

Suburban Dangers

Megan Whitson Lee

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Dedication

To Stephen, who always believed in me and in our marriage. I thank God for you every day.

Acknowledgements

The horror and enslavement of sex trafficking and its counterpart, pornography, has long burdened my heart. Prostitution in all of its forms is not a victimless crime, despite what society says.

I am thankful to all who have helped with the formation of this novel. This was not an easy one to write. In many ways, it was harder than my first novel, *Captives*, which was about the same subject. So much has changed within the public schools, technology, and trafficking practices, that I really needed as much input as possible.

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To my family, for always supporting me and standing with me through this quest to write tough, gritty, sometimes dark topics. You guys have always been my biggest fans and my cheerleaders.

To my husband, Stephen, for always encouraging and motivating me. You've cheered with me in my victories and grieved with me in my losses. Your support and love means the world to me.

Finally, to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I write stories about and for those who need You in their lives. Thank You for allowing me the honor to serve You.

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.*

~Psalm 51: 1-2

1

Kaki

Tuesday, September 15

Kaki was sixteen when she met Sydney Diaz.

The school year had just started, and Sydney was new to Runnymede Secondary. With her long, straight, black hair that hung down to her waist and a lot of piercings, Sydney was one of those girls who stood out. She was in Kaki's algebra and gym class, but right away Kaki could tell Sydney didn't want to be in school. Her face was tight and hard, and she put her feet up on the desk until the teacher told her to take them off.

In gym, Kaki was flattered when Sydney started talking to her. They stood out by the track, waiting their turn to run. Kaki stretched, pulling her ankles behind her. She liked running. She was thin and willowy with long legs that carried her along with

speed and agility. “Granddaddy-Long-Legs” her father used to call her. She’d hated that. It made her feel as if her legs were too long, too thin. Weird-looking, somehow.

Sydney looked as if she could be pretty fast, too, but she was just leaning up against the chain-link fence with a slack-faced and bored expression. Kaki could almost envision her with a cigarette in hand, blowing smoke into the autumn haze—if they’d been allowed to do that.

“So like, what do people do around here?” Sydney stared off at the other runners circling the track.

Because Kaki was surprised that this interesting, probably super-cool girl was talking to her, she did a double-take to make sure she was the one being addressed. She didn’t really have a lot of friends. On those ridiculous surveys that the school made them take every year—the ones that asked questions like: *How would you describe yourself?*—she always answered the same. *Shy. I like to read, run track, and sometimes hang out with the girls on the track team.* But she couldn’t really say she was great friends with any of those kids. Kaki looked at Sydney and shrugged. She couldn’t think of how to answer her. “Um...I don’t know.”

“I mean, like, what’s fun to do around here? It seems like this school’s pretty lame.”

Kaki laughed out of politeness. “I guess it depends on what you think is fun. Everyone around here does the normal kind of stuff.”

Sydney yawned, bending her leg back to brace herself against the chain-link. “What do you like to do?”

Kaki’s face warmed. People didn’t usually ask her that. “I don’t know. I’m kind of boring, I guess. I run

track, and, well, that's about it, really."

"Girls, you're up!" At the sound of Coach Plant's voice, they moved toward the starting line.

Sydney pushed herself off the fence as though it took an enormous amount of effort and stood beside her at the line.

"Go!" the coach called as he clicked his stopwatch. They began to jog. Sydney was much slower, and she kept motioning with her hand for Kaki to hang back. Finally, Kaki slowed her pace as much as she could.

"You got a job?" she asked, already starting to pant a little, even though she was barely running.

"No," Kaki said. "I just turned sixteen." She didn't know anyone who had a job.

"So? I know a lot of sixteen-year-olds who make a lot of money."

"Really? Doing what?"

Sydney pointed her thumb at herself. "Like me—I mean, I'm sixteen, but with what I'm doing now, I'm making so much money, I'll be able to retire by the age of twenty-two."

Kaki wondered if she was lying. Sometimes kids just said stuff to seem cool. She focused on the finish line ahead. "Wow. That's amazing. What are you doing to make so much money?"

Sydney looked over, and Kaki got the feeling Sydney was trying to read her—trying to see if she could trust her.

"I don't know if I should tell you right now."

"OK." It didn't really matter to her whether Sydney told her or not. If she was selling drugs or something, Kaki didn't want to know anyway.

"Maybe later."

As they crossed the finish line, Coach Plant said,

"That's the slowest I've ever seen you run, Kaki. What's going on with you today? Let's pick up the pace!"

