

STRIPPED

INDEPENDENCE DAY



LAS VEGAS TRANSPLANT

JEFF GOTTESFELD

INDEPENDENCE DAY

KAYLEE

BOOK 3

JEFF
GOTTESFELD



STRIPPED

Stripped
Wedding Bell Blues
Independence Day
Showdown on the Strip



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In memory of Jim Janosky.



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.*

“Whether I can wear what I’m wearing and talk the way I’m talking,” Zoey said. “Your other assistant thinks I’m not setting a good example. I think I’m getting guys to come back here day after day. Come on. It’s harmless. I’m just being a hot girl dressing hot. It’s just fooling around. No one is going to be doing the deed out behind the cabanas. Not that Kaylee here has any idea what that is.”

Kaylee’s face burned. It was true that she was a virgin and not the guy magnet that Zoey was, but she was cautious about men on purpose. Back in Echo Park, she’d seen what happened to girls who flaunted their sexuality like a matador’s cape. They ended up getting gored.

“I think it’s probably fine,” Alana muttered.

Kaylee tread carefully. Alana had said “probably fine.” That left a little opening for her. “Alana? I just want to point out that in the casino? All the dealers wear the same thing. Same thing with housekeeping. Same thing with the desk staff. It makes guests think they’re going to get the same great service from everyone. It’s like all the players on a team wearing the same uniforms. I think that’s what your dad would say.”

Zoey disagreed with Kaylee again. “But we’re not the hotel. We’re Teen Tower. We’re new, we’re hot, we’re young, we’re skin. We’re ‘what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.’ ”

“I agree with Zoey,” Alana declared. “It’s fine for her to dress how she’s dressed. And talk how she talks. Now can we just keep walking?”

Zoey shot Kaylee a triumphant look, though she had hardly won a big victory. At some point, Kaylee suspected that Steve Skye would step in and tell Alana to pull everyone’s look together. Kaylee was just trying to save Alana the embarrassment of being corrected by her father.

The walk through Teen Tower continued, past the mock casino—where kids could gamble at craps tables, roulette wheels, blackjack tables, and the like, with no-value chips—the dining room that served all-you-can-eat teen-friendly food and the best pizza in the West, the Teen Tower gym, the gaming room, and the TT hair and makeup salon, where Kaylee’s friend Chalice Walker was the official photographer.

As they moved through Teen Tower, Zoey and Kaylee pitched ideas to Alana about Independence Day weekend. July fourth was a big deal in town and at the LV Skye. The day started with the “Vegas Gives Back” charity relay race down Las Vegas Boulevard. The biggest casino-hotels competed for bragging rights and a charity donation. The holiday ended with a massive fireworks display in the LV Skye parking lot.

Most of Zoey’s ideas for the day were, in Kaylee’s

opinion, lousy. Zoey wanted to have a dance contest during the afternoon concert.

Been there, done that, thought Kaylee.

Zoey pitched open mic at Caffeine Central, the Teen Tower coffee area, where guests could perform. Kaylee said that would attract lame performers.

Kaylee suggested what she thought were far better ideas. She wanted to have a guess-the-chips contest, where the winner who could guess closest to the correct number of a pile of poker chips would win the chips cash value. She wanted food service to do a barbecue on the pool deck. She suggested red, white, and blue face painting.

Zoey criticized all of Kaylee's ideas as lame, lamer, and lamest. Then, as they headed toward the Teen Tower office, Zoey somehow came up with a great Fourth of July concept.

"You know, I think we should have a magic competition. Phantom still needs a regular opening act. We can invite the best unsigned magicians in town to do ten minutes each, and let the crowd pick the winner."

Just as a broken clock was correct twice a day, Kaylee knew that Zoey was right. Phantom did need an opening act. This would be the perfect way to choose it.

Kaylee did the right thing and praised her. "That's a great idea, Zoey."

Zoey grinned. “Yep. I know it is.” Then she tugged on Alana’s arm. “Come on. Let’s get it set up.”

As Kaylee stood by helplessly, Zoey led Alana away. Her boss didn’t ask Kaylee to come along. She seemed as distracted as she had been all morning. Again, Kaylee wondered why. Had something happened with Alana’s crazy mother down in Georgia? Was there a problem with her dad or his new wife, Roxanne? Whatever it was, Kaylee had no idea. She did know this, though: she’d just been outmaneuvered by Zoey Gold-Blum.

