks much of me,” said Jill.

“And the guy?” he asked.

Jill hardly remembered him, but she did her best to describe him.

“Probably one of the new guys,” he said. “It’s the old-timers that I’ve worked with the most. Tamara’s an old-timer. I think you should run back and guide them here.”

Jill had been thinking the same thing. She knew they had seen where they were from the air. They wouldn’t get lost, but they probably wouldn’t take the most direct route.

“You don’t want to, do you?” said Hicks, noticing her reluctance.

“Not really,” she replied, biting a thumbnail. She was trying to decide if doing so might be beneficial to David.

“I’ll go,” volunteered Nick.

Jill brightened. “You will?”

“Of course,” he replied with a smile.

“That would be so nice,” she said appreciatively as he headed off. She knew that Nick was doing his best to impress her, but that was okay. He seemed like a genuinely good guy, and their dating days, not that they’d really had any, seemed to be over.

Hicks busied himself with securing David to the stretcher while she watched. Hicks seemed to be both knowledgeable as well as conscientious.

“We won’t have to do this quite so meticulously with Ryan,” he said. “The way he has been moving around makes it obvious that his spine is very unlikely to have suffered an injury.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” she said.

A few minutes later, the helicopter crew arrived with Nick. Jill had expected it to be very awkward, and it was, just not quite as uncomfortable as she had been anticipating. Hicks had been right; the female pilot’s name was Tamara. The paramedic had introduced himself as Avery. As it was an uncommon name, he had explained that his parents had named him for the college where they had met. Jill had never heard of Avery College, but he explained that it was near Kingsley.

Hicks and Avery, with Nick’s and Tamara’s help, went right to work on getting Ryan onto the stretcher. He was being quite brave about it; Jill could tell that being moved was causing him a lot of pain. She watched from a short distance away. She was keeping David company, holding his hand. It felt wonderful to still have a twin brother.

She suspected that Nick had probably been fielding the helicopter crew’s questions relating to her nudity. She wondered what had been said. She expected it had been something about how she had admitted to daring herself to hike naked. She wished she hadn’t said what she had said, but it was pretty much what had happened. It was just embarrassing to think that what she had said would be shared. It was hard for a naked girl to have secrets.

Shortly after Ryan was on the stretcher, they were ready to go. Hicks and Avery had rigged up some straps so that the weight could be borne predominantly by their shoulders.

Hicks decided that he and Nick would carry David. He didn’t give a reason, but Jill suspected it had something to do with his more fragile nature. In other words, David was more likely to be injured if he were dropped.

That meant that Jill and the helicopter crew would be carrying Ryan, which didn’t seem to make complete sense as he was the heavier of the two. However, she wanted to help and she knew that carrying them both out at once would get the helicopter in the air the quickest, even if she didn’t like being paired with the newcomers. She chose not to say anything. She felt that Hicks’ was doing an excellent job of working with what he had at his disposal.

It was decided that Avery would go first, carrying Ryan’s feet. That placed Jill and Tamara side by side, carrying the end of the basket containing Ryan’s head. Jill was sure that she could carry one end all by herself, but she wasn’t in charge. Her mom had told Hicks to put her in charge; however, during the course of the afternoon, she had learned that Hicks was indeed the man for the job.

**Chapter 139: Left Behind**

Hicks had decided that the rest of their baggage, the excess medical supplies as well as the boys hiking boots, would be left there. After the helicopter had left, they could retrieve everything.

Walking next to Tamara while carrying Ryan was even more awkward than Jill had imagined. Fortunately, Avery was facing way, but Ryan wasn’t. He was smiling up at her, his face not even an arm’s length away from her breasts. Her nipples were diamond hard and she could feel Ryan’s eyes on them. She wanted very much to tell him to find something else to look at, but she knew that doing so would only start the teasing. In the end, she decided to put up with him ogling her chest in hopes that the half mile to the helicopter might be covered in silence.

It was not to be. Tamara decided to break the ice. “So, Jill . . . Nick filled us in a little on your background. He said that you and David are twins.”

