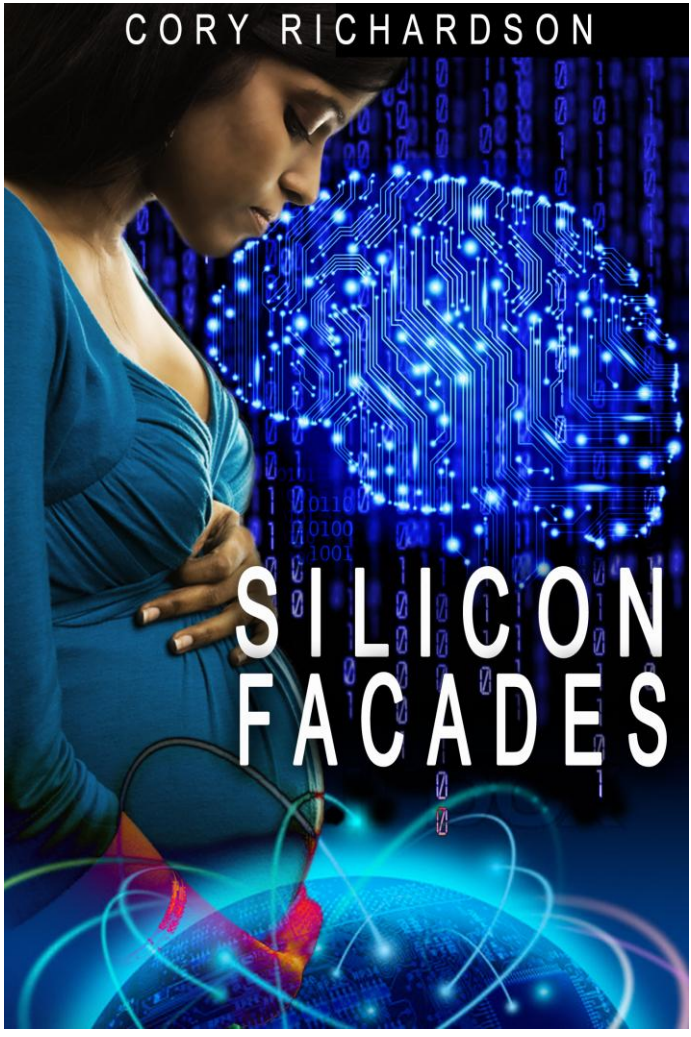

CORY RICHARDSON
SILICON
FACADES

Silicon Facades
By Cory Richardson

2026 Edition

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Forward

The Year 2050:

Note: Unless you love the nerdy detail of a societal backstory, you can skip the twisted ancestral legend below and proceed right to Chapter One where the real story begins…

Thousands of years before the Internet was even a thought, unless virtuous or depraved people did something notable that would get them into the history books, only the privileged or unlucky few could leave their mark. And even so, the physical media upon which those marks have existed are now in most cases deteriorated to nothing. Most all of early humanity's documents have vanished. To a large degree there is no remembrance of men of old and, for those fragments retained, certainly little additional factual detail known. That all started to change in very recent times.

Sixty years ago, with the advent of the computer age kicking into full force in the 1990's, a multitude of independent entrepreneurs, using a world-wide data system, began the slow, steady process of tricking individuals into giving over valuable personal information with the lure of free access to public information.

No one suspected anything sinister at first from this marvelous technology. This web of deceit, known as the World Wide Web or Internet, had started innocently enough, merely providing anyone connected to it immediate access to electronic information that had previously been only available in physical form, with a time delay, and at a cost to obtain it.

Not only was access to the World Wide Web data fast, but it was generally free, or at least advertised as such. "Any topic, any time, not a dime," was one Internet

provider's marketing motto. Why that didn't tip people off as something too good to be true is simply a mystery. The general public clamored to connect.

Sure, radio and television had been around for most of a century by then and could quickly share information in a limited sense, but never at the speed and with the self-directed raw unedited power that was possible with the Internet age.

Initially, the hardware and software companies made a killing providing the tools required for access to this monster. Like any new technology, these access machines, called Personal Computers (PCs), were very expensive. Early home PCs cost as much a modest style used car at the time.

But over time, just like what happened with the record player, radio, television, video cassette recorder, camcorder, and compact disc player, the machines needed to access the Internet advanced in design, while dropping in price to the point later on that if someone could afford a phone or similar mobile device, they were hooked up.

With everyone "connected" it wasn't long before the hardware and software companies weren't the only ones making a fortune from this technology. Advertisers and pushers of online music, books, and video came first. Then, people selling their own stuff over the Internet became popular. And in no time, online stores selling everything and anything quickly followed.

In the typical "fast food" mentality, people got used to being able to have everything without delay. Whether it was instant communication or receiving delivery of a purchased item in the next day or two, as opposed to the four to six week waiting period as in older times, our forefathers became hooked on getting things without having to wait. Patience became in short supply. It was instant gratification for a stuff-hungry generation.

And buy stuff they did. At first, it seemed incomprehensible that it could ever be less expensive to buy a product over the Internet from a store a thousand miles away and have it delivered to your front door in two days, than to just go down the street to the local "big box" store and buy it. But somehow, "they" made it work, though it was never clear who "they" were.

And people followed like pigs to slaughter because they wanted cheaper and faster. But what they didn't appreciate or care about is, that although it *was* cheaper for them back in the early 2000's, those alive now in the 2050's would be the ones paying.

Our ancestors quickly got hooked on the instant gratification. And later they also got hooked on the technology itself, to the point of ridiculous, if not just outright stupid.

It hadn't taken long for the Internet to be in vogue, *the* main attraction, information rich, with music galore, and unlimited books, videos, and pictures. It was *the* vehicle to learn about *anything*. But then it developed into something more ominous, though people were blind to it: The opportunity for everyone to put themselves out there, uploading their talents for the world to find, including uploading most of their personal information.

What morons our forefathers were! People back then never quite grasped that everything they did online, everything they texted, every post they made, every rude comment they made, and eventually everywhere they physically went was being recorded and saved for later. Years later. Decades later. Conversations too.

The most curious part of this unfolding story is how exactly all the databases were able to get populated, exponentially, with personal data. It was simple. Our numbskull ancestors populated it willingly in a variety of cleverly designed ways that they embraced like fools.

Understand: They did this even though *it was not required*. Dumb asses!

First, it started with an indoctrination to begin to prefer electronic over paper. From phone books, to maps, to newspapers and books, our ancestors began to favor the speed and portability of electronic information over printed material. They loved how it de-cluttered their spaces at home and the office.

Second, there came a real beauty that just about made the art of handwritten letters obsolete: Free email accounts. No longer did people have to wait three to five days for their letters to be hand delivered to their intended recipient or buy postage stamps! Everyone below the age of, well, old geezer, jumped on this bandwagon. And ever since the very first email accounts, all electronic letters and messages had been saved in servers, regardless of whether people ever deleted the emails, or their accounts, or themselves from this earth.

Third, in order to encourage people to blab to an even larger audience and have their ramblings out there forever for anyone to access, free blog sites were invented for their big egos, not to mention the advertisers' benefit when ads were piggybacked onto the webpages. Similarly, other free websites were also created to help these same schmucks upload personal pictures, music, and video to further stroke their growing egos.

Fourth, if it weren't enough to put personal stuff out there for people to find, social networks were created so that people could badger all their friends and work associates with all the same drivel. It was easy to get people to sign up. Since everyone was preoccupied with everything electronic, their real groups of friends were diminishing. The social networks made them feel like they had lots of friends.

And fifth, since desktop computers rapidly and largely got exchanged for laptops, tablets, and smaller mobile

devices, none of which lasted more than a few years before failing in a multitude of ways, another huge advance was made for convenience: Data storage in the "clouds."

How asinine was this! The inventor of the concept was brilliant. No longer did people need to worry about having the hassle of storing pictures, video, music, and other documents on any of their many mobile devices. Instead, it was "safely" stored out there online ready to retrieve at a moment's notice from anywhere.

The public loved it so much that they got rid of all their paper files too through senseless scanning and uploads to the clouds. Thus, having turned over the privilege of storing their own personal data, and passing it to someone else's ultimate control, the last nail in freedom's coffin was pounded in place.

Let me repeat this again: They did all this even though *it was not required*. Dumb asses!

A social revolution had started as a result of the five dip-shitted steps carried out by our relatives. Over the span of what seemed like only a few short decades, beginning around the infamous year of no return, 2000, everyone became able *and willing* to leave a record of their life. They uploaded their feelings, experiences, hopes, dreams, achievements, and every other kind of personal data through a multitude of electronic media creations such as emails, texts, blogs, short stories, pictures, music, audio and video, self-published books, scanned files, and cloud storage. This was a huge deal. In the decades to come, this era would affectionately be called the Silicon Facades.

A social phenomenon of this magnitude, and with such deep implications, had never been possible before at any time in the history of mankind. Our great-grandparents and grandparents had suddenly found themselves the holders of a technological power that allowed them to leave a permanent mark like a dog with radioactive piss. But their

egos and desire to feel important ruined everything for us today.

They got addicted to it. The Internet had the potential to allow anything to go viral and be read, watched or listened to by millions of people instantly. All of a sudden, *anyone* could have prompt fame and fortune. And many did. The constant lure of instant fame and fortune kept people playing the Internet like some big lotto. It was easy to play it. The cost of the lotto ticket was mere information, personal information, and its privacy.

The lotto's giant information cow then spawned a destructive Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in the late 2020's, which catapulted privacy invasion to a terrible new level throughout the 2030's. The AI system grew massive and was eventually taken over by government entities, and used in part to feed the Social Identity Number (SIN) Record Database by the 2040's. The Internet was then restricted to only authorized users, excluding eighty percent of the population. The SIN Record became the ultimate social control over everything people did to buy, sell, eat, play, work, travel, and just be human.

Algorithms constantly riffled through people's SIN Record and re-calculated their SIN Score. People were held accountable for their past and present behaviors, political and religious beliefs, lifestyles, and crimes, and then rewarded or punished according to how they meshed with the tenets of the State. No longer was anyone able to deny what they believed, what they'd done or where they'd gone.

By the late 2040's, everyone was pigeonholed into government established social classes, A- through D-Level. The lower C- and D-Levels contained a strictly-controlled eighty percent of the population by design.

What anyone could eat, what they could purchase, where they could live, and where they could go were all determined by their SIN Score and associated class level.

Everyone was also required to have a SIN Chip implanted in their body, usually their right hand or neck, which continuously and automatically fed new information to their SIN Record. Electronic or physical tampering with, or removing, a SIN Chip from yourself or anyone else was illegal and had severe consequences, usually immediate transfer to a State Labor Commune as a temporary or permanent slave, to live, work, and produce any number of a long list of profitable goods manufactured and sold by the government.

By the 2050's, the greatest challenge and focus of the people at the bottom of the food chain was the same it had always been throughout millennia, except that now, the risks were much, much greater. Yet those risks still didn't preclude people from attempting to increase their social standing through any means possible, legal or illegal.

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Chapter 1
Girls Can Dream

Loan officer Mattole Lavy gazed across the table at the attractive young couple, Sinead and Miranda. They were both athletic looking, slightly taller than most women, and seemed almost like twins including their medium length dark hair. But their facial expressions couldn't be more opposite. Sinead, barely smiling, glared her emerald eyes at him. Miranda, looking more welcoming with her big smile, questioned him with her cobalt blue eyes.

"Look," he hesitated, "from your application we just don't see sufficient income, high enough credit scores, or low enough drug abuse potential."

Carefully eyeing the girls up and down, imagining them kissing each other, he continued. "Besides, the data indicates that you probably don't have staying power with each other. So it would be impossible for you to secure a loan of this type."

Sinead was dumbfounded. "What? Drug abuse? You've got it all wrong. And we've been together for months. Plus, we never filled out any application. We just want to find out what our mortgage options are," she said sternly.

"Ah, I see. I can tell that you haven't done this before. The days of filling out applications died with your great-grandparents," replied Lavy, now looking superior.

"All I had to do was pull up a standard application using your Social Identity Numbers, like I do for everyone. There is really nothing more to discuss. You girls aren't ready to buy a house and I can guarantee you that no other lender in the State will want to give you a loan either."

The girls looked hurt, and glanced at each other.

"That is," Lavy continued, "unless you're interested in the Hardship Program."

Sinead and Miranda looked questioningly at each other and already knew each other's answer. Sinead turned to loan officer Mattole Lavy, softening her eyes, replying in a much friendlier tone, "Yes, of course we're interested in the Hardship Program. Thank you for helping us, Mr. Lavy." They happily signed up for forty years of extortion in one of most profitable programs administered by the State Central Bank. And the girls were damn fortunate to have that option at all.

As Sinead and Miranda excitedly left the bank and were strolling towards their car, arm in arm, they heard a familiar voice shouting to them from behind.

"Hey, you two," Amber yelled cheerfully, quickly eyeing them up and down as they slowly spun around towards her. "What are you gorgeous girls doing here?"

"We just got approved for a home loan," Sinead said, smiling.

Miranda was beaming too, her arm now around Sinead's waist. "Our new life is finally starting to happen," Miranda added, looking at Sinead and squeezing her close. Miranda gave Sinead an affectionate kiss on the lips, then looked playfully at Amber, as if daring some type of jealous reaction.

"Good for you," Amber replied, her voice rising slightly, as if nervous. "We're so happy for you. Seems like a lucky day for all of us. Darren and I are applying for a home loan today too, which we expect will be approved. Finally, we're starting to live *our* dreams too."

"Oh wow, when is your baby due, Amby?" Sinead nearly shouted, grinning as she placed her hand on Amber's baby belly. Gazing into Amber's attractive blue eyes, Sinead then slowly slid her hand downward, her long, elegant fingers leading the way, around to the underside of Amber's belly.

"Any day now," Amber blushed, a little confused but liking the feel of Sinead's hand so close. *Amby?* she thought.

Darren, who had been standing right next to Amber and holding her hand, looked put off by the flirtatious vibe and obvious chemistry between Amber and Sinead. *Sinead, you'd better keep your mouth shut*, he thought.

Miranda eyes narrowed as she curiously studied Amber's puzzled but affectionate gaze at Sinead, and noticed Sinead's hand, now very low on Amber's tummy.

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Chapter 2
High Aspirations

Six months earlier, Amber and her husband, Darren, had just finished buying some baby clothes at a yard sale down the street from their flat. She was nearly three months pregnant. They lived in a large apartment complex. Their Social Identity Number (SIN) Scores had not allowed them to purchase a house, not even in the Hardship Program. But they had a dream of getting out of the apartment flats after their baby was born.

As they walked back toward their flat carrying two bags of baby clothes, Darren started his planned dialog to convince Amber of something he'd been pondering a great deal about lately. "I've been thinking," he said quietly, "as you know, we're never going to be able to rent or buy our own house, have a car, get new clothes from a store, or afford to shop at the best food markets unless we do something drastic."

Amber looked over at Darren. She'd heard his complaints about "the system" ever since she'd known him. It was always the same basic argument: The system sucks and he had an idea how to fix it for them. She appreciated his relentless hope for a change. But he was dreamer, a talker. Nothing ever happened, nothing ever changed.

But she wasn't going to discourage his dreams of freedom. "Yes?" she said.

"A guy at work told me a story about the Silicon Facades in the early 2000's," he replied. "Long before the SIN Record was even an idea, people used to populate their own electronic record any way they wanted. You could have your own websites and add anything to them, writing, pictures, videos. You could even upload those things to a bunch of other websites. Not only were you free to do it, it

didn't cost a dime. You could put on any face you wanted the world to see. That was the Silicon Facades."

Amber had never heard of any such thing. This *was* interesting. She listened intently.

He continued, "So even if you had some negative pieces in your record back then that you couldn't make go away, it didn't really matter because you could add unlimited positive records."

"So?" she asked.

"So, if there had been any automated algorithms to create a Score for you like there is today, you would have had the power to skew the averages in your favor," he said.

"That makes sense," Amber replied, "but I don't see how anyone could do that today. People at our level don't even have access to the Line."

"Not directly," Darren quickly added, "but SIN Chips are receivers as well as transmitters. As you well know, they're programmed to receive specific data and transmit it to the scanners to add to the government's databases. Some of the data is received from our bodies like heart and breathing rates, and blood profiles. Other data is received from public sources about our physical location, our purchases, and other transactions."

Darren continued, nervously looking around, "If we were to carefully feed extra signals to the Chip, favorable ones, but not a deluge which might be too obvious, then over time our SIN Score could be improved and our Level automatically adjusted." He looked at her.

Not looking at all impressed, Amber immediately responded. "In theory," she began, "that makes sense. But how would you know what amount of data is enough, or too much? And what type of data? How would you even do it? One mistake and you would be sent to a labor commune." She touched the palm of her hand on her belly. "Our baby is going to need a father around. You know what happens to single mothers. They're D-Level."

Darren nodded. D-Level was the lowest people could sink to in this stupid world, A-Level being the main sought-after prize. The government had the audacity to consider single mothers dirt. It didn't matter if the father skipped out or was taken by the State. The female still paid.

As they reached their apartment building, Amber and Darren quit talking about how to manipulate their SIN Records and instead talked about their clothes purchase and what a nice day it was. Microphone transmitter "Mites" were everywhere, possibly even on their clothes from being out in public, transmitting conversations to government databases. Amber and Darren may have been foolishly conversing as they walked.

No one was actively listening to every conversation, though. But as many conversations as possible were recorded by a variety of means. Government computer algorithms searched continuously and endlessly for matches in long lists of targeted key words. Repeated hits on key words would certainly get noted in a person's SIN Record and could eventually affect their SIN Score. Ongoing offenses would get their conversations eventually listened to by a real person. Depending on what someone might keep blabbing on about, there could be consequences.

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Chapter 3
Conversation Band

Amber and Darren immediately did their normal routine when returning from anywhere in public. They carefully moved to the laundry room where they put their clothes in the washer, and this time along with their yard sale baby clothes. Then they vacuumed their hair and sometimes the floor to the laundry room, depending on where they'd been. Only then would they get dressed in clean clothes.

"So, what do you think of my idea?" Darren said in a quiet voice, as they sat down at the kitchen table.

Amber signed inwardly. "How would you know to go about tricking our Chips?" she replied, feeling the small bump under the skin on her right hand, about the size of a grain of rice. "A lot of people have tried it, and we hear all the time about how they end up serving time in the communes."

"Yes," Darren responded, "but I've also heard that for every one person caught, four were able to successfully increase their SIN Score."

Amber signed out loud this time. "How could there possibly be any accurate data on that? There isn't. What you've probably heard is government propaganda to keep people doing stupid things so they can continue to increase their captive workforces."

Darren was quiet for a few moments. "Yes, I know you're probably right about that. But from the research I've done on the history of cybercrime, it was often estimated that up to eighty-four percent of cybercrimes were never detected. The government just simply could not monitor and catch them all. Only a relatively small percentage got discovered."

