

# Deliver Me from Evil

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## Dedication

This book and series is humbly and heartbreakingly dedicated to all who are held in modern-day slavery.

We stand together with you with the united cry of “Abolition!” And we look to the One who died to set us all free.

On a more personal level, I dedicate this book and series to my partner and best friend, Al, who daily supports and encourages me as God calls me to “write the vision . . . and make it plain” (Habakkuk 2:2).

## Prologue

MARA FOUGHT TO BREATHE AGAINST THE THICK DARKNESS that pressed her down. The closet was so small...so dark and cramped. Impossible to stretch out, whether lying down or standing up. How long had it been now? Hours? Days? The blackness was too complete, the confines too cramped even to venture a guess.

She'd been in what they all termed "the hole" before, but not for a while now. In the beginning, before she'd learned to obey the rules without question or hesitation, she had often found herself confined in what felt like a tomb, wondering how long it would take before she crossed so far into insanity that there was no way back. And though the times in the hole were the worst, life outside the silent box wasn't much better. To survive, Mara had quickly learned to remove herself from the horrifying reality that had become her life, to travel far away in her mind where the torture was only a distant terror, one she could endure if she disciplined herself to think of something else. Eventually she had become one of the most compliant of the twenty or more wretched creatures that dwelled in this nameless location, which she had come to understand was

somewhere in the San Diego area of Southern California, not far from the Mexican border. As a result, her trips to the hole became only a vague yet obedience-motivating memory.

But this time she had dared to break a rule, not openly but secretly, praying to a god she didn't really believe in to protect her. Unfortunately, the nonexistent god had apparently chosen not to answer her prayer, and she had been caught and severely punished—beaten mercilessly and thrown into the hole without food or water—because she had allowed the face of a young child to entice her to venture beyond the tentative bounds of safety.

And for what? Not only had she failed to help the girl escape, but she had probably caused her to be thrown into the hole as well, for there were several such confines within the compound. Nearly as bad as being in the claustrophobic enclosure herself was knowing that a captive no older than six or seven was being held in a similar prison nearby, terrified beyond imagining.

When would Mara learn? She herself hadn't been much older than the tiny child when she was spirited away from her previous life, never again to see her home or family or anything else familiar. Thrust into a world of violence and perversion, Mara had learned to endure the most nightmarish and degrading of conditions. Though at first she had cried and begged to go home to her parents, even though they too had beaten and abused her, she finally came to understand that it was her father who had sold her into this new life from which there was no escape—and her very own uncle, her "*tio*" who had arranged the sale and was now her owner. And that was the worst part of it all—realizing that no one would ever come to rescue her, for those who should care enough to try were the ones who put her there—all for the price of a few weeks worth of drugs or alcohol, possibly even some food.

With that realization, Mara had chosen to harden her heart and do whatever she must to get through, one day at

a time—sometimes one moment at a time. That was how she had gained the tiniest amount of freedom and privileges, being fed more regularly and even allowed to walk relatively unhindered around the small compound that had become her world—so long as she continued to obey her tio and his two henchmen without question.

But then the little girl with the terrified eyes had arrived, bound and gagged, bloody and bruised . . . and everything had changed.

# Chapter 1

JONATHAN HAD JUST TURNED EIGHTEEN AND WAS LESS than a couple of weeks away from his high school graduation, but his lifelong dream of becoming a major league pitcher was no closer to materializing now than when he first entertained the thought while he was still in grammar school. He'd worked hard to try to achieve his goal, but it seemed that good just wasn't good enough—not for turning pro, anyway. The best he could hope for was to enjoy the game as a leisurely pursuit and maybe coach his own children's teams one day.

Meanwhile, he had to get serious about what seemed his only viable alternative—heading off to Bible college in the fall, just as his parents had always prayed he would. It wasn't that Jonathan didn't believe in Jesus or want to serve Him, but he really had no clue what that looked like in reality. His parents had been missionaries for several years, and his dad now served as an associate pastor at a healthy, growing church, so Jonathan and his younger sister and only sibling, Leah, had plenty of experience as missionary and pastor's kids. But did Jonathan want to be a missionary or a pastor

himself? Not really. He just wanted to throw a baseball faster and harder than anyone else in the history of the world.

Jonathan sighed. Just proved how totally unspiritual he really was. If he were a real on-fire Christian like his parents or even sixteen-year-old Leah, he'd be up already—even if it was Saturday—praying and reading his Bible. Instead, all he could think about was getting enough of the guys together to play a few innings before he had to head off to work this afternoon at his part-time pizza-delivery job.

