

EXCERPT- FOSTER JUSTICE (TEXAS RANGER SERIES)

Around eleven that night, music pounded in Chad's ears so loudly he could pretend, at least to himself, he wasn't aroused. Sure, his thumping heartbeat, as the red haired dancer gyrated around the pole, echoed the primitive drum beat.

Great rhythm. And while he was at it, he could explain that flagpole in his britches as a patriotic salute.

Damn you Trey...He was too humiliated at his own reluctant arousal to get up and leave, even if he had that luxury, which he didn't. While he might be convinced those paintings in Kinnard's gallery were by Trey, they weren't signed—by design, perhaps? And Kinnard denied Trey being there, so Chad had no choice but to follow his only other lead. No need now to follow Corey's theory and go to the tattoo parlors because he only had to go down La Cienega Blvd. a ways to see that butterfly lit on a pole. So for the first time in his life, he'd entered a strip club.

At least now he knew why they called it Gentleman's Pleasure. She was a pleasure, all right. To look at, no doubt to smell, and touch. And feel.

He was glad for the long tablecloth and the dark corner, but he kept his face blank as he watched the show. Texas Rangers were good at sitting stony-faced pretending disinterest while they grilled their suspects. He wasn't sure if he was angrier with himself or this redhead who'd brought him halfway across the country. Still, his eyes just about popped out of his head as he remained glued to the stage.

She had seemed so classy when he met her earlier at the gallery, fully dressed, if a bit frosty. It was an all fired shame, as his granny would say, that a woman with the perfect features

of a Botticelli angel and the body of a Victoria's Secret model was just a no'count who danced naked for a living.

Well, almost naked.

She was down to a G string, a triangle with lacy ties on both sides and a thong up her butt, and a scrap of a bikini top. Imprinted with holographic butterflies that seemed to flutter with her every movement, it was more suggestive—made a man want to catch those butterflies in his hands--than nudity.

She was too beautiful to be a stripper, and she showed some real talent in the rhythm of her moves, but the mere fact she showed her wares off for a price meant to Chad she was capable of fraud, if not worse. She certainly had the right equipment to distract a man to death. At least he finally understood what had drawn Trey away from high sky Amarillo to smoggy Lost Angeles.

Fascinated--and getting more pissed off by the minute at his own arousal--he watched as The Butterfly crossed both endless legs around the pole. Supporting all her weight, which wasn't much despite her height, she leaned so far backward her long waves of deep auburn hair brushed the stage. Her arms moving Cleopatra style, her upper torso shimmied as she continued to bend further back until she was a bow of sheer sexual energy, flexed to fly free at a man's touch.

Her large breasts pointed provocatively at the ceiling, the nipples erect. Great boob job, he tried to tell himself scornfully, but his mouth was parched. He licked his lips, watching her lick hers, caught himself and turned tomato red under the weary gaze of a topless waitress.

Well, hell, that's what this was all about, wasn't it? Using a man's baser urges against him to make him part with his hard-earned dollars. Still, the self-lecture couldn't counteract what he saw and heard and, God help him, what he wanted to touch.

One of Trey's parting comments came back to torment him. How long had it been since he had a real date, anyway? He tried to remember, but Jasmine Routh made it hard for him to recall what his old girlfriends—either one of them--even looked like.

When would this torture end so he could go to her dressing room and question her?

He'd tried a background check on Jasmine Routh before he came here and found just about zilch. No criminal record, no marriage license on file. She owned one car, a sporty Acura, and lived in an apartment in West Hollywood near all the other weirdos.

That was it. Clean as a whistle. She came to work, she danced, she went home to a crappy one bedroom when, on the money she pulled in every week, she could afford her own house even at LA prices. As for the number of her boyfriends, well, her art obviously didn't stop when she was off stage, given the way she'd dangled that poor attorney panting over her at the gallery.

Shady ladies naturally made him suspicious, and now he'd seen her, every cop instinct he'd cultivated over the last fifteen years warned that even if she wasn't involved in the land fraud, she was somehow involved in Trey's disappearance. She was just too beautiful to trust.

Most damning, Jasmine Routh was the spitting image of the girl in that last oil Trey painted before he left Amarillo. Chad vividly recalled the tattoo on the slope of that perfect white breast swaying before him now. However, despite the abbreviated top, he couldn't see a tattoo. That tattoo was the only difference between Jasmine Routh and the portrait without a face. Same length and color of hair, white skin, full bosom, proud tilt of the head. Had to be the

same girl. Still, that pissant piece of fabric surely couldn't cover a butterfly tattoo, spread wings and all.

The held breath left his lungs in a whoosh as she pulled herself back up, still attached to the pole only with the strength of her legs, and reached supple arms behind her back to untie the bikini top. It fell, a puddle of sparkles and dreams, to the stage.

Under the brilliant lights, a small yellow and blue butterfly tattoo sparkled with glitter on the lower slope of that flawless right breast.

