American Lullaby: A Dystopian Novel Written from a Theoretical Perspective

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SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the
College Scholars Honors Program
North Central College

May 12, 2014

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ABSTRACT

After examining a number of modernist and contemporary dystopian texts, I wrote my own creative response, *American Lullaby*, in which I return to the original paradigm for dystopian literature where social critique is more important than a happy ending or a plot driven by a successful romantic relationship. As such, in *American Lullaby*, there are no successful romantic pairings that exist at the end of the novel, and the novel ends with the protagonist's inevitable death. Further, I subdivide the setting of my novel into two spheres, Upper and Lower, in an attempt to clearly illustrate and critique the gross economic inequality in our country.
In creative writing, as in analytical writing, the text has an origin, a spark of an idea that helped it take form. In writing *American Lullaby*, I drew my inspiration from the classic dystopian novels *1984* and *Brave New World*, by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley respectively, which both offer a sharp social critique of our current society, ending in either a physical or spiritual death. In *1984*, the novel ends with protagonist Winston sitting in a bar drinking gin, watching the news while he plays checkers. He has been tortured extensively, to the point that under the dirt caked onto his skin "there were the red scars of wounds, and near the ankle the varicose ulcer was an inflamed mass of flakes with skin peeling off it" (Orwell 284), to the point that he even believes that two plus two makes five. In Orwell's harrowing tale, it is only a matter of time until the Thought Police come and kill Winston for good, but in the mean time, he has been brainwashed into believing that Ingsoc is good, Big Brother is deserving of love. Rather than overturn the dystopian regime, he has submitted to it. In ending the novel this way, Orwell suggests no one can overcome such a powerful institution, ultimately making Orwell's warning about our own, very similar world that much more powerful, urgent, and compelling.

Similarly, in *Brave New World*, John commits suicide when he is unable to return to his cultural roots, and his isolation is ruptured. Unlike Orwell's Winston, who is made to submit to the militant regime that surrounds him, John's inability to reconcile the world in which he wants to live with the world in which he does live causes him great distress. Rather than being left alone, as he would prefer, a number of people come to see him for entertainment, crying "We—want—the—whip" (Huxley 228); they want to witness and
enjoy his self-punishment. And when he whips them instead and partakes in an orgy, he realizes he has been unable to maintain his sexual purity, one trait about himself which he prized so highly, and this realization of decadence causes him to hang himself, and the novel ends with him swinging from the rafters, his "feet turn[ing] towards the right; north, north-east, east, south-east" (Huxley 231).

Both of these works end tragically for two of their main characters, and such an ending reinforces the social critique of each novel. Because the characters are unable to escape the society from which they try to flee (by pursuing isolation in John's case, and by attempting to overthrow the regime in Winston's), both authors establish the dystopian regime as being stronger, more powerful than any one individual, or even than a group of individuals. And since these governmental structures are meant to mirror our current social climate, a harsher, more tragic ending is more likely to shock us into taking action, into using technology less, into questioning the media that we consume. In short, the structure of these dystopian novels allows them to achieve precisely what they were meant to do: change society, one person at a time.

In more recent years, however, it has become the trend in young adult (YA) literature to create dystopian trilogies centered on young adults who go on quests and ultimately overturn the militant regime of which they are a part; two popular examples in this category are Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy and Scott Westerfield's *The Uglies* trilogy. Both series, which center on a high-school age female protagonist, end with the dissolution of the dystopia; at the end of the third novel, the militant regime has been broken apart, thanks in large part to the single girl, without any reflection upon the fact that a new dystopia could rise from the ashes of the old one. In essence, it is a post-apocalyptic quest novel,
where heroic protagonists right the wrongs of an evil society. The dystopia does not win; they do. And for this reason, the critique that these novels offer is lost among the more exciting plot points of overturning the regime, and any reader is less likely to be haunted of the possibility of such an occurrence happening in the real world, for as *The Uglies* trilogy and *The Hunger Games* trilogy both suggest, living in such a militant environment cannot only be born, but the regime itself can be overcome.

In *American Lullaby* I return to the original paradigm for dystopian literature where social critique is more important than a happy ending in which the dystopian regime dissolves. Unlike *The Hunger Games* or *The Uglies* trilogy in which the female protagonist leads a rebellion against the state, Chris is unable even to survive in such an environment, let alone attempt to start some great revolution against the upper-class society that treats her unfairly. The patriarchal nature of "Upper," the web-like skyscraper world of the upper class, breaks her spirits, forces her to become a prostitute, and ultimately rejects her when she defends herself from rape and assault by stabbing a man and wounding him horribly. She cannot remain in Upper, and must return to the rat-infested, prostitute-filled streets of Lower to either abort her baby or raise it in a cruel world.

Like the classic dystopian novelists, I end the plot with my character's death; not only are her spirits so crushed that she arguably experiences a spiritual death, but *American Lullaby* ends with Chris' assumed suicide. Though she ends the play waiting to die (after placing a syringe of air into her veins), and we ultimately don't know if she does or not, it is clear that life holds nothing for her. In contrast, at the end of *Mockingjay*, the third novel in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss has married Peeta and has two children who will grow up safely, without ever having to participate in The Hunger Games. Though the text suggests
that she has an addiction to morphling (a bastardized version of the word morphine), she has her freedom, and she has love and companionship, things that Huxley's and Orwell's protagonists sorely lack at the end of their respective narratives.

In following the more traditional dystopian narrative structure, I hoped to communicate my social critique more openly, more powerfully. The world of American Lullaby demands heteronormativity, but not everyone complies by choice; though Candy and Chris appear to have some romantic attraction for each other, it remains latent because they live in a strictly controlling society. In addition, since my goal was to critique the great divide between the poor and the wealthy in our country and our failure to adequately address this issue, overturning the dystopian regime that I create in American Lullaby would have completely negated the very process of writing the novel, would have negated my very reason for writing it.

Admittedly, American Lullaby continues to be a work in progress. Though the narrative here is complete, and it is possible to read the novel from beginning to end, it lacks the complexity I had originally wanted to write into it. As I continue to work on this project, I wish to add more nuance into Chris' relationship with her sister, with Candy, with Ivan, and with James. I also wish to extend the work so that it could be publishable as a novel; as such, in many ways the work here is a first complete draft, the result of an undergraduate writer creating a novel in less than a year. I am proud of this work, but I acknowledge that it requires revision and extension in order to be a polished, publishable work.

Though I very much consider the title of this piece, American Lullaby, to be intentional, how I came upon it was a happy accident. As I was writing the third chapter where Chris goes into her strange dream state and imagines her mother singing, I wanted to
include lyrics from a piece that reflected the values of America and fit more with the themes of my novel than something like *Braham's Lullaby* or "Hush, Little Baby," and so chose the first verse from the popular art song "American Lullaby," written and arranged by Gladys Rich. The text of the piece, printed at the end of this reflection, shares the story of a baby whose parents have essentially left it with "Nursie" while at work, or a "weekly bridge party" (Rich, line 8). The speaker, possibly the nurse herself, consoles the child by saying that its parents, though gone, are trying to make a better life for it, and for the family at large. The father, who is at "the stock-broker's office, a-keepin' the wolf from the door" (Rich, line 2) prizes his family's wealth over spending time with his child, even though the Nurse clearly thinks the child is precious and deserving of the parents' love and time. As in my novel, "American Lullaby" demonstrates that material wealth—though pursued—is quite problematic to the normal structure of society and can actually destroy the relationships that are fundamental to its continuance.

I was first introduced to this piece my senior year of high school, and interestingly enough, it is a piece that I used in my initial vocal audition for the North Central College. It is thus fitting, that as I have made my way through North Central and extended my scholarship to different disciplines, that I extend it to a piece that is near to my heart, bringing my interests during my time at North Central full circle, remembering the beginning as I approach the end.
American Lullaby

Hush-a-bye, you sweet little baby, and don't you cry any more.
Daddy is down at the stock-broker's office, a-keeping the wolf from the door.
Nursie will raise the window shade high,
So you can see the cars whizzing by.
Home in a hurry, each Daddy must fly
To a baby like you.

Hush-a-bye, you sweet little baby, and close those pretty blue eyes.
Mother is down at her weekly bridge party to get her wee baby the prize.
Nursie will turn the radio on,
So you can hear a sleepy-time song
Sung by a lady, whose poor heart must long
For a baby like you.

-Gladys Rich
Selected Bibliography


American Lullaby

Kelly Noel Rasmussen
Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank a number of people who helped make this project a success either directly or indirectly. Thanks to Dr. Matthew Kirkpatrick, for being such a supportive thesis director and not only for assuaging my fears regarding my novel, but for giving me so much life advice; to Carin Silkaitis, my second reader, for giving feedback on well over one hundred pages of work even with her busy schedule; to F. Elizabeth Nicholson, the North Central College librarian of the Division of Arts and Letters, who reviewed my novel shortly just a few short weeks ago; to Dr. Sara Eaton, my academic advisor who initially encouraged me to pursue a creative thesis with Dr. Kirkpatrick and was understanding as I navigated several research topics; to Sandra Chapman and Dr. Perry Hamalis for willing to be a listening ear throughout my four years here, regardless the issue.

To my parents, who have supported me throughout my college years and have encouraged my voracious reading and writing habits; to my sister, Katie, who frustrated me, inspired me, and gave me the creative energy to write about Blanche and Chris; to my roommate, Kate Grabon, who willingly listened to me complain about my thesis and provided emotional support on various occasions throughout the year; to the creative writing group that meets regularly in Kiekhofer, who gave me feedback on sections of my manuscript; and to all my other friends, family members, and acquaintances who listened to me, gave feedback or advice, or cheered me on as I wrote this behemoth creative project over the last nine months.
PART I

Decision (noun): a final choice or judgment, a course of action
Chapter One

"You look like shit."

That's the first thing my sister said to me when she was no longer comatose. Blanche turned her head to the side to look at me, and I noticed for the first time that the right side of her face was deep purple, matching the tips of her hair. She reached out toward me, and I grabbed her hand, holding it firmly in my own. Her eyes still looked glassy, and her face was a shade lighter than her dingy bed sheet. On her arm, barely visible since her elbow was bent, there was a red mark spidering out from where she must have inserted the needle.

Honestly, if anyone looked like shit, it was her.

"Well, I didn't really have time to change my clothes. The doctors called the landline about an hour ago and said it was an emergency. I ran to the subway and took that here."

"You took the fucking subway? Jesus, Chris."

Shaking my head, I leaned back in the chair, the orange-brown vinyl crackling in protest as I did so. "It was fine. I had Mom's old jackknife with me, just in case. Thank God I didn't have to use it."

Blanche chuckled, but it was dry, like sandpaper scratching against wood. "I bet you couldn't have stabbed anyone anyway," she said, coughing slightly. "You're a fucking pansy when it comes to fighting."

There was definitely truth in that; even though I was nearly six years older than Blanche, she'd gotten out of three times the scrapes I had. I remembered how I had wrung my hands and paced or even hid under the bed when the lights and sirens would go off during the riots. Blanche always pressed her nose against the glass and one time even broke the window to shout in unison with the protestors down below on the streets. But this wasn't a time of
rioting or even desperation; it was one of resignation. Since the world had divided itself, most of the violence had disappeared. The stores with food or electronics had been looted; no one cared if meth and heroin were on the streets; prostitution was as common as breathing. Anyone who had protested the change was dead—either they had been shot during the riots or they committed suicide later—and those of us that remained just existed. Being able to fight no longer mattered, not really. I simply pursed my lips and squeezed Blanche's hand. Best to keep my mouth shut.

At that moment, the doctor entered. He was clearly high himself: His eyes darted all around the room, and his pupils almost completely blocked out his irises. As soon as he stepped fully into the room, he shut off the lights so that only the dim fluorescence from the hallway illuminated the entrance and his face.

"So, you overdosed... on heroin," the doctor said, turning toward my sister, squinting in concentration as he read his clipboard. He looked up at us and blinked. With his large pupils and messy black hair, I couldn't help but think he looked like a raccoon. He even had faint purple bags under his light blue eyes. "We... we managed to..."

Shutting my eyes in frustration, I walked over to the door and flicked the light switch. Above us, the fluorescent light flickered to life, casting the dark room into semi-shadow before harshly coloring the walls a putrid eggshell. The doctor jumped in surprise, and his clipboard clattered to the floor. Served him right. Even if this was a Lower hospital in a seedy area of town, little better a halfway house for drug addicts, his behavior was inexcusable. I remembered for a moment the hospital I'd been to as a little girl when I had my appendix removed: lights that always worked, doctors with smiles and green surgical gloves, heart-shaped lollipops. Blanche had never known that.
"Look, I'll save you the trouble," I said picking up his clipboard and handing it to him. "We already know my sister overdosed, and it's happened before. I know she'll need to stay here a couple days for observation, and I know you're supposed to recommend that she go to the free six-week program here. How much do I owe?"

Curling into himself, the raccoon doctor blinked at me, holding his clipboard to his chest, scribbling something on it. I could feel my cheeks grow hot with impatience, and I crossed my arms. "How much do I owe?" I repeated.

"I-I don't know," he said, but he paused in his writing. At that moment, he looked like a five-year-old playing in a lab coat. The sleeves of the coat even hung slightly past his wrists. "Sometimes we don't charge patients, but Blanche... Blanche has been here a lot. Let... let me go talk to... I'll just go." And then, just as he'd arrived, he shuffled out of the room, heading down the corridor. I rolled my eyes. Sometimes it amazed me that these doctors had been able to find employment, even if it was in Lower.

I looked over at Blanche and saw that her eyes were closed, that she was an inch from sleep. I settled on the chair once more and began stroking her hair. It was so short now, not like it had been during the riot years. She'd have Mom braid it for her, and then me. It had always looked so pretty when it was long.

"Blanche, why do you do this to yourself?" I murmured, still smoothing her hair back. "This is the third time you've overdosed this year, and every time I get that call, I'm petrified. I don't want to lose you."

It was a moment before she answered. "I... I need a way... to forget," she said at last. "It was easier when Dad was around; things almost seemed normal. Porn still sold, even if the books didn't. But now..." Blanche opened her eyes and looked at me, her indigo irises
piercing mine. She seemed younger than usual, more world-weary and yet more innocent. "I have to do things, bad things, just to stay alive, just to forget Mom's death... Dad's death. I fucking hate that you didn't see either of them die because I'm sure that makes your life a hell of a lot easier."

I sat there, numb. "You don't have to... you don't have to do what you do."

"Be a whore, you mean?" Blanche laughed, but it was hollow and weak, coated with sleep. She yawned. "I do if I want smack. It's the only job that's left, Chris. There's nothing else. Strippers get paid shit, and even then they sleep with clients. At least I make enough to get what I need—a little food, a place to sleep, and drugs to keep me sane. That's all I need."

Folding my lips together, I shook my head and watched her as her eyes closed, as her breathing slowed. I continued holding her hand, absently rubbing patterns across it with my thumb and fingers. I bit my lip and pressed my leg against the hospital bed to brace myself.

"Look, please just stop working for a week or two once you're out," I said at last, grasping her hand. "I can get a visa to work in Upper, and you can go to one of those nice rehabilitation clinics out where the suburbs used to be, do some replacement therapy or something... and I'll come visit you on my vacation days."

As sleep took her, Blanche smiled. "You're so naïve, Chris."

Though the room grew slowly colder and darker, despite the flickering light, I stayed at her bedside, holding her hand as she slept.
Interlude

The riots began ten days into the government shutdown. Only those that had been watching closely, who still knew where to find reliable sources of news, realized that the breakdown of Congress signified an ending to love and life and liberty. The shutdown had wiped the gold veneer from the middle class. The wealthy were unaffected, unaware of the shutdown, and the poor were only aware of their suffering. The chaos hardly made things worse.

At first the riots were only in Washington D.C., but as those began to receive press (on the few channels that hadn't shut down), other people in other cities began to follow suit: Chicagoans, New Yorkers, Bostonians, and Los Angeles citizens alike began picketing with signs in the streets, and some of the poor saw the madness as a cover to loot stores. From their high-rise penthouses or their places out in the suburbs, the wealthy could see little more than dots, just little plastic figures playing at anger.

Day ten turned into day twenty, thirty, forty, and the government defaulted on its loans, bankrupt. And on the fifty-fourth day, the CEOs of the Fortune 500 rose up and released a statement to the press: They were creating their own joint school system for employees' children; they were creating their own complex. Hardly anyone outside the Fortune 500 cared or thought about the implications. And so the CEOs followed through with the plans. First they built walkways to connect all their skyscrapers, and then built a monorail to travel in between all the different parts of the complex. They sealed the doors that led to the streets and created a single entrance into the complex, always guarded by retina scanners.

Over the next couple years, this new colony watched the country's destruction from the comfort of the ivory pathways that connected the skyscrapers and separated the wealthy from the rioters. From inside the temperature-controlled complex, gentle pop music covered
the sounds of any screams, any protests that might have leaked inside despite the supposedly sound-proofed glass. And those poor that could see the end, that wanted to avoid their certain destruction, petitioned to join the complex. In an effort to truly create their own world, the New World leaders demanded that all new guests submit their official government documents, obtain a visa, and undergo an examination prior to entering the complex.

Down below on the streets, the protests became more violent, and inter-city public schools began closing, and parents kept their children locked in the apartments while they protested or tried to continue attending their jobs. Though their parents told them not to, the children pressed their noses and hands against the dusty windows, trying to see what exactly was going on in the streets. Occasionally a stray bullet would shatter a window and strike a child in the forehead.

In normal times of peace, the child might have received a burial, a coffin, a grave site. But with the violence on the street, and the vain hope that an even more shocking protest would cause the police to stop shooting people, the dead children were paraded through the street, held atop the signs. But the policemen and women, who also had children to feed, had switched their loyalties. They worked for the CEOs, and their goal was to maintain order in the New World and chaos below. After all, the worse things were, the higher the selling price for a visa.

And so, nothing changed. There were more and more riots, and more and more dead children.
Chapter Two

"Jesus, Chris! I'm fine!"

It was five days after Blanche had first been admitted to the Lower hospital to be treated for her overdose, and as I pushed her in the wheelchair toward the exit, she couldn't help but complain. Trying not to groan, I wheeled her toward the glass door.

The morning after she had been admitted, the raccoon doctor, Jerry, finally returned with an estimate of the bill. It was handwritten on a napkin, which wasn't too odd, considering that most of the Lower technology had been destroyed or had died of its own accord. I'd already paid a portion of the bill and had spoken with the hospital administrator, Terri (a notorious druggie and friend of my sister), about a payment plan. I asked them not to speak with Blanche on the subject; it might upset her.

"You know, I can walk. Just because I was near comatose for a couple days doesn't mean that I can't function on my own. Just let me walk back to my apartment so I can go sleep."

I folded my lips together and kept my mouth shut, continuing to wheel the chair away from her room. She tried standing up, but I pressed her gently back into the chair, and her body didn't even resist. "I told you I want you to stay with me for a few days before you return back to your apartment. And if I get accepted to go to the Upper World, then you can even stay in my place permanently. I mean, it'll be easier for you to stay away from Jerry and all your... friends. They're not good influences on you, Blanche."

My sister turned around in her chair and rolled her eyes at me. "Fuck you, Chris," she said, facing forward once more. Her jet-black hair bobbed softly from the motion. "Just
because Jerry was tripping while he was on duty doesn't mean he's a bad person. You know better than anyone how he's put up with everyone's shit, including mine."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from speaking. It was true that Jerry had been Blanche's doctor during other hospital stays, but he always seemed to have wide eyes, pupils far too dilated. And as for Blanche, I still couldn't understand how she used drugs in the first place. Yes, she'd been there when Mom had been killed by Upper World fire, and I suppose she'd seen Dad's svelte body swinging from the rafters the day the university closed. But wasn't she concerned about the effects? Even now her face was thin and pale, and her eyes had purple streaks underneath them. I could taste blood on my tongue from biting my cheek so hard, and I swallowed, wincing as the metallic taste fell into my throat.

I wheeled Blanche out of the hospital and into the bright sunshine, leaving the dingy yellow walls and flickering fluorescent lights of the hospital behind us. After a moment, I cleared my throat. "I picked up an application for an Upper World work visa," I said. "I thought maybe it would be good for us. I could work there, and then you could just enjoy yourself here, or maybe I could save enough that you could go to that rehabilitation center outside the city."

Blanche scoffed from her spot in the wheelchair, turning around yet again to stare at me. One black eyebrow was raised. "You're fucking ridiculous. It's not going to be any better for you there than it would be here. I've had friends that have been up there, and they all say the same thing. You end up as a whore, and when the Upper World is done with you, they toss you out."
The sun beat down, and rolling the creaking wheelchair over the hot, cracked cement, I could feel my forehead begin to bead with sweat. Walking all the way from the apartment had been bad enough a couple hours ago. "I'm sure that's not what happens in every case."

Blanche snorted again, and I left the conversation alone. We continued on in silence.

