

STRIPPED

Wedding Bell Blues



LAS VEGAS TRANSPLANT

JEFF GOTTESFELD



MEET THE CHARACTERS

ALANA: Heiress Alana Skye, daughter of famous billionaire hotelier Steve Skye, is drop-dead gorgeous. But her life has been less than happy. And she has a difficult time living up to her father's demand for perfection.

CHALICE: Rich girl Chalice Walker is one of Alana's besties. Her ditzy, fun-loving nature masks an old soul. College is not for her because she's an artist at heart.

CORY: In the glitzy world of Vegas, Cory Philanopoulos was Alana's rock. Then he went to Stanford and everything changed. Back for the summer, rekindling a romance with Alana is not on his radar.

ELLISON: Why is Ellison Edwards working as a personal trainer in the luxurious LV Skye Hotel when he can afford any Ivy League school? And he has the brains to get accepted.

KAYLEE: No stranger to poverty and hardship, Kaylee Ryan literally falls into her dream job at the LV Skye. As Alana Skye's personal assistant, no less. Will poor girl Kaylee get along with Alana's rich besties?

REAVIS: From Texas like Kaylee, Reavis Smith is determined to make it big in Sin City. He's a street magician with a secret identity. And he's making a name for himself all over town.

ROXANNE: Supermodel Roxanne Hunter-Gibson is beauty and brains combined. She's managed to make a killing with an entrepreneurial start-up. Now she's Steve Skye's latest hot squeeze.

STEVE: Self-made man, cunning, rude (and some would say a lot worse) are some of the words used to describe hotel billionaire Steve Skye. And his crowning achievement is the luxurious LV Skye Hotel and Casino on the Las Vegas Strip.

ZOEY: Zoey Gold-Blum is the hottest rich girl in town. She knows it. And she uses it to her advantage. Deferring college for a year, she is out to keep her besties Chalice and Alana all to herself.



CHAPTER ONE

Good morning, Kaylee. Room service!”

Kaylee Ryan was already awake when the knock came on the door of room 3121 on the thirty-first floor of the LV Skye Hotel in the heart of the Las Vegas Strip. She’d put in her order for 7:15 a.m. but set her alarm for 7:10 a.m. so she’d have time to use the bathroom and splash cold water on her face before breakfast arrived. The five-stars-plus LV Skye prided itself on being the most luxurious hotel in Vegas, where every detail mattered and where service was key. If a guest put in a breakfast room service order for 7:15 a.m., it was delivered not a minute later.

“Coming!” Kaylee called. She’d been at the window, gazing at an early June morning in Sin City, watching joggers, walkers, and passersby on the Vegas sidewalks.

She'd slept in shorts and a pink camisole she'd bought at Target. She still wore those things as she crossed the floor of a room that normally went for more than three bills a night.

Kaylee, though, was not paying a dime. That fact still felt impossible to her. Three weeks before, she'd arrived in Las Vegas an eighteen-year-old girl who was essentially homeless. Her first Vegas digs had been tacky room 109 at the zero stars Apache Motel, for which she paid one hundred and forty dollars. Not for a night. For a week.

She opened her hotel door and grinned. "Hey, Jamila," she told the African American server, who wore the crisp uniform of the kitchen delivery staff and carried Kaylee's breakfast on a tray. Behind Jamila was a silver cart with more room service orders. Kaylee and Jamila had met at the Apache. Kaylee was the reason that Jamila had this job.

"Morning yourself," Jamila told her. "Got your order. Carafe of high-octane coffee, two eggs over easy, hash browns, turkey sausage, and rye toast, no butter. Plus a glass of water. Gotta keep the executive assistant to Alana Skye fed and watered. Lemme bring it in, I've got a bunch more deliveries. And thank you again for this gig."

"Hey, it's the least I could do," Kaylee said happily. "Come on in."

