

# JUSTICE DELIVERED

PATRICIA  
BRADLEY



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To the volunteers who give a voice to the  
many victims of human trafficking.  
And to my family who encourages me.  
But most of all, to my Lord Jesus  
Christ, who gives me the words.

# PROLOGUE

**JANUARY 2010**

JASMINE EASED OUT of her cell-like room and down the dimly lit hallway. Two light raps on another bedroom door brought no response, and she turned the knob and slipped inside.

Moonlight filtered into the darkened room through narrow slats on the window. Labored breathing coming from the bed sent her heart spiraling to the floor. It was almost time to go, and Lily was still in bed. She eased closer, noticing that the thin blanket shook.

“It’s me, Jasmine,” she whispered. “You have to get dressed.”

Lily didn’t respond. If she wasn’t ready when Blade came to get them, there would be consequences. Jasmine touched her shoulder, feeling the tremor in the girl’s body. And the heat. Her hot skin made Jasmine wince.

“C-can’t . . .”

She knelt beside the bed and smoothed the girl’s hot brow. She was pretty sure from the way her friend had been coughing that she had pneumonia.

Lily’s eyes fluttered open, and she turned toward the only window in the small room. “It’s dark already?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry—maybe they won’t make you go to-night.” Even as she said the words, Jasmine knew they would.

And if Lily didn't bring in her thousand dollars, Blade would beat her or worse.

"I-I have t-to. C-can't go in the H-hole again."

The Hole was why Lily was sick. A week ago she'd had a toothache and begged off hitting the streets. And for two days he'd shut her up in a tiny room in the basement of the house where they lived. With no lights and only the bare floor to sleep on, she'd come out of it disoriented and feverish.

"You're too sick to get out of bed." Jasmine swallowed and lifted her chin. "I'll tell Blade I'll see your clients tonight too."

"They won't let you," Lily said. She tried to sit up and fell back on the bed. Tears dropped from the corners of her eyes. She tried to take a deep breath and fell into a fit of coughing. When she got her breath, she slipped a bracelet from her arm and pressed it into Jasmine's hand. "I'm not going to make it, Jaz."

Jasmine clenched the thin chain in her hands as if holding on tightly would make Lily well. She didn't know what she'd do if Lily died. "You have to make it."

"I'm so c-cold." She squeezed Jasmine's hand. "Jaz, you . . . have to . . . forgive . . ."

"Lily, don't ask me to do that. These men don't deserve forgiveness!" she whispered fiercely. Someone had given Lily a Bible, and after she started reading it, she'd changed.

"None of us deserve forgiveness . . . and it's for . . . you. If you don't forgive . . . it will eat you alive."

She didn't have to ask if Lily had forgiven Blade or the one responsible for her being sold into prostitution. Peace showed on her face. Jasmine gripped the bracelet tighter. Her anger at Austin King and Blade was all she had to hold on to, and she wasn't letting it go.

Lily closed her eyes briefly. She tried to breathe deeper and triggered a spasm of coughing. When she got her breath, she turned, and her eyes pierced Jasmine.

“You have to find a way to get out of here. Find those women.”

Last night four women from some shelter had brought coffee and doughnuts to the girls on the street. She’d ignored them, but Lily had talked to one of the ladies. Jasmine shook her head. “I can’t leave you like this. I have to get medicine and bring it to you.”

“No . . .” Lily’s chest barely moved. “Can’t breathe.” Her feverish eyes locked on to Jasmine’s. “Promise.”

Jasmine wanted to promise, but after the “modeling agent” sold her to Blade, she’d tried to get away. Escaped three times. She rubbed the scar inside her forearm. The first time, a cop found her and took her back to Blade. He branded her with his initials and beat her until half her ribs were broken. The next time he locked her in a closet for a week. The last time, he’d beaten her and locked her in her room for three weeks with nothing but moldy bread and very little water. She never tried again.

They both jerked as Blade’s voice thundered from the front of the house, ordering the women to assemble for the ride into town.

“Those women . . .” Lily’s breathing grew shallower. “They . . . will . . . help.”

Jasmine couldn’t think about trying to escape again. “They may not be there. Blade will probably drop us off in a different part of the city,” she said, looking toward the door when he shouted her name. Maybe if she told him how sick Lily was, he’d get help for her.

