



## Four Seconds to Lose: A Novel (The Ten Tiny Breaths Series Book 4)

By K.A. Tucker

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Owning a strip club isn't the fantasy most guys expect it to be. With long hours, a staff with enough issues to keep a psych ward in business, and the police regularly on his case, twenty-nine-year-old Cain is starting to second-guess his unspoken mission to save the women he employs. And then blond, brown-eyed Charlie Rourke walks through his door, and things get really complicated. Cain abides by a strict "no sleeping with his staff" rule. But being around Charlie challenges Cain's self-control . . . and it's been a long time since any woman has done that.

Twenty-two-year-old Charlie Rourke needs a lot of money, really fast, in order to vanish before it's too late. Taking her clothes off for men makes her stomach curl, but Charlie tells herself that at least she's putting her acting and dancing skills to good use. And though her fellow dancers seem eager to nab their sexy, sophisticated, and genuinely caring boss, she's not interested. After all, Charlie Rourke doesn't really exist—and the girl pretending to be her can't get distracted by romance.

Unfortunately, Charlie soon discovers that developing feelings for Cain is inevitable, and that those feelings may not be unrequited—but losing him when he finds out what she's involved with will be more painful than any other sentence awaiting her.



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Intense, hot, emotional...K.A. Tucker left no feeling untouched. A gripping read." (Colleen Hoover New York Times bestselling author)

"Tucker delivers another emotional and unforgettable read. Livie and Ashton's electrically charged connection will have readers frantically turning pages. Add in the witty and sexually suggestive banter and you've got a recipe for one hot and angsty romance. *One Tiny Lie* tackles heavy topics, but the balance between the romance, coming-of-age storyline and darker issues is extremely well-done. An absolute must read!" (Romantic Times (4.5 out of 5 stars))

"A touching, gorgeous read. I laughed, cried, swooned, and took ten tiny breaths of my own!" (Cora Carmack New York Times bestselling author of *Losing It*)

"Loved it!! A MUST READ! I won't say any more. The shock value from the very start to the very end must be experienced blindly for full impact. Just know I think you should read it." (Maryse Black Maryse's Book Blog)

"This is one the best contemporary novels to hit shelves this year, and a must-read for those who love realistic stories about strong females." (Jen Lamoureux Hypable.com)

"Tucker's probe and pacing have a vibrant energy." (Kirkus)

"Original, compelling, and wickedly sexy." (Karina Halle USA Today bestselling author)

"I devoured this book! Characters, romance, suspense -- I loved every single moment. Don't lose another second waiting to give this one a read." (Cora Carmack New York Times bestselling author)

"Likable characters, steamy liaisons and surprising plot twists add up to satisfying romance. Readers will be eager for the next installment." (Kirkus)

"Fiercely truthful, this book twisted my heart around and handed it to me. This is one you definitely don't want to miss." (Courtney Cole New York Times bestselling author of *If You Stay*)

#### About the Author

K.A. Tucker writes captivating stories with an edge. Her books have been featured in national publications including *USA TODAY*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Suspense Magazine*, and *Publishers Weekly*. She currently resides in a quaint town outside Toronto with her husband and two beautiful girls.

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Four Seconds to Lose

chapter one



CAIN

10 years ago

Blood drops decorate the dusty gray concrete like an abstract piece of art. The stocky brute facing me—his bottom lip split open, an angry cut across his cheekbone—can account for some of that. But given the colossal beating I—m taking at the hands of this recently paroled rapist, most of that blood is probably mine.

Holding my left elbow tight against the ribs that he just splintered with a series of powerful blows, I struggle not to wince as my feet shuffle back toward the ropes of the makeshift ring. Screams and shouts bombard me from all angles, echoing through the underground parking lot of the downtown business building. Normally I have a decent crowd of rich bitches throwing their names, numbers, and —pretty boy— comments at me. Not tonight, though. All of these people took the twenty-to-one odds against me and they—re no doubt picturing sandy beaches and shiny BMWs.

Hell, I almost bet against me. But, there—s not a person in the world that I trust with that kind of money to place it for me. Except maybe Nate. But he—s fourteen and a known associate of mine, so I might as well have painted a target on his head if I sent him to the bookie.

—Come on, pansy ass!— Jones bellows, slamming his meaty fists together, a wicked grin on his face.

I remain silent as Nate splashes my face with cool water and I swig some back, trying to rinse the coppery taste out of my mouth. I—ve heard this guy likes to draw his beatings out, so I—m not worried about him charging me like a bull. I am worried about the crowd shoving me in, though. I can feel their impatience swelling in the air over my pause. They want to see my skull hit the ground. Now. This is real underground fighting. The kind that brings the high-rolling criminal element and thrill-seekers together like family at Christmas. There are no weight classes here. No drug tests. No rules. No true refereeing. The match doesn—t end until one fighter—s broken body is collected off the ground.

