



Loose and Easy (Steele Street)

By Tara Janzen

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He's the bad boy she always wanted.

She's the good girl that got away.

He'd know her anywhere. Johnny Ramos had just come off a tour of duty in Afghanistan to find Esmee Alden trolling the mean streets of Denver in red lace and leather. The smartest girl he ever knew turning tricks? Not even close. Esmee's in danger so deep, only Johnny can get her out—which is why the elite government operative is shadowing her every move. Esmee had everything planned down to the last detail: dressed in disguise, she'd recover a stolen painting and pay off her dad's ruthless bookie. Until Johnny Ramos, her high school crush, blows into town and nearly blows her cover. Now Esmee, a P.I. and an art-recovery expert, has a mother lode of bad guys on her trail...including the one bad boy she always wanted: Johnny. But passion will have to wait. Because when bullets start flying, suddenly they're on the run, playing it fast and loose—and heading straight into the line of fire....

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Editorial Review

From Booklist

Johnny Ramos has just returned to Denver after a tour of duty in Afghanistan, and he hopes he'll be asked to join an elite Pentagon group, the Special Defense Force. He is shocked when he recognizes an old acquaintance from high school, Esme Alden, the class valedictorian who spent a memorable few minutes in the backseat of his car, dressed as a hooker. So he decides to follow her. Esme is actually a private investigator, working feverishly to extricate her gambler father from his latest debacle. In one night, she needs to recover a painting stolen by the Nazis, return it to the owner for a finder's fee, and take that fee to her father's bookie. She doesn't have time to spare, especially not for Johnny Ramos, who appears out of the blue and insists on following her, then on helping. One night, though, is enough time to revive powerful memories and forge a new relationship. Janzen's latest is a fun and sexy yarn filled with nonstop action and starring an irresistible bad boy. --Maria Hatton

About the Author

Tara Janzen lives in Colorado where she is at work on her next novel.

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Chapter One

Johnny Ramos knew the sad-looking little hooker limping her way down Seventeenth Street in two-inch black patent-leather platform heels. Her fishnet hose were torn in the back, revealing the bottom curve of her ass under what could only be described as a supermicrominiskirt. Red lace and leather and having seen better days, the skirt was barely seven inches wide from top to bottom and matched her red lace gloves. The cheap white vinyl tote bag slung over her shoulder was almost as big as she was and looked like it had seen better days, too. The white Lycra T-shirt laminated to her upper body had more heart-shaped cutouts and pink sequins than material. He could see a red push-up bra doing its job under the shirt.

Esme Alexandria Alden, he thought, East High School's valedictorian the year he'd graduated. Geezus, how the mighty have fallen.

"Easy Alex" hooking in LoDo, Denver's lower downtown district; it was enough to boggle the mind. Nothing about what he was seeing made sense: that sweet little size-four ass in torn fishnet; the twisted-up pile of ratted and heavily sprayed blond hair he'd only ever seen in tight and tidy braids; the smartest girl he'd ever known turning tricks.

He slid his gaze over her again, from the shoes to the French twist falling out of its pins. At seventeen, he'd have given anything to get her hair loose and falling down. Those long blond braids of hers had driven him crazy. He'd wanted so badly to undo them. Hell, he'd wanted to undo everything on the girl, from her prim little button-down shirts to her carefully tied and spotlessly white tennis shoes, but there hadn't been anything easy about "Easy Alex." That had been the joke. She'd never had a date in high school, not one, not even the prom. He knew, because he'd been the guy she'd turned down.

She couldn't possibly be a prostitute. No way in hell. Back then, she hadn't known what the word "sex" meant. He'd gotten more off of her than any guy in East, and it had taken him years of pursuit and most of one hot summer night to even get to second base.

She'd been sweet. Yeah, he remembered. Sweet and scared, mostly of him, he'd guessed, and of herself, of her reaction to him. He'd been one of the city's bad boys, and she'd had the lock on the title of Little Miss Goody Two-shoes.

He'd loved it, loved the challenge of it, but she'd been too good to let him get in her pants, which is where their party had ended that night, with him aching and her panting, and neither of them getting what they'd needed.

Fifty bucks said he could get whatever he wanted off her tonight. Hell, maybe it would only take twenty, but with her looking rode hard and put away wet all he wanted was the story, the explanation, the "What in the hell happened to you?"

Yeah, that's what he wanted. No way should Esme Alden be limping down Seventeenth with her ass hanging out of ripped fishnet. After graduating from high school, she'd been slated for the University of Colorado on a scholarship, full ride.

She got to the corner at Wazee and started across the intersection, heading toward the Oxford Hotel. When she was partway to the other side, the Oxford's valet signaled her, and Johnny swore under his breath.