The next couple weeks, I brought Blanche with me to the store. The elevator was broken, so I helped my sister up and down the stairs morning and night when I was ready to work my shift. Her blue eyes were still dull and listless, but she was eating more regularly, and her face was filling out, becoming less gaunt. I would stand behind the wooden counter while Blanche would usually sit on it, gripping the edge, letting her legs dangle. While I was tidying up the store one day, trying to use a moldy rag to wipe up some dust, I noticed that Blanche was staring at the floor, at the threadbare blue carpet.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "I know something's bothering you, so just spit it out."

Hearing a sigh come from behind me, I turned around to look at my sister. She looked up at me, and I noticed that the shadows beneath her eyes had become dark again.

"I can't live like this, Chris," she finally said. "It's been the same every single day... peaceful perhaps, but you've fucking heard me cry in the night. I know you have. I have nightmares about Mom and Dad, and I just can't do this anymore."

I paused where I was wiping the window. I remembered back when I was a little girl and Mother was still alive, how the window seemed transparent, like there hadn't even been glass. But now, no matter how hard I wiped, the dust wouldn't seem to go away. "I don't know what you're talking about," I said, resuming my task, rubbing in little circles.
Behind me, the counter creaked, and then I heard my sister's muffled footsteps across the carpet. "I can't live like this, Chris," she said again more softly than before, and her voice cracked. I continued scrubbing at a particularly stubborn piece of dirt.

"Chris, are you even listening to me? I need to go back to my apartment." Her voice was pleading now, and it made me angry. I turned around and faced her, balling the rag in my fist.

"Blanche, you're safer here, and there's food here. You're not leaving. Besides, here you don't have to... you know..."

"What? Whore myself around? I know you're a fucking prude, but get over yourself." She paced around the small shop, her hands shaking nervously. "You don't even have alcohol or molly or anything, and I can't just disappear... it's like I see Mom standing among the rioters every night, holding her sign above her head, me with my hand in the front pocket of her jeans so we don't get separated, and then there's that Upper World cop with his fucking clear shield..."

I placed the rag on the window sill and crossed over toward my sister. "Blanche, calm down. That happened years ago. You're safe now."

"... and then he just holds this gun in his one hand, and he's on the monorail platform you know, back when they were still outside, and I see him looking at me, and I swear he smiles and then just shoots the gun. And then Mom falls down on her back... and her sign flies out of her hands..."

I enfolded Blanche in my arms, and she wrapped her arms around me, just crying. Creating small circles with my hand, I rubbed her back. "Shh... it's okay. No one will hurt you."
"... and I didn't know how to get back," she sobbed. "I was walking in the dark... and Chris, I just want it to go away."

I stroked her short black hair, placing my chin on the top of her head. "I know, Blanche. I know."

Sitting in the apartment while Blanche was asleep, I stared at the visa application. It was thick, thicker than I'd certainly anticipated, but it was still thinner than some of the longer books in the store. It seemed comparable to half of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and I stared at the thick, cream-colored packet with my pen hovering over the pages.

Name? That was simple enough, so I filled it in: Christina Marie Garrison. Age? Twenty-three. Occupation? I glanced at the walls of the small study. The lone bookshelf was stuffed with novels and signed copies, from long before the e-Books appeared. I vaguely remembered that my father had had a tablet of some sort that would allow him to read and play games, but my mother smashed it after a couple of months. *Subvert the norm*, she had said. *Technology is death. Read paperback books because Earth as you know it will end*. My father always rolled his eyes, but he generally followed my mother's advice after she destroyed his tablet. His smart phone disappeared a few months after that (I always blamed my mother), and after that he only used email when necessary. His students at the time complained that he was nearly inaccessible, but technology was death.

Under occupation, I wrote bookseller because it was as true as anything else I might write. "Professionally broke" or "concerned elder sister" would both be just as accurate, if possibly less precise. Inside the shop, we had crumbling and faded books, comics, and issues of *Playboy*, but I was selling most of it as kindling.
I sighed and rubbed my eyes, putting the application on the coffee table. With a couple fingers, I traced the scratches in its wooden surface, felt the smoothed corners where our father had sanded it down after Blanche had run into it and cut her lip on her sixth birthday. Even by then, my mother decided to keep Blanche home and stitch her lip herself rather than trust her with one of the doctors she could afford. My sister still had a short white scar there.

I looked at the application again, flipped through its pages. A few essays, a number of health and medical questions, a larger number of questions for psychiatric review... I placed it back on the table, the first page still on top bearing only a few marks of my neat cursive and slid further back on the sofa, angling my body and lying down, my elbow propped on the couch cushion, my hand on my cheek.

The next moment, a loud scream ripped through the apartment, and my eyes opened. The lights were still on in the main room, and I cursed. The electric bill would no doubt be ridiculous. Another scream, this one more desperate and mingled with a sob, choked the air. I stood up, flicked off the lights and walked quickly, nearly running, to my sister's room.

She was there, turning and twisting in my queen-sized bed, the one our parents used to share, and her dark hair was sticking to her forehead. I climbed into the bed, closer to the foot and hovered over Blanche, holding down her arms so she wouldn't knock over a lamp or hurt herself.

"Blanche! Blanche! It's just a dream. It's just a dream. You're okay, you're okay. Come on, it's okay. Wake up!"

I slapped her cheek gently, and her eyes fluttered open, and they were immediately glassy. "It was the man... he was coming after me. All I did was ask him for directions, and
he was following me. All I wanted was to get home, to see you. To see Dad. And he... and then Mom..."

Releasing her arms, I rolled over onto my side next to her and wrapped her in my arms. She began sobbing, snorting up snot as I held her. I stroked her hair and rubbed her shoulders as I waited for her crying to subside.

"It's okay, Blanche. He's not here to hurt you. I'm here, and I wouldn't let anything bad happen to you, you know that, right?"

A few dry sobs still wracked her body, but slowly they turned into hiccups, and then she was silent. I kept rubbing her shoulders and back for good measure.

"Chris, I can't do this anymore. I can't."

"Shh... it's okay. You're here with me. Nothing will harm you."

"You're not listening to me." Blanche rolled over onto her other side so that she was facing me. From behind her, the moon shone, and it illuminated her silhouette but left her face in relative darkness. I could barely see the dried tears on her cheeks.

"Yes, I am. You're fine. You can do this. You will be fine. You're here with me."

Blanche reached out and grabbed my hand and looked directly at me. In the darkness, her eyes looked black. "Chris, no. I can't do this. I need to go back to my apartment, and I need to forget. I just can't keep pretending that this life is okay for me, because it's not. And if you'd experienced the horrors that I have, you'd understand. Tomorrow, I'm leaving. And I know it bothers you when I overdose, so I'll try to keep it to whiskey for the time being, okay? It's cheaper anyway since there's still the corn fields outside the city."

I shook my head and let go of Blanche's hand. "How good of you," I said. "To think of me when you're harming yourself, I mean."
Blanche sat up, and though I could barely see in moonlight, it seemed that her eyes grew colder. "That's not fair. I'm trying to work with you here, Chris. I get that you worry about me, even though you don't need to. I just... I can't live like this. Can't you understand?"

"No," I said, sitting up myself, then sliding off the bed to stand. "No, I can't understand because you hardly talk about it, and you know what? I've never been through something nearly as traumatic as you have, apparently."

"You're so lucky," Blanche cried, "and you don't even realize it. I wish I'd lived your life. Mom and Dad always made sure you stayed out of the streets, even when you were old enough to know what the hell was going on. You went to Dad's lectures, and I stayed with Mom. We were supposed to stay in the apartment or even in the storefront, but you know Mom. She just had to join the protest. And so there I am, at eight years old, sitting alone in the apartment, wondering why Dad wouldn't let me stay at the university, wondering why Mom has left, wondering why they wouldn't even have you stay with me.

"And so, after a bullet shattered the glass in our room, I just begged Mom to take me with her next time, and you know how that went. You were with Dad, like you always were, and I watched Mom take a bullet to the head. She fell down and people stepped on her body before she'd even bled out, and I... I had to leave. But there were so many people, and I was afraid of getting trampled myself..."

I walked around to the other side of the bed, nearer to where she was. "Blanche, just stop. You don't have anything to prove to me. It's okay."

"No, it's not!" she shrieked. "You don't get it! You've never understood. And so I'm telling you. I'm telling you what it was like so maybe for one second you'll stop fucking
judging me for how I live my life, you'll stop trying to fix me, you'll just let me deal with my scars the ways I know how."

"Excuse me? I do not judge you. I am your sister, and I love you. I am concerned for you because what you're doing to yourself is dangerous..."

"I KNOW, ALL RIGHT? I'm the one who's been hospitalized three times!"

I crossed my arms and stared hard at my sister. Now that she was facing the window, I could see more of her face. It looked so pale in the moonlight. I shook my head. "Blanche, I can't let you leave. You know that. You have to know how much it kills me every time they call to tell me that you've overdosed, that you could have killed yourself. You're not even eighteen. You... you deserve better." My eyes began to sting, and I swiped at them haphazardly. Blanche sat there silently, not responding. I took a deep breath before I spoke again.

"Look, I'll get some liquor for you here if that'll help, but I want you to stay here in Quadrant 2. You know it's safer, and there's less temptation here. At least here we can still buy GMO produce in exchange for the books downstairs. And I know there's not much left here... but I picked up the application, and dammit Blanche, I will go to Upper, and I will send you to that rehabilitation clinic."

She stared at me, tilted her head and then laughed as though a sob were still caught in her throat. "You're deluded. I bet you that rehabilitation clinic doesn't exist, or if it does, only family members of the fucking wealthy go there. No one from Lower could ever afford that shit."
"You're wrong," I said, balling my fists. We stood there looking at each other for goodness-knows-how-long before I finally looked away. "I'll make you some chamomile tea."

I began walking towards the doorway when I heard my sister cough behind me.

"Chris," she said, "you can't keep me here forever, you know."

I paused and rested my hand on the doorframe. I looked back at her, but I couldn't even see her face now in the dark. I sighed.

"I know, Blanche, but I can try."
Interlude

The nearby university began to feel the effects of the riots after only a few months. Professors began cancelling classes, and students stopped attending as frequently. The large performing arts space, whose walls had begun to peel with disuse and lack of maintenance, began to reflect the rest of the campus. Student vigilantes sprayed red words on the walls, and posters advertising the Christian fellowship groups were ripped from the bulletin boards or defaced. "GOD HAS ABANDONED CHICAGO" and "THE APOCALYPSE IS NOW" became some of the more prominent messages, and the custodial staff only bothered to repaint over them a few times before leaving the red spray-painted letters be, leaving them to decay and peel like everything else.

Some professors still bothered to hold class, particularly those too young or too old to have families, but over the course of the first couple years, even those classes were nothing more than voluntary. Books, even eBooks, became less popular, and grades were a formality. The Registrar was no longer interested in whether people would graduate; its workers were protesting or protecting their own children.

After awhile, the school began to rent out the dorms to families that had lost their homes in the riots, that had too little money to pay for better housing, to those that wanted a somewhat safe place to live. After all, the more anti-protest people that congregated there, the less chance of violence, even if the security staff was severely lacking and there were no gates cutting off the campus from the rest of the city. Families of five would huddle in one double dorm room on the two bare mattresses, using the communal showers and toilets, glad for a warm roof over their heads. And the lecture halls, while empty and growing steadily
dingier, were a haven compared to the streets. All anyone could do was wait, wait for the government to get its shit together or wait for it to crumble entirely.

Even when the dean of students and all the staff members abandoned the school, looking for employment in the New World or abroad, some of the professors remained still teaching. One of them, who taught medieval and Renaissance literature, would attend the school every weekday (on the weekends he managed a bookstore), his two daughters in tow. They would sit in the second row as he talked about Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton and bob their heads up and down, pretending to understand. Even if they didn't, he would still lecture, point at passages in faded and torn books, and cry vehemently that it mattered. Literature mattered.

The desks at the back of the hall were covered in spider webs and dust an inch thick, but he didn't even notice. Didn't even notice that his fifteen-year-old daughter, bright as she was, was his only listening participant; even his younger daughter would sleep more often than not. He didn't notice that the chalk pieces grew smaller and smaller until he could no longer write on the blackboard, and he didn't even notice that desks went missing, ripped from the floor. He didn't notice that the projector was broken, or even that his chair was missing an arm and that the vinyl was torn. At the very end, there was nothing but his mind and the material and two barely able listeners, but still he was there.

Then one day when he tried to enter the building, it was boarded up. The doors, not only locked, the windows not only shut, but everything impenetrable. He pulled at the wooden planks on the front doors until his hands were bloody and full of splinters, but it didn't budge. He cried, whimpered, pressed his sweaty brow against the pine boards, but the
doors didn't magically open. The school wasn't Narnia, and he wasn't the professor who created the wardrobe.

That night, his oldest daughter was sitting in the shop downstairs, lying on the window seat reading a book, and his younger one was tucked safely in bed. He chose a wire rope, not for its thickness, but for its durability, and he wound it around the rafter in the attic. He'd left a note on the kitchen table and told his darling little girls not to come upstairs but to call the police, call the hospital, call anyone. He loved them very much, he said, and too much to take them with him. Dimly remembering his Boy Scout days, he tied the wire into a noose, slipped it around his neck, stood on a chair, and kicked it out. And while he was waiting, waiting, waiting to die, the wire choking the life out of him, he heard gentle footsteps climbing the stairs to the attic.

"Daddy! Are you there? I've looked everywhere for you. Can you read me a story?" a little voice asked. His youngest daughter, her long black hair plaits and falling over her pink nightgown emerged, and his last thought as he swung from the rafters, the last thought before his eyes closed, was how he wished he had taught his youngest (whose expression was growing worried, now horrified) to read the very note he had written. He closed his eyes, felt his dead weight, and knew no more.

From the attic, a little girl howled and sobbed and cried for her daddy to come back, to please come back.
Chapter Three

Days passed before I heard anything about my visa application. I'd turned it in to one of the few offices that still dealt with them, and it was a sad place near the sole entrance to the Upper World; that part of town was the nicest with its steel buildings and fewer bubbles of rust, fewer cracks in the concrete. The office itself was nothing more than a small three-foot-wide entryway with a window and a counter where a bored, rotund little man sat. I'd slid my visa application across to him, and he had said, with a patronizing lift of his eyebrow, that I would need to return to that office in three to four weeks time once he had heard from the Upper World Immigration Review Committee whether my visa had passed the first inspection. Having received a call earlier that morning that the visa had been processed, I left Blanche to her own devices and walked out toward the visa office; I made sure I had my knife and pepper spray on me.

It was strange, walking through the city with the harsh sunlight beating down. Everything seemed bathed in white, but it was far from ethereal. Instead, it highlighted all the potholes in the road, all the rust on the old parking meters. They had once served a purpose, but no one had used cars in several years. We either walked or rode the subway, though it had long since been called the meth train, especially at night. I passed my old school, a plain concrete building with small, celled windows, and I passed underneath a bridge that covered several rusting cars from ages past. On the corner, a man with wraith-thin legs and yellow teeth grinned at me from his spot in the shadows, the lone spider out in the daylight. All his friends, most everyone else, were sleeping no doubt. I scuttled past him and finally reached the edge of Quadrant 1 and entered the visa office. The man had his eyes barely open, and he gave me a bored, condescending look.
"The Upper World Immigration Review Committee has reviewed your papers and has requested that I give you this document. In it, you will find a second application and information for how to proceed. Read and review it carefully. Have a nice day."

He slid across a thick packet, and I took it and held the creamy, white paper in my hands. I had never seen paper as luxurious as this. All the books in the shop were made of crumbling yellow paper, and even the first application that I'd filled out had been made of the stuff. This was smooth, so smooth in fact, that I could feel the ink on the paper. I traced the different letterforms with my finger, but then I heard a cough. I looked up to see the clerk look even more patronizing than he had earlier, so I nodded my head at him and left for my apartment, walking once more across the hot, cracked concrete underneath the afternoon sun.

Blanche was sitting upstairs when I arrived, the bottle of whiskey clutched in her fist, wearing nothing more than a loose camisole and a pair of underwear. She giggled as I entered, and I tried to calm myself. Even if my sister was nothing more than an infant drinking evil milk, I wanted her here. As much as the nightmares had bothered her, had even bothered me since they'd ruined my sleep, I preferred that to this, whatever this was.

"I thought I told you I'd grab that for you when I got home, and that you could have a small amount," I said, setting the keys and the application on the coffee table. "Put that away. You've had enough to drink for one day."

Her face sobered, and her brows knit together. Even in the relative light, her eyes looked stormy, and if anything her grip on the bottle tightened. "Fuck you, Chris. Seriously, fuck you. Who are you to tell me what I can and can't do? You're not my mother."

I closed my eyes and prayed for patience. "You're here in my apartment. I think that gives me every right, don't you?"
Glaring, Blanche slammed down the bottle against the floor hard enough to make the liquid to slosh, but not hard enough to make it break. I winced.

"Then by all means, big sister, please tell me what to do! Or, you know what, here's a thought: Leave me the hell alone and let me go back to my own shitty apartment. Then you don't have to worry yourself about whatever the fuck I'm doing, right?"

"Besides," she added, picking the bottle back up and taking another swig from it, "this isn't your apartment, not really. Even if Mom and Dad are dead, it's still theirs. They're the one that paid the fucking rent until the landlord was shot, and the lease was in their fucking names."

Biting the inside of my cheek, I wrestled the dark square bottle from her grasp. Then, walking over to the sink, I turned the bottle sideways and watched as the brown liquid flowed out, a small gentle waterfall. Even in her state, after a moment Blanche came running up behind me and tried to grab it.

"No, stop! Stop! Look, I'll get dressed and I'll go down to the bookshop and I'll sell a few copies of *Playboy*, or I'll go across the street and sell it as kindling. Just don't do that."

"Too late," I said. I tilted the bottle completely upside-down, and the rest spilled out, not even a drop remaining. "It's all gone. Your precious liquor is all gone, and it's not coming back, just like Mom and Dad."

When I turned around after rinse the sink, Blanche had her arms crossed against her chest, and her jaw was tight, clenched even. "You have something to say to me?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said, raising her chin defiantly. "You're a bitch. And tomorrow I'm finally leaving this hell-hole, and you can't stop me."

As she stalked away, I turned back towards the kitchenette, gripping the sink. Sometimes, Blanche was so dramatic.
That evening, I stayed up as late as I could, trying to finish the second application. It seemed nearly all the questions I had answered on the first one were repeated on this more formal application, but this one also asked more fiscally-oriented questions, such as, "What is your credit in Lower?" and "How much debt do you have?" and "What do you plan to do with the money that you would earn at a New World job?" I scribbled answers to them all, gulping tea to keep myself awake. I had to do this tonight. I had to do this for Blanche. I just had to.

As I flipped to the thirtieth page to answer some more psychological questions, I began to think of our mother. Before the DVD player had broken, Blanche and I would watch the home video on repeat... our mother bathing us as infants, her singing old Vietnam protest songs to us when I was in primary school and Blanche was only in kindergarten, her wearing her bright red bandana and her light-wash jeans and a flannel midriff proudly showing us her sign: END NEW WORLD VISAS AND END ECONOMIC STRATIFICATION.

The words from the application seemed to swim in front of me, and even when I blinked several times, I couldn't make sense of them. I closed my eyes, just for a moment. And when I did, I heard a voice begin to sing, softly at first, little more than a hum, but then the sound grew louder, stronger:

_Hush-a-bye you sweet little baby, and don't you cry anymore._
_Daddy is down at his stock broker's office a-keepin' the wolf from the door._
_Nursie will raise the window shade high,_
_So you can see the cars whizzing by._
_Home in a hurry, each daddy must fly_  
_To a baby like you._
Mommy was singing as she bounced my sister on her lap as she sat in a rocking chair in the corner of the living room, and sunlight streamed through the windows since the thick linen curtains were pulled back. Daddy's footsteps echoed across the wooden floor, getting louder and closer, and when he saw baby Blanche, he reached over to Mommy and wiggled his fingers, wanting to hold her. I wanted to hold her, too, but when I wiggled my fingers, Mommy and Daddy laughed.

And then, the sunlight faded, and Mommy was sitting alone in the rocking chair, wearing her flannel midriff and her jeans and her bandana. And she had blood crusted on her hair, all over her head. I walked towards her, humming, trying to placate her. Her head snapped up, and one of her eyes had been shot clear away. I pulled my hand back only to see that it was bloody, covered in her blood even though I hadn't touched her. I screamed, sobbing, crying, and I fell to the floor.

I jolted awake, and the lights were still on. I blinked a few times and stared in confusion for a moment. The application was in front of me, and the lights were on (again, dammit), but something felt off. Everything was silent, but my throat felt raw. I rubbed at it and swallowed, but nothing helped. The faint click of a lock. I froze. Blanche.

