

## **Second Guessing**

a novel by Gail Ward Olmsted

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### **Simon Sez**

A little birdy has confirmed that pop star Ben Fein, former Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez super hunk, now a successful solo artist, is reported to be getting quite cozy with songwriter Jill Griffin, the widow of music legend Jamie Sheridan. Despite a 14-year age difference (he's 28, she's 42) the two have been spotted in a number of local eateries, mostly in Ms. Griffin's Upper East Side neighborhood. Fein (nee Benjamin Feinstein) was reportedly Griffin's first choice to perform in the upcoming live tribute concert featuring music originally performed by her late husband. The platinum selling album *Guessing at Normal* was released 20 years ago and Sheridan would have turned 50 this year. Hmmmm. Perhaps Fein can help blow out some of the candles on the birthday cake? Stay tuned for more!

###

# Chapter 1

## Jill

“Son of a bitch! What a spineless turd! Who the hell is that Simon to think he can just write whatever the hell he pleases?” Jill Griffin was pacing back and forth in her sunny kitchen, in the home that she shared with her daughter Carly.

Her brother Ted was trying to cajole her out of the foul mood she had been in for the last hour, since receiving a text about the article. “It’s called ‘freedom of the press, Jilly. Google it. Besides, nobody even reads that rag.”

“Ben told me that his publicist’s phone is blowing up with all of the calls. So yeah Ted, I think people read it.”

“So, *are* you?”

“Am I what?”

“Are you getting cozy with Ben Fein? Is he your boyfriend?” he asked in a singsong voice.

“Screw you, Teddy. We’re just friends.”

“Hey, I don’t care who you sleep with. Well, I mean, I care. I love you and you’re my sister and all. I’m not judging you, honey. I just want to know...” His sister looked at him with such hopefulness in her eyes, that he almost stopped himself. Almost. “...if you need help updating your Facebook status. Are you two *official* or what?”

Jill stopped pacing briefly to take a long, hard look at Ted. She was furious and thought for a second about hauling off and smacking the shit out of him. Her ‘little’ brother, who stood a foot taller than her and outweighed her by a hundred pounds or more. *He would never hit back*. But as fast as her anger had surfaced, it evaporated just as quickly. She sagged against the marble countertop. Ted wasn’t the problem. She knew that. But there *was* a problem, that much was certain. Maybe it would be good to talk about it.

“It’s um, crap Teddy, this is hard for me,” she began tentatively. If he responded with ‘that’s what she said’, she would seriously reconsider violence. But Ted just pulled out a couple of the stools surrounding the huge kitchen island, sat on one and waited. Jill wasn’t ready to sit just yet and she continued to pace. “You know I’ve been writing songs, right?”

Ted rolled his eyes at her. "Yes, Jill. Everyone on the planet knows you write songs and win Grammys and..."

"No, I mean for Ben. I write for Ben." He nodded again and she continued. "His people came to me last year. They told me in confidence that he was going to be leaving the band and needed some new material."

"Broke the heart of every teenage girl in America when he left, if I recall. Wasn't Carly one of them?" Ted fondly recalled his niece during her days as a love-struck teenage girl drooling over the young performer. The fact that Carly was currently in love with Emily, a girl from her English Comp class at Columbia was, well, irrelevant to this conversation.

Jill glared at Ted. "Can I continue?" she asked in an icy tone. Ted meekly nodded his assent and Jill went on. "Anywho, I met Ben in his manager's office last spring. He was easy to work with and seemed to appreciate my work. That's when I wrote *Missing You* and *Last Night* and Ben split from the band and released both singles simultaneously. Non-compete clause be damned. I mean, who does that? The guy has some stones alright," she added with a grin.

"I know all that, Jill. Thanks to an ABC special and his pretty mug gracing the cover of *People* magazine, it's a matter of public record. Get to the juicy stuff."

"Eww, as if, you perv. I'm not telling you a thing about my love life."

"I knew it!" Ted pumped his fist in the air in jubilation. "I knew that article hit the nail on the head. That's why you're so pissed off. Your secret is out. Wait, does Carly know?"

"Nooooo, she doesn't." Jill collapsed into a heap on the floor. "She'll kill me. But first she'll hate me. What am I going to do?" Ted walked over to his sister and squatted down in front of her.

"Listen to me. Carly won't hate you, okay? She may *want* to kill you, but she won't. She'll be..."

"Pissed off? Humiliated? Embarrassed by her cradle-robbing mother?"

Ted snickered at that, before he saw Jill glaring at him. He leaned against the cabinet and turned to face her. "Yeah, probably all that too. I was just gonna say she'll be anxious to meet him, you know?"

But Jill wasn't buying it. "She's already met him. I know I told Marnie how Carly and I were backstage at one of Ben's concerts last year and I introduced her to him. Don't you and your wife ever talk?"

“Don’t turn this on me, sweetheart. I *meant*, has she met him since you two have been, you know? Getting’ horizontal? Bumpin’ uglies? Doin’ the nasty?”

“You are so immature. “

“Hey, I could go all night here.”

“That’s what she said,” Jill responded with a forced grin, which Ted failed to return.

“But seriously, did Marnie know about you two?”

“No, no one knew. Not Marnie. Not Beth. And you know how much I suck at keeping secrets.”

“Wow, if you didn’t even tell Beth...”

“How could I? I mean, Ben is almost the same age as Jesse. It’s too freakin’ weird.” Jill’s best friend Beth had gotten pregnant at the age of eighteen and had raised her son Jesse with help from her parents. Jill viewed him as a nephew, almost like a son.

Ted shook his head and grimaced. “Yeah, that is pretty screwed up. But seriously, is it serious? How long have you...?”

“Since Christmas. What, six months? We worked together last spring, and then I ran into him late last year at a follow up meeting with his label. I said something about how crazy everything was at Christmas time and he reminded me that he was Jewish. Then he invited me to celebrate with him anyway. A movie and Chinese food. Carly was leaving that morning to go on that cruise with Em’s family and you and Marnie weren’t around. So Carly and I woke up on Christmas Day and opened presents. We made pancakes, then I took her to the airport, and I went to hang out with Ben. We saw some action film and went for dinner. Then we...”

“Christ, you’re blushing. That little...”

“He’s not *little*, Ted. He’s normal height. I can’t help it if you and James are so freakishly tall.” At the sound of her late husband’s name, Jill’s voice caught just a bit. “I mean, *were* so tall,” she corrected herself. Tears welled up in her eyes. She had been with James since she was 21. The last two years since his death had been difficult ones and especially lonely for Jill. She buried her face in her hands.

Ted reached over and pulled her hands away, so she had no choice but to look at him. “Hey Jilly, it’s okay. Believe me, I’m the last person you should go to for advice about your love life. He makes you happy and that makes me happy.”

Jill studied her brother closely. “What’s going on, Ted? Something is up with you, I can tell. You’ve been...”

“Forget it. Let’s not go there today, huh? Marnie and I are, well, it doesn’t matter right now, okay? Maybe there’s a silver lining here. At least you’re not obsessing about the concert anymore.”

Over lunch, Jill had filled Ted in on her role in organizing and promoting a concert that would take place in the fall. Her late husband James had released the hit album *Guessing at Normal* twenty years earlier. Since then, it sold over twenty million copies. Looking to resurrect interest in the album and bring in some much-needed revenue, his former record label Topflite Entertainment was putting together a tribute concert. Each of the songs from the album would be performed by a different group or solo act from rock, pop, country and hip-hop genres. An accompanying album would be recorded this summer. A portion of the proceeds from the album and ticket sales from the live event would be donated to the newly established Sheridan Fund to support music education in public schools around the country.

“Don’t remind me! It’s almost three months away, but the label execs are driving me batty. Everyone is going crazy over which performer is performing which song. I know it’s a big deal, but it’s getting ridiculous. And don’t even get me started on the VIP list!”

“Well you wrote the damn songs, Jilly. You should be grateful that they want your input.”

“Yeah, I know you’re right. But now that Ben has been asked to be the headliner, it’s getting even more stressful. The news that we’re together couldn’t have come at a worse time.”

“Yeah, I hear that. But you know it will be a great concert and you’ll raise millions for charity. It’s all good. So let’s get back to the crisis at hand. What are you going to do about Carly?”

*Oh crap. Yeah, Carly.*

“What are you going to do about Carly? I dunno Mom. Just what *are* you going to do?” Carly’s voice was shrill as she bounded into the kitchen. She towered over her mother and her uncle, who were still sitting on the floor. Apparently, this particular *someone* had read that rag.

## Chapter 2

### Jill

“Hi Honey. I wasn’t expecting you this early.” Jill pulled herself up into a standing position and smiled at her daughter. Carly had been interning at an art gallery for the past few weeks and generally didn’t return home until later in the day.

“Yeah Mom, I wasn’t expecting to hear about your boy toy either, yet here we are.” She was glaring at her mother, but her face softened as Ted approached her and grabbed her in a bear hug.

“How’s my favorite niece doing?”

“Good Ted. Real good. Until today, that is. And I’m your only niece,” she reminded him with a smile. “How long are you here for? Is Marnie with you?”

“Nah, I just drove in for the day.” Ted and his wife Marnie had moved to Montauk on Long Island years earlier. He was a best-selling crime novelist who came into the city every couple of weeks to meet with his editor or his publicist. He never seemed to mind the long drive, but lately, Marnie usually chose to stay home.

“I need to come out and visit one of these days,” Jill said. “It’s been way too long since I’ve seen her.” Marnie was a longtime friend of Jill’s, having worked for James’s record label for years. Jill had introduced her brother to Marnie nearly twenty years ago and the two of them had been together ever since.

“Maybe you could have Ben drive you, Mom. Oh wait, is he even old enough to…”

“Okay, Carly. Get it over with. Say what you want to say about the age difference between us. C’mon, is that the best you’ve got?”

Ted watched his sister and her daughter with a smile on his face. They were extremely close, but argued frequently and disagreed on just about everything. He had witnessed this kind of sparring between them dozens of times.

“You couldn’t handle my best, Mom,” boasted Carly, right before she broke into the chorus of *Hello Beautiful*. It had been a huge hit for Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez when she was thirteen.

“Hey Carly. Give your mom a break, huh? And she was just telling me all about how she and Fein got together. Pull up a chair. Join the party.”

Jill held up her hand in protest. "Listen, both of you. There's nothing to say, okay? Ben and I go out a couple times a week. We watch movies or try different restaurants. He's fun to be around," *And amazing in bed, once I taught him a few things.* But she was downplaying the relationship for the benefit of her daughter and her brother. In reality, she and Ben had been spending nearly every night together until recently.

"Well, I've been home for almost a month and I haven't seen him around here. Is he grounded or something?"

"You're hilarious, Carly. You really are. You should drop out of Columbia, stop studying art history. You're wasting your talent. Stand-up comedy, that's just right for you." Carly wore an expression of amused indifference, but Jill knew she was still upset.

"Wow. Great advice, Mom. Drop out of college..... how's that working..." Carly trailed off before she said "for you?" Her mother had never gone to college and often lamented that she wished she had done things differently when she was Carly's age. "So, let's take this down a notch, huh? Someone has to be the adult here."

Ted jumped in, as he knew this was likely to be the start of a long drawn-out argument. "This looks like a perfect opportunity to leave you two ladies. I had better get going. You be nice," he warned Carly. "And as for you?" he murmured as he hugged Jill. "Lighten up, Jilly." And then he was off, humming the catchy *Hello Beautiful* just loud enough for his sister and niece to hear.

Jill wanted to follow him out the door, but knew she had to have this conversation with her daughter. "I'm sorry Carly. I didn't want you to find out this way. I've been meaning to have a talk with you, I swear. We've both been so busy since you moved back home, and I don't know. It just never felt like the right time."

Carly had lived in a dorm room during her freshman year. She wanted to have the whole college experience, despite being only a twenty-minute cab ride from home. Besides, Jill and Carly both realized that they got along much better when there was a little distance between them. Jill was happy to have her daughter living under her roof again, even though Carly was seriously cramping her style. Jill had gotten used to sleepovers with Ben several times a week, mainly here at her home. Ben's penthouse condo was lovely, but she felt she was a little too mature to be schlepping her panties and toothbrush around town. Since Carly moved home last month, she and Ben had to settle for long lunches and afternoon sex.

"So when do I get to meet this *young* man of yours? I need to ask him about his intentions. And backstage at his concert last year doesn't count," she added quickly before her mother could remind her.

Jill decided to ignore Carly's sarcasm. "Ben has been looking forward to seeing you again. I'll ask him to dinner. What night's good for you?"

Carly pretended to consult an imaginary datebook before she shrugged. "I'm open, Mom. Tonight? Tomorrow? The next day? You name it. I'm free as a bird." Jill knew that Emily, Carly's girlfriend of nearly a year, had gone to a family wedding in Pasadena and wouldn't be back to New York for another week. "It's not like anyone else is around to hang out with."

"But sweetie. You grew up here. You have so many friends. What about Lily or Sophie? I'm sure they would love to see you, to catch up. You could invite them over. Just like old times."

"This isn't about me, Mom, so don't try to change the subject. How about tomorrow? And we can just order in. No need to stress you out any more than you already are, if you have to cook."

"I'm not stressed, Carly. Honestly. Ben and I are, well, we're not 'Ben and I'. He's, well, he's more than just a friend. And if you say 'with benefits', I will smack you. Now go change out of your work clothes. I'll call in the order."

"Rainbow roll with brown rice and extra, you know those fish eggs I like. Tobiko! Thanks, Mom." She turned to her mother. "You didn't tell him what a wicked crush I used to have on him, did you?" Jill's face turned beet red. "Oh my God, you did. I can't believe you. Is nothing sacred? It's bad enough that my mother has a boy toy, but did you have to pick the only guy I've ever fan crushed on? And tell him? I'm outta here. Oh yeah, remind them about the extra tobiko. Don't forget."

Carly flounced off to her room and Jill let out a sigh of relief as she watched her leave. *That could have gone much worse.* She should probably try to touch base with Ben and see how he was handling all of this unwanted media attention. The last text she had from him was right after she and Ted had walked in from lunch. The one where he warned her about the Simon Sez article. After living for years with a celebrity, Jill was well accustomed to the media and its unquenchable thirst for anything even mildly juicy, but she had wanted to keep her relationship with Ben under wraps until after the tribute concert this fall. James's legacy was too important to tarnish it with the news that his widow was sleeping with the headliner.

Jill knew how the media would handle the news of her and Ben. She would be portrayed as a cougar who used her influence to get Ben named as the concert's headliner. But she had actually been concerned last month when Ben told her that his agent had gotten a call about the concert. Her personal and professional worlds colliding and all that. And besides, she didn't feel anything like a cougar. After all, men date younger women all the time and the only thing they're called is lucky!



At least she would finally get to spend time with both Ben *and* Carly together. She felt badly that she had told Ben of her daughter's crush, but it was when she was just writing for him. Back then; she had never dreamed that she and Ben would have anything but a professional relationship.

*Well, maybe just a little.*

She remembered the day that Ben walked into her life like it was yesterday, instead of nearly fifteen months ago. They met for the first time at his agent's office. He was looking for new material as he was going to be vacating his role as lead vocalist for Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez. They were a boy band, each member handpicked by a savvy music promoter named Billy Sheehan several years earlier. A poster child for diversity, the band included Kip, a blue-eyed blonde kid from Kansas; Sam, an Asian singer from LA; Dante, an African-American back-up vocalist from Detroit; and, Luis, an Hispanic singer/dancer from Miami. And then there was Benjamin Feinstein, a brown-eyed Jewish kid from the Bronx. He had been 'the one with the voice.'

Jill knew all about the group, because from the launch of their first hit single, Carly was hooked. She had a bunch of their posters, all their CD's and had seen them a few times in concert. Her favorite was Ben, who she deemed 'dreamy' and 'so talented'. Jill had enjoyed teasing her daughter that Ben would have been on the cover of Tiger Beat magazine, back in the day. That had always earned her a blank stare from her daughter. *Freakin' Millenials didn't know what they were missing.*

Carly had long outgrown her crush on Ben by the time he left the band and had, a couple years earlier, declared that sexuality was fluid and that people shouldn't be constrained by arbitrary labels. She dated a couple of boys from her class, and then dated a couple of girls, and by the time she entered Columbia last fall, she was focused exclusively on the female of the species. She met Emily during Freshman Orientation and had been smitten ever since. So last year, her mom's offer for her to go backstage to meet Ben, her former teen crush, was met with a roll of her eyes and a shrug of her shoulders. "Oh, cool," had been her only response.

Jill had been hob-knobbing with musicians for over twenty years. During his peak, her late husband James was one of the most recognizable faces on the planet. Through him, she met and partied with everyone who was anyone in the music business. And in her own right, she had achieved a great deal of success in the industry as well. She had won a Grammy, was nominated for several more and wrote hit songs for all kinds of different artists. So meeting with some breakout star wannabe started out as just another day for Jill. It was a Tuesday.

Ben was late for their scheduled meeting that day. Although she didn't have anything else scheduled, she resented the delay. Being extremely punctual by nature, she was grumbling to her agent Ari, and when Ben, his agent and his manager, came in thirty minutes later than the agreed upon time, she was pretty steamed. *Traffic, wrong turn, blah, blah, blah.* But what could she say? Ben was the

customer or would be if he hired her. At first glance, he appeared smaller than she remembered from all the videos she had watched with Carly. But his tousled hair, shy smile and big brown eyes were all so familiar. His face had been front and center on posters plastered all over the walls in Carly's room for years. Jill was rather surprised that he was not all that much taller than her, but she recalls wearing super cute wedges with a huge heel that day. Ben's handshake was firm and pleasantly dry. She hated to shake someone's hand when it was all damp and limp.

Ben spoke softly, with a pronounced Bronx accent. "I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting, Ms. Griffin. It was inexcusable and it won't happen again."

He was still holding her hand and when their eyes met, Jill's heart started to pound. Ben held her gaze a second longer than Jill was comfortable with, and she felt something intense and quite intimate pass between them. She wasn't prepared to feel anything but reserved and professional when meeting a potential client and she got all flustered.

She quickly pulled her hand back. "Oh, no worries. And call me Jill."

He smiled at her and turned as Ari greeted him warmly. A few minutes later, they were all sitting around a large conference table. One of the staff offered to make a coffee run, so everyone placed their orders and sat back. It was time to find out what Ben and his team were looking for.

Jill actually had a series of questions that she had compiled for potential clients. At first it had seemed kind of silly to be asking well known musicians about their favorite place to go on vacation or if they had pets growing up. But she had found that by encouraging them to talk about their interests, she could learn so much in a relatively short time. There was no opportunity to draw on her script that morning, however. Ben's people were clearly in charge of the agenda. His manager started out by bringing everyone up to speed on how Ben was planning to exit the group and what he was looking to achieve as a solo artist. Then his agent talked about the intimate clubs and small theaters that Ben was planning to perform in. A far cry from the marquee arenas and stadiums that his band was currently selling out.

Ben had been sitting silently all that time and what Jill remembered most was just how still he was. Didn't fidget, didn't check his phone. Literally sat there with a small smile on his face and didn't move a muscle, except to take a couple of sips from his herbal iced tea. He looked so peaceful in his skinny khakis, grey hoodie, and a pair of ridiculous looking red high-topped sneakers. He was listening intently to what was being said about him and his career, but he had no apparent need to react to any of it. Jill bet that if she looked up the word 'chill' in a dictionary, there would be a picture of Ben Fein.

Jill chugged her large black coffee with a turbo shot, while listening to everything and watching Ben. She kept recalling what it had felt like, holding Ben's hand for

that split second and standing close to him. It had been a long time since she had experienced that kind of an instant physical attraction to someone. Not since James. She would have liked to run her fingers through Ben's messy brown hair and wondered if it would be as soft as it looked. She was shocked at how turned on she was getting, as she felt a flush creep across her cheeks. She tried hard to slow down her breathing as she loosened the death grip on her coffee cup. *Grow the hell up and pay attention.* She needed this gig and mooning over some boy singer still in his twenties was, well, ridiculous. She sat up straighter and struggled to stay focused.

When it was his turn, Ben spoke softly, first telling Jill how much he enjoyed several of the songs she had written. He appeared to have a solid understanding of her work and told her that he loved the chorus from this song and the opening from another. He asked about some of the lyrics in particular and had seemed interested as she shared a little about her writing process and the sources of her inspiration. She didn't usually talk much during these kinds of introductory meetings, but she was a real chatterbox that morning. Ben had the ability to draw people out, she noticed that right away. But time was apparently growing short, as Ari and Ben's agent both started getting restless and checking their phones. Ben's phone beeped again, indicating that he had an incoming call. Whoever it was must not have been all that important, as Ben glanced at the screen, frowned and shut it off. He apologized for the interruption, and then confided that he had been looking forward to meeting Jill for a long time and had just one more question.

"Before we go, I just want to ask you about *Jericho Road*. It's the most haunting song I have ever heard and your late husband sang it so well. I must have played that song a thousand times growing up. So was it you or um, James that you wrote about? Which one of you grew up on Jericho Road?"

Jill's eyes filled with tears at the sound of James's name. The accident that claimed his life had only happened a little more than a year earlier, and she was far from over the loss. She was mortified that she was getting so emotional during a meet and greet with a new client, and tried to wipe her eyes before she spoke up.

"I'm so sorry. My late husband James, and just for the record, I hated when he started going by *Jamie*, was this larger than life presence, you know? Even when I didn't like him all that much, I still loved him. I just miss him... so much." She was shocked at what she had just revealed. *What's going on with me today?* Ari was staring at her with a 'what the hell?' kind of a look, and Jill looked away, right before she stole a quick glance at Ben. His dark eyes were full of concern. Even from across the wide expanse of table, she could see that he knew he had touched a nerve.

"I'm the one who's sorry, Jill. It's none of my business. I just..."

"No, it's okay. I'm fine, really. So you want to know about Jericho Road, huh?" *Wow, what a loaded question. The one word answer is me. I grew up there in my parent's crowded, unhappy home and dreamed about escaping from the time I was twelve.*

*Jericho Road is my song about hope and sadness, family dysfunction and salvation. Not fitting in.* She took a deep breath, before she smiled at Ben.

“It was me.” He smiled back at her and for a moment, it felt to Jill like they were the only two people in the room.

## Chapter 3

### T-84 days to concert

#### Ben

The morning after the story got leaked that he and Jill were seeing each other, Ben decided to skip his usual workout at the gym. It was sure to be a media circus today and he knew that the guys he worked out with would resent the intrusion from the press. His phone rang nonstop. Despite having an unlisted phone number that changed every few weeks, he had been getting dozens of calls, all of which he ignored. Last night, after talking with his parents, and calling Jill to say goodnight, he had turned his phone off in the hopes of getting a decent sleep. He frowned as he recalled how exhausted Jill had sounded when she answered.

“Hi Ben. I was hoping you’d call.”

“Hey Griff, you doing okay?”

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t know. I feel like I’m talked out. I called James’ parents, which went well, all things considered. And Carly and I talked some more, and I think she’s actually fine with everything. She’s a strong girl.”

Ben chuckled at that. “I can’t imagine you raising any other kind.”

“Oh no, she’s nothing like me, Ben. Carly is resilient and independent. Fierce, even. I’m just...”

“All those things and more. You’re amazing and somehow, I’m going to figure out a way to make you actually believe it.”

“Well good luck with that. Anywho, did you talk to your folks? Were they shocked that you were dating a *woman of a certain age*?”

“They already knew about you, Griff. I told them everything a couple of months ago.”

“Everything?”

“Well no, not everything. Like, I never told them how when you...”

“Let’s keep this call rated PG, huh? It’s been a long day, babe. Rain check, okay?”

"To be continued, Griff. So dinner tomorrow at your place. Do you need me to bring anything? Wine, dessert, a Kevlar vest?"

"Just bring that handsome face of yours. I missed seeing it today."

"Yeah, well next time your brother comes over, maybe I can actually meet him?"

"Let's see how things go with Carly first, okay?"

"Wow, no pressure right? Get some sleep, babe. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I love you, Ben."

"Love you too, Griff. G'night."

###

He had slept pretty well, but now he was restless and regretting giving up his daily workout. After checking his refrigerator for the third time and not finding anything that interested him, he decided to head to the deli down the street to grab a sandwich. He was rarely home these days and kept very little food on hand, so eating out had become second nature to him. Pulling a clean T-shirt over his head, he slipped on a pair of flip-flops he kept by the door. He grabbed a baseball cap and a pair of dark glasses and then slipped a house key into the pocket of his board shorts. He was good to go. He was debating the merits of turkey vs. corned beef as he rode the elevator and walked through the lobby.

"Good morning, Mr. Fein," the doorman called.

"Good morning Lou, and it's Ben," he responded, as he had done a thousand times.

*Oh crap!* He had already been spotted. The guy with a camera pointed at him must have been staking out the entrance to his building. He thought fleetingly about running back inside, but figured he might as well get it over with. He had nothing to hide and besides, he was starving.

"Ben. Hey man, how're you doing today?" He was young, probably in his early twenties and looked like he hadn't slept or changed his clothes yet today. That was the price you had to pay if you made a living out of stalking celebrities. Ben was always polite with the media, even when he felt they were being too intrusive.

"Hey. I'm doing well. Thanks for asking." He continued walking along briskly and the reporter rushed to keep up with him.

"So Ben, what can you tell us about the tribute concert? Is it true that your girlfriend got you the gig as the headliner?" Ben stopped short and stared at him. His manager

had warned him that this would be an angle that the media would probably try to pursue.

“Actually, I have an agent who handles all that. So, in answer to your question, no, she didn’t.”

“But, she is your girlfriend, right? It’s true you’re dating Jamie Sheridan’s widow?”

“Jill Griffin and I are in a relationship and I am looking forward to the concert. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got somewhere I need to be.” Ben pulled his cap down and adjusted his dark glasses, just as a flash bulb went off in his face. He hurried along and pulled open the door to the restaurant he had been frequenting since he had moved into the neighborhood several years earlier. Although their corned beef was nowhere near as good as his mother’s, it was convenient and he could usually get in and out of there undetected.

That was not the case today, however.

The place was mobbed and Ben suspected the majority of the patrons were not here for the rugaleh or the matzo ball soup. It was mostly girls in their late teens or early twenties and everyone was holding their phone. Coming here, or anywhere for that matter, the day after a juicy article hit the press was a rookie mistake. And Ben was no rookie. He turned on his heel, and tried to leave, but the doorway was now jammed with half a dozen more eager fans. Everyone was snapping photos and taking videos. He caught the eye of the young woman behind the cash register who had been waiting on him every couple of days for the past few years. She shrugged and smiled sheepishly at him and he figured that she had been the one who outed him. Probably had an Instagram post with his top five favorite foods. *Damn it.* Starting today, he was going to have to resort to home delivery if he ever planned to eat again.

Over the din of the shrieking fans, he heard a woman’s voice and it was getting louder. It sounded like she was trying to clear a path to reach him. Seconds later, he felt someone grabbing his arm. It was a young woman with long hair.

“C’mon,” she told him and next thing he knew, he was heading towards the back of the restaurant with her. He allowed himself to be pulled along, although he couldn’t exactly understand why. She pushed her way through the swinging door into the kitchen, and then stopped suddenly. When she turned to face him for the first time, something about her seemed familiar. She was short and on the chubby side, with brown hair that partially covered her face.

“You looked like you needed rescuing. Go straight through there,” she told him, indicating a screen door that appeared to lead out to an alley. “You should be all set.” Her voice was low and he had to strain to hear her over the din of the busy kitchen. She sounded confident, almost authoritative.

“Yeah. Well, thanks, I guess.”

“My pleasure, Ben.” She spoke his name warmly, almost intimately. He studied her more closely, almost certain that he had met her before.

“Have we met? You kind of remind me of someone.”

She smiled briefly, before turning all business like again. “No, Ben. We’ve never actually met, but not for a lack of trying,” she added with a wink. “Have a beautiful day.” Then she turned and was gone.

Ben shook his head and wondered what the hell had just happened. *Who was that girl and where had she come from?* He decided to follow her advice and slipped through the door into the deserted alley. He realized that he was only a couple of minutes from the back of his own building.

“Morning Mr. Feinstein.”

“Hey Lou.” Ben hurried across the lobby and stepped into the waiting elevator. He felt as if the air was closing in around him as the door slid shut. *Breathe.*

He couldn’t get to the top floor quickly enough, and as soon as the door opened into his apartment, he hurried out to the patio. Ignoring the amazing views of Manhattan, he focused on gulping lung fulls of air. Then he fought to slow his breathing as he had been told by his doctor. He was having a panic attack, his first in quite a while. The very first one had been a year and a half earlier, the result of a tragedy that haunted him to this day.

###

Fans were a part of the price of fame and Ben had always tried to remain philosophical about that. Even the ones who mailed their panties to a specific band member, or tried to climb onto the stage or lined up to sleep with the ever-available Sam. Ben had always treated their fans with the respect he felt they deserved. That was until right before he officially left the band, during their last big tour.

At first, it had been a couple of little things. At rehearsal one day, Ben set a half-full water bottle down and when he went to grab it minutes later, it was gone. He chalked it up to an over-zealous staffer and fetched another bottle. Then it was a hand towel he had just used to wipe the sweat off his face. Vanished. Next, it was an opened package of breath mints, followed by a half-eaten organic pomegranate granola bar. It started being a joke between the other guys, none of whom were experiencing the same kind of activity.



“Hey Mystery Girl,” Sam would call out, after discarding a towel he had just used to dry his underarms with. “Here you go. Don’t you want my towel? No? That’s racist,” he would proclaim, which always caused everyone to laugh.

Ben usually joined in, at least at first. But he was starting to get the feeling someone was going through his things. On the tour bus, in his hotel room, wherever his clothes or personal effects were, it always seemed like his neatly folded belongings were a bit disheveled or his messy pile of socks was more orderly. More than once, he found he was missing a sock or a pair of boxer briefs. He joked to his mom over the phone that the hotel laundry lost even more socks than she had when he still lived at home. He mentioned it to Bob ‘Sully’ Sullivan, the tour manager, who said he would keep an eye out. Security was virtually non-existent back stage and Ben figured it a minimum-wage staffer looking for items to sell in order to make a few extra bucks. But no one else seemed to be bothered. Just Ben.

He found himself googling his name and searching ads on EBay and Craig’s List. What would he do if he saw a pair of his underwear going for a hundred bucks? What could he do? More disappearances followed- a bottle of iced tea with only a sip out of it in the morning, a half-eaten plate of pasta in the afternoon, and then one night, a note. Under his pillow in the hotel room in Dallas. Stretching out in bed after a long day, he had slipped his hand under his pillow and felt a folded piece of paper.

It was a crudely drawn pink heart with the words ‘B Mine’, written with what looked like a black Sharpie. *What the hell?*

He got up immediately and called Sully, who contacted hotel security. Within minutes, there was a whole team of personnel milling about his room, pawing through his things and someone was dusting for prints. The hotel wanted to keep ‘the incident’ out of the press and Sully and Ben were both happy to oblige. Ben refused the hotel’s offer to move his room, which had followed Sully’s suggestion they change hotels. By 3am, everyone had cleared out and with security patrolling the hallways of the 28<sup>th</sup> floor, Ben finally fell asleep.

The teasing from the other band members was nonstop. Whether they actually thought Ben was exaggerating what was happening or that he was trying to get extra attention was unclear. There were no new notes, but the petty theft continued. Then phone calls and text messages from unidentified numbers and random emails started popping up. Sully got him a new phone and they changed his email address. Just a few days later, the messages started coming again. Sam’s comments about ‘Mystery Girl’ were starting to grate on Ben. More than once, he told him to shut the hell up which always earned a wise-ass response.

“Whattsa matter Fein? Is your secret girlfriend getting all up in your grill? Don’t you like being *special*?” The other guys didn’t say much, at least not to Ben directly, but the privileges and protective behavior towards Ben did not escape their notice

either. Ben begged Sully to just let it go, that the texts and emails were harmless. 'How R U?' & 'U R a QT', crap like that. Harmless schoolgirl stuff.

Besides, Ben had bigger things to worry about. Like quitting the band after five years and going out on his own. Or getting out of the music business altogether. He had been thinking of leaving for a while now and to be honest, this crazed fan crap was getting really old and making the decision even more clear-cut. He wondered if he would draw less of this type of attention if he were a solo act.

Then the tour arrived in Phoenix for three sold out shows in a row and nothing was ever the same again. Minutes after checking in to their hotel, Ben and Luis had switched rooms. Luis had been complaining lately, convinced that he was not receiving the same level of perks as the other band members. Ben offered to trade rooms with him to prove that no one was getting any special treatment. If it made Luis happy, who gave a damn which luxury penthouse level suite he slept in?

Ben had never given the simple exchange of room keys another thought, until the next night, when a 19-year-old fan named Lynsey slipped into room 2337 and waited for Ben to return. Only it wasn't Ben, it was Luis, who had stayed behind after the concert and gotten high with the roadies.

When Luis woke up at close to noon the next morning and went into the bathroom, he was confronted with what could only be described as a gruesome crime scene. His bloodshot eyes barely registered the greeting 'At Last', written in red lipstick on the bathroom mirror and he had failed to notice the red rose petals strewn in a path leading to the king-sized bed. All he could see was the body of the naked girl lying in the tub, wrists slit, with blood everywhere. From what the police could determine, she let herself into room and had been hiding in the closet, waiting for Ben. When Luis had stumbled in and passed out on the bed, Lynsey had realized that she was not destined to meet her crush and decided to end it all. But she survived her suicide attempt, despite a significant loss of blood and the label had been successful in keeping the details of the break-in hidden from the press.

Lynsey bragged to the shrink at the mid-western clinic she was transferred to, that she had been with 'her soul mate' Ben for the past six months. She referred to herself as the president of his official fan club. Weeks later, the authorities discovered how she had been successful tracking Ben's whereabouts and keeping up with his ever-changing phone numbers. Her source was her 'best friend', Kip's cousin Jen.

Lynsey's family was only too glad to keep their daughter's name out of the press and Kip was called on the carpet for disclosing personal information about Ben. He swore to the band's manager that it had all been in good fun with no harm intended. Sheehan threatened to fire him, but before he had the chance, Ben announced that he was quitting the band to launch a solo career.

###

Ben shuddered as he recalled the one photo of the scene that he had inadvertently viewed. He had never seen so much blood in his life. He chugged down a bottle of water, and then forced himself to eat a bowl of cereal, just to have something in his stomach. He flipped TV channels for a while, before he decided to go and lie down. He wasn't due at Jill's for a few more hours and other than taking a shower and picking up some flowers, he didn't have anywhere to be or anything to do. He would have to tell Jill the whole story one of these days, as soon as things settled down.

## Chapter 4

T- 84 days

Jill

Jill felt strangely calm as she pattered around the house. After deciding that this dinner was too special for takeout, she located a recipe she had been meaning to try. Carly had always been a fussy eater, but she knew Ben would eat just about anything she served. Veggie lasagna sounded safe along with a green salad. For dessert, perhaps a flourless chocolate cake? Or maybe she would just grab something at the market when she shopped for the rest of the ingredients. *Keep it simple.* She already had enough on her plate.

She had called James's parents last night to break the news about Ben. One tiny mention in the Simon Sez column and the story was likely to be featured on *Good Morning America* the next day. She felt like she owed it to the Sheridans to let them know what was coming. She was extremely close to her in-laws, especially to Kathy, James's mother. It was hard for Jill to make the call, but they were wonderful as always and totally understanding.

Kathy sounded glad that Jill was dating and told her daughter-in-law that she had been getting worried about her continued single status. "He's gone, Jill. James was my son and I loved him, but you're young and have your whole life ahead of you. What with Carly off at school and you rattling around that big place all by yourself? It's not right. We're not supposed to be all alone." Kathy knew what she was talking about. She and Mike had celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary last year. They were closer than any two people Jill had ever known.

Kathy only had one word of warning for Jill. "This Ben? Is he a good guy? He seems like a player."

Jill had to laugh at that. Ben didn't drink or do drugs and reports of him bedding young female pop stars were widely exaggerated. James, on the other hand, had abused drugs and alcohol and Jill knew of at least two women he'd had affairs with during their eighteen-year marriage, but she wisely said nothing to Kathy.

"It's not like that. Ben's sweet and down to earth. Don't believe everything you hear, okay? You've got to trust me on this."

"So when do we get to meet him?"

*Yikes. That's a tough one.* Jill tried to downplay the relationship. "It's not like we're really *together*, you know? But maybe one of these days we could..."

"Ooh, I know. The concert this fall. James's tribute show. Ben is going to be performing, right?"

*Oh yeah, the concert.* It was less than three months away. "Yes, Ben will be performing and he's going into the studio next month to record his track." Ben had chosen to sing *Jericho Road* and while Jill knew he would do the song justice, it remained the single most personal of all of the songs she had ever written. Although James was the only artist to ever officially record *Jericho Road*, YouTube featured dozens of young singers warbling lyrics that they would never totally understand. Now twenty years after its release, her new lover was going to take it on. It was a bit un-nerving, to say the least. Not to mention the current controversy over the lineup. Ben had recently been signed to headline the show, but the producers wanted to end with the title song, not with *Jericho Road*. Ben was pretty chill about the details, but his agent was taking a hardline.

Jill had tried to stay out of it so far, using the mantra, 'Not my monkeys. Not my circus.' "So you and Mike, you're still planning on coming up for the concert?"

"Of course we will. It's time to celebrate James's life, not keep mourning his death. It's what he would have wanted."

*Yeah, and a huge blowout party!* Jill smiled as she pictured her late husband unwinding and having a good time after one of his shows. No one loved a party like James.

"Oh and Jill. Alex and Melissa will be there too, with Ryder. They've asked Alex to play guitar for several of the performances. Isn't that so exciting? He hasn't been on a stage in years. This is just the kind of kick-start his career needs. He said he was going to see about staying with you for a bit this summer while he's recording in the studio. You knew that, right?"

*Oh crap. Alex!* He had sent her an email through his son Ryder's account a couple weeks back. Something about dates in July and the studio. She had put it out of her mind, but there it was. Something else to be dealt with.

Jill and Alex had a complicated relationship dating back more than twenty years. In her early days with James, Jill assumed that Alex didn't like her all that much. He seemed to resent her presence on the tour and her close relationship with his identical twin brother. Jill had started to suspect that Alex might actually have feelings for her though, and not the kind you should have for your brother's girlfriend. Her suspicions were confirmed when Alex made a pass at her one night in Dallas after James had passed out following a night of heavy drinking. For a split second, Jill had welcomed Alex's kiss, but then she shoved him away and threatened

to tell James. Alex had tried to make light of it, but the relationship between them grew even more strained. Soon after, Nomad, the grunge band that the two brothers had co-founded ten years earlier broke up and Alex began referring to Jill as Yoko. Over the next few years, she avoided Alex as much as possible and generally made herself scarce whenever he dropped by.

