



BOOK ONE

BEST LAID

Plans

ROBYN KELLY

BEST LAID PLANS - BOOK 1

AN ALPHA BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

ROBYN KELLY

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Also by Robyn Kelly

CHAPTER ONE

The best part of working for yourself is never having to take a job you don't want—unless it's the only job you can get. Which is why I'm the event planner for Lois Amsford's fiftieth birthday party. The theme is "Fifty Shades of Anything but Grey," and whenever anyone within two hundred miles of San Francisco wants a *Fifty Shades* party, I am the person they call.

It's not what I dreamed of when I started JW Events (JW are my initials—Jillian Whitkins). I imagined doing weddings, art openings, charity balls, fashion shows, and elegant, sophisticated soirees. But in 2011, Shelly Mitchell wanted a bachelorette party with a *Fifty Shades of Grey* theme.

At that time, I didn't know the difference between a flogger and a cat o' nine tails, so I spent a weekend reading all three of the books. I found male bartenders slash strippers who could pass for deeply disturbed billionaires, scoured every thrift store for gray neckties, and turned a corner of the Starlight Room into the Red Room of Pain.

I had a makeup artist create little plastic burn scars, and we glued them on our shirtless staff. They walked through the party with trays of hors d'oeuvres, stopped at groups of women, and with smoldering eyes barked, "Eat!" We ran out of food within the first hour.

My guys loved it. If they didn't want to be touched, they could grab the offending hand and say, "Don't. It's the way I am." And if they wanted to be touched, all they had to say was, "You're biting your lip. You know what that does to me."

Everyone had a great time and by midnight, Facebook was flooded with selfies of drunk women and shirtless Christian impersonators. Shelly thoughtfully tagged all the pictures to my business, and the next three years were a blur of whips and chains and a healthy bank balance.

I make it very clear to clients that I do not do sex parties. My events are fantasies. The birthday girl may get a spanking, the bachelorette may be blindfolded, there may even be a gentle flogging demonstration, but nudity and sex are not allowed.

Despite my rules (someone actually called me a prude!), no one wanted to hire me for the high-end events I wanted to do. Blushing brides didn't want to look into the eyes of the woman who saw them do Jell-O shots off the belly button of three different men at their bachelorette party. In fact, I was about to fold the business entirely when the movie came out and we had a brief revival.

That has come to an end. Tonight is the only event I have on the books. It's time to move on, but I feel bad having to let go of my only employee, Robert. He's been with me from the start. He provided the "servers" (which is what we call them because it sounds more professional than "hot shirtless guys") at my first party. When he found out what we were doing, he had so many good ideas and valuable contacts that I started using him at all my events. He's great at organizing, planning, and general herding—and I couldn't have done it without him. When he hinted he was looking for work, I hired him on the spot. I'm surprised he didn't leave me years ago, but he's a free spirit and wouldn't do well in a nine-to-five environment, which makes me feel worse about letting him go. People think we're a couple, but we're more like brother and sister. And, unlike me, Robert has a husband.

By ten, the party is in full swing. The theme of her fiftieth birthday is "Anything But Grey," so Lois has insisted that no gray hair is allowed. We have a selection of wigs at the coat check for those with the offending color (including the men), but anyone who wants a secret identity for the night is free to wear one (including the men—and a surprising number of them are).

The downside of a secret identity is that some of the guests are getting a little bold. Our servers started to complain about being accosted and now Robert and I

are on guard duty, monitoring the room to protect the virtue of our shirtless staff. I wonder whether it's a full moon tonight.

"I don't remember buying a Cher wig," Robert says under his breath.

I turn to look in his direction. "I think that's her real hair," I mutter, trying to keep the jealousy out of my voice. My hair has always been a mess of curls. It's a burnt copper color and I like how it looks when I straighten it, but that takes more time and patience than I have these days. I've always wanted long, straight hair and that's what this woman has.

She's young. Mid-twenties maybe, and short, even in those four-inch heels. But it's the hair you have to notice. Black, straight, and hangs past her dress (granted, it's a very short dress). It surrounds her, frames her face, and she wears it like a cape. It's both a thing of beauty and kind of creepy. "She looks like Cousin It from the Addams Family."

One of my assets is a sense of humor, and one of my character defects is a sarcastic sense of humor. I normally keep it in check, but when I'm nervous or tired, my mouth overrides my social filters.

Robert laughs. "Yes, she does! Ms. It!"

She is texting on her phone, completely oblivious of the party around her, or our stares. Luke, who's probably the most stunningly handsome of our servers (and he would be the first to agree), approaches her with a tray of champagne flutes.

Robert nudges me. "I think Luke is going to make a move."

Ms. It looks up from her phone, revealing her face. Her complexion is a pale white, almost vampire white, with bangs cut just above her eyebrows. Her makeup is very deliberate and dramatic, with bright red lipstick and enough eyeliner and shadow to give her raccoon eyes. She takes a glass from Luke's tray and I watch her lips move. I don't know what she says but Luke steps back and then hurries off.

Robert and I look at each other, and then he motions to Luke. When Luke reaches us, I notice how pale he is under the spray-on tan.

"What happened over there?"

He glances cautiously toward Ms. It to make sure she isn't watching. "I gave

her my standard line. 'I'd like to bite that lip of yours.' Then she looked at me and said, 'And I'd like to bite that dick of yours. Hard!' And snapped her teeth together!"

I put my hand on his arm, and instantly regret it. Luke likes to oil his body and now my hand is slick. "When you finish handing out those glasses, why don't you take a break. And you can avoid her for the rest of the night."

He flashes me his \$28,000 smile (he didn't cap his four wisdom teeth), and thanks me before heading back into the crowd. Robert hands me a napkin off Luke's serving tray as it passes. It's a simple gesture, and reminds me how grateful I am to have him for a friend. "I'm going to miss this. You always seem to know what I need. I wish..."

Robert grabs my clean hand. "Don't cry. I only took one napkin." He smiles warmly at me. "This has been a great ride. The last few years...it was a dream job. Thank you for giving me that." I notice Robert's eyes are getting a little misty, too. "Let me go check on the cake." He heads to the kitchen, even though we both know there's an hour before the cake is served.

I follow Robert's lead and take a lap around the room, checking that the bar stations are well stocked. It's busywork, but it's better than wallowing in self-pity.

When I finish the circuit, Ms. It is still glued to her phone, while knocking back a glass of champagne. There are three empty ones next to her, lined up like dominoes. News travels fast and my guys must be too scared to come near her. I grab a cocktail tray and head over.

She's talking on her phone by the time I arrive, too absorbed in her conversation to notice me pick up her empties. I am not an eavesdropper, but it is my duty to evaluate her state of inebriation for insurance exposure purposes. At least, that's the excuse I give myself.

"That's so unfair. You don't care about me. Now what am I supposed to do?" she whines into the phone.

My guess is that Ms. It has a drinking problem because I've heard all those phrases from the drunks in my life. I don't need to hear any more. I'll let the staff know she is cut off. And to expect her to make a scene about it.

I circle through the party, telling my servers and bartenders. She's easy to describe and most of my team know exactly who I'm talking about.

Heading to the bar near the entrance, I see Kyle stacking champagne flutes into a tower. I know it's Kyle because the tattoo on his back has his name spelled out in big letters. I once asked him why and he said, "So women will know me coming and going."

I never feel comfortable with stacking glassware, especially in a city with a history of earthquakes. I am about to say something when I spot Ms. It sitting on a stool. She doesn't have her nose buried in her phone now. She is staring into the eyes of a man. Well, trying to stare. She's so drunk her eyes keep crossing. All I can see is the back of his head as he hands her a drink—which is totally irresponsible. She says, "Thank you, sir," and he responds, "Call me Jackson."

I am not a snoop (I keep telling myself) but the low rumble of his voice—with just those three little words—piques my interest. Her hair starts to sway and I know she's wobbly. The man who says his name is Jackson (can you trust a man who gives a drunk woman more alcohol?) puts his hands out to steady her. The most beautiful hands I've ever seen. I don't notice men's hands normally, unless they're really dirty or touching me inappropriately, but his hands are sexy. They're large, and masculine, and...I don't know how to describe the appeal of them, but if you think the word manhandled is bad, you haven't seen this man's hands.

I want to see his face. I'm not a...oh, who am I kidding? I have been snooping and spying and stalking Ms. It since I saw her, and now I've moved on to the man sitting next to her. Maybe it is a full moon tonight, or maybe I just want to see the face that's attached to the first hands I ever found sexy, or maybe I want to know who would hit on a drunk girl when a perfectly wonderful, responsible, single, clear-headed woman is standing right behind him. For some reason, that thought makes me angry enough to act on this crazy impulse.

I slide behind the bar, keeping my back to the two of them. Several boxes of champagne are on the floor, and I bend over to pick up a bottle. My plan is to turn around, set the bottle on the bar, and open it while discreetly giving the man the once-over. I know from experience that a hot voice doesn't necessarily go

with an attractive face, but I have no experience with sexy hands.

The first problem is that this box of champagne is glued shut, and I need to rip it open without breaking a nail. It takes several tries until I finally get enough of the lid pried back to pull out a bottle. Now, for the big reveal. I turn, keeping my eyes down, and peel the foil covering the cork. This is actually fun. Maybe I'll become a private investigator. Robert keeps telling me I have world-class snooping skills.

"Oh, champagne! Let's have a toast, sir," Ms. It drawls. She must be too drunk to remember his name.

"Jackson. Call me Jackson. Finish the one you have, first." His tone is so authoritative. He probably has to speak that way to get it into her alcohol-soaked brain. Now is the perfect moment to peek, while he's talking to her.

I lift my eyes, targeting the prey in my sights.

If I had to pick a face in a police lineup that went with those hands, it would be his. I'm around attractive men all the time. Every event I do has shirtless waitstaff, so I've become immune to male beauty. Don't get me wrong: I can still appreciate a finely chiseled chin and buff body, but experience has taught me that if any of those men had a choice between staring in my eyes and staring in a mirror, I would be a distant second.

Yet next to him, those men are pretty. He is *hot*. And it's not just physical. There's a sexual energy that radiates off him like Sterno under a chafing dish. I could stare at this man's profile all day. His skin is the color of the salted caramel ice cream at Bi-Rite Market, and his lips point to the dimple in his cheek. His hair is damp, which makes the wavy, dark-brown mass glisten under the lights. I suspect it will dry to a chestnut hue. I smell the faint scent of chlorine, and visualize him stepping out of a swimming pool wearing nothing but a smile.

From somewhere deep inside, I let out a little "Ohhh." Not like in "Oh, dear." More like "Ohhh Santa, bring me *him*!"

When his head turns in my direction, I know I should look away. I know I am going to flunk the PI aptitude test if I let this man catch me staring. Yet I can't *not* see what he looks like. I hope there is a tremendous scar across the far side of his face (that he got in a duel) because then he wouldn't be perfect, and if

he wasn't perfect, I might have a chance. Yet when his head turns and his eyes lock on me, I can see there's nothing marring his square jaw and sensual full lips.

The corner of his mouth curls up into something like a smile. A self-satisfied one. I know I am gawking but I can't look away. My gaze moves up from his mouth to his liquid blue eyes. If I had to match them to a linen sample, Topaz Olympus is the closest. They're hypnotic and seductive and I feel like a deer in the headlights. Topaz Olympus headlights.

He winks. My body shudders, my grip loosens, and that expensive bottle of champagne falls to the floor. The impact dislodges the cork, which ricochets off the ceiling into the tower of flute glasses, knocking them over like bowling pins. They shatter into a million shards that rain down over the bar.

This is a sign. Anytime I'm attracted to a man, it always ends badly.

His laugh snaps me out of my trance and I go into disaster recovery mode. "Kyle, pull anything that might have broken glass in it. I'll take this ice and dump it." I grab the bucket and scurry out from behind the bar, getting some distance between me and the man who wants to be called Jackson.

I dump the ice, rinse the bucket out and put in a fresh bag. I look for Robert, hoping he can handle this. Unfortunately, he's busy handling our birthday girl. Lois is looking a little wobbly herself, and is calling for Luke.

Maybe this is all for the best. If tonight had run smoothly, I would want to keep my business alive. This party makes me realize it's time to do something new.

I pick up the ice and head back, trying not to care whether Jackson is there or not. I made my bed and now I need to lie in it. Well, maybe I shouldn't use a bed reference in regards to *that* man.

As I round the corner, I notice they're both still at the bar. My courage evaporates, until he throws her unconscious body over his shoulder! Her short dress bunches up, revealing a pair of very sheer, black, ridiculously flimsy panties. He turns to leave, and suddenly I don't have a good feeling about this. What did he say to her about finishing her drink? I know she was drunk, but did he slip her something?

I hurriedly set the ice on the bar while I call out to him, “Wait!” He doesn’t stop. I pull out my phone as I rush toward them. Planting myself in his path, I grab the bottom of Ms. It’s dress and pull it down where it should be (Do onto others is my motto). He stares at me like I’m bacon at a vegan buffet.

“Smile,” I squeak and snap a picture with my phone. The flash blinds both of us, and when my eyes adjust, his attractive face is looking very dangerous.

“I’m going to need that phone from you.”

I swallow, but stand my ground. “Then I’m going to need some ID from you.”

He shifts his gaze from my eyes to someplace on my left, and then he nods. Suddenly, there’s an arm around my waist and a hand prying the phone from my grip. I spin around to find a very tall man in a black suit. He looks kind of like Lurch. Is there an Addams Family theme tonight? Lurch then walks to the front door and opens it. Jackson smirks at me and heads for the exit.

“Hey, I’m calling the cops,” I yell.

“That will be hard to do without a phone,” he says over his shoulder—the shoulder that doesn’t have Ms. It on it.

I have to make a decision to follow my phone or stay on the job. Maybe I’ll just follow them to get a license plate, and then I’ll come right back. I have to move now before they get out of sight, though I doubt that Jackson, Ms. It, and Lurch would be hard to miss—even in this city.

CHAPTER TWO

I rush out the door and see the trio. Jackson has gotten pretty far considering there's a small woman on his shoulder. Maybe he has a lot of experience. I head off as fast as I can, and am grateful I didn't hesitate. They enter a swank condo complex, and I reach it just before the door locks behind them. The location is too convenient for it to be a coincidence. They must be party crashers.

Jackson is on his cell phone. "Yes, pronto. I want to make sure it's gone." He swings around to see me sneak in behind him. "I was wondering where you were."

The building guard is staring at us. Finally, an ally. "Call the police. These men have stolen my cell phone."

The guard looks from me to the men. Jackson takes his free hand and twirls a finger around his ear—the international symbol for crazy person.

"She's with me, John. Oh, and I have my head of technology stopping by. We'll be in the guest unit." His gaze turns to me. "Now, if I take you up, will you behave?"

The nerve! Me behave? "I certainly will not. I'll scream and yell and shout until I get my phone back."

"Then it's a good thing I had the place soundproofed."

The elevator doors open and Jackson steps in, with Lurch following. I know this is the threshold to further madness, but I want to slap the handsome off his smug face and I won't be able to do it from the lobby. The doors start to close, so I take a breath and step in. He presses the 22 button. I'll need to remember that

for the police report.

I'm standing by the shoulder that holds Ms. It, and I notice her designer underwear is on display again. I reach my hand up to give her dress a quick tug, and Jackson steps back. Is he afraid of me? Good!

"I'm just going to pull her dress down," I scold as my hand yanks the hem with more force than necessary. He doesn't take his eyes off me, and I can't believe he thinks I'm the dangerous one on this elevator.

"Who did you plan to sell this to?"

Is he talking to me? "Sell what?"

"The picture. Some Internet gossip site? One of the weekly rags?" He leans in and his eyes have an icy hue. "Or were you thinking I'd like to buy it?"

I was mad before. Now I'm indignant. "I'm not selling that picture!"

"Everything's for sale, for the right price." He's very close and he's using that voice again. It's low and threatening and seductive, and it's coming out of a very attractive mouth. I notice his five o'clock shadow and imagine if he kissed me, my lips would be scratched and bruised and very happy. Except I'm not supposed to be happy. I am supposed to be mad. *Focus, Jillian!*

"I saw you having drinks with that woman, and then I saw you carry her out of the party. No one leaves my events unconscious without me taking a picture." It's never actually happened before, but it sounds reasonable. For good measure I add, "It's for their protection."

Now he's offended. "You think I'm a date rapist?"

"Well, I know you're a thief, so thinking you're a pervert is not a great leap in my mind."

"Oh, I do have my perversions, but why would I need to drug a woman to get her in my bed?"

He's giving me his bedroom eyes, and he's doing it on purpose. Knowing that doesn't make it any less effective. "Maybe you don't like low-lying fruit."

His bedroom eyes blink open, and he stares at me for what feels like an eternity. From his expression, I don't think he's used to people arguing with him. Then his eyelids descend to half-mast, and he leans farther into me. "When I want something, there isn't any fruit beyond my reach. Or beyond my *plucking*."

My cheeks burn, and he almost gloats. “It seems I’ve made you blush,” he drawls as he straightens.

At that moment, Ms. It’s eyes flutter open. “I feel like I’m floating.” Then she projectile vomits all over me, before passing out again.

Jackson tsks. “No good deed goes unpunished.” As if on cue, the elevator doors open. “Let’s get you cleaned up. And try not to drip on the carpet,” he adds, stepping off the elevator.

The unit is 2201. Again, I need to remember that when the police interview me. It’s one of those techno buildings, and the door opens with a key fob, rather than a key.

The first thing I notice is the smell. Stale smoke and booze. If I can smell that over the bile on my dress, it must be really bad. Jackson curses as I enter, and even the size of those two men in front of me can’t block the view of the disaster inside. It looks like a garage sale exploded. The place is littered with bottles, ashtrays, fast-food containers, and dirty clothing. This is the home of someone hitting bottom.

“Bathroom is the first door on the left,” Jackson barks. I make a beeline to get Ms. It’s dinner off me.