As I hurried to her room, I turned on the lights. The bed contained a lump, and I exhaled, suddenly aware that I hadn't been breathing. I rushed over to hold my sister, but when I looked for her peaked, pale face and her short dark hair, all I saw was a pillow. Even when I pulled the bedcovers back, all I saw were pillows, expertly arranged to look like a human form. My heart began pounding again, and I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyeballs, trying not to cry.

Blanche had kept her promise. She was gone.
Interlude

From the gently air-conditioned pathways that connected the skyscrapers, everyone in the New World grimaced at the filth and violence below. Difficult to believe that they had ever interacted with those flannel-wearing, gun-carrying, shouting savages, they said. Savages that filled the streets below, that rammed their rifles into the clear shields of the New World police. How barbaric. But the metal chain link fence was too easy to climb, and until the New World completed a more proper entrance to the compound—one built of carbon-60, one that required identification documents upon entering—the police were the barrier between the heathen-evangelical-red-necked-hippie-carnivorous-vegan-pink-collar-blue-collar freaks and them, the civilized ones. When they weren't at work in their towers, sometimes they (but mostly their children) would press their noses against the glass of the connecting walkways and watch the people surging forward, trampling each other as they rushed towards the men and women in the navy blue SWAT uniforms—Kevlar and helmets and all—and watch a mother get shot in the head as her young daughter clung to her, crying out, "Mommy, Mommy!"

After a few more months, the shortages truly began. Electricity flickered in any building that was less than a skyscraper; the library next to the elevated tracks began housing cots and people, its marble interior growing dingy; any stores that hadn't been looted were selling out of food, closing their doors, moving upward if they could. People began buying GMOs, food that had been tampered with, food that was being cultivated by scientists out in the suburbs or being hoed by illegals still on this side of the border. No one knew what was in their food, or what their food was, and no one cared so long as their stomachs didn't rumble in the chill of night.
A few lucky ones traveled to parks or just outside the city limits, found some unpolluted soil, and planted a few seeds. Small blemished tomatoes and wilted lettuce sprang up the following spring, but by that point, everything was quiet. The proper entrance with retina scans and automated check-in machines had been built, and the chutes that took people to the highest floors of the New World were protected and reinforced with steel and carbon-60. Most people, realizing any fight was futile, had stopped rioting. The government was dead, or close enough, and people just needed to survive.

And vice and fear crawled the streets, looking for their newest victim.
Chapter Four

I sat in the small chamber, bouncing my knee. My feet were flat against the floor, and I was wearing my nicest skirt (though even this black knee-length thing had still been touched by moths), but I couldn't hide my anxiety. Blanche was in the hospital again, and I was here without any way to contact her or for the hospital to contact me. I folded my hands together, gripping until my knuckles turned white, but even then, it still wasn't enough pressure to keep me from thinking about her.

In front of me, the flat black screen was blank. Two more minutes. Two more minutes, and it would turn on, and the interview would begin. I'd heard that it wasn't a real person but a robot, an android of some sort, but maybe that was a lie. You never really knew.

It had been nearly two months since Blanche had left my apartment, and in that time, we'd hardly spoken. Where Blanche was concerned, no news was good news, but now she was in the hospital. And even though I'd turned in my visa application and had been approved for a final interview to determine whether I was a good match for Upper, I couldn't stop thinking of Blanche and how much I needed to be with her. I didn't even know why they needed to interview me; the applications had been so thorough that anything additional seemed quite excessive. But here I was, and there they would be, and hopefully it would go quickly. My knee still bounced, and I counted the seconds.

At long last the screen switched on, but instead of a face, it was nothing more than a turquoise line and a disembodied voice. "Hello, Ms. Christina Noel Garrison. My name is Cory, and I will be your interviewer today."

Cory's voice was rather monotone, lacking interest, and the pitch was strange—rather low for a woman, but with none of the cadence that a man's had. As it spoke, the turquoise
line became jagged to reflect the speech patterns, both in frequency and in volume. It took me a moment before I remembered to be polite.

"Hello, Cory." It seemed silly, talking to a screen that didn't even feature a human face.

"Are you ready to begin the interview?"

I nodded.

"I cannot confirm your response. Please assent verbally." The turquoise line on the screen became flat once more as it waited.

"Oh, um... sorry. Yes, Cory, I'm ready to begin the interview."

The interview was long, even longer than the second application it seemed, and I found myself drowning in some of the questions. What was the Latin word for "stability?" Could I name three Romantic poets who died before 1841? How did one make a hydrogen bomb? I wanted to ask if the questions were all necessary, but I bit my tongue to hold it. The minute I asked that, no doubt I would be unable to obtain the visa I so desired.

"And do you have any siblings? Any family?" Cory asked at last.

I nodded as though the turquoise line cared. "I have a sister, Blanche. She turned eighteen last month."

"No other family?"

"No," I said. The bouncing in my knee was undoubtedly far more pronounced now; I needed to leave and see what the hospital had said about Blanche. Was she stable? What had she been admitted for? How much would it cost? "No other family."
"I see." Cory paused. "And your sister Blanche? She is financially dependent on you?"

"You could say that," I said. "I pay for all her medical bills, and I try to help her out when I can."

"And if you were in the New World, or Upper as you might call it, would you continue to provide for her?"

"Yes. I love her and would do anything for her. Anything to help make her better."

"Anything?" Cory asked. With the emphasis in its tone, it sounded more human than it had at any point earlier in the conversation. "You would pay any price to see that she is cared for?"

I imagined that a man, some influential CEO was on the other side of Cory's screen. "Yes, I would. Like I said, I would do anything."

The turquoise line was flat for a moment. "Thank you," Cory said at last. "We have everything we need. We will contact you when we have processed your visa. Have a good day."

And before I could say anything in reply, the screen went dark.

When I arrived at the hospital, Blanche was sleeping, another IV drip in her arm, oxygen tubes in her nose. Jerry had informed me they were releasing all the toxins from her body after yet another heroin overdose. I sat in the same orange vinyl chair, surrounded by the same dingy yellow-cream walls, sitting under the same flickering fluorescent light, holding my mother's knife, pressing its point against my finger, testing its sharpness. With a sigh, I shoved it back into my pants pocket and part of me wished Blanche could just stay in the
hospital on permanent detox. Taking a deep breath, I pressed my anger down and stared at the floor, the cracked linoleum... or was it tile? Even tugging harder on my hair didn't seem to help.

"Chris?"

My head snapped up. Blanche had opened her eyes and was blinking at me, her lids barely lifted. Purple shadows under her blue eyes, her skin nearly grey, her arms thinner than I'd seen them in some time. I swallowed but leaned forward to grasp her hand. "You're okay," I said, rubbing small circles onto the back of her hand. "Everything will be okay. I promise you, Blanche. It'll all be okay."

She smiled and tilted her head up so that she could see me better. I held her hand, sitting on the very edge of my chair to be nearer to her. I had to go to the Upper World. I had to earn enough money to send her to the rehabilitation clinic out in the suburbs. I had to, I just had to. My eyes stung, and I released Blanche's hand so that I could smear any wetness away before she could see it. At least this way I could pretend I was just tired. I yawned for effect.

"I know I'll be okay," she said, reaching out for my hand and patting it. "It's my fucking curse. Sometimes I take too much heroin just to see if I can kill myself, but it hasn't happened yet." She sighed. "Chris, you seriously need to stop worrying about me. This is my life. This is what I fucking do. It's what I'm going to keep doing, what's going to keep happening, so butt the fuck out."

I looked at her, really looked at her, and saw blunt sincerity. No mirth, no humor. I shook my head, released her hand, stood up. My mind was blank. "You're wrong," I told her.
"You're completely wrong. It's not going to keep happening because I am going to fix this. I am going to earn enough money to send you to that clinic, and..."

"Chris, just stop it already! It's not funny anymore."

"...you'll be fine. You'll be better than fine. You won't have to... sell yourself anymore... you won't even have to do drugs anymore. I'm sure there are substitutes for that..."

"Chris!"

I stopped speaking, surprised that my sister had the strength to yell. "I just... I can't keep going through this, Blanche." And even though Jerry hadn't yet given me the bill, I left the room, left the hospital, running out the double doors.

When I was out in the cool night air, I took a deep breath. My whole chest rattled, and I bent over, falling to the ground, wracked with sobs. I didn't know what to do, I didn't know what to say, and I didn't know how I could help Blanche. I thought of the bookstore and its yellowing books, its crumbling papers. There was nothing there; my only hope was in Upper. I headed back to the apartment, moving through Quadrant 4, the most desolate and dangerous, to Quadrant 2, where our bookstore was. I rubbed at my jeans pocket just to reassure myself that the knife was still there. It was.

I slunk through the quadrant, past the neon signs and the brothels. Metal grates decorated with spray paint and piss covered most of the abandoned shops, and it was only on occasion that one of them was open. Women with blue eyes and black lips leered from behind them, curling their fingers, beckoning any man or woman who might follow. Turning my gaze from them, I continued down the street, reaching the edge of Quadrant 3. I hunched my shoulders and kept walking, but after a minute, a man blocked my path.
"Hey, pre'ddy lady," he slurred, placing a hand on my side, wrapping it around my torso. "What are you doin' out so late?" In his other hand, he held a round bottle, but it slid to the asphalt and shattered. I winced at the sound and hoped I wasn't stepping on any glass.

"I need to get home, sir." I twisted around trying to remove his arm, but his grip was tight. He laughed, and his hand slid lower. My heart thumped louder, faster.

"C'mon, le's just have some fun." His hand was gripping my ass now, and I felt adrenaline beginning to course through my veins. Fear.

"Please just let me go." A plaintive note in my voice. "Please."

"Oh, come on," the man chuckled—but his laugh was dark, menacing. "Being out here so late, you must have some plans." He winked, and I shivered, still trying to pull away.

He stopped me. Now that both his arms were free, he pushed me against a wall, pinning me there with his groin. I tried not to scream. He groped me, inching my shirt upward. I could feel more and more of my skin exposed in the night air, and even though I was breathing quickly and was thinking nothing, I remembered the knife in my pocket. I inched my fingers over there subtly, slid it out and held it in my hand. I gripped the handle, and as the man groped my chest, I twisted just enough to stab him under the ribcage. And then I stabbed him again, deeper. And again, and deeper. And again, and deeper. At some point the man let go of me and fell to the ground, lying on the asphalt, clutching his side.

The man looked at me, terror in his eye. I stood there, knife in hand, and watched him die.
PART II

Determination (*noun*): firm or fixed intention to achieve a desired end
Chapter Five

This was it. The final barrier. After months of waiting, after Blanche being hospitalized twice, I would be going to the Upper World. Even though my flat black shoes pinched my toes, and I could feel my long cotton skirt beginning to sag at my hips, my only thought was on the machine in front of me. A large metal rectangle, the machine examined my passport and visa documents after I'd fed them in. Information about me was on the screen—my name, my age, even my blood type. After spitting out the passport with its visa, a robotic arm shone a purple light in my face, and I tried to keep my eyes open. They prickled with water. At last, the light faded, the robotic arm moved back to the machine's side, and I could blink freely. "Identity verified. Access granted," a neutral voice said, and the metal doors to the right opened to reveal a small chamber. This was it.

I could feel my legs trembling and my knees threatening to give, but I stepped into the tube anyway, clutching my visa documents tightly against my chest, not having had time to stow them in the small bag I carried at my side. The metal door closed behind me, and I shut my eyes. Whoosh. As though a breeze was moving me upward, I felt that my equilibrium was unsettled for a moment. I pressed my arms against the metal that surrounded me on all sides and prayed. But then, before I knew it, the movement stopped and a slight ding echoed through my body. I opened my eyes, and I could see the doors opening. I stepped out.

Before me I saw movement like I'd never seen. People in dark grey and black and blue clothing walked past me, nearly knocking into each other as they zipped toward their destinations. One woman pushed a young boy around in a small contraption, and his screaming grew louder as they passed. A young man nearly bumped into another, and it was
only at the last minute that they swerved away from each other to avoid the collision. I blinked quickly, not wanting to miss a moment of this busy, frenetic atmosphere. And then, taking a deep breath, I joined the masses of black and grey and navy, and tried to see just what surrounded me.

From every side, I saw different retail outlets like those my mother had told me about so many years ago. Signs that meant nothing with names like Calvin Klein, Michael Kors II, Coach, covered the walls, hung right above the massive entrances to these places. And inside each place, I could just see racks of jackets and dresses and scarves, and funny white dolls lined the windows.

So this was the Upper World I'd heard so much about. Mother had always described the Upper World with venom, especially as they began barring their doors to people who didn't have certain identification, or credit as I thought Mother called it. As I continued strolling through the complex, past different stores with more vibrant window displays, I noticed there weren't quite as many people rushing around, and the people that were drifting from store to store were dressed differently; most of them wore bright colors with their hair perfectly coiffed, silver jewelry glittering on their necks and arms and ears.

I continued wandering with no idea as to where I should go. At one point, I boarded the monorail and it carried me to another section of the building complex with more people who looked like maybe they had money, so I tried to hide my skirt and my top by pushing my long mousy brown hair over my shoulders and back. As I stood there on the monorail, gripping a bar to stay standing, a handsome middle-aged man with wiry dark grey hair and a petite pointed nose was already on it, so I hesitated a moment but soon stepped on. There was no telling when the next machine might come to the floor on which I was.
"Headed to the southwest corner?" the man asked, and I just stared at him. With a small smile, he shifted in his seat, enough that I could see the magazine on his lap, *Sexdoll*. The cover featured a slim woman with large breasts, the nipples barely hidden by black X's—either band-aids or something done after the photo was taken—licking her lips, her arms raised overhead. I turned my head away and shut my eyes. My stomach was churning, but I couldn't tell if it was from the movement of the monorail, the vulgar image I'd just seen or both. I clutched the pole tighter as we jolted forward, and the man laughed.

"You must be new here," he said. "I remember my first time on a monorail... I was a young boy, and my mother took me to Walt Disney World. She assured me that we wouldn't crash, but I didn't believe her. I gripped her leg the entire time. And when we finally made it to Magic Kingdom and I let go, she had a huge red pressure print on her pantyhose from where I'd been holding onto her. I'd held her so tightly that I left a mark!" He chuckled, and I smiled weakly, just waiting, waiting for the monorail to stop moving so I could disembark. At last, the doors opened once more, and I gave a sigh of relief.

We were in a hub of sorts, I realized, a place just as active and lively as the one I had just left, but the people here looked different. Instead of wearing cleanly pressed suits like the people above or even the vibrant but elegant dresses that I had seen as I was walking around before, the people here were a bit less concerned with appearance. Some wore rainbow dresses made from a light fabric... cotton, I think it was called. And some wore light blue shirts and navy skirts like me, and still others wore raggedy shawls and sandals. The man who had been sitting on the monorail next to me, who was oddly enough wearing a suit, was still there, standing next to me. He smiled.

"I'm Giovanni," he said, extending his hand. "It's nice to make your acquaintance."
I shook his hand, feeling dazed. "I... I'm Chris. Where are we, exactly?"

Giovanni's smile grew broader. "We're near the southwest corner of the second tier of the New World, or Upper as everyone calls it nowadays. As you can see, it's a dingy place."

He gestured about him, and I could see that it didn't look too different from home. Granted, there was no spray paint, but near the walls, some of the tiles were cracked or had ugly stains on them, and a few places even had metal grates covering their storefronts. Just in front of us, a shop's neon sign Giovanni's Salle de Femmes flashed on and off.

"Do people live here?" I asked. My skirt began slipping, so I yanked at it. Giovanni raised an eyebrow.

"People live in the towers. But if you don't find a job on the second tier or higher within 72 hours of arriving at Upper, your only housing options are in this corner of the second tier or down on the main level, the third tier. Your passport and visa, the ones you just received? They will only let you travel downward, not upward." Giovanni gestured behind him. "As you can see, even this section of the second tier is pretty well walled-off from the rest of it. You have to scan your passport just to get onto the monorail, so they know if you're legally able to travel to certain parts of the complex."

My head was spinning as this man spoke, and yet I still had no idea how to process everything. "So I need to find a job quickly, then."

Giovanni smiled once more. "Good thing you know me, then."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

He chuckled, smiling just a bit. "Like I said, I'm a businessman, and I hire beautiful young women as entertainers for male clients. One of my girls quit last week, so I need a replacement."
"I still don't understand... you're offering me a job?"

Brushing at his suit, Giovanni nodded. "Yes. You're beautiful, and you can be taught the rest. Besides, if it isn't a good fit for you, I can refer you to other places. What do you say?"

I glanced around me, looking at the busy, if hopeless-looking, bustle around me. One grey-haired woman wearing simple black dress clutched a bag of groceries, and her eyes looked blank. Others shuffled slowly, but at least there was commerce. "What would I do as an entertainer?" I asked, turning back to him.

He waved a hand through the air, dismissing the question. "That's not important. I'm sure I can find a place for you, so long as you're willing to work, so long as you're obedient and don't cause trouble."

I hesitated, and Giovanni could see it in my eyes. Chuckling, he reached into his suit coat and pulled out a small, flat rectangle of paper. "If you change your mind," he said, "give me a call, or just drop in. He gestured to the shop—or business, I corrected myself now, at which I had been staring earlier. I run the Salle de Femmes, and if you ask to speak with me, one of my employees can give you directions to my office so that we can chat. If you decide to call, ask for me, Giovanni of Giovanni's Salle de Femmes."

And then, with a wink, he turned and disappeared toward the garish neon-sign entrance. I looked at the card that I now held. Giovanni's Salle de Femmes, the card read, and in the corner a curvaceous woman was wearing a low-cut dress and blowing a kiss. My stomach roiled, and I tucked the card against my chest. But as I continued walking around the main floor of the complex, I could feel it rubbing against my skin. A clock with bright red lettering blinked overhead. 3:22 p.m. Seventy hours until I had no choice.
Interlude

Down below in the world that was crumbling, men painted words on signs that already had words, and women hung around streetlamps, hoping to illuminate themselves and their garish attire in the darkness. Most bulbs had gone out, and only a faint red glow lit the cracked pavement and the crabgrass poking through. The metal grates covered the storefronts, and the buildings that had stoops, stoops with people on them were wooden, converted apartment buildings.

One of the women, little more than a girl, sat on the street with her back pressed against the siding of a house. It was a special house, the nice woman had said, one where she could have a magic drink that would take away her pain, one where she would forget her troubles, forget the man in the black jacket and faded blue jeans that threw her against pavement similar to this and peeled off her pants and panties. The girl shivered and wrapped her arms more tightly around her knees. Press them down, forget. Far away, at the end of the street, an anemic shadow grew larger. Short hair, jacket, tall frame. She sat on the cracked pavement and clutched the ground on either side of her. Three blind mice, three blind mice, see how they run...

Her childhood seemed so far away, even though she would have been in school if it hadn't been for the riots and then the closings and then the abject poverty that graced everyone. She would be innocent, laughing, pure, instead of wearing a short black skirt, crimson lipstick, and heels. She would be different, more like her sister if that man had never come, if she had never tried to walk home after... she shivered again. Press it down. The frame grew taller, closer. Finally the shadow was just inches away, and the man himself was even closer.
"So," he said, with a grin, "what does a guy 'round here gotta do to get laid?"

The girl gulped, but then she forced a smile.
Chapter Six

Holding a Post-It with an address scrawled on it, I lifted it up and matched it to the writing on the black wooden door. Office 213, the right place. Exhaling, I raised a hand to the door and knocked. After a moment, Giovanni exited, a smile plastered on his face.

"Chris, isn't it?" he asked, extending a hand to shake mine before leading me into the room and pointing at a chair in front of him. "It's a pleasure to see you again. Please sit. Would you like anything to eat or drink perhaps? Coffee, tea? We could probably wrangle a scone from the bar."

I shook my head and sat down, scanning the room. "I'm fine, thanks," I said. Though I'd wanted to avoid working for him, after three days of no job offers, I'd finally caved and agreed to an interview. Even though I had washed my skirt and top, I was painfully aware that Giovanni had seen me wearing this outfit the last time we had met. I wormed my finger through a hole at the bottom of the skirt, picking at the fabric beneath the table. Slick with sweat, my other palm pressed against my thigh.

"So," Giovanni said, leaning forward, folding his hands on top of the plastic table, "tell me about yourself, Chris. Do you have any experience working in the adult entertainment industry? Or in the entertainment industry at all?"

"Only if you count being a bookseller," I said, laughing weakly. "We sold porn at our shop, though, so I'm a bit familiar with what might be expected of me."

He smiled, but his eyes remained flat and cold. "Very good, then. We'll ease you in as a waitress and costume attendant, and after a month's training, we'll have you work as a dancer. Dancers make more money, and if you have relations with your clients, you'll earn
even more. Just sign this contract, and we can get started." He clicked a pen, placed it on a thick packet of paper and pushed both toward me.

I could feel bile rising into my throat as I grabbed the pen and began reading the document, but I bit the inside of my cheek. I needed this job. I would not have to work as a whore. Dancer, not whore. I skimmed through the document, signed where Giovanni indicated, and pushed the pen and paper back in his direction. His grin widened, and my stomach flipped.