Caffeine Central made the best iced almond milk lattes, and Kaylee was addicted. She ordered one daily on her midday break. Today, she asked for two of them, since Cory was coming to meet her. He worked in the Teen Tower social media center and usually took his midday break at the same time as Kaylee.

Kaylee spotted Cory as soon as she picked up her order. He’d grabbed a small round-top table with two chairs outside under the misters that sprayed a constant fog of water over the outdoor seating area. As the mist evaporated, it actually made the temperature pleasant. As she approached, he took the drinks from her. Then he gallantly moved a chair so she could sit. His manners were dazzling. So was his smile. He wore camouflage shorts

and a Teen Tower T-shirt. Recently, he'd buzzed his hair short. He also hadn't shaved in a few days. Kaylee thought it was sexy as hell.

They didn't kiss, though. They probably could have, but Kaylee was against PDA on the job. *Not that Zoey would care*, she thought. *If it were up to her, she'd probably erect signs all over Teen Tower that said Snog Freely!*

"How's my fave executive assistant?" Cory asked after they'd settled in.

"Blech," Kaylee intoned. "Zoey blech, actually."

"She making your life miserable?"

Kaylee took a soothing sip of the iced latte. "She hates my guts. She does her best to make me look bad in front of Alana."

Cory smiled his most winning smile. "Have faith in Alana. She's got a good head on her shoulders."

Kaylee looked at the line forming by the Caffeine Central counter and made a mental note to tell Alana to hire more baristas. "Maybe," she allowed. "When she's focused. Which she isn't."

"What happened?"

Kaylee told the story of how out of it Alana seemed all morning. "She was in another world. I'm worried."

Cory smiled again. "Maybe you're worried that you

and me haven't gone on a real date in—what is it?—three days?”

Ha-ha. That was funny. It was true too.

“That too.”

“Figure out something to do tonight. I'm putting myself in your capable hands,” Cory told her.

Well. That was different. Most of the time, Cory planned their dates. Kaylee started running possibilities through her head. Then her cell sounded with an incoming text.

“Can u come to office? Need to talk 2 u ASAP.”

Alana. She texted right back.

“Sure. On my way.”

“It's her,” Kaylee reported. “She wants to talk to me.”

“Go. I bet she's gonna tell you what's going on. If it's anything personal? Best thing to do is listen. You can give advice later.”

That was a great suggestion. Kaylee nodded. “Thanks. That makes a lot of sense.”

She left Caffeine Central ready for anything. Or, at least that's what she thought.



CHAPTER TWO

Hi,” Kaylee said to Alana as the door to the spartan Teen Tower executive office swung open. Teen Tower was run out of a single room with three desks and chairs, a bank of security cameras, files and filing cabinets, telephones, walkie-talkies, computers, and a one-way window that afforded a prime view of the pool deck. “You wanted to see me. I came right away.”

Alana was in her swivel chair, with her feet on the desk and her Mac on her lap. “Yeah, I did, didn’t I? Sit, I guess.” Alana motioned generally toward Kaylee’s desk. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

Alana still had that distracted thing going on. Kaylee wasn’t sure she wanted to have any kind of conversation when her boss wasn’t able to focus. She told herself to

calm down. She had one-on-ones with Alana every day. This was no different. In fact, Kaylee took the initiative.

“That was really a great idea Zoey had about the magician competition,” she offered. “I’ve been thinking about it. We can do it like a playoff. Like, put two people on stage at once, and let them go trick for trick. Then the crowd votes on who’s better. We can go from eight contestants to four, and then to two, and then to one.”

There was pointed silence in response.

“What do you think?” Kaylee asked, trying to get some kind of enthusiasm going.

Alana shook her head. “Not much. I already talked about this with Zoey. The important thing is for Reavis to be comfortable with his opening act. He needs to choose the winner.”

“But ... but that doesn’t give the crowd any ownership. We want people invested,” Kaylee argued. “It’s like your dad always says, if they’re invested in their experience, then they’ll remember their experience.” She smiled. “Or something like that.”

Alana put her Mac on the table and swung around to face Kaylee. “Look, Kaylee. Last time I looked, I’m in charge of Teen Tower. Not my dad. Don’t even mention his name to me. Okay?”

Whoa. Slapped down like a fly, Kaylee thought.

“Okay, for sure,” Kaylee backpedaled politely. “What did you want to see me about?”

