
A HOT MESS

Red Light Fantasies, Book Two

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

The Trinity River to my left, the downtown Dallas skyline to my right, both quintessential landmarks of the city I called home, but neither held my attention. Nothing could when *he* was around.

Fighting the urge to sigh like a lovesick puppy, I forced myself to look away from Max before I threw myself at him. If I looked directly at my lover too long, crazy things always happened to my sanity.

Blond-haired, blue-eyed, and topping six-feet tall, Maxwell Penn had shared my bed for nearly four months. Being with him was like riding a sunbeam—ethereal, spellbinding, a dream I never wanted to wake from—and yet, somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew our relationship couldn't possibly last. If I kept flying this close to the sun, I would get burned. Max and I didn't live in the same worlds. He was platinum, and I was, at best, silver-plated. I wasn't being self-deprecating, simply painfully realistic.

I, Breanne Jennings, was head-over-heels in love with a man who had the power to break my heart in ways that scared me, but for the time being, I was okay with that.

We slowed as we neared Whitecliff Park, Max's downtown Dallas hotel and site of this year's Boudoir Fashion Week—an exclusive event showcasing the most daring and innovative intimate fashions. The six-day happening usually took place in New York, but thanks to Max's pull, he'd helped relocate it here, and I was thrilled. I'd never attended the event before, but I was having a blast. Purchasing new lingerie lines for Red Light Lingerie, Max's sexy downtown boutique, was his job; I just ran the store, managed inventory, took care of payroll—pretty much every-fucking-thing else. When our relationship had shifted from *professional* to *fucking-like-bunnies*, however, I'd assumed a more liberal role in the store's management, not that I was complaining. Not in the slightest. I'd enjoyed managing Red Light long before Max and I had become an item, but now, I freaking *loved* it.

"Ms. Jennings?" Max's words harbored a smidgen of irritation, but I doubted anyone else noticed. I, on the other hand, was fluent in Max-ese. When what I'd affectionately coined his "Americanized" British accent tightened, it was a warning sign.

Time to pay attention.

I turned to Max; he was staring at me and waiting for me to answer some question I'd obviously missed. He wasn't the only one watching me, either; the seven-person group, five men and two women, who'd accompanied us from the restaurant, were also looking at me.

I sent a silent plea to Max. *What'd I miss?*

"Which designers have been your favorites so far?" Max asked, offering a lifeline.

Thank you, Max!

"Two designers have really stood out to me so far," I began. "Patrick Irwin's edgy take on classic bedroom wear is simply breathtaking. I especially loved the deep purple, mesh-and-lace, two-piece, keyhole crop top number. The side-tie shorts he'd chosen to pair with it..." To emphasize my sentiment, I over-exaggerated a shiver. "I wanted to buy that piece on the spot!"

Max nodded, lips flattening in an expression I knew well; my lover was trying to keep from smiling. "I, um..." He cleared his throat. "You and I must discuss that topic at length. *Very* soon."

"Of course, sir," I said, fighting my own smile.

By "discuss it," Max, no doubt, intended to buy said piece so I could model it for him.

"My other favorite designer has to be Giselle Dubois." I'd no doubt butchered her name. I sucked at French. "I love her colors and fabric choices. Some of the pieces were so provocative and beautiful that I could imagine people wearing them to clubs and not just in the bedroom."

Max wrinkled his nose and shook his head, two actions that didn't match his next words. "Giselle's work is very nice, yes."

Max glanced away, breaking eye contact. *Instant red flag*. When Max was uncomfortable with a topic, for whatever reason, he turned distant. The defense mechanism wasn't something I'd seen him do in the boardroom; it was something he did in the bedroom. When things got personal, he shut down. It was a reaction I'd identified in him but still didn't know the root cause.

Yet.

I wanted to take his hand and let him know I was there for him, that he wasn't alone in his pain, and I would have if we hadn't agreed to keep our relationship secret.

After a rough start, we'd both decided, for our relationship to solidify into something permanent, we needed to slow things down and keep *us* out of the limelight until we were ready. Well, at least out of the tabloids. Given the complexity of the emotional shit we still had to sort through, Max especially, staying out of the public seemed like a no-brainer. We'd go public when our relationship was on solid ground—at least, that was what I kept telling myself.

Max was hiding things from me. I'd figured that much out, but I was hiding things from him, too. Of course, the things I was hiding weren't personal. Not really. Mine were secrets I was

required by law to keep; I doubted he could say the same. I'd spent most of my life paying for a sin that was never mine.

Since I needed to get Max alone, I made a show of checking my Apple Watch. "Mr. Penn, it's nearly seven. You asked me to remind you of that phone call you needed to make."