Not exactly the world a loving father would introduce his son into. But I don—t have a loving father. I have a mean wannabe-mobster prick of a dad, who—after pounding on me enough to teach me how to hold my own and harden my muscles beyond their years—decided he could make some real cash by throwing me into L.A.—s illegal fighting scene. At the age of seventeen, when my body wasn—t even fully developed but was solid on account of the grueling workouts my dad insisted on. I can—t say that I went unwillingly. I—ve even enjoyed it, most times. It—s always my dad—s face I—m bashing in, his bones I—m snapping, every time I raise my fists.

Every time I pulverize my opponent.

And now, at nineteen years old, I—ve ended up fighting for my life in the upper echelon of this illicit world. I could win big on this one with what I put down. Or I could end up in a body bag. As I gaze at the goon in front of me—steroid-enhanced pecs twitching with anticipation, ugly veins protruding from his neck, his face a hideous mess of blood and ink—I accept that I probably won—t be the last one standing here, tonight. I—m a fucking moron for showing up to this fight. Jones is likely high on meth. Nothing short of two shots of fentanyl is going to bring the animal to his knees, and I don—t have elephant tranquilizers in my back pocket.

“Zee!” Nate’s voice cracks behind me, using my fighter name. I glance over my shoulder at the scrawny kid in my corner. My only reliable confidante, the one by my side through every single fight. He’s holding his cell phone to his ear, his ebony skin turned a sickly ashen tinge. “Somethin’ big is going down at Wilcox. Wilcox. My parents’ street. Nate’s wide molasses eyes flicker to my waiting opponent before returning to my mangled face.

“They fighting again?” I ask. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Nate’s head shakes slowly, somberly. “Nah, something different. Benny saw two guys show up about twenty minutes ago. Benny’s a fifteen-year-old kid who lives across the street from my parents and goes to Nate’s school with him. He’s a shithead, but he worships Nate because Nate is connected to me.

“For him or her?” As disturbing as the question is, it’s valid. Both of my parents took entrepreneurial paths down the wrong side of morality—my dad venturing into the drug trade, my mother running a quaint bookkeeping business/ brothel out of my late grandmother’s house. And now one of them has clearly pissed someone off enough to track them down on their doorstep.

Normally, I wouldn’t give a shit. I’d be ecstatic. Maybe, if my dad pissed off the right people, they’d get rid of my problem for me. Only it’s one in the morning on a Tuesday, and Lizzy, my sixteen-year-old sister, could be asleep in her bed. And, if these guys came looking for money and my dad goes to the hollowed-out armchair to pay them off, he’s going to find it empty.

Because I stole every last bill earlier today to put down on this fight.

A new visual blazes in my head. One of these guys collecting their payment on Lizzy.

That’s all it takes for my adrenaline to kick in. The crippling pain in my side instantly vanishes as I look at my opponent through new eyes. If I bury the odometer needle, I can get to their house in under fifteen minutes. It may be enough time. It may not. This goon is the only thing stopping me from leaving right now.

“Nate, tell Benny to call the cops.”

I toss my water bottle to the ground and charge forward.

It’s over so fast, no one watching seems to know what the hell happened. Silence fills the vast parking lot as everyone waits for Jones to get up. Everyone except me. I know he’s not getting up for a while. I felt the bones crack as his head snapped to the side with the venomous blows that I delivered in quick succession.

He still hasn’t moved as my peeling tires screech up the underground ramp.

■ ■ ■

“Stay here,” I bark at Nate as I pull my GTO to a stop in the middle of the street. I’m not sure how I didn’t crash, given that one eye is swollen shut. I jump out, running past the crowd of curious onlookers, toward the throng of emergency vehicles and police officers, lights flashing, cops running with radios in their hands. They couldn’t have beaten us by more than ten minutes.

It takes four police officers, a gun aimed at my forehead, and a set of handcuffs to stop me. They won't let me go in. They won't answer the one damn question I ask over and over again. Is Lizzy okay? Instead, they hammer me with an onslaught of words that don't register, that I don't care to acknowledge.

“What happened to you, son?”

“Who did this to you, son?”

“You need medical attention.”

“How do you know the occupants of this home?”

“Where have you been since midnight until your arrival here?”

Despite my warning, Nate ventures out of my car and somehow slips through the police tape. Like a silent shadow, he waits with me as a young paramedic tapes the gash above my eyebrow and informs me that I have three broken ribs.

I barely hear her as I watch a parade march in and out of my parents' front door.

As I watch the coroner show up.

The beginning of dawn lights the sky when one . . . two . . . three gurneys finally roll out.

All topped with black bags.

“I'm sorry for your loss, son,” a stocky police officer with a gruff voice offers. I didn't catch his name. I don't care about his name. “Things like this shouldn't happen.”

