**Summer at Cache Lake**

**Chapter 181: A New Phone**

Amber eyed her suspiciously, but replied, acting as if it were completely normal for a girl to be curious about her ex. To Jill’s delight, she gave the question some thought and told her what she knew. Tyler had indeed been around that summer. She’d mostly seen him skateboarding with friends, around town as well as in the park where they had run into one another.

Jill was particularly curious if she recalled seeing him with a girl. She was wondering if he’d moved on. Amber didn’t mention any girls, and Jill couldn’t bring herself to ask about that specifically. However, given that she was asking about her ex, she knew that Amber had clued in.

Amber mentioned having spoken with him just once that summer. He’d come into her restaurant one evening for dinner. He’d been alone with his parents and had spoken of how they were celebrating his college selection.

Jill perked up her ears. She’d been wondering what college he’d be attending. Amber only remembered that it was in California. Jill wasn’t all that surprised that she didn’t recall which institution he’d be going to. Not having gone through the process of applying to colleges herself, the various colleges that others in their class would be attending was not high on Amber’s radar. Jill knew for a fact that Tyler would not be going to her college. He hadn’t even applied there. However, it was intriguing that he’d also be going to school in California.

Once they were done shopping for clothes, Jill had Amber help her pick out a new phone. She made a point of choosing a model that was in stock. She wanted to be up and running right away. After asking a myriad of questions, she decided to allow the woman who had been helping her transfer her data and files from her old phone to the new one.

The fact that she was dealing with a woman seemed to make the prospect that her photos might be seen somewhat less scary. She was sure that others had nude photos on their phones; thinking about that helped put her mind at ease. But more than that, the fact that she was female seemed reassuring. She couldn’t imagine a woman in a cell phone store secretly making copies of a girl’s nude photos. She might be able to imagine a guy doing that, but not a woman.

Late that afternoon, Jill was back home. The time she’d spent with Amber had been a lot of fun. Amber had not disowned her due to her revelations about her new relationship with nudity AND now she had some fun clothes for college! She hadn’t gotten too many, imagining that she might want to do some shopping in California once she had a better feel for what she actually needed and once she’d seen what other girls were wearing.

Jill had intended to not buy a single bra; however, Amber had talked her into buying two. She’d been quite persuasive, convincing her that there would be situations, possibly formal events with professors present, in which the braless look would be frowned upon.

In the end, Jill had located a store with some cute little lacy bralettes. They added the appearance of a bra under a tight top but were also so thin that they didn’t alter her shape or tame her nipples. The majority of her other bras were multi-layered. She’d never bought a padded bra, per se; however, hiding her nipples had always been of utmost importance. Her considered opinion relating to nipples had changed entirely from what it had been. What was now most important to her was that whatever she wore NOT hide her nipples. Stiff nipples was destined to be her calling card. She was hoping to make it as hard as possible for any guy she met at college to look her in the eye. She would smile to herself every time that thought crossed her mind.

Sitting at the patio table in the shade, Jill took some time to familiarize herself with her new phone. She was delighted that all the images had survived. As she’d left Austin hanging, he was the recipient of her first text message, a quick apology. While she was at it, she also sent Nick, Kyle, Britt, Jenna, and even Hicks short ‘hello’ messages. It was nice to again be plugged back in. She heard right back from all of them except for Kyle and Britt.

After a short back-and-forth with Austin, she decided that it was high time she start packing. The countdown had begun! In no time, she’d be on a plane. She had to get her boxes shipped so that they’d be there when she arrived.

That night in bed, she lay awake thinking through all the developments as well as all that lay ahead. She hadn’t expected it, but her time in Holden had been a continuation of her summer of self-discovery. She’d been thinking that it would be a return to her past; however, things hadn’t been working out that way. She’d continued her trajectory toward becoming the woman that she seemed destined to become.

That said, there had been a few ups and downs. Just that evening she’d been forced to go to quite some effort to avoid putting on a fashion show for her parents. Her mom had been perceptive enough to know that Jill was excited about her new clothes. In the past, she’d always put on her new purchases and shown them to her parents. This time, she didn’t want to do that. She had no idea how she might explain why she’d gotten so many tops that did so little to conceal her nipples.

There was some moonlight streaming in her window. It seemed ironic to her that it was shining on Tyler’s photo, the one she’d only recently restored to its former position on her bedside table.

A couple of hours later, Jill was still awake. The moonlight was still flooding into her room, but it had shifted such that it was no longer illuminating the photo. Even though she couldn’t see the image of Tyler, she was still thinking about him, actually reminiscing about their time together.

She switched on her bedside lamp and took the framed photo from her nightstand. It was a photo that she loved. In fact, it was her favorite photo of Tyler. She had taken it herself with her phone the prior summer.

Her eyes zoomed in on the dimple in his chin. She smiled; it was such a cute dimple. She didn’t consider herself to be a person who was excessively swayed by a guy’s looks. In her mind, character elements were much more important. However, Tyler was gorgeous. There was no way around that. From the dimple to the ever-present, fun-loving gleam in his eyes, to his unruly dark hair, his looks were of the sort that made a girl go weak in the knees.

The thing about the photo that always made her laugh was that Tyler looked as if he’d peed his pants. That was actually why she had taken the photo in the first place; for at that moment in time, they had been essentially strangers. Unbeknownst to her, he would ask her out later that day. And not only that, but before the day was done, the two of them would share their first kiss. For Jill, that kiss had been an enchanting moment, an exciting, heart-stopping moment. And it was noteworthy that their first kiss had occurred prior to their first date! It had been late. He’d walked her home, asked her out, and before Jill had known what was happening, he’d leaned in and kissed her.

A more assertive Jill, the Jill that had emerged over the course of the summer, would most likely never have allowed that. However, after giving that a bit more consideration, she realized that just maybe this new Jill would behave the same as that Jill had. She’d been spellbound by Tyler’s charm that evening. Never before had a guy, certainly not a cute guy, taken such an interest in her. She chuckled to herself. Under similar circumstances, this new Jill might even initiate a first kiss! Thinking back to that first kiss, she realized that she had already been falling hard for him.

It had all happened the prior August. She’d just returned from Cache Lake. She’d just been through the trauma of having her tankini top torn off out on Sunken Island. Back at home, there had been little more than a week left before the start of senior year.

One day, out of the blue, her best friend Dani had shown up at her front door proposing that they go to Sutter Park with a small group of their classmates. Jill had been quite reluctant because the people Dani named were mostly people that she hardly knew, Tyler among them. However, Dani had twisted her arm. Later, Jill would learn that Tyler himself had put Dani up to the task of getting her to the park. Dani had known all along that he was interested in getting to know her – with an eye to asking her out. Dani had kept that small detail from her.

The day at the park had turned out to be loads of fun. The activity of the day, pre-planned by Tyler and a few of his friends, had been ice blocking. Sutter Park was known far and wide as having the perfect grassy slope for ice blocking.

Being an avid skateboarder, Tyler had spent time trying to go down the hill standing on his ice block. He’d quickly learned that a block of ice was completely uncontrollable, entirely different from a skateboard. He’d nearly broken his tailbone a time or two, or at least that was how it had looked to Jill. Eventually, he’d been forced to give up and ride the ice like everyone else, sitting down. Also, like everyone else, he’d ended up with wet pants in the process.

Jill’s pants had gotten wet, too. When she’d taken the photo of Tyler, he’d asked someone to take one of the two of them together. She’d refused. Later, after they’d started dating, she’d regretted that she hadn’t been more accommodating. It would have been nice to have had that moment frozen in time, the two of them together; at least she had the photo of Tyler to remember it by.

As she held his picture in her hands, she realized how fortunate she was to have it. It had come so close to being thrown away. Fortunately, it had found its way to the bottom of a drawer. The many images that she’d had of Tyler on her phone, including the original of the framed photo, had all met a much different fate. They had all been deleted – swiftly and summarily. But the one framed print that she held in her hands – it had survived. As her favorite, it had been the one that she’d chosen to print and frame for her nightstand.

The next morning, Jill awoke with something sharp poking her in the back. She quickly discovered that it was the framed 8x10 of Tyler. She’d fallen asleep holding it.

Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she made her way downstairs. Her father had already left for the day, but David was there. Mostly because of his ribs, he couldn’t be particularly active, but other than that, he seemed to be quickly getting back into his old routine. He even had a pot of coffee ready.

Jill poured herself a cup and asked David if he’d like some eggs if she decided to cook. As he was agreeable, she poached five eggs, three for David and two for herself. Once they were done, she sprinkled grated cheddar on top.

“Got any plans for the day?” he asked as they sat down together.

“Reading,” she replied flatly. It was hardly exciting, but being well prepared for what lay ahead was important to her.

“Really . . . just reading?”

“Just reading.”

But even as she said that, Jill was debating a completely different course of action in the back of her mind. A short time later, she was seated in the shade in the backyard, her book open in her hand. She’d completed the Mismeasure of Man and was now back to reading Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.

A keen observer might have quickly noticed that she was not turning pages. Instead, she was staring at them blankly. Her mind was too busy for reading. She was initiating all kinds of scenarios in her head – trying to imagine how they might each play out.

**Chapter 182: It’s Finally Time**

Jill continued trying to read; however, she eventually had to give up. An hour and a half later, she was climbing out of the shower. After toweling off, she stood in the bathroom examining the thin girl in the mirror.

She had grown to be quite content with how she looked. Her tan was deep and even – flawless to be precise. She’d just shaved – everywhere – completely; her underarms, her legs, her pussy. There was no longer the slightest hint that there had ever been a Fuzzy Wuzzy. From her belly button down to the cleft of her pussy there was simply a long uninterrupted expanse of smooth, tan skin. The vertical slit of her hoo-ha smiled happily up at her from where it peeked out at the base of her mound. As she imagined it, her pussy liked being bare-naked.

She pulled her shoulders back to study her youthful breasts. They looked rather pretty. They were, of course, little, but their shape seemed to represent the happy medium between nicely rounded and perfectly pointy. Looking closely at her stiff nipples perched proudly on top of her puffy areola, she could hardly imagine why she had once been unhappy with her figure solely due to the size of her breasts. Now they seemed nearly ideal. She still wished they were a bit larger, but she no longer thought about that much. She’d come to believe that they looked just right on her fit but skinny girl body.

Standing there nude, she leaned toward the mirror and went about applying a minimal amount of eye makeup. She didn’t really need it, not with her tan, but she wanted to look her absolute best. She took quite a bit of time working to get it just right. Her goal was to enhance her eyes, make them look slightly larger and more fetching, but in a way that would not make it appear as if she were actually wearing makeup. It was a fine balance.

Once she was happy with the look she had achieved, she strolled down the hall to her bedroom. As both of her parents were out of the house, she didn’t bother covering herself with a towel. She knew that she might encounter David along the way, but that seemed irrelevant given how much time she’d spent naked in his presence that summer.

However, once she was in her room, she closed her door making sure that it was latched. She needed to concentrate. She’d been intending to get dressed, but she decided to do something else first. All of her plans hinged on Tyler.

She picked up her phone as she sat down on her bed. A moment later, Tyler’s photo, the one she had fallen asleep holding, again caught her eye; she’d returned it to its spot on her nightstand. All of six months had passed since they’d last communicated; however, the time had come.

Jill located his phone number in her contacts. Even its status as a blocked number had transferred over to her new phone. She went through the steps of unblocking it. Taking an unhurried, deep breath to gather her wits, she fired off a quick message, “Hey Tyler! How’s it going?”

She set her phone down on the nightstand and again picked up his photo. This time, she didn’t look at it. Instead, she simply held it to her chest. She stared blankly down at the floor as she waited. She was hoping for a quick reply but knew that it might not come. Tyler might reply later. He might never reply.

A few seconds later, her phone buzzed, vibrating on the wooden tabletop. She’d never been happier to hear that sound! Wiping an emotional tear from her eye, she picked it up and looked anxiously at the screen.

“Jill? Is that really you? Am I dreaming?”

“Not dreaming. Are you home? Can we talk?”

“Yes, home. When? Now?” came the reply.

“Yes. Well . . . 20 minutes maybe. Unless you’d rather not,” she’d replied. She wanted to see him, but only if he wanted to see her.

“Sure. I’d love to see you! You don’t know how much I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” she typed quickly with her thumbs. Remembering that she was naked, she added, “Maybe 30 minutes.”

“Okay. Can’t wait!” he replied.