She turned to tell Lily she’d be right back and her heart stilled. Lily was dead.



## **EARLY APRIL 2012**

At a coffee shop near Nashville, Carly Smith typed “Lia Morgan” into the Facebook search engine, then chose Tennessee’s second largest city for where to search. It had been ten years since she’d

seen her sister, and she was probably married by now. Still, there couldn't be too many Lias in Memphis.

She hesitated with her finger poised over the enter key and closed her eyes. It had taken two years after she escaped Blade to get the courage to look for her sister. Two years and a name change. What if Lia wanted nothing to do with Carly? She wouldn't blame her. The feeling of worthlessness she struggled with daily washed over her. The psychiatrist she saw every two weeks had told her it would take time to put her past behind her, but Carly didn't believe she'd ever be free of her fear and shame. Opening her eyes, she pushed aside her hesitation and tapped enter.

While she waited, Carly fingered the gold bracelet around her wrist. Chains looped together with a locket dangling in the middle. She'd had an artist draw Lily's likeness for the inside of the locket. *Lily*. She would never have stood for Carly's self-pity.

She straightened her shoulders as only one Lia Morgan popped up on her screen. Carly studied the small image. The woman in the photo had shorter hair than she remembered . . . but it was definitely her sister. She clicked on the name, and Lia's Facebook page opened.

*Oh, wow.* Evidently her sister was a freelance photographer. That shouldn't surprise Carly, not the way Lia had always gone around with a camera in her hand. She studied the page. Portraits, sports, events, crime scenes—Lia covered it all. And based on all the awards she'd received, she was good. A phone number for her studio was listed on the sidebar, and Carly put the number in her phone.

Should she call her? She wished her friend Jamie was here—she'd know what to do. Her fingers hovered over the call button. What if Lia hung up when she told her who she was? Lia was bound to be angry with her for just dropping out of her life. Carly pressed her dry lips into a thin line. No. She couldn't do it. Not today. But she saved the number and slipped her phone in her pocket.



A week later, Carly sat in the same coffee shop, tears stinging her eyes as the barista set an oversized cupcake on the table. Another of the employees lit the one candle. “You shouldn’t have done this.”

Jamie Parker smiled. “I couldn’t let your birthday go by without a celebration.”

The barista cleared her throat, and Carly jerked her head up. “Please. Don’t sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to me.”

“No one is singing to you,” Jamie said with a laugh. “I still remember last year at the restaurant. I thought you were going to have a stroke. Now make a wish and blow the candle out.”

Carly paused, then leaned forward and blew out the flame. Everyone around her clapped and she nodded her thanks, resisting the urge to fan her heated cheeks.

“What did you wish for?” Jamie asked when they were alone again.

Carly busied herself with cutting the cupcake. All day she’d been thinking about birthdays past that she’d spent with Lia. “You have to help me eat this,” she said.

“Of course, but what was your wish?”

“If I tell, it won’t come true.”

“Oh, come on. That’s just for kids.”

She put half of the cupcake on the extra plate and pushed it toward Jamie.

“Is it about your sister?” Jamie asked.

Carly nodded.

“You should call her.”

“That’s what my psychiatrist says.”

“What’s holding you back?”

Carly almost wished she hadn’t told Jamie about finding Lia on Facebook as she thought of all the reasons she hadn’t called



and settled on the main one. “What if she doesn’t want to see me after she learns where I’ve been?”

“You’re not to blame for what happened to you. Not like me, and if my family can forgive me for the mess I made of my life, your sister will welcome you with open arms.”

Jamie reminded her of Lily. Always pushing her out of her comfort zone. No doubt the reason she’d bonded with her in the recovery home.

“Besides,” Jamie said, “you had no way of knowing the man who offered to make you a model was into human trafficking.”

“Even a seventeen-year-old should have known when something was too good to be true.” She fiddled with the turquoise pin adorning the scarf around her neck. He’d been so convincing when he said she could make \$10,000 a week.

“You’re looking at it from ten years on the other side,” Jamie said softly. “What’s the worst that can happen if you call her?”

*Rejection.*

When Carly didn’t answer, her friend said, “From what you’ve told me about Lia, she doesn’t sound like someone who would reject you for something you couldn’t help.”