"Geezus."

She'd been called in to service some guy staying at the hotel, and he had to wonder, really: How many doormen and parking valets in Denver had her name in their little black books?

He hated to say it, but he would have thought any girl working the Oxford would look a little classier than what Esme had pulled off tonight.

None of his business, he told himself, not for any good reason on God's green earth, and yet he stepped off the curb from in front of the Blue Iguana Lounge, where he'd been having a beer, and crossed Seventeenth. He wasn't following her. He was just checking things out, doing recon, getting the lay of the land, and he'd been thinking about heading this way anyway, and maybe stopping by an art gallery next door to the Oxford, the Toussi Gallery.

He'd gotten home from his last tour of duty, this one in Afghanistan, two weeks ago, and was still waiting to be reassigned to General Grant's command, specifically into Special Defense Force, SDF, an elite group of operatives based in Denver and deployed out of the Pentagon. Until his official orders came through, he was on leave, on his own, hanging out in his hometown and looking to stay out of trouble.

Or not.

A brief grin twitched the corner of his lips. Easy Alex had never been anything except trouble for him, starting in Ms. Trent's seventh-grade social studies class, where he'd come up with her nickname and ended up in detention. Decking Kevin Harrell for pushing her up against a locker in a back hallway in East High when they'd been juniors had gotten him suspended for three days. He'd been protecting her honor.

And now she was hooking?

No. He wasn't buying it. Not the Esme he knew. Something else had to be going on, no matter how much of her ass he could see—except when she got to the sidewalk, the damn valet handed her a room key.

Johnny came to a sudden halt. Geezus, a friggin' room key.

Okay, this really wasn't any of his business, and honestly, he didn't really want to see what she was going to be doing in the hotel, or who in the hell she was going to be doing it with, or doing it to, or any damn thing about Esme Alden "doing it" at all.

Which was why it took him another second and a half to get moving again. Halfway across the street, he paused as a sleek black Town Car turned the corner and cruised to a stop in front of the hotel's main entrance. The doorman stepped forward and opened the Lincoln's rear door, with the valet close behind.

Johnny detoured around the front of the car, but made a point of glancing back. A distinguished-looking gentleman got out of the car, mid-forties, slender build, very elegantly dressed, and wearing a fedora.

A fedora in Denver, in August? That was unusual, but nothing compared to the exotic Asian woman following the man out of the limo. She was gorgeous, wearing a black and white dress, heels, and a drop-dead stare that withered each of the hotel employees in turn.

Yikes. He'd hate to be the peon on the receiving end of her bad days.

Interestingly, after letting the woman out, the man in the fedora got back in the car. The dragon queen turned to say something to him, and that was the last Johnny saw. He pushed through the door into the hotel. Inside the lobby, he caught sight of Esme just before she disappeared up the stairs.

He didn't hesitate. Taking the damn things two at a time, he easily made it to the second landing in time to see which door she opened with the key—number 215. She slipped inside and the door closed behind her, and there he stood like an idiot, at the end of the hallway, wondering what in the hell he was thinking.

The seconds ticked by, and he was still standing there. When a whole minute had gone by, he knew he should leave—but he didn't, he just kept staring at the door to room 215 and telling himself not to go anywhere near it. Good advice he might have taken, if he hadn't heard a loud thump come from inside the room, a sound like somebody falling, or getting knocked over.

None of his business—right—except it was Easy Alex in there, and he didn't want to be reading about her in the morning papers. He'd "been there, done that" with too many people in his life, so better judgment be damned, he started down the hall.

When he got to the door, he could hear some guy with a German accent spluttering in indignation and anger from inside the room.

"You . . . you . . . goddamn Shiksa. You . . . you can't do this to me."

Johnny pressed his ear closer. None of his business, absolutely none—dammit. He wasn't cop of the world, not here. He should be enjoying the reprieve, not jumping in the middle of a fifty-dollar trick.

"Shiksa yourself, mister," a cool, sweetly feminine voice replied. And yes, it was definitely Easy Alex. He remembered the slightly cultured accent, the honeyed tone, the instinctive edge of authority. Christ. She'd always had the edge of authority, usually with her hand in the air, fingers wagging, her arm stick-straight, going for all the height she could get—Hey, hey, teacher, I know the answer, I know the answer. Hell, she'd always known the answer.

"That's not . . . this isn't," the guy kept spluttering, his voice starting to sound a little strained. "This isn't what I asked for . . . I wanted Dixie. I was told to ask for Dixie, and . . . and you're not Dixie."

