

Draft of Chapter 36 – While this is not an epilogue to the story, it is another chapter (literally), in the journey of Jill and Ross. Please Enjoy.

## Chapter 36

The crowd was deafening when Ross took the stage. Lanie squeezed my hand with excitement as the music began to play. It was a familiar melody. One that I had heard Ross play for days on end as he tried to perfect the chorus several weeks earlier. Stella was trying to tell me something over the crowd but I didn't understand anything. I just shook my head and smiled. Ross was wearing a pair of ripped jeans with a faded concert tee, his guitar hung around his torso as he sung the first chorus of the song. Running his hands thru his hair he adjusted the guitar and strummed along to the refrain of the song. The crowd sang and danced along as he transitioned seamlessly into another tune I was less familiar with.

“Are you sure you're okay?” Stella leaned in and asked.

“Is that what you were asking earlier?” I asked and she nodded.

“I'm fine. Why?” What I meant to ask was why she was asking me right this now.

“Didn't you and Ross leave things unresolved?”

“Yes but I don't want to talk about it right now,” I snapped back and she nodded. In truth the last twenty-four hours were not what I thought they were going to be when I arrived in the city. It was supposed to be a blissful reunion with Ross. I had planned on watching both of his shows, spending what little time he had together and the rest of the time was supposed to be catching up with Stella and Lanie. So far nothing had gone as planned.

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Lanie and I flew up from North Carolina together and Stella was going to meet us at the airport. In pure Stella fashion she had gotten held up in the city and never made it. Lanie and I waited thirty minutes before we finally hailed a cab. Stella was able to meet us in the lobby of the Carlyle Hotel shortly after we arrived. The room Stella and Lanie were sharing was ready when they checked in but my reservation could not be found. Forty-five minutes later and one outburst from Stella, my suite was now ready and I had a slew of extra amenities at my disposal. Ross called while I was in the shower to let me know his rehearsals were not going well and that

he would just meet me at the hotel later that evening. Even though I was able to shower and change in record time, we were still late for our dinner reservation across town causing us to lose the reservation. I think we were all grumpy by the time we sat down for dinner at a place far less adequate according to Stella. Stella was upset over a case at work, Lanie was worried about Mary Elizabeth and the little time they had recently spent together. In fact, I suspect she wished she'd stayed in North Carolina not that she would ever admit it. I was disappointed in not being able to see Ross and I had a sinking feeling that things were only going to get worse before they got better.

It was well after midnight when we got back to our hotel. I had texted Ross in the cab and had not yet heard anything back. Exhausted from the travel and upheaval of the day, I changed and crawled into bed. I awoke when I heard my phone ping, glancing at the clock I saw that it was after two in the morning.

*From: Ross Powers*

*So sorry!! We just finished with rehearsals. Going to crash on the bus. Meet you in the morning for breakfast. I'll be in the hotel lobby at 8. I promise. XO -R*

*To: Ross Powers*

*Ok. -J*

*From: Ross Powers*

*Don't be mad.*

*To: Ross Powers*

*Not mad. Disappointed.*

With that I rolled back over and went to bed hoping tomorrow would be a better day.

The next morning my alarm rang at seven. I was able to shower and get dressed but the hour seemed to drag on as I got ready. I kept checking the time, making sure I wasn't going to be late for breakfast with Ross. At five minutes to eight I sent a quick text to Stella and Lanie to let

them know of my breakfast plans and I raced downstairs. As I exited the elevators, there he was, standing in the hotel lobby with his back to me, dressed in dark denim jeans with a leather jacket and his signature chucks. He looked slightly out of place in the fancy lobby and that made the moment that much more perfect.

“Ross,” I said louder than I meant. He turned to look at me, flashing a crooked grin and I saw my favorite sparkle in his eyes.

“Oh Jill,” he said coming toward me and leaning in for a long slow kiss.

“I’ve missed you,” I breathed when I had a chance.

