

Empty Luck

A Mystery by
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EMPTY LUCK - Draft

CHAPTER 1

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Ricky was having the best lap dance of his life. True, he had not had that many but he knew this one was special. It was not only that she was younger than the other girls. He saw warmth in her sparkling brown eyes before she turned her back to him, sweeping her long dark hair across his face and then nestling her naked rear against his crotch. *She likes me*, he decided.

She did not have to tell him she was new at this. Her pleasure alone gave it away. With her back still to him, she stood up and raised one leg off the floor so that it rose straight up in the air and her two legs formed one long vertical line. Proud of her skill, she looked back at him and grinned. Then in one fluid move, she brought her leg down, turned and lowered herself, pressing a breast against his cheek in a soft circular motion.

She weaved her upper body like a cobra in time to the loud electronic music pulsing around them. He sat still with his legs spread wide and his hands at his sides. He knew he was not supposed to touch her, but the room was dark and he took a chance. He raised a hand to caress her breast. She allowed it. He moved his head a little and kissed the soft flesh.

After a few moments, she moved away slightly. He wanted to pull her back to him.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Tennessee. I just got here a couple of weeks ago.”

“Really? How old are you?”

“Oh, I’m seventeen. I mean eighteen. I just turned eighteen.”

Underage, he thought. Ricky graduated just one week ago from the Police Academy but at this moment, the new officer did not care a whit about legality. He was almost in love.

It was one o’clock in the afternoon. There were only a few other customers scattered about the Palace Club. Most of them, grim middle-aged men, sat in the center of the room before a round stage that was rimmed with flashing colored lights. Some of them stared down at their beers while others looked up at a topless dancer thrusting her hip at them and collecting dollar bills in a G-string.

Although bright lights illuminated the stage, it was velvety dark where Ricky sat on a vinyl banquette against the wall. He felt its slightly sticky surface and was glad he couldn’t see it clearly. He was feeling euphoric and was happy to give the young girl another twenty dollars as the song ended and another began.

Twenty feet away, halfway to the stage, the three men Ricky had come with sat at a small table

slowly nursing their drinks. Tommy, Ricky's older brother, and their friends Eric and Jared, were ready to leave. It had been Eric's idea to come to the club. Initially excited, he had selected a big-breasted, artificially enhanced woman with equally artificial blonde hair, but she had not let him touch her and he had no interest in trying another dance with anyone. "What a waste," he said. "I like 'em real, anyway."

A slender dark-skinned Latina approached their table. The other two men studiously ignored her, but Tommy finished his beer and stood up. She took his hand and walked him to an empty corner of the room, where he sat facing her. She quickly removed a gossamer camisole and tossed it on the seat beside him. She pressed herself to his chest, then turned and wriggled her rear vigorously against his crotch. She smelled of cigarette smoke and sweat and he found himself thinking instead about gambling, about poker. So he remained immobile and when the song ended, he quickly paid her and returned to his table. He shook his head as he finished his beer.

"Let's go," he said rapping his empty beer bottle hard on the table several times. The other two nodded. Peering through the murky haze that hung in the room, Tommy looked over at his brother. He tried to catch Ricky's eye and raised his bottle with a questioning shrug but Ricky was too intent on his dancer to notice the gesture.

This was their first full day in town, having flown in from Boston the night before for a one week vacation. The four men had come to the strip club early in the day because there were fewer patrons then and they believed the rules were less strict so they could touch the girls without management objecting. Once there, Jared had not wanted a lap dance at all. This was his first time and he came only because he was curious. He had looked at the dancers and the thought of paying one to rub her body against his repulsed him. And he would not drink alcohol so the expensive beverage before him was cranberry juice.

As the three waited for Ricky, they fended off women who continued to sashay up offering their own lap dances. The girls approached singly or in pairs, sat near their table or stood close by, each different, of different sizes, shapes and skin colors, but all were older than Ricky's girl. Each only made one pass and then sat as a group chatting in a nearby corner. They glanced over at the threesome from time to time in case the boys changed their minds.

When the second song ended, Ricky did not have enough money for another dance. His girl lingered a little longer and another song started. "That's all I have," he told her.