"And so," Amber quickly added, "you want to play the odds of one out of five getting caught?" She paused and thought about what she just said. "Maybe those odds aren't so terrible. If that number is even remotely accurate, maybe it *could* work. But that would be only if there are legitimate ways to trick the Chip or our SIN Records."

"There are," said Darren.

"Such as?" she asked, skeptical he had anything.

"For starters, I've been talking with someone at work who has what he calls a Conversation Band. He showed me a picture. It looks much like an old wristwatch. He wears it on his right wrist at night or whenever he isn't in public. It transmits a prerecorded inaudible conversation signal with key words designed to add positive SIN Record data through his Chip. He's been wearing it for three months already and his level changed from D to C. The level change has been accepted by the public scanners. He says in six more months it could help him jump from C to B," Darren explained.

"Where did he get it? Has it worked on anyone else?" Amber questioned, somewhat interested.

Darren replied, "He made it himself and this is the first time he's tried it. But like I said, he's seen its effect in the public scanners already. This thing has real potential. He said he could make me one. Would cost a week's wages and…"

"We can barely afford to buy baby supplies or anything else," Amber cut him off. "How can we afford it, especially now? And why would he want to help *you*?"

"He said we could pay a little each month. He's not in a hurry. In fact, he's also working on some other ideas and said maybe I could help him in getting materials and that could offset some of the cost," Darren said.

"And he agreed to help me," he continued, "after I showed him an image of you." Darren smiled.

Amber did not return the smile, instead a look of concern. "It sounds too easy, too good to be true. And are you serious about showing him my image? Was it one of your holograms? Hopefully not one you've done while I've been pregnant. And what is he anyway, some kind of pervert?"

Darren didn't respond to the questions.

Amber was a little flattered, because she knew what the whole picture sharing thing meant. Guys would often "offer" their girl, in jest, as part of a deal and show off a picture or image of her. If the girl was attractive to the schmuck, that would supposedly help cinch the deal, even though there was no expectation concerning her. A stupid guy-thing. But sometimes it would stroke her ego a little, depending on the guy.

Amber kept thinking to herself, *This is the first time Darren has followed through with details and a specific plan for how to do something like this. Maybe he's on to something*. Finally, she said, "Sorry, Darren. I do trust your judgment. If you're confident it will work, and not get you into trouble, it may be worth a try."

Surprised by her reply, Darren smiled and moved his chair closer to her. "You're the best and deserve the best," he said, kissing her hand and then her lips, while continuing to obsess about his grand plan.

The next day, Darren left for work with what little extra cash he could round up, with Amber's blessing to buy a Conversation Band. One thing that all non-A-Level people had to be concerned with was how much cash they were carrying at any one time. Generally, they were expected to pay for everything electronically so that a record of all purchases would exist. But small amounts of discretionary cash were allowed.

Darren was careful never to carry more cash than allowed. In fact, Darren was careful to obey all the rules,

so as not to cause any red flags in his SIN Record, or Amber's.

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Chapter 4
The Cost of Amber

Darren was by no means a goody two shoes, at least in his youth. Born into an A-Level family in the banking business, Darren took his elite status for granted much of his youth and into his teenage years.

As a teenager, he had experimented extensively with "safe" drugs and alcohol. "Safe" drugs were marijuana and derived substances, mushrooms, and LSD to name a few, all legalized decades earlier. Nevertheless, although legal, use of any alcohol and "safe" drugs still had an adverse effect on the SIN Score depending on the concentration and frequency of use. Darren's SIN Chip had detected these chemicals often in his bloodstream, and his Score felt the effects of the drugs as much as his brain did. Darren's history of public intoxication, fighting, and causing disturbances also hurt his Score.

Being a horny teenager, Darren got two girls pregnant, which had no effect on his SIN Score. The girls' SIN Scores were blemished. His female addiction also had him frequenting a female escort service, which indeed did offend his SIN Score.

By the time Darren was eighteen years old, his A-Level status, which he had been born into, had dropped to C-Level. He lived with his parents for another year before voluntarily joining the service. The two-year active military duty brought him back up to a B-Level. At age twenty-one, Darren was dismissed honorably from the military, ready for the world he'd left behind.

On his first night out in the night clubs to celebrate, he met nineteen-year-old Amber. He strolled up to her table that night where she sat next to another nice-looking girl. Amber caught his emotions much more than the other girl, so he put his attention towards her only, secretly looking

for a one-nighter. “Hey. I’m Darren. I just got out of the military. Haven’t been able to party like this for two years. Know any risky ways to have some fun around here?”

“Well, first, only morons take risks,” Amber quipped. “And second, I don’t talk to morons.”

Darren ended up hanging around and talking with her for most of the evening, instead of partying to blow off some steam like he thought he would mostly do that night.

He couldn’t help but think, *She’s not like any girl I’ve ever met. This isn’t a one-nighter kind of girl.*

He found out that she was D-Level when they ordered their first drinks. While taking their order the cute waitress’s scanner alarmed and started yakking about a D-Level carrying too much cash. Amber was totally not embarrassed and simply leaned over to Darren and, smiling, said, “D-Level has nothing to do with real class, or money.” He could see that.

“You said you have a kid?” Darren asked while they sipped on their second round of beers.

“Yes, a one-year-old son, Bryan. The father was never really interested, I guess. But I didn’t want to give up my baby like so many of my friends have, even though it would have made my life a lot easier. So I stayed living with my parents and they’ve helped me a lot. Now, I just work and try to be a parent.”

At this point Amber wasn’t too sure about Darren, his quirky smile and too-macho façade. He didn’t have too many interesting things to say. But she could see that he was having fun trying to pursue her and seemed genuinely interested in her. *What does he want?* she pondered. *What do I want*? she concluded, and already knew the answer.

There was something about Amber that fascinated Darren. Despite being a gorgeous, tall, exotic looking brunette with intense blue eyes, her intellect immediately captivated him. She knew three languages, and her use of them was impressive. Never acting crass, Amber had this

sophistication about her, while at the same being so friendly and approachable.

Darren studied her face as she talked. She was genuine. And not like any girl he'd ever dated or even met. She looked so hot too. Darren wanted to go home with Amber that night, but when he suggested they go to his place for one last drink she told him, "You haven't earned anything yet."

He was hooked from that first date and didn't let her get away. It wasn't long before they were seeing each other nearly every night. And after just three months of dating he asked her to move in with him. She said she wouldn't unless they were married first. With her, it wasn't a matter of morals, but the legality of it. She had little to gain financially or socially by just moving in with someone, especially giving up the support of her parents.

Most guys of any kind of social class status would not even associate with a D-Level female if they were serious about a partner, because they had too much to lose if they got married. Still, he told himself that one way or another he'd get her out of her parents' house, where she was obviously stuck because of her social status. Plus, he was crazy about her.

Six months later, they were married. Darren gave up a lot of privileges by getting married to her. The bump from B- to C-Level for Darren meant he crossed a drastic social line from the top half to the bottom half, and a pay cut at his job as a diesel engine mechanic. It also meant they wouldn't be buying a house any time soon. But it was worth it to finally bring Amber home to their apartment.

As a diesel mechanic, a skill he learned in the military, at least Darren had a job in an in-demand field. Diesel engines were used for everything from personal and public transport rigs, home and commercial electrical power systems, to big machinery. It didn't matter that they were dirty and inefficient compared to the electricity produced

by wind farms from decades earlier, that had spread like a cancer to pick up the slack from the world's depleting oil reserves. It's crazy that diesel designs were still around, considering that the wind farms had generated sufficient affordable "green" electrical energy to nearly render the common gasoline powered automobile extinct by the 2030's.

But by the late 2040's, the largest oil reserve ever discovered in history had been found in eastern Canada. This cheap energy source made diesel fuel the undisputed standard afterwards. A whole new industry was re-born around the diesel engine. Good for Darren, because he had training and experience in this field.

Darren and Amber's flat was expensive, as was childcare for toddler Bryan. Amber's job at a nearby grocery store didn't pay much, even though she initially got a pretty good pay raise after getting married because her SIN Score had increased, unlike Darren's. They were both C-Level now. But money was tight.

Their tight money situation didn't stop them from wanting another child, though. Darren wanted to wait a while, but Amber easily got him to agree. She was very capable at getting him to do just about anything she wanted. Within two months of their marriage ceremony in Darren's parents' back yard, Amber was pregnant.

As a result of the pregnancy, both their Scores dropped to D-Level as they expected it would. It was automatic. They didn't even have to report the pregnancy. No human had to be involved. Amber's SIN Chip sensed the hormone change, transmitted the data to her SIN Record, and her SIN Score immediately dropped along with Darren's.

With the lower SIN Score came the automatic decrease in their wages too, as they expected. Darren and Amber had even more trouble affording everything that their young family required. Amber got more hours at work.

Darren took on another part-time job at a news agency, in addition to his already full day as a diesel engine mechanic.

Their parents helped them out some financially, but secretly since it was frowned upon. If the D-Level couldn't support themselves, they were supposed to sink into oblivion.

Darren had his calculated plan going, though. And as he made his way to work that day, the day he'd gotten Amber's blessing to put a down payment on the Conversation Band, he suddenly had another flash of genius about his part-time job at the news agency.

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Chapter 5
Tapping the Line

The Silicon Facades are still possible, Darren schemed.

Darren's part-time job as a graphic designer for the news agency might just get him opportunity for access to the Line. But he'd have to "buy up" his position from graphic designer to one having Line access, a B-Level Article Researcher.

It was common practice in the workplace to allow employees to "buy up" into a higher-class pay scale and position. The catch was that in return, the employee had a probation period in which they typically had to work for less or no pay. The Buy Up program terms differed from employer to employer.

But the planned results of the Buy Up programs were usually easy money for the company. There were many eager employees who often overlooked one of the very lures to the Buy Up program, a misnomer that their social class position would change when in fact it absolutely would not change. The Buy Up only involved their work privileges and pay scale after probation. Once in the program, statistically anywhere from half to three quarters of the employees would not last through the probation period, usually because they couldn't afford to work for free or less pay for as long as they'd thought. Out of financial necessity they'd be forced back into their old position or to find another job altogether. Not surprisingly, the Buy Up program was a hugely popular and profitable arrangement for companies.

At the news agency where Darren worked, he discovered a gold nugget. A part-time Article Researcher position was indeed available and he was eligible through the company's Buy Up program. Coincidentally, the same

day that he put his order in for the Conversation Band with a co-worker at his mechanic gig, he also applied for the Buy Up position at the news agency. The terms were that Darren would have to work for fourteen months without pay, since he was only part time, in order to have B-Level privileges and a future pay increase. Darren agreed. Amber didn't know about it.

The B-Level Article Researcher position would involve searching the Line for news stories and background facts, posting inquires and requests for information and, get this, manually uploading finished stories, that a team of writers supplied daily, to a list of web pages and websites for publication.

Automated uploading of anything on the Line was prohibited by law, for the very reason Darren wanted access, so that people couldn't skew SIN Records through sheer volume of uploaded material. Someone could try high-volume uploads manually, but Line access was prohibited for the lower classes, expensive for the upper classes, and was monitored, all of which discouraged abuse, though not eliminating it.

Darren immediately talked to his boss about his application for the Article Researcher position. "Great, you can start tonight," his boss said, knowing that the agency was planning to do some cutbacks and this was an immediate way to make himself look good in meeting their cost saving quotas.

Darren planned to learn the ropes for a while at his new position before he would try uploading anything to the Line to benefit himself. He'd have to figure out the what, how and when logic and be very sure about the details before he took any risks. Amber would have to put her brains to the task too. But at least now he had plenty of time to work on it. His job was to learn more about using the Line. It seemed too good to be true.

On his way home from work that night he was animated. This second job had really turned out to be a brilliant opportunity for them. He couldn't wait to tell Amber about his day. *Two great plans in the works*, he thought. And plan three was already being formulated. He'd wait until the time was right to drop plan three on Amber.

By the time he got home it was just past nine-thirty, p.m. His mechanic job had started at eight a.m. and went until five in the afternoon. He always packed his lunch and dinner so that he could go straight to work at the news agency and put in four hours. It had been a long day, just like every day. Luckily, both jobs were near each other, and a fifteen minute bus ride from home.

Amber had gotten her son Bryan into bed early and was watching a movie on the Hologramic Image Display (HID). The usual routine after their long days was to hang out watching HID for a few hours then hit the sack to start the whole routine over again, dreaming about the weekends. Amber and Darren had just two precious hours together each evening. If they wanted more couple time, then they got less sleep. This was the schedule six days a week. They were lucky to both have Saturdays off.

"Hey," Amber whispered, smiling and looking up as Darren opened the front door, which opened right into the living room of the flat. After he came in and gave her a kiss, she continued, "How did it go today? Did you order your wrist band?" She already had the HID playing a movie and its volume medium loud so that a whispered conversation could not be detected by the Mites.

"Yes, I put a down payment on it," he answered, heading to the laundry room to change clothes. "I'm going to have to pay it off little by little before he'll give it to me though. I don't really have time to help him find materials for his other projects so I'll have to pay his full asking price."

"Well, at least you have your other job now so it shouldn't take long," Amber offered.

Darren looked down and was quiet.

"What is it?" she asked. "Did something happen at the news agency already? Is there some trouble?" She was quick to read him.

"No, there's not any trouble," Darren said, returning to the sofa to sit with her. "But something quite fortunate did happen. I'm sorry I didn't talk with you about this beforehand, but I didn't want to lose the opportunity. I applied through the Buy Up program for another position, a position in which I access and use the Line daily. It's a great opportunity to learn the in's and out's of using the Line. I got the job immediately tonight. There were only two openings."

"Whoa," she uttered, "so that means you're probably not getting paid for a while. Probably twelve months, right? What are we going to do for money? Keep asking our parents?" She didn't look angry, just hurt.

"Fourteen months for B-Level privileges. And I don't like asking our parents for help any more than you do," he said. "But they do have the money and are willing. All we have to do is buy enough time for some of these plans to start working and then we'll start seeing the payoffs."

"Assuming we, you, don't get caught along the way," she added. After pausing a few moments, she concluded, "I suppose we really don't have a choice."

Darren resented the constant working. Being with Amber was so worth it. But that was the very problem. They didn't have enough time together. Something had to change. The only way to get more time was to make more money so he could cut back on work hours. And the only way to make more money was to have a much higher SIN Score. The same old catch-twenty-two.

He saw no option but to take the calculated risks of artificially manipulating their SIN Records through his job. Amber was starting to see that too.

Darren moved closer to her on the sofa and put his arm around her. "I just want a better life for us, Bryan, and our baby when it comes," he said. "I know there's risk involved but maybe there's worse risk to our family if I don't do it."

Amber looked at him with the beautiful blue eyes that he had fallen in love with. "I agree," she said softly. "Just promise that you'll discuss every step with me before you do anything. Both of our brains in this are better than just flying solo."

"Of course I promise," Darren replied. "I wouldn't be able to do anything without you."

You're damn right, she imagined.

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Chapter 6
Job Perks

The next day at his diesel mechanic job, Darren talked again with the guy who was going to make the Conversation Band for him. "Hey Mike," Darren said, placing a small papery roll into Mike's palm when he was sure no one was looking. "Here's my second payment. I wish I didn't have to do it this way. You know I can't withdraw and carry too much cash at once. If I do and get caught by a scanner, it could impact my Score. But I have the money. Any chance you'll give me the band before it's all paid for?"

"I totally understand," Mike replied. "I can't carry too much cash at one time either so it wouldn't do any good even if you could bring it to me all at once." Mike looked distinguished with his dark skin, lean build, and black curly hair showing a little gray on the sides. With his glasses and bigger than normal nose it seemed like he should be teaching physics in front of a classroom rather than spinning greasy wrenches as a mechanic.

"How long do you figure it will take to pay it off at this rate?" asked Mike, already knowing the answer.

"About three more weeks," replied Darren.

Mike thought for a moment. "Because I trust you, Darren, I'll give you the band in two weeks. Oh, and I'll give it to you then because you're also going to show me an image of your lovely lady again."

"Thanks, I can't wait," said Darren, smiling while he pulled out his palm screen and projected the full-scale three-dimensional hologram image of Amber in front of them. She looked fabulous in her short white shorts, bare feet, and short black halter top.

"Nice," Mike said, eyes glued to the image. It was funny how Mike now all of a sudden wanted to continue chit chatting.

Darren smiled. In two weeks he'd have the first part of his plan implemented. He and Amber could both use the Conversation Band, taking turns wearing it around the house. And if they kept their right arms in close proximity while sleeping or watching the HID, it could act on both of their Chips at the same time.

That evening at the news agency, Darren began his second night in the new Article Researcher position. He was fascinated by the fact that he had such easy, unsupervised access to the Line. He had received some on-the-job training the first night, consisting of a few hours of explanation from a co-worker in that same position, followed by self-training videos. He was pretty much expected to be up and running after the first day.

Darren thought it was pretty easy work. Although the job involved research for information to help the actual article writers, the most mundane part that nobody seemed to like was manually uploading the completed stories to a long list of websites for publication. Darren's first assigned tasks were not to research, but upload articles. He thought it was a stroke of luck that he would so quickly end up doing the very thing that gave him an inside track to the Line, and that no one else was even interested in doing, much less supervising him.

Part of what Darren had to do, along with uploading the articles, was to generate a list of "key words" or "tags" to help the article be searchable on the Line. The tags were words and short phrases from the article. Also, the tags would include the news agency's name, author's name, and anything else relevant to the article or topic in general. Darren was wondering how he might associate his name to some of these articles. If he could, then the government web crawlers would pick it up and assign some positive

value to his SIN Record, which would eventually help his Score. This was one of the perks of a B-Level job.

Darren noticed that many of the websites where he was uploading the articles had a Comment form. He remembered from one of the training videos that he was not precluded from commenting on the articles he uploaded. In fact, it was encouraged. And he could use his own name. So with every article he uploaded that evening, if the subject matter might reflect positively on his SIN Record, he left a response with his name. Cool perk.

There was another perk to this position that he hadn't anticipated. Once he started actually doing some research, he would receive credit by mention of his name in the article's references. He had the option to leave it there or remove it, depending on the nature of the article and whether it might help or hurt his Score. This meant that for every article he had helped with research, if it was beneficial to his Score, his name would appear as a "tag."

Darren was thrilled about these perks, but also disgusted that the lower classes were not given the same, easy opportunities at Score improvement. Everyone was well aware that two main objectives were behind the class separation: Social control and wealth transfer to the twenty percent at the top. What the idiots at the top didn't seem to realize was that the bottom eighty percent of the people were the ones actually producing most everything. Without them the pyramid would crumble.

