

Chapter One

After dancing with her girlfriends to Lady Gaga, Catherine collapsed into the wooden chair and gulped down half her ice water. Oops. That was her rum and coke.

“I don’t know if I could be any happier for you, Cat.” Celeste wrapped an arm around her and clinked her glass with Cat’s.

Cat beamed. “Thanks, Cel. You’re not just saying that because you’re my maid of honor?”

“Nope,” Celeste said, sending a little spray when pronouncing the “P”. “Now, a toast. To the most beautiful bride in all of Travis County.” Her blonde bestie lifted a shot of Bazooka Joe from the selection the waitress had just delivered.

All twelve reached for the fun blue drinks.

“Here, here,” Bethany said, her big, almond-shaped eyes sparkling.

All Cat’s friends plus her bridesmaids—Cel, Riley, Lori, Julie, and Bethany—joined in.

The concoction went down in a yummy stream—so good she’d lost count how many she’d had. Cat reached for her ice water, double-checking before she took a swig.

“Oh, my request! Let’s go, girls.” Lori popped out of her chair, her red curls bouncing in the process.

The beginning of “Jack & Diane” by John Mellencamp blasted over the speakers of the dance club/bar in downtown Austin. Cat’s friends had planned the best bachelorette party a girl could ask for—the veil, the scavenger hunt, dinner, drinks at every bar. No detail left unnoticed. In fact, Riley had run into an ex-boyfriend and promised him a blow job in the back hall if he’d buy them a round of shots. After he’d dropped off tequila shots, Riley’s smile twinkled like her diamond-stud earrings, and she disappeared for a few minutes. Cat wished she could be as bold.

Cat wobbled when she stood and chuckled. Her fiancé’s name was Jack, and her middle name was Diane—Catherine Diane. The tune was like their theme song.

Carving out space on the dance floor, the twelve women let loose. Arms flying, hair swinging, and voices shaking—they sang along. Cat pushed her play veil back into position.

A deep voice sounded behind her. “Can I help you with that?”

Cat spun around to find a sorta cute blond smiling down at her. He had a build similar to Jack, maybe a little taller, and his shoulder-length hair was tucked behind his ears. But his smile did nothing for Cat. When Jack smiled, butterflies took flight in her stomach. Every single time.

“Nope.” She swayed, still fussing with her darn veil, and the blond put his hands on her hips to balance her.

“Sweetheart, you look like you’re having all kinds of fun. Your groom is one lucky man. Mind if I dance with you?”

She grinned from ear to ear hearing reference to Jack. “He is.” She nodded and felt a rush of dizziness again. “And you can dance with me, as long as you don’t get any ideas.”

He lifted his hands in surrender. “Promise.”

They danced through the next three songs, and only twice did the blond need to grab her hips to stabilize her.

“I need water,” she called to her girls and waved to the blond. Five of them followed her back to the table where she finished off her glass. She retrieved her phone from her mini purse to shoot off a text to her sweetie.

“What are you doing?” Celeste leaned in.

“Texting Jack.”

“You really are smitten.”

She looked up and sighed. “Celeste, how did I get so lucky? My world revolves around this man, and I couldn’t be happier. Jack’s different. I’m done with the losers.” After about two years together, Cat learned how caring and generous Jack was. He would always open the door for her and offer to pick up groceries from the store for her.

Celeste smiled and nodded.

She finished her text and reread it.

Hello my handsome fiancé. I’m having a wonderful time, but I’m thinking it could be even better if I dropped by tonight to do naughty things to you.

She giggled and hit send. Where did this gutsiness come from? The alcohol made her do it.

“Okay, next on the scavenger list,” Lori announced as she unfolded the sheet of paper.

Her girls had made a list of things she had to do that night, like dance with a guy who was also named Jack, have a guy give her his underwear, kiss a bald man’s head leaving a lipstick mark, and the list went on. She was about half-way through.

“Oh, you can do this one,” Bethany pointed to number five: draw a tattoo on a bartender or bouncer.

Riley handed her a black marker from her purse while Cat scanned the room. The bartenders were slammed at the bar, and there wasn’t a bouncer in sight, not that her double vision was reliable right then.

“Does a DJ count?”

The ladies looked at each other, silently taking a vote. “Yes,” Celeste announced.

Cat carefully stood and made her way to the DJ booth. *Don’t fall, and speak clearly.*

“Hey.”

The DJ pulled his headset back from one ear. “Hey, pretty lady. Wanna hear a song?”

“No. I need to do a task.”

“A task?” His eyes narrowed.

“Yeah. I have a list of things to do for my bachelorette party, and one of them is to draw a tattoo on the DJ.” She wiggled the pen in her hand. “Will you let me?”

He stared at her for a beat. “What’s your name?”

“Cat.”

“Okay. Come up here.”

She climbed the two steps as he held open the booth gate.

“Gimme a second.” He put his headset back in place and pressed some buttons on his control panel. When the song ended, he clicked on the microphone. “Okay, you party fiends. In the house, we have Cat, our bride-to-be. Everyone give it up for Cat.”

The crowd went wild with applause and hoots. Her girls beamed at her in the spotlight.

Geez! She hated the attention. *You can do this, Cat.*

“She has a list of things she needs to accomplish tonight. One is to draw a tattoo on the DJ.”

Her smile fell. She hadn’t thought about what she was going to draw.

“So, yours truly is going to be her willing-and-able victim.” More hoots and hollers. “The question is, where do I get my tattoo? My arm? My stomach? Or maybe my ass?”

The crowd went positively wild.

Shit! He wouldn’t. Holy crap!

“Now, calm down. I don’t want to lose my job, so pretty lady, stomach it is.” The DJ leaned forward to the control panel to play the instrumental piece from the Jeopardy game show. Then, he lifted his shirt to reveal a reasonably taut stomach with very little hair. “Okay, sweetheart, have at it.”

Her brain couldn’t fire on all cylinders. There was only one thing that came to her mind. “Here goes.”

Cat knew the image well, although the marker didn’t allow for much detail work, not like her charcoals. She took about two minutes and felt the DJ getting impatient. She finished quickly and wrote a caption.

The man tipped his head down to his stomach, and his mouth dropped open.

From the applause and laughter, the crowd seemed to love her work.

