

STRIPPED

# INDEPENDENCE DAY



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

Every so often as she walked through the Teen Tower resort at the LV Skye Hotel on the Las Vegas Strip, Kaylee Ryan saw something she couldn't believe. Sometimes what she saw resulted in a call to hotel security, like when six guests decided it would be fun to ride one of the water-park features buck naked.

Sometimes what she saw made her smile, like when hip-hop legend Mr. Wiggles picked a nerdy kid out of the crowd at the daily concert on the pool deck to give the kid an impromptu lesson on how to pop.

And sometimes it made her jaw drop in awe, like when the masked magician and escape artist Phantom, who did a main stage show almost every day just before closing, unveiled yet another trick that defied explanation.

Phantom's most recent feat of dazzling magic—it had been broadcast on the *Stripped* blog for days now—had been to turn a volunteer into a snorting pig and then back into a person.

Most of the time on her daily walks, though, Kaylee just felt satisfied and lucky. The walks were part of her job as one of the two main assistants to Alana Skye, the girl who ran Teen Tower under the watchful eye of her father, the very famous and very rich hotelier, Steve Skye.

Kaylee was an eighteen-year-old blonde-haired and hazel-eyed girl without a high school diploma, who'd arrived in Vegas a month or so earlier with neither a job nor a place to live. Through the most impossible series of events, Kaylee was now living for free at the LV Skye Hotel—one of the most luxurious casino-hotels anywhere. And she was making a yearly salary in the mid-five figures doing the most exciting job any girl her age could hope for.

It all made Kaylee feel like Cinderella, except the clock at the costume ball was stuck at 11:59 p.m. so she'd never have to live in a pumpkin ever again. Not that Kaylee had ever lived in a pumpkin. She'd lived in far worse. Just before she'd come to Vegas, she'd shared a roach-infested studio with her meth-head aunt in Los Angeles's dicey Echo Park neighborhood. She'd come home one night from her office-cleaning job to find all their stuff in the

driveway, an eviction notice on the door, and her aunt nowhere to be found. At that point in her life, a pumpkin would have been a step up.

Her luck changed when she came to Vegas. She had even met a hot guy: Cory Philanopoulos. He had sandy hair, cut abs, and a poet's soul. And his hedge fund director father was worth only a little less than Steve Skye. Kaylee and Cory's boss, Alana, had dated Cory in high school, but it ended when Cory left for freshman year at Stanford. But even that was okay. Alana had given Kaylee her blessing for full steam ahead on the relationship. In the meantime, Alana was hooking up in all ways except one with Ellison, the hot-bodied young ebony genius who ran the Teen Tower gym.

Good as Kaylee had it, things weren't altogether perfect. The biggest downside was that Kaylee shared assistant duties with Zoey Gold-Blum, Alana's longtime best bud. The better Kaylee came to know Zoey, the more that Zoey was a first-class witch.

On a weekday morning not long before the Fourth of July, Kaylee, Alana, and Zoey crossed the Teen Tower deck together. Kaylee and Alana wore variations of the official Teen Tower uniform—a staff T-shirt with jeans, shorts, or cutoffs. Kaylee had her blonde hair back in a ponytail, with plenty of sunscreen across her nose.

Alana was an inch taller and in great shape—she'd been working out with Ellison in the gym for several weeks. She had lush dark hair she parted in the middle, with Tom Ford sunglasses pushed up onto her head.

Zoey dressed to flaunt. Nearly five foot nine, with a model's body and short blonde hair, she'd modified her T-shirt with a pair of scissors and matched it with ultra-short cutoffs. It was an outfit designed to attract male attention, and she got what she was looking for.

"Hey, Zoey! Lookin' good!" a guy with a Southern accent called out. He was with two friends. Kaylee had seen these three guys in the same spot the past two days. They were coveted repeat customers.

"Thank you, boys," Zoey called back with a little thrust of her hips.

A second guy waved. "You gonna hang with us later, Zoey?"

Zoey smiled flirtatiously at him. "You gonna make it worth my while?"

"Come try us!" the first guy declared.

Zoey laughed and kept walking. Kaylee was happy that the guys were repeaters but was dismayed by Zoey's outrageous back and forth with them.

"You really think that's the staff image we want to have?" Kaylee asked.

“What don’t you like?” Zoey challenged.

“Flirting with the guests, that’s what I don’t like,” Kaylee told her. “It’s not professional. And that outfit you have on. It’s not professional either.”

They passed one of the lifeguard towers. The pool was packed. It was one of the largest in Vegas, and featured high-quality diving boards, platforms, swim-up bars with non-alcoholic drinks, and water-park features. Once a guest—they had to be between the ages of thirteen and eighteen—had paid the admission fee, he or she could use all the Teen Tower facilities for no additional charge. They could also eat and drink anything they wanted. The pool was always one of the most popular areas.

Zoey stopped and put her hands on her hips. “I don’t get you, Kaylee.”

Kaylee frowned. Since Alana had made Zoey her second assistant two weeks ago, Zoey had become more caustic. It didn’t seem to bother Alana, though.

“What’s not to get?” Kaylee shot back.

Zoey turned to Alana. “You’re going to need to decide this.”

“Decide what?” Alana asked distractedly. “What are you guys even talking about?”

*That was weird,* Kaylee thought. *Alana isn’t even tracking the conversation.*



WANT A DIFFERENT

point of view?



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## CHAPTER ONE

And one! Two! Three! Four! Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch!”

Ellison Edwards called out the marching orders—well, the crunching orders. Alana Skye crunched her abs just as she had crunched her abs every morning since she’d started her training with him several weeks before. Once upon a time, if anyone had told her that she’d be the first one awake in the ultra-luxury hotel penthouse she shared with her dad and her new stepmother, Alana would have suggested that they might want to consider seeing a psychologist. Yet, here she was. Soaking wet with sweat and crunching her abs for all she was worth.

