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Baring It All

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Baring It All

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
Professional Writing

by

Barbie Cure

B.A. Loyola University New Orleans, 2010

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Abstract

This collection of creative nonfiction encapsulates the author's career as a burlesque performer in New Orleans. The goal of this thesis is to tell her story using the techniques of creative nonfiction – specifically, the memoir. This is not merely a story of her career – it is a piece about her relationships, the author conquering her fears, and how she rises up to meet her goals. Part I tells of how the author discovers this new world and how she finds her place in it. Part II is the author's personal narrative of her revelation to her family. This story will introduce those who are unfamiliar with burlesque to a world of theatrics, sparkle, erotic subtexts, and this story needs the techniques of creative nonfiction to do it justice.

Keywords: Memoir, burlesque, nonfiction

Prologue

It's hard being two people. Being part of two different worlds. In one world, I'm adored by myriad fans. This world is Oz, Wonderland, Narnia, Neverland – but with more skin and spectacle. There, I'm loud, I shine, and I'm bold. This world is where I'm starting to have more friends than I can count. But in the other world, I have no support. I'm quiet. I hide. I'm alone.

I haven't always lived a double life. I used to be a regular student with a regular day job. I made good grades, spent time with my family and went to the movies with my friends. My life wasn't boring by any means, but I was going in the same direction as other middle class women with college degrees. Then I started taking off my clothes in front of an audience. Taking a major detour off the good girl path, I've been a burlesque dancer for years now. Like the women who practiced this dance style back in the forties and fifties, I've studied the art of the tease. I've learned how to use music, costumes, and costume removal to entertain and entice people who visit New Orleans from all over the country and the world. When I go to school or go to my day job, no one has a clue about my other life. My day to day appearance shows no indication that I'm a showgirl, and I give people no reason to believe that my weekends are extraordinary. Almost every weekend is an adventure because I go to a different world and become a different person.

So how did a “nice girl” like me end up in a profession like this? How did someone who went to Catholic schools all her life wind up taking her clothes off in front of strangers? How did someone who was once ashamed of her body grow to relish showing it off? How did one woman become two different people? The short answer is Jack Daniels. The long answer... The long answer is complicated.

Part I:

The Tease

“I wasn’t naked. I was completely covered by a blue spotlight!”

- Gypsy Rose Lee

Stranglehold

There's a common assumption that New Orleans is a dirty city. Then again, I guess a concept goes beyond an "assumption" if it's actually true. I wouldn't call the entire city dirty. Most of the French Quarter, with its cobblestone streets and its shops and restaurants along the Mississippi River, can be quite beautiful. The historic architecture is post-card worthy on every street, and the art galleries and street musicians make this place an artistic Mecca. As a kid, I tagged along with my dad to some of his meetings in the city, and when he was done, we would walk up and down Royal Street to look in the windows of all the antique shops. Sometimes, Mom would take me and my sister Eleanor* to the outdoor French Market to shop. Other times, my whole family and I would wander the city to take in the music and the sights. Good clean fun.

But I'll be honest; certain parts of this city *are* downright filthy. Bourbon Street, adorned with strip clubs and the fragrance of piss, vomit and bad decisions, is a prime example. Despite growing up in New Orleans my whole life, I had only seen Bourbon Street after dark a handful of times before I was legally old enough to drink.

One of those times was when I was nineteen, when my boyfriend Sean and I went to a strip club with his friend. After his friend made the suggestion Sean said, "No. My girlfriend's here, dude." But I was curious, and I insisted we go, which shocked the hell out of my college sweetheart. After weaving through the intoxicated crowd and dodging Mardi Gras beads that were flying from the balconies, we wound up at Déjà Vu, a venue where many women had breasts as real as their names. This was my first time being surrounded by nearly naked women – in a public place, at least – and I was actually

* Names changed to protect the innocent.

having more fun than Sean and his buddy. I felt weird throwing money at the female dancers, but I didn't feel weird watching them. One woman named Fallin (Fallyn? Follyn? Fallen?) kissed my neck after I gave her a five, and she sent blood flowing to parts of me that I never expected a woman to send it to. *I like it here*, I remember thinking. *I'm having fun. I want to come back.*

The quintessential dirtiness of New Orleans' underbelly grew on me like beautiful, twisting poison ivy. I liked going to the French Quarter as it was, but Bourbon after dark was a whole different animal. I tried to go to Bourbon Street as often as I could after that revelatory visit, which wasn't often at all. Sean never wanted to go, some of my friends were paranoid, my mom was *more* paranoid, and trying to park anywhere downtown made me want to gouge my eyes out with a spork. It would be several years before I set foot in another strip club.

I tried to capture some of that newly-acquired sexiness for my own love life. Armed with a few moves I learned from YouTube, sexy under-things, and Ted Nugent's song "Stranglehold," I went over to Sean's house to show him the time of his life. While I have been fascinated by sex since I figured out what it was, Sean wanted nothing more than a squeaky clean romance. When I nervously arrived in my sexy outfit, Sean didn't look excited at all. As I attempted to dance for him, he looked uncomfortable, almost *bored* even. I was down to my lace bra and a lace thong, but he just sat there. *What the hell?* I didn't want to stop before the song ended, and I felt stuck. I was awkward and uncoordinated. My attempt to reveal my sexy side backfired and I couldn't even hear the song "Stranglehold" for a while without blushing furiously because I was so

embarrassed. Every year we were together after that, he got electronics for an anniversary present.

Nasty Naughty Boy

I had planned on majoring in drama when I got to Loyola University but changed my mind and studied English. I hoped this major would get me a steadier income than one in performance arts. Though I was thoroughly enraptured with my studies of how to write a perfect sentence, I still did what I could to quell my Performance Bug – the drive to entertain: I performed in a play, crooned duets at Open Mic Night, sang in my university’s choir and even stood in the back of a Hip Hop dance class for about four weeks. I figured I would have to content myself with singing.

My career took a turn for the scandalous in 2009 when I saw a mysterious ad on Facebook that said, “Looking for a cabaret style singer to be part of a new burlesque troupe.” *Burlesque?* I saw the play *Gypsy* in high school, but that was the extent of my knowledge of the craft. My curiosity overwhelmed me, so I replied to the ad. A day barely passed before a woman named Mimi asked if I would come to her burlesque show to meet her. I trudged down to Yo Mama’s in the French Quarter to see a troupe called the Storyville Starlettes. I brought a few girlfriends in tow to see what this burlesque thing was about – and also because I believed going to the French Quarter at night without a posse was a death wish. We found the small bar and grill a few blocks from Bourbon Street.

When I got there, two women stood outside the door. Their curled hair, shiny costumes, and sparkling lips told me they were the dancers I was looking for. Mimi was shorter than me with more curves than a roller coaster. Her eyelids were dramatic and dark, and fiery red glitter covered her lips. She introduced me to another dancer named Madame Mystere, a tall, fair vixen who wore her brunette mane in victory rolls and who

also had lips that could rival Dorothy's ruby slippers. I didn't know a damn thing about these women, but I wanted them to like me.

"First burlesque show?" Mimi asked me.

I nodded.

Mimi and Mystere smiled. "You are in for a treat," Mimi said. She pointed up the stairs, like Willy Wonka leading the Golden Ticket winners into the room where everything was made of candy. Upstairs was a small stage with rows of folding chairs in front of it. Of course, I sat in the front. Another ten minutes went by before the bespectacled, lithe female emcee gave everyone the Rules of Burlesque:

1. You cannot touch the performers.
2. The performers can touch you.
3. If you catch an article of clothing, please return it. This shit's expensive.
4. No texting or talking on your phone. Burlesque dancers will lose their shit, and may or may not break YOUR shit.
5. Be LOUD! Hoot! Holler! The more noise you make, the more they take off!

"You get to knock societal standards on their ass here!" she said. "If you think a lady looks pretty, let her know! You're allowed to look at naked women without getting slapped here!" She ordered us to shout for a "practice run," and I hollered louder than my friends. "Then let's get this show on the road!"

Madame Mystere was first. Her song was "Whatever Lola Wants Lola Gets," sung by Della Reese, and her costume consisted of black pants, a white tank top, black

suspenders, black gloves, and a black fedora. A metal folding chair waited for her on the stage, and she sat up straight and drummed her fingers on her knees in time with the music. She stood up again, sauntered around the chair, and swayed her hips with each step. Mystere pulled off one glove, but she took her time. She spun around before taking off the other glove. All of her movements were very delicate, and she took the time to make eye contact with the audience. The suspenders and the pants went next, and the audience cheered louder. Finally, she removed her tank top, leaving her clad in only a black bra and black panties by the time the song was over. She left the stage to roaring applause, but not before pausing to let the audience admire her form.

I barely had time to reflect on how thrilling that was before the emcee came back to introduce Mimi. Mimi's routine was much, much darker. She wore a gas mask, a black trench coat, and black stockings. She entered the stage from the audience as her song "Wrong" by Depeche Mode started. This song wasn't delicate. It had low, heavy guitar riffs and thundering drums. Mimi's movements were sharper, more vicious. She practically ripped off the gas mask and stomped around before throwing off her trench coat, revealing her underwear beneath. She grabbed another folding chair from the side of the stage and placed it so that it was facing the other one. Fearless, she stood on the chairs, putting one foot on each, and slid down into a split on top of the chairs. I clapped furiously as she pushed herself back up from the split and stepped down onto the stage. Whereas Mystere's expression was flirty and playful, Mimi looked fierce and angry, matching the song. As the song built up, she shed her bra and revealed black tassels, which twirled as she started bouncing on the balls of her feet. She ended the song still twirling, and again, the audience went wild.

I watched dancer after dancer perform unique and clever dances, and I was having more fun than I'd had at a live show in a long time! I knew women would be taking their clothes off. But I didn't think I would *enjoy* it so much. The way they built up the anticipation, the way they teased. It was fun and outrageous and enthralling. Dancers of all sizes and shapes absolutely *owned* that stage. They sauntered out and said with their eyes and their bodies, "You're damn right I'm sexy!" I actually got excited as each article of clothing came off. I was hooting and hollering and shouting "Take it off!" with the rest of the audience.

I. Was. Hooked. The energy, the nudity, the display of the female body, the autonomy of the dancer, the rebellion, the freedom – all of it fascinated me. After the show ended, I found Mimi and told her I wanted in. She told me she would be in touch on Facebook. Good on her word, she introduced me to Nona Narcisse and Ben Wisdom, producers of a new troupe called Slow Burn. Nona was a lithe, tall woman with olive skin and brown hair. She possessed the poise and grace of a ballet dancer. Ben, on the other hand, wasn't as poised. He was tall and heavysset, and had a voice to match. He had the bearing of an evangelical preacher, and I would soon find out he emceed the same way. The Slow Burn producers had me come to Nona's home, where I told them what I could sing.

"This first show doesn't really have a theme," Nona said, "so you can sing whatever you want."

I thought of the most burlesque-y songs I knew. "How about 'Nasty Naughty Boy' by Christina Aguilera?" I asked.

“Perfect,” said Ben. “Just get us the karaoke version on a CD, and we’ll give you a shot. Oh, and you’ll need a stage name.”

I had been slowly learning about burlesque stage names since I saw my first burlesque show. The most common names I came across on my internet explorations were Cherry, Kitten, Trixie, Roxie, and Lola. Of course, these are clearly meant to be flirty. But to me, burlesque dancers are superheroes. They wear costumes, they work at night, they can do amazing things with their bodies, and they have “secret identities” in the form of stage names to keep their performance lives separate from their personal lives. I wasn’t sure if I needed my own secret identity as a mere singer, but being the comic book junkie that I am, I embraced the idea of having an alter ego. One of my favorite comic characters is Remy LeBeau, better known as Gambit from the X-Men series. So I took the name Remy and stuck “Dee” behind it to make Remy Dee, a play on the word “remedy” – a synonym of my surname Cure.

My first appearance with Slow Burn was at Dragon’s Den, a sketchy venue if there ever was one. Whereas Yo Mama’s at least had bright lights, the upstairs room at Dragon’s Den seemed to be lit only with a blue sheen. I tried to ignore the cockroaches as Sean and I found the “stage” – the dance floor where we would be performing. I tried to wear something sexy and burlesque-y to sing in: a blue tube top, a black mini skirt, heels, and a blue feather boa. I put the years of theater makeup experience to use before I left my house. My hair was a lost cause because curling irons terrify me, so I let it hang. I left an unnerved Sean alone for a moment while I gave Ben my CD. People were already starting to crowd around the dance floor, waiting for the show to start. I made my

way back to Sean on one side of the square floor. Two girls were performing before me, so I made sure I had a prime spot for watching.

Ben's voice boomed through the microphone. His stage persona was that of a sleazy high roller – quite a contrast from the teddy bear he is in real life. Ben went through the Rules of Burlesque before introducing Nona Narcisse.

Nona's song was "Summer Breeze" by the Isley Brothers, and she wore cutoff jean shorts and a sleeveless red button-up shirt that was tied at the bottom so we could see her belly. I was right – she was a ballet dancer at one point. She kept her toes pointed and pranced around the dance floor, but still kept a sexy little shake in her hips as she moved. Nona slid her shorts off for what seemed like ages because her legs went on for miles. She straightened up and reached to untie her shirt. The audience was being quiet, so she paused. Cheers and hollers erupted, and she continued to untie her shirt, letting it fall off her shoulders. She sauntered over to a small table, where a pitcher of lemonade and a glass awaited her. After pouring herself a glass, she took a sip, and poured some of the lemonade on her chest. Finally, she removed her bra, ran her fingers up between her pasty-covered nipples, and licked the lemonade off her fingers.

Watching this before I had to sing probably wasn't a good idea, because she was leaving me a bit breathless. I snuck a peek at Sean, but he didn't look impressed. Just bored. Then Ben announced that Mimi was up next, and I saw her wearing the same costume as last time, gas mask and all. *Sean will like this one*, I thought. Unfortunately, he didn't seem to. He didn't seem to care when Mimi ripped the gas mask off. He didn't bat an eyelash when she did her epic split between the chairs. Sean just stood there with his hands in his pockets.

After Mimi finished, Ben picked up the mic and said, “And now, making her burlesque debut, the sultry songstress – Remy Dee!”

I grinned as I grabbed the mic from him. *The sultry songstress Remy Dee*. I really liked that. I hoped to hear that more.

The song I picked was indeed burlesque-y. It had swanky horns and slick piano licks. Even though Christina Aguilera recorded it in 2006, the song was an excellent throwback to music of the twenties. I had no trouble crooning the words.

You’ve been a bad, bad boy

I’m gonna take my time so enjoy

While my pipes were doing fine, my body was stiff at first. I thought about the dancers who graced the stage before me, and I let my hips move a little bit.

There’s no need to feel no shame

Relax and sip upon my champagne

I vehemently fought the doubt in my head, the stupid voice that said, “You’re a singer, not a dancer. Don’t try to dance!”

‘Cause I’m gonna give you a little taste

Of the sugar below my waist (God I love that part)

You nasty boy

My hips swayed. I played with my boa. I relaxed. As the song went on, I grew more comfortable with actually moving while I was singing. I still wasn’t making eye contact with the audience like the dancers did. They seemed to find me entertaining nevertheless. I finished my song and bowed slightly before passing the mic back to Ben. “That was

fantastic!” he whispered quickly before I walked off the dance floor. I beamed while he said into the mic, “Remy Dee, ladies and gentlemen!”

I sang with Slow Burn a total of three times that summer, but I ultimately had to stop because I had one more year of college left. I also stopped because, and it pains me to say, Sean didn’t approve. “I just can’t see why you’d want to be a part of that,” Sean told me after watching the dancers in Slow Burn. “You weren’t doing anything wrong, though,” he added hastily, noting that all I did was sing.

