Redefining Realness

My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More

JANET MOCK

Chapter Eight

Wendi's first words to me were "Mary! You mahu?"

I was sitting on a park bench as Jeff ran around with his friends on the lawn that separated my school from his. Wendi was passing by with her volleyball in hand, her backpack bouncing on her butt, and her drive-by inquiry in the air. Though there was definitely a question mark floating around, her direct yet playful approach made me internalize her words as a statement. If she's asking—even kiddingly—then I must be suspect, I thought.

Everyone took notice of Wendi. She was hard to miss, prancing around Kalakaua Intermediate School in super-short soccer shorts, with her green mop of hair vibrantly declaring her presence. Subtlety was not—and still isn't—her thing. Her irritated red skin, peppered with acne, glistened with sweat as she played volleyball on campus. I'd never been this close to her, and her scrutinizing stare was intimidating.

Jeff, whom I picked up every day after school while Chad was at basketball or baseball practice, wasn't paying attention, but I remem-
ber feeling self-conscious. I was afraid that if I got close to Wendi or someone saw me interacting with her, I would be called mahu—a word that I equated to sissy. In my playground experience with the term, it was an epithet, thrown at any boy who was perceived to be too feminine. Until Wendi crossed paths with me, I was under the impression that I was doing a good job at being butch enough that such words wouldn’t be thrown my way.

I was afraid that Wendi had seen me, but beneath that fear of being visible was a sense of belonging that thrilled me. I recognize now that her stopping to ask, “You mahu?” (though I would later learn she didn’t identify as such) was her attempt at finding others like her—a connection I wasn’t ready to make. I gave her a scrunched, crumpled expression resembling adamant denial, which made her roll her eyes and prance away.

At the time, mahu was limited by our Western interpretation, mostly used as a pejorative. What I later learned in my Hawaiian studies classes in college was that mahu defined a group of people who embodied the diversity of gender beyond the dictates of our Western binary system. Mahu were often assigned male at birth but took on feminine gender roles in Kanaka Maoli (indigenous Hawaiian) culture, which celebrated mahu as spiritual healers, cultural bearers and breeders, caretakers, and expert hula dancers and instructors (or Kumus in Hawaiian). In the Western understanding and evolution of mahu, it translates to being transgender in its loosest understanding: to cross social boundaries of gender and/or sex. Like that of Hawaii’s neighboring Polynesian islands, mahu is similar to the mahu vahine in Tahiti, fa'afafine in Samoa, and fakaleiti in Tonga, which comes from the Tongan word faka (meaning “to have the way of”) and leiti (meaning “lady”). Historically, Polynesian cultures carved an “other” category in gender, uplifting the diversity, span, and spectrum in human expression.

To be mahu was to occupy a space between the poles of male and female in precolonial Hawaii, where it translated to “hermaphrodite,” used to refer to feminine boys or masculine girls. But as puritanical missionaries from the West influenced Hawaiian culture in the nineteenth century, their Christian, homophobic, and gender binary systems pushed mahu from the center of culture to the margins. Mahu became a slur, one used to describe male-to-female transgender people and feminine men who were gay or perceived as gay due to their gender expression. Despite mahu’s modern evolution, it was one of the unique benefits of growing up in a diverse place like Hawaii, specifically Oahu (which translates to “the gathering place”), where multiculturalism was the norm. It was empowering to come of age in a place that recognized that diversity existed not only in ethnicities but also in gender. There was a level of tolerance regarding gender nonconformity that made it safer for people like Wendi and me to exist as we explored and expressed our identities.

The first person I met who took pride in being mahu was my hula instructor at school. Kumu Kauai was one of those mahu who reclaimed her place in society—specifically, being celebrated in the world of hula, where the presence and talent of mahu was valuable. Some trans women, who actively engaged in restoring native Hawaiian culture, reclaimed mahu at that time, choosing to call themselves mahuwahine (wahine is Hawaiian for “woman”), just as some people in marginalized communities reclaimed formerly derogatory words like dyke, fag, nigger, queer, and tranny. It was theirs to claim, use, and uplift. Kumu didn’t call herself a woman or gay despite her femininity and preference for she and her as pronouns. She simply identified as mahu and had no qualms about the vessel she was given and nor any desire to change it.

Kumu had long, bushy black hair that waved all the way to her behind, which she draped in bright floral-print pareos or lavalava
mixed plate of a kid, how to mirror the movements of my ancestors and give thanks for the island culture that respected various other identities.

Wendi similarly captivated me because she refused to be jailed by anyone's categories or expectations. There was no confining this girl. I noticed her everywhere after our brief exchange, during which she recognized something in me that I thought I had expertly hidden behind buzz cuts and polo shirts. I took note of her slamming her volleyball at recess, whipping her flamboyant bob around campus, carrying her black flute case as she sashayed to band practice. What still stuns me about Wendi is that no one tolerated her. She was not something to be tolerated. She was accepted as fact, just as one would accept the plumpness of the lunch ladies or the way Auntie Peggy, the counselors' secretary, would grab your palm as you waited for a meeting and read you your future (I recall her telling me, "You're going to get married in white!"). Wendi's changing hues, her originality, her audacity to be fully herself, was embraced and probably even more respected at an age when the rest of us were struggling and striving to fit in.

I refuse to pretend, though, that her uniqueness didn't make her a target. Wendi was called *faggot* at recess and asked when she was going to get her sex change. She used such ignorance as ammunition, threatening to kiss the boys who sought to humiliate her. I wasn't as daring as Wendi, and looking at her I was frightened by what I saw: myself. I told no one about her calling me *mahu* at the swings and avoided her as her long legs in her rolled-up shorts and knee-high socks glided past me in the halls.

Instead, I became all the more unwavering in my commitment to being the good son that year. I didn't put up a fight when it came to haircuts at the beauty school that offered barber discounts. I earned awards for my academic performance in class, was bumped into
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advanced courses, and even worked as an editor for the yearbook and the quarterly newspaper. My teachers praised and encouraged me, and in the spring of 1996, I was inducted into the National Junior Honor Society. I was the only boy from our class to be inducted. I loved the distinction of only, though the boy part I could’ve done without.

At our induction ceremony, Mom, Chad, Jeff, Cori, and the girls sat in the audience as I received my certificate and posed for pictures with Mr. Higa, my counselor and our NJHS faculty adviser, and the rest of the girls, who surrounded me in white dresses. I wore a white button-down shirt with black slacks and my knockoff Timberland boots. This was around the time when I began parting my shorn curls at the side, resembling what I imagined was a Halle Berry-esque hairdo, a haircut that Cori loved to tease: “You look like Gumby!” All teasing was aside that day as I beamed in our school library with its gray carpet and rows of books and encyclopedias and Hawaiian quilts hanging on the wall. My family sat in the brown metal foldout chairs, listening to our rendition of Celine Dion’s “Because You Loved Me.”

