**Summer at Cache Lake**

 **Chapter 141: Two More Gates**The next stretch of dirt road was especially rocky. Jill held tightly to the grab handle with her right hand and the seat with the other. She could feel her nipples bobbing around atop her small breasts as the Jeep jostled violently side to side. **“**Should I slow down?” asked Nick, looking over sympathetically at the nude passenger bouncing around in the seat next to him. Jill appeared to be hanging on for dear life. **“**Nope, not my first rodeo,” she replied. “The sooner we’re down, the better.”Nick laughed, easing off on the brake a little. **“**So,” Jill asked with trepidation, “…the supermodel thing . . . is that all Ryan had to say?” **“**Oh, no. There was quite a bit more. Actually, he volunteered a few pointers. He said something like, ‘If I can’t have her, you may as well.’ I thought that was quite magnanimous of him. He had some choice advice for me.” **“**He did?” Jill didn’t like what she was hearing. **“**Sure. He told me what you like, what you don’t like. That sort of thing.” **“**What do I like?” she asked. She was worried about what Ryan might have said, but curious as well. **“**I’m sure you know better than Ryan,” he chuckled.To Jill that sounded like he was ducking the question. **“**Did he happen to tell you the nickname I use for him?” **“**No, I don’t remember that coming up. What do you call him?”Jill felt like telling him. In part, because she wanted to explain how the name ‘Jerk-Boy’ had come about, but she decided not to. It was funny, how she’d caught him beating off, but her own role in how things had transpired might come out. Much of what had happened would be so very embarrassing if Nick were to find out about it, and Ryan might tell him. Fortunately, just then they arrived at the next gate, allowing her to avoid answering.The drill with the last two gates played out much as the first one had. Each time, Jill picked her way self-consciously along the rocky road in front of the Jeep. She didn’t want to appear to be prancing, but she was unable to walk normally. She knew her buns were on display, and it wasn’t just that. She also knew that they were flexing differently than if she weren’t being forced to walk mostly on her toes. Try as she might, she couldn’t help but think of the show she was putting on. She felt a bit naughty doing it, and yet it was a little fun. Partly because there wasn’t really an option; she had to open the gates.As she started to climb back into the cool Jeep after the final gate, she took the jacket from her seat and slipped it on. Shortly, they would reach the outskirts of Stanton. With the coat around her shoulders, she would appear to be dressed to those in other cars. She decided to leave it open for the time being. She knew she would zip it up before too long.As Nick released the parking brake and the Jeep rolled forward, Jill suddenly realized that her dream had come true! The first time she’d had that dream, she’d been riding along bottomless with Nick in his truck, going down a steep bumpy mountain track. She’d been wearing nothing more than a jacket. She didn’t remember the sun warming her legs through the windshield in the dream, but other than that, almost everything was exactly the same; the vehicle being the obvious exception.The second time she’d had the dream, she hadn’t been in Nick’s truck; it had been a vehicle with a back seat. In that dream, Nick had been in the back and someone she hadn’t recognized had been driving. Hicks! Hicks had appeared in one of her dreams even before she had met him! Jill had never had a dream come true before! Feeling stupefied, she sat there trying to wrack her brain for anything else she might be able to remember from those dreams. Might there have been another hint about the future in one of those dreams?Nick observed her curiously. “Are you alright?” he asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”Wondering if she had, she mumbled, “I’m fine.” She thought about telling him about the dream but decided not to. She didn’t want him to know that she had dreamed about him. He might read something into that.He didn’t seem too convinced, but he changed the topic for her, “So . . . back to the cover story . . . the disappearing dress idea . . . what do you think?”As she’d been opening and closing gates, Jill had been giving the idea some thought. It actually did seem to have some merit. **“**Okay, but if David tore off my dress, as you imagine, then why am I so tan?” she asked rhetorically. **“**They won’t know that. You’ll be dressed. We’ll get you some clothes. Even if they find out about your full-body tan, what does it prove? Tanning topless . . . or nude for that matter . . . hardly unheard of.” **“**And what about the absence of underwear?” she asked, playing the devil’s advocate. **“**I don’t know. I guess you just didn’t have any on?” **“**But girls wear underwear. Maybe not always a bra, but panties . . . for sure.” **“**Well, it was hot. You went without. Why not?” **“**I wouldn’t.” **“**And yet, you did!” **“**I know, I know,” she said banging her forehead with a fist. “That’s the problem. I wasn’t wearing anything.” **“**Well, just tell everyone that you’re a nudist. Solves everything . . . what’s the big deal?” **“**It’s a big deal to me! I don’t know exactly why. I just know I can’t admit to that.” **“**Well, then we float this counter-story. Some will be convinced, others won’t. The issue will be confused enough that no one will know for sure. It’s not perfect, but it might be the best you can hope for.” **“**The best I can hope for,” she mumbled, swallowing deep and thinking hard. His reasoning did seem sound. She had been willing to focus on getting help over getting clothes. And that’s what she had done. She had been willing to pay a personal price. What that price might end up being remained to be seen. However, now was the time to work on minimizing it. “Okay . . . you’ll help me?” **“**Of course,” he replied. “If asked, I’ll say that I helped you look for the dress. I’ll say that we searched the rockslide area while Hicks was taking care of David and Ryan.” **“**Maybe no one will ask. Maybe it won’t come up,” she said wishfully. **“**Hopefully it doesn’t, but if it does, we have a plan in mind.” **“**What did my dress look like?” she asked, “Denim?” **“**Umm . . . denim is usually pretty sturdy. Something more delicate.” **“**Right . . . so how about a really light cotton dress, blue with lots of tiny white flowers. And so that it sounds fragile, spaghetti straps and a button front.” **“**Perfect! Were all the buttons buttoned?” **“**I don’t think I should say. I’ll just mention that it was awfully hot . . . people will assume…” **“**Perfect! And I never saw it, so who am I to contradict whatever you say. I’ll just say that I helped search the rocks for the dress . . . blue with small white flowers.” **“**And let’s hope it doesn’t come up,” said Jill.A short time later, Nick’s phone rang. “I guess there’s reception here,” he said, pulling over to take the call. A moment later, he handed it to Jill. “It’s for you.” **“**For me?” she asked in surprise, taking his phone.It was Hicks with an update on David’s condition. All in all, things sounded hopeful. David had remained conscious and had been answering questions. He’d just had a CT scan; they were waiting for a Radiologist to read it. There was still quite a bit of uncertainty, but at least there did not seem to be any skull fractures. Additionally, he seemed to have a few bruised or broken ribs as well as one or two broken bones in his right hand. **“**Are you coming to the hospital?” Hicks asked. **“**I’m hoping Nick will give me a ride.” **“**Absolutely,” said Nick who had been listening to her half of the conversation. **“**Well, I probably won’t be here when you get here,” Hicks said. “One of the nurses, whose shift ends in twenty minutes, has offered to give me a ride home. I’m going to take her up on it so that my wife doesn’t have to drive all the way to Elk Bend.”Jill thanked him and hung up. She wanted to give her mother an update, now that they had cell reception. She decided to give her own phone a try. It looked terrible due to the rockslide, but looks didn’t matter if it worked. She’d forgotten to have Ryan show her how to turn it on, but she was able to manage given just what he had said about using a fingernail.Jill’s mom was so relieved to hear her voice. She’d obviously been suffering a great deal since receiving the phone call from the ranger station. Ryan’s mother was there as well, so she picked up another phone so that they could both listen to what Jill had to say.Jill gave them a quick rundown on how the two boys had been airlifted to the Elk Bend Medical Center, and then she relayed what Hicks had said. She regretted that she had not asked for an update on Ryan’s condition. She handled that by simply saying that he was not as badly injured, meaning that the focus of the medical personnel seemed to always be directed toward David. She knew that would be hard for her mother to hear, and yet it was the reality of the situation.All in all, her mother seemed somewhat relieved. Even though they still had very limited information about David’s condition, prior to the call, all she had known was that he was lying unconscious on a mountainside. Awake and receiving care in a medical facility was a very favorable development.Pledging to call again as soon as she knew more, Jill hung up. While she had been talking, Nick had resumed driving. **“**Okay, first order of business . . . find me some clothes!” Jill announced. **“**Sure,” said Nick. “Unless, of course, you want to dare yourself to remain naked for the rest of the day.”Even though he hadn’t given her his shirt earlier, the comment surprised Jill. She looked over and saw that he had a sly smile on his face. **“**Nope . . . not a chance! I’m sooooo ready to be dressed again.” **“**Okay, so . . . how do you imagine we accomplish that?”Jill found it comforting to hear him use the word, ‘we.’ Alone, obtaining clothes in Stanton seemed like a daunting project; however, with his help, it seemed as if it might be easily accomplished. **“**Hicks mentioned a thrift store, and I’ve got money!” she said, holding up David’s wallet and shaking it happily. She was starting to again feel a little bit in control of her destiny. **“**There’s more than one thrift store in town,” said Nick. **“**Any thrift store will do. I’m not in a picky mood. I’ll wear anything . . . don’t care how ugly it is.”At that very moment, Nick slowed and turned into Skyline Adventures. **“**Nick, Skyline Adventures? What about, ‘first order of business . . . clothes,’ didn’t you understand?” **“**We need to get my truck,” he said, steering for the far edge of the lot. “I volunteered to drive you to the hospital. I can’t very well do that without my truck.” **“**Sure you can. If you hadn’t noticed, we have a Jeep. First stop, thrift shop. Second stop, hospital.” **“**Jill, this is a government vehicle. We can’t very well take it shopping, much less drive it to Elk Bend. Besides, my truck is right here.” **“**Okay,” said Jill sighing resignedly. There seemed little point in arguing.Realizing that she’d have to get out of the Jeep, she glanced down at her bare crotch. Even though the jacket didn’t go down that low, she was glad to have it on. She went about zipping it up, again getting the zipper to just below her ribcage. That was the best she could do. Most of her chest was bare, but her nipples were covered. Pulling the zipper up higher, not that she was sure it could be done, would result in the jacket being very confining. It also seemed as if attempting that would risk it tearing.After stopping, Nick held out a set of keys saying, “Here, follow me.” **“**What?” she asked. “Follow you?” **“**Of course. Follow me to the ranger station. We’ll drop off the Jeep. We can’t very well leave it here.”Jill realized that sounded logical, but she wanted to stay in the Jeep. **“**I know what you’re thinking, but I’m sure you overheard Hicks telling me that I needed to drive the Jeep.”With a heavy sigh, Jill realized that she was going to have to drive Nick’s truck. Driving his truck bottomless had definitely not been in her dream. **“**Can’t we just go to the thrift store first?” she pleaded. “Then we can come back for your truck.” **“**I suppose we could,” said Nick thoughtfully. “I doubt anyone would accuse us of misappropriating a government vehicle if we limited it to that.” **“**Great!” she said, brightening up. **“…**but that would mean extra miles,” he continued. “If you’re in a hurry to get to the hospital, we should take the truck and drop off the Jeep on the way to the thrift store.” **“**I do want to get to the hospital,” she said, begrudgingly accepting the keys. She studied them. “Which key is it?” **“**This key is the ignition, and this one fits the door,” he said pointing. **“**The door is locked?” she asked in surprise.Nick laughed. **“**It’s not funny!” she objected. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m naked from the waist down.” **“**Oh, I’ve noticed!” he said with a broad smile. “That’s why I parked so close.” **“**This is close?” she asked. Unfortunately, the spots right next to his truck were taken. Nick had found a relatively close spot just one row over. **“**Where would you like me to park instead?” he asked agreeably. “If I were following Ryan’s advice, I’d have parked in the far corner.”Jill frowned. “No, this is fine.”She opened the door, and then after taking some time craning her neck to look around in every direction, she slid down out of the seat, the door key held tightly between her thumb and forefinger.She’d thought about putting her hiking boots back on, but it was so nice having them off that she hadn’t been able to bring herself to do so.Outside of the air-conditioned Jeep, a blast of warm air hit her naked lower half. Jill felt it especially on her pussy; the rest of her skin was more used to such temperature changes. The warmth of the sunshine on her bare butt was also noticeable as she made her way across the wide drive to the row in which Nick’s black truck sat. The sharp gravel made it slow going, but fortunately, the lot seemed completely devoid of people.Jill got the key in the driver’s door as quickly as she could, but it wouldn’t turn. As she struggled, starting to panic, Nick called to her, “The other black truck.”

