

THIRTEEN HOURS

by
Meghan O'Brien



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HOOR ZERO

At approximately seven o'clock on the evening of her twenty-eighth birthday, during an otherwise uneventful Friday night at the office, Dana Watts was confronted by the most perfect pair of naked female breasts she had ever seen. Given that her real-life exposure to naked female breasts had, until that moment, been limited to the odd glance in the locker room at the gym and, when she was twelve years old, a rather uncomfortable glimpse of her grandmother dressing in her bedroom with the door ajar, this was perhaps not saying a lot.

The breasts in question were attached to a half-naked stripper who landed on her lap and began gyrating in time with some godawful, bass-heavy music that blasted from an iPod now sitting on Dana's desk. Unable to move with the woman's weight across her thighs, uncertain about what to do with her hands, Dana could only sit and stare at the rosy-tipped breasts that swayed in front of her face.

They were perfect, and for a crazy moment she forgot about the proposal she was supposed to be drafting and considered reaching up to cup them in her hands. But Dana wasn't the irresponsible type, and she certainly wasn't the kind of woman who went around feeling up strippers. Humiliated by her impulse, she felt hot anger surge through her body. Her proposal was far more important than whatever cheap thrill this woman thought she was offering.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Dana snapped. "Stand up and turn off that music. Now."

The dark-haired stripper grinned, rocking against her body. "I'm your birthday present." She reached down and grasped Dana's hand,

bringing it up to rest on one of her perfect breasts. "Enjoy me," she whispered hotly in her ear.

Dana's fingers curled automatically at the sensation of an erect nipple poking into the center of her palm. Exhaling through her nose, she repeated, "Turn off the music. Don't make me ask you again."

The stripper stared at her, still straddling her thighs. She raised an elegant eyebrow. "You don't seem totally disinterested."

Dana willed her face not to color in embarrassment. "Just get off my lap. Put your shirt on, for God's sake."

Her tone was harsher than she'd intended. Being so close to so much bare skin made her anxious, and she was determined to show control. Someone was responsible for this, some idiot coworker who would live to regret this stunt.

Thankfully, the stripper seemed to understand she wasn't kidding. She stood and backed away from the chair. As she bent to fish her T-shirt from the backpack she'd dropped on the floor, Dana tried not to let her gaze stray to the woman's bottom. She failed miserably.

The stripper grinned over her shoulder as she straightened up. "See something you like?"

"I'm just wondering how you made it in here without getting arrested for solicitation," Dana shot back as her unwelcome visitor pulled on a form-fitting T-shirt and torn, low-slung blue jeans. "You certainly look the part. Is the trashy outfit a stripper thing or just your own personal preference?"

In truth, the young woman looked lovely. The barest hint of black panties rose above the waistband of her jeans. In her hand was the lacy black bra she'd cast aside when she dropped onto Dana's lap. Her nipples strained against the cotton of her T-shirt.

"Scott was right," said the envoy from Slut City. "You do need to loosen up."

And suddenly it all makes sense. "Scott put you up to this," Dana said without humor. "Of course."

"Of course. But he didn't warn me you'd be such a bitch. What's your problem? Are you scared of naked women or something?"

Dana regarded the woman coolly. "Maybe I'm scared of what I might catch with you squirming around on my lap like that."

The stripper's eyes flashed. "Fuck you. I'm leaving. Happy

birthday, and go to hell.” She snatched up her iPod from Dana’s desk, shouldered her backpack, and half turned to stalk out of the office.

Dana stood up and grabbed her by the elbow. “I’ll escort you out.” She wasn’t about to let a total stranger, an interloper in her domain, wander the hallways alone. *Then I’ll call Scott and bitch at him for ruining a perfectly productive evening with his stupid little stunt.*

The woman pulled away, eyes burning. “Don’t bother. I found my way in, so I’m sure I can manage to find my way out.”

“It wasn’t an offer,” Dana said. “I’m taking you downstairs. I don’t know how you managed to get into the building after hours, but you shouldn’t even be here.”