She set her phone back on the nightstand.

“Oh, my God! I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Jill muttered to herself, her hands shaking from excitement.

She went to her closet and peered in. Everything looked just as frumpy as she remembered. Fortunately, she’d gone shopping. She dumped her bags out on her bed and started pawing through her purchases. Why hadn’t she figured this all out the night before? But she knew the answer. Her plan was too fresh to have already figured out what she might wear. She was being spontaneous – a little too spontaneous perhaps.

Grabbing the yellow tube top, its tags still in place, she pulled it on over her head.

“Nipple City!” she said aloud, studying herself in the mirror. “I don’t want to shock the poor lad . . . or do I?” She giggled nervously as she considered her options.

She pulled the yellow top right back off. She didn’t mind her nipples being visible; however, that look would be too big of a departure from the Jill that Tyler was familiar with. She definitely was not going to wear a bra, that she knew, but the occasion required something a bit more subtle. She could shock him when the time was right!

Next, she selected one of her other new tops. It was a red and white striped button down blouse. It wasn’t as tight as the tube top; however, it was made of a knit fabric such that it conformed to her shape. She slipped it on and quickly decided that it represented the happy medium.

If he looked, and what guy wouldn’t, he would quickly see that she was braless. Her nipples were definitely visible; however, mostly because of the stripes, it was much less of a ‘nipples in your face’ look.

Still bottomless, Jill contemplated herself in the mirror as she thought about what else she was going to wear. After cutting the tag off, she slipped on what she considered to be the prettiest thong that she had purchased. It matched one of her new bralettes. The thong was white and lacy – and oh so tiny. It seemed like the perfect choice because the shorts she had in mind were also white. Not only didn’t she want any visible panty lines, but she also didn’t want to wear colorful panties that might show through.

Once she had the shorts on and was again studying herself in the mirror, she decided that the overall look was just right. Her chocolate brown hair had a nice sheen to it; she’d decided to leave it down. The shorts, being white, seemed to highlight just how deep her tan was. She wondered if she’d grown; her legs looked so athletic and long. After a minute of study, she decided that she looked absolutely delectable, irresistible even – exactly the look she had been hoping to achieve! Poor Tyler!

A minute later, she was downstairs and slipping on a pair of white canvas sneakers. She felt the need to hurry – lest she be late – lest she get cold feet and chicken out.

“Where are you off to?” David inquired.

“Out,” she replied evasively as she opened the door. She closed it quickly behind herself to hinder any further discussion. He didn’t need to know the serious nature of her mission. She knew she’d probably tell him later – but most likely not the details.

As Jill strode resolutely down the sidewalk in the direction of Tyler’s house, she thought back over something she’d been remarkably slow to realize – something that had been more than obvious once she’d been willing to consider it as a possibility.

All summer long she’d been telling herself that she was not going to get involved with anyone because it was her intent to go off to college unencumbered by a relationship back home. Nick had asked her out; Kyle had asked her out; even Ryan had asked her out. She’d never given any real thought to dating any of them. In fact, she responded so coolly to their advances that she’d even had a person or two wondering if she might be more interested in girls than guys.

The truth had only just occurred to her. Subconsciously, she might have known all along, but only that morning had she finally come to a true realization. The actual reason that she hadn’t been interested in any of those guys had always been that she was already in love. Her heart belonged to Tyler! Of course, she hadn’t been open to dating anyone else! She felt as if the fog had lifted. Suddenly everything was clear – crystal clear.

She’d been hurt – hurt badly – but she’d been in love the whole time. She’d probably been focusing on the pain caused by his insensitive remark to block out what was probably the real source of her anguish. She’d been missing him – missing him terribly. Being mad at him had been nothing more than a coping mechanism. Talking about going off to college unencumbered by a relationship back home had also been a way of avoiding the truth.

The reality of the situation was that, even though she might have been pretending otherwise, she had already been experiencing all the hardships associated with a long-distance relationship – and then some. And in a week, she’d leave for college. Tyler would be going off to college, too. They’d be apart. Even if Amber was right and he was also headed for California, they wouldn’t be together – at least not very often. Maybe they would be able to manage a weekend or two together during the term. A long-distance relationship was now her destiny, or at least she hoped it was.

Granted, it wouldn’t be ideal, but the love she felt for him – that was her reality. Now that she understood it – was ready to admit the depth of her feelings – it was simply something that she was going to have to deal with. She was in love with him! Just admitting that to herself caused her heart to start skipping along happily. She was in love with Tyler!

But college was a week away. They had a week – a whole week! One week to put Humpty Dumpty back together. One glorious week! It sounded too good to be true.

As she marched toward her destiny, she realized that her intent was to bare her soul. She hoped that he’d be receptive. She’d never told him that she was in love with him. But now he was going to hear it, come hell or high water!

Back when they’d been dating, she might have told him that she loved him, but only if he’d said it first. What a weenie she’d been! She shook her head in disgust. Who falls in love and keeps it to herself? Why might she have only been willing to share that little fact with him if he had also been in love – and been ready to say so? That seemed so silly. Two people wouldn’t always fall in love simultaneously, right?

Jill had all kinds of emotions and concerns pumping through her veins. What if he was mad at her? What if he didn’t want to have anything to do with her? However, she kept her chin up and bravely followed the familiar route to his house. Mostly, she was excited – excited to see him – excited to again be gazing into his dazzling eyes – it had been far too long! At an intersection, she paused to glance back through the texts they’d just exchanged.

“Sure. I’d love to see you! You don’t know how much I’ve missed you,” he’d written. “Okay. Can’t wait!” read his next text.

As she turned onto his street, Jill was suddenly in a state of anxious disbelief. Things were happening so fast! Was she really going to do this? But she knew she was. It had been a long time, too long, but she’d made up her mind. She was going in! With her heart on her sleeve, she was going in!

As she turned onto the walk that led to the front door, she saw it swing open. He’d been watching for her! That was fun! She took a breath full of courage, pulling her shoulders back proudly. She wanted to look her very best.

**Chapter 183: A Bold Initiative**

A second later, he stood in the doorway, leaning against the doorjamb, his hands in his pockets. He was casually dressed, barefoot even. God, he looked good – standing there in loose shorts and a ratty tank top!

As she went up the steps, their eyes met. Jill almost melted. There he was! She was doing this! His smile was broad, but there was something quizzical about it. Of course, there would be. She’d caught him completely by surprise. It had been six months. Six whole months! But the twinkle in his eyes was as adorable as ever. She remembered in that moment to look for his dimple. That thought seemed odd to her, but she really loved his dimple. Her mind was jumping all over the place.

“God, how I’ve longed for this day!” he said as she approached. “You look great!”

Jill smiled. She didn’t know how to respond, where to start, but suddenly everything felt right – exactly right. They belonged together. Why had she been so stupid? She’d wasted six months of her life – six months of both of their lives.

“Hi, Tyler,” she managed. She’d been reminding herself to smile when they first met, but that hadn’t been necessary. Her brightest smile burst forth all on its own. From there the wattage climbed right along with her heart rate as she stared into his eyes.

“I know I hurt you . . . and I’m sorry . . . so sorry,” he apologized. “But what you did . . . really hurt. So painful to go from seeing you every day to never exchanging a single word…”

“Yes, I know . . . but not here,” she replied, biting her lip and looking past him into the house. “Anyone else home?”

“Just my mom. In the backyard . . . watering I think.”

“Okay, follow me,” she said bravely. She reached out and took his hand. As Tyler closed the door, Jill started for the stairs.

She was heading for his bedroom. There they would have the privacy the circumstances required. As she climbed the stairs, Tyler in tow, she was very conscious of all she had learned that summer, and how she was now putting it to good use. She’d had some good practice putting guys in the friend zone. It was important to be able to do that and to do it well. Guys deserved to know what was in a girl’s head, where they stood. And, only in that way might a girl be able to ensure that things could develop in directions that might be to her liking.

But the flip side was also true. Tyler was about to hear what he meant to her. He wasn’t going to be put in the friend zone. She was intending to put him back into the boyfriend zone! She’d messed up their relationship big time. It was time to admit that and to move on – hopefully together – as a couple – a rock-solid couple. And time was short – she needed to get right to it.

Leading him into his room, Jill directed him toward the bed. “Sit down . . . please,” she said in her friendliest tone as she turned to close the door.

“As lovely as ever!” he remarked, looking at her appreciatively.

“Not lovelier?” she asked with an impish grin.

“Actually, yes,” he replied. “You’re gorgeous! Oh, why couldn’t we have done this months ago? …four, five, six months ago? And I didn’t mean anything by what I said. But it was so hard . . . the way you shut me out.”

“I know, I know,” said Jill, hoping to quickly shift the focus to the future rather than dwell on the past.

“And now . . . look where we are.”

“Yep, back in your bedroom,” she replied happily, glancing around at the somewhat familiar setting. For some reason, it suddenly seemed as if very little time had passed since he had made the remark that in one stroke had left her feeling so utterly devastated.

Jill decided to go for Plan A. It was bold, but she was feeling brave – ready to take the bull by the horns. In one motion, her top was up and off. She cast it quickly aside as she shook out her hair. She stood before him, bare to the waist, just as she had been on that fateful day back in February.

“Umm . . . Jill,” he said, starting to stand up. She saw surprise written all over his face. “We . . . umm,” he continued, his wide eyes glued to her chest.

Gently, she pushed him back down. She placed an index finger to his lips. “Relax. Let me do the talking,” she said in a quiet voice. “You may have made a boneheaded comment, but just the one. I’m the idiot who messed us up.”

He tried to speak, but she shushed him. “Shh, shh, shh.”

She held her shoulders back, trying to make the most of what she had. She knew that her nipples were diamond hard without glancing down for confirmation.

“Tyler,” she said, forcing him to lift his gaze up to her eyes.

“You blocked me! Did you at least get my letter?” he asked.

“I did. I bought a postcard . . . started writing a reply. Should have mailed it. Never did. Sorry.”

“I’m…”

“Tyler, shush! Follow along . . . please. I’ve had time to think this through. Allow me to do it my way . . . please. It’s important to me.”

With that, Jill reached out and took his hands. She placed them on her breasts as she stepped toward him. He seemed unsure. She felt him trying to pull back, but she held him firmly, pressing her pillowy soft flesh into his hands. She saw him glance down, taking in the sight of how she was holding his hands to her chest.

“Now say it!” she instructed softly.

“Say it?” he asked, a look of dismay in his eyes.

“Yes . . . say it! Tell me what you told me that night. Tell me! That you can feel bottom. I want to hear it again. I have to hear it again!”

“Don’t, Jill,” he pleaded, trying half-heartedly to pull free.

“Say it!” she commanded in no uncertain terms. His hands felt nice on her skin, but he had to repeat those words! He had to do that for this to go down as she had been imagining! It was important.

“Please don’t make me. I know I hurt you, but now…”

“Say it!” she said in an insistent yet decidedly sweet, feminine voice. She stared passionately into his eyes.

Jill had never been more focused. She wanted that moment back! She was taking that moment back! She was fixing that moment!

She saw Tyler cast his eyes down in confusion. He didn’t seem to understand how important this was to her.

“Please…” she pleaded.

“But . . . okay,” he relented with a heavy sigh. “I can feel bottom.”

Jill let out a gasp of disgust! She pushed him away forcefully enough that he ended up again seated on his bed. She then slapped his cheek – not especially hard, but also not completely playfully.

She saw the look of utter surprise in his eyes.

“But, but… You… You told me to!” He’d obviously been caught completely off guard by her unexpected behavior.

She smiled at him tenderly. Using the backs of the fingers of one hand, she caressed the cheek she’d just slapped. Stepping toward him, she wrapped her arms around his head, pulling him close. His head was turned such that his ear was against the center of her chest, one of her nipples within an inch or so of his mouth. She held him. It felt so nice to be close.

Looking down at him, her cheek against the top of his head, she spoke softly. “That’s what I should have done that night. That’s ALL I should have done that night! I realize now that you were only speaking the truth. You were simply exploring . . . meant nothing by it . . . nothing derogatory, that is. Your words stung . . . still do . . . it’s taken me a long time. Girls with small breasts . . . we’re really sensitive about such things. But it wasn’t intentional. You weren’t trying to be mean . . . to hurt my feelings.”

“I wasn’t,” he mumbled.

