**Summer at Cache Lake**

 **Chapter 151: Sushi, concluded

“**Jill’s probably telling you the truth, Nick. It’s probably not just you. Might it be guys in general? What if she’s a closet lesbian?” asked Britt. **“**You’d know better than I,” said Nick. **“**She’s hard to read, isn’t she Jenna?” replied Britt.Jill looked over and saw Jenna nodding. **“**Guys, I’m right here. This is seriously weird for you to be talking about me like this.”Nick ignored Jill’s comment, instead, asking the twins, “Could it be that she’s still working out her sexual orientation?” **“**Nah,” replied Britt shaking her head. “She’s nineteen. Her sexual orientation has been locked down for a long time now. She claims to be into guys, and yet somehow I’m not completely convinced.” **“**Mixed signals,” said Jenna nodding. **“**Stop it . . . really!” insisted Jill. “Just because you’ve all seen me naked, doesn’t mean that my love life . . . or my lack of one . . . or the reasons behind that . . . has to be the topic of conversation.” **“**Fair enough,” agreed Britt, “but let me ask Nick this. Aren’t you worried about letting us stay with Jill in a motel room?” **“**Should I be?”Britt didn’t respond other than to shrug. **“**Nah . . . Jill’s a big girl,” he responded. “And like you said, her sexual orientation . . . well, she knows what it is. No matter what determines sexual orientation, genetics or something else, it can’t be in flux, right?”Jill decided to try and tune the conversation out. They were apparently going to talk about her no matter what she said. She knew she’d made some mistakes; getting off while spying on Britt and Jenna engaging in sex, among them. That might be part of what was confusing them. It had been hot, but it hardly proved that she wasn’t straight.As they exited the restaurant a while later, she asked Britt and Jenna to let her have a moment alone with Nick. They waited by their car while she walked him to his truck. She’d decided earlier that he wasn’t getting a goodnight kiss, but she at least wanted to say goodnight to him in private, as well as to thank him in advance for driving out to Cache Lake to inform her grandparents about what had happened.Earlier, she had thought that she’d want to tell him what she’d like him to say to them. She no longer felt that way. Nick would know what to say. She realized just how much her opinion of him had changed. He did have a feisty side; however, unlike Ryan, he had the ability to control it. She was surprised by how much he had grown on her during the course of the day. She had been particularly impressed that he had given his room key to the Copelands. He’d even brought up the topic. That had been completely unexpected.As Nick turned to face her at the driver’s door of his truck, he took her hands in his. The high altitude clouds had grown pink, indicating that the sun was beginning to set behind the ridge. As she looked up into his eyes, Jill felt her resolve weakening. His strong hands squeezed hers almost imperceptibly. She knew she should say something, and yet . . . she didn’t. She wanted to escape his grasp, and yet . . . she didn’t.As his face approached hers, she felt her own face angling up. It seemed almost as if someone else, someone who wasn’t aware of the decision she had made earlier, had taken control of her body. Her eyes closed. Their lips touched. Her lips, initially tense, relaxed upon contact, softening against his. For the longest time, the two of them remained still, frozen in place – neither of them advancing – neither of them retreating.Just the one kiss, Jill decided. One kiss wouldn’t mean anything. But after their lips separated, she pulled on his hands, bringing him back – back for a second kiss. Was it the sake, she wondered, or did she like this guy? This second time, she felt her lips moving against his. He seemed to respond. It was a friendlier, more tender kiss.As their lips parted for a second time, she stayed close, nuzzling her face near his neck, just below one of his ears. She felt Nick’s arms encircle her, holding her against him.It was at that moment that she realized just how much she had missed being held. Not since things had gone south with Tyler had she been held like that. In Tyler’s arms, she’d learned just how much of a sucker for cuddling she was. It felt absolutely wonderful to be in a man’s arms again, especially after all the trauma of the day.Suddenly, she became aware that Britt and Jenna were cheering from the other side of the parking lot. That brought her back to reality. She stepped back from Nick, half pushing him away as she retreated. **“**Don’t mind them,” he said softly. **“**Trying not to…” she replied, looking over towards the girls.She wanted to tell him that it was just a kiss and that it didn’t mean anything, but she hesitated. She couldn’t bring herself to say that. **“**When can I see you again?” he asked. **“**Well . . . I don’t know. I’m probably just going to be hanging around the hospital tomorrow.” **“**Okay…” he said quietly.It was a nice moment. Jill found his presence quite comforting, and yet she knew not to linger. She turned and started walking away, but after she heard Nick’s truck start, she stopped and looked back. She stood and watched as he drove out of the parking lot.As his truck disappeared into traffic, she resumed her walk toward the twins, wondering what she had just done. Surely that kiss – those kisses – would serve to get Nick’s hopes up. Why had she allowed that to happen? She chastised herself for her moment of weakness, but then she found herself wondering if she had let him kiss her to put to bed the questions about her sexual orientation. She hated it when she ended up second-guessing herself, and yet she couldn’t help it. Why had she let him kiss her? **“**That was beautiful,” remarked Britt. “Was that the first time you and Nick kissed?”Jill didn’t want to talk about what had happened, but the question seemed to carry no ill intent. “Yes,” she replied. **“**I like him. The two of you make a charming couple.” **“**We’re not a couple! And I don’t want to talk about it.” **“**Okay, forget I said that,” replied Britt. “But I think he’s good for you. He makes you smile.”As Jill climbed into the backseat of their modest white sedan, she found herself wondering about that comment. Did Nick really make her smile? If he did, she hadn’t been conscious of it.On the short drive to the hospital, Jill remembered something that she needed to do. She had to tell both David and Ryan about Nick’s little fib in front of the TV camera: how he had said that she’d had a sundress on just prior to the rockslide.She hoped that David wouldn’t mind taking the blame for having stripped her as he’d fallen. As she considered that, she realized that Ryan was probably going to be the one to give her trouble.Turning on her phone, she looked for the photos she had taken of him jacking off earlier in the summer. Fortunately, they were still there. She smiled as she flipped through the images of him stroking himself. She didn’t want to have to bring them up, but she didn’t think she was above doing so if it became necessary. **“**What are you looking at, pornography?” asked Britt from the front seat. **“**No . . . nothing,” said Jill, her face flushing as she shut off her phone and put it back in her pocket.Realizing that Britt had probably not been able to see the screen, she decided that it must have simply been a lucky guess inspired by whatever expression had been on her face at that moment. She imagined the teasing she’d be subjected to if Britt knew that she’d gone from kissing Nick to looking at pictures of Ryan, his dick in his hand.It was nearly dark as they climbed out of the car in front of the hospital. Once inside, Jill looked around apprehensively. Fortunately, there didn’t seem to be any reporters lying in wait. She was glad about that. She was also pleased that it was so hard to gain admittance to the emergency room. Hopefully, that would mean that the reporters had not had the opportunity to interview David and Ryan. However, she had an unwelcome surprise waiting for her at the entrance to the ER. There she learned that both David and Ryan had been moved – to separate wings of the hospital.David was now in the ICU. She obtained directions and had the ER Clerk write down both room numbers for her.As Britt seemed to be in her element, Jill let her lead the way through the hospital maze to David’s new room. Once there, Jill was confronted by a second surprise. **“**You didn’t tell me you went for a naked bike ride,” he said. **“**How do you know about that?” she asked, her voice suddenly weak.David pointed up at the TV. At first, Jill saw only a weatherman standing in front of a map of the region, but then she noticed an announcement scrolling across the bottom of the screen. “Naked Heroine invades Stanton – full report, just ahead,” it read. **“**Oh, my God,” she mumbled. In shock, she covered her nose and mouth with both hands, staring at the TV wide-eyed. “They mentioned the bike ride?” she asked, her hands muffling her words. **“**Showed it,” he replied. **“**Showed it?” she asked, her voice trembling. **“**Not the best video, but good enough that they had to place black rectangles on top . . . to hide, umm . . . you know.” **“**Black rectangles?” **“**I’m sure they have to . . . to censor nude photos like that.”Jill took a deep breath. She’d been willing to pay a price. However, her willingness to do so didn’t mean that there wouldn’t be pain. **“**You come across as a bit of a bully.” **“**I do? I did?” she stuttered. **“**I’m sure you wanted his bike, but the way you unseated him . . . the poor kid had no chance.” **“**That ‘poor kid’ deserved it. Foul-mouthed pipsqueak,” she said, finding her voice.David laughed. “What did he say?” **“**Not repeating it, but his parents need to wash the little creep’s mouth out with soap.”David laughed. “Too bad that won’t be mentioned in their broadcast.” **“**There was one nice boy in the group . . . led the way to the ranger station.” **“**Glad to hear it,” said David. “What was his name?” **“**How should I know?”Again David laughed. **“**What else have they said or shown?” she asked in a state of anguish. She didn’t really want to know, but she knew she needed to. **“**Not much,” he replied. “They’re obviously saving it for the end. Doing their best to keep people glued to their TV sets.” **“**Nothing else?” **“**There was some video of the helicopter arriving at the hospital . . . might have been stock footage. And the weatherman began his segment, just before you came in, with mention of a small earthquake this afternoon. There was some banter with the news team about it being what had likely triggered the rockslide. Other than that, just the occasional joke about streaking. That’s about it . . . so far.” **“**Jokes about streaking? Is that what they think I was doing?” **“**I think you’d better sit down, Jill,” said Jenna, sliding a chair toward her. “You’re looking rather pale.”Jill had forgotten all about Britt and Jenna. They had both been listening with interest, but as the weather ended and a commercial started, Britt walked around the bed to study the monitor. **“**Hello, David. Rough day?” she asked, **“**I’ll say,” he replied. “Were it not for Jill, I’d still be lying on those rocks . . . probably dead by now.” **“**Can I get a look at the back of your head?” she asked, walking around the monitor. **“**Yeah,” he chuckled. “I understand I have a tube coming out of my skull. A drain, I think.” **“**I think it’s called an ICP catheter . . . ICP for Intracranial Pressure, I believe.”Jill could tell that Britt was very interested in everything; however, she was too worried about the upcoming broadcast to pay any attention to Britt and what interested her.At long last, the series of commercials ended with the camera focused on the anchorwoman behind the news desk.

