

PROLOGUE

1989

THE GIRL WAS Young, tired, and strung out. So strung out she had put herself here, a place one could officially call rock bottom.

Rock bottom and trapped.

She didn't mind it at first, because the people she called *The Keepers* provided enough dope to her she really had no reason to leave. As long as she had chemical freedom, she was good. Better than good, because *The Keepers* wanted to help her with her baby. They said they had a nice family who desperately wanted a child to love, and well, the fact she had found them was Divine intervention. How else would she, a young woman who found herself pregnant but without support, be able to handle such a responsibility? She had wanted to know if her baby would be well taken care of and *The Keepers* said absolutely. They had sufficient resources to see that her child found a good home.

When she first arrived, she was allowed the freedom to roam around beyond the compound. Yet she never felt alone on those walks and started to worry about her safety. One day she caught one of the men from the compound being less than discreet as he tried to catch up to her. She lost him and returned to her cabin, unsure if she should mention it to *The Keepers*.

They came to her, first. She was told that sometimes girls, against their better judgment, ran away because they were not sure giving up their baby was something they wanted to do. *The Keepers* understood these emotions and considered them to be healthy feelings indicative of a good mother. But, they explained to the girl, being a good mother also required a stable home and considerable resources. Citing the best interest of the baby, they confined her to her cabin until her baby was to be born.

The Keepers advocated allowing the poor young mothers to continue their habit because it made giving up their children a little easier. This wasn't a treatment facility; it was a place young women came to fix their mistakes and hopefully survive their guilt.

The girl was suspicious about why *The Keepers* provided her with meth, but she knew she was in a difficult situation with absolutely no other options. At least here she didn't have to turn tricks. Here, people cared about her and the baby. Here, she didn't have to carry such a heavy burden of guilt. She could at least share the burden of being an expectant mother and when that didn't suffice, lose herself in a familiar chemical world.

She understood that when this was all over, she could leave with a promise of some money in her pocket. Enough, maybe, she could get her own apartment. Then she could find a job. One thing the pregnancy had done was give her a glimpse of the future. For the first time, she wondered what it would be like to have a family. It's just, she couldn't do it now. Not where she was in life. That much she knew. She wasn't dumb. She knew her limits, and unlike a lot of the other girls, she knew when she was trapped.

The girl walked around the room. The walls were solid, the windows high and narrow. It was like a prison, but she understood what *The Keepers* were saying when they told her sometimes you had to accept the fact you can't be free until you know why you are imprisoned. Sometimes you had to reach bottom before you could even begin to climb out of the hole you were in.

Suddenly, she felt it let go. Her underwear became soaked and she reached down and eased

herself onto the simple pine frame and firm mattress of her bed. She dried her thighs with her blue denim dress and, for the first time since coming here, she was really, truly afraid. She didn't want to give her baby away. Not now. Not ever. How could she have ever agreed to such a thing?

But it was too late. She *needed* the help of *The Keepers* now.

The girl more or less waddled to the door and banged on it with her fist. And then she remembered the door buzzer. It wasn't normal because it worked in reverse. You rang it from the inside and someone came to see what you needed. She moved her fist to the doorbell and began desperately hammering it.

She felt a stab of pain, like a cramp, but nothing like any she had experienced before. The baby was coming, and it was coming hard and fast! She doubled up and sank to the floor.

The door opened. The girl heard voices. Calm voices, which comforted her. Lying on her right side, she brought her knees up as high as she could get them, just to ease the stabbing pain. Someone caressed her forehead, combing her blond hair away from her eyes. She could feel the beads of sweat above her brow.

"The baby. It's coming. Is it too soon?"

"No, no, my girl. It's not too soon."

"I-I want to keep it . . ."

"Sure you do, dear. This is a normal reaction. It is to be expected. But you know the rules. There would be consequences."

The girl didn't remember all the rules, and she had not really believed the consequences would be as harsh as *The Keepers* had eluded to. In the drug world there were threats of beating and even death, but if you bargained hard enough, you could save yourself from any mistake. This could not be any worse.

Two men wearing camouflage T-shirts and BDU pants brought a stretcher to the door for her and helped her lie down. Then she was rushed from her hut to the main building. Strong hands lifted her from the stretcher and placed her on a cold steel table. She felt something prick her wrist. An IV line was inserted. Somewhere in the back of her consciousness, she remembered that when she was a little girl, she wanted to be a nurse, maybe even a doctor.

Then she realized she was getting sleepy. Desperately, she tried to raise her head to see what was happening.

The girl wanted to be awake when her baby was born. She wanted to know if it was a boy or a girl. She wanted to hold him. But this was as close as she would ever come. Instead, she vaguely knew questions were being asked of her. She tried to remember how she had answered those questions before, tried to provide the same consistent answers, but she really never knew if she answered out loud or only in her head.