

Scandalous

Chapter 1

These strippers didn't have a thing on me.

I had to fight hard not to roll my eyes as the faux-cop on the stage twirled his baton as if he was about to arrest somebody. Then, he smacked that wood in the palm of his hand and sent the one hundred or so women who had packed the strip club on Sunset Boulevard into a frenzy.

"Oh, my," Kyla Blake, squealed when the dancer came to the edge of the stage and gyrated right in front of us wearing nothing but his black-silk thong and police hat. His hips circled one way, while he whipped that baton over his head in the other direction.

Kyla giggled, then closed one eye as if peeking like a Cyclops was far less sinful. Beside her, Alexis Ward had both of her eyes wide open as she buckled over with laughter. Looking at the two of them made me finally roll my eyes.

Silly women!

What were they howling at? That naked cop, with his hairless chest and shoulder length Jeri curl barely looked like he was sixteen.

I shook my head. I'd always known that Kyla, who'd been my best friend since kindergarten, had lived a highly sheltered life. So for her to be sitting up in this club, giggling like a school girl at this school boy wasn't surprising. But Alexis...I don't know who she thought she was fooling. Everyone saw Alexis, Kyla's other best friend, as this

sophisticated Southern belle, teeming with purity. Please! I knew better. I was sure that this wasn't her first time in a strip club. In fact, I wouldn't have been surprised if I ever found out that she'd once taken to the pole exactly the way I had.

I was so far into my head and my thoughts, that I didn't realize everyone at the table was pointing at me. I looked up and right in front of my eyes was the center of that black silk thong.

"So, you're the birthday, girl?" the naked policeman yelled down to me from the stage in such a high-pitched voice that I wondered if he really *was* sixteen.

I hesitated for a moment, but it was only because I had to hold back my yawn. "It's not my birthday," I said in a tone that was meant to dismiss him. "I'm getting married."

But that didn't make him back up, which led me to believe that one of these foolish girls whom Kyla had invited to my bachelorette party must've been paying him a little extra so that he would jump down from the stage and fall right into my lap.

What kind of place was this? Over at Foxtails, where I'd been a...*dancer*...for the last four years, we didn't just come off the stage like this. No, not at all. As strippers, we had class...and we had rules. No fraternizing with the patrons from the stage - except of course when you came to the edge to collect those tips that the men tucked inside your G-string.

But obviously, this place didn't have the kind of class that I was used to working with. The nine women sitting around the table with me cheered when the stripper danced all over me.

"So ya getting married?" he asked with his face so close to mine that I could almost smell his mother's milk still on his breath. How old was this guy? I mean, he'd looked young on the stage, but up close and personal, he looked like he'd just learned to brush his teeth.

I pushed back in the chair, kinda surprised at the way he was coming at me. This was another thing that we didn't do at Foxtails - no touching - except of course, when you were invited into the red-curtained VIP Room.

"Let me give you something to remember me by," the kid said.

Kyla's friends ('cause really, these women sitting here at this table...that's who they were - not one of these women could say that they really liked me) all howled as the stripper leaned back as if he was about to go under a limbo pole and made his pecs jump and his thighs quiver to the beat of the music.

The women applauded and I couldn't help it - I yawned. I didn't even try to hide it. I just opened my mouth and let my lips stretch wide. And, I got all into that yawn, too. I moaned and groaned, releasing all of my boredom.

His look of hurt was instant and right away, I felt bad. But it wasn't my fault. I mean, how were you gonna bring a stripper to a strip club and expect her to be entertained? Now granted, Kyla didn't know that I was a stripper - no one knew that. But still, she knew who I was. She knew that I wouldn't be impressed by a bunch of naked men. Please, before she and I had graduated from high school I'd already seen - and had - my share.

But the poor boy had really been trying to impress me and once my yawn came out, it was all over for him. I guess it was different for guys than it was for us girls.

When I was stripping, there were many times when I would dance onto that stage and some of the men wouldn't even look at me. They were either talking to their buddies or focusing on the girls who were working the floor. That's when I'd come up with my booty quake. I'd done it my very first time on the stage, but once I saw how those dudes tossed twenties at me when I did that, I became the booty quake specialist. That move became my signature and men from all over Southern California came to see me quiver my butt like I was part of the San Andreas fault! After a couple of months, whenever I came out, the club became silent - except for the music and the cat whistles. But besides that...the talking...I shut it all down. Every man in that club - and the few women who were there - paid attention when I, Pepper Pulaski, strutted onto the stage.

