Sin in the Second City

MADAMS, MINISTERS, PLAYBOYS,
AND THE
BATTLE FOR AMERICA'S SOUL

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RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS NEW YORK

PART ONE

The Scarlet Sisters Everleigh

1899–1905

STRIPED SKUNK AND WILD ONIONS

South Dearborn Street. (The Everleigh Club is at near right.)

An amusing city, Chicago, any way you look at it. I'm afraid we are in for the time of our lives.

—THE EVERLEIGH SISTERS

In the winter of 1899, a train clattered toward Chicago, fat coils of smoke whipping the sky. Minna and Ada Everleigh sat together in a Pullman Palace car, sipping wine served by porters wearing white jackets and gloves. Velvet curtains framed the windows, and thick rugs absorbed the curved heels of their boots. The sisters checked their reflections in bevel-edged French mirrors, reclined on Marshall Field's most luxurious bedsheets, ate in a dining car where woodcock and prairie chicken were presented on tables set with Belgian linen and expensive English china. The train, lit entirely by electricity, was fitted with a new contraption—"vestibules," accordion-shaped passageways that connected the cars, shutting out the fumes and wind. The air inside their car hung heavy and whisper quiet, but the sisters were restless, giddy with plans: They would build upon what they had learned as madams in Omaha, Nebraska, and create the finest brothel in history.

Their grandiose scheme could be expected in an era when consumers, whether seeking a car or company for the night, were becoming royalty. The world was, for the first time, a market where every need could be met, every idea coaxed to fruition. Two brothers named Wright were experimenting with the idea of human flight. Druggists stocked $1 bottles of Hibbard's Herb Extract, a "wonderful cure" that soothed "itching, burning, and smarting" and cured "Female Weakness." *McClure's Magazine* marveled at how Marconi's wireless sent messages "at will through space." The country's first major automobile show would take place on New Year's Day. The economy fine-tuned itself as mass production replaced craft production—an admirable feat, but the precise inverse of what the Everleigh sisters had in mind. A man would pay and pay well to feel as though each of his parts, considered alone, was greater than his total.

Obsession with self-fulfillment began to mold the national ethos, a concept Theodore Dreiser explored in his soon-to-be-published *Sister Carrie*. Country girl Carrie Meeber, walking past posh Chicago department stores, feels keenly her "individual shortcomings of dress and that shadow of manner which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all who and what she was."

Chicago in particular had taken municipal confidence to new levels; the blustery talk of civic leaders—and not Chicago's weather—had inspired the "Windy City" moniker. Eight years before *New York Sun* editor Charles Dana popularized the nickname during the battle to host the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, it appeared in the *Cleveland Gazette*, headlining an article about Chicago politics.

The city's boosters had always been more persuasive than most. After the Great Fire of 1871, propagandist William Bross traveled to New York. "Go to Chicago now!" he commanded. "Young men, hurry there! Old men, send your sons! Women, send your husbands! You will never again have such a chance to make money!" His prediction that Chicago would have a population of 1 million by 1900 came true ten years earlier, and by the time the Everleighs arrived, nearly 1.7 million people called the city home. Visitors were equally impressed by the city's tireless ambition. "She outgrows her prophecies faster than she can make them," Mark Twain wrote of Chicago. "She is always a novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through the last time."

The Everleighs vowed to continue this perfectionism and constant reinvention, a nineteenth-century amalgamation of Martha Stewart and Madonna. Over dinner in the Pullman car, the sisters concocted backstories for themselves suffused with glamour and drama. They were southern debutantes from outside of Louisville, Kentucky, with a wealthy lawyer father, a doting mother, and finishing school pedigrees. After marrying two men—make them brothers—who turned brutish and physically abusive, the sisters escaped and ran far away, ending up in Omaha, Nebraska. Their entrée into the madam business was a fortuitous accident, two proper Victorian ladies who decided that creating a fantasy for others was better than pretending to live in one.

Preternaturally savvy about the importance of marketing and image, the sisters also lied about their ages. Ada, thirty-five, would pass for twenty-three; and Minna, thirty-three, became twenty-one again.

During the previous year, 1898, when the Everleighs decided to move their burgeoning careers as madams from Omaha to a busier town, they scoured red-light districts across the country in search of the best fit. In these waning days of the Victorian era, every significant American city, along with many smaller ones, had a designated neighborhood where prostitution, though technically illegal, was practiced openly; "segregation" was a term that referred primarily to sex rather than race. Here men were free to indulge sexually without sullying their homes or offending the fragile sensibilities of their wives.

"Respectable women, it was held," the *Chicago Tribune* mused years later in an article that compared the Everleighs with Al Capone, "were safer from rape and other crimes if open prostitution was maintained and ordered as an outlet for the lusts of men."

But the Everleighs had their own notions of prostitution and its role in society. In a good resort, they reasoned, one free from the sorrier aspects of the trade, a harlot was more than an unwitting conduit for virtue. An employee in a business, she was an investment and should be treated as such, receiving nutritious meals, a thorough education, expert medical care, and generous wages. In their house, a courtesan would make a living as viable as—and more lucrative than—those earned by the thousands of young girls seeking work in cities as stenographers and sweatshop seamstresses, department store clerks and domestics. The sisters wanted to uplift the profession, remove its stain and stigma, argue that a girl can't lose her social standing if she stands level with those poised to judge her.

Traveling to major and minor cities alike, the sisters gathered ideas and consulted with each locale's most prominent madams. They sought a distinguished town with class and style that lacked a preeminent parlor house. Theirs would be "the most celebrated banging shop in the world," although clients, naturally, would never hear such language.

"Frisco Tessie" Wall, in San Francisco's Barbary Coast, ran a decent business but was too old school, in the sisters' opinion; and Nell Kimball, with her philosophical musings, was downright depressing. Like many madams, Kimball kept someone on staff to "work over" her courtesans if they got out of line. "A drunk is no good as a whore," she advised. "You can't hide her breath, and she doesn't do her work in style. Hookers are

mean but sentimental. They cry over dogs, kittens, kids, novels, sad songs. I never cared much for a girl who came to work in a house because it was fun for her. There was a screw loose somewheres."

