

EMPLOYEE 6 IS 54

By Nancy Branka

CHAPTER 1

Jillian steadied her hand to touch the send arrow on her text: I'm on the train to meet Desmond Hensley for coffee. I'm old enough to be his mother. #butIneedthejob

Christian, her 28-year-old son, would no doubt text back a laughing emoji. But Jillian was only partly joking.

Christian was responsible for the meeting. Desmond Hensley had pitched Christian's VC firm for funding. While they decided not to back the company, Christian thought Sojourner might be an interesting fit for his mother. Still, Jillian thought it a little ridiculous that she was meeting with a startup founder about a job.

The day Christian told her about Sojourner, she'd gone straight to its website and clicked on Our Team. As expected, it was a small company. Christian said they were early-stage, but she wondered how they could do much business with—she stopped to count—five people. All guys. Variations on facial hair. Smart-looking. Hip. She read the CEO's mini-bio: Stanford MBA, previously with Boston Consulting Group, loves cigars, collects swords, and roasts his own coffee. The trend towards quirky bios annoyed her. Swords, really? And why does anyone roast their own coffee? In any case, at this point, she was in no position *not* to reach out. In fact, she was getting a little desperate.

One month prior Jillian had resigned from her role as sales director at Westbrook Hotels, where she'd worked for 30 (could it be?) years. She'd taken a stand against the new compensation structure

upper management had just imposed on hourly workers. Some catering staffers were commuting two hours each way to make ends meet, sometimes working two jobs. And now to strip away their benefits? Her resignation was an indignant move. She'd stood up for what was right. But now she was out of a job. At 54. That, it turned out, was a problem.

A few years ago she'd taken her college graduation year off her LinkedIn profile, and more recently, she'd managed to make the date she started at Westbrook to be fuzzy. Last year she had migrated her personal email from hotmail to gmail, after she'd seen a cartoon in the *New Yorker* about hotmail for grandmas. In the last week, this vague discomfort had deepened.

Now since becoming unemployed, Jillian had been forcing herself to spend three hours each day on LinkedIn, Indeed and Glassdoor, making connections and applying for jobs for which she was, generally, overqualified. To date, she'd applied for 49 positions and had only landed a single interview. A phone interview. With a suburban hotel general manager, a man named Cody Joseph. (She noticed she pronounced his name mockingly in her head.)

Before they were too far into the interview, Cody Joseph asked what she made at Westbrook. Jillian paused. She knew any role in his organization would mean a pay cut for her, since over the years she'd worked herself into a very comfortable pay grade. But she was willing to do it. Yes, she and Scott had saved responsibly over the years in retirement funds, but she'd need some sort of income—even if not at the level of her Westbrook salary—to carry them through to social security. Scott had been generous not to mention this explicitly, but she knew the reality of it. Which was at the core of her fear that she'd never earn another dollar.

Of course, Cody Joseph didn't know she expected a pay cut and he probably assumed he couldn't afford her. Someone had told her that by state law employers can't ask candidates about the salary history. Should she tell him this and risk coming off as hiding something or seeming legalistic? Instead, she simply turned it back on him: "Are you able to tell me the salary range for the role?" Cody Joseph changed the subject, averting the problem—for both of them. He knew what he was doing. However, no job offer was forthcoming from Mr. Cody Joseph. And at this point, Jillian had come to not even expect a letter of rejection. To be ignored was to be rejected.

So now Jillian had resorted to attacking the second tier of opportunities—roles that were not an obvious fit. Her cover letters were attempts to connect the dots and explain why her experience at Westbrook Hotels was actually a brilliant match for whatever the obtuse opportunity. This crafting was probably a waste of effort: she knew companies use AI to scan resumes, and most are discarded before a human even sees them. She was not willing, though, to stoop so low as to stuff her resume with keywords, to trick the AI. Damn robots.

Thus, Jillian had fallen to filling afternoons with long naps and aimless scrolling on Facebook. So a coffee meeting with a startup founder was, at best, an exciting opportunity, and at worst, an excuse to get dressed and out of the house. Yes, she was surprised—shocked even—when Desmond Hensley had responded to her email. But she'd take it.

He had suggested they meet at Brew, around the corner from the Sojourner offices. This was a relief. The man was obviously a coffee snob, and she couldn't afford a misstep by suggesting Starbucks. Not that his expertise made him superior, she told herself. She was a tea drinker. Chances were he didn't know an oolong from a white tea leaf.