So this young man - if he was gonna last - was gonna have to grow some skin that was thicker than what he had. What he needed to do was suck it up and find a way to come up with something that could catch even my attention. But for right now, this boy couldn't do a thing for me, because I was, after all, Jasmine Cox. And you had to bring it far better than that to impress me.

I didn't want him to walk away feeling too bad, though. So, when he looked at me like he was 'bout to cry, I smiled, and then started praying for his song and dance to come to an end.

"Let's hear it for Robocop."

Throughout the club, the women cheered as if Robo was part of the delegation for the second coming. I still felt bad as the young man gathered the bills that had fallen from his G-string and then trotted off the stage as if he was in a hurry. I wondered if he was rushing off to finish his homework back stage.

But whatever, at least this night was finally over. I was sure that was the last set; I'd sat through twelve dancers - and not a one of them could have stood next to me on the stage...at least not when it came to stripping. I had turned my college occupation into an art form - I had researched, studied, and rehearsed until I became the best in the business. So, I couldn't really blame any of these young men who obviously hadn't put in the time that I had.

Anyway, I was ready to rise on up out of here.

Then, a siren blared through the club as red, white, and blue strobe lights circled through the darkness giving me an instant headache. It wasn't the blasting music or the psychedelic colors that was making me sick. It was the fact that the night had not yet come to an end.

"Fire!"

"That's my song," Kyla said. She jumped up and started swiveling her narrow hips as she raised her hands high above her head. If I didn't know better, I would've thought my girl was drunk. But that concoction that she loved so much - orange and cranberry juice - couldn't hurt a five-year-old.

I sighed.

"Ladies," the DJ yelled out, "get ready for Fire Cracker!"

Oh, lawd! What was I gonna do? I wasn't about to sit through another amateur set because if I did, I would....

Then, he walked onto the stage.

The screams were so loud the walls vibrated.

"The way you walk and talk really sets me off to a full alarm, child." Kyla, still on her feet, sang along with the Ohio Players record that the DJ was spinning.

But, I hardly heard the music anymore. My eyes were on him.

Him was a six-three, two-hundred and forty pound hunk of solid, dark Godiva chocolate. Oh yeah, I could assess them like that. Being a stripper had given me the ability to hone in on those kinds of stats in three seconds flat. I'd learned how to appraise men for many reasons - including the part of my work that sometimes came after my dancing and often took place in the VIP lounge. I had to learn how to judge a book by his cover...physically, mentally, financially, especially.

And I loved this chocolate cover!

Mr. Chocolate (which was much more appropriate to me than Fire Cracker) was dressed in full fireman's gear that began to drop, piece by piece as the Ohio players sang and these women in the club screamed for him to go ahead and get naked. I almost jumped up with them - if the outside looked this good, I couldn't wait to see what he was working with.

"The way you squeeze and tease...."

Mr. Chocolate dropped to his knees and then without holding on to a single thing, rose slowly, slowly, slowly until he was standing and just wearing his fireman's pants.

The women erupted in pleasing approval.

And though I didn't applaud, I was pleased, too. And impressed. Just like everyone else, I was on the edge of my seat, mesmerized by Mr. Chocolate's talents.

His talents included looking like he'd been carved out of a solid brick of chocolate. Everything about him looked as if God was using him to show the rest of humanity what a real man should be.

From his body-builder's shaped and bulging biceps, triceps, quads and hamstrings, to his pecs that were perfection - Mr. Chocolate was a flawless man. But the best part for me was his head - completely shaven like he was Mr. Clean, and looking as soft as a baby's bottom.

Dang! All the brothers I knew were still rocking Jeri curls and the newest fad, that had started last year - the high-top fade. But obviously, Mr. Chocolate didn't follow the masses. It was 1987 and he was marching to his own drum; and I wouldn't be surprised if by 1988 every man who had come within two feet of Mr. Chocolate, started shaving their heads, too.