It wasn’t her best by any means but with such limited time... She winked at her portrait of Jack, gave her thank you to the DJ, and returned to the table of her exuberant friends.

“Oh my god. You are crazy,” Julie said.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Bethany shook her head and smiled.

“What did you write underneath?” Riley asked.

“*Jack 4 Ever.*”

The girls broke into laughter all over again.

The night ended around two, everyone hugging and piling into their Uber rides. Cat and Celeste’s driver pulled up to Jack’s apartment building.

“Are you sure he’s home?” Celeste glanced up to the second floor.

“Not exactly. He didn’t reply to my text,” which was unlike Jack unless he was hip-deep in a major project, “but he didn’t have plans tonight other than going to Randall’s for the game. I’m sure he’s sound asleep in his bed.” She grinned, thinking about the delicious way she would wake him up. Although she’d never done anything as courageous as this before, she had his key and was prepared to use it.

“I’ll wait here until I see you get inside.” Celeste wasn’t just a good roommate, she was her best friend. Cat’s parents had almost divorced when Cat was fifteen, and Cel had gotten her through. All the years of experimental hair-dyeing? Cel at her side. And she’d been right there during the breakup with Weird Will, her boyfriend during college.

“Okay, sounds like a plan.” Cat climbed the steps without issue, retrieved his key from her purse, and opened the apartment door.

Her heart raced in anticipation. She waved to Celeste in the waiting car, and Celeste waved back.

Cat stepped into Jack’s dark apartment and quietly closed the door behind her. She loved spending time here, and couldn’t wait to move in next week. The spaciousness of the hardwood floors, and new appliances in the kitchen. Of course, Jack’s job as a stock broker meant he could afford a big apartment like this.

She set her purse down, lifted her skirt, and slid off her panties. She suppressed a laugh that threatened to bubble up. She’d thought a few times of doing something like this, and now, here she was. Two days before she was officially Mrs. John Sumners.

Licking her lips, she slowly made her way down the hall to his bedroom. Immediately she noticed a light spilling from the cracked doorway. He was awake.

Maybe he’d gotten in late too. Or maybe he’d fallen asleep with the light on.

No worries. He would still *love* her surprise.

Stepping to the door, her hand hovering over the knob, she stopped short. Was that a voice?

She pushed the door open just an inch or two and heard it again. This time with a moan. Cat's breath hitched. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

She moved the door just enough to poke her head through, and nearly gasped. Her hand over her mouth silenced her shocked intake of breath as the scene played out before her. A naked woman in the center of Jack's bed on her hands and knees, a naked Jack pumping into her from behind.

Cat's stomach churned. Her fiancé was making love to another woman—a bleached-blonde with ginormous breasts.

Cat wanted to run. She wanted to scream. But she couldn't pull herself away. Like watching an accident on the road, she had to know what was going on.

Jack groaned, then pulled out of her.

"Oh baby, don't stop." The female's head dropped forward as she gasped for air.

"Don't you worry about that." Jack licked and bit her ass.

"Ooh, you know how I love that," the bimbo sighed.

Jack moved to her sex and practically buried his tongue in her.

Oh God. Cat stood stock-still, gaping, wondering how many times they'd done this. *He'd done this, to this woman.*

His fingers gripped her ass, separating her, and then... oh, he licked her, all the way up *there.*

The blonde moaned like a mare in labor. Jack hovered for several more beats before sticking his pinkie in her tiny hole.

Cat's muscles clenched.

This wasn't *her* Jack, it couldn't be. He never did these kinds of things with *her.*

Cat didn't know how much more she could take before vomiting. If she hadn't drunk so much, she would've slapped him—or something—by now.

He stood and entered her again, his hips and his pinkie working in concert.

The blonde pushed back on him and moaned.

"That's right, baby. Let me hear you," he said, preceded by a slap across her ass.

Cat gasped as if she herself had been slapped.

The two turned in her direction. Jack's mouth fell open. "Baby, you're here. I wasn't expecting you."

She stared hard at both of them. Neither looked away. *Say something.*

"I texted you." The words rolled off her tongue without a conscience thought.

Asshole. There was a thought. *What an asshole.* She was about to marry a certifiable, fucking cheating asshole.

"And who are you talking to, Jack? Isn't she *baby* too?" Cat pierced the air with her finger.

Jack pulled out of the woman on his bed. "No. Wait, let me explain."

"Asshole," she hissed. "You don't need to explain a thing. Your dick has done that for you." She quickly made her way to the living room, grabbed her purse and flew down the stairs, leaving the door wide open.

"Cat! Wait. I can explain," he yelled after her.

She didn't stop. She ran passed the next building, across the parking lot, glancing briefly at a couple who tracked her flight. She didn't care what people thought. Gasping for air, fighting back hot tears, Cat dropped onto the bench outside an office and called Celeste.

"Can you come get me?" She gave her location and sobbed into her hands.

Chapter Two

Cat awoke the next morning and froze as the memories of the prior night came rushing back. She groaned aloud. Wasn't there some way to fast forward through all this heartache, this embarrassment, to get to the part of "everything will be alright"?

A soft knock sounded before Celeste slowly opened her bedroom door and peeked inside. "How you doing?"

Her eyes felt sore and swollen, and her stomach was heavy as lead. "Shitty. What time is it?"

"About ten." Celeste walked in, holding a steaming mug. "I thought you could use some coffee, and here are two ibuprofen in case your head is pounding."

Not until she'd just mentioned it.

Cat grabbed the covers to hide her face and another ugly cry as tears threatened. "God, Celeste. What am I gonna do? Tomorrow is our wedding day. *Supposed* to be our wedding day."

Celeste sat on the bed and peeled back the sheet. Her eyes filled with sympathy and love. "You're gonna do what you've always done when you're knocked down. Fight. One day at a time, you fight to get your life back, your sanity back."

Cat wiped her cheeks and sniffled.

"Don't worry about tomorrow. I can have the girls here in an hour if you want us to start calling guests and all that."

Cat nodded. "Did he come over?"

Celeste shook her head.

Why wouldn't he? Why wouldn't he fight for her? "Okay. Give me a few minutes."

