

# STARTERS



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**LISSA PRICE**

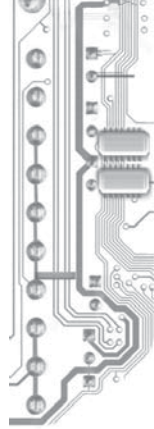
**CHAPTER SAMPLER**

# STARTERS

**LISSA PRICE**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Enders gave me the creeps. The doorman flashed a practiced smile as he let me into the body bank. He wasn't that old, maybe 110, but he still made me shudder. Like most Enders, he sported silver hair, some phony badge of honor of his age. Inside, the ultramodern space with its high ceilings dwarfed me. I walked through the lobby as if gliding through a dream, my feet barely touching the marble floor.

He directed me to the receptionist, who had white hair and matte red lipstick that transferred to her front teeth when she smiled. They had to be nice to me there, in the body bank. But if they saw me on the street, I'd be invisible. Forget that I had been top of my class—back when there was school. I was sixteen. A baby to them.

The receptionist's heels clicked and echoed in this stark space as she took me to a small waiting room, empty except for silver brocade chairs in the corners. They looked like antiques, but the chemical scent in the air belonged to new paint

and synthetics. The so-called nature sounds of forest birds were just as fake. I glanced at my frayed sweats and scuffed shoes. I had brushed them as best I could, but the stains would not go away. And because I had tramped all the way to Beverly Hills in the morning drizzle, I was also wet as a lost cat.

My feet hurt. I wanted to collapse into a chair, but I didn't dare leave a damp butt-mark on the brocade. A tall Ender popped into the room, interrupting my little etiquette dilemma.

"Callie Woodland?" He looked at his watch. "You're late."

"Sorry. The rain . . ."

"It's all right. You're here." He extended his hand.

His silver hair seemed whiter in contrast to his artificial tan. As his smile broadened, his eyes widened, making me more nervous than usual with an Ender. They didn't deserve to be called seniors, as they preferred, these greedy old fogies at the end of their lives. I forced myself to shake his wrinkled hand.

"I'm Mr. Tinnenbaum. Welcome to Prime Destinations." He wrapped his other palm over mine.

"I'm just here to see . . ." I looked around at the walls like I'd come to inspect the interior design.

"How it all works? Of course. No charge for that." He grinned and finally released my hand. "Why don't you follow me?"

He extended his arm as if I couldn't find my way out of the room. His teeth were so bright, I flinched a little when he smiled. We walked down a short hallway to his office.

"Go right in, Callie. Have a seat by the desk." He closed the door.

I bit my tongue to keep from gasping at the total ex-

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travagance inside. A massive copper fountain flowed with endless water alongside one wall. The way they were letting this clear, clean water fall and splash, you'd think the stuff was free.

A glass desk embedded with LED lights dominated the center of the room, with an airtight display hovering a foot above it. It showed a picture of a girl my age, with long red hair, wearing gym shorts. Although she was smiling, the photo was straight-on, like some full-length mug shot. Her expression was sweet. Hopeful.

I sat in a modern metal chair as Mr. Tinnenbaum stood behind the desk, pointing at the air display. "One of our newest members. Like you, she heard about us through a friend. The women who rented her body were quite pleased." He touched the corner of the screen, changing the picture to a teen in a racing swimsuit, with major abs. "This fellow, Adam, referred her. He can snowboard, ski, climb. He's a popular rental for outdoorsy men who haven't been able to enjoy these sports for decades."

Hearing his words made it all too real. Creepy old Enders with arthritic limbs taking over this teen's body for a week, living inside his skin. It made my stomach flip. I wanted to bolt, but one thought kept me there.

Tyler.

I gripped the seat of my chair with both hands. My stomach growled. Tinnenbaum extended a pewter dish of Supertruffles in paper cups. My parents had had the same dish, once.

"Would you like one?" he asked.

I took one of the oversized chocolates in silence. Then I remembered my rusty manners. "Thank you."

“Take more.” He waved the dish to entice me.

I took a second and a third, since the dish still hovered near my hand. I wrapped them in their paper cups and slipped them into my sweatshirt pocket. He looked disappointed not to see me eat them, like I was to be his entertainment for the day. Behind my chair, the fountain bubbled and splashed, teasing me. If he didn’t offer me something to drink soon, he just might get to see me with my head under the fountain, slurping like a dog.

“Could I have a glass of water? Please?”

“Of course.” He snapped his fingers and then raised his voice as if speaking to some hidden device. “Glass of water for the young lady.”

A moment later, an Ender with the figure of a model came in balancing a glass of water on a tray. It was wrapped in a cloth napkin. I took the glass and saw small cubes glistening like diamonds. Ice. She set the tray beside me and left.