That same year, I had my first and only girlfriend for a couple of weeks. We met in Mr. Wong’s social studies class, where she sat behind me, wearing gray contact lenses that made her sharp eyes look catlike and a short haircut that complemented her petite frame. Like the majority of kids in Kalahi, she was Filipino. I adored her. We spoke on the phone regularly as friends, and then all of a sudden I was her “boyfriend,” something instigated and encouraged by our peers, since we hung out so much. I reluctantly went along with it, carrying the title for those two weeks because she made me appear normal. I didn’t want to stick out like Wendi, who would enter my every day during the second half of seventh grade, when we had band class together.

I played tuba, she the flute and piccolo. I was envious of her com-
"Sickening, yeah?" Wendi would snap as we giddily skipped out of the thrift store, swinging our white plastic bags filled with donated clothes for just under twenty dollars.

We became a regular sight on Gulick Avenue, prancing up and down that main road in Kalihini from her two-bedroom apartment, where she lived with her grandparents, to my house on Owawa Street. What strikes me now is that no one in my family raised an eyebrow when Wendi came to our house. Mom didn't pull me aside and have a talk with me about my friend. Cori never teased me or Wendi. Chad and Jeff were nothing but cordial, gamely sleeping in the living room so Wendi and I could have the room all to ourselves. Wendi quickly became a regular, welcomed presence in my house. A part of me believes that I brought her around at a time when I was reluctant to vocalize who I was. Her presence allowed me to show another layer of my identity to my family. Their nonchalance helped rebut my fears of rejection.

My baby brother, Jeff, who was only seven at the time, later confessed that he was "confused" by Wendi's flamboyance and even more "confused" by my evolution. "You were always different," he later told me, citing that when he heard he had two older brothers, he thought Mom had misspoken because he'd seen a boy and a girl with wild curly hair get off the plane.

"You were never like Chad and me," he said. "You never wanted to do the things that we liked to do." Jeff even recalled an incident (that I don't remember) when I was picking him up from school. A group of boys at the recreation center asked him how he felt about his brother becoming his sister. Jeff's memory strikes me because I think my growing confidence and self-assuredness under the light of my friendship with Wendi blocked memories of the verbal brutality thrown our way.

As I look back, what impresses me about my family is their openness. They patiently let me lead the way and kept any confusion or worry to themselves during a fragile period in my self-discovery. I recognize this as one of the biggest gifts they gave me. On some level, I knew they were afraid for me, afraid that I would be teased and taunted. Instead of trying to change me, they gave me love, letting me know that I was accepted. I could stop pretending and drop the mask. My family fortified my self-esteem, which I counted on as I embarked on openly expressing my rapidly evolving self.

Reflecting on this pivotal time in my life, I think of the hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) youth who are flung from intolerant homes, from families who reject them when they reveal themselves. Of the estimated 1.6 million homeless and runaway American youth, as many as 40 percent are LGBTQ, according to a 2006 report by the Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless. A similar study by the Williams Institute cited family rejection as the leading cause of the disproportionate number of homeless LGBT youth. These young people are kicked out of their homes or are left with no choice but to leave because they can't be themselves. That's something both Wendi and I fortunately never faced.

With an air of acceptance at home, it was fairly easy to approach my mother and declare my truth. Sitting at our kitchen table, I told Mom, with no extensive planning or thought, "I'm gay." I was thirteen years old and didn't know how to fully explain who I was, conflating gender identity and sexuality. What I remember about that brief exchange was Mom's warmth. She smiled at me, letting me know that it was okay. I felt loved and heard and, more important, not othered. From her lack of reaction—her brows didn't furrow, her brown irises didn't shift from side to side—I felt as if I had announced that I had on blue today, a simple fact that we were both aware of. Mom later told me that she remembers feeling afraid for me because she sensed
that there was more I wanted to say but didn’t know how to. “My love for you never diminished, but a part of me was scared that people would hurt you, and that is what I had a hard time with,” she told me recently.

A part of me was scared, too. I couldn’t acknowledge the gender stuff because I didn’t have a full understanding of it. Saying “I think I am a girl” would have been absurd for many reasons, including my fear that it would be a lot for my mother to handle. I didn’t know that trans people existed; I had no idea that it was possible for thirteen-year-old me to become my own woman. That was a fantasy.

But no matter how incomplete my revelation to my mother was, I felt freer and began openly expressing my femininity under the grooming of my best friend. On a throw pillow in Wendi’s lap, I rested my head as she tweezed my eyebrows on her grandmother’s plastic-covered couch. I held an ice cube to my swollen eye, trying to numb the stinging pain.

“You wanna look good, right?” she asked as I flinched from her tweezers. “Now I gotta make these even.”

As she studied the curve of my brows, I felt them getting thinner with each sting. Wendi claimed she knew what she was doing, and I didn’t doubt her skills because she excelled at everything, from volleyball and flute to beauty, her latest obsession. Wendi was unwaveringly authoritative; she’d read something in a magazine or a Kevyn Aucoin book, and suddenly, she was an expert. I accepted her as nothing less. I also didn’t doubt her because I trusted her. The tweezing was my first experience of intimacy with another person, and it foreshadowed our current professional roles, with Wendi serving as my makeup artist for photo shoots and TV appearances.

Wendi’s bedroom was sponge-painted purple, black, and white, and her grandparents gave her the freedom to be who she was, despite neighbors who referred to her as bakla (Tagalog for “sissy,” “gay,” or “fag”). She had a bunch of male underwear catalogs that she stacked atop her white dresser. She didn’t hide anything.

We’d stay up late talking about everything and nothing, the only way two people eager to know each other can. I have never been as open as I was in those first few months of my discovering friendship with Wendi. I had butterflies about having found someone like me with whom I didn’t have to explain anything. I was fearless about sharing myself with her. Wendi was the first person I told about Dad’s crack addiction, about the disappointment of my mother’s absence and her preference for men over me, about the times Derek had made me blow him. She in turn told me things she had never told anyone.

Wendi (I’ve known her only as Wendi; given names and “before” photos are irrelevant in our friendship) grew up in Kaneohe with her mother, who, like her father, struggled with meth addiction. I remember her giggling at her younger self when she told me she lost her virginity at eleven to a playmate a few years older than she was. “Girl, I was such an itchy queen!” she told me in reflection, adding that she’d been attracted to boys for as long as she could remember. There was never a point in her life when she pretended to be anything other than who she was. “That’s a waste of time,” she said. “And girl, you were not fooling anybody, trying to be butch. I locked you right away.”