She let go and took a step back. Looking down at her chest, she continued, “They’re very small. I know that. I knew it then. I know it now. I can feel bottom, too.” She placed her right hand on her left breast. Pressing her fingers firmly into the flesh near her nipple, she moved her hand in a circular motion. “Yep . . . my ribs . . . right there.”

She smiled at him lovingly. He looked confused, dazed even. She wanted to again feel his hands on her chest, his lips, too. She wanted the rest of that night back as well. She had no idea where things might have been headed, but she was ready to find out.

“Do you like my tan?” she asked with a coy smile, hoping to lighten the mood. Truth be told, she was ready to take off the rest of her clothes so that he could see the full extent of her tan. So many people had seen her nude body that summer; finally, she was with someone she cared about, someone she wanted to show it to. He’d be number ninety-nine – still in the first hundred. Something about that was funny. However, looking into his eyes, she could tell that he seemed to need a minute to catch up.

That only made sense. Walking over there, she’d known that she was going to make him say those words – and then slap him. For her, there’d been no surprise. For him, it had surely been one continuous rolling surprise – undoubtedly a huge shock. She wasn’t sure just how far she was willing to take things, but there were two condoms in her pocket – just in case.

Tyler sighed heavily, his eyes still wide. Jill leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on his cheek; she shifted over and placed a second on his mouth. She wanted him to know that she was no longer angry even though she had just slapped him. His warm skin felt so nice against her lips. He hadn’t shaved that morning, but she kind of liked how he looked unshaven, like a man rather than a boy.

“You said you got my letter?” he asked. He still looked stunned.

“I did,” she admitted. “But to be completely honest, I was still hurting. I wish I hadn’t . . . on numerous occasions . . . but I threw it away . . . never opened it.” She hadn’t wanted to confess that fact. She felt that he might feel hurt that she hadn’t cared enough to bother with his letter, and she didn’t want her own thoughts returning to those darker days. However, if things were going to work out, she needed to be honest – completely honest.

“I’m in love with you, Tyler!” she blurted out, biting her lip after saying it while peering into his eyes. “There, I said it. I don’t know how you feel about me . . . especially after all I put you through . . . us through. But I want you to know . . . I love you. I loved you then. I love you now.” It hadn’t been easy to say, but Jill had decided that it had to be said. She felt good about having told him. It was true; she was merely being honest.

“Oh,” he replied, reaching up with both hands and running his fingers through his hair. He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly, allowing his cheeks to puff out in the process.

Jill had spent time thinking about how he might react, how he might respond. She had thought of a number of possibilities. ‘Oh,’ hadn’t been among them.

“Oh?” she asked. “I’m sorry about the letter. I really am. I actually tried. I went back to look for it in the trash. I’d like a second chance at a lot of what I’ve done. And I’m hoping you’ll give me one. Something special . . . that’s what we had . . . until I…”

“Jill, I tried to wait. I really did. In fact, I waited months . . . all the way to summer. I hoped you’d come around. I wanted us to be together. You’re right. What we had . . . it was…”

“Tyler?” she asked, suddenly trembling with dread.

“Yes . . . there’s someone else . . . told you about her in my letter . . . wanted you to know.”

Jill clamped her hands over her mouth but then quickly shifted them down to cover her breasts. Suddenly she was in shock; however, in the back of her mind, she’d known that something like this might happen. She’d decided to ignore that possibility, block it out of her mind, not jinx herself with negative thoughts – instead, preferring to be optimistic. But considering that, she realized that even if he had moved on, she’d wanted him to know that she had fallen in love. He deserved to know that – it was only fair – even if they weren’t destined to be together.

“I’m so sorry. But . . . Nicole Jenks . . . you know her. We’ve been seeing each other this summer . . . grown quite close.”

Even though she’d known that something like this could happen, Tyler’s news hit her like a ton of bricks, knocking the wind out of her. Suddenly feeling light-headed, she stumbled. Nicole Jenks? Did she know that person? She was racking her brain. The name sounded familiar. Reaching down, she picked up her shirt. A moment later, she had it on and was out the door, rushing back down the stairs. Suddenly she needed some fresh air – without it, she felt like she might suffocate.

“Jill, come back! Please!” she heard him calling, but she kept going, right out the door and down the steps just outside.

**Chapter 184: Walking Home**

But, as soon as she was outside, she was hit by an extreme sense of déjà vu. This was exactly what she’d done before! Tyler’s hands had been on her breasts – he’d said something – something she hadn’t been expecting – and the next thing she knew, she was running – running away.

What was she doing? She was in a state of shock – stunned and embarrassed – devastated even – sad beyond words – crushed actually – but what was she hoping to accomplish by running away? Was she going to spend the next six months feeling sorry for herself – bad about how she had handled the situation? Angry at herself?

Running away was something the old Jill did. Realizing that, she slowed and then stopped.

She wasn’t going to run away. She’d done that. It wasn’t the way a mature woman dealt with her problems.

She turned around. Taking a moment to catch her breath and gather her thoughts, she started pacing back and forth, trying to calm down, struggling to gather her thoughts. A minute later, she went back up the steps to Tyler’s front door. Deciding that she’d only just come out, she opened the door and let herself back in without ringing the doorbell.

On the way to the stairs, she encountered his mother.

“Jill?” she asked in surprise, a curious look on her face.

“Oh hi, Mrs. Cupp,” she replied without breaking stride.

A moment later, she was again upstairs. She let herself back into Tyler’s room. It looked as if he’d hardly moved. He was seated on his bed, his head in his hands. He looked up and their eyes met. He looked hurt – his eyes were red. He looked to be on the verge of crying.

She walked over and sat down next to him, her leg coming to rest against his. “I’m sorry,” she said, placing her own head in her hands. Not knowing what more to say, she just sat there. They both just sat there – both of them holding their heads. Things were really messed up, but somehow it felt better to be together.

A profound sadness permeated Jill’s soul. Even though she’d known in the back of her mind that things could turn out like this, she hadn’t prepared herself emotionally for the heartbreak. She’d had her heart set on a joyous reunion believing that optimism might play a role in bringing it about. She felt like crying, but this level of pain was beyond that – and that was not the Jill that she wanted Tyler to see. She wanted him to see the happy, confident young woman that she had become. That had been an important component of her plan. There would be plenty of time to cry later.

“Can I have a hug?” he asked.

“I’d like that,” she said softly. She turned toward him but avoided meeting his gaze. His arms encircled her. She rested her head against his shoulder, also reaching around him. She was feeling quite bad about having bared her breasts to another girl’s boyfriend, even going so far as forcing him to touch them.

Suddenly it hit her; she was ‘the other woman.’ She was still struggling to recall Nicole. The name sounded a little familiar, but that was all.

Given how things seemed to be working out, she was starting to feel terrible about what she had done.

“Umm . . . Tyler,” she said, still holding him. “Nicole? Did she go to Holden High?”

“Sophomore year. Her family used to live just across the street here. We did a lot together when we were young, but then her dad was transferred. They moved away two years ago. Our moms kept in touch. We reconnected and started dating shortly after graduation.”

“Where does she live?” Jill asked, finally realizing why Amber had not mentioned seeing Tyler with a girl.

“Benton . . . just graduated from Benton High. I’ve put a lot of miles on the car this summer.”

Jill knew where Benton was; her team had played basketball there – in Benton High, no less.

“You don’t have to tell her about . . . you know . . . do you?”

“How you took your shirt off?”

“Yeah, that . . . and the rest.”

“I tend to tell her everything,” he admitted.

“Well, this could be our secret. But if she has to know . . . and she asks . . . I’ll, of course, say it was all me. That . . . I threw myself at you.” She winced at her words.

As she was speaking, Jill was wondering just how close the two of them might actually be. Surely, Tyler must still have feelings for her. Maybe she could win him back – or simply wait him out. Surely his relationship with Nicole would run its course. She felt bad about having such thoughts, but she’d gotten her hopes up. However, she knew that if she really cared about Tyler, that she needed to be willing to let him go. At least, she had told him of her love. In spite of all the agony, she felt surprisingly good about having done that. In her mind, he deserved to know – nay, she wanted him to know – even if he had moved on – even if he was in love with someone else.

Tyler chuckled. “Threw yourself at me,” he said, echoing her statement. “I would have said you were incapable of that. The Jill I knew would never have been able to take her shirt off in front of a guy. So bold! And no bra . . . that was quite a surprise!”

“I surprise myself a lot these days.”

“Something tells me you’re not the person you used to be. You seem so different.”

Jill was surprised to hear that from him. Indeed, his words matched Dani’s almost verbatim.

“While you were talking, taking off your shirt, you seemed so confident. So self-assured. Quite a change really. What might have brought that about?”

“I had a great summer.”

“There’s got to be more to it than that. I had a great summer as well. But I doubt I’ve changed.”

“Well . . . I’ve been reading . . . reading classics all summer…for a freshman core class.”

Jill studied his expression. He looked puzzled, so she continued, telling him about the various books she’d read and what she’d gotten out of each of them. Had they been on a trajectory leading back to the romance they’d once shared, she would have been more honest. As it was, she didn’t feel like sharing details of what had really brought about the transformation he was noticing. Baring her breasts had been bad enough. Talking about running around in the hills naked would be completely out of line, especially given how he was now in a relationship with someone else. She didn’t need to be showing him any more skin, not even by talking about it. She’d been planning to bare all, body and soul, only now it would be inappropriate.

Suddenly there came a knock on the door. “Tyler, are you in there?” It was his mother.

“Yes, mom,” he replied. “Just talking to Jill. You can open the door.”

Jill quickly shifted about six inches away from him on the bed as she saw the doorknob turn.

“I don’t mean to bother you,” she said peeking in. “I was just so surprised to see Jill just now.”

“You and me both,” said Tyler. “Got a text from her this morning. We’re just catching up . . . it’s been a long time.”

The situation seemed so awkward. There she was, sitting next to Tyler on his bed, and the door had been closed. His mother had to be wondering what was going on. She, of course, knew that Tyler was dating Nicole. And Jill knew that her eyes were surely red. Indeed, Tyler’s were. At least she now had her top on.

“It’s nice to see you, Jill,” she said. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re always welcome in our home.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Cupp. It’s nice to see you, too.” Jill couldn’t think of anything more to say.

“I’ll be going now. My apologies for the interruption.” With that, Tyler’s mom backed out, closing the door behind her.

“Saw her downstairs,” explained Jill, “…when I came back in.”

“So glad you came back.”

“I’m glad too.”

Tyler placed a hand on top of one of her hands which was resting on her leg. “I’d like to be friends,” he said. His voice sounded very comforting.

“I’d like that,” she replied. The irony of the situation struck her. She’d spent the summer putting guys in the friend zone; suddenly, the roles were reversed. She liked the idea of being friends, but it was much more painful than she might have imagined. She had such strong feelings for him. Was she just supposed to suppress those feelings and be content with being his friend? It seemed challenging at best.

Tyler had not answered her question about whether he would be telling Nicole what she’d done. He’d hinted that he might, and it seemed as if he had every right. She wanted to know, but she didn’t want to ask again. Instead, she decided to bring up a different subject.

“I presume it was in your letter as well, but I still don’t know where you will be going to college.”

“Harvey Mudd.”

“Oh, wow!” she exclaimed. Without giving it any real thought, she threw her arms back around him. “I’m so excited for you! I know how much you hoped to get accepted there.”

Jill forced herself to pull away. She knew it was okay to hug him but only if she kept it short. It needed to be a quick, congratulatory hug such as one friend might give another.

“Yeah, I’m pumped!” he replied with a smile. To Jill, he appeared to be happy to have something other than their relationship to talk about.

“So . . . we’ll both be in California,” she said, trying to let her new reality sink in. She found herself wondering how long of a drive it might be from the Bay Area down to Harvey Mudd in Southern California. She was also wondering where Nicole might be attending college. She knew she most likely wouldn’t be going to Harvey Mudd, but one of the other Claremont colleges seemed like a possibility. There were quite a few. She decided not to ask. She was curious, but it was none of her business.

They talked for a bit, but then Tyler asked her if she’d like to have lunch with him.

“But Nicole?” she asked.

“I doubt she’d mind.”

“I expect she would. After all, I am your ex.”

“I really don’t think she’d care,” said Tyler.