For a hall bathroom, it’s a good size and there’s little trace of the mess in the living room, other than the empty half-gallon vodka bottle in the sink. I move it to the floor and wet one of the hand towels. They are seriously plush, which makes them useless for blotting off this mess.

I realize the dress has to come off and be rinsed out in the sink. When I put it back on, it’s going to look like I entered a wet t-shirt contest. It’s a matte black cotton/poly blend so it might hide some of the dampness, if I can get it clean.

I carefully slip out of it to find my bra is equally slimed. Once that’s removed, I’m “tits to the wind,” as Aunt Celia says, in a soundproofed apartment with two men and an unconscious woman. I probably should be afraid but I’m too damn mad. And it’s better to stay mad right now. Especially when I hear someone rattling the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s just me, Jillian.”

Is he psychic? “How do you know my name?”

“Robert called, looking for you. I told him you had an unfortunate accident but you’ll return shortly.”

“Thank you, *Jackson*.” Two can play the name game. “You aren’t planning to drug me?”

“You sound disappointed. And how do you know *my* name?”

I lower my voice to my deepest register. “Jackson. Call me Jackson.” It doesn’t sound as appealing when I do it.

“Is that what I sound like to you?”

No, what he sounds like is sex, but I’m not going to tell him that.

He doesn’t wait for a reply. “If you open the latch on the door, you’ll find a compartment with some clean clothes.”

The back of the door is a full-length mirror, with a hinge on one side and a small latch on the other. I drape the hand towel over me and open it cautiously. Inside are three dresses, hanging on a hook. There must be another one of these panels on the outside. What a wonderful invention—a hollow door to hold your clothes.

I pull the dresses out and examine them. Three identical little black dresses. Not like the one I am trying to clean—more like what Audrey Hepburn wore. They are made with the softest wool I’ve ever felt. There’s one in size eight, ten, and twelve. I could love a man who thinks I fit into a size eight. Well, not *that* man.

I try on the size ten (which is usually wishful thinking). I have to forego the bra since it’s soaking wet. The cut fits me like a glove, though I wish it was two inches longer. His words flash in my brain. *Everything’s for sale, for the right price*.

I’ll return it tomorrow. I know where he lives. I’ll address it to *The Pervert in 2201*. I roll my wet clothes up and leave them by the sink, with my bra buried deep inside. I’m not going to risk flashing any underwear to his smirking smile.

It’s pretty obvious by now that Jackson wasn’t trying to drug Ms. It. She seems quite capable of doing that on her own. They either live together, or they’re dating. He’s probably trying to control her behavior “for her own good.”

I've seen it before—and lived it before. Trying to protect someone from the consequences of their actions. I could share with him my lifetime of experience, if I wasn't supposed to be working right now.

I open the door as quietly as possible. Stealth is going to be my best weapon. Lurch is busy cleaning up the worst of the mess, and Ms. It is passed out on the sofa. Her hair has fallen to the side, and now I can see that she is in one of these same black dresses—probably a size two. He must put all his women in it. That's why it comes in every size. I wonder whether it's too late to slip back into my wet work dress.

Jackson is at the front door, letting another man in. What did he say to the guard? His head of technology. The guy doesn't look old enough to shave.

"Sorry it took so long. One of the elevators is out of service."

Jackson hands the boy wonder my phone. "I haven't seen one of these since high school," the kid squeaks.

"Was that this afternoon?" All heads turn toward me, but it's Jackson who holds my attention. He's staring at me, and I'm not sure whether he's imagining me naked, or planning how to dispose of my body. Either way, it's a dangerous look, and he's focused on the dress. The uniform for his harem.

"What's your password?"

His voice jolts me out of my concubine fantasy. "I am not telling you my password."

Junior doesn't even look up from the phone. "I don't need it. There's not a phone I can't hack. And this is *barely* a phone."

Looking at these three men, I realize that they represent the dating pool in a nutshell. A master of technology. A master of women. And Lurch. The tough choices us single women have to make. If these were the last three men on earth, who would I choose? Right now, I'm leaning toward Lurch. At least he cleans. Unless I was expected to repopulate the planet. Then it would have to be Jackson.

I finally have enough distance to see the whole package, so I take in the view of that man. He's wearing jeans, and they fit him perfectly. They're stretched tightly in the thighs and butt yet look loose in the waistband (he probably suffers

from washboard abs). He's wearing a white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the collar, and a black leather jacket. All that beauty wasted on an arrogant jerk.

The moppet holds my phone up to Jackson. "Is this the picture?"

Jackson nods. "It's not in the cloud, is it?"

The whiz kid actually snorts! "Not on this phone." He presses a few keys. "Okay, it's gone." He hands my phone to Jackson, who holds it out to me. As much as I want to lunge for it, I approach slowly in case it's a trap. Before I can reach it, he takes the phone back.

He's toying with me, and any sympathy I have for his situation disappears. "Is this your idea of fun? It's very immature."

He punches something into my phone, and flips it closed.

"I think you'd find my idea of fun much worse than this. Ron—" Lurch drops another bottle into the trash and comes to a stop next to Jackson. "Ron will take you downstairs and hand you the phone when you're out of camera range." Ron takes my phone, and Jackson leans into me. "Text me if anyone goes missing."

I notice Ms. It is lying on her back, so I give him some free advice. "You should turn her over. If she gets sick again, you don't want her choking on her vomit." Jackson has a lot to learn about being codependent. "I'll have your dress cleaned and mail it back to you."

"Keep it, for all the inconvenience."

I bristle. "I'd rather return it. I don't want you to think I have a price."

Lurch—I mean Ron—leads me to the door. I suddenly remember my wet clothes and slip into the bathroom to grab them. Returning to the living room, I swear I hear Jackson tell the wunderkind, "I want everything you can get." Is he talking about me? I'm about to confront them when Ron's paw grabs my arm, leads me into the hall, and onto the waiting elevator.

The ride down is long and silent. I can see my phone in his hand. Barely. He has large hands, too, but they aren't anything special. It's so quiet, I decide to start talking. If nothing else, it will annoy Ron. "Have you worked for Jackson long?"

He doesn't respond, or even turn. He just keeps staring ahead. That doesn't

stop me. “Are you it, or is there a whole security team to protect him from women?” His face is a mask. He could be in the Queen’s Guard with one of those big, black, fuzzy hats. Although the man doesn’t need anything that adds to his height.

When we finally reach the ground floor, Ron grabs me by the arm once again, and guides me (though it feels as if he’s dragging me) out of the elevator. I flash my biggest smile to the security guard. “Thanks for all your help!” Kill them with kindness is my other motto.

Once we’re outside, Ron hands me my phone. As I grab it, he heads back to the building, and I can’t resist one last try. “Ron, what name should I use when I send this dress back?”

He doesn’t turn around. He must think I am going to take his picture. “Send it to Current Occupant.”

Boy, these guys don’t give anything away. Except little black dresses.

I hurry back to the party. I feel awful leaving Robert alone for so long. I flip my phone open to text him, and see my last message was sent to a number I don’t recognize. The message is, “I will ruin you.” What? He wants to ruin me? And then it clicks. He has a message sent from my phone threatening him. If I were to say anything, he could show it to the police.

Oh, this is so not over!

It’s barely eleven, but based on the number of people standing in line at the valet parking, the party must be ending early. It is a Thursday night, and people have to work tomorrow. Still, they don’t usually all leave at once.

I stop at the front bar to stash my wet dress, and receive a very judgmental glare from Kyle. I can explain myself later, after I find Robert. He’s standing by the DJ and has aged a year since I’ve been gone. The fire marshal paid a surprise visit. The ladies’ restroom overflowed. But worst of all, Lois got hold of a long blonde wig, and decided she was going to go Lady Godiva. She wanted Luke to be her horse, but when he hid in the men’s room, Lois decided Kyle would do.

I remember Kyle’s judgmental look. I finish Robert’s story for him. “She went behind the bar barefoot and stepped on some broken glass.”

Robert looks at me. “How did you know?”

I sigh. “Where is she?”

“She’s in the kitchen. And she’s still in her Lady Godiva outfit.”

“You mean her birthday suit.”

“Potato, potata.”

When I open the kitchen door, I find Lois huddled in the corner on a bench, wearing nothing but a cheap nylon wig and some gauze wrapped around her foot. She is sipping champagne directly from the bottle and feeling sorry for herself. I grab a chef’s jacket off the kitchen coat rack.

“You must be cold. Why don’t you put this on?”

She stands up sheepishly, sets the bottle down, and lets me slip the jacket on her. I can’t help but notice that her body is in very good shape. I just don’t think that I should be seeing all of it.

She sits back down. “I made a fool of myself,” she whimpers, taking another swig.

I plop down next to her. “It’s your birthday. What better time?”

Lois is too intelligent a woman to believe that, and the look she gives me lets me know it. She offers me the bottle. I take a swig, and pass it back to her.

She stares at the label. “I’m a middle child. I wasn’t the firstborn and I wasn’t the baby. I was even born on my older sister’s birthday, for God’s sake. All my life I’ve thought, ‘My turn is coming. It’s just around the corner. My special, secret powers are going to blossom and people are going to notice me.’” She takes another gulp.

A sense of humor is the best antidote for self-pity. “I think people noticed you tonight,” I quip as I put my hand out for the bottle.

She laughs and passes it to me. “Careful what you wish for, right? I’m surrounded by younger, smarter, prettier people, and I think my time is over. All that’s left is to put as much money in my retirement account as I can, so I’ll be able to afford a tiny little condo in Palm Springs, early bird discount dinners for one, and cable to watch Lifetime movies all day.”

Lois forgets I’ve seen her home. She doesn’t strike me as someone who’s hurting for money. The bottle is almost empty, so I only take a small swallow before handing it back.

“I just want people to think I’m special. No one’s ever told me I’m special.”

I don’t think I gave Lois the right party. She asked for *Fifty Shades* but what she wanted was *Cinderella*. Now it’s almost midnight and she has to put the work clothes back on without ever getting to dance with the prince.

“Have you told anyone you thought they were special?” My question seems to sober her up a little.

“No. I’ve known special people, but how do you say that to someone?”

“Well, maybe people think you’re special and they don’t know how to say it either.”

I can see she’s thinking about it. I’ll let her stew on that while I work on getting her dressed. “I’ll bring your clothes if you tell me where you left them.”

She hangs her head down even lower. “I flushed them down the toilet.”

That explains the plumbing problem. I need to save this party. I can’t have my last client at my last event be naked and crying in the kitchen. “Wait here.” I start to repeat to myself: *I can salvage tonight, I can salvage tonight.*

I head back to the bar, pull my wet dress out, and make a beeline to the dressing room. I know my guys travel with hair dryers, and I grab Atom and Brett to get the dress wearable. Then I track down Luke. When I tell him my plan, he panics. “I’ll be standing nearby,” I say calmly.

“She called me her horsey, and said she wanted to ride me hard, and put me away wet!”

“Luke, just say, ‘I’d like to bite that lip of yours’ and then you can walk away.”

He stares at me. “I don’t think you understand how attractive I am. Women don’t let me walk away.”

“I’m sure you have a standard excuse.”

He stops to think, and the effort is written all over his face. “I could tell her if I was fifty years older I bet I’d find her attractive.”

I sigh. “No, Luke. Do not say that!” Poor Luke. He is very handsome, and can lift very heavy things, but that is about the extent of his assets. “Tell her you’re already seeing someone.”

Atom delivers the dress to me. I probably should give Lois the little black

dress and wear the work dress, but if I don't want to return it, I have less faith in Lois's impulse control. *And this little black dress is going back to that man!*

I hand the dress to Luke carefully so he doesn't get his body oil on it, and walk him to the kitchen door. "Remember, hand her the dress, say 'I would like to bite that lip,' and if she says anything, you say you're seeing someone."

He's as nervous as a virgin on prom night (another of Aunt Celia's sayings). "What if she does something?"

"I'll be standing at the door. Now go." I want to give him a push but don't want the oil on my hands.

Luke approaches her like a man going to the electric chair. Her eyes move from the bottle to his face. Thankfully she looks a little embarrassed, so she won't be trying to mount the horse. He hands her the dress. It's not a glass slipper, but footwear isn't what she needs right now. I can tell Luke wants to run, but he delivers the line. Maybe I was too hard on him. He does have other assets. He's dependable. Predictable, but dependable.

Lois's hand reaches up and takes his. Did he flinch? She says something to him. I'm ready to step in, but then he says something to her, and she replies, and pretty soon he sits down on the bench next to her, still with her hand in his. Maybe Luke's not so predictable.

I ease out of the kitchen. I don't know what happened in there, but I suspect she told him she thought he was special.

And who can resist that?

CHAPTER THREE

My alarm goes off at 11:59. I have a strict rule to always be out of bed before noon. I am a self-employed party planner who can't afford to sleep in, and 11:59 is still before noon. Then I remember that I'm not a self-employed party planner—I'm an unemployed party planner. That thought is so depressing I decide I'm still self-employed until I send Lois her bill for last night.

I put on a robe, and a pot of coffee. When I head to the computer, I see my phone sitting on top of the little black dress. That incredibly soft, flattering dress. It would look so good in my closet, but it *has* to go back. Parting is such sweet sorrow.

The battery on my phone is dead, so I plug it in to recharge while I pour my coffee and grab a yogurt. When I get back to my desk, the phone has enough juice to display two missed calls.

The first was a little after nine this morning. A woman is asking me to call her back today about an event for her company. Probably some admin who has to get three competitive bids and then gives the job to the same firm they always use.

The second message is from Lois. It's short. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! You really are *special*!" I guess she's over her self-pity. I hope she feels the same when she gets the bill. I'm going to charge her for the plumber and the broken glasses. I'm providing the loan of my dress complimentary.

As soon as I set the phone down, it rings. I just want to enjoy my breakfast,

so I may not be my most cheerful as I answer it.

“Ms. Whitkins? This is Felicity. I called earlier and I hadn’t heard from you.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. We had a late-night event yesterday, and didn’t open the office until noon.” She doesn’t need to know I’m still in my pajamas.

Felicity would like me to take a meeting today. She doesn’t have any particulars other than it’s a private event for one of the executives, and they need to schedule it for today. When I ask how many firms she is interviewing, she says only mine. It sounds too good to be true.

Felicity senses my hesitation, and mentions she’s just an intern, and because it’s for an executive, she needs to make this happen if she wants a job offer. I’m a sucker for a sob story, so we agree on meeting at 4:30. I was hoping for a corporate gig, but since it’s a private event I bet I’ll need to dust off the floggers.

I have four hours until the appointment, so I drag myself to the gym. I don’t want to work out, but the thought of staying home and replaying last night’s disaster is too much. I’ll do some cardio. If there’s an interesting class happening, I may join it. I just need to get out of my head right now.

By three o’clock, I’m home and scanning the closet for business meeting attire. It’s been a couple of years since I’ve bought myself a new business suit. When I had the money, I didn’t have the time for shopping. Now I have the time, but not the money.

I pull out the professional-looking gray twill jacket and skirt. It’s been my go-to garb for meeting a new client since I can remember, which is why it’s looking old. The lapels are the wrong width to be fashionable this year, and the skirt is “rump sprung”—the fabric is stretched from sitting, so when it’s hanging in the closet it looks like a death mask of my rear.

My eyes drift to the little black dress. Could I wear that? It’s short, but I have some black tights that would look good with it. It certainly would be an ego boost.

I give the dress the smell test, and it passes. It’s a little wrinkled from lying on the desk, but if I hang it in the bathroom when I shower, it should steam smooth. All right, I’m going to wear it, and tomorrow I’ll take it to the dry cleaners, and then I’ll send it back.

* * *

Hunter Enterprises is on the top floors of the Embarcadero Building. The views are incredible. Just from the reception area, you can see from Coit Tower to the Bay Bridge. But right now I'm staring at the clock tower in the Ferry Building, and it's 4:50. I'm a little peeved. They were the ones who needed to have this meeting today, and they've kept me waiting for twenty minutes. I probably should be standing. I can't let this dress get rump sprung.

"Ms. Whitkins?" a voice behind me calls.

I turn around. A woman stands in what I thought was a solid wall. Now I realize the doorway was hidden in the paneling. This certainly isn't Felicity, the intern. This elegantly dressed woman is in her fifties and could be a poster child for executive assistant.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, but there's been a little hiccup in our schedule today. Let me show you to the conference room. May I get you anything to drink?"

I stand and am shocked to see my skirt hiked up much too high, and glued to me. I try to shake it loose, but there is a buildup of static electricity between the dress and the tights and I can't pull them apart. I look up to the woman with a "Please help me" expression. She notices immediately.

"I see you're a victim of the new carpet. That was supposed to have been treated today. Come in here. There's a spray that should help."

I follow her through the door. I'm holding my briefcase in front of me, and hoping my ass isn't on display.

She shows me into a small conference room. "If you'll wait here, we'll be with you shortly. And I'll find that spray for you."

She walks out the door, and I'm alone. This is my chance to shove my hands inside the dress and wrestle it free. I face the door, so no one can walk in on me, and peel it from my tights.

"Ms. Whitkins?" Another voice behind me! A male voice. An oddly familiar male voice.

I move my hands away from the hem and turn around. That's when I see

him, standing in another of those damn hidden doors. The man who gave me this little black dress that is now clinging to me like Saran Wrap.

“I’m Jackson Hunter.” He extends his hand. I reach for it and sparks fly. Literally. The static electrical shock looks like a lightning bolt between our fingers. I shriek and suddenly my dress un-clings (if that’s even a word) and hangs perfectly relaxed.

“Hmmm, I believe we have some electricity between us,” he quips.

“I think my dress just orgasmed.” Why did I say that? “I mean your dress... I’m sending it back tomorrow. I just...all my suits were at the cleaners.”

His smile tells me he doesn’t believe me—again. “Of course, but you really don’t have to return it.”

I give him my most direct stare. “Oh, but I really do.”