Jamie knew her well. Carly scraped at a chipped nail as memories of her big sister teaching her to swim and climb on a horse flashed through her mind. Lia had always looked out for her and never seemed to mind when Carly tagged along. *That* Lia would accept her. “You’re right, and when you encourage me, I think I can do it . . .”

Jamie touched Carly’s arm. “Call her right now.” She nodded toward the patio. “You can have privacy out there.”

Carly glanced through the window at the empty tables. Could she? She pulled her phone from her pocket. “Pray for me.”

“You know I will.”

Maybe God would hear Jamie’s prayers.

On the patio, a cool breeze touched her cheek as Carly scrolled

through her contacts until she came to Lia's name. Her thumb hovered over the number, and she almost returned the phone to her pocket. *No*. It was time, and she pushed the call button before she could change her mind.

"Lia Morgan Photography. How may I help you?"

Hearing Lia's voice took her breath away. *Say something*. She couldn't. Her vocal cords were frozen.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

"Y-yes," Carly said.

"How can I help you?"

"It's me . . . Heather." The name felt strange on Carly's tongue. She'd discarded Heather years ago. Along with Jasmine, the name Blade had given her.

"I see," Lia said with an impatient sigh. "I suppose you need money for a plane ticket."

"What?" Her heart reeled at Lia's brusque tone.

"Don't act like you didn't read the article about Heather that came out in the *Commercial Appeal* today. Every time a reporter runs a story on her disappearance, at least half a dozen kooks call, claiming to be her. You're the third one today. The first one wanted me to fly her from California so we could be a family again. The second caller just plain wanted money. What do you want, the reward money?"

"Reward? What are you talking about?"

"There's a \$10,000 reward posted on Memphis CrimeStoppers."

It took Carly a few seconds to process that someone had actually been looking for her. "I don't know about any reward."

"I've heard that before too."

"You mean people can actually claim a reward for turning themselves in?" This reminded Carly of the arguments they'd had as children at the breakfast table. Lia, older and more logical, rarely backed down. "Look, I'm sorry about your other calls, but this one is for real. I'm your sister."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “You . . . don’t sound like my sister. You don’t even sound as though you’re from the South, for that matter.”

It hit Carly. While she’d recognized her sister’s voice with its Southern accent right off, Carly had forgotten she’d lost her drawl long ago in New York and hadn’t picked it up again when she was moved to Atlanta. “What if I asked you to meet me at the Natchez Trace State Park?”

There was a gasp on the other end of the line, then Lia asked, “Why there?”

“Because it’s where we spent a week every summer with our parents until they died.”

Silence filled the airwaves. “Oh my goodness,” she whispered. “It really is you.”

“Yes, it really is.”

“Where are you? And where have you been? Are you all right?” Lia’s voice rose as the questions tumbled out.

“I’d rather explain in person,” Carly said.

“I can be at the state park in two hours.”

“It will take me about the same amount of time. How about the restaurant there?”

“Okay, but how will I know you?”

“I’ll know you,” she said, glancing down at the clothes she wore. “But I’m wearing a plaid scarf and a white sweater over skinny jeans. Give me your cell number, and I’ll call you if I’m running late.”

Lia rattled off a number and Carly wrote it down. “You have my number on your caller ID.” Then she said, “You looked good on Facebook. That’s how I found you.”

“Why haven’t you called before?”

“I’ll answer all your questions when we meet. And please, don’t tell anyone I called or where we’re meeting. Not even Gigi and Frank.”

“But they’ll be so happy to know—”

“No!” She bit her lip. Her aunt and uncle had never approved of her, and she could only imagine their reaction when they heard what had happened to her. Carly didn’t want their reunion tainted with Gigi and Frank’s disapproval. “You can tell them after we talk, if you still want to.”

If they showed up with Lia, Carly would silently disappear.



Two and a half hours later at the Natchez Trace State Park, Carly sat at a corner table with a cup of dark roast and studied the people in the restaurant. She fingered the turquoise pin that held the GPS tracker she always wore somewhere in her clothing or her hair. Today she’d snapped it into a customized pin that held her brightly colored scarf in place. Tomorrow she might wear it in a barrette. Either way, she would not be without it—if she were ever kidnapped again, she wanted someone to be able to track her. Right now that was the people at RLT Security.