He inhaled deeply and dragged himself from bed, standing to his full six-foot two-inch height. He might as well jump in the shower before Leah locked herself in the bathroom for the morning or he'd never make it to the field on time.

He smiled in spite of himself. Leah. He'd spent the better part of his life complaining about his “pain in the rear” little sister tagging along behind him and doing her best to ruin his life in every possible way imaginable, but he couldn't fathom not having her around. Sure, he'd miss his parents when he went off to school in a few months, but it was Leah he would miss the most—though he'd rather have his tongue cut out than admit it.

Wait a minute. The door to the hallway bathroom that he shared with his sister was closed. Surely she wasn't up already! He tried the handle. Locked. Jonathan shook his head. Maybe life without her would have its advantages after all.



Leah swallowed a giggle. She'd heard Jonathan jiggle the bathroom doorknob, but when he called to her and asked how long she'd be, she'd turned on the shower and pretended not to hear. On weekdays she always let him have first crack at the bathroom, while she snuggled under the covers for a few extra minutes. It was only fair. Jonathan could shower and be dressed and out the door in less time than it took her



to figure out what to do with her thick, curly mane of long red hair. And since her parents had allowed her to start wearing a touch of makeup, her morning beauty regimen took even longer, driving her brother crazy if he was pacing outside the door. So she allowed him first dibs on school days or when he had to get to work early. But Saturdays? Nah. He'd just have to wait his turn. Besides, if he'd really wanted in there first, he could have gotten up earlier.

*When you snooze, you lose*, she thought, grinning as she climbed into the shower and adjusted the water, all the time considering how irritated Jonathan got when she threw that phrase at him.

"Will you quit saying that?" he'd demand. "I'm not the one who lies around in bed until the last minute and then hogs the bathroom!"

She'd shrug and raise her eyebrows nonchalantly. "I'm just saying..." Her voice would trail off then, and she'd scoot past him before he grabbed her and they ended up in a wrestling match. True, he always cooled down and let her win, but her mother had made quite a big deal lately about their being too old to roll around on the floor and holler at one another.

"You're going to break something one of these days," she'd warn. "Either one of my lamps or one of your bones. So could you please settle down and try acting your age for a change? Honestly!"

By that time the siblings would become conspirators, grinning at one another behind their mother's back. The thought that Jonathan would soon be gone away to college came like a streak of hot lightning to her heart, and her playful mood evaporated. She was glad her brother was going to attend Bible college, though she doubted it was for the right reasons, but she was going to miss him nonetheless. He'd been her protector and confidante her entire life, and things just wouldn't be the same without him. On the positive side,

she could only hope and pray that Jonathan's stint at college would be the catalyst for launching him into the ministry she was sure God had for him. Selfishly, she hoped that ministry wouldn't take him far from their San Diego home, as she really couldn't imagine her life without Jonathan in it.



Mara's feet still felt numb, as if she couldn't get enough blood flowing through them to make them work right. And so she hobbled as best she could—and as quickly as possible—to do the bidding of her uncle or any of the others who claimed ownership over her. The time in the hole, which had so restricted her movement that her limbs no longer seemed to work right, had reminded her that even the confines of the compound and the humiliation that went with her position as slave were preferable to what could happen to her if she disobeyed again.

As she busied herself preparing a simple meal for her *tio* and the two other men who currently oversaw the twenty-plus young slaves in the compound, she wondered at the fate of the little girl who had precipitated her most recent punishment. Mara hadn't seen her since being released from the hole the previous day. She didn't even know the child's name—and little else about the others in the compound, for that matter—as the captives were forbidden from discussing personal information. The names assigned the overseers were quite obviously made up, since Mara's uncle's real name was Tomas but they were all instructed to call him "Jefe" or "Chief." The other two that assisted Jefe were known as "Destroyer" and "Enforcer," no doubt for intimidation purposes, Mara presumed. And the customers who "dated" the girls—or even one of the two young boys also being held there—seldom divulged their real names.



*Don't ask names; don't look at faces.* Mara had learned that rule long ago. Her own name had eventually been changed from Maria to Mara because her uncle-turned-owner said that Mara meant “bitter” and it fit her personality since coming to live at the compound. Looking back, it was probably one of the few true statements she could remember Jefe ever making.

