**Community Theater**

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**Chapter 1: Auditions**  
I felt it as soon as I saw the article in the weekly local newspaper. It wasn't exactly a lump in the throat, more like butterflies in the tummy. Well, warm butterflies anyway that slowly spread through my whole body. And not really starting in my tummy, maybe just a little lower.  
  
The article was just a short announcement that a nearby community theater was holding auditions the next week for their fall musical. I had been in a few plays in high school but hadn't really considering trying out for something this year. After all, I had just transferred to a different college and was getting ready to start my sophomore year in a new town and in my own apartment, far from family and friends. But as soon as I saw that article, I knew I'd have to audition. The play was "Gypsy," and not only had that been one of my favorite musicals growing up, but it played right into one of my favorite fantasies...imagining I was a stripper! I love dressing in a sexy outfit and then standing in front of a mirror in my room and bumping and grinding as I take off my clothes. As I read through the article, it suddenly occurred to me that this could be the perfect way to live out that fantasy.  
  
The notice said that auditions would be held next Monday with callbacks later in the week, in a town about ten miles from campus. There would then be a month of rehearsals, three weekends of performances, with everything over before Thanksgiving. Perfect, I thought. No one will know me and the chances of anyone from college hearing about it were pretty slim. And without any real friends in town, I knew I'd have plenty of free time. And I also knew exactly the part I wanted: Louise the little girl who becomes Gypsy Rose Lee. That way, I would get to sing Let Me Entertain You while taking off my clothes in front of hundreds of strangers.   
  
The next Monday all I could think about was the audition. Yes, I was very nervous but that never stops me. When it comes to auditioning, I don't look at the people because that makes me more nervous, so I just pretend that there is a wall in front of me. That helps me a lot. Of course there's the saying "if you get nervous, picture the audience naked," but in this case I had a different picture in mind – the audience imagining me naked! But I tried not to think about that.  
  
  
  
The audition didn't start that well since everyone else seemed to know each other and were standing and chatting. A few people politely introduced themselves but then went back to talking with their friends. Finally, the assistant director came by to ask a few questions.   
  
"Name?"  
  
"Nikki Morales"  
  
Hi Nikki, where are you from?" I explained that I was just starting my sophomore year at the nearby college, and then answered some other basic questions, including the role or roles I was auditioning for. When I said "Louise," he looked up from his clipboard briefly, then flipped through a couple of sheets of paper and said, "ah, then I have a couple of extra questions." The questions seemed a little surprising: age (19), height (5 foot 7), weight (128 pounds, I answered, giving myself the benefit of a couple of future workouts at the gym), and measurements (I hesitated just a minute before saying 34-24-35).   
  
"And cup size?" he added, just a little awkwardly. Without thinking, I almost gave the answer I've given to almost every guy who's asked me that, namely, "none of your business," but remembered how much I really wanted this part. "Um, B cup, 34B." "And," he said as he jotted down a few last notes, "I see you're a brunette with brown eyes. I guess that's all I need for now," and he moved on to the next girl.   
  
When my turn came, I sang the song I had been practicing, spent a few minutes with the choreographer going over some basic dance routines, and then was given four or five pages containing lines to practice for each of the lead roles in case I got a call back. I flipped through it on my way to the car and was a little surprised to see that the lines for Louise were not a scene with another actor. Instead they were a monologue that she delivers to the audience in the middle of her big strip scene. Hmmm, I thought, I really hope I make this first cut.  
  
I got an email the next night inviting me back on Thursday. I was totally excited until I got there and saw my competition. Two other girls had also been asked back to read for Louise. I recognized one as Jennifer, the girl who had introduced herself to me the other night. She had grown up in the town, gone away to college, and had just moved home after graduation. Everyone from the theater group seemed to know her, and I heard someone say that she had been in five of their productions in the past. Not a good sign for me, the new kid in town. And my heart sunk further when I heard the other girl, Samantha, sing a bit. She had a beautiful, professionally trained voice that seemed significantly better than anyone else's I had heard at Monday's auditions.  
  
I had worn a cute skirt and top, and just before getting called in to read my lines, I totally focused on my fantasy of stripping in public. I could feel the energy flowing and the butterflies starting. As I entered the other room, the director got up from the table and introduced himself, and then went around and introduced the three women with him as the music director, the producer, and someone he referred to as the president of the board. Just my luck, I thought – only one guy in the group! But it was too late to change my plans now, so I launched into the lines we'd been asked to deliver, the speech that Gypsy delivers to the audience.   
  
