

Chapter 1 – I'm Naked

1984

It's my first day as a stripper. I haven't remembered to bring a costume. In fact, I haven't thought of what to wear at all because I've been so preoccupied with what I wasn't going to wear. I'm upstairs in the changing room of the Zanzibar. It's the first strip bar I saw in Toronto while out on a date with a guy who turned out to be an escaped convict. I look around at all the girls and think how confident they are with their bodies. Their hands don't fly up to cover their nipples when someone comes into the room. They cough, spit, smoke and laugh seemingly without thinking of how that looks while they're exposed. I notice they're not at all like that downstairs in the bar, where every move is calculated for best effect.

I'll have to improvise. I cut off the bottom of my t-shirt. I like this biker girl look. But I don't have a stripper's G-string. All I have is my thong underwear, which is going to have to do. The girls snap-on neon nylon G-strings with clips on the side; they glow in the dark downstairs, and accentuate their tanned bodies under the black lights. You have to keep your G-string on, that much was explained to me while I stood in the manager's office last week, talking tough and asking for a job. But no one says you can't unclip one side and drive customers wild with the idea of it coming off.

What do I do about shoes? How could I forget shoes? I own more shoes than most people I know put together, but I brought only running shoes today, and they're not exactly sexy. I borrow a pair of red pumps from a really nice girl whose stage name is Tiger. It doesn't seem unusual to her that I've

just walked off the street and now, I am going to strip. I go downstairs to the bar. I've never felt so much air on my body in a public place before.

I figure I have just enough time to have a couple of drinks before they call me to the stage for my first show. It's quarter past noon but I can't do this straight. I sit next to another dancer who turns to face me. Her lipstick is smudged and her mascara has racooned around her eyes. She's wearing a pink G-string and a tiny bikini top; essentially two triangles of fabric over her nipples. She wears a shoelace tied around her neck as a choker. She's very pretty and very drunk.

She leans over and says loudly over the music, "I'm Joelle. Nice outfit." The right corner of her mouth curls up and I can't tell if she's smiling or sneering at me.

"Um, thanks," I say.

Am I supposed to look at her body? We're both essentially in our underwear, sitting in a bar that looks like any other. Should I acknowledge her lack of clothing? I decide to keep looking into her eyes but it's hard to do. They're wavering. I motion the bartender over.

"Can I have a rum and coke please?" I yell to the bartender, whose greased black hair gleams in the stage lights.

Joelle leans over and says, "If you're gonna do this job, better do it straight honey." She keels into my shoulder. I prop her up a little and try to be casual about it.

"What do you mean?" I say. Joelle lifts her head up with what looks like genuine effort and says,

"You're a newbie, right? Stay off the booze. Cheers."

She lifts her glass, downs what smells like straight Scotch, and slides off the bar stool onto the floor. She stays there and giggles.

I pay for my drink and hand it to Joelle on the floor. I don't want to lose control, not in a bar filled with drinking men. In this environment, on this first day, I'd already seen the cocaine flowing like Sifto Salt from a topless shaker. An hour's worth of high is three table dances away. That's all it costs; they give discounts here. And the booze is cheap. Actually, it's free for the asking, from any customer you can squeeze.

The DJ calls me over; he's in a little booth next to the stage.

"This your first time?" he's yelling over the music.

"What? Am I first?" I yell back.

"No. First time on stage?" He points to the stage. I point to my ear and shake my head.

He yells louder, "Is it your first time...on stage...ever?" he looks at me and smiles. Then he licks his index fingers and mimes rubbing them on his nipples. He does a little shimmy.

I don't respond. My mouth is suddenly dry.

"No," I finally say, "I used to do this in Montreal." I jut out my jaw in defiance.

He laughs. I see he has a hair transplant. The pores are enlarged with plugs in them and are evenly spaced out on top of his head, like a little row garden. Each plug has a small collection of hairs growing in it. It's all spiky on the top, as if the hairs in these little plugs don't dare fall over, they stand straight up. He's wearing several earrings in each ear, from his earlobes up to the top of his ears. His bare arms sport dozens

of bangles. Completing this look is black eyeliner. I think he's going for a Boy George vibe, but I'm not sure.

"From Montreal? What bars?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "Whatever. My name's Rick. What do you wanna dance to?" He shoves a shoebox of cassettes over the counter at me. He's looking at a clipboard.

"And what's your stage name?" he yells.

Stage name? Oh. Not that I really believed Tiger had been christened 'Tiger', I just hadn't thought of a new persona. I hadn't thought through my new career at all.

I stand there in my underwear looking at Rick. I'm trembling. *Just pretend and you'll be fine. I have practice with pretending.* My mind goes blank.

I'm two years old and I feel sharp pains down there. Every time I go to the bathroom, it feels hot and it hurts.

I'm three years old. I'm awake in my bed, but I can't open my eyes. I feel my way to the bathroom but I can't reach the taps on the sink, so I climb up onto the toilet and then, onto the counter. I hold my hands out for the water and put it on my face until I can open my eyes. They are sticky and burning.