Walking the district, the sisters noticed that the harlots of each bordello, from Tessie's place to the lowest "cow yard," kept business cards on hand and distributed them at every opportunity. Most featured, simply, the name of a girl and the house to which she belonged, but some women chose to be infinitely more descriptive:

BIG MATILDA
THREE HUNDRED POUNDS OF BLACK PASSION
HOURS: ALL HOURS
RATES: 50C EACH: THREE FOR ONE DOLLAR

The sisters threw away the cards and shook their heads. They believed in advertising, but also in subtlety.

On to New Orleans. The famed Storyville district offered Belle Anderson's mirrored rooms and expert dancers, and Madam Lulu White's opulent bordello on the corner of Basin and Bienville streets. The city's Blue Book, a catalog that listed every house, its specialties and "stock," offered a kind description of White's establishment:

"Nowhere in this country will you find a more popular personage than Madame White, who is noted as being the handsomest octoroon in America . . . her mansion possesses some of the most costly oil paintings in the Southern country. Her mirror parlor is also a dream. There's always something new at Lulu White's that will interest you. 'Good time' is her motto."

A lively place, New Orleans, but the district overall wasn't to their liking—did they really want to operate up the street from a hall called the Funky Butt?

St. Louis was tolerable, but Babe Connors, a revered black madam who ran a brothel called The Palace, monopolized the city. In her house, the great Polish artist Ignace Paderewski once sat down at the piano, and a cadre of Republican politicians wrote their national platform. A large woman with a round, rambling body, she had a smile that gripped her face. Her teeth, the Everleighs were delighted to discover, were inlaid with diamonds. Tacky but fabulous. Madam Connors took Belle Anderson's mirror innovations one step further, installing an entire floor of reflective glass

in her parlor. Minna made a mental note—wherever they settled, mirrored rooms would definitely be part of the décor.

New York City, with its hectic Tenderloin district, was marvelous, but Madam Rosie Hertz, the so-called godmother for prostitutes in the city, had already cornered the elite clientele, running several sporting houses on the Lower East Side while living on a moneyed block in Brooklyn. Rose Hicks dominated Philadelphia, "Lucky" Warren ruled Cincinnati, and Annie Chambers claimed Kansas City. Minnie Stevens in Boston and Belle Stewart in Pittsburgh had plenty of "wick dipping" going on, as the saying went, but their districts, too, were well below Everleigh standards.

Washington, D.C., with its bustling "Division," was a possibility. During the Civil War, John Wilkes Booth was a reputed regular in the district, favoring a sporting house on Ohio Avenue. The sisters checked into the Willard Hotel and looked up Cleo Maitland. This madam was an old-timer, they'd heard, and could offer some sound advice.

Madam Maitland operated in a brick row house on D Street, posing as a landlady, with several girls living with her as female "boarders." She welcomed the Everleighs inside her brothel, kissing their cheeks with dry, puckered lips. Her face was a topographic map, intricately rumpled and lined, but she sat spryly and alert while Minna talked. They'd finished their research, Minna explained, but had yet to find an appropriate city, one with plenty of wealthy men but no superior houses.

The madam had the answer. Chicago, Illinois! she said. An abundance of millionaires, a well-protected red-light district, and not one dominant brothel; the city's best madam, Carrie Watson, had retired to the suburbs a few years earlier. Madam Maitland even knew of the perfect building: two adjoining three-story mansions with fifty rooms, built for $125,000 just before the World's Columbian Exposition. The brothel's current proprietor, Effie Hankins, wanted to retire and had told Madam Maitland to keep an eye out for a possible buyer.

"See Effie," the old madam urged, escorting the sisters out. "She'll listen."

The engine bell began its raucous clamor, and the train windows offered a brilliantly vile panorama: slaughterhouses, steel mills, factories, silos, coal piles that doused the sky with black. "She-caw-go!

She-caw-go!" the brakeman called, and the train sputtered to a stop beneath a long roof made of glass and steel. A porter took the sisters' gloved hands in his and helped them down the stairs, where a hansom cab waited. Dodging insulated ice wagons, streetcars, and droves of private carriages, the Everleighs' hansom pulled up to 2131–2133 South Dearborn Street.

The imposing stone mansion boasted two mahogany staircases that spiraled gently upward. Broad windows dotted the façade, greedily inhaling the light, topped by strips of molding curved like haughty frowns. The place stood like a peacock amid pigeons.

Madam Hankins welcomed the sisters inside and told them to take their time, look around. Minna could see the brothel needed work—the 2133 side wasn't yet habitable, and both buildings would benefit from plusher rugs, fresh paint, art, statues, books, and mirrors, of course—but it was *right*. The feel of that staircase under her palm, so solid and heavy, was like gripping a piece of permanence.

"It's home to me and all I have," Madam Hankins said, poking teary eyes with a handkerchief. "For fifty-five thousand dollars it is yours even though I hate to part with it." She turned, tucked two fingers inside her mouth, and blew a shrill whistle. "Come, girls," she called, "let my guests see how nice you look."

Her harlots obliged, heels scuffing the floor as they trudged into a listless single file. The scent of cheap perfume soaked the parlor. Flesh bulged in all the wrong places. And their faces . . . Three words registered in Minna's mind: sloppy, uncouth, hardened. These harlots simply wouldn't do—not for the prices she and Ada planned to charge. With all due respect to Madam Hankins, these girls looked as if they'd logged more miles than the Chicago Limited.

"Thanks," Minna said, and Madam Hankins shooed the harlots away. "How much for the rent?"

"Five hundred a month . . . not high when you consider there are two buildings."

