



Wildest Dreams Preview

It was only by chance that she sat before a mirror as she rolled the silk stocking up her leg. She saw herself in the glass, wearing only the stocking and a pair of satin, cream-colored panties.

"Get a thong," Melody had instructed her. "It'll make you feel sexier."

Stephanie had ignored that part. She hadn't particularly *wanted* to feel sexy.

But as the second stocking whispered up the smooth skin of her calf, thigh, the lace top resting only a couple of inches from her crotch, a hint of titillation rose there, unbidden.

"It takes more than a pretty dress," Melody had said. "You have to *feel* it. *Sell* it. You have to *be* it, or you'll never fool anybody."

Sell it. Those were the two words she'd plucked from Melody's advice. If Stephanie was adept at anything, it was selling. Products. Pitches. This was a little different, of course. No, a lot different. But that didn't mean she couldn't pull it off.

She glanced back at the cheval mirror in the corner of her room. She'd never seen herself look so purely sexual.

Getting to her feet, she stepped into the creamy cocktail dress, sliding her arms through spaghetti-thin shoulder straps, reaching behind to the zipper. The fabric pulled close, again sending an unexpected tendril of awareness through her body. Awareness of self, of her own sensuality.

Strange, the journeys life led a person on - strange what someone could make themselves do for love. If anyone who knew her could see her now - sexy dress, strappy shoes, about to plunge into a decadent city's underworld - they wouldn't believe it. She could hardly believe it herself.

Fastening a bracelet, she glanced to the bedside clock. Ten-thirty. "Plan to arrive just before eleven," Melody had said. "That's prime time at the hunt."

A fresh shot of trepidation whirred through her. *Wait a few minutes and maybe you can convince yourself it's too late, past prime time. You can take off this silly dress, put on pajamas, and watch TV or read a book.*

Only problem was, if she didn't go tonight, she'd have to go tomorrow night, or the next night, and every night she talked herself out of it was another night Tina was missing.

Letting out a sigh, she took one last look in the mirror. She didn't even recognize herself.

Maybe that was a good thing.

Half an hour later, a cab pulled to a stop on an ancient, narrow street, delivering her to her destination. She felt sinfully beautiful. She felt naked. She wished she were anywhere else.

"Chez Sophia," the driver said.

She handed the polite middle-aged man a ten over the seat. "Keep the change."

Stepping out into the sultry night, she watched the taxi dart away and battled a brief second of feeling too alone. Put her in front of a roomful of hard-nosed CEOs in a sharply-cut suit and she was a confident, eloquent woman, in perfect control of everything around her. The stark opposition of where she was - *who* she was - tonight, struck once more.

Yet she'd come too far to turn back, so she took a deep breath and turned toward Chez Sophia, staring up at elegant fern-hung balconies, all curving wrought iron and grace. That quickly, the aura of the place began to surround her, the sensation nearly as cloying as the sticky air.

Moving toward the front entrance in heels that clicked on the sidewalk with each stride, she subtly tugged upward on the bodice of her low cut dress in some last-minute stab at self-preservation.

But no. She wasn't here to be herself. All her suits were at home. She'd come to be someone else - someone she could never really be. Biting her lip, she gently pulled the clingy fabric back down, maximizing her cleavage. *Feel beautiful. Not naked.*

"Good evening, miss. Welcome to Chez Sophia." The twenty-something doorman wore a white shirt, red vest, black tie.

She manufactured a smile. *Sell it.* "Thank you."

He motioned toward the interior of the grand saloon, abuzz with people drinking, smoking, laughing. A Dixieland trio played in one corner, the large bass briefly drawing her eye. "Our high-tech dance club is straight down the hallway, the Zydeco Lounge is to the right, and -"

"I'm here for the private party." That's what Melody had told her to say.

The doorman's eyes changed. To disappointment? Lust? Surely she was thinking too much. Either way, his gaze dropped boldly to her cleavage before he brought it back to her face. That's all she was tonight - cleavage, curves.

