

*Ameera
Unveiled*

A NOVEL

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Ameera Unveiled

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DEDICATION

To my amazing husband, Steve, who supports all my zany projects and hobbies. And to all the true friends and family that pushed me to pursue my own dream to Unveil Ameera. You're the best!

INTRODUCTION

Although this is a work of fiction, I admit it was driven by my own desire to dance—but was told I couldn't, shouldn't, or was forbidden. As I pull my main character into facing a long neglected dance zone, I'd ask the reader to be patient with her. Her story focuses on the impact of chasing a glittery dance dream and lack of experience in a spotlight. In spite of many off the page life experiences, she's suffered and victoriously overcome many obstacles—especially as a woman. But, Ameera's pioneer spirit blazes a trail through the unknown land of Dance.

Palmetto Oasis Middle Eastern Dance Troupe is real. I was given permission to use many of the actual troupe members' names. They've been patient and supportive as I labored to unveil Ameera. I've embraced their generosity to take creative license with the unbelievable glittery story. I hope to show the bonding power of resilience, humor, and passion among friends and strangers. The therapy of dance is real—not fiction.

I would not have accomplished this tale if I hadn't been introduced to Shari Stauch. Her publishing experience and . . . let's say it like is . . . puts your balls to the walls honesty required me to get mad and tell how unfair life can be. BQB Publishing enthusiastically polished the project with many talented artists. Terri Leidich, Heidi Grauel, and Julie Breedlove offered prompt answers and resources. My editor, Sharon Hecht, untangled my grammar and cut story interruptions without ripping off the band-aid. Even the book cover embodies many of the messages in the story. Kendra Haskins did an amazing job with my website—capturing the 'pretty' that makes women and little girls say "wow!" And, thanks to Leroy Mazyck (Pixel Studios) for always easing the stage fright in front of his camera. He did a fabulous job with my

author's headshot. When I doubted my ability to finish the project, it was my family, friends, and community that urged me on.

If you are reading this, I want to thank the readers! I hope you enjoy Ameerah's glittery release from her forbidden zone. From my own experience, once you've been bitten by the dance bug, it infects all the senses and perceptions. It reveals old tapes and fears and rewards you with unique memories and bonds.

But, most of all, I thank my soul mate, Steve. He made me his queen and supported my search for the little ballerina that got left behind in my childhood. It takes a special man to stand with his belly dancing wife. They can't be afraid of a little glitter!



“Whenever a little girl ran to the dancers in the middle of the room and started dancing, the faces of the older women lit up, they laughed loudly, for life had taken on a new rhythm, a rhythm that was before us and would continue after we had gone. Of course, these performances were also used by the mothers-in-law to take a close look at their future daughters-in-law. And we girls knew about it. Yet when an old woman got up to dance, suddenly, something that was there could not be expressed in words—a gift, a woman’s prayer filled the room, borne by the subtle, nearly wise movements of one who stood far ahead of us in the long chain of women.”

— From *Grandmother’s Secrets*



I

The year 2006 was my year of change. According to the Chinese calendar, it was the Year of the Dog, the same sign under which I was born in 1958. Specifically, it was the Year of the Red Fire Dog—I thought of it as the Year of the Hotdog.

In 1982, I was a Pentecostal wife and a young mother and everything I knew about the Chinese zodiac came from discreet glances at paper placemats at all-you-can-eat Chinese buffets.

On one of these placemats, I'd read, "The Dog symbolizes responsibility, loyalty, compatibility, and kindness. Dogs frequently offer kind words and useful advice, always listening and lending a shoulder when necessary. Ensuring others are happy is more important to the Dog than wealth, money, or success. Dogs can benefit by learning to relax and being more rational." Pondering this description, I'd looked at my four-year-old daughter Isabella and then-husband Chris, a Pentecostal preacher's son, and thought, Nothing new to me.

But that was then . . .

Now, twenty-four years and a new husband later—we'd married in 2002 after a five-year courtship—I was standing at the front door of a beautiful home that my husband and I had built together, looking out at the wetlands. The sun was rising, highlighting spiderwebs heavy with dew among the marsh grass. I'd no reason to be up early, since I'd retired from running a sole practitioner's legal practice shortly after my remarriage, but my mind was still cluttered.

My late-stepfather's estate had closed and our new Italian restaurant had

opened in a problematic building downtown—part of a real estate legacy left for my soul mate, Steve, to manage for his family.

Early in the summer, my son Aiden had graduated high school. As we neared the end of August, I'd packed his bags for a trip to Europe with his father—my ex—and bade him good-bye.

With parental responsibilities waning, I had turned my focus to . . . me! Yet, even as I was preparing to send Aiden on his adventure, I'd stumbled on a goal for myself when I pulled out the local high school's adult education class schedule and found a beginner's belly dancing class. *Course description: Basic introduction to belly dancing. No dance experience required: six weeks for \$55. First class starts September 12. Register online.* After I had found this, in no time at all, I was staring at the registration website, stressing and resisting the urge to say a few bad words throughout the online ordeal.