**Chapter 142: Stanton**She looked up at him. He was hanging out the window pointing to her left. Pulling the key back out of the door, she kicked herself for not being more sure of which vehicle was his before climbing out of the Jeep. **“**Luckily that one didn’t have an alarm,” he called out as she picked her way gingerly around the truck she had mistakenly thought was his.Somewhere nearby she heard a motor start sending a ripple of anxiety traveling the length of her body. She ran the remaining steps, doing her best to ignore the pain. This time the key turned, and with a sigh of relief, she opened the door and climbed quickly up onto the unbearably hot seat. Going from the Jeep to the truck had been stressful, and yet it seemed as if she had accomplished it without anyone other than Nick seeing her bare bottom.She glanced down at the light-colored hairless stripe just above her slit as she reached for the lever to slide the seat forward. After adjusting the mirrors and familiarizing herself quickly with the controls, she started the motor, pushed in the clutch and shifted into first.She thought of her friends who did not know how to drive stick. This would be a very bad moment to only be able to drive an automatic, she realized. She gave Nick a thumbs up, and he pulled forward out of his space. Easing up on the clutch, she turned and followed him to the exit.At the stop sign, she came to a full and complete stop. “Not the time to get pulled over, Jill,” she reminded herself aloud, realizing that she didn’t have any I.D. with her. Not having a driver’s license to hand to an officer would be bad, but not having any clothes on below her navel made the prospect of a traffic stop utterly unimaginable.As they reached the first traffic light, Jill found herself in among other cars. She had a hard time believing that no one was able to tell that she was bottomless. The logical part of her brain told her that she looked entirely decent in just the jacket; however, she felt so naked that it seemed as if they would somehow have to know. Was it really possible that she could get away with this?Jill was noticing that Nick’s truck vibrated a lot more than the Jeep, especially at idle. She removed one of her hands from the steering wheel, sliding it down between her thighs to her bare lower lips. She instantly regretted doing so. Not only did it serve to make her feel even more naked, but her finger encountered moisture. Could this really be getting me excited, she wondered? But she had known the answer to that question even before she had gotten her finger wet. The light turned green.She didn’t know what to do with her wet finger as she eased the clutch out. She didn’t want to touch Nick’s steering wheel with it, and she didn’t want to wipe it off on Patty’s coat. Instead, she curled her other fingers around the steering wheel, but kept that one straight, extending up into the air to dry.She knew it would dry quickly as Nick’s truck was oven hot. She hadn’t taken any time to air it out. She hadn’t even rolled down her window or looked to see if there was air conditioning. She had just climbed in and started driving. Were it a longer drive, she’d have to do something about that; however, it was a short drive and all her focus was on following the rules of the road and not losing sight of Nick.At the next light, she followed Nick into the left turn lane. The light turned yellow just before Nick entered the intersection. Jill made a snap decision to risk running the yellow as keeping up with him was so important, but then realizing that the light would turn red on her, she slammed on the brakes. “Shit! shit! shit!” she mumbled, doing her best to follow the Jeep with her eyes.She again found herself regretting that she had not spent more time driving around Stanton. At the very least, she could have paid attention to the route as Hicks had driven it earlier. It simply hadn’t occurred to her that she might need to find her way to the ranger station a second time that day. While waiting for the light, she rolled her window down, finally letting in some air.After turning left, she drove slowly looking for Nick. Fortunately, the Forest Service green Jeep stood out like a sore thumb. Nick had apparently noticed that she’d missed the light and pulled over to allow her to catch up. She breathed a sigh of relief as she slowed way down to allow him to pull out in front of her. The rest of the drive to the ranger station was accomplished without further incident.As they drove up to the ranger station, Jill looked for the boys on the front lawn. As expected, they were gone. For some reason, the thought of them waiting there but then eventually giving up made her chuckle.As she parked next to the Jeep in the gravel lot behind the building, she saw Nick get out and go inside. Only then did she realize that her belongings were still in the Jeep. “Shit!” she swore under her breath, contemplating the prospect of climbing out to retrieve them. She looked all around; the coast seemed to be clear. She was still trying to muster her courage to get out of the truck to get her things when Nick returned. **“**Okay, I gave Mrs. Brooks the keys,” he said, after opening the driver’s door. “She’d like Patty’s jacket back. She seems a bit concerned about having loaned it to you without first obtaining permission.” **“**But it’s all I have,” objected Jill, her anxiety surging. Wrapping her arms around herself, each hand grasping the opposite shoulder, she pleaded softly, shaking her head, “I can’t. I’ll bring it back later. Don’t make me . . . please!” She was fairly certain she wouldn’t be able to give it up. Her anxiety level was much higher in town than it had been on the mountain. **“**Well, I’m sure one of us can bring it back another time. The important thing is that it gets back.” **“**Thank you,” she said appreciatively, still hugging herself. Even though she was bottomless, she liked the jacket. She needed the jacket. She felt much more dressed with it on. “Nick, I need my things from the Jeep,” she added in a tone of voice that she hoped would make him sympathetic. **“**It’s not locked,” he said, stepping to the side so she could climb out of the truck. **“**My boots from the back seat and the small backpack . . . it’s in the front. Please. Won’t you get them for me?” He gave her no indication that he was going to, so she batted her eyelashes, repeating, “Please!”Nick chuckled. “Based on what Ryan told me, I think you’d rather get them yourself.” **“**But you’re nicer than Ryan . . . and I think you have the ability to think for yourself.” **“**I imagine I do,” he said. After a quick second to mull things over, he went to the Jeep to get her things.As Jill slid over into the passenger seat, her eye caught sight of a wet spot on the driver’s seat. With no time to spare, she quickly tried to wipe it away with the palm of her hand, drying her hand on her thigh. In horror, she saw that it was still visible! In desperation, she attempted to rub it in, only stopping because, looking up, she saw Nick on his way back from the Jeep. She sat there stoically, staring straight ahead, her hands atop her thighs as Nick opened the door. He reached across the seat, extending her belongings toward her. **“**Everything alright?” he asked.Jill’s heart sank. He’d obviously noticed the activity. **“**Fine,” she replied quickly. She wondered if the spot might still be visible, but she didn’t dare look down, knowing that doing so would likely draw his eyes to his seat. “Oh, Nick?” she asked as he started to climb in. **“**Yes?” he replied, looking up into her eyes. **“**Never mind,” she said.She’d only said that to get his attention, to keep him from looking down. Now that he was sitting on the seat, she turned and again stared out the windshield. ‘How embarrassing!’ she thought as she sat there blushing. She wondered what he’d seen or what he thought he’d seen, but she wasn’t about to ask. **“**What I meant was . . . thank you,” she said with a forced smile. “I was right. You are nicer than Ryan.” **“**But I’m also able to think for myself,” he said with a mischievous grin as he backed out of the parking spot. **“**Next stop, the thrift shop?” she asked hopefully. **“**If you’re sure.” **“**Of course, I’m sure,” she said. She needed clothes, the sooner the better.After telling him what she’d like and her sizes, he responded, “I’m taking you shopping . . . not doing your shopping for you.”That comment surprised Jill. Was he suggesting that she’d have to go in? However, she remembered that she had just been able to persuade him to let her keep the jacket, and she’d also gotten him to retrieve her belongings from the Jeep.As they turned into the parking lot, Jill said, “It’ll be quick. Just pick me out a T-shirt, some shorts and a pair of light-weight shoes, size ten or bigger, and we’ll be going.” **“**I’ll come in with you,” he offered.Jill looked at him, wondering what exactly Ryan had said. **“**I’ll wait in the truck,” she replied firmly but in a friendly tone. **“**Then we might as well just head for the hospital,” he said, going straight and accelerating rather than turning into the parking spot that he appeared to have selected.That startled Jill. “No, stop! We’re getting clothes.” **“**Okay,” said Nick in a pleasant tone as he pulled into a different spot. **“**Okay . . . I’ll make it easy on you,” she said, opening David’s wallet and handing him a twenty. “Just shorts and a shirt. Since it might be hard to pick out shoes that fit, I’ll run back in and grab a pair once I’m dressed.”Nick refused the twenty. “Let’s go in together,” he said, opening his door and climbing out. “Like you said, it will be quick.”Jill bit her lip and looked at the store with a feeling of foreboding. It was a large store. It looked as if it had been a grocery store in the sixties or seventies. Now it was simply a dilapidated thrift store selling donated goods. **“**I can’t go in there like this,” she replied, waving her hands in front of herself to indicate her state of near nudity. **“**Why not?”Hoping the appeal might work for her a second time, she replied, “Nick, be reasonable. You’re nicer than Ryan. Please, think for yourself.” **“**I am thinking for myself,” he answered. “Remember our discussion from earlier? How I said I was asking you to marry me because I felt the need to do something disruptive? Nice friendly Nick will never see you again after this summer. Fun, playful Nick might not either . . . but at least he’s got a fighting chance.” **“**No he doesn’t,” said Jill shaking her head disapprovingly. **“**Remember when I said . . . also during our discussion about marriage . . . that I thought you and I could have some fun together. Well, clothes shopping might be a lot of fun!” **“**It might be,” she agreed. “…wearing clothes. People generally wear clothes when they go clothes shopping. Duh!”Nick laughed. **“**It’s not funny!” **“**But it is!” he argued. **“**To you maybe.” **“**Well, decision time. I brought you here. Are you going to get some clothes, or are we going to leave?” **“**Please! Think this through, Nick. You know I can’t go in there,” she pleaded. “And, for the record, I think nice Nick has a much better chance than mean Nick." **“**Nothing mean about it. Let’s go! It’ll be fun!” he said with a charming smile. Jill loved his smile, but not what he was saying.Suddenly she found herself remembering the time David and Ryan had tried to take her to Elmer Franks for burgers and shakes while naked. She’d driven off and stranded them there. She thought of doing that to Nick. It would serve him right; however, he’d already put the keys in his pocket.Thinking about taking his truck and leaving, she realized that it wouldn’t gain her anything. She’d still be bottomless. The only way that she could think of obtaining clothes other than from a store was to drive all the way out to Cache Lake to get some of her own. That would work, but it would take a long time. She wanted to get to the hospital. And Nick might report his truck as stolen. Even though he probably wouldn’t press charges, she might be pulled over and arrested. That would not be good. **“**Be a gentleman. Go in there and buy a lady some clothes,” she asked in her sweetest voice, extending the twenty toward him. **“**Where would the fun in that be?” **“**This isn’t going to get you anywhere,” she said matter-of-factly. “I don’t like jerks. This may qualify as disruptive, but shouldn’t you be focusing on being likable?” **“**I’ve got nothing to lose,” he said with a smug smile. **“**Yes, you do . . . my friendship.” **“**I guess I’m rolling the dice today,” he replied.Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Jill turned her eyes to study the store from the vantage point of the truck’s cab. She was beginning to realize that she might not have a choice. She needed clothes and she wanted to get on the road to Elk Bend. She was aware that the thought of walking into a store with her pussy flapping in the breeze was getting her a little aroused, making her moist, but she knew not to check. Nick might notice.Jill continued trying to talk some sense into him, but she could tell she wasn’t making any progress. Telling him that she had been among those who had talked her into hiking naked had been an unwise move.As she considered her options, she thought of her run down from the ridge to the ranger station. Over and over she’d approached people while fully naked. It was amazing what she’d been willing to do for her brother. Why not for herself? Surely obtaining clothes was a worthwhile goal . . . a little exposure now to bring her predicament to an end.Thinking about going into the store nude, or rather, nude from the waist down, she found her excitement continuing to build. She wondered if they might be able to pull it off. If so, it might indeed end up being kind of fun. If not, well – that was another matter.Looking around the parking lot, she realized that there wouldn’t be many people in the store. That made sense; it was late afternoon on a Thursday.Nick seemed certain that she wouldn’t get arrested. “Even if someone were to call the police, they’d let you go. I’d explain to them what happened to your dress, how your brother tore it off unintentionally as he fell. I’ll tell them how David and Ryan were airlifted to Elk Bend. I’ll even call Hicks on his cell phone so they can get confirmation. It’s a small town . . . I’m sure they know Hicks. If it comes to that, I expect the police will even help you get what you need. They’ll take pity on you and help.” **“**Unlike you!”Nick laughed. “I’ve got my own agenda,” he replied. **“**An evil one!” **“**A fun one.”Jill realized that she was losing the battle of wits. And Nick was acting as if he had all the time in the world, but she didn’t. She wanted to get to the hospital. It did seem as if she was going to have to do this one more thing, after which, she would be able to get dressed and stay dressed.