Cel left, and Cat reached for her phone resting on the nightstand. The screen read thirty-eight missed calls and eleven messages, all from Jack. Should she dare to listen to the messages? What if he was sorry? *Oh please, does that matter?*

After a quick shower, Cat slipped on a pair of sweatpants and a cami, wrapped her wet hair in a bun on the top of head, and dragged her body to the kitchen. Time to face the world.

Riley and Lori were already seated at the kitchen table, sipping coffee.

"Hi, sweetie." They both stood and wrapped her in a big hug. "How are you doing?"

"Lousy," she exhaled, "but I guess it's better that I know now, not after we got married."

"That's right," Riley nodded.

"I filled them in on what we need to do." Celeste joined the group at the table.

Cat looked down at her wedding binder. All her notes, guest list, contact information for the florist, caterer, church, reception hall, all of it was inside.

Celeste took her hand. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Cat slumped into an empty chair, letting a few tears flow. She was among her close friends.

Lori handed her a tissue.

"I don't see how I can trust him again. I feel so... so destroyed. How is it a man can have that much power over me? I believed in him, in us. I gave him everything. I thought I was getting everything in return. Turns out I was just sharing him." More tears streamed down her cheeks. "And I feel embarrassed." She waved a hand over her year of work on planning for what she'd hoped would be the event of her life. "Now I get to make it public that I've been jilted."

"Oh, sweetie. Give it time. Don't think about all of this," Celeste implored. "We'll take care of it."

“How do you want to handle Jack?” Riley cupped a hand over hers.

She stared down at her phone. “I’m gonna call him.”

“Okay. We’ll take care of this,” Celeste tapped her binder, “while you do that.”

“Then we’ll order in lunch and watch a comedy. How does that sound?” Lori smiled meekly.

“Kay. Thank you all for helping me. I don’t know what I would do without my girls.”

Celeste hugged her when she stood up. With her phone in hand, Cat went to her bedroom and closed the door.

With a deep breath, she pushed past the boulder in her gut, wiped her eyes, and made the call.

“Oh God, you’re alright. I was so worried.” Jack’s voice sounded rough and tired. *Serves him right. And if he was so damn worried, why didn’t he come over?*

“Jack,—”

“Wait, before you start. Let me say how sorry I am. It was a moment of weakness, and I promise you, it will never happen again.”

He sounded sincere, but was he sorry for cheating or sorry for getting caught?

She willed herself to be calm, even though her insides were torrents of emotion, wreaking havoc on her stomach, her mind, her heart. “I understand. Jack, let me ask you. How many moments of weakness have you had?”

The air over the phone deadened. She waited. She’d seen enough lawyers at her work question people, getting at the meat of the story. There was always more than what was disclosed.

“Well, I couldn’t—”

“Take your best guess. You can be honest with me. With the blonde woman and anyone else as well.”

Her throat constricted asking the question, fearing the answer, but she had to know. She didn’t bother to wipe her tears since more would fall. She moved the phone away from her mouth and took a fortifying breath. *Keep it together, Cat.*

“It was the fourth time with Bonnie.” His voice held a meek and pensive tone.

Shit! “The blonde from last night. But she’s not the only one. How many have there been? Total?”

“Cat, you really don’t want to know.”

She swallowed hard, her eyes crushing closed as if it could stop the acid tears or the images of him with other women. “Yes, I do. I need to know, Jack. How many?”

“Eight,” he said in barely a whisper.

Oh God. Oh God. How could he? What did I ever do to him?

She willed her brain to work, to hang on for a few more minutes. She had to get through this. Then she never had to talk to Jack again. “I see. Let me ask you one more question. If you wanted all of them, why propose to me?”

He sighed. “Cat, please let me come over. Let’s discuss this in person.”

She knew that wasn’t a good idea. He would try some kind of manipulation, and she wasn’t strong enough right now to handle it.

“We can talk over the phone. Why, Jack?” Her voice cracked.

“I don’t know. They were more adventurous, I guess.”

“Adventurous?” Her stomach triple-knotted. That hit a little too close to home.

“I love making love to you, but it always... it always seems so safe. So cautious. Like you were holding back. I guess I wasn’t thinking straight. I wanted this with you, but since we didn’t... God, Cat. I guess I thought I could sow my oats before we got married. Sorta get it out of my system.”

Get it out of your system? What an asshole!

“I see.” Tears streamed down like a running faucet. What more could she say? Her brain was locked up. All the emotion, all the hurt, froze her in place. She wanted so badly to crawl out of her body, out of this life, and escape. Escape the pain, escape the embarrassment for being rejected for not being enough.

“Cat, please let me come over.”

“Jack, I’ve reached a decision. The wedding is off. You won’t change, this I’m certain of. I will have someone bring your things to you. Please gather up my things,” she sobbed out loud, “so my friends... can pick them up.” She croaked the words.

“Cat, no, wait. I swear it won’t happen again. We have too much love between us to throw it all away.”

“We *had* love between us. I trusted you. That trust is broken and won’t ever be repaired. Goodbye, Jack.”

She hung up the phone and sobbed. “Ah.” She cried out, trying to release the misery.

The phone rang in her hand. Jack.

She just stared at it through clouded vision. When the device went silent, she opened her contacts, and hit “block”. She was done trusting him, he was out of her life, what more was there to say? He could have his “adventures”; she’d be too busy trying to put her life back together.

She staggered to her feet and rummaged through her drawers and closet. He’d mostly had shirts and underwear at her place. A pair of his running shoes sat in her closet. She shoved it all into a canvas bag and went to the bathroom. Toothbrush, deodorant, razor, cologne, and comb. Then, without more than five seconds of thought, she pulled the photographs of them out of her drawer and off her dresser. A year and a half of memories, erased in a heartbeat. But for her sanity, she knew this was what she had to do. She couldn’t dare be surrounded with the memories of Jack anymore.

Looking down at the ring on her left hand, she slipped it off and set it in her jewelry box.

She strolled back to the living room. Her girls were busy on their phones. Cat gathered the photos from around the space of her and Jack, so many great times. Well, maybe someday she would appreciate them because now they all seemed like one big fat lie.

Eight women. For fuck’s sake!

She dropped the bag by the front door, causing a thump. Then, she grabbed her key ring and wound Jack’s apartment key off—tossing it on top.