“Have I told you yet that you look beautiful? Because you do,” he added before embracing me again.

“Breakfast?” I asked after a couple minutes.

“Lets,” he said taking my hand and leading me out of the lobby.

“Where are we going?” I asked after we walked several blocks.

“To this little breakfast place I used to go to all the time when I was in school. They have the best food,” he said excitedly.

“Sounds perfect,” I said basking in his excitement. We walked the rest of the way hand in hand in comfortable silence.

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“What do you want to do next?” Ross asked after breakfast.

“Next? Don’t you have to be back at rehearsals or doing some important musician thing?” I teased.

“Nope. I’m yours all morning,” he winked at me.

“Oh I could think of some possibilities,” I leaned over with the idea of showing Ross my intention when my phone rang.

“Ignore it,” Ross said meeting me across the table and kissing me ever so lightly on the lips.

“It’s Stella. Let me get it because she will just keep calling until I answer,” I said after I sneaked a peek at the caller ID.

“What’s up Stella?”

“How is breakfast?” she asked making small talk.

“Good but the company was better,” I smiled looking at Ross. “You need breakfast recommendations?” I asked trying to move the conversation along.

“No. I got called into the office early, it’s actually why I’m calling,” she said with a slight pause. “Jill, I hate to do this but can you and lover boy stop by my office? There are some forms I need you to sign.”

“Really today? Can’t it wait?” I asked annoyed.

“It really can’t. We moved those stocks around like we talked about last week and now we need your signature to finalize the deal. I forgot to mention it last week but since you’re in the city today and the office is open today, it would be best.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked feeling strangely defiant.

“Jill you know I don’t like to beg. I messed up on the form and I need you to sign it today so it’s not delayed,” she pleaded and bossed all at the same time.

“Fine,” I said sliding a nervous glance at Ross who was watching me closely.

“When can you be here?” she asked.

“I don’t know fifteen to twenty?” I asked trying to map the route in my head quickly.

“Ok. Call me when you get here and I’ll come down to the lobby and get you. See you shortly.” Stella said as she hung up the call. I set down the phone, closing my eyes and letting out a sigh. Stella always had the ability to be very draining.

“Everything okay?” Ross asked after several minutes.

“Yes. But we need to amend our morning plans.”

“Amend? I didn’t know we had any,” Ross teased.

“Maybe you didn’t but I did,” I teased back.

“Sounds intriguing. What do we need to do for Stella so we can get back on track with your plans,” Ross said with a devilish smile.

“We need to stop by her office so I can sign some paperwork.”

“Paperwork for what?” he asked.

“For my…” I stopped and looked at Ross in panic. In everything that had happened I never once told Ross about the portfolio that Jay left me. How was I going to explain it in the next fifteen minutes?

“For your?” he prompted.

“It’s a long story...one I probably should have told you before now.” I said getting up and gesturing to the door.

“I like stories,” he commented as we headed towards Stella’s office.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I added dryly. By the time we reached Stella’s office building I had finished telling Ross about how I found out about the Oak Island property in the first place, the portfolio, the trip to New York in the summer, all of it.

“So that’s it,” I finished as we waited for Stella in the lobby.

“That’s it? That’s a hell of a story,” Ross commented.

“Are you upset?” I asked unsure of how to read Ross. He was about to say something when Stella interrupted.

“Thank you so much,” Stella said as she embraced me and then Ross.

“No problem,” I said and Ross stayed quiet. Stella ushered us upstairs to where she had the forms waiting. I completed the required forms in less than ten minutes and Ross and I were headed back out onto the street five minutes after that. We walked back in the general direction of the hotel, slowly in silence. I could feel the tension between us building, gone was the blissful reunion and playfulness we shared only an hour before.

“Ross, say something,” I said when I couldn’t take the silence anymore.

“I know that it shouldn’t upset me but it does. You were keeping this secret. Did you not think you could trust me with this?”

