

JILL IS NOT HAPPY

Exclusive Website Excerpt

THEN

Tires screeched on the wet pavement and the car slid, careening to the right.

A flash of something in the headlights and then a terrible thud. Finally, the brakes held and the tires gripped the road again.

We stopped. Steam rose from the hood of the car. All around us was darkness, silence. We both stepped out of the car and saw what we had done, illuminated in the headlights. We had hit a person.

What were they doing on this dark, winding road?

This didn't happen, couldn't happen, but it did. Checked for a pulse. There was none.

We needed to go.

Pulled back onto the road. It was so late.

What could we possibly have done to help?

We needed to get home, get back to campus.

We must get out of here.

And we did.

NOW

Chapter 1

Jill

As I step into the busy coffee shop, my shoulders shoot to my ears. There are too many happy people in here. Happiness is an emotion I find to be as elusive as a consistent almond latte. There is always too much or too little milk, in my experience. Why can't anything be perfect? Jack and I used to be perfect, we were. Just thinking about my handsome husband sends a flash of desire through my body, despite the circumstances we find ourselves in at the moment.

“Jill! Over here!” Michelle waves to me from a seat on the patio. I stand corrected. Michelle is perfect. She's wearing a canary yellow dress, her auburn hair shiny and rolling over her shoulders. She looks like a ray of sunshine. It's good for someone like me to keep someone like Michelle as a friend; I realized that a long time ago when we were matched as freshman year roommates. It's important to have a best friend and she is mine.

I push away my personal cloudbank and wave back at her, making my way to her table without acknowledging anyone else in the restaurant. I know some of them may recognize me, but I don't want to see them, or be seen by anyone except Jack. I never have.

Michelle pops up from her seat and wraps her arms around me in a hug. I do my best to imitate the gesture.

“So good to see you! I can’t believe it’s been a couple of months since we last grabbed coffee,” she says, releasing me as we sit down together. “You’ve lost weight, haven’t you? I mean, you look great but you look thinner than usual. You must be stressed.” I smile. “You can never be too rich or too thin, right?” The weight loss is a byproduct of my life of late, not part of my plans. Some people eat when they’re unhappy. I do the opposite.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Michelle says, her face a frown of concern. She’s so darn nice. And earnest. I thought it was an act at first. It’s not.

“You’re the best. My best,” I say. It’s a refrain for a reason.

“I ordered you an almond latte, hope that’s still your favorite?” Michelle says with a smile, pivoting.

“Perfect, you know I love those lattes,” I say. “It’s good to see you. I realize you’re kept busy driving those boys of yours everywhere.”

“It’s hectic. But I need to make time for friends. It’s so important,” she says and pats my hand. I don’t like that she has many people in her life besides me, though Michelle doesn’t know it. She just thinks I’m an introvert, and so a long time ago stopped inviting me to group outings, or even mentioning her other friends too much. It’s the way I like it. Michelle and I have been friends since college, a time that seems like someone else’s life. When I look back at photos of me then, I don’t recognize myself. That Jill was so happy, and

so very much in love. I mean, I still love Jack. It's just become complicated. I wonder how Michelle sees me now, besides thin.

“So how are the kids? How's Brad?” I ask.

Michelle's twins are fifteen years old, and in high school. I don't envy her having two teen boys around. Can't imagine it. But I'm sure, for Michelle, every day is a blessing. If you take her word for it, most things are just wonderful. Of course, that's not true, but I'm certain she believes it to be.

“He's back in the air again, and happy about it. You know he switched airlines, so he got to be home for a couple of months. It's funny, I think he learned to love being home and now misses us more than ever when he's away.” Her eyes get a little misty thinking about her pilot husband, away at work in the sky. That's so sweet. I look down at my wedding ring and spin it around my finger.

“How about you guys?” Michelle asks. “I saw Jack in town last week. It really is remarkable how Jack has kept his whole college looks, body and all. I mean, I love Brad to death, but he looks like a middle-aged man. Your Jack, well, he's still hot.”

She is right about my genetically blessed husband, and I know she means her compliment innocently enough, so I keep a smile on my face. How about us? I can't tell her the truth. I wouldn't want to dash her image of Jack and me as the perfect couple, of course not. Michelle has been carrying that impression around since senior year of college. It was true then, and for a long time after. Now, we'll see. Every couple has rough patches, but there is no need to tell the world about them. Best to handle things privately. I'll fix us. I always do.