"Welcome to the family," he said, standing up. "Let me give you a tour."

Giovanni led me out of the small conference room, and we walked down a dark hallway with cheap grey carpeting and walls carelessly painted black; above us were lights covered with blue film. "We call this backstage," he said, turning his head over his shoulder to glance at me. "It's where my employees are when they're not directly working with clients out on the floor."

I nodded and followed him as we walked around a twisting maze of hallways. A gentle humming bass line made the floor vibrate as I walked. Finally, Giovanni reached a black door with a silver handle and rested his hand on it, but didn't open it. He looked at me, his eyes intense. "I need you to follow me and to be absolutely silent," he said. I'm going to show you our onstage area. We shouldn't have too many patrons since it's during the day, but they love fresh meat. Stay close."

Pushing the door open, he led me into a massive room, and immediately the thrumming bass line I had felt in the hallway was blaring noise; I could hardly hear anything except the blood rushing through my ears. I blinked under the bright neon lights and gasped at what I saw. Massive screens covered two of the four walls, and on the screens women
were wearing next to nothing; down in the main part of the room, men sat on black couches while women hovered over them in little more than underwear. Or in less, I noted, as one of the female entertainers passed the two of us in nothing but a hot pink lace G-string. Giovanni was telling me about all the different features of the room as we walked around it, I imagine, but the music was so loud that I wouldn't have heard him even if I could have torn my eyes away from everything. Soon, though, we'd made a tour around the room, and headed back toward the black door with the silver handle, back to the hallway.

As Giovanni continued to lead me around the building, through the maze-like halls, I couldn't help but notice the strangeness of the barriers between "onstage" and "backstage" as they put it. On the main floor where the female entertainers danced and twirled around poles, the space was full of screens, neon lights, loud pulsing music, and the slick scent of sweat. I stepped back from the one way mirror and looked at Giovanni. "They honestly can't see back here?" I asked. "I mean, I know it's dark, but still, they must see something."

Giovanni shook his head. "They only see their reflection. Besides, it would ruin the illusion seeing these dark hallways. It's all about fabricating the world in which they want to live. They never see dancers out of costume, and they never see the behind-the-scenes workings of the Salle de Femmes." He turned toward me. "Surely you can understand this? After all, it's how the Upper World finds so many girls from Lower. They fabricate the myth of opportunities. It's the myth upon which America was born, and it's the myth upon which it died."

I turned from Giovanni's piercing gaze and looked through the windows. Just in front of us a woman was hovering over a man's lap, clad only in strings and ribbon hovering over a
man's lap, rolling her hips, her breasts practically shoved in his face. I swallowed. "Is that something I would have to do?"

Under the dim blue lighting of the hallway, so familiar to the night glow in Lower, Giovanni looked old, haggard, his cheeks sinking in. "we wouldn't start you there. You'd work at minimum wage as a cocktail waitress first, get used to the clothing, learn business etiquette, meet the clients. Then you might move to being a hostess, who flirts with men more directly, and after that a dancer."

He jerked up, body pulled straight like the worn Chinese finger trap my mother had given me when I was seven. "Enough questions," he said. "Let's continue the tour."

And before turning away from the glass to continue following Giovanni, the man on the other side turned his head to look straight at me, and I saw the misery in his soul.
Interlude

In the days when it had been the United States, when it had been Chicago, the man worked as a manager at Subway. College-educated, Bachelors in hand, working on a business plan of his own. He hung up the green smock and cap at five, went home, ordered Chinese, and fell asleep in a slump over his computer. Recycle. Repeat.

After the gun smoke cleared and the white collar executives had migrated, he was alone in his one-bedroom apartment with his franchise alone, no fresh deliveries. He stood at the counter making sandwiches for people who stole them, stood making subs with week-old tomatoes. Eventually even that ended, and he sat in his apartment all day. Playing video games, watching television, working on a business plan that would never materialize.

He drank. It was one of the few things he could do. He'd had plenty of beer in his fridge, and when the electric bill went unpaid (or when people stopped caring about consistent lighting in the city, he didn't know which), it had to be drunk. So he was drunk for three nights straight. There weren't even video games to distract him. The night after that, he began drinking his father's old cognac, because people would steal that shit. And then he drank the Jack. Then the Jim Beam. Then Captain, then Svedka, then Skol.

During the day, the bottle in hand, he would wander down to the red light district, bribe some woman with a few shots of whatever he was drinking, and he would fuck her. He used to resent that word in the old days, when his buddies used it in college. Fuck, a curse word. An action. So crude. But there was no other word for what he would do to these women: fuck them, angry at all he had lost, blaming it on them, sobbing once he'd come, rolling over on the bed and wishing for a love who would console him.
Years passed. He continued drinking. He left his apartment because it hurt too much. Because the lights were still off, and he wanted a place where he could goddamn see after eight o'clock in the evening. Because he wanted to be nearer his vices. The women grew older, so he looked for those that were younger. And one night, high and drunk and horny, he saw her. Innocent, virginal. He'd seen enough prostitutes to know what purity looked like, and it shone in her light brown hair and her dark grey eyes. He went up to her, propositioned her, slurring his words. The round bottle in his hand slid to the asphalt and shattered.

"I need to get home, sir," she said, but he ignored her and touched her ass, imagining she wore nothing above her innocent, fleshy cheeks. She shivered, and he delighted in her fear. How long, how long it had been. He dimly remembered the night he'd lost his own virginity, in the back of a Chevy when he was a sophomore with the senior girl he'd taken to prom. What an awkward stud he'd been.

"Please, just let me go. Please."

"Oh, come on," the man laughed, stopping her. "Being out here so late, you must have some plans." He winked, and I shivered, still trying to pull away.

He pinned her against the wall, groping her, wanting to touch her innocent flesh. He needed to feel youth. Needed to see it. Needed to experience it. How long ago he'd lost it. How long ago he'd lost hope. How long he'd been here without escape. Love, he wanted love. He touched her breasts, but gasped, clutching his side.

As his blood leaked out and his vision went dark, she stood over him, steel in her unforgiving eyes.
Chapter Seven

"Do all the waitresses dress like this?" I asked, gazing at myself in the mirror: a schoolgirl outfit with a short plaid skirt, white midriff, knee-high black socks and high-heeled black Mary Janes. Candy, the dancer I'd met during my first tour of Giovanni's Salle de Femmes, stood behind me frowning. Without warning, she reached forward, rolled over the waistband of my skirt, and hiked it up. Her tongue was to the side, and her brows were knitted.

"Yeah, that looks right," she said, leaning back. "The more skin you have showing, the more tips you'll get." Then, staring at my chest, she clucked her tongue before dashing off somewhere. Feeling my cheeks go red, I crossed my arms in front of myself. The girl in the mirror looked awkward, insecure, uncomfortable. If I'd been a schoolgirl during the years of riots, maybe I would have stood in front of my own mirror and looked like this. I unrolled the waistband of my skirt and pulled it down before re-crossing my arms. Just then, Candy re-entered the room.

"This is wrong," I said, shaking my head. "I'm not even a dancer. Why do I need to look like this?"

Candy rolled her eyes. "Men don't come here just because they like to drink; they want to see an illusion—big tits and short skirts." At this she brusquely unfolded my arms, and shoved something cloth-like into my bra—one side, both sides. "There, adjust it as you need to."

I looked in the mirror and saw that my chest looked noticeably larger. "I don't like how it feels. Besides, they look to big to be real," I said, and I lifted my arm to reach down, but Candy stayed my hand, and prodded at my breasts instead.
"Just go with it, new girl. You also don't have a name yet, so just say you're Libby, okay? We seriously need to find you a name so you can wear a themed outfit. Themes earn you more tips, and more tips means less hours, or it means more money. And more frequent promotions. How do you think I got to be the lead dancer on Thursday and Friday nights? It sure wasn't covering up like you want to do." She tugged at my skirt, making it shorter.

I just watched as she rolled up the waistband once more, transforming me into Libby the schoolgirl slut. "Why are you being so kind to me?" I asked.

She paused. "I didn't have anyone to look out for me, and my ass almost got sent back down to the Gutter. I won't let that happen to you. Didn't you say you had a sister to take care of?"

I nodded. "Blanche. She just turned eighteen a couple months ago."

"She a druggie?"

"Yeah," I said. I looked back in the mirror. High pigtails, black high-heeled Mary Janes, white midriff, short plaid skirt, waistband not showing, garish makeup, plumped-up boobs... I couldn't even recognize the woman standing there. I looked at Candy. "What now?"

"Now?" she said. "Now you go out onto the floor and sell some drinks."

After Candy had finished applying her own makeup and grabbed her feather boa, she led me out from the dressing room in the "backstage" area. The halls connected all the major spaces in Giovanni's Salle de Femmes, as he had pointed out on our tour, and she directed me to the metal door with peeling paint. On the other side, I saw the interior of the club, pulsing with life, and I was standing in the fully stocked bar. Around me, three women with short
skirts and low-cut tops dashed to and fro, grabbing liquors and glasses, pouring, serving, smiling. My eyes grew wide.

"I thought I was a waitress, not a bartender." My breath came more quickly, but before I could begin to hyperventilate, Candy put a hand on my shoulder.

"You're not a bartender, but you need to see where you might be if they're short on bar staff. But being a waitress is more fun and pays better because you flirt more. Don't envy them." Candy drew me back and led me into the hall, then through a second metal door to the immediate left of the one that we had just gone through. Now in the main area of the club next to the bar, I saw other waitresses in short dresses, short skirts, short shorts (one was dressed as a biker girl) grabbing trays, ringing up cards, heading over to the bar. The one dressed in short black leather shorts and a fringed denim vest that hardly covered her chest placed a number of drinks on her tray and began walking around the club, probably to distribute them. Watching the girls, I grabbed a virtual pad and a pen (though Candy assured me it was called a stylus), and before she walked away to prepare for her performance, Candy winked and pointed at a beautiful brunette woman with an aquiline nose and piercing frost-blue eyes. I approached her and coughed. She looked up, raising an eyebrow.

"You're the new girl, I see," she said. "All right, well, you can take the tables by the stage. None of those men have been served, and they're in your section anyway. If they ask you for a lap dance or any other services, please don't say yes. You'll just embarrass Giovanni at this point; say you're an innocent little schoolgirl and you couldn't possibly, and they'll probably leave you alone."

I blinked at her, not sure how to respond. She sighed and threw her hands up into the air.
"Just go over there, okay? Ask them what they want to drink. Then put it down on the pad using the stylus. Well," she added when I still hadn't moved, "what are you waiting for? The drinks won't order themselves."

Finally getting out of my reverie, I walked quickly to the front of the room near the stage. There were several men there, most of them far older than me, many of them with graying or balding hair. I put a smile on my face and made it as convincing as I could. "Welcome to Giovanni's Salle de Femmes," I said. "What can I get you gentlemen to drink this evening?"

The men, a group of three, looked back chuckling. One of them wiggled his brows up and down, and I suddenly felt the urge to throw on more pieces of clothing before remembering I didn't have any. "Hey sweetheart," the one said with a wink, "what's your name? Because you're what I'd like to drink this evening. How about a lap dance?"

"Um, I'm an innocent little schoolgirl, and I couldn't possibly," I said as though reciting a script. "What can I get you to drink?"

The man, sitting down in front of me grinned at me, the sparkle in his eyes lecherous. "I want a lap dance, sweetheart, so that's what I'll get."

He reached toward me, but I pulled away and tried to smile but bit my lip instead. I felt so uncomfortable, so exposed, and I didn't have my mother's jackknife with me. Thankfully, with a grunt, he sat down and said loudly to his friend, "The waitresses are all prudes. Don't want a lap dance from one of them anyway." And then he turned his attention away from me.

The rest of the day progressed in much the same way. People didn't want to be served drinks; they wanted someone to go to the private room with them, or their comments would
be so lewd initially that I just didn't know how to respond. After one of her sets, Candy finally saw me struggling and came over, decorated in indigo glitter and feathers and bright blue eye shadow. "How are things going, Libby? You doing okay?"

I blinked at her, then remembered that was the name she had given me at the beginning of the day. "Yeah, I'm fine," I said, wiping the back of my hand against my forehead. "It's just so draining, and the men... they don't want drinks."

Candy shook her head and sighed. "I don't know why Giovanni put you on a Monday morning and afternoon for your first shift. All the regulars are here, then, and they're all a bunch of creeps." She paused, then added, "Just don't tell Giovanni I said that. He'd make me work weekday mornings for a month."

"I won't," I said, placing the technological writing pad and attached stylus on the bar counter, beginning to massage the ball of my foot. "I can understand why you wouldn't want to do this eternally."

She smiled, but her lips were pulled tight against her teeth. "I've been here for three years, and I'll probably be here until I'm too old to be attractive anymore. But at least now most of my paycheck is coming from nights and weekends. And if you work hard enough, you'll get there, too."

With that, she smiled at me, pushed back a lock of her hair, and then strutted out onto the main floor.
**Interlude**

In the spider web world above, on the second tier, a small gentleman's club blasted loud music. And in that club on the second tier, an employee stood up on the stage, dancing. With her long copper hair and her large breasts, she'd moved from being part of bar staff, to being a waitress, finally to being one of the second-string dancers on weeknights. At least now she would get a raise.

"Come on baby, show us some love!"

She twirled around the pole, faster and faster, trying not to look at their leering faces.

"Come on, just one fuck!"

Faster now, until their faces and their clothing and their features blended together in a wave of color and movement. She looked at her spot on the wall so that she didn't become nauseated. And a one, two three, and a one two three... she flew above the crowd, not listening to them or to the music, absorbed in her spot and not falling off the thick, metal rod. She started slowing down, completely focused on the spot on the wall, when she felt someone grab her shoe. She stumbled, and looked at the stage even as she fell and tumbled, landing on her ass, one of her high-heels cracked.
Chapter Eight

"Hello, boy. Want a lap dance?"

I stared at Candy, who stood over me in a sparkly pink bustier set while I sat down in a plastic chair in the backstage of Giovanni's Salle de Femmes. "Do we really have to do this?"

"Yes, we do. And then we'll switch places. That's how you learn. You can only know so much through observation. And if you want to get promoted to working as a hostess, this is what you really need to learn to do. The test to become hostess is to get one of the men excited, so if you can't do that beforehand, you won't get the promotion."

"Fine," I said after a minute. "Sure, I'll have a lap dance."

So she gave me a lap dance, demonstrating step by step what she was doing, talking through it, and as she kept going, I could feel my pulse begin to race a little. Her chest was nearly pressed against mine, and then she would flip around, grinding her hips against my crotch. After a sly grin and a wink, Candy pushed herself away. My breathing was heavy, and my heart hammered against my ribcage. Strange, since all I'd done was sit in the black plastic chair. I stood there looking at her for a minute, watching as she reached for her dressing gown. She was beautiful.

"Your turn," she said, pulling the green robe on. I stood, and she sat in the chair, her legs spread apart, just as I'd seen many men sit when visiting the club.

"Do I really need to do this?" I asked, as I took off my own dressing gown. I crossed my arms against my chest. Candy had insisted that I wear the most recent costume that Giovanni had put me in, and I felt a bit uncomfortable wearing it in front of her in this way.
After all, it was little more than most of the dancers wore after their sets: a shiny purple crop top, and a set of matching shorts.

"Of course you need to do this, Chris," she said. "If you can't, you won't just lose the promotion, but you'll probably be asked to work fewer hours. Giovanni likes to keep bringing new girls in, whether they're from Upper or from Lower. Fresh faces mean more interested men, which means more excitement, which means more money."

Biting my lip, I stood before her, wrapping my arms around the back of the chair. I lowered myself onto her lap. "Okay, what do I do now?"

Candy smiled and then began giggling uncontrollably. "Sorry," she gasped once she'd finally caught her breath, "you just look so nervous, so innocent. I think I finally know what your club name should be."

"What?" I asked, still sitting there on top of her.

"Angel," she responded, just before another fit of laughter consumed her.

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Though it took a few weeks to become accustomed to strange men touching my ass, to even more lewd comments than before, I slowly became acclimated to acting as a hostess, flirting with men, letting them paw me, giving them lap dances. I kept my heart locked tightly away, for I knew even if they flirted with me and touched me in ways that still half-made me want to vomit, that they only saw me as a body, as a whore, as Angel.

Only Candy made the whole thing bearable. When we had shifts together, she would watch to make sure that no one became too violent, that I said and did everything that I should. And during our mutual breaks, or if I had gotten to work just a bit early, we might
play cards in the dressing room or she would teach me a new makeup trick that made my lips
look plumper, my boobs look bigger, my cheekbones look higher. As Giovanni had
illustrated when he first took me on that tour of Giovanni's Salle de Femmes, everything was
about the illusion. And even though I knew it was false, that I was a 34 B cup and not a 36 D
for example, I had to perpetuate the simulation, pretend that I was the naive, perfectly
beautiful Angel though I was nothing more than Chris, a former bookseller with a druggie
sister. One man in particular, Ivan, took an interest in me and asked for lap dances from me
every so often. Unlike the other men, he would tip me handsomely, especially when I smiled.

I heard very little news from Blanche, even though I made an effort to contact her—or the hospital—one a week. Usually they would say they hadn't heard from her, and I
desperately hoped that no news was good news. That was how it had been in the past, at
least. I wanted it to be good news at least. I was just thinking how I needed to send Blanche
another telegram—it had been two weeks since I last heard from her—when Candy pinched
me. We were in a staff meeting, but there was one face I didn't recognize. Behind Giovanni, a
man in a black suit and tie with a white dress shirt underneath walked towards us, his
expression sober.

I bit my lip. "Who is that? It's not a customer, is it? It's not time for the club to open
yet." I glanced around. Maintenance hadn't even finished cleaning the cages and poles.

Candy shook her head. "No, it's someone official." She cleared her throat and waved
her hand. "Geo, darling, sorry to interrupt your fascinating diatribe on the arrangements of
our payment, but a man in a classy Armani suit has crashed our meeting."

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Giovanni stopped what he was saying and looked at Candy, then turned around. The man gave a brusque nod of his head, handed a piece of paper to him and left. We all seemed stunned and even Candy, who had seen it all, seemed a little surprised.

"An urgent telegram for a Miss Christina Garrison from the Lower Quadrant 4 hospital," Giovanni said, glancing at the envelope. "Chris, I think it's for you."

My heart stopped beating for a moment. Then, I pushed through to the front of the room, ignoring the sympathetic and derisive looks that my co-workers were giving me. My fingers quivered as I grasped the yellow parchment paper. It was larger and felt thicker than a traditional telegram. Ripping it open, I scanned the contents of the message, then folded the message and tucked it in the bra of my costume before returning to the line with everyone else, and Giovanni resumed talking. Candy pinched me again.

"What did the telegram say?" she asked. "And for heaven's sake, why did you put it in your bra? You know you'll have to take it out before you're on the floor, so the men don't accidently remove it or something."

"I know," I said. "I'll take it out after the meeting." But instead of answering her other question, I kept looking forward, focusing on Giovanni's words. Especially after what I had just read, I wanted to give him no reason to fire me. Because after all, if I couldn't pay Blanche's medical bills, who would?
PART III

Denial (*noun*): psychological defense mechanism where a person avoids confronting reality
Chapter Nine

"It's okay," the man said, as I sat there on the bed, holding the kimono tightly around me. "I won't hurt you, and you'll make lots of money for your family."

I looked up at Ivan in the dim light and saw that his leathery and lined face appeared sincere. His hair was greying at the temples, and I immediately thought of my father. I turned my face away from him and hugged my knees to my chest. It was different to give someone a lap dance than to bare everything to them, and I felt like that was what was being asked of me. Even though Giovanni had assured me that Ivan had paid handsomely to take me to this private room and he would respect me, I still felt tremors in my hands as I held my dressing gown shut.

"Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?" he said at last, placing a hand on my shoulder, rubbing my back a bit. "Let's just get to know each other better."

I nodded and scooted away from him. His hand dropped, but I repositioned myself, sitting with my legs to the side instead of huddled into my chest.

"My name's Angel in the club, as you know, but my real name is Christina." The man smiled, and I began to feel a little better.

"I'm Ivan," he said. "Nice to meet you, Christina." He stuck out his hand, and it was a moment before I realized I was supposed to shake it. It was a rather outdated mode of greeting someone for the first time, but it had been covered in orientation. But instead of shaking my hand like I thought he would, he raised the back of my hand to his lips and kissed it.

After that, the next few moments were more comfortable. Would I like a drink, he asked? Two? Three? Soon, I felt my head rushing slightly, and my cheeks were warm. Ivan
had taken off his suit jacket and had unbuttoned his shirt, explaining that it was warm in the room. I agreed and had removed the dressing gown, now only in the white corset, briefs, and stockings in which I always began my routine. Ivan placed his hand on my shoulder, and I felt no need to remove it.