Feeling confused as to why any man wouldn’t want to watch a beautiful woman take her clothes off, I stopped trying to perform. Sean was the man I was going to marry, and I had to keep him happy. Trying to put thoughts of burlesque out of my mind, I wondered if maybe this interest would be just a phase, a fleeting fancy. Maybe I’d forget all about burlesque by the time Sean proposed to me, by the time we got our careers and our house and our white picket fence. Maybe I’d never go to another burlesque show again.

Or maybe Sean and I would split a year later.

Hip Shakin' Mama

I went from graduating college at age 22 with an almost-fiancé and a plan, to being single with no plan, in a matter of weeks. The summer of 2010 was looking scary and going through my first major breakup wasn't helping. My cousin Misty, who was also going through a breakup, said we needed to go out. "Fleur de Tease has a show on Sunday," she said over the phone, referring to the local burlesque troupe. Although I hadn't been to a show in a year, my love of burlesque hadn't abated. I followed local troupes and dancers on Facebook. I watched burlesque videos on YouTube. I researched the history of burlesque, learning that the word itself means "a satire achieved through parody" and that it comes from the Italian word *burlesco*, which means "in an upside down style" (Gray 88). I kept this knowledge and this passion to myself as my former college sweetheart didn't understand burlesque.

But he was out of the picture, and I wanted to see some ladies strip. So Misty and I went to One Eyed Jacks to see the troupe I'd wanted to see since I saw their ads the year before. Also in the French Quarter right off of Bourbon Street, One Eyed Jacks is more like a dark speakeasy. It has many framed pictures of nudes on the black velvet walls, and antique chandeliers hang from the high ceilings in the entry room and over the horseshoe bar in the main room. I've since learned the club used to be the Shim Sham, named in homage to a burlesque hotspot that hosted New Orleans burlesque legends in the 30s and 40s. While it's now a venue that hosts DJs, dance nights and big name bands, it still hosts a monthly burlesque show with Fleur de Tease, a troupe made up of some of the best dancers in the city.

They didn't disappoint. While the shows I saw the summer before were in small venues with simpler costumes, this venue was huge and these costumes were grander. The performers stuck to mostly classic burlesque, which is burlesque reminiscent of the 30s and 40s that usually involves gowns, gloves, and feathers. Madame Mystere was also in this show as an intense ringmaster. Another dancer named Bella Blue, headmistress of the New Orleans School of Burlesque, did a beautiful fan dance to "Send in the Clowns." A small Bette Page doppelganger named Roxie Le Rouge did a sinful strip out of a men's shirt to "You Can Leave Your Hat On." Fire performer Natasha Fiore sizzled as she played with fire while she did her striptease. And the show's director Trixie Minx did a classic routine to "Hoochie Coochie Girl" inside a shadow box.

The Bug was back. Going to burlesque shows again made me want to go back to performing with burlesque troupes, to be around the hilarious satire and the beautiful people. I sent a message to Ben Wisdom asking if Slow Burn needed a singer. He said he'd love to have me back, but there were already a lot of girls in the troupe as is. While he meant no harm with that rejection, I feared that it meant that none of the other troupes in New Orleans would have room for me either. Singers were everywhere in this town, but burlesque dancers were the hot commodities. As of yet, the thought of stripping in front of people hadn't crossed my mind.

Since I still wanted something to do with my time, I landed an internship with *Offbeat*, a local music and entertainment magazine. While this was an unpaid internship, I still got many fringe benefits from being a contributing writer – including tickets to the 2nd New Orleans Burlesque Festival. This multi-day festival included performances by the best burlesque dancers in the world, and I got to see all of them for free.

My connections to *Offbeat* also got me into the pre-festival cocktail party in a suite at the Westin Hotel. Like I tended to do, I brought a friend with me – it was still downtown New Orleans, after all. My best friend since high school Chelsea and I stood in the corner and watched performers I had, until then, only seen on YouTube. People outside of the burlesque community had no idea who these people were. Within the burlesque community, though, they were royalty. I stayed to the side and sipped my drink, star struck from seeing so many of my idols in one room.

“Lana!” Chelsea blurted. She ran up to hug a woman before coming back to grab me. “Barbie, this is my friend from school,” Chelsea said.

“Hi,” the dancer crooned. “I’m Lana Allure.”

I had heard of Lana. She was known to have “the most beguiling bust to ever incite lust.” Seeing her in person, I could understand the tagline. She was a voluptuous woman in a lovely black cocktail dress. When I say “voluptuous,” I mean that cocktail dress defied physics from the sheer act of holding her chest in.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, shaking the petite brunette’s hand. “I’m Barbie Cure with *Offbeat*. Are you performing in the festival?”

“Nah. Not this year,” she said. “I’m friends with the producer, and he invited me to the party. I’m glad the magazine is covering it again.”

“Me too. I’m glad I get to be here!” I said, not ashamed to gush.

“You know, Barbie’s a singer,” Chelsea said.

Lana looked intrigued and said, “Are you now? ‘Cause my troupe might need a singer soon.”

My face lit up like a firecracker. “Really?” I said.

Lana told me she was in a local troupe called Reverend Spooky LeStrange's Billion Dollar Baby Dolls. Her troupe performed mostly neo-burlesque, which is burlesque with modern costumes and modern songs. While I had heard of Reverend Spooky, I had yet to see her perform. Somewhere in our conversation, I mentioned to Lana that I had performed with a different troupe the summer before.

“Well, do you want to sing again?” she asked me.

“Absolutely!” I answered. “I didn't think any of the troupes had singers anymore.”

“We had a singer for awhile,” Lana said. “She could sing and strip at the same time.”

“People do that?” I asked, not hiding the wonder in my voice.

“Of course! But she moved out the state. We don't have a venue at the moment, but as soon as we get one, I'll let you know.”

I scribbled my name, number, and email on a napkin and gave it to Lana. I didn't want to hold my breath or get my hopes up, but I could not stop imagining ways to sing while taking off a costume.

At Last

Months went by, and I had all but given up on the idea of performing again when Lana emailed me. She told me that Spooky's side project, Haus of Vigilante – I still have no idea where the name came from – was going to perform in January at the Rubyfruit Jungle on Decatur. Lana told me I was more than welcome to sing with them. All I had to do was show up with a CD with my music on it.

Finally! I decided to sing “At Last” by Etta James. I've been singing that song since I was fourteen, and it's the strongest in my repertoire. I picked out my prettiest black floor-length dress before going to ask my mom's approval. Being a tomboy for the better part of my life, I still turned to my mom or my sister when I had to look feminine. I can remember several occasions growing up where they both had to force me to dress like a lady, and I was still unsure about mastering the techniques on my own.

Except for a flair for foul language, my tomboyish style and behavior certainly didn't come from my mother. Cute and sweet is more how I would describe her, and she is the most giving person I know. While she did have other jobs and passions throughout her life, eventually her family became her passion. She seems content with that. Being the wife of a musician, she places immense importance on being presentable and being likable. I can understand why: if she looks less than stellar at one of my dad's shows, it could make him look bad. She is always feminine and ladylike, and she knows how to make my dad look good.

At that moment, I needed her to tell me *I* looked good. Mom was sitting in her kitchen when the sound of my heels made her look up from behind her golden bangs. “Beautiful,” my biggest fan said. “I'm glad you found somewhere to sing.” My family

knew I went to burlesque shows all the time, and they read my coverage of the New Orleans Burlesque Festival. When I told them I'd be doing some cabaret style singing, they didn't seem to mind that I'd be sharing the stage with women who'd be taking their clothes off. Mom was always open and honest about the sex stuff when I was growing up, and she seemed to understand the idea that these women are meant to be looked at.

“Thanks, Mama!” I said, feeling giddy.

“You've got someone to go with, right?” she inquired. She was just as protective as any mother, but probably more so because her own mom lost a daughter when my mom was a little girl. Everyone says there is no greater pain than losing a child, and my mom fears for my safety and the safety of my sisters nonstop. Her over-protectiveness could be aggravating sometimes, but I knew it all came from her heart. She was my rock and my nurturer, so I always did what I could to quell her fear. “Yes, Ma'am!” I said as I turned to leave.

“Good. Have a good time! Oh, and Barbie?”

I stopped to look at her.

“Keep your clothes on.”

I rolled my eyes, thinking her a little silly for even suggesting I was coordinated enough to be a burlesque dancer. “Yes, Ma'am.”

The journey through the French Quarter was wet that night. I remember it was a Thursday – not too many people. I also remember feeling nervous because I woke up with a sore throat. As it turned out, I didn't have to be nervous. The Rubyfruit Jungle was

a hole-in-the-wall, and there were four people in our audience, including my friend Garrett.

The bar reminded me of Dragon's Den, except it had an actual – granted tiny – elevated stage, and there were no cockroaches (that we could see). Trying to be professional, I showed up early. In doing so, I beat the other dancers there. I would soon learn that burlesque dancers are never on time, and the audience never expects a show to start at the time advertised.

About fifteen minutes went by before a large woman came to the dingy bar where Garrett and I were sitting. “Are you Remy?” she asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” I said extending my hand.

“I'm Amber. But call me Bonnie Clyde. Got your music?”

I handed her my CD. “So. Um. Who's all performing tonight?”

“It's me, you, Lana Allure and Spooky LeStrange.”

That's it? Only three burlesque performers and one singer?

“Oh, and I'm hosting. Do you have a tagline?”

I panicked. “Do I need one?”

“Why not? They're fun to have and they make you stand out. Come on upstairs.”

Bonnie led the way to the second floor, a room with plenty of mirrors and open space. We even had our own private (albeit dirty) bathroom. I set my purse down, wondering why downstairs didn't look as nice as upstairs. Perhaps the New Orleans Burlesque Festival, which took place at extravagant venues like Harrah's Casino and House of Blues, made me question why other shows had to happen at smaller venues.

Then again, I suppose even the now world-famous dancers had to start somewhere. Perform at the dive bars and the hole-in-the-wall joints, and then work up.

The door opened and Lana walked in. Following her was the most pissed looking raven-haired thirty-something I'd ever seen. She threw her suitcase down and had an air about her like she was ready to stab something.

"I forgot my fucking music!" the human hurricane said.

"Spooky, no!" Bonnie said.

"I just realized it walking here from the car. It's on my iPod at home," Spooky said. I could finally put a face to the name Reverend Spooky LeStrange, and that face showed enough anger to start a war. "I can't dance tonight."

"Spooky, we'll pull it up on my phone. Calm down," Bonnie said.

"I'll just wrangle, tonight," Spooky said, referring to the act of "panty wrangling," or picking up the clothes between burlesque routines. Panty wranglers are more commonly known as "stage kittens," but some troupes call them "panty sniffers."

Lana chimed in with, "Spooky, we need four people. Bonnie can pull the songs up on her phone." She sounded like she had to deal with Spooky's stubbornness many times before.

Spooky took a breath before saying, "All right. I'm sorry, y'all. I just feel like a fucking idiot for forgetting my music."

"Dude, we all do it," Bonnie said. "We still make it work."

Spooky nodded before unzipping her bag and pulling out her makeup, and I made a mental note to never, ever forget my music. To this day, I never have.

Since I showed up stage ready, I sat on a cracked leather chair, just watching the other girls get ready. I kept quiet, not feeling like I fit in enough yet to hold a conversation with these women. None of them were Victoria's Secret models, but they were all confident and cool. Next to women who had no problem showing off their bodies, I felt timid and shy. I listened to Lana talk about her boyfriend and Spooky talk about her husband. I wondered how their significant others felt about them taking their clothes off in front of people. The ladies certainly had no qualms with getting undressed in front of me in the dressing room. I watched with fascination as they all put on sparkly pants and applied their pasties. Spooky used carpet tape while Lana and Bonnie used toupee tape.

"You just singing tonight, Remy?" Lana asked me. After I nodded, she said, "You seemed interested in singing and stripping last time I talked to you."

"I don't know how to dance," I confessed.

"You could always try," Bonnie said.

Before I could describe how god-awful my last striptease was, Lana said it was time to start. She was first on the lineup and first down the stairs in a long black velvet gown. She left her brown hair hanging in soft curls, but her makeup was dark and vampy. Bonnie, who seemed new to hosting, gave her the quickest intro I'd heard before Lana stepped onstage to "Fallin'" by Alicia Keyes. From what I remember, she performed an elegant classic routine to the soulful tune, and she was poised and polished, smiling like she had an audience filled to capacity. By the end of her routine, she was twirling her tassels, and I was shocked her giant, bouncing breasts weren't knocking the Earth out of orbit. When she finished, I realized we didn't have a panty wrangler. I scurried onto the

stage to get Lana's clothes and brought them to where she was standing topless by the bar.

"Oh sweetie, thank you!" she said.

"No problem. You were great up there!"

"Thanks," she said, still breathless from all the bouncing. "I know it's not a lot of people, but those people paid to see us, so no half-assing."

She had a good point. As sore as my throat was, I tried to give a good performance. When it came to be my turn onstage, I sang as well I could. My reliable pipes held steady even though I picked a song with a lot of high notes, and I got a good reaction from the handful of people. My voice also impressed the other dancers, including Reverend Spooky. "We're doing this again in two weeks if you wanna come back," she told me. I accepted her offer. While I was pondering over new songs to sing and what to wear, it dawned on me: *If I tried dancing here, no one would see me. My family would never know.* I must have seen a hundred performances by that time, so I at least had some idea of where do start. Bonnie's words echoed back: "You could always try."

Criminal

Certain songs best fit the description of sexy, and I've come to find out that those make the best burlesque songs. Any song that sends the blood flowing to my Happy Place or compels me to move my hips before I move any other body part is a sexy song. Some sexy songs have low, sultry instrumentals, and others have singers that sound like they could narrate a romance novel. The smooth pop song "Criminal" by Fiona Apple has both. "Criminal" was the first song I heard outside of a show that made me think, *That would be a great burlesque song*. Soon I would find out that this is a great burlesque song for a beginner. The costume choice is obvious, the lyrics are naughty, the tempo isn't too fast, and Apple's vocal range was my own. I can normally hit high notes as a soprano, but since I was attempting to do something along with the singing, her smooth, enticing alto seemed like a better option.

I wanted to try stripping. I wanted to be more than just a singer because there's nothing taboo about singing. I wanted to be desired the same way the dancers are desired, to exude the same confidence and energy they do. I wanted to play with the idea of being classy and naked at the same time. I wanted the freedom and the rebellion I saw gleaming in every burlesque dancer's eyes. After making sure the Karaoke version of the song existed, I texted Spooky asking if it was okay for me to try to dance.

"Sure thing!" she replied.

I thought it peculiar that she didn't ask me to audition or anything first, but then again, she had never seen me sing before she hired me to do that either. "Is it okay if I keep my bra on?" I asked. In my mind, wearing a bra and panties was just like wearing a

bathing suit, and I remembered Madame Mystere had kept her bra on the first time I saw her. Just stripping was making me nervous enough, so I wanted to take this in baby steps.

“Whatever you’re comfortable with. This is your routine,” Spooky answered.

I took a ride to Party City to see if they had any prison-related costumes. They had regular orange jumpsuits for men as well as “sexy” (i.e. smaller and more revealing) orange jumpsuits for women. My jaw dropped when I saw a classic black and white striped costume. It had long sleeves and it even came with the little cap the prisoners used to wear. I asked for the costume in a small, and the employees were sweet enough not to ask why I was buying a Halloween costume in January. Further down the Halloween accessory aisle, I found black and white striped arm warmers and grabbed those as well. I didn’t leave the store until I hunted down a pair of handcuffs. I refused to do this routine without handcuffs. Also, I figured every good bad girl should own a pair.

With the costume and props taken care of, all I had left to find was underwear. I had originally planned on just wearing black underwear beneath my costume. But by some divine intervention usually reserved for knocking up virgins, I found some black and white striped panties. The black bra would have to suffice, but I picked up some cheap rhinestones and some superglue – which I’ve since learned is a rookie mistake – to decorate it.