"Some man accused me of being an ecdysiast. Do you know what that means? Do you? Do you? Oh, you do! Aha! He's embarrassed! Don't be embarrassed...I like men without hair! An ecdysiast is one who, or that which, sheds its skin. In vulgar parlance: a stripper. But I'm not a stripper! At these prices, I'm an ecdysiast."  
  
As I delivered the speech, I slowly unbuttoned my top and untucked it from skirt, giving the group a peek at my best lacy bra and just a glimpse of my bare tummy. I finished with a little flourish, raising my arms with my hands outstretched so my shirt pulled a little further apart.  
  
The polite silence that followed, with a brief, "thank you, Ms. Morales, you can take a seat outside" suddenly sapped all of my confidence. I awkwardly buttoned up and left the room, feeling I had totally blown the audition. I was in no mood to talk to anyone, so I pulled out one of my textbooks and started to read. I didn't want this to be a complete waste of an evening, I thought.  
  
I sat there for about a half hour while they auditioned some guys for Herbie, the male lead, and then the two finalists for Mama Rose, which is the real starring role in the play. They appeared to quickly settle on their choices for Rose and Herbie but then huddled together in the audition room talking in hushed tones but in obvious disagreement with one another. Finally, after a few minutes, the president broke away from the others and came over to me. Putting her arm around my shoulder, she said "Nikki, let's find a quiet place talk." We went down a hallway and into an empty room, turned on the light, and sat down. "Why don't you pull up a chair down, dear? I need to have a little heart to heart with you."   
  
"I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, which sometimes can be a mistake. But I think you're a big girl and can handle this. So, let's be frank. Do you know what the board of directors do in a community theater," she asked. I had to confess that I really had no idea other than show up at some rehearsals and that the president usually welcomes people at the start of each performance.   
  
She chuckled and said, "Well, yes, that's all true, and as the president I will be there every night." But I'm also responsible for making sure the theater stays in business, that we raise enough money and earn enough from our performances to cover our costs and have a little in reserve so we can plan for our next season. And I don't mind telling you that it gets harder every year to do that."  
  
"That's one of the reasons we chose to do Gypsy. It's a popular musical, it's got a good sized cast, which means that parents and relatives and friends buy tickets and show up. And it's also got a bit of sex in it. I mean, after all, it is about a stripper. And you've auditioned for the part of the stripper."  
  
I blushed a little and felt that same warm tingly feeling I had felt when I first read the audition notice. I wanted to look away, but my actress instincts told me to look at her right in the face.  
  
"I've advised the director and producer to be a little more, um, how should I say this, adventurous with this play, to try some things that aren't usually done and that may surprise the audience a bit. That should generate some buzz, some word of mouth, and some ticket sales. Maybe even some repeaters, people who will come to see the show two or three times. And that's where you come in."  
  
"Please don't take this the wrong way," she continued. "You have a decent singing voice and we could work with you on your dancing, but the other two girls who auditioned for Louise are a lot better singers and they've been with us in other productions. That always means a lot, because we don't like surprises, at least not unpleasant ones. So I need to be certain that I can count on you to stick with this, see it through to the end, and do whatever is asked of you."  
  
I nodded vigorously and said I would definitely do anything they wanted, that I could be here every evening and weekend to rehearse, and that it had always been a dream of mine to play Louise. She nodded and said that she could sense that during the audition. "But there was something else I noticed during the audition. To be blunt, you're prettier than the other girls, you appear to have a good figure, and you have great stage presence. And I want all three in our Louise."  
  
"Then I'm your girl. I promise I won't disappoint you." Even as I said that, I somehow knew that Lorraine hadn't quite finished with everything she had to say. "But there's something else, isn't there," I asked.  
  
She smiled, adding "And you're smart and perceptive, not bad qualities for an actress. Yes, there is something else. I've suggested, and the director has agreed, that we need to take Louise's strips a little farther than you usually see in a local production. "  
  
I could feel the blush spreading upward and the heat growing, and she must have sensed that. "Now, don't worry, we're going to ask you to appear naked on stage. This is a play about a real person, and Gypsy Rose Lee was always more about the tease than anything else. But usually when Louise does her big strip number and takes off her dress, she grabs the curtain and covers herself with it and that's the end of it. And that is never going to get people coming back night after night."  
  
"I know the other girls and they're not going to go any farther than that. But that's what we want our Louise to do, and that's why I've prevailed on the director and producer to allow me to offer the part to you."  
  
I practically jumped out of my chair and ran to hug her. "Oh Lorraine, that's wonderful. And yes, you can count on me." I thought of all the little fantasies I'd had over the years and about practicing my little striptease in my room and added, "You can count on me to do anything."  
  
