

“Here you go,” Devon says. “Pink Houses.”

Four huge apartment buildings rise from the cement toward the fading orange sky - eight stories each of dirt-colored brick and small bar-covered windows cracked open to the warm air. Some have wet laundry half hanging out; others are blocked by noisy, dripping air conditioners that sag dangerously, as if they're exhausted, on the verge of giving up. In the courtyard there's a rusty playground, patches of half-dead grass, and two cement dolphins half-covered in flaking pink paint, with a warped metal sign in the middle of it all:

WELCOME TO THE LOUIS PINK HOUSES
A WONDERFUL COMMUNITY

Two young girls run past us, pushing a squeaky shopping cart filled with half-crushed boxes and a baby doll. Three guys stand by the dented metal door of a building marked 1. They nod in our direction. Devon nods back. One of them hollers loudly at us - a sound like a wolf - and Devon hollers back, tipping the rim of his red baseball hat.

“I don't understand,” I saw, staring up at the buildings. People are watching us. A man peers out from a third-floor window and blows smoke into the coming night. A mother on the second floor of a building marked 3 bounces a baby on her knee, its small hands reaching out from the metal bars. “What is this place?”

“The projects,” he says, his arms open wide like he's inviting me into his home. “I grew up a couple of blocks over, in Cypress. Pink's no joke, though. Must be a couple thousand apartments here.

“But there's only four buildings,” I say. Devon points toward the sinking sun. “Look over there. And there. And down Hemlock Avenue.”

The buildings don't stop. Beyond the courtyard, across another busy street, to my left, to my right, reaching up and out into the darkening sky, there are more and more buildings. Mud-colored brick buildings. Seven. Ten. Fifteen. On and on. I press my face to my pillow. I want to be back in my room.

“Unless you got an apartment number,” Devon continues, “I don't think you are going to find your girl.

What am I gonna do now? I can't go home. Even if I wanted to, all my money's gone and Mom don't want me there anyway. I don't even know how to get back to the bus station. I don't think we're in the city anymore. I don't know where we are. I don't know anything..

“It's all right,” he whispers.

“No it ain't,” I snap. “You don't understand.”

“Yeah, I do.” He turns me toward him and lifts my chin with his finger. “You all alone. You got nobody. You got no place to go. You thought you'd find your girl here, but you can't. You scared and you don't know what to do.”

His words pour into me like a secret. “Listen. Don't you think it's kinda crazy that I found you today? That I knew where this place was? Don't that seem strange to you? Like maybe we was supposed to meet. Like maybe I'm supposed to look out for you, 'cause I been where you are.”

He smells like soap and vanilla. Like laundry and clean socks. I feel a kiss on my forehead, warm, and friendly. Safe.

I lean into him.

"You can crash at my place tonight, all right? Me and my roommates - Kat and Baby. You'll be safe there. You can borrow some of their clothes if you need 'em."

A hotel. We stop at a hotel. The Litehouse.

A small gravel parking lot. Guys leaning up against cars, smoking, watching, nodding to one another. Devon steps out. Complicated handshakes. Throbbing music. Devon barks into the night, a sound like a wolf or bear, and the other men bark back. I shiver, keep my head down, and follow Kat, her skirt swaying as she walks through the lot and up the rusty staircase to the second floor, where there are two other girls perched outside the open doors of hotel rooms. Baby waves, walks down the outside balcony to the last room, and disappears.

Wait. Please. Not yet.

Kat leads me into Room 5. The walls are a sick yellow, the color of rotting teeth. There are two beds, a limp pillow on each, and an old dusty TV plopped on a chair in the corner. It smells like smoke and salt, like a filthy ocean.

"A'ight!" Kat claps her hands once - loudly - like a coach. "This is how we do. Tricks don't pay us direct. They pay the daddies outside so we don't gotta deal with no money, which is good because tricks always try to get over. Not the regulars, 'cause they know how it works, and they know they'll get their ass beat if they try to scam. But the tricks we don't know? Those the ones you gotta watch."

Kat talks at me, fast and clear and hard. Her hands, too. Pointing to the bed, explaining. She fishes in her silver bag. A small knife. She puts it under the mattress. More talking. She pulls out two pills and a bottle of orange juice. She swallows one, breaks the other in half and hands it to me.

