

Fallen

Out of the Sex Industry and into the Arms of the Savior

Annie Lobert

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HELPING PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE HEART OF GOD

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Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	<i>"Break Yourself!"</i>	<i>ix</i>
Chapter 1	Little Girl Lost	1
Chapter 2	Fallen Arises	17
Chapter 3	He Who Sold Me a Dream	41
Chapter 4	Broken Wings	55
Chapter 5	The Pimp Game	69
Chapter 6	Runaway Girl	93
Chapter 7	Renegade	119
Chapter 8	Glorious Disaster	137
Chapter 9	Learning to Fly	155
Chapter 10	Arms Wide Open	175
Chapter 11	Freed to Set Others Free	189
<i>Epilogue</i>	<i>My Dream Come True</i>	<i>199</i>
<i>Appendix A</i>	<i>Recognizing Sex Trafficking</i>	<i>209</i>
<i>Appendix B:</i>	<i>Testimonials from Destiny House</i>	<i>217</i>
<i>Acknowledgment</i>		<i>225</i>
<i>About the Author</i>		<i>226</i>
<i>About Hookers for Jesus</i>		<i>228</i>
<i>About Destiny House</i>		<i>229</i>

Prologue

"Break Yourself!"

A beating is all it took to be broken. An hour of fury unleashed, blood splattering onto the sparkling white floor tiles while my boyfriend-turned-pimp smashed my head repeatedly into the kitchen cabinets.

"Break yourself!" he demanded. In other words, "hand over the money." The money I had just made turning tricks on the Las Vegas Strip. As his hands clutched my throat, his nails marking my skin, my defiant cries for him to stop turned into desperate gasps for breath. The punches ensued, and I blacked out.

I drifted in and out of consciousness, coming to while being choked and punched in my face and ribs. Another blow by his large fist knocked me out. When I opened my eyes the next time, I was lying facedown in a pile of fresh dog feces in the backyard. Mixed with the tears that streamed down my face, the blood on my face ran pink, leaving a putrid taste in my mouth.

Though likely suffering a concussion, I tried to regain my bearings. My vision blurred between the tears and the feces, I saw the man I was in love with. Drops of blood stained his stark white shirt, his eyes full of rage. "You're lucky to be with me, let alone be alive! I won't be having any disrespectful attitude!" he screamed with a flurry of obscenities. "I love you! Don't you know that?! Wipe them tears off your face and shut up before I take you out to the desert and bury you six feet under! This is pimpin'! Imma be your boss from now on!"

My worst fears had come true. The man I had given my heart to really was a pimp. It was official. I had been broken. In pimp culture, that meant I now worked for him as his slave and would have to hand over every dollar I earned. That night I found myself in the game. Green, wet behind the ears, I would learn the rules as I played, breaking them at times and almost paying for the lapses with my life.

I lay on the ground practically lifeless, my nostrils filling with the reeking stench of patched grass, feces, and blood, the metallic taste dripping down my throat. I could hear my now-pimp continuing his rant of obscenities. As his berating monologue

trailed off, I waited to wake up. *Surely this is a dream, and any moment now it'll be over. Oh dear God, please let me wake up, I'm begging you!*

Only it wasn't. It was just the beginning.

Out in the backyard of my best friend's house in Sin City, getting the living daylights beaten out of me, I thought of simpler times. Home. Winters spent making angels in the deep, thick Minnesota snow. Summers on my bike, dipping up and down steep and winding country roads. My parents, who had worked hard and had done their best to raise me right.

What had happened to me? How on earth did I find myself bound to a pimp who demanded my obedience and loyalty by attempting to beat the very life out of me? I had wanted to escape this life before, but I had felt trapped. And now it had turned even worse, where I was not only trapped but caged and treated like a dog.

Little Girl Lost

"When one's lost, I suppose it's good advice to stay where you are, until someone finds you. But who'd ever think to look for me here?"

—Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*

I entered the world on September 26, 1967, in southern Minneapolis, during the summer of love. Bell-bottoms ruled, miniskirts were the rage, mood rings were hip, Twiggy was queen, and the Beatles and the Doors blared.

I'll always consider myself a Minnesota girl, even though we lived in Illinois and Wisconsin as well. Because we moved around a lot, I was the "new girl" most of my young life, with my sense of security stripped away wherever I went. As difficult as that was, a part of me liked creating adventures in new places—from the turkey farm echoing with incessant gobbling to a brownstone-lined suburb of Chicago to a house next door to a synagogue where deeply religious Jews showed us compassion many times over when we were in need.

I loved my mama, Joann, dearly. Raised Catholic, she came from a large Polish family of nine siblings. As a little girl, I was attached to her at the hip. Wherever she went, I followed on her heels, sometimes even hanging on to her purse straps to make sure she was close. I felt genuinely loved through her gentle grace and kindness.

My father, Chet, on the other hand, was not so gentle and kind. Dad served in the air force for a few years, and his personality reflected the strict, regimented military lifestyle. Originally from Chicago and of German and French descent, his roots trace back to Amsterdam, home of the famous red light district.

My sister, Diane, was the firstborn, and she took to her part well. She was smart, artistic, played the piano, and knew how to sew and cook. I looked up to Diane, who always did the right thing, but I was sometimes envious of her. I never forgot the comparisons my mom and dad would occasionally make about the two of us.

Unbeknownst to my family at the time, my sister was born with Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder that affects the body's connective tissue and causes rapid

and excessive growth; we just thought she was unusually skinny and tall. Diane was teased a lot growing up. The kids nicknamed her “Buck Teeth” because of her overbite and “Bean Pole” because she was so thin. I often stuck up for her, regardless of my resentment toward her, because I knew what a great person she was. After all, she was my sis!

My brother Bill was almost two years older than I, and he was my protector. If anyone tried to give me a hard time as a kid, he would always step in and stop it. My little brother, Charlie, is two years younger than I and was a big clown who loved instigating trouble. He made life fun with his wild ways and playful personality. He would sometimes mercilessly pick dumb fights with me while Bill would sweep in like a knight in shining armor to rescue me and save the day. We Lobert kids loved each other. Though we had our share of typical sibling rivalry and conflicts, we were as thick as thieves.

Dad was the disciplinarian in the family. He had a deep, powerful voice that carried throughout the house. Whenever he yelled, I stopped dead in my tracks, whether I was skidding on the kitchen floor in my dirty socks or playing with my Barbie dolls in my room. His anger frightened me. Since I can remember, I was deathly afraid of making him mad.

If we kids didn’t follow through with a task or chore according to what he considered was the right way, well, there was serious hell to pay. Out would come the forked leather belt, the end intentionally cut into straps. Like most parents of that generation, my father instilled the fear of beatings into us, the punishment for sassing, getting out of line, or roughhousing. While my brothers bore the brunt of Dad’s physical anger, I was always worried that I would be next in line. It seemed I was forever waiting my turn.

* * *

While living in Minneapolis, my mom took us to church every Sunday. I enjoyed Sunday school because the teachers passed out candy and cupcakes, but the preaching during the service was long and boring. Week after week, the preacher’s words strung together hypnotically and many times would make me fall asleep. The only time I sat up and paid close attention was during Christmas Eve services. I felt something pure and perfect, completely peaceful, during those services. Perhaps it was the presence of God. I would feel it so deeply and would cry when the choir sang melodies like “Ave

Maria” and “Silent Night,” because I knew instinctively there was good in the world. There just *had* to be. Jesus saw me and what I was going through. He had come to make all the wrongs done to me right.

I remember countless times watching tears stream down Mama’s face during the last lackluster hymn on a regular Sunday right before the service concluded. “Mama,” I would whisper, tugging the hem of her flowery print dress. “Why are you crying?” She would turn to me, a sadness in her eyes, and whisper back, “Hush now, Annie, be a good girl.” I felt so bad for her. I could see she was deeply anguished. I didn’t know what made her so upset, but I wanted to fix it.

I wondered if she cried because of Daddy. I knew his rage well. My father’s violent behavior, his intimidating, booming voice, his insistence on harsh discipline—all those things caused me to fear him. I tried to distance myself from him, spending a lot of time in my room under my bed or hanging outside with my friends. When I was around him, I walked on eggshells, careful not to do anything to make him angry.

We had a bittersweet relationship. While I was extremely afraid of Daddy, I still longed for him to accept and love me. After all, I loved him, no matter what he did. I really did. And I thought if I was good enough, I could make him happy and finally earn his love.

Dad’s words had a hold over me, and usually the things he said weren’t so nice. I remember hanging out at the first Target in town with my friends when I was eight years old. On a dare, I stole some plastic toy Barbie shoes, stuffing my pockets full of the tiny high heels. Nervous and scared walking out of Target and into the parking lot, I was tapped on the shoulder. I turned around to look and my stomach instantly felt ill. I was apprehended by a security guard, who to me looked like Jesus, if Jesus happened to be a hippie with glasses and long hair. When I got home, I had to tell my father what had happened. I will never forget how afraid I was because I knew the punishment that was coming.

His words stung. “So you’re a thief now? Why would you do something like that? What a bad little girl. Shame on you, Annie! Stupid girl!”

Surprisingly, I didn’t get a severe whooping. My punishment was worse. Dad grounded me for a full thirty days. The worst part was that it was in the middle of summer vacation! I wasn’t allowed to leave the house, not even to go into the backyard

to play. Every night as I rested my head on my pillow, I felt the guilt and shame of his words cover me with more weight than my heavy blanket.