On the other hand, maybe those at the top really *did* understand and that would explain why they kept the C- and D-Level in just enough "riches" to bob on the surface, neither sinking nor swimming, perpetually stuck in the slave mode. The C- and D-Levels were also one of the largest single sources of future slave labor through the giving up of their babies to the labor communes. Surely this was the most profitable and largest scale extortions in the history of mankind.

Darren thought about these great injustices on a daily basis. It was a helpful motivator whenever he began to doubt his plans or fear the risks he was taking. And it was with that sort of motivation that he took a big risk on his second night at the news agency.

Before he left for the night, he decided to search the Line for everything he could find about himself, an "unofficial" partial SIN Record, and copy the results to his own personal data chip embedded in his left hand (this was different from the SIN Chip, in his right hand). It was easy. He merely searched for his Social Identity Number on the Line. Immediately, a long list of his records came up. Darren knew his actions were probably being monitored but he copied the eighty-seven pages of data to his personal data chip anyway, signed off the Line for the night and went home.

"You won't believe all the ways I can help my Score," was the first thing out of his mouth to Amber when he walked in the door. "And it's all legit. Tonight I used my name in nineteen article comments for the government's web crawlers to find. I can do that night after night. When I start doing research for articles, I can keep my name as a tag on any article I want to."

Amber looked surprised. "Are you sure about that? It seems so easy."

"It *is* so easy. And that is the sick, sad thing about our corrupt system. If you're an A- or B-Level, it's too easy. Can you imagine how my Score, maybe yours too, might improve with stacking the deck in our favor month after month, all because I could buy up into a B-Level position? The hard work will be worth it."

"Oh, and other exciting news," he continued as he changed his clothes. "Mike the mechanic is going to give me the Conversation Band in two weeks. So we'll both be able to start using it then."

"Oh, so his name's Mike, huh?" Amber said. "So did you have to flash the shorts and halter top image again?" She was smiling.

"Works every time," Darren proudly reported.

Amber looked satisfied with the news. "This really is exciting. I had no idea that you'd be able to take these active steps so soon. Seems like you've really found something. I'm proud of you."

"Yeah, and there's one more thing." Darren pulled out his palm screen and transferred to it the data from his personal data chip. He then projected the pages of data in front of them. "Here's all the data and dirt on me that I just pulled off the Line."

Suddenly Amber appeared shaken. "How did you get that? Were you allowed access? Surely not."

"I merely did a search on my SIN and copied the results. I don't see the problem with it."

Amber's jaw dropped. "You don't see the problem with unauthorized Line access and copying restricted information?"

"For one, I do have authorized access to the Line. And my personal data is not restricted to me. That's the law. If I was trying to get someone else's data that would be another story. As for the copying part, all I did was project the images in the air like you would for any reader screen and let my personal data chip read them at the same time. There's no trace on it. There's no record of anything being copied, just viewed. Piece of cake."

"Okay, well that's a relief," Amber sounded doubtful, "So what are you going to do with that information?"

"I'm going to see what the biggest hits are to my Score and then try to specifically counterattack them through my tags and comments at the news agency."

"Sounds like you've thought of everything. I should be impressed, but..."

"And?" he interrupted.

“Okay, I am. But this is all new to me, and it just seems crazy that you’re doing this already. I’m not sure whether to be excited or scared. Actually, I’m both.”

The next morning, Darren copied his personal data file he’d gotten from the Line over to Amber’s palm screen. “You have a good sense of cutting to the chase on things. Can you look at my data and see what you think as far as where the biggest hitters are?”

“Yeah, no problem. Aren’t you afraid I might see some dirt on you that I don’t know anything about?” Her blue eyes looked teasingly at him.

“You know all the dirt. Sorry. You might find it boring.”

“Damn,” she said. “I was hoping for a few surprises.”

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Chapter 7
Worth It?

Amber knew there were always surprises in the Line data. And she understood a good deal about how the SIN Score system worked. Between her own research, personal experiences, and a number of friends' and family's stories, Amber had firsthand knowledge of a horrific array of social injustices done at the hands of government agencies, using the SIN Score as a battering ram.

It begins at a young age. Children take on the class of their parents until they're sixteen years old. After that, their SIN Record drives their SIN Score just like everyone else.

If children rebel and do stupid things in their youth, it will immediately affect their Score on their sixteenth birthday. For obvious reasons, sixteenth birthdays are always a huge stressor for both parents and children as no one really knows what all has been recorded in the SIN Record database all the years prior.

But even if there is an unexpected surprise on a sixteenth birthday, there *are* ways to advance in social class. Make some babies and give them to the State.

That's exactly what Amber's co-worker did, Kendra, along with her ignorant husband, Johnny. They were greedy B-Level types already and wanted to get pregnant just so they could give their baby to the State in order to move up to A-Level. Amber understood the desire to move up from the lower classes, but she was very judgmental towards them and thought, *You guys are already B-Level, you morons. Why not just enjoy life without creating another human to be tortured by the system? You're as bad as the State!*

But they went through with it. For months leading up to Kendra's baby delivery, Amber had to listen to her in the

break room, the stock room, the restroom, go on and on about her and Johnny-jerk's plans, week after week, bragging about moving to the A-Level. Kendra was barely seventeen! It made Amber feel kind of sick.

Indignant, Amber considered, *Is this how the upper classes really think? I can't understand how anyone could trade a baby away just so they can have more stuff when they're already doing just fine. If this kind of addiction to class progression is what Darren and I are going to develop, maybe we should rethink it. Sure, we may be trying to play the system, but at least we're not giving away any babies.*

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Chapter 8
Hidden Surprise

At the grocery store, Amber went through the normal routines of stocking shelves and cleaning. She had her palm screen with her as always, so in between tasks she could take a quick look at Darren's data from the Line. It was quite fascinating to see what information about him was on the Line.

There was stuff about him from long before they were married. Restaurants frequented, grocery store purchases, liquor buys, clothing charges; it was all in summary form over various time periods. Quantity and price totals. After a while of searching, it began to get kind of boring, though.

So this is what's on the Line, huh? Amber thought. *Pretty mundane shit. I don't get what all the hype is about.*

Later when she was on lunch break, Amber was able to bring up the data again, this time on larger air projection so she could scroll through a lot more data more quickly. Then she spotted something. The name, Amy. And more, Amy, Amy, Amy. *What the heck?*

Amber was stunned. "Who is this Amy bi-otch?" she said. A coworker in the lunchroom looked up at Amber, but Amber was silent and went back to her discovery. Scrolling through the data, she found some more disturbing information.

DARREN CROSS/AMY FORTIN ENGAGEMENT SEPT 18

DARREN CROSS/AMY FORTIN MARRIAGE TO FREEDOM

LEVEL ADVANCE

DARREN CROSS/AMY FORTIN BABY LEVEL ADVANCE

DARREN CROSS/AMY FORTIN BABY LEVEL ADVANCE APPLICATION
AMY FORTIN RETURN TO COMMUNE REQUEST DENIED

Amber was fuming mad now, her mind racing, *Darren never mentioned that he was married before. And that was only about four years ago. And he and this Amy had some babies together? What the hell?* Immediately she called Darren at work.

"What the hell, Darren? You said the Line data about you was going to be boring. It was anything but that."

"What are you talking about? What did you find?" Darren asked, sounding a little nervous.

"Amy, Amy, Amy. That's what I found. You and some Amy Fortin. Who the fuck is that bi-otch and why didn't you tell me you were married before. And you gave babies away?"

"Hold on, Amber. It's not what you think."

"How can you say that, Darren? Your SIN is right there so I know it's you. You and this little Amy chick. And you got her from a labor commune? I've heard all about the Marriage To Freedom program and why guys do that. I thought I knew you better."

It's true that the Marriage To Freedom program, available to the A- and B-Levels, allowed a form of bidding on pretty woman posted on the Line "for sale" for a hefty sum of money. It was a very profitable and popular initiative of the labor communes. The reputation of the program, however, was that it was just a rich, ugly, loser guy's way of buying a slave and making her his whore. It was not known as a good way to find a wife for life.

Amber was insulted on two levels. Not being told about a former marriage. And that marriage being in the form of a Marriage To Freedom woman.

"So, you don't deny it?" Amber challenged.

“But Amber, I can explain. Please let…”

“No, Darren. I’m not sure there’s anything you could say right now that would make me feel any better.”

Click.

As Darren headed home from work, he was extremely agitated. It had not been a good day. A terrible day now. He had hoped this secret would never have to come out. “Ahh! Why the hell did I give her that data?” he said out loud. “It wasn’t supposed to be there, ahh!” Sighing loudly, he thought, *what the fuck am I going to tell her when I get home?*

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Chapter 9
Amy

The whole Amy thing had been quite a roller coaster ride, starting four years earlier. Darren thought any public records about that had been destroyed or at least suppressed. *What are they still doing out on the Line for anyone to see? I still have a few paper records, but those are hidden*, he thought. He considered this nightmare to be long behind him. Now he was going to have to do a lot of explaining to Amber or she may never trust him again.

A little over four years earlier, on his eighteenth birthday, Darren had received quite the birthday present from his A-Level father. As Darren watched a new movie on the Holographic Image Display (HID), his father strolled into the living room holding up a palm screen and projected a file with about a dozen holograms of pretty girls with descriptions. Darren paused the HID.

"This is going to be the best birthday present you ever had. Here it is." He brought up one of the holograms to life size right in the middle of the room. "If you could have any one of these girls, which one would you pick?" He started flipped through the images, one by one. All stunningly pretty girls.

"Are you kidding? What do you mean by *have*?" Darren said, seeming both shocked and intrigued.

"You can have one of these girls for as long as you want," his father said. "They live in a commune now. But whichever one you pick will be free to come live with you. There are some rules for keeping her, but we can talk about that after she gets here."

"Live with me?" Darren paused. "For how long?"

"Forever, or for as long as you want her to. It's the Marriage To Freedom program," his father nonchalantly said.

He wondered off and left Darren to study the girls' profiles, containing pictures, descriptions, ages, and voice samples. After about ten minutes, Darren called to his father and projected his favorite into the room.

"This one," he said. "Amy Fortin." Amy was a beautiful, sixteen-year-old brunette, amazingly blue eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Darren, "but are *you* sure we should really bring her here?"

Within the week, Amy was delivered to the house in a State truck, just like a package ordered on the Line. Darren was stunned when he opened the door. With Darren's father standing beside him, nodding his approval to sign the marriage forms, Darren signed several document screens that the driver presented to him. And that was that. Darren's father said, "Happy birthday, son," and left the room.

There she was, standing in front of Darren holding a small bag of personal belongings. She looked like she had been crying, unsure of the situation. Her clothes looked like hand me downs from last decade. Yet she looked even more stunning than the hologram images he'd seen.

"Hi, I'm Darren." He held out his hand.

"Amy," she said, weakly shaking his hand.

"So, I guess we're married now."

"Guess so," she said. A tear rolled from one of her eyes.

"It'll be okay," Darren reassured her. "I know this must seem so awkward and strange to all of a sudden be brought here. Did you know what was going to happen today?"

Amy was quiet for a few moments. "Three days ago, I was told by the Ward mother that I was chosen for the Marriage To Freedom program. Everyone knows about this program. For most of my life I've heard about how

pretty girls leave the labor commune to gain their freedom. But all the stories weren't so glamorous." She paused.

"What do you mean?" Darren asked.

"Surely you're not that dense." She looked at him, took a deep breath and sighed heavily. "The biggest rumor is that the girls end up as sex slaves to mostly ugly, dirty old rich fucks. Can you imagine what's been going through my head the last three days?"

"Those were the longest most dreadful three days of my life, waiting to find out where I was going and how old that bastard would be. They don't give you any information beforehand about who bought you. I wanted to kill myself. And I might have, except they immediately put me on 4M treatments."

Marshall Mind Manipulating Mode (4M) devices, named after the AI pioneer of this technology, Everett Marshall, had been advancing for two decades already. 4M technology was at the point where predictable behavior modifications could be made. One hugely successful result was that prisons were effectively abolished and replaced by true 4M rehabilitations. 4M treatments didn't hurt either. Not at all. In fact, they were as good as many a sought-after drug. 4M treatments could be used in place of traditional drug therapies.

"The treatments made me feel pretty good and instead of worrying I started fantasizing about my potential prince. The 4M gave me some hope that this might turn out to be a good thing. But I knew I might be disappointed. I had to just accept whatever might happen. If it turned out that I went to some ugly old shit then I had Plan B."

She smiled slightly. "I was very relieved to see you and your father today and then find out it was you that I was marrying."

Smiling at her reassuringly, he said, "I think you lucked out pretty good." Arrogance was one of Darren's strong personas. "So, what was Plan B?"

"That doesn't matter, because now it's obvious I don't need it." Amy was beginning to look a little more relaxed. "So, what do you do? Where do you live? Oh, and happy birthday I guess."

Darren told her a little about his life and how he still lived at home.

"Are your parents rich?" she asked. "They must have some fucking dough." She looked a little intrigued, as she gazed around the room.

"I guess they've done okay. My father bought you for my eighteenth birthday present," he said, with a big grin.

Amy seemed really concerned all of a sudden. "So I'm some kind of birthday toy bitch? Are you sure you won't outgrow me like some birthday pony?"

"I'm not a kid anymore," he said.

"Am I just going to be your playmate until you get tired of me? Or were you planning a real marriage?"

"Ah, well, I only just saw your hologram a week ago and..."

She cut him off. "What? You probably picked me out of a lineup because you liked how I look and thought I'd be good in bed. Fuck that. You probably haven't ever thought of marriage at all, have you? And only now because that's just part of the deal."

"Just how much did you pay for me anyhow? And what do you expect me to do now? Jump into bed with you because you own me? Well, it's not going to be that easy." She stared coldly at him, her blue eyes looking almost gray.

As she stood there waiting for him to answer, Darren was thinking, W*hat a rare beauty. This was impossible to see from the Line profile. Such attitude, and the swearing. Mom and Dad are going to have to get used to hearing that*. He wasn't used to that either. He could tell she was so smart and not a pushover. That was a big turn on. And a challenge.

Darren didn't want to blow it with her right from their very first meeting, so he thought carefully before answering. "Honestly, I didn't quite know what to think about this whole marriage thing. But there was something about you that made me want to try. And now that I've met you, I want to make it work even more."

Amy was surprised by his answer and didn't know what to say. She couldn't argue with his reply. It was reassuring to know that he was willing to work on some kind of relationship with her and not just expect her to be his slave.

She also knew that the Marriage To Freedom program was a non-refundable, non-returnable deal. Even though she could have been totally screwed over by being purchased by some bastard, she thought, *Darren could have just as easily picked some psycho-chick too*.

What people on the outside didn't realize was that the pretty girls with emotional and psychological issues were quite often intentionally put in the Marriage To Freedom program to farm out to unwitting buyers.

So Darren was lucky he didn't get screwed too. At least not yet. *Definitely not tonight*, Amy plotted in silence.

Amy felt relieved, however. She was safe for now. *I'll wait until later to drop the bombshell on him.*

"What do you have to eat here?" she asked. "I'm starving."

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Chapter 10
More Dirt

After Amber hung up on Darren, she reviewed more of the Line data until her lunch break was over. Nothing more stood out. As she worked that afternoon she couldn't stop thinking about the Amy thing and what it was all about. *Why hasn't he told me about her?* She felt like not going home that night. But at the same time, she couldn't wait to get to him to find out the truth.

She had one more afternoon break at three o-clock and found a quiet corner in a back storage area behind the main grocery store so she could get serious about perusing the data. Something just kept bugging her about Amy.

She did a search for "Amy" in the data Darren had given her and saw what looked like a bunch of gibberish numbers and letters. There was something about a code match affair.

AMY FORTIN, A = 1, M = 13, Y = 25
FULL CODE = 39
ALPHA LETTERS CODE MATCH AFFAIR
AMBER CROSS, A = 1, M = 13, B = 2, E = 5, R = 18
FULL CODE = 39

"Affair?" Amber said out loud, seeing both of their names in the code. "What the f…?" And then it hit her. He must have still been seeing this Amy after she and Darren were married. *Maybe they're still seeing each other now. Does Amy work at the news agency and is that how he got the job and the Buy Up promotion so soon? Hmm.*

Amber was so upset at this point, that she stopped at the restroom and splashed cold water on her face. She felt sick, nauseous. How could she possibly keep working today with such unanswered questions looming? Finding

her boss in the office, Amber walked in and stood in front of his desk. Her boss knew something was wrong.

"What's wrong, Amber. You look terrible."

"Oh, I'm suddenly feeling pretty sick. Maybe it was something I ate at lunch. I just don't think I can finish out the day. Can I go home now?"

"Yes, of course. I don't think we'll need to call anyone else in. It's close to the end of your shift anyway. Please let me know later this evening if you won't be able to come in tomorrow."

Amber left the grocery store, fuming mad. If Darren didn't have a good answer for all this crap, she was going to take little Bryan and leave. *What good answer is there?* she thought. *He didn't deny a marriage and children with Amy. And it looks like they continued to see each other even after our marriage. That's inexcusable.*

She was thinking maybe she should just get Bryan from daycare and go to her mother's place, when she got a call. It was Darren.

"Hey Amber, I'm still at work. But I've asked to leave an hour early so we can have some time to talk before we pick up Bryan. I still have to go to my other job so that's the only time we can really talk in person. Is there any chance you can get off early?"

"I don't know, Darren. What's there to talk about? You've already admitted to a marriage and kids with that Amy. This afternoon I found some more dirt. I found some weird code entry with Amy's name. Something about an affair. Darren, really?! You continued to see her after we were together?"

"Okay, this is crazy talk. There is no affair, never was. I've been faithful to you all along. And as for Amy, like I said before, there is a good explanation. But's it's not something I want to talk about on the phone. Please try to get off early and come home. I'll be waiting for you."

Amber sighed heavily after a pause. “Okay, Darren. I’ll try to get off early. But I am feeling so hurt right now. I hope you have a good explanation because I’m so upset I was thinking of going to my mother’s.”

“Well, you won’t want to leave after I explain things to you. See you soon. I love you, Amber. Trust me.”

Amber had left work two hours before her shift was over. She would beat him home by an hour or so, and planned to dig more into the Line data that he’d given her to try and find anything else that needed explaining. Not only that, but Darren had some home e-files and a box of something in the storage room that she’d never had a reason to nose in.

It’s time to finally see what Darren has been hiding from me ever since we met, Amber plotted.

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Chapter 11
Amy's Bombshells

Amy finished the meal that Darren's mother prepared for them and thanked her. Darren's parents seemed nice enough. They asked a few general questions about her but nothing too deep. They probably already thought they knew a lot about her, commune-raised and all. It was common knowledge what all went on in the labor communes.

Darren's father, Merlin, kept staring at her throughout the meal. It made her feel uneasy, especially now knowing that it was his father's idea to buy her. It was his money that bought her too. She hoped he didn't have some sort of owner entitlement issue, even though she was married to Darren.