Home from my sparkly shopping spree, I went to my room to get to work, making sure I locked the door. The jailbird costume was a top and a bottom, and looked more like black and white striped pajamas. I took the shirt and cut it down the middle of the front. I put some Velcro strips along the new seam (another rookie mistake) so that the shirt

would stay closed until I ripped it open. After I altered the jailbird shirt, I spent a half hour super-gluing rhinestones to the black bra. It didn't look as magical or extravagant as the costumes I'd seen the professionals use, but I wasn't a professional yet.

Once I planned out what I was going to wear, I had to decide the order they would come off. Obviously, the handcuffs would have to be first. Since the shirt was long-sleeved, I had to get rid of that before the arm warmers. After that, all I'd have left would be the pants. Next I had to practice. I kept my music low and plotted out the points in the song where the clothes would come off. I waited until Eleanor and my parents fell asleep before I started moving. Even though I played music in my room all the time, I didn't want to explain why I was playing the same song over and over. Because heels and a hardwood floor don't make for a quiet night, I had to practice without them.

On the night of the show, I got to Rubyfruit Jungle early with every intention to take advantage of the big space upstairs. I put on my costume and my heels, and found a spare mic stand to practice with. I ran through my song almost three times before Spooky, Lana, and Bonnie showed up.

"You look cute," Bonnie said. "Got your music?"

"Right here," I said as I pulled my CD out of my bag. "Oh, and I thought of a tagline."

"What's that?"

"The Chalmation Sensation," I said, prompting the three of them to laugh.

While I was born in New Orleans, I grew up in a city further south called Chalmette (pronounced shal-METT). It's one of those small towns where everyone knows each other, but it also has kind of a reputation for being not so classy. Everyone

goes to church, but they all get drinks after – and sometimes before. Some of the teenagers, despite going to Catholic schools, will have either a baby or a tattoo – or both – before they turn eighteen. Lovingly called “Da Parish,” Chalmette is a strange little place. But I’m proud to be from there, proud to be a Chalmation (rhymes with “Dalmatian”). Chalmette made me who I am, so I felt it appropriate to include that in my tagline.

Bonnie jotted it down and headed to the stairs to give our set list to the DJ. She stopped and said, “Hey Remy, you want a drink?”

The nerves kicked in right as she asked that. I’m going to take my clothes off in front of strangers tonight. “I would love a shot of Jack Daniels,” I said.

“No chaser?”

“Nope.”

Two shots later, I was feeling less sick to my stomach. I reminded myself that I could sing this song backwards, and that there were only six people in our audience that night. I was starting to feel less nervous and more excited. After Spooky and Lana performed, Bonnie took the mic and said, “And now, here to pleasure you aurally is our sultry songstress, the Chalmation Sensation, Remy Dee!” Then, as we planned five minutes earlier, Bonnie walked behind me and pushed me on the stage in front the microphone, like she was a cop pushing a prisoner. Pretending to be angry, I gave her the middle finger. I looked down at my cuffed hands before I started to sing one of the best opening lyrics I’ve ever heard:

I’ve been a bad, bad girl

I sang through the first verse and the chorus before reaching for the top of my shirt, parting the top slightly, being a tease. Then I reached in my hair and pulled out a bobby pin, and I pretended to pick the fake cuffs open.

I know tomorrow brings the consequence at hand

But I'll keep living this day like the next will never come

My hands flew back to the shirt and ripped it all the way open, getting hoots and hollers from the audience. *They like my body.* I let it slide down my shoulders, feeling sexier than I had felt in a long time. The second verse and the second chorus passed through my smiling lips as I pulled off the first arm warmer. Then the second. *This is too much fun,* I thought.

So what would an angel say?

The devil wants to know

The noise from the audience grew louder as I showed more skin, and I relished it. I didn't want them to stop. *I didn't want to stop.* Their applause was cocaine, and I was Kate Moss. I slid the pants down between the last chorus and the outro vocals. I had nothing left to sing and nothing left to take off, so I picked up the handcuffs and started playing with them. I stayed put on that stage and let the audience look at me until the song was completely over.

Being onstage in my underwear didn't make me feel uncomfortable. Not in the slightest. It felt good. It felt natural. It felt *right*. Something in me clicked, and I couldn't wait to get another fix of this new drug.

Witchy Woman

After one more gig, the Haus of Vigilante started to fizzle out. The venues that could afford to hire a troupe monthly all had troupes:

- One Eyed Jacks: Fleur De Tease
- Howlin' Wolf: Slow Burn (they upgraded from Dragon's Den)
- House of Blues: Bustout Burlesque
- HiHo Lounge: Storyville Starlettes (they upgraded from Yo Mama's)
- Bayou Park Bar: Reverend Spooky LeStrange and her Billion Dollar Baby Dolls.

I didn't think to ask Spooky to let me perform in the Baby Dolls because they already had a singer. They had no need for my talent.

Writing for *Offbeat* was keeping me busy enough. I went in to the office on Frenchmen Street every Tuesday morning to do typical intern work – answer the phone, transcribe interviews, be the bubbliest front desk girl in all of creation – and I also had at least one writing assignment every week. During the year I worked there, I interviewed prominent New Orleans bands, artists, writers, and club owners. Nobody too famous; only the real writers got the big names. While the CD reviews and the concert reviews made my portfolio look good, it was my coverage of the New Orleans Burlesque Festival that made me their go-to girl for anything burlesque related. I wrote those articles with the tone of a kid in Disney World while still showing knowledge and depth on the subject.

Despite having a knack for covering those who uncovered themselves, I wasn't sure what story my editor Al was going to assign to me in July. Burlesque is slow in the summer, and I figured the magazine had real writers covering all the major music events.

Word on the cobblestone street was that a big burlesque act was coming to town, but I didn't know whether or not we were covering it. Unaware of what was coming, I went to Al's office first thing on Tuesday, like always, and asked if he had any assignments for me.

"I do, actually," he said, a hint of mischief in his voice. "How would you like to interview Dita Von Teese?"

My face must have contorted into a grotesque expression of shock, joy, disbelief, arousal and panic combined because Al let out a booming laugh when he saw it. *Dita Von Teese? DITA VON TEESE? The most famous burlesque dancer in the world?*

"I take it that's a 'yes?'" Al said as I picked my jaw up off the floor.

"Yes! A thousand times, yes!" I exclaimed.

"Excellent! You'll interview her over the phone before she comes here for her show at the end of the month," he said.

"I didn't know we were covering that show! This is awesome!" I squealed.

"Wait... When am I doing the interview?"

When Al told me the date, I felt tears prickling because I realized I'd be out of town for that date. I sadly relayed that information to my editor. Al leaned back in the leather chair behind his desk. "Barbie, I really want you to be the one to write this story. I don't think anybody will give it the same... *zest* as you would," he said. "You love burlesque more than any writer here."

He had a point. Plus this was the chance of a lifetime. How many times would I have the chance to interview an icon? A legend? One of my idols? The woman who helped save burlesque?

“If you can arrange the interview before I leave town, I’ll do it.”

Al grinned and said, “I’ll make it happen.”

Once upon a time, burlesque almost disappeared. While satire had been around since Aristophanes, the scandalous aspect of revealing flesh didn’t come about till the Victorian Era. Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes fought the constraints of being covered from head to toe by creating a play where they showed their stocking-covered legs. GASP! They spoofed and satirized American plays and often had women portraying male roles. In 1868, Thompson and her girls brought their “leg show” across the pond to New York City, and audiences’ curiosities outweighed their disgust.

Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes helped Americans let go of their prudish morals. During the 20s, when the government deemed both alcohol and showing too much skin illegal, the striptease was born amidst the speakeasies. Burlesque pioneers like Thompson “transgressed conventional standards and mores concerning sexuality and gender. They subverted the system, challenged traditional middle-class respectability and pushed boundaries” (Willson 34).

American burlesque popped up in theaters all over the Northeast, and the striptease became an integral part of this new art form. Unlike Broadway shows, burlesque shows were accessible to all classes. The striptease artists often made fun of the higher classes by stripping off extravagant gowns and expensive gloves, letting them drop to the stage like they were worthless. Audiences devoured this. Strippers – that’s what they called themselves – like Gypsy Rose Lee, Lili St. Cyr, and Sally Rand mastered the concept of having a gimmick and putting people in seats. Evangeline the

Oyster Girl even came up with a routine where she peeled underwater in a clear tank. She and the other stars easily made \$1,000 a week during the burlesque heyday of the 40s and 50s. Unfortunately, that heyday began to fizzle in the 60s with the Sexual Revolution – which brought strip clubs that allowed fully topless women. Because women no longer needed pasties in a public venue, audiences didn't want to be teased. They wanted to get right to the reveal, right to the nudity. With nowhere to perform their teases, burlesque dancers in America all but disappeared during the 70s and 80s.

In the 90s, a group of women – some worked in strip clubs, some were Playboy models, some were dancers – fought to bring burlesque back. Among them were Catherine D'Lish, Jo Weldon, and Dita Von Teese. Based out of Los Angeles, Dita was part of a troupe called Velvet Hammer, and this troupe produced cabaret shows reminiscent of the burlesque shows of the past. Word spread of these women and their teases, and they helped revive interest in burlesque and create a new community. This community grew larger and larger, eventually evolving into the phenomenon it is today – the community I'm a part of. While Dita herself can't take all the credit for the burlesque revival, her books on burlesque history and vintage hair and makeup made her a main trailblazer. With her raven hair, ruby lips, and a complexion so fair it's not fair, she looks like she herself stepped out of the 1940s. As her fame grew, her acts became more extravagant – her most famous being one where she swims in a giant Swarovski crystal-encrusted martini glass.

Even though I already knew all of this from my own research, I still read every interview I could find to make sure I didn't ask questions she's heard a million times – a task that proved difficult due to her fame and her already lengthy career. After writing

and rewriting and rewriting my interview questions, I emailed them to Dita's publicist. At exactly 11:00am on the day before I left town, I dialed the number Dita's publicist sent me. I expected her publicist to answer.

"Hello?" came a soft voice from the other end.

"Hello. This is Barbie Cure from *Offbeat Magazine*. I have an interview with Dita Von Teese this morning," I said.

"This is Dita," said the lovely voice.

The rest of me started sweating. But I recovered quickly and said, "Good morning! How are you?"

"I'm doing very well, thank you," she responded. She sounded like how I imagined Clara Bow would sound if she had starred in talkies. Soft, poised, elegant. Magical.

With a fifteen minute limit, I pressed the record button and started with my questions. I asked her about her upcoming show at the House of Blues in New Orleans, what she liked about New Orleans and the burlesque scene down here, and how she chose performers for her show. Somewhere in the conversation, my heart rate slowed back to normal. She discussed her creative process, how she felt about the direction burlesque is going in, and the message she wanted to send to the world. Her answers were so detailed and articulate that she pretty much wrote the article for me.

Then we got to the question I was most curious to hear her answer: "Have you, at any point in your career, ever felt objectified?"

She took her time, replying, "One thing that I find very interesting is that I think, deep down, we all *want* to be objectified at one point or another."

I nodded, forgetting she couldn't see what I was doing because she was across the country.

“In a way, it's kind of the ultimate taboo to let go. To say, ‘I want to be worshipped and adored for just this one moment, and I don't care if [someone] is loving me for my mind.’ It's like... you don't have to say anything. I mean, when you're in the bedroom, do you really care if someone is concerned about your intellect?”

I stopped scribbling in my notebook – the recorder was getting everything, but I always took notes when I interviewed – and just listened.

“It's not my problem if somebody thinks that I'm an object, because I know that I'm not. If someone's objectifying me, I think they're missing the point, or they don't know enough about me, and I don't think that they really need to know more about me.”

Dita then added what would become the last line of the article: “It's like that saying, ‘What people think of me is not my problem – it's theirs.’”

Somehow, I knew objectification explanation was going to be the strongest part of my piece. It certainly intrigued me the most. With barely a minute to spare, I ended our conversation by thanking her and telling her I was a fan. She thanked me quietly, and *Offbeat* published the article online the day before her performance. To this day, more people have read that article than anything else I've written, and readers were as intrigued and delighted by this woman's words as the writer was.

Painter's Song

Even though Haus of Vigilante was over and I was no longer performing, I still went to dozens of burlesque shows. Along with seeing Fleur de Tease and Slow Burn, I would go to Baby Dolls shows at Bayou Park Bar – yet another sketchy club, this time in Mid-City – to catch their monthly shows. All the troupes' shows had a different theme each month. October was obviously Halloween, December was clearly Christmas, summer month themes often had something to do with heat or fire, and the months in between were up to the troupe's discretion. I loved watching performers come up with different and creative routines to fit the themes. Often, while I sat in the audience, I thought of what I would do if I were part of that show.

Unfortunately, it wasn't looking like I would be part of any shows. This was probably for the best because I had been accepted to graduate school. I still felt a little hollow and exceedingly jealous of the women who got to do this every month.

My luck changed when I bumped into Cherry Bombshell, one of the Baby Dolls, at the bookstore where I worked. Cherry and I are the same age, but unlike me, she has the form of a runway model. Tall, thin, fiery red hair, and unbelievably fair skin. She has a classic beauty to her face and a very soft, high voice. I had met her after a Baby Dolls show where she did classic routine after classic routine. All of her dances were simple, but polished and poised. Cherry knew from Spooky that I sang with the troupe before. She had just gotten off from her job at the bank to come and pick up a copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* when she saw me.

“Do you think you'll try dancing again?” she asked.

I shrugged and replied, “I don’t know. All the troupes have enough girls, plus I’m too nervous to go down to pasties yet.” While Spooky did tell me I could do whatever I was comfortable with, I still felt like the girls who revealed the most skin were the most desirable and hireable.

Just then, the universe intervened via Cherry’s cell phone. “Oh my goodness, Spooky just texted that two girls dropped out of our show Friday.”

I damn near dropped the books I had in my arms.

“You should perform!” Cherry said. “Do you want to? I could tell her right now.”

This conversation happened on Wednesday, which gave inexperienced, unconfident me two days to come up with a routine. “I can try,” I said.

Cherry let out a happy squeal before texting Spooky that I was in. She then told me the theme for that show was “Schoolhouse Strips,” a parody of the show *Schoolhouse Rock*. Each dancer was to portray a teacher of a different school subject.

“Come over tomorrow. I can help you with your routine,” Cherry offered.

I accepted, marveling at how welcoming and friendly this community is. At her apartment the next day, we deduced that one of the only characters left for me to choose from was the art teacher. Cherry suggested a soft tune called “The Painter Song” by Norah Jones. It was perfect for my first non-singing striptease because it was only two minutes. I wasn’t ready to take the eight-minute challenge again yet.

Once we had my character and my song, we brainstormed on how a sexy art teacher would do a striptease. “You think I could paint my body?” I inquired.

“Ooh, that’d be great!” Cherry said. “Spooky’s husband has a tarp you can put on the stage first. She makes a mess up there sometimes. You should just wear nude colored underwear. You’ll look like you’re naked even though you’re not!”

I grinned. “That’s a great idea! Cherry, I can’t thank you enough for your help.”

“No problem!” she said in her bubbly voice. “Text me if you need anything.”

I went home with the trench coat she lent me. It would be the only thing I took off before I started to paint myself. That seemed... Boring. But what else could I take off? Wearing gloves didn’t make sense. Maybe stockings? No, the song wasn’t long enough for a stocking peel.

What about the bra?

No. For some reason, no one is supposed to see my breasts! I can’t think of what that reason is, but I know there is one! *What’s the big deal? I won’t be completely naked. My nipples will be covered. People will see most of my boobs, but not the sacred bulls-eyes in the not-quite-centers!* I argued with myself like a crazy person for the next 24 hours, struggling to decide if I should take the bra off until I finally made a decision: *Just fucking do it. If you don’t feel comfortable, you won’t do it again.* I texted Cherry asking her to bring an extra pair of pasties.

Her response: “HOORAY!!!”