**Chapter 152: Channel Five**As they zoomed in, the anchorwoman spoke, “Earlier today, a recent high school graduate who spends her summers at Cache Lake had her mettle put to the test. As our investigative reporters have learned, she rose to the occasion – overcoming all that was thrown at her – and then some. You interviewed her, Amanda. What did you learn?”A second woman appeared on the right half of the screen. “Exactly right, Cynthia. What an amazing young lady, and what an incredible story. I know for a fact that my brother would be dead if I had needed to do a fraction of what this nineteen-year-old had to do today.” **“**Walk us through the series of events, if you would, Amanda. How exactly did this all unfold?” **“**Sure thing, Cynthia. As Joe mentioned earlier, at 1:37 this afternoon an earthquake hit the region. It measured just 3.4 on the Richter scale. Some people felt it, others didn’t. Typically such a moderate earthquake won’t cause any damage. However, likely due to all the seismic activity we’ve had this summer, this earthquake triggered a rockslide on the back a Bearhead Summit, an obscure peak just beyond Buckner Ridge. **“**At that very moment, three hikers, all recent graduates of Holden High School on the other side of the state, were on a trail cutting across a steep slope. They didn’t know it, but they were . . . in the wrong place at precisely the wrong time. Jill and David Wahlund, nineteen-year-old twins, and a family friend, Ryan Perkins, also nineteen.”Jill took a deep breath. She was glad she was sitting down. This seemed as if it were going to be worse than she had feared. Not only did they have video, but they were naming names. **“**A section of trail gave way. As luck would have it, both David and Ryan were on that particular section of trail. Jill had just crossed. Both David and Ryan were instantly caught up in the rockslide. Jill was left alone on the ledge . . . very alone.” **“**Naked and alone, right Amanda?” interjected the anchorwoman, seemingly following a script. **“**Exactly! At that point, she was nude,” replied Amanda. “We have numerous accounts, all of them mentioning her nudity. Even video proof, which we showed at the beginning of tonight’s broadcast. We’ll be showing that again momentarily . . . for those who missed it earlier.” **“**And it will be available on our website,” interjected the anchorwoman. **“**Yes, the entire broadcast,” continued Amanda. “So we know she was nude. As we began to investigate this story, we had so many questions about why she happened to be nude. While there are still questions, we have begun to piece the puzzle together. Not only were we able to interview Jill herself and ask her that very question, but we were also able to interview Ryan Perkins, gaining even more insight.” **“**Oh, no,” Jill gasped, again covering her mouth. **“**What was Jill’s response?” asked Cynthia. **“**She didn’t exactly answer the question,” replied Amanda. “She appeared to be shell-shocked. I’m still trying to figure this out, but in a way, it’s completely understandable. I know I’d have PTSD if I had to make my way down that hillside and across town naked.”Cynthia laughed. “I’d wait until it was dark.” **“**Miss Wahlund didn’t have that luxury.”Suddenly Britt spoke up behind them. “Funny how these reporters have completely forgotten about David and Ryan.” **“**Yep,” agreed Jenna. “Sex sells. Who cares about injured boys when you’ve got video of a naked girl to get the audience worked up about.” **“**Right! Let’s see that video,” said Britt. “I’m so glad it’s going to be on their website.” **“**You’re as bad as they are,” said David. **“**Maybe,” said Britt. “But I know Jill. She’s way more interesting than either of you bozos.”Jill laughed, but then she immediately said, “Shush . . . I’m trying to hear.”Amanda was talking. “Even though Jill didn’t answer the question, the guy she was with did. Nick Bianchetti, son of Valentino Bianchetti, owner of Valentino’s, the popular pizzeria in Agency.” **“**What did Nick have to say?” asked Cynthia. **“**We’ll play that clip in a moment,” replied Amanda. “We also put the same question to Ryan Perkins, the other boy injured in the rockslide. So we have his answer as well, but first let’s show the video of Jill as she races through town, commandeering a certain boy’s bike along the way.”Jill’s heart sank. It was all so terrible, and to make matters worse, they had managed to interview Ryan. She had no idea what Ryan might say, but she knew it would be bad. He’d probably even tell the truth – or his version of the truth. **“**Just kill me now!” Jill shouted to no one in particular. **“**To set the stage for our viewers, Jill had just spoken with Madeline Hansen. Maddy was in the parking lot of Valley Foods when Jill approached her. Maddy offered Jill her assistance, but all Jill wanted was directions . . . directions to the ranger station . . . which she provided.” **“**What a f\*\*king liar!” Jill screamed. “That woman refused to help me.” **“**So the scene in our video takes place as Jill is sprinting down Stanton Creek Road. Marshall Hansen, thirteen, gets too close. Jill grabs his handlebars, and in one quick move, yanks his bike out from under him. Not a very nice thing for a nineteen-year-old to do to a thirteen-year-old, but some might give her a pass. She’s on an important life or death mission.” **“**Life or death mission, ha!” said Britt. “As if they care! Still no mention of how the boys in the hospital are doing.” **“**Okay, let’s roll the video,” said Cynthia, the anchorwoman.In the next moment, Jill saw herself running toward the camera, surrounded by the boys on their bikes. It was definitely shaky and the resolution was lacking, and yet, she could easily recognize herself. Others, too, would be able to confirm her identity. She was running fast, pumping her arms.There was a black stripe across her chest, but it could have been bigger. It covered much less than Jill’s bikini top. It did reach all the way across side-to-side, but it was relatively narrow. Their software kept it in place such that it hid her nipples; however, that seemed to be all they were trying to hide. Her small breasts were visible above and below the stripe. Down below, there was a small square situated right on top of her pussy. It did not go across side to side, making it obvious that she was bare bottomed. It covered what a girl’s pubic hair normal hid but little more. **“**No fun!” complained Britt. “They’re hiding Fuzzy Wuzzy! I wanted to see him on TV!”David laughed from his bed. “Fuzzy Wuzzy . . . but a memory. May he rest in peace.” **“**No way!” said Britt. “She shaved?” **“**Just kill me now!” Jill repeated.Eventually, Jill passed the person recording the video. As she did, she veered over, quickly grabbing the bike and unseating the boy. There was sound, but the camera hadn’t picked up his nasty comments. A moment later, Jill was on the bike and accelerating off into the distance, pedaling as hard as she could. She was clearly nude; however, there was a vertical black stripe covering her butt crack. It didn’t hide much at all, but it was certainly wider than a thong bikini bottom might have been.Jill didn’t know if she could take any more. She knew that Amanda had interviewed Hicks, Dr. Zhao, herself with Nick, as well as Ryan. Knowing that all that lay ahead, she shouted out for a third time, “Just kill me now!”A moment later, Jenna had moved her chair next to hers. Putting her arm around her, she whispered, “I’m here for you, Jill.”Jill looked over at her. Their eyes met. “I need to know what Ryan told them. This is killing me. I know it’s going to be awful.” **“**It probably will be. He’s an asshole,” said Jenna. “But you can’t do anything about it.” **“**I guess not. But that’s precisely why I need to know what he said,” she replied. “And I can do something about it. I can kill him . . . just not before the fact.” **“**So much talk of violence, Jilly,” said David. “This is not at all like you. We both know you’re a pacifist at heart.” **“**Maybe it’s the alcohol talking,” Jill replied. **“**Alcohol?” he asked. “I was wondering about that. Britt? Did you get Jill drunk again?” **“**Hey, don’t look at me!” **“**Well, I certainly didn’t buy it for myself . . . but it’s not her fault. But it was good. Have you ever had sake?” she asked, looking at her brother. **“**So . . . why did you girls buy my sister sake?” he asked. **“**We didn’t,” said Britt. “She’d grab our glasses. It seemed as if she was on a mission . . . a mission to get drunk.” **“**Shh…” said Jill. Hicks was on the screen. She wanted to hear what he had said. **“**Jill, were you trying to get drunk?” David asked. **“**Shh...” she repeated, pointing up at the TV.Jill watched Hicks’ interview with rapt attention. She didn’t think that he’d say anything derogatory, and he didn’t. He kept his responses very much on topic, primarily discussing the nuts and bolts of the actual rescue effort. **“**Finally, someone who thinks that David and Ryan are part of the story,” said Britt, speaking over the TV.However, at that moment the anchorwoman stepped in and cut the interview short saying, “Those that would like to hear the rest of what Jeffrey Hicks had to say can visit our website. His interview will be available there in its entirety. **“**Yep . . . not surprising,” said Britt. “They couldn’t get him to say anything about Jill.” **“**Salacious about her, you mean,” said Jenna. “He had plenty to say about Jill, but all of it complimentary.” **“**You’re right . . . about her character,” replied Britt. “Had he been willing to talk about her tits, they wouldn’t have cut it short.” **“**Now let’s watch the Jill Wahlund interview,” suggested Cynthia. “I’m sure our viewers are very interested to hear what she had to say.” **“**Absolutely,” replied Amanda. “I caught up with Jill just outside the Elk Bend Medical Center ER. Out of respect, we didn’t talk to her on her way in…” **“**Liar!” yelled Jill. **“**She drove down from Buckner Ridge with Nick Bianchetti. As David and Ryan were transported via medevac, they reached the hospital about two hours before Jill. We wanted her to have the opportunity to speak with them and get an update on their respective medical conditions before we interviewed her.” **“**Such liars!” said Jill under her breath. **“**As you watch this interview, you’ll notice that Jill is unaware that we know that she had been nude throughout the rescue. In order to find out as much as we could about the condition of the two boys, we saved mention of that fact for the end.” **“**She’s such a liar,” muttered Jill. **“**I watched this interview earlier,” interjected Cynthia, “and what struck me was this girl’s modest nature. You tell her she’s being called a hero, and she’s reluctant to take any credit. She talks about just doing what she had to do.” **“**Exactly right, Cynthia. And she’s very camera shy. You’ll see her eyes darting around as if she is searching for an escape route. She obviously doesn’t want to be there. And when nudity comes up . . . watch her expression. It’s almost as if she thought that no one had seen her. She blushes and then she retreats. From that point on, we only see her peeking around Nick’s shoulder. Okay, let’s watch the video.”As Jill watched, she saw herself and Nick emerge from the ER, walking across the lobby. Suddenly her expression changed to one of alarm. **“**I’ve seen that look,” said David. “The panic in your eyes. Surprising you didn’t just run off.” **“**I wanted to. Believe me.”Jill watched the rest of the interview in silence. They played it in its entirety. Other than seeing her expression, there wasn’t anything new for her there. She remembered it all vividly. It was painful to have to live through it a second time. **“**That was so nice of your boyfriend . . . saving you like that . . . lying for you,” said Britt. **“**Boyfriend?” asked David. **“**Ignore Britt. He’s not my boyfriend!” **“**Not what it looked like. You should have seen them making out in the parking lot just now,” explained Britt. **“**It was just a goodbye kiss,” said Jill meekly, looking down at her feet.Jill expected Britt to call her out on the idea that it had been just ‘a’ kiss, but she didn’t. Glancing up at the TV, she saw why. Dr. Zhao was on the screen. Britt was focused on what he had to say. Jill couldn’t bring herself to listen. On the one hand, she’d already heard what he had to say. On the other hand, she was worrying about what Ryan had told them in his interview.Considering that, she decided that they were saving it for last just as they’d sprung ‘nudity’ on her at the end of her own interview. Fretting, she realized that Ryan held her fate in his hands. He’d gotten her into this mess, and he was surely going to complete the destruction of her life as she knew it. **“**I’m gonna kill him,” she mumbled. **“**The doctor? What did he do wrong?” asked Jenna from the seat next to her. **“**No . . . Ryan. That’s who I’m gonna kill.”

