

Untech

Chapter 1 // Suasion of Charlatans

Infomercial.

Peaks and valleys of sales-y pitches and shifty prompter eyes.

Forced enthusiasm. Lies. Square smiles. And concealer.

The best concealer on the market. The kind that can cover dimples on fruit skin. It rids pubescent acne even at 42. It can conceal all of your problems or your money back. But wait there's more! **ACT NOW** and it's the fourth slashed price on the screen. The top one never was so inflated. The bottom price has been up for weeks. Months even. But it ends at midnight!

Inflammatory. Duress. It's a shopper-pocalypse.

TV fuzz.

And another pitch begins.

Dogs without homes and owners. Drooping eyes and wrenching disability.

TV fuzz.

A mop soaking up a freaking Thanksgiving dinner.

It's all exaggeration.

Consumerism blows on. Late night junkies and those stewing in regret. The restless and

the cool pillow flippers. The damned and guilty. The bored and the promiscuous. The new moms bathing in insomnia.

TV fuzz.

Television voiceover: “Are you tired of living this way?”

The voice is less selling cars and poverty, more coaxing you to believe in Santa Claus.

Television voiceover: “Do you find yourself often thinking of the way life used to be?”

A tree-lined block, synchronistic homes, one ironic ball bounces to no one and lands in its own shadow.

Television voiceover: “When was that? ‘The way life used to be’ that is. When was that for you?”

Cut to: a red turtleneck woman. (Smart marketers use red.) She has a shitty bob haircut, though.

“Uh ya know for me,” she (bob haircut, red turtleneck) starts. She fiddles with a ring on her bony finger, twisting it counterclockwise like it will open some vault of answers. “It was when my kids would sit at the kitchen table without their phones. Ya know?”

She has said “ya know” twice to absolutely no one. Or everyone.

Voice over guy now bellows a voice that clearly pays his bills. He did nothing for that damn voice.

“Families everywhere often echo the sentiment, ‘I want my kids back,’ or ‘I want my

husband back.’”

The screen splits into four quadrants. All four show varying degrees of distraction at important things like holidays or kids’ games. Friends at dinner all scroll in synchronization, unaware of each other’s presence or life in general.

The screen flips to four quadrants of robots in eerie similarity to the last. This is to tug at the personal conscience of the viewer who already feels empty for being wide eyed in the night. Now you’ve humanly emasculated them. You are tin and parts for your vices, Sir. Do better.

So comes the pitch.

What are you waiting for? Untech Your Life.

Carefully selected colors and fonts. “Untech Your Life.” A tagline no doubt born of an agency boardroom. Market research and focus groups psychologically decided that the use of “untech” was going to convert more concept buyers.

Like Robert Chrome. The very man watching this peddling parade of charlatans for 1.5 hours in an effort to soothe his relentless anxiety and swaddle him back to sleep. Only now his curiosity is piqued. He is no longer tired, nor anxious. He’s ready to buy in to this unteching at any cost.

And cost, is no object.

White beaches, even trees that look calming. What is this a timeshare? Robert has worked as a businessman for far too many years to buy into a timeshare. His panic on deck to set

back in if this has only been for a fraction of the Caribbean.

Be anything else. Please be anything else.

TV Voiceover: “This is not a timeshare.”

(Wow, they’re good.)

“Call us today and find out how you can begin unteching your own life immediately! All the work is done for you. All you have to do is pick up the phone. And after that, you may never want another phone again.”

There is a 1-800 number. Powered by Vaylex, LLC.

Robert’s fingers crawl to his phone. He mutes the TV and dials.

Chapter 2 // Chrome Industries Who?

Monday, 9:53AM. Something’s amiss. A fat, digital number on an old alarm clock rounds. Robert’s hand comes flying over to the nightstand and hits nothing. The time through his squinted vision has to be lying.

No, he must still be asleep, and dreaming. Yes, that was plausible. His head felt as if someone funneled sand through his ear and it had pooled on one side.

Cling tight to the pillow now Robert. No swift moves. Not yet.

It had to be much earlier than this. It's a workday. Robert gets up at 6:30 every workday.

Just shut your eyes and wake again. Fold the pillow and reposition. Crunch. His eyes give way.

Monday, 10:22AM.

One eye and the second followed shortly thereafter. Again, the faulty clock. Robert reached blindly for his phone. His hand caught and re-caught only air as no phone slept on his nightstand. *Groan.*

This was definitely going to be one of those days. He should have felt panic for the lateness he couldn't afford at the office today, or if not that, then surely the apparent loss of his phone. When he was late, nothing got done right.

His hand walked clumsily over the polished wood, where his clock taunted later and later numbers at him like a child's nah nah joke. *Sigh.*

An empty glass of Crown Royal whisky was now stuck on a ring of condensation and residual sugar.

Drunk or not, he hardly ever forgot to plug his phone in overnight. He was ritualistic at bedtime. A splash of cold water, sometimes a quick shave, on the rare occasion a meticulous one. He'd then plug in his phone and double check his alarm. One half glass of whisky to knock him out.

When the half glass didn't work, sometimes it turned to a half bottle, depending on the week ahead or the week behind.

Either way. The phone was always, always plugged in.

The house was silent. And it looked different. Off. Everything was off.

On any regular Monday, Robert's calls and emails would have chimed incessant. There wasn't a noise to be heard.

It must be dead. Maybe I'm dead.

He sat then pulled one leg out of bed and slowly the second joined.

I need to call the office.

I need to call the office.

I need to call the office.

Robert peeled himself up and unkinked his kinks. He lifted the rocks glass from its condensation ring and trudged to his kitchen. The sun tried hard to peek through the blinds of his otherwise blacked out house.

The house was nice. Expensive. It was a wealthy bachelor's home. But it was, in fact, different than it was the night before. It was somehow emptier.

Robert pulls the landline phone from the wall with still no sight of his cell. He dials with one hand, searches for coffee with the other. Why is he still so tired? He must be getting sick. Is it flu season?

Obnoxious Beeps. The phone doesn't complete the call. Disconnected. *Sigh.*

He hits redial and sets the phone down on speaker to percolate coffee, and now, evidently also add aspirin. He shakes two pills from a bottle, pours grinds into a machine, and the obnoxious beeps sound in the phone once more.

Disconnected.

What is going on today? Is it a holiday? Where is his damn cell phone? Why is Chrome Industries' main line down? How much did he actually drink last night?

Water from the faucet. Two aspirin. Gulp.

Perhaps a shower would do him good. No, there was simply no time. He would just drive to the office and forego his cell phone. Hell, he could use a day without technology...

That's when Robert vaguely remembered a fuzzy slice of the night prior.

Disconnect. Unconnect. Un...Untech.

What was that stupid infomercial?

Chapter 3 // The MEDS

The roads are different today. Bare. Robert never did find his cell phone and decided that lines must be down. He'd drive to Chrome Industries, the very business that bought his fancy home and his fancy things. Yes. He'd drive to the office in Longport and he'd sort this chaos out there. Because from home he was going mad. Was this some planetary retrograde?

Robert peeled down the highway and noticed the scenic display was off. The billboards that typically lined his morning were on missing. They were what he stared at in traffic.

The billboards that sold the gadgets. The billboards that sold the actions. The billboards that sold the idea man's fruits of his labor. The hashtags and the "Like Us." The feed me's. The ego pleas. The validation solicitation. Where was everything he'd grown so used to blocking his view? And honestly, where was the traffic?

He wasn't complaining. He was making record time and for how late of a start he got, he needed it. Robert employed a total of 212 people at Chrome Industries and that was just Longport's office. Nationwide saw another 1216 employees in various locations who knew who Robert was but Robert did not know who they were. There were also a few employees out of the country in various satellite offices.

He wasn't particularly good at delegation, or even trust. The narcissist in him always felt things could only be done right if they were in fact done by him himself so pawning off roles to subordinates always felt like a fool's game. He had to undo almost everything they touched and for that very reason Robert got to the office every morning at 5am. He arrived two cups of black coffee in, daily, and read all of the piles of data from an Eastern-facing office with a view. He'd given two good decades to that office and an it ain't broke don't fix it model of Monday through Friday. Except, Robert never really disconnected. How could he? He made an honest living on a business predicated on

connectivity. Following the internet boom, Chrome Industries turned Robert from a commission only computer school grad to an entrepreneur with a publicly traded company. Being disconnected was the antithesis to his empire and phones being down, even for a day, meant trouble.

Robert's leg danced with its restless syndrome. Like an addict feigning for a score of its own, with a mind of its own, in withdrawal all of its own – he shook his left leg while his right leg pushed that 583 horsepower. And horse power it had. Robert wasn't the type of guy to drive a moderate automobile on a millionaire's salary. What's the God's honest point of that? Why make any money if you're never going to spend it?

He wasn't the type of man to buy tailored and monogrammed suits but for God's sake his car wasn't going to purr. It was going to sing.

Robert pulled up to a semi-empty parking lot, which only fueled his ongoing confusion. Did he have the wrong day of the week all together at this point? Was it a weekend? He tried to remember if he had ever had enough whisky to make him think a Sunday was a Monday. The building that housed Chrome Industries had 9 floors with Chrome lining the penthouse. This wasn't a lot that would ever be freckled with only a few cars. While Robert had his own parking space, many others would circle and look for open spots by this time of day, angrily fighting for them even.

He was growing a bit agitated by all of the unexplained disconnects and delays. These were not things that served a Type A personality.

Robert locked the car (which also felt bizarre in its own right) and started for the revolving doors. Still, even the building looked different. It was right, but it was wrong.

“Morning Stan,” Robert said as he completed the glass revolve. Stan manned the desk at the 2411 property for over fifteen years now. Well into his seventies, this was a post retirement job for him that allowed him to sit most of the day and keep conversation with the nine floors of employees. He’d seen Chrome from its humble beginnings to now and Robert made sure he gifted him something for Christmas each and every year since the first.

“Sir,” Stan said, apprehensive.

Sir? That was weird. Stan never called Robert “Sir.” It was routine. Every morning Robert would say, “Morning Stan” and Stan would always say, “Morning Mr. Chrome. Have a good day today.”

It was as predictable as the days of the week. Which wasn’t saying much for this particularly peculiar day.

Robert chalked it up to early onset dementia and kept moving toward the elevator. As he passed the directory board he noticed that Chrome Industries was missing. Instead, across from Penthouse it read, “Meyer Paper.”

Ding. The elevator opened and Robert begrudgingly entered, afraid of what the top floor even held at this point. Just before the door closed him in, two men entered.

“Mr. Chrome, have you been provided your meds?”