Jill was pretty sure he was wrong about that, especially if she knew how she’d come at him. And she was starting to feel as if she had overstayed her welcome. She knew she would want to keep in touch with him, but as long as he was dating Nicole, she’d need to be careful. Even if she might be interested in eventually getting him back, she knew her sense of honor was going to keep her from doing anything that might undermine his current relationship.

Shortly thereafter, Jill said goodbye and started walking back. He’d asked if he could walk her home, but she’d turned him down.

She didn’t really want to go home, but there wasn’t anywhere else to go – at least not in the mental state she was in. She’d headed out with enthusiasm and excitement, but it had ended up being a rough morning. She felt the need to try and lose herself in a book even though that might end up being impossible. Somehow, she needed to do her best to forget her cringe-worthy attempt at winning Tyler back. She definitely did not like how that all now seemed. Telling him that she was in love with him seemed okay, but definitely not the rest. During the planning stage, it hadn’t seemed like she would be ‘throwing herself at him.’ She’d simply been wanting to rewrite history – to go back to February and pick up where they’d left off. Without a time machine, that had been the best idea that she had been able to come up with.

**Chapter 185: An Unanticipated Present**

In retrospect, it all seemed quite different. Taking her top off and forcing him to touch her now seemed like a rather slutty way to rekindle a relationship. Had things worked out as she had hoped, it might have been a masterpiece. As it was, it had become yet another piece of her history that she wished she could travel back and alter. Once again, she knew that it was merely one of those things that she was going to have to somehow come to terms with.

Her previously-meek self had done a good job of messing things up, and it now seemed clear that her new self, her more assertive self, would also be able to make a major mess of things. She chuckled at the thought. Being more confident and willing to take the bull by the horns was hardly the magic bullet that she had hoped it might be.

Once home, she went straight to the upstairs bathroom to wash her face. She hadn’t exactly broken down in tears, but the small amount of makeup that she’d put on that morning had indeed run. Not only that, but her eyes looked bloodshot. “Mrs. Hooper would say that I look like I’m on drugs,” she mumbled, chuckling to herself. “And maybe I behaved that way . . . or she’d say I’m a slut. Today, she might be right.” Jill made a face at herself in the mirror, shaking her head.

After settling down a bit, she went back downstairs intending to implement her ‘lose herself in a book’ strategy.

David was on the family computer. He seemed quite absorbed in whatever it was that he was doing. Remembering that he was much more outgoing than she was and might remember her, she asked, “Do you recall a Nicole Jenks?”

“Umm . . . yeah,” he replied. “But she doesn’t live in Holden anymore. Why?”

“Her family moved to Benton. Just learned that she and Tyler are dating.”

“Yeah . . . heard that,” he said with a shrug, returning his attention to the screen.

“Wait . . . heard that?”

“Or saw something in a post.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” she asked, realizing all the embarrassment he could have saved her.

“Excuse me?” he said indignantly, turning to face her. “We were all under explicit instructions. Don’t tell me you don’t remember calling him, ‘He Who Should Not Be Named.’”

Jill shook her head in disgust, but she knew she again only had herself to blame. David was right; she had been quite insistent.

“Why you didn’t want to know what he was up to never made any sense to me . . . especially considering how deeply you were in love with him.”

Still shaking her head, Jill went to the kitchen and got herself something cold to drink. She then went out into the backyard to read. At times having a twin could be so maddening! She expected that he’d quickly figure out that she’d attempted a reconciliation with Tyler. Likely, he’d already put two and two together.

After a brief attempt at reading, Jill ended up back upstairs in her bedroom. She’d only been able to pretend for so long that her morning had not gotten to her. Reading hadn’t worked. She couldn’t keep herself from thinking about it. It had been too traumatic.

She lay down on her bed and gave herself over to a much-needed cry. She didn’t know if it would end up being therapeutic or not. It didn’t really matter. She simply couldn’t put it off any longer.

Finally, facing facts and admitting to herself (and Tyler) that she loved him – and then learning that the feelings weren’t mutual all added up to be the most painful set of circumstances that she’d ever had to deal with. But she couldn’t crawl under a rock for the rest of her life. She’d have to figure out how to go on. Even though it seemed like the end of the world at the moment, she knew that she needed to keep reminding herself that there were other guys out there. There was, of course, only one Tyler; however, there were surely other worthy men.

Around lunchtime, she decided that she needed to get out of the house – the further away, the better. At the very least, she needed a change of scene – and some fresh air. She threw together a sandwich and headed out to the Jeep, only telling David that she was going for a drive.

“Can I come?” he asked.

“No,” she said, but she didn’t offer any explanation.

Just a few blocks down the street, she pulled over to read a couple of texts she’d received from Austin that morning. She’d glanced at them earlier, but at the time, she’d been so preoccupied with her Tyler plans that she hadn’t actually read them.

They didn’t say much, but they got her to thinking. Visiting Austin might take her mind off how completely she’d messed up – at least it seemed worth a shot.

“What are you doing this afternoon?” she asked him via text.

“Not much,” he replied. From there, they exchanged a series of texts and before she knew it, she was on the highway headed for Gadsen Falls. It was barely an hour’s drive.

For some reason, visiting and getting to know Austin seemed like just the change of pace that she needed. He knew her only as ‘Lola.’ She’d continue hiding behind that veil. She’d enjoyed getting to know him via text. She imagined that things would be much the same in person. They’d probably continue texting. She hadn’t had time to learn any sign language.

With the help of GPS, Jill found his address without difficulty. She’d been to Gadsen Falls before, but just to the high school, and each of those times, she had ridden in the team bus.

Tyler lived in a two-story home in an older neighborhood with tall shade trees. Jill parked on the street. She grew apprehensive as she walked toward his front door. What was she doing? Who was this ‘new Jill?’ Was she going to end up with two major things to regret from just the one day? Was that her destiny?

She rang the doorbell.

Austin’s mother opened the door. Jill recognized her from the trail recalling that both she and her husband had said appreciative things about how she’d treated their son.

“Lola, please come in,” she said. “Austin told me you were coming, but I’d like a quick word with you.”

“Umm . . . okay,” she replied apprehensively.

“Before Austin comes down from upstairs, I want you to know that we are very protective of him. I have no idea what you might have in mind . . . but please.”

Jill didn’t know how to respond. She could see the woman’s level of concern written all over her face. She’d, of course, been naked the last time she’d seen her.

“I don’t really have anything in mind,” she replied. “Austin and I have been texting. I’ve learned that he’s fun to talk to . . . interesting.”

“He’s a smart young man, that’s for sure,” agreed his mother. “And he’s got a future ahead of him. One day, I expect he’ll find the right girl . . . and they’ll fall in love.”

Jill understood the implication. She wasn’t the ‘right girl.’

Just then, she felt her phone vibrate. She glanced at it. It was a text from Austin. “I’ll be down in a moment.”

“It’s from Austin,” she said. “He knows I’m here.”

“I’m sure he does,” she said. “Whatever you do, please don’t take advantage of the situation.”

“What situation?” she asked. Suddenly it was clear that she was again dealing with someone who seemed to be jumping to conclusions simply because she had been hiking nude.

“I’m sure you know what I mean. But please, make yourself at home. I’ll get you a glass of water, and the restroom is just down the hall,” she said pointing. “I know it’s a long drive from Holden.”

Jill was taken aback. As his mother went into the kitchen, she was racking her brain trying to figure out how Austin’s mother might know she’d just come from Holden. She’d made a point of never revealing any such personal information to Austin.

Glancing up, she saw him coming down the stairs. He was accompanied by a young girl who looked to be around ten or eleven. Jill was guessing that she had to be a younger sister.

“I’m Emily,” she said.

“Hi Emily,” she said with a smile, but then she turned her attention to Austin. “Hi Austin,” she said, waving. Not knowing how good he might be at reading lips, she lifted up her phone to send him a text.

Emily continued, “I know who you are.”

“Who am I?” Jill asked.

“You’re Lola, but your name is ‘Jill.’” As Jill’s mouth dropped open, she continued, “Why are you dressed? I thought you’d be naked.”

Jill turned toward the door. What was happening? Should she leave? She certainly hadn’t been expecting this reception. She almost started out, but instead paused to send Austin a text. “Why is she calling me Jill?”

“I’m sorry,” came the reply. “I should have told you. But you wanted to be Lola, so I didn’t. Please don’t go.” His thumbs were lightning fast. Jill didn’t think she’d ever seen anyone who could type that fast.

“Told me what?” she replied.

Just then, Austin’s mother returned with the glass of water. Jill saw Austin signing to her as she was handing her the glass.

“Emily! You should know better!” she snapped. “I’m sorry about that, Jill . . . Lola . . . whatever you want to be called.”

She turned and left, grabbing Emily by the hand and taking her with her. Jill suddenly found herself all alone with Austin in the entryway.

“What just happened?” she asked via text.

“Do you want to come up to my room? I’ll explain.”

Jill looked around. What had she gotten herself into?

“How do you know my name?” she asked.

“Sorry. Like I said, I should have told you. I didn’t think Em would be so stupid. Sisters!”

“But how did you guys find out?”

“Internet. I’m pretty good on the computer. After we came home, I found a couple of news broadcasts. I showed them to my parents. I didn’t show them to Emily. Maybe she overheard my parents talking.”

“Oh, then you know everything.”

“We could sit on the front porch, but I have a present for you in my room.”

‘Oh, no,’ thought Jill. What kind of present might a boy get for a girl that he’d met hiking? A naked girl that he’d met hiking?

Jill saw a couch in the living room. She decided to sit there while she tried to decide if she was leaving. She smiled at Austin and then pointed at the couch. He nodded, so she went in and sat down. He took a seat nearby in a matching overstuffed chair.

Jill saw him texting. She studied him. Just as she remembered, his head looked a bit asymmetric and he didn’t seem to have much in the way of ears, nothing on one side.

The day they’d met on the hill above Lupine Lakes, she’d found that somewhat distracting. She no longer saw it that way. That day, she’d imagined he was quite handicapped. Since she’d gotten to know him, she’d learned her first impressions had been wrong. He no longer seemed very handicapped at all. Now he seemed much like any other boy her age.

Her phone buzzed. Glancing down at it she read, “How’s David? My parents and I have been worried about him. Home from the hospital?”

She looked up at him and nodded, but then typed, “Came home yesterday. It seems as if he’s going to be okay.”

“So glad to hear it,” he replied.

Jill found herself pondering his use of the word, ‘hear.’ It seemed odd that a deaf person might phrase something that way. She was curious and wanted to ask, but somehow it seemed as if it might not be PC to bring that up. Best to just act as if he could hear, she decided.

“You have a present for me?” she typed. She, of course, didn’t have anything for him. She was only there to take her mind off of what a mess she’d made of her life that morning in Tyler’s bedroom. Considering that, she realized that it was working.

“It’s upstairs in my room. I could bring it down, but it’s a bit large.”

Jill was curious about what it might be. A large stuffed animal popped into her head, but only because she couldn’t think of anything that he might have gotten for her. He hadn’t had much time. She’d been on the road for an hour, but that hardly seemed like enough time to go shopping.

“Is it for college?” she texted. “For my dorm room?”

“Sure. Why not? For your dorm room!” he replied.

“Is it a lamp?” she asked.

“Hahaha! Do you want to play Twenty Questions? Or go up to my room and open your present?”

Jill was wondering if it was safe to go into his bedroom with him. Austin’s mother was worried about what she might do to him, and here she was pondering her own safety.

“Okay, let’s go,” she wrote, standing up. She’d thought about all they had discussed before her phone had given up the ghost. Austin had seemed every bit the mild-mannered young man. She didn’t doubt that he was trustworthy.

She followed him up the stairs and then a short distance down a hall. He led her into a room. As soon as she was inside, he closed the door behind them and locked it. Jill was a bit surprised that he had a lock on his door. She didn’t. However, it was a lock that would keep people, sisters maybe, out. Jill could tell that it wasn’t a lock that would slow her down much if she decided to leave.

**Chapter 186: A Movie**

Jill glanced around. It looked as if Austin spent a great deal of time in his room. It was packed, but everything had its place. He pointed to a chair, so Jill took a seat. It was a desk chair, but a rather fancy one – more like a gaming chair, she thought.

Thanks,” she said aloud, forgetting for a moment that he couldn’t hear.

A moment later she saw that Austin had a wrapped present in his hands. I was indeed large, probably a foot and a half wide and easily twice that in length. It was also thin.

She didn’t really want a present, but she knew better than to reject it.