**Chapter 143: Meeting Mr. Mendoza**Jill was having a hard time admitting it, even to herself, but she was starting to realize that she didn’t really want to win the argument. Part of her did want to see what it would be like to go shopping naked – provided she had the excuse of having had no other option. Nick was probably right, if worse came to worse, the police would probably be sympathetic to her predicament. When would such circumstances ever occur again?Realizing that she would already be dressed if she hadn’t put up such a protracted fight, Jill decided to bite the bullet. **“**Okay, step back,” she said, sliding past the steering wheel to climb out the open driver’s door that Nick had been standing in. “But if you leave me alone . . . for even a second . . . I’m done with you. Got that?” **“**You’ll be fine. We’ll stay together. I’ll walk slowly. Stay right behind me, or go in front of me. Use me as a human shield.” **“**Okay, lead the way,” she said, sliding David’s wallet into a coat pocket. “Let’s go, before I chicken out.”Nick did exactly what he had said he would, and she started following him closely, a hand on his back as she kept close, hiding behind him. **“**Ouch! Ow!” she exclaimed all of a sudden.She hopped up onto Nick’s back, almost knocking him over. **“**Sorry . . . but hold me,” she said.She felt his hands under her thighs. There had been no time for discussion. The asphalt had been burning her bare feet. **“**Are you okay?” he asked. **“**Umm . . . I think my feet will recover . . . but, wow . . . as soon as we stepped out from between the vehicles!”Even though the position hid her body from the front, Jill wasn’t especially happy to suddenly find herself riding piggyback. It meant that her bare butt would be broadcasting ‘bottomless girl’ to anyone behind. Fortunately, she hadn’t seen anyone back there. **“**Okay, let me down,” she said apprehensively once they were close to the front door. The concrete there was in the building’s shadow. **“**Whatever you say,” said Nick, relaxing his grip. **“**So NOW you’re going to be nice and let me have my way,” she said sarcastically. She peered cautiously around him, trying to see through the glass into the interior of the store. **“**Just trying to give you what you really want,” he said with a wink. **“**Yeah, right!” she said, her voice faltering as she imagined what lay just ahead. She couldn’t believe that she was about to sneak into a store wearing just the ill-fitting jacket.Just then, Jill was startled by the automatic door which slid open with a whoosh. A large woman, carrying a toddler in one arm and a large bag in the other, emerged. Jill did her best to keep herself completely hidden behind Nick. That seemed to work, until Nick suddenly charged ahead through the door, leaving her behind. **“**Not so fast,” she called to him in a hushed voice as she scampered to catch up. She didn’t want to go in, but she also didn’t want to be left alone.Nick slowed just after they entered the store. There were two checkstands open, each with a cashier busy ringing up a customer. No one acted as if they had taken notice of them, but Jill knew that it was probably just a matter of time. She did her best to keep Nick between herself and those she had seen, but it was nearly impossible; the people were not together in one group.As they went past the checkstands, entering the store itself, Jill saw a stack of red plastic shopping baskets. Almost in a state of panic, she grabbed one and placed it behind her, covering her butt.Realizing that there were now more eyeballs behind her than ahead, she hastily ducked past Nick, shifting the position of the basket such that it hung down in front of her crotch. With the basket in front of her and Nick behind her, it might not be immediately apparent that she was essentially naked – or so she hoped.To get out of the open area near the checkstands, she took a left and then a hard right, turning down the first narrow aisle. It turned out to be the ‘Men’s Jeans’ aisle. Glancing back, she saw that Nick was still behind her, just not as close as she might have liked. He had a big grin on his face. **“**What are you smiling about?” **“**I told you this would be fun,” he replied. “Ryan was certainly right about that.” **“**Not fun!” she grumbled.Realizing that the plastic basket had large holes in it, she grabbed a pair of jeans off the rack, placing them loosely inside. She hoped that they might prevent anyone from noticing that she was naked by seeing through it. Feeling a little less exposed, she took a deep breath, trying to calm down, and yet her heart was racing. **“**Now, stay with me . . . close,” she insisted as she turned and continued on down the aisle, looking all around at the signs hanging from the store ceiling to get an idea of which direction she might need to go to get to the appropriate section.Before entering the large central aisle at the end of the narrow aisle, she hesitated. Glancing back, she saw that Nick had fallen behind. He appeared to be admiring her butt. She frowned at him. “Tsk, tsk, tsk,” she said, shaking her head disapprovingly. **“**What?” he said, pretending that he had no idea what she might be referring to. **“**I think you’ve seen enough of this butt today. Now, do me a favor . . . don’t make me ask again. Stay close!” **“**I’ll try,” he agreed. **“**You better!”At the end of the aisle, Jill leaned forward. Keeping her head low, she peered out into the wider central aisle. She was somewhat aware that her position might not be the best, considering that Nick was right behind her; however, she was much less concerned about him than others in the store.Way down the wide aisle, she could see someone walking in the other direction. Once the coast seemed clear, she whispered, “Okay, let’s go.” She turned and headed quickly in that same direction.She felt a fresh surge of excitement as she realized what she was doing, charging deep into the store down a wide aisle. The basket did hide her a little bit from the front, and Nick, if he would keep close, might be able to keep her somewhat hidden from behind.She heard a gasp from an aisle on her left. Glancing over, she saw a middle-aged woman in teal sweats, her mouth hanging open. Jill glanced down at what the woman was staring at and saw that her bare hip was completely exposed. As she accelerated, she realized that the woman was being treated to a wonderful oblique view of her naked bum. She went two aisles farther and then turned hard right to get off of the main aisle.As luck would have it, the narrow aisle she had entered was occupied some distance down by several shoppers. Reacting rather than thinking, she spun around and ran headlong into Nick, dutifully hurrying to catch up. **“**Oops . . . sorry,” he said, instinctively grabbing her shoulders to steady her.Looking past Nick, Jill saw that the middle-aged woman had followed them. She was peering into their aisle.Suddenly realizing that their collision might have attracted the attention of those behind her – and that they would have an unobstructed view of her bare butt, Jill pivoted back around, working to get the basket back in front of her naked pelvis in the process. Just as she had suspected, a couple of teen girls were staring right at her, their faces agape. Suddenly, feeling trapped, Jill panicked. Dropping down to the floor, she dove under one of the clothes racks and started crawling, leaving both the basket and Nick behind. **“**Jill, where are you going?” she heard Nick call after her.Ignoring him, she plowed on ahead, the hanging clothes rubbing against her back as she crawled under them. She went several aisles before her good sense started to return. Stopping under a rack, somewhat hidden by the clothes hanging down from above, she glanced back. No one was following, but that wasn’t really surprising. Had she expected that Nick or the teen girls might get down on their hands and knees and give chase?Suddenly it occurred to her that she was doing exactly what she had done the morning she’d found herself naked in the west side cabins, fleeing recklessly from one encounter to the next. That had obviously not worked out well for her there, and things were unlikely to go much different in a thrift store. She was going to have to use her head. Taking a moment to look around at the clothes in her vicinity, Jill crawled one more aisle. Checking carefully and not seeing anyone, she stood up, keeping her head low.Somehow she had found the aisle with women’s shorts! She reached for the closest pair, yanking it from its hanger. She stepped into them and pulled them up her legs. She knew that her time might be very limited. Surely the woman or the girls would be coming around the ends of the aisle at any moment. She was certain that they would pursue her, if for no other reason than curiosity.The shorts seemed as if they might fit; however, as she tried to get them over her hips, she realized that they were too small. If she managed to get them all the way up, she wasn’t going to be able to get them zipped or snapped. She was just stepping back out of them when someone entered the aisle. Fortunately, it was Nick. He hurried toward her. **“**Here, try this on,” he said, holding up an article of clothing.Jill glanced at it. It was a miniskirt. **“**No way! I want shorts. I’d be nearly as naked in that thing,” she said, turning her attention back to the rack to find her size. **“**This first,” he encouraged, extending the miniskirt toward her.Suddenly a light bulb went off in Jill’s brain. “Thanks,” she said, grabbing the miniskirt.A moment later she was sliding it up her thighs. It was black and flared nicely thanks to a pleated design. Even though it wasn’t obvious, it had a stretchy waistband making for a comfortable yet accommodating fit. **“**Thanks, Nick,” she said. She was of course still bare from below, but to most viewers, she would now appear to be dressed. **“**Now you can relax and find a pair of shorts,” he said.Breathing a sigh of relief, Jill turned her focus back to the rack. She selected two pair of shorts to try on. Handing one to Nick to hold, she removed the other from the hanger and stepped into it. The skirt was wonderful; it allowed her to try on the shorts without being exposed. It no longer seemed to matter if anyone might be watching. With her breasts and her pelvis now essentially hidden from view, it seemed as if her hours-long naked nightmare had finally come to an end.As she was stepping into the second pair of shorts, she saw someone enter their aisle from the back of the store. Reminding herself that nothing was showing, she turned to face Nick as she pulled the shorts up her long legs, bringing them up under the skirt carefully so as to make sure that she didn’t moon the person behind her.Suddenly she heard a click as a flash of light filled the aisle. **“**What the…?” she exclaimed in surprise as she spun around. A second flash nearly blinded her.Blinking, she saw a portly man in an oversize dark blue sports coat. He looked to be wearing a badge or some sort. His dark hair looked as if it had just been wet and slicked back. **“**Store security, Miss. Come with me,” he announced.Jill stood there stunned. Why had he photographed her? **“**Why?” asked Nick from a position just behind her. **“**None of your concern. This is between me and the young lady.” **“**It is my concern,” replied Nick. “We’re together.”Jill took a step back. Without taking her eyes off the security guard, she reached back. Finding Nick’s hand, she took ahold of it and squeezed it tightly. She felt Nick return the pressure. **“**I’ve been observing her on the monitors. We have video of her engaging in a practice known as ‘layering.’ She’s wearing multiple garments . . . store merchandise . . . concealed on her person. Now come with me.” He turned and beckoned for her to follow.Jill looked up and for the first time saw that there were several cameras located conspicuously around the store. She trembled, realizing that not only was she suspected of shoplifting, but that they had video of her, surely showing her naked from the waist down. **“**Take the stuff off,” suggested Nick from behind.Jill’s hands went to her waist in preparation for doing just that. **“**It won’t make any difference,” said the guard. “I have photos and video.” **“**I’m not shoplifting,” said Jill. “I’m shopping. I was just trying things on.” **“**We have fitting rooms for that,” he said pointing. Jill looked in the direction he indicated. She was trembling. He continued, “Only five garments allowed at a time. It is a well-known fact that those putting on clothing in the aisles are engaged in shoplifting.” **“**I’m shopping,” she asserted. “See, I have money.” She took David’s wallet out of her pocket and held it up. She opened it so that the guard would see that there was money inside.To her surprise, the guard took an interest in her wallet, reaching for it. While she watched, he pulled out the driver’s license and studied it. **“**David Wahlund,” he read aloud.She saw him hold the license up, and then she saw him looking at Nick. He was obviously comparing Nick to David’s photo. **“**Stolen as well?” he asked. **“**David’s my brother,” she said, reaching for the wallet.He pulled it back initially, but then relinquished, letting her have it. Jill quickly restored it to her pocket. **“**So, your last name is Wahlund as well?” he asked. “Your I.D. will prove that?” **“**Yes, my name is Wahlund,” she replied, simultaneously remembering that she had no I.D. with her. **“**Glad to hear it,” he said. “Now, please follow me. These discussions are supposed to take place in my office . . . not here in the aisles. And I need to call the police.”Jill gulped. “The police?” **“**Follow me,” he repeated. **“**Now hold on,” said Nick all of a sudden. “Jill has done nothing wrong. Trying clothes on does not prove an intent to steal. If she had walked out with them on without paying, you’d have a solid case. As it is, she’s in the middle of the store. She hasn’t taken off the tags. I’m pretty sure you should have waited to detain her until she set foot outside.”Jill saw the guard start to reply, but then hesitate. A look of uncertainty crept across his face. **“**Jill, take them off,” Nick continued.Jill moved to comply, but she too hesitated. She’d only just gotten herself covered. She’d been naked for eight hours.Sensing her reluctance, Nick announced, “I’ve got a better idea.”Holding her hand, he started to lead her back out of the aisle in the opposite direction, away from the plump guard.His hand in hers felt unusually comforting. “Where are we going?” she asked. **“**Just trust me,” he said in a reassuring tone as they re-entered the central aisle. **“**But, but…” she stammered.Glancing back, she saw that the guard was right behind them, following closely. She tried to read the look on his face, but she couldn’t focus. Even if she wasn’t panicking on the outside, she was on the inside. She forced herself to concentrate on Nick’s hand. Having it in hers was the only solace she could find in a suddenly very unfriendly world.

**Chapter 144: Mr. Mendoza, continued**Nick and Jill passed several people, all of them staring at her, the woman in the teal sweats and the teenage girls among them, as they made their way toward the front of the store. Jill did her best to hold her head high. She wasn’t a shoplifter and she was bound and determined to not look like one. She also held her shoulders back proudly. Zipped only part way up, the jacket was open wide across her chest, her nipples covered but just barely. The margin of safety was slim, meaning that if she twisted or slouched, a gap could open up between the front of the jacket and her chest, making her breasts, nipples and all, visible.As they approached the front of the store, Jill whispered, “Nick, we can’t just leave.” **“**I know,” he responded quietly. “This will work . . . I think.”Nick marched her to the one open checkstand, saying, “She’d like to buy what she is wearing. The skirt and the shorts.” **“**Yes, please,” said Jill, suddenly cluing in.She spun the skirt on her waist to get the tag in front, presenting it to the cashier. The middle-aged black woman looked at it but hesitated. Jill saw her glance up and look at the guard a short distance behind. **“**Okay, Mr. Mendoza?” she asked.Jill didn’t turn to look at him, and she didn’t hear a response, but he must have nodded as a moment later the woman entered the amount on an older cash register.Jill then grabbed the hem of the skirt and lifted it up, displaying the shorts that had been hiding underneath. She didn’t see a tag in front, so she arched her back while twisting and stretching her neck until she located it on a belt loop in back. She turned, presenting it toward the woman. She was now facing the guard, but she kept her eyes fixed on the floor, avoiding his gaze. She was a very honest person and it hurt deeply to be accused of stealing. **“**Is that it?” asked the cashier after entering the price of the shorts. **“**Yes,” said Jill. **“**Diana, you need to make sure,” said the guard from behind her. **“**Okay,” the cashier replied. Looking Jill in the eye, she continued, “I need to see under the shorts, Miss.”Jill flushed. She was taken aback. It caught her off-guard to not be taken at her word. Proving that there was not another garment under the shorts was the last thing she wanted to do. She glanced around at her small audience. In front of her there was the other cashier and the customer she had been ringing up, his purchases completely forgotten for the moment. A small group of the store’s patrons had also gathered to watch, some behind, others to the side.Reluctantly, Jill reached up under the skirt and unsnapped the shorts. She then lowered the zipper. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest; she had never had to do something so humiliating in her life. Her eyes focused on the checkout counter in front of her, she grasped the sides of the shorts and lowered them toward her knees.Again she hesitated. The skirt was preventing the cashier from making the requested verification. The store was silent. All eyes were on the tall brunette in the tight green winter jacket. Everyone was staring at the pair of light blue shorts which were now visible below her black miniskirt.One could have heard a pin drop. Her entire audience was holding its collective breath. Realizing that she had no choice, Jill reached down and slowly lifted the hem of the skirt. She tried to do it such that only the woman would be able to see, and yet that wasn’t really possible. The only saving grace was that she knew the guard behind her wouldn’t be able to see her nakedness.Once the hem was up, she stood there trembling, still staring at the counter to avoid seeing anyone’s reaction, until she heard the woman say, “Nothing under the shorts, Mr. Mendoza.” **“**Thank you, Diana,” came his reply.Jill, her face completely red, looked up at the woman as she let the hem fall back into place. The woman was frowning at her disapprovingly. She imagined what the woman must think of her as she wondered if she should have just followed Mr. Mendoza back to the security office, in which case, all of this could have been done in private. In some regards that seemed preferable; however, she knew that this was the better option. She was buying the goods; the threat of the police being called was no longer on the table.When she’d gotten up that morning, Jill had never imagined that she’d be flashing a cashier in the front of a store before the day was done. The day had gone much as she had imagined that it might, up until the small earthquake. After that, things had gotten quite unpredictable. **“**What about the jacket?” inquired the cashier. “Where’s the tag?” **“**It’s hers,” she heard the guard behind her say. “She was wearing it when she came in . . . all she was wearing . . . as far as I could tell.”Jill looked up and saw a security camera trained on the front of the store. She took a deep breath realizing that not only had her entrance been observed, but it had probably been recorded. She gulped, realizing that the camera had probably just recorded her lifting up the front of the skirt and flashing the cashier.Mr. Mendoza continued, “It doesn’t look like she has anything on underneath, but we need to be thorough.”Jill sucked in a small breath involuntarily. The jacket was displaying such a wide area of her chest as it was. It didn’t seem possible that he could think that it might be hiding anything. She tried to focus on the positive: it seemed as if she was being allowed to buy the clothes rather than being charged with stealing them.Her hands went to the zipper on her belly as she glanced to the side at the small group of onlookers. She wondered what they must be thinking. Were they thinking that she was a common thief or simply a girl caught up in an awkward situation?Looking back at the cashier, their eyes met. The woman nodded. Glancing down at what she was doing, Jill watched as the zipper slowly descended down her belly. She felt the upper halves sliding sideways across her nipples as the jacket relaxed. Once the zipper was completely disconnected, Jill grasped the two bottom corners and held them down and together, squeezing them against her tummy. She knew she was stalling, but she couldn’t believe that she was about to open the jacket and show her entire bare torso to the woman. That would be bad enough, and yet she knew that at a minimum the other cashier and her customer would be able to see as well.A myriad of thoughts and emotions relating to her sensitivity about her small breasts caused her to tremble as she contemplated baring them in the front of the store. She had grown more comfortable with her body, but she was not at all comfortable with the circumstances.Even if there was nothing wrong with having small breasts, it was wrong to have to show them. She knew that she might be able to ask to do this somewhere more private; however, she decided she wanted to get it over with. She pulled the bottom two corners apart, baring her chest. As she pulled the sides of the jacket out away from herself, she turned a little. She hoped to make it so that only the three individuals in front of her, not the ceiling mounted camera, would be able to see.She saw a sneer on the woman’s face as she closed the jacket and tried to get the zipper halves to re-engage. **“**Just the jacket,” the cashier announced in a condescending tone.Jill decided to forgive the woman for her attitude. She didn’t know the circumstances that Jill had been dealing with. All she saw was a girl in a jacket with nothing under it, neither a shirt nor a bra. **“**Thank you, Diana,” said Mr. Mendoza. **“**Pay the woman,” Nick whispered into her ear. **“**Yes, right,” said Jill taking out the wallet. She opened it and handed the woman the twenty she’d tried to give Nick earlier.The woman went about making change, counting it out for Jill. She wadded up the bills with the coins and stuffed them into her pocket along with the wallet. **“**Would you like your receipt?” asked the woman. **“**I’ll take it,” said Nick, extending his hand.Jill turned and glanced up at him. “Thank you,” she whispered. In a way, he’d saved her. **“**What about the tags?” asked the cashier.She was holding a pair of scissors. Jill rose up on her toes and held the skirt so the tag was toward the woman. Once it had been cut off, she turned and lifted the skirt to allow access to the tag on the back of the shorts. **“**Okay, let’s go find you some shoes,” said Nick softly, taking her hand to lead her back into the store. **“**Can’t we just go?” she asked insistently. The last place she wanted to go was back into the store. **“**It’ll be fine,” he assured her. “They’re your clothes now. You wanted shoes and a T-shirt, remember?”She had wanted those things. After a brief internal struggle, she relinquished, following Nick back into the store.As they passed the guard, Nick remarked, “This one is as honest as the day is long.” **“**I’m watching you,” came the guard’s grumbled reply. **“**Let’s just go,” said Jill. She really did want to get out of there. **“**He knows he messed up,” said Nick. “He won’t bother us. He’ll probably follow us around, but it’ll be okay.”Jill wasn’t so sure, but she decided to continue trusting Nick. A moment later she selected some lightweight canvas slip-ons. She didn’t want to try them on, but Nick insisted. Fortunately, they fit nicely. They looked almost new. She took them right back off. She wasn’t about to wear them until they were paid for. **“**Okay, a T-shirt,” said Nick.The first one she picked up from the rack displaying her size, happened to say, ‘Do You Want Sumo This?’ Below that was the image of a sumo wrestler in front of a giant red dot, clearly a Japanese sun. **“**It’ll fit. I don’t need to try it on,” she said to Nick, holding it up to make sure she was right.Nick nodded. “I’m sure you know.”A minute later, Jill had paid for the additional items, and they were walking out the front door. The guard was there, watching them carefully. Seeing that the sun was still shining on the asphalt parking lot, Jill slipped on her shoes, hopping on one foot and then the other to accomplish it. **“**That was awful!” said Jill. “I’m glad to have the clothes, but I’ve never felt so humiliated. I’d never shoplift. I hope you know that.” **“**I know that,” he replied. “That guy’s new. If he suspects someone is shoplifting, he ought to wait until they leave the store to confront them.” **“**In which case, he would have saved us all the anguish. I would never walk out of a store with merchandise that hadn’t been paid for.” **“**I know that. I doubt he knows that, but he doesn’t know you. In his world view, I’m sure a high percentage of people are crooks.” **“**He probably thinks he screwed up, letting a shoplifter slip through his fingers,” said Jill. **“**He might, but let’s forget about it.”Jill nodded. She definitely wanted to forget about it.At the truck, Jill stood behind an open door and removed the jacket. It felt great to get it off; her back and her arms were sweaty. She folded it carefully and handed it to Nick to hold while she slipped on the T-shirt. It seemed a bit odd to change in the parking lot, but compared to everything else she’d been through, that small amount of exposure seemed like nothing. **“**Is this the last time I’ll be seeing your lovely titties?” **“**I expect so.” **“**Not if I have my way,” he said with a lecherous smile. **“**They’re nothing to brag about,” she said quietly. “Nearly every girl has nicer.” **“**Bigger maybe . . . not nicer.”Jill looked up at him, biting her lip and squinting. She wondered if he really felt that way. **“**Say goodbye to the titties,” she said, holding the hem of her shirt at collar bone level and looking into his eyes. **“**Goodbye titties,” he said obediently. Jill dropped the shirt into place and climbed into the truck. It felt wonderful to again be dressed.The shirt, like the skirt, was black. Her black outfit seemed to contrast nicely with the bright red shoes she ended up with, the red sun on the T-shirt seemingly tying the ensemble together as if thought had gone into it. Her shorts probably didn’t work very well with the outfit, color-wise, but they were largely hidden. Sitting there on the truck’s seat, she looked down and saw that she could just see about an inch of the light blue material peeking out below the hem of the skirt. **“**I like the skirt you found me,” she said as he started the truck. **“**Beginner’s luck,” he said. “It does look nice on you, but I’m afraid it might be what provoked him to accuse you of shoplifting.” **“**How so?” **“**Remember, ‘layering?’ Without the skirt, you never would have had more than one piece of clothing on at a time.”Jill considered that. “But the skirt was a good idea,” she replied, deciding to look on the bright side. **“**I’ll bet Ryan would never have given you a skirt . . . so that you could try on shorts without feeling so exposed.” **“**He wouldn’t have,” she agreed. “Like I said, you are nicer than Ryan.” **“**I told you it would be fun to go shopping together.”Yes . . . you did. And you were soooo f\*\*king wrong! Worst shopping trip ever!”Nick laughed. “I suppose that’s probably true. I hope you’re not blaming that on me.” **“**Blaming you? Well . . . you did get me in there . . . so I should be. But then you saved my ass.”Again Nick laughed. “You have a lovely ass. I wish I had taken a picture of it as you crawled off under the clothing racks. So that I could save your ass . . . for later.”Jill tried, but she couldn’t keep herself from laughing at his obnoxious joke. She realized that he had probably bent down and watched as she’d been crawling away. The thought made her shudder. **“**Did I really do that?” asked Jill blushing.He didn’t reply so she snuck a peek over at him out of the corner of her eye. He was nodding, a big smile on his face. **“**You’re funny,” he said. “Sometimes you are so calm and collected . . . so focused . . . like when you were concentrating on getting your brother the help he needed. A woman on a mission! Other times, you’re…” **“**I know, I know,” she said. “I can’t help it. My brain shuts down and I panic . . . something about being naked.”Nick laughed.Jill was weighing two irreconcilable views of Nick against one another. On the one hand, he had saved her by pointing out a potential flaw in the in the security guard’s logic. He’d followed that up with a strategic move that had resulted in her being allowed to buy what she had been wearing. As if by magic, the shoplifting charge had evaporated. However, on the other hand, he had refused to go in and make a few simple purchases on her behalf. Turning her down, as he had done, had resulted in her visit to the store in the first place. The consequences had nearly been disastrous. Nick – friend or foe? It was a tough call.Deciding that she didn’t want to think about what had happened and what might be stored in the store’s CCTV memory, she decided to use their time on the drive to Agency to get to know Nick a little better. Focusing on that would also take her mind off of her concerns about David. She’d find out soon enough how he was; worrying about him in the meantime served little purpose.

