

## 5. Jillian

Cecilia Blake, having just awakened, stumbled in the dark, getting ready for work. Although she didn't have to be at Lake Marsh Dental Clinic until 7:30, it had become a matter of routine for her to get up in the pre-dawn hours. Cecilia would first check on Jillian to make sure she hadn't snuck out after Cecilia had fallen asleep to meet up with Justin Hughes somewhere to do God knows what, like she had on at least two occasions - that Cecilia knew of. Jillian, her mother thought, was at the age where pushing, and often breaking, limits was as natural to her as breathing. The girl was sixteen, and often filled with a blinding rage so overwhelming that she didn't know exactly at whom to lash out.

After assuring herself of her daughter's whereabouts (sound asleep in her bed, covered up with her Hello Kitty bed covers, looking for all the world like an angel), she would brew herself a fresh cup of coffee, in her brand-new Keurig coffeemaker, which really made her feel fancy. She'd bought it at Wal-Mart, when it went on sale. They had all kinds of different coffees, from Maxwell House to Starbucks. Cecilia's favorite was Starbucks Pikes Peak, dark and robust, relentless in its assault on the brain and its neurons, causing a release of adrenaline into Cecilia's body, aiding her in her ability to rouse herself and to get through another crappy day, working with some crappy folks, well, except for Steven and Cathy. Come to think of it, the only person that she really did not like - even though, God knows she had tried to find a glimmer of goodness in her - was Hope, the receptionist. Everyone else was okay.

Well, Cathy was okay; Steven was way better than okay. Steven - Dr. McCoy - was dreamy, with his lean, athletic body and the smoothest hands, perfectly manicured, that she had ever seen. There was another quality to his hands - their strength - that Cecilia would like to take a closer look at. Once, Cecilia remembered, she was retrieving a patient's folder from the top shelf, just far enough away from her outreached hands that she had to use a stepladder. While reaching for the record, precariously positioned on the top rung of the ladder, she lost her balance and thought that she was going to fall. After giving out a fearful whoop, Steven swooped in and grabbed her around the waist before she totally fell. With his strong, masculine arms, made up of a sinewy musculature, Steven eased her down to the ground, hands placed tightly around Cecilia's hips. It was all she could do to maintain her consciousness, as she thought about the level of sudden intimacy between Steven and her that had been brought about by sheer happenstance.

Cecilia, hazy as if in a wondrous dream, marveled at Steven's powerful physique, coupled with those soft, sensitive hands, which had just carefully delivered Cecilia from a nasty spill. Just thinking of the power in those hands, she couldn't help but to be filled with the longing that some day, he might put those hands to even better use. Just the thought of this fantastical erotic adventure with Dr. Steve made her face turn blood red; she imagined the rest of the office knew what she was thinking because they had probably wandered down the same carnal alleyway at some point in time. A quick (or maybe not so quick) trip to the restroom was in order - just to ... gather herself.

In addition to being staggeringly attractive, Steven was also unbelievably kind, a combination that was not in great supply in Lake Marsh. Seemingly, the men were either good-looking with few other positive attributes, or they were hard-favored with the manners of an angel from Heaven above. In Lake Marsh, there was very little overlap.

Hence, coffee it was for Cecilia, and in heavy doses.

Caffeine, her one vice, was required to get her through the drudgery of the day ahead, and every day ahead. After she poured her first of around three cups, Cecilia would watch re-runs of her favorite sitcom, *The Office* (no post-Steve Carell episodes, please), until it was time to put on the scrubs and clean the gunk out of people's teeth, all with an artificial cheery smile.

Cecilia paused to look at herself in the mirror. A pale, puffy face, festooned with curly red hair, stared back at her. She had been through a hell of a lot in her thirty-five years, especially the last seven. Her exuberance for life, of which she once had a surplus, had seemingly

left her when her ex-husband Jason did. In truth, Cecilia was forced to boot his ass out of the trailer because he had become a little too hands-on in his approach to parenting Jillian. It was not physical abuse, but the kind of abuse that was, perhaps, even more insidious. She gave Jason no choice but to leave. Once she had seen the evidence of what Jason had done, Cecilia felt the need to retch up her insides, so that she could rid herself of the biliousness that she had witnessed by Jason's hand. There was no coming back from that.