As she marched the stripper across the room, the woman complained, “You’re a lot of fun. What’s got you so uptight? Wait, let me guess—you haven’t gotten laid in about five years?”

Dana didn’t rise to the baiting, taking giant strides to the elevator down the hall from her office. The lights were dimmed in the hallway, a testament to her solitude in the building. Everyone else had left much earlier to begin their weekends at home. To Dana, home was intolerably boring compared to work. There was nowhere she would rather be than right here, at Boynton Software Solutions, indulging herself in her passion. Project management.

She stopped in front of the elevator and jabbed at the call button.

Incredibly, the stripper hadn’t given up. Bumping Dana with a playful shoulder, she said, “If I gave you a pity fuck, do you think you could manage a smile?”

“Getting laid isn’t as high a priority for me as it apparently is for you,” Dana said. “What makes me happy is having a great job. You know, like the one you interrupted me doing tonight.”

“Yeah, it looked fascinating.”

Dana ignored the sarcastic comeback and stared up at the display. How long did it take for the car to crawl from the lobby to the twenty-ninth floor? Was it incredibly slow tonight, or was she just incredibly angry? Indulging herself in some tit for tat, she remarked, “I wouldn’t expect a girl who takes off her clothes for money to understand the pleasure that comes from being successful.”

“And I wouldn’t expect a cold bitch like you to understand what’s really important in life.”

Dana snorted. "What? Having some cheap stripper shake her tits in my face?"

The elevator doors slid open in time to avoid further conversation. Dana stepped inside, dragging the woman with her, and pressed the button for the lobby.

As the doors slid shut in front of them, the stripper muttered, "You looked like you were enjoying my tits until you remembered that you might be stripped of your Ice Queen title."

Dana spun her head around, a denial on her lips, when the lights flickered and then blinked out, and the elevator shuddered to a halt. The sudden motion threw them both forward a step, and Dana brought her arms around the other woman instinctively, preventing her from tumbling to the ground. For a moment, the elevator was pitch black, then the dim emergency lights activated and flooded the car with gentle light. After a beat, they both looked at the elevator door and the rows of buttons next to it.

The woman in Dana's arms stared up at her with wide blue eyes. "No way," she whispered.

Shocked into action, Dana released her and took a step toward the door. She shook her head. "Everything's fine. We'll just push the emergency button." She examined the controls, searching for the one that would get them out of their unlikely prison the fastest.

"Are we...stuck in here?"

Dana shook her head. "No. There is no way I'm getting stuck in an elevator with a goddamn stripper when I'm in the middle of my goddamn proposal."

"Your proposal?" The stripper looked incredulous. "You're trapped in an elevator on your birthday, on Friday night, and you're worried about a proposal?"

Dana chewed on her lip, pushing each button on the panel in succession. None lit up, and none seemed to trigger an emergency fail-safe. "It's an important proposal."

"Oh, man. Stuck in an elevator, and it has to be with the most boring woman alive."

Having tried the last button, Dana slammed the heel of her hand against the elevator door. "Fuck! We can't actually be stuck in this thing."

"Someone will notice us, right? They'll get us out of here."

“Eventually, but everyone’s already gone for the weekend.” Dana couldn’t believe she’d stepped away from her desk without her cell phone. They were probably going to be incarcerated here until Rocky, the security guard, arrived at seven or eight tomorrow morning.

“Eventually?” the stripper screeched. “No *fucking* way I’m going to sit in this elevator all night. With *you*.”

Dana winced at the shrill put-down. “You think I’m happy? This never would have happened if you hadn’t bothered me with your stupid lap dance—”

“Hey, I was just doing my *job*,” the girl retorted. “You know, the one *your* friend hired me to do? If you’re pissed off, take it out on him. Not me.” She moved as far away from Dana as she could, facing the back of the elevator car and folding her arms across her chest. “Although I understand why he thought you needed it. You’re just a barrel of laughs.”