~*~

At home that night while Kaki checked her social media sites, she was surprised to see that Sydney had followed her. @HotSydGirl was Sydney's handle, but Kaki immediately recognized Sydney's picture—a close-up shot of her posing for the camera with puckered lips. Later, Sydney's picture and name popped up on another one of Kaki's accounts. *Sydney Diaz has just followed you.*

Kaki was excited. She'd figured Sydney would think she was a total loser after their conversation on the track. "Maybe I'm just one of the only people she knows at school," she said out loud as she clicked to confirm. She scanned Sydney's page for her statuses, pictures, and people she knew. Sydney had over 2,000 followers on one account and over a thousand on her other accounts.

Inferiority crept over Kaki. She only had around 160 followers, and most of those were family members, distant cousins, and a few friends. Her other social networking accounts were just as pathetic, and she wondered how it felt to be someone like Sydney Diaz—obviously popular, especially with the guys. Most of the posts to her page were messages from them:

*hey syd. where u been girl?
heard you moved schools. Ill still c u this weekend rite?
got some peeps for u to meet.*

There were a lot of posted selfies from guys and a few girls dressed up in short-short skirts, high-high

heels, and tight-tight tops. Sydney definitely moved in different social circles.

Pictures on Kaki's page were of friends making faces in the camera, a few family photos, and a lot of shared dorky sayings: *Only you can make it happen* and *Just because someone doesn't like you doesn't mean you're not likeable*. Kaki felt too intimidated to even send Sydney a private message. And she resolved not to be clingy at school either. The quickest way to drive a cool girl away from you was to be too needy.

But over the next few weeks, Sydney hung out with her as though they'd been friends forever. That was when she was in school. Sydney was absent a lot, and Kaki could tell she had a lot of boyfriends, both inside and outside of school.

~*~

"How did you get kicked out of your old school?" Kaki asked Sydney one day in the cafeteria.

"One of the guys I was dating asked me to, like, hold some weed for him. I mean, like, it wasn't even mine. Anyway, someone ratted, and the next thing I knew security guards were doing the big shake-down on me. So I got expelled 'cause it was like the third time I'd gotten caught with something. And I had a lot of money on me, so they figured I was selling it."

"Were you?"

"Nah. I already had that money."

The noisy cafeteria was usually where Sydney relayed the details of her social media life and the guys she met there. Often the story involved the guy spending a lot of money on her. Sydney seemed to love that. She always had a story, and Kaki was a willing

listener, although sometimes she felt more like a fan or a follower than a friend.

"So there was this guy I met last night at the club. You would have loved him. He was exactly your type." Sydney crumpled up her napkin and threw it down the length of the table where it bounced off of someone else's tray.

Her type. Did she have a type? If so, what was it? She'd only looked at boys in her classes with a safely removed longing. The idea of approaching them or talking to them was terrifying.

"We were out all night. I got home at like three this morning," Sydney said.

Kaki noticed Sydney's slightly smeared makeup. She'd probably slept in it, if she'd slept at all. "What about your parents? Don't they care you were out all night?" As busy and self-absorbed as her own parents were, they would not be OK with her staying out all night.

Sydney's face darkened. That was the best way Kaki could describe it. She'd read that line in a book once, but she'd never really understood its meaning until then.

"It's just me and my mom. And her boyfriends."

"*Boyfriends*? Like...multiple ones?" Kaki laughed.

"Yeah, they come and go."

"So, you're kind of like her." Kaki meant it innocently enough, but Sydney turned on her with the quickest mood swing she'd ever seen.

"I'm nothing like her. Nothing. *Nothing*. You understand? Guys never get something for nothing from me. Not like my mom..."

"OK." Kaki raised her eyebrows and turned away. Wow. That wasn't the reaction she had expected.

Sydney looked as if she could sprout fangs.

The bell rang and everyone began filing out of the cafeteria.

But Kaki could only focus on how she'd offended Sydney. Sydney would probably unfriend her or something.

In algebra class later that day, as if nothing had happened, Sydney held up her phone, showing Kaki a picture of a smiling guy in a white T-shirt. He had dark hair and tanned skin. "This is Damien," she said in a voice slightly louder than a whisper. "He's really into you."

Kaki racked her brain. Damien, Damien. Did she know a Damien? She didn't think so. Anyway, that guy looked older than anyone she went to school with. "How does he know me?" Kaki whispered back.

Sydney looked down at her phone, texting something. "He saw you at the track the other day. He likes your legs. He said they're like, long and sexy."

Kaki's heart drummed. It must be a joke. Guys didn't like her like that. "Yeah, right."

