



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
SIERRA KAY

FROM
BEHIND
THE
CURTAIN

From Behind the Curtain

A Novel by Sierra Kay



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Sierra Kay

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This book is dedicated to Keith A., Keith P., and all believers in “what if” and dreams that extend beyond cubicle walls.

Thank you.

PHANTOM

Killing seemed so easy now. But there were other ways of silencing people. Pain worked much better. Watching people break down and promise things that they never dreamed was ... exhilarating. Twenty-four hours was all it took. Cops didn't even stir before then. And by then, most little pawns were returned to their homes. Broken. Pliable. Mine.

The "who" always revealed itself. Someone always did something that endangered the whole operation. One would never guess the secrets this church congregation held. They would never talk. It was almost funny how closely they were controlled. If they only knew how many pawns were being moved, being manipulated. It was never supposed to come to killing, but some people weren't worth the oxygen coursing through their body.

Pastor Clifton was such a do-gooder. He could never be turned out; so he had to be put down. His murder is a true test of my power. It should signal to anyone that they should be afraid. Very afraid. If the good pastor could be killed, then no one is safe. Ahhh, the sweet stink of fear is going to be ... intoxicating.

The killer shifted toward the second entrance, but froze upon hearing an excited yell of, "Pastor Clifton!"

That familiar voice echoed through the shadows of the office. Stacy. How would she react to seeing the man she loved like a father slumped over on his desk?

The killer pressed the middle wood panel behind the desk, angling to make a quick exit.

Without Pastor Clifton around to guide his flock, they'd be ripe for the picking. With leadership came power. With power came opportunity. With opportunity came money. Yes. This could work out. Fuck the church. It was time for a change in leadership.

Seconds later, Stacy's scream pierced the quiet of the church annex, ending with a thud of what could only be a complete collapse. The killer wanted to step back inside, take in that masterpiece of pain one last time.

She never travels alone.

That should have made the killer more wary. Instead, it brought on a wicked smile. Stacy's man will know that this was my work.

And even if his woman was stretched out cold on the paisley carpet, or if she had crawled into the corner sobbing, he wouldn't say a word. He knows better.

He's such a good little pawn.

CHAPTER 1

Dee Bell swept inside the apartment, forcing the door closed behind her. She placed her back against the living room wall and tried to hold back her tears. At sixteen years old, she didn't want to think about what would happen if she ever failed to make ends meet before her family somehow met the end.

She slid into the kitchen and gave her father, Nipsey, a sideways glance as he took a long gulp of his beer.

"You know you should be in school," he said—the same words that had been coming out of his mouth for a month. The problem was he never said it with a check in his hand.

"Keep your voice down," Dee hissed. "I don't want her to wake up and hear you." Dee opened the refrigerator and snatched up the six-pack of beer.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his dark brown face furrowed with concern. "You know you're too young to drink."

"Yeah, I'm also too young to watch my mother die," Dee shot back, glaring at him. "How can you take care of her if you're guzzling all day?" She lifted the beer in mock salute. "Listen, Pops. If I don't drink, you don't drink."

She tossed the entire pack away.

Her dad flinched, then sighed before passing a bright blue envelope her way. “Why didn’t you tell me we were moving on Friday? That’s only three days away.”

“We?” Dee took a deep breath and whispered as low as her anger would allow. “Listen, your job right now is to take care of my mother. That’s it. All the rest of this,” she said, with a sweeping gesture that meant the entire apartment. “Is me.”

Her dad’s lips drew downward. “But where you got that money from—”

Dee leaned forward so they were eye to eye. “—is none of your business. My mother isn’t dying in the projects. She shouldn’t have had to live here in the first place.”

Her head snapped up at the shrill ring of the phone and managed to snatch it from the cradle before the second ring. “Hello.” Dee placed her back on the wall and relaxed ... until she heard the voice on the other end.

“Hey ... it’s been a minute,” Big Rock’s deep voice crooned, causing Dee’s heart to sink through the hollow pit of her stomach.