An overhead fan circulated cold air, making Carly shiver even with a sweater on. She rubbed her arms. Why did restaurants freeze you to death? She wished she’d told Lia she would meet her outside and turned to stare briefly through the bank of windows across the back of the room. The trees around the lake looked as though an artist had filled his palette with every shade of green known to mankind and dabbed it on the trees. Maybe they could move down by the lake once her sister arrived . . . if she came.

Restless, she glanced toward the door again. Lia wasn’t coming. Carly unclasped her hands and five seconds later gripped them again, jumping as her cell phone announced a text. Maybe it was Lia. No. Jamie.

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Did you make it safely?

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Yes. She’s not here.

Seconds later her cell phone rang. “Are you okay?” Jamie asked.

“Yes. No. What if Lia doesn’t come?” The door opened and a Tennessee state trooper ambled into the room. For a few seconds, Carly struggled to breathe against the adrenaline pumping through her body. Some days it didn’t matter how hard she worked, the sight of a policeman threw her into panic mode. “I have to go.”

“What’s wrong?”

Carly tracked the trooper as he walked to a table and pulled out a chair. “A s-state trooper just came in.”

“Don’t panic. Just close your eyes and picture a calm lake, with swans paddling in a circle . . .”

“You sound like my therapist.” She glanced out the windows again. “And I don’t have to close my eyes for that.” A deep, cleansing breath stilled the fluttering in her chest. She could do this.

“You were getting better about that. What happened?”

Nothing had happened. She’d just gotten better at hiding her fear of the police. “I guess it’s the stress of contacting Lia.”

“Most cops are not like the ones in Blade’s back pocket.”

Carly wished she could believe that, but she’d seen too much corruption and too many instances of cops turning a blind eye to human trafficking and drugs. She looked up as the waitress stopped at her table and held up a coffeepot.

“Would you like a refill, honey?”

Still holding the cell phone to her ear, Carly nodded. As soon as the waitress moved on, she glanced toward the door again. Her breath stilled. Lia stood just inside, scanning the room. “She’s here.”

“Good,” Jamie said. “Don’t rush anything.”

“I won’t. And thanks for being a good friend.” Keeping her gaze on Lia, Carly laid her phone on the table. The Facebook photo didn’t do her sister justice. Unlike Carly, who had inherited their mother’s ash-blond hair and translucent skin tone, Lia had gotten their father’s darker coloring. Dark brown hair, blue eyes, and

skin that easily tanned. They looked as though they came from different gene pools.

She waved to get Lia's attention, and their gazes locked. Lia's face showed no recognition of Carly as she slowly approached the table. Doubt shrouded her face. The waitress stopped her, and after she nodded, the waitress sped toward the kitchen.

Then her sister stood at the table, her gaze still riveted on Carly.

She'd thought Lia might recognize her. But the last time her sister had seen her, Carly's hair had been jet-black, and she'd been super thin, almost anorexic. While she wasn't overweight, she'd filled out in a healthy way. The weight gain had changed her face, softening the sharp angles of her jawline and rounding it out.

"What did you call me at the breakfast table when we argued?" Lia demanded.

Carly laughed that her sister still remembered their morning arguments. "Gorilla. You called me Stinky." Then she inhaled deeply. Lia still wore the same perfume. "And you're wearing Joy. Just like me." She held her wrist up.

Lia bit her lip, and her eyes widened. "It's really you. All the way here, I kept preparing myself for disappointment." She pressed her fingers to her lips as her eyes turned shiny. "You don't know how long I've prayed for this, and down deep I knew one day you'd come back."

Maybe Carly should try praying more often. But it was hard to trust that a God who allowed her to be sold into slavery would hear her. She brushed the thought away as the waitress returned with a cup and filled it with coffee.

"Can I get you two anything else?" she asked.

They both shook their heads. "We'll order something later," Lia said, then she turned to Carly and studied her again. "I would not have recognized you if we'd passed on the street." She cocked her head, and Carly shifted her gaze away from Lia's scrutiny. "Unless I saw your eyes, and then I might wonder if it was you."