Staring at him turns out to be a mistake, because it reminds me how incredibly handsome he is. He’s dressed in a gray suit, white shirt, with a red and navy repp necktie. The complete corporate executive. Jackson Hunter of Hunter Ente— Oh no. This is *his* company.

I turn on my professional smile. “So you have an event coming up?”

“First things first, Ms. Whitkins.” He turns toward the door. “Pippa, come in here.” Ms. It walks in with her eyes down and stands next to Jackson. I’m relieved she’s not wearing her little black dress, too.

“Pippa, tell Ms. Whitkins you’re all right.”

Pippa’s eyes rise up to meet mine. They look like two cherries in a bowl of milk. I shouldn’t be delighted that she is suffering from a hangover—but I am. The fact that her hair is perfect doesn’t help. Her gaze drifts down to my harem uniform, and there is a flash of anger in her pale face.

“Pippa!” He says it as if she’s a child who isn’t responding.

She pastes on a smile. “As you can see, I am not Mr. Hunter’s unwilling victim. I like your dress.”

I’m pretty sure I know how women get this dress, so her smarmy comment ignites my anger. “Thanks. Mr. Hunter lent it to me after you vomited all over mine.”

Oh, that look. That “I was so drunk I don’t remember, what else did I do”

look. I've seen it all my life. First my mother, then my late husband, and now Pippa. The girl with the perfect hair. Kill them with kindness. "Well, I'm glad to see you're safe and sound, and at work."

Jackson pulls a chair out. "Pippa is not an employee, but she has been in my service."

I was angry at her, and now I'm even angrier at him. This man has that smug sense of superiority that I detest. I wore this dress because it made me feel confident, until I ran into the one man I didn't want seeing me in it. What makes it even worse is that I still find him sexy as hell. I need to get this meeting on track. I pull a notebook out of my briefcase.

"Shall we discuss the event you want? We're already running late."

"Certainly, Ms. Whitkins. Sit."

The way he said "sit" makes me suspect his company is a dog obedience school. Pippa plops down in a chair. Jackson watches me, or maybe the dress, as I sit. After a pause, he takes his seat.

"My brother is turning twenty-five and I promised to throw him a party."

"And you chose me because..."

He smiles. "I had your number in my phone." He's enjoying this. I just have to remember I can walk out of his office at any time.

Pippa pipes up, "Oh, he's got your number, all right."

Jackson turns to her, and pins her with his glare. "That will be all. Wait for me in the lobby."

Pippa whines, "Yes, sir."

Jackson sighs. "I'm telling you for the last time. Call me *Jackson*."

"Yes, Jackson." She stands, flips her hair, and leaves through the secret door.

Well, that was awkward. I debate working the topic of enabling into the conversation, and quickly dismiss that idea. The less I'm involved with his personal life, the better.

Jackson clears his throat and I realize I've been staring at the door. "My event team has arranged for the birthday party at Il Fratello Fortunati."

"I thought you said he was turning twenty-five, not fifty. And have you seen the kitchen? I'm all for old-world charm, but they take it a little far."

“It seems the health department agrees with you. They closed it down. And now I’m without a restaurant, or an event team, since they’re all in Brussels preparing for our media conference on Monday.”

I scribble inside my notebook so it looks like I’m interested. “And when is his birthday?”

“Friday.”

Is he kidding me? “Next Friday? A week from today?”

“Which is why I need you.” He pulls out a checkbook. “Think of it as the start of a mutually beneficial relationship. Ever since last night, I’ve been imagining several events where I could use someone with your particular skill set. Can you work late nights?”

He’s trying to make me blush again, and I’m not going to give him the satisfaction. Let’s see how he likes his own medicine. I’ll get him all hot and bothered and then turn down his rinky-dink party. I lean forward and put my elbows on the table. “I’m very flexible.”

He smiles and the dimples in his cheeks deepen. “Hmmm. I like a flexible woman.”

I smile right back at him. “I’ve yet to meet a man who didn’t.”

His smile disappears and I take some satisfaction in that. He leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Have you met a lot of men?”

No, but he doesn’t need to know that. “I have a strict policy of client confidentiality—so I can’t answer that question. I’m sure you understand, considering how demanding you can be about your privacy.”

He doesn’t even have the courtesy to look contrite, let alone apologize for the way he treated me last night. In fact, he looks bored.

“I insist on discretion.” He leans in, and I feel the urge to retreat. “I also insist on being your only client while we’re working together.”

My fight-or-flight instinct kicks in, and I don’t choose the flight option. “You can have a whole team of planners working for you but I can’t even have one other client? Seems like a double standard.”

“The other planners are for my business. I keep business and pleasure separate.”

“What you fail to realize is that your pleasure is my business.” Oh, that didn’t come out the way I wanted. There’s no turning back now. “That’s why I have to be very selective about the clients I choose.” I close my notebook, signaling he’s not one of the chosen.

His lips flatten as he opens the checkbook. “I understand your exclusive services come at a premium. I’m prepared to write you a deposit now. Will a hundred do?”

I laugh. “A hundred dollars?”

“No. Thousand. One hundred thousand.”

When he said everything’s for sale, I didn’t realize we were talking six figures. I could keep Robert on as an employee, pay off both of my credit cards, and put some money back into savings.

“Ms. Whitkins? Is one hundred sufficient?”

I recover quickly. “I don’t know. You haven’t told me anything about this party. How many people are you expecting? Is it a sit-down dinner or buffet? Is there dancing? Did you want a band?” My mind starts spinning on all the things that need to get done in one week.

“What I want is to give my brother a birthday party that requires as little of my involvement as possible. I also want you and I’m willing to pay for both. Shall we say \$150,000?”

Damn him, it’s too good an offer to pass up and he knows it. He’s wrapped it all up in sexual innuendo so it would be doubly embarrassing for me to accept. One look at Pippa will tell you I am nothing like his type. I’m not petite, I’m not twenty-something, and I don’t have long, straight hair. If I take this job, he’ll probably make it a living hell for me. Suddenly the fact that it’s only a week away makes it more appealing. He clicks his pen rapidly, signaling his impatience, and I cave.

“That should be a sufficient deposit. I’ll send you my W-9 for tax purposes.”

He flashes a victory smile, rips a check out, and passes it to me as he picks up the conference room phone. “Shirley, I need the event file for Ms. Whitkins waiting for her at the front desk.”

The check is made out to JW Events, even though I haven’t given him my

company name. I remember he told the little tyke he wanted everything he could get on me. I can see the dossier now. Jillian Whitkins, thirty-one, widowed, owner of JW Events. Last known date with a man: no record found. Then there would be lots of pictures of my parties. I should warn him not to believe everything he sees on the Internet.

I wonder what I could find out about him. I bet he was born rich. He certainly acts like someone who's been privileged all his life. A rich kid who's always thought he's better because he's better off.

As much as I'd like to read the unauthorized biography of Jackson Hunter, it's none of my business. A week from today I'll be free of this man forever, so it's best not to dig myself in any deeper. He can remain the mysterious, enigmatic, drop dead gorgeous, wealthy client who lures women into little black dresses.

He catches me staring at him as he hangs up the phone. He smiles that same smile that caused \$362 worth of broken champagne flutes, and my toes curl.

"I'll have the complete party file waiting for you at reception. You can use what my team planned as a guide, including the guest list. The hardest part will be the time constraint."

The hardest part will be working for him. But I've got \$150,000 to spend and everything—and everyone—has a price. "I'll need your brother's contact info."

"My brother is out of the country and doesn't get back until Thursday. Leave him out of the loop. I have enough trouble keeping him focused on his work as it is."

Oh, I feel sorry for his brother. This man is such a control freak that I can't help needling him a little. "Would you like me to hire a photographer?" I try to hold a poker face but I know my eyes are giving me away. He tilts his head a little to the side. From the way he's studying me, I doubt people joke with Jackson.

"I have a photographer I always use. I'll give you her contact info."

He stands up suddenly, signaling the meeting is at an end. I ought to get out of my chair but he's hovering over me, blocking me. His hands come down and land on the armrests, and now I am trapped. As much as I want to look at his

hands, it's Topaz Olympus that's got my attention.

"I'm leaving for Brussels tomorrow. I won't be back until Thursday. I'm going to trust you to handle this. It should be cookie-cutter for an experienced planner like you. And just so I'm very clear: no whips, no chains, no half-naked men, and no kink. This isn't one of your theme parties."

"Yes, sir." Where did that come from? "I mean, Jackson."

"Oh, *you* can call me sir."

He straightens, and I finally have room to push myself up out of the chair. I'm grateful to find my dress isn't clinging. He places his hand on my back, between my shoulder blades, and I almost jump out of my skin.

"Did I shock you again?"

Yes would be the easiest answer, but not the truth. There's a very different current running through me now, and it's best to keep it to myself. "I thought you were going for my phone." If I'm going to lie, I might as well make it a good one.

"You're safe from me—today." His hand in my back gently guides me out of the conference room, toward reception. Pippa is sitting on the sofa and her long, straight hair looks like it's trying to escape, thanks to the static electricity. I should have some empathy. Maybe tomorrow. Right now I just want to enjoy the view of Pippa having a bad hair day. She sees Jackson and tries to pat it back in place, but the hairs cling to her hand and get teased wilder and wilder.

There's a can of anti-static spray sitting next to a manila envelope at reception (and no one has offered it to Pippa). Jackson hands me the envelope. "Here's what we have on the party."

The envelope is pretty thin so I doubt this is much of a birthday celebration. "If I have any questions, how can I reach you?"

"Email me with any critical questions, but I expect you to protect me from the minutia. And one more thing..."

His hands grab my arms. Those beautiful hands. He's so close and his grip is so tight. "Ohhh." I blush after making that noise again. I'm being held by the sexiest man in the world, and I sound like Homer Simpson.

Jackson smiles that annoying, smug smile, and I want the earth to swallow

me up. He leans into my ear. “I want you to wear this dress at the party. Consider it the uniform for the night.” His voice is so low only I can hear, but despite the lack of volume, there is no doubt he expects to be obeyed.

I think the dress orgasms again.

CHAPTER FOUR

The first thing I do when I get home is get out of the dress and tights, and then call Robert. I tell him we have one more job. I'm relieved to find he's available, and I think he's relieved to know that I can afford to keep him on another week or two.

Then I tell him *who* the event is for. I had filled him in on some of the details of my excursion last night. Now I can give him the name that goes with the face—and hands.

“You want to do business with that man?”

“It may have been a peace offering.” That's the story I've decided to tell myself. It's not based on any reality, but it isn't not healthy to have an adversarial relationship with a client. And I'll only be lying to myself for one week. “He specifically said he wanted to be involved as little as possible.”

“Still, can you trust him?”

“I'm holding a deposit check for \$150,000.”

The phone is silent. Then I hear the click of his keyboard. “He is hot. The *Bay Weekly* says he's the most eligible bachelor in San Francisco.”

And based on his personality, he will probably be a bachelor for a very long time.

“He's a billionaire. He's hot and he's a billionaire. Life is so unfair.”

I try to soften the blow. “Money doesn't buy happiness.”

“That's a lesson I'd like to learn the hard way.” His voice suddenly goes from playful to concerned. “Oh Jillian, you need to read this.”

“Robert, stop. If it’s personal, I don’t want to know. If it’s financial, I already have his check. I only want to know if he has a history of suing event planners. Anything else you can tell me after the event. That is a hard limit.” I don’t need to know anything personal. This isn’t his birthday party. And he’s got a girlfriend.

“Yes, sir.” I can tell by Robert’s playful tease that I’ve gone a little Dominant. We started using phrases from Christian Grey’s contract in front of our clients a few years ago, to their delight (though I’m still not clear about the difference between a hard limit and a soft limit). At some point, we started using the phrases even when the client wasn’t around. Maybe that’s why people think we’re a couple.

I open the manila envelope with the event details, and we start discussing a strategy. The guest list is fairly small—only twenty people or so. I can tell this was planned by his corporate team. Their notes make it sound more like a business dinner than a birthday party. I’m certainly not going to be able to bill \$150,000 for a party like this. I can’t even plan a theme if I don’t know anything about the birthday boy.

Robert is thinking the same. “I’ll start making calls tomorrow morning to see what’s available Friday, but we can’t make a decision until we know what we’re doing. You need to do some of your world-class snooping on the brother.”

“I prefer to call it research. I can bill for research.”

We end the call and I go to work. Facebook has thirteen Bryan Hunters, but only one looks twenty-four years old. Even better, according to his page, he is in Italy and bored out of his mind.

You wouldn’t know he’s Jackson’s brother by looking at him. Where Jackson is controlled energy in a business suit, Bryan is rocking the hipster look with his Buddy Holly glasses and skinny jeans. His hair and beard are both artfully disarranged. If Jackson is a top dog, then Bryan is definitely a show dog.

There are a bunch of selfies with a pretty blonde named Monica. A few at Ocean Beach, the Marin Headlands, and Golden Gate Park. But the majority of their pictures together are in clubs and restaurants.

Checking the guest list, I don’t see anyone named Monica. I need to contact

Bryan and get some details. If I'm doing the math right, it should be about four in the morning in Italy. I send my friend request and am surprised when it's instantly accepted. I send a private message that I'm planning his birthday party and need some info. He shoots back his Skype username and within a minute we connect.

I can't tell whether his hair is styled or he has bed-head. He's checking me out, too. "Have we met before? You don't look familiar."

"I'm an outside planner. Your brother asked me to help."

"At the Il Fratello Fortunati? He doesn't think I'd be sick of Italian food after two weeks of touring every broke-down vineyard that grows his precious nebbiolo grapes?"

I hear something that sounds like a car horn in the background. It seems to make Bryan even edgier than his grooming. "Did you hear that? That was a rooster. It's four o'clock in the morning, and they have roosters on Viagra here."

Boy, this is a high-strung family. "Actually, your brother has decided to move your party." It's not technically a lie. "That's why I'm calling. I'm trying to figure out what you'd like."

"Jackson wants to know what I'd like?"

So it's not just me. He treats everyone the same. "Well, it is your birthday. I was going over the guest list, and I didn't see Monica on it."

"Who's on the list?"

I read him off the names as quickly as I can. A Hunter woman (his mom, I find out), and the rest of the names are employees of Hunter Enterprises, which sets him off more than the rooster.

"This is a company party? He is making my birthday a company party? When was someone going to ask me who I wanted to invite?"

I think of Felicity the intern. "Oh dear, I'm afraid that's my fault. I was supposed to do that, but I dropped the ball. Please don't tell your brother. We both know how he can be." I know when I start manipulating people I'm headed for trouble. But if I can pull this party off, I'll have a nest egg and one non-kinky event I can use as a reference.

We chat for half an hour, and I realize that he wants a big blow-out party for

a hundred and fifty of his closest friends—none of whom are on the guest list Jackson provided. Jackson is expecting a quiet, boring business dinner. Can I make them both happy? I offer Bryan a compromise. If he'll endure the company dinner, with Monica by his side, I'll give him the birthday he wants.

I worry I might not be able to afford two parties, so we start negotiating. He wants a full bar, so I cut his food budget to just a cake, and I can remove the dessert from Jackson's dinner. Bryan wants the party built around the dance floor, and makes some great suggestions on how to do it. He's been going to clubs in the city long enough to know what works and what doesn't, and he gives me the names of his favorite DJs.

"And Jackson is okay with this?" he asks.

It might be 4:30 in the morning in Italy, but Bryan doesn't miss much. "He told me he didn't want to be bothered with the minutia."

"I'm not sure he would consider this minutia," Bryan warns.

"Bryan, I know it's your birthday, but can we make this a surprise for your brother?"

"He doesn't like surprises."

"He doesn't like a lot of things."

Bryan stares into his screen. In that moment, I see the family resemblance. I remember that same expression on Jackson's face in the elevator. I start to wonder whether this is a bad idea just as Bryan breaks into a smile.

"A surprise party. This is going to be *lit!*"

I hope that's a good thing.

Bryan puts me in touch with Monica, who promises to compile a list of friends to invite. I tell her we should email out an STD today, and then have to quickly explain that it's an acronym for Save The Date—not Sexually Transmitted Disease.

Once I know we need a space with both a dance floor and large dining area (and as much space between them as possible), I let Robert do his magic. At this late date, no restaurant or event venue is available. We're going to have to find a raw space, and bring everything in.

With Robert's connections, we find a church for sale in the Dogpatch

neighborhood. It's perfect. The church itself is empty, and there is a parsonage next door with a large kitchen and reception room. What's more, there's a private courtyard that connects the two buildings. We contact the realtor, and by the end of the day, we have arranged to rent it for the week.

Robert and I spend Sunday coming up with a timeline and a vendor list. Monica has received a hundred RSVPs already, and Robert tries to push me over the \$150,000 budget. He's very persuasive, but I just keep hearing Bryan's voice in my head. *He doesn't like surprises.*

Monday we hit the ground running, and the week flies by. I have an inspector verify the building is up to code, I contact our insurance company to give us a quote, I schedule a walk-through with the fire marshal, and hire a cleaning crew for before and after the event. Robert handles the caterer, the DJ, and the lighting company. We meet with our décor vendor on how to turn the parsonage into an elegant dining hall and the church into a techno palace. Bryan has been in rural Italy for two weeks. He needs some sensory overload for his birthday.

And, of course, I had the little black dress dry-cleaned.

Thursday morning, the milk curdles in my coffee. Considering I just bought it, I check the refrigerator and find that everything is warm. I call the building super and within an hour he confirms what I already know—it's dead. He promises to get a repairman out today. These things always happen when I don't have the time to deal with them.

Thursday night, there's a sticky note on my fridge. "Cheaper to replace than repair—ordering new one." Looks like I'll be eating takeout for a few more days. I hope I can still fit in that dress tomorrow night.

When Friday arrives, I'm at the church at nine in the morning. I had hoped to grab breakfast on the way in, but the line at the local coffee shop was too long. Robert is working with the lighting guys, so I take the lead on the décor crew load-in. There is some drama when the forklift gets stuck in the up position, but I leave that for the crew to handle while I run back to the parsonage.

