

PAY to PLAY

BY

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Chapter 1

Stu Sebastiani tucked a C-note down the server's sequined bra and raised his voice above the pulsing music.

"Can I cop a feel for a hundred-dollar bill?"

The curvaceous blond in her glittery halter and hot pants smiled, signaling consent in Sebastiani's mind. However, when he patted her butt, she scowled and dislodged his hand from her backside with a well-placed slug to his solar plexus.

He winced and then laughed in spite of the pain. Didn't she know who he was? He was responsible for the place jumping off tonight and, as part of the compensation for his behind-the-scenes contributions, he felt entitled to a bit of bad behavior. He had spent

the first half of the evening playing a one-sided game of grab-ass with the cocktail waitresses and dancers scurrying about the congested floor. His son, Arty, was a minority owner of JOLIE, Philadelphia's newest and most exclusive gentlemen's club. Tonight was the grand opening, and he planned to get his party on.

He massaged his now-bruised abdomen and surveyed the club. The crowd was so deep, no one could possibly take note of the painstakingly selected interior decor. So much fuss about the dimensions of the chandeliers, the grade of marble for the floors, and those ridiculous Grecian sculptures—they should have listened to him. The only thing the customers care about was the babes.

"Dad." Arty appeared at Sebastiani's side and leaned in close to shout into his ear. "I saw that. You know you're not supposed to touch."

"Can you blame me?" Sebastiani angled his head toward the luscious rear end of the cocktail waitress bending over to place an order of drinks on the next table. "I'm glad you took my advice and hired girls with a little something extra that jiggles when you smack it."

"Some of them are complaining."

"Most don't mind. How am I to know which ones do?" He pantomimed pinching the round bottom of an unsuspecting brunette scooching by but knew better than to feel up the paying customers.

"Why don't you go hang with your buddy Bill Leone?"

"Nah, he's all sour grapes tonight." Sebastiani caught a view through the crowd of his old friend parked at center stage, sipping a drink while checking out the featured entertainer, Lola or Lolly or something like that. Leone was probably scheming to book her at his club. "He did tell me earlier that I should claim partial credit for your success."

“Why?”

“’Cuz you inherited my appreciation of the female anatomy.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Sure, he’s right.” Sebastiani grinned at Arty. “You may have earned your master’s in business administration from Wharton, but you earned your master’s in boobs and ass by studying with your old man.”

“That’s so uncool, Dad.” Arty let out an exaggerated sigh. “I hope you’re not telling people that.”

“Don’t forget, I introduced you to your business partners.”

“And thank God I can always count on you to remind me of that.”

Arty muttered something else, but Sebastiani couldn’t understand what he said. He ignored his son’s reproach and looked passed him, into the crowd, where he spied one of his pals from the old neighborhood. He called him over.

“Jimmy Mastracola.” Sebastiani greeted him with a hearty embrace and a kiss on the cheek. “Glad you could make it.”

“This place is something else.” Mastracola pulled Arty into a bear hug. “You should be proud of yourself, Junior.”

“Thanks, Uncle Jimmy.”

“You too, Stu.” Mastracola bumped fists with Sebastiani. “I’m sure you were an *unofficial* consultant on all this.”

“We were just saying how he got his MBA from me.” He winked at Mastracola. “Master’s in boobs and ass.”

Mastracola laughed and nodded. “No one knows more about strip clubs than you.”

Sebastiani gave Arty a playful nudge.

A frown creased Arty's brow. "Come with me, Uncle Jimmy," he said, changing the subject. "I want to introduce you to my business associates. They had something to do with this too."

"Yeah, let's go see 'em." Sebastiani patted Arty on the back and smiled. "I got a surprise for you guys."

"What is it?"

"Just you wait."

Arty stared at him for a beat, sighed, and led them through the crush of bodies and introduced Mastracola to Lynette Hampton and Curtis Kincaid, both dressed for the occasion. She wore sequins and black silk, and so did he.

Sebastiani high-fived the partners and liked the way Lynette's breasts bounced in her low-cut dress when he slapped her hand. "Great crowd, Lynette. The house is packed."

"Should be." She stood with one hand on her hip. "We spent nearly a quarter of a million on marketing."

"Yeah, great ad campaign—billboards, flyers, and all that social media stuff." He scanned her body. Her ass was starting to look a little flat. Too bad. She used to have such a nice one. "But maybe," he continued, "everybody's here because your closest competitors are temporarily shut down."