Celeste finished a call and looked up at her. “How ya’ doing?”

“Numb.”

“That’s to be expected. Want some more coffee?”

“Yeah. But I can get it.”

A knock came at the door and she jumped, her heart lodged in her throat. She knew who it was. “I can’t see him, Cel. Not now,” she stage-whispered.

Celeste held up her hand. “I know. I’ll handle it.”

Cat peeked through the peep-hole and nodded, confirming it was Jack. Celeste pulled open the door. “What is it, Jack?”

“I need to see Cat.”

“She doesn’t want to see you right now. She’ll call you when she’s ready, *if she’s ready.*”

Cat heard him sigh.

“Please, just let me in.”

“Face it, Jack. She’s done. You took a gamble and lost. You had a fifty-fifty chance that you wouldn’t get caught. Those odds are better than Vegas. But you lost. Time to cash in your remaining chips and go home.”

Cat heard nothing more from Jack. Celeste just stared straight ahead, letting him know she was not backing down.

God, she loved her friend so much right then.

“Oh.” Celeste leaned down to pick up the canvas bag. “She wanted me to give this to you.” Cel swung the bag backward and sent it sailing. It made direct contact with his privates.

He doubled over. “Ow.”

She grinned as she closed and locked the door.

Tears filled Cat’s eyes even as her mouth gapped. “Ohmigosh.”

Celeste took her in a hug. “You’re welcome. Remember—one day at a time.”

She nodded, secretly glad that Cel used Jack’s balls as target practice.

The day proceeded without any further incident. She made a call to her parents, who were incredibly supportive. She promised to phone them later when she was alone. The girls sat around the living room, eating pizza, drinking a little beer—after the previous night, everyone was cautious—and watching some comedy of which Cat could barely recount the storyline. Instead, her mind replayed every date, every conversation, every time she’d made love to Jack, and questions filled her head. What did she do? What didn’t she do? What could she have done better? Oh yeah, be more adventurous. Well, she already knew that. Shit, *he* already knew that too. He’d never once complained about her lack of *adventure*. What a fucker!

He’d said something once, like *wouldn’t it be cool to try this outside sometime?* Or that time he’d tried to get her to go out to dinner with a bunch of their friends and not wear panties under her dress.

Whatever. That was no excuse to sleep with all those women.

The day stretched as long as it could for Cat and she needed to bring it to an end. After the movie, she rose. “I’m going to bed, guys. I feel exhausted.”

Celeste stood by her side. “We got everything taken care of, babe. Sleep as long as you need. There’s only one thing we need to talk about, but it can wait.”

What? Her shoulders slumped. *No more. Please let this nightmare end.* “Thanks. Goodnight, guys.”

“Goodnight, Cat.” They hugged her, and she went to her bedroom.

To her surprise, Cat fell asleep quickly. Unfortunately, she didn’t stay asleep. No, she wasn’t that lucky.

Feeling sad and depressed, she did what the experts would probably advise against—she opened her phone. The one place she hadn’t gotten rid of the photos, and there were so many. Countless shots of selfies, some of just him, others where someone else took their picture.

Tears streamed from her swollen eyes, landing on her pillow.

How could she have been so blind? Jack was her everything. She’d thought of traveling together, buying a house, having kids, growing old. And he’d pissed it all away because *she* wasn’t adventurous enough.

A sob escaped. She couldn't help if that was her nature. Her mother wouldn't exactly be described as adventurous, and her parents were happily married for over thirty years—even through the rough patches.

Cat threw back the covers and meandered to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. The apartment was dark except for moonlight coming through the sliding glass door in the living room.

When her water was hot, she poured it over the tea bag in her cup and brought it out to her small patio. There was space for two chairs, a little table, and two potted plants. She sat and stared at the nighttime landscape from her sixth-floor apartment. Mostly dark houses, illuminated street lights, and the Austin skyline in the distance. The summer air was still and quiet.

She sighed over her cup. How could a person be more adventurous if that wasn't in their nature? Could a person change just like that? Could she?

She was obsessing, playing and replaying times when maybe she could have taken a risk, but didn't. The mental hamster wheel she was on exhausted her.

She heard a noise and turned around. Celeste stood at the doorway in the living room.

"Hey. Couldn't sleep?"

"Nope."

Celeste sat beside her. "Whatcha thinking about?"

"Everything." She looked at her friend. "Eight women, Cel! Who does that? He said he was sowing his oats with adventurous women. What a bunch of crap. I would have been more understanding if he was drunk, macking down with someone." She huffed. "Possibly."

Celeste's eyes softened. "I don't understand it either. Did he mention wanting to be more adventurous with you before?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "A few times."

"And that scares you."

She nodded. Honestly, terrified her, but she could see how exciting it could be too, trying something new.

"I don't know, Cel. I just feel fooled. *I* was a fool."

Celeste leaned in, her hand resting on hers. "Now don't say that. No one saw that coming. I thought you two were perfect for each other."

"Yeah." Well, whatever Celeste thought, she felt like a fool. She didn't know how long it would be before she could trust a man again.

"Listen, I need you to think about something. There was only one thing we couldn't take care of."

Cat faced Celeste. "What is it?"

"The honeymoon."

"Shit," she said under her breath.

"Everything is paid for, and I can't get you any refunds. I didn't see anything about insurance. Did you happen to buy any?"

"No." She sighed. "I was expecting to go without any issues."

"I know. Well, I want you to think about something."

She stared at her friend.

"Go."

"What?" Her face crinkled.

"I want you to go. You already have off work. It's paid for. And it will do you so much good."

She turned back to her skyline view. "I don't know about that. Come with me."

Celeste gave a small smile. "I can't take off right now. You can do this. Saint Lucia is beautiful. You've always wanted to go. You'll be at an all-inclusive or have guided tours, so you'll be safe going by yourself. *And...*" Celeste waited for her to look her way, "you can take your charcoals and have a little 'me' time. You know how drawing always helps ease the pain."

Her charcoals. She'd been so busy with wedding stuff, she hadn't created any art in *months*. "I don't know, Cel. It sounds so cliché."