“When I got back to Oak Island after the trip, I don’t know, I just forgot about it. Everything just started happening so fast with you and then the incident with Harry and your tour, it just never came up,” I offered as an explanation.

“How do you forget about twenty-three million dollars?” he asked.

“If you never had that kind of money before, and you didn’t want the money, it is not the first thing on your mind,” I said defensively. We walked the last couple of blocks to the Carlyle in silence. When we entered the lobby a pretty blonde girl yelled Ross’s name causing us both to spin around.

“Ross, I was hoping to catch you here,” she said as she bounded over giving him a giant hug.

“Sorry, Megan my phone was off,” he offered her as an explanation pulling his phone out of his pocket to his messages.

“What’s up?” he asked her and they launched into a conversation about the band and rehearsal time as I stood awkwardly by. Finally after a moment, I cleared my throat.

“Oh, sorry Jill. Megan this is Jill. Jill this is Megan; she is one of the backup singers for J. Cole,” he explained.

“This is Jill? So excited to meet you. Ross has talked so much about you,” she gushed embracing me in my own bear hug.

“Nice to meet you too. Strangely I haven’t heard anything about you,” I commented quietly glancing at Ross. Megan informed Ross that she was in the area running errands and thought she would drop in and let him know that the schedule and the prep for the show had changed since he wasn’t answering his phone. Finally, Megan went to hail a cab for the two of them to get back to the venue while Ross and I stared at each other.

“This wasn’t the reunion I had planned,” I finally commented.

“Not the one I imagined either,” he agreed.

“Megan... she seems nice...pretty,” I added.

“It’s not what it looks like,” he said defensively.

“Some girl I hadn’t heard off, showing up in the hotel lobby of where we are supposed to be staying looking for you? What is that supposed to look like?” I asked trying not to start a scene in the lobby.

“First the money and now Megan. Do you trust me at all?” he questioned.

“Of course I trust you.”

“Are you sure? Because you have a funny way of showing it.”

“Ross listen,” I started.

“Ross, cab’s here,” Megan chimed from the other side of the lobby.

“I gotta go back to the venue. Later,” Ross looked at me one last time and turned to leave. I stood in my spot unable to move as I watched him get into the cab and head out without looking in my direction again. The tears started falling as I entered the elevator. Already blurring my vision, I blindly pushed the buttons for my floor and tried to hold myself together as the elevator slowly rose to the top floor. Once in my room I crawled into bed and let the tears fall. What just happened I thought to myself? This was supposed to be a fun trip to the city and it was turning into a nightmare.

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“What do you mean you got into a fight?” Lanie asked as she sat on the edge of the bed in my hotel room.

“I think your towels are better than the ones in our room,” Stella commented as she came out of the bathroom.

“Stella,” Lanie hissed.

“Calm down. It’s just a fight, this is not the end of the world. He is crazy about you, he will come around,” she said as she started to rifle through my suitcase. “Is this really what you brought to wear?” she commented again as she held up my clothes.

“Jill, you just need to try and talk with him. Things are always better when people talk things through,” she said and squeezed my hand.

“I called twice, left two messages and sent a couple texts. Anymore attempts and I will seem more crazy than I already feel.”

“Lanie she has a fair point. He’s not calling back for a reason. Maybe he needs his space,” Stella commented.

“I hate to say it but I agree,” Lanie said back.

“I hate waiting. I feel like I have done a lot of waiting in the last year and it sucks,” I said burying myself into the blankets.

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I was standing in front of the mirror in the hotel room examining the outfit Stella had bought me when the phone rang. I dove across the bed to grab the phone, but missed the call from Ross. Panicked that I missed my opportunity, I called him right back.

“Hey,” Ross answered with no real excitement in his voice.

“Sorry the phone wasn’t close by,” I offered up as an explanation.