“Twins,” she confirmed nodding. She hoped that the short, abrupt answer might help Tamara figure out that she was not interested in talking.

Fortunately, Hicks had set up the straps such that they were essentially on the corners of the stretcher. She and Tamara weren’t touching, but they were definitely in each other’s personal space. Jill was glad to be on the downhill side. That placed her head just below Tamara’s even though Jill was the taller of the two.

After an uncomfortable period of silence, one that Jill had hoped would go on and on, Tamara continued, “He also said that he doesn’t believe that incest is involved.”

Jill looked away and sucked in a breath through her nose. She didn’t want to talk about being naked, but she absolutely abhorred the prospect of trying to convince this woman that she and her brother had never had sex. That was simply too repugnant to think about, much less to talk about.

“Uncomfortable topic?” asked Tamara, studying Jill’s reaction.

After another long period of silence, she asked, “Cat got your tongue?”

Jill decided that she was not going to answer this woman’s questions, no matter how intolerable she became. It was none of her business. She decided to try and change the subject.

“Hicks tells me that you were a pilot in the Gulf War. He said that you think my generation is ignorant when it comes to the details of Desert Storm as well as what preceded it, Desert Shield. Well, I’m here to prove you wrong. Ask me a question that you think someone ought to know.”

She was feeling a little cocky. The Gulf Wars under President George H.W. Bush as well as his son, George W. Bush had been the last topic they had covered that spring in her American History class.

“I’m not at all interested in what you know about recent military history. What I want to know is if I need to report the two of you to the authorities. Have you been screwing your brother? I saw you holding hands.”

Something in Jill snapped. “Leave me alone! He’s my f\*\*king brother. He was in a goddamn rockslide,” she snarled. Jill instantly realized that her word choice had been unfortunate.

Tamara snickered. “Your f\*\*king brother!”

Jill looked away, trying to calm down. It would serve no purpose to argue with her.

“Leave Jill alone!” interjected Ryan angrily. After a pause, he continued in a steady, mature voice. “She’s had a very traumatic day, and she’s done nothing wrong. I appreciate so much all that you are doing to help David and me. I respect you and understand that you are an accomplished helicopter pilot. For all I know, you’re probably a war hero. Please show Jill some respect. Today she’s the hero!”

Jill was quite surprised to have Ryan swoop to her assistance like that.

“And for all I know, you’re probably their enabler,” said the pilot.

“I’m Jill’s friend, proudly so,” said Ryan. “If she and her brother were romantically involved, I’d be the first to know . . . and the first to advise them to seek counseling.”

Somehow Ryan’s well-targeted defense seemed to put an end to Tamara’s interest in interrogating her. Jill so very much wanted to thank Ryan for intervening; however, she didn’t. She couldn’t think of a way to do so without the woman next to her overhearing. That seemed as if it might result in more conversation – something that she definitely wanted to avoid.

Hicks and Nick had David in the helicopter when they got there. Ryan was also quickly inside with his stretcher secured.

As Tamara took her seat at the controls and started flipping switches, Hicks informed Nick and Jill that he would be leaving in the helicopter. “Continuity of care reasons,” he said.

“May I come?” Jill asked. The prospect of climbing out of the helicopter naked next to the hospital in Elk Bend was daunting, but she did want to be with David.

“I’m sorry, but there isn’t room,” he replied.

“Sorry . . . no room!” echoed Tamara from the pilot’s seat.

To Jill, there looked to be room. She was thin and didn’t weigh all that much. She could fold herself up and squeeze into a corner.

“Don’t worry,” said Hicks. “I’ll make sure that the ER staff is fully informed. In my opinion, they should do a CT scan of David’s head first thing. The doctors there won’t do it because I say so, but if I do a decent job of explaining what happened, then they will.”

“What might a CT scan show?” she asked.

“Skull fractures, internal bleeding, swelling . . . that sort of thing,” he replied. “Or none of the above. That’s what we hope it shows . . . knock on wood. However, that’s unlikely, given that he was unconscious.”