She gave him a warm smile. "Come back tomorrow then," she suggested, as she reached around him and gathered her few articles of clothing and a hat she had worn.

"Wait. Uh, what's your name?" He didn't want her to leave yet.

"Jenny," she giggled, touching his shoulder with one slender hand.

"That's your real name, I guess?" he asked.

"Well most people call me Jenny May," she said, with a new smile. "Jenny May Turner." Long eyelashes flickered over her eyes. He was staring at her intently. "You know, we could meet later, at my place. We could do more there." Her eyebrows arched invitingly.

Ricky blinked, surprised and pleased. But then he thought that offer entailed still more money and he

shook his head sadly. She shrugged and rewarded him with one last smile before going off to join the other girls.

Rising slowly, he shook himself out of a slightly dazed state and joined the three other men at their table. “Man, she was something,” he announced, catching his breath. “Did you see what she could do? She lifted her leg straight up over her head. I mean, who can do that?”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Eric laughed. “She was what you call limber.”

Ricky shook his head in wonderment. “Yeah, she was awesome,” he said, squinting toward the corner where she now sat. “She said she was eighteen, from Tennessee.”

One corner of Tommy’s mouth twisted into a half smile. Then he looked across the room and signaled their waitress with a wave.

The woman came over. She wore little more than the dancers, but she was all business and asked “another round?”

“Nah, that’s it for us,” Tommy said. “Just the check.” They had finished their two drink minimum so she dropped the tab on their table without another word.

They sorted out the cash. Ricky only had ten dollars left in his wallet and wanted to save it for the slot machines, so he contributed nothing. Tommy paid his share. “You owe me,” he told his brother, as he piled the bills on the table and stood up to leave.

Ricky glanced once more toward his girl and gave her a small wave. She was engrossed in conversation with the big blonde and did not notice him.

On the way out, they passed a baldheaded bouncer seated on a high stool at the entry. As he stared at the man’s bulging biceps, Ricky was reminded of a tattooed pit bull. When he looked up at the man’s face, he shrank back, surprised by the vehemence he saw in the keen dark eyes. He turned away and quickly followed his brother out the door.

The moment they stepped outside into the parking lot, the hot Las Vegas sun blinded them. All four men came to an abrupt stop and stood blinking until their eyes adjusted to the harsh light. Although it was fall, the temperature was still in the low eighties under a cloudless sky. The hot dry air would be gone by evening and they knew it would get surprisingly cold. Las Vegas was a place of extremes.

Ricky Sullivan looked like a younger, fresher version of his older brother. Both a little under six feet tall, they had the same wavy, reddish brown hair, but where Ricky’s face was as smooth as a young boy’s, Tommy’s checks were rough and pitted from teenage acne scars. And where only a few wispy hairs graced Ricky’s chin, Tommy’s face was darkened with thick coarse stubble. At 26, Ricky was only three years younger than Tommy, but no one would be surprised if they were told there was a ten year age difference.

They arrived at their rented Ford Fiesta in the nearly empty lot and got in. Although he hated the car, Tommy sat in the driver’s seat. He would have preferred a Camaro or a Trans Am, anything with some muscle, not this dinky little thing that seemed more like a toy than a car, but they had rented it for their

one week vacation because it was the cheapest deal they could get.

Eric bounced into the passenger seat. A short wiry man with excess energy, he quickly lit up a joint to calm down. Jared sat in back with Ricky who stared out the window at the low flat building as the car pulled out.

“I need a poker fix,” Tommy announced.

“And I need something to eat,” Eric said, adding “a beer is not a meal.”

Tommy looked over at him. “You can get food at the Stardust or I can drop you somewhere.”

Eric exhaled a lungful of smoke and marijuana filled the car, to Jared’s immense annoyance. “Do you have to do that in here?” he grouched.

“Open some windows,” Eric offered, rolling his down. He turned and looked to the back seat. “Hey Ricky,” he said, “looked like you met the love of your life in there.”

“Yeah, he’d still be there, if he could afford it,” Tommy chuckled.

“Hey, it was... she was cool,” Ricky said quietly.