“Open it?” she asked aloud, expecting he would understand by reading her lips or because of the context.

He nodded. It seemed as if he had heard what she had said.

No knowing what else to do, she started tearing the brightly colored paper.

Even before all of it was off, she knew what it was. It was a picture, a framed picture. She held it out at arm’s length, and then glanced over at him. She didn’t know how to react. It was a giant nude. She’d recognized herself immediately. It was a drawing, a piece of artwork.

Austin had taken a seat on the bed. He was looking at her expectantly. She didn’t know what to say. What was she supposed to do with a giant nude of herself? She certainly couldn’t take it home or have it up in her dorm room, for that matter.

She turned her attention to the drawing. Looking closely, she saw that it was a pencil sketch. She stood up and walked it over to a dresser. Placing it on the floor, the dresser holding it upright, she walked back to the chair. She wanted to see what it looked like from a distance – and not have anything in her hands so that she could text. It was a remarkable likeness.

“I don’t know what to say?” she wrote, being conscious that her words didn’t exactly fit the situation because she was texting.

She studied the drawing. It looked very much like a black and white photo. In it, she was standing alone in the woods. It was a full-length drawing showing her from head to toe. She was wearing boots, nothing more. Her eyes swept up her long slender legs. There was Fuzzy Wuzzy, preserved in all his glory. And just below, her smoothly shaven slit had been painstakingly included.

She studied her chest. Her breasts seemed to be accurately rendered in all regards. Even her nipples were life-like – very pointy. She studied her face. The girl in the drawing looked almost exactly like her. It was uncanny. Austin was certainly very talented. He was clearly able to do much more than draw robots.

Suddenly it struck her. The drawing was a bit too good. Had he had a photo to work from? ‘Britt!’ she hissed beneath her breath. Britt must have sent him a photo!

“Britt sent you a photo, didn’t she?” she texted him.

“Who’s Britt?” he asked.

“The one who sent you the photo. Don’t lie to me!”

To her surprise, Austin denied having received a photo. He claimed to have made the drawing working entirely from memory. Jill was having a hard time believing that. She wanted it to be the truth, but it didn’t seem possible.

She turned her eyes back to the drawing. It was simply too good. She wasn’t an artist, so she didn’t have a lot of experience to base an opinion on.

“I swear I drew it from memory,” he texted. “My mom says I have a photographic memory.”

She could tell he was feeling uncomfortable to have his honesty questioned.

“It’s a bit too good,” she repeated.

She saw him chuckle and then relax.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” he said. “I presume Britt was one of the blondes. The one with the camera-phone, I’m guessing.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Suddenly Jill recalled showing Austin the photo of the two of them side-by-side. Austin had taken charge, zooming in and studying the photo in great detail. He’d looked at the still image for an uncomfortably long time. Had he already been planning to draw her? Had he been committing details to memory with that in mind?

“I never heard from her,” he said. “And I certainly have no way of getting in touch with her. I didn’t even know her name, much less her phone number.”

Jill decided that she believed him. Thinking about Britt and Jenna made her realize how surprised they’d be if they knew where she was right then.

“Let’s take a selfie,” she proposed. “I want to send it to Britt and Jenna. The two blondes I was hiking with that day.”

She saw a shy look come over Austin. “I’m not very photogenic.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I used to feel the same way.”

She went over and sat next to him on his bed. After a couple of tries, she had one that she liked.

“They’re going to be so surprised,” she texted him.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I was embarrassed that day . . . being butt naked and all. I kept your number, but I didn’t expect to ever contact you. I’m sure they didn’t think I would either.”

“Okay,” he replied.

First Jill sent a group text to both girls. “Guess who I’m with today.”

Without waiting for a reply, she sent a second text with the selfie attached.

“OMG! The boy from the trail?” came Jenna’s reply.

“Yep, Austin!” Jill replied with glee, after showing Austin Jenna’s reply.

“I didn’t think you liked boys like that,” Jenna answered.

“Like what?” asked Jill.

“As I recall, he’s older.” At that point in her text, there was a grinning emoticon. “You’ve got a hang-up when it comes to older men, right?”

Jill showed the text to Austin. He laughed.

“Yes, I think he’s 21.” Austin was nodding, so Jill hit send.

“So, what’s really going on?” Jenna asked.

“I really don’t know,” said Jill. She hit send, but she didn’t show Austin her text. She didn’t want him to know that he was merely a distraction in an otherwise disastrous day. Maybe it would end up being more than that, but that was what had provoked her to make the drive to Gadsen Falls.

“Where’s Britt?” Jill asked.

“Working. Her residency,” came the reply.

“Ready for another surprise?” Jill asked her.

“You better not tell me you’re dating the boy! Whatever happened to going off to college unencumbered?”

Jill didn’t show that text to Austin either.

“Don’t worry. I AM going off to college a single woman.” As she hit send, she realized that it was indeed true. She would go to college single. The irony of the situation was that it wasn’t going to be by choice. Had things worked out as she had hoped, she’d have started college in a relationship.

“What’s the next surprise?” Jenna asked.

Jill moved back to the chair and pointed at the drawing, holding her phone up to indicate to Austin that she wanted to take a picture.

He nodded, but then sent a text, “Take all the pictures you like. It’s yours.” He got up and turned on the overhead light.

Jill spent quite a bit of time trying to get a nicely-lit, sharp photo. Even though she was doing so under the guise of wanting to share it with her friends, she knew the photo was for herself. She hoped Austin would not feel slighted, but she was going to have to decline the gift. In the first place, she didn’t know what she’d do with it. But, similarly important to her, she was sure that Austin had made the drawing for himself.

While she still felt as if she couldn’t share an actual nude photo with him, she wanted him to keep the drawing. After all, it was only a drawing. The girl in the drawing did look like her, but it didn’t prove that she had been naked. Indeed, Austin was probably skillful enough to make a nude drawing of anyone; he wouldn’t need to see them naked in order to pull it off.

Once she had an image she was happy with, she attached it to the thread, sending it to Jenna and Britt. Britt still wasn’t responding, but Jenna replied, “Wow! Austin drew that?!”

“He did!” Jill replied, after showing Austin Jenna’s response.

After wrapping up her exchange with Jenna, Jill sent Austin a text mentioning that, although she loved the drawing, she wanted him to keep it. He seemed disappointed, but she did want him to have it. “I’d have to keep it hidden where no one would ever see it,” she explained. Eventually, she got him to accept the fact that she wasn’t taking it with her. She did her best to impress upon him that she did in fact like it. Fortunately, he seemed to understand.

She was concerned about whom he might show it to, but she wasn’t going to bring that up. Instead, she focused her thoughts on the fact that it was merely a drawing.

As they wrapped up their text exchange about the piece of art, their conversation started to bog down. Noticing all the sci-fi movie memorabilia around the room, Jill asked him about the movie she had been wanting to see. It was the one that she and Kyle had been planning to go to. As it turned out, Austin had already seen it.

Jill was still hoping to have a chance to see it while it was in theaters. Austin then told her that he’d like to see it again. Jill was suspicious that he might just be saying that so that they might go together; however, he convinced her otherwise.

He explained that he didn’t go to very many movies in the theater, mostly just action-oriented films as they were typically much easier to follow and enjoy. He said that he often went twice. The first time, he’d watch the show using a device that he called CaptiView, reading the captions. Then, if the show had been good enough, he’d see it a second time, not bothering with the device.

Austin quickly researched show times for the local theater, and they decided on a matinee. Earlier in the day, it had crossed Jill’s mind that she might see the movie with Tyler – during their one ‘glorious’ week together. As there wasn’t going to be any such week, she was glad to have someone to see it with. Going alone would have been just too sad. And what was also good about their matinee plan, was that it gave her something to do with Austin. He was a likable guy, but the situation was a bit awkward, and she was still feeling very hurt due to how things had gone with Tyler.

Before going downstairs to leave for the movie, Austin put a sheet around the drawing and hid it under his bed. “My family doesn’t know about it,” he texted her. “Please don’t mention it.” Jill nodded, glancing over at the lock on his door. She wasn’t surprised. She knew that if she were to attempt a drawing of a naked man, that she’d keep it a secret.

For some reason, Jill had been expecting to drive; however, after a lengthy sign language exchange with his mother, Austin took some keys off of a hook in their kitchen. Together they walked out and got into what had to be the family car. Jill hadn’t known if Austin had a driver’s license or not, but she wasn’t surprised. It was much easier to let him drive as he knew where they were going.

As they sat through the previews, Jill’s mind turned once more to Tyler. Not only had she thought that they might go to the movies together, but she’d also thought that it might be fun to once again go ice blocking with him. Ice blocking had turned out to be much more of a contact sport than she had realized. Just that morning, she’d been thinking about how much fun they’d have rolling around on the grass together. She knew she was only torturing herself to be thinking about that. Fortunately, the movie started, forcing all such thoughts back out of her head.

Back at Austin’s house, his mother served the two of them watermelon in the backyard. Emily was nowhere to be seen. The watermelon was delicious, but Jill was ready to bring her impromptu visit to a close.

She sent Austin a text letting him know that she’d be leaving soon. Acting as if he was suddenly remembering something, he got up and disappeared into the house. Jill sat there in a state of bewilderment, but a minute later, Austin was back. He handed her a slip of paper. She unfolded it. It contained what appeared to be a ten-digit phone number.

“?” she texted him.

“Jane’s phone number,” he replied.

At first, Jill had no idea who Jane was, but then it came to her. “Jane Jane?” she asked.

She saw him laugh. “Yes, Jane Porter. As in, Me Tarzan, you Jane!”

It was Jill’s turn to laugh. “Where did you get this?”

“Jane said it on live TV.”

“But they muted it.”

“For you maybe, but not for me.”

“You read her lips?”

“Yup. Numbers are particularly easy.”

Jill thanked him and put it in her pocket. She didn’t know if she’d call her, but at least now she wouldn’t have to call the station if she decided to.

A short time later, after doing her best to bow out graciously, she was in the Jeep and on her way home.

**Chapter 187: Going Out to Dinner**

That evening, Jill felt like a zombie; she’d become a member of the walking dead. Deciding to attempt a reconciliation with Tyler and having it go down in flames had been devastating. It had sapped not only her spirit but her physical energy as well. She was bound and determined not to feel sorry for herself, but truth be told, she was numb – essentially dead to the world around her.

David tried to find out what was going on, but she refused to engage. At one point, she did tell him that she had been to a movie, but not only wouldn’t she tell him who she’d gone with, she wouldn’t even tell him which movie she’d seen. She suspected that he might be able to figure it out, but he seemed to have the good sense to not venture any guesses. At that point, he left Jill alone to suffer in silence. She was glad about that.

That night, Jill cried herself to sleep. She hadn’t wanted to sink to that level; it had just proven to be unavoidable. No sooner had she gotten her hopes up than they’d been dashed. As long as she’d been able to stay mad at Tyler, she’d been able to keep her true feelings for him buried deep within. However, once the anger had disappeared, her affection for him had been laid bare.

Once she’d finally been willing to reassess their breakup objectively, she’d quickly formed a new opinion of what had happened – an opposite opinion. Tyler’s ‘I can feel bottom’ comment had toggled from seeming mean and objectionable to something much more endearing. Frankly, it now seemed to Jill to be a fun comment that a boy might make while playing with his girlfriend’s boobies for the first time – if she were lightly endowed. Just possibly, he hadn’t even deserved the slap.

At the very least, his comment paled in comparison with how mean she’d treated him. It was surprising that he’d waited as long as he had. She didn’t deserve him! That depressing thought as much as anything led to her inability to suppress her tears. She imagined that David might be able to hear her blubbering through the wall, but there was little she could do about that.

The next morning saw Jill having a little more success looking on the bright side of things. She’d said over and over that she didn’t want to be dealing with a long-distance relationship. Even though she was sad about how things were working out, she was getting her wish. There would be lots of new guys at college to meet and get to know. She wouldn’t have Tyler, but she’d be fine. She’d become a much more upbeat, out-going person. Nothing, not even her Tyler reconciliation disaster, could hold her back!

She thought about Austin and the drawing he’d made. She pulled up her photos of it and studied them in detail. Focusing in on the boots, she saw that they were indeed all wrong. She chuckled, realizing that he’d paid such close attention to every detail, just not what she’d been wearing. That as much as anything probably indicated that he’d been telling the truth when he’d told her that he hadn’t had a photo to work from.