I'd toyed with the idea of enrolling in a dance class for more than a year. I'd dreamed of dance classes for what seemed a lifetime—ever since I completed the arduous commitment to homeschool my son Aiden during his junior year of high school. Aiden had argued to be homeschooled for at least a year since my retirement in 2004. I'd allowed my daughter Isabella to do it until she enrolled in high school, but after my 1994 divorce I wasn't able to homeschool while working full time and heading a single-parent household. So I'd agreed to his request. Not only had I taken on a teaching role that had put my new life on hold, I had to teach chemistry, which was anything but fun. Before and after his instruction time, I'd spent hours studying elements and stoichiometry. Together with extra knowledge, I'd gained extra pounds as a deskbound parent. As a fortyish mom who was only five-foot-three, I didn't distribute those twelve extra pounds well. They attached to "the sisters" and found residence in the love handles that were not so fashionably referred to as "muffin tops." That added smidgen to my waistline made my love handles scream, "Surrender to the idea of wearing elastic waistbands!"

I wanted to return to my fighting—excuse me—dancing weight. I'd always wanted to find my Red Shoes and dance, dance, dance. Instead, adult education and the realities of being in my forties were leading me to consider

bare feet, a hip scarf, and a choli. All I had to do was click on “Register Now” and I’d be on my way to instant shimminess.

My heart sank. Whenever “Just Click Here” flashed across the screen, my blood pressure rose and my self-esteem fell. If I missed “Required Fields” and accidentally erased my screen, I’d have to start over. But then I envisioned myself in sparkly costumes, twirling with jewel-colored veils, and wearing glittery makeup and obnoxious amounts of jewelry. Once I’d focused on the prize, I was able to return to my just-click-here fumble.

Minutes later, I had become a midlife belly dance student enrolled for lessons at my high school alma mater. I was anxious to meet my fellow adventurers—sisters in dance, perhaps. I’d assumed that each of us would embrace pursuing the art of dance for different reasons. Our only common ground would be a desire to learn to lift, drop, and shimmy . . . all in six weeks.

Now September 12 had arrived and, as I looked out my front door at the wetlands, cradling my first cup of coffee, it felt as though the first day of class had arrived too soon.

Hours later, I stood in front of my mirror for a pre-class fashion check: black yoga pants, colorful T-shirt enhancing my busty sisters, highlighted blonde hair pulled in a ponytail with a hot-pink fabric hairband, and feet grounded by distressed dance shoes. I hoped I was ready as I got into my car.

Even as I wove through traffic, I continued to battle my nerves. I tried to sort through my feelings. As I drove, I drifted back to my earliest dance memory of when the equation—dance-equalled-failure-plus-fear—first took root. In 1963, my mom had enrolled me in ballet class for ages four to five in Newport, Rhode Island. I’d blended into the circle of other timid wannabe ballerinas. With my green eyes wide open and petite arms perched on the wooden bar, I’d imitated my peers. I stretched tendons and muscles while learning foot positions and new words as Madame Levette tapped her stick, counting to eight over and over.

By the end of my second class, my mom and Madame had realized I couldn’t learn quickly.

I'd watched as Madame Levette whispered to my mom, "Your daughter's very cute, but I suggest she receive tutoring in skipping."

My mother had nodded. I'd felt like an ugly duckling as I submitted to the offer from Madame's assistant to stay after class to tutor me in the art of skipping. Oh, the horror! Because I was an obedient oldest daughter, I had attempted to shift my weight and lift each little pink shoe, skipping the perimeter of the room with the encouragement of my teacher. It had been a painful scene: A pink twig of a child jerking to the beat of left, right, left, accompanied by the exchange of cute, pink feet and a little, pink tongue alternating from corner to corner of my uncomplaining lips. After two more classes, my career as a ballerina had ended.

Memories faded as I took a left, ushering myself toward a new opportunity to be one with the music. *Oh, Goddess of Bindis*, I prayed silently as I pulled into the high school parking lot, *be kind and generous. Let the instructor see hope in my dancing heart.*

A pop-up summer thunderstorm made the parking lot steamy. Breathing the muggy air, I headed to my first day of class in thirty-one years. Charleston County had relocated the campus and built a modern facility since my school days. Nowadays, the South Carolina campus included air conditioning. No fighting for the desk near the fan in sixth period!

Tonight's school supplies consisted of a single chartreuse hip scarf, which I'd stuffed in a small book bag. My nose wasn't pressed on the glass, watching the mystery of women bonding through synchronized dance movement. Instead, the belly dancing pool was open and I was heading for the diving board! Time for me to jump into my forbidden dance zone.

After opening the Arts Building glass door, I scanned the hallway until I found the drama room. My instructor, dressed in black, looked about my age. She was bent over a CD player amid veils and hip scarves scattered in a corner of the heavily mirrored room. Blonde hair curtained her face until my footsteps alerted her to another presence in the room.