Inside, I find a hysterical woman. She starts speaking to me in Spanish. Very rapid Spanish. At that moment, my phone rings. It's not a number I recognize, so I let it go to voicemail. This woman's outburst seems more pressing.

My phone rings again from the same number. I give her my best “Uno momento” and take the call. I recognize the voice immediately. Or rather, the tone.

“For what I am paying you, I expect you to pick up the phone and not send me to voicemail.”

“How’s your Spanish?”

“What?”

“Can you speak Spanish?” I’ve thrown Jackson off his stride. He says he does, so I order, “Translate” and hand the phone to the woman. They have a short conversation before she hands the phone back to me.

He’s calmer now. “It seems there are pigeons in your kitchen. Is everything all right?”

That is not something you want a client to know. “Oh, she must mean that they’ve delivered the quail.”

“I’m sure that’s exactly what she means. So, I should expect quail for dinner?”

“Appetizer.” What tangled webs we weave. “Did you have any other questions?”

“I was just checking that everything’s on schedule.”

“And that I haven’t absconded with your money?” Oh, I’m getting testy. “No, everything is going *very* well. I look forward to seeing you tonight at six.”

“Then I’ll let you get back to your *quail*.”

“Thank you. You’re very understanding.”

“Yes, I am.” Jackson makes that phrase sound practically threatening.

Now, who can I call to deal with these *quail*?

* * *

By six o’clock, we have transformed the parsonage into a refined dining room (lots of fabric and up lighting), and turned the courtyard into a garden oasis (and dealt with the pigeon infestation). Crews are still working in the church to get it ready for later. I hired a string quartet from the Conservatory of Music. Having

worked my way through college, I know how good it feels to have a little extra money for the weekend. I just don't remember looking so young when I went to college. In their tuxedos and gowns, they look more as if they're going to the junior prom, but they play beautifully, and the music will help drown out any sounds from next door. Robert has strict orders to keep the crew in stealth mode.

I slip into the ladies' room and put on the little black dress. It isn't a good work uniform. There aren't any pockets, so there's no place to stash my phone. I've had to add a belt with a ditty bag, and that just makes the dress even shorter. I run my fingers through my hair, dab a little perfume on, and freshen my lipstick. I'm more nervous than usual, and I know why. It's not the event that scares me—it's the client.

When I return to the room, I notice the photographer is setting up. She's pretty, she's a brunette, and she has long, straight hair. I wonder whether Jackson has slept with her. I won't tell her about the after-party, in case she's a mole.

By the time I've lit all the table candles, the first of the guests arrive. Almost everyone is an employee of Jackson's, so the dress is business attire. I guess Hunter Enterprises doesn't have casual Friday. I make sure that there is someone at the bar, and I alert the chef to start the first wave of passed hors d'oeuvres.

Bryan and Monica arrive together. He's as tall as Jackson, but leaner. He has more of a runner's build compared to Jackson's solid, imposing body.

"We only have to be here until seven-thirty, right?" His tone tells me he thinks that's an eternity.

"That's for your guests. This will probably go until eight."

He looks crestfallen. "That's *two* hours."

I hope Bryan's impatience doesn't make Jackson suspicious. "I know. It will fly by, believe me. And remember, it's a secret."

I look to Monica, imploringly. Monica is even prettier than her pictures, and standing next to Bryan, you can see what a cute couple they make. She has a solid, dependable vibe about her. Monica will make sure they get where they are supposed to be, and Bryan will make sure they have fun when they get there. Hopefully, she can keep him distracted.

She places her hand on his arm. "You haven't told me about Italy. I've

always wanted to go.”

“Really?” His tone clearly communicates he doesn’t understand why *anyone* would want to visit. I sigh. I bet the Hunter men don’t have one romantic bone between the two of them.

Suddenly a silence descends on the room. My back is to the door—not that I need to turn around. “Jackson must have arrived.”

Bryan tilts his head as he stares at me. Now I truly see the resemblance to a show dog. When Bryan does it, I want to smile. When Jackson does it, I want to hide.

I turn and see Jackson standing next to an older woman. She is petite and pretty, and as uncomfortable as I am. She must be his mother. As I look at her, and then look at Jackson towering over her, my first thought is *I hope she didn’t have natural childbirth*.

Jackson watches me approach, and there is a dark, brooding look in his eyes. Did I do something wrong? If he doesn’t like this, he’s going to hate the party later. His hand goes to the small of my back as he introduces me. His mother’s name is Margaret, but she insists I call her Marge. Jackson’s fingers lightly press and dance against the back of my dress. It’s distracting and confusing—and I enjoy it a little too much.

My policy has always been to act like the help and not like a guest. I welcome them and offer to take their coats. The sooner I can get away from this man, the better. As I attempt to exit gracefully, Bryan and Monica approach and block my path. There are kisses and hugs all around—all around Jackson, because he doesn’t join in. Marge clearly knows Monica. Bryan introduces her to his brother.

This is my chance to make a getaway. I wheel my way around Bryan, and come face-to-face with Kyle. I almost didn’t recognize him with his clothes on. He presses his tray of appetizers toward the group, cutting off my escape route.

Bryan looks at the selection. “What are these?”

I asked the caterer if they could add a quail appetizer at the last minute. I knew it was hopeless, but I had to try. I picked one I thought had the best potential to pass for quail and told the chef to lie. Desperate times call for

desperate measures.

Kyle's eyes lock on me. His expression clearly communicates that he hasn't forgiven me for whatever happened between him and Lois last week. "Quail, I've been told."

Jackson notices the look on Kyle's face and takes the first one. He bites into it, chewing ever so slowly. "Quail, huh?"

"Mmmm." That's a nice, non-committal sound. It's not a yes, and it's not a no. It's just an *Mmmm*.

I can tell Jackson isn't fooled. "It tastes like chicken."

I put on my best smile. "That's what I've always heard. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to check on dinner." Exit, stage right.

* * *

Dinner is a pleasant affair. The caterers are perfect and the presentation is delightful. Everyone enjoys themselves. Well, everyone except the birthday boy. I can tell he's just waiting for it to be over. Thankfully, Monica is wonderful—taking his hand, keeping him distracted.

I head back to the kitchen. I missed breakfast and lunch (thanks to the quail infestation). Hopefully I can get something to eat for dinner, but first I need to sit down for a minute. I've been on my feet all day, going nonstop. I pull one of the extra banquet chairs off the stack and collapse. I think about slipping out of my shoes when the kitchen door swings open, and Jackson enters. There's no rest for the wicked, so I start to stand.

"Don't get up. You look tired."

"Weary. I look weary. Never tell a woman she looks tired." I think he's going to hover over me but he actually kneels so we are at eye level.

"People don't often correct me."

"That's a pity. You've probably missed a lot of valuable lessons." My filter is off. I need to remember that he's the client.

"I can think of a few lessons I'd like to give you. Lessons in being honest, being grateful, being submissive."

Submissive? Me? The nerve of this man. “The best teachers learn from their students. And from my point of view, I just got the most eligible bachelor in San Francisco down on one knee.”

Jackson gives me a smile. A very dangerous smile. “That’s because I plan on using the other knee to bend you over and spank that pretty little ass of yours.”

Is he serious? “As I remember, you’re the one who said no kink.”

Before he can react, the servers bring the dinner plates into the kitchen, and we are clearly in their way. Jackson rises and offers me his hand. Reluctantly, I take it and stand.

“That was an excellent dinner. I’m glad to know you didn’t spend all that money.” And at that moment, the walls start to shake.

No matter how I try to manage things—how many checklists, how much research, and all the disaster recovery plans I imagine in my head—there is always something I forget. This time it was soundproofing. The DJ’s subwoofer blasts a bass line with such force it makes the walls vibrate.

“What is that?” Jackson exclaims.

“That’s the rest of your money.” I head out into the dining room and see Bryan’s eyes twinkling like Christmas lights.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have dancing and dessert in the church.”

I walk the twenty guests through the courtyard and into the rear church entrance. It’s not quite eight o’clock, but based on the number of people on the dance floor, none of Bryan’s one hundred and twenty-eight *other* friends are fashionably late.

I text Robert and in a few seconds, the beam from a spotlight in the choir loft swings to and fro near the entrance, searching for Bryan. Since the lighting guy doesn’t know who Bryan is, I’m supposed to stand next to him, and when the light finds me, pull him into the spot. That plan has one serious flaw, and his name is Jackson.

I’m standing next to Bryan, waiting for the spotlight to land, and suddenly I’m not. How I got halfway across the room at the speed of sound is beyond me. All I know is that Jackson has both of his hands pinning both of my arms, so I’m not getting away.

“Um, Jackson. You need to let me go. I’m working right now.”

“I don’t remember asking for this,” he growls.

“You wanted as little involvement as possible,” I say defensively. “Now, I need to find Bryan.”

“You shouldn’t argue with me when you wear that dress.”

He is standing so close I can breathe him in. I never believed in pheromones until now. He smells like expensive shampoo and a hard day at the office. Maybe it’s because I haven’t eaten, but he smells delicious.

He raises an eyebrow. Sometimes I think that man can read my mind.

“You asked me to wear this dress. Now let me go or you won’t like what’s about to happen.”

His eyes narrow. “And you really shouldn’t threaten me...in...that...*dress!*”

They say bad things happen in threes. The three things that happened at that moment were Jackson’s lips crash-landed on mine, the spotlight guy finally found me, and the DJ announced, “Let’s hear it for the birthday booooyyyyyyy!”

While the crowd cheers, Jackson jumps back from me, cursing.

I’m madder than I should be, especially with a client. “I told you that you wouldn’t like it. Now keep your back to the spotlight and let me fix this.” I signal to the lighting guy to follow me. While the crowd whistles and laughs, I scurry back to the place where I last saw Bryan.

Thankfully he hasn’t moved. With my best Vanna White gesture, I point to him, and the DJ follows my lead, announcing, “Sorry, folks. That was just the opening act. Here’s the star of the show: the birthday boy, Bryaaaannnnn!”

Bryan’s friends explode with applause and cheers as they surround him. I push my way through the onslaught, feeling like a salmon swimming upstream. I need to sit down, so I head for the little room behind the altar. It’s private and hidden. Hopefully, I’ll get a few moments of peace.

I’m surprised to find Minerva at the altar, though I shouldn’t be. She arranged for the entertainment. I shudder a little when I think how Jackson may react to our performers. It’s not technically kink, but it does involve people hanging from the ceiling. Minerva is checking the rigging—rather, *was* checking the rigging. Right now she’s watching the corner of the room Jackson is in.

“Party by the famous Jackson Hunter. Hmmm.”

I’m curious, so I try to sound nonchalant. “Oh, you know him?”

“I’ve met plenty of his subs.”

His subs. Of course. A harem of submissives. That explains why he wanted to spank me. And why Pippa keeps calling him sir. I want to ask her how many is *plenty*?

“I’d steer clear of him if I were you,” Minerva warns. She must think that kiss meant something. “He mindfucks his women. Like an emotional vampire. They give him all their love, all their trust. He drains them dry. Then loses interest.”

At least I’m not in danger. I can’t ever see myself trusting that man. Or him trusting me, after this party.

Minerva isn’t done with her tirade. “I see his women in the clubs. They try to fit in, but they’re like the walking dead. No one else is good enough for them. He’s heroin with a dick.”

I better cut her off now. It sounds as though she’s just warming up, and I don’t want to be here all night listening to her take on Jackson’s shortcomings. I don’t think that man is a danger to my virtue. Just my sanity.

“Thanks for the warning.” I dart to my hiding place before she can reply.

Slipping inside, I switch on the light. Only one bulb is working, leaving the back of the room in shadows. I look around for someplace to sit. There aren’t any chairs, but there is a table in the far corner, and I plant myself on it. The walls have no insulation against the music, so it won’t be quiet, but I’ll get some distance from Jackson.

The two of us have been battling since we met, and I have to take some responsibility for it. I’ve judged him for being high-handed and manipulative, and then used the same behavior planning a secret party with his money.

I owe him an amends. I hate the thought of giving him one, but I need to keep my side of the street clean. We’re both strong personalities that just clash. It doesn’t help that I also find him hotter than a propane tent heater. I think that scares me, and makes me combative around him.

I’m surprised that he thought he could punish me with kissing just now. I

might have enjoyed a make-out session with Jackson. Too bad he's into kink. That's probably why he gets sex and punishment all mixed up in his pretty little head.

My phone buzzes. A text from Robert. "Where are you?"

I text back, "Behind the altar—hiding from Jackson."

He sends a "Stay there" reply. That's fine with me. I can stay here all night.

I hear the door open and close. "I'm back here," I call out.

Suddenly, Jackson fills the narrow hallway, blocking my exit. "I know, hiding from me. Robert lent me his phone."

CHAPTER FIVE

Hold on, Jillian, I tell myself. In a few more hours, I won't have to deal with this man anymore.

"Does he know he lent it to you? You have a habit of stealing phones." I try to sound calm. I don't convince myself.

"Add it to my bill," he purrs, stepping closer.

"There is a commandment about stealing, and we are in a church."

"Oh, I've broken so many of those, what's one more?" He stops a few feet from me, thankfully. "This is quite a party. I didn't know Bryan had so many friends."

"You're too modest. You didn't even know he had a girlfriend."

He shakes his head. "Jillian, you have been teasing me all night. And surprising me. The two things I hate most." He moves to the table and puts his hands on the dress shoulders. The way he's holding it, you'd think he wanted to rip it off me. "Add to that, all evening I've had to watch you in this dress."

"The harem uniform?"

"Harem?"

"Well, you had three of them in different sizes. Four, if you count the one Pippa was in that night. I just assumed you had women stashed all over the city wearing this dress."

"I am not interested in a harem. I prefer to devote myself to one woman."

"Until you grow tired of her?" I hope Minerva didn't tell me that in confidence.

“Oh, you think no woman would ever leave me?”

If they were smart they would, but I can see getting stupid for this man. Speaking of stupid, it's time to take responsibility for my own actions. “I shouldn't have hid the party from you. That was unprofessional. We've been butting heads since I took your picture, even though I realize I was wrong. I don't know if I ever apologized, but I am apologizing now. Let me know if you aren't happy with—”

At that moment, Men at Work start singing “Who Can It Be Now?” Jackson looks startled.

“It's Robert's cell phone.” I pull it out of his jacket pocket. Just because I'm apologizing for my bad behavior doesn't mean I have to put up with his. I answer and it's the lighting company verifying the pickup time tonight. I use the phone call as an excuse to get off the table and put a little distance between the two of us.

When I hang up, I realize something is peculiar. “You haven't met Robert. How did you know to borrow his phone?”

“I got his name when he called during our... misunderstanding. And there are plenty of pictures of you two on Facebook. I thought you were a couple.”

Everybody thinks that. “How did you get this phone anyway?” I ask, as I slip it into my ditty bag.

“I learned to pick pockets when I was a boy.”

“Do kleptomaniacs run in your family?”

“They have to, unless they want to get caught.” He smiles at his little joke while planting himself in front of me. “What about you? Would you like to be caught—by me?”

I feel as if I already am. I also feel as though he's trying to get me to do something stupid—like kiss him again. “I thought you devoted yourself to one woman. Does Pippa know you're here?”

He closes his eyes and smiles. “Oh, that's why we're having this big, expensive party. You're jealous of Pippa, and you want to teach me a lesson. Well, I have good news for you. Pippa and I broke up last month.”

Oh, no. That means—in his office—he was...I can't think about that right

now. “Does she know that?”

“I’ve told her. She thinks she can win me back by playing to my paternal instincts.”

“That’s not the right way to play you.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize the blunder.

“And you know the right way to play me? Maybe you do. You obviously know I like a woman to seduce me.” He closes the gap between us. I didn’t think there was a gap between us, but he got closer so there must have been. “You’re all I’ve been thinking of. Do you know how inconvenient that is?” His hands land on either side of me. I always feel pinned inside this man’s arms. “Since I broke up with Pippa, I have no outlet for all of this sexual energy. I’ve been a bear all week at work. So, as much as I’ve enjoyed your little seduction, it’s time I take back control.”

“You think I’m seducing you?” Then I remember what I said in his office.

“Oh, yes. You’re quite the expert. Acting bossy and defiant, and then turning nervous and skittish when I get this close. Then I touch you, and you’re suddenly so needy and submissive.”

I swallow. “I think you have me confused with someone else.”

“You’re doing it right now. Your mind is racing and your breathing is shallow. And I step in, and take you in my arms, and I bend my head down”—and he does, and he does, and he does, so his head floats just above mine. His lips are so close—“and you don’t pull back. You don’t turn away. You want me. And I do like a woman who wants me. More than I should.”

I suspect he thinks I’m into kink. I’m sure he got that from Facebook, too. I need to tell him the truth before we get any further. I’d do that right now if it was just my body that wanted him, but my mind betrays me. My mind wants to know what it would be like to kiss this man. It wants to know what passion tastes like. So I do something stupid. I move my head and put my lips on his. When his tongue finds mine, my mind turns off, and my body turns on.

His arms wrap around me, and I can feel the muscles under the expensive suit. I’d love to see him naked, but settle for rubbing my hands along his hard lines under the soft cloth. His tongue explores my mouth with sensual intensity,

and every stroke and thrust makes me want to take this further. My hands move to his head and I run my fingers through his soft, wavy hair. I've never felt this much desire for anyone in my life. I want him—all of him—and I want him now.

His hands move down my dress and rest at my hips. He grabs a handful of the material in each hand, and the hem rises. One hand slips down between my legs and traces circles around the outside of my panties. I need to stop him—but I have an even greater need to find out where this is headed.

His hand slips inside the elastic band. One finger entices me: stroking, circling, pressing until it works its way in.

“My God, you're already wet for me.” He turns his finger inside me and positions his thumb where he can draw slow, lazy circles around my clit. His mouth hovers above me, and I raise my head to meet his lips. He pulls his head back, out of my reach. I look in his eyes questioningly, and he lowers his head. I raise my lips and he retreats again.