Jillian's demeanor, which had seemed fairly troubled for a couple of years before Jason left, rapidly descended into its current state, generally pissy and brooding, sometimes with a temper that threatened to manifest itself in an unacceptably physical way.

Neither of them, to her knowledge, anyway – with Jillian these days, one never knew – had seen or heard from Jason since.

As she was walking about the trailer, a double-wide and one of the nicer ones in the park, she knocked on Jillian's door for their morning ritual – coaxing Jillian at first and then demanding that she get out of bed and actually get ready to go to school. Cecilia guzzled her multiple cups of Pikes Peak as fortification solely for this daily battle with her daughter. Jillian was just at that age. At least, Cecilia hoped that was the reason for what had become an almost noxious obstreperousness.

However, Jillian, no matter what she was putting her mom through now, gave Cecilia her one reason, except for Doctor Steve, for rousing herself in the morning. A small, beaming ray of sunshine in earlier years, Jillian never went anywhere without her dazzling, life-affirming smile affixed permanently to her face. Her daughter, who was once the runner-up for Little Miss Lake Marsh, always with a penchant for bright, girly-girl colors, now was suddenly dressed in all black, with a never-ending snarl on her lips, which were covered with ebony lipstick, had become little more than a doomy, despairing tower of gloom. Cecilia could not understand how someone could even stand such suffocating moroseness. Again, Jillian was at the age. Cecilia supposed that perhaps she was at that age, too.

Cecilia used that excuse as an old standby. She literally would turn a gun on herself if this was Jillian's true adult personality and not a byproduct of her teenage years, complete with an overabundance of roiling hormones careening and crashing into each other.

“God, Mom! What the hell! It's only 6:45!”

So started Cecilia's day with these words from her lovely offspring, the child who, in the very young, formative years of her life, had actually sucked at Cecilia's nipple for sustenance; it was useless to deny the fact that Jillian had now been transformed into a shrieking, drama-laden shrew.

“Yes, it is 6:45, and school starts in less than one hour. So, dear daughter, you might want to get a move on,” Cecilia countered, in her sickeningly sweet voice that she had adopted ever since reading *From Rage to Reason* by Dr. Jane Lackman, another parenting specialist. She put on this cloying, nails-on-chalkboard voice, which was faintly British-sounding, only for her many confrontations with Jillian. It didn't take Jillian, a preternaturally intelligent young lady, long to realize what was happening. It was her mom's way of dealing, and it really pissed her off, as most things did these days.

“Damn it, Mom. Stop with the voice. You sound like Mary Poppins. Jesus!”

“All right, Jillian,” Cecilia said, her voice crackling with a righteous piety. “What have I told you about taking the Lord's name in vain? This is twice in five minutes.”

Jillian snorted. Cecilia could tell it was about to go down.

“Mom, poor, simple mom, with your God,” she said, with a special derisive emphasis on ‘God,’ “Don't you know that God is a human construct? If He was real, do you think that we would be living in this shit hole, with no money, and with you as my mother, and with me as your daughter! Really!?”

This extremely impious and hurtful assertion by her daughter, who just seven years ago had lit the candles at Advent at the Lake Marsh Methodist Church and had played the Virgin Mary in the Christmas cantata with such passion that Cecilia had thought that Jillian's head

might explode, earned her a smart slap on the face by her mother, even though Cecilia knew in her heart that Jillian did not really believe the sacrilegious denial she had just uttered. At least, she thought so. It was awfully hard to tell these days.

“Great, Mom, abuse me at your leisure for just expressing my opinion! Remind me to open up to you again. I’ll make sure to tell you that rainbows are beautiful and unicorns are real – just what you want to hear! God!”