They struck a deal. The sisters advanced $20,000 and agreed to pay the remaining $35,000 within half a year, plus the subsequent $500 monthly fee.

"We have catered only to the best people," Madam Hankins insisted, shaking each sister's hand.

"Oh, yeah," Minna replied, voice rimmed with sarcasm.

She felt Ada's elbow poke her side, a clear warning to watch what she said. She knew Ada worried that her candor would one day bring them trouble.

The Everleighs took long carriage rides through their new city, peering from behind dark curtains, knees touching. Chicago was a city of superlatives, at once both spectacular and foul. Native Americans, after noting the presence of wild leeks in the watershed, began calling the city's river "Chicagoua." The word, aptly enough, reflected both the indigenous vegetation and its rank smell, also translating to "striped skunk."

The streets were flat and stretched without end. In the Loop, named for the pulley system that turned cable cars around the city's center, a dense forest of buildings stretched skyward, eclipsing the sun. Turn on Washington, and they saw the Herald Building, designed by the famous architects Daniel Burnham and John Root, with windows that arched upward and met like the hands of a man in prayer. On North Clark Street stood the Chicago-Clark Building, topped by turrets that speared the sky. Society ladies strolled down State Street, hats of every shape and color blooming from heads, a riotous country garden in motion.

The lake was a kaleidoscope of majestic blues and greens, the river rat-infested filth. A twenty-eight-mile-long canal would soon reverse its flow, sending the waste from Chicago's tenements, factories, and slaughterhouses downstream (over objections from St. Louis) instead of into Lake Michigan, which had caused devastating outbreaks of cholera. The din was omnipresent and relentless: horses' hooves clopped, elevated trains clattered, streetcars screeched, newsboys and peddlers shouted, all against the restless backdrop of ragtime.

William Archer, a Scottish critic who traveled throughout the United States, captured Chicago's dichotomy. "Walking in Dearborn Street or Adams Street of a cloudy afternoon, you think yourself in a frowning and fuliginous city of Dis," he wrote. "Driving along Lake Shore to Lincoln Park in the flush of sunset, you wonder that the dwellers in this street of palaces should trouble their heads about Naples or Venice."

The sisters' driver detoured through the red-light districts, up and down streets littered with abandoned hansoms. At night they shook, as

streetwalkers entertained their tricks inside. Messenger boys scurried, the cold turning their breath to steam, fetching makeup or booze or chop suey for whatever whorehouse hired them, delivering Western Union telegrams to the demimondes. Minna pictured how she and Ada would elevate the district, transform their profession from an accident of circumstances to a genuine calling.

Even in its frontier days, Chicago oozed vice rooted in liquor and gambling, with prostitutes and pimps following closely behind, tailed in turn by the hoodlums, pickpockets, burglars, con men, ropers, and dopers. The Levee district, according to Chicago lore, was so called due to the large influx of Southerners (with their raunchy river-town ways) during the Civil War. The town's board of trustees, as early as 1835, imposed a fine of $25 upon any person convicted of operating a bordello. But the dive keepers merely shrugged and continued about their business.

A mere three years later, brothels lined Wells Street—shoddy, lowbrow establishments, but the genesis of the largest red-light region in United States history. The Great Fire of 1871 left seventy-three miles of streets in charred ruins and almost one hundred thousand people homeless, but Chicago knew its priorities. During the first eight months of 1872, the city granted 2,218 saloon licenses—approximately 1 to every 150 citizens. The vice districts, slung like a tawdry necklace across the city's South Side, were more brazen than ever. Junkies shot one another up with "guns"—hypodermic needles—in the middle of drugstore aisles. Women lounged stark naked against doorways, calling out obscene suggestions to passersby. And the competition grew fiercer as hundreds of newcomers settled in the red-light district every week.

The sex trade even enjoyed its own weekly newspaper throughout the late 1870s and early 1880s, a sort of Page Six forebear that cheekily chronicled the comings and goings of madams and sporting girls. It covered fashion, personal peccadilloes, drinking habits, and long-running feuds:

"Black-eyed Amy, of 478 State," one edition warned, "you had better let up on your foolishness with that married man, F., or you will think a freight train has run over you. DO YOU HEAR?"

By the time Chicago garnered international attention as the host of the 1893 World's Fair, the city's vice neighborhoods had cultivated distinct personalities. There was Little Cheyenne, a nod to the town in Wyoming, which at the time was considered a very depraved place. (Cheyenne returned the favor by calling their vice district "Little Chicago.") A six-foot, 220-pound black woman named Hattie Briggs ruled Little Cheyenne. Hattie was feared, not necessarily for her size and color, but for something she gave off: an unseen, wild-rooted purpose that circled the air around her. Wearing a flowing scarlet coat, she robbed male customers by slamming their heads against a wall until they were too dazed to resist.

Little Cheyenne and other vice neighborhoods observed strict rules about race and even ethnicity. A guide to neighborhood brothels titled *The Sporting and Club House Directory* offered separate, pointed entries for "French Houses" ("everybody knows what a 'French' house is," the editor wrote, "and we need offer no further explanation") and "Colored Houses." Upscale black madams like Vina Fields employed blond-haired black prostitutes who serviced only white men, and Madam Lillian Richardson emphasized that her brothel was "the least public colored house in the city." Little Cheyenne was also home to Carrie Watson's elegant house on Clark Street, which for years enjoyed worldwide fame despite the fact that its only advertising was courtesy of the resident parrot. Housed inside a gilded cage near the entrance, the avian pimp squawked, "Carrie Watson. Come in, gentlemen," in emphatic repetition.

The Everleighs had heard of Madam Watson. They knew she was once revered by Chicago leaders and left alone by the police. Most important, she'd affected the right attitude. "Miss Carrie Watson says she would be willing to reform," one red-light newspaper reported, "but she can't think of any sins she has been guilty of." The sisters intended to pick up exactly where the legend left off—and improve on every one of her contributions to the trade.

