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Rose City Salon

by

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## Rose City Salon

### Chapter One

January 2005

Standing at the reception counter and looking through the salon's windows onto Fifth Avenue, Jillian watched as a round woman wearing a burgundy and turquoise caftan with matching turban drug a golden, hard-shell suitcase across three lanes of traffic, against the light. Cars honked. Brakes screeched. Nothing stopped the woman's imperial progress. Jillian, practically hypnotized, wished she were that assertive.

Outside great gusts of wind surged down the Columbia River Gorge and pounded Portland while January's white sun had already begun descending into the west. Inside the salon lights were turned to medium high, lazily moving fans pulled around cinnamon scented air, and Dirty Vegas played through the sound system.

As Jillian watched the woman she sensed someone step up behind her. It was Jerome, her lead hair stylist, carrying a new box of silver foil squares.

"I'm impressed," he said then hurried back to his customer.

"There are many ways to be impressed," Jillian murmured. And feelings changed — five years ago, when a failed beauty business in a run down building had been forced on her, she'd been resentful. But the years of struggle, anxiety and long days had paid off, and three months ago she'd moved Rose City Salon into a prime space attached to the lobby-mall of the Great Gray Building, in downtown Portland. Her goal, her pinnacle of desire, was to make it *thee* place

to go for hair styling, facials and makeup, and manicures. Truthfully, with the much higher rent, it was either *thee* place or it was bankrupt.

Jerome, at his hair styling booth, looked over the top of his customer's silver foil draped head, and out the windows. "That woman's got a purpose."

With every step she took toward the salon the woman became more round, more flamboyant, and then she was pulling on the salon door — which flung open in the wind. Disconcertedly the welcome bell jangled and a strong gust swept over the reception, causing Jillian to shiver and paperwork to fly. Odd, that had never happened before.

Dropping the handle of her golden hard-shell, the woman held up ten exquisitely painted nails, and said, "My name's Abilene, and I've come to lease the manicurist's table advertised on Craigs List."

"Nice to meet you," Jillian said and smiled. "Thank you for coming."

Licking her lips, Abilene said, "Please tell the owner I'm here and wish to speak with him."

"I'm the owner," Jillian said.

Cocking her head, Abilene said, "I didn't expect the owner of the great Rose City Salon to be standing at the reception counter."

Breathe in slow breathe out slow Jillian told herself. Maybe her husband was right, she had become too uptight. If the salon wasn't in crucial need of lessees, especially of another manicurist, and if this woman's fingernails weren't fabulous, Jillian would have asked her to roll her presumptuous self back out the door. Instead, she said, "That sounds good. Would you like to schedule an interview, we need to get to know you a little, and see you in action before signing a lease and contractor agreement."

Holding out her left hand, fingernails twinkling, Abilene said, “Look at these, have you ever seen nails more perfectly done, more finely detailed? No, of course you haven’t. Only I can do nails like this.”

“You’re welcome to come for an interview. You can bring a friend and do her nails or I can ask if anyone here wants to volunteer for a manicure.”

“I’d like to do that.” Abilene indicated her bag. “I’ve brought my gear. Let’s get started.”

Jillian stared at the woman; she was well groomed and even though she was bizarre she seemed forthright, but she was also loud and possibly obnoxious, and her attitude was different from anyone else in the salon which might cause problems or might add a nice mix and draw in a different mind set of customers. Other consideration were that her skin was absolute ebony perfection and her makeup was exquisite, and those qualities attracted customers. Most of all her nails were incomparable, and Jillian wanted that talent. “Does tomorrow morning work for you? Early, say seven?”

“Tomorrow’s Friday?”

“It is.”

“I’ll be here. But I won’t be bringing a model.”

Looking at her own nails, Jillian said, “Maybe I’ll have you do mine.” Then she heard the welcome bell, and looked up to see her husband. To Abilene she said, “I’ll see you tomorrow morning at seven.”

“I’ll be here.” Abruptly Abilene bent over to pick up the handle to her golden hard-shell.

Fred had to stop short to keep from ramming her, and an attitude of horror came over him. To Jillian he tersely said, “Thought I’d drop by to see if there’s anything you need me to pick up at the grocery store.”

“Do you have the list?”

“Don’t give me a hard time.” Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a piece of paper.

“Less is better.”

“More is better,” Fred growled then abruptly turned and left.

Silence reverberated through the salon.

Jillian wished she’d kept her mouth shut, and she could feel the red of embarrassment creeping up her neck and over her round cheeks.

Abilene’s eyes squinted hard as she glared at Fred’s back.

Returned from the bank, Monique, the real receptionist, coming in the door said, “I just passed Fred mumbling something about domestic harmony, and carrying a shopping list. What wonderful meal are you cooking tonight?”

There were a couple thick seconds before Jillian blurted, “Pasty rice with horseradish sauce.”

Dead silence. Then, Abilene burst into laughter. Jillian began laughing. It was infectious. Jerome, Timmy, Tamzin, Monique, everyone, all the other stylists and the customers too, laughed and laughed. Relieved that the stress had been blown off, Jillian wished all problems were so easy to solve.

In the early morning Jillian left the warmth of Fred in bed, and hoped he would stay asleep until she was gone for the day. In the shower she stayed longer than she should have, and had to hurry through the rest of her morning routine. Finally, coat on, purse over her shoulder and a full thermos-cup in hand she waited by the toaster for a bagel to pop up. All of last night’s cooking and supper was plastered across the kitchen *still*, and Fred would complain, *again*, about

lack of domestic harmony, but she didn't have time to clean. After all, in the past he'd also complained about having to loan her money to keep the salon going — and she couldn't bring more money into the salon without contracting more talent.

*Pop* went the bagel. When she reached to grab it the seams in her new coat wouldn't give far enough. Fred had told her to buy the bigger size. During the six years of their marriage she'd gained over thirty pounds. She knew she wasn't as sexy as when she was thinner, but Fred had no excuse to complain. If he had his way she'd cook breakfast every morning, and a multi-course supper six nights a week. Who had time for that much cooking? And cleaning? If he wanted it, he could do it himself. Why had he given her the salon if he hadn't wanted her to be a successful businesswoman? Careless of her coat seams she grabbed the bagel, which burnt her fingers then ended up on the floor.

At last, she got out the door.

Having parked in the garage across from the salon, Jillian stood in the cold as she waited to cross Fifth Avenue. If she wasn't too cheap to pay for parking under the Great Gray Building, she wouldn't have to brave the elements.

Would this morning's manicure turn out half as good as Abilene's nails had looked yesterday? With the lapse of customers because of the drastic location change and time of year, plus increased overhead of a prime location at the lobby-mall of a prestigious office tower, the salon desperately needed a fresh influx of customers. Always scheming new promotions and advertising campaigns, Jillian thought about a Valentines special to help boost their customer count, and introduce an exceptional nail artist.

By the time she was in the salon and had the alarm disabled it was almost seven. After turning up the heat she hurried to start coffee. Where was Jerome? Next she started clearing one of the two new manicure tables she'd bought for the move. When she was done she was still alone in the salon. Twenty after seven the welcome bell rang, and it was Jerome holding the door open for Abilene wearing a brown, green and purple caftan with matching turban, and pulling her golden hard-shell. Bantering and laughing their cheeks were bright with cold as they rushed in.

Hurrying up to Jillian, Jerome gave her a quick kiss, "I saw her walking down the side of the road."

Abilene said, "My piece-of-junk car broke down and I was going to the bus stop."

"It's my fault she's late," Jerome said. "I spilled coffee on my pants . . ."

"One drop," Abilene claimed and held up a finger.

"I had to stop at the dry cleaners anyway . . ."

"He changed his clothes at the dry cleaners," Abilene said. "You're some prima-donna, Jerome."

Stepping back, Jerome said "I'd better make sure everything's ready for the day," then disappeared around the privacy wall that ran lengthwise, halfway through the middle of the salon.

Jillian turned to Abilene. "Ready?" Holding out her hand she directed Abilene to the new manicure table that was closest to the corner windows.

From her golden hard-shell Abilene pulled bottles, trays and brushes. "What colors are you thinking about? Do you want all one color or duals, custom painting, maybe something to match an outfit?"



Hands flat on the table, nails up, Jillian said, “Show me your very best work for Valentines.”

“Whatever I want?”

“Whatever you want potential customers to see.”

From his hair station, Jerome called, “Jillian’s a marketing guru. Whatever you’re doing, think of it as an advertising blitz.”

Hands paused, eyes on Jillian, Abilene asked, “What’s he talking about?”

“I like to highlight the salon’s talent in promotions and specials.”

Abilene continued to set out her paints and potions, humming, frowning, smiling and insisting Jillian keep her hands displayed where she could study them and get a good feel of how she wanted them to look.

Watching as the curious little bottles, trays, brushes and amulets were laid out Jillian listened to Abilene’s low, rhythmic humming. And as she sat there, across the table from Abilene, a feeling of strength and optimism came over her.

“I’ve got something beautiful in mind but first tell me if you’ve got a special color outfit to wear with these nails,” Abilene said.

“I have a mint green dress I want to wear tomorrow.”

“Mint green will go good with your orangish hair,” Abilene said and began her art. Slowly painting, softly humming she concentrated on her work. Morning sun slanted through the windows and refracted on one of her amulets to flash rainbows of color that infused the salon with an aura of beauty and mysticism.

Jerome had turned on the sound system to Vivaldi’s Four Seasons, and now appeared with a cup of black coffee for Jillian. “Abilene,” he asked, “would you like a cup of coffee?”

Stopping her work to look up, Abilene said, “Lots of cream, lots of sugar.” After fussing with her things she went back to work.

Relaxed, Jillian let her thoughts spin from worry over paying next month’s salon lease, to her plans for a Valentine’s advertising special, and to what Fred was going to say about the state of his *domestic harmony*. If he said *domestic harmony* to her one more time, she was going to leap and strangle him.

“How long have you been married?” Abilene asked.

“This Valentines will be six years.”

“My grandmomma knew how to keep a man begging for attention. I watched her for years.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like when your husband — what’s his name?”

“Fred.”

“When Fred got testy with you, grandmomma would have found a way to lay him low.”

“Like what?” Jillian insisted.

“Whatever it takes. Fred argued more is better. Okay, cook him something with too many ingredients. You had the right idea about horseradish sauce, but maybe add anchovies and pickles.”

Jillian laughed. When the welcome bill jingled she turned to see Tamzin arrive for the day, and called, “Good morning.”

“Nice and warm in here,” Tamzin said. Seeing Abilene she paused.

Jillian introduced them but neither said much, and Tamzin promptly went to her facial station.

Abilene chattered, hummed, frowned or grinned as she concentrated on painting Jillian's nails.

Two minutes before eight Timmy rushed through the door. "Hello everyone." A sheen of sweat glistened on his face and he anxiously scanned the room.

Eyes lifted from her work Abilene studied him. "Looks as if you had too much fun last night."

A pink blush crept up from under his turtleneck sweater, and covered his cheeks so he looked like a naughty cherubim.

"Timmy," Jillian said, "This is Abilene. She's interested in leasing a manicure station."

"Pleased to meet you," Timmy said.

"What do you do here?" Abilene asked.

"Hair."

"You got a big hicky under that collar?" Abilene demanded.

Timmy asked, "Are you a psychic or mind reader or something?"

"I pay attention," said Abilene then shrugged. "Which is not to say I don't have my ways about me." Humming, half-grinning she again re-arranged her bottles and amulets before going back to painting Jillian's nails.

Grinning while toying with his cans of sprays and tubes of gel Timmy said. "Last night I had the best date ever." Batting his long, blonde lashes, he sighed. "I'm in love."

Tamzin, eyes lifted in alarm, said, "Not again."

Jerome said, "You never can tell love from lust."

"Have fun, take what you want; that's my motto," Abilene said.

"Especially while you're still young," Jillian said.

“Age is irrelevant,” Abilene said.

“I like the way you think.” Timmy grinned.

Tamzin, mixing cosmetics, again looked up, and this time squint-stared at Timmy.

As their regular morning customers began to arrive Jillian introduced Abilene.

Everyone oohed and aaahed at the nail art in progress.

Humming and pausing, Abilene frowned, painted and smiled. Between hair appointments Jerome and Timmy came from their hair stations to look over Jillian’s shoulder. Tamzin’s facial station was close to the manicure tables, and between customers she mixed more cosmetics, and silently monitored Abilene and Jillian. By the time Abilene was halfway done everyone anxiously awaited something marvelous.

When Monique came in she very formally introduced herself.

Abilene asked, “I saw you yesterday, but what do you do here?”

“Receptionist and admin assistant.”

“How many beauty artists are there here in total?”

“Right now,” Jillian said, “there are thirteen hairstylists, two facial and makeup artists, and three manicurists. Monique is our receptionist, and we have a cleaning service that comes through twice a day to sweep floors and clean glass.”

“A cleaning service, I like that,” Abilene said.

“Everyone is still responsible for keeping their area clean and helping with laundry.”

“Let me see,” Abilene said and started pointing. “That’s Timmy with the California-style sun-blond hair and hickey under the collar.” Her finger moved, “The tall, lean one is Jerome, who’s a wardrobe prima donna.” Redirecting her pointed finger, she continued. “Over there, too shy for her own good, is a curly red head with skin white as milk. . . “

“Tamzin,” Jillian said.

“And the odd brunette is Monique,” Abilene said.

Half turning toward the opposite corner of the salon, Monique said, “Back there is a massage room, but it’s not actually part of Rose City Salon.”

Looking to Jillian, Abilene said, “Is she talking about that private room behind and to the other side of the reception counter?”

“Yes,” Jillian nodded. “When we moved to this space the lease on that room came with it.”

“They’re never here, though,” Monica said. “I don’t know how they can afford to stay in business.”

“More money than brains,” Abilene said and shrugged.

“Or neither,” Jillian murmured and her upper lip curled.

Jerome’s customer, hair blown dry and styled, came and surveyed Abilene’s work. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that before.”

“I’m sure you haven’t,” Abilene said. “I just moved here.”

“Where are you from?”

“New Jersey.”

The customer asked, “With your unique talent what brought you to Portland?”

“I have a feeling big things are going to happen here for me.” Putting her attention back on Jillian’s nails, Abilene made a tiny, tiny adjustment then studied them for a minute. “Done.”

“Let me have a closer look,” the customer said.

Everyone in the salon wanted to see, then oohed and aaahed more emphatically than before. Only Tamzin was reserved.

Seated in her office, Jillian and Abilene went over Rose City Salon's lease and independent contractor agreement written by Fred's attorney, Yohay. Methodically Jillian explained contractors were responsible for their lease and that ten percent of their gross receipts were paid to the salon. She then waited while Abilene initialed certain clauses and finally signed at the bottom.

Writing a check for her lease and security deposit Abilene said, "Here's the last of my sugar daddy money."

Thinking she was kidding, Jillian laughed.

"I'd like to get started right away. Are there many walk-in customers for manicures?"

"I'll tell Monique that's what you want."

Jillian's office was behind the reception counter, and for the rest of the day, as most days, she spent quite a bit of time in there working on bookkeeping, time saving techniques for her contractors, and promotions. After sketching out the advertising campaign she'd decided on for Valentine's she went to stand for a minute behind Monique at the reception counter.

The entire salon space was a rectangle. The outside wall faced east, and was all windows looking out to Fifth Avenue. Now that it was afternoon the salon was shaded. As Jillian faced the windows, on her right were the hair stations going down either side of the privacy wall. At the far end, on the front side of the privacy wall were the manicure tables and facial tables. On the backside was the lounge area with hair drying hoods, couch and coffee table, and four empty hair stylist stations. Also in the back were six hair-washing sinks, and a laundry room that included

the coffee machine, mini-fridge and snack cupboard. On her left, were a small waiting area, and in the back corner was the private room that was leased to the stupid couple who gave massages.

“The cleaning service just left,” Monique said scrutinizing the windows and glass door.

“I can’t see one smudge or streak.”

Politically correctly smiling, Jillian walked around the salon. Each customer she greeted, thanked them for coming to Rose City Salon, and complimented them on something or recalled a past conversation, anything she could think of to make them feel special. When she got down to Abilene’s manicure table she was surprised at who was sitting in the customer chair. “Eileen,” Jillian said, “Was I supposed to know you would be here today?”

“No, I just dropped in. I love it you’re so close now.” Eileen Dupre held up a chipped fingernail. “I came in for a quick repair but when I saw this lovely lady’s nails I couldn’t help but get a full manicure.”

“I know,” Jillian said and displayed her own hands. “This is what she did for me this morning.”

“Five years ago, if someone had predicted the future of Rose City Salon I would have said, ‘bankrupt’.”

Jillian rolled her eyes. “Yeah, me too.”

“You’ve done a fantastic job putting together a world-class team, and Abilene here makes a phenomenal addition. I think she’ll bring a whole new dimension to your customer base.”

“I do too. Thank you. I’ve also got an ad going for another facial artist.”

As Jillian continued her circuit of the salon Tamzin drew her aside and passionately whispered, “I don’t think Abilene is a good fit.”

“Did something happen?”

“No.” Tamzin hesitated then said, “She’s loud, and I just don’t think she’s a good fit.”

“If she doesn’t work out I’ll revoke her contract.”

“I know, but . . . I don’t know. It’s not that I dislike her, but there’s something kind of . . . I guess secretive is the nicest way I can think of to say how I feel.”

Honestly, Jillian had the same thoughts, but she was more concerned about bringing in a diversity of customers. Putting her hand on Tamzin’s arm, she said, “I know it’s hard to embrace someone who’s background and mannerisms are markedly different than our own, but I think it’s important to try.”

Wrinkling her brow and pursing her lips, Tamzin nodded.

“Have you thought about doing makeup on the models for Eileen Dupre’s Annual Valentine’s Fashion Show and Cocktail Party? Like you did last year?”

Blanching, Tamzin quietly said, “I’ve been hoping so.” Her chin dropped so that her long, red, corkscrew curls shaded her eyes. “I really want to.”

Abilene called, “Eileen is done.”

Cringing, Tamzin whispered, “Does she have to yell?”

When Eileen Dupre was ready to leave, Jillian invited her into her office and said, “I’ve been meaning to call, and I hate to nudge you, but I’m wondering if you wanted to commit to Tamzin doing all the make-up for your annual Valentine’s show. Since we’re only a couple blocks from each other the process will be more streamline this year.”

“I’ve been meaning to call you too,” Eileen said. “The answer is yes. And more. This year I’d like Rose City Salon to do everything — makeup, nails and hair. There’ll be nine models.”

“Congratulations, that’s up by two.”



“Thanks, I’ve got a couple new sponsors, including The Popular. And of course I always count on your support. There’s a new model this year with long, thick, black hair perfect for Jerome to create a masterpiece.”

“He’ll like that,” Jillian said.

“Oh, guess what,” Eileen said and rushed on, “the Steward Hotel has offered to host the event at their cost, that way we can really give a lot to charity.”

“Wonderful! Knowing that, I’m looking forward more than ever to the show.”

“Me too.” Eileen laughed.

“I always love and appreciate the way you showcase the talent we’ve got here at the salon.”

“It’s nearly a month-and-a-half away, but when you can, give me your time slots so I can get the models organized.”

A week later, as they were closing, Jillian went to each of those participating in the Valentine’s show — Jerome, Timmy, Tamzin and Abilene, showed them their schedules and relayed her excitement for the opportunity to showcase their talent.

On her way out the door Abilene asked Jillian, “What are you cooking your husband for supper tonight?”

Shaking her head Jillian said, “I don’t have to cook, Wednesdays are Fred’s card playing nights.”

## Chapter Two

Jack stuck his arm into the center of the table and raked in a pile of poker chips. His stomach growled. “Anyone else hungry?”

“I could eat,” Fred said.

Jack chuckled. “You can always eat.”

Yohay said, “Let’s try that new place across the street, Sum of Asia.”

Fred grinned. “Sum of Asia? I like that.”

Jack said, “You would; it sounds like some sort of secret society for CPAs.”

“All things CPAs do are secret,” Fred said.

Looking at his huge pile of chips, Jack said, “My secrets are better.”

Yohay and the other three players laughed.

Jack’s stomach growled again. “Do we have a menu from Sum of Asia?”

“Let me do the ordering,” Yohay said.

“How are you going to know what I want?” Jack asked.

“Every Wednesday night for seven years we’ve been playing poker, plus we’ve probably gone to lunch a thousand times, literally a thousand times. I think it’s reasonable for me to have an idea of your culinary desires.”

Sarcastically frowning, Jack asked, “What are you going to order to satisfy my *culinary desires*?”

Throwing out a hundred dollar chip, Yohay said, “If you don’t like it, just say so and that chip is yours.”

“And if I do like it will you want me to give you a hundred dollars?”

“This is a gambling parlor.”

With a flick of his wrist Jack tossed in a hundred dollar chip.

Yohay stood, stretched his arms, rolled his head on his neck and went to call Sum of Asia. Fred stayed seated. Jack got up and paced then mixed himself another rum and coke. The gambling parlor was on the second floor, and was a square room with a round table and six chairs, plus two more chairs in opposing corners. On one side of the room was a counter with booze, fresh packs of cigarettes and cigars. Two of the other walls had ornate paintings and decorations from the last time the once-grand Blue Hiatus Hotel and Saloon had been remodeled, which was in the early 1950s. The wall facing northwest Davis Street had a window that was boarded and totally covered with a large tapestry.

From outside the building seemed deserted.

When the food came there was way more than the six gamblers could eat, so they offered their leftovers to upstairs and at the same time ordered a quarter ounce of cocaine. Daryl, the proprietor, sent a couple gals down to pick up the food and drop off *dessert*.

Jack conceded it was his new favorite Asian food. Mostly he hated to lose, but a hundred dollars was a paltry amount and, besides, it was good to sometimes be generous. All night he was on a winning streak.

When midnight struck Fred, as always, went home to his wife.

It was after two before Jack went upstairs to cash out his chips.

Daryl said, “I’ve got a new gal.”

“Lean, long-legged blonde?”

“Exactly for you.”

Jack nodded.

Daryl tossed him a room key. “She’ll meet you there.”

“I’ll take another gram of cocaine.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

At home, in the late morning, Jack sat in his big, marble shower in hopes the steam would clear his cocaine-swollen sinuses. Only 46 years old and silvery hairs had begun to poke out like little wires from his chest, and below that he had developed a bulbous, soft, white paunch while his legs had gotten skinny. Scratching and diddling himself he thought about last night’s gal — she had not been erotic, something had been lacking. With all the booze and cocaine, it’s no wonder he couldn’t get it up last night. It didn’t mean anything. He was still the handsome, charismatic bull he’d always been, he just needed the right woman to bring it out in him.

The phone rang and he sat still and listened while someone left a message, but he couldn’t make out the voice. Not Fred or Yohay or an ex-wife. A young man’s voice probably, but maybe a woman’s.

Out of the shower he put on last night’s shirt, but he knew better, and overpowered by the reek of stale booze, cigarette and cigar smoke, body odor and Asian food he jerked it off and threw it in the corner for the housekeeper to deal with. Ripping open dry cleaning bags, as well as tags off a new jacket, he got himself outfitted for the day then sat down to tie his shoes and listen to the phone message.

“Hello, Mr. O’Blansky, this is Alda Noonan, the heir of Noonan’s Manufacturing.”

Angry, wary Jack stopped the recording. How had this punk gotten his home number? *Heir of Noonan's Manufacturing!* Alda Noonan was an ignorant, audacious piece of shit, like his father had been.

Getting in his Porsche, Jack left the west hills of Portland for downtown and the Great Gray Building to have lunch with Fred and Yohay at Grayburn's Grill.

Stopped on Fifth Avenue for traffic in front of the building Jack looked into the windows of Rose City Salon. Jillian had made a success out of what had started five years ago as a joke after Fred had complained his new wife wanted her own career. That orange headed, big-boobed twit was so stupid as to be trusting.

Taking over businesses and manipulating for success was how Jack thrived, how Fred set business plans and how J&F, Inc. operated that allowed for the largesse in which Jack and Fred operated. Every time J&F took over a business blood rushed through Jack's heart and surged into his head giving him an exquisite high. He loved money. So did Fred, but Fred liked it for what it offered him — a sexy wife and the big house he'd bought for their marriage, and the new clothes and toys, fancy foods and extensive wine collection, and his pampered and refurbished Cadillac. Jack liked money because he wanted everyone else to see it. He had a big house that he'd bought for his last wife, Glenda, but they were divorced, and now that the real estate market was booming he had put it up for sale because he intended to buy a condo that had less square footage but was more expensive, more opulent.

J&F, Inc. had been Jack and Fred's brainchild when they were in university. They'd worked hard for this. Fred always was and always had been adamant about sticking to his business plans, so it was ironic their only deviation was Rose City Salon. It was because Fred wanted his wife to learn to want to stay home, and Jack had kept his mouth shut in order for Fred

to have a happy marriage, and to not nit-pick him. The man could be a total frickin' nag. Jillian's success was the opposite of what Fred'd had in mind five years ago when he'd convinced Jack to *give* the salon to her.

In the Great Gray Building Jack got off the elevator on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor, at Grayburn's Grill, checked his ultra-stylish, obviously expensive watch and noted he was exactly on time. The maitre-de told him Fred and Yohay were already seated, and showed him to their regular booth in a dimly lit corner of the bar area. Smiling, he arrived with his hands out as he sat down then made a slight nod to the bartender so that a minute later a tall rum and coke was set in front of him.

Yohay said to Jack, "Your realtor called me this morning with an offer on your house. It's full listing price."

"Maybe I should hold on and see if I can get a higher bid. The real estate market is on the rise."

"That also means the condo you want will go up in price," Fred said.

After sipping his drink Jack put down his glass, and asked Yohay, "What do I have to do to keep from paying Glenda anything from the house sale?"

"Jeez, Jack," Fred said. "Let the poor woman have something. She was a good enough wife. It's not like she cheated on you."

"No, but she's weird." Jack's lips curled derogatorily. "Turning men into women."

Yohay said, "Your divorce order provides her with fifty percent of the net profit on the marital home."

"Then I'll have to make sure there's no net profit shown on the closing statement." Jack laughed and looked meaningfully at Fred.

It wasn't until after the three men had ordered and the food had come and they'd almost finished eating that Jack remembered his phone message. "Alda Noonan called my home and left a pathetic message, I couldn't even stand to listen to the whole thing. Called himself the 'heir of Noonan's Manufacturing'."