For as long as I’ve known Wendi, she’s been unapologetic about who she is. I can see her clearly at six years old, snatching her cousin’s pink one-piece bathing suit and proclaiming, “I’m a girl! I’m ovah!” Wendi told me she remembers older mahu who frequented her family’s flower shop. “They were tall, with long hair, and wore pareos,” she said. “But girl, you could clock them right away. I didn’t want to look like that!” When she learned that her mother was having an affair with a neighbor, cheating on her stepfather, whom she adored, Wendi said it was easy for her—at only eleven—to make the decision to run
away, taking the bus across town to her paternal grandparents' home in Kahili, where she sought refuge and stability. "I knew that I wanted to transform without interruptions," she laughed. "And grandparents are always easy." Her Filipino grandparents took her in with no complaints about her femininity or the girls' world that she had created for herself.

It was in Wendi's room that I heard about hormones. She mentioned them as if discussing milk, something you had to drink in order to grow. She told me the older girls she knew ("These fierce, unclockable bitches!") went to a doctor in Waikiki who prescribed hormones for girls as young as sixteen. "I'm going to get my shots down when I turn sixteen," Wendi, who was fourteen at the time, said with excitement. "Trust."

I knew about hormones and puberty and safe sex from the handouts Coach Richardson gave us in health and physical education class. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he'd lecture us about how we were raging with hormones, changing the shape and feel of our bodies. I felt nothing, barely five-two and a little chunky in the face and thighs; puberty hadn't really touched me. But I noticed the suppleness of the girls in class, the ones who seemed to be towering over many of us in height and shape. They began to separate from the pack swimming way behind in the puberty kiddie pool.

"Your grandparents are going to let you do that?" I asked Wendi, stunned.

"They don't know what that is and can barely speak English," she said matter-of-factly. "My aunt's gonna take me."

I trusted that she would do exactly as she said she would, and I admired her unstoppable determination. Wendi's friendship gave me the audacity to be noticed. One morning after one of our beauty experiments, I walked into student council homeroom with arched brows that framed my almond-shaped eyes, which were sparkling with a brush of silver eye shadow that Wendi said no one would really notice because it was "natural-looking." The girls in class, the ones who wore the white SODA platform wedge sneakers I so coveted, said, "I like your makeup." I remember tucking my short curls behind my ears, beaming under the gaze my new look warranted.

One early evening after playing volleyball, Wendi and I visited a group of her friends in a reserved room at the recreation center. They were rehearsing for a show they did at Fusions, a gay club on Kuhio Avenue in Waikiki. Most of them were drag queens, but a select few were trans women who performed as showgirls. Society often blurs the lines between drag queens and trans women. This is highly problematic, because many people believe that, like drag queens, trans women go home, take off their wigs and chest plates, and walk around as men. Trans womanhood is not a performance or costume. As Wendi likes to joke, "A drag queen is part-time for showtime, and a trans woman is all the time!"

The lines continue to be blurred due to the umbrella term transgender, which bundles together diverse people (transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, drag performers, crossdressers, and gender-nonconforming folks) living with gender variance. Unfortunately, the data on the transgender population is scarce. The U.S. Census Bureau doesn't ask about gender identity, how trans people self-identify varies, and many (if asked) may not disclose that they're trans. The National Center for Transgender Equality has estimated that nearly 1 percent of the U.S. population is transgender, while the Williams Institute has stated that 0.3 percent of adults in the United States (nearly seven hundred thousand) identify as transgender, with the majority having taken steps to medically transition. This number does not take into account the number of transgender children or individuals who have expressed an incongruity between their assigned sex and gender identity or gender expression.
Despite the misconceptions, I understood the distinction between a drag queen and a trans woman because I came of age in the mid-nineties, and drag queens were in vogue. There was the 1995 release of _To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar_. I hated that movie because Wendi would tease that Noxema Jackson—Wesley Snipes’s drag character—was my “Queen Mother.” Drag queens were on Cori’s favorite talk shows, _Sally and Jerry Springer_, and then there was RuPaul, “Supermodel of the World.” It was a time when a brown, blond, and glamorous drag queen was a household name, beaming on MAC Cosmetics billboards at the mall in shiny red latex.

Like RuPaul, the queens at the rec center staked their claim on a smaller scale in Hawaii, part of the fabric of Oahu’s diverse trans community. Toni Braxton’s “Unbreak My Heart” was blasting from a boom box, and they were huddled together, about ten of them, discussing their choreography. I watched, seated on the cold tile floor with my backpack and volleyball at my side. They soon reconfigured, gathering in a circle of arms as one woman knelt at the center, hidden by the fort of mostly rotund queens. With the tape rewound, each queen walked clockwise, slowly descending into a kneeling position as the lady in the center rose, lip-synching Toni’s lyrics.

The lady had long, full wavy hair that served as a backdrop to her curvy body. She gracefully moved her head to the lyrics, basking in the glow from the yellow-tinted light bulb directly above her. Her deep-set brown eyes, magnified by a pair of full false lashes, looked straight ahead, stoic, almost numb, mirroring the turmoil of an unbearable heartbreak. She was a diva among a moving mass of chorus queens who appeared blurred; only she was in focus.

“Tracy’s ovah, yeah,” Wendi whispered at me, snapping her finger. “You can’t even clock her!”

_I want to be her_, I thought, half nodding to Wendi, speechless and captivated. I was excited and afraid of my silent revelations. Though she didn’t look it, I knew Tracy had been born like us. I knew she had wondered at night about how she was going to change. I knew she had climbed the insurmountable summit of trans womanhood. Unlike the queens she was performing with, Tracy was a woman of her own creation, and I was moved and on the verge of so many emotions that I was fragile when they stopped the tape and Wendi approached the group.

Lani, who wore a pair of knee-length denim shorts and a stretched white tank top with black bra straps visible on her shoulders, kissed Wendi on the cheek. I stood behind Wendi, looking at Lani’s winged black eyeliner, which she had whipped all the way to a sharp point where it nearly intersected with her penciled-in brows. The other girls gathered around her when Wendi turned around to introduce me. They were the first trans women I had met outside of Wendi.

I extended my hand to Lani, and she pulled me to her fleshy chest and gave me a kiss on the cheek, which left a red lip print on my face. My heart was racing because they were staring at me. Tracy was standing off to the side, uninterested, brushing her hair. I could hear her raking through her mane, strands snapping with each stroke of her brush.

“Mary, she’s fish, yeah,” Lani said with a chuckle, holding me at arm’s length by the biceps. The girls around her nodded. Then, looking directly into my eyes, she added, “You’re going to be pretty, girl. Trust!”