The line of brothels and dives on State Street, from Van Buren to 22nd, was known as Satan's Mile. Kitty Adams, better known as "the Terror of State Street," hailed from Satan's Mile and in the span of seven years robbed more than one hundred men. She and her partner, Jennie Clark,

were arrested in August 1896 for slugging an old man and fishing $5 from his pocket. The Honorable Judge James Groggin, who presided over the case, acquitted the women, issuing a celebrated ruling that any man who ventured into the district deserved whatever he got.

Custom House Place, the adjacent area, earned an international reputation during the World's Fair. Its most infamous attractions were dives called "panel houses." The walls in these resorts were punched full of holes, placed strategically behind chairs where the johns hung their pants. As one harlot distracted a trick in bed, another would slip her hand through the crack and snatch his wallet.

Number 144 Custom House Place was operated by Madam Mary Hastings, one of the pioneers of what was known in Europe—and soon in America—as "white slavery." During frequent trips to neighboring cities, she extolled the virtues of Chicago and its high-paying jobs, returning with gullible young girls aged thirteen to seventeen. She took the girls' clothing and locked them in a room with six professional rapists. Once "broken in," the girls were sold to other madams for $50 to $300 each, depending on age and appearance. The eminent British journalist William T. Stead visited Hastings's brothel while researching *If Christ Came to Chicago,* his damning 1894 screed about sin in the Second City.

The Everleighs vowed never to deal with pimps, desperate parents selling off children, panders, and white slavers. If you treated girls well, they would come begging for admittance. A prospective Everleigh courtesan must prove she's eighteen in order to earn an interview, understand exactly what the job entailed, and know she's free to leave anytime, for any reason, without penalty.

Riding through Custom House Place, the sisters noted it was still a busy district, even six years after the World's Fair. Mayor Carter Harrison II had ordered all brothels on Clark Street, the neighborhood's main thoroughfare, to evacuate, citing complaints from citizens who took the new trolley car to and from work. The majority of madams and saloon keepers defied the edict and stayed put, others migrated to the West Side, and the rest, very gradually, packed up their furnishings, piano professors, and harlots to transfer south, settling into the growing vice district around Dearborn and 22nd streets. This latter contingent constituted the sisters' new neighbors and competitors, though none of them looked like much of a threat.

The California, across the street from the Everleighs' building, was one of the roughest resorts in the district. Operated by a three-hundred-pound bruiser named "Blubber" Bob Gray and his wife, the California offered thirty girls whose uniforms consisted of high-button shoes and sheer chemises that barely brushed their bottoms. Most nights, they appeared naked at windows or in the doorway, gyrating and pointing between their legs.

"Pick a baby, boys!" the madam yelled at her clients. "Don't get glued to your seats!"

She charged a dollar, but 50 cents would do if a man could prove by turning out his pockets that he had nothing more. Here, as in other bordellos, harlots "rolled" their clients, slipping a dose of morphine into his wine or beer and robbing him while he was passed out cold. The sisters added additional rules to their list: no knockout powders, no thieving, no drugs of any kind.

On Armour Avenue stood a notorious resort called the Bucket of Blood—the sisters shuddered to think what passed for entertainment behind its walls. Flogging, they supposed—all the rage in the lower dives and another activity they would not tolerate. Farther down the block, a brutal resort blithely called the Why Not? operated near Japanese and Chinese whorehouses that also catered only to white men. The sisters heard that the "Orientals," unable to bear the frigid Chicago climate, practiced their profession during the winter months clad in long woolen underwear.

Two brothers, Ed and Louis Weiss, both of whom seemed inordinately curious about what the sisters were up to, flanked the Everleighs' place on either side. Finally, there was a tight clique of upscale brothel keepers, led by one Madam Vic Shaw, who considered their resorts the Levee's finest attractions. True, their houses came closest to Everleigh standards—but in the sisters' opinion, not nearly close enough.

Amateurs, all of them, and not worth another moment of the Everleighs' time.

ANOTHER
UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

"MY GOD! IF ONLY I COULD GET OUT OF HERE"
The midnight shriek of a young girl in the vice district of a large city, heard by two worthy men, started a crusade which resulted in closing up the dens of shame in that city.

Stead was a man we are sorry not to have known. He was just a little before our time. So broad-minded.

—Minna Everleigh

Before the Everleigh sisters so optimistically decided to improve their industry, and to apply a dignified sheen to its public image, a group of reformers in England embarked on a similar campaign of their own. Chief among them was William T. Stead, who, along with fellow activist Josephine Butler, wanted to raise England's age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen. The campaign needed, as Stead put it, its own *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

In 1885, nine years before he published *If Christ Came to Chicago,* Stead, prepared to assume the role of Harriet Beecher Stowe, descended upon London's underworld. Recalling a letter Butler received from Victor Hugo—"The slavery of black women is abolished in America," it read, "but the slavery of white women continues in Europe"—Stead set out to find a story so sensational that Parliament would be forced to act. A story that would redirect the debate over prostitution, shifting the focus from the courtesan to those who profited from her work. A story that would recast her role in society from that of necessary evil to exploited victim—a "white slave."

He found the story in the case of Eliza "Lily" Armstrong, a thirteen-year-old girl living in a west London slum with her alcoholic mother, Elizabeth. Destitute, Elizabeth agreed to sell Lily to a woman, working in concert with Stead, for the sum of £5—£3 down and £2 after her virginity had been professionally certified. Stead, meanwhile, acting the part of the "purchaser," waited in a predetermined brothel for Lily to arrive.

"The poor child," Stead wrote, "was full of delight at going to her new situation, and clung affectionately to the keeper who was taking her away—where, she knew not. The first thing to be done after the child was fairly severed from home was to secure the certificate of virginity."

Stead's cohort took Lily to a midwife, who confirmed the girl's chastity and produced a small vial of chloroform to "dull the pain."