Dawn, Darren's mother, asked many polite questions but had a disapproving look most of the time. No doubt, they knew the reputation of the Marriage To Freedom program and how it was used by the rich to buy a pretty, slave whore. Dawn probably wondered how it could ever work with her eighteen-year-old son. Or maybe she was not pleased that Merlin had bought his son a whore. Or maybe she thought Merlin wanted a whore on the side. Whatever the case was, Dawn was little more than polite to Amy and not too interested in her personally.

Glad to finally be done eating and hopefully done with his parents' questions, Darren and Amy excused themselves and went to the living room.

"So what do you think of my parents?" Darren asked as they sat together on the sofa.

"They seem nice enough, though I think they both think I'm some kind of whore. They didn't seem to take a real interest in me, other than your father looking at me like a piece of meat and your mom seeing me as a threat."

There was that firecracker again. Darren found it hard not to be drawn to her wit and cut-to-the-chase attitude, especially coming from such an attractive package. It was so refreshing after growing up in a bland, milk and toast family. His parents rarely raised their voices. Everything was always calm and predictable. And kind of boring. That's one reason why Darren found it so irresistible to create a lot of excitement in his youth. That was the same reason why he found Amy so compelling.

"It's not you," Darren said. "My parents are just polite, superficial, boring people. They never curse, never raise their voices. They don't seem real interested in anything. Even me, unless I swear then they're all negative. I think they love you, or will. They just don't know how to express it."

Amy smiled. She wasn't sure whether to believe him. But his answer sounded good. She was beginning to see a persona of Darren that she found a little likeable. He was a risk taker and a rebel, the opposite of his parents. She enjoyed that. Maybe this thing with Darren was going to work in some way.

But if she was going to give it an honest go, she thought, *I'd better come clean about some things*. She took a moment to gaze at this innocent, dark hared kid with the hunky build and attractive good looks. *Sorry, Darren, here goes...*

"I'm three months pregnant." Boom!

Darren was shocked. "What? How can that be…"

She didn't wait for him to finish. "I must have had sex three months ago, that's how. Did you think you were getting a virgin? Are you that naïve? Do you think that anyone that ever comes out of the communes for the Marriage To Freedom program is a virgin? Nope. I'm sorry, Darren. That's just not reality."

"I'm sorry, Amy. I didn't mean it that way. I wasn't complaining about that. I know that the communes want

everyone to have babies so I would expect virgins to not last very long in there. I'm just surprised that they let someone, you, leave when…"

Cutting him off again, she finished the sentence. "When I'm knocked up? Come on, Darren. Do you think they really fucking care one way or the other? They get their money just the same. At least they're not doing some bait and switch for an ugly girl. Now that would be a big surprise wouldn't it?" She smiled big at Darren.

He laughed out loud, thinking, *Man, she's good. I've never met a girl like this before.*

"Besides," she continued, "one of your baby criteria will be met early, so that's a plus."

Darren's father had filled him in on the baby criteria so he wasn't surprised by that piece of information. But he was stunned at her candor. "How can you say that? Doesn't the idea of giving up your baby bother you?"

"No, it doesn't," she said without emotion. "No one ever raises their children in the commune. Mothers don't even see them. They're born behind a curtain and taken immediately to the Baby Ward. That's just life. We're raised that way. It's not cold."

"Hmm," grunted Darren. "I've heard there are no marriages or relationships either. Is that true?"

"There are no marriages. But there are relationships, just not exclusive ones. We can see anyone we want. We just can't have any kind of exclusive relationship with anyone of the opposite sex. Our SIN Chips keep track of who we're with. We're punished if we go against the rules, rewarded if we comply."

"What are the punishments and rewards?"

"It's all about work. Punishments are more work. Rewards are less work. That's what people live for in the commune, ways to work less."

Darren seemed real curious now. "What do people have to do to be able to work less?"

"For guys it's mostly having sex and doing great at their jobs. For girls it's having sex and having babies. It doesn't matter how bad or good we are at our jobs as far as rewards go."

Darren looked shocked again. He was silent for several seconds. "How many guys have you been with?"

"How many girls have you been with, Mr. Perfect Darren? Huh? Without someone standing over your shoulder twenty-four seven telling you what and what not to do, how many girls have you boinked for nothing?"

He was silent again. "Sorry, Amy. That wasn't fair of me. I kind of knew it was like that in there. I just never heard exactly how it worked from someone…"

"Someone who's been played like Jimi Hendrix's Stratocaster?" She grinned again. "Is that what you were going to say?"

"Who…what, Amy, you know I wasn't saying that! Why did you say that?"

"Just teasing you. Any more questions, Mr. Curious?"

Darren thought for a moment. "Yeah, one more I guess. We've always heard that commune-raised women don't make good wives because of what you were talking about. You're not allowed to be married, or have exclusive relationships, or a family, or…"

"And that didn't stop you from wanting to marry me anyway, did it?" she said. "So it's really about having a pretty girl to yourself. Darren, don't be a dumbshit. We're human you know. Just because we've not allowed to have exclusive relationships doesn't mean we don't want to."

He was speechless again. She was good. He looked at her beautiful face and thought, *I'm in love already*.

Then came bombshell number two. "I really want to be honest with you in every way, Darren. I'll never play any games. So here it is. I hate to break this to you, but…I like girls."

"Doesn't everyone? So?"

"Only girls," she answered with a serious expression.

Darren's lower jawed dropped. "Oh, my gosh. Are there any more surprises? Are you really a guy that's had a sex change? Because that would just bring a nice conclusion to this wonderful day!"

She giggled. "That's good, Darren. No, I'm not a guy. At least not yet," she said, grinning.

She paused a moment and then took on a more grim tone. "Let me be serious about this, though. I haven't been with but a few guys, and none by choice. I sometimes wish I was ugly, because then I wouldn't have been a target. Pretty girls are always a target in there. And there are plenty of guys who will take advantage of them and no one cares. Women don't matter. They're just seen as baby machines and workers. That's it. So, shit, I've never liked guys in general very much at all as long as I can remember."

She continued, "It's so strange. Now, I'm married to a guy all of a sudden. You must know how glad I am to be away from all that commune life, Darren. I'm relieved that you're decent, funny, and not boring at all. And cute. But I'm pregnant and into girls. So what are you going to do with that?"

You've got to hand it to Darren for not totally losing it. Imagine being eighteen and full of hormones. You've had a hard-on for a week waiting for your beautiful, sexy mail-order bride to come. She's finally here and you can hardly take it. Then you find out she's not a virgin, probably has been with many guys, has had guys force themselves on her, now she's pregnant, really into girls and not the least bit interested in giving you your long-awaited birthday present. Talk about bring on the cold shower! But Darren, somehow, kept his cool.

He simply replied, "Maybe you'll come to be good friends with me after we hang out for a while. Once we're great friends, maybe you'll start thinking of me as

something more. It's worth a try, Amy. Because so far, I'm really liking what I'm seeing and hearing. You haven't scared me off at all."

Amy was more than pleased and gave Darren a kiss on the cheek, teasingly close to his lips. "Maybe you'll be right. But tonight you'd better be happy with a girly magazine and your right hand. Or are you left-handed, Mr. Darren?"

Magazine, smagazine, I still have your hologram image on my palm screen! he mused.

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Chapter 12
Amber's Discovery

Amber hurried home over an hour before Darren was even going to leave work. That gave her nearly an hour and a half to dig for more of this Amy shit. But she'd have to work fast. There was a lot of information to look at.

First were his home e-files. He really had never made any secret of them. Most people stored their data in the clouds. That is, the A- and B-Levels. C- and D-Levels generally had no access to the Line and had to store data at home on a variety of media.

Darren had a fingernail media unit (FMU). All you had to was wave an FMU near a palm screen unit and all the data from the FMU would be loaded. Then you could simply project it into the air as large as you needed and scour through it.

Her heart melted when she projected the data and started reviewing it. It was about all of them. Wedding pictures, pictures of them, places they'd gone. There were e-messages they'd done back and forth when they first met; he'd saved them. The rest were receipts, financial files, and some videos of Bryan. Amber felt guilty about doubting Darren. *What a good guy*, she thought. *The files he saved are all about our family.*

She scanned through the rest of the Line data that Darren had loaded on her palm screen. It took considerable amount of time to try to look at everything, as there was a lot. Forty-five minutes passed. She saw arrest records of public intoxication, fighting, and causing a disturbance. *Okay, he told me about that*. He'd also told her that he'd gone a few times to a female escort service in his teens. She saw those records too. *Hmm*, she thought, *if Darren was honest about those kinds of embarrassing things, why*

would he lie about getting married before? Maybe there really is a good explanation.

Amber could tell she was starting to relax and feel a little better. The more she cooled down and thought about it, the more she realized that Darren really was trustable. She had no reason to doubt that he had a good explanation for the Amy stuff.

Still, that nagging box in the storeroom had to be looked at. The storage room was through a locked door off the living room balcony. There wasn't much in there, really. Some boxes, tools, old electronic devices, a bicycle. She found the box right away, a cardboard one-drawer file container. She had less than a half hour to go through it. Darren always told her it was just some memorabilia from his youth, stuff his parents gave him, school records, military records. She never questioned it. It seemed like pretty mundane, boring stuff. She wasn't nosey at all that way.

When she opened the box, she expected a few minutes of review followed by the same conclusions she'd made after reviewing the FMU and the palm screen data. She expected to quickly conclude that Darren's been on the up and up all this time so there's a good explanation for Amy.

But when she started thumbing through the files, she was stunned. The first thing she noticed was a document with the name, Amy Fortin, on it. There were many more with Amy's name on them too. A marriage record, birth record, Adoption to Commune record, 4M treatment records, court records. And pictures of this Amy. "Oh shit," she yelled out in disbelief.

In awe, Amber studied the pictures of Amy, pondering, *Wow, she's so young and beautiful. A little funky clothes and hair style, but she's gorgeous.* She seemed likeable. Immediately, Amber no longer felt as jealous, now that there was a face to the name. But there was a new problem, an even bigger, uglier problem.

With the box in her arms, Amber walked into the living room and sat it on the main eating table. She began to take out papers one by one and organize them in different piles; the pictures, marriage and baby records, 4M treatments and miscellaneous court records.

She was crying hysterically now, not really knowing why. Darren hadn't cheated on her.

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Chapter 13
Amy's Atomic Bomb

Amy was everything Darren wanted, except his girlfriend. His legal wife, yes. His lover, not anytime soon it seemed. Unlike any girl he'd ever met before, he couldn't stop thinking about her from their very first meeting. She was so smart, so sexy, and so hard to get. It drove him crazy.

It went on for weeks like this. Then months. Sure, she'd always find time to talk with him, hang out with him, even sleep in the same room as him. Their agreement from that very first day had been that he wouldn't tell his father about her pregnancy for as long as possible, or the fact that she liked girls. In return, she would act as married to him as possible, sleep in his bed, appear affectionate in front of his parents, family and friends. But no sex.

It's hard to imagine an eighteen-year-old male sleeping in same the bed with a beautiful female, yet unable to act on his natural instincts. Of course, Amy would never have gone for that sleeping arrangement if she didn't trust him. He remained a gentleman and just kept trying to win her affections.

At times it seemed she was warming to him. But their relationship never got physical except the occasional peck of a kiss to impress his family or friends.

She was soon visibly pregnant. At first Darren was congratulated by his parents, family, and friends. But the math and Amy's due date didn't jive. Darren had to tell them all the truth about her pregnancy. They had less than kind things to say about her and even suggested he give her back to the commune. His dad officially requested a return of her to the commune, unbeknownst to Darren. But the State refused, citing that the minimum agreed to time-period had not been met, nor other conditions.

Darren stood by her.

When the baby was born, she opted to have a "curtain delivery" so as to never see the baby. It was immediately taken to the State Labor Commune to fulfill part of their Marriage To Freedom agreement. Darren was saddened by the whole ordeal, but Amy didn't seem upset at all.

She bounced right back into a routine of having fun and a little partying. Even though they'd go out and party together and appear as a couple in public, even dancing at the clubs, at home she wasn't interested in him. Darren had thought he was going to have a little more chance at romance after the baby was born. But she didn't seem any more interested than before.

He tried another approach. "Amy girl, don't you think we should pay off our debt to the State and provide the last baby?"

She replied coldly, "Don't worry about it, Dar. We still have over four years."

Then, within the same week, this pretty brunette showed up at the house. Darren did a double take. She looked so much like Amy, except for green eyes like he'd never seen before. "Who's this?" Darren asked as soon as Amy let her in and they strolled into the living room.

"Sinead," said Amy, "this is Darren."

"I've heard a lot about you, Darren. Nice to meet you. Amy always says how lucky she is that you saved her. And I thank you too. We never would have met otherwise." Sinead and Amy gave each other a look that said it all.

We? Darren thought. He knew.

"We're going out for a while, Dar. Don't wait up." Amy gave Darren a little punch on the arm as she grabbed Sinead's hand, as if challenging Darren to say something.

Darren was no pushover, but he knew to leave it alone. They could always talk later. One thing he'd learned about Amy: Don't argue with her. She was not only very intelligent but very stubborn too. Winning an argument

with her was next to impossible. "Have fun. Nice to meet you, Sinead."

If it wasn't bad enough that Darren now felt he had to compete with Amy's girlfriend, Amy even had the nerve one time to bring her to the house, to his room, and ask him to leave for a while. At first, Darren found it fascinating and once said, "Can I stay and watch?" Amy wasn't amused.

He had to make excuses to his parents about Sinead and told them she was just a good friend helping Amy to cope outside of commune life. That explanation seemed to satisfy them.

And then there were her frequent sleepovers at Sinead's place. Darren's fascination with the girls' relationship had long since turned to outright jealousy. He saw Amy less and less. They hardly talked. He was still crazy about her and it hurt to constantly have the cold shoulder.

The final straw was when she dropped the atomic bomb on him. It was about a year after she had given up her baby. Amy came home from one of her sleepover excursions with Sinead. "Well Dar, our final baby installment will be fulfilled in about another six months. I'm pregnant."

Darren's jaw dropped. He was immediately furious, and showed a side of himself that Amy wasn't used to seeing. "What the fuck, Amy! How could you do this?" he yelled. "I've done everything for you and I've put up with anything you dish out just to wait for you to come around some day. And you don't even give me a little taste. Nothing. You know how crazy I am about you. Yet you tell me you don't like guys. Now you're pregnant?"

He continued, slowing down his speech a little and softening his voice, "I could have made you go back to the commune anytime, you know. I've thought about it so many times before, but I didn't. Because I thought you

were worth the wait. But now I'm not so sure." After a short pause, Darren finished, "So who is he? How did it happen?"

"Darren, he doesn't mean anything. Sinead and I were just partying and there was this guy, and she dared me, and…"

"Stop," Darren was shouting again. "I don't want to hear anymore. I don't even want to look at you right now." With that, Darren left her alone at his parents' house and spent the night at a friend's place. But he couldn't get her out of his mind. He still wanted her. In some ways, more than ever.

Suffering through that night, he kept thinking about what possibly could be done to somehow fix this terrible turn of events. *She just won't listen to reason*, he thought, *or even be decent to me after all I've done. She is so fucking stubborn*.

With little hope that Amy was ever going to change and quit torturing him, Darren started researching what 4M treatments might be available to ease things. Not for him, but for her. He soon was encouraged to learn that a range of treatments existed for the sole purpose of "recalibrating" someone's brain. Such treatment was similar in theory to the "instant rehabilitation" used for convicted criminals to ready them for commune life without a fight.

There were 4M treatments to reverse obsessive compulsive disorder, mellow autism, and ease depression, mania and other psychotic behavior. And for people that had experienced a tragic, traumatic event there was even a treatment known as "partial erasure."

That's what Amy needs, a partial erasure, Darren connived. But the treatments were expensive. He finally decided to confide just a little of the Amy situation to his father and ask if he'd pay for 4M treatments to fix her.

"Why bother with treatments? You can just send her back anytime if she's making you miserable, son. I'm not

going to hold it against you. I bought her to help bring some happiness to your life but it sounds like that isn't the case. There are other girls out there you know." But his father could tell that Darren really felt something for her. "You must really love her," he said.

"There's no one like Amy."

So Darren and his father planned how they might trick Amy into going into a clinic under the guise of some requirement for Marriage To Freedom or a pregnancy checkup, where she would instead get a strong initial "partial erasure" treatment. After the first treatment, it would be easy to continue treatments from then on. She could almost instantly be Darren's faithful wife.

They had but one chance. Amy was so cunning that if she suspected anything, she'd outsmart them. The only other option was to take her in unconscious. Darren didn't want to go to that extreme yet.

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Chapter 14
The Box

Amber was still crying. Darren hadn't cheated on her. He'd cheated *her* out of something. She just needed to hear it from him. *What did he take from me, and why?* she pondered.

She was preparing an ambush for when Darren walked through the door. He would not have time to think or react. She had it all planned out. He would be bombarded with a badgering of questions so calculated that he'd be trapped in any number of ways if he tried to back step. He *had* to tell the truth.

Amber heard the main first floor door to their apartment building slam shut, its closing mechanism long since broken. Footsteps resounded as someone walked up the familiar stairs to the second floor. Then, the squeak of the stairway door to the hallway. A muffled pounding could be heard in the hallway, getting louder. Suddenly it stopped.

From the crack under the apartment front door, Amber could see the shadows of two feet, not moving. *What is he waiting for?* she thought. She heard the key being inserted into the first door lock. Then the second lock. Then, hesitating very slighty, the third. As the door began to open, Amber yelled out in a casual tone, "Hi Honey."

A stunned Darren stepped through the doorway, looking like he'd seen a ghost. "Amber. You're home already." He was holding some roses in his hand. "I thought I'd beat you home."

She was ready to dig into him, until she saw the flowers. He only bought her flowers on her birthday, and their anniversary. "What's the occasion? Guilt offering?" she coldly retorted.

Darren looked a little hurt that she didn't react more positively. "No, just an 'I love you' occasion."

She waited for a moment. "Sorry, Darren. I appreciate the flowers. You've always loved me. I'm just upset. You can't blame me, can you?"

"No, I don't blame you. I had no idea there was anything on the Line about her. I'm sorry you had to find out this way and question my faithfulness. What exactly did you find?"

"Darren, don't act like an idiot," she said as she took the flowers and set them on the nearest table. Normally she'd immediately find a vase for flowers Darren brought her, but this time she thought, *fuck it, I may throw them at him*. She continued, "I already told you I found reference to your Marriage To Freedom arrangement with Amy. You already as much admitted to that. And I'm sorry I had to nose through your stuff, but I found your box of secrets."

"And after going through all the documents, I stopped wondering who this Amy bitch is. I know who she is, Dar." She stopped, looking for some acknowledgement in his expression.

