

Chapter 1

The Cold Shed

She awoke to the sickening sound of wind assaulting the loose metal roofing above. Each metallic scrape triggered an involuntary jump in her stomach that, in turn, caused a burning sensation to rise up her throat. She was blind and struggled to force her eyelids open. They felt as though they had been glued shut, but she knew it was probably the dried blood that covered her face and neck, which had so effectively affixed her eyelashes to one another.

Even with her eyes closed, Dina could sense that the man wasn't in the shed with her; maybe it was the absence of the alcohol smell of his drugstore aftershave or the slight nasal whistling sound he made when breathing through his nose. No, the sound of the slapping corrugated metal sheets would surely cover the sound of his respiration, and she could barely breathe through her broken nose, let alone smell anything other than her own stale blood. She just knew he wasn't there. The momentary flash of measured well being that she felt as a result of his absence evaporated from her mind as she became aware of her surroundings. She worked her eyelids free of the organic adhesive binding them and looked around the room again. She had glimpsed it briefly before being knocked unconscious for the second time that day.

Dina was struggling to understand how she landed in this situation. She didn't see herself as a victim. She had lettered in both softball and basketball in high school. Her appearance and movement reflected the confidence and authority of an athlete. She didn't have the look of an easy mark. Moreover, Dina had common

sense. She understood that she wasn't bulletproof and made smart decisions when it came to personal safety. On a recent trip to New York City with some college friends, Dina was the one who navigated the girls' outings, avoiding poorly lit side streets at night and leading them across to the other side of a lonely avenue when a group of teens on the sidewalk in front of them made her feel uncomfortable. The present predicament made her wonder what she could have done to avoid being taken by this man.

She had just slipped behind the steering wheel when the passenger door flew open and she felt a life-threatening grasp around her neck. Dina didn't even see him approach the car. She punched and scratched her attacker, but he punched back much harder. When she struggled for fresh air, she inhaled chemicals on a rag smashed against her nose. What had she done wrong? Should she have stopped at a gas station with better lighting? Perhaps she should have driven off when she noticed that the two pump islands closest to the front window of the convenience store had cardboard signs taped on them, announcing that they were out of order. Had he set the trap by placing those signs there? She had to stop ruminating about her capture. It didn't matter how she got here. If she kept thinking this way, she would be killed, and worse. She needed to refocus her mind on how she was going to get out of this place.