"This," the midwife advised, "is the best. My clients find this much the most effective."

The brothel was the next stop. The madam admitted Lily without question, ordered the girl to undress, and injected chloroform into her arm. A few moments later, Stead entered the room.

"And the child's voice was heard crying, in accents of terror," he later reported, " 'There's a man's in the room; oh, take me home!' "

Stead crept away. Lily's cries, he insisted, were proof he'd "had his way" with her. Police rescued the girl and placed her in the care of the Salvation Army.

In July 1885, Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" was published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Crowds gathered in front of the paper's offices, clamoring for copies. One and a half million unauthorized reprints were circulated. Thousands rioted. Virgins clad in white marched through Hyde Park, demanding passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which proposed to raise the age of consent. It was passed in August. Stead kept his triumph—and himself—in the public eye when, in October, he was sent to prison for three months on a procuring charge. He relished his martyrdom, even publishing a pamphlet titled "My First Imprisonment."

Across the Atlantic, American reformers took careful note.

GETTING EVERLEIGHED

The alcove of the Blue Bedroom at the Everleigh Club.

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them,
for I have seen your painted women under the gas lamps
luring the farm boys.

—Carl Sandburg, "Chicago"

The Everleigh sisters were perhaps the first cathouse proprietors to apply the inverse formula for success: The more difficult it is to gain entry to an establishment, the greater the number of people who vie to do so. Minna told no one about their grand opening, planned for February 1, 1900. No free passes for critics, no advertisements in newspapers, no engraved invitations to Mayor Carter Harrison II or members of the city council, no klieg lights sweeping garish streaks across Dearborn Street. Their notoriety would come gracefully, like a red carpet slowly unfurled—leave the fireworks for those who cast no spark of their own.

Besides, Minna knew Chicago was preoccupied with other news, especially the brutal temperature, eight below zero. Telephone operators for the city's police stations experienced difficulty transmitting or receiving messages over the wires. Batteries in the patrol boxes had iced over, making communication almost impossible. Forget trying to take a streetcar anywhere. Horse carcasses turned up on corners, sometimes in pairs or groups, like capsized carousels. Several homeless people froze, splayed in rag doll poses across the slush and ice.

But inside the double mansion on South Dearborn Street, Minna and Ada bustled about, warm beneath their gowns, silk whispering with each step. It was a cataclysmic night in their lives—more important than their success in Omaha, more gratifying than leaving their pasts in the South. The past few months had been grueling and frantic; they'd had to dispose of Madam Hankins's tacky old furnishings and even shabbier girls.

Ada had taken charge of recruiting. She notified the harlots who worked their brothel in Omaha, and word spread quickly through the underworld pipeline. A few theater acquaintances expressed interest, too—

after all, acting and whoring drew from that same facet of the psyche that allowed the body to be in one place, and the mind another.

She soon had a long list of eager prospects, and set up one-on-one interviews.

"I talk with each applicant myself," Ada later explained. "She must have worked somewhere else before coming here. We do not like amateurs. Inexperienced girls and young widows are too prone to accept offers of marriage and leave. We always have a waiting list. To get in a girl must have a pretty face and figure, must be in perfect health, must look well in evening clothes. If she is addicted to drugs or to drink, we do not want her. There is no problem in keeping the Club filled."

The elder Everleigh grilled every candidate, measuring hips and busts and waists, hoisting up sleeves to check for needle tracks. After deciding on the final roster—the most luscious collages of curves and hair and tinkling laughter a man could ever meet—she sent them to Minna for proper instruction and lessons.

Minna embraced Honoré de Balzac's philosophy—"Pleasure," he wrote in 1834, "is like certain drugs; to continue to obtain the same results one must double the dose, and death or brutalization is contained in the last one"—and she stressed to her girls that contemplation of devilment was more satisfying than the act itself. In an establishment like the Everleigh Club, she advised, a girl could get away with a sly smile and a coy aside, like "Wait until I know you better." Temper the instinct to rush a man, to exploit his baser fantasies. Flirtations and banter could begin in any of the parlors, but a girl must have a deft touch once she escorted a man upstairs.

There was also the matter of appearance. Minna forbade Everleigh girls to wear those tawdry negligees that passed for standard uniforms in other houses. How would that look, after the girls had so judiciously studied the poetry of Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson and Longfellow? No, they would wear elegant, full-length evening gowns and all the jewelry they owned, as long as it wasn't gaudy. Only Minna could pull off such excess.

Minna knew that most of them had come up from the lower classes (save the occasional exception, like Valerie, a doctor's daughter), so such thorough tutoring was necessary. Their harlots, and others in brothels across the country, usually chose this life—the sporting life—out of pragmatism, not adventure. Many girls were desperately poor, burdened with

supporting parents, siblings, and children. They had been juvenile delinquents and tossed out of the home, and the $35 per week that one made as a whore—even in a low-class resort—far exceeded the $6 she could earn in a factory.

Girls who turned to prostitution often suffered the death or desertion of one or both parents at an early age; witnessed their mothers cohabiting with a series of strange men; fell victim to incest, alcoholism, tuberculosis, depression. For some, the sporting life was simply the family business, an inherited proclivity. The sisters' acquaintance Madam Nell Kimball recalled the sage advice of her aunt Letty, a retired courtesan: "Every girl, if only she knew it, is sitting on her fortune." Others were reared in brothels and knew no other life. One courtesan in New Orleans was the daughter of a prostitute and her former trick. Before the girl's fifth birthday, she learned how to prepare opium and wash off her mother's clients. At seven, she began selling sexual acts herself. Her virginity was auctioned off for $7.75.

"I ain't ashamed of what I did," she reasoned, "because I didn't have much to do with it. I knew it'd be good if I could say how awful it was and like crime don't pay, but to me it seems just like anything else—like a kid whose father owns a grocery store. He helps him in the store. Well my mother didn't sell groceries."