He's right. They shouldn't. Lizzy shouldn't have been there in the first place. If I hadn't given up on her, if I hadn't kicked her out of my apartment, she wouldn't have.

I could have saved her.

But now I'm too late.

■ ■ ■

Present Day

“What do you mean you can't deliver until after the weekend?” Despite every effort to keep my cool, my tone is biting.

“Sir, I'm sorry. As I've already explained, we're experiencing labor shortages. We're working as fast as we can to cover orders. We're sorry for the inconvenience,” the customer service rep recites evenly, sounding like she has said it a hundred times today. Because I'm sure she has.

Pinching the bridge of my nose to dull the sudden headache forming, I fight the urge to slam the receiver

against the desk. This conversation is a complete waste of time. Itâ€™s the same one Iâ€™ve had every day for two weeks. â€œTell your management that â€˜inconvenientâ€™ isnâ€™t the right word.â€ I hang up before she has a chance to spew the prewritten response for that.

With a groan, I lean back in my leather chair and fold my arms behind my head. I survey the walls of my officeâ€”lined floor-to-ceiling with shelves, doubling as supply room overflow. Five weeks of abnormally busy nights at Pennyâ€™s coupled with sporadic beer deliveries means Iâ€™m out of our top brands for the coming weekend. That means Iâ€™ll have to spend yet another Saturday night explaining to customers why being out of Heineken doesnâ€™t entitle them to a free lap dance.

I hate this business, some days.

Lately, I hate this business all days.

Cracking open a fresh bottle of high-end RÃ©my Martin, I pour the deep golden liquid into my tumbler. Itâ€™s my viceâ€”a glass before the club opens to take the edge off and one to close the place down. Unfortunately, the edge doesnâ€™t come off so easily anymore and I find myself topping up the glass a lot. Itâ€™s a good thing our hours are limited or Iâ€™d have a drinking problem. At two hundred bucks a bottle, Iâ€™d also have a money problem.

My office door cracks open just as the comforting burn slides down my throat.

â€œCain?â€ Nateâ€™s deep voice rumbles a second before his six-foot-six, 280-pound frame eases through the doorway. Iâ€™m still in awe of how that twiggy little kid turned into the giant now standing before me, almost overnight, too. It shouldnâ€™t surprise me, though, given that I was the one footing the steep grocery bill through his teenage growth spurts. â€œJust got a text from Cherry. Sheâ€™s sick.â€

â€œShe texted you?â€

He nods slowly, his dark eyes never leaving mine.

â€œThatâ€™s the third time sheâ€™s called in sick in two weeks.â€

â€œYup,â€ he agrees, and I know his thoughts are on the same wavelength as mine. No one knows me better than Nate. In fact, no one really knows me but Nate.

Cherry has worked for me for three and a half years. She has the immune system of a shark. The last time she started missing shifts because she was â€œsick,â€ we found her battered and strung out on blow, thanks to her douchebag boyfriend.

â€œDo you think heâ€™s back?â€

I shove my fingers through my hair, gritting my teeth with rising frustration. â€œHeâ€™d be the worldâ€™s biggest moron if he is, after what happened the last time.â€ Nate put him in the hospital with a broken femur and two dislocated shoulders as a warning. I have to think that was an effective deterrent.

â€œUnless Cherry invited him over.â€

I roll my eyes. Sheâ€™s a good girl with low self-esteem and terrible taste in men. Though Iâ€™d be



surprised, I wouldn't put it past her. I've seen it happen before. Many times.

I think I'll just swing by her place to make sure this isn't something more than a bug or chick issues. Nate grabs his keys from the rack.

With a sigh, I grumble, "Thanks Nate." We've helped her stay clean and idiot-boyfriend free for a year. The last thing I want to see is a repeat. "And, here." I pull a twenty-dollar bill out of my wallet and toss it across my desk. "Her kid loves Big Macs."

Nate scowls at my money, leaving it where it lays. I should know better. "And if he's there?"

"If he's back in the picture . . ." I run my tongue over my teeth. "Don't do anything yet. Call me. Immediately."

With a lazy salute, Nate exits my office, leaving me with my elbows on my desk and my folded hands against my clenched mouth, wondering what I'm going to do if Cherry has taken a turn for the worse. I can't fire her. Not when she needs our help. But . . . fuck. If we have to go through this with her again . . .

And I had to convince Delyla to go back to counseling just last week because she started cutting again. And two weeks before that, we were rushing Marisa to the hospital with complications after the back-street abortion that her asshole boyfriend convinced her to undergo. She hasn't even made it back to work yet. And the week before that"

A knock on my door only seconds later makes my temper flare unexpectedly. "What!"

Ginger's face pokes in.

Taking a deep breath, I gesture her in with a "sorry," silently chastising myself for barking at her.