I tried my best to smile, aware that she was giving me a compliment—blessing me, even. To Lani, my fishiness was something to boast about. To be called fish by these women meant that I was embodying the kind of femininity that could allow me access, safety, opportunity, and maybe happiness. To be fish meant I could “pass” as any other girl, specifically a cis woman, mirroring the concept of “realness,” which was a major theme in _Paris Is Burning_, the 1990 doc-
umentary about New York City’s ballroom community, comprising gay men, drag queens, and trans women of color. Ball legend Dorian Corey, who serves as the sage of the film, offering some of the most astute social commentary on the lived experiences of low-income LGBT people of color, describes “realness” for trans women (known in ball culture as femme queens) as being "undetectable" to the "un-trained" or "trained." Simply, “realness” is the ability to be seen as heteronormative, to assimilate, to not be read as other or deviate from the norm. “Realness” means you are extraordinary in your embodiment of what society deems normative.

“When they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies,” Corey says in the film, “those are the femme realness queens.”

Corey defines “realness” for trans women not just in the context of the ballroom but outside of the ballroom. Unlike Pepper LaBeija, a drag legend who said undergoing genital reconstruction surgery (GRS) was “taking it a little too far” in the film, a trans woman or femme queen embodies “realness” and femininity beyond performance by existing in the daylight, where she’s juxtaposed with society’s norms, expectations, and ideals of cis womanhood.

To embody “realness,” rather than performing and competing “realness,” enables trans women to enter spaces with a lower risk of being rebutted or questioned, policed or attacked. “Realness” is a pathway to survival, and the heaviness of these truths were a lot for a thirteen-year-old to carry, especially one still trying to figure out who she was. I was also unable to accept that I was perceived as beautiful because, to me, I was not. No matter how many people told me I was fish, I didn’t see myself that way. My eyes stung, betraying me, and immediately I felt embarrassed by my visible vulnerability.

“Oh, hon, no worry,” Tracy said, her brows furrowed in concern. “She never mean nothing by it.”

“Sorry, babes,” Lani said, pursing her lips emphatically. “I meant it as a compliment.”

As Wendi and I walked out of the room, I could hear Toni Braxton singing, and I imagined Tracy rising from the sea of queens.

“How come you cried, Mary?” Wendi said, confused by my emotion. It was the first time I had cried in front of her. I’d learn with time that expressing vulnerability or sentiment made Wendi defensive, uncomfortable. In all the years of our friendship, I’ve never seen her break down or her eyes well up with emotion.

“They were all staring at me, like they expected something from me, you know?” I said. “It just made me uncomfortable.”

“Mary! Life is uncomfortable,” Wendi said, rolling her eyes as she remained focused on the dark streets ahead of us. “You have to get used to it or you’re going to live your life trying to make people comfortable. I don’t care what people say about me because they don’t have to live as me. You gotta own who you are and keep it moving.”

I pushed myself to stay in step with Wendi’s long-legged stride. She didn’t have a stroll in her. I reluctantly let her words soak into my skin, like the tears that watered the conversation. We remained in silence for the rest of our walk home. When we reached Gulick Avenue, she leaned in and her cheek met mine. Then she spread her arms around me and squeezed. She turned around swiftly and crossed the street at King and Gulick. I stood on that corner for about thirty seconds, watching her backpack bounce on her behind as she headed home.

With Wendi at my side, I felt I could be bold, unapologetic, free. To be so young and aiming to discover and assert myself alongside a best friend who mirrored me in her own identity instilled possibil-
ity in me. I could be me because I was not alone. The friendship I had with Wendi, though, is not the typical experience for most trans youth. Many are often the only trans person in a school or community, and most likely, when seeking support, they are the only trans person in LGBTQ spaces. To make matters worse, these support spaces often only address sexual orientation rather than a young person’s gender identity, despite the all-encompassing acronym. Though trans youth seek community with cis gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer teens, they may have to educate their cis peers about what it means to be trans.

When support and education for trans youth are absent, feelings of isolation and hopelessness can worsen. Coupled with families who might be intolerant and ill-equipped to support a child, young trans people must deal with identity and body issues alone and in secret. The rise of social media and online resources has lessened the deafening isolation for trans people. If they have online access, trans people can find support and resources on YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, and various other platforms where trans folks of all ages are broadcasting their lives, journeys, and even social and medical transitions. Still, the fact remains that local trans-inclusive support and positive media reflections of trans people are rare outside of major cities like Los Angeles, New York, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle.

Recently, the media (from the New Yorker and the New York Times to ABC’s 20/20 and Nightline) has focused its lens on trans youth. The typical portrait involves young people grappling with social transition at relatively young ages, as early as four, declaring that they’re transgender and aiming to be welcomed in their communities and schools as their affirmed gender. As they reach puberty, these youth—with the support and resources of their welcoming families—undergo medical intervention under the expertise of an endocrinologist who may prescribe hormone-blocking medications that suppress puberty before graduating to cross-sex hormones and planning to undergo other gender affirmation surgeries.

To be frank, these stories are best-case scenarios, situations I hope become the norm for every young trans person in our society. But race and class are not usually discussed in these positive media portraits, which go as far as erasing the presence of trans youth from low-income communities and/or communities of color. Not all trans people come of age in supportive middle- and upper-middle-class homes, where parents have resources and access to knowledgeable and affordable health care that can cover expensive hormone-blocking medications and necessary surgeries. These best-case scenarios are not the reality for most trans people, regardless of age.

Certainly, this was not the reality for Wendi and me or the girls and women we would soon cross paths with in Honolulu.
Chapter Fifteen

Working on Merchant Street was a nonevent at the time. Keeping secrets in the darkness of Derek’s bedroom all those years ago had prepared me, it seemed. After I’d jumped in one man’s car, jumping in another wasn’t anything of note. The cars of strangers became my evening cubicle, my first office of sorts. Serving men and taking their money were the only requirements of the job, and I was a natural.

The bulbous gearshift of a date’s car was always in the way, no matter if it was a Lexus or a Honda. I draped my body over it or the center console in a way that flattered my exposed ass and comfortably placed my face in his crotch. Most times I jerked and sucked wearing my thong, unless he paid extra for me to be exposed. I filled every condom with a packet of lube and slipped it onto his penis. The lube made the latex softer and suppler, thus speeding up ejaculation and decreasing my time and effort. I rarely pleased a man in the backseat because it gave the date too much freedom to touch and move around and make demands I didn’t feel like fulfilling. I preferred
him confined to the snugness of the driver’s seat. Whether we were parked in a nearby lot or on a dark, tree-lined residential street, the men were all the same. Some were gross, some were not. Attractiveness was irrelevant. All I cared about was that they were respectful, clean, and had the cash in hand.

Time was money, and all the money we made was ours. We spent it on necessities, from rent and car payments to food, clothes, hormones, and surgeries. None of us had a pimp for protection; we didn’t need a man because we looked out for one another. It was the women on Merchant’s who taught me the lube-in-condom trick, who made sure my purse was filled with condoms, who whistled when an undercover cop was stopping for a girl, who rounded us all up when outreach workers were on the block testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

I had made rules for myself on Merchant Street, things that were absolutely off-limits: no anal, no kissing, no topping. Setting and articulating these rules gave me the illusion that I was in control of the ridiculous situation. The underground economy predated me. The Merchant Streets of the world were there long before I came into being and would be there long after I retired that December. It was an ecosystem with its own rules. As desperation sank in and my surgery date encroached, I bent many of my rules, depending on the money offered.