“Well,” Cecilia responded. “For someone you don’t believe exists, you sure call on Him a lot.”

Jillian wheeled around, her turquoise eyes smoldering in anger, to face her mother, preparing to go to war. Cecilia caught a glimpse of her daughter’s eyes, flecked with shards of gold, which, to Cecilia’s way of thinking, was her most striking feature. Her brainy, beautiful, rebellious daughter held a secure place in her heart, and she almost immediately regretted slapping Jillian across the face. It was just that she was at the age where sometimes the urge to strike back at Jillian physically was overpowering, and there were days when Cecilia was too weak to withstand its force.

“By the way, I am not going to school today, and you can’t make me,” said Jillian. “I can’t let anybody see me with my face all red like this from your abuse. Besides, it’ll probably bruise up. I need the weekend to recover.”

Cecilia, no dummy herself, knew exactly what would happen if she let her stay home. Justin Hughes, Jillian’s boyfriend, would coincidentally be absent from school as well. He would come over, ply Jillian with pot and alcohol, and they would screw each other until their hearts and their libidos were content, or until around 4:30, so Justin could leave without a trace before Cecilia got home from work.

The other option was the potential of some very awkward questions from Child Services, because, as Jillian had sagely predicted, her right cheek had suddenly turned the purplish hue of an overripe grape. Well, perhaps it wouldn’t hurt for both of them to clear their heads for a while.

Cecilia would call home every twenty minutes, so that Jillian and Justin, the rude, sour little stump her daughter “dated,” would have to start the foreplay over again.

“Okay, Jillian. You can stay home today.”

“Good move, Mom,” she said condescendingly.

“Honey? I’m sorry that things got out of control earlier. Please know how much I love you. I really do.”

“Funny way of showing it.”

“I just want things to get back to the way they were, Sweetie,” Cecilia said in a fierce rush of maternal feeling. “You know, really, at the end of the day, it’s you and me, kid. We are all that we have. You know?”

“Yeah, Mom,” she said dispassionately, feeling instantly the hurt emanating from her mother’s eyes. “I mean I understand, Mom. I still love you, and I know you love me. I’m just going through some shit right now.”

“God – oops, sorry, Lord – are you – pregnant?” Cecilia paused before the word “pregnant,” fully expecting Jillian’s rancorous explosion at Cecilia’s temerity in even asking that question.

“No,” she said, not angry as her mother might have expected. “Just – stuff.”

Cecilia was relieved. She did not want Jillian to follow down the path she chose, pregnant at nineteen, with so many options instantly closed off to her. Not that she would trade anything now for Jillian, but at the same time, she was petrified. With this new, unsettling persona that Jillian had adopted, she still went through the day with a grim foreboding about how their lives would ultimately be resolved and who would be left standing at the end.

“Well,” Cecilia said. “I hope you know that you can talk to me about anything.”

“Okay, Mom,” said Jillian, really ready for her to head to work, so that she could text Justin and get the party started. “Hey, aren’t you late for work?”

“Oh, crap! I have to go, Jillian. I love you, and I’m sorry I bruised you up. Oh, by the way, if, and I’m not saying you will, if you see Justin today, how’re you going to explain it?”

“Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll cover for you,” Jillian said, in a soft voice, to let her mother know that she had forgiven her.

“Okay, kiddo,” Cecilia said, then adopting her best vampish voice. “I gotta go work it with Dr. Steve, uh, work with Doctor McCoy.”

“Oooh, Mom! Gross! Don’t be disgusting!” Jillian said, smiling at the same time at her mother’s joke. To Jillian, this was one of the best things about getting older. The jokes got more mature, or more juvenile, depending on how one looked at it. Three years ago, her mom would never have cracked even a joke as slightly vulgar as that one. Now, in some of the lighter moments, things between the two of them were less guarded.

These were her favorite times with her mom, whom Jillian, although she would never admit it, admired. Jillian also knew that she wasn’t the easiest kid to live with; in her teenaged mind, it was amazing that even more violent scenarios than the one this morning did not play out more often. It was a testament, Jillian thought, to her mother’s inner fortitude.