Once again that brought a smile to her face. "Well, don't worry dear, I don't think things are as desperate as all that. But we will want to make sure you're wearing some skimpy little thing under your gowns, and we want to be sure the audience has a chance to see what you're wearing. We want the strip and the tease."  
  
I hugged her again, and we walked back into the main audition room where the director and producer were still waiting. "We have our Louise," Lorraine announced, and after sharing hugs with them all, I picked up a copy of the score and a copy of my lines and left for the evening. When I walked out to my car, there was a bit of a chill in the air, and I shivered slightly. But maybe it wasn't from the cold; maybe it was just a little bit of nervousness and excitement as I wondered just what had I gotten myself into.  
  
  
**Chapter 2: Rehearsals**  
We had four weeks of rehearsals leading into three weeks of performances with shows every Friday and Saturday night. In addition, there would be a preview on the first Thursday evening and a Sunday "family" matinee the second week. Eight performances and only a month to get ready, so I was kept busy pretty much five nights a week. Monday and Wednesday were the ensemble rehearsals, working on some of the group numbers in the first part of the play. Tuesdays and Thursday the main leads got together; we did readings, blocked out our scenes together, and worked on our songs. Saturday I spent several hours practicing with the music director (I guess my singing really wasn't all that strong), and the rest of the day discussing costume decisions with the director and doing some shopping with the designer. Occasionally Lorraine would drop by to get an update and offer her advice.  
  
The strip scene actually includes four strips and each one requires a separate gown. The first one is Louise's debut when she's asked at the last minute to fill in for the missing headliner. She's never done anything remotely like this, and Mama really pushes her into it. She's nervous and awkward and literally has to be directed (by a very loud offstage Mama) as she stumbles through the number. But by the end, she's realized she loves the attention and her confidence grows. This is followed by two quick strips, with only twenty or thirty seconds for costume changes between each. So, if you don't already have the dress off by the end of the strip, you have to get out of it and into the next costume in less than a half minute – no time to change anything else. The fourth strip is a big production number with ten chorus girls starting it off, which gives Louise – meaning, me – about a minute and a half to get into a new outfit.  
  
With the usual staging of this number, the actress can simply wear one set of "protective clothing" – with the budget of a community theater it's usually a bathing suit or leotard, which means that any unzipping during the strips can't go too far or the effect is spoiled. It also means no embarrassing moments backstage, since you have to do your costume changes in plain sight of everyone who's around. The final strip ends with Louise literally wrapping herself in one of the curtains as she peels off the dress, pulling it closed as she finishes singing. It's kind of a tradition that the actress then quickly parts the curtains to give the audience a final peek at her. With community theater productions, the audiences know they're going to see something that's less revealing than what you'd see at a beach or pool. And the director told me that in one local production, the extremely modest actress playing Louise had insisted on wearing a slip (her only concession being that it could be black). The disappointed sighs from the audience were audible even backstage. I began to understand why Lorraine had been so direct with me when I auditioned for the role.  
  
Lorraine had already made it clear we were going to give the audience more than just a brief glimpse of me in a bathing suit. But that left us with two things still to be determined – just what would I be wearing and how long would that "peek" last. The director thought we could play around a bit with the end of the final strip, but Lorraine kept asking what we could do to liven up the first three strips and implying that the final strip should go on a little longer than usual.   
  
I spent two Saturday afternoons with Michelle, the costume designer, poking around stores that rented theatrical outfits in order to come up with the right gowns, something that showed my 34-24-35 figure off to best advantage. These afternoons were the best part of the month for me; I really felt sexy trying on the gowns and I could feel my butterflies fluttering every time I imagined stripping out of them on stage. I also got to buy my first pairs of opera gloves and, during one shopping trip to a lingerie shop with Lorraine and Michelle, I picked out some very special underwear.   
  
It was just before that trip that we finally worked out exactly what I would be wearing under the dresses. Initially Michelle floated suggested that I strip down to a Brazilian bikini for the final number, thinking that would keep us safe from any local regulations and was probably what I would be most comfortable with. She seemed surprised when I told her I already owned a nice little one that I could wear if, as I said, "If that's as far as you want me to go."  
  
"Well, if you feel that way, we could consider some other possibilities," responded Michelle, with a little bit of a devilish grin. "I've been thinking that I'd have to alter some of the gowns we've picked to make sure the bra straps align with the dress straps and we'd still have to worry about what's going to show as soon as you start unzipping. But if you wear a backless strapless bra, I won't have to do a thing. It's a little more revealing when you're doing your quick changes backstage, but it would work for all four dresses."  
  