One rule none of us broke once we crossed over into working-girldom: Don’t ever do freebies or lower your prices for any date. If someone lowered her prices, she would be found out, because a date was never loyal. He would tell you, in an effort to haggle with you, who let them penetrate for sixty dollars or blow for forty or jerk off for twenty-five. Girls who dropped prices were shunned, looked down upon, called desperate.

“Oh, nay, Mary, he’s a cheap kane,” a girl would scream to you as you leaned in the car’s window. “No date him. Scram, you chaser!”

No girl would jump in that car and be able to return to the block with her head held high. We spilled the tea about good dates and bad dates, about guys who were shady or sketchy or high, about the ones who took way too long for the amount of money they offered. We also knew who was a cop who liked to date and actually paid, versus the ones who liked to date but would threaten to arrest you if you made him pay.

To avoid getting arrested by undercover cops (or maka’i) and sting operations—which usually happened at the end of the month, when the police department needed to meet quotas—we developed a code based on the experiences of the older girls on the streets. Word was that if you said gift or donation instead of price, money, or cost, you couldn’t be arrested because you hadn’t attached a dollar value to sex acts. Another safeguard was asking a date to let you touch his penis. If he willingly whipped it out, that meant he wasn’t a cop, because a cop wouldn’t cross such a line. Some girls would go as far as telling a date to lick her breasts or genitals to be completely sure he wasn’t an officer. This was all dependent on the cop’s trustworthiness. This system helped me to never get caught, unlike Wendi, who was impatient and took risks. She got popped a few times on Merchant Street. Luckily, she was a minor at the time, and her arrests were expunged from her record.

Most trans women engaged in survival sex work are not as lucky as Wendi. Poverty is the key factor that drives trans women of color into sex work. The sex industry is filled with women of color, and so are our prisons. Race, class, and gender are all factors that frame the harshness of sentences, and, more likely than not, a trans woman of color arrested on solicitation will be treated as a criminal with little regard to the systemic oppression that has led her there. Our society criminalizes underground economies like sex work, and deep moral biases and stigma make even the most liberal folk believe
that these actions are a moral failure of the individual rather than the workings of a system.

When a trans woman is arrested, she is charged with an act of prostitution, a non-violent offense committed by consensual adults, and placed in a cell with men, because prisons are segregated by genitals. A trans woman in a men’s prison or jail is vulnerable to sexual assault, contracting HIV, and being without hormones and trans-inclusive health care during her incarceration. Yes, this is cruel and unusual punishment.

While working on Merchant’s, I didn’t have the luxury to analyze the ways of the world. Weekdays were hit-or-miss; you couldn’t predict how busy you’d be. Usually, I’d be out on the street from ten P.M. to two A.M. Weekends were more reliable, dating consistently from ten P.M. to five A.M., since the nightclubs, mostly in Waikiki, closed at four. I averaged anywhere from $600 to $1,000 a weekend, giving $60 blow jobs, $40 hand jobs, and $20 to $40 upgrades (if they wanted to see, touch, or suck my penis). Occasionally, if the guy was cute enough, anal sex was on the menu for $120, but only if I was receiving it. I never topped because my very personal definition of womanhood didn’t involve exerting myself in that way. Plus, I couldn’t guarantee an erection due to years of hormone therapy. It seemed too messy and time-consuming anyway.

Most of the guys who dated me didn’t care about an erection as much as they wanted to be pleased by a woman who had something extra, something that made me a rare sex goddess in their eyes. Sexuality and people’s desires, preferences, and fantasies are difficult to define. But what I know for sure is many men are attracted to women, and trans women are among these women, and our bodies in all their varying states of being are desired. Yet it’s the bodies of women with penises who are made to feel that their bodies are less valuable, shameful, and should be kept secret.

As long as trans women are seen as less desirable, illegitimate, devalued women, then men will continue to frame their attraction to us as secret, shameful, and stigmatized, limiting their sexual interactions with trans women to pornography and prostitution. And if a trans woman believes that the only way she can share intimate space with a man is through secret hookups or transactions, she will be led to engage in risky sexual behaviors that make her more vulnerable to criminalization, disease, and violence; she will be led to coddle a man who takes out his frustrations about his sexuality on her with his fists; she will be led to question whether she’s worthy enough to protect herself with a condom when a man tells her he loves her; she will be led to believe that she is not worthy of being seen and must remain hidden.

For many dates, I was the first trans woman they had sex with. They were men who had spent years looking at transsexual porn or cyber-sexing with trans women through webcams but had never met a trans woman in real life. Honestly, many didn’t even see me as a person. If I hadn’t had a penis, I would not be as attractive to many of the dates I profited from. My allure and income on Merchant Street was dictated by what hung between my legs, and some of the men who became my regulars sexually evolved beyond me, preferring a girl who could top them or give them sexual experiences that aligned with their imaginations and fantasies.

It was empowering to not feel shameful about my body and sexuality, but it was under the guise of doing a job that was full of stigma. I was not proud of this work. I was grateful it existed, but that doesn’t mean I was grateful for the lustful gaze and touch of older men. They didn’t know me; they wanted to occupy me. And frankly, I was grossed out by the dates and had zero compassion for them.

Kindness and compassion are sisters but not twins. One you can buy, the other is priceless. To have compassion for these men would
mean that I’d have to know them and they would have to know me, and this wasn’t part of the sexual contract.

It was a bit different with regulars. There was more kindness there, something that almost resembled respect. Regulars grew to become part of my everyday life, like a neighbor you share an elevator with from time to time: He gets off on seven, you on twelve. You smile, you press the button for him, he for you, and then you never see each other until that chance meeting when he happens to ring your elevator. You smile, he presses the button, and you say bye. You don’t know his name, he doesn’t know yours, you treat him with kindness, and you appreciate the time you spend together, but you don’t dwell on it and think, Hmmm, I wonder how he’s doing. There’s no longing, just a sense of the inevitability of the exchange.

For me to know or care for my dates would mean admitting that I accepted the cruelty of the situation. Let’s be clear: A world in which a young girl uses her body, her most intimate asset, in order to survive is unconscionable. But I did and still do have hope. In the small denim handbag that held my condoms, lube, baby wipes, hand sanitizer, scented lotion, and lip gloss, I carried a folded piece of paper with words from Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: “I didn’t come to stay.”

