

STRIPPED

Meet Kaylee



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 ditzzy, 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

There was good news and bad news for Kaylee Ryan on the morning after she lost her job and lost the boy she thought might become her boyfriend.

The bad news was that Kaylee learned she had no place to live at four thirty in the morning. The good news was that the homeless shelter was only a quarter mile from the studio she shared with her aunt, Karen. Or used to share, apparently.

So she was trekking the mean streets of the Echo Park section of Los Angeles. Known locally as the Echo, the only people awake at this hour were heroin dealers, hookers, and creepy men who couldn't sleep.

Kaylee—her given name was Katherine Lee Ryan, but she'd been Kaylee since birth—found out she was

homeless when she came home from the job she used to have.

Since she arrived in Los Angeles from Texas four months before, she had worked graveyard from seven thirty until three thirty in the morning cleaning offices at Warner Brothers over in Burbank. She didn't work for the studio. Instead, she worked for a company that had a contract with the studio.

She got paid just a little more than minimum wage and slaved alone all night. It got lonely, though sometimes the writers' rooms were still inhabited by clusters of mostly out-of-shape young men who smelled of anxiety. Kaylee had come to learn that there was a perfect relationship between how well a TV show was doing with audiences and how early the writers went home. Hit shows had writers that ate dinner with their girlfriends. Shows on the verge of being canceled pulled all-nighters.

Her journey to getting fired and being homeless had started that evening at six o'clock in her aunt Karen's apartment. Karen was her mother's oldest sister and had come to Los Angeles when she was seventeen to seek fame and fortune. Back in rural Texas, where Kaylee's mother and aunt had grown up, Karen had been the prettiest girl at Killeen High School. Kaylee remembered her from when she was little, when Karen would come home at Christmas

to visit. She was like a goddess with the family trademark long blonde hair, a bangin' body, and skin as clear as a cloudless Texas sky.

Karen had come to Los Angeles to become an actress, but it had never worked out. She found her way into shoplifting, then to stealing, and then to drugs. When Kaylee moved to L.A., Karen had sworn that she was clean and sober. Kaylee learned quickly never to trust an addict.

After Karen came to California, it didn't take long for Kaylee's mother, Linda, to get the acting bug too. It promised much better pay than waiting tables, which is what she was doing in Killeen. So off she went to California. Kaylee was left with her grandmother.

California started out okay for her mom. Then she met a man who rode a Harley. That would have been okay too, if the man hadn't crashed the Harley on Pacific Coast Highway. When Kaylee got the bad news about her mom's death, she was twelve.

Her dad couldn't comfort her. He was in prison, and he wasn't getting out for a long time.

After her mom's death, things went from bad to worse. She and her grandma, who had some dementia, moved from a rented home to a double-wide and then into a single-wide. Then Grandma's mind got so bad that she had to go to a nursing home. That was when Kaylee came

out to California to live with Aunt Karen. She arrived to find that Karen was a meth head.

The night Kaylee lost her job, her home, and her possible boyfriend, she and Karen had dined on their usual dinners—microwave meatloaf for Karen, salad and cheese for Kaylee. Karen was too strung out to hold a job, so Kaylee supported them. That night she took the bus to Burbank. The building she cleaned looked like any other office building. If a person didn't know it, it was impossible to tell that a slew of the country's most popular TV shows were based there.

She picked up her cleaning cart in the basement and took the elevator to the top floor. She'd work her way down, doing her vacuuming/dusting, wiping/washing thing. She had it down to a science. It wasn't all bad. No one minded if she swapped texts with Victor Ruiz, a guy who lived a few doors down, and whom she had come to like in a way that was more than friendly. But the best part of the job was the trash.

Kaylee had come to learn that people chucked out all kinds of great stuff. In four months, she'd salvaged a laptop, an unlocked Android phone, a bunch of TV and movie publicity kits she could sell on eBay, movie passes, posters, unopened makeup by MAC and Dior, and a full box of Godiva chocolates. She'd even found usable clothes.

On the night that would prove to be her last night of employment, Kaylee texted Victor until he went to bed at midnight. Then she listened to music, cleaned, and retrieved a nice Hermes scarf from the trash can of a woman who was a reverse hoarder. Hoarders couldn't throw things away. This woman threw everything away, sometimes with the tags still attached. Crazy.