"Right, yes. Thank you, Ms. Jennings. I shall take care of it now."

I had to give the man props; even upset, he didn't miss a beat.

After making our goodbyes to the group, Max and I headed to his temporary office in the back of Whitecliff Park. We walked as close as possible as we traversed the crowd. Occasionally, when the throngs of people were at their thickest, Max would brush a hand along the small of my back the way he did when ushering me into his bedroom or, better yet, into what he called his indoor garden oasis.

Max's indoor garden oasis sat smack in the center of his house; he'd built the space to remind him of the English countryside where he'd grown up. Since we'd become lovers, the room had taken on a deeper significance, to both of us, but the newfound importance had nothing to do with the room's stunning aesthetics. It had nothing to do with the indoor waterfall or the wildflowers or any of the features that brought the outdoors indoors and everything to do with Max and what he liked to do to me in that room.

Max wasn't just a billionaire business mogul.

He wasn't just my boss *and* my boyfriend.

Maxwell Penn was my Dom.

In that room, he'd introduced me to his BDSM world—in glorious fashion. Crops, floggers, canes, he'd used them all to work my body into frenzies that never ceased to amaze me. He'd brought me to realms of pleasure that left me limp, lifeless, and begging for more—when I wasn't rendered speechless, that was.

A familiar tingle sparked between my legs, and wasn't that damn great? We had to be back in Business Room A in ten

minutes for the weeks' last round of fashion shows, something I'd been looking forward to until I'd mentioned Giselle Dubois' name, and Max had gone all stoic. Giselle was one of the night's featured designers. Five seconds ago, I'd been excited to experience more of her unique brand of fashion, but now, I just wanted to know why *that* look had crossed Max's face at the mention of her name.

When we stepped into the foyer of Max's temporary office suite, his long-time administrative assistant looked up from his seat behind a sleek, modern desk. Beautiful in its simplicity, the room looked as if it could have been lifted right from the interior of Whitecliff International's main headquarters and dropped here. Max helmed a global empire stretching from investments to real estate to green energy production and everything in between, so he couldn't simply take the week off to focus solely on one of his side businesses. He'd set up a temporary workspace here so he could tend to Whitecliff International business while indulging in the best intimate fashions from around the world.

As he pushed to his feet, Todd grabbed the stack of four-by-four memo cards from his desk and held them out to Max. Todd was about my age, mostly fit, and several inches shorter than Max. He'd be the definition of "average" if it weren't for his red, curly hair and freckled complexion; they elevated him up several rungs on the Attractiveness Ladder. He was cute, no two ways about it, but he was no Maxwell Penn.

"Good evening, Mr. Penn," Todd began. "You have three new messages. The first one's from Mrs. Bishop of Bishop Innovations. She called regarding the upcoming merger. The second message is from Mr. Washington. He didn't say what his call was regarding but requested that you call him back at your earliest convenience. The last message, the one on top there, is urgent. At least, that's what the designer keeps saying. She dropped by, at least, five times while you were at dinner."

She.

Designer.

I didn't need to be able to see Max's muscles under his designer suit to know Todd's words had made my lover go rigid.

"She?" questioned Max.

"Giselle Dubois," answered Todd.

Little pulses along Max's jaw were the only outward appearances that relayed how much the news angered him. Most people probably would have missed the reaction, but after what we'd been through, I wasn't "most people."

Max took the messages. "Thank you, Todd. Ms. Jennings and I will be in conference for the next ten minutes. No interruptions. No exceptions. Is that understood?"

"Of course, sir." Todd tossed a fleeting glance my way.

Although I didn't know for sure, I suspected Todd knew the true nature of my and Max's not-merely-professional relationship, but like a consummate professional, he acted as if nothing was amiss.

Max's office sat on the ground floor, and we had an unobstructed view of the courtyard and pool. The swimming area was what one would expect at a luxury hotel: crystal blue water, flowing waterfalls, precisely spaced lounge chairs, and with fashion designers in town, stunning supermodels sporting sexy fashions while showing off spectacular bods—because I didn't feel demure enough in the presence of supermodels.

Max shut the door and hit the magnetic lock as well as the switch that frosted over the back wall of glass. From one second to the next, Max had completely insulated us from the outside world.

Privacy.

Finally!

But not for long. The final round of fashion shows started soon. If I was gonna ask about Giselle, I had to act fast.