When Kaylee had first met Jamila and her boyfriend, Greg, she'd been homeless, unemployed, and had her heart broken by a boy who she thought might become her first real boyfriend. Before she came to Las Vegas, she'd been sharing a derelict studio with her meth-head aunt Karen in the somewhat sketchy Echo Park section of Los Angeles.

She'd returned home from getting fired to find the apartment padlocked, their meager belongings in the driveway, and her aunt nowhere to be found. They'd been evicted; her aunt reportedly had taken off for San Francisco. Kaylee found herself on the street at four thirty in the morning. She'd gone to her "boyfriend" Victor's place only to find him counting money with a bunch of gangbangers. That was the end of their relationship before it really started.

There was nothing holding her in Los Angeles, so she'd come to Vegas in search of a new start—a blonde girl raised poor in Texas with not even a high school diploma to her credit.

Through the strangest series of events that she felt was either the hand of God or the best run of dumb luck in Vegas history, she found herself befriended by, and then working for Alana Skye. Alana, who was also eighteen, had the same last name as the LV Skye for a good reason. Her father, Steve Skye, was the hotel's owner, as well as the owner of dozens of other hospitality properties around

the world. Alana ran Teen Tower, the LV Skye's special teen entertainment area. Within days of meeting her, Kaylee had been hired as Alana's assistant.

This luxury room was part of her pay. It was gold-on-white with blue accents, with floor-to-ceiling windows, a king-size bed, thick carpet, modern art on the walls, a flat screen TV, and a bathroom with tub, shower, bidet, and dressing area. It was five times the size of the shabby cubbyhole she'd rented at the Apache and about five hundred times as nice.

Jamila placed the tray on Kaylee's table. Then the girls embraced. "It's crazy you're living here, you know," Jamila told her.

"I think that every day," Kaylee responded.

"Well, Greg and I are just grateful you got us gigs."

Kaylee poured herself some of the hotel kitchen's high-end Indonesian coffee and took a grateful sip. She'd been up late the night before, going over Teen Tower plans with Alana in the luxury penthouse that her boss shared with her dad and her dad's latest gorgeous young girlfriend, Roxanne Hunter-Gibson.

"Hey. You would've done the same for me," Kaylee told her. "No doubt."

She took the room service ticket and signed it, adding a hefty tip for Jamila. She didn't have to pay for breakfast,

but gratuities came out of her own pocket. It was great to be able to throw some money to her friend like this.

“What’s up for you today?” Jamila asked.

“The usual,” Kaylee reported. “Morning meeting with Alana. Then Teen Tower opens at ten. We’re still getting four thousand kids a day. It’s a money machine.”

“Who’s playing today?”

“Some band called ZZ Top. Steve asked for them specifically.”

“Whoa. They’re old! When was their last hit?”

“What Steve Skye wants, Steve Skye gets,” Kaylee declared. “I think he wants to strap on a guitar and jam.”

In addition to its pool, game room, no-money casino, gym, and all-you-can-eat dining room and food court, Teen Tower featured a daily three o’clock concert that was broadcast live on MTV. That had been Kaylee’s idea. Though Teen Tower had only been open for a couple of weeks, the half-hour broadcast was already a national hit.

“Well, get me an autograph,” Jamila said. “I’ll send it to my grandfather.”

Kaylee grinned. “Come by at two thirty. I’ll introduce you.”

Jamila put the signed check in her rear pocket. “You busy tomorrow night? Maybe you and one of those guys hanging all over you wants to go out with Greg and me.”

Kaylee blushed. “There are not guys hanging all over me.”

“Oh, please. I see how that dude in the gym wants to be with you. What’s his name? Ellison, right? And your magic man Reavis? You told me he kissed you.”

“Not so much lately,” Kaylee corrected. “Reavis is working on his act, and Ellison—well, I’m not sure what he’s been up to.”