“Just great,” Dana whispered to herself. “What a perfect birthday present. A bitchy little stripper all my own for the night. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay Scott for this one.” Castration was a first thought, but she was open to more elaborate punishments.

“Wonderful,” her angry companion muttered. “Fucking great.”

“Exactly my thought,” Dana said.

They stared at one another for a moment in perfect agreement. Dana assumed it would be one of very few such moments of accord.

HOOR ONE—7:00 P.M.

Her name was Laurel.
“Yes, imagine that,” she said after revealing this fact. “Strippers have names...kind of like real people.”

Dana produced a humorless smile, finally looking over to her companion. The young woman sat with her knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around her legs. She regarded Dana with stormy blue eyes.

“Listen, if we’re going to be stuck in here together, do you think you could manage just a little bit of civility?”

“Let’s make a deal, *Laurel*.” Pretty name. It matched the pretty breasts. Frowning at her line of thought, Dana quickly continued, “You sit quietly on your side of this elevator and I’ll do the same on mine. If we can manage that, I think we’ll get along just fine.”

Laurel eyed her with obvious disdain. “Seriously, what’s your problem? I’m willing to start over if you are. Being trapped in here doesn’t have to be as completely miserable as you seem to be determined to make it.”

Tired of arguing—with a goddamn stripper—Dana didn’t respond to the quiet words. The last thing she wanted to do was make nice with a woman Scott had hired for the express purpose of making a statement about her life. From the moment the surprise birthday humiliation burst into her office and filled the sterile room with music and intoxicating perfume, Dana had felt vulnerable and exposed. Being trapped in a small space with her seemed a particularly cruel punishment.

She raised her eyes to the dim emergency lights that illuminated

the elevator car. Dared she hope she'd saved her document recently enough that this power outage hadn't wiped out hours of work? Leaning her head against the wall, she started piecing her proposal back together in her head. She was startled when Laurel spoke again.

"My cat Isis is going to kill me," she informed Dana. "I promised we were going to have bathtime tonight. She likes sitting on the edge of the tub and putting her nose in the bubbles. It usually irritates me, especially when she sneezes, but right now I'd give anything for bathtime."

Dana felt her lips twitching and tamped the reaction down fast. The mention of "bathtime" elicited images that made her frown. She wasn't going *there*. "Well, I'm sorry you're stuck with me instead."

Laurel's mouth stretched into a slow smile. Her white teeth and full pink lips distracted Dana so completely she forgot to maintain her cool disinterest. Despite herself, she returned the warm look. Then, just as quickly, she forced her mind back to her proposal, the one she'd lost because Scott decided to send Laurel-the-perfectly-breasted careening into her evening. Her dark mood returned, and with it, her desire to draw blood. Her eyes dropped to Laurel's hard nipples, outlined by the thin cotton of her T-shirt. The bra that was supposed to shield these distractions was still in Laurel's hand.

"Would you mind putting your bra on?" Dana asked in a rough voice. Flustered, she added, "I feel like I'm being stared at with those things pointing at me."

Laurel stretched out her legs and cocked her head. Suppressing what looked to be a smile of grand amusement, she said, "Whatever makes you happy, Dana." With that, she shuffled away from the wall and pulled her T-shirt off.

For the second time that night, Dana found herself trying hard not to stare goggle-eyed at the woman's bare breasts. Startled, she whipped her head around so that she wouldn't cave in to temptation. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Putting my bra back on, as requested." There was a smirk in her voice. "You're scared of naked women, aren't you?"

Dana glanced over to Laurel, trying hard not to flinch at the sight of her in the lacy black bra. Her breasts looked no less spectacular than they had while bare.

"I'm not 'scared' of naked women," she retorted in a remarkably

even voice. "I imagine I'd have a hard time looking in the mirror every morning if I were."

Laurel moved her eyes over Dana in a leisurely appraisal. "For the record, I imagine very few people would have a hard time looking at you in the mirror every morning."

