

HOSTAGE HOUSE | PART TWO

A slave to time and money

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It's 3 a.m. and another load of chickens is about to roll in.

"Chickens." That's what the human traffickers call them. These fresh loads of unwitting immigrants smuggled over the border and into southern California from points south.

The woman from Central America had been one of them once. She came here several summers ago in anticipation of landing a good job out east.

Then the traffickers derailed her plans, demanding more money. She's counted a couple of birthdays in this

run-down, two-story home in Los Angeles that serves as a way station for illegal immigrants, many of whom are pressed into servitude.

Most days, she follows the same routine. She gets up at 6 a.m., pulls herself off the grungy floor where she sleeps shoulder-to-shoulder with other hostages, cooks for everyone and cleans the house.

They watch her every move. She's never left alone. Never allowed to talk to people on the outside.

Sometimes, she's taken to clean

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other traffickers' houses. At night, she and others are locked in a room. The men with guns and threats want to protect their property.

The days run together. But now, the end is in sight. Her traffickers have told her she's almost paid off her debt.

Just four more months.

As she thinks about the new arrivals, the woman prepares coffee. She'll tend to their needs, as she has done for nearly three years. But that connection she's always shared with other victims is beginning to fade. Soon, she knows, she won't be one of them.

For now, though, she must get up. There are new people to serve.

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The faces never seem to change.

The woman has seen hundreds of them. Some are hopeful, some weathered and weary, and others never get past dazed.

Scrawled along the walls of the house are the markers of their time here. Like prison inmates, they write names and dates as reminders of time served.

At the moment, she's one

of eight women held in this place. They are the cooking and cleaning crew, and it's a full-time job.

The carpets are worn and dirty from the constant traffic. Food and dishes are scattered everywhere in this four-bedroom, two-bath drop house.

No one goes hungry here. The traffickers always provide plenty of staples. Beans and rice. Beef and chicken. Big bags of cheap Mexican bread for the immigrants. One item they cannot eat. Pan dulce, sugary Mexican sweet bread, is strictly for the men in charge.

For the woman, serving food is perhaps the one thing she enjoys. She understands what a hot meal means to the poor people dropped off here. It usually comes with a smile — a rare display of warmth in this grim place.

This morning, the delivery is earlier than normal.

They arrive dusty, after days without washing. On the exhausting trek, some pay the men 10 pesos for a bucket of water, just so they can wash away some of the trip.

These new arrivals keep showing up. They have no way of knowing what's await-

ing them here.

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She remembers what the men say when new people, especially young women, come into the house.

Let's see what new merchandise we have.

The raping of young women is only part of the torture. Some immigrants are burned with cigarettes or subjected to electric shock. For many, walking through this door will be their last act of freedom until "debts" are paid in full.

They will at least get a day or two to rest. Then the demands for more money will come. The coyotes also will make phone calls to family members with orders to hand over cash.

Some will plan an escape. Most will fight through a jumble of emotions. Part of her job, as always, will be to calm the most agitated — the wailing or unruly — fearing that outbursts are contagious and will infect the entire group.

Four more months, she thinks.

The new arrivals file in, their squinting eyes adjusting from predawn darkness to the well-lit living room. Their feet are blistered and legs aching from

the journey.

The woman scans their faces. They are like so many of the other faces.

Except one.

She has seen this face before. Back in Central America. Back in the house she shared with her sister and family.

For a moment, the anguish and fear and panic are so strong that the woman forgets her eyes can tell a story. *Can they see the pain? The spark of recognition?*

She pours the coffee, avoiding eye contact with one particular young woman. She hopes the men won't notice her rapid breathing, the sudden rush of blood to her face.

For her, there is no one else in the room, no one else in the world. She can't not look, it's impossible. She hasn't seen the young woman in three years, and this is the last place on earth she wants to see her now.

The world fell on me, she says to herself.

Their eyes lock. Her heart beating fast, the middle-aged woman prays the girl won't say the word she must be thinking.

Tia. Aunt.