**Chapter 145: The Drive**

She had covered all the preliminaries with Nick the night they had met, the night his father had set them up for the impromptu blind date; however, that had been early in the summer. The primary reason that she had probably not retained much from that conversation was that she had not had any interest in getting to know him better.

She did remember that he was three years older. That fact she had retained. For some reason, that had been quite a turnoff for her that first evening. Now, however, it seemed to explain the level of maturity that had been a factor in getting the guard to allow her to buy the clothes.

She knew that he was going to be a senior in college, but she had forgotten that the college he was attending happened to be in Elk Bend, where they were headed. Elk Bend was sixty miles beyond Agency; the drive would take a little more than an hour.

She’d remembered that his major had something to do with farming. She couldn’t recall any more than that, so she was forced to ask.

“Agricultural Science?” she asked upon hearing his reply. “Why aren’t you studying Forestry? It seems as if you might enjoy working for the Forest Service or the National Park Service.”

“Actually, I think I might. That’s why I volunteer as I do. Agricultural Science, contrary to what you might be thinking, happens to be a perfect degree for a career in the Forest Service. For the most part, the forests are now being managed as a crop. There’s so much forest out there . . . enough for every use. And careful management is reducing the incidence of deadly forest fires. Not eliminating them, but making a significant difference.”

A bit later in their discussion, Nick mentioned a paper that he had written for one of his classes. He described it as satire, a satire about the lowly tumbleweed.

“I’ve always been fascinated by the much-maligned tumbleweed. There are actually a number of tumbleweed species.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Neither did I until I decided to use it as the topic for my research paper. At some point, I began thinking of the tumbleweed as a potential crop. It is both self-harvesting as well as self-transporting. What if other crops had those same attributes? For example, what if corn picked itself and then rolled along the ground to market?”

“Alas, it doesn’t,” said Jill, suddenly finding herself a little interested in what he had to say. She’d found herself attracted to Tyler because of his intellect, and she realized that she’d dismissed Nick unfairly, assuming that he was less intelligent. She’d thought that he was pursuing a vocational farming degree. Nothing wrong with that, it just didn’t sound very cerebral.

“At first, I was thinking that a use for tumbleweeds needed to be developed, but from there, I started thinking of crossing the plant with other plants. My paper was about a number of new species. Just imagine, if you will, a cross between strawberries and tumbleweeds. Picking strawberries is a very labor-intensive process.”

“That’s why U-pick strawberry fields exist,” Jill interjected.

“Exactly! That’s why there are no U-pick potato fields . . . giant machines have been developed to dig up the potato crop. So what if strawberries bushes could be genetically modified so that they broke off at ground level and then rolled across the field? Maybe the bush itself could become the basket to protect the delicate fruit inside. And then the whole thing could be sold in stores as ‘vine-ripened,’ . . . just as several varieties of tomatoes are today.”

“I’d say you have your work cut out for you if you think you can develop that species.”

“Exactly!” agreed Nick. “That’s why my paper was a satire of sorts. But I got an ‘A’ . . . for thinking outside the box.”

To Jill’s surprise, Nick broke into song at that point, singing the chorus of ‘Tumbling Tumbleweeds.’ It was a well-known cowboy song, one that their family had sung. She was quite impressed with his voice. Just as he was about to stop singing, she joined in. That brought a smile to his face and they sang the rest of the song together.

“Lovely!” said Nick. “Not everyone knows that song. Especially these days. I fear that parents are no longer singing folk songs with their kids.”

“Our parents always did,” said Jill. “We spent our summers singing around the campfire. You have quite the voice, by the way.”

“High school choir. Church choir before that. Would you believe that I even sang ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ before games.”

“You did? I would have never imagined!”

Nick Laughed. “Doesn’t fit my image, right?”

It was Jill’s turn to laugh. “It certainly doesn’t! I would have never figured you for the choir type.”

“Choir was a lot of fun. I don’t normally sing to girls . . . or brag about singing at games. It’s just that, I’m still trying to behave in a disruptive manner . . . alter the course of our future. Maybe I’m even letting my guard down a bit . . . not knowing what might help.”

Jill laughed. “I need to hear it . . . The Star-Spangled Banner.”

“Another time.”

Jill begged, but he held firm. “You’ve got to earn it!” he said.

A few minutes later, as they were approaching Agency, Nick brought up what had happened at the thrift store. “I wasn’t sure that I believed Ryan . . . until then. That you are always pretending otherwise, but actually crave public nudity.”

“Ryan’s messed up in the head! I absolutely do NOT crave public nudity . . . got that? You made me go in there . . . remember?”

“What I remember is you suggesting the place. I asked you, ‘how do you imagine we get you some clothes?’ You brought up the thrift store. There would have been any number of ways to get you an outfit with much less exposure.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“I was going to suggest that we stop by my house. My little sister Martina is not quite as slender; however, I’m sure her clothes would fit.”

“Why didn’t you suggest that?”

“I would have, but you seemed dead set on the thrift store.”

“I was not!”

“You held up that wallet and said, ‘I’ve got money!’ You had a happy look of excitement on your face. I knew then and there that Ryan knew what he was talking about.”

“I was excited to get dressed, and expecting that you’d be a gentleman and help me.”

“I did help you!”

“Not at all like I was imagining. I can’t believe that you didn’t mention getting clothes from your sister, but I’m not sure how that might have gone. I don’t think she likes me.”

“She’s a snotty little girl at times, but she probably wouldn’t have been home. I thought you might not want to wait until we got to Agency to get dressed. But I know all kinds of girls who live in Stanton, girls who would have loaned you clothes, girls I went to high school with. Katie, for example. She’s the helpful sort. You remember her, right?”

“Katie?”

“Yeah, she was part of the group that saw you slip and fall in the rain.” Nick laughed. “Their description was priceless. How you were topless. How you walked into their midst and then panicked.”

“I thought you only heard about that from someone in the ER. I didn’t know you knew I was topless.”

“Initially . . . when I came out to Cache Lake and caught you hanging out with Ryan . . . literally hanging out . . . I didn’t. I heard the topless part of the story later.”

“Small towns!” said Jill, shaking her head.

“Exactly! Aren’t they great?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t mention other ways to get clothes. You could have been much more helpful!”

“You seemed to have your heart set on going shopping. Who am I to deny you that experience?”

“I guess it’s just that I don’t know people in this area. But you’re right. If I’d been in such a situation in Holden, I’d go to a friend’s house. Surely another girl would take pity on me and help . . . unlike guys. Guys never seem to want to help me get dressed.”

“I helped you.”

“Yeah, right!”

After they had passed Agency and were on the road to Elk Bend, Jill brought up something she’d been wanting to ask. “Nick, my grandparents will worry if we don’t come home tonight. They might even head out looking for us . . . in the dark. Or they’d drive into Agency to report us missing. Somehow I need to get word to them, but I want to stay in Elk Bend. I’ll either spend the night in the hospital or get a motel room nearby.”

“You’re asking for a favor, right?”

“Please! Could you drive out to Cache Lake before it gets dark and tell my grandparents what happened? I mean, first, let’s find out how David and Ryan are, but then afterwards . . . would you do that for me? Don’t tell them I was naked, but everything else. It will be hard news for them to hear, that David and Ryan were injured, but it’s better that they find out sooner rather than later.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Have dinner with me, and then I’ll head back. I’ll go straight to Cache Lake.”

“That sounds like extortion.”

“Oh, Jill. Don’t do this to me! That hardly seems fair. We’ve been through a lot together. I’ve done a lot for you . . . helping you get your brother off the mountain. Now I’m not saying that you owe me anything. You don’t. I would have helped anyone similarly. Besides, we both need to have dinner.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. That was rude of me.”

“No harm done. I’m just enjoying your company, and I’m hoping that the feeling’s mutual. I know Elk Bend quite well. I was going to suggest a sushi restaurant. Do you like sushi?”

“I do. I’ve been missing sushi, but I’ve heard that one should never order seafood . . . especially not raw . . . this far from the ocean.”

“I expect that’s good advice, but this place is the exception that proves the rule. And since sushi doesn’t have to cook, it’s pretty quick, meaning that I can be on my way to Cache Lake to inform your grandparents before it gets late.”

“Okay. Let’s have sushi,” Jill agreed with a smile.

“Great. It’s a date!” he said.

Jill felt like correcting him, telling him that it wasn’t a date; that they would be just two friends eating together, but she didn’t. She felt the need to be completely honest, but for once she was having a little trouble deciding what exactly the most honest thing to say might be.

“But I’m paying. Actually, David is paying. But I’ll pay him back.”

“You don’t have to pay.”