Alex had joined James on tour when James hit it big as a solo artist. Then he met Melissa, a lovely yoga instructor and they had a son together. They lived on a farm outside of Nashville and adopted a simple lifestyle, with no TV or Internet. The last time Jill had seen her brother-in-law, she had realized just how much it all seemed to suit him. His long hair, almost entirely grey, was pulled back into a straggly ponytail. He sported a full beard and his skin was nut brown from working outside. He was a happy man these days, but Jill knew that he would definitely have something to say about her relationship with Ben. Alex always had to get his two cents in, whenever it came to Jill's life and the choices she made. *And just how long had he said he would be staying with them?*

"Yes Kathy, I know. Carly and I are thrilled to have Alex with us." *Damn. This is getting awfully complicated, awfully fast.*

## Chapter 5

### Jill

Jill checked the lasagna and was relieved to see that it was browning nicely. Carly usually got home about 6, and she had asked Ben to come at 6:30. This would give them a chance to relax on the patio and nibble on the crudité platter she had assembled. She vowed to limit herself to a single glass of wine tonight, in order to be prepared for any issues or drama that might arise. It wouldn't be all that difficult, since Ben would no doubt stick with his usual iced tea and Carly wasn't much for alcohol either. She checked the place settings again and started to whisk together a simple vinaigrette dressing for the salad. She wanted to make this a special evening. Her daughter Carly was the most important person in the world to her and Ben was becoming extremely special as well. She hoped that the two would get along and that Carly would cut him a little slack, keeping the sarcasm to a minimum.

Jill had been spending quite a bit of time with Ben for the past several months, until Carly moved back home. *What would happen after tonight? Would their regular sleepovers start up again?* She certainly hoped so. She had grown accustomed to waking up next to Ben. He was so easy to be around. Her first impression of him had been one of calm and stillness and that hadn't changed. Unless he was on stage, belting out hit songs, he was just so peaceful. Such a marked change from James, who rarely sat still and never truly relaxed unless he was stoned, drunk or had just had sex. Although the last few years of his life had been sober ones, James was just fidgety. Exhausting, too. She had always known her marriage was far from perfect. But these last several months had shown her just how nice it was to be in a relationship of equals. Ben was well on his way to the level of superstardom that James had achieved, but he always made Jill feel like she was accomplished and worthy of love and attention. Most of the time, she believed it herself.

Ben was a homebody, just like she was, and they both appreciated their quiet time together. She felt disloyal admitting it, but she honestly preferred this new, simpler lifestyle without the hassle of constantly entertaining or rubbing shoulders with label execs and studio musicians.

Evenings with Ben were more like those that she imagined an old married couple would spend together. After she had given him a few pointers and they slowed things down a bit, their sex life was nothing short of spectacular. They got on well outside of the bedroom as well. Ben was an old soul. He could sit with her on the couch, knees and shoulders touching and watch a film or read a book. Sometimes they listened to music and Ben would casually stroke her arm or lean in to kiss her on the cheek. Jill thought that those nights were the best. Ben always made a point of shutting off his phone when he came over, which was great, as he got a lot of crank

calls. Hang-ups too. Sometimes he left his phone in the pocket of his jacket, which usually hung in the front hall closet. Jill marveled at his ability to tune out like that. As a mom, she always felt the need to be available whenever Carly called or texted. She spoke regularly to her best friend Beth and her brother Ted. And her agent Ari and James's mom Kathy. On occasion, she spoke with her own mother and her older sister Susan. The only calls Ben ever took were from his mom or his new assistant, Ian. And most often, it was Ian, letting him know that he had once again changed Ben's phone number or email address.

Jill had asked Ben several times about his seeming lack of a relationship with any of his former band mates. Although he claimed that there were no hard feelings between them, she assumed, that as the band had dissolved just weeks after Ben's unanticipated departure, there had to be some level of animosity. Ben assured Jill that he would arrange to get-together with them, but as far as Jill knew, there had been no communication with Kip, Luis, Dante or Sam.

Jill looked around the large, gleaming kitchen of her home for the past six years. It was a far cry from the tiny house she had grown up in on Jericho Road. James had worked so hard to provide an extremely comfortable standard of living for his family and for that, Jill would be forever grateful. But she'd had her own level of success for the past several years and basically supported herself and Carly.

After the estate had finally been settled, Jill had arranged to payoff her own mortgage as well as those on the New Jersey home of James's parents and Alex's farm. Carly swore that she didn't want or need that much money, but Jill wanted her to have a comfortable financial cushion 'just in case'. A trust fund that Carly would inherit when she turned twenty-five was set up and Jill planned on donating the rest of the money to a recently established non-profit organization: The Sheridan Fund. A few of the original record label execs had gotten together recently and raised half a million dollars to set up the fund, with the goal of keeping music education in public schools. With a share of the revenue from the tribute concert, as well as sales from the live album, it was anticipated that there would be roughly \$10 million on the books by the end of the first year, which Jill hoped to match. The plan was to start out by offering college scholarships to talented students in need and provide grants to individual schools. Jill knew that James would have gotten a huge kick out of his name being attached to such a worthy cause. It was possible that Carly would want to head up the organization when she graduated. Provided art history was just a phase, that is.

After a quick shower, she decided to wear a simple pair of wide-legged black pants and an off the shoulder green top that she knew Ben liked. In an effort to simplify her life or at least her wardrobe, she had started wearing primarily black and white, accented by rich jewel tones. No pastels and no floral prints. Her mantra became 'less is more'. One weekend last year, she and her oldest friend Beth had gone through her closet with the plan to eliminate at least half of the clothing and two thirds of the shoes that were bulging at the seams of the huge walk-in. Beth had



made Jill strip down and try on every single piece of clothing she owned. Beth was brutal. If the top or dress in question didn't 'bring Jill joy' or fit just so, it was added to the donate pile. Beth was several sizes larger than Jill and Carly was so much taller, so all of the clothes were being donated to a local charity. The only woman close to Jill, who would fit into any of her petite sized clothing, was Marnie. But Ted's wife had become a bit of a hermit over the past few years and rarely left the house.

Jill vowed that she would give Marnie a call this weekend and plan a visit soon. Marnie was so much more than a sister-in-law. She was one of her oldest and best friends.

Jill had just lowered the oven's temperature, when she heard a knock on the door. More of a tapping. *Has to be Ben*. Carly would never think of knocking at her own door. She rushed to greet him.

"These are for you," Ben said, presenting her with a huge bouquet of her favorite Stargazer lilies.

"Oh, that's so sweet, but you didn't have to...Oh hell, thank you. They're lovely." Ben looked around as she led him through the spacious foyer. He sounded a bit nervous as he asked about Carly's whereabouts. After hearing that they were alone in the house, he pulled Jill into his arms.

"I've been wanting to do this all day Griff," he growled into her ear, right before he proceeded to kiss her thoroughly. She moaned and melted into his arms. All of the tensions of the past couple of days seemed to disappear as she kissed Ben back with an increasing urgency.

"Maybe if this goes well tonight, you could..." she started to whisper, just as Carly brushed past them.

"Well, it looks like the party has already started," she interjected. "So, hey Ben, welcome to chez Sheridan. I'm Carly and I'll be your co-host tonight. But save the kissing for my mom, would you? You've probably heard that I've long outgrown my schoolgirl crush on you." She stood back with a satisfied smile on her lips. The sparring had officially begun.

"Hey Carly. It's good to see you again," Ben responded smoothly. In one fluid gesture, he was able to extricate himself from Jill and keeping one arm protectively around her shoulders, he extended his other arm in greeting. His tone was warm, but Jill thought she saw a hard-edged glint in his brown eyes. Clearly he was up for the challenge that was Carly, who half-heartedly clasped his hand, before dropping her bag on the chair and starting to rifle through that day's mail.

"Well c'mon," Jill urged. "Let's go sit down and have some hummus, huh?"

“Wow, this *is* a special evening. You don’t make your hummus for just anyone, Mom.” Carly put the stack of mostly junk mail back down on the desk and led the way out to the patio where the early evening sunset had already begun.

“I’ve had your mother’s hummus, Carly. Many times,” Ben assured her. “And you’re right. It’s *really* special.”

Carly cast an appraising glance at Ben. “Touché” appeared to be her wordless response. Ben seemed to be enjoying their banter, but Jill was starting to stress out, thinking that getting them together this evening was a bad idea. Carly’s phone buzzed, indicating that she had a text.

“It’s Em,” she confided happily, as she rushed out of the room. “Carry on, you two, but keep it clean.” She disappeared down the hall towards her room.

“She’s a trip,” Ben chuckled as he watched her go. “And wow, she’s super protective of you.”

“Protective? Really? I think she’s just being rude. And don’t encourage her, huh? I want everything to go smoothly.” Carly had promised her that she would ‘play nice’, but Jill knew just how open to interpretation Carly’s definition of ‘nice’ could be.

“She’ll be fine,” Ben promised. “Just let her get it out of her system. And don’t worry, I can handle it.” He settled back on the chaise lounge and smiled at Jill as she poured him a glass of iced tea.

After a few minutes of texting with her girlfriend, Carly emerged from her bedroom in time to pour herself some seltzer and smear a couple chunks of bread with hummus. “I’m starved Mom,” she admitted. “A group of donors came by and we never had a chance to break for lunch. There’s a new exhibit scheduled for next month and I thought they would never leave. What time will the food get here?”

“I made a huge pan of lasagna, Carly. It’s probably just about ready. Let’s go start on our salads.” They made their way to the kitchen where a round table was set for three. Jill located a large vase for her flowers and as she filled it with water from the tap, she listened for any conversation that Carly and Ben might be having. So far, nothing.

“Do you need any help?” Ben called and Carly followed with an offer of her own. Jill assured them both that she could manage and seconds later, carried over a tray with a large bowl of salad, three wooden salad bowls and an overflowing basket of rolls.

“I hope that everyone likes lemon vinaigrette. I’ve already dressed the salad.”

“I love your vinaigrette,” Ben assured her. “Always just the right amount of garlic.”

“Yeah Mom, your vinaigrette is the bomb.”

Jill was growing suspicious. Hummus? Vinaigrette dressing? Were the two of them actually vying for her favor through compliments about her culinary skills? She could only remember serving the dressing once before to Ben and Carly was more of a balsamic fan.

“Well, it’s nice to see you two agree on something,” she told them, and conversation ceased as they tucked into their salads and passed around the rolls.

As soon as they were done, Ben gathered the dishes and loaded up the tray. Jill was about to whisper a thank you to Carly for her good behavior, when he returned, carrying a steaming casserole with the help of a pair of potholders. “Ready for the main course, ladies?”

“Smells good, Mom,” Carly assured her as she jumped up to start serving the food. The only awkward moment came when, minutes later, a now relaxed Carly asked, with her mouth full of lasagna, “You know what Dad would have said about veggie lasagna, right?”

Jill nodded, with a grin. “Just needs some damn meat and it would be perfect.” The two women shared a moment, reflecting on James and his penchant for red meat.

Ben watched them with a small smile on his face. “My dad is also a big meat eater,” he told Carly.

“Well hopefully, he won’t get hit by a NY city bus, too!”

“It’s doubtful. More likely a runaway golf cart. He spends quite a bit of his time in Boca Raton these days,” he added with a gleam in his eye.

Carly stared at him for a second before she let out a giggle, and then started laughing. Ben joined her and Jill watched the two of them in amazement.

*This is the strangest dinner I have ever hosted. And one of the nicest, too.*

## Chapter 6

T- 83 days

Jill

“And it all turned out really well last night, Beth,” Jill concluded with a sigh of relief. Ben had just left the house en route to the gym, minutes before she had poured herself a third cup of coffee and called her oldest friend to catch up.

“I can’t believe you Jill,” Beth moaned. “Ben Fein? Are you serious right now? He’s the same age as Jesse.”

Jill felt hurt by her friend’s reaction. She had just told her all about the previous evening, after confiding that she had been seeing Ben for the past six months. She was thrilled with the way the evening had progressed, ending with a sleepover with Ben. The lasagna had been a huge success. After Jill served a pot of herbal tea and some hastily thawed lemon squares, they had lounged in the living room. They discussed Carly’s internship and her studies at Columbia, Ben’s upcoming tour and his role in the tribute concert and Jill’s recent meeting with a couple of legendary country stars who were rumored to be dating.

After a series of several barely concealed yawns, Carly had excused herself. She kissed her mom lightly on the cheek and grinned sleepily at Ben. “I keep a box of Pop Tarts in the pantry if you’re hungry in the morning,” she advised him, with a thumb pointing at Jill. “This one isn’t all that big on making breakfast.” And that was that. Shortly afterwards, Jill and Ben had retired to her bedroom and Jill slept soundly for almost eight hours straight. Following some enthusiastic lovemaking this morning after Carly had gone to work, Ben left with a Pop Tart and a promise to call later. Jill was positively glowing. *Why can’t Beth see what a good situation this is?*

“It’s not like we’re going to get married or anything. Why should it matter?” *Leave it to Beth to burst my bubble.* She always had her back, but sometimes Beth could be a tad negative. Her romantic life had always been a train wreck, starting with getting dumped at the age of eighteen. She had been six months pregnant, when her boyfriend assured her that he was not going to be one of those ‘loser teen dads that you read about’, right before he took off. Since then, she had dated a few nice enough guys, but nothing that had lasted.

“So how’s the sex?” her friend teased, apparently ready to change the direction of the conversation. “I can’t remember the last time I went to bed with a rock hard twenty something.”

Beth and Jill had exchanged lots of details about their respective love lives as young women, but all that changed after Jill met James. Married sex was off-limits as far as Jill was concerned, and touring, substance abuse and other women complicated her relationship with James. Despite almost daily conversations with Beth, Jill had kept mum on the subject of sex for years. But life with Ben was simple and happy. They had no secrets.

“How do you think it is?” she teased back. “It’s fucking fan-tabulous.”

Beth giggled and just like that, things were okay again between the two of them. Then Beth’s tone grew serious. “So what’s up with Marnie? Have you seen her? Is she any better?”

“No, not really. I’ve made dates to go out to Long Island and visit, but every time I do, she cancels on me. Ted covers for her, but he seems kind of oblivious, if you ask me. I have half a mind to just show up out there and see her for myself. What’s the worst that could happen?” It had been a few months since she had seen Marnie and a couple of weeks with no communication at all, except for a few short text messages.

“I feel like I can’t just sit by and not try to help her. After everything with James...”

“What are you talking about, Jill? You helped James get sober. I was there. You can’t blame yourself for any of it.”

Jill was hesitant to put into words the thoughts she had been plagued with for years, but this was as good a time as any. “I know James stopped drinking and doing drugs. But we never fixed the real problem. James was deeply disturbed and he tried to self-medicate for years. He needed help and I failed him.” Jill steeled herself to keep from breaking down. She had cried over James more times than she could count, both before and after his death.

“You did everything you could, Jill. And besides, you can’t really compare Marnie to James, can you?”

“Why not? Marnie is suffering. I think she has stopped eating and she apparently doesn’t want to leave her house. James drank and took drugs. And he never seemed to be at our house for a while there.” Jill had expected a response for Beth, but her friend was strangely silent. “Beth?”

“You never told me, Jill. You never told me how bad it got. I always thought you were living the glamorous life out in L.A. with your handsome rock star husband. I was, well, I hate to admit it, but I was jealous of you.”

“I’m sorry, hon. I couldn’t admit it to anyone, even myself. I had been covering for James for so long. Keeping secrets. But that’s in the past. I swore I wasn’t going to live like that again.”

“But you kept the secret of going out with Ben, didn’t you?”

Jill had to admit that her friend had a point. “You’re right, as usual. But starting today, no more secrets, okay? But anyway, that’s why I feel like I have to be there for Marnie. Life is short and we can’t take anything or anyone for granted.”

Jill decided a surprise visit to Montauk was in order. If she got ready now, she could be there in time for a late lunch, which she would pick up on the way. She knew that she should stay home and make some progress on a couple of songs that she was working on, but Marnie had always been there for her. In the aftermath of James’s affairs and a few of his drug-fueled binges, Marnie was the first one she reached out to. Frequently the only one. This was something she clearly needed to do.

“I’m going to run, sweetie. I’ve got a ton of things to do today.” She told Beth that she would talk to her soon and seconds later, she called the service James had always used, arranging for a car for the day. She texted Carly and Ben that she was going to be gone at least until early evening and packed a bag, in the off chance she decided to stay overnight. After a quick stop at the Starbuck’s drive-through, she headed towards the Long Island Expressway and her friend who needed her.

###

Three hours later, she stood in the doorway of Ted and Marnie’s home. Her brother’s voice was calm, but Jill sensed a great deal of tension just below the surface. His face was lined and haggard and the bags under his eyes left no doubt that he had not been sleeping well. Yet he shrugged off her concerns that Marnie was in any sort of trouble.

“I told you Jill, she’s lying down. She’s just getting over um, a flu bug. She’s probably still contagious. You probably shouldn’t...”

“Ted, no offense, but that’s bullshit and you know it. Marnie has never been sick a day in her life. And now, for months, she’s always ‘getting over something’. Always lying down. Too tired to talk. Even to me.” Jill’s voice broke on that last part. She had driven nearly 150 miles to check up on Marnie and she wasn’t going to leave without at least laying eyes on her. She glared at her brother, who shrugged apologetically.

“I’m sorry, but you should have called first. We could have set something up for later in the week. Maybe we could come into the city, meet you and Carly for brunch. Hey, maybe your *young* man could join us?” he offered with an attempt at a smile.

“Nice try Ted, but you’re not going to change the subject on me. I want to see your wife and I want to see her now. I knew her first. If it weren’t for me...”

“It’s okay, hon. You don’t have to cover for me anymore. It’s good to see you, Jilly.”

At the sound of her friend’s voice, Jill looked past her brother into the foyer. Her initial joy quickly turned to concern when she saw Marnie standing a dozen feet away. Only a few years older than Jill, Marnie appeared to have aged 10 years in the last few months. Her plaid flannel shirt and grey sweatpants hung off her tiny frame. She had lost the excess weight she had put on after all the hormone treatments and short-term pregnancies and many pounds more. She couldn’t weigh more than 90 pounds soaking wet, Jill realized. She quickly recovered from the sudden shock of seeing her and crossed the room towards Marnie.

“Hey sweetie,” she began, just before both women burst into tears. Jill reached out to embrace Marnie and then held on to her for dear life. “It’s okay, darlin. It’ll all be okay.”

## Chapter 7

T- 82 days

Jill

Late the next morning, Jill drove west on the Long Island Expressway towards home. The last 24 hours had been intense and emotionally draining, but somehow cathartic as well. She was relieved that a solid plan of recovery had been put in place. Marnie would get the help she so desperately needed and her brother could finally start to confide in her again. All his fears and concerns. And a ton of guilt, misplaced or not. Until yesterday, Jill had almost forgotten just how crazy and chaotic domestic life could get. Growing up in an alcoholic household, she remembered all too well the arguments, the screaming and the tears, as well as the horrible silences that hung over their home, like a dark cloud. She had watched helplessly as her mother repeatedly took the brunt of her husband's booze filled rages.

Although Jill had never witnessed any signs of physical abuse, she could recall one time when she was six or seven, finding her mother lying in a heap next to the front door. Her father had just left the house through that door, slamming it loudly as he did. Her mother claimed she was 'just resting' after a particularly long and nasty fight, which once again ended with her husband vowing that she would end up in a cold water flat if she dared to leave him. Jill had always believed that at the very least, she had been pushed. She swore she would never live a life like her mother's, tiptoeing around and always waiting for the next thing that would set her husband off.

Over the years, Jill had seen her father mellow out quite a bit, especially after she and her older sister Susan moved out. The fact that Ted grew a head taller than him and swore he would personally kick his father's ass if he ever threatened his mother again probably had something to do with the sudden and long overdue ceasefire in the Griffin household. Jill was pretty removed from it all back then, as at the time, her focus was on touring with James and his brother Alex and their band Nomad. Her father had passed away from a sudden heart attack when Carly was just a baby.

Jill knew all too well that James had a drinking problem when she married him and she was the first to admit that getting involved with an alcoholic was a common mistake among adult children of alcoholics. She had rationalized for years that James was nothing like her father, but had finally come to realize that the two men were similar in at least two ways. They both had problems with alcohol and they both failed to give her the unconditional love that she deserved.



After all the success of his debut solo album, *Guessing at Normal*, James had been determined to prove that he could be on top again. He spent years in and out of the studio, calling on friends from the industry to collaborate and jam with him. But despite all his efforts and the millions his record company pumped into the project, *Jamie Live* was both a critical and commercial flop. The tour to support the launch of the album was cut short and suddenly the former super talent was just another suburban dad in the Hollywood Hills, getting the mail in his bathrobe and taking his daughter to school in his sports car. After he overdosed on cocaine, his doctors recommended that a change of scenery would do him good, so the family moved to NY. The last several years of their marriage were much more peaceful than the ones they had spent in LA.

The drama of the last couple of days had been unexpected, but Jill tried to help as much as she could. She and Marnie hugged and cried for what seemed like forever, and then Jill drew her a steamy fragrant bath and sat silently with her while she soaked. Personal hygiene had apparently been low on her list of priorities for quite a while, along with eating. The odor emanating from Marnie's emaciated body was indescribable, as if she was rotting from the inside out. Jill wasn't totally prepared for the sight of her friend's scrawny frame as she helped her out of her smelly clothes and into the tub. The two women were about the same height, roughly 5' 2" in their bare feet and both were slight. At one point Marnie probably weighed maybe five pounds or so more than Jill, who had always been a little too thin. It had been years since Jill had seen her friend in anything but casual lounging clothes and months since she had even laid eyes on her, so she couldn't help but gasp when she realized that Marnie's thighs were roughly the same size around as Jill's forearms and her boobs were gone. Jill was shocked to see just how serious her condition had gotten.

After she soaked and Jill held her hand in silence, Marnie got settled in bed with a cup of herbal tea and a couple of the cookies from the box lunches, which Jill had purchased at a nearby deli. She sipped her tea and nibbled at the cookies and she talked. And talked. Jill sat and listened to her while she chronicled her descent over the last few years. There was so much that she had kept hidden. Marnie had routinely sworn that she was fine, but Teddy had finally sought help from medical experts after Marnie had just stopped. Stopped eating, stopped sleeping, stopped leaving the house, stopped talking.

They had been trying to get pregnant for years. Infertility treatments and five miscarriages (the last one at four months) had more than taken their toll on her. She was several years older than Ted, and doctors began to balk at trying to help a woman already in her early forties to conceive. Adoption was eventually discussed, but by then Marnie felt that she was now too old, and further, that she couldn't handle what she envisioned would be a series of grueling agency interviews

So in the face of all that loss, Marnie had just slowly shut down. She spent less time in her garden, turned down invitations, started having food and everything else

delivered and just stopped living. In the aftermath of James's death, working to get his estate settled and helping prepare Carly for college, Jill didn't realize at first how isolated she had become. Ted always had an excuse at the ready for why Marnie didn't join him during his bi-weekly trips into the city and why invitations to their sprawling homestead out on the tip of Long Island had stopped coming in. Then Jill met a certain brown-eyed young pop singer, so she was now feeling like she failed her friend when she needed her most. Marnie finally slipped into what appeared to be a calm and dreamless sleep, so after sitting and watching her for a while, Jill went in search of her brother.

She found Ted sitting behind his big, sprawling desk with amazing views of the ocean. He was staring at the magnificent body of water when she slipped into his office. She wasn't sure if he even knew she was there and was about to announce herself, but he spoke up first.

He sounded beat, totally exhausted. "Don't even say it, Jilly."

She knew instantly what he meant, but she decided to be an adult and not get defensive about the fact that he assumed she would somehow blame him for Marnie's condition. It was not easy for Jill, as she was, by nature, a rather defensive person, so she drew a deep breath before she spoke.

"Ted, it's not your fault. I get it, okay? I spent years covering for James and making excuses for his behavior, so I know all about it. The person you love is suffering and you're at a loss as to how to help them. I understand."

A look crossed over Ted's face and for a second, he almost looked angry, before his features settled back into sheer and utter exhaustion. *Was he mad that she had dared to compare James's lifelong substance abuse issues with his wife's current situation?* She wasn't sure, but then he smiled. It was a slight smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, but it was a start.

"God I miss that asshole, you know? I loved him like a brother, Jilly."

*Yeah, I know that.* Ted had been one of James's biggest supporters, as well as his most devoted fan. She reached over and squeezed his hand and willed the tears starting to well up in her eyes to stay there. "I know you did, Ted. James was amazing and he loved all of us so much."

"It's just so hard, you know? I love Marnie and I would do anything to make her happy, whole again. We have all this money, all this success, but I sit here day after day, not writing, just worrying that my wife is going to kill herself. She stays in her room with the blinds down and every day she's slipping away more and more"

Jill had noticed that Marnie had apparently appropriated one of the guestrooms as her own, but decided to say nothing.

“The only time I feel alive anymore? It’s when I’m in your damn kitchen watching you and Carly argue about something stupid or going with you to that coffee shop around the corner. I meet with my editor, tell him I’ve got nothing going on, that I’m not making any real progress on my latest work in progress and afterwards I head uptown to find you. But you want to know the worst of it?” His eyes filled with tears and he fought to gain his composure.

*Oh my God, it gets worse?* Jill nodded for him to continue.

“I have to ask our housekeeper to watch out for her, listening for I don’t even know what. A gunshot? Why? That’s crazy, right? Marnie would never have a gun in the house. Maybe a window that Marnie will jump out of? She’d be so humiliated if she knew I arranged a babysitter for her. I’m just so scared that in the off chance that Marnie were to go into the kitchen, she would find a sharp knife and use it on herself or overdose on Tylenol. But I *have* to leave, to get out of here once in a while. And she won’t come with me. But then I worry about her. I can’t lose her, Jilly. We’ve already lost so much, you know?”

Jill walked over and wrapped her arms around him, realizing for the first time that he had been losing weight himself. Always a husky kid, he had bulked up even more over the last several years, but not anymore. Jill thought how good it felt to hug him close, even though he was sobbing into her shoulder the whole time. She just held him, until he stopped crying and he pulled away, wiping at his eyes.

“Teddy. We have to make a plan. Marnie needs professional help and not just someone who makes an occasional house call and prescribes antidepressants. You can’t handle this on your own. If you say it’s okay, I’ll reach out to the doctors who helped James. We have to do this together.”

Ted nodded in agreement, and Jill gave him another hug. He went to lie down, and Jill decided to tackle the messy kitchen. She took out the garbage, wiped down sticky countertops and loaded and ran the dishwasher. She also opened windows and the French doors leading out to the oceanfront patio. The whole house reeked of sadness and well, death. She texted Carly, and then Ben to let them know that she would be staying overnight, even though she wasn’t sure exactly what she could offer in the way of help. Ben texted back a thumbs up emoji, adding a request that she call him later to say goodnight. Carly immediately called and demanded to know what was going on.

“Mom, what’s happening with Marnie? Why are you staying over? How’s Ted?” She sounded frantic at the thought that two of her favorite people were in distress. “Do you want me to come out? I can call the service or get on a train or something. Or...”

Jill assured her that there was no need to panic, that everything was under control.

“Marnie is just exhausted, sweetheart. Ted too. I’m cleaning up and if I can’t find any real food here, I may just nip out to the store and pick up a few things. Maybe make a pot of soup, you know?”

Carly was silent at first, and Jill half expected her to make another offer to help in some way. Then she spoke softly. “They’re lucky to have you, Mom. We all are. You’re our rock,” she ended with a catch in her voice. Jill was stunned and more than a little pleased. *Me? A rock? Wow. What parallel universe is this?*

## Chapter 8

T- 81 days

Ben

“We’ve gone over it already, Aaron. What the hell?”

Aaron’s tone was patient, but Ben could tell he was getting annoyed. “I know we have, Ben. But you and I both know how easy is to get carried away, to go off point. These interviews, well, they’re more important than ever, now that you’re a solo artist.”

Yeah, Ben knew that. With four other guys in Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez, one of them was always in the news for one thing or another. Press conferences and interviews had often turned into a free-for-all. But he was on his own now and Aaron warned him repeatedly about how to handle the subject of his former band members. There had been threats of a lawsuit for breach of contract when Ben had first left the group, and although Aaron assured him that nothing would come of it, he continued to coach Ben before every interview.

Today, they were sitting out on the balcony of Ben’s condo, drinking iced tea and enjoying the sun. Ben had a radio interview scheduled later this morning, which he was going to do over the phone. He settled back in his lounge chair and closed his eyes.

“Okay, shoot.”

“So Ben, did you always want to be a musician?” Aaron asked him in a conversational tone, using his best radio voice.

“No, actually I wanted to teach music at one point. I studied early childhood education in college.”

As a boy, he had never considered a career in music. At the age of five, he had told his folks that he wanted to be an astronaut, and then an architect and for a few short weeks following 9/11, a firefighter. He barely sang in the shower and had quit piano lessons after just a few weeks back in the fourth grade. He had tried out for his high school’s choir during his freshman year, only because his friend Ethan had informed him that the girls outnumbered the guys by two to one. At thirteen, he was rather

short, a little bit pudgy and extremely shy around girls. He figured anything he could do to increase his chances of meeting girls was worth it.

So during the first week of high school, he had headed to the music room and along with three other boys his age including Ethan, he sang *Barely Breathing* by Duncan Sheik in front of the music teacher and several staff members. His school had a no-cut policy, so there was no chance of his not being selected, but he was surprised when the choir director asked him to stay behind after the audition ended.

“You can really sing,” Mr. Cain, the choir director had informed him. “I’m glad you joined us today.”

Over the next few years, Ben had a number of solo performances in the choir and earned the male lead in his school’s production of *Grease* during his senior year. Shawna, a girl he had been crushing on for months, played the role of Sandy to his Danny Zuko. Kissing her on the stage was not nearly as exciting as making out with her in the den of her parent’s home. He had finally gotten to second base with her on several occasions, before the fateful night following the cast party celebrating the final performance. She had tugged at his belt and shimmied out of her jeans, as they lay sprawled on the plaid couch in the darkened room. She produced a condom and had coaxed and encouraged him as he fumbled through his first time. Things had gone exceedingly well, Ben thought with a smile, as he lay alone in his bed an hour later. Shawna had seemed to enjoy it, he thought, as he recalled what had taken place and how he might improve his performance the next time he had the chance to be with her.

But Shawna was rather distant the next day and later that week, had begged off when he asked her to go to the prom. A few weeks later, he went stag with Ethan and a couple of their friends and he watched miserably as Shawna arrived with the captain of the football team. He went home in a funk and after a couple of days of licking his wounds, completed the final week of high school. *It gets better*, he reminded himself repeatedly as he studied for his exams and attended graduation rehearsal.

During his four years of high school, he had slimmed down and grew a couple more inches, finally maxing out at his current height of 5’ 8”. An average student, Ben was not at all certain what he wanted to do after high school. His parents encouraged him to attend a local branch of a nearby college, and he went along with their plan and decided that he would figure it out when he got there. Living at home and commuting felt like an extension of high school, but he had no desire to live in a dorm like some of his friends. He partied some on weekends with his classmates and occasionally went back to the room of one of the girls he met. Ben made it through all of his general education core courses, before he switched majors for the last time during his junior year. The only classes he was at all excited about were related to music, so he decided he would be a music teacher.

###

“Wow. So how did you get your start as a performer then?”

“I was working part-time in a record store. My boss Les dared me to go to an open casting call for a new boy band that was forming.”

One day shortly after the beginning of his final semester of college, Ben had noticed a flyer on the counter when he arrived at the record store. Auditions were being held the next day at a hotel just a few blocks away for a new boy band that was being formed by Billy Sheehan of the Sheehan Entertainment Group, whoever they were. He read it over with growing excitement. Maybe?

“Did you see this?” he asked Les, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Yeah, someone dropped it off last week. I meant to post it on the board, but I just found it on my desk. The tryouts are tomorrow, so it’s probably too late to worry about it.” Les caught sight of Ben’s expression and peered at him closely. “Why, you interested?”

Ben studied the flyer more closely as he responded. “Nah, I was just wondering. I’ve never even heard of ...um, Billy Sheehan anyway.”

“No one had ever heard of George Martin before the Beatles hit the scene,” his boss responded drily. Still watching Ben closely, he continued. “You can sing. I’ve heard you out back when you think no one is listening. And besides, you’ve got just the right look. 13 year old girls would be hanging all over you, with those brown eyes of yours and that boy next door vibe you’ve got going on.”

Ben shook his head firmly. “I’m graduating from college in a few months. The only 13 year old girls in my future are gonna be my students, if I actually ever get a teaching job.”

Les shrugged. “I think you should check it out.”

“You’re serious? Me, in a boy band?”

Les glanced more closely at the flyer. “Hey, why the hell not? Tell you what. I’ll give you the time off. Paid. You’ve got nothing to lose, my man.”

Ben thought about it. It was a crazy idea. But as long as he was on the clock, he had nothing to lose. He folded the flyer and stuffed it into the back pocket of his jeans.

“You’re on,” he told Les.

###

“So what was the audition like?”

“It was crazy. There were hundreds of guys trying out. I never thought I stood a chance.”

The next day Ben took the subway to the stop closest to the hotel. The lobby was pretty deserted, but after checking at the front desk, he opened the door to the ballroom and was surrounded by a swarm of other young men. Ben was trying to decide if he should stay, when one of the staffers sporting a bright green polo shirt with the Sheehan Entertainment Group logo, sidled up and pointed at him.

“Head up front and get signed in,” she directed.

Ben was suddenly nervous. “Huh, me? No, I’m just...”

“Just what?” She narrowed her eyes at Ben.

“Just hanging out, I guess.”

“Dude, seriously? Gimme a break. Head up to the front and tell’em Krissy sent you.” She shook her head in amazement. She had an important job to do for Billy Sheehan today. No one was going to waste her time, not even a good-looking kid with big brown eyes and a messy head of hair. She turned and continued to make her way through the throng.

Heart pounding and palms sweating, Ben headed to the front of the large room, filled out a one-page questionnaire and posed for a couple of photographs, a head shot and one with his arms crossed, leaning nonchalantly against the wall. What seemed like hours later, he heard his name being called, so he walked back up to the front of the room. A staffer with a large official-looking clipboard and a name badge identifying him as Trevor C cast him an appraising glance. He directed Ben to a table with three chairs over in the corner. There was a grey-haired man about the same age as Ben’s dad sitting at it and he extended his hand to Ben in greeting and motioned for him to sit down. Trevor C. joined them just as the man started speaking. Ben had to force himself to be able to hear the soft-spoken older man’s voice.

“So why do you want to be part of this band, Ben?”

“Wow, um, to meet girls, I guess.” That earned him a smirk from Trevor C.

“Who are your musical influences?” That was a much harder question to answer. Working in the record store for the past couple of years, he had been exposed to a wide variety of music. On his own time, Ben preferred to listen to rock music and most of the songs on his Walkman were from the late 80’s and early 90’s. Pearl Jam, R.E.M and Jamie Sheridan were his current favorites. But Ben had always been good at reading people and situations. Rock and roll wasn’t the right answer. Earlier boy bands weren’t right either. Too obvious. Wait a minute. Sometimes when he sang in



the shower, he found himself trying to imitate singers with a higher pitch in their voices.

“Adam Levine, Chris Martin and Justin Timberlake,” he responded in a rush.

Another good answer apparently. Trevor C. nodded enthusiastically and the older man looked up from his notes for the first time. But his face remained impassive and Ben couldn't tell just how well he was faring. He was getting anxious to see what would happen next. He had figured he would have to sing something and was now questioning his choice of khakis and a striped button down, when the guy who was apparently in charge leaned forward.

“So what do you have prepared for us today, Ben?” He had decided to sing Maroon 5's latest hit, *She Will Be Loved*, if he actually got this far in the process, but at the last minute, he changed his mind.

“*Barely Breathing* by Duncan...”

“Yeah, we got it,” Trevor C. cut him off. “Good choice. If I have to listen to one more rendition of *She Will Be Loved*, I'll slit my wrists. So c'mon, let's go do this,” he prodded.

Ben was fitted with a cordless mike and led into a room the size of a closet. Through the glass, he could see the girl he remembered as Krissy and a couple more staffers wearing the now recognizable green polo shirts with the SEG logo had joined the older man and Trevor C. *Here's goes nothing*. He took a deep breath and started to sing.

###

“So Ben, when did you first hear that you had gotten the part? That you were in the band?”

“It was weeks later. But I still had another audition to get through. I went out to L.A. and missed my own college graduation.”

Ben had almost forgotten about the cringe-worthy audition that never should have happened in the first place. He was extremely busy that spring, since in addition to his classes and shifts at the record store, he spent his last month before graduation interning as a teacher's assistant at a performing arts high school in Brooklyn. Whenever he listened to any of his talented students, he was once again convinced that auditioning had been a fluke. Some of these kids were super-talented with amazing voices. He was just an average guy with an average voice.

Then one day, a call came. The Sheehan Entertainment Group wanted to fly him out to Los Angeles for a final round of auditions. He was apparently a semi finalist. After

confirming that it wasn't a hoax nor was it a practical joke being played by one of his friends, his skepticism turned to surprise. The caller, a young man named Seth, was starting to sound impatient as Ben tried to pry more information out of him.

"Uhhh, when?" he stammered.

"I told you. Next week."

"But, I've got graduation next week."

Now it was Seth's turn to sound surprised. "Dude, are you kidding me? Do you know what an opportunity is? This is *it*. This is *huge*. Most guys would... "

But Ben was already shaking his head as if Seth could actually see him through the phone. "I guess I'm not 'most guys' then. My mom will kill me if I miss my own graduation."

"Tell your mom that when you're a famous pop star, you'll get honorary degrees out your ass, ferchrissakes. Man, I gotta tell you. Everyone else I've called has gone freaking crazy. And by the way, there's not a lot like *you* either."

"Like me? What does that mean?"

"It's oh, crap, I shouldn't say this, but they're being pretty specific with who they're bringing in."

Ben was now more confused than ever. "Like how exactly?"

"Oh man, you didn't hear this from me, okay? There's well, five spots total. A white guy, an Hispanic, a black kid and an Asian."

"That's four."

"Yeah genius, well, you're the fifth kind. They're calling you a wild card."

"A what?" Ben could almost see Seth rolling his eyes as he explained.

"A wild card. The fifth spot could go to someone different, maybe a foreign-looking kid or bi-racial or maybe a Jew, like you."

"Seriously? That's crazy. Wait, how do you know I'm Jewish?" Ben tried to remember the form he had filled out. Had they asked about his religion?