Well, okay, Jillian mused with an inner smile that manifested itself into a broad, almost crazed grin. That’s over. Now, her mind drifting to lewder territory, thought in very graphic detail about Justin, picturing what they would be doing with and to each other just about fifteen minutes from right now.

She texted him (sexting might actually be the more accurate term) to let him know that Cecilia had gone to work and suggested to him, not so subtly, that she was ready and available for whatever he wanted to do to her. In order to hammer the point home, like she wanted Billy to do later, she inserted a really risqué video of herself, fully nude. Teenagers really were not known for their delicacy, by and large.

Justin and Jillian had known each other since she was fourteen and he was sixteen. They had met just after her father had scampered, like a scared pup, out of her and her mom’s lives forever, as far as she knew or cared. He immediately fell in with Jillian and her group of goths, with their iPods perpetually stuck in their ears, listening to music at eardrum-shattering volume from groups with weird names like Hatesex and MiseryLab.

The harsh, ear-grinding music that she listened to now was a far cry from her previous favorites, Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber, whom she once loved passionately, before Jason’s sudden exodus. As Jillian often said, one’s choice of music was the best reflection of one’s soul, and her soul was unrelentingly black and dark, except when she was alone with Justin. In those moments, she felt that she could almost put up with this shit storm called life and not put a bullet to her head.

Justin, aggressive and rage-filled to almost everyone else, was tender towards and protective of Jillian, defending her against all perceived slights from her classmates, and there were many such affronts, daily. His stubborn, aggressive loyalty to Jillian often exhibited itself in extremely violent ways - so vicious, in fact, that he had spent several weeks over the last year in county lockup. Sometimes, the disputes spread to the school, but not often. Justin handled most of the preppies that tormented Jillian daily outside of school, but sometimes his bile towards most people not named Jillian became an unstoppable, volcanic force that flowed everywhere with the force of molten lava.

In record time, probably to be expected with Jillian’s video enticement sent to him just minutes ago, Justin pulled up in the yard in his old beat-up pickup. Jillian smiled in anticipatory ecstasy. He probably had a boner already, she thought.

“Hey there, Big Sexy,” she said half sexily, half mockingly, as she rushed him at the door, planting long, lingering, hungering kisses all over his face, before he even stepped into the trailer.

“Hey, Jillian,” he said, his face lighting up at the sight of her. He didn’t care if all of his friends thought he was her lapdog. Maybe he was, but she was without doubt the best thing in his life. He did not care at all what he had to do to keep her. He would do whatever it took to

remain in her good graces without a second thought about it. An existence devoid of Jillian was just too bleak to even contemplate.

“Hey, you want something to drink?” Jillian asked.

“Now, come on. You know I brought everything we need. Got us a little beer, got us some wine coolers, some Everclear, and a lot of –.” Justin lifted his fingers to his mouth, with his thumb and index finger forming a circle - the international symbol for smoking pot.

“All right, lover.”

She kissed him once more passionately, his hands groping wildly at her body. It was at times like these that Jillian felt the vibrancy of her life, entwined with Justin’s. He calmed her, and, in some way, although Justin had plenty of darkness all his own, he lifted Jillian’s own gloominess when they were together. Together, they fashioned a never-dissipating light, one that was extinguished immediately upon one’s withdrawal from the other. Fortunately, they had all day to bask in each other’s glory, in all possible ways.

“So,” Jillian teased, “I know it really tore you up to miss school today to be here with me. Don’t forget to get a note from your mom. Tell her to write that you had to screw Jillian so that you wouldn’t get blue balls. Wow, I bet that blue would look really cute down there, by the way.”

Normally, this would be the place where the clothes would come flying off, both of them satiating their hormonal lust for each other’s taut, supple bodies. Somehow, for Jillian, though, today was different. She did not know whether it was because of the slap this morning or the place that Jason (she never called him dad or even father, after what he did to her) held in Jillian’s thoughts this morning. She wanted to take things slow today. She wasn’t saying sex wouldn’t happen, but sometimes a slow buildup makes for a more gratifying release, for both of them.