“I insist,” said Jill. “You’ll have used almost a whole tank of gas before the day is done, so it’s only fair.”

Jill glanced over and saw that Nick was smiling. He seemed to be happy that he had talked her into having dinner with him. Jill decided to be happy about it as well. She was enjoying being around him. Talking to him was invigorating.

A half hour or so later, as Jill climbed out of the truck in the hospital parking lot, she was still adjusting to how different it felt to have clothes on. There were the sensory differences, the feeling of the fabric against her skin, but more importantly, there were the differences that she felt inside – the lack of trepidation of being seen as well as the angst about the consequences of being caught or photographed.

Initially, she glanced around the parking lot carefully. Subconsciously, she was still on high alert, looking for anyone who might be able to see her, anyone that she might need to hide from. It took her a long moment to convince herself that she didn’t need to be doing that before she could start to relax.

She walked rapidly towards the main entrance, Nick at her side. Just inside, she caught sight of Hicks. He was hurrying toward them across the large lobby.

“Hey, look at you!” he said to Jill. “Something’s different. Let me guess . . . something about your hair?”

“Real funny,” she said blushing.

Sorry . . . couldn’t resist. But you are a lovely lady, dressed as well as…”

“Enough, enough!” said Jill holding up her hand and interrupting him. “I wasn’t expecting you to be here. You said you were getting a ride back to Stanton.”

“I did say that. Change of plans.”

“Do you know what room my brother’s in?” she asked.

“He’s still in the ER,” said Hicks. “Follow me.”

Rather than lead them toward one of the corridors as Jill had been expecting, Hicks took them to an unmarked door. After entering a code on a keypad, he opened it. To Jill’s surprise, they were suddenly in what seemed to be the back of the ER, having entered via what must be an employee entrance.

“Wow! Security clearance?!” exclaimed Nick.

“I’ll explain in a moment. First, let me introduce you,” said Hicks, leading the way to what looked to be the central nurses station.

**Chapter 146: The Hospital**

“Clarissa, can I interrupt you?” he asked addressing a woman working at a terminal. She appeared to be a nurse; she was dressed in purple ‘scrubs’ pants and a matching purple-blossoms floral top. Her badge read, ‘Clarissa Rampichini, LPN.’ She came out from behind the counter.

“Is this David’s twin sister?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m Jill,” she said extending her hand.

“Nice to meet you,” she smiled. “You’ll want to see David first, but we need some help with paperwork. David came in with no ID, no medical insurance card, nothing. He hoped you might have his wallet.”

“Actually, I do, but I left it in your truck,” she said, turning to Nick.

“I’ll get it,” he replied.

“No rush,” said Clarissa.

“Why don’t you?” she said speaking to Nick directly. “…should be in the coat pocket.”

“I’ll be right back,” he replied.

“I’ll come with you,” offered Hicks. “That way, you’ll be able to again come in the back way.”

“I’ll take you down to see David,” said the nurse as Nick and Hicks departed. “He’s in room eleven. Your friend Ryan’s next door . . . room ten.”

“How is David?” Jill asked as they walked past the nurses station.

“He’s alert . . . at least, as of a few minutes ago. He’s been asking for you. As for his medical condition, I’ll send Dr. Zhao down when he’s available.”

Clarissa indicated a curtain. Each room seemed to have an entire wall open to the corridor, a curtain drawn across for privacy. Jill peeked in. Seeing David on the bed inside, she stepped in. One of his arms looked to be connected to a number of machines, one of them an IV drip. He also had a small tube running across his face just below his nose.

“Hey, Pocket! Are you alive?” she asked in the most cheerful voice she could muster.

“Oh, Jillybean! I must be,” he replied. He was propped up so that he could see her without having to lift his head. “At least I think that is what the green line on the monitor shows.”

Jill walked up next to his bed to study the screen. One of the lines was clearly tracing out a heartbeat. It appeared normal, to the extent that she could discern normal.

“You’re dressed!” he said, sounding surprised.

“What did you expect? I couldn’t very well walk into a hospital . . . umm.”

“And yet you went to town and back naked.”

“Shhh…” she admonished him, her eyes darting back to the curtain. “We can keep that to ourselves.”

Suddenly realizing how much like himself David seemed, Jill broke down in tears. “Oh, David, I was so worried,” she blubbered. “I thought I was going to be a twinless twin.”

“Not if I can help it,” he replied, reaching for her with the arm that didn’t have things connected to it.

Jill walked around to that side of the bed. Taking his hand in hers, she bent over at the waist, half lying on the bed, her head on his chest. She knew she ought to be trying to get her tears under control, but it felt so good to simply let them flow. They were, after all, tears of relief.

“I was so worried,” she sobbed.

“You already said that,” he whispered.

Jill snorted but then chuckled, “Don’t make fun of me. I’ve only got one twin.”

“I have to make fun of you. If I didn’t, you’d know something was wrong . . . with my brain.” He laughed.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked, wiping her eyes with one of his sheets.

“Well, here’s what the doctor said. He said the CT scan showed dark areas in my brain . . . not supposed to be there. He said fluid shows up as dark. It indicates swelling . . . potentially dangerous.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” said a voice back by the curtain.

Jill turned and saw a tall Asian-appearing man in blue scrubs. He went to the sink and busied himself with a thorough hand washing. “You must be Jill. I’ve been hearing so much about you.” Jill gulped as he continued, “I’m Peter Zhao . . . David’s doctor for the rest of the evening. Nice to meet you. Love the shirt, by the way.”

Jill was so concerned about what he might have heard about her that she couldn’t remember what was printed on the shirt. She looked down at it to remind herself.

“Let me see,” requested David.

Jill turned so he could read it.

“Do you want sumo this?” he read with a chuckle. “Where’d you get that?”

“Oh, you remember this shirt,” she said with a wink.

“Right,” said David nodding. “Maybe getting hit in the head made me forget . . . momentarily.”

“I got it at a thrift store in Stanton . . . some time ago. You weren’t with me.” That part at least was true.

“It looks good with the skirt,” he added.

Jill wished David would stop talking about her clothes. It might make the doctor suspicious; he might realize that she hadn’t had them on earlier.

She turned to the doctor. “He seems as if he’s going to be alright?” Her inflection made it more of a question than a statement.

“As he was saying, the CT scan revealed areas of swelling inside his skull. All tissue, even brain tissue, swells when it is injured. Swelling itself is not necessarily bad; however, the skull is an enclosed area . . . no room for expansion. The result of swelling there is increased intracranial pressure.”

Dr. Zhao led Jill over to the monitor she had been studying earlier. He showed her the intracranial pressure reading below David’s heartbeat. “This is the number we are watching. It’s the number we’re trying to bring down.”

Jill was puzzled. “How does the monitor track the pressure inside a patient’s skull?” she asked.

“Excellent question! A small tube called an ICP catheter has been surgically inserted through David’s skull. A transducer feeds the internal pressure data to the monitor. Additionally, the ICP catheter serves as a drain for excess cerebrospinal fluid.” He pointed out a small tube crossing David’s pillow.

Jill nodded. She understood, but the thought made her a little queasy.

“The brain needs oxygen. Without oxygen, brain cells start to die. Oxygen is of course delivered by the blood. If the intracranial pressure gets too high, blood stops flowing to the brain.”

“But that’s not happening, right?”

“I think he’s going to be fine,” said the doctor. “But head injuries are unpredictable. Best case scenario, he’ll have a few concussion symptoms, and they won’t last too long.”

Jill didn’t want to ask, but she knew she had to. “And, worst case?”

The doctor looked at her and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “There’s no need to talk about that. People do die of head injuries. Car accidents, for example. David, however, seems to be stable and improving. That’s why I said I think he’s going to be fine, but with head injuries, there are no guarantees. At this stage, one of the things we focus on is getting oxygen to the brain. See this other number?”

“The 99?”

“Oxygen saturation. As getting oxygen to the brain is key, we try to keep this number as close to 100% as possible, so that the blood that gets in has something to deliver. David is receiving oxygen now . . . via the tube with the prongs in each nostril.”

“Hicks started the oxygen on the mountainside,” said Jill, thinking back to her mission to the helicopter.

“I know. I’m sure it made a difference . . . possibly a big one. Jeffrey Hicks is a good man . . . as smart as they come. Always taking additional courses. Always adding to his skill set.”

Jill nodded, recalling that he had told her that it was her lucky day.

“And Hicks . . . he’s trying to give you all the credit.”

“Me? All I did was run to the helicopter and back.”

The doctor smiled. “And you ran all the way to the Stanton Ranger Station. Five miles .. . . . that was Hicks’ estimate.”

Jill bit her lip wondering just exactly what had been said. She didn’t think Hicks would have mentioned that she had been nude, but then she remembered the helicopter crew. If he knew that she had been naked, she could tell that he seemed unlikely to mention it.

“Maybe you should consider a career in medicine,” he suggested.

“Because I can run?”

“No . . . because you care.”

“He’s my brother.”

“Yes, but I sense that your ability to care extends well beyond your circle . . . your family and friends. I see it in your eyes.”

Jill didn’t know what to make of that comment. All she thought that he could discern from her eyes was that she had been crying.

David joined the conversation. “You’re right, Doctor. She’s always helping others. As a matter of fact, just last weekend she rescued a couple’s canoe, and then . . . same day . . . she carried an out-of-shape girl’s backpack up a long series of switchbacks. Tell him, Jill,” he encouraged, pride evident in his eyes.

“Maybe another time,” she said, looking down and blushing as the circumstances flashed through her mind.

In that moment, she felt her phone vibrating in the pocket of her shorts, indicating the arrival of a text.

“Yes, maybe when I come back,” said the doctor. “Right now, I have other patients to attend to.”

Jill was relieved that she wasn’t going to have to recount those stories, at least not right then. She could probably tell them without mentioning that she had been nude; however, she couldn’t think about them without recalling that fact.

Again Jill felt her phone vibrate, and not just once.

Before leaving, the doctor also mentioned that David had some broken ribs as well as a few broken bones in his right hand. “Metacarpals,” he said, holding up his hand and pointing at it to indicate which bones they were. “That’s why he’s wearing the ulnar gutter splint. Once the swelling goes down, five or six days, it will be replaced by a cast. If we put a cast on it now, there would be that ‘swelling in an enclosed area’ problem.”

“Sounds like you’re going to live,” remarked Jill after the doctor had excused himself.

“I suppose . . . thanks to you and Hicks,” David replied.

Jill shrugged, trying to act as if she’d done nothing. And yet it was gratifying to hear that she might have made a difference. She’d certainly put her heart and soul into the effort.

Again Jill’s phone vibrated. She took it out of her pocket.

“Twenty-six texts!” she said in surprise. “Correction . . . photos,” she added, noticing that they were all images.

She opened the first one, recognizing it right away. She was posing next to Jenna; it had been taken the morning the Copelands had braided her hair. Jenna was of course dressed; she wasn’t. The second photo was similar, but she was with Britt. Glancing down, she saw that Fuzzy Wuzzy was prominently visible. She zoomed in. He was sharp, too, as was her slit just below. Those details were easy to discern even though her shattered screen made the images difficult to see.

She opened a third image. It was one of the selfies that Britt had taken showing all three of them from the waist up. The twins were smiling. She liked that they looked so happy. In comparison, she looked somewhat detached and worried. But all things considered, it was a nice picture. She zoomed in on her chest. In all the time she’d spent topless, she’d had very few opportunities to see her breasts as others were seeing them. They seemed to have a proud, perky look about them. Her athletic, shoulders-back posture contributed positively to the overall impression.

“What are you smiling about?” asked David. “Let me see!”

Jill hadn’t realized she was smiling. “They’re from Britt . . . just boring old naked photos of your sister. Nothing you’d be interested in, right?”

“But twenty-six of them?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

“I’m going to call her,” announced Jill, clicking on the screen and then holding the phone to her ear.

“Hey, Girlfriend! Don’t you just love those photos?” asked Britt when she answered.

“Well, they’d look better if my screen hadn’t been shattered in the rockslide. At least my phone still works . . . sort of.”

“Rockslide? What rockslide?”

“You’ll never guess where I am right now, Doctor Copeland.”

“You’re right. Tell me.”

“The ER. The Elk Bend Medical Center ER.”

“What?! Are you alright?” asked Britt. “Jenna, Jill’s in the ER,” Jill overheard her tell her companion.

Jill went on to give her a quick rundown of all that had happened, Britt putting her phone on ‘speaker’ so that Jenna could listen in.

“We’re coming,” said Britt. “You need us.”

“I appreciate the thought, but you don’t have to come.”

“We’re coming,” she repeated resolutely.

“Britt’s a doctor,” she heard Jenna say. She was obviously much further from the phone.

“Sort of,” Britt remarked.

“You don’t have to come. I sure could have used your expertise up on the mountain today, but now David and Ryan are in a hospital . . . being well taken care of . . . plenty of doctors...”

“We’re coming,” interrupted Britt. The phone went dead.

“What did they say?” asked David.

“I guess they’re coming,” she said with a shrug.

**Chapter 147: The Hospital, continued**

A few minutes later, Jill ducked out of David’s room. She’d been wondering what had happened to Nick and Hicks. She found them seated a short distance down the corridor.

“I thought you guys would come in,” she remarked, walking up to them.

“Just giving you your space,” said Nick, handing her David’s wallet.

Taking it and opening it, Jill removed a few cards. “Will you hand these to the nurse. That might be all they need.”

“I’ll take care of that,” volunteered Hicks, reaching for them.

“Thank you,” she said. “I want to say ‘hello’ to Ryan.”

“So . . . how was the helicopter ride?” she was asking him a moment later, sticking her head inside the curtain across the end of his room.

Taking his eyes off of the ceiling-mounted TV, he smiled at her as he set down the remote. “Hey, Jill! Not too bad, actually, but I couldn’t really see out . . . and my leg was throbbing.”

“How’s it feel now?”

“Better now, but it sure hurt like hell when the doctor was setting it. That was rough . . . painful.”

Jill looked at his leg. There were many wide Ace wraps presumably holding a splint in place. “Looks temporary.”

“The permanent cast comes later . . . that’s what they tell me.” Jill nodded as Ryan continued. “I sure owe you a debt of gratitude. You really stepped up today.”

“Had to,” she replied with a shrug.

“I really can’t believe that you were able to do that. I mean, you’re so shy. You panic when people see you naked . . . new people.”

“Like I said, I had to.”

“I don’t think I could have done what you did.”

“Probably not,” she replied. After a little consideration, she added, “Just because I have a vagina, does not mean that my balls aren’t bigger than yours.”

Ryan laughed.

Again studying Ryan’s leg, she continued, “You’re going to have your leg in a cast, but, Poor David, he’s going to have his right hand in one. I’ll bet you’re very glad to not be in that boat. That would really cramp your style!” She made a fist and pumped it up and down to drive home her point.

