

## Pirouette

I stood behind the curtain waiting for my cue. Pepper, the dancer on the stage, let her skimpy cowgirl get-up drop to the floor. I didn't own a costume, but the manager said my flirty summer dress was "sexy enough." My lingerie, although lacy and black, was no match for Pepper's sequined-covered bra or her eyepatch-sized G-string. Victoria's Secret was the best I could do.

For me, auditioning at a strip club was strictly about the dancing. A woman had seen me tango in a club, said I was a natural, and mentioned the audition. I'd figured, why not? The dreams I'd had as a young jazz dancer were about to come to fruition—the lights, the glory, the applause.

*There was no business like show business.*

I basked in the promise of stardom until the reality hit me like a sudden storm—I was expected to strip. A tingling held my arms and legs hostage. My heart thumped, and I squeezed my fists. To relieve my jittery nerves, I tensed my muscles as tight as I could and then, released. I imagined I was about to perform on Broadway. *This was Times Square, and I was the principle in a show bringing rave reviews. My outfit dazzled. I wore glittery jewels. The audience appreciated the difficulty of my dance moves and stood with a roar.* The promise of the glitz and the glamor of show biz calmed me down. My moment to shine was minutes away.

Rod Stewart crooned "Tonight's The Night," and Pepper writhed on a fake leopard-skin cushion in nothing but her red G-string, plaid scarf, cowgirl hat, and boots. The music stopped, and Pepper's burnt-red hair gleamed under the lights. She grabbed her holster, costume, and giddied up off the stage.

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“Our next dancer is auditioning for us today. Let’s give her a big welcome.” The manager’s black hair, pulled tight into a bun, emphasized her tiger-eyes, but it was her bright fuchsia lipstick that stole the show. As she strutted off the stage, her burgeoning breasts threatened to tumble out of her violet corset, and her spiked high heels click-clacked.

While the audience applauded, I chose Marvin Gaye, Al Green, and Maria Muldaur then punched the jukebox buttons. The standard was three songs, three dances. Slow, slower, and slowest.

“You’re up, kid. Break a leg.” Pepper gave me a slight shove.

I took a deep breath and *pirouetted* onto the stage. My heart jumped like a junkie on speed. My breath came in short spurts. I scanned the room. Not quite Broadway, but pleasant enough—with its velvet curtains tied back on each side of the stage, its low-lit lights surrounding the room with a red glow, and the scarlet carpet with gold, floral designs.

Six men in sharp suits jammed around a table to the side. A couple in the back made out like hungry vampires. In the lit doorway, the barker motioned for passersby to take a peek at “the hottest show in town.”

Pepper whispered in the ear of Jabba the Hutt’s twin who snorted when he laughed. He handed her a fistful of cash, which she stuffed into her holster before sitting on his lap. Directly in front, a penguin-faced man pulled a five from his pocket and dropped it on his table with a wink.

I moved right into a jazz walk—stylized steps with shoulders moving in opposition. I kicked one leg high then the other and switched to a perfect jazz pirouette. A *pas de bourree*—

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back step, side, front—arms bent and palms to the floor—and again on the right. One stag leap across the stage, and I turned. Jazz hands. Jazz hands Step. Step. Step.

I repeated the routine toward the back of the stage, turned, and snapped my fingers as I headed to the edge. The more I danced, the more complicated my moves.

Caught in the web that Pepper had spun, Jabba was hers. I could have done a backflip and landed on my hands; Jabba wouldn't have cared. The sextet on the side talked baseball, and Penguin's eyes seemed veiled with a glaze.

In the corner, the manager turned her hands in a rolling motion. *C'mon, get going* was what she meant. Marvin Gay finished "Let's Get It On," and I let one spaghetti strap slip down my arm. Penguin ran his tongue across his crusty lips and tapped his pudgy finger on the five-dollar bill.

I did a *mambo*—a front/back, back/front step with hips swiveling in figure eights as Al Green sang "Let's Stay Together." The drunk Giants' fans yelled take it off, and Jabba finally looked toward the stage.

The manager stepped up her signals and rapidly snapped her fingers at me—concern racked her face. I shot her a forced smile and let the other strap fall. Perhaps a jazz split would appease her. I slid to the floor, both legs 90 degrees from my body. The manager crossed her arms and shook her head like a viper watching a fly.

Her explicit instructions: the dress comes off, song one. I moved out of the splits and reluctantly pulled my dress off and swung it in a circle above my head. I glanced at her. *Happy now?*

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“Yeah, baby,” the Gaylord Perry fan yelled, and the group threw dollar bills onto the stage.

Penguin grabbed a newspaper from a vacant chair and set it on his lap just as a dancer placed two drinks on his table. “The show is free,” the barker had called, not mentioning that the two-drink minimum was \$12 a pop. If this were Broadway, they’d pay more than \$100 a seat. In my opinion, they were getting a deal.

I did a fan kick and made a sweeping arc in front of my body. I knew by the end of the second dance that the bra had to go, but instead, I did a few pirouettes. With each turn, I focused on Penguin’s beak-shaped nose. He waved the five in front of his face and blew me a kiss.

“Midnight at the Oasis” now played. It was song three. I should be hitting the leopard cushion with my bra flung to the floor. As I reached to unhook, Penguin shifted his hand from his drink, slid it under the newspaper, and hunched over the table like a hungry rat. There was no doubt in my mind what he planned to do.

Without thought, I screeched to a stop and stared in disgust.

“Jesus Christ,” the manager gasped and headed toward the stage.

Pepper stopped kissing Jabba’s ear and abruptly turned to see what I’d done.

Maria Muldaur continued her tantalizing song.

*“I’ll be your only dancer, prancer*

*And you can be my sheik.”*

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I did a lunge, reached for my dress and waved it like a matador's cape. I twirled from one end of the stage and back. With each turn, I spotted Penguin—the look on his face got creepier, and his eyes blinked like flashing traffic lights.

The room suddenly looked seedy with its tacky red lights, sleazy crowd, and whorehouse carpet. I wanted out. Now.

Into another pirouette, I swirled. Like a slow-motion tornado, I crossed the stage. I spun by the leopard cushion, the velvet curtains, down the stage stairs, and to the side exit. With one more turn, I danced out the side door and into an alley.

Out of breath, I slumped against the grimy brick wall. A rat scurried across the dirty street and hid behind a dumpster. Overhead, a crow on a wire dropped a scrap of moldy bread near my feet.

*Holy shit! What had I just done?*

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” The manager poked her head out the door. “Get the fuck back in here.”

I quickly pulled my dress on. “That was the end of my act.”

“Well, you're not hired.” She turned and slammed the door behind her.

I took a deep breath, straighten my fabulous summer dress, and headed for the glitz and glamor of everyday life.