Their husbands left them or lost their jobs; society frowned upon a wife working outside the home, but there was no other choice. Many young girls were abandoned by family owing to suspicions of promiscuity and then decided to hell with it, why not charge a man for the privilege? Sex work wasn't so different from marriage anyway, they reasoned. "It is not adequate to define a prostitute simply as a woman who sells her body," Havelock Ellis would soon write. "That is done every day by women who become wives in order to gain a home and a livelihood." At least a sporting girl got paid to take orders and perform.

Some women joined the life not out of financial necessity, but from a desire for upward mobility, the Victorian version of bling—fine hats, gowns, shoes, pricey baubles, a brand-new bicycle. A nineteen-year-old Polish factory worker in Chicago told authorities that she had sex with men at work in exchange for clothing, and proudly showed off a collection of twenty pairs of silk stockings. "I got to get out of this place and meet some guy, and marry him before my folks get wise," she added. "If my father knew he'd kill me."

And returning to "respectable" work after a stint in prostitution was often more difficult than deciding to enter the life in the first place. A Philadelphia prostitute named Maimie Pinzer, who had lost the sight in one eye from a syphilitic infection, found that few jobs were available to a half-blind unskilled woman.

"I spent 3 days in despair," she wrote to a friend, "thinking of ditching it all and taking up again the life of least resistance."

Minna sympathized with the young women who were clamoring to work for the Club. High turnover was common in the business, but she vowed that each girl they hired would be spoiled, not degraded. After all, she and Ada, their own pasts dotted with deaths and disappointments, so easily could have been statistics on the other side of the equation.

In between interviews and tutoring, the sisters grappled with prosaic but necessary details, like hiring black servants to replace Hankins's staff. Butler Edmund and housekeepers Julia Yancy and Etta Wright signed on, and the sisters even contracted with a French designer to create couture gowns for the courtesans. The esteemed Dr. Maurice Rosenberg agreed to perform regular medical examinations on the girls, a practice often forged or skipped altogether in lesser houses. The more resourceful prostitutes stocked up on quack doctors' tonics and creams, including a red mouth-wash laced with alcohol and morphine.

Redecorating projects progressed, but the sisters' grand vision wouldn't be complete without a gold piano. It would be the *pièce de résistance* in a parlor done entirely in the most precious of metals—the Gold Room. They turned to William Wallace Kimball, whose Kimball Piano Company was the largest manufacturer in the country. When Kimball recognized the Everleighs' address, as any man would, he dismissed their story about a "private conservatory of music"—who ever heard of such a thing at 22nd and Dearborn, in the heart of the South Side Levee?—and declined to sell the sisters a piano, gold or otherwise. A dealer in New York was happy to accommodate.

Piano professors came to audition on the glittering new $15,000 marvel, which Ada cooed over as if it were a sleeping newborn. The professor would complement three string orchestras comprising violins, cellos, and harps. One candidate, Vanderpool Vanderpool, wearing wildly wavy hair

and a tuxedo that actually fit, performed a boisterous tune the sisters had loved since its release in 1898. They sang along with the refrain:

She was bred in Old Kentucky
where the meadow grass is blue, there's the sunshine of the country
in her face and manner, too,
she was bred in old Kentucky, take her, boy, you're mighty lucky,
when you marry a girl like Sue.

That was that: "Van Van" was their man.

Two private suites reflected their personal styles. Ada's was plain and serene, Minna's a cacophony of color. For a canopy, Minna picked an enormous eight-by-twelve-foot mirror—she would never bed a client, but she *was* a madam, after all. Her favorite feature was the floor-to-ceiling shelves, crammed with books bound in thick, fragrant leather. One day she would write her own.

Even before choosing Chicago as the ideal city, the sisters had lengthy debates about what to call their next brothel. They knew it would be highly inappropriate to use their given surname, Simms, since they still had family throughout the South. In Omaha, they'd gone by Everly—in honor, they claimed, of their grandmother's signature closing on her letters, "Everly Yours." It had a nice ring, but this new house required something extra, a certain aristocratic twist.

Inspiration finally hit, and they turned the "ly" into "leigh," just like Sir Walter Raleigh. Fitting, especially since the writer had spent some time in the American South.

And one of America's bawdiest idioms was born.

"I have always considered their choice of their professional name to be a marvelous 'play on words,' " wrote the sisters' great-niece, "which being a member of the family I could easily relate to their sense of humor." "The double entendre was intended," agreed one Chicago historian. The phrase likely evolved from, of all things, the Bible—several passages use "lie with" as a euphemism for sex—but in the decades after the sisters christened their Club, their legacy assumed the credit. *I'm getting Everleighed tonight*, eminent men from around the country reportedly boasted. A simple declaration that said many things at once, was under-

stood only by a privileged few—and, ultimately, was shortened and vulgarized.

In the days leading up to the grand opening, the sisters encouraged the courtesans to strike a balance between comfort—this was their new home, after all—and discipline. Minna ordered breakfast to be served daily at two in the afternoon. After the Club was launched, she suspected these meals should reflect the previous night's indulgences and consist only of a soothing glass of iced clam juice with a side of aspirin. But for those who were inclined to eat, the spread offered eggs, kidney sauté, clam cakes with bacon, planked white fish, shad roe, breast of chicken with ham under glass, buttered toast, and Turkish coffee.

Minna ordered the girls to consume plenty of baked apples, applesauce, sliced oranges, stewed fruits, and, most frequently, iced canned tomatoes. She watched approvingly as they downed the entire contents in quick, wince-inducing gulps. Come now, she cajoled, it's not that bad—they'll be thankful when old age crept upon them. Their hair would remain soft, their skin unlined.