"Ex-heir," Yohay said.

"How'd he get your home phone number?" Fred asked.

"That's what I'd like to know," Jack said.

Yohay shrugged. "He can call himself whatever he wants, but his old man sold Noonan's Manufacturing to pay for the gambling debts he didn't want his family to know about."

"That's not our concern," Fred said. "We didn't force him to gamble."

"And we didn't force him to sign the acquisition documents," Jack said.

"Daryl did," Fred said.

Jack shrugged.

"If you didn't force him to sign I don't know what you would call it." Yohay laughed.

"Telling him if he didn't sign you'd blackmail him and show his family pictures of him at the Blue Hiatus."

"That piece of shit Alda Noonan may have to learn a hard lesson," Jack said.

"Are you going to be the one to teach it to him?" Yohay asked.

"If he can't," Fred said, "we'll send Jillian's newest freak to sit on his head."

"What's she got going on now?" Jack asked.

"Some behemoth canker blossom." Histrionically shaking his upper body, Fred said in a high-pitched, disgusting tone, "She wants me."

Exploding with laughter Jack finally cleared his sinuses.

### Chapter Three

Jillian got home as Fred was carrying in the last of the groceries. Trying to make up for her smart remark from last week, but not wanting to actually apologize, she said, “Thank you for going to the grocery store.”

At first his face was clouded but then he smiled. “There’s a whole new line of gourmet products in the deli section.”

“Excellent!” Smiling cheerily she followed him into the kitchen “I’m starving, let’s see what you brought.”

“I need to go make a telephone call, there’s a problem out at Noonan’s Manufacturing.” Setting down the bags, he said. “I’ll only be a couple minutes. Go ahead and make us up an hors d’oeuvres tray.”

The telephone call took him longer than a couple minutes, and she heard his voice rise in anger — which was not at all like him. After making hors d’oeuvres Jillian went upstairs and changed, and when she came back downstairs Fred was in the kitchen opening a bottle of wine.

“How’d your phone call go?” she asked.

“If it wasn’t such a money maker I’d dump the manufacturing plant.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Old man Noonan’s son doesn’t want to accept his father sold the place out from underneath him,” Fred snapped and glared, then softened. “Nothing for you to worry about.”



“Talking about it might help come up with a solution that will work for everyone.”

“Noonan’s Manufacturing belongs to J&F now.”

“What I don’t understand is why, if Noonan’s is such a moneymaker, J&F has it. I mean, J&F’s business is taking over businesses that are losing money, and you only recently acquired Noonan’s, so if . . . “

“There’s nothing more to talk about,” Fred insisted. Wine in one hand, hors d’oeuvres tray in the other he went into the TV room.

#

Five years ago, for their first wedding anniversary, she and Fred had invited Jack and his then-wife Glenda for supper. After the main meal, as Jillian and Glenda were serving desert in the large and formal dining room, Fred had announced he had a surprise for her.

Expecting jewelry, she’d said, “I love surprises.”

From his pocket Jack had pulled a set of keys he then pushed across the table to her.

Fred said, “That’s your surprise.”

She’d stared; not car keys, probably to a door lock. “A week-end at the beach?”

“No,” Fred said, “guess again.”

A smaller home is what she’d wanted to say, but didn’t.

Jack said, “Rose City Salon.”

“Oh, a day of pampering!” Raising her voice to portray excitement she’d grinned big but, truly, she was not *a day in the beauty salon* sort of person, and it made her sad her husband didn’t truly know her and, more sad, wanted her to be something she wasn’t.

With a snicker-laugh, Jack said, “I wouldn’t exactly call it pampering.”

“I bought you a beauty salon,” Fred said.

Shocked, she'd blurted, "I don't know anything about beauty salons."

"Before we were married you were a business woman," Fred said, "and I know you've been bored being a stay-at-home wife."

"Treat it like you would any other business," Jack said.

"I've never even heard of the place."

Later, in the kitchen, Glenda, who was a makeover artist, had said, "If you want, I think I might have a few pointers to get that old salon profitable."

The next day, when Fred had taken her to Rose City Salon, she'd been appalled. The place was a dump. Fred had given her a kiss before going to his J&F office in the prestigious Great Gray Building, and said, "If anyone can turn this place around it's you."

"Your confidence is the best present you could ever give me," she'd said, and meant it. With all her heart and motivation she'd wanted, and still did, for Fred to be proud of her and respect her as a businesswoman. After she'd gone over the bookkeeping she'd realized the salon could definitely qualify for bankruptcy, and whoever the old owner was they should be relieved J&F had baled them out.

A couple days after that, Jillian had met Glenda for lunch. "Here's my advice," Glenda said. "Go to the best hair stylist in Portland and offer free station lease, then start networking and marketing."

"I know how to network and market," Jillian had said.

"Exactly." Then Glenda had laughed. "Jack's super jealous because you're better at it than he is."

Pleased, Jillian had laughed but also rolled her eyes. “Thanks, but that’s hard to believe.”

“Seriously, if it weren’t for your marketing and subsequent sales, J&F would not have gotten nearly the sales price for the truck dealership where you working.”

After a few seconds thought, Jillian asked, “How do I find out who the best hair stylist is in Portland?”

“His name is Jerome Gaston. He’s a friend of mine but, truly, he is the best hair stylist in Portland, possibly on the entire west coast.”

Now, five years later, they were in the beautiful new space in the lobby-mall of the Great Gray Building in downtown Portland. As a result of Jillian’s marketing and the diverse talents of the team she’d put together, Rose City Salon steadily gained an admirable reputation and with it a long list of customers. One of her current concerns was bringing new and diverse talent into the salon. Abilene, other than being loud and sometimes disorganized, was working out well and already had quite a few regular customers. But, the salon still needed another facial and make-up artist.

Tilted back in a salon chair Jillian shut her eyes and wished she could shut her ears — the makeover had gotten too bizarre. The interviewee, who was hovering over her, smiled and jabbered inanely. No one else said a word. Even Abilene’s mouth was shut. At first Timmy had been fascinated but after less than five minutes of blather he’d disappeared. About ten minutes ago Jerome had said he was going to go find him, and now they were both hiding.

In the interviewee’s hand was a small wooden paddle heaped with yogurt. He couldn’t stop talking, ”This morning when I was getting ready to come here, and let me tell you I was so

nervous I could barely think straight, anyway, when I went to the refrigerator to get my plain yogurt it wasn't there. My roommate must have eaten it. I couldn't come and give a good facial without yogurt, now could I?"

"No, of course not," Abilene said.

Opening her eyes, Jillian glared at her. Not once before, ever, had she seen yogurt applied for a professional, salon facial.

Tamzin, at her station getting a customer settled and making sure his back was to the interviewee, kept glancing at Jillian with what seemed like anxiety.

The interviewee continued, "I stopped at a convenience store and all they had was this blueberry yogurt." He slathered more on Jillian's face.

Jillian re-closed her eyes.

Abilene said, "I think we're all curious to see how this will turn out. I certainly am."

"Like I was telling you," the interviewee continued, "I was so nervous about coming here, not because I have any doubts about my art, but an interview is always nerve wracking. But now I've met you, I don't feel at all nervous. Oh, that reminds me of a funny story . . . " On and on and on . . .

Not once did the interviewee stop jabbering — until he washed off the yogurt.

*Gasp.* Silence.

*Ha, ha, ha,* Abilene boomed. "You're a Smurf!"

Jillian's eyes popped open. From the other side of the privacy wall she heard the slam of the laundry room door and quick, purposeful steps. Next she glanced at Tamzin — whose mouth was pressed shut while her eyes shone in a bad way, and her body blocked the mirror view between her customer and Jillian.

Now at her side, Jerome's mouth was shaped in a silent *OH!*

Reaching out Jillian waved her hand.

Grimace-smiling Jerome handed her a mirror.

It was true. Her face was blue! In horror she looked at the interviewee, who was turning from stark white to beet purple.

Tamzin, keeping her customer faced the opposite direction, dropped her eyes and kept working.

Jerome said to the interviewee, "Thank you for coming, but I don't believe this is going to work out," and started packing the man's things for him.

Dropping the washcloth the interviewee clenched his hands by his side. Lips trembling he started bawling. "This is not fair, I've done really excellent work here. It's not my fault her face turned blue." Voice crescendoing he whimper-screamed, "You need to give me another chance."

Flopping around in the chair trying to sit up, Jillian looked to Jerome for help. Quickly he stepped forward and up-righted the beauty chair. Without saying a word, Jillian got up and went into her office, shut the door and stared at her face in privacy.

Yep, she'd been transformed into a fat, overripe blueberry.

From the front of the salon she heard the welcome bell then Jack's voice, "What's going on in the beauty world?"

There was no responding jollity.

After a perfunctory knock on her door, in stepped Fred. "Hello . . . what happened?" Grinning, he left the door open. Taking another look at her face he sat down on the pineapple brocade loveseat and laughed.

"It's not funny," she said.

Looking at her face again he kept laughing, yet when he said, “You used to have a good sense of humor,” there was an undertone of sadness.

From the doorway, Jack — with a peculiar confused and dazed look, said, “That . . . that . . . manicure lady . . . told me you had a blue face.”

Jillian didn’t say anything.

“You know who could cover that up,” Jack said, “is Glenda.”

It’d been since before the divorce that Jillian had talked to Glenda. “Have you heard from her?” she asked Jack.

“Her mother passed away,” Jack said.

“Will bad luck ever leave that poor woman,” Jillian said unthinkingly.

Jack and Fred both scowled at her.

Ignoring their looks, she asked Jack, “Do you know how I can get hold of her? I’d like to send her a card.”

“She didn’t say where she was,” Jack said.

On the loveseat Fred slapped his knees, stood and said, “We just dropped by to see how things are going here.”

Jack laughed. “Not so good.”

After they were gone Jillian called the number Jerome had not too long ago given her for Glenda.

“Hello.”

“Glenda, I’m so happy this number is still good for you!”

“Jillian?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“I thought you were forbidden to have any contact with me.”

Uncomfortably Jillian snickered. “I’ve stopped asking Fred for permission.”

“Be careful, that didn’t work for my marriage.”

“Jack told me your mother passed away.”

“Last Tuesday,” Glenda said.

“Are you okay?”

“I will be. She was ready to go.”

For a couple seconds there was a commiserating silence.

“Do you plan on staying in California?” Jillian asked.

“No, I’m already packing to move back to Portland. My sister wants to buy me out of mother’s house, and, believe it or not, I miss the rain. Most of all I miss the diversity. I still have lots of friends there, and customer contacts, and I know I can rebuild my business.”

“Oh!” Jillian said. “If . . . I mean . . . please don’t think this is the reason I called, but if you want, I’d love to have you work out of Rose City Salon.”

Hesitatingly Glenda asked, “Is the salon still in that old house?”

“Three months ago I moved the salon to a fabulous location. We’re in the lobby-mall of the Great Gray Building.”

“I’d love to lease a space from you, but what about J&F?”

“What do you mean? What about J&F? I own the salon.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.” Jillian thought that was a strange thing to ask. “You were there when they gave it to me.”

“Jack would have a fit if I were to work for you.”

“Why? And besides, who cares?”

“He’s got some sort of self-righteous sense of how things ought to be.”

“All for him,” Jillian said. “That’s Jack’s sense of right.”

“What do you think Fred will say?”

“Nothing.” But, soon as she said it she was pretty sure it wasn’t accurate.

“If you’re good with me leasing a space from Rose City Salon, I am too.”

“Great.”

“I can’t give you a definite time right now, but I should be there in a few days,” Glenda said.

“Let’s chat tomorrow, and if your mind is set, then we’ll start getting your lease space figured out and the timing of an advertising campaign.”

“Alright then, it’s a plan.”

After getting off the telephone, Jillian resisted staring in the mirror at her blueberry face, and instead concentrated on paperwork.

*Tap tap.*

“Come in,” Jillian called.

It was Tamzin. “How are you doing?”

“If I were in the cartoons it would be a perfect day.” Standing, she went and stood in front of the mirror.

“I don’t know if you know, but I’ve been trying to develop my own makeup line — ?” Uncertain of herself, Tamzin stopped talking and blushed.

“I’ve seen you working on some compounds, and a handful of your customers have commented on how much they like your products and asked where they can buy them.”



“They have?”

Nodding emphatically Jillian turned away from the mirror.

“I’ve designed an ultra-cover up, want me to try it on you?”

“Sure, can’t get any worse.” Jillian laughed, “If it covers this up, it’ll cover anything.”

“Thank you,” Tamzin said. “I’ll be right back,” and she whisked out the door.

Everything about Tamzin was lean, her limbs and fingers, even her nose and neck. There was a fragile, elegant look about her, plus she always wore girly-girl outfits. Jerome said she was real smart but too shy. How shy Tamzin was, Jillian debated; certainly her book of business stayed busy. She could be busier, but she was only 24 and she wasn’t married and didn’t have any kids. Tamzin called Jerome a workaholic.

A couple minutes later Tamzin returned and studiously began to mix what looked like an extra-heavy foundation. Done mixing, she began to spread it over Jillian’s face. It didn’t look or feel heavy and it covered remarkably well. Mostly keeping her eyes gently closed while Tamzin was leaning over her, Jillian snuck a few glimpses at her face and eyes as she worked — any shyness was gone, and what she noticed was earnest effort.

When Tamzin stepped back to assess then mix something different, Jillian asked, “Have you ever thought about selling your make-up?”

“Eventually, and that’s why I’m slowly developing products, but I’m not ready to start marketing. I want to take things slow, and enjoy the process.” Coming in close she added a few strokes of color.

Feeling melancholic, Jillian said, “You’re smart to not rush into things.”

Again stepping back, Tamzin re-assessed her work then handed Jillian a large hand mirror with a glittery green handle. “Let me know if you’d like anything different.”

No trace of blue was visible, and the colors Tamzin had used blended perfectly with her skin tone while highlighting her best features. “That looks great.”

“Here,” Tamzin said handing her a small, unlabeled, container. “This will remove the heavy makeup. It took a lot to completely hide the blue.” Putting the remainder of the mixed foundation into another small container she set it on Jillian’s desk. “Take this in case you’re still blue in the morning.”

“Seriously,” Jillian said, “When you get ready to develop your own products we can sell them out of the salon.”

“Thanks,” Tamzin said. “I’ve dreamed you would say that.”

“Let me pay you for this,” Jillian said, as she stepped to her desk to get her purse.

Shaking her head and backing up, Tamzin said, “I would never want you to say I laughed at your expense.” Then her dark green velveteen skirt, lavender sweater and corkscrew-curly red hair disappeared out the door.

## Chapter Four

In the very early hours of the cold, January morning, Jillian was in bed cuddled up next to Fred when the ringing phone woke them. Fred answered. It was the Great Gray Building's security company. Someone had broken into the salon. Police had been notified.

Stunned and frightened Jillian stared at Fred.

"Get dressed," he said. "We'll drive down there."

When they arrived police cars with red lights flashing were parked in front of the building, and in front of the salon entrance was a plastic, yellow streamer with black print: Crime Scene, Do Not Cross. The salon door was open, and police were walking in and out, and talking stern.

Fred said, "You wait here, I'll go see what I can find out."

Standing on the sidewalk, coat pulled tightly around her, hat way down over her ears and forehead, Jillian shivered. After a couple minutes a scuffle started inside the salon as four police pushed two handcuffed suspects through the door and headed towards a police car with another officer holding its back door open. As the two suspects were forced into the back of the police car Jillian got a good look at them. It was the masseuse couple who held the lease on the private room.

A minute later Fred stood at the salon door and waved for her to come inside.

A policewoman said, “We got here before they could do too much damage to the main part of the salon, but the laundry room and the room in the back corner are trashed.”

After answering questions Jillian and Fred went into the private room.

Jillian said, “It’s going to need a complete remodel before I can lease it out.”

“I’ll call the insurance company,” Fred said.

In the main part of the salon furniture had been thrown over, the tile flooring was heavily stained from hair dye and nail color bottles being crushed on it. The laundry room was torn apart and the hot water tank had been pushed over, and even though the water supply had since been turned off there was still significant damage.

Fred said, “The salon needed remodeling anyway, and now the insurance money will pick up part of the tab. Good thing I was wrong about how much money the salon would bring in over the holidays.”

Jillian didn’t say what she felt — the insurance company would have to pick up *most* of the tab because after she’d finished paying for the move, coupled with January’s slow start, she was worried about making February’s rent. But, of course, only the last quarter of last year’s financial statements were all Fred, being the salon’s CPA, had seen. For Fred to respect her as a business-person, and for the salon to make more and more money were her biggest goals, so she absolutely had to have the salon’s finances turned back around by the end of March.

Sitting in her office, scribbling figures while glaring at repair bills and remodel bids, Jillian felt like ramming the pencil into the middle of her forehead. The insurance company would pay a fair amount of the repair and replacement costs, but the overall remodel was staggeringly expensive. When they’d moved into this space the plan had been to wait at least a

year before any significant remodeling. Fred had been against her moving the salon downtown, and one of his arguments was it was the wrong time of year because they would lose holiday business and then January would be a tough month to recover. The part about losing holiday business had been dead wrong, the part about January business was more right than Jillian wanted to admit. Her hopes people would be impressed and supportive of their new location had been somewhat misplaced. Truthfully though, the salon's off white walls and black and brushed-silver accents were blasé. One customer had even been overheard saying to another customer, "At least the old house had character."

They could recapture the existing look, which even after insurance would cost over \$25,000 of salon money, or they could, as Monique put it, "show some real verve!" Jerome's argument was that since they had to remodel now anyway they might as well do it to show *a presence*. Working together they were developing ideas for what a presence might look like. From a bookkeeping point of view it looked very, very expensive, at least \$75,000.

When Jillian was young she'd been daring, and the idea was still appealing but reality could be harsh, and she didn't want to risk the salon by over reaching what she'd already accomplished. If that happened, Fred would for sure think she was a ditzy woman with big boobs.

Over the holidays she'd worried about being too busy, her team burning out and the customers feeling as if they weren't getting enough attention and detail. Now she worried about not keeping a steady flow of business coming through the salon. Another worry was her suspicion that Timmy was snorting cocaine in the laundry room. Worse, she suspected Jerome knew and hadn't told her, nor was he doing anything about it. Did that mean Jerome was

snorting too? Quizzing Tamzin would be a way of finding out, but the thought of exploitation made Jillian cringe.

And, even though the weather was nasty Glenda was driving up from California. Out there in the icy, wind-driven, sleety, snowy, mountain passes all by herself. What if she got caught in a storm or hit black ice and slid off the road? Once she got here what space would Jillian lease her? Jerome had told Glenda about the private room, and it would be perfect for the type of work she did, yet Jillian wondered if Glenda wasn't being over optimistic about how quickly her business would revive and grow. Glenda had said she had money coming from her share of her and Jack's marital house, plus she would be getting money from her sister for her share of their mother's house. If her business didn't revive then Glenda would have spent her money on space she didn't really need, and would still not have a comfortable financial future.

Standing and stretching Jillian left her office and stood for a second behind the reception counter. Monique had polished all the shelves and products, and re-arranged them, and now she was on the computer improving the inventory system.

"Life is so unbalanced," Monique said shaking her head and chuckling.

Jillian smiled at her and moved on. Walking down the side of the salon that faced Fifth Avenue she stopped at the end of the privacy wall — where she could see the front and back of the salon, and where Jerome worked on a wig.

His long fingers curled and primped.

"Trying out a new style?" Jillian asked,

"I want to do something fresh and romantic for the Bijou Magazine interview and photo shoot." In one hand he held a bottle of hair spray, and in the other he had a rat-tailed combed.

"That's tomorrow afternoon?"

Jerome nodded. “And the article is coming out ten days before Valentine’s.”

Jillian slowly nodded. “That’s Fred and my wedding anniversary.”

“Are you going to bake him another chocolate-raspberry heart cake?”

“I suppose I’ll have to do something for him.”

Stopping in mid-motion, Jerome focused on her. “How are you two getting along?”

“Same as always.”

“If you say so.” Attention turned back on the wig, Jerome half-asked, “You’ll be taking the day off?”

“I don’t know whether this year I will or not.”

Ratted, smoothed and sprayed the wig was done. “What do you think?” He asked holding it up.

“It’s beautiful.” After a few seconds, she said, “Maybe I should start wearing wigs.”

“Wigs have their advantages. I could style them to look as your hair does now, or any way you want.” Jerome said. “Every day you could have great hair,” stammering, he hurriedly added, “Not that it already doesn’t.”

Taking a half step closer to Jerome and lowering her voice, Jillian asked, “Is anything going on with Timmy I should know about?”

Breath held, Jerome tensed then leaning discreetly toward Jillian and lowering his voice, said, “You know he’s got that new lover who he wants to be *the one*. And . . . well . . . you know how single-minded he can be, and I think maybe he’s doing some crazy stuff.”

Nervous to ask what *crazy stuff* meant, Jillian simply said, “Have you met this new lover?”

Not looking at Jillian, Jerome said, “His name is Daryl and I think he’s significantly older.”

“You don’t know anything about him or what he does for work?”

“I have some suspicions, but Timmy’s being secretive. You know how he is — he repeatedly falls in love hard and gets dumped harder.”

For a minute the two of them frowned and stared at the wig.

“Do you know if he’s said anything to Tamzin?”

Jerome leaned even closer and his voice dropped lower. “He hasn’t said much about it to her, but from what he has said she’s pretty sure Timmy never really goes *out* with this Daryl. That they only meet at Timmy’s, and then it’s only for two or three hours at a time.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a relationship. Besides, Timmy loves to go out on the town.”

Shrugging, bobbing his head, Jerome whispered, “There’s got to be something in it for Timmy.”

“Did Tamzin say anything else?”

“No. She asked me what I know.”

Concern panged in Jillian’s stomach but she didn’t say anything. Compulsive, Timmy ran through life lust first, and reason gave way to obsession.

*Plunk, plop.* Fallen onto the floor was a naked head and off to the side an orange-haired wig.

They both stared.

From the reception end of the salon the welcome bell rang, so Jillian looked down there.

Someone handed Monique a white envelope, and walked back out.



Jerome had reunited head and wig, and was studying it. “Have you put any thought into leasing the private room to Glenda?”

Taking a few steps back and forth between the sides of vision of the privacy wall, Jillian wasn't sure what to say. “It's what her business needs.”

Jerome held up strands of medium-length, brown hair as if from it he might divine inspiration. “Glenda's had a tough three years with first the divorce then putting her career on hold and moving to California to watch her mother die. And rebuilding a business can be hard work, so she likely has a tough year in front of her.”

Thinking out loud, Jillian said, “She might be better to lease an open station for at least the first couple months, until she gets going again. She's been away over two years.”

“But, without the privacy her customers may not come.”

“Until the remodel's finished it's not an option.”

“We need to get that going as soon as possible,” Jerome said. “I know some of my customers are not impressed with the current look of the salon.”

“No, I imagine not. I don't think anyone is.” Staring at the hair dye and nail polish stains on the floor, Jillian promised herself she'd stop procrastinating, and if she had to borrow money from Fred, then she would, *damnit*.

Going up the back side of the salon she was passing the laundry room door as Timmy came out talking on his cell phone, “Why can't you come into the salon for a haircut?” . . . “Fine, whatever you want.” On his way by he flashed her a look that hollered confusion.

Before going into her office Jillian went to check on Monique at the reception counter. “Anything happening I should know about?”

“This was hand delivered a few minutes ago,” Monique said as she gave her the white envelope.

The return address was from the office of an attorney she’d never heard of, at an address that seemed residential. Going into her office and shutting the door, she read the letter. *What!?* After reading the letter again, she called Fred. “That idiot who turned my face blue is demanding \$100,000 and threatening to sue the salon for discrimination.”

“What? Discrimination! That’s absurd. You’ve got or have had, every skin color, every body size and age, every sexual orientation working out of that salon.”

“That’s what makes this so unbelievable.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll give the letter to Yohay and he’ll sort things out.”

Jillian continued, “I can’t believe, I mean . . . “

“I’ll see you tonight at home.” *Click.*

Even though she knew Fred was right, Jillian was still irritated and distracted. Forcing herself to concentrate, she began again to crunch numbers and go over interior decorating designs. The salon had to bring in more money, which set her to thinking about her marketing campaign for Valentine’s Day. There would be the Bijou Magazine article about Jerome, and the salon would attract attention for having made up the models at Eileen Dupre’s Annual Valentine’s Fashion Show and Cocktail Party, plus the special campaign for manicures. But nothing pleased her, and the more she tried the more dissatisfied and grouchy she became.

Outside, harsh periods of mixed sleet and rain marked the afternoon. By 5:00 it was black dark outside.

Shortly after 6:00 the last customer of the day left, and Jillian locked the door and turned the sign to closed.

Timmy got his area cleaned up fast, hugged Tamzin, blew everyone else kisses and dashed out the door. Behind him Jillian re-locked the door. When she turned she saw Tamzin watch Timmy disappear, then Tamzin exchanged glances with Monique, who had an unsettled look.

Jillian asked, "How did things go today?"

"Fine, not too slow." Monique stopped and frowned. "Timmy didn't turn his receipts in again."

Jillian looked at the hard copies of the other beautician's receipts stacked on the reception counter. "Does he still keep his accounts locked in his drawer?"

Monique's eyes held a questioning gleam, and her head slightly bobbed.

Going into her office, Jillian got the key.

Timmy's drawer was a jumble of receipts, along with empty foldies and vials containing residue Jillian was sure was cocaine. Annoyed, disappointed and concerned she pulled out the receipts, left everything else, relocked the drawer, and went back to her office.

*Knock, knock* on glass sounded as if came from the outside door. A hesitation, another series of knocking, then Jerome's long-legged stride hurrying down the salon, and him calling, "Jillian, look who's here!"

As she got up and went out to the reception she heard laughter. "Glenda!" Jillian cried and rushed forward. As they hugged Jillian felt the cold coming off her friend and the bones of her shoulders poking sharply inside her coat. "I want to tell you again how sorry I am about your mother."

“Thank you,” Glenda said as she fought not to cry. “She wanted to go. She was having terrible headaches and every time the doctor messed with her prescriptions her headaches got worse.”

Jillian gave her another hug, and because she couldn't think of anything else to say repeated herself. “I can't even begin to tell you how happy I am you're here.”

Glenda wiped her tears and forced a smile. “Not as happy as I am.”