Jared rolled down his window and the smoke dissipated. He had been clean for one year now and did not want to jeopardize his hard-earned sobriety. “That place, man,” Jared said. “I felt like they were watching you all the time. And they charged ten bucks for a glass of juice. It’s rip-off, worse than the casino.”

Ricky thought about it. “I don’t think they were watching me.” He paused, remembering the doorman. “But maybe,” he added after a moment.

“Anyway, time to make some money.” Tommy was anxious to gamble.

“I always like the Aladdin. Always do well there,” Jared ventured.

“We can leave you there, if you want. We’re going to the Stardust,” Tommy said, making the decision for the other two.

“Nah, it’s okay. I’ll go with you guys.” Jared did not want to be separated from his friends.

CHAPTER 2

They pulled into the Stardust parking garage, a massive multi-level structure with hundreds of cars. They found a spot on the third level. Tommy snapped off the engine and leaped out, slamming the door behind him. The others rushed to catch up as Tommy flew through the garage and came to a stop

before a bank of elevators. They joined him just as a cab opened. Three floors down, they entered a long carpeted corridor.

Even before they saw the casino, they heard sharp electronic bells ringing with every winning spin of the slot machines. The bells grew louder with each step as they arrived at the entrance and saw the vast casino arrayed before them.

As he walked past the security guard stationed at the entry, Jared felt a shudder ripple through his body. It was the uniform that struck him. A year had passed since he narrowly averted a guilty verdict that would have ruined his life. He still awoke some nights bathed in sweat, reliving his terror in dreams that felt utterly real. Coming to Vegas, he hoped, was an escape from those nightmares. He shook his head and gave the guard a wide berth as he walked past.

In the big casino hall, they immediately came upon row after row of slot machines. Ricky plunked himself down before one. Next to him, a heavyset woman in a wheelchair was busily feeding in quarters into her machine. She did not at him as he settled in.

He grinned up at his friends. "I'll be here," he told them. He watched for a moment as the group walked deeper into the casino in search of their favorite games.

Ricky's mind drifted back dreamily to Jenny May but he was suddenly startled out of his reverie as he sensed someone behind him.

He turned to her. "You need change?" she asked. She was a change girl, sporting a pocketed apron around her waist, short shorts under that, and black stockings on her long legs.

He looked up and stared for a moment at her round face and long straight brown hair. *Like Jenny May*, he thought. "Yes, thanks," he said. He opened his wallet, extracted two five dollar bills and handed them to her.

She took his money and held out a roll of quarters. "Here you go."

"Thanks." He opened the roll and emptied the coins into a large, plastic cup that sat conveniently before him on the narrow shelf in front of his machine. He fed a quarter into the slot, grasped the round wooden ball at the end of the lever, and pulled it down. Cherries and lemons and watermelons spun past his eyes. A voice in his head repeated *Jenny May, Jenny May, Jenny May*. He felt lucky as, one by one, the three wheels clicked to a stop. And sure enough, three lemons lined up. Bells rang, lights flashed, and ten quarters clattered into the tray at the front of the machine.

The plump woman beside him turned and said "Nice. I played that machine for an hour. Lost a hundred bucks. You sit down and first spin, you win." She laughed good-naturedly. "Guess it was due."

"My lucky day," Ricky said with a smile. He left the coins in the tray and took another quarter from his cup. This time, two cherries and a watermelon appeared. Another five quarters dropped into the tray. *I can't lose*, he thought. *This is for Jenny*.

CHAPTER 3

They had different preferences in the casino. Ricky played nothing but slots and Tommy played poker exclusively, claiming it was “the only game in Vegas where the odds aren’t against you.” Jared and Eric were more flexible in their gambling choices, although craps was Jared’s favorite while Eric usually played blackjack.

As they walked, Eric grinned at every cocktail waitress they passed while Tommy searched for the poker room. Finally he spotted the word “Poker” on a distant wall and picked up his pace, leaving his friends behind as he rushed toward it. Poker occupied a separate room, with quiet tables filled with serious, focused players.