Why the hell would she say that? After a moment of internal debate, Dana voiced her suspicion. "Did Scott hire you to have sex with me?"

Blinking hard, Laurel said, "No." Quickly, and with visibly shaking hands, she pulled her shirt over her head and tugged it down over her torso. "I'm not a goddamn prostitute."

Dana gave a casual shrug. "Sorry to offend. I guess I couldn't tell for sure."

Laurel moved back to her spot against the wall. "You're right," she said in a flat voice. "Why don't we just sit quietly and wait to be rescued?"

Mission accomplished. Dana wondered why she felt so shitty about her personal attack. She stared distractedly at the numbered rows of buttons on the panel next to the elevator door. The woman was a stripper, for Christ's sake. She got naked for money. Where did she get off acting offended about anyone's assumption that she might do even more than that for a paycheck?

Dana was able to stay silent for roughly five minutes before the guilt overwhelmed her. "Look, I'm sorry. Okay, Laurel? I'm sorry."

Laurel shrugged. "For what?"

"For assuming that you might have sex for money. That was wrong, and I'm sorry I offended you." When there was no response, Dana released an explosive sigh. "You know, when you do stuff like put someone's hand on your breast—"

"I was trying to get you to loosen up." Laurel swung her cold gaze over to Dana. "You looked like you wanted to eat me alive but had no idea how to even start."

"I did not," Dana responded. "I was just wondering what the hell you were doing in my lap. I was too shocked to even react at first."

"Well, I'm sorry if I offended you. In fact, I'm sorry I ever took this stupid job." Laurel swiped the back of her hand over her cheek, sniffing.

Dana felt her stomach drop. "Are you crying?" She swallowed

against the lump of pure dread that was lodged in her throat. "Please don't tell me you're about to start crying."

"I'm not crying," Laurel responded, a little too quickly. She brushed the back of her hand over her eyes again, straightening up where she sat slumped against the wall. "I'm just great. Trapped in an elevator on a Friday night with nothing to do but get called a whore by a woman who can't stand me...nowhere near the cat, the book, and the bathtub I was dreaming about enjoying tonight. Why wouldn't I be just fucking fantastic?"

This pronouncement left Dana feeling, all of a sudden, like the biggest asshole on the planet. Great, she thought, running her fingers through her hair. Just great. At a loss, she tried hard to pry her foot from her mouth.

"I'm sorry, Laurel. Really." She tried to explain what had incited her cutting remark. "I just didn't know why you said what you did... you know, about looking at me in the mirror."

Laurel gazed at her for several seconds not saying a word. Finally, she murmured, "I said it because you're a physically attractive woman." She paused. "Despite your wholly unattractive personality."

Dana felt the quiet comment like a punch to the chest. "Oh." She didn't know what else to say. She looked down at her hands. *I love this girl. Forty-six minutes with her and I realize I'm the biggest jerk alive.*

"You're forgiven," Laurel said.

Tears of frustration pricked at Dana's eyes and she lowered her head to hide them from her companion. She wasn't the kind of woman who buckled under pressure.

She thought they weren't talking again until Laurel said, "You really thought your friend would pay someone to have sex with you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't seem the type to appreciate a gesture like that."

Dana looked up. "I'm not."

"Then why would a friend do something like that for you?" Laurel appeared to have a genuine interest in the answer, and Dana could detect no malice in her eyes.

She was briefly tempted to explore that question, but it had already been a long day. "I don't know," she said. "A guy thing, maybe."

Laurel nodded as if accepting this thin rationale. "Well, it's your

birthday.” With a smile, she asked, “Wasn’t it a good day? I mean, other than the...strip-o-gram.”

“No better than any other. I came, I worked, I got stuck in an elevator with a half-naked woman who makes me feel like an asshole.”

“If you feel like an asshole, I’m sorry.” Laurel seemed to be struck by a thought, her gaze sharpening. “Is this whole getting-stuck-in-an-elevator thing going to fuck up some big plans later tonight?”