"It's not brain surgery *Feinstein*. Let's call it a hunch. So anyway, the first four slots are jammed with choices. But the fifth, I dunno. Maybe cuz it's so vague. There are not a lot of you. So you have a better than average chance of being picked. But if you

miss out, well, that's on you." Seth sounded like he was getting ready to hang up and move on to his next call.

Ben wondered how many calls like this one were being made. How many other wild cards was he actually competing with? Ben considered the offer. If he went, it's not like he wouldn't actually graduate or anything. He would just miss a long ceremony, boring speeches and crowds of people. His parents would probably thank him. Especially his dad. It was a free trip to the Coast. Like a graduation present to himself.

"Okay," he managed to get out.

Seth's voice showed his surprise. "Wait, what? You're in? I was crossing you off the list. You sure about this?"

Ben was never less sure about anything in his whole life, but if he wasn't going to take a chance at the age of 21, when would he? He took a deep breath.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

###

"So, you passed the audition with flying colors I guess, huh? What was it like meeting your band mates?"

"Well, the first couple of months were pretty stressful actually. The guys were great, but I was having a hard time with the dance moves."

Ben flopped on the bed in the closet-sized hotel room he had been calling home for the past ten days. It felt longer, much longer actually. His legs were cramped and his throat felt raw. The rehearsals had been much more difficult than he had imagined they would be and he was discouraged. He'd had no clue just how much dancing would be involved, and other than 'the running man' and 'elbow shuffle' moves, he felt lost. Although he never bothered to hang around when video of that day's performances were reviewed, he was certain his 'stop and thrust' attempts were weak, and that when he joined the others in 'the rowboat', he looked like he was doing a half-assed series of jumping jacks.

Despite Billy's continued assurances that there would not be a leader and they would all be featured equally, it was becoming apparent that both he and Kip, the tall guy from Kansas, were being given the majority of the solos and were usually placed front and center for the dance portions. He groaned as he reflected on his progress or lack thereof when it came to the dancing. On multiple occasions, Ben had to endure the glares of the other members of the band and had to protect

himself from the shoves and pushes that occurred when he made a misstep or fell out of line.

Kip had a decent voice and combined with his blonde good looks, it was relatively easy to ignore his less than stellar dance moves. Luis and Dante were both great dancers and quickly learned all of the steps. Sam struggled a bit with the moves and their choreographer Leah, a leotard-clad young woman with a perpetual frown, had to keep reminding him to focus. Ben knew if Sam actually paid more attention to his own two feet and less attention to Leah's ass, he would probably be fine.

###

"So tell us Ben, what were the other guys like? Did you all get along with each other?"

"They were great. We grew really close and got along really well, for the most part."

Their first meeting occurred when Billy arranged a meet and greet on the night they had arrived in Los Angeles. At his request, they had taken turns introducing themselves and talking a little about their backgrounds and their hopes for the upcoming months. Everyone was on their best behavior and gave the classic responses that were expected of them: glad to be here, thrilled for the opportunity, can't wait to meet the fans they were hoping to attract. Sam got the first laugh of the night when he said his plans for the future included 'banging at least one or two hot chicks' in every city they performed in. Further conversation revealed that Ben was the only one with a college degree, Luis was the youngest of the group having just turned eighteen, Dante had seven brothers and sisters, and Sam was adopted. Kip was the oldest of the five and the only band member with actual industry experience. He and his two younger brothers had recorded a number of highly successful You Tube music videos, which had been downloaded millions of times.

###

"Did you ever think that you would be part of one of the most successful boy bands in music history?"

"No, I think we were all totally surprised when we took off like that. Well, probably Billy Sheehan wasn't that surprised, I guess."

As it turned out, Billy Sheehan's vision for the group and his plans to have them dominate the pop music scene were spot-on. Their first album, which was released early the following year, went platinum, as did the next four studio albums they released. Their live album was nominated for a Grammy, which they lost to Taylor

Swift, but their world tours sold-out, which combined with the volume of iTunes downloads, propelled them into superstar status. Kip was the heartthrob, Luis and Dante were 'cute' and the best dancers, Sam was the bad boy and Ben was the favorite and the unofficial leader of the group. Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez ruled the charts for nearly five years, until Ben quit to launch his solo career.

###

"It must have been a tough decision to leave all that and go off on your own, Ben. Some might say you took a real risk."

"Well, yeah. I guess so. But it just felt like the right thing to do."

"So do you still stay in touch? Did you go to Kip's wedding last year?"

Ben frowned at that. He hadn't seen or talked to any of the guys in well over a year. Their last few weeks together had been really stressful.

"Ben, This is what I'm worried about." Aaron's tone was stern. "All you have to say is 'everyone's so busy. You wish Kip all the best. You would love to meet up soon, schedules permitting, blah, blah, blah.'"

Ben nodded slowly. "I know, Aaron. Don't worry, I've got it." He checked the time on his phone. "Hey, I'm gonna jump in the shower. I should be getting the call in about twenty minutes. Grab another tea or something. You wanna eat? There's a takeout menu for that deli down the street. Order me a turkey on rye, would you?" He hurried out of the room and tried to slow down his breathing as he went. He would have to pull himself together for the interview. He was glad it was a radio interview and not live, but taped to air in prime time. He needed to get a grip. He couldn't lose it every time he thought of that girl or someone referenced the band breaking up.

## Chapter 9

### T-78 days

#### Jill

Jill lay awake and watched Ben, who was sleeping next to her. It was barely dawn but she had been awake for a half hour. Once again, she envied Ben's ability to sleep so soundly and for so long. The only time she was able to sleep in was when she'd had too much wine the night before. Then she slept late, but woke up feeling like hell. She had cut back on drinking since Ben had come into her life. These days, she woke up feeling happy and excited. Like a kid at Christmas. She smiled, remembering their first date, on Christmas Day.

###

Jill had realized that this was going to be a very strange holiday. Last Christmas had been their first one without James, but Ted and Marnie had invited them out to their home on Montauk and had surprised Jill by inviting her best friend Beth to join them as well. It had been a wonderful time with lots of music, wine and food. But this year, Ted and Marnie were celebrating quietly, following yet another snag in their failed efforts to become parents and Beth had committed to spending the day with her own parents. Carly was going on a Caribbean cruise with her new girlfriend Emily and Jill? Well, she had a date with Ben Fein. After working with him last spring and penning a couple of hit songs for the young singer, she had run into him last week. One thing had led to another and they had made a date for a late afternoon movie and dinner.

After unwrapping a new iPhone for Carly and a vintage leather bound notebook for Jill, the two women had whipped up a batch of chocolate chip pancakes. Jill had only managed a few bites, as the thought of seeing Ben later that day had her all jumbled up inside. *My first date in more than 22 years!*

"I'm the one who has to wear a bikini later today, Mom," Carly had teased. "You could have a great big food baby all day and no one would even notice."

"Thanks for that Carly. I love being invisible, you know." Carly eyed her mother closely.

"So Mom, just thinkin' that it wouldn't be the craziest idea in the world for you to get back out there, huh?"

Jill's heart started pounding, but she strained to sound casual. She wondered why Carly was bringing up the subject of her mother dating today, when Jill was actually going out on a date. *Oh crap*. She was not particularly good at keeping secrets. She tried to sound noncommittal as she answered her daughter.

"Yeah, maybe. If I met someone nice..." She blushed at Carly's penetrating gaze. "Well, we need to get moving or you are going to miss your flight." She hopped up and fed her uneaten pancakes into the garbage disposal. Carly rinsed her own plate and left it in the sink.

"I ran the dishwasher last night. Your turn to empty it," she reminded her mother, before loping down the hall to get ready.

Jill watched her go and realized, not for the first time, just how much she missed her daughter when she was away from home. After the first couple of weeks, she had gotten used to Carly living in her dorm room, but this was different. Carly was growing up so quickly and this kind of separation would become the new normal. She knew that this was something that all parents go through, but she wished she wasn't doing it all on her own.

By the time she finished unloading the dishwasher, Carly emerged from her room dragging a large suitcase. She was wearing black skinny jeans tucked into short black booties and a loose white top and had twisted her long dark hair up into a messy topknot. Her pale face was luminous and Jill knew that she had wearing a stitch of makeup. She reflected on Carly's no-fuss appearance and how stunningly beautiful her daughter was, in that effortless way that some teenaged girls seemed to embrace.

"Earth to Mom, c'mon we'd better get going. I called for the car to show up at 11 sharp. What?" she asked suspiciously. "You're looking at me like you're never going to see me again."

"Hey, what can I say? I'm going to miss my girl."

Carly smiled at that, but was clearly not ready to give up the 'Jill dating again' discussion. Fixing her mother with a steely gaze, she gave her a quick hug. "I wish you had plans of your own. I feel bad leaving you alone on Christmas Day. Not bad enough to cancel *my* plans of course. But still. I wish Beth or Ted and Marnie were..."

"Not your job to worry about me," Jill told her daughter. "You go and have some fun with Em and her family. I'm going to catch up on my writing. I've got a few ideas to play around with." And if the romantic spark she was anticipating with Ben was even close to what she was imagining it might be, she would have plenty of material for crafting some sexy new lyrics soon. She knew she was blushing again as she thought about her date that night, so she busied herself grabbing her sunglasses and house keys. She pulled on a jacket over her T-shirt and sweatpants, telling herself

that she wouldn't be getting out of the car at the airport and would have plenty of time to get all dolled up this afternoon.

Late that afternoon, Jill arrived at the movie theatre to meet Ben. She didn't know which film they were going to see, so she couldn't join the growing line to purchase tickets. She looked down the street just as Ben turned the corner and came striding towards her. He walked quickly and mostly kept his head down, but a quick grin in her direction let her know that he had seen her. He had on a hooded parka and dark jeans and had left his red Chuck Taylor high tops at home. A breath caught in her throat. *I'm so attracted to him. What is it about this man that is driving me so crazy?* He greeted Jill warmly and grabbing her arm, guided her towards a side entrance she hadn't noticed before. A uniformed usher was waiting for them inside and whisked them off to a private section of the balcony. Ben helped Jill off with her coat and gazed at her appreciatively.

"I'm so glad to see you. You look amazing."

Jill smiled at him, feeling like a nervous schoolgirl with a crush. She was glad that she had spent a little extra time getting ready today. She wore a blue cashmere V-neck sweater tucked into a pair of slim cut charcoal grey trousers. She had kept her silver jewelry to a minimum, and had blown her light brown hair into loose waves that showed off her high cheekbones and long neck. "Not bad for an old broad," she had told herself a half hour earlier as she left her house.

"Not bad yourself," she told him as he removed his coat, revealing a navy blue button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to expose his tanned forearms. *So different than James's arms. More muscular with less length and no tattoos.* She wondered if he had any tats that weren't currently visible and realized she was blushing again.

"Service is pretty good, too," she told him as an usher deposited a tray on the folding table in the corner. It was overloaded with an ice bucket and a king-sized bowl of popcorn that smelled heavenly. To hide her nervousness, she perused the selection spread out before her. The ice bucket contained bottled waters and herbal teas as well as a couple of Diet Cokes. In addition to the popcorn, there were theater-sized boxes of Whoppers, Swedish Fish and Sour Patch Kids. Her stomach growled as she viewed all the tempting choices. The only food she had consumed all day was a few bites of pancake hours earlier, and now she wished that she had forced herself to eat more. She didn't want to pig out in front of Ben, but she grabbed a Diet Coke and a box of Whoppers. They would have to tide her over for now. Ben helped himself to a bottle of water and carried the popcorn over to their seats.

"We're kind of isolated up here, but it's easier in the long run," he told her somewhat apologetically. "You know what it's like, I mean with James and all." There it was. Less than ten minutes into their date and the elephant in the room had been revealed.



“Celebrity has its perks,” she quipped. “But don’t expect me to share my Whoppers,” she warned him good-naturedly.

A few minutes later, the lights in the theater below them dimmed and they sat side-by-side watching the coming attractions. Their hands met over the bowl of popcorn in Ben’s lap and his hand reached out and held hers. They spent the next two hours holding hands in the dark theater like a couple of teenagers. Trying to keep from gorging herself on candy and popcorn, Jill spent more time studying Ben’s hand, than actually watching the film. It was warm and sturdy, with fingers that were fairly blunt, unlike James’s long tapering fingers. ‘Piano fingers’ as her mother had called them.

She caught a glimpse of Ben’s handsome profile. He had a strong jaw, gently curving lips and a nose that beaked just a bit. There was just a tiny bit of scruff that Jill could see and she found herself wondering if he shaved that baby face of his on a daily basis. His brown hair was messy and looked like he had just gotten out of bed, but his pleasant manly scent assured her that he was freshly showered. No piercings that she could see and still no visible tats. Hmmm. Just then, Ben turned towards her and grinned, his teeth straight and white. He was clearly a non-smoker who had benefited from orthodontia as a teen. *That smile!*

He squeezed her hand a little tighter and turned back towards the big screen. She was still paying minimal attention to the film and figuring that it had to be almost over, she closed her eyes for a moment. When Ben leaned over and whispered in her ear, his breath was warm.

“Do you want to go? We don’t have to stay til the end.”

“What? No, it’s fine. I just didn’t get much sleep last night. Listening for Santa, ha ha.”

“That’s right. Merry Christmas. Next time, you get to pick the film,” he suggested and squeezed her hand again.

*Next time?* Jill’s heart gave a little lurch at the thought of a second date. *Grow up. You’re being ridiculous.* A short while later, the ending credits were rolling and Ben turned to face her.

“So in order to get the full experience, since we’ve seen a movie, we have to go for Chinese food. Unless there’s something else you’d rather...”

“No, I love Chinese,” she assured him. *I am absolutely starving.* “Did you have a place in mind?” She hoped that if he did, it was nearby.

He grinned in response and helped her on with her coat. He slipped into his and they headed back towards the door. “Yeah, it’s all set. There should be a car right out here...Yup, there it is,” he announced as they crossed the sidewalk towards a waiting

black town car. He held her arm and helped her settle into the cavernous backseat, roughly the size of a football field. Without a word, the driver took off and headed downtown and minutes later, they stopped in front of a dimly lit restaurant in the heart of Chinatown. They hadn't spoken during the short drive, but Jill felt comfortable with the silence. Ben once again helped Jill as she clambered out of the car and they both walked quickly into the dark restaurant.

"I don't think it's open, Ben," Jill murmured, but he squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

"It is open... for us." A small Asian woman appeared and led them to a table in the corner. She waited while they removed their coats and then whisked them away. Seconds later, a young man approached with a tray. He placed two glasses of ice water, crispy noodles and a bowl of duck sauce in front of them. The woman returned with a bowl of edamame and a platter of steamed dumplings.

"I already ordered for us," Ben began somewhat apologetically. "Well, actually it was my assistant Ian."

Jill was already chewing a second dumpling and she nodded enthusiastically. As soon as she could swallow, she placed the uneaten portion of the dumpling on her plate and leaned forward to squeeze his hand. "This is amazing. I can't believe you went to so much trouble just for me."

"I just don't want you to think that I always have to be in charge, you know? I mean tonight, it's all been organized, but I usually like to be more spontaneous."

"So next time, I get to choose?"

Ben's gaze was warm and he grinned at her. "I hope there'll be a next time."

Jill looked at him and her heart did another in a series of little flips. *What was this man doing to her?* She felt herself blushing again, but managed to nod enthusiastically.

Ben popped a dumpling into his mouth and chewed and they grinned at each other happily. They managed to make short work of the appetizers and Jill moaned with pleasure as their server removed the empty plates, replacing them with huge bowls of pork fried rice, shrimp lo mein and chicken in a garlicky sauce. Their dinner was served family style and Jill helped herself to large portions of everything. They ate in companionable silence, punctuated by Jill's moans of delight as she sampled each dish. After she had eaten most of the food she had taken, she drank a large gulp of water, and then she sat back with a satisfied sigh.

"Carly says I could have a food baby and no one would even notice." *God, where had that come from?*

“No one, huh?” he said with a smirk. When he saw Jill blush, he sat back and smiled. “So how is Carly?” He had met Jill’s daughter briefly backstage during one of his concerts over the summer. “You said she’s gone on a cruise with a friend’s family?”

“Yeah, she’s been seeing Emily since their first day at Columbia. She’s a sweet girl, a bit chatty at times, but I like her. Thee two of them are a good pair, I think. For now, at least. Hell, if I ended up with the guy I was dating at her age, I’d...” She broke off as she saw Ben watching her closely.

“So how about you? I want to know more about you, Jill Griffin Sheridan.”

Jill shrugged her shoulders. Always shy and intensely private, she had grown increasingly wary over the years and disliked talking about herself. She had been burned a few times by those claiming to be interested in her, when all the while they only wanted to learn something about James, as if she would relay some juicy bit of gossip about him, posthumously or not. She knew that since Ben was well on his way to the kind of super stardom that James had enjoyed, it was highly unlikely that he had any kind of ulterior motive. He was probably sincere in wanting to get better acquainted with her. Even though she felt comfortable with Ben, she was out of practice with any sort of personal narrative.

“Not much to tell. I was married to James and we had Carly and then James died.”

Ben frowned at her and his brown eyes looked sad. “I’m not asking about Jill the wife or Jill the mother.”

“Well, that’s all there is to me, I’m afraid.” Jill laughed somewhat nervously.

Ben was shaking his head at her. “I think you’re wrong Jill. I see so much more than that. I see a beautiful woman. A talented woman. A woman that I want to get to know much, much better.” Jill put down the cloth napkin she had been folding and unfolding underneath the table. She had regained some of her self-confidence and she watched him closely as she spoke.

“A *mature* woman. Ben, I’m 42 years old. I have an 18 year old daughter. I don’t know what you want from me. I’m not a ‘Mrs. Robinson’ okay? You’re so... young,” she ended weakly.

But Ben was not to be put off. “I like you Jill. Yeah, I’m a little younger than you, but so what? Just a number, am I right? I want to know what makes you tick. How you come up with all those amazing song lyrics. What you love, what you wish for. And more than anything, I want to know how it will feel to hold you in my arms. What it will be like to kiss those lips. What you taste like...” He stopped as he noticed Jill was staring at him, open-mouthed. He decided to take a chance and he pushed his chair back and slipped over next to her in the banquette.

But Jill needed to get something out there, before she started kissing him like she had been dreaming about all day.

“I just want to keep this private, okay? I haven’t been out with anyone since, well, you know. Carly says she’s ready for me to start dating again, but I’m not at all sure that I believe her. You and I kind of work together and I have to keep it professional. And there’s the big tribute concert for James this fall and there will be a ton of press. I can’t have this, this whatever it is, taking center stage. So this is just between us, okay?”

Ben was watching her closely and at his nod of agreement, she continued.

“And just for the record,” she whispered, “I imagine I taste like Whoppers and garlic sauce.”

Ben took her in his arms and just before he started kissing her, he assured her, “That’s my favorite.”

They made out for a while, right there in the deserted Chinese restaurant. Ben pulled Jill onto his lap and she straddled him, never breaking her connection with his warm, soft mouth. His hands were everywhere and she matched him move for move, as they explored each other’s unfamiliar contours. Despite feeling excited and fearing that she was losing control in a public place, something about kissing and hugging and nuzzling this young man felt achingly familiar to Jill.

“Like coming home,” she murmured in his ear.

She realized Ben was whispering something as well. He was saying her name and groaning as she pressed herself against him. It had been such a long time since anyone had touched her like this, expressed so much raw emotion and longing for her. The attraction between them was even greater than Jill had imagined it would be.

When Ben stopped kissing her for a second in order to catch his breath, she whispered to him. “Let’s get out of here.” They hopped up and grabbed their coats and arm in arm, they race-walked back to the car parked outside. The uniformed driver drove them the few short blocks to Ben’s condo in Chelsea. Uneasy with a third party in such close proximity, they had stopped making out, and instead Jill settled comfortably into the crook of Ben’s arm, wondering just how long it would take to get somewhere, anywhere, so that they could be alone again.

When they pulled up in front of a luxury condominium building downtown, Ben got out first and pulled Jill along with him. A portly older man in a starched uniform greeted them. He hurried over to open the elevator door and pushed the button for the top floor. They began kissing again and Jill unbuttoned Ben’s shirt after his jacket fell to the floor. She wrapped her arms around him as he pushed himself

against her and lifted her slightly. She wrapped her legs around him and still kissing, they all but fell down when the doors opened.

The elevator stood right in the foyer of Ben's opulent home, but Jill noticed little of the high-end surroundings. Her only thoughts were of Ben, who hurried with her down the hall, towards what Jill could only hope was his bedroom. When he set her down, she was finally free to unbuckle his belt and let herself be undressed by a pair of warm fumbling hands. In less than a minute, they were naked together in Ben's king-sized bed. Hours later, a sex-sated Ben gazed through bleary eyes at Jill.

"So who's Mrs. Robinson anyway?" he had asked sleepily.

###

That was seven months ago, but to Jill it felt like she had known Ben for years. She couldn't remember ever being happier. She burrowed deeply into her down comforter and continued to watch Ben, who literally hadn't moved a muscle in over an hour. *How does he do it?* She wanted to keep her thoughts focused on that magical day, but details about the concert and legal issues regarding the Sheridan Fund were threatening to overtake her. There was only one way that she knew of to avoid thinking about anything but Ben. She rolled over on her side and started planting little butterfly kisses on his neck and slowly rubbing her hand over his chest. Muscles started moving quickly after that.

## Chapter 10

T- 66 days

Jill

“We never fight.” Jill and Ben had been lying, half-dozing, curled up on the couch in her spacious living room. Carly was at Em’s for the evening and they had the place to themselves. They ate a light dinner out on the patio, and then came in and lounged around, listening to music, including some jazz selections that Ben was currently into. Conversation between them had ceased a while back and Jill’s words seemed to come out of nowhere.

He roused himself into a half-seated position and peered closely at her in the semidarkness. “What does *that* mean?”

Jill shook her head slowly. “I don’t know exactly. It’s just... I’m not sure. But we *don’t*, you know. Fight, that is.”

“Do you want to fight with me? I mean, if you really want to, I guess we could...”

“I don’t *want* to fight. I just think it’s kind of weird that we never do.” Now she had Ben’s total attention. She felt she needed to explain herself further if the confused look on his face was any indication of how he was interpreting her rather oblique comments. “I come from a noisy household, you know? Lots of fighting.”

“You mean, your parents? Or you and James?”

“Wait, no. This has nothing to do with James. I meant my parents. We lived in a small house and there were five of us and the only thing worse than the horrible silence was all the yelling and screaming. Didn’t your parents fight at all?”

Ben’s face screwed up in concentration. “Yeah, I guess. Not fight exactly. But sometimes they didn’t agree about things and they were a little less friendly with each other than usual. But aren’t you glad to be past all that? I thought that you had a tough time growing up on Jericho Road. I mean, the song lyrics just...”

“It was a place that any sane person would want to get away from and I did, as soon as it was possible,” she agreed. “But you’re not understanding me. I’m not suggesting that we should be like my parents or yours either for that matter. I just think it’s weird that we never disagree about anything. You say, “Let’s order Thai” and I agree. I say, “Let’s watch this film or that one,” and you say “Great”.

Ben drew himself up into a full sitting position. His look of confusion was replaced by a huge smile. "So we get along with each other. We're in sync and we like the same things. I think that's awesome, Griff."

"But what about the big things? Isn't that what most couples fight about?"

"Like money? No need to fight about it as long as we both have plenty. Hell, you told me that you could just about retire on the royalties from those two songs that you wrote for me. I wish you'd let me spend more of my money on you, but I'm cool. I get it. And sex? Isn't that a hot button for lots of couples? I got no issue there, Griff. You? We good?"

*Yeah, really good, once I showed you exactly what I like in bed.* He had been a good student and a grateful one. "The sex is fabulous, Ben. No complaints here."

"And when we're out, you never mind when the fans want to take a selfie with me or ask for an autograph. You're probably used to it, all those years with James."

*James, yeah, there it is.* He was once again the elephant in the room. For the most part, Jill had gotten used to the attention from all those adoring fans during 20 years with her late husband. But life with James was challenging, even during the best of times. He'd had a tendency to be moody and his moods shifted with the drop of a hat. She was never sure what he would be like when he walked in the door or woke up in the morning. He could be so sweet and thoughtful at times, but moments later, he would be in a foul mood over something or other. It was textbook typical alcoholic behavior, she had learned and certainly experienced with her father while growing up.

*This is the first time in my life that I'm not dealing with the mood swings of an alcoholic. Is that what I miss? The fights? The tension? That's crazy. This is the happiest I've ever been in my life.* "No, I get the fans. I'm impressed at how patient you can be with them."

"Yeah, they're great," he told her. Then something seemed to cross his mind and he frowned, as if he was remembering something unpleasant. He shook it off and quickly changed the subject. "What was James like? With fans I mean."

*Oh wow, how could she explain that one?* "He was, well, usually he could be really charming around his fans, especially the women. Once in a while, he would try to avoid them. But back in the day, no one carried cellphones. No one took selfies. It was mostly hugs and autographs." *And blowjobs,* she reflected. *Wait, too much? Oh, what the hell.* "And offers of blowjobs. Right in front of me. It was crazy. All these girls, like Carly's age or even younger, would offer to do him backstage, in airport lounges, public bathrooms." She shook her head in disgust at all of those memories. It was years ago, but Jill could recall several of the incidents as if they were just last week.

Ben looked shocked. "Most of our fans were too young for blowjobs, at least I think they were." Jill realized that he was adorable when he blushed. "Just a lot of screaming pre-teens when I was with the band. Now I finally seem to be attracting a slightly older fan base. So maybe I can start looking forward to all those blowjobs, huh?"

He tried to move quickly, but Jill punched his arm and smirked at him. "You wish."

"How did all of that make you feel?"

*How?* "Well, it bothered me for sure. I mean, you're walking along with your husband, minding your own business, and some girl half his age offers to ..." She mimicked giving oral sex and Ben chuckled briefly at the image, but quickly grew serious.

"I was a big fan of his. You know that, don't you? James was a talented guitarist, but that voice of his! It was so deep and rich." Ben laughed self-consciously. "I always wanted to sound like him and I kept waiting for my voice to change, you know? But it never did." That was a bit of an understatement as Ben's iconic falsetto contributed significantly to the success of his former band as well as his current stature as a solo artist. "But, what I started to say, was that I admired your husband. He was the consummate professional. But, he did have a reputation. As a ladies man, I mean."

*And boy, did he ever live up to that reputation.* "What are you asking exactly Ben? Did James cheat on me? Yes, he did. At least twice that I know of, or I mean, probably multiple times, but with two different women. Right after we got married there was some floozy from the record label and then a couple of years later, when he was on tour with Amber Leigh, the singer."

"Who?"

"Exactly. She was this little pop chick who wanted to sleep her way to the top. And James was certainly at the top." Once Jill found out about the relationship, she had forced James to fire Leigh as his opening act on his mega successful *Guessing at Normal* tour. The last thing Jill had heard was that Amber was appearing at malls and at the openings of car dealerships in her native North Carolina, but that was years ago. She shook her head to get rid of the painful image of James and Amber onstage together. Another painful memory that was so clear, like it was yesterday.

Ben's voice was tender as he pulled her close to him and murmured in her ear. "How did you learn to trust him again?"

*Trust?* "I never actually did. I mean, James loved me, okay? And he was a great father and a good husband, too. But he drank and did drugs and sometimes, he forgot to come home."



“That sucks. Who wouldn’t want to come home to you? I know I do. Seeing you is the best part of my day. “ He watched her closely as he asked, “So... do you trust me?”

“Umm, yeah, I guess. I mean, we’re not married, Ben. We’re both free and clear. You can sleep with...”

Ben cut her off before she could finish her thought. “That’s bullshit and you know it. I haven’t so much as looked at another woman since Christmas Day.” He looked disappointed that she could have even imagined such a thing.

“I’m just saying that you could, you know? What about that girl who keeps calling you?” Ben’s phone had been ringing constantly lately, despite having his number changed twice in as many weeks. He never accepted any of the calls and Jill liked to tease him that it was his mystery girl, but Ben never seemed to find it funny. Including tonight. He remained silent as Jill continued on. “I just mean that if you met someone...”

“I told you those were just random crank calls, Jill. But, *if* I met someone that I wanted to get to know better, I would tell you. We would talk about it. But that’s never...”

Jill held up her hand to stop Ben before he went any further. “*Never* say never, Ben. You’re young and you’ve got your whole life ahead of you. You’re not going to always want me, especially...”

“Don’t you get it, Griff? I’m crazy about you. Your smile, your jokes, the way you smell and the way you taste. I can’t get enough of you.”

Jill looked at Ben in amazement. *How did I get so lucky?* Ben was a keeper, she knew that. But someday, he would want kids and not just a snarky teenager like Carly. No, he would want to have a houseful of soft cuddly babies with his brown eyes and easygoing disposition. Of course he would. And Jill was never going to be able to give him any of that. But for right now, he was all hers and life was good.

“I think we just had our first fight, Fein. What do you think of that?”

Ben pulled her into his arms and started unbuttoning her shirt. “I think I wanna find out if makeup sex is all it’s cracked up to be,” he told her with a grin, just before he started kissing her throat and working his way lower.

## Chapter 11

T- 60 days

Jill

Jill had tossed and turned for hours last night, fretting over the issue of the damned set list. This was more than just a simple decision as far as she was concerned. The fact that Ben refused to jump into the fray actually made the whole thing worse. She was certain if he would just voice a preference, everything else would fall into place. Earlier that morning, Jill had nudged him out of a sound sleep.

“You awake? Ben? Are you listening to me?”

He sighed contentedly as he stretched himself into a state of semi-consciousness. He peered at her in the semidarkness of the room. “Hmmm. What’s wrong? You okay?”

“No, I’m not. I have to talk to you.”

He pulled her next to him and patted his shoulder. “C’mon Griff. Lie down. Talk to me, huh? Whatever it is, we can work it out.”

*Yeah, right. All the talking in the world won’t make this problem go away.* Jill wanted nothing more than to snuggle against him, pull the covers over their heads and disappear. But she couldn’t. Not yet.

“It’s just that Ben, you have to choose.”

“Choose what?”

“The slot you want. Whether you want to open the show or close it. What do you want to do?” As Ben started to respond, she cut him off. “And don’t say you don’t care, okay? That’s *not* an answer. That’s a non-answer.”

“But Jill, I *don’t* care and you know it. I’m getting the chance to perform the best song ever written and have my best girl there, so yeah, I don’t care if I’m up first or last or somewhere in the middle. It’s going to be a great night and the fact that you’ll be there with me is huge.”

“But that’s just it. I won’t be *with* you. I’ll be in the front row with Carly and James’s parents and the label execs. The press will be all over it. I can’t arrive with you. I can’t watch you from backstage. You know that. We’ve talked about this.”

"I know you'll be sitting with your family and I wouldn't dream of interfering with that. But you'll be there and I'll be singing to you and that's all I care about." Ben's tone was patient, which served to frustrate Jill even more.

"But Alex is going to be playing guitar with Maroon 5 on the title track. The label wants them to open and for you to close the show. But your agent wants you to open. He's said that you'll get more viewers at the beginning of the show. With all of the speeches and guest appearances and all of the songs being performed, the concert's likely to go more than the two hours they allotted. Some of the affiliate stations may cut to the news and pre-empt the last couple of numbers. That would suck for whoever goes last. But you're the biggest name on the docket. If you went last, it would guarantee more viewers. But so many of your fans are too young to stay up that late. And it's a school night too. And now I hear that Sting wants to be part of the finale, or the encore, I guess. He skews to an older customer base, so that's a good thing."

Ben had been listening intently and when she finished, he let out a long breath. "What do *you* want?"

"Me? What do *I* want? Hell, I want world peace. I want my brother-in-law who blames me for breaking up his band a zillion years ago to not resent me anymore. It's Alex's first time on stage in years, so it's a big deal for him. I want my personal life, which is no one's fucking business, to not overshadow this once in a lifetime tribute to James. I want you to decide, so that it's not on me. No matter what I do, I'm screwed here. If I'm not the grieving widow, then I'm the heartless cougar bitch. If Alex gets his chance to perform again and no one sees him, did it really happen?"

"But the audience will stay through the whole performance. And the album won't be impacted. That'll be wrapped up this summer. A few million less eyeballs on network TV won't make a difference at the end of the day. iTunes will probably crash with all the download traffic."

He was right and Jill knew it. It was ultimately the label's decision, but they wanted to get her to do the dirty work. After falling back to sleep in Ben's arms, she had woken up with a headache and not the kind that a trough of black coffee would get rid of. She kept pressing her hands to her temples, which felt as if she were wearing a bathing cap that was way too tight. The conflict that had been brewing for weeks was coming to a head and like it or not, Jill was right in the middle of it. A meeting had been scheduled for 11am at the Topflite offices in midtown and the proverbial shit was about to hit the fan.

The label was trying to spin the whole thing and put the focus on the fact that millions of dollars would be raised for a good cause. It was an effort to maintain some good buzz about the concert going into the long hot summer months when nobody actually cared who was going to headline a concert in September.

But that freaking Simon Sez had been having a field day in his column for days now, fabricating even more drama about the concert. When he ran out of Ben/Jill updates, he started on the other performers. Apparently Beyonce wanted Jay Z to join her on stage, but his label was resisting, as he had not been asked officially. Ed Sheeran reportedly had his nose out of joint after negotiations with Taylor Swift had broken down. If his gal pal wasn't going to perform, then should he hold out as well? Luke Bryant reportedly wanted to perform *Jericho Road*, but the song title was named specifically in Ben's contract, regardless of when he appeared. Nick Jonas and Justin Bieber both wanted to do the same song, but neither wanted to go immediately after Ben, assuming he opened the show.

There had been a groundswell of enthusiasm for the tribute concert a couple of months back when it was first announced. Michael Stipe had confided that the recently reunited R.E.M. was going to go back into the studio to work on their song for the concert. Several of the performers like Justin Timberlake and Bruno Mars had been on the late night talk show circuit last month. But that was then and this was now and the news that the hottest young pop music sensation in the world was boffing the widow of the dead guy was, well, newsworthy. It was the hook that Starlite Entertainment had been waiting for and despite their protests that they had no comment about unsubstantiated reports of sightings of the couple, Jill was pretty certain that they were more than happy to sit back and watch the whole story unfold, provided the news about the concert was factored in.

There had already been a great deal of infighting about who was going to be the headliner and close the show. The announcement that Ben was signing on, followed closely by the news that he was having sex with the widow, just added fuel to the fire. A few of the other performers seemed convinced that Ben would be given preferential treatment or a bigger dressing room, more rehearsal time or whatever. Others had added to their initial list of demands, possibly in an effort to measure their own worth to the project. First class accommodations and travel were pretty standard, but one performer clearly past his prime had requested 24 hour access to a masseuse and another wanted not just one, but two staffers to walk her teacup-sized Shitzu. Apparently the little canine was a bit of a diva as well, and didn't like to have to stop walking while her poop was bagged.

Ben had laughed when he heard about the dog. He was shocked at some of his colleagues' requests that Jill had shared with him over breakfast that morning and swore he couldn't even begin to imagine making demands like that. He was extremely low maintenance, as his entire list consisted of a fridge stocked with spring water and herbal iced teas and a stack of white hand towels. While she chugged down half a pot of freshly brewed Columbian roast, Ben had nursed a mug of tea. The two of them had eaten wholegrain toast with honey and a bowl of blackberries, feeding each other, just like a couple who were madly in love.

"You should ask for something crazy, like having a vegan chef on call or a crystal bowl of only orange M & M's."

“Why would I want all that, Griff? That’s just nuts.”

Jill shook her head. Ben had no idea just how big a name he was or how far the label execs would go to keep him happy. “Hey, I have an idea. How about you get them to reunite all you guys from Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez? Or they could arrange a backstage reunion of your fan club from the old days?”

Ben stared at her. She had never seen that particular look: pissed off and maybe even scared?

“Babe, I’m just kidding.”

Ben’s face relaxed, but his eyes still had a haunted look. “I know, it’s okay. It just gets old, you know? All those calls coming in at all hours of the day. And the damn emails...” His voice trailed off as he saw Jill staring at him.

“What emails?” *What the hell is going on?*

It was clearly a subject that Ben did not want to be grilled on and Jill figured he would talk about it when he was good and ready. He continued to clam up, so she quickly changed the topic to the current set list crisis and Ben seemed relieved to get back to the business at hand.

For the past week or so, the musicians who had signed on were reportedly going back to their studios intent on fine-tuning their own interpretation of the iconic Jamie Sheridan hit they had been assigned. The concert was going live and would air on network television pre-empting that night’s lineup of new fall programs and sales and download estimates were well into the millions. None of the performers needed the money and they all were donating their time, but it was about something bigger, more important than money. It was all about ego!

Regardless of their genre, those slated to appear at the concert represented the biggest names in the music industry. Justin Timberlake was being pretty cool, or at least that’s what Jill had been told. He’d had a great deal of success with *Dance with Me*, and was reported to not give a damn as to where he appeared on the concert’s playlist, as long as he was able to perform that particular song. A couple of the younger acts were threatening to drop out if they had to appear directly following Bruno Mars, whose high energy performances were quite literally, a hard act to follow. Everyone else was jockeying for position; everyone that is, *except* Ben Fein.

After they finished their breakfast and Ben had kissed Jill so thoroughly that she considered dragging him back to bed with her, he got ready to leave for the gym. Grabbing his jacket, he reached into the pocket.

“Hey, I almost forgot. Ian got you a new phone. Now we can be twins,” he said with a grin, and placed a sleek new phone in front of her. “It’s just like mine.”

“Why is your assistant getting me a new phone?”

“No clue. But he said it would be more secure. Whatever. He’s kind of a geek that way.”

“Well, it is pretty sexy looking and my damn battery barely holds a charge anymore, so... Tell him thank you, okay?”

“Will do. And as far as your meeting today? Don’t let it get to you, Griff. It’ll sort itself out, you’ll see.” He grabbed an apple from the ceramic bowl on the counter and blew her a kiss as he left.

Jill was not so sure, and while the caffeine had helped considerably, her head was still throbbing as she watched him go. She was checking out her new phone, when she received a call. It was Ron, James’s former manager and longtime friend.

“Hey Ron. What’s up?”

“Sweetie, we need to talk.”

“About?”

“You know I love you, Jilly. I want you to be happy, I really do. It’s just that, to be honest, this is the worst kind of publicity for the label. Normally, any kind of mentions in the press would be welcomed, get everyone all primed to watch. But you and Ben, well, it’s got to be handled delicately, you know?”

Jill *did* know, but she didn’t want to play scapegoat to the label or roll over and play dead either. She wished everyone would make up their freaking minds. They loved the headlines, but wanted her to lay low at the same time. *This is nuts!*

“I know all this, Ron. What am I supposed to do exactly?”