Arty slid toward Sebastiani and leaned in, his eyes dark and questioning. "What do you mean, Dad? What did you do?"

“L and I is conducting a semiannual inspection of all the clubs in South Philly.” He stepped sideways to allow more space between them. “The crackdowns are tonight. What a coincidence.”

“What the hell?” Arty gripped his arm. “You can’t just order up a raid to get us more business. You’ve got to call off your Department of Licenses and Inspections people, right now.”

Sebastiani pretended to be unconcerned, but his mouth was suddenly dry and there was a thickness in his throat. He raised an imaginary glass to his lips as a signal to a waitress standing nearby that he needed a drink. “Can’t you see the beauty of it all? When my guys roll in, their customers leave and come here.” He looked at each partner. How could they not understand what he had done for them?

“I can’t believe you pulled such a boneheaded stunt,” said Kincaid. His words and spittle were both forced through clenched teeth. “After all we’ve done to appear legit.”

Sebastiani glanced around the room. The music seemed to have gotten louder. The thumping rhythm made his heart beat faster. He could feel the vibrations in his feet.

“Stu. I’m talking to you.”

He gave Kincaid a stiff half smile. “It’s all good. Trust me.”

Lynette moved in closer. Her potent perfume made his eyes blink. He recalled how, after he had been with her, he’d have to scrub away her scent before he could go home.

Jabbing one of her lacquered talons in his face, she said, “You need to go.”

Sebastiani flung his arms wide. “You’re kicking *me* outta here? You guys *need* me.” He turned to Arty. “Tell them.”

“We’ll talk about that later.” Arty tugged on his sleeve. “Right now, you need to call off your boys.”

Sebastiani yanked his arm away and inadvertently bumped into Kincaid, who flinched, immediately took a weak defensive stance, and raised his fists in the air.

“Really?” Sebastiani glared at Kincaid, daring him to make a move. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll mess up your outfit?”

“*Stop it.*” Arty stepped between them. “He’ll stay and straighten everything out.”

“You *better* fix this,” said Kincaid. He wagged his finger at Sebastiani and then stomped away, sputtering obscenities. Lynette followed close behind, glaring back at him even as she greeted a guest with a warm hug and kiss.

Sebastiani stood motionless with his arms stiff against his sides. He looked at Arty, who was shaking his head. *What a clusterfuck. Say something to defend yourself.* He glanced over at Mastracola, who appeared to be embarrassed for him.

“But it worked. They came,” said Sebastiani.

“But, Dad, it wasn’t your place to do anything. You should have asked me.” Arty pointed to the rear bar. “Go sit back there and make some calls to clean up this mess. Try to keep a low profile.”

Two hours later, Sebastiani, still entrenched at the far side of the club where Arty had banished him, slumped on a barstool, his upper body draped over the counter. Just below his alcohol buzz, he detected his suppressed anger. How come everyone else got to have it all, but he was supposed to be satisfied with scraps? He ran the side of his hand slowly across the stubble on his cheek, tilted his glass to his lips, and guzzled down his Jameson.

“They can all suck my hairy balls,” he mumbled to himself. “Lay low. Hell no.”

No one had been upset when he used his connections to make sure zoning permits and construction inspections sailed through without a hitch. Now, after they had taken advantage of the courtesies his position provided, they acted like they didn’t know him. So what if Arty got a small share in the business? He wanted his own payday. They owed *him*.

“Come ’re for a minute.” He waved the bartender over. His head was at her chest level. He wished he could bury his face in those fleshy, plump mounds. He spoke to her cleavage. “Did ya know I named this joint? Those shitheads wanted to call it Jolie Visage, like dudes would come in here to check out pretty faces. I told ’em,” he said, his tongue thick and doughy, “I told ’em, ‘Skip that highbrow French shhhit. Just call it Jolie, like that hot piece actress.’”

The bartender reached for the whiskey glass resting next to Sebastiani’s head. As wasted as he was, he still managed to snatch it before she could take it away. While she waited, he lapped up the remaining brown liquid coating the bottom and sides of the empty glass, then wriggled his tongue at her.

“I hope you got it all,” she said over her shoulder as she walked away with the tumbler, “’cuz that was your last one.”

“Fuck it.” Sebastiani pounded his fist on the bar. “I’m not gonna let ’em stick me in the corner like some sssmacked ass.”