With that, he’d handed the keys to Nick, telling him that he needed to drive. “Because of your status as a volunteer, you can officially operate Forest Service vehicles when necessary,” he said.

Jill and Nick stepped back as the helicopter door slid closed and the big rotor started moving. A minute later, as the dust started to settle, Jill and Nick were alone on the ridge. Standing side by side, they watched the helicopter dive down toward the valley, picking up speed as it went. It looked as if they’d be wheeling David and Ryan into the ER in a matter of minutes.

Suddenly, Jill felt both relieved and profoundly exhausted. It was probably the fact that David was now completely in the care of others that allowed her to finally acknowledge the toll that the afternoon had taken on her body.

“Come on, there are drinks and snacks in the Jeep,” said Nick, turning toward where it was parked a few hundred yards away. “Do I need to carry you?” he asked, once he’d paused to get a good look at her.

“No, I can walk,” she said as she started up the slope. She knew that was exactly what her body needed most right then: fluids and nourishment. As she struggled up the hill, she remembered that she had sprinted up it twice that day: once, before they had made the video and then a second time, carrying the oxygen bag. Making her way slowly up the path, she couldn’t believe that she had been able to do that.

Somehow, she managed to get to the Jeep. From the box, she selected a bottle of water and a chocolate bar – and then another. The chocolate bars were liquid, so she ate them by tearing a hole in the wrapper and then squeezing the contents into her mouth through it.

They’d forgotten to leave windows open, so it was boiling hot inside the Jeep. They quickly rolled them all down and opened the rear hatch.

“You’ve had quite a day,” said Nick, looking at her sympathetically.

“I hope to never have another day like this,” she replied frankly.

“You relax. I’ll go back for what we left behind,” he said.

Jill had all but forgotten about the things that needed to be retrieved from the site of the rockslide, but then she remembered that her cell phone and her sunscreen were there, in David’s backpack. Suddenly it dawned on her that she’d forgotten to renew her UV protection. It had simply been too chaotic to remember the less important things. She felt as if she should accompany Nick; however, she knew she wouldn’t be able to.

“Thanks,” she said. “I do need to rest. Don’t forget our small backpack.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get everything,” he assured her warmly as he departed.

Jill climbed into the backseat from the downhill side – the doors on the uphill side wouldn’t stay open, but the two downhill doors were hanging wide open. The Jeep was still warm, but it was cooling down and she felt the need to be out of the sun. She started to remove her boots. “Finally!” she said aloud.

As she pulled off her socks, the twenties that she’d put there earlier fell out. Unsurprisingly, they were damp with sweat. She reached into the front seat and put them into one of the pockets in the Forest Service jacket.

Jill opened another bottle of water and started sprinkling it on her feet. Rubbing it in, she found herself thinking about running through the sprinklers in the baseball park. She thought about having Nick stop there on their way into Stanton. Fortunately, time could now slow back down. She wanted to get to the hospital as quickly as possible, but the urgency was gone now that David and Ryan were probably already there. She could again start considering her own needs.

She realized it wasn’t just her body that was exhausted. Her mind was also completely worn out from all that it had been through. In some ways, the day had been harder on her brain than it had been on her body.

She made a mess in the Jeep by washing her feet, but she knew the water would evaporate quickly. It felt so good! Now that the emergency had passed, she found herself thinking about all that her poor feet had been through. She searched them for blisters. Finding plenty of sore red areas but no actual blisters, she fell back and was quickly asleep, her feet hanging out the open door.

Jill woke with a start. She had no idea how long she’d been asleep. She lay there for a moment looking up at the dark headliner above her. Realizing that something must have caused her to wake up, she raised her head to look around. There were two faces near her feet, two sets of eyes peering up at her. Jill panicked. Jumping in fright, she kicked her feet propelling her back against the far door, the uphill door. A gasp of fright, an almost silent scream, escaped her lips.

“Calm down. It’s just us,” said a woman.