When I got to the bar, the doorman pointed me to the back kitchen where the girls were getting dressed. This was a letdown after the giant dressing room of Rubyfruit Jungle, but I carried my bag of paints with me to the back. In the kitchen, the Baby Dolls were sprinkling glitter, applying eye shadow, pulling up stockings, and adjusting thong wedgies. Cherry handed me a pair of pasties. They were made of a flexible plastic called

buckram and covered with blue sequins. We didn't realize that, how can I put this, she requires smaller pasties than I do. Houston, we have a problem.

“Don't worry about it. It's dark up there. And if any of your areola is still exposed, you can use concealer makeup.” She showed me how to put them on with fabric glue. “Make sure you don't put the adhesive in the center. It'll hurt like hell when you take them off.”

I hadn't even thought about how ripping them off would feel. After undressing, I tried putting them on. They stuck on the first try, but they were definitely too small. I didn't have any concealer with me, so I put my nude bra on and hoped I wouldn't be thrown out the bar due to a renegade nipple. Finally, I put on my nude underwear and wrapped Cherry's black trench coat around me. I squeezed the red, blue, and yellow paint onto a paper plate and stuck a paintbrush in my hair, which was up in a clip. I watched the other “teachers” do their teases before the emcee finally called my name. The panty wrangler had already laid out the tarp for me, so all I had to do was bring my paints up. I wasn't worried about the set up. I was worried about throwing up. *Don't lose your nerve.* Quivering in my heels, I somehow made it to the stage as Norah Jones softly crooned the words:

If I were a painter, I would paint my reverie

I wandered around the tiny stage, dreamlike, pretending to be in my own reverie. I took the paintbrush out of my hair and pretended to paint something in the air.

And I'm dreaming of a place where I could see your face

And I think my brush would take me there

I unwrapped the trench coat and slid it off before laying it on the floor away from the tarp. When I tried to stand up, I stumbled. I recovered quickly by stepping out of my heels. No shoes. I hate wearing shoes. I walked over to the clear tarp.

But only if I were a painter and could paint a memory

I kneeled down on the tarp and reached behind me. *No turning back now.* I unsnapped the bra and let it fall off. I can't remember if the seven-person audience cheered or not. My pulse was booming so loud in my ears I couldn't hear much of anything. Shaking, I grabbed my paint and started painting swirls on my chest, careful not to touch the blue pasties. *Oh my God, I'm topless.*

I'd climb inside the skies to be with you

The song's ending caught me off guard, but the audience was ready. The bar patrons cheered and clapped, and gave me a better reaction than I was expecting. The routine wasn't good by any means. There was no real choreography, no real costume. My face stayed the same until, as a friend told me later, I took the bra off. Then everyone could see how nervous I was.

"Everyone's nervous their first time," Cherry said. "I know I was. But once you get the first time out of the way, everything after that is cake."

I was still trying to gather my thoughts on what I just did. On how a bunch of strangers just saw me topless. And on how much I *liked* it. I *liked* being topless up there. I *liked* people looking at my body. As nervous as I was while I was actually doing it, that rush was back. I wanted to do it again.

A few days later, Lana contacted me asking if I wanted to be in the October show. I said yes, but I needed bigger pasties. “Girl, come over sometime! I can show you how to make some!”

I took her up on her offer one day after she got off work from her nursing job. Lana’s apartment, which she shared with her boyfriend, looked like someone set off a bomb in a craft store. Scraps of fabric, fake flowers, and bottles of glitter were scattered everywhere. Lana put on *Doctor Who* and got to work teaching me how to make pasties: “Red, black, and silver are good colors to start with since you can use them for almost any show.”

“I don’t know how many shows you think I’ll be doing,” I said. “I wasn’t that great in that last show.”

Lana smiled sweetly. “I’m sure you weren’t that bad. And even if you were, the only way you’re going to get better is if you get up there and do it. You can go to shows and watch YouTube and watch other people all you want. But if you want to get better, you have to move.”

“I want to take Bella Blue’s classes,” I said, tracing the cap to start making the other pasty.

“That’s a good idea,” Lana said as she glued the sequined ribbon in a spiral around a new pasty. “She teaches the basics of the tease, so you’ll get a good foundation. But you should also network.” She stopped gluing a moment to push her nosey cat off the table before continuing, “I know you’ve worked with Ben Wisdom. See if you can kitten for Slow Burn.”

“Will they let me?”

“I don’t see why they wouldn’t,” she said. “Troupes can always use the help. I can’t promise you’ll get paid, but you’d get into shows for free and you’d be able to talk to the other performers. Also, you’ll need a character.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need a stage persona. Whatever your real-life persona is, you have to exaggerate that for the stage. Or you could be a completely different person. It’s up to you. But whatever you do, your character has to be big.”

She was right. As Gypsy Rose Lee was famously told, burlesque dancers have to “get a gimmick.” I thought about it. I picked the name of a superhero. So I should be a superhero, right? Then I thought about how I was pretty well-behaved in my day-to-day life. I’ve never done drugs, never been to jail, I haven’t been knocked up, and I try my best to stay out of trouble.

I was tired of that. I didn’t want to be a superhero. I wanted a chance to be a villain. I wanted Remy to be able to do things Barbie couldn’t. I thought about my comics again. My favorite supervillain is the Joker’s girlfriend Harley Quinn from the Batman comics. I dressed up as Harley earlier that summer for San Diego Comic Con, and I had dozens of comics centered on just her. My love for Harley comes from the fact that I see a lot of myself in her. She’s a nerd and she can be very passionate about certain things – like the Joker. She takes her passion up a notch and allows it to become obsession. She seems sweet and innocent at first, but she’s really a psycho femme fatale.

I wanted Remy to be just like her. Even though she seems alluring and sexy, Remy wouldn’t take crap from anybody. She’d be tough. She’d be crazy. She’d be outrageous. She’d tell the dirtiest jokes, and she’d grin the whole time.

I decided not to tell my parents about the burlesque yet. I wasn't sure if I would continue to do it. I committed to the October show, but everything after that was still uncertain. If this magically became a career, of course I would tell them.

Little did I know how much my life was about to change. I had no clue that I'd start to hear certain songs on the radio and say, "I *have* to dance to this!" I didn't know that one day, songs would inspire me, capture me in ways they never have when I was just a singer. That they would remind me of how I feel when I have to sneeze or have an itch to scratch. I had no idea how the urgency to dance would become almost primal, and I wouldn't be happy until I could make a routine around that song. I had no clue I'd one day be playing songs over and over – in my car, at the gym, walking to class. That some songs would just make me want to move, to get it out of my system and give me some release. As someone who's never touched drugs in her life, I never thought in a quadrillion years that dancing and stripping would become an addiction.

Run the World (Girls)

It took several months, but I was finally starting to feel confident as a dancer by the following spring. I did at least one show every month with the Baby Dolls since that first pasty reveal. Since then, I made several pairs of pasties, two of which had tassels. For every month's theme, I would try to see if I had what I needed to make a costume. Dresses that were collecting dust in my closet were suddenly getting some use, and I became a thrift store queen.

The monthly shows had most of the same girls, but more often than not, Spooky sent out a mass text to every girl she's worked with saying "[Theme] show at [venue] on [date] at [time]. If you want in, email me your music ASAP." I was waiting for Spooky and the girls to accuse me of being an imposter who couldn't dance, but every month, I got that text. Every month, I got one more chance to perform. Every month, I got better.

Teasing the audience with the promise of revealing more took practice. Staying balanced, maintaining the graceful line of the body, being creative. It's work. I have to put weeks or even months of time, energy, and money into five minutes of stage time. But those five minutes are a joy to which words can't do justice. I gravitated more toward neo-burlesque since it keeps the cheekiness of classic burlesque and combines it with punk rock, fetish, or other aspects of modern culture. In fact, a lot of my co-workers have more dance training than our predecessors, "embellishing the old bump-and-grind with samba, tap, belly dancing, jazz, hula," and even martial arts (Wisner 16). We owe it to our audience to give a great show, so we train ourselves to do more than just strip.

Over the months of training with Bella and practice with Spooky, I discovered my biggest strength is timing – both musical and comedic. Revealing my body in clever,

seductive, or funny ways in perfect unison with the music just came naturally to me, probably because I grew up studying music. I can pop off a stocking at exactly the perfect drumbeat. I can rip open a shirt right as the horns swell. When I drop my pants to reveal the Batman symbol on my panties, or when I pull out a playing card from inside my bra, the crowd goes crazy with laughter. The Performance Bug in me feeds on that applause and laughter like a sexy mosquito.

Even though my Performance Bug was being sated and I was finding my place in this Wonderland, I still hadn't told my parents. This world was pulling me in so fast, but I didn't know if I would keep doing this. I created a separate Facebook page for my stage name – finally I had a place to make dick jokes on the internet without my sister giving me crap – and I waited until everyone at home fell asleep before I practiced in my bedroom. If I had stopped after a few months, I probably could have kept this secret hidden forever.

Hiding it became more difficult when Spooky said we were performing in Bourbon and Burlesque, a fundraiser for the Contemporary Arts Center that featured a group act from every burlesque troupe in the city. Spooky already had a routine in mind, and she wanted me and four other girls to be part of it. The other girls were Cherry Bombshell, Moira Vie, Hurricane Velour, and Honey Tangerine. Lana had to take a burlesque hiatus because she and her hubby were expecting. Moira Vie was as tall as Cherry and also had red hair, but it was a darker red. Moira owns a vintage clothing store called Retro Active. She's soft-spoken and thoughtful but has a sharp wit. Moira always wears her hair and does her makeup like a woman from the 1940s, and I'm fairly certain

she's seen every black and white film ever made. It makes sense that she thrives on classic burlesque.

Hurricane Velour's style was far from classic. Hurricane often cut her brown hair in crazy buzz cuts and danced to rock or rap music. Being one of the youngest members of our troupe – she wasn't old enough to drink when she started doing burlesque – she had a knack for twerking and bounce dance. She had a tendency to get an attitude with people, but in her heart she always meant well.

One of the biggest hearts in the troupe belongs to Honey Tangerine. With a sense of humor as wild as her hair, Honey loves comic books and science fiction as much as I do, and they often find their way into her routines, a practice many of us call “nerdlesque.” She is the same age as Hurricane, and the two are best friends. On more than one occasion, Honey has dropped everything she was doing to come to my house if I needed someone to talk to or just needed to hang out.

Of course, our troupe would not be complete without a leader. Spooky, our witty, stubborn mother hen, has been a burlesque performer for over a decade. I've seen her nail a poised, classic routine as well as a deadly goth routine all in the same night. She's one of the most versatile performers in the city, and she's a pleasure to work with – as long as you're in her troupe. Many people outside the Baby Dolls, however, refuse to work with her. They say she's unreasonable and volatile. I think she's a wonderful lady, but I can admit that she tends to start fights for no reason and she also holds grudges like no one I've ever seen. But she's fiercely protective of her girls. There were some nights where she went home after a show empty handed just so that we could get the tiny sum for gas money. She's always done everything she could to get us better gigs.

Tired of not being taken seriously – and let’s face it, we weren’t – Spooky came up with a concept for a routine that she assured us would blow everyone away at Bourbon and Burlesque. She chose the song “Run the World (Girls)” by Beyonce, a feisty feminist anthem with a killer drum line backing up Beyonce’s vocals. She also sketched the costumes, which were going to be red and gold majorette costumes. We choreographed the routine together. Spooky suggested marching, I came up with the glove peel, Cherry suggested the floor work, and Honey, Hurricane, and Moira choreographed the other peels and the rest of the filler. This routine didn’t belong to one of us – it was ours.

Along with choreographing this monster, we had to make our costumes. From scratch. All of it. While Spooky and Moira took care of ordering the fabric and the patterns, we all had to go to the fabric store to buy our own thread, snaps, tassels, and more thread. Every night for two weeks, we met up at Moira’s shop – which we lovingly dubbed the “Sweat Shop” – to work on our costumes. Some nights, we were there till two or three in the morning cutting and sewing. Hurricane and I were the only ones who didn’t know how to use a sewing machine, so I had to learn quickly on one of Moira’s two machines.

If this seems like way too much labor and sleep deprivation for no money, it probably was. But while we were there, we talked. With show tunes playing on the radio in the background, I had a chance to learn more about these women. I still wasn’t much of a talker at shows. I learned that Moira and Cherry were going through divorces, but found solace in dancing. I learned that Honey is working on a degree in Women’s Studies and was writing a thesis on women in comic books. I learned that Spooky dreams of starting a burlesque marching group, and I learned that Hurricane adored burlesque

because she believed all women are worthy of worship. My troupe-mates aren't just girls who take their clothes off. They're human beings... Who take their clothes off. Our sewing/bonding sessions went on until the day of the show. We left the Sweat Shop with our costumes, went back to our houses to shower/fix our hair/apply makeup and then headed downtown to the Contemporary Arts Center. We brought safety pins and a small sewing kit for last-minute costume emergencies, of which there were many but we were able to fix them.

At the CAC, we had to share a dressing room with the other troupes. I was excited knowing I'd be dancing on the same stage as the troupes I could only watch from the audience before. I was one of them now, a member of the elite club. At least, I almost was. The other troupes had good venues that sold out month after month. The Baby Dolls had to perform wherever they would have us, and we were lucky if we got half the place filled. This was probably because the other troupes did shows that the general public wanted to see. For example, in December, most troupes did a Christmas themed show. The Baby Dolls, however, did "Communist Christmas," a Russian winter themed show. Spooky's idea. She refused to do what the other troupes were doing – another reason some people didn't want to work with her – and prided herself on being avant-garde with her show themes. I respected her for that, but at the same time, I wanted people to come to our shows.

I had a feeling they would after they saw our group number. Wearing costumes that consisted of red booty shorts, red bras, black heels, red spats, red gloves, red corsets, red skirts, red majorette jackets, and red headpieces all adorned with gold trim, we gathered around, did our Hands In, and then went to the side of the stage. This was my

first time performing burlesque in an actual theater. I wanted to make damn sure it wouldn't be my last.

The emcee announced our troupe's name, and Hurricane marched onstage first, calling out "Left, left, left right left" as she made her way to the middle. Then she blew her whistle, and the DJ started our song. We marched out in an impressive formation, keeping our movements clean and sharp like soldiers do. As we removed different pieces of clothing, we changed formation, moving from a triangle, to a line, to a V, back to a line. By the time we were in our underwear, we were laying on the floor with our legs in the air.

My persuasion can build a nation

After showing off our legs, we popped back up to get back in line, take off each other's bras, and twirl red pasties with gold tassels. Then we marched back into another V formation for the last

Who run the world? Girls!

The applause was deafening. We practically skipped off the stage and tackled each other in hugs when we got back to the dressing room. Dancers from other troupes poured into the now cramped dressing space to congratulate us. "You were amazing!" Trixie Minx said. "Those costumes are fantastic! Y'all were awesome!" Bella Blue chimed in. *The best dancers in New Orleans are congratulating me?*

I did it. I was a Somebody in the burlesque world. I was part of a successful troupe. No more hole-in-the-wall bars. No more shitholes. No more empty seats. I wanted more shows in theaters with extravagant costumes and lights and grandeur and everything big big BIG! Spooky and the girls helped me get my foot in the door, and we were going

to go places. Spooky's husband DC, a man who runs a comic book shop and is in several bands and is living my dream, later told me Spooky always saw my potential: "When she saw you sing, she said, 'I'm gonna make her a star.'"

I laughed. "Oh come on. That's something people only say in movies."

"I swear she said it," DC said. "And look at you now."

I smiled. *Look at me now. All of me.*

Arriving home after the post-show soiree, I snuck back into my house, crept to the bathroom and washed Remy off my face. My costume-filled suitcase stayed in the car until I could get it back in the house without making any noise and without being seen. Even though I was inching closer to crossing the line from amateur to professional, I still hadn't told my family. I tried bringing up the idea to my mom – even took her to a show I wasn't performing in – but she didn't seem to understand it. She didn't hate it, but she didn't seem to get it. So I wanted to save that conversation for when the time was right. In the meantime, I had to be sneaky.