**Chapter 153: Ryan**After a limited amount of discussion about David’s prognosis, Ryan appeared on the screen. He was in a hospital bed, presumably in the room to which he had been moved, his leg elevated. To Jill’s surprise, the reporter hadn’t spent any time introducing the interview. They started right in with a discussion of Ryan’s leg. Next, he was asked a few questions about the rockslide.Jill listened as he described the surprise, the rapid ride atop the rocks down the slope, the pain, and then all the waiting there on the mountainside, including all his concerns about David who had been unconscious next to him much of the time. **“**Tell us about Jill,” asked the reporter, obviously framing the question as broadly as possible. **“**What do you want to know? She saved us today. No other girl on the planet like her. I’m going to marry her someday.”Jill’s jaw dropped. **“**Can you believe he’s admitting that with a TV camera pointed at him?” chuckled David. “So deluded, but so loyal . . . gets nothing in return.” **“**So what I did for him today . . . nothing?” asked Jill. **“**So . . . is Jill your girlfriend?” asked the reporter. **“**No. I think she hates me.” **“**And yet you’re going to marry her?” **“**I want to. Who wouldn’t? We have a lot of fun together. But our relationship . . . it’s unusual . . . complicated, to say the least.” **“**Okay, let me ask you this,” said Amanda. “Focusing on what happened today, is Jill an exhibitionist?”Ryan laughed. “Jill? An exhibitionist? She’ll kill me if I tell you the truth.” **“**You’re f\*\*king right!” Jill yelled at the TV. “I’m absolutely going to kill you!” **“**We’ve seen photos as well as a video. No tan lines, except . . . well . . . yeah, no tan lines.”Ryan laughed. “Almost no tan lines!” **“**I’m gonna kill him,” Jill muttered. **“**Can I see that video? The photos?” Ryan asked. **“**Later,” she replied. “Let me ask you this. How did she end up naked today?”Jill held her breath. She could think of several ways Ryan might answer that question, all of them bad. She found herself hoping for a widespread power outage, preventing everyone from seeing the rest of the interview.Ryan looked into the camera. It appeared to dawn on him for the first time that others would watch the interview, that his words were being recorded. **“**She’s going to kill me. I know it.” **“**Damn right!” Jill shouted at the TV. **“**Just answer the question as truthfully as possible,” encouraged the reporter. **“**It was all my fault. She’s not an exhibitionist . . . hardly. Being naked . . . as hard for her as anybody, I imagine.” **“**How was it your fault?” asked the reporter. **“**It was. I stripped her. Last year, too. But that time . . . just her top.” **“**You took her top off last year?” asked the reporter, obviously caught off guard by the confession. **“**He did,” said Jill, looking over at Jenna. **“**I shouldn’t admit that, right?” continued Ryan. **“**Probably not,” agreed the reporter. “But if it’s true…” **“**Not much of a friend, right?” **“**But tell us what happened today. Nick Bianchetti told us earlier that it was David who stripped off her dress as he fell.” **“**He told you that? How would he know? He wasn’t there.” **“**I suppose Jill told him,” said the reporter with a shrug. **“**It wasn’t David. He’s not to blame. It was me. Jill was naked because of me.” **“**You stripped her?” **“**Yes. I stripped her.” **“**What was she wearing? What did you strip off of her?” **“**That first time?” **“**No . . . today.” **“**I don’t remember. At the moment I only remember her being naked. What she was wearing this morning? Why the interest in that?” **“**Just trying to piece together exactly what happened . . . that’s all.” **“**I’ll tell you what happened. Jill went for help. So brave! She saved David and me. I’m sure she’ll have nightmares about it for the rest of her life, running to Stanton naked. She’s the nightmare type. David might say that this will be good for her.” **“**Why might he say that?” interrupted the reporter. **“**Right?!” agreed Ryan. “But I know Jill at least as well as he does . . . maybe better. She ran to town naked. Last thing in the world she wanted to do. So brave. She wouldn’t have done it for me . . . maybe if I’d been unconscious. She did it for her brother. Quite a bond those two have. She loves her brother; they’re twins. But you know that.” **“**And she came back naked? She stayed naked.” **“**Yep . . . not willing to waste a single second on her own needs until after she’d gotten help to her brother. She sacrificed herself on the mountain. She’s amazing . . . absolutely amazing. No one more capable under pressure.”The reporter didn’t have any more questions or they had decided to cut the interview there. Ryan’s image shrank until it was just a small inset photo. The screen went back to how it had been: Cynthia, the anchor, on the left, Amanda, the investigative reporter, on the right. **“**That guy’s in love with you,” said Britt. **“**Jill’s been surrounded by wannabe boyfriends this summer,” said David. **“**The more I tell them ‘no,’ the harder they try,” said Jill. “But then again, they’ve all seen me naked.”They all turned their attention back to the TV as the anchorwoman again started speaking. **“**Well, Amanda. That’s quite a story. I guess I have to agree with Ryan. Jill’s obviously an amazing woman.” **“**She definitely deserves a medal for what she did today. Frankly, I’m glad there were witnesses. Without them, her heroism might have gone completely unrecognized.” **“**And yet there still seems to be some confusion about what happened to her clothes,” remarked Cynthia. **“**I’d say so,” said Amanda. “Jill’s tan would seem to indicate that she’s no stranger to nudity.” **“**However, she might just sunbathe in the buff.” **“**Perhaps,” nodded Amanda, her eyebrows betraying obvious suspicions. **“**But your last interviewee . . . Ryan. That guy’s obviously in love with her.” **“**Obviously. Apparently, the feelings aren’t mutual.” **“**Hardly surprising. Especially considering how he talked about tearing off her top a year ago.” **“**Agreed,” said Amanda. “To all our male viewers. There’s a lesson in this. Girls don’t like to be mistreated. Make sure she’s ready before you attempt to take off her top. If you want a girl to like you, you need to respect her boundaries,” **“**And yet, there’s obviously more to this story . . . much more. That video of Jill taking the boy’s bike. She comes across as a bit of a bully in that scene.” **“**I’d have to agree. But I’m willing to give her a pass on that.” **“**I know what you mean. She’s obviously under a lot of stress at that point. All those boys swarming around her, and she’s racing against time. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more driven person. She’s just run four miles! And look at all the vigor she’s still able to pour into the effort of getting David and Ryan the help they so desperately need.” **“**Agreed! She may be a bully, but I say . . . let’s not judge until we’ve walked a mile in her shoes.” **“**Or in Jill’s case . . . run five miles in her hiking boots . . . naked,” joked Cynthia. **“**I will say this. I hope to never find myself in the spot that Jill found herself in earlier today.” **“**Well, that’s all the time we have,” said Cynthia. “And Jill, if you’re watching, all of us at Channel Five salute your heroism. The world needs more Jills.”Definitely,” agreed Amanda. **“**Here, here!” shouted Jenna, pumping her fist overhead. **“**And for those who’d like to see that video again . . . Jill sprinting naked . . . pulling Marshall Hansen’s bike out from under him . . . it’ll be on our website,” said the anchorwoman.The lights in the studio faded and a moment later they went to commercial. David quickly hit the mute button. **“**Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Jenna asked, turning to Jill next to her.Jill took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I never thought that I’d watch myself naked on the evening news, only to find out that I’m a bully.” **“**You’re not a bully,” said Jenna. “And I’m pretty sure that’s not what the viewers of the broadcast are thinking, either.” **“**I’m pretty sure they think you are a hero, just as I do,” said Britt. **“**And yet, they don’t know that I hiked up the backside of the mountain naked.” **“**That doesn’t change a thing. You still went for help. You’re absolutely a hero,” said Jenna. **“**We know you, Jill,” said Britt. “We know how hard that must have been for you. Where did you ever find the courage to do that . . . naked?” **“**Let’s go find Ryan,” she replied standing up. **“**You’re tipsy, aren’t you?” said David, studying how Jill didn’t look too steady on her feet. **“**I am not!” she replied unconvincingly. Continuing, she added, “Like I said, I’m going to kill him, the lovesick little bastard. How dare he talk about marrying me on live TV!”Jill had already been pissed at Ryan for what he had told Nick. During the interview, her anger had been building. **“**He certainly didn’t do himself any favors,” said Britt. **“**He never does,” said Jill. “Ryan is Ryan. But this summer, he’s been my problem.” **“**I’m going to go look for the attending,” said Britt, leaving the room.A little bit later, after locating Britt, they were all walking down a corridor looking for Ryan’s room. Jill remarked, “I really can’t believe that I just watched myself naked on live TV . . . running, then riding a bike. How embarrassing!” **“**But you have to look on the bright side,” said Britt. **“**And that would be?” **“**The video’s going to be on their website. It’ll probably be tomorrow’s internet sensation.” **“**Please, don’t say that. You’re going to make me throw up,” said Jill. **“**So . . . watch the news?” she asked a minute later as they entered Ryan’s room. **“**Uh-huh. It was fun,” he replied. **“**Fun? That’s your idea of fun?” she asked with a contemptuous smile. **“**It could have been better. They could have left those annoying black bars off.” **“**Would that have been more fun?” **“**No doubt about it. Maybe that version will find its way onto the internet. If it does, it’ll totally go viral!”The very suggestion made blushing inevitable. Jill expected he’d notice. **“**Oh, how fun!” she said facetiously. “Just imagine . . . people all over the world seeing naked little me . . . how delightful!” Walking over next to his bed, she asked, “Can you scoot over a bit? Make a little room?”Ryan looked utterly but pleasantly surprised. “Sure,” he said, shifting over. He wasn’t really able to move his broken leg much. It was the one on his side away from where Jill stood. However, he managed to get his hips and his torso shifted over. **“**May I?” she asked, placing her hands on the bed. **“**Be my guest!” **“**Should we leave the two of you alone?” asked Britt, looking just as surprised as Ryan. **“**No . . . stay,” said Jill climbing up. “I’m not going to sleep here. Maybe just snuggle for a bit . . . that is, assuming Ryan doesn’t mind.”He didn’t reply, but Jill heard him breathe in sharply as she stretched out next to him. **“**Go ahead and sit down girls,” said Jill.Britt took a seat in the lounger as Jenna located a folding chair.Jill continued, “It’s just that Ryan never told me that he expected to marry me one day. I mean, I knew he had a crush . . . makes no effort to hide that. It’s just a little surprising to have to hear of his interest in marriage . . . at the same time as the rest of the world.” **“**Surprising what one will say with a TV camera pointed at them, right?” said Jenna. **“**Surprising,” Jill agreed. She continued in a soft voice, “What made you decide to say that, Ryan? I mean, I knew my nudity would come up in the broadcast, but I didn’t expect private relationship matters to be talked about.” **“**I don’t know . . . it just came out.”Jill snuggled in close to him, reaching across his chest and pulling their bodies together. Ryan was on his back, and Jill was on her side, her chest against his ribcage. **“**Don’t you think we ought to talk things through, just you and I, before . . . umm . . . we go public?” **“**I guess,” he replied.Jill inched up, her face approaching his cheek. **“**Jill, I thought you were going to kill him. Now you’re acting like you want to have his babies,” said Britt. **“**Oh, I still want to kill him,” she replied, speaking into his neck. “I was already in such a state of shock . . . mad about whatever he said to Nick . . . and then . . . then . . . it made me mad to hear him talking about such personal matters on TV. But being mad is simply an emotion.” **“**If this is you being mad, then I hope you get really mad!” said Ryan. **“**Oh, I am really mad,” she said, but her tone contradicted her words. She sounded content, possibly even happy. **“**You also told the whole world that you took off my top last year. I hadn’t told people about that. Only you and David knew . . . because you were there. It was just too embarrassing to talk about. You girls didn’t know about that, right?” **“**Actually, we did. We heard about that the night of the campfire. The wine brought it out,” said Britt. **“**Oh, right,” said Jill. **“**But I didn’t tell my parents, my grandparents, my friends, even my boyfriend Tyler. I didn’t want people to know. Too embarrassing! I wanted to forget it happened. Just one more thing I’m mad about.”She gave Ryan a little kiss just below his ear. **“**You don’t sound very mad,” he remarked. **“**Oh, but I am,” she said softly. “I’m just trying to get you to drop your guard . . . so that I can attack. You seem so vulnerable . . . lying here . . . broken leg and all.”Ryan laughed as Jill slid up and kissed his ear. She could tell that he was enjoying himself. She drew his ear lobe in between her lips and bit down ¬¬-- hard. **“**Oww!” he yelled, lifting his head up abruptly from the pillow and shoving her away. **“**What’s wrong? You don’t like it rough?” she asked. “You attack my nipple without warning. Turn about isn’t fair play?” **“**Get out of my bed!” he yelled angrily.