It'd been a while since Carly had worn the colored contacts that dried her eyes but effectively hid the gold starbursts ringing her irises. Maybe she should start wearing them again.

"I would have known you, and thank you for coming," Carly cringed. Her voice sounded stilted, and an awkward silence fell between them. Now that Lia was here, Carly didn't know what to say. Even though they were sisters, the years apart had made them strangers.

"I'm so sorry I didn't ask you to move in with me," Lia blurted.

"Move in with you?"

"Yes. I knew it was bad with Gigi and Uncle Frank, but I was living in the college dorm with a roommate. I didn't have anywhere to put you." Her chin quivered. "It was my fault that you ran away."

The pain in Lia's face pierced Carly. All these years her sister had lived with guilt? "Didn't they tell you? I'd moved out and was staying with whoever would give me a place to sleep until I could get a job." It was one reason no one had reported her missing right away. She took a deep breath. "I didn't run away, either. I was kidnapped and sold into sex trafficking."

Lia paled. A gasp escaped her lips, and then she dropped her gaze to the table. "No," she whispered.

"I didn't mean to upset you."

Placing her hand on her chest, she brought her gaze back to Carly's. "Please, tell me that didn't happen."

"I wish I could."

"How?"

She'd known Lia would want to know, but that didn't make the telling easier. How to start? "I met a modeling agent. He promised me a job and lots of money if I would go with him to New York. You know how much I wanted to be a model." She paused to take a breath. How stupid she'd been. The memories of those first days assaulted her, and she sought the gold bracelet around her wrist.

“When we got to New York, he turned me over to a man called Blade, and the modeling job turned out to be in adult entertainment. When I said no, Blade kept me locked up in a tiny room with no food until I agreed. That’s when I found out the modeling agent had sold me to Blade.”

No need to mention the beatings she endured or what happened the times she tried to escape. Especially since her matter-of-fact words had evidently stunned Lia into silence. The once-cold room suddenly felt like a sauna, and Carly peeled the sweater off. “I finally got away from him two years ago. By then he had moved me to Atlanta. There were some ladies there who ran a shelter for trafficked women. They got me out of Georgia, otherwise Blade would have found me.”

“Who is this Blade?” Color had returned to Lia’s face, and her jaw clenched. “What’s his last name?”

“I have no idea.” The scar on her left arm throbbed, and she rubbed it with her thumb. “Blade is the only name I ever knew.”

Lia shifted her gaze to Carly’s arm. “How did you get that scar?”

She glanced down, remembering the smell of her seared skin when Blade pressed the red-hot *B* just below her elbow. “The first time I ran away and Blade caught me, he branded me with his initial. A surgeon removed it earlier this year.”

Lia winced. “Who was the New York agent?”

“He went by the name Austin King, but I’m sure it was fake. I’ve searched the internet and there’s no New York agent by that name. None of the photos I found matching Austin King turned out to be him.”

“How did you meet him?” Determination crept into Lia’s voice as she took out a notebook and pen.

Every moment of their meeting was stamped in Carly’s memory. “Logan Donovan had taken me to a party at his mother’s, and she was not at all happy I was there, so I was kind of staying under her radar and sitting in a corner. King approached me and said



he'd been watching me all night, and had I ever considered being a model. I should have checked him out, but I was seventeen and stupid."

"If he was at one of Jacqueline Donovan's parties, I'm sure you thought he was on the up-and-up."

"That's exactly what I thought. We set up a meeting for breakfast to iron out the details, and then he left the party. I should have asked Logan about him."

"Why didn't you?"

Carly made a face. "It's going to sound dumb, but King told me not to mention him or the modeling gig. That someone would try to mess it up." She shook her head. "That should have been a warning flag, but he told me how that had just happened. Another girl was all set to go to New York with him and she told someone. Her parents got wind of it and wouldn't allow her to go. I was the lucky girl who got to take her place. Pretty sure it was all a lie and there never was another girl."

"Oh, honey, he knew how to manipulate you."

"Do you think Jacqueline could have set me up with him?"

Lia paused in her note taking. "I've been to Jacqueline's parties. Some of her guests can be a little offbeat, but she'd never knowingly associate with someone dealing in human trafficking. Did you know anyone else at the party?"