I wouldn't have to worry about sneaking around much longer. During the weeks I was choreographing and sewing my costume with the girls, I was also in the process of moving out of my parents' house. It wasn't that I was trying to get away from them – okay, it kind of was. The location was better at my new apartment, equidistant from both my school and my day job. Also, I was 24; it was time for me to be a big girl and live on my own. Even though hiding my burlesque life would be much easier after I wasn't living with my folks, I still knew I should tell my family. And, one day, I did.

Ain't Misbehavin'

Getting into a profession where I take my clothes off in front of people, I knew the comparisons to *another* profession were inevitable.

“Are you the other stripper?” the stumbling tourist asked me.

The devil horns probably gave me away. “I’m the other burlesque dancer,” I politely replied.

“Same difference,” the middle-aged woman slurred.

I smiled at the oxymoron and the drunken moron. “No, it’s not,” I said before sauntering off. I didn’t feel like arguing, and hopefully after she saw us perform, I wouldn’t have to.

I wandered a bit around Irvin Mayfield’s Jazz Playhouse, a swanky little bar at the Royal Sonesta Hotel. Despite the notorious summer-in-New-Orleans humidity, the joint was packed. Even the plush seats circling the center pillar were filled. Irvin Mayfield and his jazz band wrapped up at around 11:45pm, giving us about fifteen minutes of mingle time before we started Burlesque Ballroom, a free weekly burlesque show with a rotating cast of seasoned burlesque dancers.

The moves and techniques I learned in Bella’s classes combined with the experience I gained through my monthly shows with the Baby Dolls combined with our kickass display at Bourbon and Burlesque were getting me noticed. By the end of the spring of 2012, Trixie Minx from Fleur de Tease asked me to become a dancer for Ballroom. Knowing that only the best burlesque dancers work with Trixie Minx, I jumped at the opportunity without a parachute.

After a few minutes, the woman found me again. “I’m sorry I called you a stripper.”

I suddenly felt bad for thinking she was a moron. “It’s okay.”
“No, it’s not. You seem real sweet.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I almost told her that I wasn’t offended when she called me the S-word even though I know I’m supposed to be. Instead, I went with the standard, “Thank you. Enjoy the show!”

“I will! By the way, love the costume!” she said before heading back to her table.

My costume that night was my power suit. I was wearing a black blazer, long red gloves, a red corset, special tear-away pants, black fuck-me pumps, stockings, and a red bra with gold rhinestones – and they would all be coming off in that order. The only garb I’d still be wearing by the end of my song consisted of a red thong adorned with some fringe, two red pasties with gold tassels, and my devil horns. With the just-below sweltering atmosphere threatening to annihilate my meticulous makeup, I couldn’t wait to strip away my costume.

The components of my costume were specially modified the way all of my costumes are – to come off easily and dramatically. For example, my tear-away pants used to be ordinary thrift shop pants until my best friend/seamstress made them fantastic. She cut them up the side seams, and then sewed snap tape into each seam. Whether I’m slowly pulling them apart one side at a time or yanking them off completely at the right moment, my tear-away pants get a wild reaction from the audience. They make my power suit one of my favorite costumes – that and the fact that the blazer/corset combo makes my rack look amazing.

While I normally wear a fedora with this ensemble, I opted for devil horns instead since I was dancing to “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” a peculiar song choice since all I do is misbehave when I dance. To add to the mischief, I decided to get a drink. Trixie usually doesn’t want us to have alcohol before we perform, and I can understand why: it’s hard to be intoxicating while intoxicated. But I figured out a loophole by having a drink *while* I performed. I can’t think of too many other forms of dance that allow dancers to do that.

After procuring my Jack and seven from the bar, one of the few beacons in the dark room, I meandered over to the entrance of the club. The entrance to the Jazz Playhouse is right by the front doors of the hotel, which leads down the short Yellow-Brick Road to Bourbon Street. Trixie was standing by the club entrance letting people passing by know that the burlesque show would start in a few minutes. If her crazy black and gold sequined dress and tiny glittered top hat didn’t scream “BURLESQUE DANCER,” her polite explanations and verbal advertisement would.

Trixie is one of the lucky few who makes a living as a burlesque dancer. Typical pay for a burlesque dancer is a cut of the door at each show... Which isn’t nearly enough to cover rent/bills/glitter addictions/gallons of adhesive. Because of this, we have typical Muggle jobs to fund our extravagant nightlife. Professional burlesque dancers have to hustle and they have to travel, and they usually have to crash on friends’ sofas when they do travel. But that’s part of what makes it special for us – we do it because we love it, not because there’s money in it.

“Come on in! There’s a burlesque show tonight!” Trixie said in a bubbly voice to a group of guys who were probably in their thirties but still dressed like frat boys.

“Burlesque? Doesn’t that mean stripping?” a guy with a Hand Grenade said.

“It does involve a striptease, yes,” she said.

“Dude! So you and her are gonna get naked?” another guy with way too many non-seasonal Mardi Gras beads asked.

“Nope,” Trixie perked. “If you want to see naked girls, Rick’s Cabaret is right across the street.” She smiled warmly.

The guys stared blankly, trying to decide if they should cross the threshold into the world of burlesque. Unfortunately – or fortunately, perhaps – they declined by heading into the hotel lobby.

Trixie merely shrugged. “Fuck ‘em.”

“Not enough Jack in the world, Trix” I said. “Somebody called me a stripper in there.”

“Did you say you weren’t?”

“I did. She was drunk.”

There are people in our community who feel the need to put as much distance between us and topless dancers as possible. Some of those dancers are the same people who claim that only classic burlesque is “true” burlesque. Meanwhile, they believe neo-burlesque is trashy, that somehow, getting naked out of a gown is classier than getting naked out of anything else.

While most burlesque artists may not necessarily look down on strippers, they know the rest of the world seems to. I’ll admit there are differences between burlesque shows and strip clubs. At every strip club I’ve been to, the women started out wearing a bra and thong. After maybe thirty seconds into her dance, the bra disappears, rendering the woman topless. At burlesque shows, however, nudity is not allowed.

Another difference is the execution. In the years I've been doing burlesque, I've been hearing and repeating the same explanation over and over: People go to strip clubs to see naked women; people go to burlesque shows to watch women take their clothes off. At strip clubs, the women become topless quickly and remain so for the rest of their dance. Burlesque dancers, however, take their time, slowly teasing the audience with the promise of more skin each time they unlace their corset or peel off a glove. There is much more production, more theatricality, and far more humor.

I feel some people unfairly look down on strippers because they perform for other people and cater to the public's dollar. They tend to be objectified and degraded. While I know burlesque dancers are objectified, I can say with conviction that none of us stand for degradation. We do encourage catcalls and whistles and the occasional "Take it off," but we expect the audience to keep it civil. I watched security throw a patron out for yelling, "I wanna fuck that one up the ass!" Also, as the Rules of Burlesque state, touching is out of the question.

"Don't sweat it, Remy," Trixie told me.

"I'm alright. I wasn't offended," I said. "I know I should be, but I'm not."

Trixie shrugged. "Nobody says you *should* be offended. If it doesn't bug you, who cares? Call yourself whatever you want."

Do I mind being called a stripper? I'm part of the minority that believes that strippers – and prostitutes and porn stars and sex workers – deserve respect. Unfortunately, the general public frowns upon such indecent activities. But burlesque is that strange, wispy performance art that straddles the line between the accepted and the taboo. Most people would probably have an easier time telling their coworkers "I went to

a burlesque show over the weekend” than “I had a blast at the strip club over the weekend.” We in the community are all too aware of that double standard. To have a wider audience, we have to be somewhat acceptable to the majority of the population. We want to be accepted by our families and our friends and our colleagues, and being associated with something that’s part of society’s seedy underbelly doesn’t do us any favors in that regard.

Burlesque didn’t come about by being socially acceptable. It came about by defying what society called acceptable. A woman choosing to remove her clothes before an audience, to have complete control over her body, was a revolutionary act. It’s *still* a revolutionary act. This is why I am constantly conflicted about the cookie-cutter ideals of the industry. We’re supposed to be stomping on the standards and giving the rules the middle finger. Burlesque is supposed to be dirty, raunchy, and arousing, and history shows this is not a new development. As burlesque artists, it’s our job to take taboo topics – like sex – and shove them in people’s faces. Which is exactly what I wanted to do.

Part II: The Reveal

“Art is not safe.”

- Rob Zombie

All Your Lies

I can't hide anything from my sister. My family knew I was singing in burlesque shows, but they thought it was just singing. Eleanor heard through one of my cousins that I might be doing more than just singing, and she suspected I wasn't keeping my clothes on. She confronted me about it in mid-July, but she wasn't accusatory. I told her that I don't get completely naked and that it's a lot of fun. She didn't seem to understand everything right away, but she told me that I was a grown woman and I could do what I want and she had my back.

What a relief! I had to share this with the burlesque community via Facebook: "My sister figured out my burlesque secret... And she's totally cool with it!!!! Such a weight off my shoulders!!!!" Finally, I had someone in my immediate family in the loop. In August, my troupe and I found out we had been accepted to perform in the New Orleans Burlesque Festival. We were overjoyed, and I wanted my parents to be overjoyed for me too. So I made the decision to tell them my secret. They would be proud of me, right? I told Ellie about my decision to come clean to Mom and she offered to be there with me while I told her. We invited Mom over to Ellie's house.

"Here goes nothing," I told Ellie as Mom walked inside.

"No backing out now," she told me. She was acting like I was about to tell Mom "I'm pregnant."

An unplanned pregnancy probably would have gotten a better reaction from my mother.

"I'm not happy," my mom said. "I don't like the idea of you dancing around naked. I don't like the idea of strange men drooling all over you."

Legit concerns, I suppose, but I was still shocked at her reaction. I told her I was a burlesque performer, but I think what she heard me say was that I was a Bourbon Street hooker addicted to heroin.

“It makes me happy,” I said, timidly. “I’m not ashamed of what I do.”

“Then why did you hide it from me?” Mom countered.

“Because it’s one of those things where people either get it or they don’t.”

“Well I’ll be honest, I don’t get it.”

That’s why I didn’t want to tell you... But I’m tired of hiding this.

“What if your daddy winds up at a show? Or your sisters’ husbands? Or one of your teachers?”

If I don’t invite them, they have no reason to go.

“I just wish you had more respect for yourself. More respect for your body.”

“I do have respect for my body!” I said. “Probably *more* so since I started doing this!”

One of the myriad reasons I love burlesque is because people of all shapes and sizes and races and genders and beliefs participate. Like almost every dancer I’ve worked with, I’ve struggled with body image issues. I still do some days. But knowing that I have the confidence to get onstage and show myself off has done wonders for my self-esteem. It’s done the same for a plethora of other dancers. One of the best dancers in the country, Tigger!, said, “The best thing I ever did for my body was to start showing it!” I’m now proud of my body and more than happy to show it off. My troupe-mate Moira Vie says it well: “You wouldn’t keep a Picasso in the basement.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

My skin prickled. “A year,” I whispered.

Mom’s hand flew to her face to cover her mouth. Good God, I was not ready for that. I was not ready to see her cry.

“I can’t support you on this, Baby,” she said trying to fight tears.

Please don’t cry. Yell at me, scold me, anything. Just don’t cry. But Mom cried anyway. *Because of me.*

“I’ll be the one to tell your daddy,” she said walking out the door.

I suddenly didn’t want Daddy to know. If Mom reacted this badly, how would he react? Ellie walked my mom out, hugging her tightly I’m sure. By the time Ellie came back inside, I was crying. She pulled me into a hug.

“I didn’t mean to make her cry,” I sobbed. I was such a fool. What mother would be okay with her baby girl taking her clothes off onstage and then hiding it for a year? Okay, I’m not a baby girl, but I felt about as smart as one with that decision.

“I know. But Barb, are you getting naked up there?” she asked softly.

“No. I’m wearing pasties and a thong.”

“Barb,” she said, “that’s naked.” She rubbed my head, trying to get me to stop crying. “It’ll be okay. I’m here for you.”

The next day, my mom asked me to come over to talk some more. When I arrived at my parents’ house that evening, I learned that Mom had told my dad everything, which made my stomach drop to my feet. Mom told me, “No matter how this conversation ends, I still love you,” as she sat with me on her sofa.

“I love you too, Mom.”

That was the last kind thing anyone said that night.

“So what exactly do you do?” Dad asked from his throne of a recliner.

I took a breath. “Well, my troupe and I put on a show every month. We each do two solo numbers. Sometimes duets, a group number, whatever. Usually, each show has a theme, and we base each number around that theme.”

“You strip though, right?” Dad inquired, shockingly calm. Daddy never was the waiting-on-the-porch-with-a-shotgun type when it came to me and my sisters. He was still fiercely protective of us, but has always been somewhat more relaxed than my mom. Still, I could hear the hurt in his baritone voice when he asked “What do you strip down to?”

I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm not doing anything wrong. “Pasties and a thong.”

Their disappointment was tangible, and the silence that followed stung like a swarm of silent hornets. I couldn't look at them. I felt more naked in that moment than I ever have on stage.

“Baby, why?” Mom asked.

“It breaks the rules. It's fulfilling,” was all I managed to get out. I wasn't used to fighting them.

I should have talked about how it pokes fun at *everything*. About how several times a month, I give social expectations the middle finger by taking my clothes off and not behaving like a lady. Unfortunately, behaving like a lady is what my mom wants me to do. I was stupid enough to believe she would be happy that the tomboy I used to be

had finally transformed into a woman who wears more makeup and dresses than a pageant girl.

I stopped myself from delving into how stripping gave me a high that mere singing never could. I didn't describe how I love showing off onstage, and how right now, at this moment in my life, gives me the fix I need. I was silent about how it helps me acknowledge my own beauty and the beauty in other women. Instead, I quickly summed up how I eventually became a strong dancer, strong enough to where I don't have to sing anymore. I used to have to beg people to let me perform with them. Now, producers and troupes are asking *me* to perform with *them*.

"How did you get into this?" Mom asked, as if I joined a gang or a cult.

"Remember how I told you I was singing with a burlesque troupe? The more I performed with the troupe, the more I learned." I felt like I was rambling, but I wanted to get the words out before I lost my courage. "You know how I've always wanted to dance but kind of sucked at it? Well, this is the first kind of dance that came naturally to me." They remained silent, so I continued. "Honestly, I feel like I'm back in theater like I was in high school. Except I'm running the show now. I'm the director, the choreographer, the music editor, the costume-maker, the make-up artist... Mama, I'm good at this. Like, really good."

"So why don't you just do theater?" Mom asked.

Because I would have to keep my clothes on. Because in theater, I have to listen to someone else and perform someone else's work. Because theater is too tame. Because I destroyed the part of my brain that tells me "I'm supposed to be embarrassed about being in my underwear in front of strangers."

“Or sing? Or do comedy?” Dad added, probably because he loves doing both of those things himself.

“I do both in burlesque,” I retorted. I wondered if telling Daddy that his comedic idols Abbott and Costello got their start in burlesque (*Behind the Burly Q*) would lessen his disappointment.

“What if somebody follows you home?” Mom asked.

I wasn’t surprised she went into overprotection mode, something I have to deal with more than my two older sisters. Even before I fell in love with burlesque, Mom has always been terrified that I will wind up stalked, raped, or murdered – or all of the above, not necessarily in that order. I’m in my twenties, but I’ll always be the baby to her.

“Mom, we take precautions. We carpool to shows, and we text each other when we get home. Honestly, I feel safer doing this than when I bartended.”

“But Baby, not everybody’s going to see it as art.” She started crying again, and for a moment I wondered if she was deaf because she didn’t seem to hear me. “You’re putting yourself in a dangerous situation!”

“What if this keeps you from getting hired?” Dad asked.

“I perform under a stage name. People don’t know unless I tell them.” I pulled my knees to my chest on the sofa.

“You think they won’t figure it out?”

“You didn’t,” I said, much more harshly than I intended.

“Baby... Are you okay? Are you depressed again?” Mom asked.

I looked her dead in the eye. While gritting my teeth to fight back tears, I said, “There’s nothing wrong with me!”