Holding her hand up Jillian indicated the empty shop. “Last month we stayed open sometimes until eight or nine in the evening, this month we're like a ghost salon.”

“Business is always gloomy this time of year.”

“I know.” Jillian rolled her eyes and sighed. “Still, I can't help but be anxious.”

“I've been in contact with some of my old customers and I've already got some commitments, so the sooner I can get things up and going again the better.”

“Fantastic” Jillian said. “Are you hungry? Let's go get something to eat. I want to hear all your news. Your staying with me, and I won't take no for an answer.”

“What about Fred?”

“This is poker night.”

“That's right, I forgot. Every Wednesday.” Glenda laughed. “Are you sure my being there won't cause any problems?”

“That house is way too big for two people.”

“I meant, aren't Jack and Fred still in business together?”

“Yes, but why should that matter?” Jillian asked.

“Fred and Jack operate on their own agenda.”

“Let them have their agenda. My friends and this salon are my agenda.” Patting her stomach, not truly to show she was hungry, which she was, but because she was embarrassed about how much weight she’d gained since she’d last seen Glenda, Jillian asked, “How do you feel about Italian food for supper? I’ll call it in and pick it up on the way, then we can get comfortable at my place.”

“Sounds good.” Glenda smiled, but her eyes were red and the muscles around her mouth were tight.

“You must be tired.”

“I know I should be, but I’m also excited to be back in Portland and to start getting re-organized.”

In Jillian and Fred’s living room the gas fireplace burned, the coffee table was covered with plates of food and glasses of wine, and Jillian and Glenda sat on the couch and ate, drank and talked. They were such good friends it was as if the three years since they’d last seen each other had melted away — except they had a lot of conversation to catch up on.

“You left town so fast,” Jillian said, “I’ve always felt guilty I didn’t get a chance to give you a proper going away party.”

“I figured Fred told you not to talk to me.

“Yes, he did, but I shouldn’t have listened.”

“Jack and I were arguing so fiercely, all I wanted was to get away. It’s insane how consuming passion — especially when it’s a combination of both love and hate — can be.”

“But Fred told me after you moved out you and Jack didn’t see each other anymore.”

“I don’t doubt that’s what Jack told Fred, but that’s not the way it really was.”

“But I thought the divorce was his idea?”

“It was, but as soon as I was actually out of the house Jack turned into a clinging maniac. It was awful. It was like a charade of opposites.” Glenda’s face twisted and she tipped her head back to stare at the ceiling. Blowing up her cheeks she let out a big puff of latent frustration before turning back to Jillian. “A big reason I was unhappy with our marriage was because he was hardly ever home. Moving out of our house was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do because I thought I would never see him again. But once I was actually out, he wouldn’t leave me alone, and after that I couldn’t get away fast enough.” Glenda shook her head. “I think the reason he told Fred we weren’t seeing each other anymore was so he wouldn’t have to admit rejection.”

“Relationships can be really perverted.”

At first Glenda didn’t respond, then a dreamy look came into her eyes. “I remember when Jack and I first met. Oh my goodness. I had such a crush on him I could barely speak. He was drop dead handsome, and charismatic. In the end though, what most struck me was his contrariness.” Picking up her wine glass she swirled and sniffed it then took a sip. “I wonder what he’s like now.”

“Do you talk to him much?”

“Two days after my mother died he called, and that was the first time I’d talked to him in about a year. When I heard his voice for the first time after so long, my heart pounded same as when we first met.” Glenda shook her head. “He’s got some sort of hold on me.”

“He’s got nothing on you. It’s all what you think in your own head.”

“I wish I were more like you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jillian asked.

“Objective and cool.”

Hearing the door between the kitchen and garage open and close, Jillian was surprised.

Fred called, “I’m home.”

Question-frowning at Glenda, Jillian asked, “What time is it?”

“It’s only eleven,” Glenda said. “Does he always get home from poker this early?”

“No, he’s usually home about twelve-thirty, quarter-to-one.

“Jack never came home before two and usually it was after three,” Glenda said.

Getting up, Jillian went to greet her husband in the kitchen but by the time she got to the hallway he was already headed upstairs. She called after him, “How was your evening?”

Without turning around or even slowing in his steps, Fred growled, “We’ll talk later.”

For a moment she stared after him, and her gut tightened. When she returned to the living room Glenda was standing and clearing off the coffee table.

Glenda said, “I’ve got some things to do real early. If I’m gone before you get up, I’ll see you later at the salon.”

When Jillian went upstairs, Fred was sitting up in bed, and his arms were crossed over his chest. “How long is she staying?”

“I imagine it will take her a couple weeks to find an apartment.”

“And she has to stay here because she doesn’t have any other friends?”

A stab of cold took Jillian’s breath away, and she heard herself croak, “She’s staying here because I invited her.”

“You should have asked me first.”

Retreating into the walk-in closet Jillian undressed, and seeing her naked self in the mirror she was dismayed. A long time ago she’d put the scale in the garage — it was too scary to

get on. At least thirty pounds of fat had settled onto her body since she'd married Fred. Maybe more. Irritated and discouraged, she found a flannel nightgown she'd gotten from Fred for Christmas, but hadn't worn, and pulled it over her head. Coming out of the closet she asked, "How was your card game?"

"Don't change the subject. You should have asked me first." He frowned at her.

"Where'd you get that?"

"What?"

"What you're wearing."

Unconsciously her hands came to her chest and she rubbed them down her bulbous belly. "You gave it to me." Jillian watched Fred's eyes flash confusion, then recognition with tensed muscles and twitch.

Turning off his bedside light Fred grumbled, scooped down and pulled the covers around his chin, but she knew he was avoiding her. The nights he played poker it always took him a long time to fall asleep.

All the windows were closed and the heat was up, Jillian felt suffocated. Outside, the wind had stilled.

Waking, thinking of chatting with Glenda, Jillian hurried downstairs to put coffee on — and found a note.

"Thanks for last night. I'll see you in the salon."

Going to the guest room, Jillian saw that all Glenda's things were gone. Back in the kitchen, disturbed by the wariness of Glenda and aggravation of Fred, Jillian sat at the high counter and drank coffee.



When Fred came down he matter-of-factly asked, "When did she leave?"

Showing him the note Jillian said, "She was gone when I got up."

"What's for breakfast?"

"French toast."

"Not too much cinnamon."

Getting up she poured him a cup of coffee then added cream and four big spoons full of sugar. When she set it in front of him he gave her a sweet kiss.

As she whipped up and fried French toast, Fred rooted in the pantry and got out a selection of jams, jellies and syrups. Serving the first golden brown, crispy slices, she looked at all the bottles on the counter and said, "There are more toppings here than slices of toast."

"We wouldn't want to go short in a land of plenty."

"Heaven forbid."

After they were done with breakfast, and Jillian was cleaning the kitchen she began to think about her team. Specifically Timmy and what Jerome had said about Timmy's new lover. Turning to Fred, she asked, "How was your card game last night?"

"Fine."

"A couple times in the past I've heard you mention the name Daryl. Is that whose house you play poker at?"

Standing up, Fred said, "I have a big project I want to finish today." Passing behind her he started to walk out of the kitchen then stopped. "Did you bring me that letter about the discrimination claim?"

Getting the letter out of her purse she handed it to him.

Without looking at it he said, “Unless I tell you different, you can forget this ever arrived.”

“I can’t do that, what if the salon gets a reputation for being prejudice . . . “

“I told you, I’ll get Yohay to take care of it.”

## Chapter Five

When Jillian got there Rose City Salon was already hopping. Jerome had a full book of business for the morning and the Bijou Magazine photo shoot was scheduled for that afternoon. Tamzin was doing a facial on a man who had the look of an Eileen Dupre model - beautiful, excitedly telling his dreams and experiences. Tamzin smiled and nodded, occasionally commented, and continued with her work. Jillian looked around, even checked the laundry room, Timmy wasn't there.

Across the salon Abilene called, "Where are the towels?"

Startled, Jillian scowled. Certainly Abilene didn't expect her to fetch towels. Without smiling she pointed to the laundry room. Abilene maybe looked a little different, but Jillian didn't take the time to see for sure.

Marching heavy but spry in stilettos Abilene went into the laundry room, and came back out with an armful of hand towels, which she carefully folded to fit perfectly in one of her drawers.

As the other stylists, manicurists and facial artists arrived so did the customers. Finally, Timmy showed up — looking stressed and thin with a dark, faraway shadow in his eyes, and smelling too strongly of cologne. After a quick hello wave to Jillian he went to his station. Jillian watched as Tamzin watched him, and that Timmy didn't make prolonged eye contact with her.

From the angle of the mirrors above the windows and on the walls, Jillian saw Jerome pause in his hairstyle to glance at Timmy on his way to the laundry room.

When next the welcome bell jingled it was Timmy's first customer — who Jillian helped to get settled. Timmy returned from the laundry room with a dissatisfied look in his eyes and an armful of towels. Each of the thirteen hairstylists, three manicurists and two facial artists, were busy, but it was a relatively slow pace. Rose City Salon needed to be much busier. Every month should be as busy as November and December. More artists could be contracted, and more customers made happy.

At eleven Monique came in, her black hair, straight and thick, draped down the back of her dark gray wool jacket. "Brrr," she said and smiled.

Leaving the reception counter Jillian said, "I have a few things I need to take care of, then let's talk about getting ready for the Bijou event."

"I've been looking forward to that," Monique said and ran her hands through her hair. "Jerome's asked me to be one of his models."

Abilene called, "I'm going to be one of his models too." And from her seat with wheels she rolled around in her corner then flashed her nails and delicately primped the beehive on top her head.

Jillian noticed that in Jerome's collection of heads, one was without a wig. Why hadn't he asked her to be a model?

Monique said, "It's too bad the remodel's not done. It would look good in the Bijou Magazine pictures."

Knowing she was right, but not commenting, Jillian went into her office.

A short while later there was a knock at her door. "Come in."

It was Glenda with a big grin.

“What’s up with you?” Jillian asked.

“I’ve been reconnecting with some of my old customers.”

“How’d it go?”

“Good, three set appointments for later this week, and a couple others said that now I’m back in town they’ll call as soon as they have the need. They also said they’d spread the word.”

“That’s excellent.” Jillian said. “I guess the next step is to figure out what space you want.”

Bobbing her head, Glenda said, “Let’s take a look at the private room.”

“Sure, but keep in mind it’s been vandalized and won’t be ready for customers until we remodel.”

“For now I can work at a station in the back, but as soon as possible I’d like to move to the private room.”

Jillian’s mind stuttered with uncertainty. “The lease on the private room is going to be considerably more than a booth in the back.”

“We fear, therefore we are not.” In her voice was the undertone of someone who felt she had nothing left to lose.

“I’ll get the key.” Inside, the private room had been cleaned up, but still the dark paneling was spray-painted with obscenities and there were a couple holes in the walls. On the floor was an outdated carpet, and on two walls were cupboards and counters, including a hair-washing basin. Glenda said, “Even if it hadn’t been vandalized, this room would need remodeling.”

*Knock, knock.* Coming into the room, Jerome said, “Glenda, Monique told me you were here.” Coming forward he gave her a hug.

Nodding, breaking into a grin, Glenda said, "I'm looking forward to getting back to work."

"Until this room is ready for her, she's going to work in one of the stations in the back," Jillian said.

"As private as possible," Glenda said.

"There's that empty station next to the laundry room, it's tucked on this end of the privacy wall, so it's semi-isolated."

"That's what I was thinking," Jillian said. "Let's go take a look."

When they got there, Jerome, with an edge in his voice, asked, "Whose stuff is this?"

Dismayed, Jillian stared at the golden hard-shell suitcase and its contents spread on the counter. To Glenda she said, "I'll have the mess cleaned up."

"Thanks, Glenda said and looked around. "This should work fine for now."

Monique, half way stepping around the privacy wall, raised her eyebrows at Jerome, "Where do you want to stage the Bijou shoot? In the setting parlor?"

Head cocked, Glenda stared at Monique. "Setting parlor?"

"That's her name for the back lounge area. We've made it into a sort of cozy parlor," Jerome said.

Jillian and Jerome started walking around the laundry room to the setting area, where customers relaxed while they waited for treatments to absorb, or luxuriated under hair dryers, as they sipped wine or bottled water, and looked at magazines and chatted. Stopping and contemplating the space Jerome and Glenda talked about mirror angles, lighting and shading, and positioning.

Seeing Abilene was between customers, Jillian, always smiling, went and sat at her manicure table.

“That looks like a smile that wants to say something,” Abilene said.

“Good news,” Jillian said. “We’ve got a new team member.”

“That woman Jerome’s talking to?”

“Right. Glenda.”

Turning away from Jerome and Glenda, Abilene began toying with a few of her paint bottles. “What’s her talent?”

“Makeovers.”

“Like what Tamzin does?”

“Glenda attracts a certain type of customer,” Jillian said. “Once the remodel is done she’ll be leasing the private room . . . “

“Must be some business plan she’s got.”

“Until the room is ready she’s going to use that space where you’ve placed your suitcase.”

“I can take it home with me this evening.”

“That’d be great. But in the meantime I need it moved so I can get that area cleaned up for Glenda.”

“Where do you want me to put it?”

Jillian got up, “Let’s go get it right now and see where it fits.”

Not happy, Abilene stood and in her five-inch heels marched across the front half of the salon then turned and squeezed between the reception counter and that end of the privacy wall. After she’d scooped and dropped what stuff she’d had on the counters into the golden hard-shell,

she snapped it shut and yanked the handle, and in her tall, thin heels lead the way to Jillian's office.

"Those are beautiful shoes," Jillian said knowingly. "You must have driven in today."

"I never take the bus if I can help it," Abilene said.

"I can't imagine walking anywhere in those shoes, not even across the street from the parking garage."

"I like parking downstairs."

Surprised because parking downstairs was almost twice as expensive as parking across the street, Jillian was jealous at the extravagance. "Great, then it'll only take a couple minutes to put the suitcase in the trunk of your car."

Abilene glared then dropped the handle and said, "I'll have to go get my keys."

Stomping, murmuring and swishing down the front half of the salon she made the mirrors shake.

Glenda cleaned her temporary area impeccably, to the minutest detail.

Walking around with the interior design schemes Jillian determined she was making a final decision by the end of the day. Each time she passed Timmy she tried to watch him without seeming as if that's what she was doing. He'd lost a lot of weight, and his skin didn't look as healthy as it had even a week ago. Worse, his ready smile and easy affection now seemed unnatural.

Barely saying a word Jerome worked on his customers, but he must have been thinking hard or was nervous because Jillian noticed he was chewing on his bottom lip.

When the time came, Jillian helped Monique get the back lounge ready for the Bijou Magazine shoot.



Many of the hairstylists buzzed with the excitement of Jerome's fame, and it carried so that the customers too were lively, and it wasn't only Abilene who shouted across the salon and through the privacy wall, although her voice was the loudest.

"I want you to come see these nails I am just finishing up," Abilene called to Monique, "It's a new technique I've made up to go with one of Tamzin's new products."

All the customers and many of the stylists stared, some at Abilene, others at the darling-looking freckled young lady with the long, corkscrew-curly hair.

In the spotlight Tamzin turned all shades of red.

Coming from the laundry room Timmy, sniffing, finely shaking his head, and looking pale and hungry hurried to his station. Passing Jillian and Monique, he made eye contact only briefly, smiled stiffly and didn't stop.

Monique stared after him. "Timmy's hunting ducks with rakes."

Shortly after four o'clock the Bijou Magazine writer and photographer arrived and started to set up.

Meanwhile, Jerome was nearly paralyzed by stage fright. Jillian tried to soothe him but she never knew what to say in those situations.

The cool collaborator was Tamzin. She sat Jerome in his own style chair, massaged his face, and prompted him to breathe deep then applied cosmetics to make him look his best for the camera. When she was done she used her cell phone to take a few pictures of herself and Jerome. "When you're world famous," Tamzin said, "I want to prove I once did your makeup."

Finally the interviewer started the recorder and asked Jerome questions, and the cameraperson walked around and stood in awkward positions while snapping photographs.

Leaning against the laundry room Jillian had a straight view of much of the back, and an overhead-mirrored view of the stylists' portion of the front. Everyone strained to catch the excitement, to see the hairstyles that would dominate Portland haute couture.

*Chirp, chirp, chirp.* Jillian looked around. *Chirp, chirp, chirp.* Realizing it was coming from inside the laundry room, Jillian went in and found a cell phone chirping and the screen flashing, "Daryl, Daryl, Daryl." Quickly she covered it with towels until it stopped chirping, then she slipped it into her pocket. Going around by her office and past the reception counter she came out in front of the salon. Showing the phone to Timmy, she said, "This yours?"

"Oh!" He yelped and plucked it out of Jillian's hand. "Did I miss any calls?"

"The way I found it was by its chirp."

Head bent down Timmy checked his phone activity.

His customer called. "I know you're an anxious young man and probably have a hot date tonight but even an old woman's time is valuable."

Dropping the phone into his pocket Timmy, paler than before, rushed to his customer. "I am sooooo sorry. Of course your time is valuable."

Behind her, Jillian heard Glenda say, "Monique, Jerome wants to do your hair now. I'll woman the reception counter while you're with him."

When Jillian returned to lean against the laundry room and watch the interview, Jerome was using Monique's hair to show how to create a casual, but elegant free-flowing mane without getting flyaway's. As he explained the process the recorder blinked and the camera flashed.

Noticing a lot of movement in the overhead-mirrors Jillian glanced up to see Timmy's customer getting ready to leave. A minute later she heard the jingle of the bell.

Seconds later Timmy came zipping around the corner by her office, headed for the laundry room. Seeing her standing there, he altered his direction and went, Jillian presumed, to the men's room.

After Jerome was done with Monique, he then asked Abilene to come model as he showed stylish ways to use wigs and hairpieces. More questions were asked of Jerome and more photographs of him were taken.

Then it was over.

Approaching the interviewer, Abilene asked, "Have you ever seen nails like these?"

"They'd make a good story," the interviewer said. "But today we're concentrating on Jerome and his hairdos."

"Here's my card," Abilene said. "You want to do a piece on truly unique and incredible nails, you call me."

Before leaving the interviewer said to Jillian, "Bijou Magazine's Valentine's issue will be out sometime between the first and fourth of next month."

## Chapter Six

February 14, 2005

Inside the Benson Hotel's event suite's staging-turned-dressing room was a cacophony of excitement and nerves of nine models, plus Jillian, Jerome, Timmy, Tamzin, Abilene, Monique and Eileen Dupre. Checking her progress sheet, Jillian said, "Okay, all the models are ready for their first walk."

Just finished with the makeup on Eileen Dupre, Tamzin handed her a mirror.

Critically studying her image, Eileen said, "I should have you come give classes at my school."

Grinning while turning pink, Tamzin tucked her chin, but her eyebrows rose in hope.

"What brand of make-up did you use on Eileen?" Jillian asked.

"My own," Tamzin squeaked, as she blushed pink.

From the other side of the dressing room Abilene called, "That girl is way too shy. Tamzin makes the best beauty products of any I've ever used."

Monique called, "Two minutes until show time."

Handing back the mirror, standing and clapping her hands, Eileen Dupre demanded everyone's attention. "Models, line up same as we've rehearsed. I want you all to do exactly as you did yesterday during rehearsal. The only difference today is you'll have the Rose City Salon

team here to help you change outfits, and to make sure your hair and makeup are always perfect. I'm going out front to announce you and your outfits, Jillian will manage the dressing room."

In a gaggle the models swarmed.

"What's going on here?" Jillian demanded. "We've promised our sponsors, and more importantly our audience, the show will start on time. I need everyone to be quiet, and stand still."

Abilene barked, "That's right. I hate it, and I'm sure you all do too, when a show starts late."

"One minute," Monique called.

"Models stand still. I'll call out your names in order of line-up." Jillian turned to her team. "Timmy, you stand by the door of the dressing room. Monique you stand by the curtain entrance."

From the intercom was a deafening squelch, which finally got everyone to be quiet and stand still, then, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Eileen Dupre's Annual Valentine's Fashion Show and Cocktail Party. Please allow me to introduce your hostess for this evening, Ms. Eileen Dupre."

Eileen announced her modeling agency and school, and thanked the evening's sponsors with a special thanks to Rose City Salon, then said, "First we'll see the outfits on the models walking the runway. After the runway show we will be moving to the ballroom next door for cocktails. During the cocktail party the models will be mingling while wearing the same fashions as they had on for their runway walks. Please feel welcome to ask about the designer and the fabrics, as the models will be carrying information cards particular to each wardrobe collection."

As the crowd applauded Monique switched on the sound system to Electro Beat.

The next forty minutes were a blur. Models lining up, music beating, Timmy trying to keep everyone organized, which was sort of hilarious because he was always disorganized plus he kept wanting to snap photos with his cell phone which added to the confusion, until Jerome insisted he put it away. In a continual revolving process the models one-by-one passed through the void between the dressing room door and Monique standing at the stage entrance, while another model was streaking back into the dressing room, giddy with having just walked the runway and listening to the audience clapping, and the anticipation of walking again. Abilene helped the models get their clothes quickly off while Jillian handed them the different clothes they needed to hurriedly put on. Tamzin and Glenda retouched makeup and helped with accessories. Jerome, wearing a tool belt stuffed with hair products, was ever ready with a rat-tail comb and can of spray. Then there was Timmy's final check before he passed them into the void, and Monique who sent them down the runway. It was a controlled chaos.

In the end, when the models went out in parade, the applause was thunderous.

Exhausted, Jillian found an empty chair tucked between a wall and a clothing rack, and collapsed her plumb butt into it with a sigh that resonated from the toe tips of her aching feet. In the center of the dressing room excited and nearly breathless with hyperventilation models jigged around the room talking too fast and laughing too much as they made ready to mingle at the cocktail party. Standing next to the dressing room door Jerome and Monique were flirting with the same model whom, in a tizzy, kept shifting his balance from foot to foot. Tamzin, standing by a makeshift table, was packing her cosmetics as she looked at Jillian . . . no, she was looking at the other side of the clothing rack. And that's when Jillian heard Timmy's voice low, insistent and borderline whiney, "but Daryl, I told you . . . you said . . . but . . . fine, Daryl, if that's what you want I'll be there." Embarrassed for him, Jillian quickly got up and left the dressing room.

Already the cocktail party ballroom was nearly full and vibrant with activity. Models were walking around smiling and encouraging people to touch their clothes. Designers, storeowners, marketing persons and buyers networked and drank. Those there purely to see new fashions and beauty trends laughed gaily. In one corner a quartet played cool jazz, in another corner was a cocktail bar, and walking around the floor servers offered hors d'oeuvres and champagne.

Enjoying the party Jillian was chatting with the marketing manager at Nordstrom's when Glenda arrived. Soon as she could break away, Jillian went to greet her.

"I made it," Glenda said with a gleam in her eyes.

"How'd your appointment go?"

"Really good. He was a fun customer whose only instruction was to make him into a beautiful and sexy siren." Glenda laughed. "It was his first time transforming into a woman." She looked around. "I thought Jack and Fred were supposed to be here."

"I'm sure they'll be here any minute, they never come for the fashion show." She didn't add that Jack never missed a chance to ogle the models during the cocktail hour.

Glenda's eyes swiveled toward the door, "Here they are coming in now." A pink flush rose up her neck, and her body stiffened.

"This the first time you've seen Jack since you've been back, isn't it?"

"He's still a handsome man," Glenda said. "I wonder if he's as charismatic as ever."

Jillian watched her husband until he made eye contact with her, then she waited for he and Jack to join her and Glenda.

Coming up to stand by her, Fred gave her a quick kiss, and said hello to Glenda.

Jack said, "Sorry to hear about your mother, Glenda."

“Thank you,” she said stiff as a weathered post.

Fred said, “Eileen Dupre has outdone herself this year.”

“She does an exceptional job,” Jillian said.

“Excuse me,” Jack said, “I’m going to visit the cocktail bar. Can I get anyone anything?”

Jillian and Glenda each held up mostly full glasses of champagne.

Shaking his head, Jack said, “Gives me a headache. I need real booze.”

“I’ll go with you,” Fred said.

When suddenly the murmur in the room stilled, Jillian looked where everyone else was — toward the door. The woman walking in was striking. From her left, Jerome stepped up next to Jillian. When she looked at him, he cocked his head. From a short distance away Jillian heard Timmy’s nervous laugh, then the sound in the room resumed.

Later, when she realized the woman was hitting on Jack she glanced at Glenda, who was actually smiling. This made Jillian happy because it made her feel that Glenda was truly no longer hung up on him.

As the evening progressed, and Jack drank more and more, the woman teased him with increasing shamelessness.

“Would you look at Jack,” Glenda said with a half-grin, half-disgust look on her face, “He’s about falling over with his lust.”

As Jillian watched, the woman used a long fingernail to run down Jack’s chest, then poke him in the belly. Grinning for more Jack laughed.

“I have to admit,” Glenda whispered. “He was the best in bed over any other man, or woman, I’ve ever been with.”

Choking on her champagne, Jillian didn’t care to reply.



“Sometimes I think you’re the biggest prude,” Glenda said.

“I’m not.”

“No, I can’t imagine you really are since you’re married to Fred.”

What did that mean, Jillian wondered but didn’t ask, and instead looked around the room. The models were mingling nicely in several varieties of outfits, some had ad-libbed with their styles but it brought added appreciation, so none of the designers seemed to care. Having won out over Monique, Jerome and the model were huddled together chatting and petting each other. Abilene was surrounded by a gaggle of high-societies who were studying their own and each others’ fingernails.

From across the room Eileen Dupre caught Jillian’s eye and waved her over. When she got there, Eileen said, “Jillian, I’d like you to meet the manager for the Trailblazers’ cheerleaders.”

Twenty minutes later Jillian, smiling, had an appointment to meet the manager for lunch the following week.

Coming up to her, Monique said, “Tamzin and I are taking off now. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“You both did a great job today,” Jillian said.

“I’m leaving too,” Jerome said. Standing next to him was the model.

“Where’s Timmy?” Jillian asked.

“He left a while ago without saying goodbye to anyone,” Monique said.

As Jillian was saying good-bye to her team she noticed the striking woman was walking out the door, and Jack was nearly cross-eyed with lust as he stared after her.