Jillian had dressed carefully that morning, unsure what was appropriate in the startup world. After staring into her closet for too long, she had finally pulled out dark jeans, boots and a black sweater. She dug through her scarf collection and picked out the black and turquoise paisley shawl she'd bought in India. Once dressed, she sized up the look in the mirror. *Not bad. This says, "I can be hip, too,"* she thought. She corrected herself, *"Hip-ish."*

Two hours later Jillian pulled open the door at Brew and stepped inside, met with the comforting

aroma of coffee. She straightened her shoulders and tugged at her sleeve, then scanned the faces in line to order. Even from across the room, Desmond was instantly recognizable from the website photo—tall and lanky, dark cropped hair with just a touch of premature gray, a face that was soft and kind despite the gaunt drawn cheeks. The type who played a weekly pickup game of basketball. His jeans and button-down were finely tailored, clearly not Gap grade. Jillian thought he resembled her favorite of Christian’s college roommates. Any fear she had melted away as she approached him in line. “Desmond?”

He extended his hand and smiled. “Jillian.” The ensuing bit of small talk came easily—BART, the unseasonably warm day, and Christian.

“Listen, what can I get you to drink?” Desmond asked.

“Green tea, the smallest size, please. I’ll get us a table.”

One had just opened up by the window, a stream of sunlight cutting a bright swath across the tabletop. Settling and shoving her bag underneath, she took a few deep breaths. *Just exploration. This isn’t about getting a job. It is simply making a new connection. It’s all about talking to as many people as possible.* The voice in her head had a script.

Several minutes later he approached slowly, careful not to slosh her tea, which had been overfilled. He placed her cup gingerly on the table. Setting his own down and then sliding into the chair, he bent over the coffee and sniffed as if were an expensive Cabernet.

Desmond was a comfortable conversationalist, asking her about where she lived and where she grew up, the details about her family, and how she got into hospitality. Once he approached the subject of Sojourner he became a little more polished.

Sojourner, he explained, matched a hotel’s most loyal customers with opportunities to engage in short community service projects right on the hotel premises during their stay. It was a win all the way around: the hotel could offer a unique experience to the guest, the guest could get to know another side of the city and feel good about offering an hour of time in service, and the nonprofit could enlist the support of new patrons. Sojourner facilitated all this through a web app.

What Desmond described didn’t go much past what was on the website, though she appreciated the overview. “You are probably wondering about the business model,” he added.

She nodded, feigning intrigue, even though Christian already told her about Sojourner’s structure. Companies were willing to pay a marketing fee for the service for their loyalty program members, he explained, and eventually Sojourner hoped to offer corporations “subscriptions” for their business traveler employees. What Desmond described matched Christian’s explanation exactly, which was a point in Desmond’s favor. She’d learned a long time ago to watch for information matches, a double check on truth.

“How likely do you think it will be to enroll hotels in the program?” she asked. “Since that’s where your revenue is coming from.”

“My goal is to convert 90 percent of our target group. Of course, we are choosing those targets very carefully. From my perspective, it’s a no brainer for them to sign up.”

“Right...from your perspective.” She knew that from a hotelier’s perspective it wasn’t such a no-brainer. “And if reality turns out to be more like 10 percent?” she asked.

“Then we either tweak the model, we do a major pivot, or we go out of business.” He let that sink in as she took a sip of tea, but he was still smiling—an odd dissonance.

They discussed this a little more, Desmond eager for her insights into the hospitality business. Finally, he sat back in his chair. “Do you have any questions for me?”

Thank goodness Christian had coached her on this. He said she’d need to suss out the viability of the company. And its culture—anything dysfunctional. Early-stage startups can easily go off the rails, he’d told her.

She worried her questions may insult Desmond, so only asked a couple that Christian suggested

about how financially sound the company was and growth plans for the team. His upbeat answers satisfied her, relieved her.

His face grew serious, as he looked her in the eye.

“Listen, it was great to have the conversation with you, and perhaps I could follow up on the phone? I don’t want to jump the gun here, but I think your experience may be a good fit for our team.”

As they stood and shook hands, her smile was as wide as it had been in weeks.

Maybe, just maybe, this could turn into something.

Three hours later, though, the rush of exhilaration of the early-afternoon coffee meeting had completely dissipated while she ran a few errands. The reality of her situation once again weighed on her like a backpack filled with textbooks. Really, what were the chances she’d get hired at Sojourner, despite happy coffee talk?

For now, though, she’d need to put on her cheerful face. She was walking to Zuni Cafe to meet Scott and Christian. When she’d kissed Scott goodbye that morning, he’d suggested they meet there for a dinner to celebrate her “new adventures.” *That, of course, was presumptive*, Jillian grumbled to herself as she recalled the moment.