Jillian noticed just then a brooding look that Justin had suddenly assumed.

“Hey,” he suddenly grabbed her. “What happened to your face?” He said this tenderly, with an underlying hint of anger that threatened to spill out toward whoever blemished her face, which to him symbolized perfection. It could get ugly.

“Well, I woke up this morning, after sneaking back in at 3 a.m. after getting fried with you last night,” she said, smiling at him. “When my mother woke me up at her accustomed ungodly hour, and me hung over as hell, I ran right into the door as I was stumbling around, getting ready.”

“Jillian, do you want me to go talk to that wall?” he said, with concern and empathy. He had been hit by his old man plenty of times. In reality, there was no comparison between his father and Jillian’s mother. The abuse, physical and verbal, occurred on a daily basis, until Justin got big enough to ward off his dad and get in a few well-placed licks of his own.

“Nope, that won’t be necessary.” She looked at him intensely, not liking where this conversation was going.

“Okay.”

Justin knew. Despite his lack of ambition towards all things scholarly, he was smart, in his way. But she knew that he would not confront her mother. If she said she had it handled, he would accept that.

So she continued in a fake high-class British voice that she had picked up from Cecilia, except she parodied it with an outsized accent that sounded like Queen Elizabeth on steroids.

“So, dear Justin, I told my precious mother that I just simply could not be bothered with school, bruised up as I was. So she said that I could stay home, bless her heart. I think she knew that I would lure you over here with my feminine wiles, but I guess she feels powerless to stop it.”

Jillian secretly reveled in the power of her sexuality, which she could turn on at a moment’s notice. She sometimes felt that her mother was jealous of the gift that Jillian was just beginning to discover in its full flower.

“And, so here I am,” Justin said, with a familiar gleam in his eye, sure that he was about to taste the sweet fruit of their equivalent desire for each other.

“And, there you are, stud.” She assumed a half mocking tone, which seemed to cue Billy that he needed to hold his horses, or whatever else he was of a mind to hold. “Hey, you want another beer.”

He nodded his head yes, and she grabbed a Budweiser for him from the cooler he had brought over, and a Bartles and Jaymes for herself. She was partial to the Fuzzy Navel kind that made her feel like she should be digging her toes in the sand down at PC, and making boys’ hearts smash out of their hairless chests with her tiny, little string bikini.

“Hey, you know what?” said Jillian. “I am really glad that you came over. I just cannot deal with my mom by myself. I know that we have really been getting each other off a lot lately, but you are great to talk to. You’re kind of like my father was when I was about six. After about six-and-a-half, he was an eternal prick. I got real hopes for you, though, kid. You’re kinda nice and all,” she said as she adopted, as a partial joke, the guise of a blushing schoolgirl, feeling the hot pulse of love for the first time. In a way, it was true for Jillian. Although she was far from a blushing schoolgirl, Jillian was, indisputably, deeply in love with Justin Hughes.

“So, what did you and good old Ceil fight about this morning?”

Jillian was just a little put off by the bitter sarcasm in his voice, but, according to the teenage girl code, she couldn’t really say anything.

“Oh, the usual. Me not wanting to get up, me not being Miss Sunny in the mornings, me not being like her. This morning, I denied her God, kinda like Peter, but I only did it once. That really got her started.”

“Ummm hmm,” Billy said, still keeping in mind the fresh bruise on her lovely face. Oh wait, he thought, that was caused by the wall. Never mind, he thought sardonically.

“It’s just that, I don’t know, man, sometimes, I just wake up in bitch mode, because I just know that she’s going to start in, so I bitch up to get ready for the assault.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to talk to that wall?” Justin said as he exaggeratedly flexed his quite impressive muscles and pounded his large-knuckled fists. He said this with a smile, barely hinting at the many varieties of hell he would bring to the person who did this, even if it was her mother.