**Chapter 154: A Grey Shirt

“**I told you I was mad. I was completely honest. I warned you. I told you I was just trying to get you to drop your guard.”She was still on the bed next to him, but she had risen up onto her knees. She thought about kneeing him for good measure. Looking at him, lying there on his back glaring up at her, it all seemed too easy. She could inflict some real pain, using her weight to drive her knee down into his groin; however, she decided that she’d made her point.Ryan glanced at the hand that he’d had over his ear. “You drew blood!”Jill shrugged. “Didn’t I say I was going to kill him?” she said looking over at Britt and then Jenna; however, seeing blood on his fingers had surprised her. Pain had been her sole intention. Attempting to sound confident, she continued, “And I am . . . just maybe not all at once.”Jenna smiled, but Britt didn’t look too pleased. “Jill, bites like that can lead to complications. Lots of bacteria in the human mouth.” **“**I’m not too worried,” she said. “The alcohol in the sake should kill germs, right?” **“**You go girl!” said Jenna. **“**You’ve been drinking?” asked Ryan.Jill held her thumb and forefinger up about an inch apart. “Tweeny-weeny glasses.” **“**Hardly enough alcohol to keep it from getting infected,” said Britt looking through the medical supplies in a drawer. **“**He deserved it . . . and besides, I’m sure they’ve got him pumped full of antibiotics,” said Jill. **“**I suppose so,” said Britt, glancing over at the numerous bandages and dressings on his skin. After finding what she was looking for, she washed her hands and then walked over to him, saying, “I’ll take care of this so we don’t have to call a nurse.”Bending down to get a good look, she tore open a small packet and applied it to his ear, giving it a good squeeze to make it bleed. **“**Ouch,” he said. **“**Don’t be a wimp. It’s just alcohol.”Jill laughed as Britt continued, “Look, girls, one of the rocks must have caught his ear . . . and they must not have noticed it earlier.” **“**How bad is it bleeding?” he asked. **“**You’re such a weenie!” said Britt. **“**Great bedside manner . . . doctor,” he said sarcastically. **“**He’s such a Jerk-boy! Goodnight, Jerk-boy!” said Jill, turning and leaving the room. What else was there to say? **“**What came over you, Jill?” asked Britt a few minutes later as they were walking toward the hospital exit. **“**What?” **“**Duh . . . you bit him.”Jill didn’t know how to explain. Anger was an emotion, and she knew that emotions didn’t always follow logical rules. However, Jill was trying to find some insight into her feelings about Ryan – so that she might be able to explain. She’d just gotten to the tipping point.Later, once they were all in the motel room, Britt brought the topic up again. “Biting Ryan . . . that seems so out of character. I mean, you’re a level headed person and he’s your friend . . . at least that’s how you introduced him to us originally. Things went wrong today, very wrong. I get that. But he didn’t cause the earthquake.” **“**I never said he did,” replied Jill defensively. **“**Maybe you ARE a bully,” said Britt. **“**I’m not a bully.” **“**She’s not a bully,” said Jenna, coming to her support. “She’s the opposite of a bully. Remember the canoe? Remember the girl’s backpack?” **“**Of course I do,” said Britt. “So, Jill, what gives?”Jill shook her head and went into the bathroom. She didn’t know how to explain and she wanted to brush her teeth. Realizing that she didn’t have a toothbrush, she went back out. **“**Okay. I’ll try to explain. Up on the mountain today I was faced with a disagreeable choice. But there was really only one option. I went for help. But I was naked. Still, I went for help. I knew I would pay a price. I accepted that. I was willing to pay that price, whatever it turned out to be, in order to do my best by my brother. It probably sounds trite, but I love him.” **“**Hardly trite,” said Jenna. “The two of you share a deep bond. We both sense it.”Jill glanced over and saw that Britt was nodding. **“**Well, this evening, as the price I was going to pay started to come into focus, I’ve been considering a few things. For example, I’m not going to be paying a price because I went for help. No. That’s not why.” **“**Agreed,” said Jenna. “You’re being called a hero . . . because you went for help.” **“**A hero,” said Jill, chuckling and shaking her head. “However, there is a bully here . . . but it’s not me. You saw Ryan bragging about how he took off my top off last year.” **“**Is that what he was doing . . . bragging?” asked Britt. **“**What would you call it?” **“**I guess he was bragging,” she answered with a shrug. **“**I was called a bully because I yanked a boy’s bike out from under him. That’s a little analogous to what Ryan did last year. I think taking a girl’s top off is worse than borrowing a kid’s bike, but that’s not the point. However, this year he returned with a different approach, a psychological approach. In part, that was in response to hurdles that David placed in his path. David made him agree not to strip me . . . physically strip me. So, this summer, I became the target of relentless psychological bullying.”Jill paused. She could tell that Britt was giving her words serious consideration. She went on to explain the ‘one of the guys’ program that she had been subjected to, suspecting that the sake might be contributing to how she was suddenly so loose-lipped. They’d heard it all the night of the campfire, but maybe not with this spin.It felt good to be telling her story, explaining why she was so mad at Ryan. She was purposefully not mentioning how her own inclinations had been a factor. David’s confession that morning – that he’d seen her tie her panties to the post and walk back naked – flashed through her mind. She didn’t bring that up. She didn’t want to undermine the bullying theme she had going.Truth be told, she no longer saw toplessness as a big deal, but that was beside the point. She had been treated as no girl should be treated. Even though her own fascination with nudity had played a role, none of what had happened to her that summer would have happened had the ‘one of the guys’ program never existed.She concluded, “I’m going to pay a price, but like I said, not because I went for help. No. I’m going to pay a price because I was bullied.” **“**You need to tell your side of the story,” said Britt. **“**I just did.” **“**I mean, to the authorities. Or go to that reporter. Tell her . . . she’ll listen.” **“**I don’t want to tell my story, not publically. Ryan will just say I was voluntarily nude . . . and I guess I was . . . today. He’ll say I was enjoying myself.” **“**Weren’t you?” asked Britt. “I mean, up until the rockslide.” **“**That’s not the point,” said Jill. “The fact of the matter is that I was naked because of Ryan. I put up a good long fight, but it happened. Left to my own devices, I never would have even gone topless this summer. And now I’m going to pay a price. You yourself said that the video of me, and there might be others, could end up being tomorrow’s internet sensation. I’m leaving for college soon. Will that video follow me to California? Will my future classmates see it and recognize me?” **“**Probably not,” said Britt. **“**But she’s right,” said Jenna. “It could happen.” **“**I know it could,” acknowledged Britt. **“**So Ryan’s my friend, and I shouldn’t have bitten his ear?” **“**Girls shouldn’t bite, Jill,” said Britt. **“**But Britt, what if . . . hypothetically speaking . . . while being attacked or raped, I managed to bite a man’s ear . . . drawing blood. Would you tell me I shouldn’t have done that? That he might get an infection?” **“**That’s different.” **“**Is it all that different?” **“**It’s different,” replied Britt. “Besides, you’ve had a lot of fun this summer.” **“**So . . . because I found some enjoyment in being nude, I wasn’t bullied . . . psychologically bullied out of my clothes?” **“**Something like that,” agreed Britt. **“**Well, Britt . . . you fell right into my trap.” **“**How so?” **“**I’ve read that a few women actually orgasm during rape.” **“**I’ve heard that,” said Britt. **“**Few rape victims will admit it. They’re embarrassed about it, and they think that people will conclude that they enjoyed being raped. Their assumption being that people will think that an orgasm equals enjoyment and enjoyment equals consent.”Jill paused to see how Britt might react to such a contentious, offensive statement. When she didn’t reply, Jill continued, “In other words, just because I found enjoyment in certain aspects, it doesn’t mean that I gave consent . . . that I wasn’t bullied.” **“**So, tell your story,” Britt suggested again. **“**With all due respect, Britt, I don’t think you are really listening to Jill,” said Jenna. **“**Thank you, Jenna,” said Jill. “I want less publicity, not more. A lot of rape victims never come forward. They’d rather suffer . . . alone in the shadows.” **“**Is that you?” asked Jenna. “Are you going to suffer in the shadows?” **“**Hardly,” said Jill, standing up from the bed she had been sitting on. “I’m a changed person!”In one quick motion, she pulled her shirt off over her head. In the next instant, she kicked off the slip-ons and slid both the miniskirt and the shorts down her legs. As she had no underwear, she was completely naked. She fell back onto the bed and lay there, staring up at the ceiling. **“**I’d never have done that prior to this summer . . . not even alone. I’m a changed woman. I’m surprisingly comfortable naked . . . before this summer I never would have been able to lie here on the bed like this. That’s a completely unanticipated consequence of all that has happened. In fact, I’ve learned so much about myself this summer that I’m glad I came back to Cache Lake. I wish there had been no rockslide, I wish that broadcast had never happened, and I wish the pictures and videos didn’t exist, but I do seem to enjoy being naked under the right conditions. Still . . . that doesn’t mean that I gave consent . . . that I wasn’t bullied.”She rolled over on her side and looked at the two surprised women taking in her nude form from seated positions on the other bed. **“**Is that contradictory?” she asked. **“**I guess not,” said Britt, her eyes sweeping up Jill’s slender form to her face. **“**Good,” said Jill, sitting up. It was nice to feel as if she’d gotten her point across. “I’m very glad that I learned this about myself . . . that I’m drawn to nudity. But forgive me . . . please . . . if I don’t love everything about how I got here.”Standing back up, she picked up her shorts. **“**You don’t have to get dressed,” said Britt. **“**But I do,” said Jill. “I need some toiletries. I saw a minimarket down the street. I’m going down there to get what I need.” **“**Since you like being naked so much, you should go naked,” suggested Britt. **“**I did go into a store naked today,” said Jill, the memory making her skin tingle. “But only because I had to. Not doing that again.” **“**I’ve got just the thing,” said Britt, opening a small suitcase. She pulled out a small grey garment and tossed it to Jill. “Wear this, but only this.”Jill held it up. “This?” she asked. It seemed to be a very thin T-shirt. **“**Try it on,” Britt encouraged.Jill shrugged but walked over in front of the full-length mirror as she went about locating the neck hole. A moment later, she had her arms in the short sleeves and was pulling it down her body. **“**It’s a T-shirt. I can get away with wearing it as a dress,” said Britt. “But you’re so much taller. It’ll be real short on you. Really, really short.”It was nothing more than a simple solid grey T-shirt made of very thin material. Jill reached down. Her hands touched her bare legs. **“**See . . . it’s short,” said Britt. **“**And quite loose on her narrow hips,” Jenna observed.Jill lifted her arms overhead, watching the hem rise in the mirror. **“**There’s where Fuzzy Wuzzy used to be,” remarked Jenna, staring at Jill’s crotch. **“**That’s Fuzzy Wuzzy’s ghost,” said Jill with a smile. She thought of mentioning that Ryan had coined the term, but didn’t. **“**Now all three of us are bald beaver babes! That’s what Jenna and I call ourselves,” said Britt with a broad smile. “And you, my friend, better keep your arms down in public!”Jill lowered her arms and watched her pussy disappear. With her arms down, her crotch was hidden, but just barely. **“**I’m supposed to go out in just this?” she asked. **“**Don’t you want to?” asked Britt.Jill smiled, but then bit her lip, trying to decide if she dared. **“**But if you need something from a high shelf, better have one of us get it,” said Jenna. **“**Or a low shelf,” added Britt. “No bending over.” **“**Okay,” Jill agreed, summoning her courage. She knew it would be fun but wondered if she’d give in so easily had she not had the sake. The dress provided no margin of safety.After slipping her shoes back on, the three of them headed out into the night. A minute later they were walking down the sidewalk next to a busy four-lane street. Jill had David’s wallet clutched in her hand. There wasn’t a pocket for it.