Reavis was Reavis Smith, an extremely talented magician and escape artist whom Kaylee had met at the Apache when he’d taken the room next to hers. He performed in a mask and called himself Phantom. She sometimes helped him with his tricks. His goal was to get a theater of his own and be bigger than Criss Angel. Reavis was street smart, as opposed to Ellison, who worked at the Teen Tower gym. Ellison was book smart in a way that Kaylee didn’t think she could ever be. He was also tall, buff, and gorgeous. The main reason that he worked as a trainer instead of attending a top college like Harvard was to irritate his university professor parents.

Ellison had been interested in her for sure. He’d kissed her by surprise at the Teen Tower opening two weeks before. But since that time, nothing. In fact, he hadn’t acted anything more than friendly. Not that Kaylee much minded. In so many ways, Ellison was out of her league.

Jamila checked her clipboard. “Okay. Schedule to keep. I gotta run. I’ll text you. And don’t worry about those dudes. There’s ten more where they came from. You da bomb, girl.”

They hugged one more time, and Jamila took off. Kaylee moved the breakfast tray to the table by the window, got out her laptop and phone, and went to work while she ate. Her first order of business was to read the *Stripped* blog. The blog was written by the two moms of Alana’s bestie, Zoey Gold-Blum.

Stripped had all the latest news, gossip, celebrity spotting, and inside dirt on what was going on in town. At one point, Zoey’s moms had threatened to do an exposé on Kaylee and her unsavory past. However, after the sensational Teen Tower opening that Kaylee had helped to engineer, complete with a surprise performance by Reavis behind his Phantom mask, the moms backed away from that idea. The moms could make or break anyone or anything in Vegas. Hotels, restaurants, performers, and people. They had that much power.

That morning, the blog was non-threatening, at least not threatening to Kaylee, Alana, Teen Tower, and the LV Skye. There was a nice review of Garth Brooks’s new show at the Wynn. A chop job on a new restaurant near Caesars Palace that would put the restaurant out of business. An interview with the famed painter Jeff Koons,

who was artist in residence at the LV Skye's Mondrian ultra-high-end restaurant—a restaurant that featured not just priceless modern art but also a working artist's studio. Some chatter about an upcoming charity event run by a group of trophy wives. Finally, Kaylee scrolled down to a gossipy piece about Alana's father, Steve, and his girlfriend, Roxanne:

Our sources tell us that Steve Skye's been spotted at Harry Winston Jewelers in Los Angeles, as well as at a certain diamond dealer on New York City's Forty-Seventh Street. Not to go out on a limb and make a prediction, but *Stripped* isn't *not* making a prediction either. Since his divorce from troubled model Carli Warshaw, we've counted eleven girlfriends for the town's hottest bachelor. Who knows? Maybe Roxanne is going to be the last one.

Good luck, Roxanne. You'll need it.

Huh. That was interesting. Kaylee wondered what Alana would think when she read it. Steve and Roxanne had only been together for a few months. Roxanne was only in her twenties. Not all that much older than Alana or Kaylee. What would it feel like for Alana to have—

Kaylee's cell rang. This was no shocker. As Alana's assistant, Kaylee's cell rang all the time. She answered without checking caller ID, assuming it was her boss.

"Morning, Alana," she said. "Did you read *Stripped* yet? Because there's this story about your dad—"

"Kaylee! Hi! Hi, love! How are you? Kaylee! It's me!"

Kaylee's heart pumped faster; she felt herself in the wash of an adrenaline flood. The coffee and food in her stomach turned over, and then over again.

It wasn't Alana on the phone at all. Instead, it was a female voice she dreaded hearing more than any other.

"Kaylee? You there, Kaylee?"

She hesitated a moment before responding. "Yes, Aunt Karen. I'm here."

She hadn't spoken a word to Karen since the night of the eviction. She didn't miss her. In fact, now that she had this great new job, she was glad that her aunt was out of her life, doing whatever she was doing in Northern California. Probably shooting meth, Kaylee thought.

"Wonderful! Fabulous! Terrific! Nothing better! It's *so* great to hear your voice!"

"Are you okay, Aunt Karen? How's San Francisco?"

