

# **BLACK LABEL by James L'Etoile**

## **EXCERPT**

### **Chapter 1**

It was bad this time. Jillian shielded her eyes from the sharp edge of morning light and dug her fingers into the pillow clutched over her face. Deep in her temples, her pulse hammered a fast, painful staccato rhythm. She'd gone months since her last migraine, and this one tightened a vice around her skull. Even with her eyes closed, her vision clouded with a kaleidoscope of bright dots. The rustle of bedcovers sounded like the world fell in around her. Jillian Cooper's world had crumbled down and threatened to suffocate her, only she didn't know it—yet.

She reached for the phone she kept on her bedside table. There was no way she was going to make it to her Saturday morning spin class. Her hand probed for the phone, her head still tucked under the pillow. First one way, then she groped in another direction, knocking over a small brass table lamp. Jillian recoiled from the clatter as the metal lamp rung as loudly as the bells at Saints' Peter and Paul Church over in North Beach. She peeled off her protective pillow and reached for the phone. Her phone wasn't on the bedside table, and neither was the stack of paperback books she habitually kept at hand. Blinding pinpricks of light danced in her vision, making it impossible to focus through the swirling aura.

Fighting against the pounding in her head, Jillian crept to the edge of the bed, dangled her legs off the side, and brushed her toes gently on the polished hardwood floor. Jillian shuddered, a wave of nausea poured over her. The feeling wasn't from a migraine. It came from the realization she wasn't in her apartment. Her place didn't have hardwood floors. Jillian didn't know where she was, or worse, how she got here.

Instead of her phone, a half-empty Gran Patrón Platinum tequila bottle and a wrinkled condom wrapper lay on the nightstand. She spotted her clothes on the other side of the room, in a heap on a leather chair. Jillian pulled the sheet away from herself and peered downward.

“Shit.”

She was naked under the bed covers. Jillian couldn't remember the slightest detail leading up to her ending the night disrobed, nor could she feel the lingering warmth of being with someone, in spite of the condom wrapper left on the nightstand. She'd never experienced a blackout from alcohol before. Jillian stayed away from tequila as a rule because of a few bad hangovers back when she attended San Francisco State University. If it weren't for the half-empty bottle of pricy booze, she'd have sworn she hadn't touched the stuff in ten years.

Yet, here she was—tequila, nakedness, and all. She hoped a tall, dark, handsome, athletic man was going to burst through the bedroom door with a tray of cappuccinos and warm croissants. At this point, a short, round, gnomish man with instant coffee and a day-old pop tart would be welcome. It wasn't her habit to "sleep around," as her mother used to call it. However, Jillian Cooper was a woman who enjoyed the occasional company of men, and this was not the first time she'd greeted the sunrise from a man's place following a late night hook-up. She always remembered them, until this morning. The migraine and the tequila played games in her head—loud, pulsing, and painful games.

The bedroom, where she did God-only-knows-what, was expensively furnished and decidedly masculine. Dark hues of burnished leather and deep mahogany dominated the space. A set of wooden horizontal blinds kept out some light, and in spite of her headache, curiosity demanded she open them.

The window looked out over Huntington Park in Nob Hill, some of the priciest real estate in San Francisco. From her vantage point, Jillian figured the room sat on the sixth floor, or higher, and commanded a view of the grey slate tile roof of Grace Cathedral and Mt. Sutro off to the South. The condo, or whatever this place was, offered the resident one of those "ten-million-dollar views" everyone wanted, but few could afford. Jillian's salary as a Vice President of Marketing for Dynalife Pharmaceutical wouldn't buy the dust in a place like this.

Another wave of nausea buckled Jillian's knees. She grabbed onto a dresser near the window and braced herself while the queasiness passed. As she opened her eyes, she focused on a silver-plated frame on the top of the dresser. Jillian peered at a photograph of her own image, a picture of her, with her boss, Jonathon Mattson, the CEO of Dynalife Pharmaceutical.

Confusion and panic clawed at Jillian's mind. Mattson was thirty-five years her senior and married to one of the city's society matrons. Jillian supposed some women found him attractive, with his swagger and the ease with which he flaunted his wealth. There were lines Jillian did not cross; never, ever, get involved with someone at work, and married men were off limits.