"Through the doorway past the stairwell," he said.

"Thank you." But she could no longer meet his eyes. *Damn it, you're supposed to be selling it.*

As she walked farther into the club, she decided now would be a good time to start doing just that. *If all you are is cleavage and curves, sell that. Feel it. Be it. Like Melody said. Just for tonight.* Everything depended on it.

Men watched as she passed, clearly thinking her a different sort of woman than she was, even without the knowledge of the "private party" she'd come for, and again the juncture of her thighs suffered a slight tingle. Strange, maybe even shameful, to feel that *now*, yet as she was drawn more deeply into the place, she understood Melody's advice. You couldn't do this halfway. If she were to pull it off, she *had* to let herself feel every forbidden bit of it. So as she exited the door

past the stairwell, she attempted to relish the fresh sensitivity in her breasts, to embrace the soft, slight throb between her thighs.

A large, dark-skinned man wearing a familiar red vest and black tie waited outside the door. "Private party?"

"Yes." She'd turned the one simple word silky, sexy. Practice.

"All the way to the top." He pointed up a wooden stairway painted white. Old brick walls surrounded the steps on all sides, and as she ascended, she realized she was outside again, in an enclosed courtyard. It seemed as if she were traveling a maze to reach the soiree tucked deeply within Chez Sophia - but she supposed that made sense. A thin line of perspiration trickled between her breasts.

Four half-flights of stairs later, she found another doorman, this one young, blond. "Welcome to Sophia's private party." He held the door open with a ready smile.

A wild sense of nervousness barreled down through her chest as the reality of what she was about to do struck her full force. But as she entered the room through red velvet curtains drawn back by gold cord, she struggled again to condense her feelings to the sensual, the sexual - nothing more.

The scene before her was awash in elegance, from the crystal chandeliers to the gentle clink of wine glasses to the soft jazz permeating the air. Men in well-tailored suits stood chatting with beautiful women in cocktail dresses, some shimmering with sequins and beads. Others sat on the plush couches and graceful divans that sprinkled the space in bold splashes of scarlet, amethyst, cobalt.

That's when it hit her. *She could do this.* Outwardly, the crowd didn't appear unlike those in *her* world. This was just another cocktail party. The only difference was that instead of selling an ad campaign, tonight she was selling *herself*.

She scanned the crowd for Tina. Her heart sank when she didn't find her, but she hadn't expected it to be that simple anyway, and now she had to mingle, pretend, convince. She had to flirt. But she was horrible at flirting, so even if this was all about selling, something she *could* do, she needed a drink to bolster her courage.

Clutching her small sateen purse tightly, she made a beeline for the long, mahogany bar to one side of the luxurious room. A dark-haired guy stood behind the expanse of polished wood operating a blender, his back to her, as she climbed up onto a barstool. A moment later, he stopped the blender and turned. "What would you like?"

Her heart nearly stopped just from looking into his eyes. He was everything she'd never been attracted to. Rugged. Unshaven. Unabashedly sexual without even trying. Midnight black hair framed his strong face, along with the stubble of several days curving across his upper lip and chin. One wayward lock of hair dipped onto his forehead, drawing attention to deep, sensual brown eyes. Warm and chocolaty, a place to drown. A black t-shirt stretched across a muscular chest and broad shoulders, a hint of a tattoo peeking from beneath one sleeve. The forbidden sense of arousal already coursing through her veins deepened.

He cocked his head slightly. "Did you want a drink, *beb*?"

She finally caught her breath. "Um, yes. A Chardonnay, please."

As he reached for a stemmed glass, she dug in her purse, placing a twenty on the bar, all the while fighting her reaction to him. This wasn't her. She didn't *get* aroused by a guy on mere sight. Especially not one who looked so... dangerous.

When he lowered her wine to a square napkin, his eyes fell on the cash. "What's that for?"

She blinked. "The wine."

His narrowed gaze only added to the sensations between her thighs. "Ladies don't pay."