Dee’s back sank against the wall as she gripped the receiver so hard she accidentally pressed the redial button. “Sorry about that,” she said, turning her back to Nipsey. “Yeah, I haven’t been around because my mom—”

“Your mom’s the only reason you’re getting the courtesy of a phone call and not a knock on your door,” he seethed. “I’ve been hearing some rumors. Rumors about you moving, putting up security deposits. Rumors that suggest that not getting my money has nothing to do with your mom.”

“It’s not like that,” she protested. “I just need a little more time. I just—”

“I want every cent—down to the penny—of the money you owe

me tomorrow morning,” Rock continued. “I love you like a daughter. But sometimes kids need to learn a few hard ass lessons. Not a minute after nine, Dee,” he warned. “Nobody makes a fool out of me.” Then all Dee heard was a dial tone.

Her mind raced. The money was gone. Security deposit. First month’s rent. *Think. Think. Damn!*

Several older men had told Dee that God didn’t give her that gorgeous face and “brick house” body for nothing. The thought of what they had in mind made her shiver with disgust. She would have to find another way. She always did. But she was running out of options. And time.

“Who was that?” Nipsey asked.

“None of your—”

“Dee? Dee?” her mother’s raspy whisper came from the only bedroom in the cramped apartment. “Dee, is that you?”

She gave her dad a final glare and hurried toward a bedroom that no longer wrapped Dee in her mother’s favorite lemon scent, but instead the overpowering stench of pending demise.

Her mother’s hazel eyes lit up when she said, “Hey, Baby,”

Dee was equal amounts of tired, pissed and afraid; but she couldn’t help reacting to her mother’s obvious joy. “Hey, Mom. Did you have a good day?” She hurried over to the dresser to light the white sage in a saucer and cracked the window to let in the mid-summer breeze.

“‘Bout the same. The nurse came, and your dad helped me out today.” Ilene winced a bit as she tried to settle into a more comfortable position. She then asked, “How about you? How were your classes?”

“They were good,” she replied, hoping her mother wouldn’t ask for details that were non-existent.

Dee heard a rustling sound coming from the kitchen. She peered out of the door and grimaced. Her dad was retrieving one of the cans she had tossed out. She closed her eyes against the anger settling in her soul. He was probably half drunk when he administered her mother's pain meds. But whether or not he was sober didn't matter; all that mattered was that her mother wasn't alone.

Nipsey should be more grateful. Her mother's illness had brought him out of the shelter. Her mother needed someone 24/7, and the insurance didn't cover all of it. So the on-call nurse taught Dee and Nipsey what they needed to know. Evidently, the nurse failed to mention that he might want to lay off the bottle long enough to get the job done.

"Did you need something, Mom?"

Her mother laid her head back into the pillow and smiled again. "I was waiting for you to come home. We can watch *The Wiz* on your new television. Your dad can set it up in here." Her smile widened. "As I was lying here today, I realized we hadn't watched it in a while."

"Aw, Mom, the DVD is scratched," Dee said from the edge of the bed. "I can run out and get another one."

The disappointment in Ilene's eyes broke Dee's heart. She shifted to the doorway and braced herself on the frame.

Two hours. She could've given her mom those two hours. She had so little to look forward to that it made Dee feel twice as guilty about the fact that she had sold the television, the DVD player, even the artwork off the wall. Choosing between electricity, food, and medication had become a familiar thing.

Her mother's sensitivity to generic meds that Medicare covered meant Dee had to find the money to upgrade to ones that her frail body could tolerate. She feared what her mother's life would be like without the brand-named pills that kept her pain-free. That fear drove her on a daily basis. Drove Dee to sell weed for Big Rock to the very people she called friends at one point in time.

"Oh no, no. Don't worry about getting another one," her mother said in a barely audible voice. "I got that online." Her mother lay in the bed picking at the rose-colored blanket. Her mom's once beautiful face was now sallow and drawn. The IV and the oxygen tank were indications of the depth of her mother's illness. But the sunken eyes really told the story of how Ilene had struggled down this road.