With my bravest voice, I put out my hand. "Are you Sybil Yocum?" I asked. "I'm one of your students . . . Kat Varn."

She looked up at me, a lock of hair draped over one eye, and reciprocated

the hand extension. “Hellllloo! Pat?” she fumbled my name. She was a pretty woman with a sunny smile and a dimple.

Bet her high school memories included cheerleading and homecoming queen crowns. “Kat. Short for Kathleen,” I respectfully corrected her.

“Glad you signed up,” she said. “I’ll warn you—you’re gonna become addicted.”

Smiling, our introduction over, she turned to greet my classmates who had arrived behind me, each jingling hip scarves. There were nine of us; an eclectic mix of curly-haired, tall, short, overweight, ethnic, single professionals, mostly forty-somethings, and mothers.

We circled and listened as Sybil enlightened us on the history and art of belly dancing: Women dancing for women, celebrating fertility and childbearing. Women providing the first pathway to life via the womb. Babies cradled in the belly, listening to the pulsing of a mother’s heartbeat. Twirling, stretching, and spinning before little feet hit terra firma. If I had been born centuries ago, as a little girl I would have undulated and memorized the dance of women before me. No one would have passed judgment on my skipping.

Every word watered a goddess seed hiding in my heart’s hope chest.

“Okay, ladies. Let’s warm up.” Sybil shocked me back to the moment. We stretched and warmed up to my first Arabic song. “Find a place in front of the mirrors.”

I took my place near the corner beside a brunette student.

“Belly dancing is a dance of isolations,” Sybil explained.

I understood about isolation. Before I’d ended my first marriage thirteen years earlier, isolation had been the story of my life, but I smiled at the word tonight.

“Module one includes the neck and head. Module two, shoulders, arms to hips. Module three is everyone’s favorite—hips to toes. Let’s try some moves in each zone.” Sybil demonstrated and invited us to imitate her.

As I stared at myself in the tall mirrors, I saw that my movements were short, jerky, and not at all pretty. My extra twelve pounds distracted me as they settled over the hip scarf and curled the waistband. To my right, the brunette’s curvaceous body extenuated her efforts.

As Sybil led us through the module movements, it became obvious that Western civilization didn't use these moves or muscles. I adjusted my view from the weight issue to exercise. As I continued to stare in the mirror, I fought voices from the past discouraging me and waging war on my belly dance crusade.

"Okay, ladies, I want you in neutral position in a circle," Sybil ordered, brushing that rogue strand of hair from her eye. "We'll be traveling in a circle alternating a hip push for eight counts, then alternating a shoulder push. Let's try it."

She pushed her remote and Shakira's "Hips Don't Lie" blared from the boom box. I tried to comply while fighting reality. My hips fibbed big time, and I didn't understand the choreography terms.

The song faded and Sybil started a cool down. Again, my head began to argue with my dancing heart. Experience had taught me not to give up after one try. I had five more classes and homework. Sybil busily packed her scarves, CDs, and player. She then sneaked out of the classroom, avoiding post-class fraternization.

My fellow students chattered like blackbirds, jingling hip scarves.

"It's harder than I thought."

"I looked like a dork. Isn't this fun?"

I left the room, ignoring them, and strolled alone to the parking lot. I drove my car on autopilot as my brain continued sifting and filing information. I thanked my inner little girl for taking the plunge into another effort toward dance training.

When I got home and entered the kitchen, stir-fry aromas filled the room.

"Dear, how was class?" my husband Steve asked. "Did you like it? When's the next one? How many students? By the way, we're having dinner with Gwen and Alan on Friday. The gym asked how you've been."

I forced a smile. He looked up and caught my cocked eyebrow. I shook my hip scarf and grinned. "It's hard. I'm stiff and not fluid, but I want to do this. You wouldn't believe how many diverse women were there, and a lot of them are about my age."

Steve turned back to his stir-fry. “Can I ask you about your class choice?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Why belly dancing? Why not ballet or ballroom?”

I paused, turning the question over in my head. It sounded like a hard question, but the answer was obvious. “If I took ballet, jazz, or ballroom, what would I do with it? I want to do something for myself. I’ll never be a ballerina or someone’s dance partner. This is for me. I think it’ll challenge me without making me feel left behind. Every time I see a belly dancer on TV, it stirs something inside me—a feeling of wanting to be pretty but strong, like a goddess.”

“Well, my little goddess, go get comfortable. Supper’s almost ready,” he said with a grin.

I inched toward the bedroom to exchange my dance garb for flannels and a T-shirt. I needed a moment to regroup.

In light of my first day of belly dancing class, the unbreakable ties between my past and present had resurrected the old fears I’d felt about freeing my inner butterfly. Steve’s encouragement contrasted vividly with the lack of support I’d received from my ex-husband in my previous life. Isolation, neglect, and restrictions didn’t exist in my new home.

“Did I tell you Sybil said belly dance is all about isolations?” I yelled. As I thought about that word, isolation, and how it contrasted with my present life, I couldn’t help but smile.