## Chapter Seven

August 2005

Excited, Jillian, in her remodeled office, sitting in front of her computer, said a little prayer, held her breath and pushed the send button. It'd been six months since Eileen Dupre's Annual Valentine's Fashion Show and Cocktail Party, and she'd finally managed to get commitments from the contacts Eileen had introduced her to while there. Jumping from her chair, she checked her makeup and hair then went out to the reception counter. "Guess what?"

"What?" Monique asked.

Coincidentally coming out of her private room just then Glenda stopped. "What?"

"We're going to be doing all the hair, nails and makeup needs for the Trailblazers' cheerleaders for next season," Jillian announced triumphantly. "And, I've made deals with both Nordstrom and Meier & Frank for their employees to receive a ten percent discount on all the services we offer. In return we'll receive a ten-percent discount on anything we purchase from either of those stores."

"Nice!" Abilene called.

Monique said, "If we get any busier we're going to have to hire more talent."

"Awesome," Glenda said to Jillian. "You have a golden touch when it comes to running a business and marketing."

“It’s been less than a year since we moved to the Great Gray Building and if business keeps up like this we’re going to need a bigger space by this time next year,” Jerome said as he walked by with an armful of clean towels.

Holding her breath, Jillian kept from commenting that up until now she’d had a lot of stress wondering if the salon could actually support the current rent, and pay her a livable income. Thank goodness she was married to a generous man, because for the last year the pay she’d allotted herself from the salon would only allow for the most meager of existences.

Timmy said, “I think we should celebrate.”

“Definitely,” Abilene called, “we need to celebrate.”

Glenda whispered, “That woman must have bionic ears.”

Late in the afternoon Tamzin, asked, “Where are we going tonight?”

Jillian looked at her. “What?”

“Abilene said we’re all going out tonight.”

Even though she hadn’t actually planned to go out with the team that evening, Jillian wondered if it wouldn’t be better than going home. “How about Red Star?”

“I like it there,” Tamzin said.

Going into her office, Jillian called Fred, but he didn’t answer. Used to be he always answered her calls or got back to her quickly, but lately that had changed. He was busier than ever, he had explained. And there was nothing to retaliate with because she was too. She left a message.

#

Jack studied Fred and asked, “What’s up with that face?”

Nostrils flaring, Fred put the cell phone back in his pocket. “Jillian’s not going to be home to cook supper tonight.”

“Did she say why?”

“Something about going out with her freak team to celebrate more marketing contracts she’s closed.”

“That woman’s a marketing fool.” Jack shook his head. “Did she say where they were going?”

“Red Star.”

Looking out the window Jack asked, “Does Jillian still not know J&F is the real owner of the salon?”

“She does not.”

Laughing, Jack leaned back in his chair and propped his left foot against his desk.

#

At Red Star the Rose City Salon team dominated the entire back section. Jillian had finished her second sazerac and was debating with herself whether she should go home to her husband.

Abilene, who was sitting on the other side of the table, said, in her loud way, “Of course you should have another cocktail. You can’t go home now, Jillian.”

Usually resentful that Abilene seemed able to see into her thoughts, Jillian didn’t mind tonight.

“Look,” Jerome said. “Fred and Jack are here.”

“What?” Jillian asked with unexpected dismay.

For a second Jerome stared at her. “Are you okay?”

“Of course.” Putting on a smile, Jillian waved at Fred. Brightening her smile she and everyone else scooted around to make room for two more chairs.

“Surprised to see me?” Fred asked as he sat next to her.

Jillian laughed. “It’s a good surprise.”

Jack took a seat between Tamzin and Abilene. “What new contract are we celebrating?”

Irritation made Jillian feel like telling him *we’re* not celebrating anything.

Abilene said, “I’m going to be painting the fingernails of the jewels.”

“Is that so?” Jack laughed.

“She wants Bijou Magazine to do an interview on her,” Monique corrected Abilene.

Jillian watched as Abilene and Jack exchanged eye rolls.

Reaching for his phone, Timmy concentrated on it for a second, then said, “Ohh, I have a date tonight.” Quickly gulping his drink he jumped up and blew kisses to everyone.

With squinted eyes Tamzin watched him rush out the door. “I can’t believe he’s still letting that moron jerk his chain.”

“I know,” Jerome said. “This is the most unhealthy relationship I’ve ever seen him in, and it’s also the longest.”

A server appeared.

Leaning close to his wife, Fred asked, “When can we cut out of here and go get supper?”

“Why don’t you have a drink?”

Without looking at the server, Fred said, “Bourbon, neat.”

“Another sazerac for me,” Jillian said.

“What are you drinking?” Jack heard himself ask Abilene.

“Mai Tais,” Abilene told him.

To the waiter Jack said, "We'll have a couple Mai Tais here." Inside his head he cringed, he hated foofy-girlie drinks.

Abilene smiled and pushed her large and pillowy breasts forward. "Tell me what you do all day."

"Jillian's not the only one who can get contracts signed," Jack said. "In fact, J&F is about to sign a contract to take over Perky Partners Distributing."

"That big funky-painted building on the side of I-84?" Abilene asked.

"That's the one," Jack said.

"What does Perky Partners distribute?" Abilene asked.

"Some sort of personal care products." Jack shrugged. "Condoms, hell, I don't know."

Abilene chuckled. "No, I guess that's not the important part."

"I like the way you think," Jack said.

When her and Fred's drinks came Jillian took a sip and set it down.

"I need to get going," Glenda said and stood up.

Picking up his bourbon, Fred gulped half of it.

Jillian got up to make room for Glenda to get out.

Quickly, Fred finished his bourbon, stood up and dropped a fifty-dollar bill on the table.

"Let's go."

As they walked down Fifth Avenue, Jillian breathed in the fresh air. It was dark and the temperature had dropped to a comfortable degree. Street lights threw long shadows that skidded over their faces and when she looked at Fred she glimpsed his intolerance and fatigue, and part

of her resolved to take better care of him and spend more time with him, but another part of her filled with resentment.

#

Wafting coffee aroma woke Jillian then she heard Fred's steps on the stairs. Had she forgotten to set the alarm? Shocked, she looked at the clock — she should have been out the door by now.

Coming into the room, Fred said, "You're awake." He handed her a cup of coffee then opened the curtains and morning sun, bright yellow and sharp, cut into her eyes, so she sat up and threw back the covers. It was summer, but the room was cool from air conditioning.

"Don't get up yet," Fred said.

Telling herself she wanted to be the best wife she could be, Jillian scooted back, pulled the covers around her waist, and leaned against the headboard.

"I'm glad you decided to stay home this morning."

From her coffee cup steam swirled and she looked down into its deep blackness and didn't tell the truth.

Back in bed, Fred pulled her next to him.

Warm and cozy Jillian snuggled in with a sigh.

With his free hand Fred drank his coffee.

Jillian waited but nothing more happened. Bored, she asked, "What would you like for supper tonight?"

"This is my poker night," Fred said.

"Oh, right."

"I'll give you a call here at the house tonight between nine and ten."

“I’ll be waiting.”

Giving her a soft squeeze, he said, “How about trying out the new waffle iron I gave you?”

“That sounds yummy,” she said and jumped out of bed.

#

The second Jillian stepped into the salon she felt the discordance of chaos.

“Why wasn’t I called and told Abilene was out sick today?” Livid, a customer was leaning over the reception counter and yelling.

“I’m sorry,” Monique gasped. “I’m sure it was an accident, she said she would call everyone on her schedule today.”

Moving around to Monique’s side of the reception counter, Jillian asked, “What can I do to help?”

The welcome bell jingled as another customer came in.

The customer at the reception counter hissed, “Can you paint nails like Abilene?”

The newcomer said, “No one paints nails like Abilene.”

Monique, face blanched with stress, said to Jillian, “Abilene is sick today, and she said she’d call all her customers but . . . “

“What do you mean?” the newcomer demanded. “She’s not here?”

Jillian said, “I’m afraid not.”

“What kind of way is this to do business?” loudly demanded the customer at the reception counter. Turning abruptly she rammed the door open. The bell jangled.



“I left my office and drove into downtown, and I hate driving downtown, to have my nails done by Abilene,” the newcomer snapped. “And now you tell me she’s sick today. I think you owe me a free manicure.”

“I’ll talk to Abilene and see what can be done,” Jillian said.

The newcomer stormed out the door.

Blowing fans, humming hairdryers and clacking curling irons were the only sounds in the salon. Jillian looked around. Everyone was staring at her in horror and expectation.

“Well,” Jerome blurted. “Nothing like late-morning drama.”

Timmy, in high-pitched nerves, laughed uncontrollably — which made everyone else laugh.

Monique asked, “Do you think I should call the rest of Abilene’s customers for today?”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Jillian said. Swiveling on a high-heel she went into her office, closed the door and called Abilene but there was no answer so she left a voice mail message to call her back.

In the afternoon Jillian asked Monique, “Have you heard from Abilene?”

“No. But I certainly got bitched-out by a couple of her customers.”

“If I could find someone to replace her, I would in a heartbeat,” Jillian muttered mostly to herself. The woman believed she was queen of acrylic and paint. Problem was, her customers did too — some months Abilene brought as many customers into the salon as Jerome.

## Chapter Eight

Shortly before midnight Jack snorted up the last of his cocaine, gulped from his rum and coke, and tapped the cards on the poker table. While he dealt he eyed his opponents. Fred methodically picked up what was dealt him. Yohay didn't touch his cards because he believed it was bad luck to do so until after the dealing was completed. Superstition though, Jack knew, wasn't Yohay's strategy it was his obsession with the game and his razor intellect. The man was wound too tight, and Jack didn't doubt that one day they would all read about him in the newspaper for having gone berserk. Nevertheless, until that day he was a brilliant acquisition attorney and a wicked opponent in the courtroom. Of the other three players, one was Daryl's mole, and the other two were losing badly.

Usually Jack played until between two and three in the morning then spent an hour upstairs with a gal before going home. But last night's sexing with Abilene had nearly broken him in half. Sweet Jesus, he couldn't remember when he'd ever had that much fun with a woman. Made him feel young and strong again, as if he truly was master of the universe.

Fred won the hand, scooped up his money and checked his watch then pushed himself away from the table. "It's my curfew."

"I need to get going myself," Jack said.

Everyone looked at him in surprise. Fred always left at midnight but never Jack.

"Did you stay out late partying with the salon crew?" Fred asked.

“You know I can’t stand to be around those sorts of people,” Jack said loudly. To himself he reasoned Fred couldn’t possibly know. “Shortly after you left I did too. I don’t know when I was last in bed so early,” he laughed, “alone anyway.”

Fred and everyone else laughed.

“Maybe I’m coming down with a cold or something.”

As he and Fred entered the upstairs parlor, they overheard Daryl on the phone, “I’m done with you, bitch. Next time you think about calling me, remember I know where you live and work.” *Slam!*

At home Jack made himself a strong rum and coke, got into bed and put on a movie. But the sheets smelled of Abilene and thinking about her aroused him, which made him proud of his virility, so he put on a pornographic video — but that didn’t do it for him. Abilene had totally used him up. Remembering all the things they’d done Jack laughed.

#

Timmy had been crying for days, and Jillian was done with even trying to act sympathetic. He sat on the pineapple brocade loveseat bawling. She said, “Everyone gets dumped. A couple years ago you about broke that . . . I don’t remember his name . . . the really cute one with the dark hair and blue eyes.”

“But that was different,” Timmy said.

How so? She wanted to ask. “I know it was different for you, but what I remember is how grief stricken he looked.”

In a fresh wave of sobbing, Timmy stuttered, “Why doesn’t he love me anymore?”

What makes you think he ever did? Jillian bit her tongue and wished Timmy would get out of her office.

*Knock, knock.*

Getting up, Jillian went to the door.

Monique was there. "Timmy's got a customer waiting."

"He'll be right there." Closing the door, Jillian went to stand in front of Timmy. "You need to pull yourself together. Now, come on." Holding out her hand for him to take she encouraged him to stand and let him hug her for a few seconds then gently pushed him away. "Go around the back way, and stop in the laundry room and wash your face with cold water. "I'll get your customer seated in your salon chair, and I'll say you'll be right there, that you got something in your eye and had to go wash it out."

Shuddering with suppressed sobs, Timmy nodded.

At the reception counter Jillian greeted Timmy's customer and told the story then escorted him to Timmy's station. A minute later Timmy, eyes still puffy and red, but somewhat pulled together, arrived with an armful of clean towels.

With a smile, Jillian took a step back. "If you need anything, or if I can be of any help at all, please come and get me in my office."

## Chapter Eight

June 2006

Alarmed at the yelling, Jillian stood up from her desk and rushed into the hallway. This had been the craziest June ever. It was as if some psychological oddity, an out-of-sortness had gotten into everyone and couldn't be shaken loose. Even the weather pattern was awry. Last

month had been typically cool and rainy, yet this month was dry and uncharacteristically warm. For at least a full minute there was silence, and Jillian relaxed, then she heard yelling coming from Glenda's private room. "This make-up is all wrong! And look at my hair, it's not cinnamon, it's orangutan orange. You made me look like a baboon!" The voice was shrill and nasty. Low and firm Glenda said something but Jillian couldn't make out the words. Taking a half step closer to the door Jillian raised her hand to knock, but hesitated and listened.

Glenda's customers were mostly stage performers — dancers and musicians who lived in clouds of vanity and had vivid pictures in their minds of the glory in which they perceived themselves.

"I should have never come to this worthless little salon," the customer yelled. "I should have brought my own makeup artist with me."

Glenda's voice rose. "You insisted on choosing your own colors." There was a short, glaring silence. "But, no matter, I'll clean all the makeup off you, and re-dye your hair gray — and you'll still walk out of here looking better than when you walked in four hours ago. But you'll never get another appointment with me."

"No," the customer screamed. "Tonight is the premier of *Les Cage Aux Folles*, and I'm starring as Albin."

"Take a better look at yourself in the mirror," Glenda said, "You'll make an absolutely striking Albin."

"Striking?" the man woman voice shrieked, "What's striking? I want to be stunning."

Jillian knocked twice, paused then twice more, paused again then opened the door.

"Excuse me, but did I hear something about *Les Cage Aux Folles*?"

"I'm starring as Albin, and it's opening night."

“I love *Les Cage Aux Folles*.” Jillian said. “You’re going to make an absolutely fabulous Albin.” Indirectly pointing at him she moved her index finger up and down while wagging her head in admiration. “Your colors are extraordinary.”

The customer beamed. “Thank you.”

Smiling, nodding, keeping herself firmly in the doorway, Jillian said. “Truly extraordinary. Did you pick those colors yourself?”

“Yes, I did.” He fluttered his fingers. “That round woman, what’s her name, Abilene, I would really of rather these violets she painted on my nails were a darker shade of purple.”

“Abilene’s left early, but if you’re unhappy I will remove all the polish and discount the price of the manicure.”

“I can’t very well go on stage with naked nails.”

“The salon closes in half-an-hour. Is there anything at all I can do to help?” Jillian asked as she remained firm in the doorway. “If you need to stay late let me know and I’ll make arrangements with security to hover by the salon door until you’re done.”

“What time is it? I need to go.”

Glenda glared at the customer.

Jillian nodded in continual wonder. “You look beautiful, absolutely stunning, you’re going to be the biggest hit ever. And I know I’ve already said this, but the colors you chose are perfect. Perfect for Albin, perfect for this beautiful spring evening, perfect for your skin tone.

His hair was flaming orange, and twisted and teased into a beehive spun a foot above his head. The stage makeup was creamy and flawless, his eyes were dusted in green with glitters and rimmed in black, his mouth was scarlet and his purple gown fit snugly. If Jillian didn’t know better she wouldn’t have recognized him as a man. “Is this your first visit to Rose City Salon?”

“Yes, I’m an actor based in San Francisco.”

“How did you find out about us?”

“Glenda was recommended by my agent. Now, I really must be going.”

“Then you don’t want me to do anything else?” Glenda asked.

“You’ve done enough.” He stepped toward the door.

Without budging Jillian continued to smile but her heart banged in her chest. What if to keep from paying he tried to rush the door and bowl her down? “Where will *Les Cage aux Folles* be playing? I would love to see you perform.”

“At the Peacock Lounge.”

“Oh,” Glenda said, “I know one of the dancers there.”

Shrugging and smirking the customer said, “I have to go now.”

Jillian kept smiling as her heart banged more frighteningly than before but she didn’t budge.

“You’re bill today is \$375,” Glenda said.

Jillian said, “Plus \$85 for your nails. Abilene told me you wanted to pay all at once.”

“That’s outrageous. \$460. Maybe, if I was in Paris, but not in Portland.”

“You can go anywhere in the world and not get as good quality beauty treatments as you get here,” Jillian said. “I’m sure it’s much like your acting.”

Glenda pointed at her pricing poster. “You can’t say you didn’t know what the charges would be.”

“I’m not paying you \$460.”

“Monique,” Jillian called without taking her eyes off the man woman. “Please call 911 and tell them we need a police officer here as soon as possible.” To the customer she said, “The jailhouse is only a couple blocks away, there’ll be an officer here in no time.”

“Bitches,” he hissed and pulled out a checkbook.

“We don’t accept out of town checks,” Glenda said. “I told you that on the telephone.”

Carrying down the hall was Monique’s voice talking to 911, “That’s right Rose City Salon, we’re in the lobby-mall of the Great Gray Building.” There was a pause then her voice rose, “Two officers will be here in three or four minutes? The sooner the better; yes, we think he may be violent.”

The customer slammed five, hundred dollar bills on the counter. “I’m not giving you a tip, so you’d better come up with some change in a hurry!”

Jillian stepped from the doorway into the room.

Counting the hundreds Glenda then turned and unlocked a drawer, and when she turned back around she had two twenties.

Grabbing his change, the customer rushed out.

Shaken, Jillian followed him as far as the reception, and watched through the windows as he flagged down and got in a Checkered Taxi. “Monique, we need to cancel 911.”

“I never really called them, I knew the threat would make him pay up.”

Glenda came out of her room, stood next to Monique and handed her \$85. “Abilene’s been leaving early a lot lately.”

Jillian didn’t say anything.

“Soon as we get cleaned up and closed I’m going out for a martini,” Glenda said.

“Anyone care to join me?”



“That sounds good, but I’ve got a Women In Business meeting, and I promised Fred I’d go straight home afterwards and cook him supper.”

“I sure don’t miss being married.”

Monique looked at her with a face that said *really*.

Glenda frown-sighed. “Ok, sometimes I do.”

“Fred’s been complaining we don’t spend enough time together,” Jillian said. She suspected Fred’s new need for attention was because Jack was occupied with a lust interest. Usually Jack’s lusts burned hot and fast, so she hadn’t seriously considered changing her schedule, but this interest, according to what few hints she could pick up, had been going on since the end of last summer.

Women In Business was an interesting group, and the evening’s presentation was on marketing and promotions, Jillian’s passion. Afterwards there was a fascinating question and answer session then she chatted with other business women to find out what they were doing to draw customers, and got some great ideas for cooperative marketing. When Jillian checked the time, she was shocked at how late it had gotten, and she was upset that Fred would be upset. Quickly she ran out and got in the car. About two miles from home she heard sirens then saw ambulances. After that traffic was stop and go. Half an hour and three blocks later she inched around two mangled cars in the middle of a busy intersection.

By the time she got home and parked in the garage next to Fred’s Caddie it was way past the time Fred liked his supper, and she was beat. The house was quiet and the lights were out. Thinking Fred was already in bed, and the only thing she had to do was snuggle in next to him made her feel warm and comforted.

Kicking off her shoes, she walked toward the night light at the foot of stairs, past the television room. All the other lights were out.

“Do you like to pretend you’re not married?” Fred’s voice, hard and accusing, came out of the dark.

Shocked and too tired to think well she stood in the doorway. “You knew where I was, and on the way home there was a terrible wreck.”

“I know that more and more you are entertaining yourself elsewhere than at home.”

“Aren’t you proud of the success of the salon?”

“You love that salon more than you love me.”

Overwhelmed by frustration and fatigue, she blurted, “If you had preferred for me to stay home then you shouldn’t have given me the salon.”

“I had thought you would run it for a couple of months then you would be sick of the work and the drama, and we could file bankruptcy on that business.

Stunned, her mouth fell open as the implications of what her husband was saying reached conscious censorship. Real anger surged through her. “You wanted me to fail!”

“I wanted you to be happy to stay home. Why did you think I bought you this house?”

“If you had wanted to buy a house for me,” she blurted, and what she had not said all the seven and nearly a half years of their marriage raged out of her. “You should have consulted me in advance.”

“You love this house.”

She had grown to hate the house. “What I love is you.”

“If you love me as much as you say, you’d be responsible to our marriage.”

Hands clenched so her nails dug mercilessly into her palms, Jillian forced herself to keep her mouth shut and to breathe deep. Every bit of self-training and reading on personal improvement and conflict management she'd ever done circled in her head.

Fred, jaw out in self-righteousness and indignation, watched her.

"I'm disappointed you feel this way," Jillian finally said, and went upstairs.

Friday when Jillian got home Fred wasn't there. The evening was warm, and late spring sun cast shadows across budding greenery. Inside the big house felt stale, so she opened windows and the sliding patio door to get a cross breeze. That was one of the differences between her and Fred — she always wanted the windows open, he always wanted them closed. When she repeated it in her mind it seemed embarrassingly petty, but in practice it was truly stifling, and while it never used to bother her it now made her increasingly infuriated. By the time she got to the last room in the suffocating house she was slamming the damn windows open.

On the patio, taking big breaths of fresh air, she started coals in the barbecue.

Fred was obsessive about the landscaping, and the backyard was fenced then ringed on the inside with arborvitae. There were roses, dahlias and iris, rhododendrons, azaleas, petunias and many other plants. It was beautiful, and the air smelled of their goodness, and she hardly ever spent time there. In the back corner was a grape arbor with a lovers' swing she and Fred had bought last summer and never sat in.

By the time the coals were glowing red it was after 8:00, but Fred still wasn't home. Jillian put the sausages on and wished she liked skinless, sauce less, chicken breast, but *blah*. Fred still had not complained out loud about her weight, but eventually how could he not? She

kept gaining. And gaining. Thirty pounds overweight, she'd read, was obese and she was probably way over that, but she embraced denial, and there was no way in blubber hell the scale was coming out of the garage.

Before she ate she checked the phone. There had been no calls or messages. Part of her was disappointed, and she told herself that's how she should feel. Another part of her was relieved. Every time she heard a car that sounded like the Caddie she held her breath hoping it would keep going, and when it did she felt guilty for being glad. After she ate she made up a plate for Fred and left it in the kitchen.

On the patio, in a chaise lounge with a throw blanket, Jillian reclined and marveled at the darkening sky. Next week would be summer solstice. Maybe she should have a Rose City Salon picnic the following Sunday. A couple month's ago at a Women In Business meeting she'd learned a few teambuilding games they could play. She also wanted to review tactics to get the most out of their time. Especially with Abilene, who recently had been talking as much as she worked, and not keeping her table organized so she lost time searching for what she wanted, which, she argued, gave her time to think about what the customer truly wanted. Customers loved her, so if they had to wait another ten minutes while she told them some fascinating story and meanwhile put an extra bird or mosaic in the detail of her nails, all the better. Jillian knew Abilene knew it wasn't cost effective, but sometimes Abilene looked at her with a quizzical smirk. Maybe her sugar daddy was as rich as she bragged.

Pulling the throw blanket around her shoulders, Jillian closed her eyes.

The bangs of shutting windows woke her but she didn't get up. Fred came through the sliding glass door and stood over her, and still she feigned sleep. When he went back into the

kitchen she assumed he was eating, then she heard him climb the stairs then the bedroom windows close.

After it had gotten too cold to stay outside with only the throw blanket, and she was sure Fred would be asleep, Jillian went upstairs and got in bed.

The air was still and stuffy, and Fred's sleep was fitful. She stared at the ceiling. Fred, breath caught in a snore, jerked and kicked, then released a gasp and shudder in her ear. Irritated, Jillian slid out of bed. In the guest room she closed the door, opened the window, got into bed and fell asleep.

Next morning Fred was up and had the coffee going when she got downstairs.

"Sorry about last night. Old man Noonan's son refuses to accept J&F's takeover of the manufacturing plant."

"It's been nearly two years since J&F bought out Noonan's." She off-handedly remarked as she poured her coffee.

"I invited Jack over for a barbecue this Sunday."

She nodded. "The following Sunday I'm having a picnic here for the team at Rose City Salon."

"You need to ask me these things first."

"You didn't ask me about having Jack over."

"There's a big difference between having Jack here and your entire freak show."

"If people are the least bit different than you they're freaks?"

"Least bit' doesn't qualify here."

"Everyone different than you is a freak?"

"That's not what I meant, but yes."

Silently, teeth clenched, she fried bacon. As the fat sizzled and popped, so did her frustration.

## Chapter Nine

Summer 2007

Late July heat baked the city, and each day seemed hotter than the one before. The days slid into August and the heat became visible, almost tangible as it rippled up from the tarmac, hung heavy in the air and pressed down on the top of one's head.

Saturday evening's drive home had been tedious and the car's air conditioning was inadequate so Jillian kept it on full blast. But, in stop and go traffic, her engine overheated. Turning off the air conditioner she put down the windows. By the time she got home and parked next to the Caddie sweat soaked the back of her blouse and plastered her against the seat. Inside the garage was an inferno, and she felt as if she was crossing the desert in the fifteen feet from the car to the kitchen door. Inside the house was cool with air conditioning, and immediately Jillian went into the television room where Fred had recreated Antarctic temperatures.

Looking away from whatever movie he was watching, Fred said, "Your face is as red as a tomato."

Trying to be fun, she blurted, "Beefsteak or roma?" and collapsed onto the couch.

"You're as round as a beefsteak tomato."

Hurt, Jillian counted to ten breathing slow and taking in the cold air. Sighing, she heaved herself up and went to sit in the formal living room until she shivered, then she went upstairs, showered, and put on loose, comfy sweat clothes.

Both of her days off, Sunday and Monday were too hot to go outside, and Jillian felt trapped in the big, cold house. It was Monday afternoon, and she'd been closeted with Fred since she'd gotten home Saturday evening. Sunday she'd suggested they go to Washington Square Mall, but he'd said he preferred to stay home, that being at the mall wasn't *quality* time together.

Now, standing in the kitchen, not feeling like cooking, she wished her weekend was over, that it was Tuesday morning and she was at the salon with her team, interacting with their customers, and feeling alive — part of something beautiful and progressive. Wandering into the television room she sat down on the couch and discontentedly stared at the television.