“It’s just that if *you* could forget James, then why shouldn’t his fans?”

Oh. Hell. No!

“You did NOT just say that to me, Ron. You did not just accuse me of forgetting James.” *Just who the hell does he think he is?* Ron was an old friend, but he had crossed a line. A great big one.

“Jill. Jilly, sweetheart. I know you loved James. I know you could never forget him. Yours was a love story for the ages. I’m just saying that’s what his fans might think. It’s public perception that we have to worry about.”

“So what are you telling me? Do you expect me to break it off with Ben? Or come out and support him as the opener, Alex be damned? Christ, just tell me what you want. This is getting ridiculous.”

Ron’s tone was hurt as he responded. “Jill, this is me, Ron, your friend. I don’t care what the label wants. I only have James’s best interests at heart. And yours too. The estate. James’s legacy. That’s all that matters to me. It hurts me to think...”

“Ron!!! Give me a break, okay? Trust me, the last thing I wanted was for the news to leak about Ben and me. Maybe I was being naive or just plain dumb, but I hoped to keep it on the down low for a couple more months. Hold off telling our families and keep it out of the press. If you want to be mad at someone, what about that goddamn Simon? He’s the one you should be mad at.”

“I’m not mad. I’m disappointed. Okay, and maybe a little bit mad too. It’s just rotten timing is all. It was good at first.... To get everyone talking, but you can’t let it take over. We have to keep the focus on the concert. Maybe you could try to minimize the relationship, huh? Just downplay it, you know? Stay out of the tabloids, kid. When it’s over, you can do whatever makes you happy. Whatever you want. But until then, focus on the concert, the fact that Mike and um, Kathy will be there. And Alex! Can’t forget your old pal Alex, ha ha.”

*As if I could ever forget Alex.* Her former nemesis was arriving in a couple of days and now planned to stay for a week or more. Jill found herself agreeing to Ron’s suggestion that she and Ben go back to keeping a low profile. She told him she would see him in about an hour and she rushed off to hop in the shower. She would be relieved to no longer be the news du jour. Hopefully, the set list issue would be resolved at today’s meeting, but if her conversation with Ron was any indication, she seriously doubted it. She needed to clear her head and fix this and soon. Alex already had enough to be pissed at her about. At least as far as Alex was concerned.

## Chapter 12

T- 57 days

Jill

"I'm just saying it looks different somehow, that's all. Bigger, I guess." Alex was wandering around the house, having just arrived following a cab ride from the airport. Jill had offered to send a car to pick him up, but he had turned her down, saying he didn't want to inconvenience anyone.

Jill wondered again if a hotel would have been a better option after all. But she told herself that it was only for a few days, one week max, and that Alex was family. He had not visited New York since James's funeral more than two years prior, but he seemed convinced that she had somehow magically enlarged the living space since then.

"You're just not used to being here without James," she responded, only half joking. "He sure knew how to fill up a room, huh?"

Alex winced in response, but rallied quickly. "I hear that someone new is taking my brother's place these days. But from what I can tell, he doesn't seem to take up as much, um, room."

*Wow.* He hadn't even been here for five minutes and not only had the subject of Ben already come up, Alex had managed to squeeze in a short guy joke as well. That had to be a record, even for Alex, who had a tendency to cut right through to the heart of whatever issue was being discussed. He had none of his late brother's finesse or tact, Jill realized, not for the first time. She decided to be equally direct in her response.

"Nobody could ever take James's place, Alex. You know that as well as anyone. But yes, I'm seeing Ben. Quite a bit of him, if you want the truth. James is gone, Alex. I've had to get used to that fact, for myself, as well as for your niece. She's fine, by the way, in case you were wondering. She's looking forward to seeing you at dinner tonight." A dinner, which Jill was now considering skipping. Or at least telling Ben that the plans had changed. She wouldn't put him in the middle of all this. And if this was the way the entire visit was going to go, perhaps a hotel reservation *was* in order.

Alex's tone was conciliatory when he responded. "I was just kidding around, Jill. God, have you always been this sensitive? It's great that you're dating again. I'm looking forward to meeting Ben. And I'm well aware that Carly is gonna be here



soon. She and I have been texting each other all day. We're planning on the Indian place near here that she likes. You're going to join us, right?"

"Yeah, sure. I guess so. But wait, you're into texting these days? I didn't even know you had a cellphone." Alex's disdain for virtually all of the modern conveniences that most took for granted was legendary. His only communications with her on the current travel arrangements were a couple of quick emails sent from his son Ryder's account.

Alex chuckled as he stroked his scraggly beard. "Oh yeah, that. It just seemed like the right time you know? It's one of those trac phones and I only use it for emergencies or to work out a dinner date with lovely young women."

He grinned at her and, for a split second, he reminded Jill of her late husband with those sparkling blue eyes. She had to hold back the sob welling up in her throat, as she crossed over to where he stood and threw her arms around him.

"It's good to see you Alex. I just this moment realized how much I've missed you."

Alex returned the hug, and then patted the top of Jill's head as if she were a small child or a family pet. "We're family, Jilly, never forget that. It's weirding me out, being here without James, I gotta tell you. Being anywhere in this whole city is tough, if I'm honest. But this concert, this charity you're starting up? Man, it's unreal. I'm so proud of you, honoring my brother like that." He hugged Jill again, before letting her go.

"You know that you can always count on me, right?" At Jill's tearful nod, he smiled. "Okay, but hey, nature calls. I'll go drop my stuff and hit the head. Where are you stashing me this week?"

Jill wiped her eyes and shook her head good-naturedly. Despite the fact that her home was large, there was still only one guestroom with an attached bath. The same one that Alex had stayed in both before and after the funeral. They climbed the stairs together and Jill pointed it out to him, right before she headed down the hall to her own bathroom.

*Alex is proud of me.* She was surprised at how much his opinion of her mattered. Maybe this was the start of a whole new relationship for the two of them. She certainly hoped so.

She splashed cold water on her face as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Even under the unforgiving fluorescent lighting, she swore she could pass for 30, okay mid-thirties. That was the downside to dating a much younger man. With her short stature and slight build, she had always appeared younger than her years, but sun worshipping and a Southern California lifestyle had done their long-term damage to her pale skin. The sprinkling of freckles that had always appeared along

the bridge of her nose was starting to multiply. With her forefingers, she pulled back the skin on the outside corners of her eyes. The crow's feet just starting to make their appearance all but disappeared and she smiled in agreement. She knew that if she were ever going to get some work done, this was the time to do it. Plenty of opportunity to recuperate before the concert and she could hide behind the oversized sunglasses she favored until then. She decided to book an appointment as soon as Alex was safely back in Nashville. The last thing in the world that she needed was his teasing.

Of course, Carly, the uber-feminist, would bristle at the idea of her mother going under the knife for an elective vanity-induced procedure and would probably blame the presence of young Ben for her mother's decision. But for Jill, it was more about the TV cameras and the live audience. She was hardly going to appear in front of tens of millions of James's fans with freckles the size of saucers. This was her decision to make and it was a good one. Her reverie was broken by the sounds of Alex calling out to her from downstairs. To be continued, she advised her reflection in the mirror and rushed down the stairs to find him.

"Hey Jill, you mind if I take a break?" he asked, waving a tightly rolled joint in her general direction. "Are you gonna make me take this outside?"

"Yes! Go out on the patio, would you? I can't let you smoke in here." *The lingering smell of weed on all of my nice furniture and carpets? No way!* Even James had not had smoking privileges inside their home. "And bring in the butt, okay? Don't just toss it out there. "

Alex grinned at her as he crossed the room towards the door leading to the patio. "It's called a roach, darlin', just in case you've forgotten." Seconds later, he stuck his head back in. "Wanna join me?"

*Get high? In the middle of the afternoon?* Just for a little while, forget the stresses caused by the still unresolved scheduling conflict, the arrival of her brother in law and the inevitability that the evening's dinner would get uncomfortable for poor Ben. *Hmmm.* Well maybe a bit of a contact high couldn't hurt, she decided. Alex had traveled all day just to get here. The very least she could do, would be to sit out there on the patio and keep him company for a few minutes.

## Chapter 13

T- 56 days

Jill

“It was unreal, Beth. I wish you could have been there. We had such a good time last night. Everyone just got along, you know?”

“So Carly and Alex were on their best behavior, I take it.” Even on the phone, Jill could detect a whiff of skepticism.

“No, it wasn’t like that. It was relaxed and enjoyable. Everyone was just themselves, just better somehow.”

Beth had witnessed countless times just how stubborn and argumentative both Carly and Alex could be. “Well kudos to you, and Ben too. I hope he knows that he dodged a real bullet last night.”

*And he had.* The whole evening had gone smoothly, right from the start. Ben had offered to meet them at the restaurant, and from the moment he approached them in the doorway, Jill had been able to exhale a slow, deep breath.

Mellowed out after a couple of late afternoon joints, Alex had been on his best behavior. He was friendly and warm and never once gave the impression that he would choose to be anywhere else but in a crowded Indian restaurant with his niece and his sister-in-law and her new boyfriend. Too often the unwilling target of Alex’s sharp wit and even sharper tongue, Jill knew full well just how hostile he could be when he was feeling threatened. But this had been a gentler, kinder Alex. Ben always seemed to have that impact on people. He was so relaxed and so genuine. For a change, Ben wasn’t hounded by a horde of teenaged girls begging for photos or autographs last night. The service had been impeccable and the food as delicious as ever.

Carly was both gracious and engaging, despite her disappointment over Em having to beg off at the last minute, due to a family obligation of her own. She had everyone laughing as she imitated a recent visitor to the art gallery where she interned. He was trying to demonstrate his knowledge of the current exhibit in order to impress his date, a much younger woman.

“He couldn’t even get the gender of the artist correct. He kept saying ‘he’ and ‘him’, but Brennan McIntire is a woman!” Carly spoke with a snooty accent. “Ah, yes. His

use of color is quite like that of a young Matisse, don't you know?" When his date looked over and saw Carly rolling her eyes, she had burst out laughing.

Ben admitted to knowing next to nothing about art, and Alex did as well. Both were eager to share stories from years of touring, many of which Jill had never heard. James's name had figured prominently in Alex's stories, but somehow, it was not in the least bit awkward. Jill realized with relief that everyone was moving on. She had wondered how Ben would have gotten along with James if the two had ever met. Under totally different circumstances, of course.

The only thing she remembered from a few years back when Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez was at the top of the charts and Carly, a hysterical fan, was one comment James had made. "That one," he'd announced, pointing a finger at Ben's handsome face staring back from Carly's wall. "That one can really sing."

*Have I told Ben what James had said about him?* She knew that he would be thrilled.

Halfway through the evening, Jill had leaned over and grabbed Ben's hand. He smiled at her and squeezed back. It was one of those perfect moments watching the people she loved most in the world, passing around a platter of piping-hot naan and dipping their samosas into a bowl of spicy green curry. If only Ted was with them. And Marnie and Beth. Mike and Kathy too. That's when she decided that the upcoming concert would be the perfect opportunity to bring everyone together. She would reserve a huge space, somewhere cool and trendy, and the food would be wonderful and the drinks would flow and everyone she loved most in the world would be together and celebrating a successful concert and the millions it had raised for charity.

She would not let the ridiculous egos and petty behavior of a bunch of over the hill recording executives, and musicians that should be grateful that they were performing at such a prestigious event, spoil these next several weeks for her. This was James's legacy after all, and everyone would need to get on board and fast.

Jill repeated that last thought to Beth, who enthusiastically agreed with her.

"I can't wait for the concert. Is Sting really going to perform?"

Jill assured her that he would and Beth squealed with joy. Jill had been planning on sharing something else with Beth that morning, but decided to hold off. She hated to spoil the mood, by bringing up what were probably just a few random coincidences. She had been getting more hang ups than usual and had received a couple of emails with links to websites that featured videos of couples into some really kinky sex. *It's probably nothing. Relax. Maybe I should go smoke some of Alex's pot and chill out.*

## Chapter 14

T- 54 days

Ben

Alex assured him that he was a quick study, but Ben was not convinced. Try as he might, his relatively short and stubby fingers couldn't seem to play the chords correctly. Alex made mastering the guitar look so easy.

"Just keep practicing, man. It's just like anything else. You gotta keep at it. So any songs you want to learn?"

"Well, yeah. Jill loves this one... In the video, there's two guys..."

Alex shook his head. "You just narrowed it down to about a million songs, man."

"It's from the early 90's."

"Before your time, Einstein."

"Not you, too! Jill is always on me. She swears everything I know about music is all post-Bluetooth."

"Well, Jill sure knows her music. Especially the 80's and 90's."

"I'm gonna text her. This is driving me crazy."

"Hey Griff. What's that song you like with two guys we saw on You Tube?"

"That's random. *More than Words*"

"Artist?"

"Extreme"

"Hmmm. British?"

"American"

Alex motioned to Ben. "Ask her the year..."

"What year?"

“Seriously? 1990. Anything else or can I go ahead and pay for my groceries?”

“All good. Thanks, Griff. See you soon. XO”

“So Alex, do you know *More Than Words*?”

“Sure. Great tune. We met the guys from Extreme once. James and me. They were in the same studio and we hung out for a while.” He started singing the chorus, “Hold me close, don’t ev-ah let me go...”

Ben watched Alex as he sang. He had been a big fan of James when he was younger, but had never seen Alex perform. “Cool. I can’t thank you enough. Having you as my teacher is like a dream come true.”

Alex smiled at him as he put his guitar down and stretched. “Yeah, this whole thing has been surreal for me, too. Being back in the studio, playing again after all these years. I thought I was through with it all, but here I am. Livin’ the dream.”

“Do you miss it? The tours, playing to packed houses?”

Alex chuckled at that. “You wanna know what I miss? The early days, when we didn’t have a pot to piss in, just touring around in our broke-ass van, playing for people we could actually see from the stage. Talk to after the show. When we started Nomad, that was my dream. I never cared about the fame.” He said the word ‘fame’ as if it was something truly reprehensible. “But my brother? He was the ambitious one. He always wanted more. I was happy with what we had accomplished, but not James. No sir.” His eyes had a faraway cast to them, but he was smiling. “We were identical twins, but really, we were so different.”

“You’re lucky. I never had a brother *or* a sister. Growing up, it was just me. My parents had always wanted a big family, but it just didn’t turn out that way.

“How about you? You want the whole thing, the house, the kids?”

“I’m not sure. I had a girlfriend in college and a couple times we would talk about getting married. But I was on the road too much. I don’t know. I can’t see it, not right now at least. The kids, I mean.

“What does Jill have to say on the subject?”

“It hasn’t come up. Anyway, she’s not ready for a real commitment. Not now. Not with me.”

Alex studied Ben closely. “Don’t be too sure about that. I’ve known Jill more than half her life and I can tell when she’s really into someone. She watches you sometimes

and gets this look. Like she's won the lottery or cured cancer or something. Don't give up on her just yet."

"I won't. I can't. I love her. She's the most amazing woman..." Ben stopped himself, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"You don't have to convince me. Don't get me wrong. She was married to my brother and I love Melissa. But at one point, I would have given it all up just to be with Jill." Now it was Alex's turn to feel self-conscious. "You're a lucky man, Fein."

"Yeah, I am."

The y sat quietly for a few moments. Alex was the first to break the silence.

"While we're tossing around accolades, you got to admit in addition to being one incredible woman, she's also a terrific mom."

"Yeah, she's great with Carly. The two of them are so close."

"You don't know the half of it. She practically raised that kid all by herself. I mean, James loved his daughter and all that, but Jill was the one who made it work. She had to put up with all of my brother's crap, his touring, his um, issues. It wasn't easy for her, but she raised a smart, feisty young woman. She never complained when they had to move here to New York and leave their whole life behind in California. And now, with the concert and raising money for charity, and she's got her own career to boot. I never would have guessed that the mousy little girl who mooned over my brother and wrote in that damned journal of hers would ever become a Grammy winning songwriter." Alex shook his head. "Go figure."

"How about a tall, long-haired hippie guitarist so talented that there's not a musician in the world who wouldn't want to record with him?"

"Or a short, Jewish kid from Brooklyn..."

"The Bronx," Ben corrected him.

"My bad. A short, Jewish kid from the Bronx, who goes from being a teeny-bopper poster boy to a damn fine singer and performer?"

"Yeah, no way any of that could actually happen," Ben said solemnly, right before both men started laughing.

"What's so funny, you two?" Jill entered the room and walked over to where the guys were sitting. Ben wasn't positive, but from the tears in her eyes and the smile on her face, he figured that she had heard at least part of their conversation.

“My efforts at playing guitar, Griff. C’mon. Join us and hear for yourself. Guaranteed to make you laugh.”



## Chapter 15

T- 49 days

Jill

Jill and her brother Ted were standing spellbound in the doorway of Ted's beachfront mansion. But it wasn't the impressive views of the Atlantic that had their total attention. They were watching a different scene play out less than fifty 50 feet in front of them. Ted's wife Marnie was having an animated discussion with none other than Ben Fein.

"I haven't seen her this happy since, Christ, I have no idea how long it's been," Ted told Jill with wonder in his voice. "It's just so good to see her like this."

Jill had witnessed the calming effect that Ben seemed to have on just about everybody, with the exception of his young, screaming fans, who he drove to near hysteria when he appeared on stage. But even Jill was surprised to see just how much he had drawn her sister-in-law out this weekend. Jill and Ben had decided on the spur of the moment to get out of Manhattan for a couple of days, and after a quick phone call to Ted, had rented a red convertible and driven to Montauk. Jill had wanted to introduce Ben to these two, among the most important people in her life for ages and had hoped that they would welcome Ben with open arms. Despite Ted's constant teasing, she knew he loved her unconditionally and she had been crossing her fingers that her boyfriend would be made to feel welcome in their home.

Marnie had been undergoing treatment for depression and anorexia for a few weeks at this point and Jill was thrilled to see that her whisper-thin friend had possibly put on a few pounds since Jill had seen her last. She still wore the baggy sweatpants and T-shirts she had been favoring for the past year or so, but over the last two days, Jill had seen a change in Marnie's appearance. She was showering regularly again, had pulled her long brown hair up into a high ponytail and appeared to be wearing makeup as well. The deep circles under her eyes were not as pronounced and her cheeks were highlighted with a pinkish blush that brightened up her pale complexion. And she had been sitting out in the sunshine all morning, which would provide some much needed natural color to her face and bare arms.

Ted and Ben had prepared a veritable feast for brunch a couple hours earlier and everyone was glad to see that Marnie had eaten a reasonable amount of food. Now, long after most of the dishes had been cleared, she continued to sit outside, talking animatedly to Ben and nibbling on the fresh fruit platter that remained. Jill looked at

Ted with tears in his eyes, as he watched his wife pop a series of green grapes into her mouth and laugh delightedly at something Ben was saying to her.

“No offense Jilly, but do you think that you can leave your boyfriend here when you head back to the city today? He’s been, I don’t even know what, but Marnie is....” His voice broke and he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “She’s been doing better, but Ben has managed to get her laughing and talking *and* eating. What’s his secret?” Jill detected a tinge of bitterness in his voice. He must be wondering what Ben had, that he himself lacked. She tried to sound upbeat.

“He’s a pop star, silly. Years of being in a boy band have trained him well. Even Carly has fallen under his spell.”

Ted smiled as he imagined his niece who could be less than charming at times, especially around people she wasn’t crazy about.

“Well, if he’s been able to charm Carly, I guess Marnie is no challenge at all.” Until the last couple of years, Marnie had always been an upbeat woman with the ability to find the best in every situation. Ted told Jill how much he hoped that his wife was now on the mend. He gestured around the large home and the two-acre spread he had purchased several years ago.

“All I ever wanted was to make her happy, you know?” At Jill’s nod, he went on. “But, in hindsight, maybe we would have been better off staying in the city.”

“Marnie’s going to get better, Ted. I just feel it. But, I’m sorry. You can’t have Ben. I need him with me so I can stay in the headlines. You know how it goes. Rock widow and her young boy-toy,” she mocked, with her hands faking quotation marks. “Someone has to keep those rags in business.”

Ted squeezed her arm and with a final glance at his wife and Ben, saw that they were still engaged in rapt conversation and that Marnie continued to nibble fruit. With all of the green grapes devoured, she had moved on to alternating between fresh pineapple chunks and wafer thin slices of cantaloupe. With a grin, Ted motioned to Jill.

“C’mon. Let me bore you to tears with Garrett’s latest escapades.”

Jill snorted at that as she followed him down the hall to his office. “Sexcapades, you mean.”

Ted’s protagonist Garrett Sinclair was as well known for his prowess in the bedroom as he was for his meteoric rise to prominence as a crime-fighting District Attorney in the fictional city of Middlebury. Jill loved to tease her brother about how much of a stud his main character was, starting with the first book in the series,

which had hit the best seller's charts five years earlier. Now on his 4<sup>th</sup> installment, Garrett showed no signs of slowing down, not as an attorney, nor as a womanizer.

"Those who can, do, Ted. Those who can't, write about it."

"Right back at ya, Sis."

They spent a companionable hour in Ted's office talking character development and plot twists, before moving on to Jill's upcoming songwriting projects. Ari had been successfully maximizing Jill's current media presence and there was now a long waiting list of clients. Ted looked impressed as he listened to his sister list all of the performers who wanted to work with her. Marnie's condition and the quickly approaching tribute concert were both seemingly forgotten as they had their own spirited conversation.

## Chapter 16

### Ben

Later that day, Jill and Ben headed back to Manhattan. It had been a wonderful couple of days. He had finally been able to meet Ted and Jill had seen for herself just how well Marnie was doing.

“He’s great. They both are. Ted reminds me of you, Griff.”

Jill glanced over at Ben as she adjusted the mirrors and moved her seat up closer. “Me? Me and Ted?” She shook her head. “We couldn’t be more different if we tried.”

But Ben was not convinced. “You are so much alike. You’re both super creative- you with your songs and him with his books. You are two of the most loving and compassionate people I’ve ever known. You both take amazing care of the people you love. You finish each other’s sentences. You both hate crossword puzzles, you hate talking politics, you love R.E.M. more than any two people should and you’re like musical encyclopedias. You wrinkle your noses when you’re thinking and you both have this way of chewing on your lower lip that, well, it’s not quite as enticing when he does it, but you? Aaahh. Makes me crazy, Griff.”

Jill stared at him open-mouthed. “Wow, someone has given the matter quite a lot of thought.”

“And you both drink way too much black coffee and you both put ketchup on your eggs.” Ben shuddered at that. “It’s wrong, I’m telling you. It’s just not natural ...ugh.”

“And hotdogs too. I love ketchup on my hotdogs, remember?” They had purchased hotdogs from a street vendor on one of their first public outings this past spring, and he had been aghast as he watched his new girlfriend slather ketchup over her steamed foot long. At his horrified expression, Jill had grinned rather wickedly before shoving it in her mouth and with ketchup lining her lips, asked him, “See anything you like, big boy?”

He had been shocked at how he could be revolted and so completely turned on at the same time. And was turned on now as well. He watched Jill bite her lower lip as she concentrated her efforts navigating the entrance ramp of the Expressway. In profile, he could see her pert nose and her upturned mouth with those luscious lips, and the image made him shift uncomfortably in his seat. He needed to turn the

conversation around or he would be looking to have Jill pull off at the very first exit, find a hotel room and....

“See anything you like?” she asked him with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

He groaned to himself and shut his eyes. It was going to be a long drive and he would have to let her concentrate on the driving. But later on... He smiled at the images popping up in his brain. Once they were finally alone, he would get her to concentrate on him.

Despite Jill’s worries, the mid-afternoon traffic was not nearly as bad as she had been anticipating and she seemed relieved. She had confessed that it had been years since she drove with any sort of regularity and the thought of bumper-to-bumper traffic and all those bridges had her on edge. Since moving to New York six years earlier, Jill could count on both hands the actual number of times she had been behind the wheel. She let out a long sigh and rotated her neck to get rid of the tension that had been building up.

“You doing okay, Griff?” He reached over and grasped her hand for a second. His touch seemed to relax her and she shifted her attention from the road and glanced quickly over at him.

“I’m fine. Just happy that the traffic isn’t too heavy. I had visions of total gridlock, what with everyone at the end of their weekend.” She shrugged somewhat apologetically and Ben grinned at her.

“You’re doing great. I love watching you with the wind blowing and your hair flying all around. Top down and your sunglasses on. Just like that Eagles song.”

“Don Henley.”

“Hmmm, what?”

“It’s Don Henley. *Boys of Summer*. You said The Eagles.”

“Oh yeah, sure. Don Henley. What a voice, huh?” He started humming the song absently. Leaning back with a grin on his face, he started to sing. “I can see you....”

“Maybe I should let you drive. You like to drive, don’t you?”

Ben shifted in his seat before he responded. “Well actually....no. I mean I like to drive. Or I imagine I would. But I haven’t ever um, actually driven.”

Jill seemed surprised to hear that and told him so.

He shrugged noncommittally. "I'm a city kid. My parents didn't own a car. We took public transit everywhere. I came close in college. My girl, um, Allie and I were talking about driving cross-country the summer we graduated. I was planning on taking the test, but then, as you know, our plans changed. With the band and touring, I just never got around to it." He turned to face Jill who was watching him between focusing on the traffic, which had gotten heavier the closer they got to the city. "Maybe you could teach me," he added with a mischievous grin.

"Hot for teacher, huh? Yeah, no," Jill responded flatly. "I tried teaching Carly a few years ago and well, let's just say that she's still not driving and swears that she never will." Jill shuddered as she shared how she had stomped her foot on the imaginary brake from the passenger's seat, as her daughter careened around the parking lot at an Ikea store in North Jersey. The drive home with Jill behind the wheel had been a silent one, a welcome relief from the screaming and crying from a few minutes earlier.

After leaving the car in front of their house to be picked up by the rental company, Jill had stormed inside, following closely behind her daughter. Carly had fled up the stairs to her room, after tearfully begging her surprised father, "Don't make me go out with HER again Daddy. EVER!!" When James turned to Jill, she glared at him. "Don't ask!" she shouted, before retreating to the bedroom they shared and slamming the door. The driving lesson, which had been James's idea, was an epic fail.

"As far as I know, Carly hasn't not been behind the wheel of a moving vehicle since."

Ben sat back in his seat, pulled on his baseball cap and adjusted his dark sunglasses. He was already going into incognito mode, as they exited the Expressway and started driving south on the congested surface streets. Slouched in his seat, wearing his everyday garb consisting of a hoodie, faded cargo shorts and Teva sandals, with sunglasses camouflaging his brown eyes and the cap temporarily taming his tousled brown hair, he could be just about anybody.

But he knew he was the luckiest guy in the world as he gazed over at Jill. Life was perfect.

## Chapter 17

### T-48 days

#### Jill

Things were starting to settle down, at least as much as could be expected in the music industry. The upcoming tribute concert continued to be in the news, but the Jill/Ben angle was no longer the top story, since it was now rumored that the reigning pop princess was not only bi-sexual, she was also heading to rehab. Jill cringed every time she saw a version of the original headline **Bye Bi Tracie!** She felt badly for the young girl, who was barely older than Carly. The label already had a backup act in case Tracie was unable to perform in September, so at least that was not another issue piled on Jill's shoulders. She felt herself starting to relax a bit more each day.

Marnie had entered a rehab facility earlier in the week and Ted sounded very encouraged whenever Jill called him every day or two. She and Ben ventured out more freely these days and they walked the streets, which were a lot less congested with so many of the locals away on vacation. They explored the various neighborhoods of Manhattan, discovered a number of independent coffee shops and whiled away many afternoons in Central Park. It was so relaxing sitting on a park bench, strolling around, or one memorable afternoon when they stretched out on a grassy hill and Ben fell asleep with his head in Jill's lap. Stroking his hair, Jill felt a level of peaceful contentment she hadn't experienced since Carly was a little girl. Not that she felt in the least bit maternal towards Ben, but as she watched him sleep, she was able to match his deep slow breaths with her own and almost fell asleep herself. Jill had always been rather high-strung, but hanging out with Ben brought out a relaxed side of her that everyone in her life seemed to notice.

Growing up in a crumbling mill town, Jill had never imagined living anywhere as exciting as New York. But after several years here, it was now her home. It was crowded and noisy, but she could not imagine living anywhere else.

There was much to feel grateful for these days. She had stopped getting emails with links to porn, but the random phone calls continued, always from an unknown caller. Jill had learned to ignore them. Professionally, she was on a roll, following a dry spell from a couple of years ago. After the two songs she had written for Ben went to the top of the charts last year, her agent Ari complained she needed to hire another assistant just to keep up with the demands for Jill's time and talents. One of the songs she had written for a country artist was being considered for a movie

soundtrack. If it made it to the big screen, that particular royalty stream could be her most largest yet.

She spent a couple of hours writing each day, and had put aside her Mac Book, in favor of a journal, similar to one she had used years earlier. After she had heard Alex mention her old habit of keeping a journal last week, she decided to dig one out. She was thrilled at how relaxed she felt as she scribbled and doodled away, often sitting near Ben.

Most importantly, her relationship with Carly had never been better. Always close, the two of them had hit some rough patches during the last several years. Carly was headstrong and tended towards the dramatic. She wore her heart on her sleeve and had an air of vulnerability that belied her tall stature and outgoing personality. Her mother was the person closest to her, and was frequently the target of her teenaged angst.

Losing her dad so suddenly had devastated Carly, but she had tried to be the strong one for her mom. She, too, was in a good place this summer, and her freshman year at Columbia had exceeded her expectations in every way. She loved her classes and truly thrived in her new environment and then, of course, there was Emily. Emily Thorne was a lovely girl. Petite, with long blonde hair and huge brown eyes, light and breezy, she was a perfect foil for Carly who frequently wore the cloak of darkness she had inherited from her moody and mercurial father. Em was an only child, raised in Greenwich, on the Gold Coast of Connecticut.

Jill hadn't met Em's parents yet, but from what she could gather, they were less than thrilled when their daughter had come home one weekend last fall, and announced she was in love with her classmate, a girl named Carly. Her mother in particular had struggled with the news her daughter was gay. Em told Carly that her exact words were: "But you can't be gay, you were a cheerleader." But she was eighteen, stubborn and clearly in love, so after much maneuvering, tears and begging, Carly had been invited along on the family's Caribbean cruise over Christmas.

It had gone well overall, but the Thornes chose to spend most of their time apart and Carly came home after a week in their company and admitted to her mom that she had barely exchanged more than a few words with either of Elm's parents. Priscilla (call me Pris) Thorne slept in every morning and enjoyed a host of treatments every afternoon in the spa. She joined the family for dinner each night, but spent most of the time socializing with other women who were sitting at tables nearby. Carly had reported to her mother, that Phillip Thorne was a rather formidable man, who spent most of his time on the phone or working on his laptop.

Her second time meeting the Thornes had come a few months later. She had taken the train with Em to Connecticut, back in April. It was the Thrones' annual Easter egg hunt for all the neighborhood kids who lived in their gated community. It was always held the day before Easter, because according to Pris, "The Catholics have



Good Friday and of course, Easter Sunday, so there's nothing going on Saturday. It's just kind of an in-between day."

Although Em had admitted to Carly that she while wished her parents did something for kids *outside* their gates, like in Bridgeport for example, she was thrilled to share the tradition with her girlfriend. Carly had won over Em's father Phil, when her speed and manual dexterity at filling the required hundreds of plastic eggs, allowed Phil to have a couple more hours out on the links. Relieved at being freed from the assembly line Pris had set up in their spacious dining room the afternoon prior to the event, Phil was especially friendly to Carly that night at dinner. Carly had thoroughly enjoyed her visit, as well as the opportunity to explore the stately home and accompanying grounds where Em had grown up.

In addition to being in the throes of a relatively new romance, Carly loved her internship at the art gallery down in Soho. Most days she just made coffee and handled the phones, but new exhibits were frequently scheduled and she had the opportunity to help with guest lists and the refreshments. She was a born multi-tasker with her late father's ability to charm even the most obstinate artists or dawdling caterers. "Ask Carly" became the rallying cry heard around the gallery.

As far as the other occupant currently staying at Chez Sheridan, Jill had to admit the first week of Alex's visit had gone spectacularly well. It had been years since he had been in a studio and every night, he came home enthusiastic about the caliber of musicians he was getting to work with. He had taken over the guestroom and, despite the best efforts of Molly, the cleaning woman who came by twice a week, it quickly grew to be the rumpled lair of the bachelor he had been before Melissa had gotten him to clean up his act. Although he grumbled good-naturedly about having to take his smoke breaks out on the patio, overall he was easy to have around. His 'early to bed, early to rise' lifestyle after years spent on his farm, meant a couple of days could go by without Jill even laying eyes on her brother-in-law. She took to leaving him notes on the large whiteboard posted on a wall in the kitchen.

A-  
Doing okay? Dinner tonite with Ben & the girls?  
Steakhouse? Ha Ha.  
xoxo  
Jill-

J-  
You are what you eat. Indian Palace or Thai Garden?  
Be there or be square.  
Alex

Alex never said no to an opportunity for a family dinner, as he liked to call them and Jill enjoyed being on such good terms with him. She was glad they could put the past behind them and be friends again, although they had never actually *been* friends.

She had overheard him telling Ben just how much he thought of her, and that had made her really happy. She realized she would miss the tall, lanky musician when he returned home to Nashville tomorrow. But he would be back in September for the concert and had already claimed the guest room for him and Melissa. He assured Jill that Ryder would be fine on the pullout sofa in the den for a few days. His son was still in high school and he and his mom would only be staying for a couple of nights.

Jill was thrilled that Alex seemed to enjoy Ben's company. One night after Alex produced a couple of guitars, the two of them huddled close together in the den, with Alex teaching Ben to play *Proud Mary*. Ben seemed to pick it up quickly and soon the two of them were strumming away and singing. Jill got all choked up as she watched them, Ben's head of messy brown hair just inches away from Alex's with his straggly grey ponytail. The only other musician she had ever seen playing with Alex like that had been James. She managed to hold back her tears and started to join in on the chorus when Carly had come strolling in. She had already looked upset, but when she saw her uncle teaching Ben on one of James's old guitars, she'd really lost it.

"Are you kidding me? That's my Dad's. Get your own guitar, Junior." She started to cross the room, ostensibly to rip the guitar Ben was playing away from him. Jill was mortified at Carly's outburst. Ben calmly put down the guitar and started to apologize for offending Carly, when Alex spoke up. Jill couldn't remember the last time she had seen him so angry.

"Your dad has a dozen of these in storage, Carly. He would want someone to play them. And I don't want to ever hear you talk so disrespectfully to your mother or to Ben. He's a welcome guest in this house. You had better watch yourself, young lady."

Carly had stormed off to her room, and after a short pause Jill followed her. She entered her daughter's room without knocking, and found Carly lying face down on her bed, sobbing into her pillow. Jill perched on the edge and waited. It was a couple of minutes before Carly spoke.

"I know, Mom. I'm sorry I overreacted. I just had a fight with Em and I was kind of pissed. When I saw Ben with one of Dad's guitars, I couldn't stand it. I thought I was ready for all this, but I guess this means I'm not."

Jill reached out to rub her daughter's back, just like she used to when Carly was younger. It had always been an effective way of soothing her, after a bad dream or a rough day at school. She spoke softly.

"Ben's not going to take your dad's place, sweetheart. That's not ever going to happen. But he's important to me and you can't talk to him like that again. I mean it. If you're having a hard time with something, you come to me next time. Got it?"

Carly rolled over and faced her mother. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were damp with tears. "Okay. I'll try Mom. Tell Ben I'm sorry, would you please?"

With a final pat on her daughter's back, Jill stood, and then leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Pull yourself together, then you tell him yourself, okay? Take your time, darlin'."

She left to go rejoin the guys in order to salvage the evening. She ordered takeout and they played a couple rounds of gin rummy while they waited for their food, the unpleasantness seemingly forgotten. Jill and Ben continued the game after Alex went out for a smoke break, right before he dragged himself off to bed. They were sitting at the kitchen table, totally immersed in their game when Carly emerged from her room, repentant and starving. She rummaged through the refrigerator and grabbed a container of Greek yogurt and a bowl of raspberries.

"I'm sorry Ben. I was out of line and I shouldn't have said those things. You can play anything you want. It's all good." She grinned and sniffed the air. "Did you guys get street noodles from Ping's and is there any leftover for me?" she asked sweetly.

## Chapter 18

### T-43 days

#### Ben

Jill returned from the restroom and sank gratefully into one of the plush leather armchairs strategically placed around the first-class lounge at the airport. She poked Ben playfully in the arm and he turned and smiled at her.

“Someone’s in a good mood today.” Jill was beaming at him and from his close vantage point, he could see she was actually glowing. He couldn’t remember ever seeing her look more beautiful. She was wearing skinny white jeans with strategic rips, a pair of knee-high black boots with high heels and a light pink pullover that brought out the color in her cheeks. Her hair was tousled and pulled back from her face. She was positively breathtaking. He leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips. “God, I love you Griff,” he murmured in her ear.

For once, she didn’t back away quickly. Ben could attest to the fact that Jill was an extremely passionate woman, both in and out of the bedroom and always enthusiastic when it came to sex, but he knew she was paranoid about public displays of affection. Years of interfering paparazzi and over-curious fans had caused her to eschew any signs of physical closeness in public, but chilling out in the elegant lounge over the last half hour must have convinced her no one was watching or cared about the affectionate couple in the corner.

“I love you too,” she whispered, before she pulled away from him and looked at him closely. “And why shouldn’t I be in a good mood?” she asked. “The sun is shining, the label is satisfied with the progress we’re making on the set list and I’m jetting off for a romantic weekend in a tropical paradise with my boyfriend. What’s not to love?”

“Your boyfriend, huh? Is that what I am then?” At Jill’s enthusiastic nod, he continued. “So that would make you my girlfriend, right?”

“God, you’re a genius. I love that about you,” she gushed. “Cute, talented, great in the sack and clever to boot. I *am* a lucky girl.” She continued on, trying to bring a smile back to Ben’s face. “Would you prefer *partner*? Significant other? Eww. So *not* a fan. How about lover? I am your lov-ah, am I not?”

Ben shook his head at her silliness. “Yeah, Griff. That’s us. We’re lov-ahs!”

“Ben, what’s going on? Did I say something wrong?”

Ben leaned back in his chair. "You don't usually *call* me anything, Griff. I'm 'just Ben' most of the time."

Jill looked surprised at this. "What are you talking about? Do you think I take you for granted? Cuz I don't. I know how lucky I am, how special what we have is..."

"The other morning, Beth called, when we were still in bed. We had just had the most mind-blowing sex ever and I was thinking how happy I was, how much I loved you. I had never felt closer to anyone in my entire life. But Beth called and you told her you couldn't talk and she must have asked you if there was anyone with you and you told her, "No, it's just Ben."