"Are you ready, my angel?" he asked, and I blinked at him. And then, without warning, he attacked my mouth with his own and began unlacing the corset.

My blood pressure rose. I tried to push him away, but he pressed his body weight against me so that my arms were caught between us. From behind, he continued to unlace me until the corset came loose and both my breasts were exposed. And then, he removed his hands from where they had cupped my chin, stroked my hair and began rubbing and squeezing, one breast in each hand. I wanted him to stop; I could feel myself about to scream, and then I thought about Giovanni. I could see the scorn and disappointment in his harsh blue eyes should I fail, given the transaction had already been made. But I leapt up anyway.

"Can we... can we stop for a moment? I... I could use another drink, please. A strong one. Maybe a couple strong ones."

Ivan looked annoyed, and the sincerity that I had seen there earlier had disappeared. "You've had three drinks, and you're not drunk enough for this? I've tried to be patient, knowing that you're untainted because that's hard to come by. But I can't babysit all day. My wife will be expecting me in an hour."

I bit my lip and looked away. He sighed.

"All right," he said. "At least get ready, then." He walked to the nearby wall, considered a few jars and tubes before placing one in my hand before exiting the room
through the door. As soon as he left, I put on my dressing gown again, even though my corset still lay on the floor.

Where was Angel's flirty but confident innocence when I needed it?

The strange tube still in my hand, I looked around the room again more closely and wandered over toward the wooden shelves with the various products. There was a pair of handcuffs, a blindfold, some underwear that looked like it was made from rubber, and several jars with oil. I blinked several times, but my head soon began to hurt after looking at the shelves for a few moments. I returned to the bed and tried to make sense of what Ivan had handed me; nowhere on the container could I find any instructions, or if they were there they were unreadable.

Ivan soon returned with two drinks, a stemmed glass in each hand, each glass filled with a faintly pink liquid. "It's called a Cosmopolitan," he said, handing one to me and placing the other on the side table. "Drink it quickly."

I tipped it back in a few gulps, ignoring the sharp taste of vodka. I grabbed the second one and finished that one as well. Ivan joined me on the bed and began kissing me as he had earlier. The kimono slipped off quickly, and he pressed me flat to the bed. As his hands worked lower, one sliding into my briefs, I could feel the cocktails heat my blood, loosen my muscles. And then, just as I began to feel comfortable, I suddenly felt my breath coming more quickly, my heart pounding. Ivan was rubbing his hand over me, sliding his fingers into me, and I closed my eyes. Was this why Blanche hadn't ever minded being a hooker? I felt myself shake, and my back arched. I barely noticed when the briefs and G-string came off entirely. Then I felt hot skin against mine. My eyes opened.

The next moment, I screamed.
That night, when I returned to my apartment in Freman's Tower, I avoided the mirror entirely. I didn't want to see my reflection's accusing eyes. Instead, I headed directly for the liquor cabinet I had never opened, and I poured myself a glass of the first thing that I found. It was an awful-tasting brown liquid, but after two more glasses, I could let my mind wander from that afternoon's work to other things. Yes, I had taken a job at Giovanni's Salle de Femmes, but I would apply elsewhere. Surely someone would take a chance on a bright, young Lower World girl. Even as I told myself this, I knew it was a lie. I didn't have to look in the mirror, even though it hung just to the right of the entrance, to know that my reflection was a tired, scornful woman with limp brown-blond hair. Someone with small, watery eyes. Someone neither bright nor girlish.

I turned on the television that had come with the apartment, and I let my mind become numb.

The next few weeks were much more normal. I performed my usual set, flirted half-heartedly with a couple of the guests and returned to the dressing room when I was no longer needed. Giovanni didn't introduce any new patrons to me, and I returned home and began reading more and watching TV less. I tried to avoid Ivan whenever he came to the club, even feigning sick and losing pay. Whenever this happened, rather than head home early, I would stroll along the streets of the mall, looking at the glass dome above, imagining that I belonged among all the people in their two-piece suits and designer dresses. They had lived forever in this temperature-controlled paradise, and they never knew what it was like to shiver or to sweat. They didn't even have thick sweaters or coats in their shops; anything
functional had been tossed away. I wished I could belong to them, be able to throw anything away, but I still kept the old cotton skirt and blue blouse that I'd worn upon entering the Upper World for the first time. I never knew when I might want or need them again.

During that time, I'd received one ratty telegram from Blanche. I'd sent her mail every day, initially, but lately it had petered to once or twice a week. In her telegram to me, she told me how she had been clean for several days and was working less. The Quadrant 4 hospital called me the day after that to inform me of an opiate overdose; I sent the remaining money I had saved to pay the medical bills and prayed that Blanche would just stop relapsing.

"So, what's your deal?" Candy asked me one day after I'd finished my set. She was sitting on one of the stools in front of the mirrors, putting on more silver eye shadow. I tried not to wince, but the color looked especially garish under the bare light bulbs that surrounded the frame of the mirror.

"Sorry, I don't know what you mean," I said as I sat down.

She just stared at me, the eye shadow brush still lingering on her eyelid. "Oh, come on. Everyone knows you freaked out when Ivan took you to the private room, and you haven't talked to me about it at all. I know you're inexperienced, but you do know that he's the CFO of SynthDiamond, the right-hand man to James Tourncoat? He's super rich, and he's married so he wouldn't become clingy like some of the guys. Half the girls in here are mad that he wanted you, and you have a target on your back because of it."

It was my turn to stare at her. "How... how can you talk about it like that? Like... like it's not a big deal."

Candy shrugged, finally turning back toward the mirror, applying the rest of her makeup. "Look, I get that it's new for you, like everything else, but for the rest of us, it's just..."
not. You fuck a guy. Then, you fuck another, and then a third... a fourth... eventually they all start blending together."

I watched Candy for a few more moments as she painted her face, and I was struck by how she could paint her lips to form a pout, how her kohl eyeliner made her green eyes seem deeper, how her cheekbones jutted out with highlight and bronzer and rouge. The few tricks she had shown me seemed to pale in comparison. But just as I was reflecting on this, she finished applying her makeup and stood up, grabbed her boa and headed toward the stage, but she hesitated a moment with a hand on the doorknob.

"Eventually, Chris," she said, looking at the ground, "everything that mattered to you doesn't, and everything you said you wouldn't do... well, you do it because you have to, to survive." Then she closed the door behind her with a soft 'click.' I buried my head in my hands and stared in front of myself, into the eyes of my reflection. I was nearly distinguishable from my sister: Purple streaks were under my eyes, and my face must have been gaunter than it had been just a couple weeks earlier. I sighed and rested my head on the cool ceramic counter.

I knew I couldn't avoid Ivan forever, just like I couldn't avoid Blanche's increasing medical bills. Five nights, completely uncovered at a Lower hospital, not to mention she'd broken a rib this time from God-knew-what and needed surgery. Standing up, I walked to the bar at the back of the club, ignoring everyone's stares as I strode over there more confidently than I ever had. I had one, two, three of those Cosmos and waited for the effect to set in. Once my vision had blurred slightly, and I could feel myself wobbling in my knee-high black stiletto boots, I scoured the audience until I saw a neatly trimmed head of dark brown hair, grey at the temples. Still trying not to fall, I walked over to Ivan and slipped my arms around
his neck while standing behind him. "Three hundred dollars, and can do whatever you want to me," I murmured in his ear, leaning forward.

I wasn't sure he'd heard me at first, but then I could see him frown. "That's far too expensive for a novice like you, now that you're tainted," he said quietly. "One fifty, and we go until I'm done."

Though this was hardly what I wanted, the numbers from the bill swam in front of my eyes: $13,421.07, and that wasn't even including all the other surgeries or stays that my sister might accrue in the next days, next weeks, next months. And if I didn't pay, they would stop treating her. She could overdose, and no one would care. I pushed thoughts about my sister away and focused on the present; Ivan had turned his head to look at me now, and he looked bored, impatient, wondering whether I would accept his offer. I nodded, and he stood. We walked past the bar, down the hallway, and into the private room. I was still wobbling where I stood, so I sat on the bed and waited for him, but Ivan just stood over me.

"Kneel in front of me," he said, and I complied. He unzipped his pants, and he pushed my head toward him. I tried to move my head away, but he was stronger. "Stop fighting me, Angel. You agreed to this, remember?"

That taunting voice. I could feel my head swimming and my eyes tearing. "But I... I..."

"Open your mouth," he instructed. I did, and he moved my head even closer until it surrounded him.

"Now suck," he said, and even though my body wanted to purge itself, I forced myself to think of something, anything else. To think of Blanche. To imagine how strong she must be to have done this so many times before, how wrongly I had judged her for thinking
her life was simple, was self-chosen, how horrible she must find it all, and I did as he asked.
After a while, I could feel him growing stiffer, and I opened my mouth and moved away.
Still wearing my heels, I began to run toward the bathroom, but Ivan caught my wrist.

"If you leave now," he said, "I'm not giving you anything. Finish it."

And so I knelt once more, and I complied.
Interlude

It wasn't long that the pretty young girl from Lower stayed that way. She chopped off her long dark hair for a few grams of molly, of coke, of anything to get her away. Her mother's head fracturing into a thousand pieces and the memories of the men made her wish for a drug to make her forget. Erase that day with the riots. Erase the moment where she tried to get home. Erase. Erase. Erase.

Her sister looked at her strangely, asked her where she was going, when she would be home. The girl had stopped going home long ago because being having smack, even if it meant biting her tongue until it bled, was better than crying herself to sleep every night, better than waking moments where the moon seemed to spill her tears. She took a tablet, took a hit, took a shot, slept with a man.

She wondered what her sister did during the day. Did she sell porn in their father's old shop, cleaning the dusty carpet when no one came? Did she smoke the stash of weed that their father had kept in the attic? Had she even found the stash? The girl made a mental note to sneak back home for a short visit. If it was still there, and Chris wasn't using it, best not to let it go to waste, even if it really wasn't that strong. Not compared to smack, at least.

She fluffed her short, spiky hair and faced the man in front of her on the bed, who was lying down, his pudgy stomach exposed. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"
Chapter Ten

Every night after work now, I turned to the liquor cabinet and slept during the day. Reading held little pleasure for me now: Fairytales had become rancid with lies, and romance novels were far worse. I was managing to pay back the hospital, I was able to eat two meals a day, even if they were simple, and I was able to restock the liquor cabinet. I began to learn that the brown liquid was something called whiskey, and that the alcohol in the Cosmopolitans that I usually drank at Salle de Femmes was vodka. Neither was nearly as nice as rum, but they were both as powerful. Like everything else that wasn't diamonds or fur or expensive technology, the liquor that I bought was on the ground floor, hidden behind a wall in a small drugstore. The cheapest stuff was there, and as I wanted to save more money for my sister, that was all I could afford for the time being. One day, though, while I was having a shot on the job, Candy snatched it from me and poured it down the drain.

"You shouldn't be drinking that, you know," she said. "If anything, it's going to make you more tired while working with clients unless you have a lot of it, but then you tend to stumble and bump into people, and Giovanni hates it when his girls cause trouble like that. Have some of this instead." She rustled through her bag and removed a few tablets, and handed me a couple.

"What are these?" I asked, turning over the two tablets in my hand. One was yellow with the imprint of a sun on it; the other was green with a leaf printed on one side. Candy's were pink and blue. "What do they do?"

She smiled at me, then ruffled my hair playfully. "I love how innocent you are. This is ecstasy, or molly. It's an upper, which means your body becomes more awake rather than
more tired. It's also a bit like a hallucinogen—you know like acid or shrooms—because it distorts your sense of reality a bit. But in a good way," she added quickly.

"Is it safe?" I asked.

"Of course," Candy said. "On the scale of what you could be doing, this is not bad at all. It's right above pot and definitely below coke. No one gives a shit if you use this stuff unless you're an idiot. Heroin or meth on the other hand..."

I thought back to my sister, and the times I'd seen her lying in the hospital with IV drips in her arms, and tubes in her nose. "All right, so what do I do?"

"You just take the tablet." She picked the pink one out of her palm, placed it on her tongue and swallowed dramatically, making a pained face afterwards. "You may want some water, though."

Staring at the two tablets in my palm, I placed one on my tongue—swallowing it dry—and put the other in my bra. I winced. "Yeah, I probably should have taken some water with that."

Candy shrugged, but she smiled. "Told you so, but you'll be fine. Especially if you're meeting with Ivan today; it'll make you feel more powerful and in-control during sex than you probably ever have."

I raised my eyebrows. "If it works as well as you say it does, I'll be impressed." I began to walk out of the room, but then I paused and glanced back at her. "Thanks, Candy. I... I really appreciate it."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "No problem, Angel."
"You're getting better, you lasted a lot longer today," Ivan said, pulling his pants back on. I was sitting on the bed, wearing a chemise, my eyes glazed over. I'd only had one drink, but I felt disconnected from myself. "You still need more endurance, though. I'd pay you for an all-night session."

I couldn't even process what he was telling me until nearly a minute later, when I realized he was staring at me as he clutched his unbuttoned shirt in his hand. "More endurance?" I asked incredulously. "We've been going for the last couple hours."

Ivan gave me a condescending look. "Yes, that's what I said." He put his shirt over his arms, hiding where the muscle had turned into flab and began buttoning it.

Biting my lip, I grabbed my bag and went to the bathroom. Though my fingers shook, I pulled the second tablet from my bra, placed it my tongue, and turned on the faucet. After swallowing, I clamped my fingers around the porcelain sink and stared into the mirror. I didn't feel that different, perhaps a little warmer. Frowning, I returned to the room and saw Ivan glancing at his watch, completely dressed. It will give you more control and power than you've ever had. Candy hadn't lied, but I needed to do something, anything, to prevent Ivan from leaving. I was Angel — not Chris. I could never be Chris and do this.

"C-call your wife." I took a deep breath. "You're not going home tonight."

Ivan looked confused for a moment but pulled out his iPhone 12SC anyway. He pressed the button, and it unlocked revealing the home screen. He sighed, mindlessly scrolling past different apps. "I don't think this is a good idea, Angel."

Panicking slightly, I kissed him on the mouth desperately. "For three thousand, I'm yours the whole night. We'll do whatever you want."
"I don't want my wife to think I have a mistress, or worse that I'm visiting whores on a daily basis. She'd request a divorce and take more of my assets than I care losing. Besides, you don't have enough endurance."

I scooted closer, pushing my crotch right against his. "I do," I whispered, my heart pounding in my chest. "I will." I kissed him again, but he pushed me away.

"You're so goddamn needy. Maybe I should find a new whore; I should have known that sleeping with you so much would make you fall in love with me." But even as he said this, Ivan pressed something on his phone and held it to his ear. I could hear a faint ringing.

We sat in silence for a moment, and I moved over to the side. Ivan looked at me. "Hello? Anna? Yes, I'm still at work... Yes, I am going to be here all night. I'll probably just spend a couple of hours on the sofa in my office. Okay, love you, too. Bye."

I felt bile rising in my throat. That was love? I knew that fairy stories exaggerated the good in people, in the world, but I hadn't ever thought that love would mean lies and sex with strangers. I pushed away the feeling, and once Ivan had set down his phone, we began kissing, falling into a tangle on the bed.

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"You know, you'd make a good secretary... or a good executive personal assistant," Ivan said, as we both lied back on the bed. It was three hours after I had taken the second tablet of molly that Candy had given me, and still I felt strong, happy, powerful.

"Why is that?" I asked. "I've never used a computer, and I don't know how to file anything. That's the reason I was rejected for that kind of position when I first arrived here three months ago."
"You can learn those things," Ivan scoffed, "but it's nice when I know my secretary will do what I ask, so long as I pay her enough. And having sex during the workday is always a nice release."

I rolled on my side to look at him. "Are you ready to go again?"

"Not yet," Ivan said. "What about it? Would you like to be my personal assistant? You could stop working here as a whore."

"I thought you just said you wanted to avoid having me fall in love with you. Why not one of the other girls?" I asked. "Some of them are so much prettier."

"But I'm not looking for beauty," Ivan said. "You're perfect because you're desperate. You'll do anything to make money, even if it goes against whatever moral code you had before you came here. Don't pretend you're not on something right now. You're normally dead on your feet after we have sex once, but we've done it four times in the space of five hours now, and you're still energized? There's something in that bathroom."

I could feel my heart thudding and my face and stomach turn hot with anger. "What if I don't want to be your secretary? Right now this is on my terms, and I can say who, and when, and where, and how much. You wouldn't be here if I hadn't asked you to stay."

Ivan rolled over towards me, and in one movement was over me, pinning me to the bed, tightly holding my wrists. "You really think you have control right now?" he asked. "I could let it slip to the DEA that Giovanni lets his whores use drugs... that they are mules, or dealers themselves, and no one would question it. You're in the Southwest corner on the monorail level. The DEA would come in here with hounds and they would find the meth or crack or whatever you were doing, and they would close Giovanni's Salle de Femmes. Or, I could just report you, and then you would be thrown out of the Upper World. Drug use is
okay when it's hidden, and everyone pretends that you're not using uppers, but the minute
your use is uncloaked, well... you get the idea." Ivan smiled, but from the pictures that I'd
seen, he looked more like a shark than Prince Charming.

The pressure on my wrists was uncomfortable. "You'll pay me well?"

"As well as I pay any secretary of mine," Ivan said indifferently, finally unpinning
me.

I swallowed, and my mouth felt dry. "All right then. When do I start?"
PART IV

Delusion (*noun*): persistent false psychotic belief maintained despite contradicting evidence
Wearing a nice blouse and a skirt was strange. Granted, I'd bought them from a thrift shop down on the first level, and there was a small tear in the blouse, but as it was tucked into the skirt, no one would ever know. My light brown hair was pulled back with a few pins I had found while dusting the living room, and my shoes were black and flat... conservative. I hoped this was what a secretary would wear; Ivan hadn't given me any guidance. I glanced at the clock on the microwave: 8:41. My eyes widened and after grabbing my coat, purse, and lunch, I darted out the door, locking it behind me. Even if I managed to get onto the monorail right away, who knew if I'd be able to get to the other side of the complex in just a few minutes?

I jogged to the entrance of the apartment building, and took the elevator to the monorail level. As the doors dinged open, I quickly stepped out and the throng of people headed toward the nearest monorail stop. Like me, the women wore blouses and skirts, though most of them also wore blazers and heels. I tried, as I was walking quickly, to tuck my shirt into my skirt more neatly. I wanted any advantage that I could get. Normally, to go to Giovanni's, I would simply walk the couple blocks from my apartment to the southwest corner, but the business sector was on the north side. As we walked the three blocks in the white hallway past different retail establishments, the crowd grew larger, and I was pressed against others, barely able to move, barely able to breathe.

The monorail was waiting for us, the glass doors that separated the Upper World and the monorail tube open. We piled on, pressed together as we were before, and I stood holding a bar above my head. Part of me nearly missed the empty subways from Lower with their graffiti and junkie passengers. Thankfully, the monorail traveled quickly throughout the...
complex, and even with people shuffling on and off, I reached the business sector within ten minutes, leaving five minutes to get to SynthDiamond headquarters.

I dashed off the monorail and began running toward the Sheraton tower, at the northwest corner. The white glass-like tile was smooth beneath my feet, and I could feel my feet slap it. Reaching the corner, I entered the Sheraton lobby, entered the elevator, and pressed the 94th floor. The penthouse was 100, but I wondered who was above the 94th... did SynthDiamond rent out space to employees? Did it use all the levels as its corporate headquarters? I pushed those thoughts away as the elevator opened, and I exited and found myself facing a reception desk. There was a beautiful brunette talking into a headpiece. Her sweater was low-cut, and her breasts appeared to be pushed close together and upward. I nervously ran my fingers across the collar of my light blue blouse; it wasn't much more than a women's polo shirt, and my thin body hardly filled all the space that the shirt left. I tugged at the waistband of my skirt.

"Hello," I said, "I believe a Mr. Ivan Kleijn is waiting for me. I'm his new secretary."

The young woman raised her eyebrow. "I didn't know Mr. Kleijn's secretaries dressed like that." From the scorn in her voice, I could hear what she had thought of me, my family, and even from her tone, I could discern meaning: scorn, disdain. Condescension. The same thing for which I'd been crucified by my sister.

"Yes, well, I'm new here," I repeated to the receptionist, and I smiled politely. At least, I hoped it appeared polite. I couldn't even begin to fathom how angry it looked.

"Anyhow, could you please direct me to Mr. Kleijn? I'm sure that he's waiting for me."

Rolling her eyes to the ceiling, the receptionist pressed a button and began talking in under tones, pressing her headset closer to her mouth so that I could only hear a faint
murmur. Then, tapping her headset once more, she finally looked at me again. "Mr. Kleijn will be out to greet you in a few moments. Please wait here patiently." She then began typing at a keyboard, and I turned my attention to the room.