What was she doing here, naked in Mattson's apartment? Had Jillian broken both rules? The thought of a relationship with Mattson was unthinkable. The photograph meant they'd been together before. The two looked at ease with one another in the photo, and it hinted at a close personal relationship, her hand on his chest. *When the bell was that taken?* She had no recollection of an evening with Jonathon Mattson, let alone posing for a photo.

"What have I done?"

Jillian staggered to the chair with her wadded-up clothes, slid into her panties, quickly stepped into her dark blue dress, shoved a bra in her purse, and grabbed her shoes from the floor. With an ear to the door, Jillian listened. Filtered by the thrum of her heartbeat, she heard voices deep within the apartment. She felt her face blush thinking about who she'd meet as she snuck out. Her hand trembled on the doorknob as she turned it, a fraction of an inch at a time until the lock slid back with a muted click. The door opened inward a few inches, the voices became more distinct—a television.

Shoes in hand, Jillian crept down the hallway. The hardwood floor felt cold under her bare feet as she made her way to the large open living space. A flat-screen television blared the financial news from CNN to an empty room. Jillian glanced at the kitchen, and she exhaled when she realized she was alone in the apartment. The veil of swirling bright spots in her vision started to clear, and she needed to head home for her migraine medication. She desperately wanted to leave before Jonathon Mattson returned. She couldn't face him with the cocktail of anger and shame whirling inside her.

Slipping on her shoes, she listened as the CNN anchor, a carefully coifed and airbrushed young blonde reporter, delivered her monologue.

"The market opened with a quick rally this morning," the anchorwoman said.

"Today's Saturday and the market isn't open, bimbo," Jillian said. "Where do they find these people?" She found her jacket folded over the back of a sofa.

Jillian tucked the jacket under her arm, reached for the apartment door and stopped when she heard the woman's voice drone on.

"In other financial news, the death of Dynalife Pharmaceutical CEO, Jonathon Mattson sent the mega-pharmaceutical company's stock prices plummeting in early trading. Authorities are looking into the matter and haven't disclosed any details about the death."

Jillian froze when the screen flashed a photo of Mattson, with a banner under the image proclaiming, "Billionaire Pharmaceutical CEO Dead."

The television news turned the page and droned on about other financial news. Mattson was a mere footnote in the market ledgers. Business goes on.

“That can’t be. Jonathon, dead?”

Another cramp of nausea hit her, and she wrapped her arms around her midsection as if she held her insides together. The apartment space closed in on her, and when the spasms subsided, Jillian darted for the door and flung it open. She ran across the hall to an elevator and stabbed the down button repeatedly, willing the car to appear. The hallway space was foreign; nothing in the décor sparked a memory of how she got here. But here she was, and it wasn’t like she magically appeared in Mattson’s apartment. Jillian didn’t know Jonathon kept an apartment on Knob Hill. It must have been a secret rendezvous pad for Jonathon and his rumored affairs. A wave of nausea swept over Jillian at the thought she was now among his conquests.

The whirl of the elevator stopped, and a light electronic bleep sounded the arrival of the conveyance. She slid into the empty elevator before the doors fully opened and punched the lobby button. The cool wall of the elevator car soothed the back of her head, the first comforting thing since awakening in this bad dream.

She couldn’t shake the nightmare off. Questions without answers cascaded through her mind. *What happened? Where was she? Who was she with?*

“Come on—come on,” she urged the doors as they closed at a slow agonizing pace.

“It’s not possible. Today is Saturday, and I saw Jonathon at a board meeting yesterday—Friday. It has to be a huge mistake.” She drew in a deep breath and tried to center herself.

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened into the building’s lobby. Jonathon wasn’t there to expose some elaborate practical joke. Instead, Jillian found the marble-tiled lobby empty, except for a doorman who gave her a smirk and a nod signaling, “I know what you did last night.” The man leered and stroked his short stubble beard as Jillian passed his station.

Jillian stepped outside to the curb and raised her hand for a taxi. She glanced at a newspaper rack on the sidewalk next to her, and the headline caught her breath short.

*Billionaire Jonathon Mattson Murdered.*

The date jumped off the page. It was the Monday edition.

Mattson was dead; she’d met with him on Friday and woke up in his apartment this morning. Jillian’s knees buckled with the realization that two days passed without a single lingering memory. Two days erased without a trace.