**Chapter 155: Jill’s Motel Room

“**My God, you’ve got long legs!” exclaimed Jenna from just behind. **“**That’s just an optical illusion . . . half her butt’s showing,” giggled Britt. **“**It’s not. Is it?” she asked, turning to look at Jenna. **“**Just when you move,” chuckled Jenna. “No more turns like that. You’re going to need to be careful . . . really, really careful.”Again, Jill used her hands to feel the length of the skirt. She’d never worn anything nearly so short before. She’d also never gone out in a dress without panties. Suddenly she realized that she was experiencing two firsts at once. Probably not the right two firsts to cross off her list at the same time, she thought. **“**Almost like being naked,” she mumbled, feeling the breeze all the way up to her ribcage. **“**It would be so easy to strip you,” said Britt. **“**You better not!” said Jill, grabbing the hem and holding it down over her pubic mound. **“**I only meant to point out, that it’s good that Ryan’s not here.” **“**Yeah, good thing,” agreed Jenna with a laugh. “He might be in the mood for a little revenge.” **“**Revenge?” asked Jill. **“**A definite possibility. I’d say you just upped the ante. You made it physical. What’s to stop him now?”As Jill entered the store, she glanced up. There was a security camera pointing right at her. She’d never looked for those in the past. She moved quickly into the store, turning her face away from the camera. She did her best to avoid any sudden, dress-swinging movements. She wanted to be in and out as quickly as possible.She was on pins and needles as she found the aisle she needed in the brightly lit store. She saw another security camera, but fortunately, it too was up high. A low-angle camera might be able to see that she was bottomless. Such a camera might actually capture an image of her bare lady lips, but not one up high, she considered. She focused her thoughts on keeping her arms down and avoiding any sudden movements.She kept a watchful eye on Britt as she made her selections. Jenna would never tear off or hike her dress up in public, but Britt was a lot less predictable. Fortunately, it was late and the store seemed empty.While checking out, she noticed that the cashier seemed to be staring. His eyes would sweep the length of her legs, lingering on her hemline, but then he would glance up at her chest. Jill looked down and saw that her nipples had a happy, excited look about them, holding the shirt out away from her chest. She’d been so fixated on how bare she felt down below, that she hadn’t noticed just how pointy they were. But it only made sense. Being pantiless meant that her libido was cranked way up.As Jill paid, Britt broke the silence. “What are you staring at, young man?”Her question surprised Jill. The answer seemed so obvious. **“**She’s the naked girl from the news, isn’t she?” he asked.His words shocked Jill. Grabbing her purchases, she turned and raced for the door, not stopping until she was a few hundred feet down the sidewalk.Brit and Jenna caught up with her a minute later. They couldn’t stop laughing. **“**It’s not funny!” she shouted.It had never occurred to her that she might be recognized. She wondered if it was from the video or her interview, which had of course shown her face clearly. **“**That was hilarious!” said Britt. “You should have seen the look on his face!” **“**Not the right outfit to run in,” said Jenna. “The dress went up around your waist from your spin . . . and stayed there.” **“**It did?” she said in horror. **“**I can just imagine tomorrow’s follow-up news program . . . complete with a clip from the store’s security camera. Two clips, actually. Your smiling but nervous face on the way in. Your smiling butt crack on the way out,” said Britt. **“**Britt, don’t . . . you’re making her worry,” chastised Jenna. **“**Just being realistic. Those newswomen will have a field day with that!” laughed Britt. “Imagine the jokes they’ll ‘crack’!” **“**Stop it! I never should have listened to you two,” said Jill stomping off. **“**Actually, you should have,” said Britt. “How many times did we caution you about quick movements?” **“**Leave me alone,” said Jill, slowing way down. She’d suddenly realized that they were right next to the road and that headlights were illuminating her bare legs as cars whizzed by. She didn’t need to moon anyone else.Once they were back in the room, Jill stripped off the shirt and threw it at Britt. **“**It’s not the shirt’s fault,” said Britt. When Jill didn’t respond, she continued, “I think you should keep it . . . as a souvenir.” **“**No!” said Jill angrily. **“**She doesn’t need it,” said Jenna. “If she wants a souvenir, she can download the video of herself wearing it from the Channel Five website tomorrow.” **“**Not funny!” said Jill, grabbing her toiletries and going into the bathroom.A few minutes later, she emerged. After borrowing a charger and getting her phone plugged in, she climbed naked into bed. She had considered sleeping in her Sumo T-shirt, but she wanted to keep it as clean as possible. As it was her only shirt, she’d have to wear it again the next day.She was wishing she hadn’t thrown the shirt at Britt. It would have made a good nightshirt, but as things stood, she couldn’t ask to borrow it. Jill didn’t mind sleeping naked, but somehow, with the Copelands in the other bed, it didn’t feel right.Jill fell asleep while Britt and Jenna were getting ready for bed. It had been quite a day, physically as well as mentally exhausting.She might have slept straight through; however, something caused her to wake up in the middle of the night. It was quite dark, but a little light from the porch outside was seeping into the room around the perimeter of the curtain. Suddenly she realized what had caused her to wake up. There was someone at the door. The knock came again.Alarmed and confused, she got up and crept toward the door. She reached up and checked the chain lock. Relieved, she discovered that it was secure. Suddenly someone switched on the bedside lamp. Jill glanced back at the girls in the other bed.Britt was sitting up. “What’s going on?” she asked. **“**Someone’s outside,” replied Jill in a hushed voice.The knocking came again. **“**The peephole,” suggested Britt quietly.As Jill placed her eye to the small lens, she heard, “Jill, it’s us . . . let us in.” **“**Who is that?” asked Britt. **“**Oh, my God! It’s my mom,” she said, her face against the door. Suddenly she felt more naked than ever. **“**Aren’t you going to let her in?” asked Britt. **“**Do I have to?” **“**Here, put this on,” said Britt.Jill felt something hit her. It was the grey shirt. In a flash, she had it back on. **“**Mom, what’s going on?” she asked, opening the door just the few inches that the chain allowed. **“**I’m sorry to wake you, but they don’t have any more rooms. We’ll have to stay with you.” **“**Mom, I’m not alone.” **“**I know. David told us about Nick.”Suddenly Jill remembered mentioning something to David about not being able to rent a room . . . how Nick had helped. She couldn’t recall exactly what she had said, but she remembered giving him the motel name and her room number – just in case. **“**Just a minute, Mom,” said Jill, closing the door. **“**You’re going to let her in, right?” asked Britt, shaking Jenna to wake her up. **“**I guess have to. It’s my mom and dad.” **“**It’s okay . . . but it’ll be tight,” said Britt. **“**Are you decent?” **“**We’ve got more on than you,” Britt replied.Jill’s hands went to the hem of the grey dress. **“**Okay,” said Jill, undoing the chain and opening the door. **“**So sorry to wake you,” said her mom. “There just didn’t seem to be an option. But I’m not very happy about you spending the night with a guy . . . an older man.” **“**Is that what David said?” asked Jill, stepping back so her parents could enter. “Mom, Dad, this is Britt and Jenna,” she added as her parents' eyes adjusted to the dim light in the room.Jill saw her mom’s eyes darting around. “Where’s Nick? In the bathroom?” **“**Mom, please. Don’t embarrass me. I’m nineteen. Nick’s not here. He went home . . . back to Agency. He helped me by renting the room. I didn’t have my ID.”Britt got up and went into the restroom while Jenna rolled over to go back to sleep. **“**Hi, Dad,” said Jill, giving him a hug as he set down some luggage. **“**Who are they?” her mom asked in a whisper, pointing at Jenna.Jill looked at the clock. It was 2:10 am. “Friends, but it’s a long story. I’ll tell you in the morning.” **“**Jill, you can sleep with us,” said Britt, coming back out of the restroom. She climbed back into the bed next to Jenna, shoving her over to try and make room. **“**Okay,” said Jill appreciatively. “You guys can take my bed,” she added, looking at her mother. **“**Thanks,” said her mom, stepping toward her for a hug. “It’s been a tough day, hasn’t it?” **“**That’s sure an understatement,” said Jill, holding her mom. **“**By the way, your nightshirt is inside out. The tag’s in front.”Jill glanced down at the tag on her chest and felt her face flush. She didn’t know how to explain, so she went over and climbed into bed next to Britt, doing her best not to flash her parents in the process. **“**Turn off the light as soon as you can,” she said, rolling over to face Britt.Their eyes met. Britt reached up and lightly stroked Jill’s cheek. “It’s alright. Get some sleep,” she whispered softly.Jill tried to fall back asleep, but that proved to be impossible until long after her parents were settled and the light was off. It had been such a wild day that her thoughts jumped from one thing to another like a ping pong ball.Jill woke in a state of bewilderment, the feeling of an actual bed causing her confusion. She hadn’t slept on a mattress in nearly two months. Seeing the morning light filtering in around the curtain, she quickly recalled why she was in a motel. Hearing the shower running, she lifted her head. She was the only one in the bed.Rolling onto her back, she raised herself up onto her elbows and looked around. Her parents were in the other bed; her mom looking at her. **“**Good morning, Sweetheart,” she said with a smile. **“**Good morning, Mom.” **“**I’m so glad you weren’t in here with a boy. I’m sure he’s nice, but…”Jill interrupted her. “Mom, I’m nineteen.” **“**I guess I must be a little old-fashioned.” **“**In which case, I probably shouldn’t tell you that Britt and Jenna are lesbians.” **“**Don’t joke with me. Yesterday was quite a shock . . . not sure I can take much more.” **“**I hear you,” replied Jill, “but it wasn’t a joke. They are lesbians.” **“**Is that why they’re showering together?” **“**I suppose,” said Jill with a shrug. **“**Is that why your nightshirt was inside out and backwards?” **“**No! Nothing happened. They’re nice women . . . they’re married.” She looked down at the tag just below her chin. “It’s like that because I put it on in the dark.”Her mom gave that a little consideration. “Makes sense. If I shared a room with a couple of lesbians, I know I wouldn’t change until the lights were off.”Jill chuckled to herself, but she was glad that her mother had found an explanation that worked for her.

**Chapter 156: Pancake House**

Jill looked at her mother in the dim light of the motel room. Both Britt and Jenna were in the bathroom, and the shower could be heard running.

“I know, Mom, but again . . . please don’t embarrass me. I’m sure that girls didn’t marry each other back in the day…”

“They didn’t. They couldn’t.”

“Well, things have changed. And these are nice girls, smart girls.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I won’t say anything, and I’ll explain things to your father.”

“Don’t worry,” she heard her father say. “I’m awake. I heard. I’m an open-minded guy.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she said, trying to figure out the logistics of how they might all get showered and dressed in such close quarters. “Why don’t you get the next shower? That might be the most comfortable for Britt and Jenna . . . so that they can get dressed and dry their hair.”

“No problem,” he replied.

Quite sometime later, the five of them were waiting to be seated at a pancake house located next door to the motel. Jill had thought that her mother would race across the street to see David first thing; however, she’d seen him the night before. That seemed to have taken care of the urgency. It had involved waking him up, but the nurses had assured her that it would be fine.

“I see where Jill gets her long legs,” Britt commented, looking her father up and down. He was every bit as tall as David, probably taller.

“Certainly not from me,” replied her mother. Physique wise, she was a short version of Jill, similarly slender.

As they were seated, Jill’s father said, “I’m so glad you made the effort to get word to my parents, Jill. It’s not good news, but it’s better for them to know than to be left worrying. At some point, they’d initiate a search and rescue operation of their own.”

“So if Nick shows up today, be real nice to him. He was a big help yesterday.” She went on to describe, in addition to how he had rented the room for her and agreed to drive out to Cache Lake to speak with her grandparents, how he had taken part in the rescue as a Forest Service volunteer, and how he had driven her to Elk Bend, “Pretty nice for the ‘older man’ that you thought was taking advantage of your daughter, right?”

“I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions,” her mother apologized.

“Someone has a crush on Jill . . . if you’re not picking up on that,” said Jenna.

“And the feelings seem to be mutual,” added Britt.

Jill quickly denied having any romantic interests in Nick whatsoever.

“We learned a few things at the hospital last night, Jill,” said her mom.

“You did?” replied Jill apprehensively.

“The nurses told us that you were a hero . . . getting help to David so quickly . . . possibly even saving his life. They also told us that you were naked the entire time. That you even made the evening news . . . also naked . . . something about a video of you running through town that way. I can’t even begin to wrap my head around that.”

Jill had known that her parents would find out everything, but she’d hoped it wouldn’t be so soon.

“Mom, I’m not going to lie to you,” she said with a heavy sigh.

Jill glanced over at Britt. She was looking deep into her eyes and shaking her head discreetly.

Realizing that Britt was right, Jill decided that she was going to lie, but it would be a white lie. She started off by repeating, “I’m not going to lie to you. I’m hardly a hero. I was so scared. I can’t imagine life without David. I did what I had to do, but I had very little to work with.”

“Your daughter rose to the occasion, Mrs. Wahlund! She saved the day!” said Britt. “And don’t put up with her humility.”

“We are proud of you, dear,” said her mother. “I don’t know what all happened, but I just can’t imagine how you managed . . . how you kept your wits about you. Glad you did, but I just can’t begin to believe that you were able to do anything more than curl up into a ball and cry . . . under those circumstances.”

“Crying wouldn’t have solved anything,” replied Jill.

“I know, I know,” said her mom.

“And Jill’s not a crybaby,” said her father. “She’s good under pressure. That’s why she’s always the one chosen to take the shot at the buzzer.”

“I know,” said her mom. “But this is different. You know as well as I just how shy she is. The Jill I know would freeze up solid upon finding herself naked.”

“Well, you have a point there,” acknowledged her father raising his eyebrows and nodding knowingly.

Jill was surprised to hear them talking about her like this, especially in front of Britt and Jenna, but not at all by what they were saying. Her parents knew her as well as anyone. The old Jill would never have been able to function naked. She wondered if that Jill would have even been able to breathe.

“But I don’t know the first thing about head injuries,” said her mom. “What the nurses said about David’s condition went in one ear and out the other. Cerebral edema . . . whatever that is?”

“Ask Britt,” suggested Jill. “She’s just gotten her M.D. degree.”

“Really!?” said both her parents simultaneously.

Jill was glad that her parents had lots of medical questions for Britt, keeping the nudity issue at bay for the time being.

“The brain does not heal like other organs,” explained Britt. “And it’s important to understand that traumatic brain injury typically occurs in two stages. The primary stage involves injuries that are a direct result of the impact. Brain cells killed in that event . . . gone forever . . . however, to a limited extent, other brain cells can take over their function. A secondary injury then typically follows . . . an indirect result of the primary injury. The primary injury causes bleeding or swelling within the brain…”

“Cerebral edema,” said her father, paying close attention.

“Exactly! Brain cells that die due to these secondary issues . . . also gone forever. What happened in David’s case is very typical. His doctor . . . I had the chance to speak with him last night . . . believes that the extent of the initial damage was rather limited. However, a time bomb was activated because swelling ensued . . . swelling that would lead to decreased circulation. Hypoxia, oxygen deprivation. It was critically important that the swelling process be prevented from running its course.”

“Isn’t she good at explaining medical stuff,” said Jenna proudly.

“She is,” agreed Mr. Wahlund. “Go on.”

“Swelling is a relatively slow process. There is time; however, it’s a limited amount of time. But if the pressure gets too high, blood stops flowing into the skull. Result . . . no oxygen to the brain. The doctor told me that all the right things happened on the mountain yesterday. In the first place, Jeffrey Hicks got to David before the swelling was too severe, and once there, he initiated all the right things. Fortunately, he’d gotten the helicopter dispatched immediately . . . even making sure that there was oxygen on board . . . right after speaking with Jill.”

“And me,” said her mother.

That comment surprised Britt, so Jill took a moment to explain how she had called her mother from Hicks’ office in her desperate effort to be taken seriously. Britt had not been aware of that detail.

“Again,” replied Britt. “That’s a perfect example of Jill working the situation . . . using her brain . . . doing all that was within her power to get David the help he needed. Somehow, under very difficult circumstances, she managed to find just the right person in all of Stanton.”

“She’s a smart girl,” said her father proudly.

“And she ran her little butt off,” interjected Jenna. “…so obvious in that video.”

“Yes . . . that too!” said Britt. “Thanks to her, the helicopter crew was being called up even before Hicks and Jill left the Stanton city limits.”

“And Nick . . . he was with us,” Jill reminded her.

