

⚠ WARNING:
MATURE CONTENT

KEYS TO FREEDOM



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Chapter 1

REALITY

What a week. I caught my mom using heroin. My boyfriend dumped me for some other girl. Burning with desperation, I agreed to Genie's plan to steal a car.

If I made enough money from the deal, I could support my little brother on my own. I was terrified Jesse would be taken away from us.

Genie was a friend from high school. She didn't look down on me because of my mom.

"Get. In. Now. Darlene," Genie said.

I froze, staring at her through the open car window. "Maybe we shouldn't do this." I had second thoughts. Maybe I shouldn't jump into the Rolls.

"What's your problem, girlfriend? It's too late now. Do you have any idea what will happen if we skip out?" She aimed a finger at her temple. "These guys play for keeps."

I forced myself into the car, stuffing my valet vest under the seat.

Genie drove out the back parking lot exit.

I twisted around to see if anyone was watching. I thought someone was staring at us. No one followed. We drove down the street. Genie was careful to obey the speed limit.

“Were you trying to get us caught?” she said, keeping her eyes on the road.

“No,” I whispered. “But what if we are?”

She turned on the jammer. It would block any tracking device that might’ve been installed. That’s what her cousin Whitey told her when he dropped it off. I prayed it worked.

“Darlene, Whitey wouldn’t let us get busted.” Genie snapped her gum.

I ground my teeth—a stress habit. Reality hit. I had just committed a felony.

Once on the highway, Genie seemed to relax. That helped. I stretched out my legs and took in a breath.

Whitey was waiting for us to deliver the Rolls up in Ashland. Music blared on the radio. Genie tapped her fingers on the steering wheel.

I gazed at a cross hanging from the mirror. What would happen when they couldn’t find the owner’s car?

I thought about the valet boss who hired us. Guilt crushed me.

Genie’s words startled me. “I think we’re in the clear.”

she said. “Can’t wait to see the look on Whitey’s face when he sees this beauty.”

Excitement kicked in.

I smiled at the thought of moving out of our apartment and having a safe place to live.

“How much will we get for it?” I asked.

“Bet we score at least fifteen each.” She moved to the music. “Whitey told me if I brought him a Rolls or a Bentley, he’d get a hundred grand for it.”

“Wait. What? Whitey keeps seventy thousand, and we have to split what’s left?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” She seemed bothered. “He has to pay the guy who’s gonna send the car out of the country. There’s also the middleman who’ll find a buyer.”

“Oh.” I tuned to another station.

“There’s more to this operation than you know. Fifteen grand isn’t enough for you?”

“Of course it is,” I said.

It was drizzling. Headlights from oncoming cars reminded me of flashlights. Jesse and I would flip them on under our covers whenever the electricity was cut off. That would never happen again.

“I’m gonna throw a huge party. Then I’ll hide the rest of the money till I start my own tattoo shop,” Genie said.

I was surprised. She didn’t have one tattoo on her body.

“Cool.”

“What are you gonna do with your take?” Genie asked.

I didn’t want to admit I was panicked my mom might get busted again. What if Jesse was taken away and sent to a foster home? I didn’t want Genie to know I couldn’t live with myself if that happened.

“You won’t think I’m crazy?”

Genie laughed. “I already think you are. But the good kind of crazy.”

“I’m gonna put my take in the bank.”

“You can’t deposit that much cash and not be reported,” Genie shouted. “Girlfriend, you’re not crazy. You’re out of your mind!”

“Okay. Okay. No bank.” I bit the inside of my lip.

Genie shook her head.

She looked in the car’s mirrors—like fifty times. This went on for an hour. Then she said, “I’m getting tired. How ’bout you take a turn driving?”

“Wait. You sure that’s a good idea? You know I didn’t pass my driving test.” My stomach felt tight.

“What are you worried about?” Genie said. “You’re a good driver. You would’ve passed your test if that truck didn’t cut you off.” She shrugged. “It wasn’t your fault.” Genie pulled over at the next rest stop. “Quick. Get out and switch with me.”

I got behind the awesome steering wheel. No car I ever rode in smelled or shined like this one. I felt like royalty.

I shifted into drive and got back on the highway. The long hood and Rolls emblem led the way.

Out of nowhere, flashing red lights surrounded the car. Screaming sirens sent me into a panic. It was the end of my world.

Oh my God.

I held on tight with wet palms. “Genie. Help. What should I do?”

That’s when the cop following us ordered me to pull over.

“You better pull over and stop the car.”

“But, Genie ...”

“Do it, Darlene. Just say you want a lawyer.”