Early to the restaurant, she ducked into the restroom immediately inside the door where it was quiet. There she applied a fresh smear of lipstick and smoothed her shoulder-length hair, then stepped back from the mirror for a more favorable view. Sometimes she saw a stranger looking back at her, someone so different from the way she felt inside. Friends commented that she looked a decade younger than she was—but those were usually the ones who themselves were younger. She ran her hand through her hair again. Last year she’d sought a well recommended colorist to add highlights to her natural brown, a half-hearted effort to mask the gray roots that inched in every month. Maybe it was time to stop the madness of coloring it, let it go gray. Wouldn’t that be freeing? *Oh god, I’m in the job market non—no way can I do that with gray hair.* She sighed and straightened herself, revising her body language in the mirror.

Shoulders back and chin up, she went into the restaurant and approached the maitre d’, following him through the buzzing restaurant to an empty table tucked in the back.

Jillian had always loved Zuni Cafe’s iconic San Francisco vibe, which to her meant great light from an abundance of windows and an almost rustic, lofted space, along with California comfort food and the barely perceptible smoky smell of a wood-fired oven. The room was filled with a convivial mix of attorneys, investment bankers, and pre-opera diners. Just as she stashed her bag under the table, she heard his voice: “There she is, the brave and courageous Jillian Johnson.” God, how she loved that voice.

Straightening, she stood and laughed. “Right, the *still unemployed* Jillian Johnson.”

Scott pulled her close and held her there for a moment. “I have a good feeling about this,” he whispered in her ear, followed by a kiss on the cheek.

Her sigh was more “that’s a joke,” than “thank you.”

She met his eyes and her mood lifted, even if just a millimeter. After more than thirty years of marriage, she still marveled that she was able to land a man this handsome. At six-foot-three, he still carried himself as an athlete, and the gray in his longish hair had only mellowed the snowboarder-blond to a dusty golden. Best of all, he had no idea how good looking he was. Today he was wearing dark jeans and a heather gray hooded sweater. What worked for his young customers at the board shop somehow managed to look quite natural on Scott, too.

When Jillian and Scott met, she was a few years out of college and already working at Westbrook, a solid corporate job. Scott worked in the exact opposite of a corporate job: snowboarding. It was an unlikely profession with a distinct rebel culture. A hotdog rider from early in the sport, he had dropped

out of community college and competed every weekend. For several years, sponsors had flown him to New Zealand and South America after the snow melted at Tahoe. But an ankle injury sidelined him early the year he met Jillian. Somehow their different backgrounds clicked on the first date, and he never quite regained that vagabond lifestyle, instead settling in Berkeley--and settling in as Jillian's steady boyfriend. Two years later they married. Two years after that, he opened On the Board, selling snowboards and skateboards to kids who were just like him.

Christian arrived at the table only a few minutes later and offered similar congratulations. This time she was able to relax and take in his optimism. She didn't want to discourage her own child from thinking positively about her. Besides, his well-educated opinion mattered to her, with a Stanford MBA recently added to his resume.

Christian was nattily dressed in VC casual: crisp shirt, dark jeans and a Patagonia down jacket. "This place is almost cool, it's so old-fashioned," he said, draping the jacket over the chair back.

"Old fashioned? You're kidding. It's the epitome of dining in San Francisco," Jillian said, turning to Scott for affirmation.

Scott nodded in agreement, his expression serious, like this was not open to debate.

Christian shrugged, smiling. "I guess I've already become re-cultured by tech—sushi at funky dive bars and the latest restaurant openings recommended by Eater."

Jillian and Scott raised eyebrows. The trio then settled in with further small talk, clinked their water glasses with a pre-toast, pored over the menu, and bantered with the server before ordering. Jillian and Scott, as was their tradition, would share the wood oven-roasted chicken over bread salad, meant for two. Christian went rogue, again as tradition, with the special of the day, a braised halibut.

After the server collected the menus and left the table, Scott and Christian turned in unison to Jillian, eyebrows raised, not even needing to ask the question.

"It went well," she said, and described the meeting with little embellishment. "Yes, I think it went well. But I'd be surprised if it turned into anything."

Just as she finished her story, the server reappeared, cradling a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, which he held out to Scott for approval. The gentleman, who likely had been performing this ritual at Zuni for 30 years, took his time, slowly, very slowly, twisting the cork from the bottle neck. He then poured a splash into Scott's glass and waited for the silent nod of approval before filling the others. Jillian shifted in her chair like an antsy child waiting for dessert to be served, anxious for the relief from the wine's warm flush.

Scott raised his glass first. "To my beautiful wife. A woman with conviction and smarts. To you, reinvented. In a startup. One that makes the world a better place."

"Hear, hear," added Christian.

"Well, from your lips to...." She smiled at the two of them as she raised her glass, not finishing the expression. Really, what could go wrong?

The complete novel will be released August 18 on Amazon.com. To receive notification, [join the Startup Decoder newsletter](#), which you can unsubscribe from at any time. Thanks for reading!