Dee walked over to her mom's bedside and stumbled on a pair of shoes in the middle of the floor. "Damn it," she whispered, before she could catch the words. "Nipsey must've left these here." She placed the red pumps in a clear box near the closet filled with her mother's shoe legacy.

Every pair had a story, a memory for her mom. She often liked to see them to remember. "You know I wore these black ones when I took your aunt back to the airport," her mom would say. "That's how I learned beauty and pain went hand-in-hand. Girl, her plane was delayed and my dogs were barkin', but I did get a lot of compliments." Or, "I wore these when I left your father in Las Vegas," she would say with a defiant gleam in her eyes. "I strutted out of there on my pink stilettos with my head held high. I got a lot of second looks that day."

Every time her mother told the latter story, Dee thought her mother received those looks for a different reason. Being beautiful and happy in Gateway Gardens Projects meant a loneliness that settled into the soul. Anyone could see it lingering under the surface of the smiles her mom tried to keep in place. Ilene had lived here for seventeen years and hadn't made a lot of friends. And if anything happened to her mom, the rest of Dee's life would be about surviving. Alone.

One man, Big Rock—the neighborhood dealer/pimp/entrepreneur—had extended his protection to Ilene after she became friends with his girlfriend. At fourteen, Dee's face took after her mother and her body blossomed like the females on her father's side of the family. Then she started getting stares from men old enough to know better. Big Rock had blanketed the protection around Dee as well. Evidently that protection was now being called into question.

Not a minute after nine, Dee. Nobody makes a fool out of me ...

Dee knelt down beside her mother's bed. "Cheer up, Mom."

"Oh, Baby, I'm fine," she confessed, reaching out a shaky hand to stroke Dee's cheek. "I just wanted to do something with you. There isn't much we can do together these days. And we used to love watching *The Wiz*. That's all." She tried to lean forward, but Dee accommodated her instead, allowing her mother to place a kiss on her forehead. "Tell me a story from school. Oh, and how's Rocky?" she inquired, her forehead creasing with concern. "You haven't said anything about her in a while."

Dee's best friend Rachel—"Rocky"—Big Rock's daughter, had been steering clear of Dee when the cancer caused a downward spiral of her mother's health. It seemed all Dee did when they got together was cry. Guess Rocky got tired of that.

"Nothing much is happening at school," Dee said gently smiling. "How 'bout a verse of 'Slide Some Oil to Me?'" Dee pantomimed that Dance of the Tin Man in her mother's favorite movie.

"No, Baby," she replied, shaking her head. "You know the song that I want you to sing."

"Come on, Mom," Dee whined. "How about something upbeat?"

"That's upbeat to me," she countered, her expression solemn. "It's about strength. How to be strong. How to have courage. Life's a ghetto bitch," she whispered. "She'll just keep coming at you until you put her down for good. You gotta have courage to stand up to that."

For her mom, Dee took a slow breath, lifted her head, and belted out a rendition of "Be a Lion" that would rival Diana Ross any day.

Her mother sighed, sank lower into the pillows, and closed her eyes.

Tears made tracks down Dee's face, but she kept singing. By the time she reached the chorus, her mother was asleep. Sleep was a good thing.

If her mom died, she had two options—the system or the street. The system at sixteen years old was a waste of time. And without Big Rock's protection, she wouldn't survive the street. Now the problem was if she would survive Big Rock.

Dee watched her mother for a minute; something she often did while she slept. She wanted to be there when she passed. God, just the thought made her stomach cramp – her mom, the bills, a new place to stay, Big Rock. Just keep breathing, Mom, please.

She lay down next to her mother and placed a hand on her mother's chest. This was the only way she could sleep nowadays. Dee's body was already set to wake if Ilene's breathing even so much as hitched.

Dee closed her eyes and let the pillow silently collect more of her tears, as she fell into a deep sleep ... only to be jerked awake.

Ilene's breathing ... was different.

"Mom?"

Her mother slowly turned her head. That's all, just her head. Her eyes were glassy. And then there was one more breath.

Dee sat up. Her heartbeat accelerated with that small movement.

"Mom?!"