"Here. You need to calm the hell down."

"What is it?"

"It'll help you maintain. Anything goes wrong, we yell for Devon. He and his boys'll be up here in a second. Girls out there on the track, they ain't got no daddy lookin' out, not really. Once you in a car with a trick, he can do whatever he wants and nobody gonna help you. Up in here, though, we covered. Shit goes wrong, you just yell."

I don't understand what she's saying.

"Take the pull. Drink your juice. In five minutes, you won't feel so scared."

Kat's eyes burn into me. Small beads of sweat dot her forehead. She grips my shoulders and kneels in front of me. "Please."

"I ain't a junkie," I say, staring at the pill.

"Me neither," she snaps.

I swallow it, gulping down the juice. Kat sighs deeply, rubs her forehead, and glances at the door like she's making sure no one heard us. Like we've just escaped something terrible.

“Do you want a ride home?” he asked.

“Sure, practice just got canceled,” I lied. “I just need to get my coat.”

Anything to get to spend time with him without the watchful eyes of my disapproving friends. I went by the gym, grabbed my things, and don't the coach that I didn't feel well all of a sudden, and was going home. David and I walked to the school parking lot to his black Pontiac Trans Am GT - an expensive, sporty car. I hurried to get inside so my running mates wouldn't see me leaving with him.

David turned the wrong way out of the school parking lot. I lived within walking distance to the school in the other direction.

“I live the other way,” I told him.

David gave me a beautiful smile. “I know, Theresa. But I want to spend some time with you and get to know you better. I have wanted to do this for a long time. But I need to run by my house first for something. I take you home after that.

How could I say no? Here was the guy I'd had a crush on all year long, and he wanted to spend time with me. I was too naive to be scared.

“I need to run inside,” he said. “Do you want to come in?”

Pleading sore muscles from track, I evaded school for several days. Depression swooped over me like a shadow and I felt separated from my body. I didn't leave my room, didn't accept Jim's phone calls, and couldn't write the daily letters we had exchanged for the past year.

How could I act as if nothing happened? The guilt was suffocating. Then the voices started.

It had been my fault. I could have prevented it. I should have done something. I shouldn't have gone with him. I berated myself with the same accusations I would later hear from others.

When I could no longer escape school, I returned. I thought I had made it successfully through the day without seeing David. I didn't go to the school store and he never stayed for lunch. Instead, he usually went out with his friends.

But as the bell rang, indicating that school was over, I turned the corner of the hall to go to my locker and stopped dead in my tracks. Leaning against my locker, arms crossed over his chest, was David, waiting for me.

“Why haven't you answered my calls? I need to talk to you,” he whispered. “It's urgent.”

I stared at him silently.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

I wanted to believe his apology, but part of me was gone. He had stolen it.

“Meet me at my car. It's a matter of life or death.”

“Something terrible happened. The day we were together. I’m really sorry about that. If I could take it back, I would.”

“Well, you can’t.”

“I thought we were the only ones in the house that day, but we weren’t. My cousins come to my house after school. They must have come in after we had been in my room for a while. I’m really sorry.”

I couldn’t figure it out. If they had come in later, then they had witnessed him raping me. Why was my life in jeopardy?

“Theresa, I don’t know how to tell you this, but they saw us together. They took pictures of you.”

Bile rose in my throat. My knees buckled and I reached for the hood of his car for support. David reached to help me.

I recoiled. “Don’t touch me!”

“They told me they would give the photos to your dad if you don’t do things for them. You have to earn the pictures or they will hang them around the school, church, and show your friends. They are cruel. You must do what they say... They want you to meet them tonight at my house to earn the pictures. You have to have sex with them. Do whatever they say and then they will give you the pictures... I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. I told them what really happened and they didn’t believe me. I told them you don’t do this. You’re not that kind of girl. But they don’t care. Theresa, if you don’t do this, they will hurt your brothers. They know a lot about you and your family. They know where your dad works and that he is gone a lot. And that you and your brother walk to school.”

I was too stunned to talk.

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