"Not cliché. Practical. Just think about it. Think about stepping out of your comfort zone. Your flight isn't until Sunday at two." With that, Celeste rose, kissed her on the top of her head, and went back inside.

Go by myself? On a trip that was supposed to be with my husband?

Cat would definitely need to sleep on that. Having a reminder that the trip was supposed to be her honeymoon thrown in her face didn't sound like her idea of a good time.

Cat finished her tea and went back to bed. Blessed sleep came as she reminded herself to take it one day at a time.

Chapter Three

Saturday morning, Cat yanked off the covers and walked to the bathroom, stripping along the way. She had an energy, a determination, pulsing through her veins she hadn't felt before. Like some outside force was propelling her forward.

Frankly, she wanted to harness it, embrace it. This day was supposed to have been her wedding day, but if she dwelled on that, she'd be sick over Jack again. She was already tired of crying. Thinking about what could have been.

She dressed and headed out to the kitchen.

"Hey. How ya' feeling?" Celeste looked up from her tablet and smiled.

"Strangely energized."

"Really?" Her friend's eyebrows rose.

Prepping a cup of coffee with cream and sugar, she began, "I need to get my gown and all that put away. I don't exactly know what I'll do with it, but I don't want to toss it out. Then I need to unpack what I packed to move into Jack's."

"Okay, I like that plan."

She sat at the table across from her friend. "Then, I'll go through my suitcase and make sure I have everything I need for tomorrow."

Celeste gasped. "You're going to Saint Lucia." It wasn't a question.

A small smile appeared, the first since she'd caught Jack cheating on her. "That's right."

"What made you change your mind?"

Cat sipped her coffee. "Well, you."

Celeste sat straighter. "Me?"

"You encouraged me to spread my wings. Plus I decided some time alone would help me reassess and reevaluate. I think some sun would be good too."

Celeste bit her lip. "And I like the idea that it's the last thing Jack could do for you—a free two-week vacation. I think he owes you that."

She grinned from ear to ear. "I one-hundred percent agree."

Cat spent the day getting organized, packing for her trip, and trying not to think about Jack. She'd cried a few times, but searched deep down for the strength to get through the day. She welcomed the determination that pulsed through her, because if she let it, the sadness and depression of this whole fiasco would swallow her whole.

She stopped for lunch Celeste had made, turning on her phone to call her parents and tell them where she'd be for the next two weeks.

"Honey, I'm happy for you. I think a trip is a great idea," her mom said.

"Thanks. Did Jack call you?"

Her mom's voice dropped. "Yes, he did. He asked if I would talk to you. Of course, I told him if and when you were ready to talk, he would likely be the first to know."

Cat loved that her mom was in her corner, and not trying to somehow convince her that "men slip up" or some other line of crap. "Great. Thanks."

They wrapped up the conversation, and Cat turned off her phone. She had no interest in hearing from anyone about this whole incident. She needed time alone to process.

Celeste pulled her out of her wandering thoughts. "Hey, care to go through your bachelorette gifts? You might even want to pack some of the gifts for Saint Lucia."

A distraction sounded like a banner idea. "Okay."

Celeste set the gifts on the table and grabbed a note pad to mark everything down.

The first gift was from Lori—a bath and spa set in a wonderful lavender set. Cat knew she could relax with something like this. Next, Bethany had given her a purple satin robe with the word “Bride” in gold lettering printed on the back.

Cel looked at garment. “Oops,” and quickly folded it back into the bag.

The gifts continued—wine and chocolate, a jewelry box, luxurious sheet set. Then, she opened Celeste’s gift—lingerie. She held up a bra that had hole in each cup and matching panties.

“I love these cutouts, don’t you?” Celeste said with a twinkle in her eye.

Cat wasn’t much into fancy underwear, although the pink color was gorgeous.

Celeste turned, cupped her upper arm, and spoke softly. “This is a new chapter in your life, Cat. I know you feel like crap now, but it won’t stay that way. Break out of the practical cotton bras and panties. Because some day you will meet someone who will love to see you in this.”

Cat groaned. She had no other response. She wasn’t looking for a “someone”. She’d had a someone and he’d deceived her. There was no rush to fill the vacancy.

There was no use arguing, instead she reached for the next gift. Cat felt like she was having an out-of-body experience, like she was just going through the motions of life. She vacillated between anger and sadness, between energized to move on and depressed about what could have been.

She’d opened all her wonderful gifts—her friends were so thoughtful—when Cel patted the chocolate and lotions. “Do you want to check to make sure you have room in your suitcase for these?”

“Good idea.”

By the time Cat had stuffed the last few things in her luggage, down to the sunblock and lip balm, Cel walked in holding her new lingerie.

“Don’t forget this.” She waved the garments in the air.

Again, not much Cat’s cup of tea, unlike her BFF who had a passion for lacy and satin things. “No way, Cel. I’m not taking that with me.”

“Aw, c’mon. It will make you feel sexy.”

“That’s okay. Maybe some other time.” Cat’s stomach rumbled. She considered that a good sign. “How about I make dinner tonight?”

“That works for me.”

She was ever so thankful her friend dropped the subject.

Over spaghetti and meatballs, Celeste asked, “How are you feeling? Any phone calls?”

“I’m hanging in there. I don’t know about the calls. I left my phone in my purse the whole day.” She was doing all she could not think about Jack or the wedding, but she didn’t know exactly how to move on from something like this. There should be a manual or something.

“Are you still planning on going to Saint Lucia?”

That thought had crossed her mind a few times to bag it, but it never stuck. “Yes.”

“Good. Are you thinking about calling him?”

“Hell no.” Okay, that wasn’t entirely true. She needed closure to heal, and she knew it...but would she actually get it from Jack, or would he feed her the same bullshit he’d dished out last time?

“Good and good. Be strong. One day at a time.”

The seven and a half hour flight to the island of Saint Lucia was grueling. Not because of the length, but because Cat had serious second thoughts.

Who travels to some foreign place alone?

People do it all the time.

Sure, people who are more daring or brave.

She battled with herself, rehashed conversations with, not just Jack, but every boy she'd ever dated. Maybe those times she'd thought her relationships had simply fizzled because of lack of chemistry it had really been lack of risk-taking. Weird Will might have had some weird fetishes, but how could she *really* judge without trying and experiencing firsthand?