Around me, the women were screaming and stomping like animals. Through my peripheral vision, I saw that even Kyla Carrington - I still hadn't gotten used to calling her by her married name - was panting like a dog in heat. And that was huge because I knew for a fact that her husband, the up and coming Dr. Jefferson Blake, was the only man that she had ever had sex with. So, was she fantasizing about someone else for the first time in her life?

But thoughts of my best friend flew right out of my head when Mr. Chocolate looked straight down at me; I would've dropped my panties right there if he had asked me. It was because of his eyes. I was completely taken by this man's eyes. I'm telling you, Mr. Chocolate was a delicious piece of the finest dark candy that you would ever find. But his eyes - were the color of freshly watered Spring grass.

I'd never seen anyone with skin as dark as his with sparkling green eyes.

The Ohio Players sang, "When you push, push...." and Mr. Chocolate dropped his pants.

It was official; I was in love.

He came to the edge of the stage, right above where I was sitting, and he gave me a wonderful view of his complete magnificence. Daannnggg! I knew this man had to be mine.

But then I coughed, and reeled back that thought. How could I have him? Yes, I was absolutely used to getting any man I wanted. But no, I couldn't do that anymore.

I was getting married in two days.

In forty-eight hours, I would have a husband whom I was supposed to love, honor and obey. That meant that I had to give up all of this extra-curricular sextivity. Right?

Right! I repeated to myself. Right! Right! Right!

I kept up that mantra as Mr. Chocolate grinded. I kept up that mantra as Mr. Chocolate bucked. I kept up that mantra until Mr. Chocolate danced right off the stage.

I couldn't even move. Not for a couple of minutes. I had to wait, to get myself together and my mind right before I was able to stand up.

Just ten minutes before, I'd been thinking that this was the worst bachelorette party ever! But those six blessed minutes that Mr. Chocolate had given me, made it worth the whole night.

I grabbed my sweater and just tossed it over my shoulders. It wasn't that I needed it. Not only had it been one of those dog-hot August days, but Mr. Chocolate had warmed me up so much, I was about to start taking off some clothes myself.

Around me, the girls were still cackling and giggling, comparing how many dollar bills they had left. I hoped that I was going to be able to sneak away without having to go through a bunch of goodbyes and well wishes from these heifers who would be lying through their teeth if they said anything nice to me. Not a one of Kyla's friends liked me. Because of their husbands and boyfriends, of course.

Not that I cared what these females thought, but them not liking me wasn't really my fault. I couldn't help the fact that I was a man-magnet wherever I went, even if it was just to a party at Kyla and Jefferson's house. Whenever I was around, their men were always all up in my Kool-Aid. But like I said, not my fault. That drama belonged to them.

I decided that I could walk right out of the club without having to say anything. But just as I turned away from the table, Kyla yelled out, "Jasmine!"

Dang! My hope had been to jet on out of here with just visions of Mr. Chocolate on my mind. But, I couldn't turn away from my best friend, so I did a little pirouette on my tippy-toes and faced Kyla with a smile.

She was still grinning as she stepped to me. I'm telling you, she had never seen anything like this show before.

"I hope you enjoyed your party," she gushed as she hugged me.

"I did, girl."

"You know I wanted to give you something bigger but...."

I held up my hand. "This was enough."

It was true that Kyla had wanted to plan some elaborate affair for me because that was just who she was. But really, who was gonna come? It had already been proven that I didn't have many...okay, I didn't have *any* female friends. Kyla had sent out fifty invitations for my bridal shower and only she and Alexis had shown up. And, I would've bet that she'd had to pay Alexis to be there, which was a waste of money because I wanted to pay Alexis to leave.

So, I didn't want Kyla to go through the trouble of a no-show bachelorette party. But Kyla, being Kyla had to do something and she had come up with the perfect way to get her friends to attend. Naked men always attracted desperate women.