"Amber, I don't know what to…"

"Stop it, Darren. Don't play dumb. You and I both know that I am Amy. It's all right there," she said, pointing to the table where all the documents were piled.

"If you didn't want me to ever find out, Darren, why did you upload that data on my palm screen and why did you keep that box of documents? I was surprised by the clothes I used to wear, though."

"Okay, Amber, you win. You're right. You're always right. You're too damn smart for your own good, you know that? You've opened a Pandora's Box."

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Chapter 15
Truth Hurts

"Those documents," Darren said, pointing to the table, "were kept only so that if you ever found a reason to question me or who you are, I'd have something to back up the story that I'd tell you. So listen to this, Amber, because I only want to tell you this once. Let it sink into your stubborn brain."

"Yes, you were Amy four years ago. My dad bought you from the labor communes for my eighteenth birthday. But I'm the one who married you, protected you, loved you. And you rejected me over and over again. Rubbed it in my face. I was your friend. Never took advantage of you. You gave me hope that it might turn into something more than friendship, then ran to your girlfriend instead. You said you didn't like guys, then ended up pregnant. You stabbed me in the heart. I could have sent you back to the commune time after time but I didn't."

"Instead, I got help. For you. For us. The 4M treatments transformed your mind. You forgot about Amy. You became Amber." He stopped for a second.

"And I thought with just a subtle name change, it would kind of blend with the old, maybe like it's just a fuzzy dream in case you ever remembered the name Amy. That way it might not make you suspicious or accidently trigger some past memory of your wild ways. Was that a bad assumption on my part?"

She didn't answer, her gaze slightly downward. But he could see her eyes moving back and forth like she was scheming something.

"We placed you in the family of one of my mother's friends, the Millers, so that you would think you came from somewhere besides the communes. And damn, I went into the military and gave my life away for two long years,

partly so you'd have time to adjust as Amber at the Millers, and also so I could move up one class level for us."

"After I got out of the military, we planted you in the night club where you supposedly met me for the first time. We used pheromone hypnosis so that you'd fall only for me that night. Continual 4M treatments."

"Who's *we*?" Amber demanded. "Fuck. Who helped you? Tell me!"

"We'll get to that," Darren immediately answered back, halting briefly. "Please, Amber, hear me out because this part is more important than that."

When she softened her aggressive expression a little, he continued, "And it worked. You became my real wife. My willing wife. That's all I ever wanted from you, Amber. We took bad girl Amy away and gave you class and a new life instead."

"You know what else? I gave you Bryan, to keep. Get it? He was supposed to be the second baby to fulfill the Marriage To Freedom obligation. He was the result of your little, wild fling dared by your girlfriend. But as Amber you wanted him, so I made sure you could keep him. We still owe one baby," he stopped and lifted his right hand to this forehead and slightly shook his head side to side.

Sighing, he continued, "Some of the Line data was supposed to be a smoke screen, a Silicon Façade if you can believe it. But it didn't work and only made you more suspicious. Some of that data about Amy was obviously real and I'm surprised it was still there. They told me the record would be cleaned…" his voice trailing off.

"You're too damn smart, Amber. You figured it out so easy," Darren snapped, moving his eyes side to side. "I'm not surprised though. I've been afraid this would happen. Brains were always your strength. And your looks. I could never resist either, from day one."

He watched her as she studied the pictures of Amy, a curious look on her face.

"You know what you told me the first day we met, Amber? You said 'I don't like guys, I'm pregnant and I'm into girls. So what are you going to do with that?' "

"Well, here's what I did with that," Darren said, pointing to the piles of documents on the table again. "I made you into Amber. And you've been so happy ever since. So what are *you* going to do with *that*, Amber?"

Amber was quiet. She had a tear running from her eye. "I can't believe I came from a labor commune." She paused several moments. "And I never knew there was another baby before Bryan that I gave up." She paused again. "I can't imagine not having Bryan," she said. "Thank you. I'd be lost without you, Darren. I'm sorry I was such a bitch in the past. I don't blame you for anything you did. Sounds like you only helped me come to my senses."

"I'm sorry I had to tell you all this, Amber."

After a long pause, she finally said, "Here's what I'm going to do with this." Still teary eyed, she came close to him and gave him a rare, I'm-so-sorry kiss. Then she suddenly took a step back, smiling through the tears, with an almost delirious look on her face.

"You know," she continued, "It always has seemed odd that whenever I think that a migraine headache might be coming on I go in immediately for a 4M treatment. Yet, I've never had a migraine headache in my life that I can ever remember. So why am I always going in for a 4M treatment?"

Darren shrugged his shoulders. "Hypnosis. And don't you dare stop the treatments or Amy will return to muck everything up in our lives."

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Chapter 16
Killer Plans

Darren and Amber didn't discuss the Amy thing any further for more than a week. Even though she seemed content with the whole truth coming out, Darren wasn't so sure what was going on in her head. He often found himself thinking, *Is she really okay with being made into Amber so that we could have a life together?*

"Do you remember why I wanted you to look at the Line data about me?" Darren asked, as they enjoyed a normal evening after work. Bryan had long since been put to bed and was sleeping peacefully.

"Do I look like a moron, Darren? Just because a girl gets upset doesn't mean she's lost her mind like some PMSing freak." She grinned. "You wanted me to see what the biggest hits were to your SIN Score so you could use your tags and comments at the news agency to try to counter them."

"And?" he asked.

"And, aside from being totally distracted by that Amy bi-otch, I did see a few things. First, you, we, still owe a baby to the State. What are we going to do about that? You said you were working on something. You're not wanting to give up our baby when it's born, are you, because I…?"

"No. Absolutely not. Don't worry about that, Amber. We're keeping our family unit intact. Isn't that what you want?"

"Yes, it's what I want. So what's your plan then?"

Taking care of the baby debt was at the heart of Darren's third plan, a topic he'd purposely been putting off even mentioning ever since the Amy thing came to life. *I guess now is as good a time as ever to get her onboard*, he

thought. “Maybe there’s someone in one of our families that would do it for us.”

Amber giggled. “Yes, please give us your baby. Really? Who in *your* family would do that? And are you also forgetting that *I* don’t have a family? The commune, remember? Did you take a stupid pill on the way home or what?”

“This is a new way of thinking for me too, Amber,” Darren offered. “And you really do have a family. For a few years, you were part of the Miller family. They’re still your family now, you know. They loved having you.”

“And?” Amber smirked.

“What about Peggy?” the Miller’s daughter. “You two were like sisters.”

“What about Peggy?” Amber demanded. “She was always kind of weird. Remember how she’s never really been into guys at all, always making those strange comments? I never even saw her date the whole time I lived with the Millers, even though guys and girls both seemed to drool over her. I used to think maybe she was into girls, and into me, so I developed this curious crush on her for a while and even fantasized about it. Which was strange because I never believed I was into girls.”

Amber paused, thinking about that last statement. “But she never seemed interested in me in that way, so I didn’t push it, though I saw her flirt with other girls more than once. Her parents would have surely kicked me out for something like that.”

“What does Peggy have to do with our situation anyway? She can’t help us. Why are you even bringing it up? You’re not really thinking, Darren. You got any other bright ideas?”

“If we knew an A-Level couple that was pregnant, maybe by accident, who didn’t really want kids…”

She cut him off, “What A-Level couple is going to help us scum? I doubt whether anyone in their right mind

would help a C- or D-Level couple with anything." She suddenly stopped and smiled, her eyes begging him to answer.

"But someone *out* of their mind might." Darren proudly replied.

Amber was sharing a light bulb moment with him and started talking fast, "I gotta hand it to you. If you and your *father* could trick me into 4M treatments as you did, then no doubt you and *I* could find someone who is pregnant, trick her into a few 4M treatments and she'd be ours to do what we wanted. Her baby would clear our debt. And afterwards, she'd be happy as clam, just like me." A devious grin spread across Amber's face.

Darren was pleasantly surprised, thinking, *Wow, that went much better than expected. Amber is totally okay with this devious plan and is probably going to think it was her idea all along. Might as well feed her ego a little*. "Amber, that's a great plan. So priority number one is to clear our baby debt. I'm glad we're doing this together because I didn't know what I was going to do. I've always feared the day I couldn't pay the baby obligation, and they'd come looking for payment somehow. You wouldn't know what the heck was going on."

After a slight pause so that he could confirm from her expression that she was no longer so spun up, Darren continued, "Okay, moving on. What else did you see in my Line data?'' he asked.

"Oh, some girlfriends, and pregnancies. Even visits to an escort service. My gosh, Darren, were you really that hard up for a date? I always thought you were so cute in your pictures from back then so I can't imagine you having trouble with the girls. The escort service hurt your Score, though. If you had gone there only once, maybe not at all. But you must have gone there often. I guess there's no point in asking why now."

She continued, “You can’t do anything directly about the escort service. But I think a ‘good marriage’ is good for the SIN score. So we should also have you flood the Line with stories about you getting married, being happily married, being a devoted father, and other stuff like that. It’s all true so it should be easy to come up with. I’ll help you.”

“The only other things that stood out in your Line data were some anti-government and anti-commune rhetorics.” Amber made a dumb look. “Really, Dar, do you think you can mouth off to the government and have no repercussions?”

“Yeah, I know. Most of that was years ago, but I guess I’ve made a few comments in recent years too. I didn’t think it would end up on the Line,” Darren said.

“You also need to flood the Line with ‘I love the government’ propaganda. Of course, this will all be lies so we’ll have to be clever in our approach,” she said. “When you’re at the news agency you can search the articles you’re uploading for anything to do with family or the government. Then post a comment using our prewritten responses, which we’ll carefully craft ahead of time. You’ll be able to post a lot of comments a lot faster that way too.”

“What would I do without you, Amber?”

“Probably slither back to the escort service. Or a girly magazine and your right hand. Or are you left-handed, Mr. Darren?”

Darren was shocked. “How do you remember saying that? Amy said that.”

“Ah, ‘partial erasure,’ dumbass. Do you honestly think my entire brain was erased by the 4M treatments? What science fiction books have you been reading lately anyway?” sneered Amber.

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Chapter 17
Peggy's Stalkers

The only daughter to A-Level parents and the youngest of three children, she was a little spoiled having been the awaited baby girl and princess after two brothers. Popular in school, her brown eyes, long dark hair, and tall and slender body had the boys interested ever since grade school.

By her senior year in high school, Peggy seemed to have it all; beauty, money, status, privilege, male and female attention, and not much competition. That is, until Amber came to live with their family.

Amber was a year younger, but looked like she should be in college already. Amber's sophisticated, exotic looks were as different from Peggy as a supermodel is from a small-town prom queen.

Peggy felt more than a ting of jealousy from day one. "Why did she come to live with us? I don't get it. And she's pregnant," she said to her mother, like it was some kind of disease. "Doesn't she have a family already?"

"No, honey. She doesn't have a family. And she's been in some kind of accident and doesn't remember anything about her past. A good friend of mine has asked for our help and, well, we're able to help so we're going to do it. So I suggest you change your attitude right now, young lady." That was Peggy's cool mom.

The 4M treatments had transformed Amy into the new Amber, who now was quite amiable. The Millers knew nothing of her past, but understood that Amber needed regular 4M checkups, and they damn well made sure she got them throughout her stay.

Amber and Peggy quickly became sisterly besties. Together, they gamely harassed every male around that they could dig their claws into, without remorse; not sex, but emotional, and sometimes physical, torment. *Those*

bastards deserve some hate, was an unspoken bond between the girls. Peggy wanted Amber more than just as a friend but could never approach that subject with her, instead always waiting for the right moment. Peggy was there when Amber gave birth to Bryan. She was there in the bar the first time Amber met Darren, and jealously watched as Amber's new relationship blossomed. And she was a reluctant bridesmaid in Amber and Darren's wedding.

Peggy was thrilled to get a call from Amber. "Amber! I haven't heard from you forever. How's my favorite girl?"

"It's so good to hear your voice, Peg. We've been so busy with Bryan, and being pregnant and both working. Sorry I haven't called in a while. I think of you all the time."

"I think of you guys all the time, too. Wish you didn't live thirty miles away. Makes it harder to just drop by and say hello," said Peggy.

"I know. We hardly go anywhere, except to work and back on the bus. We still don't own a car. What are you doing these days? Last time we talked you were telling me about this weird guy stalking you at work and…"

"Ugh, don't remind me, Amber. Yeah, he was disgusting, stalking me at my workplace. Then he found out where I live. If you had been here we would have put an end to it so fast! Remember the fun we had?! What a creepy loser prick."

She paused for a moment and made her tone softer, "Oh, if you had just been a guy, Amber, back in the day we could have a chance for something special." Peggy chuckled a little then continued "But you were like my sister, which would have made you my brother, so, weird!"

Peggy paused again, a bit longer, then quickly blurted out a bombshell, "That stalker got me pregnant. I'm due in about two months."

"Oh, my gosh, Peg." Amber was taken aback by this gushing of information. So much to process. *Peggy was into me back then?* Amber thought, *I never knew*. Amber continued, in disbelief, "How did you even hook up with someone like that? Did he rape you? Why didn't you kick his ass the way we used to?" Amber's mind started racing, *I can't believe she's pregnant.*

"He tricked me…somehow…I don't want to talk about it. It's been a real bitch, to tell you the truth. I couldn't tell my parents anything and had to act like I was happy about it. It's been a nightmare. If there was someone to share it with, like what you and Darren have...," Peggy's voice trailed off and she stopped for a moment. "So, you must be getting close too."

"Yeah," said Amber. "I'm also due in about two months. What's your due date?

"May eleventh."

"May twenty-fifth," said Amber. "That seems more than coincidence, Peg. You and I both pregnant at the same time!" she paused. "What are your plans with the baby?"

"I don't know, Amber. I just don't know if I can raise a child alone. Or if I want to even try that, especially after...," her voice trailing off again."

"Sorry about whatever happened with that man-fuck. Damn it, I wish I had been there to help you annihilate him," Amber barked.

Peggy continued, "Maybe it's just better to…"

"Don't terminate it, Peggy. But it wouldn't help your already perfect Score to just give it to the State either." *There may be a third option, aside from her keeping it*, Amber schemed.

"Oh, my parents would shit if I even thought of terminating the pregnancy. And I don't need any class boost like most of those poor remaining citizens do. Shit.

Sorry, Amber, I didn't mean it like that. I know you guys have gotten the shaft for reasons unfair…," she trailed off.

"No problem, Peg. We're doing great. Making some progress towards improving our Score too. We're happy."

"Good. Glad to hear it," Peggy answered.

"So what do you think you're going to do?"

Peggy paused, then replied, "I'm really undecided at this point. I could be a single mom, I guess. What would you do if you were me?"

"I'd come with your best friend to her pregnancy checkup, that's what. I have one scheduled for this Thursday afternoon. Any chance you could come over and go with me?" asked Amber.

"I miss you, Amber. Yes, I'd love to come."

"Groovy!" *But I'm not going to hurt her*, Amber conceded.

After chatting a bit more Amber said goodbye, then looked over at Darren, who'd been eavesdropping and smiling the whole time. They discussed the plan right away. Since Darren's father had long ago agreed to pay for whatever 4M treatments were needed for Amber, they could easily have a few treatments for Peggy charged to Amber's account and no one would question it.

The trick was going to be how to get Peggy to the clinic where the 4M treatments are done. Amber offered, "I could fake a migraine as soon as Peggy gets here and have her go with me to the 4M clinic before my prenatal checkup." But she reconsidered, thinking, *How would we get Peggy to agree to a 4M treatment just for fun? She wouldn't think it was anything special since, having A-Level parents, she could probably have treatments whenever she wanted.*

"We're going to have to knock her out somehow," said Amber. "Then we can take her into the 4M clinic and have a real treatment done on her."

"Will they actually give her a treatment without her consent?" asked Darren.

"They will if it's requested by an immediate family member, which will be you, her husband. We'll say she's Amber. If anyone asks, I'll claim to be her stepsister, Peggy, just along to help," replied a now smiling Amber. "If we have to scan her Chip before we check in, we'll just scan mine."

"Okay," Darren said, mockingly, "I can see how that could work in a cartoon. Really? But since I know your mind is beautiful and this would go seamlessly, how would we knock her out?"

"Commune Love Potion Number Three."

"What?"

"Come on, Darren. You've really never heard of the date rape drugs used in the labor communes?" She looked a little surprised. "Maybe that kind of news doesn't make it out here. It's standard practice in there."

Darren was dumbfounded. "Do you actually remember that? Or have your heard or read about it since you were Amber?"

Amber looked up and thought, *Hmm, I don't know how I know that.* Then she blurted out, "Maybe I do remember. Interesting." She paused a moment, then looked back at Darren. "Anyway, I do know this about it: It's common for males to use this date rape drug to basically have any women they want, whenever they want. It's frowned upon in the Commune as being unethical, if you can believe the government really taking a moral stand about anything. But it's used anyway, and everyone looks the other way because women are socially at the bottom and one goal of the commune is for women to make lots of babies."

"That's awful Amber. I'm sorry to hear that. So do you think you were ever rap…"

"It's possible," she cut him off. "But how would I really know? Maybe that's how I ended up pregnant with my first baby."

"I'm sorry, Amber," Darren said, squeezing her arm. After a pause, he continued, "Not trying to downplay your bad experiences, but where can we get some of this love potion?"

"Those specialty stores usually have it, selling it as a tranquilizer."

"How do you use it?" Darren asked.

"It comes in different forms. Some are designed to put in food or drinks, and that's great if you're out having drinks or something. But we can't guarantee that we can get Peggy to drink or eat anything in the short window of time we'll have with her. There's another form that is a liquid in a small tube with a roller ball. All we have to do is rub some on her skin. It only takes a small amount, which is absorbed into her body in no time. And there's a gel that could be put in her mouth."

"How do you know all this stuff?"

"Ah, it's called reading. Ever try it?" Amber sarcastically scoffed. "Let's buy every form of the potion we can find."

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Chapter 18
Peggy's Kidnapping

On Thursday afternoon, Amber got the expected call from Peggy. "Hey Amber. I'm about ten minutes away. Do you guys want to meet me in the parking lot?" Amber had made plans that they would all ride with Peggy.

"Sure, unless you want to come up to the apartment for tea first. We've got some time to kill before my appointment."

"How about we go out to a tea café and have tea and muffins or something?"

"Sounds great, Peggy. We'll be waiting downstairs."

"Do we need to take Bryan somewhere, or is he coming with us?" Peggy asked.

"Darren's mom already came by and picked him up, so we're good. Thanks."

After Amber got off the phone, Darren asked her, "How are you going to rub it on her without her noticing?"

"The same way I rub it on you without you noticing. How else do you think I manage to get you to do anything I want?" Amber laughed.

"You wouldn't!" Darren teased.