Thief.

Bad.

Stupid.

Throughout my childhood, I was lost in my father's anger, unsure of his love for me. I felt disconnected from him, and always hoped that maybe someday a bond would develop. It never did. The absence of love I felt from my father growing up left a life-sized hole in my heart that I became quite adept at trying to fill—usually with all the wrong things.

Years later, as an adult, I visited my parents in Wisconsin on Christmas, with the hopes of telling my dad I forgave him for how he treated me growing up. I had a deep sense of how important it was to do, not for him, but for me. It was part of my healing process. But as I opened my mouth to tell him, my dad bowed his head slightly and said, barely above a whisper, "Annie, I need to tell you something. I need to ask you to forgive me. I didn't treat you right growing up. My dad raised me pretty rough. He did things to me I can't talk about right now. I didn't know how to be a father. And I'm sorry." My father's voice trembled as tears slid down the face of a man I had rarely seen cry.

My tears joined his, and I reached out for his hand, rough from years of manual labor, worn from age and hard work. I held his hand as the stillness of the holy moment consumed us. I didn't even have to broach the topic. I didn't have to say a word. Dad said it all. And all the years of harshness, of feeling disconnected from him, of feeling unloved, unraveled in truth. Hurt people hurt people. And I finally understood why he acted the way he did—he was abused harshly as a child by my grandfather.

Don't get me wrong. I always loved my dad. I saw the good in him. I knew how much fun he could be. Sometimes he'd play games with us, his bellowing voice softened by hearty laughter. He would take us on fishing and camping adventures to lakes up north in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Other times he'd take us on wild rides on our snowmobiles in the cold and snowy Minnesota winters and hit the four-wheelers when spring and summer came. We always got the latest toys before the other kids in town. I thought it was strange because we didn't have much money, certainly nothing extra we could afford to spend on frivolous things. What I didn't know was that he was

depleting his retirement account with those purchases. Maybe it was a way to relieve the guilt he felt for being harsh with us.

Guilt makes you do funny things. It's a powerful emotion that changes how you look at, react, and respond to people, situations, and life. Guilt that stems from a place of confusion is a tricky thing. While it may not be legitimate, it can still shape you. And it can create in you a shame that grows and festers for years.

* * *

When I was nine years old, I hung out with a girl a few years older than I from my school. Every now and then I'd spend the night. We'd watch TV way past midnight, shovel popcorn in our mouths, and talk about nothing too important—you know, little-girl stuff.

On one particular sleepover, I woke up early one morning and found her on top of me, groping my body. No more little-girl stuff. I was shocked, grossed out. I didn't know exactly what she was doing; I just knew it made me feel awkward and uncomfortable. "I don't want to do that," I said, wrangling my body out from under hers. My friend just shrugged and began talking about her record collection.

I was so embarrassed, and I didn't want to make a big deal about it. I tried to forget about it, hoping it was an isolated incident. But something similar happened weeks later. And then again. I was so confused. She was my friend, yet I felt violated. I was afraid to tell anyone, and the guilt consumed me. I blamed myself for what happened and wondered if God could ever forgive me. I decided then that I was dirty little girl, undeserving of redemption. I carried the shame with me over the years, blaming myself time after time when others mistreated or even abused me. I felt responsible. The instinctive voice in my head said it was always my fault.

At the time of the abuse, I began attending a Lutheran parochial school. My previous elementary school had closed down, and my father didn't like the neighborhood the new school was in. My parents had enrolled me in what I was sure would be a stuffy eight-hour bore fest, given my church experience. I was gloriously wrong.

There I discovered a faith rooted in love and joy. My teacher, Miss Barbara, glowed with something special that I couldn't quite figure out at first. Then I realized what it was. She was never worried. She never seemed to have a bad day. She had peace, and always wore a genuine smile. I wanted to be like her, happy, confident, and

full of joy. She would play the guitar in class and sing songs. The first one I ever learned was “I got the joy-joy-joy-joy down in my heart.” With sweet kindness in her eyes, she shared how Jesus was my friend and loved me so much, and that there wasn’t anything or anybody who could stop Him from loving me.

Seeds were planted. I wanted the kind of love that Miss Barbara spoke of, the kind of love it was evident she felt. I started to believe that Jesus loved me, that it was possible to be loved, even when I wasn’t perfect and I messed up. However, that small sense of inner security would sadly be ripped away whenever the neighborhood girl made sexual advances.

I had my first real crush when I was nine, and I was pretty sure I was going to go steady with him. As far as I was concerned, I was all grown up and knew what I was doing. He was the first boy to hold my hand, the first to share a kiss. My ecstasy at finding true love was short-lived, however, as my parents had to pull me out of the school because they couldn’t afford the tuition any longer.

Crushing on that kid revealed my deep-rooted desire for love, for a fairytale. It was in my bones. Disney movies established a precedent for my romantic expectations—specifically the part about falling in love and living happily ever after. That whimsical notion was the focus of every movie I watched and consequently became the goal of my life. I was Cinderella. I knew there was a fancy life-changing ball that I was going to be invited to one day. How hard could it be, right?

I wanted my prince. I needed him. I pined after the image of a well-dressed, handsome, smart guy who would buy me roses and sweep me off my feet. I think those unrealistic expectations set the stage for me to become boy crazy in my preteen years. I constantly giggled around boys and craved their attention. I mean, it was all about the boys! I’d get butterflies in my stomach when a cute guy would smile approvingly at me or dole out a compliment.

* * *

Right before I entered the sixth grade, we moved to Balsam Lake, Wisconsin, a little country town about seventy miles from Minneapolis. My parents had bought property there a few years earlier, and Dad wanted out of the city because his job was stressing him out. He loved the country life, the peaceful setting of the great outdoors, the pace of farmers who weren’t bound by time clocks and demanding bosses. I didn’t

want to move. I finally had established some roots in Minneapolis. I had friends. I knew all the kids in the neighborhood, and everyone knew me.

For the first six months, we lived in a trailer without running water while my dad and brothers built our new home. We had to shower at our neighbors' down the road. I hated it. It was embarrassing and inconvenient, and once again I was the new girl on the block, but this time I lived way out in the country and had to ride a bus for over an hour just to get to the middle school.

The kids there were stuck up, and the pressure to fit in was overwhelming, especially because I was in a physically awkward stage. I was flat as a board, but my mom took me shopping for a bra anyway. Could life get any worse? I hated school, but I didn't hate boys. And the few girlfriends I had just added to the problem because we were constantly talking about cute boys we thought we were in love with.

I did hate being picked last in gym class. Hated when teachers called on me and I would get tongue-tied, tripping up my words. Hated when I was made fun of because I didn't wear cool layered polo shirts, boat shoes, or turtlenecks with specks of stars and hearts on them like the popular girls did. I hated being called ugly names by girls and getting pushed and punched in the stomach by boys (whom I later found out had crushes on me). Basically I hated the way I was treated at school. I felt unlovable and was convinced there was something seriously wrong with me.

My one escape was music. I could play the piano by ear since I was five. And in the eighth grade, I taught myself how to play the guitar, plucking away on a cheap acoustic my sister had found at a yard sale. I would hear songs on the radio and strum along. At night I'd listen to the lulling sounds of classic music on my Walkman, floating away on the heavenly melodies of Mozart and Handel. I loved music. And yet, not even the classics could soothe my pain. I had so much pent-up angst that was dying to escape.

I know now this is unfair to my dad, but at the time I resented him. I resented him for spending money to build up his antique collection while making me shop at garage sales or the local church basement for my outfits. I resented him for not understanding how important it was for me to fit in with all the cool kids. I resented not being able to participate in after-school activities because we lived too far away and didn't have the money for it anyway. Dad tried his best—I know that now—but somewhere between the resentment I felt toward him and the exhausting climb to try to

win his approval, I snapped. I figured I might as well try the bad route but keep it quiet, like a secret rebellion. Because the good route wasn't getting me anywhere I wanted to be.

I started stealing Dad and Mom's cigarettes. My friends and I would hightail it into the woods on our three-wheelers and smoke in secret, hanging out on a hill overlooking our property. Cigarette dangling from my mouth, I'd peer through a small clearing amid the dense grove of red pine trees, puffing out circles of smoke (I didn't inhale yet), and watch Dad work on the house below. I felt a sense of satisfaction, doing something behind his back. *Look at me, Dad. Look at what I'm doing. Oh wait, you can't. Nah-nah-nah-nah-nah.* My parents never knew I smoked. Perfume and gum masked the telltale odor.

Taking a cue from Daisy Mae Dukes, the sexy character from the original *Dukes of Hazard* show, I started slicing off my jeans and wore the shortest cutoffs possible. The higher my shorts, the happier I was. I was proud of my super lean body. I rode my bike constantly along the hilly country roads so my legs were thin but muscular. On one hand, I had no problem showing off my physique; on the other hand, I never felt thin enough. I was always on a diet. I was also a part-time bulimic. Fearing that I would gain a pound, I would sneak into the bathroom and discard food if I felt too full after I ate. The scale became my best friend and my worst enemy. I'd obsessively step on it five to ten times a day, my eyes glued to the red dial as it jiggled furiously to its resting place, to what I hoped would be a skinny number.