When I wasn’t on Merchant’s or at home, I was on campus at the University of Hawai’i. I adapted to college life effortlessly and thrived on the independence of my course schedule. I attended lectures on philosophy, English composition, religion, and political science during the day and spent my late afternoons completing my coursework. Wednesday through Saturday, I juggled my academic load and my evening shifts on Merchant Street, where the older girls like Rebecca and Shayna cheered me on, ensuring I had a ride home early enough to make it to my morning classes. It was understood in our sisterhood that I was making something of my life, that I was reaching heights that most girls and women like us were unable to grasp, and that my time on Merchant’s would be short-lived.

I now know that I survived the dissonance of my daytime and nighttime lives through compartmentalization. Psychologists define compartmentalization as a defense mechanism or a coping strategy, one that enables a person to deal with opposing situations simultaneously. I employed it for over three months. I saw myself as a college student by day, diligent about classes, study groups, and library hours, and a teenage sex worker at night, diligent about being professional, quick, and smart with fast money. These two worlds, in my mind at the time, had nothing to do with the other. I applied extreme focus on getting good grades in the day and making the money I needed for my surgery at night.

When I was watching TV with my brothers or typing my term papers at the computer lab, I didn’t think about my dates or the girls on Merchant Street. It was a short-term coping mechanism that allowed me to survive the intensity of the situation. It gave me the freedom that I needed to believe that I was still just any other college coed with plans and promise, though I broke the law four nights a week. I realize that I was able to make it through and actually succeed despite many traumatic situations, from sexual abuse to my father’s drug addiction to our family’s homelessness, because of compartmentalization. What I had done with my body issues, my family’s economic struggles, and my academic success was place them all in compartments. I isolated each from the other as I dealt with them separately.

In the evenings, as Chad, Mom, and Jeff were saying their good nights, I was preparing for my nights out. One of my friends who also worked the streets would pick me up on her way to Merchant Street (I usually filled up her tank once a week by way of thanks) at about nine-thirty P.M. When we arrived downtown, I always greeted the girls who were out, and we’d have small talk about whether it was slow, dead.
or busy and how their previous night went. We’d swap stories about
the randomness of the streets, like the guy who’d approach a girl and
ask her to pee on him in the alleyway for forty dollars. Or some poor
girl, her arms bruised, would detail her unfortunate run-in with one
of the tax-collecting queens. They were trans women, most likely high
on meth, who worked for cheap or for drugs on the “back streets,” a
seedier area at River and Kukui Streets. They randomly made their
way to Merchant’s, asking girls for twenty here, fifty there. If you didn’t
give them money and they thought you were lying, they would attack
you. Fortunately, I never crossed paths with those vicious queens.

At home, though, with the exhaustion of the streets and my course
workload, I was turning into a vicious queen myself. I didn’t really try
to hide the fact that I was on the streets nearly every night. Frankly, I
couldn’t care less what my mother thought at the time because she
had no right to pass judgment on my life after what she had put us
through. I remember one day Mom was complaining about the elec-
tric bill, scolding me and my brothers for leaving lights on in empty
rooms. She had these outbursts, when she cursed and slammed cab-

inets in the kitchen while cleaning, once every few months. Right-
fully, she was stressed, overburdened, and underappreciated. Tired
of hearing that particular woe-is-me monologue, I lifted myself from
the couch, walked into my room, grabbed $120, and placed the cash
on the kitchen counter. When I returned to the couch, Chad’s eyes
went from the twenties to my face. He wore a look of shock and sus-
picion that asked, Where’d you get that?

I watched my mother closely. She dried her hands on the striped
dishrag and turned toward the money. She paused on the bills lying
on the counter for a few seconds. I waited for her to ask me how I
got that money. I wanted to confess to her about what I was doing. I
wanted to cry into her chest and tell her that I rented out my mouth
and sometimes my ass to men to make money for the things she
couldn’t afford to get me. I wanted to tell her I was tired and I needed
help. I needed her. Instead, she picked up the six bills and went to her
room. Even then I knew that I was never a priority for my mother. It
was the curse of always excelling. I never got in trouble. I always took
care of things, and this was a blessing for my overstretched mother,
who knew I had a handle on things.

I wanted her to be the parent in that moment and demand that
I stop. I wanted her to shake me and tell me that she’d find another
way for me. But we both knew that she had no solution, no money,
no resources that would stop me. She wouldn’t be saving me, so she
remained silent and paid the electric bill.

Chad, seventeen and a senior in high school, was worried about
his sister. His look let me know that he knew where the twenties
came from, why I was rarely home at night, and why I had new
clothes and hairstyles. I wish I’d been empathetic enough to lie to
Chad and say I had a rich boyfriend whom I spent nights with, who
bought me things. At the time, I didn’t have the capacity to care what
others thought. I was going to do what I needed to do regardless of
anyone’s input.

Chad recently told me he became suspicious after he heard whis-
pers at school from his jock friends about seeing me on Merchant
Street. His friends were among the caravan of guys who’d drive by,
throwing obscenities, pennies, or eggs at the girls. They were the
same guys who’d drop their friends off and return alone to date the
girls. Chad also told me that he woke up a few times a night when
I was out, checking my room periodically to see if I was home. “I
couldn’t really sleep if you were out,” he said. “I was scared something
was going to happen to you.”

It broke my heart hearing this because I loved my brother, but I
felt alone and was angry at the world. It was an anger and despair
that blinded me to the genuine concern he had for me at a time
when I was reckless and arrogant enough to think that I could handle it all.

"I didn't like some of the decisions you were making," Chad told me recently. "I hated the fact that you were out there doing whatever you were doing. But I knew that you were doing it to be who you are today."

The woman I am today has sensory triggers that transport me back to late 2001. The smell of latex never fails to place me naked in the passenger seats of men's cars. Waiting for a friend alone on a dark street corner of New York takes me back to being eighteen, scantily clad and in high heels, waiting for someone to pick me up. Any woman wearing Victoria's Secret Amber Romance, the lotion I wore at the time, brings me back to the reflective windows on the buildings of that block where I'd primp myself between dates.

It took years of self-reflection and heightened political consciousness for me to look back on my time as a teenager in the sex trade with the same compassion that I easily extended to young girls I read about in articles or saw featured in documentaries on sex trafficking. I saw these girls as vulnerable, controlled by an abusive man who lured them under the guise of love into the commercial sex industry. They even called him Daddy. No one on Merchant Street had a pimp to blame. I operated under the illusion that I was out there on my own free will. I had no villain, no one person to blame for my circumstance, so for years I blamed myself. This lack of a villain initially made it difficult for me to look at my younger self with compassion. I've argued with myself for years that no one forced me to do it; no pimp wooed me with sweet nothings and gifts to work the stroll. I chose to do it. But how many choices did my younger self really have?