He whirled his finger around the wet ring left behind on the bar, collecting himself. He smiled. Tannie. He would get Tannie a job at JOLIE. She would be his spy. She would make sure he got his fair share of the business he had helped build.

Tannie would make sure he got what he deserved.

Chapter 2

Special Agent Kari Wheeler toggled the cursor between two e-mails on her computer screen. She took in and then let out a long breath. She didn't want to respond to either. The first was from Justin Fiske, an agent in the Chicago Division whom she'd met during a recent trip to the FBI Academy in Quantico, where, for the third time in less than two years, she had been asked to conduct an advanced seminar on recruiting and managing white-collar-crime informants.

She had flirted with Justin at the hotel bar for more than an hour. And, as was the rule of the game, just when she knew he thought she would be going up to his room, she excused herself "for a moment" and never returned. She always slipped away before things went too far, before it was too late. To know they wanted to be with her was all she needed. When she and Justin bumped into each other on the FBI Academy campus the next day, she had pretended not to recognize him. But now he was e-mailing her and asking when she would be returning to the Academy for another in-service class. *Was he kidding?*

She glanced at the photo of Kevin and the kids and then back at the e-mail on the computer screen, a giant placard flagging her shame.

She hit delete.

The second message, "Please see me," was from her new boss, Juanita Negron. Kari hadn't bothered to apply for the job. She didn't need to be the boss to be in charge.

Her fourteen years working fraud cases had earned her a place of influence on the prestigious Public Corruption Squad, the FBI's number-one criminal priority. Juanita, on the other hand, had no problem proclaiming her authority. That woman ticked Kari off. Kari preferred to stay out of Juanita's office, where she held court and issued edicts. Kari had hoped Juanita would pop out to get coffee and when she walked through the squad area, Kari could casually ask what she wanted. But it had been almost two hours, and Juanita had not yet made a move.

Kari sighed, gathered up her notepad and a pen, and went in to see her boss. As she tapped on the open door and entered the sparsely decorated office, Juanita peered over the top of her designer glasses and gave Kari one of her insincere smiles. A midmarket TV reporter in Miami before she joined the FBI, her perfectly applied makeup accented her flawless, caramel-cream complexion. Juanita pushed aside the statistical evaluations she'd been reviewing and held up a single sheet of paper.

"I can't go back down to Quantico right now, if that's why you needed to see me."

"It wasn't, but is everything all right?"

"My mother's been ill." Juanita opened her mouth to speak and Kari waved her hand, swatting away Juanita's concerns. "She's doing much better now. She's in remission..." Kari immediately wished she hadn't shared that intimate detail. Her rule had always been *Don't ever give them anything to later use against you*.

"That's great," said Juanita, displaying another weak smile. "I was actually going to assign you a complaint that came in today. Sounds like bad timing."

"No, no. What do you got?"

"You have time to work another case?"

“Of course.” Kari smiled. “You know me. If it’s something good, I’ll find a way.”

“You sure?”

Kari nodded and took the paper from Juanita.

The information block of the one-page form contained the name Tannie Colosi, a telephone number, and a few lines of succinct narrative. “Complainant advised that she has information about the head of business licensing and inspections for the City of Philadelphia, Stuart Sebastiani, accepting cash and gifts from strip club owners. Complainant is a stripper at a local club. Complainant requests confidentiality.”

“I thought it was a perfect case for you. Your kind of thing.”

Strip clubs? “What makes you say that?”

“I heard the *Inquirer* dubbed you the ‘Hall Monitor’ after your second city-councilman conviction. This case has the potential to be another public official busted on a bribery and kickbacks indictment. Right up your alley, right?”

Kari read the complaint again.

“Sebastiani? Isn’t he that Boobgate guy?”

Juanita looked puzzled.

“Never mind,” Kari said. “Go ahead and assign it to me.” She scanned the name listed on the paper. “I’ll go see this Tannie Colosi woman today.”

Juanita motioned for her to return the complaint form. While waiting for her to scribble and initial an assignment memo at the bottom of the page with her Bulgari pen, Kari stared at the area behind the desk. Centered behind Juanita was the same signed and numbered watercolor print of an FBI seal and Thompson submachine gun that hung in the office or home of every FBI agent with vacant wall space. She had been promoted

more than three months ago but had unpacked only this one item. Why were there no family photos, no mementos, no plaques or certificates?

“Can you take one of the young guys with you?” Juanita looked up for her desk. “They’re hanging around the office too much.”