"Hey, Cain, my friend is coming in to meet you tonight," she reminds me in that low, husky voice suitable for phone sex companies. The customers here love it. They love everything else about her, too, including those naturally large breasts and that sharp-witted tongue. "Remember? The one I mentioned earlier this week."

I groan. I completely forgot. Ginger sprung it on me last Friday as I was refereeing an argument between Kinsley and China in the hallway. I never did agree to meet with this person but I didn't say no. Ginger is clearly taking advantage of that. "Right. And she wants a job as what again? A dancer?"

Ginger's head bobs up and down, her wild short hair "colored in chunks of platinum blond, honey, and pink" in styled disarray. "I think you'll like her, Cain. She's different."

"Different, how?"

Ginger's hot pink lips twist. "Hard to explain. You'll see when you meet her. You'll like her."

My hand finds its way to the back of my neck, trying to rub the permanent tension out. It won't work. Weekly trips to a massage therapist do nothing for the kind of knots this place creates. "It's not about

liking her, Ginger. Itâ€™s about being overstaffed. I donâ€™t need any more dancers or bartenders right now.â€ Given Pennyâ€™s reputation, this place has basically become the crÃ¨me de la crÃ¨me of adult entertainment clubs. I donâ€™t take walk-ins or random applications. Employment is by referral only and turnover is low. Aside from Kinsley, I havenâ€™t hired anyone new in almost a year. Too many dancers means catfights over money.

â€I know, Cain, but . . . I think youâ€™re really going to like her.â€ Ginger has been bartending for me for years, longer than anyone else. I trust her opinion of people. The three others she recommended turned out to be outstanding employees who are now on healthy life paths, leading far away from the sex trade business. Hell, sheâ€™s the one who introduced me to Stormâ€™ my shining success story!

After a long pause, I ask, â€And her preferences? Is she . . .? Not that it matters, of course.â€

Teal-green cat eyes sparkle as she smiles at me. â€Iâ€™m pretty sure sheâ€™s into dudes. Havenâ€™t seen the proof yet, but thatâ€™s what my vibe tells me. Unfortunate for me.â€ Iâ€™ve come to truly appreciate Gingerâ€™s sexual orientation. Thereâ€™s never been that awkward moment with her, where sheâ€™s decided that I would welcome her hand on my cock. Sheâ€™s one of the very few female employees I can say that about. Itâ€™s one of the reasons why I get along with her so well.

â€Her name?â€

â€Charlie.â€

â€Real or stage?â€

She shrugs. â€Real, I think. â€Charlieâ€™ is the only name sheâ€™s ever given me.â€

I pause to take another sip of my drink. â€You vetted her?â€ Ginger knows the requirements. No track marks. No pimps. No prostitution. I have zero tolerance for drugs and prostitution. Iâ€™d get shut down in a heartbeat if the cops caught on, and too many people rely on Pennyâ€™s to let that happen. Plus, thereâ€™s no need for it here. I make sure the girls can rake in the money safely, without selling the last shreds of their dignity.

Her curt nod answers me.

â€Experience?â€

â€Vegas. She had a couple of interviews here, including one at Sin City.â€ Gingerâ€™s brow arches meaningfully. â€You know what Rick makes them do.â€

I lean back in my chair. Yeah, Iâ€™ve heard what Rickâ€™s requirements are for getting and keeping a job in his club. The fact that the guyâ€™s a fat, sweaty tub of hair doesnâ€™t help. â€She didnâ€™t comply?â€

Ginger giggles. â€She barely made it out of there without puking, from what she told me.â€

I nod slowly. That definitely earns her a few points with me. I want to help out every woman who feels she needs to take her clothes off to survive but Iâ€™m only one man, and not every woman is strong enough to avoid the pitfalls of this industry.

Iâ€™ve seen too many of them fall fast.

And trying to catch them over and over again is so very exhausting.

Taking in Gingerâ€™s exotically beautiful face, I finally ask the big question. â€œWhatâ€™s her deal, Ginger? Why strip?â€ With a finger, I slowly trace the rim of my glass. Thereâ€™s usually a good reason. Or a bad reason, depending on how you look at it. As far as ratios of completely normal to fucked-up employees go, the numbers generally weigh in heavy for the latter. â€œHigh school dropout with no future? History of abuse? Douchebag boyfriend wanting extra cash? Daddy issues? Or is she just looking for attention?â€

Gingerâ€™s head tilts as she murmurs in a dry tone, â€œJaded much?â€

I throw my hands up in the air. â€œYouâ€™re the exception, Ginger. You know that.â€ Since the day Ginger walked into my officeâ€”on her eighteenth birthdayâ€”Iâ€™ve never had to worry about her. She comes from a stable, abuse-free home and she has never even batted an eye at the stage. Her purpose is straightforward and honest: save enough money to open an inn in Napa Valley. With the kind of money she rakes in here, Iâ€™d say sheâ€™s getting close to that dream.