Selling sex seemed like a small price to pay in order to get what I needed. I did it for "free" my whole life, I thought, with Derek and Junior and the men I blew and fucked in my adolescence. I later learned that sexual abuse is a common pathway for many women in sex trade and work, with an estimated 66 to 90 percent of teen and adult women reporting that they were sexually abused prior to engaging in sex work, according to anthropologist Dorothy H. Bracey, who spent years profiling youth and women engaged in sex work. Uncovering that fact led me to realize that I was not alone, and there were many factors that made young trans women like me all the more vulnerable to the survival sex trade, whether by choice, circumstance, or coercion.

Trans youth, especially those of color, represent a large portion of young people engaging in survival sex, yet they are often erased from narratives of organizations serving youth sex workers. The greatest push factor for trans girls engaged in the sex trade is poverty, stemming from homelessness (often brought on by parents and/or guardians refusing to accept their gender identity) or growing up in already struggling low-income communities where resources are scarce. A young trans woman, especially a runaway with no familial support, may not find a job due to lack of education or prior experience, age, or no updated ID documents showing her appropriate gender markers, which can lead to further discrimination. Most likely, if you're a low-income trans woman of color, you don't have access to health care, which makes it difficult to cover hormones and surgeries. With this systemic lack of resources glaring in your face, your body aching for food and hormones, your mind internalizing the pressures of society that say you must look a certain way and that you don't matter, survival sex work becomes a tried-and-true solution that you've seen older girls survive on for years.

Without money of my own, I had no doctors, no hormones, no surgeries. Without money of my own, I had no independence, no control over my life and my body. No one person forced me or my friends into the sex trade; we were groomed by an entire system that failed us and a society that refused to see us. No one cared about
or accounted for us. We were disposable, and we knew that. So we used the resources we had—our bodies—to navigate this failed state, doing dirty, dangerous work that increased our risk of HIV/AIDS, criminalization, and violence.

Fortune and luck were the elements separating me from the hundreds of vulnerable women killed every year for being poor, trans, feminine, and of color. I later learned that trans women of color are disproportionately affected by hate violence. In 2012 alone, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) documented twenty-five homicides of people in the United States who were murdered because of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Thirteen were trans women, all of whom were women of color, comprising an astounding 53 percent of all anti-LGBTQ homicide victims, despite representing only 10.5 percent of survivors who reported incidents of hate violence to NCAVP. These stark statistics point to the disproportionate and deadly impact of hate violence against trans women of color.

On a late night in November, just four weeks before my scheduled surgery, with my flight to Bangkok booked and finals around the corner, a white van pulled up to me on Queen Street. I had a rule never to date men in vans. I couldn’t know what they carried in the back of their vehicle, like weapons or other men. Too much risk was involved. So I just kept walking.

“Can you please stop and talk to me?” the man said, heightening the pitch of his voice to sound less intimidating. “I’ve dated other girls before.”

“Sorry, I don’t date men in vans,” I said as he continued to trail me slowly.

“I’ve dated Shayna, Rebecca, and Heather,” he said, stopping me in my tracks. “Everyone knows me.”

My guard went down a bit, and I asked him to turn on his over-

head light. The yellow glow uncovered a chubby-cheeked man with brown shaggy hair under a Rainbow Warriors football cap. His eyes were bugged, like a pug’s.

“What do you want?” I said from the sidewalk, refusing to lean into his passenger window. I knew distance would keep me safe.

“I’d like you to suck me off while I touch your sweet titties,” he said in the unabashedly horny way of horny men with no need for pleasantries.

“You okay with my eighty-dollar donation?”

He nodded while licking his lips. I had to do everything in my power not to laugh. I had become a professional at controlling my instincts and reactions in the pursuit of money. When I told him I’d follow him to the public parking lot on Beretania Street, he put his tongue back in his mouth. “Oh, just come with me,” he pleaded. “I’m really fast, easy. I’ll give you an extra forty.” He pulled a fan of crispy twenty-dollar bills from his pocket. They looked fresh, like unhandled bills from the ATM, my favorite kind. They made the work appear less dirty.

Something in my core whispered, *Wait for another date.* But the sound of those crisp twenties in his stubby fingers was too loud. I jumped in the van and directed him to the parking lot where I took a lot of my dates. After he parked, he unbuttoned his cargo shorts and began stroking himself. “Help me out,” he said. “Show me those sweet titties.”

I couldn’t stand men who said *titties.* It made me not want to have breasts. I lifted the bottom of my brown boobs out of my bra and began tweaking my nipples. He was hard, oohhhing and ahhhing as he kept stroking. I pulled a condom out of my purse and twisted the cap from my lube, filling the condom.

“Ahhh, no need condom,” he said.

“I don’t blow without a condom,” I said.

“Okay, what about just a hand job, then?” he asked.

“I don’t jerk without a condom,” I lied, because he was starting to skeeze me out.
“Come on, I’ll give you two hundred dollars,” he said. “The easiest two hundred of your night.”

“Money first,” I said as he let his penis stand on its own and grabbed the bills from his pocket.

I put the money in my denim handbag and began stroking him. Under the beams of the moon, I could see the darkness of his dilated eyes. He looked at me with a focus that scared me. I realized that he was high on something. That internal whisper escalated to a shout: *Just leave the money and get out.* I ignored it, and he came within five minutes. I put my breasts away, handed him some wipes, and rubbed sanitizer on my hands, the smell of alcohol filling the car.

“Told you I was easy,” he smiled as he turned the ignition. “Should I drop you at the same spot?”

I nodded as my anxieties about him left me. He came, I got paid, and we were on our way back to the block. As we approached the corner of Merchant and Bethel, I noticed more girls were out at the far corner and asked him to drop me near them. Instead, he pulled over and grabbed my arm.

“Give me your purse,” he said calmly. Under the lights of the street, I could see the irritated pocks on his cheeks and the frightening intensity of his stare. He was definitely tweaking.

“No,” I said, lifting the lever of the door while tugging my purse, which held about eight hundred dollars from two nights of work.

“Let your fucking purse go or I promise I’ll gut you,” he said as the glare of the pocketknife in his hand reflected slightly.

“Please, just let it go,” I pleaded with him in my sweetest voice, hoping to ignite compassion in him, something absent in all of these exchanges.

“Bitch,” he said, grabbing a handful of my hair and bashing the side of my face into the center console between our seats. “Let the fucking purse go.”

“HELP! HELP! SOMEBODY FUCKING HELP ME!” I screamed. I didn’t feel the throbbing of my head, just the rush of adrenaline.

Miraculously, I got the door open with my left hand gripping my bag, my right foot on the street, and some of my hair still in his hand. He was too strong and won the tug-of-war, speeding off with my purse and a hair extension as I fell on the street. The sting from the glued track stung my scalp as I lay there in defeat.

“GET THAT LICENSE PLATE!” I screamed when a couple of girls ran down the street to me. I called the cops from one of their cell phones, even though some of the girls predicted that they wouldn’t do anything for me. I told the operator that I’d been robbed, describing the van, the license plate, and the incident.