Jill stifled the urge to laugh, but something in his sad face must have alerted her to hold back. She tried to hug him, but he stayed stiff and unyielding. "What should I have said exactly? What would you have liked me to tell my friend, whom I am fairly certain has not had sex herself in well over a year? Oh Beth. I'm in bed here with my boyfriend Ben. Yes. Of course we're still in bed. I just lost count of how many times we....oh, girl, the guy is a stud, I am telling you. Is *that* what I should have said?"

"Of course not. It's got nothing to do with sex. It's when we're *not* in bed. That's when I don't know where I stand with you."

"This is an odd time to pitch a hissy fit, darlin'." They were heading off on a romantic getaway right before Ben's two-week concert tour on the west coast. "Um, James used to get kind of weird before heading off on tour. Do you think you might be trying to soften the impact of a long separation?"

Ben scratched his head and thought about that. It would be the first time they would really be separated. Maybe that *was* what was going on. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Ben. Sweetheart. I love you. I love being with you. I love making love with you. You're my guy. You're my boyfriend. Do you have any idea how much I'm going to miss you?"

Ben looked a little less glum, but he seemed to be searching for the right words to respond with. He was watching her intently as he spoke.

"I love you, Griff. You're it for me. I am never going to want more than what we have. Never. Please don't tell me I'm too young to know for sure," he finished with his hand up to stop her. "I want you in my life. And I always will."

Jill threw up her hands in mock surrender. "So what is it then? What do you want me to do? You've met my friends and my family. Well, at least most of my family. We've been going out in public more and more, and here we are boarding a plane together. I'm still not crazy about all the photos and mentions in the press about our

relationship and what a cougar I am, but after the concert's over, no one will care. We can be..."

"Be what exactly?"

Now Jill was starting to get annoyed. "They'll be calling the flight soon. Maybe we should just cancel our plans. What's the point of getting on a plane to fly to an island in order to be all-alone, if we aren't even getting along?"

"I'm sorry. I should have said something sooner. We've never really talk about us. Or marriage. In the future, I mean."

"I am *not* ready to get married again, Ben. I may never be. You have to know this. I'm sorry, but you can't rush me. It's not fair."

"I know and I'm not trying to rush you. But all this sneaking around. It's just not me. I want to show you off to my friends and family. I want to share a home with you. Our home. Someplace new where we can create our own memories. No more ghosts," he trailed off miserably.

Jill clearly hadn't seen that coming. "Moving from my home is *not* anything I had planned on. Honestly, the idea is terrifying to me." After she took a deep breath, she spoke slowly and deliberately. "When you get back from California, I'll go with you to visit your parents. I want to meet them. I really do. They must be amazing people to have raised such a loving son. And next time you get together with the guys from the band, I'll join you. Let's have them over, okay? We'll host a barbecue or a brunch. They can bring their girlfriends or whomever," she added with a smile. "I'm certain some of them are even older than Carly. And then? The summer is going to fly by, you'll see. Before you know it, it'll be time for the tribute concert and the after-party. Yikes, I'm exhausted just thinking about it." She leaned back in her seat, as she appeared to wait for Ben's response.

"Maybe it's just all coming to a head because of the tour. I'm going to miss you like crazy. Two weeks on the West Coast- maybe even three? I'm kind of freaking out here. I need to know who we are. What we are to each other. That we have a future."

Jill nodded vigorously and grasped his hands in hers. Ben smiled and relaxed back in his seat. He expelled a large breath.

"Thanks for that. For saying you'll meet my folks and the guys. They'll all love you. Hell, Sam will probably hit on you. I'm just warning you in advance. But, it's important to me. I'm glad you understand."

Jill squeezed his hand and visibly relaxed. Seconds later, their flight was called and she grabbed her handbag and carryon. Ben threw his arm around her and they strode off towards the gate.

But just after they settled in to their seats and buckled up, right before the attendant came over with a tray of orange juice and champagne, he leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“We still need to talk about where we’re going to live after all this settles down, Griff. To be continued.”

## Chapter 19

T -40 days

Jill

This *is* the life, Jill thought with a smile as she languished in bed early one morning. From her current vantage point, she could watch waves crashing against the perfect white sand beach. The sun was rising and it looked as if it would be another perfect day in paradise. They had been in Bermuda for just four days at this point, but Jill had already decided that

- a) Bermuda was her favorite place in the world,
- b) There was nothing overrated about taking time away from it all, and
- c) Ben was an amazing travel companion and boyfriend.

She studied his brown, tousled head as he lay peacefully sleeping next to her, only partially covered by a white sheet. Resisting the urge to curl up in his arms and spoon her naked body against his for just a moment, she watched the slow and steady rise of his chest and the slight parting of his perfectly kissable lips. There was no doubt about it- Ben was a perfect specimen of a young man. All toned, but not rippling muscles, smooth evenly tanned skin made even more so by the past several days outdoors in the perfect weather. His chest was broad, but not in a weight-lifting kind of way. He was truly perfectly formed and every inch of him was covered with the softest, smoothest skin. He was compact and perfect. And all hers. She loved absolutely everything about Benjamin Feinstein.

She had gotten so used to being in his company, that she rarely thought any more of how different he was from James. Her late husband had been tall and lanky, with pale skin covered in tattoos and dark, near black hair, which he had worn long, up until his label's forced transformation of him from grunge rocker to pop star. Through it all, James had given off a tough, potentially dangerous vibe with his glittery blue eyes and perpetual five o'clock shadow. Definitely the bad boy and that was what had drawn her to him in the first place.

But Ben? No, clearly *not* a bad boy. He was more like the boy next door, with his big brown eyes and full head of messy brown hair, that she loved to muss up even further by running her fingers through it. Sometimes, gently as they sat together reading, watching TV or listening to music and at others, frantically, when she clung to him and dug in her fingers when they made love. Making love with Ben could be either fast and furious, or slow and languid, like they had all the time in the



world. Aaahh. She let out a long, deep breath. She hadn't imagined ever loving anyone again, after James's sudden death had left a large and gaping hole in her heart. But little by little, she had fallen for Ben.

The day they met in his agent's office, she had felt something, some kind of connection, but she had tried to put it out of her mind. She was old enough to be his much older sister, for God's sakes. She remembered thinking: *What on earth would I do with a man so young?* Turns out plenty, she had discovered.

Jill assumed he would eventually want more than she could offer. A wife and kids. Even James, the party loving playboy, had wanted that. And someday, so would Ben. When the time came, she would have no choice but to let him go, to set him free. Walking away from him would be difficult, and even more so, the longer they were together. But it would be the right thing to do and if that was the price she would need to pay in order to spend this amazing time with him, so be it.

But right now, she would try to catch a few more moments of sleep, wrapped up in the warm arms of this magnificent man. He would probably want to make love when he woke up, and based upon recent history, it would be the slow, unhurried variety she had grown to love.

Later, the coffee maker in the kitchen would brew a half pot just for her and she would drink it out on the patio of the small cottage they had rented. Mid-morning, Marta, the woman employed by the rental office would arrive and quietly and efficiently sweep through the unit, straightening and dusting, all the while grilling today's fresh catch of the day out on the porch. Before they had even finished showering, she would be gone, leaving behind foil wrapped platters of fish, plus rice and beans, a colorful assortment of grilled veggies and a bowl of fresh fruit. Depending on their mood, they would either assemble plates for themselves right then, which they would enjoy outside or take a dip in their private saltwater pool before collapsing on the twin chaise lounges and taking a nap.

Afternoons, they spent down on their private beach, racing in and out of the waves or playing Frisbee. Ben had been an Ultimate Frisbee player in college, while Jill was in possession of two left feet, and to say she threw like a girl was an insult to girls everywhere. What she lacked in coordination however, she made up for in speed and thought nothing of untying her bikini top and dropping it on the sand to distract Ben from catching her awkward throws, assuring her of a precious few points. They would share the close confines of the outdoor tiled shower to wash off sand and sunscreen, before wrapping up in towels to catch the late afternoon sunsets. Jill would usually have a glass of white wine, which she would enjoy as they reheated the grilled fish and sumptuous side dishes.

Right before dinner, Jill would usually send a text to Carly and wait for her daughter's brief response. 'With Em. Going to grab dinner. Have fun. Love, Carly' was typical. Other than that brief connection with the real world, there were no

distractions from TV or social media. The only thing Ben used his phone for was to play her some jazz tunes he enjoyed. The rest of the time, he left it shut off. No random texts or crank callers, which was a huge relief. While she cherished her family and close friends, she was thrilled, being here, in this tropical paradise with Ben. In a couple of days, they would be re-entering the real world, with its incessant phone calls, text messages and the sounds of traffic and crowds.

*Enjoy this while it lasts.* She slipped back down between the sheets and pressed herself into Ben's warm back, thinking that life didn't get any better than this. She was exactly where she wanted to be. At least for right now, this was her own version of an epic love story and she would enjoy every blessed moment.

## Chapter 20

### T- 33 days

#### Ben

If the first day was any indication of the kind of tour this one was going to be, Ben knew he was royally screwed. He had not been looking forward to the next two weeks without Jill. He would have loved it if she could have joined him, but he understood that this wasn't a good time for her to be on the road. Marnie was due home from rehab in a few days and Jill wanted to be there for her, in case she was needed. The concert was only a month away and there were still a number of things Jill needed to do to prepare.

Besides, he had to admit, 'Working Ben' was not all that exciting to be around. When he toured, he spent mornings at the gym and afternoons doing sound checks and working with the musicians in the band that his label had assembled for him. His concerts went on for hours and he rarely made it back to his hotel room until the well past midnight, when he would collapse in bed, feeling more exhausted than he could ever remember. In between travelling to a different venue every other day in order to play eight sold out shows up and down the west coast, it would not be fair to expect anyone to put up with that kind of grueling schedule, even a seasoned rock and roll wife like Jill.

He wondered if she had enjoyed touring with James in the early days. He tried to picture her waiting in the wings, while James prowled the stage, singing in that deep baritone voice of his, with thousands of screaming fans, mostly women. But now, he knew, it was different for her. She had a career and a daughter and a family who needed her. Ben needed her too, but he was trying to chill and keep his expectations in check. The last thing Jill needed right now was a clingy boyfriend.

Despite his efforts at maintaining a positive mental attitude, it had been a real shit storm so far. He had spent last night with Jill, glad to wake up this morning and hold her close to him for a few more precious moments. He was already running behind schedule when he left her house, and the car that was supposed to bring him to his own home to grab a few things was late. He had arranged to be picked up a block from Jill's, in an effort to not be spotted. That damn hack Simon had printed her home address in his stupid column just the other day. But somehow, despite the early hour and the random location, a crowd of fans quickly gathered around him as he waited on the sidewalk. He posed for a few selfies, but turned down an offer to scrawl his name on the body of one young woman, who brazenly bared her stomach

by pulling up one of his concert T's that she wore. Then more girls showed up and by the time the car arrived for him, he was starting to hyperventilate. *Where had all these girls come from?* He recognized the driver, who jumped out, and grabbing his arm, pushed him into the car. Ben collapsed gratefully across the seat.

"It's Rick, right? I was beginning to wonder where you were at, man."

"Wow, I'm really sorry about that. The dispatcher texted me that the pickup time was pushed ahead. I thought I was right on time, Mr. Fein. It sure is early in the day for that many fans. It's like they knew you would be there this morning."

As the car pulled away, Ben glanced out the window. The group of twenty or more young women was starting to disperse, but he noticed one of them was standing alone and watching him closely. When she lifted a hand and waved good-bye, Ben was certain that he recognized her from somewhere, but he focused on slowing down his breathing and he closed his eyes.

"Hey man, we'd better skip stopping downtown at my place. Let's just head to the airport."

"Whatever you want, Mr. Fein. There's water back there for you. Or I could stop and get you a coffee, if you want."

"Nah, I'm good. Let's just get out of here, okay?" He popped in his ear buds, found a playlist of light jazz, and spent the next forty minutes slouched in his seat, lost in his music. He briefly considered calling Jill, but it was still so early, and he hoped she had fallen back to sleep after he left. He sent her a text instead.

"Miss you already. XO Ben."

Traffic was heavy, and by the time they pulled into the section of the airport reserved for private planes and corporate jets, there was already a group waiting for him. This time it wasn't fans, it was his team, gathered to see him off. He spotted Aaron first, wearing his trademark pinstriped suit, phone plastered to his ear. Ben liked to tease him that he looked more like an investment banker instead of a talent agent, but he wasn't in the mood for that kind of banter this morning. A few of the staffers from his label were standing around and right by the portable steps leading up to the waiting plane was his recently hired assistant, Ian. He was about Ben's age, but looked even younger, with his spiky blonde hair and sagging jeans revealing tartan plaid boxers.

Ben got out of the car and walked over to them, carrying only his phone and well-worn leather duffel. Everyone slapped him on the back and wished him well, and a few minutes later, he and Ian boarded the plane. He buckled in and leaned back into the comfortable seat. Looking around the plush interior of the private plane, he was struck once again by the fact that he was living an extremely privileged life. He still

felt like a regular kid from the Bronx, who called his mom every other day and ate dinner with his parents once a week. He smiled in Ian's general direction and told him that he was beat and going to try to get some sleep.

Ian winked at him. "Late night, huh, boss? You were at Jill's, right?"

Ben ignored his questions. The last thing he wanted to do was discuss his love life with Ian or anyone else.

"I'll take an egg sandwich or whatever after a while, okay? You should get some rest yourself. It's gonna be a long-ass day." Then he closed his eyes and tried to picture Jill's lovely face. But he couldn't get the image of another woman out of his mind. She had long brown hair that partially covered her eyes. He shuddered and switched on some music.

Several hours later, Ben was sitting in the first-class lounge at an airport in Chicago. The pilot had reported an issue that required an unscheduled landing, so he and Ian had exited the plane and wandered inside. Ian decided to head down to the main terminal and pick up some magazines, but Ben sat in the corner, playing with his phone, restless and uncharacteristically jumpy. A mother and her young daughter approached him for an autograph and the daughter took a photo of him with his arm around her mother. He suddenly thought of Jill and their discussion about the advancing age of his fans and the likelihood of blowjobs and he grinned widely just as the photo was being taken. He sure loved that crazy girlfriend of his.

Ian came rushing back and told him that they were cleared for takeoff, so they hurried out onto the tarmac. Shortly after they hit cruising altitude, he realized he had left his phone behind. *God damn it!* Ian promised him that a new phone would be waiting for him by the time they landed at LAX.

"It's been a few weeks since we changed your number anyway. You're updating your password every time, right?"

Ben assured him that he had, but it had actually been a few months since he changed it from BFEIN1984 to GRIFF1970. He had a lot of things to remember day to day and besides, who would want to hack his phone anyway?

The rest of the day went off without a hitch, but when they finally got to the hotel late that afternoon, his luggage still had not arrived. He had to ask Ian to run out and grab him some underwear and essential toiletries, while he headed over to the venue to check things out. By the time he got back to the hotel, he was exhausted, but was buoyed by the sight of the familiar face of the pretty blonde girl who was waiting for him. Suddenly, things were looking up.

## Chapter 21

T- 30 days

Jill

It had been a long crappy day. She and Ben returned from Bermuda less than a week ago, and both her tan and her happy memories had already faded considerably. She'd had a splitting headache all day long, which left her feeling exhausted. Her migraine meds, when mixed with a great deal of white wine, made for a pain-free fog in which she was currently engulfed. Other contributors to her lousy mood were the scorching heat wave that had descended upon the city and the fact she hadn't heard from Ben for two long days. Total radio silence.

"He's ghosting you, Mom" Carly teased, causing Em to giggle.

Em's high-pitched voice had been grating on Jill all afternoon. Even with the noise from the AC blasting on full, Jill had been unable to tune her out. The two girls had been attempting to make homemade pasta, but Jill was predicting that someone would need to order a pizza soon, if the three women were going to actually eat dinner this evening. Jill topped off the wine in her glass with a near empty bottle of Chablis. She took a long sip and leaned back against the kitchen counter before she answered her daughter. She had no idea what 'ghosting' was, but it didn't sound promising but she was certain the 'he' Carly was referring to was Ben.

"And what, pray tell, is ghosting exactly?" she asked, right before she took another gulp of wine.

Carly studied her mother closely. "It's um, well, it's when someone disappears without a trace, like a ghost." When she watched her mother put her glass of wine down with a shaking hand, she grew concerned. "Hey, you've been hitting the vino pretty hard today, Mom. How's about I make you a nice cup of tea?"

"What makes you think that? That he's disappeared?" Jill stammered. "It's only been two days..."

Em gave Carly a poke in the ribs. "Be nice," she growled in a voice not meant for Jill to hear.

But Jill *had* heard her.

“First off, I was kidding, okay? I overheard your call before to Aunt Beth, and you said...” Carly’s voice trailed off as she watched her mother’s face tighten and turn red.

“You shouldn’t be listening in on other people’s calls, Carly. Not cool, okay? Ben’s busy out there. His concerts go for hours and what with the time change? It’s hard to keep in touch, you know?”

Em piped up. “You’re right,” she nodded emphatically, her huge eyes glowing earnestly. “When my dad travels to the west coast, sometimes my mom doesn’t hear from him for days at a time.”

Her words were of little comfort to Jill, as several times, Carly had voiced her concerns about the longevity of the Thorne’s marriage, and even cited evidence that Phil Thorne had a long-time mistress.

Carly looked at her mother in alarm. Growing up, she had heard the rumors about her own father’s infidelities while on the road, and although Jill never confirmed or denied them, Carly knew her mom had always been more stressed than usual whenever James was touring.

Now, it was déjà vu all over again, Carly realized. Jill was once again tending the home fires while the man she loved was out on the road. But Ben was one of the good guys, wasn’t he? Carly had grown to like the young man who had stolen her mother’s heart. He was smart and funny, and he handled Carly’s snarky comments with good-natured humor. Surely he wasn’t screwing around.

Carly decided it was time to be the grown up. Surveying the disaster area that was the usually neat as a pin kitchen, she gathered up a few of the measuring cups and the huge bowl bearing a gelatinous heap of what could only be described as library paste. Somewhere underneath all of the flour and rolling pins were the gleaming marble countertops, and her phone. There it was, propped up behind the huge state of the art pasta-making machine, which had never been used, in the six years since Jill had received it as a house-warming gift. Her exact words when she opened it were, “Does she know me?” Jill had a number of positive attributes, but being a foodie or an accomplished chef was not among them.

“Why don’t I text your young man and get to the bottom of this?” Carly asked lightly.

Jill clenched her jaw and held up her hand to stop her daughter, whose thumbs were already starting to peck away. “No, Carly. Please, don’t do that, okay? No, I’m serious. I don’t want you to text Ben.... because I already did. Earlier today.” And he hadn’t texted back, she admitted to herself. *What was going on out there in California?*

“Why, that little bastard. What the hell?” Carly crossed the room to where her mom was still leaning against the counter. Jill’s eyes were glistening with unshed tears,

and Carly knew one wrong word would set her off. “Mom,” she began gently. “Was everything okay before he left?”

Jill considered the question carefully before nodding. Things had been a little weird at the airport last week right before they jetted off for a long weekend to Bermuda. Ben had been pressing for a commitment, uncharacteristically anxious about the state of their relationship. She had attributed his mood to the impending concert tour, and although Jill had done her best to placate him, she hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that something was still off. They’d had an amazing several days. Ben’s assistant Ian had outdone himself in organizing their accommodations. Between the privacy, the sun and the sparkling blue water, it had been a perfect getaway. They had relaxed and played and spent a lot of time making love, she recalled and felt the telltale blush spreading across her cheeks.

“Go, Mom,” Carly crowed. “Keeping’ it real, between the sheets, huh?”

Jill shook her head at that last comment. “I’m not sure exactly where I went wrong with you.” She failed at keeping the annoyance she was feeling out of her voice. “Boundaries, Carly. You should try them sometime.”

Carly snorted at that. “Oh yeah. Boundaries, huh? You and Dad couldn’t keep your hands off each other,” she reminded her with a big grin. Turning towards her girlfriend, she continued. “I tell you, Em. They were like rabbits. Every time I would walk in the room, I had to announce myself in case they were going at it. You can’t imagine. It was hell,” she complained, wiping imaginary sweat off her brow.

“My folks have had separate bedrooms for years, so, yeah, you’re right. I can’t imagine,” Em admitted sadly.

“Well, I’ve been scarred for life, that’s all I’m saying,” Carly announced dramatically.

“Oh please, I never saw my parents so much as hold hands, so, what the hell, huh?” Jill stumbled a bit as she made her way out of the kitchen. She realized she was way drunker than she had previously thought. “I’m going to take a long, hot soak in the tub. You two can clean up this mess and order a pizza, okay? Domenic’s, Carly, not that Greek places. Then we’ll have a girls’ night and watch whatever is binge-worthy these days.” She waved vaguely in the girls’ general direction, before she headed up to her bedroom.

Hours later, the kitchen had been put back in some semblance of order and a large Margherita pizza from Domenic’s had arrived. Jill had passed out cold on her bed en route to the shower, so the two girls spent a companionable couple of hours on the sofa, eating pizza and catching up on *Gossip Girl*. It wasn’t until just after 11, when Carly’s phone started buzzing. She received several texts within minutes and noticed her mom’s phone, lying on the coffee table, was lighting up as well. It wasn’t long before Carly found out the reason for the flurry of activity. TMZ had reported that



pop star Ben Fein had appeared out in public with a mystery woman, while on tour in California. The images going viral were grainy, but anyone with a pair of eyes could make out Ben walking with his arm around a young and attractive blonde woman. The headlines were predictable. *Feeling Fein!* and *Fein Trades Up for a Younger Model.*

“Em, I cannot fucking believe this. What an ass hat he is.”

“Should we wake your Mom?”

“No way. She’ll find out soon enough.”

## Chapter 22

T- 29 days

Jill

The sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. The constant need to slow down her breathing. The persistent pounding of her heart. The fear of an imminent panic attack. Jill remembered all too well how this felt. She had been here before, reeling in the aftermath of the undeniable fact she had been cheated on. James had been a serial flirt, for sure, and she had always suspected his extramarital affairs had numbered more than the two of which she was certain. She had assumed all of that was behind her. *Here we go again. Goddamn it.*

She recalled the waves of anger, bitterness and shock. *How? Why?* James had been her husband, so it had been almost unbearable when he strayed. And while she had been seeing Ben for less than a year, it still felt like a major act of betrayal. *I'm almost 43 years old. When will I learn?* She vaguely recalled an article she had once read on muscle memory. It had been years ago in L.A. when James was on one of his health kicks. Every year or so, her late husband would vow to clean up his act. He would quit drinking, stop smoking and avoid any and all recreational drugs. He would hit the gym daily and nag at Jill to help him to eat better and live a healthier lifestyle. Red meat was verboten and junk foods would be trashed and in their place, an assortment of tofu and plant-based entrees and low salt, fat free munchies would appear. Suddenly there would be stacks of men's health magazines piling up everywhere. James was never much of a reader, but suddenly he was poring over articles about how to 'jumpstart your metabolism' and ways to 'slow down the aging process.'

"You don't need to lose weight, James," she had advised him. Despite being in his 40's and nowhere near as active as he had once been, James had the body fat of a marathon runner and the stamina of a man half his age. "And neither do Carly or I."

"It's not just a number on a scale," he had explained patiently. "Being fit is way more complicated than that." He would regale her with facts and figures, cite statistics and talk about findings from studies. One article had stuck with her. James had been particularly fascinated by the concept of muscle memory. The idea that various muscle-related tasks seem to be easier to perform after previous practice, even if the task has not been performed for a while, as if the muscles could actually "remember".

Jill had tried to be enthusiastic whenever James was in one of those phases. It wasn't as if she didn't want her husband to be healthy. She very much wanted to grow old

with him, but she knew James would eventually tire of this new regime. One day he'd grab a burger at the bistro down the street or add an order of bacon to his egg white veggie scramble. A couple of cigarettes would be next, followed by a beer at the end of the day. Soon he would be back to nearly all of his bad habits and all of the healthy ones would be forgotten.

But the concept of muscle memory had stayed with her and Jill knew that the heart *is* a muscle. This feeling she was having was all too familiar. Maybe her heart remembered clearly the devastation of being broken and never fully recovered. Maybe having had her heart broken before made her more susceptible to having it break again.

"It's muscle memory," she sobbed to Carly, who had been tending to her almost nonstop since Jill had awakened yesterday morning with a raging hangover. As she microwaved a leftover slice of pizza and guzzled an energy drink, she had found out what the rest of the world had discovered almost twelve hours earlier. Ben Fein had moved on. He had been seen all over L.A. with a mystery blonde who looked to be in her early 20's. Shopping on Rodeo Drive, hitting a variety of popular bars and trendy eateries, Ben and his new squeeze were an item and tabloid fodder. And Jill had not heard a single word from him in nearly three days. The silence spoke volumes.

She had been dumped.

The pain in her heart, though familiar, was anything but welcome. Jill had tried to keep herself from falling too hard for Ben. After James had died, leaving her thirty years too soon, Jill was devastated. She had vowed to never, ever, let herself get so wrapped up with a man again. She had expected that eventually, she would get to the place where she could date casually, even sleep with another guy, but she had sworn she would never again fall in love and never get married.

Her relationship with James, although far from perfect, had been an extremely passionate one. She had warned herself she would not be able to handle riding that particular rollercoaster again. And yet, somehow, despite all that, here she was, back on the same fucking ride once more. *Maybe I brought this all on myself. He told me he wanted more and I blew him off. This is my fault.* Pizza forgotten, she sat slumped over the breakfast bar and rested her feverishly hot forehead against the cold marble top. She wished she had listened to her own advice, because it actually felt even worse this time around, she realized. She was older, but no wiser and the heartbreaker in question was just a kid. *What was I thinking?*

Her phone had been ringing off the hook for the last day and a half. Beth and Ted were the only ones she would talk to, but she didn't want to see them. "No, please don't come by," she begged. "I'm going to be fine, and besides Carly and Em are all over me. They've got it covered." Carly served her countless mugs of sweet, milky

hot tea and slice after slice of cinnamon toast, most of which Jill ignored, while Em handled the calls from the press and even issued a statement on Jill's behalf.

"Ms. Griffin is delighted to hear that the concert tour of her client and friend Ben Fein has been so well received and while she is unaware of any new relationship he might be involved in, she wishes him well." Ari should have been the one to speak on Jill's behalf to the press, but since she had been unable to get through to Jill herself, her only response to the press was a terse "no comment." Jill didn't want to speak to anyone who reminded her of Ben, and since Ari had been the one to introduce them, Jill was choosing to not answer her calls.

At Jill's request, Carly had called her grandparents and reassured them Jill was fine and that she was just exhausted and would speak to them in a day or so. Jill's mother offered to drive down from upstate NY where she lived with Jill's sister Susan and her family, but Carly had convinced her it was not a good time to make the trip, and that maybe she and Jill would head north and pay a visit soon. Her grandma Kathy was not as easy to placate. The normally placid and sweet woman was uncharacteristically furious when she heard of Ben's betrayal.

"That little bastard," she had fumed. "Sorry Carly, I'm just so mad. After all that your poor mother has been through.... It's just not fair."

It wasn't fair, Carly agreed. She had hoped Ben was one of the good guys and she thought that his behavior was totally out of character. Alex had half-jokingly threatened to fly out to California and kick Ben's ass, but Carly informed her uncle that he would have to get in line behind her.

She had been texting Ben nonstop for the last two days, but he hadn't answered a single one. "WTF Dude?" she had recently messaged him. "Why r u being such a douchebag?"

Late in the afternoon of the second day of 'Ben-Gate', Em came bursting into Carly's room waving her phone. "It's his cousin, Carly. It's his freaking cousin," she exclaimed triumphantly.

"What? Who?" Carly was confused. She was furious with Ben and feeling so sad for her mom, that she was clearly not thinking straight. Em flew across the room and launched herself into Carly's arms. They crashed across the unmade bed together and just before Carly managed to plant a kiss on her girlfriend's soft cheek, Em pulled away and started shrieking.

In a high-pitched voice that would cause glass to shatter or neighborhood dogs to commence howling, she explained. "The girl? The one Ben has been spotted with? It's his cousin Phoebe. It's his freaking cousin. He hasn't dumped your mom!!"

Carly rolled herself up into a seated position and pressed her hands to her throbbing temples. She needed a massive dose of caffeine or a long hot shower or maybe a decent night's sleep. Or all of the above. The last two days had taken their toll.

"But, I don't get it, Em. Why has he been MIA? He hasn't called or answered my texts or my mom's. If he has been hanging with his cousin, what's the big deal? He could pick up the fucking phone, right? Jesus, what is that guy's problem?"

Em's eyes filled with tears. "Maybe he *has* broken up with your mom and they're just using his cousin as a decoy or something. I don't know. It's confusing." She pulled Carly into a hug. "But at least he's not cheating on her," she whispered into her ear. "That we know of anyway."

A few minutes later, both girls were perched at the foot of Jill's bed. Claiming a headache, Jill had taken to hiding out in her darkened bedroom more often than not since yesterday morning. After she struggled out of the confines of her bedding, Jill sniffed and sat up, propped against the pillows. She was silent as Em and Carly took turns relating the story of Ben and his cousin Phoebe. When each of them finally took a breath, she cut in.

"Yeah sure, I've heard Ben mention Phoebe a few times, but she lives in Chicago, not L.A. He never said she was going to visit him and join him on tour." She sniffed again and took a sip of water from the glass Carly had left at her bedside. "They're not even first cousins anyway." She and Ben had marveled over the fact neither of them had any first cousins. Both of Jill's parents had been only children, as had Ben's dad. His mom had a sister who had never had kids. "I think she's like a second or third cousin or whatever." She tried to sound dispassionate, like she couldn't have cared less, but neither girl looked convinced.

"Well, I seriously doubt Ben is dating his cousin," Em had announced primly.

Carly rolled her eyes at this, but reached out to hug her anyway. She knew her girlfriend sounded, on occasion, a little nuts, but she meant well and Carly would be on board with anything that could make her mom feel better.

Jill smiled for the first time in days. "I agree with you, but it doesn't change the fact Ben hasn't called or texted me since he left town. Maybe he's just over it, you know? Over me." Her voice quavered on that last bit, and Carly was afraid her mom would dissolve into tears again.

Suddenly there was a loud banging on the door. Jill heard her name being called over the pounding.

Ben had returned.



## Chapter 23

### Jill

She started to tell Carly she would handle it herself, but Carly leapt across the room and raced down the stairs. Jill and Em sat in silence as they heard Carly pull open the door and begin screaming.

“What the hell, dude? Are you kidding me? What happened to you? Where have you been? My mom has been...Oh hey, Mom.”

Jill stood at the foot of the stairs in her robe. Her brown hair was all spikey and flattened on one side and she was even more pale than usual. But she stood tall and her eyes were dry.

“I’ve been wondering what is going on.” Jill stood up even straighter and tightened the belt of her terrycloth robe around her. Despite her swollen eyes and red nose, Jill was determined to project some dignity into the situation. She held up her hand as if to stop Ben from advancing on her and spoke calmly. “Please let me and Ben have some privacy. We need to talk.”

“But Mom,” Carly began. “I just...”, but her mother silenced her with a look.

“Carly, please. You and Em have been cooped up in this place for two days. Go take a walk, go get a coffee. Anything. Now,” she added, probably more harshly than she had intended.

With a quick glance in Ben’s general direction, she turned and crossed the living room heading towards the patio and motioned for him to follow her.

“This isn’t over jerk face,” Carly threatened. “You have a lot of explaining to do.” Then she grabbed Em’s hand and both girls went out the door. Ben joined Jill on the patio.

“Jill,” Ben began. “This whole thing has been a disaster right from the start. I know you’re pissed, but you have to hear me out.”

Despite a pounding heart and shaking hands, which Jill had shoved in the pockets of her robe, she tried to sound cool.

“Really Ben? I *have* to hear you out?” She sat down on one of the lounge chairs and regarded him disdainfully. “That’s where you’re wrong. I don’t *have* to do a fucking

thing, okay?" She held her hand up again to keep Ben from coming any closer to her, and the look she gave him succeeded in stopping him in his tracks.

"What the hell, Griff? Those pictures? You know that's my cousin Phoebe. The press was all over this mystery girl I was supposedly dating, but it was Phoebe. She wanted to surprise me, so she worked it out with Ian and was waiting for me at the hotel when we got in the other night. I had no idea just how much the story of the two of us had blown up until just this morning." He was watching Jill closely, probably looking for her to smile or at least demonstrate she understood how it had all been a giant misunderstanding.

But Jill was resolute and forced herself to look at Ben. "How nice of her. How wonderful for you to have her there."

Ben continued to pace in circles, never coming within five feet of Jill.

"She's my cousin. You know that. I didn't realize what a field day the press was having trying to figure out her identity. We don't have the same last name, so that kept everyone guessing. And..." his face darkened. "Godamn Frank was enjoying the whole 'no comment' game. Making me look like a player or something. Anything for the press. But I'm not, Griff. I'm not a player, and what's more, you know that. You fucking know that as well as anyone does."

Jill was relieved to hear Ben confirm this for her, but it didn't change anything. It didn't fix a single thing, at least not for her. "Well, that's just great. Mystery solved. Those rascally paparazzi. But what can you do, am I right? So why are you here then? Don't you have a concert to perform for your adoring fans?"

Ben had stopped even trying to smile. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before he responded.

"I got the earliest flight I could this morning. I'm due back tomorrow. Tonight was a small private concert that I cancelled. They're not exactly thrilled with me, but I figure they owe me for the whole 'mystery girl' fiasco."

Jill looked mystified. "But why are you *here*? What is it you want?"

Ben moved in and knelt down next to Jill. He was unsuccessful trying to put his arms around her, but he would not be put off. He leaned in close to her. "I want *you*. I'm here because I've been just about out of my mind. I've tried to reach you. I called..."

"You called? You tried to reach me? When? I've been calling you and texting you since you left. Five days. Five goddamned days. Carly's texted you, too. Not a word. Not a goddamn word from you." Jill reached out and shoved Ben away from her.



“ Godamnit. You’re not letting me explain. My phone was stolen. We had to make an emergency landing in Chicago. I posed for a photo for some girl and her mom and then they called the flight. I had to hurry and I didn’t even realize it was missing until after we took off. It had all your numbers stored in it and Carly’s too.”

Jill was not convinced. She’d had it with listening to the man in her life spew excuses for his crappy treatment of her. *Been there, done that. Never again.*

“So you buy another phone. You buy another phone and you call me.” Her voice broke and she struggled to keep from sobbing.

“I *did* get another phone. They had one for me when I landed. Ian swore he had programmed your number into it and my folks’ number too. I don’t call anyone else. I didn’t call you that first night cuz it was late and Phoeb’s was waiting for me. The next day she and I hit the beach and then I took her shopping. We had sound check at 5 and right afterwards I sent you a text. The concert went great, thanks for asking, and it was past 1 when we got back to the hotel. You hadn’t texted me back, so I chalked it up to the time difference. The next morning, I took Phoebe sightseeing and I texted you again. I was starting to get worried, so I called you. The recording I got was kind of weird, so I tried again. Same thing. So I dug out my laptop and sent you an email. I told you that I miss you and I love you. I asked you to call me or email me. I never heard back from you, so I asked Ian to check your number. But your landline’s unlisted and hardly anyone has your top secret cell phone number.” He smiled at her as he said it, but got no response.

“So Ian called Ari and she told me she couldn’t get through to you either. I panicked and figured I needed to get back here. Just now in the car coming from the airport, I called Ari myself. “What’s Jill’s number?” I asked her. She told me. Fucking Ian had screwed it up. He swore he keyed in the right number, but he hadn’t.”

Jill stared at him, uncomprehending.

“4. 2. The last two digits of your number. 4. 2. He entered 2. 4. “ That’s why I couldn’t get through to you. And they changed my number when my phone was stolen. They change it every so often. You know that. I emailed you my new number, but you never called me.”

Jill felt a momentary surge of sympathy for Ben. He looked worse than she felt, if that was even possible. His eyes were red and ringed with dark circles. She spoke so softly, that he had to lean in closer in order to hear her.

“I haven’t looked at my computer in days. The Internet was blowing up with pictures of you cavorting all around L.A. I wouldn’t let Carly or Em have the TV on when I was in the room. I just held onto my phone and waited for you to call. I felt like...” She shrugged unconvincingly. “Hell, it doesn’t matter what I felt like. “

Ben moved closer to Jill and tried to hug her. “It *does* matter. It matters to me. I love you, Griff.” Ben was shaking his head repeatedly and it almost looked to Jill like he was starting to hyperventilate.

Jill let out a breath she hadn’t even realized she had been holding. She pulled away from Ben and regarded him soberly. “It sounds like one classic fuckup after the next. It’s not your fault, it’s not anyone’s fault. Well, maybe it’s Ian’s fault.”

Ben started to smile, but the look in Jill’s eyes stopped him cold. “I will have him flogged publicly if you want me to. I’ll cancel his corporate credit cards. I’ll make him fly coach. I’ll ... oh, crap. What do you want me to do? I wish my phone hadn’t been stolen. I wish my assistant wasn’t a moron. I wish you opened my emails. Christ, I wish I never went on this tour to begin with. The whole thing is a freaking disaster. But it’s not my goddamn fault.”

Jill looked like she was trying to choose her words carefully and she spoke slowly. “I wish all those things hadn’t happened either Ben. I really do. But they *did* happen and now we have to live with it. And try to put it behind us. Maybe it’s a sign.”

“Are you crazy? A sign? A sign of what? That we’re not supposed to be together?” Jill let him hug her, but she remained stiff and unyielding in his arms. He pulled back and stared at her. “I don’t believe this. I know you have a hard time trusting people but give me a break. I wasn’t cheating. I wasn’t dodging your calls. I’m not...James, okay? I’m not fucking James.” He shook his head, probably realizing he had gone too far.

Jill stood and tightened the belt of her robe. Her voice was like ice as she stared at him dispassionately. “No, Ben, you’re right. You’re *not* James. He’s dead and so are we. Go back to L.A. Your fans are waiting.” She strode towards the French doors. Just before she disappeared inside, she turned to him. “You need to leave. We’re done here.” And then she was gone.

## Chapter 24

### Ben

Ben watched silently as Jill walked away from him. She headed up the stairs towards her room and seconds later, he heard her door slam. *What the hell had just happened?* He had figured that she would be with him for not staying in touch over the last several days. And the photos of him and Phoebe? He realized how it must have looked to her at first, especially since she had confided in him just how much the rumors of James and other women had impacted her over the years. He knew that she had major trust issues, combined with pitifully low self-esteem. He had vowed to never give her a reason to doubt him, but here they were.