In his pocket, Chad crumpled the card in his hand, wishing it were her throat. He didn't know how, and he didn't know why, but this seductive bitch had somehow contributed to his brother's disappearance. She'd sure as shootin' lured him from Texas to California.

Distastefully, Chad watched her pick up the tens, twenties, even a few hundreds, littering the stage after her dance. She allowed a couple of the guys sitting near the stage to slip large bills into her garter. When he walked up and waved a twenty to add to the little elastic band, she backed a step, her brilliant smile fading. She crossed her arms over her bosom reflexively, as if embarrassed.

He would have liked her for that, if he believed her act. He folded the bill and set it at her feet. "I talk to you later?"

She hesitated, looking from his blank expression to the twenty, but when a stage hand brought her a robe, she wrapped it around herself, bent and picked up the twenty. Holding his eyes, she stuck one of those long legs outside the robe, folded it into her garter, and sashayed off stage. The swagger would have been perfect if she hadn't tripped on one too-high spike heel. Chad went over to a waitress and asked for the manager.

While he waited, Chad stared blindly at the stage. No matter what it took, if Trey was hurt or worse as he feared, no matter if he went to jail in the process, he'd personally take this deceitful, treacherous little bitch back to Texas so the people Trey had introduced her to could positively I.D. her.

He hadn't given up his badge and The Job he loved for nothing. He didn't care if he had to kidnap her, there would be no Californio style justice for the likes of her. Time for some Texas style retribution....

Jasmine closed the dressing room door and leaned against it. Even more drained than usual, she stared around her closet-like private dressing room, the only perk she insisted on as a headliner. The minute she walked off that stage, naked but for the G string and the robe, the vitality and sexuality she oozed on command dissipated with the lights. She was just tired.

Tired of being leered at. Tired of pretending to be something she wasn't, tired of hating herself. Tired of actively disliking men for leaving loving wives and lovers for these few hours to spend more money than they could afford on the lure of the forbidden. In her experience, most of the men who frequented strip clubs fell into three categories.

Some celebrated male identity for one night at least, running with the wolves, maintaining their atavistic male right to covet even if they couldn't touch. The other group was as lonely as she was, reaching for the only connection they knew how to offer women and fantasizing she was theirs, the mythical angel in the kitchen and whore in the bedroom.

The last group, well, they were the worst of all. The ones who made her skin crawl and made her glad of all the bouncers. They were the users who saw women as their personal playgrounds and never tarried long after playing.

Someday she'd write a book about all this, when she was married, with her Juris Doctor Degree, and had about five kids. She tied the dressing gown more tightly over her G-string, wishing she hadn't promised to fill in for a sick waitress so she could go home and study. She'd made over five hundred dollars tonight, even without Chad Foster's twenty.

A smile played about her lips as she recalled the look on his face as he stared up at her. He didn't like it, one bit, but he was as drawn to her as all the others. Jasmine suspected he'd never been in a strip club. Still, she hoped his promise to talk to her had been an empty threat as he was a Texas sized complication she didn't need. Thomas was right about this, as usual: whatever the conflict between Chad and Trey, it was between the two of them.

Or so she tried to tell herself. She glanced at her message light, but it wasn't blinking. She was worried sick about Trey. Why hadn't he called her back? It had been over a week since she left a message on his new cell phone with the California number. She knew he was busy getting ready for the art exhibit, but still...this was a cold, lonely place for people like Trey who looked at a refuse heap and saw only the wildflowers.

She touched up her makeup, staring at the tattoo she still wasn't used to. Maybe Mary had been right, and she should get rid of it. She stroked it with her fingertip. She already felt like she had the word 'whore' branded on her forehead given her job, and this flighty symbol of what she did, not who she was, didn't help. She resolved to have it removed like Mary suggested.

A knock came at the door. Herman, the club manager, peeked inside. "Jasmine, there's a former cop here who wants to ask you some questions."

"About what?" Jasmine touched up her lipstick but she knew the answer.

"He says a disappearance. Somebody he says you know may have been the subject of foul play."

She froze in capping the mascara.

The door shoved wide and someone big stepped through. She looked up, way up, at a hard face granite would envy. At her pleading look, the manager stepped inside too, closing the door. The ‘cop’ glared at him but Herman shrugged.

“Policy. Don’t allow my girls to be alone with anyone, even cops.”

Cop my Aunt Hattie, she thought. Even if she hadn’t met him at the gallery, she suspected she’d have recognized a Texas Ranger when she saw one. Because of her Dad, she knew what they went through to become one. They were the elite of the elite special forces in Texas. Known not just throughout the nation, but the world. Jasmine had never understood the mythological sway things Texan held over so many people. This living example of the still vibrant west was in reality only a brass balled asshole who’d been surrogate father to his much younger brother. Who made Trey so miserable he’d pulled up stakes and moved to Los Angeles partly to get away from the jury, judge and executioner eyeing the world from wintry gray eyes.

Chad opened his mouth, looked at the way she crossed her arms over her bosom, closed his mouth. Then he took a long, deep breath, closing his eyes as if to steady himself. She saw how long and dark his lashes were, almost feminine, like Trey’s. She would have sworn he whispered something that sounded like “pat—ience,” to himself.