She softly pulled in her breath. "Oh. Right." His tone said she should have known that. She shoved the bill back into her purse, then reached for the glass, taking a large swallow.

"First time here?"

What sort of accent was that? Something slightly Cajun? "Um, yes." She nodded, softly, trying to quit feeling like a schoolgirl. Here she'd finally begun to think she could control this situation as efficiently as she controlled the rest of her life, and this darkly sexy man was already turning her soft and vulnerable, emotions equally as foreign as the sensuality currently pummeling her.

Time to take back control, to start doing what she'd come here for. And the bartender seemed like a good place to start.

Sell it, she reminded herself, reassuming her silky voice. "I was hoping to run into a friend of mine here. Maybe you know her. Tina Grant?"

His brows knit slightly, making her wonder what he found perplexing about the question. "Your friend in the escort business, too?"

She nodded.

He shook his head lightly. "No, *chere*, afraid the name doesn't ring a bell."

Strike one. Fortunately for her, she had more than three tries, but just like when she'd first entered the room, she'd simply hoped against hope that maybe she wouldn't have to look any further.

As she took another sip of wine, his slow smile blazed all through her, heating her skin with the same force as the sun breaking through the clouds on a hot summer day.

"What are you smiling at?" She forgot the silky voice, too curious to find out what prompted that wicked grin.

"Just thinkin' you probably been sittin' on that stool longer than anyone ever has."

She lowered her chin, confused. "Oh?"

"Girls don't come here to sit and have a quiet glass of wine, *chere*. They come to work. They don't usually waste time." He shifted his eyes to the crowded room behind her and her chest tightened. "Not that it's any of my business," he went on, "but it's after eleven. Place'll start clearin' out soon."

She opened her eyes wider. "So early?" Melody hadn't mentioned that.

He gave a soft laugh. "This isn't exactly the main event of the evenin', you know." Then he tilted his head, his warm eyes penetrating her defenses. "Your first time here, or your first time *period*?"

For some reason, she refused to let him think she was brand new at this. He already seemed to have the upper hand, and she didn't intend to let him keep it. "Just my first time here. And I'm not in a hurry."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. But I'd hate to see that pretty dress and hairdo go to waste."

The sentiment reminded her once more: she was cleavage and curves tonight.

In her world, how you looked was only one part of your identity; here, *everything* was about the business of flesh. "Maybe you're right." She slipped down from the stool and lifted her glass. "I should... get to work."

His expression softened, but his eyes still had the power to burn into her soul - or at least the spot between her legs. "Good luck, *chere*."

That escalating sensation - no longer just awareness or sensuality, now pure desire - persisted as she immersed herself into the crowd. She took another sip of wine and repeated her new mantra in her mind. *Sell it. Sell it.*

Although, admittedly, part of her remained back on the stool peering up at the bartender. What had come over her? *It's just the dress*, she told herself. *And the evening's quest*. That was the only reason her body had reacted so strongly to the guy.

Just as she wandered aimlessly through a sea of suits and slinky dresses, wondering what her next move should be, a man's hand fell warm on her shoulder. She hated his touch instantly, the clammy feel of his palm on her bare skin, but forced a smile.

"Hi there, honey. You new in town? Don't think I've seen you before." The pushing-fifty guy sported a deep southern accent and a beer belly beneath his expensive black suit. His graying hair looked unkempt, the style too long for a man his age.

Sell it. Unfortunately, it was much harder with him than with the bartender. "Um, yes, this is my first night here."

"That so? Why, I'd be more than happy to break ya in... so to speak." He winked. "I'm stayin' at the Fairmont. Real fancy place - we can get it on in style." He concluded with a laugh that made her stomach churn.

"I'm... sorry," she said, "but I'm already... spoken for. I'm meeting someone here. A pre-arranged date."

He looked crestfallen. "Well, I'm mighty sorry to hear that. But what say we get together another time real soon?"

She sighed. "Um... perhaps. I'm sure I'll bump into you again."