He thought briefly about heading up to her room and trying to talk to her again. To convince her that he had never meant to hurt her and that the whole fiasco was just a big, unfortunate series of events. But he had seen the way she looked at him and he realized that what she really needed from him right now was some space. Then he decided to wait for her and give her time to calm down. He immediately realized that the girls would probably return shortly and he knew that he was not up to fending off Carly's angry accusations. He decided to leave and grab a cab over to his parents' house, but as soon as he was out on the sidewalk, he remembered his folks had left town to spend time with his aunt in Florida. *Can this fucking day get any worse?*

In the end, he hailed a cab and went straight back to the airport. He called the airline himself in order to have a plane waiting to take him back to California. He estimated that he would land just before midnight, plenty of time to get a decent sleep in order to be ready for tomorrow's grueling schedule. *Yeah, what am I thinking?* A good night's sleep was not in the cards for him. Not until he had squared things with Jill.

He reached for his phone and sent her a quick text.

"Heading back to L.A. I'll call you tomorrow. I love you. XO Ben"

###

The next several days were a blur. As if on autopilot, he somehow managed to show up on time for sound checks and scheduled flights to San Diego, then Sacramento and finally here to San Francisco. After two shows in a row, he would be heading to Seattle, and then Portland. He checked his phone constantly, but Jill never returned his texts and was not taking his calls either. He had reached out to both Carly and

Alex, but he was apparently on their shit lists as well. He was sick and tired of being treated like a goddamned criminal.

Ian was slinking around with a hangdog look on his face, probably feeling guilty about his role in the whole mess. Although Ben knew it had been a careless mistake that anyone could have made, he was furious with his assistant and snapped at him several times to stop hovering and that he could get his own fucking tea, thank you very much.

He had been avoiding talking to the guys in the band and the roadies more than usual. Just yesterday, he realized he had gone the whole day without uttering a single word to anyone, until he went out on stage. His own voice sounded unfamiliar to him as he began to sing, but the audience didn't seem to notice that anything was off. He thought about Alex and what he had said about being able to see the faces in the crowd and actually talking with some of the fans. Despite his plans to play smaller, more intimate venues during this tour, he realized when he looked out at the screaming crowds, he couldn't see a single one of their faces. Not a single fucking one.

## Chapter 25

T- 26 days

Jill

"I just don't get it, Mom." Carly's voice sounded confused as she wondered about the rather erratic behavior her mother was displaying.

"Get what Carly? What is there to get exactly?" Jill's tone was noncommittal as she looked up at her daughter. Sheets of paper were piling up after spewing from the printer. Jill had been web surfing and printing out pages from a variety of travel websites all morning. Most were from resorts located in the Northeast, as well as a few from the Caribbean.

Carly started rifling through some of the latest printouts. "Well, let's see. It seems like you are trying to decide between a cabin in the Catskills and a tropical hideaway in Barbados. Um, have you ever heard the one about apples and oranges?"

"I'm not deciding *between* them Carly. I haven't lost my mind, so stop being so sassy, will you? I'm trying to do a little research for *two* trips I want to take. Beth and I have been talking about getting away for over a year now. We had such a great time on that cruise last year, but I like the idea of an all-inclusive spa this time. And I want to take a road trip with Marnie. Ted says she's been going a little stir crazy since she got back from rehab. I think she's ready for some R & R, so I am trying to decide between the Catskills and Lake George. Both places are just a few hours of driving and we would have a ball. We can shop and go antiquing. Talk and go out to eat. It will be great. Her doctors don't want her to fly anywhere far away just yet, so I'll get a car and off we'll go."

Carly seemed relieved at hearing her mother apparently knew what she was doing. "I'm glad Marnie is doing better, Mom. She sounded pretty good on the phone earlier. Ted must be over the moon."

"He is and I am too, sweetheart. I missed my friend and I know Ted missed his wife. She still has a long road to recovery in front of her, but at least she's getting the help she needs. Our little trip will be a nice celebration. Hey, do you want to join us? Plenty of room in one of your dad's big-ass cars."

Carly's face darkened at the mention of her late father. But maybe this was a good opportunity to talk about what she had wanted to bring up with her mom. It was so

hard to talk to her, following her breakup with Ben last week. As far as Carly knew, her mom had not had any contact with him since. He was back on the west coast according to all the entertainment websites, selling out the smaller venues he preferred and getting rave reviews. The last thing that Carly had read was that he was on his way to Seattle. She had been stalking him on social media, trying to keep track of his whereabouts. She wasn't exactly sure when would he come back to New York and the tribute concert was less than a month away. She shifted her thoughts back to the more immediate future. Maybe this was the chance she had been looking for. She forced a grin.

"Yeah, Dad and his cars, huh?" Although Carly could count on one hand the number of times she had been in a car driven by her father since they had moved to New York, his preference for oversized SUV's was legendary. "As long as Hector or one of the other guys drove, am I right?"

"Hmm, yeah. Your dad wasn't afraid of much, but city driving always threw him for a loop." Jill grinned at the memory. "I'm a better driver than both of them," she mumbled to herself.

Carly decided to continue, trying to keep her tone conversational. "And clowns, Mom. Dad was totally weirded out by clowns, remember?"

Jill laughed out loud at that. "Mimes too. Remember that street carnival we went to a few years ago? That mime kept following him around. Daddy freaked out. I think they can sense fear, like dogs or whatever," she ended with a mock shudder.

"I miss him, Mom. I miss him a lot. I'm scared sometimes that..." Carly's eyes filled with tears and her voice broke.

Jill reached out and brought her daughter down to eye level and regarded her soberly. "Scared of what, darlin'?" Her voice was tender as she stared into her daughter's glittery blue eyes. Just like her father's. Sometimes it was hard to look this closely at her, as there was no doubt in the world, that this beautiful young woman was James Sheridan's daughter.

Carly wiped away her tears with the sleeve of her shirt. "I forget him sometimes. Like I forget he's gone, that he even was ever here. I'm going along, doing okay, at work or with Em and I suddenly remember my dad's gone! But then I panic, cuz I forget what he sounded like, what he was like, you know? I listen to his music, but his voice isn't how I remember. It's just not the same. I miss him." The tears Carly had been trying to hold back spilled over again.

Jill pulled her daughter into her arms and held her close. "I know, baby. It's like that for me, too. Even after all this time, something happens and I think, "Wait until I tell James," and then it hits me." Jill gestured around the spacious den. "I wasn't sure if I could even stay here at first. I was trying to decide if you and I should find a smaller

place, with no memories of your dad. But I decided to hold off for a while. I told myself we had been through enough over the last couple of years, and there was the whole mess with the estate. Everyone kept telling me *not* to make any major moves right away. Then, I don't know. We started to get comfortable again, right? You and I settled in and now I can't imagine living anywhere else." There was no point in telling her about Ben's desire to move with her to someplace new. He and his wishes were irrelevant to this or any conversation she would have now or in the future. But man, she missed him.

She pushed those thoughts out of her mind in order to focus on her daughter. She slowly let go of Carly, who pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. Carly clearly had more she wanted to say. Carly apparently decided to pull off the Band-Aid all at once.

"Can you picture living here after I'm gone, Mom? All alone I mean."

Jill regarded her daughter briefly before averting her eyes. She drew a long breath and let it out slowly. "Wow, where did that come from? Honey, you're only 18. You have three more years of college, and then maybe you'll go to grad school or help me to run the non-profit fund to honor your dad. This is New York, this is your home." Her voice trailed off at the end.

Carly was quick to reassure her mother. "I love it here, Mom. I really do. If you want, I can stay with you during the school year. I can call Campus Housing and tell them..."

Jill cut her off. "Why am I beginning to think this is less about your father and more about...um, Ben?" She glared at her daughter, who was trying to maintain an air of total innocence as she flicked her hair away from her face.

"What? I don't know..."

"You are a sucky liar, Carly. Just as bad as your dad was. Want to know your tell?" She mimicked brushing her hair out of her eyes with a flick of her wrist. "I always know when you're being less than honest with me. So spill. What's up?"

"Damn it Mom. You're in mourning again and don't try to deny it. Ever since Ben went back to California, you've been so sad. It's obvious you miss him. You have barely left the house, you're not eating for shit and now you're on a tear planning not one, but two trips. You haven't been returning calls about the concert and even I know they're waiting on you to make some decisions. You planned some big shindig for afterwards and the caterer keeps leaving messages. They want a final menu, a head count. You need to pull yourself together. It's like you don't even...care anymore." Carly's voice trailed off at the end. She looked positively miserable.

Jill watched her closely before responding. She poked her playfully in the arm. “Did you just say ‘shindig?’ The 70’s called and they want...”

“That’s all you heard, Mom? *Shindig?* Out of all that?”

“Of course not, Carly. I heard every word and believe me, I am well aware of the deadlines for the concert. I’m super stressed about it. Who is singing which song and the final set list? Oh my God. I wish we never... And the trips I’m planning are just a diversion. It’s fun to have something to look forward to. You’ve got Em and your job and school. Your semester starts in only three weeks. I just need to get away. I could really use a break or a change of scenery. And Marnie could too. After all she’s been through? And Beth is my oldest friend. We never get to spend more than just a few minutes on the phone, so it would be wonderful to travel somewhere with her.”

“And as far as the after-party? I’m thinking of cancelling it. I never sent out invitations and it might be kind of awkward at this point. Maybe a few of us can just come back here for sushi or something. The concert is the big event. That’s where I should focus my attention, not on some stupid dinner party.”

“And what about Ben?”

“What about him?”

“You miss him. You know you do. Sometimes me and Em, we just...”

“Carly, please don’t. Don’t tell me you two are worried about me. That you stay in most nights because you don’t want me to be alone. That’s just crazy. I’ve been alone before. I can handle it.”

“We don’t exactly do that. We like hanging out with you.”

“Well, just make sure it’s the real reason. It’s my sparkling personality and witty banter you love, right?” Even Jill had to laugh at that last part. After picking at whatever take-out the girls ordered in, she had been falling asleep on the couch minutes after the three of them settled on a movie and remained passed out until they roused her to head off to bed. Once there, she would lie flat on her back, staring at the ceiling for hours, unable to fall back asleep. Thoughts of Ben plagued her. *Why can’t I let this go and call him? Or at least take one of his calls.* She missed him so much, but she convinced herself that it was for the best.

The pre-dawn hours had always been productive ones for Jill. In the months after James died, that was when she had written some of her best songs. But these days, he had less than zero interest in writing. Or much of anything else for that matter. Jill knew Carly’s concerns were valid.



“Yeah, Mom. You’re a regular party animal. But back to Ben. I don’t get it. I mean, it’s clear he wasn’t cheating on you. And the whole thing with his phone? It was hardly his fault. Geez, you can’t blame him. And besides, I miss him. We need a little testosterone around here, don’t you think?”

Jill tried to smile, but failed. “Well, before you know it your Uncle Alex will be camped out in our guestroom again. And I think Ted will be coming over for lunch later this week, so there’s that. Will that be enough of a male presence, do you think?”

Carly shook her head emphatically. “It’s not the same, Mom. I don’t understand why you won’t forgive Ben. Why can’t you give him a break? You two were amazing together.”

Jill felt like she was going to be sick. Her heart was pounding and she was starting to feel clammy. She was not enjoying this whole line of questioning and none of it mattered anyway. She and Ben were in the past. Carly needed to stop with the arguing.

“I can’t do this again. Don’t you see that? When your dad died, I wanted to die too. A part of me *did* die. But I had to keep going. For you, for Kathy and Mike. I had to learn how to live in a world without him. I worked hard and tried to focus on all the things I was grateful for. I kept busy and started writing again.”

“Because you’re strong. You’re the strongest woman I know.”

But Jill shook her head emphatically. “No, that’s just the thing. I’m not strong! I just can’t do it anymore. This whole ‘love thing’? It’s not worth it.” Jill let out a shudder, but to her own surprise, her tears had left her, replaced with a surge of anger. “It hurts too much. When I thought Ben had broken up with me, all of those crappy feelings came back with a vengeance. The hurt, the pain. I’m not good enough. I don’t deserve... Aaahhh! I won’t go through it again.”

“But Mom. It was a simple misunderstanding. He didn’t cheat, he didn’t...”

“I know that, Carly. But maybe next time he will. There’s always that chance and I just can’t take it. It’s better we end things now, before things get totally out of control. “

Carly pulled away and looked at her mom, her eyes flashing. “So you’re telling me that on the off chance Ben will hurt you in the future, you are going to cut your losses and quit while you’re ahead?”

Jill nodded almost imperceptibly. That was precisely her plan.

“So what about ‘it’s better to have loved and lost’? Huh? All those songs you write about true love and second chances and keeping love alive? Are they all just empty words to you?”

“This is my *life*, Carly, not some sappy song lyrics. This is the real world. Believe me, I never thought I’d be feeling like this again. I married your dad ‘til death do us part.’ And he died. Hell, I never expected to fall in love again, but I did. But I’ve got to protect myself. I am telling you this and you have to believe me. And it never would have lasted with Ben, anyway. He would have wanted to move on eventually and the next time, the blonde in question would *not* be his cousin.”

“You don’t know that. Ben loves you. Any fool can see that. You have to give him a chance.”

“No sweetheart, I don’t. It was fun while it lasted, but now it’s time to get back to reality. And honey, I love you, but please don’t bring up the subject of Ben again. I’m asking you nicely. I promise I’ll get myself back in gear. First thing tomorrow, I’ll call the label and resolve the set list. Then I’ll cancel the caterer for the after party. I’ll return calls to both of your grandmothers and Marnie and Beth too. Then I’ll... “

“I can call the caterers, Mom. One less thing for you to have to think about.”

“Why thank you, sweetheart. That would be so helpful The contact info is on a card on the fridge..”

Carly leaned over and kissed her mother lightly on the cheek. “Anything for you Mom. Good night,” she murmured and left the room.

As Jill watched her go, she hoped she had convinced Carly she was ready to move on. Now if only she could convince herself as well!

## Chapter 26

T- 20 days

Jill

The next week flew by. Jill got caught up in the flurry of activity promoting the upcoming tribute concert. The set list had been finalized at long last and despite a few bruised egos and some hurt feelings, all of the issues had been resolved. Maroon 5 would open the show, accompanied by Alex on lead guitar. They would perform *Guessing at Normal*, the title song as well as the biggest hit off the album. All of the remaining songs had been matched up with artists and bands that would satisfy any music lover, including Justin Timberlake, Beyonce, R.E.M., Usher, Justin Bieber and Sting. As the current reigning prince of pop, Ben Fein would close the concert with his rendition of *Jericho Road*. He would be joined on stage by Adam Levine, Michael Stipe, Sting and fellow Police band member Stewart Copeland on drums as well as Alex. Together, they would perform an encore performance of *Guessing*. The finale had been Jill's idea and the Topflite execs were thrilled.

It had been reported to Jill that Ben and his people were pleased as well, but she had not spoken with him since the night two weeks ago when she asked him to leave. A few days ago, she had opened the email he had sent her from California.

“Griff. Where are you? Lost my phone. Here's my new number. Call me. I love you  
XO Ben”

He hadn't lied about trying to reach her, but that didn't surprise Jill in the least. He probably hadn't lied much about anything in his life. Despite the years of fame and all of the money he had earned, Ben hadn't changed much from the sweet, shy boy who grew up in the Bronx and who considered his parents to be among his closest friends. He was upbeat and positive, but not annoyingly so. Despite the difference in their ages, Jill had frequently felt Ben was the mature one in their relationship. She missed his calm and steadying influence in her daily life and his commanding, and anything but calm presence in her bed. Boy, did she ever.

Jill was relieved that she had not gone with Ben to meet his parents and that their lives hadn't gotten any more intertwined. She and Ben had gotten caught up in their own little bubble for the first few months of their relationship. There was no room for anyone else. And of course, they were trying to keep the whole thing a secret. Ben had invited Jill to join his folks for brunch one Sunday back in April and she promised she would, but panicked at the last moment. She begged off, citing a

migraine. Ben had gone without her and the whole time he was gone, she tried to picture how it would have gone. She had never viewed herself as the kind of girl anyone would want to bring home to 'meet the parents' and in this case, it was even less likely. A 42-year-old rock widow with a college-aged daughter was probably not the type of partner the Feinsteins were seeking for their only son, their golden boy. They knew Ben was involved with someone, but as far as she knew, Ben hadn't given his parents any details.

Early that evening, when Ben came over, he was smiling and carrying a big bag with handles. He proceeded to unload a number of plastic containers and covered plates, which threatened to overtake the large kitchen island. Jill sniffed the air appreciatively and started investigating.

"What is all this? There's enough food here for an army."

"My mom has always prescribed to the 'feed a cold, feed anything and everything' theory. She hoped it would cure your headache. I recommend starting with chicken soup, aka Jewish penicillin." He went to the cupboard to get her a bowl. "It's still hot, if you want some right now."

Jill was not a big fan of soup, but she hadn't eaten anything all day, except for a bowl of cereal hours earlier, and her stomach rumbled with appreciation. The soup looked so good with big chunks of chicken and loads of carrots and celery, and it smelled even better. She had cancelled on his parents at the last minute today; the very least she could do was enjoy a small bowl of what looked like delicious homemade soup.

"Yes, please," she told Ben and he ladled her a good-sized portion. He went to the silverware drawer and grabbed a spoon, then pushed the steaming bowl towards her and watched as she started to dig in. After a couple of minutes of steady eating, Jill looked up at Ben. He had a quizzical look on his face.

"It's really good, Ben. Please tell your mom it's the best ..."

"Tell her yourself."

*Huh?* "Well, yeah, sure when I meet her, I'll be sure to thank her for being so thoughtful. And what else did you bring? Oh my, is that like a noodle casserole or something?" She started opening random containers and was pointing at a large buttery square of baked macaroni topped with a crispy brown crust.

"It's kugel and it's awesome. I can call her for you and you can say thank you. She'll want to hear you're feeling better too. How about it?"

Jill was struggling to put the cover back on the plastic dish. "Oh, I hate these things. They're so annoying. I mean please, we can send a man to the moon, but no one can invent a better way to store leftovers?"

"You're chicken, Griff. Admit it." His tone was even, but Jill saw a firm resolve on his face that hadn't been there before.

"No, I'm not, Ben. Geez, I mean...oh hell, yeah I am, okay? C'mon look at me. I'm probably closer to your folks' age than I am to yours. And then there's Carly. Are your folks secretly hoping for a granddaughter who's already in college? And James had kind of a reputation as a partier. He was pretty wild. They would be so disappointed in me. Can't you see that?"

Ben took the plastic lid from Jill and swung her stool around so she was facing him. He moved in closer, causing her legs to spread further apart. When he placed his hands on her shoulders, she stuck hers in the back pockets of his pants and pulled him even closer.

"Well, okay then," she purred in his ear.

He shook his head at her. "You're not going to get off that easy," he warned her and stepped back just far enough so Jill was no longer able to grind herself against him. "You're not getting any of this," he informed her soberly, indicating his lower half, "Until you agree to meet my folks. It's been months Griff, and believe me, they already know about you and Carly too. They are dying to meet you."

"You told them about me? I can't believe this. I thought we were trying to lay low."

"We're really close and their opinions mean a lot to me. They're happy that I have a girlfriend. What do you think I've been talking about with them all this time?"

Ben had a regular dinner date with his folks most Monday nights. His dad frequently traveled to Florida for business mid-week and his mom stood firm in her belief their family should sit down for a meal together at least once a week. Enjoyable family dinners were such a foreign concept to Jill. Mealtimes in the Griffin household had ranged from loud and chaotic to tense and silent. It all depended on her father's mood and level of intoxication. Meaningful conversation was never on the menu.

"Okay, I promise. I'll go with you one of these days to meet your parents. Now can we please get back to more important matters, like is that brisket I smell?" Jill pulled Ben close to her and wrapped her legs around him. "And then maybe you can rock your girlfriend's world, huh?" After a few nibbles of the most delicious beef Jill had ever eaten, Ben had picked her up and carried her off to bed.

Now less than four months later, she was alone again. Sex with Ben had been smoking hot. But even more than the lovemaking, she missed the man. The sweet,

generous loving man who had managed to achieve what she had believed was impossible. He had carved a place for himself in her heart and all that was left was the gaping hole in its center he had occupied for the past eight months. This sucked!

Realizing that she had already exceeded the time she allotted to wallowing for the entire day, Jill hopped up and grabbed her mug half full of cold coffee. She poured it down the drain and left her mug in the sink. It was time to get a move on. She wanted to grab a quick shower, before heading over to the Topflite office. She was meeting with a member of the label's public relations department to go over a few last minute details, before the program was sent to the printers. After joining Ari and her newest client for a working lunch, she planed to hit up Bloomingdale's in search of a sparkly pair of heels for the concert.

As she was drying off, she decided to see if Carly might want to grab a coffee with her this afternoon. She sent her a quick text.

"Meet for coffee later?"

"Later? Like when?"

"IDK 3? 4? Whatever works for you."

"What's up?"

"I just miss my girl."

"R U OK?"

"I'm fine. Just thought you might want to meet. Or I can swing by the gallery."

As she waited impatiently for Carly to respond, she wandered back into her bathroom. After wiping the steam of the mirror with a hand towel, she was shocked to see just how desperately she needed a haircut. She planned to grow her hair out a bit more before getting it styled for the concert, but decided that she couldn't wait until then. She was just starting to attempt to trim her bangs with a pair of cuticle scissors, when she saw that Carly had texted her back.

"Sorry. Had to take a call from one of our donors"

"No worries. Just sitting here trimming my bangs."

"PUT DOWN THE SCISSORS & WALK AWAY FROM THE MIRROR!"

"Yikes OK! Scissors are down"

“I can leave early today. Jonesing for eggplant parm. Mario’s? See you here around 5.”

“See you then! XO Mom”

Jill put down her phone and with a big smile on her face, hurried to get ready. Meetings, a business lunch, shoe shopping and dinner with Carly! Today would be a good day, and with any luck, she would be so exhausted from all of the running around, that she would actually be able to get a decent sleep for a change. Just in case, she would have to pass up her favorite after-dinner cappuccino at Mario’s. Well, maybe she could enjoy just a sip or two of Carly’s.

## Chapter 27

### T-17 days

#### Jill

"You're doing it again, Jill. You're humming all of Five<sup>2</sup><sup>nd</sup>Rulez' greatest hits. You've been doing it this whole trip."

Jill glanced over at Marnie, who was watching her with a big grin on her pale face. She actually looked happier than she had in months. Jill just shook her head at her. "I have not. You're crazy."

"Well yeah, that's a given. You visited me in the looney bin, so tell me something I don't already know."

Jill had been paying strict attention to the traffic on the narrow road, as she drove them towards the busy downtown shopping area of Lake George Village. They were staying at a quaint bed and breakfast overlooking the lake, and today after a late breakfast, they decided to head into town. Alone together for the first time in months, the two of them had been talking non-stop about this and that since they had left the city two days ago, but had somehow managed to keep their conversations from delving into anything too serious. Like Jill's recent breakup with Ben and more importantly, Marnie's ongoing rehabilitation. With regard to that most sensitive of topics, Jill chose her words carefully.

"You're *not* crazy, Marnie. You've been under a great deal of stress for the past few years and you needed a break. You and Ted have been through a lot, my friend. He was working around the clock at the District Attorney's office, and then he starts on his first novel. Suddenly he's this hot author on all the best seller's lists. You quit your job and move out to the Hamptons. Then you try for a baby and that doesn't um, go all that well. Hell, I'm exhausted just thinking about it."

"And James died, don't forget. I mean, I know you can't forget, but it was tough on everyone, you know? Ted worshipped him and I thought he was um, special too."

She colored a bit at that last statement, confirming what Jill had always suspected. Before she and Marnie had gotten to be close, Jill was fairly certain that Marnie was one of several women working at the label, with a crush on James.

"I know. It's been crazy for all of us. And that just proves my point. You've had too much to deal with. But you're better now. And didn't you say the doctor said you could maybe think about trying again, for a baby I mean?" Her voice trailed off as



she saw the startled look on Marnie's face. *Oh crap.* That had been the wrong thing to say.

Marnie looked out the passenger side window as traffic slowed to a crawl and Jill started watching for a parking space. Her voice was low, but firm when she finally spoke up.

"No, Jill. We're done. It's time to move on with our lives. I have to face facts." She hurried on as she saw Jill start to protest. "I'm 45 years old. My eggs are basically non-existent. No one else's eggs have worked either. And it's all me. Apparently your brother produces some pretty strong swimmers. It's my fault we can't have a family. He'd have been better off with...someone else. Anyone else."

"Don't say that. Ted is over the moon in love with you. There's no one else for him. He's happy with the life you two have built. You're the one..."

"Yeah, I'm the one with the crazy notion of the whole family thing. But it's not meant to be, so now I'm gonna have to figure out what my next move is. What I'm going to do with the rest of my life."

Jill felt a touch of panic as she eased into a recently vacated spot on a side street in the center of town. She put the car in park and shut off the engine. As she started to unbuckle her seatbelt, she spoke in as casual a tone as she could manage.

"With Ted, you mean. You *and* Ted, right?"

"Of course silly. I'm crazy, I'm not insane. I love my husband, but I need to find something for me, you know? So come on, let's go spend some of your brother's money. I'm in a smaller size these days and I need a new dress for the concert. I can't even remember the last time I bought any new clothes."

Jill had hoped that Marnie would put on a few more pounds between now and the concert, but kept her comments to herself. She knew that she couldn't make her friend eat, anymore than she had been able to make James stop drinking or doing drugs. All she could do was be there for her and offer unconditional support.

She slung her bag over her shoulder and after locking the car, linked her arm through Marnie's. Shopping was always so much fun with her. They would laugh and try on all sorts of clothes that they would never consider buying. She should probably look for a dress for the concert herself. She no longer wanted to play the grieving widow for the night. Fuck that. Maybe something sexy, low-cut or backless. Ben always thought she looked beautiful, even wearing a T-shirt and sweat pants. But on the night of the concert, it was unlikely that she would ever be close enough for him to even see what she was wearing anyway.

*I wonder if he'll bring a date? Aaahhh.* She shook her head, to banish thoughts of Ben from intruding on her time with Marnie. *Go. Shop. Eat.*

She wondered if Marnie would be interested in a late lunch at the pub they were passing. Boneless Buffalo wings and stuffed potato skins were starting to sound awfully good. She couldn't remember the last time she had really pigged out. Ben and Carly were both such healthy eaters and Jill tended to mimic the habits of those around her. Back in the day, Marnie had shared Jill's appetite for pub grub and sweets. And booze. But there would be no alcohol today. Not with all of the meds her friend was currently taking. But a selection of appetizers and maybe a brownie sundae? Was Marnie's inner junk food junkie still in there somewhere? She was dying to find out.

"You're doing it again Jilly," Marnie announced in a singsong voice.

Jill realized her friend was right. She had been mindlessly humming *You're So Beautiful* as she walked down the cobbled street in search of the dress shop that the B & B owner had recommended.

"You miss Ben. I know you do," she continued.

*Yeah, I miss him. I ache for him, if you want to know the God's honest truth.* But Jill knew that it was better this way. Despite all the rumors and tabloid headlines, Ben hadn't cheated on her while he was on tour. Not this time anyway. But he was young and had his whole life ahead of him. He could have any girl he wanted. Someone who would love to make a whole houseful of brown-eyed babies with him. Someone his parents would love and welcome for Sunday brunches. Someone who was *not* her.

But just like Marnie, she needed to move on. Get Carly settled back into her dorm at Columbia, and then get this damn tribute concert behind her. It was time to write some new songs. But for today, she would just try to enjoy the sunshine and Marnie's company, buy a freaking dress and go pig out on fried food and ice cream. Maybe she could order a single glass of wine. She turned to her friend and pasted on a smile.

"I can't help it, darlin'. Those songs are just so damn catchy. C'mon, the sooner we find dresses, the sooner we can go eat." She continued to hum as they meandered along, looking at the shop windows. And although it made no logical sense, it helped to feel closer to Ben somehow.

## Chapter 28

### T- 10 days

#### Jill

The steam rising up from the sidewalk grates was even hotter than the scorching mid-town temperatures. Jill trudged along the sidewalk, keeping her head down. She was seriously regretting not arranging for a car. Forty blocks in this heat was just crazy. She had pulled her hair into a skimpy ponytail to keep it off her neck, and added a baseball cap as she left the house, as well as a pair of oversized sunglasses. The perfect look for traveling incognito. She needn't have bothered, as the streets were nearly deserted and the wave of interest directed towards her was currently minimal at best. She grinned ruefully at just how invisible she suddenly was. If she wasn't 'the wife of' or 'the girlfriend of' someone famous, as far as the media and the gossip hungry public were concerned, she was just another one of the nameless, faceless denizens foolish enough to stay in the city at the end of August. But this was something she had to do.

Carly and Em had begged her to join them as they headed out to the Hamptons to crash at Ted and Marnie's place for a few days. Carly had been itching to spend some time with her favorite aunt and this would be the first time she had seen her since Marnie had left the rehab center. Ted had committed months ago to attend an event his publishers were sponsoring out in the Napa Valley, so it would be a girls' weekend. Jill had pretended to consider the invitation, but never actually thought twice about going. She had enjoyed the few days she had spent with Marnie last week and rarely turned down an opportunity to spend time with her daughter, but the thought of a chatty weekend didn't sound in the last bit appealing to her.

The topic of Ben would inevitably come up and she was sick to death of attempting to justify her decision to end things with him a few weeks ago. She realized he hadn't cheated on her, that his lack of communication for those fateful few days was the result of a series of unfortunate incidents, not his decision to 'ghost' her and that he remained a sweet and sexy young man who had treated her like a queen the whole time they had been together. She knew all that, but remained steadfast in her decision to pull out of the relationship and she was feeling resentful of everyone around her as they tried to get her to change her mind. It was easier to just steer clear of the whole issue.

*How much further is 1665 Lombard Street? Wait, this is #1887.* She stopped short as she realized she had already gone too far, and despite the lack of crowds, the young guy following closely behind almost knocked her over.

“Watch where you’re going, you dumb bitch,” he mumbled as he passed her in a huff.

*Yikes. This heat brings out the worst in everyone!*

“Have a nice day,” she called out sweetly as she turned and retraced her steps. She would pay attention, get this dumb-ass errand done, and then head home for a cool shower and a large icy glass of Chardonnay. Boost up the AC and spend the rest of the day on the couch with the latest Elin Hilderbrand novel. Order some sushi, check if there was a spare pint of her favorite Cherry Garcia ice cream and loose herself in another wonderful romance set on Nantucket. She knew she needed some sort of inspiration if she was going to continue to make a living by writing love songs. If she couldn’t experience love herself, at least she could read about those who did.

*Okay, time to focus!* And there it was: 1665 Lombard. She realized why it had been easy to miss walking by for the first time. The numbers were faded and the storefront looked boarded up. *Did I get the address wrong?* She pulled out her phone and scanned the recent messages carefully. No, she had been correct. This was the right place.

She tried the handle and as it turned easily, she pushed the door open. A bell tinkled merrily, in total contrast to the dark and gloomy interior. The store seemed deserted, but she called out anyway.

“Hello. Hello, is anyone...”

She stopped as she saw a man emerging from the shadows. He lumbered towards her and despite his foreboding size and the decrepit nature of the shop, she stood calmly and watched him approach. Something about him was comfortingly familiar.

“You must be Jill,” the man boomed and he held out his hand in welcome. Jill extended her own, which was quickly engulfed in his large calloused hand, which was roughly the size of a baseball mitt.

He drew back after a moment and examined her closely. “You look like you could use a cold drink,” he announced. “Come on back with me. We can have a chat before we get down to business. He turned and took off towards the back of the small space, which was littered with cardboard boxes which looked as if they had never been unpacked, vinyl LP’s and stacks of sheet music.

Jill followed him through a doorway with a curtain of dusty beads and stepped into a small lounge area jammed with a couple of overstuffed armchairs and a small table. The man was examining the contents of a battered mini-fridge.

“Take a seat,” he offered. “Anywhere you like. Patsy Cline will move if you ask her nice.”

Jill noted a huge tortoise-shell cat occupying the chair closest to where she was standing, so she perched down on the chair wedged into the corner.

“Coke?” he called out right before he stood and turned to face her, brandishing two soda cans. “Coke or Diet Coke? I thought I might have a Mountain Dew in there, but I must have finished the last of them.”

Jill gratefully reached for the Diet Coke and briefly placed the iced cold can against her forehead. It felt so good, she almost decided not to bother drinking it, but after a moment, she sat back and cracked it open. She took a long swallow and immediately felt the heat of the day dissipate just a little. Another long swallow and she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her host had scooped up the cat and sat with it on his lap. He was drinking his own can of soda and the cat was purring loudly. They were both watching her closely and the silence was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable.

“Thank you,” she began tentatively. “For seeing me, I mean and for the drink too. It’s hot as hell out there.” *Well said, Captain Obvious.*

The older man smiled gently at her. “I was curious when you tracked me down. It’s been quite a while since anyone has asked *me* about James Sheridan.” He was still watching her closely. I barely remember what I ate for breakfast today, but I can remember James and his brother and Steve and of course, my boy Brian practicing in my garage, eating all my food and drinking all my beer. Nomad got their start with me,” he added with a note of pride in his voice. “But even I never imagined how big James would get, especially after he went solo. After Nomad broke up. After you...” His voice trailed off and it was Jill’s turn to watch him closely.

She was searching for some sign of bitterness or anger, but try as she might, she was unable to sense anything like that. Just sadness, of course. He was clearly still mourning the loss of his only son.

“Mr. Flanigan” she began, but he interrupted her.

“It’s Desmond, but you can call me Pops.” *Of course!* Desmond ‘Pops’ Flanigan, father of Brian Flanigan, the husky redheaded drummer who had started Nomad with the Sheridan twins. He had his son’s kind eyes and wide-open freckled face. Brian had been so nice to Jill when she joined Nomad on tour shortly after meeting James.

Jill considered asking about Steve, the fourth member of the band, but as far as she knew, he had dropped out of sight two decades ago and was believed to be living off the grid in either Canada or Mexico. No one was really certain. But Brian had stayed in the music industry after Nomad broke up. He and Alex had both found work in Nashville, nothing steady, mostly studio work, but Brian was devoted to his music, even after Alex left to join his brother on tour.

Always a heavy drinker, Brian started doing drugs. Before long, he was missing gigs and word got around the former dependable and talented drummer was strung out on meth and he was blacklisted. Less than a year later, his father had reported him missing, as the weekly calls between them had stopped suddenly. A few days later, Brian was found dead of an overdose. That was fifteen years earlier.

“So Pops,” she began after another long swallow of soda. “I really appreciate your meeting with me. You’re aware, I’m sure, the tribute concert for James is just a couple of weeks away.” Waiting for his nod, she rambled on. “Well, like I told you over the phone, the guys at Topflite asked me to track down anything from those early days. There’ll be some sort of a display at the venue. Anything, at all,” she trailed off, noting the grin on the older man’s face.

“Well, if you’re looking for empty beer cans or discarded cigarette butts that might have graced your husband’s lips, I’m afraid they were auctioned off on EBay years ago.” At Jill shocked look, he went on with a chuckle. “Don’t get me wrong, Missy. I never benefitted from any of it. All those vultures circling around, looking for anything even remotely related to James Sheridan.” He shook his head, remembering the media frenzy that once followed James everywhere he went and everywhere he had ever been.

Jill recalled how crazy it had been for James’s folks when their son became a superstar. Reporters camped out on the sidewalk, surrounding their small house. Groupies begging for keepsakes, anything related to James. It had never occurred to her that Brian’s family would have been impacted as well.

“That must have been really difficult for you.”

“Nah, not really. Back then, I was working pretty steady, but then my wife died. I sold the house and bought this dump, thinking I could turn it into a record shop. I hoped maybe Brian would join me, but he, well, he lost interest, and then he died too. I kept the place going for a while, but I think it’s about time to call it quits. I live upstairs with Miss Patsy Cline here, and believe me, at the end of the day, those stairs feel like climbing Everest. The other night? I left my glasses down here and I went the whole night stumbling around in the dark instead of facing the damn stairs again,” he told her without a bit of bitterness in his voice. “Me and Patsy are thinking of moving in with my brother for a while, until we figure out our next move.”

Jill’s heart went out to the man and she marveled at his attitude. His son and James had started out together in the music industry, but while James went on to super stardom and worldwide fame, Brian had OD’d in a tenement after a brief shot at fame. *Life is so fucking unfair!*

“Well, you didn’t come out in this heat to listen to an old man go on and on. After you called, I started digging around and I came up with some stuff you might want.” He reached over and pulled a decrepit looking shoebox towards him. Jill sat patiently

while he fumbled with it and finally presented it to her. Then he sat back, looking like a young boy who desperately wanted praise for a job well done.

Jill smiled as she started to investigate its contents. Her heart sank as she quickly realized most of it was worthless. *Damn.* Alex had predicted that if anyone had access to early Nomad memorabilia, it would be Brian's dad.

She had promised the label she would come up with enough to fill one of the display cases in the lobby at the concert venue. *But not with this crap.* A crumpled pack of cigarettes, a few ticket stubs to non-Nomad concerts circa 1984-87, a New Jersey lottery scratch card (not a winner!), hmmm, this might be something. A flyer advertising a Nomad appearance at the Red Pony, the iconic Asbury Park nightclub that had hosted the likes of Bruce Springsteen and Jon Bon Jovi. But the Nomad name was virtually unrecognizable due to a large water stain that almost obliterated it. She would have to dig around more on her own. Surely she could scare up a concert ticket or something to add to the pitifully small collection of memorabilia she had been able to assemble with help from Alex, the Sheridans, and Ron, the band's original manager. *Crap.* Pops was still waiting for a response from her. She pasted on a smile and leaned forward.

"Wow, this is great. Really, just great." Pops watched her closely for a moment before he suddenly burst out laughing, which caused Patsy Cline to jump down off of his lap and hightail it out of the room.

"Brian always said you were a good sport."

"Me?" *Brian thought I was a good sport?* "I always figured that..."

"That he blamed you for breaking up the band? That he resented you and James for all your success? No, Missy. Not my Brian. He was thrilled James went as far as he did. And Alex, too. No, Brian was not one for jealousy or regrets. 'Life's too short Pops,' he would always tell me.