There was something to be said about the way I looked and the attention it commanded. I would walk down the country roads of Wisconsin with my friends and wave at men, young and old alike, driving in their cars. Sometimes I even boldly flashed cars that whooshed by just to see what kind of reaction I would get. It was exhilarating. The attention from the opposite sex gave me a thrill like no other. It boosted my confidence, and my self-esteem soared. I felt proud, beautiful, wanted. This was a new feeling I craved and wanted more of.

I was in the ninth grade, right before our final move to another town, when I was sexually abused again. A cute senior liked me. He was older, mature, and, boy, was I spellbound by his sweet words and warm kisses. He would pick me up at the house and we'd go for long drives, stopping atop scenic hills to make out. One afternoon he slid his hands down my pants. I was taken aback and embarrassed, but afraid to push

him away or say no. I truly believed if I let him have his way, he would like me even more. It was such a pattern—doing things I really didn't want to do because I thought it was the only way I'd ever experience love. I was crushed and confused the next day when he left a note for me on my school locker saying he never wanted to see me again.

I thought he liked me. I thought letting him touch me would guarantee a relationship. I should have learned my lesson, but I continued to act out in different ways and with different men.

* * *

When we moved to Frederick, thirty miles away, I was determined to fit in, so I joined as many after-school activities as I could (although that was short-lived because I didn't have a way to get home) and regularly attended parties following football and basketball games to smoke cigarettes and drink beer with all the cool kids. And then I met my first real boyfriend.

Jerry was a gorgeous football player, and I was smitten. I had found my prince. We fell in love hard and fast. Jerry was a master at pulling my heartstrings and knew exactly how to woo me into romantic oblivion, surprising me with red roses at the most random times and showering me with sweet compliments while looking deep into my eyes with his dreamy blue eyes.

It wasn't long before he told me he loved me and wanted to consummate our relationship with sex. I wasn't ready yet. When I told him, he freaked out and put the pressure on, but I wouldn't budge. I needed time. I can't remember who initiated the breakup, but it happened. And I was devastated.

A few weeks later I agreed to go with a girlfriend of mine to a keg party after a football game one night. I got drunk. Some guy I vaguely remember, who was in his early twenties, started flirting with me and led me upstairs to a dark bedroom. In a matter of a few blurry seconds, he pushed me down on the bed and grabbed the top of my pants, roughly pulling them down to my ankles with a force that shocked me. As inebriated as I was, I lashed out at him with my fingernails and began to claw whatever flesh my hands could touch. When I heard the rip of a condom package opening and the unzipping of his jeans, I screamed and fought my way out of his strong grip, continuing to claw his chest. My heart pounded as I ran out of the room, down the stairs, and through the crowd of teenage partiers who were dancing. With shaking

hands, I pulled my girlfriend Jennifer out of the intoxicated mob and whispered, "Someone just tried to rape me."

She drove me home, dumbfounded, as I sat in silence and numbly fixed my sight ahead. I felt a familiar sense of guilt wash over me. I closed my eyes, trying to stuff away the fuzzy memory of a stranger forcing himself on me, but the voices of shame echoing in my heart only grew louder. *It's my fault. I deserved the attempted rape.* I didn't tell another soul, and as days passed into weeks, I became better at pretending, ignoring the violation, pressing it further back into my memory until only broken bits remained.

Jerry and I ended up getting back together, and by then I was ready, willing, and able to give him what he wanted. Making love to him for the first time was a special moment to me. I looked at my virginity as a gift, and I thought that by giving Jerry this piece of me, I would keep him, that a part of him would always remain connected to me.

Young love is manipulative, full of lies that can easily poison a naive and desperate heart. It tricks you into thinking it will last forever, that the one you love is the only one for you, that you will marry him, have cute babies who never cry, and live a perfect white-picket-fence life. It's magic, complete with castles, pixie dust, and fairytales. I was convinced Jerry and I were the real deal. Then I learned he was cheating on me with three different girls. I was devastated. My heart cried, *But he promised this was forever!* Jerry didn't deny or confirm my accusations. He just looked at me with no expression whatsoever and said, "Well, let's break up then." His apathy hit me hard. I cried myself to sleep every night for weeks.

Once I allowed the sadness its due, though, I became hell-bent on getting my groove back by drinking a bit more at parties, smoking pot, and finding another boyfriend. And even though I was looking for love, a hardness of heart developed as time went by, with more failed relationships and more sexual abuse. I was embittered by men, determined not to let another one hurt me like Jerry had ever again.

I graduated from high school in 1986 with a huge chip on my shoulder. The pain of betrayal and continuing absence of paternal affection snowballed into this hunger for revenge. I made it my mission to be successful, to show everyone I believed robbed me of my happiness who the real boss was. I couldn't wait to get the heck out of that little town in Wisconsin

I made plans to stay with my sister, Diane, in her tiny two-bedroom basement apartment, a mere seven blocks from bustling downtown Minneapolis. I had thought about college, but it didn't seem like it was going to happen. My parents neither encouraged nor dissuaded me going to school. They certainly didn't have the cash to pay my tuition. So I determined to work, save up money, and eventually go to college. Then I'd become a successful business chick and make big money. I would become the prettiest, the smartest, and the fastest woman around the track.

The week after graduation I said tearful good-byes to all my girlfriends and family. My grandfather picked me up in his white Chevy Malibu. As we rode down the driveway, I whipped my neck around to see Mom and Dad waving. As they got smaller and smaller in the distance, I saw my mother wipe away tears. I couldn't hold in my emotions any longer and let the stream of tears fall down my face as my parents became mere black specs. And then they were gone.

I can't explain it. I knew in my heart I'd never be back, but the ache I felt for the loss was tempered by the sense of freedom deep in my soul. My life was now a blank slate. I wanted to be somebody. I wanted power, not to be squashed as a helpless victim.

World, here I come.

Fallen Arises

“God has given you one face, and you make yourself another.”

—William Shakespeare

I was so excited to head out into the world and make my life an adventurous success. I knew my future would bring true happiness, accomplishment, fulfillment . . . and love.

The freedom of being on my own was invigorating. I felt like the chains had been cut off my feet and hands. My new life was awesome! I could do what I wanted, when I wanted. No curfew. No dad breathing down my neck. No mandatory chore list. No roaring demands to make my bed (though my sister would repeatedly and very lovingly remind me to rinse out my dishes in the sink).

I hit the ground running, looking for work in the clerical field so I could stash away enough for school or even for some music courses. Within five days of moving to Minneapolis, searching the want ads in the local paper and making phone calls, I found work. From 7:40 a.m. until 4:40 p.m., Monday through Friday, I worked downtown at Investors Diversified Services (IDS), a subsidiary of American Express, in the accounting department. I absolutely loved going into work. My office was in the tallest building in all of Minnesota, standing at an impressive 190 feet. The glass revolving doors constantly cycled through serious-faced male and female executives wearing sharp suits and carrying leather briefcases. I felt like I was working in the heartbeat of the city. In the maze of the corporate skyscrapers, gourmet restaurants, and luxury department stores that catered to the sophisticated, I felt pretty darn important.

Day after day, I sat in my cubicle staring at the screen of a bulky beige-colored computer while combing through insurance policies. I worked hard and was good at what I did. I definitely enjoyed the perks of the company. They offered free health insurance, company shares, and even paid for my car insurance.

Inspired by TV shows like *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, I looked the part in the corporate world. I loved to power-dress and wore square-shouldered suits or blazers and colorful pumps that always matched my handbags. My hair was high and stiff, and the jewelry I

wore was just as bright and bold. I'll admit; I had a bit of a spending problem. I blew most of my first paycheck on clothes. I'd try to restrain myself on future paydays, saving up some money to eventually get my own place and, of course, spend the extra on nice outfits. After all, I didn't get to have new clothes very often growing up—they were mostly from garage sales. Back then, image was everything. Looking good and put together would attract acceptance and respect, two things I craved and desperately needed in addition, of course, to love.

A few nights a week I moonlighted at Ichiban, a Japanese steakhouse and sushi bar about ten blocks and a quick bus ride away from IDS. Wearing a traditional Japanese kimono, I served teppanyaki to the customers. On the weekends I waited at Dulono's Pizza, a biker bar that served the best pizza in town.

I worked hard and played just as hard. A childhood friend had introduced me to a beautiful girl named Kimmie, who had long brown hair, a stunning million-dollar smile, and a charming and bubbly personality. We clicked immediately and became best friends. When I had a day off, we'd party and hit the clubs. Carrie, a childhood friend who also lived in the city, and I would crash the frat parties at the University of Minnesota in hopes of meeting guys who were on their way to becoming somebodies, their education catapulting them into big-time money-making careers.

While Carrie and I never got carded at the college parties, Kimmie and I would have to sneak or flirt our way into the downtown rock clubs like First Avenue (where Prince got his start), Uptown, and Marshall's. There, we let off steam to the sounds of Depeche Mode, Robert Palmer, Run DMC, Alexander O-Neil, Salt-N-Peppa, and Prince while shooting back Long Island iced teas. I also started hanging around the local musicians. I loved all forms of music, but was mostly drawn to soft rock, R&B, pop, and funk. I made some pretty strong connections with some of the local bands, and a few months down the road started doing some vocal studio work.