I see the smug look I've become accustomed to. He's teasing me, and the flash of anger I feel gives me the willpower to break his spell. Before I can move, he slides a second finger into me, finding that sweet spot inside. My head rolls back, and now his mouth covers mine. My body responds as intensely as before, but I can't get the image of his cocky satisfaction out of my mind. He's a cold-blooded sexpert.

He lifts his head again, and his hand continues to stimulate every nerve ending I have between my legs. My knees feel weak, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

“Look up, Jillian. I need to see your face.”

When I raise my head, he puts his free hand under my chin, and slowly wraps his fingers around my neck. His gentle grip steadies me, but also works like a brace, keeping my head upright and locked on his face.

“I need to see how you respond to me. I need to know just how far I can go.”

His voice is as smooth as a chocolate fountain, and I instinctively reach my arms out. I don't know if it's to stop him or to feel him, but he gently squeezes my throat.

“Put your arms down. I know you think I want to be touched, but that's not

what this is about. This is a sexual position I call 68.” He moves his mouth to my ear. “I do you, and you owe me one.”

He relaxes his grip on my throat, as his other hand increases its rhythmic taunting. My knees buckle at the intensity, but the hand on my throat is immobile. I have to stand straight or it cuts off my air supply.

“Poor Jillian. You want to let go, but if you do, you choke yourself. All those sensations, and you can’t give in. You can’t surrender. You have to keep your precious control around me. How long can you hold out until you don’t care about breathing? Until you stop playing your games with me? How long before you—”

“Jillian, are you in here?”

Oh my God, it’s Robert. “Back here,” I croak.

“Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over—”

As quickly as Jackson and I pull apart, Robert is quicker. He looks the two of us over and if he suspects something, he’s kind enough to keep it to himself.

“I can’t find my cell phone—and we need to start the birthday toast.”

“Yes, coming.” Robert’s too smart to be fooled but I decide to put on an empty show anyway. “Robert, I don’t think you’ve met Mr. Hunter.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Robert says, offering his hand.

Jackson holds up his right arm. “My hand’s wet.”

My face turns cranberry, and I spin toward Jackson so Robert can’t see. “Thank you for your feedback, Mr. Hunter. I’ll be sure to keep all of your suggestions in mind.”

Jackson refuses to play along. “They weren’t suggestions. They were promises.”

It takes all my concentration to turn around and push Robert toward the door. When I hand him his phone, he gives me a quizzical look.

“Don’t ask. Would you check with the caterers about the cake? I’ll find Bryan and then text you.”

Robert heads out the door. I take a breath, adjust my dress (and everything under it) and follow. I’m only a few steps over the threshold when a hand grabs hold of my arm and I slam into Jackson.

“I wasn’t done with your lesson.” His tone has lost the sensual edge, and he sounds annoyed.

Lesson? I don’t want any more tutoring on that subject. I try to sound calm. “We need to cut the cake now or the caterers will go into overtime.” He’s as still as a statue, but keeps hold of my arm in his vise-like grip.

Since he doesn’t seem concerned with the cost, I change tactics. His mouth has turned Berry Noir, so I grab a tissue from my ditty bag and hand it to him. “You should wipe the lipstick off your face.” He just stares at me, silent and still, but lets go of my arm to retrieve the tissue. I turn and walk away as fast as my shaking knees can manage.

Bryan is easy to find—he’s been standing in plain sight the entire time. Maybe that’s why Jackson was so still. He doesn’t want his brother to see us together. I feel like a dirty little secret.

When I reach Bryan, I wrap my arm through his. “Follow me to the DJ booth. We want you to make a little speech to thank your guests before we bring the cake out.”

I try to stay half a step in front of him, so I don’t have to meet his gaze.

“Are you dating Jackson?”

“Don’t be silly.” I’m sure Jackson doesn’t date. More likely, he just plunders.

“I saw him kiss you earlier, and then you both came out of that back room—and I know sex hair when I see it.”

My hand goes instantly to my head.

“Not *your* hair. Jackson’s.” I realize my little move just confirmed Bryan’s suspicions. “Jillian, I think you’d be great for my brother. Just—make sure—always be honest with him.”

“And no surprises?”

Bryan acts contrite. “I was a little worried about that. But instead he gave you a big kiss!”

There’s how things are, and there’s how things look. Nobody knows that better than an event planner. Bryan thinks Jackson is dating me, and I’m thinking it’s more of a personal vendetta. How did things go so far, so fast?

When we reach the DJ booth, I text Robert, the lighting guy, and Minerva

before I hand Bryan the microphone.

As the DJ finishes his mix, I push Bryan into the spotlight.

“Thank you all for coming to my party! As you know, I’ve just spent two weeks in the Italian countryside and tonight in San Francisco—both thanks to my brother.” Bryan walks back toward Jackson, and the spotlight follows him. “If there’s one thing I learned in my first quarter of a century, it’s that family can be annoying, but they can also be awesome!”

When Bryan reaches his brother, he gives him a big bear hug. Jackson looks terrified, and that expression on his face is worth the price of admission. “Let’s give it up for my bro—Jackson! He’s the guy who’s paying for all this!” Glasses fill the air and mix with shouts of approval.

Bryan’s friends descend on the two and slap Jackson on the back. He looks like such a fish out of water when only five minutes ago he was master of all he could hold—and manhandle.

The house lights dim and spotlights illuminate the two large silk banners flanking the DJ booth. The silk billows and twists, and two aerialists plunge from the ceiling into the suspended fabric. While they climb, wrap, and drop to the strains of a Tchaikovsky piece, I make a beeline to the pipe and drape. I need to wheel out the cake, sing “Happy Birthday,” and get the hell out of here.

Now that I have some distance from the man, I’m horrified at what I let him do. I fell right into his beautiful hands, because I thought he wanted me. I feel like a fool, and I’ll bet that was his intent. It’s my own fault. He told me he wanted to give me a lesson in submission. Sex isn’t about attraction with him; it’s about power. Minerva warned me. He mindfucks women, and even knowing that was no defense against it.

Robert is right behind the curtain, placing twenty-five candles on the cake.

“Listen, I need a really big favor, and I’m willing to pay for it.”

“You want to leave early with Jackson? I think that’s worth \$250, if I have to close by myself.”

“I’ll pay you \$500, and I want to leave without Jackson. He has the wrong impression of me.”

“That you’re easy?”

“That I’m kinky.”

“Wait, what?” I suddenly have all of Robert’s attention.

“He’s into kinky sex. I guess he’s kind of famous for it because Minerva was giving me all the dirt.”

“And what was he giving you in the backroom?”

“A sample.” I need to get away from Jackson, and his wandering hands, so I add a few incentives. “I’ll close the parsonage. I should be safe there. And I’ll take the morning shift with the janitors tomorrow. But you need to tell Jackson I left.”

“Jillian, I’m not comfortable with lying so you can avoid dealing with a situation.”

It’s great having a friend who calls you on your bullshit. Except tonight. I need to win this argument, so I use the secret weapon.

“He’s the one who took your cell phone. That’s how he found out where I was hiding.”

Robert stops and stares. “Let’s light this cake up and start lying our asses off.”

As soon as the aerialists finish their act, we light the candles first, then the sparklers, and roll the cake out as the applause dies down. Everyone bursts into “Happy Birthday,” and I sneak out the back exit, longing for a piece of cake.

When I enter the parsonage, I’m happy to see the pack-up is almost finished. I verify the return counts on all the rentals before signing the paperwork. That only leaves waiting for the lighting crew to remove the overhead illumination. They work quickly, and we have the move-out completed in record time. The cleaners come tomorrow, so my goal is to get home, get to bed, and be back in the morning.

My phone buzzes. A text message from Robert. “Lied to the a-hole. Txt me when u leave.” Well, now it’s safe to go.

I remember that the real estate agent had told me there was a trick to locking the front door—but there had been tricks to every door and I was trying to remember this one. Do I have to hold the latch when I turn the key—or was that the trick to unlock it? I try both and the door won’t lock. This tiny little dress is

no protection against the cold breeze coming off the bay, and I start to shiver.

“Ms. Whitkins, what a surprise.”

I look to my right, and see Jackson saunter toward me. His jacket is open, his white shirt is unbuttoned at the top, and his tie is folded in his breast pocket. This must be his casual look.

“Jackson. I was just closing up the parsonage before coming back to the party.” I try turning the key again.

He climbs the steps, two at a time, and stops threateningly close to me. “I was under the impression you had left for the night.”

“No. I was just checking the return counts for the linens and furniture.” I pull out my paperwork. That would certainly convince him. Solid proof.

“Oh. Because Robert was very definite that you had left. He was also very vocal in telling me that you had no experience with kinky sex. Or did he say you had no interest? They are two very different things...experience and interest.”

I can feel the heat radiating from his body, and I’m so cold I just want to wrap myself around him. “Are you sure it was Robert? That doesn’t sound like something Robert would say.” (That totally sounds like something Robert would say).

“I’m sure it was Robert. He texted you that he had lied to the a-hole.”

I freeze (literally and figuratively) and turn toward him. “Yes, I got the text. The question is, how did *you* get it?”

“I’ve been monitoring your phone since our first meeting. I needed to know if your story was true. I intended to turn it off, but was out of the country. It’s just a lucky coincidence that it’s still on.”

I feel so lucky—and so stalked. “Well, I will certainly talk to Robert. That is not the sort of behavior I tolerate.” I’m babbling. I just need to stall him enough to get this door locked so I can put some distance between us.

I recite every corny sales line I can remember, while I struggle with the lock and my chattering teeth. “Your business means a lot to us. We strive to go the extra mile for you. Our customers always come first.”

“Not tonight, Jillian. Like I told you earlier, I’m not the one who will be coming first.” He grabs the door handle, pulls it open, and drags me inside.

The only illumination in the room comes from the streetlight that shines through the windows, and I find myself pinned between the wall and Jackson. He feels so warm, I lean into him.

“You’re freezing.” He rubs his hands up and down my arms and I begin to defrost. When his hands rub other parts of my body, I realize I’m making the same mistake again.

“Shouldn’t you be checking on your mother? She probably doesn’t know anyone.”

“I sent her home after dinner. She doesn’t like loud music.” His hands move down to my thighs.

“I can save her a piece of cake, if you’d like.”

“Aren’t you thoughtful,” he says sarcastically. “Worried about my mother, apologizing for your behavior, handing out tissues, and giving Bryan his dream party. I’ve got a room full of people who believe I planned this big production. Why would you let them think that? I’ve spent my life disappointing my family.”

I need to keep it light. I also need to press my thighs together as tightly as I can. “Hard to believe one party can undo a lifetime of hard work.”

His hands still. “I wanted a simple dinner.”

“Then why did you give me \$150,000?” I know why, but I want to hear him say it.

He steps back. “Where’s the damn lights?”

I step to my right and flip the switch. The harsh fluorescents blink on while he studies me.

“So Bryan’s party...that wasn’t you throwing the money back in my face?”

“Honestly, I was trying to justify a higher fee.”

“You were supposed to do a simple dinner and then keep the rest of the money. I thought I made that clear.”

I sigh. “Has anything *ever* been clear between us?”

He shakes his head. “I told you I wanted you. The women I’ve dated know what that means.”

I think of Pippa. “How have those women been working out for you?”

The tight set of his jaw lets me know Jackson isn’t a fan of sarcasm, either.

“There’s always been an understanding. I take care of them, and they take care of me.”

So there it is. I was supposed to be the next Pippa. “You were trying to buy my love?”

“I have no interest in love. That money was intended as an incentive to play with me.”

I should be offended, but it was a *lot* of money. Plus, he thinks I’m as attractive as Pippa—or was I just low-lying fruit? “I guess my price has gone down since you found out I wasn’t kinky.”

“I don’t believe so. You’re a very responsive woman.” He takes my head in his hands. “I’ve never trained a brand new submissive. I might be able to get exactly the woman I want. Someone who doesn’t have to unlearn all those bad habits.”

His lips brush against mine and then he tilts his head back to gauge my reaction. This is a different Jackson than the one behind the altar. That man commanded and dominated. This man is all gentle seduction. I just have to remind myself that gentle doesn’t mean sincere.

I try to think of a good exit line until his mouth comes down on mine and his tongue parts my lips. I surrender to his kiss, and a small part of me hates myself for doing it. Our tongues dance and explore, and I don’t know how long we stand there before he comes up for air.

“When was the last time you had sex?”

“With someone else?” *Filter, Jillian. Get your mouth filter on.*

He chuckles. “That’s a good start. The way you’re reacting, it was either very recent or very long ago.”

I think. When was it? The thought is so depressing. “It was another lifetime.” My tone sounds maudlin, even to me. If he offers to break my losing streak right now, I might even say yes.

He scans my face. “I wish I knew what was going on in that brain of yours. Maybe if you weren’t such a mystery...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence. Maybe what? Maybe he wouldn’t be interested?

“I can see I’ve moved too fast earlier tonight. You’re very willing when you’re aroused, and I took that for experience. It’s important we communicate. I...make mistakes...when I misjudge situations.” He steps back from me and I almost fall forward. I hadn’t realized I was pressing myself against him that much.

He surveys the room. “This is where we had dinner?” Stripped bare, without the décor, it’s just a plain assembly room. Linoleum floor, bars on the windows, acoustical tile ceiling. I watch him move around the space, trying to compare what he remembered to what he is seeing now. “Why did you decide to expand the party?”

His tone has changed from accusatory to curious, and I know I don’t have to defend myself. “I listened to your brother. He was bored to tears in the countryside. I knew he needed something urban, something loud and bright. Something that would stimulate all his senses.”

I want to add, *Oh, and I had all that money*, but my filter is firmly in place now.

“I thought he’d be interested in wine importing.” I can hear the frustration in his voice. Family does that to you.

“No, your brother is more mojito than nebbiolo. I see him running a club, not a distribution chain.”

The tight set of his lips informs me he’s not about to indulge his brother’s latent talents.

“How was this space to work in?” And for the next twenty minutes, he bombards me with questions. Why did I choose this space? How big is the parsonage? What worked? What didn’t work? How were the owners? Are the buildings attached? What did I do pre-planning? What had the inspection found? He asks a ton of questions and listens to my answers. A man who listens. Jackson must suffer from multiple personality disorder. If only I could keep this one.

I stifle a yawn as best I can, but he notices.

“You’ve had a long day. You must be *weary*.”

I can’t help but smile. “I thought you didn’t like teasing.”

“I don’t like *being* teased. Let’s get you home.” He opens the door and holds it for me as I step out into the cool night air. I’m grateful Robert is closing the party. Still, I don’t think it’s good for clients to see me yawning—or have their fingers in my hoo-ha.

Jackson locks the door in his first attempt. I have to test it myself, and he raises an eyebrow.

“I have a lot of experience with locks.” He hands me the keychain.

I put it in my ditty bag as he places his hand on my back again, and walks me to his car. When he opens the door, I hesitate, not knowing what he is planning.

The man is all cool professionalism. “My driver will take you home. I’m going back to the party. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Of course. Behind closed doors, he’s dangerous, sexy Jackson. In front of the help, he’s unruffled CEO Jackson. No public displays of passion. Except that once, when the spotlight found us. When he thought I was throwing his money in his face. The money he intended to buy me with.

I settle in to the seat as he shuts the door. I look to see who’s driving, and it’s Ron.

“Ron, it’s good to see the back of your head again.”

“It’s good to see you in my rearview mirror.” That comment could be taken a number of ways, but I let it go. I give him my address, and his reply is, “I know.”

Of course he does. I’m not the only one with snooping skills.

As I text Robert that I’ve left, my stomach grumbles. I’m sure it’s loud enough for Ron to hear in the front seat. I try to remember the last time I ate, and realize I didn’t have a chance today. Funny: when I’m on a diet, I am *always* thinking about food, but when I’m working for Jackson, I don’t have the time. The Jackson diet. I can see women all over the world starving themselves on that regimen.

CHAPTER SIX

I dream of being chased by a pack of wolves that all look like Jackson. That isn't the disturbing part. In my dream, I'm waving my arms so they can find me.

I awake with a start. I've overslept, so I don't have time for either a shower or a cup of coffee. The fridge is still dead, and I make a mental note to call the super to get the status. I'll have to do it later because the cleaners arrive at nine, and I need to let them in. I grab a taxi and barely make it in time.

I retrieve the work clothes I hid last night and stuff them into my backpack. I check the refrigerator to see whether the caterers left any food, but there's only an opened bottle of water.

By noon, when the real estate agent arrives, all traces of the previous evening have been scrubbed away. I hand over the keys and thank her profusely for the rental.

"The pleasure is all mine. I've been trying to move this property for months, and today someone wants to see it. Someone with deep pockets." She winks at me. "I don't think it's a coincidence."

I don't have to guess who the mystery buyer is. The wink told me all I need to know. I thought he was interested in me. I should know better. You don't become a billionaire by romancing event planners. You get inside information from them. It makes me a little mad.

I leave the church and head for the neighborhood sandwich shop. The more I think about all his questions, the angrier I get. I might have my mouth filter on,

but my texting fingers are itching.

“Texting U (even tho U read ALL my txts). Hear ur getting n2 church biz.”

My phone rings. I don’t need to guess who is calling. “How did you know about the church?”

Based on his tone, I’m glad I’m out of his reach, and that makes me bold. “It must feel awful when people don’t respect your privacy.”

“I’m waiting.”

“I just called my head of technology and had him bug your phone.”

“Ms. Whitkins, you need to tell me now or I’m going to get mad. Trust me, you don’t want to see me mad.”

“I’ve seen you mad, remember?”

“That was annoyed. This is mad! ” He’s shouting into the phone, and it sounds as if he’s right next to me. Suddenly there’s an arm around my waist, and I’m thrown into the back of a limo.