It was a large lobby with shining dark wooden floors, and on either side of the door through which I had entered, there was a single leather armchair and a potted plant. The symmetry made me feel off-center, so instead of sitting, I just stood in front of the marble reception counter and waited there, tracing the patterns in the wood with my eyes. I had begun counting the knots in each panel of wood and was beginning to average them together when I heard clear, decisive footsteps. Ivan was standing in front of me wearing a dark grey suit with thin pinstripes, a white shirt, silver tie, black shoes. I tugged at the waistband of my skirt.

"Morning," Ivan said brusquely, barely nodding. "Follow me, and keep up." Then, turning on his heel, he walked toward the side of the room, where there was a door. It wasn't strange that I hadn't noticed it; its texture was the same as the rest of the wood-paneled wall. Next to it, on the wall, there was a small scanning station. Ivan bent down slightly and put his finger on the pad, and the door opened. We walked through into a large office area with several cubicles in the center; around the edge of the large space, including near where Ivan and I stood, there were larger offices with windows and blinds. Unlike the lobby, however, which was sleek and luxurious with its color palate, everything here was drained of color: the cubicles were grey, the carpeting was grey. Ivan guided me through the maze of cubicles, where it seemed hundreds of people must have been working. I noticed a few people lift their heads and look after us.
"What are all these people doing?" I asked. "They're not producing diamonds, are they?"

Ivan looked as though he had bitten into a rotten egg. "Of course not," he said. "SynthDiamond is more than an industrial company with the occasional Lower running a machine."

I wanted to ask him another question, but he turned around and began walking more quickly, and so I folded my lips together in silence. As we continued winding through the cubicles, I noticed that the women wore low-cut, satin blouses and fitted black skirts. I crossed my arms across my torso to hide as much of my shirt as I could.

Finally, we reached the other side of the massive office space, and Ivan stood in front of an office, waiting. I stood beside him. Without the club, without my stage name, in my real clothing, I felt so exposed. I crossed my arms more tightly. "What are we waiting for?"

"My secretary always opens the door for me," he said, staring at me.

Blushing, I reached forward to pull the handle of one of the glass doors. As soon as it was fully open, Ivan strode through, and I followed. He immediately sat behind his desk, and gestured carelessly at one of the two chairs on the other side before drawing a pen and piece of paper from inside his desk. As he began writing, I sat down, folding my hands across my knees, holding my breath.

"You will never wear that outfit again," he said, not looking up from the paper. "Burn it when you return home. Your clothing must be from the monorail level or higher, we prefer the first or second tier shops. No patterned fabric. No earrings that are not studs. Skirts, not dresses. I prefer my secretaries to wear tweed or wool." He paused. "Well, why aren't you writing this down?"
"I think I can remember all that: skirts, not dresses; no patterned fabric; no earrings that are not studs. You prefer your secretaries to wear tweed or wool. Anything else I should know?"

Ivan looked up, not amused. "I like my secretaries to join me during my lunch hour."

"For lunch?" I asked, my heart pounding.

"Of course not, Angel," Ivan said, a slight smirk on his face now. "Why would I ever ask you to have lunch with me? Like I told you the other evening."

I nodded, but my heart continued to speed up. "I thought you hired me to work as your personal assistant, though. Your secretary? Don't you need me to do more secretarial work, like filing?"

He sneered, rolling his eyes, making my cheeks flush. "Oh, that's why I have a secretary and a personal assistant," he said. "You're not my personal assistant; David is, and I would never dream of getting rid of him. You'll report to him if I'm busy or can't think of something for you to do. He will be your direct supervisor. Well, why aren't you writing this down?"

"Sorry," I said. I looked about me, then looked sheepishly at Ivan. "Um, do you have a pen and paper?"

Handing me a notepad and a pen, he sighed in exasperation. "You are not off to a good start."

The rest of the day didn't go particularly well, either. During my lunch hour, before I could even go to the floor's canteen, Ivan demanded my presence in his office. Closing the blinds and locking the door, he had fucked me twice, and then I'd had to do more filing while I ate a
bagel. My stomach rumbled. When the end of day came, I went back to Ivan's office and knocked. Though he rolled his eyes, he let me in.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I'm here for my paycheck," I said. "It's the end of the day."

After staring at me for a moment, he burst into a loud laugh and had to lean against the doorframe for support. My cheeks grew hot.

"You only get paid once every two weeks," he said, "like everyone else. Surely I told you that?" 

I shook my head. "No," I said, trying not to let the anger into my voice. "No, you didn't."

"Well, that's how it is," he said, his voice brusque. "But aren't you still working at Giovanni's Salle de Femmes, anyway? Surely you're earning enough there."

As he continued chuckling, I walked away quickly, eager to leave the office before I yelled at someone.

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"I can't believe he didn't tell you that you only get paid once every two weeks," Candy said later that week as I was getting ready for my set. Giovanni had finally let me start working as a dancer on Friday evenings, at Candy's insistence. I was nervous, but she told me not to worry since she was working as the main dancer and a hostess; she promised she would keep an eye on me. "What a jerkwad."

"Yeah, well, it's Ivan. I'm not that surprised. But you know," I said, abruptly switching topics, "I still don't know your real name. We've worked together for a few
months, and I only know you by your club name. And I still don't know anything about you, and I feel like you know everything about me."

A wry smile crossed her face. "My real life isn't that exciting. There's nothing that you, or anyone here needs to know about that part of me." She took off her dressing gown and walked to the mirror, grabbing the silicone inserts and shoving them into the bra portion of her top. Then holding her eyebrows up, pouting her lips and pushing in her stomach, she sighed. "I think I need some work done. Maybe some collagen? Liposuction?"

As she stood there in front of the mirror, I couldn't help but think how beautiful she looked, how she didn't need to change anything. How I still wished she would tell me her real name. "I'm headed to the stage for my set. I'll see you later."

And I walked through the hallways to a black door with a silver handle, stood in the wings of the stage and waited until it was my turn to go on. Until it was my turn to become Angel, white sparkling wings and all.
Interlude

As the New World emerged steel beam by steel beam, a young teenage girl with strawberry blonde hair stood on a balcony and from far away watched the skyscrapers being built. Her mother stood beside her and stroked her hair, reassuring her, comforting her. Below on the streets, there came loud shouting and gunshots... one, two, three. The girl hid her face in her mother's blouse as a loud shriek pierced the air.

"Mother, I don't understand why there's all this violence," the girl said, looking up at her mother. "Just last year everything seemed fine. And now I can't even go to school or see my friends. I don't like this." She nuzzled against the fabric once more, resting her head on her mother's chest as her mother began stroking her strawberry blonde hair more quickly, more insistently. The girl could feel her heart rate slow down. Less adrenaline, more comfort, even as her mother's heartbeat sped up. The girl knew that because she could hear it.

"I know, baby," the girl's mother said. "I know you're upset that you're not in school, but we need to be grateful for the little things right now. You're safe from the destruction on the streets, and we have each other. I still have my job, for however long, and we may even get a transfer to the New World. What would you say about that?"

The girl froze but faced her mother once more. "I-I-I don't want to," she stuttered. "All the violence will follow. I don't want to be in a place without my friends, either, and I know Sally's dad isn't getting a transfer. They let him go last week, she said."

Sighing, the mother stopped stroking her daughter's hair and pulled away, moving to lean against the railing of the balcony. "One day, Marcy, my little marzipan, there will be nothing down here, and you will realize how lucky we would have been if we had transferred."

But the girl just kept shaking her head as the gunshots continued.
Chapter Twelve

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said, dashing into Ivan's office one day, about a month after I'd begun working for him. "The monorail was vandalized, and I had to run here, but I grabbed you a coffee." The red heat was still in my cheeks, and sweat covered my forehead, my neck, my sides. I hoped that he wasn't looking too closely. I held out the steaming drink out to him, but he just glared at me.

"I'm sorry for my secretary's interruption, Mr. Tourncoat," Ivan said coldly. "She was just leaving."

I blinked, noticing a man sitting in one of the chairs facing Ivan's desk, and immediately my cheeks grew redder. Still holding the coffee, I walked backwards until my back was against the door, pressing it open with the weight of my body. Just as I was about to let the door close behind me, I heard a gentle cough.

"Wait," Mr. Tourncoat said. "Leave the coffee here. I'm sure Mr. Kleijn may want it at some point."

As I walked forward to give Ivan the coffee, something brushed—no, caressed—my arm. I turned to see what had happened, but in doing so, I bumped into Ivan's desk and the coffee fell onto my new white blouse. My eyes widened, and Ivan gave me a sympathetic look, shaking his head slightly. He picked up his phone, but then after furrowing his eyebrows, he slowly placed it back on the hook.

"Ivan, why don't you see if Gina has an extra blouse that your secretary could wear?" Mr. Tourncoat said from behind me. "It would be unfortunate if she had to wear a stained blouse all day long."
"I'm fine," I said quickly, setting down the now half-full cup of coffee, trying to cover the stain by crossing my arms. "If I could just use the ladies' room for a moment..."

"Really, I insist," Mr. Tourncoat said. "Ivan, would you mind?"

Though Ivan stood up and walked to the entrance of the room, he practically shoved the chair away from himself, and he walked with such determination, such speed, that I could only assume he wasn't pleased with being tasked to do this. Once the door was closed, I leaned against Ivan's desk awkwardly, still trying to cover the stain on the front of my shirt.

"You don't have to be so self-conscious, you know," Mr. Tourncoat said. "It's just a stain."

I blushed. "I suppose, but the thing is, now you can kind of see, well... um... I mean, never mind."

"You mean I can see your bra?" he asked, lifting a brow, and cocking his mouth to the side in a half-smirk. "I'm a gentleman. I wasn't looking... well, hardly looking anyway. And you have nothing to feel embarrassed about. This happens to everyone."

"I-I guess."

"Besides, it's my fault," he continued with a small smile. "You just looked so irresistible while you were leaning over about to hand the cup of coffee to Ivan... I mean, Mr. Kleijn, and I couldn't help but touch you. I think it startled you."

I blinked. "No, it... it didn't. It was fine, and I mean, I'm fine, too. It... it's fine." I stood up and darted to the door. "I really should try to get the stain out... this blouse is new, and I... I really should just go. I have work to do, and..." I left the office, then, but as I began walking to the women's washroom, I heard muffled footsteps behind me. I turned and saw Mr. Tourncoat following me.
"I apologize that I made you so flustered," he said. He dashed forward, placing a hand on either of my shoulders. "Let me make it up to you. I have tickets to go see a concert next week, and I think you'd be wonderful company."

"Mr. Tourncoat, I-I just don't know... "

"Please, call me James. And if you're unsure, just give it a little thought." He smiled, removed his hands, and winked. "I promise I don't bite that hard."

My eyebrows felt as if they were at the back of my skull they were lifted so high and so flattened against my face. This was so strange. First he was asking me to a concert and then he asked me to call him by his first name. "I-uh... I... okay."

James flashed another grin. "Fantastic."

The next week passed quickly, though I only saw James once during that time, and it was only in passing. He winked at me before continuing on his way. Ivan seemed surlier than usual that day and gave me more tasks using Excel, using math I had barely learned a couple weeks earlier. Even during his lunch hour when he had me pinned naked against the top of his desk, or we were having sex in the break room, he seemed angry. I would wince in pain but tried not to let it show on my face. I looked forward to Friday greedily; I would be done with Ivan for the week (we had agreed he couldn't visit Salle de Femmes when I worked there on the weekends), and then I would be going to my first-ever concert. Using company email, James had relayed to me that the event was formal, and informed me that he would send over an appropriate dress.
On Friday, Ivan released me just before lunch at Mr. Tourncoat's orders. As I made my way to the front doors, the receptionist stopped me, waving a hand. "Ms. Garrison, Mr. Tourncoat has requested that you take this package with you."

Leaning behind the desk, she withdrew a bendable fabric package on a hanger and handed it to me. Hesitantly, I grabbed the package and held it by the metal hook. "What is it?" I asked. "Is this the dress?"

The woman shrugged. "It's none of my business. I was simply informed to make sure you left with the garment bag when you left the office. Mr. Tourncoat has requested that you return to the office building at 6:00 p.m. sharp tonight so you can have dinner prior to the event." Then, sitting down again, she turned her attention to the screen in front of her and ignored me as I grunted under the heavy weight of the garment bag and began heading toward the monorail and toward my apartment where I began to get ready for the evening's festivities.

After a quick shower, I set my hair in bobby pins and curled them as Candy had once done for me. Pin curls, she had said, are the sexiest kind of curls once they are released. I'd received so many more tips from the men that evening that I begged her to teach me how to do them myself. I bit the side of my lip as I pinned the first few and uttered a few choice curses. But after I finally pinned them straight, I turned to the garment bag and holding my breath, unzipped it.

It was a beautiful dress, floor-length and ruby red with thick wide straps and a square diamond brooch at the center of the bosom where the straps came together. I touched the fabric, let my fingers glide over it, then removed the dress, put it on, zipped it up, and glanced in the mirror. Even with my hair half-done and my face plain of makeup, my face
was glowing, my cheeks gently flushed. I turned away quickly, for my cheeks had heated up with embarrassment. With a practiced hand, I released the curls and began to apply my makeup.

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"You look stunning," James said when I finally arrived at the SynthDiamond headquarters once more. "I knew that dress would look phenomenal on you."

"Thank you," I said, holding my small bag next to my side. Inside the garment bag, there had also surprisingly been a small red clutch that matched the dress James had lent me. "Thank you for picking it out, I mean."

He smiled. "Of course. I can't let any woman that I go to the opera with look like a beggar, now can I?" A small chuckle escaped his throat, and the corners of my own mouth lifted.

"You said you wanted to have dinner before the concert?" I said.

"Yes, and then we'll simply walk over to the concert hall. It's right across the way," James replied, with a curt nod of the head before extending his arm. He looked at me. "Shall we?"

I wrapped mine around his and settled into the touch. "We shall," I said with a smile. And then, arm in arm, we walked to the restaurant.
Interlude

The boy didn't remember much before the transition. His father had always worn a charcoal suit, and they had always had bread and meat and fruit on their rectangular glass table, and they had always had someone who cooked for them. He never heard the gunshots or saw the blood or witnessed people with dirt-smudged noses being whacked with the clear police shields. As they lived in the right suburb, there was no violent crime, just swindling and money laundering.

And then came the day they packed the house, the day they moved all their belongings to the webbed city in the sky, and they downsized to a flat. He threw a fit, screaming and crying, holding onto a drainage pipe (which ultimately broke) so that they wouldn't have to leave. Once they'd managed to calm him down, his mother and father sat him down. It would be safer in this new place, Mother and Father said, but the boy didn't believe them. And once they had moved, he missed the giraffes and lions at the zoo. The people running this new place tried to bring in wildlife, and they brought in plants and the occasional monkey or parrot, but lions and tigers and bears were too large for the skyscraper city. The New World, Father called it. The boy remembered when America had been the New World. But now it was old, dead.

The boy never knew what his father did during the day until he was older, until they'd already moved to the glass tower and he was contained inside. They created fake diamonds, his father explained. You couldn't make real ones when everything was inside because the earth pressed carbon into diamond. And one day, his father told him, you'll take over my business, and you'll be the one running this company that makes the diamonds. And the boy just nodded, uncomprehending.
At that time, he didn't understand that living such a life, being a CEO of a burgeoning company, was the perfect recipe for him to lose his humanity.
Chapter Thirteen

Once we reached the concert hall and had taken our seats, the lights dimmed, and the soft violin music floated into the balcony. "Is this how a concert normally begins?" I asked, turning to James. "This seems..."

"Yes?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I blinked, unable to remember what I had planned to say. The violinist was striking her bow, as James had called it, across the instrument, and the music swelled, becoming more intense. I leaned forward, pressing my gloved forearms against the railing. "This is magnificent," I breathed as more instruments joined the piece. "What are those other instruments?" I asked.

"You mean the violas and the cellos?" James said with a small smile. "Have you honestly never been to an orchestral performance? There are so many here, on different levels, too, so anyone who gives a Heath bar about the music has been to one. Not that I do, but I have to keep up appearances at the least."

I just stared as the violinist at the front of the stage almost bounced on her toes as she moved the bow back and forth across the instrument. She was so tiny, like a pixie from a fairytale. Her wire-thin legs and her nimble feet allowed her to jump so lightly, as if she were a pixie from a fairytale. "I wish every night could be like this," I said, "filled with beauty and joy, not pain or sorrow or discomfort."

As soon as I said it, I thought back to all the moments where my nights had been filled with sorrow: The moments with my sister in the bookshop where she had cried, where I scraped at the window with my rag, where I had dusted the old tomes, even though no one entered to buy anything. The moments in which I had given my body to a man, peeling back
the rind of my clothing to expose myself. The violin and the cello had me forgetting, slowly, as though I were purging myself of all the memories that had scarred the inside of my skull. In the dim light of the concert hall, I could pretend my dress wasn't less elaborate than everyone else's, that I fit in. "She must like it," I said, still staring at the pixie of a violinist. "She gets to do whatever she wants, every single day of her life. How wonderful that must be."

"She's just as trapped as you are," James said, his fingers brushing against mine in the near darkness. "She has to perform several times a week, and even though she has had calluses for years, her fingers still bleed sometimes. If you look closely, you'll see she has bandages on a couple of her fingers."

I swallowed; that was a depressing thought. But even as the light shifted, as the violinist darted around the stage, I could see exactly what he meant. She did have bandaged fingers, little rings of darker material surrounding the joints. As I relaxed into the music once more, I tried to forget what James had just pointed out to me; even a woman who appeared to have a job that was intellectually and emotionally fulfilling suffered. And here I had thought that the Upper World had minimized everyone's suffering with its existence, but instead, they had simply perfected it and learned how to desensitize others to it. Here, suffering was so commonplace, it was possible to see the bandages wrapped around a monkey-performer's fingers, or hidden beneath on a different floor. Except in my own experience, I had barely even paid it mind, but now as I watched her play, I noticed her face contort ever so slightly with pain as she moved the bow. I imagined blood was dripping down from her fingers and onto the wooden stage. If that were to happen, would it cause a mass panic?

James wrapped my hand in his. "Don't think about it," he whispered, leaning over. "It'll just ruin your evening. All the violinists practice too much. It's what they do."
How much of her art and its beauty, I wondered, as the notes continued to fall fluidly, were due to her pain, to her suffering? The brown pixie-head bobbed up and down in time with the music, and she lost herself in the music. I tried to ignore everything else except the swell of the music, but still, I imagined her blood falling onto the wood.

After the performance, James guided me from the balcony back to the entrance of the concert hall. It was strange to stand in the lobby of the concert hall and to see stores and people shopping through the windows, to see the abrupt shift from the thick, rich carpeting to the white marble tile of the first tier pathways, flecked with silver and gold. It seemed like two separate worlds: One promoted materialism and the other promoted a different kind of consumption, cultural consumption, perhaps.

"I enjoyed spending time with you," James said as we were walking around the sprawling complex. Several of the shops were beginning to close, but some were still open. Among them was Le Salle de Femmes, of course, but we weren't headed that far southwest or that low. Some food shops were open, but on the first tier where we were, the restaurants lacked counter service, making the halls of the complex nearly empty.

"It was definitely an interesting night," I admitted. Suddenly aware of how alone we were, I stepped a little off to the side, putting a few more inches between us.

James smiled. "Are you trying to get away from me?"

"Was I that obvious?"

"You were."

He looked at me, and I realized why I had put space between us: He scared me. He was attractive, and wealthy, and seemed to really care for me. Angel might be able to spend
time with a man like Ivan and not develop attachments, but my stomach grew warm every
time James smiled at me or touched me. I turned my head and didn't say anything.

"Christina, just stop for a second." His hands were on my shoulders, and he had planted his feet firmly to the ground.

"It's Chris," I mumbled, and I tried weakly to squirm away. I wanted space, and I didn't. I wanted to be near him, and I didn't. I wanted him to love me, and I didn't.

"Chris, then. Stop for a second."

I stared at the ground, and it was only when James tilted my chin up that I looked at him.

"You don't need to be afraid of me," he murmured. "Remember what I told you when we first met? I don't bite that hard." He chuckled. I didn't.

I bit my lip. "I... I guess I just don't... know."

"Yes, you do," he said, brushing his hand over my cheek. "Trust me, just a little bit."

His dark blue eyes seemed bottomless, like the black holes I had learned about in primary school before the riots. I blinked furiously and turned my head away. James let go of my chin, and I was grateful for the foot of space that was now between us, even as I missed the heat that his fingers had transferred to my skin. I shivered, even though the temperature of the complex was always set at a perfect 74 degrees Fahrenheit.

"Are you cold?" James asked, shrugging off his jacket, laying it across my shoulders. His hand lingered there, and its heat seared me. I could feel the heat pooling in my stomach, too.

"James, I..."

"Let's go back to my penthouse," he said, cutting me off. He smiled, but his eyes seemed flat. "I don't know about you, but I think a glass of wine sounds nice."
With one of his hands placed gently across the middle of my back, James guided me through the empty complex halls. We walked towards the northeast corner of the complex, entered the building of SynthDiamond headquarters. I paused, stopped entirely, so that James' gentle hand smacked into me. I winced.