The university parties were wild, a blur of beer and inebriated students. One night at a frat house party, I was drunk and went upstairs to find a bathroom. A guy was following me, but I didn't see him until I stumbled into a bedroom. I thought I had just clumsily tripped on some empty Budweiser cans until I found myself lying on an unmade bed with a guy I had never seen standing over me. He looked at me as he turned up the volume on a radio playing top-forty songs, and then he ripped my yellow sundress off and began to rape me. It happened so fast. Bits and pieces remain in my

mind today. I'll never forget how dirty I felt. And responsible. *It's my fault. I asked for it. I made him do it.*

I don't mean to sound detached as I write these events. They were traumatic. Disgusting. Hurtful and shameful. I tried hard to block out some of them as if they never happened, but it was a destructive pattern that kept repeating.

A few weeks later I woke up one morning in an unfamiliar bed. As the blinding sunlight streamed through the panoramic window of a high-rise condo, I panicked, not knowing where I was. I furiously tried to untangle myself from a twisted web of black satin sheets. The first step I took was pain-filled, my private parts so sore I almost fell flat on my face. I saw a man in the bathroom, shaving. He looked familiar. As scenes from a club the night before surfaced in a fuzzy sea of random snapshots, my head began to pound. He was a famous local music producer, a man I'd been introduced to by a friend.

He seemed oblivious to my disorientation and panic. "What did you do to me last night?" I cried out, partly from fear and partly from the unbearable pain I was feeling. As my mind stumbled through the shadowy memory of the previous night, I started to recall more details about him. I gasped to myself when I remembered his other occupation as a prominent local drug dealer. The guy looked at me, unfazed, and smiled. "Girl, you know you wanted it."

Choking back tears, I furiously gathered up my belongings that were scattered all over the stark bedroom and made a beeline for the door. I left the condo feeling dirty and ashamed, which was sadly becoming commonplace.

I dated during this time, going in and out of short-term relationships. I thought of myself as a romantic, but you could have called me a love addict. I fell hard and fast for the men I met, giving away my heart easily and quickly. There was the one sweet musician who totally trashed my heart, the other musician I said good-bye to, the steamy romance with the air force guy from the gym who moved away to California, and many others. I was always crushing on someone.

I was a sucker for love, for wild and adventurous romance. And I thought if I could do the right things or look the right part, I could attract a guy and ultimately win his love forever. Problem is, I started realizing that the perfect man, even the perfect romance, could sour—and usually did. And once the fire dampened, I stood alone in my dark and lonely castle of love gone wrong, fielding the blame every time.

When a guy lost interest in me or moved on to someone else or did something so simple like not return my phone call, I determined it was my fault. There was always something wrong me, and these thoughts continually crept into my mind: *I like him too much. I was too aloof. I was vulnerable too soon. I didn't call him enough. I called him too much. I didn't kiss him the right way. I smelled funny. I'm not pretty. I'm too fat. I'm too thin. I've got too many pimples on my face. I'm too forward. I'm too shy. I talk too much. I don't say the right things.* But if a man really liked me and let me have my way in our relationship, I became unattracted to him, thinking he was too weak minded, and quickly dumped him. I was constantly chasing the ideal man, only to find out the perfect man did not exist.

No matter who the guy was or what the situation, my self-deprecating monologues replayed themselves over and over. It was terrible. The mental gymnastics were exhausting. And it all stemmed from my deep-rooted feelings of rejection, insecurity, lack of identity, and mostly my strong desire to be loved.

In hindsight, I can see many times when all those failures with men were actually feeble attempts at fixing the broken relationship I had with my dad. If I could make a guy love me, that would make up for the fact that my dad didn't. I was trying to find the one who would fit perfectly into my empty heart. Of course that One could only be Jesus, but I didn't know that back then. I was determined to find a man, my dream man, to fill those shoes, even if I needed to sell my soul to do it.

* * *

It was a Friday night at Marshall's, a downtown club Kimmie and I frequented. Black leather couches and palm trees adorned the art deco-styled popular hangout, splashed by geometric patterns of bright reds and deep purples. Though we were underage, we knew the owner and he always let us in.

My dirty-blond hair defied gravity and stayed perfectly in place thanks to a shiny pink can of sticky Aqua Net hairspray. A Lycra top and miniskirt showed off my thin yet curvy shape. My best friend and I danced to the sounds of "Addicted to Love," tossing our heads back and wearing our signature seductive smiles that we flashed to the guys we liked, hoping to secure some free drinks —and we usually did. As we moved in rhythm, I noticed two tall, dark, and handsome men swagger into the club. One wore a silver fox fur coat, the other a black mink. Both sporting Gucci aviator sunglasses, they took long, deliberate strides toward the bar, checking out the mad

scene of dancing bodies and overflowing drinks dripping sloppily onto the ash-covered floor. The men sat down, sunglasses still on, and slowly sipped on cognac.

Dollar signs flashed in my eyes. I grabbed my bestie. "Check out those dudes." Sunglasses or not, we knew they were watching us. We were young, hot, cocky. We knew the game well, at least this one. Sure enough, the guys beckoned us over, and we spent the next few hours throwing back drinks and swapping flirtations. They told us they were businessmen. (I know, vague, right?) Kimmie and I were impressed. It's easy to be when you're young and naive.

What we didn't know, and learned only after I moved to Las Vegas and was turned out (meaning being taught by a pimp or another prostitute how to sell myself), was that they were "circuit pimps," pimps who travel from city to city, finding and moving working girls (prostitutes) around. They had connections all over the United States and nice places to stay: mansions and high-rise condominiums. They lived the life, and it showed.

My friend hit it off with one of the guys. The other was not at all my type. He seemed too old for me. Before the night ended, she and I made a pit stop at the bathroom. As we teased our hair and swiped on more lipstick, I quipped, "Girl, they have money, and lots of it."

Kimmie started dating one of the guys. He lavished her with expensive gifts, namely this huge diamond rock I was convinced was fake and had probably been purchased at some cheap mall kiosk. I asked my friend to get it appraised. Imagine our shock when a reputable jeweler told us that it was worth between \$25,000 and \$30,000! Not only was she sporting a blinding rock on her finger, she was also driving around in a flashy, custom-painted, pearl-white Mercedes Benz, decked out in trim from the door handles to the rims in 24K gold. This wasn't the norm for a small-town girl who was used to going muddin' in pickup trucks. This was something new, a rich lifestyle that commanded my attention, and ultimately my worship.

A few weeks after they met, Kimmie and her new man took off for beautiful Hawaii. I stayed in freezing Minneapolis working three jobs for chump change. Oh sure, I had enough money to pay my bills and some nice clothes to impress guys at the club, but nothing that made a dent in my college fund, which at this point was pretty close to a big fat zero.

One day Kimmie called while I was on lunch break. “Annie,” she said excitedly into the phone with a background cacophony of crashing waves. “I’m sitting on the beach talking on my own cell phone! Can you believe it? And I’m making, like, five hundred to one thousand-plus bucks an hour! You have got to come over here! I’ll cover your plane ticket!” She told me what she was doing without actually saying it, which, simply put, was prostitution. The way she told it, it wasn’t about selling your body. It was about the hustle of having the money given to you. “You don’t have to actually have sex,” she reassured me. “You can just get in the room, get the money, and run out. You won’t believe how easy it really is!”

It didn’t take a math genius to figure out the difference between the kind of cash she was making versus my measly \$3.47 an hour. And it didn’t take much for me to entertain the tempting offer. I was tired of being overworked and underpaid. At the time, I’d moved out of my sister’s place and was sharing an apartment with a friend from work, and the rent wasn’t cheap. So I traded in my long, black wool coat and snow boots for a neon-pink bikini and flew to Hawaii. I decided I’d spend some time with Kimmie and then go to Los Angeles for a few days to visit an ex-boyfriend who had been transferred from Minneapolis to California because of a military assignment. I just needed to see him again. I realized that he had my heart, and my heart wasn’t willing to let go that easy.

As the plane inched closer to the Aloha State, I pressed my face against the window, transfixed by the crystal-clear aqua waters and the outline of the tropical green islands. I was so excited to be on a two-week vacation I could barely sit still. *Oh my gosh! This is really happening! I can’t believe it!* What my friend was doing in Hawaii, and what she was encouraging me to do, didn’t quite sink in. At least I didn’t want it to at that moment.

When I stepped into Kimmie’s hotel room, I admired the casual yet pricey decor, the artwork showcasing ornate conch shells and beach scenes, the elegant wicker furniture lost in a sea of stunning sundresses, strappy sandals, and multiple pairs of designer sunglasses. *Gosh, my friend has so many beautiful clothes!* I jumped on the plush bed, screaming at the top of my lungs, while Kimmie relaxed on an elegant chaise lounge and giggled at my excitement. We had made it! This place was awesome!

I immediately fell in love with the island, the life. Who wouldn’t? It was Hawaii! It was breathtaking. In a sunlit haze, I strolled on the beach of the sapphire sea, inhaling

the intoxicating scents of exotic flowers. Soothing melodies poured out of a ukulele played by a local while people in colorful bathing suits splashed in the ocean and other tanned bodies threw Frisbees. My feet dug into warm sand as the tropical breeze swept over my face. The gray skyscrapers of downtown Minneapolis and the freezing rain, snow, and whipping wind seemed a distant memory as the sun baked my skin a golden bronze on Waikiki Beach.