After a pause, she shrugs. â€œAll I know is she wants to make good money. But she seems to have her head on straight, since she didnâ€™t take the other jobs.â€

Because she probably figured out sheâ€™d be sucking cock in the private room . . . With a deep exhale and my hand pressed against my forehead, rubbing the frown smooth, I mutter, â€œAll right. Weâ€™ll see.â€ Am I really going to do this right now? What if sheâ€™s another Cherry? Or Marisa? Or China? Or Shaylen? Orâ€”

â€œGreat. Thanks, Cain.â€ She pauses, her curvy frameâ€”dressed in cut-off shorts and a tank top for setting up the barâ€”leaning against the door frame. â€œYou okay? You seem worn out lately.â€

Worn out. Thatâ€™s a good way to describe it. Worn out by week after week, month after month of brazen customers, everyday ownership issues, and employees who canâ€™t seem to straighten out their lives without someone running interference. Throw in police attentionâ€”because they assume, based on my past and my current business, that Iâ€™m following in the footsteps of my parentsâ€”and youâ€™ve summarized my life for the past decade.

Itâ€™s enough to make any rational person quit.

And I have considered quitting. Iâ€™ve considered selling Pennyâ€™s and walking away. And then I look at my employeesâ€™ facesâ€”the ones who I know will end up at a place like Sin City without meâ€”and the metal teeth of the trap around my chest dig in tighter.

I canâ€™t abandon them. Not yet. If I could just get this lot out and safe, without adding any more problems to my plate, I could live out my life somewhere quietly. A remote beach in Fiji is sounding pretty damn good.

None of those thoughts ever gets spoken out loud, though. â€œJust havenâ€™t been sleeping well,â€ I say to Ginger, pulling on the fake smile that Iâ€™ve mastered. Itâ€™s beginning to feel like a suffocating iron mask.

By the way Ginger's brow pulls together, I know she doesn't believe me. "Okay, well, you know you always have my ears if you want 'em," she offers, grinning playfully as she rolls her hips and winks. "And nothing else."

Her soft laughter follows her out the door, temporarily lifting my dour mood as I set to preparing payroll for the small army of dancers, security, kitchen, and wait staff I have under my employ. Serge—a forty-eight-year-old retired Italian opera singer—manages my kitchen as if it were his own, but I handle everything else.

Unfortunately, the dour mood returns with a vengeance twenty minutes later when Nate's call comes through. "His blue Dodge is here."

My fist slams down against the desk, rattling everything. "You're kidding me, right?" I take a moment to gain control of the rage bubbling inside me. Nate doesn't bother to answer. The two of us have always had an easy back-and-forth banter, but he knows what not to joke with me about. Fuckheads taking advantage of women is one of those things.

"You want me to go in?" Nate offers.

"No, wait outside. If he's back, he's probably carrying." As stupid as this guy is, he must have learned after the last time. "I'm on my way. Don't go inside, Nate." I throw that last warning in with a stern voice. I couldn't bear to lose Nate over this. I shouldn't even have let him get involved. I should have made him go to college and lead a normal life. But I didn't, because he's all I have and I like having him around.

I'm out of my seat and crouched in the corner in seconds, dialing the safe combination. My fingers wrap tightly around the biting steel of my Glock. I despise myself for touching it. It represents violence, illegality . . . the life and the choices that I've left behind, that I would never let consume me again. But if it means keeping Nate and Cherry and her eight-year-old son—the one who dialed my number on Cherry's cell phone for help when he found his mother unconscious on the couch the last time—safe, then I will jam the barrel right into the scumbag's temple.

I'm about to slip on the holster when the door creaks open. "Cain?"

I need to start locking my damn office door again, I tell myself. Stifling a curse, I slide the gun back into the safe and stand, struggling to keep the venom from my voice as I growl, "Ginger, you really need to learn—" "How to knock is how that sentence is supposed to end."

But instead it ends in a sharp hiss, as I find myself staring at my past.

At Penny. | Four Seconds to Lose

chapter two

■■■

CHARLIE

Plan A—Turn myself in and beg for immunity in exchange for information.

I donâ€™t have enough concrete information to nail him. Iâ€™ll probably end up in jail for the next twenty-five years. If I even make it there, alive.

Plan A â€œ Turn myself in and beg for immunity in exchange for information.

Plan Bâ€™Lose all my identification and fake amnesia so the government will be forced to create new documentation for me . . . eventually.

What if they put my picture up on the news? Heâ€™ll find me. Plus, I could end up locked in a psych ward for an indefinite length of time. And I donâ€™t know that my acting abilities are quite that convincing.