Again, there was awful silence before Alana finally talked. “The first thing I want you to know is that I’m not firing you.”

Kaylee broke out in a cold sweat at the mention of that ugly word. Why would Alana even mention firing? A start like that could only be a way to make bad news seem a little less bad. Sort of like telling your BFF that her boyfriend didn’t get hurt in the accident he was in, *but* his old girlfriend was in the car with him. Upset as she was, Kaylee tried to focus. She understood that the next few minutes were going to be important.

“That’s not very promising,” she told Alana.

“It’s not so bad,” Alana said in a voice that now reminded Kaylee of how they used to talk before things got so strained between them. Before Steve Skye married Roxanne. Before Cory and Kaylee. And before Alana polluted Kaylee’s life by naming Zoey as her co-assistant. “You’re going to get paid the same as before, you’ll keep your room at the hotel, but your job is going to change.”

Kaylee kept her voice neutral. “Change ... how?”

“I’m assigning you to work in the casino,” Alana said. “You can deal blackjack or run a roulette wheel. I know

you like that. Zoey's going to be my assistant now. My *only* assistant. Are you okay with that?"

God. No. Kaylee was not okay with that. She did not want to be demoted. There was no way for this to be anything but a demotion. She did not want to be replaced by Zoey Gold-Blum. Most of all, she did not want to work in the mock casino. Casinos were a dangerous place for her, whether the money being gambled was real or just plastic chips.

She never gambled a dime before coming to Vegas. She'd thought she hated gambling. But then she found herself lured in by the slot machines. She came to find casinos irresistible. One night, she had even gone with Alana and Cory to a private club in North Las Vegas, where she could gamble with real money. She would have stayed there all night if they'd let her.

Cory knew about this weakness of hers. He was helping her with it. If he were here in this office, Kaylee knew he would say something. It would be far too easy to go from playing with fake chips to playing with real chips. For Kaylee, it would be playing with fire.

She did have an alternative. Chalice had once said that she could find Kaylee a gig at a different hotel if Kaylee ever wanted that. Kaylee didn't want that. She wanted to work here at Teen Tower. She wanted things to be like they

were before, when she was Alana's go-to girl, and Zoey was irrelevant.

"Okay," she told Alana. "Mostly."

"Okay?" Alana seemed surprised.

"I said 'okay' and I mean okay. I love Teen Tower. You and I built Teen Tower. I mean, we didn't build it, but we made it happen and look how great it is. You're the boss. I'm—I was—your assistant. If you think I can help Teen Tower in another role, well ... I live to serve."

"Really?"

"What did you expect me to say, Alana?"

"I don't know. I just thought you'd have more of a problem with it."

Kaylee looked down toward the floor. "But there is one little problem. Is there someplace else I can help out besides the casino?"

Alana rolled her chair back toward her desk and got a legal pad and a pen. "Is there someone you don't like at the casino? Because I'll transfer her. Or him, or something. I want this to be easy for you. Give me the name, please. Don't worry. It's fine."

Kaylee shook her head this time. "Nope. I just don't want to work in the mock casino. It's just ... personal."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning ... I shouldn't be around gambling."

Alana looked at her and then cracked up. “You shouldn’t be around gambling?” She howled with laughter. “Omigod, I needed to laugh today. You have no idea. And you’re saying you shouldn’t be around gambling? Kaylee, if you don’t want to be around gambling, you picked the wrong city to live in!”

Alana guffawed. Kaylee just sat there. Alana could laugh all she wanted, but this was a deal breaker. Finally, Alana was laughed out.

“You’re serious,” she said.

Kaylee nodded. “As a heart attack.”

“But I went with you to the casino club. You played. You won. You had a great time!”

Kaylee sighed and then told Alana the story of her issues with gambling. How they’d emerged here in Las Vegas. How they might be dangerous to her. And how she did not want to tempt fate.

“You should have told me this,” Alana said.

“Maybe. But it’s not exactly like we’ve been hanging with each other. Not since before the wedding.”

Alana rubbed her chin with one finger. “Yeah. I guess that’s true. Okay. No casino. How about food service?”

“Any place but the casino,” Kaylee repeated, glad that Alana was willing to accommodate her.