She chanced upon the selfie that she’d taken sitting next to him on his bed. She attached it to a text and sent it to Austin along with a thank you for the nice afternoon they’d spent together. Austin hadn’t asked for the selfie, but she expected that he’d appreciate it. In and of itself, it was quite innocuous.

While having breakfast, Jill found herself remembering how she had told Tyler that it had been all the reading she had done that summer that lay behind all the change that he was noticing. For some reason, that now seemed quite funny. She wondered if he might have believed her. She thought about sending him a text, but after a little consideration, she decided not to. He was dating Nicole. She needed to let go and move on.

Time was starting to seem short, so she went out and came back with some boxes. Upon returning, she saw David sitting there. He looked depressed. She spoke with him and quickly learned that he had no idea how he was going to be ready to start college. He’d be attending one of the state universities. It wasn’t particularly far away. He’d be able to drive home on weekends; however, like her, he was going off to college. He’d also be living in a dorm.

Rather than working on her own packing, Jill ended up helping David get started with his preparations. That ended up being very therapeutic. At the very least, it served to remind her that she wasn’t the only one experiencing difficulties. Indeed, she quickly decided that her love life related problems seemed quite insignificant in comparison to what David was dealing with. His ribs were still quite painful, he had a cast on one hand, and he was still dealing with the repercussions and restrictions that were a direct result of his head injury.

She felt sorry for him. Those were hardly ideal conditions under which to be starting college. Since he too needed some new clothes, Jill began her efforts by taking him shopping.

Two days later, there was a pile of boxes in the corner of the living room. They contained what David would be taking to college. Jill was all packed up as well; however, her boxes weren’t there. She’d gotten them shipped that morning.

That evening, Jill’s parents decided that they should all go out to dinner to celebrate. Jill again suggested the steakhouse where Amber worked and was delighted to learn that they already had reservations there.

Jill sent Amber a text in hopes that she’d be working that evening. Amber’s response confirmed that she would be. As a matter of fact, she’d noticed the Wahlund name on the schedule and had penciled them in for one of the better tables.

Much later that evening, after they’d been seated and had placed their order, Amber stopped by their table. She said that she had a break coming up and wanted to know if Jill had a few minutes. Jill followed her through the kitchen and out a back door. She found herself in an alley behind what was from the rear a very ordinary looking cinder block building. Amber didn’t smoke, but Jill noticed evidence that other restaurant employees took smoke breaks there.

“I hope the rest of your evening is free,” said Amber.

“Why? What’s up?”

“You’re coming to my house for a slumber party.”

“I am?”

Dani, too.”

“Sounds fun,” Jill replied. She’d been wanting to spend more time with them before leaving town.

“But only come,” said Amber, “…if you were serious about wanting to play basketball naked . . . because that’s what Dani has been lining up.”

“Oh, I can’t do that,” said Jill. “Where?”

“I’m not supposed to warn you, so I’ve already said too much. All I was supposed to do was to invite you over.”

“I’m glad you’re telling me. I’ve had too many naked surprises this summer.”

“One is too many,” said Amber.

“Agreed. So where might this game take place?” Jill was trying not to sound too interested, but she was curious.

“She’s scouted out an outdoor court in the park next to the golf course. Supposedly a sign says that the park is closed dusk to dawn; however, there’s no gate. Dani says they make no effort to keep people out at night.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. Even at night, not in Holden.”

“Glad to hear you say that. Pretty much what I told her.”

“But . . . how late is she thinking? After midnight?”

Amber smiled. “You sound like you want to do this.”

“Just curious, that’s all. Doesn’t mean I want to. Just trying to picture it,” said Jill with a shrug. She was doing her best to act indifferent.

“Well, it would have to be late. I usually don’t get off until ten-thirty, sometimes eleven. I’m sure it would be midnight by the time we got there.”

“Would that be late enough?” asked Jill. She wasn’t really asking, mostly just thinking out loud.

“If you’re asking me, I’d say that there doesn’t exist a time between dusk and down that is late enough . . . not to be outside naked.”

“I know. You’re right about that,” said Jill, nodding in agreement. “Who else would come? Just us, or…” Looking at the expression on Amber’s face, she added, “…not that I’m considering it. Just wondering what Dani might have set up.”

“Sure you are,” said Amber suspiciously.

“I am. You’re the one who brought this up. I already told you I’m not doing it, but that doesn’t mean I’m not curious.”

“Initially, she was talking about inviting a lot of players . . . guys and gals.”

Jill sucked in a breath upon hearing that. “She better not have!”

Amber continued, “…but she might have chickened out. Decided to keep it small to start with.”

“Yes . . . best to keep it small,” agreed Jill. But then seeing the look on Amber’s face, she added, “Not that it matters.”

“Why doesn’t it matter?” asked Amber.

“Because . . . like I already told you . . . I’m not doing it.”

“I think you want to. I think you’re thinking about it. Your mouth says one thing, but your…”

“How long’s your break?” asked Jill, interrupting her.

Amber looked at her phone. “Yeah . . . I guess I should be getting back. But the sleepover?”

“Sure. Sounds fun. Anything I can bring?”

“White wine?” asked Amber.

“I would, but I don’t have anyone to buy for me,” said Jill. She knew she would be ill-advised to have any, but she didn’t care if they did.

“That’s alright,” said Amber. “I already got my neighbor to buy me some. So we’re set.” She winked and then led the way back inside.

Back at their table, Jill did her best to take part in the family conversation: however, she couldn’t get the idea of a naked basketball game out of her head. Amber had planted a seed and it had taken root in the fertile soil of her imagination. Who might Dani have invited? What might she have told them? Her thoughts bounced back and forth from her anger at Dani to the excitement of finally doing something that she had been teased with all summer. Dani had surely told a few people something. Who now knew and what did they know?

“You seem to be somewhere else tonight, dear,” her mother remarked at one point.
Jill did her best to explain that it was just her concerns relating to going off to college that was keeping her quiet, but she doubted that her parents were convinced. David’s smile seemed to indicate that he was on to her. Jill even started to wonder if Dani had been in contact with him. She hoped not. She could just picture David coaching Dani, giving her all sorts of advice.

Down inside, Jill was fuming; Dani had promised to keep her secret! She found herself trying to reconstruct exactly what it was that Dani and Amber had promised, but she was too flustered to remember that conversation in sufficient detail.

As if she hadn’t been worried enough, just after their waitress handed out dessert menus, she received a text from none other than Ryan. “Brendan knows,” it read. “He just called asking questions. He’s seen the broadcasts. Just wanted you to know. For the record, I didn’t tell him. I kept my promise. I have my suspicions about who spilled the beans. I asked him not to tell anyone. Probably already has.”

“What’s wrong, dear?” her mother asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Jill set down her phone and looked up. Her parents were studying her. “It’s nothing, mom,” she said, attempting a smile.

**Chapter 188: Dani**

Jill got up from the dinner table and made her way to the restroom. She felt the need to go somewhere private so that she could scream and punch walls in peace. She knew she shouldn’t be jumping to conclusions, but how could Dani have done this to her.

She’d surely taken Brendan into her confidence. Brendan, in turn, would then tell someone, also making them promise to never tell a soul. And in that manner, the entire town would find out – probably already had.

“How could you?” she texted Dani.

“What?” came the reply.

“You know. Brendan.”

“Okay. He knows, but I didn’t tell him. I’m thinking Ryan.”

Jill didn’t know what to think. Of course, those two would end up pointing fingers at one another. She couldn’t believe that Ryan suddenly seemed more trustworthy than Dani, but he did. She thought of a third possibility. Maybe they were both telling the truth. Brendan could have found out on his own. She’d always been assuming that everyone would simply find out. Maybe that was what was happening.

But if Dani was to blame, if she had been the one who had told Brendan, then Jill realized that she again had herself to blame. She kicked herself. Why had she let Amber and Dani in on her secret? She hadn’t been planning to.

But she knew the answer to that question. It had felt so good, so refreshing, to bare her soul to Kyle and the others the night of the final campfire. She’d felt as if she’d found some acceptance. She’d wanted the same from her real friends, her long-term friends. In fact, she needed it – to be accepted. But were they really her friends? Not if they were going to talk about her behind her back! Not if they were going to make fun of her! Not if they were going to break promises.

She found herself wondering what might have been said. Even if Dani hadn’t told Brendan, they’d talked about her. Dani knew that he knew, so they’d definitely talked about her.

Heading back out of the restroom, she saw Amber and approached her. “So . . . Brendan knows. Did you know that Dani was going to tell him?”

Amber’s jaw dropped. “Dani told him?”

“I assume so. Who did you tell?”

“No one. Absolutely no one.”

“Really? Be honest!” Jill felt bad taking Amber to task like that, but suddenly she felt as if everyone were lying to her. Did she have friends? Any at all? Friends she could trust?

“I swear,” said Amber.

Jill turned away from her without comment and walked back to their table. As she sat down, she got another text. It was Amber. “I swear,” she repeated.

On the way out of the restaurant, Jill kept her eyes on the ground, avoiding Amber’s gaze. She felt bad to be taking what seemed to be Dani’s transgression out on Amber, but she couldn’t help herself. She was feeling hurt – betrayed.

Later, at home in her room, while trying to decide what to do, she received another text from Amber. “I’m sorry about Brendan. Dani swears she didn’t tell him and I believe her. Please come!”

Jill didn’t reply. She still didn’t know what to think. For a couple of days, it had seemed as if no one was going to find out. Then she’d shared her secret with her two best friends. Now it was clear that everyone would find out. The timeline seemed rather compelling, especially in light of the fact that Dani and Brendan were dating. It was simply very hard to believe that Dani was innocent. Hadn’t Amber said that she’d been arranging a basketball game? Surely that had involved telling some people something.

College couldn’t come soon enough, and yet her flight wasn’t for three more days. Jill started to pack the few things she’d need for a slumber party. She’d decided that she would go. She didn’t know if she’d end up staying, but she’d show up. At the very least, she felt the need to have it out with Dani. She wanted to believe that she’d kept her promise, but the possibility that she hadn’t loomed large. She felt bad for thinking that Dani was lying, but she was simply looking at the evidence objectively.

Jill ended up packing her court shoes, just in case. She couldn’t imagine actually taking part in a basketball game, but it didn’t hurt to be prepared. She was a much better player with her shoes. She smiled, thinking about how shoes were the only part of a player’s uniform that had anything to do with performance.

A while later, after telling her parents where she was going but that she might be back, she left for Amber’s house. Even though it was across town, she’d decided to walk. Indeed, it was still early and walking would give her a chance to think.

The fresh air ended up being a good choice. Until running into Amber in the park, she’d been operating under the assumption that everyone would find out and watch the videos. It had been quite a shock to learn that it was now indeed going to play out that way. A shock, yes, but an outcome that she’d previously gotten somewhat used to. She’d never liked the idea, not at all, but she had concluded that life would go on.

She hadn’t been arrested. As a matter of fact, nothing bad, other than all the embarrassment, had happened. Indeed, she’d received a considerable amount of praise for getting help up the mountain so quickly. Being outed as a nudist or an exhibitionist, whatever she was, could certainly have gone much worse.

Considering how Holden seemed destined to find out, she tried to imagine what that might be like. She’d probably experience a considerable amount to notoriety. She’d likely notice people pointing; possibly she’d overhear whispering behind her back. But she’d be off at college for long stretches. Over time, the story would gradually fade; it would have to.

She was glad that it wasn’t just a story about a girl running around naked pretending to be Tarzan. There certainly was that element, but fortunately, there was the heroism angle mixed in, adding complexity to the picture. She’d certainly been doing things that society frowned upon; however, when push came to shove, she’d stepped up. Ignoring her own interests, she’d gone for help – by the fastest but most exposing route.

As it was a long walk, she had time to again consider Tyler and how she’d botched things up with him so completely. She thought about how a lot of girls would share their love life woes with their closest friends. She thought about telling Amber and Dani what had happened but realized that, even if she weren’t mad at Dani, she wouldn’t.

Possibly, it might do her some good to open up to her friends like that, and yet, it had never been something that she’d been able to do. Typically, she always kept her thoughts and desires bottled up within herself. Given how humiliating her latest efforts had turned out, she knew she wouldn’t be sharing. Maybe one day, after enough time had passed, she might be able to look back at her various missteps and laugh. Maybe then she’d be able to talk about it; however, that day seemed as if it was likely decades in the future – or might never arrive.