"There were a lot of people there, even Gigi and Frank." She searched her memory bank. "Jared Donovan . . . and a couple of friends of Logan's I'd met . . . I haven't thought about them in years, so I'll have to work on remembering their names."

"Yes. I'll need them. But I really have a hard time believing Jacqueline had anything to do with it."

"She didn't like me." Carly played with the gold chain around her wrist. "She wasn't pleased that Logan had brought me, or that he was even dating me—I wasn't upper class enough for him. I used to think that was one of the reasons he took me out—he

liked irritating his mother. I don't know if she would have gone that far, though."

"He was too old for you," her sister said.

"You're probably right. Logan didn't know I was only seventeen. If he had, he never would have asked me out."

Lia rubbed the handle of her cup with her thumb. "I barely remember you dating him, but I was working to finish my bachelor's, totally swamped."

"I didn't understand why I rarely saw you, but I do now," Carly said with a rueful smile. When Lia looked puzzled, she added, "I'm getting my bachelor's now."

Lia grinned, her smile stretching big. "Oh, Heather, that's wonderful."

"Yeah, it is. And I don't go by Heather anymore. After I escaped, I changed my name to Carly Smith."

"Carly?" Lia's lips curved into a smile. "That's a wonderful name. It means strength."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I almost named my little girl that."

"You have a daughter?" Carly had missed out on so much. "Tell me about her, and what's been going on in your life."

"My daughter is five. I met David when . . . you went missing. I kept running into him whenever I went to see the detective that worked on your case. We were married a year later, and Alexis was born three years after that."

"Alexis." Carly liked the way it rolled off her tongue. "Did you choose it for any particular reason?"

"I liked that it means helpful or defender, and Lexi is certainly both—even as a five-year-old, she makes sure no one bullies her friends. I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't follow in her daddy's footsteps."

"What do you mean?"

"He's a sergeant with the Memphis police department."

A shiver chased over her body. Of all the men Lia could have married, why did she have to choose a policeman? “I’m sure he’s nice.” It was all she could think of to say. “But I’m glad you hadn’t changed your name on your Facebook page.”

“That’s my photography page. My married name is Raines.”

“Are you happy?”

“I am now that I’ve found you.” She stared down at the table, then raised her gaze. “Why did you wait two years to contact me?”

Another question Carly had known was coming, but it was still difficult to explain. “I wasn’t a nice person that first year. I was really messed up and living at a recovery home.”

“Recovery home?”

“Drugs had been the only way I could cope while I was . . .” Carly looked down at her clasped fingers. “Anyway, after I was clean, well, let’s just say when you’ve been in the situation I was in, it’s hard to face people, especially those you care about.”

“But it wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s what my psychiatrist keeps telling me, but it doesn’t change the shame.”

“You shouldn’t feel shame over something you had no control of.”

Almost the same words Jamie used. Carly looked up into Lia’s tender gaze. “One day I hope to believe that, but I’m not there yet. Just now, it took every ounce of courage I had to tell you what happened.”

“Why? Did you think I’d turn away from you?”

“I didn’t know how you would react.”

Lia’s face hardened. “Whoever is responsible needs to pay, and I’m going to find out who it is. Can you describe this Austin King?”

“No!” Lead settled in her stomach. She hadn’t dreamed Lia might go after King. Carly leaned forward. “Please, just let it go. It’s too dangerous for you to get involved.”

Her sister lifted her chin. “I’ve been trying to find you for ten

years. I can't let it go. What happened to you might happen to someone else. And what if I'm coming in contact with him every day or even occasionally? Austin King probably wasn't even his name, and I wouldn't know him."

"He wouldn't look the same."

"He couldn't have changed that much. What did he look like?"

Carly should have seen this coming. Lia had always been her champion and protector, and once her sister set her mind, there was no changing it. Slowly, she took a sketch from her purse. "I had a forensic artist draw this from my description, and it may not even look like him now. I was pulling from eight-year-old memories. He would have been maybe forty then, so he'd be close to fifty now."

Lia studied the sketch then raised her gaze, her eyes round. "*This is Austin King?*"

A cold chill ran over Carly's body. "Do you know him?"

"I don't know for sure, but he looks so . . . normal, and I was expecting a monster, I guess."

"But you do think you know him?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure."