Bitter. What else could she be, growing up in a place like this? She might as well have a name that fit her.

*Don't ask names; don't look at faces.* The warning still echoed in her mind. If only she'd remembered that when the little girl came in a few days earlier, maybe they both could have been spared some time in the hole.

*So where is she now?* Mara wondered again, using a large spoon to scoop the steaming canned stew into three bowls. Though it was her job to feed her captors, she had to wait to eat anything until they gave her permission. She hoped it wouldn't be too long, as she'd had very little since emerging from her punishment the previous evening.

*The kid probably hasn't had anything at all yet,* she thought, remembering how it was when she first arrived. Part of the painful process of breaking her down had been keeping her hungry, so much so that her stomach growled and burned almost constantly, and she was soon willing to do anything for a piece of stale bread. No doubt the new girl was receiving the same treatment.

*It doesn't matter,* she told herself, steeling her heart. *She's not my problem. If either one of us is going to survive, I've got to remember that. And if she doesn't survive... that's not my problem either. The only problem I've got right now is getting these men fed before they get mad and throw me back in the hole.*

Walking gingerly on feet that still felt like partially thawed blocks of ice, she concentrated on balancing the tray with the three bowls of food. More than once she'd paid the price for spilling even a drop, and she was not about to let that happen

again. The memory of the beatings, plus two or three days with no food at all, were more than she could bear on top of what she'd already endured.

As she stood in her uncle's office in front of the three men, her eyes downcast and her back straight, hoping her arms wouldn't start shaking from the weight of the tray, she waited for them to acknowledge her, even as she sneaked peeks at them from under her lashes.

"How many healthy ones have we got right now?" Enforcer asked, his shaved head gleaming in the overhead light.

"Counting this one," Jefe answered, jerking his head in Mara's direction, "twelve or thirteen. But we'll need to clean them up first. Tonight's customers are particular. They want us to bring them clean and healthy." He smirked. "And young, of course. A few more years and this one won't be acceptable to them anymore."

Mara's heart constricted with fear. As much as she hated what she knew would be required of her this night, she had grown used to it. She knew how to escape in her mind and not even feel what was being done to her. She also knew the night's activities, as distasteful as they were, meant she would get a bath and clean clothes, as well as something to eat, before going to meet the man or men—or occasionally a woman—who would be her companion through the long, dark hours. But when she got to the point that she was considered too old—as had happened with several others since Mara joined the group nearly ten years earlier—her life would hold no more value. She would become a liability to the men, and she would quickly disappear, like the others, sold to anyone who would take her or turned out on the street to fend for herself, sleeping behind deserted buildings and scavenging for food. As bad as it was to be used by the highest bidder for whatever his pleasure might be, it was better than the alternative.

Or so she tried to convince herself. There were also times when the bidder's pleasure was such horrible torture for

her that she wondered if death wouldn't be the best option after all.

"Don't just stand there," her uncle barked, nearly causing Mara to drop the tray in front of her. Only years of disciplined practice kept it steady in her hands. "Give us our food and get out of here. We'll get you ready for your night out later."

Doing her best to control her breathing, Mara placed the bowls on the round glass table in front of the men and then, still gazing at her feet, turned to leave.

"It's too bad about the new one," she heard Destroyer say. "She was young and small—and you could smell the fear on her. She would have brought a lot of money."

"Would have," Jefe growled, the familiar lust in his voice evident. "Too late now, though. Who would have thought two days in the hole would kill her? I just wanted to teach her who was boss, that's all." He laughed, and the sound of it sent a chill snaking up Mara's spine. If her stomach hadn't been so empty, she might have vomited. "I wanted her myself," her uncle continued. "Wanted to train her right before I turned her over to the customers." He laughed again, and Mara could picture his lecherous grin. "Guess we'll have to make a point of finding a nice young replacement for her real soon, now, won't we?"

The overweight middle-aged man and his two slightly younger companions laughed heartily, continuing with their lewd conversation about what they would like to have done to the little girl whose fear they could smell. Mara hurried as quickly as she was able into the cramped room that served as home to her and several others. Hot tears stung her eyes, and she rebelled at the emotions she had thought were dead, now rising up within her once again.

So, the little girl with the terrified eyes had escaped after all. Perhaps there really was no other way out of this horrible place.