It was a warm, spring-like day as they exited the apartment building. Amber was in a good mood, thinking, *Gorgeous day, seems like a surreal omen of our future luck.*

Amber and Darren had just ambled out to the parking lot when Peggy drove up. She smiled as she stopped the car in a no-parking zone and got out to give Amber a hug, kissing her cheek. "It's so wonderful to see you," she said, gazing into Amber's eyes. "I couldn't wait to come over today. And wow, you are looking so fine. I'd say being pregnant does you good. Hey, Darren."

Amber gave her another hug. "You look great, too. I can't believe you're due about the same time I am. Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I didn't want to steal the thunder from you guys."

"Nonsense," said Amber. "It would have been awesome to share all the nausea and aches and pains together. Hey, why don't you let Darren drive and we sit in the back and visit."

"Sure," Peggy sounded cheerful.

The three of them piled in her car and Darren started driving towards the tea café. As they headed toward the city center, Peggy's speech became more garbled. Darren looked in the rear-view mirror with a frown on his face. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Everything's fine," said Amber. "Right, Peggy?"

Peggy was smiling, but not saying anything. Within a few more minutes, Peggy's eyes were closed, her head leaning on Amber's shoulder.

"Okay, driver, to the magic clinic please."

"What! But you haven't even…"

"Yes I have. While you were picking your nose back at the apartment parking lot trying to figure out how to drive Peggy's car, I was giving my old friend a nice hug. I had that little gizmo hidden in my hand as I caressed the back of her neck." Amber looked smug.

"Wow, Amber. You never cease to amaze me."

They arrived shortly at the 4M treatment clinic. After he parked the car, Darren went inside to get a wheelchair. He was back out to the car after a few minutes. They both managed to get Peggy from the back seat of the car and into the wheelchair.

Inside the clinic, they signed in by scanning Amber's hand, and waited to be called for their turn. These types of clinics typically had a doctor on staff, but you rarely saw them after your first consultation. Once you had an established identify file and funds transfer set up, you could

pretty much come in whenever you wanted, scan your hand, and order just about any treatment you wanted.

One or two technicians usually staffed the computer controlled 4M devices. The technicians did little more than confirm your account, get you comfortable on a table, select the treatment from the screen options and hit the start button.

A technician peaked through a door in the waiting room and called out, "Mrs. Darren Cross? Amber Cross?"

Darren stood up and nodded, pushing the wheelchair with Peggy through the waiting room door into a hallway leading to the 4M rooms. Amber walked behind.

"This is Amber?" the technician asked, nodding to Peggy. Peggy had her eyes open now, but was just staring into space.

"Yes. She's been complaining of a headache coming on. I think this one turned into one of the worst migraines she's had in a while," Darren said.

"Maybe you should take her to a hospital," the technician said. "She looks out of it."

Amber spoke up, "No, this happens fairly often. I think the Z19 treatment will do it for her."

The technician eyed Amber. "That's a pretty strong treatment. Who are you?"

"I'm her sister, Peggy. She's had these headaches most of her life. The doctors say there's really nothing they can do. Just get a 4M treatment when they happen. Sometimes we're able to get her to a clinic when she feels it coming on. The R-Series treatments work pretty well if we get here early. But we couldn't get here fast enough today. We've learned the hard way that the Z-Series are the only thing that works when she gets like this." Amber reached down and gently stroked Peggy's head. "You're going to be okay, Amber."

Wow, Darren thought. *What a pro. I bet she could sell a heart attack to someone and make them excited to get it.*

The technician looked bored at Amber's response and went about preparing Peggy and the 4M device.

The new generation of 4M machines used more sophisticated electromagnetic pulse technology than the earlier laser or nuclear technologies. Depending on the desired effect, the treatments ranged from in-facility sessions, to portable devices and implants.

The in-facility sessions were the most powerful, longest lasting and quickest to administer. Typically, a probe about the size of a grapefruit, supported on a telescoping lance, would be positioned within three hundred centimeters, about a foot, of the patient's head. The machine's pre-programmed algorithms would do the rest.

"Okay, Z19 treatment. Please sign here Mr. Cross," he said, handing Darren an e-doc pad. Darren quickly signed with his index finger and handled the pad back to the technician.

The treatment took a mere five minutes. Peggy was remarkably more coherent immediately following the treatment. Although she didn't know who anyone was or where she was, she looked very serene and satisfied.

Amber spoke up again, talking to Darren in a loud enough tone so the technician would overhear her. "You know, Dad thinks Amber should have one of those portable devices just to help take the edge off if she can't get in right away. What do you think, Darren?"

"It's probably time to try something like that. She's been having more trouble lately. When I'm at work she can't get to a clinic if she's having an episode."

Darren turned to the technician. "What do you have for portable devices?"

"Depends how much you want to spend."

"I'm not letting cost get in the way of giving my wife the best possible treatments. What do you recommend if price isn't an issue?"

“Definitely, the Lansing III Model. Do you want me to get one?”

“Yes, let’s do it.”

In another ten minutes they were all back in the car, along with the Lansing III. Peggy was starting to be more talkative. “So how do I know you two?”

Amber answered, “I’m your sister, Amber, and this is my husband, Darren. We’re going to help you through your difficult decision to give up your baby. You’re going to come live with us for a few months until you have your baby. We’ll help you through it.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Peggy said. “You’re good people. Thank you so much for helping me. I don’t know how to repay you.” Peggy looked at her belly, rubbing it slightly.

“I’m sure we’ll think of some way,” Darren mumbled to himself as he stomped on the accelerator.

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Chapter 19
Brainwashed

The drama at the 4M clinic had been child's play for Amber and Darren. They had essentially kidnapped Peggy using a readily available "date rape" drug. The first 4M treatment had already made her very compliant. As long as they got her intense, regular treatments, they could manipulate her in just about any way they wanted. They planned to keep her until after her baby was born. With the portable Lansing III unit as additional help, it wouldn't be too difficult to keep Peggy on a tight leash.

Unfortunately, this type of thing had become increasingly common. Much like cybercrimes had become mainstream forty years earlier, Crimes of Manipulation (COM) had become a mainstream technique for robbery, extortion, sex offenses, and controlling a spouse, employees, relatives, anyone. All you had to do was get someone a strong initial 4M treatment, assuming it was the right type of treatment, and then you could keep them under your control provided you didn't neglect the continual maintenance treatments that were vital. The most difficult part was usually getting them that initial treatment.

An even bigger challenge for Amber and Darren now was going to be in convincing Peggy's parents that she needed and wanted to stay with Amber and Darren for a few months to "sort things out." It was going to take some careful finessing so that they wouldn't be suspicious. This could be the deal breaker.

While Darren distracted Peggy with some food and drinks in the kitchen, Amber went into their bedroom and called Peggy's mom.

In the sweetest of voices, Amber said, "Hi, Mrs. Miller? It's Amber. How are you doing?"

"Oh, hello dear. Peggy was so excited you called last week and couldn't wait to get over to see you. Did she get there alright? Oh, and congratulations on your baby. I bet you two are just thrilled."

"Thanks. Yes, we are very excited. And Peggy did get here just fine. In fact, we just got back from my prenatal appointment." Amber paused. "Peggy seems pretty upset about her baby and the whole situation with the father and all."

"Yes, she's talked about what she should do with the baby. She never told us much about the baby's father though. All for the best he's out of the picture I suppose. But her father and I have had the tough love talk with her. We told her that we just can't be raising a child at our ages. We are still working too, you know. This is going to have to be entirely up to her whether to keep it or not. I don't mean to sound uncaring, but if she wants to be a mother and raise her child, she's going to have to make some serious changes in her life, and work two jobs because that's what it takes these days."

What a stroke of luck, thought Amber. *This will play quite easily right into our hands.*

"Well," said Amber, "Darren and I thought it would be good for Peggy to stay with us for a while. You know how sometimes friends can have influence when parents don't?"

Mrs. Miller laughed, "My, yes. We've seen that over and over with our Peggy."

Amber continued, "We can help her out. I had already planned to take some time off from work, starting now, until after our baby is born. Whatever Peggy decides to do, we'll help her through it. What do you think?"

"You kids are such good friends to Peggy to unselfishly sacrifice so much of your time like that. I think it's a great idea for Peggy. I just worry a little about the imposition to your lives…"

"It will be fine for us. Peggy will help out and carry her weight. It will be good for her I think," Amber said. "Plus it will be nice for me to spend time with Peggy again. It's been a while."

"I couldn't agree more. This is just what Peggy needs, I think. Well, you kids can work out the details. Be sure and let us know if there is anything we can do to help."

They talked for a few more minutes, and that was that. After the call, Amber took a deep breath, went out to the living room and looked at Darren, who was grinning, having heard the entire conversation on his ear bug. Peggy was still in the kitchen.

"Can you believe it?" Darren asked. "I thought they'd be wondering what the heck we were trying to do, calling up and saying Peggy was staying with us. Sounded like her mom pretty much said, 'that sounds great.' "

"She didn't even ask to talk to Peggy," Amber said. "Don't you think that's a little strange? Maybe her husband's running a 4M routine on her!" Amber laughed.

Having successfully completed the physical and emotional kidnapping of Peggy, Amber started her two-month leave from her job at the grocery store so she could keep tabs on Peggy at all times. That was essential for making this plan work.

Any major improvements to Amber and Darren's SIN Scores depended on them paying off the Marriage To Freedom obligation by giving over a second baby. Without that done, there was little hope of moving up any class level. The government wasn't in the business of forgiving debt.

Peggy required a 4M treatment from the portable Lansing III unit daily to keep her from asking too many questions. At first they tried to go two days between treatments, but they noticed that by the second day Peggy's intellect would grow stronger and she'd start questioning more why she was at their home and not at her parents'

place. She required an in-clinic treatment about once a week.

They tried to also have daily talks with Peggy about giving up her baby in order to keep reinforcing this idea in her mind. Early on, Peggy made quite a fuss about it, saying that she wanted to keep the baby. But Amber kept reiterating Peggy's mom's same sediment about how it is too hard for a single woman to raise a child and how her parents still had to work too much to be able to help. Slowly, as the weeks passed, Peggy began to accept the idea that giving the baby up would be best. But she still had concerns.

"Who's going to adopt my baby?" she would ask. "I hope some nice, young, A-Level couple is waiting to adopt my baby." This posed another challenge for Amber and Darren. They'd have to make sure Peggy was 4M dosed pretty good the day of her delivery so she wouldn't be saying such things.

Arrangements were already completed to give the baby to the State Commune System. Amber had recently applied to a State office posing as Peggy, and signed the documents for the State "adoption." She also picked out a nearby State sanctioned birthing clinic and signed up for a "curtain delivery" so that Peggy wouldn't even see the baby.

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Chapter 20
Surprise Visit

While they constantly groomed Peggy for giving up her child, they continued to work their other plans for improving their Scores. At the news agency job, Darren took every opportunity to post comments, that Amber had pre-written, on any article he uploaded that was remotely related to family life or government policies.

Whenever he and Amber were at home, they took turns wearing the Conversation Band that he had bought from his mechanic friend. They tried to sleep with their right hands in close proximity so they both could benefit from the Conversation Band at night.

The last two months of the girls' pregnancies seemed to drag on, especially with the endless monitoring of Peggy. Her due date was two weeks before Amber's. Amber was hoping that Peggy really would have her baby first so everything could be finalized. The plan was for Peggy to be returned home before Amber's baby came. Amber worried that if Peggy saw another baby so soon after giving up her own baby, it would cause some trouble.

About a week before Peggy's delivery date, her parents showed up one afternoon at Amber and Darren's apartment without warning. Amber was just starting to give Peggy a 4M treatment in a back bedroom when the doorbell rang.

Darren stuck his head in the bedroom where Amber was setting up the 4M machine with Peggy laying down on the bed. "You expecting anyone, Amber?" She shook her head. Darren went back to the front room and opened the door, "Mr. and Mrs. Miller. Good to see you."

He told them to sit down, "Peggy and Amber are both just resting. I don't think they're asleep." Darren nervously went back to the room where Peggy and Amber

were. Sticking his head in the door, he whispered and pointed toward the front room, "Her parents are here!"

Amber was startled. The treatment on the portable unit was not as intense or as fast as the clinic treatments. They didn't have twenty minutes, so the treatment would have to wait.

"Your parents are here for a visit, Peg," she said. "They've probably come to see how you've been doing and also find out what your plans are with the baby. Remember what we've been talking about. Let's not upset your parents with talk of keeping your baby."

Peggy looked at Amber as she helped her up from the bed. "I know Amber. It's just hard, but I'm glad I have your support."

"You have your parents' support too."

As Peggy walked out into the living room, her parents got up and rushed over to see her, giving her hugs.

"You're looking great, Peggy," her mother said. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling pretty good, except…"

"What it is, honey?"

"I know it's best that I give up the baby, but it's a difficult choice. What you do think?"

Peggy's mother continued, "I know it's a hard thing for a mother to give up her baby. But it's even harder to try to support a baby by yourself. I had to give up a baby before I met your father. Same kind of situation. I thought I was in love with this guy, but after I got pregnant, he vanished. There was no way to raise a child on my own. It's even worse today."

"I never knew that, mom. Why haven't you ever told me this before?"

"I didn't see any reason for you to know until now. Plus," Mrs. Miller paused, "I gave it up to the State. I've always been ashamed of that. I've always wondered what kind of life she's had, and how it may have been different if

I could have found a regular family. But things were different back then…" She paused again.

"She?" asked Peggy. "Don't you know what happens to…"

"Now, Peggy," Mr. Miller interrupted. "Let's not make your mother upset. She did the only thing she could at that age and under her circumstances at the time."

Mrs. Miller squeezed Peggy's arm. "I'm sure you have a nice family lined up to adopt your baby by now anyway, so I think you're making a really a good choice, for you and the baby." Mrs. Miller turned and looked at her husband and then at Darren and Amber, as if asking them to agree.

"Your mother is right, honey," Mr. Miller said reassuringly. "Darren, Amber, have you been able to help Peggy line up anything in the way of a family adoption?"

They all stared at Darren and Amber, who for once said nothing.

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Chapter 21
Back Pedal

"Oh, we met the nicest couple three weeks ago," Amber finally started. "Remember them, Peggy?" Without giving Peggy a chance to respond she immediately continued. "David and Marcie? They're in their early thirties."

Amber turned towards Mr. and Mrs. Miller. "He's a dentist and she's a hair stylist. They're B-Level and have money. She wants to quit working when the adoption is complete so she can be a full-time stay-at-home mom. It's all set up, nothing more to do but wait for the baby to come." Amber smiled.

What a great liar, Darren thought as he marveled at Amber's wit.

"That sounds wonderful," Mrs. Miller said. Turning to Peggy she continued, "See, honey, I knew this decision was right for everyone involved." She turned back to Darren and Amber. "Thanks so much for being there for Peggy. I hope she appreciates all you've done for her."

Peggy sat there looking bewildered. She tried to look appreciative and smiled slightly, saying, "Yes, thank you guys. You've done a lot for me." She paused for a moment. "But I don't really remember David and Marcie." She paused for another few seconds and continued, "But maybe the treatments have made me a little forgetful."

"What treatments?" said Mr. Miller, now looking a little confused.

Amber spoke up before anybody could say anything else. "Nothing out of the ordinary, really. If we notice that Peggy is feeling a little anxious, we can give her a small 4M dose. Her doctor prescribed it and asked us to help out after he'd seen her appear so anxious during the first few

visits. He sent us home with a portable unit so we wouldn't have to come in all the time."

"Okay, that's makes sense," Mr. Miller replied. "So how are you feeling, Peggy? Is everything alright?"

Amber and Darren weren't sure if he was just sincerely asking her, or probing for some hint of suspicious doings. Amber nervously squeezed Darren's hand as they looked at Peggy. Peggy could easily unravel their entire plan right now if she said something stupid.

"What are you getting at, dear?" Mrs. Miller said to her husband. "It's obvious how good they're taking care of Peggy. Look how great she looks. She could call us anytime if things weren't going well." Turning to Peggy she asked, "You have your palm screen handy at all times, right?"

Peggy began looking around for her purse. "Yes, it should be in my purse."

"Which is in your room, Peg. Let me grab it for you." Amber quickly walked back to Peggy's room and reached for her purse which was up in the closet where she and Darren had put it. Peggy's palm screen was kept in Amber's purse at all times so she could screen all calls and make calls on behalf of Peggy. Amber quickly put Peggy's palm screen into the purse and returned to the front room with it.

"Here you go," she said as she handed the purse to Peggy.

Peggy opened her purse the saw the palm screen. "Yep, it's always right here in my purse."

"I'd like to see Peggy's 4M device," said Mr. Miller.

"Really!" said Mrs. Miller to her husband. "Is that necessary? You're just going to upset everyone with your prying, that's what."

Mr. Miller looked embarrassed and said, "Oh, I didn't mean it like that, honey. I was just curious what the technology looked like today, that's all. I knew they were

making home devices for a while, but the last ones I'd seen were as big as a nightstand."

Darren spoke up, "No problem, Mr. Miller. Let's go have a look."

As Darren and Mr. Miller went to the back room to inspect the 4M machine, Peggy spoke to her mother. "Amber and Darren are taking good care of me, mom. I'm just really scared about having my baby and how I'm going to feel giving it up for adoption."

"I know, dear. It's hard. You're just going to have to trust that this is really best for all. Someday not too far off from now you'll see that. But it's understandable that you're nervous about it now." Mrs. Miller continued, "We love you and support your decision. As soon as this is all over, we want you to come back home and we'll take care of you until you can get on your feet again." She gave Peggy a hug.

Peggy looked a little relieved. "I'm glad you guys are there for me too."

A few minutes later Darren and Mr. Miller came back from looking at the 4M device. Mr. Miller was excitedly babbling. "Wow, that is some amazing technology." Looking over to Mrs. Miller he continued, "Honey, that thing is small enough to carry under your arm. And it can run off your vehicle too. Pretty handy for long trips, or being stranded in traffic, or…"

Mrs. Miller cut him off, "Honey, why are you so interested in that bloody thing? I don't get it." She looked at Amber and Darren. "It must be a guy thing." Looking back at Mr. Miller, she said, "You certainly have the money so if you want to buy one of those contraptions, for goodness sake, go right ahead."

For goodness sake is right, Mr. Miller was thinking. He was already scheming and planning how he could incorporate a Lansing III portable 4M machine into the car, conspicuously hidden so that Mrs. Miller would

nonchalantly get a dose to his choosing whenever they were in the car. It would sure cut down on those long babbling sessions whenever they traveled and all but eliminate any arguments about how he was driving.

Turns out, Mr. Miller wasn't being suspicious about Darren and Amber's treatment of Peggy at all. He really was interested in that blooming machine.

