

# **Set Loose**

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Emily Chase sat in a cramped waiting room somewhere off the highway in Las Vegas, listlessly paging through a year-old issue of *Newsweek*. She looked up when the grizzled old mechanic came in, wiping his brow like a surgeon with bad news for the waiting family.

“Your transmission’s gone,” he said without preamble.

“That’s more or less the worst news I could get, right?” she asked.

“Afraid so.”

“But it can be fixed? It’s not dead?”

“Sure, we can fix it, but I’ll need to order parts. It’s too late to get anything done today and then we got the weekend and Labor Day. We’re looking at next Thursday or Friday, and it’ll run you about two thousand dollars.”

Jesus. She’d been braced for something bad, but not that bad. She was already broke, so this would have to go on her last non-maxed out credit card, a thought that caused an instant stomachache. When was her downward slide going to end?

Even before her injury she wouldn’t have been able to afford this. Ballet looked glamorous from the seats but the pay was barely adequate, even for soloists like she’d been, and living in San Francisco wasn’t cheap. And she wasn’t even a dancer anymore, just an injured ex-dancer with no job, no prospects, and collection agencies calling her on a regular basis.

“Okay. Go ahead and fix it,” she said, wondering if she was making an enormous mistake.

“Want me to call you a cab?” he asked, and she nodded her head and thanked him, then went out to her car where she rummaged through her belongings, moving items into the two bags she’d take with her. She’d have to leave everything else there – pretty much everything she owned in the world– and hope no one took anything.

Maybe she should junk the car and fly to Boston, but she wasn’t ready to face her friends and family when she was still such a mess. A plane ride was too quick. She needed the process of driving and all those hours to ruminate. Besides, she’d still need a car when she got there. Either way she’d be spending money she didn’t have.

The cab arrived and she stared out the window as they drove, taking in the enormous restaurants, clubs and hotels on Las Vegas Boulevard. She’d never been here before, but she could tell the driver was taking her to the touristy part of the city. It didn’t look like what she’d imagined though because it was still full daylight, too hot for people to be out walking around. The sidewalks were almost deserted and the buildings looked tired instead of glitzy.

The taxi pulled to a stop in front of the Luxor hotel.

“I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to afford any of the hotels around here,” Emily said, leaning forward to talk to the driver. She had asked him to drop her off

someplace decent and affordable. The giant pyramid rising into the sky wasn't what she had in mind.

"Sure you can," he said, turning around to look at her. "These places are as cheap as a motel you'd find anywhere else. Especially the ones that have their own casinos, like this one. They figure it's better for you to have money in your pocket to gamble. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

Too tired to argue, she paid him and grabbed her bags. The heat hit her full force as she got out of the air-conditioned cab, her tank top and skirt sticking to her as she made for the entrance. She was miserable and expecting more disappointment, but the driver was right. Though the weekend rates were too steep for her, averaged together with the cheap weekday rates it would only cost her sixty dollars a night.

Her room was on the twenty-second floor, and when she stepped inside her jaw dropped. It was enormous, with a king-sized bed and sitting area done in royal blue and cream, and a huge bathroom with a sunken Jacuzzi tub. Maybe her week wouldn't be so terrible after all. Exhausted, she fell back on the bed and turned on the TV.

She didn't leave the hotel all weekend. It was over a hundred degrees outside, she had about a thousand channels for her viewing pleasure, and the hotel was like its own small city, complete with five different restaurants, a food court, plus a bunch of bars and nightclubs.

Not that she did much besides watch TV. Where most people would have been running around town, Emily lay in bed for hours, remote control in hand, catching up on all the shows and movies she'd never had the time to see.

Sunday night she was lying in bed in a t-shirt and underwear when her cell phone rang. Probably her mom calling to check in.

“Hello,” she said, her eyes still glued to “Say Yes to the Dress.” What was with these women, anyway?

“Emily?” It sounded like someone she ought to know, a friendly female voice, but she couldn't quite place it.

“Yes?”

The voice was suddenly all business. “I'm calling on behalf of Bank of America. As I believe you're aware, you are now ninety days delinquent in your payments to us. If you do not –”

Emily hung up the phone and sat there, breathing hard. The collection agency had always called her landline before. How had they gotten this number?

She couldn't seem to catch her breath. Lightheaded, she sat on the edge of the bed and folded over, letting her head hang between her knees. When she sat up again she stared at the phone like a snake had suddenly crawled into her bed.

What the hell she was going to do?

After the ballet company let her go, she'd had to live off her credit cards. But she'd stayed in San Francisco, desperately certain that her foot would recover and she'd prove everyone wrong. It had been foolish and delusional, and now she was paying for it.