"My apologies," he said. A pause. "Is everything all right? Why did you stop?"

"I... I thought we were going to your penthouse; this is the office, isn't it?"

James laughed and ran a hand through my hair. "Silly goose, I live on the top floor. Our office is only on the 96th story."

Blushing, I kept my eyes fixed on the ground and followed James up the elevator. It dinged when we reached the top, and facing us was the most elaborate hallway I had ever seen. Thick, moss-green carpeting stretched from baseboard to baseboard, and on top of the carpeting was a long rug with rich swirls of gold, green, and crimson. The walls had dark wood paneling halfway up, and above that was a light beige paint. One large, abstract painting covered the wall. Ahead, to our left was a set of golden double doors with scrolling around the edges. Toward the top was a knocker with an animal's head. I exhaled heavily. I'd never seen such wealth all in one place. James approached the door, and I moved to the side; he pressed his thumb against a small golden square that looked almost like a screen. There was a faint beeping, and the door clicked open. Pulling the door open wider, James gestured an arm toward the doorway. "Ladies first," he said. The edges of my mouth curled up in a nervous smile, and I walked through into pitch blackness. He followed me into the penthouse apartment, closing the door behind him.
Interlude

In time, as typically happens, the boy who watched his father run a multimillion dollar company took life for granted. Unlimited streams of money flowed over his fingers, as did booze and drugs and whores. Never anything dangerous, and always discreetly. He couldn't let his father be disappointed, and he didn't want to be pushed out into Lower, or the Gutter, as everyone was calling it. He didn't know much about the waste management system here, but if he had to guess as to the name's origin, it probably stemmed from that. And the Gutter was an appropriate name for it: even from the windows of the shining skyscraper, he could see dirt and filth and poverty. Nothing with which he desired to be associated. Nothing that would ever interest him.

And then, one day, there was an accident. The monorail crashed, the result of some bandits from the Gutter in a final protest against Upper, and the boy's mother and father were slammed into the wall of the monorail car which fell off the tracks into the rat-infested streets below. *Jack fell down and broke his crown, and Jill came tumbling after,* the boy remembered wryly. And though they recovered the bodies, a mess of sinew and metal and bone, the boy—now a man, as tragedy made him become—screamed in the middle of the night for the first several months until booze and drugs and whores soothed his fried nerves and helped him harden against the tragedies that had kept him awake.

He was hardened, hardened against Lower and the people from it. Hardened against love and compassion. Hardened against empathy. Now that he had taken over his father's company, he played the role of the charmer, the charismatic political philanthropic businessman, but his actions were empty of emotion, and his soul—which had been spotted with sin before the crash—now withered beyond recognition, decaying inside his handsome façade.
Chapter Fourteen

"Let me turn on the lights," James said, closing the door to his apartment. As he moved past me, his arm brushed against my waist in a way that didn't seem entirely accidental; it lingered. A moment later, though, James had flicked on a switch and a couple dim lamps illuminated the room. We stood in a foyer, actually, with white gold-flecked marble tiles beneath our feet, white walls and an ebony hat stand. It seemed so modern, so contrasted with the hallway outside. But yet it was still luxurious, more than anything I'd ever seen in my life.

"Do you like it?"

I turned toward the sound of James' voice; he was standing right in front of me, his gaze intense. I nodded, unable to speak. "It's very nice," I croaked out at last.

"I'm glad you think so." He smirked. "But let me get you that glass of wine I promised; I want you to see the kitchen."

He reached for my hand, and we walked in single-file through the foyer into an open kitchen. "You must really like black and white," I said, glancing around. White marble still covered the floor; black granite the countertops. Idly, I noticed that James was rubbing circles into my hand with his thumb, and I bit my lip, trying to focus on something, anything else.

"I do like black and white," he said, "because together they make grey. And I think grey is the perfect color to describe our world, don't you think?"

"No, I think some things are very clear-cut," I said.

"Like what? Prostitution?"
My cheeks grew hot. I was glad that it was still dim in the penthouse. "Well, I don't know about that, specifically. Sometimes it's the only way a person can survive."

"Drugs?"

I hesitated. "Yes, that's a good example. Didn't you say something about wine?"

A slow, almost crocodilian smile spread over his face. "Yes, of course. Just one moment. I gave my staff the night off, so bear with me while I find the glasses."

He let go of my hand and walked over to the cabinets, which were also white, with thin knobs that appeared black in the light. Black and white, clear-cut. My forehead beaded with sweat, and I tugged at my dress, willing it to cover more of my chest.

James returned to the kitchen peninsula just a couple moments later, two wine glasses and a bottle of red wine in hand. "I imagine you like merlot? This is a 2016 varietal from Bordeaux."

"2016?" I asked, watching as he screwed into the neck of the bottle and began twisting. "That's from before. I thought nearly everything was destroyed from that era... libraries were burned, and people starved when the factory farms failed... how on earth did you get it?"

He pulled the cork from the bottle and poured the wine into the two glasses. "My father was an influential man. He had his ways." He handed me a glass, and his fingers brushed mine. "Tell me what you think of it."

I raised the glass to my lips, watching him watch me. The red liquid slid into my throat, and it tasted thick, and bitter. "It's good," I said, after I'd taken a large sip. I choked down another gulp, and then another as James was sipping at his own glass.
"I'm glad you like it. Would you like another glass?" he asked. I nodded, and he poured the wine into the glass, this one a bit fuller than the last. As I sipped at the second glass, my head began to feel heavy, and I set the crystal container on the granite countertop.

"Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I just usually don't drink wine."

James stepped closer to me, set down his own glass. He brushed his hand against my cheek, pushed my hair behind my ear, just touched me. I closed my eyes and leaned into his hand, into the heat. It didn't seem as terrifying now, with the wine-induced fuzziness muting my anxiety. He placed his other hand on my waist, shifted towards me, pulled me to him.

"You're such a fascinating creature, Chris," he murmured. "You're not like the other girls I've met here. You're unpolished like all the girls from Lower, but you have something I've never encountered before... you have innocence."

I shook my head, my eyes still closed. "I don't. I'm not. I..." I didn't want to think about my employment, didn't want to think about all the things I had done with Ivan. All the things he had done to me.

"You do and you are," James countered. He was rubbing slow circles across my cheek, sliding down to my neck. "You have hope, and I can tell you cling to it. That's why you're here, isn't it? You hope things will get better."

Opening my eyes, I saw that James' face was just a couple inches from mine, so close that if I paid attention, I could feel a gentle wisp of breath on my face as he exhaled. "Is that foolish?" I asked, looking at his nearly-black eyes. "I wonder sometimes if it is."

James returned my gaze. "No, it's not foolish." And then, before I could process what was happening, he had closed the distance between us, had crushed his lips to mine. I kissed
him back, wrapping my one arm around his neck, pressed my body closer to his. How
different we were—him with his 2016 merlot and me with my black market whiskey. Him
with his muscles and sharp angles, me with my petite frame and soft roundness. Him with his
black and white penthouse, me with my very grey soul.

James would never know the difficulty of eating only celery soup for days on end, nor
would he ever need to have sex just to pay his sister's medical bills. Like everyone else in
Upper, he could afford anything, without concern, without consequence. We clung to each
other for a long moment before I regained my senses enough the pull away and break the
embrace. "We can't do this, James," I said. "You know we can't."

"Why not?" He wrapped his arm around my waist, kissing me again. I pulled away
more quickly this time, releasing myself from his grip and downed the rest of my wine.
Walking to the one end of the kitchen, I leaned against the white wall. I had no answer for
him.

James stood in front of me, one hand pressed flat against the wall, just above my
head. "Why not?" he asked again. "Don't you want this? I do."

I hesitated, avoiding his stare. "I do, but like you said—"

"I stopped listening after 'I do.' If you want this, and I want this, then where's the
problem?"

"Ivan," I said, looking up at him, staring into his deep sapphire eyes. "Ivan's the
problem. He'll fire me, James, and I can't..."

He placed a finger against my lips. "Shh... Ivan can't do anything to you, not when
I'm here. You know that." His finger drifted downward, and his hand cupped my cheek. His
eyes were looking down, and I could count his black eyelashes. "Let me show you how much
I want you, Chris. How much I desperately want you."

His hand now around my neck, he leaned in, pressing me against the wall, and even
through my dress and through his tuxedo, I could feel his muscles, could feel the heat from
his skin. His kiss scorched my lips, and I wound my hands through his short dark brown hair.
I wanted to feel more of him, wanted to feel him against me. All I felt was tongue and skin
and heat and thick, dark lust, and I wanted to cling to that feeling, but as James began
unzipping the dress I was wearing, I froze and pulled away. My lips felt swollen.

"You don't see me as a whore, do you?" I asked. "That's not what this is, is it?"

He smiled. "Of course not." He stroked my cheek. "I would never see you as a whore,
Chris. I could never see you that way."

And he kissed me once more, even deeper this time, and I wrapped my arms around
his neck. He guided me through the halls of his penthouse, stumbling, bumping into things.
Something crashed at one point, and I pulled away, paused for just an instant, but James
gripped me tightly. "Don't worry about it," he murmured into my ear. "I can replace whatever
you broke."

At last we made it to the bedroom. Once there, our kisses became more intense—
scorching even—and James began unzipping the dress once more in a frenzy of fingers. This
time I didn't mind, and I slid my arms through the straps to help him, and then the red satin
pooled at my feet, almost like blood. As I began helping James unbutton his shirt, undo his
pants, I knew this was different than all the other times. He wanted me, not Angel. He
wanted more than just my body, and he cared for me: Chris, the broke girl from Lower, not
Angel the fantasy. I crushed my skin against his, the heat growing even stronger, and as he
lowered me gently onto the bed, we tangled together, arms and legs inseparable. But then James pulled his lips away from mine and pushed himself onto the palms of his hands, leaning away from me.

"I want to be inside you," he whispered, and then with a devilish grin, he leaned forward and nipped me on the ear. "I hope that's all right."

I moaned, and my breath was coming quickly now, more quickly than it ever had with Ivan. This was different; this was love, making love, not fucking. Not terrible pain and drunkenness and bearing and waiting and catering. This was a partnership, and James wanted me as I wanted him. "I... I want that, too."

Then we merged without anything between us, and as a thousand stars burst and fell about us, I saw the world clearly. The clock of my life began to tick, and James cradled his body against mine. Peace, and love, and passion. That would be my life from now on.
Interlude

Down in the streets, the woman with short black hair, streaked with purple stared at the sky with its light pollution and clouds but wondered where her sister was. The woman, in some ways little more than a girl, stared at her forearm, near the elbow. An angry red spider web glared at her as it spread across her skin. Next to it was a long, ropy white scar, a result of one of the few times she had done meth, shrooms, and pot all together. She shuddered. Never again.

“Come on, babe,” a man with a thin frame said, lying on the bed, tying a rubber restraint around his upper arm. “Do some smack with me.”

The vein in the crook of the woman’s right arm throbbed painfully, and she covered it with her other hand, shielding it from view. “Not tonight. I got really fucking high last night. I’ll be good with some whiskey.”

The man laughed, and his yellow, broken teeth came into view. “Blanche, you’re pathetic. Not getting some smack tonight won’t change things tomorrow. At least fucking snort it or some shit.”

But from where she stood in the doorway, looking at the sky and the vaguely visible moon, the woman just shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself, looking like a petulant child. “No,” she said. “No, no, no.”

And as she uttered this monosyllabic cry, looking at the sky, in the glittering world above, her sister lay next to a broken man, thinking sex was love.
Chapter Fifteen

I heaved into the toilet once more. This seemed to be a common occurrence lately. Puking, cleaning up, puking once more. It had begun affecting my work for Ivan, and he was in a foul mood. From my spot in the stall, bent over, I could see a pair of shoes in the stall next to me, black and pointed with heels. They turned toward me, and whoever was wearing them was standing on the balls of her feet.

"Have you taken a pregnancy test?" the faceless voice said. "I feel like you've been in here so much this week that it's definitely not food poisoning."

"No, I haven't," I said weakly. "But I always use protection, so it can't be that." My throat ached from the acid, and I rested against my forearms, the sweat from my forehead transferring to them.

"Well, you probably should," the voice said. "I mean, if you are pregnant, you should get that thing out stat. Bosses don't like it when their secretaries are expecting a kid. After all, they're legally required to pay for medical insurance and maternity leave, so either they get massively pissed off, or they just find some other reason to fire you."

I lifted my head and glared at the shoes. "Thanks for the advice. I'll be sure to keep it in mind the next time I get pregnant."

And dipping my head over the toilet once more, I vomited even more bile.

That night, while walking home, I picked up a pregnancy test from a pharmacy, thinking back on the strange woman's words. Even though it would be quicker and a more accurate exam if I were to visit a nurse on the first or second tier and got tested, I wanted the privacy that a more traditional test offered. Once I was in my bathroom and I'd locked the door—not
that it mattered much since I lived alone—I sat on the toilet, held the little stick underneath me, and tried to calm my breathing. After the flow of urine had stopped, I pulled the stick away and tossed it into the sink then washed my hands.

"Please don't be positive, please don't be positive," I murmured as I waited the three minutes that the box had instructed. After counting to one-hundred-eighty, I glanced at the stick. There was a little blue plus sign. My heartbeat thrummed in my ears.

"Shit."

The next night after work, I walked to the main elevator, but instead of going downward, I went up to the ninety-ninth floor. The man in the elevator looked at me suspiciously when I asked him to press that floor and raised an eyebrow at me, but I told him that I'd left my best purse at Mr. Tourncoat's apartment and didn't want to bother him during the workday with such trivialities.

I still had James' key from the night of the concert, so once I was on the right floor, I let myself into his penthouse and waited. For all his talk about having so many servants, the place seemed completely desolate and dark. As I sat on one of the white living room sofas, I turned on one of the lights, simply so that I wouldn't feel quite as alone. It wasn't long before I heard his key in the door, before I heard his footsteps. The sound paused, and I knew he had seen the lamp light from the hall.

"Hello, James," I said quietly as he entered the sitting room. I could feel him glowering at me from where he stood under the archway, but I busied myself my hands, sliding them over and under one another. "It's good to see you."
"How dare you come here uninvited," he said coldly, walking towards me. "How did you get around the penthouse security measures?"

"I still had your key, and I needed to see you," I said, standing up, brushing the tears from the corners of my eye. "I... I have to tell you something." I'd imagined this moment differently, where I would rush forward and wrap my arms around him. He would embrace me warmly, and he would wipe away any tears I might shed. But instead, James had not embraced me and would not. I fidgeted, holding my hands together. "I... I'm... you see, a few weeks ago when we... when we spent time together after the concert... you... I mean, we... we didn't take precaution, and... well, now we're... I mean I'm... I'm pregnant." I stood there, staring at the ground, waiting for James to say something, but he said nothing for several long moments.

"You have intruded into my private residence, and this is unacceptable," he said at last, exiting through the archway. "I'm going to call security, and maybe that will teach you only to come when you've been invited."

"But James!" I cried, running after him, following him down the hall. "This is your child! I'm... I'm carrying your child! Don't you care? You said you loved me!" I reached out and finally touched him on the shoulder, willing him to turn around. He didn't, so I clutched his shoulder more tightly. He froze.

"Get your hands off me, you slut," he said, and I carefully peeled my hand away from his suit jacket. I watched as the fabric expanded slightly, and my handprint disappeared. James turned slightly, just enough that he could see me from the corner of his eye. I looked at the hardwood floor, waiting for him to speak.
"That child isn't mine," he finally said, "and you know it. I would never have a bastard son." He paused. "You will leave my residence now, and I will never see you again. What happens now is your own doing. You should have known better than to ever come here, and you should have gotten an abortion as soon as you realized what had happened. Neither Ivan nor I have any use for a woman who is pregnant—mood swings during sex, need to be careful because of the baby... if you're willing to get an abortion now, I might be able to forgive this still, so long as you never mention this again. Can you do that?"

I placed an arm across my stomach. I had just found out the other day from an ultrasound that my child's heart was beating, that it was living. I couldn't kill him... her... it... whatever its gender was. Innocent, not like that man that the pretty girl stabbed. I thought about my sister. Blanche was the same as she was months ago, and the money wasn't helping her anymore anyway. Ivan gave me barely enough to cover rent and living expenses, unless I did extra. I almost wanted to gag at the thought. "No, I can't," I finally said, not meeting James' eye. "You'd have to kill me first."

"I don't resort to such grotesque measures," James said, turning around. His Armani shoes clicked against the wood. "Security!"

The last thing I saw before I left James' penthouse, to avoid being carried out by security, was the unflinching backside of his head, and his hands clenched in fists at his sides.
PART V

Desperation (noun): a state of hopelessness leading to rash behavior
Chapter Sixteen

I didn't go into work the next several days. I couldn't face James, so I remained in my apartment, whiling away the hours by carving into the walls, folding and unfolding my clothing, reading a yellowed book marked 70% off that I had picked up from a peddler-woman on the main level of Upper. The musty smell reminded me of my father's bookstore, reminded me of home and of Blanche.

*Don Quixote*, one of the classics that I had never read. The story of delusion and madness, a man who believes he is knight errant and loves a whore as though she were a pure, chaste woman. As though she had never made a mistake, let a man make love to her without protection, become pregnant outside a committed relationship. I ended up skipping all the parts about Dulcinea because they hurt too much; I had hoped that James was like the Don, whimsical and idealistic, for he had praised my hopefulness, my innocence. But instead, now I sat hunched over this old copy of Cervantes' classic unable to go to work for Ivan, and with the baby, I'd had to be careful about what I would do at Giovanni's Salle de Femmes.

With a sigh, I tossed the book to the side of the couch and rubbed my temples. *Don Quixote*, the man who suggested madness was marvelous. *Don Quixote*, the man who believed he was a knight capable of doing anything, under the impression that the more adventure he had, the better his life would be. I flipped the book over so even the front of the novel couldn't taunt me. Books seemed to be the only constant in my life, but they were all crumbling, just like my life. Most English translations of Cervantes’ work had been destroyed, and my old battered copy was probably one of the few that still existed in print. I was just like the book: outdated, outmoded. James had made that painfully clear.
As I stood there, pacing across the room, the click of the answering machine came on. “Leave a message at the tone,” my voice said, and then a beep. A pause. Candy’s voice.

“Look, Chris… I don’t know what’s going on, but Giovanni’s getting pissed that he hasn’t heard from you in almost a week. He’s threatening to take you off the schedule entirely—to fire you, that is—and I’m running out of reasons to tell him that he shouldn’t do so.”

Candy paused again, but I could hear the frustration in her heavy breathing. “Just talk to me, okay? If something’s up with you, I want to know. I want to help if I can—I know I never seemed the most cuddly, or whatever, but I care about you, okay? I don’t want Giovanni to fire you, but he’s starting to threaten me, Chris, and I can’t lose this job. I may not have a sister to pay for anymore, but I know what gong to Lower means. It means death, Chris. Prostitution and drugs and death, Chris, without any of the security of safety or housing. At least here, I can pretend that everything ends when I go home, that Candy is a persona, not who I really am. That when I go home, I’m just Marcy, and I’m me. I’m in control. You can’t do that in Lower. You’re never in control.

“Well, anyway, that’s all. Just please call me. Okay, Chris? I guess I’ll try back later.”

And with another beep, the phone call ended, and there was silence.

I began to walk over to the phone, to pick it up and call her back, or maybe just to play the message once more to hear her voice again, but a loud pounding came at my main door, and before I could run over and see what the matter was, the wood splintered and the door fell open. Standing in the entryway now, I just gaped at the doorway, slowly backing up.

“Ivan?” I whispered.
He stood, his normally well-coifed grey hair spilling all over the place, a bottle of something in his hand, his cheeks flushed, his shirt half untucked. My heart began to thrum in my chest, and I had to blink my eyes a number of times before I could order my feet to move. But just as I did, Ivan reached out and grabbed my wrist, twisting it. I cried in pain and tried to squirm away. As I did so, the bottle that Ivan was holding slipped out of his grasp and fell onto the floor.

“You little cunt,” he said as we stood among the shards of glass. “I figured you slept with James, since everyone does, but I can’t believe you went and got pregnant with his child and then had the stupidity to tell him that you wouldn’t get an abortion. We may live in progressive times, but a whore still can’t have a CEO’s baby without there being consequences. You should have known that.”

“You’re an ass,” I spat, still trying to wrest my arm away from his tight grip. “He said he cared about me, and I just held him at his word.”

Ivan laughed. “Did he really say he cared for you? If he did, I’m sure as hell he didn’t mean it. James doesn’t care for anyone, not even himself. All he cares about is his company and its profits, and that’s why he’s the perfect CEO.” His smile grew nasty, and his nails dug into my skin, drawing blood now. “But I bet he really sucks as a boyfriend. Or wait, I bet you sucked him.” He laughed, coldly, cruelly, his grip growing tighter, and tighter.