"San Francisco? San Francisco?" Aunt Karen cackled a laugh roughened by a lifetime of booze, cigarettes, and meth. "What are you talking about, San Francisco? I'm not

in San Francisco. I'm on the road! Guess who's comin' to Vegas? Me!"

Oh no. Aunt Karen was coming to town. That was a problem. No. That was a huge, giant, massive, enormous, gargantuan, colossal problem. As Karen prattled on, Kaylee solved a word problem in her head. The equation proved maddeningly simple:

Aunt Karen + Las Vegas + Kaylee = TROUBLE

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CHAPTER ONE

Alana Skye woke up thinking that it was a great day to be young, hot, and Sick Rich. One of the advantages of being rich was breakfast in bed whenever she wanted. It was always delivered by the butler, Mr. Clermont, and her order was always the same—a little pick-me-up before she got the day moving. Two cups of the LV Skye Hotel’s house brand Indonesian coffee in a French press, one lightly buttered croissant, and a glass of filtered water drawn from the hotel’s own well.

For anyone else, croissants in bed would be a risky choice because of the crumb factor. In Alana’s case, the penthouse housekeeping crew changed her sheets daily whether she slept in them or not. So croissants were no problem. Alana could have scattered a ton of crumbs on

her bed and floor, and within hours they would be vacuumed and disposed of without so much as her making a phone call.

Alana had an easy life. But as her best friend, Zoey Gold-Blum, who also had an easy life, always said, “Alana? There’s nothing to apologize for. It’s an easy life, yeah. But someone’s got to live it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Clermont,” Alana said when the butler had placed her tray on the side table. She was still in bed, with the 2,000-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets pulled up to her chin.

“Very good, Miss Alana,” Mr. Clermont told her. “Your friends Miss Zoey and Miss Chalice are awaiting you in the dining room. When you’re ready.”

“I’ll be out in fifteen minutes,” Alana said to the butler.

Zoey and Chalice had texted the night before to see if the three of them could meet up for coffee. They had something they wanted to talk over with her. It had been hard for Alana to find any time since she was so crazy busy these days with the LV Skye Hotel Teen Tower project. Once upon a time, the three girls pretty much owned the town and never came home before midnight. These days, with Teen Tower up and running, and Alana in charge again, Alana kept very different hours. For the last two weeks, she hadn’t been to bed later than eleven.

“Very well, Miss Alana,” Mr. Clermont acknowledged. “Is there anything else?”

Alana shook her head. “No, Mr. Clermont. Thank you.”

“Of course, Miss Alana.”

He nodded gravely and left the room, tall and thin in his formal dark suit and tie. Alana had only ever seen him in a suit and tie, except when he came to work in a tuxedo. She couldn’t imagine what Mr. Clermont looked like, say, in surfer jams and a UNLV Runnin’ Rebels muscle shirt. The thought made her giggle. She’d pay to see that.

She poured and drank a little coffee, then got out of bed and stretched, cat-like. Her dark hair cascaded past her shoulders. There was a 270 degree mirror in her private bedroom suite, and she stepped into it and onto the scale. She smiled at herself—brown eyes flashing, full lips parting, but then frowned at the digits on the scale. She’d been working so hard at Teen Tower that she’d been eating on the fly, and she was six pounds over where she wanted to be. Ugh. She had work to do. But the unlimited Teen Tower dining room food was just so good.

“Coffee for breakfast,” she mentally told herself. “Then the *Stripped* blog. Then Zoey and Chalice. And then Kaylee and work. I want my dad to see me working hard today.”

One of the few things that made Alana's life less than perfection was her father. She was the only daughter of the great Steve Skye, for whom the LV Skye Hotel was named. The LV Skye was the flagship of the Skye empire of hotels and real estate. It was his baby, his pride and joy. It was the casino-hotel against which all other Las Vegas casino-hotels on Las Vegas Boulevard, otherwise known as the Strip, were judged.