I'd never worn a bra like that and wanted to be sure it wouldn't fall off at the wrong time. "No worries about that," said Michelle. "They're self adhesive, and your breasts will be fully covered. But from the side or the back, it will look like you're not wearing anything up top." So, I ended up getting my first backless strapless bra, which is really nothing more than two bra cups joined together in the middle.   
  
Lorraine had a few suggestions to make as well. As we were driving to the lingerie shop, she casually speculated, "You know, I think that quite a few members of our audience would appreciate seeing an attractive young woman like Nikki in a thong." Then, without giving me a chance to responded, she turned to Michelle and asked, "Would that work better with some of the dresses you've picked." Michelle was forced to agree it would, eliminating any concern about panty lines. "And it would also let everyone backstage see Nikki's butt when she changes dresses," added Michelle with a little bit of a giggle  
  
We all smiled as Lorraine continued, "Oh, I know Nikki's a total professional and can handle that." "And I have a couple of other ideas that could be a nice surprise for our audience," Lorraine continued. "But let's see what sort of things they can show us at the store."  
  
And that's how we decided that the first strip would be staged the way it always is, ending with nothing more than the drop of a shoulder strap. The second strip involved some funny dialog, which gave me the option of how far I wanted to go with the zipper, and third strip involved a very large hat (and another funny line), so we decided I could vary that depending on the response I was getting from the audience. The fourth strip would have me taking off the dress and popping out from behind the curtains at the very end to show off my bra and thong. Needless to say, I couldn't wait for opening night!  
  
I went through the blocking of the strips with the choreographer during the third week of rehearsals, and of course every night at home. But it wasn't until the final week before our debut that I actually ran through the number with the rest of the cast. Monday was a dress rehearsal of act one, Tuesday we did a run-through of act two, and then Wednesday we tried the entire play in full costume from start to finish. That was it; then we had a preview performance on Thursday night and the official opening on Friday.   
  
Now I should mention that you almost always get to know the other members of the cast really well. There's a lot of down time, sitting around while other people read lines or practice their songs. And this was a really good group of people. In the first part of the show, there's a number with June and her Farmboys, a group of six teenage boys. And one of them, Tulsa, runs off with June at the end of Act One. Then there are seven girls (plus me) who make up Madame Rose's Toreadorables in Act Two. We were all getting to be good friends, sometimes stopping for a cup of coffee after rehearsal or bringing in a pizza to eat for dinner before getting started.

On the Tuesday night run through of Act Two, I was going to perform my strips for the first time in front of my new group of friends. It was one thing to think about standing practically naked in front of an audience of strangers, but another to be taking it off in front of people I had seen practically every day for the last month. I was so nervous that I was unable to eat before coming to the theater that night and totally missed my entrance for the Toreadorable number. As I came offstage, I took a deep breath, thought about my character and decided if Louise could make the transformation, then so could I.  
  
We had to run through the timing of the dialog and the music for the first strip several times, each one ending with only a shoulder strap out of place as I left the stage. When we finally had it figured out, the director called out, "okay, let's see the second strip." Without thinking I unzipped the dress, stepped out of it and looked around for my next gown. It was nowhere to be found! I turned around and saw all six farmboys and seven Toreadorables standing there, staring at me. Or more precisely, staring at my butt, which was on display thanks to the thong I was wearing. And one of the girls, the one I had beaten out for the part of Louise, was holding my dress. I decided there was only one way to respond. I stayed totally in character, pushed up on the balls of my feet to accentuate the smooth curves of my ass, and paraded right past them to grab my dress. Turning around, I made sure to casually brush my boobs against Josh, the boy playing the part of Tulsa, and then stepped into the dress and back out onto stage.  
  
At the end of the next strip, the dress was already unzipped as I came off stage, so I simply let it fall to the ground. Looking around, I noticed that Jennifer and half of the girls had left, having had their little joke. The guys, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying the show. "Don't go yet, guys," I joked, "I'll be back in just a minute." The number ended with me standing behind the closed curtains, then quickly opening and closing them again, so the audience just sees me head on, whereas the guys backstage got another opportunity to stare. As I walked off stage, I heard one of them mutter "nice ass" and another wonder aloud "how does that bra stay on." I just smiled and said "thank you boys."  
  
The full dress rehearsal the next day had a few rough spots but no major problems. I still had my audience of farmboys backstage, and even got a round of applause from them this time. Thursday was our first public performance, a preview night where tickets were sold for lower prices. The theater was just about two thirds full but everything was flowing much more smoothly. Still, for the entire week, I hadn't performed the strips the way that Lorraine and Michelle and I had discussed them. In part, I think the director wanted to give me some time to get used to stripping in public, but we also wanted to have a surprise in store for opening night. Still, I was disappointed that when it came time for the curtain calls at the end, I got a polite round of applause, but the big cheers were all for Debbie as Mama Rose. Well, I vowed to myself, that's the last time that will happen. Let's see what happens opening night.  
  