“Jack and I are having a lot of fun empty nesting,” I tell her with a grin. “There’s nobody there to bother us when the moment strikes. Maybe that’s my weight loss plan?”

“Oh my gosh. Lucky you. So you’re just having sex all the time?” Michelle asks, her eyes are wide trying to imagine it, along with an empty house.

“All the time,” I say. “I mean, it started heating up when Maggie left for boarding school. You know that already. Now that she’s in college, well, it’s almost like we’re newlyweds again.”

“I know. That’s what you’ve been telling me. I guess there’s an upside for when the boys go to college,” Michelle says. “But I’m still dreading the thought of an empty nest.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t. It’s wonderful. Maggie is in her happy place, living her best life. And so are we,” I say with a smile. That I only know this from social media is a fact I keep to myself. My daughter and I, well, we struggle to connect.

“And how’s Jack? I realize he had a big disappointment with the election,” Michelle says. Her lips form a frown. Jack was mayor of our town for a couple of years. He did love it, but then he lost in the last election, in a rather scandalous manner, unfortunately.

“He’s fine. Just needs to figure out his next act, you know?” I answer, as the waitress places my drink in front of me. “I mean, he is a little, um . . .” I struggle to find the right word.

“What? You know you can tell me anything,” Michelle says and reaches across the table for my hand. “Honey, what is it?”

I wait for the waitress to walk past us with a plate of eggs and sausage, and my stomach growls. I do need to remember to eat.

“Ok, I guess I can tell you. The truth is, Jack’s depressed. I don’t know if it’s the election, or something else. Even though he looks the same on the outside, let’s just say, he’s not the Jack I fell in love with. He tries, he does, but it seems like one of the only places we’re connecting right now is the bedroom.”

“Oh, dear, I’m so sorry. What can I do?” Michelle asks.

“Nothing. He’ll have to tackle this himself, with my help,” I answer.

“Depression is serious, Jill,” Michelle says. “The number of calls to suicide hotlines is skyrocketing.”

Yes, I know. I allow a tear to spill over onto my cheek before quickly swiping at it with my napkin. “Oh, it’s not that bad, really, he just needs to figure out what’s next and then I’m sure he’ll be fine,” I say. “I’m helping him every step of the way. Don’t worry.”

Michelle’s happy face falls with concern. She nods doubtfully. I feel bad about that, I really do.

“We’re finally going to take that road trip to Utah’s national parks,” I say. “We leave in the morning.”

“You’ve been talking about getting away for a while. I’m glad you’re doing it. A trip is the perfect solution. Get out of the rut of being at home and get outside.” Michelle nods vigorously, brightening again. “When we snuck away to Big Sur last winter it was life changing. You never know how much stress and worry you’re holding until you get away. My neck had been so tense and now, look, I can turn it again.” She demonstrates, her brown hair spinning across her shoulders.

“Yes, it will be lovely to get away,” I say.

“I mean in Big Sur, we finally had sex again without teenage boys around,” she takes a sip of coffee. “I need to go back.”

I smile at my friend, and she pats my hand.

“Yes, well, it should help lighten Jack’s mood. Sunshine, fresh air. Nothing better. I’m excited to hike and talk, to reconnect outside the bedroom.”

“I’m sure it will be just what the doctor ordered. You two are so lucky. You always have been the golden couple,” she says. “Like a fairy tale.” I love that she sees the best, the brightest, in people.

Even when she shouldn’t.

“Jack and Jill is a nursery rhyme,” I remind her. “Not a fairy tale.”

“Same same,” she says. All’s well or will be she’s decided, despite Jack’s election loss and subsequent bout of depression. I’m certain she’ll tell her husband about that. Jack Tingley has never before had anything to be sad about, as far as most people are concerned. That’s good gossip.

“I better get going. A lot of packing to do,” I say. “I haven’t been hiking for years, or to a national park. Neither has Jack.”

“You’ll love it,” Michelle says. “Go on, I’ll get the check. And I’ll expect to hear all about it when you get back. Have some romance for me.”

“Oh, don’t worry, we will.” I blow her a kiss and hurry out of the café, pleased with myself. Experts say you should tell someone where you’re going when you’re heading out into the wilderness in case you get lost, or into trouble.



In case you need to be rescued. We're good at getting ourselves out of trouble as long as we stick together. That's the part I'm worried about, though.

The togetherness.