I land a little less than ladylike, and by the time I right myself (and my clothes), Jackson has climbed in and shut his door. I try the handle on my side but it’s locked. The limo moves and I spot Ron behind the wheel. I should kick and scream. I’m sure they assume I’ll do that. I’ll try disarming them with calmness.

“Are you two expecting me to hand over my phone, or are we going to wrestle for it?”

Jackson straightens his tie. “Business first.”

The thought of wrestling Jackson does have its appeal. As does kicking him in that special place I learned in my self-defense class. This man certainly brings out conflicting emotions in me.

He’s dressed for work on a Saturday afternoon, and looks like sin in a suit. I guess when you’re a billionaire, you never get any free time. I’m surprised he could fit a kidnapping into his busy schedule.

“We’re going to need a little privacy.” Jackson presses a button and a glass partition inside the driver seat closes between us and Ron. While I’m admiring the technology, Jackson slides across the seat, pinning me against the door. His voice is soft, but there is no mistaking the tone. “Let me make this perfectly

clear. You are not getting out of this car until you tell me how you knew about my offer.”

My heart races and my breathing is shallow. I’m just not sure it’s because I’m frightened. “You should put your seat belt on. We’re in a moving vehicle.”

“I would suggest being more concerned with your safety than with mine.”

I’m tired of this man threatening me. “I will tell you when you *stop monitoring my phone!*” This kidnapping isn’t serendipity. I could be having lunch now if he wasn’t still tracking me.

He grabs me by the shoulders and moves in so close I can feel his breath on my face. “Why can’t you just obey me?”

I shoot back, “And why can’t you use the magic word?”

He looks puzzled. “Abracadabra?”

“*Please*. Please is the magic word. Were you raised by wolves?” His face goes blank, and I can see his emotional partition go up like the glass partition in the car. I instantly regret it. I met his mother. She’s a sweet woman. It’s not her fault she gave birth to the devil’s spawn.

“I was raised by the juvenile detention system, as I’m sure you know,” he drones.

So that’s what Robert found on the Internet. What I didn’t want him to tell me. Jackson’s face and posture are such a mask now, I almost wish the dangerous side of him would come back. At least he seemed alive.

I give him the only apology I can manage, considering I’m still technically kidnapped. “I didn’t know.”

I get his lie detector glare, and then he sighs. “I’m about to make a multi-million dollar offer and this deal has to be done in strict secrecy. I need to know how you discovered it.” There is a pause. Before I can respond, he adds, “Please.”

He used the magic word. There was no pleading in his voice, as I’m sure there never is. I would have preferred he said it as if he meant it, but he made the effort.

“I just met the real estate agent to give her the keys, and she said someone called her this morning to see the place. I remembered all your questions last

night, and put two and two together.”

“You couldn’t just tell me that on the phone?”

“I thought you asked those questions last night because—” Don’t finish that sentence, Jillian. It will only give him more ammunition against you. “I felt played. And then you were so bossy on the phone.” It’s not much of an amends, but he did hijack me off the street.

“And I didn’t use the magic word.”

“That didn’t help.” Looking back at my behavior, I’m embarrassed by how childish I acted. All of my emotions seem to get amplified by this man. At least I’ve taught him to say “please.” Maybe I can teach him “sorry,” too. That’s another word I’ve never heard out of his lips.

I realize as much as I’d like to take his inventory, I need to keep the focus on me. I take a deep breath and try to sound civil. “Why are you interested in the church?”

“Condos. The reason the lot hasn’t sold is that the church has landmark status. I can’t tear it down. But it appears the parsonage isn’t restricted at all.”

The thought of Jackson owning a church is so mind-boggling it makes me smile. Jackson mistakes my smile for something else, and puts his hand on my thigh.

“And who knows, maybe I’ll start my own religion. Would you like to join my flock?”

“I don’t think your ego needs any more devoted worshippers.” I picture the little black dress. “But I do like the habit.”

The car comes to a stop. Jackson opens his door, steps out, and offers me his hand. I grab it and realize we are at my apartment building.

“We’re not done here, Ms. Whitkins. Dinner tonight. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“What for? Are you thinking of buying a restaurant, and need my opinion on that, too?”

“You and I have unfinished business about last night.”

I’m about to ask for a little more information, but he disappears back into the car and drives away. He just assumes I’m free on a Saturday night? It makes me

even madder that he's right.

I take the long, slow ride in the elevator, sending positive refrigerator energy to my kitchen. I've never had any supernatural powers, so I'm not surprised when it's still not working.

I go through the mail, pay the bills (which I can afford to do now that his check has cleared) and grab a load of clothes for the dry cleaner, with the little black dress on the top of the pile.

I normally do my errands during the week, so I'm not used to the longer lines on the weekend. It's three o'clock by the time I finish. I think about getting a sandwich, but if Jackson is taking me to dinner in a few hours, I guess I can wait.

I decide to call my dad. I look at the clock and do the calculation for the time difference. It's only six in Maryland.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hi, honey. How are you? Any earthquakes?"

Our conversations always go about the same. He asks me about earthquakes; I ask him about the weather. Then he tells me what he's done, and I talk about what I've done. What I've done usually takes more time.

"What do single women like you do on a Saturday night?" His question surprises me. He's never asked that before.

"I'm going out to dinner tonight."

He's on that like a bloodhound. "With a man?"

"Yes. A client." He might be listening in right now, so I change the subject. "I'm not looking to date. I don't even know if I can afford to stay in the city, since I don't have any jobs lined up. I may have to come live with you, unless you've got a girlfriend."

"Well, I'm volunteering at the senior center, so most of the women I meet are old enough to be my mother. There's always room for you here, honey. You know, I'm an odd duck, and I think you're the only person who could put up with me. Do you remember Mrs. Condon? She lives two doors down. Her husband passed away a year ago. She's been flirting with me. But, you know, she drinks."

The words hang in the air. We both know what it's like to be in a relationship

with someone who drinks.

I try to lighten the mood. “How’s the book coming?”

“Oh, I had the greatest interview this week. I met a woman at the senior center whose father worked there!” Dad is writing the definitive (and probably only) book on the Deluxe Record Company—it started in 1920 and went bankrupt in 1931 during the Great Depression. “She said she used to have a bunch of records, but tossed them when she had to move into the center. It broke my heart.”

Ever since I can remember, my dad has collected every record put out by the Deluxe Record Company. His grandfather had been a recording engineer there, and had left him both his record collection, and his house in Baltimore. Now that Dad’s retired, I’m starting to worry he might be a little obsessive-compulsive about his hobby. I suspect he volunteered to work with seniors to get access to their attics, looking for records.

“Well, Dad, I always check thrift shop for 78s.”

“Just remember, I still need the elusive 44211.”

My dad has been searching for Deluxe Record 44211 since I was a child. The 44000 series were their spoken records. Deluxe would record performers touring the vaudeville theatres in Baltimore. He has his grandfather’s log that shows the missing record number was recorded in May of 1923 with the initials RV. That’s when Rudolph Valentino was in Baltimore—and Dad thinks it’s a record of him. He’s come up with scenarios worthy of a Dan Brown novel to explain its mysterious disappearance.

But I also know when he gives me his shopping list, he’s ready to hang up.

“Well, I’ll let you go. Have a good night, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I put the phone down and look around my apartment. I’m antsy, restless, and bored, and it’s not even 3:30. I should probably clean my apartment and change the sheets. It has nothing to do with seeing Jackson tonight. I’m just going to straighten up. I’m not going to clean; I’m just going to straighten.

Two hours later, my apartment is spotless. Purely unintentional. I just started with a light dusting, but was horrified at how dirty the cloth was, so I got the

Swiffer, and then the vacuum and then I had to mop the kitchen and bathroom floors, and let scrubbing bubbles take care of the tub (but I did squeegee the shower doors). I also changed the sheets, and finally got around to tightening the screw on the toilet seat.

I've been thinking of what to text Jackson. When he says unfinished business, does he mean the bill, or what was happening when we were alone? If we're in a restaurant, he probably means the bill. He doesn't turn up the testosterone until he's behind closed doors. I want my text to sound casual, but I have to start setting boundaries.

"Running l8. What r we meeting 4 2nite?"

His reply is quick and short. "Business then pleasure."

He needs to stop telling me, and start asking me. I text, "May only stay 4 first. Hoping 2 get 2 bed early."

When my phone rings two seconds later, I debate answering. I can't think of a good reason to avoid it, so I take the call.

"I thought I'd phone, since you're running late. Talking is so much faster than typing. So, if I understand, it's business and then right to bed?"

I should know by now he's better at this than I am. "Where can I meet you?"

"I'm picking you up. Your apartment is on the way to the restaurant."

I can ask the question I didn't ask Ron last night. "How do you know my address?"

"It was on the W-9 you so thoughtfully provided."

"How did you know that isn't my office address?"

"Because I own the building."

Jackson is my landlord? "Did you buy that today, too?"

"I already owned it. People are going to think you're stalking me."

No one would ever believe it's the other way around. "It must be part of my plot to ruin you."

He's silent. Finally, I've left him speechless.

"I'm starting to think you already have. At least where other women are concerned. Since you're running late, I'll give you an extra half hour. But I'm picking you up at 7:30 *sharp*."

I hear his phone disconnect before I can complain about my refrigerator. No good-bye. No “See you soon.” His style is to keep people off balance. Like telling me I’ve ruined him for other women. Does he imagine I believe that? How gullible does he think I am? Gullible enough to let him get his hands on me—and in me.

But business first. He must want his invoice for the party. Did he really expect me to give him a dinner for twenty people and keep the rest of the money? He’s already so arrogant—but it would only get worse if he thought he bought the full-service package.

The caterer is the biggest part of the bill, and then when I add the bar, DJ, church rental, décor, and insurance, I’ve made a hefty dent in the \$150,000 he gave me.

The last number to enter is my fee. I’ve never had to do so much in so little time. Well, I didn’t *have* to do it. Still, I enter the number into the spreadsheet and my first invoice shows Jackson owes me money. I don’t feel comfortable asking for more, so I revise my fee downward and print the invoice. I’ll write a check for the balance I owe him: \$1.13.

If Mr. Hunter is not happy with the amount, he doesn’t have to use me again. But part of me likes the thought of Mr. Hunter using me. And part of me doesn’t.

I’m sure after dinner he will be inviting himself up. Or taking me to his place. Or taking me in the backseat of his car. If I don’t want that, I’m going to have to be equally direct—once I decide.

So what do I want? There’s no debating that he knows his way around a woman’s body. And I’m certainly attracted to him physically. Is it enough? Could I have casual sex with Jackson? A better question is what kind of kinky stuff does he like? Is he into bondage, or whipping, or making me get on all fours and bark like a poodle? What would I be willing to try?

I’ve spent the last five years on the outskirts of the San Francisco kink community, and it’s not the scary and strange place I thought it was. Yet, I’ve never had any interest in experimenting with it before Jackson.

I have an entire dinner’s worth of time to decide. A lot will depend on which Jackson I dine with tonight: the bossy dictator, the sexual predator, the

thoughtful listener, the gentle seducer, or the manipulative control freak. He has more sides than a princess cut diamond.

I look at my watch, and realize I need to get moving. The thought of seeing him sets off a swarm of butterflies in my stomach. I need to calm down. I will take a few deep breaths, find a dress, shower, and get through the evening without making a fool of myself. I can do this.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It's 7:29 and I'm ready. I would have liked some mascara, but my hands are a little unsteady. I don't remember any man having this effect on me. When the intercom beeps, I will tell him to wait downstairs, and then I won't be alone in my apartment with him. My clean apartment. My very clean apartment. And hopefully my hands will stop shaking by the time I get to the lobby.

At 7:30, there is a knock on the door, and I jump. When I look through the security lens, I see Jackson. He wasn't supposed to be inside the building—then I remember that he owns it. The butterflies in my stomach turn into raptors.

"Who is it?" I squeak.

"You know who it is. Open the door."

"I mean...just a minute." I've already made a fool of myself and I haven't even opened the door yet.

"Jillian, I know you're standing right there." His tone is very...what...can someone sound patient and demanding at the same time? "Jillian?" he asks again, not sounding so patient this time.

"I'm thinking," I blurt out.

"What are you thinking?"

My heart races and the back of my neck is sweaty. "I'm thinking if I open this door, we are really going to do this."

"Yes, we are. We are really going to dinner. We are really going to talk business. Unless you don't open the door, and I have to stand in the hall all

night.” He fakes a whisper. “I hope your neighbors don’t notice.”

His little joke lightens the mood. I tentatively unlock the door, and slowly pull it open, staying behind it as if it’s a shield. He stands in the hall watching me, trying to judge my emotional state. “May I come in?”

He’s so damn sexy in his dark-gray suit that I can’t speak. I just nod my head...a little too quickly, like one of those bobbing-head toys in a car that just hit a speed bump.

He moves cautiously into the apartment, eyeing me as if I were an injured animal that might attack. “Jillian, why don’t we leave the door open so you’ll have some fresh air. Have you eaten today?”

I try to think. Have I? I worked, and then met the realtor, and then cleaned the apartment, and then made his invoice, and then showered, and then had this damn panic attack. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Your blood sugar might be low right now. Do you have anything in your refrigerator? Can I look for you?”

My blood sugar. That’s right. This happened before. At my wedding. I wanted to fit into that damn dress, and starved myself. And then embarrassed myself. But Bill was too drunk to notice. “He’s dead.”

“Who’s dead?”

Did I say that out loud? “My husband. I was thinking about him.”

“I’m sorry about your husband. But you need to think about yourself right now.”

“I was. The blood sugar. Yes, I think it’s low. But I don’t have anything to eat. My refrigerator died. Your refrigerator, I mean. I was going to go shopping.”

The elevator chimes and Mrs. Johnson walks by, with her groceries. I watch Jackson deftly intercept her.

“Pardon me. Jillian’s blood sugar is dangerously low and she doesn’t have any food in the apartment. Could you spare a piece of fruit or something? I’ll gladly reimburse you.”

Who is that man? He sounds as sweet as an Eagle Scout helping an old woman across the street. Mrs. Johnson falls for the act—hook, line, and sinker.

“Would a yogurt do?” She’s practically cooing. I bet Jackson uses that sweet

voice to get women to do what he wants all the time. I just wonder why this is the first time I've heard it.

They both turn to look at me, and now I know how the animals in the zoo feel. Jackson smiles. "Jillian, would you like a yogurt?"

I swallow and try to hold it together long enough to answer. "Yes, thank you, Mrs. Johnson. And Jackson..." He tilts his head. He looks so sweet and so concerned I can't stand it. "Please stop talking to me like I'm holding a gun to your head."

"Yes, Ms. Whitkins," he mutters.

"Better take two." Mrs. Johnson hands him a couple of yogurts. He hands her some money but she shakes her head.

"I insist," Jackson whispers, and I can tell by the look in her eyes that it isn't a dollar bill he's slipping into her palm. She giggles like a schoolgirl (even though she's old enough to be his grandmother) and finally leaves. Jackson sets the yogurts down on the table and heads to the kitchen for a spoon.

I step out from behind the door and take a seat. I'm so mortified by this entire episode I pray it's all a bad dream, and I'll wake up very soon.

Jackson returns, rips open a yogurt, and sticks the spoon in with one swift motion. We don't talk while I eat. I start to feel my old self, except for the part of looking like a fool in front of this man. "I'm sorry." I keep my eyes glued to the yogurt container.

"Don't be sorry. Just don't forget to eat. You scared me."

"I can't imagine you scared of anyone."

He raises an eyebrow at me. "I feel partly responsible. Like I said last night, I thought you were more experienced and I played too hard, too fast. I can misread things. You're probably afraid of me, at least subconsciously. And then what you must have read on the Internet made it worse."

"Are you trying to tell me this is post-coital stress disorder?"

"Pre-coital, Jillian. Definitely pre-coital. You don't feel like you can trust me, and when I showed up at your door..."

Tonight was just one more embarrassing moment we've shared. It's time to reboot. "Can we call a truce? Can we just agree that you weren't drugging Pippa;

I wasn't scamming you; you offered to buy me, I didn't understand so I spent all that money on your brother's party; I overreacted when the real estate agent hinted you were buying the church; you overreacted when you kidnapped me."

He shifts toward me in his chair. "I'll agree if you change kidnap to abduct. I wasn't doing it for a ransom."

"Duly noted. Can we also decide to stop manipulating, threatening, overreacting, and *abducting*, and instead try communicating as our first response."

Jackson smiles and nods his head.

"Then in the spirit of communication, I'll be honest. You said you played too hard, but I still found it...erotic. I'd like to trust you." He stares at me, and it's too intimidating to hold his gaze. I pretend to concentrate on scraping the bottom of the yogurt container. "I'm not sure I can trust myself. I don't trust I can finish what we started." I look down at those lovely hands of his, and see them clench. "Even if I want to," I add in a small, shy voice.

I must still be a little off-kilter because when I look into his face, his expression tells me either he's confused, or surprised, or just trying to find a way to get out of here before I go totally off the deep end. I'll give him the opportunity for a graceful exit. I owe him that. "I'm sorry for ruining your evening. They must have canceled the dinner reservation by now. I'll get your invoice and if you have any questions, you can email me."

He stands and I can't help thinking that I could be on a date with a sexy, single billionaire if I had a working refrigerator. He holds out his hand. "No restaurant cancels a Jackson Hunter reservation. Come."

We're doing this? I put my hand in his and stand up. He helps me on with my coat, and I notice the front door of my apartment is still open. I close it behind me while he presses the elevator button. Suddenly it clicks.

"You didn't leave my front door open for the air, did you?"

"I'm used to women being afraid of me. I always give them a clear escape route." He motions toward the small elevator car. "I can take the stairs if you want to ride alone."

"I think I can hold it together for five floors."

The doors close and the elevator begins its slow descent. Part of me wishes he'd grab me and kiss me senseless but he's all business, staring at the floor numbers above the door, and I can't blame him. I do miss the flirty Jackson, though. If I can lighten the mood, he may realize I've returned from my trip to Looneytown.