  
**Chapter 3: Opening Night**  
I could barely sleep that night, and I was glad I only had two classes on Friday morning. I was nervous and excited, and I found that as I walked back to my apartment I was humming and swaying my hips. Anyone watching would have thought I was on my way to a strip club, and in a sense, I was. I kept thinking how much fun it had been teasing the newsboys during the rehearsals, and how I had "accidentally" brushed my boob against Josh. But I was determined that tonight I was going to make a some changes that Lorraine had discussed last night, and that I would try out those changes in front of hundreds of strangers.   
  
That night the first act seemed to me like it went on forever. I kept thinking about what I was going to be doing in just a few minutes. I even messed up a couple of my lines but somehow got through it all. I guess I wasn't the only one with opening night jitters. But as I got ready for my big scene, I saw the Tulsa and the farmboys and the Toreadorables and even Jennifer crowding in the wings to watch and I realized that what they had wasn't exactly a case of jitters. They had heard the rumor that I was going to take this further than I had in dress rehearsal and at last night's preview, and they wanted to see just what I was going to do.   
  
The strip scene has a long set up, where Herbie and Mama are talking about finally getting married. It's the last night of their contract at a third-rate burlesque house where Louise has been booked as song-and-dance act that fills up the time in between strippers. But as Herbie leaves to get their luggage, the manager comes in and says the headliner has disappeared. Mama sees this as a chance to show that they be stars and says that Louise will do the strip. I then go off stage and come back in a beautiful blue gown.   
  
Up to that point in the play, the costume and make-up are all designed to make me look plain, almost tomboyish. My costumes were loose fitting, giving no indication of my body shape. But this dress changed all that. It might have been my imagination, but I could swear I heard some gasps from the audience as I started to speak. They hadn't realized it was me back on stage, and suddenly they were seeing me in a whole new light. The neckline showed some cleavage so there could be no doubt I really was a woman. The dress pulled in around the waist and was tight across my butt and then flared out. I played the scene for all it was worth, picking up a feather boa and wrapping it around me as if I was embarrassed by my boobs. And I walked like someone not used to high heels, shuffling along in a kind of trance. But in my mind I was running through every little move and action I was going to take over the next ten minutes, ten minutes when I intended to have every guy in the theater thinking of nothing but me.  
  
There's some really clever staging to show that Gypsy is going on stage. The lights flash from the back of the set, as if that's the stage front. I turn my back to the audience and walk to the lights, then things go black for a second, and the lights come back up. I'm now facing the audience and the curtain is closing behind me. I'm on stage alone, ready to do my strip, and the play's audience is now the audience in the burlesque house waiting to watch me strip. My stomach literally did several flips and I moved toward the footlights and began to sing. "Let me entertain you, let me make you smile...."  
  
The audience was absolutely silent, picking up on Louise's nervousness and feeling at first somewhat embarrassed for her. I sang in a very weak voice, the way we'd practiced it, with Mama Rose yelling out from the wings "sing out, Louise, sing out." The audience started to laugh and squirm a little in their seats, and on cue, the band stopped. That's my cue to begin my transformation. I finally look out and make eye contact with the audience, saying, "Hello everybody, my name is...gypsy...rose....lee." Then, picking an older man around tenth room center, I looked directly at him and said "what's your name sir." And believe it or not, he answered back, "Walter." Something about the name got a laugh, and I turned to the band and said "Mr. orchestra leader, if you please," and the music started in again. This time the arrangement was louder, brassier, and, how should I say it, more like stripper music. I began to confidently walk back and forth across the stage, making an effort to pull off a glove but letting it seem like it was stuck. I threw back the boa that I still had wrapped across my neck, and bent forward just a little as Mama shouted from backstage "dip Louise, dip." I put a little shimmy in it and let my breasts jiggle. I walked toward the side of the stage, turned back, let a shoulder strap drop and ducked out of sight as the lights cut out. Louise had finished her stripping debut.  
  