Nothing I said worked.

“Baby, I wish I could take you in my arms and tell you everything’s gonna be okay. But I can’t take you in my arms and tell you everything’s gonna be okay. Not when you keep a secret like that for a fucking year.” She couldn’t keep her voice from shaking. “You put burlesque before your family. Nothing should come before your family!”

My throat closed like it always does when I’m scared or upset. I kept my head down and cried. I couldn’t look at her. *Christ, I fucked up.*

Even after talking for what seemed like hours, Mom said, “Nothing you said has changed my mind. And I know nothing I said has changed your mind.” She brushed her blonde hair away from her drenched face. “And it hurts so much because I know there’s nothing I can do to stop you.” She pleaded at me with her greenish blue eyes, eyes she was kind enough to pass along to me. I haven’t seen her look that helpless since Hurricane Katrina.

After that conversation, my nightlife became the taboo topic, the sparkly circus elephant in the room. My parents’ reaction reminded me why I kept this hidden for so long. For the first time in my life, I couldn’t turn to them for support, a fact that left me feeling helpless and hollow.

Holding Out For a Hero

I turned to my sister Eleanor, who is only two years older than I. Ellie's been in my corner my whole life. Whenever people called me weird or said I was a freak, she told them "Fuck off." Given her history as my biggest cheerleader, I hoped she could get behind me this time. Because she had yet to see a show, I asked her to come see me at the New Orleans Burlesque Festival, the apex of my career until that point. Then she could tell my folks that it really isn't as bad as they're making it out to be. I hoped with everything I had that she would understand burlesque and see what it's about.

She didn't.

"I felt physically sick seeing you up there," she said, sitting next to me in her kitchen. "All those men drooling over you, knocking each other out the way to get to the stage. I cried the whole way home."

Um... Were we at the same show? At the House of Blues New Orleans that night, the audience was mostly women. In reality, almost all burlesque audiences are mostly women. Some ladies, much like myself, enjoy seeing other ladies being confident and sexy and in charge. They love the glamour and the spectacle, and can actually be more rowdy than the men. The men who do attend burlesque shows are often there on dates with women – or men; we have a very large gay following.

But Ellie was being about as open as my mom was. "You're objectifying yourself." Now *she* started crying. Must be genetic. "You think that you're better than a stripper," – *When did I say that?* – "But you can take a piece of shit and wrap it in pretty paper, but it'll still be a piece of shit."

Wow. I have no idea what getting a bullet in the chest feels like, but something tells me the shock I felt that second is similar. Did my hero really just say that? Is she agreeing with the rest of the close-minded naysayers who think we're Bourbon Street strippers disguised in glamorous gowns and look down on us as such? Does she think that negatively of strippers? Yet again, I made the mistake of forgetting that not everyone gets it. My sister, like many other people, doesn't understand that burlesque is art. It's an objective, aesthetically appealing expression. When I dance, I express not only my sexuality, but also happiness, anger, love, betrayal, or whatever else that number happens to be about. I use nothing but my clothing and my body to tell a story in the span of one song. Despite the fact that I love what I do and am dedicated to my craft, my sister's words still cut. It was my turn to cry.

"Barb... I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. I'm not judging you..."

Could've fucking fooled me!

"I'm just trying to understand. Why do you do this?" she said, sounding eerily similar to Mom. "Is something missing in your life or something? Are you okay?" She pleaded at me with her blue eyes, eyes Dad was kind enough to pass along to her.

Typical. Since I'm taking my clothes off in front of strangers, I must be not right in the head. Just like every single stripper in a strip joint has "daddy issues." I'm not saying burlesque dancers or strippers don't have issues. I've worked with burlesque dancers who suffer from bipolar disorder, who have been molested, who are single mothers, who are former drug addicts, etc. But *anyone* could have those struggles. In fact, sometimes performing helps us cope with whatever life throws at us. But taking our

clothes off doesn't make us less human. Even if we do it as a response to our issues, we still deserve respect.

“You think your audience respects you?”

Yes.

“You think any man will respect you?”

Yes.

“Are you trying to get attention?”

Yes.

My throat closed again, like it always does when I get upset or scared. Ellie brushed her blonde hair away from her drenched face, again mimicking our mother. “Barb, seeing you naked should be something special, something reserved for someone you love,” she said, reminding me of our Catholic high school principal.

“Dammit, Ellie, I'm not naked! If I were naked, I'd get thrown out of the theater!”

“But you are. You degrade yourself when you become *Remy Dee*.”

She said my burlesque name with contempt and disgust, and it felt like someone took a power drill to my chest cavity. Instead, a few horrible moments of silence crept by before Ellie finally spoke: “Look. I'm not telling you to stop. I want you to be happy. I know Mom, Dad, and I aren't going to like everything you do.”

For the first time in hours, I grinned. “Well, I don't like everything you do either. You read *Twilight*.”

That made her laugh. Then I laughed. She and I have exactly the same laugh, and hearing it was like finding water in the Sahara. For about two seconds, the hurt

disappeared and things felt normal. Then we stopped laughing, and I knew our relationship would never be normal again. She wasn't in my corner on this.

Upsettin' Me

Right around the time I unintentionally alienated myself from my family, my dating life took an interesting turn when a pale A.V. nerd who resembled a slightly emaciated Harry Potter entered the stage. Funnily enough, Fred met Remy first on Facebook. I wasn't expecting anything beyond a pleasant conversation. He wasn't looking for a hot date when he saw my picture through a mutual friend on Facebook. We weren't looking for a significant other when we agreed to meet for ice cream and a writing session. He didn't seem interested in making me his girlfriend when he came to one of my shows not two weeks after meeting me.

But my stupid heart wouldn't stay still. I didn't fall in love so much as carefully tiptoe into it. As the months passed, we made the transition from Facebook friends to friends with benefits to best friends to people who look at each other and think, "OH MY GOD IS THIS REALLY POSSIBLE HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE I'M SO FREAKING HAPPY!!!!!!!!!!!"

He couldn't have come at a better time. There my mom was telling me burlesque would keep me from getting a boyfriend, and low and behold I had a boyfriend! Was he a perfect boyfriend? No. But he was there for me! Even though he knew I was a burlesque dancer as soon as he met me, I asked him how he felt about having a girlfriend who took her clothes off in front of strangers: "You really have no problem with other guys seeing what... what..."

"What only I'm supposed to see? What's supposed to be 'mine'?" he inquired.

I nodded.

“But it’s not ‘mine.’ It’s yours,” he replied. “Baby, I see the look you get on your face when you’re up there. It’s amazing!”

“You do know I flirt with the audience, right?” I said, playing an amateur devil’s advocate.

“I know it’s part of your act. You’re supposed to flirt with the audience. It doesn’t make me jealous or anything.”

I’ve met a few dancers with disapproving beaus. I don’t know how they could date someone who doesn’t support them. If Fred didn’t like me dancing, that would have been a deal breaker.

He got special treatment at my shows sometimes. One night at a Burlesque Ballroom show, I was dancing to one of my favorites “Upsettin’ Me,” blissfully aware of all the eyes on me, including one particular smile and deep green eyes that make me feel like a fool. I sauntered over to where he was sitting, gently kicking my heels off along the way. I raised one leg so that my foot was resting on his knee, and I pointed at my stocking. Knowing what to do, Fred slowly rolled my stocking down my leg, and looked up at me as if to say “The heat of your body is all I want to know.” He left a soft kiss on my exposed knee, giving me a rush that added to my already skyrocketing adrenaline levels. Finally, I lifted my foot so that he could take the stocking off completely. I playfully snatched my stocking back with a quick wink before turning around to finish my number.

Fred became what Spooky’s husband DC calls a “burlesque husband.” Spooky and DC make up one of many burlesque power couples. Even after ten years of marriage,

they still act like love-stricken teenagers around each other. DC often works sound for Spooky's shows, and Spooky go-go dances when one of DC's four bands plays.

Fred would soon follow DC's lead, helping me make props for routines, working sound for my shows, even hosting a show here or there. DC recognized what Fred was becoming:

"If a guy comes to a girl's burlesque shows a lot, he's a burlesque boyfriend," DC explained. "If you're dating a burlesque dancer, then you're a burlesque husband."

"What are you if you marry a burlesque dancer?" Fred asked.

"Doomed."

Fred laughed while Spooky smacked DC.

Knowing I had a "burlesque husband" comforted me. As my family and I grew more distant, Fred and I grew closer. More than once, I told Fred why it meant so much that he came to my shows: "You're the closest thing to family I'll ever have in that audience."

Even though I had a pleasant distraction with my blossoming romance, the sparkly circus elephant in the room was still there. After coming clean to my mom and my sister about my nightlife, I just didn't want to try anymore. Not to sound like a teenager obsessed with Nirvana and black clothes – that was so ten years ago for me – but I've always been a bit of a pariah in my family. Both of my older sisters have their husbands and their jobs and their houses. They have socially acceptable hobbies like watching reality TV or shopping for shoes. I'm the one wearing costumes when it's not Halloween, geeking out like a crazy person at comic book conventions, and performing

sexy dances in front of strangers. I feel like I fit in better around erotic dancers and circus freaks than I do in my own family.

But I love my family so much. They've supported me on almost everything until this. Not having their support cuts. Even though I had a loving boyfriend, more friends than I could ask for, and hundreds of fans (according to Facebook), I've never felt more alone.

The loneliness was awful, but I knew I couldn't say anything to change their minds, so I tried to avoid the topic of burlesque at all costs. Unfortunately, my mom would address it at the most random moments. My birthday dinner, for instance. A few days before my 25th birthday – three months after I “came out” as a dancer – my mom and Ellie took me to dinner. After having a few glasses of wine, my mom felt the need to bring up the fact that she doesn't approve of my lifestyle.

“I just can't figure out why you'd deliberately sink to that level.”

I tried to stay calm and not let her words puncture the verbal shield I'd built up. “I didn't sink anywhere. I'm still a good kid... I'm still a good *woman*.”

Mom didn't stop to choose her words. “You are a good kid. You're a smart kid. But you're doing something stupid.”

While I was fighting the urge to storm out the restaurant, Ellie was quiet. She said nothing to defend me. “Happy Birthday,” she said after Mom's rant.

My fists balled up under the table. Was this a joke? Did they lure me to my favorite restaurant under celebratory pretenses just to scold me? *Again?* I had never wanted so desperately to get away from the two women I love the most. When I finally did, I cried the whole car ride home.

Mom and I had conversations similar to this at least once a month since my revelation, and I endured them like I endure my period. She always made the effort to remind me that she loves me unconditionally, so there's that. But she continually got frustrated when I proved her wrong about my profession and what it means for me.

"You'll get fired," she said.

"My boss knows."

"You'll never be a professor."

"There are already professors who know what I do. There are professors who *do* what I do." *So sorry I have a different dream, a different definition of success than what you'd hoped for.*

One day when we were trying to talk about it, she calmly asked, "Will you ever stop?"

"I don't know."

"Because the only thing giving me hope is that one day you'll stop."

I scrambled for an answer, "I want to do it at least until the end of the season."

"Which is when?"

"March."

She looked crestfallen. Even though it was only few months away, it must have seemed like forever to her.

"March then."

My throat closed again. I don't regret many things, but I do regret giving my mom more hope when I knew, deep down, I wasn't going to stop in March.

Summertime

“Your mother cried herself to sleep last night because of you,” my dad said in an email. He sent me the message the day after I told my sister, who told Mom, that I wasn’t going to stop dancing. March had come and gone, and this news must have finally sunk in for my mom. “I think we need to talk,” the pixels read. “Let me know when you and I can get together.”

I barely finished the email before I started crying. *Need to talk? What is there to talk about?* Mom has been holding on to the hope that I would stop doing burlesque. That it’s just a phase. That I will one day give up the dozens of costume pieces and the hours of choreography and practice. That I will stop doing something that gives me a rush and confidence and is just so much freaking fun. Even if I do stop, do they really think that will change anything? Do they think I’ll be the prodigal daughter returned, and that we’ll be a happy, “normal” family again? Will we just pretend that my burlesque career never happened? It was too late to go back to a life without burlesque, and even if it wasn’t, that’s the last thing in the world I wanted for myself.

I hated hurting my mom. I hated not being able to talk to my mom. I hated getting a sick feeling in my stomach every time I saw her name on my cell phone. I hated that we were both scared. I didn’t want to resurrect the elephant in the room by talking to Dad. I didn’t want to go on a verbal rampage.

But Dad wanted to talk. So after two days of fighting mini-panic attacks, I packed my emotional baggage and made the trip to my parents’ house in the abyss we call Kenner. Dad was sitting on the swing in the backyard, his blindingly bald orb of a head

bent over a book about Fats Domino. When he heard me shuffling over the concrete, he looked up and smiled, which lessened my panic somewhat.

“Hey,” he said in his comforting, familiar baritone.

“Hi, Daddy,” I said, sitting next to him on the swing and kissing him on the cheek.

When Dad didn’t say anything, I asked, “How’s she doing?”

“She’s upset... And I think you know why.” He wasn’t accusing. Just stating fact.

The words fell out of my mouth like hot coals. “I don’t know what else to say to her, Dad. I don’t know how to convince her that I’m not ruining my reputation, I’m not ruining my future. I’m not hurting myself, I’m not hurting other people. I’ve... I’ve fired everything in my arsenal.”

Get ready for it. Get ready for him to tell you to stop.

“Well, there are still some things that she’s worried about.” He caught himself.

“Some things *we’re* worried about. First of all, your safety.”

“I take precautions, Dad. I don’t really perform at bars anymore.”

“I don’t even know where you perform.”

That’s because I didn’t tell him. I never tell him or my mom when or where my shows are. My burlesque life is usually something we just don’t talk about. The thing in the background.

“Shadowbox Theater... La Nuit Theater. The only bar I perform at anymore is at the Royal Sonesta. And they let us park in their parking garage there.”

Dad nodded, taking in my words.

“I usually have Fred with me, or another friend. The girls always text each other. We’re safe, Dad.”

Dad scratched his more-salt-than-pepper beard. “Well, our other concern is your future. You know, the first thing people look at when they’re trying to hire someone is their Facebook page.”

“My Facebook page is fine.”

“But what about your other page?” Dad asked, referring to my performer page. Before I could argue about how that’s under a completely different name, Dad said, “You know, I don’t want you to go through all this school and then miss out on a job because of this.”

I nodded, taking in his words.

“Do you think, if maybe... you deleted that Facebook page? Maybe that would make your mother a bit happier?”

Wait. He’s not asking me to stop? He’s... trying to compromise??? “I think I can do that, Daddy,” I answered. “I think a lot of why Mom’s upset is because she still doesn’t understand what burlesque is.” It was the first time either of us mentioned the B-word. “I know you and Mom have been watching a lot of documentaries lately. Would you be willing to watch some about burlesque?”

“Sure.”

It wasn’t much... But it was a start. For the first time in several months, I had hope.

I couldn’t believe Dad was being open. Whether it’s because I’m his baby girl and I can do no wrong in his eyes, or because his past could rival an episode of the Maury

Povich show and he's got no room to judge me, is anyone's guess. Maybe it's because he's got the Performance Bug, too. I don't know. I didn't question it.

I heard Mom moving about inside, so I went in to tell her hi. The tension in the room thickened the second I stepped in. I told her I was going to delete my Remy page on Facebook.

"Well, I think the damage has been done," she said, referring to pictures of me in my underwear that are floating around cyberspace.

"Are you going to stop dancing?"

I inhaled. "No."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I meant, are you going to stop taking your clothes off in public? Cause that's all it is."

Don't you cry. "I'm not doing anything wrong."

"That's your opinion," she retched. "Good-bye." She stalked back into her room.

She wants me to leave. I lumbered out of her house, passing Dad along the way.

"Where you going? Did you tell Mom?"

"I said I'd delete my page," I told him, shutting my eyes to keep the tears in.

"That wasn't good enough. She wants me to stop dancing."