Dana thought again of her proposal and sighed. The “urgent” project was supposed to keep her from thinking too much about her solitary, boring birthday. A strategy Laurel and Scott had very ably ruined.

“No,” she murmured. “No big plans. I was thinking about maybe catching a movie tomorrow, but I’m going to have to re-create the proposal that got interrupted.”

“What do you mean, re-create it?”

Dana raised her arm and gave an irritated wave at the emergency lights. “Power outage. I’m sure I hadn’t saved the file in quite some time, *if* my computer even survives the whole thing.”

“Oh,” Laurel said. “Well, it’s not really my fault, you know. But... I hope you don’t have to redo everything.” She waited for Dana to respond, and when she didn’t, she asked, “What kind of proposal is it?”

Dana struggled to figure out how to make the task sound as important as she suggested. “It’s for a software development project,” she said. “We want to sell our client some additional functionality to a piece of custom software we wrote for them. I want to get it e-mailed by Monday morning.”

Laurel blinked. “You write software?”

“No.” Dana chuckled and shook her head. “I manage the programmers who write the software. They make the application work, and I make them work.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, a lot.”

“It sounds a little...boring. No offense, just not my thing.”

Dana felt immediately defensive. “It’s a good job. It challenges me.” Unable to resist, she added, “Don’t tell me you can say that about your career.”

Laurel maintained a polite smile. “It’s not my career, not that it’s

any of your business. And I guess the best thing about my job is all the great people I meet.” She shot Dana a meaningful smirk. “Like you.”

“And the opportunity to make money without relying on any real skill,” Dana sniped back. God, why did she find it so easy to get into it with this woman? “Coasting through life, courtesy of your perfect breasts.”

Laurel tilted her head to the side. “You think they’re perfect?”

Dana blushed hard and sought to retract her careless revelation. “To tell you the truth, I really didn’t pay much attention.”

Laurel laughed out loud. “Uh-huh. That’s why I still have scorch marks on my skin from where your eyes were burning into me.”

“You’re imagining things.” Dana scowled.

“If you say so.”

Refusing to admit to her intense fascination with the stripper’s chest, Dana decided to pull out the big guns. “I’m not a lesbian.”

Laurel’s smile gave way to a look of shock. “What?”

Shifting in discomfort at Laurel’s obvious surprise, Dana repeated, “I’m not a lesbian. Your breasts are irrelevant to me.”

“Huh.” Laurel frowned. “So why the hell did Scott hire me to dance for you?”

“Trust me,” Dana said, “I plan on asking him that very question first thing tomorrow morning. As soon as we get out of here.”

“So, do you have a boyfriend?” Laurel asked in a careful voice.

“No.” Dana didn’t elaborate. Eager to shift the attention away from herself, she asked, “Do you?”

Laurel broke into a wide grin, showing Dana her white teeth. “No. I *am* a lesbian.”

Dana’s throat went dry. “Oh.” How was she constantly left speechless by this woman?

“Does that bother you?” Laurel asked.

Something in her knowing smile rankled Dana. She thought hard before answering, torn between revealing her turbulent emotions and keeping the peace. “No more than anything else about you bothers me.”

Laurel snickered. “Don’t worry, I won’t hold your sexuality against you, either.”

“I appreciate that.” Dana managed a half-smile.

“See?” Laurel murmured. “I told you I wasn’t such a bad conversationalist.”

Dana tipped her head in acknowledgment. “Better than sitting in here in complete silence all night long, that’s for sure.”

“You never know. By tomorrow morning, we might actually be friends.”

Dana rolled her eyes. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. It’s going to be a long night. Anything could happen.”

At that, Laurel folded her arms over her stomach, hugging her body. Her expression seemed almost hopeful, and a little shy. “You’re right. Absolutely anything could happen.”

Dana could only wonder what the next twelve hours would bring. Hopefully no more tears.