When Kaylee was about to finish her shift, her cell rang. It was her supervisor, Caroline, who always checked in toward the end of the night.

"Hi, it's Kaylee."

"Hey, Kaylee, Caroline Jones here. Your shift went okay?"

"Same as always." Kaylee sat in the reverse hoarder's empty office chair, happy for the break.

"Good." Caroline took a breath. "So listen, you don't need to come in tomorrow."

"Oh. Okay. I'll take the day off." This was no biggie. Sometimes things got overbooked.

"Um, Kaylee? I don't think you're hearing me," Caroline told her. "Don't come in tomorrow. Or any other day. We're letting you go. We lost a contract, and we're shifting some people around. Sorry. You're a good worker, but you know how it goes."

"Oh."

Kaylee reeled. It had been hard finding this job. She was pretty much the sole support of herself and Karen. Now she was being fired. Not that being fired was so odd. When a girl took jobs that didn't require a high school diploma or a GED, she was expendable.

"You can get unemployment, and definitely use me for a reference," Caroline said. "Keep your uniform. It's our gift. We'll mail your final overnight. Okay. See you later. And thanks."

Caroline clicked off.

"Keep your uniform. It's our gift." Who makes a gift like that? "Sure, Caroline," I should have said. "I'll box it up and give it to someone else. What a great Christmas present! An ACME Cleaning Services blue uniform! 'It's what everyone dreams of!'"

The truth was that Kaylee was more angry than upset. It wasn't that the job was so great, except for the trash-can fishing. It was that the timing was so bad. Rent was due in ten days. She'd have to find another gig fast. She sighed. She'd faced hardship before. She'd face it again. Victor worked in a restaurant in Glendale. Maybe he could help her find a job.

Even though it didn't matter any more, she still finished cleaning the last few offices before catching the late-night bus home. It was a good thing too. She'd found an

unopened box of Cuban cigars in a sitcom writer's trash, along with about a hundred mini 3 Musketeers wrappers. She put the cigars in her backpack, which served as her purse—another castoff from a Warner Brother's employee. Someone would want them for sure.

The bus driver greeted her by name. He prided himself on knowing his riders. Kaylee sat in her usual seat on the left side and stared out the window. Los Angeles was quiet at this hour. From Burbank to the Echo took forty minutes. Her aunt's place was three blocks from the bus stop at the corner of Glendale and Scott Avenue. She walked with purpose, not wanting to attract any human vermin.

The Echo used to be much tougher than it was, but it was still plenty bad. Auto repair and junk shops gave way to bungalows that had seen better days. Karen rented a tiny studio behind one of these bungalows. Since Karen was usually trying to find or cadge meth, most of the time Kaylee found herself—

Holy crap. Crap, crap, crap.

When Kaylee turned up the driveway to the guesthouse, the floodlights were on. All their furniture was outside. The pull-out couch, cot, card table, two kitchen chairs, piles of clothing, the boxy TV, pots, pans, dishes. As she looked on in horror, a couple of huge rats scampered through the kitchen stuff, looking for food. She hated rats.

There had been rats in the last trailer she'd shared with her grandmother. She hated, hated, hated them.

There was a sign taped to the front door, which now had a big padlock on it.

BY ORDER OF THE
LOS ANGELES COUNTY SHERIFF
NOTICE OF ACTUAL EVICTION

“Kaylee!”

Kaylee turned. It was Mrs. Martinez, whose family rented the main bungalow. She wore a nasty green bathrobe.

“When was the sheriff here?” Kaylee asked. “Where’s my aunt?”

“They came after midnight,” Mrs. Martinez said. “They say she no pay rent for three months. They say every time they put note on door she take it off. So, poof!” Mrs. Martinez had a shaky command of English.

“That’s not possible! I gave her money to pay the rent! Every month!”

Mrs. Martinez wagged a finger at Kaylee. “It go for drugs, you understand? Anyway, you put your stuff under my steps if you want. Am sorry you no can stay with us for night, but my husband say your aunt *loca*.”

Kaylee sighed. “Was she here when the sheriff came?”

“Yes, she here. Then she say she go San Francisco, but who knows? She bad. Understand?”

“San Francisco?” Kaylee asked in disbelief. “Karen said she was going to San Francisco?”