I got a fake ID within the first few days through a connection Kimmie had. I chose the name Fallen from the character Fallon on the hit TV show *Dynasty*. She was the most gorgeous woman I had ever seen. I wanted to be like her—smart, sophisticated, sexy . . . and *rich*!

Kimmie introduced me to the life of prostitution, but she didn't know what she was getting herself, or me, into. She looked at being a high-class call girl from the perspective of what she was gaining. Her boyfriend showered her with diamonds. He draped her in a designer wardrobe. He bought her a fancy car. So what if she turned a few tricks at night? During the day she was sipping a cocktail under sweeping palm trees and enjoying the perks of making insane money sometimes even just for performing the simple act of taking off her clothes. (Kimmie never considered her boyfriend a pimp because she believed he was completely in love with her.)

My friend didn't have to goad me into following her lead. After being groomed by the American dream, pop culture, Disney, music videos, romance novels, fashion magazines, night clubs, soap operas, you name it, I figured out pretty quickly that by being beautiful, I could get virtually anything I wanted.

Don't mistake me. I knew prostitution was wrong, but the temptation to pull in that much money in a few hours because someone desires you was too strong. As I listened to Kimmie talk endlessly about the cool stuff she had and how much fun she was having and how her boyfriend adored her and how he gave her anything she wanted, the intrigue overrode my whispering conscience. But more than that, my heart had been so broken and I had been raped more times than I wanted to admit, a sense of apathy had set in.

I was numb, honestly, and I just didn't care anymore. Sure, I wanted to fall in love and live in the center of a fairytale, but dark reality was quickly closing in around me to the point where I could barely see that Cinderella dream anymore. But I knew

what I could see: Money. And lots of it. Fame. Success. And men I could use as a means to get those things. Heck, maybe I could buy my own real castle one day?

Prostitution was at its peak in Waikiki in the late eighties and early nineties. Japan's economy was booming, and many travelers from that area vacationed and bought property in Hawaii. I knew a thing or two about Japanese men. They were very respectful, kind, and gentle. Kimmie and I made a pact that we would only hit on the Japanese tourists for that reason. We didn't want to put ourselves in danger.

We got ready my first night there with beautifying precision. We looked classy, not like the stereotypical, dilapidated streetwalker I had always envisioned. You know, the old and wrinkly kind with missing teeth and torn fishnets that you typically see in movies and television. Kimmie and I wore miniskirts that showed off our toned legs and lacy cropped tops underneath *Miami Vice*-style blazers. We made a pact to keep an eye on one another. We would only take "doubles," tricks where the two of us could stick together.

We hopped in Kimmie's bronze convertible Mustang as twilight danced on the horizon, the sky brushed soft with hints of pink, orange, and purple. We drove down to the congested Kalakaua Avenue, the main thoroughfare in Waikiki Strip. Japanese men littered the sidewalks like candy. Horns honked, neon signs blared, and traffic congested this tropical paradise. Kimmie showed me the "track" (a street where prostitutes walk up and down to pick up their dates) and taught me how to proposition men speaking Japanese. Her boyfriend's friend had taught to her.

I set my sights on a good-looking Japanese man in his early forties and coyly sidled up to him. Staring deeply into his eyes and with a sexy slip of my blazer to show him what he could find underneath, I asked this man in his native tongue if he wanted to come with me and play. He said yes. My friend and I bated my trick's friend, and together we made our way to their nearby Hilton hotel. We blared our music and flirted with them as we sailed through green lights.

When we got to their room, it turned out that I didn't have to do a thing except perform my striptease act because that's all it took to arouse him, so I ended up making \$500 in less than ten minutes. Prostituting myself for the first time filled me with an intense lust for money. It was a powerful drug. Like a scene from the *Lord of the Rings*, once I slipped on that ring of selling myself and the incredible money and influence that

came with it, I couldn't take it off. This was going to be my secret way of making it in life—and no one would ever find out.

Turning tricks in Hawaii was pretty glamorous with the perfect combination of fancy hotels and sweet, rich men. The Japanese men were easy to control, and I had no reason to fear that they were going to turn into a maniac and kill me. Most nights Kimmie and I drove around looking for dates or walked up and down the track, inviting tricks back to our or their hotel room. We didn't have to do much work selling ourselves; the men were drawn to us like magnets. It was too easy!

I pocketed thousands of dollars during my stay. Not bad for a few nights, right? My friend and I hit the clubs after work, plunking down cash for high-end liquor drinks. During the day, we lay on the beach or wore out the soles of our shoes shopping at luxury boutiques.

I didn't think too deeply about what I was doing, selling my body for cash. It was easy to do because I was the sophisticated Fallen, not Annie. My alter ego was titanium, strong, unshakeable. Because of her, I was able to dissociate myself from what I was doing. Also, I enjoyed the power over these men that it seemed I had, it was a challenge and rush to see if could control them with my body and my looks. Plus I could think about the crazy money I was making and dream up plans to do something great with it instead of thinking about the fact that I was servicing strange men.

I also figured that if I had things like a nice house and a new car, I was going to attract success and a possible millionaire because of my independence and hefty bank account. What had hurt me in previous relationships was being dependent on someone I trusted. But I thought if I controlled the reigns, well, I could finally have a say in my destiny.

After my two weeks in Hawaii, I headed off to Los Angeles to spend time with my ex. Before that, though, Kimmie's boyfriend decided to check out the Hollywood scene to see how lucrative prostitution was there. He made arrangements to fly to California with Kimmie and drive up and down the track on Sunset looking for tricks (a.k.a. potential clients) and then later hook up with a Beverly Hills escort service. I figured after getting my man fix from my military dreamboat, I could meet up with them and make some cash myself. My broken and bitter heart was possessed by greed and a lust for new adventures and excitement, an easy way to fill my empty places.

My ex drove me around Beverly Hills, where I saw my first Rolls Royce and more sprawling mansions atop beautiful manicured lawns and swaying palm trees than I had ever seen, even on TV. We drove down the famous Rodeo Drive, where it seemed almost every woman was decked out in a pretty Chanel suit and carrying shopping bags from luxury boutiques. I was so naive and impressed!

The night Kimmie and I tested the waters, or rather the streets of Hollywood, we drove up and down Sunset Avenue in a rented car. The Boulevard featured endless rows of bars and clubs like the famous Roxy, Whiskey, and Rainbow. The sidewalks were packed with eighties hair band-looking dudes chugging beer and women with even bigger hair hanging on them dressed in tight, barely there clothing.

But the partying scene wasn't what caught my eye. I couldn't stop staring at the unusual number of tall, manly looking women wearing wild wigs and sporting so much makeup you couldn't see skin. As a small-town girl, they looked like something out of a movie. And even though they looked beautiful and wore high heels and sequin dresses and were draped with bold costume jewelry, they looked, well, masculine! There was no denying the Adam's apples or the distinct muscularity in their legs. Those were the first transvestite prostitutes Kimmie and I had ever seen. They walked the streets like they owned them. It was their town. Honestly, the whole vibe freaked us out, and we drove off toward our hotel, never once stepping out of our car. The Hollywood track wasn't what we thought it would be.

Kimmie's boyfriend told us he had a spot in Vegas and would take us there for a few days to make a little money. I had never been to Sin City before. Not only was I impressed that this dude had another house in another state, I was anxious to visit the popular destination I had only read about or seen on TV. The whole experience of traveling to new places was exhilarating. I could be whoever I wanted to be, just as I felt when moving so often as a child. I felt sophisticated, important, special—the lustful feelings that drove my empty heart.

The three of us hopped in a car for the four-hour drive. My heart beat faster the closer we got to the Vegas Strip. I was so excited. I rolled down my window, my face blasted by the warm, dry air. As we drove alongside camping trailers, tourist buses, sports cars, and limousines, I was transfixed by the bold, colorful signs of the many motels inviting you to play, eat, sleep, dream. The bigger resorts, like the original Sands and the Desert Inn, towered over palm trees that lined the sidewalks where tourists

snapped pictures with bulky cameras. The city drew me in immediately with the hypnotic landscape of flashing neon lights and the beckoning energy of fun.

Kimmie hooked up with an escort agency while I “freelanced” or “walked the carpet” on my own. Instead of going on escort calls, I hung out at the bars in the casino, eyeing the men I could turn into a trick. My way, my hustle, my money.

I’ll never forget wearing my father’s royal-blue cardigan sweater my first night working in Las Vegas. I had taken it from his closet when I lived in Wisconsin, and though it was baggy, I cinched it up with a wide sequined belt and wore a revealing lacey tank underneath. Sexy and chic.

I staked my claim at Caesar’s Palace. Though the Vegas scene was mesmerizing—the flashing lights, the constant ringing of slot machines, the crowd of people standing shoulder to shoulder with jackpots gleaming in their eyes, the cocktail waitresses in their teeny skirts and busting bosoms balancing trays of drinks—I kept my excitement contained. I was still underage and couldn’t gamble or drink. If any of the security guards got wind of how young I was, I could end up in jail. It’s an artful balance, being seductively alluring to draw men your way while not attracting the wrong kind of attention.

I sat at the bar, below impressive chandeliers that gave off a soft light, and eyed the well-dressed crowd that started to gather around the sleek cocktail tables. A gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair in his late fifties sat down beside me. As he reached forward with his hand to get the bartender’s attention, I noticed his gold Rolex watch. *Cha-ching!*

After he ordered a drink, he turned to me. I had discreetly moved my stool closer to his so he could catch a whiff of my expensive French perfume and so I could be close enough to lightly touch his arm if we were to chat.