I tilted my head back and downed the sweet water all at once, the cool liquid running down my throat. My eyes closed as I savored the cleanest water I’d had since the war ended. When I finished, I let one of the ice cubes fall into my mouth. I bit into it with a crunch. When I opened my eyes, I saw Tinnenbaum staring at me.

“Would you like more?” he asked.

I would have, but his eyes told me he didn’t mean it. I shook my head and finished the cube. My fingernails looked even dirtier against the glass as I set it back on the tray. Seeing the ice melting in the glass reminded me of the last time I had had ice water. It seemed like forever, but it was only a year ago, the last day in our house before the marshals came.

“Would you like to know how it all works?” Tinnenbaum asked. “Here at Prime Destinations?”

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I stopped myself from rolling my eyes. Enders. Why else would I be there? I gave him a half smile and nodded.

He tapped a corner of the aircreeen to clear it, and then a second time to bring up holo-mations. The first one showed a senior reclining on a lounge chair, the back of her head being fitted with a small cap. Colored wires protruding from the cap led to a computer.

"The renter is connected to a BCI—Body Computer Interface—in a room staffed with experienced nurses," he said. "Then she's put into a twilight sleep."

"Like at the dentist?"

"Yes. All her vital signs are monitored throughout the entire journey." On the other side of the screen, a teen girl reclined in a long padded chair. "You'll be put under, with a kind of anesthesia. Completely painless and harmless. You wake up a week later, a little groggy but a whole lot richer." He flashed those teeth again.

I forced myself not to wince. "What happens during the week?"

"She gets to be you." He spread his palms and rotated them. "Do you know about computer assists that help amputees move fake hands? They just think about it and it moves? It's very much like that."

"So she visualizes that she's me and if she wants something, she just thinks it and my hand grabs it?"

"Just like she was in your body. She uses her mind to walk your body out of here, and gets to be young again." He cradled one elbow in his other hand. "For a little while."

"But how . . . ?"

He nodded to the other side of the screen. "Over here, in another room, the donor—that would be you—is connected to the computer via a wireless BCI."

“Wireless?”

“We insert a tiny neurochip into the back of your head. You won’t feel a thing. Totally painless. Allows us to connect you to the computer at all times. We then connect your brain waves to the computer, and the computer connects the two of you.”

“Connects.” My brow furrowed as I tried to imagine two minds connected that way. BCI. Neurochip. Inserted. This was getting creepier by the minute. That urge to run was coming back hard. But at the same time, I wanted to know more.

“I know, it’s all so new.” He gave me a condescending smirk. “We make sure you’re completely asleep. The renter’s mind takes over your body. She answers a series of questions posed by the team to be sure everything is working the way it should. Then she’s free to go enjoy her rented body.”

The diagram showed graphics of the rented body playing golf, playing tennis, diving.

“The body retains its muscle memory, so whatever sports you’ve played, she’ll be able to play. When the time is over, the renter walks the body back here. The connection is shut down in the proper sequence. The renter is taken off the twilight-sleep drugs. She is checked over and then goes on her merry way. You, the donor, are restored to your full brain functions via the computer. You awake in your body as if you’d slept for several days.”

“What if something happens to me while she’s in my body? Snowboarding, skydiving? What if I get hurt?”

“Nothing like that has ever happened here. Our renters sign a contract that makes them financially liable. Believe me, everyone wants that deposit back.”

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He made me sound like a rental car. A chill went through me like someone had run an ice cube up my spine. That reminded me of Tyler, the only thing keeping me in that chair.

“What about the chip?” I asked.

“That’s removed after your third rental.” He handed me a sheet of paper. “Here. This might put you at ease.”

### Rules for Renters at Prime Destinations

1. You may not alter the appearance of your rental body in any way, including but not limited to piercings, tattoos, hair cutting or dyeing, cosmetic contact lenses, and any surgical procedures, including augmentation.
  2. No changes to the teeth are allowed, including fillings, removal, and imbedded jewelry.
  3. You must remain inside a fifty-mile perimeter around Prime Destinations. Maps are available.
  4. Any attempt to tamper with the chip will result in immediate cancellation without refund, and fines will be levied.
  5. If you have a problem with your rental body, return to Prime Destinations as soon as possible. Please treat your rental with care, remembering at all times that it is an actual young person.
- Be advised that each neurochip blocks renters from engaging in illegal activities.

The rules didn’t make me feel any better. They brought up more problems I hadn’t even considered.

“What about . . . other things?” I asked.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” I wished he wasn’t going to make me say it. But he was. “Sex?”

“What about it?”

“There’s nothing in the rules,” I said.

I sure didn’t want my first time to happen when I wasn’t there.

He shook his head. “That’s made quite clear to the renters. It is forbidden.”