I'm four years old. Someone is leaning on me and I can't breathe. I look at his shirt buttons and take small sips of air. This has happened before. Like changing the channel on the television, now I see my friend Judy. We play in the garage with our rabbit Checkers until I can breathe again. Judy is always there for me in the television in my head.

His name was Terry and he was a neighbour. He's the father of my friends Diane and Dana. My mom and Judy's mom are friends' with their mom Sylvie. We moved away when I turned five.

Rick expects a name of me. I really hadn't thought this through. I realize I'm fulfilling exactly what was expected of me since high school, in my small town.

Since the age of thirteen, I had stuck out, literally. I was a size 36D by grade eight. I was singing and acting, and had intentions to leave where I was for Toronto, then New York. I had planned this since puberty.

I remembered bible-thumping church kids from my small town. I was teased mercilessly. I hated them. And the old church ladies with judgmental pinched mouths and frowns. Was I supposed to embrace their look? Have six kids and accept Jesus into my heart to be saved?

My mother wants me to marry well. My father wants me to be a famous singer. I hadn't done either of those things yet. Growing up in small towns had been hell for me. The only saving grace was the menagerie of animals we kept, at least two of nearly everything. We had a hobby farm. My father's dream. I had a pet duck named Chipper that had hatched from an egg I'd found in an abandoned nest. She followed me around for most of my childhood. I had my own Shetland pony, Cathy. When I outgrew her, I rode Oatmeal, one of our two quarter horses. He was chestnut draft cross and stood over 16 hands high. Oatmeal had been a rescue horse, and had been abused. My mother took pity on him at an auction, and insisted my father buy him to save him from the glue factory. Though he'd settled down over the years, he was still frisky and would

throw me off whenever he had the chance, most often while speeding downhill. When I mastered the art of staying on him going down the hills, he got creative and threw me off while cantering uphill. I'd land in front of him and he'd sidestep me, then he'd run off and jump the fence, to roam the rest of the fields. I would chase him and approach him quietly, while he was grazing. He would ignore me until I reached for the reins. Then he would rear, whinny, snort, and take off again. He was laughing at me. One day I collapsed in the field in a fit of tears, thoroughly frustrated, an hour into this game. A few minutes later, Oatmeal nudged my shoulder, surrendering. I used the crying trick several more times until I had to rewrite the script. He didn't believe my tears anymore. It took me a dozen more throws to remember to hang on to the reins, as I flew through the air over his head. It wasn't much fun for him then, as I'd smack him and get right back on.

The animals and the fresh air were wonderful until I was a teenager, and then, all I wanted was a bustling city, loaded with opportunities. No one was going to discover me in this little town. I spent my teenage years singing in the local bars. Eventually I spent my last year in high school commuting to Montreal to perform in musical theatre productions. I wanted out of this town. My schoolmates didn't share in my ambitions and our interests were vastly different. My entire family had a hard time fitting in, with my older brother playing rock guitar in bands and my father working in radio and television; a minor celebrity in Quebec.

Mr. Evans, the vice principal, is sitting at his desk in his office. I'm in a chair across from him. He's rifling through my purse again. Finally,

he finds a roach, a tiny fragment of a joint. I'd forgotten it was there. He holds it up like a prize and informs me he'll tell my parents. I'm surprised he hasn't found the little vial of valium I stole from my mother. I don't flinch. We stare at each other. I wait for him to avert his eyes first. I win. But it's not long before his eyes make their way to my cleavage, where they rest as he recites the school rules on drugs. He orders a detention in his office, for the next two lunch hours, in lieu of telling my parents about the roach. During detention, he takes long visual sips of my body as he works. I make no noise but silently chuckle to myself. He may have found a roach but I'm high every day and he doesn't even notice. Idiot.

Most Likely to be the First to Divorce In Graduating Class of '83'. That's what they said about me in my graduating yearbook. The day after I turn eighteen, I move to Montreal. I attend Vanier College and major in vocals. After a year, I move to Toronto and continue in the Royal Conservatory of Music in the mornings, as part of the University of Toronto mature student program. I get a part time job in an art gallery in Yorkville. I type out and stick artist names on the wall beside canvases, and field calls about the exhibit. I look for acting and modeling agents on my break time, and crash auditions as an unrepresented artist, wherever I can. After rent, I have enough money to eat for the rest of the month, if I skip lunch everyday. I need real money, fast. The Zanzibar Strip Bar is an obvious choice. I think I can do this.

I look at Rick, whose tweezed and penciled eyebrows shoot up his forehead in anticipation of a response.

“Come on, come on....stage name?” he repeats.

I'm about to step on stage and remove what little fabric I'm wearing. I look around. I'm a long way from my small town. What would they think of me now?

