**My Skin**

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Let's get this out there. Confess it, like I used to do on second dates with the boys I met back then.

It's like this: when I was in college, I stripped for cash.

Telling this secret on the second date as a rule meant that the second one was usually the last. I never understood why guys couldn't handle that when you knew it was the same ones who wanted it.

I would guess that just about any one of the guys in my night-time life would have given his left testicle to go on a date with me, the naughty "Wendy" that they watched disrobe for them. But I never dated customers.

To most of the guys in my day-time life, when they found this out, I was damaged goods. Well, fuck them.

Campus was on the east side of the city, and over on the west side, in the older industrial area, were the strip clubs. I had met a girl in Sophomore English who eventually told me she was stripping and when I found out how much she was making for a few hours' work, I asked her to introduce me to the owner of the place where she danced.

He invited me to come over one Saturday night to sit in the DJ's booth and watch the dancers. The place was called Lacey's, and while it looked like a typical old mill-town shotgun house from the outside, on the inside it had been redone as a modern nightclub. It had racks of colored lighting in the ceiling, mirrors on the walls, a high-powered sound system, a bar, and a half-dozen or so round tables on pedestals with high stools scattered around. Up a narrow flight of stairs there was a room with several couches strewn around. That was where the private dances were.

What made the main room different from a nightclub was that, instead of a dance floor, it had a long, narrow stage, surrounded by barstools and a ledge for patrons to set their drinks. The stage was made of polished wood and it had three poles – one in the far back of the place, one in the middle, and one up front, close to where the bouncers collected the cover charge from guests, close enough that you could feel the night air wash in when the door opened and a new customer came in.

I settled nervously in the DJ booth, listening to the muted music while the owner poured us some drinks. He sat down beside me and we looked down through the glass. From here, the DJ had a complete view of the main room below, and he would make his announcements and play music while pretty young women came out on the runway after every third song. Each new girl was usually dressed in some frilly lingerie and high-heeled shoes to start, always with a garter on one thigh, and these young women would come out and tease the lonely men who hunched in the seats pressed up against the stage, one at a time collecting dollar bills from them in their turn.

As the music throbbed and the lights played across the stage, the dancer would eventually remove her clothes, either dropping them lazily onto the stage or tossing them impishly to one of the bouncers with a knowing smile, until at last she was bare – save for the garter and a growing bloom of dollar bills – alone there in the midst of the men.

Once she was nude, the girl would make the rounds of the edge of the stage one last time, squatting or posing with legs wide open, displaying herself in front of each man, collecting his tip, until her third song had finished.

Once in a while a girl would crawl around the stage on her hands and knees, exposing not just her genitals but also her bare little ass to the faces of those men, and sometimes the girl would use her hands on her behind to spread herself even more. But always, finally, as her third song played to its end, each dancer would stand one last time and strut her bare body around one of the poles, as the DJ announced "give it up for Sandy!" Or Brandy, or Desiree.

Then the dancer would walk toward the back of the runway and the curtained opening that led to the dressing room, to disappear and be replaced by the next pretty girl on the stage, only the bravest of them bearing red marks on her knees as she left.

I sat in the booth that first night, looking down through the colored glass at the scene. It was so dirty and erotic what they did in there, a handful of young, slender girls, all smiling and stepping out of their clothing, sharing their beauty with men, trading their soft naked skin for one-dollar bills.

The next scantily-clad performer, it turned out, was my Sophomore English classmate. Watching her come out on stage, I squirmed a little in my chair. I was used to seeing her on campus in baggy sweatpants and a loosely-fitting t-shirt, with her hair drawn up casually behind in a clip.

Tonight, inside this place, she was someone else entirely. Her wavy brown hair fell down softly around her shoulders, and instead of her modest classroom things, she wore nothing but a lacy black bra and a G-string, a black and red garter around her right thigh. She had on high black stiletto heels, and a smile as big as the room that beamed, "look here, boys."

As a new song pulsed from the sound system, she strutted out onto the stage, sliding one leg seductively in front of the other and swaying her hips, then resting a hand on the center pole and twirling herself around it.

She teased the boys by sticking out her backside, swaying to the throbbing music and playing with the straps of her bra. She smiled invitingly and collected a first round of tips from the men by the stage, sometimes moving deftly to avoid those who tried to touch her. Then she took some time exposing her top, eventually dropping her bra in a little pile on the stage. I was sipping a cocktail and seeing my classmate's bare breasts as she danced in a room full of swirling lights and generally drunken, horny men.

