

HOSTAGE HOUSE | PART ONE

Beginning a descent into despair

By LAURA BAUER
The Kansas City Star

It's gonna cost you more.

The man's words fill the cramped bedroom inside this dingy, two-story house in Los Angeles. A middle-aged woman stands in front of him, scared, her dream slowly dying.

There are guns on the bed — rifles and a pistol. Her eyes take in everything: the

weapons, the man, his words searing and uncompromising, still hanging in the air.

More money.

She's been in America less than a week, stashed away in a house full of immigrants who, like her, just made the illegal trek into America. Any day now she expects to leave this place with the stained carpet and

grimy, cream-colored walls to hop a bus and head east to Boston. There's a job waiting for her there, good work taking care of an elderly woman.

But the tired road from Central America has so far just led her here, to this room. She will soon learn her fate. At this moment,

SEE PLIGHT | A17



though, only the questions in her head are coming fast.

How did she end up in this trap, tangled up with a conniving band of human traffickers? How will she get out?

After all that she has suffered, she thinks, *how can I go back now?*

■■■

In Central America, crushing poverty has swallowed the woman and her family.

She lives with more than 20 people in a home built of thick plastic and dirt. It is partitioned into many quarters, and two to three family members share beds at night.

She has come back here after venturing out on her own, and the conditions are worse than she remembered. She had left when she was 18 — just as her sister was getting married — and experienced a better life in Mexico.

It has made her hungry for more.

In Mexico, she made decent money. She got married and lived among the middle class, and things were pretty good there for a while. But her husband began spending their

hard-earned cash on other women, and she wasn't going to live like that. The divorce eventually drove her back home.

But now, there are even more mouths to feed. Her married sister has a daughter and two sons, and there is little money for anything beyond basic sustenance.

Despite the comfort of family, the woman feels smothered inside this house of dirt.

She wants more, needs more. She's not a young girl anymore, and her options are dwindling. All her life she's been a nurturer, the kind who cooked and cleaned and took care of kids. But she will have to have money to live out her older years.

She is drawn to the men who come to her town wearing fancy clothes and driving fancy American trucks. In the United States, they brag, there are \$14-an-hour jobs.

She allows her mind to wander, to do the math. More money in 60 minutes than she'll make in about a week in Central America.

I want a better life, she decides.

She asks her ex-husband to

help her come to America, and he agrees. It will take money and courage and the well-dressed men to make the 2,000-mile journey across Central America, through the badlands of Mexico and to the doorstep of America.

The fee: \$5,500.

So much money, and yet, what did the coyotes say?

Life is good there. Whatever you want, it's yours.

■■■

All the woman wants now is freedom. She has made it to America — twice. The first time, she was caught after crossing the border, and it took all the resolve she could muster to try again.

This time, there are other obstacles. Like the man in front of her. The guns scattered on the bed. His words still resonating.

More money.

The fee had already been impossible. Her ex-husband made the down payment of \$2,500 and she had planned to come up with the rest somehow.

But the man now tells her they smuggled her in on a "special trip." He needs another

\$5,000. *Pay up, he tells her, or go back home.*

Go back? After all she's suffered?

The trips north had been brutal. Days in an old pickup truck bouncing along bumpy roads had been the easiest part. Then there was the walking. She is still nursing her aching feet, swollen and discolored from the hours of marching in her ragged shoes.

She is trying hard to forget the desert. The steep hills and thorny handholds. Men starving, waiting for the food they would get once they stopped for the night. Moms trying to calm their crying kids.

Sometimes the only water was from stagnant pools in troughs or bowls left out for livestock or dogs. If she pulled her shirt collar out far enough, she could create a makeshift sieve to pour the water through. At least she could strain out

some of the filth.

Through the hunger and thirst, she had pulled herself up those hills, wrapping small, worn hands around branches and rocks.

Hold on tight, she'd tell herself.

She'd made it through the dust and the grit. Through the mounds of loose rock and stinging scrub brush and ominous saguaro cactus standing guard like sentries.

Yes, she had made it. But already, standing in this bedroom, she worries it was all for nothing.

After her first painful trek through the northern Mexican desert, she'd finally crossed the border in California and arrived at a cluster of houses.

For hours, the Sonoran sun had sucked the moisture from her body. Parched and dizzy from dehydration, her lips cracked and peeling, there was

only one thing on her mind.

Ahead of her was a clinic. Outside the clinic was a hose.

She knew the risk, but she couldn't resist.

She ran for the hose.

The rest was a blur. An immigration official handing out water and crackers. The monotonous trip back to Mexico. The gradual, sickening realization that she had been tossed back when she was so close.

Not again, she thinks.

■■■

The man is on the phone, and her ex-husband is on the other end. In coming days, there will be more calls with the same demand.

You're gonna have to come up with \$5,000 more.

He says he doesn't have it, can't get it. There is not much more to say.

By now, the woman is crying. It seems like she and the man have been in this bedroom a

very long time. Outside, there is a house full of dreamers who await the same meeting.

She's thinking so hard, trying to come up with the right answer. And finally, it occurs to her that she can fall back on what she knows, what she's known all her life.

She can cook. She can clean.

Can I work off the debt? she asks.

There are many more illegal immigrants who must be told today of the special trip and the new surcharge. The man gives in.

Why not, he tells her.

Work here in the house until your debt is paid. Fifty dollars a week.

She lets it sink in. Fifty dollars. What choice does she have? The realization hits her.

They own me. Until the debt is paid.

Here in America, she's a slave.