Chapter 4 // Thought Rate

“Excuse me?” Robert croaked out.

One man looked at the other man and shook his head. “He clearly hasn’t.” The other man simply nodded his agreement.

“I’m not quite sure I know what you’re talking about,” Robert said. “But I sure feel like I might be on something,” he said, more to himself than them.

Neither man appreciated his jest.

They were dressed in suits that could very well be the same. They weren't particularly fine suits, but definitely matching black and gray. Stiff, like they'd never been worn before today.

"MEDS Mr. Chrome. If they were not provided to you today, you will be extremely confused."

"But I don't take anything," Robert protested. "I appreciate the offer gentlemen. It's been a confusing day. But I'm more of a drinker than a pill guy."

The elevator dinged its destination. Penthouse. As Robert tried to shimmy past the men in black and gray, they turned to follow him.

He exited the elevator and took in the view. He paused. "I must have gotten off at the wrong floor," he nervously said to the men. He knew fair well this didn't make his confusion look any less so.

"This is the penthouse. Home to Meyer Paper," one man said reaching into his jacket pocket.

"Meyer Paper my ass," Robert quipped. "This has been the headquarters of Chrome Industries for years. I don't know what kind of sick joke you're playing but enough is

enough. It's late in the day and money is being lost every second that I'm not in the office. Hell, I can't even call in."

The man reaching into his suit now removed a leather zipper bag. He rounded the zipper and shook out an array of instruments in some kind of kit. Robert watched each and every movement with intention.

"This is ridiculous," Robert said.

The other man pushed the elevator buttons to return to ground. "Mr. Chrome, if you let us explain, your day will get a lot simpler than it has been," he said to Robert. He turned to his partner. "Jake, get his vitals before we get on. I don't want the elevator to skew anything."

The one called Jake began removing instruments from the thing that looked like a men's grooming kit. One gadget somewhat resembling a thermometer was placed on Robert's forehead without warning.

BEEP.

"Ninety-nine two," Jake said. He punched keys on another gadget and returned the thermometer to its slot.

“Grab the TR now. I don’t want to wait much longer on it because it’ll only get higher.”

“TR?” Robert asked. “What’s that like BP?” I have to be honest my blood pressure is always a little-“

“It’s a bit different Mr. Chrome. More like your heart rate.”

“Oh, well I’ve always had a solid ticker,” said Robert.

Jake placed another, similar, device to Robert’s forehead.

BEEP.

“Why is it on my head if it’s for my heart? Shouldn’t it be near a pulse? Are you guys just messing with me or what? Come on.”

“I said it’s *like* a heart rate. I didn’t say it *was* your heart rate,” the unnamed one said. He turned toward Jake. “What’s the read?”

“276,” Jake read aloud.

“Well, if that was my heart rate I assume I’d be dead,” Robert joked.

The two men remained un-amused.

“It’s your thought rate actually and it’s through the roof. A typical TR is around 105-112 and we’d like to see it under 100.”

“A thought rate? What on Earth? Now I *know* you guys are messing with me.”

“I can assure you we’re not. Your rapid thoughts at this point are not good for your health and we need to get you thinking much slower than you are. In other words, Mr. Chrome, if you don’t start listening to us soon, there are consequences for you that are dangerous.”

Robert began to retort but bit his tongue. “Aw Hell, I give up,” he said defeated.

The elevator doors opened.

“Mickey, should we wait on the blood pressure?” Jake asked. “He really should be seated.”

“Well at least now I know both of your names since you both evidently knew mine,”

Robert said. He started for the elevator.

The one called Mickey didn’t look particularly pleased with Robert knowing this much information. He motioned to Jake a hand signal that was foreign to Robert.

“We going gentleman?” Robert held the door but decided he was likely going to make a run for it downstairs to the nearest bar the second he could shake these two.

The men followed Robert in. “Let’s take it from the top,” Mickey said as he pushed the ground button.

“MEDs,” stands for Manufactured Emotions Dealers. That is what Jake and I do. I am a Senior MED and Jake is a Junior MED. I am, indirectly, Jake’s boss. We both work for a company called Vaylex, LLC. Perhaps you’ve heard of us,” Mickey said.

Robert didn’t know why that sounded familiar but instead he merely shook his head no.

“I suppose it’s neither here nor there at this point. What’s important is that you understand we are employed to temper and control your emotions through this transitional phase. Keep your thoughts low, your adrenal function suppressed and help you navigate through this confusion. We’re called manufactured emotions dealers because we ensure that what you are feeling at each stage is in fact the emotion you are supposed to feel when you are supposed to feel it – that is, at the beta tested level of supreme susceptibility. Does this make sense?”

“Not really. And if you two are in charge of making sure I’m not confused, you’re doing a crappy job.”

The elevator hit the bottom and the doors slid open. Robert locked eyes with Stan the doorman who still clearly didn't have the foggiest idea who Robert was. Mickey and Jake remained behind Robert.

"I admit we are a bit tardy on your case. Typically we arrive within a one to two hour window of opt in but there were extenuating circumstances in this case."

Mickey hit Jake in the chest as if to say, *Now*. With that Jake inserted a tiny syringe in the back of Robert's neck just before he exited the elevator.

"Well Mr. Chrome, better late than never," Jake said.

Chapter 5 // Vaylex, LLC

Sherry Marlowe opened her eyes to a blistering sun. She felt groggy. There was simply no other word for it. She knew this feeling well. Like somebody scrambled her brains and then put them back in her head. There was a hard disconnect between her and reality, but slowly, definitely, it was returning. As she came to, her eyes watered from the sun's intensity and drew streams down the sides of her face. God damn they were so heavy. Much easier to close than to keep open.

She was on a beach chair but hadn't the faintest idea why. She wasn't even remotely dressed for the beach. A band of sweat was forming around her middle from her (clearly) poor choice of jeans and sweatshirt. She didn't remember making plans for the beach. In fact, she didn't even recognize this beach. It was so deserted and pristine. Not any beaches she knew.

Sherry began to peer around in search of other beach goers but saw no one. There was nothing but her chair, a small bamboo table next to it, and the umbrella that lurched above her.

On the table she saw a card with cursive calligraphy on the front: Ms. Marlowe. She had to be lost in a lucid dream. This just wasn't her life. She hadn't had a vacation in nine years. No, ten. There was just never the time.

She retrieved the card and slid her nail under the back adhesive along the lip of the triangle. She peered inside then took the card out. It was black and gray and parchment-like. Disposable.

Ms. Marlowe :

At this point, you should be feeling the effects of the Cathartica wearing off.

You may feel drowsy, dizzy, irritable, disoriented, or experience memory loss. These are common aftershocks with such high dose anesthetics. Someone will be there shortly to

escort you to the facility that can process your follow up vitals. We look forward to your stay here.

Greyson Davis

CEO

Vaylex, LLC

High dose anesthetics? Now she knew she wasn't awake. There was no anesthesia called Cathartica and no way she would have undergone surgery here. Plus no surgery center on Earth lets you recover on a beach. This was the part of the dream when a shark would come out of the water but then turn into a Gerber Daisy or something insane. She'd wake up tomorrow and tell her colleagues, "I had the darndest dream. There was this envelope and a beach and shark and a Gerber Daisy." They'd laugh and quietly analyze her over their coffee.

"Ms. Marlowe?"

A pair of white 1960s Go-Go boots attached to a girl who clearly didn't know she was walking in sand, suddenly stood before Sherry. Sherry tried to look up at the girl's face but she was in direct blinding sunlight. She cupped her eyes to find a very stunning young woman who, also, appeared to be from the sixties.

This is some dream, Sherry thought.

“I’m here to escort you to the facility. My name is Ivy.”

“Of course it is,” Sherry quipped. “So what, did I take LSD or something?”

“I don’t know, did you?” Ivy asked, undeterred.

“You’re in Go-Go boots on the sand. I don’t have a damn clue how I got here. I’m wearing jeans and there are zero people here other than me. But I have a greeting card about anesthetics that don’t exist.”

Ivy extends her hand. “If we don’t hurry, you’ll miss your appointment.”

“Right. That makes sense,” Sherry said, fighting from rolling her eyes.

“Do you remember anything at all about your trip here,” Ivy asked and extended her hand.

“Nope. Not a thing.”

Ivy half smiled.

“Look, with all due respect, Ivy. I’m a doctor. I know there is no such thing as Cathartica.

I may be a homeopathic doctor or whatever you want to call it, but I know drugs. Well. And this, this is a scam of some sort.”

“You have five minutes to make it to your vitals check. Why don’t we discuss this after we know everything is okay. I can let Mr. Davis and the team know that you have questions.”

“Mr. who and what?” Sherry sighed. She saw none of her things anywhere. Not a phone or a purse. Nothing. It seemed Ivy was all she had. Clumsily, she rose from the beach chair without taking Ivy’s slender hand. She refused to give credence to this dream.

“After they do finish your vitals and check in, you have orientation at 2. Try to be on time. Mr. Davis hates when people are late. Something about Circadian rhythm...He’s so brilliant.”

Sherry was beginning to wonder if she’d been kidnapped by a cult. In the 60’s. If Charles Manson came out in this dream she was going to be very disturbed.

She walked in the sand following Ivy when a déjà vu-like flash stopped her cold. It was so brief it was hard to catch it. One second she was watching the back of Ivy’s head. Her long, blond hair swaying and shifting as she walked (near-effortlessly for being in boots on a beach).

The next second she saw Ivy's hair swirled up in a surgical hat and mask. A quick pan of glass jars. Labeled. Apothecary style. A minimalistic room with clean, monochromatic sterility. Wood, white, and jars.

Back to Ivy's sashaying hair in the ocean breeze. Sherry realized she had been standing still during these quick flashes. As she came to, she noticed other sets of footprints had taken the same recent path from the beach chair to wherever it was they were headed.

"Are you okay Ms. Marlowe? Let's hurry and get your vitals."

Chapter 6 // Approxis

Robert opened his eyes. He knew it was a dream. All those long hours working getting to his head. He twitched. Something was poking his arm.

A stifled sound.

"Jake, he's awake."

"That's impossible. That dose could knock out an elephant."

“I’m looking at him, and he is awake. His eyes are open and he’s moving.”

“Well, up the dose.”

Robert craned his neck toward the voices. There was a tube connected to him and...

* * * * *

Sherry sat in a cold metal chair. The flashes were coming now every few minutes or so.

Wood. White. Wood. White. Jars. Apothecary.

“Ms. Marlowe this is Steven. He’ll be triaging you. He’ll take good care of you.”

Sherry began to roll up her sleeves for a blood draw.

“Do you know where my phone is?” she asked.