Plan Bâ€™Lose all my identification and fake amnesia so the government will be forced to create new documentation for me . . . eventually.

Plan Câ€™Buy a new identity and make Charlie Rourke disappear.

Heâ€™s just standing there, boring holes into my face.

Given that Iâ€™ve never laid eyes on him before, I donâ€™t know what his normal complexion looks like, but Iâ€™ll bet itâ€™s not the sickly white pallor that I see now.

As if heâ€™s seen a ghost.

I try to catch Gingerâ€™s eye, to see if she thinks his reaction is strange, but I canâ€™t.

â€œSorry. I knocked but you didnâ€™t answer,â€ she offers in apology. Itâ€™s true, she did knock, and we waited for close to a minute before entering. I donâ€™t know what he was doing in his officeâ€ behind the closed door with a sign that reads â€œboss manâ€ and pair of lacy underwear pinned to itâ€™but, by the stunned expression on his face, weâ€™ve interrupted something. A glance down confirms that his belt is at least buckled.

â€œThis is my friend, Charlie, who I told you about.â€ Gingerâ€™s long, slender fingers point to me and I force a bright smile. â€œFriendâ€ sounds a bit misleading, seeing as everything Iâ€™ve ever told Ginger about me is a deliberate lie.

I met her only three weeks ago. Her beginner pole-dancing class was just finishing up and she stayed on to watch the advanced class. I guess I impressed her, because she sat through the entire hour and then talked my ear off in the change room afterward about how good I am. I took her proffered number with no intentions to call. The next week, Ginger cornered me after class and wouldnâ€™t leave until I went out to lunch with her. Last week, she coerced me into shopping. Thereâ€™s nothing wrong with her. Sheâ€™s twenty-six, but she doesnâ€™t act like it most of the time. She has an easy, genuine laugh and a sarcastic sense of humor. Sheâ€™s persistent, too. I just didnâ€™t plan on getting to know people, seeing as I wonâ€™t be in Miami long. But I guess you could say that weâ€™ve become friendsâ€™lies and all.

Itâ€™s ironic that we met when we did, actually. By my pole-dancing skills and looks, Ginger automatically assumed I was a stripper. There was no judgment in those bright green eyes when she asked which club I worked at. Thatâ€™s why I admitted to the few unappealing adult clubs I had applied to and the appalling â€œinterviewâ€ at one called Sin City. The one I had run out of. Her pixie-like face lit up, which was not the reaction I was expecting. Then she explained that she bartended at the best club in Miami and offered to get

me a job. She asked about my experience and I, of course, lied. I told her that I had worked in Vegas.

I left Vegas when I was six. I have certainly never stripped there.

After my experience with Sin City, I wasn't sure if I could go through with it. But when I saw the unusually elegant sign out front void of any big-breasted caricatures or flashing lights, just the name, Penny's Palace I knew instantly that this was the place for me. And Ginger promised me that the owner, Cain, is like none other. The way she talks about him, I think he holds some sort of œboss of the millennium award.

But he's still staring me down.

He hasn't blinked once.

I catch the almost indiscernible shake of his head before he offers in a clipped tone, œCharlie. Right. Hi.

œHi. I was cool and confident coming in here, leveraging countless hours of acting classes to ready my wide, friendly smile. Now, though, under this man's steely gaze, I hear the wobble with that one tiny word. I step forward and hold my hand out.

His coffee-colored eyes finally pry themselves from my face to glare down at my hand without moving and I fight the urge to retract it. Ginger swore that this guy was first class, but he still makes his money off the sex trade. A lot of things get shaken under this roof and hands are probably not one of them. I never did shake the hand of that slimeball at Sin City Rick before he instructed me to climb onto his lap two minutes into my interview. I shouldn't be surprised by this guy's reaction.

These owners are all the same.

I take a deep breath, reminding myself that I've handled my fair share of degenerates and can do this.

Hell, I'm a degenerate.

As if snapping out of a daze, Cain finally accepts my hand in his, his eyes locked on mine. œHi, Charlie. I'm sorry. You just . . . startled me. You look a lot like someone I know. There's a pause. œLike someone I knew, he corrects himself softly. His voice carries with it a smooth, educated sound, which surprises me, given our surroundings.

œOkay, well, I'll just be at the bar, getting things set up. Ginger scoots out of the office, closing the door behind her, leaving me alone with this man. I take a few calming breaths. I'm going to throttle her.

I don't know what to expect now. Ginger didn't tell me much about Cain, other than that he's really nice and honest, he treats his employees very well, and if I'm going to dance in Miami, then Penny's is the place to work. She did say that he sometimes comes off as intimidating but he's just reserved. And he's got a lot on his plate, running this club.