“Yep . . . can’t leave him out, right?” said Britt, glancing over at Jill with an amused look on her face. “The injury took place in a very remote location. And yet David was receiving medical treatment in around an hour and a half . . . amazing . . . simply amazing! Your daughter did that!”

“She kicked some serious butt!” added Jenna.

Jill didn’t know what to say; she just sat there listening.

“Even ten minutes more might have made a significant difference,” added Britt. “And if an hour or two had been lost, everything would now be different. David might not have survived . . . we refer to that as being ‘brain dead.’ And if he had lived, he probably wouldn’t be talking.”

“So, what the nurses said about Jill possibly having saved his life . . . true?” asked her mother.

“Impossible to know, but hardly lip service,” replied Britt. “Every year we lose a football player or two, young men around David’s age, to just such a head injury because they aren’t diagnosed and treated in time. Of course, David might not have died had an hour or two been lost, but he’d probably be looking at a much different future . . . months, maybe years of rehab. And he’d never be the same. Under those circumstances, he’d probably never attend college. Like Jill, he’s planning to go this fall, right?”

“Yes . . . will he be able to?” asked Jill’s father.

“I don’t know . . . hopefully,” said Britt. “But remember, I’m not his doctor. I wasn’t even allowed to see his medical records. You know . . . HIPAA regulations. I’m just telling you what I know, mostly based on a recent rotation.”

“We understand . . . much appreciated,” said Jill’s father.

“Rotation?” asked Jill’s mother.

“I’ll explain,” said Jenna. “The last two years of medical school are composed primarily of six-week clerkships. Britt calls them rotations.”

“It’s what everyone calls them,” said Britt with a shrug.

“Thank you for explaining things. And I mean that most sincerely,” said Jill’s father.

“I don’t know everything, but I know enough to know how much of an impact Jill’s efforts yesterday will likely have on David’s prognosis. She sacrificed herself on that mountain . . . and in Stanton yesterday. She did it knowingly. And it will probably end up making all the difference in the world . . . for David.”

**Chapter 157: The Waitress**

Jill glanced over and saw tears streaming down her mother’s face. Her father looked to be on the verge. She’d heard the word ‘hero’ being tossed about, but she’d assumed that everyone was using the term lightly. Hearing Britt explain things so that a layman might understand them, was finally making it all sink in.

“She could have gone in search of clothing . . . she didn’t,” continued Britt. “An inner voice told her that every second counted. That voice was right.”

“She loves her brother,” said Jenna. “Even exposed like that, getting help was her primary focus . . . nay . . . her only focus. She’s worried that she’s going to pay a price for the choice she made. And she might be right.”

“But she’ll have her brother!” said Britt.

Jill’s mom reached over and put her arms around Jill, pulling her toward her. “I love you so much, Jilly! I hope you know that.”

Jill was surprised. ‘Jilly,’ was David’s term of endearment. Her parents didn’t call her that. Similarly, no one other than herself called David, ‘Pocket.’ Those nicknames had always been sacred ‘twins’ territory, at least within the Wahlund household. Hearing the nickname from her mother caught her off guard. She was doing her best to resist crying, but that only made it more difficult. She felt another set of hands on her shoulders. Glancing up, she saw that her father had slid in behind her mother and was hugging the both of them, his eyes tear-filled as well.

“Thank you for doing this . . . for David,” said her father.

“It was what anyone would have done . . . but I did it for me, Dad. I wouldn’t be able to go on without David,” she said, blinking back a tear.

Jill could tell that her mom was struggling, trying to say something.

“You did it for all of us . . . but mostly for David,” said her father. He was clearly getting choked up.

“I’d die without my twins,” her mother finally managed to get out, breaking down.

Jenna pulled a packet of tissues out of her purse and started handing them out. “It’s wonderful to see how much you all love one another,” she said once they were starting to put the emotional moment behind them.

“There has been no greater blessing in this life than these twins,” replied her mother through her blubbering.

“Agreed,” echoed her father.

Jill went to the bathroom to splash water on her face. That helped, but her eyes were red.

A few minutes later, as they were placing their orders, Jill noticed that the waitress was eyeing her.

“You’re the talk of the town, young lady,” she remarked after receiving all their orders.

“Me?” said Jill, not wanting to have anyone talking about her.

“I watched the news last night, but a lot of people never do. Alfonso, the lead cook, showed everyone what they missed . . . in the kitchen a while ago . . . so now everyone’s seen it.”

“I want to see it,” said Jill’s father.

“No you don’t, Dad,” said Jill, realizing that he might eventually, but wishing that he wouldn’t.

“Is she that easy to recognize in the video?” asked her mom.

“Well, wearing that shirt, certainly,” replied the waitress before leaving to put in the order.

“Jill, they led me to believe that you were naked on TV,” said her mother quietly.

Jill looked down at the giant red sun on her ‘Do you want Sumo this?’ T-shirt. “Not during the interview, Mom,” she said. “But I’ve really got to change my shirt.”

“Go naked!” suggested Britt with a mischievous smile.

Jill scowled at her. “Then everyone would recognize me.”

“I was just kidding,” said Britt, getting up from the table. “Here, I’ll help you.”

Jill and Britt left the restaurant, returning a few minutes later. Jill was again wearing Britt’s grey T-shirt, this time with the pair of light blue shorts visible below the hem.

“I can’t believe you’re not wearing a bra,” said her mother quietly. “You’ve never gone out without a bra.”

“I don’t have one,” said Jill with a shrug.

“You could borrow one,” said her mother.

Jill glanced around at the three women’s chests: Jenna’s large breasts, Britt’s medium-sized breasts, and her mother’s barely-there breasts.

“Mom, I don’t need a bra any more than you do.”

“I know that, Dear. But that’s not why we wear them, now is it?”

Jill shrugged. “I’m not sure I see the point anymore.”

Jill saw the surprised look on her mother’s face.

“You go girl!” remarked Britt, giving her the thumbs up.

The conversation about bras ended there as their food arrived at that point.

Jill was about half done with her veggie omelet when the waitress again stopped by, this time with a pot of coffee for refills.

“We’ve got a wager going,” she explained. “A few of us think that you lost your clothes yesterday as a result of the rockslide . . . as your sidekick said. But a couple of the guys in the kitchen believe that you were already naked. I’m embarrassed to bring this up, but as there’s money riding on it, they elected me to come and find out the truth.”

Jill glanced over and saw that the door to the kitchen was being held open. There were several faces peering out.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” she said, deciding that she’d had enough – enough of her breakfast as well as the situation.

She stood up and walked out. Britt and Jenna followed. They stood outside talking while they waited for their parents to pay and join them.

The waitress did stick her head out the door to apologize, but somehow it didn’t sound especially sincere to Jill.

“Sorry about that, Dad,” Jill said when he came out a minute later.

“It’s quite alright,” he replied. “She was out of line. This situation is new for all of us . . . the waitress included.”

“There’s still no excuse,” added her mother. “But let’s forget about it and go and see your brother.”

With that, the five of them walked to the intersection and pressed the button for the walk light.

David was still in the ICU. Jill’s parents wanted a physician update, but they had to wait a long time for a doctor to stop by his room. While they were all waiting, Britt and Jenna offered to again do Jill’s hair.

Jill didn’t know if she was in the mood, but then Britt whispered in her ear, “Maybe it will help you be a little more incognito.”

That was all that Jill needed to hear. It actually made her wonder if she should chop her hair off, but she decided that she was much too attached to it to consider something so extreme.

“Your hair looks so lovely this summer,” remarked her mother before they started. “I love the highlights.”

“I’ve gotten a lot of sun this summer,” she replied. They were, of course, talking about her hair, but Jill couldn’t help but think about all the sun the rest of her body had gotten as well.

“Let’s do it just like before,” proposed Jenna. “Only, this time, instead of French braids, let’s do Dutch braids.”

“What are Dutch braids?” asked Jill.

“You really don’t know?” asked Britt. Seeing Jill shaking her head, Britt continued, “Well then, Dutch braids it is.”

“I don’t know either,” said David as both girls started working on Jill’s hair.

“Yeah, but you’ve got a good excuse,” said Britt. “You’re a dude. Guys are always oblivious to such things.”

“And your hair is too short to braid,” added Jenna. “…yet another excuse.”

Eventually, the doctor did come and they all received an update on David’s condition. Britt asked a number of questions that went over everyone else’s heads; however, the doctor appeared delighted to have the opportunity to discuss David’s treatment on a more technical level.

“Love that about medicine,” said Britt after the doctor had gone. “Everyone is so willing to share their knowledge, especially the doctors.”

As the morning rolled on, Jill started getting a little bored. David had turned back into her twin brother – the same old somewhat boring twin brother. She was delighted that it seemed as if he was doing fine, but she didn’t exactly feel like hanging out with him in the hospital room.

Lamenting that she didn’t have a book from her college syllabus with her, Jill left the room saying that she was going to go and visit Ryan. Along the way, while looking for an excuse to not visit him, a women’s magazine caught her eye in a small waiting room near the elevators.

She opened it, but instead of reading, she decided to try and update her tally while things were still fresh in her mind. The last twenty-four hours had been beyond crazy, and she knew it was going to be a challenge. She walked back to the closest nurses station and borrowed a pen and a piece of paper.

The nurse she spoke with recognized Jill from the evening news, but Jill managed to limit the conversation to a brief discussion of her twin brother’s condition. Fortunately, the nurse seemed just as interested in that as the fact that she had been naked.

Back in the otherwise empty waiting room, she wrote ‘38’ at the top of the page. That had been the total prior to the hike that had come to an abrupt end with the rockslide. She wrote ‘+5’ for the group that had witnessed them making the video of the Tarzan yell. Next came a ‘+2’ for the male hikers near the top and then another ‘+2’ for the couple that included the lawyer. She totaled the column, ’47.’ That was where the count had stood as she’d entered Stanton. Deciding that she would keep the sheet of paper as a memento, she went back and wrote short descriptions next to each number.

From there, she thought back over the baseball diamonds and her run through the sprinkler. The people there had all been too far away to count, so she didn’t add them. Next, she wrote down ‘+3’ for the woman with kids in the grocery store parking lot. There might have been more kids in her vehicle, she realized, but there had been at least two. Again she totaled the sheet, ’50.’

Next, she considered the boys on their bikes. Deciding that a dozen was a conservative estimate, she raised the tally to, ’62.’ There might have been as many as sixteen or more, but there had certainly been a dozen.

She then thought of the pedestrians along the route, both those that had seen her running as well as those who had seen her on the bike. It had been a sunny afternoon, and there had been quite a few people on the sidewalk. Again, she was forced to come up with an estimate. She wrote down, ‘+10’ and again totaled the sheet, ’72.’

There had also been people in cars, both drivers as well as passengers. Remembering the four-way stop intersection that she had crossed diagonally while following the helpful boy, she wrote down, ‘+8’ making for a new total of, ’80.’

After that, she wrote down, ‘+1 … driver of small pickup that followed me.’

With that addition, the total had increased from forty-seven to eighty-one on the way across town to the ranger station. Thirty-four people in such a short span of time, and yet it was hardly surprising. Stanton was a small city, not a hiking trail. She, of course, had no trouble believing it – she had lived it!

She then added ‘+3’ for Mrs. Brooks, Hicks, and the man who had been getting the Jeep ready behind the ranger station. Again she totaled the column, ’84.’

And from there, she and Hicks had headed out of town. Considering the stop at Skyline Adventures, she wrote, ‘+1’ … Nick.’ From there she didn’t have any additions until, ‘+2 … helicopter crew.’ Her next total was therefore, ’87.’

She remembered the couple finding her asleep in the back of the Jeep, but they were already in the tally; she’d met them on the trail on the way into town.

From there, Jill decided that she had gotten all the way to the thrift store without anyone else seeing her that needed to be added to the list. People had seen her along the way, but she’d been mostly hidden within Nick’s truck; this was her tally of those that had gotten a good look at her – seen everything.

At the thrift store, she decided not to add the woman with the toddler or those in the front of the store. Any of them might have noticed her and seen that she was naked, but she hadn’t caught sight of them doing so including them would involve speculation.

The next person that she decided to add was the woman in teal sweats. That woman had certainly seen her! She wrote down, ‘+3’ for her and the two teen girls in the aisle she’d turned down. That made her new subtotal ‘90.’ After writing that down, she again went back and added a few short descriptions.

Jill couldn’t believe that the number had gotten to ninety, but she also knew that she wasn’t done.