## Chapter 2

JONATHAN LOVED THE COOL EVENING BREEZE THAT BLEW IN from the Pacific, often bringing with it a thick marine layer that settled down over the city like a fluffy fleece blanket. It was typical for this time of year and probably would continue to be the norm for several more weeks, until the clear summer nights warmed enough to keep the fog away. As the last hint of daylight evaporated behind the oncoming darkness, Jonathan gunned his ancient, once-blue VW Bug, willing it to keep going until he could coast into the gas station on the other side of the intersection.

Why hadn't he remembered to stop and fill up before going to work? His dad was always on him about running the tank to empty, but he'd been caught up in the ballgame he'd managed to put together that afternoon, and by the time he realized he needed to get to work, he scarcely had time to shower and change. Now, with a pile of cooling-fast pizzas encased in a heavy plastic carrier in his back seat, he knew he didn't dare take too long at the pump or he'd lose out on the tips he counted on from satisfied customers.

Fortunately he didn't have to wait in line for an available spot, and he was soon on his way, weaving through traffic in the direction of the first address on his delivery list. When he pulled up in front of a motel, he groaned. He never liked delivering to places like this. Occasionally the people were very nice, respectful, and big tippers. More than once, however, Jonathan had found himself standing in front of a bunch of intoxicated partiers, each fumbling with their change and hoping someone else would pay for the food. Worse yet, Jonathan had heard of employees being robbed and beaten for a couple of twenties and some change. Fortunately, that hadn't yet happened to him.

Taking a deep breath and sending up a quick but silent "foxhole prayer," as his dad called the "help me" type of petitions, he retrieved the two pizzas marked for the motel address and made his way to the office to get directions to the correct room. He had just reached the top of the stairs on his way to the second floor when a door jerked open not twenty feet from him, and a nearly naked girl who couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen bolted from the motel room, her long blonde hair streaming behind her. The look of terror on her face froze Jonathan in place, pizzas in hand, unable to speak as he watched the drama unfold in front of him.

The middle-aged man who dashed from the room after the girl was dressed in dark suit pants and a pale blue shirt, his tie loosened as if he'd been relaxing and watching TV. When the two spotted Jonathan, they halted, as if undecided as to what to do next. Then the girl ran to him and nearly knocked the pizzas out of his hands as she cried, "Help me! Please! I don't want to—"

Before she could say another word, the man from the room grabbed her from behind, pulling her gently but firmly against him as he smiled at Jonathan. "Forgive us," he said. "My daughter is...mentally unstable. She hasn't had her medication today, and I was just trying to give it to her. I'm

afraid she always puts up a fight about it, but this is the first time she's actually tried to escape."

He lifted the girl's face until she was looking up at him, and then he spoke, firmly and, in Jonathan's opinion, a bit coldly. "This is why I told you to take your medicine, sweetheart. You can't be running around out here like this, upsetting people. Now come back inside with me, and—"

Her eyes wide with what Jonathan could only assume was fright, she opened her mouth, but no words came out. Instead she shook her head no, a low moan accompanying the action. Jonathan was beginning to collect his wits once again and thinking the man's story didn't add up when another girl, a few years older, appeared in the open motel room door.

"Jasmine, get back in here now," she said, leaning against the doorjamb, her voice as calm as her demeanor. "You know Daddy is trying to help you, just like the doctor said. Come on now. Come back inside, and everything will be all right."

Jonathan was struck by the older girl's beauty, though he imagined she was somewhere between his own age and Leah's. Her clothing, however, was much more provocative than anything Leah would ever wear, but he knew girls often dressed that way these days. When she smiled at him, he couldn't resist returning the gesture. Her hair was long and dark brown, her eyes hazel. She didn't really look like the younger girl's sister, but she had referred to the man as "Daddy," in a way that implied they were all family. Of course, that must be the case. What else could it be?

"Sorry if we alarmed you," the man was saying, pulling Jonathan's eyes and thoughts back from the girl in the doorway. "It's difficult being a single parent with two daughters, especially when one is mentally challenged."

The young girl turned her wide blue eyes toward Jonathan, and she opened her mouth again as if she were about to say something. Then she closed it and dropped her head, her shoulders slumping in apparent resignation.

When Jonathan looked back at the man who still held the girl around the waist, he saw that the older girl had come to stand by his side.

Jonathan nodded in response to the man's statement. "I can imagine," he said, still wondering why the whole scene just didn't feel right and trying to keep his gaze on the girls' father and not on the older daughter. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I really need to deliver these pizzas before they get cold."