She certainly left out details about his physical appearance, I realize, as my gaze skates over his frame to see the well-defined curves beneath a fitted button-down black dress shirt and black dress pants. As if that body isn't enough, his face is flawless angular cheekbones and a sharp jaw combine to give him a masculine yet almost pretty look. He's like a sculpture and about as opposite to Sin City Rick as you

can get.

Basically, Cain is panty-dropping hot.

That your boss is panty-dropping hot is an odd thing to leave out of the equation. Cain's the type of guy that makes women lose their words and their train of thought when he walks by. Except Ginger, it would seem.

But attractive or not, I'm feeling all kinds of uncomfortable right now, as Cain's hard, intelligent gaze slowly rolls over my body, appraising me. Taking a deep breath, I pull my shoulders back. I hold my chin up. I look him straight in the eye. I do all the things I know to do to appear confident. I will not cower under the intense scrutiny. If I'm going to be up on his stage, taking my clothes off for his customers, I can't be unnerved by this.

And so I stand and let him pass silent judgment while I survey his office, taking in all the shelves, crammed with boxes. Aside from the large desk on one end and a black leather couch tucked into a corner, it seems like a storage room. By his appearance, I'd expect something sleek and tidy.

"Ginger said you have experience?" His tone is gentler than it was when we first stepped in.

I answer without hesitation. "Yes, one year in Vegas. At The Playhouse." I fight the urge to start twirling one of my loose blond curls. I know my tells, and that's one that says I'm lying. Ginger warned me, under no circumstances, to lie to Cain Ford, because he always finds out anyway and it pisses him off when he does. It's kind of impossible to heed that warning, though, given my situation.

Plus, I am a very proficient liar.

And I'm banking on him not doing an in-depth reference check. Short of divine intervention, he won't find a Charlie Rourke that worked at The Playhouse in Vegas.

Because Charlie Rourke doesn't exist.

Cain leans back against his desk and folds his arms over his chest, only accentuating the defined muscles in his shoulders and biceps. "Do you have a preference?"

I keep my face composed "I'm an expert at stone cold" while I struggle to decipher his question. Preference with what exactly? The desk? The floor? That couch? Is he seconds away from undoing his zipper?

Either Cain interprets my long pause as confusion or he replayed the question in his head and realized how it could be taken because he adds very clearly, "On the stage. When you're dancing."

I exhale and silently admonish myself. "I'm pretty good on a pole." That isn't a lie. That's actually a discredit to my talent. I've been in gymnastics since I was five, so my body is strong and limber. Then, two years ago, I needed an excuse to visit a specific dance studio in Queens once a week so I enrolled in a pole-dancing class. Not under my real name, of course.

It turns out I took to pole-dancing naturally. I just haven't worked up to the move where I drop my clothes.

“Okay,” Cain says slowly, his jaw shifting, appearing as if in thought. He hesitates for a second. “Full nude or topless?”

“Topless.” I shouldn’t be so eager. I’ve heard what these girls wear as bottoms and they may as well be completely naked.

Cain’s eyes automatically drop to my chest when I say that, and they seem to settle there. His entire form is frozen in place.

As if he’s waiting.

Of course he is. He wants to know what he’s putting up on his stage.

A quiver runs through my stomach. I can do this. This will be way less mortifying than the last time. Trying to pace my breathing before my heart explodes out of my chest, I quickly slip my thumbs beneath the spaghetti straps of my lemon-yellow sundress and pull on them until they pass the balls of my shoulders. With a sharp inhale, I let my arms drop and the dress goes with it. I intentionally didn’t wear a bra today. I figured that would make this uncomfortable process quick and a tiny bit less embarrassing. The last thing I wanted to do was fumble with bra hooks . . .

Because that would make standing in this man’s storage-room office in my white thong that much more awkward than it is already.

Cain’s lips part but not a sound comes out of him as his eyes widen for one, two, three, four seconds. And then it’s as if he wakes up, because he’s suddenly moving. Standing, unfolding his arms, and taking steps forward to reach me quickly, I watch with my lungs constricting as he crouches down in front of me and grasps the straps of the dress pooled around my ankles. He pulls my dress back up, his fingertips leaving hot trails against my skin as he affixes the straps. If my body weren’t already as stiff as a corpse, his touch probably would have made me shudder.

Locking eyes that look wise beyond his years on me, he says in a strained voice, as if he’s holding his breath, “You don’t have to do that for me. In fact, I ask that you please don’t do that for me again. Ever.”

I swallow and nod, my cheeks flaming, somehow more humiliated by his reaction than had he groped my breasts like that other pig. Spinning on his heels, he marches over behind his desk, a grimace on his handsome features. I don’t know if I’ve done something wrong or if I have the job.

I need this job.

Cain speaks up again. “Just stage dancing? What about private dances?” I see his gaze on me from beneath a fringe of thick lashes. “I don’t charge any stage fees, so what you earn up there, you take home.”