“Are you still coming tonight?” he asked. I paused for a moment unsure of how to respond. I had asked Lanie and Stella if they thought we should still go to the show tonight. They both thought it was still a good idea. Actually Stella had told me that she was going to the concert with our without me because she wasn’t about to miss out on free front row seats to a J. Cole concert.

“Didn’t know if you wanted me to come,” I answered, truthfully.

“Jill...the seats are yours. Use them as you wish,” he said.

“Ross, I...” I tried to apologize for everything when he interrupted me.

“I need to get back to rehearsals. Maybe I’ll see you tonight.” He said as he hung up the phone.

“Maybe,” I said back to no one.

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Ross played a total of six songs during his opening act. During each one I experienced a wide range of emotions. I was nervous for him, I was excited for him, I was in awe of him and I knew I was in love with him. After his set, J. Cole came on about thirty minutes later. It was a good show but like this summer I couldn’t take my eyes off of Ross. Occasionally, I did steal a glance at Megan the infamous backup singer that I met earlier that day. I had to admit she was very pretty and that thought depressed me.

When the show was over, the three of us headed out for a couple late night drinks before we headed back to the hotel. During drinks I could tell Lanie and Stella were holding back but being respectful of my space. I left instructions at the front desk for Ross to be able to get a room key in case he came by, it was the original plan, but nothing about this trip had gone as scheduled but I still had hope as I headed up for bed.

*To: Ross Powers*

*Great show tonight. Left a key at the front desk, hope you still come by tonight. XO – J*

I re-read the text a thousand times before I sent it, but no matter how I re-wrote it, it always sounded desperate. It sounded desperate because I felt desperate. I seemed to be sinking faster than I was able to bail myself out. It was after two in the morning when I crawled into bed.

“Jill?” I heard my name whispered before I felt him in bed.

“Ross?” I mumbled.

“I’m here,” he said his lips finding mine in the darkness.

When I rolled over in bed the next morning, Ross was gone. I wondered if the entire thing was a dream when I saw the note on his pillow.

*Let's talk tonight after the show. – Ross*

I sighed, long gone were the feelings of butterflies and nervous tension. Those were now replaced with feelings of dread and desperation. A mental countdown began, time until the 'talk', the breakup.

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Stella and Lanie weren't able to make it to the second night of the show but we were able to grab a late lunch together and we made plans for the holidays before we separated. Stella had a case she had to get ready for court and Lanie was going to try and get an earlier flight back to North Carolina so she headed to the airport to be on standby. Again, I wore a new outfit that Stella bought for me after chastising me for my wardrobe selection.

The second night of the show started out just like the first. Ross came out as an opening act and began to play much to the excitement of the crowd. He had just finished his sixth song and as with the night before I was expecting him to go off stage. Instead as his band cleared the stage he began to play one more song. It was the song he played at Oceanside amusement park several months earlier; it instantly brought a grin to my face. When he finished playing the song he looked down in the crowd until his eyes met mine and as he did before he said, "You should always have hope." With that he was gone and the crew started to prepare the stage for J. Cole. From there the rest of the evening mirrored that of the night before.

As the show ended I was about to make my way out of the venue and try to hail a cab when Megan called out my name.

"Yes?" I asked confused as to what she could possibly want with me.

"Can you please come with me?" she asked. I could tell she saw my hesitation because she added, "Ross wanted to see you." Damn. It was now. The talk was happening now, it's where he felt safe, and it made sense. I took a deep breath and nodded, following Megan through a labyrinth of stage equipment, crew and instruments. After passing through a final door we were standing in an underground parking deck.

"Ross wants to meet me here?" I asked looking at Megan with confusion.

"Not exactly," she said with a smile.

"Then what is going on?" I asked frustrated.

“I just said Ross wanted to see you. I didn’t say where. He got called away but did arrange for a town car to take you back to your hotel,” she said as a black town car pulled up.