Kari glanced out the doorway at the agents gathered in the squad area. Asking one of the beer-guzzling former frat boys to come to interview a stripper with her didn’t seem prudent. Instead, she would bring along conservative family man Everett Hildebrand, just for “grins and giggles” a phrase she’d often heard him use.

“I’ll get Hildebrand to help me out.”

“Karolina, really? Hildebrand?”

She knew Juanita didn’t like Hildebrand, but that was no reason for Juanita to use her full name, as if she were a child. The supervisor waited for her to say something, but she kept her mouth shut. *Just because he made the mistake of disrespecting your squad-car policy, doesn’t mean I have to shun him too.*

Juanita handed back the form.

“One more thing. The Citizen’s Crime Commission Awards luncheon?”

“I told you. Can’t go. It conflicts with my kids’ parent-teacher conferences.”

“But you’re one of the recipients.”

“I appreciate the recognition, but as much time as I spend here, it’s my family that deserves an award.” She smiled, placed her right hand over her heart, and patted her chest. She left the room without saying another word.

Back in her cubicle, she got right to work. She googled the name Stuart Sebastiani. *Aha. He is that Boobgate guy.* Perhaps it was a quirk of fate that a complaint involving strip clubs and the Boobgate guy would come across her desk today. Just that

morning, after finding a digital copy of *Muffs Illustrated* downloaded on Carter's laptop, she had told Kevin she was designating the past few days as "porn week."

Two days earlier, she had caught Carter looking at sex GIFs on his phone. A quick check of his Twitter account revealed that many of the people he followed had porn star names. She was now policing all of his devices. It was as if his thirteen-year-old hormones had roared into full throttle that very week. She chuckled. *Carter would go bananas if he knew I was going to interview a stripper.*

She called the number listed on the paper. A female voice answered.

"Hi, is this Tannie Colosi?"

"Yeah? Who's this?"

"Tannie, this is Kari Wheeler. I'm an agent with the FBI and I'm calling about the complaint you filed earlier today. I want to set up a time for us to talk."

"Oh. I don't know...I think I changed my mind," Tannie said. "I was angry when I called."

"At Stuart Sebastiani? Did he do something to upset you?"

Silence.

"Sometimes we try to talk ourselves out of stuff," Kari nudged, "even when we know it's the right thing to do."

Still no response.

"Hello? Are you there?"

Tannie let out a long groan. She was clearly irritated, but whether with herself or with the phone call, Kari couldn't tell. "You'll have to come to the club," she finally said. "I don't want you coming over to my place." She spit out the address to the PlayRoom, the South Philly strip club where she worked. "How long will it take you to get here?"

“You’re open now?” Kari asked. It was not yet two o’clock.

“We open at noon. The lunch crowd has thinned out. If you come by now, we’ll have a few minutes to talk.”

“I’m on my way.”

“I’m not saying I’m going to tell you anything. I’ll see how I feel after you get here.”

“I want you to be comfortable.”

“Oh, do you? You might have to buy a lap dance then.”

Kari paused for a beat and cleared her throat. *I hope she’s joking.* “That will depend on what you tell me.”

“Cool. Just make sure to ask for me when you get here, so I can make you out from all the other business types,” said Tannie.

“I’m a black female, about five foot eight. I have on a dark gray suit.”

“Of course you do.”

Kari laughed to herself. Tannie thought she knew her already, the typical female law enforcement officer who underplayed her appearance. *Humph.* Tannie was right. Clean and presentable was her standard beauty regime.

“What about Sebastiani?”

“What about him?”

“You’re not concerned that someone will see us talking and say something to him?”

“Nah. He’s got no reason to worry about me.”

Kari disconnected and called over to Hildebrand, who sat with his back to her, pecking away at his keyboard in a cubicle nearby. He swiveled his six-foot-three-inch,

broad-shouldered frame to face her. She liked having him accompany her on interviews. People assumed with his height and large build that he was in charge. She enjoyed watching their reactions when they learned she was in command of their two-man team. She liked that, being in control.

“Hey, Ev,” she said. “You wanna sit in on an interview with me?”

“Definitely. What’s up?”

“Not sure yet. I’m guessing it’s the usual scorned woman rats out lover.”

“You need me to drive?”

“Uh, I don’t think so,” Kari said, laughing. She knew he was joking. His was the worst car on the squad. She jingled the keys in her jacket pocket. “We’ll take my Bureau car.”

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Thank you!