Never before had she felt so completely uncertain of herself. She was a paralegal with tons of confidence at her job. This? This was new territory.

As they prepared to land, Cat wiped her clammy hands down the sides of her sundress. She could do this.

She'd go straight to the hotel, have a bite, and collapse in bed. It was late, and she had zero plans the next day on purpose.

The bellhop took her bags from the taxi's trunk, and Cat paid the cab driver. She walked through the revolving door and took in her surroundings.

The hotel was everything she'd dreamed of—open, breezy, well-appointed without being over the top. Low, deep sofas and chairs scattered on an oversized tile floor that stretched out to the pool area. Dim light filled the back gardens and outlined the vast infinity pool. In the dark of night, she couldn't see the ocean, but the salty smell lingered.

"Good evening. Welcome to the resort." The front desk receptionist had smooth cocoa skin and wore a fuchsia skirt suit. She greeted Cat with a warm smile.

"Hello. I'm Catherine Dalton. Checking in."

"Yes, Miss Dalton." She clicked on her keyboard, verified Cat's I.D., and handed her a key. "You are in suite five-forty. The resort is all-inclusive," she slid a brochure over the counter, "so here are the services and amenities that are included in your package. If you would like to go to town, simply schedule with the valets ahead of time. Please enjoy your stay, and don't hesitate to ask if there is anything you need."

Cat returned the smile, simply thankful to not get called Mrs. Sumners. She owed that to Celeste and the girls.

The bellhop escorted her to her room, and after a brief introduction of where things were, she tipped him before he left.

Wow! The suite was beautiful. A luxurious oversized bed with crisp white linens, a large pale blue and salmon Oriental rug over marble tile flooring, and soft linen drapes that flowed gently at an open sliding glass door leading to the balcony.

"Jack, you have outdone yourself." She appreciated the hotel, her room, but mostly she was glad to have landed and was only minutes from a comfy bed.

If she didn't cry herself to sleep, that would be a bonus.

The next morning, sun spilled through the windows, touches of gilded gold on everything. Cat had tossed and turned before finally settling into a deep coma of sleep. She glanced at the time. Ten a.m.

She must have needed—she did the math in her head—eleven hours of sleep.

Geez!

She reached for her phone and shot off a text to Celeste, who immediately replied.

So glad you made it! Have fun. Drink drinks with umbrellas and fruit. Get a massage and facial. Create the next Cat Dalton work of art. Cel xx

Cat chuckled out loud. It felt good to laugh, even if it was only briefly.

She flung her suitcase on the king-sized bed and proceeded to unpack her clothes. It took only a minute when she noticed Celeste's sexy pink lingerie gift. She lifted the bra, running her fingertips over the lace. Cel must have snuck it in her bag. She rolled her eyes.

Cat gasped. Beneath the lingerie was a box with the image of a pink vibrator. Holy cow!

She opened the box and brought the item closer for inspection. Cat had a vibrator at home, somewhere. But it wasn't nearly as big as this, and not so life-like. This was thick and had bumpy lines and ridges like a real man would have. Heat rose in her cheeks just holding the implement.

Knowing Cel, it was probably already charged. *Clearly she thought this would be encouraging—stretching my boundaries and all that.*

Cat stuck the box in the nightstand drawer—sex was the last thing on her mind—and finished unpacking.

After putting her clothes away, she slipped on her bathing suit, cover-up and hat, grabbed the hotel brochure, and headed to the pool. She sat at a small table off to the side and ordered the largest egg breakfast they offered.

She was famished, and it didn't bother her in the least when the waiter's eyes went big at her breakfast selection.

Now to fill some of this time so I don't spend it thinking about that asshole, she thought.

She flipped open the brochure and read the highlights:

Seven restaurants and shops, including a nightclub

Full spa and salon with massage, facial, nails, hair, makeup

Gym and sauna

Daily snorkeling and paddle boarding

Movie theater

Live bands

Two pool and hot tub

Concierge services

Local area transportation

Her itinerary included several spa services during the two-week respite. She should be doing backflips but instead she just felt sorta numb. Glancing around the resort at the happy couples, she decided screw it. This was her vacation.

One day at a time.

After breakfast, she lifted her mimosa and walked out to the beach. The soft, warm sand crunched under her feet and squished between her toes. Instantly, salty air filled her nostrils. The clear blue water stretched to the horizon, the waves creating a soothing, lulling sound. She found a lounge chair under a cabana and propped up her legs.

Cat took several deep breaths of fresh ocean air and decided she needed a plan. But that idea sailed out into the ocean as she closed her eyes “for just a minute” and woke up two hours later.

She stretched, reaching her hands past the lounge, and laughed. She could *not* come all the way to this fabulous island and sleep the entire time. Oh, the ribbing she would get from Celeste would be never-ending.

She hoisted herself off the lounge and went to the concierge desk to plan an agenda. Not every waking moment, but a little something every day. Something to look forward to.

“I would also like to take a trip or two off the resort to do some sketching,” she told the young man dressed in black and white.

“Yes, Miss. We can arrange for that. Any place in particular?”

What did she want? “I don’t exactly know, but maybe some old buildings, churches, or bridges.” She shrugged her shoulder.

The concierge glanced at the brochures beside the desk. “I will make a list of a few things and leave it at the front desk for you to retrieve tonight. Then you can just select what you want and the driver will take you there.”

What more could she ask for? “Thanks.”

She stepped onto the elevator, barely aware of the man who followed. She thought of the concierge’s suggestion of a list and wondered what to choose first. Maybe there would be an old courthouse or something she could draw.

“Must be a really good thought.”

His voice pulled her out of her daydream and she observed the man beside her in dress slacks and a knit, collared shirt with some kind of emblem over the chest. His smile seemed genuine, and she realized she must have been smiling too.

“I guess it was.”

“That’s how vacations are supposed to be, right?” His blue eyes shone and he gripped the handle of his suitcase, then wheeled it off the elevator. “Have a good stay,” he said before the doors closed.

That was nice, she thought to herself. Nice-looking guy too.

She was so distracted, she felt the elevator descend. She’d forgotten to press the button when she first got on. She chuckled to herself.