“No, I hashed it out with my wall, and we love each other now. We truly do, but if it acts out again, I’ll let you know.”

After a pause, just spent being happy about being in each other’s orbit, Jillian continued:

“You know I didn’t mean what I said this morning, don’t you?”

“What? The part about the wall?” There he was again with the semi-feral grin.

“No, dumbass. The part about God. I do believe in Him, and I want to do my best for Him, but it’s just so damn hard, you know?”

“Well, I’ve been in lockup, so I think I know what you’re getting at.”

“I remember going to church with Mom and Jason when I was a kid,” Jillian said, haltingly, as if she were trying to remember something that happened eons ago. “I would go in my best, little pretty flowered dress, cute as shit. Every few weeks it would be my turn to light the candles. Usually with Madison – that skank. I cannot believe I was ever friends with any of them. Well, anyway, I would make those candles blaze. I thought as long as those candles blazed, God and I would always be together, side by side, fighting the good fight. I think it’s safe to say those candles went out a long time ago. Whether it was Him deserting me or me deserting Him, I don’t know. Well, that’s silly! Of course, I deserted Him.” She paused, as if thinking whether to go any farther. “I do know one solid He did for me. Getting rid of my asshole father!”

She said this with a passion that Justin had never heard in her voice the few times she spoke about her father. Jillian, eyes brimming with tears, stared forlornly into the middle distance, trying to think of ways to assuage the searing pain that clutched at her heart.

“Hey, where’s the pot?” she asked, hoping that would salve her aching soul.

“Right here, babe.”

It was times like these, when Jillian dropped the tough, don't-give-a-shit act that he most wanted to cradle her in his arms, unveiling for her, and her alone, the plans he had for them, a future, stretched on into eternity, at each other's side. This, right here, right now, was just about as perfect as life got. Jillian and Justin rejoiced at the mere fact of being together, united against the random ass-kickings that the universe meted out in abundance.

Of course, being a teenage boy, Justin just had to screw it up. Jillian knew that he couldn't help it, just like very few boys his age, and hell, even older, could.

Justin looked at her all glossy-eyed from a potent combination of love, lust, and marijuana. He intently studied her face, all the time thinking that she was probably the most stunning woman he had ever seen, and he had been with plenty of good-looking girls, but none like his Jillian. He wanted her here, now, and forever. So he just had to open his mouth:

“Hey, babe, you wanna –.” He finished his proposition by wiggling his eyebrows up and down manically, like someone having a seizure from the eyebrows up. She assumed, rightly, that in his mind that frenzied eyebrow movement, which was so rapid that she was afraid he would pull an eyebrow muscle, was the international symbol for fornicating. Wow, Jillian thought, that was a lucky guess. I mean Justin, and most of the boys she hung with, and most boys and men, too, had screwing on the brain one hundred per cent of the time. But she wanted to test the waters here.

“You know how much I love having sex with you and making your body part of mine, but, you know what, I'd kind of like to see how we are apart from all of that,” Jillian said.

“Wow! Jillian, are you breaking up with me?”

“No, Justin,” she said, in a huff of anger, tinged with hurt. “Damn it, I just don't feel like being a twenty-four hour sex machine today! Is that okay with you? And, no, I am not breaking up with you, asshole! I feel like sometimes you're the only one who keeps me sane. Can we just talk and do anything right now but have sex? Please?”

“Okay, Jillian. Okay, babe,” Justin said, purring tenderly in her ear. “I'm sorry for being a jerk. I'm trying to be more sensitive to your needs, you know, after we had that talk.”

Jillian rolled her eyes at him, with some of the playfulness returning.

“God, I didn't want to turn you into a pussy,” she said, beaming a mischievous smile. It didn't quite translate to Justin right away.