"Well, when are you going to stop dancing?" he asked.

"When it stops being fun," was all I could get out.

We stood there for several moments, not knowing what the hell to say. Until finally, Daddy came over and hugged me. My cheek only came up to his chest. I felt too small. I was half tempted to ask him to start singing "Summertime," a standard he sang with me and my sister when we were kids. I wanted his voice to take me back to that, to

when “the livin’ was easy.” To a time when all it took was his voice to make the hurt go away.

“It’ll be okay. I love you, Baby,” he said.

“I love you too, Daddy.”

I left feeling both hopeful and broken. I’ve got one parent who’s trying, one parent who’s shut down, and one sister who’s repulsed.

I called Fred on my way home.

“Hey, Babs. How’d it go?”

I recounted the conversation to him, losing the battle against crying.

“I’m proud of you,” he said. “You stood your ground.”

I felt a little proud of that myself.

By the time I got home, I had finished my phone call with Fred. I had a text from Eleanor waiting for me: “You okay?”

She must have heard from Mom. “I will be. Just gonna lay low for a bit.”

“Okay. Call me if you need to talk. Love you.”

I was still crying, but her words meant the world to me. “Love you, too.”

Oogie Boogie's Song

My family and I didn't talk about burlesque for the rest of the year. It's a shame we couldn't talk about it, because I would have had a lot to tell them. I performed one gig before an audience of a thousand people. I performed another gig that had a few horror film icons in attendance. Performers that I could only admire from the audience three years ago were now calling me their friend. But my biggest accomplishment of 2013 didn't come to fruition until the year was almost over.

One of my favorite movies of all time is Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. In the film, a skeleton named Jack Skellington is the Pumpkin King of Halloween Town. But he grows dissatisfied with his life and searches for something different. What he finds is Christmas Town. He falls in love with this new world and does everything he can to emulate it – including kidnapping Santa Claus and stealing his job.

The film has some incredible songs that range from creepy to upbeat to heartbroken. It's full of strange, yet beautiful colors, and characters that are more eclectic than any our world has ever seen. Turning this into a burlesque show made sense to me. I ran the idea by Spooky and the girls, and everyone was all for it. Spooky gave me creative control over the show, and I got to work on a script. In late October, I approached Vincent Gallant, the owner of the Shadowbox Theatre and a good friend of the troupe's, about possibly having the show at his theater. Vincent amazes me in that he's only a year older than me, but still acts in several shows and runs a successful venue. Amazing me further, he pulled out his wallet, which had Jack Skellington's face on it.

"It's one of my favorite movies," he said. "I'm all for this. Just one thing: I want to be Santa."

“You got it!” I said.

Working on the *Nightmare* script through November helped me keep my mind off the fact that Fred and I were growing distant. We had been dating for about a year, but the passion was waning. He couldn't hold down a job, he and I fought frequently, and the highs no longer outnumbered the lows. In mid-November, he acted like going to my parents' house to celebrate my 26th birthday was a chore. I was still clinging to the good memories, trying to hold on to whatever it was about Fred that made me happy. I reminded myself that he supported my art, that he was there for me when my parents and sisters weren't.

Is that the only reason I started dating him? Because he was Remy's ally?

Thankfully, I could count on burlesque to make me happy, so I finished my script and chose my cast of performers. I asked the girls who were already members of our ever-growing troupe if they had a preference on who they wanted to play. Spooky chose to be Zero, Jack Skellington's ghost dog. Honey asked to play Barrel, a mischievous trick-or-treater who dressed up as a skeleton. Lydia Treats, a pierced and tattooed mother of two who officially became a Baby Doll a few months before, asked to do a sideshow routine as the Mayor of Halloween Town. Finally, Cherry Bombshell offered to portray Jack's love interest Sally the ragdoll.

There weren't enough Baby Dolls to cast the entire show, so I turned to a few people outside of the troupe. I had performed with another troupe called the Bluestockings the winter before when they brought back their Super Mario burlesque show. I became close with a lot of those dancers, including a tall, thin brunette a few years younger than me named Perse Fanny, who happened to be Vincent's girlfriend.

When I asked the Bluestockings if they knew of anyone who could play Jack, Perse called me saying she would be honored if she could play Jack. I was honored to accept. I felt like I hit the jackpot (pun intended) when she offered. Not only could she dance, but she was also a phenomenal actress. Whoever played Jack was carrying the show, and I knew I could trust this woman with my show.

Even with my lead taken care of, I still needed three more actors plus some stage kittens. I remembered my cousin asking me if I could let her know if we needed any more performers. Two years older than me, this mother of one had been dancing her whole life, but had been curious to try burlesque since I was getting into it. She and I grew up watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas* together, so I asked if she wanted to play the little witch Shock in my show. Taking the stage name Ember Scorpious because she is a Scorpio and because she has incredible red hair that comes down to her waist, she happily accepted.

Next, I turned to Artemis Lark, my college buddy's girlfriend. Although she was also new to burlesque, she was immensely enthusiastic when I asked her to play the mad scientist Dr. Finkelstein. I wasn't as worried about her. Artemis had come to me many months before asking how to become a burlesque dancer. When she wasn't working as a nanny, she was reading my copy of the *Burlesque Handbook* and taking Bella Blue's burlesque classes religiously.

Another girl who came to me with dreams of becoming a burlesque performer was Xena Zeit-geist. Fresh out of college and eager to try the tease, Xena invited me out for coffee earlier in the fall to pick my brain about how to break into this business. I told her my story and I told her that going to see as many shows as possible was essential. I'll

never forget how she scribbled almost everything I said into her doodle-covered notebook. “Go to shows... Read *Burlesque Handbook*... Take Bella’s classes...” As for my *Nightmare* show, I asked her to play Lock, the little devil, and she jumped at the chance to make her burlesque debut with us.

Normally, casting inexperienced burlesque dancers is a crapshoot, but I saw the drive in their eyes. They looked like I did years ago, when I desperately wanted be on that stage. Between those three dancers plus the three ladies I chose to be my stage kittens, six women are now performing burlesque regularly because of me. I paid it forward, giving them the same chance that Spooky gave me, the chance to get on stage and show the world what they could do.

Of course I’m not going to write a show without giving myself a killer role. I gave myself the part of the villain Oogie Boogie, an evil boogie man who holds Santa in his lair after Jack’s goons kidnap him. I wanted to be this character for two reasons: I love playing the villain, and Oogie Boogie has the best song in the movie. So I hunted down green underwear – and it was a brutal hunt because matching green underwear is a rarity – and had a seamstress friend make me a green panel skirt. While the villain in the movie looked like a scary potato sack, I was going more for scary showgirl in this routine.

While I left everyone else in charge of their own costumes and routines, I only gave Vincent dialogue. I decided to make his character Santa the narrator so that the entire story would still be cohesive. Burlesque plays – and even individual routines – work better when the performer has a reason to take his or her clothes off. In this version of *Nightmare*, I wrote it so that people of Halloween Town just enjoy being naked. This idea came from seeing how women’s Halloween costumes get more and more revealing

each year, as if Halloween just brings out the slut in everybody. Poking fun at this phenomenon made the show work.

Vincent had the most acting experience, so I wasn't worried about him. What I did worry about was the time crunch. We opened the first weekend of December, and I wasn't sure if everything would be ready. But I didn't worry for long because my cast was beyond competent. Most of the actors took care of their own props and costumes, and Honey helped some of the girls with their choreography. I didn't have to do much directing because everyone bent over backwards to make this show work. It didn't even feel like work because we all loved the source material.

So did our audience. On opening night, there were people in the audience wearing *Nightmare Before Christmas* shirts, hats, pins, and other accessories. Tim Burton fans packed the theater to the point where we were turning people away at the door. Backstage before the show, Spooky let me lead the Hands In. We all got in a circle and piled our hands in the center.

"Guys. I love you," I said, honored to be leading the pre-show ritual. "I'm proud of you, and I can't thank you enough for helping me make this happen. Best show ever!"

"Best show ever!" they all shouted. Then we lowered our hands before throwing them into the air and screaming like a bunch of banshees.

I threw on my trusty black silk robe and went out to greet an audience that was packed into the Shadowbox like Tim Burton-loving sardines. This was a new kind of nervousness that hit me like a freight train, but I still spoke clearly and proudly. I gave the Rules of Burlesque, asked them to silence their cell phones, to keep the aisles clear,

and told them no flash photography. While I had heard the Rules a million times before, actually saying them was a new thrill.

“Are you guys ready to see some burlesque?” I yelled.

The audience answered me with shrill cheers.

“Then without further ado, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of a cinematic masterpiece, I give you *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.” I ran offstage as they applauded, then quieted for the opening number.

Opening night was almost perfect – it will never actually be perfect because it’s theater. We sold so many tickets that Vincent asked if I wanted to extend the show two more weeks. Fighting the urge to pass out from sheer joy, I absolutely accepted. I couldn’t wait for Fred to come see my show. Even though we were in a weird place romantically, he was still my boyfriend and still supported me.

He came to see it the second night, the first Saturday of December. After the show, I tried to find him to hug him, but I didn’t see him. He found me a few minutes after the theater emptied. “Great job,” was all he said.

That’s it? Aren’t you gonna say you’re proud of me? Your show is amazing?

“Thank you, baby,” I replied, feeling disappointed at his lack of enthusiasm.

The rest of the night felt off. The cast went to eat at a nearby pub afterward, and Fred came with us. He was quieter than usual and seemed distracted. I wondered what was bothering him.

He called me the next morning to give me my answer. “Can you come over? I have a lot on my mind. I need to talk to you.”

I went over to his apartment and sat on the sofa. He sat down next to me, but he didn't touch me. He looked down at his hands, trying to choose his words.

"I tried shaking it off. But what I saw last night really upset me."

I was confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Your dance."

My dance? Why would my dance upset... Oh fuck.

I wasn't exactly alone on the stage during my routine. In that scene, Santa is tied to a chair while Oogie Boogie tortures him. For the purposes of our play, we changed torturing to teasing. In my routine, there's a part where I stand Vincent up, turn around, and slide down the front of his body. But the trick is I wasn't actually touching him. We were angled in such a way that my body only *appeared* to be sliding against his. There's another part of the routine where I put my foot on his knee, the same way I did on Fred's knee at Ballroom.

I was so busy and so frazzled trying to get the show off the ground, I didn't even think to tell Fred about my routine. I didn't think I was doing anything that risqué to begin with. Vincent or his girlfriend Perse Fanny surely would have said something if I were crossing the line. I didn't think anything I was doing would upset him because he'd seen me do more scandalous things when I was *alone* onstage. For example, I have a "Book Fetish" routine where I simulate doing nasty things to a book while a medley of songs about sex plays in the background. Personally, I think my "Oogie Boogie" routine is tamer than my "Book Fetish" routine, but Fred couldn't disagree more.

"I had to sit there and watch that," Fred said. "My friends were with me. *They* had to sit there and watch that." He lit a cigarette even though he knew I hated being around

cigarette smoke. “That’s why I disappeared after the show. I had to go for a walk just to calm down. I felt sick seeing you up there.”

This isn’t happening. “Fred, I’m sorry it upset you, but my routine wasn’t that bad.” I backtracked a bit. “You’re right. I should have told you ahead of time I’d be onstage with another guy. I’m sorry I was such a space cadet.”

“Why didn’t you let me be Santa Claus?” he spat, catching me off guard. “I’ve emceed for you guys plenty of times.”

Honestly, I hadn’t even thought to cast Fred as Santa. He did emcee for us before, but he always got nervous and messed up our names. I chose my words as carefully as I could, bracing myself for the worst. “I did what was best for the show. Vincent is a trained actor. Plus it was his theater and he wanted the role.”

Fred stood up and stalked to the other side of the room. Then he twisted around and shouted, “You didn’t even ask me! You didn’t even show me the script! You have a show that you’re calling ‘your baby,’ the best thing you’ve ever done. And you shut me out of it! You didn’t let me help you! You didn’t involve me in any way.”

You’re joking me. You gotta be.

“But you asked me to do sound. I’m not good enough to be in your show, but I’m good enough to be your fucking sound guy!”

I sat tense on the sofa. “Baby, I…”

“You know what? I can’t even look at you right now.” He walked into the other room.

Stunned, shocked, and shattered, I stood up and walked out. My legs felt like they weighed a ton. I spent almost the rest of the day crying and I barely slept that night.

The next morning, Fred sent me a text asking if we could try to talk again, so I called him.

His voice was deceptively calm when he asked, “Do you still think Vincent was a better choice?”

I took a deep breath knowing that I was about to end our relationship. “Yes.”

Fred turned volatile. He shouted many things into the phone that I don’t ever want to repeat. He tried to hit below the belt when he yelled, “Your mom was right! You remember how she said doing burlesque was going to ruin your relationships? Well she was fucking right!”

“What’s wrong with you?” I shouted back. I felt like I was talking to a stranger. *This can’t be the right guy.* We yelled some more before I hung up, furious and hurt. He tried to call me again to apologize and win me back and save our relationship, but the damage was done.

After talking back and forth over the next few days, I figured out this wasn’t going to work. I gave him back his things, including a few props he made for some of my burlesque routines. The breakup hurt, but I knew it was a long time coming. Looking back, I know it was over for me before it actually ended, and some part of me was actually relieved to be out of that relationship. I made it through the rest of the show’s three-weekend run without my cast realizing that I was going through a breakup.

Ruler of My Heart

A few weeks after splitting with Fred, I started seeing an old friend named Leo. The chemistry was always there, but the singleness wasn't until after my *Nightmare* show. He'd come watch a movie, we'd go see a movie, we'd go see a band, we'd go see a show, and he'd come see *my* shows. Being courted again and doing things the "old fashioned" way were customs I had to get used to. And as slowly as we were taking things, I was falling hard.

Hard enough to the point where I wanted him to meet my family. That chance came a week before Mardi Gras. I ride in an all-female parade every year, and Leo met my parents when he helped me load my float the night before my parade rolled. He was a little quiet, but very polite. My mom spoke to him warmly, and I think the normally tumultuous meeting of the parents went rather well.

On Mardi Gras Day, my dad's band was playing at The Max in Metairie. My mom, my sister, and my brother-in-law were all at the dimly-lit lounge, a place that reminds me very much of the jazz club at the Royal Sonesta. The live band played on an elevated stage in the corner, and the dance floor was spacious and surrounded by high tables. I had mused before that this would be a great venue for burlesque if it wasn't in Metairie. The suburb is an excellent place for raising kids, but I'm not sure if a burlesque show would draw much interest for the law-abiding, mostly Christian adults there. Since it was Fat Tuesday, I wore sparkly blue makeup and a deep blue wig to the lounge. I even glued small blue rhinestones around my eyes – the same rhinestones I use to decorate pasties. I found my mom and sister.

"Your makeup looks great!" Ellie said squeezing me in a hug.

“I know! When did this switch happen?” Mom joked, noting Eleanor’s lack of makeup, messy bun, and plain clothes.

Growing up, Ellie was always the girly girl while I was the tomboy. These days, Ellie just wants to dress as comfortably as possible on her days off while I find any excuse to wear outlandish makeup or a costume wig.

We weren’t there long before Dad said into the microphone, “Come on, Barb, you wanna sing one?”

This was always a rhetorical question. I practically sprinted across the dance floor and leapt onto the stage.

“Whatcha wanna sing, baby?” Dad asked from behind the drum kit.

I asked him to play “Ruler of My Heart” in B while I grabbed the microphone. After the familiar tiptoeing of the piano notes, I started to sing. From the stage, I saw Ellie lead her husband to the dance floor.

My heart cries out with pain inside.

Where can you be? I wait patiently.

While I crooned my way through the first verse, Ellie gave me a small wave and a warm smile from the dance floor. “Ruler of My Heart” is Eleanor’s favorite Irma Thomas song. I smiled back and belted through the bridge.

‘Cause when you’re alone, and the going gets rough,

Come back, come back, come back, baby. I’ve had enough.

