

HOSTAGE HOUSE | PART FOUR

Armed men, just outside the door

By LAURA BAUER
The Kansas City Star

It's 6:30 a.m. at the two-story drop house in Southern California, and men with guns are quietly circling outside.

The middle-aged woman from Central America — who came here looking for a better life but was enslaved in a human trafficking ring — is in the kitchen making coffee for her pregnant niece.

There is one last moment of silence in this dreaded place ... and then, boom!

Within seconds, men are bursting through the front door and running from room to room, barking orders at sleepy-eyed immigrants. You can hear women screaming, children crying.

It's like a movie.

For some reason, the aunt thinks this as

SEE HOSTAGE | A14

the door comes down — the same door through which hundreds of victims have passed the last few years.

In their uniforms, with shielded masks over their faces, the men make their way to the kitchen. The aunt instinctively raises her hands in surrender. To whom she's surrendering she doesn't know.

This is a raid.

■■■

Upstairs, men, women and children sleep piled on the floor. So many bodies that arms and legs overlap. Some people sit up as they sleep, just so more bodies can fit latticed across a dirty carpet.

A total of 60 immigrants are in the house. All controlled by the traffickers.

The niece is getting up as she hears the commotion downstairs.

La migra, she thinks. Immigration.

But at this point, eight months pregnant, she doesn't care.

Just get us out of here.

After 10 months in this house, she doesn't care if she's sent back to Central America. She just wants to be free again. Anywhere.

Amid the tumult, a Spanish-speaking man walks through the house trying to calm everyone.

Don't worry, relax, he tells them in Spanish. What we are doing is to help you guys out.

For many of the immigrants, this next part — where federal agents question them and sift traffickers from possible victims — is almost as scary as what they've already gone through.

Traffickers warned them about this day. Their words still resonate:

If you ever speak, we'll catch you.

We know your family, we know where they live, they will pay the consequences.

They will send you back. We know people at immigration.

So many of them stay silent. Can they trust these uniformed agents? These men with guns telling them what to do? In their home countries, police are often part of the corruption.

Scared and confused, they can't know that the raid is part of a three-year human smuggling investigation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Authorities will soon have three of the traffickers under arrest.

■■■

The aunt? No problem, she's ready to talk. She's already given up so much, what more could she lose?

But the decision is not so easy for the niece, her story harder to tell.

The rape. The shame. She still hasn't told her aunt about these things. And she's thinking about the uncertain future she and her baby face. She just needs to think.

Her aunt is back in the kitchen, restless.

I'm hungry, she tells agents.

And there, in the same place where she cooked and cleaned for others, followed orders from men who stank and drank and did drugs, she serves herself breakfast.

First a glass of milk.

And then, without even thinking, she grabs the pan dulce, the sugary Mexican sweet bread that has been reserved for the traffickers.

On this morning, she takes a bite.

Because she can. Because, for the moment, she's free.