Ivy looked at Steven as if to say “quiet” with her eyes. Steven pulled a clunky tray toward him and placed something foreign on Sherry’s forehead.

“Her TR is 312. Grab 1 cc of Approxis and let Mr. Davis know,” he said to Ivy. Ivy stood.

“Quick,” Steven added.

“My what? That’s not even a thing.”

“Ms. Marlowe, let’s just talk about something else. Get your mind off things. Don’t worry about all this administrative stuff. You’re on vacation,” he said to her, in a completely forced script kind of way.

“I am? Well, this is some vacation!”

Flashes. Wood. White. Jars. Labeled jars.

“Well silly it hasn’t started yet. We’re just getting you, you know, immunized if you will.”

“Immunized? Where am I, a beach in Africa? C’mon. I need my phone. This is absurd. I am a doctor!”

Steven completely ignored her and began fishing through a nearby drawer. He withdrew a binder and index fingered the pages. Then he read to himself.

Sherry began to get up from the chair when Ivy returned. She held a small tray with a teeny syringe in the middle.

“I’m not letting you use me as your guinea pig. I’m leaving,” she said while realizing she had no things to retrieve.

Steven pulled the syringe from the tray.

“Ms. Marlowe, have a seat. I assure you you are in capable hands. You wanted a break from your life and signed up for a retreat called Untech. Does this ring a bell?” he asked.

Sherry paused. It did ring a bell.

“Well we’re just priming you for pure relaxation and that break you so badly wanted. You paid for it handsomely. We don’t want you in a state of overdrive and stress while you’re here.”

Flashes. Wood. White. Sterile. Jars. Labels. Cancer. Diabetes.

“Ms. Marlowe?”

Sherry came to.

“Ivy can you run her TR again please?”

Foreign forehead object. Sherry struggled to remember signing up for Untech through the déjà vu'd imagery.

"It's 380," Ivy said to Steven. "And rising."

"Did you tell Mr. Davis?"

"Who's Mr. Davis?" Sherry asked, confused.

Steven stuck the small syringe in Sherry's hand. He pulled. A liquid pushed. Sherry slowed.

"There you are. Now you can enjoy your time with us. Just relax and everything you need to know will be explained at orientation. Ivy will walk you there now."

Sherry couldn't even remember what she was just trying to remember.

She looked up at Ivy. What a beautiful girl in such beautiful boots.

"One seventy-eight and falling," Ivy said to Steven.

"Perfect. She has three minutes to get to class."

Steven tossed some items into a biohazard bag and doused his hands with sanitizer. He spun on a chair and clicked a pen open on a clipboard. Then checked a box and grinned.

“Enjoy your Untech experience.”

* * * * *

Sherry and Robert sit adjacent in a huge auditorium. There is cheap and sleazy marketing collateral everywhere. Banners. So many banners. “Untech Your Life.” They all say this. With trademark tradeshow triangles. Sharp edges and attention grabbers. Fluorescents. Fonts underlined and italicized. Gimmick gimmick gimmick.

A woman sits next to Robert and Sherry. Mousy. Unassuming. Fly on the wall.

There are only three others in the room, in a row of three desks directly behind them.

They are in an ostentatious showing in a larger than life auditorium for a half dozen people.

Robert is skeptical, but groggy enough that this doesn't seem like a hill worth dying on.

Sherry is succumbing to whatever slowed her down. After all, she apparently paid handsomely for this break. Break from life. From pressure. From people. From connection.

“Good afternoon, my name is Greyson Davis,” a voice boomed in an over the top way.

A man, dressed in black and gray, wearing glasses and dimples centered himself in front of the crowd. He used a small device to project an image to the ceiling and another to talk into.

“Your seats recline, please relax while I orientate you to Vaylex.”

The six cast of characters in the audience are so tired, they oblige. Reclining was a welcomed bonus.

The projection above showed a brochure-looking island. Likely the one they were on.

"I am the CEO of a company called Vaylex, LLC. In the last 72 hours, you opted in to our Untech way of living. This may or may not sound familiar to you and that is because we've had to micro dose you to both get you here and keep you comfortable. Everything we use is safe and well tolerated. You have all had micro dosings of Approxis today and Cathartica to transport you here. Think of Approxis like a 'mind eraser' shot."

The girl next to Robert raises her hand.

“Please, refrain from all questions until the end. We've provided pencils and notebooks for you take notes. Stating the obvious here, there are no computers.”

“Are we in a timeshare class here?” Robert asks, leaning into Sherry.

As soon as the words left his mouth he remembered having that thought before.

Timeshare, timeshare, timeshare. Why was he thinking about this recently?

Sherry smiled and shrugged. "I hope not," she whispers back.

Greyson continues on in a very cult preacher fashion. "We have a few simple rules here, and they are only for your benefit. To get the most out of your experience and to ensure that our guests before you continue to thrive in the tech-free environment we have created for them. First, what does that mean?"

He clicks a button on the projection above. This speech has definitely been given before.

The next slide is cozy people in slippers reading a magazine. It reeks of spa pamphlet.

"Currently we have about 262 lodging accommodations on the island. We spared no expense on luxuries for each. Of course, they are without modern unnecessary upgrades like digital assistants but rest assured any and every thing you'll need to relax and unwind is provided." Greyson clicks the slide. The next picture shows a compact-like container filled with pills, in a phasal layout, like birth control.

Some of the women look uncomfortable.

Greyson smiles. "I know. It looks like contraception. Not to worry. Of course it's not.

You see, being disconnected has brought on some very unfavorable withdrawal

symptoms for people. It made them ornery, restless, anxious or even enraged. We've developed a taper of Approxis to.. take the edge off. Allow you to really embrace this time away. As I noted before, it's nothing more than a shot of alcohol that will make you a bit forgetful. Forgetful of allll those ties that bound you in your tech-obsessed lives."

Greyson pulls a packet out of his suit coat. "Each day it will get a bit less and ease you into disconnection. Questions on Approxis?"

The audience of six is mute, each glancing at the other, perhaps willing someone *else* to say something of worth.

"Perfect. I will hand you each a pill packet and ask that you take these every morning with food. And trust me, the food here is just delicious!"

Greyson hands the packet in his hand to Robert, then continues to pull five more from his coat one by one and divvy out.

"I have a question," the unassuming girl next to Sherry tries once again to raise her hand. Greyson looks up. "Yes. Go ahead."

"If we've all been given Approxis already, how will we remember to take these pills?"

Greyson laughs a sly laugh but doesn't answer the question.

“No, really. Won’t we just forget everything that’s happening right now?” the girl shrinks a bit but does not blush.

“What is your name miss?”

“A..Albie. Alberta. Albie for short.”

“Albie, it’s a completely fair question. Today you’ve been micro-dosed and to be fair, Approxis is a bit more complex than I am making it sound. I assure you, you’ll retain this class and there are papers to remind you in your dwellings. Shall I continue?” He assumes center stage again and clicks forward.

The next image on the ceiling is of various smart phones, computers and other gadgets all with red slashed circles around each.

“This one is really our only cardinal rule. The rest are merely strong recommendations made by our staff here. There is NO technology and there is NO speaking of technology outside of your classmates. Look around you. These are your classmates. If you need to discuss how you’re feeling, hold a support group, be reminiscent of email – you do it with these five other individuals. Anyone outside of that, not one word. We cannot have newcomers corrupting the serenity that our residents have found here. Understood?”

Head nods.

“When we say technology, we mean smart technology. Anything that was born of the internet. This is not the Stone Age. You have appliances. You have television, be it somewhat dated in programming. We did this so as not to tempt our guests or remind them of what they are missing. So you’ll largely see TV shows from the nineties and before. Many of our guests like it that way. They feel a warm nostalgia with these shows and they remember things to do outside of their computers. Like read a magazine or a good book. There is a fully functional library on the island as well.”

Robert half lifts his hand.

“Yes. Mister...Chrome, is it?”

Robert laughs. “I feel honored. You know my name but you didn’t know hers.” He gestures toward Albie.

Greyson waits, stoic but still fake charming. Like a game show host wax statue.

Robert continues. “I’m just curious how you have such advanced things like your projector or thermometers in a place that is against technology.”

Greyson bites the side of his lip. “Well,” he pauses. “These are Vaylex products and our staff uses them only in the medical facility. They don’t involve connectivity or smart

technology, though I see your point. Our residents are comfortable with the product advances we are making here for their benefit.”

Robert chuckles. He stifles a retort.

“You are all about to be taken to your accommodations, which are all near one another on the North side of the island. Inside your new homes, you’ll find additional reading material about the island, the program, and code of conduct. The most important thing is to make sure you get what you came here for. Unteching your lives with us is a beautiful commitment you made to yourselves. A hard one, but a rewarding one. Give yourselves a pat on the back”

Sherry raises her hand.

“Yes?”

“When will we get our phones back?”

Greyson’s eyes dodge hers. “In due time. The entire point is to learn life without this appendage.”

“Yes, but I need to update people of where I am. I can’t just poof be missing. I’m sure none of us can,” Sherry added.

A few others grumble their agreement.

“This will all be taken care of Ms. Marlowe. Not to worry.”

Sherry glances at Robert as if to say, *he knows me too*.

Greyson shuts the projection off.

“A bus is arriving now outside to take you to where you need to go. There is a 24-hour concierge who will get you anything you need so long as it isn’t internet-related. I will see each of you for one-on-one consultations later in the week. Enjoy your stay.”

“Exactly how long is this stay?” Albie asked.

“As long as is needed.”

A rickety bus pulls to an awkward stop outside of the facility.

“Lodging!” the man calls.

Chapter 7 // Well Albie Damned

A rickety bus screeches to a stop in the sand in front of the facility. No one has bothered making small talk outside. All six are grappling with the muscle memory of reaching for a phone and getting lost in a screen. No device divisiveness. There is a somber mourning mixed with relief in the air. Is this a vacation? Perhaps it is. The next logical step for the world after going smaller and smaller then faster and faster and then bigger and bigger was now slower and slower.

Robert, likely the biggest skeptic, couldn't deny he saw it coming. What his customers used to want they simply didn't anymore. Color and busy went to white space and clean. Surely man would pay now to "untech" their lives. Opt in to opt out. It all became too dizzying and what glorious fantasy it would be to have it taken all away. After all, that's what vacations once were weren't they? A break from the office. A chance to slip away to a tiny room with minimal belongings and zero distractions. White space.

Robert flipped this thought over in his mind. He slowly nodded with himself in agreement in his head. What did it mean for his business?

