**EXCERPT FROM ENDURANCE**

**Prologue**

Dereka drifts somewhere between the conscious and the unconscious. She feels like she is in a dark, narrow tunnel, floating in a place that is neither here nor there. Visions of a birthday cake, candles, and colorful balloons drift like a dream across the breadth of her mind. Dereka tries to reach out and touch them, but everything seems just out of reach. She visualizes the beautiful smiling face of her mother, Serena, and hears her gentle voice and joyful laughter as they walk arm in arm across a huge parking lot. Serena is carrying a birthday cake in her free arm, and Dereka has a huge bundle of balloons.

But something isn’t right. Something has happened; something horrible. In her subconscious state, Dereka feels a deep sense of fear and trepidation. *What’s wrong?* she questions in her mind. *I have to find out what’s wrong.* So Dereka fights her way to consciousness as if she were freeing herself from a thick net that was determined to keep its catch. But when Dereka opens her eyes, she is still enveloped in darkness. She is lying on her side somewhere in total darkness. She closes her eyes and opens them again only to be greeted by that same foreboding darkness. Fear grips her heart as she moves her head slowly from side to side, trying to get her bearings.

Dereka tries to remember something, anything that would explain where she is and why. *Let’s see*, she thinks*. I went shopping with Mama to pick up my birthday cake and balloons for my party*, Dereka recalls, feeling a twinge of excitement at the thought of finally becoming a teenager. She remembers going to her mother’s favorite bakery in Old Town Alexandria and picking up a chocolate cake with purple and white icing. She also recalls buying a variety of colorful balloons with “Happy 13th Birthday” written on them. She even remembers her mother laughing and teasing her about the fact that some boy who lived down the street from them, and who had a crush on Dereka, had called and asked to be invited to her party. And he wouldn’t take no for an answer. The last thing Dereka remembers is walking arm in arm towards the car with her mother. But that’s when things goes black. Dereka can’t remember anything after that*. Why can’t I remember? Where’s Mama? What happened?* she thinks frantically.

Dereka tries to stand up, but something is preventing her from standing. She’s in some kind of contraption, in a cramped, stuffy place. She tries to stretch out her arms and legs but can move them only a few inches in any direction. Her body is curled up in a fetal position. She uses her arms and legs to push against whatever is enclosing her, but it won’t bulge. Then Dereka senses a slight moving sensation. It seems whatever she is in is actually moving. She lies perfectly still, trying to hear anything that will give her a clue as to where she is and what is happening. For a moment the moving sensation stops, and she believes she hears a deep humming or rumbling sound, like a motor of some sort was left running. When the moving sensation starts again, Dereka’s body shifts sharply to one side. She listens carefully and thinks she hears the faint sound of horns and cars in the distance.

And it is at this moment that pure, unadulterated panic and hysteria seizes Dereka as she finally realizes where she is. She is trapped in the dark trunk of somebody’s car. Dereka begins to scream.