But, I really loved my friend who would do anything for me. Few understood our friendship - the good girl and her morally-corrupt side-kick. The thing was, though, Kyla and I had a history that began when I had to beat-down some little boy for picking on the new girl in our kindergarten class. She'd been grateful that day and our friendship had blossomed from there. Even though she was the privileged child of Lynn and Winston Carrington, Kyla treated me so much like a sister, that her parents began to treat me like their daughter. But though their intentions were always good, I was always aware that I was a Cox, not a Carrington. There was nothing white about my parents blue-collar jobs. Our house was barely one thousand square feet and couldn't compare to the expansive three bedroom home where she'd grown up. The only thing I ever had over Kyla was my social abilities...I had boyfriends. Not that the boys didn't want her - by the time we hit fifth grade, it killed me the way that the boys constantly drooled over her.

But the thing was, Kyla wasn't giving up anything, where I, on the other hand, had no problem with giving it and getting it. Some girls called me a slut, others said I was a ho. But whatever the name, I was the most popular girl in high school. I was so popular that I'd snagged our school's star jock - Kenneth Larson. Not only had I snagged him, but then, Kenny and I had gone to USC together where I had to fight hard to keep him. But, I did. And he had put that ring on my finger.

The star jock part - where he was supposed to be drafted into the NFL - didn't quite work out after he was injured in his first Bowl game. But he was still Kenny Larson, the ex-USC football superstar. And, he was still going to be my husband.

"I hope you're not getting ready to leave," Kyla said, tugging me away from my thoughts. "I have one final surprise for you."

I guess my plans to sneak out and just call Kyla later were now derailed. But in my mind, I was already preparing the lie for whatever plans she had - the reason why I couldn't go out to dinner with them, or go somewhere for a drink with them, or whatever it was that Kyla wanted to do.

"You know what?" I began my lie, "I've got to get over to my dad's because...."

Kyla spoke over me. "But I've arranged for us to meet the dancers."

I zipped my mouth shut for a moment to make sure that I'd heard her right.

"What did you say?"

She grinned and nodded. "Surprise!" she said in her kooky kind of way. "You know, since you wouldn't let me do anything really special for your bachelorette party, I thought this would be just a little extra nice surprise. Just for us to get together for a little while."

"So, the dancers are gonna come out here now?" I asked so that I could get clarification.

She nodded like a bobble-head.

"They let you meet the dancers here?" I asked, really surprised.

"Yeah." She frowned. "You say that like it's strange or something."

"It is. In these kinds of places, the dancers are not supposed to fraternize with the customers - at least not in a chatting-getting-to-know-you kind of way."

"As if you're an expert on strip clubs." Kyla laughed.

I did not laugh with her.

After she giggled for a few more moments, she waved her hand and said, "Please. I am Doctor Jefferson Blake's wife."

I grinned. "Oh, so Jefferson is an expert on strip clubs."

"No, but the owner is a patient of his. So, I got the hook-up. They arranged this little get together. It's not gonna be that long or that elaborate. But the guys are gonna come out and say hello." Her smile faded and she pouted a little in the way that only Kyla Blake could. "So please, stay. Just for a little while. Please?"

I slipped that sweater right off my shoulders. She didn't have to beg me twice. "Okay." I let the word drag out of me. "I'll stay," I said as if it was going to be a chore and not a pleasure.

"Great," Kyla said, right before one of the girls who'd come to my party - I couldn't even remember her name - called Kyla back over to the table.

As she turned back to her friends, I headed toward the bar. So, I was gonna get a chance to meet Mr. Chocolate personally? Oh, yeah!

I edged up to the bar, glad that there was no one standing there. I knew how to work this thing. I wanted to be all alone when Mr. Chocolate moseyed into the main part of the club. Even though I always stood out, I wanted him to see me far away from the other - silly - women.

Oh, yeah!

When the bartender came up to me, I said, "I'll have a ginger ale," thinking that I'd already had one glass of wine. That was enough. I wanted a clear head for lots of reasons.

As I stood at the bar, someone began to brighten the lights in the club. Not too much, but now enough for me to take a good glance around at this place.

Clearly, this was more of a club than a strip joint. Where I worked, at Foxtails, it was all about the stage and the girls. Nothing else - except for the bar - mattered.

But here, the emphasis seemed to be on the club itself. There were cloths covering the tables, pictures hanging on the walls and fresh flowers all around. Flowers in a place where men took off their clothes? I guess here, because they were catering to women, the atmosphere mattered as much as the dancers.