“Very funny!” he scowled.

“And I’ve got a bone to pick with you, Mister. I’m mad . . . seriously mad! What in the hell did you tell Nick? As if my life wasn’t difficult enough, you had to go and do that!”

Ryan laughed. “What did he say?”

“Not so much what he said. It’s what he did.”

“So tell me . . . what did he do?”

“Not telling you. But know that I’m mad at you!” She glared at him, her index finger pointed between his eyes. “Better watch your back! Why do you always do this to me? You’re such a Jerk-boy!”

“Stop calling me that already!”

“I’m so much nicer to you than you deserve.”

“That’s probably true,” he acknowledged.

“Somewhere I have some crutches I might be able to lend you. See . . . there I go again . . . thinking of something nice.”

“I forgot about the crutches. I’ll probably be getting more use out of crutches than you did.”

Jill studied the monitoring device. Ryan looked to be hooked up about the same as David, but there was no IV drip.

“Are they releasing you?” she asked. “It doesn’t seem like they keep people overnight for a broken leg.”

“Hard to get answers,” he replied. “I’ve been wondering the same thing, not that I have any idea where I’d go. But . . . maybe you and I could get a room . . . a hotel room.”

Jill saw a hopeful look in his eyes. “Dream on, Jerk-boy!”

“Stop calling me that. At least, not here! You masturbate, too. We heard you . . . remember? Or do you want me calling you, ‘Jilling-Jilly’?”

It was one thing to kid him about beating off, but Jill didn’t like having the tables turned on her. “Okay, okay . . . truce,” she offered.

Ryan nodded appreciatively. “Actually, there has been talk of keeping me overnight.”

“Did they mention a reason?”

“Observation . . . whatever that means.”

They talked a little longer, Jill informing him about what the doctor had said regarding David’s condition. She found that she was still quite worried about him. The doctor had said that he thought he’d be fine, and yet his remarks had left her with a lot of uncertainty.

She also told Ryan about her conversation with Britt, and how she and Jenna were probably on their way. She thought of telling him about the twenty-six photos – teasing him. She knew how badly he’d want to see them. She’d, of course, deny him. That would be fun. She decided to save that for another time.

Once she stepped out of his room, she found that Nick was alone.

“Where’s Hicks?” she asked.

“He had to leave. His wife came for him.”

“I wanted to say goodbye. I wanted to thank him,” she said, feeling genuinely sad that she hadn’t had the opportunity.

“You did that already. You don’t have to worry. He feels appreciated. You have very expressive eyes.”

“I do?”

Nick nodded and smiled. “Lovely, expressive eyes.” Jill blushed as he continued, “Should we go to dinner?”

“I am hungry, but maybe the staff still has questions regarding David’s insurance coverage.”

“All taken care of,” he said, handing Jill the cards she had given Hicks earlier.

“Thanks. Okay . . . sushi?” she said with a smile.

“Absolutely! Let’s go!”

“Let me speak to David first. I’ll tell him I’ll be back in a while . . . then we can go.”

A few minutes later, just after they had exited through the automatic doors that separated the ER from the public areas of the hospital, several reporters pounced on Jill. She hadn’t seen them coming. Suddenly microphones, two of them, were in her face.

“Jill Wahlund?” a female reporter in a dark pantsuit asked.

“Umm . . . yeah,” she replied, instantly wishing she’d had the presence of mind to do something, anything other than confirm her identity.

“How is your brother, your twin brother?” she asked, speaking to her, but with her head turned just enough so that her face was angled towards the TV camera.

“I don’t really know,” she said, looking for a way to slip past.

“Have you spoken with him?”

“Yes.”

“So he’s conscious? We understand that he wasn’t earlier . . . after the rockslide up above Buckner Ridge, the popular day hike destination above Stanton.”

Jill thought that the woman’s phrasing was rather odd. She was obviously adding additional detail, detail obviously intended for a TV audience.

“Yes, he’s conscious,” she said, instantly worrying about the extent of the reporter’s knowledge.

Jill wanted to disappear. She looked for a way out, but the reporters and their entourage had formed a nearly complete circle around the two of them. She wanted to escape, but it seemed as if that might entail pushing.

“Your efforts today . . . to get help for your brother as well as a second individual, a friend . . . have been described as heroic. It must have been a harrowing experience. What happened up there on the mountain today?”

Jill could tell that she was hoping to get her to talk, something she was not at all in the mood to do. “Umm . . . sounds like you already know.”

“A ranger involved in today’s rescue told us that you may have single-handedly saved your twin brother’s life.”

Again the microphone was thrust in front of her face for comment. The cameraman stepped closer, obviously attempting to capture her reaction.

“Hicks!” she said gruffly under her breath, turning to Nick who was beside her.

“Yes, Search and Rescue Officer Jeffrey Hicks,” confirmed the reporter into the microphone, which was immediately returned to a position in front of Jill’s chin.

“I don’t know what to say,” she replied nervously, realizing that she was going to have to give them something in order to bring the interview to a close. “I just went for help. I had to. Just the three of us, I was the only one who could walk . . . no cell reception up there.”

“Well, like I said, you ARE being described as a hero. You should know that, but you’re obviously modest. Based upon what I’ve heard today, I’d have to say that all the praise seems to be well-deserved.” She paused, hoping that Jill might respond, but when she didn’t, the reporter continued, “I understand that there are two young men, here in the Elk Bend Medical Center tonight, one of them your twin brother. They both clearly owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“I’m not a hero. I was worried, so worried . . . my brother was unconscious. I just went for help. You would have done the same,” she said in an unsteady voice.

She did her best not to revisit her various concerns for her brother. The last thing she wanted to do with cameras pointing at her was to cry.

“I understand that you ran.”

“Yes . . . of course I ran . . . it was an emergency. My brother . . . they both needed help.”

“And you are an athlete, a basketball player. You were a key player on your high school basketball team, graduating just a few months ago . . . Holden High . . . over on the other side of the state. That’s a long run . . . steep as well.”

Jill was stunned. She just stared at the woman dumbfounded. Again the microphone was placed back in front of her for comment. She didn’t know what to say. How did they know the name of her high school? About basketball? What else might they know?

Sensing that she wasn’t going to respond, the reporter continued, “We interviewed a doctor and learned that your brother suffered a head injury in the rockslide. He said a CT scan revealed Cerebral Edema, or swelling inside the skull. He described it as a life-threatening condition, depending on the severity and how quickly it is treated.”

“Why are you talking to me? You already know as much as I,” replied Jill. Turning to Nick, she said, “Let’s go Nick.” She made an effort to walk toward the exit, hoping that a gap would open in the small crowd that was watching.

“Miss Wahlund,” continued the reporter. “Several of those who saw you today have described you as being naked. Were you, in fact . . . naked?”

Jill blushed. Even though she had been worrying that that might be coming, it still knocked the wind out of her. In addition to the TV camera and a handful of reporters, there were thirty or forty people in the lobby, all of them with their eyes glued to her, all of them seemingly holding their breath, waiting for her reply.

When she didn’t respond, the reporter continued, “Your reaction leads me to believe that our information is correct.” She asked her again, point blank, “Were you naked today, Miss Wahlund?”

In a state of panic, Jill’s vision went blurry; she felt lightheaded. Her words caught in her throat and her knees felt as if they might buckle. She would not have been able to speak had she known what to say. This was worse than any nightmare she’d ever experienced – and she knew she wasn’t going to wake up.

“Why were you naked, Miss Wahlund?”

“I’ve got this,” said Nick quietly near her ear.

He took her hand and stepped forward into the limelight. Jill slipped in behind him, her face just inches from his shoulder. Having her hand in Nick’s steady grasp made her realize just how badly she was shaking. With her free hand, she took ahold of his upper arm to steady herself. She was still feeling lightheaded.

“Jill WAS the hero today,” Nick said confidently, “but she was also one of the victims.”

“And your name?” asked the reporter.

“Nick Bianchetti,” he replied. “I volunteer with the Forest Service. Jeffrey Hicks called me early this afternoon. They picked me up on the way out of Stanton early this afternoon. I accompanied Hicks and Jill up to the rockslide in the Forest Service’s Search and Rescue vehicle. We were the first on the scene.”

“And was she naked?”

“I’m not really sure that it’s any of your business . . . but yes . . . yes, she was. Because of the rockslide,” he lied.

“Now, wait a second. Really? How might that be possible?”

“Her brother was beside her when the earthquake hit. As the trail gave way beneath his feet, he grabbed for her. I wasn’t there, but what I understand is that her dress went down the mountainside in his hands. Fortunately, it was flimsy . . . tore easily . . . otherwise, there would have been no one to go for help. The three of them might still be up there, lying severely injured atop the rocks.”

“Is that what happened?” asked the reporter, shifting the microphone over to Jill.

Remembering the story that they’d discussed, Jill struggled to get a few words out. “Blue . . . with tiny white flowers.”

Jill looked at the woman. She thought she looked as if she didn’t believe her, but she also looked as if she didn’t want to call a young woman a liar on the air in front of the station’s viewers.

Nick continued, “Later, after Hicks was attending to David and Ryan, Jill and I combed the rockslide looking for her dress.”

“Did you find it?” asked the reporter, a skeptical look on her face.

“We only found her phone,” he said. “Jill, where is your phone?”

Realizing what Nick had in mind, Jill’s mood brightened a notch. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and handed it to Nick. He continued, holding it up, “This is what Jill might look like, had her dress not torn.”

“Spaghetti straps. Buttons down the front,” Jill mumbled quietly, finally remembering those details.

“Get a close-up of that,” said the reporter, leaning forward and studying the phone closely.

Nick held the phone steady as the cameraman took a few steps forward.

“Wow, it looks destroyed,” acknowledged the reporter. “I’m surprised you found it.”

“So was I,” said Nick. “The dress, however . . . no such luck. Under tons of rock, I suppose.”

**Chapter 148: Leaving the Hospital**

“Miss Wahlund,” said the reporter. “It sounds as if life handed you more than your share of challenges today. On behalf of myself, everyone at Channel Five, and our viewers throughout the valley, I’d like to salute you for your heroism. We’re all sincerely grateful that you were unscathed in today’s rockslide, and we hope that your two companions experience complete and speedy recoveries. We hope to interview them when circumstances allow.”

Jill squeezed Nick’s hand. It seemed as if the interview had concluded, possibly indicating that they didn’t have any more dirt to ask about. She was glad about that, but the idea of David and especially Ryan being asked the same questions gave her pause. She’d have to get to them first and persuade them to support Nick’s fib about the dress that never was.

The woman seemed to be waiting for a reply, so Jill said simply, “Thank you.”

“Anything else you’d like to tell our viewers?”

“Umm . . . no,” said Jill stepping back. Of course not; she wanted to get out of the spotlight. She attempted to get back behind Nick.

Pressing the point, the woman continued, “I’m sure our viewers would love to hear what it was like to be in the unusual position of needing to go for help . . . naked.”

Jill bit her lip and looked to the side as her warm cheeks grew hot. “I’d rather not,” she mumbled.

“She’s had a rough day,” said Nick, placing his arms around her shoulders and steering her toward the exit. Someone stepped to the side and the small crowd of onlookers parted. Getting all the way across the lobby was difficult, but less than a minute later they were exiting the hospital.

With that very awkward interview behind her, Jill was struggling to come to terms with the fact that everyone would now know that she had been naked while running into Stanton. That was terrible – unimaginably horrible – but at least her complicity in the matter of her own nudity had been called into question. For some reason, it seemed a lot better to her that people not realize that she had voluntarily gone out naked that morning.

It had been a stroke of genius, in her mind, for Nick to show her phone. That seemed as if it might have made the difference. Even the reporter seemed as if she had started believing their little white lie at that point.

“Thank you, Nick,” she said. “Bringing up my poor phone . . . might have made the difference. Glad you thought of that.”

He laughed. “Later, someone will realize that a naked girl, a girl with no pockets, might not have been carrying her own phone.”

Jill chuckled as well. She was again holding his hand and holding it tightly. It felt comforting to have a big strong hand to hold.

“But a girl in a dress . . . well, some dresses have pockets . . . so it works.”

“Exactly!” he said, nodding.

“You might have saved me . . . a second time in one day.”

“You’re welcome.”

“But, again, you’re also to blame. You knew that was going to happen!” she said accusingly. “You knew the reporters were waiting for me.” She looked at him carefully, studying his reaction. She didn’t know for sure, but she wanted to know. “You delivered me to the wolves, didn’t you?”

“That’s hardly fair. But, yes. I knew the reporters were there.”

“And still you took me out via that route!? No warning! Disruptive behavior or what?”

“Okay, okay,” he said stopping in the middle of the parking lot and turning to face her. “Full disclosure – Hicks filled me in. He knew they were there. As you now know, he’d spoken with them. As a matter of fact, that’s why he was still at the hospital. He met us in order to take us in the back way. He even went to the trouble of talking a friend into sharing his security code; otherwise, he wouldn’t have been able to do that.”

“That’s nice of him . . . I guess. But you and I could have gone back out that same door. But where would the fun in that have been, right?”

“We could have,” Nick agreed. “But it was best this way, trust me.”

“Trust you? Are you kidding? It was absolutely awful this way!”

“Jill, they would have found you. You’ll be around the hospital tomorrow. At some point, they would have cornered you. I might not have been there. I wanted to be with you when it happened . . . to support you. I’m leaving after dinner, spending the night in Agency. This way you had me by your side . . . to stand up for you if you started to panic. The disappearing dress story . . . I think it’s working.”

“Maybe . . . I’m not positive. The reporter looked like she was very suspicious.”

“But it’s out there. Many will view it as a plausible explanation.”

“But many won’t!”

“And your point is? Would you have preferred it if I had told them that you were hiking naked . . . because you love to hike naked?”

“Certainly not!” said Jill indignantly.

“Well, alright then,” he said in a smug tone; however, a look of compassion came over his face as he continued, “For a second there, I thought you were going to faint.”

“You and me both!”

“So glad you didn’t. The interview . . . it wasn’t ideal, but it’s also not a disaster.”

“Yes, it is!”

“Well, it could have been worse . . . that’s all I’m saying. It’s done. It’s behind you. Now hopefully, they’ll leave you alone.”

Jill mulled that over as they resumed walking to where the truck was parked. Unfortunately, she had to agree with some of what he had said. She was glad that she’d had Nick with her. The experience would have been much worse had she been alone. She remembered how nice his hand had felt and how wonderful it had been when he had stepped forward, taking the spotlight off of her just when things had gotten unbearable. Were it not for him, she might have actually fainted.

“That was nice of Hicks to hang around,” she said at long last.