The small exhale escapes my lips before I can stop it. When I came up with this plan two weeks ago, I wasn’t fully aware of the inner workings at these clubs. But you can find anything on the internet. I found out that many owners charge a high stage fee, so the girls actually earn their money working hard on the floor and in the private rooms. Rumor has it that, though illegal, many of them do “extras,” on top of the lap dances. The idea of stripping on a stage in front of people is a giant pill to swallow for me. But lap



dances . . .

Iâ€™I do it.

I have to do it, I remind myself.

When I ran out of Sin City that day, I was sure that my plan was dead in the water. I mean, how was I going to perform daily lap dances when I couldnâ€™t even get through my interview!

But Ginger told me that Pennyâ€™s is different. That Cain is different. That no one in the private rooms will be taking their pants off, and that doing â€œextrasâ€ is one of the only ways that you get fired at Pennyâ€™s.

Cain sounded too good to be true.

Setting my chin with steely determination, I say, â€œBoth, please.â€ Swallowing the revulsion bubbling up in my throat, I clarify with a struggle, â€œI want to work the private rooms as well as the stage.â€

Cain blows air out of his mouth, one hand on his hip while the other pushes through perfectly styled, slightly wavy dark hair as he stares hard at me. Thereâ€™s an inexplicable look in his eyes, but I know heâ€™s trying to read me. I wonder if heâ€™s deciding whether to ask me for a demonstration. My gaze drifts to the couch again and my stomach tightens. Somehow I think giving this guy an interview lap dance might be harder than doing one for a sleazeball.

Because if I could get past the embarrassment and nerves, I might enjoy it.

But he doesnâ€™t ask me to demonstrate. Instead, he asks me, â€œHave you ever bartended before?â€

I shake my head, frowning.

â€œI have too many girls working the private rooms right now. But working behind the bar would bring your earnings up significantly. Itâ€™s what another stage dancer of mine used to do.â€ He continues, more to himself, â€œMaybe we see how that works out first.â€

I came in here expecting the worstâ€”that Iâ€™d be grinding on guysâ€™ laps by the weekend because I have to. And yet, now, the relief is pouring out of me.

â€œWhy are you in this profession?â€ he suddenly asks, lifting his eyes to bore into me once again.

One question I did expect. I meet his stare and hold it as I explain, â€œBecause Iâ€™m good at it, Iâ€™ve got a decent body, and have no interest in serving French fries for minimum wage while I figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life.â€ I deliver that as I practiced itâ€”calmly, clearly, convincingly. Itâ€™s a good answer. One that creates no doubt. And so far from the truth. I know exactly what I want to do with my life.

End it and begin a new one.

He nods slowly, his lip pressed together in a grimace. I donâ€™t know if that means Iâ€™m hired or not, so I bite my tongue and wait for a concrete verdict. Iâ€™m still waiting for Cainâ€™s decision when his cell

phone rings. I watch with fingers laced together in front of me while he answers with a gruff, "Yup." He listens, his free hand absently rubbing a small tattoo behind his ear. A second later he barks, "No! I'm on my way." Hanging up, he digs into a drawer and comes out with a handful of papers. "Fill these out, please. Bring a copy of your driver's license tomorrow night with you." Whatever gentleness crept into his voice before has vanished. It's all business now, as he slides the sheets across his desk with hands that look strong and muscular but incapable to soothe. "If the crowd likes you, you've got a job." Turning those eyes my way once more and pausing for a moment, he adds, "Fair?"

"Absolutely. Thank you," I say with a nod and what I hope is a courteous smile as I collect the forms.

With that, he turns and crouches down behind his desk. I hear something metal slam that reminds me of my stepdad's safe door. When Cain stands again, it's to fit a holster and gun on him, startling me. It's not the first time I've seen a gun. I have a gun. I've used a gun. But seeing Cain with one right here, right now, was unexpected. Why does he even need one?

Throwing a light jacket over himself to conceal it "he'll die wearing that in the summer heat, but concealing your weapon is a law in Florida and I guess Cain is a law-abiding citizen" he walks over and, with one hand on the small of my back, ushers me toward the door. It's not exactly rude, but it's also far from polite. With me in the hall, he pulls his office door shut and marches out the back exit, not turning once.

I'm left standing alone, inhaling the faint scent of beer, my ears catching someone testing the sound system. The one that will play music that I strip to tomorrow night.

I take a deep breath as a rash of butterflies swirl through my stomach, the sudden urge to let loose my bladder overwhelming.

It's not a big deal.

Mom did this.

I can do this.

After everything I've done, that I've been accomplice to, taking my top off in front of a bunch of drunks is nothing. I deserve to suffer a bit.

I glance down at the paperwork in my hand. He said he wants a copy of my license. That's fine. The only accurate thing on it is my picture.

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