“We saw your feet hanging out and came to investigate,” explained the man.

With wide, terrified eyes, Jill stared at the two people. She’d wrapped her arms around her torso, simply a gut reaction; more a defense mechanism than an attempt to hide her nakedness. ‘Just us?’ Did she know these people? And then she recognized them. She’d met them on the trail. This was the lawyer and his companion, the pair with new clothes and perfect hair.

“Are you alright?” asked the woman.

Jill was still in shock, unable to reply.

“By the looks of it, you found the help you needed,” said the man, peering curiously around the interior of the Jeep. “So glad.”

Still unable to speak, Jill nodded in the affirmative. Realizing that they were not axe murderers, Jill’s heart rate started to come down. “My brother and . . . um . . . taken out in a helicopter,” she stammered.

“We saw the helicopter,” said the woman.

Suddenly she heard Nick yelling from a distance. “Jill, are you alright? What’s going on?”

Glancing out the front windshield, she saw him running toward the Jeep, his arms full. Suddenly realizing where her legs were, pulled up against herself but not together, Jill turned sideways, shifting her body such that she was sitting in the seat, as close to the uphill door as she could get.

Nick yanked her door wide open. “Are you alright?” he asked. Somewhere he’d dropped everything he had been carrying.

Jill nodded, but then retreated even further from the couple by immediately climbing out the door toward him. With her arms still tightly wrapped around her upper body, she leaned into him for comfort, her chin tucked down and the top of her head touching his chest.

“Are you sure? You don’t seem alright,” he said, placing a comforting hand on the back of her neck and holding her against him.

Jill lifted her head and they made eye contact. She again nodded. “They startled me, but just because I’d fallen asleep.”

Nick looked deep into her eyes for a moment but then shifted his attention to the couple on the other side of the Jeep. Looking at them through the open back doors, he asked, “Do you have a reason to be here?”

The man started to answer, but Jill cut him off, “They were just concerned. They saw my legs hanging out of the door and came to investigate. I met them on the trail earlier. He’s a lawyer. He offered me his card.”

“Correction . . . I offered her my assistance.”

“Well, I found the help I needed. Thank you for your concern.”

“Here’s my card again,” he said, walking around the back of the Jeep to hand it to her. “I see you still don’t have any pockets. Possibly the ranger can hold it for you for now.”

“Thank you,” she said, handing the card to Nick.

She really didn’t want it, but she also didn’t want to be rude. She considered explaining to them that Nick was not a ranger, but there seemed little point; doing so would take time. Nick’s Skyline Adventure’s uniform was composed of muted colors – not altogether different from Forest Service clothing. However, it was different enough – again proving to Jill just how distracting a naked girl could be.

As quickly as they could, she and Nick got rid of the couple. They were curious about the rockslide, so after saying goodbye, they headed off along the trail that went around Bearhead Summit with the intention of seeing it.

Jill retrieved David’s backpack from where Nick had dropped it. While he loaded Hicks’ things into the back of the Jeep, she went about applying sunscreen. She didn’t know how much more she might be out in the sun, but it seemed like a good idea. Realizing that Nick was watching, she turned her back to him as she coated her neck, shoulders, and breasts. She then applied a thick layer to the little pinkish-white stripe just above her slit.

While she was doing that, she was thinking about asking him to do her back. However, just as she had finished getting her lower abdomen taken care of, Nick commented, “You just shaved off your landing strip, didn’t you?”

Surprised at his audacity, she decided that her back would have to go without. “It’s that obvious?” she asked, knowing full well that it was. She peeked bashfully back at him.

He nodded as their eyes met. “Pretty obvious,” he said with a grin, an engaging twinkle in his eyes. Jill blushed crimson.

**Chapter 140: Starting Down**

A few minutes later, she was in the passenger seat and Nick was steering across the ridge in the general direction of Stanton. There were no road signs and no tracks to follow on the rocky surface. To Jill, it almost felt as if they were about to drive off a cliff. The angle of descent kept getting steeper and steeper. Past the hood, Jill could see nothing but the bottom of the valley at least a mile below.