**Chapter 158: Jill’s Tally**

The store security guard brought the total to ‘91.’ Diana, the cashier that had rung her up, was ‘92.’ For the second cashier and her customer, she wrote, ‘+2.’ She totaled the column, ‘94.’ There had been others watching as she’d pulled down her shorts and opened the coat, flashing the cashier to prove that she didn’t have anything else on, but they had mostly been to the side. Some of them might have gotten an eyeful. Indeed, they’d known that she was baring all, but they hadn’t had the frontal view required to meet the strict definition for inclusion on her list of those that had seen her naked.

And then she’d been dressed and she and Nick had driven to Elk Bend. She considered the minimarket cashier. He’d certainly gotten a great view of her butt, but possibly not much else. She decided not to add him. And with that, her list was up-to-date. She glanced over her sheet detailing the 56 people, (94-38), that had seen her naked during the course of just the one day. She had no doubt that it was a record that would stand the test of time.

Suddenly, Jill sensed that someone in the hallway was standing still and looking into the room. Glancing up, she was surprised to see Kyle.

“Kyle! Where the heck did you come from?” she asked in a cheery voice, folding up the sheet of paper as quickly as she could.

“Been looking everywhere for you,” he replied, entering and walking toward her. “What were you working on so seriously, pen in hand?”

“Nothing,” she said, hurriedly shoving the folded up piece of paper into a pocket.

Kyle eyed her suspiciously as Jill did her best to appear as innocent as possible. She certainly didn’t want anyone to know that she was tracking how many people had seen her naked. They might think that she was trying to drive up the number. She knew she wasn’t, but she didn’t want the topic to even come up.

At first, it appeared that Kyle was going to keep asking about the sheet of paper, but then he said, “In David’s room, they told me that you had gone to see Ryan. However, when I got there, Ryan said you hadn’t been by. So, I’ve been wandering the halls looking for you.”

“I’m kinda hiding out,” Jill admitted.

“So I see. Nice braids, by the way!”

“Thanks, but . . . what brings you here?”

“Actually, I drove your grandparents . . . in their truck.” Sitting down next to her, he explained how, after seeing no activity in their camp via binoculars the evening before or that morning, he had paddled across the lake. “Mostly, I was coming over in hopes of confirming that we were still on for our weekly basketball game.”

“Oh, is it Friday?”

“It’s Friday, and you and I are teammates, remember?”

“Oh, Kyle. I’m sorry. Basketball’s been the furthest thing from my mind.”

“I’m not surprised. Your grandparents filled me in. After I found your camp empty, I took the trail back to their trailer. They were getting ready to leave for the hospital. They told me everything. I asked to ride along . . . ended up driving.

“Everything?” asked Jill. She was glad to have confirmation that Nick had completed his mission, but she was curious just how much detail he might have included.

“Yes, everything. They told me that you sent a friend out to the lake last night so that they would know where you all were. I learned that David and Ryan had been injured and airlifted to Elk Bend.”

“What else did they say?” she asked. She wanted to know if Nick had told her grandparents about the nudity.

“They told me how you had gone for help . . . running all the way to Stanton . . . returning with search and rescue personnel. They were so worried about David, but they’re with him now. They seem relieved . . . he’s awake and talking. Your parents are there as well.”

“It was nice of you to drive them here,” said Jill, realizing that she was probably not going to find out if Kyle and her grandparents knew that she had been nude without asking about that specifically. She didn’t want to do that for the simple reason that it would give it away. She knew that it didn’t really matter. Kyle would find out sooner or later – probably sooner.

“It looks as if we won’t be playing basketball today,” he said glumly.

“I guess not,” she said, remembering that David would have been pressuring her to play naked.

“Hopefully, we’re still on for the movie.”

“Oh, Kyle . . . I’m so sorry. I forgot all about that, too.”

“It’s okay. You’ve had your hands full.”

“The last twenty-four hours did not go at all as I thought they might,” she said, trying to make it an open-ended remark, hopefully, one that would invite comment. She was still hoping to get him to reveal what he knew about the nudity – if he did.

“Yeah . . . sounds like you had quite a day yesterday. Wow! My day was pretty dull, but to my credit, I practiced everything you taught me . . . really hoping you and I might win a game . . . together.”

“That’s so sweet!” she said. “…would have been fun.”

“Would have been? How about next week! We can keep practicing. I’m available every day.”

“I don’t imagine that there’ll be any more basketball games this summer,” she said, wishing there was a way to let him down easily. “Especially not any that include David and Ryan.”

“Suppose not. But surely we’re still on for the movie,” he said, sounding as if he was trying to look on the bright side.

Jill took a deep breath. “I don’t know,” she said, looking out the window. “But I’m ready to go back to David’s room. I’d like to see my grandparents.”

“Okay,” he said, standing back up.

Remembering the twins as they walked down the hall, she asked, “While you were in David’s room, did you happen to meet my two new friends, Britt and Jenna?”

“Oh, yes. The blondes. How could I forget?”

“What do you mean?”

“One of them asked me if I was the asshole that roped you. That sure caught me off guard!”

“Oh dear! Not in front of my parents . . . or grandparents, I hope.”

“No. In the hall.”

“Phew . . . that’s a relief. Don’t need more people finding out about that. That I was roped, but also that I was naked that day as well. What did you say?”

“That I didn’t rope you, but that I was there and helped chase you up a tree.”

“You didn’t!”

“I thought it sounded funny, but I should have sensed that it wasn’t a moment for humor. For a minute there, I thought I was going to get my ass kicked.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t.”

“I explained a bit more of what happened, but they seemed to already know the whole story. I tried to get them to believe that I was the good guy in all of it. I’m pretty sure they didn’t believe much of what I said.”

“You WERE the good guy!”

“In retrospect, I could have done better by you.”

After taking a moment to give that some thought, Jill said, “Too bad you didn’t drive separately . . . you could have given me a ride. I’ve been thinking about the Jeep. It’s sitting by the side of a lonesome dirt road. I doubt anyone will mess with it, but the sooner I go and get it the better.

“We could take your grandparents’ truck,” suggested Kyle.

“But they’ll need it. Maybe the Copelands could drive me.”

“The who?”

“The blondes. That’s their last name.”

After a pause in their conversation, as they continued through the hospital, Kyle asked, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I was under the impression that your nude foray into the cabin area was some sort of an accident . . . certainly a ‘one-off.’ But here, suddenly it’s happened again. It can’t be a coincidence. There seems to be another side to you, Jill. One that . . . you are in denial about? Or trying to keep hidden?”

Jill stopped in the middle of the hall and turned to face him. “I thought that you didn’t know. I kept asking…”

“You kept asking what your grandparents told me. The nudity . . . I just found out about that from Ryan.”

“What did he say?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does to me.”

“I want to know the truth . . . what YOU have to say . . . not Ryan’s take on things. I know that you don’t really want to talk about it, but hopefully, you know that you can trust me.”

Jill took a deep breath. There were several upholstered benches in front of some tall plate-glass windows with a view of the distant mountains. She walked over and sat down. This was destined to be a conversation that could not be concluded on the short walk to David’s room.

With her elbows on her knees, she leaned forward and placed her head in her hands. She sighed deeply. She felt trapped, but she had to figure out how to deal with such questions. They weren’t going to be unique to Kyle. Likely she’d be facing them over and over.

Glancing up, she looked into his eyes. “Okay, fair enough. Sit down and let’s talk.”

“Okay,” said Kyle, taking a seat next to her.

“Kyle, I’m just a girl . . . an ordinary girl. As ordinary as they come.”

He looked doubtful. “As ordinary as they come? I hardly think so.”

“But I am. In the past, if I stood out from the crowd, it was only because I’ve gotten good grades and was the captain of the girls’ basketball team. Few at my school would have even known that I played basketball, had I not worn my letterman’s jacket occasionally. I mean, who goes to the girls’ games?”

“I’m listening,” he replied.

“You’re not going to make this any easier, are you?”

Kyle just smiled.

“Well, like I said . . . an ordinary girl. Lots of girls get good grades, lots of student athletes. But this summer…” she paused.

“Go on,” he encouraged, a warm smile on his lips.

“It’s been a transformative summer. I’m no longer the same girl that I was when I came to the lake less than two months ago. I told the twins a take on this story last night.”

“The twins? But you’re the twins.”

“The Copelands. The blondes.”

**Chapter 159: A Bit Closer to the Truth**

“They’re twins?”

“No. It’s a long story. Like I was saying, I told them this story. The explanation I gave them involved psychological bullying . . . Ryan.”

“Really?”

“Yes . . . and it’s certainly true . . . and David was involved as well. However . . . there’s a lot more to it than that. Even though that might be the root cause, it’s hardly the full story. Even though, on the outside, I might have appeared to be an extremely well-adjusted girl, a model student even . . . inside, I was anything but. I’ve always considered myself an introvert. Basketball was difficult for me because I was uncomfortable being in the spotlight. I still am. That will always be me.”

“You don’t seem like an introvert.”

“But I am. I’ve always had difficulty making genuine connections with people. I’m not a person who has ever had many friends. Even the friends I’ve had . . . well . . . I guess I feel as if I’ve never been able to connect. David’s always been my best friend. How many girls would say that about their brother?”

“But the nudity?”

“I’m getting there. Bear with me. What I’ve come to realize this summer, is that it all went back to low self-esteem. I’ve always thought of myself as an ugly duckling.”

“You? An ugly duckling?”

“David called me ‘Jilly Bean’ . . . as in Jelly Bean, often shortening it to ‘Jilly’ or ‘Bean.’ That was fine, but at school, people picked up on it. ‘Bean’ became ‘Beanpole.’”

Kyle chuckled.

“Don’t laugh! I didn’t like being called, ‘Beanpole.’ I always tried to smile, but I hated it. It hurt because it was true. Now, there are a few girls as tall as me, but growing up, I was by far the tallest. First to grow height-wise, last to grow chest-wise. Flat as they come . . . that’s me!”

“You’re not flat!”

“Please, Kyle. If I’m going to be honest, then you need to be honest.” Kyle didn’t respond, so she continued, “I’ve made a little progress in the last year….” Looking down at her braless breasts just barely hidden by the one thin layer of cotton, Jill couldn’t believe that she was saying all this, especially to a member of the opposite sex. “…still essentially flat. I hope you don’t mind the long explanation.”

“I’m enjoying hearing what you have to say. I’m glad you’re comfortable talking to me . . . telling me this.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m comfortable. I’m shaking . . . see.” She took his hand so that he could feel hers. She tried to pull it back, but he held on.

“Due to being an introvert… Due to my low self-esteem… Due to being an unattractive beanpole… I was in a state of shock as Ryan embarked on a quest to get me to go topless this summer.”

“He what? How did he do that?”

“He wanted me to walk around topless . . . be ‘one of the guys.’”

“You . . . a guy?”

“I’m never going to get through this story if I have to tell it day-by-day. The bottom line is that, with David’s complicity, he succeeded in getting me to hike topless. It was scary as hell, but thrilling at the same time. And . . . I really can’t believe I’m telling you all this.”

“I’m glad you are.”

“At first I was positive that he wanted me topless to humiliate me. It seemed as if there could be no other explanation. That was simply the only justification that came to mind. But now I realize that was just me. I thought that ‘small’ and ‘ugly’ were synonyms when it came to tits. But, even though it was a difficult process to go through, I learned something. Ryan wasn’t trying to humiliate me. He genuinely thinks that I’m attractive . . . little tits and all.”

“You’re very attractive, gorgeous even.”

“I hope this won’t sound conceited . . . but I actually feel attractive now. I used to hide my skinny self under multiple layers. Look at me now. No bra! And the amazing thing is that I’m comfortable like this . . . without one.”

“Makes complete sense. It’s been such a warm summer.”

“But so was last summer. And yet last summer I didn’t go anywhere without a bra . . . no matter how hot and sweaty I was. Like I said, this summer has been transformative. I came here a shy, ugly beanpole. Ryan, even though he’s the ultimate asshole, has made me feel better about myself . . . much better.”

“He describes you as a supermodel.”

“I’ve heard him say that. I’m no supermodel. I’m just no longer embarrassed about my looks. So that’s definitely a positive.”

“And now you’re a streaker? You feel so good about your looks that you want to show the world?”

Jill blushed. “That’s not it at all. I’m not an exhibitionist . . . that’s what that would make me, right?”

“I suppose so.”

“I don’t even think I’m a nudist. There’s just something about being naked. Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it . . . that’s what I’d tell my old self if I could send a message back in time. It feels so wrong, that it feels so right!”

“Now that’s going to take some explaining.”

“Since I’m telling you this . . . trusting you . . . you’re not going to tell anyone else, right?” she asked apprehensively.