I turned to my lover. "Okay, Max. We only have a few

minutes, so talk fast. What's the deal with Giselle Dubois? Why does the mention of her name make you—"

Max cut me off with the kind of kiss meant to command my complete, unconditional surrender, and despite myself, my traitorous body was all too willing to wave the white flag. With the first graze of his lips against mine, my bones went liquid, and I had to throw my arms around Max's strong shoulders to keep from hitting the deck. Goddamn it. I needed to find some sort of immunity to this man.

The moment my arms closed around him, Max lifted me, turned on legs that were too damn steady, considering how unsteady *I* felt, and deposited me unceremoniously on his desk. He forced me backward until my back hit the oak surface, and he wedged himself between my legs. He grabbed me around the wrists, wrenched my arms up and over my head, and held me there, pinned as thoroughly as if he'd restrained me to his bed—or one of the many other places he'd "pinned" me over the months.

He kissed his way along my jaw to my ear. "I'm not sure how much longer I can stand all this secrecy. Being next to you without being able to touch you drives me mad. Every time I get a whiff of your peach lotion, I get hard. Just *wham*."

I hated all the secrecy, too. I did. Part of me wanted to shout our relationship from the rooftops, but the other half—the more cautious half—lived in a world grounded in anxiety. Being in the tabloids terrified me, especially given my past. When I'd been a child, my family had been at the center of a scandal that had rocked Wall Street, and I never wanted to find myself at the center of that kind of scrutiny again. If anyone learned Max and I were together, in the limelight was precisely where I'd find myself. I had no doubt about that. The tabloids loved Max, and they were always speculating when one of the world's sexiest bachelors would go back off the market.

Even as I knew we needed to pull the brakes on this little

moment, I wrapped my legs around his waist and fit his hard cock more securely against my sex. "As much as I want you right now, tonight's final show starts in, what, seven minutes?"

"I don't care about the damn show. I need to be inside you. Now."

I knew he meant it, too. When Max got that animalistic timbre in his voice, it meant one thing. I was about to be thoroughly and exhaustingly ravished. Usually, that was a grand thing to experience, but not here. Not now. We couldn't be late for the final show.

"Max, we can't."

"Yes, my sweet, we most certainly can, and we most certainly *will*."

I hugged him tighter. I loved when he called me that. *My sweet*. When we'd first gotten together, he'd shuffled through several pet names for me, sweetheart, love, things like that. But when he'd fallen on *my sweet*, it had stuck—except for when we were in the bedroom. He had a special name for me there, too, and it never failed to make me shiver.

"Max—"

He took my mouth again, swallowing any complaints I might have uttered. With the same commanding authority he used in everything he did, he lifted my skirt out of the way and pressed his covered cock to my covered pussy. The sensation of having him so close and still not close enough drew a groan from some deep part of me I hadn't known existed until Max had claimed it.

He broke our kiss. "Let's blow off tonight's show. I've missed this body, and I can think of a much more pleasing way to spend a Friday evening than sitting in another fashion show."

"We had sex last night." My voice was little more than a breathless sigh.

"Sex, yes. But that's not what I'm craving from you, little sub."

A shiver danced around my spine. Max wasn't craving sex. What he wanted was my complete and total surrender, the kind of sexual control that only came from consensual power exchange. In other words, my Dom wanted a long, uninterrupted night with his sub, and truth be told, his sub wanted that, too. But...

"You're the one who singlehandedly put Boudoir Fashion Week together," I reminded him. "It'd fall apart without you."

"No, *because* I put it together, it'll continue to flow without a hitch."

He was right. The man was brilliant, and I had no doubt the events would likely continue on autopilot.

"One more day," I murmured. "And I'm all yours."

"You're already all mine."

"You know what I mean."

He gave me a sly smile as he rocked his hips forward and ground his erection against my sex.

God.

I gasped. My labia felt too sensitive, too engorged and way too needy, and fuck, every time he hit my clit, I had trouble remembering why I was objecting to him taking me right here and now. He shouldn't be able to affect me so quickly, so thoroughly, but here we were.

"Soon," I said, using my last remaining shred of resistance, "we'll have all the time in the world."

He pulled back far enough to captivate me with the feral grin I loved. "And what, my sweet, might you envision when we have all that time?"

"Enough to fill my own erotic novel."

"Care to elaborate?" He grabbed the silver letter opener from his desk, Whitecliff International's logo on the blade, and pantomimed using it to cut my clothes off. "And if it involves me going caveman on you, I wouldn't be opposed to that."

"No clothes cutting, but if that turns you on..." I nipped at

his jaw, letting the idea percolate between us a few moments before continuing. "What I want is a simple fantasy, but one that's been in my thoughts a lot lately. A re-creation of our first night together, once we were alone at your place anyway, in your bed, just the two of us."