Not one cop—more like five—shouted, “Get out of the car. Put your hands on your head.” Guns were drawn. “Get down on the ground. Spread your arms away from your body.”

I heard Genie ordered to do the same on the other side of the car.

The cop cuffed my hands behind my back. “You have the right to remain silent,” he began. He pressed my chest and face into the wet pavement. Little stones stuck to my cheek.

“Officers, please,” Genie blurted. “I didn’t know I was riding in a stolen Rolls Royce.” She almost cried. “Darlene told me it belonged to her uncle. We were just taking it out for a ride.”

I about puked up the last thing I ate.

CONFESSING

Tell me everything. I can't help you if you don't," my public defender said. He sat across from me at a metal table.

"Well," I started. "Genie said we should valet for the fundraiser held at the CCC. She told me it was the Columbus Cultural Center." I wiped my palms on my thighs. "She said we could make some good tips."

"Go on, Miss Mills."

"Genie's brother worked with the valet company for years before he joined the Marines. She knew they hired extras for big events."

"What's the brother's name?"

"Harris Maxwell."

The attorney moved his gold pen across a yellow notepad. I assumed he was taking notes. Then I watched more closely. He was doodling.

“You’re only sixteen,” he said. “Your ID said eighteen.”

“Yeah. Genie’s cousin made us fake IDs. It was so we could get the jobs.”

He raised a bushy dark eyebrow.

“And we wore a lot of makeup.”

“What’s the cousin’s name? Where does he live?” He took a sip of coffee from a paper cup.

I sure could’ve used a coffee. My stomach felt more upset than when I was arrested. I hadn’t had anything to eat or drink since I got into the patrol car.

“She called him Whitey. He lives in Cleveland. That’s all I know.”

“So it was that easy to get the job?”

“Genie could talk a scarecrow into buying straw.”

“What made you pick the Rolls Royce?”

“There was a line of super-rich rides driving into the CCC parking lot. Genie tapped my shoulder. She said, ‘See that black one comin’ at us?’ I was focused on the guests. There were women in jewels and high-society dudes. They walked up the marble steps. Then I saw the Rolls.”

“Explain.”

“Her favorite saying was ‘I’ll take care of it.’ And she always did. We got the job and the key to the Rolls Royce.”

He rubbed his forehead.

I slumped in my chair.

“Frankly, I’m surprised they let two newbies park a car like that. How’d you get behind the wheel in the first place?”

“Well, Genie flirted with the valet boss. I heard her say, ‘Hey, Pratt. Give me the thrill of my life. Let me drive the Rolls into the lot.’ It seemed he wasn’t gonna let her. Then she said she’d make it worth his while.”

“How did you drive out without being seen?”

“I didn’t drive it. Genie drove. She parked it close to the exit. We left during a smoke break. The owner had a spare key on the chain. Genie handed it to me to slip it into my pocket. Then she dropped the remote key at the front desk.”

“You know, Miss Mills, Genie claims it was your idea to steal the car.” He pulled on his eyebrow. “She says she got you the job for the money. Then you blackmailed her into riding along with you.”

“Wait. What?”

“Yes. You got the fake IDs so you two could get the job. Then you threatened to give up Genie to the valet company if she didn’t go along for the ride. She says you’d joyride and return the car before the end of the fundraiser.”

“But that’s not true.”

“What *is* true, Miss Mills? You just said you put the spare key into your pocket.”

“At the break, Genie said she had to take a call and left

to answer it. She came back, wiping her eyes—crying. She said she'd just heard from her mom that Harris was MIA."

He leaned over the table. "You believed her?"

"Yeah, of course. She was sobbing. She said her mom was really upset. We needed to get home," I said. "The boss told Genie it'd be okay if we left. She was supposed to let him know as soon as she heard anything. He said Harris would want Genie to be brave for her mom."

The lawyer squinted at my face, like he was concentrating.

"I was relieved we wouldn't be taking the Rolls. I put my arm around Genie. We just needed to put the spare key back on the ring. That's when Genie stuck her hand out for the spare. She said Harris would be fine."

"Did that seem odd to you?"

"Yeah, kind of. But it was hard to think Genie would make up something like that about her brother. I just let it go."

That's when I stopped talking. I'd said too much. I had just confessed to stealing a \$400,000 car.

KEYS TO FREEDOM

*FRIENDS AND FAMILY CAN FAIL YOU, AND
YOU CAN FAIL YOURSELF.*

Make just one bad decision and you can ruin your life. That's what I did. I caught my mom using heroin. My boyfriend dumped me. Burning with desperation, I agreed to Genie's plan to steal a car. Ended up at Buckeye Village—the Ohio correctional facility for girls.



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