The harlots ate again at 6:00 p.m. If they kept to this schedule, they would have plenty of time to primp and polish before the nightly festivities. These were raucous gatherings, with loud, rude jokes that made them all slap the table out of laughter, china jostling, silverware hopping. Petty quarrels and jealousies erupted, especially among the girls who'd become lovers. Such relationships were common in brothels, Minna and Ada knew. For many of the harlots, the Club was the first place they'd felt genuine affection, camaraderie, or security. But the spats, fortunately, were short-lived. They were a close group, a good group, each passing on tips and wisdom collected during her time in the trade—even if such folklore didn't apply to a place like the Everleigh Club:

It's bad luck for a man to come in and then leave without spending, the girls advised one another. To remove the curse from the house, spit on the trick's back. A harlot should never use her real name—best to forget it altogether the minute she joins a house. Never bring a cat inside the resort; it's plain bad luck. But setting wine out on the sidewalk or straightening a parlor mirror will make the men come running. If the first customer of the

night passes over a girl, her luck will be bad for a long time. And when a harlot goes down on a trick, she mustn't swallow—that stuff causes an upset stomach and rotten teeth.

After a day of preparations and tutoring, Minna and Ada retired to another dining room, the Pullman Buffet. Carved out of mahogany, it was a splendid replica of a Pullman train car—just like the one they had traveled in during their journey to Chicago. The expert kitchen staff handled requests as well as any professor. Minna preferred chicken, and Ada liked vegetables. Both had a fondness for cheese and ice cream, which they ate as often as four times a day.

While they dined, the sisters finalized the rules for the Club's daily operations. Southern dishes and mannerisms and courtesies prevailed: Fruits, salted pecans, bonbons, cigarettes, cigars, and liqueurs would be available in every parlor, all night long. They must be strict, Minna insisted. After the first night, prospective customers could gain entry only with a solid letter of referral. Out-of-town visitors to Chicago had to prove their identity and financial standing. No sightseers or slumming parties allowed, but the sisters would make exceptions for a few colorful local rogues who paid their bills and kept their lewdness in check—at least until they climbed the stairs.

Banish anyone who spent less than $50, which was technically an entrance fee. Elsewhere in Chicago, a man could enjoy a three-course meal for 50 cents, but dinner in the Pullman Buffet started at $50 per plate. It would behoove them to open an account with Chicago's Chapin & Gore, allotting a budget of $2,000 to $5,000 a month for imported spirits. Wine would be sold in the parlors for $12 a bottle and in the bedrooms for $15, but beer and hard liquor weren't available at any price. Servants would press a gentleman's suit while he was being entertained, and money would not be mentioned until his party was over. All transactions would be handled discreetly, by check—cash was considered crass. When a client looked over his bank statement, he would find his check endorsed by the "Utopia Novelty Company."

On February 1, 1900, before the doors opened at 8:00 p.m., Minna ordered her courtesans to line up.

"Be polite, patient and forget what you are here for," she said. A dia-

mond clasp, shaped like a butterfly, gripped her throat. She had grown tremendously fond of the insects, of how their short lives revolved wholly around the process of change. "Gentlemen are only gentlemen when properly introduced. We shall see that each girl is properly presented to each guest. No lining up for selection as in other houses. There shall be no cry, 'In the parlor, girls' when visitors arrive. Be patient is all I ask. And remember that the Everleigh Club has no time for the rough element, the clerk on a holiday or a man without a checkbook."

The girls clucked, shifted their weight, fidgeted beneath mountainous gowns.

"It's going to be difficult, at first, I know," Minna continued. She walked slowly up and down the line, a commander instructing her troops, arms folded, heels clacking. "It means, briefly, that your language will have to be ladylike and that you will forgo the entreaties you had used in the past. You have the whole night before you, and one fifty-dollar client is more desirable than five ten-dollar ones. Less wear and tear. You will thank me for this advice in later years. Your youth and beauty are all you have. Preserve it. Stay respectable by all means. We know men better than you do. Don't rush 'em or roll 'em. We will permit no monkeyshines, no knockout drops, no robberies, no crimes of any description. We'll supply the clients, you amuse them in a way they've never been amused before. Give, but give interestingly and with mystery. I want you girls to be proud that you are in the Everleigh Club. That is all. Now spruce up and look your best."

From then on, Minna would refer to their girls as "butterflies." And she had an idea: On special occasions, why not import swarms of the insects and release them in the conversation parlors to flutter and float among the guests?

Initially, some of the butterfly girls doubted the sisters, whispering behind their backs that the $50-minimum rule was absurd. "Just a bluff," one harlot sneered before the Club's doors opened for the first time. "Who is going to pay fifty dollars for a good time? I've heard of southern hospitality, but not at these prices."

At 8:00 p.m., several men sought admittance, but neither their credentials nor their wallets were sufficiently impressive. One look and Minna

could tell they didn't belong: eyes shifty, hands shaking, feet restless. Before she could give them the boot, Ada told them, kindly, that they were at the wrong house.

Moments later, a group of actors stood, shivering, by the entrance. They worked at the Alhambra Theater, currently offering a play called *The City of New York*. A few of the girls had slipped out during the afternoon for a matinee, were "thrilled by the leading men," and had invited them to the premiere of their resort, opening under new management. More evidence that the harlots doubted the sisters' standards, since an actor's salary averaged just $40 per week. These men, too, were politely advised to seek their kicks elsewhere in the Levee.

Then came a group of Texas cattlemen who passed muster handily and spent $300 within a few hours. Madam Cleo Maitland, who so helpfully referred their building, sent flowers, as did a U.S. senator who knew the sisters from Omaha. A few friends from their theatrical troupe sent telegrams full of good wishes. Ike Bloom, a powerful Levee district leader known as "the King of the Brothels," came by early to pay his respects and promised the sisters he'd be in touch. Minna asked Ada if she could perhaps take a break—traffic was ebbing, and she had some reading to do.