As they filed onto the bus, Sherry had already felt her pocket three times for her phone. Despite how many times she reminded herself that it wasn't there, her hand saw it differently. She noticed that Alberta –Albie—was watching her. She chose a seat. There weren't many. It wasn't a full-length bus but more like the bus that drives people and luggage from a parking lot to a terminal at the airport.

Sherry sat. Robert sat. The three others sat. A man and two women, varying ages.

“I’m Albie,” Albie finally said and extended her hand to Sherry.

“Doctor Sherry Marlowe,” Sherry replied.

“Doctor? Oh ha, wow yes me too,” Albie said. “Holistic that is.”

“Interesting. I practice alternative myself. What are the odds?”

Robert is crunching numbers in his head next to the Sherry and Albie introduction when a silver haired man turns around to him. “Well, I guess we should get acquainted. Not like we can get each other by phone!” He laughs at his observation. “I’m Harold.”

“Robert Chrome,” Robert said. He gave him a nod in place of a handshake. The two other women turned from their conversation at the front of the bus.

“Robert Chrome as in Robert Chrome from Chrome Industries?” one asked.

This made Robert uncomfortable but also proud.

“I don’t know. Who’s asking?” he mused.

“I’m Dianna. I work in tech,” the strawberry blonde one answered with a smile. “I suppose you could say I’m a small competitor of yours.” She glanced at the brunette next to her as if to cue her.

“I’m Kelsey. I actually work for Link.”

“Oh no way. Link is a great company. So let me get this straight. Six of us here and most of us are either doctors or tech folk? Sounds a bit forced.”

Albie chuckled from the back.

“How’d you know I was a doctor Robert?” Harold asked.

“Okay so then six of us here and we’re *all* either doctors or tech folk. Ironic indeed,” Robert mused.

The bus comes to a rocky halt.

“Folks, this is where you’ll be staying. There are phones in your units to call anyone on the island and that includes me. I’m at #33. Name’s Roy. Any rides you need anywhere, I’ll getcha where you’re going. No use walkin’ around where you don’t know.”

“Okay, so where do we go?” Sherry asked.

“There’s six units in this little section and numbers are on the front. I have each of your keys to give you right here in this bucket. There’s welcome folders in your kitchens and plenty clothes in the closets. Any other questions, you can call the concierge at #11.”

As each left the bus in single file, Roy handed a key on a chain that looked like a “2.” Don’t confuse the keychain “2” with your unit number. That’s just the keychain. Your units are on the keys themselves.

Albie lagged behind Robert and Sherry.

“Pst. Hey,” she said in a lowered voice. “Do you guys feel creepy about this place or is it just me?”

“Totally,” Sherry said.

“Kind of,” said Robert. “Maybe.”

Albie shifted her eyes around to make sure no one else was in earshot. “I don’t trust this. I mean what gives? What’s the catch? Why are we all here crippled with no means of outside access?”

“To be fair, it *is* what we signed up for,” Robert said.

“I don’t even really remember that,” said Sherry. I mean I remember an ad running while I had had a couple glasses of wine and was feeling particularly low the other night so I guess it’s entirely possible but what kind of pretty penny did we fork out for this ‘vacation’ exactly?”

“Twenty-five thousand,” Robert and Albie said in unison.

“Dollars?!”

Albie nodded.

Robert has his first laugh in days at Sherry’s expense.

“We don’t even know how long we’re here for! I guess I really need a vacation. Hey are either of you having any flashes of anything? Like an apothecary?”

Albie and Robert exchange looks.

“No.”

“Nope.”

“Wonderful. Well then I really, really need a vacation. I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

Sherry checks out the keys in her palm. She starts for the units, which are very overly gussied up huts. She had to admit they were stunning.

Robert and Albie watch as Sherry disappears. Everyone is gone now but them.

“Why don’t we see how we feel after we check the place out,” Robert said. “It might be completely legit. Everything we hoped for. And paid for.”

“I’m not saying it’s not beautiful. But mark my words, we don’t have the whole picture.”

* * *

Sherry runs her hand along the marble tiling of the bathroom. The inside of her place is stunning. Minimalistic, clean, comfortable. White and wood. As promised there is a closet filled to the brim of clothing. All in her size which was only slightly unsettling. The rooms smelled of tea tree oil and sage, then coconut and lavender. There was a fridge filled with fruits and a rack packed with wine. Not just any wines but very aged, very rich varietals. Multiple pairs of lush slippers lined the floors and tons of never cracked open magazines sat waiting to be read. In essence, this was her dream vacation. The epitome of relaxation and utter disconnection. But how long can anyone live like this? Surely she had to go back home sooner rather than later.

A gray metal file folder with her name on it beckons her from the kitchen counter.

She opens it to find a map, a food order form of sorts, a job application, and a rule book.

More rules. Sherry leafs through the book too tired to actually read any of it. *Why is there a job application? Were they putting her to work?*

She decides to navigate the food instead. Yes. Macaroni and Cheese. Done.

* * * *

Robert surveys his new digs.

Not bad at all.

Mid-century, the way he liked it. He couldn't help but notice the lack of gadgets from his home to this one. It had a fair size television and a cordless phone. That was it.

He peeked in the closet. Threads that bore an eerie resemblance to his exact taste.

Nice touch.

He felt the bedding for good measure. Ha! His thread count at home was definitely higher. Decent though.

Quickly, Robert sees a flash. A split-second picture of being chained, no, wired or bound.

Like he was waking in a coffin.

The flash breaks. He shakes it off.

Probably drug side effects.

Robert walks to the kitchen where a black metal folder awaits him on the counter.

Robert Chrome.

Does he want to do this now? It's already been a very long day. He opens the folder in a very non-committal way. The front still in his hand and ready to abort mission. He slides a map out and closes the folder. He's on vacation after all.

He walks the map to the front door and outside so he can orientate himself and get his bearings.

A woman, familiar looking, is not too far away staring at him.

That face.

The woman smiles and "big" waves. High and slow like a half moon. "Yoo hoo!" she calls.

Robert does a "who me?" motion to the woman.

Is she on TV?

The woman walks to Robert. She is brightly dressed with a bob haircut.

“I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

“Well I don’t think so! That certainly wouldn’t be possible. But I am so excited to meet you!”

“Were you on television? Like a commercial? I swear I know your face.”

“Me? A commercial! Well now that is too funny! Maybe I have a twin,” bob cut woman said. “They say everybody does you know.”

“Sure, right. Must be.”

Robert notices that the woman’s keys in her hand have a shiny “Y” instead of a number two like his and everyone else on his bus.

“I’m just thrilled more survivors were found,” the woman said, beaming. “You know I said to Danny that there would be more survivors and he said Kate you are too much of an optimist. But I knew it. I knew it in my heart. That’s why I didn’t want to do the freezing ya know. But Danny he’s just a glass half empty son of a gun. Didn’t have a damn belief left in him.”

“Survivors? Freezing? What on Earth are you talking about?”

Chapter 8 // Anecdotal

Robert finds Albie's accommodations in a panic and raps on her door.

"Albie! You home?"

Albie comes to the door looking somehow different. It could be just the glasses and wet hair but Robert takes a pause.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I think you're right. Something is off. Can you talk? I didn't know what else to do. No cell phones and all."

Albie steps outside the door and closes it. "Yes but not inside. You just never know."

"What, you think they'll bug a place built on no technology? A little oxymoronic, no?"

"*We* have no technology. *They* have whatever they want," said Albie.

Robert had to admit she had a point. They walk a few steps past what could only be a fake garden.

Albie grabs Robert's arm to stop him. "Look, I can't tell you every reason I know something isn't right about this place. But I will tell you that I'm not really a doctor and I'm not who they think I am," she said, lowly.

Robert paused. "Well then no offense but how do I know to trust *you*?"

"You don't frankly. But I at least just told you the truth, which is more than I can say for the people here. Whatever led you to my door is only going to happen again. And them trying to keep us medicated *is* for a reason. We need to find a way to not take those pills. Keep ourselves alert while everyone around us turns to mush."

"Can't we just not take them? How will they know?"

"Those thought rates are going to be checked everyday. Mark my words. They say it's for the better of us. I mean...Thought police? They're *actually* policing our thoughts."

"Well there has to be a way to trip the system," Robert reasoned. "If people can trip polygraphs, they can trip this."

Robert and Albie see a pedestrian across the way – not someone from their "class" – and lower their voices even more.

“So I saw this woman and she referred to me as a ‘survivor’ and then said something about someone freezing. I have no idea what she was talking about. But she looked familiar and she just kept smiling. Eerily though. Not endearingly. Her face...”

“Survivor? What else did she say?”

“That’s it. She knew there were survivors and she was optimistic while someone named Danny was pessimistic and freezing or something like that.”

“Who’s Danny?”

“Like I know. I know as much as you know. Well, I guess less than you know because you’re here under some false guise and so I know you know more.”

“Yes I know more than you know. But what I don’t know is if telling you can put you in danger. So for now, let’s just do our best to stay alert and not take those drugs. Tell Sherry too if you can.”

“Damn it. Sherry! Have you seen her?”

* * * *

A soft knock.

Sherry stands with extreme trepidation at the door of an office in the building they just left hours earlier. She's not even sure she's in the right place. A stack of papers in her left hand, she waits for the girl at the desk to notice. The girl is sitting in front of what looks like a brand new typewriter. White. Flawless.

“Yes, may I help you?”

“Uh, yes hi. My name is Dr. Sherry Marlowe.”

“Mm Hmm.”

“I noticed there was a job application in our welcome folders and well, I'm just a little confused. For one, I have a job. And two, well, how long is this stay exactly? I mean, we obviously don't have our things. Are we expected to be earning income?”

“Doctor you say? Well, the island always needs those! Mr. Davis will be meeting with each of you to go over all of this. I'm not really at liberty to say how long your stay will be.”

Sherry looks down at the ground in disappointment. The tiling is a pattern she knows.

Flashback.

Wood. White. Apothecary. Clean. Sterile. Jars.

Sherry shakes her head to break her flashed memory.

“Have you taken your Approxis?” the girl at the typewriter asks. “Perhaps you can use more. Relax a little.”

“Oh I’m okay. Maybe just a water fountain or a restroom I could splash some cold water on my face?”

“Last door on your left,” the girl doesn’t break her typing.

Sherry blindly walks the long corridor and nearly enters the last door on the left but decides to keep going. She barely realized she was still wearing slippers on her feet until she glanced down again. She knew these floors. They were the floors in her flashes. She must have been here when she spotted those jars.

She rounded a corner and noticed a wood door with white stencil on the outside.

AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

She peered in the oblong window and a chill iced its way down her spine.

