

*“He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness  
he had in his keeping.”*

~ Heart of Darkness, by Joseph Conrad

## PROLOGUE

*1943, Columbia University, New York*

It began as an idea, only an idea, but a beautiful one, dazzling and brilliant in its conception, like a flash of lightning crossing the heavens and landing on earth. There was no feeling or attachment to it, no perception other than seeing the moral rightness of a profound commitment, an unfettered faith to it, something to which you could offer sacrifices...

She was quite beautiful, though, that girl in his history class, a photographer's delight. Her skin had an exquisite dewy quality to it when the light shone across her body, as if she were made of alabaster and polished to a soft sheen. Her long black hair, trailing down to the small of her back, radiated a kind of blue light, having an otherworldly, almost ghostly quality to it. Her dark blue eyes, though, were her best feature, framed by thick, black lashes. She was a virtual love affair for the camera.

Thomas happened upon her quite by accident outside that history class. He already knew her schedule intimately, knew her quirky little habits when she sat outside the café in town, her lack of friends, all of it. She accepted too easily the invitation to go with him – young girls are always flattered by the prospects of romance. The jolting idea percolated throughout that first conversation, while her full, dark lips expressed all the disappointments in her life closing in on her. Her thoughts were foolish, silly narcissisms and he knew she could be easily manipulated with the right words.

For several weeks, they engaged in long talks where he had to endure her endless soliloquies about her fruitless life, the recitations of her maudlin poetry, talking about a brutal darkness within her, the many depressions and the unsuccessful attempts. He began to doubt that she even deserved the divine spark she wanted to give up so easily. She was incapable of seeing the disillusionment was of her

own making. He had been advised by his friend that she would fail him, that those kissable lips wanted to prattle in any willing ear, that she couldn't help but disembosom every one of her secrets. However, he pressed on, ignoring his friend's warnings.

She, of course, came upon the plan first. He only encouraged her to go through with it. A sacrifice would provide the proof he needed for his thesis, his manifesto. He never had an appetite for the threat of death, but in her case it was possible, with her affectations and woeful exaggerations that bored everyone into a coma. Then came the histrionics because he stopped coming to her, stopped feeding her insatiable need and he knew it was time.

He insisted on procuring the means, saying he wanted to do it with her. She wanted to cut into her body, and he couldn't have that. She would ruin everything. That alabaster skin had to be perfect for the light, for him to see it escape as she expelled her final breath. He was the witness, the worshiper of the idea, recording all of it with his camera. She finally agreed. The day was set, and he could feel the savage moment descend into their midst, the exhilaration of anticipating the moment, like trails of light all around him, falling from the sky, he finally had a sacrifice for his idea.

He ran from class to class, his trembling hands unable to write a single note or sit through a lecture. He couldn't sleep, knowing that they were standing on the edge of a new but dark continent, the thrill of discovering what lay within it lighting up his brain. He was like those intrepid explorers setting sail for the new world, and finding feral creatures in the form of humans inhabiting the place, innocent of civilization and, yet, barbarous killers not having the moral compass of Christendom, or regard for any life.