Without looking at her Fred asked, "What movie do you want to watch?"

"I don't care, whatever you want."

"That's what you been saying for months."

I don't want to watch another damn movie, is what she wanted to say, instead she said, "Actually, I'm getting hungry. How about going out to supper?"

"You need to cook those shrimp before they go bad."

"This morning I put them in the freezer."

"Go get them out and put them in a bowl of water so they thaw quickly."

"Fred," Jillian said, and even though she hadn't intended it, she heard the edge in her voice. "I'm about to go stir crazy."

Turning his glare full on her, his eyes shone a hardness she'd never seen before. He barked, "Going? You've been there for some time."

Shocked and hurt, Jillian snapped, "What is that supposed to mean?"

“Look at yourself! You don’t look anything like the woman I married. You look like . . . you look . . .” Abruptly he stood, and in a low, carefully announced tone, said, “You’ve let yourself get fat.” Turning, he walked out of the room and into the kitchen.

“What did you expect?” she called angrily. After floundering for a second she pushed off the couch and chased him into the kitchen. “All you want from me is to cook. Of course, I’ve gained weight.”

“Don’t blame your weight on me. You’ll notice I haven’t gained any weight. And, you’re wrong about what I want.”

“Tell me then, what would make you happy.”

“What I want is the beautiful, sexy, sweet woman I married. Not only have you gained an embarrassing amount of weight, you’ve turned into a self-righteous bitch. I’ve stopped worrying about you cheating on me, who would have you?” Slamming a cupboard he stormed out of the kitchen, down the hall and up the stairs.

Gutted, Jillian gaped after her husband then, emotionally stuck in the kitchen, she listened to him stomping and rummaging upstairs.

Noisily pulling a suitcase behind him, Fred came down the stairs. “You can keep the house, I bought it for you.”

“Maybe this monstrosity is part of our problem. You *know* should have asked me before you bought it.”

“You used to love this house.”

“It’s turned into a monster.”

“You mean me? I’ve turned into a monster?” Fred demanded. “Maybe it’s you who’s turned into a monster. Ever think about that?”



“Immediate gratification, that’s what you want,” she yelled. “Ever-confirmation of your manly man-ness.”

“Which you no longer do for me.” His hand slithered into his pocket then pulled out the keys. “Not in the least.” Holding up his keys he dangled them like a limp dick. Dragging his suitcase, clunkety-clunk over the threshold to the garage, Fred left.

## Chapter Ten

Autumn 2007

Outside was a perfect October day. Cool and dry the weather was mentally relaxing and physically stimulating. Serene in its best season, Portland was a harvest of produce, red and gold leaves swirled in the breeze, and fat birds and squirrels shouted warnings as they packed for winter.

Inside, Rose City Salon hummed with activity of busy stylists, manicurists, facial artists and happy customers. The front door was propped open and electric fans circulated autumn's air as the tinkling of little things blew and waved cheerily. At his hair booth Timmy, who'd finally, after more than two years, stopped talking about getting dumped by Daryl, and had long since regained his weight and health, was staring at his new cell phone. In the manicure corner Abilene chattered in her endless way that by now everyone had gotten used to — since nothing seemed to shut her up. Looking up, she called, “Timmy, you look befuddled. Who's leaving you messages?”

“I know if I see him I'll go crazy again.”

Tamzin, at her station, looked over the top of a facial she was giving and gave him a *don't you dare* squint.

Hardly noticing, Jillian, reeling and confused over a call she'd just gotten off of with her divorce attorney, walked down the front half of the salon.

Abilene, holding a customer's hand, looked up from painting and said, "Something's bothering the boss."

Pinched by aggravation Jillian forced a smile but kept walking. When she got to Jerome, she couldn't remember what she'd come to tell or ask him.

Studiously busy, Jerome's hands tucked squares of silver foil squares under a thin layer of hair, painted on dye, folded and smoothed. Then his right hand reached for another square, and his left hand re-dabbed the paintbrush. There was only a slight slowing in his hands when he looked up at Jillian then back to his work.

Recalling Fred's departure three months earlier, her mind went over and over possible innuendos and outcomes.

"Have you heard from him?" Jerome quietly asked.

Shaking her head, she kept a smile firmly plastered on her face.

Jerome's hands worked steadily.

Everyone kept smiling. Abilene never stopped humming.

Jillian breathed in the coolness of the salon, listened to the humming, tried to feel tranquility. But she was distraught. A popular song that came on the sound system triggered her memory of why she'd come to find Jerome. "Bobby Dean and the Jamsters are going to be in town."

"I saw that," Jerome said.

"Bobby Dean's spokesperson called and asked if you would go to the show-trailer and do Bobby Dean's hair."

That stopped his hands, and quickly he looked up as a smile tried to break his serious, beautiful face. "You're kidding!"

“I’m not,” Jillian said. “He said to tell you Bobby Dean’s sure you have a busy schedule, but he’d like for you to do his hair tomorrow evening, before their show. The spokesperson left a telephone number and asked that you please call.”

“Wow,” Timmy said.

Jerome had resumed painting, folding, smoothing. “You should come with me.” For a second he looked at Jillian and fluttered his eyes. “Make sure I don’t get raped.”

Abilene hooted and called, “Jerome, you aren’t a spring rooster anymore. Besides, you don’t know which way Bobby Dean swings. I’ve read he only pretends to be gay. I’m the one who ought to go with you. I haven’t had any strange action in months. A self-respecting woman’s got to mix it up.”

Glenda, who’d come to stand by Timmy, said, “Bobby Dean’s really a woman.”

Customers in the salon either turned red in embarrassment or laughed out loud.

Jerome said, “Jillian, I’d like for you to come with me because if it weren’t for you I wouldn’t have a reputation.”

“You’re the one with the talent.”

“But who would know if it weren’t for your promotions and marketing? Besides, it’ll be a fun night.”

Timmy called, “Jillian, you should go, you need some fun.”

Glenda said, “I agree. Jillian needs some fun.”

Standing over the beauty chair, Jerome finished painting and folding.

“I’ll get you settled under a hair dryer,” Jillian said to Jerome’s customer, and escorted her to the back lounge.

When Jillian got to the reception counter, Jerome was telling Monique that if she made the call he would trade her a hairstyle. But, she argued, he already owed her two hairstyles so she bargained for a cocktail.

“Fine,” Jerome said and waited.

On the telephone Monique listened then repeated, “About six thirty?”

Jerome nodded then bobbed his head at Jillian who nodded.

“What?” Monique asked. “How many people?”

Flashing all ten of his fingers, Jerome grinned.

“Yes, we also do nails. Yes, we do makeup. Okay, let me ask around. Can I call you back?” Monique got off the phone and said to Jerome and Jillian, “They want to have a total makeover party.”

“Who’re ‘they’?” Jerome asked with a little wiggle of his shoulders.

“The spokesperson said counting Bobby Dean and the Jamsters there would be seven people needing to be ready to go on stage by nine.”

“I’ll go,” Abilene called.

Tamzin said, “I thought you said you already had plans for the evening.”

“That elitest, rich, boy friend of mine can spend his time counting his money until I get around to him.”

In his high-pitched way Timmy laughed so hard he about fell over.

Monique said, “Timmy, you should go.”

Tamzin said, “Not unless he promises, crosses his heart hope to die, stick a rat tailed comb in his eye, he will never return a call or a text, absolutely never, never see that Daryl creep again.”

Obediently and with sincerity, Timmy recited, “I have absolutely no intention of seeing him or returning his messages.”

“Then what was that look in your eye?” Tamzin demanded.

“I was wishing I could figure out some way to get even with him.”

Patting him on the back, Glenda said, “When you get that figured out let me know. I’d like to wreak some havoc on Jack.”

Monique said, “I need to call back Bobby Dean’s spokes person. What’s our plan?”

#

As Jillian was greeted by Bobby Dean the first thing that ran through her mind was that maybe Glenda hadn’t been kidding. What he presented himself as on stage and in the media — a loud singing hunk of aggressive masculinity — was little like the sweet natured, epicene soul standing in front of her offering his hand to shake, asking if he could get her anything, and quietly expressing how he wanted the evening to progress and the look he desired.

“Wow,” Monique said, “This is a way-nifty show trailer!”

“Isn’t it though,” one of the Jamsters exclaimed.

The back area was set up as a lounge with mini-bar and kitchenette, and the remainder was an elaborate dressing and grooming space.

Jerome, studying pictures of past perfect stage hair, looked up and at Bobby Dean, do you usually wear a wig?”

Going to a large cupboard and pulling it open to reveal about two dozen wigs, Bobby Dean said, “You can use any of these you think is necessary, as long as when I go on stage there’s something unique and extraordinarily outrageous about my look.”

“Actually,” said a Jamster who was leaning against a wall, “that’s true for all of us.”

From the couch, another Jamster said, “There are only a couple of us who wear wigs, for the rest of us you’ll have to deal with our real hair.”

Monique, looking around, asked, “Do you keep your outfits in that trailer parked along side this one?”

Bobby Dean nodded. “I’ve already listed what we’re wearing for tonight’s performance, and those outfits are being pulled right now.”

“I’m going to need to see your colors before I can match your nail paint,” Abilene announced. “And Tamzin and Glenda aren’t going to be able to do your facial tones . . . “

“You can get started on any chips or cracks that need filling,” Monique said. “Tamzin, why don’t you start applying stage foundation?”

Smiling, Jillian explained, “Monique’s our organizer.”

“Thank goodness someone’s here to organize us,” Bobby Dean said.

“Knock, knock,” came the voice of a man as he opened the outside door. Behind him were two others — each with their arms full of spangled and gaudy stage outfits.

Jillian heard Timmy’s laugh as he and Jerome were being hovered over by four Jamsters.

“You need to be ready to go on stage by nine?” Glenda asked as she glanced at the wall clock.”

“Absolutely no later than nine,” Bobby Dean said, and looked at Monique.

For the next two hours everyone was all business; it was a rush of transformation from the look of folks seen everyday on the street, to the look of the famous performer and his ensemble. In fine fettle, Monique kept everyone on task and there was barely a wasted second. Abilene hummed constantly but very quietly and she didn’t say anything particularly loud or obnoxious, for which Jillian was inwardly grateful. Working in tandem, Tamzin and Glenda

applied cosmetics thickly and vibrantly, and at Glenda's insistence, they used only Tamzin's mixtures. Jerome spent nearly an hour on a wig and getting it set on Bobby Dean's head, while at the same time Abilene painted his nails. When they were finished he looked especially outrageous.

"This is the best stage presentation I've ever had," Bobby Dean said, and threw his arms around Jerome.

Surprised, Jerome shot Jillian a look that asked *what do I do now*, and stiffly patted Bobby Dean on the back.

Abilene's nostrils flared in silent amusement.

Meanwhile, Timmy had outdone himself with a hair-do on the lead Jamster that made her look as if she belonged in the court of Louis XIV or on set with Marge Simpson.

There was a craze of dressing and last second touches then they were all filing out of the show-trailer. Bobby Dean and the Jamsters went in two limousines to the auditorium, and, having been given special passes, Jillian and team packed into another limousine.

Late that night, standing on the sidewalk in front of the salon, Jillian looked at her team and began to laugh. "Did we just walk out of a hurricane?"

Grinning, Jerome, in a precious moment of emotion, emphatically said, "I would do it again in a second."

Timmy said, "I am exhausted."

Seemingly perplexed "One of the Jamsters asked me out for breakfast tomorrow morning," Tamzin said as if

"Man or woman?" Monique wanted to know.



Tamzin shrugged. "Not a clue."

"You're going to go aren't you?" Glenda asked.

"Yeah! Chris was super-sweet and sincere."

"Which one was Chris?" Abilene asked.

"The one who wanted the aqua blue nail paint," Monique answered.

Two weeks later Jillian took a call from Bobby Dean's agent, who said she would like to hire the talent at Rose City Salon for other gigs she placed in Portland, starting with one next month.

"That'd be wonderful," Jillian said.

"Chris, one of the Jamsters, was showing me the Bijou Magazine photographs from, heck, Valentine's two-and-a-half years ago. After that the name of your salon kept circling in my head so I started flipping through my magazines, and there you were, Rose City Salon, credited for having done the hair, nail and cosmetic needs for last month's Mercantile ad in Portland Magazine, and then I saw your name as the beauty team for the Trailblazers' cheerleaders, and a few other places too. You do a really good job of promoting Rose City Salon."

"Thank you," Jillian said. "It's a constant effort."

"You don't need to tell me."

"No, I guess not." Jillian laughed. "My team and I want to again tell, Bobby Dean and the Jamsters what a wonderful time we had that evening."

"I'll pass the message along. I'll also tell my associates who place gigs in Portland about your salon."

“That’d be great. If you ever come to Portland give me a call, and I’ll compliment you to a free day of salon pampering.”

The agent laughed in pleasure. “I’ve been in this business a long time, and it used to be Portland was someplace no one really wanted to go to, but more and more the bigger names are asking to be booked there.”

#

When Jillian worked on the fourth quarter for 2007 bookkeeping she was amazed at the profit the salon was bringing in. Reminiscing about how proud Fred would have been of her she felt a pang of sorrow, but it didn’t last long. Thinking of improvements she could do on the salon and maybe eventually expand into the neighboring space was empowering.

## Chapter Eleven

January 2008

Outside, winter wind howled and drove frozen rain crashing against the condominium building. Inside, Jack, warm under new flannel sheets, couldn't sleep. From his first pecker-woody he has sought sex, and pretty much gotten everything he'd asked for. Give women something they wanted, he'd always found, and in their nurturing souls they'd justify giving back. It was that simple. Women liked handsome, well-dressed, smooth talking men who weren't afraid to spend money. Like him! Urbane, handsome and wealthy he'd caught and released gorgeous women — blondes, brunettes, red heads with perky breasts, flat stomachs and long, lean legs. Now, at 52, he liked to amuse himself with thinking about all the beauties he's caressed, probably more than a hundred. Never before, not for a girl friend or any of his three wives had he been monogamous, and it's not like he *wants* to be monogamous now. But he can't help himself. Abilene is the opposite of everything he'd ever thought he'd wanted in a partner, and to his own mystification, even after over two-and-a-half years together, smelling her on his sheets still made him moan with desire. In fact, he wanted her more now than ever before, more than he'd ever wanted any woman, including Glenda.

In the morning he dialed Abilene's number. When she didn't answer he left her a voice message, rolled over in bed, punched his pillow in frustration, tried to get comfortable, couldn't, and got up.

From the shower he heard the phone ring so he dashed, dripping, to answer. "Abilene!"

"What?" It was Fred. "Who?"

Alarmed, Jack barked, "Who what?"

"Who's name did you just say?"

"I didn't say anyone's name. What are you talking about?"

"I thought I heard you say 'Abilene'."

"Who?"

"You know, that canker blossom Jillian's got doing manicures."

"If you believe I'm fucking that woman I'm not sure we can be friends anymore."

For a second there was silence. Then, "That thought never entered my mind. I had rather thought you were using her as a spy."

Forcing himself to laugh light-heartedly, Jack said, "For what do I owe the honor of your call this blizzardy, wintery morning?"

"Old man Noonan's son is threatening to file another lawsuit."

"I'm sick of his righteous bullshit. His father was a bad gambler and payment was due. Are all father and son teams as ignorant as they are? Hell, now I know why I never had children."

"He's claiming we falsified the accounting and used cronyism."

"He has no idea what he's putting his neck into," Jack yelled. "But he's going to get a damn tight lesson." Pausing, he caught his breath. "What time are you going to be in the office?"

"I'm leaving now to meet with Yohay, and I'll be in after that."

"What's up with Yohay?"

“He wants to talk about finalizing my divorce from Jillian,” Fred said. “I don’t even know if it’s worth getting married anymore, divorce is so damned expensive.”

“We can always yank the salon out from underneath Jillian. It’s making great money.”

“I’ll ask him to find a time when we can talk about this new Noonan’s problem.”

Jack’s call waiting blinked at him, and called identification told him it was Abilene.

“Listen, I’ve got to go.” Quickly, without waiting for Fred to say ‘good-bye’, he punched the buttons on his phone. “Hey, babe.”

“What’s going on?” Abilene asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Why’d you asked me to call you?”

His voice dripped honey. “I was thinking of you and wanted to say good morning.”

“I’ll bet I know what you were thinking,” she said.

“You know me pretty good.”

Abilene smirk-laughed.

“How about supper tonight?” Jack asked.

“Ohh,” she cooed, “I thought on Wednesdays you always had supper with your buddies before going to play poker.”

“I don’t need to have supper with them. Call me tonight between 5:30 and 6:00.

“I have to go, one of my customers just walked through the door.”

“I can’t wait to see you again.”

That time her laugh was full and throaty.

In the background Jack heard Jillian call for Abilene.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Abilene said and hung up.

Jillian the bitch, Jack murmured in his mind, needs to learn to stay out of my way.

Before going to the Great Gray Building Jack drove out to Noonan's Manufacturing for the sake of making an appearance, and pretending to care about the dilapidated state of the reception, employee lounge and upstairs office area — all of which had been bitterly complained about. Honestly, he could care less. A handful of the employees had been there since old man Noonan had built the business, and mostly they scowled at Jack, but as long as they did their work he planned to continue ignoring them. When J&F took-over, Jack had thought there would have been a lot of employee turn-around but there was a core team that had a perverse loyalty and never moved on even though there were plenty of jobs available. It was as if those core employees believed someone was going to come along and treat them good again.

While there, Jack got the upstairs office and file cabinet keys from Receptionist Ratchett. Looking at them, he said, "Make little tags for each of these, would you? I don't want to get up there and have to fumble around trying to figure out which key goes to what."

Without saying a word she snatched them away from him.

Waiting for her to get the job done, he went into the employee lounge. There was no denying the place needed remodeling.

After Noonan's he stopped for lunch then went shopping and bought himself a couple sweaters. For Abilene he bought earrings. By the time he got to the J&F office in the Great Gray Building it was late afternoon. Fred was concentrating on year-end accounting and tax preparation. Jack made some phone calls, including to Daryl — who had another business owner who'd gotten in over his head in gambling debt. Which, of course, he'd seen coming because of

the Wednesday night spoiler. Promptly at 4:00 Jack left the office, took the elevator down, and before going to his car, walked by the Rose City Salon windows. Abilene was painting a customer's nails but she did look up to give him a quick smile. He winked at her.

At home with a rum and coke and the music on, happy thinking about her and anticipating the phone call, Jack crooned and danced in his socks across his parquet floors.

Abilene didn't call. At six he called her again but she didn't answer so he hung up without leaving a message. An hour-and-a-half later, at supper with Fred and Yohay, he ordered rib steak cooked medium, asparagus and garlic mashed potatoes, but the boring waitress said there wasn't any asparagus and that it came with broccoli, which he hated so he told her to leave off the vegetables. When he got his steak it was well done and piled between it and the potatoes was broccoli, which leaked juice that contaminated his other food. After a couple bites he pushed the plate away and ordered a rum and coke.

As they got ready to leave the restaurant Fred threw down his standard five dollar tip, Yohay, who thought the waitress was excellent, gave her a double tip, which still wasn't much, and Jack didn't give anything.

Yohay laughed. "A rich man like you being a cheap bastard."

"I'm not as rich you are," Jack retorted. "How can I be when I have to pay your attorney fees?"

"If it weren't for me," Yohay argued, "you wouldn't have nearly so much money to pay me with." Uncharacteristically he threw more money on the table. "Think of it as a consolation against what I'm going to win from you tonight."

"You're wrong there," Jack said.

Amused, Fred shook his head. "I'll meet you two at the Blue."

Hungry, ornery and horny for Abilene, Jack arrived at the Blue Hiatus ready to take money off someone, anyone. But, like his other appetites, it was not his day.

At midnight Fred, same as every Wednesday, got ready to leave. As Jack watched him pick his chips off the table he said, “You should stay and let me take those winnings back off you.”

“I don’t have until next Wednesday,” Fred said.

“Then loan me a couple hundred, and I’ll pay you in cash tomorrow.”

Counting chips Fred said, “Maybe I should save you some time and hand these directly to Yohay.”

“Shut up,” Jack said.

Yohay laughed and laughed.

A couple hours later, when Jack went upstairs to cash in his one remaining chip, Daryl said, “I’ve got a new gal I can have meet you in a room if you want.”

Jack checked his cell phone, but there was no message from Abilene. To Daryl he said, “I’ll take her.”

In room nine Jack, sitting on the bed, watched the woman strip. She was beautiful, exactly what he’d always preferred — pale and voluptuous with long legs. Didn’t do a thing for him. Listlessly he fondled himself. She rubbed and teased him — nothing. Finally he told her to get on her knees and give him a blowjob.

After leaving Blue Hiatus he drove by Abilene’s apartment. The lights in her unit were off as he felt they should be, but her piece-of-junk car wasn’t in its designated space under the carport. It was after three in the morning, where was she?



The next day Jack drove to the Great Gray Building and circled until he got a parking spot where he could see in the windows of Rose City Salon. There she was, busy at her manicure table. Feeling needy and stupid he restarted the car and re-parked under the building before going upstairs to J&F's offices. All afternoon he waited for Abilene to call, but she never did. Until late he stayed at his desk plotting acquisitions and pestering Fred with questions about how much money they were making, as if he were worried — the economy was booming, *booming*, and J&F was too.

By six Abilene still hadn't called. He called her. No answer. He hung up. Half an hour later he called again, no answer.

On his way home, hungry and overall dissatisfied, he drove-through Burgerville then he drove to her apartment building, and dashboard dined. Her piece-of-junk car was there, and the lights were on in her unit. This time when he called she answered. He said, "I'm parked outside."

"Outside where?"

"Your building."

"Did I invite you?"

"Do you need to invite me for me to come over?"

"Yes," she spat. "Have I ever shown up at your home uninvited, unannounced?"

"I wouldn't mind if you did." There was a long pause and Jack could hear himself breathing, and knew when in the past any other woman had done that he'd been pissed. He wanted her to ask him in, to lay in the comfort of her body, to forget everything else and delve into the vastness of her joy.

"I'm tired."

"Perfect," he said, "I am too. We can watch a little television and go to bed."

“Not tonight. I’ll call you . . . ”

“Abilene . . . “ Panicked she would hang up he heard himself say, “Tomorrow’s Friday night.”

“Mmm, hmmm.”

“I’d like to take you to dinner at Hook’s on the Columbia.” There was another long pause, what was the problem? Many times she’d mentioned she wanted him to take her there.

“I’ll make reservations for two at eight.”

“Alright. Pick me up at 7:30. See you tomorrow evening.”

Dazed, Jack pulled slowly out of the apartment parking lot and onto Burnside. What had he been thinking? Too many of his longtime pals went to Hook’s!

Holding a dozen red roses Jack knocked on Abilene’s door. She was dressed in a tight gown of midnight blue sequins sparkling in the light. Scents of amber and musk drew him close as her heat resonated into him. No one had ever sustained his interest as Abilene did. Painted peacock feathers swept back from her eyes and fanned over her temples. Ready to go, she held her purse, coat and evening gloves. One look at him and her eyes squinted.

“You look beautiful,” he said and handed her the roses. With his other hand he took her hand and held it up and out to get a better look at her.

“Our reservation is at eight?” she asked.

“You look so beautiful.” Leaning forward he tried giving her a kiss.

Evading him, she said, “You’re not very dressed up.”

“Invite me in for a minute.”

“I wasn’t thinking to be having anyone in.”

“But Abilene, baby, how can I eat when all I think about is you.” Squeezing her hand he purred in his most charismatic voice, “I feel as if you’ve been putting me off.”

Setting the roses down inside she stepped outside and closed the door behind her. “I need something to eat and I’ve always wanted someone special to take me to Hook’s. I hear they have an aquarium full of big lobsters for people to chose from and eat.”

Jack didn’t say anything until after they were both in the car, buckled in and slowly cruising down Burnside. “I couldn’t get us a reservation at Hook’s.”

Instantly, visibly perturbed, she stared at him. “Couldn’t get a reservation?”

“I called and they said they weren’t taking any more reservations.”

“Don’t they have a bar we can wait at until there’s a table available?”

“Darling,” Jack said. “You know I hate waiting.” Reaching across the consul he took her hand. “Where else would you like to go?”

Fixedly she stared out the front window and absolutely did not smile or even look at him.

“You know this side of town better than me, I mean I don’t know this side of town at all, so if you have any places you’d like to go I’d sure like to know.”

“Hook’s.”

“Please?” Softly his hand gave hers another squeeze. “Pick somewhere else.”

Stolidly her eyes stared ahead.

Into the night Jack drove and in his mind he rehearsed the horror of being recognized with her in an obvious romantic situation. *Romance!*? No. This was purely lust. Abilene wasn’t his type at all. Twice he peeked sideways at her.

She didn’t look back. “I was all ready to watch the river and eat lobster.”

After repeating that over in his mind a couple times an idea finally came, and withdrawing his hand from hers he started driving with purpose. They crossed the I-5 Bridge into Vancouver, Washington and stopped at Captain's Seafood Shanty with a view of the Columbia.

It was a jeans and casual shirt place where the wait staff wore red paisley kerchiefs around their necks — way below the status of Abilene's midnight blue sequined dress, and her presence was pointed at and murmured about. Some smiled indulgently. Abilene scowled furiously. "Look," she pointed "those people over there are taking pictures."

Turning to look, Jack said, "They're having a birthday party, that's what they're taking pictures of, not us."

Boiled lobster dipped in melted butter, deep fried prawns and squid, crab legs and baked potatoes with all the toppings, creamy and sloppy coleslaw, piles of cheese rolls, dessert of turtle pie oozing caramel syrup and topped with extra hot fudge and whipped cream; they ate it all.

"River's dramatic tonight," Jack said. "It's all winter fierce and dark outside." Leaning over he kissed Abilene. "And we're so cozy and wonderful inside."

"You make me a fool coming here. And look at you, dressed casual, you never intended to take me to Hook's." Squinting her eyes at him she took a big spoonful of pie then her tongue slid out and slowly licked the hot fudge and whipped cream off her lips.

Getting a hard-on, he shifted in his chair.

Abilene leaned toward him and reaching under the table whispered, "In my younger years I would have spilled this entire plate in your lap and walked out on your pompous ass." Using a pouty lip, she enticed him to come to her as she leaned further forward.

"I'm glad you've learned better ways," he said and lingered after they kissed.

Her eyes blinked as she sat back, drank from her Mai Tai and contemplated him.