“Well, what do you want then, Jillian? I come on to you, and you tell me you don't want to, and I back away, and you say don't be a pussy! I sure as hell don't get you sometimes, you –”

It was then that, thankfully for him, before Justin uttered one more word, which would have likely gotten him a slap on the face, that he caught a glimpse of her wry, teasing smile. She was just going on at him. He loved that about Jillian; almost everyone else in his life, even his other good friends, seemed kind of scared around him. Not Jillian. She was totally at ease and put him at ease – around her.

They both giggled insanely at the other and made deliberately goofy faces at each other, which made them cackle even more hysterically. After about ten minutes of cracking each other up, Justin stood up and looked at her, the epitome of seriousness.

“Jillian, I need to tell you something. Seriously,” Justin looked around for a minute, as if he were trying to gather his thoughts. Then he said with mock solemnity, “Jillian ... I really need to go ... take a piss. Right now.”

They looked at each other and laughed the laugh of the truly buzzed. The laughter sounded as if it had just made its way out of a small tear in a paper bag.

Jillian threw a decorative pillow at him in mock indignation. Being the opposite of an athlete and being very impaired at this point, the pillow soared high over his head, crashing into some of the glasses set out on the counter on a hand towel to dry. Again, laughter radiated from her in staccato bursts - Jillian felt powerless to stop it - not that she wanted to. Focusing on the broken glass on the floor, Jillian figured that she would clean it up before her mom got home from Doctor Steve. She giggled again, more softly this time. Mom had a crush! Mom and

Doctor Steve were gonna do it! Somehow, this filled her with joy. Jillian knew that, unless Cecilia snuck away for it, her mom had not enjoyed the company of a man, since the Turd left.

God, that was four years ago! To Jillian, in her hormone-riddled state, her mom's self-imposed abstinence seemed like an impossible chore. How in the hell did she get by, Jillian mused, except for the obvious solution? And why would she want to undertake that chore anyway? Why in the everliving world? Since Jillian had gotten old enough to know better, she had thought that Cecilia was throwing away a golden opportunity – she had the freedom to screw anyone she wanted, and she sat at home watching *Golden Girls* reruns.

Jillian had once asked her mother why she never went out. Jillian thought to herself that, although Cecilia had gained some weight and it was obvious that life, the weight of it all, was beginning to wear her down, her mother was still a very pretty woman. She could definitely understand why Shit for Brains had gone for Cecilia. Her mom, even though they had their tumultuous moments, there was a true love between the two of them that was too often unexpressed, especially by Jillian. Everyone said that the physical resemblance between them was so strong that they could pass for sisters instead of mother and daughter.

Maybe that was why her dad had stolen into Jillian's room and reached for her quite often at night after Cecilia, exhausted from being on her feet all day and scraping around in people's mouths, had gone to bed without first satisfying Jason's base desires. At first, Jason entered her room around twice a month, and then more often after that, culminating in about two weekly visits, before he left them for good. Jillian, all of twelve, always pretended to be asleep during his visits, hoping that her pretend slumber would cut his visits short. He usually just took his time.

Sometimes, he would stand just inside the doorframe and stare at her, steeling himself for what he knew was to come. Gradually, he moved closer and closer to Jillian. When he had advanced as far as her bed, for a while, he still stood and stared, sometimes with his eyes closed and a pained expression on his face, as if he were engaged in battle with the nameless, formless demon inside him.

Then, one night about two months before he walked off the earth, as far as Jillian knew or cared, he stuck his arm haltingly underneath her Jonas Brothers bedcovers, searching with his hands, as his eyes glazed over. This further transgression stretched on for the remainder of his time with her and her mom. The visits became more frequent and more bold, always leaving Jillian with a sickening feeling that she was never entirely able to shake.

Then, one day – poof!– he was gone, with his name never mentioned by her mother and rarely by Jillian. The words “bastard,” “prick,” and “asshole,” among other harsh, but certainly fitting, monikers, did come up in conversation with Jillian, whenever someone had the guts, or the impudence, depending on how you looked at it, to discuss her father with Jillian.