“That what she say. I go sleep. You *buena suerte*.” Mrs. Martinez shuffled back inside.

So there she was. It was four thirty in the morning. She had no job. No home. She had no family, except for a druggie aunt who may or may not have skipped town.

Kaylee allowed herself five minutes of self-pity. Then, wary of the rats, she found her clothes and stuffed them into a small rolling suitcase she’d found. She had known that luggage would come in handy someday. Tonight was that day. At least she had a place to go. Victor’s.

STRIPPED

Meet Alana



LAS VEGAS HEIRESS

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SADDLEBACK
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING
www.sdlback.com

ISBN: 978-1-62250-788-9



9781622507889



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CHAPTER ONE

Some say that New York City is the city that never sleeps. They say wrong. The city that really never sleeps is Las Vegas, Nevada. “Sin City.” “The Gambling Capital of the World.” For example, just about every Vegas restaurant serves breakfast twenty-four hours a day to accommodate players who decide their best time to play blackjack is from four in the morning until noon. None of the casinos have clocks; the better to get gamblers to forget about time and focus on the riches that could come with the next spin of the slot machine or turn of the cards.

So 5:30 a.m. isn’t an impossible time to be awake in Vegas. It is, however, a hell of a time for a girl who just graduated from high school to get home after a night of heavy-duty partying—particularly when “home” was the

six thousand square foot penthouse at the LV Skye Hotel, located on the south side of Las Vegas Boulevard in the heart of the famous Las Vegas Strip.

The Skye was named for the famous hotelier Steve Skye. He was a man accustomed to control. And he didn't get anywhere by being nice. The girl coming through the door at that ungodly hour was his drop-dead gorgeous daughter, Alana. At almost eighteen, she was an only child.

His rags-to-riches story was known around the world. He'd dropped out of the Cornell School of Hotel Management at age twenty because he figured he'd already learned enough. His first job, way back before he changed his name from Steve Johnson to Steve Skye, was at a cheap motel in Tupelo, Mississippi.

Tupelo is known as the birthplace of Elvis Presley. Steve doubled that motel's business by convincing the owner to decorate each room in the theme of one of the rooms at Elvis's mansion in Memphis, Tennessee. He also made all of Elvis's movies available on pay-per-view on the motel televisions. He renamed the motel the Presley Palace. And he got the attached coffee shop to sell some of Elvis's favorite treats, like fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

Before long, the Bengali owner made Steve his partner. Four years later, they controlled over a hundred hotels and

motels from coast to coast. The owner went back to India, and Steve sent him a hefty check every month.

That was the beginning of the Steve Skye story, but it was by no means the end. By the time he was thirty, Steve started the Skye family of hotels, with oh-so-chic must-stays in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Dallas. He was also the father of young Alana, whose home base was in New York City. She was largely raised by nannies because Daddy was always on the road visiting one of his properties or scouting locations for a new one.

Her mom, the famous fashion model Carli Warshaw, tended to be off doing fashion shoots. At least that's what she did until her infamous nervous breakdown on the runway during New York Fashion Week. After that, Carli went to a facility in Georgia for a stay that stretched from weeks to months to years. She wasn't coming to Vegas for Alana's eighteenth birthday. Alana didn't mind. When she'd seen her a few years ago, Carli could barely put together a sentence. It was scary for Alana to think that she had a dose of her mother's genes somewhere inside her.

By the time Alana finished tenth grade, Steve had built and opened the LV Skye. It was the biggest, best, classiest, hippest, most sought-after place to stay, play, gamble, and party. Here you could really have that "whatever happens

in Vegas stays in Vegas” experience. Right from the get-go, the hotel had been a sell-out. It was nearly impossible to get a room. Which was no mean feat because the place had three thousand rooms that went for an average of three bills a night. Even taking into account the rooms that are giveaways, called *comped*, to big stars and big gamblers, the hotel took in a boatload of cash.

Alana was no math wizard, but even she could run the numbers. (3,000 x \$300 = \$900,000 per night / \$6.3 million per week / \$327.6 million per year.)

That was before a single guest paid a resort fee, ate a meal at one of the hotel’s ten restaurants, visited the ultra-luxury spa, or valet parked their car. But here was the kicker: this was before the guest had even gambled away one dime. That’s where the real money was made—gambling.

