**EXCERPT FROM RESTORED**

**Prologue**

Dereka is running for her life. The ground is cold and wet underneath her bare feet, and her arms are covered with chill bumps due to the night’s brisk air. Wearing only a thin nightgown, she races across the front lawn and grabs hold of the tall chain-link fence. She hesitates slightly and looks around nervously to see if anyone has followed her. Then she slowly and painfully slides her toes and fingers through the small openings in the fence and starts climbing upward. The rough wire cuts into her flesh, causing severe pain, but Dereka keeps going. She has to escape from the child sex-slave house where she and other girls are being held captive. She has to get help for them before it’s too late.

When Dereka is near the top of the fifteen-foot fence, she hears the sound of a door opening. She looks back and sees three men emerge from the house, one of them carrying an assault rifle and a flashlight. They are her captors, the evil Tavaras brothers, with one of their guards. Dereka knows if she’s caught she’ll be taken to the shed and tortured nearly to death. Pure adrenaline and fear compels her forward. When she reaches the top of the fence, there are three strands of barbwire mounted there. Dereka doesn’t take time to consider the pain her next action will cause. She grabs the barbwire with her bare hands, and climbs over. The sharp wire tears into the flesh of her hands, arms, and legs. Dereka cries out in pain.

Once she’s over the barbwire, Dereka drops to the ground, landing heavily on her left side and injuring her leg. She grimaces in pain and lies on the ground for a moment. She thinks about Sun-Yu, Jia, Emma, Gabriela, and her other friends still trapped in the basement of the house. They’re depending on her, and she can’t let them down. Dereka struggles to her feet and limps as fast as she can into the dense surrounding jungle. She stumbles blindly through the thick undergrowth, barely able to see where she’s going, with only the brightness of a nearly full moon to light her path. Thorns pierce her feet and branches scratch her face and body as she staggers forward. She can hear the sound of the men’s voices and see the light from their flashlight as they close in on her.

“Help me, Jesus. Please help me, Lord,” Dereka prays. Soon she comes to the top of a deep cliff. There’s nowhere else for her to run. The men are getting closer and closer, and the light from their flashlight is getting brighter and brighter. Dereka’s heart races as she stands there, cold and shivering in her thin nightgown. She hopes against hope that they will not find her. But then suddenly they’re there, shining the flashlight full in her face. Dereka looks down the deep cliff and sees nothing but darkness below. She doesn’t know what’s at the bottom of the cliff. But she’s sure it can’t be worse than what she’s already been through or the pain she’ll suffer if they take her back to that place. Even death itself couldn’t be worse.

Dereka jumps. Her body tingles with the sinking feeling of weightlessness as she careens faster and faster toward whatever lies below. Dereka braces for impact.

## A Lost Soul

Dereka screamed and sat straight up in her bed. Her heart was beating fast and sweat poured down her face. Her eyes darted about wildly as she looked around in fear. Then she breathed a sigh of relief when she realized she was home, safe in her bed.

“It was just another bad dream,” she murmured. “Thank God.”

Dereka lay back down in her bed and stared up at the ceiling. Although it had been six years since she was rescued from a child sex-slave house, the terror she’d suffered there still haunted her in both daydreams and nightmares. *Will it ever end*, she thought sadly. Her family and friends knew that Dereka had struggled mentally and emotionally when she first returned home after being abducted and sold into child sex slavery, but they thought she was doing fine now. But Dereka knew better.

She sat up, turned on the nightstand lamp, and picked up a pen and her journal. Sleep was impossible now. Writing helped, somewhat. So she wrote.