Eric and Jared watched him disappear. They arrived at a row of half a dozen blackjack tables. The first one required a minimum hundred dollar bet and, aside from the dealer, it was deserted. That was followed by two twenty-five dollar tables that were occupied by a few players and then the busiest tables were the last three which each had a five dollar minimum. Eric sat down at the only one with an empty seat. Jared noticed the other players said nothing, but moved their chips and chairs slightly to make room.

“How’s it going?” Eric asked a young dark-haired man to his right.

“Yeah, up and down,” the guy said. “This is a pretty cold shoe.”

Eric grinned and said “time for a change then.” He took two twenty dollar bills from his wallet and slid them over to the dealer, a crisply efficient Asian woman who immediately spread the bills apart, counted out eight red five dollar chips in two neat piles and placed them in front of Eric. “Good luck,” she said as she pumped the twenties into a slot next to her.

Jared watched the play for a few minutes, but soon tired of it. Blackjack lacked the excitement and camaraderie of craps. He tapped his friend on the shoulder. “I’m going to play some craps. See you later.”

Eric was watching the cards intensely and did not look around and barely moved, other than a slight nod. “Okay,” he said. Concentrating on blackjack was one of the few activities that could keep Eric’s normally agitated body relatively still.

Jared went off in search of the craps tables. For some reason, they were hard to locate in the big casino. He wandered past the roulette and baccarat tables, past the wheel of fortune, three-card poker and other more obscure table games he did not recognize. He was in no hurry. He enjoyed walking around, soaking in the lively atmosphere.

Finally he spotted the craps tables. There were four of them. He walked that way, thinking he would just watch for a while.

The four large tables sat at the ends of two adjacent rows of table games. The area between the rows was off limits to the players. Pit bosses worked there, warily eying the action and stepping forward to render a decision whenever a problem or question arose.

Jared felt his heart beat a little faster as he homed in on his destination. Like Eric, he was interested in playing at a table with the lowest minimum bet, a five dollar table. Naturally those were the most crowded. The two twenty-five dollar tables were nearly empty, but the two five dollar tables were quite lively. Nearing one, he peered through the crowd. Everyone was leaning forward, their eyes on a young girl who held the dice.

Her boyfriend kissed her cheek. "Make this six," he said. "You can do it. I know you can."

Others joined in the shouts. "Six, six. How 'bout a hard six?" they laughed.

She threw the dice.

"Eight. Came easy," said the stickman.

"All right. We'll take that while we're waiting," a man in front of Jared said as he was paid forty dollars.

The dice were sent back to the girl. "C'mon six," her boyfriend urged again.

The dice flew down the table coming to a stop with a two and a four showing. "Winner. Six," said the stickman.

The players around the table shouted "all right!" or just grinned as they were paid. They arranged their chips in the slots in front of them and laughed loudly. "Keep it up," they said. "Same good shooter."

It seemed like a hot roll and Jared wanted to join the action so he squeezed into a spot along the rail. He had three hundred dollars with him and dropped a hundred dollars in front of him on the felt.

"Change a hundred," said the seated pit boss. He took the money and counted out a stack of twenty red five dollar chips for Jared, who picked them up quickly, leaving one on the pass line for the next roll.

A moment later, the girl threw a seven. "Front line winner," said the stickman. "Take the don'ts, pay the line." A second five dollar chip landed next to Jared's bet. He picked it up and left the original bet in place.

This time, she rolled a four, a difficult number to make, Jared knew, but he placed ten dollars behind his bet anyway. *What the hell*, he thought, *I came to gamble*.

"How long has she been holding the dice?" he asked the player to his left, a balding middle-aged man whose pot belly kept him a bit further from the table than Jared. He was busy organizing his chips by color.

"She rolls a lot of numbers," the man said without looking up. He selected a group of chips, dropped them on the table, and told the dealer, "Gimme sixty-four across." His chips were distributed on

the boxes designated 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10, the “numbers.”

Sure enough, she did roll numbers, fives, sixes, eights, and then remarkably, a four. Jared was paid \$25. He felt his pulse quicken. Sometimes a girl shooter was lucky. He would ride this roll as far as it would take him.