But the drummer kept up a slow steady beat, and a voice announced that the Alhambra Theatre of Philadelphia was proud to bring you their featured attraction, Miss Gypsy Rose Lee. This gave me the thirty seconds I needed to quickly unzip the blue gown, shrug that to the floor and step into a black dress with silver straps that fastened like a halter behind my neck. It hugged my breasts and waist, but the flared bottom half of the dress had very prominent slits up the front and back. At rehearsals I realized that each costume change made me feel sexier, and now performing in front of a live audience only heightened that sensation. I strode confidently to center stage, holding the fabric with my hands so my legs were fully visible with each step. Singing another verse of the song, I moved to the other side and, leaning against the side of the side, bent my knees and move up and down, pressing my butt hard against the wooden arch.   
  
"My mother, who got me into all of this," I said as I started to unfasten the straps behind my neck, "always told me to leave them begging for more and then don't give it to them." I stopped with a look of sudden awareness that all eyes were glued on me, waiting to see what I would do next. I slowly reached to the zipper on the side of the dress, and said "But I'm not my mother." I stepped off stage as I continued with lines, "so if you want some more, I'll give it to you," and took the dress off and held it out in my arm so the audience could see it, and then leaned my head around the corner and said "Beg," in a loud commanding voice. The music paused, and it seemed like eternity before one small voice called out "more." With my head still peering around the corner, I put my hand to my ear as my other hand continued to clutch my dress. A couple of more guys called out "more," and I held the dress in front of me, reappearing on stage.   
  
The band wasn't expecting this, and I looked down at the orchestra leader, still ready to give the downbeat to the resume the music. I gave a quick shake of my head and he held off. There were a few whistles from the audience as I wrapped my leg around the dress, giving some of the audience a glimpse of the tie on my right hip and the butt cheek behind it. The whistles and shouts mounted, and I feigned shock and then delight. Finally, with a shrug of my shoulder, I put my left arm across my chest and with my right hand, dropped the dress, leaving me standing there in just my bra and thong. I nodded to the band, the music resumed and I walked off stage, establishing once and for all (at least for those on the left side of the audience) that I was indeed wearing a thong.  
  
Another thirty seconds to slip into a multicolored strapless dress with a giant hat while the announcer told the audience we were now in Detroit and about to be treated to that rising young star, Gypsy Rose Lee. As silly as it sounds, I had more trouble getting that hat on than any other piece of clothing. So I was a few seconds late getting to center stage and coming out through the curtains, but I think that only added to the audience's anticipation. In this strip, I didn't sing but instead delivered some lines of dialog while the drum beat continued. I then turned my back to the audience and, looking over my shoulder, I lowered the zipper just to the start of my butt crack. I then faced the audience, taking off my hat and holding it front of me. I let my dress fall to the floor and kicked it away. The hat was, as I said, huge, and covered me from my neck to almost my knees. At that point, I supposed say, "What am I going to do when big hats go out." But I knew as soon as I did that, the crew would cut the lights so I could rush backstage for my final change. So instead, I just dropped the hat to the floor to give the audience their first unobstructed view of the two cups clinging to my breasts and said, "I can't wait for big hats to go out, can you?" There was a burst of applause and the lights went down, and I ran backstage.   
  
Well, Nikki, I thought to myself, they've now seen everything that you were going to show them at the end. It's not going to be much of a finish if you don't go through with it. "It" in this case were some changes that Lorraine had first suggested when we picked up a few extra items at the lingerie store. We had discussed those changes again last night after the lukewarm audience reaction at the preview. After all, we decided, this was a show about burlesque, and burlesque was starting to make a comeback. Burlesque now had interesting ways of keeping the naughty bits covered so as not to upset the local officials. Maybe just barely covered, but covered nevertheless. Only Lorraine and I knew that I was wearing pasties under my bra and the tiniest little c-string under my thong. Just before going on tonight, Lorraine had come backstage to remind me that the decision was all mine. She declared the bra and thong "darling little things" and just what she thought we needed to give the show a little notoriety. But then, as she was leaving, she added, "but of course we could always use a little more." Translation: you could wear a little less. And she knew that I would!  
  
So, during the change, I ripped off my bra so quickly that it actually hurt a little and I felt my nipples stiffen. Uh oh, I thought, better check to make sure those nipple covers are securely fastened, and giggled softly in spite of the tension and excitement I could feel in the air. Then I squeezed into the red dress and gloves, picked up the matching boa, and proceeded to center stage rear behind a screen that the chorus girls then turned around to reveal me. I actually heard some applause, the audience welcoming me back. I moved forward, taking command of the stage the way Gypsy Rose Lee did in her prime. I had a line telling the girls to take their apples and go back to the trees. I slid the boa off my shoulders and handed it to one of the girls, shedding one piece of protective clothing that wasn't going to be there for me if I changed my mind.   
  