If only she could go back and replay that one jump, that one bad landing, everything would be different. She'd be living the life she was supposed to have instead of this nightmare.

Once again she replayed it in her head – the sheer joy of soaring through the air ending with the unmistakable pop of her Achilles tendon rupturing, the sudden pain that dropped her to the floor.

Those few seconds of her life played over and over on a never-ending loop, one she couldn't change no matter how many times it ran.

She needed to get out.

Getting up she pulled the first thing she saw out of her bag. Then she stood and stared at the red strapless dress she used to wear to opening night galas. Fine, she'd wear this. She might as well look her best even if her life was crumbling around her.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror in her dress and heels, she pulled her long blond hair into a ponytail and dragged red lipstick across her mouth. She didn't look half bad. If no one looked her in the eye, they'd never know how desperate she was.

Once out on the sidewalk she stood there, looking around. The city definitely looked a lot better at night all lit up, and the heat was tolerable. She breathed deeply, turned left and started walking.

The Strip was a bit of a let down, just hotels and casinos, each one over-the-top in its own way. But she had no money to spare and wouldn't know how to gamble even if she did, so the casinos were out. That left eating, but she'd already had a cheap taco dinner from the hotel food court.

She stood uncertainly on the sidewalk a block or so from her hotel. Now that she was outside, the unfamiliar city felt unnerving, yet another unknowable thing in her life. Maybe instead of working so hard to feel better she should go back to her room, turn off the phone and numb her brain with more television.

Paralyzed by indecision, a trait she'd only recently developed, she stood rooted to the sidewalk for several minutes. Only gradually did she become aware of the stream of people heading into a nearby doorway. Looking up, she realized she was standing in front of the Pink Pussycat Gentleman's Club. A neon sign complete with sexy pink cat lured people in.

She'd never been in a strip club before. The idea of them had always both repelled and intrigued her. This one didn't look seedy though. It was right on the main drag and the people going in were well-dressed.

What the hell? She'd always been curious. Besides, she wanted to get out of her head. What better place to be distracted than here?



The twenty-dollar cover charge was steeper than she expected, but she paid it anyway, determined now. Moving along with the crowd, she looked around, trying to take it all in – the loud music, people yelling and catcalling. A smiling hostess in a black, body-hugging dress came up to her and asked if she wanted a table.

“Would it be all right if I just stand around and watch?”

“Sure, honey. You’re here alone?”

Emily nodded, hoping she didn’t look as lost as she felt. “Yes. This was kind of an impulsive visit.”

“Nothing wrong with that. We’re all about impulses here. I hope you see something you like,” she said, giving a wink before turning to a group of businessmen who’d just arrived.

Emily let out a sigh of relief at having passed the first trial. Now she needed a drink. Spotting the bar on the other side of the room, she slowly made her way through the crowd, all the while trying to convince herself she had no reason to feel uncomfortable. Which wasn’t easy considering the attention she was getting. There were more women than she would have expected if she’d given this any thought at all, but that wasn’t saying much. The audience was still overwhelmingly male, and they had no problem making their interest known with looks, smiles and requests to stop and talk. Emily smiled and kept moving.

Even after she made it to the bar it took a while to get her drink. The bartenders were all scantily clad women who seemed more inclined to wait on the men, but eventually she got her gin and tonic. Scoping the room out, she decided to watch

from the edge of the crowd, where she could see the action without being a part of it.

Several women, naked but for their thongs, were circulating among the tables and standing customers while another dancer was on stage stripping to the AC/DC song “You Shook Me,” her garters thick with bills. The stage extended out into the audience and had a pole at the end of it. Men filled the seats running along the edge, every one of them clutching money as they stared with rapt attention.

Emily watched just as raptly as the dancer moved to the pole where she swung around it with the precision of a gymnast. She had decent presence, worked the whole stage well and looked like she was having a good time.

*I could do that.*

The thought popped into Emily’s head, and once it did she couldn’t help but imagine herself up there. Which was crazy. No way could she really do that.

Could she?

Just as she was contemplating the idea, a stripper stopped at a table about ten feet in front of her, climbed onto a guy’s lap and started grinding on him. Emily stood there, feeling like a pervert for watching but unable to look away. It just seemed so...private. But even as her face heated in mortification, her body was humming with awareness. Her nipples were tight buds, her underwear damp, and her breath was coming fast and light.

The woman ground faster and faster, her long dark hair whipping around as the man stared at her with rapt attention. Then she slid off him and stood by while he slid a fifty-dollar bill into her thong.