"I think that can be arranged." He placed the letter opener back on his desk.

Our very first night together hadn't started with just the two of us. His longtime friend, Garrett Lanyon, had been there, too, the three of us in Max's office at Red Light after hours. That night was my first taste of Max and his world of sex without restraints—and then later at his place *with* restraints. It was a moment that changed my life forever, as stupidly melodramatic as it sounded, but it was the truth.

"Speaking of fantasies, my sweet, have you given any further thought to going to the Swingers' Ball?"

"Further thought, yes, but—"

"But you're still not ready," he concluded.

I closed my eyes but said nothing. Max had approached me a couple weeks back about attending a Swingers' Ball tomorrow evening at Restrained Fantasies, a local BDSM club where he was a member, and while I was interested in going with him, I wasn't sure I was ready to be *that* adventurous. He and I had played around with his long-time friend Garrett and Garrett's lovely wife, Karen, but that was as far as I'd dared go into the swingers' arena. I'd always enjoyed our quartet trysts, but to go to a club and let complete strangers touch me?

A shudder worked its way through me. I trusted Max; exploring his BDSM world had been one of the most freeing things I'd ever experienced, but going *that* far wasn't a step I was ready to make.

"It's okay, Bree," he said as if reading my mind and kissed my forehead. "I don't want you to go if you're not ready."

I opened my eyes. "Maybe you could take me to the club

someday. I'd like to see what it's like. Maybe I won't feel so overwhelmed by the place after I see it."

"I'll make the arrangements."

The left side of his mouth turned up, expression soft and affectionate. This wasn't a grin or a smirk. Intimacy played in the blue eyes I loved, an affection I'd noticed with increasing frequency. True, we hadn't yet exchanged the "L-word," but I liked to imagine we were close, that Max would finally confess his feelings toward me, not just his desire to possess my body.

I traced my index finger along the rigid line of his jaw. "Tell me about Giselle Dubois and why the mention of her name affects you so much."

He turned away, both physically and emotionally, and moved to the opposite side of the office. His sudden absence left me feeling cold.

"Max?" I went after him and caught him around the waist, holding tight. "I didn't mean to hurt you. You know that. I—"

"I know. Talking about that bitch is..." As he turned, he wrapped me in his strong arms and rested his cheek on the top of my head. The move was as much about comfort as about hiding his face.

Despite everything we'd been through, especially regarding what he'd told me about his ex-wife, Max had trouble opening up. He had trouble trusting; he'd told me in almost those exact words not long after we'd gotten together. Distracting me with his body when I pushed him for more, however, he was damn good at.

"I don't like talking about Giselle." His words were flat and final, but over the past few months, I'd discovered Max was a bit like a ketchup bottle. Sometimes I had to give him a good whack to get something to come out.

"Which is Max-ese for, 'We used to go out.' Am I right?"

"I don't like—"

"Talking about Giselle. Yeah, I heard you." I paused a few

heartbeats. "Which is Max-ese for, 'We used to go out.' Am I right?"

He let out a sigh, his breath bristling the hairs on the top of my head. "Yes, she and I used to go out. A long time ago. But we don't have time to get into everything right now. We'd be here a week."

Great. *Now*, he realized we didn't have the time.

"Later then?" I asked.

"Maybe." He pressed a lingering kiss to my lips before heading for the door. *Maybe* was as close to a yes as I figured I'd get. We'd been dating long enough for me to know that.

I tried not to feel too dejected as I followed Max. But he froze the second he crossed the threshold into the foyer and I ran right smack into him before freezing myself.

Wearing a dress as sheer and skimpy as some of the lingerie she'd designed, Giselle Dubois stood next to Todd and beamed at Max, an upturn of the lips so stunning it should come with a warning sign.

"Max, darling!" Giselle exclaimed, throwing her arms open and pushing her way past Todd. "I was hoping to catch you before tonight's final showing."

Before Max could react, Giselle wrapped slender arms around Max and pressed her lips to his.

Jealousy spiked as harsh and volatile as floodwaters spilling over their banks, and a thousand tiny snakes slithered in my stomach. Those were *my* lips; they'd been against mine mere moments ago. I sucked in a deep breath, doing everything I could to keep from grabbing Giselle by her pretty blonde hair and yanking her away. Luckily, however, I didn't have to.

Max did it for me.

With lightning speed, he pushed Giselle to arm's length, extricating himself from her embrace. The dark expression painting his face in harsh lines wasn't one I'd ever been on the receiving end of, thankfully. It was an expression I imagined he'd

practiced countless times in the mirror, carefully crafted to make other people fear for their lives.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, but the timbre held a heavy undercurrent of menace. "I'd advise you to remember our contract, Ms. Dubois, and to abide by it. To the goddamn letter. If you don't, I *guarantee* you hotel security will escort you off the premises permanently. Do I make myself clear?"