With her plan in hand, she felt more in control. Maybe she’d actually enjoy herself for two weeks. Indulge in some R&R, try out some new things, go exploring. As long as she didn’t think about Jack specifically, she knew she’d be alright.

Chapter Four

Cat decided starting a vacation with a massage was the right way to go. She lucked out when she called the spa Tuesday morning and they had an opening.

The previous night, she'd picked up the concierge's recommendations of places to visit and then updated her two-week agenda. She looked forward to something for once that didn't revolve around the wedding. She'd caught a glimpse of the vibe Celeste had packed for her and chuckled. Some things might still not be on the agenda.

After a late breakfast, she entered the hotel's posh spa five minutes early. Soft, instrumental music played in the background and the scent of vanilla filled the air. "Hello. I have an appointment at eleven for a massage."

"Excellent. You would be Miss Dalton?"

"That's correct."

"Can I get you a glass of fruit-infused cold water before I take you back to Sebastian?"

What? Her back straightened. A male masseur? The idea hadn't even occurred to Cat. Of course, it was possible, and not that it really mattered, but... Well, she couldn't say why she was apprehensive.

"Is everything alright, Miss Dalton?"

Calm down, Cat. You have nothing to worry about. Just because she'd never had a male massage therapist before didn't mean there was anything to be wary of. Jack might have been the last man to touch her, but Cat couldn't expect for that to last forever. Eventually there would be men...

"Everything is great. And yes, I'd love some water." She chased away the apprehension and forced a casual smile.

She followed the receptionist back to a cozy, softly lit room. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back with your water."

True to her word, the receptionist returned shortly with a glass of ice water. "Sebastian will be with you in a few moments. Enjoy." The young woman pivoted on her heel and left, closing the door behind her.

Cat sank into the upholstered bench and sipped her water. A male. Cat never had a massage given by a man before. Only ever a woman. She shook her head. She was overreacting. Not to mention, if he was gay, he'd have no interest in her.

The door opened quietly, pulling her from her thoughts. A tall, dark-haired, brown-eyed man walked into the massage room and smiled at her. His white, short-sleeve uniform shirt pulled snugly over his shoulders and chest muscles. His waist was trim and his skin bronzed.

My! He was a fine specimen of a man.

"Miss Dalton, I'm Sebastian. I'll perform your massage today." He had an exotic Latin American accent. He leaned forward, offering his hand.

She hesitantly reached for it, allowing his large warm hand to engulf hers. "Hello."

His brow furrowed softly. "I apologize for being late. My previous appointment was delayed. If you could remove your clothes and jewelry, and lie face-up on the massage table, I'll return in a few moments, and we'll get started."

She swallowed hard. He certainly didn't *act* gay. "Sure," she choked out.

Sebastian left the room. Her heart beat faster. She could do this. Not all men were untrustworthy slime balls.

Cat stripped, hiding her underthings beneath her cotton tee and shorts. She gulped some cool water and climbed onto the table, under the covers. The table seemed wider than a traditional massage table. Not that that would matter for a tall man like Sebastian.

She pulled up the sheet, letting the soft cotton envelope her, brushing lightly against her bare form.

A soft knock at the door announced his return. Cat's eyes were squeezed shut; she forced her face to relax.

"Comfortable?" She heard him adjust the music, then the lamp to darken the room, before he gathered his lotion.

"Yes."

"Any areas that feel particularly tight, Miss Dalton?"

She opened her eyes to see him looking down at her. Oh, she'd better not regret this.

"Cat, please. No. I just need to relax," her tone sounded curt. *Shoot!* Why had she said that? Keep it together, she scolded herself.

"I can see that. Well, take a few deep breaths for me. I will start with your head and work my way to your toes. Then you will turn over and I'll repeat the same process on the backside. If anything feels tight, and needs more work, please let me know. Also, if something is uncomfortable, let me know so I can stop. All right?"

Sebastian may look straight off the Man of the Year calendar, but he was professional and attentive, and Cat appreciated that.

"Yes. Thank you."

She closed her eyes again when Sebastian's fingers smoothed her hair off her face in light, feathery strokes. He applied an oil to his fingers and started massaging her face and neck, going into her hairline.

Quietly, he said, "I can see you have a lot on your mind. Try and quiet your thoughts. Be here in the moment. Find peace."

He'd hit the nail on the head. She had a lot on her mind—cheating fiancés that lied through their teeth, and now, literally putting herself in another man's hands.

She forced a deeper breath. She could do this. She *needed* a massage. Sebastian was a professional. She wanted to kick her vacation off with a bang. And she deserved it, dammit!

His hands moved over her neck and shoulders, making a few passes between her breasts. She was sure it wasn't intended to be a sexual thing, but it certainly felt sensual. His hands were warm and the pace of his movements helped her nerves and muscles start to calm.

Finishing her arms, he moved the blanket aside to pull her right leg out. Applying more oil, he worked his strong hands up and down. His thumbs pressed firmly into her quads and a tiny moan passed her lips.

Heat rose in her cheeks. She'd never moaned with a female masseuse.

Cat tensed slightly when his hands worked their way upward, very close to her sex. She swallowed. His fingers never touched her *there*, instead they merely grazed passed to work her right hip and a bit of her stomach. Dang! Her muscles were tight. After several minutes, he covered the right leg and repeated the procedure on her left leg.

She noticed the blanket wasn't really tucked in anywhere. In fact, moisture had begun to gather at the apex of her thighs, and whenever the blanket shifted, air sent a coolness over her vulva.

Her heartbeat increased slightly, but a hypnotic state also settled in. She felt so incredibly relaxed that she didn't bother opening her eyes or care if any private parts were exposed. Sebastian had magic fingers. Her earlier nervousness was for no good reason.

He re-covered her leg and whispered, "Please turn over, Cat."

He held the blanket to conceal her breasts. She rotated and placed her face in the padded face rest. She inhaled and a sweet scent of vanilla filled her senses. Sebastian lowered the sheet to her waist, maybe past her waist. She couldn't be sure, but some of her derriere might be exposed. Her muscles tensed.

He whispered close to her ear, "Relax. Relaxation is good for your blood pressure, your memory, so many things."

Right. She tried to calm down and focus on not letting her anxiety ruin her wonderful massage.