Forget how turned on she was. Her head spun at the amount of money these women must make in one night. Even if she never did a lap dance, and she wasn't sure she could, a few weeks of this sort of cash and her most pressing problem would be solved.

Maybe this wasn't what she'd trained all those years for, but it was still dancing. She'd danced in front of audiences all around the world, audiences that expected perfection from every role she performed. She could dance anything. Surely she could play the part of a sexy stripper? All she had to do was stick around Vegas a little longer than she'd planned. She'd had to scrape to come up with September's rent for a room in an apartment in Boston, so it would be a shame not to be living in it, but at least she knew it would be waiting for her when she got there. Besides, this way she'd have money for October's rent as well.

As crazy as it sounded even in her head, the chance to make enough money to get out of debt and back on her feet was too good to pass up. Besides, she wasn't self-conscious about her body the way most women were. She'd spent too long thinking of it as her instrument, dressing around other dancers, both men and women, for years. Male partners and ballet masters and choreographers had been putting their hands on her all her life and it had never fazed her a bit.

Determined now, she headed back toward the entrance, figuring the hostess could advise her how to get an audition. She was so focused that at first she didn't hear

the drunk guy talking to her. By the time did hear him, he was standing right in front of her, blocking her way.

“Hey, sweetheart. You’re not leaving yet, are you?” he asked, his beer breath blowing in her face.

“I need to talk to someone.”

“You are talking to someone. Me,” he said, and then laughed like he’d said something incredibly clever.

“Excuse me, I really need to go.”

“I saw you watching the girls. Is that what you like?” he asked, as if she hadn’t spoken.

”I’d like to be left alone, actually,” Emily said, her temper flaring.

She needed to get away from this creep. Unfortunately, a group of guys started to push their way through just as she was trying to escape and she didn’t get anywhere.

“Come on, lighten up,” the creep said, reaching out and grabbing her arm.

Emily tried to pull away from him. “Look, I’m not interested.”

“Take it easy. All I want to do is talk,” he said, his grip tightening.

Now what was she supposed to do? Call for help? Hit him? This was crazy. Emily was looking around, wondering if she'd have to cause a scene, when a man pushed through the crowd and grabbed the creep's shoulder with an air of professional intimidation.

"That's it, buddy. You're out of here," he said.

"What? You can't do that. I'm here with a bunch of people."

"Then I guess you'd better say your goodbyes. You've got exactly thirty seconds. Starting now."

The creep shot the bouncer a malevolent look and hurried over to his friends, saying something while darting a glance backward. Then he was out the door. Emily let out the breath she'd been holding and turned to her rescuer, finally taking him in.

Oh my.

He was probably a couple of inches over six feet, like any respectable bouncer would be, but lean and hard rather than bulky. Native American, with nut-brown skin and straight black hair that slid across his high cheekbones and just brushed the nape of his neck. He was dressed like the other bouncers in dark pants and a white button-down shirt rolled to the elbows, and just the sight of his muscled forearms nearly sent her into a swoon.

His dark, thickly lashed eyes were focused on her.

“Thanks,” she said, her voice breathier than usual. “He really wasn’t taking no for an answer.”

“No thanks necessary. I love throwing guys like that out.” He looked at her curiously. “If you don’t mind my saying, you seem out of place here. Like you were looking for the opera or something.”

“What makes you say that?” Emily asked, irrationally annoyed. “I’m perfectly comfortable here. And I’m not the only woman who’s dressed up.”

“It’s not what you’re wearing, exactly,” he said, looking uncomfortable now, probably wishing he hadn’t said anything. “You carry yourself differently. Like maybe you ran away from the castle to see how the rabble live.”

Emily stared at him, not knowing what to say. God knew she was no princess. She was broke and jobless and didn’t even have a college degree since she went straight from high school into the Boston corps de ballet. But it just showed what good posture could do for a person. Or maybe all those years playing princesses on stage had rubbed off.

“I’m afraid not,” she finally said. “I’m just well-dressed rabble.”

This triggered a smile from him that sent unexpected heat into her cheeks and belly. Standing this close to him, she could tell how powerful his body was, his strength brought under control by what appeared to be a steely disposition. Was she imagining the flicker of interest in his eyes as he took her in so thoroughly?

The mood broke when he looked at something over her head. “Damn. I have to go.” He looked back down at her, his expression serious and thoughtful. “You have a good night. Give a shout if you get into any trouble,” he said, squeezing her arm before heading off.

Emily watched him make his way through the crowd and between tables to a customer who’d gotten too friendly during a lap dance. He leaned over and said a few words and the man’s hands fell away from the stripper’s breasts. Then he continued on, moving around the room, his gaze taking everything in.

Clearly he had his hands full rescuing damsels in distress.