"Why don't restaurants cancel your reservations? Do you write scathing Yelp reviews?"

He turns his head, and looks puzzled. "You don't know how power works in this town, do you?" Instead of turning away, he just keeps staring, and there's something in his eyes.

His words make me feel like a child, but that look makes me feel like a sex goddess.

His car is parked in front, and Jackson holds the door for me. Ron watches me in the rearview mirror, and I give him a quick smile before he looks away.

I reach into my coat pocket. "I have your invoice with me." I hand Jackson the slip of paper and the check.

He is momentarily confused, and then realizes what it is. "Oh, that." He slips it into his jacket pocket without even looking at it. "I wanted to talk to you about the church. The numbers don't work unless I can make it generate some income. Then I remembered your advice. You said Bryan would make a good club manager. When I asked if he was interested, he said yes. Jumped at the chance, actually. He would have given me another damn hug if I had been anywhere near him."

"You bought your brother a church for his birthday?"

He pulls his phone out of his pocket. "I haven't bought it yet. That's where you come in."

I suspect Jackson has a soft spot for his family that he likes to keep hidden, and I would say something if he wasn't making a phone call right now. I think it's a little rude to be calling someone while he's with me, but he is a mogul and I'm the crazy woman who lives on the fifth floor of one building in his real estate empire.

"The space could be a great event venue. My brother is energetic but

inexperienced. I need someone to guide him. I thought you did an excellent job and would be the perfect person. I'm not going to buy it unless you agree to work with Bryan." He puts the phone up to his ear. "Hi, Bryan. I've got Jillian here and told her the deal. I'll let her give you her answer."

He holds the phone out but I refuse to take it. He presses the speakerphone button, and Bryan's voice fills the car. "Hi, Jillian. I hope you're going to say yes."

"Actually, this is the first I've heard of it. I'm not sure what I'm saying yes to."

"Oh." I can hear his disappointment. "Maybe you should take this off speakerphone and we can talk privately."

Jackson's manipulating me again, and all the gratitude I felt toward him for putting up with my little breakdown disappears. When he reaches to press the button, I grab the phone out of his hand. "I know how to work a smartphone." I turn the speaker off and put the phone to my ear. "Don't assume this is any more private. I suspect your brother taps his own phone."

"Look, I bet you're feeling used right now. That's not uncommon when working for Jackson...but don't let that make the decision for you. I'm nothing like him. I respect you, I think we communicate well, and this could be really fun. Just give it a try. The worst that can happen is that you don't like it and quit."

Of course. I can quit. "Well, we are going to dinner right now. Let me find out exactly what the offer is."

He decides to go for one more sales push. "My brother knows how to fit the right people to the right job."

"That's not what you were saying in Italy."

"This isn't Italy. This is San Fran-friggin-cisco. Please, Jillian, say yes." He's pleading now, half in jest—but only half.

"Good night, Bryan."

"He'll send me back to Italy. I know he will." He sighs in mock desperation.

"Good night, Bryan," I repeat, chuckling to myself.

"Hunter Enterprises will look great on your resume," he adds in his Jackson

voice.

“Bryan, I’m hanging up now.”

He tries one more guilt trip. “I won’t sleep until one of you calls me!”

I hang up and hand the phone back to Jackson. “I may have a grin on my face but that was manipulative, and we had just agreed not to do that.”

“No. That was time management.” He looks out the window. “See. We’re here.”

The here he’s speaking of is the House of Prime Rib. It’s right out of *Mad Men*. Solid, traditional, and lots of prime beef. Much like Jackson. I chuckle at my private joke and he raises an eyebrow at me. “Is there something I should know about the kitchen here, also?”

“No. They’re very fastidious. But I’m noticing you do like your old school San Francisco restaurants.”

“Can you see me in a trendy restaurant? They’re too loud, too crowded, and too rude. I prefer someplace less hectic when I’m discussing business.”

No, I can’t see him in a trendy restaurant. I’m sure he can pronounce every word on a sushi menu, and tell the difference between antipasto and charcuterie, but I bet he’s most at home with a well-prepared steak. Despite a line of people waiting to be seated, we are shown to a private corner table immediately.

With Bryan’s appeal still ringing in my ear, I get right to business. “So, what’s your offer?”

“What do you want?”

The first one to blink loses. “Six-month non-exclusive contract, \$10,000 a month retainer, plus ten percent of all event billables.”

“No.”

I didn’t expect him to say yes, and now it’s his turn to blink.

“I hire you as an employee. You’re paid a salary, and bonuses depend on how quickly you can make the club profitable.”

I can see this negotiation is going to be harder than I thought. “I can’t just shut down my business.”

“You have any contracted jobs this year?” My face is all the answer he needs. “Jillian, you are a terrible businesswoman. The only presence you have

on social media is what your clients create, I don't see any marketing plan, and you didn't even know who I was the first time we met."

I am about to respond sarcastically, when the waiter approaches. Jackson dismisses him with a wave of his hand.

I take a breath and calm myself. "Why do I need to know who *you* are to be a good businesswoman?"

"I am constantly in the social pages. My face is plastered on every magazine and local Internet site. I run one of the biggest corporations in San Francisco. Any serious event planner knows who's who in their market. They don't wait until I take them to dinner to Google all the dirty little facts about my past."

"Well, I must be even worse than you thought because I still haven't Googled you."

The waiter returns with water and a basket of bread. Dinner with Jackson—bread and water. Just like in prison, and the uniform is a little black dress. My mind pictures him dressed as a guard with a big nightstick and...I need to stop daydreaming. I look from the bread back to Jackson and his expression is less prison guard and more executioner.

"You truly haven't done any research on me?"

"Sadly, no. Are you going to scold me for that, too?"

"I should." He breaks off a piece of bread, and butters it. "But I can't remember the last date I had where I was still a mystery to someone."

He's doing that thing with his voice. Where it starts in my ears and somehow moves down my body and makes everything tingle. I'm sure the serpent in the Garden of Eden had the same sensual purr.

But the sting of his criticism helps me ward off his charm. "This isn't a date. It's a business meeting, as I remember. And I'm sure you're a mystery to a lot of people. The mystery to me is why you want to hire a terrible businesswoman."

He offers me the buttered bread slice. "Eat this." I shake my head while he stares me down. "You're getting a little cranky."

"And you think it's my blood sugar?"

"So eat the bread and prove me wrong."

"You answer my question, and I'll eat that butter-soaked bread."

“All right. I said you were a terrible businesswoman, but I think you’re a remarkable event planner. I still can’t believe what you pulled off in only one week. Especially after I saw the church in the daylight. I almost overbid for it. You take this job and you’ll be able to do what you love and delegate the business end to my team. You’ll have a steady income, you’ll have benefits, and you’ll have security.”

I take a bite from the bread. Chewing it will give me a chance to think. He’s a better salesman than his brother, or maybe he just knows me better. He got me to eat the bread, and he’ll get me to join his team. And maybe join him in bed. Or maybe not, if he’s offering me a job.

“I’ve got an employee.”

“Robert? I’ll hire him.”

Maybe I am cranky, but I can’t resist poking the bear. “You do remember he called you an asshole?”

“Most people have called me that at some time.”

He signals the waiter, so I hurriedly scan the menu. I consider ordering the fish but—when in Rome—I order the prime rib. I’m about to ask him how he expects this plan to work, when our waiter returns and dresses our salad at our table with theatrical flourish.

Jackson picks up his salad fork. “So, are you ready to become an employee?” He stabs at the lettuce with the force of a jackhammer.

“We haven’t discussed salary,” I say before I take a bite of the salad. I’m going to have to remember to do dinner meetings with this man. I can buy a lot of time to think by chewing slowly.

“I’ll meet your \$10,000 a month. And I want a two-year contract.” His fork pile drives into the salad again. I know these salad plates. This line is popular with restaurants because they’re sturdy. I just don’t know if they’ve been tested against Jackson.

I pop a cucumber slice in my mouth while I think. Two years isn’t unreasonable, but a contract won’t let me quit if we can’t work together. “I’ll give you six months.”

“I’m afraid I have to be firm on the two years.” Once more, his fork rams

into the salad. His table manners help me understand why he has to pay women to date him.

“That’s too long. Just today, one of the leading CEOs in San Francisco told me that I’m a remarkable event planner. You don’t want to lose me because your ego got in the way of negotiation, do you? I’ll give you nine months.”

He sets his fork down, and I check to see whether it’s bent. He reaches for his phone.

“Now who’s manipulating? You’ll give me a year, I’ll hire Robert, and I’m texting Bryan that you said...” He leaves the sentence open, for me to fill in the blank.

I sigh. It’s been a long day, and I hadn’t expected to be negotiating a job offer. I’m sure it will be exciting, and after the last year of scraping by I’ll be happy for a steady paycheck. If I was smart, I’d hold out for a sign-on bonus, but I just spent \$150,000 of his money already this weekend. “Okay. Yes. He’s probably been checking his phone every five seconds. Put him out of his misery, and maybe we all can enjoy the rest of this evening.”

Jackson sends the text and then puts the phone away. When he picks up his salad fork, I tense. To my surprise, he doesn’t use it like a power tool, and we finish our salads in silence. The carver arrives and serves our entrée along with baked potatoes, creamed spinach, and corn bread. Jackson orders us a split of red wine, and I unwind over the lovely meal.

He asks about my start as an event planner. It’s not that exciting a story. How he became a billionaire is probably more interesting, but I tell him how I got into the business. He listens thoughtfully, and when I finish, he looks me in the eye.

“That’s very nice but I didn’t ask how you became an event planner. I asked *why*.”

Why? How do you answer that? “I just seem to have a talent for finding out what people want.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I get a sense. Like your brother. Remember his face at dinner and then at the party? The party was what he wanted.”

“And you thought the dinner is what I wanted?”

No, I thought embarrassing me was what you wanted. Now I'm not so sure. "I didn't know. You were out of town and all I had was a guest list and dinner menu from the party you were going to give him. I tried to give you both what you wanted. It just took two parties to do it."

My plate is empty and I don't even remember eating. It's hard to concentrate on anything else when Jackson is around. My new boss. Is this a huge mistake? He's right when he says the job will give me security. Financial security. It's the most money I've ever made. It's emotional security that I'm not so sure about. Something happens to me when I'm with this man. Everything gets magnified. I'm either very angry, very embarrassed, or very turned on. And right now, I'm not angry or embarrassed.

The waiter clears our table and brings two glasses of champagne.

"I thought we'd toast our new partnership." He holds out one of the champagne flutes to me.

I take the other one, and bat my eyes. "A girl can't be too careful."

He laughs loud enough to make the tables next to us turn before raising his glass. "To a woman who knows what I want."

I hesitate. I wish I knew what he wanted. There are some people I can't predict. Like my husband and my mother. "I'm not sure I have that skill set. You're a mystery to me."

He looks disappointed, but smiles. "I shouldn't be surprised. Around you, I'm a mystery to myself."

He taps his glass against mine and we drink, his eyes never leaving me. He sets his glass down, places the napkin on the table, and holds out his hand.

"Now, let's get you to bed."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jackson doesn't speak the entire ride back to my apartment. He might be staring at me, but in the dark I only can see his face when we pass under a streetlight. I'm not going to stare at his face to see whether he's staring at me because then he'll think I'm the one staring and...I'm overthinking this.

I could break the silence, but what would I say? I don't even know whether I want to invite him up or not. Now that he's my boss, the fantasy of a one-night stand is shot to hell. I'm so lost in thought, trying to anticipate every scenario, I don't notice we've arrived at my building until he opens the door and I hear the low rumble of his laugh.

"I can hear the gears turning, Jillian. I left something in your apartment, so you're going to have to invite me up."

He unlocks the front door with his key (I'm sure he did it on purpose to remind me who owns the building). In the elevator, I sneak a peek at his face, and he turns his head toward me. His expression seems to promise sensual delights, and I can't look away. He's so damn handsome, and he holds my gaze. I tremble.

"Cold?"

"Nervous." Oh, not the right thing to say. "I mean, uh..."

He puts a hand against my face. "You are the most honest person I've met."

"Well, I hate to disappoint you, but remember that quail?"

He puts his finger over my lips. "I don't mean your words. It's your face."

You don't have a poker face. Everything you're feeling is written all over it."

The elevator shudders to a stop at my floor, and I reach for my keys. He takes them from my hand and opens the apartment door. That's the second time he's taken keys out of my hand. He might think it's gallant, but I find it annoying.

I walk past him and turn on the light. "What did you leave here?"

Jackson is still standing in the hallway. "I left a frightened, panicking female."

It's still embarrassing to think of, and my irritation evaporates. I push the shame out of my mind. "I hope my landlord doesn't find out about you leaving women in my apartment." I look around. "I think she's gone."

"Then you should invite me in."

When did he become so formal? "Are you a vampire?" Isn't that what Minerva called him—an *emotional vampire*? "You can't cross a threshold without an invitation?"

"What was it you said earlier? 'If I open this door, we are really going to do this.' I need you to decide. Either invite me in or say good-night. It's your choice, Jillian."

Part of me wishes he would just come in and kiss me senseless and then ravish me. That's not his style tonight. Still, I need to know a little more. "If I invite you in, what will happen?"

He raises his eyebrows and laughs, almost like a villain in an old James Bond film. "You want me to sell you on the idea of inviting me in?"

His lips curl into a sensual smile as he crosses his arms and leans against the doorframe. The pose suits him—he looks like an ad for sex. "The first thing I'll do is close the door. And *lock* it. There is a frightened, panicked female loose in the building, and I don't want her coming back into this apartment."

"Unpredictable people can be scary, but so are experienced people to the beginner."

He tilts his head back. "I understand now. What I want to do is explore. I want to explore your body, I want to explore what turns you on, and I want to explore what makes your eyes roll back in your head. I want to know what

makes you whimper, what makes you moan, and what makes you shout my name. I'm not a rapist. You can say no to me. But that doesn't mean I won't try to turn it into an 'oh no,' which means something else entirely."

"You're very persuasive."

"I must be. I've turned myself on." He straightens and drops his arms. "Invite me in."

Despite every nagging doubt and fear, I hold out my hand. "Won't you come in, Jackson?"

He saunters in, shuts the door, and locks it. He is a man of his word, but I wish he would hurry. He grabs my wrist, pulls me into his embrace, and pins me to the door.

"You've put me through hell this weekend." His voice is low and gravelly. "I have half a mind to rip your dress off and take you right here, right now. Hard and fast."

His hand goes to the back of my head, and he presses my mouth to his. I respond with all the pent-up passion he has been awakening in me. I need to feel him. I can't stop myself from leaning into his kiss, into his arms, into his seduction. There is something so powerful between us that it almost distracts me from the hands working the zipper on the back of my dress.

Then just as suddenly, his head snaps back. He looks confused, as if he awoke from a dream and hasn't quite realized where he is. "I get such mixed signals from you," he says, almost to himself. His eyes have a laser-like quality as he scans my face. "You really haven't done anything kinky before?"

I shake my head and his expression hardens. "If you lied to me I'll find out. I always find out."

A minute ago he thought I was the most honest person he's met, and now he is threatening me. Sounds like a man with trust issues.

Jackson takes my shoulders in his hands and steps back. "I want you. All of you. But let me be clear. There is no one else—for either of us. As long as we're together, there will be no one else. Do you understand?"

I nod my head. It's not like I have a waiting room full of men, and I'm not expecting this to be a long term commitment. In fact, I'm not sure I'll ever see

him again after tonight. The whole job offer could just be billionaire foreplay.

He grabs one of my hands and reels me in as the other arm slides around my back, pressing us together tightly. “Having second thoughts?”

I look into his eyes. They are as blue as a gas burner flame, and just as warm. “I was thinking this through.”

His brow furrows. “Thinking? Thinking isn’t sexy. Thinking leads to guessing, and planning, and judging.”

He forgot to add *worrying*. “You like thoughtless women?”

He tilts his head. I know it was a smartass comment, but bantering with him helps me feel a little less insecure about where this is leading.

“What I like,” he intones, “is a woman who can abandon herself to the moment.”

It sounds like a challenge. *I have nothing to fear but fear itself*. I wrap my arms around his neck, and part his lips with my tongue. Was it only last night when we first kissed? When I thought he was the most arrogant man in the world.

He slams me up against the door again, never losing contact with my mouth. His thigh presses between my legs, and his foot spreads them wider.

He lifts his head and we are equally breathless. “I’m not interested in casual sex. There is nothing casual about what is going to happen tonight. We are going to get to know each other very well.”

“Then let’s move this party to the bedroom,” I add with more certainty than I feel.

“A traditionalist, huh? You only like sex in a bed?”

“The neighbor across the hall is a busybody. But I share a bedroom wall with Mrs. Johnson, and she’s going a little deaf.”

A sly smile crosses his lips. “How could I forget you’re an event planner.” He takes a step back and holds out his hand. I wrap mine inside it and head toward the bedroom. This is the awkward part, but it’s best to get it over with. I reach into my nightstand and pull out a box.

“I don’t know if you came prepared...but I have some—”

“A box of condoms? No wonder you’re worried about the noise.”

“There’s only six in there.”

“*Only* six? I’m feeling pressured.” Then he laughs out loud. “But they did expire last year.”

“Condoms expire?”

That only makes him laugh harder. “I thought you were a passionate woman, and now I know why. You are *starving* and I find that an incredible turn-on.”

He pounces like an animal, kissing me, touching me, his hands pulling at the back of my dress. “I was going to have you strip for me. I was going to make you take off each piece of clothing and fold it carefully.” He pulls the dress over my head. “But I need you naked *now*.”

He tosses the dress on the floor before I can grab it. He unhooks my bra, and flings it in the same direction. “So beautiful.” He steps back, takes off his suit jacket, and adds it to the pile.

He unknots his tie, pulls it from under his collar, and then stares at the silk material (probably wondering if he wants to tie me up with it). I guess it’s one of his favorites, because he tosses it on top of the other clothing.