“Ivan,” I said, “you’re hurting me! Let go!”

Though he stopped laughing, he glared at me his usually blue-grey eyes now a dark stormy grey, almost black. And instead of letting me go, he pulled me into the living room where he pushed me to the floor. As my face touched the sea green fabric, I was glad that I had decided to put carpeting in the room. Even so, I still winced.
“Come on, you little whore. You want to make love to a man without being paid? Well, I think of anyone you’ve ever fucked, I’ve earned that right.”

When I finally pushed myself off the floor to look at him, Ivan was half-naked, angrily tearing off his clothing. His white shirt unbuttoned and his tie discarded, he was unzipping his pants. I walked—it was painful to do even that—toward the side table where I usually kept my mother’s jackknife. As Ivan continued taking off his clothes, I opened the drawer, slid the knife’s handle into my palm and tightened my fist around it, then leaned against the sofa.

“Don’t you dare come near me,” I said. “I will hurt you.”

Ignoring me, Ivan walked toward me wearing nothing but his unbuttoned shirt and his socks. “Oh, I sincerely doubt that, princess,” he said. “I could always let it slip to the DEA that you—”

“NO!” I shouted. “I don’t care about leaving and going back to Lower. My life is over anyway; I’m sure James will see to that. He made it quite clear that he doesn’t want to be the father of this child, and if I stay here, he’ll see it’s killed. I’ll go to the suburbs and raise my child there. I’ll have a life away from you and from him, and I’ll be happy.”

Ivan began to clap slowly, letting each peal strike the walls. “How moving. Now lie down and take your punishment like a good girl.” And he grabbed my arm once more, the one not holding the knife, trying to pull me into his body, but I slashed at his arm. He cried out in pain but didn’t release me. I stabbed him again and again until the muscle showed through and Ivan was clutching his arm.

“Now get the hell out of my apartment,” I said. “I’ll go to Lower in a few days, and I won’t bother you anymore. But if you don’t leave, I’ll do what I have to in order to protect myself.”
Ivan glared at me but he began backing away. “You don’t know what game you’re playing, you whore. I’m the chess master, and I will win no matter where you try to hide.”

And though he left, shoving my door roughly into place, goose bumps chilled my flesh and my wrist still throbbed painfully.

Moments later, I was running around the apartment collecting my things; I didn't know how long I had before Ivan might report me to the DEA, and if that were to happen I needed to be far, far away. Anything important, I packed. I emptied the liquor cabinet, stuffing the small bottles and the plastic ones among my clothing and toiletries. I packed towels and dresses and shoes and a pink feather boa that I had forgotten to return to Giovanni's Salle de Femmes. I packed all my stashes of cash, even packed a few books that still seemed important. But once an hour had passed, I knew I couldn't risk spending any more time in Upper, and so I grabbed my passport, my large suitcase, and my coat and wheeled it toward the door when I paused. I was missing something.

Dammnit, Mother's old jackknife. Running back to the kitchen, I rinsed blood from the knife and slid its clean metal into the inside pocket of my coat. Then, without bothering to check if I had left any blood behind (it was pointless since they would believe Ivan's testimony over mine anyway), I left my apartment, pulling the newer, large suitcase behind me.

When I reached the nearest elevator, I pushed the down button and headed to the main level, the third tier. The place I had so often tried to avoid. It seemed little better than Lower, but since I was trying to get to Lower, I figured that was a good sign. Though the walls were little more than concrete blocks, and the men and women walking around glared
at me with dull eyes, I still felt a wave of relief. It would take Ivan and the DEA at least a little bit of time to locate me, I hoped.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I said to a woman in a black dress wearing a green shawl. "Do you know by any chance where I might be able to find the exit to Lower? I need to go visit my sister, and I'd really like to bypass Customs."

The woman turned and shook her head. "Youse think you can leave Upper and come back as you please? It don't work like that, you know. Once you leave, you ain't comin' back."

I nodded. "I know. I just need to leave," I said, pulling out a small bottle of rum that I had fortunately put in one of my coat pockets and not in my suitcase. "If you tell me in the next twenty seconds, I'll give you this nip of alcohol."

Her eyes widened, and she pointed behind her. "There's a one-way exit where the alarm broke if you go that way. No one never checks it, and you'll be on street level in Quad 1."

With a smile, I handed her the bottle. Before I had even wheeled out of her sight line, she had opened the cap of the bottle and had begun drinking its contents greedily. Turning my attention to the tiled path in front of me, I began looking for the exit, the path back to Lower.
Interlude

When the policeman fired his pistol, time slowed down until it crawled across the woman’s skin. She saw the bullet blast from the gun, she saw it fly through the air, and she saw it go between her eyes where her third eye would have been—if she had believed in chakras and witch-magic, that is. And then, after an instant of discomfort, she felt nothing. But even as she felt nothing, she saw everything—she saw her body lying on the ground, her head blown apart. She saw her daughter’s unshed tears and saw her clutching the leg of a corpse. She saw the policeman’s blank face, but she saw a bead of sweat roll down the side of his face. She saw the past and the future converge in that single moment, her death. It would change everything for her younger daughter.

Whatever comes, I want to protect her, she had once said about her eldest daughter. I want to protect her, but I want her to know that freedom is something you have to fight for. I want her to understand that.

She regretted that she had never been quite as careful with her young one, who was now sobbing while trying to avoid being trampled. She had seen her youngest daughter’s exuberance as strength and courage, and maybe it was, but a battlefield was not the appropriate place for any six-year-old to be.

And just before she closed her eyes, letting her consciousness drift to whichever plane it desired, she uttered a prayer that Blanche would be strong.
Chapter Seventeen

A few hours later, sweating and panting, I stood in front of my parents' old apartment in Quadrant 2. It looked even more decrepit than I remembered. I hesitated at the threshold before turning away, wheeling my luggage behind me. If the lights were off, no doubt Blanche was elsewhere. Or maybe the wiring had finally given out. You never knew with Lower electric services.

The streets seemed so much grimmer than I remembered, I thought, as I made my way to Quadrant 4. Rust and spray paint and death seeped into the buildings that surrounded me, and I hardly even noticed the old hospital when I passed it on my right. Glass shards littered the street, and a number of the broken windows were boarded up. If it hadn't been for a faint flicker of light, I might not have guessed that anyone still occupied it.

I finally reached the outskirts of the red-light district where Blanche sometimes lived. A boarded up old apartment complex (that had once housed the wealthy, who were all now in Upper) that had nearly crumbled. On the side of the building, red spray paint letters declared, "GOD IS DEAD, AND SO IS MY DOG," and a little further on, there was a sad mural of a man trying to hang himself. I turned away from the artwork and approached the entrance, pushing my way past the metal door and into the crack house. Or, perhaps a more fitting title, the smack house.

Inside the old apartment complex, laughter—no, cackling—came through the halls. I picked my way across the stained and litter-strewn carpet to the only room on the main floor where any light shone; at the very end of the hall, a single apartment door stood open a few inches, and a narrow beam of light almost made the carpet glow. The locks on the doors had long since been broken, and so different groups of druggies typically gathered in the different
apartments on the main floor, choosing to sleep apart on the floors above. I shook my head as I crossed to the door and pushed it open further. Before me was a group of people, men and women, but no Blanche.

"Hello," I said. Some of them looked up. "Does anyone know where I can find Blanche Garrison?"

Everyone in the room, men and women alike, simply stared at me—blinking, uncomprehending.

"Blanche Garrison," I repeated more slowly, enunciating. I stuck out a hand out at eye-level. "About so tall, short black hair. Really thin, usually prefers heroin, but also drinks."

A few of them, who weren't so strung out nodded. "She's upstairs," one of the girls said as she grabbed a needle from the guy next to her. "She was tired from working last night and wanted to sleep. You might try finding her on the third floor. That's usually where she sets up camp."

"Thanks," I said. I waved in parting, found the stairs, and began climbing. Though Blanche had shown me the outside of the building a few times, I'd never really been inside that much. Maybe once, twice. As I climbed, I noticed that the random graffiti and litter that had decorated much of the first floor began to disappear. I wondered how tall the building was. Why hadn't it been flushed of all the crack and smack addicts and used as housing for Upper? Why had druggies even begun using this building in the first place?

Panting, I reached the landing of the third floor. Darkness, all around me. Along one side of the hall, light filtered through a crack at the base of the door. Approaching the door, I knocked. My heart was beating faster, faster, pounding now. I waited.
After a long moment, the doorknob turned and the door opened, revealing Blanche. Her eyes were wide for a few moments as she processed that it was me in front of her, but I barely noticed. I scanned her body casually, looking for any signs that she had tried to endanger herself. But she looked good, healthier somehow. Not as thin as when I had last seen her. Her hair was a little longer, too; instead of ending at her jaw, it now reached past her chin. Maybe someday she would wear braids again. I resisted the urge to reach over and smooth her hair.

"Chris? What the fuck are you doing here? I thought you were still in Upper. What the shit?"

"Hi, Blanche," I said with a smile, reaching forward to hug her. She kept her arms by her sides and stiffened at my touch, so I let go quickly, but I was happy to see her. "It's good to see you again, finally."

"Yeah, you too," she said. "You get sick of fucking rich dudes?" she asked, a smile—but a wry one—on her face as well.

"Not exactly," I said. "I'm pregnant. It's James', he's the CEO of a big company, and he didn't want me to keep it. I didn't want to get an abortion... and then my client Ivan found out and he trespassed into my apartment and assaulted me. I defended myself, but I knew they'd come looking for me, they'd want to kill me. I had no choice but to leave."

"God, Chris. You're a real killjoy. You can't even fuck a guy properly. Didn't you use a rubber or something?"

I shrugged, and instead glanced behind Blanche to the apartment. "Mind if I come in for a bit?" I asked. "It felt strange to go back to Mom and Dad's."
She sighed but opened the door wider, letting me pass. As I walked in, I took note of
the flat. Though the studio apartment might have been luxurious at some point, now it was
dank, the blue-grey paint chipping on the walls. Still, it felt more comfortable being with
Blanche than being alone. I placed a hand against my stomach.

"Blanche," I said, drawing out her name. "Do you think I might stay with you for a
bit? Just... I don't know where else to go right now."

She raised an eyebrow but shrugged. "Sure, whatever." Then she left the room and
walked into the kitchen, to do only God knew what.

Several days passed, and I was getting used to being in Lower again, not working, getting
used to seeing my sister being high. Not that it made it easier.

"Blanche, what are you doing?" I asked one afternoon as my sister was prepping a
drug mixture of some kind. "Has that needle even been sterilized?"

I was lying on the mattress, a hand on my stomach, and my sister was adding water to
what looked like a white powder. She held a syringe in one hand, and a spoon in the other.
Placing the spoon on the table, she stirred it using the tip of the needle. I winced. Blanche
ignored me entirely.

"Are you sure that's safe?" I asked again. "I really don't think you should be..." I
closed my eyes and pressed my hand to my mouth and leaned over where Blanche had put a
small wastebasket. When I opened my eyes, Blanche was looking at me, glaring in
annoyance.
"Seriously, Chris, just shut the fuck up. If you're going to stay here with me, you just need to accept that this is what I do. I shoot heroin until the hospital needs me to detox, and then when I'm clear, I do it again. If you'd seen what I have, you'd need to do this, too."

"I've seen a lot," I said defensively, closing my eyes again. I pulled the wastebasket up toward my mouth and tried not to throw up. The smell of pee and vomit filled my nose. "I've been through a lot, maybe just as much as you."

"Yeah, I've certainly never been pregnant with one of my clients' children. Good thing Jerry tied my tubes when I was seventeen or God only knows how many abortions I would have had by now. Or how many kids." Blanche chuckled, but I thought it sounded more like a cackle. The child-hating witch was brewing something in her cauldron, just like in nearly every fairytale. It was too much. I heaved into the wastebasket, and the smell of vomit became much stronger.

"I would say I'm about to be sick," I said weakly, "but that just happened." I gagged again, vomited again. Blanche laughed, at my misery no doubt. I raised my head and opened my eyes, peering over the sick-filled basket.

"What I'm doing now," Blanche said, placing the spoon on the table, resting the tip of the needle against it, "is putting the smack in the needle." I watched as the liquid disappeared from the spoon and traveled into the syringe. Then, letting the spoon clatter to the floor, Blanche held the syringe with the needle facing the ceiling and tapped it with her finger. I must have been frowning because I no sooner looked at her than she clarified, "That's to get the air bubbles out."

"Does that matter?" I asked, sitting up and placing the wastebasket on the floor once more. The last thing that I needed was to get sick a third time, and if the last few days had
been any indication, that was definitely a possibility, especially since I hadn't eaten anything all day. Blanche just looked at me.

"Shit, Chris. Course it matters. If you don't tap the air bubbles out," she told me, still flicking the syringe thoughtfully, "then the air bubbles enter your stream. And if you have air in your blood, pure air, like actual bubbles and gas, or whatever, then you die. It's like, what, basic chemistry or something? Shit, I don't know, Chris."

"Great," I said weakly, rolling on my other side, turning away from my sister, facing the wall. "You know, I really didn't want a demonstration of your junkie habits. All I asked was if I could crash with you for a couple days until I get things sorted out. I mean, I can open the store again, sell the manuscripts for food, save to get out of this city, backpack somewhere, maybe a different city... raise my son or daughter..."

"No, you can't," Blanche said quickly, looking up at me. "I already did that. Sold the books, I mean. There's nothing left aside from some shitty ones that no one even wanted for firewood. There's nothing, Chris. There was barely ever anything in that store, not even when Dad was still alive."

I looked at the beige-green paint chipping on the walls, and traced a particularly large chip with my finger. "You mean there's nothing," I said in a flat voice. "After all, it's not like I can sell the apartment. No one would buy it; someone's probably already moved in."

"You were gone for over a year, Chris. What was I supposed to do?"

I didn't answer my sister, simply kept tracing the crumbling pattern of the walls. "You really need a new coat of paint."

"You're impossible," she said. And with a slam of the door, I knew she had left the one-room apartment, probably to go get high.
Interlude

Long ago—before the necrosis of the United States government became glaringly apparent—a woman sat in a bright and clean, if small, apartment and rocked her child to sleep. Every time her baby would wake she would kiss its head and snuggle it to her chest. She was a stay-at-home mother, and though her other feminist friends might take issue with her abandoning her career (even temporarily), she still wrote her blog and gardened and volunteered at the university where her husband taught Medieval Literature. He thought it was a dying field (and she feared it was too), but she always insisted it was an art to appreciate Beowulf and Chaucer, especially without a translation.

“Rocking our little girl to sleep?” her husband asked as he entered the room, wiping down a glass with a rag. “Was she fussy at all?”

His wife smiled at him. “Isn’t she always?”

“I suppose so.” The man looked at his baby girl. “She’s so beautiful, so innocent. How long do you think she’ll be so perfect?”

Perfection, his wife wanted to say, was not a reality, just an appearance, but she bit cheek to keep from speaking. “I don’t know… until the apocalypse comes and the world ends?”

“Really, Nat, you need to stop reading all that doomsday literature. We’re not going through the end of the world.” He paused, cocked his head, still looking at his daughter. “I wonder what it will be like when she’s about to have her own children. I bet she’ll have cravings for nachos just like you did and her husband will be running out at 3 a.m. to get jalapeno sauce for her so that he doesn’t have to sleep on the couch.”
His wife smiled but held the child even closer to her chest. “I don’t know,” she whispered, looking down into the infant’s dark eyes, “but whatever comes, I want to protect her. I want to protect her, but I want her to know that freedom is something you have to fight for. I want her to understand that.”

The man chortled as he headed back to the kitchen to replace the glass. “Of course you would. But you can’t always protect your children, no matter how hard you try. Our parents’ generation showed us that.”

And though the woman understood her husband’s point, she continued rocking in the chair, staring into her daughter’s face, watching as the infant’s eyes began to close. And as she did so, she hung a tune so familiar to all of America, a true American lullaby.
James. I'd decided to name this child, the bastard that it was, after its father. Though I'd been carrying it for four months, I barely knew what it looked like; I'd only been to prenatal care once before it was discontinued. Only the Upper World used ultrasound, so I didn't even know if it had any major deformities. Needless to say, I could barely guess its sex. Despite that I'd been carrying him—*it*—for four months, he—*it*—could have three stomachs for all I knew. I didn't know if it was a boy that I was going to have, but I knew that this child was a problem. If I carried him—*IT*—to full-term, I would be responsible for it. I would have to care for it, raise it, feed it. And then it would grow up in a barren world with no opportunity and no father, and what kind of life would that be?

It was decided. I pulled off my clothes, my jeans fitting much more loosely than they had before I'd gone to Upper, and I stood naked in front of the mirror. From the side, the tiniest bump was visible in my abdomen, but I tried to convince myself that it was the burger I'd had early in the week. Though, of course, my reflection and I both knew that the burger had never existed. I turned from the mirror before I could change my mind, and I lied down on the bed—legs apart, feet flat against the dingy mattress.

Ever since I'd returned from the Upper World, I had kept my mother's old jackknife on the side table. Blanche said that sometimes people would break into the apartment, breaking the chain on the door, so I made sure it was always close by. At least living with Blanche was consistent: We always fought, but we loved each other equally, and so even when she spilled Jack Daniels on the floor, or when she spilled her smack, or when she'd just had a speedball, I would bite my lip and try to say nothing. She, in turn, wouldn't say
I grabbed the jackknife and held it, rubbing my fingers against the polished metal handle. I could feel my heart pounding faster and faster, and I shut my eyes so maybe some of the vertigo would go away. I pushed my legs open even wider, pressing the knife next to my crotch. The metal was cold. I shivered involuntarily. Moving the knife up toward my abdomen, where I could barely see the bump, I pressed its sharp point just beneath my navel, saw blood begin to pool, and I immediately withdrew the metal object from my stomach.

I couldn't do this, not like this. The knife fell from my hand, against the mattress, and then I heard a strange, choked sound coming from my throat. I curled onto my side and wrapped my arms around my chest. Though I might wish to remain intact and kill the thing inside of me, I knew to kill one was to kill the other. My cheeks grew cold, and I realized they were wet. I wasn't sure how long I remained on that mattress, naked and crying, but the light faded, and the moon rose. I could hear music and shouts coming from the street below, and still I was curled up. Stiff, I sat up and looked around the room I had grown to detest. The chipping paint, which had seemed a sickly beige-green in the pale sunlight, now seemed an equally sickly blue. Blue, always blue at night, even though the crackling neon lights were just below us.

I wanted to scream with the hope I might wake myself, but I knew that would be useless. I stumbled up from my spot on the bed and shoved on my loose jeans, my sister's torn tee. Whiskey... where was the whiskey? Blanche had had some the other night; I knew this much. I began rummaging around the small room, even dragging the few pots and pans out of their cabinets until I found a small paper package. I opened it, and though it wasn't
what I was looking for, it would do. I crossed again to the mattress and sat down and imitated what I had seen my sister do dozens of times in the last few months, what I had even done once myself. Mix the powder with water on the tinfoil, place the tip of the needle against it to soak up the liquid. But as the syringe was about to suck up the liquid mixture, I paused. Air bubbles. I pulled the needle away from the smack, as Blanche called it, and filled the syringe with air. Biting my lip, I held the point to my vein and paused.

There were no other options. Few clients wanted to sleep with a pregnant whore, and like Blanche had told me, like I myself had realized, the baby would be a problem. No one would adopt it, and so killing it would be the only thing. At least right now I could pretend it was a cancerous being, something that didn't deserve to live, something a lot like me. The needle teetered on the edge of my skin, and I pulled it away for a moment.

They would come for me. They would hunt me, and they would find me, and I would not be prepared. I would be sitting in an apartment full of booze and smack and my sister's dingy needles, and they would shoot me before I could even explain. I placed the needle upon the bed, and ran my hand against my nearly smooth stomach, and I imagined how life could have been. Living with James Jr. in the black and white penthouse, me snuggling him as he cooed. Waking in the early morning light, lying next to James, skin against skin. Blanche, clean, with long black hair, holding my infant son as James sat next to me, rubbing my back, smiling.

A loud sob drew me back to reality.

They were looking for me. It was only an issue of time, but they would come. They would kill my son if I hadn't, and if he lived, he would be condemned to die in a garbage can, his head flung and smashed on the concrete. This would be mercy. I picked up the syringe of
air once more, my hand shaking, and held it once more to my inner elbow, as I had seen
dozens of nurses do in order to draw Blanche's blood or to administer an IV. As I had seen
Blanche do several times in order to get high. Hissing through my teeth, I pushed the needle
in. And then, pressing down on the end of the syringe, I emptied its contents into my vein,
removed it, and waited.

_Hush-a-bye you sweet little baby, and close those pretty blue eyes._

_Mother has gone to her weekly bridge party, to get her wee baby the prize._

_Nursie will turn the radio on_

_So you can hear a sleepy-time song_

_Sung by a lady whose poor heart must long_

_For a baby like you._