

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 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

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.

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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?