"Serious. He told me. Look, he's texting me about you right now."

Sydney held up the phone to Kaki's face again, and she saw the text in the green bubble. *Did u talk to ur friend about me?*

"Girls!" Mrs. Moss called out, her voice punctuated with irritation. "Put the cell phone away."

"Yeah, in just a sec," Sydney said, obviously determined to finish her text response to Damien.

Mrs. Moss's face flared. "No, now, Sydney!"

Sydney paid her no attention. Still smiling, she completed her text.

Everyone knew that teachers couldn't do anything

about cell phones. They could ask students to put them away, but they weren't allowed to take them.

Triumphantly, Sydney smiled at Kaki and put her phone down on her desk even as it buzzed against the wood. "I just said to meet us after school. Then you can meet him in person."

Truthfully, Kaki didn't want to meet him—well, she did, but she didn't. Like any other girl, she wanted a guy to like her, but she didn't want to have to come up with conversation and try to be as cool as Sydney. It required too much energy.

~*~

Sydney pulled Kaki into the bathroom after the bell rang and forced some of her red lipstick onto her lips. "You never wear any makeup, and you really should. You've got great lips." Sydney made a smacking sound as she demonstrated how to pop her lips together so that the color spread across the top and the bottom.

When Kaki looked in the mirror, she thought she looked OK, although the bright red was a brash contrast with her pale hair and skin. It would take some getting used to.

"Let's go!" Sydney grabbed Kaki's hand and pulled her down the back steps toward the parking lot by the football field. "He said he'd wait for us out here."

"But I'll miss my bus!" Kaki protested.

"He'll drive us home."

2

Tyler

Saturday, September 19

Tyler didn't know what was wrong with his wife. She'd been sullen and non-communicative since they'd left their friends' house. Lifting his eyes from the illuminated yellow lines in the road, he stole a glance at her pale profile etched against the dark background outside the passenger window.

The gentle slope of her nose gave way to naturally pouty lips and a proportionally prominent chin—a profile as familiar as his own face after ten years of marriage. The downward turn of her mouth and the creases tugging at the corners had always been an endearing part of her facial features, but over the past few years the lines had deepened with discontentment.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing."

He sighed. Her response signified this would be one of those conversations where he asked and pleaded for information, and she punished him with silence for some offense he'd committed and knew nothing about.

"I know it's not nothing, so you might as well tell me what I did. Things were fine back at Hilary and Drew's house. Now what?"

She shook her head, crossed her arms, and turned her body toward the window where the outside scenery blew by in a mask of neons, car lights, and darkened landscape.

"I did what you wanted, didn't I? I told them how great everything looked. What else did you want me to do? Did I not act envious enough or something?"

"This has nothing to do with you, Tyler," Lana said, her voice muffled and trembling, the way it always sounded just before she burst into tears.

"If it's not me, then what is it?"

"The world doesn't revolve around you." She sounded just like her mother.

He ground his teeth. "Man, and don't I know it."

These days, Lana never missed an opportunity to remind him that not only did the world not revolve around him, but he was on a priority list in a galaxy somewhere outside of her solar system. He was lucky to get a civil word out of her unless they were going out to eat or doing something extraordinary.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snipped.

Tyler shrugged. "I never know what's going on with you, Lana. You asked me to come with you to this thing tonight, and I agreed—even though I really don't care that their house was remodeled by some television network and they're going to be on that home show. And really, I don't know why you're so impressed with that either. We have a nice house, too."

"Yeah, right. I'd be embarrassed to ask Hilary and Drew over."

Tyler shook his head. He refused to respond to her goad. Now she was just picking a fight.

Lana sniffed, turning her face toward the window. "Between your mess—the golf clubs, the computer

stuff—and the kids' junk all over the place, some days I feel like checking into a hotel."

"Fine," Tyler said. "You need me to do more around the house? Is that what you're saying? 'Cause I can do that. Just let me know."

But it was obvious this offer wasn't enough for her. Oh no. She was looking for a proper battle tonight, and nothing he said would cool Lana's belligerent state of mind. Her ice-blue eyes—the ones he'd fallen in love with so long ago—bored into the side of his face.

"Did you see the storage units they put in their basement? And the size of their master bath? It would be great to have some updated hardware in our bathrooms, instead of the builder's special from fifteen years ago."

"Well, maybe we can look into that," Tyler said as anger circled his emotional periphery, banging at the outskirts of his brain with all of the clumsiness of an off-kilter washing machine. "We'll see what we can do, Lana. We don't have the budget a TV network has, though."