The pile is getting too big for me to ignore. I’m about to pick the items up when he commands, “Unbutton me.” He pulls his shirt tails out of his pants, and I feel his eyes on me when I reach for the bottom button.

“There are things I want to do to that beautiful body of yours,” he murmurs. “Sensual adventures. Pleasurable little games. The kind of things your mind says good girls don’t do.”

I work my way up his shirt to the collar. I know I should be listening to what he is saying. I know it’s important, but he’s so damn handsome I can’t concentrate. Even his self-satisfied smile, as I release the last button, is hot.

He slips out of his shirt. His chest is the perfect blend of muscle and hair. His broad shoulders and wide back taper down to a muscular waist. There is a thin line of hair below his navel that trails down behind the zipper of his pants. I notice a flash of white as his shirt descends onto the discard pile.

He takes my chin in his hand, and tilts my head up to his face. “What would you like to do first?”

“I’d like to pick up your clothes from the floor.”

His sensual smirk slips and, after a confused pause, a grin crosses his face. “You want to be my little servant? Should I get you a French maid’s uniform?”

I sidestep him, and bend over to pick up his clothes. “I am trying to save you from a wrinkled Walk of Shame.”

“Really? Or is that just an excuse for you to bend over and show me your ass?”

I lay our clothes on top of the dresser. “I’m sorry. I’m a little funny about bedrooms. They’re a kind of sanctuary for me...ever since I was a child.”

“You get distracted so easily,” he muses, slipping his shoes off. He steps out of his pants and hands them to me. “Are you done with your chores now? Can I get back to seducing you?”

Seeing Jackson in only a pair of boxers makes it easy to nod my head.

He steps closer. “Actually, it’s my turn for a little housekeeping. First, I have to ruin your carefully folded pile of clothes.” He removes his jacket, reaches in a pocket, and pulls out a condom. He hands the jacket back to me, watching with an amused expression, as I fold and return it to the pile.

He slides up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. His skin is warm, and it feels good against my naked back. I inhale his spicy, masculine scent. If Dr. Bronner made a soap in this fragrance I would soak in it until my skin pickles.

Jackson gently exhales across my neck and shoulders. “And now the last piece of housekeeping. Do you have a safe word?”

“Do I need one?”

“They’re useful for role play. Maybe you’d like me to be the dangerous man who’s doing terrible, wonderful things to you. Then you’ll have the freedom to beg me to stop...and not have to worry I will. The poor little victim who’s trapped in the clutches of a man determined to have her.”

I hate the word victim. I have fought all my life against being one. So why does it sound so intriguing when he says it?

“So, what shall we use for our safe word?” he whispers.

I turn inside his embrace and drape my arms around his shoulders. “The only ones I know are yellow and red.”

“Little Jillian Whitkins. Everything she knows about kinky sex she read in a book. No one ever stops to think how you use a safe word when there’s a gag in your mouth.”

My eyes must have flashed a panicked look, because a sexual smile crosses his face. “No, Jillian. Not tonight. I’m not going to gag you, or bind you, or blindfold you. Tonight, we’re just going to play with our bodies, and our dirty little minds. So use *yellow* if things are getting to be too much, and say *red* if we need to stop altogether. But if we’re going with the traffic light example, let’s add green. Anytime I’m doing something you like and you want more of—say *green*.” In a flash, I hear a rip and my panties are yanked off me. I’m exposed, possessed, and surprisingly turned on.

“I like ripping clothing. And the color in your cheeks tells me you don’t mind when I do it.”

My mental light bulb comes on. “That’s why you have all those little black dresses.”

“Some women are very particular about their wardrobe. I’ll replace anything I ruin, but I suggest you don’t wear things around me you would hate to lose.”

I think about my closet and imagine him ripping through it, until he slaps me on my thigh. “I can always tell when you start thinking. It’s like you’re somewhere else. Are you trying to figure me out in that busy little mind of yours? I’m giving you all my attention right now, and I need all of yours. That will be your first lesson.”

“Lesson?” I thought we were going to have sex.

“Get on the bed.”

I roll the comforter down and hear Jackson mumble, “We definitely need a French maid uniform.” I don’t care if he thinks I’m prissy, these things are a pain to wash and I suspect we might be having some sweaty sex soon.

He pushes me down on the bed, drops his boxers to the floor, and kneels between my splayed legs. His hands land above my shoulders as he hovers over me on all fours.

“When we are having a scene, thinking is bad and feeling is good.” His gaze is so intense, I almost want to look away. “This is how we’re going to play. It

should be easy for someone who loves to be in control as much as you do.”

I know better than to interrupt him right now, so I only roll my eyes.

“I want you to take your arms and raise them over your head. Grab hold of the rods in the headboard.” I do as he says. “Good girl. Now don’t let go. Keep your legs open and your eyes always on me. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Is that the right answer?

“You’re thinking. Thinking is bad. What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to say ‘yes, sir.’”

“So eager.” He gives me a quick kiss on the lips. “I’ll tell you what I want. You don’t have to think—you just have to be honest. There’s no punishment here. There is only the first lesson. And now, one more thing—I don’t want you making any noise. You can answer if I ask you a question, but no other sounds. If you make a sound, I stop—and you won’t want me to stop.”

He nibbles on my ear. He’s so close, hovering over me. I can feel the heat radiate off his body, but I can’t touch him. He trails his tongue down my neck and I shiver. I never knew that was an erogenous zone, and I surrender to the sensation.

“Open your eyes, Jillian.”

My eyes fly open. When did I close them?

“What did I tell you?”

“Keep my eyes on you.”

“And?”

“Don’t let go of the headboard. And keep my legs open. And don’t make a sound.” My mind races. What else? “Don’t think.”

“And?”

What else did he tell me? Isn’t that everything?

“I want you to always be honest,” he gently reminds me.

Well, if I was honest, I’d tell him this is a lot harder than it looks.

His mouth descends on my left breast. He suckles it, and I want to close my eyes and moan, but I clamp those reactions down tight. I’m doing pretty well until his teeth capture my nipple, and I make a sound I couldn’t repeat if my life depended on it. Jackson raises his head.

“Why did I stop?”

“Because I made a sound,” I manage in a strangled voice.

“And haven’t we discussed this, Jillian? What were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Answer the question. What were you thinking? Be honest.”

“I wasn’t making any sounds and I wasn’t moving anything and I was looking at the top of your head and it felt wonderful. Then you bit my nipple and I lost control.”

“You didn’t lose control. You let go of it. For a few seconds, I made you let go of control, and the world did not come to an end. You have it back now, don’t you?”

Do I? “I think I’m going to disappoint you.”

His sudden laugh is like a bark. “Look at me. All of me. Do I look disappointed?”

He straightens, and I move my eyes down the length of him to...the length of him. He is hard, and straight, and certainly not disappointed. In fact, over-enthusiastic is a better description.

“Your mind doesn’t like giving up control. It’s going to try to distract you—to make you feel ridiculous, or frightened, or shamed. None of those things are true. All that is true is that you are laying here on your bed, unrestrained, receiving a lesson from a teacher who only wants you to be an excellent pupil.”

He kisses me between my breasts. “The lesson is almost over. I just need you to focus a little harder.” He moves to my right side and lays on his side, pressing against me. He positions his head over my right breast, while his hand strokes my thigh.

I can feel his erection pressed against my hip. He slides a finger into me and my arms move reflexively.

I blurt out, “Sorry,” before I remember I’m not supposed to speak. I silently mouth *Sorry* to apologize for saying the word.

He chuckles that same low rumble he did in my doorway. “It’s hard having to control yourself around me, isn’t it?” I nod my head, never taking my eyes off him. “If your hands were restrained, you wouldn’t have to remember to grip the

headboard.” His finger slips in and out, slowly circling. “If your legs were restrained, you could forget about keeping them spread. If I blindfolded you, you wouldn’t have to focus on my face. You could just let go and feel every sensation.”

His finger slides out of me, and he holds it in front of my face. “See how wet you are. You must be really turned on by this. I bet that makes it harder to control yourself.” Then his voice drops an octave. “Open your mouth.”

His eyes are like two hypnotic spirals and, without thinking, my jaw drops open while my tongue moves toward his hand. He places his finger in my mouth and orders, “Suck it.”

I wrap my lips around his finger, as his head descends on my breast. I stroke his finger with my tongue and feel him do the same to my nipple. His mouth mirrors mine, letting me signal how hard he can play with it. I flick my tongue against his finger repeatedly, and enjoy the sensations from his mimicking tongue. I close my jaw a little, and scrape my teeth against his finger. When his teeth scrape against me, I moan. His finger slips out of my mouth, and presses into my sex. His teeth continue to fondle my nipple while he slips a second finger deep into me. My breathing crumbles into short, shallow gulps until he opens his mouth and releases the tight bud.

He turns his face toward me, and there is a possessive gleam in his eyes. “I don’t think I would gag you. You suffer so erotically.”

He pushes up on his elbow and glides on top of me. “You can touch me if you want,” he whispers. My mind is confused but my body responds instinctively; my arms wrap around him and I mold myself against his muscular frame. I want to feel his naked body pressed against me so much that I’m clinging.

He brushes a curl off my forehead. “This is a pleasant surprise. You’ve been so stop-and-go all night, I was afraid we’d never get here.” He nibbles on my lower lip. I pull it free from his teeth and place my hands on his head, raising up to kiss him. His lesson has made me bolder, or am I just too excited to be self-conscious about what I’m doing? My hands need to feel his hair, the muscles in his back, his arms—every part of him.

I don't know how long we spend like this, but when he pulls his mouth free I still want more.

"This is what I was waiting for. You're a passionate woman, Jillian, but you hold everything in so tightly. Always controlling what you say, what you do, and second-guessing yourself. I want you to learn how to surrender when we're like this. I want to set you free." He reaches for the night stand. "But right now I need to fuck you. Luckily, I have a condom from this century. You can move your arms, you can move your legs, and you can make as much noise as you want. Just don't think. Follow my lead and trust me. And use the safe words if you can't."

He pulls himself off me and lifts up on his knees, hovering over my chest. He tosses the condom between my breasts. "Put it on me."

I open the package and pull out the latex ring. I take hold of him with my left hand. He's big and straight and beautifully shaped. He's so hard, yet the skin feels wonderfully smooth and very warm. There isn't anything that isn't hot about this man. I roll the condom down his shaft, and hear his sharp intake of breath. When I look in his face, it's obvious he isn't trying to control his expression anymore.

"You seem to have some experience with this."

"I've decorated a lot of parties with condom balloons."

He chuckles under his breath. "So much experience, and all of it the wrong kind. Why does that turn me on?"

His lips lock on mine, and I feel the need again. It's not quite as strong now that I'm a little worried about fitting him inside me. He presses his fists into the mattress as he lowers himself down, and it makes me want to lick his tensed chest muscles.

He presses between my legs. I stare into his darkened eyes and we communicate through this silent connection. "Tell me you want me, Jillian." His voice is low but so controlled.

Right now there isn't anything I want more. "I want you," I whisper.

"Tell me how badly you want me. Don't think. Your pleasure is so close. Your release. But you're going to have to convince me you want it."

This isn't the time for shyness. "I want it."

"You made me wait outside your door and sell you on coming in. Now it's your turn. *Sell me.*"

He moves his mouth to my neck while a hand plays with my breast. I arch my back in response, and give voice to the hunger building within me. "I need you, Jackson. I need you inside me now."

His hand moves between my legs, and gently rubs between my thighs. "And?"

That word again. Is this a lesson? *Don't think.* "No man has ever made me feel this way. I didn't think any man could."

"And?"

Damn him! "In the back of my mind, you are going to take me and use me up and then leave, and I'll never recover but right now I don't care. I only know I want you to fuck me!"

"Jillian, this is very nice to hear, but all I'm asking for is the magic word."

Oh, no. Tomorrow I'll regret everything I said, but right now all I want is to end this agony of waiting. "*Please!*"

He thrusts deep and hard, and my eyes close at the mixture of pleasure and pain. My breathing is ragged as I try to relax all the muscles inside me.

"Fuck, you're so tight," he moans before giving me a quick kiss on the forehead. "That wasn't a criticism," he adds.

The fullness starts to recede, as his hips lift off me slightly. I open my eyes to find him staring at me so intently—waiting for me to let him know what I'm feeling. His razor stubble scratches my cheek as he whispers in my ear, "Where are you?"

A good question. "I'm on a cliff," I moan. "I'm afraid I'll fall. Afraid I'll crash and burn." Afraid I'll end up like all his other exes from just this one night of passion.

"You can fly, Jillian. You can soar with me. Let go. Let go of all of those thoughts and worries. Trust me. I've got you. Make the leap."

I close my eyes and imagine stepping off the edge of Half Dome as my body relaxes into his erotic assault. He moves slowly and gently, working his way

deeper with every thrust. My arms wrap around his neck, and I lift my hips up to match his thrusts. His appreciative growl is loud enough for even Mrs. Johnson to hear, and soon our rhythmic pounding reflects the urgency building inside us.

“Open your eyes. Look at me.” His voice has lost its sensual purr. It’s pinched and tense, and I instantly obey it. “I knew it would be like this, once we got past all of your defenses. I knew there was a sweet little submissive woman inside.”

My tongue wants to debate that observation, so I move my mouth on his and let it express itself with action rather than words. When his tongue lunges for mine, I parry his attack with the skill of a fencing instructor.

He lifts his head up and his eyes are alight with amusement—and excitement. He tsks at me. “What am I going to do with you?”

His mouth moves to a pebbled nipple and flicks it with his tongue. I arch my back, raising my breasts higher, wanting him to play harder with them. His teeth replace his tongue and my breathing becomes shallow.

“Jackson, I’m close.”

“I know. Keep your eyes open. I need to see what it looks like when you come. We’re going to come together, looking in each other’s eyes.”

I respond without thinking. “Yes, sir.”

I can see the effect my words have on him. His eyes open wider, and the look on his face is so possessive that it sets off a sensation deep inside me. His thrusts become more demanding—deeper and faster.

“Come for me. Come for me now.”

Jackson was right—I am flying, and all my senses are in overload. My muscles try to contract, but there’s no room when he’s buried deep inside me. My body shudders into his solid mass of muscle. Staring at him takes all of the concentration I have left. His breath halts and trembles, and his expression becomes so twisted and tight that I wonder whether orgasm is painful to him. He thrusts his hips into me with an erratic rhythm, while gritting his teeth, and then collapses.

I relish the weight of this man covering my body. As we lie there catching our breath, I get an impulse to kiss him. I’m sure if I thought about it, I would

second-guess myself so I kiss him on the forehead and whisper in his ear, “Thank you.”

He takes a deep breath and lifts his head over mine. “For what?”

“For all your hard work.” If I had known it was going to be like this, I wouldn’t have fought with him for the last two weeks.

“You’re too sweet and trusting for this to be considered work.”

“Thank you.” I don’t even remember why I was fighting with him.

“It’s not a compliment. Life isn’t kind. It grinds up the sweet and trusting.”

Okay, now I remember why I was fighting with him.

He gets out of the bed and tosses the condom in the wastebasket. “You should be protected.” He grabs his pants off the pile.

Much as I want to respond to his opinion on my ability to take care of myself, the realization that he is leaving so quickly after sex makes my heart sink a little. “I guess this is good-night.” I sound petulant, even to me.

He looks at me curiously. “I’m getting my cell phone. I have to tell Ron to go home.”

He’s spending the night and Ron is the first to know? Part of me is glad and part of me is a little annoyed. I may like his take-charge attitude during sex, but couldn’t he at least include me in on his plans?

He turns to face me, and his smile turns to granite. “All right, Ron. I’ll call you tomorrow morning when I’m ready.” He crosses his arms. “She’s back.”

I ignore his sarcastic tone. “Who?”

He tosses his phone on the dresser. “I’m beginning to recognize your expressions. You’re setting me up for failure.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say defensively.

“You’ve got your tight lips on. That means I’ve disappointed you. Let me guess. I didn’t ask if I could stay the night.”

“I thought that...briefly.”

“Right. *Thought*. But what you told me when you were *feeling* was that you were afraid I was going to use you and then leave. That made it very clear I was invited. Or are you just looking for all the little dating conventions? Is that what your other boyfriends would do? I’m sure they were very sweet and had very

nice little apartments, and very nice little cars, and very nice little bosses who told them what to do. That is not me. People don't tell me what to do. I have worked very hard all my life for that privilege. So don't think you can change me into someone who wastes time with all that etiquette crap. Decide now. Tell me to go, if you want me to go."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I want you to stay." He tilts his head and raises an eyebrow. I'm starting to recognize his expressions, too. "Please."

Jackson slides in next to me, and the weight of him feels so good, even my bed moans. I give him a kiss on the lips and then stretch to turn off the lamp on my nightstand. Jackson presses himself against my back, and his arm circles my waist. I lay back down and he moves his mouth to my ear, whispering, "I got a thank you for the sex. Don't I get one for spending the night?"

"If we do this again, please gag me."

"If? You'll find I'm not an easy man to get rid of. Now thank me and we can go to sleep."

I let go of my mental walls. I snuggle up to him and enjoy the feel of his body. "Thank you."

"Just one more time, Jillian. And add, *sir*."

I hesitate. When I'm not wrapped up in the passion of the moment, it's harder for me to play the part of a submissive. I know he senses my hesitation. I can feel his grip around my waist tightening. His lips are at my ear again, and I expect a reprimand.

"Please." That simple word, spoken softly, and sincerely—it unravels all the tension and second-guessing in my mind. The man who doesn't do etiquette is using the magic word.

"Thank you, sir."

His lips stroke the back of my neck. Then he settles beside me, and for the first time in a long time, I feel completely at peace.

I hope you enjoyed *Best Laid Plans - Book 1*. Jillian and Jackson's story continues in *Best Laid Plans - Book 2*.

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Best Laid Plans - Book 2

Best Laid Hopes

Best Laid Dreams