I was ready to deliver the monologue that I had read as part of my final audition, but dressed somewhat differently than I was that first night. As I began this recitation, I walked out on a runway that had been extended from the center of stage out into the audience, requiring the removal of seats from the first three rows. In rehearsals and the preview, I delivered the entire speech from the end of the runway, then return to the main stage to take off my earrings and remove the straps of my dress. Then, singing a final chorus of Let Me Entertain You, I'm supposed to unzip and unwrap the dress, holding it front of me until I reach the end of my song. By then, I should be at the left side of the stage where I can grab the curtain and pull it in front of me as I drop the dress. We'd choreographed it so I then pull the curtains closed as I move to the middle of the stage, and then quickly step back through the closed curtains to give the audience the quick peak at me in my bra and thong. But they'd already seen me in that three minutes ago, so I needed another surprise for the finale.  
  
I walked out on the runway and began my little speech. I actually spotted a bald headed guy and he answered me back, which got a big laugh. But then, in the middle of the speech, I started to unzip my dress. Standing at the very end of the runway, three rows into the audience and a very long way from the curtain, I unwrapped the dress and delivered the line, "But at these prices I'm not a stripper, I'm an ecdysiast," stretching my arms to the ceiling as the dress fell to the ground. Uh oh, I thought, no help for me now!  
  
The band began the music for Let Me Entertain you, but they were drowned out by the waves of applause and whistles. I stood there slowly turning as I sang, just to make sure everyone got a good view of the real Nikki. The pasties did nothing more than cover my nipples; the full curve and shape of my 34B's were there for all to see. And guys who had gotten just a glimpse of my butt earlier in the number now had plenty of time to stare. And I could see that most of them were staring, along with a surprising number of the women. When I got to the final note, the long sustained, " a real good time,  
  
I turned to walk back to center stage and reached for ties on my hips, quickly undoing them and sliding my panties back and forth between my legs and then casually tossing them over my back and into the audience.   
  
At first, I think many in the audience, including every single one of the farmboys, thought that I was completely naked. They had never heard of a c-string and didn't even notice the little colored end sticking up at the top of my butt crack. I turned to face the audience, and it was like being completely naked in front of hundreds of strangers. Just the tiniest little strip of white covered my most intimate area, and the nipple covers were barely the size of dollar coins. I later figured out that I had at most four square inches of material covering my entire body. The curtain closed with me still on stage, with no need for me to step behind it and then reappear. I just stood there and again slowly turned around with arms raised, acknowledging the applause and making sure everyone got one good last look before disappearing into the curtains. Last look, that is, until tomorrow night when I hoped they would be back for more.  
  
  
**Chapter 4: Run Of The Show**  
And they did come back. Our online sales picked up about 20 minutes after the end of the performance, just enough time for people to get home and turn on their computers. The only change we made was to change the type size of the label "family friendly" for the one Sunday matinee we had scheduled for next week and to add a note that said anyone who preferred to exchange their matinee tickets for an evening performance should contact the box office. We accommodated the exchanges by adding a row of folding chairs in front of the first, which now gave even more people a chance to see me close-up. I later heard that there were some guys desperate to get those "premium" seats near the runway were offering double or triple the face value for the tickets.   
  
It was exciting to see the reviews in the local weekly as well as two daily papers from neighboring towns. I couldn't believe that one critic even went so far as to write that "Ms Morales is the perfect Louise, performing a memorable strip that indeed brings the evening the a happy ending." Did he really mean that? Was he implying that he gone home and jerked off thinking about me? The realization that I was going to be the focus of the guys in the audience each night brought my commitment to a whole other level. I went to the theater every night determined to make sure that everyone in the audience would definitely remember me!  
  
It seemed that each night the crowd grew a little rowdier, with whistles and catcalls starting any time I appeared on stag. Finally, one night, when guys started yelling "take it off" the first time I appeared in Act One, I turned to the audience and said "give me a break guys, we gotta wait until I'm eighteen," which got a big laugh (and helped to calm things down).   
  
I found myself feeling a little sad as we approached the third Saturday of our run, the final performance of Gypsy. And I heard from Lorraine that she and the other members of the board had been approached with so many requests for tickets that they had sold standing room only at the back of the theater. Maybe it was the added excitement of the larger audience for closing night, or maybe it was just my growing restlessness, but when I got to the theater Saturday, I approached Lorraine and the director and asked for their permission to add a reprise at the end of Let Me Entertain You.

"I'd like to ask the band to play one more verse of the song after the strip scene ends. I'd like to come out and sing one more chorus, just kind of my way of saying thank you to everyone for being a great audience."  
  