"Or the Newell's budget," Lana reminded him.

They'd had this conversation more than a few times recently—ever since Hilary and Drew Newell, friends from church, had been contacted by Remodel, Inc., Television and were told they'd been chosen from thousands of applicants to appear on one of the reality shows.

"After the new year, we'll contact The DIY Outlet, OK? I'll see if I can have someone come in and give us a quote on our master bathroom, but we can't go crazy and do an entire remodel like they did. We don't have that kind of cash."

Lana turned on him. "I know that. Why do you

keep saying that? What do you want me to do? Go back to work? Put the kids in daycare?"

"No, Lana, I'd just like you to be satisfied for once in your life. It doesn't matter how much we have, you always want more. We could live in a mansion in Great Falls and you'd want us to live in Newport, Rhode Island, instead. You are never, never happy!" The rage came on suddenly, leaving him no space to talk himself down from it. He'd been reading a book on controlling his anger, and he was working on redirecting it, channeling it into his workouts at the gym, or finding ways to deflect or control it before it flared. But tonight, the techniques weren't working.

Lana went silent.

He sighed heavily as the adrenaline subsided, and he propped his elbow against the window, leaning his head upon his hand as he drove. "I'm sorry," he breathed, as much to himself as to his wife.

At least he had dinner with the Wolfs to look forward to. He and Lana had gone early to the Newells' open house so they could still meet Josh and Molly for drinks and dinner. Plus, tonight they were trying out the new restaurant on the corner of Elden Street and Herndon Parkway. That was secretly the only reason he'd gone to this thing anyway. That and the chance for a night away from the kids. "You might text Molly and Josh and let them know we'll be a few minutes late," Tyler suggested.

"Oh, I'm not going. Text and tell them to forget it."

A tight knot developed in the pit of Tyler's stomach. He knew that tone all too well, and it usually meant she would dig in her heels. Some of their worst fights had ended that way, and in the last few years, the fights were more frequent. Embarrassing

premature exits from church events and Bible studies, feeble excuses as to why they couldn't attend birthday parties, sheepish phone calls to his parents asking if the kids could stay the night with them because of some emergency or other...Tyler knew they never really fooled anyone. "Come on, Lana. I've been looking forward to this all week."

"Why? So you can stare across the table at Molly all night?"

"What?" Tyler shot her a glare. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind."

"No. That's ridiculous. And you know it."

"Is it?" she sneered.

"Yes, it is. Now you're acting like some crazy person. Let's just go and have a nice meal and forget about this."

"No." She crossed her arms. "I'm not going. I'll jump out of this car right now."

"Molly and Josh are our friends, Lana. It's not like you don't know them. Anyway, they're probably already there."

"You want to call them or you want me to do it?"

"Come on, Lana." He really did want to go. He wanted to sit down with friends and talk and laugh. He wanted to pretend like they were in love—as they used to be.

"Nope. I'm not going."

"What do you want to tell them?"

"I don't care. Tell them there's an emergency with the kids or the babysitter."

"You mean lie."

"I don't care what you tell them. Tell them the truth, for all I care."

Tyler's shoulders slumped with defeat. The clicking of the car's signal light reminded him of the *tsking* noise his father sometimes made—the one he'd made ten years ago when Tyler had told him he was going to marry Lana. His father hadn't liked Lana from the start. And Tyler's father had never been wrong about anything.

Tyler shook his head as he jerked the steering wheel to the right and onto the street that would take them home rather than to dinner. "Fine. Go ahead and call them. Tell them whatever you want."

3

Kaki
September

Damien was a hot guy and everything, but to Kaki, he looked a little older than she'd expected. Way older-than-high-school old. Not dad-old, but definitely twenties.

"Hey pretty ladies!" he called out as they approached.

Kaki lagged behind a little as Sydney walk up to him. She really knew how to strut with confidence. Shoulders back, head held high, hips swaying everywhere. She had the clothes, too. The skinny jeans, the figure-enhancing top, the high-heeled pumps.

Kaki wore the same jeans she always did, straight-legged and plain. Her favorite button-down hung like a shapeless sack over her T-shirt. Her slip-ons were like house slippers. Sensible, comfortable, sometimes sporty, never sexy.

"Hey-hey!" Sydney swaggered up to him, throwing her arms around his neck.

Kaki could hardly look at him. He had sharp eyes that pierced her skin like arrows. Hot, prickly things raked over her insides as his gaze moved up and down her body.

"I saw you at the track the other day. Girl, you can run," he said.