What started out as a sort of numbing depression, gradually transformed itself into a full-bore rage, poisoning just about every relationship that she had tried to sustain, except for the she shared with her mother, who basically had to put up with her, and Justin, who tolerated her moodiness, perhaps because he knew that her sins in comparison paled to his, in. However, Jillian was secure in the belief that both Justin and Cecilia were there for her – a constant for her in a life sorely lacking in constancy.

One of the byproducts of her traumas - a coping mechanism, she told herself - was a wicked, warped sense of humor, used to combat all sorts of melancholic, cancerous emotions that bounded about in her mind.

Looking around, escaping her dark reverie, Jillian noticed that Justin had not come back from the bathroom. She had a good idea of what exactly was going on in there.

“Hey, Justin,” she said, liltily, with just a hint of mockery that she could not help letting seep in. “Do you need some Vaseline in there?”

She smiled slyly at her ribald joke, still enamored with her ability to make Justin do strange things, although pleasurable, to his body all to satiate his lust for her.



“Nope. Got it covered,” Justin called back. She didn’t know if he was aware of the vulgar double entendre that he had just called out to her. Jillian loved her boyfriend passionately, but sometimes he wasn’t the most self-aware person around, bless his heart.

Jillian laughed freely, nearly doubling over with a mirth that lightened her entire body and soul, as if a burdensome weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Well, after all, if Justin could dump his load, she certainly could abandon all that she had been lugging around – for at least a little while.

For the remainder of their time together that day, they cuddled and hugged each other. They drank some, they smoked some. But mostly Jillian and Justin exulted in the sheer excitement of their love for each other. They knew that their relationship had shifted in some way, into a more heightened intimacy, a closeness not deriving from physical love alone, but a ravenous need for each other that stemmed from an ability to laugh at the same jokes and know what the other craved without the other ever saying a word.

Jillian wanted to tell him about her and five years ago with her father lurking in the pitch black shadows of her room, waiting to prey on her, to take her innocence in such an appalling abuse of a child’s trust. It just wasn’t the right time. It wouldn’t surprise her if Justin took off and tried to track Jason down to strangle the life out of that bastard. While part of her would love to see that, the other more sensible part of her won out, when she thought about the time he would spend in prison, away from her. Time together, building a life - that was all that mattered.

Justin left at about 4:30, after one last passionate kiss, complete with searching, probing tongues. Jillian would spend literally all night thinking about him, driving herself crazy anticipating seeing him again. She promised herself that she would open herself up to him fully and tell him all about her and Jason, the very next time she had a chance, if she didn’t turn away in fear. It was so hard to let anyone know the awfulness of it.

Jillian straightened up the house, remembering to sweep up the glass shards that were sprinkled onto the floor, a byproduct of her errant pillow toss at Justin. It had been a fun day, but she was ready to see her mom. She really needed to talk to her, something that she hadn’t felt the need to do too much over the last five years. She needed to try to get ahead of this big, black thing festering inside of her, get it out of her.

As if on cue, Cecilia pulled onto the geranium-lined little dirt driveway. With a bedraggled, hangdog expression on her face, she looked around to make sure that Justin was gone. Relieved that he was no longer at the trailer, she walked into the house, wondering what to cook for dinner.

Cecilia walked into the living room, immediately kicking off her shoes, which had become like steel weights encasing her feet. She then saw Jillian, her beautiful Jillian, who had struggled with so many things over the last five years – that’s when it had started, this change which had converted her daughter from a sunny, extroverted child to a brooding, dour teen-aged girl. Somehow, though, she looked different this afternoon. Jillian wasn’t snarling at her – that was a good thing.

“Hey, Mom. What do you want for dinner? I’m cooking. Maybe after that, we can watch a movie – your choice. Then, I want to talk to you about something very important.”

It was the last sentence that scared the hell out of Cecilia, but she knew her Jillian, and she knew that Jillian would just as soon sever her tongue from her mouth as tell Cecilia of this urgent matter one second before she wanted to. She figured she might as well enjoy these kindnesses, which were rarely bestowed on her by her daughter, and then settle in for one hell of a night.