No, Johnny thought, a little taken back. She most certainly wasn't. Anywhere in Denver north of the Sixteenth Street Mall, the name Dixie bandied about in that tone of voice by some guy in a hotel could only mean one thing: a diminutive forty-year-old dominatrix with a quirt. She'd been a permanent fixture of the city's nights for as long as Johnny could remember, which did nothing to answer the questions of why Esme Alden was taking one of Dixie's calls, and what in the hell she'd just done to the guy in 215.

Somebody in the room let out a strangled sound of distress, and he knocked, twice, hard and solid, a pure knee-jerk reaction that clearly said, "What in the hell is going on in there?"—and the room went silent. He could have heard a frickin' pin drop in the hall, and he could just imagine the two of them frozen in some sordid S&M act, their gazes glued to the door, wondering who in the hell had knocked.

"Housekeeping," he said, loud and clear. "We have your towels."

Towels?

Esme tightened her grip on the handcuffs she'd used at Otto Von Lindberg's request to secure his hands behind his back. He was facedown on the floor, her knee planted firmly and deliberately in his back, pressing hard. Her other hand had a strong grip on the dog collar the German had also been so kind as to provide already in place around his neck. She had the attached leash tied to the bed frame—and there was somebody at the door, somebody she'd bet didn't have any towels.

Dammit. Releasing her hold on the collar, she swiveled on Otto's back, and used one of his other leashes to hog-tie his flex-cuffed ankles to his wrists. He was old, and his ankles looked frail, considering his well-over-two-hundred-pound girth, but she wasn't overly concerned about Otto's skinny ankles. They'd been carting him around for sixty-some years. More than likely, they'd hold up under a little hog-tying.

"Nein . . . nein," he gasped and struggled—to no avail. She'd had the bastard cold from the instant he'd let her lock him into the cuffs.

Let her? Hell, he'd begged her. It was part of the game.

She finished off the knot on the leash and jerked it tight. Geez. Germans and dogs—it was always the Germans with the dog paraphernalia. She'd seen it half a dozen times in her line of work, which despite her outfit didn't have a damn thing to do with prostitution.

Esme Alden, Master of Disguise—yes, sir, that was her, all right, when the situation called for it, and old Otto had laid himself wide open to get taken by a hooker tonight. She'd known he would, and she'd known exactly what kind of girl he'd be looking to hire. Fifty bucks to the parking valet hadn't gone to naught. The call for Dixie had come to her instead. She might have to make up the missed trick to the aging dominatrix, just to keep peace on the street, but a couple hundred bucks ought to cover it, which left her with the night's potential profit margin still hitting at the required eighty-two-thousand-dollar mark.

And it wasn't enough, not even close, not for the risk she was taking, not if she didn't make a clean deal of it and an even cleaner getaway.

Esme rose to her feet, leaving Otto to cuss and squirm on the floor. He'd left his suitcase open on the bed,

and it took her about thirty seconds to search through his clothes and the rest of his dog collars. He had a penchant for spikes and studs.

She had a penchant for fine art, the stolen variety, and she wasn't finding any packed in his suitcase. Oh, hell, no—that would have been too easy.

"Wh-what are you looking for?" he stammered. "What do you want? Money? More money?"

Actually, bottom line, yes, and the art was the means to that end.

"You . . . you shouldn't be doing this. Not . . . not to me," he rattled on. "You don't know who you're dealing with."

Oh, yes, she did. She knew exactly whom she was dealing with.

"I am a very important man."

True. Damned important to her, for now, or she wouldn't be in this damn hotel room, wearing a damn stupid outfit, with a damn fat old German at her feet.

Some nights, life just got quirky on a girl. She was sure as hell redlining the Quirky-O-Meter tonight, which she could handle. No problem. As long as the Shit-Hitting-The-Fan-O-Meter stayed well on the low end of the scale.

Reaching into a narrow pocket on her skirt, Esme pulled out a knife and thumbed it open, and next to her on the floor, Otto went dead silent. Suddenly, there wasn't a peep, or a squeak, or a twitch coming out of him. She could almost hear the gears in his head grind to a halt in sheer, unadulterated terror.

Yes, old boy, she thought, this is the masochist's risk, that the game gets out of hand.

Not bothering to reassure him of anything, let alone his safety, she leaned farther over the bed and started in on the suitcase—and in her opinion, his relief, heralded by a sharp expulsion of breath and a general collapse of his body against his restraints, was overly optimistic. He was in it up to his neck for this night's work even if he was safe from her blade.

"Wh-what . . ." he finally stammered, when he'd gotten his breath back. "Wh-what are you doing? I don't . . . I don't understand."

Oh, yes, he did. He just needed to think it through a bit.

She kept to the edges of his suitcase, inside and out, running the blade close to the frame and carefully pulling back the linings and fabric covering.

No art.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Michael Naylor:

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