“Fair enough. Just between us.”

Jill looked into his eyes, trying to decide if she was sure she could trust him.

“Maybe I’m a bit of a thrill seeker. I don’t know. I guess I must be drawn to it . . . being naked . . . because it’s so off-the-charts scary.”

“Do you enjoy taking risks?”

“I never thought I did. But I must . . . up until the point that things go wrong. Like the morning I swam out to Sunken Island. That was fun . . . until . . . it suddenly wasn’t.”

“You aren’t exactly making sense. I mean, what you’re telling me seems full of contradictions.”

“I know that. I’m just answering your question, and I’m still trying to figure it out for myself. If it made sense, it would be easy. I took off my own clothes yesterday . . . don’t tell anyone that . . . and I did it all the way back in camp. The clothes I had on that morning are in my tent. I was naked in the Jeep on the way to the trailhead. I wasn’t stripped. I’d rather people believe that I was. But I was nude long before the rockslide. And then I had a hard choice to make. I think I made good decisions yesterday . . . other than deciding to go on the hike naked.”

Jill saw a smile form on Kyle’s lips. He chuckled.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re something. You are really something.”

“What am I?”

“A few minutes ago, I asked you to level with me . . . tell me the truth. I wanted to try and understand the real you. Thank you.”

“Okay then, but the real me? Who is the real me? …because I don’t think I know.”

“Well, on the one hand, you’re beautiful . . . on the outside. And on the other hand, you’re beautiful . . . on the inside.”

“I am?”

“What I mean is, you’ve got a lot of spunk. Guts! It’s your personality that makes you so appealing.”

Doing her best to ignore his comment, she said, “I make a lot of mistakes, that’s for sure, but let’s get going. And remember, not a word about this to anyone.”

Glancing over shyly, she saw him trace across his lips with a thumb and forefinger, zipping them shut. She couldn’t believe all that she had just told him.

“Thank you,” she said, standing up. Doing so made her conscious of the fact that she was still holding his hand. She’d been holding it the whole time. She dropped it like a hot potato.

He laughed. “I’m glad you are comfortable enough around me to share your inner thoughts.”

“You stuck up for me that day,” she said, glancing down nervously. “You’d do so again, I imagine.”

“I would.”

A minute later they walked into the ICU section of the hospital. Britt caught sight of them and headed in their direction.

“It’s an interesting day in the ICU,” she said excitedly. “Only the doctors wouldn’t let me go on rounds with them.”

“That’s too bad,” said Jill, wondering if Britt had really thought that they might. Jill didn’t know that much about the medical field, but it didn’t seem like something that would be allowed. “This is Kyle,” she added, turning to introduce him. “But I hear you’ve already met.”

“We have,” replied Britt. “Earlier. Have we met all of your boyfriends now, or are there still more?”

“I don’t have any boyfriends,” said Jill, glancing bashfully over at Kyle.

Britt laughed. “Is she really that clueless?” she asked, turning to Jenna.

Jill looked at Jenna and saw her smiling and nodding.

“I am not,” Jill said defensively. “I don’t have any boyfriends! Not one!”

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” said Jenna.

“Isn’t the quote, ‘Methinks, the lady doth protest too much’?” asked Britt.

Jenna laughed. “You’re questioning me on Shakespeare?”

“I guess not,” said Britt.

“Who protests too much?” asked Jill’s mother, walking up.

“Never mind,” said Jill. “They’re just teasing me.” Thinking on her feet in order to change the subject quickly, she said, “I’ve been trying to figure out how to retrieve the Jeep. It’s parked by the side of the road . . . just below Arrowhead Falls.”

“Yeah, that’s a problem,” agreed her mother thoughtfully. “That would be at least a three hour round trip for one of us to drive you there to get it.”

“That’s why I was thinking of asking Britt and Jenna. It would be less driving for them as they wouldn’t need to come back to the hospital.”

“What do you say, Britt,” asked Jenna. “Why not, right?”

Jill jumped in before Britt could reply. “But you guys are getting such a late start on your way home as it is. Your residency starts on Monday.”

“True, but we can drive straight through. We still have time to spare. We had meant to do a little exploring along the way, but we don’t need to,” replied Britt.

“It’s nice that you girls came to Elk Bend . . . to support Jill and David. I’m glad they have the two of you as friends,” said Mrs. Wahlund. Jill smiled at her mother appreciatively.

Jill, her parents and grandparents, Kyle and the Copelands all ended up having lunch together in the hospital cafeteria. They all found a lot to talk about. Jill was glad that the subject of her nudity didn’t come up. Her grandparents seemed completely unaware that she had been naked even though everyone else at the table knew.

**Chapter 160: Back to David’s Room**

As all the food in the hospital cafeteria was pre-cooked and served buffet style, the group lunch did not last long. Jill was glad about that. In some ways, it was rather awkward. Her grandparents didn’t know that she had been nude during the rescue, so everyone steered clear of that topic. As if that wasn’t bad enough, no one seemed to know how Kyle fit in.

No sooner had her parents learned that there was a guy named Nick who had an interest in their daughter than they were confronted by Kyle. Kyle too seemed to have an obvious interest in Jill, going to some effort to make sure that he sat by her at the table. And yet Kyle was well-spoken and rather congenial, making matters much less difficult than they might have been.

Jill was glad to learn that her father had walked back to the motel midmorning to switch the room into his name. She wouldn’t need to pay Nick back as her dad had paid for the first night such that Nick’s card was not charged.

As they returned to the ICU, Jill remarked to the group, “I’d like a few minutes alone with David. Would that be alright?”

“I think he’d like that, Dear,” said her mother. “He now realizes . . . well . . . that he owes you a rather large debt of gratitude.”

“He doesn’t owe me anything,” she replied staunchly.

“Even so, I think he’d like the opportunity to thank you,” said their mother.

Jill entered the room. Finding David alone, she closed the door behind her. David smiled as she walked to the side of his bed and took his hand in hers.

“Hey, Pocket,” she said softly. “How’s the brain?”

“No idea,” he replied. “I’ve been realizing that if my tumble down the mountainside lowered my IQ or erased some of my memory banks, I probably wouldn’t even know it.”

“Yes, you would. I’d tell you.”

“Thanks, Sis,” he said with a smile. “Always there for me!”

“You betcha! Just don’t be needing me to run into any more towns naked. I’d like to think that my streaking days are over.”

“I doubt they are. I think it’s in your blood.”

“I certainly hope not,” said Jill. “This time . . . there was a good excuse. If there’s a next time . . . I’ll be in deep shit.”

“What are you going to do now?” he asked.

“Still going off to college . . . nothing’s changed. At least not for me.”

“I know that. What I meant was the next two weeks.”

Jill had started to give that some thought. The original plan had involved another week and a half at Cache Lake and then a short amount of time back in Holden to pack. Just a few days was all she really needed to get ready for her flight to California.

“I’ll probably go home early. I can’t imagine staying in my tent on the point without you and Ryan around.”

“You could read. That’s probably a lot of what you would have done with us there.”

“Probably. But I’d be so bored . . . and sad. I’d be missing you guys day and night. We’re the Three Amigos!”

“Right! But what will you do at home?”

“Will you be there?”

“Eventually. They’re going to keep me here for a few more days . . . at least that’s what I’ve heard being discussed. But even when I get home, I’ll likely be bed-ridden for a while. At the very least, I’ll have to take it easy.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do at home,” said Jill. “Probably read . . . and hide . . . all the curtains closed.”

“Why?”

“It just depends on if everyone there saw the Channel Five news report. I suppose it is probably on their website by now.”

“About that.”

“What?” asked Jill, sensing in his tone that he had something to tell her.

“Channel Five has been showing some teaser ads,” he said, pointing up at the TV near the ceiling. “They’re trying to get people to watch the news later for an update.”

“An update?” she said, choking on the words.

“There was a brief clip of an interview with a girl. She was talking about you, but referring to you as ‘Tarzan.’”

“Oh, my God!” said Jill, sucking in a breath. “Jane!”

“Yes, that’s her name! You know her?”

“Met her on the trail. What a terrible development! You must have met her, too . . . on top of Spaghetti.”

“I was wondering about that. Those are the only people who would know about Tarzan.”

“You went and talked to them . . . right after we heard them cheering. Did they get photos of me? Their own video?”

“Hmm…” said David, looking thoughtfully up at the ceiling. “Let me think. I guess I really don’t know.”

“Jane! This is a disaster . . . even without photos. She’ll describe what she saw. That will prove that Nick was lying. Everyone will know that I was naked before the rockslide.”

“I’m so sorry, Jill. I don’t know what to say or do. It doesn’t seem as if I can fix this. And I owe you everything. They tell me that you were superhuman yesterday. That . . . were it not for you, I might be a vegetable . . . or worse.”

“They’re exaggerating. I went for help. You would have done the same.”

“But you pulled out all the stops, and you were naked. Even the short ‘Jane’ clip . . . the one that they played . . . brought tears to my eyes.”

“What did she say?”

“She talked about how focused and driven you were. She called you a ‘woman on a mission.’ She said that she and her friends decided to help . . . to come with you.”

“They did. They tried,” said Jill with a chuckle.

“Jane said that you left them in the dust . . . that you were literally sprinting down the mountain. She couldn’t believe how fast you were moving.”

“I wasn’t sprinting. I was holding back. I couldn’t risk a fall. And boy, were my quads ever burning. They’re still sore.”

“Well, we’ll have to tune in later to find out what she said in her interview about Tarzan beating on her chest, but her report of watching you run down the mountain left me speechless. I don’t know how to thank you. There’s no one else in my life like you. I can’t imagine life without you, without a twin. What a dull existence, right?”

“I’m sure glad I have you,” she replied. “There were moments yesterday when I thought I might have seen your lovely eyes for the last time.”

He chuckled. “My lovely eyes?”

“Don’t tease me . . . I’ve been teased enough . . . you know very well what I mean.”

“But I’m here . . . ‘lovely eyes’ and all. And they tell me I’m going to be fine . . . mostly fine, anyway. I’ll probably still be able to start college this fall . . . all, thanks to you.”

“Stop it. You’re going to make me cry,” she said taking a tissue from a box on the nightstand.

“Give me one of those . . . and then give me a hug, Bean,” he said, his voice changing noticeably as he was starting to get choked up. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

As she leaned over him and felt his arms encircle her, he added, “And tell me why you went all Mike Tyson on Ryan last night.”

Jill started laughing through her tears, still holding tightly to David.

A moment later she lifted up and looked at him face to face. “How did you hear about that?”

“Britt.”

“Figures! I can tell I’m not going to have any secrets.”

“Nope. Tonight’s news broadcast . . . the sensational account of how Tarzan saves people and then bites their ears!”

“They better not find out about that!” Suddenly Jill had something more to worry about. She’d been thinking that there might be a follow-up story, but her concerns had centered around the possibility that the TV station might get security camera footage from the thrift store or even the minimarket – or worse yet – both.

“Have you talked with Ryan today? Maybe you better try to mend fences a little before that reporter visits him again. Now that they know about Tarzan, they’re likely to want to circle back to get his reaction.”

“I’ll go and talk to him,” she agreed. “This is all so terrible, and it only seems to get worse.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I wish I could help . . . and you did it all for me. How will I ever repay you?”

“You can start by doing me a favor. I can tell that grandma and grandpa still don’t know that I was naked. Will you break the news to them?”

“You want them to know?”

“Of course not! But I don’t want them to hear about it for the first time in the checkout line in Agency.”

“Okay . . . but which version? That I tore off your dress, that Ryan stripped you . . . or a Tarzan variation?”

“Oh, my God! Not that! Not Tarzan! Maybe . . . Nick’s version.”

“But he mentioned a dress. Your grandparents know that you don’t wear dresses camping, much less hiking.”

“I know, I know,” said Jill, biting a thumbnail.

“I’ll do my best,” said David. “Your grandmother knows you’re shy. She wouldn’t believe any versions in which you were already naked . . . willingly naked.”

“I certainly hope not!”

“I’ll probably just say that I must have grabbed for you. That is what Nick said happened . . . but that I don’t remember doing so. If there is anything I can probably get away with, claiming a loss of memory might very well be it.”

“I expect so. Do you remember that moment . . . the moment the trail gave way?”

“I do. We looked at each other.”

“We did . . . my eyes locked on yours . . . for a split second. And then you were gone. That’s what I remember. I’m glad you remember.”

“Why?”

“Just because it has to be a good sign. Like . . . if you didn’t remember my name . . . that would be a bad sign.”

“A very bad sign,” he said nodding.