He ran his hand around the back of his neck, as if the hair curling about his shirt collar bothered him. And only when that six feet plus of male pride exhibited a little boy charm was her anger disarmed.

Something intrinsically feminine in her she normally quashed surged in response to his intensity. Her nipples hardened. It had been a long time since she was attracted to a man and

the self protective surge was automatic, especially as the true import of this meeting hit her past his sheer physical presence.

If he'd left the high skies for the smoggy ones, he had a damn good reason. He obviously viewed strippers and LA in general as populated by low lifes so he hadn't come by choice. He'd come because he was worried about Trey...Jasmine felt her robe gap open as she waved him to an adjacent bench. His eyes glued to her tattoo and stayed there. It hit her then—Chad had mistaken her for Mary. Both tall redheads with identical tattoos.

Chad's voice was soft, almost respectful. "I saw you in the gallery today. You looked—different."

She eyed his clean clothes and shining dark hair. "So did you. You clean up well. Did you bring your horse?"

"Yeah."

"I used to have a horse. A long time ago. I miss him."

Chad's head tilted as if he couldn't quite compute her owning a horse.

She'd been about to make an off hand comment indicating yes, she knew Trey but hadn't heard from him in over a week, the truth, but she didn't like the way he apparently thought she was lying to impress him. He slapped that worn Stetson against his thigh, veiling his silvery gray eyes, but contempt behind the empty smile hit Jasmine like a slap to her flushed face.

More importantly, it made her mad.

He wanted her, but he didn't like it that he wanted her. He was classic type three, a typical macho redneck who had one use for women. She wondered if he wore spurs to bed. She glanced down at the front of his tight jeans at the tell tale bulge, telling him wordlessly that his mind might find her repulsive but his body sure as heck didn't.

He needed an attitude adjustment.

Pretending indifference, she turned a shoulder on him. She made her voice coarse.

“What can I help ya with, mister?” She began adding shadow to her already accented eyes that were the luminous green color of aspen leaves in spring. So men told her. She saw plain old dishwater green.

“I’m trying to reconstruct the movements of a young man who just moved to Los Angeles,” Chad replied. “An artist, with an opening of his work scheduled at that gallery in Beverly Hills I saw you in earlier. Trey Foster.”

Slowly, Jasmine put down the mascara tube and met the Texan’s eyes in the mirror.

“Why have you come to me?”

“I have reason to believe he...knows you.”

And I know you, too.. It wasn’t her duty to tell him a thing, especially as Trey obviously didn’t want him to know where he was. She went back to applying her mascara. “I might have met him a time or two, but I have no idea where he is.” Partially true. She knew where he was moving, in with Mary when Mary returned from her mysterious business trip, but at this precise moment she didn’t know where Trey was either.

“Oh yeah? Bit strange isn’t it, since he came out here because of you.” He slapped a crumpled card before her.

She glanced from it to his hard eyes in the mirror. “So? Lots of men take my card.”

“I found it in Texas. That means he already had it on his last trip out here six months ago when he met a redhead. A redhead he wouldn’t talk about much because he knew I’d disapprove of her job.” He looked at her figure in the thin wrap, his lip curling. “Could be.”

Mary. He was talking about Mary. She'd pretended to be a dancer, too, when she met Trey. At Thomas's insistence, for a reason Jasmine still didn't understand.

While she had no idea why Trey would have had her card, much less leave it behind, this explained a lot. But she had no intention of setting this ball's to the wall SOB straight. It would be far more fun to lead him astray. For Trey.

For herself and for her momentary weakness. There was a reason why half the dancers she knew hated men, and she was looking at it. Strong, arrogant, handsome and a hypocrite big as Dallas, appropriately enough in his case.

She tilted her head to the side as she studied him. And then she gave that slow, sensual, bedroom smile she'd perfected on stage. "Oh, I think you like me more than you'll admit. I have many...dimensions."

"Yeah, I can see 'em." He slapped his hat back on his head. "Honey, I wouldn't take it if you were giving it away free."

The legal training had aided her natural bent to hold her cards close. Her smile actually sparkled under the lights. "Shall we put it to the test?"

His eyes narrowed under the thick lashes. "Oh, I forget. This is the part where you do your lap dances to make the really big bucks. Thanks, but no thanks. Besides, I tipped you twenty bucks already."

What a jerk. She'd been about to tell him she didn't do lap dances any more, but now she gave him that little sexy north-south appraisal designed to tickle men right below the belt. And based on the way he shifted his weight from hip to hip, as if his pants felt too tight, it worked whether he liked it or not.

Jasmine said softly, "Tell you what, you follow the rules and avoid touching me and I won't even charge you my usual going rate."

"How much is that?"

"Two hundred bucks."

He almost flinched, but his hard gray eyes delved into hers. "Tell you what, if I don't touch you, you answer two questions for me. Straight on. In more than one syllable."

"You're on, Mr. Policeman."