He smiled at me, my open invitation.

“What are you doing here?” I asked in a flirtatious tone.

“I’m here on business,” he answered. “Can I buy you a drink?”

While I nursed my rum and Coke, he asked what I was doing. “I’m here on business too. My name is Fallen, and I’m here to make men happy.” I inched my way closer, placing my manicured hand on his forearm. “Do you want to go upstairs and get happy?”

The man turned bright red. I didn't let his embarrassment stop me and did my best to close the deal. "You can either spend your money on the floor and take your chances, or spend your money on me. Your best bet, of course, is to stick with me because I'm going to guarantee you a good time."

It was easy to turn on the charm, to activate Fallen. She could get practically any man into a bed. She was fearless, confident, and in charge. It didn't take long for us to make our way into his hotel room. A half hour later I left with \$500 (with the rate of inflation that's just about \$1,000 today). He stayed in bed with a smile.

I turned about ten tricks in a few days, pocketing more money than I knew what to do with. The day I flew back home to Minneapolis, I had already made my choice. I hugged my newly purchased Chanel purse close to my chest and tuned out the flight attendant reciting safety instructions. Peering out the window as the colors of Vegas dulled and white puffs of clouds surrounded the jet, I made an official plan to make my dreams come true. I'd keep my job at IDS but quit my moonlighting jobs at the Japanese steakhouse and pizza place, using those open slots in my schedule to work nights as a fancy high-class call girl. I thought about my love for music and dreamt about the guitars, keyboards, and sound equipment I could buy to help write my own music. I set my own foot race, seeing how fast I could make good money.

* * *

Vacation was over. When I went back to work after my two-week break, the microcosm of my world in Minneapolis hit me with shocking force. The frigid air whipped my face as I walked speedily through the parking deck, up the elevator, and resumed my duties working with microfiche and the IBM computer in my cubicle.

After my first day back, I pulled a giant yellow phone book out of my kitchen drawer and looked up escort agencies. I dialed the number of one at random and made arrangements to begin working. I was given a beeper and told they'd be in touch when calls came in.

My experience was nothing like prostituting myself in Hawaii. It wasn't as glamorous. Though I had some clients who lived in beautiful lakeside homes, there were times I found myself in seedy motel rooms and apartments that hadn't seen a mop or vacuum in years and that reeked of urine. I never felt safe being in that type of environment. And the money compared to Hawaii was terrible.

As hard as I tried to keep my new part-time job under wraps, some people caught on. My sister wasn't one of them, however. She was busy with work and life. We never spoke much about my personal life other than the guy I was into at the moment.

I was at work one day, combing through a ledger sheet for one of our clients, tapping my foot to the beats of Janet Jackson playing low on my mini pink boom box, when my supervisor buzzed in my line. "Annie." She sounded concerned. "Can you come into my office for a few minutes?"

My friend in the adjoining cubicle overheard her and mockingly joked, "Oooh, you're in trouble."

"Maybe I'm getting a raise," I retorted, laughing and putting aside my ledger. I did hear some rumbling in the office gossip chain that I was possibly being considered for a promotion into another department.

The minute I sat down in my supervisor's office, I knew something was wrong. I doubted this impromptu meeting had anything to do with getting a raise.

"Annie, I don't even know how to begin to say this." She nervously wrung her hands and looked down at her desk. When her eyes gazed back into mine, there was something about them, a sense of compassion. I still felt uncomfortable, but noticed a slight release of anxiety.

"Annie, I heard, um, a rumor that you were, uh, selling your body in Hawaii."

My heart raced like the speed of sound, and I shifted awkwardly in my seat. How on earth did she find out? I did tell a friend of mine at work, but surely she wouldn't betray my confidence. Would she? I was so embarrassed but denied every bit of the truth. The next day I resigned.

What a shame. What a waste! I was doing so well at IDS, and I was beginning to get noticed by the higher-ups and was being assigned more responsibilities. Looking back, I know I would have moved far up that corporate ladder into an executive position, but I foolishly tossed away all that potential for what I thought was my American dream of making money and being a successful business woman.

My supervisor wasn't the only one who called me out. I had made many friends hanging out at the clubs, namely local musicians, including the band Mazarati, formed by Prince. I never considered myself a groupie. I just wanted to do music. And that day came, when one of my friend's in the Prince circle asked if I wanted to sing some background vocals for a friend on an album his friend was recording. *Yes, please!* I was

in the studio one evening, the same one where Janet Jackson recorded her album *Control*, laying down vocal tracks for one of his buddies, when I got paged.

"I've got to go," I told my friend Eric. "I'll be right back." I grabbed my long wool coat off the chair and started walking toward the door, trying to remember where I had last seen the closest pay phone.

Eric reached out for my arm before I could leave and started giving me the third degree. "Whoa, wait a second. What do you mean? Where are you going? And why do you have a beeper?"

I rolled my eyes and tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let go. "Annie, what are you doing? Are you selling drugs?" he asked with genuine concern.

"No, uh, of course, uh, not . . ." I stammered, suddenly feeling guilty, ashamed.

"Oh, come on, Annie, what's going on?" He continued to hound me with question after question, and though at first I denied every one of his accusations, I finally burst into tears and told him the truth. "Look," I sputtered, the words falling out with force. "It's no big deal. I go on calls. I make good money. What are you in my grill for? Let it go!" The strange thing was, I wasn't really ashamed of what I was doing at the time; I just felt shamed when others knew my business.

He took me to dinner later that night, bringing with him a Gideon Bible. As my soup got cold, he read to me passages from the New Testament about Jesus and His love for people, for sinners. He read about Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery. "Annie, what you're doing is a terrible thing. You've got to stop it!" I didn't detect a tone of judgment from his words; it was clear Eric cared for my soul.

I felt bad. I really did. I cried, almost choking on the ice water I forced myself to drink, trying to get a grip. I agreed with him. He was right, I said. I had to stop selling my body. That night, through a heartfelt prayer to God, I decided to quit the escort business. I wouldn't sell my body ever again, no matter how tempting the money or the offer.

But I still needed to pay my bills, so I took up stripping instead. It seemed an obvious alternative. I loved music. I loved to dance. And I loved men. Besides, stripping to me wasn't the same thing as prostitution because I believed that if a man wasn't allowed to touch your body, you were just a visual fantasy and weren't getting paid for sex. (I now realize the absurdity of my thinking. Truth is, if a man is looking at you with

a fantasy in his head, he is lusting after you, and more than likely will act on that lust through porn, self-gratification, or other women.) But of course I didn't think of those implications.

I got gigs through an entertainment agency called PartyTime that sent me to different clubs and bachelor parties and even to popular establishments in nearby Wisconsin. Stripping was not easy to do at first. I was scared to death, petrified at the thought of a group of men seeing my nearly naked body and dancing in skyscraping stiletto heels I could barely even walk on. Having two shots of tequila and listening to the pulsating music before I got on stage helped. Eventually it became easier. The attention was addicting. I started to love teasing guys who professed their undying love for me. I swayed on shiny poles on many a catwalk stage, enticing men with my slow gyrations while they threw tens and twenties at my feet. While I would flash customers to bring home a few extra bucks, I never did private lap dances or anything "extra." At least not at first.

Every club was different. Some were seedy, some more luxurious. But still, a strip club is a strip club, no matter how fancy it looks. All kinds of men frequented these "Gentleman's Cabarets"—young, old, married, single, blue collar, suits, you name it. As a stripper, I was a guy's ultimate fantasy. I could be whatever they wanted me to be, no strings attached.

One of the regular customers who stands out was a heavysset man we dancers nicknamed "Pete the Millionaire." Every time I danced, he forked over at least \$400 at my feet. I took turns with the other girls dancing for Pete so everyone could get a piece of the action.

I worked hard, booking as many gigs as I could a day, keeping only a night or two free so I could do my own partying. After a while, I got a few regulars. I called them my fans. They would fill up every first row seat at the cocktail tables by the stage and toss the greenbacks my way, raising their sweaty brows in approval of my more risqué moves. Some of the guys seemed to be genuinely interested in me. Some of them even asked me why I was stripping. "Fallen, you're a smart girl," they'd tell me. "What are you doing in a place like this?" Fallen just smiled sweetly and thanked them for what I guessed was a compliment.

Stripping on a stage was far safer than meeting strange men at rundown motels. I felt secure in the strip joints, quite untouchable. But the thrill only lasted for a brief

time. Some of the attention got creepy. A few guys got weirdly obsessed with me, hunting me down at the end of shows; some of them even proposed.

The hard fact is, just taking off your clothes on a stage, several feet away from groping hands, doesn't earn you a ton of money. A few months after I started stripping, my checking account was practically depleted. Looking at my bank statements made me depressed. I had bills and rent to pay. I was living on my own for the first time in a charming downtown apartment outfitted with black-and-gold lacquer furniture, satin couches, and music equipment I bought with my earnings, including an electric Fender Stratocaster guitar, a Korg M50 keyboard, and a Hohner guitar. It was expensive living on my own, and my lifestyle was definitely not cheap. I needed some cold, hard cash and fast. Pride kicked in. I couldn't lose my very own first place! That would make me look bad to others, especially after I quit my good job at IDS . . . it would embarrass me.