This was the room. White. Wood. Apothecary-like. She squinted to see the line of jars that had been haunting her. They each had a disease listed on them. AIDS. Cancer. Cirrhosis. Rheumatoid Arthritis. Lupus. Crohn's Disease. There must have been seventy-five jars, just from her vantage point. All the same proportions. All white ceramic with slate labels.

She tried to twist the knob and heard a faint beeping. Above the knob was a prompt for a 4-digit passcode.

There was only one way in this room and that was to become authorized personnel.

Sherry quickly rushed back to the girl behind the typewriter.

“Did you find the restroom?”

“Um. Yes. May I borrow a pen? I'd like to get my job application in right away. A place can never have too many doctors, right?”

A phone next to the girl rings just as she hands off a pen.

Sherry begins to scribble in her details as the girl “Yes sir” and “No sir”'s on the phone call. Click.

“Mr. Davis would like to see you first thing tomorrow morning. Please take your Approxis with breakfast as instructed and a golf cart will come by to pick you up. You can bring your resume to him then. If you have any questions, dial the concierge.”

“But, how did...”

“He said to tell you that it’s all just anecdotal,” the girl chuckled. “Whatever that means...He’s brilliant. Have a great day Ms. Marlowe.”

Chapter 9 // Caterpillar Effect

It’s somewhere around 6 am and Robert has barely slept. He felt pangs of withdrawal already from no phone or email. No matter how many times he reminded himself that these things were gone, he still went for them every half hour or so. He was used to mindlessly surfing. To checking the stock market or the weather. Hell, everything he did he did on the phone. Right down to waking up to its alarm.

This morning, he can hear crashing water, which in essence, should have all but rocked him to sleep.

He tried everything last night to entertain himself. He read three magazines cover to cover. He took a bath with things like Himalayan Salt and Frankincense oil. He did a few push ups and ordered a salmon dinner.

But there were too many unknowns here for him to find peace. Robert was a hard numbers guy. He liked things finite and left-brained. Admittedly, he wanted to deeply disconnect from the world. But not like this. He had to find out more from the smiley neighbor. And no matter what, he had to flush today's dose of Approxis down the toilet.

* * * *

Albie popped today's pill out of the slot in the holder. She had to look like she was taking it just in case there were cameras. Might be paranoia but why chance it?

She placed the pill under her tongue and ran cold water from the kitchen faucet into a glass she found in the cupboard. She's deciding between pancakes or eggs in her head.

With a quick slight of hand, she spit the just slightly dissolved pill into her glass then splashed the whole cup into the sink.

There. No pills. She fixed a cup of coffee and was thankful for the modernity of the coffee maker.

Albie headed toward the shower, which she had to admit she could get used to. It was a beautiful open wood basin tub. It even had were fresh petals inside. She turned the knob.

They really pull out all the stops.

Just as Albie reached for a terry robe nearby, she heard a knock at the door.

This can't be Robert again, can it?

Albie shut the water and traipsed back toward the front door. She cracked it just slightly.

“Ms. Dennison? Hi. We’re here to take your morning vitals.”

* * * *

Sherry dialed the concierge.

Before it even rang, she hung up.

If she can dial the concierge, what’s stopping her from calling home? Calling the office at least? That was a number she knew by heart.

She punched the keys utilizing the country code, knowing fair well they were at least that far away.

It rang. Once. Twice. Then silence.

“Hello?” Sherry said.

“Hello.” Came a voice back.

“This is Dr. Marlowe,” she added.

“This is Doctor Marlowe,” the voice said.

“Is this an echo?” she asked

“Is this an echo?” the voice repeated.

Only, it didn’t sound like an echo. The voice gave Sherry chills because it sounded like an alien version of her own voice. She clicked the phone on the receiver.

So much for that.

She dialed the concierge.

“Vaylex concierge, how may I help you?”

“Hi, this is Dr. Sherry Marlowe. I am trying to schedule an appointment with Greyson Davis this morning.”

“Yes, I can take care of that for you. Have you taken your morning meds yet Ms. Marlowe?”

“I’m not sure why that matters but no.” Sherry nervously twirls the phone coils.

“We just want to keep you on schedule and ensure you’re not going to go into any withdrawal, that’s all.”

“I see. Well, I am about to take them with breakfast. Can I speak with Mr. Davis around noon?”

“I have an 11:45. I will pencil you in.”

Sherry clicks the phone and starts over to the kitchen where her Approxis waits.

* * * *

Robert hunted for the familiar woman for almost an hour. There are two things he is sure of at this point. One, that *is* the woman from the television commercial – so either she didn’t know she was being filmed for public television or she lied. Robert wasn’t sure what the motive of the latter would be. Two, he couldn’t and wouldn’t take his pills until he had more info. So far, it seemed like everyone is lying and he had to get to the bottom of it. With a sober mind.

He touched the pills in his pocket while he walked aware of the fact that he may get caught. Caught? My goodness! This was truly absurd. He paid for a vacation not a jail! And he vaguely even remembered doing that.

Right then, Kate the Familiar Bob Cut Lady, stepped out to water (perhaps fake) plants in front of her unit.

“Excuse me. I’m sorry to bother you it’s just some of the things you said yesterday stuck with me.”

She looked at him like she’d never seen him before in her life.

“I saw you yesterday. You were thrilled? Um. You mentioned that I had ‘survived’ and I just wasn’t clear on that part.”

Kate lifted the watering can and cautiously started stepping out of her doorframe.

“Uh. Okay. Perhaps that was someone else? Maybe another woman who resembles me?”

“Nooo. I’m quite certain. I wouldn’t forget a face. Just like I didn’t forget it from the commercial.”

Kate moved in closer to Robert and brought her voice down to a whisper. “You keep mentioning this commercial, I’m not an actress.”

“So then you do remember talking to me.”

“Yes. But keep your voice down.”

Robert shifted his approach.

“I just don’t think of myself as a survivor I guess. That survivor guilt as they call it. And well, what I survived was so harrowing and all.”

“I understand,” said Kate.

“Well, how would you describe it? What I survived.”

“How can anyone describe the end? I mean. I know we had fair warning but. I don’t know. It’s definitely been easier for us all here at Vaylex to adjust than I’m sure it was for you. But I swore there were more out there. In the early weeks, I had gotten a call out to my sister’s phone number. I knew it was her. Least I thought it was. And I said to her, ‘please, please let me speak to my nephew’ because I just missed him so much. You have kids? No? Anyway. Then she said I must have the wrong person. That she didn’t have any children. Well, I didn’t know if I really did have the wrong person, or if the other survivors had just gone mad.”

Robert tried his hardest to look like this wasn't the craziest person he'd ever met. He nodded in all the right places and offered an "MmHm," where necessary. But he knew that whatever she thought they had mutually "survived" was put into her head by the employees. And it was very likely she was drinking the Approxis Koolaid.

"Well, I'm sure your nephew and your sister are just fine. When is the last time you saw them?"

"What do you mean?" Kate looked very puzzled.

"Like, when did you, you know, come to the island? How long ago?"

"Well. Right after silly," Kate said. She paused and mentally counted. "Almost twenty years ago I guess."

* * * *

Sherry arrived at the facility to meet Greyson a bit early. She had dressed in an Italian suit she found in the closet. Her wardrobe was at the top its game. Her mind was not. The Approxis had kicked in somewhere between a golf cart picking her up and now. Slowly she muttered, "I'm checking in to see Mr. Davis."

"Take a seat Ms. Marlowe," said a new girl behind a typewriter.

* * * *

Robert feverishly dialed the phone in his dwelling. “Hi. I need an appointment to speak with Mr. Davis. It’s urgent.”

“We’ll send a golf cart right now Mr. Chrome. He can see you at 11:45.”

Robert crushes one pill in his thumb and forefinger and flushes it down the toilet.

* * * *

Kate retreats into her home feeling confused. She picks up the extension.

“Lily? This is Kate. Yes. Yes. I did get your basket. It was lovely. Does Mr. Davis have any free time? I just have a couple of questions. Eleven forty-five? Oh that’s very soon. Okay. I’ll hurry.” Kate hangs up the phone.

* * * *

Greyson Davis walks out of his office dressed in a black and gray and suit. He seems cool and collected. He mouths to the girl behind the typewriter, Lily, in reception.

“Set up three different rooms.”

Lily leaves her post and retrieves several cold water bottles from a mini fridge. She click clacks across the floor from one room to another placing a cold water in each room and closing each door. She returns to reception. Sherry is still waiting.

“If you’ll just take a seat in room 3, Mr. Davis will be right with you. I left some ice cold water in there for you.”

She smiles an electric white.

“Also, Jake will be in to check your vitals before your meeting. We want to make sure you are as relaxed as possible and enjoying your stay.”

Sherry nodded. She felt like she was speaking to a stewardess on a plane and not a receptionist. She walked to room 3 and took a seat.

She stared blankly at the resume in front of her as the words began to jump off the page.

Definitely not micro-dosed anymore.

Greyson entered the room with Jake right behind him. Jake placed a tiny device on Sherry’s forehead until it beeped. “She’s at 101,” he said to Greyson

“Perfect.”

Greyson turned to Sherry.

“What can I do for you Dr. Marlowe? I assume by the resume you’re holding you want to discuss a job?”

Sherry was struggling for clarity.

“Yes. Yes, I do. I’m a doctor.”

Greyson smiled. “Yes, I am aware.” He paused for a long inhalation. “Ms. Marlowe what I’m about to tell you may seem like a lot to take in but I think you’ll find that you’re in just the right state of awareness to absorb it.”

“Really because I feel kind of—”

“Nonsense. You’re great. Now, I’m sure with all the experience in your field you’ve heard of the many ‘mysterious holistic doctor deaths,’ correct?” He used his fingers to do air quotes.

“What like the conspiracy theories? Of course. Who hasn’t?”

“Well, what if I told you that most if not all of those doctors were here. On the island. Helping. That none of those of those doctors died but that were, er, called to a higher purpose.”

“Well that’s just crazy. I’ve barely even seen any people here.”

“Would you at least consider staying here? With us. Working with us? In the lifestyle we have cultivated here *for* alternative health. A simple life. With handsome rewards.”

Sherry remembered why she was there in the first place. To get access to the room for authorized personnel.

“How handsome are these rewards?”

“That’s the spirit Ms. Marlowe. I’ll have HR talk to you and take that resume from you. Excuse me for one moment.”

The wall clock ticked eleven forty-five.

* * * *

Greyson slid out of the room with Sherry and right into the next room where a worrisome Kate sat, legs crossed and body language closed.

“To what do I owe the honor?”

Kate, chewing a nail, is surprised. She was expecting her thought rate to be taken first.