"Well, Pops. Thank you so much for telling me that. I always worried, but now I know. You can't imagine how great that makes me feel." It more than made up for the less than memorable souvenirs he had shared with her. The hot trek down to the East Village was a small price to pay in order to hear Brian had not resented James nor had he blamed Jill for breaking up the band. *Hah, take that Alex. So much for calling me Yoko!*

"If you think I dragged you all the way down here for that box of crap, you're crazy. Hold on a minute, would you?" He hoisted himself up and made his way across the room to a large wooden storage chest. He bent down and pulled it open, and then turned to look at her. "So c'mon then. This stuff isn't going to unpack itself." Jill hurried over and her heart started racing as she peered inside and realized what she was looking at. Several Nomad concert T's in pristine condition. Original flyers and

ticket stubs encased in plastic from shows all over the country. Jill's eyes welled up with tears. Plastic wrapped copies of the only album Nomad had ever recorded. Jill had her own tattered copy of the album, purchased just months before she met James. His handsome face stared up at her from the cover. And there was Alex, and Steve, and dear Brian. The husky redhead was smiling broadly, while the other band members had adopted serious facial expressions. James had admitted to Jill they had been trying to look cool, like recording an album was just another life event and posing for a photo for the cover was just so commonplace. Only Brian had been unable to resist grinning from ear to ear, and after several attempts to get him to look more serious, they relented and that was the cover. And here were half a dozen copies in their original packaging.

"Oh Pops. I don't know what to say. This is unreal. How did you, I mean... This is worth a fortune." *He could have sold this stuff years ago.* He would have been able to get rid of this dump, travel. Why had he held on to it all?

"At first, I just held onto it, because it had been left in my garage. Then they broke up and I was getting ready to sell the place and Brian asked me to hold on to everything just a little while longer. In case there was ever a reunion. Then James got so famous and Stevie took off. Alex joined the tour and it was just Brian. Just only Brian," he finished with a catch in his throat. Jill wanted to prevent the grieving father from breaking down. She knew she would be unable to do anything but cry along with him. But what good would that do?

Jill was certain that the label would compensate Pops for the loan, and if they didn't, she would! But for now, she relayed the story of the album cover photograph and Pops laughed when she told him how irritated the rest of the band had been at Brian during the photo shoot, his freckled face grinning with joy. He loved that story, and laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks.

Jill told Pops that she would arrange for the trunk to be picked up within the week and begged him to attend the concert as her guest. Then she hugged him and promised she would see him soon. After guzzling down the warm dregs from her soda can, she set it down and with a wave, set off for home. Her original plan was to call for a car, but she once again decided to walk the forty blocks. She could definitely use the exercise, so she straightened her baseball cap and headed uptown.

She couldn't wait to tell Alex and Carly.



## Chapter 29

T – 9 days

Ben

Ben had been dreading this day for weeks. He had known a meeting like this was inevitable, but would have preferred to put it off for as long as possible. He didn't feel like he could handle much more stress right now. Professionally, he was doing well. Really well, if his accountant was to be believed. His gamble of choosing to play smaller, more intimate venues up and down the west coast had paid off big time. The buzz about the upcoming Jamie Sheridan tribute had reached an all-time high, with the focus finally on the all-star lineup and his closing the show, as well as the performance featuring him with Adam Levine, Michael Stipe and Sting. It would truly be an epic evening. *Not bad for a geeky kid from the Bronx!*

But his personal life? That was a hot mess. Jill had dumped him and he couldn't remember a time when he had felt more alone. Even when his college girlfriend Allie had broken up with him after nearly three years together.

"It's too hard, Ben," she had told him shortly after a three month separation when he and the band toured Asia for night after night of sold-out shows. He had understood it, he totally did. Allie deserved someone who was around a lot more than Ben. It had hurt, but mixed in with the pain was a degree of relief he wouldn't be disappointing her any more. But this separation from Jill was worse. Much worse.

The hours between his performances were too long and his desire for the woman who had stolen his heart eight months earlier was literally crushing him. And being a solo act instead of a member of a group of five meant he was on his own. The band, the roadies and the staffers were great, but they usually had little to say to him, unless it was about the show or some tour logistics. *It truly is lonely at the top.* Plus most of them partied frequently, so he spent all his waking time at the gym enduring punishing workouts or watching hours of reality TV in the pre-dawn hours when he felt the loss of Jill the most.

He shivered slightly, as he crossed the marble floor of his manager's lobby, stepped into the elevator and punched in number 23. He nervously zipped and unzipped his hoodie, before giving up and shoving his hands into the front pockets of his khakis. He watched mesmerized as the numbers on the monitor changed slowly and he waited for the doors to finally open.

*Goddamnit!* He missed Jill. He wanted to contact her, just to lay his eyes on her or hear her voice, but it had been three weeks since she ordered him out of her home.

Out of her life. He had spent the last seventeen days on the road, playing sold out concerts from San Diego and L.A. to Portland and Seattle. He had felt eager to return to New York, but if Jill refused to see him or even take his calls, he might as well be 10,000 miles away.

Since getting back two days earlier, he steered clear of Manhattan, but in his parents' home in the Bronx, he had been acutely aware of the nine or so miles separating him and Jill. She had made it perfectly clear she wanted nothing to do with him since that disastrous first leg of his tour last month. Losing his phone and getting photographed with his cousin Phoebe- you wouldn't imagine your whole life could implode based on a couple of random events, but it had. And now he was facing the most awkward and potentially painful moment of his adult life. In just a few moments, he would be face to face with Kip, Dante, Luis and Sam: the other four members of Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez. He hadn't laid eyes on any of them in eighteen months when he announced that he was quitting the band.

Ben assumed the other four guys still got together, at least socially. Photos of Kip and his new bride Caroline had surfaced last winter in all the tabloids. It had been rumored TMZ had paid for the wedding reception as well as the couple's honeymoon in Hawaii. The beaming blond couple had been surrounded by groomsmen Dante, Luis and Sam. Ben hadn't been invited to the lavish ceremony, which hadn't surprised him in the least.

Less than three months after he had departed, the band broken up due to 'creative differences', amid swirling rumors of infighting, drug use and poor ticket sales. Ben's career, on the other hand, had exploded. Billy Sheehan, the band's former manager, had persuaded everyone to get together today to tie up some 'loose ends'.

After exiting the elevator, he pushed his way through the heavy glass doors and greeted the red haired receptionist who smiled up at him.

"Hey Sarah! How're you doing?"

"Ben Fein! Good to see you, my friend. How are you?" Sarah moved around her desk and walked out to greet Ben. They hugged and he felt more relaxed than he'd been all morning. Maybe this would be...

"They're all in there, Ben. Waiting on you."

"I guess I'd better get in there then."

"Can I get you an iced tea? Or maybe something stronger?"

Ben declined her offer with a wave and headed down the hall towards the conference room. *What's the worst that can happen?*

His agent Aaron rushed across the room to greet him. An immediate hush followed, the kind of awkward silence that can only occur when the subject of several simultaneous discussions shows up. Ben saw Sam and Luis over in the corner, talking with two men he did not recognize. Kip and Dante were already seated on the far side of the huge mahogany table at the center of the room. An older man that Ben also did not know was behind them, leaning over and pointing to something in a bound report. They had been nodding at whatever he was telling them, but stopped paying attention and were now staring at Ben. Billy Sheehan was sitting alone near the head of the table, poring over a stack of documents. He nodded briefly at Ben, before looking back down at the paperwork before him.

Aaron grabbed Ben by the arm and steered him towards the back of the room, where a selection of juices and bottled waters were laid out, along with a tray of fresh fruit and pastries.

“C’mon, let’s get you hydrated,” he murmured, and they spent a minute surveying their choices, before Aaron grabbed a tropical juice blend and Ben chose a bottle of water.

“Let’s just do this, huh?” Ben whispered as they turned and surveyed the room. Everyone was starting to choose their seats at the table, so Ben and Aaron grabbed the two closest chairs. Sam slipped into the seat next to Ben. His handsome face was set in a smirk as he clapped Ben on the shoulder.

“Hey Ben! It’s good to see you again. How the hell are ya? Do you remember your old pal Sam?”

“Hey Sam. Good to see you, man.” Out of all the guys, Sam was the only one Ben could not honestly say he trusted or even cared for, for that matter. His humor could be over the top and his habit of inviting more girls than he could possibly handle back to his hotel room at night had gotten old. Ben couldn’t even count how many of Sam’s ‘rejects’ had knocked on his own door in the off chance Ben would be interested in their company. He had turned them all down.

“She’s someone’s daughter,” he had argued unsuccessfully with Sam on a number of occasions. Sam’s response usually centered on his being ready and willing to play the role of ‘big daddy’. The guy was a louse.

“So how’s the old ball and chain?” Sam asked, his face a mask of innocence. “Oh wait, you’re not with her any more, are you? Forgot you dumped her, man.”

*Don’t let him get to you.* Before he had a chance to assure Sam that Jill was fine, Ed Lewis, the current head of Ben’s former recording label, welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order.

“Let’s get this started. Everyone’s busy, some more than others,” he added with a smile directed at Ben, who cringed and once again faced the hostile stares of half the room’s occupants. “You’ve all been briefed on this separately, but I felt it was important to get everyone together to hear the progress we’re making. These nonsense suits are, for the most part, of a frivolous nature. I’m confident we’ll be able to settle with those venues where we had to cancel dates, as well as the manufacturers and vendors for their excess inventories.”

Ben shook his head, remembering the days of bobble head dolls, posters and T-shirts. All of the remaining band merchandise with his image or name had been sold for grossly inflated prices after his departure was announced, but everything printed since hadn’t sold well at all. There was a lot of nodding, but the tension in the room actually started to increase again.

*Something is up.*

Lewis continued, after loudly clearing his throat. “We do, however, have one more issue to deal with, I’m afraid to say. In light of the most recent developments, I thought it prudent to attempt to discuss this all together. As friends. This latest lawsuit, is of course, extremely serious.” At his emphatic nod, a young staffer started around the table, passing out thickly bound packets. By the time he reached Ben, most of the others had time to scan the document and broad smiles were appearing on their faces Ben picked up his copy as he heard Aaron mumble ‘Oh, crap!’. He glanced at the cover sheet quickly, and did a double take. He, Benjamin Feinstein was named as the sole defendant in a civil suit brought by Kipling Armstrong, Dante Johnson, Luis Jesus Morales and Samuel Chan. His former band members were suing him for breach of contract and were seeking \$200 million in damages.

“What the hell, Aaron?” Ben growled in his agent’s ear. “You told me this was over. That they weren’t going to sue me. That they had no case.”

Aaron’s forehead was beaded with sweat and the paper napkin he has mopping his face with was literally coming apart. He spoke in a frantic whisper as he tried to remove the disintegrating remnants off his forehead.

“I thought it was Ben. I swear, I thought we were all past this. I don’t know what happened. We need to call in your lawyers for this one.”

“What happened?” Kip spoke up loudly from across the room. “Are you kidding me right now? What *happened* is, you’re the hottest thing in the music industry, Feinstein. And we can’t get a paying gig in the goddamn Poconos.”

Ben had no idea how or even if he should respond, but Aaron spoke up on his behalf.

“My client has already provided compensation that more than covers any losses incurred as a result of his departure. He surrendered all his rights to the songs he

helped to create and any and all rights and privileges going forward, as well," he announced confidently. "As other members of the band are clearly represented by legal counsel today, I will say for the record, that my client was given no reason to assume that anything of this nature would be introduced as a part of today's meeting, and that any further discussion should be conducted with Mr. Feinstein's legal team. That is all we have to say right now. C'mon Ben," he added, motioning for Ben to stand.

It was as if a damn burst. Everyone started speaking at once and the result was a jumble of threats, complaints and accusations. The paperwork filed by the four plaintiffs asserted that all three elements of a defensible lawsuit existed. There had been a valid contract in place at the time of Ben's departure, Ben had willingly broken that contract and the remaining members of the band had been harmed financially and were due damages. The common consensus appeared to be that Ben's success was inversely related to the band's lack of success and now the remaining four wanted to be compensated by sharing a portion of whatever financial gains Ben was currently enjoying.

"If David Lee Roth had been successful as a solo artist, don't you think Van Halen would've wanted a piece of that action?" Luis shouted suddenly. Everyone turned to look at him and he grinned slowly. "Hey Ben, it's not personal, you know? It's just business," he added, before dissolving into a fit of giggles.

Ben regarded his former band mate sadly. Luis was wasted and it was only 11 in the morning. It would appear that the rumors circulating of his issues with substance abuse were accurate.

"Thank you Sammy Hagar," Kip interjected coldly. "So, getting back to reality here. You left a real mess behind, Benny Boy, and I'm not just talking about the music either," he added with a new note of warning in his tone. "And you know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?" he ended with a smirk.

Ben felt a shiver through his body as he reflected on what Kip had said. He had tried, with limited success, keeping his thoughts off of Lynsey. Sometimes it felt to him like it had happened to someone else. Even his parents remained in the dark. He had almost felt ready to spill the whole story to Jill on a few occasions, but it never seemed like the right time.

*But what is the right time to tell your girlfriend you used have a stalker who attempted suicide in your hotel room?*

Lately he had started getting texts from unknown numbers again, as well as random emails, but there were no cheery greetings attached. Most contained links to random news articles or websites related to psychosis and depression. Ben had been meaning to ask someone at the label to look into it and to check on Lynsey's

current whereabouts, but then his phone had been lost and Jill had dumped him.  
*Maybe it's time to check, just to be sure. Couldn't hurt.*

Belt felt dazed as he followed Aaron out of the room. Was the lawsuit truly frivolous or without merit? That was to be determined, but the remaining members of the defunct boy band were clearly out for blood. Ben's blood.

## Chapter 30

T- 6 days

Jill

Carly and Jill were relaxing at the end of a long day. They had gobbled up the sushi platter delivered an hour earlier and were currently sprawled on opposite ends of the couch. It seemed like the first night in weeks that Em wasn't with them, and Jill was secretly relieved. She liked her just fine, but felt on occasion, the girl needed more of a filter. She wasn't ditsy, not exactly, but she had a tendency to say whatever she felt, whenever she felt it. An admirable quality at times, but even Carly had taken to rolling her eyes at some of her girlfriend's verbal musings. Jill was really enjoying this time with her daughter, and was glad to just relax and listen to the upbeat instrumental music Carly had been playing on her iPhone. Jill had started listening to and attempting to appreciate light Jazz, which was Ben's influence, but tonight was, um...

"What's this called again, Carly? House? Beach house?"

"It's 'Tropical House', Mom. You were pretty close." Carly closed her eyes again. "What do you think Dad would say about it? Do ya think he'd approve?"

Jill thought about it for a minute, and then grinned at the image that popped up of her late husband. He had transitioned professionally from grunge rocker to pop singer, but he had maintained a limited listening appreciation for any music outside of his beloved rock and roll. As far as James Sheridan was concerned, the only music worth listening to was classic rock- The Beatles, the Stones, The Doors, Aerosmith and a little Zeppelin on occasion.

"I think he'd say we were pussies, sweetheart. Wimps maybe. This would be way too chill for him."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Carly agreed and both women continued to listen to the feel good tunes. Even James would have approved the high quality of the sounds emanating from his daughter's tiny phone.

Jill had a sudden image of lying with James on the floor of his childhood bedroom, listening to vinyl LP's on his ancient turntable. He had undressed her and made love to her ever so quietly that afternoon, while his unsuspecting parents had been watching TV downstairs. Her reverie was interrupted by her daughter's voice.

“Mom, what do you think? Too late to watch any *Orange* tonight? I’m actually pretty beat. And Em would probably kill me if we skipped ahead without her.” The three women had started binge-watching *Orange is the New Black* last week.

Jill loved the show, but was just as glad to lounge around and listen to music. She would ask Carly to download some of these tunes onto her iPod.

Carly pulled herself up into a seated position and stretched, her long arms and legs going off in all directions. Jill took the opportunity to stroke her arm gently.

“Not to mix business with pleasure sweetie, but...” Jill began. After Carly rolled her eyes at her, she continued. “I just need to know about Em and her folks. I want to make sure there are seats for them at the concert, but I can’t hold onto them if they aren’t going to attend.”

“I already told you. Em is going to sit with me in the front row. You don’t listen.”

“And I told you, there may not be room for Em in the front row. It’s not just me and you and Grandma and Grandpa,” she began. “Ron and the execs from the label are going to be there with us too. There are an extremely limited number of seats. We’ve already had this discussion,” she added wearily.

“Em can just sit on my lap,” Carly countered. “Hell, we’ll probably be on our feet most of the time anyway. Especially when Adam and Bruno and *Ben* are performing.”

Jill winced at the sound of Ben’s name, but decided to ignore her daughter’s obvious attempt to push her buttons. She needed to resolve this and Carly was being so stubborn. It was infuriating at times.

“I know it’s important for you to have Em there. I get it. Let me see what I can do.” If Ron decided to bring a plus one that night, the two of them would be relegated to the bank of seats the label had earmarked for VIPs and invited guests. Then Em could have Ron’s seat and Carly could relax and get off of her case. But the matter of Em’s parents remained. Jill had a block of twelve tickets in the center orchestra section and she knew that come hell or high water, scoring any additional seats was out of the question.

“So anyway, the family bank of seats is really tight. There’s Melissa and Ryder, Ted and Marnie, Beth and Jesse, Ari’s got a ticket from the label, thank God, your Grandma Griffin, Aunt Susan and her...”

“That’s another thing Mom. Aunt Susan? Please! We barely know her and she has the balls to ask for tickets for two of her kids?” Jill had to agree, but her family issues were complicated. Her sister Susan had a long history of mental health issues and had vanished from the view of her family shortly after Jill had started going out with



James. Susan had gone off the grid for years, not contacting Jill until after James had been killed. Twenty years in the wind, but since then, she had stepped up as far as their widowed mother was concerned. She had surprised everyone by selling her home and moving in with Susan and her family upstate nearly two years ago.

Susan had known tickets were nearly impossible to come by, but a couple of weeks earlier, she had asked Jill if she could invite her oldest son, Jill's nephew Dylan, along with Dylan's pregnant girlfriend Tai, to attend with her and their mother. She had even offered to give up her own seat, if that would help. She would see everyone after the show and spend the night relaxing in the nearby hotel suite, which Jill had reserved and paid for. Jill had assured her it would be fine, but now she wasn't so sure. 'Pops' Flanigan had agreed to attend the tribute concert as her guest and now, if both of Em's folks came, she would be short one seat. *What are the ticket brokers getting on the black market?* She broke out of her reverie, when she realized Carly was speaking to her.

"Earth to Mom. You say you want to get this settled, and then you flake out on me," she complained. "I just texted Em and she said to not count on her parents for the concert. She says they're barely speaking to each other and she's pretty certain her mom is gonna file for divorce any day now. Doesn't that suck? Mom?"

Jill had mentally started doing a happy dance, as soon as she heard her ticket dilemma had been solved. *Wow. How awful is it to celebrate the news that someone's marriage is coming to an end?*

"Yes, Carly, it does suck. I'm sorry to hear the news, but maybe Mrs. Thorne, um, Pris will be happier once she's out of an unhappy marriage."

Carly didn't look convinced. "Nah, Mom. I doubt it. I think Pris is one of those Stepford Wives you read about. Like some throwback. Stand by your man and be happy just being 'the wife of', you know? It's like her whole identity is wrapped up in being *Mrs. Phillip Thorne*."

Carly's words gave Jill pause. Did she really want to go where her mind was taking her? What would she do if Carly expressed similar feelings towards her? "Sweetie, you know your dad wasn't an angel by any stretch of the imagination. But I stood by him. The drinking, the drugs, and there were rumors..."

Carly leaned over and grabbed her mother's hands in her own. "Mom, no! You can't compare yourself to Pris. Dad loved you. You two were a real couple. You guys were nothing like Em's folks. Ugh," she shuddered dramatically. "I'm chilled to the bone just thinking about them."

Jill was relieved and glad her daughter didn't view her as a victim of an unhappy marriage. But her relationship with James had frequently left her feeling badly about herself and her self-esteem had been damaged as a result of his behavior. So maybe

Pris needed someone on her side right about now. She made a snap decision and shared it with Carly, who looked like she was getting ready to head off to bed.

“I’m going to call Pris tomorrow. I’ll invite her to attend the concert with us as my guest. Beth will take her under her wing during the show and make her feel welcome and afterwards...” Her voice trailed off. At her request, Carly had canceled the post-concert party she had been planning. She had envisioned herself on Ben’s arm, flush with the success of a record-breaking tribute to her late husband, walking around, meeting and greeting all of the people she loved most in the world. Maybe it was time to resurrect the plan. Even without Ben, it would be a wonderful time and she would have to feed all of their guests anyway.

“Too bad you canceled your big soiree. But we’ll make do, heh? This girl is heading to la la land. I’m wiped out. I love you, Mom,” she added, kissing the top of Jill’s head and absentmindedly patting her arm. “Get a good sleep, okay?” And then she was off, taking her lovely music with her.

The sudden solitude and accompanying silence were unwelcome to Jill and all at once, there were too many ghosts in the room. She knew she would always have a place in her heart for James. After all, he had given her Carly and opportunities that she had never dared to dream of. But their marriage had been nothing like the fairy tale love story she had pretended it was for so many years. Then, with Ben, she’d had a second chance at her ‘happy ever after’, but she had let her non-existent self-esteem and issues with trust dominate her thinking. Maybe, when all of the dust settled, she could give Ben a call and ask him to meet her for a walk in the park or a cup of coffee. Maybe it was time to get back to writing her own epic love story.

## Chapter 31

### T-34 hours

#### Jill

Jill sat nervously on the edge of her seat on the large, plush sofa. It all but dominated the windowless room, except for a huge wooden table placed squarely in its center. Jill ignored the tray of pastries, as well as an assortment of fresh fruit. There was a coffee urn, but Jill was feeling so jittery, she knew she couldn't handle any more caffeine. So she sat quietly and sipped at her water.

Despite having done many interviews over the years, this would be her first time by herself on live TV. She had been James's 'plus one' many times and they had always gone fairly smoothly. Except for that one nasty reporter who only wanted to talk about the dozens of rumors relating to James' reputation as a ladies' man. Jill had sat silently while her husband was grilled relentlessly about his extra-marital affairs.

"I'm right here," Jill had wanted to scream. "Do you think I would be here by his side if even half of this bullshit was actually true?" James had struggled to remain composed, but as soon as the cameras were turned off, he stormed off the set propelling Jill along with him. When the reporter came trotting along after him, he started yelling at her, claiming he would sue for slander and Jill had to pull him away.

"C'mon James. She's just a mean-spirited nobody trying to grab a few sound bites on the evening news. Screw her," Jill tried to cheer James up as they headed across the sidewalk to the waiting car. James had finally calmed down after he saw how well Jill was handling the whole debacle.

"Maybe if someone *had* screwed her, she'd shut the hell up," he shot back with a smirk. Jill scrambled into the back seat, and had held James's hand all the way back uptown.

She smiled at the long-ago memory. She sure had been a 'stand by your man' kind of girl back then. She figured this morning's interview for *A Bite of the Big Apple* would be a piece of cake in comparison. Several of the performers from the concert had already been interviewed this week. It was rumored, but never confirmed, that tomorrow's interview, on the morning of the concert, would be with Ben Fein.

*Get a grip and do your job.* She had already been to makeup and she prayed the cameras would be kind. The makeup artist tried to be positive, but Jill's under eye

circles and pallid complexion required layers of foundation and blush. The finished result felt unnatural to Jill, who usually wore lipgloss and a little blush. But she smiled and thanked her and was led to the green room. A young man with a faux-hawk smiled at her as he fit her with a microphone.

Mindy, the Production Assistant, came to get her a few minutes later, and for a second, she thought of cancelling. *Don't do this. You're not ready.* She tried to relax and pictured Diane Shore's pleasant face. She was the anchor, a middle-aged woman with a short blonde bob. *It would be fine. Or would it? What's the worst thing that would happen if I bailed at the last minute?* The concert would still go on and viewers could certainly do with one less ten-minute segment of fluff news. She pictured Diane's face, screwed up in confusion, when she was told of Jill's sudden departure.

"What do you mean, she's gone?" she would ask Mindy. "How could you let her go?"

But by then it was too late. Jill was led onto the set, to a seat in one of two comfy looking armchairs flanking an oval coffee table. She sat back and closed her eyes. *Breathe.* Carly had offered to join her this morning for moral support as had Ted, but she had refused both of them. Even if they were waiting back stage, she would still be out here alone.

The studio lights were hot and Jill could feel sweat pooling under her arms and between her breasts. Ari had picked out a V-necked black top and a flirty metallic skirt for her. Jill's personal choice of a lightweight dress was deemed 'too juvenile'. When she opened her eyes, she looked right at Diane, who smiled encouragingly at her.

"You all right there, Jill?" she asked in a bright and conversational tone. *She made you want to like her.*

"I'm great," she replied, in a high voice she barely recognized as her own. "Nice dress," she added. *I told you so, Ari.*

"Thank you. I'll be just a minute, and then we'll get started. This'll be great."

Jill watched Diane retreat and let out a breath. She knew this was important to help promote the concert. And it would all be over quickly and then she could go home.

The first part of the interview went well, with no surprises. Diane introduced Jill as the widow of musical icon Jamie Sheridan and also made a quick reference to Jill's successful songwriting career, right before she segued to the upcoming tribute concert. Jill talked enthusiastically about several of the songs on the album as well as the performer or band scheduled to be singing each one. She was careful not to mention Ben's name. If it came up during the second half of the interview, she would just have to deal with it. When she saw the stage manager hold up a card labeled '30 seconds', she smiled widely and leaned in closer to Diane.

“Of course all of your viewers have heard Justin Timberlake’s amazing version of *Dance with Me*. But I understand his live performance will include a few surprises that no one will want to miss.”

Diane beamed right back at Jill. “We all love Justin and his performance is something all of our viewers are looking forward to. When we return, more on the concert including an update on the reigning king of pop, Ben Fein.”

The stage manager approached Diane and while the two of them talked in whispers, Jill gratefully accepted a water bottle from Mindy. She downed half of it in one gulp, before she held the dripping bottle to her forehead. She worried she was about to hyperventilate and she tried to slow her breathing. It would look really bad if she raced off stage the minute Ben’s name was mentioned, but it would be better than crying on camera or freaking out. She sipped more water and tried to relax, just as the phone in the pocket of her skirt started to vibrate.

*What now?* She grabbed her phone and whispered into it.

“Hello.”

“Mom. It’s me.”

*Carly?* “What’s up? Everything okay?”

“Mom. You need to breathe. You can do this, I know you can.”

“How did you know I ...”

“I’ve watching from home. I called in sick and heard her mention Feinstein’s name. I knew you’d be freaking out right about now.”

The station manager called, “Two minutes.”

“I’m fine. Please don’t worry about me.” Actually Jill was starting to feel better and saw Diane was now free to talk. “Gotta go. Thanks, honey.” She stuffed the phone back in her pocket and gave Diane a big grin.

“That was my daughter.”

“That was sweet of her to call you.”

“Yeah, she’s a sweetie. So, I know you’re looking for ratings, okay? I get it. But I’m asking you, as a friend, woman to woman, please don’t make a big thing out of Ben and me. Our relationship I mean. Our breakup is pretty recent and I am not sure if it’s all that interesting anyway.”

There was silence as Diane stared blankly, her brow wrinkled in confusion. Then a look of understanding came over her. "Oh Jill, you and Ben? Girl, that's old news. I'm pretty sure we aired a segment earlier today detailing your ex's latest conquest."

Seeing Jill's shocked expression, and possibly realizing she may have come on a bit strong, she tried to backtrack. "It's probably nothing, but you know kids today. It's the finalist from that singing competition- Jordan someone. She's just the latest flavor of the month," she confided in a conciliatory tone, absentmindedly patting Jill's hand.

"One minute."

*Ben is already dating someone?*

"Oh darn. She's leaking," Mindy attempted damage control on Jill's eye makeup with a wad of tissues.

The stage manager hurried over waving a sheet of paper. As he handed it to Diane, he whispered frantically in her ear. Her eyes grew wide and she stared briefly at Jill, before turning her attention to the page in her hands.

"30 seconds."

"Goddamn," she muttered, shaking her head.

Jill was relieved to not have to rehash her breakup, but she hadn't expected to hear that Ben had moved on. She plastered on a bright smile. There would be plenty of time to cry later on. Diane was still looking at her with an odd expression on her face.

"Stand by. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2," and the stage manager pointed at Diane.

She reintroduced Jill in her friendliest voice, but then things turned ugly fast.

"So Jill, we just got word that a teenaged girl broke into your ex-boyfriend's hotel room, and then tried to commit suicide by slashing her wrists. They found her naked and unconscious in his bathtub. Do you have any more details for our viewers?" She leaned in even closer. "Jill? Anything you can tell us?"

*Oh God. No!* Jill brought a shaking hand to her forehead and clutched at her stomach with her other arm. She was breathing heavily and having difficulty forming a response. *Is Ben okay? Was he hurt?*

"What are you...? Is Ben... is he all right? I don't understand..."

Diane started to look panicky herself, as she tried to explain. "Jill, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I should have mentioned that this happened more than a year ago. I'm sure your ...Ben is fine. It's the first we've heard of it though, and now I'm betting that it's the first time you heard as well, huh?"

Jill sagged against the back of her chair. "Wait, what do you mean? This happened last year?"

"Yes, in Phoenix. Must have been right before Ben quit the band and went out on his own. His people sure did a good job of keeping it from the press. We would have had a field day with it back then."

Jill was slowly regaining her composure. Shock and surprise had turned to anger.

"So instead, you're having a field day right now. I have no comment on this story. You should be sure to get your facts straight next time, instead of... Oh fuck! Get this goddamned thing off of me."

The young staffer hurried over to help Jill remove the microphone he had clipped on her just fifteen minutes earlier. The stage manager had given an all-clear signal and the cameras were already being moved to another part of the studio. Jill took a deep breath and clutching the arms of the chair, she pushed herself up on shaking legs.

Diane saw her getting ready to leave and came over, looking frustrated. "I'm so sorry, Jill. I thought you knew all about it. I never..."

"You got what you were looking for, Diane. If it bleeds, it leads, huh?" Shaking her head in disgust, Jill grabbed her handbag and hurried out of the studio.

Looking at her phone, she saw she had missed 13 calls, all in the last 10 minutes. Three from Carly, one each from Kathy Sheridan, Ted, Marnie, Ari and Beth, and five from unidentified numbers. As much as she wanted to talk to her daughter or best friend, she placed a call to Ari and got right through.

"Jill, is that you?"

"Yes, Ari. What the hell is going on? Is Ben alright?"

"Honey, you just got blindsided on a morning talk show with millions of viewers, and your first thought is about your boyfriend's welfare?"

"TELL ME. Is he okay?"

"Yes, don't worry about him right now. Where are you?"

“I’m right outside the studio, getting into the car. It’s waiting for me... ‘Oh, yes, thank you very much. Yes, I’m heading straight home.’ Sorry Ari. Okay, I’m on my way home. What happened?”

Ari recounted what little information that she had. Apparently, a copy of one of the crime scene photos had been faxed to all of the major news outlets less than an hour earlier, along with a note. The anonymous sender indicated that a suicide attempt had taken place in the Phoenix Hilton on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011 in Ben Fein’s hotel room. The victim was a 19-year-old Caucasian female identified as L. Parker.

She ended with a long sigh. “That’s all I know.”

“Is she okay, L. Parker? You said ‘attempt’, so she survived?”

“Yeah, I guess so. And her name is Lynsey. I’ll check it out. I’m just sorry that you had to find out about it this way, babe. Ben never mentioned anything to you?”

“No, never. Maybe, he didn’t know. Maybe his team covered it up so that he wouldn’t...”

“Okay, time for a reality check. Are you hearing yourself? Didn’t know? Of course he knew. Jesus Christ, Jill! We need to prepare you better than this. I can be at your place in 15 minutes. Put on a pot of coffee. We have work to do.”

The car pulled up in front of Jill’s brownstone and she didn’t even wait for the driver to open her door. She ran up the steps two at a time and twisting the key in her door, burst inside. Straight into Carly’s waiting arms.



## Chapter 32

### Ben

Ben knew that no matter how long he lived, he would never be able to forget the look of shock on Jill's lovely face, when she was told of the suicide attempt that occurred in his hotel room last year. He had watched the scene unfold on his TV screen and had been powerless to do anything to stop it from happening. He should have told her about it himself. There had been plenty of opportunities over the last eight months, but he had never felt ready to admit how much guilt he felt and how what happened had impacted him. Knowing Jill as well as he did, she would have understood. Her first concern would have probably been Lynsey herself. Hell, she was about the same age as Carly. Maybe telling Jill would have helped him to move on and deal better with the panic that he continued to feel at times. But it was too late for that now.

His phone had been blowing up in the ten minutes since the news that had been buried for so long, started to make headlines and sound bites. He had missed calls from Aaron, his manager Frank, his attorney and his mother. They were the only ones who had his brand new phone number, but there were several calls from unidentified numbers as well.

He tried calling Jill, but she didn't pick up. He called his mother next. She had known that something had happened in Phoenix, but he had never shared the details with her. She answered sounding breathless.

"Ben, what's going on? Are you okay?"

"Yeah Mom, I'm fine. I'm sorry. I should have told you."

"I wish you had, Benjy. Is that poor girl okay? What happened to her?"

"Jill is fine, Mom. At least I hope she is. I..."

"I meant the *other* poor girl, the teenager. The one who tried to..."

"Oh, yeah. She went to some treatment facility in Pennsylvania, near where she's from. Last thing I heard, she was getting better."

"So that was Jill, huh? I've seen photos of her, but I enjoyed watching her. The first part at least. She seems nice."

"Mom, she's great. You'll see for yourself, I promise. Jill's not speaking to me at the moment, but she will. I have to sort this mess out. I just don't know what..."

"You need to get your message out there, Ben. Let everyone know how badly you feel about that girl. Isn't that what your publicist would tell you? Or that manager of yours? Hold a press conference. Donate some money to suicide prevention. Use your celebrity for something good."

"I know. You're right. I need to get started on this. I'll talk to you soon. I love you, Mom. Love to Dad."

"G'bye sweetheart. Don't worry. It gets better."

Ben shook his head as he ended the call and saw that he had 4 more missed calls. Aaron, Frank and two unknown callers. *Crap.*

He called Frank, who answered on the first ring.

"Ben. What the hell? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Frank. I'm fine. Any word on who leaked the story? Was it one of the guys?" Ben couldn't help feeling that his former band mates were somehow to blame. He had seen how bitter and resentful they were, especially Kip. "Maybe this was some act of revenge or an attempt to back me into a corner and settle the lawsuit?"

"I don't know, but I'm looking into it. Meanwhile, I've hired a private security firm to keep a look out. Two of them will be outside your building and another one will be um, inside. With you."

"What? Why? That makes no sense. You don't think I'm in any kind of danger, do you?"

"We can't take any chances, Ben. With the concert tomorrow night. It's just a precaution."

"I don't understand. Who would want to hurt me?"

The silence on the other end of the call made Ben shiver. Frank was never at a loss for words.

"Well, you see. I called to check on that girl, the one who..."

"Lynsey. Her name is Lynsey."

"Well, Lynsey checked herself out of that hospital almost two months ago. I got hold of her records. Don't ask. She signed herself out on her twenty-first birthday."

"You don't actually think that she would..."

"We don't know, Ben. But last week she used an ATM two blocks from you and today a delivery of flowers were delivered for you. Dozens of red roses that probably cost a few hundred dollars."

"Well, it could have been..."

"There was a card. And I quote:

"B Have a beautiful day! L

Ben thought about the inscription that Frank had just read to him. Have a beautiful day? Who said that? It was always 'Have a great day or a nice day or a good day. But a beautiful day? The group's biggest hit had been *Hello Beautiful*. He hummed the chorus to himself, 'Hello Beautiful. Have a beautiful day. *Crap*.

"Ben?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"The security detail should be in place any time now. The contact is Jim Barry. He'll be the one inside with you. The other two are Steve something and um, Todd Hamilton. Got it?"

"Okay. If you think it's the right thing to do."

"It is. Do you need anything in the meantime?"

"No. I'm good. But hey, have you heard from Ian?"

"No, I thought he'd be with you. Is he MIA?"

"Maybe he's just sleeping in. He's been kind of jumpy around me lately. Ever since the whole phone thing."

"What's that?"

"When I was on tour few weeks ago. And my phone went missing? You haven't heard any of this? Ian arranged for me to get a new one, but he put Jill's number in wrong. I figured he would have told you. I almost fired him over it."

"First I heard of it. Want me to send someone round to his place?"

"Nah. If I'm stuck here anyway, he might as well have the day to himself. I'll need him on deck tomorrow though. He needs to pick up my tux, send some flowers for

me and get someone in to cut my hair. I have a sound check in the afternoon and, oh yeah, cancel my interview in the morning would you?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I think it’s the best idea I’ve had all week. The way they ambushed Jill just now? Fuck them.”

Frank voiced his concern about canceling with such short notice, but Ben stood firm. After ending the call, he checked and saw that Aaron and ‘unknown caller’ had both tried him again. *What a shit show this is turning into.* He had once imagined that the day before the concert would be spent with Jill. Doing something relaxing. Making love all afternoon. Instead he was being held hostage with private security guys as babysitters. And because of him, Jill had been blindsided and was probably more upset than ever with him and all his goddamn baggage.

*Beautiful day, my ass.*

## Chapter 33

T- 12 hours

Jill

The day of the concert had finally arrived. Jill rolled over in bed and peered at the clock on her bedside table. Anticipating another sleepless night, she had taken a second of her prescribed sleep aids and had finally passed out sometime past midnight. Through bleary eyes, she was finally able to decipher the glowing red digits. 8:43. All she had hoped for was a solid 8 hours of sleep and it appeared she had gotten her wish. She groaned as she recalled her to-do list on the massive chart Carly had compiled.

Em had booked her for a massage, a mani-pedi, a makeup session and a wash and blow dry at Pris' favorite salon. She'd gone there earlier in the week for a facial, as well as a haircut. The stylist had recommended a series of appointments in the tanning bed, but Jill had turned her suggestion down. *Ain't nobody got time for that.* A little self-tanner would have to be sufficient to eliminate the pasty white complexion she had developed after spending much of the summer indoors.

Jill hoped that the green dress she and Marnie had found during their trip last month would be flattering, but had given up on the idea that tonight was really anything about her. It would be little more than a series of sound bites and photo ops. James was the real star and her only goal was to get through the evening in one piece. *And find Ben and shag him senseless.*

Pulling herself upright in a seated position, she leaned back against the padded headboard and closed her eyes. *Focus.* In between her spa appointments, Jill needed to stay on top of the arrival times and travel logistics for her family and friends. Carly had carefully mapped everything out, but had moved back into her dorm room a week earlier and was already knee-deep in the start of a new semester. Jill was pretty certain her daughter and Em would be showing up fairly soon and she wanted to be able to demonstrate that she had things under control. She thought, not for the first time, how much she had relied on her daughter this past summer. Carly had stepped up time and again and had proven to be indispensable. And a loyal and supportive friend. *What a wonderful girl we raised, James!*

Jill had decided late last week that she was not up for any overnight guests, so Alex had been relegated to a two-bedroom suite at the hotel. He had checked in two days earlier. Melissa and his son Ryder were scheduled to fly in from Nashville this morning. Carly had arranged for a car to pick them up and deliver them to the hotel,

since Alex would be tied up in last minute rehearsals and sound checks for most of the day. He had been resistant to the change in plans at first, but Jill had stood firm and Carly had convinced her uncle everyone would be much happier with the new arrangements.