“How do you know where to go?” she asked apprehensively.

“Dead Reckoning,” he replied with a relaxed smile.

Nick’s confidence was reassuring, but even so, Jill cinched her seatbelt tighter. She had the jacket up in front of her. She’d thought about putting it on, but had decided to wait at least until the AC had kicked in. She was torn between an inclination to protect her modesty and a desire to be comfortable. Because it was so warm, she held it away from her skin, allowing room for the air to circulate.

“Remember the night we met?” asked Nick out of the blue.

“How could I forget . . . so embarrassing . . . such a lonesome puppy dog. Your father calling you . . . setting me up for a blind date,” said Jill, her strained voice betraying feelings of indignity and remorse.

Nick laughed amiably.

“Remember me asking you to go for a drive in the mountains?”

“Again . . . how could I forget?”

“Scared you off, didn’t I?”

“Well . . . sort of,” she agreed. She remembered back to thinking that he was just an older college guy who wanted to get her alone and drunk so that he could get into her pants.

“I was going to bring you up here. This ridge is beautiful at night . . . absolutely gorgeous. An endless number of stars above. The lights of Stanton below.”

Suddenly Jill was wishing that she had agreed that night. She could have simply stipulated that there be no alcohol. Now that she’d gotten to know him, she knew that he would have been fine with that.

She could almost picture how lovely that would have been. Even now, she wanted that experience, yet in the back of her mind, she had the feeling that her summer was quickly coming to a premature end. The curtain seemed to be falling. It was unlikely that she’d have the opportunity to visit the ridge at night, even if Nick were to again extend the offer.

As they continued to talk, Jill found it hard to believe that she had been so worried about the idea of being alone with him. She had been dead set against going up into the mountains where there would be no one to hear her if she had needed to call for help. How ironic that she was now all alone with him. There, in the Jeep heading down from the ridge, she could scream all she wanted to – no one would hear. And she was naked, not even a pair of panties protecting her from unwanted advances. And yet, she wasn’t at all concerned for her personal safety. She wondered about that, given that Nick had not been willing to let her wear his shirt. And yet, for some reason, that hadn’t made her feel uncomfortable in his presence.

Somehow her unease that first night had prevented her from sensing Nick’s true nature. There was something peaceful about him. He was indeed a calm soul. On the outside, he was a slender but brawny guy with a love for the outdoors, always looking as if he didn’t own a comb. However, on the inside he was a principled, straightforward man; she could tell. Wondering if they were kindred spirits, she realized that he was fun but also as reliable as they come.

Jill’s thoughts were interrupted by a comment of Nick’s. “Ryan told me that the two of you were never going out. That surprises me. That day Martina and I walked into your camp unannounced, catching you…”

“Don’t remind me,” said Jill. She didn’t want to hear him talk about how she had been topless.

“Well, I’m pretty sure there was confirmation. I recall the word ‘honey’ being used. It’s a distinct memory.”

Jill didn’t know what to say. In the first place, even though she’d said it, the word ‘honey’ sounded stupid. She’d cared a great deal about Tyler, and she’d never called him, ‘honey.’ And in the second place, she hadn’t been in a relationship with Ryan. She had sought to deceive Nick. That had been so unlike herself.

“I guess I owe you a bit of an explanation,” she said. She didn’t want to talk about the matter; however, doing so was in keeping with her new honesty commitment. She was bound and determined to conduct her future relationships with the opposite sex by being honest. Never again was she going to take a backseat and allow things to unfold haphazardly.

“Only if you’re comfortable talking about it.”

Jill smiled; she liked his respectful attitude. “I was an ugly duckling during my formative years. At least that is how I pictured myself, and that self-image imprinted itself deeply. I have also always been a shy, reserved person. While my friends all . . . how should I say this . . . started to fill out . . . I kept my boyish figure.”

“I wouldn’t…” interrupted Nick.

“Wait . . . hear me out,” she pleaded.