“Mr. Davis! Oh I’m so sorry to take up your time. It’s just, well, I met one of the survivors and he just seemed to have no idea what I was talking about. I mean he really looked at me like I had three heads!”

“Kate. Dear. We talked about how they might be delusional. Remember? For weeks I taught you all in class that these survivors may be shocked, they may have amnesia. And what did I say the best thing to do was?”

Kate paused for a minute then blushed. “Not bring up anything about being a survivor.”
She hung her head sheepishly.

“And what did you do?”

“Brought it right up. I apologize Mr. Davis.”

“It’s fine this time. But this was why I offered you all the freezing. We just knew this wasn’t going to be an easy adjustment. You and the others that opted out can still change your minds you know. Just until this all blows over. When we can integrate a much more seamless society.”

“No, thank you Mr. Davis. I will just be more careful with my words.”

“That’s the spirit.”

* * * *

Greyson makes a swift exit from the room and dodges quickly into the room next to it where Robert is sitting, restlessly shaking his leg.

“Mr. Chrome, I’ve been expecting you.” Grayson pushes a wall intercom button and leans in. “Lily can you send Jake for vitals on Mr. Chrome.”

Robert is visibly nervous. He hadn't quite figured out how he was going to trip the TR system other than some old meditation tricks to clear his mind. Which never worked then and would never work now.

"With all due respect Mr. Davis," Robert started.

"Ut oh. No good conversation ever starts with all due respect." Grayson is undeterred and fixes his tie. He pulls a chair out across from Robert.

"I want to know what's really going on here. Man to man. I am a respected business man as I'm sure you are, too."

"I understand." Greyson said. "Why don't you tell me exactly is bothering you and I can answer you. Man to man."

"Fine well, I spoke with someone who wasn't making a whole lot of sense. She referred to me as a survivor and said something was freezing. I was also told that when a guest here tried to contact her nephew at home, she was told her nephew didn't exist."

Grayson seemed unmoved at the start of Robert's rant but perked up at the nephew part.

"Have you taken your Approxis today Mr. Chrome?"

"Damn. I completely forgot," Robert lied. "I'm just not used to it but when I get back I will."

Grayson's face was tightening into a look of displeasure. "I see," he said, clearly calling his bluff. "So you're saying someone claims to have gotten a call out?"

"Yes! She also said she's been here twenty years!"

"Well, doesn't that tell you she is delusional? Look, some people don't react that well to being disconnected. This is exactly why we want people to take their meds."

Now Robert was scared that he crushed his pill. He didn't want to be delusional.

"I will tell you this much Mr. Chrome. And I beg that you keep this between us so as not to scare other guests. There is something called the Caterpillar Effect that we have found on the island."

"Caterpillar Effect?"

"Yes. It is somewhat of a Butterfly Effect but different. It operates backwards. In the continuum that we are in here on the island, anything that happened *because* of the internet – in other words, as a direct result of – didn't happen because you are in a parallel where it doesn't exist. So, best I can tell, perhaps whoever told you she tried to reach her nephew may have only had that nephew as a direct result of the internet."

"How is that possible?"

“Oh many ways. Off the top of my head? Perhaps her sister and brother-in-law or brother and sister-in-law or whichever sibling marriage bore this child, resulted from a dating site. Maybe they met or rekindled on social media. Maybe they met at an internet café. The possibilities are endless. Truthfully, it doesn’t matter. But that baby only happened because of the internet. So if we revert back to a time where it doesn’t exist, neither does he.”

Robert was incredibly uncomfortable. What did this mean for his entire empire?

“It would behoove you to take your Approxis, Mr. Chrome. None of this will be easy to digest otherwise.”

Chapter 10 // A House Divided

Three days have passed on the island. Robert has been half dosing himself, to the knowledge of no one but him. Takes the edge off. Enough to pass the TR checks but stay with it.

Albie isn’t dosing at all. She puts on a show every morning for the cameras she can’t see but she can just *feel*. Somehow, she has tripped the vitals check each day. Maybe because

she's known about Vaylex for so long, her mind actually isn't racing. None of this came as a shock to her. They came every morning like clockwork to check and every morning before they got there she practiced techniques to clear her mind. Jake would say, "It's still in the higher numbers, but it's passable. Make sure you take the Approxis with food." She'd nod and thumb through the menu like this was the problem. "Eggs look good," she'd say.

She decided today was the day to tell to tell Robert what she knew. She had dropped crumbs to others in their group but they were all so far gone. All of the others were loving the disconnected lifestyle and adapting fast. Albie had to admit they looked better than they did just days ago. But she had a job to do here.

Both Albie and Robert hadn't seen Sherry in a few days. They both independently assumed she was fully medicating and under the spell of the island.

Albie was waiting for Robert to get to her place. It was admittedly such a different world without phones. Without texting. Without email. Although, what she had to tell Robert she would never risk over the phone anyway. She knew better. Though they had the ability to call anyone on the island, from hut to hut, she was just sure of it that those lines were tapped.

She sifted through a magazine on the couch. Magazines. Did these still exist? Robert knocked three times like they discussed.

She sprang up and flung the door open. “Are you medicated? This is kind of a lot.”

* * * *

Sherry slid a time card through a slot. This was her first day as a Vaylex employee. They provided her with scrubs-ish. They didn’t really look like scrubs but they did have Dr. Marlowe sewn into the breast. She had trained for two days on “policy and procedure.” Little things. The minute Sherry was provided a 4-digit employee code she checked out mentally on the rest. That code was all she needed.

Despite her exact Approxis dosing, she still felt clear. Clear enough anyway. Enough to remember why she was doing this and that something was compelling to her to go into that room.

She quietly crept past reception. Ivy was where Lily was sitting last time. The typewriter thing was kitschy but unnecessary. She retraced her steps from the other day back to the authorized personnel door. She plunged down on the keys as quickly and quietly as possible. 1-2-3-1. (*That* she may have been able to eventually guess.)

The bolt unbolted. *Click Click.*

She turned the knob just enough to crack the door and slid in the room, thankful she was skinny.

Just like she'd seen in her flashes was an entire room wall to wall of ceramic jars. She grabbed a latex glove and shimmied it onto her hand before touching anything. Her heart was beating so fast she could hear thumping in her ears.

Gingerly, she lifted the top on a jar that said, Type 1 Diabetes. Inside she found only a scrolled paper. She could barely fit her hand inside the jar but retrieved the paper with two fingers.

She uncurled the page and found a molecular structure, often used in medicines. Odd that this was in a jar for a disease and not a drug. She twisted it back up and placed it back inside. She reached for another. Crohn's Disease. Same contents, different molecular diagram. Pancreatic Cancer. Same. As she plunked the top back onto the Alzheimer's jar, she heard a noise behind her and realized she was not alone.

"Looking for something, Dr. Marlowe?"

Greyson stood behind her.

* * * *

Albie and Robert took a walk around the island. Harold jogged passed them and waved. He looked happy.

"So, there's some things I need to tell you. About Vaylex. About this place. About me."

Robert nodded. He too had some new information. Though he wasn't sure yet if he should tell Albie about the Caterpillar Effect. It had already cost him three nights of sleep.

“First of all, I'm not a doctor. I'm a reporter.”

“Okay, you've got my attention.”

“I work for a large newspaper called the Sun Tribune. We had been getting these weird tips called in to our tipline. Whenever I traced them back, or tried to, it would go to an out of country number. Which was odd.”

“Sure. Sounds odd to me too,” Robert agreed.

“So we began to do some digging. Which led to more digging. And then it became this sort of obsessive project like you see in those shows where they have a whole room devoted to storyboards. My editor and I were going back to every tip that came in from out of range. Many had similar through lines. Stories to cover for missing people mostly. Which is when we got really suspicious. When we started looking into all of those people, we saw that they were mostly holistic doctors. Some tech people like yourself.”

“Really? That's a bit of a large coincidence.”

“Exactly what we thought. So we pushed further. And we found that many of them had dialed the same phone number the night before they went missing.”

Robert stops walking. “Let me guess. The number from the infomercial.”

“You got it. We realized it was playing in the homes, targeted-like, of holistic doctors and high up tech folks. But a strange thing happened. The more I dug on this story, the more bizarre things started happening to me.”

“Like what?”

“At first it was little things. A slip and fall where I injured my arm. Food poisoning. A fire where I lived.”

“These are little things?”

“By comparison, unfortunately. There was a freak ‘accident’ from a construction site right onto my car and I had just gotten out. A robbery that involved my computer. It was as though this black cloud was following me everywhere, right above my head. So I began to go undercover. The Tribune backed the whole thing financially. Then we baited Vaylex under my new identity and in my ‘new home’ until I finally got the infomercial. Well, Albie Dennison, Homeopathic Doctor did anyway.”

“Wow. That’s insane.”

“It gets worse.”

“Wonderful.”

“As far as we could trace it back, the tips came in for almost twenty years. The first one was that people were undergoing cryogenic freezing in order to ‘live forever’ or something crazy.”

The word ‘freezing’ sent an actual chill down Robert’s spine. He could hear Kate talking about Danny all over again.

Albie, or whoever she was, stared at Robert in hesitation.

“What?”

“My editor continued to get odd tips from the source. So the very last tip we got was how I knew I could and should talk to you.”

Robert swallowed. Hard. He dreaded whatever she was about to say.

“It was that the CEO and Founder of Chrome Industries was arrested on a total of ninety-nine counts of fraud and embezzlement.”

* * * *

Sherry stuttered. “I apologize Mr. Davis. It just looked like you were doing such important work in here and I have to be in on it.”

It was hard to tell if Greyson was buying that or not.

“What are these exactly?” she pried.

“They’re nothing you need to concern yourself with other than preventive medicines.”

“Preventative? I’m confused. I thought what we did here was alternative medicine.”

“Yes. That is true. Our holistic approach is much more centered around a lifestyle. That is, the lifestyle you see here on the island. Free of technology. Free of stress. We have cultivated an environment that lowers the risk of disease.”

“How do you figure? People had this life for centuries and had a life expectancy of 40.”

“True. We’re not alleging there is immunity here Ms. Marlowe. Which is why we also practice Western medicine. Just more at the forefront.”

“Like vaccines?”

“Something like that. But again, this is not your department nor your concern. You should get to work.”

* * * *

Robert, furious, has picked up the pace.

“I committed fraud? That’s absurd! Embezzlement? What? Well I’ll have you know that Greyson Davis told me personally he has some paradoxical reaction here that literally creates some weird butterfly effect.”

“Butteryfly Effect? How so?”

“I don’t know! He calls it a Caterpillar Effect and anything that happened as a direct result of the internet, never happened. It’s like some quantum physics thing. Which basically means I have no business.”