Before she came to Las Vegas to join dear old Dad, her father told her that he wanted her to learn the business. His goal was for her to take it over one day. To that end, he made every moment he could into a lesson in hotel management. He loved to talk about how much money there was to be made in Sin City. People who come to Las Vegas wagered \$12 *billion* dollars every year. Bets on the Super Bowl accounted for upwards of \$100 *million* dollars. Best of all, he explained with glee, the “house” always had an

advantage when a person gambled in a Vegas casino. That edge could be anywhere from one percent to ten percent depending on the bet. If the advantage was five percent, for every thousand dollars gambled the casino was sure to win fifty dollars. The games were set up for the house to have this edge.

Once again, Alana did the math. Five percent of \$12 billion dollars was \$600 million dollars a year. Her father's goal was making sure a large percentage of that money was gambled away in his hotel.

Her dad had made billions from his other hotels, but the LV Skye was like a money printing press, and she and her father were the ones who benefited the most. Sure, there were investors and banks. But the fact of the matter was that her dad was richer than any of the rich guys you could name. And one day Alana would be richer than all of them too.

No wonder everyone had been nice to her when she'd started at Las Vegas Country Day School.

However, none of these things mattered when she let herself into the penthouse at 5:30 a.m. on the night before her eighteenth birthday. She'd been out all night partying with her best friends from school. Most of them were also the sons and daughters of Vegas hotel and casino elite. Some parents owned the buildings, and others owned the

businesses that served the hotels and casinos. But all of them made money. Lots of money. Alana ran with a crowd that was the next generation of Las Vegas royalty. There were three main groups of kids: Big Rich, Filthy Rich, and Sick Rich. Alana was Sick Rich. She shared this category with her best friends. Zoey Gold-Blum was the daughter of the city's most famed bloggers, and Chalice Walker's dad was the most successful gaming lawyer in town. Both besties came from old East Coast money. Together, they ruled.

Alana had hoped that she could just sneak into the penthouse; that Steve would be asleep. No such luck. In fact, hotel security had called Steve the minute she'd pulled her vintage red Mustang to the valet stand. He was waiting for her in the classic early-morning pose of so many fathers pissed about their teen daughters coming in after curfew. He stood barefoot in the entry hall, wearing a white silk robe—monogrammed with the LV Skye logo—over matching sleep pants. His arms were tightly crossed. Alana opened the door to parental disgust.

“Do you know what time it is?” he boomed, probably loud enough to be heard in Los Angeles. “Do you know what day it is? Do you remember what's happening in approximately eighteen hours?”

Though there were no clocks in the casinos, Alana knew very well what time it was. Not only were there

digital read-outs in all the elevators, she also had the latest beta-test iPhone sent to her from the Apple campus in Cupertino, California. Many of their executives liked to stay and play at the Skye when they needed to blow off a little steam. Meanwhile, the elevators also had high-tech video displays that listed all the doings at the resort. One of the main listings for that day was “Alana Skye’s Eighteen!—Private Party, Skye in the Sky Club.” She’d been out celebrating that eighteenth birthday with Zoey and Chalice. A pre-party party, as it were, with people she actually cared about. At the big party, there’d be about a thousand people and most of them would be business associates of her father. It wouldn’t be an intimate experience.

“It’s five thirty,” she said softly. “And it’s my birthday. Well, my birthday is tonight at midnight officially, but Chalice and Zoey wanted to do something extra special for me ... just us girls. They took me out.”

Steve looked down at her. He was tall and thin, with thick dark hair and olive skin that favored his mother. She’d come from Lebanon. His father’s family was from Northern Europe. They had been in the United States for many generations—even settling parts of Long Island, New York.

The two of them, Alana’s paternal grandparents, were dead. Alana often thought her father never got

over their deaths. She knew she hadn't. Her grandparents had been such a wonderful part of her life. They were always available for her to talk to, no matter what the issue. Especially when her mother was cracking up, they were there for her. Now they were gone, and they weren't coming back.

Alana pursed her lips and held back a tear. They weren't going to be able to see her eighteenth birthday either. They were always so proud of her for who she was as a person. They accepted her for who she was, not for the way she presented herself to the world.

"What are you thinking about?" Steve asked suddenly. "You're so quiet. I'm not used to it. In the casino business you have to be outgoing, Alana. It makes people want to engage with you, which makes them want to spend their money the way you want them to spend it. I always tell you that. Be outgoing. Even with me."

