

HOSTAGE HOUSE |  
PART THREE

# Family link offers solace — and peril

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The Kansas City Star

*Don't act like you know me. Please!*

The middle-aged woman from Central America, who has been held hostage in a Southern California drop house for the last two years and eight months, is desperately trying to signal her niece.

*Shhhhh, she mouths.*

No one can know they're related. It will make life hell. If they find out, these kidnappers with guns, they may keep the aunt longer or the niece indefinitely. They may hurt or kill one of them. Already, the men have told the older woman she knows too much.

The niece doesn't understand at first — *why are you making funny faces?* — but she trusts her aunt. On this morning, with a new load of "chickens" roaming through the house, the women are convincingly unattached.

Later, the niece will be startled

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by what her aunt tells her in stolen moments away from the men. About the extra fees. About the lack of freedom. About the abuse.

Up until today, the aunt had a clear conscience and a clear path out of this place. Work hard, cooking and cleaning, and pay off her debt to the traffickers \$50 a week. But with only four months and \$800 to go, her pretty, 26-year-old niece walked through the door and changed everything.

One day soon, the men will learn their secret, and it will spin their lives in directions they never imagined.

For now, the aunt worries.

*What will happen to us?*

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The young woman didn't come to the United States for herself. She came for her family.

In Central America, she thought life was pretty good. Her parents were poor but they had enough for food, clothing and to send her and her brothers to school.

They were all together, happy. And that was enough.

Then her father got sick. The doctors said he had the beginnings of prostate cancer. A school bus driver, he could no longer sit for long periods. He started missing work.

*I have to help, she said to herself. Help provide for my family.*

But jobs in Central America couldn't pay enough.

So the young woman, who had studied accounting at the local university for two years, planned her trip north. She used the same coyote her aunt did a couple of years before, unaware of what happened to her on the other side.

The first time she tried to cross into the United States, she got caught. And the second time. And a third. But during each trip through the Mexican desert, she thought of her parents. Of the help they needed.

She tried again and again and again.

On her seventh attempt, she made it.

She had no idea, though, that her aunt would be waiting for her in this house full of immigrants. Back home, they all figured she had reached America and taken that good job in Boston.

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The niece is standing in a bedroom just like her aunt years before. There are guns in the room. Not surprisingly, she too was part of a "special trip" and more money is now required.

This time, it's \$2,500.

She can't pay. Neither can her male friend in America who has already made a down payment for her.

She is young and attractive, the kind of woman these traffickers like to keep around the house. She makes the same deal as her aunt. She will work it off over time cooking and cleaning.

As the weeks pass, the women whisper comforting thoughts to each other in private. They talk about family and life back in Central America. *Was it really so bad?* They have questions without answers, and no one really to ask.

And things are about to take a dramatic turn.

Two months after she arrives, the niece gets pregnant. She tells her aunt but leaves out one dark secret.

She has been raped by one of the traffickers and continues to be assaulted. The baby is his.

By this time, it's becoming clear to the men that these women know each other. They share an obvious bond the others don't. They're both from the same town in Central America. And they're always close.

This new wrinkle worries the niece.

If her aunt knows she was raped, the men may think they need to kill her.

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The father of the niece's unborn child is determined. He wants to get rid of the baby. He threatens her often and this, more than anything they've seen in the house, terrorizes the women.

At one point, he tries to push the niece down the stairs of the two-story house. In the struggle, her aunt jumps in to protect her. She is viciously shocked on the back with a stun gun, but it is enough of a distraction to stop the attacker.

For the women, the baby is their whole world — innocent, a symbol of hope for the future.

But the man and his fellow traffickers have other plans. If they can't abort the child in her belly, then they'll murder both of them before the baby is born. They'll cut them up in pieces and dump them in the trash that's picked up every Tuesday.

*No one will ever know you're dead, they say.*

The clock is ticking.

Already, the niece is in her third trimester. And the women have no idea if they'll ever see this baby.