Alana made a quick call to the food service manager

and said Kaylee would soon be reporting for duty. Then she turned back to Kaylee. “You don’t have to pick up trash or anything like that or serve pizza. Just go around, talk to the guests, see what’s working and what’s not, and write me a memo—a short memo—at the end of the day. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good luck.”

That was it. And that was how Kaylee found herself an hour later, wandering around Teen Eats with a notebook and pen in her hands. It was a long way down from being Alana’s assistant, and she didn’t like it one bit. In fact, despite what she’d told Alana about living to serve, she hated it.



CHAPTER THREE

At the end of a rotten day, it was great to watch a fantastic masked magician in action.

Kaylee was the reason that Reavis, better known as Phantom, was even performing at Teen Tower. She had met him when they'd both lived at the one star Apache Motel near the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. As far as Kaylee knew, Reavis was still crashing there, though he now made plenty of money from his Teen Tower job.

She'd helped him as an assistant before he got this gig, back when he was doing hit-and-run tricks in parking lots and disrupting other magician's shows. Reavis had been covered so often in the *Stripped* blog that Zoey's moms had even posted a reward for anyone who could give them the scoop on his real identity. Kaylee had been the one

who'd introduced him to Alana and set up the audition that brought him to Teen Tower.

The night of her demotion, Kaylee stood with Cory and Chalice to watch the end of his show. As usual, he performed in a mask and black clothes. His new regular assistant was a stunning blonde named Marina, who had come to Vegas from Moscow to be a showgirl. There were already Tumblrs devoted to her.

Reavis's final trick was based on Harry Houdini's famous "Metamorphosis." In that trick, the Great Houdini would be bound, chained, and locked in a box. When a curtain was placed between him and the audience, Houdini would slip the bindings and escape through a hatch in the box. Then his assistant—who just happened to be his wife, Bess—would climb into the box. The curtain would get pulled away, and Houdini would be revealed to the audience. Then he would open the box and Bess would climb out. Audiences were dumbfounded.

Reavis did his own version. The only difference was he did it more dangerously. He first warned the audience never to try this at home. He placed a plastic bag around his head, fastened at the bottom with duct tape by a member of the audience. And then, instead of climbing into an air-filled box, he climbed into a Lucite cube filled to the brim with ice water. Seconds later, he emerged dripping wet.

Then Marina was revealed in the cube in a wet suit and scuba gear.

It was a death-defying trick. Four thousand teens held their collective breath while he was behind the curtain and bellowed cheers and approval when he emerged safely. They cheered again when they saw the submerged Marina.

“He’s ... I don’t know what he is. Except amazing,” Chalice declared.

“It’s thanks to Kaylee, you know,” Cory said.

“It’s thanks to a lot of people,” Kaylee corrected modestly.

“It’s thanks to you,” Cory repeated.

“You, Kaylee,” Chalice chimed in. “I saw you make it happen.”

Kaylee grinned. Petite Chalice, with her red hair and eye-popping curves, had been a good friend of Zoey and Alana’s, and also knew Cory from high school. Over the last few weeks, though, Chalice and Kaylee had gotten close. Chalice was quirky, a great artist, and almost relentlessly upbeat. She was one of those people who tried to see the good in every situation and in every person.

“Where are you going after the show?” Kaylee asked her.

“Home. Manicurist is making a house call. What about you guys?”

Cory smiled. "I told Kaylee to plan a date. So she did."

"We're going out to the speedway," Kaylee explained. "My friend Greg is racing tonight. Hey. If you want to put off the manicure and join us, I'm sure that would be cool."

Chalice wrinkled her nose. "I don't do car exhaust." She gave Cory an odd look. "Since when are you a NASCAR fan? Guys who go to Stanford aren't NASCAR fans."

Cory put his arm around Kaylee. "Simple. Since I met Kaylee."

"It's not really NASCAR," Kaylee explained as Cory pulled his car into the huge parking lot at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway, the big auto racing complex just off Interstate 15, east of town. "It's sprint car racing."

"There's a difference?" Cory asked her.

"Tons," Kaylee said as she pointed away from the main track toward a smaller oval at the outskirts of the parking lot. She'd grown up in Texas, where stock car racing of all kinds, and dirt track racing in particular, was something approaching religion. She'd never been a big fan herself, but when she did go, it was to dirt ovals like this one, where small, high-powered sprint cars with big spoilers drifted through the turns.

Many drivers got their start in sprint cars because they were so much cheaper to build and maintain than the

specialized machines that raced in NASCAR events like Talladega or Daytona.