Amber's joking weeks before about Mr. Miller had been right on the mark. Mr. Miller already had a portable unit secretly hidden in their bedroom so at nighttime he could administer a subtle 4M treatment to his wife while she sleep or whenever she napped. It kept her right in check, non-argumentative, and happy as a clam. But traveling had always been a problem. Not anymore.

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Chapter 22
Peg Knows

When Mr. and Mrs. Miller finally left to go home, Darren and Amber looked at each other and smiled. *What a relief*, Darren assumed. All had gone well, even much better than expected considering that they had no time to prepare or rehearse their stories for a meeting with Peggy's parents like that.

"Okay, Peg," Amber started, "time to get back to that treatment. We don't want to disappoint the doctor, or your parents. The treatments do make you feel better, don't they?"

Peggy nodded.

"Good," said Amber. She helped Peggy get comfortable on her bed, got the machine in place, and started the routine. "Just relax now, Peggy. Take a little nap if you want." Amber turned off the lights in the room. The curtains were already closed so there was only a small amount of light seeping into the room through the curtains.

Before leaving the room, Amber removed the palm screen from Peggy's purse and held it hidden in her hand. After closing the door to Peggy's room, Amber went out to the front room and sat beside Darren on the sofa. Bryan had been napping in their bedroom since before the Millers came and was still quietly sleeping. He napped a lot. They finally had a few minutes to talk.

"That was close," whispered Darren.

"Why do you say that?" asked Amber. "I thought I answered all their questions perfectly."

"You did. But Peggy could have totally messed things up if she had opened her big mouth and said some of the things she's blurted out to us in the past."

Amber thought for a moment. "Yeah, she can be a real pill at times. I guess we're lucky this wasn't one of those times. The treatments really seem to help her stay stable."

After talking for several more minutes, Amber went to check on Peggy, and found her standing beside the bed holding the 4M machine's plug in her hand. She'd unplugged it from the wall.

"What are you doing, Peggy?"

Peggy spun around and faced Amber. "I know what you and Darren are up to," she said. "You're giving me 4M treatments so you can make me give up my baby. Just because you think you have my mom and dad on your side doesn't mean it's going to work. Now where is my purse? I'm going home."

"Darren," Amber shouted. Darren was at the room in a few seconds. "Keep her here," she whispered to him as she walked past him out of the room, "while I grab some love potion." *We're going to have to take her to the clinic for a strong treatment this time*, she thought.

Looking at Peggy, Darren tried to have a soothing tone while he asked, "What's wrong, Peggy?"

"What's wrong is this: You guys are keeping me here against my will. I had no idea what you were up to until I began to wonder about why you had this machine and why you were giving me doses every day. So last week I decided to unplug it after you left the room, then plug it right back in so you wouldn't know. I'd pretend to nap."

She continued, as Amber came back into the room. "After about four or five days without treatment my head started to get clearer. And I wondered why you were doing this to me. I've overheard you talking at times and I think I've finally figured it out. You want to use my baby for the Class Advance program or something like that." She was getting more agitated now, her voice escalating higher and louder. "Why don't you use your baby for that, Amber?

You don't really have an adopting family lined up, do you? Why don't…"

At that moment, Amber pushed Peggy down hard onto the bed and then crawled on top of her. It looked pretty comical considering they were both eight months' pregnant. Peggy thrashed around and tried to hit Amber. When Peggy started to scream, Amber slapped her hard across the face. Peggy tried to scream again and Amber slapped her hard again. Peggy stopped screaming and started crying. "Why? Amber, why?"

"Hold her arms," Amber whispered to Darren. Straddling on top of Peggy, with one hand squeezing her face and holding her jaw open, Amber used her other hand to place a finger with some date rape gel on it into Peggy's mouth, rubbing it inside her cheek where Peggy could not bite down on her finger.

Then she held Peggy's jaw closed. Peggy continued to thrash and moan. "Peggy, you can't raise a baby. This is best for everyone. We're just trying to help you so why do you keep fighting it?"

Within thirty seconds, Peggy was knocked out. Amber got off her and said to Darren, "I gotta wash this off my hands or I'll be next to drop."

As Amber left the room, Darren got the 4M machine in place and started a treatment routine again. This time, Peggy wouldn't be pulling any plugs. And from now on, they'd have to watch her like a hawk.

After a few minutes, Amber returned to the room. "Bryan slept through the commotion." It's funny how Bryan seemed to always be sleeping, no doubt a result of the 4M treatments that Amber had been administering most of his life. Looking at Peggy, she said, "When she revives enough to walk, we're going to have to take her in for a stronger treatment at the clinic. We should do clinic treatments more often, too. We'll have to take shifts

watching her twenty-four-seven until the baby comes. Let's set up a camera in her room. She's on to us."

Returning to the front room, Darren and Amber sat down on the sofa again. Darren looked over at Amber. "Do you still think we're doing the right thing?" he asked.

Amber looked down at her belly and rubbed it gently. "Part of me feels sorry for her. I really do feel for how hard it must be to have a baby then give it up. It would be like me, right now, having to deal with giving up our baby,"

"But another part of me knows that Peggy can't possibly raise a baby on her own. She'd have a hard enough time just supporting herself, let alone a baby too. And I've gotten the impression that her parents really don't want to take on any of that responsibility either. So, it really is best for all." Amber paused. "She's not going to go psycho and fuck this up for us." She looked unsure of what she just said.

"It's one thing to help her give up her baby to an adopting family," Darren continued. "But to give her 4M treatments and trick her into a curtain delivery and State handover? Have we gone too far?"

Amber didn't reply.

"Is she going to remember you slapping her?" Darren asked.

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Chapter 23
Bread's Done

The Peggy uproar had been calmed, thanks to the love potion, portable 4M treatment, and a follow up strong treatment at a clinic once Peggy revived later that evening. A technician at the clinic asked them, "Why is one side of her face so red?"

Amber was quick to respond. "She was having a panic attack and ended up falling and hitting the side of her head on our kitchen table. Good thing we were right there when it happened. We got an ice pack on it right away. Otherwise, I think it would look a lot worse now."

By the next day, Peggy had bruises on the side of her face where Amber had slapped her. But because she was captive in Amber's apartment, no one could see the abuse.

Three days after the Peggy incident, as Darren and Amber finished a home 4M treatment on her just before lunch time, Peggy suddenly cried out in pain. "I think I'm in labor."

"Are you sure?" asked Amber. "Maybe it's just false labor." They watched Peggy for a while and timed the contractions. They were three minutes apart already. Maybe she'd been in labor a while and the recent stronger 4M treatments made her not feel as much.

Amber called ahead to the birthing clinic as they prepared to leave the house. Since she'd already made arrangements for the State "adoption," the clinic was pre-authorized to administer the curtain delivery and take immediate custody of the baby until the actual transport to the labor commune. Usually, the State came for the baby within hours.

This was the moment they'd planned for months, the last step, having the baby. Then it would be over. Their debt paid. Their Score improved. A step up in class. A few days of recoup, then ship Peggy back to her parents.

And then life back to normal, or their new normal. They could finally start looking for a house to purchase.

Taking Peggy's car, they dropped a sleeping Bryan off at Darren's parents' house and continued to the birthing clinic. Peggy cried out in the back seat. "Oh, my God, hurry up," she yelled. Amber sat beside Peggy in the back seat and held her hand. "It's going to be alright."

At the clinic, Amber checked Peggy in under the name of Amber Cross, a departure from the plans she and Darren had made. "Why are you doing that?" Darren whispered. "I thought you already forged the State adoption documents as Peggy, so why not check her in as Peggy and let her baby go off smoothly to the State?"

"Because," Amber scolded, "after the surprises that have happened the past few days with Peggy's sudden awareness, I'm nervous about her blowing it for us right at the end. What if she has some clarity of mind moment on the delivery table and changes her mind about the State adoption and ruins it for us? This way, if she's checked in as Amber, the one giving up her baby, and has some change of heart on the delivery table, then I'll just come back later and change the adoption back to the State. Once Peggy delivers the baby and we get her out of here later tonight, that baby is legally mine," Amber said.

"What about when you have our baby in a few weeks? Won't there be a record of two births under your name?"

"No, because we'll go to a different birthing clinic and I'll use a different name."

Darren shrugged and said, "Guess you've thought it through already." But he wasn't so sure this was better than their original plan, and thought, *Is Amber thinking logically now? Maybe the hormones are messing with her mind.*

What they hadn't planned on, or even anticipated, was that Peggy's SIN Chip transmitted her vitals to a database. When her labor started, a computer program automatically

sent a notification to her parents, listed as her immediate family, that she was in labor.

Normally, what would follow that first auto-notification, is that when the woman went to a hospital or clinic in labor, her SIN Chip would be scanned upon admission there, her location identified, and another notification would be sent to the closest family members, telling them which clinic she was in.

But Amber had purposely scanned her own hand at the clinic so that the system would think Peggy was Amber. Since Amber wasn't actually in labor, the computer algorithm saw her clinic admission as routine and no further notifications were made to anyone.

In the case of Peggy's parents, they had been notified that Peggy was in labor, but there was no follow up notification as to where she was. It didn't matter, though, because Mrs. Miller immediately called Peggy.

Amber had Peggy's palm screen and purposely didn't answer it. Mrs. Miller then called Amber's palm screen. Amber ignored that call too.

Then Mr. Miller tried calling both of them. They ignored the calls. Mrs. Miller tried both again. Amber ignored the call to Peggy's palm screen again, but finally answered hers.

"Hello?" Amber said.

"Hi, Amber. This is Mrs. Miller. We've been trying to call both of you. We received a notification that Peggy was in labor. Is she at a hospital yet?"

Shit, thought Amber. *How in the heck did they find out already?* She and Darren hadn't talked about what to do in this situation, so Amber had to think fast.

"No, she's still at home. Everything is fine. She thought she might be starting labor so we went to a clinic nearest the apartment right away. They told us it was false labor so we came back home."

"Okay, that's a relief," said Mrs. Miller. It's a half hour drive so at least we won't miss it. What hospital will she be at?"

Amber thought for a moment. "The clinic told us it could be tomorrow or even a few days before actual labor begins. When it does, we were planning to go Forest View Clinic."

"Forest View. Got it. Please let us know right away when she's in labor and we'll come right over," said Mrs. Miller. "Why didn't Peggy answer her palm screen? We tried calling several times."

"Peggy's tired, poor thing. After the excitement of earlier today she decided to take a nap. She said after she laid down the pains went away. So maybe it was just gas pressure or something." That seemed to satisfy Mrs. Miller's curiosity for the moment.

Within an hour Peggy's labor had progressed to the point of contractions being just a minute apart. With any luck, she'd have the baby within a few hours before the Millers knew anything.

Then crap hit the fan.

One of the nurses checking Peggy's contraction intervals and her chart screen noticed something. "Hmm, there seems to be something missing. Usually when someone goes into labor, the vitals are automatically uploaded by their Chip so that when they're admitted to the clinic, that information shows up immediately on their chart and we know how long they've been in labor and other important data. All that data is missing."

Before Amber could say anything, the nurse pulled a small scanner out of her pocket and swiped it across Peggy's right hand. She looked back at the chart screen, which was actually Amber's chart since she was the one that scanned her own hand at the admission room.

"It's not updating," the nurse said. And it wasn't going to either, since there was no correlation between

Peggy's Chip and Amber's chart data. "Must be a bad Chip or something." The nurse didn't seem concerned and keep doing her routines.

Darren looked at Amber and raised his eyebrows. "Close call," he mouthed. What they had no way of knowing, however, was that by scanning Peggy's hand as the nurse had just done, her location was now known in the Line database, and an auto- notification was sent to Peggy's parents that she was at Forest View Clinic, in Delivery Room 45.

Peggy's palm screen immediately rang. It was her mom calling. Amber answered it right away.

"Peggy?"

"No, this is Amber. Peggy is taking a warm bath."

"Amber, we just received a notification that Peggy was at Forest View Clinic, in Delivery Room 45."

Amber felt her cheeks flushing red. *How could they possibly know already…oh, that damn nurse*, she thought.

"Yes, that's correct. When she woke up from her nap and got up, she thought she had another contraction. So we timed them and they were seven or eight minutes apart. We thought to be safe we'd go ahead and come to the clinic early. Darren has to work later this evening so I didn't want to have to get her here later by myself," Amber reported.

She continued, "I was going to call you but the doctor told us it might be this evening or even tomorrow before labor might begin. I didn't want you to have to sit around doing nothing so I thought we'd wait until the contractions were a lot closer together."

"Well," said Mrs. Miller, "we want to be there for her so we're leaving now to come over there. We should be there in about thirty minutes."

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Chapter 24
Hits The Fan Again

Darren had a look of deep concern, as he and Amber stood in the hallway outside of Peggy's delivery room. His voice sounded agitated. "What are we going to do? As soon as they get here they're going to find out that their daughter is admitted to the birthing clinic as Amber Cross. Then, with the 'curtain delivery' situation, they'll surely be asking questions…"

"I'm going to see if they can induce the birth right now," Amber said. Darren watched as his feisty, nearly nine-month pregnant wife quickly hustled down the hall to the nurses' station. She was beautiful, and smart, and possibly in big trouble. What did he let them get themselves into? *Man I wish we never agreed to trick Peggy*, he thought.

Down the hallway, Darren could see Amber talking with a nurse. Amber was quite animated, gesturing with her hands and pointing down towards Peggy's room. In a few moments, Amber threw up her hands in frustration and, by the look on her face as she walked back towards Darren, he could tell that the nurse was not going to go along with her request.

When Amber got to the door of Peggy's room, she stopped and looked at Darren. "Desperate times call for desperate measures," she said. Darren looked puzzled as Amber went into the room and walked over to the bed that Peggy was lying in. Reaching into her purse, Amber grabbed the love potion gel and squeezed some onto a finger.

Leaning over to Peggy and touching her forehead with the other hand, Amber said in a soothing tone, "How are we doing, Peg? Are you hanging in there? Your baby will

be here soon and this nightmare will be over. I know this has been hard for you, but we're here for you."

Peggy was still a bit dazed by the previous three days of strong 4M treatments so she didn't say much. As she looked up at Amber and started to answer, Amber swiped the gel inside Peggy's mouth on her cheek and then held her mouth shut.

Peggy started to struggle and protest, but Amber held tight on her mouth while Darren held down Peggy's arms. In about twenty seconds, Peggy started to fade and Amber let up.

Amber then did something very surprising and gruesome, even to Darren. She peeled back the gown covering Peggy's belly and put her hands on Peggy, feeling where the baby was. She looked over at Darren and pointed to a spot on Peggy's belly, "Here's where the baby is, and here's its head. Just making sure you see this, Dar, because I want you to understand that I'm not trying to hurt the baby, just get a quicker delivery."

Then Amber promptly and swiftly struck Peggy's belly hard with the edge of her hand, away from the baby's head and body. It was one clean martial arts type hit, immediately making Darren recall how Amy had been so into karate. As soon as she did this, several of the monitors started beeping. With that, Amber quickly moved out into the hall and shouted to the nurses' station, "Amber fainted and it looks like the baby's in distress. Hurry!"

Within seconds, a nurse and technician were running towards Peggy's room. When they got there, they quickly scanned the mother and baby's vital signs and then the nurse said, "We've got to get this baby out now. Call two more techs."

Fifty years earlier, if a baby needed to be taken out of the mother, the routine procedure was called a cesarean section, where they would cut through the belly into the woman's uterus and remove the baby. The uterus, muscles

and other layers would be sewn up afterwards. It was a fairly quick procedure, but very crude and overkill. Baby extraction methods had changed drastically since then.

There was no time to waste. Using a tool known as Spatial Sector Separator (3S Tool) and a new drug to get the cervix and other muscles and skin to relax and rapidly stretch, the nurse and two technicians began the seven-minute process of extracting the baby.

Mr. and Mrs. Miller were about fifteen minutes away. "I hope she can hold out until after we get there," said an escalating Mrs. Miller. "I want us to be there for our daughter. I can't imagine how hard this must be for her. We should have insisted that she come home a few weeks before this so we could help her at the end of her pregnancy. I've begun to have second-thoughts about that Amber." As she babbled on, Mr. Miller was thinking, *Man I wish that Lansing III was already installed in the car, so she'd calm down and shut up.*

There was no need to put up a curtain for the governmental curtain delivery, as Peggy was out cold. Her blood pressure had dropped, as had her heart and respiratory rates. The baby had an increased heart rate and other signs of distress, though not likely life threatening.

Since Peggy was unconscious, they didn't need to use local anesthesia or other sedatives to make the 3S device less painful or traumatic. With swift precision, the team had the baby out in six and a half minutes, a record for them. Peggy had only minor tearing and bleeding.

The baby was quickly deemed healthy and carried off to the State's locked and guarded holding nursery. Peggy was cleaned up in five minutes and taken to the recovery ward.

Amber looked at Darren in disbelief as they slowly strolled down the hall from the delivery room towards the recovery ward. "Can you believe what just happened?" she whispered. "I think we got away with it."

Darren looked dumbfounded. What he had seen over the past week reminded him so much of…Amy. All the lies, cold hearted meanness, and hitting. That wasn't the Amber he knew. "No, I can't believe it, Amber. I'm still in shock over what I saw you do to Peggy. I can't believe you…jabbed her in the belly like that."

"Darren, don't be such a puss. I did what had to be done. Mother and baby are both fine—no harm, no foul. What are you whining about it like a schoolgirl? We did it. Don't you get it?"

After a short pause, he replied, "You're sounding like Amy used to sound."

"Maybe that's because I've been unplugging my portable 4M machine too. Ever think maybe I was sick of always being nice Amber girl?" Amber grinned slyly, but it was hard to tell if she was joking. Darren didn't ask.

"And that reminds me," a curious looking Amber now demanded, "who was it that helped you first do a 4M number on me?"

Darren looked sheepish. "My mom."

"Ha, I always thought she had more balls than your father," Amber announced, laughing out loud.

As they left the delivery ward hallway and turned toward the elevators, Mr. and Mrs. Miller were just coming out of an elevator, when they spotted Darren and Amber. Rushing over to them, they immediately asked where Peggy's room was.

"They moved her to the recovery ward," Darren said. Amber added, "She had a very successful delivery, faster than anyone thought. The baby is in the custody of the adopting family, and Peggy's already recovering nicely."

The Miller's looked angry. Mrs. Miller glared at Amber. "You should have called us sooner and not gave us the runaround like you did. It really pisses me off, Amber. It makes me wonder what kind of friend you've really been

to Peggy the past two months. What will Peggy tell us? Hmm?"

Mrs. Miller sounded like she'd pulled the plug on her 4M treatments too. Or maybe it was PMS, or "the change." Either way, she was not the jovial Mrs. Miller that everyone adored.

Darren thought about getting Amber to leave the clinic with him that very minute. He was tired of the drama and didn't want another scene in Peggy's recovery room. But until they were sure everything was really over, until the Millers went home or left the clinic with Peggy to take her home, they'd never sleep tonight wondering about this last piece of closure.