One of my regulars, a blue-collar average Joe who would follow me to all my local shows, had been asking me for weeks to hang out. Mind you, this wasn't to watch a movie and share a tub of popcorn. I finally gave in. He was a nice enough guy, and I felt safe around him. Why not let him pay me to have sex with him? My alter ego coaxed me, "Get on with yourself, Annie. Step aside so Fallen can get this money—she will handle everything just fine."

So I resorted to the quick fix, the easy way out, the path of the familiar. Sleeping with that one client set me on a downward spiral, but at this point in my life I didn't care anymore. I knew I'd do this over and over, but it was my decision and I figured I could quit whenever I wanted to. The truth is, greed took over my heart.

I started taking more and more clients up on their offer to pay good money for a quickie in their hotel or at their home. The money poured in slowly and sporadically. I had a good thing going, or so I thought. Annie had started to fade away at this point. The egomaniac Fallen fed my thoughts, convincing me this was what I needed to do: I was smart, learning how to use what I had to earn a bankroll, and ultimately it was a win-win if I could make a lot of money to justify the means.

I had the power. I had the control. But when you keep playing with matches, it's only a matter of time before a tiny spark ignites a roaring, uncontrollable fire that destroys everything around you.

He Who Sold Me a Dream

“Much dreaming and many words are meaningless.”

—Ecclesiastes 5:7 NIV

The Skyway Lounge in downtown Minneapolis was a happening strip joint. Slick businessmen in fancy suits strolled in for lunch and after work, ties loosened, money rolling. The tips were great, the best in the area, and dancers lined up to work at this place. I was lucky to be a regular.

One Saturday night I was dancing to Prince’s “Kiss,” giving some special customers a little extra glimpse of skin, when in walked a man who caught my attention. The bright lights illuminating the catwalk stage couldn’t distract me from how gorgeous he was. A cross between a young Billy Dee Williams and Denzel Washington, he wore a gray tweed suit and pointy loafers. He walked confidently, light and smooth, his Jeri Curl pulled back in a sleek ponytail.

Mr. Hotness moved toward the stage, almost in rhythm to the blaring song, and sat down in front of me. He looked up at my face and, never taking his eyes away for a second, pulled out a couple of twenties and laid them before me like a five-course meal for a starving girl.

I was so taken aback by how good looking this guy was and the obvious attention he was giving me, I almost tripped over my stilettos. I was so nervous, he might as well have been my first schoolgirl crush. The tip he left was big, and I owed him some well-earned attention in return. So I finished the rest of my set in his honor, dancing just for him.

The song ended, and to the tune of echoing applause and catcalls, I walked up the spiral staircase to the dark but spacious dressing room. Bright bulbs outlined the wall-length mirror. Counter space overflowed with bottles of lotion, glitter, hairspray, countless tubes of mascara and lipstick, and empty beer bottles and shot glasses smeared with faint lipstick marks. Clothing racks rammed in the corner were stuffed with revealing, sparkly outfits, puffy feather boas and stripper shoes in all sizes littered

the floor. I stared in the mirror and did a final beauty check. Anxiously fixing my tousled hair, I wondered if that heavenly vision of a man was still downstairs. Maybe he'd even talk to me. I was giddy with excitement. Ah, the wonders of lust.

When I walked into the main area of the strip club, sashaying through the smoky haze as cool as I could be, I smiled and made sweet small talk with some of my regulars but politely refused their offers for a drink. Turned out the man I was interested in was waiting for me at the bar.

"I'm Julian," he said, offering a warm, lingering handshake. "And you, baby, are super fine! My kind of woman!"

I blushed shyly at the compliment. "I'm Fallen." My nerves got the best of me, and the pitch of my voice embarrassingly shot up a seeming octave higher.

We talked for a bit, him twirling the drink in his hand in slow, deliberate circles. Julian told me he was a businessman. I never asked for specifics. I imagined he was successful, whatever his work, by the look of his shiny gold watch, which was dripping with diamonds. Julian was extremely charming, sweet, and smart. I was impressed. And I liked him. A lot. Too much, in fact. Something deep inside me said this man and my desperate desire for him was dangerous, but my fantasy of what the relationship could be far outweighed my reasoning. This could be "the one," the love of my life.

Drinks turned into dinner later that night outside the club. More talking, more flirting, more desperate desire. Even though I had many relationships that tore my heart in two, I wasn't willing to give up that easily. Though I desired both love and money, money had proven to be a more reliable companion—but if love became part of the package, great! With Julian I felt there was a heated spark of hope left. I believed I had a soul mate out there somewhere, and I was determined to be happy in love, no matter the cost. I was suspicious of men, which is why it was easy for me to get money out of guys in the strip club, but I still wore my heart on my sleeve. Julian was no dummy. He saw right through me from the start—a teenage girl, broken but desperately craving attention.

* * *

We started dating immediately. The romance was swift, but I didn't care because I wanted to dive right in. Julian, who was a few years older, took me shopping frequently. He'd buy me sexy dresses for the clubs and ornate yet skimpy costumes for my shows. He'd surprise me with gold necklaces and diamond earrings and tell me,

“Baby, I want to give you this because you’re very special to me.” I’ll admit, I loved being spoiled. I was just as materialistic as he was. We were the perfect match in that respect. I wanted him to be wealthy and make money so he could spend it on me.

Julian was an awesome dancer, and we spent many nights shaking our booties at the local night clubs. He was well known by many of the Minneapolis club and bar owners, and many of them would let us in without having to pay the cover charge. That impressed me! We would roll right into the VIP sections where the big boys of the city sprawled out over leather couches, enjoying the overt, adoring attention of beautiful young ladies.

My man was a romantic, always buying me single red roses and singing in my ear. He’d get real close, nuzzle my neck, and sweetly sing classic R&B love songs like, “You Are My Lady” by Freddie Jackson: “You are my lady / You’re everything I need and more . . .” He reeled me in with these songs, caused my heart to go pitter-patter, and made me feel as though I was on top of the world.

We’d take long rides in his brand-new Lincoln Continental, talking about our dreams, the things we would do together. He’d say, “Baby, I know you want more out of life. I do too. We have so much in common!” At this point I didn’t even question what he did for a living, or the cash he always seemed to have on hand. Everything he said fit perfectly with what I thought I wanted for my life. Though I was head over heels in love, I kept our passionate romance quiet, just like I did my escort jobs. Besides, no one would understand the love and desire I had for this guy.

Whenever we went out, Julian held me close, proudly displaying me as “his woman.” I liked that. One night his possessive side showed its true colors. We were at a club when some random guy grabbed my butt while I was getting us some drinks. I whipped around and gave the guy a dirty look and marched, shots in hand, right up to Julian. I told him what had happened and he went wild. Julian erupted in a rage, eyes wild with fire, and roared, “Where is he? Where’s that guy?” as he manically looked around the dance floor for the unsuspecting dude. When I pointed him out, Julian got in his face, screaming obscenities, and punched him right in the mouth, knocking out the guy’s two front teeth. Fellow clubbers circled around like vultures while Julian pounded balled-up fists into the guy’s face. Someone called the police, who swiftly arrived on the scene and hauled my man to jail. Julian was in cuffs, getting dragged out of the club by men in uniform, when he yelled, “I love you, baby!” I felt protected.

Julian was my prince, my guardian, my hero, and I was his princess. Just as I had always dreamed about.

I quickly grew to trust Julian. One day we were lying on my black satin couch watching a movie when he turned to me and asked where I was getting the money to afford all this nice stuff—the clothes, the music equipment, the designer handbags. “Dancers aren’t true hustlers to the bone,” he casually remarked, “they just think they are. But they really don’t know how to make a lot of money.”

I laughed and proudly puffed out my chest. “Well, I do!”

Julian leaned in closer, his fingers seductively trailing down the side of my face. “Oh really? How’s that?”

I had no reason to lie. I didn’t see the need. I felt comfortable with him, open. I bragged that every client in the strip club was a john to be tricked. How naïve the men I met were. I didn’t want him thinking I was a whore, however, and made it clear that the only reason I was doing this was to save up money for college. I was a smart business woman. Escorting was a temporary fling. I also made sure to point out I wasn’t doing it all the time.

I expected some sort of shock, or at the least an expression of surprise, but Julian simply nodded, as if having sex with strangers for money were a natural side job. “Wow,” he said, nodding with approval. “That’s hip, baby. I dig it. Good for you! I got me a hustling woman!”

I’m sure he already knew what I was doing before I told him. Like I said, he wasn’t stupid. Julian made another strange comment during our conversation. He mentioned something about me bringing in more money than his other squares. I didn’t take Julian’s nonchalance and the odd remark as warning signs, however. I didn’t think it strange that he didn’t care I was sleeping with other men. In my mind, his acceptance of my part-time job only affirmed his love for me. *He gets it, I thought. And loves me unconditionally. Jackpot, baby!*

I wasn’t the only one with some secrets. Julian shared some with me, but not everything. He confided that he spent the last seven years in prison, selling me a dramatic sob story of how he had been set up by his ex-girlfriend, who worked in a massage parlor. According to him, she had lied to the police about some illicit activity he was involved with and as a result got wrongfully locked up in the penitentiary. Julian put on a convincing show of being the victim. He was trying to do the right thing

in life but kept running into some bad luck. (I found out the truth when I moved to Vegas. He went to prison for attempting to set his ex's massage parlor on fire.)