The racing was underway when they arrived. As they walked from Cory's car to the track, where they were supposed to meet Kaylee's friend Jamila in the grandstand, Kaylee explained about what they'd be watching. Sprint races were short, on a banked track of one-third of a mile. There were no pit stops. Cars raced so close that there was plenty of bumping. It would be easy to follow Greg's car. His big number 3 would be painted on the "wing" spoiler that kept the car stable and safe.

"It's freaking loud!" Cory exclaimed once they were inside. There were twenty cars entered in the current race. They screamed around the track like high-octane mosquitoes, leaving dust trails in their wake.

Kaylee pointed. "Check out Greg! He's in third place." She glanced at the track scoreboard. Five laps to go. She looked around for Jamila, whom she thought would be easy to spot. When she didn't see her, she took Cory's arm. "Let's watch the end and catch up with Jamila later."

They squeezed into a couple of empty spots. Greg was racing hard, looking for a gap. But the two drivers ahead of him closed off every opening.

"Come on!" Kaylee shouted as the second-to-last lap started and then turned to Cory. "What do you think?"

He had a huge grin. “It rocks!”

Kaylee was pleased. That he was so upper class, and dirt track racing seemed so, well, lower class, made her like him even more. Then she felt a moment of uncertainty. Maybe he was just humoring her. Maybe he was experimenting, in some weird way, to see if he could be with a girl different from himself.

Kaylee didn’t even have a high school diploma, while Cory went to one of the finest colleges in the country. What could he possibly see in her other than a pretty face and a good figure?

She pushed those thoughts aside and tried to concentrate on the race. They stood and cheered with the rest of the crowd for the last lap. On the final curve, Greg snuck past the number 14 car into second place. That was it, though. There was nothing wrong with finishing second, but Kaylee still felt disappointed. Just as the race ended, she got a text from Jamila.

“U here?”

“Yep,” she texted back. **“Where ru?”**

“Down front. Meet garage. Your boy can meet Greg.”

“KK.”

It was just a short walk down to the garage. Kaylee and Cory looked around until they found Greg and Jamila standing near Greg’s race car. He was still in his flameproof

racing suit doing some post-race work on the engine. He and Jamila greeted Kaylee and Cory warmly.

“Sorry I couldn’t win one for you the first time you’re out here, buddy,” Greg told Cory in his Tennessee accent.

“Second place is pretty good,” Cory said.

“We’re so glad you came,” Jamila told Kaylee. Then she looked at Cory. “Especially you.”

Kaylee smiled. She was proud to be with Cory. She and Jamila had met when she’d lived at the Apache Motel. Jamila was a maid there. When Kaylee had been hired at the LV Skye, Kaylee had lobbied for her friend to come work in housekeeping or hospitality. Jamila now served room service in the morning, where a hundred buck tip for breakfast was not unheard-of.

“How do I go about driving one of those?” Cory asked Greg.

“You wanna try?”

Cory nodded. “I’d love to.”

Greg grinned at him. “Kaylee’s got my digits. Gimme a call. I’ll get you set up some day when the track is clear. It’s a rush, man.”

“Thanks.” Cory offered Greg a fist bump. Greg accepted, his gloved hand fist-bumping Cory’s bare one.

They talked a while longer, and then Greg said he needed to go help a buddy change a tire. Kaylee and Cory

went back to Cory's car. He started it up, and they headed for the freeway.

"That was really great," he told her. "Now I want to show *you* something great."

He kept heading west, toward town, but instead of returning to the Strip, he took the freeway exit toward Nellis Air Force Base, a large military installation south of the freeway. After Cory pulled off the service road onto a sandy dirt shoulder, they sat on his hood and watched fighter jets practice night landings.

"What do you think?" Cory asked. "They're training in case they ever have a mission after the sun sets, and fifty planes are coming back to the airfield all at the same time."

Kaylee had never seen anything like this. "I love it."

"I hope you love this too."

He kissed her. She kissed him back. She felt his arms go around her. She let hers slide around his neck. They were in public, on the hood of a car, so there was no chance of *that* happening.

Kaylee felt like she was back in middle school, necking with a boy she liked with no thoughts of more. Not that Cory had pushed it, ever. That thought made her wonder. She wasn't ready, she knew that. But didn't all guys want that when they had the means and an opportunity? Cory