Two police cars—the normal squad car and a single-rider golfcar-like vehicle—arrived within ten minutes. I sat on a bench in Fort Street Mall as three officers asked me to relay the details of the attack. I felt naked, unprotected without my purse or identification, and inappropriate, like a girl with no keys to any home.

“Why did you go in the van?” asked the officer writing the report.

“He was giving me a ride home,” I lied, knowing that the truth couldn’t be written in the report.

“Are you out here every weekend?” asked the officer who drove the cart, chewing his gum nonchalantly. I recognized him and his mustache. He never bothered us but did drive around the block every few hours, often stopping to chat with Rebecca.

I nodded with embarrassment. He wanted to squash this report and put me in my place as a prostitute unworthy of justice. His indignant tone said what all three officers were thinking: *There is no purpose in writing a report for you as you pretend to be a victim.* You *brought this on yourself.* I wanted to cry, because I realized the absurdity of my claims, of the fact that I had the audacity to report someone else’s wrongdoing to the police when I was breaking the law on
the regular. Still, I wanted to show them my worth, to say that I was more than just a teenage prostitute. I was different, special, worthy. I was a college scholar with promise and a 3.8 GPA. My cleavage-baring tank top and frayed denim miniskirt betrayed me. To them, I was nothing more than another hooker. No one would miss me if I went missing.

"Do you want to press charges?" the officer with the notebook asked in an exasperated tone.

I shook my head and watched as they drove away. I used one of the girls' phones and called one of my regulars, Sam, whom I had been dating since my junior year of high school, to pick me up. I didn't have the courage to return home. I felt unworthy of my own bed and stayed at Sam's high-rise apartment overlooking Ala Moana Beach. I relayed the details of the attack while lying in his Notre Dame T-shirt.

Sam was in his late thirties, with sandy blond hair and large green eyes that always took me in with a warm compassion that I rejected each time he hugged me, touched me, moved deep inside me. Sam was from San Diego and had lived in Hawaii for about five years, working as a lawyer. He moonlighted as a photographer, traveling to Brazil, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Thailand to capture trans women for his friend's popular pornography portal.

I cried myself to sleep that night and woke in the morning to the smell of eggs and coffee. He handed me a mug as I sat at his breakfast bar, where I saw the brightest blue ocean. I still marvel at the fact that I grew up surrounded by such powerful beauty, the Pacific Ocean nestling me in its majesty.

"You know, Janet, I was thinking," he started. He was my only regular who knew my name and where I lived. "You don't have to do this anymore."

"You think I want to do this?" I said, swishing the sweet bitterness of the coffee in my mouth. "I'm too close to bow out now."

"What if I gave you another option?" he said. "What if you let me pay for the rest of your surgery?"

"I couldn't let you do that," I said, tucking my knees to my chest, stretching his college shirt.

"Why not?"

"It just wouldn't be right," I said.

"What's the use of me having money if I can't help someone I love?"

His question lingered over breakfast. This was the dream of thousands of girls everywhere: for a man to love you, care for you, provide for you. It was the rescue, like Richard Gere climbing Julia Roberts's fire escape in Pretty Woman. Sam was the embodiment of that dream, a husband or sugar daddy who was attractive enough and generous with his wealth. I knew women like Kahlúa and many others who had fulfilled that dream of having a man provide for them, giving them surgeries and resources. I could not try on their dreams; they didn't fit me. To accept Sam's charity would involve the ultimate compromise of appropriating someone else's dream.

I realize this sounds contradictory, coming from the same girl who offered her body to men for half hours at a time. But I wasn't for sale in that way. Never was. I couldn't imagine looking between my legs and thinking of Sam's pity disguised as love for the rest of my life. I wanted to be able to say I did it myself, on my terms, my way. To accept Sam's gift would be to lie, and I had never lied to him or myself. I couldn't accept his gift because I knew he thought he loved me. It was a one-way affection I'd profited from for years. Sam was aware that I was hustling every night to raise the money for my surgery, and only now, as I was so close to reaching my goal, just twenty-five hundred dollars away, he had extended charity. Acceptance of his offer would cost too much. It would involve my freedom under the unspoken understanding that I would then be his woman.
I declined Sam’s offer just a few weeks before I lifted off to Bangkok. I had finals coming up, though flash cards and all-nighters weren’t really on my mind. I was sacrificing pieces of myself nightly for the bigger picture: to exist in a body that represented me more fully. Using my body was easy initially. I owned it and used it to benefit me. I was born with it and had to live, love, and suffer in this world with it. It was mine to sleep with, profit from, and modify. I grew up in a world where the sex trade, like the modifications we all went through, was part of the pact, a part of the journey we had to go through as trans women.

There’s a level of competence and mastery involved in being good at hustling, and the constant attention from dates falsely boosts your self-esteem. The tragedy is when girls believe all they are good at is being some man’s plaything. When your self-identity and self-worth are tied up in how much money you can make and how many men want you, it can be scary not to rely on that identity; it can be hard to let it go and not know how to define your worth for yourself. Unlearning all I had been taught about who I was, what I could imagine for myself, what I felt was possible, and my tenets on love and sex and trust have been my biggest lessons. I’m still learning.

Sitting in Sam’s kitchen, I paused and experienced one of those check-in moments with myself. I sat there and thought, You know you’re a prostitute, right? That you sought comfort in a regular after being attacked by another date, and now this date is proclaiming his love for you, his go-to fetish come true. I waited for some sense of shock, for some well of emotion. This wasn’t the trans version of Pretty Woman. No one was going to climb my fire escape and rescue me. Nothing but a solution came. Not a good one, but it was a way out.

“How much do you pay those girls who pose for you?” I asked.

“That’s not for you, Janet,” he said with a skeptical look. “You can’t take it back once it’s out there.”

Chapter Sixteen

I cringe at one thing when I look back on my adolescence. Reliving this decision, made over a dozen years ago, has been the most difficult part of my writing. I’ve thought honestly about softening it, maybe even erasing it from my history. My ego convinced me several times that I could deny it ever happened. But I know that excluding it from this chronicle of my life would be cowardly. It would mean I was actively erasing a part of my journey. Why tell your story if you’re not going to tell it in its entirety?

My decisions are my decisions, my choices my choices, and I must stand by the bad ones as much as I applaud my good ones. Collectively, they’re an active archive of my strength and my vulnerability.

I wish I valued myself enough to tell myself that there are in fact things you don’t have to do to survive. You can say no, but that’s the thing about vulnerability. I didn’t know then that I was at my weakest, my most exposed. I was too much of a survivor to admit it. I was busy fighting and didn’t have the luxury of weighing options and considering consequences. Instead, I quickly made the best possible decision.