Contract?

I filed the information away. I'd ask Max later. I was too busy wrenching my jaw off the ground. I so rarely saw Max in full-on fury mode, so when I did, it was always a shock. I said a silent prayer I'd never been on the receiving end of *that* look and, hopefully, never would be.

Despite Max's hostility, Giselle's smile stayed glued in place. In fact, the bitch looked a little smug, as if she was not just unfazed by Max's outburst but *expected it*. No, as if she'd intended to *cause* it.

What are you up to, Giselle?

A warning flickered in the back of my mind, but I tamped it down. This was merely my jealousy getting the better of me. Nothing more.

Max turned to Todd. "Please let security know Ms. Dubois is not allowed near my office. If she does make her way here again, please inform Mr. Washington, and he will promptly toss her out on her ass."

"Yes, sir." A slight smile played on Todd's lips, and he grabbed the phone from his desk and spoke to someone I assumed was in security.

"Seriously, Max, darling. Is all this hostility really necessary?" Giselle leaned against the side of Todd's desk as if she was the one who owned this hotel, not the other way around. "Surely, we can let bygones be bygones, can't we? No sense in anyone getting their feathers ruffled."

Max crossed his arms, looking every part the intimidating

business mogul, and his body language was clear. They most certainly could not let bygones be bygones.

"Giselle, *darling*, do you know what I'd like from you?" Max strung out the word 'darling' and layered in a hefty dollop of sarcasm.

"Absolutely," Giselle said with a wicked grin.

"For you to promptly fuck off." Max nodded in my direction. "Bree and I are late for the show."

Giselle turned her smile on me, her expression as stunning as it was calculating, as if she were privy to information no one else knew and knew how to wield it for maximum destruction.

That flickering warning in the back of my mind re-emerged with a vengeance, but I fought it down.

With my shoulders back and my head high, I thrust my hand toward her. "Breanne Jennings, manager of Red Light Lingerie. I oversee all new line acquisitions for the company, and I must say, I have truly enjoyed your designs. I very much look forward to a possible partnership with you and Dubois Fashions."

Okay, I was stretching the truth. I wasn't in charge of new line acquisitions, and after this display with Max, I wasn't interested in working with her any longer, either—not that I'd admit that to her.

Giselle shook my hand as if she'd been forced to touch something slimy, but her lips never lost that upward curl. "A pleasure, Ms. Jennings."

Sure. A pleasure. I totally bought that.

Giselle turned back to Max. "Since we're both headed the same way, how about we walk and talk. That would be agreeable, yes?"

"Talk if you must, but I have no intention of listening." Max turned to me. "Come along, Ms. Jennings. They will not hold the curtain long, even for me."

"Of course, sir." I fought the urge to snicker; Max's dismissal of Giselle couldn't have been more finite. The only thing that

would have made Max's dismissal better was if he'd have looped my arm around the arm Giselle had tried to take earlier. That, however, would have been breaking our agreement for secrecy.

Max's strides ate the ground, and I had to double time to keep up. I thanked my trainer for the grueling workouts she put me through, or else I was pretty sure my breathing would have sounded like Giselle's, a pack-a-day smoker on the final leg of a marathon. I couldn't help but smile at her discomfort. Petty, sure, but gratifying...hell yeah.

Giselle's words were choppy as she fought to keep pace with Max and me. "I was hoping to offer you an exclusive *extended* preview of my new line of premier bedroom wear. I'm having a private showing a few days after Boudoir Fashion Week wraps up. It's at a place I'm sure you know well."

Max didn't respond, but I had to admit Giselle had certainly piqued *my* curiosity.

We'd almost reached Business Room A when Giselle answered the question Max obviously had no interest in asking. "My show's going to be at *Restrained Fantasies*."

I almost tripped over my stilettos. Giselle knew about *Restrained Fantasies*? Even more disturbing, she knew Max's sexual preferences because, most likely, he'd been her Dom, too.

I tried not to think about Max and Giselle together the way Max and I were together. Max had dated scores of beautiful women before settling on plain little me. I knew this, but knowing it *while* looking headlong at one of the gorgeous women from his past was a different smack to the gut altogether.

Max cast a sideways glance at me. I didn't need to be a mind reader to decipher the questions in his eyes.

Where was Giselle going with this?

Should we be worried?

Was I about to freak out at the thought of him putting Giselle into bondage?

No clue, probably, and absofuckinglutely.