“He didn’t want them to get to you before you had a chance to see your brother.”

“But he also didn’t warn me.”

“No, he didn’t. We discussed the situation. I know you’re not happy about it, but we both decided that this would be for the best.”

“But why was that your decision? I should have been consulted.”

“Maybe. Probably. I still think that this was for the best. Your performance came across as very authentic.”

“I presume I looked like a cornered rat . . . because that’s how I felt. And that’s for the best?”

“No one who watches that is going to think that you’re a bold, attention-seeking exhibitionist.”

“Because I’m not.”

“A nudist maybe?”

“Not that either! Now stop it!”

“You looked completely uncomfortable being in the spotlight . . . shy, bashful. It was perfect.”

“Far from perfect . . . so embarrassing,” she said in a quiet, meek tone of voice.

Nick laughed.

“I don’t have to have dinner with you, you know.”

“But you want to.”

“You’re every bit as bad as Jerk-boy!”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

“Jill, try to see this from my perspective. I’m just trying to do my best by you. You’re not the only one being challenged by circumstances today. When I got up this morning and went to work, I had no idea that any of this would happen.”

“And I bet you’re glad it did!”

“That’s hardly fair! I may be glad that fate threw us together today, but certainly not at the price of what happened to David and Ryan.”

Suddenly Jill felt bad. “I didn’t mean it that way,” she said as they climbed into the truck.

For a minute, nothing was said as Nick started the motor. A minute later they exited the parking lot in silence. They both had plenty to think about.

“Hey, turn in here,” Jill said all of a sudden, a sign catching her eye.

“Here? The motel?” he asked, putting on his blinker.

“Yes. Maybe they’ve got a room. I don’t want to spend the night hanging out in the hospital.”

A minute later they were in the lobby, asking questions at the reception counter. There were vacancies. It was an older place, so the rates were reasonable. Jill filled out a registration form.

As she handed it to the clerk, he said, “Great. And I’ll need two forms of ID, your driver’s license and a major credit card.”

Jill looked at the things in David’s wallet, trying to decide what to say. “I’ll just pay cash,” she said, taking out a number of bills.

“That’s fine. You can do that in the morning, but we still need ID and a credit card.”

Jill bit her lip wondering how she might best explain why she didn’t have ID of her own. “Here’s my brother’s driver’s license and his credit card,” she said. “But I’ll pay cash. He’s in the ER across the street. You can probably call the hospital for verification.”

The man didn’t reach for the cards.

“Sorry to hear about your brother, but I’m afraid I can’t do anything with those. I’ll need your ID, not his. I don’t make the policies.”

“Put the room in my name,” said Nick. Jill looked over and saw him digging cards out of his wallet.

“That should work,” said the clerk after he had gotten a good look at Nick’s ID. “Will you still be paying cash?”

“Yes,” said Jill.

“No. Put the room on my card,” said Nick. Turning to address Jill directly, he said, “You’d better preserve your cash.”

Jill nodded. She had been worrying about that. “I’ll pay you back,” she said quietly.

The clerk handed Nick a registration card and a pen. He tore Jill’s in two, tossing it into a wastepaper basket behind him.

“Would you like your name on the room as well?” the clerk asked, glancing up at Jill.

“Yes, please,” she said. “Jill Wahlund.” Because he’d thrown away her card, she spelled her last name for him as he entered it into the computer.

Actually, she wanted her name to be the only one on the room, but she didn’t say anything. She didn’t want to rock the boat. She was getting a room; that was what mattered.

“One key or two?” he asked.

“One,” replied Jill at the same moment that Nick said, “Two.”

The clerk didn’t look up. A moment later he handed Nick a small envelope containing two keycards. It had the room number written on it.

Removing one of the cards, Nick handed Jill the envelope. “I just think that it might be more convenient if you have your own,” he said with a smile.

“Thank you,” she said, taking it but then reaching for the card in his hand.

Nick was too fast. Pulling it back, he placed it in his wallet which went quickly back into his hip pocket.

“Should we go see ‘our’ room?” he asked as they walked out of the lobby.

“My room,” she corrected. “You’re not sleeping with me,” she added defiantly.

“Probably best to make sure the room is suitable before we go out,” he said. “Do you want to get your luggage . . . put it in the room?”

Jill noted that this second time he had called it ‘the’ room.

“Yes, I’ll do that,” she said. All she had with her was the small backpack and her hiking boots, but she went and got them out of his truck.

Standing at the door, Jill purposefully didn’t get out her keycard. Acting as if her hands were full, she forced Nick to pull out his keycard. After he had opened the door, she held out her hand, indicating that he was to give her the card.

With a smile, Nick returned it to his wallet.

“It’s not your room,” she said.

“I didn’t say it was,” he replied, walking in and turning on the light.

Jill followed him in. The room seemed fine, basic, but relatively clean. As expected, there were two queen beds. Jill went into the bathroom to see what toiletries were provided. She knew she was going to have to stop somewhere and pick up a few things.

“Okay . . . dinner?” he asked when she came back out.

“Sure, but you need to give me the other keycard.”

“Be a sport. You know I’m not the type to take advantage.”

“I do? How do I know that?” she said, raising her eyebrows questioningly. Nick laughed as she continued, “Disruptive behavior? Or narcissistic behavior?”

“Call it what you like. However, I sense you’re having a good time . . . at least to the extent that might be possible . . . given the difficult circumstances.”

Jill shook her head disapprovingly, but she knew it was partly an act. The truth was that he was somewhat right about that. He had a playful personality. He’d definitely turned out to be the one bright spot in her day.

Rather than giving her the card, Nick turned and left, leading the way back to his truck.

**Chapter 149: Sushi**

“How far is the restaurant?” she asked as she again took her seat and buckled her safety belt.

“Oh, maybe two miles,” he said. “Samurai Sushi . . . that’s the name.”

Jill laughed. “Only in America, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve never been to Japan, but I’ll bet the Japanese would never use that name for a restaurant there.”

“Probably not,” she agreed.

“Once we’re married, we should go there . . . maybe for our honeymoon. We can find out for ourselves.”

Jill just laughed. It was a contemptuous laugh. It didn’t seem as if she needed to remind him that they weren’t going to be getting married.

As they were being greeted inside the restaurant, Jill saw the Japanese woman eyeing her shirt.

After the woman had seated them, she remarked quietly to Nick, “Do you think my shirt is inappropriate? Culturally insensitive? That woman was staring.”

“It’s not the shirt,” he replied. “It’s your pokies.”

“My what?” she asked, but then she looked down. “Oh…” she said. Her nipples were making her braless state more than obvious. “Not much I can do about that.”

“Why would you want to?”

Still looking down, she gave that remark a little consideration. Why indeed? Once upon a time, it would have been a major source of embarrassment to have her nipples poking out through her shirt like they were.

Just after their waitress had brought them a pot of tea, Jill’s phone rang. “Hi, Britt,” she said quietly, feeling as if she shouldn’t be taking a call in a restaurant.

Jill learned that they had just gotten to Elk Bend. Upon hearing that Jill had just been seated for dinner, Britt asked if she and Jenna could join her. “I’m famished,” she said. “I’m sure Jenna is as well. We love sushi.”

Jill didn’t know how to respond. Britt obviously assumed she was alone. She liked the idea of the Copelands having dinner with them, but she didn’t think that Nick would. Deciding that she needed to ask him before agreeing, she hung up promising to call right back.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Britt . . . one of the twins. They’re in town. They’d like to join us for dinner.”

“I’m game if you are,” he said.

Jill was surprised, pleasantly surprised. She had expected him to react negatively to the idea of having their ‘date’ dissolve into a group meal.

“They’re nice,” she said.

“I’m sure I’ll like them,” he replied.

“You probably will. They are attractive blondes. One has a degree in English Lit. The other just got her MD . . . she starts her residency soon.”

“Call them back. Have them join us,” he encouraged.

Jill was curious if he’d think they were actually twins. Remembering the photos that Britt had sent, she decided to conduct a small experiment.

“I’ll show you a photo,” she said, pulling out her phone.

She opened the selfie of the three of them together. She was topless in the picture, but with Nick, she wasn’t particularly concerned about that aspect. After all, she’d spent much of the afternoon nude in his presence. Just so that he wouldn’t think that she was purposefully showing him a photo of her breasts, she zoomed in so that they dropped out of sight.

“This is the three of us,” she said, holding out her phone, “…taken last weekend.”

Nick studied the image but didn’t say anything.

“That’s Britt on the left, Jenna on the right. And don’t get your hopes up . . . they’re married,” she said.

“Love your hair. You look great in braids!”

“Nick, I’m showing you the picture so you’ll look at them, not me. But, yes, they braided my hair that morning. It came out really nice, I thought.”

“It did,” he said with a smile. “Fraternal or identical?”

“You tell me.”

Nick examined the image carefully. “Fraternal, I’d say. Am I right?”

“Not saying,” she replied. “See if that’s still your opinion when they get here.”

By that point in time, Nick was holding her phone. He placed his finger on the screen and slid it up. Jill couldn’t see, but she suspected that he had brought her breasts into view.

As luck would have it, the Japanese hostess walked up behind him in that instant. The shocked look on her face, as well as her sharp intake of breath, was all the confirmation that Jill needed.

“Give me that!” she said, her face flushing bright red as she grabbed for her phone. “Boys! You’re all the same.”

“Just confirming a hunch.”

“And flashing our poor innocent hostess!”

Nick spun around, but the woman had already disappeared into the back.

“Sorry,” he said.

Jill laughed. “Sure you are! But I suppose it was partly my fault. Just don’t get us kicked out.”

“Show me the rest of your pictures,” he requested. “I’ll be more careful.”

“Like I said, you boys are all alike.” Jill was frowning and shaking her head as she said that.

She called Britt and read her the address off the back of the menu. A few minutes later, the Copelands walked in the door. Jill waved.

“I should have guessed you weren’t alone,” said Britt, arriving at their table. “Stand up, Girlfriend. Let us get a look at you.”

Jill did as requested, even doing a little pirouette to show off her fun skirt. They both looked her up and down. Jill realized that Britt and Jenna were seeing her in clothes for the first time. She hoped that they wouldn’t mention as much.

“You look nice,” said Jenna, stepping forward and giving her a hug. “And you’ve had such a rough day. So very sorry.”

Jill felt Jenna’s sincere empathy in her hug. It had been a rough day. It helped to get a hug from a friend.

“Yes, so very sorry,” echoed Britt with a compassionate nod as she stepped forward to take her turn. “I hope the boys will both be alright,” she whispered into Jill’s ear. “And you. My, God! What a day! But I’m so glad the rockslide spared you.” Jill was struggling to recall how much she had told Britt during their brief phone conversation on that topic.

As their hug relaxed, Britt looked over at Nick and scowled. “Which one is this? It better not be the misogynistic redneck that roped you.”

“Definitely not!” said Jill.

“Roped you?” asked Nick.

“Never mind,” said Jill, wishing that hadn’t come up.

“Roped you?” he asked a second time.

“I said, never mind.” From there, Jill did her best to avoid that subject via the process of introducing him to Britt and Jenna.

The waitress came by and Nick informed her that the two women would be joining them for dinner. Getting them seated was easily accomplished as it was a table for four. Britt sat next to Jill and Jenna sat across from her, next to Nick.

“It’s obvious that you don’t want to talk about it, but I’ve got to know,” insisted Nick. “Misogynistic redneck who roped you? Did I hear that right? Who’s going to explain?”

“So he wasn’t even there?” asked Britt.

“No . . . and he doesn’t need to hear about it either,” said Jill.

“Yes I do.”

“He doesn’t. It’s not who I am. What happened to me that day doesn’t define me. I’m nobody’s victim.”

“Does he know who you are? Does he know about you?” asked Britt.

“Apparently not,” said Nick.

“Does he know about…?” Britt asked, making fists and pounding them alternately against her chest. She let out a brief Tarzan yell using her quiet restaurant voice’ so as to not disturb the other diners.

“Well, he didn’t,” said Jill, rolling her eyes. “Please don’t make me regret allowing you join us for dinner.”

“Now I’m really getting curious,” said Nick. “I’m so glad we invited your friends! …like them already.”

“Is Nick your boyfriend?” Britt asked.

“No,” replied Jill in the same moment that Nick said, “Yes.”

Both Jenna and Britt laughed, but Jill didn’t think it was funny at all. Nick just smiled, looking deep into her eyes.

“She’s in denial,” he said. “She’ll come around.”

“No, I won’t!”

At that point, the conversation was interrupted by the waitress stopping by to ask if they were ready to order.

“Warm sake!” said Britt enthusiastically.

“Okay, I’ll need to see ID,” said the waitress.

Britt and Jenna pulled out their driver’s licenses. Nick did the same. After she had checked their dates of birth, the waitress looked at Jill. “Your ID, Miss?”

“I only have my brother’s driver’s license with me,” she said handing it to the woman. “But we’re the same age.”

Britt grabbed the license away from the waitress and handed it back to Jill. “Just three glasses. She’s not twenty-one.”

“What? Don’t look at me,” objected Jill, throwing up her hands. “I never said I was.”

“And even if she was, we couldn’t let her drink. She can’t hold her liquor,” said Bitt as the waitress departed.

Nick chuckled, a broad smile on his face. “Jill, I like your friends. Best date ever!”

“Oh, you guys are on a date? And all this information is new to him?” said Jenna. “Britt, we should leave.”

“They’re obviously on a date,” replied Brit, “and we’re not leaving. At least not until we determine that Nick is suitable. Jill needs a chaperone. If he doesn’t measure up, then he’ll be the one leaving.”

Jill took a deep breath and shook her head. She should have known something like this would happen.

“Sounds fair,” said Nick. “What would you like to know?”

“From you . . . nothing,” said Britt. “But that reminds me. I’d like to hear more from Jill . . . about David and Ryan. Let’s stop by the hospital after dinner.”

“Umm . . . sure,” said Jill. “That’s what I was planning on doing.”

As Jill started to explain what more she knew about David’s medical condition, the sake arrived. The waitress was ready to take their food order. Both Britt and Nick seemed to know their way around a sushi menu, so Jill sat back and let everyone else order for the table.

After the waitress had left, Nick lined up the three cups. After filling them, he handed Britt and Jenna each one.

“Here’s to David and Ryan’s health,” said Jenna, holding up her sake cup. Jill raised her teacup. They all clinked glasses and took a sip.

After the three of them had finished their first glasses, they set them in a row and Nick refilled them. Seeing her opportunity, Jill grabbed Nick’s cup. After making sure that the waitress was not watching, she chugged it.

“Jill!” Nick scolded. “Sake is supposed to be sipped!”

“That’s pretty good,” she said, smacking her lips.

“Oh no! I sense trouble,” said Jenna.