“Fifteen! Sixteen! Seventeen! Eighteen! Come on,

Alana, you want the best abs in Vegas? Work 'em, baby, work 'em!"

Alana did want the best abs in Vegas. She also wanted the best body. When she'd started training with her sort-of boyfriend—Ellison—during the run-up to her dad and Roxanne's wedding, she'd been a conventionally pretty, five foot seven eighteen-year-old with seriously great dark hair, pale skin, and the best wardrobe money could buy. She wore a size 2 dress on a good day. And she felt decent about herself in a black Gottex bikini. But compared to the mind-blowing curves of her friend Chalice Walker, or the model-thin looks of her bestie Zoey Gold-Blum, she'd been the last of the three to be stared at on the pool deck.

Now, after a month with Ellison, she was nine pounds lighter, and down to twenty percent body fat. She had crossed the line to certified drool material, judging from the reaction of the teen guy guests at the LV Skye Casino-Hotel's Teen Tower. This was a good thing because Ellison was serious drool material of the male kind. Seven inches taller than Alana, he was built like a football running back, with ebony skin, high cheekbones, and perhaps the best pecs, biceps, and triceps in the Western Hemisphere.

Alana's old boyfriend, Cory Philanopoulos—the one she still missed in her heart of hearts—had been drool-worthy in his own way, but he was no specimen like

Ellison. Together, Alana and Ellison could have been young Las Vegas's "It" couple if only Alana could have found a way to elevate Ellison to full-on boyfriend. Alas, looks were not everything. Alana still had a Cory-sized hole in her heart.

"Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and ... stop!"

Alana slumped back to the workout mat. The Teen Tower gym was as well equipped as any in town. There was a dedicated stretching area, weight machines, free weights, a spinning room, an aerobics and dance room, a yoga studio, and a cardio area. Everything was brand-spanking new. The locker rooms had showers, saunas, and whirlpools. Teen Tower guests who wanted to train didn't even have to worry about workout clothes because the hotel supplied anyone who wanted to use the gym with a "roll" of a Teen Tower T-shirt, shorts, simple undergarments, and socks. Guests could even borrow shoes. The laundry bill was enormous, but it was all in keeping with Steve Skye's philosophy of hospitality, which he shared with Alana as often as he could. "If you give people an experience they will never forget, you can charge them whatever you want."

Teen Tower was Steve's latest innovation at the LV Skye, and Alana was in charge of it. It operated on the same all-inclusive basis as many resorts in the Caribbean.

That is, guests—who had to be between thirteen and eighteen to be admitted—paid a single entrance fee. Actually their parents usually paid the fee, which was well north of a hundred dollars a day. Whoever paid, there was no need for more money once they passed the admissions area and security. He or she could eat, drink, swim, enjoy the gym, the theater, the concerts, the shows, the game room, and the no-money mock casino all day and evening. Tipping was strictly prohibited.

Teen Tower opened at ten in the morning and closed around eight thirty in the evening. The final event of the day was a magic show at the pool-deck stage starring Phantom, the great young masked magician who'd taken Vegas by storm. In its first month of operation, Teen Tower averaged four thousand customers a day and was grossing three million bucks a week. With that kind of revenue, Alana could afford her nice wardrobe.

At seven thirty in the morning, though, Ellison and Alana had the gym to themselves. Daily training always started with cardio and ended with abdominals. Ellison said that the regular muscle groups should only be worked once every three days, but abs and the heart were such big muscles that they could be exercised every day. Alana didn't argue. All she had to do to convince herself to do whatever Ellison said was to stand in the middle of the

three-way mirror of her palatial penthouse bathroom and gaze with pleasure at her reflections. One thing about training: results always spoke for themselves.

“We’re done?” Alana asked. “Because you’re going to have to peel me off the floor if we’re not, then squeegee this mat.”

Ellison nodded. “We’re done. Here.” He reached down with two enormous hands. Alana took them. With the most modest of efforts, he helped her up. Then he handed her a white towel with the Teen Tower monogram. “Good job today.”

They’d worked Alana’s back and triceps, in addition to cardio and abs. She was up to twenty pounds on the triceps pushdown machine, three sets of ten reps. “Thanks. I do what my instructor says.”

“Your instructor says, ‘remove that shirt.’”

Alana grinned. “Oh? Really? Is that what my instructor says? Is he living dangerously?” She had visions of a romantic embrace and maybe some serious lip-locking, which would have been great except for two things. First, she was sweaty despite her best efforts with the towel. Second, lingering thoughts about Cory would have busted great down to good. Not that she was opposed to good. But still.

Ellison laughed. “No. We are not living dangerously.



## JEFF GOTTESFELD

Jeff Gottesfeld is an award-winning writer for page, screen, and stage. His *Robinson's Hood* trilogy for Saddleback won the "IPPY" Silver Medal for multicultural fiction. He was part of the editorial team on *Juicy Central* and wrote the *Campus Confessions* series. He was Emmy-nominated for his work on the CBS daytime drama *The Young and the Restless*, and also wrote for *Smallville* and *As the World Turns*. His *Anne Frank and Me* (as himself) and *The A-List* series (as Zoey Dean) were NCSS and ALA award-winning *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* bestsellers. Coming soon is his first picture book, *The Tree in the Courtyard*. He was born in Manhattan, went to school in Maine, has lived in Tennessee and Utah, and now happily calls Los Angeles home. He speaks three languages and thinks all teens deserve to find the fun in great stories. Learn more at [www.jeffgottesfeldwrites.com](http://www.jeffgottesfeldwrites.com).

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