Albie, or whoever she is, struggles to keep up, both in walking and in conversation.

“So whatever they’re doing here erases things that happened? How is that even possible?”

“Who knows? All I know is, I’m going to have a word with Mr. Davis. Give him a piece of my mind.”

“Slow down. Let’s think this through. I’ve worked for years on this and I wouldn’t want to blow it by being rash.”

“I won’t involve you. I promise. But if this company is spreading lies about me to media, now it’s personal.”

They had walked so fast they had gotten to the other side of the island and to the facility in less time than the carts even took.

“ I just want you to have a strategy. They’re only going to lie to you anyway. You know that. But no matter what, I’m still Albie, got it?.”

Robert huffed his way through the sliding door to the facility. He didn’t hear a single word being said to him.

Robert and “Albie” stopped dead in their tracks once inside the facility. In front of them was Sherry, in full scrubs, with Dr. Marlowe sewn into the breast. She held a clipboard. They stood dumbfounded.

“Are you *working* for them?” Albie whispered.

“Are you fully dosing those meds?” Robert asked.

He turned to Albie.

“She has to be hopped up on this Approxis.”

“They offered me a position and it’s good for me. I like it here. And you guys should be taking your meds. There are a lot of side effects to withdrawal from connectivity.”

Albie rolled her eyes. “You sound like them.”

“I don’t know what that means but I need to get back to work,” Sherry said. She removed a pen from the clipboard and walked off.

“She’s like a completely different person,” Robert said to Albie.

“Can I help you two?” Ivy asked from behind the desk.

“Yes. I need to speak with Mr. Davis. I’ll take whatever his next availability is.”

“Let me check his availability this afternoon,” said Ivy. She flipped through a paper calendar.

“I should really take off,” Albie said to Robert. “You don’t need me here and frankly, I don’t want to be here.”

“I don’t blame you. I’ll catch up with you later. Hopefully I’ll have some answers.”

“Good luck.”

Robert slunk into a chair in reception.

“Actually, Mr. Davis has two hours blocked off for you starting right now.”

“How is that possible? I didn’t speak to anyone.”

“It says right here. Robert Chrome. Two hours. Main auditorium.”

Robert looked to where Ivy was pointing. It sure did.

“You’ll just want to go to that large room where you had your orientation. Have a nice day.” Ivy smiled.

Chapter 11 // Mission 99

Robert walks into the auditorium with extreme trepidation. He wants to punch this Greyson guy. Who does he think he is?

“Mr. Chrome. I was expecting you.”

Greyson was already inside, seated on the center stage.

“You lied to me!”

“A lie by omission is hardly a lie, Mr. Chrome.”

“Is that the Greyson Davis Book of Morals?”

“Look. What I told you the other day, was one hundred percent the truth. I just didn’t tell you the whole truth. I had to be sure you were the person that needed to hear it first.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that I have been trying to fill a role here and that I recruited for that role. I handpicked a few very overworked, very stressed out tech minds like yourself and showed them a better way of life. But I’m not going to give up decades of my hard work to just anyone. I needed to first figure out which one of you was right for the job.”

“I don’t need a job. Thank you. I have a company. A thriving company. Well, had, until you came along.”

“All I can do Mr. Chrome is ask that you hear me out. I will, as you put it earlier, do this man to man. I won’t omit a single detail. And I can assure you that when I am done explaining all of it, you will in fact be on board.”

“Why don’t you start with why you spread lies about me to the media! That I am a fraud. You’re the fraud Mr. Davis.”

“It s a bit unsettling that you know about the media frenzy from here but it shows me that you are cunning. I reward cunning.”

“I’m waiting.”

“Well, I can’t start at that part of the story. I have to give you a chronology. It’s many layered.”

“Well, I don’t really have anywhere to be.”

“I’m going to have someone reverse the effects of your Approxis. I need you to be at your sharpest. It’ll take a shot but we’re only increasing your brain’s intake. It won’t hurt. For now I’ll start slow. Take a seat.”

Greyson clicked on the projection screen and showed a black and white photo above them. It was of men he didn’t recognize.

“As you are probably aware, there are sub branches of the government. Ones typically at the center of conspiracy theories. I assume you’ve heard of MK Ultra and similar experiments?”

“I’m not well versed but yes, I’ve heard of them.”

“After the falling out of experiments such as these, an even more covert branch of the CIA was created. Many decades ago. The entire purpose was to launch missions that could better humankind, but sometimes their means of doing so weren’t very ethical.”

Robert had no idea where he was going with this.

“Headed by a corrupt mind control expert, the branch’s cohorts included people like Bernays and Ledbetter Lee – two very famous propaganda experts who aided as consultants, if you will.”

Robert watched as the next slide clicked on.

“The question at the time was, how do we experiment on mass hysteria, mental illness, mind control, human ego, vice, depression, and illness for the radical good of mankind but conduct in a double blind fashion with no socioeconomic bias.”

Greyson began to pace the stage.

“The long lead plan was to corrupt a small subset in three parts: Mind, Body and Soul of the human race. The government began to get stakeholders on board. Big ones. Names

you are very much aware of. Household names today. Though all of that is confidential. You following me so far?"

Robert simply nodded.

"Ultimately, they found by tiny experiments from 1994 to 1998 that information readiness was radically impacting human mood, virtue, patience, stress... Well, it was impacting everything. But at a slowly, barely noticeable level. Similar to an abuse tactic, it was eroding humans on every level without them ever even noticing."

Greyson clicked to the next slide.

"They surmised that if they could put humans in control of information intake, mimicking only robots of the time, they could successfully corrupt their souls through rapidfire gratification, instant times. Then came a hypothesis of, can we take an entire room dedicated to a computer, and get them in individualized homes. Perhaps further. You're familiar with the industry. You remember the size of an old computer. As we saw at the latter part of the 90s, this became achievable. To get these large monsters into people's homes. But this wasn't enough."

He paused. Then paced again.

“So they strategized further. The end result became a simple question: Can you personalize a computer for individuals instead of for a home?”

Robert knew where this was headed.

“As you may have guessed, the answer was yes. With handheld access to the world, they were then equipped to corrupt souls.”

He clicked to the next slide.

“I know this is a lot Mr. Chrome. Are you still with me?”

“Sort of.”

“Good. Next became the body, which was an easy thing to do. Paying big business to sprinkle a few extra ingredients onto their exports, use ‘harmless chemicals’ for higher yield? No big deal. So they sanctioned and sold the biggest producers a simple ‘Miracle Growth’-like chemical. More harvest, one product. Kept under wraps of course, competition and such.”

“Are you saying they poisoned people? Because that’s kind of what it sounds like you’re saying.”

“Of course not. Through simple saliva testing that people were *voluntarily* offering up, they were able to find out slight allergies. Aversions. Intolerances. Nothing deadly of course. It was just enough to compromise the bodies.”

“I guess that’s how everyone became allergic to Gluten?”

“Keep in mind Mr. Chrome, all of this was to be done to a test group. It was a beta test on a percentage of the population. This was never to become, the population.”

“Well that failed,” Robert quipped.

“You are correct. But we’ll delve a bit deeper into that later. To their horror, Inflammatory Disease, Cancers, Arthritis, digestive illnesses like Celiac began growing rampant... They had successfully corrupted the bodies, just too many bodies.”

Robert’s mind was spinning, with or without the Approxis.

“Following quick suit would be the mind. With the soul bare and the body weak, the mind was willing to latch on to what it could to feel better. Enter Opiates. Pain Killers. Anxiety Drugs. Depression Meds...”

“So now people were paying for anecdotes to what essentially was manufactured in the first place.”

“Precisely. Our biggest government sectors set to profit were profiting but best of all, no one really knew they were part of the Kill Plan.”

“How so?”

“Well, think of it like this. We are all living in a discipline/distraction dichotomy. There is a running linear discipline in us all. If nothing made waves and took us aside. So pretend you’re in Gods Factory and they’re making human life and they’re like here is the brain and it thinks, logically. That’s what it does. That’s its function. And the factory workers were like great, but okay playing ‘Devil’s Advocate’ then won’t people just logically realize they are born, live hard and short then die with virtually no answers?’ And God was like, I see your point. Let’s split this brain. Half is logical. Give me the other half irrational and emotional and responding to intangible feelings so they are ALWAYS thrown off course. I need a half that is so stimulated by nothing to so that it distracts humans from realizing their own mortality. Give me synapses that send songs down your spine and smells that transport you. Sensory overload the other side.”

Greyson laughed, sinister.

“Regardless, the distraction of all they had put in place was enough to launch Mission 99. This is when I came on board. The question I answered was how and when to launch. So we invented another thing. Buzz around a false crisis. Easiest thing in the world to implement. Try it, pick a day and say the Mayans said the world was ending. Some a-hole will Doomsday Prep a house full of canned God damn beans.”

“Mission 99? I’m lost.”

“You’re a computer guy Mr. Chrome. Do you remember the hype around a little thing called Y2K? Was a pure catastrophe and then in a blink it was nothing?”

“Of course. How could I forget? The months leading up to that was a chaotic nightmare.”

“Well what if I told you that Y2K wasn’t nothing. It just wasn’t what you think it was.”

Robert furrowed his brows.

“Okay before we proceed. I’m going to get you the anti-Approxis. I need you at your sharpest right about now.” Greyson walked to the wall and pushed an intercom button.

“Ivy can you send someone in with the anti-Approxis.”

“Yes sir,” came from the speaker.

“If you’ll excuse me for one moment Mr. Chrome. Think of this as an intermission.

When I come back, your mind will be sharper than it has ever been before in your life.”

Greyson left the room.

Robert wasn't sure what to believe. If all of these things were true, there was an agency at play and what they were playing was God. He had to tell someone.

Right then, Sherry, well, Dr. Sherry Marlowe, entered the room with a needle.

“Mr. Chrome.”

“Sherry, it's Robert. There's no need to call me Mr. Chrome. Please with the formalities. Look, you can't work for these people,” he said in a low voice.

Sherry prepped the needle and leaned closer.

“They're playing God. They've manufactured everything. Everything Sherry – since the beginning.”

Sherry stuck the needle into Robert's flesh without warning.

“What makes you say that?” she whispered.

“They told me. He *just* told me.”

“When you say everything, do you mean disease? Because as far as I can tell, they have the cure for every disease known to man just sitting in jars!” Sherry whisper-yelled.

“Yes! Robert whisper-yelled back. “So why are working for them?”

“I had to find a way into the room with the jars. It’s hard to explain like this. Just meet me tonight. Bring Albie. I’m throwing the Approxis out.”