He also admitted he dealt cocaine on the side, but I wasn't surprised. Crack cocaine was at its height in the late eighties, although I'd never done hard drugs before—just smoked pot occasionally. I was impressed with his opportunistic nature, his wisdom in taking advantage of the market. While I knew he was smart, I wasn't impressed with the possibility that he could get caught and go to jail for a long time. I tried to encourage him to stop. Time and time again I told him, "Look, we both have to figure out a new trade." We even talked about opening a jewelry store one day. It seemed like a good career move. I mean, I did love diamonds, precious gems, and gold.

Because I was curious why we never hung out at his place, he also told me he was living with a woman, who also happened to be a major dope dealer. "We're just friends," he promised, and reassured me nothing romantic was going on between them. Even though he said they were "just friends," I was extremely jealous of his time away from me.

The more I got to know Julian, the more I learned about his past. It wasn't pretty. He grew up on the streets and learned to survive by shooting dice. His dad left him when he was just a few years old. His mother hated Julian simply because he looked like his dad. Out of disgust, she would beat him mercilessly. When Julian was in his early teens, she finally told him, "I can't stand looking at you anymore. Get out!" He hit the streets on his own, not even a legal adult. I felt sorry for him, for the little boy in him who didn't even stand a chance. In hindsight, I can see where Julian's rage came—his deep-seated anger not only toward his mother but also for a father he never knew.

Knowing his history made it a lot easier to turn a blind eye to his bad behavior and make excuses for him. And ignore the obvious. Our relationship was a ticking bomb, but I didn't see red flags. I only saw a man who needed love and a second chance at happiness. I understood that and could relate on some level to his pain. It drew me closer to him.

Dating Julian was hard, not just because of his past, but also because of the emotional intensity. There were no moments of calm. Everything about our relationship was heightened—our passion, our fights, our words, our desire, our emotions. If he didn't call one evening, I'd be devastated, spending the rest of the night with my stomach in knots, unable to sleep. When I wasn't with Julian, I actually felt sick, a

familiar feeling I had with other boyfriends, including Jerry. I was lovesick. I felt like I had no power over his overwhelming hold and all the emotions I was experiencing. I thought Julian was the cure for my sickness, and believe me, he knew it.

I would also compare my relationship with Julian to Kimmie's with her boyfriend's. I admired how well he treated her. He was so warm and kind and often showered her with gifts. She felt adored, valued, fulfilled; I wanted to feel the same way. My love tank had been empty for so long, and I was desperate for attention—any attention, positive or negative—I devoured every word, every touch, and every false promise Julian threw my way. Toxic? Yes. Unhealthy? Definitely. But to me at the time? Nothing but true love! I saw Julian as the savior I had been waiting for my whole life. What I really needed was Jesus my Savior. Unfortunately I was so lost in this relationship that I was blind to the truth.

* * *

A few months after we started dating, sometime during the summer of 1988, Julian started standing me up. I'd page him but he wouldn't call back for hours, sometimes even days. One particular time we had made plans to have dinner and check out a club that had just opened. I waited for him at home, touching up my hair and makeup for the hundredth time, when I realized he wasn't coming. I was so angry. A few hours later, when he called to apologize and asked me to meet him somewhere, I told him I was done with the mind games. "It's over," I said. Even though in my heart, I didn't mean it—I knew that if I said it was over, it would hurt him and I could get even somehow. I was fed up with his behavior. As hard as it was to be apart, the roller-coaster ride of emotions was getting old. And I could no longer handle him not showing up for me on a regular basis. I needed to show him that I refused to be treated like a doormat.

That night I decided to check out the new club anyway with my girlfriend. I picked her up, venting the entire way about my jerk of an ex-boyfriend. How I was teaching him a lesson. I was running low on gas so I made a pit stop. As I held the nozzle in my hand, still steaming mad, my girlfriend piped up from inside the car, "Girl, you'll forget all about that dude once we get our drink on tonight! Pick yourself up another guy!"

I looked up at the sky, the twinkling bright lights gazing down on me, and sighed. I missed Julian, but maybe breaking up was for the best. In the middle of my

silent monologue, I heard the sound of screeching tires and smelled rubber. I reoriented myself in just enough time to see Julian's car flying into the gas station. The tires squealed and the car came to a screeching halt, just inches away from hitting the back of my car.

I was stunned. I couldn't move. He jumped out of the car like an Olympian, the slamming door echoing in the quiet Minneapolis neighborhood, and started yelling obscenities at me. Before I could say a word, he pushed me against the metal car door, grabbed me by the neck, and gripped tight. And tighter. Until I realized I couldn't breathe. I blindly started swinging my hands at his face as my friend was screaming for help. All I saw was his fist. I crumpled to the ground, tearing my new miniskirt on the edge of the car door. I didn't know it at the time, but the minute I hit the concrete, he turned on my friend and started choking her and telling her to shut up. She maced him! Then he was gone, with the same screech of tires fading into the distance.

(Side note: My friend who was with me that night recently reminded me of this incident as I was writing this chapter. I had completely put the entire episode out of my mind, I think out of denial. I didn't want to believe the man I loved was bad. She even showed me the pictures she took of me after Julian had hit me.)

My friend and I went to the police station that night and I filed a report. I stayed away from Julian for about a month, ignoring his phone calls and avoiding him at all costs. He left message after message apologizing, and he even showed up at one of the clubs where I danced. Every apology, every plea for mercy, included one or more or all of the following, laced with profanities where he deemed appropriate:

"I'm sorry I lost my temper."

"I don't know what got into me."

"I'll change."

"I can't live without you."

"You're *my* woman!"

"I don't want us to be apart."

"You make me go crazy!"

"You're the best woman I've ever had!"

"I've never loved anyone as much as you!"

One evening I sat on the edge of a bed in a luxury downtown hotel watching a man count out loud a few hundreds that he slapped down on the marble dresser top.

“Ready?” He smiled at me, putting out the cigarette that had accidentally dropped ashes all over the plush carpet in his excited anticipation. Dialing up Fallen, I nodded seductively and beckoned him over. When he left twenty minutes later, leaving me to lay alone on the Egyptian cotton sheets for the rest of the forty minutes of the paid room, I thought about Julian.

Traveling back to my childhood, I remembered the scenes where my father begged my mom for forgiveness. She always accepted his tearful apologies. She forgave; I should too. In my heart I believed Julian’s violent episode was an isolated incident. I thought of different reasons why his outrage would perhaps be justified. *Maybe he was set off by a childhood memory. Maybe someone did something to piss him off. Maybe he got conned out of a drug deal and lost money. Everyone deserves another chance. I mean, we all lose it from time to time, right?*

I missed him. How do you explain loving someone you fear? I don’t know. It was the beginning of intense brainwashing, and also of me wanting to fix whatever was wrong with him and with us. I believed in the power of love so strongly that I was convinced it would change him and nothing like this would ever happen again. He was my beast, I was determined to be his beauty.

Julian and I got back together, and I even offered to let him move in with me. He had been talking about the problems he was having with his roommate, so it seemed a natural next step to get out of that messy situation and shack up with me. Recently I had moved into a brand-new apartment near the Lake of the Isles in a prestigious area of town. Beautiful custom mini mansions overlooked the tranquil waters near my complex. I felt like I had arrived. My apartment was small but stunning, with new appliances, sparkling tile, beautiful gold carpet, and shiny hardwood floors.

When Julian moved in with me, he brought with him a TV camera monitoring system that was connected to the Minneapolis probation department. Initially I didn’t understand what the mesh of wires and equipment were about. I just thought it had something to do with the cable, VHS, or a gaming system. But when I saw the grainy black-and-white video footage of the police department, I was shocked. As Julian knelt in front of the electronic gadget, turning knobs and adjusting settings, I demanded he tell me what was going on.

He added to the sob story he had told me earlier. As part of his probation, he was put on house arrest after serving time and wasn't allowed to leave the state. Each morning and night he had to check in with his probation officer via video camera.

I loved Julian deeply and felt he'd been cheated by life, by his ex, by the police. I wanted to be there for him, and I was, even though there were countless times he would disappear for hours before making sure to "check in" with the probation department on the camera. I always asked where he was. His typical response was that he was "taking care of business."

Over the next few months, the police started harassing Julian more frequently. He told me they were always on his tail, following his every move and frequently pulling him over on the road, giving him the third degree. In a way, I felt the cops were being prejudiced and were only messing with him because he was a black man dating a white chick. But things had to change. There was too much drama happening with the cops. I thought about moving. Besides, I was getting really tired of the exotic dancing scene in Minnesota, and Julian knew it.

So I made a drastic move. My girlfriend Kimmie had moved from Hawaii to Vegas. I called and asked her if Julian and I could visit for a few months, while still keeping our apartment in Minneapolis. Kimmie warned me Julian was up to no good and word on the street was that he was a violent man with a crazy temper, but I refused to believe her because I was in love. Believing her would wreck the fantasy I was in, as well as the potential for happiness I'd never known, so I assured her, "You don't know anything about him. He is sweet and kind and has a big heart."

Reluctantly, she agreed. Julian and I started packing up a few things, making plans to stay with Kimmie and her man for a week or two until we got settled on our own. I was so done with the Midwest. I wanted way more than this cold and dreary place had to offer. The lights were calling me home.