When she got to Amber’s, she found the house dark. She’d assumed she might be the first one there. She’d thought that Amber’s parents would be home, but then it occurred to her that Amber’s house had probably been chosen because, for one reason or another, they’d have the house to themselves.

Jill ended up waiting outside, not that there was an option. It was a nice evening, so she strolled up and down the street. At one point, she passed a man walking a dog on a leash. Initially, she’d wondered if he might be Ninety-Six, but she knew that there was little chance. She was much too far from her side of town.

As she had time on her hands, they ended up having a brief conversation. Mostly they just chatted about his dog. She learned that it was a purebred Yorkie, a female. Her pups had been in demand, but that had been in years past. She was now enjoying her retirement, living out her golden years. The man seemed quite nice as well as very fond of the family pet.

Dani was the next to arrive, parking right in front of Amber’s house. Jill had been in a very confrontational mood, but that had been hours earlier. She was glad that she’d had the time to calm down a little.

“So, if he didn’t hear it from you, just how did Brendan find out?” she asked, dispensing with any and all pleasantries. “I’m sure it wasn’t from Ryan.”

“Oh, Jill. I’m so sorry,” Dani replied evasively. She stepped toward her, attempting to give her a hug.

Jill would have nothing of it. She just stared at her point blank, her arms folded.

Realizing that she first needed to answer the question, Dani continued, “You’re right. Not from Ryan. After your texts, I called Brendan to find out. He said that Jacob P. called him about the video. He also mentioned Matt . . . the Matt who sat by us in Freshman English.”

Jill nodded, letting the news sink in. Her breath caught in her throat. Even though the news wasn’t surprising, it hit her like a ton of bricks. If Brendan, Jacob P., and Matt all knew, then everyone would find out. This was the start of the end. Everyone who knew her would see the videos. It wasn’t the sort of news that one kept to himself.

She thought about Matt. According to Dani, he’d been planning to ask her to the Homecoming Dance that year. He never did. A year or so later, she’d heard something similar from David. He hadn’t asked her out that time either – even though she’d always smiled at him, hoping to send encouraging vibes.

Studying the look on Jill’s face, Dani spoke again, “I’m sorry. I really am. But I’m telling the truth . . . didn’t tell him. I wouldn’t do that to you. I know you wanted us to know . . . but no one else. I kept my promise.”

“But you were putting together a basketball game. Who did you tell? What did you tell them?”

“Oh . . . Amber. She wasn’t supposed to say anything.”

“I’m glad she did. Silly me. I imagine it concerns me.”

“Sure it does, but . . . but it’s just that…”

“Spit it out!”

“Well, you did say you wanted to play basketball naked.”

Jill was fretting. “I suppose I did.”

“Well, I couldn’t think about that without imagining myself in your shoes. I wouldn’t be able to do it . . . play naked.”

Jill realized that at one time she wouldn’t have been able to imagine it either. Now she could. And she wanted the experience, only she didn’t. And she wanted others there, only she didn’t.

“So you didn’t talk to people? Find others to play?”

“I wanted to . . . I really did. For you. But I wimped out. I did find a basketball court . . . spent some time on that. It seems just right . . . not that far from here. I started making a list of players to invite, but I couldn’t bring myself to talk to any of them. I always ended up picturing myself naked in front of them . . . that would stop me. And then I thought of how you made us promise. I didn’t know what to do.”

“So . . . you wimped out!” said Jill with a chuckle. She was relieved, but then she felt a twinge of disappointment.

“Sorry,” said Dani, hanging her head. “I guess I’m not much of a friend.”

“You’re a great friend,” said Jill, finally accepting the hug that had been offered earlier. “Assuming you’re telling the truth about Brendan…”

“I am.”

“…then you ARE a great friend.”

**Chapter 189: Wine?**

“But we can still play basketball,” said Dani. “We could play one-on-one. It will seem a bit strange, but maybe a wee bit fun as well. I’ve seen you naked, but I’ve never seen anyone, male or female, play basketball naked. I couldn’t do it, but you can . . . not much to flop around.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Certainly not. The real reason that I couldn’t do it is just that I couldn’t do it. And some girls need bras more than others. It’s a fact of life . . . no slight intended. That said, that’s not the reason I couldn’t do it.”

Jill smiled and nodded. Dani had never been one to make her feel bad because she was so light on top; however, neither had she been one to pretend that breast size differences did not exist. It was a fine line, but Dani had always walked it quite respectfully.

“So, what do you say? One-on-one?”

“What’s the court like?”

“Concrete . . . partially fenced . . . chain nets.”

“Lighting?”

“So, there’s a sign that says the park is closed dusk to dawn. As the court is not used at night, there are no lights on the court itself; however, there are security lights, none especially close. Enough lighting, but just barely.

“Sounds about perfect,” Jill admitted. She wouldn’t want to play on a brightly lit court, but it would be impossible to play in the dark. One had to be able to see the hoop, the ball, and the other players. “But is it close to the road?”

“It’s quite some distance from the road. If I were going to play naked, and I never will… Well, it seems about ideal. Next to the golf course . . . a lonely part of town at night.”

As Jill gave Dani’s description of the court a little serious consideration, she realized that she’d gotten her hopes up. That process had begun as soon as Amber had mentioned the possibility of a basketball game earlier that evening.

She knew she would have been mad at Dani if she’d set up a game with other players, male or female, telling them that she’d be playing naked. However, she couldn’t help but feel a bit disappointed to learn that no such game had been arranged.

At that point, Amber arrived. She was delighted that Jill had decided to come and especially pleased that she and Dani had talked through their differences.

After Amber had changed out of her dress, the three friends ended up around a table in Amber’s backyard. Her home was much like Jill’s, a typical suburban home with a fenced backyard.

Amber brought out her chilled bottle of wine and three glasses. Jill covered the glass that Amber had placed in front of her while Amber was pouring. She found it quite a coincidence that Amber and Dani were drinking white wine given that it was also Britt and Jenna’s beverage of choice, but she knew that it was popular.

“Jill and I are going to play one-on-one,” Dani announced. “She’s going to play naked.”

“I didn’t say I was.”

“But you will.”

Jill let out a heavy sigh. She knew she’d agree. “How late is it?” she asked.

“Quarter to midnight,” answered Dani, looking at her phone.

Jill shook her head. “Needs to be after midnight.”

“You look scared,” observed Amber.

“Wouldn’t you be . . . if you were thinking of doing something like that in a public park?”

“I know I’d be. No doubt about it,” said Amber. “Are you sure you don’t want a glass . . . for courage?”

“Okay. But just one.”

Jill saw Amber and Dani exchange knowing smiles as Amber reached over and poured wine into her glass. They were acting as if she had just agreed to go through with it, but she essentially had.

“Amber can be our getaway driver,” Dani proposed.

“I thought we’d walk,” said Amber. “The park’s next to Rolling Hills Golf Course. It’s not that far.”

“So . . . we’ll walk?” asked Dani.

“I’d say so,” said Amber. “Jill will, of course, need to be in uniform.”

Jill took a sip of her wine as she considered that.

“Yes,” agreed Dani. “Of course, it’s nothing compared to the distance that she has covered naked in the past.”

“But it’s in Holden,” Jill pointed out.

“But at night,” said Dani. “You ran through Stanton in full daylight.”

“I had no choice.”

“But you want to do this,” said Dani. “Maybe you don’t have to, but you want to.”

Jill looked from one face to the other. Both girls were looking at her curiously. Both of them clearly wondering what she would say.

“How far is it?” she asked.

She saw smiles break out on both girls faces. They both reached up and exchanged a high five. Somehow her question had been taken to mean that she’d agreed.

“I propose a toast,” said Dani. “Here’s to Jill!”

“To Jill!” acknowledged Amber, holding up her glass.

“To our naked friend,” added Dani.

Jill lifted up her glass and the three girls all clinked together. Jill took a large sip realizing that not only would she be playing naked, but she’d also be making her way to the park naked. While waiting in front of Amber’s house, she’d walked up and down the street. She had a pretty good idea of what the neighborhood was like. Her tally might get to a hundred after all, except that she was going to be careful to ensure that it didn’t.

“How far is it?” she asked again.

“Eight or ten blocks,” Amber replied, staring at her, a broad smile on her face.

Jill considered that, wondering just what she’d gotten herself into.

A short time later, Jill emptied her glass. When Amber went to refill it, she again covered it. “I better not,” she said.

“Suit yourself,” said Amber, setting the bottle back on the table.

“Time to get into uniform,” suggested Dani.

“Yep . . . better have one more,” said Jill, sliding her glass toward Amber.

Amber smiled as she poured Jill another glass. “I’d need the whole bottle . . . and then some.”

Jill knew better than to drink too much. Her second glass was going to be her last. A little bit would probably help her find the courage she was going to need. Too much, however, might get her into trouble.

Sometime later, after both Jill and Dani had changed into their game outfits, the three girls were again seated around the table in Amber’s backyard. Dani was dressed in rather plain yet comfortable athletic wear. Jill, too, was wearing athletic wear, only what she had on ended at her ankles, her white socks and shoes contrasting nicely with her deep tan.

In spite of the shoes, Jill was starting to get cold feet, figuratively speaking. She was also trying to reconstruct in her mind how a game of one-on-one basketball had grown to include a daring cross-town streak. Backcountry streaking – she had experience with that – however, this was completely different. This would take place in Holden, her home town.

“How far did you say it was?” she asked.

“Ten, twelve blocks,” said Amber.

“Wait, a minute or two ago it was only eight or ten blocks,” said Dani.

“We don’t have to take the shortest route,” Amber replied.

Dani laughed.

“How far did you say it was?” asked Jill good-naturedly.

“About fifteen blocks,” said Amber with a smile.

“I don’t think so,” laughed Jill while shaking her head. What had she gotten herself into?

Even though there was hardly more than a swallow of wine left in her glass, Jill pushed it away. She was starting to feel the effects. The little bit in her glass was all that remained of the bottle; the other two girls had polished it off.

Minutes later, the three girls were huddled in Amber’s side yard. Just as Jill had done at her house, they were planning to slip out to the street via that route. Jill had attempted to get Amber to describe the turns to her such that she might be able to get to the park on her own. She wasn’t very familiar with that side of town. She didn’t want to be dependent on Amber to find her way. What if they became separated?

While they were lingering in the shadows, preparing themselves mentally for the adventure that lay just ahead, Amber started giggling. It proved contagious, and a moment later Dani was snickering as well. Both girls were attempting to stifle their laughter, but for some reason, that only seemed to make the problem worse. Their merriment grew until they were both laughing out loud.

“Shush,” said Jill. “You guys are going to give us away before we even start. This won’t work if you two can’t keep it down.”

“But it’s funny,” said Dani.

“It is not! You need to be serious,” Jill insisted. She was doing her best to maintain a straight face.

Jill’s solemn expression and tone only served to make Dani crack up.

“I agree with Jill,” said Amber attempting a stern tone. “This is serious shit. Try to put yourself in her shoes.”

All three girls looked down at Jill’s feet. There wasn’t anything especially funny about the comment, but all three girls cracked up. Jill did her best not to, but even she hadn’t been able to hold back.

“Okay, give me your tops,” Jill said, extending an open hand toward each of her friends.

“No way!” said Amber, slapping her hand away.

“Why in the world would we do that?” asked Dani.

“You both obviously need to have some skin in the game.”

“We do . . . your skin!” Dani replied, with a twinkle in her eye.

“That doesn’t count!” said Jill, but she knew it was the wine as much as anything that had put her two friends in such a silly mood. She looked from one of them to the other. They were making a weak attempt at being serious, but it seemed to be a self-defeating effort.

Because she had their attention, she continued, “You guys have to promise to stay with me. No splitting up.”

“More promises,” said Amber rolling her eyes. Her comment caused Dani to again crack up.

Jill wanted the three of them to stay together, but she wasn’t sure if she would be safer with them or not. If things went sideways, she might be better off on her own. “Okay, quiet now,” Jill said in a hushed voice, leading the way out of the narrow side yard and along the car in the driveway.

“Strength in numbers, right?” Amber asked.

“Exactly, now shush,” said Jill looking back at her. “Now, lead the way . . . and take the most direct route.” Giving that a little thought, she added, “I mean, the most direct route that’s safe.”