The man's smile was immediate, though it appeared forced, as he backed up to let Jonathan pass. "Of course," he said. "Sorry to have interrupted you."

Another moan escaped the younger girl, so soft Jonathan wasn't sure he really heard it. But he pressed ahead, anxious to finish his delivery and move on. The entire encounter had unnerved him, and he wanted nothing more than to leave it behind and drive away as quickly as possible.

As he stopped in front of a door a few rooms down and raised his hand to knock, he dared a glance backward, only to see the father nearly shoving the young girl back into the room, with the other girl following close behind. Just before stepping inside, she raised her head and looked straight at him. When their eyes locked, Jonathan felt a chill pass over him. Was it just his imagination, or was the fear on the older girl's face even more pronounced than it had been on the younger one's?



Mara breathed a sigh of relief. Her practiced, cool-under-fire demeanor had helped avert what more than likely would have been a disaster. Various scenarios had flown through her mind in the few seconds that passed from the time she realized the girl known as Jasmine was trying to escape and the instant Mara laid eyes on the handsome stranger in the



hallway, delivering pizzas. The various possibilities included the “elimination” of the delivery guy, severe punishment for Jasmine, and no doubt retribution against Mara for having been there and not preventing the situation.

But how could she have known? Jasmine was different than the other girls. She hadn’t been brought across the border, but was in fact the only real blonde, white-skinned girl in Jefe’s stable. It was unusual, though certainly not unheard of, for pimps to cross racial boundaries, and apparently Jasmine was Jefe’s exception to the otherwise dark-haired, dark-eyed Hispanic girls in his brothel. Mara looked now at the younger girl, no doubt kidnapped and wondering why her family hadn’t come to rescue her. Her parents, on the other hand, were probably frantic and frustrated, as the police labeled their missing child a runaway. It happened all the time, Mara knew—right here in the United States. And because Jasmine was so new to the “business,” she still held out the slimmest of hopes that escape was a possibility, even though she’d been warned of the punishment that would follow such an attempt, not only to herself but to her family.

Mara had long since given up trying to escape. Her family was too far away and had sold her into this life in the first place. Still, she didn’t blame Jasmine for taking advantage of the split second of opportunity that had presented itself when their “date” for the night had excused himself to go to the bathroom, but Mara should have been more vigilant and kept a closer watch on the younger girl. For that, though she had done her best to compensate, Mara would no doubt still suffer some sort of punishment once her dear uncle heard of the incident.

*Tio, she thought. To think I once called him by that name and thought he cared about me. When my own parents had no time for me, he always seemed to have a smile and a kind word. I remember when he used to bring me candy... before —*

She stopped, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. Dwelling on the past just made the present that much more difficult to bear. And though it was obvious that Jasmine was the main attraction for the night, Mara too would have her part to play in the evening's entertainment. And from the look on the man's face as he stood, belt in hand, glaring down at the whimpering girl on the bed, things were about to get underway.



It had been a busy night, but Jonathan's shift had finally come to an end. The last pizza was delivered, the last utensil washed and put away, and the building locked up for the night. Jonathan said goodbye to his two fellow employees and nearly sank into the front seat of his car. It wasn't so much that he was tired from working, but rather from holding in the emotional turmoil that had swirled within him throughout the evening.

No matter how hard he tried, he had not been able to shake the vision of the young, half-dressed girl, in the clutches of a man who claimed to be her father, while another girl—one whose sultry good looks had not escaped Jonathan's notice—made what appeared to be an attempt to diffuse the situation.

Why was he interpreting it that way? He started the car and backed out of the parking space, then pulled out onto the road, still asking himself that question. The older girl and the father had explained the circumstances—hadn't they? But if they had, why did the incident still nag at him? And why did the faint memory of the younger girl's moans and her wide eyes still haunt him?

He continued to wrestle with that question after he got home and climbed the stairs, heading to his room. When he



noticed a light peeking through the crack beneath the door to Leah's room, he took a detour.

"Come in," she called in answer to his rap on the door.

"What's up?" he asked, walking in to find her sitting at her desk, books and papers spread out in front of her and her computer waiting patiently behind the screen saver of an empty cross standing against a muted sunrise. He winced to think that his screen saver was a baseball, swirling and bouncing like a pinball. How shallow was he?

Leah looked up and rolled her eyes. "I'm building a rocket for NASA. What does it look like, Mr. Genius?"