“What did I do wrong now? That was a compliment . . . “

Again leaning forward, this time she smiled. “Darling, excuse me, please? Do you mind?”

“Of course not. I’ll wait here for you.”

“I’d like it if you did.”

From the depths of her cleavage arose warm amber and musk that further stirred Jack’s lust. Before she left she kissed him again on the mouth.

As she walked away midnight blue sequins sashayed and sparkled.

After his drink was finished he became irritated. How long did it take to pee?

Approaching, the waitress looked at him funny. “Can I get you anything else?”

“I’d like for you to go check on my friend in the ladies room.”

“The lady in the dark blue gown?”

“In the sequins.”

“She left in a taxi.”

“What?” Jumping up Jack was stunned, insulted. Furious!

From outside the apartment building it didn’t look like Abilene was home, but that’s what she’d have him believe. Without hesitation Jack stomped up the stairs so they shook and reverberated. *Knock, knock, knock*. He waited. *Knock, knock, knock*. It was close to midnight.

*Bam, bam, bam*. He pounded on her door.

Behind Jack a door flung open. “She’s not home, asshole.”

Snarling, Jack turned to face the man. But when he had to look up to a mean face and deep, chiseled muscles, his confidence fled.

“Get out.”

Backward Jack stepped then turned and walked away. Something hard whizzed past his ear, and when it skidded and bounced on the cement he saw it was a golf ball.

“Next time I hear one peep out of you it hits your head.”

Jack walked faster. Getting in his car he glanced at Abilene’s window. And saw . . . did he . . . ? Was she laughing at him? Scared off, that was him. Was that body builder across the hall servicing her when she wasn’t with him? Why did that man say she wasn’t home? The bitch. Never again would he speak to her. Humiliation burned and he writhed in agony. As he drove he fantasized her running out to wave him down, crying, begging him to take her back. He would show her what rejection was all about.

First he stopped at the liquor store for a bottle of rum then at Blue Hiatus to get an eight-ball of cocaine from Daryl. Home, on the couch, he drank and stewed and snorted, and putting on a porno video he tried to get himself off but all he could think about was his anger against Abilene. Deep into the night he drank and stewed and snorted. When the bottle was empty and the cocaine gone he kicked over the coffee table.

Stumbling and lurching he got out the bourbon he kept for Fred then, drinking straight from the bottle, he raged around in his ultra-fancy condo.

Where was he and what smelled? It took him a couple seconds to recognize his bathroom floor, and that he’d puked and pissed himself. Groaning, both fearing and wishing he’d puke again, head hot and floating, Jack scabbled into the shower.

As he sat on the marble bench, in the back of the shower, with his elbows on his knees, and his head in his hands, hot water poured over him, steam rose, and his sinuses ran. Deep down

inside him a cynical chuckle rose, yeah, this was living. It'd been since the confidence of his audacious youth, fueled by natural good looks and charisma, and a wealthy family, that he'd provoked a woman to walk out on him. Pride swelled in him for the daring roles he'd played, and that only strong emotions drove that kind of risky behavior.

But, that wasn't what was happening now. It was she who hadn't been returning calls, and it was he who, broken hearted had wasted himself last night and woken alone, on his bathroom floor. *Love!* No, not love, he could never love someone so utterly outside his status.

For a long time he'd waited for her — he remembered that much. She'd stroked him then excused herself. There was a time when she couldn't get enough of him and every thing he did for her was rewarded with sex. There was a time when no woman could get enough of him. When the phone rang his heart pounded with hope. Wanting to hurry, but trying not joggle his head, he dripped his way to the phone.

It was Fred. Disappointed, Jack didn't answer.

Back under the hot shower he resolved Abilene would have to take care of herself; he was done with her. Why should he have to feel stupid and jilted? *Bitch!*

For the rest of that day, Saturday, Jack stayed inside, barely moving from couch to kitchen, and not talking to anyone except his housekeeper, who he'd asked to come in special. Three times Fred called, once Yohay and a few others. Jack didn't answer, didn't even listen to their messages. Most of the morning he stayed on his couch watching television and movies, and feeling bad. Cheerios with milk and lots of sugar was the only thing he felt like eating all afternoon. When the housekeeper wanted to vacuum and plump-up the couch, Jack moved to his recliner, and soon fell asleep.

Everything was dark. Where was he? Peripherally he glimpsed the LED on his television. And when he looked down the chair moved. Carefully rolling his neck, he decided his headache wasn't so bad, so he slowly lowered the footrest, took a couple deep breathes and stood up. What should he have to eat? Switching on lights he shuffled into the kitchen, looked in the fridge, opened all the cupboards and searched the pantry. Munching wasn't what he wanted, but neither did he want to cook. The clock on the microwave said eleven, eleven. Sum of Asia would still be cooking. First he called for take out then he called Blue Cab for delivery.

Sunday afternoon he woke knowing all he had to do was give Abilene something to keep her coming back for more. Number one on his list was to lease her a new car so every month she would be acutely aware of what he was doing for her.

Monday evening Jack arranged for two salespeople from the car dealership to knock on Abilene's door, show her the car and let her take it for a drive then, parked in front of her apartment, hand her a note he'd prepared which explained that if she wanted it to give him a call. After handing her the note, the salespeople were to bring the car to his condo and park it in the space next to his Porsche.

When she called, Jack let it ring four times then with a lazy, non-concerned voice, he answered. "Hello?"

"How did you know I wanted just that car?" Abilene asked.

"Why don't you come over tomorrow evening and we'll talk about it."



By the tone of her voice and agreeableness of her words Jack knew he had done the right thing. But, to be sure, after he hung up with Abilene he called Daryl and arranged to have someone go to her apartment building parking lot and pour sugar into the gas tank of her old car.

Tuesday business was hot and everything went Jack's way. The people he needed to talk to were available, and agreeable, and profits soared into the future. Fred, with his calculator, worked and reworked the numbers until the right answers rolled and clicked into the right places. By mid-afternoon, Fred had finessed the accounting on a previously shaky aspect of their newest acquisition, and by quitting time Jack had that contract committed to by all parties.

Fred started shutting down from the workday. "Are we still on to meet the contractors in the morning at Noonan's?"

"Definitely," Jack said. "We need to get the employee lounge area remodeled before the state comes for their annual inspection."

"I think we should take the contractors suggestion and get the upper level office space remodeled too."

"What's the point in that?"

"If worse comes to worse we can always move our J&F office over there," Fred said.

"That's never going to happen."

"Of course not. Actually, I think we should rent it out. That's a big area up there, and old man Noonan had good taste. It just needs some updates, then we'll lease it out as fully furnished office space" Fred smirked, "And for the right amount of money Receptionist Ratchett can offer secretarial support. I don't think she works hard enough for what we pay her."

Soon as Fred was gone Jack checked his phone messages to find, as he expected, a message from Abilene that yes, she would be over that evening but that her old car wouldn't start and she'd had to take the bus to work that morning and she didn't know how she could get to his place. Calling back, he said he'd send a Checkered Taxi for her. After a while he called Mazzi's and ordered their suppers to pick up on his way home.

By dessert she was eating out of his hand, licking his fingers. "Is the car really mine to keep?" she asked. "Because I really need it. Like I told you, my old piece-of-junk wouldn't start . . ."

"The lease is in my name, but it's yours to use, and I thought you might also like a smart phone. All you have to do is be nice to me."

"But Jackie, darling, I am nice to you." Cozy and petting him, Abilene continued, "When am I not nice to you?"

"For one, when you don't return my calls."

"But, Jackie . . ."

"That can't happen any more." He kissed and stroked her. "Not if you want the car and the phone."

"I see," she said and batted her eyelashes at him. "I know how to play by those rules."

"It's a game we both win at."

"That's right." She reached her hand into his pants. "Win, win."

Three weeks later, lying in bed, Abilene said, "Jillian's such a bitch and an idiot. Honestly, I could run that salon so much better than her."

Propping his himself on his elbow, Jack asked, "What would you do different?"

“To begin with I’d make Jerome pay station lease same as everyone else.”

“Wait.” Jack demanded. “Jerome doesn’t pay a lease?”

“No. It’s some deal he and Jillian worked out years ago to bring customers into the salon. I think originally it was Glenda’s idea.”

“Glenda?” Jack snapped. “What’s that unnatural bitch got to do with anything?”

“I bring in as many customers as Jerome does, why don’t I get free lease?”

“Sugar plum, you’re absolutely right about Jerome not paying lease. That’s got to stop. Tell me, what else would you change?”

“Jillian always claims that the salon’s profits could be better and she’s always working to bring in more customers so she can lease more space, but that’s ignorant, I don’t want more manicurists in there. And too, Jillian wastes so much money. For instance, she pays for someone to clean the door and windows, which Monique should do, and to sweep the floors, which the hair stylists should do. Three years I’ve been working there, and I’ve seen her make bad decision after bad decision.”

“Ok.” He fondled her breasts. “Do you really think you can run the salon better than Jillian?”

“I know so.”

Falling back, Jack laughed. “Come show me how much you want it.”

“What have you got to do with it?”

“Who do you think . . . “ He almost said *who really owns the salon*, but changed his mind. “Don’t forget Jillian’s soon-to-be-ex-husband, my business partner, is half owner of the salon.”

Laughing, Abilene twisted Jack up, turned him topsy-turvy and blew off his head.

Later, after she'd gone, Jack laughed at how easy it was to control women.

The rest of the week was business and daily lunches at Grayburn's Grill with Fred and Yohay. Wednesday was poker night, and Jack came out almost even. Winning always made him happy, but knowing Abilene would visit him at home Thursday and Friday took his mind off everything else.

## Chapter Twelve

The courtroom was over warm and stuffy, and Fred's attorney, Yohay, coldly but sharply mocked Jillian's attorney.

Nauseas, head about to explode, Jillian felt as if it wasn't truly her sitting in the court listening to arguments over who owned what. In hindsight she saw how stupid she'd been — all the things she hadn't wanted to believe so she'd ignored the hints.

The judge had a pale face with silver hair and a corpuscle-fat nose. He cleared his throat and tapped his gable, and in a monotone voice read his decision. "In that Ms. Ridge has been unable to provide documentation she compensated J&F Inc. for Rose City Salon or to convince the court she was gifted the salon as a first anniversary present, management of Rose City Salon will be transferred from Jillian Ridge and returned to J&F, Inc.

"Ms. Ridge will have until the last day of the month to vacate herself and all of her personal belongings from the salon. By that same time, Mr. Liciano will remove all his belongings from the marital home. Henceforth, Ms. Ridge will be the sole owner of said real estate."

Jillian's nails dug into her palms. That damn house. Heat steamed up her face and into her head, and squinting her eyes at Fred she waited for him to look at her but he didn't. Coward! Fred was a liar and a coward.

Outside the courthouse was already dark and she let the cold, winter air soak into her senses. Standing at the corner, uncertain of which way to cross, she watched Fred and Yohay get into a Blue Cab with darkened windows and drive away.

The light changed and other pedestrians surged around as Jillian consciously placed one foot in front of the other. Fifth Avenue ribboned ahead of her, and it seemed she walked a long, long time then she was opening the door of the salon and the jingle of the welcome bell was surreal, and after the sting of harsh elements the warmth was shocking. She raised her eyes. There was Monique straight-ahead, behind the reception counter, staring.

Jillian slowed, but didn't stop walking. "Please hold my calls. I need to be alone." In her office she closed the door and without taking her coat off sat down on the pineapple brocade loveseat. Slumping onto her side she put her head on the armrest and curled her feet up. Feeling almost comatose she heard a peculiar hush then Monique and others' voices low and grave.

So, this was the end. Eight years Jillian had been, or believed she'd been the owner. What would life be without her team and interactions in the salon?

Someone tapped then slid an envelope under the door. It was from Yohay's law office. Inside were a letter signed by Yohay and a directive regarding Rose City Salon that was signed by Jack and Fred for J&F.

Astonished, Jillian read, re-read and stared at the directive then, because she didn't want to break down and cry, she laughed. Probably she should be deeply angry but there was something twisted, and she was too mentally beat to care enough to figure it out. Dropping the letter and directive onto the floor she slumped back over and re-curled her feet up onto the couch.

When she heard the flurry of the last customer leave she forced herself to sit up. Taking a couple minutes to collect her wits she sucked up her courage then stepped out of the office.

Everyone's head turned her way and stared expectantly. Bluntly she made her announcement, "I've lost the salon."

*What! No! How can that be?* Several people murmured.

"According to J&F, and they've convinced the court, I have never been the owner. They will be taking over on the first of next month." She waved the letter, "From that date forward Abilene will be the manager."

Timmy stopped breathing. He was standing next to Tamzin, whose face was neon shock. She whispered in his ear. Gloomily he nodded, and after a few seconds began to hiccup.

Jillian continued, "I'll be using the next two weeks to clear out my personal belongings and take my name off all accounts. I want each of you to do what is right for your own situations."

Timmy hiccupped again, high-pitched and oddly eerie.

Abilene hoisted herself off the couch. "After I'm manager you can expect many changes. I'll review each of your lease and contractor agreements," she stared at Jerome, "and make necessary adjustments." Then she left.

Jerome, Timmy, Tamzin, Monique and Glenda stayed around to hug and commiserate with Jillian, and worry about the future. Timmy's face was eerily pale. A couple times Jillian was sure he had something to say to her. Finally he blurted, "This one needs to come back on Daryl." After he said it, she saw Glenda's head cock then a flicker of a gleam in her eyes. But, it didn't make any sense to Jillian.

On her final day in the salon, in the evening after everyone else was gone, Jillian felt justifiably vindictive as she transferred the last of the computer data onto discs. Exhausted, emotionally jagged, she picked up the keyboard to smash it through the screen but then all she did was slam it back down on the counter, and not hard. What a wimp she was. A roll over, stick a fork in her pussy.

The day before Jerome, Timmy, Tamzin, Monique and Glenda had cleared out the last of their belongings. Everyone else had decided to stay and work under Abilene.

Untying the welcome bell she dropped it in her purse, next to the computer discs, then putting on her hat and gloves Jillian set the security alarm, stepped out, locked the door, and put the key in a pre-arranged mailer, which she dropped in a post box on the corner.

Harsh winter wind howled around the edges of the building and slammed down Fifth Avenue. Freezing rain stung her face as she crossed Burnside. Along the walls of the buildings homeless people huddled in filthy blankets, their faces puffy and red. What would happen to her now? Where was there to hide and scream? Where could she run? Where would she be this time next year? The year after?

Head down Jillian walked as fast as she could and didn't wonder about the out-of-the-way address Glenda had given her. When she put her head up to check where she was, she saw three familiar figures walking on the far side of the street. Quickly she turned the other way and stepped into a portico. What if they saw her? She peeked — it *was* them. They disappeared into an alley. Jillian ducked back into the portico and looked around. There was a sign announcing the restaurant, Sum of Asia, where Glenda wanted to meet. The arrow pointed upstairs.

Inside the second-story restaurant was warm, and smelled of fried cabbage, sizzling pork, garlic and yeast. She heard the clanging of metal utensils stirring in a wok, and there was rapid



chatter in an unfamiliar language. The place was small, basically a take-out kitchen. There was a tall counter and behind that was the kitchen with a gas stove flaming under two woks; and there were also a grill, a steaming cupboard for dim sum, and other culinary equipment, including a heavy cleaver on a wooden shopping block piled with chunks of seasoned red, roasted duck. On the customer side of the counter were four mismatched tables and an odd variety of chairs. Glenda sat at a formica table that was bare except for a pot of tea and two handle-less mugs. The table was set against a window looking down on Davis Street.

Still shivering, Jillian sat down and took off her gloves, and as Glenda poured hot tea Jillian hunched and leaned forward, and wrapped her hands around the mug in front of her.

Glenda asked, "Did you do it?"

Jillian nodded and removed her hands from the warm mug to give her purse a little shake, which set off the welcome bell along with the clunk of computer discs.

"You're daring."

"I wish."

"You look cold."

Wrapping her hands back around the handleless mug, Jillian said, "I'm comforted by the warmth." Then, leaning further forward, she lowered her voice. "I just saw Fred, Jack and Yohay ducking into an alley."

"That's why I wanted to meet here, on a Wednesday night," Glenda emphasized.

At first, Jillian didn't make the connection then, "Oh, that's right, it's poker night."

"Did they see you?"

"I don't think so. I didn't know Fred came to this side of town."

"They don't want you to know."

Blood rushed to Jillian's head. "What do you know?"

"Did you ever ask Fred where he plays his weekly games? Or who he plays with?"

"Every time I even hinted at it, he changed the subject or walked away." Jillian's stomach clenched.

"Did you ever hear him mention Daryl or Blue Hiatus?"

"A couple times he vaguely mentioned he was going over to the Blue or he needed to talk to Daryl." Jillian gasped. "Do you think it's the same Daryl who got Timmy hooked on cocaine, used him rudely, then dumped him?"

"Absolutely."

Jillian stared into her tea mug.

"You know Blue Cab? How Jack and Fred refuse to travel in any other cab, and some have blackened windows?"

"Yes." Jillian's mind sunk into what she'd like to do to Jack and Fred, and now Daryl, and her nostrils flared.

Glenda looked across the street and nodded her head. "Daryl is the owner of that old hotel and saloon. His great grandfather built it in 1898. There's a sign that says Blue Hiatus, but the lights don't come on anymore."

"But it looks boarded up and deserted." Outside, across Davis Street, headlights at the entrance to the alley caught Jillian's attention. "There, a Blue Cab is pulling out now."

"My customers tell me parts of the inside have been maintained, and there's a gallery of escorts with rooms for rent by the hour, plus there's the gambling parlor."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Jillian said, "It's like there was a whole part of Fred I didn't know." Keeping her eyes directed out the window, she asked, "What kind of escorts?"

“Every kind of escort.”

Turning to face her friend, Jillian gave her a quizzical look.

“Sexual escorts.”

“Oh!” Jillian felt she should have figured that out.

“Every Thursday morning, Jack came home and took a shower before getting into bed with me. But his clothes always stank strongly of body odor, and it took me a long time to figure out part of that smell was stale sex.”

For a while they sat silently drinking tea and looked out the window. A Blue Cab lurked into the alley.

Glenda said, “I ordered their house specials.”

Dim sum and roasted duck were placed on the counter for them, and when they got up to get it they looked into the cooking area. Two large white bags were being filled with food cartons.

Back at their table, as they sat eating with chopsticks, they noticed one of the two workers darted out of the kitchen with the two full white bags. Down the stairs her footsteps went then there was a blast of shivering cold air and the sound of the door closing. Looking out the window, Jillian and Glenda watched her cross the street and disappear into the alley.

“Are you going to put the house up for sale?” Glenda asked.

“Tomorrow the real estate agent is coming over, and I’m signing the listing.”

Again they silently stared out the window, and Jillian contemplated her misery. Something deep inside her felt dulled, as if she would never feel passion again. *Happiness* what was that?

Without taking her eyes away from the window, Glenda, half-whispered, “I know you’ve never cared for Jack.”

“Especially not after he cheated you on the house sale.” Jillian looked down to hide her disgust and fear.

Gravely, Glenda said, “I think you should keep in mind there’s a reason Jack and Fred are partners.”

Immediate denial struck Jillian, but she recalled Fred’s deceptions and hints of maliciousness. Weary with stress, she closed her eyes, pinched the bridge of her nose then reopened her eyes.

“You can still fight to get the salon back,” Glenda said.

“I’m not sure how much fight I’ve got left in me.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do. It’s been eight years since I’ve had a truly relaxing vacation. I wouldn’t mind living a low-stress life.”

Glenda leaned forward over the table, and her fingernail pounded the formica. “I watched you change Rose City Salon from a near-bankrupt salon into *thee* place to go in Portland — and beyond. You had customers from all over the country, all over the world.”

A part of Jillian marveled at how much she didn’t care, at how extremely worn out she was. She looked down at Glenda’s pounding nail.

Looking down too Glenda paused expostulating, and her finger froze.

Jillian said, “The house, even after paying off the mortgage, is worth far more than the salon. It’s mind boggling how much more it’s worth now than when Fred bought it when we got married in 1999.”

“Where are you going to move to?”

“A small apartment where I can rest for a while then establish a new source of income.”

They kept eating the good food, and Jillian began to feel warm again.

Glenda said, “Abilene won’t be able to manage the salon.”

“The economy is booming, she’ll do fine. Fred will give her a business plan to follow.

That’s how J&F manages all their businesses.”

“Is that how you managed the salon?”

Jillian nodded and shrugged. “At the beginning. Soon as I figured out what needed to be done to keep everyone happy and customers coming in I continually customized the plan. But, I told Fred I always followed his plan to the word. He doesn’t like deviation of any sort.”

“Following a business plan takes discipline.” Meaningfully Glenda raised her eyebrows. “Abilene is not that disciplined.”

Setting down her chopsticks Jillian wrapped her hands back around the mug. “So what? The salon belongs to J&F. And if for some reason in the future I did have the opportunity to get it back would I want to start over there? The only two things I know for sure right now are that I’m going to sell the house and take a break.”

Sipping tea and glaring out the window, Glenda said, “The reason they picked Abilene is because she’s the only one who knows the job and they don’t want to sleep with.”

Tightening her grip on her tea mug Jillian looked at her hands. Recently they’d grown thinner from stress, and now she looked for visible signs of her nerves quivering. “I don’t think that’s the case.”

Glenda’s mouth shut. Her eyes squinted and she leaned forward and whispered, “You think Fred’s sleeping with Abilene?”

“Not Fred.”

Blankness flashed on Glenda’s face then she turned a sickly pale. Gradually she flushed, and shook her head. “All these years Jack and I’ve been divorced and he still has a hold on me.”

Jillian thought about how satisfying it would be to do nothing except nap and wallow in loss and stupidity, and she began to rehash in her mind the hints she should have paid attention to.

Glenda said, “I want to introduce you to a friend of mine. I think you might like him.”

Jillian looked at her skeptically. “I’m not ready to date.”

“Even if you don’t like him romantically, I think you’ll still want to know him. He’s figured out some of J&F’s nasty business practices. His name is Alda Noonan.”

“Noonan?”

“Of Noonan’s Manufacturing.” Sitting back, Glenda smiled and her eyebrows bobbed up. “He’s really handsome.”

Jillian didn’t say anything.

Glenda said, “Alda’s an accountant, and he’s worked over the numbers J&F used during the takeover, and they’ve been falsified.”

“There was a time when I would never have believed that from Fred, but now I think about him differently.”

For a second Glenda looked down then she asked, “Those discs,” and indicated Jillian’s purse. “Do they include the bookkeeping you entered?”

“I copied the bookkeeping and the customer lists.”

“Perfect.”

“I don’t really know why I copied the customer list, the court order stipulates I nor anyone not remaining to work at Rose City Salon is allowed to contact them.”

Without talking they sipped tea and continued to look out the window. After a couple more minutes the server who’d run into the alley with the full white bags came back empty handed.

Glenda said, “I think this restaurant is owned by Yohay.”

“The attorney?”

A couple minutes later the server arrived with a big metal pot of steaming tea.

Glenda told her, “We saw you cross the street.”

She said, “For Mr. Yohay we always deliver but he never gives a big tip, the Blue Hiatus owner Daryl, he’s stingy too. When we deliver to the escorts they always give us big tips.”

“You deliver for Mr. Yohay at Daryl’s?” Glenda asked.

“Onhohh, and at his office in the Great Gray Building.”

“You deliver to J&F in the Great Gray?” Jillian asked.

“We don’t like to go there,” the server said. “They never tip more than a dollar. Five blocks I run so their food doesn’t get cold and all I get is a dollar. Besides, they give us the creeps.”

“They give us the creeps too,” Glenda said.

A new surge of dismay flooded Jillian.

As they were getting ready to leave Glenda left a twenty-dollar tip.

At the bottom of the stairs, bundled against the bitter winter, Jillian and Glenda hugged goodbye, and Glenda said, “We need to figure out a way to get even.” Then they stepped outside, and the harsh elements pounded them.

## Chapter Thirteen

June 2008

In an effort to calm her pounding heart Jillian took slow deep breaths and thought about the beauty of the summer evening as she drove into the Hook's lot and found a parking spot. Eight o'clock in the evening and it was full light out. On the Columbia River she could see a dozen or more sailboats. Getting out of the car she uncertainly shut the door. It took all of her nerve to keep from re-opening it, jumping back in and speeding away. Why had she let Glenda talk her into this? Even though there was the commonality of having been cheated by J&F, there was also Glenda's constant reminder that Alda was a good-looking, single man, and that Jillian might *like* him. Damn her nerves; she felt as if she were 16 instead of almost 48. But at least, after nearly a year since Fred had walked out, she'd finally lost all the weight she'd gained during her marriage.

Inside was exactly as she remembered from when Fred used to take her there. Diners chatted and laughed, wait service hustled, would-be divas posed on the stairs, lobsters swam suspiciously in their aquarium, eyeing people eyeing them.

"Welcome to Hook's, how many are in your party this evening?" asked a smiling greeter.

"I'm meeting a gentleman here," Jillian said.

"There's someone named Alda upstairs at the bar. Could that be him?"



Nodding, lips pressed together she smiled, and her heart pounded in her chest. Feeling as stupid and ugly as a hairball she started up the steps. With each step she silently repeated to herself to be calm, tranquil and calm, and all the time reminding herself to breathe deep. By the time she got to the top of the stairs she was pretty sure she was going to fall over right there and pass out from nerves.

Seated around the bar were three couples, and by the window, in the corner at a high table sat a lone man — watching her. Even though she didn't understand how it possibly could without exploding, her heart pounded even harder than it had been, and she nearly gasped for breath.

Smiling, the man stood and walked up to her. “Jillian?”

“You must be Alda.” He was the same height as her, and slight with dark hair trimmed close above his ears and collar while the top was curly and combed back away from his forehead. His eyes were dark and intense. Jillian's heart crashed and she wanted to flee. He was at least ten, probably more, years younger than her.

Opening his arms he ushered her to the high table in the corner. “This okay? I made supper reservations for 8:45 but I told them downstairs I would wait for a table upstairs. But if you're hungry or in a hurry I'll go ask them to seat us as soon as possible.”

“I like the view up here,” she said.

As Alda sat and leaned back in his chair he smiled and his face glowed. “I'm pleased to meet you.”

“I'm pleased to meet you too,” she said and wondered what better things there were to say.

“Have you known Glenda for a long time?” he asked.