He flashed a leering grin. "That sounds damn good. I'll be lookin' forward to it."

As he was about to move off in search of greener pastures, she remembered her mission - and reached up to touch his sleeve. His lusty gaze beamed down on her. "Maybe you can help me with something. I was hoping to find a friend of mine here - she's fairly new in town, too. Her name is Tina -"

"I ain't much good with names, honey."

"She's blond, twenty-five, has a light complexion, and..." She trailed off, realizing she'd just described around a third of the women in the room.

Above her, the beer belly shook his head absently. "Sorry," he said, taking off into the crowd, clearly uninterested in helping her if she wasn't going to be in his bed tonight.

Jake Broussard popped a mint in his mouth and kept an eye on the blonde moving through the crowd. She was trying her damndest to look poised and relaxed, but something about her didn't ring true. Maybe she acted a little too sophisticated, or maybe her up-do was a little too severe, precise - not one pretty golden hair out of place. Not that he hadn't met plenty of working girls who pulled it off with class, but for some reason, he didn't quite buy Miss Chardonnay's claim of being a pro.

"Pour me another, Jake. And a second glass of wine for the lady."

He drew his gaze to Charles Winthrop, a married forty-something scotch on the rocks who came in every Thursday night for a little adultery. The lady on his arm this evening was Tiffany, a brunette Chablis who couldn't be a day over eighteen.

"Sure," Jake replied, scooping ice into a glass and reaching for Winthrop's favorite brand of scotch.

As he poured the drinks, Winthrop slid one hand from Tiffany's hip up to the side of her breast. "Drink up, honey, and we'll head to a hotel."

Winthrop handed Jake a twenty and said, "Keep the rest." A common statement from the men who climbed the steps to Sophia's secret third floor. They figured big tips bought Jake's discretion.

What they didn't know was that he didn't care. He didn't care that Winthrop was screwing around on his wife, and he didn't care that, at the moment, he was doing it with an obscenely young girl, likely younger than Winthrop's own daughters. Once upon a time, he *did* care - about people, about righting wrongs, about trying to fix things in his own little corner of the world. But those days were gone.

"Have a good evenin'," he murmured as the couple strolled away. He didn't mean it. But he didn't *not* mean it, either. He really didn't give a damn either way, so long as he earned his paycheck. That's what life was about for Jake the last two years - earning a paycheck, and sleeping.

The paycheck was easy - he worked at Chez Sophia a few nights a week, setting his own schedule. It didn't take too many hours behind this particular bar to make a decent living when you picked up hundred percent tips all night long. And as for the sleeping, it was getting better lately. He hadn't had a nightmare in a couple of months.

But the thought brought to mind the dream he'd had the other night. He couldn't ever recall a dream being so detailed, intense. So erotically raw. What the hell had that been about?

It's your dick complaining.

Probably. Couldn't blame it. The last time he'd had sex had been... too long ago. But every time a girl came on to him these days, he found himself bored, apathetic. He just wanted to look the other way. Wanted to go home and go to bed. Alone.

Of course, other than the girls at Sophia's, he didn't run into many. Because other than work, he stayed in. Lifted weights. Slept.

"This is no way to live," Tony had told him a few weeks ago when he'd shown up at Jake's place unexpected.

"You live your life, I'll live mine," he'd said. "I'm doin' fine."

Tony had nosed around, peeking in the near-empty fridge, spying the piles of dirty clothes in Jake's bedroom. "Yeah, right. Fine."

Jake knew he wasn't fine just as much as Tony knew it, but he only wanted to be left to himself, left free not to feel - *anything*.

Now he remembered that waking up from the dream had left him with a vague, nagging sense of guilt that had stuck around for hours. Damn, couldn't even outrun feelings in his sleep. Couldn't even dream about something as simple as sex without it getting complicated.

Wiping down the bar, he scanned the crowd for Miss Chardonnay again. She wove slowly through the well-dressed men and scantily-clad women, but seemed to be doing a lot more moving than stopping or talking. "Not gonna get picked up like that, *chere*," he mumbled.