I gazed down through the glass, hoping she could not look up and see me watching her. I followed the young nymph as she danced for these ravenous men. Honestly, it was not so much the sight of her breasts that I found so erotic as it was the thought of someone I knew baring them here in this place with these men. I was in awe of her style and her grace.

I knew that I was supposed to think that I was witnessing her exploitation, but the lilt in her step and the way she tossed her head wearing just her G-string and garter made me wonder if she wasn't somehow enjoying it.

Through the glass of the booth, I could hear the muted sounds of the music and the whistles and hollers of appreciation that she was earning from the men. She spun around the front pole once and then, again bending seductively at the waist and gyrating her slender little bum in the face of an entranced customer, she hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her bottoms and slid them down past the curve of her thighs and helped them fall down to the stage. The skimpy fabric caught on a heel for an instant before she kicked them away to the side. I remember thinking what a rush she must have felt at that intimate moment.

I looked up the length of her legs to her naked slit, with no hint of hair, out in the man-filled room.

I had seen other girls in the nude before, of course, in the gym locker room, where the setting was frank and not sexual. This was so different. Here, it was sex and no mistaking it, and that was my friend down there with no clothing on in a room that was swimming in "horny." It was weird to be watching her. It aroused me, I admit, most of all by the thought that I was thinking of doing the same things she was doing, down there.

My friend proceeded to dance bare around the stage, using the three poles to pivot and turn, and then she stooped down and squatted in front of each customer seated against the stage. She did not get on her knees like some of the girls had, but she did approach those men one by one and spread her thighs beside their faces, sometimes trailing a finger or two across her private places, and then she leaned toward each one to invite him to place his money between her garter and her thigh. She got so close to them, without ever touching, and I wondered if any could smell her feminine scent.

When she had made the rounds of the stage, my classmate turned away toward the back of the room, showing the soft curve of her little ass, and she strode away confidently, wiggling her butt for the boys as she left the stage. From beside me, the DJ called out, "let's hear it for Connor, gentlemen, isn't she lovely?" And indeed she was, and she drew appreciative cheers from the roomful of men. Connor. It was sexy in a boyish sort of way. What name would I choose?

Better yet, I wondered if I could do the things I had been watching, or would I get out there on stage in some tiny silly underwear and freeze, or would I even be able to make my legs carry me out there under the lights in front of all of those leering male eyes?

I went back to campus to think about what I had seen, to see if my nerves would succeed in talking me out of doing it.

They didn't.

Two weekends later, after my visitor had passed, I was standing behind the curtain at the back of the stage. I had nothing on except a tiny white thong and a white lace bra and white stiletto heels, and of course a frilly white garter on my thigh. I had purposely chosen all white for my first time. I acutely felt the air in the room caressing my skin, reminding me how immodest I looked. I could feel every inch of my exposed skin.

I was waiting for the DJ to call for applause for the nude young woman who had just walked off the runway, striding past me into the dressing room. The cheers eventually faded and I knew that when the next song's throbbing beat began, it was my signal to go out there and dance.

I remember how I felt so totally exposed and so cold. I could feel goosebumps rising on my shoulders and arms and my ass. I peeked through the curtain at the empty stage, knowing that in a moment, a room full of fully-dressed men would be staring at me, and I would dance and undress for them there on that stage.

As if to prolong my wait, the DJ picked this time to repeat his usual announcement about touching the performers. I stood and waited, struggling now to keep my nerves under control. Through the racing beats of my heart I heard him say something else about "first time," and I blushed hard.

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit! I thought, what am I doing here? I can't do this.

I will do this.

I can't do this.

I am going to do this.

Get ready!

In the end, go out there I did. The other girls had done their best to calm and encourage me as I got ready. I had tossed back a shot of vodka from the private wet bar in the dressing room to quiet my nerves, and then finished my preparations by dabbing just the slightest drop of perfume high up on my inner thighs as my friend had suggested. I poured myself another shot.

If I had thought I was done getting ready, I was wrong. My girlfriend, the one they call "Connor," tugged on the front waistband of my thong to inspect the state of my grooming down there. I distinctly smelled marijuana smoke on her, and I knew she had just come in from outside.