Minna took her copy of the *Chicago Daily News* to the Gold Room. One headline in particular caught her eye: RITES FOR P. D. ARMOUR, JR. The young son of the famous Chicago meatpacker had died suddenly in San Francisco five days earlier, and his body had finally arrived home for funeral services. His father, Philip Danforth Armour Sr., was so upset by his heir's untimely death that he couldn't receive the body at the train station. Masses of men whose lives were connected to the great Armour enterprise filed past a coffin buried beneath a vast tumbling of flowers. Burial was at the prestigious Graceland Cemetery.

Minna was so engrossed in the article that she didn't notice a harlot tiptoeing up behind her. The girl backed away quietly and found her fellow courtesans.

"We've got her all wrong," she whispered, impressed. "Minna knows the swells all right. I caught her reading about the Armour funeral and she acted like she had known him. She's been holding out on us."

Ten minutes later, a loyal servant who had overheard the girls' chatter cornered Minna and relayed the conversation. The madam laughed, a screeching peal that orbited the room.

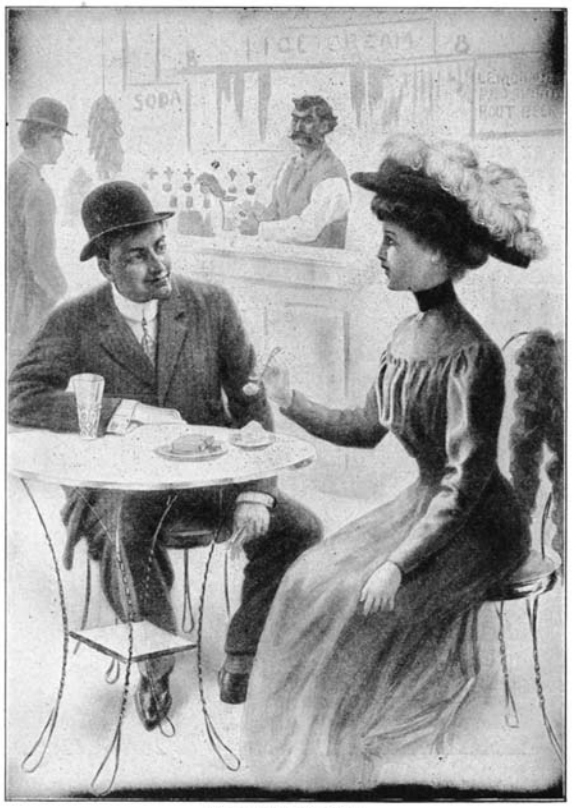
"I never heard of Armour until today," Minna confided. "Don't tell anyone I told you."

She and Ada had great fun and satisfaction tallying the opening night proceeds. The gross business was about $1,000, a resounding success for a Thursday evening, and from then on the courtesans could expect to pocket more than $100 per week.

Come Friday, no one posed further questions or made snide asides. One hundred dollars a week was an unthinkable salary in other houses.

Besides, the Everleigh butterflies were exhausted.

THE DEMON OF LUST LIES IN WAIT



THE FIRST STEP

Ice cream parlors of the city and fruit stores combined, largely run by foreigners, are the places where scores of girls have taken their first step downward. Does her mother know the character of the place and the man she is with?

There are no good girls gone wrong,
just bad girls found out.
—Mae West

In January 1886, as William Stead neared the end of his prison sentence for purchasing thirteen-year-old Lily Armstrong, a magazine titled *The Philanthropist* made its debut. The editors, all members of the New York Committee for the Prevention of the State Regulation of Vice—which had, over the years, defeated four proposals to legalize prostitution in that city—picked up where their British counterparts left off, printing Josephine Butler's impassioned defense of her friend.

"You may believe it or not as you please," Butler warned, "but I think we are living on the top of an inferno, walking about on a volcano which may burst at any moment and destroy us. . . . Mr. Stead tore aside the curtain and revealed the abyss of crime and misery."

Despite lurid narratives about virgins for sale, purity campaigns in Europe would hold Americans' attention for only so long. Trying a new tack, *The Philanthropist* editors shifted the focus to American victims. An article titled "The Traffic in Young Girls" warned of "an organized agency, by which, from rural districts and other cities, honest girls are lured to Chicago with expectation of work, and are then lost forever to friends, honor and hope . . . in one shape or another the demon of lust lies in wait at every door."

Still, not even a ripple of reaction among the American public. The editors continued to search for a story as dramatic as Stead's own "Maiden Tribute." They found it in January 1887, when authorities raided a Michigan lumber camp and arrested a group of nine women on prostitution charges.

Eight of the women accepted their prison sentences without protest, but one spun a salacious tale of torture and forced captivity. She thought she was going to the camp for work, making $14 a week plus "extras," but

when she arrived her bosses locked her in a cage. Thirteen vicious bulldogs served as her constant guards. She was bound and gang-raped, her virtue forever lost. Few believed the den keepers' assertions that *all* of the women, including this alleged white slave, knew full well what they had been hired to do at the lumber camps—a job description that made no mention of cutting trees. The public was so moved by the woman's story that she was pardoned and released from jail.

Newspapers across the country seized the story, and *The Philanthropist* followed every twist and turn, underscoring its relevance to the average American. "These atrocities are committed against the womanhood of our country," declared one editorial, written by a Woman's Christian Temperance Union leader. The WCTU, founded thirteen years earlier in 1874, protested alcohol partly because women, already disenfranchised, were also barred from saloons, where ward leaders mingled and men argued about politics. White slavery gave women a chance to insert themselves into political discourse; America's women would best know how to protect America's girls. "When we see the condition of things in which the foreigner of the North," the editorial continued, "because all of the den keepers without exception are either foreigners or of foreign extraction, and have not been long in this country—when these foreigners of the North work as they do for the enslavement of our American girls . . . what shall we say of this condition of things?"

As a result of the scandal, Michigan lawmakers passed a bill that increased fines for owning a brothel, reformers raised troubling suspicions about immigrants, and America's sporting girls learned a valuable lesson in nuance: People reviled prostitutes, but pitied white slaves.