Ah. Another teachable moment from her dad. Alana thought about not sharing her thoughts with him. She didn't want to reopen any wounds. It was five thirty in the morning after all. Her father didn't really set a curfew for her, but there was the expectation that she'd be in bed before two.

"Nothing," she mumbled. "I should just go to bed. I'll be up and ready for the party. I promise."

She started toward her room, but Steve blocked the way. “I asked you a question. I want an answer. Remember I have the world’s best bullcrap detector. To succeed in this business, you need a good bullcrap detector. There’s something you don’t want to tell me. Which means I will find out. So you’d better tell me.”

She shook her head. “You really don’t want to know.”

“I really do.”

Blech. She really had no choice. Her father could be relentless.

“I was thinking about Grandma. And Grandpa,” she said simply. “How much I miss them. How much I wish they could be there tonight with us. That’s all.”

She looked up at him. She was about five eight, with a willowy figure and thick, lustrous dark hair that cascaded to the middle of her back. Her skin was pale, her eyes huge and honey brown. Tonight she wore a black cocktail dress by Michael Kors with an uneven neckline and a very high hemline. She had the legs to pull it off, and the black-and-silver Louboutins didn’t hurt either. Her handbag was by Chanel. One of the advantages of being Sick Rich was that a girl could have a lot of nice things. Steve had given her a black American Express card with instructions to use it on herself. His theory was that when Alana looked good, she got photographed. And when people saw her

photographs, they wanted to come to the hotel. She wasn't afraid to use the card either. She liked nice things as much as the next girl. Besides, Zoey always said that handbags lasted longer than boyfriends.

Steve blew some air between his lips and looked at her cockeyed. "It's five thirty in the morning; you're just getting home, and you're thinking about *my parents*?"

Alana nodded. She felt shy about being so honest. Maybe for once her father would be ready to have a real conversat—

"I think you should go to bed," he answered gruffly. "That's what I'm doing. Next time you come home this late, I'm not going to be so understanding. You shouldn't be thinking about your grandparents. You should be thinking about Teen Tower. We're opening soon. It's supposed to be your project."

That was it. He turned and headed back toward his wing of the penthouse. There was no sound. The penthouse had the thickest, most luxurious wall-to-wall Berber carpeting in the world. And the room was so big it took the cleaning crew an hour to vacuum it on their daily pass.

But that same carpet muffled all sound. Between the thick walls and special glass that separated the penthouse on the fifty-fifth floor from the air outside, it was as silent as a cabin deep in the woods.

That was it. No conversation. Not even an, “I miss them too.” Just a gruff order to go to bed. Alana often wondered what her father dreamed of. She herself dreamed of her grandparents and of actually being able to one day run the LV Skye like her father wanted her to. The problem was that she knew she didn’t have the skills to do it. She had desire, but desire without skills amounted to nothing. She often wondered if there was something else she should try to do with her life. The problem with that was her father would have a fit if she turned her back on him. He might even get angry. When truly angry, Steven Skye was dangerous.

She moved to the wall of windows that looked out on the Las Vegas Strip. In both directions, casino hotels stretched as far as the eye could see. The sun was coming up in the east, but the Strip still gleamed with the power of millions of watts of lights.

The Strip. For some, it was the setting of a miracle. For others, it was the boulevard of broken dreams. Sometimes—her father didn’t know this; no one did—she liked to wash off her makeup, put her hair up in a ponytail, throw on some jeans and a ratty T-shirt, and go wander through resorts like Sam’s and Circus Circus, where the clientele was far less tony than at the LV Skye. They were mostly normal people with normal lives.

Nothing about her life was normal. Not her father, not where she lived, not her friends, not her future. Who was she kidding? She'd never be able to run the hotel. She could barely do the work she needed to do on Teen Tower, her dad's latest project. It was a teen entertainment center at the hotel. If she couldn't do the work, her father would probably disown her. And then where would she be?

STRIPPED

Wedding Bell Blues



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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

STRIPPED

Wedding Bell Blues



LAS VEGAS HEIRESS

JEFF GOTTESFELD

SADDLEBACK
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING
www.sdlback.com

ISBN: 978-1-62250-769-6





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

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.