Maybe she was a cop. He made a mental note to ask Tony if he knew anything about an undercover vice operation. But he didn't think things were quiet enough at the NOPD that they'd started actively pursuing misdemeanors. Not unless somebody knew for sure that other crimes were tied in. He knew Tony *suspected* they were, but since Tony didn't have enough to move forward, Jake doubted anyone else in the department did, either.

Or maybe she was a reporter, looking for a story. Prostitution was practically a tradition in the Big Easy, but the men who "shopped" here in the "high-priced hooker zone," as Tony called it, were often public figures, guys who expected discretion because they had a lot to lose. List their names in the newspaper and, well... he was sure that kind of expose' could garner any journalist some major attention. So that idea actually held a little water.

Either way, though, she was playing with fire. You didn't play games with men as rich and powerful as the ones who came to Sophia's third floor. If anyone else developed the same suspicions he had, things would get ugly real fast.

Not that he cared. He didn't.

She was a big girl - she surely knew what she was getting herself into.

He didn't care, but then... why did he keep watching her? Why did he give a damn why she was here? Since when did he even pay attention to the people who came to his bar? They were all drinks to him. Bloody Marys, whiskey sours, rum and Cokes. Merlots, Cabernets... and Chardonnays.

Over the next half hour, the lush interior of the room became more pronounced as the crowd thinned, pairing off for the evening and moving on to hotels or apartments. Once or twice, he saw the blonde talking - with other girls, a few men - and found himself wishing he could hear their conversations, since they would probably reveal to his practiced ear whether she was here looking to make money like a good little escort, or whether she'd come for something else.

"Just don't say anything to get yourself in trouble," he murmured as he studied her across the room conversing with Malcolm Unger, a prominent local attorney and a whiskey neat - and just one example of a guy who wouldn't like finding out he was flirting with someone who might be a reporter.

By 11:15, only a handful of customers dotted the velvet and brocade room. A drunk parish judge with an expensive hooker perched on each knee, and a group of young corporate types laughing and drinking with three girls. And Miss Chardonnay, who strolled swiftly past the bar, high color in her cheeks, breasts bouncing gently with each step.

"*Chere*," he said.

She looked up and, when their eyes met, stopped.

He held out one arm, motioning her closer.

Although she complied, wariness filled her gaze.

"Get yourself a date for the night?" He'd had to ask, couldn't help himself.

She pulled in her breath, looking affronted by the question. Nope, no way was she a working girl - they weren't that sensitive. "Dates" were their job. "Um... no, if it's any of your business."

Another dead giveaway. A woman who looked like that, in a room full of men seeking sex, and she hadn't found any takers? He tilted his head, let her see just a hint of suspicion. "I find it hard to believe a lovely lady like you didn't get an offer tonight."

She released a soft breath, looking nervous, but also determined. "I... made a few dates for *other* nights, if you must know."

Possible, but he still wasn't buying. The third floor was all about instant gratification. And damn if he knew why he gave a shit, but something just beneath her surface seemed so innocent that he had to press on.

Just this one last time, he promised himself. *Just this one last time, you can try to save somebody*. After that, it was back to working and sleeping and not caring.

"Listen, *chere*, you got anyplace to be right now?"

She blinked, looking uncertain, and gave her head a light shake.

"Good. Hang around a little while."

Her eyes widened. They were a soft, inviting shade of blue. "Why?"

He let the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. "Nothin' too terrible, *beb*. Just want to talk to you a minute. What do you say? Stick around while I close up the bar?" He motioned to the right. "There's a little room just around the corner. You can wait there."

Her gaze sparkled with hesitation, a hint of fear.

Did she think he was going to proposition her? If his suspicions were right, he'd probably just scared her shitless. Good, that was the point. "How about it?" he asked again. "Stay?"

Miss Chardonnay bit her lip, then slowly nodded.

To his surprise, he felt that nod tightening his groin. "Good, *chere*. See you soon."

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