Roy, the school bus driver signals for me to stand at the yellow line and wait for him to come to a complete stop in front of my house. As I wait for the door to open, he reaches up and pinches my nipple. For four years, throughout high school, he does this periodically. He laughs when I recoil. As I cross in front of the bus to our driveway, he blasts his horn.

Passages from the Book of Kings are read at my Friday youth group bible study; Jezebel, a Phoenician redheaded queen, is married to Ahab, to unite their kingdoms in the land of Israel. I hate these meetings but they are simply a gateway to fun activities once the bible-thumping is done. There wasn't much else to do in this town. The patriarchal passages don't say much about Jezebel but what is said speaks volumes of who she was; Jezebel was considered a heathen, a witch and a harlot too. That's a lot of labels. I'm fascinated by how much they presumed of her. She may have been all that, but in my eyes, she's a hero. I'm in awe of her for remaining queenly to the end; as her executioner approached, she brushed her long hair and put on makeup. Such dignity!

“My name is Jezebel,” I yell.

Rick snorts, “Two L’s and an E at the end or just one L?” I hold up one digit and he scribbles it down on the schedule. He hands me a paper. It’s a full page of rules and tips for the dancers.

The stage’s back wall is a mirror with a brass ballet bar running horizontally across it; not for doing plies I’m sure. Rick points to the sign on the stage mirror, above the ballet bar; “Hands Off Mirror”.

“Don’t leave fingerprints on it or I’ll make you Windex it yourself.” He yells.

There is a vertical brass pole at one end of the stage and a Plexiglas shower stall at the other end. Rick leans over the counter and yells,

“One shower show per shift, on the third and final song of your last set. You gotta mop up the floor with your towel when you leave the stage.”

Great. Now I have to soap up, rinse and clean the floor while naked, on a stage, with men watching? The sexual appeal of this is lost on me. I pick some songs that I think are good. Marvin Gaye’s *Sexual Healing* is my first song. The irony of the title hits me and I start giggling uncontrollably. Rick darts a worried look at me. I decide on Prince for the second and third songs; *Little Red Corvette* and *Purple Rain*. This last song should be slow, ‘romantic’, it’s stated in the rules.

It’s my turn. Now? Now!

Rick flicks on the microphone while jamming the first cassette into the tape deck. “Gentlemen, grab a waitress and a beer. You’ll want the best seat in the house. Table dancing only \$5 for a little piece of heaven. And now, Zanzibar is proud to introduce this next lady. She’s a peeler with appeal, she’ll make you wanna kneel, she’s tall and she’s a ball, a mover and a shaker, don’t you wanna make her. Please welcome Montreal’s very own Jezebel.”

I don’t know how I make it to the stage. I look down at my feet stuffed into Tiger’s shoes and I can see they’re moving though I’m not sure how. One step, two steps, three and I’m on the stage. There’s a roaring in my ears, I can’t really hear my music. I start to panic. I can’t find the beat. I can’t swallow, there’s a lump in my throat growing by the second. I try to

look relaxed, blasé even. I remember not to run my hands all over my body. That's a dead giveaway of a new dancer. And I don't want to smile because in my mind, I'm the perfect mix of seductress and runway model. I adopt a smoky pout.

I do a few spins. Thank you Dad for those dance lessons, they're paying off already. I raise my hands above my head and sway my hips, then I realize my t-shirt is cut so short, I've just flashed my boobs, in the first thirty seconds of my first song. So much for building suspense.

Mid-way through Little Red Corvette, the point at which Prince growls OhhhOhhhOhhh, I do a backbend at the ballet bar and flick my head back and contort into a perfect arc. But my head flick has now caused my long hair to catch on the heel of Tiger's right shoe. I can't straighten up because it's pulling on a knot and now I'm somehow semi upside down, stuck. I force my head up and take a clump of hair out of my scalp. My eyes tear up immediately. I discreetly remove the hair from my heel, and try to blow it over to the back corner of the stage. I hope no one has noticed.

I gravitate toward the pole at the outside corner of the stage. I grab it and spin around it a few times. Now what? Maybe I'll hold it and lean on it. I'm looking out into the audience at the corner of the stage, and pick a guy in the front row. I'm looking seductively into his eyes. But he's not looking into my eyes. For once, I'm grateful that my breasts are his focus. I try to spin around it again and my wet palms slip off. Oh no. I'm going to wind up in his lap. I grab it again and pull myself up. I'm not wearing much fabric on which to wipe my hands. But I'm okay. Everything is okay. I made it through the second song. I'm sure these men don't know the difference between experienced

talent and a newbie. Well, I'll show them. I'm a trained dancer and musician after all. How hard can this be?

Prince's first chord on guitar in Purple Rain blasts through the club and I throw my head back, hold on to the brass pole and do a high kick, right over my head. It's a perfect showgirl kick; my leg extended high above my head, toes pointed, in vertical splits. Then, as I bend my knee and fold my leg to lower it, I slice the inside of my other knee open with the stiletto heel of Tiger's shoe. I spend the remainder of my last song wiping blood and miming ecstasy.