"Who is he?"

Her sister shook her head. "If I accuse someone without being certain, it could ruin his life."

"How will you find out?"

"We have a shelter for women who've been on the streets. I'll talk with the person running it. Either the director or one of the women might recognize the sketch. Or maybe the name." Then Lia leaned forward. "Why haven't you returned to Memphis and taken this to the police? They're equipped to find this man."

"Cops don't care about victims of human trafficking," Carly said.

"The ones I know do. Please, come back with me, give this information to David."

Lia's husband probably wasn't on the take, but he could be. So many she'd met in her past were. Her fear of cops wasn't the only reason Carly hadn't pursued finding Austin King. Going to the police meant reliving every day she was on the streets. She worried a hangnail on her thumb. "I just can't."

# 1

## **OCTOBER, SIX YEARS LATER**

The nip in the air invigorated Carly as she cantered the Arabian mare on the smooth lane. Getting up an hour early to ride Angel had been so worth it. The horses at Tabula Rasa had been a deciding factor in accepting the recovery center's job offer.

Carly's earliest memories had involved horses, and after her parents died, her mare, Candy, had been her biggest comfort. She'd like to know if the horse was still alive . . . horses lived thirty years sometimes. But to see her would mean revealing who she was to the world. What if Blade tracked her down?

No. For now she'd have to settle for the horses at the center. She brought the mare down to a trot then to a walk, and then she leaned over and patted the horse's neck. "Good girl. Are you ready to go back to the barn?"

Carly didn't know what she'd do if the mare answered her with more than the toss of her head.

She reined Angel around and nudged her into a trot, rising out of the saddle to match the one-two beat of Angel's rhythm. Her mind turned to the counseling sessions for later in the morning. Over the weekend a new girl had arrived at the center, and Carly

was anxious to meet her. No one had said exactly what her problem was . . . probably drugs. That was the majority of the girls' problems here.

An hour and a half later, Carly lit a lavender candle then turned as the door opened and girls filed in for their session. She made eye contact with each girl as they handed her a sheet of paper that listed their name and what they wanted to discuss. Most smiled and nodded, but not the new girl. Carly had learned from one of the other counselors that her name was Jenna Carson.

After she collected the last sheet, Carly scanned the room, searching until she found Jenna sitting in a rocker with her knees pulled close to her chest, ignoring the activity around her. Brassy blonde hair almost covered a pixie face. Carly hadn't had an opportunity to look over the girl's paperwork, so she knew nothing other than her name. By noon, that would change when she plowed through the stack of folders on her desk.

She nodded to the two assistants who would sit in on today's session and then turned to study the other girls in the group. All recovering addicts, and all still in their teens. She skimmed the papers the girls had handed her. Jenna had only written her first name and age, seventeen, on the sheet. Evidently there was nothing she wanted to talk about.

Typical of a new girl who was still hiding from her past. After eight years, Carly understood that better than anyone. But it was her job to get Jenna to realize the past did not define her. Here at Tabula Rasa she had a clean slate. That's what *tabula rasa* meant in Latin. Carly had to remind herself daily that she had a clean slate because not a day went by that she didn't struggle with her past, and especially with her sister's death.

She hadn't discovered Lia was dead until almost six months after they'd met at the state park. When a week went by and her sister hadn't contacted Carly again, she figured once Lia had time to think about what she'd learned, she'd decided Carly had too

much baggage. And Carly didn't blame her, but she wasn't about to contact Lia again and suffer more rejection.

It had been Jamie who had tracked down Lia's unsolved murder case that the police termed a random act of violence. Hers was similar to three other unsolved shootings on the 385 bypass.

"Ms. Carly, when we getting started?"

"Shortly," she said, blocking the memories. She turned to Trinity. The eighteen-year-old would graduate from the program in two weeks, an accomplishment that had been hard to envision five months ago. Surly and uncooperative, she'd only been there because the alternative was prison. But somewhere around two months into the program, Carly had broken through the hard shell encasing the girl and helped her see her worth, freeing the prisoner inside. Breakthroughs like she'd had with Trinity kept her going.

Carly scanned the room again. Jenna now stood facing the window with her arms wrapped around her thin body. Carly stepped closer to Trinity and lowered her voice. "Could you try and engage Jenna? Let her know she's in a safe place?"