Jill laughed.

“Nick, we can’t let her drink,” cautioned Britt. “And not just because she’s too young.”

“Yep. Been there. Done that,” said Jenna.

“What happens?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Jill, picking up one of the other glasses and chugging it.

She would have gotten the third glass had Jenna not beaten her to it.

“We better finish the sake before she does,” said Britt, refilling the empty glasses out of Jill’s reach and handing Nick his. “Kanpai!” she said, holding up her cup.

Noticing that the ceramic carafe itself was unguarded, Jill poured some into her teacup and drank it. “What does ‘Kanpai’ mean?” she asked. “Cheers?”

“Yep . . . exactly,” replied Nick as Britt moved the sake carafe out of Jill’s reach.

“I like sake,” said Jill. “A little bit sweet. A little bit fruity.”

“No more sake for you!” said Britt sternly. “And I’m serious. You’ll get us in trouble. You’ll get yourself in trouble!”

“Well, I’ve got to drive, so I shouldn’t have anymore,” said Nick, turning his sake cup over and placing it upside down on the table.

“I don’t have to drive,” said Jill with an impish smile, reaching for his cup.

Jenna placed her hand on top of Jill’s. Looking disapprovingly into her eyes, she shook her head. Thrusting out her lower lip, Jill pulled her hand back, leaving Nick’s cup where it was.

“Have a little sympathy. It’s been a very stressful day,” said Jill, casting her eyes down.

“You can have all the sympathy you want, just no more sake,” Jenna replied firmly.

“So, what’s it like being twins?” asked Nick, obviously making an effort to change the dynamics. “Can you read each other’s thoughts?”

Britt and Jenna both laughed.

“Who told you we were twins?” asked Britt, smiling at Jill.

“Is it supposed to be a secret?” he asked.

“Nick, we’re lesbians. So we are close, very close,” said Britt. “But in a different way.”

“We’re bosom buddies,” added Jenna with a wink.

Jill looked over at Nick. There was a surprised, wide-eyed look on his face.

“So, you’re not twins?” he asked.

Britt shook her head. “Not twins. It’s a long story.”

“Suffice it to say, we’re married,” said Jenna, reaching across the table and taking Britt’s hand in hers and giving it a squeeze.

“However, we were both born Copelands,” added Britt.

“You were?” asked Nick.

“Nick, I told you they were married,” said Jill.

“But not to each other,” he replied.

“I never said they were married to other people. That’s just what you assumed.”

“Duh! You said they were twins.”

“My bad,” said Jill with a shrug and a chuckle.

Seeing an unguarded cup of sake within arm’s length, Jill grabbed it and downed it before anyone could react.

“You’re the one who’s going to pay,” scolded Britt.

Jill didn’t really care. The warm liquid felt good going down. She didn’t know if she was feeling the effects, but she was starting to relax. That in and of itself was nice. It had indeed been a most stressful day. Sneaking sake from her friends was proving to be a fun game. It was taking her mind off all that had happened.

Suddenly she hiccupped loudly, startling even herself. She covered her mouth as if trying to prevent it from happening again.

Everyone laughed, and Jill saw a woman at another table turn around in her chair to look.

“Serves you right . . . that’s the alcohol,” said Britt.

Jill’s body convulsed with a second powerful hiccup. It was audible, but not nearly as loud because she had her hand over her mouth.

Again everyone chuckled. Jill grabbed her water glass and took a big gulp.

**Chapter 150: Hiccups**

Remembering what he had been about to say, Nick commented, “Jill looked great in braids. You two ladies are really good with hair.”

“You saw the braids?” asked Britt.

“Just in a photo. Not in person.”

“Wait, Jill showed you the photos?”

Nick nodded. “Lovely photos,” he said, even though he had seen just the one. “Like I said, she’s lovely in braids.”

“I only showed him (hic) the one.” Jill took another drink of water as she pulled out her phone, opening it to the photo she had allowed Nick to see. “This one,” she said, showing Britt the image.

“You showed him a topless photo?” she asked in surprise.

“Let me see,” said Jenna. Britt handed the phone across the table to her.

“I didn’t intend to . . . but he (hic) shifted it up . . . so he saw. It doesn’t really matter.” Jill shrugged before continuing, “I spent the day naked (hic) with him.”

“Shh…” said Britt, placing her finger to her lips and glancing around the restaurant. At a much lower volume that Jill had been speaking in, she continued. “What? You spent the day with him . . . naked? But you’re not dating?”

Jill hadn’t been thinking about how she had never mentioned that she had been naked during all that had happened that day. As she started to tell her story, their food arrived.

“Here Jenna, switch with me,” said Britt.

As Jenna moved to the seat next to her, Jill asked for more water. Preoccupied as she was with keeping her hiccups from being loud and conspicuous, she hadn’t realized that Britt had her phone.

While Jill was looking around the room, hoping to see a pitcher of water on the way, Jenna and Nick were preparing small dishes with wasabi and soy sauce. Britt, for her part, was focused on Jill’s phone. She was holding it down low, hidden from view just below table level.

A short time later, after she’d downed almost an entire glass of water, Jill turned her attention to the sushi on the table. She was somewhat aware that Britt was talking quietly to Nick, but she had not noticed that she was showing him photos – that is until she heard the unmistakable sound of her Tarzan yell coming from the phone. Britt quickly silenced it. Jill was in shock. By the look on Nick’s face, she could tell that the video was still running.

“Hey, give that back,” she said angrily. “What gives you (hic) the goddam right?”

Nick handed Jill her phone as Britt shrugged.

“Shh…” said Jenna, looking around the restaurant to see which customers had taken notice of Jill’s outburst.

“What’s the big deal?” said Britt quietly. “He’s seen you naked. You spent the day with him naked. You said so yourself. He may as well see you at your naked best!”

“My naked best?” Jill puzzled. Glancing down she saw the video filmed that morning on the top of Spaghetti. It had completed, but the last frame was frozen on the screen. She recalled the group of five hikers that had been visible in the background of the video but knew that Nick and Britt wouldn’t have noticed them. Their eyes would have been focused on her.

“You are awesome!” said Nick.

“Isn’t she quite the specimen?” said Britt.

“Fun, too,” said Nick, an endearing smile on his lips.

“And you’re all in so in much trouble,” said Jill, turning off her phone and putting it in her pocket. “And to think, I once trusted you,” she added, glaring at Britt.

“You’re stuck with trusting me,” said Britt. “I haven’t deleted your photos, but you have nothing to worry about.”

Jill wasn’t so sure, but she really had no choice but to trust her.

Britt continued, “And now I have the Tarzan video as well.”

“You what?”

“There was also this great little clip of you hitchhiking. Pretty bold . . . standing by the road, thumb up – pussy out! Somehow I ended up with that, too.”

“You didn’t!” Jill thought back to that video, picturing it in her mind. It seemed so long ago, and yet it had been just that morning.

“I sent them to myself . . . while you were busy with your drinking-inspired hiccups.” She laughed.

Jill’s jaw dropped. She’d let her guard drop for just a brief moment.

“I can see that you’re worried, but I’m telling you that I have them. Doesn’t my honesty about that prove that you can trust me?”

“No! (hic) Hardly!” said Jill. “It tells me that I can’t trust you.”

“Hey, the videos aren’t as bad as some of the photos . . . the ones taken after the wrestling at the falls. I didn’t show those to Nick.”

“Wrestling . . . at the falls?” he asked.

Jill shook her head, getting up she made her way toward the restroom. Maybe getting up and moving about would chase away her hiccups. And she needed to think. However, she was a bit unsteady on her feet. Before she had made it halfway to the restroom, Jenna was by her side, holding her arm.

“Here, Girlfriend, let me help you,” she offered.

“Thanks,” said Jill. “I guess I screwed up again. No more sake, right?”

“I guess you have to find your own limits,” said Jenna. “But I’m glad to hear you say that. I certainly think you’ve had enough. You don’t want to be throwing up again.”

“At the moment, I think I’d be happy to throw up if it’d make these infernal hiccups go away.”

As Jill made her way back to the table a few minutes later, she saw that Britt had her phone out. She appeared to be showing Nick more photos.

“You better not be doing what I think you’re doing!” she said as she took her seat.

“I asked specifically to see the wrestling photos. She won’t show them to me,” he complained. “That doesn’t seem fair given that I know about them.”

“So . . . knowing about some photos automatically gives you the right to see them?” Jill asked.

“Uh-huh,” he said with a nod.

Jill knew that there were no wrestling photos. They’d all been too wet and too preoccupied for photography. It was the photos taken afterwards in the forest that concerned her. She didn’t know if those photos were among the twenty-six that Britt had sent her earlier, but she knew that Brit had them. She shuddered at the thought – pictures of her rubbing one out, pictures of her sliding her tongue between her sticky fingers as she’d been pretending to give them oral sex. Having Nick see her naked had been bad enough, but she’d die if he saw those images.

She did her best to get those disagreeable photos out of her head. That wasn’t exactly possible; however, being a little tipsy did seem to reduce the stress of the situation. She wanted another cup of sake, but she feared that her hiccups would return. She was also worried about what she might say or do if she had more.

She stole a glance around the table, looking for a sake cup that wasn’t empty. Not seeing one, she picked up the sake carafe and tipped it to pour sake into her empty teacup. One lone drop came out.

Britt laughed. “All gone. Too bad for you.”

Jill did her best to act indifferent. “I don’t care. I didn’t want any.”

Britt laughed. “Not what it looked like!”

“Stop teasing me!” said Jill. “Why is it always like this with you?”

“Would you guys stop changing the subject!” interjected Nick. “I want to hear about the wrestling.”

“It was below the falls . . . the Broken Canyon Falls,” replied Britt.

“Love those falls. Such a cool place . . . the pool below. I know it well.”

“Jill was naked. Had been the entire day. But at the falls, Jenna and I stripped off, too. Three naked girls. Six bare breasts. Three glistening…”

“Britt, stop it,” said Jill. “He doesn’t need to hear this.”

“What’s the problem? Worried he’ll think you’re a lesbian?” When Jill didn’t reply, Britt turned to Nick and continued. “Just three girls having some innocent fun.”

Jill rolled her eyes.

“At least leave the forest part out,” whispered Jenna, quietly but not quietly enough.

“Okay,” agreed Britt. “I’ll leave out the sex.”

Jill shook her head. She could just imagine what Nick had to be thinking.

“Jill started it. Just a little splashing at first, but it quickly escalated. Jill’s a powerhouse in the water . . . a lot of muscle packed onto that slender, lanky frame.”

“I know. She is strong. We rolled logs together,” he remarked.

“Rolled logs together?” asked Britt.

Jill looked at Nick. He was staring at her, an unrepentant smile on his lips.

“Splashing and then it escalated. Go on,” he encouraged.

In a soft but throaty voice, Jill took over, “The match went on and on. Three naked girls battling it out . . . breasts smashed against each other’s bodies . . . legs intertwined . . . lots of grabbing and squeezing, above and below. Splashing . . . dunking . . . a grueling physical battle . . . above and below the surface of the water. Hearts pounding . . . chests heaving . . . until finally, we collapsed . . . exhausted . . . trying to catch our breath . . . into a single pile of naked, wet, wanton female flesh. End of story.”

“Wow, you told that so well!” said Jenna. “Just like it happened.”

“Is it hot in here, or is it just me?” asked Britt.

Jill looked into Nick’s eyes. They were as big as saucers.

“Happy?” she asked.

“Wow!” he replied. “You had me at, ‘wet, wonton female flesh!’ Thank you so much! But now I need the unabridged version.”

“I’m sure you do,” Jill responded.

“And then I need to hear what happened in the forest.”

“Too bad for you,” said Jill, half expecting that Britt would oblige.

When nobody did, Nick asked, “Is that really what happened? The three of you wrestling, butt naked?”

“You can just picture it, can’t you?” teased Britt.

“I want to hear about the sex in the forest,” he said in a low voice to avoid being overheard.

“Why am I not surprised?” asked Britt.

“Britt, stop,” said Jenna. “You’re going to make the poor lad think that Jill’s gay.”

“How do you know she’s not?” asked Britt.

“You guys are killing me,” said Jill.

“Don’t worry,” said Britt. “Jenna and I both know that guys have a thing for lesbians. Nothing seems to capture their imagination more than girls with an appetite for pussy. Right, Nick?”

“I’m going to have to take the fifth on that one,” he answered.

“So you expect us to talk, but you get to plead the fifth?” Britt challenged.

“Okay, fine,” he conceded. “Maybe there is something intriguing about the concept of a lesbian.”

“The ‘concept of a lesbian?’” Britt chuckled. “You sound like you’re planning on writing a research paper on the topic.”

“Not really into lesbians myself.” he continued. “While an appetite for pussy might grab one’s attention, ultimately we guys want our women to be interested in our dicks.”

“I suppose that’s true,” acknowledged Britt.

Jill turned her attention back to the sushi. Even though thoughts of her nudity had probably provoked all the discussion of sex, at least she wasn’t the topic of conversation, at least not at the moment. Her hiccups had disappeared, so she was able to eat a little, dipping each piece in a mixture of soy sauce and wasabi.

“So, what are your plans? Where are you going to spend the night?” Jill asked the girls a little later.

“We saw an RV park on the way into town,” replied Jenna. “They had a tent area. Those places generally have nice facilities . . . really looking forward to a shower. So many days of going without.”

“Maybe Jill will let you stay with her,” proposed Nick, taking his wallet out of his pocket and pulling out the keycard. “Her room has two queen beds.”

Jill was surprised, pleasantly surprised. She had been thinking that he was probably planning to return to Elk Bend later that evening, after he had taken care of his commitment to inform her grandparents.

“Shall I give them my room key?” he asked, looking into Jill’s eyes.

Jill nodded appreciatively. This didn’t seem like disruptive behavior at all. Had he finally figured her out enough to understand how to get her to notice him?

“Wait, we can’t take your key,” said Britt. “We already horned in on the dinner portion of your date. We’re not about to ruin your motel plans as well, right Jenna?”

“Exactly right!” Jenna agreed.

“No, take it,” he insisted. “There’s a spare bed. I am crunching on Jill . . . not embarrassed to admit that, but she’s not ready for anything physical.”

“Thanks,” said Jill with a grateful smile. It felt nice to be treated with respect.

“Are you sure?” asked Britt, reaching tentatively for the card.

“I’m sure,” said Nick. “She’s saving herself for . . . college.”

Britt laughed. “That’s her mantra!”

“Seems to be,” Nick grinned. “She’s dead set on making sure she doesn’t get involved this summer. Unless it’s just me.”

“It’s not just you,” said Jill. “Thanks, Nick,” she added in a very appreciative tone. There was obviously much more to him than she had originally been thinking.