She looked over at Nick and saw him nodding.

“So I focused on basketball. I’ve had very few actual dates, and for the most part, they went badly. There was one exception, one boy. We might have been in love. That relationship also ended up . . . well, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t have to.”

“But lately things seem to be changing. Even though this ugly duckling will never become a swan, I’ve been attracting my share of attention.”

“If you were ever an ugly duckling, you have certainly blossomed.”

“Well, maybe . . . but still essentially no curves,” said Jill. She pointed her index fingers at her bare breasts and shrugged. “Well, like I was saying. This last year guys have started noticing me. Prior to that, I felt as if I were invisible. I haven’t known how to handle all this new attention. I haven’t wanted to date and suffer through more of my blunders. What happened that day with Ryan? One in a long series of missteps. I’ve resolved to do better. Mostly by being honest . . . I’m being very honest right now . . . and by taking a hiatus from dating.”

“Jill, will you marry me?”

Jill laughed. “Nick! I’m being serious. Why can’t you be?”

“What makes you think I’m not serious?”

“We hardly know each other?”

“But that’s your fault. I’ve been trying to get to know you.”

“Darn it . . . now where was I?” she said, struggling to recall her train of thought.

“Don’t just brush me off,” said Nick. “It’s my turn to talk.”

“Okay…” said Jill reluctantly. “But marriage? Definitely out of the question.”

“Maybe it was foolish of me to suggest that,” said Nick. “But this is how I see it. I’ve been trying to get to know you, and now you’ll be going home. Hopefully David is fine, but even so, you’ll leave. And then in a few weeks, you’ll be off to college. I’ll never see you again.”

“Probably not,” said Jill with a shrug. What was there to be unhappy about? That had been the plan all along.

They were now driving slowly down a steep rock-strewn road, the Jeep constantly pitching from side to side. Fortunately, Nick knew to be in low gear and to keep his speed down. Even though the AC had done a good job of lowering the temperature in the vehicle, the jacket lay all but forgotten, just a token sleeve draped across one of Jill’s thighs, covering nothing of significance.

“Well, over the course of the summer, I’ve been realizing that you and I have quite a bit in common. I admire you in so many ways. You’re smart and honest, kind and ambitious. I’ve never met another girl like you.”

“You didn’t mention, ‘naked.’ Are you sure your thoughts aren’t clouded by the fact that I don’t have any clothes on?” She had to ask. Her nudity was certainly a factor. It had to be influencing him, even if he wouldn’t admit it.

“I knew you were beautiful even before I saw you without clothes,” he said. “That’s not really what we’re talking about here. You and I, we both love nature, and I enjoy your company a great deal. We have so much in common. I’ve come to believe that we’d make a great couple. You and I . . . we’d have a lot of fun together.”

Jill knew that the two of them were probably well suited for one another, but she didn’t reply. They weren’t going to be a couple. She was going off to college. She had her priorities firmly in mind. The discussion was pointless.

“I brought up marriage because I feel the need to do something disruptive. Being nice to you and asking you out has gotten me exactly nowhere. I could kidnap you . . . that would be disruptive . . . but I’m not a kidnapper.”

“Glad to hear that,” said Jill. She knew he wasn’t, but she didn’t appreciate being reminded of her vulnerability, off alone on the mountainside with him.

As they drove through the gap they had cut through the fallen tree, Nick commented, “I’ll bet these rounds aren’t here more than a week or two. Somebody in a truck will see them as free firewood.” Suddenly a smile crossed his face. “I’m going to treasure that memory . . . when I turned around and realized you were naked. Almost had a heart attack. And then working side by side!”

Jill blushed yet again. Why did every reminder of her nudity do that, she wondered. It seemed as if she should have the blushing out of the way.

After a lull in the conversation, Nick said, “I’ve seen how Ryan treats you. He’s a bit nasty . . . always demanding, always in your face, and yet you put up with him. You seem to reward such behavior . . . spending a lot more time with him than you spend with me.”