Jonathan grinned. "Okay. So you're doing your homework. I figured that. But on Saturday night? This late?"

She shrugged, her cascading red curls moving with her shoulders. "I've got a report due on Monday. What can I say?"

"That you should have started it sooner?"

Leah laughed. "Whatever."

Jonathan plunked down on the bed, and Leah scooted her chair around until she was facing him.

"So what's bugging you?" She grinned, her green eyes sparkling with what Jonathan knew was mischief. Teasing her older brother had long been one of her favorite pastimes. "Need some girl advice—again?"

He shook his head. "Nah. Not this time anyway."

Pausing, he wondered if he should just let it go. After all, he was probably blowing the whole thing way out of proportion. But it really bothered him, and he sure couldn't talk to his parents about it.

"I saw something tonight," he said after a moment, taking a deep breath before plunging ahead. "While I was delivering pizzas at a motel."

Leah's eyes widened. "You probably see all kinds of stuff at places like that."

Jonathan nodded. “More than I want to, sometimes. Most of the time, though, it’s OK. But tonight . . .”

Eyebrows raised, Leah waited. When he didn’t continue right away, she said, “So tell me. What happened? What did you see?”

“There was this girl—”

Her shoulders relaxed, and she rolled her eyes again. “See, I knew it was a girl! Why didn’t you just say so? Was she hot? She was, wasn’t she?”

Jonathan smiled. “Not really. I mean, well . . . Actually, she was just a kid. Twelve or thirteen, I think. And she was . . . undressed. Sort of.”

It was obvious he had her attention again. Leah frowned. “Sort of undressed? What does that mean? Was she naked?”

“Not . . . completely. She had . . . underwear and . . . a bra on. That’s it. Nothing else. And she came running out of this room, looking wild and scared and—”

“Wild?” Leah’s frown deepened. “What do you mean, wild? Jonathan, what are you talking about? You’re not making any sense.”

Jonathan shook his head. “I know. It doesn’t make sense to me either. But . . . I’m just telling you what I saw. This young girl burst out of this room running straight toward me. She nearly knocked me over. And then this guy—her dad, I guess—came after her. She looked like she was scared of him or something. But he said he was her father and that she didn’t want to take her medicine. And then this other girl came and stood in the door—”

“Another girl? Now there are two girls in this story?”

“It’s not a story,” Jonathan insisted. “It really happened. Just like I told you. And the older girl—the one in the doorway—she backed up what the guy was saying. About him being their dad and all. But—”

“Was the older girl half naked too?”

Jonathan shook his head again. “No. She was dressed, but...well, not in the kind of clothes you’d wear to school or church, if you know what I mean.”

Leah watched him for a moment, as if trying to discern just what he did mean. When she finally spoke, her voice was hushed. “Do you think they were hookers?”

Jonathan’s head snapped up. He hadn’t allowed himself to consider it until then, but now that Leah had said it, he realized the thought had definitely been dancing around the fringes of his mind all evening. Hookers? The older one, maybe. But the younger one? How could that be?

His voice cracked when he spoke. “She was just a...a kid. Like I said, twelve or thirteen, maybe. How could she be a hooker?”

Leah’s face softened. “I don’t know. That does seem awfully young, but...I’ve heard of things like that happening. You have too.”

Jonathan nodded. She was right, though he didn’t want her to be. He didn’t want to admit that he had heard of such things, and that now he might even have seen the reality of it. He knew there were a lot of evil and unfathomable things going on in the world, but they had never come close enough to him or to his family to become personal before. Now... He sighed and caught his sister’s eyes, as the thought flashed through his mind that the second of the two girls he’d seen earlier that evening was probably only slightly older than Leah, and the other one, much younger. His heart constricted at the implications.

“What are you going to do about it?” Leah asked at last.

Jonathan felt his eyes widen. What did she mean? What could he possibly do? Even if he called the police, what would he tell them? That he saw a man with two girls at a motel, the older of whom claimed he was their father? Would the police even follow up on something so vague? And if they did, what would they find when they arrived? If what the so-called

father and older sister had said were true, everything would check out just fine. And if it weren't true and something illegal or immoral had been going on, they had undoubtedly all moved on by now. So what was the point?

"What do you think I should do?" Jonathan asked, hoping Leah would tell him to pray about it and leave it alone.

"You know," she said. "You already know what you have to do."

After a moment, Jonathan nodded. She was right. He knew. And though he would never admit it—to Leah or anyone—the thought terrified him.