The LV Skye was the biggest. It was the priciest. It had the best facilities. It had the most famous clientele. It had the fanciest casino, restaurants, indoor mall, convention center, spa, art gallery, and nightclubs in the city. Whenever there was an MMA title fight to be held in Vegas, it happened in an arena erected in the LV Skye parking lot. When rock and hip-hop artists came to Vegas, they stayed at the LV Skye, no matter where they were performing. It rose like a gold modernist sculpture above the Strip. Its fifty-five stories gleamed in the desert sun, with three thousand guest rooms that were always full.

The LV Skye was, quite simply, the greatest. It was also a money machine. Steve Skye made money from the rooms, the restaurants, the casino, the spa, the parking, the shops, and even the resort fees that guests paid for Internet use and the "free" bottles of water and box of Belgian chocolates in their rooms. It was a multi-billion

dollar a year enterprise, run with an iron fist by Alana's father, who was grooming his daughter to take over when it was time for him to retire.

Steve was widely known as a bully. Charming to strangers, curt to those who worked for him, and driven beyond measure, he never failed to turn any conversation with Alana into a teachable moment about the hotel business. The difficulty for Alana was that until very recently she demonstrated no particular aptitude for her father's business. She was a nice girl, bright enough, more than cute enough. She was also a good friend. But there were no signs that she'd inherited her father's business smarts, despite Steve's constant teaching, exhorting, encouraging, and shaming.

Then Steve Skye put Alana in charge of Teen Tower, his new teen-themed entertainment space at the hotel. Teen Tower operated on the same all-inclusive fee basis as many Caribbean and Mexican resorts, but the clientele was limited to kids between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. They—meaning, their parents, grandparents, or some other adult—dropped three figures a day so that the kids could eat, drink non-alcoholic beverages, play in a no-money casino, hang by the pool, and enjoy the game room and top-notch entertainment. Basically they had a place to go so they wouldn't make their parents' vacations miserable.

Alana had floundered at Teen Tower until she met Kaylee Ryan, a girl her age who had no education to speak of but a fantastic knack for making Teen Tower a cool place to be. Alana had made Kaylee her assistant, and Teen Tower had opened with an enormous splash. After just two weeks, Teen Tower was generating almost half a million dollars for the hotel every day. The profit margin was enormous. For the first time in her life, it seemed Steve Skye was totally happy with his daughter.

Alana slipped into a silk bra and panties, then went back to bed to do the first thing that anyone who was in the Vegas casino-hotel business did when they awakened: check the *Stripped* blog. *Stripped* was the Las Vegas newswire, gossip wire, entertainment wire, scandal wire, and business wire all rolled into one. Zoey's two mothers wrote it, and they had access to great information. When something big was happening in Vegas, they always heard about it first. Good, bad, scandalous, whatever.

She had a *Stripped* app on her iPhone. One touch and the blog came up. She scanned the stories, looking to see if there was anything relevant to Teen Tower or about the new street magician, Phantom. His feats of magic and illusion were dazzling the town. His real name was Reavis Smith. Kaylee knew him personally and had finally revealed his identity to Alana. She had even snuck him into Teen Tower to perform

at the grand opening—which had restored Alana’s dad’s faith in her abilities, *and* gotten Kaylee’s job back.

Kaylee and Alana wanted Phantom to perform at Teen Tower permanently. So far, though, he was content to do street magic and buff up his daredevil reputation.

Today’s *Stripped* seemed normal. There was a clever and nasty review of a new Asian fusion restaurant near Caesar’s Palace that the moms compared to Panda Express. Kiss of death. The place would have to close.

Then Alana saw something that made her sit up in her custom-made four-poster bed and take notice.

Our sources tell us that Steve Skye’s been spotted at Harry Winston Jewelers in Los Angeles, as well as at a certain diamond dealer on New York City’s Forty-Seventh Street. Not to go out on a limb and make a prediction, but *Stripped* isn’t *not* making a prediction either. Since his divorce from troubled model Carli Warshaw, we’ve counted eleven girlfriends for the town’s hottest bachelor. Who knows? Maybe Roxanne is going to be the last one.