Ted and Marnie would be driving in this morning and understood that she would be tied up all day and would see them after the show. Ditto with her mother and sister Susan, as well as Beth and her son Jesse. Their room reservations had been confirmed.

The only family members Jill promised to see today were her in-laws, Kathy and Mike Sheridan. They were also booked at the hotel, and Jill planned to join them for a drink in their suite late this afternoon. Brian's dad, Pops Flanigan had turned down overnight accommodations, but had gratefully accepted Jill's offer of a car and driver to escort him to the show. Ted had agreed to watch for the older man's arrival and ensure he was comfortable, as had Beth when it came to Em's mom, Pris.

One by one, Jill checked off each of the special people on her personal guest list. Ari would be attending along with Ron, but their seats were part of the label's block of tickets. Jill hoped her time with Ron would be minimal at best. She was still pissed at him for suggesting her loyalties were anything but sincere in her devotion towards her late husband. It was true she had been completely swept up in the heady glow of her relationship with Ben, but she deeply resented the implication that she was anything but 100% devoted to James's memory. She panicked at the thought of laying eyes on Ben for the first time in a month. She had imagined herself walking into the post-concert reception on Ben's arm, greeting her family and closest friends, introducing Ben to all of them and basking in the glow of a wonderfully successful evening. Thank goodness she'd had the foresight to cancel it.

Carly had reminded her on numerous occasions that everyone would still want to celebrate, so with Jill's approval, she arranged for a small reception at the hotel where everyone were staying. There would be an open bar, a selection of passed hors d'oeuvres, a pasta station and a dessert bar for a dozen or so guests. This was a far cry from the huge celebration that Jill had previously envisioned, but in the aftermath of her breakup with Ben, it was all that Jill felt she could manage and it would just have to do.

Beth had offered to come by tomorrow morning before heading home, but Jill had not confirmed anything with her. At the moment, all she could imagine doing tomorrow was sleeping in and having a late morning coffee with her daughter, before she headed back to school. Life would go on and the sooner the better. When things got too much for Jill, she generally allowed herself a short window in which to chuck it all and try to escape, but then she knew when it was time to pick herself up and get back into the world of responsibilities and reality. She had been doing better, until yesterday's disastrous interview. That picture of the poor naked girl in

Ben's bathtub was everywhere she looked. *Why didn't Ben tell me? I would have handled it much better hearing it from him than on live TV.*

Tomorrow she would figure out what to do next. This concert and all of the accompanying responsibilities had dominated the entire summer, especially in the past month since she had broken up with Ben. After tonight, she would need to start thinking of what *she* needed, what was actually good for Jill.

There were lots of songs to write and days to be enjoyed. Ari was working on an opportunity in Dublin with the Coors, who had recently re-assembled as a band. They were looking for some new songs for their reunion tour and wanted to meet with Jill. The thought of going to Ireland sounded appealing to Jill and she daydreamed for a moment about bringing her mother with her. Maybe Susan too. Both of Jill's parents had roots in Ireland and it would be an amazing opportunity to trace them together. She would definitely give Ari the go-ahead to set something up and soon. It would be great to have something new to look forward to. The house had been so quiet this past week with Carly back in school.

*Enough!* She hopped up and grabbed the lightweight robe from the foot of the bed and padded barefoot down the stairs towards the kitchen. Glad she'd had the foresight to prepare her coffee in advance before bed last night, she flipped the on switch and headed back up towards the master bath. Plenty of time for a shower while her coffee brewed. She would review her to-do list and send a quick text to Carly letting her know she was up and moving and that all was well. It was time to step up and be responsible. Everyone was counting on her and the finish line was in sight. *And I get to see Ben.*

## Chapter 34

T – 3 hours

Jill

It had seemed like an unnecessary expense when Carly had first suggested it, but Jill was feeling quite pleased as she sank down on the comfortable couch in the sitting room of her own suite at the hotel. Although she had no intention of sleeping here tonight, and she could have easily arranged to get ready for the evening at home or in Beth's room, she had to admit that it would be so convenient to hop on the elevator in a bit and head down a couple of floors to see Kathy and Mike, as she had planned.

Several huge floral arrangements were waiting for her when she arrived, along with a fruit basket and a bottle of champagne from the hotel manager. She checked the cards on the flowers and found herself feeling mildly disappointed that none of them were from Ben. *But how would Ben even know I would be staying here when I live only twenty minutes away? How had anyone known? Carly!* She checked the flowers again. One was from Starlite Entertainment, and another from Ron. There was a lovely arrangement from Pris, but the largest one consisted of several dozen red roses. The card accompanying them was a bit of a puzzle.

'Griff. Have a beautiful day! XO.'

*Hmmm.* The only person who called her Griff was Ben. But red roses? The few times he had brought her flowers, they were her favorite Stargazer lilies. *Who else could have sent them?*

Jill caught a quick glimpse of her pale face and dark-circled eyes as she left her room to visit her in-laws. Pris's stylist would need to be a miracle worker to glam her up for the evening.

###

An hour later, Jill let herself back in the room after a rather weepy visit with the Sheridans. Alex's son Ryder had stopped by to see his grandparents as Jill was starting to make her apologies and excuse herself to go and get ready. At 16, Ryder Sheridan was the spitting image of identical twins Alex and James at that age. He was tall and thin with dark hair that he wore fairly long and the same glittery blue eyes that graced his dad's and late uncle's faces. He was just entering his junior year



in high school, but was already playing guitar and singing backup at a number of smaller venues around the Nashville area. Although Jill had not seen Ryder perform in person, Carly had played her some of his You Tube videos and Jill marveled at the deep voice of this young man, so reminiscent of James.

Ryder's arrival gave Jill the opportunity she had been waiting for and she hugged everyone and made her way back to her room. She had plenty of time for a shower and a quick coffee from the little in-room coffee brewer before her stylist was due to arrive. Several minutes later, she emerged from the steamy bathroom draped in the hotel's bathrobe, and she flipped the on switch for her coffee. Two new floral arrangements had been delivered, both huge bouquets of Stargazer lilies! She grabbed the first tiny envelope and anxiously scanned the card.

'Griff' It's your turn! I love you XO Ben'.

Her heart soared. It was so typical of Ben to want to shine a light on her contribution to the evening. Or was it his way of saying that he wanted her back and that the next move was hers. *Maybe?*

She could picture him so clearly. Holding her closely and gazing at her as they made love. Lying next to her in bed as she drank in every magnificent inch of him. Grinning at her as they sat in the kitchen, him with his tea and her with a mug of coffee, or relaxing together on the couch, watching a film or reading. So affectionate, so passionate and so damn authentic. Such a sweetheart, but so young, with so much going for him. He would want more than she could ever give him and he would realize it soon. Or would he? He said he wanted to be with her. That he loved her. Her eyes welled with tears as she imagined being able to let go of her lifelong struggles with trust and abandonment. *Can I feel secure with Ben in spite of everything? Can I give him what he needs to be happy as well?*

James had not been the right man for her, she suspected it then and she certainly knew it now. He had loved her, but he had never been the steady presence in her life she had craved. His larger than life persona and need to always be the center of interest had been hard to compensate for. She had been comfortable living her life in his shadow, but a brief time in the spotlight had taught her to want more from her own life. She wondered if she and James would still be together, if he had survived the accident. She knew things hadn't been great between them for some time. If she had still been with James, would she have denied her attraction to Ben if they had been able to work together? Would James have slipped back into his habits, drinking again or doing drugs? Would he have cheated on her with another woman? There was no way of knowing for certain, but in all likelihood, her dream of growing old together with James had been just that- a dream. But growing old with Ben? A future with him? That was actually something Jill could imagine. *Maybe after tonight?*

It was sweet of Ben to send her flowers. She should send him a quick text to say thank you. As she reached for her phone, she realized that she hadn't looked at the

card that came with the other arrangement. Why would Ben have sent both? She grabbed it and read:

'Griff - I'm in room 873. Please come XO'

*Ben is right down the hall?*

###

Knowing she must look like a crazy person, with her hair wrapped in a towel and wearing the robe provided by the hotel, Jill grabbed her room key and left. His room was just a few doors down from her, so seconds later, she was standing there, trying to work up the courage to knock. She would listen to what Ben had to say, and then proceed to kiss him and tell him that she loved him and couldn't be without him without him for another day. She knocked quickly and listened. His voice was muffled, but hadn't he said to come in? The doorknob turned and Jill entered the room. With the curtains drawn and no lights on, it was hard at first to see anything, but then she heard a voice. Not Ben's.

"Welcome, Jill. Come on in."

Following the sound of the speaker's voice, Jill was able to make out the small figure of a woman, sitting on a chair in the far corner of the room. She had a blanket over her lap as if she was cold, but the temperature in the room was probably 80 degrees or more. She had long brown hair, which partially covered her face, but Jill recognized her immediately. It was the girl from the crime scene photo.

"Lynsey?"

"Yes, Jill. Please come and sit down."

"Lynsey, what are you doing here? Where's Ben?"

"I imagine he's next door at the venue, doing whatever superstars do before they go on stage. But, you're the one I wanted to talk to. I've called you dozens of times."

"You should have identified yourself. I would have talked to you, but I'm kind of freaked out right now." Despite her fear that she was walking into some sort of trap, Jill crossed the room towards Lynsey. "I'm supposed to be in my room getting ready. This isn't the best time for a chat."

The girl's eyes were cold as she glared at Jill. "Not the best time, heh? I almost died because of Ben. Surely you can spare me a few minutes of your time."

"It wasn't Ben's fault. He never wanted anything bad to happen to you." The girl just stared at her, when suddenly it hit Jill. "Wait, how did you even know I was here? I never..."

"Gold star, Jill. Ian said you were smart. I didn't see it, you know? You just seemed like any other clueless middle-aged mom trying to regain her lost youth with a younger man."

"Ian? Ben's assistant? How do you know Ian?"

"It's called networking. It's how you make things happen today." The girl's voice was peaceful, almost dream-like. "Ian is my new bestest friend and friends share things. Like you and Beth or what's her name? Marnie? How's Marnie doing, by the way? Anorexia and depression? That's tough. Some of the girls from the clinic they locked me up in suffered from that. You're a good friend, Jill. You girls are always texting back and forth. That's how I knew you were checking in here today. I have been reading your texts for weeks."

"What are you talking about? How?"

"Duh, spy software, Jill. It's the latest *thing*. I would have thought you'd be more up to speed. But let me go on record by saying that, in my opinion, the term 'spy' is a bit harsh, don't you agree? I much prefer 'checking in.'

"You mean the phone Ben gave me last month was..."

"Equipped. Yes. Thanks to Ian."

Jill was speechless, but her gut was still telling her that she was in no real danger. Lynsey was probably only capable of hurting herself. Delusional for sure, but harmless.

Suddenly Lynsey started humming, and then singing. Her voice was weak, but Jill immediately recognized the tune.

"Hello Beautiful, I've got something to say.  
Hello Beautiful, would you walk my way?  
You're the prettiest girl I've ever seen  
Hello Beautiful, have a beautiful day!"

"Do you want to know something?" At Jill's tentative nod, Lynsey continued. "When I was 15 years old, I thought Ben had written that song just for me."

"Ben didn't actually write that song. It was his..."

"You're missing the point. I *meant* that when he sang it, it's like he was singing to me, you know?"

"I do know. My um, daughter felt that way, too."

"It's Carly, right? She seems like a nice girl. A bit spoiled maybe. But what can you do, am I right?"

Jill was growing increasingly uncomfortable as she heard this troubled woman talking about the people she loved as if she actually knew them. She decided to cut the visit short.

"What do you want, Lynsey? I'm running out of time."

"Ooh, my bad. I had almost forgotten what a busy lady you are. I'm just gonna be hanging out here in my room all night. Watching the concert on the tube. Maybe a soak in the tub to relax me, huh? Thoughts?" Jill just stared at her.

"Don't judge me, Jill. I'm exhausted and rightfully so. Sending photos to all those media outlets yesterday was hard work. Do you have any idea how difficult it was to get all those fax numbers?"

Jill was dumbfounded. "Why, Lynsey? Why did you...?"

"Because I *could*. I figured Ben hadn't shared my little visit to his room with you. You never mentioned anything in all those texts you send. Besides, you should know what kind of man you're involved with. Or used to be with. He's no angel. I love him, but he's far from perfect."

"Did you ask me here just to tell me that?"

"Oh goodness, no. I have a favor. Ben would do something if you asked him, wouldn't he?"

"That depends. What is it you want?"

"I want him to dedicate his song to me tonight. I want him to say- 'Hey Lynsey, this one's for you, girl. Have a beautiful day.'" That's what I want. Can you promise me that you'll talk to him?"

*Can you say whack job?* Not taking her eyes off the girl, Jill took a few steps backward. "Um, yeah. No problem. I'm sure Ben will do it. Anything for his fans, right?"

Lynsey's eyes turned cold again and she snapped at Jill. "A *fan*? Seriously, is that what you think I am? Ben and I are soul mates. We're meant to be together. He's just too wrapped up in you to know that yet. But he will. One way or the other."

Jill didn't wait to hear another word. She turned and started towards the door, which suddenly flew open and Carly came charging in, followed closely by three men wearing jackets with the hotel's logo. Carly ran straight to Jill while the security personnel surrounded Lynsey, who had started moaning loudly.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"Carly, how did..."

"I was calling to see if you needed anything, but you didn't answer. Grandma said you went back to your room and one of the maids let me in. I saw the note and figured that you were here with Ben. So I called him, but he's still over at the venue. He had no idea what I was talking about. I got scared, so..."

"You did the right thing, sweetheart. That poor girl is so mixed up. I just..."  
The door opened again and both women watched as Ben headed towards them at a run.

Lynsey started shrieking. "Ben. Tell them that I'm with you. Tell them, please."

Ben pulled Jill to him in a crushing embrace. "Christ Griff, way to give a guy a heart attack," he growled in her ear.

"I'm fine, really. Oh Ben, I've missed you so much." Jill dissolved into tears. "I thought it was you, darlin'," she snuffled against his neck. "I came here for you."

"I know, Griff. Don't worry. Everything's gonna be fine."

Carly interrupted them. "C'mon. Let's let these guys do their jobs and clear out of here."

"That Ian? Fire his ass the first chance you get. And toss your phone. It's time for an upgrade."

Ben looked confused at Jill's request, but she told him she would explain everything to him to him later. He promised to catch up to them and as the women left the room, he approached one of the men. Lynsey was moaning again and no longer seemed to be aware that her 'soul-mate' stood just a few feet away from her. Ben was told that a medical professional had been contacted and was due shortly to evaluate Lynsey. He assured them that Ms. Griffin would not want to press charges and that he would be ever so grateful if they could keep this out of the press, at least until the concert was over later tonight. To sweeten the deal, he promised that

tickets for them and their guests would be waiting at the will-call window. Ben turned to go, after a quick glance at Lynsey, who now appeared to be sound asleep, wrapped in her blanket.

“Thanks Mr. Fein. Can’t wait for the show,” one of the men called out.

He waved in their general direction. “Just make sure that Miss Parker is well attended to, will you?” Then he raced down the hall to see Jill.

## Chapter 35

T- 30 minutes

Jill

Security was tight and even the A-listers were having their bags searched as they entered the lobby. Jill handed over her tiny silver clutch and watched as an armed security guard pawed through its contents. She wondered what he thought he might find besides her lipstick, cellphone, tissues, credit card and \$20 bill. Jill looked around the crowded lobby watching for Carly as she retrieved her bag. They had walked in from outside only a few minutes earlier, but had gotten separated. She handed her ticket to the attendant and took back the stub. She wondered if she should have taken the label up on their offer to whisk her in through the back entrance, but she had wanted to experience the event in its entirety. The press, the hoards of fans hoping to catch a glimpse of someone famous, the hucksters trying to peddle tickets that would probably turn out to be fake and the ticketholders themselves who probably felt like they had won the entertainment lottery, based on the promised set list of performers.

Jill continued to scan the crowd for Carly and finally spotted her about 20 feet ahead. It was hard to miss her beautiful daughter, who frequently seemed to stand half a head taller than everyone else. A tall girl made even taller by the stiletto pumps she had chosen for the evening, Carly moved through the crowd gracefully and with the kind of assurance Jill had never known. She had inherited it from her dad, who had that ability to stand out, but also to fit in wherever he went. Worried she wouldn’t be able to catch up to her daughter and starting to feel more than a

little anxious, she called her name. Carly whipped around and immediately spied her mother. She hurried back towards her and grasped her arm.

“C’mon, Mom. Let’s get you out of this crowd. You’ve had enough excitement tonight, don’t you think?” She glided through the lobby with Jill following closely behind her and finally stopped just inside the theater.

She scrunched up her face in mock confusion and smirking at Jill and Em, quipped, “I wonder where our seats are. Gee, I hope we’re not stuck up in the nosebleed section.”

One of the ushers came bustling over just then and greeting Jill by name, offered to escort the three women to their front row seats. They settled in and Jill started to fan herself with the program she had just been handed.

“Jill, are you okay?” Em whispered.

“Yeah, I’m fine. “

“Carly told me about that girl. You must have been so scared.”

“I honestly don’t think she would have hurt me. She just wanted someone to listen to her. To hear what she had to say.”

“You were running for your life out of that room, Mom. It’s a good thing we...”

“Oh Carly, stop being so dramatic. I was in a hurry to get back and finish getting ready. You don’t think all of this,” she drawled, indicating her dress, makeup and hair, “happens on its own, do you?”

“So you’re saying you’re fine, then?”

“Yes, or at least I will be as soon as your grandparents get here. I probably should go wait for them, just in case...”

“I’m on it,” Carly promised and raced back towards the lobby, a task made much more difficult by the dozens of people suddenly eager to claim their seats.

“Don’t worry,” Em told Jill. “I just texted my mom and she’s all settled back in Row T.” Jill turned to look at where she imagined Row T was located, but couldn’t see a thing. Em patted her hand.

“She’s met Beth and Jesse and Ted and Marnie and let’s see.... Melissa and Ryder plus your mom and sister and her kids. Oh and some guy named Pops. All present and accounted for.” She read the names off of her phone and ended with a mock salute.

Jill let out a breath and felt herself starting to relax.

“Um Jill. Carly said Ben was there?”

Yeah, Ben had been there with her. He got to her room just after the stylist arrived. They had barely a minute to themselves, but he had kissed her and told her that he loved her and she had been able to tell him that she loved him too. She gave him an abbreviated version of what been happening with Ian and Lynsey. He was shocked but recovered quickly. He used the stylist’s phone to alert his security detail to apprehend Ian when he arrived for the concert. He promised to see Jill later and left to go get showered and dressed.

Thinking about him, dripping wet from the shower, made Jill want to...

“From the look on your face, I imagine that everything is okay with you two?”

“What? Oh, yes. I sure hope so, Em.”

“Look who I found!” Carly boomed as she made her way towards her mother. Jill was relieved to see Mike and Kathy trailing right behind their granddaughter. She jumped up and threw her arms around Kathy.

“You made it! I’m so happy to see you both.” Kathy sank gratefully into her seat next to Jill. She started to fan herself with the program just as Jill had done. Her face was glowing with excitement as she remarked about the traffic and the crowds and the overall level of anticipation in the theater. Jill barely had time to squeeze Mike’s hand, when the overhead lights started to dim. The show was about to begin.



## Chapter 36

### It's Showtime!

Afterwards when Jill was asked what she remembered most about that night, she would honestly report she could recall very little about the actual show. The photo reel at the beginning was a real tear jerker, featuring photos of James growing up, then onto him performing as well as a few of him with Jill by his side or playing with Carly as a little girl. The last image was of James on stage, backed up on guitar by Alex. Jill recognized all but a few of the photos as they passed by in a blur. Jamie the performer and James the family man. With Kathy on one side and Carly on the other, her hands were being squeezed tightly as each new photo appeared. Then the video montage came on with the selections from the original album. *James sounds amazing*. She looked over to see the tears streaming down the faces of both of her in-laws.

One of the label execs was serving as emcee for the evening and he stood beaming as the crowd gave a standing ovation as the video came to an end. Jill had been warned, so when he announced that James's widow Grammy winning songwriter Jill Griffin Sheridan was in the house, along with daughter Carly and parents Mike and Kathy Sheridan, the four of them stood and waved to the crowds and the TV cameras. When Jill watched a recording of the concert a few days later, she would be relieved to see her waterproof mascara had not run and that she looked happy and thrilled, instead of all but ready to pass out.

After a few more tributes, Adam Levine and his band took the stage and everyone cheered. When Alex Sheridan was identified as being featured on lead guitar, he got a brief standing ovation as he walked out on stage. They performed the title song *Guessing at Normal*. Several other performances followed, and when R.E.M., Jill's all time favorite band, got ready to perform *Unspoken*, Alex returned to the stage and backed them up masterfully. It was thrilling for Jill to hear the lyrics she had written for James being performed by such an eclectic mix of artists. As soon as they left the stage, the house lights came on signaling intermission.

"Do you think we should try to get in line to the ladies' room?" Kathy stage-whispered.

Jill turned to look at the throngs of concertgoers heading towards the lobby. The one downside of being in the front row was that you were the last ones to exit the theater. She was about to tell Kathy they would probably not make it in time, when one of the ushers approached them. He whispered to Jill there was a private lounge available, so the five of them followed him out the side door and down a short hallway to another door marked private. As soon as they were inside, Kathy made a

beeline for the door discreetly marked with a W. Jill followed suit and after splashing cold water on her wrists and making sure her hastily applied lipstick was actually on her lips, she joined the others.

Several icy cold water bottles were sweating all over the beautiful mahogany sideboard and Jill grabbed one gratefully. She offered it to Kathy, who declined, insisting she wouldn't want to miss any of the second half of the show due to an unscheduled bathroom break. Mike teased his wife about having such a tiny bladder and she took the ribbing with her usual good nature. He wrapped her up in a big hug and she kissed him on the lips as Carly, Em and Jill watched happily.

"Get a room you two," Carly teased her grandparents. Mike made a motion as if to sweep Kathy off her feet and everyone laughed.

"You look beautiful honey," Kathy told her as they made their way back to their seats a few minutes later. Jill was about to return the compliment when the older woman spoke again. "I'm really sorry about your young man. I hoped you two would work it out, you know?"

"Thanks, but I'm fine, Kath. And tonight's about James," she reminded her gently, with a catch in her throat. She followed the others down the hallway and re-entered the theater. As she sank into her seat, Jill managed a quick glance at her phone. Several missed calls and texts from Beth, Ted and her sister Susan, all reassuring her that their seats were great, the show was amazing, and that she looked beautiful. Jill smoothed the skirt of her emerald green cocktail dress and slipped her feet out of the silver high-heeled pumps. *Ahhhh*. She wondered once again how women could stand to wear shoes like this so often. After tonight, she would put them in a box at the back of her closet and pray she wouldn't need to see them again for a year or more. She couldn't even imagine when the next opportunity to dress up like this might be. *The glamorous life of a rock widow*.

The second half of the concert flew by with more star-studded performances. Jill felt a flash of pride as she reflected on the tortuous job of finalizing the set list. It had all been worth it. Between welcomes to the stage and standing ovations, she thought she was pretty much clapped out and she continued to stay barefoot, despite the need to stand every few minutes. After Bruce Springsteen and his band walked offstage to thunderous applause and yet another standing ovation, Jill felt a flush of excitement. *This is it*. Seconds later, the whole theater exploded with applause as Ben Fein was introduced.

It had been a no-brainer to have him close the show, despite his choice of a song that critics had once referred to as 'kind of a downer'. He strode out on stage and stood quietly as the audience showed their appreciation. Dazzling in a Tom Ford tuxedo, he smiled and waved and Jill felt she would burst with pride. Both Kathy and Carly were squeezing her hands tightly as Jill waited to hear what Ben would say. Finally, a hush fell over the crowd. Ben smiled and began.

"I am thrilled to be here tonight with all of you. And I'm proud too. Being here on stage, singing for all of you at this amazing tribute for one of my favorite performers of all time? It's a true honor. James Sheridan was a trendsetter, a trailblazer and from what from everyone tells me, one hell of a guy. I never had the chance to meet him personally, but as you know I've gotten close to members of his family during this past year."

Jill's cheeks burned at this and even under the bright lights, she could see Ben was blushing as well. He waited until the laughter died down before he continued.

"When I decided to learn to play the guitar, I knew the only teacher I wanted was Alex Sheridan. He's about the best musician I've ever heard. I'll try to do him proud tonight, but if I suck, it's on me, folks. Alex did everything he could."

Everyone laughed again and Jill marveled at Ben's poise. He had several thousand people literally hanging on his every word, not to mention the millions who were watching from their homes all over the world.

"Yes, I've had the pleasure of getting to know Alex," he announced, just as Alex joined him on the stage. He handed Ben one of two guitars he was carrying, and then sat down on one of the stools that had just been placed there. *Ben was going to play guitar? Where had this come from?* Alex was looking more comfortable than ever, as he sat slouched on his stool, waiting for his cue to start.

"And the woman who wrote virtually all of the songs on this timeless album is also with us tonight. Please show your appreciation for my good friend, Jill Griffin Sheridan. C'mon Griff," he urged her over thunderous applause. "It's your turn," he reminded her and despite shaking knees she was certain would not support her, Jill stood and waved to Ben and Alex, before she turned to face the audience. Earlier she had been the Widow, but this was different. Now she was being celebrated as the Writer.

The applause was starting to die down as Jill sat and suddenly a voice boomed out from the middle of the theater. "Jilly, you rock!" Everyone laughed at that, including Jill. *Freaking Teddy.*

The crowd grew quiet again as both men started to play the opening notes of *Jericho Road*. Jill held her breath as Ben's perfect tenor voice began to soar. His guitar playing was not bad for a beginner, but Jill knew no one would even notice, what with Alex's masterful performance and Ben's world class vocals. She had heard Ben sing snippets of *Jericho Road* before, but hadn't realized just what an amazing job he would do. *JR 2.0* was a bit more upbeat, a tad less melancholy than James's original version. Ben lent a certain hopefulness to the lyrics and Alex was turning up the tempo as well.

When Jill took her eyes off Ben for a second, she saw tears running down Carly's cheeks as she gazed spellbound at the performance. Her young face positively glowed as she watched Ben and her uncle perform. It was an amazing several minutes and when the last few notes of the song were played, Jill gratefully accepted the wad of tissue Kathy pressed upon her. She patted her cheeks down, and joined the audience in a standing ovation.

Someone backstage must have been watching the clock, because suddenly Adam Levine, Sting and Michael Stipe joined Ben and Alex on stage. A curtain at the back of the stage lifted and several of the evening's musicians stood ready to perform an encore performance of the title song. The result was a fusion of sounds that drove the audience to their feet once more and most sang along.

Ben appeared to be singing directly at Jill as he shared a mike with Adam. *He did it.* He had made the song his own. Earlier, Jill had offered up a prayer and a thank you to James for all he had done for her. James was gone, but she was still here and Ben's was the only voice she heard. Another standing ovation followed and the label exec thanked the TV audience and said goodnight. The official concert on broadcast TV was over, but then Justin Bieber, Rihanna and other performers from earlier walked onto the stage to play a medley of hit pop songs. The audience watched spellbound at the extemporaneous outpouring of music.

Jill felt her heart would burst as she followed Kathy and Mike out of the theater a half hour later. All the work and all the planning and now, the concert, the tribute to James was done. She could go back to doing whatever it was she used to do before the concert had taken over such a huge chunk of her spare time. She felt hopeful that much of it would be spent with Ben.

Based on the long press line awaiting the performers, Jill figured it was unlikely she would run into Ben. She would send him a text later, congratulating him on his performance. Right now, she needed to gather up her peeps and head back to the hotel for an intimate get together. She vowed it would not last all that long and as she reflected on those who would attend, she realized gratefully there wasn't a real partier in the bunch, unless Pris decided to break loose and get her groove on. If Jill played her cards right, she could permanently retire these freaking shoes and be relaxing at home in just a couple of hours. *With any luck, I'll be sitting on Ben's lap!*

## Chapter 37

### The After-Party

Jill knew she could count on Beth and Ted to get everyone back to the hotel a block away, so she felt no need to rush as they made their way down the sidewalk. She was surprised when Carly and Em who were leading them, walked right past the hotel. She called ahead to her daughter.

“Where are you going Carly? You just walked past the hotel.” Carly turned briefly and mumbled about needing to check something and kept walking, Kathy and Mike following closely behind. Jill’s feet were killing her and she was craving a glass of chardonnay. *What is that girl up to?* She decided to be a good sport and she followed along for another block. Suddenly everyone turned and walked through an open doorway framed by a red canopy. *Wait. This is the restaurant I reserved for the post-concert celebration!* But Carly had cancelled the affair at her request weeks ago, and it looked like there was another party booked this evening. The place was teeming with well-dressed people. She had to stop her daughter before she went any further.

“Carly, it’s a private event. You can’t go...” Carly finally stopped at the entrance to a large room and after she motioned her grandparents and Em inside, she turned towards Jill.

“I love you Mom. And Ben was right, it *is* your turn.”

Jill immediately recognized a number of the faces in the crowd, including Beth, Ted and Marnie and her mom and sister Susan. At her arrival, the partygoers broke out into thunderous applause and Jill stood and tried to smile gratefully. Carly shrugged half-apologetically and squeezed her mom’s arm before she walked away. There was nothing left for Jill to do. When the crowd calmed down, she spoke directly into a microphone, which had appeared out of nowhere. It really *was* her turn.

“Thank you. This evening, this music, this amazing group of people here tonight—none of it would be possible without the love and support of two people. Mike and Kathy Sheridan. You raised two amazingly talented sons and I had the good luck to fall in love with just one of them. Sorry Alex,” she added with a wink. Everyone laughed, and Jill continued after taking a deep breath. She thanked Ron for always having James’s back and she thanked the record label for their support. She thanked her family for all of the love they had shown her though all the good times as well as some pretty dark days.

“But mostly, I have to thank my partner in crime, my best friend and my favorite person in the whole world. My daughter Carly. My beautiful, sneaky girl. Sweetie,

your dad is so proud of you. And so am I.” As the applause started to die down again, she spoke up. “And if it hasn’t been said enough tonight, ‘Thank you James Ryan Sheridan’. If you’re up there and watching right now, we’re about to have a kickass party you would have loved. And if you’re listening to me, and darlin’, despite everything, you always listened to me and helped me to find my voice, I just want to say ‘I love you and I always will’.” She gave a big wave and set down the cordless microphone feeling relieved. She had fulfilled every one of her unofficial duties for the evening and it was time to relax and enjoy the party.

She approached Carly who was standing off to the side. “Carly you...” The rest of what she was going to say got lost as her family and close friends quickly surrounded her. Carly had pulled it off. Everyone was here, even oh my God. Michael Stipe handed her a glass of chardonnay and Sting guided her over to a huge display of plump shrimp and oysters on the half shell glistening on a mountain of chopped ice. She looked over and saw a carving station and a pasta bar had been set up. It was exactly what Jill had envisioned, as long as there was....yes! A chocolate fountain centered a huge display of luscious looking desserts. She’d not had much of an appetite lately, but the thought of a plateful of tiny éclairs and cream puffs made her mouth water. *“If Adam Levine would feed them to me, I would die a happy woman, But, no. I choose Ben. If only he was here.*

She looked around for Carly and spotted her daughter with Em and a few people she didn’t recognize. Then Em hugged the blond woman and Jill figured it had to be Pris. But who was the older couple still talking with the girls? They seemed vaguely familiar as if she should know them.

Then Ben walked in and the room erupted once more.

## Chapter 38

Jill felt her whole body go numb as she watched Ben greet the guests who had been standing by the door. He had changed out of his tuxedo, and to Jill, he was looking even more handsome than ever, in a white shirt and khakis along with his red sneakers. Everyone wanted to hug him or shake his hand or pose for a photo. He appeared to take it all in stride and he seemed relaxed, but Jill could see him looking around for something or somebody.

"I'm here," she whispered, and as if he had heard her, Ben turned in her direction and smiled at her. She smiled back, and then froze as he walked, not towards her, but to the microphone she had just used. *What is he going to do?* The room quieted down as Ben stood there, waiting for his turn to speak to the crowd.

"Hey everyone. What a night, am I right?" More cheers followed, before Ben spoke again.

"None of us would have gotten to where we are today without the constant love and support of our parents. I want to begin by introducing you to mine- Joel and Betsy Feinstein," he announced proudly and gestured to the couple that Carly and Em had been chatting with. *Of course.* Jill could see Ben in his father, an handsome man with a messy head of grey hair and a wide smile. And in his mom, with her big brown eyes. Ben's parents waved to the crowd, who responded with thunderous applause and cheers.

"And of course, as has been mentioned, none of tonight's performances would ever have occurred without the love of Mike and Kathy Sheridan, proud parents to my good friend Alex and the late James Sheridan. Thank you for everything- Mom, Dad, Mike and Kathy. I hope all of the amazing performances you've enjoyed tonight confirms that all your love and sacrifice was worth it."

Jill continued to watch Ben closely as he waited patiently, once again, for the applause to die down. She knew this man and he clearly had something else he wanted to say.

"A wonderful and very brave woman I know and love very much, shared something a while back during an interview. She was describing her songwriting process and her sources of inspiration. She said, and I quote, "All the best love stories start with a great relationship." Well Jill Griffin, I have to say I agree with you. Truer words were never spoken, my love, and I'm going to tell you, right here and right now, in front of our families and our friends, that you and me? *Ours* is a great relationship and we have the potential for an epic love story. I love you, Griff, and you need to know I always will. I'll cherish you and sing your praises and never leave you to doubt just

how amazing you are and how great we are together. I know you're a private person and you probably want to kill me right now, but this has to be said. I love you and want to spend every moment of every day showing you just how much."

The room erupted once more and someone started chanting. In a matter of seconds, dozens of party goers were repeating, "Jill, Jill, Jill." Jill felt herself moving towards Ben as the crowd parted for her as if by magic. For the first time in her life, she felt calm and composed as she thought about her future and what she wanted. It was suddenly and totally crystal clear. She wanted Ben. A life with him was the life she was meant to live.

She knew she was blushing wildly and grinning like a fool, as she continued walking towards Ben and her future. Their love story, while not necessarily pre-ordained, was perfect. Hell, it was epic! She saw Carly cheering and chanting as she stood with her arm around Em. She could see her mother waving madly from the far corner of the room. She watched Alex fist-pumping wildly. Ted and Marnie were positively beaming at her and Jill was close enough to hear her long-time best friend Beth yelling for her to 'Go for it, Jilly'.

Having the approval of her family meant a lot to Jill, but right then, all she needed to know was already in her heart. She deserved a second chance at love as much as anyone did. Ben was standing alone, microphone abandoned as he opened his arms to her and she rushed into them. This was her happy ever after, she knew that now. This was her epic love story.

The End



Five years later

## **For Immediate Release**

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### **The Sheridan Fund Announces \$20 Million in Donations**

The Sheridan Fund, one of the leading non-profit charity organizations supporting music education in the U.S., has revealed that due to record earnings and strategic partnerships with a number of key sponsors, their donations to public school systems will once again top \$20 million for the current fiscal year.

“The benefits of music education are staggering,” reports Sheridan Fund CEO Carly Sheridan-Barrows. “Studies show that music in the schools has a positive effect on overall academic performance as well as self-esteem.” Sheridan-Barrows, the daughter of the late rock icon Jamie Sheridan and Grammy winning songwriter Jill Griffin, has been with the organization, which was founded five years ago, since 2015. She was named CEO earlier this year.

For more information on the Sheridan Fund or to apply for one of their grants or scholarships, visit their website at [www.sheridanfund.org](http://www.sheridanfund.org).

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## **Rags to Riches: Insider News & Views**

NY, NY

### **Simon Sez**

Reported sightings of Ben Fein, the reigning king of pop, with a baby in tow can now be confirmed. My readers have been sharing photos for the past week of Fein, who has been spotted all over town with a baby in a stroller, often accompanied by his long-time partner, songwriter Jill Griffin. My sources tell me that the infant is the grandson of the late rock icon Jamie Sheridan. The mystery baby's name is Griffin James Barrows-Sheridan and his parents are Sheridan's daughter, philanthropist Carly Sheridan and her partner, artist Taylor Barrows. As Ben has long been romantically linked to two-time Grammy winner Griffin that makes the barely 30-year-old crooner a pseudo grandfather. Fein, who recently settled out of court with his former Five2<sup>nd</sup>Rulez band members for an undisclosed amount, is getting ready to go back on tour later this year. Hope there's room on the tour bus for a playpen! Keep watching this column for more updates on all your favorite celebs.

###

## **The Hartsdale Press: Your Hometown Paper for Over 55 Years**

Hartsdale, TN

### **Local Musician to Appear in Concert**

Local musician and longtime area resident Alex Sheridan is slated to perform at a number of Nashville area music venues over the next several weeks. His 21-year-old son Ryder is reported to be joining him on stage. Their first appearance will be this Friday at the popular Bluebird Café. Sheridan has seen a growing demand for his considerable musical talents ever since his multiple appearances on the stage at the hugely popular *Guessing at Normal* tribute concert five years ago. Alex and his late brother James were co-founders of grunge band Nomad back in the 80's.

###

# The Jamie Sheridan Tribute Concert

## September 8, 2012

A night of stars celebrating the music of iconic performer Jamie Sheridan on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his platinum selling album *Guessing at Normal*.

*Guessing at Normal* performed by Maroon 5, featuring Alex Sheridan, lead guitar

*Best Day Ever* performed by Bruno Mars

*Without You* performed by Usher

*Dance with Me* performed by Justin Timberlake

*Why'd You Go?* performed by Beyonce

*If Only* performed by Coldplay

*Unspoken* performed by R.E.M. featuring Alex Sheridan, lead guitar

*One Night Stand* performed by Justin Bieber

*Leaving Home* performed by Rihanna

*Waiting on You* performed by Kenny Chesney & Tim McGraw

*It's Just My Life* performed by Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band

*Jericho Road* performed by Ben Fein

*Guessing at Normal* performed by Ben Fein, Adam Levine, Michel Stipe and Sting featuring Alex Sheridan, lead guitar and Stewart Copeland, drums.

There will be a fifteen-minute intermission following Coldplay's performance.