“About eleven years. How about you?”

“We met about three years ago,” Alda said.

“I hadn’t realized you’d known each other that long.”

“We met not long after J&F took over my family’s business . . . “

“Noonan’s Manufacturing?”

“That’s right,” he said and his eyes clouded for a second. “Actually, I saw you later the same day I met Glenda.”

Quizzically, Jillian frowned.

“I wanted to meet Jack and Fred, but I didn’t want them to know who I was, and I found out through the Noonan’s crew they were going to Eileen Dupre’s Annual Valentine’s Fashion Show and Cocktail Party. So I got referrals and found a woman who made a business of changing men into women.”

Jillian said, “Was that you . . . the . . . the . . . ?”

“The siren coming on to Jack?”

“Fred is my ex-husband, he was at that party.”

“I know,” Alda said. “The people at the manufacturing plant hate Jack and Fred.”

“You’re still in contact with them?”

“Five of them are what’s left of the group from when my father started the business.”

“Do they really hate Jack and Fred?”

Alda nodded. “Especially the receptionist and the floor manager who are close friends of mine. When I was in high school I’d go there every afternoon and study upstairs with my dad in his office. And I worked there over the summers.

The waitress came, took their drinks orders and left.

Sitting back in his chair, Alda tilted his head and in a low voice said, “Glenda told me J&F swindled you out of Rose City Salon.”

Mildly as possible Jillian said, “Yes, they did.”

“It’s been over five years since J&F forced my father out of his manufacturing plant, and I’m still furious. Sometimes I wish I could move on. I’ve got my own CPA firm, so it’s not like I need another business. But, I’ve been over and over the accounting J&F submitted to the court, and it’s extremely well done, very tricky and smooth, but it’s screwy”

“Seems much of Fred’s accounting is screwy.”

“There’s always been this sort-of undertone that my father had a secret. Perhaps he did. But he also had a twelve year history of working long and hard for that business, and I always intended to take it over when he was ready.” Shaking his head, Alda force-laughed in self-consternation.

Hands clasped under the table Jillian recalled the last six months of her own ongoing deliberation and agony — she *did* want the salon back, and she wanted Fred and Jack to feel her pain.

The waitress came and served their drinks.

Eyes steady on her Alda held up his glass. “Thanks again for coming out to meet me.”

Giddy, Jillian’s thoughts were swept away in a new surge of blood pounding through her heart, and before speaking she rehearsed the words to herself, I’m so glad I did — then she still wondered if she would sound stupid, so she kept her mouth shut. Which then made her feel more inept because what if he took that to mean she *wasn’t* glad? Were her premonitions of herself, and Fred’s accusations true, was she not sexy anymore? Was her insecurity the real reason why

she'd resisted dating since Fred had gone? No, life was busy, that's why. Except, other than sell the house and move, she hadn't done anything since winter.

Feeling his eyes on her Jillian looked back. They grinned and giggled. She blurted, "When you're not working what do you do?"

"I like to cook."

Half-teasingly, she said, "I always think chef's should be fat. How else could anyone trust their cooking?"

"You're saying you wouldn't trust me to cook you a meal because I'm not fat?"

"Either that or tell me your secret for staying thin."

Alda laughed. "Not tasting the food while I'm cooking."

"So then how do you know if it's any good?"

"Why wouldn't it be good? I use the best ingredients and follow old family recipes."

Not wanting to say the only way to know would be to taste it, Jillian batted her eyes and bobbed her head. Good golly, she thought, and tried to keep from grinning incessantly, but her lips kept turning up.

A greeter approached their table. "If you'll follow me, I'll seat you now in the upstairs dining room."

Through supper and dessert of chocolate dipped strawberries they chatted and giggled. Afterward Alda walked her to her car, and as they crossed the parking lot she got uptight again. Would he want to kiss her goodnight? Is that what she wanted?

But he didn't.

Backing the car out of the slot she watched him walk away, and thought him a handsome and interesting man.

Driving home she questioned whether not kissing her meant he wasn't romantically interested in her, or maybe he was a puritan, maybe faithful to a religion she didn't understand, or he didn't want to spoil the beginning of something wonderful by being too forward, or he sensed she was uncertain so felt rejected, or all he wanted was an ally against J&F. Round and round in her head went the same questions and possibilities. Which was stupid because she was so old that when he looked at her romance was probably the last thing on his mind. Old and boring, that was she. Why would a handsome young man with a professional career be attracted to her?

In the morning she slugged in bed until the phone rang. Maybe it was Alda! Up she jumped and ran into the living room.

It was Glenda. "Tell me all about it."

Not wanting to, Jillian said, "What?"

"You're missy private-shy?"

"You didn't tell me he was so young. How old is he?"

"I didn't know you were an ageist."

Not having before heard the term Jillian liked it. "I'm not."

"Neither is Alda." Glenda paused. "Do you like him?"

"I just met him."

"I cannot believe how weird and uptight you're being. Did you know Fred used to tell Jack all about your sex life?"

A fireball ignited in Jillian's stomach. "No."

"Fred is a kiss and tell man."

“That son-of-a-bitch,” Jillian hissed, thoroughly and deeply mad at Fred. Things she hadn’t been mad at, or even questioned, started to foment to the surface of her conscious.

Glenda asked, “Are you going to see Alda again?”

“He hasn’t asked.”

“I’m betting he will.”

“Have you talked to him since last night?”

“I know him and I know you, and I think you two could find a lot of peace and joy.”

“Peace and joy,” Jillian repeated, and even though she tried to disguise it, she heard the cynicism in her voice. “That would be wonderful.” *Peace and joy?*

“You need an attitude adjustment.”

Glenda hadn’t answered her question but Jillian didn’t want to repeat it because she didn’t want to sound anxious. “What are you doing today?”

“I’ve got customers from eleven this morning until nine this evening, and after that I’m going to a mixer.”

“A mixer?”

“Like an orgy.”

“An orgy?”

“Yeah, want to come? It’s a lot of fun and you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

“Uhhh, thanks, but, well, I don’t think . . .”

“Rub yourself with oil, you’ll be fine.”

Heat surged through Jillian’s body and she gasped a few times trying to think of *anything* to say.

“You are such a prude. How you were married to a man like Fred is beyond me.”

“I’m beginning to think you know more about him than I do.”

“Jack’s a pillow talker,” Glenda’s voice was as sad yet edgy. “Once he squirts his sex everything on his mind comes out his mouth.”

On the telephone line Jillian heard a click.

“Someone’s on call waiting.” There was a another click and a brief pause then Glenda was back. “It’s Alda. I’ll call you back later.” *Click!*

Breath held; Jillian stared at the phone.

## Chapter Fourteen

October 2008

In the passenger seat Jillian clutched her hands together and grinned. Dense forest of huge evergreens and mountain creeks sped past at increasing speed as they crested the mountain where the view opened to the Pacific coast. “It’s stunning,” Jillian said.

Taking the Volvo out of gear, Alda said, “We’re free wheeling.”

“This is a fun ride.”

“You’re what makes it fun,” Alda said and grinned. Reaching across the middle console he took her hand, and the car rolled quicker and quicker down the mountain.

Gripping his hand she began to laugh. Alda laughed too. Then he slowed the car to cruise around the corner, and on down to the ocean.

At Pacific Sands Hotel they got organized in their room then went out to walk the beach. When the autumn sun began to fall below the water line they sat in the protection of a bluff facing west, breathing in the salty, fishy air, they held hands and watched the sky turn red mauve, navy and black.

“It’s like the financial picture,” Jillian said.

“Very romantic.” Alda laughed.

“I know, I’m sorry, but I can’t get over it. When we met the economy was booming, now it’s busted, and we’ve only known each other four months, I mean our purpose really changes.”



“What?”

“When we thought the economy would boom forever I wanted the salon back, but now that we’re in an out-of-control financial dive I’m good with letting Abilene ride out the worst part.”

“But what did you mean by ‘our purpose’?”

Quietly, Jillian said, “Could be years before the economy recovers.”

Alda’s entire body became still. “My purpose is to love you and for us to enjoy being with each other.”

Involuntarily her hand twitched. *Love!* She had not heard that before from him. “Ok.”

“Ok.” Alda laughed — for a second then paused. After a full minute he soberly asked, “Do you find how easily and openly I express myself odd?”

In a soul-full, but excessive monotone voice she asked, “Does that mean you find my lack of expression equally odd?”

Laughing, he jumped up and held a hand out to her. “Ready to go back to the room?”

Taking his hand she stood then held on until he brought her into his arms.

Two full days they stayed at the beach lounging, laughing, making love. Then they were driving back to Portland. And the Volvo didn’t go nearly as fast up the mountain.

Halloween they were at Jillian’s apartment, hanging out on the deck and barbecuing when Alda’s phone alerted them of a text. Looking at the screen, Alda laughed easily, it’s from the Noonan’s Manufacturing receptionist; she said her brother was showing her some pictures taken in January from his birthday supper at Captain’s Seafood Shanty that I might find interesting.” Smiling, pushing buttons on his phone, he said, “Probably something goofy . . .”

Jillian couldn't see what he was looking at, but she did see his whole posture and facial expression come to attention then his left hand flew up to cover his mouth. "What? She asked.

Barely able to contain his glee, he showed her what he was looking at — pictures of Jack and Abilene at a restaurant where the wait staff wore red paisley kerchiefs around their necks. Abilene wore a midnight blue sequined gown and Jack looked as if he wanted to gobble her whole. At first Jillian was shocked, then she began to laugh, and gasped, "That is rich."

## Chapter Fifteen

Winter 2009

As Jack watched the trucking company workers carry computers and files up the stairs, he had mixed feelings. J&F had been in the Great Gray Building for a dozen years, and the last couple years he'd been considering moving, but to a newer, fancier building, not to Noonan's Manufacturing second floor. Part of him was still in denial. Since last fall, when the financial and housing bubble exploded, J&F had filed bankruptcy on over half their businesses. A large income was what he'd been accustomed to, and not having that support of his superiority busted his spirit. Lately he'd begun to feel boxed in at the Great Gray Building: Yohay was upstairs, and had a habit of dropping in to discuss schemes he didn't want a paper or electronic record of, as if no one else's time was as valuable because they didn't charge by six minute increments; Blue Hiatus was only five blocks away, and since most of J&F's acquisitions had been initiated by collections of gambling debts, Daryl believed it was okay to send any number of his thugs over with questions; but the real problem was Rose City Salon was downstairs, and a couple times Abilene had come up to see him — luckily each time he'd been the only one there. If anyone

knew about him and Abilene, he'd never be able to live down the shame. Moving into the manufacturing building was shame enough.

Between the time J&F had made improvements at Noonan's Manufacturing building and the financial debacle, they'd had the upstairs office rented to a small entrepreneur, who last month they'd evicted for not paying rent. Noonan's office wasn't up to Jack's standard, but to J&F it came free with the lease of the manufacturing building, plus Fred set up the accounting so J&F could use it as a tax right-off.

At first Jack told himself he would never get used to not being downtown, not having hundreds of strangers to attract with his handsome, wealthy look and charismatic nature. Downtown was thrilling and impressionable, and he had craved fast-paced attention, but now he was pleased to relax more. Traffic was still slow getting to Noona's, but parking was good, and he and Fred had their names on spaces close to the front door. The upstairs office was spacious, and came with sandalwood room dividers and oriental carpets, and big elaborately carved wooden cabinets and desks with drawers that locked.

Staring out the second story windows, Jack asked, "How long have we been here?"

Fred, keeping his eyes on his accounting, said, "Two months."

Getting up from his desk Jack walked over to where he could look down on and be seen by the workers on the main conveyor belt. Below, the floor manager, with a cheesy grin waved at him. Pretending he didn't see, Jack turned his back.

After entering one more figure, Fred, closed the computer. "Efficiency has improved on the floor since we moved in."

“Yeah, it’s because they know I’m watching them,” Jack snickered. “And firing those three deadbeats.”

“Plus an unemployment rate of 9.8 percent.”

“They *should* be afraid of losing their jobs.”

“As long as they keep up the production,” Fred said, “I’m staying out of their way.”

*Beep, beep.*

“Receptionist Ratchett is paging you,” Fred said.

Coming away from the window, Jack pushed the speakerphone button. “What is it?”

“Someone’s here wanting to sell you something.”

“If they’re trying to sell me something, and they don’t have an appointment — which you would know — send them away. I don’t need or want to hear about it.” Jack punched the disconnect button. To Fred he said, “I’ve told her that a hundred times. I swear she does it just to annoy me.” Stomping back to the windows he closed the curtains then returned to his desk, and opening a locked drawer took out a mirror, razor blade and straw.

Fred handed him a foldie of cocaine.

After they’d snorted and the cocaine absorbed into Jack’s blood for the first time that day, he started to feel good.

“Drink?” Fred asked.

“That’d be nice.”

Getting up and going to a set of cabinets that looked as if they held files but were really a refrigerator and mini-bar, Fred mixed cocktails. Spilling rum on the bar and cursing, he said, “Remind me to ask Ratchett if she’s found a new cleaning service yet.”

Returned to his habitual position of leaned back in his chair, left foot propped up against the edge of his desk, Jack said, "I think Noonan's Manufacturing should get away with showing zero profit this year."

"Hell, I've already got that in mind but I've been too damn busy with the bankruptcies. What a debacle. One day we're making money hand over fist and the next we're palming for a dime," Fred said and took a drink of his scotch and soda.

"The day I have to beg for anything is the day I cut off my balls."

Fred, handed him a rum and coke, and sat back down.

"What about the trucking company, can we show zero profit there too?" Jack asked.

"That trucking company is a gold mine, we're still going to have to pay taxes on that one, although not nearly what we have in the past." Visibly showing distaste Fred asked, "Did you tell Abilene I need the bookkeeping for the salon?"

"Not yet."

Fred's nostrils flared. "Do you want me to talk to her?"

"No, I'll do it, but you're not ready for the salon's year-end financials anyway so there's no hurry."

"I want you to tell her now because her bookkeeping is a mess, and it takes me a long time to get it to make sense. Tell her she needs to get it cleaned up and turned over to me as soon as possible."

"Alright, I'll tell her." Thinking about the look that would cross Abilene's face if he told her Fred had called her a mess made Jack grin. Every twist of the accounting, every manipulation against the IRS, against government fees and financial restrictions that could be made Fred performed, and he didn't elaborate about what he was doing. What Fred didn't know was that

was what Jack wanted. At the end of the day there would be no emails, nothing to associate Jack with tax evasion. Sipping his drink, eyeing Fred on the other side of the desk, Jack changed the subject. “How was your date last night?”

“Good. She was eager and confident, which put a whole different twist on the evening. I had a lot of fun.”

Lost in his own reveries of lust, Jack mumbled, “If I have to amuse another blonde I think I’ll get her a black wig.”

Fred frowned. “You’ve always said you liked blondes.”

Quickly Jack corrected, “I didn’t mean I don’t like blondes.” Then he started to make shit up. “I wonder whatever happened to that long-legged, cork-screw curly red head who used to do facials and makeup at the salon.”

“Tamzin.”

“Yeah. I spent a lot of time imagining those legs wrapped around my ears, but I always felt it would be inappropriate to mess with anyone in the salon.”

Fred drank his scotch and soda. “I thought you had a fling with her?”

“Tamzin!? No. Why would you think that?”

“That night we met Jillian and her freak team at Red Star. I got Jillian out of there right away, but I know you stayed for a long time, and weren’t around much for the next couple weeks.”

“No, nothing happened. I remember the evening, and nothing happened. With anyone.”

## Chapter Sixteen

April 2011

Outside new growth was budding, but inside Jack's mind and heart was only uncertainty. There were few days when the sun shone, birds flew and tweeted, and bees buzzed. Most days rain poured incessantly. Like the financial crisis, it was always there, always a wet blanket weighing down things money or rain should not affect, but did. Up until the market crash two-and-a-half years ago, Jack knew his income made him special. But now, as he stood in the checkout line at the grocery store he more than ever questioned his place in the world.

Used to be either a wife or housekeeper did his grocery shopping, or he called for home delivery, now he actually went to the market. Partly, he told himself, was so he could make sure and have all his favorite foods, but when he was there and selecting items it was Abilene who possessed his thoughts and controlled his buying decisions.

Coming home from picking up everything he wanted for snacks and supper Jack swooped his Porsche down his condo garage entry and parked in the first of his two designated spots. The other space was empty. What would it be like to have Abilene there making his home embracing and cooking his supper? Instead it was the other way around. All the little things that made life endearing he'd learned to do. Grunting, he climbed out of the car. From the trunk he pulled full bags of groceries — hopefully he hadn't forgotten anything. It was a bit much to carry

in one trip but he reasoned the struggle of carrying one bag too many was better than coming back downstairs.

Upstairs, in his condo, he quickly set the bags on the counter and massaged his aching arms. Next he lit candles and turned on his stereo then began dancing his way around while putting groceries away. Checking the time, he started setting out delicacies and sweets. And as he danced he began to sing then he fantasized Abilene was in his arms and they were waltzing in a great and crowded ballroom with all eyes admiring and envying them. Which, he told himself, was an utterly ridiculous fantasy because the look in everyone's eyes would be condemnation.

*Bzzz*

Hurrying to the intercom he said, "Hello."

"Are you going to leave a sexy thing like me waiting in the lobby?"

"Sugar plum, would I do that to you?" Jack purred and pushed the security button.

A couple minutes later Abilene was knocking on his door.

Soon as he had the door relocked she was on him, in the hallway, pushing him against the wall. "Whoa, slow down," he said. "I thought we'd have supper first."

"Why can't we have sex first?" Abilene asked. "You order the food and we'll do it while we're waiting for delivery."

"Let's cook something."

"I don't come over here to cook," Abilene said with a pouty lip, and rubbed her breasts against him.

"I don't pay for your car and insurance, and your phone, and keep that salon open so you can fuck me and drive away as fast as you can."

"I thought that's what you wanted."



How she'd gotten that idea he didn't have a clue. "Look around Abilene, think," Sweeping his hand to show off his living room, he said, "Candles, chocolates, liquors and wines, all these things I do for you." Expectantly he waited.

After a few seconds of glaring at him, she asked, "What do you want? You call and I come over." Her voice began to rise. "You say roll over, I roll over; you say get on my knees, I suck your dick. And you think it's all light hearted but I come here some days so depressed it's all I can do to keep from breaking down." Visibly fighting tears her eyes searched his.

Concerned she would bawl in front of him Jack quickly petted her, "But baby, I had no idea, you never said anything before."

"All these years we've been together and I've never once cried on you, but now I'm overwhelmed."

"Tell me what the problem is."

"Ever since the economy went bad the salon's been losing income."

"I thought you said you were doing okay."

"I'm not anymore. I would have said something earlier but I didn't want you to think I was a burden." Her lower lip quivered and tears welled out of her lids.

"You're never a burden to me." Taking her in his arms he said, "Tell me what would make you happy."

"I kept thinking things would get better. But they're not. Everything keeps getting worse and worse. Worrying about the salon not being able to pay its bills, and all that damn bookkeeping. It's giving me nightmares."

"You know I can't take over the bookkeeping for you baby. Fred . . ."

"I'm not asking you to do the damn bookkeeping, and I don't want to hear about Fred."

“Tell Jackie what it is you do want.” He could not believe the tone and words coming out of his mouth. Six years ago, before meeting her, he’d never of believed this of himself.

She looked at him tearfully, “Why can’t J&F lend money to Rose City Salon?”

Jack knew Fred would have a conniption fit. “How much money?”

“Twenty thousand dollars.”

Oh fuck, oh dear! Taking half a step away from her, he asked, “Sugar plum, darling, what would you do with that much money?”

“I told you.” Abilene began again to pout and quiver. “You’re not even listening to me, and you’ve never taken any of my needs into consideration.”

“If that were true would you be driving a nice car?”

This time when her eyes squinted and gleamed there were no welling tears, yet her voice remained pouty. “Maybe it’s the rain that depresses me.”

“That’s right, sugar plum, it’s the rain and since you know that, you don’t have to be depressed anymore. Now give me a smile and a kiss.”

“You’re right,” Abilene said. “I should move somewhere where it doesn’t rain as much. I’ve got friends in Arizona.” Frowning, she leaned forward and gave him a kiss. “I like hot weather.”

Feeling cold and pale, Jack said, “You’re just saying that, I know you haven’t really thought this out. I don’t want you to even think about the rain anymore.”

“What I don’t want to think about anymore are the salon’s finances. How are they my problem? Since J&F owns the salon it’s your problem. An owner needs to invest in his business.”

“When did you last eat?” Fred asked. Taking her arm he guided her into the kitchen and seated her on the extra large bar stool he’d gotten especially for her glorious ass.

“I don’t want to eat.”

“Yes, you do.” As Jack heard himself he involuntarily shuddered.

“Are you feeling alright?” Abilene asked. “You look pale.”

“Let’s eat and maybe we’ll both feel better.”

“What are we going to have?”

“I thought we’d grill steaks.”

“But I was feeling like having Persian food delivered,” Abilene said. “There’s this new place I’ve been wanting us to try.”

“Persian food? No, I don’t think I would like that.”

Cocking her head she stared at him for a few seconds then said, “Okay, if you insist, I’ll help you cook.”

The best foods were brought out; things Jack knew were her favorites and new things he’d gotten for her to try and delight over. Uncorking a bottle of wine he poured the deep red cabernet into crystal glasses.

Throughout the evening they ate and cooked, drank and rolled in their lusts.

When it was late and Jack lay sated, Abilene asked, “Would you visit me in Arizona?”

“You’re not going to Arizona.”

“What’s stopping me?”

“The ten thousand dollars I’m giving you in the morning.”

“Twenty thousand would be a better stopper.”

Rolling into her large goodness, sighing into her heat and musk, he said, “Ten thousand won’t alarm Fred as much as twenty thousand.”

“Fred again.”

“You can’t tell anyone.”

Abilene petted him. “It’ll be our secret.”

After that they had dessert in bed watching television until they fell asleep. As he knew he would, Jack woke to find Abilene still in bed with him, and climbed on top of her.

Low and throaty Abilene chuckled.

Forty-five minutes later Abilene left with a personal check from Jack made out to her for \$10,000, and a smile.

After Abilene was gone Jack wrote himself a check out of one of the J&F investment accounts, for \$12,000.

Spring slipped into summer, into fall and on and on the Great Recession ground. Noonan’s Manufacturing made money, not good but okay; the trucking company did great because it had added a new service capitalizing on the home foreclosure business. Jack wrote checks to Abilene out of his personal account then repaid himself even more generously from a J&F account. Why Fred hadn’t seen what was going on Jack knew was because Fred had become engaged, and was planning a wedding and honeymoon. Besides, J&F money was at least half Jack’s, he didn’t need Fred’s approval.

## Chapter Seventeen

September 2012

Laughing, Jillian peddled her bike down the Springwater Trail as, next to her, Alda showed off by riding without any hands. “Don’t fall,” she said, “I don’t want my lunch squished.”

“Wonderful, you don’t care about me, only your bologna sandwich.”

She hated bologna. “I thought you said you were making kibbeh and garlic green beans.”

“You should see the look of disgust on your face.” Alda laughed. “I made kibbeh and roasted Brussels sprouts.”

“I’m reserving my look of disgust until after I taste the Brussels sprouts.”

“You’ll like my Brussels sprouts.”

“That’s what they all say!” hooted Jillian in mock derision. Standing up on the pedals she sped ahead. The good feeling of her legs pumping and the bike zooming along under her, the dry, cool day filled with fall’s oranges, reds and gold, the loud scolding of the deep blue Steller’s jays, and the smell of the woods made her feel free and exuberant.

When they got to downtown Portland they stopped at Tom McCall Waterfront Park and ate their picnic lunch while seated on a bench overlooking the Willamette River.

Alda said, “Before we put our plan into action, I think we should go on a month long vacation.”

“A month?”

“Once you get the salon back and I take over Noonan’s Manufacturing, there’s not going to be much time for fun.”

“If our plan even works.”

“If you could go anywhere you wanted, where would you go?” Alda insisted.

“Some place lazy and romantic.”

Alda laughed, and for a couple minutes they sat holding hands and smiling. Sobering, Alda said, “When we get back I’d like for us to get serious about our future as a couple.”

Instead of answering Jillian stared at the water and wondered if not having the common goal of getting even with J&F would leave their relationship in a void. If she didn’t pursue getting the salon back would she forever feel like a sap? But, if she was deliberately deceitful, even if it was to regain what had been wrongfully taken, what kind of person did that make her? And, what about Alda, if he didn’t do everything he could to get his father’s business back would his lack of action haunt him the rest of his life? How would she feel about him after their plan had been accomplished? More probable, how would they feel about each other if their plan didn’t work? There was also Glenda to think about; the entertainment business, where the majority of her customers came, had struggled hard these past four years. Glenda *needed* the money Jack had cheated her out of on the sale of their marital home. And, now that they’d gotten Timmy involved for extra leverage, what repercussions might he have to endure? Mostly, though, weaving through all Jillian’s thoughts was the desire to out-scheme Jack and Fred, which brought her back to the question of what kind of person she was.

Reaching to take her hand, Alda asked, “What are you thinking?”

“Are we sure about this plan? You’ve got the CPA firm, and I’ve got my account rep job at Nike . . . “

“You hate working for someone else.”

“I know, but once the economy really picks up again I can start my own business. I was thinking about opening a clothing boutique.” But she knew that wasn’t what she most wanted.

“Whatever you want to do I’m going to support you, but that’s not really what I meant.”

“Oh!” Jillian’s heart pounded so suddenly and hard her mind pivoted only on one possibility. Did he mean . . . was he going to ask . . . did she want to be married again?

“I’d like for us to go on a long vacation, and when we get back I’d love for us to live together.”

“Live together?”

“If you prefer we can get married . . . I mean, I didn’t . . . “

The first couple days of their month long vacation were odd but then they relaxed and enjoyed their surroundings and each other, and little else crossed their minds. Instead of someplace far away they rented a house on the Oregon beach, and spent long days walking and talking, napping in the afternoons, and cooking and eating. It seemed as if nothing serious was ever discussed, that life was all peace and joy, and by the time they left Jillian felt more content and hopeful for the future than she ever remembered.

Back in Portland they lived in Alda’s townhouse, and started condo hunting. One evening, after spending the afternoon driving from home to home with a realtor, the two of them had supper at an indistinct, out of the way restaurant.