*I’m not okay. I do my best to pretend I am. I try to put up a good front for my family. But I’m not okay. Far from it.*

*How could I ever be okay after what happened to me? I was only thirteen when I was kidnapped and taken to that horrible place in Colombia. For five horrific years I was held captive and forced to do despicable, degrading things for the pleasure of sick, perverted men. For five long, miserable years my body was ravished and abused by the scum of the earth. I can still see their beady eyes peeking out from beneath the masks they wore to conceal their identities. The masks they wore to hide their faces from the victims of their sick depravities***.** *I can still smell the stench of their sweat and vile semen. I can still feel the pain of their violent, lust-filled thrusts into my body.*

*There were twelve girls, including me, trapped in the basement of that godforsaken place, a place ironically called La Casa de Placer or the House of Pleasure. The girls became my family, and I’ll never forget how kind they were to me. Sun-Yu helped me so much when I first got there. When she died, I wanted to die too. Sometimes I wonder if I would have been better off dying there. At least my torment would be over.*

*There were times I didn’t think I would make it out of that dreadful place, that I thought I would die there, be stuffed into a black trash bag, and be buried in the dense jungle like my dear friends Sun-Yu and Crystal. My heart still hurts for them. I think of them every day rotting away in some shallow grave. I can’t get it out of my mind. It could have been me. Maybe it should have been me.*

*As far as I know, only a few of us, including Jia and myself, made it out of there alive. Poor Jia. She was the youngest of us all. Only nine years old when I got there. I’ll never forget how her eyes looked back then. Jia had the saddest eyes I’d ever seen on anyone, no less a little girl. And she never said much back then. She’d just look at you with those big sad eyes. If she had something to say, she’d whisper it to her big sister, Sun-Yu, who’d say it for her. Sun-Yu was my best friend there. She really loved Jia and took care of her as best she could. After Sun-Yu died, I did my best to take care of Jia. Now she and I take care of each other. We help each other navigate through the darkness.*

*Sometimes I wonder if I’m losing my mind. Or if I’ve already lost it. They tell me that my dear friend Ms. Vee never existed. Ms. Vee, the kind, elderly lady who befriended me in that awful place. She was warm, comforting, and understanding, and frankly I don’t know if I would have survived without her. So how can the doctors say that she never existed? That she was just a figment of my imagination—some imaginary person I created to help me endure my ordeal? They say she was just a hypothetical substitute figure for the women in my life I love so much. For my mama, Grandma Ruth, Aunt Kenya, and Auntie Jazz. My family that I thought I would never see again.*

*They think I don’t see Ms. Vee anymore, but I do. Sure, she disappeared for a while when I allowed the doctors and my family to convince me that she wasn’t real. But lately, she’s been visiting me again. And she’s just as real as anybody. Ms. Vee really gets me. She understands what I’ve been through—the pain and the heartache that will never heal. With Ms. Vee I don’t have to pretend that I’m okay. With her I can just be myself, knowing that she’ll support me no matter what. But I have to be careful when Ms. Vee visits me. I have to talk to her in hushed tones so Aunt Kenya and Auntie Jazz don’t hear us. Sometimes I think they listen outside my door just waiting to catch me doing something wrong. Just waiting for me to slip up.*

*They think I’m still taking my medication, but I’m not. I just throw one pill away each day to fool them. I don’t like taking those pills. They make me feel funny. Like I’m not myself. And I’d rather feel like myself than someone else, no matter how terrible feeling like me can be.*

*I’ve finally convinced them that I don’t need to go to therapy every week anymore. Now I’m supposed to go every two weeks. But I don’t plan to go back. Ever. I hate those therapy sessions. All those doctors trying to get into my head to see what makes me tick or not tick. They don’t know. They don’t have a clue. How could they? They haven’t been through what I’ve been through. Haven’t seen the horrors I’ve seen. Haven’t felt what I’ve felt. They don’t know the damaged that’s been done to my soul.*

*What is a soul, anyway? Is it that fuzzy-wuzzy thing that makes us us? Whatever it is I don’t think I have one anymore. I think I left it in that dank, dark basement of that awful sex-slave house in Colombia where we were trapped like animals. Perhaps my soul is still floating around in that dark, deserted place—floating around and around in the darkness. A lost soul.*

Dereka put down her pen and closed her journal. That was enough writing for tonight. She got out of bed, retrieved a shoebox, and put her journal into the box. Then she stepped up on a stool, and placed the box in the corner on the top shelf of her closet. There it would be safe from prying eyes.

**END OF EXCERPT**