She doused Robert’s arm with alcohol then placed a cotton ball and bandage over where she pulled the shot from.

“As for what this shot’s gonna do to you, that has yet to be seen.”

“All done Dr. Marlowe?” Greyson’s voice boomed.

“All done.”

“Great. Thank you.”

Robert suddenly felt a wave of sharpness. Crisp. Things looked and sounded like they had edges. Like nothing was blurry or confusing anymore. It was defined. It was simple. It was easy to see the big picture without all of the noise.

“How are you feeling Mr. Chrome?”

“Clear,” was all Robert said.

“Perfect. Let’s continue,” said Greyson.

He clicked.

Robert was mesmerized by the projection.

“So back to Y2K. The plan initially was to isolate two test groups. One was going to be an untouched society and the other sampling would be impacted by the toxins we set free to study impact on the big three: Mind, Body, Soul.”

“Kind of like a placebo?” Robert asked.

“Yes. Exactly like a placebo. So let’s call them Groups A and B. Group A was taken somewhere remote – which was here – under monitored anesthesia and told Y2K not only happened, but wiped out most of the world. Sad, apocalyptic, but it was for the greater good. Our group A had 262 test subjects. They were not suffering. But for all intents and purposes, nothing has progressed since 1999. They don’t have cell phones or the internet. 9/11 never happened. Tsunamis and named Hurricanes of the 00s. None of these things have impacted their lives. They watch basic sitcoms at night and call one another on simple landlines. They know of no advancements in technology. All they know is that thing they were starting to use, a dial-up internet that beeped for a long time and then said, ‘You’ve got mail,’ was a great big bust. It failed and there they were . In

simple, un-engineered beauty. No chemical sprinkle on their Cornflakes, no need for Oxycodone, no reality TV families. No selfies, no social media, and no spike in depression or anxiety.”

Robert clung to every word like fly paper.

“And Group B?” he asked.

Greyson paused. “Well, Group B essentially became the rest of the world. You see, what we hadn’t accounted for, Mr. Chrome, was information to spread like wildfire. The contagion of information was faster than we planned and people that were not commissioned by the agency were creating more internets, more phones, more platforms, and soon everyone simply had more. Tech companies, such as Chrome Industries.”

Robert slowly nodded. He knew that company.

Greyson continued to Robert’s chagrin.

“More companies wanted their share of genetically modified crops. More disease meant more pills selling meant lining more pockets and it all just began funding and fueling itself outside of our experiment. It had a lifeblood of its own. And there was no way to take it back.”

Robert let out a long exhalation. He was thankful he was given the meds to process this with.

“So. We decided the only way to reel it back in, was *for* profit. If we could wait until everyone was so incredibly miserable with this surefire experiment, we can begin to sell them *each* a way out. ‘Untech their lives’ for \$25,000 a person by bringing them to Group A: an oasis of natural foods, a simpler life, a way to feel better, and a place where technology doesn’t exist. It’s an actual parallel universe so long as they don’t leave the island. And since there are no towers, they can’t get their hands on technology anyway.”

Robert flashed to the keyring he held of a number “2” and the keyring Kate held of a letter “Y.”

“The only thing we couldn’t figure out, was how the new guests would not tell the 262 patient zero people living here for nearly 20 years about life outside of here. We couldn’t very well separate them. So we offered the entire existing colony Cryomortal: a way to freeze themselves until new life populated or survivors were found post Y2K. Two-hundred and fifty of them agreed to be frozen with only a deviant dozen. Then we told the media that two-hundred and fifty people had been frozen in hopes of immortality. Which is what the world outside of here – the world you live in – believes happened to those folks. And to be clear, Cryomortal is Vaylex’s biggest success.”

Robert was still in tune but full of questions.

“How were you able to gain so much information on people. I mean I understand that the lineage of this goes back decades or centuries in the CIA but you’re essentially now just a tech gadget company yourself aren’t you?”

“Mr. Chrome, Vaylex LLC is the product, not the agency. We still have the backings of every original stakeholder. Over these years, people have just been all but offering up their data constantly. They *give* us their fingerprints every single time they use their cell phones. They *mailed* us in their own saliva and blood. They fill out forms foregoing their privacies every time they use an app. You’re in the business. Did you think this was all a coincidence? We got every piece of DNA we needed free of liability.”

“What about these media tip offs? You said I was jailed for fraud.”

“I did. Yes. Because I need you here. I need you to be something like our CTO, only in reverse. Rather than a Chief Technology Officer, you’re going to be our Chief Deprogramming Officer.”

“And I have to stay here?”

“No. You will be given the rights to leave so that you can get people on board with Untech. Chrome Industries will back this as a good and healthy break from connectivity.”

“But I’m a fraud on 99 counts of embezzlement.”

“But if you take this position, you’re a wrongly accused fraud that the world will immediately side with in sympathy of your plight and short white collar jail time.”

“And if I don’t take the position?”

“Mr. Chrome, what we are doing at this point is launching a Mission 66 if you will. It’s turning Mission 99 on its side. While we are doing it for profit, I admit, we are also doing this for the good of humanity.”

“How so? You’re freezing humans under the guise that there is no other life!”

“Is there Mr. Chrome? Is there a life chained to screens and gadgets? Scared that if you walk away you are disappointing someone. Not getting back to someone with immediacy. You have a 24-7, 365 rush in place, an obligation to answer. Answer your text, answer your email, answer your social media, answer your phone. This is hardly a life being lived anymore. This is a prison sentence.”

Robert made a face.

“Sorry, poor analogy,” Greyson added.

“What about the day Jake and Mickey came to bring me here? I was already seeing the world without technology. I was seeing blank billboards and my office was gone. How can I trust that there is still a world I know outside of here?”

“Fair question. The night you saw the infomercial and opted into Untech, was the night they were supposed to take you. Which is how we’ve done everyone. The first batch of people at midnight on New Year’s Eve in 1999 and the second batch – well, half dozen of you. We only took you six to find the right holistic doctors and the right tech people for the jobs we needed to fill for the 20th anniversary recruitment. Next year we plan on bringing in thousands. We’re in the process of finding new land as we speak. You were given the Cathartica that night, but then there was an emergency. The drugs were taking effect on you by morning and already showing you what you’re only supposed to see here. It’s extraordinarily complicated and you won’t understand it all in one sitting.”

Robert processed in his mind. Everything Greyson was saying seemed to check out, but he still didn’t trust him.

“Why would I do this for you? Other than you leaving me on the hook for a crime I didn’t commit?”

“You’re by no means doing this for me Mr. Chrome. I assure you, you will be doing this for humanity.”

“How so?”

“We’ve seen quite a few IO’s already and if the trend continues, your world is headed for extinction.”

“IO’s?”

Information overdose, if you will. Death by information. Basically people’s brain get caught in a ruminating pattern from being fed way more than they were primed to take in in a lifespan. They can’t process new thoughts anymore. They’re essentially, well, robots.

“C’mon. It’s not that bad.”

“Mr. Chrome, you are living in a world were humans are people paying for ‘likes.’ Treating an abstract form of validation like a commodity on the market. It’s so deeply conditioned it doesn’t even seem odd to anyone anymore. Hard earned currency is going to an abstract click of a button to feed vanity. Does this seem ‘not that bad’ when you break it apart?”

Robert’s hairs on his arm stood up. *Was he right? Were people headed for information overdoses? Death by information? There had to be some truth in humans not meant to know as much as they do today.*

“How will my contract work?”

Chapter 12 // Nothing To See Here

Sherry and Albie had been knocking on Robert's door for nearly ten minutes.

"Albie, I'm really starting to worry." Sherry said. "You should have seen him today."

"It's not really Albie but story for another time," she said shielding her eyes and peeking through the window.

"Okay. Well, whoever you are."

"It's Marcie," she said and smiled. "I'll explain later."

"Well, Marcie, he was going on and on about how they manufactured everything and I shouldn't work for them. He looked really upset. Then they made me stick him with some anti-Approxis drug."

"Ugh. Do you even know what that was?"

"No. All I know is they have cures in there. Cures for everything."

"Okay well as soon as we find Robert you both need to tell me everything you know. I've been trying to get this information for years. I've risked my damn life for it."

“Still, no idea what you’re talking about but I assume you’ll tell me later.”

Robert finally appeared at the door. He looked refreshed. Un-panicked.

“We’ve been knocking for like fifteen minutes!” Albie/Marcie said.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t hear the door. So, believe it or not. There’s nothing. There’s nothing to it. No story here. Nothing to tell. I asked all of the questions and it’s exactly what they’re representing it to be. A vacation from connection that’s good for our good.”

“What?” they said, practically in unison.

“You *just* told me hours ago that they were manufacturing everything and in control of everything,” Sherry pleaded.

“What do they have you on because there is no way your mind is clear,” Albie/Marcie added.

“I’m clear as a bell. Clean as a whistle. I’m telling you there’s nothing to see here,”

Robert offered with complete calm.

“You’re lying. They got to you. How did they get to you?” Albie/Marcie said.

Robert laughed, coolly. “This isn’t like some government conspiracy.”

“That’s exactly what it is and you know it!”

“C’mon Marcie let’s go. We can figure this out between us.”

“Marcie?”

“Yes. Marcie is my real name.”

“Oh and I’m the liar,” Robert said.

“You know what? You’re just as bad as Grayson. I should have known not to trust some big hot shot tech mogul,” Marcie said.

Sherry stared at Robert. “I know what you said to me today. *You* know what you said to me today. Gaslighting us isn’t going to change that.”

“Goodnight ladies,” Robert said, and causally closed the door. He clicked the lock behind him.

Chapter 12 // Death By Information

Marcie woke up on Sherry's floor. There were four channels on every TV to surf. One could only watch the same sitcoms so many times. They had no idea how the others were doing it. So they stayed up all night drinking everything in the mini bar and drawing venn diagrams in an effort to get to the bottom of the Robert riddle. Marcie told Sherry everything she knew from her years studying Vaylex. Sherry told Marcie all about the cure jars.

"I'm going to go out of my mind here! How is a reporter supposed to not watch the news?"

"How is a doctor supposed to not work? You know Greyson will never let me back in the building."

Just then Breaking News flashed on the TV screen.

"Here you go, Marcie. Something to write about!"

"For who? The townspeople of four?" Marcie said laughing.

It was Greyson on the screen. He was center stage in the auditorium behind a podium.

"What's he doing?"

Greyson smiled big and toothy for the camera. Forced enthusiasm. Lies. A square smile.
And concealer.

“It is with great pleasure that I announce the new Chief Technology Officer of Vaylex,
LLC – Mr. Robert Chrome.”

THE END