"And just how are you going to say 'thank you,' Nikki?" Lorraine asked. I looked up and saw her smiling at me; after almost two months of working together, she could almost read my mind. "Oh, I have one or two things in mind," I replied.   
  
"Nikki," she said, taking my hand, you've done everything we asked of you, I'm sure we can all support you in this." I glanced at the director, who was grinning and nodding, and said "absolutely no problem. I'll talk to the orchestra right now."  
  
Three hours later I was entering center stage for the final strip, chasing the chorus girls offstage with the line "go back to the trees." But this time I didn't hand my boa to one of the girls; instead, after I had the stage to myself, I simply let it fall center stage and then proceeded to the very end of the runaway. I launched into my lines but decided to make another change. There was perfectly sweet little bald man sitting right at the side of the runway, and I was pretty sure I had seen him once or twice before. So instead of just saying "don't be embarrassed," I changed it to "no need to be shy...why don't you come up here in help me." And he immediately climbed out of his seat and onto the runway. I guided his hands to the clasps on the side of my dress and had him unfasten them. In his clumsy hands, the dress immediately fell off of me. He jumped back almost falling off the stage, so I grabbed his hand and said, "don't go yet, I love men without hair." And I continued with my speech.  
  
"An ecdysiast is one who" (as I placed his hand on my hip), "or that which" (at this point I encouraged him to gently tug on the tie), "sheds its skin." It slowly dawned on the audience that I was allowing this man to strip me down to just the barest of coverings in full view literally surrounded by the audience.   
  
The ties on one hip came undone by the thong still stayed in place. I continued, "In vulgar parlance: a stripper." I paused, turned around so he could reach my other hip and nodded to him to undo the other ties. As the thong started to slip away, I grabbed the ties, and practically shouted, "But I'm not a stripper! At these prices, I'm an ecdysiast," and threw my thong as far into the crowd as I could.  
  
The audience went wild, as I kept my arms extended and sang "and if you're real good, I'll make you feel good," not moving from my spot at the end of the runway. I could literally feel the eyes of the guys on both sides of me staring up, trying to peek under my c-string, looking for any hint of my pussy lips. I began to feel the heat spread and hoped that my growing wetness wouldn't cause anything to slip.   
  
I didn't move until I finished the last note, the sustained "real good time," and I then turned and headed quickly back to center stage and vanished behind the curtains. The music director let the applause go on for at least thirty seconds before starting up again. I remerged from the curtains still in my pasties and c-string, picked up the boa where I had dropped it minutes before and threw it around my shoulders as I quickly walked out on the runway and resumed signing, "let me entertain you, let me make you smile."  
  
I made sure the boa was strategically placed so it covered my boobs and came together under my tummy to cover my c-string. When I got to the lines, "let me do a few tricks, some old tricks and some new tricks," I reached under the boa and peeled off the pasties, holding them aloft one at a time and then flicking them into the audience, as I sang "I'm very versatile."   
  
With the lines, "and if you're real good, I'll make you feel good," I turned my back to the office and grabbed hold of the end of the c-string showing at the top of my butt and on the line "I want your spirits to climb," I yanked the c-string off and threw that into the audience as well.  
  
Now I was completely naked with nothing but a feather boa covering me, and the audience knew it. They went wild, and in a moment of inspiration, the band paused so I could slowly back off the runway to center stage, pause and turn to face the audience. The music kicked back in, and I sang the final lines "let me entertain you, and we'll have a real good time" as I tugged on one end of the boa, moving the other end slowly move up to reveal one breast, then finally coming around my neck and falling away to reveal my other breast. On the final "we'll...have... a real good time," I threw the boa away and stood completely naked for the final few measures of the music and then vanished behind the curtains. The standing ovation lasted over two minutes but the calls for "more" went unanswered. I really wasn't sure what more I could show them!  
  
At the cast party afterwards, when things were starting to wind down and people were heading home, Lorraine pulled me aside for a quick goodbye. "Debby was a great Rose, but you my dear, stole the show. And tonight's little performance will only enhance your reputation. We brought in double the profit that we had aimed for, and the board of directors couldn't be happier. I even had a couple of our trustees contact me to voice their appreciation for your, er, 'talents' I believe they said and they expressed the hope that you'll be joining us for future productions."  
  
I said there was nothing I would like better and then, for the first time, saw Lorraine blush ever so slightly. "That's wonderful, Nikki. You see one of our trustees recommended a play for our spring drama that he had just seen off-Broadway, something about the secret life of a call girl. I don't suppose you'd be interested in that, would you?" She kissed me lightly on both cheeks to say goodbye, and then added, "In the lead role this time, of course."