I finished up the song to thunderous applause, and I went back over to my mom. It was shaping up to be a great night.

“Where’s Leo?” my mom yelled over the music.

“It’s Mardi Gras,” I yelled back. “And he works at a bar. Take a guess.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Mom stammered, sipping her third (maybe fourth) beer. “I like him.”

“I like him too, Mom,” I said.

“Y’all doing okay?” she asked.

Eleanor stood nearby drinking her own beer, listening to the conversation.

“I think so. We’re not sick of each other yet,” I answered.

“That’s good,” Mom went on. “Just keep doing what you’re doing. But whatever you do, don’t sleep with him yet!”

Even in the dark, I turned bright red. I know Mom was just playing around and trying to put me on the spot, but like with most people, alcohol rendered her verbal filter useless.

“Yes, ma’am,” I laughed.

She nodded at me before wandering off to talk to one of her friends.

Eleanor then swooped in to give me her trademark look that reminded me I can’t hide anything from her.

“Don’t give me that look,” I said.

“I’m not,” she retorted. My sister’s level of alcohol consumption is revealed by how high her voice gets, and her voice was getting closer to shrill. “If you wanna sleep with him, sleep with him. It’s your life. Although...”

I was ready for a tipsy lecture on how I should take things slow and how I should make him wait and how I should do things the “right way.”

I was not ready for what she actually said.

“I’m sure you’re okay with him seeing you naked. Plenty of other people have already seen you naked.”

I forgot how to breathe for a few seconds. *Did she really just say that?* My sister is one of the kindest people in existence. She never says anything for the sake of being mean. Especially not to her baby sister.

Not here, I pleaded silently. *Not here*.

But Ellie kept speaking: “We might not talk about it, but we know you’re still out there doing it.”

My throat closed up again.

“And by the way, I saw a picture of you in your bridesmaid’s dress. Doing your little *burlesque* thing.”

She was referring to the gold halter dress I had worn as maid of honor for her wedding. The dress that I had paid for. The dress that would be otherwise sitting in my closet collecting dust if I weren’t wearing it for burlesque performances.

“I just wanted to let you know I don’t appreciate it.”

“Wait a minute.” My throat finally opened. “Where did you see that? You’re blocked from my burlesque page.”

“Does it matter?” she fired. “You put something on the internet, anyone can see it.”

She had a point. I didn’t argue that. “When did you see it?”

“November,” she said. “I was gonna bring it up then, but Mom told me to wait till after the holidays.”

This was too much. *Mom knew about the dress too? And she asked Ellie not to say anything?* Mom and Dad hadn't said a peep about my burlesque life in almost a year. *Do they talk about me a lot when I'm not around? What else do they say about me?*

"But yeah. I didn't appreciate it," she added.

I don't want to be here. I don't want to be here. "I'm sorry," I said.

She gave me her trademark look again before one of Mom's friends came up to tell her hello. I sat there for as long as I could remain stoic. While Ellie was distracted I escaped to the employee bathroom. My family and I are allowed in the back room because Dad knows the owners, and I took full advantage of the privacy to go have my meltdown.

I locked the bathroom door and dropped the false face. I cried off the blue makeup and the black mascara and the silver glitter. I lost some rhinestones while rubbing my eyes. I sobbed so loud I wondered if people would hear me through the walls over my dad's music.

Why did she have to bring it up? Not talking about it sucks, but actually addressing it hurts more. It never adds anything new to the festering pot either. I already knew she didn't like me dancing. I already knew that she believes I should only show my body to my significant other, and that I should keep it "special" for him.

I wished I could have put her on the phone with my guy. I wished I could have put her on the phone with anyone dating or married to a burlesque performer. They would tell my sister that just because burlesque artists use their sexuality to express themselves, it doesn't make sex with them any less special. Sure, a lot of people have seen my body. But they don't get to caress me, or kiss me, or hold me while I fall asleep. Countless

people have seen the *Venus de Milo*, but how many people have had her in their living room?

Composing myself and fighting the devouring loneliness proved futile, and I was in the bathroom long enough for Ellie to notice I had disappeared. She tried calling my phone. I ignored it. She tried calling it again. I ignored it.

Finally, she sent me a text message: “Where are you?!”

So I did my best to dry my face and stepped out of the bathroom. She was already in the back room waiting for me.

As hard as I tried to hide the fact that my eyes were Niagara Falls for several minutes, I can’t hide anything from her.

But she looked upset. “Barb! There you are!” She pulled me into a hug and I started crying again. “I went outside to look for you!”

“I’m sorry!” I blurted. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t want to hurt you! I won’t wear the dress anymore!” I think I damn near suffocated her from squeezing her so tightly.

“Barb. It’s okay,” she soothed. “It’s okay, stop crying.”

I slowly stepped back and wiped my face again. No rhinestones left.

“I’m sorry, too,” Ellie said. “I didn’t mean to be hurtful. And I shouldn’t have brought this up here.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t done crying.

Ellie wiped my face. “Look, I’m not going to support everything you do, but I still love you. You’re still my sister.”

“I know, Ellie,” I sputtered. “I just... I feel so fucking alone.” The words were mimicking my tears – they just kept pouring out. “I’m scared to talk to you or Mom about burlesque. I hate it. I hate this. I’ve never felt more distant from you.”

Her expression was soft. Even with messy hair and no makeup, she still looked beautiful. She always looked beautiful. “Barb. We’re not *trying* to be distant,” she said.

“I know.” I sniffled. “It’s just hard.”

“It is hard. But you don’t ever have to be scared to talk to me. I love you.”

I wiped my mess of a face. “I love you, too.”

“You know I’ll listen.” She hugged me again for awhile before getting me some tissues. Then she took my hand and led me back out to the lounge to watch Dad’s band.

The next day while I was at the gym, I got another text from Ellie.

“Are we okay?”

It was a loaded question, but I answered it fairly quickly: “I’m okay. Are you okay?”

“I think so. I still feel really bad about last night.”

I went over to the windows, away from everyone else, as if the gym patrons might somehow see or hear what we’re texting. “It’s okay, Ellie. It’s over.”

“Okay. If you ever need to talk, I’m here.”

Still my hero. “I know, Sis. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

Too Darn Hot

Despite the awkward conversations with my family members, the next few blissful months with Leo had me up in the clouds. But the nasty thing about being up in the clouds is that, eventually, we have to come down. And I came crashing down when Leo broke up with me in mid-May. The morning after, I willed myself out of bed and made the drive of shame over to my parents' house. Being a supermom, Mama immediately knew something was wrong. She brought me outside to sit on the swing in the backyard.

“Why ya here and why ya sad?” she said.

I couldn't get the words out before I started crying.

“Is it Leo?”

I nodded.

“What happened?” she asked.

“He broke up with me yesterday.”

“THAT LYING TRASH BASTARD MOTHERFUCKER!” she yelled, coaxing a tiny smile from me. She composed herself before she asked why he broke up with me, and I gave her the details. Ever the bluntest of the blunt, Mom told me, “You know, you can't change people. You can't fix them. I see you try to fix people all the time. You tried so hard with Fred. But you can't make people into what you want them to be.”

I should be telling YOU all that, I thought.

As if reading my mind, Mom asked, “Did Leo know about the dancing?”

I sighed heavily. *Of course she would think that's why he dumped me.* “Yes,” I said, “and I swear he was okay with it. He came to see me dance all the time.”

But then Mom switched gears and said, “When’s your next show?”

I gave her a funny look. “Wednesday,” I answered.

Mom nodded. “I’ll be there.”

The cold adrenaline shot through my body, creating a layer of chills beneath my skin, and my tongue suddenly felt too big for my mouth. “What?” was the only noise I could convince my vocal cords to emit.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot. Since I don’t see you stopping this dancing anytime soon, I figured I should try to come see you perform.” She held a hand up before saying, “I’m not making any promises, but I will try to go in with an open mind.”

I pinched my leg. *Nope. Still awake.*

The next two days were filled with a blurry panic. My mom was coming to see me perform. While I felt a bit hopeful, the dread outweighed the hope. I went through every routine I had ever done, obsessing over which numbers she could handle:

- “Gambit?” No, she won’t get the reference.
- “Springtime for Hitler?” No. Might be too offensive for her.
- “Book Fetish?” Funny, but too raunchy.
- “Seduction of Harley Quinn?” AKA a duet where my male dance partner touches me a lot? Nope nope nope nope nope.

After pondering and getting opinions from other dancers, I settled on a comedy routine and my strongest classic routine. I wanted to show her my range in case this was the only chance she ever got to see me perform.

Wednesday finally arrived, and the butterflies in my stomach grew more and more vengeful as the day went on. Mom called me to get the time and the place, and I warned her that Siberia was a dirty dive bar. She said she didn't mind, and that she met Daddy in a dive bar. Still, I asked Ember to come so that Mom would have someone to sit with. Ember and I made it to Siberia, and we walked in to find Mom already sitting at the bar. Wearing a pink shirt. And a cute headband. And holding a beer in her hand. Although she stood out like a Barbie doll in a goth club, she always knew how to make herself at home in any alcohol-serving establishment.

“You nervous?” Mom asked as she hugged me.

“Yes, Ma'am,” I mumbled.

“Good.”

I rolled my suitcase to the back room, leaving Ember sitting with my mom. One by one, Honey, Spooky, and a new dancer arrived. Everyone knew my mom was in the audience, and they were almost as nervous as I was. Almost. They still went about getting ready, getting their faces on, and assuring me that everything would be okay.

Although their words helped a little, my sanity (what was left of it) was still in serious jeopardy. I sat on the floor in front of the full length mirror and tried to do my makeup. I tried not to think about what would happen if my mom didn't like what she saw. I tried not to think about the pressure. But being the crier that I am, nothing could stop the waterworks. Trying to apply eye shadow while crying was futile, and I'm sure I looked ridiculous attempting to do so. The tears just wouldn't stop. I kept wiping them away furiously, trying to make my eyes cooperate long enough to finish my makeup. Deep breaths weren't helping.

Honey helped. She swept in from behind and wrapped her arms around me, and I stopped fighting the tears. While Honey held me, Spooky tried to joke, “Don’t cry now. Save the crying for after.” I tried to smile, but that just made my scrunched up face look even stranger in the mirror. Honey didn’t seem to mind. She just kept holding me while I cried. If the rest of humanity was half as sweet as Honey, we could end wars. I couldn’t express my gratitude at the moment due to the choking sobs, but I’m truly grateful to this woman for being there for me.

Several moments went by before Honey said, “We’re here. And you’re gonna be great tonight.”

I squeezed Honey’s hand, and she let go. The waterworks finally stopped, and I was able to finish my makeup and get dressed. The Hands In that night was tense, but we still screamed like banshees, determined to treat this like any other show.

Decked out in theatrical makeup and fabulous costumes, we left the back room. Siberia is one of those venues where we have to walk through the audience to get past the bar and onto the stage. Except for the fact that it always reeks of cigarette smoke, it’s one of my favorite places to perform. Like with Burlesque Ballroom, I can interact with the audience, and I’m not limited to the stage. Unlike with Ballroom, I can do pretty much whatever I want. Spooky has been friends with the owners forever, and they let us have free reign on their stage during our allotted time. Any theme, any costume, any routine.

As I walked through the smoky club, some relief came when I saw a group of my friends. Word got out that my mom was coming to see me perform for the first time, so many of my burlesque friends, some of my comedian friends, and even a few civilian friends came out to show their support. A lot of them introduced themselves to my mom,

and two of my friends offered to buy her a drink. They all did whatever they could to make her feel comfortable and welcome.

While Honey and Spooky danced, Mom would lean over and say things to Ember. I watched them from across the room. Ember told me later that Mom was asking a lot of questions, and she did her best to answer them. I noticed a lot of people in the audience kept glancing at my mom too. At any given time, there were as many people watching her as there were watching the women on stage.

My legs felt heavy again as I walked to the side of the stage. *Oh God, I'm next.* I tried to buck up and trust that my routine was beautiful. I had to trust my art. *Can't back out now.* I stepped onto the stage and did a quick comedy routine with no trouble. That routine was fairly harmless -- the only "forbidden zone" that I reveal is my butt.

The classic routine I chose would make or break me that night. I dance to a remix of Ella Fitzgerald's "Too Darn Hot." My costume is a stunning red gown, plus my devil horns and a devil tail pinned to my red thong. This routine is one of my sexiest, one of my strongest, one of my favorites. But this routine also has a bit of a surprise ending, which makes it one of my raunchiest. However, I wasn't going to censor it because my mom was in the audience. It was a gamble, but I had to stand by my declaration that I'm not doing anything wrong when I perform burlesque.

After my comedy routine ended, I ran to the back room to put on my "Too Darn Hot" costume. I made sure not to look at my mom during my first routine, and I didn't want to talk to her until after my second for fear that I would lose my nerve. This routine required a champagne flute full of water, but I could barely get my shaking hands to cooperate.

The shortest eternity finally ended when I heard our emcee say, “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome back Remy Dee!” *Get serious. Get into Remy Mode. It’s just another show.* My mental pep talk made my hands shake somewhat less. I heard the piano intro, and I forced my face into a sultry expression. I parted my lips slightly as I strutted toward the stage in time with the music.

It’s too darn hot

It’s too darn hot

I set the champagne flute down near the folding chair on the stage before getting to work on removing my first glove. I pulled it off with my teeth right as the trumpets erupted in the song. I was more delicate with the second glove, pulling it off with my hands before twirling it around. My friends’ shouts were thunderous, and I winked at them before I turned around to unzip my dress. I bent over as I slid the red dress down my hips, revealing the thong and the devil tail. I shook my hips from side to side to make the tail swish before going to sit in the chair to peel off my stockings.

The climax of the song was getting closer. Even though I was smiling, I was terrified, willing my muscles to move gracefully even though my heart was making my ribcage rattle.

According to the Kinsey report

Every average man you know

Much prefers his lovey dovey to court

When the temperature is low

I slid one bra strap down. I couldn’t back out before the song was over.

But when the thermometer goes way up

And the weather is sizzling hot

I slid the other strap down.

Mister God, for his squad

A marine for a queen

I turned my back to the audience and unsnapped the bra. But I didn't turn back around to face them yet. Instead, I picked up the champagne flute.

A G.I. for his cutie pie, is not

I turned around and dropped to my knees and leaned back.

'Cause it's too, too, too darn hot

I poured the water on my nearly bare chest, let it run down my stomach and over my red panties. My mouth opened to show my gnashed teeth, giving the illusion that this water running down my skin felt orgasmic. While I was pouring the water, my hips slowly rose and fell, and the audience got a long look at all of me.

It's too darn hot

I leaned all the way back on the floor and extended my arms over my head so that my breasts were closest to the heavens. The audience's screams turned shrill, and for a few euphoric moments completely exposed on that stage, I forgot about my broken heart. I forgot about my mother's harsh judgments. I forgot about the whole world.

It's too darn hot

I sat back up on my knees, stood up, took one last strut around the stage, then faced the audience and held up my glass for a toast right as the song cut out.

When the music ended, so did the fantasy. I suddenly remembered where I was and who was in that audience. I hopped off the stage and threw my arms across my chest

to cover myself. Sprinting to the shroud of the dressing room, I kept my eyes forward so I couldn't make eye contact with anyone in the audience.

Safe in the dressing room, I dropped my arms and leaned panting against the wall. *Holy shit, I did it. I did the whole routine.* I felt nervous and overjoyed and scared and proud. It hit me that I'm living my dream – I'm entertaining. I'm making people laugh. I'm bringing people joy. I don't know if I'll be a burlesque dancer forever – just until it stops giving me a rush, or stops being an absolute joy. I've worked hard. I've met wonderful people. I am *in love* with this. I got dressed in my civilian clothes and walked back out to see my mom. The anxiety was back, but I stood up straight and proud, my head held sky high. Mom was looking at me. She wasn't smiling. But she gathered me into a hug. She held me tight, and I held my breath, before she finally spoke:

“I could've done without the devil.”

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