Jill didn’t know how to respond to that observation. It was true; however, Ryan’s nastiness was getting him exactly nowhere. Surely Nick knew that as well.

“Ryan and I have an unusual relationship. No excuses. But he’s not the sort of person that I would ever consider dating . . . to be completely frank.”

“Am I?” asked Nick point blank.

“Oh, Nick,” said Jill with an involuntary sigh. “You probably are, but that doesn’t change anything. To be completely honest, I’m just not available right now, emotionally or otherwise.”

“What about next summer? We could keep in touch. You spend every summer at Cache Lake, right?”

“In the past I have. But I’ll be in college, so I don’t know what I’ll be doing next summer. However, if word of me hiking naked spreads, I’ll have to stay away from this side of the state. And the word is probably going to get out . . . so many have seen me nude today, on the trail, in town, the helicopter crew.”

“I can probably help with that,” he volunteered. “I can tell people that you fell victim to a serious wardrobe malfunction.”

“No one’s going to believe that. What? That I got caught up in the rockslide and it tore off my clothes, leaving me otherwise unscathed. Hardly plausible.”

“You’re right, but try this on for size. You were wearing a light, flimsy sundress, and when the earthquake struck, you were standing next to David. The section of trail under his feet collapsed, but yours held. In desperation, he reached for you, grabbing anything his hands came in contact with. The next thing you knew, he was sliding down the mountainside, your dress in his hands. Fortunately! For had it not ripped, you would have been with him . . . you would have been hurt, too. There would have been no one to go for help. Later, you searched for it, but it was nowhere to be found . . . buried somewhere under tons of rock. It’s a stretch . . . maybe . . . but I think people will buy it. It’s probably as easy to believe, for most people, as the notion that a young girl hikes in the nude of her own free will.”

“My own free will?”

“Sorry . . . isn’t that what you said?”

“Never mind,” she replied. It no longer seemed to matter whether she had been talked into hiking naked, been dared, or done it voluntarily. “I guess by now it’s water under the bridge.”

At that point in their conversation, they came to the first gate. Nick set the parking brake, indicating that he was intending to open and close it himself. She knew that would be twice the work; he’d have to return to the Jeep to drive through and then get back out to close it behind them.

“I’ll do it,” she said, unbuckling her seat belt.

“Are you sure? You don’t have shoes on.”

Jill hadn’t thought about that. Her thoughts had all been about how she was nude, how she’d be putting on a little naked show for Nick at each of the three gates.

“My feet will survive,” she said, opening the door to climb out.

As she made her way to the gate, walking on her toes and picking each step with care, she tried to imagine what she must look like to Nick, watching from the driver’s seat. She wondered if walking like that made her legs look sexy. As she was up on her toes, she thought of the things she’d heard about high heels; how they altered a woman’s posture, resulting in her butt being thrust out and her back being arched.

She’d also heard that women walked differently than men, swinging their hips more, and that high heels accentuated that particular aspect, making a woman’s walk appear even more feminine than it already was. She did her best to walk as normally as she could, and yet she knew that being up on her toes was affecting her gait.

Opening the first gate and waiting for him to drive through, she struggled with the decision of how to stand. As she turned and faced the Jeep, she fought the inclination to cover up. It seemed that doing so might look a bit theatrical, almost as if she were trying to draw attention to herself.

Instead, she did her best to appear casual, neither standing with her legs clamped together nor especially far apart. She tried to imagine how she might stand if she were dressed; however, that proved to be nearly impossible. She was simply too self-conscious.

Nick gave her a charming smile and a thumbs up as the Jeep rolled slowly by.

“You’re beautiful, Jill,” he said as she climbed back in. “Ryan was right. You do look like a supermodel.”

“When did that come up, pray tell?”

“While you were off getting the oxygen. I probably shouldn’t admit this, but he noticed me admiring you as you were running away.”

Jill flushed. “You were admiring me?”

“Hey, what can I say? I’m a normal red-blooded American. It would be strange if I didn’t look.”

“I guess,” she replied, looking down bashfully.