“Ok, sure,” I said feeling deflated as I climbed into the car but glad to be leaving Megan behind. As the car pulled away I texted Stella and Lanie to let them know what was going on, it helped focus my nerves on the heavy conversation that Ross and I were about to have. The normally short ride seemed to drag on until finally the driver came to a stop. Almost immediately the back passenger side door where I was sitting opened. There standing in front of me with the backdrop of Central Park was Ross.

“Ross what is going on? Why are we in Central Park? Are you wearing a suit?” I asked in complete confusion.

“Do you trust me?” he asked holding out his hand to me.

“You know I do.”

“Then let’s take a walk,” he paused a moment and whispered something to the driver and then lead me down a path.

“Jill I think we can both agree the last couple of days have been less than stellar.”

“Agreed... Ross I need to apologize...” I started.

“Jill can I finish?” he tried to interrupt.

“No, if I don’t get it out now I never will. I’m sorry about not telling you about the money. It just it doesn’t mean anything to me, it doesn’t define me. I’m sorry about not trusting you with Megan. The fact is, I do trust you and I love you,” I stammered, getting it all out before he could interrupt me, again. If he was going to break up with me I at least wanted him to know how sorry I was.

“Jill, I’m not mad about any of it, you don’t need to apologize,” he said after several moments.

“You’re not mad?” I repeated.

“Mad? No. Disappointed? Yes. But this argument and the time apart has brought me some clarity. It has caused me to figure out what I want out of my life. Being on the road, it gives a person a new perspective. I had really wanted to do this back home, on the beach but given the circumstances and the last twenty-fours I didn’t want to wait,” he paused and stopped walking. I wasn’t breathing; all I could do was look into his eyes and try to memorize every feature one last time.

“Jill, take a look around. Do you know where we are?” he asked. I shook my head looking around for the first time since we had started walking. The park at night was magical, so scenic and romantic. I thought about the irony of it all.

“It’s Bow Bridge. Arguably the prettiest spot in the city. I would come here when I was in school and just sit and write for hours.” He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts bringing him back to the present moment; I just nodded again as tears welled up. “Jill, I don’t care about the money. Your right it doesn’t define you. But I wish you had told me earlier. Megan is just a person on tour; she doesn’t mean anything to me. You are the most important person in my life. What I have learned from what little time we have been apart is what I can and cannot live without and I cannot live without you,” he paused for a moment to let me take in what he had said before continuing, “Jill Greenfield, will you marry me?” he asked as he got down on one knee pulling out a Tiffany’s blue ring box. Inside was the most beautiful intricate diamond I had ever seen. My head was spinning, the last twenty-hours, the panic, the desperation. I loved Ross, did I want to spend the rest of my life with him? Was I ready to take that step?

“Jill?” Ross asked, clearly nervous.

“Yes,” I whispered as I knelt down to where he was and leaning in for a kiss.

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“I was so sure you were going to break up with me,” I whispered still wiping the tears of joy from my cheeks.

“I was so worried you were going to be so mad you would say no,” he said and we both started laughing. “But seriously Jill, last night when I got back to the hotel I must have watched you sleep for what seemed like hours. You looked so peaceful and I knew then that the fight, the money, none of it mattered. I loved you and I didn’t want to wait any longer.”

“You put this all together in a day? Oh! I need to call Stella and Lanie,” I exclaimed, excited to share news of my pending nuptials with my best friends.

“They already know,” Ross said with a sly grin. “They were my first call this morning. I had to call and ask their permission after all,” he explained only to lean down and kiss me on the forehead.

“So where are we going?”

“To celebrate,” he said with another grin as the car came to a stop and the passenger door opened. There in front of the River City Café stood Stella and Lanie.

“Surprise!” they all yelled.

“How?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Let’s celebrate! First round of champagne is on me,” Stella said as we all embraced.

“You’re amazing,” I whispered to Ross as we headed into the restaurant.

“I know.”