Yeah, right. At least pregnancy would be impossible. Everyone knew that was a side effect, hopefully temporary, of the vaccination.

My stomach tightened. I shook the hair back from my eyes and stood.

“Thanks for your time, Mr. Tinnenbaum. And the demonstration.”

His lip twitched. He tried to cover it with a half smile. “If you sign today, there’s a bonus.” He pulled a form out of his drawer and scribbled on it, then slid it across the desk. “That’s for three rentals.” He capped his pen.

I picked up the contract. That money could buy us a house and food for a year. I sat back down and took a deep breath.

He held out the pen. I grabbed it.

“Three rentals?” I asked.

“Yes. And you’ll be paid upon completion.”

The paper waved. I realized my hand was shaking.

“It’s a very generous offer,” he said. “That’s with the bonus if you sign today.”

I needed that money. Tyler needed it.

As I gripped the pen, the bubbling of the fountain got louder in my head. I was staring at the paper but saw flashes of the matte red lipstick, the eyes of the doorman, Mr. Tin-

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nenbaum's unreal teeth. I pressed the pen to the paper, but before I made a mark, I looked up at him. Maybe I wanted one last reassurance. He nodded and smiled. His suit was perfect, except for a piece of white lint on his lapel. It was shaped like a question mark.

He was so eager. Before I knew it, I put the pen down.

His eyes narrowed. "Something wrong?"

"It's just something my mother always said."

"What was that?"

"She said always sleep on an important decision. I have to think about it."

His eyes went cold. "I can't promise this offer will be good later."

"I'll have to take my chances." I folded the contract into my pocket and rose from the chair. I forced a little smile.

"Can you afford to do that?" He stepped in front of me.

"Probably not. But I have to think about it." I moved around him and walked to the door.

"Call if you have questions," he said a little too loudly.

I rushed past the receptionist, who seemed upset to see me leaving so soon. She followed me with her eyes as she punched what I imagined was a panic button. I kept going. The doorman stared at me through the glass door before opening it.

"Leaving already?" His hollow expression was ghoulish.

I bolted past him.

Once I was outside, the brisk fall air hit my face. I breathed it in as I wove through the crowd of Enders packing the sidewalk. I must have been the only one who had ever turned Tinnenbaum down, who didn't fall for his pitch. But I'd learned not to trust Enders.

I walked through Beverly Hills, shaking my head at the

pockets of wealth that remained, over a year after the war had ended. Here, only every third storefront was vacant. Designer wear, visual electronics, and bot-shops, all for the wealthy Enders' shopping fix. Scrounging was good here. If anything broke, they'd have to throw it away because there was no one to fix it and no way to get parts.

I kept my head down. Even though I wasn't doing anything illegal at the moment, if a marshal stopped me, I couldn't produce the necessary docs that claimed minors had to carry.

As I waited for a traffic light, a truck stopped with a bunch of glum Starters, dirty and battered, sitting cross-legged in the back, picks and shovels piled in the center. One girl with a bandage around her head stared at me with dead eyes.

I saw the flicker of jealousy in them, as if my life were any better. As the truck pulled away, the girl folded her arms, sort of hugging herself. As bad as my life was, hers was worse. There had to be some way out of this insanity. Some way that didn't involve that creepy body bank or legalized slave labor.

I stuck to the side streets, avoiding Wilshire Boulevard, which was a marshal magnet. Two Enders, businessmen in black raincoats, walked toward me. I looked away and slipped my hands inside my pockets. In my left pocket was the contract. In my right, the paper-wrapped chocolates.

Bitter and sweet.

The neighborhoods became rougher the farther I got from Beverly Hills. I sidestepped piles of garbage waiting for pickups that were long overdue. I looked up and realized I was passing a building that was red-tented. Contaminated. The last spore missiles had been over a year ago, but the

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hazmat teams hadn't gotten around to purging this house. Or didn't want to. I held my sleeve to cover my nose and mouth, as my dad had taught me, and hurried by.

Daylight faded away, and I moved more freely. I pulled out my handlite and strapped it to the back of my left hand but didn't turn it on. We'd broken the streetlights here. We needed the protection of the shadows so the authorities couldn't pick us up with one of their lame excuses. They'd be only too happy to lock us in an institution. I'd never seen the inside of one, but I'd heard about them. One of the worst, Institution 37, was just a few miles away. I'd heard other Starters whisper about it.

By the time I was a couple of blocks from our home, it was as dark as it got. I flicked on my handlite. A minute later, I caught the streaking of two handlites darting at an angle, coming from the other side of the road. Because whoever it was kept their handlites on, I hoped they were friendlies. But then, at the same second, the lights both went dark.

Renegades.



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# ENDERS

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