Trinity glanced toward the other girl. "She's been through a lot. Not going to be easy for her to trust."

Carly queried her with her eyes.

"She's been trafficked."

The bottom dropped out of Carly's stomach and her knees threatened to buckle. Instinctively, she fingered the chain around her wrist. Why had Jenna been put in her group? The director knew she didn't counsel victims of human trafficking. "How do you know?"

Even as she asked, she recognized the symptoms in Jenna—avoiding eye contact, isolating herself, like now at the window, arms crossed over her body for protection. She'd heard the facility planned to take in rescued women who had drug and alcohol problems, but she thought they'd be in their own group. Trafficked



girls dealt with more than addiction and would need specialized treatment.

The director didn't know Carly's history, only that she wanted to focus on counseling victims of substance abuse. No one knew her story except her psychiatrist, Laura Abernathy, and her friend, Jamie Parker. Carly rubbed the scar below her left elbow, feeling the ridge that surgery had not been able to completely erase. Her first impulse was to call Dr. Abernathy or maybe Jamie.

No. Both women would only tell Carly to face this challenge head-on, even though she didn't want to. Not right now.

She had two weeks of vacation coming. Maybe now was the time to take it. But what if it was too short notice? She wouldn't know unless she tried, and as soon as this session ended, she'd put in for her leave.

But there was nothing to be done for this session except see it through. She turned to Trinity. "Call the girls together," she said, her voice cracking. "I'm going to grab a water bottle and my pen and pad."

The teenager shot an odd glance toward her then arranged the chairs in a circle and announced the start of the meeting.

One by one the girls took a chair while Carly sipped her water. It did little to relax her throat. *Focus on getting the meeting started and then let the girls take over.* Maybe she could plead a sore throat . . . no, she could do this.

Jenna was the last to take a seat at the far side of the semicircle. Turning to the opposite side, Carly scanned the waiting faces, stopping at a girl who'd been at the facility two months. Taylor was inches from a breakthrough. Could be today. Her gaze finally rested on the new girl. Jenna never looked up from studying her fingers.

"Good morning," she said and received mostly mumbles from the girls. It was going to be a long day. "Tell me how you feel today. What are your P.I.E.S.?"

Each session started with the patients telling where they stood

physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. No one spoke up. Carly waited. Finally, Trinity nodded toward the girl sitting next to her with her head ducked. "Birdie's upset."

The girl elbowed Trinity. "My name's not Birdie. It's Holly."

The girls had nicknamed her Birdie because of her small frame and quick movements. "But are you upset?" Carly asked.

Holly lifted her shoulder in a shrug.

Carly waited again.

Huffing a breath, Holly said, "My mama came to see me Sunday afternoon."

That explained a lot. Her mother's visits usually left the girl angry for days. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not really." She picked at her thumb. "When she left I was wiped. She told me if I wasn't so dumb I'd already be out of here."

Carly's jaw tightened. She'd counseled with the woman, asking her to be positive when she came to see her daughter. Maybe it was time to let the director deal with her. Before she could encourage her, Trinity spoke up.

"You're not dumb."

"She said I had to get new friends when I got out too."

"She's right about that," another of the girls said.

Holly pressed her lips together. "I know it's what I have to do, but I don't have to like it."

"You'll be right back here if you don't find new friends," Trinity said.

Carly nodded. "That's right. Who can tell me why?"

"Because they'll want you to party with them," Trinity said. "They'll tell you that one drink or a snort won't hurt you."

Another girl agreed. Jenna never spoke up as the group batted the question around, and Carly directed the discussion back to their P.I.E.S., asking each girl to talk about how they were feeling. She kept an eye on Jenna, noticing her agitation when the discussion turned to God.

“God is my best friend,” Trinity said. “He had a good plan for my life, and I messed it up, but he’s gonna take my mistakes and make something good from them.”

“Oh, give me a break! What if you didn’t make a mistake and you were just at the wrong place at the wrong time!” Jenna stood and palmed her hands toward the group. “Y’all can sit here and listen to this baloney, but I’m out of here.”

She turned and bolted from the room.

Carly took a deep breath. Everything in her wanted to let the girl go.