I took a sip of my ginger ale, then turned around. Most of the women who'd been in this place had left; I guess it was just going to be our group who would have the pleasure of mixing with the strippers.

Kyla and the rest of the girls were still giggling and cackling, even though there was not yet a dancer in sight.

Silly women.

But then, he came out. Mr. Chocolate. He was the first one.

The women clapped as he stepped into their midst, but with just a smile and a nod, he made his way away from where Kyla and her friends stood and came toward the bar. It was as if he was looking for me!

Behind him, the other dancers came out and kept the women's attention away from Mr. Chocolate. So for at least a moment, I was gonna bask in the presence of perfection all by myself.

He didn't even look my way as he leaned against the mahogany bar and said, "Doug, get me a hit."

A hit? What was that? Whatever it was, I wanted to be the one to give it to him.

One of the things that made me so good at being a stripper was that I always played it cool. I kept my feelings to myself - something I'd been doing for the last few years, ever since my mother passed away. After going through her death, there was no one and nothing that could get to me.

But all of my cool was gone right now. Just because I was only inches away from this fine thang. I was staring and raking my brain for the right thing to say, but I couldn't think of anything. Dang! I was acting like all the other women who were here.

Mr. Chocolate had reduced me to a silly woman.

Maybe I needed to turn away for a moment. Maybe I needed to break my eyes away so that I could get myself together. I had never been attracted to any man so instantly. It was like I'd known Mr. Chocolate from before.

I turned away, but only for a couple of seconds before I allowed my eyes to wander, inching down his body bit by bit, until my eyes settled on his shoes. My assessment - he wore a size thirteen...at least.

I sighed.

Right when I had that thought, he turned toward me. "So, you're here with that party?"

Okay, Jasmine, I thought to myself. Don't lose any cool points. I took a sip of my soda and let a couple of ice chips settle onto my tongue, before I responded.

"Actually, yes," I said, totally composed, totally faking it. "The party is in my honor."

"Ah!" He took a sip of the golden liquid that was in the screwball glass in front of him. "Well then, happy whatever to you."

"Thank you," I said, glad that he hadn't asked me what kind of party I was being honored with.

He held his hand out to me. "My name is Roman."

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

"So that's funny?" he asked, though he didn't look like he was insulted. His beautiful green eyes sparkled like he wanted in on the joke.

"No...not funny. It's just that I'm not surprised." I paused. "Roman...as in a roman god?"

He took a longer sip of his drink before he said, "No, Roman as in empire!"

I laughed louder this time. This was my kind of man, 'cause I was all about being on the top of everything.

"So," he said. "What's the occasion? What are y'all celebrating?"

It took me a couple of seconds to calculate my answer. I'd already made the mistake of telling him that the party was in my honor, but I could easily say that I was

celebrating a birthday. The problem with that, though, was that there were too many witnesses here, which meant there were too many chances that he'd speak to someone who would tell him different. So, the truth - which didn't always work out so well for me - was what I was left with.

"It's a bachelorette party."

His eyebrows arched upwards as if he couldn't believe it. And then, he did what so many men did to me...he assessed me...inch by inch, just like I'd done to him just minutes before. I was glad that I'd worn this black Tadashi dress. The spandex told anyone who was looking that I was all woman.

"You're getting married?" he finally asked.

"You say that like you can't believe that someone would marry me."

He chuckled. "No, sweetheart, that's not it at all." He took a final swig of his drink before he said, "I know there would be plenty of men who'd want to marry you. I just can't believe that one of them actually caught you." He slid his glass across the bar then stepped closer to me.

My mouth became instantly dry.

There were just a few inches between us, when Roman said, "So, Miss...I'm Getting Married, were you caught? Were you caught, for real?"

In forty-eight hours, I'm getting married. I'm getting married, in forty-eight hours.

My plan was to say that over and over. But the problem was when my eyes focused in on Mr. Chocolate's plump bottom lip, I couldn't get those words to make any kind of sense in my mind.

"So, what do you say?" His voice sounded a little like he had gravel in his mouth.

"Are you really gonna get married?"

Then, the tip of his tongue traveled slowly, slowly, slowly across that juicy lip of his. And, I was completely done!