Good luck, Roxanne. You’ll need it.

Whoa, extra whoa, and maybe extra woe. Alana

frowned. Since the time he'd divorced her mother, Steve had indeed hooked up with eleven serious girlfriends. These relationships always followed the same course. Hot meeting, hot passion, hot split.

The latest girlfriend, Roxanne Hunter-Gibson, was as smart, as beautiful, and as young as all Steve's other girlfriends had been. In today's *Stripped*, Zoey's moms were intimating that this was a more serious relationship. That could be, but Alana decided they were guessing beyond the facts. Vegas was nothing if not all about odds. And Alana knew the odds that her playboy father was in a jewelry store to do anything but buy Roxanne a regular gift were slim to none. It made a good story, though. It would get the town talking.

There was a knock at her door.

"Hold a sec," she called, figuring it was Mr. Clermont.

"What's this 'hold a sec' bull? You've grown something you don't want us to see?"

Alana smiled. Zoey. She and Chalice must have gotten tired of waiting for her. "Come on in, you guys. I thought you were Mr. Clermont."

The door opened; Zoey and Chalice piled into her room. Zoey was tall and thin, with short hair and a size 0 body that the camera loved. She wore a short black dress and sandals.

Chalice was smaller and curvier, with red ringlets. Her body was packed into a retro green-and-white polka dot dress. Alana had known both girls since her arrival in Las Vegas. Zoey was whip-smart, caustic, fierce, and forward. Chalice was sweet and fun-loving, and a genius with hair and cosmetics, but not the brightest bulb lighting the makeup mirror.

There were hugs all around. Her friends flopped down on Alana's bed. Alana spilled a little coffee on the white comforter in the process but didn't fret. That would be changed by the daily help too.

"Did you see *Stripped*?" Zoey asked bluntly.

"You mean the thing about my dad and Roxanne?" Alana asked.

Chalice clasped her hands together. "Isn't it romantic? Picking out a diamond."

Zoey made a face. "Please. First of all, she's like ten years older than we are. Second of all, he's not marrying her. He'd have to sleep with only her for the rest of his life."

"I still think it's romantic," Chalice opined. "I wish someone would buy me a diamond."

"Buy one for yourself and say it came from your lover in Paris," Zoey suggested.

"I don't have a lover in ... Oh! I get it. Well. Maybe

I will get myself a lover in Paris. I wonder how long that would take me.”

Alana smiled. Chalice was always willing to laugh at herself. It was a good quality.

“So,” she said to her friends. “There was something you wanted to talk to me about. Bring it.”

Zoey and Chalice exchanged a serious glance that made Alana nervous.

“What?” Alana asked.

“We wanted to talk to you about—”

Before Zoey could go further, there was another knock on the door.

“Yes?” Alana called.

“Miss Alana, are you decent?” Mr. Clermont asked through the closed door. “Your father is on his way to see you.”

“Tell him thirty seconds!” Alana looked back to Zoey and Chalice. “Hold that thought.”

She got up and scrambled for her white terrycloth robe with the hotel monogram. She put it on just in time too. Her father knocked once and then opened the door. He was dressed in tennis clothes; he always hit for forty-five minutes on the hotel courts with the in-house pro before going to his office. He had a strong build and thick, dark hair. For a guy in his forties, he looked good.

“Hey,” he said gruffly, expressing no surprise that Zoey and Chalice were on the bed with Alana.

“Hi, Daddy. Is everything okay?”

Steve Skye shook his head and glared at Zoey. “No. Everything is not okay, thanks to Zoey’s mothers. This is not the way that I intended for word to get out.”

Alana startled. What had he just said? *“This is not the way I intended for word to get out.”*

Oh no! It was true. Steve and Roxanne were actually getting married. It was just a matter of when. She, Alana Skye, was going to get a stepmother. Like it or not.