As the four of them entered Peggy's recovery room, she was just beginning to open her eyes. A nurse was in the room and saw them walk in. "Ah, you must be her family."

"We're her parents," Mr. Miller stated.

"Yes, well, you can be proud of Amber. She did great today. She had a very successful delivery."

"Amber?" the Millers both said together.

As they walked over to Peggy's bed, they could see numerous bruises on the left side of her face. She had a terror stricken look on her face, though she was unable to talk yet. Her hands were shaking, and tears were running down her cheeks.

"Okay, something isn't right here," said Mr. Miller. "First of all, this is our daughter, Peggy. And second, why is she so beat up looking? Why can't she talk? Why is she looking at us like that? And I guess the big question is, where in the hell is her baby?

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Chapter 25
Near Success

"The baby's fine," said the nurse. "It's up in the State nursery just like Amber requested."

"No, Peggy actually requested it," Amber said, looking at the nurse. "Please check the record. Peggy Miller. That's what she wanted."

Amber looked at the Millers. "Peggy signed the State adoption documents several weeks ago. She told me that's what she wanted. She thought it would help her Score the most." Amber knew that was dumb statement to blurt out; Peggy's score was already perfect. *Why the fuck did I say that?* she thought.

The nurse was looking at adoption records on her palm screen. She projected the records into the room so everyone could see. "Yes, the records show that Peggy Miller requested a State adoption. Everything looks good here."

"But why did you call her Amber?" asked Mrs. Miller.

Amber replied, "When we checked in, the scanner must have picked up my Chip since we were close together. I had to help her in because she was having contractions. Maybe the system was confused since I'm pregnant too and it somehow read my Chip instead of Peggy's."

"It happens," said the nurse.

"So, what happened to her face?" asked Mr. Miller.

"I was helping her into the bathroom a few days ago because she said she was lightheaded," said Amber. "When we got into the bathroom, she fainted. I couldn't hold her up and she hit her head on the sink."

"Sounds like everyone has an answer for everything," scoffed Mr. Miller. "So why is Peggy so upset then? Shouldn't she be relieved that all this is behind her now?"

The nurse replied, “Peggy’s been through a lot today, Mr. Miller. And she’s been through a lot emotionally for some time dealing with this decision. It’s not uncommon at all for new mothers to be upset after giving birth. And especially if a baby adoption is involved. I’d say Peggy is acting pretty normal under the circumstances.”

“Answers for everything…” Mr. Miller said, his voice trailing off as he turned towards Peggy’s bed and walked over to her. Mrs. Miller had been standing beside Peggy, stroking her hair and gently talking to her. Mr. Miller touched Peggy’s arm. “You okay, honey?”

Peggy nodded. “What happened?” she asked.

Darren and Amber came over to Peggy’s bed. Amber took Peggy’s hand and held it. “You passed out, Peg. But everything is okay now. You had your baby and it’s fine. It’s with the adopting agency.”

Mrs. Miller eyed Amber with a scolding look and asked, “Why did you guys lie about the adopting family, when Peggy knew all along the baby was going to the State?”

Amber pondered for a moment. “We thought you’d be upset by her giving the baby to the State system, especially after the story you told her.”

Mr. Miller rolled his eyes. *More answers*, he thought.

“Well, I want to hear what Peggy has to say about all this,” said Mrs. Miller. “Honey, are you alert now? Can you tell us what you remember?”

“I’m just so tired, mom. Right now all I remember is Amber and Darren helping me get to the clinic and to the delivery room. Then I must have blacked out. Are you sure my baby is alright?”

The nurse had been standing nearby and responded, “Yes, Peggy, your baby is just fine. You need to get some rest now.” Looking at the others, she continued, “Maybe it’s best if everyone gives Peggy a little break.”

When they were all outside the room in the hallway, Mrs. Miller said to Amber and Darren, “We’re going to take Peggy straight home from the clinic tonight. Please go get all her things from your apartment, put them in her car and bring it back here to the clinic. I’ll be driving it home and Peggy will ride with her father. I guess I should say thank you for all your help. Now we’ll take it from here.”

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Chapter 26
This Could Be Paradise

Amber and Darren were relieved that things at the Forest View Clinic were apparently ending so cleanly without any additional ugly scenes. But they felt turmoil as they drove Peggy's car back to their apartment flat, hardly talking at all.

They did as Mrs. Miller requested, returning to the clinic with Peggy's car and belongings, then took public transit back to their apartment. The Millers, all of them, were probably already heading home by now. Bryan had been left earlier with Darren's parents for the night, a common occurrence.

Amber and Darren were finally alone at home and could reassess all that had happened and try to determine whether their plan had paid off. The HID was playing a movie at medium volume.

"Well, this is finally what we've been waiting for," Darren said, lowering his voice. "With our baby debt paid, months of wearing the Conversation Band, and uploading all of those endless comments and tags at the news agency to help our Records, let's see where we're at."

With both fear and extreme excitement, they checked their SIN Scores using Darren's palm screen. No changes. Nothing. "Did something go wrong?" asked Amber. The couple discussed all the twists of the past few days. "Did Peggy somehow blow it for us?" Amber wondered out loud, as she thought, *did she blab everything to her parents?* They were starting to get very nervous.

After several hours of worry and pacing around their apartment, continually re-checking their Scores, which hadn't been updated, they finally collapsed on the sofa. Amber looked weary. "I hope this fucking baby comes soon. I'm so sick of this shit," Amber said, sounding

disgusted. Darren looked surprised by her choice of words. Holding hands while staring at the HID, not talking any further, they both drifted to sleep on the sofa.

Suddenly, waking up with a terrorized look on his face and not knowing how long he'd been napping, Darren quickly pulled out his palm screen. He projected their Scores and yelled out, "Holy shit, Amber, look at this!" She immediately awoke with a panicked look on her face. "What the fuck, Darren?" she said. They both stared in disbelief at Darren's screen projection. "Look! We moved up to B-Level, Amber. Do you know what this means?"

Darren stood up and yelled, "Holy crap!" They were stoked. He paced around the room. "Can you believe it? We can have so many more opportunities now. Shit! Just in time for our baby too."

Amber was smiling now with a wide grin, shaking her head back and forth. "I *can't* believe it. Looks like we really pulled it off." She stood up and they hugged and kissed. "If I wasn't almost nine months pregnant I'd say let's open a bottle of wine, but that can wait a week or two. Hell, go ahead and open one for you, Darren. Thank you, my hero." They kissed some more and savored the moment.

Over the next few days, Amber and Darren continued to quietly celebrate and make plans for their new future together. They re-checked their Scores throughout each day, as if to pinch themselves to make sure it wasn't just a dream. And they hadn't heard a peep from the Millers either.

The following week, with Amber's baby due at any time, Amber and Darren were convinced that their new class status was cemented enough to inquire about home loan possibilities. On their way towards the brass trimmed glass doors at the local bank branch, they spotted Amber's friends, Sinead and Miranda, who had just left and were walking away towards a side parking lot.

"Hey, you two," Amber yelled cheerfully, quickly eyeing them up and down as they slowly spun around towards her. "What are you gorgeous girls doing here?"

"We just got approved for a home loan," Sinead said, smiling.

Miranda was beaming too, her arm now around Sinead's waist. "Our new life is finally starting to happen," Miranda added, looking at Sinead and squeezing her close. Miranda gave Sinead an affectionate kiss on the lips, then looked playfully at Amber, as if daring some type of jealous reaction.

"Good for you," Amber replied, her voice rising slightly, as if nervous. "We're so happy for you. Seems like a lucky day for all of us. Darren and I are applying for a home loan today too, which we expect will be approved. Finally, we're starting to live *our* dreams too."

"Oh wow, when is your baby due, Amby?" Sinead nearly shouted, grinning as she placed her hand on Amber's baby belly. Gazing into Amber's attractive blue eyes, Sinead then slowly slid her hand downward, her long, elegant fingers leading the way, around to the underside of Amber's belly.

"Any day now," Amber blushed, a little confused but liking the feel of Sinead's hand so close. *Amby?* Amber mused, *you don't need to hint, Sinead! I remember you quite well, from when I was your Amy girl.* Amber gazed affectionately into Sinead's sexy emerald eyes.

Amber had been fantasizing about Sinead again for months. Darren's little box from the storage room had triggered a lot of memories, as did pulling the plug on the 4M treatments that Darren thought she was continuing to get.

She longed to fully become Amy again and get Sinead back from Miranda. She didn't even have to steal her back. Miranda had been Amber's good friend from back in the Amy days. Miranda had been coached by Amber a few

months ago on how to win over Sinead. And although Miranda wasn't really into Sinead, she had agreed to be a girlfriend place-keeper for Amber until Amber's grand plan could be worked out.

As Amber and Darren walked into the bank lobby, her mind started racing, *I just can't get over how Darren thought he could manipulate me and change me into Amber. I loved being Amy. And I'll never forgive him for taking Sinead away from me.*

Looking over at him as they walked through the lobby, she thought, *So it's bye-bye Darren, you selfish bastard. I'm going to leave some anonymous tips to the news agency about some of the comments you've been posting, that I carefully crafted ahead of time to foil your efforts. You won't see that coming. And I'm sure the State will love to hear about that Conversation Band that you purchased too.*

As they sat down at the loan officer's desk, she mentally concluded her grand plan narrative, *With that loser Darren out of the way, I'll give our baby away to the State. And little Bryan, sorry but you've become part of the Amy-Sinead plan. I've had a change of heart about you so you'll have to go too. Giving those snotty brats to the State will bump me up at least one Level. With Darren and the kids gone, I can finally bring Sinead home to my, our, new house.*

Her plans were already in motion. Amber would finally have everything she'd been dreaming of.

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Chapter 27
Busted

The Millers weren't living any sort of pleasant dreams. At home, since the night of Peggy's baby extraction, Mr. and Mrs. Miller watched their daughter slowly come out of the fog. Peggy was gradually regaining her mental capacity from months of intense 4M treatments. At first, Peggy didn't complain much about what all had happened.

But each day she began to remember more and more, like overhearing some of Amber's conversations with Darren, about State baby adoption, tricking their Chips, raising their Scores, buying a house. She recalled being drugged with something that knocked her out and left her with the worst headaches afterwards.

Peggy remembered their rough handling of her and being slapped hard in the face on multiple occasions. She hadn't been allowed to use her palm screen or leave the apartment without Darren or Amber. The daily 4M treatments had left her feeling like a zombie. The worse, grueling part, she'd recall, was the constant coaching to give up her baby.

The Record "remembered" plenty too.

The funny thing about the whole SIN Record was that few people were ever being actively watched. As intrusive as it may have been, everyone was mostly invisible to prying eyes. SIN Scores were all automatically calculated and social positions automatically adjusted and enforced by predetermined computer algorithms. Only when things got out of line did real human intervention follow.

For those who dared to cross the line, though, they had better beware. There was the Record of everything they'd done, everywhere they'd gone, everything they'd purchased, every call they'd made. There were no lies capable of getting someone out of their mess. There were

no Silicon Facades. The Record was there forever. It was the judge and jury. It was the truth.

The truth caught up with Amber and Darren. Within a week of Peggy's baby being born, Peggy began to sing like a parrot. There were lots of interested ears.

That fateful day at the bank, while seated in front of loan officer Mattole Lavy's desk, Amber and Darren Cross glanced nervously towards two police officers just making their way into the bank lobby. Amber jumped to the most obvious conclusion in her mind, *What the hell did you do Darren?*

The police quickly spotted Amber and Darren, who were immediately arrested and charged with a host of crimes, including kidnapping, Crimes of Manipulation using 4M technology, criminal use of date rape drugs, assault, medical fraud, and falsifying information on a State adoption application.

Darren tried to free himself from these accusations, throwing Amber, and Sinead of all people, under the bus, claiming that it was Amber and Sinead who had masterminded this entire plan without his knowledge. The State was not humored by his claim of innocence. A longer investigation into Sinead's activities discovered that she had indeed played a secret but significant role in some of the Cross's affairs.

Amber's baby was immediately extracted from her and custody of her little Bryan taken away, both kids becoming State property. For their crimes, all three of them were stripped of any class status they had attained. The young trio of State antagonists, Sinead, Amber, and Darren, were then 4M-recalibrated, relocated, and retained somewhere they would pay for their crimes, somewhere they could not manipulate anyone.

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Chapter 28
Girls Can Dream Again

Loan officer Mattole Lavy gazed across the table at the attractive young couple, Miranda and Peggy. They were both athletic looking, slightly taller than most women, and seemed like they could be sisters. Peggy's brown eyes showed no emotion, her expression a bit uptight. Miranda, looking more welcoming with her big smile, questioned him with her cobalt blue eyes.

"Look," he hesitated, "from your application we just don't see sufficient income or high enough credit scores for securing this type of refinancing on Miranda's house."

Carefully eyeing the girls up and down, imagining them kissing each other, he continued. "But have you heard of the Hardship Program?"

Just before Sinead's arrest two months earlier, Miranda overheard through the rumor mill at her accountant job at Forrest View Clinic some gossip about the drama that had occurred the night Peggy had given birth there. A bruised and nearly comatose woman had given birth, her baby immediately taken by the State. Miranda did a little digging and was surprised to see a record of Amber's visit that same night. Inquiring with come coworkers, she became more curious about why Amber and Darren had been there that night too.

After work that day, Miranda interrogated Sinead. "What do you know about Amber and Darren and their visit to Forrest View Clinic?"

Sinead quickly answered, "Amber's pregnant, right? They must have been there to have her baby."

"That wasn't the reason for their visit," Miranda touted.

Sinead was quiet, looking as if her mind was racing for an answer. Finally, she blurted, "All I know is that Amber said they were helping a friend through her baby delivery."

Miranda eyed her carefully, "Look, I know you had this thing for Amber, Amy I mean, a few years ago. I didn't realize you two were having any contact with each other these days."

Immediately cutting her off, Sinead sounded agitated, "It's not like I'm having an affair with her, you know. I just check in with her once in a while, as a friend."

"I'm not accusing you of anything, girl," Miranda gently offered, "it's just that Amber wasn't supposed to remember her Amy days with you. For Darren, right? Does Amber remember you from when she was Amy?"

"Please just drop it," Sinead sighed, adding, "you know I love you, that's all that matters."

Miranda and Sinead's relationship had been rocky soon after getting the Hardship Program loan and buying their small house in a nearby town. The mortgage payment and other associated household expenses were already causing almost daily riffs between them.

Then the police showed up to their new house one evening, as they sat cuddled together on the sofa trying to work some things out. "Sorry Miranda, I love you," was all Sinead said as the police took her away. Miranda tried to find more information about the crimes that Sinead had been charged with, and where she was being held. But the police wouldn't tell her anything.

Miranda knew nothing of Sinead's supposed crimes. Yet Miranda had agreed to keep Sinead entertained while Amber worked on some plan to get Sinead back. *Does that make me an accessory to something they've done?* Miranda pondered, scared and constantly looking over her shoulder, wondering if the police would be coming for her next, not knowing what Sinead had done or said.

Curious about what that bruised woman giving birth at the clinic might know since Amber had also been there that night, she did some research at the clinic and found Peggy's address. Peggy Miller lived in same town as her.

"Hello," a tall, brown-eyed brunette opened the door and coldly stared at Miranda. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Peggy Miller."

"Are you with the State?" Peggy nervously asked.

"No, no. I'm just a fr…an acquaintance of Amber Cross and..." Miranda explained, as a horrified Peggy started to close the door.

"Please wait, are you Peggy? I want to help," Miranda pleaded. "I know that Amber got into some trouble, and she hurt my friend."

"She hurt me too, her and her bastard husband." Peggy was looking through the small opening in the nearly closed door.

"Can we please talk?" Miranda softly asked, her blue eyes pleading.

They talked together for hours. Miranda learned the whole story about Amber and Darren, though Peggy knew nothing about, nor had ever met, Sinead.

Peggy had gotten her baby back from the State. She took Miranda back to her bedroom to see him. As they gazed into the crib where baby Andrew slept, Peggy glanced over at Miranda, her beautiful face, those lips. Peggy inched closer to her, contemplating, *She is so pretty, I should kiss her right now*.

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Chapter 29
Where Babies Come From

He relaxed in the warm soaking pool and looked around at the beautiful scenery inside the grand meeting hall. Girls in bikinis and girls in shorts. Several meandered in the pool nearby him, a few more sat at the edge dangling their feet in the water. Other beauties milled about on the outskirts, talking, laughing, eating.

Music played just loud enough to block out the dozens of conversations, but quiet enough to allow a couple to talk together. "This could be para, para, paradise…" the latest 2055 Coldplay hit, was soothing the vibe of the place.

There she was, standing at the periphery of the pool area talking with two other girls, smiling. They all were wearing short shorts. She gazed around and saw him in the pool, gave him a big smile and waved. He smiled back and thought, *Oh ya!* If she waved at him, it usually meant she wanted some company.

He'd been coming to this youthful venue for at least three months that he could remember. He'd only seen her here for a month or two. She probably had been a pregnant blimp before that, had a baby, and then resurfaced. But you'd never have guessed she'd recently had a baby if that was the story. Or ever, wow!

Whenever she came to these events and spotted him, they usually left together. It wasn't long before he learned he had been correct about the baby thing. Of course, that was a common story around this place. So were pretty girls.

The labor communes had parties every night. There was a free 4M treatment just for coming to the party, free food, music and dancing, great seating, lounging pools and hot tubs. These grand meeting halls had sex rooms too, and

people were expected to use them nightly, babies being the State's most sought-after commodity.

SIN Chips monitored body vital functions. Orgasms had a distinct signature easily recognized by the Chips. The rooms had plenty of sensors to detect who was there. Such encounters, if they resulted in pregnancy, were rewarded with future hours off work for both instigators.

With a mesmerized look on his face, Darren stared as some gorgeous female legs suddenly blocked his field of view. He looked up to see a tall, lean, brunette with stunning blue eyes gazing at him from a few feet away, short white shorts, bare feet, very short black halter top.

"Hey Dar," he heard a familiar voice say. "Want to be the father of my baby?"

Her name was Amy and he felt as if he'd known her much longer than just a few months.

"We gotta make it quick though," she said. "After our little warmup I want to get cozy with this girl I just met, Sinead," motioning with her head towards a girl that Amy had just been standing with. "She just got here, doesn't seem to remember much about what happened to her. Nice girl though, very cute, with the sexiest emerald eyes. You understand, Dar, right?"

"Can I stay and watch," Darren politely inquired.

"You may not," she quipped.

Holding hands, Darren and Amy deliberately walked in Sinead's direction. Amy grabbed Sinead's hand and pulled her along as the three of them wandered towards the sex rooms, happy as clams.

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