His oiled hands began long strokes up and down her back. He kneaded and worked out knots along the way. She breathed deeply. *Oh yeah.*

The sensual feeling flowing through her, coupled with the deep relaxation, brought Cat to a place she had rarely been. Simply euphoric. Sebastian massaged her arms, leaving them limp and pliable. He covered her torso and moved to her left leg next, this time exposing half her ass. However, when his hands began to stroke her leg, hip, and butt cheek in deep, satisfying, rhythmic glides, she didn't have the energy to give it much thought.

An achiness built as Sebastian's motions continued. He moved to the right leg. Again her right ass cheek was bared to him, to the room, to his marvelous hands.

A moan slipped passed her lips, and she wished she could reach down to take care of the blossoming need at her sex. Maybe she would have a use for the vibe after all.

After several minutes, he re-covered her leg, and she feared the massage was over. That was sixty minutes? Damn! But it was so good. Worth every blessed penny! Every one of Jack's pennies!

She felt his breath at her ear, and his hand at her hip. "Lift your hips and I will slide a pillow underneath."

Confused, she met his gaze. "My massage isn't over?"

He shook his head. "You don't have to be finished. If you'll let me, I can help you. Help you to completely relax." He spoke the words in a most professional manner, but his deep chocolate eyes told a different story. "Would you like my help, Cat?"

Holy crap! Was he offering what she thought he was offering? Her heart pounded against her ribcage. What should she do? She couldn't allow this. No. But wouldn't a release be welcome right now? NO.

Ugh. She somehow knew she could trust him. Trust that he could take care of her need and yet expect nothing more.

And she had to admit, any amount of trust in a man right now was huge.

But was she crazy to do this? This was off the charts of adventurous, right?

Double holy crap!

She licked her lips and taking a chance, she nodded.

She raised her hips off the table slightly. He slid his forearm under her, along her belly, and lifted her the rest of the way. With his other hand, he slipped a fluffy pillow under her hips.

She could only imagine what she looked like with her ass protruding off the table.

His hands returned to her ankles and feet. She remained covered as he slid underneath the blanket to massage her legs in long strokes. With each pass, he went higher, at the same time, he

spread her legs a little farther apart. Up and down he went. His warm hands finally made it to her ass cheeks—one on each globe.

The blanket collected on her thighs. He made another pass—down to her ankles and slid back up to her ass. More blanket bunched over her hips. A cool breeze of air over her exposed sex sent a shiver through her.

Oh my. Another rush of moisture filled her sex. This had to be the most erotic thing she'd ever experienced. Her heart pounded.

Another pass over her legs and this time the blanket rested at her low back, completely exposing her sex and ass to him.

She lay on this table with her ass raised up, legs spread, and his fingers working the tiny muscles at the top of her thighs. Finally, one strong finger glossed through her slit, spreading her moisture around.

"Oh," she breathed.

He so gently stroked her slit with his fingers, making brief passes over her clit and bringing the whole area alive. She heard him shift, even as his fingers stayed in place. His voice was at her ear. "May I use my tongue?"

Oh, mercy. His fingers never stopped moving. Thinking became difficult. If this man was as talented with his tongue as he was with his fingers, she would die and go to heaven.

She replayed her new mantra: *Be adventurous.* She took in air. "Yes," she whispered.

He maneuvered to the end of the table again, and his fingers gently spread her apart. In a beat, his tongue was on her clit. She moaned aloud.

Glorious. In no time, he would have her coming. His tongue massaged over her clit and through her core, poking inside and swirling around.

Her breath escalated to panting.

His strong hands spread her farther apart, but not to the point of pain. His tongue never stopped the delicious torture.

"Sebastian," she breathed.

He didn't let up, and she knew she was closing in on something spectacular. Leveraging her arms, she lifted her ass even more. He groaned.

He applied more pressure with his tongue, and God help her, she didn't want it to end. This had to be the best oral sex she'd ever received.

As if sensing her desires, Sebastian left her clit and continued his licks in areas nearby: soft parts of skin, her smooth ass cheeks, and over her lips.

He returned to her clit more gently this time. He teased her, and Cat's clit swelled, longing for friction. Longing for release.

Without notice, the slow creep of her orgasm began, sending a warmth throughout her body. Building and building, she finally exploded, muffling her scream into the headrest. She was fairly sure she squirted on Sebastian's tongue.

Slowly, her muscles relaxed, and her hips lowered back onto the pillow.

Sebastian carefully covered her body and slipped the pillow out from under her hips. His hands traveled several times over the sheet on her back.

"Take as much time as you need. This room is vacant for another hour." He leaned closer. "Cat, look at me."

Did she have to? She was a little freaked. Mortified, really. She raised her head to find Sebastian's mere inches away.

“You are exquisite,” he said in a low tone. “You are beautiful inside and out. Don’t ever believe otherwise.” He lifted the back of her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss. “You are absolutely beautiful when you come. You will make some man incredibly, insanely happy.” His smile was sweet and genuine. He kissed her hand one last time before he straightened to leave.

Whoa! What was that? The most incredible orgasm, given to her by an exotic, sexy stranger, and it felt positively euphoric. Out of this world. She exhaled. This would be a day Cat would not soon forget.

In a strange way, she felt powerful, and her self-confidence rose. What if the compliments from Sebastian were real? Not some flowery crap to make her feel good because he wanted a big tip.

Her whole body hummed with the after-glow of her orgasm, but it was more than that. The way he’d moved over her naked body made her feel beautiful. The way she’d come so easily? Empowered.

She sat up, leaving the blanket on the table. She felt new.

That was pretty adventurous, huh?

She chuckled quietly—taking a chance had paid off.

Her story wasn’t yet written. She got to decide the end. She could decide what would happen next. She wouldn’t let Jackass Jack determine her future or her worth.

She didn’t need Sebastian and his marvelous gift to figure all of this out. She would have gotten there in her own time, eventually. She reached for her shorts. Sooner was better than later.

Where to Buy

[Amazon](#)

[Apple Books](#)

[Nook](#)

[Kobo](#)

[GooglePlay](#)

Thank You!

I hope you enjoyed this sample of Honeymoon Hideaway. To download the complete book click on your favorite e-tailer above.

Happy Reading!

Mia