Done eating, tired and not really thinking about anything, Jillian gazed around the room. Suddenly sucking her breath in, she sat up straighter in her seat and tried not to gawk.

“What do you see?” Alda asked.

“Don’t turn around, but try and guess who just walked in.”

Shrugging, Alda kept his eyes on Jillian.

“Jack and Abilene.”

“You’re kidding!”

“They’re being seated a couples tables behind you.”

“Do you think you can get a picture of them?”

From her purse Jillian pulled out her cell phone, and as she was focusing to take a picture, Abilene looked up and right at her, and smiled and winked. With ready lips, Abilene leaned toward Jack Passionately he kissed her. Jillian took three pictures.



## Chapter Eighteen

July 2013

After not hearing from Abilene for four days Jack stopped, unannounced, into the salon. First thing he noticed was the glass door was badly smudged, and as he walked inside he was assaulted by a strong smell of chemicals. To the receptionist, whom he'd never seen before, he said, "Please tell the manager Jack is here to see her."

"Who is your appointment with?"

Was this girl as dumb as a box of rocks? "Abilene, the manager."

"Abilene's the owner, not the manager. I haven't met her yet, yesterday was my first day."

"Who hired you?"

"I did," a buxom, long-legged blonde walked up to Jack and said, "I'm the manager."

"Where's Abilene?"

"She doesn't usually come into the salon, she has several other businesses she owns," the manager said. "Who did you say you are?"

"I'm the owner," Jack said.

"I don't know what kind of stupid trick you're trying to play but Abilene's the owner."

"I'm the owner," Jack insisted.

"I'm calling 911," the receptionist said.

Holding up his hands in defense, and stepping backward, Jack said. “Alright, I’m leaving, but you tell Abilene I was here.”

“Do you have a card?” the manager asked.

He gave her one of his president of J&F cards.

“What’s J&F? I’ve never heard of it.” With a flat look of distaste, she dropped the card onto the reception counter.

Even as he had been writing the checks Jack knew he was going too far. Now it was too late. Over the past two years he’d given Abilene fifty thousand dollars. But there’d been no profit, no success for Rose City Salon. Only failure.

Blame, Abilene insisted, was his.

But no, it was all her fault. There was something unnatural about her, witchy — there was no other explanation for the last eight years of his insane lust. But now the spell was broken. His phone rang and caller identification told him it was her. “What?”

“Jackie, darling, you said you’d write me a check, but you haven’t, and now the leasing agent is calling demanding payment.”

“Fred and I have decided to file bankruptcy on the salon.”

“You can’t do that.”

“You need to get out of there by the tenth.”

“Or what?”

“The sheriff will forcibly evict you. Who knows, maybe you’ll go to jail.”

“You’re the one who deserves to go to jail.” Abilene screeched. “If you don’t pay the lease I’m going to tell Fred everything.”

“The tenth, Abilene.” Jack hung up.

Searching his condo, he finally found the spare key to the car he leased for her. In the middle of the night he took a Checkered Taxi to her apartment building, drove the car to his condo building, and parked it underground, behind the security gate.

In the morning Jack called Abilene. “It’s me.”

“I know who it is,” she said.

“You can forget knowing who I am because I never want to see you again. Make sure you’re out of the salon by the tenth. I’ve taken your car, and my next call is to cut off your phone service.” *Click!*

That night Abilene showed up at his condo building, and from downstairs rang the security buzzer until he threatened to call the cops.

On the ninth of the month he went to visit Yohay and walked by Rose City Salon. Even though it was summer, and the economy was on the upswing, the place was dead and the glass door looked as if it’d never been cleaned, but through the windows he could see the ‘new manager’ reading a magazine, and that no progress had been made to vacate the salon.

By the time he got in to see Yohay, Jack was nearly apoplectic with anger. “I told the manager to have everything out of there by the tenth.”

“I’ll start the process to have her legally evicted,” Yohay said. “Meanwhile, go ahead and file bankruptcy.”

“Not one damn thing has been done to close down the salon.”

Yohay sighed. “Where are you going to store the equipment?”

“There’s room in the warehouse at Noonan’s.”

“On the eleventh you can get a crew in there and pull out all your stuff. The lease terminates on the last day of the month.”

“Fred will get the accounting ready,” Jack said.

“You and Abilene?” Fred spat. “Eight years. Fifty thousand J&F dollars.” Pinching the bridge of his nose Fred tried to control his fury. “Tell me, Jack. Why didn’t you use your own money?”

“The salon is a J&F business. Why would I use my own money? You know, I have as much authority with the money as you.”

Fred bellowed, “How did you figure Abilene was a good business investment?”

Jack had never seen him so mad. “I don’t know what your problem is with filing bankruptcy.”

“This one could have been avoided. When you insisted Abilene would make a better manager than Jillian, you weren’t making good sense. I knew it then but I didn’t listen to my own better judgment. That salon was in great shape — in every way. Reputation, potential, the look, and most importantly it was making good money, not only for itself but for everyone else.” Car keys in his hand, Fred headed for the door. “Where’s your image, Jack? A canker blossom and a beauty salon run into the ground? That’s what we’ve worked for?” Fred stormed out.

“Wait . . .” Jack called, but he had lost impetus. Fred was right.

Quiet pervaded the office. When he looked out the Noonan’s employees were looking up. Grinning cheesier than ever was the floor manager. Jack slammed the curtains closed.

Quietness pressed down on him as he sat at his desk. Fred always was a moron. There was no difference between Jillian having the salon and Abilene having the salon. Jillian's time with the salon had been during economic growth but since then the financial bust had set them all back.

He had paid Abilene for sex and to play around with Rose City Salon. A whore was exactly what she was — a disrespectful, money-grubbing whore. For a long time Jack ruminated on his hate for Abilene. Finally, knowing the only way to move forward was to re-focus on his financial goals he forced himself to concentrate on an actual work project. Abilene had told Fred everything. Overwhelmed by the urge to strike back, Jack didn't get anything accomplished.

After everything was removed from the salon and as much as could be retrieved from Abilene and stored at Noonan's Manufacturing, Jack sat in his opulent condo, alone on his big couch, with the intent to plot his next scheme, but mostly he continued to dwell on what a bitch Abilene was. Occasionally he thought about Fred and how he had not attempted to repair their rift. Moron. Jack was miserable. New lust and fun ought to help, and all he had to do was call Daryl and order up a gal or two or three. With the thought came a gleam of desire, but nothing more happened. Glaring at the walls, he sat stewing as he waited for Abilene to call and screech at him, but that didn't happen either.

Wednesday evening at home he was still stewing when he realized no one had called to ask where to meet for supper. Reaching for the telephone he started to call Fred but stopped. Next he dialed Yohay, but hung up after one ring. Everyone else was changing, only he remained the same.

Going into the kitchen he opened the refrigerator, then looked in the cupboards then went into the pantry. They were all packed with crap he'd bought just to make Abilene happy. Well, no more domestication for him. He was a man's man. Stomping out of the kitchen he called for pizza delivery.

By the time Jack got to Blue Hiatus and entered the gambling parlor the game was going strong. Fred acted his normal self, and Jack was relieved. At midnight, when Fred got up to leave, Jack said, "You coming to work tomorrow?"

"I'm getting used to working from home."

"Ho, ho," Yohay blurted. "Are the power brokers breaking up?"

"No," Jack snapped.

Sadder than before, Fred said, "Yes," and walked out.

For a half-second the entire table was quiet, then everyone started carrying on as before. After that Jack didn't say much, and by one o'clock he was ready to go home, but he didn't want anyone to think he was falling apart, so he made a point of announcing he was going upstairs to chat with Daryl about getting a gal and a room for an hour.

Friday Jack went to Yohay's office and signed the paperwork for the bankruptcy on the salon. "Where's Fred?" he asked.

"He was here this morning," Yohay said as he eyed him.

"J&F is as strong as it ever was," Jack blurted.

Yohay gave Jack an *I know better* stare.

"What did Fred say?"

“He wants to dissolve J&F.”

“He can’t do that.”

“Why can’t he?” Yohay asked.

“I say no.”

“It’s not all up to you, Jack.”

Angry and alarmed, Jack said, “I’ll take care of Fred. You take care of the bankruptcy.”

“I’ve got the bankruptcy on the salon ready to be filed, but it’s the last project I’ll be doing for J&F.”

“You’re walking out on me too?”

Yohay smiled with what looked like forced patience. “I’m retiring.”

“You’ve never before said one word to me about retiring.”

“Why would I?”

“I thought we were friends.”

“Who said we’re not?”

Jack didn’t have an answer.

“Don’t look so lost,” Yohay said. “If Fred wants out of J&F you’ll need to hire another attorney anyway. That’s the same advice I gave Fred.”

“I want you to represent me if Fred goes that route.”

“I’m hoping J&F won’t go that route. But, if so, I won’t represent either of you.”

Feeling lost and unsure Jack didn’t know what to say or do. Abruptly, he stood and left.

Outside was drizzly and chilly with a stiff breeze that slapped him in the face. “I need a drink,” he said out loud to himself. Formerly he would have stayed in the building and gone to Grayburn’s Grill but now he wanted to go somewhere no one knew him. All he could think about was his hate for Abilene — she had ruined his life. If it weren’t for her Fred wouldn’t be mad at him. If it weren’t for her he would have never insisted Fred take the salon away from Jillian, and she would have had to deal with the mess. As he walked by the space where the salon used to be he turned to look in the windows but they were papered over.



## Chapter Nineteen

August 2014

Outside was blistering hot in the late summer heat and Jack, parked at Noonan's Manufacturing, hurried from his Porsche to inside the building. Ratchett had her good qualities, and that's why he kept her, and one of them was she kept the air conditioning turned down cold. Soon as he got inside he took a breath of cold air. "Aaahh."

Holding out his phone messages, Ratchett said, "Here."

"Why don't you put them on my desk?"

"The office door is locked."

"Don't you have a key?"

"If you lock the door it must mean you don't want anyone in there."

Snatching the phone messages, Jack slogged up the stairs and unlocked the door. With a big sigh he fell into the chair at his desk, and the air conditioning blasted directly on him. It'd been a year since Fred had found out about him and Abilene, and although J&F hadn't legally dissolved Jack kept the office at Noonan's and Fred either worked at home or at the trucking company. A manufacturing plant and a trucking company were all that was left of the assets they'd accumulated in the 1990s, and thought were their rights in the early 2000s. But now the economy was growing strong again, and Jack had recently started an ad campaign for Noonan's Manufacturing products, an outrageously expensive campaign but it was worth

every penny because sales had already increased. By the end of the month he expected to recover his advertising expense, and the campaign still had another two months to run. That should make him happy but he wallowed in ennui. No longer sure what he wanted in life, he felt as if he were rambling around trying to find answers without questions.

The week before he'd had an appraiser look at the salon equipment still stored downstairs. Today, checking his email, he found the valuation sheet. "Wow," he said out loud, even though he was alone. It was worth far more than he'd imagined, almost enough to pay back what he'd given to Abilene. So, yeah, if one was patient and cool everything worked out. Just like his current loneliness, it too would turnaround and all his old friends would be longing for his company, same as before.

Wednesdays he still played poker at Blue Hiatus but since Fred had remarried and Yohay retired there were no more pre-game suppers. Jack, Fred, Yohay — they had been a team. Jack the handsome, smooth talking businessman who sought and exploited weaknesses; Fred the CPA, the human calculator, methodical in his business plans, creative in his accounting; and their attorney Yohay, who had sharply minimalized any avenues of legal recourse. All their camaraderie was gone. Fred now left the poker table at eleven to go home to his new wife. Yohay, even though he still played most weeks, had lost his passion for the game, and only wanted to talk about his new hobby, skydiving, and how it gave him wood. These days the only thing that put wood in Jack's pecker was Viagra.

Usually, sitting at the poker table were they three plus three or four other players. In the old days, when one of the players had been someone Daryl sent down from upstairs to work as a spoiler, there had been an intricate strategy. But, it'd been since the financial bust that Daryl had

allowed a gambler to owe him more than a couple hundred dollars, and now the games were merely games with no high-rolling antes, no ride high or grovel stakes.

Squinting into the computer screen Jack's heart started to pound. An email from Abilene! Instead of Arizona she had moved to Mt. Tabor area, and opened a small manicure parlor. What was this? An invitation to visit her!

## Chapter Twenty

March 2015

Outside was a glorious early spring day, and Japanese Cherry and apple trees were in bloom. Birds tweeted, the air smelled green and hopeful, and stink bugs showed up in the oddest places. Inside, the yellow sun shone in the dining room and living room windows. Tense quietness filled the townhouse as Jillian hid the camera in the voluptuous breast padding shaped and cut to fit Alda's chest. After angling what appeared to be a large faux-diamond brooch but was really a video camera lens she stepped back. Glenda stepped in and finished Alda's eye shadow and applied mascara, then secured a long, black haired wig on his head.

Giddy with nerves Jillian laughed at Alda. "And I thought you were beautiful before."

"If this doesn't work," Alda said, "let's move to Singapore."

"If this doesn't work we'll be moving somewhere far, far away," Jillian said.

"Are you afraid?" Alda asked.

"Yes! Aren't you?"

Nodding with a grimace-grin Alda stared at himself in the mirror but he couldn't help but crack up. "I make a great siren."

Glenda took a formal bow. "My finest work."

“I could always make a career out of being an oversexed woman,” Alda said as he sashayed across the room.

In a voice mocking Jack’s, Jillian said, “If I had a swing like that I’d hang it up in a tree and play with it.”

“Isn’t that what you do now?” Glenda asked.

Alda laughed, and sticking out his sized double D breasts strutted up to Jillian and in his best smoky, Mae West voice, said, “Are you just happy to see me Jack, or is that a banana in your pocket?”

“Ohh, yeaahh, baaby.”

“Let me take a final look at the both of you,” Glenda said with a crooked smile.

Stopping their hi-jinx, Alda and Jillian stood for inspection.

“I think you’re ready,” Glenda said. Then she walked a circle around Alda. “This truly is some of my finest work.”

Jillian grinned.

“Do you remember what I told you about what Jack likes?” Glenda asked.

Alda nodded.

“Let’s do an equipment check,” Jillian said.

Reaching inside his left double D, Alda switched on the video camera.

Glenda checked her monitor. “Adjust the lens downward a tad.”

Alda adjusted the broach.

“Perfect,” Glenda said as she looked into the monitor.

*Beep.* Going to her purse, Jillian found her cell phone. “Timmy texted he found his old cell phone and located the pictures needed to blackmail Daryl.”

“What if Jack doesn’t think I’m sexy,” Alda asked in a pouty voice.

“He sure thought you were sexy years ago at Eileen Dupre’s Annual Valentine’s Fashion Show and Cocktail Party,” Glenda said.

“That was a long time ago,” Alda said.

“Yeah, so he’s probably more desperate than ever for someone to have sex with,” Glenda said.

“Right, but flirting with someone at a cocktail party is one thing. Getting him naked and on his knees is another.”

“Do what you would want a woman to do to you,” Glenda said.

With a glance and wink at Jillian, Alda said, “Okay, ready.”

Dressed in jeans and an old shirt, and wearing a wig with raggedy blonde hair that partially covered her face Jillian picked up a cleaning bucket that was topped off with rags.

Glenda was dressed as herself.

The three of them each got in their own cars.

#

In his office Jack was reading profit and loss statements Fred had sent over, and was about to fall asleep, when Receptionist Ratchett’s voice blared on his speakerphone.

“There’s a Darlene North here to see you.”

Not one day of his life went by without someone haranguing him to buy something. “You know I don’t see people without an appointment.” But even as he snapped at Receptionist Ratchett, Jack had a vague impression he should know the name.

“Ms. North, said she’s come to deliver your birthday present from Daryl.”

“Oh, well.” Jack chuckled. “Send her up.”

*Click.*

Standing up from behind his desk Jack went to the window, turned his back to the door and looked out over the manufacturing plant. Every person in the factory was looking toward the stairs, but as usual, when they saw him scowling down they returned to work. Today even the floor manager looked away. Jack closed the curtains. From the stairs he heard the slow, deliberate ascent of high heels. A birthday present from Daryl, Jack mused. Part of him wanted to be pleased, but suddenly a bigger part of him resented being put in a position where he would have to perform.

“Hello Mr. O’Blansky,” said a smoky, sexy voice. “Remember me?”

Having turned to face his present, Jack’s knees weakened. He could definitely perform for this. “Ms. North.”

Slowly, unwaveringly, high heels clicking, leading with her magnificent tits she kept coming at him. “From now on you call me Ms. Dominatrix.” Her eyes bored into his. “I’m your birthday present from Daryl.”

“Are we going to finish the party we started so many years ago?”

“Why else would I be here?”

“No reason I can think of.”

Close now, she reached out until the palms of her hands pressed against the curtained window on either side of his head, and kept leaning until he was smooched into her. “A party to remember.” Slowly her tongue rimmed his ear, and her thigh pressed into his hardening dick. After pressing a little harder she stepped back and started strutting around the room. From her bag she pulled out handcuffs, a short whip, and a vibrating dildo.

There were things Jack did that day he'd never done before, things he didn't know he wanted to do, things that just thinking about had disgusted him but coming from Ms. Dominatrix, he couldn't get enough of. Leaning over his desk, being probed from in the ass with the vibrator full blast, he climaxed in pain and exquisite ecstasy.

Then, he was spent and beaten.

Done with him, Ms. Dominatrix dressed and walked out, and he heard her heels descend the stairs.

Still panting and light headed, Jack got himself redressed then sat and stared at the ceiling.

*Knock, knock, knock.* "Cleaning service."

Immediately the door opened and some hag with the ugliest blonde hair he'd even seen, and a bucket full of cleaning supplies brimming over with rags trudged in.

*Buzz, buzz.* Over the intercom Receptionist Ratchett blared, "Mr. O'Blansky, there's another woman down here demanding to see you. Her name is Glenda."

From downstairs came the angry yells of his ex-wife. "Jack, you better come down here and talk to me NOW, or I'll have the accounting on the house sale investigated." Her voice crescendoed into a horrifically loud yell. "You fraudulent piece of shit."

The cleaning hag, going to the closet, pulled out the vacuum, plugged it in and turned it on.

Jack limped downstairs, a twisted smile lingering on his face.

Soon as he was gone, Jillian left the vacuum cleaner going and began to take pictures of all the financial papers on the big desk. Next she plugged a thumb drive into the computer, and started copying files. Shaking with nerves she feared she was going to throw



up, but she didn't stop what she was up to. When she had all the pictures of financial documents, and everything copied off the computer that she wanted she packed the camera and thumb drives in the bottom of her cleaning bucket. When she was done, she turned off the vacuum.

A minute later Jillian heard Glenda yelling again, which was her cue to that it was a good time to go downstairs and slip out of the building.

#

It was Wednesday afternoon and on Jillian and Alda's coffee table were four thumb drives. Two were copies of J&F Inc.'s financials, one was a copy of the video of Ms. Dominatrix and Jack, and the fourth were pictures Timmy had gotten years ago that clearly showed Daryl weighing and packaging cocaine.

Picking up one of the thumb drives with the financials, Alda said, "There's enough here to put both Jack, Fred and Daryle in prison."

Glenda said, "Plus, we've got the video to further blackmail Jack with."

"It's just a sex video," Jillian said. "Maybe Jack won't care."

"He'll care," Glenda said.

"We've also got Timmy's pictures to encourage Daryl to put extra pressure on Jack and Fred," Alda said.

Forcing a smile through her doubts and nerves, Jillian nodded.

"Let's go over this one last time," Glenda said staring at the computer screen. "Jillian, you get the Rose City Salon name and the equipment plus \$50,000. J&F will remain the owner of all salon debt, and they will relinquish all rights."

"Correct," Jillian said.

“Alda, you get Noonan’s Manufacturing. Jack assumes debts not directly related to operating the plant. He must relinquish all rights, contracts and properties.”

“Correct,” Alda said.

“Timmy gets \$5,000.”

“Glenda,” Jillian said, “you get \$95,000.”

Glenda printed three copies of their demands then wrapped each around the designated thumb drives, tied them with a pretty ribbon and added special hand written notes.

#

That night in the Blue Hiatus gambling parlor Yohay, as usual, treated them to their late night snack from Sum of Asia. When the food arrived there were three bonus cartons — one with Jack’s name, one with Fred’s name, and the other marked for Daryl. Opening his carton Jack merrily grabbed the pretty ribbon and plucked out his surprise. A letter and two thumb drives fell onto the table, which he let lay while he read his hand written note, “Enjoy, from Ms. North.” Immediately he grinned and also began to flush with memories.

“What have we got here?” Fred mused. For his surprise, he found one thumb drive, a letter and Alda Noonan’s CPA business card. On the back of the card was written, “You can talk to me, or you can talk to the FBI and the IRS. Call me by noon tomorrow.” There was also a letter. Fred froze.

Happily, Jack unfolded his letter and began to read to himself.

“One of the other players plucked up the carton with Daryl’s name and said, “I’m going upstairs for an eight-ball anyway so I might as well deliver this.”

Jack's face went from a blush of desire to scarlet rage. Standing abruptly, so that his chair fell over, he left the room.

Fred followed him out.

"Did you read the fucking demand letter?" Jack asked.

"We're being blackmailed," Fred said. Livid, visibly shaking, he held up the thumb drive and said, "I'm going to the trucking company office to see what's on here."

Jack watched Fred storm downstairs and leave the building. Turning, he started up the stairs. The player who had delivered Daryl's carton was on his way down and held up a baggy of cocaine invitingly, but Jack ignored him.

Dashing up the stairs and bursting into Daryl's suite Jack saw the unopened carton on his desk. When Daryl looked up and saw Jack, he froze. "What's wrong . . . Are you okay?"

"Did you send a dominatrix to my office on Monday?"

Staring at him and starting to frown, Daryl said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

For a second Jack hesitated then asked, "Did you know Monday was my birthday?"

"Not until this very second." Daryl stood up. "What's happened? What have you got in your hand?"

Pointing at the carton on Daryl's desk, Jack said, "I see you got a surprise too."

Opening the carton, Daryl pulled out the thumb drive, "What's on this?"

Forcing a chuckle, Jack said, "Just a silly joke."

Cynically laughing Daryl said, "Nothing I want to see."

Jack held out his hand to take the thumb drive, but instead Daryl chucked it into a desk drawer.

Returned to the poker table, Jack tried to act calm and play cards, but he was distraught and couldn't concentrate. The cards went sour and he lost three hands in a row. Standing he said. "My head's about to split open with a migraine." He couldn't get out of there fast enough.

At home Jack put the first thumb drive into his laptop. It was J&F's financial papers. Everywhere Fred had connived the figures was highlighted.

On the other thumb drive was Jack naked and hand-cuffed to the desk with his dick hard, and Ms. Dominatrix with a whip in one hand and in the other a dildo.

Ripping the thumb drive out of the computer he threw it against the wall. Anguished and afraid he ranted round his living room.

The phone rang. It was Fred. "We're in big trouble if this gets out."

"You're telling me."

"I saw you got two thumb drives," Fred said. "What was on them?"

"They're two copies of the same thing."

"Well, what are they?"

"Financial papers with yellow highlighting," Jack snapped.

"Why would they send you two copies of the same thing?"

"Because their screaming idiots," Jack bellowed.

"In the morning I'm calling Alda Noonan."

"I'm going to teach all of them a lesson."

“Don’t be more stupid and impotent than you already are,” Fred hissed. “You’ve been saying shit like that for years, yet all you’ve really done is drag J&F into your greed and debauchery.” *Slam!*

*Ring, ring.* Caller identification told Jack it was Daryl. He didn’t answer but he did listen while the message was being left. “You get this mess cleared up NOW,” Daryl yelled. *Slam!*

## Chapter Twenty One

June 2015

Every time Jillian entered the building she felt pleased, and today her pleasure continued to rise as the elevator carried her to the 19<sup>th</sup> floor. Arms full of grocery bags she stepped out of the elevator, and as she walked down the hall an aroma, rich and delicious, pulled her closer and closer to condo 1919. Inside music played, and she quietly closed the door then tip toed toward the kitchen. Grinning, she considered suddenly making a loud noise, or disguising her voice to seem like a thief, or sneak up behind Alda and cover his eyes. But, watching him trying to stir the saucepan on the stove, read a recipe book and also do a kind of anxious half-step-stand on one foot, touched her heart. “Ahh,” she sighed out loud. “There’s nothing better than a man who cooks.”

“Huh!?” Alda jumped, *Clatter, splat*. Whatever was in the saucepan was now globbing down the front of the stove and onto the floor. Alda, frozen in dismay, stared at the mess.

Coming around the center island Jillian stopped short to keep from stepping in steaming, yellowish goo.

“So much for lemon meringue pie,” Alda said.

“But, it’s one of my favorites, and Jerome’s too,” Jillian said.

“I know. Why else would I attempt to make a recipe that obviously calls for three hands?”

Finally setting down the bags of groceries Jillian sidled around the goo.

*Ding dong.*

“What time is it?” Alda asked in alarm.

“Glenda’s coming early to help get ready.”

An hour later the condo was a merry gathering of Jerome, Timmy, Tamzin, Monique and Glenda, and the core crew from Noonan’s Manufacturing.

Jerome, holding a gin and tonic, made the first toast, “It’s been a hard but rewarding year. *We have arrived.*”

Receptionist Rachett, whose real name was Rachel, said, “Here’s to a great summer and continued success.”

Jillian said, “Here’s to all of us.”

#

Shortly after having been routed Jack listed his opulent condo for sale. A three-some from California offered full price, but wanted it remodeled. By the time the sale closed Jack was significantly behind in his mortgage payments, but with Fred’s accounting he managed to end up with enough cash to obtain a private contract for a two story building in the Park Rose District.

In the bottom floor was Abilene’s Manicure Salon, where she had enough customers to support two freehand artists, plus two fill and paint artists. The parlor used only Tamzin’s products.

On the top floor were Jack and Abilene's living quarters, and Jack's office. He marketed Abilene's Manicure Salon and Tamzin's products — which he also sold online, and he gambled professionally. And he did all the cooking.

Crooning and dancing in the kitchen, Jack served their food onto the plates Abilene was holding. Then, as she hummed and swayed, he followed her into the television room.

"Sugar plum," Jack purred while holding two full glasses of wine, "this is going to be the best meal ever."

Pouting at him and licking her lips, Abilene said, "What's for dessert?"

"I've got a surprise especially for you."