Jill was definitely feeling the alcohol. Without it, she knew she might not be doing what she was doing. However, the situation was sobering. Why was she heading out into Holden naked with two silly, slightly drunk girls? Something about it was certainly exciting – and fun – but she was aware that it was not the wisest thing to be doing.

As instructed, Amber passed her and turned left at the sidewalk. Jill was right on her heels. She knew she might run into her if Amber stopped suddenly, but she felt less exposed with someone immediately in front of her. They passed about two houses sneaking along in that manner, Jill sandwiched in between her two friends.

“Tomorrow must be garbage day,” Jill observed in a whisper. There were garbage cans as well as large blue recycle bins at the road in front of many of the houses.

“I think so,” replied Amber in a normal talking voice.

“Shh…” replied Jill quickly.

Jill was pleased to see all the cans and bins up and down the street. That made it so that there were places to hide even though the majority of the cars were parked off the street in driveways or garages.

The first cross street was small and insignificant, but not the second one; it was a large four-way intersection with an overhead light. As luck would have it, they hadn’t yet seen a single car. For some reason, probably due to wine inspired nervous energy, all three girls scampered quickly across the street to the opposite corner. Dani and Amber, making more noise that Jill would have liked, paused on the sidewalk. Jill continued on, ducking down behind the first garbage can she came to.

Dani followed, but Amber stayed on the corner. “Are you guys really this drunk?” she asked.

“Shh…” said Jill, looking at Dani who was, in turn, looking at her. Jill shrugged. She knew she might have had too much alcohol to drive, but she felt as if she could probably walk a straight line.

“Let me ask it this way,” continued Amber a notch quieter. “Why am I with you guys?”

“To keep us company?” Dani replied, smiling and regarding her curiously.

“Not to be your referee?” Amber asked in reply.

“We don’t really need one,” Dani answered without giving the matter much thought.

“And why are you coming?” Amber asked.

“To play basketball,” said Dani. Jill was still listening to the exchange. She’d stood back up, but she was still behind the garbage can.

“Does that require anything? Equipment . . . maybe?” Amber asked.

“Oh, oops,” said Dani. “I guess we need a basketball.”

“I was wondering,” Amber laughed.

Jill laughed as well. She couldn’t believe they’d come that far without a ball.

**Chapter 190: Driving Distractions**

“Seriously, guys,” said Amber. “I’m not even playing, and yet I’m the only one who remembers that basketball requires a ball? I thought I had as much wine as you did, Dani.”

“I wasn’t keeping track, but I did remember to bring a ball.”

“You did?”

“But it’s in my car. I’ll be right back.” With that, Dani headed back across the street.

“I’ll wait here,” said Jill, moving one house further down the street, hiding again behind the next garbage can. By doing so, she put a little more distance between herself and the nearest street light.

A minute later, Jill and Amber heard the unmistakable sound of dribbling. “Now that won’t get anyone’s attention,” remarked Amber.

“Will you go and tell her to stop that?” Jill pleaded, worry evident in her voice. “She’ll wake everyone up.”

“I’ll tell her when she gets here.”

“You two definitely need some skin in the game,” said Jill anxiously. The sound of the basketball was echoing up and down the street. After looking carefully in all four directions, Jill ran back across the intersection. She needed to get Dani to stop.

A minute later, the three girls were back together and again making their way toward their destination. In order to keep it quiet, Jill had taken possession of the ball. She was worrying that the basketball court might be too close to some houses and that people might hear them. Indeed, it was a warm evening; those without AC would be sleeping with their bedroom windows open. Dani assured Jill that the houses were all far enough from the court so that it wasn’t a concern.

“You two definitely need to take your shirts off and leave them hidden somewhere here,” said Jill. “Go the rest of the way in just your bras. That will help you imagine what this is like from my point of view . . . and you might start to realize how much fun it is!”

“If it’s so much fun, why are you so stressed out?” Amber asked.

“Just take off your top,” Jill encouraged. “Find out for yourself.” It seemed like such a winning argument. It was the perfect opportunity for them to experiment a little.

“No way,” said Amber. “I’m not going anywhere in just my bra.”

“Me neither,” echoed Dani.

Jill chuckled. “You two are seriously a bunch of wimps.” She couldn’t believe that walking down the street at night in just their bras was too much for them. She didn’t really care if they did; she just thought that feeling a little more vulnerable would make them a little quieter and a little more sneaky. Indeed, she was always much more careful when she was naked.

As it was, she was doing her best to look up and down the street and be mindful of the nearest places to hide. It was pretty much the method she had employed in the forest, adapted to the suburban setting. Dani and Amber were walking down the middle of the street just ahead of her. They were acting as if they didn’t have a care in the world, even behaving boisterously at times.

One block further on, Jill finally saw a pair of headlights coming toward them. Fortunately, she was near a large recycle bin. She quickly got behind it and bent over, getting her head down low. A few seconds later, she leaned over to peak around the bin and check on the car’s progress. It turned out to be a pickup truck, a rather loud one at that, its muffler clearly in need of repair.

Just as it was about to pass, Jill suddenly found herself bathed in white light. There was a second vehicle approaching; however, it was coming from the opposite direction! She’d been so focused on keeping out of sight of the noisy truck that she hadn’t noticed the car until its headlights were on her. She froze just as if she were subconsciously remembering her belief that movement more than anything would catch a driver’s eye.

She closed her eyes, trying to not think about how she was bent over, her butt pointing right at the approaching vehicle. Even with her eyes shut, she was fully aware of being brightly illuminated, her shadow falling on the recycle bin that she had been hiding behind.

The car passed without slowing, but a split second later, the stillness of the night was shattered by an ear-splitting crash. Standing up to look over the bin, Jill saw that the car had veered to the right, taking out a number of garbage cans in the process. All manner of refuse had been thrown in every direction; trash filled the street.

In shock, Jill stayed still as the car, as well as all the bottles and cans in the road, came to rest. She knew she’d caused the accident.

“Jill, are you all right?” she heard Dani’s voice call out.

“I’m fine, where’s Amber?” she replied. Glancing at the car that now had two of its wheels up on the curb, she noticed movement in the driver’s seat. She suspected the driver had to be fine. He’d probably only been going about 25mph, and he hadn’t hit anything that had been bolted down. The garbage cans had fared much worse; two of them were in the street, one of them still rolling.

“Holy shit!” said Amber.

Looking in the direction of her voice, Jill saw her take a step out into the street. She too had probably been down behind a garbage can. Fortunately, both Amber and Dani had been on the same side of the street as Jill. Realizing that they were all unscathed, a sigh of relief escaped her lips.

Jill felt as if she should check on the driver – and probably apologize; however, imagining how that would play out, she hesitated. She didn’t need to meet any police officers that evening. In the next instant, a porch light came on – and then another. The lights made Jill’s mind up for her. She bolted. A split second later, all three girls were sprinting down the middle of the street. Dani and Amber were laughing, but not Jill. She felt bad and she was concerned about being pursued.

Glancing back, she saw that the driver of the car had made the same decision. After first backing up to dislodge a garbage can that had been caught under his front bumper, he executed a three-point turn and sped off in the other direction. Jill saw him hit the brakes as he turned right at the first street he came to.

After they’d gone almost two blocks, Amber and Dani slowed to a walk, but not Jill. She wanted to get to the park. It seemed to her that the driver of the car might circle back to investigate. Possibly he’d left the area entirely, not wanting to get a ticket for leaving the scene of an accident; however, he’d seen a naked girl. Depending on his disposition, he might decide to look into why she was out running around at night without any clothes on.

“Please! Don’t stop here,” Jill called back to her companions while jogging backwards; however, both girls seemed content to walk the rest of the way. The park was now visible ahead. She didn’t like the idea of getting separated, but that didn’t seem like a real concern.

As she entered the park, she realized that the driver who had just taken out the garbage cans had earned himself a spot on her list. Had he seen enough? Well, he’d seen enough to be distracted and crash, she reasoned. And she had other driver’s on her list, a number of them in Stanton.

She awarded the man his due place on her list, number ninety-nine. Had there been anyone with him in the car? It was a possibility, but she hadn’t seen anyone, not that she’d really looked – she’d been in too much a state of panic to give any real thought to passengers. In keeping with the conservative nature of her official tally, she added just the person she’d actually seen.

Number Ninety-Nine! The number itself gave her pause. At one time, she’d expected that Tyler was destined to become Mr. Number Ninety-Nine. Now it seemed as if he wouldn’t be making the list. To avoid getting sad about that, she tried to imagine funny scenarios that might result in Tyler earning himself a spot on her still growing tally.

Considering her count, it seemed as if she was destined to get to a hundred, that night even, for it was still young. It seemed like she might be there before she knew it. Jill shook her head. What was she doing? It seemed completely foolish to be out running around Holden with nothing on. It was, of course, after midnight, but what did that matter? It was still crazy – thrilling too – but undeniably crazy.

Approaching the basketball court, which she had no trouble locating as it was light enough to see the fence, she finally slowed. Stepping onto the court, she tossed the ball gently into the air, testing its bounce. As the sound of the ball on the concrete broke the tranquility of the night, she looked around. Yes, Dani had been right; there weren’t any houses close enough for her to be overly concerned. It wouldn’t be wise to yell or scream, but the sound of the basketball itself was unlikely to wake anyone.

Studying the court itself, she saw that they were going to have to play half court. One of the backboards was adequately lit, but the other wasn’t. In fact, she couldn’t even see the hoop. Dani had also been right about the chain nets. Jill didn’t like them, but what did it matter? As far as parks went, the alternative to chain nets seemed to be no net at all.

She walked to the free-throw line and started warming up with a few shots while waiting for her dressed friends to catch up. Once they were there, she tossed the ball to Dani and started doing a little stretching. That got her thinking about her first orgasm the night she’d been humping her basketball in her front yard. That orgasm had resulted while imagining herself stretching for an audience. Here she was, stretching in front of an audience, and yet it was hardly the same. This time it was only Dani and Amber. What was also different was that the physical stimulation that the ball had been providing was absent. She could supply that herself with her fingers, of course; however, she was not about to do that with her friends watching.

While observing Dani shooting baskets, Jill thought ahead to their game. She found herself trying to imagine how fun it might end up being. It wouldn’t be nearly the game that she had missed out on at Cache Lake; there wouldn’t be any guys present. And she’d played a lot of basketball with Dani over the years. Might it end up being just an ordinary game of one-on-one?

She decided not. She was sure it was going to be fun. Thinking back to how much fun she’d had in her front yard, she decided that it might end up being a lot of fun. Just the fact that she was naked seemed to guarantee that. And the fact that she was miles from home and in a public park all added up to a powerful cocktail. Sure, she was only with girls, and just two of them at that, but in her front yard, she’d been alone. Well, not quite alone as it had turned out, but she had believed herself to be alone.

Jill decided to make one final appeal. “Surely you’d like to find out what it’s like,” she said. “Take off your top. Your bra too . . . or keep it on if you like, but at least the top. Dip a toe in the water!”

To Jill’s surprise, Dani tossed her the ball and then while looking her unflinchingly in the eye, she pulled her top off over her head.

Jill gave her two thumbs up but then started clapping. While Dani folded her shirt and walked it over to a picnic table that was located just outside the one wide opening in the tall chain link enclosure, Jill regarded Amber. She didn’t look at all pleased by the unexpected development.

“Why not just strip naked,” she suggested sarcastically. “If Jill can do it, then so can you.”

“It’s just a shirt,” Dani replied. “My bra covers as much as my bikini top . . . and then some.”

“But it’s a bra,” argued Amber.

Jill found it ironic that Amber liked to wear fashionable, rather daring clothing, but that Dani’s level of dress seemed to cross the line for her. Or just possibly she didn’t want to end up being the only one dressed.

Jill felt Dani’s eyes upon her. “Now don’t get any ideas, naked lady. I’m straight. You might be bi-curious, but I’m not.”

“What?” said Jill with a shrug. “I didn’t say anything.”

“That look in your eye,” Dani replied.

Jill had no idea what she was talking about. What look in her eye? Jill didn’t imagine herself bi-curious either; however, a thought occurred to her. Maybe she could use this to her advantage. If Dani was feeling a bit uncomfortable, then just maybe she could find a way to benefit from the situation.

“Not bi-curious?” she remarked as she took her position on the court for the start of the game. “We’ll see about that!”

“Yes, I guess we will!” replied Dani with a mischievous smile.

Jill smiled to herself. It seemed to be ‘game on!’