"Ok, now the rear," she directed. I laughed at her and didn't move. "I mean it, girl, let's see," so reluctantly I turned around and bent over, hands on my knees, feeling the thong pull tightly across my nearly bare ass hole, while she inspected me. "Ok, babe, you look great," she said, and she spanked me once, hard. The other girls laughed and whooped.

I hoped she hadn't left a handprint.

So, yes, I went out there, and I did it all, finishing by alternately sitting and squatting unclothed on the stage, opening my legs in front of each man so that he could stare at my genitals while I collected a last round of tips, occasionally catching a glimpse of myself in the mirrored walls – something that gave me goosebumps every time it happened.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, my third song ended and I stood up and strode off the stage. I was taken anew by the feeling of my bareness as I turned my back on the roomful of clapping, whistling men. I thrilled at hearing their applause.

A moment later, as I reached for my robe, one of the bouncers stuck his head through the curtained doorway into the dressing room and tossed me the lingerie I had left on the stage, one piece at a time. He gave me a smile and a thumbs up.

It was done. I had done it. I had stripped.

I was a stripper.

I won't deny that I was acutely aware of the eroticism of having taken off all my clothes in a room full of strange men; but that time, my first time as a dancer, as a stripper, it was more of a frightening and nerve-edged experience than an erotic one.

That would change.

As time went on, I grew to enjoy the plain naughty feeling of taking off my last piece of clothing in front of appreciative men. I especially loved the sensation of sitting, or lying, with my skin touching the cold polished wood, bare of my clothing, in the midst of a roomful of guys.

I understood now my classmate's big smile when she danced. I was an exhibitionist. I took a warm wave of pleasure every time I stood fully naked in that room, being watched.

It was my work, but it was more. It was good.

Sure, some nights there were jerks, men who said awful things to me or tried to get too close and touch me, but the bouncers truly took great care of us, and no customer ever got to make a second mistake, as the DJ liked to remind them. Most of the men were really quite kind and appreciative.

And as time went by, I learned a few tricks. I became one of those girls who would get down on all fours for the men and rock back and forth, baring myself so indecently back there, mimicking the sexual act, willfully showing them my most private place.

So, yes, I wore the red knees, but my signature act became stepping out on the stage wearing a sleek, dark grey business suit with a very short skirt. It was a more expensive costume than just having a few pairs of skimpy underthings, but I had bought it with my now-burgeoning savings. The skirt in particular was way too tight to wear anywhere but at the club, but it really seemed to drive the boys wild to see a neat and proper "businesswoman" stride out under the lights and slowly, completely undress herself for them.

Not only did it draw men from their tables scattered around the room to the seats at the edge of the stage, but it got me more private dances as well.

Apart from the club, I had my other life. In September, at the start of my Junior year, I met Ron. He had passed the test of the second date, and the third, and after the fourth we had made love in his bed. From that night, each time when I went off to work, he kissed me and held a hand to my cheek and simply said, "I'll wait for you here."

Oh, what Gods had sent me this boy who accepted me for who I was?

As years have gone by, the phrase, "I want you to come" is a thing that I breathe to my lover, a man with such steely control, as I beg him to have his release. But back then, in the middle of my college career, when I said to Ron, "I want you to come," I meant that I wanted him to find a place to sit inside Lacey's so that I could show him the things that I did.

I wanted him there, to see everything that I did. I wanted him to see me step out in that dark business suit. I wanted him to see me crawl on the stage on my knees. He had to know all of it. It was me, as I was, or nothing.

So it was that one night I came out on the stage in my suit, prepared to peel it away one piece at a time leaving just me and my curves on the stage, that I saw him there, sipping a drink and watching me. He was not at the stage, sitting instead at a high table near the front door.

Knowing that he was there, I went through my routine, teasing and flashing all of those strange men in the club. I went down on my knees and pointed my backside at Ron, letting the men there see my secret place, spreading myself and touching myself lightly while Ron simply sat at his table and watched.

New feelings of desire washed across me as I displayed myself for the men in the room, knowing that my boyfriend could see me performing. A delightful feeling of nudity spread across my body as I danced for the men, anticipating the fucking Ron would treat me to, later.

I checked on him every time I exposed my sex to another strange man. Each time, he smiled back at me, encouraging me, enjoying me. And in response, my wanton desire flowed out of me there as I finished my dance on the stage.

At the end, as I turned away and headed for the curtain, he was gone. It was just me and those men as I walked toward the end of my dance.

I wanted him then. I missed him then. I needed him then. Where had he gone?